

WITCH AND PRIEST JUXTAPOSED: TWO FIGURES FROM IRISH TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES*

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This paper will deal with two traditional characters of Irish folk tradition: the **Parish Priest** and the **Witch**. Both two characters feature in historical narratives including a range of legends, fabulates and memorates.¹ In this article, I will look particularly closely at two discrete legend types which are categorised by Reider H Christiansen² as; ML 3015 *The Cardplayers and the Devil* and ML 3055, *The Witch that was Hurt* while referring briefly to other aspects of tradition or, more specifically (after Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, MLSIT 3056, *The Witch as Hare*³, an Irish adaption of the internationally known narrative.

As legends, the narratives discussed here are related in a manner which suggests that they are true, whether or not the narrator believes this to be the case. This stylistic quality of the narratives implies the importance of the realities which are – symbolically at least– depicted within the legends framework.

The priest is represented in folklore as both a ‘real’ or flesh-and-blood character and as the symbolic figure of good (community/order) against evil (external influences/chaos). Evil is personified, in the legend type discussed here, as the Devil.

The priests and witches of Irish folklore embody, within or without the restraints of a legend structure caricatures of Irish notions of proper and improper behaviour for men and women.

Within the context of the legendary narratives that will be discussed, as well as in corollary traditional material, the figures of priest and witch are structurally opposed, the priest representing Irish masculinity at its best, and the witch representing the antithesis of the feminine. They are not, however, *actually* opposed, which is to say that they are not generally presented as adversaries within the context of a discrete narrative type.

The material to which I refer comes from the archival holdings of the department of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin. All the narratives quoted come from the southeastern area of Ireland, but may be considered as representative of Irish traditional thought on a broader scale. This material has also been referred to in my PhD thesis, which was submitted to the Department of Irish Folklore in 1998. The abbreviation IFC stands for Irish Folklore Collection, and S signifies that archival entries come from the 'Schools Collection', a vast section of the archive composed of material collected in the 1937/8 school year, coordinated in national schools throughout the republic.

THE PRIEST

The priest is often juxtaposed in Irish folklore with the Devil, commonly in variants of ML 3015, as well as in a wide range of narrative types and beliefs. The huge importance of the priest in Irish folklore reflects not only the strength of religious feeling of the Irish people but also the immense importance of the Catholic church and its priests and administrators to Irish cultural and political identity. Below are some examples of versions of this legend type, reduced to their essential characteristics:

A [Protestant] gentleman says, without meaning it literally, that he will 'ride with the Devil today'.⁴

OR A man obsessed with cards is going home.⁵

Shortly after this he is overtaken by a stranger. The two ride together and become friendly.⁶

OR A prince steps out of a rath [a prehistoric site, often a mound or fort, frequently associated in Irish folklore with the supernatural] and rides along.⁷

The strange gentleman is invited back to the house to play cards⁸ with the company.

Stooping [to pick up a card] the cloven hoof is seen and it is realised that it is the Devil.⁹

The Protestant minister comes to banish him but fails.¹⁰

The priest comes and banishes him [using his possessions to block the exit routes].¹¹

The Devil disappears in a ball of fire.¹²

An indelible physical mark may be left by the Devil's violent exit.¹³ The family converts to Catholicism.¹⁴

OR Donates a gift to the local Catholic church.¹⁵

Between the lines of this legend type one can read the story of Ireland's long history of social and economic division, with the profoundly unjust distribution of wealth and power along broadly religious lines. For many years Irish society consisted largely of Catholic peasants and workers and Protestant landowners and employers. Class division along religious lines has resulted in a strong association in folklore of demonic or evil forces with the ruling classes, who are represented in Irish folklore as external – foreign – to mainstream Irish society, as indeed they were.

In Irish variants of ML 3015, the Devil is frequently a readily identifiable symbol of the Protestant gentleman, which is to say a member of the oppressing or privileged classes. He may be depicted as having an English accent. He is invariably well-dressed. He is charming and well-mannered. He is *so very similar* to the gentry that they fail to realise for a long time that there is anything amiss. From the viewpoint of a Catholic Irish narrator the gentry represents malign influences coming from outside society. When at last the Devil's real identity is unmasked, he is ousted by the priest, a symbolic champion of the underdog and image of all that is most noble about Irish Catholicism and Irish manhood. Over the years, economic and political conditions in Ireland have provided the Devil with a ready-made, familiar identity, that of the uninvited, privileged and foreign guest.

The priest's power is presented as being so strong, in ML 3015, that it somehow rubs off on his possessions, or by things that have come into contact with his person, such as handkerchiefs and umbrellas, these being the objects that are used to block the Devil from possible exit routes. There is also a substantial body of tradition attesting to the healing qualities of priests' spittle, earth from priests' graves, and so on and priests were also thought to have powers capable of influencing the weather, tides and so on, as well as being able to absolve sin and communicate directly with God and the saints.

During the many years of profound social injustice along religious and social line in Ireland, the priest provided the reassurance of spiritual superiority that the Catholic people needed in the face of economic and political inferiority, and was frequently distinguished by having a much higher level of education than most members of his flock. As, in the narratives that are considered here, the priest almost invariably ousts the Devil in versions of ML 3015, his god-ordained powers are shown to exceed the depraved powers of the Devil. The frequent juxtaposition of the priest with Devil clearly demonstrates the triumph of good over evil and also identifies the wielding of power as a masculine occupation, whether this power is wielded for good or for evil. In fact, as the priest is successful in his mission he is shown to be more powerful than the Devil. Effectively, the priest is *elevated to superhuman status*.

