

Flyting and Fighting in the Irish *Táin Bó Cúailange*

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A year or two ago, the building where I worked was being painted; painters were everywhere with ladders and brushes and radios. The job was a biggish one, and there was a contractual time-limit for finishing it; the men were under some pressure. Two of them began to argue a technical point just outside my door, and their voices progressively rose in anger. I couldn't clearly hear everything because of the general din, but after several exchanges back and forth, one painter said to the other, '... And when I've finished with you, *mate*, and you get home, your kids will say, "What's that thing crawling in the door, Mum ? " And she'll say, "That used to be your dad.'" The two men moved away then, still wrangling, and I didn't hear the end of it; I don't know whether they came to blows. Scenes like that are fairly common in everyday life, perhaps especially in the building and transport industries. Sometimes the threats and boasts and counter-threats lead to an actual fight; but if one of the contestants can establish verbal dominance over the other, or if some accommodation can be reached, a fight can be avoided. In epic literature, we find plenty of scenes in which two heroes meet on a battlefield and gird at each other before they set to work with spear or sword, or perhaps decide not to fight after all. Such verbal exchanges are called 'flytings'. One definition of flyting is 'verbal contesting with an *ad hominem* orientation'.¹ Flyting is a cross-cultural genre of verbal behaviour, well attested in ancient Greek and in Old English epic poetry, and elsewhere as well. What about Irish heroic literature ?

Before the time of Gerald of Wales in the twelfth century, few outsiders left descriptions of Ireland or of its people; but we do have certain accounts composed by Greek and Roman writers, and also an extensive medieval literature in the native language. The Greek and Roman historians and

1 Ward Parks, *Verbal Dueling : The Homeric and Old English Traditions*. (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1990), pp.6-7.

ethnographers whom I have in mind lived about the beginning of our present era, and though they did not write directly about the Irish (concerning whom they knew little), they had a good deal to say about the Celts of the continent.² In spite of their faults and biases, these ancient historical accounts of the continental Celts are interesting and precious. Strabo indicates, for example, that the Celts were great consumers of beef and dairy products, and of pork.³ Pork, beef and milk are prominently mentioned in the the medieval Irish *Story of Mac Dathó's Pig*, for example; and recent excavations at Dún Ailinne, an important Iron Age site in Leinster, have revealed thousands of animal bones: about half are from cattle, and most of the rest are from pigs.⁴ Again, according to Diodorus of Sicily, the continental Celts rode and fought in horse-drawn chariots, and regularly took the heads of slain enemies as trophies and proofs of valour;⁵ in medieval Irish heroic tales, warriors do the same.⁶

In particular, Diodorus has this to say about the Gauls: "It is also their custom, when they are formed for battle, to step out in front of the line and to challenge the most valiant men from among their opponents to single combat, brandishing their weapons in front of them to terrify their adversaries. And when any man accepts the challenge to battle, they then break forth (*eksumnóisi*) into a song of praise of the valiant deeds of their ancestors and in boast of their own high achievements, reviling all the while and belittling their opponent, and trying, in a word, to strip him of his bold spirit before the combat'.⁷ A little later, Diodorus adds that the Gauls were 'boasters and threateners,' though sharp-witted. Their lyric poets, the 'bards', would sing songs of praise (*humnoúsin*) or of obloquy (*blasphemoúsi*)⁸. The battlefield custom sounds like a well-established and stylised Celtic form of

2 The authorities most often cited are Caesar, *Galic War*, esp. VI. 11-20; Diodorus Siculus, V. 24-32; and Strabo, IV. 4. 1-6. All these writers probably drew from a lost book of Poseidonius (1st cent. BC), or from Timagenes: see R. M. Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy: Books 1-5.*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 700-02.

3 Strabo, IV. 4. 3.

4 They feast on milk-fed pork and on beef in *Scéla Mucce Meic Dá Thó*, (ed.) Rudolf Thurneysen, *Medieval and Modern Irish Series 6*, (Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1935), trans. in *Ancient Irish Tales.*, (ed.) T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, (2nd ed., Dublin, Allen Figgis, 1969), 199-207. See also Bernard Wailes, 'Dún Ailinne: A Summary Excavation Report,' *Emania 7* (1990): 10-21. This Iron Age site was apparently occupied between the the third century BC and the third century AD.

5 Diodorus Siculus, V. 29.

6 For a general discussion of these matters, see Kenneth H. Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1964); and a hostile review by Francoise LeRoux in *Ogam* 18 (1966): 333-7. Further, Myles Dillon and Nora K. Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms*, (2nd ed., London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), esp. 1-17. For some cautionary remarks about literature when related to the archaeological record, see Ruth and Vincent Megaw, *Celtic Art: From Its Beginnings to the Book of Kells*, (London, Thames and Hudson, 1989), esp. 235.

7 Diodorus Siculus. (Loeb Classical Library. Vol. 3), (ed. and trans.) C. H. Oldfather, (London, Heinemann, 1939), V. 29. 2-3..

