

Women Satirists and the Wielding Of Cultural Capital in Early Medieval Ireland

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It has been convincingly argued by Wendy Davies that 'in the early and central middle ages, land equalled power'.¹ Land, in the medieval period in Western Europe, has been perceived as the major form of what Pierre Bourdieu would title 'economic capital', the form of capital most efficiently transferable into power and status.² Following on from this, it has often been accepted that men, and specifically wealthy and elite men, as the holders and heirs of the majority of this form of economic capital, also held the majority of the power within society. It should be recognised, however, that in this period, as in the modern period examined by Bourdieu, there was more than one usable form of capital, more than one means of displaying, improving, and/or acquiring status. A second form of capital - and the one under examination throughout this issue - is 'cultural' capital, capital based on education, knowledge, and/or physical goods perceived in society as high status. This article will focus on one particular form of what appears to have been cultural capital, in the hands of one particular group of people: the cultural capital of satire in early medieval Ireland, as wielded by professional women satirists.³ It will look at depictions of women satirists in the early Irish legal texts of the late seventh and early eighth centuries, as well as in two literary prose tales, one also dating to that period, and one whose roots may be found in the eighth century, but whose present

¹ W. Davies, 'Introduction', in (eds) W. Davies and P. Fouracre, *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1-16, at p. 2.

² P. Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in (ed.) J.G. Richardson, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: NY, 1986), pp. 241-58.

³ For more general work on satire, see: R. McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire* (Dublin, 2008).

form is later. It should be noted from the outset that both legal and literary texts are authorial creations, often depicting ideals and their antitheses, rather than historical realities. This article therefore investigates representations and mentalities and is not a hopeful attempt to discover a mysterious 'truth', which must inevitably be hidden from modern eyes. Through these literary and legal images, the article will examine the represented effect of these women's ability to wield satire, as a form of cultural as opposed to economic capital, on their status, honour and power within society. These three elements - status, honour, and power - were closely interconnected, although separate, and were fundamental to the workings of early Irish society.⁴

It is firstly necessary to show that satire was indeed a form of cultural capital in the sense that Bourdieu intended. As John Guillory has argued, '[i]f there exists a form of capital which is specifically symbolic or *cultural*, the production, exchange, distribution, and consumption of this capital presupposes the division of society into groups that can be called classes. Bourdieu's sociology assumes such a division, but it does not assume that an economic account of classes is sufficient in itself.⁵ A hierarchy within society is therefore essential background to the production and use of cultural capital. The existence of the conception of such a hierarchical society in Ireland in the seventh and eighth centuries is extremely clear in the legal sources: indeed, it could be argued that the differentiation of legal status was the most significant element of society as depicted within the legal texts. The legal texts *Críth Gablach*, 'branched purchase', *Uraicecht Becc*, 'small primer', and *Míadshlechta*, 'rank sections', all of the later seventh or early eighth century, explicitly focus on the rank and status of various types of *nemed*, 'privileged persons', while other legal texts, such as *Uraicecht na Ríar*, 'the primer of the stipulations', and *Hibernensis*, focus on the specific hierarchies of such groups as poets and religious people.⁶ There was no single, simple hierarchy into which every early Irish person could easily be placed. Instead, there were several separate ladders of hierarchy, encompassing different types of person. In the context of this article, it is particularly significant to note that members of the different hierarchies appear to have gained their status through the acquisition of different forms of capital. In *Críth Gablach*, for example, the description of each rank of non-noble freeman is based on his possession-holding: the size of his house and its contents, the number of livestock he has, and so on.⁷ Indeed, rank is here explicitly connected with economic capital, as the question is asked 'What deprives this man of the status of *bóaire*?' (*bóaire* meaning

⁴ T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Honour and Status in Some Irish and Welsh Prose Tales', *Ériu* 29 (1978), 123–41, esp. at pp. 123–4.

⁵ J. Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: IL, 1993), p. viii.

⁶ See: F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988; repr. 2005), pp. 267–8; 282; N. McLeod, 'Interpreting Early Irish Law: Status and Currency (part 1)', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 41 (1986), 46–65, at pp. 46–52. For editions of these texts, see: *Críth Gablach*, ed. D.A. Binchy, Medieval and Modern Irish Series 11 (Dublin, 1979); trans. E. MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish Law: The Law of Status or Franchise', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 36 C (1923), 265–316; *Uraicecht Becc*, ed. D.A. Binchy, in *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 1590–1618; *Míadshlechta*, ed. D.A. Binchy, in *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 582.32–589.32; *Uraicecht na Ríar*, ed. and trans. L. Breathnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series 2 (Dublin, 1987); *Hibernensis*, ed. and trans. R. Flechner (forthcoming).

⁷ *Críth Gablach*, ed. D.A. Binchy, Medieval and Modern Irish Series 11 (Dublin, 1979); trans. E. MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish Law'; see, for example: §§ 10, 12, 13, 14, and 15.

literally ‘cow-freeman’, and apparently referring to the standard rank of non-noble freeman), to which the answer given is ‘for if it is that four or five men may be in joint heirship to a *bóaire*, so that each of them cannot easily be a *bóaire*.⁸ The implication here is clearly that if too many sons inherit from the same father they will no longer have the appropriate economic capital, in landed and moveable goods, to allow them to retain their rank. *Uraicecht na Ríar*, on the other hand, presents a different means by which a person, and in this case specifically a poet, might gain high rank. Here, instead of property, family connections and poetic compositions are the most significant elements.⁹ As Robert Matz has noted, much of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is focused on the fact that ‘social position may depend not only on economic determinants, but also, for example, on ‘good’ connections or educational achievement’; the two elements explicitly marked out in *Uraicecht na Ríar* as vital to the status of a poet.¹⁰ In Bourdieu’s own words, this form of cultural capital was *embodied* ‘in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body’.¹¹ Poetic ability is therefore explicitly demarcated in the early Irish laws as a form of capital, separate to economic capital, which could determine a professional person’s status.

