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Aislinge Meic Con Glinne: Studies on a Middle Irish tale and its afterlives

Edited by
Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha and Jan Erik Rekdal

2013
ABIGAIL BURNYEAT

*Filidecht nó légend? Compilatio*, commentary and critical practice in the B text of Aislinge Meic Con Glinne

The following paper will focus on an analysis of a series of differences between the B and H texts of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* which may give us some insight into both the creative and the interpretive approaches taken by the creator of the B text towards his exemplar. It will focus on areas in which the author/compiler's work demonstrates an engagement with literary theoretical concepts deriving from the medieval grammatical commentary tradition, examining his reworking and rearrangement of the narrative in the context of grammatical concepts of *ordinatio* and *explanatio*, and exploring the critical stances revealed in his addition of a paradigmatic *accessus* prologue, and his designation of a specific section of the text as *řáball*. Finally, it will analyse the significance of the text's characterization of Aniér mac Con Glinne himself as *scolaige* and *mac léiginn*.

As is demonstrated in Erich Poppe's article in the present volume, we see in the B text of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* a number of indications of its author/compiler's engagement with the techniques and terminology of medieval Irish literary thought. Its use of literary terms and critical structures, its deliberate presentation of the content of *AMCG* as *fabula*, rather than *historia*, and its sophisticated reshaping of the narrative materials of its source reveal a complex and subtle engagement with the meta-literary concerns of medieval literate culture (Poppe 2012: 000).

As Poppe has dealt with the literary terminology and structures in some detail, this paper will use his conclusions as a starting point from which to examine some aspects of the texts of *AMCG* which might further illuminate their debts to a conceptual framework informed by medieval literary theory and to a tradition of theoretical approaches to textual culture shaped and transmitted by grammatical teaching. In doing this I hope to emphasize the significance of the content as well as the form of the developments seen in the B text's version of *AMCG*, and to explore how a greater understanding of the approaches and techniques used by the B text's redactor may give us new insights into his own perceptions and interpretation of his material.

The textual tradition of *AMCG* places us in a position to develop insights into the activity and interests of the B text's redactor. The texts of the two extant manuscript copies, here called B (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 2130 (*Leabhar Breac*), pp 213-219) and H (Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337, pp 732-743), appear to derive ultimately from a common source, conventionally described as the X text, and believed to date from the late
eleventh or early twelfth century (Jackson 1990: xxv). The key aspect of this
textual history for our present purposes is the relationship of the two texts to
their common exemplar, rather than the absolute dating. Although Henry
Jefferies has suggested that the H text represents an abridged version of the
X text in contrast to the B text’s elaboration of it (Jefferies 1995-97: 10),
most other scholars have tended to agree with Wollner’s suggestion in his
introduction to Meyer’s edition that the H text should be seen as the closest
to the source text, and the B text as a reworked and redeveloped version
(Meyer 1892: xiii). Wollner’s opinion was that H represents an ‘older and
purer stage of the story’, and this was shared by Jackson, who said that ‘H’s
version is economical, straightforward, logical, and well-constructed in its
sequence of events, though there are a few contradictions and doublets,
whereas B is diffuse, illogical, and very badly constructed. It is evident that
H represents a relatively primary construction and B a secondary one.’
(Jackson 1990: xxx).

There is, of course, a series of value judgements present here which is
indicative of a tradition of critical thought predating more recent emphases
on the value of medieval narrative techniques and aesthetics. There is also a
certain irony in the fact that though there seems to have been a general
perception in early scholarly approaches to the text that the H text is a
‘better’ version of the story, the B text is the one that has gained, whether by
virtue of its length, or of its earlier manuscript date, a much greater currency
and far more editorial attention. Nevertheless, at face value, the attitude
shown by early scholarship to the B text is that in comparison to the
relatively straightforward H text, it is high-flown, over-blown, exaggerated
and erratic.

