Costuming Characters in Early Medieval Irish Literature

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ABSTRACT

Clothing in early medieval Irish literature can often serve as a representation of a character’s wealth and status. However, this paper asserts that the storytellers of these texts costume characters in order to reflect more nuanced layers of their identity. By examining the ways in which clothing is described in Irish tales from the Mythological Cycle and the Ulster Cycle, as well as the legal text “Cáin larraith,” this paper argues that storytellers use garments to indicate a character’s geographical roots and occupation, reinforce customs and strengthen social bonds, comment on gender roles of aristocratic women, and serve as a characterization device. By analyzing how attire is portrayed in these texts, one can glean how this society may have used clothing to define identity beyond socioeconomic class.

Early medieval Irish literature regularly employs detailed descriptions of nobles and heroes dressed in lavish clothing, which are often interpreted as indicators of their wealth and position in society. However, clothing is more than merely a class marker; storytellers use garments to display more complex dimensions of the wearer’s societal identity and function in the story. In narratives from the Mythological Cycle, “Togail Bruidhe Da Derga” and “Suídigud Tellach Temra,” the storyteller uses a character’s dress to represent his or her geographical roots and vocation. Tales from the Ulster Cycle, including “Táin Bó Fráich,” “Toruigheacht Gruaidhe Griansholus,” and “The Wooing of Emer by Cú Chulainn,” demonstrate how garments can reinforce social customs and fulfill relational obligations. Wooing stories such as “Altram Tige Dá Medar” and “The Wooing of Etain,” as well as the legal text “Cáin larraith,” describe how embroidery confirms aristocratic prerogatives for women. The storyteller of “Tochmarc Becfhola” also uses clothing to further character development. In early medieval Irish literature, storytellers deliberately costume characters not only to indicate their social status, but also to reveal other attributes of their identity to a contemporary audience who understood their significance. Thus, in analyzing how dress adds nuance to a character’s portrayal, one can investigate how early medieval Irish society defined and perceived identity.

In the scholarly debate regarding the function of costume in early medieval Irish literature and society, many have described clothing as a mere status symbol. In her article, “Dress and Accessories in the Early Irish Tale ‘The Wooing Of Becfhola’,” Niamh Whitfield describes the clothing in “Tochmarc Becfhola” as conveying a “clear message” regarding the characters’ “wealth and status” (3). Likewise, in her book, Dress in Ireland, Mairead Dunlevy observes that early Irish literature refers to clothing “principally as an indicator of the status of the wearer,” since “wealth dictated dress styles as well as fabrics” (22-25). One’s status and wealth is reflected in the type, quality, and quantity of fabric used in one’s garments, as well as their “colour and decoration” (Dunlevy 40-59). Elizabeth Coatswort and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, in Medieval Textiles of the British Isles, AD 450-1100: An Annotated Bibliography, have also described textiles as a “signifier of wealth and status” (19). While these prominent scholars have primarily viewed and interpreted clothing in early medieval Irish literature from an economic perspective, this paper investigates attire from a different lens: how storytellers costume characters to add layers of complexity to their identity.