As can be seen from *Uraicecht na Ríar*, the early Irish poet was a person of great significance and power within society. As Fergus Kelly has noted, the *filí*, ‘poet’, ‘scholar’, or ‘man of learning’, was the ‘only lay professional who has full *nemed* status’ – *nemed* referring to privilege – while James Carney has noted that ‘[t]he highest-ranking poet, the *ollam*, could theoretically have dignity equal to that of a king; and a king of a *túath*, an *ollam*, and a bishop all had an equal *wergeld* or honour-price’.¹² It should be noted at this point that, as well as status, an early Irish poet’s cultural capital could also be converted directly into economic capital, and very notable economic capital if he was successful. One of the prescriptions within the *Triads*, a ninth-century wisdom text, names ‘three coffers whose depth is not known’ as ‘the coffer of a chieftain, of the Church, of a privileged poet’.¹³ It should also be noted that there was a distinction drawn between the ranks of the *filí* and the *baird*: both groups of poetic functionaries, but one, the *filí*, of notably higher overall status.¹⁴ It has been argued that the major difference between these two groups, and the major reason behind the difference in their status, was that the *filí* grades underwent rigorous training in literacy and poetical composition, as well as having the other elements of natural ability and family background, while the

⁸ *Ibid.*, §12; *Cid nodmbris i fer so a bóairechas?*; *Ar bés bid cethrar nó chóicer bíté hi comarbus bóairech có[n]ach assa[e] báire do cach áe*.

⁹ *Uraicecht na Ríar*, see, for example: §§ 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 12, and 13.

¹⁰ R. Matz, *Defending Literature in Early Modern England: Renaissance Literary Theory in Social Context* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 5.

¹¹ Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, p. 243.

¹² Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 43; J. Carney, ‘Language and Literature to 1169’, in (ed.) D. Ó Cróinín, *A New History of Ireland I: Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 451–510, at p. 453.

¹³ *Triads*, ed. and trans. K. Meyer, *The Triads of Ireland*, Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series 13 (Dublin, 1906) §255; *Trí gúala doná fess fudomain: gúala flatha, gúala ecalse, gúala nemid filed*. See also, Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 45.

¹⁴ *Uraicecht na Ríar*, §§7 and 8. See also, Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 45.

baird had only the recommendation of natural ability.¹⁵ Here then, as is argued by Bourdieu, there are a variety of ways in which cultural capital might be acquired and developed.¹⁶

Where, however, did satire come into all this, and why exactly did early Irish poets hold such high levels of cultural capital within their society? It should be noted at this stage that satire was a subset of poetry; ‘[o]ne of the poet’s most important functions was evidently to satirize and to praise’.¹⁷ People who wielded satire could therefore often be members of this high-status group within society. As to the second part of the question, it should be recognised that early Irish legal texts were deeply preoccupied not only with status, but also with honour. As the legal text *Bretha Nemed déidenach* puts it, ‘the body is not as vulnerable as the face/honour (*enech*)...so that everyone submits to the poets for fear of their satire, having their cheeks/honour (*gruad*) as hostage’.¹⁸ Honour, and honour-price, were not a matter of merely superficial importance: they were rather the bedrock of the early Irish social and legal systems. A person’s honour-price determined his or her ability to act as a witness, a surety, or an oath-giver. It also determined what he or she was entitled to in terms of compensation when unlawfully injured. Indeed, as Eoin MacNeill argued, ‘the element of honour-price entered into almost every operation of law’.¹⁹ In such a society, the maintenance of reputation and honour-price would therefore have been paramount. This is where the poet, as the wielder of satire, comes in as a highly powerful figure. A person who was either justly satirised, or who allowed themselves to be unjustly satirised without seeking reprisals, was in danger of losing their honour-price, and thus their standing within society. Not only this, but there was a belief that satire could cause actual physical injury, particularly the appearance of blemishes, redness in the face, or even death.²⁰ It thus seems that satire as a craft could be closely associated with curses or sorcery, as holding an almost supernatural level of power.²¹ There do not seem to have been any precisely parallel figures in Western Europe in the early Christian period, but as Robinson has argued, ‘[b]etter parallels to the

¹⁵ *Uraicecht na Ríar*, §§7 and 8. See also, K. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990), p. 28; K. McCone, ‘A Tale of Two Ditties: Poet and Satirist in *Cath Maige Tuired*’, in (eds) D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach and K. McCone, *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth, 1989), pp. 122–43, at p. 131.

¹⁶ Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, pp. 246–8.

¹⁷ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 43. See also, McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Bretha Nemed déidenach*, (ed.) D.A. Binchy, in *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 1111.19–22; this section trans. by L. Breatnach, ‘On Satire and the Poet’s Circuit’, in (ed.) C.G. Ó Háinle and D.E. Meek, *Unity in Diversity: Studies in Irish and Scottish Gaelic Language, Literature and History* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 25–35, at pp. 26–7; [n]í roich colainn coimdilsi n-einech...coro fhuigleá cách dia gíall grúaide frisna fileada ar omun a n-aíre.

¹⁹ E. MacNeill, ‘Ancient Irish Law’, p. 266.

²⁰ McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, p. 4.

²¹ See L. Breatnach, ‘Cáin Ónae: An Old Irish Law Text on Lending’, in (eds) J. Jasenoff, H.C. Melchert and L. Oliver, *Mír Curad: Studies in Honor of Calvert Watkins* (Innsbruck, 1998), pp. 29–46, at p. 42; Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 44; T. Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Curse and Satire’, *Éigse* 21 (1986), 10–15; F.N. Robinson, ‘Satirists and Enchanters in Early Irish Literature’, in (eds) D.G. Lyon and G.F. Moore, *Studies in the History of Religions: Presented to Crawford Howell Toy by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends* (New York: NY, 1912), pp. 95–130, at p. 103.

Irish situation are furnished by the popular poetry of ancient Arabia', where again satire wielded by a poet could be highly destructive for its victims.²²

It should thus be very clear that the poet was a highly revered figure in early Irish society, that he had the prerogative to praise and satirise, and that his use of praise poetry and particularly of satire, both of which required a certain level of cultural capital, meant that he wielded a significant degree of power. It might then be assumed that should a woman be able to act as a poet and/or satirist, she too would be capable of holding extremely high cultural capital, and wielding considerable actual power within society. It has often been argued in scholarship on early medieval Ireland that women were perceived as somehow 'lesser' than men: that they were unable to hold as much property, and generally had lower honour-price than men, and were therefore less able to gain high status, and to engage in many legal and social transactions.²³

In all the multiplicity of hierarchies which emerge from the early Irish legal texts, women rarely explicitly appear, except in a relational sense, as the wives or daughters of men. The vocabulary used in the texts is generally masculine - *rí*, 'king', rather than *rígan*, 'queen', for example - and this has led to a belief that women were not included in the official hierarchies, which has again served to enhance the image of women's legal inferiority.²⁴ It is certainly true that the apparently 'standard' rule for a married woman was that she should hold half the honour-price of her husband: this is laid out within the *Fuidir*-text, a text which focuses mainly on the 'semi-freeman' in Irish society.²⁵ It should be noted, however, that this did not automatically mean that a wife was of low status, nor that all women were inferior to all men. *Críth Gablach* is highly schematic in its representation of society, but that representation is indicative of a certain mode of thought.²⁶ Within this text, a *rí ruirech*, 'king of overkings' (and therefore a king who had power not only over his own *túath*, 'petty kingdom' or 'territory', but also over the *túatha* of other kings), had honour-price of *dá .vii. cumal*: fourteen

²² Robinson, 'Satirists and Enchanters', p. 100. See also, R.C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton: NJ, 1960), pp. 17-18.

