Beyond metonymy, beyond extravagance: two literary devices in the poetry of Sìleas na Ceapaich

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses two literary devices of late medieval and early modern Gaelic poetry from the starting point of their presence in the work of Sìleas na Ceapaich. The first part shows that in certain cases what has been seen as a metonymy (or a metaphor) is in fact a metalepsis, a more complex figure of speech. Early modern Western-European rhetoricians were understandably ambivalent, if not wary, in respect of metalepsis. Not so the Gaelic poets, for whom the codified register of courtly panegyric provided a cultural framework around which to build this particular figure of speech with full confidence of its successful delivery. The second part of the paper proposes that the well-known extended-praise section in *Alasdair a Gleanna Garadh* is a replication of a literary device common in the work of the Classical, school-trained court poets. Both devices discussed, or traces of them, can also be found in vernacular verse.

KEYWORDS

metonymy, metalepsis, *fras adhmholta*, shower of praise, figure of speech, panegyric code, education, Classical Gaelic poetry

Sìleas na Ceapaich (Sìleas MacDonald, *c*.1660–*c*.1729) has deservedly received a substantial amount of attention from modern scholarship.[1] Perhaps most celebrated for her political verse, she was also the author of a considerable corpus of religious poems, as well as of some pieces of a more personal, familial nature. The latter are of particular interest for the departures they make from Gaelic poetry as was traditional in her time (Ó Baoill 1972, 2004; Ní Annracháin 2007; Hillers 2010; Sumner 2012; Mathis 2018). This paper, an offshoot of a larger study of literary devices in Sìleas' work (Coira [in preparation]), will focus on two figures of speech. The first part considers metalepsis, a trope exploited by Sìleas as well as by other Gaelic poets. The second deals with the 'fras adhmholta' (shower of praise), a literary device which as deployed by Sìleas remains, as far as is known, the one instance of its kind within the extant corpus of Gaelic vernacular verse.[2]

METONYMY AND METALEPSIS

Metonymy, it is agreed since at least Eleanor Knott's edition of the poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (1550–1591) a century ago, is a frequent figure of speech in the work of the

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[1] Throughout this paper Scottish Gaelic names are in the modern spelling, but those of authors composing in Classical syllabic style are given in the Classical form as customary.

[2] I am grateful to the editors and to *Aiste*'s anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions, as well as to Colm Ó Baoill who read an earlier draft of this paper. For the final product I alone am responsible.

Classical Gaelic poets (1922, lv). It is similarly common in the vernacular verse of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland, of the same period and beyond, which shared much, in terms of themes and imagery, with Classical panegyric. More recently an important step forward was taken by Máire Ní Annracháin (2007), who defended the centrality of metonymy in Gaelic poetry as opposed to that of metaphor as traditionally claimed for poetry in general. Both metaphor and metonymy are figures of speech classed within the wider category of figures of comparison. The distinction between them is uncomplicated: metaphor directly substitutes a thing or concept for another, metonymy substitutes a related term. Thus, 'Oh lion in combat' is a metaphor for the subject's superior martial skills, while 'Oh invincible sword' is a metonymy conveying the same meaning, and 'Oh invincible hand' is a synecdoche (the allusion to a part by its whole or, as here, to the whole by a part) which expresses exactly the same idea as the previous two. Yet we may have been too quick in identifying as metonymy every form of figurative language that clearly involves a metonymic comparison. Sometimes a more complex process of figuration is at play, as will be shown, so that the figure of speech employed is not metonymy but metalepsis. While metalepsis is found in both Classical and vernacular Gaelic poetry, preliminary study suggests that it is more frequent in the former than in the latter.

Metalepsis, or transumption (Latin *transumptio*, 'assuming one thing for another'), is a figure of speech that perhaps requires some introduction. Cumming's essay (2007) provides a particularly relevant one, focusing as it does with metalepsis – in non-Gaelic literatures – in the early modern period. In this 'highly specialised type of rhetorical figure' (Cummings 2007, 221) one thing refers to another that is not immediately connected to it: metalepsis replaces one figure with another, missing out the figure – or figures – between the two, the key to the connection being precisely in the missing figure (say a metaphor or a metonymy). In other words, metalepsis is created by beginning with a figure of speech and then picking an element or quality from it to create another figure of speech. An example is 'pallid death': death itself is not pallid, but it causes the body to become pale.[3] Another, oft-quoted example comes from the sixteenth-century English playwright Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*:

> Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
> and burnt the topless towers of Ilium?[4]

A face does not launch ships or burn towers. But one might read 'face' as a metonymy for the beauty of Helen of Troy and recall the story of how her abduction resulted in the Trojan wars, which began with the Greek army sending out a thousand ships against Ilium (Troy), and the connection is made, despite the missing details.

Early modern handbooks of poetry grouped metalepsis with other figures of comparison (metaphor, simile, metonymy, and so on), but their authors often treated it 'with some note of caution or distaste' (Cummings 2007, 220). Partly this was because this figure of speech is close to catachresis (the improper use of words), regarded in the manuals as a fault (Cummings 2007, 223). But also, because metalepsis involves a process of moving by stages towards what one means to say but with one or more stages left out, there is a risk of the missing figure escaping the reader, or listener, in which case the metalepsis has failed. Despite all this, not all early modern *literati* of the European Latin tradition steered clear of metalepsis: Shakespeare's work teems with it – not that his has changed some views that this device 'can hardly be counted amongst the most glamorous of the flowers of rhetoric' (Cummings 2007, 217–18, 219, 231).[5]

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[3] 'Metalepsis', in *Silva Rhetoricae* <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/> [accessed 27 December 2022]

[4] Quoted in Baldick 2015, s.v.

