



ADVICE FROM A
PRINCELY IN-LAW:

Wisdom texts in old Irish

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“Wonder, Wisdom and War”

Essays on Early Ireland

By Brendan Halligan

Chapter Three

Advice from a princely in-law

Wisdom texts in Old Irish

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Summary

Wisdom texts are defined in this essay as political advice or instructions given in early Irish society by a relative or tutor to a prospective or new king.

The texts are analysed in the context of Indo-European culture, which ascribed a sacral role to kings, who, in turn, embodied the communal prosperity and well-being of the people.

Nine texts traditionally regarded as part of the *Speculum Principum* genre of Old Irish literature are analysed from a political science perspective in terms of their central thrust, structure, form and content. It is concluded that only four of the texts conform with the definition specified, and that others belong to the category of proverbial wisdom.

The durability of the genre is examined by reference to early and late medieval Ireland, with the suggestion that the genre might have had a greater role in the native culture than that commonly accepted. It is recommended that this be made the subject of new research.

Introduction

Wisdom texts are a literary genre in early Irish consisting of formal political advice to a king in respect of personal conduct and the official discharge of his duties as a ruler. Known elsewhere as the *Speculum Principum/Principis* 'Mirror of princes/a prince' or *Fürstenspiegel*, and in Irish by a number of terms, of which *Tecosca(a)* [Ríg] 'Instruction(s) [of a king]' is the most representative, the genre is believed to have originated deep from within the prevailing culture.

One theory has it that these texts spring from the inauguration ceremonies at which kings were invested with authority. In other words, they are essentially derivative in nature. Despite the antiquity of the inauguration ceremony, and despite its importance, no detailed account of its format in Irish society survives from the earliest period (Ó Corráin 1972: 35), but it seems that as part of the ceremony the *ollam* or chief poet of the dynasty sang the praises of the new king and recited his genealogy. The latter was the equivalent of a charter of rights and was proof of the king's title to reign (36). This conferred legitimacy on the new king, an essential feature of any political system.

Keating says in *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (Comyn and Dineen 1902–14: vol. 3, 10) that a *Teagasc Ríogh* was indeed read out at these inauguration ceremonies 'from the coming of Patrick...to the Norman invasion', and he adds that the dynastic historian or *ollam* read aloud the *speculum principis* at the inauguration. Notwithstanding some contemporary reservations about his credibility as a historian, I would take Keating as a reliable authority on social customs and rituals, especially as, in this case, he is corroborated by the well-known account by John le Fourdan recording the coronation of Alexander III of Scotland in the twelfth century, at which the laws and oaths relating to the king were read out to him (Kelly 1976: xiv).

More to the point, Dillon (1952) edited 'The story of the finding of Cashel' containing a *rosc* or rhetoric, after which the king says *rob fír fírthar, rob bríg bríghther* 'may it be a truth which is fulfilled, may it be a power which is enforced'. The people respond to this 'Amen' (Kelly 1976: xiv). MacCana believes that the genre is traditional and preliterate and 'an integral part of the pagan liturgy of sovereignty' (1979: 448). This would seem to vindicate the idea that a traditional inauguration ceremony took place at which a druid or member of the learned class publicly recited a *speculum* to which the king expressed consent and which was then affirmed by the people.

On this basis, it is possible to reconstruct the inauguration ceremony into five parts: establishment of legitimacy by recounting the new king's genealogy; confirmation of his fitness to rule by reciting his personal prowess; swearing into office by reading a *speculum principis* or *teosc*; taking of the oath of office and its affirmation by the people; and coronation or formal investiture by conferring a white rod as the symbol of authority, to which Keating makes reference. Two indispensable elements of the ceremony were that it should take place at a site dedicated to that purpose and be followed by a *crech rígh* or royal foray, 'by which the king demonstrated his suitability for office and acquired not only a heroic reputation but also the wealth in cattle to play a generous lord' (Ó Corráin 1972: 37), i.e. he demonstrated martial prowess and acquired the means for dispensing hospitality.

Viewed from this perspective, the wisdom texts would be basically literary compositions based on public ceremony, analogous in the Ireland of today to that of the swearing in of the president in accordance with the provisions of the constitution. It would not be too fanciful to argue that every society, no matter how primitive, has a constitution, or legal framework, for the exercise of authority and the imposition of duties and limits on those who exercise it, and that in early Irish society the inauguration ceremony was the occasion for the public reaffirmation of the 'constitution'.

Against this background, Ó Corráin encapsulates the first theory by arguing that the function of the *ollam* as ritual adviser to the king at the inauguration ceremony gave rise to the genre of *speculum principis* (1972: 36). Nevertheless, there is no evidence as to how or why the subject matter of established public ceremony was transformed into private literature as seen in the wisdom texts themselves. In the absence of such evidence, the theory is little more than speculation and, as will emerge later, would appear to be untenable.

The second theory is that advanced by Smith (1927), who characterised early Irish society as one which delighted in proverbs and sententious sayings. He noted that the literature from the period abounds in maxims and proverbial phrases which are not confined to random quotations since, 'whole collections of them...are to be found in fairly old manuscripts' (1927: 411). He regarded the instructions to princes as one considerable subdivision of Irish sententious literature.

Smith later expanded on this theory by arguing (1930: 33) that there was no reason for believing any of the *tecosca* was composed by the persons whose names they bear. He offered two reasons for this conclusion. First, 'they are not the sort of writing expected from the pen of any individual'. He developed the second reason into what can be taken as his central thesis: 'instead, they would seem to represent the slow growth, anonymously, of popular proverbial literature, added to from generation to generation, and finally collected and classified by an industrious scribe'.

Later again, authorship was ascribed to kings and kingmakers noted for their wisdom in an attempt to invest them with dignity and authority. On this basis, the wisdom texts are the product of that ubiquitous character in medieval Ireland, the anonymous scribe of surpassing industry and devilish cunning, whose schemes are exposed by a sombre, street-wise scholar a millennium later.

This would place the genre more or less on par with other branches of proverbial wisdom, so that it was nothing more than a reflection of the prevailing common culture. As such, the content would mainly be of interest to the anthropologist. From a literary perspective, the *speculum/tecosca* would simply be an anthology of proverbs ordered in accordance with the preferences or whims of the collectors. This, too, seems untenable on the basis of the evidence emerging from a review of the genre.

McCone, by way of contrast, encapsulates the wisdom texts within his grander theory that all early Irish literature is the product of a Christian literati, ruthless reshapers of pagan tradition as he describes them. Within this global framework, the wisdom texts are said to have obvious affinities with Old Testament wisdom literature, because the monastic literati drew pertinent parallels between their gnomic literature and that of the Bible. The question and answer format of the *Tecosca Cormaic* is allegedly derived from a monastic schoolroom and, anyway, is similar to Solomon's instructions to his son (1990: 31). He further believes (142) that it is no coincidence the three wisdom texts purporting to belong to the pre-Christian period in Ireland should be ascribed to early believers in Christianity and dismisses Smith's claim that they come from a purely pagan tradition. Instead, he argues, they contain little or nothing of that tradition.

