

Love, Marriage and
The Midnight Court (1780)

Ciarán Mac Murchaidh

One of the best and most humorous Irish-language texts that deals with the topic of love and marriage is *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* (*The Midnight Court*), which was composed by the County Clare poet Brian Merriman in 1780. The 1,026-line text takes the form of a quasi-legal debate about the issue of love, sexuality and marriage chaired by Aoibheall (or Eevul), queen of the fairies. The definitive edition of the original Irish-language text is *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, edited by Liam P. Ó Murchú, who spent his career teaching in the Department of Modern Irish at University College, Cork. Ó Murchú considered Frank O'Connor's translation of the text, *The Midnight Court* (which first appeared in 1945), to be the best of all that have appeared either before or since, primarily because of the manner in which he succeeded in capturing and relaying to the English-reading public the spirit, rhythmic virtues and rollicking impact of the original poem.

The story of *The Midnight Court* is quite straightforward: the poet, while out strolling in a rural setting, is overcome by fatigue, falls asleep and has a dream in which he is visited by a fearsome woman, Aoibheall, who summons him to a court sitting:

And she cried in a voice with a brassy ring
'Get up out of this, you lazy thing!
That a man of your age can think 'tis fitting
To sleep in a ditch while the court is sitting!'

The reason for the court is Aoibheall's contention that the country is failing because of the lack of a vigorous manhood that is attentive to the needs of its womenfolk:

'A plea that concerns yourself as well,
That the youth of the country's gone to hell,
And the population in decline
As only happened within your time ...
Shame on you there without chick nor child
With women in thousands running wild ...
What matter to you if their beauty founder,
If belly and breast will never be rounder,
If ready and glad to be mother and wife
They drop, unplucked, from the boughs of life.'

Thus Aoibheall convenes the court to address the injustices of the time against the women of Ireland.

In the second part of the poem, the case of Irish womanhood is put forward by a young woman who gives an account of her woes and those of her contemporaries to the assembled court – that while she has youth and beauty on her side she has no mate because of the refusal of the young men to marry:

A man that's looking for a wife,
Here's a face that will keep for life!
Hand and arm and neck and breast,
Each is better than the rest.
Look at my waist! My legs are long,
Limber as willows and light and strong,
There's bottom and belly that claim attention
And the best concealed that I needn't mention.'

The fact that young men put off marrying till they are older or marry older women for love of land and property as opposed to love of a good woman their own age is no way for love and marriage to blossom, as far as the young woman is concerned:

'A boy in the blush of his youthful vigour
With a gracious flush and a passable figure
Finds a fortune the best attraction
And sires himself off on some bitter extraction,
Some fretful old maid with her heels in the dung
And pious airs and venomous tongue.'

In Part Three of the poem an old man steps up to present a defence of Ireland's manhood, and he blames the young women of the time for the predicament in which they find themselves. He recounts the circumstances of his own marriage, at the time of which (unbeknownst to him), his wife-to-be was already pregnant by someone else:

'Your worship, 'tis women's sinful pride
And that alone has the world destroyed!
Every young fellow that's ripe for marriage
Is hooked like this by some tricky baggage.'

From that moment on, the old man's carefree existence disappeared:

'But you see the troubles a man takes on;
From the minute he marries his peace is gone ...
I lived alone as happy as Larry,
Till I took it into my head to marry;
Tilling my fields with an easy mind
And going wherever I felt inclined.'

His claims do not go uncontested, however, as the young woman returns to the fray in the final part of the poem with a withering condemnation of the old man and his ilk. She mocks his inability to satisfy his young, passionate wife:

‘What possible use could she have at night
For dourness, dropsy, bother and blight,
A basket of bones with thighs of lead,
Knees absconded from the dead,
Reddening shanks and temples whitening,
Looking like one that was struck by lightning?’

The young woman pleads for a ruling that will require all young men to marry and force the clergy to abandon celibacy:

‘Has the Catholic Church a glimmer of sense
That the priests won’t marry like anyone else?
Backs erect and heavy hind quarters,
Hot-blooded men, the best of partners,
Freshness and charm, youth and good looks
And nothing to ease their mind but books!’

As the poem draws to a close, Aobheall issues her judgment on the matters before the court. She allows the women to seize and tie up the men while their fate is decided, and she predicts the end of the waste that is clerical celibacy. The poet, to his horror, finds that he will be the first to meet this judgement, but as he awaits his new destiny he awakens – with immense relief – from his dream.

As well as its value as an influential text from the canon of eighteenth-century writing in Irish, *The Midnight Court* is a poem by turn bawdy, humorous and ribald. It nevertheless treats of the age-old tension between the sexes in a clever and imaginative manner and also provides a mine of information about herbs and potions, aspects of eighteenth-century rural life, as well as addressing – in a surprisingly prescient manner – the many issues that still bedevil contemporary discourse on this key aspect of human interaction.

Further reading

Brian Merriman, *The Midnight Court* (trans. Frank O’Connor; illus. Brian Bourke) (Dublin, 1989).

Brian Merriman, *The Midnight Court* (trans. Ciaran Carson) (Dublin, 2005).

Liam P. Ó Murchú (ed.), *Cúirt an Mheon-oíche le Brian Merriman* (Dublin, 1982).