

WHEN A HERO LIES

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THE STORY TOLD in the early medieval Irish prose text at the centre of this contribution, the *Táin Bó Fraich* (Cattle Raid of Fróech) (hereafter *TBF*), contains several story elements that would have been very familiar to John Miles Foley from the other heroic narrative traditions on which he worked and wrote.¹ There is, for example, the conspicuous arrival of the protagonist-hero, described by the storyteller with special attention to the impressive details of the appearance and equipment of the hero (Fróech) and his retinue. The purpose of their trip is to woo a high-born maiden, a process involving negotiation with hostile parents, and a series of tests for the hero-suitor that he must pass in order to win a princess who proves to be as brave, defiant, and loyal as the hero himself. These tests include a fight with a monster in a pool and the recovery of a lost precious item.²

In a way that (as we shall see) makes a shambles of the story's internal consistency as preserved in this text, the plot elements listed above are followed by an abduction and the hero's subsequent search in foreign lands for his abducted wife and stolen cattle, a quest predicated on his joining forces with another hero, who just as easily could have been his enemy. This "part two" of the text/story, where the heroes for guidance rely on the advice given by sympathetic women whom they meet on the way, climaxes with a confrontation with yet another monster and the subsequent recovery of the hero's family and herd. At the end, the author-storyteller embeds the story into the larger cycle of heroic tales told in early medieval Irish literature known as the Ulster cycle, and reveals his tale to be a "prequel" to the central story of the cycle, told in the famous text known as the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Cattle Raid of Cúailnge).³ Hence, while capable of standing on its own as a story about a hero of the province of Connacht, this account of Fróech's *táin* (cattle raid) (which strictly speaking isn't really a "raid," in that he is recovering his own cattle) is converted into an explanation for why Fróech becomes involved (fatally, it turns out) in the "greater" *Táin*. The latter is an expedition led by the queen of Connacht accompanied by her (in that story sheepish) royal spouse: the notoriously promiscuous Medb and the cuckolded Ailill, the parents of the girl whom Fróech successfully woos in part by promising his support for the royal pair's future plans.

The esteemed Irish scholar James Carney argued influentially in the last century that the *TBF* was a literary pastiche, hardly indebted at all to native traditional story-

1 I am using and citing (by lines and page numbers) the English-language edition and translation of *TBF* by Meid and others, *Romance of Froech and Findabair*.

2 I note here in passing that many of these story elements would be at home in the realm of the folktale as well as in the domain of oral-traditional epic.

3 The scenic area featured in the title is known today in English as the Cooley Peninsula, in northern County Louth, which historically has alternated between belonging to the province of Ulster to the north and Leinster to the south.

lore, and that the author borrowed freely and sometimes clumsily from existing texts, including hagiography.⁴ Other commentators, however, have adumbrated elements of oral tradition in both the story and the prose style of the text, which is witnessed in four manuscripts, including the famous *Book of Leinster*, Dublin, Trinity College, MS H 2.18 (twelfth century). For example, the comparatist Vincent A. Dunn, once a participant in one of John's fabled National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminars, has written insightfully about how *TBF* combines two closely related traditional narrative genres of Indo-European pedigree that are represented in medieval Irish literature, the *táin* (cattle raid) and the *tochmarc* (wooing).⁵ Already in the late nineteenth century, *The Celtic Dragon Myth*, a book by the great Scottish folklorist James Francis Campbell, completed by George Henderson, featured, as an example of the kind of story advertised in the title, a translation of most of *TBF*. Also included were the text and a translation of a song telling the story of Fróech from the sixteenth-century *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS 72.137, a Scottish manuscript that contains Gaelic poetry recorded in spellings that suggest an oral source for the materials included. This song, concerning Fróech's encounter with the water-monster already mentioned, survived in the repertoire of traditional Scottish singers down to the last century.⁶