This latter claim can be disputed by reference to the three texts, as will be seen below. At this point, it suffices to say that McCone's master-theory falls short as an explanation for the texts; it would reduce them to an incidental side-show in an Orwellian conspiracy to rewrite history from top to bottom. Above all, it fails to take account of the fact that politics, irrespective of its cultural context, has enduring pre-occupations, one of them being that rulers should sleep easy in their beds (as Shakespeare reminds us).

But in advancing his theory, as mentioned earlier, Smith noted perceptively that the wisdom texts consist of instructions to princes 'given by their tutors or advisers, often by their fathers, whom they are about to succeed' (1927: 411). Meyer had immediately noted in his preface to *Tecosca Cormaic* that the instructions were 'given by princes to their heirs, by tutors to their disciples or by foster-fathers to their sons' (1909: v). These insights allow for a fourth theory, since, in every case, the instructions are attributed to one individual and directed at another. In other words, they are

personal in terms of their authorship, and equally so in terms of their intended audience. This specific characteristic would place the *speculum principis* in the realm of political science rather than see it as a reflection of ceremonial ritual, an example of accumulated proverbial wisdom or a subplot in rewriting early Irish history.

As in the case of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the essential purpose of the wisdom text is political, and the aim is to prepare someone for the highest office and to advise them on how to hold onto it, i.e., such texts outline how a ruler should behave as a prince and how a prince should behave as a ruler. The instructor is older and wiser than the instructed and, as Meyer and Smith observed, related to him by blood, marriage or fosterage. The wisdom text might be described as the wisdom of the in-laws; certainly it can be called the wisdom of the insiders.

The concept of kingship

The theory that a *speculum principis* is consciously intended as advice to a prospective or new king on kingly behaviour gains force from the very concept of kingship in early Irish society. As Ó Corráin has explained (1972: 42) the king was a sacred personage, and through the rule of the rightful king nature was fertile and fruitful. Society flourished and peace reigned. On the other hand, an unjust king brought war, famine, unrest and death on his people—the four horsemen of the Apocalypse rode the land. The king was thus not just a political and military figure but, more importantly, a priestly personage who embodied the people. Their fortunes and prosperity rested on his personal behaviour and the public conduct of his office.

Given the pivotal importance of agriculture in pastoral societies, and given also the utter dependence of agricultural economies on the vagaries of nature for the supply of food, the communal instinct to appease nature was a common sense approach to collective self-protection. Indeed, the societal instinct in early Ireland, and many other similar societies, was to go beyond appeasing nature and, instead, turn it into an ally; more than that, in fact, the specific intent of the inauguration ceremony was to make nature an ally by marriage. For that reason, the king married the goddess of the territory and the ceremony was a sacred marriage between the two, which as late as 1310 was described as a king-marriage (Ó Corráin, 1972: 33). Indeed, Kelly views the relationship between a king and his territory in sexual terms when he quotes from the same source, the *Annals of Connacht*, which describe the inauguration of Fedlimid as his 'sleeping with the province of Connacht' (*feis re cóiced Connacht*, Kelly 1988: 18).

To fulfil his role as the protector of the people, the king not only had to be without physical blemish, but also without spiritual imperfection, i.e. he had to be a perfect consort for the goddess. Physical perfection was easily discerned (and there are many examples where any disfigurement through the loss of a limb or damage to other body-parts leads to immediate abdication). But spiritual imperfection is not so easily detected; it usually emerges over time through conduct and requires constant vigilance by the people to prevent it, and vigorous self-discipline by the king to avoid it. This would explain the emphasis in the wisdom texts on the overriding necessity for the king to be always true to his calling, i.e. at all times, in every place, and in each circumstance, to be a man of the truth.

In the law texts, many crimes and omissions on the part of the king are regarded as breaches of his justice and can lead to his overthrow (Kelly 1988: 18). His honour-price would be lost if he defaulted on his oath or tolerated satire (15). Thus, the king must be wise, valorous and just if he is to be a true king, i.e. the protector of the people he personifies, the one who literally embodies their

concordat with nature and guarantees their survival and prosperity. In short, the king is the living truth, a prospect at which modern politicians would blanch.

Nature of the wisdom texts

In his famous lecture, 'The archaism of Irish tradition', delivered in 1947, Dillon drew parallels between the Hindu and Irish belief in the magic power of the truth by referring to sagas in both traditions (1947: 247–50). He quoted a poem in the Book of Leinster, which says that in respect of a prince the three best things for him during his reign are 'truth, mercy and silence', and then went on to repeat the sacral role of the prince, for 'a prince's truth is an effort which overpowers armies: it brings milk into the world, it brings corn and mast' (250). The magic power of the truth comes across as the most fundamental theological or ideological belief which explains the universe by means of an ordered harmony between the gods of the other world and humankind. Any breach of that harmony by a disavowal or betrayal of the truth brings immediate retribution, not only on those responsible but also on others; in the case of the prince, it spells disaster for the people as a whole. Ó Cathasaigh says that this concept is found in the laws and the sagas and testifies to an anthropocentric world-view which pervades the Irish literature on kingship: the king is the centre of the cosmos (1972: 64–5).

Hence, the singular importance of the prince being faithful to the truth, particularly in respect of maintaining harmony within society, i.e. ensuring that justice is done. The pivotal task for the prince is, consequently, to be the fountainhead of justice. Through him, justice flows like water through a conduit, a metaphor justified by the Hindu belief that Truth was localised in a huge lake at the summit of heaven (Dillon 1947: 250) and by the Irish belief in the sacredness of the River Boyne.

This representation of the cosmos explains the central role assigned to the prince as the interface between men and gods and, consequently, the unrelenting emphasis in the inauguration ceremony and in the wisdom texts on the utter necessity for the prince to act in accordance with the truth by being just. In practical terms this meant, above all, that the king had to make true judgements in the everyday discharge of his duties – otherwise the house would literally fall down, as it began to do when Lugaid Mac Con gave a false judgement, only for Cormac to stay the house by pronouncing a true verdict (Kelly 1969: 4). This insight into the overwhelming power and importance of the truth and the king's role as its guardian and protector puts the wisdom texts in their true context, i.e. the native ideology of kingship (Ó Cathasaigh, 1972: 65) rather than a hybrid of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as McCone would have it.

It should be added, of course, that ideology, theology or religious belief is only one dimension to human behaviour. There are other more unworthy concerns in the realm of politics in which any prince had to operate. Caesar was, after all, both *Pontifex Maximus* and a military dictator. Consequently, the wisdom texts will be found to be a complex mixture of advice on religion (as defined above), power, politics, human nature and the art of survival, mixing the trivial with the exalted, the particular with the universal, and the philanthropic with self-interest.

Primary sources

In the preface to his translation of *Tecosca Cormaic* (1909), the great German scholar, Kuno Meyer, provided a list of the wisdom texts as follows:

Audacht Morainn
Bríathartheosc Con Culainn
Senbríathra or Senráite Fíthail
Sayings of Flann Fína
Tecosca Cormaic

At that point, *Audacht Morainn* had neither been edited nor translated. The *Bríathartheosc Con Culainn* had, on the other hand, been edited by Windisch and translated four times. But the *Senbríathra Fíthail* had not been edited or translated, and neither had the sayings of *Flann Fína*. As for the *Tecosca Cormaic*, Meyer had offered the first publication and translation of the entire text (1909), and so launched the genre on what should have been a sea of scholarship, but which has proven to be a shallow pool, mostly stagnant.

