

## The Transition from Early to Modern Irish Tales

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From the early tales of Thomas Kinsella's *The Táin* to the later tales of William Butler Yeats' *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, the stylized techniques of Irish storytelling have significantly changed due to the English influence. While some traditional Irish themes and elements of storytelling have remained throughout the years, others have been modernized and manipulated by the English. The tales Kinsella compiled are from around the late 11<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and the English invaded Ireland starting in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that many Englishmen "adopted the Irish language and customs," which proves the likeliness of the Irish adopting many English customs and language in return (Wilson 1093). By combining the techniques of traditional oral and written tales of both Ireland and England, many tales or manuscripts eventually transformed into something very similar to Yeats' *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* that appear to be "Englandized" versions of early Irish tales.

Throughout Queen Elizabeth's rule of England and Ireland until her death in 1603, the Irish language was forbidden as English was enforced. Because of this, English literature was also implemented on traditional Irish literature, including oral and written tales (Cahill 116). The early Irish tales compiled by Kinsella mainly have the consistent theme of savage warriors fighting battles to defend one's honor. Compared with the blissful and romance themes of Yeats' *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, traditional Irish tales have a much more savage, gruesome, and not-so-subtle approach to similar plots and themes; death was a regular

occurrence that the audience thoroughly enjoyed. However, the major themes of both *The Táin* and *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* tend to favor men and demoralize women.

In many tales, traditional Irish plots of determination are molded and shaped into newer versions with English subtleties in place of the Irish gruesomeness. In *The Táin*, majority of the first quarter of the book is about Medb's strong desire to prove her equal wealth to her husband, Ailill, because Ailill had said to her, "It struck me how much better off you are today than the day I married you" (Kinsella 52). Medb finds it incredibly unfair to assume such a thing and felt it is right for her to prove how much of her own wealth she has to make them equals. They began taking out all of their things and comparing "the lowliest of their possessions," which included "buckets and tubs and iron pots, jugs and wash-pails and vessels with handles. Then their finger-rings, bracelets, thumb-rings and gold treasures" (Kinsella 54). What it all comes down to is measuring each other's cows in size and number. When it is noticed that one of Medb's bulls went to Ailill's herd, Medb goes to drastic measures to find another bull of the exact same size. When the man who owns such a bull refuses to give it up freely, Medb starts a war in which she loses thousands of men in her army, and almost her own life, to the great Chúchulainn. Nevertheless, Medb stirs up a lot of gruesome action because of her determination to do anything in her power to prove to Ailill she has just as much wealth as he does.

Hundreds of years later, in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, there is a tale called "Jamie Freel and the Young Lady." It is about a young man who goes to the castle of the fairies "to seek [his] fortune" with the fairies (Yeats 52). In this case, Jamie Freel has no real reason to go lurking in this dangerous castle other than acting upon his own curiosity. The fairies take him on a journey to Dublin to steal a girl. However, Jamie does not think that stealing this girl for no apparent reason—that he knew of, at least—was very fair to her, so he takes the girl

back. Jamie only lives with his widowed mother, so when he comes back with a girl, cursed with being dumb and deaf, his mother yells out, “But a *lady*, Jamie! How can a lady eat we’er poor diet, and live in we’er poor way? I ax you that, you foolitch fellow?” (Yeats 55). In a way, Jamie is acting almost as selfish as Medb, but he wants to help this stolen girl even though his family cannot afford it. He wants to feel as if she is equal to him and his mom—not a slave to the fairies. He only responds with, “Weel, mother, sure it’s better for her to be here nor over yonder” (Yeats 55). In the same way that Medb keeps risking her and her army’s lives by having continuous battles, Jamie risks his life once more by going back to the castle of the fairies on the same night one year later to, once again, “seek [his fortune]” (Yeats 56). He overhears one of the fairies talk about how if the lady gets three drops of the liquid in the cup that the fairy is holding, she will be cured of her dumbness and deafness. Just as fast as Jamie walks into the castle, he leaves with the glass of liquid in his hand and runs all the way home before the fairies even know what had happened. Jamie Freel is like Medb in a lot of ways, one being that his character also goes through great lengths to justify what he thinks is considered fair and equal. Jamie does not want the lady to be trapped with the fairy people because, since they stole this innocent girl, he finds that to be unjust. He then goes through many obstacles to give the lady the freedom she deserves. Medb does not allow Ailill to believe he has more fortune or that Medb has more fortune now because of her marriage to him, so she has numerous battles and loses majority of her army to get her own bull to be considered his equal. Both Medb and Jamie have a strong sense of determination to justify the equality that is deserved.

In the earlier Irish tales, there is always a big emphasis on beauty and the physical appearance of characters, especially male warriors. In “Combat with Ferguson and Others” in *The Táin*, Cúchulainn is described as “handsome” in great detail. His hair is described as

Brown at the base, blood-red in the middle, and a crown of golden yellow. This hair was settled strikingly into three coils on the cleft at the back of his head. Each long loose-flowing strand hung down in shining splendour over his shoulders, deep-gold and beautiful and fine as a thread of gold. A hundred red-gold curls shone darkly on his neck, and his head was covered with a hundred crimson threads matted with gems. (Kinsella 157-8)

This incredible detail goes on for almost an entire page. In other early tales similar to “Combat with Ferguson and Others,” it is typically the main, heroic characters that are described like this. Chúchulainn is *The Táin*’s main character who fights and wins every single battle—the audience looks up to him because he is so boldly brave, beautiful, and successful, which is why he is admired so much by all other characters, as well as the audience, and described with such eloquent detail.

