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# Humor and Gender in 'The Woman's Excuse' as Told by Bab Feiritéar

*Lillis Ó Laoire*

The Virgin Mary and our Saviour were out walking one day, and they happened to come to a bridge. And there was a poor man sitting on the bridge wall and they began to talk to him and they discovered he was blind—he said he was blind, and he said that his wife had gone across the field, and what was there but his wife in the field with another man and both of them very much in love.

Our saviour said then to the Virgin Mary:

“Oh, that is very difficult indeed,” said he, “and do you know now, I will give the blind man his sight so that he will see that his wife is not as faithful to him as he thinks, for that is a shameful turn of events.”

“Oh,” said the Virgin Mary, “if you do that, give her an opportunity to have some excuse.”

So it happened, the blind man regained his sight and he saw the pair inside in the field cooing at each other, and when she came out, the blind man said to her—that is to say, her husband—that it was a shameful and unjust thing she had done, when he had been so faithful to her always and that he had thought that she had been faithful to him too, “but if that’s how it is!” says he.

“Ah now,” said the woman, “look, don’t you see the consolation

that has come from the matter, you have your sight back, and if I had not done that, you'd have stayed blind forever.”

And always since then, women have had an excuse, and it is said that the excuse is nearer to them than their apron.<sup>1</sup>

**L**ike all teaching of the arts and humanities at university in the current climate, making the teaching of folklore seem relevant to student lives is a particular challenge. In searching for material to include on a first-year module on folklore in the freshman B.A. program for Irish, I came across the above story, “Leithscéal ag na Mná” [The Women’s Excuse] (AT1423, “The Enchanted Pear Tree”), by Cáit (Bab) Feiritéar in the collection *Ó Bhéal an Bhab: Cnuas-Scéalta Bhab Feiritéar*, and decided to include it because of its brevity and humor. It had high literary merit, being an international folktale, but was also short enough and, I hoped, funny enough to engage even the most linguistically-challenged student. This inclusion led me to conduct research on the story for the current essay.

Problematizing humor in the Irish language may seem to be an ineffectual exercise. Irish is, after all, a language known for its propensity for humor and Irish people are widely, and sometimes stereotypically regarded as a witty, humorous people in both languages.<sup>2</sup> However, the question of humor about subjects considered specifically Irish is not without its complications, and has recurrently created challenges for the expression and portrayal of humor in Ireland generally, and in the Irish language especially. The external gaze of the Anglophone world, and often defensive reactions to its perceptions, have long rankled and sparked vigorous controversies and disagreements. Maria Tymoczko addresses the problem of translating humor from old Irish and in an extensive treatment of the topic points out that in the cultural milieu in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland, Victorian ideas about propriety and morality led to a strong tendency toward prudery that caused many difficulties for translators of humorous literature.<sup>3</sup> She refers to the Atkinson controversy, in which the Trinity professor and RIA member claimed in court that early Irish literature was either “silly or indecent” as a particularly important moment that brought forth a forceful rebuttal from the opposite camp.<sup>4</sup> The sexual frankness that characterizes that body of literature also emerges in later cultural expressions, and gave rise to similar intractable disputes because of the widespread puritan discomfort concerning sexuality.

One area that provided a battleground for such quarrels was folklore. This territory was particularly sensitive because of folklore's identification with rural life and dwellers, those who, for Gaelic revivalists and cultural nationalists, represented the true Irish nation. Consequently, folklore became closely linked to the image of Ireland and was therefore a site of contention, particularly when humor of an erotic or sexual nature was involved. Stiofán Ó Cadhla has recently noted that folklore was molded and presented in palatable ways according to the prescriptive agendas of a whole range of –isms.<sup>5</sup> The *Playboy* riots and other similar events remain as symbolic touchstones for such priggish attitudes, though earthy humor may no longer attract the kind of negative reaction it once did. It is also worth remembering that many people were not bothered by the issues raised in the *Playboy* riots and that Ireland was not exceptional in its prudery. However, the residual effects of such controversies last a long time. As James M. Cahalan remarked of a particular case which I will discuss below, “In Ireland . . . controversy seems to die hard.”<sup>6</sup>

That quarrel, one which continued to rumble over many years, was precipitated by the publication of Eric Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty* in 1942. This was a collection of anecdotes and stories from Tadhg Ó Buachalla, Thady Buckley, and his wife Anastasia, or Ansty, Irish speakers from the Cork Gaeltacht. The state's censorship board banned the book because of its portrayal of premarital cohabitation and its sexual openness. In his introduction to the second edition, Frank O'Connor distinguishes between respectability and virtue,<sup>7</sup> underscoring again the dilemma that free discussion of sexual matters could occasion even in a humorous vein. The Bucleys were treated rather harshly by any measure—a four day Seanad debate, a book burning, and other overly zealous negative responses to Cross's account of their lives and stories. The tailor took it all in good part although the controversy distressed Ansty. The gendered nature of much of the criticism aimed at the Bucleys does not often receive attention. The bawdy remarks ascribed to Ansty seem to have especially incensed the supporters of the proscription and she was called a “moron” by one of them.<sup>8</sup> The book has been called “as radical a recasting of the traditional picture of Irish rural life as is Myles na gCopaleen's *An Béal Bocht* [The Poor Mouth] also published in 1942. In many ways Cross's book is even more subversive than that more obviously satirical novel; its critique is made more cutting by its gentleness.”<sup>9</sup>