In his introduction to *Audacht Morainn*, three quarters of a century later, Kelly (1976: xiii) says the *Speculum Principum* genre is represented by the following five texts, all of which had, by then, been both edited and translated:

Audacht Morainn
Tecosca Cormaic
Bríathartheosc Con Culainn
Tecosc Cuscraid
Senbríathra Fíthail

Kelly offers no explanation for limiting the list to this number or for the order chosen, other than to note that the text he has edited, *Audacht Morainn*, is the earliest of this group; grammar, orthography and syntax pointing to a date *c.* AD 700.

Over a decade later he expanded his list on the basis that the wisdom texts are 'particularly useful in that they contain some general statements expressing early Irish views on the society's structure and ethos' (1988: 2). In addition to the five texts quoted above, he included *Trechend Breth Féne*, translated by Meyer (1906) under the title *The Triads of Ireland*, and the *Aibidil Luigne maic Éremóin*, edited and translated by Smith (1928a) as *Aibidil Cuigne maic Emoin* (on which, see Kelly 1988: 286).

R.M. Smith, the American scholar who specialised during the 1920s in the *Speculum Principum*, and haunted the Trinity College library, provided a more elaborate listing and also offered two sets of classification, the first based on the importance and popularity of a text, the second dividing the texts into the periods to which they can be assigned. Quite properly, he warns that it would be impossible to trace any of the *Tecosca*, as he calls them, to their original sources or to say how soon they were given literary form (1927: 413). All that can be said, he argues, is that they had their origin at some time between the period to which they are traditionally assigned and the period, spanning perhaps several centuries, of the language of the existing versions. On that basis, he believes that both the *Audacht Morainn* and the *Tecosca Cormaic* must have been popular well before the beginning

of the ninth century and goes on to say that 'the pagan character which the originals must have exhibited would seem to point to a date not far removed from the fifth century' (1927: 414).

He offers the following more extensive listing and orders it on the basis of the traditional assignment of the texts, not to be equated under any circumstances with date of composition (1927: 414):

First Century

Audacht Morainn

Bríathartheosc Con Culainn

Tecosc Cuscraid

Third Century

Tecosca Cormaic

Senbríathra Fíthail

Aibidil Luigne maic Éremóin

Seventh and Eighth Centuries

Briathra Flainn *Fína

Poem ascribed to St Moling

Aside from the traditional basis for dating the origin of the wisdom texts, Smith justifies his division by referring to the distinct characteristics of each group. The first-century group is more archaic and obscure in meaning; in form it consists of rugged rhythmical prose, while in style it is marked by recurrent alliteration, tmesis and parataxis. The third-century group is most characterised by the striking trait of a regular formula, from which the text seldom departs. In contrast to the first-century group, the form and style are simple but the use of a fixed formula leads to extreme regularity and a terseness of expression, sometimes to the point of unintelligibility. The third group, from the seventh and eighth centuries, shows a Christian influence, unlike its predecessors, and lacks their primitive vigour. Nevertheless, this group borrows phraseology from the other two and imitates them in other respects (1927: 414–15).

Smith appears to be the only scholar to have made a systematic study of the genre as a whole (while also editing some of the above texts), and his criteria for classification merit particular respect. As will be seen, his judgements and analysis are not always well grounded, but his framework for listing the wisdom texts is still acceptable in the absence of anything better.

Finally, it is worth noting that Smith regards the *Audacht Morainn*, the *Tecosca Cormaic* and the *Senbríathra Fíthail* as the most prominent of the texts not only for the number of copies that have

come down to us but also because they are often found together in older manuscripts and only rarely are found to stand alone in any manuscript (1927: 412). Using Smith's historical classification, the various texts are analysed below in chronological order from the perspective of political advice to a potential or actual king.

Audacht Morainn

Audacht means 'bequest' or 'legacy' or 'testament', and its use in the title of this first text is appropriate to the context in which the advice is transmitted. Morann is on his deathbed and describes what he has to say as *mo bríathra rem bás*, 'my words before my death'. According to the Annals of the Four Masters, Morann was son of Cairbre Cinn Chait, who usurped the throne of Ireland after the vassal tribes had destroyed the nobility. The rightful heir, Feradach, assumed the kingship after Cairbre's disastrous reign and appointed Morann his chief judge (Smith 1927: 415). Now on the point of death, Morann instructs his foster-son Neire to convey the testament to Feradach.

The significance of the wisdom imparted is that Morann was famed as a judge, revered for his wisdom and devotion to justice and acknowledged for centuries afterwards as a most authoritative jurist and commentator on the laws.

More particularly, his advice to Feradach is dispassionate and disinterested, dedicated no doubt to ensuring that order and harmony are completely restored after the chaos for which he must feel some element of guilt.

In other words, the Testament is the distillation of the accumulated wisdom of the wisest of judges and has an intensely practical political purpose, i.e. that Feradach should be a just king, and hence successful. As argued earlier, *Audacht Morainn* is personal communication, although delivered through a trusted intermediary, and is neither an account of ceremonial ritual, nor an anthology of proverbial wisdom nor a Christian polemic.

The *Audacht Morainn* (AM) was first edited by Thurneysen (1917). The text edited by Kelly (1976) was established by Dr Binchy, in a seminar he conducted in 1963, from RIA manuscript 23 N.10, which was transcribed in 1575 but preserves most of the archaic spellings (Kelly 1976: xx). Thurneysen had earlier concluded that AM derived from the famous missing manuscript, *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, generally dated to the early-eighth century (Kelly 1976: xxv). All in all, there are seven witnesses extant, found, *inter alia*, in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster, the fourteenth-century Yellow Book of Lecan and the fifteenth-century TCD manuscript H 2.7, as well as the sixteenth-century RIA manuscript mentioned above (Kelly 1976: xxvi).

Kelly believes, on the basis of a number of archaic spellings, best preserved in the text edited by him, that it 'was written down well before the main Würzburg glosses', and that this gives us a compilation date of approximately AD 700, though much of the text 'must have had a previous oral or possibly manuscript existence' (xxix). Archaic features of syntax, however, suggested to him that much of his recension was composed a good deal earlier than the proposed compilation date of c. AD 700 (xxxiii –xl).

An analysis of the text in terms of content suggests that AM can be divided into at least eight parts:

	Paragraphs
1) Introduction	1–5
2) Maxims on justice	6–21
3) Precepts for a young king	22
4) More maxims on justice	23–29
5) Advice on how to rule	30–52
6) Proverbial wisdom	53–54
7) Instructions on becoming a true ruler	55–62
8) Conclusion	63

The introduction opens with a brief explanation of the background to the *Audacht*, which is editorial in style. It then continues in what purports to be Morann’s own words, instructing Neire to bring his dying words to Feradach, his lasting advice as he describes it. In part two, the *Audacht* immediately sets out a series of maxims on justice, which corresponds exactly with the sacral role of the king outlined above. That justice (*fir flathemon* in the text) is chosen for the opening section merely reinforces its fundamental importance in the role assigned to the king. ‘Let him preserve justice, it will care for him’ (§6). ‘It is through the justice of the ruler that he secures peace, tranquillity, joy, ease, comfort’ (§14). ‘It is through the justice of the ruler that abundances of great tree-fruit of the great wood are tasted’ (§17).

