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INTERVENTION AND DISRUPTION IN THE MYTHS OF FINN AND SIGURD

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the parallel between the Irish hero Finn and the Norse hero Sigurd extends beyond the incident of the burnt finger, which occurs during the youth of each figure.[1] The following is a typological study of two heroic traditions, which suggests (although it does not prove) the existence of a historical link between them.

Finn is one of the most popular heroes in traditional Irish narrative; he is the chief warrior of the king of Ireland and a hunter who lives outside society in the wilderness, where he has frequent encounters with people of the otherworld. Sigurd is a great dragon-slayer and the owner of a great hoard in Germanic heroic tradition. Both Finn and Sigurd win special knowledge accidentally while they are cooking food for someone else—Finn burns his finger on the salmon of knowledge and becomes a great poet and seer, while Sigurd burns his finger on a dragon's heart and thus acquires the ability to understand the language of birds. The salmon which Finn is cooking is originally intended for Finn's teacher, and the dragon's heart which Sigurd prepares is intended for his fosterfather. However, these edibles are ultimately consumed, and the powers contained in them acquired, by the young heroes. The fact that Finn and Sigurd obtain special powers as cooks serving their masters is part of a general pattern which is apparent throughout the careers of both figures. They win their extraordinary characteristics and their heroic fame by intervening in situations and relationships to which they are initially strangers. Finn and Sigurd function in the myths about them as paradigmatic interlopers, able to penetrate closed systems of relationships and acquire hidden possessions.

According to the medieval Irish text *Macgnímartha Finn* 'The Boyhood Deeds of Finn', Finn acquires his name and his special knowledge while he is the pupil and servant (*gilla*) of a poet also known as Finn.[2] The young hero, called Demne at first, is in exile away from society; his fosterers have raised him in the wilderness to be a warrior and a hunter. But Demne leaves the isolation and extra-social environment

[1] Robert D. Scott's *The Thumb of Knowledge in Legends of Finn, Sigurd, and Taliesin* (New York, 1930) is a lengthy study of the burnt finger motif but is limited in scope. (In a future paper I intend to extend my comparative analysis to the Welsh myth of Taliesin, a poet who, like Finn and Sigurd, is the beneficiary of a cooking accident.)

[2] Ed. Kuno Meyer in *Revue Celtique* (*RC*), v (1882), 201; trans. Meyer, *Ériu*, i (1904), 185–6. The story of Finn and the salmon has survived into recent times as a folktale, though it has been changed considerably (see the version published in *Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonaill*, ed. James Delargy [Dublin, 1948], pp. 201–2, and the bibliography on p. 427).

of his early youth and becomes a poetic apprentice in order to be safe from his enemies. Poets were revered and inviolable persons in Irish society; they and other kinds of skilled craftsmen were free to cross tribal boundaries, and their rights and privileges were universally respected.[3] The poetic profession becomes a sanctuary for Demne, a distinctly anomalous and extra-social figure.

In early Irish culture it was believed that the poet acquires inspiration and special knowledge from a source beyond human society, even though the poet performs his main functions within society.[4] Thus, the process of poetic composition transcends the boundary between society and the worlds outside it, just as the poet, who can travel and practise his craft freely, transcends intra-social boundaries. The poet and his source of inspiration and knowledge are linked together by a mysterious line of communication which crosses all borders. The institution which provides refuge for the anomalous Finn is highly anomalous itself.

Finn the Poet, Demne's teacher, dwells on the banks of the Boyne River and waits for the salmon of knowledge, a magical creature from the source of poetry which, according to prophecy, will bring enlightenment to Finn. However, the 'Finn' who is to acquire the poetic knowledge contained in the fish is not the master poet but the pupil.

The teacher catches the fish and orders his *gilla* Demne to cook it without eating any of it. Since the poetic essence comes from outside society, it is raw and must be subjected to the process of cooking, which culturalizes food and makes it usable in society.[5] The salmon has not yet completed its passage from the extra-social source of poetry to the representative of society, the poet; before the latter can consume it and utilize the poetic essence within, the *gilla* must cook the fish.

