

Sex in the *civitas*:

Early Irish Intellectuals and their Vision of Women

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Given arguments that Irish poets and churchmen could be educated together, this paper quarries ecclesiastical sources for stereotypes informing female depictions in narrative literature.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, W.B. Yeats described various females from Irish saga in the following terms: “After Cuchulainn, we think most of certain great queens—of angry amorous Maeve with her long pale face, of Findabair, her daughter who dies of shame and pity, of Deirdre who might be some mild modern housewife but for her prophetic vision... I think it might be proud Emer... who will linger longest in the memory, whether she is the newly married wife fighting for precedence, fierce as some beautiful bird or the confident housewife who would waken her husband from his magic sleep with mocking words.” A hundred years later, it is the description of early Irish queens as “housewives” which is particularly striking. This perspective is not confined to Yeats’ critical writing but also occurs in his poetry. In the 1893 collection *The Rose*, the poem *Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea* refers repetitively to Emer in a domestic setting, working at the arduous task of preparing cloth:

A man came slowly from the setting sun,
 To Emer, raddling raiment in her dun,

 Then Emer cast the web upon the floor,
 And raising arms all raddled with the dye,

Parted her lips with a loud sudden cry.

.....

‘You dare me to my face,’ and thereupon

She smote with raddled fist...¹

Our evidence for the daily lifestyles of early Irish women is relatively limited but there is little in our sources to suggest that those of high status commonly undertook the hard physical labor involved in homemaking. Rather, Yeats’ words seem today a vivid illustration of the contemporary Victorian attitudes as to the proper concerns of married women. They are also an important reminder that the Anglo-Irish literary revival popularized not the original translations of Old Irish tales by nineteenth and early twentieth-century Celtic scholars but rather the bowdlerized versions of such texts concocted by Lady Gregory to suit what she described as “the peasant point of view” and contemporary Catholic sensibilities.² It is only recently that scholarship has moved away from the nationalist, anachronistic and often romantic (in the sense of Pre-Raphaelite) concerns of writers in the early twentieth century and seeks to analyze our sagas in their contemporary cultural contexts.³

In trying to understand the cultural paradigms that shaped early literary descriptions of Irish women, it is important to consider the educational background of their authors. Older views of these men as solely the products of secular schools has given way to a stress on their common membership of a mixed “mandarin” class of poets and churchmen:

F.J. Byrne..., in keeping with the received wisdom of the time, distinguished between the ‘mandarin class of poets and pedants’ composing the secular *áes dána* and ecclesiastical men of learning...the validity of this dichotomy has been questioned and the term ‘mandarin class’ has been enthusiastically taken up...it has been contended that the

practitioners of all forms of literate learning belonged to a single class or caste, sustained or at least endorsed by the church. This fundamental revision of which James Carney in a sense was a precursor,⁴ has been effected principally by Liam Breatnach, Kim McCone and Donnchadh Ó Corráin.⁵

Among various studies by this triumvirate, Ó Corráin has quarried the annalistic obits indicating ecclesiastical involvement in the practice of law and the creation of poetry.⁶ In his *Uraicecht na Ríar*, Liam Breatnach argued that the hierarchy of poets mirrors the seven-fold categorization of clerical orders. Elsewhere, he argued that the style of poetry known as *rosc(ad)* or *retoiric* could have been produced in what has been termed a “Christian-inspired environment of integrated learning.”⁷ Finally, in his book *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, Kim McCone has outlined detailed, if not always entirely convincing, arguments that the writing of Irish vernacular saga was influenced by a mixture of inherited Indo-European traditions and Old Testament inspiration.⁸ Thus the “mandarins” have been defined as including lawyers, poets, saga writers, and professional churchmen.

