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Reading the *Bean Feasa*

Gearóid Ó Cruallaóich

Abstract

Legends of the *bean feasa*, the “woman-of-knowledge” or “wise-woman,” are numerous in Irish Gaelic tradition. Here a corpus of such legends, from the archive of the former Irish Folklore Commission, at University College Dublin, is examined with a view to revealing the significance of the figure of the *bean feasa* and the role that the narration and transmission of legends about her plays in Irish vernacular cultural tradition. Presenting itself as historical truth, the lore of the *bean feasa* has a character nearer to religious faith. It is suggested here, on the basis of the evidence examined, that the oral narrative tradition of the *bean feasa* functioned as a communal, psychotherapeutic device that operated so as to enable its hearers to cope with their individual misfortunes and afflictions. Stories of the resort of people to the “wise-woman” in the face of such misfortune and affliction, and of her oracular and often relieving diagnosis and ministrations, can be seen as representing, in the arena of public discourse, a source of imaginative creativity that could be brought to bear by individual listeners on the private circumstances of their own individual afflictions and misfortunes. *Bean feasa* legends thus constitute a valuable cultural resource.

Introduction

There was this girl in Sherkin Island who was an only child and she lost her speech. She went to bed in her health and in the morning she was unable to speak. There was a woman east in *Béal Átha an Fhíona* who used to be giving out knowledge—she used to be going with the good people. The girl was brought to visit her to see if she could cure her. When she saw her, she couldn't do anything for her and she told her to come back again after a fortnight.

She came back and the woman asked her father why he built his house so close to a *port* and she said that while they would never thrive there, neither would they ever want for anything there. She took a basin off the dresser and asked the girl did she recognise it. She said she did and that she had missed it. “I was at your house since,” said the woman, “and I took the basin.” “Weren't you,” she said, “driving a horse down the hillside when you met an angry, red-haired woman of the Harnedys and she had a woollen cloak around her and she struck you a blow on each side of you and the third blow down on top of your head? There was poison in that.”

She cured the girl then, but the loss of speech used to return, at the same time, regularly, until the day she died (Irish Folklore Collection [IFC] 49, 143–4). [1]

Legends about the *bean feasa* are a part of the repertoire of traditional or ancestral Irish lore. A *bean feasa*, literally “woman of knowledge, wisdom; a wise-woman,” is credited with having the gift of prophecy and second-sight, the *taghairm* of Scottish Gaelic tradition. Legends of the *bean feasa* are numerous in the manuscripts of the Irish Folklore Commission although there has not yet been any comprehensive work performed on their distribution patterns. Neither has

much attention been given to the categories into which legends of the *bean feasa* might be classified: ones in which she travels with the *slua sí*, the otherworld/fairy host, ones in which herbal cures and healing are involved, ones where she makes prophetic diagnosis and so forth. Since *bean feasa* or wise-woman legends are not to be regarded as Migratory Legend, they were not dealt with in the Symposium on the Supernatural in Irish and Scottish Migratory Legends (1988) nor in the Nordic-Celtic Legend Symposium (1991). Consequently, the *bean feasa*, the wise-woman, does not feature in the legend sampler "Crossing the Border" published in conjunction with the 1988 Symposium (Almqvist 1991b, 209–78; Ó Héalaí 1991), or in the papers from the Nordic-Celtic Symposium that have been published in two issues of *Béaloidéas*, the Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society, and that deal with Scottish and Welsh legends as well as Irish ones and with legend-aspects of Irish literature, medieval and modern (Ó Héalaí 1992; 1995). Similarly, apart from Biddy Early, in Lady Gregory's account of her (Gregory 1970, 31–50), there is no mention of a wise-woman in the very comprehensive Field Day anthology of women's writing and traditions (Lysaght 2002, 1435–45). Nevertheless, the *bean feasa*, the figure of the wise-woman, is that of a central, prominent personage in Irish oral tradition whose characteristics are well worthy of study as part of any initial consideration of the significance, in cultural terms, of the lore concerning her and her powers.

