

Supporting Enemies: How Secondary Characters Characterize Cúchulainn

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In early Irish cultural storytelling, secondary characters play almost as big of a role as main characters do, just in different aspects. While main characters are typically used as the heroic warriors or honorable characters, some secondary characters, like the Galeóin warriors, Orlám and his charioteer, Laeg, Mac Roth, and Nadcranntail, are all used to enhance the storytelling conventions and the plot of each tale. By creating anticipation and excitement, along with adding in some humor, the characters that are hardly noticeable by the modern reader actually made telling these oral tales to the early Irish audience more entertaining in regards to their culture. More specifically, five distinct tales from *The Táin* really underline the roles of these characters. Orlám and his charioteer in “The Death of Orlám” and Laeg and Nadcranntail in “Single Combat,” “Death of Etarcomol,” and “Death of Nadcranntail” make the audience feel high anticipation and excitement about what’s going to happen next, while Mac Roth in “Single Combat” and the warriors of Galeóin in “The Army Encounters Cúchulainn” are used to make the audience laugh. Because of these storytelling conventions, each secondary character helps to add to the general plot of the overall story by reinforcing Cúchulainn’s strengths and Ailill and Medb’s weaknesses as characters.

When Cúchulainn is first introduced in *The Táin* in “The Army Encounters Cúchulainn,” Ailill and Medb are currently arguing over who has more wealth. Medb is infuriated when she discovers that one of her bulls left her side of the land to go live with Ailill’s bulls where a man is in charge instead of a woman. When she sends Mac Roth to ask Dáire for his bull, equal in size, he did not give it up freely. In return, Ailill and Medb assemble warrior troops to retaliate. After Medb checks up on all of the troops, she decides that it would be “foolish” to allow all

three thousand Galeóin soldiers from north Leinster to go with the others (Kinsella 66). When Ailill asks why, Medb argues:

They are fine soldiers. While the others were making a space for their camp they had roofed theirs and were making their meal. While the others were eating they had finished their meal and had their harpers playing. So it would be foolish to take them. They would get all the credit for our army's triumph. (Kinsella 66)

At this, the audience is crying from laughing so hard. The Galeóin soldiers are famous for being one of the worst armies in all of early Ireland. Not only does Medb believe the Galeóin soldiers to be great warriors, she also believes them to be so good that they would even successfully steal her and Ailill's land while they are gone. Since she wants these soldiers neither to stay on their land nor come and fight for her, she originally decides that it's only best to kill them. However, it is Fergus who corrects her and gives her the idea that they should scatter the Galeóin soldiers amongst the rest of the army so that they will not stand out much. Since they will also not be all together, Medb believes that the chances of the Galeóin soldiers scheming against her are much lower. By having the Galeóin soldiers considered to be her best army, they are setting Medb up for complete and utter failure, and the entire audience knows and is ready for her or the soldiers' downfall in the following tales.

When the troops start moving, they have to catch food to eat, as well. At this point in the story, there are eight troops of three thousand men—the Galeóin soldiers being one of those troops. Around Móin Coltna, eight score of wild deer were spotted. The greatness of the Galeóin soldiers is expressed, once again, when it is said that all but five deer were caught by Galeóin soldiers. To the audience, this shows how pathetic Medb's army really is. If the Galeóin are the

only ones to succeed in catching wild deer, one could only imagine what the other troops look like—unorganized, unskilled, and non-athletic. If the Galeóin are catching more deer than the rest of the troops, those troops must be stumbling over one another while trying to hunt. Having the Galeóin soldiers idolized by Medb creates an incredibly humorous and ironic aspect to this specific tale, foreshadowing how well her army will be able to fight off Cúchulainn later on.

Later on in “Death of Orlám,” Orlám is introduced as the son of Ailill and Medb. While Cúchulainn is in the middle of fixing or replacing his broken chariot, he spots Orlám’s charioteer doing the same. When Cúchulainn confronts the charioteer and questions his reasoning for being here, he says, “Getting shafts. We smashed our chariots chasing that wild deer Cúchulainn,” and then tells Cúchulainn to help him (Kinsella 95). While Cúchulainn is doing the trimming of the chariot-shaft for Orlám’s charioteer, he tries to show off his skill by stripping and paring the bark all in one motion. The charioteer says, “This isn’t your usual work” (Kinsella 95). Yet again, this is another form of comedic relief found in yet another tale. The audience loves that Orlám’s charioteer is so shocked and nervous about the strength and ease of precision Cúchulainn has in such a time-consuming task. This is when he asks Cúchulainn who he is; Cúchulainn tells Orlám’s charioteer his name and that he should not be afraid, but just to tell him where Orlám is. Shortly after Orlám’s charioteer points out Orlám, Orlám is beheaded.

