

Classic Poetry Series

**Brian Merriman**  
**- poems -**

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## Brian Merriman(circa 1749 – 27 July 1805)

Merriman appears to have been born illegitimately in Ennistymon, County Clare. His mother was surnamed Quilkeen and his father's identity remains unknown.

Shortly after his birth, his mother married a stonemason who was working on the walls of the Deerpark estate in Ennistymon. The family moved to Feakle and some years later Merriman is known to have owned a 20 acre (81,000 m<sup>2</sup>) farm in the area. He is also known to have taught the hedge school nearby in the townland of Kilclaren. He married around 1787 and had two daughters. In 1797, the Royal Dublin Society awarded him two prizes for his flax crop. Around 1800 he moved to County Limerick, where he ran a school until his death. He is buried in Feakle graveyard.

**<b>Cúirt An Mheán Oíche</b>**

The poem begins by using the conventions of the Aisling, or vision poem, in which the poet is out walking when he has a vision of a woman from the other world. Typically, this woman is Ireland and the poem will lament her lot and/or call on her 'sons' to rebel against foreign tyranny. In Merriman's hands, the convention is made to take a satirical and deeply ironic twist.

In the opening section of the poem, a hideous female giant appears to the poet and drags him kicking and screaming to the court of Queen Aoibheal of the Fairies. On the way to the ruined monastery at Moinmoy, the messenger explains that the Queen, disgusted by the twin corruptions of Anglo-Irish landlords and English Law, has taken the dispensing of justice upon herself. There follows a traditional court case under the Brehon law form of a three-part debate.

In the first part, a young woman calls on Aoibheal declares her case against the young men of Ireland for their refusal to marry. She complains that, despite increasingly desperate attempts to capture a husband via intensive flirtation at hurling matches, wakes, and pattern days, the young men insist on ignoring her in favor of late marriages to much older women. The young woman further bewails the contempt with which she is treated by the married women of the village.

She is answered by an old man who first denounces the wanton promiscuity of young women in general, suggesting that the young woman who spoke before was conceived by a Tinker under a cart. He vividly describes the infidelity of his own young wife. He declares his humiliation at finding her already pregnant on

their wedding night and the gossip which has surrounded the "premature" birth of "his" son ever since. He disgustingly attacks the dissolute lifestyles of young women in general. Then, however, he declares that there is nothing wrong with his illegitimate children and denounces marriage as "out of date." He demands that the Queen outlaw it altogether and replace it with a system of free love.

The young woman, however, is infuriated by the old' man's words and is barely restrained from physically attacking him. She mocks his inability to fulfill his marital duties with his young wife, saying that she was a homeless beggar who married him to avoid starvation. She vividly argues that if his wife has taken a lover, she well deserves one. She then calls for the abolition of priestly celibacy, alleging that priests would otherwise make wonderful husbands and fathers. In the meantime, however, she will keep trying to attract an older man in hopes that her unmarried humiliation will finally end.

Finally, in the judgement section Queen Aoibheal rules that all laymen must marry before the age of 21, on pain of corporal punishment at the hands of Ireland's women. She advises them to equally target the romantically indifferent, homosexuals, and unmarried skirt chasers who boast of the number of notches on their belts. Aoibheal tells them to be careful, however, not to leave any man unable to father children. She also states that abolishing priestly celibacy is beyond her mandate and counsels patience.

To the poet's horror, the younger woman angrily points him out as a 30-year-old, bachelor and describes her many failed attempts to attract his interest in hopes of becoming his wife. She declares that he must be the first man to suffer the consequences of the new marriage law. As a crowd of infuriated women prepares to flog him into a quivering bowl of jelly, he awakens to find it was all a terrible nightmare.

### <b>Influence and Legacy</b>

The language of the poem is essentially the everyday Munster Irish of the time. In its frank and satirical treatment of sexuality, ironic parody of the battle of the sexes, and its biting social commentary, *Cúirt An Mheán Óiche* is a unique document in the history of Irish poetry in either language.

*Cúirt An Mheán Óiche* was never written down by its author and preserved, like much Gaelic poetry, in an oral format. It was first published in 1850 in an edition by the Irish scholar John O'Daly. In the 20th century, a number of translations have been produced, including notable English versions by Arland Ussher, Frank O'Connor, Edward Pakenham, 6th Earl of Longford, David Marcus, Ciarán Carson,

Thomas Kinsella and a partial translation by Seamus Heaney. Brendan Behan is believed to have written an unpublished, lost, version. O'Connor's translation, which is perhaps the most popular, was banned in Ireland by the Censorship Board in 1946, because of the sexual frankness of the content.

Cumann Merriman was founded in 1967 to promote the poet's work. They run an annual Merriman Summer School in County Clare each August.

In 2005, the Clare County Library released a CD recording of a local seanchai reciting *Cúirt An Mheán Óiche* in the traditional oral manner. Although it has not been made available for purchase, Cumann Merriman has posted excerpts on their website. For added contrast, the same passages are also reproduced from a modern dramatic reading of the poem.

In recent years, Merriman's poem and other Gaelic satires have heavily influenced the writings of several modern Irish poets like Seamus Heaney and Thomas Kinsella.[citation needed] Flann O'Brian's metafictional novel *At Swim Two Birds* also shows the influence of *Cúirt An Mheán Óiche* as well as other works of Irish mythology and literature.

In a 1993 lecture on Merriman's life and work, Seamus Heaney declared, "Perhaps I can convey the ongoing reality of the poem's life more simply by recollecting a Saturday evening last August when I had the privilege of unveiling a memorial to Brian Merriman on the shore of Lough Graney in Co. Clare, where the opening scene of 'The Midnight Court' is set. The memorial is a large stone quarried from a hill overlooking the lake, and the opening lines are carved on it in Irish. The people who attended the ceremony were almost all from the local district, and were eager to point out the exact corner of the nearby field where the poet had run his hedge school, and the spot on the lough shore where he had fallen asleep and had his vision. This was, and is, the first circle where Merriman's poem flourished and continues to flourish. Later that evening, for example, in a marquee a couple of miles down the road, we attended a performance by the Druid Theatre Company from Galway in which the poem was given a dramatic presentation with all the boost and blast-off that song and music and topical allusion could provide. Again, hundreds of local people were in the tent, shouting and taking sides like a football crowd, as the old man and the young woman battled it out and the president of the court gave her judgement. The psychosexual demons were no longer at bay but rampant and fully recognised, so that the audience, at the end of the performance, came away from the experience every bit as accused and absolved as the poet himself at the end of his poem. The 'profane perfection of mankind' was going ahead and civilisation was being kept on course; in a ceremony that was entirely convincing

and contemporary, Orpheus has been remembered in Ireland."

# A Limerick By Robert Conquest

First you get puking and mewling  
Then very p-ed off with your schooling  
    Then f-s and then fights  
    Then judging chaps' rights  
Then sitting in slippers-then drooling.

Brian Merriman