²³ M. Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Birr and the Law of the Innocents', in (ed.) T. O'Loughlin, *Adomnán at Birr, AD 697: Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 13-32, at p. 20; L.M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (New York: NY, 1996), p. 15; Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 75-6; D. Ó Corráin, 'Women in Early Irish Society', in (eds) M. MacCurtain and D. Ó Corráin, *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 1-13, at p. 1.

²⁴ See, D. Ó Corráin, 'Early Medieval Law c. 700-1200', in (eds) A. Bourke et al., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, 4: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (Cork, 2002), pp. 6-44, at pp. 7-8; Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Birr and the Law', p. 20; Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 8-19; C.E. Meek and M.K. Simms, 'Introduction', in (eds) C.E. Meek and M.K. Simms, *'The Fragility of her Sex'? Medieval Irish Women in their European Context* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 7-15, at p. 8; M. Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland* (New York: NY, 1989), p. 78.

²⁵ *Fuidir*-text, ed. and trans. R. Thurneysen, in *Irisches Recht* (Berlin, 1931), pp. 63-7, §4. See also, *Bretha Crólige*, ed. and trans. D.A. Binchy, *Ériu* 12 (1938), 1-77, at §§ 6 and 30.

²⁶ N. Edwards, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland* (London, 1990), p. 33; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Críth Gablach and the Law of Status', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 53-73, at p. 53-4.

cumals, a *cumal* being originally a female slave, and coming to mean a high value unit of currency (worth three milch cows).²⁷ Following the standard rule, his queen would have honour-price of seven *cumals*. This gave her the same honour-price as *rí benn*, 'king of peaks', who exercised power over a single *túath*.²⁸ Such a woman, therefore, had the honour-price of a king, even though her husband's honour-price was yet higher. Her honour-price is higher than any non-royal in this hierarchy. Going further down the hierarchical ladder, *aire coisring*, 'the noble of constraint', who appears to have been the head of a kin group and therefore a man of significance, has honour-price of nine *séts* (equivalent to one-and-a-half *cumals*).²⁹ His wife would, therefore, theoretically have honour-price of four-and-a-half *séts*: still notably higher than that of the *ócaire*, 'young noble', whose honour-price was three *séts*.³⁰

Likewise, it should be noted that even within marriages, the blanket rule found in the *Fuidir*-text is not always applicable. That text itself made three notable exceptions, of men who, instead of conferring honour-price on their wives, had their own honour-price estimated by that of their wives:

namely a man without land, without property, who is with an heiress, his honour is reckoned by that of his wife; and a man who follows the buttocks of his wife over a border, his honour is reckoned by his wife; and a *cú glas*, his honour is reckoned by that of his wife and it is she who pays for his offences.³¹

Each of these men is one who, for whatever reason, held no land of his own. In the first instance, the man simply possesses no land or property, and must depend on that of his wife, *banchomarbae*, 'a female heir'. The second, who follows his wife over the border, presumably also does so because he must go to her kin land, rather than bringing her to his.³² Finally, as Charles-Edwards has noted, *cú glas*, literally 'grey dog', is explained by a ninth-century glossator as an exile from overseas: i.e. a man who would have no Irish land to bring to his marriage, and would therefore be dependent on his

²⁷ *Críth Gablach*, §33; 'twice seven *cumals*'. For the ranks of society in descending order, and the various units of currency, see: Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. xxiii; 115–16.

²⁸ *Críth Gablach*, §31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, §20. For the comparative values of *séts* and *cumals*, see: Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. xxiii. For the role of the *aire coisring*, see, pp. 13–14, esp. n. 91.

³⁰ *Críth Gablach*, §10.

³¹ *Fuidir*-text, §4; *fer son cen se[i]lb cen t[h]othchus las-mbi bancomarba, a inchuib a mna di-renar side; ocus fer in-etet toin a mna tar crich, di-renar a inchuib a mna; ocus cu glas, di-renar side a inch(a)uib a mna ocus is[s]i iccas a cinta.*

³² Charles-Edwards has argued that this person was 'an exile from another kingdom within Ireland': T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Social Background to Irish *peregrinatio*', *Celtica* 11 (1976), 43–59, at pp. 46–7. See also, Richter, *Ireland and her Neighbours*, pp. 41–2; T. Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Sister's Son in Early Irish Literature', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 128–60, at pp. 143–4. Note that Ní Bhrolcháin states that the man who 'follows the buttocks of his wife' 'was unacceptable to the Church', but there is no indication of this in the text (itself composed in the Christian period): M. Ní Bhrolcháin, 'Re toin mná: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women', in (eds) J.P. Mallory and G. Stockman, *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 115–122, at p. 117.

wife.³³ Here, therefore, it is very clear that it is capital, and specifically economic capital - the possession of *selb*, 'land', and *tothchus*, 'property' - which determines by whom honour-price within a marriage is reckoned. As well as this, in those marriages in which a woman held greater property than her husband, it was she who held the legal power within the household, she whose right it was to buy, sell, make contracts, and so on; indeed it is stated that 'it is in this case the husband goes in the track of the wife and the wife in the track of the husband'.³⁴ Already, therefore, it becomes clear that the status and power of women as a group cannot simply be classified as inferior to that of men; there must be greater nuance.

Economic capital, specifically in cases when a woman held greater economic capital than her husband, could clearly therefore, according to the early Irish laws, allow a woman to acquire a higher comparative degree of status within her household than the 'standard' rules would imply, as well as a higher level of legal capacity. What, then, of different forms of capital, of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, in the form of poetry and satire? Could such capital also be perceived as granting to a woman greater power, honour and/or status than is represented as 'standard' within the legal texts? Firstly, it is necessary to show that women were indeed represented as capable of wielding poetry and satire as cultural capital. Thomas Clancy has argued that 'women poets clearly did exist in early medieval Ireland', citing both an annalistic entry of 934 or 932 AD which records the death of Úallach ingen Mui(m)necháin, *banfile hÉrend*, 'woman poet of Ireland', and a series of poetic texts which are placed in the mouths of women, or describe women poets.³⁵ There is also a representation of a woman-satirist in the c. 700 literary tale 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde' (and in *Longes mac n-Uislen*, 'the exile of the sons of Uísliu', whose current form is late, but whose roots are in the eighth century), and women satirists are also mentioned in a number of the early legal texts.³⁶ In *Bretha Crólige*, for example, it is stated that 'there are twelve women in the territory whom the rule of nursing in Irish law excludes'.³⁷ One of these is *bé rinnuis*, the 'woman who satirises'.³⁸ The

³³ Charles-Edwards, 'The Social Background', pp. 46-50. See also, Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 6. For the literary figure Conall Corc wishing to return to Ireland and avoid being *cú glas*, even when he is offered the kingship of Alba, see: M. Ní Mhaonaigh, 'The Outward Look: Britain and Beyond in Medieval Irish Literature', in (eds) P. Linehan and J.L. Nelson, *The Medieval World* (London, 2001), pp. 381-97, at pp. 387-8.