Hence, uniquely among Irish saga texts that have survived from the first millennium CE, *TBF* tells a story, a crucial portion of which, along with its protagonist Fróech, enjoyed a healthy shelf-life in oral tradition. That the story survived and even thrived in poetic form (albeit crucially different in its outcome from the story as told in *TBF*) is ironic, given that, unlike the typical early Irish saga, *TBF* has nothing prosimetric about it and adheres strictly to stylish prose—although, unusually, there exists in Irish manuscript literature a later medieval rendering of the *TBF* story into verse form, a composition that seems independent of (and is much longer than) the Scottish Gaelic song text. In sum, the protean history of Fróech and his adventures, as lucidly traced by Donald Meek, presents an irresistible invitation to those of us committed to a better understanding of the interweaving of literary and oral tradition evident in the written materi-

⁴ Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature*, 1–76. For a critique of Carney's analysis, see Evans, "Learned Borrowings."

⁵ Dunn, *Cattle-Raids*, 82–91. The discrepancy in the title, mentioned above, was first noted by Dunn, 89: "[t]o return to the *táin-bó* formula, the second part of *Táin Bó Fraích* fails to conform to the standard. In no case is the construction used as a subjective genitive: thus 'X's cattle-raid', i.e., 'the Cattle-raid conducted by X' must be ruled out, according to the available evidence. It is only by the most roundabout of technicalities that both the formula and the pattern may be satisfied in the second story. Quite plainly, I think, the story follows the *táin* pattern, but only defectively. According to the formula, the title ought to refer to the man—or woman—to whom the cattle belong, but in this story the character filling that function is not developed, nor is any name given. Yet inasmuch as the story is told as a retrieval of cows rather than as a cattle-raid proper, it may technically qualify as a *táin bó Froech*: it is his own cows that Froech and Conall are stealing back."

⁶ Campbell, *Celtic Dragon Myth*, 1–31. The Scottish Gaelic poem was later edited and translated in Ross, *Heroic Poetry*, 198–207. Versions of the *Laoidh Fhraoich* recorded from 1954 to 1963 are available on the website *Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches*, <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/>, accessed 18 August 2016.

als from early medieval to early modern times in Ireland and Scotland, and in Gaelic oral storytelling recorded over the last two hundred years.⁷

In a way that points to a prescient textual awareness of that invitation to scholarly posterity, *TBF*, I would argue, teases us—the readers (or audience)—with the hint that the author was keenly aware of the multiformity characterizing the oral-traditional background to the story, and which no doubt was already a feature of the narrative(s) centred on Fróech as they were known to the author of the text. Key to my argument is a reading of what is perhaps the climactic scene in the saga—not, as might be expected, the fight with the “dragon” in the water, or the attack on the fort of the marauders who had abducted Fróech’s wife and children (a family whose existence the text early on had famously, and confusingly, denied). Rather, the pivotal moment in the plot, when Fróech finally wins the bride he is seeking from her parents Ailill and Medb, after which Fróech can go home and, upon learning about what has happened to them, sets out on his quest to recover the family we previously did not know he had, is a test of the hero’s ability to be a persuasive public speaker and a credible liar.⁸

When Fróech arrives at the court in Crúachain on his mission to woo Findabair he does not announce his purpose, seeking first to meet with the girl in private to sound out her feelings after hearing that Findabair had fallen in love with him on the basis of what she had heard about him. When they have their tête-à-tête, it is in the morning by the pond at the royal residence, where Findabair had come to perform her ablutions. In a typical early Irish *mélange* of sentiment and expediency, infused with an equally characteristic keen awareness of status, the young man and woman express their attraction towards each other, but she refuses his suggestion that they elope, pointing out that girls of high standing do not do that sort of thing, and insisting that, as an aristocratic suitor of high repute, surely he has the resources to obtain her as his bride from her parents openly and honourably. While not encouraging drastic action, Findabair does give Fróech a thumb-ring as a token of their mutual affection and her expectation that he will pursue the negotiations with her parents to a successful outcome. It turns out, however, that the ring is not exactly hers to give away freely. Her father entrusted her with the precious object, Findabair explains to Fróech, and, if she is asked to return it, she will say that she has lost it.