If one withdraws from the value judgements implicit in Jackson’s
assessment of the relationship between the two versions, one can suggest
that his analysis is an indication that we can take the construction of B to be
a development from an X version to which H bears a much closer
resemblance. We then have an opportunity to use H as a control, allowing us
a view into the creative processes of the author/compiler of the B text as he
developed and reworked his exemplar. I think we can also go further: by
treating the two versions as separate texts, or *scripta*, to use the term
employed by John Dagenais,1 and by examining the variations that appear in
the B text, it may be possible to get some sense of the interests and
motivations of the particular author/compiler who produced it. The places
where the B text departs from the H text give us, in a sense, a window into

1 Dagenais (1994: xvI: 13-17) stresses the need to re-examine traditional attitudes to medieval
text production, and to consider individual copies of medieval texts as revealing not just a
version of the text itself, more or less successful in its representation of a semi-idealized
original (‘good’ or ‘bad’ in the more usual terminology of editorial practice), but instead an
artifact which presents us with scribal and authorial attitudes to the text, hand in hand with the
text itself.
its author's working practice; we can gain some idea of his response to his
text, his reading and interpretation of it. His version can be seen, then, not
just as a creative development of his source material but as a critical
response to it.

The innovations in the B text that will be examined in the present paper
are those which appear to be indicative of traditions of medieval critical
thought informed by what one might term the 'institution' of *grammatica*.
Recent scholarly work shows that we should think of medieval *grammatica*
as something far broader than modern conceptions of grammar as essentially
confined to the description and prescription of language; in practice,
medieval *grammatica* was regarded as an integral part of the school
curriculum at all levels of study, and not restricted to the elementary stages
of linguistic training. It is within the structures of grammatical training that
we should locate medieval attention to the principles of interpretation of
texts, at a variety of levels ranging from the specific activities of lexical
examination and textual analysis to broader conceptual issues such as the
interpretation of allegory, the use of rhetorical techniques, and the analysis
of genre. *Grammatica* also, perhaps significantly for our purposes, embraced
the disciplines involved in the creation of texts, not simply the skills
involved in composition, but also methodologies of arranging, adapting and
compiling pre-existing material. An investigation of innovations in the B text
of *Aislinge Meic Conglaine* that appear to engage with approaches to textual
material informed by these medieval theoretical structures should, then, be
revealing in regard to our understanding of the interpretive approach that the
creator of the B text might have taken towards his source material, and
should also shed some light on the creative and compilatory strategies used
to develop his version of the text.

One of the key mechanisms for the delivery of grammatical critical
commentary was the paradigmatic *accessus* prologue introduction, derived
from the Latin commentary tradition (Irvine 1994: 121). Irish usage of the
Servian and Donatan prologue categories *locus*, *tempus*, *persona* and *causa
scríbhendí* was well established (Poppe 2005: 308-9), and the B text's use of
this paradigmatic formula to introduce the tale is a clear indication that its
author is engaging with the tale at a critical level, using techniques drawn
from the commentary practices of *grammatica*:

Cethardai as c[h]uintesta da cach elathain, iss ed ass c[h]uintesta don eladain-
se, i. loce [7 persa] 7 aímsir 7 fáth aíirc. Locce don eladain-se Corcach mór
Muman, 7 persa di Anér Mac Con Glídhe di Éoganacht Glannmacht. 1 n-
aímsir C[h]athail meic Phhuine meic Con cen Gairm nó meic Con cen

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3 See Reynolds (1996), Irvine (2006). For *grammatica* in an Irish context see especially Poppe
Máthair do-rónad. Is hé didiu fíth airicce a dènma i. de díchor in luin c[h]raes bhoi i mbrágait C[h]uadhail meic Fhinguine. (Jackson 1990: 1 §1)

The four things to be asked of every composition are to be asked of this composition, that is, place, and person, and time, and cause of invention. The place of this composition is great Cork of Munster, and its author is Aniér mac Con Glinne of the Eóganacht Glennannach. It was made in the time of Cathal mac Finguine, son of Cú cen Gairm, or son of Cú cen Máthair. Its cause of invention was to banish the demon of gluttony that was in the throat of Cathal mac Finguine.³

While the addition of the prologue introduction is striking in its own right, the material within it also repays some further investigation. Firstly, the designation of the text as elada presents some immediate questions as to the way in which it was perceived by its author. Elada is a term used elsewhere to describe texts of relatively high status, and appears to be used to identify them as distinct from a simple scéil; though some usages appear to refer to literary or poetic art in a broad sense, the term also appears to have a more specific semantic connotation in relation to advanced study and craft, particularly advanced study in a learned literary context.⁴ If that is the way in which it is being used here, it may give us some insight into the author’s response to AMCG and the interpretive stance his approach reveals.