³⁴ *Cáin Lánamna*, ed. and trans. C.M. Eska, *Cáin Lánamna: An Old Irish Tract on Marriage and Divorce Law*, Medieval Law and its Practice 5 (Leiden, 2010) §31; *is i suidiu téit fer i n-uidiu mná ocus ben i n-uidiu fir*. For a twelfth-century literary image of a woman wishing to hold the status endowed by this greater ownership of wealth (in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley'), see: A. Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Toronto, 2006), pp. 40-3.

³⁵ T.O. Clancy, 'Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland: Stating the Case', in (eds) C.E. Meek and M.K. Simms, 'The Fragility of their Sex? Medieval Irish Women in their European Context' (Dublin, 1996), pp. 43-72.

³⁶ 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde', in (ed.) K. Meyer, *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* 3, ed. O. Bergin, R.I. Best, K. Meyer and J.G. O'Keefe (Dublin, 1910), pp. 57-63; trans. V. Hull, *PMLA* 62 (1947), 887-909; *Longes mac n Uislen*, ed. and trans. V. Hull (New York: NY, 1949).

³⁷ *Bretha Crólige*, §32; [a]ta[t] dí mnai dec hi tuait aroscuile cáin otrusa la Féne.

³⁸ *Idem*.

woman-satirist is named also in the *Díre*-text, and in *Sechtae*, a legal text in heptad form.³⁹ Clearly, then, the woman-satirist was a figure who was recognised within pre-900 Ireland.

In recent decades, indeed, it has become generally accepted that 'women writers existed in sizeable numbers' across western medieval Europe, that they, as well as men, were able to hold, develop, and wield the cultural capital of writing and book production.⁴⁰ These women tended to be those in ecclesiastical circles: in women's monasteries, for example, where education and expert help were available.⁴¹ It has, however, been stated by Kelly that 'a woman could be recognised as a fully-fledged poet, though it must have been regarded as unusual. It is probable that the admission of a woman into the poetic class occurred mainly when a poet had no sons, and a daughter showed some aptitude for the profession' and by Carney that '[i]t may be supposed that since poetry was a hereditary craft, a young girl might occasionally receive training, either because she showed exceptional talent at an early age, or because there was no male issue in the family'.⁴² Both of these comments suggest that the admission of a woman or girl into the poetic class was unusual, that it would only take place in extraordinary cases: unlike a boy, they suggest, a girl had to explicitly show a particular talent for poetry if she were to be trained, and even then, she would probably only be given the opportunity if she had no brothers. Neither of these authors give any references to the sources for these beliefs (although Kelly's focus is on legal material), but it may be that they are based on the fact that, of those texts dated to before AD 900 which come down to us, those which have attributions to named authors are all assigned to men. It could also be based on the fact that the rules for other types of inheritance - largely that of landed property - do suggest that male kin members would inherit first, and women only if they had no male siblings.⁴³ If this were the case, women would often have been barred from the acquisition of cultural capital in the form of poetry and satire on the basis of their sex, as it has been believed that they were barred usually from inheriting the economic capital of land.⁴⁴ Nowhere, however, does any early Irish source state either explicitly or even implicitly that a woman was less likely to inherit the poetic craft than her male counterparts.

Across the legal texts related to the acquisition of the poetic craft, as noted above, there were three main elements regarding ability to become a poet, and determining what level of the craft a person could attain: none of these, despite the image presented by Kelly and Carney, is 'you must be male'.

³⁹ *Díre*-text, §6; *Sechtae*, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 15.10-14.

⁴⁰ Clancy, 'Women Poets', p. 43. See also, K. Cherewatuk and U. Wiethaus, 'Introduction: Women Writing Letters in the Middle Ages', in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia: PA, 1993), pp. 1-19; P. Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. vii-xi.

⁴¹ Clancy, 'Women Poets', pp. 47-8. See also, B.K. Gold, 'Hrotswitha Writes Herself: *Clamor validus Gandeshemensis*', in (eds) B.K. Gold, P.A. Miller and C. Platter, *Sex and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Texts: The Latin Tradition* (New York: NY, 1997), pp. 41-70.

⁴² Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 49; Carney, 'Language and Literature to 1169', pp. 453-4.

⁴³ See, for example: T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 88; Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 104-5.

⁴⁴ For an argument against the standard view of the wide gulf between inheritance of property by men and women, see: H. Oxenham, 'Perceptions of Femininity in Early Irish Society', unpublished PhD thesis (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 110-13.

Perhaps the most notable of the three was the ‘three-generation’ requirement: as *Uraicecht na Ríar* put it, ‘[i]f he be not the son of a poet, however, or a grandson, only half honour-price goes to him’.⁴⁵ The same text also states:

When is the family a family of poets? Not difficult; their father is a poet and their grandfather.
| When is the status of poet extinguished in the family? Not difficult; if there be not three
[viz. generations] of them, they are then bards.⁴⁶

It was, therefore, possible to be a poet if a person did not come from a family of poets, but the assigned honour-price was significantly lower – only half for the same qualifications. There is no indication, however, that a woman could not be part of this hereditary system. It is true that the family members mentioned as vital to the continuation of the poetic craft within a family are *athair* and *senathair*, ‘father’ and ‘grandfather’, and that a person must be *mac* or *aue*, ‘son’ or ‘grandson’. This could, however, simply reflect either the general agnatic principles of the society – that inheritance usually passes down the male line – without wholly excluding women from also inheriting the craft (even if it were more likely that men would do so), or represent legal simplification, such that it is the three generations, not the specific members, which are important. There is likewise no indication in the texts that only one child in each generation could continue the tradition, rather than all or a subset of them. There are therefore several possibilities for poetic inheritance: it is possible that one male child would inherit (except where there were no sons, in which case a daughter could take their place); or that all of the children, male or female, would do so; or that all of those blessed with natural ability would do so.⁴⁷ All of these ideas must of course remain speculative, as no surviving early Irish legal text spells it out more clearly. It should be noted, however, that it is extremely risky in such a context as the history of early Ireland to make such generalisations as female poets ‘must have been regarded as unusual’, as the vast majority of the surviving source material is anonymous, there are difficulties with many of those attributions which do survive, and the laws and literary texts nowhere suggest that women poets were regarded as particularly unusual.