The line of communication between poet and source—the basis of the poetic institution—*should* function smoothly; Finn the Poet *should* eat the salmon. Yet the insignificant Demne unintentionally meddles with this line because he is the one who prepares the salmon for the poet. It is appropriate for a *gilla* 'servant' to have the task of cooking food. In medieval Irish literature the *gilla* is frequently a domestic

[3] Wolfgang Meid, 'Dichtkunst, Rechtspflege und Medizin im alten Irland', *Antiquitates Indogermanicae: Gedenkschrift für Hermann Güntert*, ed. Meid and others (Innsbruck, 1974), pp. 30–1.

[4] The poetic essence (*imbas*) is contained in the nuts of hazel trees which grow around a spring; the nuts fall into the water and are consumed by salmon, which swim into the rivers of Ireland and are caught and eaten by poets, who thus acquire knowledge and inspiration—see Thomas O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), pp. 318–23.

In Celtic societies the poet functioned as a prophet, historian, and social critic. O'Rahilly describes the poet's mantic function in *Early Irish History and Mythology*, pp. 323–5. On the poetic functions of praise and blame, see J. E. Caerwyn Williams, 'The Court Poet in Medieval Ireland', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 57 (1971), 98–117.

[5] This formulation of the symbolic role of cooking is based on the ideas of Claude Lévi-Strauss, especially as expressed in his *Mythologiques I: Le cru et le cuit* (Paris, 1964).

figure, a social parasite who sometimes even functions as a symbol of culture and domesticity.[6] Cooking is one of the *gilla*'s areas of expertise, and so Demne the *gilla* is told by his master to cook the fish; he is to translate the raw salmon and the knowledge it contains into an edible and socially acceptable form. However, Demne proves to be a force of disruption in the process of transferring poetic knowledge and inspiration from source to poet.

Finn the Poet loses the gift from the otherworld through a confusion of identities arising from the interaction of the cook with the food that he cooks. While he is preparing the salmon Demne burns his finger on it; the bringer of the poetic essence 'cooks' a part of the cook. Demne puts his finger, on to which the essence has been transferred, in his mouth—the cook puts a part of himself that has been 'cooked' in his mouth almost as a parody of eating. In this way Demne acquires and consumes the poetic inspiration and knowledge meant for his teacher. The *gilla* actually assumes his master's identity: upon realizing what has happened, Finn the Poet gives the salmon and his own name to Demne.[7]

The humble cook thus causes, and is the beneficiary of, a breakdown in communication between the poet and the source of his poetry. As done by Demne, cooking is a means of subverting the transfer of the poetic essence from source to poet; it subverts the poetic institution itself. In this tale cooking, an essential technique of culture, spreads disorder more than it creates order: the distinction between 'cook' and 'food', as well as the distinction between 'cook' and 'consumer', is weakened as Demne becomes like the food that he is cooking and then assumes the identity of his teacher. Yet cooking does have *some* civilizing and ordering effect: the *gilla* Demne is 'cooked', matures, and acquires an adult social identity as Finn the Poet. The youth has wreaked havoc on the institutional line of communication between poet and his source, but in the process his own identity has taken shape, and the poetic institution is revitalized through the coming into being of an exceptional poet and seer—the real 'Finn'.

In Finn's next adventure after the salmon episode in the *Macgnímartha*, he joins the retinue of another poet, who tries to communicate

[6] In another Finn tale, Finn's *gilla* has the ability to leap back and forth across a cooking pit; his name is Red Corra, descendant of Flame (ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer, 'Finn and the Man in the Tree', *RC*, xxv [1904], 346–7). This association with fire and cooking, a basic cultural activity, suggests the *gilla*'s domestic nature. In another Irish tale a primeval inhabitant of Ireland, Partholón, is so intent on hunting that he neglects his wife, who commits adultery with the only male left at home—Partholón's *gilla* (*Lebor Gabála Érenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, ed. and trans. R. A. S. Macalister, III, Irish Texts Society, xxxix [Dublin, 1940], 38–9).