8 *Ibid.*, V. 31. 1-2.

flying. 'Praise' and 'obloquy' are the verbal counterparts to honour and shame; and eulogy and satire were specific functions of the Irish court poet well into historical times. It was said in fact that these poets had the power to raise weals and blisters of shame on the faces of those whom they formally reviled, or even to cause death; such poets were much feared.⁹

Now the medieval Irish narrative which most closely approximates to 'epic' scope and elaboration is the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.¹⁰ The title means, approximately, 'The Driving-Off of the Cattle of Cooley', Cooley being a locality near modern Dundalk, Co. Louth, and formerly within the ancient kingdom of Ulster. 'Liftings' or 'drivings-off' of cattle are mentioned in the *Iliad*,¹¹ as typical heroic adventures, and a number of *tána bó* exist in medieval Irish literature; but that of Cooley is the most famous, and hence it is known simply as 'the *Táin*.' Its chief hero is CúChulainn. In this *Táin* are to be found some six or ten episodes which seem referable to flying, and which bear comparison with what Diodorus said about the ancient Gauls boasting and threatening and scorning their enemies in individual confrontations.

Clearly there is much time and space between Diodorus and his authorities on the one hand and medieval Irish narrative on the other, for our oldest texts of the *Táin* were written out in the twelfth century; but they, too, had their sources. Their scribes were compilers who occasionally refer to 'other books' which must have been older than they, and which at certain points they preferred not to follow. These scribes also copied down linguistic forms which in their day had become obsolete. The *Táin* may in fact have taken something like its present written shape in the eighth century, or a little earlier, and a brief poetical piece belonging to the earlier part of the eighth century, the *Verba Scáthaige*, plainly alludes to CúChulainn and his deeds in the *Táin*.¹² Besides this, the general atmosphere of the narrative is pagan: the druids - traditional enemies of St Patrick - are powerful and revered in it, and the hero occasionally traffics

9 On poetical praise and satire, see Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire : Magic, Ritual, Art.*, (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1960), esp. 1-48; J. E. Caerwyn Williams, 'The Court Poet in Medieval Ireland,' *PBA* 57 (1971): 85-153; Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans : Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry.* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1979), esp. ch. 12.

10 The *Táin* exists in two main recensions, both now edited by Cecile O'Rahilly with introductions, translations and notes, and both published by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies : *Táin Bó Cúailnge : Recension I* (1976), and *Táin Bó Cúailnge : From the Book of Leinster* (1970). The two recensions will be referred here to as Rec. I and LL, and the two editions as *Rec. I* and *LL*, respectively. In a paper intended for non-specialist readers, I refer often to *The Táin*. (trans.) Thomas Kinsella, (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1969). As Kinsella explains in his Notes, he follows Rec. I, supplementing it from LL.

11 I. 152-7 and II.670-761, for example.

12 For mentions of 'other versions' see, for example, Kinsella, 71 and 94, and O'Rahilly, *Rec. I*, 10, note 5; also Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, (Halle, Niemeyer, 1921), 112-3. For the *Verba Scáthaige*, see Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, 376-7, and P. L. Henry, 'Verba Scáthaige', *Celtica* 21 (1990) : 191-201.

with named figures from the old Celtic pantheon¹³. Apart from a brief Latin end-note to the *Book of Leinster* version¹⁴, the narrating voices make no overt attempt to create a Christian perspective such as we find in the Old English *Beowulf*. In fact, the Irish annalistic tradition registers the Táin Bó Cúailnge as having taken place in BC 19 (in modern chronological notation), and it seems likely that a *Táin* oral tradition, in some form, was in existence before St Patrick's mission to Ireland in the fifth century. It is hard to imagine Christianised men of letters confecting a pagan epic out of nothing.¹⁵ All this narrows the gap between medieval Irish fiction and the reports of the ancient Mediterranean historians and ethnographers, and it increases the relevance of the one to the other in respect of flyting and other matters.

Since the *Táin* has now been mentioned, and since I propose to discuss flyting in it, it seems best to outline how the story goes. - Medb and her consort Ailill rule Connacht in the west of Ireland; Conchobar rules Ulster from Emain Macha in the north-east. One of Conchobar's Ulstermen possesses a certain wondrous bull, named the Donn or Brown Bull of Cooley. Medb greatly covets this animal for herself, but its Ulster owner will not give it up to her. Medb and Ailill therefore decide to launch a great raid into Ulster to ravage and plunder and to seize the bull by force. They muster a great army from all over Ireland, and it includes a number of famous Ulster warriors. These men have taken service with Medb because they have serious grievances against King Conchobar; with mixed feelings, they now join the attack on their former homeland.

The invaders choose their moment well; for at the time when they enter Ulster Conchobar and almost all his fighting men can offer no resistance, because they lie stricken with a supernatural debility which comes upon them from time to time. Their youthful champion CúChulainn, however, is immune to the debility, and for long weeks he defends Ulster and its people and its cattle almost single-handed: by his courage, strength and strategy he delays the invaders and imposes his will on the course of the campaign. Much of the *Táin* in fact consists of loose-strung episodes which demonstrate CúChulainn's astonishing prowess, so that at times the *Táin* reads like a long 'bravery' or epic *aristeia*. CúChulainn's defence, however, brings him into direct conflict with the Ulster exiles and other former friends.

