

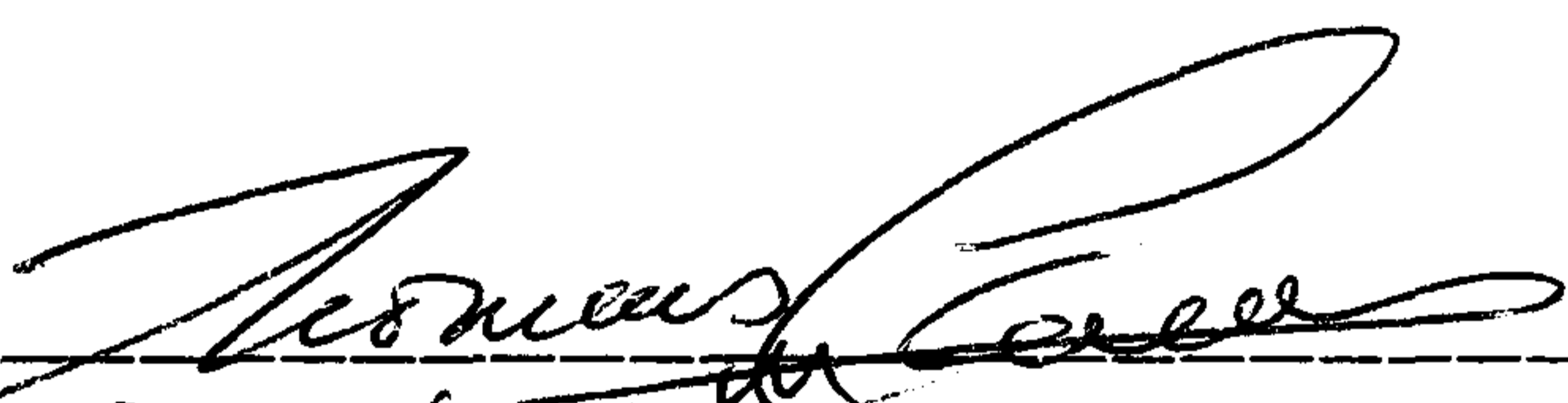
**SAINT AND FOOL: The image and function of Cumíne Fota  
and Comgán Mac Da Cherda in early Irish literature.**

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1991**



I hereby declare that all the material in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, has been composed by myself and is my own work.

Signature   
Date 23 December 1991

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## **ABSTRACT**

St. Cummíne Fota and the fool, Comgán Mac Da Cherda, are two minor but important characters in early Irish literature. They appear in a diverse range of texts of varying genres, and thus lend themselves to an in-depth study of the ways in which they are depicted and the functions of these depictions. As saint and fool they also invite investigation into the nature and portrayal of sanctity, insanity and holy folly in early Ireland. Moreover, the literature relating to Cummíne seems relatively free of the temporal concerns of most Irish hagiography, and thus allows an examination of an image of sanctity detached from the demands of monastic politics and economics. Comgán, while in nature close to other early Irish literary fools, is more closely allied to the tradition of holy folly within the Christian church.

This thesis aims to establish the images of fool and saint in early Irish literature, and measure the specific depictions of Cummíne and Comgán against more general stereotypes. This is undertaken in the first two survey chapters. Using this information, a series of close readings of short texts featuring the two characters follows. These text studies attempt to compare particular portrayals of Cummíne and Comgán with portrayals of other characters in texts of similar genres. The main questions at issue are the extent to which Cummíne and Comgán conform to or subvert the expectations of their character-types and the genres of their tales; what the functions of such characters might be; and to what literary and historical context the texts might belong.

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Sud bàrca beag le antrom gaoithe sìorruidh  
'na siùil chaithte, a' dìreadh cuain gun chòrsa,  
'si leatha fhéin an cearcal cian na faire,  
is gul is gàireachdaich troimh chéil' air bòrd dhith.

Tha Bròn, Aoibh, Aois is Òige, Sàr is Suarach  
a' tarruing nam ball buan a tha ri 'bréidibh;  
tha Amaideas is Gliocas, Naomh is Peacadh  
air a stiùir mu seach is càch 'gan eisteachd.

Yonder sails a little bark, with the grievous burden of an eternal wind  
on her worn sails, climbing an ocean that has no coast,  
alone within the distant circle of the horizon,  
with a confusion of weeping and laughter aboard her.

Grief, Joy, Age and Youth, Eminent and Of-No-Account  
are heaving at the everlasting gear that trims her canvas;  
Folly and Wisdom, Saint and Sinner  
take her helm in turn, and all obey them.

--George Campbell Hay.

a charaid, is mise  
an t-amadan naomh  
am bàrd  
amhairc is éisd rium

friend, i am  
the holy fool  
the bard  
observe and listen

--Aonghas MacNeacail.

## Introduction

Saint Cummíne Fota (Cummíne the Tall) and Comgán Mac Da Cherda (popularly, "son of the two arts") are two minor, but important characters within the corpus of early Irish literature. They are minor in that they appear as central figures in only a few texts, and otherwise appear as supporting players in the dramas of other heroes and heroines: the generous king of Connacht, Guaire; the once-mad queen of Munster, Mór; the archetypal just king, Domnall mac Áeda. And yet they are important in three respects. First, the body of literature in which they appear, in either central or peripheral roles, is fairly sizeable, covering a diverse range of genres and dates of composition. Second, they are key figures in the West Munster cycle which, though an extremely varied collection of tales and poetry, demonstrates a surprising unity in its representation of traditional material and in its early seventh-century Munster setting.<sup>1</sup> It is not only this unity which makes the West Munster cycle so significant. To it also belong some of the finest works of early Irish literature: "The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare" (*Aithbe dam-sa bés mara*); the poem "King and Hermit" (*A Marbáin, a díthruabaig*); "Créd's Lament" (*It é saigte gona súain*); *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*; and one of the texts we shall be examining in detail, *Comrac Líadain ocus Cuirithir*.<sup>2</sup> Third, as saint and fool, frequently associated in a partnership of sorts in the literature, Cummíne and Comgán form early Ireland's clearest witness to a tradition of holy folly, at least in fiction. In that tradition, they have also provided a valuable parallel to the better studied companionship of saint and madman, attested

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<sup>1</sup>Seán Ó Coileáin, "The Structure of a Literary Cycle," *Ériu* 25 (1974) 125. Prof. Ó Coileáin's article provides a detailed and careful examination of the traditions and relationships of the characters who appear in the various texts included in what he refers to as the "Guaire cycle."

<sup>2</sup>G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956) nos. 34, 8, and 36; D. Binchy, *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin* (Dublin, 1975); K. Meyer, *Comrac Líadain ocus Cuirithir* (London, 1902).



particularly in the instances of Saint Moling and Suibne, and the North British Saint Kentigern and Lailoken or Myrddin.<sup>3</sup>

Additional importance lies in the relative freedom from the normal temporal concerns of monastic hagiography which I hope to show exists in the literature relating to the saint, Cummíne. The persistence of his reputation as an unattached, wandering or eremitic saint, seen in relation to his companionship with the fool Comgán Mac Da Cherda, suggests that in this small corpus we have an unusual body of tales and poetry: a body clearly Christian, yet comparatively exempt from the economic and political spin of standard medieval Irish Christian literature.

Moreover, in Cummíne Fota and Comgán Mac Da Cherda we have two characters who are explicitly Christian. Recent detailed character-studies have concentrated on figures whose temporal setting is the pre-Christian past. These include Tomás Ó Cathasaigh's study of Cormac mac Airt, Joseph Nagy's treatment of early Finn material, Dáithí Ó hOgáin's more general treatment of Fenian literature, and Charles MacQuarrie's examination of Manannán mac Lir.<sup>4</sup> Cummíne and Comgán are explicitly Christian characters, and hence provide an opportunity to examine the image and function of specific figures within a manifestly Christian narrative context without having to wrestle with the problems of euhemerization, christianisation and preservation which beset studies of characters on the Pagan-Christian or Secular-Monastic interface. Most recent studies of Christian literature have dealt with hagiography, a genre limited by the necessary ulterior motives of its authors.<sup>5</sup> The particular circumstances of the material concerning Cummíne and Comgán

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<sup>3</sup>J. G. O'Keeffe, *Buile Shuibhne* (Dublin, 1931); J. and W. MacQueen, "Vita Merlini Sylvestris", *Scottish Studies* 29 (1989) 77-93. The most recent and detailed study of the saint-madman nexus is Brian Frykenberg, *The Wild-Man in Celtic Ecclesiastical Legend and Tradition* (unpublished M.Litt. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>T. Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin, 1977); J. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw; the boyhood deeds of Finn in Gaelic narrative tradition* (California, 1985); D. Ó hOgáin *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (Dublin, 1988); C. MacQuarrie, *Concepts of Manannán* (unpub. M.Litt. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>The most important recent case-study is Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988).

allows a consideration of the themes and techniques of early Irish Christian literature beyond that dealing with either the pre-Christian past or the period of monastic foundation.

Although both characters have often been referred to in studies of folly in early Ireland,<sup>6</sup> no detailed literary critical study of the material concerning them has yet been attempted. Professor Gearóid Mac Eoin has been for some years preparing an edition of the texts which feature Cummíne and Comgán, including a study of the development of their traditions and the relationships and datings of the various texts, particularly the long Late Middle Irish text *Imtheachta na nÓinmídeadh*.<sup>7</sup> Pending his extensive edition and study, I have endeavoured to present in this thesis an examination of this material, excepting the *Imtheachta*, and of certain of the earlier texts in which Cummíne and Comgán appear as central figures. It is intended as a character-study and an exercise in literary criticism, and hence complementary to Prof. Mac Eoin's work.

## AIMS

Any character study must allow for the conformity of the figure or figures studied to standard depictions of the character-types under which they are classed. Hence, one of the first aims of this study is to establish the extent to which the presentations of Cummíne and Comgán in their literature partake of stereotyped portrayals of saints and fools. In the first section of this thesis, I have attempted a brief survey of the early Irish literature of fools, and of hagiography, and have attempted to set each of the characters against the conventional demands of these genres. The results of this assessment seem to indicate that the standard saint and standard fool of early Irish literature

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<sup>6</sup>E. Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London, 1935)100-2; A. Harrison, *The Irish Trickster* (Sheffield, 1989) 30-1, 72-80; J. Seward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford, 1980) 38-40.

<sup>7</sup>Translations which appear from this text in the course of this study are from Professor Mac Eoin's unpublished preliminary translation of the version of the *Imtheachta* in the Royal Irish Academy manuscript Stowe D.iv.1, supplied by the kindness of Professor Mac Eoin. Photostats of the D.iv.1 and B.iv.1 versions were supplied by the courtesy and generosity of the Royal Irish Academy.



do not explain adequately the images and functions of Cummíne and Comgán. Rather, Cummíne's detached and somewhat foolish saint and Comgán's holy fool are almost unique character-types in early Irish literature, and hence demanding of a more detailed examination.

This I have attempted to provide in the second section, a close reading of five short texts in which either Cummíne or Comgán or both appear as central characters. Set against other texts of similar genres, each one provides a case-study of the image of saint or fool as against standard early Irish images, and suggests possible functions for the deviations of their characters from these standards. These texts have been selected for diversity of genre as well as the centrality of the two characters, in order to provide as wide a field as possible. Other texts in which Cummíne and Comgán appear in more minor roles are discussed under the treatment of relevant and related texts. Although a study of these characters cannot be complete without considering the long late text *Imtheachta na nÓinmhideadh*, in the absence of an edition a close study of it seemed beyond the scope of this thesis. Thus, discussion of it is limited to those instances where it illuminates confusing or ambiguous points in the earlier texts. Because of the lateness and the composite nature of the *Imtheachta*, however, it is possible to limit the study to the earlier texts and still retain an adequate cross-section of the literature of Cummíne and Comgán.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the establishment of the image and function of Cummíne and Comgán in this literature, this thesis has more general goals. The first is to consider how specific figures are used in early Irish narrative to achieve specific aims. To this end, the text-studies draw on the standard uses of fool or saint to question how their appearance in a given text functions allusively or symbolically. Thus, for example, the frequent appearance of fools in tales of lust or adultery sheds light on the fate of Mac Da Cherda, transformed into a fool as the result of an

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<sup>8</sup>Compare Seán Ó Coileáin's comments on the relative unity and consistency of the West Munster material, as against the "artificial and non-traditional" *Tromdám Guaire*. "Structure," p.125.

illicit love-affair. So, too, the appearance of a *sacerdos*, a holy man, in the tales of fools and madmen illuminates Cummine's role in Mac Da Cherda's adventures. In the examination of the final text, "The Meeting of Liadain and Cuirithir," the image developed by each character is considered in a context in which they themselves appear to function allusively or symbolically.

The second of these wider aims is to apply literary considerations to a group of Christian texts, and hence to study the operations of Christian narrative and the treatment of genre, theme, and language. The existence of these particular texts outside the monastic mainstream, indeed, in some cases counter to it, seems to explain the apparent radical stance found in some of them, and must lead to considerations of audience, composition and purpose for these orthodox yet seemingly counter-cultural fictions.

## METHODOLOGY

The examination of the fool in this thesis is more extensive than that of the saint. This is partially because the figure of the saint is much better supplied with critical studies in the well-tilled field of hagiography.<sup>9</sup> The character of the fool has received some attention, notably in Alan Harrison's recent study, but the broader scope of his work, both chronologically and in the types of character included as "fools" or "tricksters" has led me to undertake a more limited but detailed discussion of the topic, with particular reference to the image and function of fools in early narrative texts. The divergence of Comgan from these images and functions has made necessary a consideration of the tradition of holy folly within the Christian church in general, and an attempt to apply this tradition to his character. The treatment of hagiography is much briefer and more general, devoted mainly to establishing Cummine Fota's relation to the standard images and functions of the early Irish saint.

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<sup>9</sup>See particularly Dorothy Ann Bray, *The Lives of the Early Irish Saints: A study in formulaic composition and the creation of an image* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1982).



In the text-studies, approach has varied with the genre under consideration. No attempt has been made to apply a particular literary theory or critical technique to the texts, but I have attempted to maintain certain common goals in my analysis. These include establishing the genre and paradigm closest to that of the text in question, and measuring the extent of the text's compliance with or deviation from that paradigm or genre. Concentration has been focussed on the deviations from the paradigms, in an attempt to establish each text's particular agenda and purpose.

I have also endeavoured to assess the internal workings of each text with regard to structural cohesion or lack thereof, rhetoric or conscious applied use of significant language, and the presence of literary or biblical allusions. Such assessment has hopefully helped to untangle the meaning and purpose of occasionally elliptical or unclear texts or parts of texts.

Where possible, and bearing in mind the uncertainty of the date of composition of all these texts, I have attempted to suggest a tentative context and audience for each. This has been done in line with the use by early Irish literary men and women of what we might call "applied exegesis": the use of the exegetical techniques of typology and allegory in making tales relevant to contemporary figures and concerns.<sup>10</sup> I have focussed my attentions in my attempts to supply contexts for these works on ninth and tenth century Munster, with in most cases the suggested audience of the king-clerics of Cashel and other kingdoms in Munster. This is not meant to exclude other possible contexts, but rather to aid in establishing the purpose and target of each text by the use of specific examples of such targets.

Nonetheless, the Munster orientation of all the material in this study is a feature we cannot avoid. How it might function within the broader spectrum of the literature and the monastic

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<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of typology and exegesis, see K. McCone, *Pagan Past<sup>and</sup> Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990), particularly chapter two, "Literary genre and narrative technique", and chapter three, "'Pagan' myth and Christian 'history'". For the application of the techniques to contemporary concerns, see, for instance, Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, chapter thirteen.

and political milieu of early medieval Munster is the subject of a broader discussion than can be attempted in this thesis. Nonetheless, the value of folly, sanctity and kingship under the sovereignty of Cashel in the ninth and tenth centuries must remain a constant, if oblique consideration in the course of the study. That the Christian concerns of a clerically-oriented kingship, or lack thereof, may have influenced the development of a counter-cultural literature of holy folly and rejected power remains a distinct possibility. Given the symbolic treatment in the foundation legends of the ruling Eóganacht, which place their ancestor Corc in the care of a witch (*ammait*) and a female satirist (*bancháinte*),<sup>11</sup> have him aided in his finding of the holy site of Cashel by wood-dwelling swineherds and angels,<sup>12</sup> and appear in one text to call him a fool (*óinmit*),<sup>13</sup> it would not be surprising if the fictions of holy folly were of interest to and even aimed towards the kings committed to "the blessing of the mighty Lord who made the whole world by his sole word from its yellow foundation."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973)184-5.

<sup>12</sup>ibid., p.186-7.

<sup>13</sup>K. Meyer, "The Laud Genealogies and Tribal Histories," *ZCP* 8 (1912) 308, l.31, 309, l.3.

<sup>14</sup>Byrne, *Kings*, p.187.

NOTE: Orthography.

In general I have tried to give the earlier spelling of names in this thesis, hence "Suibne", "Comgán", rather than "Suibhne", "Comhdhán." The spelling I have used for Comgán's epithet may need some explanation. Generally represented in later literature as *Mac Dá Cherda*, with the folk-etymology "son of the two arts," earlier texts demonstrate a wide variety of forms, including *Moc[c]u Cerdda*, *Mac Mo Cherda*, *Mc. na Cerda*, and *Mac Da/Dá Cherd[d]a*.<sup>15</sup> Ó Coileáin considers *Moccu Cerdda* likely to be the original form, and with this Jackson seems to concur.<sup>16</sup> In the main texts we shall be examining, the forms *Mac Mo Cherda* and *Mac Da/Do Cherda* alternate freely. I have used throughout the thesis the form *Mac Da Cherda* as it retains a form close to that in the main texts, without the later imposed implications of the lengthened *dá*.

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<sup>15</sup>For sources, see S. Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p.105n.73.

<sup>16</sup>*ibid.*, pp.104-5; Jackson, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (Dublin, 1990) 47. As Ó Coileáin points out, the form suggests that he was of the Cerdraige in West Cork, but all the texts place Comgán among the Déisi in Co. Waterford. The name needs further investigation, as do all the *moccu-*, *mac da/do/mo* names.



**SECTION ONE: Saint and Fool.**

## Chapter One

### The Fool in Early Medieval Ireland

In approaching the image and function of the two characters we shall be examining in this study, the holy fool Comgán and the foolish saint Cummíne, we need first to establish the place, respectively, of the fool and the saint in early Irish society and literature. The saint, whom we will discuss in Chapter Two, is a much more frequently studied character, both in regard to his actual place in society and his role in early Irish literature, particularly hagiography. The fool has been less studied, despite the extent of early law provisions in Ireland for the insane and the frequency of the appearance of fools in early narrative. Some of the wider studies of folly in the medieval world have recognised the importance of the Irish fool, notably Enid Welsford's classic study *The Fool*, and John Seward's study of holy folly, *Perfect Fools*.<sup>1</sup> Fools, tricksters and entertainers have been studied in a specifically Irish context by Vivian Mercier, and by Alan Harrison in a number of recent works.<sup>2</sup> This chapter draws on the works of these scholars, but seeks to expand the range of the study and apply it specifically to a particular type of fool, the idiot or simpleton, sometimes an entertainer, more often an ignored, insane character who nonetheless has special and potent powers and symbolic significance.

#### CLASSIFICATION

There is a natural tendency to discuss the insane without distinguishing between types of mental illness, and also to discuss in the same context entertainers whose stock-in-trade was comic buffoonery and imitation of the insane. This is a result of the overlap of character traits, types of behaviour, and narrative function for all these diverse, aberrant figures. Nonetheless some distinction should be made, for the purpose of

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<sup>1</sup>E. Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London, 1935); J. Seward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>2</sup>V. Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford, 1962.); A. Harrison, *An Chrosántacht* (Dublin, 1979); *The Irish Trickster* (Sheffield, 1989).

clarity. Alan Harrison has separated the "natural" fool from the "professional" fool, defining the natural fool as "one who is different from other people because of some mental or physical aberration" and suggests that the professional fool assumes such aberrations into his costume or performance.<sup>3</sup> While such a distinction is useful, it does not take into account the fact that natural fools could often act as professionals, and that the "trickster" character with whom Harrison is most concerned fits uncomfortably in either slot.

A three-fold classification would seem to be in order. First, the **Buffoon**, whom we must consider a person in full possession of his senses, normally if not abnormally intelligent. The buffoon uses his wits either to play the role of the professional fool or a like figure such as a satirist. He is predominantly an entertainer, and his style is usually lewd or abusive. Under this category we may also include tricksters, such as Bricriu of the Ulster Cycle, who are socially unstable, inclined toward mischief and dissent, and use their wits to make "fools" out of other people.<sup>4</sup>

Old Irish terms for this type of person include *crosán*, *glám*, and *cáinte*, as well as terms used for professional jesters such as *fuirseóir*, *réimm*, *oblaire*, and *drúth*.<sup>5</sup> Some of these terms have narrower definitions, such as *glám* and *cáinte* which usually denote satirists. Others are more vague and include the actually insane as well as the buffoon, such as *drúth*. *Crosán* is a more problematic word, and for its meanings and development, consult the in-depth studies of Alan Harrison.<sup>6</sup>

The second type is the **Fool**, one mentally incompetent, not in his right mind, but whose existence is to an extent provided

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<sup>3</sup>A. Harrison, "Tricksters and Entertainers in the Irish Tradition," *Proceedings of the First North American Congress of Celtic Studies* (ed. MacLennan, Ottawa, 1988) 293-4; *The Irish Trickster*, pp.23-5.

<sup>4</sup>ibid., pp.294-5.

<sup>5</sup>See *R.I.A. Dictionary of the Irish Language (DIL)* for terms and references. For the legal status of these figures, see F. Kelly *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988) 49-50, 64-5. For comparison with continental entertainers at a contemporary period, see J. Ogilvy, "*Mimi, Scurrae, Histriones* : Entertainers of the Early Middle Ages," *Speculum* 38 (1963)603-19.

<sup>6</sup>Harrison, *An Chrosántacht ; Trickster*, chapters Three and Four.



for by and accepted within society. This could include a functional acceptance, usually as an entertainer, a jester, or a non-functional acceptance as a social hanger-on or recipient of charity, supported by the family network and society at large but with few rights and little place within it. Terms for the fool include *drúth*, *óinmit*, *mer*, *báeth*, *foíndelach*.<sup>7</sup> Again the terminology is flexible, *báeth* for instance implying stupidity or naiveté rather than actual mental illness, or *foíndelach*, meaning "wandering, vagrant" and as applicable to the madman as to the fool. Likewise *mer* is an all-inclusive term, covering insanity under many types of behavioural manifestation, as well as heightened emotion such as sexual fervour and battle rage. Some terms for professional jesters are applied to people we would call fools, and also rarer terms such as *óinmit* or *mer* where these mean "mad woman", more usually *ben mer*.

The third category is that of the **Madman** whom we must consider a person whose insanity is either violent or of such an unstable nature as to place him outside the social order. He is characterised by a volatile and wandering nature and an element of danger and ferocity. His depiction, as for instance in the character of Suibne,<sup>8</sup> is reminiscent in many ways of the paranoid or schizophrenic, one whose psychosis is at any rate extreme. Terms for the madman include *geilt*, *dásachtach*, *fulla* and also *mer* and *foíndelach*, terms which can apply to the fool.

Thus we can see that there is a certain overlap and ambiguity in regard to the terms for fools and their behaviour, as indeed there is in English: consider the range of meaning and association in the word "fool." In general, however, the fool and the madman have a certain overlap in character terms, descriptions of behaviour, and the fool and the buffoon overlap in functional terms, in their performance style and status. Because Comgán Mac Da Cherda is quite clearly a natural fool, it is predominantly characters belonging to the second category which will concern us. To understand better how Comgán fits into this

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<sup>7</sup>Terms and references in *DIL*; Legal status in Kelly, *Guide*, 91-5.

<sup>8</sup>J.G. O'Keeffe, *Buile Shuibhne* (Dublin, 1931).

category, we must explore more fully the position of these fools within society and literature in early Ireland.

## TERMINOLOGY

This must necessarily begin with a discussion of certain of the terms used for the fool, in particular the terms *drúth* and *óinmit*. The latter is the word used almost exclusively to describe Comgán, but *drúth* is very close to it in both range of meaning and use.

*Drúth* is in origin an adjective meaning "foolish" or "lewd, wanton." As a substantive it can mean both "fool"(as idiot and as entertainer) and "harlot"; nor should this be surprising if we consider the old-fashioned English euphemism "a foolish woman." Which meaning came first, "lewd" or "foolish" is difficult to establish. The corresponding abstract noun *drús* leans towards the sense of "amorous desire" or "lust." Thus it may be that this term for the fool derives from his associations (common in other cultures) with sexual license. The word is cognate with the Welsh *drud*, OW *drut*, which means "furious, raging" but also "foolish, mad." What the relationship of the cognates is is uncertain, though Loth, following Pedersen, suggests that the Irish derives from the Welsh.<sup>9</sup>

The term *drúth* is used in early Irish law texts to refer to a mentally unsound person, but also in law and literature to refer to one who performs as a jester. It is sometimes used as a general word for the professional jester.<sup>10</sup> In the glossaries it is glossed by "*óinmit*," and the further note *quasi dirraith*: "i.e. suretyless." It is also glossed, in a separate entry, by *merdreach*, "harlot."<sup>11</sup> *Drúth* along with *fuirseóir* is used to gloss *reimm*, "clown, jester" in the law text on *Míadshlechta*.<sup>12</sup>

*Óinmit* is a term of contentious origin, and is as mentioned above the word applied almost exclusively to the fools Comgán

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<sup>9</sup>J. Loth, "Notes étymologiques et lexicographiques 171:lr. *drúth*, *drúis*, W. *drud*," *Revue Celtique* 38 (1920-1) 174-6.

<sup>10</sup>Kelly, *Guide*, p.65.

<sup>11</sup>W. Stokes, *Cormac's Glossary* (1868)59.

<sup>12</sup>D. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici (CIH)* (6 volumes, Dublin, 1979)585.25(=*Ancient Laws of Ireland (ALI)*) (6 volumes, Dublin, 1865-1901) vol. iv, p.354.



Mac Da Cherda and, probably in imitation, Conall Clocach. T.F. O'Rahilly states that though it became replaced by *amadán* in the modern language (*óinseach* for a female) *óinmit* or *óinmhid* yet survived as a dialect word in Munster until the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> <sup>In origin</sup> a compound word, it is taken by O'Rahilly to be comprised of the elements \**on*, *uan* "lamb" and a "mind" word from \**mentī*, *mŋtī*, thus giving a meaning of "lamb-wit," a convincing term for a fool. His argument is strengthened by the gloss on the adjective *ónna* (another lamb derivative) as *báeth* "foolish"<sup>14</sup> which complements its usual meaning of "feeble, timid." Vendryes seems to agree with the main line of O'Rahilly's argument.<sup>15</sup> At any rate, the root of the first element can hardly be a negative \**ŋ* such as O'Rahilly gives for the derivation of the first element in *ammait* "a witless female, foolish woman, witch" (\**ŋ-mentī* or \**ŋ-mŋtī*).<sup>16</sup>

One problem in this argument is how to connect the Ol *óinmit* with the Welsh cognate *ynfyd*. Pedersen<sup>17</sup> connects the two words along with Old English *unwitti*, but a straightforward relationship among the three seems unlikely, especially as neither *óin-* nor *yn-* can originate from a negative prefix, as does the English *un-*. Vendryes<sup>18</sup> connects Welsh *ynfyd* with the Old Breton *enbit* (glossed *debilis*, "faible d'esprit, insensé"<sup>19</sup>) but remains unconvinced of the connection between these two and the Irish word, a connection which O'Rahilly, moreover, dismisses out of hand.

<sup>13</sup>T.F. O'Rahilly, "Notes, mostly Etymological:5, *óinmhid* . *ónna* . *amaid* ." *Ériu* 13 (1942) 149-51.

<sup>14</sup>Stokes, *Cormac's Glossary*, p.132.

<sup>15</sup>J. Vendryes, *Lexique Étymologique de L'Irlandais Ancien, lettres MNOP* (Dublin/Paris, 1960) O-pp.17-18.

<sup>16</sup> O'Rahilly, "Notes", p.150. See Vendryes, *Lexique* s.u. *ammait* A-p.67, for a different derivation (from baby-talk for grandmother *amma*). Eric Hamp disagrees with O'Rahilly's derivations. See text for his arguments on *óinmit*. *ammait* he derives from an intensive compound \**ambi-* + \**-bito-* ("foolish", from \**boito-* a supposed precursor of Ol *báeth*. "Varia 1.4: *óinmhid*, *ónna*, *amaid*, *amadán*, again," *Ériu* 39 (1988)191.

<sup>17</sup>Pedersen, *Vergleichende Grammatik der Keltischen Sprachen* (Göttingen, 1909) vol. I, p.21.

<sup>18</sup>Vendryes, *Lexique*, O-p.17.

<sup>19</sup>L. Fleuriot, *Dictionnaire des Glosses en Vieux Breton* (Paris, 1964) s.u. *enbit*, p.159.

The most logical scenario would seem to be an acceptance of *ynfyd*, *enbit* and *óinmit* as cognates, and to account for their different forms from some root structure. This is exactly the issue Eric Hamp has addressed. He takes as his base the OI *báeth*, postulating an earlier form in *\*boito-* / *\*-bito-* which in combination with an intensive compound *\*ande-* could explain the origins of all three forms.<sup>20</sup> The *ón-* of the Irish forms, he suggests, is supplied by folk etymology.<sup>21</sup>

The Irish do not seem to have connected *óinmit* with a folk etymology from "lamb." *Sanas Cormaic* gives an unlikely etymology of *.i. muit onna .i. amlabar 7 baeth* "i.e., dumb-foolish, i.e. dumb and foolish."<sup>22</sup> Another dubious explanation, though more helpful, is from the laws: *oinmit: fer mitir im drochmnai (7 ona) co ndentar mear 7 fonachtaide .i. fosgenigh*. "a man who is matched (?) with a bad woman (and[the]blemishes(?)) by which he is made mad and unsteady (?) i.e. starting."<sup>23</sup> In the Laws it is a very uncommon term. In one instance, it glosses( as *fer óinmit* ) *drúth* , said to be *co rath*, "with *rath*"<sup>24</sup> which in this context seems to mean a fool capable of performing a useful function. Elsewhere *óinmit* is used to mean a female fool (a unique instance) while *ón* is used for the male.<sup>25</sup> In literature it clearly means an idiot or fool, but in earlier literature it seems restricted to a behavioural, rather than a functional description. It is perhaps noteworthy that the two characters most often described as *óinmiti*, Comgán and Conall Clocach, share certain traits. Like madmen, and unlike most other fools, both are turned into fools through enchantment or curse. Thus, unlike the *drúth*, whom the law-texts make clear was a fool from birth or earlier childhood, something in adulthood causes these *óinmiti*

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<sup>20</sup>Hamp, "Varia", p.191.

<sup>21</sup>ibid., p.192.

<sup>22</sup>Stokes, *Cormac's Glossary* , p.132.

<sup>23</sup>*CIH* , 585.20-1(=*ALI* , iv, 352)

<sup>24</sup>See Kelly, *Guide* , p.319, and references there cited, for the two terms, *rath*, "stock given by a chief or a landlord to a tribesman or tenant subject to certain counter-obligations." and *ráth* "surety, security."(*DIL* ) It seems that the former is meant in this phrase, and owing to the "counter-obligations" some translate the term *co rath* as "capable of doing work."

<sup>25</sup>*CIH* 1459.8(=*ALI* , ii, 44, 46.)



to become insane. Here we may compare the gloss from the laws quoted above, which suggest that men become *óinmiti* through the influence of bad wives. Another trait common to the two is that both are essentially pas<sup>s</sup>ive, non-violent fools, and therefore differ from the frenzied behaviour of madmen. Likewise, neither Comgán nor Conall appears to function as a professional jester or entertainer. They seem to be fit only for menial work: chopping firewood, milking cows, tending kilns.<sup>26</sup>

These traits may suggest that the term developed as a quite limited one, and was indeed popularly connected with an etymology like "lamb-wit," as seen in Comgán's essential innocence. Indeed, it is possible that the word was applied originally to Comgán, and through the influence of his legend passed into more widespread usage. In the texts recounting Conall Clocach's cursing and transformation he is not referred to by this term, and only in later sources is he described as an *óinmit*. The scarcity of the term in the Laws and other technical documents would support this argument. *Óinmit* then may be a term intimately associated with the character of Comgán Mac Da Cherda.

## LAW AND SOCIETY

Further information regarding the character of the fool can be obtained from an examination of his legal position and of his place within early Irish society. In both these areas the law texts are invaluable sources.<sup>27</sup> Most of the references are concerned with protection either of the society from the insane or of the insane from being taken advantage of by other members of society. Some, however, serve to clarify the understanding of the people of early Ireland of what a fool was and how he was to be assessed.

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<sup>26</sup>See P. Ó Riain, "A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man," *Éigse* 14 (1972) 201; and below, Chapter Four, for a discussion of Comgán's menial work.

<sup>27</sup>F. Kelly, *Guide*, 91-5.

Particularly in the text *Bretha Étgid* ("judgments of inadvertence")<sup>28</sup> we are given the impression that the *drúth* was a type of person insane from birth or from a very young age. That text states: *.i. cuin deiligther é ma áis in drúth é no in gaeth? Secht mbliadan am.* ("When is it determined by age whether he is a fool or a sensible person? At seven years, indeed.") And it continues: "And when is it determined by age whether he is a fool or a person of half-sense? (*in drúth é no in fear leth cuind*) At the end of fourteen years."<sup>29</sup>

Thus the *drúth* is set apart from the more "normal" stupidity of the *fer leth cuind*. A further division is provided by the "usefulness" of the fool. The *drúth co rath*<sup>30</sup> was a fool capable of performing some service that would gain him land and possessions, thus a fool with a societal function. One of the law texts sheds light on this term:

Five cows is the fine for neglecting to provide for the maintenance of the fool who has land and ability to entertain (*co n-oblairecht*) [and his having them] is the cause of the smallness of the fine. Ten cows is the fine for neglecting to provide for the maintenance of every madwoman (*cech mire*) and the reason that the fine is greater than that of the fool is because the madwoman is not an entertainer (*ni hairfidig in mer*) and has no land. If the fool (*drúth*) has no land, nor the ability to entertain, the fine for neglecting to provide for his maintenance is equal to that of the madwoman who can do no work (*mer cin rath*).<sup>31</sup>

Thus, although some insane people were deemed "useless" in terms of providing more than menial labour, their well-being was assiduously guarded. The functional fool, it is made clear, was capable of becoming a jester (*oblaire*) by means of his *oblairecht*. The *oblaire* was the tenth and lowest class of

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<sup>28</sup>*CIH* 250.1-337.36; 925.1-945.19, etc.(=*ALI* , iii, 83-547); cf. Kelly, *Guide*, p.272.

<sup>29</sup>*CIH* (= *ALI* iii, p.156.)

<sup>30</sup>See note 24 above.

<sup>31</sup>*CIH* 372.31-35 (= *ALI* i, p.136.) And see *Do Brethaib Gaire*, "de druthbrethaib": *CIH* 2107.21-35.



poets.<sup>32</sup> This professional role is the one in which the fool is most often depicted in literature, as will be discussed below.

In one of the many schematic passages in the law texts, the varying divisions of the fool are delineated beyond reasonable expectation:

*Tri drúith fil and, 7 da ainm decc fil orro. In bobreith 7 in bocmbell 7 in mellach suirig, an righ druth 7 in rindinech 7 in druth go rath: se hanmanna sin ar in druth co rath. [In buic(n)e 7] in caeptha 7 in finelogh baeth 7 gaeth 7 in fer leth chuind: ceithre hanmanna sin ar in fer leth cuind. In salach druth 7 in mer gan rath: da ainm sin ar in mer gan rath.*<sup>33</sup>

The text's editor, Roland Smith, points to a parallel passage to the one quoted earlier, which states that at the end of fourteen years it is discovered "what kind of fool the fool is" (*ce druth dib é*).<sup>34</sup> By this scheme, the *drúth* divides into three types: a fool who can do some work which would gain him land and status, a person of half-sense, feeble-minded, and a mad person incapable of work. The particular meanings for the sub-divisions within these classes are hard to determine, and we must assume the usual legalistic over-schematisation is in operation here as well. There is also the possibility that ultimately all these terms for the fool were more or less used synonymously, or were in reality no more distinct than the English words "nut", "kook", "loony" etc.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, the references provided by Smith and speculations on the meanings of the names of these types of fools provide some further knowledge of the place of the fool in society.

The first category, the *drúth co rath*, seems clearly to be comprised of fools with the ability to entertain. Both the *boicmell* and the *mellach suirig* appear to contain in their names the element *mell-*, which may denote playfulness or pleasure, or amorousness, although glosses on the names connect it with

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<sup>32</sup>See L. Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar* (Dublin, 1988) 102 §17 (=CIH 2339.20).

<sup>33</sup>Passage from ms. H.3.10, 423a, edited by R. Smith, "The Advice to Doidín," *Ériu* 11 (1932)80 n.7.(=CIH 955.25-29).

<sup>34</sup>ibid., p.80 n. 1.

<sup>35</sup>For an example of the multiplicity of words for stupid or mad people in a given Irish dialect, see for instance N. Breatnach, "Focail Ghaeilge atá le clos sa Bhéarla a labhartar i gceanntar an Chaisleán Nua, Co. Luimnigh," *Éigse* 7 (1940) 47-51.



lumps on the fool's neck.<sup>36</sup> The *Rindinech* likewise would seem to be a variety of satirist from his name, which may mean "pointy-face" or "satire-face" (from *rind* "point" or *rindaíd* "satirise/satirist" and *enech* "face.")<sup>37</sup> That some of these *drúith* might perform for, or in essence belong to, the aristocracy is implied in terms such as *rígdrúth* ("royal- or king's fool") and *suirig rígdamna* ("the royal heir's *suirig*"), the latter to be connected with the *mellach suirig* and equated with a character like that of Mac Glas in *Fingal Rónáin*.<sup>38</sup> The *rígdrúth* might have a special status, as indicated by the following text: "If he is a fool who is with the king alone, there is then no portion of the body-fine due to the family. It is for the crimes of him who is fool to the king alone that he (the king) had undertaken to be responsible on this occasion. When a fool is between a king and a people who is accompanying the king, he (the king) does not undertake to be responsible for his crimes."<sup>39</sup> The *rígdrúth* may be illustrated in characters from literature, such as Róimid in *Mesca Ulad*, Tulchaine in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, or for the fool shared between king and host, perhaps Ua Maigleine in *Cath Almaine*.<sup>40</sup>

The concern with the wrongdoings of the insane still dominates the discussion in the law texts, the families of all except the *rígdrúth* being liable for their misdeeds.<sup>41</sup> And despite the ability of this type of fool to attain *rath*, references show they were still thought insane. A gloss on the *bobreith* suggest that he behaved like, or lowed like a cow,<sup>42</sup> and another contests that his memory was not reliable.<sup>43</sup> Of the *drúth*, with reference as well to the *boicmell* and the *mellach suirig*, we are told, *isi a aithne cacha noma[dh] briathar atbeir do firad* ("he is recognised

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<sup>36</sup>Smith, "Advice", pp.73, 80, 81.

<sup>37</sup>ibid., p.82.

<sup>38</sup>ibid., pp.81-2; Greene, *Fingal Rónáin and other stories* (Dublin, 1955).

<sup>39</sup>Smith, "Advice," p.81.

<sup>40</sup>J. C. Watson, *Mesca Ulad* (Dublin, 1941) ll.686-701; E. Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Dublin, 1936) ll.1162-74, 1193-5; P. Ó Riain, *Cath Almaine* (Dublin, 1978) ll.64-71; Joan Radner, *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (Dublin, 1978) 70.

<sup>41</sup>Smith, "Advice," p.69, 71.

<sup>42</sup>ibid., p.73.

<sup>43</sup>ibid., p.69.

because every ninth word he says [needs] corrected (or verifying).")<sup>44</sup> This passage makes reference to Conall Clocach, and his behaviour in the earlier version of the Battle of Mag Rath may illustrate this quality.<sup>45</sup>

Although the second category, the *fer leth-cuind* would appear to be a man capable of doing ordinary work, the implication of the terms in this section suggest that he might be either prone to fits of insanity, or perhaps just simple-minded. The *buice* is explained as *.i. an ceo do buaic .i. in fer leith cuinn* ("i.e. the fog for his cap, i.e. the man of half-sense")<sup>46</sup> and the name *finelogh baeth 7 gaeth*, whatever precisely it may mean, implies a person sometimes sensible, sometimes foolish. In law, the man of half-sense seems to have been himself held responsible for some of his actions, as he is called "a man of half-sense or half-liability."<sup>47</sup>

Most interesting is the *caeptha*, connected with the *finelogh baeth 7 gaeth* and the *fer leth-cuind*. The references to this type of fool suggest perhaps that he has been transformed from a sane man into a fool, perhaps by social vilification, and indeed his name appears to mean "one who has been pelted with clods." His status is explained:

*nad i fulang ar a chinta co tabair secht cumala as do righ. Benaid side caep ind re cach, diles do cach a caepad iarum. Muna ro gaphad rig, bith a chin for fine, 7 conoat orba do.* ("who is unmaintainable on account of his crimes until he has given seven *cumala* to the king. [If] he (the king) throws a clod at him before everyone, it is lawful for anyone to throw afterwards. Unless the king has taken him, his crime shall be on his family and they hold the land for him.)<sup>48</sup>

The reference to the pelting of the fool with clods is reminiscent of the *dlaí fulla*. This is the "wisp of wandering" referred to as

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<sup>44</sup>ibid., p.81.

<sup>45</sup>C. Marstrander, "A New Version of the Battle of Mag Rath," *Ériu* 5 (1911) 226. See also the distinctive speech of the fool in the *Táin*, C. O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cuailnge ; Recension 1* (Dublin, 1976) ll.1599-1600: "*Ecmaic atgeóin-sium for erlabrai ind fir combo drúth.*"

<sup>46</sup>Smith, p.73.

<sup>47</sup>*CIH* 394.36 (= *ALI*, i, 202.)

<sup>48</sup>Smith, p.69.



the cause of certain madnesses, seemingly violent.<sup>49</sup> The *Cóir Anmann* derives the name of the druid Fullón from his being the first to throw the *dlaí fulla* on a person.<sup>50</sup> As we shall see in Chapter Four, this is the way that Comgán becomes a fool in "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda": the druid casts a wisp on him and the rest of the court--including the king-- follow suit. Comgán, however, becomes neither *fulla* nor *caeptha* but *óinmit*.<sup>51</sup> We may also note the similarity to Conall Clocach's abuse of Colum Cille, where he and his followers pelt the saint with clods and mock him, whereafter the saint curses Conall into foolishness.<sup>52</sup> There are also similar scenes in Norse literature (the death of Baldr) and in the Welsh tale of Peredur where the seneschal and the rest of Arthur's court throw twigs at the foolish hero as he enters the court.<sup>53</sup> It is worth emphasising that the *caeptha*'s crimes seem to be of a more violent nature, connecting him with the ferocity of the madman. However, his classification in this category, and the similarity of his situation to that of the two *óinmiti* would seem to indicate that he was considered a fool, capable of existing within society.

The final category seems to be the one under which we should group Comgán, since he appears unable to perform as a jester (except inadvertently) and is seen performing menial tasks such as milking and gathering wood, tasks normally left to women and servants. The *salach drúth* would seem to be an unclean fool ("dirty (type) of fool"?) essentially one who performed degrading tasks, perhaps. Similarly the *mer gan rath* has no ability to attain status and land. This may refer to madwomen, rather than "useless" fools in general. As is evident from the passage quoted earlier, the madwoman had little or no social standing. She was not a jester, did not hold land, and like

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<sup>49</sup>Cf. *CIH* 421.4-5(=ALI ,i, 300)"in duine mir .i. fo tabur in dluighe fulla ."; *CIH* 359.29-30(=ALI , i, 90) "fulla, .i. fo tabir in dlai fulla."

<sup>50</sup>Stokes, "Cóir Anmann," *Irische Texte*, vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1897) 366.

<sup>51</sup>J.G. O'Keeffe, "Mac da Cherda and Cummaine Foda," *Ériu* 5 (1911) 34.

<sup>52</sup>See below, Chapter Four, and Keating, *Forus Feasa for Éirinn: History of Ireland* vol. 3 (ed. Dinneen, ITS vol. 9, Dublin, 1908) 90.

<sup>53</sup>J. Young, *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson* (California, 1966) 80-1; G. Goetinck, *Historia Peredur vab Efracw* (Cardiff, 1976) 12.



other fools could make no contracts or other legal arrangements. She could not rear her own children.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, the law acknowledges that because of her incapacity, her rights were above all other rights.<sup>55</sup>

To an extent this situation seems to be true of the insane in general in early Irish society: barred from legal status, but holding certain legal rights. The fool could make few legal arrangements. He could not make contracts and was discouraged from acting as surety for another person.<sup>56</sup> To some extent these provisions may be intended to save the insane from being exploited, but they were also discouraged from using the courts concerning contracts and distress: "As to strangers and foreigners, lunatics (*na mir*) those without sense (*na h-écodnaig*)

and bondmen, it is not unlawful not to allow them to levy their suit, or not to permit them to take distress."<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless there were provisions in the law for the protection of fools, and their responsibility for their own misdoings was treated with leniency. Thus we find the distress for the maintaining of fools and of madwomen of whom it is said "for their rights take precedence over other rights" (*im gaire ndrúith, im gaire mire, ar dofet a cert certaib*.)<sup>58</sup> Likewise there are provisions for the sick-maintenance of the son of an insane man and woman.<sup>59</sup> As quoted earlier, there are serious fines for neglecting to provide for a fool or madwoman. There is also reference to fools having adult guardians who were responsible for them.<sup>60</sup>

As to the responsibilities for raising fools, *Do drúthaib 7 meraib 7 dásachtaib* points out that "a sane woman who bears a son to a fool is obliged to foster him to the completion of fosterage." Later it states "A madwoman who bears a son to a fool: (fosterage) is performed between the family of the mother

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<sup>54</sup>CIH 1276.36-7. See Kelly, *Guide*, p.93.

<sup>55</sup>CIH 372.21.

<sup>56</sup>CIH 351.26 (=ALI, i, 50.); Smith, "Advice," p.73.

<sup>57</sup>CIH 358.33-36.(=ALI, i, 86.)

<sup>58</sup>CIH 372.21(=ALI, i, 124.) cf. Kelly, *Guide*, p.93.

<sup>59</sup>CIH 519.23f.(=ALI, ii, 406.)

<sup>60</sup>CIH 1459.8 (=ALI, ii, 44):*Ni gaibter athgabail druith, na dasachtaidh, na oin, na oinmiti, na haimbil; na athgabail a cond bertai a cinta ocus a rath.*



and of the father." Land likewise was held intact for the fool's descendants. The land of the fool and the land of a man whose reason has left him are listed among the three lands not divided, but "whose portion is held by sureties during the lifetime of a man, for collecting maintenance and for withholding his land from one who does not perform his maintenance."<sup>61</sup> It is stated in *Bretha Étgid* that the land of the fool is kept without being divided by his family "as far as five persons and the division of forfeited land is made from then on; and if by the end of a hundred years a sensible son (i.e. descendant) should be born to the fool, the land shall be returned to him again."<sup>62</sup>

The responsibilities of fools for their crimes are likewise detailed. For the most part there is full responsibility on the fool only if the crime was unprovoked or premeditated. *Bretha Étgid* details the division of liability in the case of assault by a fool if he was incited, and in the case of bringing a fool into an alehouse with a view towards taunting him.<sup>63</sup> There is also a passage concerning why a fool would make an assault in such a situation which shows the insight the Irish legalist could sometimes have: "The manifest assault of a fool (*drúth*) is when he made it of his own accord and was not drunk (*mescaiti*) from having drunk ale, but (because) his having heard the noise and voice of the crowd had the effect of inciting him."<sup>64</sup> This statement is preceded by a note that if the fool does something through drunkenness, he pays compensation for it, "for though every fool is 'drunk', that is the drunkenness of folly and not the drunkenness of ale, for if it were he would not be merely a fool."

Crimes committed against the fool are also regulated. *Do drúthaib 7rl.* states that "every king in whose territory (the fool) is injured: (the king) takes the *dire* in his stead, but it is unrighteousness in a king (not to give) a third of it to (the fool's)

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<sup>61</sup>Smith, "Advice," p.70.

<sup>62</sup>*CIH* 1265.10-13(=*ALI* , iii, 156.)

<sup>63</sup>*CIH* 1264.33f (=*ALI* , iii, 156, 198.)

<sup>64</sup>*CIH* 269.23f.(=*ALI* , iii, 202.)



family."<sup>65</sup> Likewise there is provision concerning the uniting of a male and female mad person for the purpose of sport:

In the case of coupling for entertainment(*lanamnas genaig*) [of] a fool (*drúth*) or madman (*dásachtach*) with a (female) fool (*mer*) or madwoman (*dásachtaig?*) neither of them is entitled to any share of profits or losses; the person who united them for fun, and the sensible adult before whom it was done, are bound to foster the offspring, if offspring come of it, and bear their crimes, and become their security; their *eric* -fine and their legacy belong to the king and the church and the tribe."<sup>66</sup>

As always, the provisions of law make starkly clear the horrific possibilities of inhumanity within any given society. Early Irish law was acutely conscious of the vulnerability of the fool, of the insane in a society based on usefulness, landholding, status and legal rights. It is perhaps owing to the fact that the fool remained within the family and the social structure that his care and protection were so guarded in the legal texts. Nonetheless they make it clear that the fool was in society what he would become in literature: a liminal figure, neither an outcast nor an insider, possessing rights but no rank, protected but unwanted, an unpredictable figure. Perhaps it is due to his social liminality, and hence legal oddness that the lawyers found the fool such an interesting topic.

Before turning to the image of the fool in literature, it would be well to point out the characteristics which distinguish the madman (*dásachtach, geilt, fulla*) from the fool. As we have seen, the madman is often associated with more violent and anti-social behaviour. Thus in the Old Irish glosses, *dásacht* is used to translate *amentia* or *dementia*, as well as *tradere Satanae* "possessed of a demon."<sup>67</sup> O'Davoren's Glossary implies a violent madness as well, under the word *Doalaigh.i. dasacht no mire, ut est mífocul marmartra dogni doalaigh* ("i.e., madness or lunacy, that is, a bad word of great death which causes *doalaigh*

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<sup>65</sup>Smith, "Advice," p.70.

<sup>66</sup>*CIH* 519.23-7(=*ALI* , ii, 406.)

<sup>67</sup>*Mil.* 20b7, *Wb.* 28 a11, and see *DIL* , su. *dásacht* , for further references.



)<sup>68</sup> This passage also implies the generative nature of this type of madness, here produced by great emotion or grief. As to the violence of the madman, in law, people were exempted from distress from harm caused while securing or fettering a madman.<sup>69</sup>

The *dásacht* is portrayed as a figure of dread in literature. Thus in the Life of Brigit in the Book of Lismore, there is a story of a converted madman:

*Feacht doluidh Brigit tar Sliabh Fuait. Bui dasachtach issin t-sleib no-oircedh na cuitechna. O't conncatar na caillecha he ros-gabh ecla 7 uamun mor iat. Adubairt Brigit risin ndasachtach: "O dhat-rala ann protchai breitir nDé dhun." "Ni cumngaim gan umhaloit duit, ár it trocar fria muintir in Coimded etir truagha 7 bhochta ."* ("Once Brigit went over Sliabh Fuait. There was a madman on the mountain who used to attack the congregations. When the nuns saw him, fear and great terror seized them. Brigit said to the madman: 'Since I have come to you here, preach the word of God to us.' 'I cannot avoid ministering to you, for you are merciful to the Lord's household, both the wretched and the poor.' he says."<sup>70</sup>

There is a detailed description of a violent man which employs the language of madness in Keating's *Three Shafts of Death* :

*7 fós nach gabhaid geasa ná gnáith-iarmharta greim dhe, acht é dorrdha do-uraghaill amhail fhear baoise neo buain-ghealtachta, lán do dasacht 7 do deirg-mhire, ag imirt éigin 7 anfhorráin orra, ag buain aisig iomláin díobh sna toirthibh fiadhánta fiath-amhla fuaradar uaidh. ("He doesn't take hold of taboos or the usual consequences, but he is grim, hard to speak to like a foolish man or one of certain madness, full of madness and furious insanity, inflicting violence and oppression on them, seizing a perfect expedient from them in the wild savage fruits which are gotten from them.")<sup>71</sup>*

<sup>68</sup>Stokes, "O'Davoren's Glossary," *Archiv für Celtische Lexicographie*, vol. 2 (1904) 298, 628. *doalaigh* =? vice (*do-alaig* "bad behaviour") cf. *sualig* "virtue"<*so-alaig* .

<sup>69</sup>*CIH* 420.31, 421.4-5(=*ALI* , i, 268, 300.)

<sup>70</sup>Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford, 1890) 46.

<sup>71</sup>O. Bergin, *Keating's Three Shafts of Death* (Dublin, 1931) 188.



This is equally applicable to the *geilt* whose violent nature is evident in the characters of Suibne and Mis, though the *geilt* seems not to attack but run in fear.<sup>72</sup> Another quality common to these madmen is that their madness is produced from the outside: they are made insane either by spell or curse (the *dlaí fulla*, Rónán's curse) or by some intense emotional crisis (the death of Mis's father, the horror of battle, feelings of guilt.) Although similar to the *óinmiti* in this respect, in the madmen we find a hostile, paranoid, solitary sort of insanity manifestly different to the witless dependency of the fool. There of course many other similarities in the nature of both, and traditions of both have gone to make up the paradigm of the wild man legend in Pádraig Ó Riain's study.<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, we must emphasise the differences: the fool maintains himself in the liminal range that makes him attached to society while being removed from it by his insanity. The madman roams the wilds beyond the reach of human ties.

From an early Irish Christian point of view, insanity and sin were connected, a perspective it shared with the rest of medieval Europe.<sup>74</sup> This seems in Ireland, however, to have been a typological, rather than a causal connection. The sinner acts like a madman, he disobeys the word of his law, goes against sense. This similarity of sin and madness is expressed best in a short poem from the Berne Codex:

<i>Mór báis, mór baile</i>	Much folly, much frenzy,
<i>mór coll ceille, mor mire</i>	much loss of sense, much madness,
<i>olais airchenn techt do écaib</i>	since going to death is certain,
<i>beith fo étoil maic Maire.</i>	to be under the displeasure of Mary's son. <sup>75</sup>

Outside literary sources, however, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that madness or insanity was thought to be a result of sin. In tales such as *Buile Shuibne* and *Serglige Con Culainn*, however, the madness of the protagonists is intimately

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<sup>72</sup>B. Frykenberg *The Wild-Man in Celtic Ecclesiastical Legend and Tradition* (unpub. M.Litt. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1984) 92f.

<sup>73</sup>Ó Riain, "Wild Man", 179f.

<sup>74</sup>See P. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, 1974) 1-53.

<sup>75</sup>Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Paleo-hibernicus*, vol. 2, p.296.



bound up with sin. The same is true of Comgán's more passive insanity in "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda." Moreover, in these works the descent into madness is portrayed almost as a penance, a purgative act, the tales finishing with the redemption and reconciliation of the sinner-hero. In the case of the pre-Christian Cú Chulainn this is effected by Manannán, acting almost as a confessor figure, shaking his cloak of forgetfulness between Cú Chulainn and his illicit lover, wiping his slate clean.<sup>76</sup>

These literary treatments, however, appear to be extended commentaries on the typological connections between sin and penance and insanity. While in some tales also sinning characters are depicted as possessed,<sup>77</sup> and the glosses quoted above suggest that madness was in some quarters equated with possession, no other legal or ecclesiastical text suggests that the fool or madman was prejudged to have deserved his insanity by reason of sin or possession.<sup>78</sup>

#### THE FOOL IN LITERATURE:

The fool in early Irish literature spans the range between comic entertainer and prophetic madman, and it should be fair to say that his characterisation in early Irish texts draws on both extremes of his nature. Fools who appear to be merely jesters are yet prophets and harbingers of doom. Most often depicted in a professional capacity as a performer, the fool is yet shown partaking of the chaos and strangeness which characterises the actually insane. Some of this range can be gathered from descriptions of the physical appearance of fools.

There are a number of passages which show fools in performance and in uniform. Most notably, in *Mesca Ulad* there is among the long procession of the Ulstermen a jester:

I see there a rowdy crowd. There's one man among them with a bare,  
dark, close-cropped head on him, big bulging pure-white eyes in his head;

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<sup>76</sup>On the literary extension of the sin-madness-redemption theme, see Chapter Four below.

<sup>77</sup>Notably Áedán in *Scéla Cano*, and Cathal in *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*.