The critical approach apparent in this prologue also reflects the degree to which medieval Irish practice had developed characteristic ways of handling these commentary techniques. One aspect of the introduction to AMCG presented in this prologue material that may reveal a particularly Irish slant is the apparent self-reflexiveness of the information provided. The use of accessus topics in Latin grammatical commentary is generally structured to pay lip-service at least to the presentation of genuine information within the prologue structure, the Servian accessus to the Aeneid, for example, telling us that Virgil is the name of the author, and giving the causa scribendi as a commission by the Emperor Augustus (Thilo and Hagen 1878-1902: 8). In the accessus to Aislinge Meic Con Glinne, however, the information provided is drawn from the internal narrative content of the tale itself. We are told that the author is Mac Con Glinne himself, the principal character of the story; that the time of the text’s composition is that of Cathal mac Finguine, the king whose troubles with a lon crais, or demon of gluttony, form the subject of the story; that the place of its composition is Cork, which is also the story’s setting; and that the causa scribendi is in fact the central element of the story’s plot: the banishment of the lon crais that was in the throat of Cathal. This self-reflexive analysis, using internal narrative content

³ All translations of passages from Aislinge Meic Con Glinne are my own.
⁴ DIL, s.v. elada, E.103a-b; see also the discussion in Burnyeat 2013: 293).
as a source for commentary, occurs elsewhere in medieval Irish examples of these paradigmatic *accessus* structures; for instance, the collection of material relating to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* contained in London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782, situates its copy of the *Finding of the Táin* as a preatory opening to its copy of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, adding a paradigmatic prologue introduced with similar formulae, and clearly making use of a comparable interpretative strategy in its provision of information:

*Cethardó connadas* da gach eladhin is cuinniosta don eladhin si na Táin. Loc dí cétamus lige Fergus mac Róích áit in rohadnucht ar Mag nÁi. Tempus autem Diarmait mac Ceraill in regno Hibernie. Perso dí Fergus mac Róích, ar is hé rothirechan dona h-éibh archeana. A tucaid sgridhinn dono dia n-dechaid Sencáin Torpést cona trí cóica rigécius mnáib mucual seó ingenuib lóo do shaigid Guaire ríg Connacht. (Meyer 1905: 2)

The four things that are to be asked of every composition are to be asked of this composition of the *Táin*. Its place, first, was the grave of Fergus mac Róích wherein he was buried on Mag nÁi. Its time was when Diarmait mac Cerball held the kingship of Ireland. Its person was Fergus mac Róích, for it was he who recited it to the poets. Its occasion (cause) of writing was when Sencán Torpést, with his three fifties of royal poets, accompanied by wives, sons and daughters, went to visit Guaire, king of Connacht.\(^5\)

Another significant feature of the introductory material added to the B text, paralleled elsewhere in the Irish tradition, is the way in which the prologue heading *causa scribendi* or its Irish counterpart *fáth airice* appears to act as a prompt for the provision of additional story material. Thus the passage which explains how the demon of glutonygot into Cathal mac Finguine’s throat (it was smuggled in via apples sent as a romantic gift from Ligach, the daughter of a competing king) is introduced by reusing the phrase *fáth airice* to introduce this background material relevant to the narrative:

Is hé trí fáth airice in luin c[h]rais i mbrágait C[h]athail meic Flinghuiné, dáig boí cét-shercus émaise dófría Liggaig ingín Moile Dúin, rí Oíllig, 7 derbhshúr-side do Fhergal mac Moile Dúin, rí Oíllig beó; 7 bhcosnaid Érenn e'àide an inbhaíd-sìn i n-agaid Cathail meic Flinghuiné, amal is f[h]ollus a h-ímarbágí in dá chuilech dú ndéanta in dì chambrand i nÁchad Ur saindrud... (Jackson 1990: 1 §3)

The cause of the demon of glutony in the throat of Cathal mac Finguine was because he had a case of first-love-in-absence for Ligach, daughter of Mael Dùin, king of Ailech; and she was sister to Fergal, son of Mael Dùin, also King of Ailech, and he was then contending for the kingship of Ireland.

