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The value of the face

Face, fear, flaw and shame in an Irish king’s saga

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ABSTRACT Rekdal presents a reading of one Old Irish King saga, *Echtra Fergus mac Léti*. Rekdal concentrates on an important honour motive in literature: how honour and shame are connected to the human face and bodily descriptions. Rekdal interprets the tale as an exposition of the meaning and implications of honour-price: The fact that the honour price of a person refers to a word for face underscores how central both face and façade are to honour and to shame; a king whose face is tarnished is no longer fit to rule his kingdom.

KEY WORDS honour | shame | values | loss of face

The greatest fear in early Irish sagas and tales seems to be made to blush: your face should remain unmarked by outer and inner turmoil. In the above quote we hear about a warrior-champion’s fear of being made to blush by others (cf. ‘úamun a imderchta’ lit. transl. ‘fear of his being made to blush’). The verbs used for blushing are expressing to become red: *ruadaig, imdergad* both containing an adjective for red (‘ruad’, ‘derg’). Blushing would, of course, reveal a kind of inner turmoil hence the fear of blushing. Whether the shame is a result of the blushing or the blushing a result of the shame, however, is sometimes hard to say as the face or the appearance

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1.  DIL: Dictionary of the Irish language (eDII on the internet), TBC² = Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Yellow Book of Lecan

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is supposed to remain untouched and therefore anything that may change it should be shunned.² In the case under discussion in this essay, however, the actual shame can be concealed as long as it does not show. Also for a king – who is the exemplum of a warrior – fear was a great challenge that had to be tackled. Sometimes, however, the fear becomes overwhelming with catastrophic results, an example of which is the well-known king Suibne – a protagonist of the twelfth-century saga Buile Shuibne (‘Suibne’s frenzy’). Suibne’s fear at the battle field which becomes a kind of madness makes him incapable of ruling and remaining as king.

The word for face often semantically representing only a part of the face seems to refer to appearance or, façade, more than a restricted meaning of face. In other words it is first and foremost a matter of appearance and façade. We recognize it in the universal importance held by the aristocracy in keeping up appearance.³

The text on which the following analysis is based is the Irish king’s saga Echtra Fergusa maic Léti (‘Fergus mac Létis ekspedisjon’). The saga belongs to the early Irish king tales which in the nineteenth century were labelled the ‘Historical Cycle’ as they are regarded by historians as historical rather than legendary. In many cases this may be questioned, as none of the tales is contemporary with the king described (Rekdal 2011, 211). Fergus is described as a king of the mighty old kingdom of Ulster that was fragmented and diminished in the fifth century. These king tales tend to criticize royal conduct explicitly or implicitly, so also this tale.

The saga exists in two old Irish versions both closely related to Old Irish law. One version makes up the introductory part of the law called Cetharshlicht Athgabálae (‘The four divisions of distraint’) which is the first law mentioned in the extensive collection of laws Senchas Már – and can be dated to the middle of the seventh century.⁴ The other version is part of the commentary to the same law-text Di Chetharshlicht Athgabálae (‘On the four divisions of distraint’). This commentary is dated to the middle of the eighth century by Daniel Binchy who edited the saga in 1952 (Ériu 16, 33–48). From this it is clear that the saga was used as an illustrating example of what the law discusses: distress as part of the compensation of gold and silver, discussed in detail below. The distress in the saga is a woman who gives herself as distress in lieu of her son.

