

**The Poet-Outsider and the Passion of Christ:
Interlacing Myths in the Middle Irish Preface to *Cáin Adomnáin*.**

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Abstract: The preface to *Cáin Adomnáin* is a Middle Irish narrative added to a seventh-century law designed, amongst other things, to protect women. In this essay I intend to analyse the way in which the author of the preface is using and adapting the various mythic narratives available to him, both secular and Christian, in order to create an allusively complex justification for upholding the law. This is done by means of a hagiographical narrative concerning the author of the law, Adomnán of Iona, in which he receives the law from heaven at the request of his mother. The role of Adomnán's character has been interpreted as that of the poet-outsider or shaman and the preface has been viewed as an essentially secular narrative.

I argue that this is only half of the picture and that, in fact, the author is using the secular myth in order to paint the relationship between Adomnán and his mother as that of Christ and Mary at the Passion but in such a way as to avoid the charge of blasphemy. This parallel would have been prompted by the growing popularity of the Virgin Mary in the twelfth century, an obvious model to endorse a law designed to protect women. This discussion forms part of my MPhil thesis looking at the construction of women and femininity throughout the preface to *Cáin Adomnáin*.

The text known to us as *Cáin Adomnáin* is a composite one being composed of the Middle Irish preface, the focus of this essay; an Old Irish guarantor list; a Latin preface written in the ninth century; and finally the Old Irish law itself. This was the law that, in 697, the cleric St. Adomnán of Iona promulgated designed to protect innocents, that is clerics, women, and children, from harm in its various incarnations by exacting heavy fines from the perpetrators. As time passed the law came to be regarded as solely pertaining to women.¹ About four centuries later another cleric, probably working in the Columban foundation at Raphoe, wrote a preface to this text in which Adomnán's mother Ronnat forces him to extort the law from God by undergoing an extended period of mortification including taking nil by mouth and being left in a river for eight months. The torments have to reach such an extreme that he dies

¹ Whitley Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé: The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London, [Harrison and Sons], 1905), p. 211

before God sends an angel to acquiesce to Adomnán's wishes. The role that the saint plays in this tale is similar to that of the poet-outsider, as represented by figures such as Finn mac Cumail, Amairgen, and Marbán. The similarity between this poet-outsider and Adomnán has led Daniel Melia to see the saint's role as essentially shamanic.² I propose that the author of the preface of *Cáin Adomnáin* is not presenting a straightforward shamanic figure; rather I would see the use of the myth of the poet-outsider as a means by which to introduce the Christian myth of the Passion. This allows him to present the relationship between Adomnán and his mother as similar to that between Jesus and Mary; this in its turn is a productive parallel due to the centrality of women and motherhood in the tale and the rising importance of Mary in the Christian pantheon.

The figure of the poet-outsider occurs in myths concerning the nature and source of poetic inspiration and is most explicitly described in the lemma on the word *prull* (a poetic term for 'greatly' or 'excessively) in *Sanas Chormaic*. Here, Senchán Torpéist, that most famous poet, is accompanied on his trip to Man by a hideous youth who despite his appearance is the only member of the poetic party who can answer the challenge set by an equally hideous old woman. The role of this youth is made explicit when he is called the Spirit of Poetry: 'Dubium itaque non est quod ille Poematis erat spiritus' ('Therefore, there was no doubt that he was the Spirit of Poetry').³ Patrick Ford has analysed this story, alongside a number of others, as representing the 'darker, mystical practice of poetry' and as pertaining to a concept of poetry originating in an extra-social, supernatural locus.⁴ Although the arguments have been focused on the figure of the poet this does not preclude the idea that other knowledge might be accessed in the same manner, due in part to the flexible nature of

² Daniel Melia, 'Law and the Shaman Saint', in Patrick K. Ford (ed.), *Celtic Folklore and Christianity: Studies in Memory of William W. Heist* (California: McNally and Loftin, 1983), pp. 113-28.

³ *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, ed. by Osborn Bergin and others, 5 vols (Dublin: Hodges and Figgis, 1907-1913), IV (1912), p. 94.