Having established the basics of metalepsis, as well as the ambivalence surrounding it, we now turn to Gaelic poetry. Beginning with Classical syllabic verse, we find that the *filidh* are no strangers to this particular type of figurative language. An example, from a sixteenth-century panegyric by Munster poet Domhnall Mac Bruaideadha, is 'Banbha bratuaine' (green-cloaked Banbha) (McKenna 1939–40, 108, at §23b) with a process of figuration similar to that in 'pallid death': Banbha is a metaphorical name for Ireland; Ireland's landscape abounds in green fields (the missing stage of metalepsis, here in a metonymic relation to Banbha); the green fields resemble a cloak that Banbha (in poetry regularly understood as a woman) is wearing. Another example comes from a warning poem by Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn, where he reproaches William Búrc for raiding his cattle: 'níor ghníomh cóir… | béin a hóir don ealadhain' (it was no meet action to snatch her gold from poesy) (Knott 1922, 170, at §12cd). The chain here involves two metonymies: gold for cattle and poesy for the poet himself. Elsewhere the same poet describes the castle of Seán Ó Néill (d.1567) as 'an cróchbhrugh ceólbhras' (saffron-tinted castle of brave melody) (Knott 1922, 38, at §4a); the missing information here are the musicians playing at the sumptuous feasts that Ó Néill, at least in accordance with poetic codified diction, frequently holds for his friends and men of learning.

While metalepsis is relatively frequent in Classical verse, some instances can also be found in pre-Classical poetry. Thus, in a seventh-century poem Colum Cille is praised as 'caindel Néill' (Níall's candle) (Clancy and Márkus 1995, 138, at §14). The word 'candle' is a common metaphor of the category termed by Eleanor Knott as 'conveying the idea of brilliance' (Knott 1922, liv); and the word 'Níall' is not just a mere, fanciful allusion to Níall Noígíallach ('Níall of the Nine Hostages'), high-king of Ireland (d. 405), but a celebration of Colum Cille's descent from him. Had the poet said 'candle of Níall, your royal ancestor', we would have a plain metaphor; but instead we have a metalepsis, by reason of a missing element, the explicit genealogical connection. To give another example, a tenth-century king of Dublin was praised by a poet as 'déne dúthaige', which has been rendered 'zeal of heredity' (Mac Cana 2004, 26); a more literal translation, 'zeal of native [or hereditary] land', shows that figuration is more complex than a simple metaphor ('zeal') for the patron, with zealousness applying to his protection of his land and people.

We next look at some instances of metalepsis in poetry for Scottish subjects. Am Bard Mac an tSaoir, who lived in the late fifteenth century and may not have been a *file* (Coira 2012, 198), speaks of 'long… go h-úrchóideach ionnsaightheach' (A ship … hurtful and hostile) (Watson 1937, 224), which more accurately is a ship whose crew are hurtful and hostile. Cathal Mac Muireadhaigh (*fl.*1600–1650) notes 'Tighe dearga ó thráigh gu tráigh' (Red houses from shore to shore). It is not that the houses themselves are red: they appear that colour because, in the poet's hyperbolical statement, they have become doused in the enemy blood spilt by the victorious warrior (Black 1973, 344, at §3a). The well-known incitement poem for Seamus MacDhòmhnaill (James MacDonald of Islay, d.1626) contains several metalepses, as where the anonymous Irish author urges his subject: 'Beir ar chraoisigh na gcáor neimhe' (Take hold of the lance of the piercing flashes). It is not the flashes that pierce, that injure, but the lance that produces them as it is swiftly wielded in combat. In another quatrain the poet urges his subject to make for Ireland: 'eirg san Iobhraigh nár airg chill' (embark […] in the *Iobhrach* that has never harried church); in this metalepsis the poetic conceit that presents the patron as a protector of the church is transferred to the *Iobhrach* (Seamus's ship). Obviously, this is only a roundabout way of applying the conceit to MacDhòmhnaill himself; but what matters for our purpose is that this roundabout way is in effect a metalepsis. A few quatrains later Seamus is said to be 'bile sháorfas Éirinn óigh' (the great tree that shall deliver virgin Ireland). This four-word phrase contains multiple figuration: 'bile' is a metaphor for the subject; 'óigh' conveys the idea that Ireland is without a high-king (a metaphor for spouse), which metonymically connects with the conceit of the chief's marriage to the territory, and contextually legitimates MacDhòmhnaill's suitability for the high-kingship of Ireland; and the deliverance sought is that from foreign domination, a theme and an argument that likewise connects with the high-kingship (Bergin 1970, 162–63, 164, at §§6, 7, 18).

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[5] Similarly: '[a] second-order device in rhetoric' (Baldick 2008, s.v.).