The sickness of the Ulster warriors at last abates; they arise and march out together as a great host. In a pitched battle they defeat the Connacht

13 Kinsella, 84-5 and 142-3, respectively.

14 Kinsella, 283.

15 For the Irish annalistic tradition, see Eoin Mac Neill, *Celtic Ireland* (1921), (ed.) Donnchadh O'Corraí, (Dublin: Academy Press, 1981), 24-42 and 186-7; also John V. Kelleher, 'The *Táin* and the Annals', *Eriu* 22 (1971): 107-27.

invaders and drive them away. The exhausted CúChulainn gets no special reward for all his long labours, and the bull which had been the cause of all the strife expires: it had already lived multiple lives, and perhaps at one time figured in a myth. But if that be so, the myth is now indecipherable; the *Táin* as we have it is concerned with the deeds of mortal men.¹⁶

I now turn to the specific matter of flyting in the *Táin*, and to what relation it may bear to Diodorus' remarks about how the continental Celts used formally to threaten and challenge individual enemies. - The general territory of flyting has recently been mapped by Ward Parks, who mainly has ancient Greek and Old English epic poetry in mind. Parks shows that flyting and representations of flyting in literature function at more than one level of significance. At the sociobiological level, for example, flyting may be compared with that vocal threatening which often precedes ritualised combat for individual or group survival in the non-human world.¹⁷ Culturally, formalised flyting can express and display the elaborated principles of honour; while in the epic, flyting can provide type-scenes and 'generative kernels' for individual artists to develop in recital or oral improvisation or writing. Within these frameworks Parks constructs a general schema to show how flyting and fighting were linked together and presented in ancient Greek and in Old English¹⁸. In outline, his 'flyting to fighting pathways' and flyting itself go somewhat as follows.

First, the 'Engagement'. The epic narrator selects two potential combatants from his cast of characters and has them confront each other. In the *Iliad* they usually meet by chance on the Trojan plain; in the *Táin*, where the fighting is more mobile, the two usually meet by pre-arrangement at some variable place, generally a ford in a river. After the Engagement comes the formal 'Flyting'; and, as Parks shows, flyting is a paradoxical thing. For since the two contestants are open enemies, their relationship to each other is 'eristic' or hostile (the Gauls in Diodorus step from the ranks of two armies already arrayed against one another); yet since the contestants are also negotiating how to proceed against each other - negotiating a contract to fight, as it were - their relationship is also 'eirenic' and in a sense co-operative. Negotiation about fighting does not invariably lead to mortal combat. Often, indeed, it does; but sometimes one or the other man may yield, and occasionally the two find reason not to fight each other at all.

The conduct of the Flyting itself forms the second movement in Parks'

16 For views on a mythological origin for the *Táin*, see David Greene, 'Táin Bó Cúailnge,' in *Irish Sagas*, (ed.) Myles Dillon, (Dublin, Stationery Office, 1959), 94-106. and T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*. (Dublin, DIAS, 1946), esp. 260-85.

17 In the *Táin*, CúChulainn suffers wounds and fatigue not only in pursuit of personal glory, but also in altruistic defence of his people, their women, children, and herds, Kinsella, 218-9; *Rec. I*, 3419-50, trans. 217.

18 Parks, *Verbal Dueling*, ch. II and ch. III.

sequence, and within it he recognises several sub-divisions. 'Identification' is the first of these; for if the winning or confirmation of personal fame and honour was the prime reason for duelling, it was important to be sure who one's opponent was, and what his ancestry and status. No honour could be got by fighting men who were of no account, and there were also certain kinds of opponent whom one would rather avoid. Closely related to Identification is 'Retrojection', -- the warrior's proclamation of his ancestors' glory and of his own deeds¹⁹. 'Projection' is a flyting speaker's prediction of present triumph on the basis of past successes, and with it go positive and negative 'Evaluations' and comparisons. Diodorus has his Gauls do most of this: they meet, announce who they are by boasting of their ancestors and of themselves, and they belittle their opponents; though it is possible that Diodorus filled out purported ethnography with Homeric recollections or with the *loci a persona* of rhetoric.²⁰ In any case, when one of the two engaged opponents has made his flyting speech, the other will usually reply along similar lines.

It sometimes happens that an exchange of flyting words is of such a kind that physical combat does not take place.²¹ There are certain kinds of 'untouchables' whom one does not fight, and the Identification move may reveal them. Diomedes, for example, does not want to fight gods²²; and when he also discovers that a Trojan opponent, Glaucus, stands to him in a *kseinos* relationship, the two clasp hands in recognition of ancestral guest-friendship: they go on with the war, but they will not fight each other²³. It may also happen that one man, recognising that he is quite outmatched, tries to negotiate for his life. In the *Iliad* he will generally fail and be slaughtered; in the *Táin* there are occasions when the lesser man rejects an offer of life, choosing death rather than dishonour²⁴.

Most commonly, however, flyting negotiations lead directly to the third phase of Parks's sequence, the 'Combat' or 'Trial of arms'. It has its own set of conventions, and it generally ends in the death of at least one of the

19 Parks, 106-109.

20 Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik : eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft*, (Munich, 1960), 204-5.

21 Just as 'ritualised' fighting in the non-human world may sometimes be differentiated from 'escalated' fighting, so human combatants also may wish to minimise the risk to their lives. For biological perspectives, see Edward O. Wilson. *Sociobiology*, (abr. ed., Cambridge MA : Belknap, 1980), 62. In the *Waltharius*, 1396-1456 (not discussed by Parks), three heroes engage in flyting, then fight, suffer wounds, reach an accomodation, drink together, and part amicably. See *Waltharius*, in *MGH: Poetae Latini Medii Aevi*, VI. i., (ed.) Karl Strecker, (Weimar, Böhlau, 1951).

22 *Iliad*, 5. 121-32, and 6. 128-9.

23 *Iliad*, 6. 119-236. The tragic outcomes of the OHG *Hildebrandslied* and the Irish *Death of Aife's One Son* (Kinsella, 39-45 and 260) derive from the circumstance that the fathers and sons fail to identify themselves to one another, or identify themselves too late. Both texts contain approximations to flyting not discussed by Parks; in the latter, CúChulainn's son replicates his father's character.