⁴ Patrick K. Ford, 'The Blind, the Dumb, and the Ugly: Aspects of Poets and their Craft in Early Ireland and Wales', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 19 (1990), 27-40 (p. 40).

the Irish concept of *senchas*. This concept covers both lore and law, as one of the largest law texts in medieval Ireland is known as the *Senchas Már* and aetiological tales concerning the naming of geographic features are known as *Dindsenchas*, that is lore of place-names; these tales are recorded in prose as well as verse. Robin Chapman Stacey has seen Caratnia as fulfilling a similar role for the jurist; in the beginning to the *Gúbretha Caratniad*, he ‘would appear to be conceptualized in the tale not as a mere functionary or agent of the king, but as one whose wisdom transcends ordinary human knowledge in that it stems from the otherworld’.⁵ Thus Adomnán’s access to law is not outside of the native imagination.

The figure of the poet-outsider works in a state of tension between his liminal position on the outside of society, which gives rise to his poetic genius, and the centrality of poetry to the working of settled society. While Joseph Nagy was formulating this idea with reference to Finn he was not unaware of the similarities between the *fénnid* who has rejected society and the churchman who should, ideally, turn his back on the world of men: ‘Their poetry [that of the hermits and ascetic saints], like the nature verse that we find in the Fenian tradition, expresses not only a love of nature but also a strong preference for a “savage” life in the wilderness, as opposed to a comfortable life in human society’.⁶ This rejection of the worldly is not confined to the hermits and ascetics but finds its expression in the entire body of the church in the late-eleventh-century Gregorian reform.⁷ Thus, there would appear to be a fundamental connection between these two types of person, poet-outsider and cleric, which is being played upon in Adomnán’s presentation.

The myths concerning the poet-outsider, such as that of Caratnia and Amairgen, are in essence initiatory myths where the poet undergoes a transition from ignorance to inspiration.

⁵ Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 151.

⁶ Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (California: University of California Press, 1985), p. 28.

⁷ Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 116.

The transition that Adomnán undergoes can be seen in this light; it conforms to Ford's analysis that such narratives 'demonstrate an evolutionary process, as it were, whereby the opposition is realised as a "before" and "after" condition: eloquence is born of dumbness, vision of blindness and radiance of loathsomeness'.⁸ Eloquence arising from dumbness is particularly applicable to Adomnán, as has been noted by Stacey, for it is in reply to Loingsech's insult, *bodur amlabor* 'deaf and dumb one', that Adomnán enters dramatically into the public sphere of performative speech.⁹ The change wrought in Adomnán by his tortures is analysed by Melia as indicative of his shamanic character, as it is only after he communicates with God that he has access to his wondrous powers.¹⁰

The details of the torture also seem to give support to the connection between Adomnán and the shaman. In discussing the *imbas forosnai* and similar practices Ford has concluded 'the essentials of these various rituals include the ingestion of uncooked food, lying down, and sleeping - or at least going into some state with eyes closed.'¹¹ This process is enacted in the tortures of Adomnán: he is given a flint stone to stave off his hunger pangs, an un-food which paradoxically sustains him for eight months. At the end of that time he is buried in a stone chest, which both forces him to lie down (the angel tells him 'éirigh súas' 'get up', which implies his supine position) and takes away his sight. Furthermore while he undergoes this 'death' we are told that slime bursts forth from his head: 'roimidh salchur a chin dar a chlúasaib immach' ('the slime of his head broke forth through his ears').¹² This is similar to the young Spirit of Poetry in his hideous form: 'intan tra dosbereal amér foraéadan nomebdais srotha doghur brén triaclúasaib achúil siar' ('when he would put his finger on his

⁸ Ford, p. 27.

⁹ Stacey, p. 142.

¹⁰ Melia, p. 122.

¹¹ Ford, p. 37.

¹² Kuno Meyer, *Cáin Adamnáin: An Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnán* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), pp. 8-9.

forehead a foetid stream of pus would break out through his ears and down his back').¹³ Adomnán, then, is taking on this role of the hideous poet-outsider, with slime bursting from his head and the ability to speak and see taken from him, in order to undergo the transformation into a far-sighted and mystically empowered giver of law.

