

INTIMATIONS OF IRISH:

O'Meara's *Ormonius* and the display of vernacular learning



By Keith Sidwell

Dermot O'Meara's Latin epic Ormonius (London 1615) was written by a native speaker of Irish who was also (at least) a good English-speaker. Though O'Meara's competence in both vernaculars is clear from the introductory material and from the poem itself, he appears to draw more attention to his knowledge of Irish through the use of Latin calques on place-names which directly reflect their Irish meanings. It is possible that O'Meara expected his target-audience – Gaelic-speaking Scots in the circle of King James I? – to pick up and appreciate these nuances.

The Ireland of Dermitius O'Meara, author of the five book epic poem *Ormonius*, published in London in 1615, was a trilingual place.¹ It was Irish, English and Latin which made up this linguistic triumvirate. The two vernaculars, English and Irish, existed both separately and together. The eastern settlement, known as the Pale, was culturally and linguistically English and occupied by people who traced their origins back to the Norman conquerors of Ireland in the twelfth century. These were the so-called “Old English”.² It was against the dilution of this vernacular that Richard Stanihurst (author of the *De rebus in Hibernia gestis* of 1584) wrote his strange and archaic versions of the *Aeneid*, just as Shakespeare was growing up in Stratford-upon-Avon.³ The North, Ulster, was Irish-speaking, as were also, predominantly, the West and the South-West (Connacht and Munster). The Tipperary Liberty, however, and Kilkenny, the territory of the Earl of Ormond, were among a number of places where the long process of co-existence and the inevitable intermarriage it brought in its wake had created a mixed language environment. The tenth Earl, “Black” Thomas Butler (1532–1614), was honoured by many poems in Irish celebrating his military victories, describ-

¹ Published by Thomas Snodham, one of the foremost printers of Jacobean London. A modern edition, with introduction, translation, notes, commentary and full *apparatus fontium*, edited by Keith Sidwell and David Edwards, is due to appear as *Officina Neolatina* 1 from Brepols Publishers (Turnhout, Belgium) in 2010.

² See further Lennon 1978.

³ Stanihurst 1582. See further Bernigau 1904.

ing his new house, and – paradoxically, you might think – his loyalty to the English crown.⁴ The opening of the posthumous *Eolach mé ar mheirge an iarla* (Ms. Maynooth C.63) is typical:

Well do I know the flag of the Earl,
The beautiful, rich-bordered banner,
The broadly-weaving, crimson ensign,
The terror-striking victorious cloth.

The variegated, living standard,
The graceful and high weaving cross,
The fang-poisoned dragon of a hundred battles,
The power-charged and far-travelled jewel.

(tr. adapted from Eugene O'Curry)⁵

But he was also one of the dedicatees of that quintessentially English poem, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1596), which was composed in Ireland – in County Cork, as it happens – where its author was a “planter”, a “New English” settler, whose land was hacked out of traditionally Gaelic territory. There is a suggestion he may even have stayed at Butler's “mansion”, presumably the fine Elizabethan house at Carrick-on-Suir rather than Kilkenny Castle.

Receive most noble Lord a simple taste
Of the wilde fruit, which salvage soyl hath bred,
Which being through long wars left almost waste,
With brutish barbarisme is overspredd:
And in so fair a land, as may be redd,
Not one *Parnassus*, nor one *Helicone*
Left for sweete Muses to be harboured,
But where thy selfe hast thy brave mansione;
There in deede dwel faire Graces many one,
And gentle Nymphes, delights of learned wits,
And in thy person without Paragone
All goodly bountie and true honour sits,
Such therefore, as that wasted soyl doth yield,
Receive dear Lord in worth, the fruit of barren field.⁶

In Ireland, as in the rest of Europe – and of course, the New World too – Latin was the language of high international culture, of diplomacy, education and learning. It was sustained in this period by the newly introduced

⁴ Carney 1945.

⁵ Carney 1945, 67–73 poem XV.1553–1736.

⁶ Spenser 1978, 28.