². The connection was pointed out as early as in the late ninth-century Cormac glossary (Sanas Cormaic) which names the blushing in the cheek náire ‘shame’ (Sanas Cormaic ed. by Meyer in Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts IV, p. 85, par. 883 (recte 993). Cf. also, O’Leary (1991, 25).
³. Cf. the play Don Ranudo de Colibrados (1723) by Ludvig Holberg where the gentry’s prestigious vestments indicating their stand are so worn and thorn at the back that they can only expose their front and are forced to move sideways (on the stage).
⁴. Liam Breathnach, Companion to the Corpus iuris Hibernici (Dublin, 2005) 338–346, 344
The tale consists of two episodes that may seem not to be well integrated or fused. The first relates how Fergus mac Léti is offended with the ensuing episode about how he gains knowledge that enables him to go under lakes (except for one particular lake) and his confrontation with a sea-beast that frightens him to such a degree that his face becomes distorted by fear, a beast that he finally conquers. Binchy claims that ‘the story about Fergus had nothing whatever to do with the origin of the the primitive legal remedy known to the Irish as athgáiböl [“distraint”].’ In regard to this Jacqueline Borsje (1996, 19, n. 47) points out that the tale could serve legally ‘as precedent or casus because a woman (together with land and valuables) was distrained’: ‘Without this woman the story loses its point,’ she argues. There is, however, another link to the theme of distraint, if one permits a perhaps wider definition of having your offences compensated according to your wish and not necessarily according to law, as in both cases it is a matter of compensation for offence and that is the compensation offered Fergus by the dwarfs (lúchorpáin ‘small bodies’) who try to capture him in the second episode, or part, of the tale, but fail and are confronted by Fergus and offer to compensate for the offence.

The focus of my reading of this tale here, however, is to interpret it as an exposition of the meaning and implications of honour-price (lóg n-enech ‘the value of the face’). The fact that the honour price of a person refers to a word for face underscores how central face and façade is to honour and to shame; a king whose face is tarnished is no longer fit to rule his kingdom. This has been precisely formulated by Philip O’Leary discussing laughter in early Irish literature (‘Jeers and Judgments: Laughter in Early Irish Literature’ 1991, 25): ‘For when a person whose self-image is a reflection of public opinion, whose existence achieves meaning only in a social context, is rejected…by that opinion and denied that context, he is in effect stripped of his very identity.’ O’Leary realizes the ambiguity of the word ‘enech’ mentioning our tale only in passing without discussing it (21–22).

The tale opens with Fergus giving regular safeguard (snádud) to one of three chieftains who are at war with each other. All three belong to the Féni – one of the peoples living in Ireland at the time (according to the narrative), while Fergus himself belongs to the Ulaid – the Ulster-people. Eochu Bélbuide, one of the chieftains, seeks exile with Fergus. Later on when Eochu returns to his own tribe asking for peace he is killed by six men. One of the killers is the son of Dorn (‘fist’) a chieftain’s daughter who begot the boy with an outlander (deorad). In the ensuing settlement of the injustice inflicted on Fergus by killing a man that was in Fergus’ protection, the law demands that this young assassin either must be punished by
death or his mother take on punishment on his behalf since the family does not acknowledge her child with a foreigner. The others can compensate for the punishment of murder by payment, whereas the progeny fathered by an outlander will be punished to death. A foreigner is not legally responsible for the crimes committed by his offspring, according to early Irish law, as he finds himself outside the law. In such cases, however, it is the family on the mother’s side that is responsible for the compensation of the offence. In one recension of the text, it is mentioned that the boy was conceived without the family’s knowledge or approval. In lieu of her son Dorn gives herself up in lifelong bondage to Fergus. In addition to receiving Dorn as slave Fergus is compensated by land, gold and silver measured out among the other five that inflicted the injustice on him. The exact price or his exact, legal demand (a riar – ‘his demand’) is specified: 3 x 7 cumal (a value entity: a female slave, or its equivalent). So he received 7 cumal of gold and silver, 7 cumal of land, and a female slave.5

A free man’s status was reflected in his honour-price (lóg n-enech, eg. ‘price of face’). Unfree men had no such price. The price was exacted to compensate for insults or injuries inflicted on the person himself. It would vary as to the degree of injury, like murder, satire, refused hospitality or, as in this case, ignoring protection, etc. The compensation is assessed according to the honour price corresponding to the status of the injured party.6 As Fergus is king, the price is high.

