The Midnight Court

Translated from the Gaelic

by

Percy Arland Ussher

With a preface by

W. B. Yeats

Introduction

Months ago Mr. Ussher asked me to introduce his translation of *The Midnight Court*, I had seen a few pages in an Irish magazine; praised its vitality; my words had been repeated; and because I could discover no reason for refusal that did not make me a little ashamed, I consented. Yet I could wish that a Gaelic scholar had been found, or failing that some man of known sobriety of manner and of mind — Professor Trench of Trinity College let us say — to introduce to the Irish reading public this vital, extravagant, immoral, preposterous poem.

Brian Mac Giolla Meidhre — or to put it in English, Brian Merriman — wrote in Gaelic, one final and three internal rhymes in every line, pouring all his mediaeval abundance into that narrow neck. He was born early in the eighteenth century, somewhere in Clare, even now the most turbulent of counties, and the countrymen of Clare and of many parts of Munster have repeated his poem down to our own day. Yet this poem which is so characteristically Gaelic and mediaeval is founded upon *Cadenus and Vanessa*, [1] read perhaps in some country-gentleman’s library. The shepherds and nymphs of Jonathan Swift plead by counsel before Venus:

> ‘Accusing the false creature man.  
> The brief with weighty crimes was charged  
> On which the pleader much enlarged,  
> That Cupid now has lost his art.  
> Or blunt the point of every dart.’

Men have made marriage mercenary and love an intrigue; but the shepherds’ counsel answers that the fault lies with women who have changed love for ‘gross desire’ and care but for ‘fops and fools and rakes.’ Venus finds the matter so weighty that she calls the Muses and the Graces to her assistance and consults her books of law — Ovid, Virgil, Tibullus, Cowley, Waller — continuously adjourns the court for sixteen years, and then after the failure of an experiment gives the case in favour of the women. The experiment is the creation of Vanessa, who instead of becoming all men’s idol and reformer, all women’s example, repels both by her learning and falls in love with her tutor Swift.

The Gaelic poet changed a dead to a living mythology, and called men and women to plead before Eevell of Craglee, the chief of Munster Spirits, and gave her court reality by seeing it as a vision upon a mid-summer day under a Munster tree. No countryman of that
time doubted, nor in all probability did the poet doubt, the existence of Eevell, a famous
figure to every story-teller. The mediaeval convention of a dream or vision has served the turn
of innumerable licentious rhymers in Gaelic and other languages, of Irish Jacobites who have
substituted some personification of Ireland, some Dark Rosaleen, for a mortal mistress, of
learned poets who call before our eyes an elaborate allegory of courtly love. I think of
Chaucer’s ‘Romaunt of the Rose,’ his ‘Book of the Duchess,’ and of two later poems that
used to be called his, ‘Chaucer’s Dream’ and ‘The Complaint of the Black Knight.’ But in all
these the vision comes in May.

‘That it was May, me thoughte tho,
It is fyve yere or more ago;
That it was May, thus dreamed me
In tyme of love and jolitie
That all things ginneth waxen gay.’

One wonders if there is some Gaelic precedent for changing the spring festival for that of
summer, the May-day singing of the birds to the silence of summer fields. Had Mac Giolla
Meidhre before his mind the fires of St. John’s Night, for all through Munster men and
women leaped the fires that they might be fruitful, and after scattered the ashes that the fields
might be fruitful also. Certainly it is not possible to read his verses without being shocked
and horrified as city onlookers were perhaps shocked and horrified at the free speech and
buffoonery of some traditional country festival.

He wrote at a moment of national discouragement, the penal laws were still in force
though weakening, the old order was a vivid memory but with the failure of the last Jacobite
rising hope of its return had vanished, and no new political dream had come. The state of
Ireland is described: ‘Her land purloined, her law decayed...pastures with weeds
o’ergrown, her ground untilled...hirelings holding the upper hand,’ and worst of all — and
this the fairy court has been summoned to investigate — ‘the lads and lasses have left off
breeding.’ Are the men or the women to blame? A woman speaks first, and it is Swift’s
argument but uttered with voluble country extravagance, and as she speaks one calls up a
Munster hearth, farmers sitting round at the day’s end, some old farmer famous through all
the countryside for this long recitation, speaking or singing with dramatic gesture. If a man
marries, the girl declares, he does not choose a young girl but some rich scold ‘with a hair-
less crown and a snotty nose.’ Then she describes her own beauty and asks if she is not more
fit for marriage? She has gone everywhere ‘bedizened from top to toe,’ but because she lacks
money nobody will look at her and she is single still.

