

Adomnán – Vanquisher of Binary Opposition: A Structural Analysis of the Miracles in the Second Book of Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*

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The immense amount of scholarship that surrounds the *Vita Columbae*¹ has predominantly focussed on historical interpretations of the text. These historical interpretations are united by a view of the text as primarily a source of information about the Gaelic world of Columba and above all as a vehicle of ‘information about the life of Colum Cille [Columba]’ himself.² This article attempts, through the introduction of literary theory, to lay the foundations of an alternative approach to the *Vita*, for while the historical approach is invaluable it can only be enriched and enlivened by complementary alternative approaches. One immediate consequence of viewing the text as literature is that the approach to the figure of Columba changes, moving away from a historical portrait to a view of him as a narrated character. This causes the temporal sphere of enquiry to leap forward from the sixth to the seventh century, for the text is no longer viewed as primarily a source of information about Columba and his world but instead is approached as a reflection of the world and culture of Adomnán.³ The degree of emphasis that I have already placed upon the cultural setting of the *Vita* should make it clear that the approach is not literary in a Piatigorskian manner.⁴ The purpose of this analysis is not to express my contemporary response to the text as a timeless work of art. The concern of the analysis is instead anthropological: it seeks to uncover the structure which lies underneath the narrative in order to learn something about the culture which conceived it.⁵ Thus,

¹ Henceforth referred to as simply the *Vita*.

² Thomson (1983:48).

³ Just as an examination of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* would tend to view the text as informative about Shakespeare and the Elizabethan world rather than about the historical figure of *Macbeth* and the world of eleventh century Scotland.

⁴ See Piatigorsky (1993) for a full discussion of this approach.

⁵ In the case of the *Vita* the culture which conceived it is historical and so this analysis is in essence a historical endeavour and therefore perhaps not such a radical departure from traditional analysis as may be first supposed.

the following essay commences by briefly exploring miracles of sustenance before moving on to a more detailed analysis of miracles of reintegration in which the political implications of the structure are fully explored. Finally the essay draws together the two groups to suggest the underlying consciousness of the whole book.

The repetitive elements readily apparent in the structure of the majority of the forty-four miracles of Book Two can be grouped into two main categories, miracles of sustenance and miracles of reintegration. Miracles of sustenance account for almost a third of the total miracles presented in the sample (see figure 1). The main group of these provide a simple structure involving transformation in the relationship of the underlying categories, one of which is always a source of sustenance of one sort or another (hence the thematic name).⁶ Thus, the basic underlying pattern is always a movement from $A - B$ to $A + B$ facilitated by C (see figure 1.1). A good example of this structure is to be found in *the miracle of the bitter fruit*.⁷

Figure 1: Miracles of sustenance

- Main Group

1 *wine from water*, 2. *Bitter fruit*, 3 *a late harvest*,
19 *fresh fish*, 21 *105 cattle*, 26 *wild boar*, 38 *milk skin*, 44 *rain to dry land*.

- Sub Group 1: *Removal of false sustenance*

11 *the Pictish well*, 16 *milk devil*, 17 *more milk*.

- Sub Group 2: *Desecration of fir flatheomon*

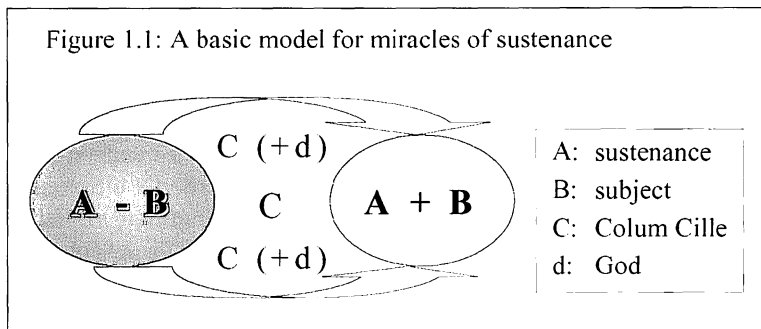
22 *evil destroyed*, 23 *Feradach's death*, 24 *attacking churches*, 25 *attacking women*.

This miracle takes place in Durrow where there is to be found a fruit bearing tree, but far from causing the people to rejoice, this tree causes them to complain, for the tree's fruit is always too bitter to be eaten. One day Columba visited the tree and found it full of a crop of bitter fruit. He blessed the tree in the name of God and a moment later the fruit was transformed so that it now tasted of a wonderful

⁶ Analysis of structure is best accompanied by suggestion of theme, as this acts as a guide to the structure through otherwise 'certain impasses' (Hénaff 1998:179).