Part three consists of a brief interpolation, which is best understood as advice from a wise counsellor to a new ruler and is simply an attempt to put an old head on young shoulders. Part four resumes the maxims on justice, although more in a practical than a philosophical vein. Part five reverts to personal advice, being a series of guidelines on how to rule wisely, ranging from maintaining peace – ‘bloodshed is a vain destruction of all rule’ (§29) – to the regulation of business affairs, the administration of the laws and the maintenance of social stability.

What follows next might seem out of place, for it consists, as Smith would have it, of proverbial wisdom. There are thirteen proverbs in all, the tenor of which is that everything changes and certain things are inevitable. The overall thrust is stoic, without any reference to Christian belief and can be justified as the philosophic setting for the next section, which is the most profound passage in the *Audacht*: fifteen virtues of a good ruler are expounded and ten things which extinguish justice are enumerated (§§55, 56). Four types of ruler are described in this section; the true, the wily, the occupier and the tyrant (§§58–62). The king is reminded stoically that he will die (*memento mori*). How he will be remembered will depend on how he practised or ignored the virtues of just kingship during his life (§57).

The text concludes with a refrain from the introduction: the underlying motivation of Morann in bestowing his wisdom on Feradach is the protection of his own kin. Unquestionably, this confirms that the primary purpose of the *Audacht* is to ensure social stability as a direct consequence of just rule by a king who abides by ‘truth’.

As political advice to a prince, it could hardly be bettered as a reflection on the transitory nature of power and glory (*sic transit gloria mundi*) and an admonition in purely human terms as to why he should be a true ruler: ‘he whom the living do not glorify with blessings is not a true ruler’

(§59). At the same time, *AM* perfectly welds the power of the truth to more human or mundane considerations: ‘the true ruler smiles on the truth when he hears it, he exalts it when he sees it’. Power, politics and religion are married with elegance and precision into a message that cannot be misunderstood, at least not by an actual ruler.

Bríathartheosc Con Culainn

The saga *Serglige Con Culainn* (‘The wasting sickness of Cú Chulainn’) contains an episode in which Cú Chulainn gives advice to Lugaid Réo nDerg, who has been chosen to be king of Tara. The only extant copies of the story have come down to us in *Lebor na hUidre* (twelfth century) and TCD H 4. 22, possibly from the seventeenth century (Dillon 1953: xi). The text is a mixture of two recensions which, Dillon believes, come from the ninth century and the twelfth century, respectively (xiii). Dillon edited the Trinity College manuscript copy in 1949 and translated it in 1953 (Dillon 1949 and 1953a, respectively). In the same year he edited the text contained in *Lebor na hUidre* (Dillon 1953).

Dillon believes that this collection of *teosca* is an interruption in the wider story of Cú Chulainn’s foray into the otherworld and can hardly belong to the original version (1953: x). Smith (1925) had already translated the section containing the instructions, arguing that the content had not yet been given the discussion it merited. He pointed out that the ‘writer’s familiarity with ancient Irish law, and his familiarity with earlier compositions of the “instructions” type, notably the *Tecosca Cormaic*’ were worthy of note (1925: 187). Knowledge of the *Tecosca Cormaic* was attested not only by resemblances in general vocabulary, but by insertions of complete lines from that composition (1925: 187). Obviously, this analysis conflicts with Smith’s later classification of the *Tecosca* by period, a point which he does not explain and which is beyond the competence of this writer to unravel.

The ‘instructions’ section, despite being regarded as a later addition by Dillon, seems to fit quite naturally in the narrative. While Cú Chulainn is suffering from the wasting sickness, the four provinces of Ireland are meeting in Tara to choose a king in order to fill a seven year vacuum left by the death of Conaire. The successor is identified in a vision following a bull-feast as ‘a young warrior, noble and strong, with two red circles around his body, standing over the pillow of a sick man in Emuin’ (1953: 56). When approached by messengers from Tara seeking such a man, Conchobar identifies him as Lugaid Réo nDerg, who fortuitously happens to be close by ‘comforting his foster-father, Cú Chulainn, who is sick’. On hearing this, and as Lugaid prepares to depart for Tara, Cú Chulainn immediately issues his instructions to the putative king. The two manuscript versions of the saga correspond almost exactly, and both confirm the thesis that the *teosca* consist of personal political advice from an older counsellor to a young prince, in this instance from a foster-father to a foster-son, perhaps the closest of personal relationships in early Irish society.

The content of *Serglige Con Culainn* cannot be so easily divided as that in the *Audacht Morainn*, since the former consists of only two categories of instructions, which might be termed princely behaviour and respect for the law, and both are intertwined in the short text. The most striking feature of the instructions, however, is their urgency; they are short, sharp admonitions without any philosophical framework or any resort to proverbial wisdom, still less to religion. The tone is paternal, as befits the relationship, and the instructions are mainly given in the negative, thus emphasising their urgency. Lugaid is told of things not to do, thereby avoiding those pitfalls that bring down a ruler through unjust or unacceptable behaviour.

There are thirty instructions relating to princely behaviour in the TCD manuscript, of which only four are cast in the positive (1953a: 57–8). They range from the essentially political – ‘seek out

not men of ill fame and little power' to the intensely personal—'do not play the buffoon, do not mock'. There is emphasis on the value of advice from the wise and the old; on the benefit of being cautious and generous; and on the need to be stern towards enemies and warm towards friends; above all, the advice is not to be too garrulous, contentious or vulgar.

The same manuscript contains ten legal maxims, which corroborate Smith's judgement on Cú Chulainn's knowledge of the law, and which doubtless gladdened the hearts of contemporary lawyers. While separated by intervening instructions, they constitute an organic whole centered around the primacy of contracts and the importance of established jurisprudence. Only one refers to justice per se, yet it is pregnant with wisdom: justice must not be suppressed in the face of public pressure, i.e. it is better to be just than to be popular. Lugaid immediately responds that it would be well for every man to know these instructions and promises that he will abide by them. On going to Tara, he is proclaimed king and reigns for 27 years.

Despite their brevity, the *tecosca* in *Serglige Con Culainn* consist of eminently sensible advice from a man who knows how the political world works, understands human nature and values order in society. That they lack the philosophical framework of a jurist like Morann is hardly surprising, but then the *Audacht* lacks the sharpness expected of a man of action. The passage, as said earlier, seems to fall naturally into the flow of the narrative and gives an insight into the character of Cú Chulainn, which is invaluable in arriving at a rounded view of his personality. He is more than a great warrior; he is also reflective, wise and educated—as well as being an articulate counsellor who knows what it takes to operate in the world of politics.