24 Parks, 58-9; Kinsella, 93-4 and 119-20.

combatants. In the final phase, the 'Resolution', a Homeric victor will often utter a vaunt or triumphant speech, and then strip his dead foe's armour from him, sometimes maltreating the corpse as well²⁵. According to Diodorus, when a Gaul had slain his man he would take the head as a trophy; and CúChulainn often does the same in the *Táin*. Sometimes he does other symbolic things with heads²⁶.

Parks' scheme of flyting-and-fighting sequences (thus summarily outlined) is of course no more rigidly fixed than an oral-formulaic type-scene or a speech developed from stock rhetorical topics; and in fact flyting-and-fighting shares material with type-scenes and also with rhetoric. Any one of the four major movements of Parks' scenario is open to variation, as is the ensemble as a whole. Parks describes, for example, a major 'indoor' allomorph to 'battlefield' flyting, namely, flyting between a guest and a host²⁷. Besides this, elements which occur in flyting-and-fighting sequences may also occur in other contexts, and within such sequences elements may also be expanded, omitted or transplanted. Vaunts over dead enemies may be made in the *Iliad*, for example, when no other word has been uttered,²⁸ where the outcome is predicted or 'projected' not by the successful combatant, but by the narrator. Hector and Patroclus exchange speeches only when the latter has been disabled by Apollo and Euphorbus; and on this occasion Patroclus 'projects' the future death of his slayer²⁹. Again, Acamas boasts of killing Promachus and gets his answer a few lines later from Peneleos, who boasts of killing yet a fourth man, Ilioneus³⁰. In the preliminaries to the formal duel between Aias and Hector, where proxies conduct the negotiations, Menelaus and Nestor speak disparagingly not of the enemy, but of their own men³¹. Glaucus 'identifies' himself with a long 'retrojective' account of his ancestry, complete with Potiphar's Wife, Uriah Letter, and Difficult Task motifs³², but bio-topographical information also goes into a retrospective vaunt uttered by Achilles over Iphition³³. And so on.

Flying scenes are as plastic as any other literary convention. They have no special integrity or autonomy, and will be subordinated to the wider

25 As in *Iliad*, 22. 344-404.

26 Kinsella, 89-90, 95-6, 156, etc.

27 Parks, 71-88. Beowulf's flyting with Unferth provides a well-known example: *Beowulf*, 499-606. In some Irish stories the guests contend not with the hosts, but with one another. See *The Story of Mac Dathó's Pig*, and *Bricriu's Feast* in *Ancient Irish Tales*, 199-207 and 254-80; also Diodorus Siculus, V. 28. 4-6.

28 As in 13. 601-42.

29 *Iliad* 16. 786-863.

30 *Iliad*, 14. 475-505.

31 *Iliad*, 7. 92-160.

32 *Iliad*, 6. 144-211.

33 *Iliad* 20. 381-92.

purposes of the narrative. As a device of epic narrative, they can 'show' and 'tell' whatever a narrator wishes his audience to know or feel, while plausibly celebrating the virtues of courage, honour and the like, and while functioning, where necessary, as vehicles for that encyclopaedic material which is part of epic inclusiveness. The boundaries of flyting are quite fluid - perhaps more so than Parks allows. Nevertheless, his generalised flyting scenario allows comparisons to be made between medieval Irish and other epic materials.

The shape, function and meaning of *Táin* episodes of a 'flyting' type are affected by three peculiarities of the narrative as a whole. These are peculiarities of plot, character and situation; and, in broad comparative terms, they produce distinctively Irish allomorphs of flyting. First, CúChulainn the lone defender is made to dominate the whole campaign. Although he suffers wounds and fatigue, it is a given of the *Táin* plot that he is the supreme warrior in his world. If CúChulainn is an Achilles or an Aeneas, the story gives him no plot-length rival on the other side - no Hector, no Turnus. Opposition to CúChulainn is dispersed episodically among many contestants (some of whom are dangerous, but not all); and to CúChulainn is attributed such prowess that he can force Ailill and Medb to suspend the mass advance of their army while single combats are decided. It is true that the treacherous pair often break the terms of the agreement, but in the main they are held to it by Fergus, Ulster exile, lover to Medb, and foster-father to CúChulainn. And in this way CúChulainn gains the time that Conchobar's warriors need to recover from their debility³⁴. Whether or not this seems arbitrary to modern readers, it is how matters stand in the story.

A second feature of the *Táin* derives from the strict categories of ascribed social status which are common in epic literature: you were either nobly born or base born, man or woman, adult or child; and among mature warriors, 'woman' and 'child' may be terms of derision and abuse³⁵. But the figure of CúChulainn in the *Táin* is not to be contained by such categorisations. In outward appearance he seems an untried, beardless boy, almost a child. People call him *sirite*, variously translated as 'sprite, wild boy, whipper-snapper, little demon', and the like. Yet on the battlefield CúChulainn becomes an epiphany of war's violent fury. When his full warrior's wrath is upon him, he is subject to 'warp-spasms' - appalling and uncanny distortions of his whole body which seem to signal transition from a more or less ordinary human condition to a state of transcendental pagan *furor*³⁶. And yet at some other points in the *Táin* CúChulainn is said to be