Each of these examples shows a profound figurative process in place, and that Cummings is correct (2007, 221) in stating that 'much of the interest in metalepsis lies indeed in what it leaves out'. In the case of Classical Gaelic poetry, no one with at least some knowledge of its conventions would have any difficulties (except where facing cultural or lexical lacunae) in understanding such expressions; in other words, in identifying what has been left out, the missing steps in the metaleptic process. Why this is so has a simple explanation. Cummings notes that there are questions about 'how such transference [of meaning] can take place, and the conditions under which the transference can be held to be successful'; questions about 'what are understood to be the criteria of [metalepsis'] success', 'what has been substituted for what' (Cummings 2007, 220, 224). But no such questions arise in the case of early modern Gaelic poetry (and Gaelic literature generally), because it operates within the clear criteria provided by the rhetoric of panegyric, the set of codified praise conceits or conventions that some modern scholars also refer to as the panegyric code or the heroic code. Here it must be noted that there was nothing exclusive or arcane about this codification. The praise conventions – many of which are also found in medieval poetry generally, as prescribed by the British and continental schools (Coira 2020, 189–90) – portrayed the subject as the ideal ruler and thus, as uttered by the *file*, legitimised the subject's leadership. That they were understood by the audience is hardly questionable, for court poetry was essentially political propaganda (Simms 1987, 60, 66). Public recitation was the means through which this poetry fulfilled its sociopolitical function, and unintelligibility would have defeated its purpose, both in praise and in satire.[6] Knowing, then, how the codification worked, what each figure stood for, meant that the transference process could be made without difficulty and therefore metalepsis could be confidently used by authors without fear of failure. The examples in the two previous paragraphs indeed show how in virtually every instance the metalepsis is intricately wrought around established praise conventions. In contrast to what was the experience of other cultures, Gaelic metalepsis was not difficult or obscure and did not '[strain] the understanding and the patience of the reader or auditor' hoping to work it out 'perhaps even with some pleasure' (Cummings 2007, 222–23).[7]

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[6] This is despite an apparent lingering reputation of the *filidh* of preserving their early-medieval predecessors' delight in linguistic obscurity; see Innes 2017, especially at 291, 294–97. There is no evidence of contemporary need for *enarratio* (explanation, interpretation) of the poetry of the Classical Gaelic period. The codified diction, which also features in other literary genres and in historical writing, affected principally the imagery presenting the subject as the ideal ruler (or otherwise in case of satire), with many motifs originating in Gaelic law. What might affect comprehension was the sometimes strained syntax caused by the complexity of versification rules, as I note below.

Metalepsis, 'a kind of compressed chain of metaphorical reasoning' (Lanham 1991, 99), facilitates economy of expression because it leaves out at least one step in the figurative process. Thus it is perhaps well suited to Classical syllabic verse, which is characterised by terseness and succinctness (and at times concomitant obscurity) of expression, often resulting from its own complex prosodic requirements. Vernacular poetry, on the other hand, has considerably fewer such constraints, and so can generally accommodate whole sentences that are syntactically arranged in the way they would be in natural speech, or close enough to it. This may at least in part explain why, if my initial survey points in the right direction, metalepsis is less frequent in the work of the vernacular poets. To give some examples, Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh (*c.*1620–*c.*1707) has metaleptic expressions like 'talla nan cuach' (the hall of the wine-cups), 'taigh mòr macnasach meadhrach' (A mansion blithe and festive), or 'àras nach crìon' (a dwelling which is not niggardly) (Ó Baoill 2014, ll. 263, 86, 481). The first two refer to a hall and a mansion whose owner often and lavishly entertains in, the last to a dwelling with an owner of bountiful generosity and hospitality. None of the expressions actually praises a room or a building but rather the person to whom they belong, and all ascribe to a place a quality of its owner, much as in the 'pallid death' example. Despite instances of metalepsis (almost always in the form of a kenning), much more frequently Màiri expresses the same or similar ideas in full sentences: thus '[…] do thalla mòr prìosail […] | Far am faca mi fìon bhith ga òl' (Your great and brilliant hall, where I have seen wine being drunk); or 'Innis nam bàrd cinneadail gràidh, | Duineil ri dàimh dualachais' (the refuge of poets, clannish and loving, hospitable to long-established friends) (Ó Baoill 2014, ll. 89, 91, 609–11). Similar, and sometimes identical, expressions can be found in the poetry of Iain Lom (*c.*1624–*c.*1710) (MacKenzie 1964, ll. 1641, 1815, 1816–17, 2818–20).

Focusing now on Sìleas na Ceapaich, she is noteworthy not only on account of the several metalepses we find in her extant work but also because some of them have been constructed without any reference to the codified conventions of panegyric. This points to a true understanding by Sìleas of this figure of speech (as opposed to the repetition of kennings borrowed from the Classical repertoire, or at least based on it) as well as to genuine poetic creativity. While it is agreed that she was educated to a high standard, we have near to no detail about the place, form and content of her education; but there may well have been an emphasis on its literary component, since her father, Gilleasbaig (d.1682), fifteenth chief of Keppoch, was himself a poet.[8] Whether through formal instruction or social exposure to both Classical and vernacular Gaelic poetry, clearly our poet had absorbed this rhetorical device and could put it into use herself, even in new, creative ways. To give some examples of metalepsis in her work, and beginning with those involving stock conventions, we will first note the statement 'Bu tu 'n laoch gun athadh làimhe' in the lament for the chief of Glengarry, which Sìleas' biographer and editor renders 'You were a champion whose arm never flinched' (Ó Baoill 1972, l. 834). But something has been lost in translation, and that is the figure of speech, for the original speaks of a champion without 'cowardice of arm', a metalepsis again of the type of 'pallid death': the quality of bravery (lack of cowardice) is ascribed to the champion, not directly but synecdochically by applying it to his arm. Of the same type is 'craobh chosgairt' (a slaughtering tree, or perhaps a victorious tree, with tree as a metaphor for a warrior) in one of the political poems (Ó Baoill 1972, l. 252).

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[7] For studies on the codified conventions of Gaelic panegyric see MacInnes 2006 ; Black 2001; Dewar 2006; Ní Annracháin 2007; Coira 2012. See also the series of articles in McManus 2006, 2009, 2013, 2015.