[7] In a previous episode of the *Macgnímartha* Finn had already received his name (*RC*, v, 199–200; trans. in *Ériu*, i, 183); apparently the compiler of the *Macgnímartha* incorporated two separate versions of the story of how Finn got his name into his compilation of Finn tales.

with the people of the otherworld and woo an otherworldly woman.[8] The poet's quest fails, and one of his companions is slain by a jealous supernatural rival. Finn sets out to take revenge on the otherworld, which refuses to communicate or share its women with members of this world. Just as he succeeded in penetrating the poetic profession, so Finn, unlike the poet, succeeds in penetrating the otherworld. He finds a spot from where he can look into two separate *síde* (otherworldly dwellings). Finn sees great fires burning in them and overhears their residents agreeing to exchange gifts; he kills a man carrying cooked food from one *síd* to the other.[9] As in the salmon episode, the context of cooking (the fires in the *síde*) and cooked food is one which Finn can exploit: he disrupts a channel of communication between the *síde* and diverts cooked food from its rightful recipient. In subsequent adventures from the *Macgnímartha*, Finn captures women of the otherworld and releases them when he receives valuable ransoms.[10] Finn succeeds completely in forcing the otherworld to communicate and share its resources with him.

In another version of the story of how Finn acquired his talents as a poet and seer, it is through his penchant for penetrating the otherworld that Finn acquires the poetic essence.[11] The meat which Finn's men cook in the wilderness is continually being stolen by an otherworldly thief. Finn takes the matter into his own hands: he cooks and guards a pig himself. Once again cooking creates a situation in which Finn wins knowledge which should not belong to him. The thief manages to steal the pig, but Finn pursues him to the door of the *síd* and slays him there. Finn tries to enter the otherworldly dwelling, but a woman holding a vessel closes the door against the intruder. Finn's finger is stuck in the doorway and, presumably, some of the liquid in the woman's vessel spills on to his finger.[12] Finn removes it and puts it in his mouth, thus ingesting the magical fluid; since then, whenever Finn puts his finger in his mouth, he is enlightened.

[8] *RC*, v, 202–3; trans. in *Ériu*, i, 187–8.

[9] The man is carrying a pig (*muic slainsi*—the meaning of *slainsi* is unclear), a cooked calf (*laeg fuinti*), and a bunch of garlic (*dlocht crema*)—*RC*, v, 202.

[10] *RC*, v, 203–4; trans. in *Ériu*, i, 189–90. The final adventure included in the *Macgnímartha*, in which Finn captures a mourning woman of the other world, is left incomplete in the manuscript; however, the ending can be reconstructed through references to this adventure in a medieval poem ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer in his *Fianaigecht*, Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series, xvi (Dublin, 1910), pp. 46–9.

[11] *RC*, xxv (1904), 344–7; variant version ed. and trans. Vernam Hull, 'Two Tales About Find', *Speculum*, xvi (1941), 329–33.

[12] This detail is not stated explicitly in the texts, but it can be inferred through a comparison of this tale with a close variant from the medieval *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, 'The Feast of Conán's House' (ed. Maud Joynt, Medieval and Modern Irish Series, 7 [Dublin, 1936], lines 1331–76). In this variant, Finn and his men try to enter the *síd* where the well of knowledge is located; one of the three women who are trying to close the door and keep Finn out is carrying a vessel full of liquid from the well, and some of the liquid splashes out of the vessel and into Finn's mouth, so that he acquires knowledge.