\(^{5}\) The translation is my own.
against Cathal mac Finguine, as is clear from the quarrel of the two hags, when they made the two crooked quatrains, at Freshford to be precise...

This expansive use of the prologue format as a mechanism that could be extended to introduce additional narrative content recalls the way in which the early Irish collection that makes greatest use of the paradigmatic prologue as a critical technique, the Irish *Liber Hymnorum*, also extends and expands the material placed under the category headings. Supplementary narrative is added to fill out additional background information, or simply to provide alternative versions. The preface to the hymn *Altus Prosator*, for example, uses the category *causa* as trigger for an extensive piece of narrative about Columba's life in Iona, some of which is directly connected to the description of the composition and poetic form of the hymn, but some of which is simply historical and anecdotal narrative, as the following extract shows:

Locus huius hymni Hí; tempus Aedán meic Gabráin rig Alban, ocus Àeda meic Ainnmerich rig Herenn; Muricius autem vel Foccas iss-e ba ri Roman tunc; perso Colum Cille de nobile genero Scotorum, Columba dicitur ut 'estote prudentes sicut serpentes et simplices sicut columbae'; causa quia voluit Deum laudare. Per septim annos hunc ymnum scrutans in Nigra Cellula sine lumine .i. ar chuinhid dífguda i n-inad catha Cule Dremne do brisiud for Diarmait mac Cerbaill, ocus na catha aile ro-briste tre n-a fochun. Uel ut alii dicunt, is co hoporn dorónad .i. aairle lathe ro-bói Colum Cille i nHi, ocus ni bái nech oca acht Bóithin, ocus ni bói biad oceu acht criathar corca... (Bernard and Atkinson 1898: 62)

The place of this hymn, Iona; the time, that of Aedán macc Gabráin, king of Alba, and Àed macc Ainnmerich, king of Ireland; Mauritius or Phocas, on the other hand, it is he who was king of the Romans then; the person (author) Colum Cille of the noble race of the Scoti, called *columba* (dove) as in 'be wise as a serpent and simple as a dove'; the cause (of composition) because he wished to praise God. Searching out this hymn for seven years in a black cell without light, i.e. to beg forgiveness on account of gaining the battle of Cúil Dremne over Diarmait mac Cerbaill, and the other battles that were gained because of him. Or as others say, it was suddenly made, i.e. one day Colum Cille was in Iona, and there was no one with him except Baithin, and they had no food except a sieve of oats...^6

It seems, then, that the reading of AMCG with which the creator of the B text provided us situates it firmly in the kind of literary context in which the use of critical techniques belonging to the grammatical commentary tradition, derived from Latin educational methods and developed within an Irish literary context, was appropriate. The additional materials in the B text

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^6 The translation is my own.
version continue to signal this mode of approach throughout later sections of the text.

As we have seen, the grammatical approach is evident in the use of accessus topics presented in the B text's paradigmatic prologue; it may, however, be possible to identify additional evidence for a grammatical analytical underpinning to the creation of the B text's version of AMCG. One of the concerns often reflected in grammatical schemata for critical analysis is an emphasis on the classification and ordering of the material of narrative texts, with specific stress on categories such as numerus, ordo, and explanatio. These issues are often observed at a macro-level in the context of compilatio, but are also presented as elements to be defined in ipso opere, within the text itself (Irvine 1994: 123).

A concern with the order and definition of the elements of the text is clearly apparent in the B text of AMCG, and is strikingly more evident than in the H text. This interest in order and definition can be seen most clearly in the passages concerning the vision material, in which one finds the elaborate fantasies of different kinds of food for which this story is most famous. The varying arrangement of these aisling passages, particularly the poems, is one of the most striking differences between the two extant versions of AMCG, and so offers a view into the substantial editorial and critical activity undertaken by the creator of the B text.