<sup>78</sup>For the evolution and integration of the themes of madness, sin, and penitence, see Frykenberg, *Wild-man*, pp.31-2.



he has a smooth-blue face like an Ethiopian. A speckled cloak gathered about him, a bronze brooch in his cloak above his front; a long bronze crook in his hand. A little sweet melodious bell along with him. He brandishes his horse-switch on the host so that it causes delight and joy to the high king and to the whole host.

He is then identified as *Róimid ríógóinmit*, royal fool to Conchobar.<sup>79</sup>

A second description of the *drúth* appears in *Táin Bó Fraích*, as Fráech's retinue proceeds to Medb's court:

There were three fools (*drúith*) before them with gilded silver crests (*mind*, "diadems") Each of them had shields with engraved ornaments, with staves inlaid with bronze along their sides.<sup>80</sup>

It should be noted that Meid suggests that these might really be druids, as the term *drúth* became confused in later literature with *druí*. But the placement of the *drúith* here amongst harpers and hornblowers suggests a figure of entertainment.

A third portrait comes from *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, which contains a number of references to fools and entertainers. A particularly detailed description is given of Tulchaine the royal fool (*Taulchaine rígdruíth*) by Ingcél, the foreign marauder, who has watched the court through a window.

I saw there a plump fellow in front of the same room on the floor of the house. The shame of baldness on him. As white as cotton-grass each hair that grows through his head. Gold earrings about his ears. A many-coloured, speckled cloak about him. Nine swords in his hands and nine silver shields and nine golden apples. He throws each one up and none of them falls on the floor and there is only one of them on his palm and it's like the moving about of bees on a bright day, each one of them up past the other. When he was at his fastest, I saw him at the trick and as I looked they made a clatter about him so that they were all on the floor of the house. It's then the prince who was in the house said to the juggler, "We have come together since I was a boy and your trick of juggling hasn't failed you until tonight."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Watson, *MU*, ll.689-701. Is it possible that the name "Róimid" is from *ró - ammaid* "very mad"?

<sup>80</sup>W. Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích* (Dublin, 1967)ll.35-8, and see note p. 23.

<sup>81</sup>Knott, *TBDD*, ll. 1162-74.



He is later identified as "Taulchaine *rígdrúth* of the king of Tara, Conaire's juggler that one. A powerful big man, that man."<sup>82</sup>

We have then a number of descriptions of the *drúth* as entertainer, a court jester in a very ordinary sense, dressed in distinctive and outlandish gear. Though to an extent these descriptions are in keeping with the formulaic, adjective-laden passages in which they appear, nonetheless the uniform of the fool may reveal some deeper significance, with the cautious use of comparative evidence. The phenomenon of the court fool is well documented in British and Continental sources, although mostly from a period later in the Middle Ages.<sup>83</sup> There is also ample evidence of fools playing similar roles in other societies. In these courts, the fool appears to have played not only a humorous but a symbolic role, venting the rebellion of the society, contrasting in his deformity and stupidity the supposedly wise and unblemished king, and mocking the formal rules and rituals of court and church. As well as mental deficiencies, fools, outside of Ireland at least, were often employed for physical oddness, and the general dress and features of the professional served to heighten these abnormalities.

Thus the shaved or bald head of the fool. There is some evidence that this was a general characteristic in Ireland. In addition to the foregoing passages, in the much later text *The Lad of the Ferule*, the hero says, "I had nothing to do myself, a king's son, but to take on myself the shaving of a fool or idiot (*bearradh óinsigh no amadáin*)." <sup>84</sup> Likewise in the *Imtheachta na nÓinmhideadh*, when Comgúán is turned into an *óinmit* all his hair falls out.<sup>85</sup> It has been frequently pointed out that the hair was a symbol of manliness and beauty, and this particularly among the Celts. Joseph Nagy, in a discussion of the symbolism of baldness in early Irish texts, points to it as a mark both of

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<sup>82</sup>ibid., II.1193-5.

<sup>83</sup>See for instance, E. Welsford, *The Fool*, part 2.

<sup>84</sup>D. Hyde, *The Lad of the Ferule* (ITS vol. 1, London, 1899) 24

<sup>85</sup>RIA B.iv. 1, p.152r.



servility and of liminality.<sup>86</sup> In the same vein, the bulging white eyes and black face are common to fools and clowns to this day in many places, and seem to reverse the heroic emphasis on fair skin. The reference in *Mesca Ulad* however, should also bring to mind the comment in the laws referring to the *réimm* (glossed *drúth* or *fuirseóir*): "Every man who brings distortion on his body and his face is not entitled to a *dire* -fine because he goes out of his own shape before hosts and crowds."<sup>87</sup> Thus the physical distortion of the fool seems to mock the manliness and the dignity of the warrior.

The speckled or pied cloak is similar in many ways to (though has no direct connection with) the motley of the late medieval jester or the patterned shapes of the harlequin. William Willeford suggests that these are symbolic of the chaos and disorder which accompany the fool.<sup>88</sup> His bronze staff or crook again compares with the pattern of medieval and later jester's gear: he usually carried some sort of stick or wand topped by a bauble, a fool's head or a bladder. Some comparison of the garments of the Irish fool may be made with this description of an Elizabethan court jester:

[His] coat was motley or parti-coloured...A hood resembling a monk's cowl, which at a very early period, it was certainly designed to imitate, covered the head entirely, and fell down over the breast and shoulders...It often had the comb or crest only of the animal [the cock] whence the term cockscomb or coxcomb was afterwards used to denote any silly upstart. This fool usually carried in his hand an official sceptre or bauble, which was a short stick ornamented at the end with the figure of a fool's head...To this instrument there was frequently annexed an inflated skin or bladder, with which the fool belaboured those who offended him, or with whom he was inclined to make sport; this was often used by itself, in lieu, as it should seem, of a bauble. The form of it varied, and in some instances was obscene in the highest degree."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Nagy, "Demne Mael," *Celtica* 14 (1981) 8f.

<sup>87</sup>*CIH* 585.25-6 (=ALI, iv, 355.)

<sup>88</sup>W. Willeford, *The Fool and his Scepter* (London, 1982) 21.

<sup>89</sup>F. Douce, *Illustrations of Shakespeare and of Ancient Manners*, quoted in Willeford, *Fool*, p.22.



With the bladder and its use on the audience we may compare the *rígóinmit*'s *echlasc*, or horse-switch, which in *Mesca Ulad* he similarly brandishes to amuse the crowds. There is a possible sexual connotation to the horse-switch, as witnessed by the scene in *Fingal Rónáin* where Congal beats the sexually errant daughter of Echach with a horse-switch.<sup>90</sup> There is perhaps a mention of the jester in Ireland using an actual bladder. In a description of the *crosán* in the triads in the Yellow Book of Lecan, it is stated: "A *crosán* is identified by three things, a stretched mouth, a stretched stomach, and a stretched bag."<sup>91</sup> Although Harrison cites the suggestion that the last refers to "the inevitable phallus" it is more likely that it refers to an "inflated skin or bladder," which, to be fair, was in itself a phallic representation.

With the sceptre or bauble we may also compare the bronze stave in *Mesca Ulad*. The *mind* in *Táin Bó Fraích* which is worn on the heads of the *drúith* is reminiscent of the coxcomb ornament on the Elizabethan fool's cap. The silver and gold which covers them does make this seem unlikely, although *mind* does sometimes mean "crest." As a diadem, this headpiece could be seen as a mocking counterpart to the hero's diadem, although this is rarely described.<sup>92</sup> Note, however, the possibility that the *crosán* wore some sort of headpiece. In a verse on the divisions of the parts of animals caught in a hunt, there is assigned: "Its rump to the jesters--they are got up with headdress."<sup>93</sup> As for the ornamented shields in *Táin Bó Fraích*, the above passage from *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* makes it clear that these would be for juggling. Perhaps the richer quality of the *drúith*'s gear in *Táin Bó Fraích* is meant to emphasise Fráech's own wealth.

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<sup>90</sup>Greene, *FR*, I.99.

<sup>91</sup>Atkinson, *Yellow Book of Lecan* (facsimile, Dublin, 1896) 416, quoted by Harrison, "Tricksters," p.301. The stretched mouth, Harrison reasons, could refer to his abusiveness or his gluttony, his stretched stomach also showing his gluttony or his grotesqueness. Note the possible description above of Tulchaine in *TBDD* as "fat."

<sup>92</sup>See F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973) 22.

<sup>93</sup>A. O'Sullivan, "Verses on Honorific Portions," *Celtic Studies: Essays in Memory of Angus Matheson* (ed. Carney and Greene, London, 1968) 120-1.



That there is some comparison between the costume and appearance of the Elizabethan fool and the early Irish one should not suggest any connection in evolution or influence. Rather, it is a result of the symbolic function of the fool and his costume: in both cases the various elements of his appearance reflect an outside image he is twisting around or mocking. Principally, at least in the literary texts we shall be examining, this is the king or ruler, his employer. While the shaved head (like the Elizabethan monk's hood) and the bell may be parodies of the Irish monastic, the rest of the fool's costume may be seen as mirroring and distorting the image of kingship. In Irish society, the king was supposed to be truthful, unblemished and pure, to comply with ceremony and ritual, respect taboo. The fool represents the possibilities of flaw and fault denied to the ideal ruler. Thus the distorted face of the fool, and particularly the black face in *Mesca Ulad*, and the white hair and portly build of the jester in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, contrast with the dignity and regal appearance of the king, epitomised in praise-poetry so often by the pale white skin, slender build, and black or fair hair. So within the texts themselves, Conaire and Conchobar cut regal figures, the latter wearing a costume similar to the fool's but regal and excellent in comparison:

A broad-eyed kingly huge warrior among them in the middle, comparable to the moon...his countenance his visage, and his face. He has a forked, fair, narrow beard, his clipped red-blond hair is caught up in a cingulum to the slope of the nape of his neck. A purple fringed cloak about him.<sup>94</sup>

The fool's bauble, likewise, (Douce in his description of the Elizabethan fool calls it a sceptre) makes a mockery of the king's sceptre, the fool using his to create disorder as the king uses his to rule and regulate the country. In this context we may refer to the description of the royal inauguration by Martin Martin:

"Then he was to receive a white rod in his hand, intimating that he had power to rule not with tyranny and partiality, but with discretion and sincerity..."<sup>95</sup> This *slat*

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<sup>94</sup>Watson, *MU*, II.529-33.

<sup>95</sup>Quoted in Byrne, *Kings* p. 21.



"wand or sceptre," was surrounded by careful ritual in the enking ceremony, one of the more prominent nobles, in a hereditary right, being allowed to place the rod in his hand, "and if he or his successor shall place the wand in the hand of the king, he will be preeminent in strength and valour."<sup>96</sup> The fool's wand, his bronze crook, his horse-switch, break through this order and ceremony to create humour and raucousness in defiance of ritual. The horse-switch was also used in at least one inauguration ceremony, held in the hand of the king while he was in a vulnerable position.<sup>97</sup> We may also contrast the fool's wand with the rod of peace which Sencha mac Ailill holds above the Ulstermen to pacify them.<sup>98</sup> The sexual nature of the fool's bauble is also applicable here, its wantonness contrasting with the symbolic and solemn mating with and fertilising of the land which is implicit in the king's *slat*.

#### FOOL AND KING

This complementary or contrasting relationship of king and fool is not limited to their physical descriptions. The two are frequently found together in literary texts; or more precisely, in tales about kings the fool is often present as a shadowy counterpart. In the account of the Battle of Mag Mucrama, for instance, the fool (*drúth*) Doderá of the Corco Laighe is described as "exactly like Mac Con in form and appearance." Mac Con is the king, and central character of the story, and Doderá volunteers to go in his place to the battle, wearing the king's diadem on his head and his armour on his body, and be slain in his stead.<sup>99</sup> Mac Con later mourns the loss of the fool, saying that the kingdom will not smile now that he is gone. In two incidents (which may be doublets) in the *Táin* a fool is killed by Cú Chulainn while masquerading as the Connacht king Ailill. In the first, a fool accompanies Ailill's daughter to a meeting with Cú

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<sup>96</sup>C. Plummer, "Life of M'Áedóc," *Beathada Naemh nÉirenn*, (Oxford, 1922) vol. 1, p.203; vol. 2, p. 197-8. Cf. Byrne, *Kings*, p.21-2.

<sup>97</sup>Y. de Pontfarcy, "Two late inaugurations of Irish kings," *Études Celtiques* 24 (1987) 206-8.

<sup>98</sup>Watson, *MU*, II.118-20.

<sup>99</sup>M. O'Daly, *Cath Maige Mucrama* (ITS vol. 50, Dublin, 1975) 40-3.



Chulainn, dressed as the king but at a distance so that the warrior might not recognise him. In the second, Ailill's followers put his *mind* on the fool's head, because "Ailill himself did not venture to wear it." <sup>100</sup> Similarly, in the "Minor Annals" s.u.626, the fool of the king Fiachna mac Baetáin prays of St. Comgall "that at one and the same instant with his lord he too might die in the battle; and that as in this world he had ever been in his lord's close fellowship, even so in the kingdom of Heaven he might still be his companion."<sup>101</sup> A similar scenario occurs in the Battle of Allen (*Cath Almaine*) where the fool Úa Magleine is beheaded at the same time as the king, Fergal.<sup>102</sup>

On a more symbolic level we find the king's fate and the fool's intricately tied. In *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* for instance, the *rígdrúth*'s dropping of his juggling objects is explained by him as caused by the angry, evil eye of the bandit Ingcél watching him. The jester's subsequent dialogue with Conaire, the king, and his failure to juggle a second time all suggest that Tulchaine's sudden clumsiness portends the King's imminent destruction.<sup>103</sup> Likewise, the accounts of the Battle of Mag Rath present further examples of this more symbolic link between king and fool. In the earlier version we find the aggressor king of Ulster, Congal Caech ("one-eye") and the "royal fool" Conall Clogach meeting on the battlefield.

Afterwards Congal and Conall Clogach the royal fool chanced to meet in the battle. "Sing a stave, Conall," said Congal,"to show who will overcome in the battle." Conall said:

"A boy walks the road of raths  
around which were dug the graves of wheels:  
*sescbaid* where is here the squint-eye  
upon which the famous Congal fell."

"Falsely you recite the stave," said Congal, "not so is it but thus:

A boy walks the road of wheels,  
around which are the graves of heroes:

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<sup>100</sup>O'Rahilly, *Táin*, 1 ll.1593f., ll.2484-7.

<sup>101</sup>S. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London, 1892) vol. 1, p.393; vol. 2, 427-8.

<sup>102</sup>Ó Riain, *CA*, ll.106-112; Radner, *Fragmentary Annals*, p.72.

<sup>103</sup>Knott, *TBDD*, ll.1162f.



*sescbaid* where is here the stone  
upon which squint-eyed Congal fell.

It will be true, " he says, "I shall fall there."<sup>104</sup>

The fool here is acting in a seemingly expected role as prophet, but he also acts as a mirror to the king, since the king must rightly order the words of the fool to discover the outcome of the battle and his own place of death. In this context we should remember the opposition of the truthfulness of the king (although Congal Caech is a "false" or unjust king) and the falsehood of the fool. The importance of the king's truth (*fír flaitheamon*) has been amply demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>105</sup> but witness *Audacht Morainn*: "It is through the justice of the ruler that he judges great tribes and riches. It is through the justice of the ruler that he secures peace, tranquility, joy, ease, comfort."<sup>106</sup> Extremely significant to the fool in this regard is the passage from the laws relating to the *drúth co sundragach*: "The fool with a special gift: he is to be recognised by [the necessity of] verifying (or correcting) every ninth word he utters, as was [the case with] Conall Clogach."<sup>107</sup> In this version of the Battle of Mag Rath, the unjust king Congal, having performed falsehood in the past, as almost a last "act of truth" orders the statement of the fool to reveal his own imminent death. Thus, because of their complementary characteristics of truth and falsehood, or perhaps more accurately, order and chaos, the king and fool are intimately linked in the prophetic process.

Congal's fate in the late version of the Battle of Mag Rath is likewise bound up with the character of the fool, here named Cuana.<sup>108</sup> In this version, the fool discovers that his father is out fighting in the battle against Congal, and though the latter is in fact Cuana's foster-brother, he resolves to join his father. In

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<sup>104</sup>Marstrander, "Mag Rath," p.241.

<sup>105</sup>Byrne, *Kings*, p.24; Kelly, *Guide*, 18-21.

<sup>106</sup>F.Kelly, *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin, 1976) 7.

<sup>107</sup>Smith, "Advice," p.81.

<sup>108</sup> J. O'Donovan, *The Battle of Magh Rath* (1842) 274f.; Seán Ó Coileáin has convincingly shown that Cuana is in fact Conall Clogach under a different name. See "The making of Tromdámh Guaire," *Ériu* 28 (1977) 53, 68-9.



the course of the battle it turns out that Cuana strikes the first deadly blow against Congal, thus serving him, eventually, with a more ignominious death. The importance of Congal's death will be discussed below, but it is noteworthy that Congal in the story represents disorder and strife, and it is thus symbolically appropriate that he should be slain by the societal representation of that chaos, here acting on behalf of the representative of order, the "high king", Domnall mac Áeda.<sup>109</sup>

Some literary influence for the relationship of king and fool may come from the depiction of King David in the Old Testament. David was for the medieval world the archetypal king, and in two incidents becomes like or is described as behaving like a fool or madman, both recorded in early Irish adaptations as well. One incident, incorporated into *Saltair na Rann*, describes David as dancing before the Ark of the Covenant "like a fool at (his) buffoonery" ("*amal drúth ic furseóracht* .")<sup>110</sup> The other incident is recounted in an Old Irish gloss on Psalm 33 in the Milan Codex:

When David went into exile to [the] Edomites or to [the] Ammonites before Saul, much of the treasure was given by him (Saul) to Abimelech in payment for killing David, and he went a day after that unto David and did not recognise him, for God put a form of great madness and a foolish man (*deilb mordaige 7 fir bóith*) on that David to make him unlike [himself] and that Abimelech did not know him.<sup>111</sup>

David is also described as acting violent and angry like a madman in *Saltair na Rann*, (*dauid dian dássachtach*).<sup>112</sup> Certainly the description of Nebuchadnezzar's madness in the Book of Daniel influenced the Irish depiction of the mad king Suibne, and all other medieval versions of the wild man legend.<sup>113</sup> Suibne in particular is a king-turned-*geilt* who has lost all semblance of his royal character. After being captured for the first time after

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<sup>109</sup>Domnall, Congal, and Cuana are all depicted as foster-brothers in the story.

<sup>110</sup>W. Stokes, *Saltair na Rann* (Oxford, 1883) l.6684. Cf. 2 Samuel 6:14-16.

<sup>111</sup>Stokes, *Goidelica* (1872) 20. The actual story concerns David's flight to Achish, king of Gath, in whose court he is recognised, and subsequently feigns madness, cf. 1 Samuel 21:11ff.

<sup>112</sup>Stokes, *SR*, l.5890.

<sup>113</sup>P. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, 1974) Chapter Two, p.54f.



his flight into madness, he begins to regain his "own shape and guise." After this, the story relates that "his kingship was made manifest to him" (*rosamhlaidhedh a ríge fris*).<sup>114</sup> A more lucid statement of this image is in the tale of the Battle of Ventry, when Bolcán, king of the Franks, goes mad in battle: "His beauty and comeliness went from him, and valour and prowess left him."<sup>115</sup>

The creators of tales like the ones we have been examining thus had biblical models to work from, as well as undoubted native conceptions, in forging this intimate relationship between king and fool. The symbolism of their relationship extended to the state of the kingdom itself. The fool represented disorder and indignity, untruth and ugliness, everything that was unacceptable in a king. Thus as William Willeford says, "The fool stands beside the king, in a sense reflecting him, but also suggesting a long-lost element of the king that, we may imagine, had to be sacrificed at the founding of the kingdom, an element without which neither the king nor the kingdom is complete."<sup>116</sup> The fool was the dirty funny-bone of the ritualised realm.

That status as a chaotic or obscene shadow figure to the king is made most clear in the deaths of fools in some of these texts. It has been pointed out that the general means of death for the warrior or hero was beheading.<sup>117</sup> So too for the fool, but in a rather less dignified or heroic way. Finn's fool Lomna (see below), the fool Úa Maigleine, Lomna in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*: all are slain by beheading, none receiving any dignity from it. The second Lomna in particular has his head kicked around like a football. In *Fingal Rónáin* the death of the hero is accompanied by the grotesque and undignified death of his fool. And in each of the two incidents mentioned above from the *Táin*, the fool, wearing the king's diadem, has his brains driven out by the force of Cú Chulainn's stone. In death, then, the fool performs almost a grotesque mockery of the king or hero.

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<sup>114</sup>O'Keeffe, *BS*, §37.

<sup>115</sup>C. O'Rahilly, *Cath Finntrágha* (Dublin, 1962)ll.495f.

<sup>116</sup>Willeford, *Fool*, p.156.

<sup>117</sup>Piotr Sadowski, "On the Head and Decapitation among the Celts," seminar given at University of Edinburgh, May, 1988.



Under this shadowing of death we find a more subtle symbolic function for the character of the fool. It is too simple a statement of narrative paradigm to say merely that the fool represents the blemishes that the king could not have. This assumes an ideal situation, an ideal just king, and neither are the stuff of literature. On the contrary, most of the texts we have been examining deal with the tensions involved in an abrogation of ideal standards. Thus the kings Congal and Mac Con, though sympathetically portrayed, are unjust kings and blemished. Likewise Conaire in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* breaks his ritual *gessa* one by one and the story thereby concerns itself with the gradual and deliberate disintegration of kingly order.

In these situations we find fools in close relation to their respective kings, providing a shadow to the kings, a suggestion that there is perhaps chaos at the heart of their realms. Let us consider the three kings Congal Caech, Lugaid Mac Con, and Conaire Mór. The first two of these are usurpers or potential usurpers, though each meets with some measure of success. Conaire is a predicted saviour almost, but his tragedy seems likewise fated from the first. His downfall has been seen in terms of an abrogation of the "king's truth" discussed above. Máirín O'Daly suggest that "Conaire's fate was brought about, not by his successive and sometimes unwitting violations of all his *gessa* but by the one act of injustice of which he was guilty."<sup>118</sup> Mac Con is likewise guilty of false judgement, twice: once before his defeat and exile, the second after his usurpation and a reign of seven years. Each is related to his downfall.<sup>119</sup> So too Congal is associated with false judgement. In a passage in the laws referring to the Battle of Mag Rath, it lists as one of the three virtues of that battle "the defeat of Congal Claen in his falsehood by Domnall in his truth."<sup>120</sup> All three kings can

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<sup>118</sup>M. O'Daly, "Togail Bruidne Da Derga," *Irish Sagas* (ed. Dillon, Dublin/Cork, 1968) 114. See also T. Ó Cathasaigh, "The Semantics of *síd*," *Éigse* 17 (1977-9) 145.

<sup>119</sup>O'Daly, *CMM*, pp.40, 58; T. Ó Cathasaigh, "The theme of *Iommrad* in *Cath Maige Mucraime*" *Éigse* 18 (1980-1) 211f.

<sup>120</sup>*CIH* 250.33f. (= *ALI*, iii, 88.)



therefore be considered unjust kings, breachers of the cosmic order.

Likewise all three break the ritual order. Congal is blemished, his eye wounded by a bee-sting. Lugaid Mac Con it has been suggested is an anti-king, demonstrated not least by his breach of dignity in eating the mice served to him by the Scottish king.<sup>121</sup> Although Conaire is not a blemished king, his arrival as a naked boy walking along the road to Tara heralds some oddness. His breaking of his taboos or *gessa* is what ultimately signals his destruction. Each king is then guilty of ritual as well as ethical disorder.

In this context we find fools shadowing each king. Doderá, as has been mentioned, offers to die for Mac Con, a king staking a battle on an unjust judgement. Doderá pretends to be Mac Con, but the ruse is found out, and Mac Con flees to Scotland. <sup>Dodera</sup> is later mourned by his lord, who suggests that without the fool, the kingdom would no longer laugh. Conaire's fool Tulchaine heralds his destruction by the dropping of his juggler's gear. The dialogue, we have seen, sets up a scenario which suggests a connection between the fool's success and the king's.

Finally, Conall reveals the demise of Congal's ambitions in a manner appropriate to Congal's own unworthiness. It is worth noting that once Congal has discovered his fate, he goes berserk, launching into the battle like a madman. The demeaning of the Ulster king is brought out effectively in the later version, where Cuana causes Congal's death, piercing him through his abdomen and spilling Congal's intestines. We may compare this undignified death with the deaths in *Fingal Rónáin*. Just before his mortal blow, Cuana exchanges words with Congal, who is scornful of the idea of a fool on the battlefield. This flippancy is rebuked by Cuana who twice says, "It is not the act of a high-king for you to

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<sup>121</sup> He is also blemished by his wound, cf. O'Daly, *CMM*, p.42, and Art mac Cuinn is called the rightful king, p.54. Cf. J. Koch, "A Welsh Window on the Iron Age: Manawydan, Mandubracios," *CMCS* 14 (1987) 39-40. Koch suggests that this act also breaks a name taboo, as he considers Lugaid to be related to *luch* "mouse." While unlikely in actuality, it would not be beyond the power of folk etymology to connect the two.



say so."<sup>122</sup> Congal has failed the "act of truth" and the fool judges and condemns him.

In these three tales then, we find a subtle relation between fool and king, one in which the fool's symbolic import is to point to the folly and untruth of the king and his movement away from the order of kingship. This is true as well for the pre-eminent king in early Irish literature, Conchobar, whose own death is a result of the doings of fools, his own blemishes, and his madness (see below). It is not just in his death tale that these things are demonstrated. It is well to remember that despite the glorification of the Ulster cycle as the epitome of the heroic code in early Ireland, the tales themselves represent a kingdom far from ideal in its espousal of basic ethics. It is made clear in a number of Ulster tales, particularly those known as the *reimscela* (*Longes Mac nUislenn*, *Noínden Ulad*<sup>123</sup>) that something is not right in the kingdom, particularly that Conchobar's betrayal of his pledge to the sons of Uisliu has plunged the kingdom into the factional chaos of the *Táin*, and that the injustice of the Ulstermen to the woman/goddess Macha has cursed them to the debilitating *noínden*. Conchobar in the Deirdre story and elsewhere, then, fails to live up to the ideals of kingship. Nor is this non-heroic aspect confined to Conchobar: *Scéla Muicce meic Dathó* and *Fled Bricrenn* both show the Ulstermen behaving badly and generally failing even by the standards of the heroic code.<sup>124</sup> In *Fled Bricrenn* in particular, the pretensions of the warriors and their wives are shown up as flimsy, their boasts hypocritical, and only Cú Chulainn finally submits to the demanded test. Cú Chulainn himself often verges dangerously on the comic, often acts "unheroically", and the characteristics of his warp-spasm would theoretically lay him open to the charge against the fools: "every man who brings

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<sup>122</sup>O'Donovan, *Magh Rath*, p.284.

<sup>123</sup>V. Hull, *Longes mac n-Uislenn* (New York, 1949); "Noínden Ulad :The Debility of the Ulidians," *Celtica* 8 (1968)1-42.

<sup>124</sup>K. McCone, *Pagan Past<sup>and</sup> Christian Present* (Maynooth, 1990)77-8 on *Scéla Muicce*; Harrison, *Trickster*, p.24 on *Fled Bricrenn*.



distortion on his body and face... he goes out of his shape before hosts and crowds."<sup>125</sup>

Viewing the Ulster tales thus as literature not about ideal heroism but about skewed ideals, we may approach the folly, implicit and explicit, in the tale of Conchobar's death. This opens with fools (*óinmide*) playing on the fields of Emain Macha with the brain of Mes-gegra, the object which will ultimately be the instrument of the king's death. Yet there is more than just the embedding of the brain in his head to his death, for the fool's play sets off a chain of events which depend upon Conchobar's own moral folly: his pride of appearance when the women gather around him, his unresistable passion. Again, once the brain is embedded in Conchobar's head, the Ulstermen choose to have a blemished king rather than dismiss him. In the end, according to some versions of the story, Conchobar hears of Christ's death, is seized by fury (Keating uses the term *dásacht*) and charges into a wood hacking away, causing the brain to leap from his head, and he dies.<sup>126</sup>

Thus we see a king dying by his own folly, both as an intrinsic character flaw and as a spontaneous emotion. This death is foreshadowed by the presence of fools, who play with his greatest enemy's brain, and silently give the signal for his downfall. In all these king-tales we can see the way in which authors use the fool as a symbol, almost a device, not emphasised but understated, evoking the expectation of certain types of action to come. The fool then is part of a subtle undercurrent of imagery.

## THE FOOL AS PROPHET

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<sup>125</sup>*CIH* 585.25-6, see above. For Cú Chulainn's warp-spasm, see O'Rahilly, *Táin 1*, II.2245ff. Cú Chulainn's nature is indeed close to that of the fool, especially in the comedy of the boyhood deeds, but it must be remembered that much of his breaking of taboo and custom, successfully, is part of the function of the hero. It is *because* he is the exception to social norms (his youth, his conception, his warp-spasm) that he is able to be the saviour of Ulster. His approach to Emain Macha as a youth, indeed, parallels that of the other "great fool" and hero, Peredur/ Percival.

<sup>126</sup>K. Meyer, "The Death of Conchobar," *Death Tales of the Ulster Heroes* (Todd Lecture Series 15, Dublin, 1906) 2ff; Keating, *History*, vol. 2, p.201.



Symbolically, at least, the fool in the king-tales acts as a prophet, a harbinger of doom. That in other texts he performs this role more explicitly is in keeping with the belief, common elsewhere, that fools and madmen are touched and gifted with the power of prophecy.<sup>127</sup> We have already seen that in the earlier version of the Battle of Mag Rath, Congal seems to expect the fool to be able to prophecy the outcome of the battle. This ability, for the chaotic fool, is often accompanied by a certain failure of transmission: the prophecy, though true, is given in an obscure or seeming impossible formulation, or it is left unheeded. As the Mag Rath encounter demonstrates, Conall Clocach's prophecy is given in muddled form and must be "translated." Although a British manifestation of the fool/madman, the best formulation of this dilemma is in the fragments referring to the southern Scottish madman Lailoken (Myrddin): "For he foretold there many future events, as if he were a prophet, but because he used never to repeat what he had foretold, although the prophecies were extremely obscure and quite unintelligible, no one dared to believe him."<sup>128</sup>

One of the clearest examples of the fool as unheeded prophet in early Irish literature is in the tale of the overflowing of Lough Neagh (*Tomaidm Loch nEchach*). The fool is the one who foresees this event in both the early and late versions of this tale. In the early version it is a *midlach* (sometimes "coward", but also "idiot") called Mídend who foretells it,<sup>129</sup> and in the later version it is an *óinmit*, Curnán, who "went among the people foretelling that a lake would flow over them from the well, and urging them earnestly to make ready their boats...but the people gave no heed to the words of the simpleton."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>Cf. Welsford, *Fool*, part 2, chapter 1; Harrison, *Trickster*, p.29; and Frykenberg, *Wild-Man*, p.124f.

<sup>128</sup>J and W. MacQueen, "Vita Merlini Sylvestris," *Scottish Studies* 29 (1989) 79, 84.

<sup>129</sup>K. Meyer, "The Laud Genealogies and Tribal Histories: *Ba mol Mídend midlaige*," *ZCP* 8 (1912) 308.

<sup>130</sup>Welsford, *Fool*, pp.96-7; cf. S. O'Grady, "*Aided Echach meic Maireda*," *SG* vol. 1, 233-7; vol. 2, 265-9. On this tale, see J. Carney, "The Earliest Bran Material," *Latin Script and Letters, AD 400-900* (ed. O'Meara and Naumann, Leiden, 1976) 190.



In *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* , the fool Lomna acts both as conscience and as prophet, constantly telling Ingcél, the foreign pirate marauder and his overlord who is bent on destruction of the hostel: "Alas for him who wreaks the slaughter. If my advice might prevail, the slaughter would not be attempted." But Ingcél overrules him each time.<sup>131</sup> Tulchaine, the king's fool in this tale, likewise predicts the coming slaughter upon feeling Ingcél's eye on him: "Battles are fought with it. it should be known forever that there is evil in front of the hostel."<sup>132</sup> Lomna predicts his own death: that he will be the first to be killed in the attack on the hostel, in an appropriately undignified way. This happens: his head is struck from him by the doorkeeper as he is first to enter the hostel, and the head is thrown three times into the hostel and three times back out.<sup>133</sup>

Sometimes this gift of prophecy is more an insight into the way things are, or an ability to reveal information hidden to other people, rather than divination or foresight. Another Lomna, fool to Finn mac Cumail, acts in this fashion. In *Sanas Cormaic* , under the term *orc tréith* , the tale is told of how this Lomna (*drúth, midlach* ) remained at home while Finn went hunting. Lomna sees one of Finn's women in a tryst with Coirpre, a champion of the Luigne. The woman asks Lomna not to tell Finn about her, but torn by guilt Lomna instead cuts an ogam on a square rod which says: "*Cúaille [feda] i felaim n-argait; athaba i fothlacht; fer mná drúithe drúthlach la feinn forcthi; fraech for ualaind luimm Lugne .*"("A wooden stake in a fence of silver, monk's hood among cresses; the husband of a wanton woman is a foolish man with the well-taught Fianna; there is heather on bare Ualann (or shoulders?) of the Luigne.")<sup>134</sup> By this cryptic message, Finn understands what has happened, but the woman realises that Lomna has betrayed her secret and suggests to Coirpre that he should kill the fool. Coirpre beheads Lomna and

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<sup>131</sup>Knott, *TBDD* , ll.705-15, etc.

<sup>132</sup>ibid., ll.1178-80.

<sup>133</sup>ibid., ll.1903-6.

<sup>134</sup>Stokes, *Cormac's Glossary* , pp.129-31; *Three Irish Glossaries* (1862) 34-5. For a reading from the Yellow Book of Lecan, see Meyer, *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* , vol. 4 (1912) 86-8.



takes the head with him. As Coirpre is eating with his warriors, the head complains of not getting his share of food, and foretells Coirpre's imminent death at the hands of Finn.

The fool in this story thus acts as the revealer of hidden things, and later more straightforwardly as a prophet of doom. Although Finn interprets his coded message, we see that like Conall his prophecy is couched in obscure language and must be deciphered. The British madman Lailoken here provides an instructive comparison. In another fragment, a king keeps Lailoken in prison until he should prophesy. Just as the king's patience is running out, his queen walks in with a leaf on her head, which the king absent-mindedly tears to pieces. Lailoken bursts into laughter, and when questioned as to why warns the king that if he tells him it will bring the king sadness and himself death. He then recites a number of seemingly paradoxical riddles, the meaning of which, when explained, is that "a short time before while the queen was committing adultery in the underking's garden, a leaf from a tree fell on her head to betray her and reveal her adultery to the king." But the king chose to ignore it and tear the leaf to pieces. The king then sets Lailoken free, obviously believing the fool. Some time later, the queen incites some shepherds to murder Lailoken.<sup>135</sup>

More clearly here, the fool reveals hidden information--again of a sexual nature--and prophesies death. That he is believed, in both stories, shows the assumptions current about the prophetic powers of the insane. Thus, he is used not only as a symbolic, silent signal of doom or death as in the king-tales, but as an active guide to the future or the arcane, particularly, it would seem, with regard to sexual matters.

Many of the aforementioned traits are contained in the account of the Battle of Allen.<sup>136</sup> His position as entertainer, his role as prophet, his connection to the king, his beheading and death: all come into this story. Here, however, the king is shadowed not merely by the fool, but also by the beautiful and

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<sup>135</sup>J. and W. MacQueen, "*Vita Merlini Sylvestris*," pp. 81-2, 87-9.

<sup>136</sup>Ó Riain, *Cath Almaine*, passim; J. Radner, *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (Dublin, 1978) 68f. For discussion, see Harrison, *Trickster*, pp.27-8.



mysterious figure of the boy Donn Bó, whose presence alone allows the king, Fergal, to gather troops for the battle. The relation between king and fool may nonetheless be clearly seen. Once again we have a king making himself an un-king by an act of unrighteousness. Fergal's army, before the battle, maltreats the leper Áedán, and Fergal and the other kings of the north refuse him succour. One of the kings, who hears the leper's pleas, predicts doom for the coming battle. Later, instead of Donn Bó singing before Fergal as he had promised, the task is given over to the royal fool (*rígdrúth*) Úa Maigleine, who sings the triumphs and terrors of the enemy army. This substitution, it must be taken, signifies the change in fortunes resulting from the king's injustice, and the fool by praising the enemy subtly predicts the next day's doom and frightens the northern warriors. In the battle both Fergal and Úa Maigleine are captured, and both are beheaded together, the fool after having given a shout, which, the tale says, "has remained with the fools of Ireland," and "was in the air for three days and three nights."<sup>137</sup> Donn Bó is also beheaded, but his head is found so that he may sing before the now headless body of his lord, after which Donn Bó is miraculously restored to life. The macabre ending emphasises the tragedy of the king's injustice and defeat, that tragedy initiated by the introduction of the sign of disorder in the kingdom, the fool. As Carney writes, referring to the story of Lough Neagh, "The prophet's function then is to create tension, and to prepare the audience for tragedy."<sup>138</sup>

#### FOOL AND LOVER

The fool's role as counterpart to the king does not explain his function in another set of texts. These texts all have paradigms conforming either to the basic plot of the "Tristan" story, in which a younger man commits adultery with the wife or promised woman of an older, more powerful man (see below, Chapter Seven) or the plot of the "Hippolytus" story, in which a young man refuses the advances of the wife/ woman of an older, more powerful man, and she extracts a deadly revenge. In a

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<sup>137</sup>Ó'Riain, *CA*, II.40-71..

<sup>138</sup>Carney, "Bran," p.190.



number of Irish examples, the fool is part of this paradigm, acting either as a counterpart to the young man, or as the victim of the adulterous pair.

We have met with one of these stories already, the tale of Finn's fool Lomna, given above. Here, the paradigm is that of the Tristan story, Finn (the older man) being cuckolded by his woman and a younger champion (Coipre). Lomna, the fool, is witness to this action, and is the victim of it. It would seem to be part of the fool's nature that he is involved in such a tale of sex. The fool is often associated with overt sexuality, and in this tale the fool uses suggestive language to demonstrate Finn's "unmanning", punning on the very word "*drúth*" in its connotations of insanity and promiscuity.

In another tale, one of those we shall examine in detail, the "heir apparent", Comgán, commits adultery with the wife of his father's druid.<sup>139</sup> The result of this act is that he is cursed into becoming a fool, an *óinmit*. The way in which this punishment is an appropriate extension of the nature of his crime will be discussed below, in Chapter Four. For the moment, it is enough to note that here the fool is concretely the alter ego<sup>of</sup> the lover, on the one hand the noble lover's own opposite, powerless and rankless; but also in some sense the implied result of his illicit actions, almost an extension of the lover's personality in his overt sexuality.

The tale of *Fingal Rónáin* partakes of the paradigm of the Hippolytus story, the "heir apparent," Mael Fothartaig being falsely accused by his stepmother of sexual advances, and being killed as a result. Killed along with him are his friend, Congal, who had undertaken to drive the woman off, and Mael Fothartaig's fool, Mac Glas. In *Fingal Rónáin* the fool has a fairly understated role, but Mael Fothartaig is extraordinarily straight and dignified, reacting with great horror to the sexual advances of his stepmother. Here the fool may suggest the indignity and suffering which the hero is not allowed to show. Thus, at the end Mac Glas, pierced by a spear and with ravens pecking at his

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<sup>139</sup>"The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda," J. G. O'Keefe, "Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda," *Ériu* 5 (1911) 34-41.



intestines, seems to go into contortions which cause the crowd to laugh. Mael Fothartaig asks him, "Have you no shame? Put back your guts--the rabble is laughing at you."<sup>140</sup> Mac Glas's death is undignified, but also low and blackly humorous, a loss of honour and face which Mael Fothartaig's moral, honour-bound nature could not allow. "Loss of face" is perhaps a good term here: the fool vicariously "loses face"--both in his contortions and in his lack of *enech* "face or honour"--for the hero.

Something similar is seen in the tale as a whole, which is replete with sexual innuendo, including the final fatal verse-capping scene, but is in the end quite a serious tale with severe moral implications. Elsewhere in the story it may be Congal who rounds out Mael Fothartaig's character by revealing a dirty side. He participates in the sexual banter, unlike the hero, and it is he to whom Mael Fothartaig promises his dogs in return for his "dirty work": accusing the hero's stepmother of base adultery and beating her with a horse-whip. In any case, at the end it falls to the fool in this story to display "the great primal joke that is the undignified human body."<sup>141</sup>

#### COMGÁN MAC DA CHERDA: FOOL AND SAINT

It is of course the way in which the character of Comgán Mac Da Cherda fits into these various roles of the literary fool which concerns us here. Comgán appears to be a basically literary creature: although we have his obit in two of the annals (A. Innis 645; ATig 641) and a number of accounts of his genealogy,<sup>142</sup> we know little more about him as an historical person. If the little we know is not fiction, he seems to have been the son of one Mael-Ochtraig, of the Déisi Muman - who was

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<sup>140</sup>Greene, *FR*, II.153-9.

<sup>141</sup>Welsford, *Fool*, p.51; and cf. T. Ó Cathasaigh, "The Rhetoric of *Fingal Rónáin*", *Celtica* 17 (1985) 142. Although undoubtedly a mistaken reading of the text (cf. Ó Cathasaigh, "The Trial of Mael Fothartaig," *Ériu* 34 (1985) 179) it may yet be useful to refer to T. M. Charles-Edwards' interpretation of the verse-capping incident. ("Honour and Status in Some Prose Tales," *Ériu* 29 (1978)123-41.) There he has the fool himself speaking the first verse, substituting, as he thinks, for the hero. (p.139) This would put Mac Glas in a role similar to Lomna's, helping to "reveal" the crime, and because of his nature as a fool, being unfortunately believed.

<sup>142</sup>See S. Ó Coileáin, "The Structure of a Literary Cycle," *Ériu* 25 (1974) 105-8.



according to some versions their king. Comgán was thus a *rígdamna*, potential heir to the kingship, but seems to have become insane, at least according to the tales. He is called *rígóinmit*,<sup>143</sup> but otherwise has little dealing with kings. In the story "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda" he remains in his father's court after he has been cursed into madness, but does not seem to perform as a jester, nor does he function as other fools in king-tales.

In the same tale he does function as a prophet. He reveals a number of hidden things: the whereabouts of a peasant's corpse and its fate, the plans of a brigand to attack his father, the whereabouts of his father's corpse.<sup>144</sup> In the second of these incidents, we see him prophesying in manner reminiscent of that described for Conall or Lailoken. Just as he is about to reveal the information, he speaks: "'Beware,' he said, so that the attention of everyone should be on him, for he had never sung a stave twice."<sup>145</sup> The verses he recites to reveal the information are likewise cryptic formulations, and more than a little obscure. His reputation in the larger Irish tradition as a prophet is evident from the reference to him in a late medieval poem among other famous prophets of Ireland.<sup>146</sup>

As shown above, his tale of transformation demonstrates concretely the connection between the fool and the lover. In another of the tales we shall examine, "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir"(see Chapter Seven) Comgán appears as a wandering fool who assists the hero and would-be lover, Cuirithir, in his attempt to speak with Líadain. In this he may be acting almost vicariously, and symbolically showing the fool hidden in the yearning lover.<sup>147</sup>

Although demonstrating that Comgán fits into some of the expected roles of the fool, none of these functions account for his pre-dominant characteristics: innocence, God-given wisdom,

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<sup>143</sup>M. A. O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962)399.

<sup>144</sup>O'Keefe, "Mac Dá Cherda," pp.36-9.

<sup>145</sup>ibid., pp.36-7.

<sup>146</sup>P. O'Dwyer, "A vision concerning Hugh O'Connor(+1309)," *Éigse* 5 (1945) 86 v. 39.

<sup>147</sup>K. Meyer, *Comrac Líadain agus Cuirithir* (London, 1902) 9-12.



sanctity, and his continual association with the saint Cummíne Fota. To properly understand this part of his nature, we must examine how the fool may reflect or parody the monk or saint, and how in turn the fool by means of holy folly could himself be considered a saint.

First, returning to the fool's appearance, we should recall that in the description of the *rígóinmit* in *Mesca Ulad*, he was described as bald and carrying a bell. Although the tale is set in pre-Christian times, the description is as likely to be of the appearance a contemporary jester. Both the shaved head and the bell may relate to the monastic: the tonsure and the bell were their distinguishing features. The tonsure set the monk apart from the warrior world in a symbolic dispensing of the image of manhood and beauty, the hair. As has been shown, the fool too seems to have been characteristically bald or shaved. In medieval continental illuminations of the 14th psalm, "Dixit insipiens," a fool is often depicted, either disputing with a king, or bald and thinly clad, disputing with or dressed as a monk.<sup>148</sup>

The bell too resounds in the tales of fools and madmen. It is the clanging of Colum Cille's bells which drives the *rígdamna* Conall insane, turning him into an *óinmit* and giving him the epithet *clocach*. Likewise the madman Suibne is initially enraged by the tolling of St. Rónán's bell, which he later pierces with a spear. His redemption is won through another saint's bell.<sup>149</sup> Though bells were common in the uniforms of continental fools, it is probably part of the literary symbolism that these particular fools are involved with both bells and saints.

It should be remembered too that the *rígóinmit* in *Mesca Ulad* is described as holding a *sithbacc* "a long crook or crozier." This too may reflect part of the monastic uniform, the abbot or bishop's crozier, the *bachall*. This had the same function for the abbot or bishop as the *slat* for the king: the emblem of his authority, the visible sign of his order and command. It is

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<sup>148</sup>D. J. Gifford, 'Iconographical Notes towards a definition of the Medieval Fool,' *The Fool and the Trickster: Studies in honour of Enid Welsford* (ed. P. Williams, Cambridge 1979) 18f.

<sup>149</sup>Frykenberg, *Wild-Man*, p.86.



perhaps worth noting in this context that some scholars have identified Comgán Mac Da Cherda with the Comgán, abbot of Emly, who took part in the so-called West Munster Synod in the late sixth century.<sup>150</sup> This identification seems rather unlikely, and it certainly plays no part in the traditions of Comgán Mac Da Cherda.

To understand the function of Comgán in the literature about him, it is necessary first to examine the tradition of holy folly within the Christian Church. In other regions, and at other times, the practice of folly for Christ's sake was evident, and in regions like Russia became almost the national ideal of sanctity.<sup>151</sup> Lennart Rydén defines the holy fool as

a person who serves God under the guise of foolishness. In principle, the disguise is not discovered until the fool is dead. Then he or she becomes a saint. If the holy fool happens to be recognised earlier he runs away, or else commits an act so foolish that the rent in his disguise is repaired.<sup>152</sup>

How Comgán fits within this definition we will discuss later.

The concept of the fool for Christ's sake was looked on as originating out of the words and ideas of Paul, principally as expressed in 1 Corinthians, in which he counters the pretensions of the Christian community at Corinth by setting himself up as an example of weakness and idiocy, and setting the folly of the gospel of Christ crucified against the wisdom of the power-hungry world. "If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise," Paul writes, and, "We are fools for Christ's sake, while you are such sensible Christians," and "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise."<sup>153</sup> This thinking was based directly on the paradoxical absurdity of the incarnation, whereby Christ, the

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<sup>150</sup>Byrne, *Kings*, pp. 216-7, 242; Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p.112-13.

<sup>151</sup>G. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind. Vol. 2: The Middle Ages* (Massachusetts, 1975) 317.

<sup>152</sup>L. Rydén, "The Holy Fool," *The Byzantine Saint* (ed. S. Hackel, London, 1981) 106.

<sup>153</sup>1 Cor. 3:18; 4:9; 1:26. The first chapter of 1 Corinthians, from 18ff. contains a good explication of Paul's view of the absurdity of Christ crucified. The Irish exegesis of 1 Corinthians, and other similar Pauline writings, is as yet an unexplored area.



rich, the king, became poor and a slave for the sake of the people.

Whether or not Paul intended his words to be practical, these ideas were put into action by various individuals and groups in the Church at various times, such as the early Franciscans, the Cistercians, the Byzantine *saloi* and the Russian *yurodivy*, who attempted in the words of John Seward, to "witness to...the foolishness of God incarnate, who in the praetorium of Pilate, was stripped naked, clothed in mocking scarlet and exposed to the cruel laughter of the worldly wise." In this description we can already see the powerful connection between the passion of Christ and the figure of the fool. Seward goes on to say of the saints following this path that they were "men made mad and merry by their faith in a God 'silly in the crib' and 'foolish on the cross,' a God whose sage folly alone can save us from the raving lunacy of the princes of the age."<sup>154</sup>

Within the eastern Church, this early grew to be an accepted form of sainthood. Along with the doctor, virgin, and martyr, the *salos* or fool took his place. The *saloi* acted out lives of abjection, poverty and abuse not for the most part in the desert or monastery, but in the city. They would play the roles of destitutes, begging in the streets, mocking the now-rich priests and bishops, publicly breaking church rituals and being beaten and abused by the "faithful." In secret, though, they would spend much time in long prayer vigils. All this folly was a demonstration, a protest against succumbing to the world's wisdom and pride.

One example should suffice to demonstrate the Byzantine *salos*. Symeon Salos, who probably died towards the end of the sixth century, was depicted in hagiography by Leontios of Neapolis in the early decades of the seventh century.<sup>155</sup> This Symeon is described as leaving the monastery for a life in the desert, becoming a *boskos*, a grass-eater, for thirty years. The

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<sup>154</sup>Seward, *Perfect Fools*, p.xi. Seward's book is a comprehensive and important investigation of the phenomenon of holy folly within the church during its history. Much of the following discussion is based on his observations.

<sup>155</sup>*Das Leben des hl. Narren Symeon von Leontios von Neapolis*, ed. L. Rydén (Upsalla, 1963), quoted in Rydén, "Holy fool," 108-9.



*boskoi* roamed the desert, eating plants and wild herbs, trying to achieve total *apatheia*, lack of desire and complete self-control.<sup>156</sup> Having acquired this *apatheia*, he returns to the world, to the city of Emesa, and lives a secret ascetic life, yet all the while seeming to the citizens of Emesa to be "a fornicator, a glutton, a drunkard, a fool..."<sup>157</sup> Examples of his outrageous behaviour include dragging a dead dog through the city, throwing nuts in church during the eucharistic rite, publicly eating sausages on Good Friday, and running into the baths reserved for women.<sup>158</sup> His inner sanctity is known only to one other person, the Deacon John, who records these things. According to Leontios,

The whole aim of this all-wise Symeon was this. First to save souls, either through visitations which he brought about in an absurd or ingenious way, or through wonders, which he performed foolishly, or through instructions which he gave while playing the fool. Second, to keep his virtue secret, lest he become the object of praise and honour.<sup>159</sup>

Within the Eastern churches this type of sanctity caught on, and it is still greatly venerated. In the west, the example did not take hold, and the manifestations of folly within the western church are altogether more tame, and less widespread.

Nonetheless, it was recognised. Gregory the Great, a theologian of first importance to early Irish churchmen, seems to have such in mind when writing the *Moralium in Job*:

We should know that some people in the Holy Church are called fools, but they are nevertheless noble, whereas others are truly fools and vile. For those so-called fools who despise the wisdom of the flesh and who desire a folly which will benefit them, cannot be fools. These fools, who

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<sup>156</sup>The similarity of these *boskoi* to the behaviour of Suibne has been frequently noted. See especially N. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (Oxford, 1961) 105-11; Frykenberg, *Wild-Man*, 107-9; Seward, *Perfect Fools*, p.34.

<sup>157</sup>Rydén, "Holy Fool," p.109.

<sup>158</sup>Seward, *Perfect Fools*, p.19.

<sup>159</sup>Rydén, "Holy Fool," p.109. A striking parallel to Symeon is the Scottish Gaelic fool Gilleasbuig Aotrom, a nineteenth century resident of Skye, who played tricks on the local minister and in one incident dropped an egg on a bald man's head during a church service. It is noteworthy that Gilleasbuig Aotrom, like the *saloi*, operates in a strict, regimented religious environment, one in which morality is judged by social conformity. See N. Mac Leoid, *Clarsach an Doire* (Glasgow, 1883)193-239.





despise the foolish wisdom of the world and who desire eagerly the wise foolishness of God, are raised up by the nobility of their virtue to the newness of spiritual rebirth...On the contrary, the foolish and vile are those who flee superior wisdom and follow their own desires.<sup>160</sup>

This definition of folly deliberately embraces the monastic and other forms of religious life, as well as religious insanity. This is only natural, as the religious and particularly the monastic or eremitic life, was in itself folly to the world. The hermit himself could be considered as a fool for Christ's sake in his rejection of the normal, sane life, in his living in the desert, on the margins. But even this marginal life could become a centre, become static, become itself a type of worldly wisdom and take on all the vices, especially pride. The monasteries could, and constantly did, become stagnant and powerful. It is good to think then of the fool within the church as a counter to that stagnation. In this context it is noted that "the fool appears most commonly at a time of political tranquility when the Church adapts herself to the political status quo."<sup>161</sup> Like Francis, or the Cistercians, they appear to upset the complacency of the Church as an institution. Thus they operate "outside the Christian establishment, which has compromised with the agreed criteria and sensibility of the world and measures the regeneration of man and the new life with the yardstick of ...public decency."<sup>162</sup> The holy fool acts within the Church then as the secular fool appeared to work within the kingdom, a weather-vane or symptom of ideals gone wrong.

Saward sees holy folly as an element of early Irish society as well.<sup>163</sup> He is not the first to note the similarities between

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<sup>160</sup>Gregory the Great, *Moralium libri, sive exposito in librum B. Job*, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1849) vol. 76, cols. 161-2. Translation from J. McCrary, *The Fool in French Medieval Drama* (PhD. Thesis, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1976)14. Gregory's *Moralium in Job* was certainly known from the seventh-century on in Ireland. See Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (New York, 1929)278-9. I am unsure whether this excerpt was among those in Laidcenn's *Ecloga*.

<sup>161</sup>Saward, *Perfect Fools*, p.28.

<sup>162</sup>C. Yanneros, quoted in Saward, *ibid.*

<sup>163</sup>*ibid.*, pp.31f.



the lifestyles of the Byzantine and Irish saints and madmen. Nora Chadwick went so far as to identify the *gelta* of Ireland with the *boskoi*, the grass eaters, and to suggest that the *geilt* was a particular type of ascetic whose way derived from the Syrian desert, and whom the literature, as in *Buile Shuibhne*, mocked.<sup>164</sup> There are problems with this theory, not the least of which is that the *gelta* are always explicitly madmen, sharing a lifestyle with the ascetic, but not identified with him. The differences and similarities among the Byzantine and Irish examples, however, need not be arguments for or against a developmental connection. As Seward points out, the sources which inspired holy folly in the East originally were as accessible in Ireland: namely Paul and certain other biblical passages.<sup>165</sup>

Turning directly to the Irish examples, it is important to note one major difference. Unlike the Byzantine *saloí*, the Irish fools (Comgán, Conall) or madmen (Suibne) are not shown feigning madness, but as pathologically insane. Their insanity differs from that of other Irish fools, however, by virtue of their having been driven mad by a sudden curse or occurrence, usually ascribed to the influence of God.<sup>166</sup> In this they bear relation to some of the *saloí* who had intense and sudden conversion experiences, and among these we may perhaps include as an example Paul himself. While this difference is important, it should not be over-stressed. The definition of an intentional madness is too elusive and subjective to be held to rigid guidelines. This is especially so where religious thought is concerned.<sup>167</sup> In the case of Comgán and Suibne, their madness is

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<sup>164</sup>N. Chadwick, *Age of the Saints*, 105-11.

<sup>165</sup>Seward, *Perfect Fools*, p.34.

<sup>166</sup>Ó Riain, "Wild Man," p.182. As to the nature of Suibne's madness, see for contrast Chadwick, op. cit., p.106: "the saga-teller adheres throughout to the tradition that it was not the result of true madness, but of a deliberate way of life."

<sup>167</sup>On this issue see Bríd Cullen, *Religion and Schizophrenia* (unpub. M.Th. thesis, New College, University of Edinburgh, 1988) 14f. See particularly her discussion of Anton Boisen's views, pp.27f., with relevance to Paul and madness. "Boisen draws on the accounts of mystics such as George Fox and Saint Paul to demonstrate the close association of certain types of religious experience with mental disorder." (p. 29.) Cf. A. Boisen, *Exploration of the Inner World* (1936); *Out of the Depths* (1960).



directly ascribed to Christ.<sup>168</sup> In each case their actions engage them with the other servants of God, the monks. In Suibne's case this is a protracted struggle which ends in reconciliation and sanctity. In the case of Comgán, his association is peaceful and continuous. Moreover, perhaps due to his innocence of the crime for which he was cursed, he is of all the fools depicted as the most innocent, most virtuous and holy.