I am emphasising the legendary status of the lore or *seanchas* concerning the wise-woman. Thus we are attempting to "read," literally and metaphorically, a corpus of legends written down from oral performance, in our efforts to understand the cultural significance of the wise-woman and the cultural functioning of the traditions associated with her. As ever with legend, the lore of the wise-woman presents itself in the guise of history and truth. We have here, it seems, accounts of events that really took place and that are known in reliable ways to those who tell of them; with such knowledge being based in their own experience and that of their relatives and neighbours. In particular, these legends portray the wise-women as real, human females who have lived in communities within human memory, whose houses are still there and whose presence in everyday living is still remembered. Against this we see that Nancy Schmitz (1977) failed to locate the historical Biddy Early despite sustained research on the historical background to the Thomond and North Munster traditions of the famous wise-woman of that name. In like fashion, Máirtín Verling has registered his failure to identify and locate any historical Máire Ní Mhurchú in the censuses and genealogies of the Eyerries community of Beara, a community and a district with both an extensive tradition of a wise-woman of that name and a well developed knowledge of the history of the parish and its families (Verling 1996, 297–8).

It appears as if the lore and legends concerning the wise-woman, in Irish ancestral tradition, are possessed of the truth, not of history, but of another order of knowledge, to which assent is readily, if ambiguously, given in oral narrative performance. In this other order of knowledge, truth has a character nearer to religious faith than to historical fact, it seems, and we can account the legends of the wise-woman as expressions of popular religious tradition and place them together with the *exempla* of Christian piety, on the one hand, and the *síscéalta* or fairy legends, on the other, as subgenres of religious folk-narrative. It was C. W. von Sydow, three-quarters of a century ago, who urged caution in respect of any

attempt to study legends *in vacuo* (von Sydow 1931, 106). He believed that they should always be regarded as developing on the basis of beliefs that constitute elements of systems of cosmology or elements of worldview that cannot, ultimately, be reduced to the affairs and circumstances of a historical order. In keeping with this understanding of the belief-based nature of legend, other aspects of traditional Irish lore have already been studied and illuminated; for example, traditions of the *iarlais*/changeling (Mac Philib 1991), the banshee (Lysaght 1996 [1986]), the *lucharachán*/leprechaun (Ó Giolláin 1984; 1991), the *bean chabhartha*/midwife (Mac Cárthaigh 1991), the child-murdress (O'Connor 1991), the old woman as hare (Ní Dhuibhne 1993), and the *bean chaointe*/keener (Lysaght 1995; 1996, 29, 32–4, 145–6, 210, 368 and 376; 1997; Sorlin 1991).

There is another level again, apart from that of belief—religious or non-religious—on which legends can be said to operate and to have significance; the level of the psychological. Bo Almqvist has already asserted as much in regard to Irish migratory legends of the supernatural. We are able to obtain from such legends, he claims, “keener understanding and deeper psychological insight into the fears and hopes of the people who tell them and listen to them” (Almqvist 1991a, 1–2). I am claiming that this is also the case in respect of legends of the wise-woman, and my emphasis, in this article, is on how such legends represent and give effect to the workings of a psychodynamic aspect of the cultural traditions of the *bean feasa*/wise woman.

Sources and Method

In the same article in which Bo Almqvist refers to the way in which migratory legends of the supernatural can yield psychological insights, he urges that empirical study rather than speculative assertion is required if progress is to be made in our understanding of the significance and the operation of such legends in this and in other respects. I have attempted such empirical study, in initial fashion, on the texts of a small corpus of largely Munster legends of the wise-woman, together with a few legends from western and northern Ireland. With the exception of nine texts that are not of *Gaeltacht* provenance, they are all in the Irish language.