In the song for her daughter, Màiri, the poet claims royal connections for the young girl on account of her fostering: 'Gur dalta Chiorstan Stiùbhart thu, | 'S gun do d'òl thu sùgh a féithean (Ó Baoill 1972, ll. 34–35). Sìleas' editor translates these lines as 'You are a foster-child of Christine Stewart, and you have been fed at her breast'; here again the figure of speech has vanished in translation. The fundamental meaning of 'sùgh' is 'juice, sap, moisture', and among a variety of applications the term is found in poetry conveying the meaning '[breast] milk', as in metonymical expressions like 'súgh do chíoch' (the juice of your breasts). 'Féith' has several meanings, including 'sinew' and 'vein'.[9] Sìleas' 'sùgh a féithean', then, is literally 'the juice of her veins', a figuration process that goes beyond simple metonymy by incorporating a second one ('veins' for 'breasts'), and the result is a metalepsis. While Ciorstan seems to be invoked as Màiri's wet nurse, this is more likely a further metonymical figure, for Màiri was Ciorstan's 'dalta', and fostering took place at a second stage of childhood rather than at the infant stage (Nenadic 2007, 45–47).[10] The suggestion seems to be that Màiri had absorbed royalty, so to speak, by reason of her fostering with a woman bearing the surname Stiùbhart. The poet Dòmhnall Moireasdan (*fl.* mid-eighteenth century) used a similar image in a poem for the chief of Coll: 'B'i do mhuime bhean chìche | Rinn do chuislean a lìonadh' (It was your wet nurse | who filled your veins) (Ó Baoill 1997, ll. 945–46).

Again we have a metalepsis in the lament for Lachlann Dall, where Sìleas says: 'Bu bhinn do mheòir' (Your fingers were sweet[-sounding]). The pleasant musical sound is attributed to the musician's fingers (so that additionally we have here synesthesia, a figure of speech which describes a sense-impression in terms normally used to describe another), without reference to the harp's strings from which it actually emerges. There is, then, an implicit, left-out metonymy, similar to that in the phrase 'do chom buidhe binn' (your sweet[-sounding] sallow body) in Sìleas' address to the harp (Ó Baoill 1972, ll. 1305, 1342). It might be noted at this point that the excluded middle figure in the Gaelic metalepses given so far is almost without exception metonymy, as opposed to metaphor or some other figure of comparison. This is hardly surprising, given both the central place of metonymy in Gaelic poetry and the crucial part consistently played by the codified praise rhetoric in Gaelic metalepsis. A more comprehensive study will be needed to test the accuracy of what begins to suggest itself from my initial survey: that most Gaelic metalepses are wrought around the codified stock conventions of panegyric, and consequently are metonymy-based.

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[8] For the manuscript and print sources of the poems ascribed to Gilleasbaig na Ceapaich see Ó Baoill and MacAulay 2001, 12–13. One of Gilleasbaig's poems, interestingly, makes a number of allusions to writing and to writing equipment (Hogg 2021, 280).

[9] eDIL **súg (a)**; eDIL **1 féith**.

[10] See also eDIL **1 cích (c)** for the connection between 'breast' and 'fostering'.

A further example is to be found in a line of the chorus of another lament, where Sìleas has: 'So ceann na bliadhna thog riadh dhìom dùbailt' (here ends the year which has levied a double interest on me) (Ó Baoill 1972, l. 742). The image evoked is one of the year as a greedy profiteer who has on this occasion doubled its interest, the missing figure being interest as a metaphor for death. Here admittedly the codified praise conventions are no help; but the meaning of this line becomes clear as the next few stanzas reveal the nature of the double interest, with Sìleas first mourning her two personal losses (her husband and their daughter Anna) and next the loss suffered by the whole clan (the death of the chief of Sleat, at the time considered the head of Clan Donald). Another instance of a metalepsis that does not involve routine praise conventions comes from one of Sìleas' religious poems: 'éideadh na fuarachd' (the garb of coldness) to refer to the 'lèine-bhàis' or death shroud (Ó Baoill 1972, l. 1064).[11] The special interest of metalepses like these last two is precisely their creation without reference to the cultural frame and conventions provided by the Gaelic poetic code: they are a testimony to Sìleas' talent and creativity beyond the well-trodden confines of tradition.

ALASDAIR A GLEANNA GARADH[12]

The poem beginning *Alasdair a Gleanna Garadh* is a lament by Sìleas for Alasdair Dubh MacDhòmhnaill (Black Alexander MacDonald), 11th chief of Glengarry (d.1721), and, if we believe one source, one of many composed by her in his memory (Ó Baoill 1972, 164). It is syllabic-based, in a loose form of *rannaigheacht*, and, as will be shown, the metre is far from the only distinctive feature making it a higher-register literary work. One can only speculate on the reason why Sìleas would have chosen to make it so; her lament for MacDonald of Sleat (Ó Baoill 1972, ll. 739–98), in content as in metre (accentual), and sharing a space with the poet's personal losses, pales in comparison. Shared Jacobite affinities are unlikely to be the only explanation. There may have been a family connection: tantalisingly, our main source for Clan Donald history states, when giving the offspring of Alasdair nan Cleas, 10th chief of Keppoch (d.1645), that 'A daughter […] married Donald McAngus of Glengarry'. Yet there is no mention of this marriage where the same source gives the genealogy of the Glengarry branch of the clan (MacDonald & MacDonald, 3: 310–11, 420, 421). If such a union did take place, Alasdair nan Cleas would have been a shared ancestor of Sìleas and Alasdair Dubh. On the other hand, while the Clan Donald historians mention the second marriage of Alasdair Buidhe of Keppoch, 14th chief (d.1669) and grandfather of Sìleas, without identifying his wife, *The Peerage* supplies 'unknown daughter MacDonnell, daughter of unknown MacDonnell of Glengarry'.[13] This marriage, from which stemmed the MacDhòmhnaill branch of Clianaig, does provide a clear familial link between these two branches of the clan. And finally, and not to be underestimated, there had been a history of Keppoch support for Glengarry in his campaigns against the Earl of Argyll (MacKenzie 1964, 298; MacDonald & MacDonald 1896–1904, 2: 640, 642).