*Seanchas an Táilliúra* [The Tailor's Lore] a compilation of stories in Irish, collected by Seán Ó Cróinín for the Irish Folklore Commission and edited by

Aindrias Ó Muimhneacháin, was published in 1978.<sup>10</sup> According to Cahalan, echoes of the original acrimony had continued to simmer. A disagreement broke out, conducted in *The Irish Times* and in the journal *Béaloidéas* [Folklore], between Professor Bo Almqvist and Professor Seán Ó Coileáin of UCC, which centered on their differing views on the respective merits and shortcomings of representations of the Tailor and his world with respect to academic worth and general readability in Cross's work and in *Seanchas an Táilliúra*.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, indirect references to the dispute surrounding the bawdy content of Cross's book also cropped up. Both participants distanced themselves from any association with those who had precipitated the ban. The details of this misunderstanding do not concern us. The wrangle shows, however, how the banning of the Tailor's book indicates a highly sensitized atmosphere around portrayals and expressions of humor in Irish, especially bawdy humor, for readers of English and attitudes to such depictions. This background summary is important as it bears upon the story that provides the main focus of this paper, "Leithscéal ag na Mná."

The decision to include this story in Bab's Feiritéar's collection was taken by the editors according to Bab herself.<sup>12</sup> Given the controversy that led to the banning of Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty*, which persisted into the 1960s, the inclusion of such a racy tale in the collection is noteworthy, although by 2002 socio-cultural conditions had undergone a complete transformation since the nineteen forties. Because of Almqvist's involvement in debate surrounding Cross's book and its Irish language sequel, the inclusion must have reminded him of that argument. Indeed, it is likely that the argument partially influenced the decision along with other more relevant considerations. The collection provides a rounded picture of the storyteller's range of stories and the humor of this item clearly made it an appealing choice. This is not to suggest, however, that the inclusion was made without the storyteller's consent. Since the editors were very careful to have the support of the storyteller in their work, the project amounting to a close collaboration of all three participants, it can be safely regarded as having been fully acceptable to her. However, as Almqvist himself noted, it reinforced the fact that "the cultural climate has changed for the better in Ireland,"<sup>13</sup> so that the publication of such an item could pass without unfavorable reaction. Perhaps, indeed, this story might never have caused any fuss. Also, the work is in Irish only with no English translation supplied ensuring that it is available mostly to those who read Irish. As happened with Frank O'Connor's translation of Brian Merriman's great comic poem, "Cúirt

an Mheán Oíche” [The Midnight Court], no problems followed its availability in Irish, but a rendition in English was an entirely different matter and the book was promptly censored in 1945.<sup>14</sup> Almqvist was well aware of this history and both editors, it is fair to say, would have opposed any censorship on grounds that it was repressive and unworthy. The decision of Almqvist and his co-editor, Roibeard Ó Cathasaigh, to choose the “Enchanted Pear Tree,” AT1423, an international folktale with a hallowed pedigree in European literature, provided an effective countervailing strategy against any lingering scruples.

This short amusing story, recorded from Bab Feiritéar of Dún Chaoin, Co. Kerry, was published in her first collection of stories.<sup>15</sup> It is so short in fact, that it might almost be regarded as a joke. However, like many jokes, it is a resilient and long-lived entity that is found in much more elaborated form in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, in “The Merchant’s Tale,” to be specific. A commentator on the various Irish versions of the collected stories in the twentieth century speculates with some justification that one of Chaucer’s sources may well have been Irish, because of the similarity of the Irish versions to his.<sup>16</sup> The tale is given the number AT1423 and the title “The Enchanted Pear Tree” in the international catalog of folktales updated by Hans-Jörg Uther and published in 2004, and is also found in Tubach’s *Index Exemplorum*.<sup>17</sup> The Irish versions, of which twenty-one are known (excluding the present version) from the catalog of Irish folktales by Christiansen and Ó Súilleabháin,<sup>18</sup> have been briefly discussed in Pádraig Ó Héalaí’s recent book, *An Slánaitheoir ag Siúl ar an Talamh* [The Saviour Walking on Earth],<sup>19</sup> and other examples have also recently appeared in print.<sup>20</sup> The story is found in two major groups, one in which the motif of double vision is deployed and the second in which a blind man has his sight restored. Bab Feiritéar’s version belongs to the second group.<sup>21</sup>

I want to focus on this particular version as an example of humor expressed around the topic of gender, a narrative told by a woman and published by two male folklore collectors and editors who categorize this item among a number of religious tales in the storyteller’s extensive store. Both the storyteller’s female gender and the male gender of the editors is relevant.<sup>22</sup> Most important, the gender of the various agents in the story in a symbolic, metaphorical ordering of the narrative plays an important role in considering what messages the story conveys and transmits. The editors divide the religious items in Bab’s repertoire in three as follows: (1) apocryphal tales from the Bible, based on the Life of Christ and the

Virgin Mary, (2) legends concerning named Irish saints, local and national, and (3) legends dealing with theological questions and moral problems. Moreover, they place our story in the first category and, certainly, the presence of Jesus and Mary as actors in the tale gives that classification weight. However, the editors point out that Bab knew about six stories that belonged to category three, and they comment tellingly I believe, “Is léir go bhfuil luí ar leith aici leis an sórt seo scéil.” [It is obvious that she feels a special affinity with this kind of tale].<sup>23</sup>