The corpus of legend in question here derives from a search through the Subject Index to the manuscripts of the Main Collection of the Irish Folklore Commission Archive under the key-word “*Bean Feasa*,” noting especially texts of a Munster provenance but omitting those relating to Biddy Early, the best-known and best-studied Munster wise-woman. The search yielded forty-six texts and these, while certainly not exhausting the possibility of the Archive to yield many more wise-woman references and texts, can, I believe, constitute a satisfactorily adequate sample for analysis and commentary (see Appendix: Folklore Archive Sources 1–40).

Almost one-half of the texts in the corpus came from County Cork—twenty-two legends. Seven more are from County Kerry, three from County Clare, two from County Tipperary and one from County Waterford. Outside Munster, eight legends came from County Galway and three from County Donegal. The majority of them were written down from oral narration in the 1930s, although a small number of them were recorded up to a decade later than that. Among the recorders

of this material, who wrote it down in the field, from oral tradition, are well-known, experienced and full-time collectors with the Irish Folklore Commission such as Nioclás Breathnach, Proinsias de Búrca, Liam Mac Coisdealbha, Liam Mac Meanman, Tomás Ó Ciardha, Seán Ó Dubhda, Seán Ó Flannagáin and Tadhg Ó Murchú, among others—practically all of them male. Also, it is from male informants and tradition-bearers that almost all of this material has been collected, although eight items come from a single female informant, Máiréad Ní Mhionacháin, the Beara Woman of the anthology of traditional material—lore and story—taken down by the collector Tadhg Ó Murchú and edited and published, in both the original Irish and in an English translation, by the folklore scholar Máirtín Verling (1999; 2003).

Overall, one can say that these legends concerning the wise-woman involve resort to her, as a possible source of help, by those afflicted with a misfortune that cannot be alleviated otherwise and that is obscure, perhaps even mysterious, in its origin. Despite variation in form and narrative style from district to district and from one textual version to another, a basic patterning presents itself that is worthy of study. In this regard the following aspects of these wise-woman legends suggest themselves as being of significance:

- By what title or term is such a person known?
- What is her name (first; family) in the story?
- What is her age and her social standing in the community?
- Is travelling with the fairy host attributed to her?
- What affliction or sorrow is involved in the story?
- In what manner is the wise-woman engaged with in the face of affliction?
- What explanation (if any) of the affliction does the wise-woman provide?
- What kind of treatment or healing does she provide?
- What affirmation is preferred of the powers of the wise-woman and of the veracity of the story?

Title

The term *bean feasa* (lit. “woman of knowledge”) is one of the most frequently encountered. Other terms used are *bean leighis* (“woman of healing”), *bean siubhail* (“travelling woman”), *seanbhean* (“old woman”), *cailleach* (“old woman, hag”), *bean chumhachtach* (“powerful woman, woman of supernatural power”), *bean chrosach* (“fortune-telling woman”), and two English language terms— *a strange woman*, *an old woman*. In one-third of the stories no particular title or term is used and the female in question is called by her own name(s) with a clear implication of her acceptance on all sides as a wise-woman. In the case of the title *bean feasa* (“woman of knowledge”), its use can be taken to indicate both knowledge and power, extraordinary knowledge and power, that are mysterious.

The Name of the Wise-woman

In the case of three wise-women we are given both a first and a family name: Eibhlín Ní Ghuinníola from Baile Bhoithín, Dingle, County Kerry (see Appendix, no. 3); Máire Ní Chearbhaill from West Carbery, County Cork (ibid. no. 25); and Máire Ní Mhurchú from Beara, County Cork (ibid. nos. 26–40)