Yet despite this, it is in the figure of the female helper that we find that the author of this preface is using this well-known secular myth for his own, more Christian, ends. The transformation that the shamanic poet undergoes is usually mediated by a female figure. The *prull* narrative in *Sanas Chormaic* is centred around the poetic exchange between the daughter of Ua Dulsaine, who is being sought throughout Ireland, and the hideous youth. This tale has been seen as an initiatory journey by Ford as she 'is a kind of *alma mater* of poets, a personification of the feminine genius of poetry'.¹⁴ This figure also occurs in the tale of Amairgen, whose sister presides over his first speech and then helps him undergo his death-by-proxy.¹⁵ Finn, too, has his character fixed, in terms of his poetic function, thanks to the female aid he gains in his fosterage; in the *Boyhood Deeds* his fosterers are the two women Bodbmall and Líath Lúachra, who have great affinity with nature and a supernatural swiftness, coupled with a knowledge of poetry: 'Thus, the world of Finn's early youth is dominated by females, centred on *fénnidecht* [service in a warrior band], and imbued with the numinous: for Bodbmall is not only a *benfénnid* [female warrior] but also a *bendruí* [female poet]'.¹⁶ All of which seems to resonate with the initiatory female character of shamanic myth. However it is clear that if we are dealing with a narrative in which the central character undergoes a death in order to gain access to mystical knowledge and that death is watched over by a female character, specifically his mother, and this narrative is being written in

¹³ Whitley Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1862), p. 36. Translation is my own.

¹⁴ Ford, p. 35.

¹⁵ *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebar na Núachongbála*, ed. by Richard I. Best et al, 6 vols (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1954-83), II (1956), pp. 435-36. Translation to be found in Ford, pp. 28-30.

¹⁶ Nagy, p. 101.

strongly Christian context, the parallels to the Passion of Christ must have been obvious to the contemporary audience.

What function, then, is the Passion myth performing in the context of the *Cáin*? Around the time of its composition, there was a growing popularity in the veneration of Mary, the mother of God, in two important areas: her role as *mediatrix*, intercessor with God and her com-passion at the crucifixion in which she played an important role in the salvation of the world.¹⁷ By alluding to these roles in the presentation of the relationship between Adomnán and his mother the author grants the promulgation of the law a greater weight and the Marian image of the perfectly loving and nurturing mother gives a strong emotional resonance to the law; Bitel has noted with regard to the presentation of mothers in the *Cáin* that they are protected ‘not because mothers bore babies to patrilineages, but because everyone owed a debt of affection to mothers for the pregnancy, labour, and nurturing they performed and a debt of worship for embodying all the same sacral principles as the Virgin Mary herself’.¹⁸

One of the first instances of Mary as a *mediatrix* is found in Paul the Deacon’s translation of the Theophilus legend in the ninth century where she is described ‘que intercedit pro peccatoribus, refrigerium pauperum, mediatrix Dei ad homines’ (‘she who

¹⁷ Regarding the date of composition of the preface, there is no space currently for a more involved discussion. In Ryan’s analysis of 1936 it was held to have been written c. 900 and this is the date that Melia and Bitel, among others have used. However in her translation of 2001 Ní Dhonnchadha gave the preface a later date, writing that ‘the hagiographic material [...] was added to it in the late-tenth or early-eleventh century’ in ‘The Law of Adomnán: a translation’, in ed. T. O’Loughlin *Adomnán at Birr: AD 697; Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents*, pp. 53-68 (p. 53), which places the text in the Middle Irish period. I would argue for a twelfth century date of composition, still within the Middle Irish period. However space precludes a more detailed discussion.