Tecosc Cuscraid

The primary sources for the *Tecosc Cuscraid*, according to Best (1916: 170), are the Book of Lecan and the sixteenth century TCD manuscript, H 3.18. His translation of the Book of Lecan recension appeared in 1916 under the title 'The Battle of Airtech'. Smith seemed unaware of this version, despite referring to Best, when he claimed there was only one text to hand, adding that it was very corrupt (1927: 421). For this and other reasons he doubted its reliability, although he had no hesitation in using it. On the other hand, Best thought that the *Cath Airtig*, in which the *tecosca* appear, was a natural sequel to the *Bruiden Dá Chocae*, as it filled a gap in the Conchubar–Cú Chulainn cycle. He also thought the *tecosca* to be an example of the instruction given to a newly elected prince, 'which would seem to have been part of an inauguration ceremony' (1916: 170), although in the narrative the *tecosca* seem to follow the ceremony rather than be part of it.

The background to the tale provides the context for this particular wisdom text. After the death of Conchubar and that of his son, Cormac, before he was even proclaimed king, the Ulstermen offer the kingdom to Conall Cernach who refuses it on the grounds that the responsibilities are too great for him (Smith 1927: 421). He recommends that his foster-son, Cuscraid, also a natural son of Conchobar, be appointed instead.

Thereupon, Cuscraid is proclaimed king and it is then that Conall speaks, indicating that his intervention is a spontaneous reaction to events, like Cú Chulainn's, rather than a measured deliberate message, like that of Morann, or of Cormac as will be seen below. In fact, Conall first laments the loss of Conchubar, his mighty sovereign (without mentioning Cormac at all), and he is so stricken with grief that he wants to die. Only then does he utter his instructions to the man who has just become Conchubar's successor.

The instructions are short and to the point, there being only ten in all. It is utterly clear that they are a personal communication between an older man and a new king. As in the case of Cú Chulainn and Lugaid, the relationship is that of foster-father and foster-son. The fact that the instructions are given in public does not detract from the immediacy or intimacy of the communication, and so this example fits with the theory about wisdom texts offered at the outset.

There are only ten instructions given by Conall, all but one expressed positively, and again it is too difficult to divide such a short text into logically coherent elements. The better approach is to focus on themes. Not unexpectedly, Cuscraid is told to be just and righteous in judgement and to be a follower of the sovereign law, thereby reaffirming the sacral role of the king. Continuing this theme, he is advised to fulfill oaths and to consolidate the law of his rule, i.e. to be faithful to the truth, lest his misdeeds bring ruin on the people.

A political theme, not so clearly evident in the *Audacht Morainn* and hardly present in the *Bríathartheosc Con Culainn*, is developed with reference to the advisability of holding frequent assemblies for resolving border disputes and appeasing the nobility. This is repeated in an instruction to protect the territory by ardent and warlike means in contending with 'foreign lands'. But, in this regard, Cuscraid is advised against going to war too hastily, lest it add unnecessarily to sorrow. Finally, the theme of appropriate princely behaviour is developed. Apart from a warning not to be drunk in a pub (a common theme in the *tecosca*), the new king is shrewdly advised to be well-briefed, or multi-lingual as it is put, for fear that he would appear ignorant in public on any topic. The implication is that being outsmarted in public would detract from his aura of authority.

For all its brevity, the *Tecosca Cuscraid* contains the main political points that any counsellor would wish to get across to a new and untried king, in this case one who is not only taking office in a crisis but who is also an intimate relation. From this perspective, the task is fulfilled admirably. Moreover, what is said adds greatly to our understanding of kingship at the time of the *Táin*, as it is in harmony with the instructions in the *Audacht* and the *Bríathartheosc Con Chulainn*.

Tecosca Cormaic

If Cú Chulainn and Conall Cernach were mercifully short, and Morann brief and precise, neither of these traits can be said to be true of Cormac, son of Art, son of Conn, the greatest and wisest of Irish kings, whose reign ended in 266. His *Tecosc Ríg* runs to 48 pages of small print and practically covers every conceivable aspect of kingship; it is virtually impossible to summarise adequately in an essay and deserves a book in itself. The 'Instructions of Cormac' were first published and translated in their entirety by the eminent scholar Kuno Meyer (1909), and he was convinced that the form in which the text has come down to us was compiled during the Old Irish period of the language, not later than the first half of the ninth century as far as he could judge from numerous verbal forms (1909: xi). For this reason, Ó Cathasaigh, in assessing Cormac's heroic biography, says that the attribution belongs to tradition rather than history (1972: 86).

The background to the *Tecosc Ríg* is given in the Book of Aicill, which tells us that after Cormac had been deprived of one of his eyes by Áengus he retired to Aicill, and the sovereignty of Ireland passed to his son Cairbre Lifechair. When faced with a difficult case for judgement Cairbre was wont to go for advice to his father, and the continuous interchange between the two led to the compilation of the *tecosca* (Smith, 1927: 428). Keating gives a similar explanation for the background to the text, adding that the *Tecosc Ríg* set forth 'what a king should be...and how he should rule the people through their laws' (Comyn and Dinneen, 1902-14, vol. 2: 347).

The *Tecosca Cormaic* is by far the longest treatise on politics in Old Irish literature. It is structured in the form of questions and answers, a style which McCone had attributed to the influence of the monastic schoolroom. The questions put by Cairbre are terse and to the point, giving little flavour of his personality, although here and there a psychologist could detect some interesting traits. Essentially, he is an instrument for Cormac to expound on a political topic of his own choosing. The answers follow no set formula in terms of style or length, varying from some short pithy responses of one line to fairly lengthy dissertations on a theme. There is a page and a half in respect of the proper qualities of a king, and nearly four pages on women, in what is hardly a feminist credo and which McCone aptly calls a 'great misogynist litany' (1990: 77).

Thematically, the instructions do not progress systematically through the role, nature and responsibilities of kingship but shift from the general to the particular in no observable pattern. Neither do they offer the sort of philosophic overview that lends a certain solemnity to the *Audacht Morainn*, and there are no reflections on life as a passing vale of sorrows. The stoicism of Morann is absent. So too are references to Christian belief. While God is mentioned occasionally, it is only in passing and obviously added as a scribal after-thought.

But, on the other hand, the instructions provide a profound psychological insight into human nature, its strengths and weaknesses, its follies and triumphs. Their greatest value to a prince is, as a result, Cormac's advice on how to govern. This would be at odds with the background presented by the Book of Aicill and by Keating, if both are to be taken as suggesting that Cairbre was seeking advice from his father when faced with a difficult legal problem, but would be entirely consistent with the implication that the judgements Cairbre had to make were essentially political, i.e. to do with kingcraft rather than adjudication; this would seem to be the better representation of the main thrust of the 'Instructions'.