34 Kinsella, 114-7.

35 As in *Iliad*, 7. 96 and 234-6, etc.

36 For example Kinsella, 150-53.

seventeen years old, and married³⁷. These various data about CúChulainn in the *Táin* do not fit together neatly. Possibly the compilers of the older stories never fully unified their materials; or possibly they were content to 'milk' the possibilities of beardless boy and supernatural monster for local horror-comedy effects. More probably, I think, there was something old and well-loved and pagan about the 'warp-spasms' which the narrators could neither discard nor openly admit. In any case, CúChulainn maintains his paradoxical sub-heroic and super-heroic aspects for the *Táin's* length. It is an aspect of his domination of events, and it affects his encounters with rash opponents who first scorn him and then feel his powers.³⁸

Lastly we have the Ulster exiles and other former friends of CúChulainn's. The exiles were the men led by Fergus mac Róig who had quarrelled with Conchobar over a serious matter of honour³⁹. They now join in the attack on their former homeland. Several of them were not only CúChulainn's friends, but also intimately bound to him by common fosterage; Fergus is in the complex position of being chief lieutenant to Ailill and Medb, one of Medb's lovers, and CúChulainn's revered foster-father, all at the same time.⁴⁰ Others in Medb's army, such as Fer Diad, are not Ulster exiles, but still CúChulainn's friends and foster-brothers. Normally foster-kin would be as 'untouchable' on the battlefield as Homeric *kseínoi* to one another; but when Medb sends such men against him, CúChulainn has to fight them to the death if he is to protect his people and their essential resources, the cattle. In ancient Greek literature such acute conflicts of moral obligation are usually explored in tragedy; but in medieval Ireland it is the epic *Táin* in which they appear.

In combination, these three broad features of the *Táin* set the flytings in it at some distance from Parks' Greco-Germanic model. The underlying paradox of flyting is present, that is, those 'eirenic' negotiations about fighting 'eristic' and deadly combats; but in the *Táin* both the sequence of the Engagement - Flyting - Combat - Resolution pattern and the contents and inflections of its separate moves and adjuncts seem, to borrow a folklorists' term, to create an Irish 'ecotype' of the epic flyting convention. - Much of the 'negotiating' that goes on in the *Táin* is actually about *avoiding*

37 This is in certain discursive and non-narrative passages, Kinsella 84 and 175.

38 The Irish word *sirite* as applied to CúChulainn may have a little in common with some uses of the Homeric *daímonios*. For descriptions of the 'warp-spasm,' see Kinsella 77, 91-2, and 150-58; also Georges Dumézil, *Horace et les Curiaces*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1942), 11-44. In the *Chanson de Guillaume*, 2 vols., (ed.) Duncan McMillan, (Paris, Gallimard, 1949-50), the fifteen-year-old Guiot plays an heroic-comic role (*laissez* 107-30); flyting in this heroic poem sometimes takes the form of religious disputation between Christian and Moslem. For Iulus as youthful warrior, see *Aeneid*, 10. 132-8.

39 See Kinsella, 8-20.

40 For fosterage in Ireland, see Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*. Early Irish Law Series 3, (Dublin, DIAS, 1988), 86-91.

combat, and there are certain double symmetries in it. A good many of Medb's warriors are frankly as reluctant to meet the supra-heroic CúChulainn as the Achaeans were to meet Hector⁴¹. They are not poltroons, but they recognise that CúChulainn is too good for them. 'Not I, not I!' they cry. 'My family owes no sacrifice! And if it did, why should I be the one?'⁴². Others among Medb's troops find it beneath their dignity to fight the infra-heroic beardless boy that they believe him to be. The result in the story is that Medb has to find ways of overcoming the reluctance of her champions to go down to the ford where CúChulainn will be waiting at dawn. Conversely, CúChulainn tries to avoid inglorious victories over inferior men, and sometimes he must resort to trickery to get first-class ones to take him seriously. In a second set of symmetries, CúChulainn's former friends and foster-kin do not set out to have to fight him; nor does he want to fight them. Hence 'Engagement,' 'Identification,' and 'negotiation' tend to blend together, but to take place in separate localities. The night before a proposed duel, Medb will persuade, cajole, bribe, trick or coerce someone into engaging in combat with CúChulainn. 'Identification' will consist not of discussion about who CúChulainn is - everyone soon knows his name - but about *what* he is: beardless boy, or notionally acceptable opponent? Then, in the field, CúChulainn will either try to find an honourable way not to fight a friend or an inferior, or will try to convince a worthy opponent that he also is worthy. Given these complications, there is scope for manoeuvre, misunderstanding, absurdity and tragedy; and these the narrators of the *Táin* do not neglect.

The underlying conflict is really between CúChulainn and Medb, for he is fighting her through her proxies. Neither of them is a 'classic' warrior of the ancient Greek or Germanic epic kind. For all the forcefully masculoid personality attributed to Medb in the story, she remains socially and sexually a woman; while within the story the beardless CúChulainn is often thought by others to be not entirely masculine. He sometimes seems not entirely human, given those transformations from ordinary-seeming adolescent to unearthly fury which disturb even him.⁴³ But in moral character the two antagonists are completely different from one another. Medb is painted as egotistical and Macchiavellian: she wants that Ulster bull at any cost to other people; to her, warriors are expendable; she pays no heed to the fidelities of male kinship. On the other side, CúChulainn often resembles the knight of later medieval literature: a seeker of personal glory,

41 *Iliad*, 7. 92-180.