In summary, the H-text's version of the vision section of the tale is as follows: under threat of execution for satirising the hospitality offered to him in Cork, Mac Con Glinne receives a vision in a dream, told to him by a cleric called Mura. We are not at this stage given any insight into the content of the vision, but we are told that Mura instructs Mac Con Glinne to recite it in the presence of King Cathal in order to cure him of his demon of gluttony. The next day, Mac Con Glinne manages to obtain a stay of execution and engineers a situation in which he is allowed to recite the vision in front of Cathal. His recital includes poetic material and prose narrative, a substantial proportion of which also appear in the B text, and at the close of this 'reportage' of the vision, Cathal's cure is described. The only moments in these passages in which the formal status of this material is alluded to are in the introductory verses of the poems, in the passing references that Mura and Mac Con Glinne make to the material in dialogue, where they identify it as an aisling (Meyer 1892: 116), and in contextualising lines such as the following:

Aislinge atcondare arráir,
mo dul ar fecht cíis no triúr (Meyer 1892: 118)

I saw a vision last night,
I set out in a band of two or three
Aislingi atconnarc arrír,
ba cùin gèbenn (ibid.)

I saw a vision last night,
it was a fair captivity.

In contrast to this straightforward presentation of the vision material, the B text makes a number of adaptations and additions, many of which are suggestive of an interest in the kinds of classificatory and ordering issues represented in grammatical interpretive schemata. The changes made are significant: Mac Con Glinne’s interlocutor in the H text, the cleric Mura, is replaced by ‘aingel Dé’ (an angel of God) Jackson 1990: 11), and the elements that make up the vision sections are broken up, re-arranged, and added to, as well as being interspersed with sections of narrative that give further indications of the author/compiler’s attitude to his material. Most importantly, we see a strong interest in defining the different sections of the vision material, establishing which parts of the narrative should be considered as the actual vision shown to Mac Conglinne by marking them with authorial statements such as ‘at-berut is òthá sin sí s ro fhailisg in t-aingel dò (they say that what the angel revealed to him is from there onward)’ (Jackson 1990: 14), and dividing the rest of the material into a cennphort (a term which appears to correlate with Latin prologus, and is thus again indicative of the terminology of grammatical criticism) which we are specifically told is separate from the vision, and a separate section defined as a fàball, which is again marked by overt authorial statements. These adaptations will now be outlined more fully below.

We find both the introduction of the angel as interlocutor, delivering the vision, and the identification of Mac Conglinne’s own composed element as a cennphort, in the opening passages of the vision section:


He slept there until midnight. Then an angel of God came to him on the pillar stone, and began to reveal the vision to him... Afterwards he shaped a little cennphort of his own which might be suitable to relate what had been revealed to him, and he remained there till morning, with the cennphort of his vision ready..

The distinction created between the vision ‘proper’ and Mac Con Glinne’s mediating introduction is also emphasized in the exchange between
Manchín and Mac Con Glinne after Mac Con Glinne delivers his slanderous genealogical account of Manchín’s ancestry, expressed in a pedigree of food:


‘Aislingi do-m-árfas-[s]a,
taidbsi ingnad indisimm
i Dhiadnaise chách...’ (Jackson 1990: 14 §32)

‘That does me no harm, Mac Con Glinne,” said Manchín. ‘Little you cared about slandering me and the Church when you composed a food pedigree to commemorate me, the like of which was never made for anyone before me, and which will not be made till Doomsday.’ ‘It is no slander at all, cleric,’ said Mac Con Glinne, ‘but a vision that was shown to me last night. That is its cemphort. The vision is not unfitting, and, if respite or delay be granted to me, I will relate the vision.’ And Manchín said, as before, that he would not grant respite. But Mac Con Glinne began to tell his vision, and they say that from there onward is what the angel revealed to him, as he said:

‘A vision has been shown to me,
a wonderful manifestation which I relate
in the presence of all...’

Here, in addition to the specific terminology used in the dialogue between the two speakers, we see the inclusion of commentary in an authorial voice, locating the technical distinctions between the vision and the other narrative elements in relation to the order and structure of the text. This authorial definition of the precise boundaries of the vision element is repeated at the end of Mac Con Glinne’s delivery of the verse section identified here as the manifestation from the angel:

Ro indis-[s]ium a aislingi uli ann sin i fiodnaise muitir Corcoraige co roacht a deriud, cen cop é so a deriud, 7 ro fàilsiged do Manchín rath in aislingi. (Jackson 1990: 16 §34)

He then related his entire vision in the presence of the community of Cork until he reached its end, though this is not its end, and the virtue of the vision was revealed to Manchín.
This attention to the demarcation and categorization of specific sections of the text is also visible in the section which the B text designates as a fáball, the elaborate narrative of the phantom Buarannach, or ‘Squitty’, which is contained within Mac Con Glinne’s performance of his vision for Cathal mac Finguine. The section begins with a formal incipit: ‘Incipit do[n] fhiábull sisana budesta (Here now begins the fable)’, and there is a further marking of the status of the segment after a brief narrative preamble: ‘Iarsin dód i cend na fáible (After this he begins the fable)’ (Jackson 1990: 27 §52).

