‘Kiss Me, I’m Ireland’ – An Examination of the *Aisling* genre in the work of three Irish poets

Danielle Stirling
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St Francis Xavier University

Through the 1600s well into the 1700s, Irish society experienced a number of changes - from the perspective of most of the upper class, changes for the worse. With the flight of these upper classes or the appropriation of their wealth by the English, the bardic class gradually lost their patrons and eventually could no longer persist as they had - a class of educated poets, artists and self-styled guardians of history and genealogy - and had to turn to other means to survive. Hopes for the old social hierarchy to return remained, expressed in their poetry. This desire for the good old days - the backwards look - is often expressed in Irish bardic and post-bardic poetry in terms of the hope for the future, prophesying a return to the old ways. This is most obvious in the aisling genre of poetry, in which Ireland is represented as an otherworldly woman weeping for her misfortunes, awaiting her savior. From earliest times in Ireland, the notion of the whole country (in the guise of a queen figure) being united with a redeemer king had always been a vague aspiration, and the king's coming had been endlessly foretold (O Tuama 130). The genre has its roots in prophetic and love poetry, but it was only in the 17th century that these two were joined to form the political aisling (Mahon 251). As a means of comparing and contrasting the past and present - with a bias in favor of the past, of course - the aisling was extremely effective. The dream-woman, as the past, held immense appeal. Her attractiveness was due partly to physical attractiveness and sex appeal, which paved the way to draw in the seer's sympathy and allegiance to her (Leerssen 270). In this paper, I will analyze three poems selected from the period 1600-1800, focusing on the symbolic representation of Ireland as a woman. The poems will be analyzed within their historical context as well as how this applies to the theme of the backwards look. The three selections are Daibhi O Bruadair's O Lady of the Plaited Tresses, Aogan O Rathaille's Mac an Cheannai, and Eoghan Rua O Suilleabhain's Ceo Draiochta.

Born ca. 1630 and living into the late seventeenth century, Daibhi O Bruadair received his training in one of the bardic schools, and for most of his career - into the 1670s - he was supported by various patrons (Welch). The time in which he lived in made him a witness to, and for the most part the victim of, the upheavals of the seventeenth century (Leerssen 251), which would have given him a clear perspective on the decline of the upper class and a certainty that he was in a better position in the past. The poet gives the past and present up for comparison in O Lady of the Plaited Tresses (MacEarlan 67), a poem in which he addresses the present-day Ireland, portrayed as a woman, to accuse her of betrayal. Her abandonment of her past "rightful" lovers, all Irish heroes and kings, is shown as a foolish, unworthy choice because it denies the greatness of the past and those who have the knowledge of it, i.e. the poets.

Unlike the other two poems to be dealt with in this paper, Daibhi O Bruadair's O Lady of the Plaited Tresses does not, strictly speaking, fit into the political aisling genre, as there is no reference in the text to meeting in a vision with the woman addressed in the poem. It does, however, echo the other four motifs of standard aisling genre, as described by Brendan O Buachalla:

-Description of the vision-woman
-Conversation (in which the poet interrogates the woman)
-The naming (in which she reveals herself to be Ireland)
-The prophecy

(qtd. in Mahon 252)

The poem is scattered with allusions to the woman's physical features, such as her hair and eyes, and the conversation/interrogation consists of the poet asking her the reasons for her treachery. Her identification as Ireland comes from the description of her as being overrun by "fluffy Saxons". Finally, the prophecy can be seen as having already come to be; Ireland has been humbled by God for her "lustful desires", predicted by the poet himself. While not an aisling, the poem makes use of similiar motifs, making it sufficiently similiar to Mac an Cheannai and Ceo Draiochta to make an adequate basis for comparison.

The poems opens with a reference to physical attributes, so that the first thing the reader is made aware of is the woman's attractiveness. The following lines betray these expectations.

> O lady of the plaited tresses thickly curling,
> Who hast consented to concupiscence deceitful,
> The guiding star thou hast become of public harlots,
> Although thou art advanced in years, thou aged matron.
> Perversely thou, it seems to me, hast here abandoned
> All the gentle progeny of Niul the fearless;
> Thou, their fair-locked love, of brightest white-walled mansions
> Beneath the clouded dome Paradise's palace.