The specifics of where and how such men might have been educated have not been explored in the same detail. The later medieval legend of Tuaim Drecaín where there was a *scol leigind*, *scol feinechas*, and a *scol filid* [school of a master of Latin learning, school of law and school of master of poetry] is seen by many now as a “creation myth” explaining how the two traditions came together rather than as a depiction of reality.⁹ In *Teist Choemáin* [Testimony of Coemán], the ethos of the school of Sinchell of Cell Achaid includes:

Crabath cen scís, Umla cen fodord. Eitiud cen forcraid....Bíthecht fri hespaib.... Fedli fri foglaim. Frithailm tratha.. Nertath cech faind. Nemsnim don tsaegal. Sanntugadh oifrin.
Eistecht fri sruitheib. Adrath do genus... Michata cuirp. Catu do anmain. Doennacht fri

hecin... Scrutach sgrepra. Adscela do faisneis. Onair do senaib. Saire do
sollamnaib..Coimed cairdesa. Mna do móringabail. Athuath dia n-érsclaib... Cen escus
dia n-acallaim. Idna isna feraib se, ferrdi dia n-anmaib. Inisli dia maigistir. A maigistir
amod.

Devotion without weariness. Humility without murmuring. Fasting without corruption...
Constancy against frivolities... Perseverance in studying. Observance of the canonical
hours... Strengthening of every weak one. No anxiety for the worldly life. Desiring mass.
Listening to elders. Adoration of chastity... Dishonor of a body. Honor of a soul.
Humanity in face of need (or return good for evil).... Searching Scripture. Tales for
explanation. Honor to the old. Freedom for festival days. Brevity in chanting. Keeping
friendship. Women to be greatly avoided. Great dread of their famous stories. Total
aversion of their prattle... Without eagerness to converse. Purity in these men, the better
for their souls. Abasement to their teacher. Their teacher their honor.¹⁰

This would appear to be a *scol leigind* and as such, it would appear heavily influenced by
Christian monastic practice and a single-sex establishment. It does however refer to texts
described as *adscela* and *érscla* (recte *airscéla*) – words which are used of secular tales in other
contexts. In a letter to Wihtfrith, the Anglo-Saxon writer Aldhelm states that secular tales of
antiquity were passed on in Ireland in church schools “through studying and reading” while
commentary on the law text *Uraicecht na Ríar* states that the *filid*, for their part, should know
two hundred and fifty *prímscela* and one hundred *foscela*. Christian ethics are also apparent in
early law tracts which suggest that poets should undergo similar restrictions concerning sexual
intercourse to those practiced by their ecclesiastical counterparts among the *gráda ecnai* [church
scholars] as well as by members of the *manaig* [church tenantry].¹¹

If at least some Irish schools were teaching both church texts and secular tales, it follows that the descriptions of females in Irish ecclesiastical sources such as canon law or biblical commentary can be seen as relevant to the quest for cultural stereotypes in sagas. The churchmen who copied such stories into manuscripts such as the late eleventh-century *Lebor na hUidre* may not have been reshaping an inherited portrayal of prehistoric goddesses as often thought¹² but rather, they may have been reflecting the well established prejudices of a clerically-minded caste involved in the creation of such tales as well as the transmission of them.

In their 1904 compendium, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, Whitley Stokes and John Strachan published the letters of St Paul as found in the Würzburg manuscript M th f.12. Quoting the saint on suitable roles for women it says:

Anus similiter in habitu sancto non criminatrices non vino multo servientes bene docentes ut prudentiam doceant adolescentulas ut viros suos ament filios diligent prudentes castas domus curam habentes benignas subditas suis viris ut non blasphemetur verbum Dei.
(Titus 2:3–5)¹³

[The aged women, in like manner, in holy attire, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teaching well: That they may teach the young women to be wise, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, sober, having a care of the house, gentle, obedient to their husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.]