A first name, only, is given in the case of a further five wise-woman, as follows: Máire Liam on the borders of Cork and Waterford between Mitchelstown and Lismore (see Appendix, no. 10); Nóirín na Sprideanna (“N of the sprites”) from the Déise of West Waterford (ibid. no. 12); Auld Margaret in Dungarvan, West Waterford (ibid. no. 20); Brighdín Cuileann from Tiaquin, County Galway (ibid. no. 17); and Lizzie Scot from Golladuff, County Donegal (ibid. no. 14), of whom it is remarked that she was an Albanach (lit. “Scottish”), that is, a Presbyterian. One other female in this material is given a first and family name with the suggestion that she is indeed a wise-woman (ibid. no. 4). She is from Tuosist, County Kerry, and it is related of her that she used to bring “knowledge” (*fios*) out of the trance-like states that regularly befell her during attendance at wakes. We can take it that this is a real individual. There is no evidence of anyone having ever had resort to her, however, in the face of affliction, and she cannot be considered as an equivalent to Eibhlín Ní Ghuinníola or Máire Ní Mhurchú or Máire Ní Chearbhaill, despite being a very interesting instance, in her own right, of the interface of life and lore.

Age and Status of the Wise-woman

The wise-woman is obviously aged, as a rule. She is frequently referred to as a *seanbhean*, an “old woman.” She appears to be unmarried, or at least there is no mention of marriage or spouse in relation to her. This contrasts, interestingly, with the case of Biddy Early, whose stories I have excluded from consideration. The wise-woman of this corpus has a status as itinerant, shifting, multi-locational presence that is attested to in at least three ways:

1. She is a “travelling woman,” an itinerant who, in one instance, is engaged in the business of having goods for sale.
2. Even though a settled resident of the community, she frequently travels with the fairy host so that she is present in various locations at various times and she has detailed local knowledge in different settings.
3. She is regularly present, in a usual and normal way, in different locations distant from each other, so that she takes on something of the multi-locational omnipresence of the territorial Sovereignty Queen who, in medieval literature and tradition personifies territories and kingdoms. The figure of *Cailleach Bhéarra*, the tutelary goddess of landscape, is a powerful articulation of this tradition and has powerful associations with much of the territory from which these stories of the wise-woman derive. The question of the relationship in cultural logic between the personages of the wise-woman and the *Cailleach* is discussed in detail in my recent book (Ó Cruaíoch 2003, 100–73).

Another aspect of the wise-woman’s status is that she is regarded as an oracular authority for her community regarding the meaning and significance of experiences they fail to understand—accidents, misfortunes, mysterious illness. Because of this she is regarded with a certain respectful awe mingled with anxiety in respect of her extraordinary and supernatural endowments of knowledge and power.

Travel with the Fairy Host: Other Avenues of Knowledge

In eight of the County Cork stories it is unequivocally stated that travel with the fairy host is the means whereby the wise-woman comes by her extraordinary knowledge:

bhíodh sí ag dul leis na daoine maithe ("she used to travel with the good people").

bhíodh sí ag imeacht leis an tslua ("she used to travel with the host").

"t'was said she used to go with the good people."

ráite go mbíodh sí in éineacht le dream an uabhair ("it was said that she used to go along with the proud set [Angels of Pride]").

"it is many a night she spent out in the company of the good people, the poor woman."

Such travel with the fairy host is attributed to the wise-woman not only in County Cork sources, but in sources from all over, in the present corpus.

In stories from Galway and Kerry the wise-woman has her powers not as a result of fairy host travel, but on the basis of "cup-tossing," the "reading" of bowls and cups that are mixed and shuffled about on a table or dresser for the purposes of divination. In another story, from Galway, the wise-woman is said to shape-shift into the form of a hare, on occasion, and to acquire her knowledge in this way. In a Tipperary story she has her knowledge from being "fasting, in bed, for seven years, without food or drink." In one of the Kerry stories in which the local priest is obliged to resort to the wise-woman when his horse is mysteriously lamed, we are told that many people believed that it was from the Devil that she had her powers. As the story proceeds, however, it is made clear that these powers do not derive from a demonic source. As a kind of corollary or reinforcement, even, of this clarification, the story tells of how, in this instance, the wise-woman was able to teach the priest a lesson in Christian piety when she reveals to him that the cause of his horse's injury is his own neglectfulness in not uttering a prophylactic blessing on the animal when he was praising it extravagantly.