‘After all I have spent upon readers of palms
And tellers of tea-leaves and sellers of charms.’

Then an old man replies, and heaps upon her and upon her poverty-stricken father and
family all manner of abuse: he is the champion of the men, and he will show where the
blame lies. He tells of his own marriage. He was a man of substance but has been ruined by
his wife who gave herself up to every sort of dissipation — Swift’s argument again. A child
was born, but when he asked to see the child the women tried to cover it up, and when he did
see it, it was too fine, too handsome and vigorous to be a child of his. And now Swift is for-
gotten and dramatic propriety, the poet speaks through the old man’s mouth and asks Eevell
of Craglee to abolish marriage that such children may be born in plenty.
‘For why call a Priest in to bind and to bless
Since Mary the Mother of God did conceive
Without calling the Clergy or begging their leave.
The love-gotten children are famed as the flower
Of man’s procreation and nature’s power,
For love is a lustier sire than law,
And has made them sound without fault or flaw
And better and braver in heart and head
Than the puny breed of the marriage bed.’

The bastard’s speech in Lear is floating through his mind mixed up doubtless with old stories of Diarmuid’s and Cuchullain’s loves, and old dialogues where Oisin railed at Patrick; but there is something more, an air of personal conviction that is of his age, something that makes his words — spoken to that audience — more than the last song of Irish paganism. One remembers that Burns is about to write his beautiful defiant ‘Welcome to his love-begotten daughter’ and that Blake who is defiant in thought alone meditates perhaps his ‘Marriage of Heaven and Hell.’ The girl replies to the old man that if he were not so old and crazed she would break his bones, and that if his wife is unfaithful what better could he expect seeing that she was starved into marrying him. However, she has her own solution. Let all the handsome young priests be compelled to marry. Then Eevell of Craglee gives her judgment, the Priests are left to the Pope who will order them into marriage one of these days, but let all other young men marry or be stripped and beaten by her spirits, and let all old bachelors be tortured by the spinsters. The poem ends by the girl falling upon the poet and beating him because he is unmarried. He is ugly and humped, she says, but might look as well as another in the dark.

Standish Hayes O’Grady has described the Midnight Court as the best poem written in Gaelic, and as I read Mr. Ussher’s translation I have felt, without sharing what seems to me an extravagant opinion, that Giolla Meidhre, had political circumstances been different, might have founded a modern Gaelic literature. Mac Conmara, or Macnamara, though his poem is of historical importance, does not interest me so much. He knew Irish and Latin only, knew nothing of his own age, saw vividly but could not reflect upon what he saw, and so remained an amusing provincial figure.