¹⁸ Lisa Marie Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 106. While Bitel is articulating something similar to my proposition she sees the allusion to Mary as working in a more general sense; Mary and all of womankind are linked by the fact that they were mothers. This is a view common to the mid-to-late Middle Ages and the obvious basis for much of what the author of this preface is doing. However I am arguing that the connection in this text, between Ronnat and Mary, is much more specific, deeper, and more integral to our understanding of different characters’ actions throughout the preface.

interceded for the sinners, refuge of the poor, intercessor with God for mankind').¹⁹ Yet although the title *mediatrix* was not to come into common use until the twelfth century, there are hints that this aspect of the mother of God was productive in Ireland before that. In the two longer poems by Bláthmac, dated by Carney to the mid-eighth century,²⁰ he rounds off his first poem by asking three petitions from her which she can get from her son, presumably by using the maternal relationship that formed the basis of her ability to mediate in later centuries. This role is the one that is most explicitly referred to in *Cáin Adomnáin*: in the Latin preface of §33 she and Adomnán engage in a joint imprecation to her son 'Maria filium suum apud Adomnanum circa hanc legem rogavit' ('Mary besought her Son on behalf of Adomnan about this Law').²¹ In the preface itself once Adomnán has resurrected Smirgat she says 'Ní fetur nech síu nó tall doneth bóidiu nó trócuiríe immum aghat Adamnán 7 Mairei húag-ingen ic a gresacht a hucht muintirei nime' ('I know no one here or yonder who would do a kindness or show mercy to me save Adamnan, the Virgin Mary urging him thereto on behalf of the host of Heaven').²² This does not demonstrate her ability to coerce her son, but it does define the power of Mary as being wielded indirectly. Furthermore the reversal of roles in the two quotations highlights the way in which the author subtly draws parallels between Adomnán and Christ, and Ronnat and Mary. Here, Mary uses her power of intercession with Adomnán and not her son. Conversely, before the resurrection of Smirgat there is no reference to Mary and the only female who is forcing any action is Ronnat; indeed, she is the one who urges Adomnán to do the kindness, not any supernatural agent: 'Sóithis Adamnán fri bréitheir a máthar [...]' ('At the word of his mother Adamnan turned

¹⁹ Robert Petsch, *Theophilus: Mittelniederdeutsches Drama in Drei Fassungen Herausgegeben* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1908), p. 7.

²⁰ *The Poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan together with the Irish Gospel of Thomas and A Poem on the Virgin Mary*, ed. by James Carney, *Irish Texts Society*, 47 (Dublin, 1964), pp. 45-6.

²¹ Meyer, pp. 24-25

²² *ibid*, pp. 6-7.

aside [...]’).²³ Thus, a certain equivalency is set up in the minds of audience between Ronnat and Mary.

This link is furthered when we consider that both Ronnat and Mary have a hand in the death of their sons. In the case of Ronnat, she organises the tortures that Adomnán has to undergo; for Mary this role is highlighted in one of Bláthmac’s poems in which he sees the crucifixion as *fingal*, or kin slaying, on behalf of the Jews because they are Jesus’ maternal kin (*maithre*).²⁴ *Fingal* is often described as one of the more horrendous crimes in the laws and as such has an emotive force in educated circles even if the reality is quite different. A parallel with Christ based on kin slaying has been suggested for Caratnia and the same could be said of Adomnán.²⁵ The mothers’ parts in the slaying are hinted at in the text: ‘Is í pían roathirriged leissi dó 7 ní sochaide do mnáib dogénad fria mac’ (‘This is the change of torture that she made for him, and not many women would do so to their sons’).²⁶ The crucial point here is that she is causing pain to her son. This directly contravenes the role of mothers, as set out in the preface, as life givers and nurturers; the text says ‘not many’, literally ‘not a multitude of women’, would do so to their sons. Does this mean, then, that Mary and Ronnat are the two standing apart from the crowd? As has been shown, Ronnat is the driving force behind the freeing of the women of Ireland and it is the manner in which she does it that links her again to Mary.

Both Mary and Ronnat need the death of their sons in order to fulfil the salvation they have initiated. In the case of Mary she is the means by which the world is saved, as Cú Chuimne put it around the year 700: ‘per mulierem et lignum mundus prius periit|per mulieris virtutem ad salutem rediit’ (‘before the world died through a woman and a branch/through

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *The Poems of Blathmac*, p. 37.

²⁵ Stacey, p. 151.