Rather than having the virtues to match her beauty, she is the exact opposite; instead of being a queen among queens, she is a queen among harlots, and therefore the lowest of the low. She has chosen to allow herself to be seduced by the foreigners. By inviting their attentions, she loses her honour. Disdain for the uncouth was a favorite theme of O Bruadair's, expressed pointedly in his poem O it's best be a total boor (O Tuama 113). Leerssen notes that "when he lashes out against boors and churls, he does not (and need not) specify whether these are Gaelic or English"(252). This same idea is present in O Lady of the Plaited Tresses. O Bruadair is more than willing to reproach Ireland for abasing herself by allowing her land to be overrun by foreigners, and to turn her back on kinship and hospitality.

> What can the reason be, O stately blue-eyed matron
> Why thou, with treachery, hast Banbha's blood forsaken,
> After all the jealous care by Eibhear Fionn exerted
> To Guard and keep thee safe from foreign hordes ferocious?
> By the relentless daring of his active valour
> He worsted the renowned and free-born son of Cearmad
> Yet we must now perforce live on in languor gloomy
> With wistful eyes still gazing on thy curling ringlets.

She rejects the protection offered to her by Eibhear Fionn, ungratefully refusing the care taken by these ancient heroes to protect her and thereby betraying her own blood and flesh. In spite of his "jealous care," she removes herself from her rightful husband, making herself unattainable and yet not undesirable. This forces her "worthier" suitors to gaze on her only from a distance, perhaps of time rather than space. That her beauty can still be perceived and yet is untouchable drives the poet to madness:

> O spouse of Lughaidh, binder tight of foes in fetters,
> How perverse a cause is this of maddening frenzy!
> Or can thine eyes without regret behold those heroes
> To whom thou once didst yield thy loyal, helpful heart's love?--
> First of all, the strong and valiant son of Cumhall,
> Fionn, the Fenian chief, along with Cu and Cairbre,
> Youthful Feidhlim, Laeghaire, Conn the hundred-fighter,

Dragonlike and stern, whose foot ne'er knew retreating.

He accuses Ireland of having turned from loving to heartless, having abandoned the past and looking back on it without regret, unthinkable to O Bruadair. By making so many references to the kings of the past, O Bruadair is creating a contrast between what is correct and what is inappropriate, revealing the reason why the past is infinitely preferable to the current state of affairs. He defines this clearly by the use of the pathetic fallacy, blurring the line between the humanity and natural elements attributed to Ireland.

It pains my breast to see her fertile, sloping mantle,
Trodden, trampled down by droves of fluffy Saxons,
Those lands, which proudly swelled with dewdrops brightly dazzling,
While strains of music sounded in the cloudy mansions,
Her grassy meadows fair, adorned with branching thickets,
Without defect or flaw beside the river-harbours;
Therefore is my tear constrained to flow, O stately darling,
Calm and condescending, yet so false and fickle.

The land is ravaged and stripped by invaders, seemingly as a direct consequence of Ireland's abandonment of her proper suitors. The contrast between the current state of the land and its past bounty is made clear by the poet's description of Ireland's land at its peak with, significantly, "music sounded in the cloudy mansions," a reference to the poet's own status when supported by a wealthy patron. The reason for his fall in status is placed squarely on Ireland herself, and is explained by the lack of value and even open contempt for Irish poetry by the English (Repossessions 121). Their persecution meant that there was less support for O Bruadair from patrons, and eventually less respect and even contempt from the common people, as well. O Bruadair's own people, in his view, ought to know better. He condemns Ireland - and therefore the Irish - in his poetry, and provides the reason why.

God hath now humbled, methinks, to the dust in exhaustion and pain
The spouse of the heart-secret love of Fionntann and Irial Faidh,
Who away from the races of Fal hath diverted her lustful desires,
She, the true love of just Lughaidh, the son of the righteous MacNiadh,

Ireland suffers the due punishment for her unfaithfulness: her "lustful desires" have degraded her, placing her social status at the lowest it can be, in the poet's eyes. That the poem finishes with another reminder about the rightful rulers of Ireland is significant to a more self-centered backwards look. Throughout the poem, O Bruadair lists proper spouses for Ireland, not only to provide a contrast to the current rulers but possibly as a means to display his own knowledge of Irish history. By refusing to acknowledge the poet's learning and looking on it without regret, Ireland has betrayed the poet himself, and therefore his change in status can be blamed on her. Without the poets' stewardship of her history, she is "humbled... to the dust". O Bruadair's backwards look in O Lady of the Plaited Tresses consists of a look towards the former status of the poets as a learned class, using Ireland's degradation since abandoning them as a measure of how far they have fallen because of Ireland's betrayal.