Indeed, storytellers do often use clothing to reveal the wearer’s wealth and class in early medieval Irish narratives. In the heroic tale “Táin Bó Fráich,” as Fráich approaches the plain of Cruachan, his cohort boasts seven trumpeters with “shining tunics” and “many coloured garments” in a massive display of his wealth, to which the watchman declares, “there shall not come to them, a multitude, which is more beautiful, or which is more splendid,” affirming Fráich’s great prestige and influence (Heroic Romances of Ireland). In the epic Táin Bó Cúailnge, when Medb and Aíilll disagree on who is wealthier, they bring out all of their “purple, blue, black, green, and yellow, plain grey and many-coloured, yellow-brown, checked and striped” cloth in order to see who owns more (52). Possessing a larger quantity and variety of textiles in many colors signifies one’s superior economic status; thus, when one displays one’s cloth, one is flaunting one’s wealth and standing in society. In the wooing story “Toruigheacht Gruaidhe Griansholus,” when Laoi tells Cúchulainn to “don thy valourous apparel” in preparation for battle, Cúchulainn puts on a “white, delicately-soft satin” shirt, a “gold-bordered tunic of orange silk,” two blue-green silk buskins, “seven and twenty” waxed shirts, and a brown doublet of the leather of “seven oxhides,” adorned with “brilliant shining gems” (45). Precious textiles and gemstones are prevalent even in garments as functional as armor; even in battle, one is expected to exhibit one’s wealth and status. Outfitting characters with lavish clothing in order to indicate their high position in society is a pervasive trope used by storytellers of early medieval Irish literature.
While clothing is commonly interpreted as indicating one’s status and prosperity, it is far too limiting to examine costume solely through this viewpoint. Storytellers can also use garments to specify the wearer or owner’s geographical origin and current occupation, two dimensions of a person’s identity other than wealth or social standing. The mythological tale “Suídghid Tellaich Temhra” describes the “many treasures, her satin, her serge, her silks, her cloths, her green spotted cloth” of the “eastern part in the east,” establishing a regional identity by highlighting the geographical specificity of the textiles (Best 149). Moreover, in the heroic tale “Togail Bruidne Da Derga,” when Fer Rogain hears about those wearing “three short black crows about them reaching to their elbows” with “long hoods...on the cows,” he concludes that they must be the “trio of Pictland, who went into exile from their country” (“Medieval Sourcebook”). A character’s dress can also help to identify his or her occupation: those with “three speckled mantles...three linen shirts with red insertion: three golden brooches in their mantles” are immediately identified by Fer Rogain as the “three poets” of the king (“Medieval Sourcebook”). Furthermore, in the wooing narrative “The Wooing of Emer by Cú Chulainn,” a man wears a distinctive garment that identifies him as a charioteer: a “shoulder-mantle with sleeves about him, with openings at his two elbows,” which would have given him greater range of motion when steering the chariot (72). In fact, in Dress in Ireland, Dunlevy states that charioteers, as well as soldiers and some workers, wore a “distinctive style of clothing” that would allow for “ease of movement” (21). The storytellers’ contemporary audience perceived how characters’ identities were framed and represented through dress by relying on prior knowledge of cultural associations between dress and region or occupation in this society. In turn, clothing can be used as a tool to communicate two facets of the character’s identity: regional roots and vocation.

Additionally, storytellers describe characters’ interactions with clothing in order to reflect implicit societal norms of mourning and gift-giving. Special dress is prescribed for mourning rituals; during the lament-cry on Cruachan in “Táin Bó Fráích,” there are “three linen shirts with red insertion: three golden brooches in their mantles” are immediately identified by Fer Rogain as the “three poets” of the king (“Medieval Sourcebook”). The storytellers’ contemporary audience perceived how characters’ identities were framed and represented through dress by relying on prior knowledge of cultural associations between dress and region or occupation in this society. In turn, clothing can be used as a tool to communicate two facets of the character’s identity: regional roots and vocation.