This view of Comgán is made explicit in the preface to "The Dialogue of Cummíne and Comgán" (see below, Chapter Six):

Chief fool of Ireland and of the western world was this Comgán; likewise a man full of understanding and of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Such was his grace that Heaven and earth and the multitudes therein were manifest to him. For when Comgán was in possession of his senses he would deliver true judgments to the men of the world, and neither poets nor judges nor literary folk could resolve or contradict them.

But when he was a fool he would go dryshod in seas and waters and he would sleep beneath them and nothing of them would harm him... Neither would the birds quit his path, and when there would be a tempest or snow and Comgán would sleep out of doors in the desert places, the feathered things and birds of the wilderness would come to him and spread their wings over him.<sup>169</sup>

This is a very romantic portrait, and one that bears many resemblances to the Byzantine *salos*. Perhaps the best way, however, to assess the way in which Comgán's character is that of the holy fool is to adopt the criteria set out by Seward for the Eastern fool, and see how Comgán measures up to it. He lists nine elements by which holy folly could be determined: it should be christocentric, charismatic, simulated, eschatological, pilgrim, political, capable of discerning spirits, ascetic, and childlike.<sup>170</sup>

It would perhaps be an error to describe Comgán as Christocentric, though in most of the texts he does display an involvement with God and Christianity. In one text, "The Dialogue," he appears as a prophet of Christ and an advocate of

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<sup>168</sup>Seward, *Perfect Fools*, p.39; O'Keeffe, *BS*, ll.724-5, 1900-3.

<sup>169</sup>O'Keeffe, "Mac Dá Cherda," p20-1.

<sup>170</sup>Seward, *Perfect Fools*, pp.25-9.



the King of Heaven. <sup>171</sup> Elsewhere he says, "My madness, I thank the King of Heaven for it."<sup>172</sup> Perhaps most significant is his behaviour in "The Adventures" which overtly displays an *imitatio Christi* : he walks on water, drinks from a well of wine, and speaks in words reminiscent of Christ's. (see Chapter Four.)

That he is charismatic is clear also from the two quotes above, ascribing his madness to the king of heaven and to the grace of the Holy Spirit. His more mundane folly, however, would seem to exclude him from Seward's criteria, since he says that charismatic madness must be distinguished from eccentricity or pathological madness, both of which apply to Comgán.<sup>173</sup> This also creates problems with the third criterion, the simulated nature of the folly. But he too admits that there are problems in excluding actual madness, in that this assumes a clear definition of madness. Moreover, in the Russian tradition of holy folly there was little distinction between the mad and the holy, more a dependence on the quality, rather than the actuality of the madness. Fedotov writes,

Indeed, from a certain point of view a real madness or a mental deficiency is no obstacle for Christian holiness...Most Western scholars see in all Orthodox holy fools pure mental cases...The Church, when canonizing a holy fool always presumes the mask, the disguise, because the point of departure of this kind of life is monastic and ascetical. But for lay people, especially for the Russian people, the difficulty does not exist. Sincere or feigned, a madman with religious charisma is always a saint.<sup>174</sup>

Within the context then, we may take it that although Comgán's insanity is apparently real, it is nonetheless charismatic and "folly for Christ."

The eschatological nature of Comgán's madness is seen clearly in the "Dialogue," where Comgán reveals his vision of the true Christian approach to many issues. This accords with Yanneros' explanation of the nature of this element: "The fool is the charismatic man who has direct experience of the new reality

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<sup>171</sup>O'Keeffe, "Mac Dá Cherda," pp.20f.

<sup>172</sup>cf. Seward, *Perfect Fools*, p.39.

<sup>173</sup>ibid., p.25.

<sup>174</sup>Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind*, pp.323-4.



of the Kingdom of God and undertakes to demonstrate in a prophetic way the antithesis of this present world to the world of the Kingdom."<sup>175</sup> This perspective is shown in the final exchange of the "Dialogue", where Comgán says, "The least reward in heaven / is better than kingship of the earth," and Cummíne replies: "Bide there as you are/ do not depart until morning/ from the marvels of the King of Heaven / and conceal not what he says."<sup>176</sup>

The pilgrim aspect of the fool, his being a "nomad, stranger, foreigner," is also found in Comgán. He is shown wandering freely in the later *Imtheachta* texts, and in "The Adventures" he is described as "seeking Cummíne Fota for a long time."<sup>177</sup>

Elsewhere, in "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir" he is met travelling along the road, highlighting his detached nature.<sup>178</sup>

It is the appearance of the fool at times of political or ecclesiastical stagnation which gives him his political quality. He is there to jeer the church out of its rut and its collaboration with the powers. The "Dialogue" again provides evidence of this for Comgán. Here he criticises surface Christianity, the pomp and pretension of the Church's image. (See Chapter Six). In the *Imtheachta* he also insults bishops, and the story of "The Trial of Mac Teléne" can be seen as social (political or ecclesiastical) satire.(See Chapter Five).

As to discernment of spirits, this seems to refer to the fool's visionary aspects, obvious in the texts. His wisdom is frequently alluded to, as is his ability to pass judgments. So too his ascetic quality, although we may recognise in certain incidents a sort of gluttony in Comgán, but this is found among the *saloí* too. Finally, his childlikeness is manifest most particularly in the innocence of the preface to the "Dialogue."

Thus on most counts Comgán fulfils the criteria for holy folly. He fits into Rydén's definition as well, with the already discussed exception of the non-simulated madness. We may well

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<sup>175</sup>Saward, *Perfect Fools*, p.27.

<sup>176</sup>O'Keeffe, "Mac Dá Cherda," p.26-7.

<sup>177</sup>ibid., pp.38-9.

<sup>178</sup>Meyer, *Comrac*, p.12.



see an attempt to hide his saintliness from recognition in this incident from the *Imtheachta*, where Comgán insults a bishop in church under the guise of displaying wisdom:

And as the bishop was in the middle of his sermon his attention fell pleasantly on Comhdhán in the midst of the company and he said: " A question for you Comhdhán: What would make Loch Léin to be all porridge?" "The melting of the whole great fairy mound of Loch Léin into it," said Comhdhán. "And what would be the mixing stick for it?" "Your great big dog-like ignorant stump of a penis, my beloved bishop." The bishop finished then and a more humiliating thing never happened to him.<sup>179</sup>

We may note too that as in Seward's paradigm, the fool has one holy confidante who knows of his true sanctity, and that is his companion Cummíne Fota. The preface to the "Dialogue" states "Cummíne Fota loved Comgán and held him in special affection; he had delight in listening to his stories and lore, for he often recognised his saintliness."<sup>180</sup> We may accurately conclude, then, that the image developed for Comgán Mac Da Cherda by early Irish literature was that of the holy fool.

As Seward points out, we need not look to derivations for an explanation of the close similarities between the holy fool in Ireland and elsewhere, but rather to similar circumstances. Indeed, the holy fool is a transcultural, trans-religious phenomenon. An example from a culture far removed from Ireland should suffice to demonstrate this. The stories of Han-shan, the holy fool in a Chinese Buddhist monastery, present the same sort of figure in a completely unrelated context:

He looked like a tramp. His body and face were old and beat. Yet in every word he breathed was a meaning in line with the subtle principle of things, if only you thought of it deeply. Everything he said had a feeling of the Tao in it, profound and arcane secrets. His hat was made of birch bark, his clothes were ragged and worn out, and his shoes were wood. Thus men who have made it hide their tracks: unifying categories and interpenetrating things. On that long veranda calling and singing, in his words of reply--Ha

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<sup>179</sup>RIA B.iv.1, p.161r. translation in Harrison, *Trickster*, p.73.

<sup>180</sup>O'Keeffe, "Mac Dá Cherda," p.20-1.



Ha!--the three worlds revolve...But how could a person without wisdom recognise him?<sup>181</sup>

The key to the phenomenon of the holy fool lies in similar circumstances. Vital to the identification of those circumstances for the literature of Comgán Mac Da Chérda is the frequency of holy folly arising during periods of spiritual stagnation and social conformity in the Church. Such a context matches very well the period from the middle of the eighth century on, but most particularly the ninth and tenth centuries, in Ireland. At this point, the church had grown powerful, stagnant, and heavily laicised.<sup>182</sup>

One possible context for the literature of holy folly is the reform movement of the late eighth- early ninth-centuries, which attempted to return the church to its ascetic and eremitic roots.<sup>183</sup> The Celi Dé, as scholars term them, espoused asceticism and detachment from the world, particularly from sinful dealings and institutions. An early saint who seems to have been looked up to by the movement was the seventh-century Moling, founder of Tech Moling in Co. Wicklow. This saint himself displays many of the attributes of holy folly, most particularly in his associations with lepers, madmen and the like and his unconditional love of them. In the stories of the Devil's visit,<sup>184</sup> and the leper's nose<sup>185</sup> we see him turning away from the fine appearances and espousing instead the humble action. We also see him become a patron of folly, in the story of Mael Dobarchon<sup>186</sup> and of course in his friendship with Suibne. It is at Moling's house that the *geilt* dies, and one of his monks

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<sup>181</sup>Preface to "Cold Mountain Poems," by Lü-ch'iu Yin, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature* (ed. Birch and Keene, Middlesex, 1965) 211.

<sup>182</sup>K. Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London, 1966) chapters 14, 15, 20.

<sup>183</sup>ibid., chapters 16, 17; P. O'Dwyer, "Celtic Monks and the Culdee Reform," *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh, 1990)140-71.

<sup>184</sup>Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso* (Dublin, 1906) 156-7.

<sup>185</sup>Stokes, *The Birth and Life of St. Moling* (London, 1907)30-2. This work will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

<sup>186</sup>Stokes, *Féilire* , pp.152-3.

pronounces the dictum on his being , "the king, the saint, the holy madman."<sup>187</sup>

Nonetheless, there are differences between the ascetic vision of the reformers and the holy folly of Comgán. Some of these differences will be discussed in Chapter Six. It is perhaps safer to think of both the religious literature of the reform movement and the fictional literature of folly associated with Comgán as products of the same impetus, a need to prophesy by concrete or narrative examples against the power and conformity of the contemporary Irish Church. That Comgán's folly is not mere buffoonery is ensured by the presence of his soul-friend and mentor, the saint Cummíne Fota.

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<sup>187</sup>O'Keeffe, *BS* , l. 2586.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Role of the Saint in Early Irish Literature

To fashion a groundwork for understanding the second character in this study, the saint Cummíne Fota, we must first examine the ways in which the "holy man" functioned in the literature in which his own legends and tales are involved. Hagiography in Ireland has been much studied, and recent works have broken new ground in establishing the complex interplay between fiction and reality, the past and the contemporary which makes the genre one fraught with difficulties.<sup>1</sup>

One of the chief problems with discussing the Irish saint's life is that its relationship with the past is a distant and at times anarchic one. The saint's character was, within certain limits, fairly malleable, well suited to the needs of monastic hagiographers, whose purposes varied from spiritual improvement to political and economic aggrandisement, often within the same work.<sup>2</sup>

Part of this malleability of the past, particularly in the later, more economically and politically oriented lives, stems from the fact that by the end of the eighth century most of the men and women honoured by Irish hagiography as saints had already died. Not until much later would new "holy men" become the subjects of literature. The day to day functions of clerics themselves, holy or not, continued, whether it be as a spiritual beacon in a hermit retreat, or a practical minister to the needs of the community and of the poor. The church had by this time assumed a large and powerful role in Irish society, a result of its symbolic power, its aristocratic connections, and the focus of

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<sup>1</sup>For background studies, see Ludwig Bieler, "Hagiography and Romance in Medieval Ireland," *Medievalia et Humanistica* NS 6 (1975) 13-24; W.W. Heist, "Irish Saints' Lives, Romance, and Cultural History," *ibid.*, p.25-40.; Dorothy Ann Bray, *The Lives of the Irish Saints: A study in Formulaic Composition and the Creation of an Image* (unpub. PhD. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1982.); P. Ó Riain, "The Saints and their Amanuenses: early models and later issues," *Early Irish Literature:-- Media and Communication* (edd. Tranter and Tristram, Tübingen, 1989) 267-80.

For a more specialised study, see Maire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>See Bray, *Lives*, p.4.



trade, exchange and employment that the "monastic city" created.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the contemporary "holy man" might equally be involved as an administrator, organisational leader, or participant in contemporary power politics. The monasteries also carried on their important teaching and writing skills, and so the "holy man" might be scholar or scribe. It is fair to say that even as early as our first hagiographical document, the *Amra Coluim Cille*<sup>4</sup> we find all these various roles represented, and we continue to find them, if obliquely, in the later lives. So the saints continued to fill the roles of exempla long after their deaths, attracting legend and literature through their participation in the beginning centuries of the church in Ireland. These first three centuries, the "Age of the Saints," became a stage on which the main characters, the saints, could play the roles most important to their monastic dramatizers, against a backdrop at once familiar, recognizable, and suitably distant.

Most civilisations, most cultures, create for themselves out of their past a Heroic Age in which lines are clearly drawn, the setting becomes familiar, and dramas of varying significance can be acted out by tale-tellers and writers for the consumption of contemporary audiences. So for instance, Homer's Aegean to the Greeks, the British North in the sixth- and seventh-centuries to the Welsh, or the American Wild West, take on a mantle of ideal times--ideal, not in the sense of a "Golden Age" of peace and prosperity, but in the largeness, clarity and simplicity of deeds and characters. This sense of grandeur and lucidity is often brought about by the presence of great conflict, usually war. A modern example can be seen in the use through the eighties in American films of the Vietnam War as a backdrop against which to debate important and complex societal issues. Such issues can be trivialised and simplified, as in the Rambo films, or made into searchlights for the nation's conscience, as in *The Deerhunter* or

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<sup>3</sup>See Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London, 1966), especially part III.; and Charles Doherty, "Some aspects of hagiography as a source for Irish economic history," *Peritia* 1(1982)300-328.

<sup>4</sup>J. Bernard and R. Atkinson, *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, i.162-83, ii, 53-80; W. Stokes, "The Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille," *Revue Celtique* 20 (1899)30-55, 132-83, 248-87, 400-37.



*The Killing Fields*. Similarly in Britain, the Second World War has continued to be used as a "Heroic Age" by writers and filmmakers as a setting for Britain's own societal conflicts. Of course, such a backdrop, being comfortable and stereotyped, can be crystalised into a formula, like a war/spy film, or even parodied and made comic.<sup>5</sup>

In much of the Irish literature set in the Age of the Saints, the hero--the founder saint, *miles christi*, monastic ancestor--becomes the Christian equivalent of a Ulysses, Wyatt Earp or Cú Chulainn. The Christian virtues become the equivalent of a heroic code.<sup>6</sup> For the Church in general, the Heroic Age was the time of persecutions under the Roman Empire, with martyrs larger than life, often seemingly more heroic in their possession of virtue and faith than Christ himself. Although the Irish church looked to the martyrs with great reverence,<sup>7</sup> its very dissimilar history of Christianisation meant that the persecutions were not satisfactory as settings for Irish Christians' attempts to understand their origins, nor did it satisfy the needs of a society greatly concerned with locality and genealogy, and one moreover whose church was thoroughly monastic. So it turned to its own period of conversion and foundation as the realm of its mythologising. A document<sup>8</sup> originally thought to be of the eighth century, but now thought to be ninth or tenth, outlines a succession of periods within the "Age of the Saints". It tells us that the first wave was of bishops following Patrick, lasting

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<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of the "heroic age" in relation to Irish hagiography, see Bray, *Lives*, pp.39-44.

<sup>6</sup>For an exercise in delineation of this code, see the *peroratio* of the Book of Lismore life of Mochua, Stokes *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, (Oxford, 1890) pp145-6(=288). See also Bray, *Lives*, p.20: "Hagiography, like bardic panegyric, is concerned with projecting an ideal image, rather than with describing reality. The saints appear in their *vitae* as almost heroic examples of Christian living, and it is in accordance with this ideal that the hagiographers depict their heroes."

<sup>7</sup>For instance, the prologue to *Féilire Óengus*, so, ed. Stokes, (London, 1905)18-20; Middle-Irish versions of martyrdoms in R. Atkinson, *The Passions and Homilies from the Leabhar Breac* (Dublin, 1887). Cf. Bray, *Lives*, pp.59-60. The Cambrai Homily has a passage on types of martyrdom which shows adaptation of the idea to the Irish monastic context. Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus*, (1903) vol. 2, pp.244-7.

<sup>8</sup>P.Grosjean, "Catalogus Sanctorum Hiberniae," *Analecta Bollandiana* 73 (1955) 197-213, 289-322.



from ca. 432-544. The second wave or order was comprised of priests and founders of monasteries, and this lasted until 598. The last order, that of the anchorites, is shown in a rather bad light, but fictionally described as contemporary although the document only brings us up to the plague years of 664-5.<sup>9</sup> Such schematisation is familiar not only from an Irish pseudo-historical context, but from many other cultures' mythologies of their past.<sup>10</sup> The evolution described, despite or because of its simplicity, is one which would have been readily familiar as "true" to hagiographers in the centuries after 665.

The creation of the character of the saint is a process of popular development as well as monastic intention, for the holy man played an important role in the social fabric and hence in local tradition and legend. The extent of the saint's role is outlined by Elissa R. Henken:

They did not become simply the protagonists of religious narrative; they were rather the Christianized form of the folk hero. Amongst their other roles, they are culture heroes, helping to create and define the world, as geomorphic constructors -- making wells, raising hills, changing the course of rivers, confining the sea-- and as benefactors, providing men with both physical and cultural necessities--food, healing, law.<sup>11</sup>

To this I would add that in relation to the monks of their *paruchia* the founder saints act in the role of exalted ancestors, "begetting" lines (often kept within families<sup>12</sup>) whose greatness is validated by that of their progenitors. This ancestral role is seen most clearly in the term *comarba* "heir, successor," used to describe the abbots of monasteries in association with a particular saint.

At a basic level, the saint's character is a popular creation, though the "public" concerned might sometimes be a limited one.

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<sup>9</sup>And here we can already see the means by which the hagiographer plays with the past, in this case attacking the ascetic reformers of his own day under the guise of describing an earlier phase of the church.

<sup>10</sup>See Kelleher, "Early Irish History and Pseudo-history," *Studia Hibernica* 3 (1963) 113-27, and compare, for instance, the Greek myth of the golden, silver, bronze and iron men.

<sup>11</sup>E. Henken, "The Welsh Saint as Folk Hero," *Celtic Folklore and Christianity* (ed. Ford, California, 1983) 58.

<sup>12</sup>See Hughes, *Church in Early Irish Society*, chapter 15.



Stefan Czarnowski's views on this are outlined by Dorothy Ann Bray:

The hero, in Czarnowski's view, is the incarnation and perfection of a social value or ideal which conforms to the group which created him. He is elected to the status of hero by his society, and here Czarnowski draws an analogy between heroes and saints--both are named by public voice.<sup>13</sup> This public development, then, reflects the literary (in the widest sense) function of the saint for the particular sector of the society which manifests it.<sup>14</sup> A saint's legend could develop with input from many different quarters. This is described by Henken:

The individual traditions, which pertain to specific aspects of a saint's life, are transmitted in discrete, narrative units, which can stand independent, without necessarily being strung together in extended narratives. While legends cluster around a central figure, being drawn into his orbit from the traditions of others or being developed to meet public interest in all aspects of his life, they are not necessarily attached one to the other or told together.<sup>15</sup>

Despite being drawn from a great range of sources, popular, monastic or literary, the tales of saints tend to follow a similar pattern of being compiled and cut to fit a basic framework. This framework has been studied in depth by Henken and particularly Bray in its relation to the more general heroic biography.<sup>16</sup> It is important to realise that in general, the end products of these compilations, as we have them preserved in Ireland, are very standardised and moulded to the designs of the monastic communities.<sup>17</sup>

The image of the saint as a Christian, alternative hero can be seen in the very earliest Irish texts. Soon after Columba's death, the "Amra Coluim Cille" was composed, celebrating in

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<sup>13</sup>Bray, *Lives*, pp.71-2, paraphrasing Czarnowski, *Le culte des héros et ses conditions sociales*, (Bruxelles, 1919). Cf. Bray, p.66f.

<sup>14</sup>For the folk image of the saint as hero, see Dáithí Ó hOgáin, *The Hero in Irish Folk History* (Dublin, 1985) Chapter One, pp.4-61.

<sup>15</sup>Henken, "Welsh Saints", pp.59-60.

<sup>16</sup>Henken, "Welsh Saints", and *The Traditions of the Welsh Saints* (Bury, 1987); and Bray, *Lives*.

<sup>17</sup>See J-M Picard, "Structural Patterns in Early Irish Saints' Lives," *Peritia* 4 (1984) 67-82.



obscure panegyric language his virtues (here remember that *virtus* has its roots in manliness and strength). Columba's heroism is the transformed heroism of the Christian, involving asceticism, sagacity, converse with the supernatural, generosity and discipline--as well as good family connections.<sup>18</sup> These became the commonplace qualities available to all holy men. A century later, another poem celebrates Columba's heroism in striking imagery:

<i>Do-ell Éirinn, indel cor,</i>	He turned away from Ireland, having made covenants,
<i>cechaing noib nemed mbled;</i>	he traversed in ships the whales' sanctuary;
<i>brisis tola tindis for,</i>	he broke desires, he was illuminated(?)
<i>fairrge al druim dánae fer.</i>	a brave man over the ridge of the sea.

<i>Fích fri colainn catha íuil,</i>	He fought with the flesh familiar battles,
<i>légais la sin suíthe n-óg;</i>	in addition to that, he read pure wisdom;
<i>uágais, brígais benna síuil;</i>	he sewed, he displayed sail-tops,
<i>sruith tar fairrgi, flaith a lóg.</i>	a sage over the sea, Heaven his reward. <sup>19</sup>

This sort of imagery is striking and bold, but the use of the holy man as *miles christi* at all times has trod a razor edge between the original subversive metaphor and its corruption in the creation of actually vengeful, often partisan warrior saints. In stumbling towards the latter side, hagiography in Ireland as elsewhere has a tendency to absorb not only the motifs and structures of secular tales, but also their values.

Such is the Life of Findchú,<sup>20</sup> described by Hughes as "one of the most successful of Irish saints' lives" in terms of entertainment.<sup>21</sup> In terms of imparting Christian virtues it falls short of most others. Its protagonist is blatantly militaristic, triumphalist and violent, and is described in the text as "the valiant warrior."<sup>22</sup> Exaggeration of a comic or near-comic sort abounds, prompting suggestions that it may be a parody.<sup>23</sup> So,

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<sup>18</sup>See Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp.10-1.

<sup>19</sup> F. Kelly, "A Poem in Praise of Columb Cille," *Ériu* 24 (1973) 1-34.

<sup>20</sup>Stokes, *Lismore Lives*, pp84-98; 231-246.

<sup>21</sup>Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, p.244.

<sup>22</sup>Stokes, *Lismore Lives*, p.96; 244.

<sup>23</sup>V. Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition*, (Oxford, 1962) 218.



for instance, in his early career, Findchú buries a king up to his chin in the earth out of sheer annoyance, at which his mentor Comgall suggests, "It is better for you to be even as I am." Findchú promptly buries his head in Comgall's cowl, and so great is his shame that he burns the cowl.<sup>24</sup> The saint shows little actual sign of reform, however, until the end of the Life, where we are told "he went to Rome, for he was repentant of the battles which he had fought and the deeds which he had done for friendship and for love of brotherhood."<sup>25</sup> The poem immediately following this, however, suggests that this is a rather Chaucerian recantation, and that he is not at all sorry for his warrior past.

Possibly a hero story for the sort of monks whose own military exploits increasingly fill the annals from the middle of the eighth century on,<sup>26</sup> the Life of Findchú also provides a template for the relations of his monastery of Brí-gobann with the kings of Munster and the rest of Ireland. A better example of this political strain is seen in the tenth-century Life of Adomnán,<sup>27</sup> which has been examined in some detail by Maire Herbert.<sup>28</sup> In her discussion she shows quite clearly the methods by which a saint's career could be turned to the use of a later monastic foundation. She details numerous instances in which the saint is shown cursing or demonstrating his thaumaturgical power against kings with whom he historically would have had little or no dealing. These kings are chosen not because tradition connects the saint with them, but because of the similarity in their history, and sometimes their genealogy, to contemporary kings whom the monastery which originated the Life (almost certainly Kells) wished to impress. Herbert summarises the purpose of the Life:

Its main aim, however, is the articulation of contemporary comment in the guise of hagiographical narrative. A fundamental issue is the

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<sup>24</sup>ibid., p.86; 233.

<sup>25</sup>ibid., p.97;245.

<sup>26</sup>See Hughes, *Church*, pp.169-170.

<sup>27</sup>M. Herbert and P. Ó Riain, *Betha Adamnán: The Life of Adomnán* (ITS vol. 54) (Dublin, 1988).

<sup>28</sup>See ibid., introduction; and *Iona, Kells and Derry*, esp. ch. 13, pp151ff.



relationship between secular and ecclesiastical areas of authority. The stance of *Beatha Adhamhnáin* is openly partisan. Adomnán the churchman is depicted as having the power to deprive of kingship, and even of life itself, the secular rulers who oppose him. The hagiographical discourse recreates the records of the past in the light of present events, and chooses seventh-century dramatis personae to stand as surrogates for tenth-century counterparts.<sup>29</sup>

Herbert shows, however, that this political message was embedded in a traditional hagiographical setting, which includes the performance of certain miracles by Adomnán which serve merely to demonstrate his sanctity and specialness. These do also have the purpose of reinforcing the power of the saintly figure. She demonstrates clearly that the Life was directed not at a popular audience, but at a monastic and aristocratic one--indeed, the latter included the very kings at whom the Life's message was aimed.

The saint could also become the focus of legend and myth in much the way a hero would, and in some cases saints' lives have, through the legends attached to their protagonists, given them a character reminiscent of a demi-god or shaman, working potent magics of various kinds. Such is the character of Adomnán in the stories concerning the establishment of the *Cáin* or *Lex Innocentium*.<sup>30</sup> There he is depicted engaging in bizarre ascetic feats, including a seeming death and resurrection, in order to wring from God a law to protect women from violence. Moreover, the consideration that the Irish saints owe much of their character to reminiscences of pre-Christian deities is not a new one: numerous "paganisings" of the saints are listed by Plummer in his introduction to the Latin saints' lives.<sup>31</sup> The example of Brigit may be cited, as it is often claimed that her character is much based on that of a pre-Christian goddess of the same

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<sup>29</sup>Herbert, *Iona*, p.174. Such a use of the fictional reflex of a contemporary figure may also be seen in secular sources, especially bardic poetry. See, for instance, Cinaed ūa hArtagáin's poem to Óengus, king of Louth.

<sup>30</sup>K. Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin* (Oxford, 1905); and D. Melia, "Law and the Shamanic Saint," in Ford, *Celtic Folklore and Christianity* (California, 1983), 113-28.

<sup>31</sup>C. Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, (Oxford, 1910) vol I, introduction.



name.<sup>32</sup> Thus the pre-Christian and popular images of the holy--the gods, shamans, wonder-workers-- could fuse with the orthodox Christian images to form a sort of Christian wizard, "a practitioner of 'white magic.'"<sup>33</sup>

But we must not deceive ourselves into thinking that Irish hagiography is entirely a matter of sagas, politics and folklore, with none of the more edificatory spiritual and devotional content we would expect from a Christian *exemplum*. Even a text such as the Life of Adomnán, bound up with politics as it is, uses a largely conventional homiletic framework which nonetheless gives striking witness to the image of the saint as a template of Christian virtue. Although unconnected thematically with the text,<sup>34</sup> the *peroratio* which closes the Life piles up a wealth of metaphors for the subject's sanctity: "A true pilgrim, like Abraham. Gentle and forgiving of heart, like Moses. A praiseworthy psalmist, like David...A choice vessel for proclaiming truth, like Paul the Apostle...A beautiful herb garden with plants of virtues...A lion in strength and power. A dove in meekness and simplicity. A serpent in sagacity and prudence towards righteousness..."<sup>35</sup>

The *peroratio* then builds up from an image of Adomnán's death and attainment of heaven, and the continued efficacy of his body on earth, to an image of ecstatic union with the Godhead, which the author prays help from Adomnán to enter. Such images, even if formulaic,<sup>36</sup> are not the stuff of mere lip-service religion. Rather, the structure of the Life shows that medieval Irish hagiographers could be aware of the purposes of their lives and segregate them from and complement them with more devotional material. And we must always remember that parallel

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<sup>32</sup>See D. A. Bray, "The Image of Brigit in the Early Irish Church," *Études Celtiques* 20 (1987)209-15.

<sup>33</sup>L. Bieler, "Hagiography and Romance in Medieval Ireland," *Medievalia et Humanistica* NS6 (Cambridge, 1975) 13.

<sup>34</sup>Herbert, *Iona*, pp.151-2.

<sup>35</sup>Herbert and Ó Riain, *Betha Adamnáin*, pp.60-3.

<sup>36</sup>See for instance the almost identical *peroratio* at the end of the Life of Bairre of Cork, C. Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉirenn:Lives of the Irish Saints*, (Oxford, 1922) vol. 1, pp.19-20; vol.2, p.19, and discussion in Bray, *Lives*, pp.29-30.



to hagiography run many other genres of religious writing whose devotional content is unmistakable.

Saints' lives could, however, be relatively free of manipulation toward political or material ends. Adomnán's own *Life of Columba* has been shown to be aimed primarily at forging a unity in the somewhat fractured Iona community around the image of their patron and founder. According to Herbert, Adomnán wrote the *Life* because in his eyes "the resolution of contemporary contentions was to be found by looking to the example of the saintly life of Colum Cille, which was above all dispute."<sup>37</sup> In this she seems to concur with J.M. Picard, who stresses that "despite an underlying propaganda element the tone of the *Vita* is moderate and it is likely that Adomnán's primary aim was to write what he saw as a model for the Christians of his time."<sup>38</sup> Herbert and Picard both point out that the book was intended for Northumbrian and Continental audiences as well as Irish, and thus shows a concern with trying to present "a saint worthy of comparison with the great figures of scripture and hagiography."<sup>39</sup>

Nor is Adomnán the last hagiographer to have such intentions. Some of the lives of women saints emphasise the Christian virtues rather than wonder-working, and the saint's sanctity is manifested in acts rather than miracles. The *Life of Samthann*,<sup>40</sup> for example, stresses charity and hospitality, asceticism and prayerful devotion. Kathleen Hughes describes this as one of the "few examples of hagiography which seem to have been intended to build up the spiritual life."<sup>41</sup> Grouped with the *Life of Ite* and others, Hughes sees this as written for a religious community with didactic purposes. She suggests that since women's communities were probably shorter-lived and "less

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<sup>37</sup>Herbert, *Iona*, p.148.

<sup>38</sup>Picard, "The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*," *Peritia* 1 (1982) 177.

<sup>39</sup>Herbert, *Iona*, p.148.

<sup>40</sup>Plummer, *VSH*, vol.2, pp.253-61.

<sup>41</sup>Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, p.232, but see Bray "Motival Derivations in the *Life of St. Samthann*," *SC* 20 (1985/6) 28-38.



ambitious, less competitive than many men's houses" this "may account for the accent of genuine piety."<sup>42</sup>

Thus we can see that the function of the saint within hagiographical literature in Ireland was no simple matter, but varied with the purposes of those writing the lives, and with the sources of particular accounts. One Life could also encompass many functions, many strata of intentions. The Lives are, for the most part, composites of various traditions, and thus naturally of varying intended functions for the saint. The seams that joined traditions and functions are more visible in some Lives than others, and in those we can more nearly distinguish the various strands.

A Life well suited to detailing and assessing the strata of functions is the Irish Life of Moling.<sup>43</sup> This Life is one of those accredited with a good deal of literary merit, chiefly owing to the more endearing, folk-derived stories included in it. Kenney suggests the sources of these stories when he comments "the subject matter is, for the most part, pure legend and folk-lore direct from the people."<sup>44</sup> It remains "entirely distinct" from the more monastically-oriented Latin lives. Its literary merit is, I believe, rather diminished by its composite structure, in which the sequence of narrative is never entirely resolved. This structure gives us an advantage, nevertheless, in analysing the contents for the various guises of the saint.

Not all the Life is without "secular" influence or political purpose. The opening two chapters, however, are common to all hero-stories: they concern the wondrous birth of the divine hero. His conception is unnatural (here by incest), his mother exiled and alone; the favour of God is displayed immediately at the boy's birth by the angels, the sun which warms the snow-filled birthplace, and the dove which protects the boy from his mother. The function of such a story is to initiate us into Moling's

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<sup>42</sup>Hughes, *ibid*, p.235.

<sup>43</sup>W.Stokes, *The Birth and Life of St. Moling* (London, 1907).

<sup>44</sup>Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (New York, 1929) 462. Cf. Bray, *Lives*, p.28.



wondrous qualities. Through the motif of the dove, it also provides an explanation of the saint's first name.

The introduction of Brendan in chapters three and four is a jarring anachronism and one that suggests monastic attempts to associate their patron with one of the top-notch saints. The presence of the priest Collanach, however, suggests an original tradition for the saint's fosterer-- a less<sup>er</sup> known name, unlikely to impress. And if Collanach is indeed the MoC<sup>h</sup>onóc of the Martyrology of Gorman, at 19 December, the cave to which the priest brings mother and child might have been "his", though it now has Brendan's name, since he is there described as *MoConóc uais uamach*. ("noble Mo Chonóc the cave-dweller.")<sup>45</sup> The combination of this more plausible tradition with the dropping of names like Brendan and Victor suggests that the monastic editors were concerned to better Moling's image. Furthermore, as this section proceeds in Chapter Five to his very unconventional begging tour, it has an air of authenticity. Brendan is introduced again in Chapter Seven in a different context, as one of the saints to whom the hero's advent is prophesied. Thus he sets up camp by the Barrow, but must later leave it to be occupied by Moling. This emphasises more strongly the importance of Tech Moling, by showing Brendan as its original founder.

Similarly, the Life makes only fleeting reference to Maedoc (to whom Moling was successor at Ferns.) The lack of mention of this is undoubtedly due to the Life's Tech Moling provenance. This has the appearance also of a name-dropping episode. On the other hand Chapter Seven makes reference with some detail to his mother and the priest Collanach, both claiming to have suffered villification from the community for raising the "bastard" Moling.

We must also consider Moling's encounters with the supernatural. In Chapter Six he is chased by a spectre and its family, whom he avoids by gaining "three steps of pilgrimage and three steps of folly" as a sort of last request from the phantoms. This allows him to escape by means of his extraordinary leaping abilities (this is another onomastic story.) He also encounters a demon when a chip flies into the saint's eye in Chapter Eleven.

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<sup>45</sup>Stokes, *The Martyrology of Gorman* (London, 1895) 242-3.



Moling recognises the cleric who heals him. In these two stories there is an emphasis on his discernment, and on his cleverness in avoiding harm. In a more solid christological vein is the story of his discernment of the leper he encounters and helps.

Moling's cleverness is transformed from mere wit into the scheming of a trickster in the narrative about Moling's dealings with Gobbán, where Moling's payment to the craftsman of an oratory full of grain turns into maggots the next day--a common folk-motif. This narrative is joined to the next by a passage which indicates Moling's status as a national hero: "Through those miracles fame and renown and splendour accrued to Moling; so that the Leinstermen gave him headship and honour and counsel, so that it was he who was high chief to them all."<sup>46</sup> Here surely is a more secular example of Tech Moling's attempts at monastic aggrandisement. So too in the long story recounted in Chapters Fifteen-Twenty, concerning the removal of the Bóroma, the tribute levied upon the Leinstermen by the Uí Néill. Once again it is Moling's cleverness which prevails, this time by his use of ambiguous wording in gaining a temporary (but interpretable as permanent) respite from the tax. His cleverness is here displayed on a national stage, besting the kings of the Uí Néill, the saint Adomnán, and a great warrior of Tara. That this has beneficial effects for the entire province gives justification to Moling's rise as a national hero, and adds another strand to his character.

At the very end of the Life, we return to the more endearing stories, in the tale of his madman and other pets. And it is here that we can see the Life branching out to the other sources which make up his dossier: his involvement with the Suibne legends, and the numerous stray anecdotes about him. Here is not the place for a discussion of the Suibne texts, but some reference to the anecdotes should support the character types established in the Life: cleverness in his encounter with robbers;<sup>47</sup> discernment in his encounter with the devil in handsome guise;<sup>48</sup> and some of

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<sup>46</sup>Stokes, *Moling*, p.40-1.

<sup>47</sup>Meyer, "Anecdotes of St. Moling," *Revue Celtique* 14 (1893) 190-3.

<sup>48</sup>Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso*, p.156-7.



the Christology and folly seen in the Life in his encounter with Mael-dobarchon.<sup>49</sup>

In Moling we have a saint whose dossier is relatively free from homogenisation, allowing us to detect the various strands of his character and perhaps their ultimate origins. He acquires a reputation for cleverness and trickery, a reputation duly used as enhancement of his status as a Leinster hero. Other aspects include humility, Christian discernment, and an element of holy folly. Importantly, too, we see how a saint's known role--Moling was surely involved in monastic affairs as bishop of Ferns, and was one of the guarantors of Adomnán's Law--could be completely changed by tradition into new and different roles, and how the changes of monastic fortune could effect the setting for his legendary activities.

Armed then with some information about how to discern the functions of a saint within a given literary context, it is time to turn to the dossier of our own saintly subject, Cummíne Fota. We have no extant compilation which could properly be termed a "Life" for Cummíne, the so-called "Early Life"<sup>50</sup> being a short summary in the form of a tale, and the various versions of the *Imtheachta na nÓinmhideadh* being not primarily concerned with Cummíne, and not truly hagiographic. What we have instead of a homogenised hagiography are snippets from tradition, similar to those about Moling in quality. Such snippets are the putative contents of a "Life", but retain more vitality in their exemption from the monastic mill.

We are also fortunate in that the historical Cummíne can to some extent be delineated. His birth is recorded in the Annals of Ulster at 591(=592) and his death at 661(=662).<sup>51</sup> In AU and elsewhere this is said to have been the seventy-second year of his life, so there is some inconsistency. In the Martyrologies, his feast day is recorded as 12 November. Although there is some

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<sup>49</sup>ibid., p.152-3.

<sup>50</sup>G. MacEoin, "The Life of Cuimine Fota," *Béaloides* 39-41 (1971-3)=*Hereditas* (Dublin, 1975) 192-205.

<sup>51</sup>For a comparison of all annal entries on Cummíne's death, see K. Grabowski and D. Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals of Medieval Ireland and Wales* (Woodbridge, 1984) 222.



confusion in his genealogy<sup>52</sup> the main tradition places him among the Eóganacht Locha Léin, the ruling dynasty of West Munster (Iarmuma or Iarluachra).

As to his historical role, we know a little and can glean more. There is no evidence of his being a monastic founder in any way--there are numerous Kilcummin's and Kilcommon's, but none can be shown to be linked with Cummíne<sup>53</sup>--although in the seventh-century that is not surprising. The notes to *Féilire Óengusso* in Leabar Brecc state that his *baile* was a place called *Druim da liter*, but this has not been identified.<sup>54</sup> A slight but persistent tradition has represented him as bishop of Clonfert. The Annals of Innisfallen call him *comarbai Brenaind* and the Martyrology of Gorman calls him *epscop Cluain Ferta Brenainn*.<sup>55</sup> He is called bishop in the "Lament" for his death, the date of which is contentious, but the line may merely contain exaggerated praise.<sup>56</sup> The tradition connecting him with Clonfert must have continued, however, for what were believed to be his relics were exhumed there, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, in 1162, and translated to a gold shrine.<sup>57</sup> This is despite the fact that literary tradition seems otherwise to have ignored the connection with Clonfert, even in those documents, such as the *Imtheachta*, which certainly date from after the discovery of Cummíne's remains.<sup>58</sup>

Based on the writings attributed to him, some involvement must be postulated in monastic administration. This is certainly true of the one work universally accepted as genuine, the

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<sup>52</sup>See S.Ó Coileáin, "The Structure of a Literary Cycle," *Ériu* 25 (1977) 93-7.

<sup>53</sup>The most relevant are: Kilcummin on the north of the Dingle peninsula; Kilcummin to the north-east of Killarney; and Kilcommon south of Caher.

<sup>54</sup>Ó Coileáin, "Structure", p. 93. Could this place be connected to the *Cill Ietrach* of "The Meeting of Liadain and Cuirithir"?

<sup>55</sup>Stokes, *Féilire hUí Ghormáin*, (London, 1895) 216-7.

<sup>56</sup>G. MacEoin, "The Lament for Cuimine Fota," *Ériu* 28(1977) 17-31; F. Byrne "The Lament for Cummíne Fota," *Ériu* 31 (1980) 111-22.

<sup>57</sup>A.T. Lucas, "The Social Role of Relics and Reliquaries in Ancient Ireland," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 116 (1986) 7; 11.

<sup>58</sup>This *pace* G. MacEoin, who believes that references in the "Lament", and his later appellation as "archbishop of Cashel" are expansions of the Clonfert tradition (MacEoin, "Lament", p.21.).



"Penitential".<sup>59</sup> Recent identification of Cummíne Fota with the Cummianus who wrote the letter on the Easter controversy (ca. 632/3) both enhances this view, and to some extent depends on the Clonfert tradition.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the glosses on the fragments of the seventh-century *Cáin Fhuithirbe* suggest that one Cummíne instigated the legislation because he "was unable to decide on a point of law in Áine Cliach after studying ecclesiastical learning, so that he went to the North to learn it."<sup>61</sup> This would certainly suggest a prominent administrative position for Cummíne, if this is indeed Cummíne Fota.<sup>62</sup>

Contrary to such a view, Mac Eoin argues that the tradition representing Cummíne as a wandering preacher and humble cleric is nearer historical fact.<sup>63</sup> Certainly, outside of the exaggerations of the *Imtheachta* which makes him archbishop of Cashel,<sup>64</sup> his role in literature is not one of power or authority, other than spiritual authority. Indeed, in "The Life" he seems consciously to reject such monastic stewardship.<sup>65</sup> But it is the more non-literary sources which attest to this role of authority, and we must question, as we have seen, the purposes of literary tradition. Daibhí Ó Croinín puts the case clearly: "It seems unlikely, however, that the author of a monastic penitential rule would have lived the wandering life described in the cycle of stories concerning Cuimíne Fota. It seems to suit the evidence better to assume that the connection with Clonfert, rather than being a late invention, was in fact the earlier historical situation, which was only later submerged in the development of the legend..."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>L. Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin, 1963)108-135.

<sup>60</sup>D. Ó Croinín, "Cummeanus Longus and the Iconography of Christ and the Apostles in Early Irish Literature," *Sages, Saints and Storytellers* (ed. Ó Corráin, et. al., Maynooth, 1989)274-7.

<sup>61</sup>L. Breatnach, "The Ecclesiastical Element in the Old-Irish Legal tract *Cáin Fhuithirbe*," *Peritia* 5 (1986) 37. and see pp.43-4.(see also Binchy *CIH* 979.23ff. and 1553.26-1555.40.)

<sup>62</sup>A solid identification is given by S. Ó Coileáin, "Mag Fuithirbe Revisited," *Éigse* 23 (1989) 16-26, esp p.22.

<sup>63</sup>MacEoin, "Lament," p.21; "Life", p.192.

<sup>64</sup>e.g. B.iv. 1, p.151r.

<sup>65</sup>MacEoin, "Life", p.200, 204.

<sup>66</sup>Ó Croinín, "Cummeanus Longus," p.274.



There is of course a close parallel to such a development in the case of Moling. Although persistent tradition regarded him as successor to M'Áedóc at Ferns, and despite his connection with the *Cáin Adamnáin*, his traditions emphasise his eremiticism, and include a certain amount of wandering and begging. We must, however, remember that these two roles, that of wanderer and that of administrator and monastic are not completely contradictory. The wanderings of Columbanus did not affect his proficiency as founder and abbot, and in a non-Irish context the life of "rootless" poverty and preaching espoused by Francis of Assisi did not conflict with his establishing a permanent base and founding an entire order, complete with rule.

The emphasis in the annal entries and martyrologies is on Cummíne's sagacity and learning. The Annals of Ulster call him *sapiens* and the usually fairly vague verse in *Félire Óengusso* states "*Dorindnacht la suithi / soas co mmeit tiachrai/ dom Chummain...*" ("There has been given, with wisdom,/science and much prudence/ to my Cummain...") The late Martyrology of Donegal calls him "*leastar n-eccna a aimsire*" and "*proceptaidh eargna bréithre dé.*"(The vessel of wisdom of his time; the learned preacher of the word of God).<sup>67</sup> These assessments undoubtedly reflect the small corpus of work attributed to Cummíne, works of Latin learning, poetry, exegesis, and iconography.

Most certain of these works is the Penitential of Cummean, described by Kenney as "of penitentials of purely Irish origin, the next in point of time after Vinnian and Columban, and in some respects the most important."<sup>68</sup> Bieler calls it "with the exception of the Old Irish Penitential of Tallaght, the most comprehensive of the Irish Penitentials."<sup>69</sup> The stated Old Irish Penitential, and the Old Irish Table of Commutations both draw on Cummean, whom they identify as Cummíne Fota, for their formulations.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Stokes, *Félire*, p.234; J. Todd and W. Reeves, *The Martyrology of Donegal* (Dublin, 1864) 304-5.

<sup>68</sup>Kenney, *Sources*, p.241.

<sup>69</sup>Bieler, *Penitentials*, p.5.

<sup>70</sup>Bieler, *Penitentials*, pp.266 §2, 267 §12, 15; 281 §31.



To him is also attributed a Latin hymn on the apostles, *Celebra Juda*.<sup>71</sup> MacEoin suggests that, because of the northern emphasis of the story which prefaces the hymn in the *Liber Hymnorum*, the ascription has been confused with that of either Cummine Ailbe of Iona or Cuimin of Condere, both northern saints.<sup>72</sup> This might be supported by further investigation into the cult of apostles on Iona.<sup>73</sup> There is independent testimony to a northern connection for Cummíne Fota in the preface to *Cáin Fhuithirbe*.<sup>74</sup> MacEoin's objections should, nevertheless, be a reminder of the difficulties of positive attribution of any seventh century work to Cummíne Fota, since there were at least four other men of the same name living at the same time: Cummene Ailbe, abbot of Iona (+659); Cummene, abbot of Bangor (+665); Cummene, abbot of Clonmacnoise (+665); and Cummene of Condere (+669).

The attribution of *Celebra Juda* is complemented by the ascription of another text on the apostles, first noted by Bernhard Bischoff and recently discussed by Daibhí Ó Croinín. This text describes the appearances of Christ and the apostles for iconographical purposes, and is ascribed in one manuscript to "Commianus Longus."<sup>75</sup> Although this ascription could derive from a similarity in theme to *Celebra Juda*, there seems to be little reason to reject it without further negative evidence.

More controversially, it has been claimed that Cummíne Fota is the author of the letter sent by the *romani* churchmen in 632/3 to Segéne abbot of Iona.<sup>76</sup> If this is the case, then we should link Cummíne Fota with those reforming churchmen of the early seventh-century, and with the emphasis on certain types

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<sup>71</sup>Bernard and Atkinson, *Liber Hymnorum* (London, 1898)vol. 1, pp.18-21.

<sup>72</sup>MacEoin, "Life", p.195.

<sup>73</sup>See for instance, Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, p.23; and the poem on maledictive psalms, ed. Meyer, *Hibernica Minora*, (Oxford, 1894) p.44

<sup>74</sup>Breatnach "*Cáin Fhuithirbe*," p.37.

<sup>75</sup>B. Bischoff, "Regensburger Beiträge zur mittelalterlichen Dramatik und Ikonographie," *Mittelalterliche Studien* (Stuttgart, 1966-7) vol.2, 167-8; Ó Croinín, "Cummeanus Longus," pp.270-7.

<sup>76</sup>Ó Croinín, *ibid.* 274-7.



of learning which have been assigned to them.<sup>77</sup> This further strengthens the identification put forward by Bischoff of the anonymous Commentary on Mark with the author of the Easter letter, as both draw heavily on Gregory the Great as a source.<sup>78</sup> This entire corpus remains in need of examination of its language and latinity, as well as its sources, in order to determine how likely it is that all five works are from the same hand.

Before we leave the "historical" Cummine, it should be noted that the name Cummine is found on an early grave slab at Pekaun, co. Tipperary. Although a common name, it is found along with the name of Laidcenn, which is also that of another notable sage and probable *romanus* of the early seventh century.<sup>79</sup>

The "historical" Cummine, then, appears as a sage, one learned in religious matters and Latin scholarship, one skilled at spiritual direction in a monastic context and interested in law. Some of these aspects of his character are retained in the literature in which he plays a larger role, but others, such as his monastic authority and to an extent his wisdom, become attenuated or transformed. The literary tradition emphasises a view of him as a hermit or as a wandering preacher or simple cleric. Though this does not necessarily conflict with the more monastic traditions, it is difficult to determine if this wandering character is historical. In some texts he is represented as a foolish character, or a trickster, elsewhere as a failure. Where there is a great gulf between the "historical" and the

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<sup>77</sup>See P. Ó Néill, "*Romani* influences on seventh-century Hiberno-Latin literature," in *Ireland and Europe* (edd. Ní Chathain and Richter) 280-90.

<sup>78</sup>B. Bischoff, "Wendepunkte in der Geschichte der lateinischen Exegese im Frühmittelalter," *Mittelalterliche Studien*, vol. 1 213-5; 257-8. In a study of the paschal letter and the commentary on Mark, Maura Walsh has concluded that "it is certainly tempting on a number of grounds to accept Prof. Bischoff's identification." "Some Remarks on Cummin's Paschal Letter and the Commentary on Mark ascribed to Cummin," *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission* (ed. Ní Chatháin and Richter, Stuttgart, 1987) 229. See also Ó Néill, "*Romani*," p.287, 289. For an opposing view, see Clare Stancliffe, "Early 'Irish' Biblical Exegesis", *Studia Patristica* 12 (1975) 365-6.

<sup>79</sup>Hughes *Church*, p.105, n.4; P. Lionard, "Early Irish Grave-Slabs," *PRIA* 61C (1961) 104, fig.3; M. Maloney, "The Riddle of the Slabs," *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* 9 (1964) 103. For Laidcenn, see M. Herren, "The Authorship, Date of Composition, and Provenance of the So-Called *Lorica Gilae*," *Ériu* 24 (1973) 35-51.



literary, we should not be surprised: witness the separation between the Patrick of the Confession and the Patrick of Muirchú, or that between Adomnán the abbot and author, and the strange shamanistic saint of the *Cáin Adomnáin*. Part of the interest of this thesis is in what sort of character the literary Cummine becomes when his connection to history has been forgotten.

To that end, a brief survey of some of the minor sources for the literary Cummine should serve as an introduction. One text which lies in the borderland between the "historical" and the literary is the "Lament" already referred to above. This is a poem of eight stanzas, possibly incomplete, assembled as a composite from annals, *Sanas Cormaic* and elsewhere. Because of its manner of preservation, the actual order of the text cannot be adequately determined.<sup>80</sup> The poem is attributed in the brief preface in three of the manuscript sources to Colmán úa Cluasaig, the *aide*, foster-father or tutor of Cummine. This Colmán is also the reputed author of *Sen Dé*.<sup>81</sup> The preface to that hymn calls Colmán a "scholar of Cork", which agrees with the information in the "Life" regarding Cummine's training in Cork. Colmán's death is listed in Annals of the Four Masters at 661, the same year as Cummine, but this does not agree with the preface to *Sen Dé*, which considers it a poem against the plague which ravaged Ireland, according to the Annals of Ulster, in 665 and thereafter. Colmán's obit may thus be merely a mistake in the Four Masters, since it is at 661 that the lament is recorded.<sup>82</sup> This still leaves some discrepancy in dates, for if Cummine was 72 when he died in 661/2, Colmán must have been very old indeed to be his fosterer and still survive him. However unlikely, though, it is far from impossible, and if we interpret *aide* as tutor, Colmán need not have been so much his senior. It is then possible to retain a connection between Colmán and the composition of the poem, provided the age of the language in the poem can sustain such a connection.

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<sup>80</sup>MacEoin and Byrne differ in their ordering of the text. Byrne places MacEoin's stanzas in the order 1,2,3,6,4,7,8,5, with the couplets of 5 reversed.

<sup>81</sup>Bernard and Atkinson, *LH*, vol.1, p.25; vol.2, p.12-14.

<sup>82</sup>MacEoin, "Lament", p.17.



On the date of the poem there is considerable disagreement between its two most recent editors. MacEoin takes it to be a late development of Cummíne's tradition, based on some of the references in it and some of the hyperbolic praise, and finds language evidence for a date around 1000AD, with verses 7 and 8 being "tenth century."<sup>83</sup> Byrne, on the other hand, finds the language predominantly early, and the traditions debatable, and sees no reason why the composition could not be from the seventh century, "about a generation later" than Cummíne.<sup>84</sup> Both editors exclude verse 2, which is obviously an annalistic insert, and Byrne excludes from his early dating verse 7, for metrical reasons.

A summary of the structure and content of the poem, in the order given by MacEoin, follows: Verse 1: Grief is expressed for many dead people dear to the speaker; Verse 2: An annalistic interpolation, listing "the dead of the present year"; Verse 3: *Luimnech* bears no corpse towards *Leth Cuinn* as worthy as Cummíne; Verse 4: If any one from Ireland were worthy to sit on Gregory's chair, it would be Cummíne; Verse 5: grief does not save him, though it is great lamentation after Cummíne's encoffining; Verse 6: he was bishop, king and son of a king (or "overlord" - Byrne), wise and fair; Verse 7: he was descendant of Coirpre and Corc, was great, his death in winter is cause for great grief; Verse 8: none will lament if those living west of Clíu do not.

MacEoin's arguments based on the traditions contained in the poem argue from the stance already mentioned, that the historical Cummíne was akin to the humble cleric and wandering preacher found elsewhere in the literary tradition. But a reading of that tradition as having taken the opposite course suggests that "late developments" such as his episcopate, comparisons to Gregory, and the image of the coffin travelling north do not in fact preclude an early date. The coffin afloat on the Shannon, for instance is not a readily understandable image, and has a power and authenticity which if not based on an actual event must

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<sup>83</sup>ibid., p.25.

<sup>84</sup>Byrne, "Lament," p.114.



relate to a "hagiographical saga" of the sort suggested by Byrne.<sup>85</sup> So too the corpse's travelling north into Leth Cuinn, which MacEoin sees as a reference to the Clonfert connection.<sup>86</sup> It is unclear to me why "into Leth Cuinn" must mean Clonfert, although late tradition did regard him as having been buried there. There are other difficulties with the geography of the poem. If Byrne's reading of *desel* in verse 3 is correct, the intended destination of the corpse can hardly be Clonfert, if it is travelling "sunwise (i.e. clockwise) around Munster" on the Shannon. Furthermore, I know of no reference which would allow the Shannon further north than Limerick to be included in the term *Luimnech*. And finally, verse 8 speaks of "ears west of Clíu," which would suggest that the author is somewhere in Co. Tipperary, rather than on the mid-Shannon. All in all, then, the geography of the poem must be reconsidered as representing a tradition as yet undetermined, but certainly not a well-known literary one.

So too the problematic references to Cummíne's ecclesiastical status. Verse 6 states, "*sech ba h-epsco-p-som, ba rí/ ba macthigern Mo Chummi*."<sup>87</sup> MacEoin takes this as a reference to later traditions of Cummíne as bishop of Clonfert and archbishop of Cashel. Here he surely is taking the term *epsco-p* too strongly, since in pre-reform Ireland it was a spiritual, rather than administrative post, not as high as that of abbot. In this regard it is important that although sources call Cummíne *comarbai Brénaínd*, tradition regards him as a bishop, not an abbot. The term *rí* may hold the key to the problem. Although it may be mere hyperbole, it could also be a statement of Cummíne's ecclesiastical authority. The term *rí* is known elsewhere as an Irish equivalent of the latin *princeps*, for "abbot, ruler of a monastery."<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Kathleen Hughes has pointed

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<sup>85</sup>ibid., p.114-5.

<sup>86</sup>MacEoin, "Lament," p.21.

<sup>87</sup>Byrne, "Lament," p.115.

<sup>88</sup>See particularly W. Davies, "Clerics as Rulers: Some implications of the terminology of Ecclesiastical Authority in Early Medieval Ireland," *Latin and the Vernacular Languages in Early Medieval Britain* (ed. Brooke) (Leicester, 1982)81-97. For examples of *rí* as abbot or church ruler, see *Betha Adamnáin* p.62-3,



out that the seventh-century *romani* favoured the bishop as authority within the church.<sup>89</sup> Given other evidence linking Cummíne to the sphere of the *romani* this line might be seen as a formulation of his authority, as bishop, in Clonfert: "not only was he bishop, he was ruler."