²⁶ Meyer, pp. 8-9.

the virtue of a woman it was brought back to salvation’);²⁷ in the case of Ronnat she is the driving force behind much of the narrative and initiates Adomnán’s quest for the law: ‘Ced ed ón’, or issi, ‘ba maith do gori-se, acht noch a n-í sein mu gori-sae, acht mnáu do hsóerad dam [...]’ (‘Even so,’ she said. ‘Your dutifulness was good; however, that is not the duty I desire, but that you should free women for me [...]’).²⁸ This role of the mother directing the actions of the son is in agreement with the growing popularity of Mary’s compassion and her central position in the salvation narrative. Arnold of Bonneval was one of the first to expound Mary’s role in salvation beyond merely being the means by which Christ entered the world by giving her an important role to play at Calvary. She is seen to ask for the salvation of the world ‘Maria Christo se spiritu immolat et pro mundi salute obsecrat, Filius impetrat Pater condonat’ (‘Mary sacrificed herself in spirit for Christ and beseeched him to save the world. The Son brought it about and the Father allowed it’), as Ronnat asks for the freeing of women.²⁹ Furthermore, in this final moment, mother and son are united in purpose ‘Movebat enim eum matris affectio, et omnino tunc erat una Christi et Mariae voluntas, unumque holocaustum ambo pariter offerebant Deo: haec in sanguine cordis, hic in sanguine carnis’ (‘For the will of his mother moved him and then in all things the desire of Christ and Mary was one, and they both equally offered one holocaust to God: she in the blood of her heart, he in the blood of his body’).³⁰ The unification of purpose between Adomnán and Ronnat can be seen in the subtle shift of speaker, from Ronnat who asks her son ‘you should free women for me’³¹ to Adomnán when he is haggling with the angel, saying: ‘Nocho n-érus [...] co

²⁷ David Howlett, ‘Five Experiments in Textual Reconstruction and Analysis’, *Peritia*, 9 (1995), 1-50 (p. 19).

²⁸ Meyer, pp. 4-5, translation modified.

²⁹ *Patrologia Latina*, ed. by Jacques-Paul Migne, 221 vols (Paris, 1844-65), CLXXXIX (1854), col. 1727A, in *Patrologia Latina: The Full Text Database* <http://pld.chadwyck.co.uk> [accessed 30th July 2010].

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Meyer, p. 5.

rosóertar mná dam’ (‘I will not arise [...] until women are freed for me’).³² It is only when he has taken his mother’s quest for himself that the angel relents.

The main conceit of the preface to *Cáin Adomnáin* is that women, all women, are mothers and life givers and thus should be preserved from harm. This is made explicit in §4, ‘Ar is [s]ruith máin máthair, maith máin máthair, máthair nóeb 7 escop 7 firián, tuillem flatha nime, tustigud talman’ (‘For a mother is a venerable treasure, a mother is a goodly treasure, the mother of saints and bishops and righteous men, an increase of the Kingdom of Heaven, a propagation on earth’).³³ Thus, when the author of the preface was seeking to create an unassailable authority for the *Cáin* he did not rest satisfied with a merely God-given authority but wove throughout the text images of the highest mother, Mary. Mary is the mother of all, as is noted in the Latin preface, and the whole of womankind is united with Mary and Christ using Mary’s ambiguous position as a member of the human race and the divine family: ‘quod grande peccatum qui matrem 7 sororem matris Christi 7 matrem Christi occidit’ (‘for the sin is great when any one slays the mother and the sister of Christ’s mother and the mother of Christ’).³⁴ Mary’s part in the salvation of humanity is used as a model for a woman to be the instigator of women’s freedom reflecting the central Christian myth of humanity’s liberation, the Passion of Christ. In order that this sensitive yet powerful image can be utilized the author never directly addresses it but rather alludes to it in his presentation of the secular myth of the poet-outsider and his female initiator. The *Cáin* has been characterized as ‘a deliberate attempt to establish a more peaceful society’ and it does so by fusing native secular and foreign Christian myths, just as the law’s promulgation is characterized by cooperation between kings of the world and clerics of the Columban community.³⁵

³² *ibid*, pp. 8-9.

³³ *ibid*, pp. 4-5.

³⁴ *ibid*, pp. 24-25.

³⁵ Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘Preface’, in O’Loughlin, ed., *Adomnán at Birr: AD 697. Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), p. 9.