The Irish commentator has two remarks to make on this: the first on drinking wine and the second on the overall prescription: “(1) .i. arnicundil mesce caillech” [for the drunkenness of [old] women is not seemly] “(2) .i. arnaérbarthar o chretsit nintá airli armban” [lest it should be said, since they have believed we have not the management of our wives].¹⁴ Stokes and Strachan’s translation assumes that the Irish word *caillech* is a literal translation of the Latin

anus [old woman or matron] although Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha has shown that *caillech* has, in fact, a wide range of possible meanings and here may well mean simply a woman of any age in her capacity as partner in a domestic setting.¹⁵ Certainly the second gloss refers to married women generically. Again the 1904 editors have translated *airle* as ‘management’ though the *Dictionary of Irish language* lists other alternatives first: “advising, giving counsel, deliberating”.¹⁶ What is of interest here is the commentator’s concern with drunkenness and “management” rather than with any of the more positive attributes that married women might share with their younger counterparts.

Clearly the Irish commentator saw women as inferior to men. On the instruction “mulieres in aeclesis taceant” [women should be silent in churches],¹⁷ the mixed gloss that follows reads, “si uiri in presentia arisinseo inball dothinchosc neich asbeerad cenn” [if men be present, for it is impossible that the limb should correct what the head might utter]. Similarly on Ephesians 5:22 “mulieres viris suis subditae sint sicut Domino” [Let women be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord] the interlinear commentary reads, “Arisball dicrist infer et isball dindfiur inben” [for a man is a limb of Christ and a woman is a limb of man]. A marginal note above has “.i. Isbés tra dosom anisiu cosc innamban (ito)ssug et atabairt fochumacte (a) feir armbat (i)rlamude indfir fochumacte dæi combi iarum coscitur indfir” [i.e. this then is a custom of his to correct the wives at first and to bring them under the power of their husbands in order that the husbands may be readier under God’s power so that usually afterwards the husbands are corrected and reduced under God’s will]. And a gloss at the end of Ephesians 5 provides a neat summary of the commentator’s understanding of the text: “carad uir mulierum timiat mulier uirum” [let man love woman, let woman fear man].¹⁸

A fascination with sexual relationships was not limited to the letters of St Paul. In the

eighth-century collection of Irish canon law, *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, a quotation from Isaiah is used to illustrate the rule that an adulterous woman should be discarded: “CCH 46:26 *Concerning a woman to be thrown out because of adultery*: Isaiah (28:20): Our bed has been so narrowed that a second person falls out and the short blanket cannot cover both.” Originally a proverb to describe a frustrating situation, the piece in Isaiah was an oracle outlining what would happen to those who abandoned the Covenant with Yahweh.¹⁹ The link being made here with female adultery is not one found elsewhere in biblical commentary of the period and appears to reflect a peculiarly Irish formulation.

Indeed, looking at the prescriptions about women in the *Collectio canonum* as a whole, what is striking is the number of provisions and precepts revolving around the issue of adulterous females. Of the thirty-eight chapters in Book 46: *Concerning the business of matrimony*, twenty-three deal with such women but only nine with adulterous men. The collection includes the quotation from St Paul cited above—“Let women be subject to their husbands”—as well as a subsequent chapter attributing to Augustine a statement that a woman (*mulier*) gets her name from weakness (*mollitia*) and subjection.²⁰ There is also a lengthy quotation from Numbers 5:12–29 dealing with ritual procedures for investigating a woman who may have had illicit intercourse but against whom there is no evidence. The upshot of that particular canon is that the accused woman’s womb is to be ritually cursed in a dramatic and public ceremony so that she will become barren if guilty.

The tenor of the *Collectio*, in short, is very clearly that females are naturally subordinate as well as inherently likely to stray. The most common citations are from works by Augustine and Jerome and the influence of the latter’s negative view of marriage appears obvious. It was Jerome who famously wrote: “If a woman be fair, she soon finds lovers; if she be ugly, it is easy

to be wanton.”²¹ This particular quotation does not occur in the *Collectio* but it seems reasonable to infer from their writing that Irish church lawyers would have endorsed the sentiment. In chapters 9 and 10 of the *Collectio*, however, we do find a certain concern to defend the rights of married women:

Cap 9. De causis quas narrat liber repudii.

Augustinus: Haec sunt, quae narrat liber repudii de muliere: .i.e. si temulenta, si iracunda, si luxuriosa, si jurgatrix, si gulosa, si maledica, aut si non est inventa virgo, sed si haec falsa fuerint, maritus ille centum libras argenti dabit uxori.