The final objection to the authenticity of the traditions in the "Lament" is to the verse 4, which compares Cummíne to Gregory the Great, stating that if anyone from Ireland were worthy to sit in his chair--i.e. become pope--it would be Cummíne. MacEoin again links this to the late legend of Cummíne becoming archbishop of Cashel. Here, again, he reckons without mere hyperbole. Furthermore, the verse does not state that Cummíne was pope, merely that he was worthy of the office. The subjunctive nature of the verse ("*Ma ro-dligthe,*" "*mad a Eri*") rules out any extreme claims. Moreover, continuing the *romani* links, it has been shown that the reforming Irishmen set great store by Gregory the Great, and indeed two works attributed to Cummíne make extensive use of his works.<sup>90</sup>

MacEoin himself raises a pint in favour of the poem's antiquity, namely that the poem seems to represent Cummíne as dying "west of Clíu" which agrees with the tradition in the "Life" that Cummíne died in the territory of the Uí Fhidgeinte.<sup>91</sup> As to the poem's time-setting, which appears to be during the plague years of the mid 660s, it is worth remembering that the *Lorica* written by Laidcenn, whose death is also recorded in 661, speaks of *mortalitas huius anni*.<sup>92</sup> A great mortality of one's colleagues, especially if they are old, need not be due to a plague.

Leaving aside the antiquity of the traditions in it, what we notice about the poem is the personal and emotional nature of the lament. It emphasises Cummíne's wisdom, his worthiness, and the sadness felt at his death. It is not a verse which makes

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describing Adomnán as "*rí ar ordain ocus cumachtach* ."; and *Féilire Óengusso*, March 11 p.81, which refers to "*Constantín rí Rathin* ."

<sup>89</sup>Hughes, *Church*, pp.123-7.

<sup>90</sup>Ó Néill, "*Romani*," p.287, 289.

<sup>91</sup>MacEoin, "Lament," p.22.

<sup>92</sup>Herren, "*Lorica*," p.50.



monastic claims, nor is it terribly triumphal. His worldly connections are noted, but that bears comparison with such elegies as the *Amra Coluim Cille*. It is possible then that a genuine early lament for Cummíne has been preserved in this poem, even if all verses should not prove genuine. The most clear external evidence of the age of the poem is Seán Ó Coileáin's convincing identification of the character Marbán with Cummíne Fota. The most sensible derivation of this name is from this lament, in which the words *marb* and *marbán* are repeated frequently in reference to Cummíne's body. The poem then must have been well known before the ninth century, at which time Marbán appears as an independent character.<sup>93</sup>

We should be cautious about accepting the entire poem as a seventh-century composition, however, for there are elements within it which might best be explained by there having been later reworkings. Such a situation might help to explain the geographical confusion. There is also little in it to prevent a slightly later date, one in the eighth or ninth century, for instance, without putting it as late as does MacEoin. Indeed, verses 7 and 8 must be as old as the ninth century, for they are found in *Sanas Cormaic*. It may be worth noting that two elegies for Munster kings contain language reminiscent of the "Lament." A lament for Fedlimid mac Crimthainn(+847) calls his body "*marbán*", and an elegy on Cormac mac Cuilennáin (+908) refers to him as "*in suí, in ro-escop, in rí*."<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, the arguments are strongly in favour of an early date for the "Lament", and thus we should see it as the earliest testimony to a literary Cummíne, one viewed as wise and prestigious in learning, strongly connected with Munster and the Eóganacht, and one seen as involved in ecclesiastical administration.

Now it remains to survey the other sources for the literary Cummíne, and we may do this by separating his roles, his particular functions for his hagiographers, to see to what extent he was useful in any of them. First, then, we should examine the

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<sup>93</sup>Ó Coileáin, "The Making of *Tromdám Guaire*," *Ériu* 28 (1979) 53.

<sup>94</sup>K. Meyer, *Bruchstücke der älteren Lyrik Irlands* (Berlin, 1919) 45 (no.102); J. Carney, "The Ó Cianáin Miscellany," *Ériu* 21 (1969)141.



ways his character and history have been moulded by monastic politics, and secular politics, and then turn to see his more spiritual aspects as sage, hermit, and confessor, and finally question the trickster element in his personality and his relationship with the holy fool, Comgán.

There appears to be little in the development of the literary Cummíne which we could trace to the interests of monasteries. If he was popularly connected with Clonfert, that monastery seems not to have made use of that connection until the twelfth century, when his relics were exhumed and enshrined. What little there is falls into two categories: the use of other saints to boost Cummíne's reputation, and the use of Cummíne to enhance the reputation of other saints. Of the first, we have one obvious example in two of the sources for his birth and boyhood, in which he is said to have been fostered by the *comarbae* of St. Íte.<sup>95</sup> The place of his fosterage is not recorded in the "Life", but by the time of the *Imtheachta*, the abbess has become Íte herself. There also he is made to have a curious double baptism which brings him in contact with Declan and Mochuta as well.<sup>96</sup> This name-dropping comes from a late stage in Cummíne's development, and the placement of Cummíne's rearing in Cell Íte is not improbable. Ó Coileáin points out that Cummíne's rearing and death thus take place in Uí Fhidgeinte,<sup>97</sup> and we should remember as well the tradition in the preface to *Cáin Fhuithirbe* that he studied first in Aine Cliach, not far removed from Cell Íte. In the preface to the "Lament" he is connected with Cork and the more obscure Colmán úa Clusaig, and this tradition is borne out in the "Life" which sees him studying in Bairre's community at Carraic, probably Carrigaline, near Cork.<sup>98</sup> Here it is clear, however, that it is merely Bairre's monasteries involved and not the saint himself. There is thus little attempt to enhance Cummíne's fortunes by assuming other, more famous saints into his ambit, as we saw even in Moling's Life.

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<sup>95</sup>Bernard and Atkinson, *LH* vol 1. p.14-16; vol. 2, p.9-10, where it is Íte's successor, and *Imtheachta*, B.iv.1, p.

<sup>96</sup>See S. Ó Coileáin, "Structure," pp.101-3.

<sup>97</sup>ibid., p.103, n.59.

<sup>98</sup>MacEoin, "Life," p.202.



As to the use of Cummíne in the hagiography of other saints, only in the Life of Molaga do we see him used as a validating influence.<sup>99</sup> In this Life, with its thorough seventh-century setting, Cummíne is involved, along with Comgán, in the blessing of the future saint's conception, and in his baptism.<sup>100</sup> By the time of this Life then, possibly the twelfth century, Cummíne had attained sufficient reputation to make him useful for another saint's hagiographer. We have already seen, however, that he was of some worth to Clonfert, at least, by the second half of that century. What is of greatest interest in this Life is that even while functioning as a validating force, Cummíne is in the guise of wanderer, together with a troop of clerics. The pattern of the literary Cummíne identified by MacEoin is retained here.

His political importance can be seen more clearly. A number of poems on Munster kings are ascribed to him and to Comgán. Most notable is the *dindshenchas* dialogue on Mag Femen.<sup>101</sup> This is a panegyric on the past glories particularly of the prehistoric king Lugaid mac Óengussa and other legendary ancestors of the Dál Cais in what is now Co. Clare.<sup>102</sup> From its themes it is clear that this poem was written in promotion of the upwardly mobile Dál Cais who emerged from obscurity to become rulers of Munster in the late tenth century.<sup>103</sup> The poem also associates the Dál Cais ancestors with later "golden age" rulers of Munster, Cormac mac Cuilennán (+908) and Fingen mac Áeda Duib (+619) and his wife Mór. These last two are associated elsewhere with Cummíne and Comgán, and the presence of all these in a poem ostensibly about the plain of Femen suggest an attempt by Dál Cais *literati* to link their dynasty with the traditional rulers of Femen, the Eóganacht Caisil. The use of the saint and fool to deliver the message suggests that the two had become somehow linked with

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<sup>99</sup>J.G. O'Keeffe, "Betha Molaga", *Irish Texts* fasc. 3 (ed. Fraser et. al., London, 1931) 11-21.

<sup>100</sup>ibid., p.13.

<sup>101</sup>E. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchus* III (RIA Todd Lecture Series 10) (Dublin, 1913)200-3.

<sup>102</sup>On Lugaid, see O'Brien, *CGH*, Rawl. B502,159b24; and Keating, vol. 3, p.126.

<sup>103</sup>See A. Kelleher, "The Rise of the Dál Cais," *North Munster Studies* (ed. Rynne) (Limerick, 1967)230-41.



the kingship of Cashel, and <sup>were</sup> thought appropriate vehicles for such a text. It is unlikely that the Dál Cais would have originated such a link, but we should note that the *Imtheachta* displays some shifts of geography that may be traced to Dál Cais influence.<sup>104</sup>

Another poem attributed to Cummíne deals with Munster kings. This is a quatrain in *Sanas Cormaic*:<sup>105</sup>

<i>Mo thrí Brain</i>	My three Bran's
<i>do Día doberat edil</i>	send up a prayer to God,
<i>Bran trí Maige, Bran Laigen,</i>	Bran of the three plains, Bran of Leinster,
<i>Bran Find for acce Feimin.</i>	Bran the fair, near Femen.

I cannot identify the first Bran, but the second could be one of four kings of Leinster up to the ninth century of that name. The most likely, however, is Bran Mut mac Conaill (+693). This is perhaps a moot point, as the arrangement of such triadic poems suggests that the most important element is often the third. Here it is likely to be Bran Find son of Mael Ochtraig (+671/2). In the genealogies he is called Bran Find Femin, and is linked to the Déisi Muman.<sup>106</sup> This connects Cummíne once again to Femen, and also to Comgán, who is portrayed as Bran Find's brother in "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda."<sup>107</sup>

Comgán himself is assigned poems on Munster kings. One, in *Sanas Cormaic*<sup>108</sup> praises the past glories of Rath Fhiachach meic Monche, the fort of Fiachu Muillethan, prehistoric ancestor of the Eóganacht. Rath Fhiachach is Cnoc Rafann, two miles north of Cahir, in the west of the plain of Femen. He is also assigned stanzas on contemporary kings, in the margins of the Lebor na hUidre version of *Cath Cairn Chonaill*.<sup>109</sup> These lament the deaths of Talomnach moccu Cirb and Cuan mac Conaill. Although the tradition of their participation in the battle is suspect,<sup>110</sup> these

<sup>104</sup>Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p.112 .

<sup>105</sup>Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries* (1862) 18.

<sup>106</sup>See S. Pender, "Two Unpublished Versions of the Expulsion of the Déssi," *Féilscríbhinn Torna* (Cork, 1947)210.

<sup>107</sup>O'Keeffe, "Cumaine Fota and Mac Dá Cherda," *Ériu* 5 (1911) p.36; and see Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p.107.

<sup>108</sup>Stokes, *Three Irish Glosaries*, p.3.

<sup>109</sup>Best and Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre* (Dublin, 1929) 288; Stokes, "The Battle of Carn Conaill," *ZCP* 3 (1901) 203-19.

<sup>110</sup>Byrne, *Kings* , p.241.



stanzas connect Comgán to the cycle of Guaire Aidne, king of Connacht, and to Cummíne, who participates in some versions of the saga.

Cummíne is associated with the story of the battle itself in the Egerton version.<sup>111</sup> Guaire there asks Cummíne to intercede with Diarmait for a truce. This is done at the Shannon, and Cummíne's inability to gain the truce suggests that the power of Caimín of Inis Cealtra is greater, since he has cursed Guaire to defeat, although at the same time blessing him for ultimate victory.

The tale of the Battle of Carn Conaill suggests something further about the political use of Cummíne. Byrne says of it "the story was evidently composed at Clonmacnoise and reflects the success of that monastery in winning and keeping the support of the rival Uí Néill and Connachta."<sup>112</sup> It is at Clonmacnoise that Diarmait crosses the Shannon, rejects Cummíne's truce, is blessed for battle, and at Clonmacnoise that Guaire is finally buried. Is it possible to see the further relevance of this seventh-century event to ninth-century audiences? The basis of the LU and LL versions must have been fashioned around then, for it gives ostensible justification for the absorption of Liath Mancháin, originally a Munster possession, by Clonmacnoise, an event which happened in the ninth century.<sup>113</sup> It is possible that this story uses Guaire's battle against Diarmait, and his subsequent defeat and humiliation, as a warning against Fedlimid mac Crimthainn(+847) who in the early ninth century repeatedly attacked and burned Clonmacnoise. There are other reasons (see below) to associate Fedlimid with the literary Guaire, and it may be that the development of the latter's cycle in the ninth century was influenced by these associations. If so, Cummíne may be seen to act as a symbolic bridge linking Guaire and Fedlimid. That

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<sup>111</sup>Egerton 1782 f.59b, ed. S. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London, 1892) vol. 1, p.396; vol. 2, p.431.

<sup>112</sup>Byrne, *Kings*, p.240.

<sup>113</sup>ibid., p.241. But see G. MacEoin, "Orality and Literacy in Some Middle-Irish King -Tales," *Early Irish Literature--Media and Communication* (ed. Tranter and Tristram)(Tübingen, 1989)168-72, who dates the LU text to around 900, the "nucleus of the tale" and some of the poetry to the early eighth century.



he is an apposite foil for the Munster king is clear from the "Lament": "*sech ba h-epsco-p-som, ba rí*," terms applicable to Fedlimid as well.<sup>114</sup> The traditions which associate Cummíne with Cork, Clonfert and Cashel are equally transferrable to Fedlimid. He is reported in the Annals of Innisfallen (838) to have gained both the kingship of Ireland and the abbacy of Clonfert in the same day. . But the counterbalance to a specific association between Fedlimid and the scenario of the Battle of Carn Conaill is that many of the ninth- and tenth-century Munster kings were also ecclesiastics.

Fedlimid's own character is a paradoxical one.<sup>115</sup> A man both blessed for his sanctity and cursed for his violence, he was a frequent sacker of churches, and yet was celebrated in the Annals of Ulster as "*Feidhlimidh rex Muman, optimus Scotorum..scriba et ancorita* ." He was a patron of the Celi Dé, as is obvious from his inclusion in the "Unity of Mael-Ruain" and the tradition of his own "Unity of Fedlimid."<sup>116</sup> His reign was long (820-847), prosperous and powerful; it saw Munster at the zenith of its power in the period before the rise of the Dál Cais. If the saga of Carn Conaill has some reference to Fedlimid's relationship with Clonmacnoise, it may refer specifically to his hosting in 841, which saw his defeat by Niall mac Áeda in an attempt to claim decisively the high-kingship. Guaire, as portrayed in *Cath Cairn Chonaill* has obvious resonances of Fedlimid's character. Violent and abusive, he nonetheless at the end of the tale demonstrates his generosity and charity, particularly toward the Celi Dé. Elsewhere, in the poem "*A Marbáin, a díthruabaíg*"<sup>117</sup> he is portrayed as having monastic leanings, in discussion with Marbán, Cummíne's alter ego.

Cummíne's involvement with Guaire is demonstrated in a number of texts, but only in *Cath Cairn Chonaill* does there seem to be political motivation. Their legends became closely tied,

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<sup>114</sup>And to other kings of Cashel. Note for instance the elegy on Cormac mac Cuilennán: "*in suí, in ro-escop, in rí ..*"J. Carney, "The Ó Cianáin Miscellany," *Ériu* 21 (1969)141.

<sup>115</sup>See K. Hughes, *Church*, pp.192-3; Byrne, *Kings* , 211-29.

<sup>116</sup>Hughes, *Church* , p.182.

<sup>117</sup>G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford, 1956)10-19.



but the motivation behind this fusion is uncertain. It is of course possible that they were associated in reality, but most of the texts are of a distinctly literary nature, and two at least portray Cummíne as a type of trickster figure. In "The Trial of Mac Teléne," which will be examined in detail in chapter five, Cummíne comes with companions to prove their foolishness and thwart Guaire's designs. There is a fair amount of social satire in this tale, as there is in the other, *Tromdámh Guaire*,<sup>118</sup> a later story in which Cummíne, here as Marbán, rescues his brother Guaire from the overbearing demands of his poetic guests. He is once again a trickster figure, besting the skills of the most highly regarded poets and outdoing them. This aspect of Cummíne's character will be explored in depth in the coming chapters.

The tales in which Guaire and Cummíne are involved belong to a cycle discussed in detail by Seán Ó Coileáin.<sup>119</sup> The emphasis in many of these tales is on the personal difficulties and conflicts which Christianity introduces into people's lives<sup>120</sup>: the Caillech Beare's attempts to reconcile her past and present, Liadain's attempts to reconcile human and divine love, Créd's struggle with her own illicit longings. Cummíne plays in a number of these tales the role of *anmchara* or soul friend, confessor. The preface to *Celebra Juda* portrays him as confessor to Domnall mac Áeda. So too he becomes *anmchara* to Liadain and Cuirithir, the Caillech Beare, Comgán, and in the guise of Marbán, to Guaire.

Guaire was highly celebrated as a patron of the Celi Dé, rather anachronistically. This is manifest in his generosity after the Battle of Carn Conaill. In an exemplary story, Guaire, Cummíne and Caimín of Inis Cealtra divulge their own greatest wishes: Guaire for wealth to give to the poor; Cummíne for knowledge to preach to the ignorant; and Caimín for personal

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<sup>118</sup>M. Joynt, *Tromdámh Guaire* (Dublin, 1931).

<sup>119</sup>Ó Coileáin, "Structure," pp.88-125.

<sup>120</sup>MacEoin, "Orality," p.153: "...we find in many tales a sensitive treatment of the more directly human themes of love, friendship, hate, revenge, death and mourning. These tales are often very modern in feeling and portray emotions in a way which is closer to modern literature..."



suffering.<sup>121</sup> It is hard, then, to dissociate these tales from the Celi Dé and the ascetic reform movement of the late eighth and early ninth centuries, with their emphasis on charity, learning and asceticism. Cummíne was certainly known to the early reformers: he is quoted in "The Monastery of Tallaght", the Old-Irish Penitential and the Table of Commutations.<sup>122</sup> The ethos of his character--sagacity, eremiticism, spiritual guidance--correspond with those of the movement in general. Finally, as we will see in chapter six, the tolerance and subject matter of "The Dialogue" bear strong comparison with the literature of the reform movement. We must then question whether Cummíne was being used as a protagonist for the Celi Dé.

And finally, like the "Three Wishes", another legend is attached to the Egerton version of the Battle of Carn Conaill. In this, Cummíne adopts the life of a wandering preacher, but Mochuta curses his career to be unsuccessful. In this anecdote we see an explanation for the vagabond nature of the saint in many texts, not fixed, often consorting with fools and other dubious characters. Whether this literary image is in the interests of any particular group, and why, is another question we must ask in the following chapters.

The development of the figure of Cummíne shows little sign of monastic manipulation, and only late influence from secular politics. Perhaps the gradual development of the wandering preacher and simple cleric as his character left little room for the ties of charter-bound hagiography, but undoubtedly his lack of strong connection to any one foundation was a contributory factor. His removal from that world leaves him free to be used as a vehicle of social criticism, both of the secular world and of the ecclesiastical, and makes him an extremely interesting and unusual saint. In examining in closer detail five texts in which Cummíne and Comgán play major roles, we should be able better to discern the particular purposes of some of their literary

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<sup>121</sup>This story is found in many sources: see Stokes, "Carn Conaill," pp.210-11, and 211n.3 for sources.

<sup>122</sup>E. J. Gwynn and W. J. Purton, "The Monastery of Tallaght," *PRIA* 29C (1911)142-3; Bieler, *Penitentials*, pp.266-7, 281.



aspects, the context in which we might place them, and the direction in which they are aimed.



**SECTION TWO: Text Studies.**



## CHAPTER THREE "The Life of Cummíne Fota"

The first of the five texts we shall examine is "The Life of Cummíne Fota." This is by no means a typical *vita*, but nonetheless it gives a condensed biography of our character. Neither Comgán nor Guaire, nor indeed any prominent "West Munster cycle" character enters this tale, and it thus provides us with an opportunity to examine Cummíne in "isolation."

The text itself, edited by Gearóid MacEoin,<sup>1</sup> is contained partially in two manuscripts, RIA C.1.2, p.5a-8b, and the Book of Leinster, f.286b42. The latter contains only a brief fragment--the beginning of the tale--but the former contains what appears to be almost the entire tale. The ending is lacking owing to a loss of pages in the manuscript, but a probable conclusion to the story can be surmised.

### SUMMARY

1. Cummíne Fota is fathered by Fiachna, of the Eóganacht Caisil,<sup>2</sup> through drunkenness, upon his own daughter. When Fiachna discovers this, he orders the child to be abandoned to the wild beasts.

2. The child is placed on a cross outside a church, in a milk-pail, with money and a purple cloth. The prior finds him and takes him in as his own son. The mother also joins the monastery. Cummíne is named from the milk-pail (*com*, diminutive *commain* or *cuimín*<sup>3</sup>) in which he was found.

3. Cummíne is educated at the monastery until he discovers his parentage by overhearing a conversation between his mother and the prior in which she admits him to be the son of herself and "Fiachna Mullethan son of Eógan," who we are told is king of

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<sup>1</sup>G. MacEoin, "The Life of Cumaine Fota," *Béaloideas* 39-41(1971-3)(=*Hereditas* (Dublin, 1975)192-205.

<sup>2</sup>This seems erroneous. Cummíne is usually taken to have been of the Eóganacht Locha Léin. See S. Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p.94-5. The reasons for this probably deliberate mistake will be discussed below.

<sup>3</sup>For *com*, see *DIL*, *coim* and cf. *cummain*. On the form in the text, see S. Ó Coileáin, "Review:*Hereditas*" *Studia Hibernica* 15 (1975)188: "But *com* is hardly satisfactory here; I would suggest that a suspension mark has been omitted by a previous copyist...and that we should read '*com[main]*'."



Munster.<sup>4</sup> Cummíne then goes away to study at Carraig in the household of Bairre of Cork. A young cleric there is granted the grace to know the day of people's deaths and the spot on which they will die. He predicts that Cummíne will die "in Corcach," so Cummíne immediately leaves with eleven (or twelve) clerics.

4.They set out to get clothing from Fiachna, king of Munster. On the way, Cummíne begins to preach successfully in verse. He arrives at Cashel and demonstrates his wisdom. In the course of some verses he divulges that he is the king's son. Fiachna offers him headship of all Munster monasteries, but Cummíne instead offers his father heaven, and asks only for clothing for his clerics so he might go off alone.

5.Cummíne leaves with one young cleric and spends the rest of his life preaching. Eventually he comes unwittingly to a monastery called Corcach Bec, in the territory of the Uí Fhidgeinte. He arrives during the feast of the patron saint, and is put in the guest house, while a lay-monk or tenant farmer of the monastery is put in the abbot's house because of his generous tribute. Here the tale breaks off, but we can assume, because of the earlier prophecy, that somehow this situation leads to his death.

A similar tale is recounted about Cummíne in two other texts, the *Liber Hymnorum* preface to the hymn *Celebra Juda*,<sup>5</sup> and the commentary to *Féilire Óengusso* in Rawlinson B512.<sup>6</sup> The latter text gives only the first part of Cummíne's life, his birth, abandonment, and discovery. The *LH* text relates those events, but adds to them the story of Cummíne's composing the hymn. In the first part, both texts are at variance with the "Life". Fiachna is titled king of West Munster,<sup>7</sup> and his genealogy is given as the

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<sup>4</sup>This too is clearly erroneous. Fiacha Muillethan was the prehistoric ancestor of the Eóganacht, and it seems highly unlikely that confusion of such a famous character with Cummíne's own, relatively well known, genealogy is unintentional.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard and Atkinson, *LH*, vol. 1, 16-18; vol.2, 9-10.

<sup>6</sup>Stokes, *Féilire*, 242-3.

<sup>7</sup>It is unlikely he was actually king, but <sup>he</sup>was certainly of West Munster. In the *Féilire* notes it is Cummíne himself who is king of West Munster. This is undoubtedly a misunderstanding of the sentence in *LH* or one like it: "*Cummaini Fota mac Fiachna rí Iar-Muman...*" (*LH*, II.1-2).



Eóganacht Locha Léin(LH , l.20). The monastery at which Cummíne is abandoned is identified as Cell Íte (LH , l.5) but his mother does not join the monastery, and it is only as a visitor that she reveals Cummíne's parentage. This event is occasioned by her giving him a drink from the abbess' vessel, after which she reveals the truth in verse. (LH , ll.7-18.) Cummíne goes to Cork to study, and thence to Loch Léin, where he recites a long variation on the riddle-quatrain of his parentage. (LH , ll.19-39.)

The added section concerning the hymn's composition states that he became soul-friend (*anmchara*) to Domnall mac Áeda meic Ainmirech, who could not weep in repentance for his crimes. The composition of the hymn "in reliance on the apostles" allows Domnall to weep, and Cummíne promises heaven to him. It is stated that the poem was composed in Derry. (LH , ll. 41-74.) Some motival similarities to the "Life" include the purple cloth, here said to have been given him by his mother, which he casts over the shoulders of Domnall (LH , ll.56-62.) and the granting of heaven to the repentant king. (LH , ll.65-8.) MacEoin has suggested that one of the northern Cummíne's--Cummíne Ailbe or Cummíne of Condere--was the actual saint involved in this legend, as Cummíne Fota's traditions are almost entirely southern.<sup>8</sup> Although the preface to *Cáin Fhuithirbe* does speak of him going north,<sup>9</sup> and the "Preface" speaks of him coming from the south, (LH , l.49) it is indeed possible that it is through confusion with another saint that he has been subsumed into the ambit of Domnall mac Áeda. We must not neglect the fact, however, that Domnall, as the premier king of the Uí Néill at that period, and as an exemplary "just king" might have been for the hagiographer the best symbolic figure on which Cummíne could demonstrate his spiritual authority. The tale, indeed, remains well integrated into Cummíne's dossier, and the motival similarities will provide valuable clues for understanding the later part of the "Life."

Structurally, the "Life" is far superior to the "Preface." The basic elements which comprise it are well integrated, and

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<sup>8</sup>MacEoin, "Life," p.195.

<sup>9</sup>Breatnach, "*Cáin Fhuithirbe* ,"p.37.



despite occasional obscurities in the plot--a problem endemic to early Irish prose--it flows smoothly. While in the "Preface" there is an obvious break between the two sections, in the "Life" the two main parts (Cummíne's birth tale and his death tale) are neatly joined. Thus the "sod of death" motif is introduced before the culmination of the birth tale in the reunion of father and son, and indeed the prophecy of his death gives Cummíne a plausible motive for the wandering which will return him to his father. Although it differs from most *vitae* in its complete absence of the miraculous, its cohesive rather than cumulative nature, and its general folk-tale atmosphere,<sup>10</sup> it yet contains the exact and basic structure of a heroic biography.

There have been many attempts at establishing a definitive paradigm for the heroic biography.<sup>11</sup> An outline of Cummíne's life would comply with a paradigm including: 1. Conception (here incestuous) 2. Birth. 3. Threat to life and Abandonment. 4. Fostering and Upbringing. 5. Wandering. 6. Return to land from which he was exiled and Encounter with father. 7. Tragic Death.<sup>12</sup> This contrasts sharply with the saintly biography as outlined by Elissa Henken: "conception and birth; childhood; performing a miracle which indicates spiritual maturity; going out into the world--founding churches, making pilgrimages, retiring to the wilderness, journeying as a missionary; conflict with secular powers (kings or beasts); ruling a territory; death."<sup>13</sup>

The points of divergence in the "Life" from both the secular and the saintly heroic biography are significant. Cummíne's "Life" differs chiefly in the centre of the paradigm: Cummíne in his wanderings is a preacher, and eventually becomes detached. He practises no martial skills, shows no supernatural tendencies,

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<sup>10</sup>See for instance Dorothy Ann Bray's description of the popular tale as "abounding in twists of fate, ingenious riddles and neat solutions." (Bray, *Lives*, p.38)

<sup>11</sup>See Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin, 1977)2-8, for examples and discussion.

<sup>12</sup>Compare with the paradigm of DeVries, in Ó Cathasaigh, *Cormac*, p.6, including I.Begetting II.Birth III.The youth of the hero is threatened. IV.The way in which the hero is brought up. V.Acquisition of invulnerability. VI. Fight with dragon. VII. Winning of maiden. VIII.Expedition to otherworld. IX. The banished hero returns and is victorious over enemies. Sometimes must leave the realm he has won. X.The death of the hero.

<sup>13</sup>Henken, "The Welsh Saint," p.59. cf. Bray, *Lives*, pp.93-4.



heroic or saintly, founds no monasteries--indeed he does very little. He also refuses the offer of the rule of a territory. His death provides the most startling departure from the saintly biography. Henken writes, "unlike the hero's tragic death, the saint's death is one of joy and fulfillment."<sup>14</sup> Though we do not witness Cummine's actual death, nevertheless his avoidance of it, and the way in which it is intricately bound up with elements of fate and hubris imply that ultimately his encounter with death is tragic.

The tale may also be broken down in motival terms by recourse to the listings of Stith Thompson and Tom Peete Cross.<sup>15</sup> While this methodology will not prove as helpful in the other texts we will be examining, here an awareness of folk-tale motifs will give us valuable insight into the structure and function of the tale. In broad terms there are two main sections. The first may be classified under N365.2/T411.2: "Girl got with child by intoxicated father." This is followed by the subsidiary S312.1: "Child of incest is exposed" which here includes S334: "Tokens of royalty are left with exposed child." The second main section we may classify under M341: "Death prophesied," but specifically M341.3.1: "Death in Jerusalem." these two sections are bridged by a central section which we could consider A516: "Expulsion and return of culture hero," including H501: "Test of wisdom," and H540: "Propounding of riddles." These are all fairly common motifs, but their exploration in this tale contains elements which make it exceptional, at least within an Irish context. The purpose of such classification of this tale will become clear as we examine the tale section by section.

## CONCEPTION

Father-daughter incest is a common element in the begetting of heroes in many cultures. Like any form of incest, it

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<sup>14</sup>Henken, "The Welsh Saint," p.74.

<sup>15</sup>S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (6 vols., Indiana, 1958); T.P. Cross, *Motif-index of Early Irish Literature* (Indiana, 1952).



makes the hero from the start a paradoxical and liminal character, outside the bounds of normal genealogical classification.<sup>16</sup> The presence of this type of incest motif in western legends may gain its extent from the Biblical story of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30-8.) There, Lot's daughters get him drunk so that they can have intercourse with him and conceive. The position of their offspring naturally gave rise to riddles, and one such is contained in apocryphal accounts of the riddle-contest between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Found "in every culture which has been exposed to Judaism, Islam or Christianity," it runs:

"A woman said to her son,  
Thy father is my father,  
And thy grandfather my husband;  
Thou art my son and I am thy sister."

The solution is Lot's daughter speaking to Moab, her son.<sup>17</sup>

Whether or not the Irish knew of that riddle itself as connected with the Genesis story, or of the riddle potentially contained in the name Moab,<sup>18</sup> is questionable, but the motif occurs elsewhere in Irish literature. Notably, Mes Buachalla, Conaire Mór's mother, is conceived in such a relationship, as is Fiacha Fer Mara.<sup>19</sup> The latter shares also the abandonment motif with Cummíne. In addition, there is a version of the conception of Cú Chulainn in which Conchobar fathers him on Dechtine--here his daughter rather than his sister--*tré meisce*, "through drunkenness".<sup>20</sup> While no riddle is attached to this tale, it likewise contributes to the other-ness and puzzle of Cú Chulainn's nature.

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<sup>16</sup>A. and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, (London, 1961) 233-5.

<sup>17</sup>*Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York, 1949-50) vol. 2, p.943.

<sup>18</sup>*Encyclopedia Judaica*, (Jerusalem, 1974) vol.12, p.190:"the meaning of the name, according to Targum Jonathan and the Septuagint, is 'from my father.'" The other son, Ammon (Ben 'Ammi), means "son of my kin." (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol.2, p.854.)

<sup>19</sup>E. Knott, *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* (Dublin, 1936) p.3; Keating, (Dublin, 1908) vol. 2, p.176-9.

<sup>20</sup> *Irische Texte* 1., p.139. cf. R. Thurneysen, *Die Irische Helden- und Königsagen* (1921) 268-70.



I have traced no instance of a saint being conceived in this way in Irish hagiography, and indeed in saint's lives the incest motif is rarely so scandalous as it is here.<sup>21</sup> Cummíne is thus from the first placed by analogy alongside secular heroes, and the incestuous nature of his conception lends that peculiarity to his background which is a pre-requisite of the "wonder-child." It also sets the scene for some sort of redemption. Incest is considered "sinful" in social as well as a religious or moral context. As the Rees's tell us, "in a poem in which the Badb prophesies the end of the world, incest appears among the disorders that presage the end."<sup>22</sup> So Cummíne, in a verse later in the tale in which he reveals his identity, says, "If there was ever good out of evil, I am my own uncle<sup>(?)</sup>." ("Life", ll.49-50.) The Irish of the "Preface" verse emphasises the subject of this statement: "*Ma ro-genair maith de ulc.*" (LH, l.27.) A suspect and sinful conception is found elsewhere where the theme of a tale is essentially that of redemption, for instance, in The Voyage of Mael Dúin, where the hero is born of the rape by a soldier of a nun, or the Voyage of the Uí Chorra's Coracle, where they are conceived after their parents make a pact with the devil.<sup>23</sup>

#### ABANDONMENT

Themes of the "wonder-child" and of redemption are developed further in Cummíne's preservation from danger. That the child, rather than being left to the beasts, is instead left on a cross in front of a monastery leads in a symbolic as well as a narrational sense to his eventual calling. Thus he is preserved from danger, from the mouths of beasts, for this new life. In order to obtain a clearer understanding of this episode, however, we must examine some cognate versions. First, we should realise that in the *Imtheachta* texts, the *com* is abandoned on a river, in a clear echo of the Moses story (Exodus 2:3).<sup>24</sup> This

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<sup>21</sup>cf. Bray, *Lives*, p.145, for a catalogue of the motif of "illegitimate or incestuous birth or conception." No instance of incest is as close or overt as in the "Life."

<sup>22</sup>A. and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p.233, and see Ó Cathasaigh, *Cormac*, p.46, for the impurity of Corc Duibne's incestuous conception.

<sup>23</sup>A. G. van Hamel, *Immrama* (Dublin, 1941) 26; 96.

<sup>24</sup>B.iv. 1, p.149v.



parallels the legend of Fiacha Fer Mara, also a child of father-daughter incest, as mentioned above: "and he was called Fiachaidh Fear Mara because he was abandoned, being put on the sea in a small curragh with precious valuables about him, such as befitted the son of a king; and fishermen came upon him and brought him ashore and put him to nurse."<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy that in the *Imtheachta* it is a fisherman who first discovers Cummíne in his *com*. Moreover, the folklore of St. Cummin of Mayo, clearly based on the story of Cummíne Fota, draws a stronger parallel with the Moses tale, as the boy is found in a "sculptured box" among a clump of rushes.<sup>26</sup>

An apparent parallel, albeit disjointed, to the version of the abandonment found in the "Life" and in the "Preface" can be found in the birth-tale of Cormac mac Airt.<sup>27</sup> This tale itself shows the same indecisiveness about the form of abandonment displayed by the various Cummíne texts: Cormac is first stolen from his mother by wolves and then, after his mother recovers him and reaches Art's foster-father, "a vessel (*muide*) of yew is made about the boy and a purple cloak (*tlacht corcra*) [placed] on the vessel, so that the hands of those welcoming the boy might not reach him, lest he be crushed."<sup>28</sup> Ó Cathasaigh acknowledges<sup>29</sup> that this must be a second version of Cormac's abandonment which has lost its motivation and become petrified in the motif of the construction of the *muide*, the word used also in the "Life" for the vessel in which Cummíne is abandoned. ("Life," l.8) Cormac's adventure among the wolves may have once been an element of Cummíne's abandonment, as suggested by Fiachna's command to leave him to the beasts.

It is interesting to note the presence of these varying realisations of the abandonment motif in different Irish versions of the international Gregory legend.<sup>30</sup> In the earliest Irish

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<sup>25</sup>Keating, vol. 2,p.177-8.

<sup>26</sup>D. Ó hÓgáin, *The Hero*, p.39.

<sup>27</sup>*Scéla Eogain ocus Cormaic*, Ó Cathasaigh, *Cormac*, pp.119-127.

<sup>28</sup>ibid., p.122, ll.78-80; 126.

<sup>29</sup>ibid., pp.53-4.

<sup>30</sup>S. Falconer, "An Irish Translation of the Gregory Legend," *Celtica* 4 (1958) 52-95. See esp. p.53, for background literature on the Gregory legend.



version, Gregory, son of a brother-sister incest, is set in a cask (*tuinne*) bound all about with iron hoops, containing gold and silver, and the cask is put to sea. He is found by monks and given to fishermen for rearing. In a modern oral version of the story<sup>31</sup> the child is exposed at crossroads instead of being cast adrift. In two other modern tellings,<sup>32</sup> the incest is between father and daughter, and in the second of these a rich cloth is wrapped around the abandoned child and subsequently plays a part in the discovery of his origin. A further instance, for comparison's sake, of this motif involving abandonment at a monastery and the presence of rich cloth can be found in Marie de France's *lai* "*La Fresne*."<sup>33</sup> There, as in the tales of Cummíne and Fiacha Fer Mara, the place or manner of finding gives a name to the child--she is named *la Fresne* after the ash tree in which she is found.

In the abandonment sequence, then, we are left sensing a number of submerged possibilities in our text. Should there have been an encounter with wild beasts? Should the money placed in the milk-pail have explicitly been used for Cummíne's education, as it is in the Gregory legend? Should the purple cloak left with him have been the means of his discovery, or perhaps later the means by which he revealed himself to his father? This last is certainly meant on a practical level to have suggested to the finder of the *muide* the child's noble origins. But we have seen that in the "Preface" Cummíne also uses this cloth in his conversion of Domnall.<sup>34</sup> We should note too that in *Scéla Eogain ocus Cormaic* certain tokens-- a sword, a thumb-ring, and an assembly garment--are left by Art with Achtán, to be donned later by Cormac as a proof of his heritage.<sup>35</sup> If we can draw some connection between the purple cloak and the assembly garment, there may be further significance in the cloth left with

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p.93 (Irish Folklore Commission ms.842, 11-18.)

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p.93 (IFC ms.868, 211-5; ms.182, 438-50.)

<sup>33</sup> G. Burgess and K. Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France* (London, 1986) 62-4.

<sup>34</sup> It has been suggested to me by Fr. Gilbert Márkus, *op.*, that the purple cloth in the tale of Domnall's conversion may have overtones of the purple ecclesiastical cloths of the times of penance, Advent and Lent. This would depend on such a colour scheme being known in Ireland at the period in question.

<sup>35</sup> Ó Cathasaigh, *Cormac*, p.120, ll.50-1; p.125.



Cummíne, for, like Cormac, when he goes to his father's court, he displays his wisdom. Before Cormac goes, he dons the assembly garment and it fits him. He then passes proper judgments at Tara.<sup>36</sup> Cummíne goes to his father seeking clothing, and passes proper judgments at the court. What is the place of the purple cloak or cloth in this scenario?

One of the problems, but conversely, perhaps, one of the virtues of early Irish prose is its ability to contain variant versions and the stray threads of variant versions under the aegis of the same text. We need not try to establish for any of these sequences a "right" version, for each of these threads could set up a chain of associations for the Irish storyteller which could or could not lead to an entire variant. Such is the fluid nature of the tradition.

## DISCOVERY

The same two unrelated texts, *Scéla Eogain ocus Cormaic* and the Irish Gregory, can aid our understanding of the next sequence.<sup>37</sup> In the "Life" Cummíne's discovery of his origins is a fairly innocuous event: with the child nearby, the prior admits he is not the father, and the mother owns up. ("Life," ll.15-18) Cummíne then leaves the monastery to go elsewhere for his training. In the "Preface," however, his mother visits the monastery one day (in this text she has not entered the cloister) and gives Cummíne a drink from the abbess's vessel (*sínium* or *ballán*, *LH*, ll.12,13.) Reprimanded for this, she replies in a verse which explains the boy's parentage.

In the Cormac birth-tale, we find the use of vessels not only in the abandonment section, where Cormac is placed in a *yew muide*, but also in the initial sequence, where vessels and

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<sup>36</sup>ibid., p.122, ll.82ff.;p.126.

<sup>37</sup>The two texts have their own internal similarities. Gregory discovers he is parentless through the taunts of a boy in the monastery he is reared in. So Cormac, in another version of his birth tale, *Geneamuin Cormaic* (O'Grady, *SG*, vol.1, 253-6; vol.2, 286-9.) discovers his parentage in a fight with one of his fosterbrothers. (This incident is paralleled in the story of Cummin of Mayo, Ó hÓgáin, *The Hero*, p.39) In *SEC* Olc Aiche puts five protective bands (*cresa imdeglá*) on Cormac to guard him from dangers. So in Gregory, the empress commands a cask to be built: "bind a cask all about with iron hoops (*cressa*).



their contents have symbolic importance. Achtán gives Art and his men to drink from the vessel (*lestar*) of milk-strippings. When her father comes home he says, *Is hé mo chóí(m)dén at-gén, ni hed mo ass a cétnae* ("It is my little vessel, I recognise it, but the first (milk) is not my milk.") Thus he recognises his "little vessel", but reprimands her for giving out his drink of strippings, leaving him the new milk. This leads to the liaison between Art and Achtán.<sup>38</sup>

In a sense, in this encounter the act of giving to drink from the father's vessel is an act of acknowledgement that Art is a specially designated person, a person whose needs or status supersede those of the owner. This may be the case in the "Preface" sequence, where Cummíne's mother gives him to drink from the abbess's vessel. This is a sign, then, a symbolic representation both of her relationship to the boy, and of his status relative to the abbess: as "child of destiny" he is her equal or better.<sup>39</sup>

Apprised of his origins, Cummíne in the "Life" sets off immediately for Carraig,<sup>40</sup> where he places himself in scholarly service for twelve years to the company of Bairre of Cork. In the "Preface" account, we are told merely that he went to Cork for schooling, and after to his father in Loch Léin. (*LH*, ll.19-20.) In the "Life" then we are conscious of his delay, almost hiding in Carraig, suggesting a reluctance to go to the encounter with his father, a reluctance which becomes clearer in their eventual encounter. The "Life" version poses questions not encountered in the "Preface": why is Carraig even mentioned, when in other texts, and in the dominant tradition, it is clear that Cork itself was the place of his education? And why does Cummíne's reaction to his origin bear him away from his parents, rather than, as elsewhere, towards his father?

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<sup>38</sup>Ó Cathasaigh, *Cormac*, pp.121-2, ll.22-46; pp.124-5.

<sup>39</sup>Compare too the statement of Olc Aiche, difficult to interpret, "*arita lacluicher ngaise in sen di lestri*." (ibid., p.120, ll.45-6.) Ó Cathasaigh (p.130) suggests the emendation to "*ar atá la cluich[e n]-erngaise in sén di lestri*," which could mean "there is ...the good omen from the vessel."

<sup>40</sup>This has been convincingly identified by MacEoin as Carrigaline, (Carraig Uí Laighin) co. Cork, where the relics of Bairre were kept ca. 1088. (MacEoin, "Life," p.202.)



The answer may be that in the "Life" the emphasis in the account of his parentage is on his being a child of incest rather than a child of a king. The emphasis in the "Preface" is on Cummine as an important saint, and it highlights his virtue and worthiness. In that context, the abbess's drink indicates that he is chosen in terms of his holiness and ecclesiastical power. Also in such a scheme, his progress through education at Cork to his father's house to gain recognition merely indicates his claim to worth and power. All this is preparation for the second half, where Cummine as representative of the church throws his purple cloak about Domnall's shoulders to complete the king's submission to the higher authority of God.

In the "Life," however, Cummine is constantly divorced from claims to worth and power, indeed rejects them. So perhaps his movement away from his parents and his reluctance to meet with his father are rejections of the sinful nature of his conception, and furthermore of the power of his heritage. Remember that that power is doubly emphasised in this text by making his father king of Munster itself, rather than the subsidiary kingdom of West Munster, and giving him the name of the prehistoric ancestor-king Fiacha (here Fiachna) Mullethan, son of Eógan Mór. A similar reaction to parentage can be seen in the Gregory story. Gregory has just married his mother when he discovers their relation: she is the Empress; his father, her brother, was Emperor. On realising this, he leaves immediately in search of a deserted hermitage off the coast. During his search, a fisherman tells him, "One day that I went out to fish from this city, the wind drove my ship far out to sea. And I was for three days before the wind until I came upon a rock in the sea and I remained in the shelter of the rock until the sea calmed. And I found a church on the rock that was locked."<sup>41</sup> It is to this rock that Gregory goes to spend his life in penance. He is later called from this penance by a summons to become Pope in Rome.

The retreat to a seabound rock acts as a purification for Gregory from his congenital sin of an incestuous conception, and his near-sin of unwitting incest. An example of this image in its

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<sup>41</sup>Falconer, "Gregory," p.79.



rawest form may be found in the *LU* version of "The Expulsion of the Déisi."<sup>42</sup> In an incident in this tale, Corc Duibne, eponymous ancestor of the Corco Duibne, is fathered by Coirpre Musc on his sister Duibind, at a time when Coirpre was king of Munster. Because of Corc's polluted state, the crops fail and Corc is taken to Tech nDuinn, a place usually identified as Dursey Island. There, a druid and "his caillech" gradually transfer Corc's blemish onto a cow<sup>43</sup> which at the end of a year, having absorbed all the pollution, springs into the ocean and becomes a rock (*carraig*) the rock island known as Bó Buí.

In both these incidents, then, we have children of incest who must remove themselves from the world for a time to a rock in the sea in order to purify themselves, and who return after a time to the world to assume positions of importance. Ó Cathasaigh considers this a ritual death and rebirth.<sup>44</sup> It is quite possible that this motif is embedded in Cummíne's "Life" as well. Having discovered his incestuous conception, he puts himself in servitude for twelve years at Carraig ("rock"), perhaps in order to purify himself. This will make him worthy of the new, unfettered life he is to lead. If the motif is present here, it must be very subtextual, for on the face of it we simply have a place called Carraig<sup>45</sup> to which Cummíne goes to study. The emphasis here on the otherwise unknown Carraig, rather than Cork, perhaps indicates not so much a concrete variant tradition, but rather a subtext seeking the surface.

## THE PROPHECY OF DEATH

This is the section which in its treatment most differs from the lives of saints, and the attitude towards death

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<sup>42</sup>V. Hull, "The Later Version of The Expulsion of the Déisi," *ZCP* 27 (1958/9)34-63, esp. pp.32-4.

<sup>43</sup>"...through the administration of ablutions, presumably of milk." P. O Riain, "A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man," *Éigse* 14 (1972) 201.

<sup>44</sup>Ó Cathasaigh, *Cormac*, p.55; and "The Eponym of Cnogba," *Éigse* 23 (1989) 34-5.

<sup>45</sup> Indeed, if Carraig is Carrigaline as Mac Eoin suggests, then it is hardly suggestive, outside its name, of the rocks of the other two examples. On the other hand, there is another rock island associated with a Cork story. This is the island to which Colmán Ua Clúasaig (Cummíne's *aide*) flees from the plague. The structure of this event is also centred on purification.



conflicts too with that of martial heroes. In the story, a monk of Bairre's household is gifted with the ability to know when a person would die and the sod on which it would happen. Cummíne visits him and stating that he is afraid of death asks where he would die. The monk, Broccán, answers that it would be in "Corcach," and this prompts Cummíne to set off from that monastery the next morning with eleven (or twelve) companions in order to avoid his death. He goes to seek clothing for his companions from his father, the king of Munster.

The "sod of death" (*fót báis*) is a common motif in both early Irish literature and modern folktales. The basic premise is that somewhere there is predestined for each person a piece of earth on which he is to die. This belief, which included also the predestination of a "sod of birth" and "sod of burial" became fused with Christian ideas of death and predestination, and the "sod of death" and "sod of burial" became associated with the belief in a place appointed for each person to await the day of judgment and the resurrection of the body. Thus in an Irish saint's life, when the saint seeks "the place of his resurrection," he means the spot on which he is destined to die and be buried, a spot often pointed out to him by prophecy, angelic intervention, or similar revelation.<sup>46</sup> In most early Irish texts which use this image, the "sod of death" has two possible functions. It may act as a fatalistic assurance and comfort, in that since one is destined to die on a particular spot, one need not fear danger until then. Hence the poem "*M'aenarán dam isa sliab*": "It does not hinder me from going on a journey, though someone sneezes in an assembly;/ the sod whereon my tombstone has been shaped/I must needs approach it... However often a person may avoid being slain, /the day of his encompassing arrives for everyone at the end of his life."<sup>47</sup> In other texts, however, especially saints' lives, the "sod of death" or burial is actively sought and jealously

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<sup>46</sup>See D. A. Bray, *Lives*, p.146 for a list of these incidents in saints' lives. On the "sod of death" see Maura Carney, "*fót báis / banapufa*" *Arv* 13 (1957) 157-180; and James Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics* (Dublin, 1967) xxix.

<sup>47</sup>J. Carney, "*M'aenaran dam isa sliab*," *Éigse* 2 (1940)107



guarded. Consider this scene from the Life of M'Áedóc of Ferns, in which the saint encounters two local rulers:

Now Failenn and Muirigen were annoyed that Maedoc should occupy their inheritance and their land; and they warned him off and denied it to him. But he would brook no denial, and said: 'The spot in which God has granted me to make my lasting resting-place and abode, that spot I will not forsake,' said he, "for the sod on which I stand is the sod of my resurrection and burial." For there are three sods which no single man can avoid or elude, the sod of his birth, the sod of his death, and the sod of his burial.<sup>48</sup>

From this example we can also see that the destiny involved in the motif came also to be used as justification for monasteries retaining certain lands, almost a charter sealed by fate. If the founding saint was destined to die in a particular place, then that place belonged to him.

But unlike the fatalistic or triumphal attitudes of these two formulations of the motif, Cummíne's "Life" displays elements of hubris, the foolish attempt to avoid fate. In this it is much more closely related to the modern folktales which use the motif, where the "sod of death" is to be avoided at all costs, and the plot centres around the vain attempts of the protagonist to escape death by the use of foreknowledge. Maura Carney describes the basic outlook of these texts: "The place of one's death is determined and cannot be avoided. To demonstrate this figurative idea the literal object, the sod itself, is actualised, and the stories show how useless it is for the person for whom the sod is fatal to escape it, either by running away from it or by throwing it into the sea."<sup>49</sup>

Cummíne, a cleric and a saint, is an odd protagonist for such a story. In general saints actively seek or at least willingly accept death as their entry into heaven. Indeed, in many *vitae* saints jealously and violently strive to find and retain their place of resurrection.<sup>50</sup> Cummíne's behaviour here has its closest analogue (in early Irish literature) in that of Loegaire in the *LU*

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<sup>48</sup>Plummer, *BNE* vol. 1, p. ; vol. 2, p.229.

<sup>49</sup>M. Carney, "*fót báis* " p.176.

<sup>50</sup>See particularly the Life of Sénán, Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore* , pp.54-74; 337-41, where the theme is dominant.



version of his death tale: "Now this had been foretold to Loegaire, that it would be between Ériu and Alba that he would find his death and hence he never went on a naval expedition."<sup>51</sup> The conclusion of that tale, as the conclusion of Cummíne's, is that the protagonist finds himself unknowingly in a place of the same name as that in the prophecy. Thus Loegaire, on a journey against his *gessa* to extract the Bóroma, finds himself between two hills named Ériu and Alba and dies there.<sup>52</sup> So too Cummíne finds himself in Corcach Bec unwittingly, and we must assume circumstances lead to his death.

These are both manifestations of the Stith Thompson motif called "Death in Jerusalem"(M341.3.1) so called because most continental versions of this motif involve people who are destined to die in a spot named Jerusalem. We find this story told of Robert Guiscard, one of the main figures in the Crusades, a man described as cunning and clever.<sup>53</sup> The most famous example, however, is that told of Pope Sylvester II. This is Gerbert, the tenth-century philosopher and theologian renowned for his wisdom and knowledge of science. In the legend told of him, for example in Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*, his knowledge is said to have come from a pact he entered into with a demon named Meridiana. Through this knowledge he attains ecclesiastical power and eventually becomes pope. We are told:

"Now Meridiana appeared to him in the last years of his papacy and intimated to him that his life was safe until he celebrated mass in Jerusalem; and as he lived in Rome he thought he could avoid doing this at his pleasure. But it befell him to celebrate in that place where, they say, the board is laid up which Pilate affixed to the top of the Lord's cross, inscribed with the title of his passion, and that church is to this day called Jerusalem."<sup>54</sup>

It would be fruitless to speculate on the ultimate origin of this motif, but the stories of Gerbert and Cummíne bear certain similarities. Particularly striking is that a tale of unwisely

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<sup>51</sup>Best and Bergin, *LU*, pp.117-8; C. Plummer, "The Conversion of Loegaire and his Death," *RC* 6 (1883-5) 168.

<sup>52</sup>On this motif in Irish literature, see G. MacEoin, "The Mysterious Death of Loegaire mac Néill" *Studia Hibernica* 8 (1968)31ff.

<sup>53</sup>E.R.A. Sewter, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena* (1969) 192.

<sup>54</sup>M.R. James, et al, *Walter Map's De Nugis Curialium* (Oxford, 1983) 361.



trying to avoid death should be attributed in both cases to men famous for their wisdom and book-learning. Strangely, in Gerbert's case his prodigious knowledge is viewed with suspicion; the tale holds it to be from the devil. No such thing is suggested of Cummíne. It is also superficially interesting that Cummíne's "Life" bears structural resemblance once again to later legends of aberrant men who became Pope, as it did in the case of the Gregory legend.

Most importantly, however, the "Life" takes up a theme of tragic death, something rarely if ever found in Irish saints' lives.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, secular heroes often prove placidly fatalistic about encountering their sod of death.<sup>56</sup> Thus for the first time in the "Life" Cummíne undermines the assumptions of the heroic and saintly biographies: he goes like any human, fearful and ignorant into death. Furthermore, he challenges assumptions about monastic foundations. In much of Irish hagiography the saint would found his most important monastery on the site on which he was to be resurrected. This came to be a form of fictionalised property rights. As the date of our text is uncertain, we cannot be sure quite how far the image of the "sod of burial and resurrection" had become this legitimising foundation narrative, but it is likely that such attitudes were developing. If such an idea of the "sod of burial" was prevalent, then Cummíne, by actively avoiding his "sod of death", is rejecting the ecclesiastical claims inherent in the prophecy. In the next sequence of the text he rejects such inheritance in a more concrete fashion.

Returning to the Gerbert legend, it is possible that it provides us with clues to the conclusion of the story. In it, Sylvester the Pope repents of his sins and asks God for mercy just before he dies, which we assume and hope he attains. It is possible that such an incident was involved in the conclusion of Cummíne's "Life" as well, although not having made pacts with the devil, the story would seem not to be about repentance, as such.

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<sup>55</sup>See Bray *Lives*, pp.148-9 for death motifs.

<sup>56</sup>O' Rahilly, *The Stowe Version of Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Dublin, 1961) 96, ll.3014-5.



## ENCOUNTER WITH FATHER

In many ways this sequence occupies the crucial position in the text. As we have seen, in the "Life" Cummíne proceeds rather unwillingly to the encounter with his parent, his father and grandfather. Unlike the "Preface" where their encounter comes as part of a natural, legitimising process, here it appears to occur only as a result of his desire to flee Cork and his need to clothe his companions. He proceeds very slowly, first "preaching to everyone" in verse. When they arrive at the court of the "king of Munster", king and cleric greet each other, and we are told that Cummíne "solved the problems of the assembly that day." As Cummíne retires, he leaves behind him a riddle-quatrain alluding to his relationship to the king. When he repeats this on the second night, Fiachna realises he is his son. The next morning Fiachna confronts him with the knowledge, and Cummíne confirms it. Fiachna offers his son the obedience of all the monasteries in Munster. Cummíne in turn offers Fiachna heaven, in addition to the earth which God has given him, and asks only for clothing for his companions so that they might leave him, and "so that it may not earn me hell for me to have them following me." He then bids farewell to his father and goes off with a single cleric and spends the rest of his life preaching.

In the scheme of the normal heroic biography, this space would be occupied by the triumphant return of the hero to claim his rightful inheritance and to overthrow the person occupying his rightful place. As Ó Cathasaigh has shown, this point often marks the transition of rule and role from "villain" to "hero", whereby the former takes the place of the latter, allowing himself to be in turn deposed by another "hero."<sup>57</sup> In some tales this deposition is a martial act. In others, as in the case of Cormac mac Airt, the hero deposes the king by demonstrating the justice of his claim and the virtue of his decisions, thereby revealing the injustice of the king. In Cormac's case he shows his wisdom by solving the problems of the assembly.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Ó Cathasaigh, *Cormac*, p.16.

<sup>58</sup>ibid., pp.62-8.