42 Kinsella, 164.

43 Kinsella, 153-8. Epithets such as *isotheos*, 'godlike,' and *diogenes*, 'sprung from Zeus,' are common enough in Homer, but it is what CúChulainn does in the *Táin* rather than how he is spoken of that seems so supernatural. Medb occasionally appears in person on the battlefield, as in Kinsella 208 and 250-51. On the latter occasion CúChulainn chivalrously spares her life.

certainly, but a defender of his people, an upholder of fair play, and a guarantor of the affectionate obligations of friendship. The egotism and the altruism recognised by the sociobiologists, and their 'ritual' and 'escalated' kinds of combat, seem to be present in *Táin* perceptions, though not of course fully realised and much complicated by literary and other factors.

I now give some representative examples of scenes of flying-and-fighting in the *Táin* which I think can be recognised as belonging among the Irish allomorphs of this epic convention. I summarise and paraphrase, and for present purposes I will draw freely on both the Recension I and the *Book of Leinster* versions of the *Táin*. I pass over numerous problems and points of interpretation.

I begin at the point in the narrative where CúChulainn has killed so many men in the invading host that Ailill and Medb realise that they must treat with him. They do not want to lose more men's lives than they can help, while on the other hand not even CúChulainn can turn back a whole army by himself. The two sides must agree about how they are going to fight each other, and a program of daily single combats will allow them to prosecute their war with some advantage to both sides. The Etarcomol episode then begins.⁴⁴ It includes a flying passage with the expected identification, threats and predictions; but the remarkable thing about it is how CúChulainn tries his best to avoid fighting Etarcomol, largely because a moral problem is forced upon him against his will. For Etarcomol is under the personal protection of Fergus, who is both Medb's man and CúChulainn's foster-father.

The narrative goes like this. Just as Fergus is about to leave Medb's camp to ratify the agreement with CúChulainn, this brash youth of high rank named Etarcomol announces that he wants to come too, in order to behold the famous CúChulainn. Fergus demurs: 'What with your insolence and CúChulainn's ferocity, trouble will come from it.' Etarcomol suggests that Fergus stand as his guarantor. Fergus reluctantly agrees. Etarcomol promises that he will offer no provocation.

They leave Medb's camp in their separate chariots and find CúChulainn on guard at a ford. He and Fergus settle the diplomatic business, and Fergus sets off on the return journey. Etarcomol stays behind, staring at CúChulainn. 'What are you staring at?' 'You.' 'Don't annoy me.' 'I see nothing to fear in you,' says Etarcomol; 'perhaps you can do clever tricks with weapons, but you're no real warrior.' 'You're trying to belittle me; and if you weren't under Fergus's protection, I'd rip your guts out.' 'All *right*, then,' says Etarcomol. 'When these single combats start tomorrow, I'll be the first to come.'

44 Kinsella, 117-21; *LL*, 1547-1695, trans. 181-5. I paraphrase freely here, and draw on both the Rec. I and LL versions.

Etarcomol also leaves the scene, but then changes his mind: 'I can't wait until tomorrow morning to fight CúChulainn; I'll do it now.' Returning in his chariot, he circles CúChulainn counter-clockwise, with shield turned towards him - a well-known gesture of defiance that no self-respecting warrior can ignore. CúChulainn tells Etarcomol that he wants no fight with him. 'I'm not going to give you any choice,' is Etarcomol's answer. Then follows a piece of violent comedy of a kind more familiar in animated cartoons than in epics. With a sweep of his sword, CúChulainn literally cuts the ground from under Etarcomol's feet, laying him on his back. 'That's a warning,' he says. 'If you weren't under Fergus's protection, you'd be a dead man by now. Go away!' 'I will not. Either I take your head, or you take mine.' 'Your head it will be, for sure.' The texts do not specify it, but the two men presumably now fall to sword-play, and CúChulainn with a dextrous flick of his blade cuts all Etarcomol's clothes off him (old Irish dress was basically a simple tunic). 'Now will you go?' 'I will not.' With another prestidigitatious pass CúChulainn shears off all Etarcomol's hair as a third warning. But since the fellow still remains stubborn, CúChulainn finally loses patience and cleaves Etarcomol to the navel.

Now according to the *Book of Leinster*, Fergus never looked anywhere but resolutely straight in front of him; but when he sees Etarcomol's chariot overtake him with only the driver on board, he realises that something is wrong. He returns to see what has happened. 'You little demon (*sirite*)! Etarcomol was under my protection! Now you've brought me dishonour!' 'Dont be angry with me, father Fergus,' says CúChulainn; and in a passage of stylised prose he explains what he has had to do, and why. As he stands humbly before his foster-father, Fergus perceives that the fault was not really his; he had been provoked; he could not have done anything else but defend himself. Fergus then ties Etarcomol's corpse to the tail of his own chariot by its feet and drags it back to Medb's camp. When the body passed over rocky ground, the two cloven halves of it split asunder, and when it passed over smooth ground, the two halves came together again. On Fergus's arrival, Medb raises an eyebrow. 'I understood that Etarcomol was under your protection?' 'He was a fool to challenge CúChulainn. He got what he deserved,' says Fergus. Etarcomol's remains are given ceremonious burial and a memorial stone is set up; for he was Ailill's foster-son and though rash, he was not despicable.