It is tempting to view this expansion and re-arrangement of the vision sections in the B text, in particular the efforts to define, order and identify the material, as a conscious attempt by the author/compiler to structure and make sense of his source, to impose upon it the ordo and provide the explanatio required by the intellectual framework of the grammatical critical approach. While many of the textual devices involved may seem familiar features of medieval Irish narrative text, the opportunity provided by the two texts of AMCG to compare two roughly coeval versions of the same tale allows us to demonstrate that their use is clearly not inevitable. The inclusion of these elements in the B-text version, and their use to structure and define the material, affords us an insight not just into the techniques with which its author/compiler approached the creation of his version, but also into his own interpretative framework and understanding of the text.

Treating the B text as a scriptum in this way, and identifying the interests of its author/compiler through the additional and adapted material not present in the H text, points to a clear interest in the kinds of techniques and interpretive approaches that we would associate with the practice of medieval grammatica. With this indication of the relevance of medieval grammatical commentary and analysis to the B text in mind, we have an inviting opportunity to investigate the further potential of grammatical interpretive frameworks for our own reading and interpretation of the material.

A specific area in which the implications of grammatical readings of the text may prove fruitful is in a further analysis of the aisling and fáball elements outlined above, focused on the B text author/redactor’s potential assessments of and interpretive approaches to the content, rather than the structure, of these sections. Of course grammatical critical analysis was not only concerned with the description of texts at a technical level. It also placed significant emphasis on the need to assess and evaluate content, particularly in respect to the status and nature of the veracity of narrative forms – an equivalent, perhaps, of genre analysis.

The key distinctions made within grammatica in relation to the assessment of narrative material are those between the factual and the fictional, between historia and fabula (Irvine 1994: 239-241). The B-text designation of a section of the vision as fáball suggests that this conceptual framework is being invoked, and I shall return to the ways in which
grammatical theories of *fabula* might contribute to a reading of this section below. First, however, the vision section as a whole may be considered in the context of a further theoretical approach, one which evolved and was deployed *pari passu* with theories of *fabula*: I mean the approach concerned with the evaluation and assessment of different types of dreams and visions.

The long twelfth century saw a heightened interest in this tradition of analysis, one which drew on theoretical structures established by Calcidius, Macrobius, and Gregory the Great, while resting fundamentally on the creation of a series of distinctions between credible and purposeless dream and visionary experiences (Kruger 1992: 134; Peden 1985: 60). Macrobius' commentary *In somnum Scipionis* provided a scale ranging from the *visum*, or deliberate demonic deception, through the kinds of nightmares or *insomnia* caused by too much cheese before bedtime, to *somnia* and *visiones* which could contain real, though disguised, truth, and the *oraculum*, or true vision vouchsafed by God (Stahl 1952: 88). This scale bears an obvious similarity to the theoretical distinctions between different types of *fabula* which shaped critical approaches to literary narrative throughout the middle ages, and which were an important resource for the practitioners of grammatical criticism (Dronke 1985: 26; Kruger 1992: 134). The analogy between the two scales or schemata underlines the significance of dream and vision theory as a tool with which to approach medieval literary dream visions, and while Alison Peden has rightly cautioned against seeing medieval dream and vision literature as a straightforward translation of theory into literary practice (1985: 69-70), it nevertheless seems worth exploring possible resonances of these modes of assessment of visionary content in the presentation of Mac Con Glinne's *aisling*.

The B-text's replacement of the monk Mura as the provider of Mac Con Glinne's vision with the *aingel Dé* does suggest an awareness of the Macrobian stress on the origin of the vision as the source of its validity and authority. One could read this in either of two ways: either that as the author/compiler attempted to rationalise and make sense of his materials, he sought the added status for the vision that its being delivered by a messenger from God would ensure, or that in an attempt to increase the satirical impact of his text, he worked to exaggerate the effect of the ludicrousness of a vision of a world made of food by claiming for it the highest status available.