Women were certainly represented in the legal and literary texts as being able to hold the cultural capital of poetry and satire, however common or otherwise this was considered to be. What, however, did this mean for their power, status and honour within society? It is important to note that satire held a very ambiguous status within early Irish society, as recent studies have shown. McLaughlin has argued that there were different types of satire, performed by different types of satirist: there

⁴⁵ *Uraicecht na Ríar*, §4; *Manip mac fileid, immurgu, nó aue, ní tét acht lethdíre dó.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, §7; *Ceist, cuin as cland fhiled in chland? Ní hansae, fili a n-athair ocus a senathair.* | *Ceist, cuin do-báiter isin chlaind ind fhiledacht? Ní hansae, mani bet a trí diib, it baird íarum.* See also, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D.A. Binchy (Dublin, 1978), p. 978.34 ff; trans. Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar*, p. 95.

⁴⁷ Note the importance of natural ability as emphasised in the allegorical text ‘The Cauldron of Poesy’: L. Breatnach, ‘The Cauldron of Poesy’, *Ériu* 32 (1981), 45–93, at p. 51 and §3.

were justified and unjustified satire, and ‘the formal, legal satire of the *filí* ‘poet’ and that of the *cáinte* ‘satirist’, who was reviled by both secular and ecclesiastical authorities’.⁴⁸ McCone has also investigated the views held by the upper echelons of society, and particularly ecclesiastics, about satirists. With a focus on the literary text *Cath Maige Tuired*, ‘The Battle of Mag Tuired’ (an eleventh- or twelfth-century redaction of ninth-century material) and several early legal texts, he has argued that the *cáinte* was separate from, and lower in status than, the *filí*, the *cáinte* being ‘an object of clerical odium’.⁴⁹ McCone has shown that satirists are commonly linked with *drúth*, *drúi*, and *díbergach*, the ‘jester’, the ‘druid’ and the ‘brigand’, in early Irish law texts.⁵⁰ Satirising is considered so dreadful a sin that the Old Irish Table of Penitential Commutations states ‘for there are some sins which are not entitled to any remission of the penitence due for them, however long be the period prescribed for them’.⁵¹ Satirising, along with the unthinkable sins of kin-slaying, secret murder, druidism, brigandage, adultery, and incest, is one of these. *Córus Béscnai*, a legal text which ‘deals mainly with the mutual obligations of clergy and laity’ describes the *fled domonda*, ‘demon feast’, as being given ‘to sons of death and bad men, that is, to fools and satirists and jugglers and buffoons and clowns and robbers and heathens and harlots and bad men generally’.⁵² Likewise, *Sechtae* class the ‘son of a satirist who does not yield right or justice to any person’ among those children whose fathers do not raise them with their mothers.⁵³ This match is among others upon which society frowned: a secret liaison with the son of a living father, or a cleric who fell from chastity. It is clear in these texts that the satire of the *cáinte* was despised and feared. This was a class of person who held some degree of cultural capital – in his or her ability to make satirical verse – and it was capital which was directly convertible into power, certainly. It was, however, unjust power wielded by low-status, disreputable figures.⁵⁴ Here, then, we see an element that does not really emerge in the work of Bourdieu: the idea that cultural capital could be viewed as a bad, a dangerous thing, as well as a good one. In early Irish society, where this form of cultural capital was so closely connected with societal power, it could cause fear and loathing in its potential victims.

Kelly, specifically examining woman-satirists, has argued that ‘it would seem that most women who composed verse were not legally recognised poets, but satirists who used verse for malicious purposes’, and that illegal female satirists were particularly despised.⁵⁵ Kelly places all female poets in the position of the despised male satirist, suggesting that the only form of cultural capital they were able to wield was the destructive, dangerous form; powerful but despicable. The question is more

⁴⁸ McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ McCone, ‘A Tale of Two Ditties’, pp. 127–30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 127–8.

⁵¹ Old Irish Table of Penitential Commutations, ed. D.A. Binchy, *Ériu* 19 (1962), at §5; *[a]r ata at alaili pecdae dib in dlegad dilgud a pende cid fotae an ree coestar doib mar.*

⁵² *Córus Béscnai*, ed. D.A. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 526.15–19; *do macaib bais ocus drochdainaib .i. do druthaib ocus caintib ocus oblairaib ocus bruidiraib ocus fuirseoraib ocus merlechaib ocus geintaib ocus merdrechaib ocus drochdainaib arcena*. For the three estates outlined by the types of ‘feast’ – godly, human, and demon, see: McCone, *Pagan Past*, pp. 221–3.

⁵³ *Sechtae*, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, p. 22.8; *mac rindile nadcon daim cert na dlidet do duine.*

⁵⁴ McCone, ‘A Tale of Two Ditties’, p. 130.

⁵⁵ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 49–50.

complex than this however. *Birach briatar*, the ‘one who is sharp with words’, has been viewed by most modern scholarship as representing a type of female satirist, and she is certainly set alongside female werewolves and vagrant women in *Bretha Crólige* as women who do not receive sick-maintenance because ‘one dare not [assume] responsibility for a crime of their audacity’.⁵⁶ Here, then, it would seem that the female satirist is indeed being treated as a nuisance, a problem with which the laws had to cope. In the same list, however, is *bé rinnuis*, the ‘woman who satirises’, and her position within the list suggests a far higher status than her colleague of the sharp tongue.⁵⁷ Far from taking a place amidst low-status, criminal figures, *bé rinnuis* is placed alongside such figures as ‘a ruler of hostages’, ‘one possessing miracles’, ‘a woman-wright’, and ‘a woman-doctor of the *túath*’.⁵⁸ These women are represented as highly revered, and each ‘is paid honour-price by her worth and her property just as a man of sick-maintenance is paid’.⁵⁹ Here, then, is an indication that it was not only economic capital, which was described above, which could alter a woman’s ability to hold her own honour-price rather than half that of her husband or father. This text explicitly states that, for these women, honour-price was to be assigned according to the woman’s own merits. It could be suggested that, for these women, their professional activities overtook their sex as their most significant defining characteristic. It is clear that this woman-satirist is not being viewed as a despised, malicious figure: she is alongside other highly influential women, and her own *feb*, ‘worth’, ‘excellence’, ‘distinction’, not that of her male kin, is used to assess her legal standing in society. *Bretha Crólige*, therefore, is making a distinction between two types of woman-satirist. While it is not made explicit what that distinction is based upon, analogy with the situation surrounding men satirists would suggest that *birach briatar* was a woman-satirist who used her powers unlawfully, outside the legal context, and for purposes of extortion, while *bé rinnuis* exercised her knowledge justly.