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[11] cf. Dwelly 1973, s.v. **fuar-léine** 'shroud'.

[12] This section is based on a paper presented at the Staff Research Conference of the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture of the University of Aberdeen, on 27 January 2021.

While widely acknowledged as a fine piece of poetry, *Alasdair a Gleanna Garadh* is perhaps best remembered for a particular passage in it which contains nothing but extended praise of its subject: three eight-line stanzas densely packed with conventional praise motifs, or conceits. Various scholars have briefly commented on this truly kaleidoscopic section, some perhaps with some amusement; it has been viewed as 'the longest list of kennings and related images of praise in Scottish Gaelic verse', 'an extreme example of heroic hyperbole', and its author as becoming 'near-ecstatic', 'going on overdrive' (MacInnes 2006, 303; Ó Baoill 2004, 142; Ní Annracháin 2007, 173; Gillies 2010, 98). It is with this passage, unique in its kind in the extant corpus of Gaelic vernacular poetry, that the second part of this paper is concerned.

In 1997 Pádraig Breatnach first brought attention to a particular feature often found in the court poetry of the *filidh* of the Classical period, the 'fras adhmholta' (shower of praise), which he also noticed in medieval Welsh poetry. Both, Breatnach concluded, were part of the shared literary inheritance of the European Latin Middle Ages (Breatnach 1997, 66; Breatnach 2001, 65–66). The 'fras adhmholta' is a prolonged description of the subject using imaginative and hyperbolical comparisons. It consists of strings of epithets or metaphorical epithets (understanding metaphor in a broader sense to include other figures of the same class, such as simile or metonymy) arranged into paratactical phrases, that is, without connecting conjunctions between them; and it makes use of anaphora (the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses) in a variety of ways. Its position in the poem may be at the beginning – although this is rare – in the middle or, as is the case most of the time, at the end. It does not, however, reach the very end of the poem: it is followed by one or two more quatrains – where parataxis is abandoned and there is a return to structured sentences – in which the poet identifies the individual praised. He may do so by giving the patron's name or surname, or some other form of identification, for instance through a reference to his territory. The shower of praise was not a stand-alone unit but an essential component in the whole poem, aiming to strengthen its message; and it provided a higher literary status than did the occasional metaphor (or metonymy, simile, etc.) (Breatnach 1997, 66–68 *et passim*; Breatnach 2001, 66–67). Additionally, it was Breatnach's view that this rhetorical device was a means for the author to display his personal poetic talent, to show off his artistic proficiency and resourcefulness (Breatnach 1997, 92; Breatnach 2001, 67).[14] Here is one of the examples given by Breatnach, who italicises the personal pronoun 'tú' because he is at this point illustrating this copula-based type of anaphora (translation is my own):

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[13] 'Alexander "Buidhe" Macdonald, 14th of Keppoch', *The Peerage* <http://www.thepeerage.com/p51016.htm#c510159.1> [accessed 29 December 2022].

[14] Talent and creativity could of course be displayed in various other ways too, such as the use of the more complex metres, ornamentation beyond that required, or a variety of figures of speech, as well as *exempla* in support of the author's argument (Simms 1987, 70).

> *Tú* ó Duibhne, a dhreach mhálla,
> *tú* bréagthóir na bandála,
> *tú* do bhí ar iarraidh ó Fhionn,
> a rí ós fhiannaibh Éirionn.
>
> *Tú* do iomlair an t-as óir
> go Doirinn d'iarraidh éalóidh
> dá bhfuair cos dod chosaibh
> a huain don as órdhasain.
>
> *Tú* an dalta do bhí ag Bodhmhuinn
> ler éirigh gach éanfhoghluim;
> *tú* do bhaoi i gcuasaibh na gcrann
> gan dlaoi uasaibh dot altrom.
>
> *You are Ó Duibhne, oh noble face, | you are the seducer of women, | you are who was sought by Fionn, | oh king above Ireland's warriors.*
>
> *You are who changed the golden shoe | when attempting to escape to Doireann | so that each of your feet | would get its chance of that gold.*
>
> *You are the pupil of Bodhmhuinn | by whom all learning succeeds; | you were in the dens of the woods | without a cover over them to protect you.*
>
> (Breatnach 1997, 79, at §§39–41)

In brief, a passage of this type is not merely a display of poetic extravagance: it is a high-status established literary device. The incitement address to Seamus MacDhòmhnaill mentioned in the discussion of metalepsis above also contains this figure of speech, placed at the end of the poem, with the subject identification after the shower of praise, in the final quatrain:

> A Shémuis, a shearc na n-áoigheadh,
> a eó Duibhlinni, a dhearc mhall,
> a mhír cruadha dár fhaomh Íle,
> a cháor bhúadha an tíre thall.
>
> A chéim romhat, a rinn ghábhaidh,
> a ghrádh einigh, a fhúath séad,
> a dhortadh crú, a omhain áoigheadh,
> a chnú toraidh Ghaoidheal nGrég.
>
> A bhláth cumhra Chloinne Domhnaill,
> a dhamh dealbhach Innsi Fáil,
> a láogh na hoighi ó íadh Muile,
> a ghrian sgoile Mhuighe Máil.
>
> [A] Shémuis mheardha mheic Aonghuis

fhóirfios Banbha, bean Dá Thí,
[Ar] Bhóinn ghrianaigh na bfeadh bfionnghlan
ag iarraidh cean bhiodhbhadh bí.

O James, beloved of guests, | salmon of the Duibhlinn, stately eye, | steel blade to which Islay has yielded, | thunderbolt of victory of the land beyond the sea.