It is possible to claim that our present narrative belongs equally well to category three as to category one, in so far as it sets the scene for a discussion of sexual morality, fidelity and the complex relationship between married partners in a patriarchal society, using humor to create an opportunity for debate around such questions. This international tale seems also to convey the “cutting edge and serious import” found in the oldest Irish humorous tales, according to Tymoczko.<sup>24</sup>

It may be useful to rehearse some of the reflexes of patriarchy that prevailed in the environment from which this tale emanates. In a rural agrarian society, such as characterized the life led by Bab Feiritéar, strict social control was the norm.<sup>25</sup> Patriarchally ordained norms of sexual morality placed an added burden on women. A double standard prevailed where women were responsible for remaining impervious to the attentions of men. If they succumbed to temptation and became pregnant as a result, the man could often abscond, leaving his partner in the lurch. The desire to continue the male line and to ensure the transference of property was passed on through the male heirs provided a strong underpinning for this moral anomaly. Additionally, women were regarded as creatures without the ability to reason, subject to the vagaries of their emotions and moods, in contrast to men, who made balanced decisions based on their superior and more rational intelligence. Women had to be guided, because of their susceptibility to emotion, whereas men were regarded as mature and capable of independent thought. It is exactly these rigid prescriptions which are subjected to scrutiny and humorous destabilization in this story.<sup>26</sup>

The symbolism of the Virgin Mary was appropriated to represent and promote a stringently enforced version of this ideology. At once “both absolutely carnal . . . and yet entirely etherealised,”<sup>27</sup> she came to embody an impossible ideal that, strive though they might, real flesh and blood women could never hope to attain. As Sherry Ortner has remarked: “Feminine symbolism, far more often than masculine symbolism, manifests this propensity toward polarized ambiguity—sometimes


utterly exalted, sometimes utterly debased, rarely within the normal range of human possibilities.”<sup>28</sup> Through the agency of a male-dominated clergy, the Virgin came to represent the ideal of the submissive woman, whose virgin status nevertheless augmented her motherhood. These images were common in the iconography of Catholicism before and during Bab Feiritéar’s early life as a child whose mother had died soon after her birth and later, after her marriage in 1942, as a young woman who raised seven children herself.<sup>29</sup> Dún Chaoin, Dunquin, Co. Kerry, both her place of origin and her lifelong home, evokes images of the literary classics written in the Blaskets by Tomás Ó Criomhthain and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin. Naturally, one also thinks immediately of the great woman storyteller of the Blaskets, Peig Sayers (1873-1958), herself a native of Dunquin. Not literate in the Irish language, Peig’s stories were written down by others, some by her own son, Micheál Ó Guithín, *Maidhc file* [Mike the Poet]. Other men and women also recorded tales from Peig. Not unlike the paragon of the Virgin, Peig has had rather a bad press over the years in Ireland, largely due to her status as a Leaving Certificate author. Through the official curriculum for Irish, Peig came to represent the archetypal submissive, longsuffering woman.<sup>30</sup> As one student of mine remarked recently when she told someone she was studying Irish at university, the rejoinder came, “I hated Irish. We were forced to read Peig. Nothing but tragedy and misery.”<sup>31</sup> By putting a version of Peig’s life story on the Leaving Certificate, and by emphasizing the hardship she had borne, a certain view of that life achieved official sanction, adding an extra dimension to existing negative attitudes toward learning Irish. Additionally, it cemented for many others a profound antipathy toward the Irish language and that officially promoted image of what it meant to be an Irishwoman. Peig was known in the Blaskets as an entertaining woman, whose house welcomed visitors to engage in storytelling, singing and other forms of amusement, nevertheless, the portrayal of an unhappy, tragic figure, fatalistically resigned to the loss of her children to accident and emigration invariably predominates. Certainly, talented teachers managed to circumvent this gloomy image, by reading Peig’s story as social history and providing a more distanced and nuanced picture of her life. However, the established portrayal, lacking any mitigating interpretation, is the one that usually prevails. Therefore, despite her reputation among students and scholars of folklore as a lively intelligent, engaged woman with a sharp wit and a keen sense of humor, Peig is not often popularly viewed as a great verbal artist in her own right, but rather as a flat, cardboard, caricature of traditional, compliant,



subjugated femininity. This and other myth-making stereotypes were what Myles na gCopaleen sought to undermine in *An Béal Bocht*, but the book's message was often misunderstood as a satire on the characters in the "dealeabhair", the "guid buiks" themselves.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the portrayal of humor in the Irish language and especially around its folklore can be understood as a loaded and contested site, its representations complicated by various contradictory and problematic portrayals that have emerged over time.