This is the scenario presented to us in Cummíne's "Life." The hero arrives at court, his father's court, and demonstrates his wisdom by solving the problems of the assembly. This encounter too is not generally a part of saints' lives: the saint has progressed beyond his "earthly" parents, and the territory he rules is a holy one granted him by God.<sup>59</sup> Parents give the saint a worthy lineage and are usually left behind after childhood. To the extent that a saint is a "worthy successor" it is to his educators, or the abbot at his monastery, or in some sense to the ancestor of his family group. The "hero"- "villain" conflict comes into play when a king is attempting to deprive the church or a saint of land he has claimed as due to him from God, or by virtue of his destined resurrection. Having already rejected the latter, Cummíne here proceeds to reject the offer from the king of power and to deflate the heroic return by breaking the "hero"- "villain" cycle.

There are two sides to Cummíne's character in this episode. In the assembly, he assumes the role of the wonder-child, like Cormac or Jesus in the Temple, solving problems and astonishing the crowds. The latter is perhaps an apt and consciously intended comparison, as Cummíne performs in his father's house, posing for the court the riddle of his parentage. In this he also assumes some of the trickster-like qualities which seem to accrue to wise characters.

In the end, when he is recognised by Fiachna, Cummíne deflects the action from himself. For instance, when he confirms the nature of his relationship to the king, he does not state that he is Fiachna's son, but rather that it is "as though I were your son." Fiachna's offer of the obedience of the monasteries of Munster is topped by Cummíne's counter-offer of heaven, an action akin to a rejection, or at least an indication that Fiachna is asking the wrong questions. By granting Fiachna something better than earth--heaven--and saying that he need now fear no one, Cummíne is acting in a fashion very similar to

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<sup>59</sup>The saint does have hostile encounters in which he vanquishes kings who stand in the way of his territory, but they are neither his relatives nor is the territory, strictly speaking, an inheritance. See Bray, *Lives*, p.148.



his role in the "Preface." There, once Domnall has wept for his sins, Cummíne recites: "Now/ Domnall recognises a king above him / his good is the good in the next world;/ this (i.e. earthly) good is not his good." (*LH* , ll.65-8) It is surprising to find the purple cloak given by Cummíne's mother involved in the "Preface" and not in this part of the "Life." Indeed, if as I suggested earlier the cloak may be an "assembly garment" as in the Cormac tale, we might have expected Cummíne to wear it to the court. There is the further consideration that the "Preface" specifies that the cloak was made by his mother, there called (F)lann. Why should this cloak thrown about his shoulders cause Domnall to weep? Ought we to connect the purple cloak with the purple cloth of his abandonment? And is it possible that the colour purple is symbolic of penance?<sup>60</sup>

I think it most likely that the story of Domnall's repentance, as we have it in the "Preface", is an adaptation of another version of Cummíne's encounter with Fiachna, which became confused with a similar story about Domnall (and a different Cummíne?) and the composition of the hymn *Celebra Juda* . Thus in this hypothetical version, Fiachna cannot weep for his particular sin of the illicit and incestuous fathering of his son on his daughter. It is only the recognition of the purple cloak, made by his daughter, Cummíne's mother, which causes him to weep and repent. After that, Cummíne declares the king to have gained heaven, as is the case in both "Preface" and "Life", because of his acknowledgement of a divine overking and a superior law.

The final action of Cummíne in this section is to reject his inheritance. This is offered to him in both secular and ecclesiastical terms: his father, king of Munster, offers him the obedience of all the monasteries in Munster on account of his being his son. It is interesting to note that the king is assumed to possess this kind of authority, and we may speculate regarding what this could demonstrate about the ecclesiastical status of the Cashel kingship at the time of composition. Although this could refer to the authority that Cummíne held via his penitential, he must in some sense be rejecting such

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<sup>60</sup>See above, n.34.



authority when he asks only for the clothing due to his companions so that he may go off to wander in relative solitude. He puts his request in the terms of moral behaviour: to continue to accept the responsibility of his authority over the young clerics might earn him hell. This would appear to deliver a strong message concerning the activities of, and the exercise of authority by, monastics.<sup>61</sup> Coming at a section of the tale where normal heroic patterns would lead us to expect a certain triumphalism in the acquisition of a realm or inheritance, and saintly biographic patterns would lead us to expect the wresting of predestined land from the king, such humility receives a strong accent. That his rejection of ecclesiastical authority in fact takes place within a secular heroic pattern--the hero's return-- itself suggests that this incident may be directed at secular and dynastic inheritance patterns and lay intrusion into the monastic church. This is further emphasised by the statement that Cummíne spent the rest of his life as a wandering preacher: from the point of view of the settled church, a liminal position indeed.

## DEATH

This sequence is difficult to analyse properly since it breaks off in the middle, and it is unclear exactly how Cummíne's death would result from the circumstances outlined. These circumstances bear some resemblance to tales involving satire of monastic establishment, including the most famous of these in *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, where the protagonist, a wandering student cleric, arrives at the monastery of Cork and receives poor hospitality from the monks, and is almost crucified as a result of his protestations.<sup>62</sup> Closely related too is the H.3.18 version of the tale, in which Mac Conglinne and a young cleric called Mac-na- Cairre<sup>63</sup> first visit Kells and mock their poor hospitality, and then arrive in Cork on the festival of the patron

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<sup>61</sup>On the other hand it could relate to the strong injunctions against clerics wandering outside the rule of their abbot.

<sup>62</sup>K. Meyer, *The Vision of Mac Conglinne* (London, 1892) 10-19.

<sup>63</sup>"Son of the Scabs", probably an adaptation or confusion of the name Mac Da Cherda. See Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p.105n.73.



saint, Bairre.<sup>64</sup> It is perhaps no accident that Cummíne too, a wandering if less scurrilous cleric, arrives at a monastery called Cork on the night of the patron's festival and receives poor hospitality, which he proceeds to criticise. However, it would be difficult without the conclusion of the "Life" to draw any firm relation between these texts.

Nonetheless, it would seem that following the implicit criticism of secular authority in the previous section, the "Life" is here dealing with abuses of ecclesiastical, specifically monastic authority, as do the versions of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*.

Once again it is a pity that we lack the ending, but the quatrain with which it finishes, probably meant to be spoken by Cummíne, is reminiscent of some of the critical material we will examine in the other texts. Specifically, the abbot has housed the lay-monk or tenant (*manach*) in the abbot's own house on account of the gift to the monastery and its patron (*érlam*) of two oxen.<sup>65</sup> Thus financial benefits, rather than spiritual worth, have become the guiding force in the hierarchy of privileges in this monastery of Corcach Bec. Cummíne's quatrain seems to criticise this and set up an alternative standard based on good works (*fearr duit bud maith do-gnithea*, "it were better for you to do a good deed", "Life," l.83.). With this we should compare, for instance, the quatrain in the "Dialogue of Cummíne Fota and Comgán Mac Da Cherda" :

Cummíne: *In bó dobeir neach oc éc  
isin cennáithi celmar*

The cow which one gives at death  
in his last bequest?

Comgán: *Cid buidech di int airchinnech  
nocha buidech int érlum.*

Though the erenach be grateful for it  
the patron saint is not grateful.<sup>66</sup>

Hence, Cummíne's death may result from the social critique of those in authority, a stance eminently suited to his life of wandering, detachment, and preaching.

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<sup>64</sup>Meyer, *Vision*, pp.114-5; 148-9.

<sup>65</sup>It seems best to accept MacEoin's suggested emendation of line 84 *minapadh rad do colgaid to colpaig* "yearling, beast". ("Life", p.205n.2)

<sup>66</sup>O'Keeffe, "Mac Da Cherda and Cummaine Fota," *Ériu* 5 (1911) 24-5, v.11.



A further speculation may be garnered from the Gerbert material. Although, as was mentioned above, it is difficult to see how a death-bed repentance would fit the mould of Cummíne's "Life", the disposal of the Pope's body in that tale is more revealing. In the legend, the Pope commands that his sinful body be cut into pieces. In a fifteenth century English translation of one version of the tale, we are told that he commanded the pieces of his body to be put into a cart, "& whethir-som-evur at þe catell led it, at þer it sulde be berid, and so þe pepull did. And þai led it into þe kirk of Sannt John Lateranensis; & þer it was berid.'<sup>67</sup> Now this incident is very like certain examples in Irish saints' lives, where the saint goes searching for his place of resurrection ( i.e. burial, i.e. main foundation) in a cart or chariot, and realises he has reached it when the vehicle stops or breaks down.<sup>68</sup> We may compare with this the scene envisaged by F. J. Byrne in his edition of the "Lament,"<sup>69</sup> where he imagines for the words "*Ni beir Luimnech for a druim / desel Muimnech i lLeth Cuinn...*" the boat with coffin, journeying clockwise around Munster, perhaps, we might conjecture, in search of a grave.

What is more significant in the comparison between the Gerbert legend and Cummíne is that the theme of foolishly trying to elude death is in each case used about a man so much equated with knowledge and learning. Whether this is to underline the vanity of attaining knowledge, or whether it is something intrinsic to the character of fictional wise men, as fools are often depicted as wise, is unclear. But it does complete a picture of Cummíne as a character who is well book-learned, but lacks the wisdom to see clearly the absurdity of trying to escape death. It is perhaps this nature that draws the holy fool Comgán to him, as his mirror image, the companion, perhaps, who keeps him on the straight and narrow. Nowhere is such an image made more clear than in the "Dialogue", where we find Cummíne the sage asking theological questions of Comgán the idiot.

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<sup>67</sup>M.M.Banks, *An Alphabet of Tales: An English 15th c. Translation of the Alphabetum Narrationum of Etienne de Besançon* (London, 1904: Early English Texts Society 126-7) 34-5.

<sup>68</sup>e.g. Stokes, *Lismore Lives*, p.104-5; 251-2.

<sup>69</sup>Byrne, "Lament," pp.117-8.



## CONCLUSIONS

The "Life" moulds Cummíne into a rather unexpected and untraditional character by its use of motifs in striking and uncommon ways, and by its play with accepted narrative patterns of heroism and sanctity. Thus it presents a saint blemished by incest, afraid of death, unwilling to accept for himself ecclesiastical authority. It presents also a hero who does not displace the villain, a saint with a tragic death. Indeed, the very role Cummíne adopts is uncommon in both literature and law: the wandering preacher, unfixed to any locality, any family grouping, not founding or taking up administration of monasteries, not even a proper hermit, having no specific desert.

In its use of traditions about its protagonist, the "Life" conserves, ignores and alters these, to suit its purposes, we must imagine. So for instance, it retains a pattern which is to be found elsewhere concerning Cummíne's conception, his abandonment, his education and wanderings. His death in the territory of the Uí Fhidgeinte complements the information in the "Lament," and his education at Cork, or at least in the *familia* of Cork agrees with the traditions of Colmán úa Clúasaig as his fosterer. We find his wanderings in the Life of Molaga and his preaching in the Battle of Carn Conaill.

Despite the retention of these relatively minor traditions, other ones which predominate elsewhere are not to be found. Hence, associations with Clonfert, with Íte or Áine Cliach, with West Munster and the Déisi are all lacking. His connection with Cork has been attenuated by the unique tradition of his study at Carraig. There is no mention of Fingín, Guaire, or Comgán, and the only other named monastic figure is the prophet Broccán. Thus the text emphasises the wandering preacher, and isolates him from the larger community, playing down his admittedly slim traditional associations with the monastic establishment.

Furthermore, the "Life" seems conspicuously and, I believe, deliberately to change strong genealogical traditions. Thus his father is anachronistically "Fiachna Mullethan", and is made to be king of Cashel. In the previous chapter it was noted that other



traditions associate Cummíne with Cashel, and some possibilities as to the motivations of these were put forward. Here we should remember the contrast between the "Life" and the "Preface", the latter situating Cummíne in West Munster but emphasising his status and authority, while the former places him in Cashel though he deliberately rejects these things. If there is a central message in the "Life" which the modulations of these traditions seek to highlight, we ought to consider the ninth-tenth century religious kingship of Cashel, and note that we are presented with a saint who rejects ecclesiastical authority and worldly status, who wanders free instead of taking on power and responsibility, and who confers heaven on the king of Munster, demonstrating that there is a higher law. This saint is also a sage who foolishly tries to avoid death. All these might be appropriate images in a kingdom where the rulers were also frequently abbots, and where in the early ninth century the strongest king Fedlimid mac Crimthainn of the Eóganacht Caisil wrested the abbacies of Cork and Clonfert from their rightful owners, and was described on his death as *scriba et ancorita*.<sup>70</sup>

The role depicted by this tale must be considered more carefully. The wandering preacher is not part of our concept of the early Irish church, and if, as MacEoin suggest, it is the tradition which comes closest to the historical Cummíne, it deserves our attention. The Cummíne of the tale can hardly be historical, however, if the writings ascribed to him are genuine, and other traditions prove authentic. Thus, as the alleged author of the Penitential, a text packed with practical material concerning daily, mundane sins in a monastic setting, he must have had at least some administrative experience. So too his literary role as *anmchara* to Domnall, Comgán, Liadain and Cuirithir sits ill with his rootless, detached character in the "Life." It should be clear that although other saints with roles of administrator and confessor, sage and holy man also wander, their wandering is usually tied up with their foundations. Thus Sénán is made a wanderer to account for the many monasteries owing allegiance to him, and this movement is prolonged by his

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<sup>70</sup>See Byrne, *Kings*, 190, 213-5.



inability to find his place of resurrection.<sup>71</sup> Even a saint who actively promoted a theology of detachment, such as Columbanus,<sup>72</sup> is also associated with foundations, disputes with bishops over jurisdiction, and practical monastic rules. Cummíne is detached even from this, rootless and wandering, preaching, but not ruling.

This confers on him a certain liminality, walking as he does on the boundaries of society. His existence as a cypher, a riddle, a being on the edge of the understood, which began in his incestuous conception is then never resolved, but instead purposefully maintained down to his death in a place which is itself a riddle, a joke. He is detached not into the wilderness liminality of a Suibne, nor even the settled liminality of the hermit. Cummíne is a preacher, and so maintains a necessary contact with society while at the same time never becoming a part of it, walking the tightrope of the "pilgrim church."

This position leaves him free to be critical of both society and the church, and in texts we will examine later we find just such a function, here only slightly visible. Nonetheless we must question for whose use this character was created, if indeed this is not a real Cummíne. We know of no movement or group in early Irish society which would correspond to his character, although injunctions against wandering and begging are frequent. Such injunctions often point to the *vagi* as scurrilous, lacking in morals, chancers in the Mac Conglinne mould.<sup>73</sup> Cummíne in the "Life" seems too sober to be one of these, but they provide the nearest prallel to the lifestyle of this wandering scholar.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Stokes, *Lismore Lives*, 54-74;337-41.

<sup>72</sup>"What are you human life? You are the roadway of mortals...Thus you are to be questioned, not believed or warranted, traversed, not occupied, wretched human life, for on a roadway none dwells but walks, that those who walk upon the way may dwell in their homeland." G.S.M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin, 1957) 17.

<sup>73</sup>Wasserschleben, *Die Irische Kanonensammlung* (Leipzig, 1885)149:".iii. *genus est vagabundi, qui nomen monachi desiderant habere, sed mores abnegant, inter mulierculas discurant, fabulas monasteriorum narrant, sub nullo regimine vivunt, negotiis saecularibus occupati, his periculum magis imminet, quam praemium et cavendum his, quod alius dicit: vae mihi peccatori, quia nomen falsi monachi fero.*"

<sup>74</sup>Critics are often not the best witnesses to the character of certain groups, as well. We need only remember the reputation of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, versus their often real achievements in scholarship,



Another text provides the ultimate irony for this liminal figure. In the Egerton account of the Battle of Carn Conaill,<sup>75</sup> Mochuda of Lismore curses Cummíne for preaching on his territory: "for all Cuimin's great labour in preaching, may the whole sum of that which by his discoursing he shall win back from the world not exceed one hornless dun cow in a byre." This demonstrates the threat the rootless wanderer seemed to pose to the established church. Read in the context of the "Life", it gives us a picture of a very "foolish" wise man indeed, preaching constantly to unheeding ears. A fit companion, then, for the holy fool.

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humility and the life of poverty, to realise that both images of wandering clerics could be equally "true."

<sup>75</sup>O'Grady, *SG* , vol.1, 400-1; vol.2, 436-7.



## CHAPTER FOUR "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda"

The tale of "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda", like "The Life of Cummíne Fota", presents its protagonist in isolation from the fully developed complex of legend and association which connects the holy fool with the "West Munster cycle" characters of Fingín, Mór, Guaire Aidne and Líadain and Cuirithir, and indeed Cummíne Fota himself appears only at its conclusion. We have in the story prototypes of incidents later expanded and incorporated into the *Imtheachta* texts, but here they are in a more embryonic state, less elaborate and unassimilated into the larger setting of those texts. The network of characters displayed in the tale is instead a distinctly Déisi one, and the setting highly parochial.

The text is found only in the Yellow Book of Lecan,<sup>1</sup> and has been edited once, by J. G. O'Keeffe.<sup>2</sup> The narrative is presented as a series of anecdotes, and there has been little attempt to make it into a coherent or fluid tale. The anecdotes do seem to be arranged in rough chronological fashion, but the tale does not comply with the patterns of a heroic biography, since we lack information on Mac Da Cherda's birth and upbringing. Rather the tale begins with his transformation into a fool, and the text would seem to represent an early attempt at gathering a dossier of the various anecdotes known in the region of the Déisi about the fool, Mac Da Cherda. It may be possible to date the text roughly to the tenth century based on internal information.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative is fragmented and occasionally unclear. Particularly vexing is the lack of distinction among the referents of pronouns. For instance, in lines 15-16: "*luid i teach da thabairt a chranna, na susta, 7 in tseichi. Ised thuc ina richt co tudchid rath De fair fa deoid .*" Here the masculine pronouns could refer to either Mac Da Cherda, or Mael Ochtraig, or a combination of the two. The text is also interspersed with verse

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<sup>1</sup> *Yellow Book of Lecan*, col. 798; facsimile, p.134a.

<sup>2</sup> O'Keeffe, "Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Fota," *Ériu* 5 (1911) 34-41.

<sup>3</sup> see below, in the sections on Conamail mac Suibne and Bran Find.



passages which sit, sometimes loosely, in the prose. In the case of some of Comgán's quatrains, the sense is predictably obscure.

## SUMMARY

1. Mac Da Cherda<sup>4</sup> is the son of Mael Ochtraig, king of the Déisi of Mag Femin at Dún Letrach on the river Suir.<sup>5</sup> He is said to have been a potential heir to the kingship until he committed adultery with the wife of his father's druid. The king's fool having died, the druid offers the king a new one, by means of magic. The king agrees and in the morning the druid casts a magic wisp in Mac Da Cherda's face. This we must assume turns him into a fool. The king is disgraced by this. Comgán (or the king) fetches his "staves, the flails and the hide", and he is brought back to his own form (?) and the grace of God eventually comes to him. He recites a verse regretting his adultery.

2. His father entrusts him with a cow to milk, a servant and a milk-pail. He walks on the water dryshod. One day, seeing some women on the shore of the Suir, he throws himself under the water and sleeps there until morning, emerging with his clothes still dry. He recites a verse on this sleep.

3. Mac Da Cherda finds a well full of wine and goes to it every day. One day a churl follows him, drinks from the well and dies from it. People search for his corpse. Mac Da Cherda recites a cryptic verse revealing its whereabouts.

4. An outlaw, Conamail mac Suibne, is disputing the kingdom with Mael Ochtraig. Mac Da Cherda learns of a raid on his father, but says nothing until his supper is brought to him. When

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<sup>4</sup>This is the name given throughout, with variations (Mac Mo Cherda, Mac Co.) There is no evidence of his original name, given elsewhere (e.g. O'Brien, *CGH*, pp.398-9.) as Comgán.

<sup>5</sup>S. Ó Coileáin states that this version of Mac Da Cherda's genealogy is unreconcilable with known genealogies. His proper descent is probably from the Uí Rossa (mac Maile Ochtraich m. Áeda m. Fíngin. See O'Brien, *CGH*, 398-9) branch of the Déisi, but a tradition, shown later in the YBL text, represents him as of the main Déisi royal line, brother to Bran Find (m. Maile Ochtraich m. Cobthaig m. Áeda, cf. O'Brien, *CGH*, LL327g50.) The pedigree given in the "Adventures", ll.1-2, agrees with neither of these, and is unknown in the genealogies of the Déisi. For a discussion of the above, see Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p.105-8.

Dún Letrach remains unidentified, but is probably to be linked with the Cell Letrach of "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir." (Meyer, *Comrac Líadain ocus Cuirithir* (London, 1902) 22 ) cf. Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p.111n.105.



his father gives him the food, he recites a cryptic verse which reveals the planned raid. Mael Ochtraig pursues the outlaw, but does not find him.

5. Mac Da Cherda's brother, Bran Find, also a potential heir, is constantly engaged in brigandage. One day he insults MoLaisse of Devenish in a verse mocking his monk's clothing. MoLaisse curses his descendants to become clerics, and replies with a threatening verse.

6. Mael Ochtraig dies, and the two monastic communities of Fid Dúin (Fiddown, co. Kilkenny?) and Lismore compete for his body. Fid Dúin steal it and bury it. Mac Da Cherda recites a verse revealing the body's whereabouts.

7. Mac Da Cherda seeks for Cummíne Fota, and eventually finds his house and goes in. They exchange a series of cryptic and gnomic phrases, then recite a quatrain in alternate lines. After that, we are told, they become foster brothers and Cummíne gives Mac Da Cherda communion, after which he goes to heaven.

## GENRE

In the previous chapter we examined "The Life of Cummíne Fota" and measured the extent to which it conforms to or diverges from saints' lives and the heroic biography. We need to do likewise for this tale, to determine its relationship to other Irish tales of the insane. Although the character of Mac Da Cherda differs from that of other literary fools in the religious nature of his folly, this tale follows the paradigm of a genre we might call the manic biography, or the biography of madmen and fools. This is the genre called by Pádraig Ó Riain "novitiate tales" in his examination of the largest subset of these, the Wild Man legends.<sup>6</sup> The tales surrounding this legend generally involve a man (or sometimes a woman) who through some crisis becomes mad, is taken out of his comfortable existence into a savage, austere and otherworldly state, and is eventually restored to his "wonted status." Ó Riain includes in the greater genre people who do not actually become insane, but are merely separated in some

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<sup>6</sup>P. Ó Riain, "A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man," *Éigse* 14 (1971-2) 179-206.



way into a real or metaphorical wilderness away from their "wonted status."

Using his generalised scheme<sup>7</sup> we find that the tale "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda" fits roughly to its pattern, if we include:

A1: "The curse of a *sacerdos* " as the occasion of madness.

B1: "The madman takes to the woods"; B3: "The madman collects firewood"; B7: "The madman is restless and travels great

distances"; B5: "The madman levitates." Though different in detail, these correspond closely to incidents in the "Adventures."

C1: "The intervention of a *sacerdos* " and C2: "The consumption of 'blessed' food and drink" are both involved in Mac Da Cherda's "cure."

The exact way in which these labels are applicable to individual incidents in the texts will be discussed in greater detail below.<sup>8</sup>

Comgán's story of transformation belongs most securely with a subset of the Wild Man tales, most clearly articulated in the Suibne story, with its British cognates Myrddin and Lailoken.<sup>9</sup> Unlike many of the other protagonists of both Wild Man and "novitiate" tales, these madmen do not return to their "wonted status" after their stay in the wilderness. This is in fact a quite fundamental difference, and I believe Ó Riain has missed an essential part of the paradigm of these particular tales. His view of the conclusion of such tales is seen where he states "Recourse to a *sacerdos* was not, however, a guarantee of reconciliation or restoration. For example, Suibne's recourse to Mo-Ling ended in disaster."<sup>10</sup> Here he misses the essential geometry of *Buile Shuibne*, a geometry which extends to the other texts in the group. Cursed by a saint because of pride, violent anger and

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<sup>7</sup>ibid., pp.182-4.

<sup>8</sup>Ó Riain himself used material from texts about Comgán, including the "Adventures," in compiling his paradigm. See ibid., pp.182-4, notes.

<sup>9</sup>O'Keeffe, *Buile Shuibhne* (Dublin, 1931); A.O.H. Jarman, *The Legend of Merlin* (Cardiff, 1976), "The Welsh Myrddin Poems," *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (ed. R. Loomis, Oxford, 1959); J. and W. MacQueen, "Vita Merlini Sylvestris," *Scottish Studies* 29 (1989)77-93. A fine study of this literature is to be found in B. Frykenberg, *The Wild Man in Celtic Ecclesiastical Legend and Tradition* (unpub. M.Litt. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1984 ).

<sup>10</sup>Ó Riain, "Wild Man," p.204.



murder with a spear, he is reconciled, "cured" only after he is humbled, made fearful before God, and made himself to suffer the curse of a death at spearpoint. The true reconciliation is not with his former self, his "wonted status," but with the new creation his severe penance has formed.<sup>11</sup> Thus the intervention of the *sacerdos*, MoLing, is not disaster but benediction, for only he recognises the sanctity in the transformed Suibne. He reconciles the madman to the church, and by administration of communion, "'blessed' food and drink," completes Suibne's reconciliation with his erstwhile tormentor, Christ.<sup>12</sup> This geometry, as we shall see, is directly applicable to the tale of Mac Da Cherda.

Just as the conclusion of the paradigm needs some adjustment, so too does the beginning, for the true "occasion of madness", at least in these tales, precedes the actual curse of the *sacerdos* or other immediate crisis. Instead we find there is some disorder which leads to the crisis, or offends the *sacerdos* and incurs his malediction. In Suibne this disorder is pride, arrogance, anger, violence;<sup>13</sup> in Myrddin it is vanity and manslaughter;<sup>14</sup> in Mis it is misdirected love;<sup>15</sup> in Cú Chulainn, adultery and jealousy.<sup>16</sup> Such disorders then are expressly connected with sin or immorality, and indeed in the medieval world sin was equated with madness, and being mad was seen as a sign of guilt.<sup>17</sup> Particularly relevant may be the view of Isidore of Seville, who in his *Etymologiae* (the Irish *Culmen*), suggests that sin and madness are etymologically related, deriving *mania* "from sin which the Greeks call '*manie*.'"<sup>18</sup> An Irish statement of this connection may be seen in the quatrain from the Berne Codex,

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<sup>11</sup>Frykenberg, *Wild Man*, p.85-6.

<sup>12</sup>ibid., p.89.

<sup>13</sup>ibid., p.86f.

<sup>14</sup>A.O.H. Jarman, *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Cardiff, 1982) 27.

<sup>15</sup>B. Ó Cuiv, "The Romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis," *Celtica* 2 (1954)325-33.

<sup>16</sup>M. Dillon, *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dublin, 1953).

<sup>17</sup>P. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, 1974) 1f.

<sup>18</sup>ibid., p.50n.76.



which states: "Much folly, much frenzy / much loss of sense, much madness,/...to be under the displeasure of Mary's son."<sup>19</sup>

The beginning and end of this revised paradigm are connected by what goes between. In the tales of madmen, aspects of the intervening punishment and ultimate reconciliation are often symbolically appropriate to the subject's sin or sins. This again reflects Christian philosophy. In the Penitentials, for instance, the healing for a particular sin was the application of a penance opposed to it. So in the prologue to the Penitential of Cummean, we are told "The eight principal vices...shall be healed by the eight remedies which are their contrary."<sup>20</sup> An example of this principle at work in a literary setting may be seen in the Life of Ciaran of Saigir from Egerton 112, in the story of the love between a student of St. Ciaran and a nun of his mother's community. Just as the two monastic lovers are about to embrace, a thunderbolt comes between them, blinding the woman. To explain the imagery, the author states, "nor was it an inequitable judgment that the woman who had blinded her mind even to sin should have her eyes blinded to corporal light."<sup>21</sup>

Other literary examples may be found in *Buile Shuibne*, where Suibne is constantly to be found on the "points" or "tips" of things--trees, bushes, antlers, mountains--in an echo of the spearpoint he left in Rónán's bell. So too his leaping echoes the leap of the spearshaft in the air. Both these are echoed in the wording of the incident and the curse in the text.<sup>22</sup> Another pervasive theme is the sound of bells and other noises: the clang of Rónán's struck bell sends Suibne mad, starting at every noise in the wilderness, but we can see the "symptoms" of his madness long before the curse, since it is Rónán's bell which so irrationally angers Suibne at the start of the tale. So too the sound of bells is caught up in his reconciliation, as Moling's bell

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<sup>19</sup>Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus*, vol. 2, p.296, and see above, Chapter One.

<sup>20</sup>Bieler, *Penitentials*, p.110.

<sup>21</sup>O'Grady, *SG*, vol.1, p.11, vol.2, pp.11-12.

<sup>22</sup>O'Keefe, *Buile Shuibhne*, ll.140-187.



draws Suibne back to the church, and the bell for prime rings out as Suibne is killed.<sup>23</sup>

The story of "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda" is held together, despite its narrational shortcomings, by just such a geometry. The scheme which takes him from his status as *adbar rí* to that of *óinmit* by means of a druid's curse takes him eventually to the woods and the company of a saint, Cummíne, who will administer the 'blessed' food and drink of reconciliation. What intervenes shows him to be like Suibne, special to God despite the curse in his possession of "*rath Dé*."

#### ADULTERY AND CURSE

While the "Adventures" conforms to the pattern of the subset of the Wild Man paradigm typified by Suibne, Myrddin and Lailoken, it is surely significant that Comgán becomes not a violent, volatile madman, a *geilt*, but an *óinmit*, an altogether more passive form of insanity, an idiot, a fool. This again is bound up in the protagonist's crime or supposed crime, for while the *gelta* are guilty of violent crimes such as murder and anger, Comgán is guilty of the sensual crime of adultery.

In the first chapter we discussed the involvement of fools in literary love-triangles, and the symbolic appropriateness of the fool to tales of sexual immorality. Many of these tales partake of the structure of the "Hippolytus" story, the young man falsely accused by the wife of his father or of another powerful man of making advances toward her. The most salient Irish example is *Fingal Rónáin*.<sup>24</sup> There, however, the accusation is false and the end tragic, the hero is killed and the fool merely a shadowy member of his retinue. Thus, in the *Imtheachta* texts, Comgán is portrayed as innocent of the adultery, and is accused as the result of rebuffing his stepmother.<sup>25</sup> His foolish innocence then emerges as a result of his actual guiltlessness, since his transformation is an unjust punishment. In the "Adventures," however, the accusation seems to be true, for the storyteller

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<sup>23</sup>Frykenberg, *Wild Man*, 85-6.

<sup>24</sup>D. Greene, *Fingal Rónáin and other Stories* (Dublin, 1955).

<sup>25</sup>B iv. 1, pp.151v-152r.



informs us himself of Comgán's adultery. We are dealing as well then with a variation in the paradigm of the "Tristan" story, in which a younger man cuckolds an older man in an influential position, who then attempts to cause his downfall. However, the "Adventures" give no hint of a romantic interest in the sexual activity here, as there is in many other examples of the "Tristan" paradigm. We are told merely: *Adbar rígid didiu in Mac Da Cherda co comranic fri mnai druad a athar* .("This Mac Da Cherda, then, was a potential heir to the kingship until he had sex with the wife of his father's druid." ll.3-4.)

An instructive parallel to the case of Mac Da Cherda, both in the crime and the punishment, is that of Cumascach, son of Áed mac Ainmirech.<sup>26</sup> In *Cath Belaig Dúin Bolc*<sup>27</sup> the *adbar rígid* sets off on a *cuairt rígid*, a royal tour in which he sleeps with the wife of each of his hosts. The wife of Brandub the king of Leinster refuses, and Cumascach commits "great evil" on the women of the court. Cumascach is then imprisoned with his retinue, and they are burnt, but Cumascach escapes through the skylight, dislocating his hip-joint ("*uball a leis* ") in the process. He flees to Cell Rannairech, whose abbot strikes off his head.<sup>28</sup> The tale is given a different twist in the Book of Leinster version of the Bórama,<sup>29</sup> where Cumascach's satirist (*cáinte*) called Glasdamh, about to be burnt with the king's son, extracts safe passage from Brandub on account of his having eaten the king's food and thus received his hospitality. The *cáinte* then exchanges clothes with Cumascach so that he can escape, but in his jump from the skylight he hurts himself badly ("*ro brised co mór* .")

In this tale of adultery on a grand scale by the son of a king, we meet again Ó Riain's paradigm of separation from wanted status, brief and final though it is,<sup>30</sup> and very specifically a result of the protagonist's breaches of morality and hospitality.

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<sup>26</sup>In the D. iv. 1 version of the *Imtheachta*, we are told that Mac Da Cherda's first name was Cumascach (p.28 v.) although he is there also called Comgán. There may be some confusion intruding from the character of Cumascach mac Aeda.

<sup>27</sup>A. Maniet, "*Cath Belaig Dúin Bolc*," *Éigse* 7(1953) 95-111.

<sup>28</sup>ibid., pp.98-101.

<sup>29</sup>O'Grady, *SG*, vol.1, p.372f; vol. 2, p.408f.

<sup>30</sup>Ó Riain, "Wild Man," p.204, discusses the story.



Themes from both Wild Man and fool tales echoed in *Cath Belaig Dúin Bolc* include the leap through the skylight (Suibne, Mór), the exchange of clothing between king/ king's son and fool/ satirist (Ailill and the drúth in *Táin Bó Cuailnge* ; Mac Con and Doderá in *Cath Maige Mucrama* ), and the beheading of the "fool" (*Cath Almáine* , *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* ). We also find the geometry of appropriate punishment, the crimes of adultery and rape being punished in the one version by symbolic emasculation in his dislocated hip-joint ("uball a leis ", literally, "apple of his thigh.") and in the other version by his "transformation" into a satirist, a type of entertainer similar to the *drúth* or *óinmit* in its function and lowly status.<sup>31</sup> It may also be significant that, unlike a true *geilt* or *óinmit* , he has no supernatural leaping/ levitating powers, and hence his leap from the skylight ends in disaster.

The implication of this story is that symbolic emasculation, or transformation into an obscene and lowly satirist, are in some way appropriate punishments for the crime of adultery. Hence, Comgán's being cursed into foolishness seems likewise appropriate. We should remember, too, the ways in which fools are depicted as representing an exaggerated sexuality.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, adultery itself can be described in literature as "folly."<sup>33</sup> What remains unclear is why Comgán, if guilty of adultery, is portrayed as such an innocent, holy fool. In the *Imtheachta* this is clearly a result of his wrongful punishment and blamelessness, but here it is a strange and unresolved feature.

The cursing incident itself follows a pattern similar to those described in law texts and elsewhere regarding fools and madmen. For instance, the law text on fools edited by Roland Smith as "The Advice to Doidín" says of the *caeptha* "If [the king] throws a clod at him before everyone, it is lawful for anyone to

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<sup>31</sup>e.g. *Corus Bescnai* , *CIH* , p.526 (=ALI vol. 3, p.24)"do drochdainaib .i. do druthaib 7 caintib..."

<sup>32</sup>For example, the phrase "*drúth cech mer, mianach cech báeth* ," "Every madman is loose, every idiot is lustful." T. Ó Donnchadha, "Advice to a Prince," *Ériu* 9 (1921-3) 47, v.20.

<sup>33</sup>See the story of Partholón's wife Delgnat and his servant, whose adultery is called "*egcaine ocus econn* " "indecency and folly."R.A.S. Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* vol. 3 (ITS vol. 39, Dublin, 1940)61f.



throw afterwards."<sup>34</sup> More specifically relevant to the episode in the "Adventure" is the description of Nuada Fullón in *Coir Anmann*: "*Fullón ainm in drúadh rot-nalt, 7 is eisein cétna druí rolái bricht for dluí riamh do chur dhuine for foluamhain. Inde dluí fulla dicitur ó sin.*" ("Fullón is the name of the druid who raised him, and he is the first druid who ever lay a spell on a wisp to put a man to wandering. Hence the 'wisp of wandering' it is called from that.")<sup>35</sup> The *dlaí fulla* must certainly be the same as the *sop* in our text.

The manner of the curse and its function in depriving a nobleman of his status and sanity because of a sin against a *sacerdos* puts Comgán in a paradigm not only with Suibne, but with Conall Clocach as well, the northern *rígóinmit*, and another errant son of Áed mac Ainmirech. In the various accounts of the Council of Druim Cet, we are told of how Conall, encouraged by his stepmother, mocked Colum Cille and his retinue when they arrived at the assembly. As a result, he is cursed to insanity by the clerics who ring their bells against him. In Keating's version of the story, we are told that Conall and his followers pelted the clerics with clods (*caoba*) of clay in mockery.<sup>36</sup> The version of the tale embedded in a twelfth-century Life of Colum Cille edited by Maire Herbert does not mention the clods, but otherwise the tale is much as Keating would later tell it:

When Conall saw [the clerics] he incited the rabble of the assembly upon them, so that thrice nine of them were taken and injured. Colum Cille asked: 'By whom were that band set upon us?' He was told it was by Conall. Colum Cille cursed Conall, and thrice nine bells were rung against him, so that someone said 'Conall is getting bells,' and because of this he is given the name Conall Clocach. And the cleric took from him kingship and sovereignty, and banished his sense and intellect save only for the length of time that he was defecating.<sup>37</sup>

Note that reciprocity and equivalence of crime and punishment is here a major theme. The thrice-nine bells rung against Conall

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<sup>34</sup>R. Smith, "The Advice to Doidín," *Ériu* 11 (1932) 73.

<sup>35</sup>Stokes, "Cóir Anmann: The Fitness of Names," *Irische Texte* 3.2 (ed. Stokes and Windisch, Leipzig, 1897) 366.

<sup>36</sup>Keating, vol. 3 (ITS vol.9)90-1.

<sup>37</sup>M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 245, 266.



correspond to the thrice-nine clerics injured, Conall is made permanently foolish for making mock of the clerics, and his only periods of sanity are when he is defecating, an act reminiscent of the clods of clay with which he mocks Colum Cille in some versions. His name forever bears the sign of the bells of his cursing. Moreover, in most versions the stepmother too mocks ColumCille, calling him "*corrclerech*" ("crane-cleric") and is subsequently transformed by the saint into a crane.<sup>38</sup>

Comgán's "conversion" fits this pattern perfectly. He is transformed into a fool because of an insult to a *sacerdos*. A stark contrast is provided, however, by the role of God and the nature of the *sacerdos*. In the story of Conall Clocach, the cursing is divinely inspired, the "magic" comes from God. In the "Adventures" it is a druid, a rather suspect figure, who does the cursing, and God appears to intervene later on to give Mac Da Cherda his grace. It is unclear whether this grace serves to abate his madness, or merely adds a spark of holiness, the divine inspiration which fuels the fool's prophecies. Indeed, the actions which follow the cursing are extremely unclear.

After the cursing in the *Imtheachta*, Comgán is taken by a fever and all his hair falls out.<sup>39</sup> It is possible that this section of the "Adventures" in YBL has gotten confused, for certainly the remarks of Mac Da Cherda in line 20 "*bean mo druad ni romaithge[i]n*" ("my druid's wife doesn't recognise me"), and the text in lines 15-16, "*Ised thuc ina richt*" ("It is that which brought him to his form...")<sup>40</sup> imply that his physical appearance has been transformed. The bald head of the fool has been discussed in the first chapter. Here, it would be appropriate as well, complementing the other signs of servility such as the kiln equipment, and the milking pail.<sup>41</sup> Baldness as punishment for a sexual crime appears elsewhere in early Irish literature. In the

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<sup>38</sup>ibid., 245, 267.

<sup>39</sup>B.iv.1, p.152r.

<sup>40</sup>For a similar situation, see *Buile Shuibhne*, ll.903-6, where the mad Suibne has his sense and kingship restored to him, along with "*a chruth 7 a dhealbh*." I owe this interpretation to Prof. Gillies.

<sup>41</sup>For baldness as a sign of servility, see J. Nagy, "Demne Mael," *Celtica* 14 (1981) 8.



medieval tale *Forbuis Droma Damhghaire*, Connla, a Munsterman, rapes a supernatural female. As a result, *ro fhas bruth maeili claime o mhulluch cu bonn tria*. ("the fever of leprous baldness permeated him from top to toe.")<sup>42</sup>

If we try to amend the text slightly, by assuming something of this sort has been left out, and considering the verse in lines 17-20 to be misplaced, their proper position being before line 15, we at least find ourselves with a more comprehensible text. Comgán has been cursed, and is physically transformed by some sort of fever / madness. No one recognises him, and his wife has left him, as he laments in the verse. Then he goes into the house to fetch some implements, staves, a flail, a hide. This action restores him to his proper form, so that the grace of God comes to him at last.

What is the significance of the implements, and why does fetching them bring him back to form? It is unlikely in the context that O'Keeffe's translation of "spearshafts" and reference to "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir" can be right.<sup>43</sup> More likely is that these implements are meant as equipment for menial labour, such as belong to kilns for winnowing and drying corn. *Leabar Aicle* mentions both flail and hide in this context: "*7 aithgin na atha cona comhobair .i. scuab, seiche, 7 susta*."<sup>44</sup> The *cranna* then could perhaps be kindling, "sticks of firewood", or perhaps some other rods used for raking or prodding in the corn-drying process. This task was undoubtedly seen as a menial one. A passage in *Cogadh Gaedhil ri Gallaibh* suggests this: "no son of a warrior or of an officer deigned to put his hand to a flail, or any other work on land."<sup>45</sup> In *Críth Gablach* we are told that when a king "does manual work with mallet, spade or axe, his honour-price is reduced to that of a commoner."<sup>46</sup> More apposite, perhaps, is the story of Óengus mac Óiblenn, author of the *Félire*.

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<sup>42</sup>M. L. Sjøstedt, "*Forbuis Droma Damhghaire*," *RC* 43 (1926)118; Nagy, "Demne Mael", p.13.

<sup>43</sup>O'Keeffe, "Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda," p.43.

<sup>44</sup>*ALI*, vol. 3, p.264.(=*CIH* p.283). For the presence of the flail at a drying-kiln, see *CIH* 273.29(=*ALI* vol. 3, 220.15.)

<sup>45</sup>Todd, *Cogadh Gaedhil ri Gallaibh* (London, 1867)116.

<sup>46</sup>Kelly, *Guide*, p.19; cf.*CIH* 569.21-3 (= Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, 530-3.)



In the Preface to that text, we find Óengus disguising himself as a slave to humble himself, and being entrusted with work at the kiln: *Doruacht iarsin Aengus ir-richt moghad chuice, 7 ro erb Maelruain fris frestal ne hatha*.<sup>47</sup> A poem on Óengus describes this disguise as if it were involuntary, almost a punishment:

<i>Aengus a carcair chachta</i>	Óengus in a prison of bondage,
<i>do déoin Maic Dé hi Tamlachta</i>	by the will of God's Son, in Tallaght:
<i>nocharbúi in betha brígach</i>	that was not a vigorous life
<i>isin aith oc urthirad .</i>	in the kiln, drying (corn). <sup>48</sup>

Thus, such an activity is seen as slavish, and a saint takes it on in order to humble himself. It is then possible to interpret Mac Da Cherda's actions in fetching the kiln equipment as acceptance of his humbled status, an acceptance which could lead to his physical restoration, and the leavening of his insanity by *rath Dé*, the grace of God.

#### THE INCIDENT AT THE SUIR

This is the beginning of a series of loosely connected episodes which serve to demonstrate the character of Mac Da Cherda. In this first of these, the theme of servility is carried over from the cursing episode, in the menial task allotted to Mac Da Cherda, here milking. More significant, however, is that Mac Da Cherda walks on the water dryshod. The first of a number of extraordinary powers displayed by him in the text, the nonchalance of the action and its description in the text are redolent of the innocence of the holy fool. The miraculous act is accompanied by no fanfare of the sort we would find in a saint's life, for instance the Life of Colmán of Lann, which asks, "What other cleric in Ireland has gone on a lake without a boat except he?"<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the overt Christological reference of the action is in keeping with the nature of holy folly.

Mac Da Cherda's casual miracle is interrupted by the appearance of a woman and her servant on the opposite shore of

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<sup>47</sup>Stokes, *Félire*, p.12.

<sup>48</sup>ibid., pp.xxiv-xxv.

<sup>49</sup>K. Meyer, *Betha Colmán mac Lúacháin : The Life of Colmán son of Lúachán* (Dublin, 1911)102-3. For other examples, see Bray, *Lives*, p.157.



the Suir. The sight of her causes the fool to throw himself under the water and sleep there until the next day. While it is possible that this is meant to be a particular woman, it is more likely that Mac Da Cherda's reaction represents his attitude towards women in general, especially as representatives of his downfall. Such ambivalence, not to say hostility, to women is seen in the *Imtheachta* texts, where for instance, he resists the advances of fifty women with whom he is alone in a forest.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, he blames a woman for his downfall: "I have suffered at the hands of the woman /on whom is the long hair."<sup>51</sup> And later he states his hostile indifference to women: "Though you find the two legs/ of the daughter of Bédois attractive/ for me it would be like / eating dog to go between them."<sup>52</sup>

The particular situation of the encounter may also be connected with the accusation found in *Fingal Rónáin* that the protagonist propositioned the woman in wild and deserted places.<sup>53</sup> Considering where such an accusation had already brought Mac da Cherda, it is no surprise if he flees. Such misogyny is also characteristic of the male saints, some of whom go to great lengths to avoid women, or to impress upon their monks not to have any truck with them.<sup>54</sup> Indeed his diving beneath the river may be a play on the depiction of hermit saints as immersing themselves in water, often rivers, to avoid temptation.<sup>55</sup> If there is a parallel being drawn between ascetic practices and Mac Da Cherda's abilities, it is no doubt significant that Mac Da Cherda's miraculous sleep under the water is both

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<sup>50</sup>B.iv.1, p.151v.

<sup>51</sup>D.iv.1, p.33.

<sup>52</sup>D.iv.1, p.33, B.iv.1, p.156v.

<sup>53</sup>D. Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, p.5-6. Also note the implications of the description of Conaire Mór's reign in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* :

<sup>54</sup>For instance, V. Hull, "Two Anecdotes of St. Moling," *ZCP* 18 (1930) 91-4; Gwynn and Purton, "The Monastery of Tallaght," pp.150-1, §61, 62.

<sup>55</sup>ibid., p.161, §81: "It was Colccu's opinion that those who used to stand in water did so for the purpose of crushing and subduing their desires and longings..."; Stokes, *Féilire*, pp.40-1. Saints are also shown sleeping beneath the water, e.g. Caencomrac, bishop of Clonmacnoise (O'Grady, *SG*, vol.1, pp.87-8, vol.2, pp.94-6.) and Colmán mac Lúacháin (Meyer, *Colmán*, pp.16-19.) Both these texts are probably composed later than the "Adventures" and thus may have been influenced by it.



more marvellous and more innocent than those of the hermit saints. It would seem that the innocence of the fool allows him to escape the laws of nature.

There may moreover be a Pauline reference in Mac Da Cherda's night under the water. In a similar episode in the Life of Colmán mac Lúacháin, we are told, "Then Colmán was a day and a night under water, and came dry out of it, as the apostle Paul was under water."<sup>56</sup> Meyer suggests that this is an echo of 2 Corinthians 11.25, where Paul, in the midst of recounting his hardships states, "*nocte et die in profundo maris fui*" ("I passed a day and a night on the sea (lit. in the depth of the sea)")<sup>57</sup> The "Adventures" is an earlier text than that of the Life of Colmán, however, and the image may be particularly appropriate to fools. The passage from Paul comes at a point when he says, "Now I am really talking like a fool." ("*in insipientia dico*," 2 Cor. 11:23.) Indeed, the passage goes on, in Latin, "*nocte et die in profundo maris fui, in itineribus saepe, periculis fluminum ...*" and the whole passage may thus have inspired the adventure in the text, from the sleep under the water to Mac Da Cherda's journey beneath the river to Comar Tri nUisce.

## THE WELL OF WINE

This short incident describes Mac Da Cherda's well of wine in Collamair, which a "churl" attempts to drink from and dies, punished it would seem. There is an echo of this in the *Imtheachta* account of the incident at the Suir. There, Odrán, a fake fool, accompanies Comgán to fetch milk, butter and cheese for Cummíne, but on the return journey they both fall in the Suir. Odrán is drowned, while Comgán sleeps the night out on the riverbed.

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<sup>56</sup>ibid.,pp.16-7.

<sup>57</sup>ibid., p.17 n.1. Probably there has been a misunderstanding of the Latin: "*nocte et die in profundo maris fui*" or indeed of an Irish version which might have had for Paul's statement "*lá 7 adaig forusci*" as reading "*fo usci*". The previous passage refers to Paul's being shipwrecked, and so his being under the sea would not be improbable.



The implications are the same in each episode: only a true, and one supposes innocent, fool can partake of the miraculous with impunity. Odrán in the *Imtheachta* is essentially punished for making Comgán bear the heavier load, which on the true fool's shoulders becomes very light. The *aithech* who drinks from the well of wine is indulging in gluttony, he drinks "*co raemid a bru,*" until his stomach bursts. ("Adventures", l.38) While Mac Da Cherda shows signs of moderate gluttony elsewhere in the text, it is clear that his mental state preserves him from punishment for such behaviour. The connection of folly with gluttony is a longstanding one. For instance, the Old-Irish Penitential lists the qualities born of gluttony: "immoderate joy, excess of talking, wanton folly, lewdness of thought, impurity of mind, despair, drinking without stint, unbridled drunkenness."<sup>58</sup> Many of these qualities apply also to the fool. However, we should contrast the immoral folly of the *aithech* in his "drinking without stint" and the holy folly of Mac Da Cherda, who leaves the wine every day in the evening, and who appears to be judged blameless.<sup>59</sup>

Once again we should note the Christological significance of the image in question, the well of water which is here a well of wine. This would seem to be a reference to the eucharist, and it would then follow that the moral of the incident draws on the idea that only those worthy and free from sin should receive the sacrament. Once again it would seem to be Paul who is the inspiration, this time 1 Corinthians:

*Itaque quicumque manducaverit panem hunc, vel biberit calicem Domini indigne: reus erit corporis, et sanguinis Domini. Probet autem seipsum homo: et sic de pane illo edat, et de calice bibat. Qui enim manducat, et bibit indigne, iudicium sibi manducat, et bibit: non diiudicans corpus Domini. Ideo inter vos multi infirmi et imbecilles, et dormiunt multi.* ('This means that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord. A man should examine himself first; only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup. He who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

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<sup>58</sup>E.J. Gwynn, "An Irish penitential," *Ériu* 7 (1914) 136.

<sup>59</sup>An inordinate interest in food and drink is a characteristic of the "wild man", cf. Ó Riain, "Wild Man," pp.201-2.



That is why many among you are sick and infirm, and why so many are dying.")<sup>60</sup>

Such an idea is also deeply imbedded in the Irish Penitentials,<sup>61</sup> and is certainly appropriate in the "Adventures" where the conclusion is bound up in repentance and reception of communion.

Finally, as Mac Da Cherda's behaviour on the Suir echoed that of the saints, so too does his well of wine. This theme is found associated with a number of saints. Ciaran of Saigir, for instance, "blessed a well and made wine of it, so that [his guests] were merry, satisfied and joyful."<sup>62</sup> This is unsurprising, as it is a clear case of *imitatio Christi* in the miracles of the saints, as is the motif of walking on water. Mac Da Cherda, of course, finds the well, does not create it or change the water to wine. Nonetheless, a dual parallel is being drawn between the fool and on the one hand the ascetic saint and on the other, Christ. The parallel in this text seems to be a favourable one, designed to highlight the fool's sanctity rather than to downgrade the sanctity of saints. It is not then being used here as a vehicle of social criticism.

#### CONAMAIL MAC SUIBNE

The range of characters who occupy the liminal position described by van Gennep,<sup>63</sup> applied to Irish literature by Ó Riain,<sup>64</sup> and more fully explored by Nagy,<sup>65</sup> includes not only madman and fools but also hermits, lepers, outlaws, brigands, swineherds. That all these characters naturally meet up in early Irish tales is only to be expected, as such contact is based as much on physical reality as on abstract social liminality: all

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<sup>60</sup>1 Corinthians 11: 27-30. This text was clearly well known in early Ireland, as it forms the generic epistle reading for the Mass in the Stowe Missal.

<sup>61</sup>e.g., "Penitential of Finnian," Bieler, *Penitentials*, p.87, §35,36.

<sup>62</sup>Plummer, *BNE*, vol. 1, p.119, vol.2, p.115; cf. Stokes, *Féilire*, pp.198-9. For further examples, see Bray, *Lives*, pp.153-4.

<sup>63</sup>Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago, 1966)

<sup>64</sup>Ó Riain, "Wild Man," and "Boundary Association in Early Irish Society," *SC* 7 (1972) 12-29.

<sup>65</sup>Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw* (California, 1985); "The Wisdom of the Geilt," *Éigse* 19 (1982-3) 44-60; "Liminality and Knowledge in Irish Tradition," *SC* 16/17 (1981-2) 135-43.



these figures live in woods and wildernesses. In a society in which land ties and family and social bonds were so important, those neither tied to land nor bonded in a family or client relationship must have exerted a great attraction for storytellers. Moreover, most were considered suspect characters, and hence were grouped together. For instance, fools, buffoons and bandits are included at the devilish feast (*fled demunda*) in *Córus Béscnai*: "a feast that is given to sons of death and bad people, namely buffoons (*drúthaib*) and satirists and inferior poets (*oblairaib*) and fartars and clowns (*fuirseoraib*) and bandits (*merlechaib*) and pagans and whores and other bad people."<sup>66</sup> In the next few episodes we meet a few of these liminal inhabitants.

The first is a *foglaid*, a plunderer or outlaw, who lives in the woods and is contesting the kingship of the Déisi. He is thus part of the group of social outcasts included under the terms *díberga* and *fianna* discussed by both McCone and Nagy.<sup>67</sup> The way of life followed by such people was recognised as an option for those who were landless and disinherited, though usually condemned by the church. As seen in the *Córus Béscnai* passage, the association of such characters with a fool is not unlikely, and indeed, may have some inspiration in the same Pauline passage which gave rise to Mac Da Cherda's underwater adventure. That passage continues "*in itineribus saepe... periculis latronum.*" (2. Cor 11:26)

While the associations of bandit and fool are explainable, it is more difficult to see how the person of Conamail mac Suibne fits in. The brother of Congal mac Suibne who died in 701 as king of the Déisi, his presence here is anachronistic.<sup>68</sup> Ó Riain points out that "Conamail belonged to an important rival family of the Déise with claims to kingship."<sup>69</sup> His exile in the wilderness is thus part of the novitiate pattern of tales: he too has been

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<sup>66</sup>Binchy *CIH* vol.2, p.526, ll.15-19; K.McCone, "Werewolves, cyclopes, díberga and fianna: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland," *CMCS* 12 (1986) 5.

<sup>67</sup>ibid., p.12 and McCone, *Pagan Past, Christian Present* (Maynooth, 1990) 203-220; Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>68</sup>Ó Coileáin, "Structure", 108.

<sup>69</sup>Ó Riain, "Wild Man," 193.



deprived of his wonted status. Although we do not know if he gained the kingship at all, his brother's reign suggests that his family, the Uí Fothaid, ultimately did. His anachronistic inclusion in this tale would seem to reflect the rivalries of a later period, probably the early tenth century. There seems to have been rivalry between the main Déisi branch and the Uí Fothaid, and also between septs of the royal branch.<sup>70</sup>

Mac Da Cherda's knowledge of the raid planned by Conamail may come either from his wanderings in the forest or through the insight of prophecy. In the "Adventures," Comgán's prophetic powers are played down, and many of his predictions seem rather to be a result of access to restricted information. I believe that the author must have intended these as prophecies: they demonstrate consistent obscurity of language, are in verse, and come at times of crisis. In each case--the lost corpse of the churl in the well of wine incident, the lost corpse of Mael Ochtraig, the planned raid--Comgán possesses the required information, but it is not information about future happenings which he can predict, but rather knowledge about the state of things as they are.

The balance to his powers of sight is his seeming gluttony. As in the previous episode, Mac Da Cherda shows an inordinate interest in food, here refusing to divulge information about the raid until he gets his dinner. The attributes of gluttony were discussed above as being appropriate to a fool such as Comgán. The attributes of abstinence, gluttony's opposite, are shown by him in his fits of wisdom: "spiritual joy ... purity of soul ... comprehension of wisdom, abundance of intelligence, application to the mysteries of God."<sup>71</sup> That Mac Da Cherda's "comprehension

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<sup>70</sup>Cormac (mac)Mothlai, king of the Déisi Muman, was "martyred" by the Uí Fothaid in 920, according to the Annals of Innisfallen. In 912 his brother Cuileán was killed by Mael-Ruanaid m. Néill, "son of the king who had previously ruled the Déissi." Radner, *Fragmentary Annals*, su 912. The story of Conamail may contain a reflex of this incident, since it occurred while Cormac was plundering Osraige, in which is Fid Dúin. For the genealogic tree of the Déisi in the late-ninth, early-tenth centuries, see D. Ó Corráin, "Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil: History or Propaganda?" *Ériu* 25 (1974) 19. See below for the connection of Cormac with this text.