There is no evidence that Aogan O Rathaille (ca. 1675 - 1729) attended a bardic school, unlike O Bruadair, but being from a fairly well-off family with ties to the traditional poetic class he received a very good education in both Irish and continental material (O Tuama 139, Repossessions 101-3). The decline of the poetic class was already well under way, and O Rathaille was not unaffected; by the time of his death, he was "an impoverished undertenant, owner of one cow"(Repossessions 115). His aisling poem

Mac an Cheannai is a vision of the harsh reality he knew well, as opposed to a prophecy of the glorious past's return - in this sense it is almost an anti-aisling. However, otherwise it follows O Buachalla's political aisling formula. Like O Lady of the Plaited Tresses, the poem ends with the fulfillment of a prophecy, of a sort, and in doing so expresses the despair felt at the death of hope for help from Spain for the Jacobite cause (O Tuama 155). Stricken by weariness, the poet does not receive his vision in a beautiful outdoor setting, but in his bed:

> A bitter vision I beheld
> in bed as I lay weary:
> a maiden mild whose name was Eire
> coming toward me riding,
> with eyes of green hair curled and thick,
> fair her waist and brows,
> declaring he was on his way
> - her loved one *Mac an Cheannai.*

As a place to receive dream-visions, a bed is of course an obvious choice, and not only because it is a sleeping place. In a less narrow context, it can be a marriage bed or a death bed. Common object though it may be, the possibility of its inclusion in these opposing situations make it a liminal setting - between sleep and waking, between life and death - ideal for contact with the Otherworld and the beginning of a vision. The liminal nature of the setting and the poet's emotional turmoil are both typical features of aisling poetry (Leerssen 272). According to Leerssen, "the most basic statement of an aisling concerns the fact that the poet has seen a vision.... It marks the shift from reality (in which a poet presents a poem to an audience) into fiction (in which supernatural females and their prophecies can be seen and heard)"(--- 272). In this case, the poet's vision takes place from his bed - a sickbed, even a deathbed, which foreshadows the fate of the vision-woman that is to come. Initially, she is presented as the typical beautiful woman, but rather than engage in not-so-witty banter inquiring if she is a goddess, etc., O Rathaille states plainly that she is Eire and that her troubles come from the "aliens" and her lack of a proper king, and therefore does not have to coax her into telling her story.

> Her mouth so sweet, her voice so mild,
> I love the maiden dearly,
> wife to Brian, acclaimed of heroes
> - her troubles are my ruin!
> Crushed cruelly under alien flails
> my fair-haired slim kinswoman:
> she's a dried branch, that pleasant queen,
> till he come, her *Mac an Cheannai*

She is the former wife to Irish heroes and kings, an old motif referring to the symbolic marriage of the king to the land (Repossessions 130). This motif is further reinforced by the poet's referring to her as "a dried branch". If Eire is a withered branch, then she can no longer produce new growth or perpetuate the line until her Mac an Cheannai comes to her. This image of a withered branch is repeated throughout the poem as part of its structure as being in song metre, along with the poet's declaration that the maiden's troubles are the cause of his own ruin. Critics differ on the point of whether the poet sees his ruin as being purely concerned with his own decline in status or that of the Irish in general. Leerssen, for example, argues that he perceived the decline mainly as a class upheaval but states that some of his poetry briefly held nationalistic themes (252, 260). The following verses seem to indicate that at least a slight nationalistic bent.

Hundreds hurt for love of her
- her smooth skin - in soft passion:
kingly children, sons of Mile,
champions, wrathful dragons.
Her face, her countenance is dead,
in weariness declining,
and nowhere near is there relief
till he come, her *Mac an Cheannai.*

A fearful tale, by her account
- her weakness my heart's ruin!
She, musicless and weeping tears,
her faint troops leaderless;
no meat or game; she suffers much
- a scrap for every dog;
wasted, weak, with mourning eyes,
till he come, her *Mac an Cheannai.*

The sweet mild woman spoke again:
her former kings being fallen
- Conn and Art of violent reigns
and deadly hands in combat;
strong Criomthainn home with hostages,
Luighdheach Mac Cein the sturdy -
dried branch she'll stay, with no man lie,
till he come, her *Mac an Cheannai.*

Eire's beauty and strength is declining for lack of her beloved, the waiting itself wearing her away. The lack of music might indicate a sadness inexpressible by music, or more likely is representative of the loss of Irish culture. Poverty is widespread, if there is not enough to properly feed the dogs, and the mention of leaderless troops indicates a consciousness of others dedicated to Eire's cause, and not only a particular class, though Eire's inability to defend herself is again stated as the poet's ruin. By mentioning these misfortunes, O Rathaille is using the present state to define the past. If the poverty and lack of leadership is significant enough to comment on, then it can not have always been present. . It is by recalling the greatness of the past that the bleakness of the current situation is made clear. The two are placed in contrast by Eire's gazing out to sea, to the rightful king's coming, and to the banishment of her "dappled Friars", representing the Catholic faith.