The Crisis that Causes People to Send for the Wise-woman

There are two kinds of crisis to be identified here:

1. A small crisis, as it were—an animal stolen or strayed; the shortage or absence of a substance like butter or tobacco; a non-mysterious physical injury or illness; the misfortune or danger arising from certain behaviours (for example, returning at night-fall from tilling a field without bringing one's spade along with one or building one's house on a fairy fort).
2. A mysterious illness striking down an individual or an animal; for example, the priest's horse; two young men in the course of robbing the landlord's orchard; someone returning from an evening's storytelling; the young girl who was struck dumb (see the text of the story at the head of this article).

The Encounter with the Wise-woman

At least two kinds of encounter to be distinguished:

1. She is intentionally sent for or visited at her home, since either she is well known and her power appreciated or else those who would not normally credit her with such power are advised, in affliction, to resort to her and do so; for example, the priest in Dingle with the lamed horse, the sceptical husband in Beara whose wife is abducted across the waters of the bay by the fairy host.
2. The local wise-woman happens on the scene of the affliction, by chance or by fate. Both Eibhlín Ní Ghuinníola and Máire Ní Mhurchú are related as having called in, unexpectedly, to the house of a victim of unexplained illness. A wise-woman from another district can, likewise, make a similarly timely appearance—as in the case of the travelling wise-woman from County Clare who calls in to the Bantry, County Cork household just as they are mysteriously failing to churn their cream to butter.

The Wise-woman's Explanation of the Misfortune

On occasion she extracts the meaning of the occurrence by means of a divinatory ritual involving the “tossing” and other handling of bowls or cups. This seems to occur mainly in connection with the location and recovery of animals that have been stolen or have strayed—although we have noted its occurrence in the story of the girl who was struck dumb.

On other occasions the wise-woman already knows the nature and cause of the misfortune, before anyone comes to visit her. In these cases she has foreknowledge, as it were, either because she has acquired it in the course of her travels in the company of the fairy host or else she has herself been mysteriously present when the misfortune happened. A story of Máire Ní Chearbhaill and the blow her “client” received from the otherworld Red-Haired Woman he met late at night is an example of this (see Appendix, no. 25).

Sometimes, too, the wise-woman will offer no explanation at all but pronounce and prophecy that even greater misfortune will befall the afflicted party; for example, Nóirín na Sprideanna foretells the death of the husband of the woman who meets her (see Appendix, no. 12); Brighdín Cuileann foretells further catastrophe for the mother of the drowned/abducted child—that the whole family will die of the plague in a little while (*ibid.* no. 17).

The Healing the Wise-woman Provides

The simplest kind of healing she effects is in terms of the knowledge she has out of which the missing animal or object is recovered. Sometimes the information she communicates is coded or covert—where exactly the missing animal may be found, for instance. Having found out by means of cup-tossing that the heifer that was lost for several days is still alive, Máire Ní Chearbhaill says, to its owner, in relation to finding it, no more than “*d’imighis thairsti trí uaire ar maidin inniu*” (“you have passed by her three times this morning”) (see Appendix, no. 25).

In other instances definite, specific advice is available from the wise-woman in order to set things right. The travelling wise-woman instructed the Bantry family as to how they might prevent their butter being magically stolen; they were to make a bottle-full of butter on a Sunday morning before sun-rise and to put portions of this butter into three successive churnings (see Appendix, no. 7). Máire Ní Mhurchú directed that a specific herbal ointment be used to relieve

the suffering of a young girl afflicted since passing water into a kitchen utensil within the house (*ibid.* no. 37).

Another wise-woman story, from Duhallow in North Cork in this case, has highly specific instructions being given to the man whose wife has been abducted by the fairy host with a male changeling substituted in her place (see Appendix, no. 13). The instructions include detailing the use by him of holy water to wrest his wife back from the *lios* (the “fairy-fort,” ringfort) and one is reminded of aspects of the tragic and notorious case of Bridget Cleary, of Tipperary, whose death, in the late nineteenth century, resulted from attempts by her husband and other family to combat what was believed to be fairy abduction (Bourke, 1999).