<sup>71</sup>Gwynn, "Penitential," p.137.



of wisdom" is in this episode coupled with his gluttony is not accidental, but represents, like the well of wine, the dual aspect of the holy fool: coarse, attentive to his body and to food, but in his madness possessing preternatural wisdom.

Finally, the idea that "the attention of everyone should be on him, for he had never sung a stave twice"(Adventures, II.51-2) is seen elsewhere in fool-literature, for instance in the comment concerning Conall Clocach: "A fool with a special gift; he was recognised because every ninth word he utters needs corrected."<sup>72</sup> More salient yet is the passage from the Lailoken fragments, where we are told of that madman, "But he foretold many future events, as if he were a prophet, but because he used never to repeat what he had foretold, although his prophecies were extremely obscure and quite unintelligible, no one dared to believe him."<sup>73</sup> Mac Da Cherda, however, is believed, and his verse apparently understood, but to no avail.

## BRAN FIND

Although similar to Conamail, Bran is a different character, not the outlaw rival contesting the kingship from the woods, but the "royal prince" (*rígdamna*) who prior to inheritance of status or land lives as a brigand, a *díberg*, possibly one of a *fianna*.<sup>74</sup> His genealogy is among the earliest recorded,<sup>75</sup> that of the royal line of the Déisi, son of Mael Ochtraig mac Cobthaig, who died in 645 according to the Annals of Innisfallen. Bran Find's own obit is given at 671, and thus his outlaw, landless status in the "Adventures" is in keeping with his putative young age while his father was still alive. By a confusion, one assumes intentional, of the genealogies he is stated to be brother of Mac Da Cherda. The presence of this incident, only thinly attached to the main character of the tale, needs some explanation.

Structurally, the episode reflects the tale as a whole: just as Comgán offended the druid and was transformed into a fool, so

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<sup>72</sup>R. Smith, "Advice to Doidín," p.81, referring to the term *boicmell*.

<sup>73</sup>W. and J. MacQueen, "Vita Merlini Silvestris," p.84.

<sup>74</sup>See McCone, "Juvenile Delinquency, pp.8-11.

<sup>75</sup>O'Brien, *CGH*, LL327g50; cf. S. Pender, "Two Unpublished Versions of the Expulsion of the Déssi," *Féilscríbhinn Torna* (ed.Pender, Cork, 1947) 210.



Bran mocks the saint and his descendants are "turned into" clerics. This at least must be the meaning of the exchange. Bran sees MoLaise mac Conichtai (*recte* moccu Nechtai), a Munster saint of the Eóganacht Caisil, approaching and mocks his appearance: the snout of his *bacán*, the snout of his crozier (*bachall*) and the snout of his hood or cowl (*cochall*). The saint replies with a curse and a pun: "*Is ed regas orddan a chlaindi!*"

"That is the way the honour of his children will take", which plays on the meaning of *ordán*, "dignity" and "ordaining." ("Adventures," ll.65-70.) The implication is that the descendants of Bran Find will be clerics, will have the same appearance, the same *ordán*, in both senses, as clerics. This curse echoes Comgán's own, and may be compared to the cursing of Conall Clocach's mother by Colum Cille, who is turned into a crane for mocking the saint as a crane-cleric.<sup>76</sup> The use of a seeming digression to tell a minor story reflecting the overall theme of a tale is found elsewhere in early Irish literature, notably in *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*.<sup>77</sup>

However, it seems unlikely that this tangential episode is meant to function purely as a narrational ornament. It seems more likely to reflect matters of significance at the time of the composition of the text. Indeed, this is probably the case. If we consider that MoLaise's curse implies that Bran Find's descendants would become clerics, it is of the first significance to realise that the king of the Déisi in the late-ninth/early-tenth centuries was one Cormac (mac) Mothlai meic Rudrach,<sup>78</sup> who

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<sup>76</sup>Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, p.245, 267. Cf. also Meyer, *Colmán*, pp.34-5, where the saint curses Anfossaid mac Leda for laughing at him: "Your successors shall be vessels of mockery and laughter forever, and your land and your heirs will serve me forever."

<sup>77</sup>Binchy, *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin* (Dublin, 1975) p.9-11; For an explanation of the purpose of the "significant digression", see T. Ó Cathasaigh, "The Theme of *ainmne* in *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*" *Celtica* 15 (1983) 84.

<sup>78</sup>Alnnis 897 states: "*Cormacc Mothla do gabáil ríge na nDéisse*." but the genealogies list him as *Cormac m. Mothlai m. Rudrach* (O'Brien, *CGH*, LL327g35). Either is possible, especially if *Mothal* is the place of that name (now Mothel) in co. Waterford, south of Carrick-on-Suir. Cormac's father or grandfather Ruaidrí m. Cormaic quite possibly gave his name to the *Lios Ruadhrach* which is the residence of Mael-ochtraig in the *Imtheachta*. This Hogan in turn identifies with Lisronagh, co. Tipperary, and Ó Coileáin further suggests that Dún Letrach and Lios Ruadhrach



was also abbot of Cell Mo-Laisse (Kilmolash, co. Waterford) and bishop and vice-abbot (*secnap*) of Lismore. Since Cormac was descended from the same line as the earlier Bran Find, although not directly from Bran himself, it is likely that Molaise's prophecy refers to him, especially when we consider that Cormac was abbot of one of MoLaise's monasteries.

If we take this incident as a reference to a later person, Cormac (mac) Mothlai, king of the Déisi, this may also explain the two anachronisms introduced into the text. First, the presence of the sixth-century saint Molaise (+564, 571, AU) may be a result of the connection between Cormac and the monastery of Cell Molaise, to make more obvert the hidden reference in the text. Second, the presence of Conamail mac Suibne, of the rival Uí Fothaid, could refer to contemporary tenth-century rivalries, as the Annals of Innisfallen tell us that Cormac was murdered by the Uí Fothaid Aiched.<sup>79</sup> There may also be a reference in this to the rivalry of Mael-Ruanaid mac Néill (+917) son of Niall mac Laegaire(+894) who held the kingship before Cormac. This contestant killed Cormac's brother Cuilennán while Cormac was raiding Osraige.<sup>80</sup> Part of the purpose of the Bran Find episode then is as a reference point, a clue to the audience of the text as a whole and the milieu in which it was written.

Realisation that the incident refers to a distant relative of Bran Find's helps us to understand the verse which MoLaise recites. Far from being an extension of the curse, it is a confirmation of Bran Find's worth despite his current status of *díberg*.

<i>Is aire is cing[id?]</i>	It is a noble, it is a champion, (?)
<i>cia meles a lindi</i>	who consumes his beverages: (?)
<i>Bran Find mac Mail[e] Ochtraig</i>	Bran Find son of Mael-ochtraig,

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may be early and late names for the same place. In the area is also Rathgormuck (from *Rátha Uá gCormaic*). See Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p.111n.105.

<sup>79</sup>Alnnis 920: "*Martra Cormaic meicc Cuilennain [recte meicc Mothlai] epscop 7 secnap Lis Móir 7 abb Cille Mo-Laisse 7 rí na nDéisse 7 cend ath-chomairc Muman olchena, la Huí Fothaid Aiched.*" The Uí Fothaid do not seem to have gained the kingship, if that was their intention. Cormac's sons held the kingship, Célechair m. Cormaic (+941 Alnnis) and Faelán m. Cormaic (+966 Alnnis.) The Máenach m. Cormaic, abbot of Lismore (+959, Alnnis.) may be another son.

<sup>80</sup>Radner, *Fragmentary Annals*, su.912.



*cona dibergaib imbi .*

with his bandits about him.

("Adventures," ll.71-4)

It is possible to think of the second line as referring to the consumption of the ales of kingship, a theme met elsewhere in early Irish literature.<sup>81</sup> MoLaise then would be acting as a legitimising force, despite the "curse" put on Bran Find's descendants. Such an interpretation would add extra meaning to the placement of the episode, coming as it does immediately before Mael-Ochtraig's death.

Beyond narrative and referential functions, both Bran Find and Molaise have traditional associations which bind them more firmly into Mac da Cherda's environment. Molaise is said to have felt the elements equally, and been particularly kind to the poor and lepers. Most importantly, his Life describes him going to hell with a *cochall* of badgerskin to rescue a certain *drúth* named Manann.<sup>82</sup> Bran Find is accounted in *Bretha Nemed* as a *rígbard* : "i.e. he has kingship and bardic art, as was Bran Finn mac Máel Ochtraig over the Déisi."<sup>83</sup> These traditions make the characters of the saint and the poetic prince more obvious characters in the adventures of the holy fool, former *rígdamna* , and poet.

#### THE DEATH OF MAEL OCHTRAIG

This episode too would seem to operate both narratively and referentially. Certainly the rivalry between Lismore and Fid Dúin for the body of the king would appear to refer to some sort of political or monastic rivalry contemporary with the composition of the text. This may be so particularly if we consider that Fid Dúin might have been in the possession of the Uí Fothaid or the sept to which Mael-Ruanaid belonged: earlier in the text Mael-Ochtraig chases Conamail mac Suibne to Fid Dúin. ("Adventures," l.59) Rivalries of this sort can be seen elsewhere, for instance the battle between Durrow and Clonmacnoise in 764, probably sparked off by the burial of Domnall mac Murchada in the

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<sup>81</sup>Binchy, *Scéla Cano* , pp.17-19, poem "*Cid dech do lindaib flatha .*"

<sup>82</sup>O'Grady, *SG* vol.1, 17f; vol.2 18f.

<sup>83</sup>L. Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar* (Dublin, 1987) 50-1.



former.<sup>84</sup> The rivalry may not refer to the political rivalries of the period then, but to purely monastic ones. If we consider that Cormac held the abbacy of Kilmolash and the bishopric and vice-abbacy of Lismore, such a rivalry may be based on an actual event or foreseen events. What the status of Fid Dúin was in relation to other monasteries or to the Déisi kingship is unknown. However, it may be significant that Mac da Cherda's verse speaks of "the son of Mael-Ochtraig in Fid Dúin." (l.82.)

On a narrative level the episode serves first to release Mac Da Cherda from his father's court, leaving him free to wander towards Cummíne. More importantly, it contains yet another Christological reference, this time to the women at the tomb of Jesus. The language of the section seems to be drawing parallels: *Badar na mna ic gul* ("The women were weeping") and "*Eirig, a bean, féig calad, / i nDun Lettrach ni marad* ." ("Rise, woman, look close, none remains in Dun Lettrach." ll.78-80) seem to echo the events of the gospels and the words of the angel at the tomb.<sup>85</sup> There is also a hint of criticism against the contention of monasteries in this episode, but it is slight and ambiguous.

#### THE MEETING OF CUMMÍNE AND COMGÁN

The final episode in the tale ties it together by connecting Mac Da Cherda's cure with his curse. One has a feeling, however, that much has been intentionally glossed over and encapsulated in the phrases *Bui-seom ed ciana, inti Mac Da Cherda, for iarair Cumaine Fota* ("That Mac Da Cherda was a long time seeking Cummíne Fota." ll.84-5), and *Batar comalta-seom onn uair sin* . ("They became foster-brothers then." l.99) If the author of the text knew more about Comgán's adventures with Cummíne he chose not to include them in the story.

The style of the meeting is itself important, for the two seem to be engaged throughout in a form of verse-capping, exchanging cryptic but appropriate (in subject and form) phrases.

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<sup>84</sup>See Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, p.66. For the robbing of relics and corpses in the medieval period elsewhere, see P. Geary, *Furta Sacra: thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1978).

<sup>85</sup>cf. Matthew 28:1-7; Mark 16:1-6; Luke 24:1-5.



In the first set of exchanges this is accomplished by the use of internal rhymes and alliterations linking their comments: "*Is flechad in fid .*" "*Immid mo flechad .*" "*I tech tirim do-dechad .*" ("The wood is wet(?)" "Too great my wetness." "Into a dry house you have come." ll.86-8.) This first set sets the scene, dealing as it does with the wood and its wetness and the house and its dryness, and welcoming Comgán from the world of the wanderer to the world of the hermit.

The second set, from *Nirbo coir cach dias istaig* ("It is not proper for each pair to be inside." l.91) seems clearly modelled on a run of maxims, here made into nonsense phrases. This run of maxims is seen elsewhere with reference to sex or adultery. For instance, two triads state: *Trí ata ferr i tig: daim, fir, béla; Trí ata messum i tig: maicc, mná, méile*. ("Three which are better in a house: oxen, men, mouths; Three which are worse in a house: sons, women, fools.")<sup>86</sup> It is interesting that in the second maxim, two of the three items are mentioned in the run in the "Adventures", and the third is speaking the run. More cogent is the run of maxims closely related to this which occurs in the story of Partholón's wife and her adultery with a slave, mentioned earlier. There the woman protests her innocence: "I am innocent, I deserve recompense. Honey and a woman, new milk and a cat, food and a generous person, meat and a young boy, a craftsman and a tool, each in the presence of the other is a great hazard."<sup>87</sup> Although the series of maxims in the "Adventures" seems to echo this, and thus perhaps make reference to the context, the connection between the items in the maxims (the stone and the woman, the boy and the whip, the dog and the cauldron) is far from clear. Perhaps they are intended to be humorously enigmatic.

The final section of Cummíne and Mac Dá Cherda's exchange is evidently an exercise in verse-capping, as found, for instance, in *Fingal Rónáin*. We should note that in the *Imtheachta*, Cummíne

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<sup>86</sup>Meyer, *The Triads of Ireland* (RIA Todd Lecture Series 13, Dublin, 1906) 28 nos. 227, 228. Meyer translates *meile* as "lewdness", but cf DIL: *meile*, 1, for a suggestion that this means "fools" or "cowards".

<sup>87</sup>Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Érenn* vol. 3, p. 68-70. See also B. Ó Cuiv, "Three Middle Irish Poems", *Éigse* 16 (1975) 9f.



is told that he will not find his companion until he meets someone who will cap a certain verse. Mac Da Cherda is also shown elsewhere using verse-capping as a means of identification.<sup>88</sup> In *Fingal Rónáin*, verse-capping too is found in the context of presumed adultery, as a trial of the hero's guilt, and there a fool is involved in the scene as well.

These associations suggest that this scene is meant as a counterpoint to the first scene in the tale, a parallelism that fits the paradigm of the "wild Man" described earlier. This is all the more convincing because of the significant repetition of the verb *con-ricc* ("meets") in the verse-capping. In the first episode of the "Adventures," we are told that Mac Da Cherda was an *adbar rí*g "co comranic fri mnai druad a athar ." (l.3.) Here he says, "Coir ar comruc imatu ." (l.95) This suggests that he has gone from a wrong relationship, the *comrac* with the druid's wife, to a right one, his *comrac* with Cummíne. Their meeting then, which Cummíne states they have both been seeking a long time ("is cian mor cummacuingen " l.98) is the resolution of Comgán's sin, similar to the meeting of Suibne and Moling, or Lailoken and Kentigern. The final resolution of all these tales is the reception by the fool/madman of communion, and its significance is shown most clearly in the first of the Lailoken fragments.<sup>89</sup>

The reconciliation in "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda" is by no means elegantly achieved, nor is the significant rhetoric of the parallel "*comranic / comruc*" a common or consistent feature of the text. Nevertheless it conforms broadly to a genre: the biography of the madman or fool. This genre is the story of sin, punishment and reconciliation, and the sin is intimately related to the hero's madness. Within the genre of the wild man tales, the text occupies a small subset in which the fool is not returned to his former life of status and sin, but dies holy in his insanity. Within that subset, Mac Da Cherda is virtually unique in typifying not the violent and wilderness-bound *geilt* but the *óinmit*, a man whose liminality draws him only partially to the wilds, keeping him still in contact with society at large. Like Cummíne

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<sup>88</sup>O'Nolan, "Mór Muman," p.263-4; 270.

<sup>89</sup>MacQueen, "Vita Merlini Sylvestris," 84-6.



Fota then, the fool Mac Da Cherda occupies a liminal position as a detached person within society, disconnected from his noble status, taken by *rath Dé* and yet never entirely free from the circles of the society they have left. The two are then useful vehicles for social criticism, which is how we find them being used in the next three tales.

This tale, however, would appear to have been composed in a very specific context. The references to Cormac (mac) Mothlai which are concealed in the text would have meaning only during his period of kingship (897-920) or immediately after. It would seem unlikely that the text was composed after the king's "martyrdom", for the references give no clue of such a fate awaiting any of the characters who seem calques on Cormac (Mael Ochtraig, Bran Find.) It is possible, then, that the tale was composed for the king-abbot, to amuse and enlighten him as to the doings of his predecessors in the royal line. The text is undoubtedly a Déisi production, since all its characters and placenames are local. What significance a holy fool would have to such a person as the king, abbot, bishop and chief-counsellor of Munster in the early tenth century must remain an area for further exploration. The text does conceal warnings about the rival Uí Fothaid, however, and as we have seen, the holy fool is often an apposite counterpart to one who thinks himself wise.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### "The Trial of Mac Teléne"

The next story to be considered treats the two characters, Comgán and Cummíne, together as part of a team. In it we can already see the influence of each on the other, since Cummíne acts as a type of trickster figure and Comgán displays a certain saintly detachment. I have called this text "The Trial of Mac Teléne" since it deals with the captivity of that character until a trio of Munstermen, including Comgán and Cummíne, come to free him by proving his boastful remarks to be true. The tale is to be found in two manuscripts: in the Yellow Book of Lecan (col.797ms.; p.133b facs.) and in the Harleian 5280 ms. in the British Museum (f.25a). There are minor variations between the two. The tale was edited by J.G. O'Keeffe in *Ériu* 5 (p.26-33) from the YBL text. A summary of the tale is as follows:

1. Mac Teléne, a Munsterman, the chief causer of contention (*cenn imarbága*) in Ireland, made contention in the court of Guaire Aidne, boasting that the men of Munster had better entertainers, since they had a cleric who was a champion (*ségonn*) of Ireland; a fool who was the chief poet of Ireland; and a bishop who was its chief fool. Mac Teléne is imprisoned by Guaire until these three should come to prove themselves.
2. A year later, the trio, Cummíne Fota, Comgán Mac Da Cherda and the bishop MoRónóc appear at Durlas. Mac Da Cherda joins some youths playing hurling on the green. Mo Rónóc takes their hurling sticks. After going into the house, Cummíne sits on a chair under the cushion of which Guaire has placed an egg. Mo-Rónóc trips coming through the door, breaking the handles of the hurling sticks. Guaire says that if Cummíne has broken the egg under his cushion, he is no champion. Cummíne produces the egg unbroken, commenting that he didn't know that that was where Guaire's hens laid their eggs. MoRónóc with his shoes full of muck sashes over and sits next to Cummíne. Guaire agrees with Mac Teléne that the bishop is a fool.
3. Next they call Mac Da Cherda to prove himself a poet, and he responds with a quatrain refusing to come in, prompting Guaire



to remark "The chief poet has said that." Someone points out that nevertheless he is a fool, and so to prove it Cummíne has them make Comgán find his supposedly stolen nag. Comgán follows the trail of the nag all over Ireland, although he is shown the beast itself. Cummíne says, "Though he were to see the nag he would not stop from following it till he reached its rump." Cummíne then has them make Comgán fetch firewood for his bath. They put gold in front of him, and state that if he takes it he's no fool, but if he doesn't he is. He refuses to take it, protesting that he was looking for firewood, not gold. Guaire admits then that he is a fool.

4. Guaire proposes that he and Cummíne play fidchell. Cummíne says that though he has not learned how to play that, he's learned a more difficult lesson. He then competes with Senchán (here, Guaire's chief poet) to see which can recite the other's poetry better. Cummíne recites twelve lessons from the Gospel which Senchán has trouble understanding or remembering; Senchán's poems are easy for Cummíne to repeat. Then Cummíne and Guaire play fidchell. Cummíne explains that since he can't slay Guaire's men, he won't let any of his be slain. They play for a whole day and Guaire cannot slay any of his men. Guaire declares Cummíne a champion.

5. Mac Teléne is released. Guaire asks them all to stay, but Cummíne refuses. MoRónóc then, in putting on his shoes, gets his laces tangled up in the flock bed, which he upsets, sending Cummíne and Guaire sprawling onto the floor. They all leave "with their honour" and return to Munster.

## GENRE

Despite the broad physical humour, the tale appears to have some satirical purpose. This O'Keeffe first suggested, saying, "The peculiar character of the story tempts one to take the view that it may be a satire directed at such institutions as *segond*, *óinmit*, *fili*, &c , but in the absence of more direct proof it would be unwise to make too much of this point."<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to see where direct proof would come from, since satire, or humour of

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<sup>1</sup>O'Keeffe, "Mac Dá Cherda," p.42.



any kind, is notoriously difficult to diagnose, nowhere more so than in early Irish literature where the wildest of hyperbole is often taken by critics with a straight, not to say reverent face.<sup>2</sup>

If we are to attempt a reading of this tale as satire, we shall need more typically satirical works to measure it against. Throughout this chapter, when I speak of "satire" I shall be referring to social or literary satire, the specifics of which will be defined later. I shall not be concerned with the rather better explored type of Irish satire, the polemic or satire of dispraise.<sup>3</sup> There are essentially two main groupings of satirical works in early Irish literature. The first consists of the less serious works of the Ulster cycle: *Fled Bricrenn*, *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*, *Mesca Ulad*. These belong to roughly the same period of composition as "The Trial"- late Old Irish/early Middle Irish. The second group comprises tales more obviously satirical, set in the seventh century, but composed in the late Middle Irish period. These are from "the cycles of the kings", and include *Tromdám Guaire*, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, and *Fled Dúin na nGéd*.<sup>4</sup> With these later satires "The Trial" shares incidents and characters, though it is earlier in date of composition. In a sense, then, we could view this story as a bridge between the two groups, using some of the techniques and attitudes of the Ulster-cycle "satires" which principally mark the ethics and pretensions of nobles and warriors, and applying them to the wider social context of early medieval Ireland which we find depicted in the "historical cycles."

Before fully investigating the possibilities of a satiric agenda in this tale, we should first identify the characters involved. Their identification should show extensive links

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<sup>2</sup>One exception to this is Nora Chadwick's strange opinion of *Buile Shuibne* that it was essentially a joke from beginning to end. See, "Geilt", *SGS* 5 (1942) 108..

<sup>3</sup>For distinctions and commentary in Irish contexts, see Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford, 1962), particularly chapter five, 'Satire in Early Irish', and chapter eight, 'James Joyce and the Irish Tradition of Parody.' Mercier refers to the type of satire discussed in regard to "the Trial" as "generalized satire" or "parody."

<sup>4</sup>On this last see Máire Herbert, "*Fled Duin na nGéd*: A Reappraisal", *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 18(1989) 75-88..



between the characters of this tale and those of more clearly satirical works, especially *Tromdám Guaire*.

Comgán and Cummíne we need not treat here, except to recognise that this is probably the earliest tale in which we find them together as a team, and to note one example of a satirical motif whose early development can be seen in texts relating to these two characters. In the early Irish tract on satire *Cis Lir Fodlai Aire*,<sup>5</sup> a story about Comgán is included under the heading *Tamall Aíre*: "Touch of satire then, as Mac Do Cherdae composed. He went to Cill Aithcherdae in the territory of the Fir Maige Féne. [The door] was closed before him there, and he went afterwards to Cell Comair. He was welcomed there. It was Broccán son of Adde who was superior there, so that it is for that reason that Mac Do Cherdae said: 'The door which is not shut before me in the house of Broccán son of Adde, let it not go to waste for a single year--let it be taken to Mac Aithcherdae.'"<sup>6</sup>

This scenario is similar to the one we find in the H text of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, where Mac Con Glinne and a single lay brother called Mac-na-Cairre stop at Kells, get no food, and compose a satiric verse on the lack of hospitality.<sup>7</sup> Of this Mac-na-Cairre, Seán Ó Coileáin says he is "almost certainly the same as Mac Dá Cherda, who appears in A. Innis. and L.L. as Mc. na Cerda."<sup>8</sup> Both these scenes are suggestive of the set up at the end of "The Life of Cummíne Fota", which involves the saint's arrival at a monastery and the poor hospitality he receives. It is possible that he speaks some satire in the missing fragment, which might lead to his fated death at the monastery, but we shall never know.

Of course, all three of these scenes have their fullest realisation in *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*'s encounter at the monastery of Cork, which involves the hero's near-crucifixion by

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<sup>5</sup>ed. Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire* (unpub. M.Litt. thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 1989) 14, 18.

<sup>6</sup>McLaughlin, p.14, 18. Is "Mac Aithcherdae" a scribal error for "Cill Aithcherdae"?

<sup>7</sup>K. Meyer, *The Vision of Mac Conglinne* (London, 1892) 114.

<sup>8</sup>Ó Coileáin, "Structure", p.105. A. Innis, s.u. 645; P. Grosjean, "Oenmeic hErend Inso Síis," *Irish Texts* 3 (1931) 25.



the monks in revenge for his aspersions on their hospitality.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that a motif strongly associated with Comgán and Cummíne lies at the heart of a fully realised satiric episode in one of the classics of early Irish comedy.

Guaire Aidne, whom we meet here for the first time in connection with our characters, is involved with them in a number of texts, most notably with Cummíne in *Cath Cairn Chonaill*, *Na Trí Miana*, and as Marbán, in *Tromdám Guaire* and "King and Hermit." It is not certain when he became king of Connacht, though he must have been king of the Uí Fhiachrach Aidne from at least 627, the date of the battle of Carn Feradaig.<sup>10</sup> His importance as a Connacht king seems to have been swollen by his inclusion in the patchwork of poetry and prose tales called the West Munster cycle, and by his reputation as the epitome of generosity. His association with later satirical works is obvious from *Tromdám Guaire* and *Imtheachta na nÓinmhideadh*, and it is not impossible that "The Trial" is at the heart of his role in both these texts. We should note, however, his association with fools, for instance in *Cath Cairn Chonaill* where a fool receives his last, posthumous act of generosity; and possibly in *Betha Molaga*<sup>11</sup> where Guaire sends three "druidh" (leg. *drúith*?) to Cuana mac Cailchinn. This last incident bears some superficial resemblance to "The Trial", and is almost the converse of *Tromdám Guaire*: "...tangattar tri druidh Guaire mic Colmain rígh Connacht cona ccliaraibh do chuingidh neich for Cuana m. Cailchinn.i. Laoch Liathmuine, co nar gabsat ní úadh acht an baile d'argain doibh no a glámhadh."<sup>12</sup>

Finally in regard to Guaire, a number of his tales which include Cummíne (as himself or as Marbán) seem directed against the pretensions and wealth of the court in a moralising way. Thus in *Na Trí Miana*, Guaire wishes for wealth to give to the poor.<sup>13</sup> In *Cath Cairn Chonaill*, Guaire is humbled and humiliated for

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<sup>9</sup>K. Jackson, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (Dublin, 1991) 5f.

<sup>10</sup>J.F. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings* (London, 1973) 239-40.

<sup>11</sup>J.G. O'Keefe, "Betha Molaga" *Irish Texts* 3 (1931)19.

<sup>12</sup>cf. Ó Coileáin, "Structure", p.121-2..

<sup>13</sup>Stokes, "The Battle of Carn Conaill", *ZCP* 3(1901)203n. for references to the numerous versions of this anecdote..



oppressing the poor, and in the end displays his conversion through outrageous generosity.<sup>14</sup> And the poem "King and Hermit" has been shown by Donnchadh Ó Corráin to delicately play on and subvert the images of the court (the crowds of people, domesticity, entertainment) and shows the eremitic life as contrastingly peaceful and joyful.<sup>15</sup>

Senchán Torpéist, in "The Trial" described as Guaire's file, has been identified as an early Irish poet who wrote genealogical poems on the Leinster dynasties. Carney gives him a tentative lifespan of 580-650, with his main work around 630.<sup>16</sup> He is persistently associated with Guaire in tradition, though this text is unusual in seeing him actually attached to Guaire's court. In *Tromdám Guaire* he is the chief poet of Ireland, and leads a delegation of poets and hangers-on to Durlas to force Guaire's reputation for hospitality into crisis by making excessive demands on him.<sup>17</sup> This role of the burdensome guest first accrues to him in *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*,<sup>18</sup> where he has become a more or less permanent fixture of Guaire's court and suggests that Connacht cannot host both himself and Cano at once. In one episode of *Scéla Cano* he is said to have come over Sliab Echtge with a band of Munstermen. This bears some similarity--with the roles reversed--to "The Trial". Senchán is described in *Scéla Cano* in rather "uncivilised" and comic terms: he is very small and weak, and has to wear a woollen hide all the time to keep him warm; he eats very little.<sup>19</sup> Senchán's contest with Marbán in *Tromdám Guaire* is closely related to the contest described in "The Trial" between Cummíne and Senchán.<sup>20</sup>

MoRónóc the bishop can not be confidently identified. It is likely that his name is a hypochoristic of Rónán.<sup>21</sup> He might in

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<sup>14</sup>ibid., 203-19.

<sup>15</sup>"Early Irish Hermit Poetry?", *Sages, Saints and Storytellers* (ed. Ó Corráin et. al., Maynooth, 1989) .257-261.

<sup>16</sup>James Carney, "Three Old Irish Accentual Poems", *Ériu* 22 (1971) 73ff.

<sup>17</sup>Maud Joynt, *Tromdám Guaire* (1931) p.8-9.

<sup>18</sup>D. Binchy, *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin* (1975) 8-11

<sup>19</sup>Binchy, *Scéla Cano*, p. 9, ll.222-224:"*Fer beg trúag, i rrúsc olla no-bídh do-grés dia chadudh ara-thruaighi. Cethrumthu bairgine do-meled co cend trí tráth.*"

<sup>20</sup>See Ó Coileáin, "*Tromdám*", p.54.

<sup>21</sup>Ó Coileáin, "*Tromdám*", p.53.



this case be the Rónán, bishop of Lismore, mentioned in *Félire Óengusso*, at Feb. 9.<sup>22</sup> Since the genealogy there given is erroneously that of Rónán Find, it is difficult to say any more concerning this saint, except that his being bishop at Lismore would qualify him admirably for his role in this tale. It is possible, however, that this Rónán may be the same as the Rónán epscop (al.Crach) listed in the Leinster genealogies of the Uí Mail as brother to Crimthann m. Áeda Díbchinne (=633). There<sup>23</sup> he is said to have killed his brother. This Crimthann m. Áeda should be identified with the king of Leinster in the *Imtheachta na nÓinmhideadh*, and perhaps with the "Crimthand m. Áeda Cirr" listed as uterine brother to Guaire and Cummíne and Comgán.<sup>24</sup>

Mac Teléne poses further problems of identification, too great to go into in depth here.<sup>25</sup> Let it suffice to say that I believe he is to be identified with the Dub-dá-Thuath mac Steléne of the "eight in Armagh" poem in *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*. This poem mentions also Mac Da Cherda and Marbán.<sup>26</sup> He may also be identified with the Mac Stelín whose genealogy is given under the Muintir Fhlannchada of the Músraige Tíre<sup>27</sup> and tentatively the Dub-dá-Thuath to whom is ascribed a platitudinous "Advice to a Prince" poem *Dia mbad messe bad rí réil*.<sup>28</sup> All three of these identifications place him firmly in a Munster context, and the "eight in Armagh" poem arguably lists seventh century characters. None of these identities give us much help as to why he would be the protagonist of this story, or why he is characterised as a boaster, though *Dia mbad messe* is at one point blatantly pro-Munster.<sup>29</sup> The *Aislinge* poem places

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<sup>22</sup>Stokes, *Félire*, Feb 9, and p.72.

<sup>23</sup>O'Brien, *CGH*, Rawl B502, 125a11: *Ronan epscop mac Aeda is e ro geguin Chrimthann a brathair.*

<sup>24</sup>*CGH*, LL322c20; see Ó Coileain, "Structure," p.92-3, and *ZCP* 19, p.88.

<sup>25</sup>But see T. Clancy, "Mac Steléne and the Eight in Armagh: Identity and Context," *Éigse* 26, forthcoming.

<sup>26</sup>Meyer, *Mac Conglinne*, p. 7; Jackson, *AMC*, p.3. Jackson, p.47-8, gives identifications for the characters in the poem, though this connection is not made.

<sup>27</sup>*CGH*, LL323g50.

<sup>28</sup>Tadhg Ó Donnchadha, "Advice to a Prince," *Ériu* 9 (1921-3) 43-54.

<sup>29</sup>*ibid.*, p.45.



him among other comic and satirical characters, though this may reflect a tradition based on the adventures in "The Trial."

This list of the characters gives us a sense of the type of web of tradition and relationship from which "The Trial" is drawn. Three are said to be uterine brothers (Guaire, Cummíne and Comgán) and another (MoRónóc) may be full brother to another of their "uterine brothers" (Crimthand.) Three are listed in a poem which refers to people connected in some way to folly or satire, found in the context of a late satirical work.<sup>30</sup> And three (Guaire, Marb\_án/Cummíne, Senchán) appear as the main characters in the fully developed social satire of *Tromdám Guaire*.

"The Trial of Mac Teléne" is undoubtedly intended to be humorous, though the separation of time and culture probably creates for us jokes which do not really exist and makes opaque ones that do. But humour is not the same as satire, and we shall have to define our genre if we are to measure "The Trial" against it. Of the requirements of satire, Northrop Frye says, "Two things, then are essential to satire; one is wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack."<sup>31</sup> The presence of absurd and fantastic humour in "The Trial" should be obvious, for example, the bishop's shoes full of mud, the standard of a champion being his ability to sit on an egg without breaking it, or Mac Da Cherda's hunt through the studs of Ireland for Cummíne's nag. The object of attack, however, is not always readily visible, though our examination of the text should demonstrate such an object or objects, which may have been more visible to contemporaries. It is difficult, however, to demonstrate what would have been obvious to a ninth-tenth century Irishman, and therefore we will need to take into account Frye's suggestions concerning irony: "Whenever a reader is not sure what the author's attitude is or what his own is supposed to be, we have irony with relatively little satire."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Jackson, *Aislinge*, p47 calls it "a collection of strange characters [including] a prophetic half-wit, a cunning trickster, a supernatural hag, two Wild Men of the Woods, and Mac Conglinne." Some of these descriptions are debatable.

<sup>31</sup>N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957) 224.

<sup>32</sup>ibid., p.223.



Here, it is hard to see a precisely ironic intent in "The Trial" : the tale seems to include too much parody of literary and social norms, though what the stance actually is towards those objects parodied is harder to say:

Perhaps we should classify our tale under what Frye terms "the comedy of escape" or "the picaresque novel": "The simplest form of the corresponding second phase of comedy is the comedy of escape, in which a hero runs away to a more congenial society without transforming his own. The satiric counterpart of this is the picaresque novel, the story of the successful rogue who...makes conventional society look foolish without setting up any positive standard."<sup>33</sup> This certainly seems to match the situation in "The Trial", where both social and literary norms are parodied, and social conventions such as rank and deference are upset and reversed. Frye continues: "Whenever the 'other world' appears in satire, it appears as an ironic counterpart to our own, a reversal of accepted standards."<sup>34</sup> In "The Trial" the reversal of standards comes in the persons of three Munstermen; thus, Munster acts as a sort of 'other world' which visits the real one of Guaire's court. In doing so, it shows the standards of the real world to be themselves laughable. The casting of Munster in an other world role is not a surprising one in a very broad view of tradition. The Rees's pointed strongly to the otherworldly, inverted, mirror-image of Munster's character.<sup>35</sup> F.J. Byrne summarizes this view, saying, "Munster, being thus the outsider and also the Otherworld in this cosmological scheme, can present a mirror image of Ireland."<sup>36</sup> Here, it is almost a "looking-glass" world which the clerics bring to Guaire's court. Their performance is a double-edged one: just as their assumption of other roles mocks their real status as cleric, fool, bishop, so too it mocks the new roles they assume and the standards by which

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<sup>33</sup>ibid., p229. See also W. Tydeman, "Satiric Strategies in the English Cycle Plays," *Popular Drama in Northern Europe in the Later Middle Ages* (ed. Tydeman, Odense, 1988) 16-18 on distinctions between "satire" and "complaint."

<sup>34</sup>Frye, *Criticism*, p.233.

<sup>35</sup>A. and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London, 1961)126-7, and 132-9. Note their conclusion:"There, the last is first."

<sup>36</sup>Byrne, *Kings*, p.165ff.



they are judged: poet, champion, jester. It should also be said that there may be some element of mockery directed at Munster in the tale.

In order to determine the satiric agenda of "The Trial", we will need to examine it sequentially and suggest where possible the literary resonances in it and the possible targets of attack. It should be clear from the start, however, that this text is in no way comparable for strength, clarity or style to those masterpieces of Irish social and literary satire, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* and *Tromdám Guaire*.

### MAC TELÉNE AND GUAIRE

The story begins, essentially, at a feast. It is noteworthy that many of the satires mentioned above centre in some way around a feast: *Fled Bricrenn*, *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó* and *Mesca Ulad* all deal in some way with contention at feasts<sup>37</sup>; *Tromdám Guaire* revolves around the over-extended and fastidious feast of Guaire's guests, and *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* concerns the gluttonous and ruinous feasting of Cathal, and the hunger of Mac Conglinne. Juliette Wood comments that "the festal occasion has been much exploited in narrative as the beginning of an adventure," and indeed she comments on a Welsh tale whose plot bears a significant resemblance to that of "The Trial." This is *Hanes Taliesin*, a work known only through late sources, but based on earlier material, in which one character, Elphin, boasts that his bard is better than those of the king, Maelgwn, and his wife more chaste than Maelgwn's. His bard, Taliesin, succeeds in freeing Elphin from the prison he is then cast into, by besting and humiliating the bards and proving the worth of Elphin's wife. There is evidence of the imprisonment and bardic contest elements in this tale from as early as the twelfth century.<sup>38</sup>

The contention in many of the Ulster cycle "satires" and indeed other tales, is brought about by boasting and one-

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<sup>37</sup>See P. O'Leary, "Contention at Feasts in Early Irish Literature", *Éigse* 20 (1984) 115-27.

<sup>38</sup>J. Wood, "The Elphin Section of *Hanes Taliesin*", *Études Celtiques* 18(1981) .234.



upmanship.<sup>39</sup> Here, it is initially the behaviour of the sycophantic retinue in praising the entertainment of their host, Guaire, which sparks off the conflict. So too in such texts as *Noínden Ulad* and *Hanes Taliesin*. Indeed, reasons should emerge which would allow us to consider the element of vainglory implicit in this initial episode of bragging by the retinue, Mac Teléne, and *de facto* by Guaire through his reaction to Mac Teléne's boast, to be one the main themes of "The Trial."

Mac Teléne is called "*cend imarbaga nErend*" (l.1), which could mean either "the chief of contentious people" ("strife fomentors", O'Keefe) or the "source of contentions." In this he may be compared to Bricriu, although the more usual term applied to his activities is *imchosnam*, or *imchossaít*. In Fléd Bricrenn, *immarbág* is used once, of the warriors' wives who were *oc imarbaig eter a feraib*.<sup>40</sup> So Mac Teléne's protest is not so much that of a Bricriu or Efnisien, nor that of a purposeful troublemaker: he is a boaster, he challenges the proud assumptions of those of rank. We should compare him, then, to Elphin, or to Crunniuc in the story *Noínden Ulad*.<sup>41</sup> He is like these two, correct in his boast, as the three clerics prove, but perhaps some criticism of his act of *bragadoccio* is present in Cummíne's reluctance to go to his rescue: "*Bliadain lán dó and 7 ní fetus for Cumaine dul fris*." (l.10) His imprisonment is then, in a sense, a minor punishment.

But Guaire is also on trial, along with the court society that surrounds him, with all its associations of wealth, rank, honour, and pride. The particular sin that is involved here is that of vainglory, *iactantia*. In Cummean's Penitential, probably written by the historical Cummíne Fota, we find two telling strictures on this sin:

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<sup>39</sup>See particularly the discussion of *Scéla Muicce* in McCone, *Pagan Past<sup>and</sup> Christian Present*, (Maynooth, 1990) 77-9: "In effect, this story is a glorious moral essay on the consequences, dire, absurd or both as the case may be, of human vanity." See also Cornelius Buttimer, "*Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó* : A reappraisal," *Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 2 (1982) 65.

<sup>40</sup>G. Henderson, *Fled Bricrenn* (ITS vol.2, London, 1899) §29.

<sup>41</sup>V. Hull, *Noínden Ulad* : The Debility of the Ulidians," *Celtica* 8 (1968) 1-42.



*De lactantia: 1. Contentiosus etiam alterius sententiae subdat se; sin autem, anathemazatur ut regno Dei est alienorum. 2. lactans in suis benefactis humiliat se, alioquin quicquid boni fecerit humanae gloriae causa perdidit.* <sup>42</sup>

Guaire is in a sense guilty of this vainglory, and also represents the court society whose standards are mocked in the course of the tale. In other texts relating to this reputedly wealthy king we see variations on the conversion process. In *Cath Cairn Chonaill*, he is humbled and made to submit to Diarmait king of Tara. In this submission, Diarmait puts Guaire's generosity to the test in words that echo Cummean's: "Why does Guaire practice that generosity? Is it for God's sake or for men's?"<sup>43</sup> In the course of his "trial", he is asked by a fool, a beggar and a Céle Dé in turn for alms, and responds more than generously. Diarmait admits that he has "submitted to another king, even to God's son."<sup>44</sup> Note here the emphasis on submission to the "king of heaven" present in the preface to *Celebra Juda*.<sup>45</sup> We should note too, in *Cath Carn Chonaill*, the causes of the battle--Guaire's theft of an old woman's cow--and the means of his conversion--his loss of the battle, flight to the "wilderness", his eating humble food.<sup>46</sup>

The emphasis on conversion, and on the abandonment of wealth to the poor and court society for God, is repeated in the dialogue between Marbán and Guaire, where Marbán states "Though you relish/that which you enjoy/exceeding all wealth// I am content/with that which is given to me/by my gentle Christ." Guaire replies:"I will give my great kingdom/and my share of Colmán's heritage,/undisputed possession of it till my death/ to

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<sup>42</sup>Bieler, *Irish Penitentials*, p.120-1. "1.The contentious shall (not only mend his ways but) even subject himself to the decision of another; otherwise he shall be anathematized, since he is among the strangers to the kingdom of God. 2. One who boasts of his own good deeds shall humble himself; otherwise any good he has done he has lost on account of human glory."

<sup>43</sup>Stokes, "Carn Conaill", p.212-3.

<sup>44</sup>ibid., p.212-3. Note also the use of the language of submission in the homily *Sermo ad Reges*, R. Atkinson, *Passions and Homilies in the Leabhar Brecc*, (Dublin, 1887) 151-62.

<sup>45</sup>Bernard and Atkinson, *Liber Hymnorum*, vol. 1, pp.17-18; vol. 2, p.10.

<sup>46</sup>See also, P. Ó Riain, "Wild Man", p. 201-2.



live with you, Marbán."<sup>47</sup> Note that as in "The Trial" it is Cummíne, here in his alias as Marbán, who brings an "other world" to the attention of Guaire, an other world which subverts and changes the images of the court. Ó Corráin has pointed to the subtext of contrast between the life of aristocratic society and that of the hermit woven through the imagery of the poem. Significantly, perhaps, one of these refers to entertainment: "Beautiful are the pines/which make music for me/ unhired."<sup>48</sup> In "The Trial," it is particularly in his proving of Cummíne that Guaire's own lifestyle comes into question. In all these Guaire texts, we could perhaps trace a thread of biblical moralising based around such texts as Ecclesiastes and Psalm 48(9), with its emphasis on folly, wisdom, and the vanity of riches: "Fear not when a man grows rich,/ when the wealth of his house becomes great/ for when he dies, he shall take none of it (cf. the ending of *Cath Cairn Chonail* and Guaire's last act of generosity!) his wealth shall not follow him down./ Though in his lifetime he counted himself blessed,/ 'They will praise you for doing well for yourself,'/ He shall join the circle of his forebears who shall never more see light." Remember in this context, too, the role of "other worlds", satirical or idealised, in these texts, and the injunction from Cummean's Penitential "he is among the strangers to the kingdom of God."

## THE ROLES

We are given a list of the three characters, Cummíne, MoRónóc and Mac Da Cherda, and a list of their actual roles in life: MoRónóc is a bishop, Mac Da Cherda is a fool (*óinmit*), and Cummíne is called throughout the text simply a cleric. What they are otherwise are respectively fool (*óinmit* again), poet (*file*) and champion (*ségon*).

Cummíne is portrayed in an ironic way as a *ségon*, a "champion". This is not to be understood so much as a military champion or warrior, but as something of a cross between an

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<sup>47</sup>Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, p.18-19.

<sup>48</sup>Murphy, *EIL*, p.18-19. See Ó Corráin, "Early Irish Hermit Poetry?", p.257-261.



athlete and a courtier, an accomplished gentleman. This is the term applied to Fróech after his arrival at the court of Ailill and Medb on account of his possession of skilled hunting hounds, his fine musicians, and his skill at playing fidchell.<sup>49</sup> So too we should consider the entry of Lug into Tara in The Second Battle of Mag Tuired as a demonstration of "championship", though the word *ségon* is not used there.<sup>50</sup> In a sense, they must have sometimes been regarded as entertainers, though hardly professionals. Something of the royal retainer or noble courtier then. In a list of the *frithfolaid* (counter-obligations) owed to the king of Cashel, we are told of various craftsmen and entertainers owed him by surrounding tribes, including the chief poet from the Múscraige, the champions (*séguinn*) from the Uaithni, Oبراige and Corco Athrach, and fools (*drúith*) and doorkeepers from the Corcomruad.<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to note that three of these tribes--Múscraige (poets), Uaithni (champions) and Corcomruad (fools) lie in close proximity to Guaire's kingdom of Aidne.

We should note finally the fortuitous nature of Cummíne's championship--he is unaware of his skills: he doesn't break an egg that he was unaware of sitting on; he is skilled at poetry, but in an offhand and unorthodox fashion; he is a master of fidchell, though he's never played it before. All of this is in keeping with the intent of the piece--to prick the balloon of noble social pretensions, yet keep the protagonist essentially humble and untouched by his own virtuosity.

## ARRIVAL AT COURT

The arrival of the three clerics at Durlas should be seen in light of similar arrivals to which it bears some resemblance. At one level it is similar to the arrival of Fróech already mentioned, particularly if we consider Fróech, the *ségon*, as the role Cummíne fills, and MoRónóc and Mac Da Cherda as variously his entertainers and his dogs.

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<sup>49</sup>Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích*, p.5 l.114.

<sup>50</sup>E.A. Gray, *Cath Maige Tuired* (ITS vol.52, Dublin, 1982)38-41.

<sup>51</sup>Byrne, p.197-8.



More clearly, in the scene on the lawn of Durlas where Mac Da Cherda and MoRónóc involve themselves in a game of hurling (ll.11-14), there is an unmistakable echo of passages in *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. In the boyhood-deeds section particularly, we find Cú Chulainn encountering boys playing hurling on Emain Macha's lawn, and defeating them soundly:

"Another time he was playing ball in the playing field east of Emain, he alone on one side against the thrice fifty boys. He kept defeating them in every game in that way all the time. Eventually the boy began to belabour them with his fists and fifty of them died. Whereupon he fled and hid under the pillow of Conchobar's couch."<sup>52</sup>

There are numerous similar episodes in this section of the *Táin*, including Cú Chulainn's first encounter with the boys, his besting them, and his first warp-spasm. So too, in a later scene he knocks off the Badb's head and dribbles it about.<sup>53</sup>

This sort of setting is clearly being evoked in "The Trial". In particular the hurling match (followed by a retreat to a flock-bed, and also *fidchell*) echoes the environment of Emain Macha, although undoubtedly these were normal accoutrements of Irish court society. Specifically, though, we could note the uses of this setting in our text's agenda. For instance, in the Harleian manuscript, we are told that Mac Da Cherda leaped into the middle of the boys so that he was in the place (*port*) of the ball, which may echo Cú Chulainn's encounter with the Badb.

More importantly, the word used for the hurling sticks is not, as would be usual, *lorga*, but *bachla* --the plural of *bachall*, "staff or crozier" (from L. *baculus*). This is the unique instance of *bachall* in such a usage, and the fact that the bishop collects the *bachla* makes it clear that a pun is at work. This pun is extended by the phrase *geibid didiu MoRónóc a mbachla* (l.13). The expression *gaibid bachaill* was often used to mean "takes holy orders" or "goes on pilgrimage." The hurling game is turned into a religious act--though the breaking of the sticks is less easily explained.

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<sup>52</sup>O'Rahilly, *Táin 1*, ll.470-6.

<sup>53</sup>*ibid.*, ll.501-2.



The integration of the movements of MoRónóc with those of Cummíne is one of the features that give this text a sense of continuity and a strong dramatic quality; rather than concentrating on one character, we follow each in turn. Cummíne's entrance is preceded by a bit of comic subterfuge on Guaire's part, as he hides the egg under Cummíne's cushion. The pantomime atmosphere is enhanced by the dialogue after he has sat in the chair: "Come over here, cleric, onto the flock-bed, but it's not champion-like of you if you've broken the egg which has been left behind in the chair." (ll.24-5) The nonchalance of the phrasing *an uigh rodermadad isin chathair* combines with the dramatic irony of the reader's knowledge that Guaire put the egg there; we have "seen" him do it. Cummíne's witty reply ("We didn't know that it was in your chairs that your hens laid." ll.26-7.) is the height of coolness, yet has about it some of the naiveté of the fool, and is a fitting cap to this sequence.

The affair with the egg seems to be playing on a type of feat called *léim ar bhailg is gan a bloghadh*, "leaping on a bubble (?) without breaking it."<sup>54</sup> We find this feat mentioned elsewhere, most germanely perhaps in a poem by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh, describing a nobleman's championlike qualities, and referring to the story of Lug's entrance into Tara.<sup>55</sup> What the original feat involved is hard to imagine, but despite its humorous sound it was quite possibly a serious feat. The egg here lends a comic touch to the scene, quite apart from the new hypothetical feat *suide for uig is cen a brised*. Hens' eggs are of comic import elsewhere. In *Tromdám Guaire*, it is the eating of a hen's egg by mice which causes Senchán to launch into a series of invectives, first against the mice, then against the cats for not doing their job properly, an accusation which leads to his near death at the claws of the cat-king.<sup>56</sup> In *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, the intent of which has recently been shown as satirical, it is the substitution of the hen's egg for a goose egg on Congal's plate which causes

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<sup>54</sup>Cf. Ó Coileáin, "*Tromdám*", p.54n.79, and Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry* (Dublin, 1984) 246n.

<sup>55</sup>Bergin, p.77, v.33; v.46.

<sup>56</sup>TG, p.21-23.



him to go off in a huff and make war on Domnall. In both these incidents, the egg is a trivial matter about which serious contentions arise.<sup>57</sup> The egg becomes a *casus belli* to Senchán as satirist and Congal as warrior. In "The Trial" the egg potentially fills the same slot, a trivial matter over which Guaire is itching to quibble. Cummíne defuses the situation by his gentility and tact, and moreover has not broken the egg. The target of this sequence is the criteria of courtly nobility, the absurdity which suggests that what makes a *sécond* is his ability to sit on an egg without breaking it.

This exchange between Guaire and Cummíne is interwoven with MoRónóc's buffoonery, tripping in the door and decapitating the *bachla*. There may be some satire in this act, beyond the sheer slapstick of it. Note, for instance, the proscription concerning an adulterous bishop which refers to him as *espoc tuisledach*, "a stumbling bishop."<sup>58</sup> Though the passage in "The Trial" is slightly corrupt here, it is clear that we are dealing with some form of the verb *tuisled*; O'Keefe amends *Tuslis 7 timmortis in chomlai...* In the Irish Bible, the translation of *petram scandali* (Isaiah 8:14) is *cloich thuisligh*. In the Scottish Gaelic Bible, *ceap-tuisligh* is used also for Paul's "a stumbling block (*scandalum*) to the Jews", in 1 Cor 1:23, a passage with close connections to this text and to holy folly in general. Furthermore, it is tempting to see the use of the adjective *mael* -- here, "headless", but elsewhere "tonsured, shaven" -- as intending a sort of ecclesiastical pun along the lines of *bachall*.<sup>59</sup> In this context, the mysterious poem from the St. Gall Priscian may be relevant, being addressed to *mail bachal* "servant of the croziers?":

*Gaib do chúil isin charcair*

Take your corner in the prison,

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<sup>57</sup>With this we might compare the Battle of Arfderydd in Welsh tradition, said to have been fought "*ar achaws nyth yr echedyd* ." (R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Cardiff, 1961) 206.) We are possibly dealing with an unknown proverb in both cases, dealing with a fight over something trivial, like the English "cavilling over a hair."

<sup>58</sup>*CIH*, 234.4-8. Note also the Penitential of Finnian: "if one who is a cleric falls (*cecidit*) miserably through fornication and loses his crown (*coronam suam perdiderit*)...", Bieler, *Penitentials*, p76-7.

<sup>59</sup>On "mael", see Joseph Nagy, "Demne Mael." *Celtica* 14,(1981) 8-14.



*ni róis chluim na colcaid.*                    you shall reach neither down nor flock-bed.  
*Truag insin, a mail bachal,*                    Sad is that, servant of the croziers(?)  
*rot-giuil ind shrathar dodcaid.*            the packsaddle of ill-luck has stuck to you.<sup>60</sup>

What the precise meaning of this verse is is far from clear, but surely the presence of the phrase *mael bachal* and the reference to *cluim* and *colcad* are significant.

The comedy continues with MoRónóc going to join Cummíne on the flock-bed with his shoes full of muck. A great deal of the bishop's buffoonery revolves around his *assa*, his shoes: *Tarail a asa oc dul isinn tech in comlai* (l.20); *luid cona asaib lana do cechair* (ll.28-9); *Geibid M. a assa ime forsin colcaig, iall inn asai lais tri bruach na seichi beos7 triasan asai* (ll.92-3).

Comedy is associated with muddy shoes later in Irish literature, specifically in *Bodach in Chóta Lachtna*, where the *bodach* appears in shoes which constantly squelch mud up the back of his legs.<sup>61</sup> Extending the frame of reference to the ecclesiastical, it is possible that the incident parodies passages like that in the notes to *Féilire Óegusso*, referring to Finan Cam's bringing agriculture into Ireland in his shoes, which were later venerated as relics.<sup>62</sup>

More clear is the sequence which follows (ll.28-33). MoRónóc sits next to Cummíne. "The serving-boys laughed at that. 'Perhaps it is his customary seat,' says Guaire,'next to the cleric.'*(Bes as e a suide dogres...for laim in cleirich .)* 'It is indeed,' says Cummíne. 'That bishop, that one's your fool,' says Mac Teléne. 'He proves himself a fool indeed,' says Guaire.*(Dothoet oinmit de-seom immorro .)*

This exchange focuses on the status reversal of Cummíne, a mere "cleric" and MoRónóc, a bishop. As a higher ranking position, a bishop's honour-price was considerably higher than that of an ordinary cleric, and in a status-conscious society would take precedence in seating. His apparent submission to Cummíne shows the rejection of status in the upside-down world of the

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<sup>60</sup>Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus* (Cambridge, 1901-3)vol.2, p.290.

<sup>61</sup>O'Grady, *SG*, vol. 1, p.290; vol. 2, pp.325-6.

<sup>62</sup>Stokes, *Féilire*, 112: *Finan Cam tuc cruithnecht i nErinn .i. lan a assa tug.*



Munster trio, as much as the bishop's adventures with his shoes show a lack of vanity. For this rejection of status, as much as for his physical buffoonery, he is termed a fool, an *óinmit*. So it will be in the next episode that Mac Da Cherda's foolishness is finally proved by his rejection of wealth. At this point we should recall the Christology implicit in such aspects of the holy fool, and consider such biblical referents as *exaltavit humiles*, "he has raised the lowly to high places." (Luke 1:52), from the *Magnificat* which undoubtedly supplies the subtext for a later episode in "The Trial."

That this, as in "The Life", suggests a quite radical agenda for the satire of the tale should be clear. Early Irish society was nothing if not rank obsessed. The preface to the main compilation of law texts, the *Senchas Már*, speaks with implied horror of the time before the laws established status, when everyone was equal.<sup>63</sup> The prophetic section of *Imacallam in Dá Thuarad*, "The Colloquy of the two Sages"<sup>64</sup> talks in apocalyptic language of the dread times to come: *Ragaid cech oen assa richt la uail7 dímmus* ("Everyone will pass out of his [proper] state from pride and arrogance"); *Dimnigfider cech sáer, conutaster doér, cona aderthar dia na duine*. ("Every noble will be comtemned, every base-born will be set up, so that neither God nor man will be worshipped."); *...corop maith la sin sosar bith in a shuidiu 7 a shinser uas a chind*. ("so that the junior will like to be seated while his senior is above his head.")<sup>65</sup> The stance of "The Trial" is the complete antithesis of the view in this work of aristocratic propaganda. Allegiance to rank is implied to be a problem, and the triumph of the Munster fools in their cause bears out the rightness of their inverted system. We should note too Kim McCone's apposite comments on the end of *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*, which he sees as a satire on excess, pride, and vainglory : "[The Fer Loga episode] subverts the love of fighting as an end in itself by representing battle as a bagatelle in which, with luck, even the lowly born might distinguish themselves at

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<sup>63</sup>Kelly, *Guide*, p.8.