The likelihood of this theoretical context for the switch is increased by Mac Con Glinne's declaration to Manchín that the vision is not *inchubaid*, 'unfitting' or 'inappropriate' (Jackson 1990: 14). This statement invites contextualisation in a framework in which validity is a key issue for the assessment of visions, particularly as it occurs as part of an exchange in which Mac Con Glinne is emphasising the status of the material he is about to relate. Certainly, the vision (*aislinge*) is presented in the B text as something that belongs to a category open to interpretation:

‘Well, Cathal,’ said Mac Con Glinne, ‘a vision has been shown to me, and I have heard that you are good at judging a vision.’ ‘By my God of Doom!’ exclaimed Cathal, ‘though I should interpret the dreams of the men of the world, I would not interpret yours.’ ‘I vow,’ said Mac Con Glinne, ‘even though you do not interpret it, it shall be told in your presence.’

If the B-text author/compiler is, indeed, revealing his engagement with contemporary theoretical concerns by this reworking of the vision section, his designation of a specific section of the vision as fábail (fabula) is even more worthy of investigation. Can this categorization give us some insight into his view of the material, or into his motivations in reorganizing and retitling it?

As we have seen, the section defined as fábail is embedded within Mac Con Glinne’s performance version of the vision, told to Cathal mac Finguine as part of the cure for his lon crais. It is marked textually at the beginning with a titulus and then an authorial statement indicating the starting point, but appears not to have a concluding titulus or other statement beyond the closing line of the vision section as a whole, ‘Ind Aislinghti ind sin anuas, et reliqua (Thus far the Vision, and the rest)’ (Jackson 1990: 39 §70). The section describes Mac Con Glinne’s meeting with Buarannach, the phantom, and his travel to the land of the Fáthliaig (The Seer-Physician) and the tribes of food; it contains some of the most extravagant and elaborate passages of food-related fantastical description in AMCG as a whole. In terms of its content, it seems to fit appropriately within medieval categorizations of fabula as essentially fictional: it could well be described by definitions such as those provided by Isidore (Etymologiae I, 40.1):

Fabulae vero sunt quae nec factae sunt nec fieri possunt, quia contra naturam sunt. (Lindsay 1911: 46)

Fables are matters which neither happened nor could have happened, since they are contrary to nature.

However, equally extravagant satirical descriptive elements are also found elsewhere within the B text of AMCG, in Mac Con Glinne’s first telling of his vision to the monks of Cork, and in the opening of his address to Cathal, and they are not there designated with the technical term fábail. Why does the author/redactor identify this particular section as fábail and
not the others? While firm conclusions can not be drawn, it seems reasonable to suggest that his decision may have been guided by critical judgment of issues covered by medieval theories of fable. Grammatical critical definitions of fábula allowed for a broad range of different varieties of text, and divided them into categories according to the degree or manner in which they could be said to communicate truth, however disguised (Dronke 1985: 26; Wheatley 2000: 32-4). A particular concern for the interpretive approaches taken to the type of moral fábula (such as Aesopic fables) in which the narrative, however unlikely, could contain an important and truthful message for readers, was the existence of an imago veritatis (image of truth) within its structure (Wheatley, 2000:34-7).

If we consider the B-text’s fáball section in the light of this focus on the effect, rather than the form, of narrative, the function of the segment as a turning point in the plot is thrown into relief. While there may not be a straightforward moral to be decoded, there is a clear indication of a relationship between the events told in the narrative and the eventual enactment of the cure of Cathal’s gluttony. The fable’s presentation of the Fáithliaig’s prescription of a cure for desperate hunger to Mac Con Glinne clearly resonates with Cathal’s own affliction, and it is the narration of the fáball that enables Mac Con Glinne to tempt the ion crais out of Cathal’s belly so that he can perform the more practical aspects of his remedy. Perhaps the B-text author/compiler should be seen as responding to this narrative function of the section in identifying it as fáball. Might there even be an implication that the successful cure which the recitation of the passage produced could be seen as a type of imago veritatis?