⁷ II:2. See Sharpe (1995:154) for a full recounting of the miracle.

sweetness. In this tale the main elements are the fruit (*A*), the people (*B*) and Columba (*C*). God also is mentioned but only ever acts when invoked by Columba to do what he desires; therefore, the element of God (*d*) in the miracle is always cognate with that of *C*. Therefore, $C = d$ and vice versa. However, the theme of the tale is better expressed



through the structure if written in the unorthodox manner of $C (+d)$, as this displays the notion that Columba is not God but is performing as a vessel of God; he is the means by which the infinite can make its presence known in the finite.

These elements interact with each other in various revealing ways and it is their interrelation which is crucial for exposing their meaning at the level of S_3 . For, a symbol on its own can have unlimited meanings, but when it is placed in the context of further interlocking symbols the way that they interact dramatically narrows the field of interpretation.⁸ In this tale *A* begins in a negative relationship with *B* and ends in a positive relationship; this transformation is brought about by *C*, which achieves the transformation by invoking the power of *d*. Therefore, the structure can be written: $A - B \rightarrow A + B$. This miracle then exactly fits the basic model proposed above (see figure 1.1) and in doing so can be seen as identical to eight other miracle tales that also have identical structures to the basic model (see figure 1).

It is interesting to speculate as to what this motif may be prescriptive of, within the context of Adomnán's cultural and societal framework, utilising the structure to look afresh at the narrative. The primary element *A*, the element represented as fruit in the previously mentioned miracle, is the natural place to begin such speculation. The element *A* is always a form of sustenance, sometimes food (as above)

⁸ See Turner (1967:30-37) for a full description of why this is so.

but more often water, wine or milk (see figure 1). The prominence of this motif of sustenance is not limited to the work of Adomnán but is central to much Gaelic Medieval Literature, where often it appears as food (as it does in *The Phantoms' Vision*⁹) but more often as liquid (as it does in *The sons of Eochaid Mugmedon*¹⁰). This mytheme has recently been examined by Herbert¹¹ who suggests that the motif of sustenance is connected to ideas of kingship. For, she argues, the giving of sustenance is a signifier of the giving of sovereignty¹². She not only uncovers the repeated use of the mytheme of sustenance, but is also able to narrow the field of its interpretation through showing its occurrence in relation to the mythemes of sovereignty and fertility. Therefore, it is possible to deduce from Máire Herbert's article that the theme of sustenance has a long and popular tradition in Gaelic literature and that this theme usually is connected to true sovereignty, which in turn is connected to fertility of the land.

Figure 2: Miracles of reintegration

- Main Group

4 disease cloud, 5 broken hip, 6 Druim Cett, 7 salt block, 33 disease of Broichan, 46 the plague, 10 water from rock, 32 raising the dead, 41 ugly little hammer

- Sub Group 1: Direct healing

30 Diarmait's sickness, 18 nose bleeds, 42 Cormac, 31 Fintan healed

- Sub Group 2: Ritemes of liminality

40 childbirth

Miracles of reintegration (or re-incorporation) form the major unit of the text (see figure 2). The main group of these miracles has a structure not too unlike that seen previously. Both miracles are essentially transformatory ($A \rightarrow B$) and they share the common narrative figure of Columba (C) as facilitator of the transformation. However, in this miracle group an initial transformation has already occurred which was not the result of the action of C but a further element (E). This action of E is then undone by C , which restores the

⁹ See Dillon (1997:107-109) for a full recounting of the tale.

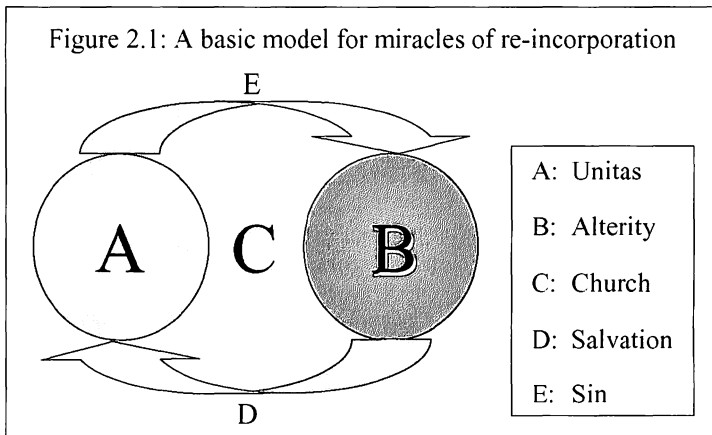
¹⁰ See Cross & Clark (1981:508-511) for a full recounting of the tale.