Cúchulainn puts Orlám’s head on the charioteer’s back and gives him strict instruction to crawl on his knees with Orlám’s head on his back and “keep it like that all the way into camp.” He threatens, “If you do anything but exactly what I say you’ll get shot from my sling” (Kinsella 95). When the charioteer gets close enough to camp and thinks he is out of Cúchulainn’s sight, he stands up and walks directly to Ailill and Medb, explaining the horror of events that he just witnessed and the terrible threat Cúchulainn sent him with. After he explains this to Ailill and

Medb, “Cúchulainn hurled a stone at him, shattering his head so that the brains spattered the ears” (Kinsella 96). To some, at first, it may seem confusing as to why Cúchulainn kills Orlám’s charioteer since in the beginning of this tale, he says very plainly to the charioteer, “You needn’t worry...I have no quarrel with charioteers” (Kinsella 95). However, at the end of the tale, the narrator says, “It is not true, therefore, Cúchulainn didn’t kill charioteers; he killed them if they did wrong” (Kinsella 96). The end of this tale really intensifies the drama and suspense of the sequential tales to come. Cúchulainn beheads Orlám before even speaking to him and then kills his charioteer for not listening to his direct and specific orders. Although Cúchulainn is a man who maintains his honor and keeps his word, there are some things that are not clearly spoken at first, like how he does not kill charioteers, but will if they “do wrong.” This also makes it clear that Cúchulainn does not have any sympathy for those whom he feels should be punished.

In the beginning of “Single Combat,” Cúchulainn is fighting and killing Ailill’s entire army with ease. Ailill wants to make Cúchulainn a deal so that he will end this barbaric fight against his army, so he sends a messenger, Mac Roth, to Cúchulainn to convey the deal. Laeg, Cúchulainn’s charioteer, is facing towards Cúchulainn as he sees movement in the background. He says, “There is a man coming. He has a linen band round his yellow hair. He grasps a wrathful cub. An ivory-hilted sword hangs at his waist. A red-embroidered hooded tunic is wrapped around him” (Kinsella 116). At this point, although the audience listening to the story already knows who the messenger is, they are deeply intrigued and cannot help but wonder if Cúchulainn is going to guess who that man is. Cúchulainn asks which warrior the man coming is, and Laeg responds with not a name, but another, more detailed, description:

A dark, good-looking, broad-faced man, with a bronze brooch in his handsome brown cloak, a tough triple shirt next his skin, and a pair of well-worn shoes between his feet

and the ground. He holds a peeled hazel-wand in one hand and a single-edged sword with guards of ivory in the other. (Kinsella 116)

By Laeg revealing only more and more descriptions instead of blatantly stating a name, it allows the audience listening to the tale to be eagerly anticipating the conversation coming that will be between Cúchulainn and Mac Roth.

First, Mac Roth asks Laeg whose charioteer he is. Laeg is playing a guessing game with him, as well, by stating bluntly, “That man’s there” and pointing towards Cúchulainn (Kinsella 116). Now, since Cúchulainn is sitting naked in the snow, picking his shirt of lice, he is hardly identifiable. Meanwhile, Mac Roth still continues to try to get Cúchulainn to reveal his name so that he is able to recognize who he is. Cúchulainn only says, “I serve Conchobor mac Nesa” and that “it’s clear enough” for him to understand who he is just by saying that alone (Kinsella 116). The guessing game that Laeg originally began started out by creating anticipation, causing the audience to be on the edge of their seats; now, it is still continuing between characters. This makes it humorous to the audience because Mac Roth asks where he can find Cúchulainn to Cúchulainn himself and then has a conversation about what he wants to say to Cúchulainn when he finds him. At this point, the audience is cracking up because Mac Roth is coming off as such a naïve character since he has no idea he is talking directly to Cúchulainn, and everyone knows who Cúchulainn is. Mac Roth also emphasizes how poor Medb and Ailill’s army is by not even being able to identify who Cúchulainn is after being sent to him and talking directly to him.