Grammar Schools and, from 1592, by the University founded by Queen Elizabeth in Dublin in 1592, Trinity College.⁷ Towards the end of the sixteenth century, however, increasingly fervent Protestantism and the political factionalism it brought in its wake pushed Irish Catholics abroad to pursue their studies in the ever-increasing numbers of Irish Colleges which sprang up from Salamanca to Prague.⁸

O'Meara was born in Ormond territory and his family owed their position to the Butlers, as he admits in the prefatory letter to Earl Thomas.⁹ It is clear that he knew English. Like many Irishmen of his day before the opening of Trinity College Dublin, he went to the University of Oxford to pursue his studies and eventually settled in London, where he practised medicine. Before leaving Ireland, he had published a medical treatise on hereditary diseases written in Latin (Dublin 1619), which was later reprinted with Latin works of his equally medical and literate son Edmund.¹⁰ The language intrudes several times in *Ormonius* also. For example, in the *Argumentum* to book four, while outlining the Earl of Desmond's appropriation of the wine-taxes due by long-standing royal gift to the Earls of Ormond, O'Meara writes: "Vinorum enim vectigalia (vulgo *pricevine*)", where the vernacular is English. At I.327–328, when he wants to explain the origin of the surname "Butler", and why Theobald Becket took this name, he says: "pincer-nam idiomate namque/ Denotat Angligenum Butler." Similarly, at I.390, when he wants to evoke the actual title of the Tipperary Liberty, "the County Palatine" he writes "(Vulgo Palatini vocitant comitatus honorem)", though here the term had wider currency in Europe. In book five, a rushed composition, my collaborator and I think, O'Meara is less careful. Twice (V.113 and V.137) the singular honour paid to Ormond in the Queen's appointment of him as a Knight of the Garter is mentioned thus: "insignitus/insignitur honore Garterij." On the title-page, this honour is called "periscelidos ordinis", an elegant (if effeminate!) Graecism, as opposed to the blatant Anglicism in book five, for which, unusually, the author does not even stop to apologise.

O'Meara takes pains, as most of these examples show, to communicate the meaning of any "vulgar" – that is in this case English – words to an audience which he assumes may not be conversant with the language. But

⁷ Hammerstein 1971 and 1992.

⁸ O'Connor 2004. Harris & Sidwell 2009, 7–8.

⁹ *Ormonius* A2 i: "Cumque decus omne meum meorumque, quantum cumque sit, ab *Amplitudinis tuae* illustriumque tuorum Maiorum benignitate acceptum obliuisci nequirem" (And since I could not forget that my whole standing, and that of my family, little as it may be, was received through the benignity of your Greatness and that of your glorious ancestors).

¹⁰ For details see Barry 2004.

there are even stronger signs also of this poet's desire to have his Latin show reflexes of the Irish language which had been his native tongue. In the rest of my paper, then, I am going to examine his use of this vernacular and ask whether his treatment is the same as that of English and if not, why not.

O'Meara, it is generally held, came from a Gaelic bardic family.¹¹ The treatment of Hibernia at the beginning of *Ormonius* book two as a female dream vision, an *Aisling*, draws on a motif typical of the Irish literary tradition, but one which is also made fully understandable within the classical tradition by the use of Morpheus, the shape-shifting god, to impersonate her. The coincidence that it is *Hibernia*, however, makes it pretty clear that O'Meara knew the Irish material and wished at least the Irish-speaking members of his ideal audience to catch the cross-reference. The poem I quoted earlier, *Eolach mé ar mheirge an iarla*, is an example of the *Cath Réim*, or 'military career', genre. It is possible to argue that *Ormonius* may reasonably be regarded as a very large example of this type of Irish writing. This view may still be held, despite the fact that more detailed analysis of the sources of the poem's language over the intervening period incline me to think that a more immediate concern (and more immediately accessible to the Latinate target audience) was imitation of Silius Italicus' *Punica*, the one ancient epic where a single hero (Scipio) defeats the nearly-successful attempts to overthrow the Roman empire of Hannibal, a parallel often evoked in language and imagery by O'Meara.¹² More specifically, O'Meara's ability – and desire – to use Irish is evidenced in the *Argumentum* to book two, where he first gives a Latin translation of a place-name "apud Campanae villam" and immediately follows it with the explanation "(Hybernice *baille in chluig*"). The Irish word *baille* (very often encountered today in names like Ballyferriter, Ballymaloe, and Ballykissangel) is perfectly translated by *villa*, a small settlement. *In chluig* is the genitive form of the word for 'bell' ('clog' in Modern Irish), which again is accurately translated by the Latin genitive *Campanae*.