The flyting in this episode is aggressive in tone only on Etarcomol's side, while CúChulainn speaks and acts with restraint throughout it. It illustrates a recurrent moral problem in the *Táin*, which the narrators evidently found interesting. How does a man defend himself, his honour and his people in circumstances where he also risks infringing the obligations of kinship and amity? It is another kind of eirenic-eristic paradox; as a problem, it has no

neat solution. Perhaps the grimly comic treatment of Etarcomol's body - divided, abused, yet honourably buried - touches tangentially on this theme; and though the dragging of Hector's corpse round the walls of Troy has sometimes been mentioned as an analogy, the *Táin* moral question has little in common with Homer at this point.

The Nadcranntail episode now shows CúChulainn dealing with another kind of opponent - a mature warrior who will not take him seriously. Morphologically, it provides an example of an interrupted or double encounter, with two separate approximations to flyting⁴⁵.

Whom can Medb now find to meet CúChulainn? The names of CúRoi, and Nadcranntail are put forward; but CúRoi, owes Medb nothing, and will not come. Medb then sends messengers to Nadcranntail, a self-confident tough. He demands Medb's daughter Findabair as reward for his services, and Medb has to agree. Nadcranntail arrives at her camp with a wagon-load of weapons; but the next morning he takes with him only a little bundle of light, untipped wooden spears, so confident of an easy outcome is he. He goes to the ford, where CúChulainn is busy catching waterfowl. He flings his spits at CúChulainn one by one, evidently thinking to intimidate him simply by presence and token gesture. The spears do no harm, and CúChulainn, still pursuing birds, leaves the scene without a word. The reason is that it was a rule with him never to attack a man who was not properly armed (that would be shameful); and being unarmed was the condition in which he now perceives Nadcranntail to be. Here, then, is a kind of flyting by gestures. The silent dialogue goes, as it were, like this. 'You, you're not worth a proper fight. A few bits of wood will drive you off. Run away, little boy!' And in answer: 'Don't you understand that you're in no position to threaten me? Stop wasting my time.'

Nadcranntail does not grasp CúChulainn's chivalrous finesse, thinks he is fleeing, and noisily proclaims a victory. Medb remarks that she had known all along that the little whipper-snapper would never stand firm if a real warrior came along. When CúChulainn hears of these things being said about him, he feels disgraced, and becomes very angry, and demands a second encounter. It is arranged for the next morning. Nadcranntail comes to a hillside where CúChulainn has spent the night brooding and watching. 'Show me CúChulainn,' says Nadcranntail. 'That's him there,' says an intermediary. 'He doesn't look the same as he did before,' remarks Nadcranntail (baiting CúChulainn and implying, I think, 'When I saw you yesterday, my friend, you were running for your life!'). 'Are you really CúChulainn? If you are,' continues Nadcranntail, 'how can I take a little lamb's head back to the camp? I can't behead a beardless boy!'

45 Kinsella, 121-5, *Rec. I*, 1388-1486, trans. 163-6, and *LL*, 1696-1755, trans. 185-7.

However galling the references to immaturity and timid herbivores, CúChulainn sees that he will get no honour-redeeming fight with Nadcranntail unless he does something about his outward appearance. So denying that he is 'CúChulainn,' he runs out of sight, makes a false beard, dons it, and then comes back. Seeing the beard - sure sign of masculinity - Nadcranntail contracts for a formal duel. I will not detail the course of it here. It ends with CúChulainn cutting his arrogant opponent to pieces. In a formal Resolution to the episode of a kind rather uncommon in the *Táin*, CúChulainn chants a quatrain of triumph.

Morphologically, then, two 'Engagements' here, and two 'flytings,' the first of them by gesture, and with misunderstandings. CúChulainn's denial of his own identity and the admission of a fault (or at least the appearance of a fault), and also the grotesque remedy of the false beard seem hard to match among epic flyting scenes. But then, CúChulainn really does have a double character in the *Táin*. In fact, he is so angry at being thought a mere cowardly boy after the first encounter with Nadcranntail that, after watching all night, he catches up a nearby pillar-stone in his cloak and tears it out of the ground without even noticing.

The long Fer Diad episode marks the climax of the series of single combats, and it illustrates most of the flyting-and-fighting epic conventions in Irish allomorphs appropriate to the preoccupations and character of the *Táin* narrative.⁴⁶

The 'Engagement' phase takes place off the battlefield and is split into several scenes, some of which contain transplacéd 'flyting' elements. -- Fer Diad, though not an Ulster exile, is one of CúChulainn's foster-brothers. Medb sends for him but, mindful of old loyalties, Fer Diad at first refuses to come. Medb then threatens dire revilings and satires by her poets, and this coercion brings him in. On arrival at Medb's camp, Fer Diad is plied with drinks and kisses by Medb's daughter Findabair. Bemused, bedazzled, and beguiled by wine, gold, and deceitful speeches, Fer Diad agrees to Medb's terms for fighting CúChulainn, his old friend. A second scene shows Fergus going to warn CúChulainn. Partly in verse dialogue, Fergus identifies Fer Diad by name, declares his fighting qualities, and mentions the 'horn skin' which makes him invulnerable to wounds. In a reply which one would take as counter-flyting were it uttered on the battlefield, CúChulainn reviews his achievements so far and predicts his success, though he does not presume that the fight with Fer Diad will be easy. Fergus then returns to the invaders' camp, where Ailill and Medb are calculating that if Fer Diad wins on the

46 The LL version of the Fer Diad episode is more elaborately told in LL than in Rec. I: *Rec. I*, 2567-3148, trans. 195-208; *LL*, 2606-3608, trans. 211-35. Kinsella, 168-205, makes use of both versions, and gives the name of CúChulainn's opponent as Ferdia. Here I draw summarily and selectively on both the main Irish versions.

morrow, so much the better for them; but if he loses his life, that loss will be one they can bear. Fer Diad passes an anxious night, and a night not the less anxious inasmuch as his personal charioteer reproachfully reminds him of how in the past CúChulainn has done him services. At the ford the next morning, the charioteer is the first to see CúChulainn approaching, and he praises his appearance in hyperboles unwelcome to his master, Fer Diad.