Not long after “Single Combat,” “Death of Etarcomol” begins. Fergus decides to make a new deal with Cúchulainn so that he will single-handedly fight one warrior a day instead of hundreds since he has been slaughtering so many much more quickly than expected. Again,

Cúchulainn has his back turned towards where Laeg is looking ahead, so Laeg starts telling him there are other men coming with a new description:

I see two chariots coming. In the first chariot there is a great dark man. His hair is dark and full. A purple cloak is wrapped about him, held by a gold brooch. He wears a red-embroidered hooded tunic. He carries a curved shield with a scalloped edge of light gold and a stabbing-spear bound around from its neck to its foot. There is a sword as big as a boat's rudder at his thigh. (Kinsella 118)

Once more, this description Laeg uses to illustrate Fergus as he is coming towards them really builds up the audience's anticipation of whether or not Cúchulainn is able to guess who Laeg is talking about. Since these men are arriving in chariots, it makes it a little bit easier for Cúchulainn to identify the men. Although not always a symbol of wealth, horses tended to be used to show off one's "social advantage" in medieval Ireland (Notes, 3.6). With another description from Laeg and knowing that the men coming are at least in a higher social class, like himself, Cúchulainn finds it unproblematic in making out at least one of the men.

To the audience's pleasure, Cúchulainn recognizes right away that the man Laeg is describing is his friend Fergus. He proceeds to demoralize Fergus' character by telling Laeg that Fergus does not even have a sword, but actually "a big empty rudder" because he was caught sleeping with Ailill's wife (Kinsella 118). The audience loves this because not only is Cúchulainn able to promptly identify Laeg's incredibly detailed description of Fergus, but he then immediately emasculates Fergus when speaking to Laeg. By Cúchulainn saying that the sword that is "as big as a boat's rudder" is actually only filled with a less-intimidating stick, Fergus is seen as less of a warrior now (Kinsella 118). Because of Laeg's exceedingly detailed

descriptions of Mac Roth and Fergus, the plot of both “Single Combat” and “Death of Etarcomol” become humorous and enhance Cúchulainn as a character because Laeg helps to show off Cúchulainn’s cunning personality as well as his ability to easily identify warriors.

Later on in “Death of Nadcranntail,” Ailill and Medb are looking for the next warrior to face a one-on-one battle with Cúchulainn. When they are completely at a loss, Medb suggests they bring in Nadcranntail. Since, typically, no one in the audience listening to the tale has ever heard of Nadcranntail, they become quite excited over this new character—especially since he is the single person being summoned to fight the great and powerful Cúchulainn. When a messenger goes to tell Nadcranntail about this fight he is being called for, Nadcranntail decides that he will only do it if Medb and Ailill promise to give him their daughter, Finnabair. This is easily agreed upon quite hastily, which is strange for an early Irish tale. Bride prices are types of dowries that are given to the bride’s family where “half of the bride price went to husband or male relative and half went to the bride herself” to ensure the bride will live a comfortable life in case death ever came upon the groom (Notes 1.6). In this case, Medb and Ailill never once discuss a bride price with Nadcranntail at all. However, it can be assumed that killing off Cúchulainn is a vast enough bride price for Medb and Ailill in exchange for their daughter, since they grew incredibly worried about their warriors’ and their own safety. Not discussing a bride price for their own daughter really shows how important it is to Medb and Ailill for Cúchulainn to be conquered.

Lugaid then goes to Cúchulainn to warn him about how Nadcranntail is deemed to be a great warrior. Lugaid says, “The news is bad. Nadcranntail will be coming against you tomorrow. You’ll never resist him” (Kinsella 122). This makes the audience become even more excited because not only was Nadcranntail chosen to fight Cúchulainn, but now others are actually worried that Nadcranntail will beat Cúchulainn. Nadcranntail builds up a dramatic

suspense of the tale because of this. However, Cúchulainn just tries to brush it off by saying, “We’ll see” (Kinsella 122).