A seminal article, "The Woman Who Went to Hell: Coded Values in Irish Folk Narrative," by the American scholar Joanne N. Radner, however, opened up new ways of reading Peig's work and her achievement.<sup>33</sup> In her essay, Radner compares two versions of the same story, ATU425, "The Search for the Lost Husband," and "Micí na Muc" [Mickey of the Pigs] by Corca Dhuibhne storytellers, in which a woman goes to hell to redeem her damned supernatural lover and the father of her child. One of these is told by Peig and the other narrated by her son Maidhc. Peig's telling is considerably more favorable to the female protagonist than Maidhc's, who tends to be critical of her actions and to ridicule them. Radner's analysis showed how such a comparison could reveal subtle but profound differences in the interpretation by storytellers of gender ideologies:

"The tale, because of its portrayal of the traditional roles of Irish women, lends itself to expressing its tellers' attitudes about women and their roles—attitudes which may conflict with and even subvert the community consensus and must therefore be coded, cloaked in the traditional community sanctioned form of the folktale."<sup>34</sup>

Later, other scholars also examined Peig's narratives to recover a more complex picture than that of the long suffering victim of tragedy marooned on a maritime island. Patricia Coughlan ruffled some academic and clerical feathers with her claim, based on a reading of three versions of Peig's life story, that Peig had not submitted unquestioningly and without choice to a match with a man she did not know. On the contrary, a careful reading of the whole record showed, for example, that Peig knew that her future husband was interested in her and that she was quite taken with him. Certainly, the pair did not have an extended courtship, but they did know each other and that, for Peig, her husband  be was a handsome attractive man, known to be a capable fisherman and therefore likely to be a good

provider. This goes against the portrayal of Peig in the official biography read by Leaving Certificate candidates, where her father simply asks Peig, after receiving a proposal from a group of islanders, none of whom she knows, “An raghaidh tú ‘on oileán?” [Will you go to the island?] and Peig replies meekly, “Raghad pé áit a déarfaidh tú liom.” [I will go wherever you tell me.]<sup>35</sup> Peig herself seems to have propagated the idea that she did not know Peatsaí before that night. Later in life, she admitted she had known him to some extent.<sup>36</sup> Attributing agency, intelligence and some autonomy to Peig seemed rather too radical for some, to the extent that they voiced their opinions in the press and on national radio. As Professor Coughlan has observed of the controversy:

This revisionist move itself, however, produced a certain backlash in 1998, when a controversy ensued in the *Irish Times* after a perhaps mischievous sub-editor headlined the report of my lecture (given at the annual Blasket commemoration) as follows: “A feminist Peig Sayers chafed at being a chattel.” In fact, I had not anachronistically attributed feminism to Peig but had only suggested, as I do here, that a feminist *reading* might and should be made of her work. A Co. Kerry-based priest began a public correspondence in which he sought to defend and preserve the traditional image of Peig; my reply explaining my views and expressing my admiration for her failed, over several exchanges, to allay his expressed sense of profanation. This unlikely and sometimes hilarious controversy over who owned Peig, who might think and write about her, and in what ways, generated national radio coverage, even on the current-affairs program *Morning Ireland*, besides widespread discussion on local radio stations.<sup>37</sup>

Professor Coughlan examined a variety of Peig’s narratives, coming to the conclusion that she had a well-developed positive sense of her identity and purpose as a woman, and that despite the hardship of the adverse material circumstances of her life, and despite the tyrannies of being a woman in a patriarchal society, she had a robust, optimistic view of life. Coughlan sees “a fascinating patchwork of attitudes” including traditional anti-feminine tropes in Peig’s narratives. Overall, however, these cohabit happily with “a strong strand of feminine intelligence, wit and capacity to stand up for oneself.”<sup>38</sup>

My discussion of Peig and her portrayals, and of the various ways she has been received and appropriated may seem an unnecessary digression in a paper focusing on a different individual entirely, albeit from the same place. However, as a national and international figure, Peig casts a long shadow, and any account of Bab Feiritéar's identity as a female storyteller, and a teller of humorous tales, would be remiss without first outlining the trends that have shaped Peig's image in the national and international consciousness. The same reactionary elements that turned their ire on the *Tailor and Ansty* were equally at work in molding the view of Peig as a latter day west of Ireland *mater dolorosa*. Such an acknowledgment provides a necessary backdrop to an interpretation of Bab's identity as a storyteller, and supplies a context through which my remarks and observations about her stories and especially about the humorous narrative, "Leithscéal ag na Mná" may be more clearly understood. Cáit Feiritéar (1916-2004) was herself a figure of considerable stature among the storytellers of West Kerry, and her life and Peig Sayers' (1873-1958) overlap. Although they were separated by the channel between the Great Blasket and Dunquin, Bab recalled meeting Peig during a visit to the island in 1936 when she was twenty years old, and remarked on what a fine narrator she was.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the poet Seán Ó Ríordáin, compared the two women favorably, calling Bab a "classic" and contending that she was a second Peig:

"Peig Sayers eile is ea Cáit Bean an Fheirtéaraigh. Tá sí ina clasic cheana féin. Tá gach draíocht, gach réchúis, gach foirfeacht scéaltóireachta bronnta uirthi. Tá fios aici agus rud is measa filíocht."<sup>40</sup> [Mrs. Cáit Feiritéar is another Peig Sayers. She is already a classic. She is endowed every magic, every ease, every perfection of storytelling. She has wisdom and something more esteemed, poetry.] (My translation.) This succinct but high praise was not given lightly by Ó Ríordáin, indicating exactly what a strong resolute figure Bab Feiritéar cut among her admirers, those who visited the West Kerry Gaeltacht during the summer months to practice their Irish in a vernacular setting.<sup>41</sup> It was these people, indeed, who provided an audience for Bab as traditional contexts for storytelling waned with the encroachment of modern living conditions. Another younger visitor from the United States, Kathleen Mundell, has also provided an account of the forceful energetic dynamism of Bab's presence as a storyteller adept at putting her listeners at ease:

