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AN EXORCISMCaoimhín Ó Danachair

Many writers, including the present one¹, have remarked upon the minor role played by the Devil in Irish tradition. In his introduction to Saints and Sinners² Dr. Douglas Hyde remarked:

When we consider the collection as a whole, we find that its purely Irish aspect is apparent in many ways, and in none more than in the very characteristic dovetailing of what is Pagan in what is Christian. But its omissions are even more distinctly Irish than its inclusions.

In most countries, for instance, the Devil is the great anthropomorphic conception added to the folk-lore of Europe by the introduction of Christianity; and later the belief in Witches, who trafficked directly with the Evil One, became extraordinarily prevalent and powerful. Now the striking fact about our collection is that the Devil personified rarely appears in it, and the Witch never.

Dr. Hyde goes on to remark that the Devil in Irish tradition is a much less grotesque and fearful figure than the European medieval concept of him, that only certain types of stories are told about him, and that even place-names such as the Devil's Bit and the Devil's Punch Bowl are Anglo-Irish rather than Irish in origin³.

It is clear that the main role of the Devil in Irish tradition is not that of the fearsome enemy of mankind but of a figure in folk tales. Here it is interesting to note that his portrayal in early Irish literature⁴ is nearer to the medieval European concept than is our recent tradition; this in itself is a matter worthy of investigation. In

this, perhaps because much of early Irish literature came from the monasteries and thus might reflect the 'official' ecclesiastical view rather than the folk tradition? Or is the reduction of the Devil's role a later development in folk tradition?

Seán Ó Súilleabháin, in his article 'The Devil in Irish Folk Narrative'⁵ shows that the Irish folk tales of the Devil fall into the usual classes of Märchen, such as Aa.Th.330, which we know as the Séadhna and which tells how a man promised his soul to Devil in return for riches, but tricks him and saves his own soul, or Aa.Th.1174, in which the Devil is defeated by being given the task of twisting a rope out of sand; and Sagen such as the Devil as Cardplayer, or the Devil in disguise betrayed by his cloven hoof and driven away. Very seldom does the Devil, in any of these tales get the better of a mortal; where he does, the mortal is evil and deserves his fate. All of these were recognised by the people as tales, not accounts of the actual experiences of friends or neighbours, for while there are numerous 'true stories' of people's encounters with ghosts, fairies, púcaí and water horses, face to face meetings with the Devil are extremely rare.

Therefore, it is with some surprise that we find, clearly remembered in the tradition of a remote district of West County Limerick, a detailed and circumstantial account of an exorcism in the early eighteenth century⁶.

The old church of Templeathea, then a minor house or mission of the Augustinian Friars was burned by Queen Elizabeth's Lord Justice Sir William Pelham during the assault on the Earl of Desmond in 1580, and the makeshift repair which after that served as a church was destroyed by Murchadh na dTóiteán, Lord Inchiquin, about 1649. After this, for a century or so mass was said in the open, here and there in

hidden places to avoid detection, but the people still gathered to celebrate some festivals at the old church ruin and the nearby holy well. One such gathering was to light the Midsummer fire on Saint John's Eve, and the parish priest of the time had the custom of reciting the rosary there with his flock. On one such occasion about 1730, the people brought to him at the bonfire a girl who, they alleged, was possessed by an evil spirit, and asked the priest to use his power of exorcism.

The priest, Father Maurice Dineen,⁷ long remembered in local tradition for piety, learning and wisdom, questioned the girl - or the possessing spirit - in terms remembered in tradition, and these were written down, towards the beginning of this century by an old man, Edmund Woulfe of Cratloe, Athea, who was popularly known as Dicky Ned. This old gentleman, who was educated at a hedge school, was literate in both Irish and English, and he provided a written version of what tradition held to be the original questions and answers as well as an English translation, which apparently was his own.

The Irish version runs as follows:⁸

1. Ceist: 'Ce hé tusa? No an spirid thú atá istig sa chailín seo?'

Freagra: 'Is spirid de'n chineal san me'.