¹¹ Barry 2004.

¹² Scipio was in O'Meara's mind as he composed the prefatory letter to Earl Thomas (*Ormonius* A2), but there are also several instances of an implied or explicit comparison between Ormond and Scipio, and his adversaries and Hannibal embedded in the poem, often in clear imitation of Silius' language. See II.602–603 (a line from Silius' description of Hannibal applied to O'Neill); III.100–104 (Mercury as Herimon, ancestor of the MacDonnells, using language from contexts in Silius Italicus where Carthaginians are involved); IV.2–4 (Ormond surpassing Scipio, a deliberate echo of Silius Italicus 17.651–2); IV.261–267, 304–305 (James FitzMaurice as Hannibal). But the modelling is not consistent: see II.587–588, where Ormond's daring advance against O'Neill is compared to that of Hannibal crossing the Alps, and III.11–16, where the defections of O'Neill's allies to Ormond and the crown are imaged in terms of the defection of *Rome's* allies to *Hannibal* after Cannae.

In fact, it is in O'Meara's treatment of place-names that the Irish language comes most to the fore in *Ormonius*. Perhaps, you will say, that is not surprising, given that the last four books of the poem are set in Ireland. But what O'Meara does in the example just cited, and many times elsewhere, far exceeds what would be necessary simply to communicate *where* a place is located: you can just give the name and, if necessary, a mileage from some other place. Take, for example, II.69–70: “Millia ter distat *Limbrici* quatuor urbe, *Maghagher* in Boream.” A name is in some ways just a name, however foreign it may be. O'Meara, however, often seems bent on giving to the non-Gaelic speaking reader at least in some instances a sense of what these strange-sounding names might actually mean. So in my first example, the name *Baille in chluig* would have been as good as *Maghagher*, since immediately afterwards in the *Argumentum* we read: “locum circa novem miliaria distantem Eoum versus a Dungennain prima et praecipua Tironiae sede.” Perhaps the only reason it differs is that at II.270–273, the Irish name is *not* given (“indigenis Campanae villa vocatur”). But this does not explain instances where both the Irish name and its Latin translation are given.

Let me examine two instances of this tendency. The first is found in the *Argumentum* to book three: “Ormonius in Glinarmum sive armorum vallem...aquilas ducit.” Unlike with *baille in chluig*, however, both the name Glenarm and its direct translation appear in the poem's text. At III.242–244, O'Meara writes: “Est locus Ultoniam Borealia ad aequora iungens,/ Nomine Glinarmus; vox armis valleque ducta,/ Armorum Hyberno signans idiomate vallem.” This is perhaps the clearest instance of a real desire to communicate the details of a place-name's etymology. The *glen* element is of course familiar to English speakers from the Scots word, or should I say, the Gaelic and Gaelic word *gleann* (as it is spelt nowadays). *Arm* is Irish for ‘weapon’. Both parts of the word would have been instantly recognised by a native English speaker in 1615, so the assertion that the place-name is specifically an *Irish* one is especially significant here. The second occurs in book five. This time, although the name *Monro* occurs in the *Argumentum*, it is without its translation. In the poem, however, at V.810, we read “Arma ad Sradbalianam rursus Rubramque paludem” and a marginal note informs us that “Rubra palus” is *Manro*. The Irish name appears to have been *móin rua*, where *móin* means ‘peat’, or ‘bog’ and *rua* means ‘red’. The reason for this translation may, of course, be purely aesthetic, though it doesn't seem likely to have anything to do with problems of versification: O'Meara regularly uses Irish names in a variety of metrical shapes, depending upon his needs at the time, and he could easily have written “Manroque paludem”, had he only wished to stress the nature of the place. This chimes in, however, with two other marginal translations, one of an Irish name and one of its Latin

equivalent into English. At V.506–507, in the aftermath of a disastrous defeat inflicted on the Viceroy Bagnal by the Earl of Tyrone, we read: “Angligenum at postquam stagnarunt sanguine ripae/ Duffavonae.” In the margin, *Duffavonae* is glossed ‘Blackwater’. It is, in fact, composed of the Irish words *dubh* ‘black’ and *abhainn* ‘river’. Earlier, when the battle is described, at V.482–483, O’Meara had written: “confinia nigri/ Amnis at ut tetigit” and the marginal note on “nigri Amnis” also reads ‘Blackwater’. One is beginning to get the impression that for O’Meara both his linguistic learning *and* the sounds of Irish are important.