My strongest impression of Cáit . . . was that she was a very wise

woman. At our initial meeting . . . I was struck by her strong and knowing gaze. I felt that she could see into me without saying a word. . . . I was impressed by her vitality. It was if suddenly a great bolt of energy entered the room . . . She had the appearance of looking much younger than her age. . . . I was captivated by the quality of her expression. She had a natural bent towards making you feel at ease. She often times during the course of the evening gave me a warm smile that overcame my own self-consciousness.<sup>42</sup>

Bab Feiritéar had many recent forebears, both men and women, who were accomplished narrators and detailed accounts of their lives and the stories they told are extant.<sup>43</sup>

I have already alluded to a tale ATU425 “The Woman Who Went to Hell,” from which Radner read coded messages that both reinforced and subverted the patriarchal status quo. It is relevant to point out that Bab Feiritéar told this very same story “*Micí na Muc.*”<sup>44</sup> She inherited this tale from her paternal uncle Tadhg Ó Guithín, although she had also heard her great-aunt Máire tell it. Her version differs considerably from Peig’s in detail, although a similar emphasis on female heroism pervades both. Máire, the main character, places enormous store on caring for her mother to the extent that she leaves her home to wander the roads with her rather than submit to her husband’s desire to summarily evict her. Finding work in the house of a married couple, she exhibits great courage in front of the monstrous male ghost in the haunted house and eventually spends fourteen (only seven in Peig’s version) years in hell in an attempt to redeem the same ghost, the damned son of her employers, who by then had become the father of her son. Like Peig’s heroine, she meets her former husband as she leaves hell, bent down under the burden of the souls she has redeemed, and invites him to find room on her person, thereby also saving him from the flames. She is patient, courageous, long suffering, resolute and clever, managing, through her son, to communicate her identity to the man she had redeemed, on the eve of his wedding to another woman. She saves the day, and the husband cancels the impending marriage when he realizes that Máire has returned to him.

Two other short tales in this collection titled “*Is trua nár chuas go Sasana*” [A pity I did not go to England] (or “*Paidir an Chailín Aimsire*” [The Servant Girl’s Prayer]) and “*Na Trí Shraoth*” [The Three Sneezes]<sup>45</sup> cogently reveal Bab

Feiritéar's interest in "innocent persecuted heroines."<sup>46</sup> She told Gearóidín Nic Cárthaigh that the latter two were among her favorite stories.<sup>47</sup> All three of these narratives portray women characters dealing resourcefully with difficult situations and prevailing against adversity. A gendered view of morality emerges from each of them in which the male characters are inclined to be more materialistic, whereas the heroic women stalwartly prevail over greed and selfishness through their resourcefulness and kindness. It is a widespread phenomenon that women storytellers enjoy telling tales about everyday life, and about the lives of other women. According to Dégh: "Among experienced storytellers, women favor the themes of first love, marriage ritual, intimate sexual relationships, child-rearing, family life and grievances and injustice."<sup>48</sup>

Referring to these stories provides a broader context for understanding the storyteller's world view and her understanding of gender relationships in a patriarchal society. They indicate that the awareness and portrayal of asymmetrical power balances in gender relations were a matter of some concern to her. Consequently, they provide a relevant prelude to a discussion of "Leithscéal ag na Mná" by showing how the serious and humorous aspects of her repertoire intersect.

"Leithscéal ag na Mná" consists of a short humorous narrative from Bab Feiritéar's estimated store of 150 stories and, although fond of the serious stories, she is said to have also excelled at telling jocular tales.<sup>49</sup> I am not here concerned with a detailed comparison between Bab's version and those collected from others elsewhere in Ireland. The various similarities and differences between them have already been sufficiently explored.<sup>50</sup> My primary concern here is to highlight the way in which humor works in this heavily gendered tale and the coded messages that may be interpreted from a woman narrator's telling of such a story. That she told it to male collectors, and that with their assistance and consent, she saw that performance through the publication process in her own lifetime is an additional point of interest. The storyteller in this case exerted some control on the transformation from the oral to the literate, thereby ensuring that the portrayal of her stories satisfied her own ideas of how she might and ought to be represented in such a defining transition.

The agency of Jesus and the Virgin Mary reveals a distinctly earthy tone. Jesus, the male authority figure, takes pity on the poor blind man's cuckoldry by his wife across the bridge in the field with another man. He decides to restore the blind man's sight so he will be able to see his wife's infidelity. Mary asks him to provide

the wife with some excuse although Christ does not verbally agree to this. When the husband's sight is restored he begins to upbraid his wife for her lack of loyalty to him. The woman, however, points out the advantage that has accrued to her husband directly because of her infidelity. He would have remained blind forever had she not taken a lover.