THE WITCH

Unlike the figure common in traditional narratives and ecclesiastical and legal records in much of Europe, the witch of Irish folklore is not depicted as posing any *direct* threat to the church or to other patriarchal institutions. Her interference is confined to domestic and economic areas, and in the legend type discussed below she is depicted stealing milk from cows while in the form of a hare.

Structured legend types about witches are much less common than those which feature priests. Most references to witches in Irish folklore refer to disliked and pathetic elderly single women, thought to have the facility of cursing, which may involve the use of formulaic actions or words. The folk character of the witch is also known in Irish folk legend, as in MLSIT 3056, *The Witch as Hare*.

A farmer notices that his cows are not giving milk.¹⁶

Early in the morning [on the advice of a priest]¹⁷ he is in the field and observes a hare sucking milk from the cows.¹⁸

His dogs chase the hare, which leaps into a house.¹⁹

OR He shoots the hare, wounding it.²⁰

Inside the house an old woman is found, suffering from wounds identical to those that were inflicted on the hare.²¹

OR A priest is called to the same house to attend to a sick woman.²²

Inside the house an old woman is dying for want of food.²³

The witch of Irish folklore does not take part in Satanic rituals, she is not shown engaging in group rites such as covens. Her malevolence is not such that it is necessary to juxtapose her with a mighty adversary such as the parish priest. She is most frequently depicted as the enemy of the domestic or economic unit, and more specifically to the domestic economic unit of the dairy herd and the milking process. In examples of ML 3056, the witch is usually represented as aged, pitiful, decrepit and weak, as a widow, or as an elderly, childless woman. She can be severely damaged or injured unwittingly or almost unwittingly by the farmer and the dog. The threat posed by her to society is nothing compared to that wielded by the Devil, and her presence is dealt with not by the priest, but by an ordinary man, doing ordinary things. Feminine evil then is depicted as essentially weak and subversive.

THE PRIEST AND THE WITCH

Although priests and witches are not directly juxtaposed in the narratives outlined in this article and in other aspects of Irish folklore they share more characteristics that is immediately apparent.

Both witches and priests are represented in Irish tradition as having, in one way or another, the power to manipulate natural circumstances. Both are generally assumed to be and both come from Irish, as opposed to English, Protestant, or foreign society, while each remains on the fringes of that society, the priest removed by his lofty spiritual role and the witch by her abjection, and, in the legends discussed, her animality. The priest's power, however, is presented as being overt and good while the witch's undoubted supernatural qualities are portrayed as subversive and evil. Feminine qualities that are not safely contained, invisible, in a domestic environment, become *overt* and thus *offensive*.

A symbols of masculine evil is provided in versions of ML 3015 by representations of the Devil (or the Landlord). Nonetheless, the Devil also a symbol of real social injustice is ousted by the priest,

not just a servant of God but the leader of his community and the people of Ireland against malignant outside influences

Feminine evil is represented, in the person of the witch, as elderly, unattractive and weak and, above, all subversive, failing to adhere to the correct models of feminine behaviour in Irish society, she is reduced to the form of a hare. To dismiss such a feeble character, it is clear, there is no need to call on an expert. A farmer with his dogs may do the job just as well. Feminine evil does not require ousting by one with supernatural or extraordinary powers.

Legends and belief statements about priests and witches clearly demonstrate the guidelines for desirable behaviour. Those who deviate from the behaviour endorsed by Irish tradition are symbolically punished in folklore.

Comments

* Material selected from south-east Ireland, comprising counties Wexford, Waterford and Kilkenny)

¹ Fabulate: Second- or third hand- relating of a putative sequence of events. Memorate: First hand account of putative events. See Sydow, Carl Wilhelm von, *Selected Papers in Folklore*, Published on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday, Rosenkilde & Bagger, Copenhagen, 1948, which includes seminal discussions of these terms.

² After Christiansen 1958.

³ The abbreviation MLSIT (Migratory Legend Suggested Irish Type) was proposed by Bo Almqvist in *Crossing the Border* 1991, 6 and this classification number suggested by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne 'The Old Woman as Hare', Structure and Meaning in an Irish Legend', *Folklore*, Vol. 104, 1993, 67. This legend type will be referred to hereafter as ML 3056, for the sake of brevity, because this discussion is not restricted to Irish material and to allow for the inclusion of versions featuring animals other than hares.

⁴ IFC S 849:185–6, 858: 79–81

⁵ IFC S 850:126.

⁶This introductory motif is found in IFC 849:185–6, 858:79–81.

⁷IFC S 863:94–5.

⁸IFC S 849:185–6, IFC S 850, 126 858: 79–81, IFC S 863:94–5.

⁹IFC S 849: 185–6, 858: 79–81, 863: 94–5, 850: 126.

¹⁰IFC S 849:185–6, 850:126.

¹¹IFC S 849:185–6, IFC S 850, 126 858: 79–81, IFC S 863:94–5.

¹²IFC 849:185–6, 858:79–81.

¹³IFC 849:185–6, 858:79–81.

¹⁴IFC 849:185–6, 858:79–81.

¹⁵IFC S 858:79–81.

¹⁶IA 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

¹⁷IA 4.

¹⁸IA 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9.

¹⁹IA 2, 4, 7, 8, 9.

²⁰IA 5, 6.

²¹IA 2, 6, 9, 8.

²²IDN 4, 7.

²³IA 5.