This first episode works in many ways as a frame-story to the next which describes how Fergus lived thereafter – a life in which the female slave, Dorn, plays a minor, but crucial part. In this part Fergus goes on an expedition to the sea accompanied by his charioteer. At the shore they fall asleep and while sleeping Fergus is captured and brought out to sea by lúchorpáin – (probably ‘small bodies’, later forms with metathesis were anglicized into ‘leprechaun’7) – a kind of submarine creatures. They are also referred to as abacc (dwarf). Fergus captures three of them with his hands, and they beg him to release them. So he will provide that he gets the following compensation: knowledge (eolas) that enables him to travel under seas, pools and lakes. They agree to give him that knowledge with the

5. There are some inconsistencies here which I do not see relevant for our discussion. They are, however, pointed out and discussed by Borsje (Borsje 1996: 22, n.58)
6. Charles-Edwards points out in his famous article “Honour and status in some Irish and Welsh prose tales” (1978: 130) discussing the corresponding Welsh term wynebwerth: “…wyneb (‘face’) is honour and not status; yet wynebwerth ‘face-value’ is determined by status. The reason for this is that public shame destroys the value of status and hence wrongful insult must be compensated according to status.”
7. Binchy 1952, 41, n. 2
reservation of not going into Loch Rudraige which is actually situated in Fergus’ own territory (possibly Dundrum Bay or Carlingford Lough in Co. Down).

Overcome by temptation Fergus goes into Loch Rudraige. There he is confronted by a monster (muirdris) which is described as a horrible sea-beast (peist uisice uathmar). At the sight of it Fergus’ mouth was wrenched back as far as the back of his head, and he came on land in terror (ar omon). On the beach, he asks his charioteer: ‘How do I appear to you?’ The charioteer confirms that his countenance (gné – a word for ‘face’ is not used here) is bad and advises him to go to sleep in order to let the sleep adjust the deformity of his face. He is laid down and falls to sleep.

The king has attracted a flaw or defect that does not make him fit to continue as a king; a king had to be flawless. While Fergus is asleep the charioteer consults the wise men of Ulster about the king’s distorted face. He asks who they shall replace him with as it would not be proper to have a blemished king. The wise men suggest removing all the people of the court who could in any way make the indiscretion of mentioning the blemish to the king – ‘throw his blemish into his face’ as the text says (toirbeitis a ainme ina inchaib). When he had his hair washed, he should be on his back so that he might not see his reflection in the water. This lasted for seven years.

Then somebody ‘threw his blemish into his face’. One day Fergus wanted the maidservant Dorn to wash his hair. He thought she was slow and hit her with a horsewhip (ech-fhlesc). Humiliated Dorn ‘threw’, resentfully, the ‘blemish in his face’ (dobi a an(a)im fria enechsom – we note the expression again that the blemish is ‘thrown against his face’). It is as if the utterance of the words fixes or attaches the blemish on the face and not the blemish in itself. If the blemish can be unsaid, not hidden, the status quo may be upheld.

The king reacts by cutting her into two pieces with his sword and proceeds immediately down into Loch Rudraige. The sea seethed from the contest between him and the sea-monster and after a day and a night he appeared on the surface of the loch and shows the head of the beast to the Ulstermen saying ‘I am the survivor (tiugba)’ – until he fell down dead. For a whole month the water remained red. It is noteworthy that the first part of the name Rudraige seems to be a variant of the adjective ‘ruad’ (red) as has been pointed out by Ruairí Ó hUiginn (1993). It is relevant to ask whether there is a wordplay going on in the tale that interconnects the fact of blushing of shame with the reddening sea which for a month remains red from blood after the killing of the sea-monster. Binchy seems to be of the same

8. Inchaib is dativ plural of ēnech often used for a face as the original meaning of the word seems to be brows or cheeks (cf. eDIL – Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language).
opinion when he suggests that it might have been ‘intended as an “etymological” explanation of the name Loch Rudraige’ (Binchy 1952, 44, n. 3).