Thou forward step, thou spearpoint of danger, | lover of bounty, hater of wealth, | spiller of blood, dreaded visitor, | fruitful nut of the Grecian Gaels.

Fragrant blossom of Clann Domhnaill, | comely stag of Inis Fáil, | fawn of the doe from the land of Mull, | sun of the school of Magh Máil.

O vigorous James, son of Angus, | that shalt help Banbha, wife of Dá Thí, | from the sunny Boyne of the fair bright woods, | seek thou triumph over foes.
(Bergin 1970, 31, at §§31–4)

Neither was the *fras adhmholta* unknown to Scottish poets. One instance is found at the end of an (unedited) elegy, by an anonymous poet, for Iain Òg MacFhionghain of Strath Suardail (Skye), who died *c*.1682.[15] The bulk of this thirty-quatrain syllabic poem laments the deceased, but the last few stanzas are addressed to his father, Lochlann, beginning at §23 with what seems an echo of the opening line of Cathal Mac Muireadhaigh's mid-seventeenth century condolence poem addressed for Seònaid, wife of MacDhòmhnaill, chief of Sleat:

A Loc*h*lu*inn* méad*aigh* mea*n*mna
na tréig toil an tig*h*erna

Lachlann, lift your spirits; | do not forsake the Lord's will.[16]

The shower of praise comes at §§25–26:

A lām*h* is calma a ccog*h*ad*h*
ge tá tais le tiog*h*lagad*h*
s a s*h*ealgoir g*h*lic an g*h*lin*n*e
a m*ar*b*hthair* b*r*ic blāt*h* b*h*ein*n*e

A coin*n*le c*h*ill moruig*h*e
a m*hic* ionm*huin* f*h*iong*huine*
a t*h*alc t*huir* c*h*at*h*a do c*h*ur
a m*har*cui*dh* srat*h* su*ar*dail

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[15] *Adhbhur tuirse ag fuil Fhionghuin*, §23ab (NLS Adv. 72.2.2, 33v); transcription and translation are my own. I supply macrons and give expansions and unmarked lenition in italics.
[16] Compare Cathal's 'A Sheónóid méadaigh meanma; | tuig thrá toil an Tighearna' (*O Seónóid, be of good cheer; understand now the Lord's will*), in Ó Baoill and Bateman 1994, 94.

> *Oh hand bravest in war | though it is gentle when bestowing gifts, | oh wise hunter of the glen, | oh slayer of the trout of Blaven.*
>
> *Oh candle of Kilmaree, | oh beloved son of Fingon, | oh strong tower to give battle, | oh rider of Strath Suardail.*

While on this poem we may note the oddity of this final section. A couple of quatrains at the end, consoling the deceased subject's widow, mother, or some other relative are customary, although the same for a male relative less so. Also unusual is the length of this final section (eight quatrains), not to speak of the inclusion of the *fras adhmholta* for someone (Lochlann) in an elegy for someone else (Iain Òg). We might well be looking at two separate poems copied one immediately after the other. This possibility appears reinforced by the fact that the two quatrains previous to §23 (where the address to Lochlann begins) are a prayer for the dead subject, something that customarily is placed at the close of an elegy; admittedly, there is no *dúnadh* at this point, but neither is there one at the end of the poem. Further, echoes of first lines are normally first lines themselves, thus retaining all their value, resonance and prestige; and so, if our anonymous author is indeed echoing the earlier Mac Muireadhaigh consolation poem, it is an odd departure that he should do so at §23.

We return to Sìleas' lament for Glengarry for closer scrutiny, beginning with the structure:

- §§1–4: lament for the subject's death and general praise in the conventional style; connection with wider clan and mention of its other recent losses
- §§5–7: the pure-praise section
- §8: for Alastair's widow (the 'lady's quatrain' customarily appended to poems)
- §9: a prayer (as common in panegyric too); for the soul of the deceased, for the bereaved wife, and for the heir

The carefully thought-out structure is striking, adhering faithfully as it does to that of a *file*'s formal elegy, down to the positioning of the envoi to the subject's spouse and the closing prayer. The pure-praise section comes towards the end, but does not close the poem: two more stanzas follow.

For ease of reference I reproduce in full the famed §§5–7, followed by the last two lines of the poem, which will be needed for present purposes too:

> Bu tu 'n lasair dhearg 'gan losgadh,
> Bu tu sgoltadh iad gu 'n sàiltibh,
> Bu tu curaidh cur a' chatha,
> Bu tu 'n laoch gun athadh làimhe;
> Bu tu 'm bradan anns an fhìor-uisg,
> Fìreun air an eunlaith 's àirde,
> Bu tu 'n leómhann thar gach beathach,
> Bu tu damh leathan na cràice.
>
> Bu tu 'n loch nach fhaoidte thaomadh,

Bu tu tobar faoilidh na slàinte,
Bu tu Beinn Nibheis thar gach aonach,
Bu tu chreag nach fhaoidte theàrnadh;
Bu tu clach uachdair a’ chaisteil,
Bu tu leac leathan na sràide,
Bu tu leug lòghmhor nam buadhan,
Bu tu clach uasal an fhàinne.

Bu tu ’n t-iubhar thar gach coillidh,
Bu tu ’n darach daingean làidir,
Bu tu ’n cuileann ’s bu tu ’n draigheann,
Bu tu ’n t-abhall molach blàthmhor;
Cha robh do dhàimh ris a’ chritheann
Na do dhligheadh ris an fheàrna;
Cha robh bheag ionnad de ’n leamhan;
Bu tu leannan nam ban àlainn.

[. . .]