In this tale Finn does not acquire the poetic essence by diverting it out of the channel between the human poet and the extra-social source of his inspiration; instead, in the act of reclaiming food which belongs to him from the otherworld, Finn accidentally 'steals' a small portion of liquid—and the poetic essence therein—from an otherworldly hostess, perhaps the possessor and distributor of the otherworld's supply of the poetic essence.[13] Finn is not entitled to even the tiny bit of drink that he receives; but, as a cook reclaiming the cooked food, Finn succeeds in acquiring something that does not belong to him. While mediating between the categories of 'raw' and 'cooked', or 'nature' and 'culture', Finn is propelled into a situation where he is caught in the doorway of the *síd* and mediates between this world and the otherworld. He also comes between the people of the *síd* and their drink of inspiration. He deprives them of only a small amount, just as in the *Macgnímartha* Demne deprives his teacher of only the smallest bit of the salmon; but in these infinitesimal amounts is concentrated the knowledge of poets and of the otherworld. Through the slightest of leaks in the closed system of the poetic institution or that of the otherworld Finn acquires the knowledge which poets seek and the otherworld hoards.

The young Sigurd also wins special knowledge and treasure by intervening in a closed system of relationships. But the system which is invaded and disrupted in the myth of Sigurd is an intra-social one: it is the institution of the family, specifically, the set of relationships between parents and children and between siblings. As depicted in the narratives about Sigurd, families are isolated and nearly independent units, so alienated from one another that the concept of society is threatened. Sigurd brings continuity to this discontinuous world; he opens up introverted families so that their private wealth and resources become available to outsiders such as himself, and he creates bonds between isolated families.

In his first great exploit Sigurd wins a fabulous treasure from a pair of brothers who belong to a family with a history of introversion.[14] A man named Hreidmar has three sons, one of whom is in the shape of an otter. One day this bestial son is killed by the god Loki, who thinks that he has killed just an otter. He and the other two gods with whom he is travelling bring the dead otter to Hreidmar and offer to share their catch with him, unaware that they are offering up the son

[13] The woman comes to the door after she has distributed most of the drink in the vessel to the people in the *síd* (*RC*, xxv, 344–5).

[14] I synopsize the story of Hreidmar, his sons, and Sigurd as it is found in the Old Norse *Reginsmál* and *Fáfnismál*, ed. Gustav Neckel in *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, I. Text, fourth ed., rev. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1962), 173–88; in Snorri's *Edda*, ed. Anne Holtsmark and Jón Helgason (Copenhagen, 1950), pp. 93–6; and in the *Vǫlsunga Saga*, ed. and trans. R. G. Finch (London, 1965), pp. 23–34.

to the father. Hreidmar is outraged, and he and his remaining sons hold the gods as prisoners. Clearly, the perspective of those within a family is radically different from the perspective of those who are not. The travelling gods think that they have killed a mere animal and are repaying their host by offering him their prize. But, in the eyes of Hreidmar and his sons, the gods have attacked the family by killing a member and depriving them of a provider of food.[15] For these strangers to suggest that they all share the otter as if he was common property is an outrageous insult to the family. Relationship and intercourse between family and guests are strained and virtually impossible, because they share no common perspective on reality: what to the gods is an otter is to the family a kinsman, and what to the gods is the most civilized thing to do is to the family the most barbaric.

The otter is skinned, and Hreidmar demands that the gods atone for his murder by covering the skin with gold—the familial provider is to be reconstituted as a container of treasure. Thus, the gods' assumption that Hreidmar's son was just a commodity is ironically vindicated by the nature of the retribution which Hreidmar requests. In their isolation from the rest of society the members of this family lose their humanity; they appear as animals and precious commodities to outsiders, and gradually even to each other.

Loki finds the treasure with which to cover the otter's skin at the same place where he found and killed his victim: the treasure is taken from the fish which lives in the waterfall where the otter had been fishing before he died. It is as if the gods are making restitution for the death of the familial provider by internalizing the wealth available from the provider's source within the family. Hreidmar and his sons are no longer dependent on the otter or his external source of food and wealth, since through the accidental intervention of strangers the family has been made completely self-sustaining and independent of the outside world.