My final set of examples perhaps underlines the last point further. For there are times when O’Meara appears to forget that his target audience will probably not know Irish (though there may be another plausible explanation which I shall essay at the end). On these occasions, he offers – in true Alexandrian fashion, presumably in imitation of Vergil – a description of a place which, though it is not presented as a translation, nonetheless alludes to the underlying meaning for those who do know Irish. The clearest instance occurs again in respect of a river. At IV.196–197, O’Meara writes: “Deciae pars ultima ab ortu/Aumori madefit spatiosi fluminis undis.” (The westernmost part of the Decies (*Deise*) is watered by the streams *of a broad river*). The name *Aumor* is made up of the Irish words *abhainn* ‘river’ and *mór* ‘big, large’. The Latin description “spatiosi fluminis” actually translates *Aumori* from Irish, but without any indication that this *is* a translation. A similar trope can be observed at III.488–490, a description of the location of Carrickfergus (famous from the Irish folk song “... I wish I were in Carrickfergus...”): “Alta Carigfergi rupes: sic rege vocata/ Scotorum a primo, fluctuanti illo aequare merse/ Fergusio.” Now the explanation of the name focuses here upon the second part, the Irish king Fergus, who was drowned in the sea. But “alta...rupes”, as well as describing the site of the citadel, also alludes to the etymology of the first half of the name: *carraig* is the Irish for ‘rock’. My last example takes me into troubled waters. It is a passage I have already alluded to earlier, where I was dealing with the use of locational devices rather than translation. At II.69–70 we read: “Millia ter distat Limbrici quatuor urbe, Maghagher in Boream.” This is then followed, however, by a parenthesis: “faecundo gramine campus/ Dives.” Now there is no doubt that the first element of this place-name *magh* means ‘plain’ in Irish, and that *campus* therefore translates it (without alluding to the fact of translation). Given the other examples I have cited, this really should mean that “faecundo gramine” translates the second element –*agher*, perhaps representing a lenited form of *féar* ‘grass’. However, my colleague Pádraig Ó Riain, the doyen of Irish place-names, tells me this is impossible. I do, chastened, nonetheless still wonder whether our passage is not evidence that

O'Meara *thought* that *Maghagher* meant 'grassy plain', a false etymology, then, but one he may have expected *some* readers to spot – unless, that it his linguistic games are merely for his own delectation.

This brings me back to my main question. Does O'Meara use the English and Irish vernaculars differently? I think the answer to that is "yes". While he does translate English names into Latin, and vice-versa, he does not so far as I can tell offer unmarked calques of the sort I have just been dealing with in Irish. There does, as I've suggested, appear to be some sense of O'Meara's enjoyment of being learned in three languages. But in respect of the unmarked calques, it may perhaps be something more. For if he *did* in fact expect some of his audience to spot these, they can only have come from two types of reader: either Irish Gaelic speakers or Scottish Gaelic speakers who were learned in Latin. I am flying a kite here, but David Edwards and I have recently been musing much upon the projected audience for *Ormonius* and the poem's ideological purpose. His view, as an historian, is that Ormond, through O'Meara, was attempting to reclaim the credit owed to him for his part in the Nine Years War, which by the time the poet sat down to write could be seen as having brought the definitive defeat of Gaelic aspirations, the crux coming at Kinsale in 1601, a battle which the already blind Ormond was involved in planning. Hence, the potential addressees whose linguistic apparatus would allow them to read O'Meara's calques might be seen as (1) on the Irish side, any remaining Gaelic lords still loyal to the English crown, (2) on the Scottish side, the group of Scottish nobles close to King James, who, though he was the first of England, was Scottish and the sixth of his ilk in Scotland. The second group would clearly have been more influential at this time, and in view of the over-emphasis (David Edwards' view) upon the MacDonnells and the inclusion of long accounts of otherwise unheard of campaigns against the "Hebrid-eans", and the importance of Scottish issues after 1609, it is not entirely fantastic. But perhaps a few calques are too little evidence on which to build such an ideological reading?

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