¹¹ The article is listed in references under Herbert (1992)

¹² Herbert (1992:267).

initial status of *A* (see figure 2.1). A clear miracle of this type is *The healing of Druim Cett*.¹³ In this tale there is a multitude of people whose ailments cause them to be invalids but Columba restores them to health by various methods. Thus, *A* has transformed into *B* (in this case due to an ill-defined facilitator) but *C* is able to transform *B* back into *A*.

In order to interpret the structure of this category it is useful to presuppose two basic states, state *A* which is one of *unitas* (unity) and state *B* which is one of alterity (or otherness). This basic binary model is what lies at the essence of most notions of community, as a sense of identity is often defined by negatives, which create a sense of what the community is not. Van Dam suggests that in the early medieval period these boundaries were not as dependent upon geography or politics as we may expect today.¹⁴ Instead, he argues, the main definition of someone who was within the community was someone who had a useful role within the community, whereas someone who lay outside the community was someone who could not enjoy such a role.¹⁵ Van Dam concludes that the main cause for being removed from the society and placed into the category of other was illness.¹⁶ As in the miracles of St Martin (that Van Dam has analysed) it is illness that is the main narrative theme of Adomnán's miracles of reintegration.



¹³ Book II:6. See Sharpe (1995:159) for a full recounting of the miracle.

¹⁴ Van Dam (1993:91).

¹⁵ Similar to the notion of *arete* that is presented in Homeric literature, where goodness is defined by excellence in any given field.

¹⁶ Van Dam (1993:89).

Having identified the context of the states *A* and *B* it is necessary to turn to look at the facilitators which enact the transformations. While the initial facilitator seems to be easily defined as illness (see above), such a view would be guilty of ethnocentrism, for in the medieval world (like many non-western societies today) illness was not a cause but a symptom. The most commonly believed cause for the symptom of illness in the medieval world was sin and in this respect Adomnán is no exception.¹⁷ For while at times Adomnán attempts to play down the connection between illness and sin, particularly when dealing with the illness of Columban monks,¹⁸ at other times he is very clear that such a causal chain exists. Adomnán's views on this matter are made clear when he records his thoughts on the plague, as he states that it is unusual that the population of Pictland were not affected by the plague, for they are 'not without great Sin'.¹⁹ Therefore, element *E* may be defined as sin which often causes an illness that in turn causes alienation from society (through the loss of the ability to function normally). The remedy to this dilemma is always presented as the Church; Adomnán demonstrates repeatedly how Columba engages in the pastoral role of *re-ligare* (a re-binding of the society). The means by which the element of *C* achieves this is illuminating as to what Adomnán may have seen this re-binding as entailing. The healing often involves the sprinkling of water (into which has previously been dipped the Sacrament) over the sick.²⁰ This chain of healing is laced with the symbolism of communion and baptism suggesting that the society is re-bound by often public rituals involving liturgy, which invoke the remembrance of the salvation of Christ which binds the community of believers together as one body, for they have shared of one body. The result of this for the status of the Church is clear: in Adomnán's mind it is healer and binder, the glue of society, capable of transforming an illness into healing, sin into salvation and infective individualism into cohesive unity. Thus, the Church is far more than a glorified doctor: it is the provider of *unitas* in much the same way that the pagan Roman state religion, to which Christianity was the heir, sought to unify Rome's subjects.

¹⁷ For information on the wider role of sin as the cause of medieval illness, see Van Dam (1993:89).

¹⁸ Separated in figure 1 as the first sub-group.

¹⁹ Sharpe (1995:203).

²⁰ Interestingly, this process is often replaced by a direct intervention of God to heal Columban monks when they are ill (see figure 2).