Herbs—or a liquid prepared by boiling herbs—sometimes feature in the healing the wise-woman effects. Such herbal use, however, is seen to involve mysterious healing power that goes beyond the range of herbal and folk medicine. For instance, in one story Eibhlín Ní Ghuinníola is reported as having a *leannán sí* (a fairy suitor) accompanying her as she picks and gathers herbs (see Appendix, no. 3). In other cases the herb that is required to affect healing has to be obtained from a distant graveyard under cover of dark (*ibid.* no. 37). Even when the healing itself involves no more, apparently, than the rubbing on of a herb or the drinking of a herbal infusion, there are still circumstances of a mysterious nature that pertain; for example, Máire Ní Chearbhaill happens to bring along the exact and specific herbal requirements to the house of the sick individual when she chances in unexpectedly (*ibid.* no. 25); Máire Ní Mhurchú pointedly forbids anyone to be present with her when the herbal potion is administered (*ibid.* no. 27); and Eibhlín Ní Ghuinníola dispenses the herbal remedy to her visitors only on condition that they obey a taboo in regard to looking behind them on the journey home to their sick relative (*ibid.* no. 3).

Stories where the wise-woman is using herbs as part of healing treatment in the case of fairy-abduction show most clearly that more than the “normal” folk pharmacopoeia is involved; for example, the stories featuring Máire Ní Mhurchú’s journeying on horseback or by boat, along with the relatives of the abducted individual, in order to acquire, in a distant graveyard the necessary herb with which to treat the affliction (see Appendix, nos. 26–8). The struggle and race to avoid fairy pursuers on these occasions confirm beyond doubt that supernatural healing, beyond herbal medicine, is involved in these instances.

Affirmation of the Truth of the Story

Sometimes we are given to understand that what happened, in the story, befell the family of the narrator herself or himself: it was from one narrator’s grandfather that a colt was stolen; it was to another narrator’s own mother that the woman came in seeking the loan of a saucepan and flour; another narrator again says “all that happened within this house” (the stealing away of butter and its redress).

Other times we are told that the house of the wise-woman is still in existence and that her descendants are known to members of the narrator’s own family. “Her children are alive today; they are old, of course.” In some cases it’s the ruin of the wise-woman’s house that still stands near the informant’s own home. In other cases, we are told by the narrator that his own parents were well acquainted with the wise-woman in their day.

Of particular interest are those instances where features of the wise-woman and her activities are affirmed that are, in reality, beyond any human scale of things. Máire Ní Chearbhaill is affirmed from the evidence of relatives of different narrators to have been present daily in two far-flung locations. She is said, on the one hand, to have visited a house in Gallans every day “where my mother’s aunt was serving” (see Appendix, no. 25). On the other hand we have it vouched for by someone whose “wife’s people were living over beyond Reenascreena” that “Máire Ní Chearbhaill used to come in visiting them every day” (ibid. no. 25). The location of Gallans and Reenascreena is unlikely to allow for their both being visited on a daily basis by the same woman. Similarly it is related how there were daily sightings of and dealings with Máire Ní Mhurchú in places as far apart from each other in Beara as Dursey Island and Adrigole.

Nevertheless, the narrators strive their best to affirm the authenticity of their stories of the wise-woman. An account may end with the words “This is a true story” or “But I am absolutely certain that this story is no make-up” or “and there is hardly anyone today who could believe that things were like that long ago, and they were like that.”

A separate study of such affirmations could be made in respect of the narrator Pádraig Ó Murchú, of Gort Broc in Beara, who tries continually to impress on his listeners (and on his collector) the veracity of the incidents he relates concerning Máire Ní Mhurchú, the Beara wise-woman. He invokes his own father and mother together with his parish priest as witnesses to the truth of the stories he narrates about Máire, and he proclaims the truth of his lore again and again. “There’s no lie in that,” he says, at the end of one story, “or any old make-up.” “*Bhí san chomh fíor agus tá an ghrian ag taitneamh ar an aer*” (“That was as true and as real as the sun shining in the sky”) (see Appendix, no. 26).