However, with the winning of wealth and independence, the members of the family turn against one another. Hreidmar refuses to share the treasure with his sons, and so they kill him. The brothers themselves quarrel over the treasure, and one of them, Fáfnir, seizes it and guards the hoard in the form of a dragon. Relationships within the family are now as strained as the relationship between strangers and the family; the latter is no longer a hoarding and isolated unit of individuals but rather an unstable group of hoarding individuals. The greed which united the family against strangers now splinters the family so that it barely exists.

[15] The otter was a great fisher, who would give his catch to his father (Finch, *Vǫlsunga Saga*, p. 25).

Regin, the brother cheated of the treasure, raises the young exile Sigurd in order to have him kill his brother, the dragon Fáfnir. A member of the family is actually encouraging an outsider to slay another member, recognized by all, including Regin, to be a beast and no longer a human. Sigurd takes up Regin's quarrel with his brother and slays the dragon. The last surviving member of the family thus wins the familial treasure, but almost more important to Regin than the hoard is the dragon's contents: after Sigurd has slain the monster, Regin drinks some of its blood and orders the young hero to cook for him the dragon's heart, which has magical properties. Like his brother the otter in death and his family as a unit, the dragon contains valuables within; Sigurd is to transfer the 'hoard' inside the dragon out to Regin.

But Sigurd as cook, like Demne the cook, mediates to his own advantage—he diverts the commodity being transferred from one brother to another and acquires it for himself. Sigurd's finger is burnt by the hot blood flowing out of the heart which he is cooking; he puts his finger in his mouth and thus gains the special knowledge which Regin coveted. Sigurd finds that he can understand the language of birds. Just as the hero has penetrated the closed system of relationships within the family, so he now can listen in on the private conversation of birds and gain valuable information. Sigurd learns from the birds that Regin intends to kill him; he himself kills his treacherous foster-father, eats the dragon's heart, and drinks Regin's blood,[16] treating him as if he too was a container of a precious commodity, like his two deceased brothers.

Thus Sigurd gains the golden hoard and the other contents of this introverted familial system. In its isolation the family gathers wealth within itself until it literally bursts—when Sigurd slays Fáfnir he is awash in the dragon's blood,[17] and when he cooks the heart he is affected by the overflow of fluid in the meat. Sigurd, who penetrates the familial system of relationships as Regin's fosterson, causes overflows at crucial points in the system as a dragon-slayer and as a cook. The wealth and lore stored within the family and its members flow out and come into the possession of the adopted outsider.

After his adventure with the sons of Hreidmar, Sigurd comes across another kind of hoard which is isolated from society and to which the hero gains access: Sigurd finds the virgin Brynhild lying alone in a

[16] Neckel, *Edda*, p. 187: Sigurðr hió hǫfuð af Regin, oc þá át hann Fáfnis hiarta oc dracc blóð þeira beggia, Regins oc Fáfnis ('Sigurd cut off Regin's head, then ate Fáfnir's heart, and drank the blood of both of them, Regin and Fáfnir').

[17] Sigurd stabs the dragon while he is standing in a pit below the monster, so that he is covered with blood and venom (Neckel, *Edda*, p. 180). In the medieval German *Nibelungenlied*, Sifrit actually bathes in the dragon's blood and so becomes invulnerable—except in one spot (*Das Nibelungenlied. Nach der Ausgabe von Karl Bartsch*, ed. Helmut de Boor, twentieth rev. ed. [Wiesbaden, 1972], stanzas 899–902).

magical sleep. The hero removes her helmet and cuts open her armour, exposing this familial 'treasure' just as he opened up Fáfnir and won his hoard. Sigurd frees Brynhild from her state of inertia and isolation, so that she can be given by her family in marriage to an outsider.[18]

Sigurd travels on to the court of King Gjúki, where he is accepted into the king's family and becomes the blood-brother of Gjúki's sons—once again Sigurd penetrates a family. He is given the king's daughter as a wife and aids Gunnar, Gjúki's son, in his quest to win Brynhild. Sigurd actually assumes Gunnar's appearance and acquires the maiden for Gunnar from her family.[19] As in the dragon episode, Sigurd takes the place of a member of a family which he has penetrated and acts as his agent in an important transaction. However, now the transaction is not intra-familial but between two separate families, Gunnar's and Brynhild's. The hero not only manipulates relations and communication within the family, but he also helps the family communicate outward.