2. Ceist: 'Cad é an rang ata agatsa i measc na spirideanna san?'

Freagra: 'Is neach díbh siúd mé ata ceapaithe chun dul isteach i nduine'.

3. Ceist: 'An annspirid no drochspirid thú?'
- Freagra: 'Ní headh'.
4. Ceist: 'An bhfuil mórán spirideanna ann atá dhá irraidh dul isteach i nduine mar an cailín seo?'
- Freagra: 'Tá mórán mór de'n chineál san ann'.
5. Ceist: 'An rabhais-se ar Neamh seal?'
- Freagra: 'Bhíos ann'.
6. Ceist: 'Cé an fhaid a bhís ar Neamh?'
- (Níor tugadh aon fhreagra.)
7. Ceist: 'Cad í an teanga a bhí dá labhairt ar Adhamh and Eva i nGairdín an Pharathais?'
- (Tugadh freagra ar an gceist seo, ach níor thuig an saqart ná aoinne eile díbh siúd a bhí i lathair é. Cheap na daoine gurab í teanga an Pharathais a bhí dá labhairt ag an spirid).
8. Ceist: 'An raighir arís ar Neamh?'
- Freagra: 'Ag Rí na bhFlaitheas amháin atá a fhios san'.

9. Ceist: 'Cathain a bheidh deire le géarle-anúint na nGall ar na Gaeil?'
- Freagra: 'Ní fada uait an lá san'.
10. Ceist: 'An maith leat a bheith ad' cheistiú agam?'
- Freagra: 'Ní maith'.
11. Ceist: 'An gcaithfidh tú freagra a thúirt ar gach ceist a cuirim ort?'
- Freagra: 'Gach uair is éigin dom é'.
12. Ceist: 'An bhfuil aon chomhacht agat mise do smachtú nó do ghortú ar nós ar bith?'
- Freagra: 'Marach an ola do cuireadh ort agus an leabhar do léigheadh ort d'fhéadfainn tú do thógaint in áirde san aer agus thú theilgean leis an dtalamh'.
13. Ceist: 'An feidir leat mé do mharbhú mar sin?'
- Freagra: 'Níl cead agam tú do mharbhú'.
14. Ceist: 'An féidir leat duine mar an gcailín seo do ghortú an fhaid athá tú istig inti?'
- Freagra: 'Níl cead agam é sin do dheanamh'.

The English translation, as given by Edmund Woulfe runs as follows:⁹

1. Question: 'Are you a spirit in possession of this young girl?'
- Answer: 'I am'.
2. Question: 'What position do you hold among those spirits?'
- Answer: 'I am one of those selected for such possession'.
3. Question: 'Are you a spirit of evil?'
- Answer: 'No'.
4. Question: 'Are there many spirits who seek habitation in a person like this young girl?'
- Answer: 'Yes, there are very many'.
5. Question: 'Were you in heaven one time?'
- Answer: 'Yes'.
6. Question: 'How long were you in Heaven?'
- Answer: (No answer given).
7. Question: 'What was the language that Adam and Eve spoke in the Garden or Paradise?'

(Answer given but not understood).

8. Question: 'Will you ever get back to Heaven?'
- Answer: 'The King of Heaven alone know that'.
9. Question: 'When will the evil laws of the English cease to persecute the Irish?'
- Answer: 'That time is at hand'.
10. Question: 'Do you like being questioned by me?'
- Answer: 'No'.
11. Question: 'Must you answer every question I put to you?'
- Answer: 'Whenever I am compelled to do so'.
12. Question: 'Have you power to punish or injure me in any way?'
- Answer: 'But for the oil poured on you and the book read over you I could take you up in the air and dash you to the ground'.
13. Question: 'Could you kill me in this way?'
- Answer: 'I am not permitted to kill you'.

14. Question: 'Could you injure a person like this girl when you are within her body?'

Answer: 'I am not permitted to do so'.