After the private exchange has taken place between the lovers, Ailill, Findabair’s father, who is dead-set against giving his daughter in marriage to Fróech for reasons that are not altogether clear, intuitively makes a bee-line for Fróech’s clothes that he leaves on the bank when he goes for a dip in the pool after Ailill invites him to demonstrate his reputation as an adept swimmer. Finding the ring, and planning to make trouble for the young pair (especially for his own daughter), Ailill casts it into the water. Fróech, however, having noticed what Ailill did, and seeing that a salmon leaps up and catches the ring in its mouth, proceeds to seize the fish and hide his catch, with the ring inside it, on the bank. Later in the story, Ailill demands of his daughter that she produce the thumb-ring, which he claims he wants to display along with his other treasures to his

⁷ Meek, “*Táin Bó Fraích*.”

⁸ Different instances of mendacity are discussed in O’Leary, “Verbal Deceit.”

assembled court. Defiant but concerned, Findabair is reassured by Fróech and, following his instructions, has the salmon cooked and presented to her father, with the ring on top of it. Fróech, pretending that he does not know, demands that Ailill tell him how the ring had been taken from Fróech. Ailill, after confessing to his pilfering and his spiteful attempt to have the ring lost forever (the first time in the story, perhaps the only time, that the devious Ailill “comes clean” with Fróech), in turn demands of the young hero that he give an explanation for how the ring was recovered (and, by implication, how the ring came into Fróech’s possession in the first place).

This is where the story takes a curious twist. Fróech does tell Ailill (and the assembled court) about his having noticed Ailill’s taking of the ring, and of his having caught the salmon that swallowed it. But he tells a different story from that told by the narrator about how the hero came to have the ring in the first place. Fróech claims that he found the ring on the ground where it had been accidentally dropped by Findabair, and recognized it as something valuable. When he came upon Findabair near the pond looking for it, he asked her what she would give in exchange for the ring. She offered a year of her love, claims Fróech, an offer he implies that he accepted. Before he could find the private moment in which to return the ring to Findabair, Ailill took it out of Fróech’s man-bag. The hero’s explanation is met, the text tells us, with praise and admiration from the assembled household, which had been listening to the exchange between their king and the suitor.

What, though, are the witnesses to Fróech’s verbal performance said to be praising and admiring? What he tells Ailill is only partly true: he did indeed recover the ring from the pond, but he did not “just happen” to find it originally, nor did the girl pledge her love to him merely as a way to recover the ring and thus protect her honour as the designated guardian of her father’s valuable possession. Do the members of the household, as is often the case in these situations, perhaps know more about what has happened than they are letting on? And if so, are they admiring Fróech’s alertness in regard to the fate of the ring, his catching a salmon with his bare hands, the succinctness with which he recalls (and reshapes) the past, his deft diverting of attention away from what Findabair had done (namely, out of love for Fróech, giving away a precious object that was not yet hers to give), or all of the above?

As gallant and redolent with discretion as Fróech’s mendacious gesture might seem (though it hardly goes so far as to absolve the girl of any complicity in their relationship), it is a peculiar move for an Irish saga-hero to make. Indeed, his lie, which wins the commendation of his audience, would not befit the behaviour of most oral-traditional heroes, with the exception of heroes-in-disguise as featured in “return songs,” such as Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. These, however, lie about their own identities, with the intention of hiding them from their enemies and facilitating their revenge. Fróech, on the other hand, is bending the truth about what both *he* and *she* have done in an attempt to keep what was said and transacted on the bank of the pond private—but all this is taking place in a narrative world where heroes typically say what they mean, and mean what they say. A villainous antagonist, such as Ailill, is far more likely to be caught lying, as he is in this story. Before Fróech enters the water, he asks, “Cindas na linde se?” (line 164) (What kind of pool is this? [p. 69]) Ailill, eager to search through Fróech’s posses-

sions for something incriminating that he seems already to know he will find, and also scheming to expose Fróech to a monster that lives in the pond and that (later in the episode) actually attacks the hero, slyly responds, “Ni-fetammar nach ndodaing indi’ ol Ailill, ‘ocus is comtig fothrucud indi’” (line 165) (“We do not know of anything dangerous in it,” said Ailill, “and it is customary to bathe in it” [p.69]).