One final feature of the changes made in the B-text presentation of AMCG may also contribute to our view of this version as one which engages with the methodology and practice of medieval grammatica. As we have seen, the grammatical prologue introduction added to the B text states that the author of the text is Mac Con Glinne himself. Although Irish literary conventions may have contributed to the use of this tactic, it is nevertheless interesting to explore the effects of this identification of Mac Con Glinne as author as well as central character upon our reading of the text. In a sense, it enables us to view the actual author/redactor as personifying himself in his depiction of his protagonist. The way in which Mac Con Glinne is presented may, then, give us some indications of the author’s attitude to his own activities.

Mac Con Glinne is described as a scolaige, or scholar, in both versions of AMCG. However there is a very suggestive increase in the use of this description in the B text: while there are two instances of the term in the H text, Mac Con Glinne is identified as a scolaige in the B text seventeen times. Reading the B text in terms of its own logic, the presentational mode of the story should be such as would be employed by a scolaige, and the ways in which the author/redactor manipulates his material should fit his
conception of the activity of the scolaïge. The semantic range of the term scolaïge may be instructive here. While its basic meaning is ‘school-goer, student’, it is sometimes used interchangeably with the more specific designation mac léiginn. The latter tends to be associated with the spheres of Latin and ecclesiastical learning in which grammatical techniques were maintained and developed. It is also used to describe Mac Con Glinne elsewhere in the text. As we have seen, many of the adaptations and additions made in the B text do seem appropriate to the scholarly context that this emphasis on presenting Mac Con Glinne as a scolaïge implies. In his presentation of the tale, the author/compiler of the B text of AMCG demonstrates the potential of the grammatical critical techniques of the scolaïge or mac léiginn when applied to the production and assessment of secular material. The things that he does with the text are, in his self-defining presentation, the things that a scolaïge would do. The fact that the narrative of AMCG is satirical and fantastical does not preclude its engagement with the processes of assessment, commentary and justification that characterize the grammatical approach to medieval narrative. To simply say, however, that the scolaïge is someone who can, and does, engage in this kind of critical literary practice does an injustice to both the B-text author’s veiled self-portrait and to the medieval evaluation of the function of grammatica as a discipline. The purpose of training in the techniques of grammatica is not only to be able to read and interpret the texts of others; it is also to be able to produce one’s own. The seventh-century Irish grammatical dialogue text known as Donatus Ortigrafus poses the question, ‘Quid adiuat grammatica in scriptura?’, effectively, ‘what’s the point of grammatica?’ Clearly considering grammatica in its widest application as embracing many different varieties of scholarly activity rather than simply grammar, it stresses its importance for creative, as well as analytic, activity:

Quid nemo potest loqui et scribere bene proales et metricos libros nisi qui grammaticam discit. Ut Victorinus dicit: Grammatica est scientia interpretandi poetas atque historicos et recte scribendi logendique ratio. (Chittenden, 1982:4)

That no-one can speak or write prose and metrical books well except he who learns grammatica. As Victorinus says: ‘Grammatica is the science of interpreting the poets and historians and a method of writing and speaking correctly.

We should see in the adaptations and additions made by the author/compiler of the B text of AMCG not simply a reflection of his interpretive approach to

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7 See DIL. s.v. scolina (S 100, lines 77-8).
8 See also Poppe’s discussion of the use of technical critical vocabulary at pp 000-000.
the text, but also a creative response. The task of the scolaige – the scholar of grammatica – is not just to read and interpret; it is also one of literary creation. The question posed in the title of this essay as to whether we should think of AMCG as filidecht or légend derives from one of the opening statements the text makes about Mac Con Glinne:

Tánic móit móir for mermain don scolaige, .i. dol ra filidecht 7 a légend do f[h]acáil, ar ba doinmech dó a betha for scáth a fhogluma. (Jackson 2000: 3-4 §10)

A great desire came into the mind of the scholar, to take up poetry, and to abandon his learning, for wretched to him was his life on account of his studies.

The B-text’s author/compiler’s reading and interpretation of his material is revealed in his highly creative, individual, literary production, and the version of AMCG he presents us with demonstrates his skill in both filidecht and légend. In our own assessment of the B text we must keep in mind that its author/compiler, unlike Mac Con Glinne, did not feel obliged to abandon one to pursue the other.

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Bibliography