Her eye looks South day after day
to the shore for ships arriving,
to sea Southeast she gazes long
(her troubles are my grief!)
and a Westward eye, with hope in God,
o'er wild and sandy billows
- defeated, lifeless, powerless,
till he come, her *Mac an Cheannai.*

Her dappled Friars are overseas,
those droves that she held dear;
no welcome, no regard or love,
for her friends in any quarter.
Their cheeks are wet; no ease or sleep;
dressed in black, for sorrow

- dried branch she'll stay, with no man lie,
till he come, her *Mac an Cheannai.*

All these Friars mourn with her, despite being exiled. The fact that they are dressed in black, as in mourning, suggests that they have foreknowledge of what is to become of Eire, as if she is dead already and is unaware of it yet. This proves to be the case in the last verse:

I told her, when I heard her tale,
in a whisper, he was dead,
that he had found death up in Spain,
that no one heard her plaint.
She heard my voice beside her;
her body shook; she shrieked;
her soul departed in a leap.
Alas, that woman lifeless.

Upon learning that her hero is dead, the hope sustaining her vanishes, and she dies; her fate is so closely intertwined with his that while the cause lived, though waning, she survived, but the instant she was made aware of his death, she despairs and dies. In Sean O Tuama's introduction to Mac an Cheannai, he states that this poem may have been O Rathaille's last aisling (155). If that is the case, Mac an Cheannai marks a final disillusionment along with the death of hope for help from Spain.

O Rathaille's interests in the Jacobite cause were quite substantial. He was "probably was the last of our poets to enjoy in any appreciable measure the old poetic privileges"(Repossessions 118), and so he, personally, had much to lose by the erosion of the old social hierarchy. Critics seem to differ only slightly on the extent to which his attention to these issues was motivated by personal or nationalistic concerns. It would be naive to argue that it is solely one or the other, as both are present in some measure. Leerssen argues that O Rathaille's "personal plight is never treated in absolute terms but as the subordinate part of a wider disruption", registering social upheaval through his personal plight rather than in it (Leerssen 267). Mac an Cheannai is an ideal example of this outlook. O Rathaille's repetition of the idea that Ireland's troubles are the cause of his ruin and that he empathizes with her pain show that he marks his own woes as being only a tithe of those suffered by Eire. By using this waning, withering personification of Ireland as spokeswoman for the Jacobite cause, O Rathaille calls to mind both the past and present conditions in Ireland concerning the social structure, and in doing so presents a realistic rather than overly glorified view of both.

Eoghan Rua O Suilleabhain's poem differs from the other two dealt with in this paper on two counts. Firstly, it is the only example selected that completely fits the pattern for an aisling poem as set out by Brendan O'Buachalla. Secondly, O Suilleabhain was not writing in a time that saw any particular upheavals to match those witnessed by O Bruadair and O Rathaille. At most, he was witness to the echo of the end of the bardic order - he never made a living as a poet sustained by patronage, and his position was not accorded the same amount of respect as bardic poets had previously taken as their due; however, he did retain some measure of knowledge as to the former position of poets, expressing in his poetry a reluctance to take up manual labour as opposed to more learned pursuits (Repossessions 128). While O Suilleabhain was capable of writing lyrical verse, he was also known for his satire (Welch). The bathetic image of Ireland in distress in Ceo Draiochta seems to border on the satiric, looking back at a time when the return of "our

Stuart" was more than just wishful thinking and remained a possibility. O Suilleabhain was born in 1748, only a few years after of the defeat at Culloden in 1745, after which the coming of a Stuart prince was unlikely (Repossessions 130), and yet in Ceo Draiochta, the poet and the vision-woman are still waiting.

Through the deep night a magic mist led me
like a simpleton roaming the land,
no friends of my bosom beside me,
an outcast in places unknown.
I stretched out dejected and tearful
in a nut-sheltered wood all alone
and prayed to the bright King of Glory
with 'Mercy!' alone on my lips.

My heart, I declare, full of turmoil
in that wood with no human sound nigh,
the thrush's sweet voice the sole pleasure,
ever singing its tunes on each bough.
Then a noble sidh-girl sat beside me
like a saint in her figure and form:
in her countenance roses contended
with white - and I know not which lost.