In “Jamie Freel and the Young Lady” in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, the emphasis on beauty is slightly altered. There are no longer extensive passages, detailing every single aspect of a character’s appearance. Also, the character who is being complimented on their beauty is no longer the brave warrior. Instead, it is the young lady who is both innocent and helpless who is said to be beautiful. After Jamie’s mom finishes scolding him for taking home another mouth to feed, she notices the young lady’s attractiveness and says, “Poor crathur, she’s quare and handsome! Nae wonder they set their hearts on her” (Yeats 55). Instead of just admiring her good looks, she decides to enhance them by putting her in her own clothes. She “took out her Sunday gown of brown drugget; she then opened a drawer, and drew forth a pair of white stockings, a long snowy garment of fine linen, and a cap, her ‘dead dress,’ as she called it” (Yeats 55). While other characters in the earlier Irish tales, like those in *The Táin*, simply are in

awe of a prestigious warrior's beauty, Jamie's mother is helping to make this somewhat secondary character, who does not appear to have any wealth, even more beautiful by dressing her up in the best clothes that she has to offer. No longer are just heroic men looked at for being beautiful, but now beauty has transitioned into secondary female characters that are feeble and unable to save themselves.

In early Irish tales, happy endings are not nearly as happy as the more modernized versions. In *The Táin*, the tale entitled "The Last Battle" is considered to have a happy ending. However, to the modern reader, it is not what would be considered the norm. At the end of this tale, Medb is just about to be killed by Cúchulainn while she is "relieving herself," but Cúchulainn ends up sparing her life because he does not believe in "being a killer of women" (Kinsella 250). The battles are then officially over. Medb admits that there were some elements of "shame and shambles" during the battles, since she lost majority of her warriors, but it is all finally over and they made it out alive. Fergus makes it a point to comment back with, "We followed the rump of a misguiding woman. It is the usual thing for a herd led by a mare to be strayed and destroyed" (Kinsella 251). Although Medb believes she has won, Fergus needs to tell her that they lost a lot of their army because they were lead by a woman. Medb fights for her equality throughout all of the battles, and in the end, she does not even achieve it. Although "The Táin Ends" concludes with a seven-year peace between Ulster and Cúchulainn, even Fergus dies not but one page before. The early Irish tales attempt to always end with a "happy ending," but their happy endings always involve the brutal death of many characters, sometimes even major ones, like Fergus. In addition, Medb fights all of these battles to fight for her equality to Ailill, but Fergus makes sure she still is not equal to him. All in all, this ending is not really too happy.

Once modernized with English techniques of storytelling, Irish tales not only have truly happy endings, but they now feature people being rescued instead of being killed. “Jamie Freel and the Young Lady” begins with Jamie being the sole supporter for himself as well as his widowed mother. He then rescues a beautiful lady who ends up being the daughter of a wealthy man. Although the fairies “mak’ her deaf and dumb,” Jamie goes back one year later to steal the antidote, which revitalizes her speech and intelligence (Yeats 54). They quickly wed, and Jamie and his mother move into the young lady’s home where he becomes the heir to his father-in-law’s fortune; they all live happily ever after. In this tale, there are five characters being rescued; Jamie Freel rescues the young lady from the fairies, the young lady rescues Jamie and his mother from a hard lifestyle, and Jamie rescues the young lady’s parents from a lifetime of sadness without their daughter. However, compared to *The Táin*, where women are repeatedly discouraged to fight for themselves, “Jamie Freel and the Young Lady” completely ignores any kind of female dominance and is replaced with men saving the incapable and powerless women, like Jamie’s mother and the young lady.

The tale called “The Brewery of Egg-Shells” also presents a happy ending with characters being saved instead of killed. Mrs. Sullivan, the mother of a young boy, believes that her son is overtaken by a fairy. To cure him, she is told to

Put down the big pot, full of water, on the fire, and make it boil like mad; then get a dozen new-laid eggs, break them, and keep the shells, but throw away the rest; when that is done, put the shells in the pot of boiling water, and you will soon know whether it is your own boy or a fairy. If you find that it is a fairy in the cradle, take the red-hot poker and cram it down his ugly throat, and you will not have much trouble with him after that.” (Yeats 49)

Mrs. Sullivan is still convinced that her son is now a fairy, especially when she tells him what she is brewing and he responds with, “I’m fifteen hundred years in the world, and I never saw a brewery of egg-shells before!” (Yeats 50). Mrs. Sullivan attempts to shove the poker down his throat when she trips and falls. However, when she gets up and goes to the cradle, it is her own son that is sleeping soundly. Mrs. Sullivan’s son is the one who is saved in this tale since his own mother does not end up killing him with a poker, and the “fairy” that was inside of him instantly disappears, saving his soul. Compared to “Jamie Freel and the Young Lady” where there is a man saving the incapable woman, “The Brewery of Egg-Shells” does not feature a male savior, but also does not have Mrs. Sullivan save her son in a heroic way—she does so by her clumsiness, also proving her incapability even if it did save her son in the end.

From *The Táin* all the way *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, the English influence has created a clear transition from early Irish tales to more modernized ones. Earlier tales have distinct themes of determination for equality, perception of beauty, female incapability, and happy endings that involve a lot of gruesome deaths because of female incapability. In Irish tales manipulated by the English language, these themes are still clear, but altered a bit by changing female to male determination, idealized beauty of the male warrior to the feeble female, and more obvious happy endings in which characters are saved, sometimes by men because of female incapability. It is clear that there is still a strong sense of the traditional Irish tales embedded in the modernized tales, but the tales of *Fairy and Folks Tales of the Irish Peasantry* are what we are used to seeing today, which were used to entertain both the Irish and English audience in Ireland at one point in time.

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