<sup>64</sup>W.Stokes, "Imacallam in dá Thuarad," *Revue Celtique* 26, p.4ff.

<sup>65</sup>Stokes, "Imacallam", p.36/7;p.38/9;p.42/3.



their betters' expense, a scenario hardly calculated to appeal to an aristocratic audience."<sup>66</sup>

## MAC DA CHERDA

The two aspects of Mac Da Cherda manifested in the next sequence, his folly and his ability at poetry, are ones we have discussed before, and have been discussed by others. Once again, the standards by which the court judges its *áes dána* are called into question by the exclamation of Guaire following Mac Da Cherda's rather feeble quatrain: "The chief poet of Ireland has said that." (ll.35-40) Consider the quality of the quatrain:

<i>Ní fetar citne briga</i>	I don't know what good it brings
<i>mo dul i teach cor-riga</i>	my going in a house with kings;
<i>nimtha nach cundail atber</i>	I have nothing fit to say,
<i>ní fuiglim nímfuiglither.</i>	I don't judge, none judges me.

One wonders why--other than to point up the absurd standards of poetry--Guaire would be made to respond so positively to this verse. The verse itself contains some implicit criticism of the social scene. Mac Da Cherda calls into question the value of consorting with kings, suggests silence as a mode of behaviour, and then utters the statement *ní fuiglim, nímfuiglither* (l.39), which I have taken as "I judge not, I am not judged," perhaps playing on the Gospels' *Nolite iudicare, ut non iudicemini* "Judge not, that you may not be judged." (Matthew 7:1).<sup>67</sup> There are other possible meanings, however: O'Keeffe gives "I consult not, I am not consulted," taking the verb *fo-gella* to mean "pronounces upon or gives counsel." It can also mean "binds pledges, pleads at law," which would be suitable as well. At any rate, the quatrain certainly suggests the humility of Mac Da Cherda and his

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<sup>66</sup>McCone, *Pagan Past*, p.78.

<sup>67</sup>It is perhaps interesting that this sentiment is echoed in 1 Corinthians 4:3, the same chapter of Paul's epistle that contains his references to "fools for Christ's sake." (4:10-13) This chapter also contains admonitions against boasting and riches and status. In the first chapter of the letter, which deals mainly with folly and wisdom, we have the reference to *scandalum*, "stumbling block", noted above in the context of *tuisled*.



rejection of the court and its values. We should also note the words of *Imacallam in dá Thuarad* : *bíd furside cech dán* (every art will be buffoonery.)"<sup>68</sup>

There is also a certain wisdom in the quatrain which could occasion Guaire's opinion of it. This is entirely in keeping with Mac Da Cherda's propensity, noted elsewhere, to lapse into wise pronouncements and prophecy. This then, might necessitate the ensuing trial of his insanity (ll.41-60). The humour in this sequence is fairly international, the point of the two "ordeals" being that Mac Da Cherda is so foolish that he ignores both reason and the lure of wealth. His single-minded pursuit of the aim in front of him has some of the quality of the holy fool about it. We might, for instance, compare the actions of Mael Dobarchon in "rescuing Christ."<sup>69</sup> As a contrast, we might suggest *Echtra Nerai* , where Nerae, assigned to fetch firewood every day, discovers a gold diadem, which he eventually retrieves along with other talismans of kingship. If we consider McCone's analysis of this tale ("A central message of our text, then, is that they [the emblems of kingship] and consequently the sovereignty embodied by them, have been released from a moribund and demonic pagan environment into proper Christian custody.") we may wonder if the saintly Mac Da Cherda's rejection of the gold is not directed equally at a church audience.<sup>70</sup>

## CUMMÍNE FOTA

Fidchell seems to be a constant of court society in early Ireland, and the proof of the warrior aristocrat. Thus in *Táin Bó Fraích* , one of the attributes which cause Ailill to exclaim "*Is segond dofánic* ," is Fráech's ability at fidchell. So too, after Lug's entry into Tara in *Cath Maige Tuired* , he plays fidchell with the Dagda, as a sort of confirmation of his championship, which he secures by winning convincingly. It is not surprising then that

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<sup>68</sup>Stokes, *Imacallam*, p.36/7, §185.

<sup>69</sup>Stokes, *Félire* , p152.

<sup>70</sup>Meyer, "*Echtra Nerai* ," *RC* 10(1889), p.212-228, par.6-8. McCone, *Pagan Past* , p.152.



Cummíne's main test of his skill and attainment is a game of fidchell (ll.60-1).

First, however, Cummíne engages in a poetry competition with Senchán, here, Guaire's poet(II.62-80). Ó Coileáin sees this sequence as an interpolated passage,<sup>71</sup> and indeed it does seem somewhat artificially placed here. Nonetheless, the insertion, if so it be, is intentional, and the author has been at pains to integrate it, making a conscious *segué* into it after the start of the fidchell scene, and even taking care to echo language from outside the sequence, as for instance, Cummíne's repetition of "*mo chubais* ." (ll.78, 85)

This conscious integration suggests that the sequence holds some importance in the text. In it, Cummíne displays his own talent as a *file* --unwitting as elsewhere-- as he outdoes the courtpoet by his ability at reciting secular verse, and the court poet's inability to grasp Gospel verses. Ó Coileáin finds this to be "presented in terms of the opposition of pagan and Christian learning," and thus representing "early tradition."<sup>72</sup> How this indicates the earliness of the tradition I am not sure, but I feel Ó Coileáin goes too far in seeing Senchán as a representative of pagan learning. There is nothing pagan about the *iarcaae*, whether it be drinking song or poem of another type. The phrasing *iarcaae Guaire* (l.75) suggests that it is a praise poem, and thus Cummíne's opposition of the Gospels to such a poem indicate not an attack on paganism but yet another attack on the cult of vanity within court society. Senchán's difficulty with the poetry may not indicate his ignorance of Christianity--unlikely in the setting of Guaire's court--but may be a joke, playing with the idea of the obscurity of secular poetry criticised elsewhere,<sup>73</sup> and turning it around. Moreover, the Gospels may be in Latin, which heightens the humour of Senchán's bluffing remarks "the poetry is difficult", and "the interpretation is obscure." Finally, Cummíne's ability to recite the *iarcaae* shows once more the flaunting of the court's standards. If Ó Coileáin is right about the

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<sup>71</sup>Ó Coileáin, "*Tromdám*," p.54.

<sup>72</sup>ibid., p54.

<sup>73</sup>Joynt, *TG*, p3-4.



interpolation of this incident, its inclusion was suggested by its closeness to the overall theme of "The Trial:" its criticism of vanity and the standards of the nobility and professionals.

The game of fidchell presents perhaps a different direction for the satire. Cummíne's reaction to the rules ("My conscience, indeed, I cannot do either, but I won't kill your men, and you won't kill my men." ll.85-6) may refer to the idea that clerics were supposed to be non-combatants, not supposed to fight or kill people. A glance at the annals in the eighth and ninth centuries will give a sense of how little this was followed, and indeed in "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda" we have two monasteries falling out over a body. Cummíne's absurdly strict adherence to this rule may reflect on the hypocrisy of those who followed it so loosely. His championship is demonstrated, in contrast to the usual, by his ability not to win but to keep peace. Furthermore, the description of the fidchell itself may parallel descriptions in religious literature of battles between angels and demons. So for instance an early Hiberno-Latin homily on *iustitia* describes it thus: *Et in fine uite uniuscuiusque hominis futurum est duos hostes uenire in obuiam ei, hostis niger Ethiopum, quasi corui uel carbones extincti, et aliud exercitus in vestimentis albis, sicut nix*.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the fidchell competition may represent the struggle for a soul.

Once again *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* provides a contrasting agenda to that given here. In the prophetic section, it portrays a grim future when *soifid fiannas i cella 7 i cleirchiu* (warrior ways will change into cells and to clerics.)<sup>75</sup> The turning of the focus of the satire onto the roles of clerics themselves draws attention to the unavoidable fact that there must be some anti-clericalism within the satiric agenda of "The Trial." This criticism may be aimed at the secularisation of the church whose members, coming from the aristocracy, we would not be surprised to find consorting with kings, demonstrating championlike and "courteous" behaviour, and entertaining the

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<sup>74</sup>R. McNally, "'In Nomine Dei Summi,' Seven Hiberno-Latin Sermons," *Traditio* 35 (1979) 134.

<sup>75</sup>Stokes, "Imacallam", p.40/1, §213.



nobility. This does not lessen the holiness of the three fool-clerics in "The Trial." The use here of both satiric subject and satiric object can be paralleled elsewhere.<sup>76</sup> Their possession of the abilities of court entertainers and hangers on is shown to be a humble and innocent attainment, and even Cummíne's status attained by the exalted title of *ségonn* is essentially stripped from him in the sequence that follows.

## FINALE

The final scene involves the release of Mac Teléne and the clerics' refusal to remain at the court. With this latter we may compare Cummíne's refusal of worldly power in his "Life." Then follows the last and perhaps most significant piece of slapstick in the text. MoRónóc, in putting on his ubiquitous shoes, tangles the laces in the flock bed and overturns it, sending Cummíne and Guaire sprawling(II.92-6). This is ultimately a joke, based on the Magnificat: *Deposuit potentes de sede*. "He has cast down the mighty from their seat." is enacted quite literally here, with Guaire in his vanity and wealth being cast down from his seat, along with Cummíne who, we might imagine, needs some humbling after the success of his adventure. Guaire's adherence to his life-style is purged in this action, as indicated by the double meaning contained in *conid teasarcain rotheasarcthe asin tenid* "so that it was a deliverance/mercy which delivered /saved them from the fire."

However, this reading should not prevent the passage also drawing on other literature for its action. Once again, "The Trial" parallels the boyhood deeds section of the *Táin*. The passage quoted above, in which Cú Chulainn defeats the other boys and then hides under Conchobar's bed ends with him getting up and overturning it: "The boy rose to his feet under the couch and on to the floor of the house he threw from him the couch together with the thirty warriors who were in it."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>J. Mann, "Satiric Subject and Satiric Object in Goliardic Literature," *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch*, 15(1980), p.63-86.

<sup>77</sup>C. O'Rahilly, *Táin 1*, II.477-8.



Finally, we are told they go back to Munster *7 a n-eneach leo* (l.97). This ascription of honour to them is slightly odd, unless *enech* here means "protection, security", an item they might well need after their adventure in Guaire's court. We should note the reading of the Harleian manuscript *7 a n-aitheach leo*. The *aithech* here could refer to Mac Teléne, who, continuing the subversion of status and rank, has now become their "serf" or vassal.

## CONCLUSIONS

"The Trial of Mac Teléne" shows clear signs of humour and satire directed primarily at the nobility and secular court society, but secondarily towards the church as well. Its main technique is that of inversion--of rank, custom and expectation. Its three heroes are clerics, but display other roles as well, and show proficiency in the entertainment of the court which was promised by Mac Teléne. At the same time, they all play the parts of fools, both in their antics and in their rejection of worldly values: wealth, status, "killing," vanity, logic.

In order to further this interpretation of the tale, we need to place it in a literary, and a possible historical context. As regards the literary, "The Trial" must be seen as one of the predecessors of the longer and more complex *Tromdám Guaire*. The plots in both are broadly similar, although in *Tromdám* Marbán/Cummíne is rescuing Guaire from the excessive demands of his guests. There is in *Tromdám* too an implicit contrast between the absurdity and pretensions of court society and the professional poets and the wisdom and humility of the scruffy, erem<sup>í</sup>tic life of Marbán. In particular, the contest scene between Marbán and the poets is likely to have evolved from some scene similar to the one in "The Trial." The same contrast of Christian learning versus secular learning is present, though the Christian learning is no longer the Gospels, but the biblical and pseudo-scientific trivia of the medieval monk.

The Welsh *Hanes Taliesin* helps to provide another link in the chain between the two texts, although this must be used cautiously. Though it may not be possible to prove a direct



influence of "The Trial" or version of *Tromdám* on *Hanes Taliesin*, there is certainly a remarkable similarity, and its use of elements found in *Tromdám* and "The Trial" but common to neither suggests that an early Irish tale might have existed which was an intermediary between the two. As noted before, *Hanes Taliesin*'s theme, Taliesin's freeing of Elphin by bardic prowess, was known from before the twelfth century. In contrast to *Tromdám* this is the theme of "The Trial" and establishes a paradigmatic relationship between Guaire and Maelgwn, Cummíne and Taliesin, Elphin and Mac Teléne, and Senchán and Henin Fardd. The name Henin is strikingly similar to Senchán, and the historicity and priority of Senchán as a character suggests that Henin may be based on him.<sup>78</sup> Guaire and Maelgwn have similar positions in the traditions of their respective literatures, though it should be noted that Guaire's role of oppressive king is not as conspicuous as Maelgwn's. Nonetheless, both exist, in such a role, to be converted.<sup>79</sup> The emphasis on bards and entertainment is appropriate to both. Finally, the similarities between Cummíne and Taliesin extend beyond the bardic contest: in "The Life" Cummíne is abandoned in a vessel, and elsewhere is said to have been abandoned in the water. So too Taliesin's appearance at the weir of Gwyddno. Both demonstrate the same precociousness at court.

*Hanes Taliesin*'s resemblance to *Tromdám* is strong as well. Wood notes the similarities, but contrasts the two by noting "here (in *Hanes Taliesin*) the poet wins over his opponents by causing them to recite nonsense."<sup>80</sup> This may however be favourably compared with the *crónán snagach* required by Marbán, which may be echoed in *Hanes Taliesin*'s "*blerwm, blerwm*." In *Tromdám Guaire* and *Hanes Taliesin*, pseudo-scientific and biblical trivia is used to confound the bards.

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<sup>78</sup>Henin is unknown in the Triads, and it is not clear that there is any early tradition concerning him. Lady Charlotte Guest's only reference to him is to a manuscript of Iolo Morgannwg, and thus a suspect reference. cf. Guest, *The Mabinogion*, (London, 1877) 504.

<sup>79</sup>See Juliette Wood, "Maelgwn Gwynedd: A Forgotten Welsh Hero," *Trivium* 19 (1984), p.103-117.

<sup>80</sup>Wood, "Elphin Section," p.239.



Despite these similarities, the function of the clerics in "The Trial" is distinct: they are portrayed as fools and the boasting and vanity is left to Mac Teléne, Guaire and Senchán. Even in the "bardic contest", Cummíne displays humility, and his victory appears innocent and almost accidental. This is consonant with the particular agenda of "The Trial," and the use of the Gospels rather than biblical trivia in the contest scene emphasises the nature of that agenda.

The relationship of "The Trial" to the other major work of social satire, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, is one more of spirit than of substance, but helps to suggest a context for the creation of such a work. The direction of the satire is double-edged in both, though in *Aislinge* it swings more in the direction of literary parody and anti-clericalism. Jackson suggests three establishment bodies burlesqued in *Aislinge*: the church, the lawyers, and the literary men.<sup>81</sup> He suggests that the nobility is not an object of satire, but Mac Con Glinne's stance against Cathal's gluttony cannot be ignored, nor, I think, is it "polite."<sup>82</sup> Mac Con Glinne's attitude towards Cathal's gluttony is similar to Cummíne's opposition to Guaire's vainglory: it is implicit and understated<sup>83</sup> but the direction of the narrative moves towards the cure of both kings. Gwara's suggestion of a "goliardic" milieu for the composition of *Aislinge*<sup>84</sup> should be extended cautiously to "The Trial," with the caveat that we are not here talking about the specific attributes of Goliardic literature on the continent, but rather the underlying themes and techniques used in that literature.

Jackson argues against such an aspect to *Aislinge*: "there seems no reason to suppose that this very European institution had found its way to Ireland, or cause to think that the *drúth* or *crossán* is not a wholly native Irish figure. Once again it can be risky to see Continental characteristics in early Irish

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<sup>81</sup>Jackson, *Aislinge*, p.xxxii-xxxviii.

<sup>82</sup>ibid., p.xxxviii.

<sup>83</sup>Scott James Gwara, "Gluttony, Lust and Penance in the B-Text of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*," *Celtica* 20 (1988)63, where he calls *Aislinge*'s satire "diaphonous."

<sup>84</sup>ibid., , p.63.



institutions without an adequate knowledge of Irish conditions."<sup>85</sup> Gwara suggests that a Goliardic influence would push the date of *Aislinge* forward considerably. These views seem to ignore the very similar conditions at play in the secular and ecclesiastical worlds of ninth and tenth century Ireland and twelfth century Europe (as well as twelfth century Ireland.) In both, a strong, wealthy, self-confident church was becoming ever more secularized, powerful and corrupt. In both, leading ecclesiastical and secular rulers could be patrons to a growing class of men learned in both secular and religious learning, and capable of applying it in satirical attacks on society and the church. In both, these attacks could be as orthodox as they were blasphemous.<sup>86</sup> *Pace* Jackson, there is no reason to think that the *drúth* or *crosán* was not quite similar at times to the character of the goliard or *clericus vagans* --and indeed Mac Con Glinne is manifestly a wandering, satirical, irreverent cleric. So too Cummíne and his crew.

The issue of the relationship between Goliardic literature and Irish satire is too complex and fraught to be explored here--a full and intelligent study is needed on it. For the purposes of "The Trial", however, we need only note some similarities which need not be due to direct influence.

1. In the Feast of Fools in the twelfth century, according to Chambers, the theme was the Magnificat passage *deposuit potentes de sede, et exaltavit humiles* : "The symbolical phrase, during which probably the *baculus* was handed over from the dominus of one year to the dominus of the next, became the keynote of the feast, and was hailed with inordinate repetition by the delighted throng of inferior clergy."<sup>87</sup> Both the presence of the theme of this Magnificat verse and the play on the bishop-fool and the *baculus* may be noted in "The Trial."

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<sup>85</sup>Jackson, *Aislinge* , p.xli.

<sup>86</sup>cf Gwara on the Christian subtext of *Aislinge* , and Mann, "Satiric Subject", p.63,"We have learned that medieval writers could for comic purposes make free with orthodoxy without ceasing to be orthodox."

<sup>87</sup>E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, voll(1903),p.278, and see in general p.273-335, 'The Feast of Fools.'" cf. also Welsford, *Fool* , p.200.



2. The image of the wandering cleric, so much a part of *Aislinge* and the goliardic tradition is present in "The Trial", as it is in less comic form in "The Life." In the ninth century, travelling and wandering by clerics was beginning to be frowned on, both in Ireland (particularly by those churches associated with the name Celi Dé) and on the Continent. We may note the situation expressed in one continental document: "An unhappy custom has arisen in our time, that many subject to ecclesiastical rule, deserting their vow and their place...make their way wherever their desire persuadeth them. They are received not only by abbots and bishops but by counts and nobles. It is entreated...that no layman shall receive a cleric of this kind."<sup>88</sup> The *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* enjoins in a similar vein against wandering clerics, described as "*vagabundi, qui nomen monachi desiderant habere, sed mores abnegant, inter mulierculas discurant, fabulas monasteriorum narrant, sub nullo regimine vivunt, negotiis saecularibus occupati, his periculum magis imminet...*"<sup>89</sup> A seventh century Irish canon forbids clerics to sing jokingly or behave like fools<sup>90</sup> and other strictures from the works of the Celi Dé frown upon interaction between monks and the world. These strictures are seemingly subverted in "The Trial."

3. The emphasis on parody of church and secular learning, and the use of the condemned figure of the fool-cleric to mock social failings, and to preach Christian teaching are common features. The comic realisation of biblical passages (*petram scandali, deposuit potentes de sede*) through irreverent buffoonery demonstrates an ability common to both "The Trial" and the later Irish and continental works to be "heretical" and orthodox at the same time. Thus we must at very least consider "The Trial" within a learned, critical and reformist clerical milieu, one which, like the goliardic scene on the continent,

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<sup>88</sup>H. Waddell *The Wandering Scholars*. (1954) 270, and cf. the documents she quotes from eighth and ninth century councils, including ones condemning "Scottis".

<sup>89</sup>H. Wasserschleben, *Die Irische Kanonensammlung* (Leipzig, 1885) 149 (xxxix.3)

<sup>90</sup>Waddell, *Scholars*, p.266.



would choose the ribald and foolish wandering cleric as the vehicle for its social criticism.

Such a milieu is particularly suited to the ninth or tenth century Munster in which the language of the tale and its setting would place it. Throughout these two centuries, Munster experienced a series of reigns by strong kings, whose connections to the church were evident and whose wealth and prosperity might have occasioned some work of this nature. Earlier in this thesis (Chapters Two and Three) I suggested that some of the works dealing with Cummíne and with Guaire could be aimed at one of the Munster cleric-kings, possibly Fedlimid mac Crimthainn. Here too we must consider that possibility. Note first that Guaire is throughout this text the king of Aidne, not Connacht, and therefore more usable as a foil for a Munster king. Relevant here, perhaps, is the reference to Fedlimid in an elegy on him as *macc Crimthainn Cláiri*.<sup>91</sup> The use of the *bachall* too recalls some elements of Fedlimid's tradition, such as the annal entry which states *Bachall Feidlimid figlig / forácbad isna draignib*. "The crozier of vigil-keeping Fedlimid/was left behind in the bushes." The tradition of his death described his being struck by the crozier of the ghost of St. Ciarán in the stomach.<sup>92</sup> And we may note the dichotomy between Fedlimid's association with the Celi Dé and his religious reputation, and the descriptions of his raids on monasteries and other war-like pursuits, and consider these in relation to the fidchell scene.<sup>93</sup>

Overall the evidence is far from conclusive, but we need not pin down the historical setting to realize the satirical intent of the text. Like "The Life of Cummíne Fota" and "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda", "The Trial" uses existing genres and subverts them to its own agenda. It describes figures on the margins of

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<sup>91</sup>Meyer, *Bruchstücke der älteren Lyrik Irlands* (Berlin, 1919) 45 (102)

<sup>92</sup>*Annals of Ulster*, s.u. 841; Byrne, *Kings*, p.226.

<sup>93</sup>On the other hand, it should be noted that the elegy for Cormac mac Cuilennáin mentioned in chapter two draws on the imagery of the Magnificat: *Is béss do ruirí na rí / do mac Muire--mór a nuall -/ turcbáil ind liúin assa lén, / béim forin trén conid truag.* ("This is what the great king of kings does, the son of Mary (great his renown!) : he lifts the weak man from his misfortune; he strikes down the mighty bringing him to misery.) Carney, "The Ó Cíanáin Miscellany," *Ériu* 21 (1969) 142.



society and indeed of acceptability, who reject the wisdom of the world. It describes too figures who straddle two roles and two worlds, and whose comic nature always threatens to undermine their hidden message. It takes its place, then, alongside the other texts we have examined and extends the range of Cummíne and Comgán's uses, as comic characters, liminal figures and vehicles for social criticism.



## Chapter Six "The Dialogue of Cummíne and Comgán"

The satiric agenda which underlies "The Trial of Mac Teléne" is displayed in a more serious and didactic form in another text from YBL, "The Dialogue of Cummíne and Comgán". This text is formed of two parts, the first being a general prologue giving a short description of each of the two characters, which will be discussed only briefly, and the second a poem of twenty-two quatrains, in which Cummíne and Comgán exchange couplets. Variants of this dialogue exist in *Imtheachta na nÓinmhideadh*, but there the poem is interwoven with prose and with verse not organic to the poem. In general, these later versions are greatly augmented, in keeping with the nature of the larger work. Although I do not wish to examine the relation of the versions, it is important to realise the difference in tone between them. An example of differing attitudes may be seen in verse 21 of the YBL text, a verse on adultery:

Cummíne: *Ocus cinnus bes in fer/ co méd adaltrais adbail ?*

Comgán: *Cidead sin is maith re corp/ is fada a olc don anmain.*

Instead of this ending, B.iv.1 has:

Comgán: *An ní sin is maith le a chorp/ as é as olc don anmain.*

(161v.)

This difference, subtle though it may be, is indicative of the separate agendas of each, particularly in regard to their attitudes to sin. "Although that might be pleasant for the body/ lasting is its evil for the soul" shows a more mature and complex attitude toward the body-soul relationship and the pursuit of carnal desires than does the almost manichaeian "Whatever is pleasing for the body/ is evil for the soul." In general the *Imtheachta* texts mirror the YBL ones quite closely, but even these changes of mood, and the mixing of other texts, such as the argument for monastic property found in the poem on fence building<sup>1</sup> show the late and mixed character of the larger work.

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<sup>1</sup>B.iv.1, p. 155a: *Fál tnuidhe / do.nithear re hucht ruígne .*



The YBL "Dialogue" discusses lay piety and practice, but its chief target is the hypocrisy often implicit in the religious observances of the church and the cultivation of ritual in place of faith. Its attitude to sin is often relaxed, at least in that the emphasis is on personal conscience. Superstitious attributions of sins are frowned upon, and the text concentrates on intentionality in both ritual and sin.

As with the three previous texts concerning our characters, "The Dialogue" plays on a genre, this time the genre of the *immacallam*, the dialogue or colloquy, represented by a healthy group of poems and prose texts in Old and Middle Irish. Welsh literature too possesses a wealth of *ymddiddanau*. The genre has been only tentatively explored, so we will need to establish some of its parameters in order to determine the use made of the genre by "The Dialogue."

But first, an outline of the text:

Prologue: We are told a bit about each character. Cummíne Fota is called a sage and *ardespoc Muman*, a wise man and a man without sin. He sang this poem asking news from Comgán, who is called chief fool of Ireland and of the western world, full of understanding and the grace of the holy spirit. When sane he would give true judgements and no one could resolve or contradict them. But when a fool he would go dryshod on water, could sleep beneath it, and the water-beasts would come to him while he slept. Likewise the animals and birds would shelter him when he slept out in the wilderness. Cummíne loved Comgán and listened to his stories "for he often recognised his saintliness."

Dialogue:verse 1. Introduction. Cummíne asks about sins.

2.-4.On religious observance and ecclesiastical piety.

5-11.On personal piety and almsgiving.

12.Cosmology.

13.On "grudging."

14-15.On ill-will and anger.

16.On either hospitality or ease.

17.On baths and women.

18.Christ's poverty.

19.-21.On sexual matters.



22-23. Cosmology of the afterlife.

24. Conclusion.

Prologue.

This is probably the latest of the five texts we are examining, both linguistically and in the stage of the tradition. Nowhere is this more clear than in the prologue, which is probably later than the dialogue itself, supplied to show the context of the poem, and to establish the credentials of the participants. That it comes at the end of the tradition seen in earlier texts is demonstrated by the habitual description of singular events. Thus, in "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda," we saw Comgán walking on water and sleeping beneath it in one episode. Here, however, it has become a quality: *tiagadh na muire 7 na huisci cosaib tirmaib 7 nochodlud fóithib*. We must assume that particular episodes of an earlier dossier are behind the comments on the animals in the wilderness and his confounding of the intelligentsia.

Likewise, Cummíne's reputation has undergone the usual extrapolation into power and wisdom, thus he is "archbishop of Munster," a term which if meant technically must date the prologue to the twelfth century or later. It may be an extrapolation from "The Lament," which says of Cummíne "*ba hepscop-som*", although MacEoin sees this itself as a mark of lateness in "The Lament."<sup>2</sup>

What this encapsulated tradition presents, however, is the archetypal relationship between holy fool and wise mentor, seen in many examples in the lives of the *yurodivy* and *saloí*,<sup>3</sup> and indeed elsewhere in Celtic literature. While this cannot show anything concrete about the early traditions of Comgán, it does at least show that his character was read by later medieval Irishmen in much the way we have been reading it.

Genre.

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<sup>2</sup>G. MacEoin, "The Lament for Cuimine Fota," *Ériu* 28 (1977), p.30/1, v.6; and see p.22.

<sup>3</sup>J. Saward, *Perfect Fools*, p.20; p.25.



The Genre which this text uses to represent its views, the *immacallam* or dialogue, has been discussed partially in a number of recent studies. John Carey, in an analysis of *Scél Tuáin meic Cairill* <sup>4</sup> summarizes the genre: "Tales of this type are structured around a conversation between two learned persons, which provides a context for the disclosure of esoteric lore...In each text, both participants represent the indigenous learned class."<sup>5</sup> Joseph Falaky Nagy, in a discussion primarily of *Acallam na Senórach* and *Síabarchapat Con Culainn*, lays stress on the use of these stories to reinterpret older, "pagan" and oral traditions to a newer audience, a way of explaining contemporary knowledge of events long past.<sup>6</sup> He writes,

"...the focus of attention--that of the sympathetic saint as well as that of the audience of the tale--is on a pagan otherworld as revealed by a remarkable traveller in that world who is summoned by or attracted to the Christian holy man. Also, it is important to appreciate the fact that the revealing of the otherworld through the tale of the otherworldly traveller is made possible by the presence and power of a sacerdotal figure...who is himself the translating medium between the bearer of that revelation and the audience of the narrative tradition through which the tale is known."<sup>7</sup>

Such a device is exploited elsewhere, as in the Moling-Suibne section of *Buile Shuibne*, or in the beginning of *Navigatio Brendani*, in Brendan's encounter with Barinthus.

In terms of format, Peter Dronke has pointed to the existence of a number of dialogue poems of the specific type seen in "The Dialogue",<sup>8</sup> and on the Welsh side, Brinley Roberts has edited and discussed a number of the dialogue poems and their format.<sup>9</sup> Some of these, it must be said, need to be excluded from this discussion, as they are either organic parts of "sagas",

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<sup>4</sup>Edited, *Ériu* 35 (1984) 93ff.; discussion, "Suibne Geilt 7 Tuán m. Cairill," *Éigse* 20 (1984) 93ff.

<sup>5</sup>"Suibne Geilt 7 Tuán m. Cairill," p.99-100.

<sup>6</sup>"Close Encounters of the Traditional Kind," *Celtic Folklore and Christianity*, (ed. Ford California, 1983) 129-49.

<sup>7</sup>Nagy, "Close Encounters," p.135.

<sup>8</sup>"*Ad Deum Meum Convertere Volo* ' and Early Irish Evidence for Lyrical Dialogues," *CMCS* 12 (1986) 23-32.

<sup>9</sup>"Rhai O Gerddi Ymddiddan Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin," *Astudiaethau ar yr Hengerdd*, (ed. Bromwich, Brinley Jones, Cardiff, 1978) 281-325.



like the dialogue between Suibne and Eóránn discussed by Dronke, or do not fit the thematic criteria established. On a larger scale, such poems are not unknown elsewhere, and certainly the format of the dialogue has a long tradition. Particularly relevant in terms of wise man/ fool opposition are the dialogues of Solomon and Saturn, and variations thereupon, prevalent in Anglo-Saxon sources.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that the Dialogues of Gregory the Great provided an important inspiration for the literature in Irish, but there is certainly evidence that the genre is not a specifically Christian one.

For the purpose of this discussion, we may divide the dialogues into two types, (excluding functional dialogue in prose texts, and other types referred to above) the first being those in which the participants are of the same "learned class", either secular or ecclesiastical, and the dialogue is essentially an equal exchange of privileged information or even a competition. The second includes those in which the participants are of different classes or backgrounds, and the dialogue directed toward eliciting from one of the participants information he is supposedly uniquely privy to. As an example of each, we may take two of the earliest *immacallaim*. "The Dialogue of Bran's Druid and Febail's Prophetess,"<sup>11</sup> is a discussion of the druid's otherworld experiences, particularly of the treasure contained in a certain well. In this text, however, the prophetess also has knowledge of this otherworld, and there is some hint of debate or rivalry. An example of the second type is a related prose text, "The Colloquy of the Youth and Columcille at Loch Eolairg."<sup>12</sup> Here a youth--"some say he was Mongán mac Fiachna"--appears from over the sea and is questioned by Columba. Mongán reveals his knowledge of otherworlds and esoteric knowledge, some of it "pagan," some stock medieval lore of the marvellous: "double-

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<sup>10</sup>See T.A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, 1976); Robert J. Menner, *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (New York, 1941); and James E. Cross and Thomas D. Hill, *The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrian and Ritheus* (Toronto, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> James Carney, "The Earliest Bran Material," in *Latin Script and Letters, AD 400-900* (ed. O'Meara and Naumann, Leiden, 1976) 175f..

<sup>12</sup>K. Meyer, *ZCP* 11(1899) 313-7. cf. also P. Grosjean, *Analecta Bollandiana* 45 (1927) 75-83.



heads, triple heads, in Europe, in Asia." Columba, after a long discussion with Mongán, refuses to reveal any knowledge to his monks.<sup>13</sup> Columba, despite his great learning and sanctity, is willing himself to learn from one with direct knowledge of an alternative world.

Of the first type there are a number of other examples in Irish and Welsh sources. Secular, non-Christian sages debate in *Immacallam in Dá Thuarad*, and Christian ecclesiastics debate about involvement in worldly matters in "A Colam Cille Dialogue."<sup>14</sup> Welsh examples include exchanges between prophets, as in *Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin*, and between other legendary characters such as Gwyddneu Garanhir and Gwyn ap Nudd.<sup>15</sup>

The second type, under which we should include "The Dialogue of Cummine and Comgán", often includes a well-known and learned person as the questioner and interpreter, such as Patrick in the *Acallam*, Finian in *Scél Tuáin*, Moling in *Buile Shuibne*. The questioned has often returned from some sort of otherworld or otherworldly existence. The information flow in these texts is generally one-sided, and the purpose of the dialogue can often be to lend credence to the experience described, especially across a time barrier such as that present in the *Acallam* or *Scél Tuáin*, and to devise a way of recording the otherworld experiences of these figures without actually removing them from their otherworldly context by, for instance, having them personally record their experiences. Such a device leads naturally to some poems becoming more or less monologues, such as the poem "King and Hermit," in which Guaire questions Marbán about his experience in the "otherworld" of the eremitic life. Marbán's answer forms the bulk of the text.<sup>16</sup> So too "Ysgolan"<sup>17</sup> in which an opening questioning *englyn* allows the narrator, Ysgolan, to be identified and then recount his experience

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<sup>13</sup>On this, see Nagy, "Encounters," p.142-3.

<sup>14</sup>W. Stokes, *RC* 26, p.4ff.; Brian Ó Cuiv, *Éigse* 12 (1967-8)165-72.

<sup>15</sup>Jarman, (1967), and Jarman, *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Cardiff, 1982)1-2; p.71-3.

<sup>16</sup>G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, p.10-19.

<sup>17</sup>Jarman, *Llyfr Du*, p.55. Tr. P.Henry, *Early English and Celtic Lyric* (London, 1966) 88.; Gwyn Williams, *Introduction to Welsh Poetry* (London, 1953) 41



of his almost purgatorial penance, and to warn "*Bei ys cuypun ar vn...ar avvneuthum e bith nys gunaun.*"<sup>18</sup> In the late Breton version of this legend, Skolan has indeed returned from purgatory.<sup>19</sup>

The didactic element in many of these texts is pronounced, as it is in "The Dialogue", and one feature of this element is that the learned person of the pair becomes for the purpose of the piece quite ignorant. The clearest example of this is in a Welsh text, *Ymddiddan Arthur a'r Eryr*,<sup>20</sup> probably composed before 1150. In this dialogue, Arthur is almost an ignorant churl, as he engages in conversation with a revenant eagle who explains at a very basic level issues of death, sin (at one point Arthur asks *Yr Eryr, barabyl diawc/a'm dywedy yn amlwc/ Y wneuthur beth yssyd drwc ?* "Eagle, slow of speech, tell me clearly what it is bad to do?") and judgement. A text closely resembling this is *Ymddiddan Llywelyn a Gwrnerth*, from the Red Book of Hergest.<sup>21</sup> Here, there is an emphasis on confession, but also a concentration on charity to the poor which makes it comparable to "The Dialogue." Once again, one of the two hermits returns from the dead to advise his comrade on the basics of faith.

The emphasis on basic catechesis, and occasionally on debates about trickier issues of faith, raises the question of the milieu and purpose of some, at least, of our poems. Jackson has given some thought in this direction where he describes *Ymddiddan Arthur a'rEryr* (and, by inference, *Llywelyn a Gwrnerth*) as "a sermon on how to get to Heaven by virtuous living...put into the form of a dialogue in simple englynion, one speaker asking questions and the other instructing him."<sup>22</sup> In a Welsh context it is good to remember the close connection that can be seen between certain dialogues and the later stage pieces called *anterliwtiau* or interludes. A particularly good example of this is the traditional Body/Soul dialogue, popular in medieval Welsh

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<sup>18</sup>"If I knew then what I know/ that which I did I would never have done."Jarman, p.55, l.18.

<sup>19</sup>Jarman, "Cerdd Ysgolan," *Ysgrifau Beirniadol* 10 (1977)51-78.

<sup>20</sup>I. Williams, *BBCS* 2(1923) 269-86.

<sup>21</sup>K. Jackson, "The Colloquy of Llywelyn and Gwrnerth," *ZCP* 21 (1938) 24-32.

<sup>22</sup>Jackson, "Colloquy", p.25-6.



sources<sup>23</sup> which can be seen in a performance based version, essentially a prototype interlude.<sup>24</sup> We may wonder whether such texts as "Ymddiddan Arthur a'r Eryr" and indeed our own text, were designed as "morality dialogues," for popular performance and lay catechism. This at least would explain their didactic stance, and in the context of our text, might help us understand its audience and its balanced perspective on sin.

There is some residual evidence of the performance basis of certain dialogue texts, the most important, though needing closer examination, being the "Colam Cille Dialogue" edited by Brian Ó Cuiv.<sup>25</sup> A detailed reading of the content could establish it as a reciter's prologue, possibly to a recital of the *Amra Coluim Cille*. As with the various prose prologues to the *Amra* <sup>26</sup> the scene is at Druim Cett, but here, in dialogue, each character introduces the other, first Columba, then Dallán. Dallán next offers to recite a poem: "*Ata agum-sa duit duan,...a gabail do ba mian leam/da madh cet leat-sa*."<sup>27</sup> Columba welcomes the poem, but Baíthín intervenes, suggesting that it is a sign of worldliness (*saegultacht*) to listen to poems. A debate ensues, which Columba wins. It may be suggested, especially from the references to paying poets later on in verses 9 and 13, for example, that such a dialogue could be recited/performed before the recitation of the *Amra* or similar Columban poem at a monastery in a climate wary of secular intrusion into monasteries. The "prologue" might be used to allay concerns about its propriety.

Nonetheless, "The Dialogue of Cummíne and Comgán" gives no concrete indication of such a scenario, although the direction of the piece seems to be towards a lay audience. In a more specific look at "The Dialogue" and its provenance, it should be

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<sup>23</sup>eg. Jarman, *Llyfr Du*, pp.7-11; p.54; and see p.xlvii-xlix for discussion.

<sup>24</sup>I. Williams, "Chwarae Ymddiddan yr Enaid a'r Corff," *BBCS* iv, (1927-9)p.36-41; and "Yr Ymryson rhwng yr Enaid a'r Corff," *Trans of the Hon Soc. of Cym\_rydorion*, 1913-14, p.185-91.

<sup>25</sup>Ó Cuiv, "A Colam Cille Dialogue," p.165-172

<sup>26</sup>cf. M. Herbert, "The preface to *Amra Coluim Cille*," *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*, p.67-75.

<sup>27</sup>Ó Cuiv, "Dialogue," p.167, v.4.



noted that there is another dialogue poem between Cummíne and Comgán, this a *dindshenchas* on Mag Femen, principally concerned with the legendary history of the area of Tuathmuma in which the Dál Cáis developed.<sup>28</sup> Although the poem addresses obliquely Fingen and Mór, the king and queen of Munster usually associated with Cummíne and Comgán, it seems clear that the poem is later, and its concerns suggest that it was addressed to the dominant Dál Cáis sometime after they won control of Munster.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to know how Cummíne and Comgán acquired such political roles as those of dynastic apologists, but the dialogue form, Cummíne the questioner, Comgán the questioned, would seem derived from a tradition of such dialogues as the one we are examining. Such a tradition can be seen in its nucleus in the final section of "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda", and it is entirely possible that some of the other dialogues in the *Imtheachta* are gleaned from a dossier of earlier material of diverse provenances.

### The Dialogue

The summary given above of the themes in the poem shows that they deal mainly with medieval Irish attitudes to sin and religious observance. The audience addressed would appear to be lay people; that can perhaps be inferred from the verses on sexual conduct, on contributions to monasteries, and on Church attendance. It certainly does not seem aimed at a monastic audience. This in itself may account for some of the differences in perspective from more or less contemporary religious material with which it could be compared. Such texts as the "rules" associated with the eighth- and ninth-century reform movements on the one hand, and the penitentials on the other, demonstrate on the whole a bias towards an ascetic monastic audience and

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<sup>28</sup>E. J.Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchus*, III (RIA Todd Lecture Series, vol. 10) 200-5.

<sup>29</sup>It is of the first importance here that Fingen and Mór are located at Cashel/ Femen in the *Dindshenchas*, but by the time of the *Imtheachta* their base is at Dún Ard Echráis, perhaps near Emly, but certainly within the area of later Dál Cáis dominance. This suggests that from the time of the *Dindshenchas* on, the subject of Cummíne and Comgán was moving into the sphere of the literature of North-west Munster. See Ó Coileáin, "Structure," p112.



approach. Hence the more rigorous tone, perhaps, and the different emphasis in its comments on alms, hospitality, churchgoing. There is, however, a great deal that these texts share with "The Dialogue": attention to balance, not overdoing ritual observance; (*Nitcualae...neuch asroepred bat rrofassad ind fer hisin* "I have never heard...of anyone of whom it was said that 'this man is too steady.'"<sup>30</sup>) concern for the poor (*bad for déirc 7 umli congabthar do chell* "let it be on alms and humility that thy church be founded"<sup>31</sup>) and relaxed stance towards condemnation (*Caín-coscaid. Ní caín-cúrsachid.* "You do well to correct. You do not do well to reprove."<sup>32</sup>). There is a mass of further material, mostly edited by Kuno Meyer in his diverse "Neue Mitteilungen aus Irische Handschriften" and subsequently ignored, of pious, lay-oriented religious material, much of it didactic in tone. Without a better guide to the content and context of this material, and an adequate theological assessment of it, it is difficult to discover the relationship of "The Dialogue" to it. Nonetheless, where relevant, some of this poetry has been used to compare with "The Dialogue."

Ultimately, however, much of the argument for the tone of the piece, particularly with regard to its critical stance, must be based on internal analysis. Certain verses assume a prevailing attitude that cannot necessarily be demonstrated with concrete evidence. So for instance, verse five, on *in leigenn gabur...i tig na tuata soinmech*, assumes that current religious trends advocated lay reading of scripture, hagiography and other material as an index of devotion. The verse is pointless outside such a context, but the evidence for the actual social situation is almost non-existent.

#### Cosmology:

The cosmological sections of the text are of a very basic type, limited to observations on the origins of snow and fruit

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<sup>30</sup>E.J. Gwynn and W. J. Purton, "The Monastery of Tallaght," *PRIA* 29 (1911) C, §76, p.159. See also §77, §34.

<sup>31</sup>Joseph Ó Néill, "The Rule of Ailbe of Emly," *Ériu* 3(1905), §55, p.108/9.

<sup>32</sup>Vernam Hull, "*Apgitir Chrábaid* : The Alphabet of Piety," *Celtica* 8 (1968), §36, p76/7.



(verse 12) and knowledge of heaven and hell. (verses 22-24). These latter justify the authority of Comgán as an "otherworld traveller," in Nagy's terminology,<sup>33</sup> and are in keeping with other statements about Comgán's prophetic nature. It is interesting to compare the use of knowledge of heaven and hell as a yardstick of authority, in light of the copious voyage and vision literature cultivated by the medieval Irish. In the dialogue context, a statement of Gregory the Great is apposite, in that it claims merely "sight" of the other worlds, rather than the "direct experience" of vision or voyage. Gregory speaks of how his soul "did usually think upon nothing but heavenly things; and though it was enclosed in mortal body, yet did it by contemplation pass far beyond earthly bounds, and penetrate to the very height of heaven."<sup>34</sup> This claim for authority is interesting in light of Gregory's discussion of proper living through the examples of "pure souls" and his discussion in the fourth book of the *Dialogues* of the nature of the soul and the afterlife. With this we should compare the statement in *Apgitir Chrábaid* : *Cía nessam do Día? Int-í immod-rádaí*. "Who is nearest to God? He who meditates on him."<sup>35</sup> The last stanza of our text should be taken as spoken by Cummíne, as it clearly refers to the meditative and revelatory position of the fool, as echoed in the Prologue: *Ar bui do med a ratha co mba réil do neam 7 talamm gusna hilib filet indib* .

### Religious Practice

The emphasis in these stanzas is on intent in actions, and on the pointlessness of ritual performance without genuine faith. Both of these themes are present in varying degrees and approaches, in other religious texts. In his investigation of the triad "thought, word and deed," Patrick Sims-Williams comments on the basis of its popularity in Ireland, "In its introspective emphasis on the subtler (verbal and mental) aspects of behaviour it harmonised with the Irish Penitentials' discrimination with

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<sup>33</sup>Nagy, "Encounters," p.135.

<sup>34</sup>E. Gardner, ed. *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great* , translated by Philip Warner, (1911), p.4.

<sup>35</sup>Hull, §37.



regard to the intentional element of sin."<sup>36</sup> The emphasis he refers to in the Penitentials distinguishes between acts committed intentionally, those committed accidentally, and those the person intended to do but did not.<sup>37</sup> Such detail is reversed when the dialogue considers intention as a function of righteous action as well.

The concern with "going through the motions" and with hypocrisy is also present in the ascetic literature. "Cormac's Rule" advises *lécind sechte co súibi*, "a putting away of hypocrisy with perversity."<sup>38</sup> *Apgitir Chrábaid* shows a concern with it as well, particularly in §11. Nonetheless, there is an awareness of the problems of familiarity and formal ritual, especially within the monastic community. *Apgitir Chrábaid* classes three types of people who are at a remove from attaining piety. The type at middle distance from it is described thus: *Is é int-í bís occai, .i. int-í do-sluindi in bith ó bélaib 7 fa-[s]isedar inna chridiu. Frigidir fri aíni 7 ernaighi. Ní ro-dlom dorair do shaint 7 chailti; ala lám dó dorm [sic? for do nim?], alaile do thalam*. ("The one who is near it is he who rejects the world with his lips, but professes it in his heart. He is cold (?) towards fasting and prayer. Nor has he proclaimed war against greed and harshness; one hand of his [is] towards Heaven, the other is towards the earth.)<sup>39</sup> Similarly, some of the "rules" associated with the Céili Dé stress the acceptability of performance. Thus the "Rule of Ailbe," *ní locht do chlérchib sechtae, dá trian crábaid a dochtae* ("simulation is no fault for clerics, two-thirds of piety is its silence" {?})<sup>40</sup> Others have tendencies which suggest that ritual alone could aid one's salvation, as for instance *Trí chét slechtain cach laithi...ni b[i]a th'ainm fri fugall/ ind rí g hi laithiu brátho*.

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<sup>36</sup>P. Sims-Williams, "Thought, Word and Deed: An Irish Triad," *Ériu* 29 (1978), p.110.

<sup>37</sup>eg. the opening sections of the Penitential of Finian, Bieler, *Penitentials*, p74-5.

<sup>38</sup>Strachan, "Cormac's Rule," *Ériu* 2 (1905), §8, p.65. For a later mainstream European dialogue on hypocrisy, see M. Colker, *Analecta Dublinensia* (1975), part 1 "Contra Religiones Simulatores."

<sup>39</sup>Hull, "Apgitir," §19.

<sup>40</sup>Ó Néill, "Ailbe," §38, p.104/5.



("Three hundred prostrations every day...thy soul will not be at the judgment of the king on the Day of Doom.")<sup>41</sup>

There is a certain tension between observance and intention in these texts then, but "The Dialogue," being more critical and less prescriptive than the "rules" and other sources, tends to argue against "meaningless" observance. Most striking is verse two's caution on churchgoing: *Minub ina duthracht bes/ ni rice a leas a dula* ("If he be not in devotion/it does not profit him to go.") The criticism of hypocrisy is extended to the church in verses three and four. Verse three, in its dismissal of the relevance of the details of tonsorial practice, seems to cut through the debates on the tonsure, and the sort of wrangling seen, for instance in "The Monastery of Tallaght"<sup>42</sup> which lays down careful rules for the proper time of tonsuring. Similarly, though the author of "Cormac's Rule" prays for *étind bán bésaib srotha* ("white raiment after the fashion of an elder")<sup>43</sup> verse four of "The Dialogue" stresses that *gan in credim* ("without faith") there is nothing so bad as the white-robed cleric. The conspicuous practice of devotion among lay people is viewed at sceptically in verse five, the emphasis throughout being that God judges *in craide craibdech*. ("the devout heart.")

The questioning of religious motivation is extended further to what one might call "religious superstition." Verse seventeen seems directed against contemporary anathematisation of women--though it is possible that baths are the real concern--particularly contact with women.<sup>44</sup> Such views are echoed in the Tallaght documents, for instance in the "Monastery", where even

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<sup>41</sup>J. Strachan, "Old Irish Metrical Rule," *Ériu* i (1904)§13a,p.196.

<sup>42</sup>Gwynn and Purdon, "Monastery", § 27.

<sup>43</sup>Strachan, §13, p.66.

<sup>44</sup>See A.T. Lucas, "Washing and Bathing in Early Ireland," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 94-5 (1964-5) 69, 72, 108. For an instance of men dying after using water in which women's feet had been washed, see p. 89. Fear of contact with other people via bath water can be seen in the Life of Colmán mac Lúacháin (Meyer, p.30-1) where in honour of three saints Colmán: "three vats were made for bathing lest any of them should go into water used by another." With specific reference to women, see the Life of Maedóc (I): "And the women of the place would come on their side to wash and bathe at the spring which Moeog had revealed. 'Do not wash here,' said Moeog, ' this is the monks' domestic spring and it is not fitting for women to consort with them.'"(Plummer, *BNÉ* , vol. 2, p.179-80.) Contact with a holy person's bath water could be beneficial. See Lucas, p.68.



contact with holy women is deemed somewhat suspect for the monk<sup>45</sup>--though here we must remember the different audiences of it and "The Dialogue." Nonetheless the contact fears suggested by verse seventeen are clearly shown in the "Monastery", §67, where a cloak used by a wedded couple gives "carnal visions" to a monk who sleeps in it. We are told that "any cloak that is taken from lustful people, a demon accompanies it so long as it is not washed."<sup>46</sup> The verse further implies a direct equating of women and sin, a common medieval attitude, but it rejects the superstitious dimension of the problem.

The three verses on sex (19-21) show a more relaxed attitude than one might expect from such literature as the penitentials, "rules," and devotional poems.<sup>47</sup> An adulterous woman is accused only of lack of *naire* and threatened with not getting *fochraicc*. This is a far cry from the vehement denouncements of such texts as *Ochthoclach Choluim Chille*, which speaks of *Mná drútha díthlecha díthles in degmuintir/ do- gníat cach n-uoprad amuig sa taig*. ("wanton thieving women who pillage the good, who engage in every evil work within and without.")<sup>48</sup> Similarly, a nod is given towards acceptance of pleasure in sexual matters in verse twenty-one, and there is no suspicion of marriage or condemnation, unlike the "Monastery", §21, where it is likened to the Devil, and §50 where it is circumscribed with rules.<sup>49</sup> Certainly, the critical weight of the poem is on hypocrisy and greed, not on sexual matters.

## Alms

Verses six - eleven discuss the ethics of almsgiving, emphasising that alms should go to the poor and needy, regardless of one's liking for them or their merit. This tallies with the literature of the ascetics, although the discussion in such

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<sup>45</sup>Gwynn and Purdon, "Monastery", §61, 62.

<sup>46</sup>*ibid.*, p.155.

<sup>47</sup>See also Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550-1150* (Toronto, 1984). And in general, Wassersleben, *Die Irische Kanonensammlung* (Leipzig, 1885) liber 46, pp.185-96.

<sup>48</sup>E.G. Quin, "Ochthoclach Choluim Chille," *Celtica* 14 (1981) 142.

<sup>49</sup>*cf.* Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, p.34.



documents is generally about where the monastery's excess should go, and from whom they should accept charity.<sup>50</sup> Particularly interesting are the injunctions against monks begging found in some of the "rules."<sup>51</sup> "The Dialogue" does not seem opposed to this, but rather advocates giving to "poor scholars" (*bocht ecnaid*, v.7.) This is in keeping with the lay audience it addresses and perhaps also the context of its composition. The emphasis is clearly on not judging the worthiness of the recipients of charity, suggesting a milieu in which there was perhaps a "preferential option for the penitent," or the "deserving" poor.

Attention is also paid to motives. In contemporary verse, injunctions to charity often take the form of threat and punishment, and often suggest the church as recipient of such charity. So perhaps a verse attributed to Columba in Laud 615:

<i>A fhir féil</i>	O generous man
<i>madh áil let gan beith a péin</i>	if you desire not to be in torture
<i>tabor don Coimde a cuit</i>	give to the Lord his share
<i>amail do beir duit badéin.</i>	as you give it to yourself.

<i>As mocin</i>	Welcome to him
<i>do beir an biadh is in digh.</i>	who gives food and drink.
<i>Madh da tuga biadh is brat</i>	If you give food and clothing
<i>cuingat sin lat ar nim .</i>	that will help you get to heaven. <sup>52</sup>

Less altruistic and more ominous are verses on "The Duties of a Husbandman":

<i>Ba dechmadach prímedach,</i>	Pay tithes and first-fruits,
<i>do bríathar bad fír,</i>	let thy word be true,
<i>ní forcba ní ar do chúl</i>	neglect nothing
<i>do dliged ind Rígh.</i>	of the law of the King.

<i>A ndoberó ar Día</i>	What you give for God's sake
<i>do thriun nó do thrúagh,</i>	to the strong or the weak...
<i>sech ní maíthe ní máide,</i>	

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<sup>50</sup>Gwynn and Purdon, "Monastery", §3,4.

<sup>51</sup>particularly "Ailbe", Ó Néill, §50, 52.

<sup>52</sup>K. Meyer, "Colum Cille Cecinit," *Ériu* 4 (1910) 17.



*dáigh fogéba a lúach.*"

you will get its reward. <sup>53</sup>

"The Dialogue" cautions against giving alms with ulterior motives, *tria glor ocus tria saidbre.* (v.10)

Most importantly, "The Dialogue" seems to warn against donations to monasteries, the sort of donations advocated in texts like *Cáin Adamnáin*.<sup>54</sup> "The Dialogue" states *Cid buidech di int airchinnech/ nocha buidech int érlum.* (v.11) This seems to play on a verse found in at least two contexts, which is essentially an apology for the corruption of church administrators: *ceat olca ne hairchinnigh,/it maithe na hérlamha.* ("Though the erenachs be evil, the patron-saints are good.")<sup>55</sup> For obvious reasons, the erenach was viewed with some suspicion in religious literature. The "rule of Ailbe" seems almost desperate in its wishing for *Airchinnech glan, cráibdech, / algen fri cech ndlicht, / fodlad día manchaib co cert, / ni rucca as a richt.* ("A pure pious erenach, /gentle in every determination, /let him distribute justly to his church tenants/ let him not take them beyond their power.")<sup>56</sup> "The Dialogue" seems to go beyond such caution here, and suggests that because of misuse of charity by monasteries, it is better to give directly to the poor.

#### Stinting and Hospitality.

Verse thirteen and verse sixteen are rather elusive in their content. The former seems, like verse seventeen, to put in balance some of the misogynist sentiments going about. *Cesacht* was listed among the fifteen worst traits of a woman.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps this verse seeks to point out that men practice such *cesacht* as well.

The verse on hospitality is difficult, in that it is hard to know if the verse is saying that providing warmth and shelter is the moral equivalent of going on pilgrimage to Rome, or if it is saying that it is as futile--recalling here the quatrain from the

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<sup>53</sup>Meyer, *Ériu* 2( 1903) 172.

<sup>54</sup>ed. Meyer (1905), §24 (p.12-5.)

<sup>55</sup>Meyer, "Altirische Reimsprüche," *ZCP* 7 (1911) 269. There it is addressed to Cathal m. Finguine, but it is elsewhere found addressed to Cormac m. Cuilennáin (Meyer, "Neue Mitteilungen," *ZCP* 7, p.299).

<sup>56</sup>Ó Néill, "Ailbe", §41a.

<sup>57</sup>Meyer, "Fithels Ratschläge an seinen Sohn," *ZCP* viii, p.113.