Though lost to myself till that moment,
with love for the lady I throbbed
and I found myself filled with great pleasure
that she was directed my way.
How it fell, I write out in these verses
- how I let my lips speak unrestrained,
the sweet things that I told the fair maiden
as we stretched on the green mountain-slope:

He is compelled to tell of the encounter, implying that there is more to the vision than meets the eye. He recognizes the dangers inherent in the sidh-girl, comparing her to mythological figures who brought ruin to their suitors. In these questions, we can recall O Bruadair's O Lady of the Plaited Tresses, who saw Ireland's invasion as being her own fault, having been invited by her. However, the sidh-girl of O Suilleabhain's invention is quick to deny that this is the case.

"Are you, languid-eyed lady who pierced me
with love for your face and your form,
the Fair-One caused hordes to be slaughtered
as they write in the Battle of Troy?
Or the mild royal girl who let languish
the chief of Boru and his troop?
Or the queen who decreed that the great prince
from Howth follow far in pursuit?"

Delicious, sweet, tender, she answered,
ever shedding tears down in her pain:
"I am none of those women you speak of,
and I see that you don't know my clan.
I'm the bride wed in bliss for a season
- under right royal rule - to the King
over Caiseal of Conn and of Eoghan
who ruled undisputed o'er Fodla.

"Gloomy my state, sad and mournful,
by horned tyrants daily devoured,
and heavy oppressed by grim blackguards
while my prince is set sailing abroad.
I look to the great Son of Glory
to send my lion back to his sway
in his strong native towns, in good order,
to flay the swarth goats with his blades."

She is identified and defined by the lack of her proper king, speaking of him as if he may yet return to put everything in order. The blame for her fall is placed with the foreign "horned tyrants" and "grim blackguards". Her mention of previous kings of Ireland recalls the desire for days past to return. However, because her wish is what defines her, and because of its near-anachronism, it renders the vision-woman herself into a ghost of the beautiful Ireland of bygone days, unchanged in death. The poet is easily seduced by the beauty of this ghost, claiming to be willing to fight for her.

"Mild, golden-haired, courteous fair lady,
of true royal blood, and no lie,
I mourn for your plight among blackguards,
sad and joyless, dark under a pall.
If your King to his strong native mansions
the Son of Glory should send, in His aid,
those swarth goats - swift, freely and willing -
with shot I would joyfully flay!"

"If our Stuart returned o'er the ocean
to the lands of Inis Ailge in full course
with a fleet of Louis' men, and the Spaniard's,
by dint of joy truly I'd be
on a prancing steed of swift mettle
ever sluicing them out with much shot
- after which I'd not injure my spirit
standing guard for the rest of my life."

In this Otherworldly vision, it seems the possibility of the Stuart's return is still alive, and the poet is willing to take up arms for the cause. The extent to which he personally is invested in it seems to stem entirely from the love of the sidh-girl, not from a desire to regain status which, as a schoolmaster (O Tuama 183), he would not have had.

While the most basic trait of an aisling is that it is a vision, and to properly be immersed in it the reader must accept that it takes place in an Otherworldly setting (Leerssen 272), Ceo Draiochta contains not only a vision but an illusion *within* the vision. An additional suspension of disbelief is required; in order to take the poet's profession of love for Ireland and willingness to guard her seriously, the reader must take part in the idea that the hope for reviving her exists outside the vision, or else that the Ireland of the past can only exist as a dream, frozen in time in a perpetual state of mingled hope and mourning.

The period 1600-1800 in Ireland saw many changes brought about in Irish society. Through analyzing these selected poetic visions of Ireland from different points within this period, with a focus on the presence of the backwards look, a changing perception of the past is apparent. The aspects of the past represented in each poem appear to be due partly to the poets' own personal opinions rather than adherence to convention, and partly a reflection of the events occurring during the time the poems were written and the undercurrents these provoked. The use of the representation of Ireland as a woman in the

backwards look was efficient in portraying the above because of the functions ascribed to them. Love of and loyalty to Ireland could easily be transferred to a female representation of the country, whether Ireland is defined in the context of its people or only the land. In O Bruadair and O Rathaille's poems, Ireland is aging and waning, inferring her beauty in youth, while in O Suilleabhain's version, Ireland is younger and unblemished. Considering only the contents of these selections, the differing visions of Ireland seem to imply that the more distant the past, the more appeal it has, however artificial it is.

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