It is difficult to think of any other metaphor of affirmation that could go so directly to the heart of things and to the centre of existence; the sun shining in the sky. It brings us back to a consideration of the question of the function that such lore and legends of the wise-woman had—and has—in the oral narrative tradition of Ireland and of the Gaelic-speaking world.

Reading the Bean Feasa

We are today increasingly aware of how aspects of folklore relating to women and the feminine have to be understood as a kind of code in which metaphorical expression is given to matters that would, otherwise, normally prove impossible of expression in the public arena (Bourke 1993). Such matters include, for example, marital difficulties, anorexia, post-natal depression, physical and sexual abuse and other injuries, afflictions and misfortunes of an intimate and private nature. I would like to suggest that the finite, closed set of complaints and troubles and disasters that cause people in Irish legend tradition to resort to the powers of the wise-woman represent the open, unlimited order of just such troubles and afflictions as all women and all men are prone to experience in the course of their lives. I would argue that these stories deal imaginatively—if at a symbolic remove—with the troubles and afflictions that arise for people in respect of the psychodynamic aspect of their personal lives, especially at the emotional level. In these stories from tradition, people fail to comprehend sickness or loss or

disaster. It is related how the wise-woman is able to elucidate the cause of such affliction—even if she sometimes omits to communicate her knowledge fully. It is to be seen that such understanding of what is happening, or what has happened, to the victims of affliction and their families is something that they could themselves have known had it not been for a kind of denial, and rejection of the truth about their lives and their relationships. Such denial results in the suppression of their knowledge of the truth—and the true causes of things—to a level lower than that of everyday social consciousness. In the stories they are made to submit to the truth—about themselves and about life—by means of the diagnostic explanations and the authoritative pronouncements of the wise-woman; they are obliged, in general, to recognise their failings and short-comings in respect of their relationships to family members, to neighbours, to their communities, to their environment and to their cultural heritage of cosmology and worldview. The inevitable transgressions of fallible, fearful mortals as well as the darker transgressions arising from pathology and personality disorder are what are being processed imaginatively and narratively in the legend tradition of the wise-woman. In so far as these stories relate—and propose to their audiences—that relief from the affliction that arises from situations where there is denial of human reality is available for those who can submit to the honesties of the deeper levels of heart and conscience, these stories represent understanding of psychic life. They represent that implicit knowledge of cultural psychodynamics that exists for communities in the vernacular imagination of communal discourse—in the telling of stories out of the common repertoire of local narrative tradition.

Such simple stories told in the public domain about the knowledge and power of the wise-woman—stories telling of a limited and repeating range of afflictions and of the healing of such afflictions in time-honoured, traditional fashion—engage, in vernacular narrative and cultural tradition, with the private psychic lives of their listeners. In doing so they constitute a public and communal reflex of that private, complex, individual and highly personal process through which people cope with, and come to terms with, the vicissitudes of life. Such coping and coming to terms may be understood as being achieved, within the psyche, on grounds that involve deep symbolism and the operation of archetypes of human living. In regularly listening to and identifying with the figures and the events of wise-woman legends in the arena of the public discourse, individual consciousness is able, on occasion, to attain to the archetypal levels of the psychic life of the individual and to benefit from the psychodynamic processes that enable imagination and creative imaginative energies to somewhat assuage the troubles and pain of living.

Writing of a different subgenre of legend, than that of the wise-woman, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne states: “I suggest that it is because it has a structure that carries . . . archetypal meaning that it exists in tradition” (Ní Dhuibhne 1993, 80). She is referring here to the Migratory Legend of the elderly female in the form of the hare. What she says can, I believe, also be referred to the legends of the wise-woman. They possess a structure that enables the listener, hearing them with the “ears of tradition” and in the framework of a traditional worldview, to open his or her imagination to the healing and remedial energies of psychic creativity and thereby contain and even transcend life’s current difficulties.