Alasdair a Gleanna Garadh,
Thug thu ’n diugh gal air mo shùilibh.

You were a red torch to burn them, you would cleave them to the heels, you were a hero for waging battle, you were a champion whose arm never flinched. You were the salmon in fresh water, the eagle in the highest flock, you were the lion above all beasts, you were the stout antlered stag.

You were an undrainable loch, you were the liberal fount of health; you were Ben Nevis above every moor, you were an unscalable crag. You were the top-stone of the castle, you were the broad flag of the street, you were a priceless gem, you were the jewel in the ring.

You were the yew above every forest, you were the strong steadfast oak, you were the holly and the blackthorn, you were the apple-tree, rough-barked and many-flowered. You had no kinship with the aspen, owed no bonds to the alder; there was none of the lime-tree in you; you were the darling of beautiful women.

[. . .]

Alasdair of Glengarry, you have caused me to shed tears today.

(Ó Baoill 1972, 72)

Looking now at the grammatical and rhetorical features of these stanzas:

- each stanza contains a string of metaphorical epithets, arranged paratactically (the pattern breaks in the second half of §7, which contains two grammatically complete sentences)

- there is anaphora throughout: each epithetic phrase begins with ‘Bu tu’; in the second half of §7, where full sentences are used, this changes to ‘Cha robh’, with a return to ‘Bu tu’ in the last line
- the subject is identified by name and territory in the last stanza

We begin to see a suggestion of Sìleas consciously employing the *fras adhmholta* of Classical panegyric. The parallels are remarkable, the position within the poem correct, and if the shower of praise did indeed provide an opportunity for the display of talent, Sìleas made good use of it. It is here that, in sharp contrast to the rest of her verse (Coira [in preparation]), metaphors are numerous, though it is worth noting that all of them are of the kind that, in Ní Annracháin’s words and with reference to the poetry of Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, ‘bear a heavy weight of metonymy’ (2007, 171). The metonymic weight is simply caused by the metaphors being formulated through the established praise code, which, as the same author notes, is based fundamentally on metonymy in both subject matter and technique (Ní Annracháin 2007, 172). Sìleas collects in this section imagery of objects of brilliance (torch, jewel), of martial prowess (hero, champion), of noble animals, fish, and birds (lion, stag, salmon, eagle), noble plants (yew, oak, holly, blackthorn, apple-tree), and much more. One of her metaphors unambiguously ties her subject to Scotland: ‘Bu tu Beinn Nibheis thar gach aonach’ (you were Ben Nevis above every moor),[17] and in another she adroitly brings together contrasting descriptive terms, the rough and the delicate: ‘Bu tu ’n t-abhall molach blàthmhor’ (you were the apple-tree, rough-barked and many-flowered). A good number of these metaphors are of the kind that some categorise as hyperbole (Ó Baoill 2007, 308) and others as the *sans pareil* motif of the poetic code (Black 2001, 526); and though hyperbole is infrequent in Sìleas’ verse, here it is found aplenty, as is customary in the *fras adhmholta*.[18] As noted, for this lament Sìleas chose a syllabic-based metre. It would seem, then, that in metre, structure, and ornamentation the poet consciously sought to produce something as close as possible to a *file*’s formal elegy, as far as her education and skills would allow. This includes closing her piece with *dúnadh*, a feature of Classical Gaelic verse (not unlike epanalepsis in some respects) which correctly should have a place in a list of Gaelic rhetorical devices. Sìleas uses it also in another two of her syllabic-based poems (Ó Baoill 1972, ll. 118, 1332).[19] Her choice of tune, assuming the one we have is the original, was no less fitting: according to one source, it was in existence before Sìleas’ time and was employed ‘exclusively in heroic or battle songs’ (Ó Baoill 1972, 240, 241).

Elsewhere in vernacular Gaelic poetry it is possible to find what might well be traces of the *fras adhmholta* device. Ní Annracháin noted lists of metaphors showing ‘some signs of the rhythmic, litanic rehearsal of short epithets that are a common feature of Gaelic poetry from earliest times', and the first of the two such lists she gives as examples – quoting Watson (1934, ll. 49–54) – would seem to be an instance of a 'vernacularised' survival of the shower of praise:

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[17] Perhaps a reference to the peaks nearest Ben Nevis, An t-Aonach Mòr and the taller An t-Aonach Beag. But also see Dwelly 1973, s.v. **aonach**, for the various meanings of this word, including ‘prince’. There may be deliberate ambiguity here, as Sìleas shows a fondness for wordplay (Coira [in preparation]).

[18] ‘[A] prolonged description of the object or creature concerned, by means of imaginative comparisons and hyperbolical similes’ (Breatnach 1997, 67).

[19] Epanalepsis repeats at the end of a clause or sentence the same word or words with which it began. The stronger emphasis of the beginning and end positions means that special attention is given to them. *Dúnadh* closes the poem by repeating the first line, or at least the first word in it. Thus, both epanalepsis and *dúnadh* play with repetition and both take advantage of the all-important beginning and end positions. In Classical Gaelic verse the first line is of course of the utmost importance in respect of the poem’s message.

Is tù mo mhire
Is mo cheòl sùgraidh:
Is tù mo phaidirean,
Mo chìr-chùil thu:
Mo ghàradh mheas
Am bi na h-ùbhlan
penchant
Thou art my mirth | and my merry music, | Thou are my rosary | and the comb of my hair, | Thou art my fruit-garden | wherein are apples.
(Ní Annracháin 2007, 169)[20]

Vernacular poets, however, tend to give these lists in complete sentences rather than in paratactical speech, as in Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh's lament for MacCoinnich of Applecross (which is limited to praise of physical appearance):

Fhuair mi m' àilleagan ùr
'S e gun smal air gun smùr:
Bu bhreac mìndearg do ghnùis,
Bu ghorm laghach do shùil,
Bu ghlan sliasad is glùn,
Bu dheas daingeann an lùb ghleust thu.