What should we make of this ending? When told by the slave woman that his face was blemished Fergus realized that his position was untenable. He could no longer continue as a king. This happened as the slave woman spoke out about his blemish that had hitherto been kept a secret from him and from the people in general. Once it is said aloud, it is made public and the public opinion will reject him. It is clear from the question he asked his charioteer when he came out of the sea that king Fergus himself dreaded that the fright he experienced during his meeting with the terrifying sea-monster may have had deformed his face. His charioteer even told him that it had, but promised that it would go away by sleep. Thus Fergus was well aware that his kingship was at stake. As, however, no step was taken to replace him, one could say that Fergus was led to believe that his face had been cured by the sleep. It must, then, have been a shock for him to realize that he had been deceived for seven years. As his position as king is doomed he can at least try to conquer that which took from him his kingship without risking other than his life: the sea-monster. This will prove his prowess. So he goes immediately down into the loch in order to kill the monster. Thus he dies as a result of violating a prohibition and promise which brought on the shame of being frightened and that fear caused his blemish; his death at least is marked by courage – a virtue for a war-leader and champion. This reveals how the blemish is part of something shameful: fear. A king and warrior-champion should not show fear. The fact that Fergus immediately after being told about his blemish enters the forbidden loch may be read as he trying to amend the shameful state he had brought himself into. By venturing to fight the beast that frightened him so that he was blemished he is showing courage. As he finally conquers it his exclamation serves to demonstrate his virtue of prowess: I, the king, am the survivor and not the beast.

It should be noted that blemish could imply any physical flaw. The flaw, however, needs not to be in the face – the seat of honour and shame – but also loss of limb like king Nuadu who loses his arm, and his kingship, in the tale called Cath Maige Tuired (‘The Second battle of Mag Tuired’). It is the physical flaw, wherever it is, that has honour removed from the face and replaced by shame. Consequently, the person has no longer an honour-price. That it in this case is the face, I take it to underscore the consequences a blemish has for a person’s honour-price (lóg n-enech), it refers to a literal meaning of the term. The word used – enech – was probably still used generally for face when these texts were written in the eighth century. According to DIL, it is supposed that it originally meant eyebrow or cheek more than face as such (‘face, countenance’) and it occurred (therefore)
often in plural form (cf. ina inchaib – as is used in the tale). In Old Irish it may seem to appear mostly in compounds and set phrases: clár-ainech/enech (flat-faced) and enech i n-inchaib (face to face). The more usually word for face was probably agad, aiged (Cf. the use of agad in a gloss in the MS called TCD H 3.18 which preserves a recension of the tale called H, (see Binchy: 44, n.1). Aiged in this meaning was eventually in some dialects of Modern Irish replaced by éadan (Old Irish étan) which originally meant forehead. In the archaic poem based on the same saga as well as in the other prose version different words for face are used ‘gnuí’, ‘gné’, ‘agad’ (TCD H). In this latter recension gné is used by the charioteer answering the king about his face (see also O’Leary 1991, 20–21).

The close relation between face and honour seems to occur in many cultures as it is reflected in their respective languages: to lose face, etc. Thus, we can discern two stages in this particular process of losing face. The first phase is how Fergus’ face becomes distorted by fear in confrontation with the beast. In meeting with the beast words for fear are mentioned twice: the beast is described as frightful (uath-mar) and when frightened Fergus goes ashore in terror (ar omon). Fear is related to shame and degradation, but it seems that the distortion caused by Fergus’ fright does not become a cause for shame until it is made official. The story seems to tell that a blemish (ainim) first becomes the blemish that precludes the king’s ability to rule when it is uttered loudly, publicized. As long as the people are ignorant of his flaw his image as a just king remains intact.

If we compare these implications of honour in the medieval Irish aristocratic and elitist society with the honour-culture of Arab and Muslim countries of today there are many similarities. We recognize the importance of appearing strong as was also the case for Fergus: more important than the continuation of his rule – even more important than his life. This is commonplace in the Arabic honour-culture as is shrewdly pointed out by James Bowman (29–30) in the case of Saddam Hussein’s way of handling the negotiations with the West concerning the eventuality of his possession of weapons of mass destruction. In the Western culture we cannot easily comprehend the gravity of the offense felt among Arabs as our apprehension refers to the ‘feelings of the individual or the individual in relation to some vague defined public – to people in general.’ (Bowman 2006, 38) Whereas in these saga-tales honour depends on the honour group as is claimed by Bowman for greater parts of the Arab world, and its demands on the individual. Thus, as long as Fergus’ blemish was kept within his small honour-group (the wise men of Ulster) his honour remained intact, but as soon as it was made public, shared with a wider group – as is demonstrated clearly by its being announced by a bondmaid, it became immediately a public issue and had to be defended in some
way. The blemish could not be undone, but his fear could be disproved by fighting the cause of his blemish.

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