From a thematic perspective, the lengthy text can be divided into the following topics, bearing in mind that there is no consistency in paragraph length:

Thematic Division

	Paragraphs
1. Requirements for success	1
2. Duties	2
3. Rules of good governance	3
4. Responsibilities of his steward	4
5. Accession to power	5
6. Proper qualities of a king	6
7. Preparation for office	7–8
8. Lessons from life	9–10
9. Advice on princely behaviour	11–12
10. Reflections on human nature	13

Thematic Division (cntd)

	Paragraphs
11. The ways of folly	14-15
12. On women	16
13. Proverbial wisdom	17-18
14. Rules on personal behaviour	19
15. Proverbial wisdom	20-21
16. Legal maxims	22-24
17. Political maxims	25-26
18. People to avoid	27-28
19. Rules for behaviour	29-31
20. Pitfalls	32-33
21. Personal staff	34
22. Proverbial wisdom	35-37

This analysis suggests that the *Tecosca* can be grouped initially into 22 parts. A modern editor might impose a more rigorous order by rearranging them as follows for reasons of coherence:

Restructured Text

Paragraphs

Kingship

Preparation	7-8
Requirements for success	1
Accession	5
Duties	2
Demeanour	30

The Person

Necessary qualities	6
Princely behaviour	11-12
Precautions	29
Staff	4 .34

The Ruler

Ground rules	19
Governance	3
Politics	25-26
Law	22-24

Human nature

Universal truths	13.31
Weaknesses	14-15
Ill nature	27-28
Personality types	32-33

Proverbial wisdom

Life's lessons	9-10
On women	16
Good health	21
Home truths	17-18
Durability	20
Final thoughts	35-37

If Cormac were to permit a textual rearrangement along these lines, the text would take on a greater coherence, and even though his consent cannot be secured at this distance it can be assumed for purposes of thematic analysis. Because the text is so long, the analysis itself will have to be impressionistic; a more detailed examination (mercifully) awaits another day.

The theme of kingship is opened in this new arrangement with preparations for the office. The two paragraphs presenting this topic are based on questions relating to Cormac's own youth. In enumerating his habits as a young man, all carefully designed to cultivate a reputation for maturity and shrewdness, he adds that 'it is through those habits that the young become old and kingly warriors' (§7.27). Ó Cathasaigh laments the absence of legendary episodes in what he regards as a reply set in general terms (1972: 60). Indeed it is.

It is intended as advice on how to behave before assuming power, not as an autobiographical account of princely heroics. No doubt, Henry V could have benefited from this advice, rather than consorting with Falstaff. The requirements for success, which actually open the text itself in a paragraph of 46 lines, contain all the by now familiar enjoiners about truth and justice, but add new advice about enriching society. A Christian influence is evident through two perfunctory references to God. Indeed, the conclusion to the paragraph asserts 'it is through the truth of a ruler

that God gives all that', i.e. peace and abundance. But these sentiments are pious additions to the text and in no way affect its otherwise pagan provenance.

The requirements for assuming office are spelled out in a short paragraph (§ 5), but manage to compress ten qualifications into a clear definition of what it takes to make a king. Having entered office, the duties are explained in a long paragraph of 27 lines, in what are described as 'the duties of a lord towards tribes' (§2.31). It can be inferred that a higher king is in mind for the expression *fri túatha* is used in the original Irish. It needs to be said at once that the duties, although fearsome, have the common theme of consolidating peace, planting law, protecting the just, pursuing justice and bringing everyone under the law. There is a democratic twist to these sentiments that suggests there was much more to early Irish society than some historians have realised. There is meat here for some young hungry political scientist.

The section on kingship closes with a reply to a question: how should Cairbre behave. The qualities described are essentially those regarding the demeanour a king should adopt in a variety of circumstances. 'Be proud with the proud lest anyone make you tremble' (§30.4) gives a good flavour of the political advice on offer.

The second section, on the personality of the king, opens with one of the longest paragraphs (51 lines), in answer to the question: what are the proper qualities of a leader. In this case, the qualities expressed, for 23 lines, follow a formula of *rop* 'let him be' plus an adjective. After an interruption, the *rop* formula is resumed but, this time, with a phrase. The break in the pattern suggests two or more authors at work sometime before the present manuscript compilation, and if the material was copied directly from the *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, then the original composition would be very early indeed.

That said, the paragraph defies brief analysis. It does, however, repeat some of the duties as qualities, e.g. 'let him love truth, let him give true judgements', and contains a complex mixture of politics – 'let him be attended by few in secret councils' – ethics and even the social graces, plus short references to the need for a social conscience.

On princely behaviour (§§11 and 12), the first rule of thumb is that it's better to be sure than sorry, i.e. don't start what cannot be finished properly, for such failures 'are a crime in the gatherings of the world' (§11.14). The second is about those qualities which are 'hateful before God and man' (§12.18) in the public conduct of the prince, and which are to be avoided at all cost. To these are added in paragraph 29 a second set of undesirable personality traits, which, in the end, focus on how to avert unreasonable expectations in the public mind or how to avoid being overthrown by enemies. These are precautionary in tone and full of political common sense; interestingly, each precept consists of opposites which are later explained in terms of their consequences – 'be not too harsh, you will be broken; if you be too feeble, you will be crushed' (§29.9, §29.16–17).

This section on the king's personality could be said to conclude with two paragraphs which are widely separated in the text (§§4 and 34), but which, in dealing with the matter of personal staff, come straight out of a Human Resources Manager's manual. The message is simple: do not put square pegs in round holes; surround yourself with those best fitted for the task assigned.

The third section has been called 'The ruler', and in many ways is the core of the *speculum* for it concentrates on the very stuff of kingcraft. Paragraph 19, which runs to a page, can be regarded as the basic ground rules for a ruler. Although it is one of the few answers without any indication of the question, the theme is clearly related to success as a king. A notable feature of the paragraph

is that all the instructions are cast in the negative, thus aping Cú Chulainn's advice to Lugaid. Essentially, the king is to be above the herd and to act as a unifying force in society, i.e. 'be not the laughing stock in an assembly' (§19.13) and 'do not be a leader in strife' (§19.19).

Paragraphs 25 and 26, here described as relating to politics, are both short, but to the point. Paragraph 25 specifically relates to what could be called parliamentary behaviour, as it answers a question about the worst form of arguing before an assembly, with the best form of argument to be understood by implication. The advice can be summed up in the precept that 'playing a dangerous game' (§25.10) is bad politics, i.e. don't take unjustifiable risks. Similarly, in paragraph 26, the worst practice in pleading is briefly summarised, and the tone of the advice can be caught in the belief being expressed that 'violence in discussion' and 'discussion without reason' are bad for debate, maxims that might be repeated on occasion with advantage by the Ceann Comhairle in the Dáil.

Finally, three paragraphs (§§22–24), can be characterised as advising the new king in the discharge of his judicial functions by warning him to be vigilant against certain types of pleading. These could be called guidelines for detecting bad evidence, and might be of interest to the distinguished chairmen of various tribunals.

Inevitably, Cormac's instructions include long dissertations on the vagaries of human nature, and as expected of an old man who has seen it all, the message has all to do with weaknesses, follies, deceit and sharp practice. In the thematic restructuring of the text proposed here, these are gathered together from a number of paragraphs, which have been reassembled as Section 4. While they make for a woeful reading, e.g. 'everyone is a friend until it comes to debts' (§31.4), they are lightened by Cormac's descriptions of personality types in paragraphs 32 and 33.