In contrast to this lie (revealed to be such once the monster attacks Fróech), on the occasion when Ailill demands the ring back from his daughter, he says something to her that he clearly thinks is true, that adds up to a surprisingly frank admission of his spiteful intent, but that turns out to be acutely ironic:

“Tongu día tonges mo thúath, at-bélat do béoil mani-aisce úait,” ol Ailill. “Is airi con-degar cucut, úair is decmaing, ar ro-fetar-sa co-tísat inna doíni at-bathatar ó thossuch domuin cossindíu, ni-tic assin magin in ro-lád.” (lines 252–54)

(“I swear to the god by whom my tribe swears, your lips shall die unless you restore it [the ring],” said Ailill. “It is demanded of you just because it is impossible [to fulfil Ailill’s request], for I know, until [all] the men who have died from the beginning of the world to this day come back, it [the ring] will not come out of the place into which it was cast.”)

(p. 71)

Ailill’s statement reflects the meta-narrative playfulness that also underlies Fróech’s deceptive speech discussed above. In fact, the person who rescued the ring and thereby Findabair’s reputation, Fróech, *did return from the dead*. Nearly killed by the monster in the pool (though triumphant in the end), Fróech emerges grievously wounded, according to our text. He is given special therapeutic treatment by his royal hosts, but we are given no indication that he is subsequently any closer to recovery. Then, *deae ex machina* appear on the scene: an approaching band of women from the nearby *síd* (the Irish otherworld), engaged in lamenting the (near-)dead⁹ and announcing their presence with a *gol(gaire)* (lines 213, 218, 225, 226) (lament), which they say (when asked) is for the badly hurt Fróech. Hearing it, he knows right away that the women are a delegation sent by his supernatural relations to take him away. Fróech asks to be handed over to the lamenting visitors, who whisk him away to the *síd*. They bring him back the next day as good as new, rapidly cured and miraculously restored by other-worldly means.

Fróech’s escape from the near-death experience with the monster and his return to the mortal world should have been a cause for celebration, but, oddly, the women who fetched and now return him, are still lamenting: “Ad-agat a ngol oc dul úad co-corastar na doíni bátar issind liss tar cenn. Is de atá golgaire mban síde la háes cíuil Érenn” (lines 225–27) (They let forth their cry [*gol*] as they go from him so that it threw the people who were inside the enclosure into confusion. From this is “The Lament of the Fairy-Women” with the musicians of Ireland [p. 71]). We too are “confused” (the Irish says literally “knocked over”) by this strange comment of the supernatural women on the situation, until we realize that they are following a different script: a *multiform* of the story, attested in the Fróech ballad already in the sixteenth century, according to which he *did*

⁹ The finite verbal form in the text is *rochainset* (line 215) (they keened [him]). (English *keen* “to lament” comes from the Irish verb used in this passage, “caínid.”)

die in the fight in the pond, which, according to this way of telling the story, resulted in the death of both monster and hero:¹⁰

Do thuiteadar bonn ar bonn
ar tráigh na gclach gcorr so theas,
Fraoch mac Fiodhaigh is an phéisid
truagh, a Dhé, mar tug an treas.
(202)

(Together they fell upon this southern strand of jagged stones, Fraoch [the Scottish Gaelic spelling of Fróech] son of Fiodagh and the monster; sad, alas the story of the fray.) (203)

Truagh nach i gcomhrag ré laoch
do thuit Fraoch do bhronnadh ór;
dursan a thuitim lé péisd:
truagh, a Dhé, nach maireann fós.
(206)

(Sad that not in combat with a hero did Fraoch fall who lavished gold; pitiable that he should fall by a monster; sad, alas, that he lives not still.) (207)