Interestingly, the reference to the woman-satirist in *Sechtae*, the legal text in heptad form, seems initially more uncompromising, stating that *bean rindas*, ‘the woman who satirises’, should be entitled neither to honour-price nor *díre*, another status-based payment, suggesting that she would lose every right to status, legal redress, and compensation should she exercise this form of cultural capital.⁶⁰ The acquisition and utilisation of what elsewhere appears to be a form of cultural capital appears here, rather, to be potentially damaging to the one wielding it. As Kelly has noted, however, the manuscripts containing this heptad are divided between *bean rindas cach recht*, ‘the woman who satirises every lawful person’, and *bean rindas cach richt*, ‘the woman who satirises every shape of person’.⁶¹ Kelly has stated that ‘[t]he general sense is unaffected’ by either reading. It is possible, however, that the wording could make a significant difference to our understanding of the treatment

⁵⁶ *Bretha Crólige*, §34; *ni laimter arratas ar cin a leten*. Note that Binchy has ‘a sharp-tongued virago’, but this wording is unnecessarily perjorative.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, §34; ‘woman who satirises’.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, §34; *rechtaid géill; maineach ferta; bansaer; banliaig tuaithe*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, §35; *direnaite lo(i)gh nen(n)ech asa feib ocus asa totgus amal direnar fer otrusa*.

⁶⁰ *Sechtae*, 10.

⁶¹ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 50.

of women satirists in this text. If the text indeed read 'every shape of person', it would seem that the compiler of *Sechtae* was suggesting that every woman wielding satire was condemned and despised, not to be granted the basic right of the free person to honour-price. If, however, the reading is 'every lawful person', it might suggest, in accordance with the general stipulations regarding men satirists, that a woman who satirised a lawful person, a person undeserving of satire, was to be condemned, while a woman who satirised lawfully (i.e. she satirised unlawful people, perhaps referring to people who had behaved in such a way as to be deserving of satire) was not to be so condemned. It is possible that, as would appear to be the case in *Bretha Crólige*, there is a distinction being made between lawfully and unlawfully practised satire; that correctly used satire could be cultural capital, while wrongly used satire could condemn those who practised it.

This is reflected also in *Bretha im Fhuillema Gell*, the legal text regarding pledge-interests. Here, it would seem that a, specifically female, satirist was *expected* to use her cultural capital in the exercise of power: if a woman lost her pledge-interest, she was allowed to satirise the head of the *fine*, 'kin group', of the person who failed to return it, so that the issue might be resolved.⁶² This is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, the text recommends the use of satire in a specific legal situation: it bestows on wronged women the power to personally, without the aid of another, reclaim their rightful property. The means by which they should do so is through the use of lawful satire. This is not satire wielded purely for personal gain, it is not mere unlawful extortion; rather it is a means of acquiring rightful possessions. Again, then, there is a significant distinction being made between lawful and unlawful satire. Secondly, the situation in question appears to be one specifically affecting women, and is held distinct. Again, the text refers to the *ben rindas*, 'the woman who satirises', afterwards moving on to *fer rinnas*, 'the man who satirises'.⁶³ It should be noted here, however, that she, like both low and high status male poets who are described after her, is able to regain her rights through the wielding of her own level of cultural capital. It is not made clear in this text on what level a woman-satirist was considered to rank - male poets of both low and high ranks are described after her - but it is clear that when she acted in this instance, she did so lawfully.

It is not clear, therefore, that the unlawful woman-satirist is dealt with more frequently in the early Irish legal texts than the lawful woman-satirist, and thus it does not necessarily appear, as Kelly has argued, that most women satirists were of the unlawful, despised type. Indeed, even if it were the case that the unlawful women satirists appeared with greater frequency in the legal texts, it could be argued that this might have stemmed from the fact that they needed greater regulation than lawful satirists. It could be that lawful satire, whether practised by men or by women, was supposed to be practised in a particular way, or in particular situations - as is indicated in *Bretha im Fhuillema Gell*, for example - and that both men and women should adhere to these rules. Unlawful satirists, who failed to adhere to the rules, would have required greater attention in the legal texts as they were the ones who failed to behave in the prescribed manner. In the case of either the lawful or unlawful satirist, it could be argued that their satire was utilised as a form of cultural capital insofar as it was

⁶² *Bretha im Fhuillema Gell*, ed. D.A. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 466.5-9.

⁶³ *Idem*.

convertible into a direct form of power. For the unlawful satirist, however, the backlash from this would potentially have outweighed the benefits: his or her moment of power would theoretically result in an absolute loss of legal status, and therefore future legal power, within the community. If, as has been argued so convincingly by Kelly and McCone, these people were also despised by the ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies, they would lose any semblance of honour as well as power and status. Lefevere has argued that, according to Bourdieu, 'cultural capital is what you need to be seen to belong to the 'right circles' in the society in which you live'.⁶⁴ Taking this definition, unlawful satire is almost the opposite of cultural capital, sinking its wielder below contempt and removing them from the legal sphere.

My focus thus far has very much been on the representations of satire and women satirists within the early Irish legal texts; indeed, given that in the period before AD 900 this is where they most commonly appear, this approach is not surprising. There is, however, as noted above, a woman-satirist described in an early prose tale, the *c. 700 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde'*, and it is to this literary representation that we shall now turn. The woman-satirist enters the tale simply but powerfully:

[Conall's] mother [was] Bolce Ban-bretnach of the Britons. A female satirist. She put on the king a demand that she should spend the night with him. It is from this that Corc mac Luigthig was conceived.⁶⁵

Here there is no explicit indication given to the reader of Bolce's status within society, nor her economic holdings, nor the level of her honour. Indeed, the reader is given no detail at all except that Bolce was a Briton (perhaps suggesting that she was, to some extent, outside Irish society; a foreigner), and a woman-satirist. It would seem, therefore, that the latter piece of information was considered explanation enough for the ensuing events. While Bolce's status and honour were not explicated, her power was made clear. Apparently as a woman-satirist, Bolce was represented as capable of placing a demand upon a king which that king was unable to refuse. The compiler of the tale places in quick succession the facts that Bolce was a satirist, that she demanded to sleep with the king, and that Corc mac Luigthig was conceived on account of this. The indication is clearly that these facts stem one from another; they would not make sense if it were not the case that the

⁶⁴ A. Lefevere, 'Translation Practice(s) and the Circulation of Cultural Capital: Some Aeneids in English', in (eds) S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* (Clevedon, 1998), pp. 41-56, at p. 41.