Bab Feiritéar said that all the old women used to tell this tale. Age may not be an accident in the matter of context. Older postmenopausal women could be bawdy in ways that young women could not. If a young woman were to narrate this tale in a non-segregated gender context, I submit that, depending on the circumstances, it might be interpreted as not so coded a challenge to patriarchal norms. Narrating it in the context of a women-only gathering would soften that edge to a significant degree, but I argue that older postmenopausal women could tell this story in mixed company without incurring the potential censure that a young woman might. That kind of salty story could legitimately form a part of the "lively mutual chaffing between men and women,"<sup>51</sup> that characterized conversation, as well as forming a bonding narrative for women-only contexts using humor as a means of standing up for themselves in a male-dominated world.<sup>52</sup> It must be said, however, that there is not even a hint of indecorousness in any syllable of Bab's telling of the story. She chooses every word with precision and accuracy, astutely avoiding any potential impropriety. This is a considerable feat, given the subject matter, and reveals that she understood the issues at stake. Indeed, her judiciousness shows exactly why she was such a successful storyteller. The narrative strikes to the quick of patriarchal insecurity regarding the succession of property. In this case, the blind man is poor, not a man of property. However, the infidelity specifically takes place across the bridge in a field, the other side of the boundary between the blind man and his wife and her lover. The husband's disability, blindness, may suggest other deficiencies such as impotence.<sup>53</sup> This reading is suggested by the identification between the woman's apron and her excuse. The apron is a veiled reference to the female genitalia, linking the capacity for composing excuses or mediation, specifically with women. The placing of the proverb at the end of the story is a stroke of narrative brilliance. It turns this story into an etiological narrative, or a story that assigns a cause or a reason for this feminine characteristic, a mythic precedent for women's perceived propensity for relativism, for negotiation and for bargaining. In fact, one of the Virgin Mary's main roles was that of intercessor and mediator, providing a role for other women in this respect.

Reference to the apron makes a connection between such characteristics and women's gender by referring to their sex and their domestic role simultaneously. Another proverb suggests itself though it is not directly expressed "Tá Dia láidir agus tá máthair mhaith aige" [God is strong and he has a good mother.]— This saying is often quoted to justify petitions to the Virgin Mary whose influence on her son was regarded as particularly strong. This idea probably derives from the miracle of the water and the wine at the wedding feast at Cana, one of the few mentions that Mary receives in the New Testament. All in all, this story seems to express a coded critique of the potential excesses of patriarchy and to situate that in a context where women have an active role in mitigating its prospective destructive impulses. The absolutist tendencies diminish in the face of a contrary viewpoint that portrays women as quick-witted and alert, ready to intuit the positive in a situation that, from a patriarchal point of view, can only be viewed as negative. That this softening, mollifying influence is attributed to the Virgin reveals a folkloric representation of her as a humane mediator in potentially harmful domestic disputes supporting her fellow females in their navigation of the severe restraints imposed on their gender by the strictures of patriarchy.

This story frequently appears with the fairies substituting for Jesus and Mary as the supernatural helpers.<sup>54</sup> By transforming the fairies into the Mother/Virgin Mary and her son Jesus Christ, the story takes on a moral dimension, indicating the centrality of religious experience to people's lives. Arguably, this change adds considerably to the power of the narrative. The point of the tale, after all, is the breaking of the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." In the past, women have been killed because of such sexual transgression in Ireland.<sup>55</sup> To this day in other parts of the world, under conservative religious regimes, adultery can be punishable by death, as for example the notorious case of Amina Lawal from the Islamic Hausa region of Northern Nigeria showed in 2003. Ms. Lawal was sentenced to death for having a relationship outside of wedlock although she was acquitted when her sentence was overturned by a higher court.<sup>56</sup>

"Leithscéal ag na Mná," by invoking Jesus and Mary, creates a context in which absolute decisions are questioned and mediation is valorized. The strength of the story rests upon a paradox, instigated in this case by a woman telling the story against her own gender. Women may be morally weak, and prone to sexual temptation, but at the same time they are more humane than male figures of authority and believe in interceding on behalf of those about to be punished. The fundamental

premise here is a charitable outlook on the weaknesses of others, with humor being invoked to bring the importance of mercy to our attention.<sup>57</sup> A quality of the Virgin, it is among those considered most feminine across many cultures, a point made clearly and unambiguously by the inclusion of the proverb at the very end. ♦

**In Memoriam:**

**Máire Ní Chéilleachair, 1949-2007, Friend and Colleague**

My friendship with Máire Ní Chéilleachair informs this essay considerably. She promoted research on women's roles in Irish Folklore Studies. She edited the collection *Ceiliúradh an Bhlascaoid 3: Peig Sayers, Scéalai, 1878-1958*. Patricia Coughlan's well-known essay on the portrayal of women's lives in Peig's work, which sparked lively debate, and which brought renewed attention to Peig's work, is published in that volume.