In the stories examined above, Finn and Sigurd characteristically interfere in situations and relationships. Finn joins the poetic profession and gains access to the line of communication between the poet and the source of his inspiration and knowledge. Although he does not belong to the otherworld, Finn can enter the *síd* partially and disrupt its order. Sigurd is able to penetrate familial systems of relationship. He controls the channels of communication between members of a family and the channels between different families.

Each hero gains special qualities and insight through this ability to penetrate and interfere with closed systems of relationships. However, this disruptive tendency ultimately destroys both heroes, who become fatally entangled in the lines of communication which they disrupt or create. Finn is beheaded by fisherman after he dies leaping over the Boyne;[20] he dies almost as a mock salmon of knowledge, which travels from the source of inspiration to the fisher-poet. Finn's identification with this creature, whose essence is transferred to his finger, is the key to his possession of knowledge but also the cause of Finn's undoing. As for Sigurd, he is slain at the instigation of his blood-brothers after Brynhild, who loves Sigurd, stirs jealousy in her husband's heart.[21]

[18] This synopsis of the story of Brynhild is based on the *Sigdrífomál*, Neckel, *Edda*, pp. 189–97; Snorri's *Edda*, Holtsmark and Helgason, pp. 96–7; and Finch, *Vǫlsunga Saga*, pp. 35–40. Sigurd learns esoteric lore from the awakened Brynhild, just as he did from the dying Fáfnir (Neckel, *Edda*, pp. 180–3; Finch, *Vǫlsunga Saga*, p. 32).

[19] Neckel, *Edda*, pp. 168–70; Snorri's *Edda*, Holtsmark and Helgason, p. 97; Finch, *Vǫlsunga Saga*, pp. 44–50.

[20] 'The Death of Finn Mac Cumaill', ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, i (1897), 464–5.

[21] Neckel, *Edda*, pp. 207–11; Snorri's *Edda*, Holtsmark and Helgason, pp. 97–8; Finch, *Vǫlsunga Saga*, pp. 50–9.

The sons of Gjúki come to resent Sigurd for his great wealth;[22] ironically he becomes another Fáfnir, a 'brother' who owns great treasures (both Brynhild, who still loves him, and the dragon hoard) and must be slain so that his 'brothers' may enjoy the treasure.

In the story of Finn and the salmon, the institution of poets and poetry is violated by the hero's penetration and unexpected interference, but it survives the shock and finally proves to be stronger than the hero—Finn is destroyed by the poetic channel of communication which he disrupted. In the myth of Sigurd the unit which the hero penetrates and manipulates, the family, survives the disruption and destroys Sigurd. Finn's acquisition of knowledge and Sigurd's acquisition of wealth are only temporary triumphs of accident over the rigid and predictable working of cultural institutions.

Despite their final failure, both figures bring essential new life into the systems which they disrupt and enter. Their tool of disruption is cooking, a paradigmatic cultural activity which in these myths produces a positive and liberating kind of disorder. Such sabotage ultimately glorifies the saboteur: Finn and Sigurd are famed in their respective traditions not as bumbling cooks and thieves but as heroes.

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[22] The implication in the *Guðrunqviða in fyrsta*, Neckel, *Edda*, p. 205, stanza 21, and in the *Sigurðarqviða in scamma*, ibid., p. 209, stanza 16, is that Sigurd is killed in part because his blood-brothers crave his gold.