W. B. YEATS.
The Midnight Court

Translated By Percy Arland Ussher

From The Gaelic of Brian Merriman

In Four Parts

Part One

't was my wont to wander beside the stream
On the soft greensward in the morning beam.
Where the woods stand thick on the mountainside
Without trouble or care what might betide.
My heart would leap at the lake's near blue,
The horizon and the far-off view.
The hills that rear their heads on high
Over each other's backs to spy.
'Twould gladden the soul with dole oppressed,
With sorrows seared and with cares obsessed
Of the outcast Gael without gold or goods
To watch for a while o'er the tops of the woods
The ducks in their flocks on the tide, the swan
Gliding with stately gait along,
The fish that leap on the air with glee
And the speckled perch with gambols free,
The labouring waves laving the shore
With glistening spray and rumbling roar,
The sea-gulls shrieking and reeling wide,
And the red deer romping in woodland ride,
The bugle's blare and the huntsman's yell
And the hue and cry of the pack pell-mell.
Yesterday morn the sky was clear
In the dog-days' heat of the mad mid-year,
And the sun was scouring the slumb'rous air
With his burning beams and gleaming glare.
And the leaves lay dense on the bending trees
And the lush grass waved in the scented breeze.
Blossom and spray and spreading leaf
Lightened my load and laid my grief,
Weary and spent with aching brain
I sank and lay on the murmuring plain,
In the shade of a tree with feet outspread
With my hot brow bared and shoe-gear shed.
When I closed the lids on my languid eyes
And covered my face from teasing flies
In slumber deep and in sleep's delusion
The scene was changed in strange confusion,
My frame was heaved and my head turned round
Without sense or sight in sleep profound.
I fancied there as I dare avouch
That the land was quaking beneath my couch,
And a hurricane blew with fury o’er me
And tongues of fire flared forth before me.
I threw a glance with beglamoured eyes
And beheld a hag of hideous guise.
Her shape with age and ague shook,
The plain she scoured with glowering look,
Her girth was huge, her height was quite
Seven yards or more if I reckoned it right,
Her cloak’s tail trailed a perch’s length,
She gripped a staff with manful strength,
Her aspect stark with angry stare,
Her features tanned by wind and air,
Her rheumy eyes were red and blear,
Her mouth was stretched from ear to ear,
A plate of brass held fast her bonnet
With bailiff’s powers inscribed upon it.
She grimly gazed and gruffly spake:—
‘You lazy laggard, arise! awake!
Is this the way for you, wretch, to be,
When the court is seated for all to see?
No court of robbers and spoilers strong
To maintain the bane of fraud and wrong,
But the court of the poor and lowly-born,
The court of women and folk forlorn.
It’s joyful hearing for Erin that
The Good Folk’s Host [1] have in Council sat
On the mountain’s summit for three days’ space
In Brean Moy Graney’s meeting-place.
His Highness grieves and his noble throng
That Erin lingers in thraldom long,
Wasted by woe without respite,
To misery’s hand abandoned quite,
Her land purloined, her laws decayed,
Her wealth destroyed and her trust betrayed,
Her fields and pastures with weeds o’ergrown,
Her ground untilled and her crops unsown,
Her chieftains banished and an upstart band
Of hirelings holding the upper hand,
Who’d skin the widow and orphan child
And grind the weak and the meek and mild.
Shame ’tis, sure, that the poor oppressed
By lawless might, in plight distressed.
Get nought for aught but extortion vile,
The judge’s fraud and the lawyer’s wile,
The tyrant’s frown and the sycophant’s sneer
Bribing with fee and with fawning leer.
’Twas among the plaints that there were pleaded—
For every wrong was heard and heeded—
A charge in which you'll be implicated,
That the men and youths remain unmated,
And your maids in spinsterhood repining
And their bloom and beauty in age declining,
And the human race apace decreasing
With wars and famines and plagues unceasing,
The pride of kings and princes feeding,
Since your lads and lasses have left off breeding.
Your scanty brood 'tis sad to see
With women in bands on land and sea,
Buxom maids that fade obscure
And tender slips with lips that lure,
Damsels shy by shame retarded
And willing wenches unregarded.
'Tis sad no noble seed should rise
From lads of lusty thews and thighs,
'Twere well could all know what maids' woes are,
Prepared to fall on the first proposer.
To consider the case with due precision
The council came to a new decision,
To find the fittest among the throng
To learn the right and requite the wrong.
They appointed straight a maid serene,
Eevell of Craglee, Munster's queen.
To hold her court and preside there o'er it
And invite the plaintiffs to plead before it.
The gentle lady swore to elicit
Of falsehood purged the truth explicit,
To hear the plea of the unbefriended
And see the state of the hapless mended.
This court is seated in Feakle now,
Arise and trudge, for you thither must go,
Arise and trudge without more delay,
Arise at once for I'll take no nay !'
She clapped her claw on my cape behind
And whisked me away like a wisp on the wind
O'er mud and mire, mountain and valley.
To Moinmoy Hill at the churchyard alley.
'Tis sure I saw with torches flaring
A lofty hall with trumpets blaring,
With glare of light and brightly burnished.
With fleeces draped and great doors furnished,