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*Endnotes*

- <sup>1</sup> Bo Almqvist and Roibeard Ó Cathasaigh, eds., *Ó Bhéal an Bhab: Cnuas-Scéalta Bhab Feiritéar* (Indreabhán, Ireland: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2002), 73-74.
- <sup>2</sup> Malachy Ó Néill and Regina Uí Chollatáin, *An Greann sa Ghaeilge* (Baile Átha Cliath: Coiscéim, 2012), ix
- <sup>3</sup> Maria Tymoczko, "Translating the Humor in Early Irish Hero Tales," in *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation*, 191-221 (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing 1999), 205.
- <sup>4</sup> Maria Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation*, (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing 1999), 297.
- <sup>5</sup> Stiofán Ó Cadhla, *An tSlat Féithleoge: Ealaíona an Dúchais 1800-2000* (Indreabhán, Ireland: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2002), 154-160.
- <sup>6</sup> James M. Callahan, "Tailor Tim Buckley: Folklore Literature and Seanchas and Táilliúra," *Éire-Ireland* 14, no. 2 Summer (1979): 110-111.
- <sup>7</sup> Frank O'Connor, introduction to *The Tailor and Ansty*, by Eric Cross (Dublin: Mercier Press, [1942] 1999), 8
- <sup>8</sup> O'Connor, introduction to *The Tailor*, 11.
- <sup>9</sup> Caleb Richardson, "They are Not Worthy of Themselves: The Tailor and Ansty Debates of 1942," *Éire-Ireland* 42, no. 3 and 4, Fall Winter (2007), 148-172, (154).
- <sup>10</sup> Ed. Aindrias Ó Muimhneacháin (Baile Átha Cliath: Mercier, 1978).
- <sup>11</sup> Bo Almqvist, review of *Folk and Farm: Essays in Honour of A. T. Lucas*, ed. Caoimhín Ó Danachair, *Béaloideas* 42/44 (1974-1976): 344-352, see especially 346; Seán Ó Coileáin's review of *Seanchas an Táilliúra*, "The Tailor and the Scholars," *The Irish Times*, March 31, 1979; Bo Almqvist, review of *Seanchas an Táilliúra*, ed. Aindrias Ó Muimhneacháin, *Béaloideas* 48/49 (1980/1981): 228-235; Seán Ó Coileáin, "The Tailor and the Critics; A Reply to Bo Almqvist," *Béaloideas* 50 (1982): 206-214. The editor, Aindrias Ó Muimhneacháin, also weighed in on this debate, replying to Ó Coileáin's review of March 31st in the letters page of *The Irish Times* on April 11<sup>th</sup> 1979. Ó Coileáin replied again on April 27<sup>th</sup>, which was answered once more by Ó Muimhneacháin on May 12<sup>th</sup>, with the final contribution from Ó Coileáin appearing on May 27<sup>th</sup>.
- <sup>12</sup> Gearóidín Nic Cárthaigh, "Scéalaí Duibhneach: Staidéar Eitneagrafaíoch i gComhar le Bab Feiritéar," (Ph.D. diss., University College Cork, 2007), 268. In an interview about the selection of the contents of *Ó Bhéal an Bhab*, the storyteller said: "Phiocadar iad, ní mise a phioc iad" [They picked them, I did not.]. See Almqvist and Ó Cathasaigh, *Ó Bhéal an Bhab*, 11-50.
- <sup>13</sup> Almqvist, review of *Seanchas an Táilliúra*, 228.
- <sup>14</sup> O'Connor, introduction to *The Tailor*, 8.
- <sup>15</sup> Almqvist and Ó Cathasaigh, *Ó Bhéal an Bhab*, 73, 74, 172-173.
- <sup>16</sup> Karl P. Wentersdorf, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale and Its Irish Analogues," *Studies in Philology* 63, no. 5 (October 1966): 611. See also, Charles A. Watkins, "Modern Irish Variants of the Enchanted Pear Tree," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 30 (1966), 202-213.
- <sup>17</sup> Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* (Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Sciences, 2004); Frederic Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Sciences, 1968), 692.

- <sup>18</sup> Seán Ó Súilleabháin and Reidar T. Christiansen, *The Types of the Irish Folktale* (Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Sciences, 1963), 254.
- <sup>19</sup> Pádraig Ó Héalaí, *An Slánaitheoir ag Siúl ar an Talamh* (An Daingean, Ireland: An Sagart, 2012), 234-235.
- <sup>20</sup> Jimmí Chearra, “Lá Deidilín DÍ Dó,” in *Seanchas Jimmí Chearra: Chois Fharráige*, ed. Pádraig Ó Cearra (Dublin: Coiscéim, 2010), 323-324.
- <sup>21</sup> Watkins, “Modern Irish Variants,” 202.
- <sup>22</sup> Stiofán Ó Cadhla, “Dochtúirí Sagairt agus Bean,” in *An tSlat Féithleoige, Ealaíona an Dúchais 1800-2000* (Indreabhán, Ireland: Cló Iar-Chonnacht), 176-198.
- <sup>23</sup> Almqvist and Ó Cathasaigh, *Ó Bhéal an Bhab*, 172.
- <sup>24</sup> Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, 193.
- <sup>25</sup> Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *An Dúchas agus an Domhan* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005), 7.
- <sup>26</sup> Patriarchy is, of course, not confined to agrarian societies. Its ideology is alive and well today in many countries besides Ireland, in both urban and rural settings.
- <sup>27</sup> Kathryn Hughes, “Rereading *Alone of All Her Sex* by Marina Warner,” *The Guardian*, March 23, 2013, [www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/23/rereading-alone-of-all-her-sex](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/23/rereading-alone-of-all-her-sex).
- <sup>28</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 68-87.
- <sup>29</sup> Maryann Valiulis, “Neither Feminist nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman,” in *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women’s Status in Church, State and Society*, ed. Mary O’Dowd and Sabine Wichert, (Belfast: Institute for Irish Studies, 1993), 168-178.
- <sup>30</sup> See, for example, Karin Altenberg, “A Paradise Lost To Time,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 25, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970203711104577200933875118696>.
- <sup>31</sup> Karen Ní Chonghaile, [seminar discussion] to author, February 19, 2014. See also, Irene Luchitti, “Spent in the Telling: Peig Sayers and Her Life,” in *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing*, ed. Anne Markey and Anne O’Connor, [129-141] (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014) 129-141, where she discusses Peig’s image in detail.
- <sup>32</sup> Louis de Paor, “Myles na gCopaleen agus Drochshampla na nDealeabhar,” *The Irish Review* 23, no. 1 (1998), 24-32.
- <sup>33</sup> Joanne N. Radner, “The Woman Who Went to Hell: Coded Values in Irish Folk Narrative,” *Midwestern Folklore: Journal of the Hoosier Folklore Society*, 15, 2 (1989), 109-118.
- <sup>34</sup> Radner, “Coded Values”, (1989), 114.
- <sup>35</sup> Peig Sayers, *Peig: A Scéal Féin*, ed. Máire Ní Chinnéide (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1936), 177-178.
- <sup>36</sup> Bo Almqvist and Pádraig Ó Héalaí, eds., *Peig Sayers: Labharfad le Cáchl I Will Speak to You All* (Dublin: New Island, 2009), 163. This may support a view that Peig herself condoned a representation of herself as a poor passive woman who had suffered a great deal.
- <sup>37</sup> Patricia Coughlan, “Rereading Peig Sayers: Women’s Autobiography, Social History and Narrative Art,” in *Opening The Field: Irish Women, Texts and Contexts*, ed. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh and Christine St. Peter, 58-73 (Cork: Cork University Press), 63. See also, Patricia Coughlan, “An Léiriú ar Shaol na mBan i dTeácsanna Dírbheathaisnéise Pheig Sayers [The Representation of Women’s Lives in the Autobiographical Texts of Peig Sayers],” in *Peig Sayers’s Scéaláí, 1873-*