Bern Codex: *Teicht do Róim, / mór saído, becc torbai* .<sup>58</sup> The greater likelihood is that he is praising hospitality. Such praise is paralleled in other sources, such as "The Rule of Allbe": *Tech glan donaib óigedaib / ocus tene mór, / ossaic is indlat dóib, / la dergad cen brón*. "Blessing and welcome for everyone who comes to him, /A clean house for the guests and a big fire, /Washing and bathing for them /And a couch without sorrow."<sup>59</sup>

## Sins

The main sins condemned in "The Dialogue" are ill-will and anger (v. 14, 15) hypocrisy, vainglory (v.10), and it also advises caution in sexual matters. The stress seems to be on humility, on proper intent, and ultimately on poverty. The most powerful image in the poem is in verse eighteen, where the shame and poverty of the bed of *rí na nduille* is implicitly contrasted with the richness and comfort of other kings and well-off people. O'Keefe is undoubtedly right in thinking *Dornn do thuige ocus d'edach* refers to the manger in the nativity narrative, but I would suggest that the final *Da dornn do chrúibe* refers to the crucifixion. Following on from verse seventeen, with its discussion of comfort and hospitality, this verse emphasises the dearth of such hospitality and comfort received by Christ in his incarnation.

## Conclusions

It is difficult to find a precise context for this poem, and the existence of the verses incorporated more or less wholesale into the *Imtheachta* suggests that the issues it addresses are not ephemeral ones for the Irish faithful. In a broad historical context, it should be enough to note Kathleen Hughes' comment on the secularisation of the church: "The indifference to worldly interests which sustained {the} early pilgrims and their concentration on purely religious values contrast sharply with the early ninth-century church, a great institution fully alive to

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<sup>58</sup>Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus*, vol. ii (1903), p.296.

<sup>59</sup>Ó Néill, "Ailbe", §41.



the civilising influence which power and wealth could exert."<sup>60</sup> We needn't draw too simple a picture though. "The Dialogue" addresses abuses of charity, laxness of faith, and suspect beliefs that would have plagued the Irish church more or less from its inception. In religious terms, the importance of "The Dialogue" is that it speaks to the layman, at an angle slightly counter to that of the institutional church.

In terms of the function of Cummíne and Comgán, once again we find them being orthodox, yet critical, reasserting genuine convictions against abuses of power and lax morals. That these critical views are spoken by the idiot, Comgán, is very much in keeping with the role of the holy fool. Indeed, it may be proposed that it is only because he is a holy fool that we hear this critical voice in this text.

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<sup>60</sup>Hughes, "The Church and the World in Early Christian Ireland", *Church and Society in Ireland, 400-1200*. (ed. Dumville, 1987), chapter viii, p.100.



## Chapter Seven

### "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir"

The final text we shall examine is one in which Comgán and Cummíne, the focus of our study, appear as minor characters. In this, the story differs from the other four texts, but not in this alone, for the portrayal of the two characters is somewhat circumscribed by their function in the tale. Whether this results from their secondary positions in the text, or from a different use of the traditions concerning the characters are questions we must pose. Whatever the answers, "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir" provides a test-case, a control, and a caution. It allows us a sight of the characters in a story not essentially about them, and enables us to balance our assessment of their functions in their own tales with a different angle on the tradition. In short, if we consider Comgán's status of holy fool, and Cummíne's of foolish saint, sage, and confessor figure as units in a vocabulary of images, "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir" shows us an extended use of that vocabulary, and can enrich our understanding of its function.

*Comrac Líadain agus Cuirithir* is a story contained in two manuscripts, Harleian 5280 in the British Museum, and H.3.18 in Trinity College, Dublin.<sup>1</sup> Interest in the text has concentrated on the fine poetry it contains, especially the poem "*Cen áinius*."<sup>2</sup> The entire text has been edited only once, by Meyer.<sup>3</sup> As a narrative, the text has received disparaging criticism, being called "brief and obscure," "confused and improbable" and "notes, which often maddeningly skirt the essential scenes."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it has "suggestions of beauty"<sup>5</sup> and I shall attempt

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<sup>1</sup>Harl.5280, fo.26a-26b; H.3.18, p.759.

<sup>2</sup>Edited by G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, p.82-5; D. Greene and F. O'Connor, *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry*, p.72-4 (They edit two other poems from the text as well); K. Meyer, *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*, p.65, to give a few versions.

<sup>3</sup>K. Meyer, *Comrac Líadain agus Cuirithir* (London, 1902)

<sup>4</sup>R.Flower, *A Catalogue of the Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol ii (London, 1926) 305; James Carney, *Studies in Irish History and Literature*, (Dublin, 1955) 220; O'Connor, *A Short History of Irish Literature: A Backward Look* (1967) 60.

<sup>5</sup>Carney, *Studies*, p.220.



to show briefly that much of the criticism is undeserved. Murphy would date the language of the text to the ninth century. As Meyer points out, the story must have had at least some limited fame, for Líadain is alluded to as the wife of Cuirithir in the introduction to "*Aithbe damsas bes mara* ." <sup>6</sup> The main characters are unknown elsewhere. The setting, like that of our other texts, is Munster, particularly West Munster, with visits to Connacht and the Déisi, and thus it participates in the same geographical sweep we have seen elsewhere.

#### SUMMARY

1. Líadain is a poet from Corco Duibne, in West Munster, and Cuirithir is a poet from Connacht. They meet while she is on a circuit of Connacht, and he proposes that they "unite." She agrees, if he will wait until she finishes her tour, and come for her to her house.

2. Cuirithir heads south with one servant boy. He travels incognito, with the emblems of his trade in a bag. When he reaches Líadain's house, he stops at the well, dons his cloak and brandishes his spears.

3. Mac Da Cherda, the fool of the Déisi, arrives, and Cuirithir gets him to go to arrange a tryst with Líadain, subtly. This he does in a cryptic poem which puns on the names of the protagonists.

4. Líadain and Cuirithir then go to place themselves under the spiritual guidance of Cummíne Fota. He asks them to choose between seeing each other and speaking to each other. They choose speaking "for what will come of it is better." They spend their time taking turns enclosed, and speaking through a wall.

5. Cummíne proposes that they sleep together with a novice between them. Afterwards the novice is threatened by Cummíne if he does not say what has happened, threatened if he does by Cuirithir. Cuirithir is sent to another monastery. Líadain discusses Cuirithir with Cummíne.

6. Líadain follows Cuirithir, and speaks the poem "*Cen áinius*". He flees from her in a coracle on the sea. She stays on the stone

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<sup>6</sup>Comrac, p.8; and see D. Ó hAodha, "The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare," *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*, p.309.



on which he used to pray until she dies, and her soul goes to heaven, and the stone is placed over her.

## STRUCTURE AND INTEGRITY

Much of the criticism of the narrative has concentrated on its somewhat disjointed nature, key plot junctures being absent in places. The most glaring example is that we are not told that Líadain has become a nun until after "*Cen áinius*" (p.26, l.1), although it must have happened much earlier. Other *cruces* occur after Mac Da Cherda's poem and before the lovers place themselves under Cummíne's guidance (p.16, ll.12-13); during the night spent together (p.20, ll.13ff.); and after Cuirithir sails off (p.26, ll. 3-4). The absence of joins and explanations has led to suggestions that the prose is merely a series of short contexts for the more important poetry. Dillon comments that in the prose "we are told only enough to justify the verse passages" and Greene and O'Connor have posited that the prose might be "the fragmentary notes of a professional storyteller."<sup>7</sup> More perceptively, Carney states, "Although the text on the whole is in the condensed style often favoured by early Irish writers, the progress of the story is clear except at a few points."<sup>8</sup> When compared with texts in a similarly condensed style, such as *Compert Con Culainn*, which uses terse exposition, but with less confusion, or *Fingal Rónáin*, which despite a number of problematic plot junctures has received critical acclaim for style and content, it should become apparent that the narrative difficulties are not insurmountable. Such comparison also suggests that the text of "The Meeting" is<sup>a</sup> literary one, not the basis for oral delivery.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, it may be argued that there is an integrity to the text demanded by the relative uniformity in the language of both prose and poetry, and other features common to both. These include a high concentration of dialogue and banter, puns and

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<sup>7</sup>Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*, p.168; Greene and O'Connor, *Irish Poetry*, p.72.

<sup>8</sup>Carney, *Studies*, p.221.

<sup>9</sup>On matters of the "condensed" literary style, see Mac Cana, "Mongán mac Fiachna and Immram Brain," *Ériu* 23 (1972) 102-42.



sexual innuendo, and deliberate ambiguity. Neither prose nor verse seems obviously modelled on the other. Certain allusive and confusing incidents, such as Cuirithir's brandishing of his spears, cannot be taken as indicators of a faulty text, but rather demonstrate our continuing ignorance of the cultural context of much of early Irish literature.

This line of argument may be taken further. All the above mentioned features--dialogue, word-play, banter, ambiguity--may be considered as positive assets of the text. To take some examples, consider first Cuirithir's initial proposition to Líadain: *Cid ná dénim-ni óentaíd ?* "Why do we not unite?" (p.12, l.4). The word *óentu*, often used as here for sexual union, is from the late eighth century on also used of a particularly close relationship between two or more holy men or women. In the context of the ninth century ascetic movement, we know of two groups of people using this term, *Óentu Maelruain* and *Óentu Fedlimid*.<sup>10</sup> In various hagiographical sources, the particular syntax found in "The Meeting" is used, eg: "*A Brenaind...cinnus do-génam aentaíd ?*" or "*...do-gniatt oentaíd Mocholmoc 7 Colman.*"<sup>11</sup> Thus is established a sexual / religious pun entirely in keeping with the nature of the text, and an ambiguity about the nature of the lovers' "union" which is a core theme in the tale.<sup>12</sup> The "unity" of Líadain and Cuirithir, originally proposed as a sexual one, will turn out to be a union of saints, leading to their mutual salvation.

The ambiguity about their *óentu* is maintained throughout, until the pun in the postposited title, the suggestive *comrac*

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<sup>10</sup>K. Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, p.181-2; P. O'Dwyer "Celtic Monks and the Culdee Reform," in J. P. Mackey, *Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, (Edinburgh, 1990) 145-8.

<sup>11</sup>Meyer, "Mitteilungen...", *ZCP* 7(1911) 302; and Meyer, *Betha Colmain maic Lúacháin*, 92. For further examples, cf. DIL *óentu*.

<sup>12</sup>For another possible example of a pun or ambiguity with the word *óentu* see the story of Scoithíne and Brendan in the notes to the *Féilire Óengusso*. There Brendan, competing with Scoithíne for sanctity, is tempted, as Scoithíne was every night, by "maidens with pointed breasts" who pour hot coals in before him. Brendan agrees with the maidens that Scoithíne is better than he is: "*'is ferr intí seo itamni.' Doniat a n-aentaíd 7 a cotach iarsin, 7 scarait feliciter.*" (Stokes, *Féilire*, pp.40-1.) Considering the scenario, there is some undoubtedly humorous ambiguity about who is making "their union" and parting happier.



(p.26, l.8).<sup>13</sup> This uncertainty may be deliberate; certainly it enhances the piece, giving it an intrigue and delicacy which clarity would destroy. We are given vague and conflicting signals about the nature of their relationship, and at one point intentionally kept in the dark. This is the episode of the night they are made to sleep together. In anticipation of it, each recites a quatrain which in a very studied fashion gives nothing away. Cuirithir says:

<i>Másu óenadaig atbir</i>	If it is one night you say
<i>fesi dam-sae la Líadain</i>	of sleeping I'll get with Líadain,
<i>méti la laech nodfiad</i>	a layman who slept there would think it important
<i>ind adaig ní archriad.</i>	the night wouldn't be wasted.(p.20, ll.4-7)

This is all very well, but we know that Cuirithir is now an "athéces", essentially then an *athlaech*, an ex-layman, a monk. So his quatrain may have the air of innuendo, but remains unrevealing. Líadain says:

<i>Másu óenadaig atbir</i>	If it is one night you say
<i>feis dam-sae la Cuirithir</i>	I'll get sleeping with Cuirithir,
<i>cid blíadain dobérmais fris</i>	though we might give it a year
<i>baithum<sup>14</sup> immarordamais .</i>	we would have something to think on.

(p.20, ll.9-12)

Again the sense is suggestive, but no more. The word *imm-rádi* "thinks on, commemorates", portends something exciting, but the word is often used in a religious sense, "meditates", for example "*Crist i cridiu cech duine immirorda.*"<sup>15</sup> Cuirithir's "*arachrin*" can also have a religious sense, denoting the wasting away of the fasting ascetic.

The dilemma of the novice who must chaperone the lovers and then choose between two death-threats adds to the mystery and ambiguity. Perhaps we should assume that he confesses Cuirithir's threat to Cummíne, and this causes Cummíne to

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<sup>13</sup>It should be remembered that a similar pun was used with *comrac* in "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda," where Comgán's initial sexual *comrac* with the druid's wife is transformed at the end to a religious *comrac* with Cummíne.

<sup>14</sup>amend to *baithunn* ? cf. Greene and O' Connor, *Irish Poetry*, p.

<sup>15</sup>"St. Patrick's Hymn", *Irische Texte* 1, p.57--variant reading. cf. DIL for further examples.



assume the worst and send Cuirithir away. The poetic dialogue between Cummíne and Líadain, however, suggests a different story. Cummíne's calling Líadain *ben Chuirithir* prompts a response from the woman:

<i>Dia háine dídine</i>	That Friday
<i>ní bu scor for mílide</i>	there was no camping in meadows,
<i>for lóae mo gaimnén gil</i>	on the tufts of my small white hide
<i>itir dí láim Cuirithir.</i>	between the arms of Cuirithir. (p.22, ll.11-15.)

This certainly seems to mean, in quite erotic language, that nothing happened. It is interesting, and perhaps the very essence of the work, that Líadain and Cuirithir use religious terms to be sexually suggestive, and then Líadain uses quite sexual language to protest their chastity. In this context one textual emendation should be recommended. Although it is quite a radical emendation, it would make a great deal of sense to take the quatrain beginning "*A fhir*" (p.18, ll.19-22) as belonging after the quatrain "*Ní maith lim*" (p.22, ll.7-10). This then would be Líadain's initial response to being called "*ben Chuirithir*". It too contains a loaded word, "*líud*", accusing, often used of illicit sexual encounters. This, then, is the accusation she denies in the verse "*Dia háine dídine*."

Finally, the great poem "*Cen áinius*" contains the playful use of the term *dáil*, "tryst", another word, like *comrac* and *óentu*, meaning a meeting or foregathering in both normal and sexual senses. There are also two very ambiguous verses in the poem concerning the lovers' time together -- presumably before coming to Cummíne's monastery.

<i>Gair bá-sa</i>	I was a short time
<i>in coimthecht Cuirithir:</i>	together with Cuirithir,
<i>fris-som ba maith mo gnás-sa.</i>	I kept him good company.

<i>Céol caille</i>	The wood's music
<i>fomchanad la Cuirithir</i>	would sing to me with Cuirithir
<i>la fogur fairce flainne.</i>	with the sound of the fierce sea.

(p.24, ll.10-15)



And in the end, the story finishes on a strange sort of unity or union, Líadain's death upon the stone on which Cuirithir used to pray (p.26, ll.5-6). This is a powerful symbol, in a culture permeated by belief in relics and the significance of place and stone.

This is however not the place for a full exposition of "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir". The above suggestions should help to establish the relative integrity of the work, and should indicate its depth and tone. That tone is not far-removed from the tone of the other texts in this study: it uses carefully chosen and suggestive language, adopting for its word-play the language of sex and religion. It takes a rather suspect view of the practice and attitudes of the institutional--or here the ascetic--church. Above all, the elements of innuendo, pun, ambiguity create an atmosphere of folly, a theme reinforced by references in both prose and verse to folly and madness, from the entrance of the *óinmit* on, including Cummíne's warning against "*anespa*" (p.20, l.2), Líadain and Cummíne's discussion of Cuirithir's sanity (p.22, ll.1ff.), and the use of the term *mer* in "*Cen áinius.*" (p.22, l.21) Indeed, it may be suggested that the theme and the actions of the characters contribute to a reading of their ill-fated love-affair as an example of holy folly.

#### GENRE: The Tristan Analogues

As with the other texts, a full understanding of "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir" will be achieved only with an adequate appreciation of the way it fits into and subverts the expectations of its genre. "The Meeting" has long been assessed as one of the stories bearing a resemblance to the continental stories of Tristan and Iseult, and in Irish terms it may be generally grouped with the Irish tale-type of the *aithed*.<sup>16</sup> The scholar who most fully explored this particular subset of the *aitheda* was James Carney, whose work in connecting Irish texts with continental tales and in exposing the broad similarities and

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<sup>16</sup>G.Schoepperle, *Tristan and Isolt: A Study of the Sources of the Romance*. (1913) pp.395ff, especially pp.461-469; Carney, *Studies*, pp.189ff, esp.220-3.



striking shared details built on the foundation laid by Gertrude Schoepperle. His work was marred, however, by a failure to acknowledge international tale-types and folk-motifs, a too-heavy insistence on literary genealogies for texts and details, and a glossing over of the gulf of technique and tone which separates the courtly continental incarnations of the "Tristan" story from its Irish relations. Most problematic was his insistence on the primacy of the matter of Tristan himself-- as found in the twelfth century continental texts--as the nucleus underlying Irish and other related tales. The connections drawn in his work and elsewhere have been rightly criticised, though this criticism has tended to overlook a great deal of evidence present in his arguments, yet not fully or properly digested, concerning the relationship between the continental Tristan and his Irish cousins.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the structural similarities remain valid, as do many of the details. A more solid method of discussing the "Tristan" analogues is to treat them as versions of a paradigm which both Irish and continental writers helped to refine and cultivate, albeit in different directions.<sup>18</sup> The delineation of such a paradigm, along the lines of Ó Riain's model for the Wild Man tales, will allow us to assess Comrac's conformity to the model and understand the functions of Cumíne and Comgán within it.

Structurally, a model for the Tristan analogues could be laid out as follows:

A.Woman promised to/ married to/ under the control of older/powerful man(possessor).

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<sup>17</sup>For recent approaches to the problem, see R.J. Cormier, "Open Contrast: Tristan and Diarmaid," *Speculum* 51 (1976) 589-601; and "Remarks on the 'Tale of Deirdriu and Noísiu' and the Tristan Legend," *Études Celtiques* 15(1976-8) 303-15; and Oliver Padel, "The Cornish Background of the Tristan Stories," *CMCS* 1 (1981) 56-7.

<sup>18</sup>The idea of the paradigm lies behind B.K. Martin's structural analysis of some of the Irish tales in "Medieval Irish aitheda and Todorov's 'Narratologie,'" *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975-6) 142ff; and indeed Raymond Cormier's examinations of the treatment of the hero in the Tristan stories and in Irish analogues depend on the structural similarities.



- B. Woman falls in love with younger/ more handsome man (abductor)(or vice versa).
- C. Woman causes man to elope with/ make secret love to her.
  - 1. Man refuses/hesitates from loyalty, but is overcome.
  - 2. Man refuses/hesitates due to own situation, and postpones elopement
- D. A period of exile.
  - 1. Time spent in wilderness.
  - 2. A mediator figure becomes involved.
  - 3. Couple undergo trials.
  - 4. Couple sleep together.
  - 5. The couple are separated.
- E. Reconciliation/reunion of lovers (and spouse/ representative of spouse) leads to death of one or both of the lovers.
- F. A concrete symbol exists/grows of the tragic love.

In broad terms, this outline suits not only the "full" continental versions (Beroul, Thomas, Eilhart) but also *Longes Mac nUislenn*, *Scéla Cano Mac Gartnain*, and *Toruigheacht Dhiarmada 7 Ghráinne*, and provides a context for understanding more complex variants on the paradigm. These include (out of those treated by Carney) the story of Baile and Ailinn, in which the story is oddly weighted by its emphasis on the concrete symbol of tragic love (F); *Tochmarc Becfhola*, in which there is a duplication of the "Tristan" character (the abductor) and a strange resolution resulting from the story's emphasis on sabbatarianism; and *Aided Con Roí*, a striking treatment of the paradigm, in which the Tristan figure assumes the character and position of the Mark figure, becoming both abductor and possessor.<sup>19</sup>

It also provides a paradigm which may be set alongside two similar paradigms, dependent on major variations in one or more of the plot stages: that of "The Giant's Daughter", in which the opposition is not intrinsic to the love affair, is overcome, and the lovers are happily united (an Irish example is *Aislinge Óengusso*); and the "Hippolytus" type discussed in chapter four, in which the "Tristan" character refuses the love of the woman,

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<sup>19</sup>Martin "Aitheda", p.146.



and she causes him harm in revenge (*Fingal Rónáin* is an example.)

As with the Wild Man paradigm and the paradigms of many international tales, there are details which the story seems to carry with it, although they are not structurally inherent. These include the workings of a servant/ friend of one or both of the lovers as an intermediary or accomplice in the love affair; the concentration on the motif of the forest or wilderness of exile; the presence of the sea; and the motif called by Carney "the stone of life" which takes forms from the metaphorical to the fantastically real.<sup>20</sup>

The nature of "The Meeting"'s relation to this paradigm was skillfully argued by Carney, who saw their important divergence: "The adapter took the historical background of seventh century Ireland and asked himself the question: How can I tell this love story of people from that period? He saw the conflict in Tristan's mind between loyalty to Mark and his passion for Isolde. He realised that there were other kinds of conflict: that for instance between a guilty passion on the one side, and love for God on the other."<sup>21</sup> The result of such a treatment is essentially a monastic love story, with an outstanding "psychological maturity"<sup>22</sup> in its sympathetic approach to the main characters and their conflicts. Carney noted two other important diversions from the paradigm: "It differs from all the other related stories in that the roles are reversed. The woman and not the man is the unwilling lover."<sup>23</sup> Besides this she is also the subject of the piece, a status she shares with Deirdriu and Becfhola, among others. The second difference noted by Carney is that "Cuméne Fota, who in part as the person officially concerned in the heroine's sin, plays the role of Mark, and in part is suggested by the hermit Ogrin."<sup>24</sup> The extent to which Ogrin/the mediator in

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<sup>20</sup>Carney, *Studies*, p.204-6.

<sup>21</sup>ibid., p.220-1.

<sup>22</sup>O'Connor, *History*, p.60.

<sup>23</sup>Carney, *Studies*, p.221.

<sup>24</sup>ibid., p.222.



the wilderness is essential to the structure of the tales is debatable, as is the question of the origin of Ogrin's character. But certainly Cummíne enacts the "Mark" role, the possessor, or more aptly is the representative of the real possessor, God. For that is the true tangle of loyalties here, a conflict between human and divine love. Cummíne is merely the rather suspect arbiter of the demands of the divine possessor.

The subversion of the paradigm is striking, most importantly in its replacement of the trouble-causing woman, sexually dangerous and a threat to social stability, with a woman who is at the centre of the conflict of loyalties, trying to reconcile two types of love. This is a superbly realised portrait, and one that attacks Irish narrative stereotypes of women,<sup>25</sup> and is deserving of fuller critical evaluation. Her will and resistance, in the end, saves not only herself but Cuirithir as well.

Although we have been concentrating on the idea of the paradigm, it should not be overlooked that "The Meeting" may play on actual texts or tales. This may be particularly true of *Longes Mac nUislenn*. Líadain can be seen as an effective counterweight to Deirdriu's destructiveness, and details and symbols from *Longes* may be behind similar ones in "The Meeting". Most important is the use of the lovers' sleeping together, a scene highlighted in *Longes*.<sup>26</sup> Certainly the two stanzas of "*Cen ánius*" quoted above, which refer to the lovers' time together, is reminiscent of descriptions of Deirdriu and Noísiu's time in the wilderness. Moreover, in "The Meeting" the existence or not of a sexual union is the motivating force behind the plot and its central riddle, heightened by linguistic and narrative ambiguity. Another possible echo of *Longes* is Líadain's comment on Cuirithir: "*Nicon biaid aice bó/ ná dáirtí ná dartadó*," (p.18, ll.6-7) which seems to recall the farmyard banter of Deirdriu and Noísiu.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the stone upon which Líadain dies seems to be a

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<sup>25</sup>See for example the poem of Daniél úa Líathaiti, abbot of Lismore, which assumes the usual stereotype of the woman as a creature of desire. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, pp.6-9.

<sup>26</sup>Hull, *Longes Mac nUislenn* (New York, 1949) 46.

<sup>27</sup>ibid., p.46; p.51.



redeemed version of Deirdriu's suicide stone, its symbolic value raised to an image almost of mystical union between the lovers, and perhaps dependent for its power on its relation to the stone in *Longes* .

#### THE ROLES OF CUMMÍNE AND COMGÁN.

The outline of tone and technique, and of the treatment of genre is necessary in understanding how our characters fit into the tale. Their depictions are separate and very different, especially in the use of the character-types we have established over the preceding chapters. Both are here essentially stereotypes, Comgán of the holy fool, Cummíne of the confessor. Comgán's depiction more or less conforms with that shown elsewhere, but Cummíne is a bungling, almost malevolent character, and although it results in a critique of monastic attitudes similar to that in the other texts, he is the focus, rather than the vehicle, of criticism, and displays none of the integrity shown elsewhere.

Mac Da Cherda's depiction in the tale appears to be dependent on the same sources as the prologue to "The Dialogue," showing the same tendency to generalisation from specific stories, for example : "*Cumma imtéged muir 7 tír inna chossaib tírmaib. Ard fili na Hérenn 7 óinmit na Hérenn é-siden.* " (p.12, ll.14-16)) His portrait is indeed similar to that in "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda," particularly in his riddle-like poem. His function in the story, however, derives predominantly from his relationship to Cuirithir.

In the first chapter and in the fourth, I discussed the way in which fools often function in love affairs, either symbolically shadowing the hero, or as another facet of the hero, when for instance the hero is turned into a fool or madman, or disguises himself as one. Such, essentially, is the nature of the relationship between Mac Da Cherda and Cuirithir in this text. Mac Da Cherda represents Cuirithir, actually and symbolically, in his dealings with Líadain. We have seen such exchanges in other texts discussed briefly, involving kings exchanging places with a fool in a symbolic gesture of the collapse of order. Here we



might wish to compare two different examples from the Tristan canon, to understand fully the exchange taking place.

In one of the Welsh Triads, the three mighty swineherds of the Island of Britain are described. This includes an account of Tristan which is very apposite: "*Drystan mab Tallwch, a gedwis moch March mab Meirchyawn hyt tra aeth y meirchyat y erchi y Esyllt dyuot y'w gynnadyl* " ("Drystan son of Tallwch, who guarded the swine of March son of Meirchiawn, while the swineherd went to ask Esyllt to come to a meeting with him.")<sup>28</sup> Here, Tristan's exchange with the swineherd bears a great resemblance, structurally and symbolically, to Cuirithir's and Comgán's agreement. So too, in the texts of Eilhart, and especially in the two Old French *Folies*, the continental Tristan disguises himself as, indeed becomes, a fool and madman. Of this, Merritt Blakeslee writes, "Tristan's madness must be understood as a metaphor for foolish or ungoverned passion. Passionate love (or lust) was often conceived as a moral disorder, an unbalancing of the reason in which the heart (or loins) governed the head, obscuring the image of right actions. The unlawful, adulterous passion of Tristan and Iseut is repeatedly characterized...by the terms *folie, aimer par folie, aimer follement* ." <sup>29</sup> While not suggesting any genealogical connection among these texts, it demonstrates within other versions of the paradigm similar uses of the change of places and the lover as fool.

It is not simply in his folly that Mac Da Cherda is an appropriate counterpart to Cuirithir. Their match is particularly suitable in that Mac Da Cherda, like Cuirithir--and indeed Líadain-- is a poet (*ardfili na Hérenn* (p.12, l.15) ). His folly, moreover, is the result of an alleged or actual love-affair, and so even more clearly represents the sort of madness discussed elsewhere as implicit in Irish treatments of sexual sin. But it must be remembered too that his is a holy folly, that Comgán is shown as full of "*rath Dé* ", and so he incorporates the religious

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<sup>28</sup>R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydain* (Cardiff, 1978) no.26, p.45.

<sup>29</sup>Merritt R. Blakeslee, *Love's Masks: Identity, Intertextuality and Meaning in the Old French Tristan Poems* (1989) 78. The discussion in her chapter on "*Tristan Fou* ", (p.72-86), is of the foremost relevance to the consideration of Líadain and Cuirithir.



aspects of the lovers' sexual madness as well. In short, his character is used allusively, carrying with it as it does a whole tradition of sanctity, sex and madness, and thus epitomises the themes of the work. That this tradition would be expected to be known seems to be implied both by the generalisations about Mac da Cherda, and by Cuirithir's statement, "*Rocúalamar* " (We have heard [of you].)(p.14, l.5).

If Mac Da Cherda's replacement of Cuirithir suggests the hero's madness, Mac Da Cherda himself testifies to the sanity of Líadain, at the same time suggesting obliquely her religious status: "*nicon festar fo chailliu/ banscál badid cíallaidiu*." (Unknown under a nun's veil/A woman who's so sensible.) She discusses the nature of her *ciall* in "*Cen áinius* ": "*Ba mire/ ná dernad a airer-som/manbad oman ríg nime* ." ("It was mad/Not to do what he wanted,/But for fear of Heaven's Lord.")(p.22, ll.21-3) Thus she ranges her own sense, which is madness outside of a religious perspective, against, essentially, common sense. It is then interesting to note two other examples of "sense", *ciall* . The first, lexically: Cuirithir asks Mac Da Cherda, a fool, to speak to Líadain "*triat chéill féin* " (through your own sense, p.14, l.8 ). The other is implied: the basis for the lovers' proposed union lies not in passionate love, initially, but in sense, reason: "*Cid ná dénaim-ni óentaid, a Líadain?*" *ol Cuirithir. "Ropud án ar mac ar ndís* ." ("Why don't we unite, Líadain?" said Cuirithir. "The son of the two of us would be famous."p.12, ll.4-6)

Folly was supposed to blind the sense, and indeed, the penitentials suggest this as the result of fornication as well: the Old Irish Penitential lists as the qualities born of fornication: "shameless scurrility, blindness of mind, fickleness of nature..." In this regard it is surely significant that among his other cryptic statements, Mac Da Cherda says "*Rolá temel dom roscaib,/am dillig ar inchoscaib* ..." ("Darkness falls upon my eyes,/ I am stupid about signals...", p.16, ll.1-2) He is the representative of their mad love, and so the appropriate person to arrange a tryst (*dáil* ) between them.

Mac Da Cherda functions in this tale as a symbol of the madness of love and a harbinger of the holy folly intrinsic in



divine love. To this extent his representation in the tale draws on both the traditional symbolism of the fool within early Irish literature and on his own particular background in tradition. Cummíne Fota's role is more difficult to assess. Certainly his role as *anmchara* is not unfamiliar: he plays this role opposite many figures (Caillech Beare, Domnall mac Aeda, Guaire Aidne) and indeed we may see it as the basis of his relationship with Comgán. On the other hand, here Cummíne is a fixed character, as he appears in "The Adventures of Mac da Cherda." He appears to have one fixed residence or monastery (perhaps what is now Kilcummin near Killarney). But the nature of his confessor figure seems altered by a heavy influence from the preoccupations of the penitential attributed to Cummíne.<sup>30</sup> That penitential devotes a great deal of space to discussions of sex, and one passage seems particularly relevant: "He who loves any woman (but is) unaware of any evil beyond a few conversations, shall do penance for forty days. But if he kisses and embraces her, one year... He who loves her in mind only, seven days. If, however, he has spoken but has not been accepted by her, forty days..."<sup>31</sup>

Cummíne seems a figure of satire, overly ready to try the lovers' sexual restraint, overly ready to believe the worst of them. Moreover, he seems incapable of discerning their sanctity in the midst of their trials. Nonetheless, his initial statement "*Mór dom mírennaib adobarr*" (p.16, l.15) is an interesting one. *Mír* "morsel", is used in at least one poem to refer to the eucharist.<sup>32</sup> The verb *ad-opair* has a dual meaning--it is used for those who give themselves to a religious vocation, but also is the term for sacrifice. Both seem to be applicable to the fate of the lovers.

The regime the lovers follow in Cummíne's monastery, conversing but not looking at each other, seems to resemble some of the practices found in the literature of the ascetic reform. Thus in the "Monastery of Tallaght", we find "Devout

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<sup>30</sup>The Penitential of Cummean, in Bieler, *Penitentials*, esp. pp.112-7.

<sup>31</sup>ibid., p.116/7.

<sup>32</sup>The poem "*Ro loiscit na lámasa*", Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, pp.166-7, v.4:"*Meir ar cloich de, mír ar cnáim, mír ar in láim loiscthisea*."



young nuns he thinks it right to go and converse with and to confirm their faith, but without looking on their faces, and taking an elder man in thy company: and it is right to converse with them standing on the slab by the cross in front of the hostel, or in the retreat where they live."<sup>33</sup> It would not be unreasonable to see a piece written in the mid-ninth century taking Cummíne as representative of the ascetic reforms, imposing a harsh and perhaps foolhardy regime on those whose devout, but passionate hearts would break beneath it.

There is a tone in the portrayal of Cummíne that suggests his is a satire of this particular type of cleric. Nonetheless, the lovers seem to achieve salvation--almost despite him. His depiction is the most critical and unsympathetic in the text, and though satire is consistent with his function elsewhere in tradition, he is usually the vehicle, not the butt of it. Nonetheless, if we conceive of the lovers' struggles as an example of holy folly, Cummíne's acting as *anmchara* to two such mad saints is fitting enough.

What sets "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir" apart from our other texts is more than anything else its psychological complexity, especially with regard to love, sex and God. This complexity is evident in the balanced approach of "The Dialogue" as well, but the didactic quality of that work means it must argue and take positions rather than explore. "The Meeting" 's different approach and its more restrained and stereotyped use of the characters of Comgán and Cummíne suggest it is from a different literary milieu than our other texts. Frank O'Connor has, indeed, connected it with the equally complex and sensitive "*Aithbe dam-sa bes mara*" and "Créd's Lament."<sup>34</sup> Whatever the basis for this belief, we should see such texts as running parallel to the sort we have previously been examining, using the traditions contained in them, but engaging in a more profound level of religious and psychological discourse.

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<sup>33</sup>Gwynn and Paron, "Monastery", p.151 §62.

<sup>34</sup>O'Connor, *History*, p.58-60.



## Conclusions

The close reading of texts in the last section reveals that it is dangerous to generalise about the roles of either stereotyped figures such as "saint" and "fool", or of specific characters such as the subjects of this thesis. Just as Cú Chulainn's typecast role as the great warrior is called into question by texts such as *Serglige Con Culainn* and *Aided Con Roí*, the general types into which we might put Cummíne Fota and Comgán Mac Da Chérda must be balanced by the use of their images in specific texts with specific agendas. Thus, despite the apparent use of Cummíne as an alternative saint, one not in conformity with the usual literary standards of sanctity, he is used in both "The Dialogue" and in "The Meeting" in a stereotyped way. In the former he acts as the sagacious mediator of the prophetic ramblings of the holy fool, his partner in vision and criticism. In the latter text, however, his character is a stereotypical ascetic confessor, less in keeping with his image elsewhere than with a constructed image based on the historical Cummíne's Penitential and contemporary religious practice. So in critical examination of early Irish literature we should not rely too heavily on "tradition", but must constantly assess a given text's relationship with that tradition--whether it is conformist, subversive or completely creative--or consider whether it draws on a different "tradition" altogether.

In this brief study of two character types and two specific characters, I have tried to examine the questions of image and function. How the image of the fool relates to the specific image of holy fool created for Comgán, and how the image of saint relates to the specific non-conformist image of wandering, preaching failure typified by Cummíne was my concern in the first section. How these images function in given texts was my concern in the second section, particularly since both Cummíne and Comgán are in some sense unique characters: by nature iconoclastic, their literature hinting of the subversive. The resulting work has uncovered conclusions both on the interplay of image and function, and on general critical questions in early



Irish literature, as well as a range of tangential questions in need of further investigation.

First, in the background section, the dossiers of Cummíne and Comgán, set against standard early Irish literature relating to saint and fool, revealed that the images of both are at variance with normal "saints" and "fools". However, while Comgán's character seems moulded to a pattern met elsewhere in early and medieval Christianity--that of the holy fool or fool for Christ--Cummíne's character is more amorphous, diverging from contemporary literary portrayals of sanctity, but not evidently resolved into a clear image of his own. This perhaps explains why in their respective dossiers Comgán fulfills the same character type time and time again, and frequently appears as what one might call an "archetypal" holy fool, while Cummíne appears in various roles: hermit, wandering preacher, simple cleric, sage, ascetic confessor.

The first two texts examined in the second section give some sense of how these images relate to literary traditions, and an idea of the function of these untraditional character types. While Cummíne's "Life" plays with both heroic and saintly biographies to create a character at odds with the world, one who rejects both secular and ecclesiastical yardsticks for success and chooses the humble role of rootlessness and "failure", Comgán's "Adventures" use both Christian imagery and the genre of the wild-man tale to create an archetype. This type, like Cummíne's, subverts the expectations of the exile-and-return paradigm often found in wild-man tales and their counterparts with a Christian paradigm of salvation. Thus his fall from success does not lead eventually to a return to worldly success, but rather to his salvation from the very paradigms of success in his holy folly and his eventual communion with God.

Both of the images produced in these "biographies" allow Cummíne and Comgán to act as counter-cultural figures, critics, in their liminality and in their conscious or enforced rejection of worldly success. Further texts which depict them together show how such images function as critical ones in narrative and didactic forms. In "The Trial", the pair bring their liminality,



their existence outside standard categories, into the world of the court and set up an "other world" in contrast to that espoused by Guaire, Senchán and indeed Mac Teléne. Their comic, humiliating, slapstick world is sharply set against a court society based on praise, power and wealth. The satire, though clearly humorous, also uses Christian allusions to point to a more serious subtext. In this way the visit of the troop of fool-clerics to Guaire's court acts in a salvific manner, exposing the pretensions of the worldly king and his retinue, and suggesting alternative, "foolish", Christ-like patterns of behaviour.

In a more didactic mode, Comgán in "The Dialogue" reveals methods of right living which reject similar false standards. Speaking as prophet and visionary, he holds against hypocrisy and pretension, while advocating humility, charity and poverty. His holy folly allows him to criticise with impunity churchmen and the rich, while Cummíne the sage acts as his mediator and verifies the divine source of the holy fool's revelation.

The final text, "The Meeting of Líadain and Cuirithir", is in the same mode as the other works, but its use of Cummíne in particular is at variance with his depiction in the other texts. Here, rather than being the vehicle of social criticism, he is the target of it, playing the role of the monastic authority figure whose competence is called into question. In his role as confessor, however, the text does retail an image of Cummíne rooted securely in his tradition. In "The Meeting" it is the bumbling nature of his spiritual counsel which gives us pause. Comgán on the other hand is in this text more stereotyped than ever, acting almost as a symbol of folly, sex and poetry and introducing into the tale a note of madness which infects the surroundings. In "The Meeting" we can clearly glimpse how a character type can be used in an understated manner to put a particular shading on a text without further exploration of that character.

In all of these texts the most remarkable feature is their stance towards the institutional church, the monastic establishment. In each text the church comes in for implicit or explicit criticism for its failure to live up to its own standards.



The vessels of sanctity in these tales operate on the very margins of the establishment: a wandering preacher, an idiot prince, a gang of clerical buffoons, a visionary fool, a pair of lovers. In the last two texts, despite their great differences, the message of the works seems to be directed at ordinary people, particularly lay people, and sets up an opposition between how normal folk can gain sanctity and the pretentious asceticism of the monastery. The message of the first three texts seems directed rather at the establishment itself, in the shape of the church and the politico-religious kingships of Munster.

This leads to the first of the general literary questions which emerge from this study. The counter-cultural stance of the texts, and their exaltation of the lowly and liminal as the repositories of sanctity, suggests a milieu outside of the establishment. This is particularly so with the first text, "The Life", and the fourth, "The Dialogue." In the one, the characterisation of Cummine as a wandering preacher, and in the other, the advocacy of charity--especially to poor scholars--and the directing of its message towards lay folk in an almost homiletic fashion, suggests that it may be among such wandering preachers and poor scholars that such texts originated. A comparison with the continental phenomenon of the goliards, while it must be pursued with caution, reveals a very similar combination of earthiness, folly, and criticism together with a Christian orthodoxy and the highly intelligent, if irreverent, use of biblical texts. Such a comparison also warns that such texts need not be extra-establishment because they are anti-establishment: many of the goliardic authors were prominent churchmen and theologians. Nonetheless, when we consider the highly dramatic and satirical nature of "The Trial", and the slight indications in "The Dialogue" that it may have been intended as a homiletic playlet for performance, we feel we are in a stratum of literature wholly unexplored in Early Ireland.

To that end, a clear desideratum is the examination of dialogues and other texts for any indications that they might have been intended for performance. This examination should also



consider other genres which in continental Europe have revealed fruitful signs of the dramatic such as liturgies and poems spoken in persona. An intelligent comparison of the goliardic milieu in Europe with the texts in this study and others with similar critical or satirical agendas would also be of great benefit, not least in determining what can and cannot be said about these two different environments. There remains in this regard another unexplored area in the genre of popular religious literature, particularly the pietistic and didactic poems which abound in Kuno Meyer's "Neue Mitteilungen". The presence of poetic masterpieces in the corpus of early Irish verse has allowed anthologists and critics alike to create a picture of a spiritually well-endowed church, without posing the more difficult questions of how ordinary people lived as Christians and what their image of sanctity was.

Further literary questions are found in the critical techniques used--it must be admitted, fitfully--in this study. Of particular interest is the question of genre and paradigm. Many paradigms of tale-types have already been established. New ground may be broken, however, by exploring the specific agendas of particular tales within those genres by establishing the differences each tale shows from the established paradigm. This may be particularly fruitful with contrasting "secular" and "christian" texts, where such categories can safely be applied. Related to this question is the possibility that early Irish texts draw on others, a possibility broached somewhat unsuccessfully by the late Professor James Carney. If more secure relationships between clearly literary texts can be established, it may be possible to examine how early Irish literati worked against and played with familiar themes, plots and symbols to create new meanings and agendas.

There is also the need for character studies which set traditional views of particular figures against their depiction in specific texts. Characters in particular need of such examination include Cú Chulainn, whose oft-vaunted role as archetypal warrior must also be squared with less than flattering portrayals and with his being in some texts represented as almost a type of



Christ. So too a study of a just king like Domnall mac Áeda would allow a perspective on the development of a concretely historical figure into an archetype, a perspective unattainable for the more mythological kings such as Cormac mac Airt and Conaire Mór. Both these figures present a fruitful subject for study, as the literature concerning them is extensive, and covers a long span of periods and environments of composition.

Finally, there is the question of the wider environment of these texts. The literature of eighth-tenth century Munster may be of great value in that it displays the thought-world of a kingdom consciously Christian. In Munster scholarly activity began early and continued, and various religious reform movements appear to have their origins in the south and west of Ireland. During the period in question, the kingships of various Munster peoples and of the province itself espoused Christian values and were often held by men who also possessed ecclesiastical authority. In all these characteristics it is a world in which the ideas of Christianity, applied to the body politic and society at large, may reveal a kingdom closer to those seen elsewhere in contemporary European societies. An examination of the literature relating to explicitly Christian Munster kings, such as Cormac mac Cuilennáin or Fedlimid mac Crimthainn would also be of value, in that it would complete the examination of the trinity of king, fool and saint, begun in this study of Cummíne Fota and Comgán Mac Da Chérda.

Completed 12 November 1991  
The Feast of Cummíne Fota.  
Cummeane Longe, ora pro nobis.



## **APPENDIX AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**



## Annotated Bibliography of Sources relating to Cummíne Fota and Comgán Mac Da Cherda.

**Annals.**(for comparison of annal entries on Cummíne Fota, See Grabowski and Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals* , p.222.)

- 1.AU 591(=592) *Nativitas Cumeni Longi*. (Alnnis, 591/2).
- 2.AU 661(=662) *Cummeni Longus (gl.cumain fada ) lxxii@ anno etatis sue quievit/ 7 Sarán nepos Critain sapientes dormierunt*. (Alnnis 661/2).
- 3.Alnnis 645 *Mc. na Cerda* .(AT 641).

**Genealogies** (for discussion of genealogical traditions, see Ó Coileáin, "Structure," pp.92-108.)

Cummíne Fota:

- 1.Lec.34 Va36 and variants (see Ó Coileáin, "Structure", 92n.)  
*Rim ingen Fiachna meic Fiachrach Gairine meic Duach Iarlaithi mathair Cumaine meic Fiachna 7 Comgain Meic Da Cerda 7 Guairi meic Colmain 7 Crimthand Caeil meic Aeda Cirr, rig Laigean 7 Chuana meic Cailchine, Laech Liathmune 7 Bracan Dairindse.*
- 2.Banshenchus (LL17381-2) *Guaire.Crimthand. Cuanu. Comgan. Cummain Breccan bec a briathra cen baís.*
- 3.a.LL notes to Féilire Óengusso(Stokes, p.242); *Cumain Fota mac Fiachnai meic Fiachrach Gairine meic Duach meic Maine meic Coirpri meic Cuirc meic Luigdech.*  
b.LB notes to Féilire Óengusso " *..Cumin fota mac fiachnai...deoganacht lacha léin dó... Da mac déc rogensit o mumain (leg. mugain) .i. uí escuip ocus .ui.rig. cumin7 comgall "(leg. comgan ). Stokes, Fel2, clxviii-clxix).*
- 4.a.LL 286b. (vol.V, 1248):"*Cummíne Fota mac Fiachnai di Eoganacht Chassil.*"  
b."*The Life of Cummíne Fota* ", from RIA C.I.2, 5a:"*Cumain Fota mac Fiachna de Eoganacht Caisil..(.5b)mac do Fiachna Muillétan mac Eogain.* "

Comgán Mac Da Cherda:

- 1.Genealogy of the Uí Rossa, Déssi. LL: " *Fogertach m. Mael-umai m. Aeda m. Fingin. Da mac Aeda: Mael-uma et Mael-ochtraig.*" Lec: "*Aenmac ac Mael-ochtraich .i. Comgan .i. in rigoimnit.*"(O' Brien, CGH , 398-9)
- 2."*The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda,*" O'Keefe, Ériu 5, p.36. "*Brathair do-som Bran Find mac Maile-Ochtraich.*" (Au/Ainnis 671 *Bran Find mac Máile Ochtraig m. Cobthaig* ).
- 3.a."*The Meeting of Liadain and Cuirithir,*" Meyer, p.12:"*Mac Dá Cherda...mac Máile-ochtraig maic Dinertaig dona Déssib Muman.*"  
b."*The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda,*" p.35: "*Mac Da Cherda...mac...Maile Ochtraig meic Dineartaich .i. ri na nDeisi Maigi Femin o Dun Letrach for Siuir.*"  
c. Lec. Banshenchus: *Mael Ochtraig m. Dineartaig.*

## Martyrologies

1.Féilire Óengusso

- a.Text, Nov. 12 (Stokes, p.234-5): "*Dorindnacht la suithi/soas co mméit tiachrai/ dom Chummain cain mílti/ macc find Fotae Fiachnai.*"
- b.LB notes (Stokes, Fel2, clxviii-clxix): *dom chumain .i. Cumin fota mac fiachnai . comarba brenaind cluanai fertai 7 deoganacht lacha léin deo. aed din ainm diles - chumin 7 druim daliter ainm abaile 7 hi cumín frith hicill íte inúb conaill gabra ...Mugain ingen fiachach find/máthair cumine cheolbind/sisi mugain amáthair/sesium disi derbrathair. Damac déc rogensit mumain (leg. mugain) .i. uí escuip ocus .ui. rig. cumin 7 comgall (leg. comgan) .*
- c. Rawl B 512notes (Stokes, FO, 242):*dom Chummain .i. Cuimmini mac Fiachna, comarba Brénainn Chlúana ferta: d'Euganacht Locha Léin dó...*"



2. Féilire hUí Gormáin (Stokes, 216-7): "*Cuimmin Foda mac Fiachna do Eoganacht Locha Lein, epscop Cluand Ferta Brenainn. Aodh a chédainm díleas 7 Druim da liter ainm a bhaile .*"
3. Martyrology of Donegal (O'Donovan, 304-7): as above, and "*M'Ide an ógh naomhtha do ba buime do. Leastar n-eccna a aimsire an fersa. Proiceptaidh eargna bréithre dé. Aeis Crist an tan rofhaidh a spirat do chum nimhe 661. Adeir an seinleabhar memraim adubart ag Brigit, 1 Feb., 7 ag Pátraicc, 17 Mart, go raibhe Cuimin Foda cosmail a mbhósaibh, acus a mbeathaidh re Grigoir moralium.*"

## Works Attributed To.

1. Authentic or possibly authentic (Cummíne Fota)
  - a. Penitential of Cummean (Lapidge and Sharp no.601) ed. Bieler, Irish Penitentials, 108-135.
  - b. Hymn: "Celebra Iuda" (Lapidge and Sharp, no.582) ed. Bernard and Atkinson, Liber Hymnorum, vol I, 16-21.
  - c. Description of Apostles and Christ (Lapidge and Sharp, no.292) . ms. Paris BN lat.18108 f.70v. ed. Bischoff, "Beiträge", 167-8; Ó Croinín, "Cummianus Longus," 270-1.
  - d. Cummean's letter to Ségéne, abbot of Iona *de controversia paschali* (Lapidge and Sharp no.289) ms. BL Cotton Vitellius A xii, 79-83. ed. PL lxxxvii, 969-78. Extensive bibliography, qv. Lapidge and Sharp. Identification with Cummíne Fota, cf. Ó Croinín, "Cummianus Longus," 274-7.
  - e. Commentary on Mark, att. to Jerome. (Lapidge and Sharp no.345) ed. PL xxx, 589-644; Stokes and Strachan, Thesaurus, vol. 1, 484-94, partial, from Turin Codex, with Irish glosses. For identification with the Cummean of the Paschal letter, see Bischoff, "Turning-Points," 80-82 (in MacNamara) and further Ó Néill, "Romani," 289-90.
2. Spurious Works.
  - a. Dialogue on sin ("The Dialogue"), between Cummíne and Comgán. YBL col.335, facs.p.326a. ed. O'Keefe, Ériu 5, 20-7.
  - b. Dialogue on Mag Femin, between Cummíne and Comgán (attributed in LL, 209b-210a, =vol iv, p.1018-1020.) ed. Gwynn, Met. Dind. iii, 200-205.
  - c. Quatrain on "the Three Bráns", attributed to Cummíne. Sanas Cormaic LB (Stokes, p.18); YBL (Meyer, p.43) s.u. *edel*.
  - d. Poem on Judgment Day, "*Slúaigead so re Síil Adaim*". attributed to "Cummín", Lec., 347. ed. Bergin, Irish Bardic Poetry, 194-6.
  - e. Quatrain on Cnoc Raffond, attributed to Comgán. Sanas Cormaic: LB "Mac da Cherda" (Stokes, Three Irish Glossaries, 3); YBL "Mocu Cerdda" (Meyer, Anecdotes iv, 5) s.u. *ána*; and LL 201b (=vol.iv, 958).
  - f. Two Quatrains on the battle of Carn Conaill, attributed to Comgán (Mac Da Certa). LU 116a (marginal note) = Best and Bergin, 289n.
  - g. Quatrain on a well, attributed to Comgán, in "Trefhocul," LL 37b (=vol ii, 166) s.u. *can rudrach*. This is found in "The Adventures of Mac da Cherda", Ériu 5, 36.

## Works Concerning

1. As characters in narrative/ verse.
  - a. Lament for Cummine Fota, ("The Lament") attributed to Colmán maccu Clúasaig (+662). ed. Meyer, Bruchstücke, 41-3; Mac Eoin, "Lament,"; Byrne, "Lament."
  - b. Life of Cummíne Fota ("The Life"). RIA C.I. 2, 5a-8b, ed Mac Eoin, "A Life." bi.notes in Féilire Óengusso on Cummíne, from Rawl B. 512 (Stokes, Féil., 242).



- bii. Preface to "Celebra Iuda", ("The Preface") in *Liber Hymnorum*, ed. Bernard and Atkinson, vol. i, 16-18; ii, 9-10.
  - biii. Fragment in LL, 286b.
  - c. "The Adventures of Mac Da Cherda" ("The Adventures") YBL, col.798, ed. O'Keefe, *Ériu* 5, 34-41.
  - d. "The Trial of Mac Teléne" ("The Trial"), YBL, col.797; Harleian 5280, f.25a; ed. O'Keefe, *Ériu* 5, 26-33.
  - e. "The Dialogue of Cummine and Comgan" ("The Dialogue"). see Works, 2.a. above. Prose prologue describing characters. YBL. col.335; ed. O'Keefe, *Ériu* 5, 20-1.
  - f. "The Meeting of Liadain and Cuirithir" ("The Meeting"), Harleian 5280, f.26a-26b.; H.3.18, p.759.
  - g. *Imtheachta na nOinmideadh (Imtheachta)*; three versions: RIA B.iv.1, 149a-178a (acephalous); D.iv.1, 27ff.; 23.C.19, 49-157 (summary).
  - h. "The Battle of Carn Conaill," (*Cath Cairn Chonaill*) three versions: LU 115b-117b. includes "Three Wishes", see i. below., and quatrains attributed to Mac Da Cherda, see Works 2.e. above; LL 276b-277b; Egerton 1782, 59b-61a, includes Cummine as mediator, and further anecdotes about him. ed. O'Grady, SG 1, 396-401. Edition from LU with variants from other versions, Stokes, ZCP 3, 203-219.
  - i. "The Three Wishes" (*Na Trí Miana*). anecdote about Cummine, Caimin of Inis Cealtra, and Guaire Aidne. Lismore, f.446, 1; LU 116 (Carn Conaill); Rawl B512 f. 141a2; YBL col. 795; Keating, 3, 68-71. cf. Stokes, ZCP 3, 203 for references.
  - j. "Life of Molaga" (*Betha Molaga*) Cummine and Comgan appear. ed. O'Keefe, lr. texts 3, 12-22.
  - k. "The Rivalry of Cuana and Guaire". Role given to Comgan in Keating, 3, 130.
  - l. Glosses on *Cáin Fuithirbe*. associate Cummine with origin of the law, ed. Breatnach, *Peritia* 5, 37, 43-4.
  - m. Preface to "Lament of the Old Woman of Beare" (*Aithbe dam-sa bés mara*) in TCD H.3.18, 42, col.2. associates Cummine with veiling of the caillech. ed. Murphy, *PRIA* 55C, 83; Ó hAodha, *Sages Saints and Storytellers*, 309.
  - n. "The Frenzy of Mór Muman" (*Mór Muman ocus Aided Cuanach meic Ailchine*). Mac Da Cherda appears as poet and prophet. LL 274a-275b. ed. O'Nolan, *PRIA* 30C, 261-82.
  - o. *Cis Lir Fotlai Aíre*, section on *Tamall Aíre*. anecdote about Comgan. ed. McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, 14.
  - p. "The Vision of Mac Conglinne" (*Aislinge Meic Conglinne*). text in H.3.18, includes character "mac-na Cairre". Meyer, *Vision*, 114-5. see Ó Coileáin, "Structure", 105n.73. for identification.
2. Cummine as Marbán. see. Ó Coileáin, *Ériu* 28, 85, for identification.
- a. "King and Hermit" (*A Marbán, a díthruaig*). dialogue with Guaire. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, 10.
  - b. *Tromdám Guaire*, Marbán saves Guaire from overbearing guests., ed. Joynt, TG.
3. References to Cummine and Comgan in prose and verse.
- a. "The Vision of Mac Conglinne" (*Aislinge Meic Conglinne*)
    - i. LB text, poem, mentions Comgan, Marbán, ed. Jackson, *Aislinge*, 3.
    - ii. LB text, poem, mentions Comgan as fool, Jackson, *Aislinge*, 42.
  - b. "Aisling do chonairc Cormac", poem by Mac Cearbhaill Uí Dhálaigh. refers to Comgan as prophet. ed. O'Dwyer, *Éigse* 5, 86, v.39.
  - c. *Imscothad Cuimine*. reference to tale in Tale-List in *Airec Menman Uraird meic Coisse*. ed. M.Byrne, *Anec.* 2, 53.
  - d. "The Monastery of Tallaght", refers to Cummine as authority. ed. Gwynn and Purton, *PRIA* 29C, 142-3, 131.
  - e. Old Irish Table of Penitential Commutations, refers to Cummine as one of the four chief sages of Ireland. ed. Binchy, *Ériu* 19, 64-5.



- f. Old Irish Penitential, various references to Cummine's penitential, Gwynn, Ériu 7, chap. 3, §2,12,15; chap. 2, § 21.
- g. "The Cauldron of Poesy," refers to Cummine as poet. ed. Breatnach, Ériu 32, 68.

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- b. Inscribed stone, Kilpeacon, Co. Tipperary. *CUMMENE*. see. Lionard, PRIA 61C, 104.



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