And the portly queen with a courtly gesture
On the judge's bench in a splendid vesture,
And a troop of toughs with gruff demeanour
To clear the court and escort and screen her,
And people in throngs along the benches
Both women and men and boys and wenches,
And a weeping nymph in the witness-box
Of comely mould and golden locks,
With heaving breast and face aflame
And tears that gushed with grief and shame,  
With flowing hair and staring eyes  
And moans and groans and sobs and sighs.
Her passion’s blast at last abated,  
Weary of woe, with sorrow sated,  
She dried her eyes, her sighs surmounted,  
And in these words her woes recounted:—
‘We give you greeting, Eevell fair,  
Gracious queen, your people’s care,  
Who pity the poor and relieve their plight  
And save the brave and retrieve the right.
’Tis the cause of my anguish and grief of heart,  
The source of my sorrow and inward smart,  
My wounding rending pain unending,  
The way our women thro’ life are wending,
Gray, gloomy nuns with the grave pursuing,  
Since our men and maidens have left off wooing;
Myself among them condemned to wait  
Without hope and mope in the maiden state,  
Or children creeping on hearth and floor
In dread and fear—a drear subsistence—  
Of finding nought to support existence,  
By troubles pressed and by rest forsaken,  
By cares consumed and by sorrows shaken.
Chaste Eevell, hasten to the relief  
Of the women of Erin in their grief,  
Wasting their pains in vain endeavour  
To meet with mates who elude them ever,  
Till in the ages is such disparity  
We would not touch them except from charity,  
With bleary eyes and wry grimaces  
To scare a maiden from their embraces.  
And if in manhood’s warm pulsation  
A youth is tempted to change his station,  
He chooses a dour and sour-faced scold  
Who’s wasted her days in raising gold;  
No lively lass of sweet seventeen  
Of figure neat and features clean,  
But blear-eyed hag or harridan brown  
With toothless jaws and hairless crown  
And snotty nose and dun complexion  
And offering constant shrill correction.
My heart is torn and worn with grieving,  
And my breast distressed with restless heaving,  
With torture dull and with desperation  
At the thought of my dismal situation,
When I see a bonny and bold young blade  
With comely features and frame displayed,  
A sturdy swearer or spanking buck,  
A sprightly strapper with spunk and pluck,
A goodly wopper well made and planned,
A gamey walloper gay and grand,
Nimble and brave and bland and blithe.
Eager and active and brisk and lithe,
Of noted parts and of proved precocity,
Sold to a scold or old hidiosity,
Withered and worn and blear and brown,
A mumbling, grumbling, garrulous clown,
A surly, sluttish and graceless gawk
Knotted and gnarled like a cabbage’s stalk,
A sleepy, sluggish decayed old stump,
A useless, juiceless and faded frump.
Ah, woe is me ! there’s a crumpled crone
Being buckled to-night while I’m left lone.
She’s a surly scold and a bold-faced jade
And this moment she’s merry — and me a maid !
Why wouldn’t they have myself in marriage ?
I’m comely and shapely, of stately carriage,
I’ve a mouth and a smile to make men dream
And a forehead that’s fair with ne’er a seam,
My teeth are pearls in a peerless row,
Cherries to vie with my lips pray show.
I’ve a dancing, glancing, entrancing eye,
Roguish and rakish and takish and sly,
Gold lacks lustre beside my hair,
And every curl might a saint ensnare,
My cheeks are smooth without stain or spot,
Dimpled and fresh without blemish or blot,
My throat, my hands, my neck, my face,
Rival each other in dainty grace,
I’ve hips and ankles and lips and breast
And limbs to offer as good as the best.
Look at my waist tight-laced and slim,
I’m not coarse or ragged or rank of limb,
Not stringy or scraggy or lanky or lean
But as fair a female as e’er was seen,
A pleasing, teasing and tempting tart
That might coax and entice the coldest heart.
If I were a tasteless, graceless baggage,
A slummocky scut of cumbrous carriage,
A sloven or slut or frump or fright,
Or maid morose and impolite,
An awkward gawk of ungainly make,
A stark and crooked and stiff old stake,
A senseless, sightless bent old crone,
I wouldn’t complain if they left me alone.
I’ve never been present that I’m aware
At wedding or wake or fete or fair.
At the racing-ring or the hurling-ground
Or wherever the menfolk may be found,
But I’ve managed to make some shape and show
And been bedizened from top to toe
With stylish hood and starched coiffure
And powder-sprinkled chevelure,
My speckled gown with ribbons tied
And ruffles with the richest vied.
With cardinal of scarlet hue
And facings pleasing to the view.
And cambric apron gaily sown
With blowzy flowers of kind unknown,
And rigid hoops and buckled shoes
With smooth high heels attached by screws
And silken gloves and costly lace
And flounces, fringes, frills and stays.
Mind, do not think I’m an artless gull,
A stupid, unsocial or bashful trull,
Timid, a prey to wayward fancies,
Or shy or ashamed of a man’s advances.
I’m ever on view to the crowds that pass
At market or meeting or Sunday Mass,
At supper or social or raffle or race
Or wherever the gayest are going the pace,
At party or pattern or picnic or fete
In hopes that I’d click with some lad soon or late;
But all my pursuit is a futile endeavour.
They’ve baulked me and bilked me and slipped from me ever.