A further outstanding miracle of reintegration is that of the hardening of Broichan's heart. In this tale Broichan has a slave girl of the Uí Néill who Columba demands should be set free; Broichan hardens his heart against this wish and so becomes ill; the illness causes him to recant, in light of which Columba brings about his healing.²¹ Structurally this tale may be read as a straightforward miracle of healing with Broichan moving from health to illness through the sin of keeping the girl and then returning back to health through the intervention of Columba (see figure 2.1). However, the narrative level of the tale is laced with political connotations, which suggest that the structure may be being deliberately employed in a political manner. The most obvious narrative resonance is with the biblical tale of Moses,²² yet this tale is not identical to the Hebrew narrative. If we look at the figure of the slave girl (whom we may identify as *F*), it is apparent that she begins the tale in a negative relationship to Broichan (*B*); this relationship is detrimental to the status of *B* and causes him to move outwith acceptable society. Through his illness he is caused to move into a negative relationship with *A* (his people²³); Columba (*C*) negotiates a change in relationship so that *B* and *F* end in a positive relationship, the result of which is the reconciliation of Broichan and his people. Thus the structure may be written $(F - B) - A \rightarrow (F + B) + A$. This alternative structure would seem to display a power dynamic which is made clearer if the structure is read in reverse. For it is then possible to see that if the sovereignty of Pictland (represented by Broichan and identified as the element *B*) maintains good relations with the Uí Néill (represented by the slave girl and identified as the structural element *F*) then Pictland (represented by the people of Pictland and identified as the element *A*) will enjoy prosperity. However, if the opposite should occur, then an automatic result of being in a negative relation with the Uí Néill (*F*) is lack of prosperity (as certain as that illness will follow sin). In the centre of the relationship stands *C*, representing the Abbot of Iona and the kingdom of Dál Riata; it is they who negotiate the terms and it is through them that the peace of God is able to descend on all elements concerned. It is, therefore, possible to read a strong political element in this miracle, which has complicated the structure causing a divergence away from the basic model. This miracle is far from the sole example of this change and an analysis of the structure allows

²¹ II:33 see Sharpe (1995:33) for a full recounting of this miracle.

²² The tale of Exodus where Moses Pharaoh's heart hardens against Moses' command to 'let my people go' (Ex. 5:1).

²³ As a critically ill king is not a boon to his society but a handicap.

detection of a further thirteen miracles which, while structurally belonging to this category (of re-integration) or the category of sustenance (see above), thematically are political.²⁴ In many of these miracles the political interpretation is obvious and has been suggested by many authors (Márkus, Herbert *et al.*). However, in certain miracles political themes become clear only when the underlying structure is exposed: one such miracle is *The doors of Terryglass*.²⁵

The miracle of *The doors of Terryglass* is situated in Ireland (as the place-name indicates). In this tale Columba arrives at the church, but because he has no keys and cannot enter, through the power of God he bursts open the church doors, enters the church and earns the respect of the clergy. The structure of this narrative is somewhat fragmentary and broken: all we know is that Columba (*A*) wishes to gain entry to the church (*B*) but is barred by lack of keys (*C*): through the aid of God (*d*) he is able to rectify this problem dramatically. Thus, the structure may be written as $(A - C) - B \rightarrow (A + d) + B$. In order to understand this miracle fully it is necessary to look to the surrounding miracles to fill in some of the gaps in the structure. A myth which instantly suggests itself for comparison is *The doors of the fort of Pictland*²⁶ which, on the narrative level, shares the similar motif of doors opened. However, the institution in *The doors of Terryglass* is religious rather than political and therefore the analysis must be directed in a different direction. The base model of miracles of reintegration (see figure 2.1) is far more useful for its structural parallels, despite the fact that narrative parallels are not obvious. It is possible to use this model to reconstruct a prior movement of Columba from a position of integration with *A* to a position where he is defined as other than *A* (that is *B*). The structure then pre-empts a movement back to reintegration through the power of *d* (direct action of God). When viewed in this way it is plausible to suggest that the problem the tale raises is fundamentally one of access to integration with a certain community (*A*). It is plausible that *A* may represent the organised Church in Leinster, where the myth is situated; Columba may be seen to be denied access on grounds of the violation that Adomnán hints estranged Columba from the Irish Church, only later to be rectified at Teltown.²⁷ However, it is equally possible that not too much emphasis should be placed upon the geographic location of the Church: instead it may be read as a message intended for

²⁴ They may be listed as: 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 43.

²⁵ II:36. See Sharpe (1995:184).

²⁶ II:35. See Sharpe (1995:184).

²⁷ Meek (2000:180).