Cap 10. De eo, quod non repudianda in novo probis causis.

Isidorus ait: Quid ergo, si sterilis, si deformis est, si aetate vetula, si foetida, si temulenta, si iracunda, si malis moribus, si luxuriosa, si gulosa, si jurgatrix et maledica, tenenda sit vel tradenda sit? velis nolis, qualiscumque accepta sit habenda

Ch 9 – Of the reasons which a book of repudiation speaks

Augustine: These are the things which are spoken of in a book of repudiation about a woman: if she is drunken, if she is angry, if she is wanton, if she is quarrelsome, if she is a glutton, if she is abusive or if she is found not be a virgin but if these accusations are false, that husband must give to the wife a hundred pounds of silver.

Ch 10 – On this, that now she should not be repudiated even for honorable reasons (?)

Isidore says: What therefore (is to be done), if she is barren, if she is deformed, if she is a little old woman, if she is smelly, if drunken, if angry, if she has evil habits, if she is wanton, if she is a glutton, quarrelsome and abusive should she be kept or handed over? If she has been accepted, she must be kept.

These two positions seem contradictory: chapter 9 states that if the woman is guilty of any or all of the above, her husband is entitled to divorce her whereas the quotation from Isidore in chapter 10 appears to imply that divorce is not allowable in any circumstance. What this means for the attitude of eighth-century Irish churchmen to marriage practice is not clear. Divorce was recognized by at least some authorities in Irish secular courts and an entire tract, *Cáin Lánamna*, deals with the equitable distribution of goods in such situations.²² Ó Corráin has, however, drawn attention to an extract elsewhere in the vernacular codes extolling monogamy:

For every fief that is granted is not returned until a noble heir is as base as a base one and a base heir is as noble as a noble one, for these are the three that do not break their partnership until death: a client and his lord...and a legal first spouse and his/her partner after a marriage contract witnessed by two firm sureties, for they are indissoluble after sexual intercourse and sleeping together until the hand part from the side, the head from the body and the tongue from speech. As they do not part until death, so a monastic tenant does not part from his superior until death...or a legal first spouse from his/her partner until they are both in the grave.²³

Perhaps the explanation for these differences lie in the fact that early Irish law codes did not provide case law but rather a series of precepts and admonitions “which may have provided an ecclesiastical judge with authorities for a judgement but it left him with the task of deciding what, in any particular case, was the just solution.”²⁴ Equally, since synods might differ in their views, there may well have been varying conclusions for church lawyers to draw upon.

Alternatively, Ó Corráin has suggested that there were stricter rules on marriage and divorce for the mandarin class and that while some attempt was made to extend the stricter rules to the laity at large, this was unsuccessful.²⁵

In comparing Isidore's list of negative female qualities with depictions of women in early Irish literature, it is worth considering *Senbriathra Fithail*, which condemns *bé chairn* [woman of flesh] and those who introduce them to their kin-group in the *cormthech* [ale-house].²⁶ A slightly different perspective is represented in the law tract *Gúbretha Caratniad* which states that a woman should not be in the *tech midchúarda* [house of mead-circuit] without a male partner to protect her while a later gloss re-interprets this to say that a woman on her own in a *cormthech* or at the *óenach* [assembly-fair] cannot claim recompense if she is attacked.²⁷

Women who drank in ale-houses, whether or not accompanied by males, appear, in fact, to have been so condemned that no figure in early Irish literature is depicted clearly in such a position. In *Longes mac nUisnig*, Deirdre's mother is described as “oc airiuc don slúag os a cind is sí torrach. Tairmchell corn 7 cuibrend 7 rolasat gáir mesca” [supplying the host, at its head, while pregnant. A circuit of horns and food and they let out a cry of drunkenness]. It is not apparent from this description whether she is serving the drink (in the manner of noble Germanic women) or merely presiding over the feast. A poem refers to Eithne daughter of Domnall in connection with the drinking habits of a group of 32 boorish pack-saddle owners—again it is not clear whether the woman is serving them or joining them in the festivities.²⁸ Thus when canonists and biblical commentators condemn drunken women, they appear to be reflecting commonly held beliefs, at least amongst the so-called “mandarin” class who provide us with our sources.