⁶⁵ *Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde*, ed. K. Meyer, in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts 3*, ed. O. Bergin, R.I. Best, K. Meyer and J.G. O'Keeffe (Dublin, 1910), pp. 57-63, at p. 57; *Bolce banbretnach a mathair di Bretnaib. Banchánte. Tóbert áilges forsind rig im feis laiss. Is de conbreth Corc mac Luigthig*. A translation of this text may be found at: V. Hull, 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde', pp. 887-909.

audience reading or hearing the tale did not recognise the power held by the woman-satirist within society.⁶⁶

An interesting point to note in this instance is that Bolce does not, in fact, use her power of satire: the cultural capital she possesses is clearly behind her success, and recognised in its potentiality by the king, but it is not, in the tale, realised in the saying of a satire.⁶⁷ Instead a demand, referenced but not described, is put on the king and, presumably to avoid satire, he submits. Joanne Findon has examined the uses of women's words in early Irish literature, with reference particularly to Emer, a woman who appears in several connected tales about the hero Cú Chulainn. She has argued of medieval literature from continental Europe and Anglo-Saxon England that 'a female character is usually denied the position of 'speaking subject' in the text, and when she does speak she often produces mere chatter instead of meaningful discourse'.⁶⁸ In contrast to this, 'many medieval Irish tales seem striking for their portrayal of strong, active women who have much to say'.⁶⁹ This part of 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde' is interesting insofar as it does not fit into either of these categories. Bolce's words are not represented (although the reference to her 'demand' suggests that she did speak in an assertive manner): it is not a show of her wit and wisdom which grants her power, as it is in the case of Emer. Nevertheless, she is clearly represented, in her textual silence, as capable of wielding power over the king. This is explicable through the idea that a woman-satirist, due to her recognised cultural capital within society, held potential power; power which she could choose to wield more directly or not, depending on whether the potential was enough to ensure that she gained her will at once. In this prose tale, unlike in the legal texts, there is no indication of whether Bolce's power of satire might be considered lawful or not, but it certainly suggests that Bolce, specifically as a woman-satirist, held power where other women would not. Wholly independent of economic capital, Bolce's cultural capital is viewed as transferable into power.

If finally the search is moved slightly later chronologically, to another prose tale, a similar message is again indicated. In *Longes mac n-Uislen*, which details the exile of Uísliu's son, a tale whose core is eighth- or ninth-century, but whose current form is later, the figure of Leborcham, woman-satirist, is present.⁷⁰ Once again, almost no information is given about this woman, other than her name and her profession. The king, Conchobar, wishes to keep the beautiful Derdriu separate from all people until she is of age, in order that he will then be able to marry her. There were some exceptions made, however:

⁶⁶ For the idea that one must separate women producing texts, women characters described in texts written by men, and women described as poets in texts written by men, see: N. Ní Dhomhnaill, 'What Foremothers?', *Poetry Ireland Review* 36 (1992), 18-31. I fully accept this, but would still argue that, in the tales cited here, the woman satirist is necessarily a recognisably powerful figure for the audience.

⁶⁷ For the importance of recognition in the theory of cultural capital, see: P. Bourdieu, 'The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed', *Poetics* 12 (1983), 311-56, at pp. 316-18.

⁶⁸ J. Findon, *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle* (Toronto, 1997), p. 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, *A Woman's Words*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ For dating, see: V. Hull, *Longes Mac n-Uislen: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu* (New York: NY, 1949), pp. 29-30.

'no person ever was allowed into that house except her foster father and her foster mother and Leborcham; for the last-mentioned one could not be prevented, for she was a female satirist'.⁷¹

Even more explicitly than in the case of Bolce, Leborcham is stated to be able to act in a way in which others are not permitted because she is a woman-satirist. Again, no words need to be spoken by Leborcham for the potential of her power to be recognised both by the audience and the characters within the tale. The compiler is clearly once again playing on the concept of the recognised cultural capital and power of the satirist to convey a message to his audience. Again, too, there is no explicit reference to Leborcham's status or economic capital; only her power, connected explicitly to her potential to satirise, is elucidated. Likewise, there is again no reference to whether Leborcham was perceived as wielding lawful or unlawful power, except insofar as she gets away with her actions without consequences befalling her. This is in contrast to a rather later text (although again with a ninth-century core) analysed in detail by Kim McCone and, more recently, Liam Breathnach; *Cath Maige Tuired*, 'the second battle of Mag Tuired'.⁷² In that tale, a very definite line is drawn between the lawful, high-ranking *fili*, 'poet', and the low-ranking, disreputable *cáinte*, 'satirist', who ultimately comes to his downfall through his own greed and extortion. No such indication is given in either of our tales of woman-satirists: their power is accepted, but not elaborated upon.

It is interesting to note that there is arguably another instance of the use of some form of satire within *Longes Mac n-Uislen*, in this instance not wielded by the professional woman-satirist herself, but rather by the beautiful and ultimately tragic figure of Derdriu. Derdriu, despite Conchobar's best efforts, saw Noísiu, a most handsome son of Úisliu, and immediately desired him.

'While, therefore, the aforesaid Noísiu was alone outside, she quickly stole out to him as if to go past him, and he did not recognize her. 'Fair,' he said, 'is the heifer that goes past me.' 'Heifers,' she said, 'are bound to be big where bulls are not wont to be.' 'You have the bull of the province,' he said, 'namely, the king of the Ulstermen.' 'I would choose between the two of you,' she said, 'and I would take a young bullock like you.' 'By no means!' he said. 'Even because of Cathbad's prophecy.' 'Do you say that in order to reject me?' 'It assuredly will be for that reason,' he said. Therewith she made a leap to him and grasped both ears on his head. 'These [are] two ears of shame and of derision,' she said, 'unless you take me away with you.'⁷³

⁷¹ *Longes Mac n-Uislen*, 45; [N]i baí duine no léicthe issin les sin acht a haite-si ocus a mumme ocus dano Lebarcham, ar ní éta gabál di ssidi ar ba ban-cháinte.

⁷² McCone, 'A Tale of Two Ditties', pp. 122-43; L. Breathnach, 'The Lord's Share in the Profits of Justice and a Passage in *Cath Maige Tuired*', *Celtica* 27 (2013), 1-17.