- 1958 (Ceiliúradh an Bhlascaoid), ed. Máire Ní Chéilleachair, 20-57, (Baile Átha Cliath: Coiscéim, 1999).
- <sup>38</sup> Coughlan, "Rereading Peig," 66.
- <sup>39</sup> Almquist and Ó Cathasaigh, *Ó Bhéal an Bhab*, 14. Bab remarked on another occasion of Peig's unique voice, "Ní gheofá traochta go raibí 'é bheith ag éisteacht léi" [You wouldn't get tired listening to her]. Quoted in Nic Cárthaigh, "Scéalaí Duibhneach," (2007), 255.
- <sup>40</sup> Diarmuid Breathnach and Máire Ní Mhurchú, "Feiritéar, Cáit (1916-2005)," *An Bunachar Náisiúnta Beathaisnéisí Gaeilge*, accessed September 26, 2014, " <http://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=1833>.
- <sup>41</sup> Almquist and Ó Cathasaigh, *Ó Bhéal an Bhab*, 30-32
- <sup>42</sup> Almquist and Ó Cathasaigh, *Ó Bhéal an Bhab*, 42.
- <sup>43</sup> Almquist and Ó Cathasaigh, *Ó Bhéal an Bhab*, 13-27.
- <sup>44</sup> Almquist and Ó Cathasaigh *Ó Bhéal an Bhab*, 80-91.
- <sup>45</sup> Almquist and Ó Cathasaigh, 108-110, 111-113.
- <sup>46</sup> W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "Why Tell Stories about Innocent, Persecuted Heroines?" *Western Folklore* 52, no. 1 (1993): 61-71.
- <sup>47</sup> Nic Cárthaigh, "Scéalaí Duibhneach," 215
- <sup>48</sup> Linda Dégh, "Folk Narrative," in *Folklore and Myth: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, 53-84 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 7
- <sup>49</sup> Eilís Ní Dhuibhne-Almquist, "The Cow That Ate the Pedlar in Kerry and Wyoming," *Eolas* 67 (1999): 12
- <sup>50</sup> Watkins, "Modern Irish Variants," and Wentersdorf, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale"
- <sup>51</sup> Coughlan "Rereading Peig," 66
- <sup>52</sup> Clodagh Brennan Harvey "Some Irish Women Storytellers and Reflections on the Role of Women in the Storytelling Tradition," *Western Folklore* 48, no. 2 (1989): 109-128. For a comprehensive exploration of women's storytelling contexts in West Kerry, see Nic Cárthaigh, "Scéalaí Duibhneach," 128-156
- <sup>53</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 219-252 (London: Hogarth, 1953)
- <sup>54</sup> Ó Héalaí, *An Slánaitheoir ag Siar*, 4-235.
- <sup>55</sup> Marcus Bourke, *Murder at Marmill: Was Harry Gleeson Innocent?* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1993). This book relates the story of the murder of Moll McCarthy in Tipperary in 1942, and documents the case of Harry Gleeson who was hanged for the crime. Harry Gleeson received a state pardon absolving him of any guilt in 2014.
- <sup>56</sup> Somini Sengupta, "Facing Death for Adultery, Nigerian Woman is Acquitted," *The New York Times*, September 26, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/26/world/facing-death-for-adultery-nigerian-woman-is-acquitted.html>
- <sup>57</sup> Pádraig Ó Héalaí, "Moral Values in Irish Religious Tales," *Eolas* 42/44 (1974-1976): 176-212