Apart from general attitudes to women, lust and drunkenness, we can also detect more specific links between canon law and narrative literature. In the *Collectio*'s book on matrimony, for example, the canonists discuss those occasions when a woman can commit adultery with impunity. They conclude that she may do so if it is to the benefit of her husband:

It is asked, if there is any occasion in which a wife can lie with another man if her first man still lives. There are three such:

I because compelling force does not sever a marriage

II if any such person should find reasons just as Sarah had, so that Abraham would not be killed by the wicked king. *Augustine*; If it is done as in recent times (?) when a certain rich man demanded a coin of silver from another man, and he does not have it, what shall be given? A certain rich young man said of his wife, if she should prostrate herself before him, he should return the coin but she knowing that she did not have power over her body, spoke to her man. He uttering thanks, agreed for it is judged not to be adultery where there is no desire.

III if she should be barren just as Abraham and Jacob were permitted to take their servant girls in union.²⁹

These principles are accepted by the author of *Compert Mongáin*:

Then Fíachnae went across the sea. He left his queen at home. While the hosts were there in warfare, a distinguished man came to his fort in Ráith Mór of Mag Line. He told her to arrange a place of meeting. The woman said there was not in the world enough of jewels or treasures for which she would do anything that would be shame to the honour of her husband. He asked her whether she would do it to save her husband's life. She said if she were to see him in danger it would not be unlikely that she would help him with anything that would be possible. He said "Do it then! For your husband is in great danger. A terrifying man has been brought to meet him whom he will not trample on and he will die by him When we, I and you, shall have made love....I will fight the warrior."³⁰

Fortunately, it transpires that the distinguished man in question is the Otherworld figure

Manannán mac Lir who is in a position to carry out his words and he does, in fact, save Fíachnae from a ferocious opponent. Interestingly, Manannán specifies to Fíachnae's wife that, although she must make the decision to sleep with him on her own, he will tell her husband what she has done to help him. "Ocus a:tluigestar a chéle a ndo:géni fris ocus ad:dámir-si a imthechta uili" [And he thanked his partner for what she had done for him and she confessed all her adventures].

These details may seem unimportant but, in fact, they represent important principles in canon law. The quotation from the *Collectio* above, based on a simplification of Augustine's commentary on the Sermon of the Mount, states that the woman "knowing she did not have power over her body, spoke to her man."³¹ Not having power over her own body is an idea drawn from St. Paul that was also cited in the *Collectio*: "Ch 23: How neither a woman nor a man has power over their body. *Paul* [1 Cor 7:4] A woman does not have power over her body but man; similarly the man does not have power over his body but the woman." This same passage occurs in the Wurzburg manuscript of Paul's letters with an accompanying gloss above the phrase *sed uir* [but man]: ".i. act madmeltach lassin fer" [i.e. unless it be agreeable to the man].

It would seem clear that both biblical commentator and narrative author agree with the canonist—the key idea is that the husband must agree to the act. The literal meaning of *imthecht*—translated by White as "adventures"—is to "go about"; other meanings ascribed to the word in the *Dictionary of Irish language* are "evading" and "transgressing". Fíachnae's wife clearly loved him dearly if she was willing to risk social shame by assuming her husband's permission in advance.