Adomnán's wider audience of Northumbria.²⁸ If viewed in this way the *A* to be gained access to is the wider Church which we know Adomnán was keen to seek integration with.²⁹

The barrier presented by the doors which Columba does not have the keys to open could be the technical arguments over the dating of Easter and the tonsure which threatened to overshadow Columba's reputation. It is teasing that Bede claimed that one of the reasons the argument of dating was lost was on the grounds that St Peter's authority was superior to Columba's as he holds the keys to heaven.³⁰ However, in this miracle Columba shows that he does not need keys to enter the sacred (represented by the church) as he dramatically causes the doors to open by a direct manifestation of the power of God (*d*). It is tempting, then, to read this miracle as a message to the Northumbrian readers that Columba is a valid saint despite having been ignorant of certain practices, as he was a vessel for the power of God which the Gospels repeatedly claim supersedes the authority of ritual. As Paul reminds the Galatians 'a man is not justified by serving the law but by faith in Jesus Christ'.³¹

It would be incorrect to seek to conclude discussion of this group of miracles with a single interpretation of the narrative level. The power of the mythic is that it does not force a choice of one interpretation or another but rather resonates with the complexity of a symphony. While some may be drawn to the bass line for others it is the soaring of the violins that attracts. Yet neither melody contradicts the other. Rather they rise as a whole into a harmony which gives the tale its complexity, creating a permanence and malleability essential for its ongoing survival. It is only at the structural level that we can present a single grammar which not only holds true for one miracle, but unifies all fourteen miracles of this group. At the level of S_3 all these miracles have in common the motif of an ephemeral transformation from one status to another before the resolution, which is to be transformed once again to the original status ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$).

The two models of miracle presented have certain commonalities in structure, which allows for a tentative suggestion as to what the structure at the level of S_2 may be. The data collected so far shows a clear degree of correlation in the presence of a theme of

²⁸ See Herbert (1998:55) as to why this might be a viable audience.

²⁹ His argument for the dating of Easter may be seen to presume this (Herbert 1998:49).

³⁰ Of course Bede's analysis itself could be subject to analysis. See Ward (1998) for a full description of these events.

³¹ Galatians 1:16.

transformation. In essence both models involve raising an awareness of fundamentally binary oppositions before playing with various ways in which the oppositions can be overcome. Sometimes a previous state of harmony is conceived that must be returned to (see figure 2.1); at other times the focus is purely on transforming things from negative to positive (see figure 1.1). This structure is fascinating as it correlates with the formula which Lévi-Strauss has suggested is fundamental to all human mythic tales (the level of S_1).³² At the heart of the miracles' structure may lie something fundamental to all human kind; a knowledge of the dichotomy of existence and a desire to unify that gap. The play of the mythic is the ability in numerous ways to overcome basic binary oppositions in theory if not in practice; it is a ray of hope which suggests that the apparently un-purposeful has purpose.³³ Often through abandoning the rules of the world of sense perception, the mythic gives sense to the world we perceive. In Adomnán's book the way that these oppositions are overcome is unerringly consistent on one form, that the facilitator is the Columban Church. This consistency exists whether transforming negative sustenance into positive, or transforming the sick into the healed, or bringing the dislocated into the community. It suggests a deep-seated subconscious belief in the centrality of the role of the church in improving the life of the community.

The purpose of this article has been to begin to highlight the structure of the miracles in an attempt to stimulate debate as to what they may be prescriptive of; this turning away from the analysis of the phenomenon of miracles as a descriptive element is not intended to detract from their existence as such. The reverse is true, as the structure of the miracles reinforces the phenomenon of them. For the narrative interpreter the structure reflects back to the narrative suggesting new interpretations and reinforcing established assumptions. For the reader who comes to the text in search of the phenomenon of the miraculous, the structure reinforces the message of the miraculous to which the conclusion of the *Vita Columbae* implores the scholar to remain faithful. The underlying structure shows a transformation of valence from positive to negative through the power of a facilitator, which is not bound by the laws of binaries

³² In *The Raw and The Cooked* Lévi-Strauss commented on how, at the level of S_1 , each myth plays on the notion of transformation of opposites. He then further comments: 'it is remarkable that we always find this play of mediation between systems of oppositions with two or more extremes' (Hénaff 1998: 172).

³³ *Ibid.*

which govern the world. Thus the structure, far from detracting from the phenomenon of the miraculous, reinforces it.

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