⁷³ *Longes Mac n-Uislen*, §9; *A mboí-seom didiu a oínur int-í Noísi i-mmaig, mos-éétlan-si cuci i-mmach amal bid do thecht secha ocus nis-n-athgéoin. 'Is cáin,' ol-se-sseom, 'in t-samaisc téte sechunn!' 'Dlegtair,' ol-si-si, 'samaisci móra bale na-bít tairb.' 'Atá tarb in chóicid lat,' or-se-sseom, 'i. rí Ulad.' 'No-togfaínn-se etruib far ndís,' or-si-si, 'ocus no-gébainn tarbín óag amalt-so.' 'Ni-thó!' ol-se-sseom. 'Cid fo bithín fátsine Cathbad.' 'In dom fémed-sa adeiri sin?' 'Bid dó immurgu,' or-se-ssem. La sodain fo-ceird-si bedg cuci corro-gab a dá n-ó fora chinn. 'Dá n-ó méle ocus cuitbiuda in-so,' ol-si, 'manim-bera-su latt.*

This episode might appear rather strange at first glance; the seizing of the ears being a particularly odd element. As Vernam Hull has shown, however, there does appear to have been a procedure in which ears were involved in a form of satire.⁷⁴ Hull cited several texts of the earliest (before AD 900) Irish period which describe the poet seizing either his own earlobe or that of his victim, and rubbing it, indicating that, just as the earlobe has no strength or fibre, so the victim of the satire is weak.⁷⁵ Hull did in fact note the potential connection with the Derdriu and Noísiu episode, but stated that Derdriu's act was not coercive, that she did not rub one ear, but instead grasped both, and that therefore '〔t〕he underlying motives...bear no relation to each other'.⁷⁶ Indeed, Hull believed that Derdriu's grasping of Noísiu's ears was not to shame him, but to express the idea that he was manly.⁷⁷ This is problematic. While it is true that Derdriu was not represented as having enacted the procedure of rubbing the ears precisely in the way that it is described in the other texts which Hull cited, she was certainly represented as acting in a coercive manner. As can be seen from the extract quoted above, Derdriu told Noísiu that she wished to be with him, not with Conchobar. Noísiu refused her, citing a prophecy made before Derdriu's birth which stated that because of her, many men would die. It was then in the tale that Derdriu was represented as seizing Noísiu's ears, and telling him that his ears would be those of *méla ocus cuitbiud*, 'shame and derision', if he did not accede to her demand. She was essentially threatening him with a loss of his honour if he did not do her will, just as other satirists, both men and women, would have done. In the section following this episode, Noísiu asked his brothers what he ought to do.

"Evil will ensue", the warriors said. 'Although there may be [evil resulting therefrom], you shall not be under disgrace as long as we shall be alive. We shall go with her into another land. There is not in Ireland a king who will not give welcome to us."⁷⁸

The brothers therefore realised that taking Derdriu with them would inevitably have terrible consequences, but that nevertheless, Noísiu's disgrace, as caused by Derdriu's potentially satirical action, would be still worse. The action described in this tale is certainly represented as coercive, and the threat is that of a loss of honour. Given that the author earlier in the tale made it very clear that Derdriu had little company in her upbringing other than that of a woman-satirist, it is quite possible that the suggestion is that the young girl picked up some of Leborcham's methods. Leborcham herself otherwise has very little role in the tale, other than briefly informing Derdriu who Noísiu was. It is possible, therefore, that Leborcham's presence is designed in part to show the cultural capital of the woman-satirist, and to explain where Derdriu discovered her ability to use that capital for gain. It is interesting to note that the threatening words of Derdriu, unlike the threats of either

⁷⁴ V. Hull, 'Miscellanea 4: The Ancient Irish Custom of Rubbing the Earlap as a Means of Coercion', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 21 (1940), 324–9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 325–6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 328.

⁷⁷ *Idem*.

⁷⁸ *Longes Mac n-Uislen*, §10; 'Biaid olc de,' ol ind óicc. 'Cía beith, noco-bia-so fo mebail céin bemmit-ni i mbethaid. Ragmai-ni lee i tir n-aili. Ni-fil i n-Hérinn ríg na-tibre fáilti dún.'

Bolce or Leborcham, are recorded; here the woman was given a voice within the text. Derdriu, unlike either of those women, was not a satirist by trade. Perhaps then the author felt it necessary to outline the words she used in order to explain to his audience the techniques she was using; something which, for the professional woman-satirists, is made clear to the audience simply through the description of that profession. Ultimately, the story has a tragic end: Noísiu did indeed take Derdriu with him, but was slaughtered by Conchobar, who took Derdriu back against her will, eventually causing her to commit suicide in her grief. The satirical threat initially gained the woman her wish, therefore, but in the end could not save her from her prophesied fate.

It would seem, therefore, that both in the early legal texts and the early narrative prose tales in which woman-satirists appear, poetry and specifically the subsection of poetry which made up professional satire represented a form of capital separate to economic capital. This cultural capital, as it has been termed by Pierre Bourdieu, could be used by women (and indeed by men), as an alternative to directly inherited economic capital (although it was also transferable into economic capital) and could theoretically raise their levels of status and power. Women who lawfully utilised the cultural capital of satire could not only acquire things they wanted, as represented in the narrative prose tales, or were entitled to, as in the legal text on pledge-interests, *Bretha Fhuillema Gell*, but could also have their honour-price reckoned according to their own merits rather than that of their nearest male relative. Honour-price was directly related to status in early Irish society, and so it would appear that a lawful professional woman-satirist, like other women perceived as holding power or meritorious positions, had her status assigned as a man would have his. Thus lawful satire could act as capital in giving a woman both her status and power within society. Honour, in opposition to shame, is a more difficult question, and less easily measurable. It is clear that a woman-satirist, whether lawful or unlawful, held in her hands the honour and shame of those around her: were she to choose to satirise a person, that person could lose both honour and status, and thus their overall position in the community. From the texts which survive, it would appear that a lawful woman-satirist held an honourable position in society. An unlawful woman-satirist, on the other hand, as has been argued by such scholars as McCone, Breathnach and Kelly, was a disreputable, dishonourable, despised figure. This circumstance was the same for men-satirists: lawful satirists were recognised as powerful, high-status, and honourable members of society, and unlawful satirists quite the opposite. This was not a distinction made on the basis of sex, but on the basis of legality, lawfulness. Used in the correct, recognised way, satire in early Irish society was a form of cultural capital available to both men and women which could grant the individual power, status, and honour.

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