While relatively short, these paragraphs are profound; the first describes those most open to ridicule, and hence to be shunned, and the second those likely to be the least dependable when it matters most, and hence to be avoided. A modern psychologist would hardly disagree with any of the conclusions. Thus fortified against the worst types in society, the new king can set off on his career clad in the invaluable armoury of what could be called Cormac's cynicism.

The concluding section draws together the sort of proverbial wisdom to which Smith has referred. In one sense, this is out of place, since some of Cormac's observations are those that could be heard in a country pub late at night, such as paragraph 17 on the weather, and 18 on housekeeping. Then again, some could be justified as practical advice, such as paragraph 21 on maintaining good health (*mens sana in corpore sano*). And the three closing paragraphs could be excused as the final ruminations on life, with Cairbre acting as an early Gay Byrne.

Paragraph 16, however, running to nearly four pages of vituperation against women, genuinely seems at odds with the purpose and tone of the instructions. It is also at odds with the answer to the question that prompts it: what is the sweetest thing Cormac has heard (§10). He gives three replies, the last of which is 'a lady's invitation to her pillow' (§10.6). This would seem a truer reflection of his views, especially as it is counterpoised with his answer in the previous paragraph to the question as to the worst thing he has ever seen. In this case there is only one reply: 'faces of foes in a battle field' (§9.3). The contrast between the best and the worst could not be starker, or more human. For the sake of feminist well-being, and Cormac's reputation, the treatise on women is best left aside.

All that said, *Tecosca Cormaic* is as profound a piece of political advice as a new king could desire and is of enduring value to politicians, whatever their circumstances. It has suffered in three respects. First, its structure seems haphazard; the absence of a good editor greatly weakens the force

of what is a remarkable dissertation on the art of ruling. Second, despite its continuing popularity in medieval Ireland and the emergence of what could be called the 'Cult of Cormac', it disappeared more or less from the mainstream of European political thought, a fate it shared with many other Irish writings for reasons best left unsaid. Last, it has virtually gone ignored since Meyer published the text and its translation. 'Cormac's Instructions' deserved better than this. There is a book to be written yet that would restore it to its rightful place in the history of Irish and European political thought. It is immaterial whether Cormac wrote it or not. What can be said with confidence is that the 'Instructions' represent Irish political thought around AD 700 at the latest, and are testimony to the culture of our early society. That is their real value. It should be realised.

Senbríathra Fíthail

Smith's theory, it will be recalled, was that the *Tecosca* were no more than 'popular proverbial literature' (1930: 33). If that theory has any validity, then certainly the *Senbríathra Fíthail* (*SF*) would be its strongest corroboration. Ascribed to Fíthail, the chief brehon of Cormac, and reputed to be a jurist as distinguished as Morann, the text is truly an anthology of sententious sayings, as its title suggests. With the exception of one section, the text lacks the questions and answers structure evident in the *Audacht Morainn* and *Tecosca Cormaic*, has no ostensible purpose in mind and assuredly does not purport to be political advice to a prince. As such, it fails to meet the criteria laid down by Smith and others for being included in the genre of *Speculum Principum*.

In short, *Senbríathra Fíthail* is similar to O'Rahilly's 'A miscellany of Irish proverbs' (1922), to which Smith acknowledged his indebtedness when editing and translating the *Senbríathra* text (1928: 3). There is a complication, however, in dismissing Fíthail from the canon of the *speculum*. As Smith notes (1928: 2), the text includes material to be found in the *Tecosca Cormaic*, such as sections 6, 7, 8 and 9 dealing with pleading, behaviour, and human nature. Furthermore, Section 8 of the *SF* is prefaced with a question presumably from Fíthail's son, Flaithrí, who is not identified in the text (but is identified by Keating, see Comyn and Dinneen 1902-14, vol. 2, 338) according to Smith (1927: 430) in discussing another *Tecosca*.

Smith concludes that the compiler of *Tecosca Cormaic* pillaged the *SF* 'for his own purposes' (1928: 2) and put the advice presented directly into the mouth of Cormac, a plagiarism he also unearths in other compilers. But it is equally possible that the charge can be reversed, and that the anthologist of *SF* is the guilty party. Either way, it does not detract from the argument that *SF* is no more than what Smith had termed 'popular proverbial literature' and, consequently, should find no place in the *speculum* genre. This may prove to be faulty conclusion, perhaps a serious one, but for the moment the content of *Senbríathra Fíthail* is gently left aside as it falls outside the scope of this essay.

Aibidil Luigne maic Éremóin

This particular text, which Smith (who published it as *Aibidil Cuigne maic Emoin*, on which, see Kelly, 1988: 286) assigns to the third century group, is 'but a miscellaneous collection of legal and proverbial maxims which can be traced in many cases to other sources' (Smith 1928a: 45). In a short but complex sentence, Smith conveys his belief that the name Cuigne mac Emoin is obviously not that of the original author of the sayings, but of the scribe who brought them together from various sources (1928a: 45, but see Kelly, 1988: 286). He offers no reason for distinguishing between the

author and scribe or for believing that the original text had been scattered and required subsequent restoration.

The only copy of the text to be found is in the Yellow Book of Lecan and was first edited by Meyer; this is the version which Smith further edited and translated (1928a). That the Alphabet, as Smith calls it, does not fall into the category of the *speculum*, is immediately evident from his analysis of its content. He argues that it falls into three sections: the first a group of legal maxims; the second a group of *tecosc* passages; and the third a smaller number of proverbial sayings. On inspection, the second section can more accurately be described as proverbial wisdom, being nothing other than a random collection of sayings put down without any discernible structure or stated purpose.

Smith, however, believes that the 'close adherence to formula, the poetic structure, as well as other considerations, make it certain that the *Aibidil* belong to the relatively large number of texts of the *Speculum* or *Fürstenspiegel* type which have come down to us' (1928a: 46). In particular, he holds that the maxim 'enduring is every ruler by whom justice is achieved' (§2.68), closely links the *Aibidil* with the other *Tecosca* texts, a group to which it must have originally belonged. The adage comes nearer to the spirit of the old *Tecosca rí*g than do other texts which bear that name (1928a: 68).

Those comments by Smith give a clue to his definition of a *speculum* as employed here; it is a question of formula, poetic structure and subject matter. The specific characteristic of political advice to a prince is omitted. But since that is the defining purpose of the genre, even according to Smith himself in his 1927 overview, the *Aibidil* cannot be included in the family of wisdom texts whereby an aspiring or new prince is instructed on what to do and what not to do as king.

Notwithstanding some similarities in form and content with the *Tecosca*, the *Aibidil* must be gently placed alongside the *Senbríathra Fíthail* under the heading of work for somebody else. Fortunately, Smith himself had agreed with this: 'Strictly speaking, this text does not belong to the *tecosc* group...there is no internal evidence that it was the work of a father or tutor for the instruction of his son or lord – in fact, we may safely conclude that it performed no such office' (1927: 431-2). It didn't.

Bríathra Flainn *Fína

The same fate, it has to be confessed, must befall the *Bríathra Flainn *Fína*. This text was first assigned to the seventh and eighth century group by Smith and is generally ascribed to Flann Fína, otherwise known as Aldfrith, King of Northumbria, who died in 705. Later, Smith rethought his dating of the text, and assigned it to the third-century group (1927: 433) on the grounds that the form and whole tenor of the text were distinctly of the pagan tradition, and inconsonant with all that was known of the Christian King Aldfrith. The text was edited by Smith in the second half of his 'The *Senbhriathra Fithail* and related texts' (1928: 61-92).