Specific interactions with clothing are intrinsically linked with gender within early medieval Irish literature and culture; the most notable example is embroidery, which is used by storytellers to emphasize the presence of a woman of high social status. Embroidery is considered one of the few appropriate activities for aristocratic women in this society, as it is decidedly decorative, not utilitarian: Old Irish Laws refer to the needle of the embroiderer as the “prerogative of high-ranking women,” or noblewomen, who generally do not work for profit (Whitfield, “Dress and Accessories” 9). Indeed, according to the law-text “Cáin Íarraith,” in contrast to the daughter of an ócaire, or a free-man, who focuses on learning to use the quern, the kneading trough, and the sieve, the daughter of the aire-tuíseo, or the “lord of precedence,” and the daughter of the king learn sewing, cloth-cutting, and embroidery (Ghrádaigh 93). As embroidery does not involve intensive manual labor, it is also viewed in this society as a form of leisure: “Altram Tige Dá Medar” describes the “merriment of the maidens at their slow embroidery,” presenting a prescriptive view of aristocratic women in which they derive pleasure from and find camaraderie in the shared activity (“The Fosterage of the House of the Two Pails”). Moreover, a woman who is skilled in this field is highly valued in this society: in “The Wooing of Etain,” Etain is praised as one who “surpassed all women in embroidery. Her eyes saw nothing that her hands could not embroider,” lauding her ability to display this feminine virtue (Heroic Romances of Ireland). As a noblewoman’s role is most prevalent in the domestic realm, embroidery is a proper form of feminine activity prescribed to her by this culture. Thus, a character’s skill in embroidery represents her influence, accomplishments, and value to society.

Furthermore, storytellers can outfit characters with royal garments to accentuate their key role in the scene. In “Togail Bruidne Da Derga,” King Eochaid Feidlech sees a woman washing who has a “curly and purple” mantle, “a beautiful cloak, and in the mantle silverly fringes arranged, and a brooch of fairest gold” (“Medieval Sourcebook”). A purple cloak and a golden brooch are considered marks of a king’s son in this society; indeed, taken together, they represent an “emblem of kingship” (Whitfield, “Dress and Accessories” 11). Therefore, by attributing this specific dress to a female
character, the storyteller clearly distinguishes her as one who is worthy of attention and who likely possesses great influence. As a matter of fact, she is Etain, the “loveliest” of all women, and King Eochaid immediately falls in love with her (“Heroic Sourcebook”). In the “The Wooing of Emer by Cú Chulainn,” a “dark sad man” wears similar royal regalia as Etain: a “beautiful purple five-folded tunic” with a “brooch of inlaid gold,” again indicating his significance without explicitly mentioning his name, occupation, or status (72). As purple is the color of “power,” it is thus the “most common” color that is worn by protagonists (Whitfield, “Aristocratic Display” 165-176). Correspondingly, the man wearing purple is revealed to be Cú Chulainn, the protagonist of the narrative and a heroic champion who has come to woo the beautiful Emer (“The Wooing of Emer by Cú Chulainn” 72). In these tales, the storyteller highlights the characters as the focal point of the scene by costuming them with purple garments, signaling the audience to pay attention to them.

In addition, characters’ interactions with clothing can provide insight into their disposition, development, and intentions. In the wooing narrative “Tochmarc Bechola,” Bechola, who is dissatisfied in her arranged marriage with Diarmait, uses her supposed need to retrieve “eight smocks with embroidery of gold, eight brooches fully set, and three diadems of gold” as a ruse for attempting to seduce the king’s foster-son, then eventually leaves with Flann, a fairy lover (Silva Gadelica). In “Toruigheacht Gruaidhe Griansholus,” after Cúchulainn’s victory over the Ga Bulga, fairy hosts “stripped him of his bloodstained, reddened tunics, and they clothed him in shining, full-beautiful garments,” transforming him.

Clothing, as described in early medieval Irish literature, is not monolithic in its purpose; indeed, it serves a more complex symbolic function than simply displaying one’s social status or wealth. A careful analysis of how storytellers costume characters reveals a multilayered use of clothing to delineate the characters’ societal role and narrative function. Storytellers can use garments to indicate the wearer’s geographic origin and occupation, reinforce social interactions and customs, and confirm the prerogative of aristocratic women. They can also describe clothing to highlight those who play key roles in a scene and to deepen characterization. These literary choices, in turn, provide insight into how this society defined identity. While it is uncertain how factual or reliable these sources are at describing early medieval Irish life as it was truly lived, they do reveal the storytellers’ values as depicted by how they costume their characters, and, by extension, the values of the culture.

Acknowledgements
Written for Sebastian Rider-Bezerr’s course HIST 207J: Medieval Britain.

References