They’ve baffled my schemes and my best-conceived art’
They’ve spurned me and turned from me and tattered my heart;
After all my advances, my ogling and sighing,
My most killing glances, my coaxing and eyeing,
After all I have spent upon readers of palms
And tellers of tea-leaves and sellers of charms.
There isn’t a plan you can conceive
For Christmas or Easter or All Saints’ Eve,
At the moon’s eclipse or the New Year’s chime
That I haven’t attempted time on time.
I never would sleep a night in bed
Without fruit-stuffed stocking beneath my head,
I would steep my shift in the millstream deep
And await the vows of my spouse in sleep,
With broom I brushed the barn as bid,
My nails and hair in ashpit hid,
Beneath the hearth the flail I laid,
Below my pillow placed the spade,
My distaff in the graveyard’s bed,
In lime-kiln low my ball of thread,
The flax I strewed amid the dust,
A cabbage-head in bed-straw thrust,
At every stage, by rage distraught,
The deuce and his dam aloud besought.
'Tis why I am laying my case before ye
That I’m single still at the end of the story,
And age draws near with outrageous pace
To rob my form of its former grace.
O matchless maid, have mercy, pray,
E’er my freshness fade and my charms decay
And you see me left in plight forlorn
My beauty’s prime and pride to mourn,
With bleaching hairs, by cares oppressed,
On unfriendly hearths an unwelcome guest.
By blood and wounds, fire, thunder, air,
Of shame and scorn I’ve borne my share,
My plans and plots foiled and frustrated
Whilst I view my nearest kindred mated.
Jane has a fine and fair-faced spouse
And Kate is waiting to take the vows,
Helen has hooked a handsome buck
And with jeers and gibes derides my luck,
My neighbour Nan is spliced with a spanker
While I’m left on the shelf to cark and canker,
Consider my case and face my plight,
And say if you dare that it’s fair and right.
Too long I wait and waste my pains,
One hope untried as yet remains,
A potent charm as I have heard
Is putrid herbs well stewed and stirred,
I know the sort and will proceed
To make it aid me in my need.
A subtle spell that succour brings
Is orchid’s leaves and dungfly’s wings
And roots of figwort powdered well
With more besides I may not tell.
'Twas wondered everywhere of late
How yonder maid secured a mate,
At Shrove her secret she confessed
And Hallow E’en has seen her braced,
For water-spiders soaked in beer
And withered grass formed all her fare.
So, pity, queen, my lonely plight
Or troth! I’ll try the plan to-night.'

[1] Mr. Robin Flower pointed this out to me. *Cadmus and Vanessa*, which has the precision of fine prose, is the chief authority for the first meeting of Swift and Esther Vanhomrigh. I think it was Sir Walter Scott who first suggested ‘a constitutional infirmity’ to account for Swift’s emotional entanglement, but this suggestion is not supported by Irish tradition. Some years ago a one-act play was submitted to the Abbey Theatre reading committee which showed Swift saved from English soldiers at the time of the ‘Drapier letters’ by a young harlot he was accustomed to visit. The author claimed that though the actual incident was his invention, his view of Swift was traditional, and inquiry proved him right. I had always known that stories of Swift and his serving man were folklore all over Ireland and now I learned from country friends why the man was once dismissed. Swift
sent him out to fetch a woman and when Swift woke in the morning he found that she was a negress.


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