Hull edited a different text also attributed to Flann Fína (1929) shortly after Smith's second thoughts and argued that it was unmistakably religious in tone and spirit, which indeed it is, but also argued that it could not have been written by Flann Fína since the language was Middle Irish (1929: 96-7). Smith vigorously defended himself in his views of the text he edited (1930: 32-3), but the dispute is of little interest here. The *Bríathra Flainn *Fína* no more belongs to the wisdom texts than does a Redemptorist Sermon on the torments of Hell, or the Vision of Adamnán for that matter. For a recent edition of the *Bríathra* and a detailed analysis see Ireland (1999).

Three poems

Smith appears to be the only authority including three poems from the seventh–ninth centuries as part of the *speculum* genre. I have not been able to unearth the original texts and can do no more here than briefly summarise Smith’s analysis (1927: 434–6).

The first poem (*Díambad messe bad rí réil*), ascribed to Dubh dá Thuath (†783), is of thirty-seven stanzas and is steeped in the pagan tradition, drawing on earlier *tecosca*. The second (*Cert cech rí g co réil*), written by Fothad na Canóine (floruit late eighth–early–ninth century), has a more Christian tone and seems to have been addressed to Áed Oirdnide on his inauguration as king of Tara in AD 815. This would suggest it belongs to the wisdom texts. The third poem in the series (*Ro-cúala, la nech légas libru*) is attributed to St Moling (†696) and found only in the Book of Leinster. It contains ‘instructions to a prince’ for king Móenach of Munster. In Smith’s view, this brief poem of seven stanzas is the earliest of the three and in the content of its closing two verses belongs strictly to the *tecosca* tradition.

Whether these poems should be included among the wisdom texts must await another day. At first sight, their value seems to lie in the hint that the *tecosca* tradition lived on long after the period in which it is thought to have arisen.

Survival of the tradition

The durability of the tradition of wisdom texts is attested by the fact that Smith traces a continuous line from the *Cath Maige Léna* and the *Cath Maige Rath* (in which kings are harangued by their foster fathers on the eve of battle) down to the eighteenth century *Comhairle na bárrsgolóige dá mhac* ‘The advice of the wise man to his son’. Indeed, there seems to have been some renewed academic interest among Gaelic scholars in the genre around the turn of the nineteenth century (Smith 1927: 437).

Pride of place goes to Theophilus O’Flanagan who founded the Gaelic Society of Dublin in 1807 and published an English and Latin translation of the inauguration ode, if such it was, of Donnchadh Ó Briain, fourth Earl of Thomond the following year. The ode was composed by Thaddy Mac Brody, or MacBrodin (Tadhg mac Dáire Mhic Bhruaideadha), in the seventeenth century. Smith correctly draws attention to O’Flanagan’s doubts as to whether the poem ever formed part of the inauguration ceremony (1927: 436, fn. 2).

O’Flanagan, as his long, erudite and elegant introduction to the poem demonstrates, was an authority on Irish history, folklore and literature who cannot so easily be dismissed from the groves of academe. He exudes that immediate and deep familiarity with this subject that so characterised O’Curry, both of them native speakers steeped in the Gaelic tradition. O’Flanagan is confidently assured in stating that Mac Brody was in conformity ‘with the ancient usage of Ireland which entitled the bard to advise his prince’ (1808: 27). He furthermore traces the history of the manuscript with precision and recounts how it came into his possession. Not only does he translate the ode into two languages in verse, he adds copious footnotes explaining the text, such as when Mac Brody makes reference to Feradach and Morann (1808: 39–40), and gives a scholarly, credible explanation for the background to the *Audacht*, which is not found in any modern criticism.

Suffice it to say that the poem faithfully reflects the *tecosca* genre, and commences with those precepts on the role and duties of a king which are so deeply embedded in the Indo-European

culture. The concept of the truth manifesting itself in justice leaps out from the ode (lines 149–52, page 45):

*Daily attend, my prince, thy people's cause,
For this thy duty to dispense the laws,
No easy task, with justice to decide,
The tedious office yet you must abide.*

And if he should fail, the terrible consequences are spelled out in familiar detail: war, famine, death, with nature in revolt. The influence of the *Audacht Morainn* and *Tecosca Cormaic* are easily discerned throughout the inauguration ode, even down to the advice of choosing subordinates well: 'to men of violence entrust no power' (line 209, page 48). The poet, in fact, makes specific reference to both texts, while drawing on other apposite historical references back to the earliest times.

Conclusion

The point to be made is that whether the poem was composed in the eleventh or sixteenth century is immaterial to the fact that at the beginning of the nineteenth it was being presented as part of a living tradition, and as being representative of a continuous culture stretching back to the beginning of Irish history. This fact is cause for reflection. It suggests that the *tecosca* may have played a larger role in framing or reflecting political and societal values than the corpus of extant texts suggests.

There are some tantalising hints about other *tecosca* in the literature which, however, do not figure in any of the listings given earlier. If unearthed and analysed they could well add to the corpus of material available and help flesh out the theory. It could also be the case that Bardic poetry contains examples of inauguration odes, per se, which might contain *tecosc*-like passages or allusions to kingcraft. These are no more than instinctive reactions to both the original texts examined here and the critical literature; they may well prove false. But Mac Brody's poem is hardly an aberration; it seems more like a representative of a class of literature than a historical oddity. It should be taken as a signpost to material for further research.

It would be worthwhile on these grounds to revisit Irish literature from its earliest days down to the famine, to see if other wisdom texts exist. This is a project that should be encouraged, for the cultural rewards would be great. But then, the search for wisdom is its own reward.

Within the strict limits that a *tecosc* text should consist of political advice to a prince, it would seem that only four texts from early Irish literature successfully pass the test. The *Audacht Morainn* and the *Tecosca Cormaic* are consciously intended for that task and are stand-alone as literary compositions. The *Bríathartheosc Con Culainn* and the *Tecosc Cuscraid* are each essentially part of a larger narrative but, while incidental, are self-contained and appropriate to the task immediately to hand. Despite these differences, the four texts display a thematic unity that goes beyond mere coincidence. Something else is at work—the same mindset, a common cultural instinct, a shared frame of reference, a standard world view.

The ideology which pervades the wisdom texts is grounded in medieval Irish society's view of the cosmic order. That has explained their continued and central emphasis on the sacral role of

the king, on the need for him to be the human manifestation of the truth by ensuring that justice is done. But throughout the wisdom texts this fundamental role is not allowed to obscure the reality that it can only properly be fulfilled by one who is endowed with and also cultivates the necessary regal qualities and the political skills to fulfil it properly.

Politics, kingcraft, statesmanship—however this dimension is to be described—is always present. It is this latter feature which gives the texts that particular quality which marks them off from proverbial wisdom or pious sermonising. Having heard what has been said by a wise and trusted mentor, the prince can truly look into the mirror, and see himself as he should be.

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