I found my fresh young darling to be without spot, | without gloom: freckled, smooth and pink was your countenance, | blue and winsome your eye, | shapely the thigh and knee; | you were a trim youth comely and firm.
(Ó Baoill 2014, ll. 22–27)[21]

Similar passages are to be found in the poetry of Eachann Bacach, as in:

Bu tu 'n t-oighre 's an t-àrmann
'S am marcaich deas dàicheil
'S an t-àilleagan àlainn ùr éibhinn.

Bu tu sgàthan na glaine;
'N àird an iar riut gun teannadh
An àm chruinneachadh do charad ri chéile.

Bu tu seobhag na h-uaisle
'S ceann seanchais gach duanachd,
Bheireadh trusgan is duais do luchd theudan.

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[20] Watson 1934 ascribed this song to Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, but see Ó Baoill 2014, 261 for reasons to reject this ascription.
[21] See also ll. 286–97.

> *You were the heir, the champion, | a fine handsome horseman | and an attractive, youthful and sunny favourite.*
>
> *You were the mirror of brightness: | the whole west would gather to you | when your kinsmen were assembled together.*
>
> *You were a hawk of nobility | and the subject of all poetry, | who would give clothing and reward to harpists*.
>
> (Ó Baoill 1979, ll. 525–33)[22]

In all these examples there is some attempt at anaphora (with 'Is tù', 'Bu tu', 'Bu' + adjective), and at metaphor also in the first two, but none is of the standard of Sìleas' in the lament for Glengarry: none meets the various requirements of the *fras adhmholta* of Classical verse as closely as we find in *Alasdair a Gleanna Garadh*. The vernacular survival of the device is but a diluted version of the original of Classical verse. Sìleas herself has this same type of 'vernacular shower of praise' in the piece where she laments the chief of Sleat (Ó Baoill 1972, ll. 775–82). The metre is accentual rather than syllabic, the shower is much shorter there than in the lament for Glengarry, there is no anaphora (but synonymia, piling of epithets, and alliteration work effectively together), no following identification of the subject, and full sentences, rather than paratactically arranged metaphorical epithets, are used.

There is little doubt that Sìleas, like other vernacular poets, was acquainted, even closely acquainted, with this particular feature of panegyric. What I propose is that, while in her lament for Sleat she used it in its 'vernacularised form', in her lament for Glengarry she aimed for something much closer to the original 'fras adhmholta' of Classical verse. How could she possibly know so much detail about this rhetorical device, including its customary location in the poem, something that seems disregarded by other vernacular poets? Did she simply absorb it by listening to visiting poets' recitations during her youth, in the parental home? One possibility is that acquaintance with it formed part of her education. While we do not have the finer details of her formative years, it is generally accepted that Sìleas was educated to a high standard. In all probability part at least of her learning was acquired from professional school poets (*filidh*), whose involvement in the tutoring of the nobility is well attested (Bannerman 1983, 214–35). It is hard to imagine where else she would have learned to compose syllabic verse (which required not only literacy but also far more advanced instruction in linguistics as well as prosody), and do so to the standard we find in contemporary vernacular poets, by which I mean poets by profession, as well as in those termed amateur syllabic poets. Her lament for the harper Lachlann Dall may be poignant where she names many of the tunes he would play when he visited her home. But it is also a class-conscious and education-conscious statement, the poet noting that 'ùmaidh' (a boor, a person of vulgar manners, a fool) would hardly be able to appreciate either the harper's music or her own recitation of poems (Ó Baoill 1972, ll. 1301–12).[23]

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[22] See also ll. 136–38, 285–60; and ll. 584–91 for a further instance by another MacLean poet.

[23] For the tunes named by Sìleas see Ó Baoill 1972, 179–80.

CONCLUSION

Figures of comparison are frequent in late medieval and early modern Gaelic poetry, particularly (and unsurprisingly, due to its very nature) in panegyric, both Classical and vernacular. A close reading of this type of figurative language shows that sometimes poets went beyond simple simile, metaphor, or metonymy to produce metalepsis, a sophisticated, highly specialised trope. The authors of early modern European manuals of poetry were outwith their own comfort zone regarding metalepsis. This was because the lack of clear criteria on transference of meaning in the trope between the various figures, both explicit and implicit, posed a risk to successful figuration. Yet Gaelic poets were able to use metalepsis without such unease because the established codified conventions of panegyric provided the criteria in(what stood for what). A codified convention constituted a springboard, as it were, which embodied a first step or more of figuration around which they could craft the next. This was particularly true of the court poets of the Classical period. But many panegyric conventions passed into vernacular verse, and in the process some existing metaleptic expressions did too ('talla nan cuach', for instance). There are instances, however, of vernacular poets creating their own metalepses, sometimes, as in the case of Sìleas na Ceapaich, in a truly creative way, without reference to the praise code in either imagery or diction. The 'fras adhmholta' was another learned literary device that found its way into vernacular poetry, although here it is almost always deficient in the original literary requirements and lacking in development. The one known exception is the instance provided by Sìleas in her elegy for Alasdair of Glengarry. Her well-known 'purple passage' is no mere extended section of extravagant praise but an outstanding replication of the 'fras adhmholta' of the school-trained poets and as such, a testimony to the depth of her literary Gaelic education. It is also a testimony to her enduring native-literary abilities despite long years (close on four decades at the time of composition) living in a multilingual and multicultural north-east area, and in contrast with the instances of literary innovation she has left us elsewhere in her work.

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