Nadcranntail shows up to the fight the next day with nine charred and sharpened spears. Much to the audience’s surprise, Cúchulainn actually flees from the scene where the fight is supposed to take place. Since the audience has never heard of the almighty Cúchulainn running away from a fight, they are shocked and surprised, anxiously awaiting to see what happens next. Nadcranntail goes up to the Ulster men and boasts with his head up high saying, “Look at your Cúchulainn there. He has run away.” Medb joins in and says to Fergus, “And why not? A true warrior came, and a cowardly sprite vanished” (Kinsella 122). At this point, the audience is eagerly listening to the tale with their mouths hanging wide open, waiting for how Cúchulainn is going to handle this situation after he has clearly just run away from a fight. However, when Fergus confronts Cúchulainn about running away, he says that “if [Nadcranntail] had been carrying real weapons he wouldn’t be boasting now; you know I don’t kill unarmed men” (Kinsella 123). The audience begins to crack up at this because Cúchulainn was never unsure of his own skills at any point; he just did not feel that it was a fair to have a fight with this man who only carried nine spears as his defense.

The following day, Nadcranntail shows up to fight Cúchulainn again with a wagon full of weapons. This time, however, he really looks at Cúchulainn, recognizes his age, and refuses to bring back “a little lamb’s head...to the camp” because he “can’t behead a beardless boy” (Kinsella 123). Again, the audience finds this humorous because although Cúchulainn is extremely young, they know that he is fully capable of slaughtering incredible warriors with ease. Once Laeg helps Cúchulainn to create a false beard, he comes out to fight a “fair” fight with Nadcranntail. Nadcranntail explains that he wants there to be one rule in this fight: no

dodging spears. Cúchulainn adjusts this single rule so that there is no dodging unless one jumps upwards to dodge the spear. Nadcranntail shoots and Cúchulainn leaps over it. When Nadcranntail expresses that he is upset by this rule, Cúchulainn says that he is allowed to do the same. There is a lot of tension throughout this scene because the audience does not know if Nadcranntail is actually as good as everyone else is talking him up to be. Although, when Nadcranntail leaps up to avoid the arrow, Cúchulainn purposely aims high so the arrow drops down and pierces Nadcranntail right in through the skull. The audience probably cheers loudly at this because the powerful Cúchulainn has beat yet another “great” warrior, reinforcing his reputation as the best and most strategic warrior.

Nevertheless, Nadcranntail is alive. He tells Cúchulainn that he wishes to show this to his sons in the camp and then will be back to be beheaded. However, when he comes back, he tries to trick Cúchulainn and throws his sword at him. Cúchulainn dodges this and is so infuriated Nadcranntail tries to trick him that “he sprang onto the rim of Nadcranntail’s shield and struck his head off. He struck Nadcranntail again through the neck, down to the navel, so that he fell in four sections to the ground” (Kinsella 125). When Nadcranntail abruptly throws his sword at Cúchulainn, the audience gasps in shock because Cúchulainn wasn’t expecting this at all; they are unsure if he will be able to fend off the surprise attack. When he does, the audience doesn’t take pity in Nadcranntail’s death, but praises Cúchulainn’s strength and swiftness. Nadcranntail plays a great role in building up excitement and suspense of the fight in this tale, but is never a match for Cúchulainn.

All of these secondary characters are included in the story of *The Táin* to enhance the powerfulness, in both mind and body, of Cúchulainn. Without all of these “less important” characters, we would not be able to recognize the true importance and greatness of Cúchulainn

himself. Even though he does not have to try hard physically, Cúchulainn is always showing off his capability of being smarter than all the other warriors in Ireland. His cunning personality allows him to always be one step ahead of his enemies, which helps to prove his status as a great warrior. By using secondary characters to characterize the prominence of Cúchulainn as a warrior, this also helps to reinforce Medb and Ailill's, along with some others, weaknesses as substantial warriors. Characterizing both Cúchulainn's and the secondary characters' strengths and weaknesses in *The Táin* helps to create a more entertaining story for the audience.

Works Cited

Kinsella, Thomas. *The Táin: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cualinge*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

Notes from Cattle Lord and Clansmen: <https://blogs.stockton.edu/ireland/cattle-lord-clansmen/>