It is as if, in allowing the supernatural keeners to continue or to repeat their performance of lament, the author of *TBF* were acknowledging that there is more than one way to tell the story, or even that this storyteller's way diverges from the more usual way. More subtle than Fróech's lie to Ailill about how he came to have the ring but equally unsettling to any sense of certainty we may have about what really happened, *TBF*'s account of the incident in the water and its aftermath gestures towards an alternative, tragic version of the story. The audible hint of this other telling, however, cannot be sustained, since the tale as told here takes the hero, once again alive and well, on a further adventure.¹¹

The mendacity, moreover, mounts. It is in this continuation of *TBF*, the part actually featuring the *táin* promised in the title, that the author turns out to be an even greater deceiver than Fróech. The first part of *TBF*, the wooing tale, states as an opening premise concerning its protagonist: "Boí trebadocco co cenn ocht mblíadnae cen tabairt mná cucai" (lines 4–5) (He kept house with them [that is, the special cattle given to him by his supernatural mother] till the end of eight years without taking a wife [p. 65]). In the latter section of *TBF*, after the trials and tribulations Fróech encounters while wooing Findabair, this erstwhile eligible bachelor (now confident in his possession of a princess for a wife) returns home, where he and we receive shocking news from his mother:

¹⁰ Cited from Ross, *Heroic Poetry*, by page number.

¹¹ The text also hints at an alternative outcome to Fróech's encounter in the water when it introduces him as "láech as áildem ro-boí di feraib Érenn ocus Alban, acht nibo suthain" (lines 2–3) (the most beautiful warrior of the men of Ireland and Scotland, but he was not long-lived [p. 65]). This ominous note, like the women's renewed lament, might also be anticipating what awaits Fróech in the text to which *TBF* presents itself as a prequel: O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge (The Cattle-Raid of Cúailnge)*, 26–27, 148–49, in which Fróech meets a watery end at the hands of the hero of that *Táin*, Cú Chulainn, who in his distorting battle-rage is arguably "monstrous." In this text as well, women from the *síd* appear, but this time, instead of removing a badly wounded Fróech, they take the hero's corpse away, never to be returned.

"Ni béodae do fechtas," olsi, "do-choas. Fo-firfe mór n-imnid duit. Ro-gatta do baí ocus do ben ocus do thri maicc conda-fil oc Sléib Alpae. Ata at teora baí díb i nAlbain túascirt la Cruithnechu." (lines 293–95)

("Not fortunate is your journey," said she, "that has been made. It shall cause you great trouble. Your cows and your wife and your three sons have been abducted, so that they are at the mountain range of the Alps. Three cows of them are in northern Scotland with the Picts.") (p. 72)

Some have argued that what we see here in *TBF* is the clumsy splicing of two different stories about Fróech, evidence of the *TBF*'s author's indifference to narrative consistency, or scribal error resulting in the earlier statement seemingly stating that Fróech was unmarried. It is also possible to assume, if one were straining for consistency, that in the chronology of the story, this stolen "Mrs. Fróech" came into the picture eight or more years ago, before Fróech received the special cattle to which he tended, according to the text, without acquiring a (*second*) wife—polygamy hardly being unknown in early medieval Ireland, let alone pre-Christian Ireland, the explicit setting of this and the other tales of the Ulster Cycle. The easiest explanation, however, gives the benefit of the doubt to the author, assumes that he knew what he was doing, and lets us avoid the dangers of rewriting the story by ourselves. Fróech's pivotal speech act, I argue, *prepares us for lying by the narrator/narrative*, and alerts us to the weaving-together of alternating and contrasting (multiform, so to speak) strands of the plot. The death or survival of Fróech, the winning of a bride, and the recovery of a stolen wife—these story elements brought together in uneasy concert by a storyteller who is unwilling to eliminate any one element completely, even if it creates egregious contradictions and misleading impressions. To put it another way, *TBF* rehearses the lesson that scholars of oral-traditional literature already learned from the *Odyssey*: when a hero lies, it is but the calling card of the ultimate "fabricator" who knows of more than one way to tell a tale—the storyteller himself, whether he be an oral performer or a literary author.¹²

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12 There is more on *TBF* in J. Nagy, "Pride of Heroes," 142–45 and J. Nagy "Celtic Dragon Myth," 33–34 and 37–38.