Regarded in this way, the lore and legends of the wise-woman constitute a limited set of accounts—regarding the dealing with, and the healing of, afflictions—that operate in the arena of public communal discourse to the benefit of the individual members of the community in their personal achievement of a sense of meaningfulness and a sense of hope in their experience of their lives.

In the face of life's troubles, those that manifest themselves in physical, bodily affliction and those that arise in emotional life and in the psyche, oral narrative tradition can here be said to be providing a cultural mechanism whereby the redemptive powers of the psyche itself and of the creative imagination are made available in the course of community life. Thus one of the functions of the recounting of legends and lore of the wise-woman is to make whole, as it were, that sense of oneself that resides in the individual and in the communal group. Consequently, the bearers and narrators of such *seanchas* ("lore and legendary") can be seen to play a very significant role in the cultural life of the community in terms that are creative and therapeutic along with being commemorative. It is surely this understanding of the powerful and vital contribution to life and tradition of the *seanchaí*, the narrator of lore, that underlies the invocation of the Aran Island *seanchaí* Darach Ó Direáin in a poem by the Aran-born Máirtín Ó Direáin, long resident in Dublin (2002, 62–3). Remembering back to his early life on Aran, the poet calls on the now-dead *seanchaí*, Darach, to come to the assistance of the living. Out of the stressful, lonely, threatening circumstances of urban life in a modern city the poet turns to his remembered experience of the imaginative riches of the *seanchaí's* repertoire and performance. Everything could be right again if only Darach would let loose his stories and his storytelling, narrating each item and event of lore exactly as tradition had it . . . Alas, this cannot be and the reality of loss and death, personal and communal, infuses itself quietly into the last two lines of the piece.

*Cén scéal, a Dharaigh, ón tír úd thall?
Ar casadh Seáinín ort nó Séamus fós?
An bhfuil Mac Rí Éireann féin san áit?
An bhfuil Fionn Mac Cumhaill ná Conán ann?
An raibh an Cailleach Bhéarra rót sa ród
Scaoil chugainn do scéal, a Dharaigh chóir!*

*Chuireas do thuairisc uair ar Cháit
Ach d'fhágais ise féin gán tás;
Fóir orainn a Dharaigh, go beo
Is aithris dúinn gach eachtra i gceart.
Ach b'áil liom a rá cén mhaith bheith leat,
Tá an fód, mo léan, i do bhéal go beacht (Ó Direáin,; 2002, 62–3, published with permission).*

What news, Darach, from the land beyond?
Did you meet Seáinín yet, or Séamus?
Is the King of Ireland's Son himself there?
Is Fionn Mac Cumhaill or Conán there?
Was Cailleach Bhéarra out in front of you on the road?
Let us have your story [i.e. news], Darach, my honest man!

I enquired after you one time from Cáit
 But you have left even her without tidings;
 Come quickly to our aid, Darach,
 And narrate every adventure correctly for us,
 But, I would want to say, what's the use of going on about you,
 Since, to my great sorrow, the sod sits trimly in your mouth (author's translation).

We may conclude that the figure of the wise-woman and the repertoire of legends about her in oral narrative tradition constitute a significant native resource in the imaginative and cultural life of the Gaelic world.

Note

- [1] A manuscript of the Irish Folklore Commission (Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin, Ireland). A collector of the former Irish Folklore Commission (1935–71), Seán Standún, wrote down this item of lore from Mrs Eibhlín Uí Cheadagáin, aged 70 years, of Baile Iartach in Cape Clear, County Cork, in December 1933. It is reproduced here—in my own translation—by permission of the Head of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin, in whose archive the former Irish Folklore Commission's manuscripts are housed. An analytic commentary on this and other legends featuring the wise-woman will be found in Ó Cruallaioich 2003.

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Appendix: Folklore Archive Sources

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