These we are told, are only a few of the questions put by the priest, before he 'read his book' over the girl and restored her to her normal condition. People who remembered the tradition recall the initial shock and fright among the onlookers, and people's speculation about the whole affair. What did the spirit mean by saying it was not evil? Could it be one of the Good People and not an evil demon? Or was its answer another deceit of the Evil One? Was the strange language that of Paradise? And so on. Altogether it was a remarkable experience for the people, puzzling as well as terrifying. It is still a puzzle for the ethnologist. It is quite clear that something happened two hundred and fifty years ago. So clear a tradition, with names, places and details of an occurrence in the presence of a large number of people, all of whom knew each other, cannot be the sheer invention of some perverted humourist or notoriety seeker.

It would be interesting to know if there is, in Irish folk tradition, any similar account of an actual exorcism, or is this unique?

1. C. Ó Danachair, : 'The Neutral in Irish Folk Tradition', Ethnologia Europaea, 10(1977-78), 173-177.
2. D. Hyde, : Saints and Sinners, Dublin 1915, ix.
3. idem, xii-xiii.
4. See T.P. Cross, : Motif Index of Early Irish Literature, Indiana University, 1952.

5. in Volksüberlieferung (Festschrift für Prof. Dr. Kurt Ranke, Göttingen 1968, 275-286.
6. This information is mainly derived from the late Liam Ó Danachair, N.T., of Athesa, Co. Limerick.
7. see Canon Begley, : History of the Diocese of Limerick, Vol. 3, 602.
8. as written down by Edmund Woulfe, about 1905.
9. this is included in IFC 1193:317-320.

BUNRATTY CASTLE A YOUNG VISITOR'S GUIDE

Bunratty Castle a Young Visitor's Guide is a recent publication, designed and produced by Shannon Free Airport Development Company Limited. This twenty-four page booklet fulfils many functions. In addition to guiding the young visitor through the exterior and interior of the castle, it gives a brief historical background to its building. The reader is brought through Bunratty Castle, section by section, and on this tour, attention is brought to items of interest such as furniture, armour, carvings, etc. In each section, questions are asked and these encourage the reader to view the castle in its historical perspective and to place it in its original context and environment. Illustrations appear on every page and these are vivid reconstructions of life in Bunratty Castle in the fifteenth century. Answers to the questions which are asked throughout the text are given at the end of the booklet. Encouragement of this nature is of extreme importance in making young people more aware of their heritage and of its role in their daily lives. The text throughout is clearly written and informative, with the exception of the introductory section in Irish. The number of grammatical and spelling errors in the Irish text indicate a carelessness not in evidence in the English text. Nonetheless this booklet is a worthwhile publication and an excellent guide to the visitor, young or old, but more particularly young, to Bunratty Castle.

A brochure published alongside BUNRATTY CASTLE entitled STUDENT EDUCATIONAL TOURS is an encouragement to teachers to bring their pupils on outings to other castles. Dún Guaire and Knappogue, and places of interest such as Bunratty Folk Park and Craggaunowen Project and Museum all of which serve to increase the young person's appreciation and understanding of the nature of history, archaeology, folklore, geography and many related disciplines as seen in their environment.

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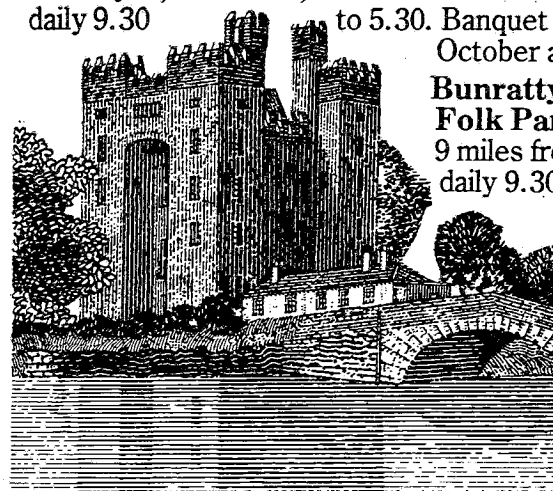
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