The two champions now meet face to face at the designated ford. In flyting speeches (partly in verse) they seek to dishearten and intimidate each other, each predicting, after a hard struggle, victory for himself. The LL version adds at this point two further stylised passages in which CúChulainn attempts to evoke past comradeship, deplors the breaking of friendship, and exposes Medb's deceptions. Fer Diad turns a deaf ear. Medb and Findabair have overcome the bonds of friendship, he says; the wounds he will give CúChulainn have been paid for. In other words, he will earn his mercenary pay⁴⁷.

The Combat or 'Trial of Arms' is much more elaborately described in LL than in Rec. I, and it is said that it lasted four days and was conducted with scrupulous and 'eirenic' fairness, almost up to the end. I do not follow its course in detail here. Just before the fight reaches its climax, however, CúChulainn instructs his faithful charioteer, Lóeg, to encourage him if he is doing well, but to jeer at him if he appears to be losing the fight; in this fashion Lóeg will play a 'Helper' role, though otherwise a spectator. When the time comes, Lóeg cries out to CúChulainn that he is being slapped like a child by its mother, ground like malt in a mill, bound as a tree is bound by a creeper, harried as little birds are harried by hawks, "so that never again will you have a claim or right or title to valour or to feats of arms, you distorted little sprite"⁴⁸. CúChulainn is not robbed of courage by these seemingly scornful remarks, but rather stimulated to supreme efforts. A 'warp-spasm' comes upon him, and he ends the fight by thrusting his special weapon, the *gai bolga*, into Fer Diad's anus, the only part of him not protected by his 'horn skin.'

Lóeg's ironic pseudo-flyting similes here are not unique in medieval Irish heroic fiction, for Lóeg does much the same for his master in similar circumstances in other stories, and analogous material can be found outside the CúChulainn cycle of narratives.⁴⁹ In context, however, Lóeg's feigned

47 LL, 3018-86, trans. 220-22, Kinsella, 185-6.

48 *Sirite*, LL, 3303-10, trans. 227-8, Kinsella, 195.

49 See *Fled Briand : Bricriu's Feast*. (ed.) George Henderson, Irish Texts Society 2 (1899), sec. 67; and Whitley Stokes, '*Aided Guill mac Carbada ocus aided Gairb Glinne Rige*, RC 14 (1893) : 396-449, esp. sec. 19. Thurneysen regarded the latter passage as a 'borrowing' (*Heldensage*, 485), but it can just as well represent a conventional device of narrative for expressing either the difficulties of a hard-pressed warrior or a triumphant *aristeia*. For the latter, see *The Death of Finn*, in *Ancient Irish Tales*, 436 (and 605). -- For avian predators and their victims, compare *Iliad*, 15. 690-94, 16. 581-3, etc.; for unstoppable warriors and similes of grinding and threshing, 20. 495-9; and for the feebleness

scorn makes a rather remarkable variant on Parks' general Greco-Germanic flyting model; for it is directed by an inferior non-combatant spectator to a fighting social superior, and in this story it makes a morphological counterpart to real discouragement to his master offered on the eve of the battle by Fer Diad's charioteer. As for the contents of the similes, the semantic polarities of animal-human, feminine-masculine, immature-grown, and weak-strong all resonate with thoroughly *ad hominem* insults directed at CúChulainn earlier by Etarcomol, Nadcranntail and other enemies, and, together with the 'warp-spasm' which the duel provokes, they illustrate once again the uncanny character of the *Táin* hero, that beardless boy who turns into a supernatural fury when he fights Medb's proxies.

The final phase of flyting-and-fighting is the Resolution, and in this *Táin* episode the Resolution does not much resemble the vaunts and gloatings of triumphant warriors in the *Iliad*. Rather lamentation for the fallen is the modality chosen, and it is assigned not to a Priam or an Andromache, but to the victor himself. For as CúChulainn stands contemplating the lifeless body of his former friend and brother, he brushes aside Lóeg's congratulations and himself utters the elegy. Would that Fer Diad had listened to wiser counsels! Alas that he was deceived by women; alas for heroism betrayed; alas for former comradeship. At last, CúChulainn is persuaded to leave the scene and have his many wounds attended to⁵⁰.

Historically, most of what Diodorus Siculus said about the the Gauls boasting, threatening, eulogising and satirising was probably accurate enough; and it is not unreasonable to think of a cultural continuity between them on the European continent and the insular Irish many centuries later. Behaviour like flyting still exists and it may have deep, even pre-human, origins. It is behaviour which lends itself to dramatisation along lines such as those which Parks has mapped for the ancient Greek and Old English epic traditions, sharing material with other conventions, and expressing social judgements on what behaviour is to be praised and what condemned. The Irish *Táin*, however, seems to demonstrate the plasticity of convention in respect of both morphology and application. It adapts flyting conventions to its themes of resolute heroism and compromised friendship, and to its effects of tragic pathos and grotesque comedy, modulating epic convention for a particular literary purposes.

of women and children when set against mature warriors, 11. 389-90.

50 Kinsella, 199-206.