A CELTIC ETYMOLOGY FOR *STRUGGLE* "CONTEND, FIGHT"

ALTHOUGH A COMMON WORD, *STRUGGLE* "TO CONTEND (with an adversary) in a close grapple" and so on has been of obscure etymology. *OED* first records the verb from Chaucer (the noun "a resolute contest" not being attested until John Locke in 1692). So the Merchant tells of a faithless wife, assuring an old husband that he regained sight by her shameless action (see Mann 2005: 379, 468): "'Was nothing bet to make yow to se, / Than strugle with a man upon a tree. / God woot, I dide it in ful good entente.'" His response is brusque: "'Strugle!' quod he, 'ye, algate in it wente! / God yeve yow bothe on shames deth to dien!'" More grimly, the Pardoner repeats words of conspiracy to murder through a wrestling-bout: "'And I shal rive him thurgh the sides tweye / Whil that thow strogelest with him as in game, / And with thy daggere looke thow do the same.'" On derivation, suggestions by Skeat and others of links with Norse *strúgr* "ill will, contention" or Dutch *struikelen* and German *straucheln* "stumble" have not been convincing (*SOED*, *s.v.*). The origin has been unknown.

Struggle may thus not be Germanic, but Celtic. Middle Irish has a verb *sraíglid* "whips, flogs, scourges, lashes; afflicts, punishes, slaughters; pulls, tears," giving later *sraíllid* (Vendryes 1974: S.186–187). It is from the noun represented in Old Irish as *srogell* or *sroigell* (thereafter *sroigheall*) "whip, lash," itself from Latin *flagellum* (by way of Vulgar Latin), as is older Welsh *ffrowyll* "a whip, a scourge" (Rowland 1990: 525). The Irish forms are well attested, though the meaning "flagellate" has become literary, and the verb's main sense is now "rip, tear apart," as in *Bhí siad á sraoilleadh ag na madraí* "they were being torn to bits by the dogs" (O Dónaill 1977: 1153). Middle Irish also offers the verb-noun *sroigled* "an act of scourging, flogging; act of striking, beating, attacking; act of tearing, pulling"

ISSN: 1132–631X

(*DIL*, *s.v.*). Middle English *strogle* "contend in a close grapple" may hence derive from Irish or Gaelic *srogell* "a whip." Formally it seems that this noun (not the verb) was borrowed by English, and was then used in senses resembling those of the Irish verb. In either case it would have the intrusive *t* standard for Irish loans in *sr-*, familiar from Strabane (*An Srath Bán* "the white river-holm") in Northern Ireland (McKay 2007: 136).

Granted that we have a Celtic loan, how might Chaucer know the word, which evidently caught his fancy? Attestations in *OED* imply that it came via Scots. It quotes an account by John Shirley (d. 1456) of James I's murder in 1437 at Blackfriars, Perth. He wrote, "And gretely the Kyng strogild with hem [his assassins]," so that his hands bled as he grabbed their knives. Shirley may have had the verb from a Scottish source, or picked it up from Chaucer. *OED* also quotes *The Earle of Gowries Conspiracie Against the Kings Maiestie of Scotland* (London, 1600) on James VI, who "wyth struggeling and wrastling" got the advantage over an attacker. If *struggle* were borrowed from Gaelic, it would hence be in Scotland, not Ireland. The loan need not be early, as the voiced guttural spirant of *sroigheall* survived longer in Scottish Gaelic than it did in Irish (O'Rahilly 1972: 141). The spirant having no equivalent in English, *-gg-* would be due to sound-substitution.

Middle English *strugle* or *strogle* thus apparently goes back to Old Irish *srogell* "whip, lash" (a borrowing of Latin *flagellum*), which gives a Gaelic verb meaning "to whip; strike, beat, attack; afflict, punish; pull, tear." It will be an interesting addition to the stock of Celtic loanwords in English, a subject now gaining attention from scholars in Poland and Finland (Stalmaszczyk 2005; Filppula, Klemola & Paulasto 2008).

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