Sleeping with a god was not the worst fate that could happen to an early Irish wife. In another tale, *Talland Étair*, the principle produced a much more horrific denouement. A poet

described as “*amnas étrócar*” [cruel and unmerciful] called Aithirne *Áilgesach* [Aithirne the Demanding] travelled throughout Ireland until he came to Munster: “This is where Aithirne went after that, to the king of Munster, namely to Tigernach *Tétbuillech*. He took nothing from his honour then, but that the queen should sleep with him that night or the honour of the Munstermen would be erased forever. And that night in which the woman was in labour was the night that she had slept with Aithirne for her husband’s honour, that his honour might not be erased.”³² Tigernach’s epithet *tétbuillech* may be translated as “furious blow-striker,” which has the effect of heightening still further the outrageous request of Aithirne. Yet this is simply an introductory incident helping to illustrate the context of the main conflict between Ulster and Leinster. Indeed, the next paragraph indicates that demanding to sleep with a married woman while she was in the throes of giving birth was not necessarily considered the nadir in the poet’s demands:

This is where Aithirne went after that, into Leinster until he was in Ard Brestine in the south of Mag Fea. And the southern Leinstermen came before him to offer him chattels and treasures that he might not enter the land so that he would not leave great insults. For the wealth of no one on whom he used to make an attack used to remain unless something was given to him. The people or race by whom he should be killed would have no quarter so that a man should give his wife to him or the only eye from his head or he should give him whatever he desired of chattels and treasures.³³

The legal logic underlying the fate of Munster’s queen thus appears to be that the possible loss of honor or *lóg n-enech* because of a poetic satire was viewed as sufficiently destructive of a man’s circumstances as to permit a husband to demand such sacrifices. Nor does the author appear to view it as particularly surprising that, as a wife, she was apparently willing to comply.

In fact, the same principle may underlie one of the most famous incidents in early Irish narrative literature. An abiding image of early Irish women was created by Tomás Ó Máille in 1927 when he defined Queen Medb of Connacht as a pagan sovereignty goddess with whom union symbolized political domination.³⁴ Key to Ó Máille's analysis was the fact that Medb is described in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as a promiscuous woman who has sex with multiple men, most notably the great leader of the Ulster exiles, Fergus mac Róich. In the first recension, Ailill sends his charioteer, Cuillius, to investigate what the couple are doing: “‘As you thought’ said Cuillius, ‘I found them both lying together.’ ‘She is right (to behave thus) said Ailill. ‘She did it to help in the cattle-driving’.”³⁵ The maxim that a woman can sleep with other men with the permission of her husband, if it is to his benefit, is here stretched to its ultimate. Medb, like Fiachnae's wife, decided on a course of action without consulting her partner and is only subsequently awarded his permission. Unlike Fíachnae, however, Ailill is not in danger of death and the deed is merely intended to aid an enterprise in which he is engaged but for which Medb has provided the inspiration. Moreover Ailill's motives are rather mixed: he is pleased that Cuillius removed Fergus's sword from the scene and he laughs at Fergus when he meets him next. Fergus replies saying that it was Medb's idea and Ailill mocks him: “‘Ná fer báig’ or Ailill, ‘di dith claidib’” [‘Do not wage battle,’ says Ailill, ‘after the loss of your sword’]. He does, however, seem to agree that the major sinner involved was probably Medb herself: “cétchinta for mnaib meldrígi” [original crimes by women of an agreeable kingdom] though the preposition *for* is ambiguous here and may mean “against” or “upon” women.³⁶

The *rosc* poems involved in these speeches are particularly obscure and there is still no consensus as to their exact meaning.³⁷ It seems likely, however, that they incorporate sexual puns: *báig* can mean boast as well as battle or fight and while *meldrígi* probably uses *mell/meld*

meaning pleasant, it might well remind hearers of *mela* meaning shame. It seems a reasonable interpretation that the two men are jousting with each other about their sexual prowess and it also is probable that both are united in crediting Medb with instigating the cuckoldry and thus of being an adulterous woman. At the end of the final battle in the *Táin*: Fergus sighs, “‘That is what usually happens,’ said Fergus ‘to a herd of horses (*graig*) led by a mare. Their substance is taken and carried off and guarded [spied upon?] as they follow a woman who has misled them’.”³⁸ The Irish canonists had their own formulation: “nor is it without cause that it is written that Sarah stood behind Abraham.”³⁹

Another area of overlap between Irish canonists and authors of vernacular literature can be detected in their treatment of virgins who are attacked prior to marriage. An apocryphal canon fathered on Jerome outlines the legal principle:

Jerome: Three legitimate unions are to be read about in scripture.... The second is a virgin seized by a man in a *civitas* and forced into union with him; if her father wishes it, the man shall grant her 50 shekels of silver to be handed over to her father or as much as the father shall judge and the man shall give the price of her chastity to her. If, however, she should have a spouse before she was captured, it will be given to him, provided father and daughter agree. The third union is with the aforesaid daughter who has been captured, if this is not according to the will of the father, she shall not be joined to him who has corrupted her but to him whom the father shall choose who will provide for her and she will be a legitimate wife.⁴⁰

This prescription is based on the Old Testament: “If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged and seizes her and lies with her and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekals of silver to the young woman’s father and she shall become his wife. Because

he violated her, he will not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.”⁴¹ The detail about sex in the *civitas* is taken from the previous verses: if a man should have sex with an engaged woman in the *civitas* she is in part culpable as she might have called for help. If, however, he attacked her *in agro* [in the field] she is deemed innocent as there would be nothing she could do to prevent it. For the Israelites, it made a legal difference to the girl’s ultimate fate but for the Irish this was deemed irrelevant. The key effect of the canon was simply that the Irish girl was transferred from the authority of her father to a man of his choosing—whether that be he who attacked her or another.

Irish canonists frequently quote Merovingian sources but on this occasion they appear to stray from prescriptions that were based ultimately on Roman civil law. For those meeting at an early sixth-century church council at Orléans, for example, a woman was entitled to be freed from the consequences of non-consensual sex:

On the subject of *raptores* [abductors], we have decided that the following should be observed—if the abductor should hide himself in the church together with the woman he has abducted and if it is established that the woman has suffered violence, she is to be immediately freed from the power of her abductor; as for the abductor, he is to suffer death or other punishments if that is suitable or he could be made a slave or.... If however it appears that the young girl abducted still has her father and she agreed to the abduction either before or after the deed, she is to be returned to her father and her father can claim nothing from the abductor.⁴²

This is very different perspective from that of the Irish canonists who limited the punishment of men involved to financial compensation for the women’s protector and were content to leave open the possibility that she would be left in the power of her attacker.

The author of *Togail Bruidne da Dergae* is careful to specify both the location and the circumstances involving his hero: “There was a famous and noble king over Erin, named Eochaid Feidlech. Once upon a time he came over the *óenach* of Brí Leith, and he saw at the edge of a well a woman with a bright comb of silver adorned with gold, washing in a silver basin... A longing for her straightaway seized the king; so he sent forward a man of his people to detain her. The king asked tidings of her and said, while announcing himself: ‘Shall I have an hour of dalliance with thee?’”⁴³ In his translation, Stokes uses the Victorian euphemism “dalliance” but a modern editor might well produce a rather more earthy version: “Will I get an hour of sex with you?”⁴⁴ The encounter takes place in the open land of an *óenach*—the combination of camp, sports field and (often) prehistoric monuments in which the great assemblies would take place at the chief festivals of the agricultural year.⁴⁵ (In light of the gloss on *Gúbretha Caratniad* cited above, it is noteworthy that the woman is alone.) The protagonists are the king and a woman who introduces herself as “Étain ingen Étair ríge eochraidí a sídaib” [Étain, daughter of Étar, king of steeds from the *síd*-mounds]. The woman agrees to the proposition, saying she has loved the king from afar despite the fact that “fir in tsíde eter rigú 7 chaemu ocum chuindchid” [men from the *síd*, both kings and nobles, have sought me]. Before they should lie together, however, the girl demands her rights as a woman and a king’s daughter: “‘Mo thinnsra choir dam’ or sí, ‘7 mo ríar íar suidhiu.’ ‘Rot-bía’ ol Eochaid. Do-berthar .uii. cumala dí” [“Give my bride-price to me,” says she “and my submission after that.” “It will be yours” says Eochaid. Seven *cumals* are given to her]. Clearly the girl is a virgin who has not been forced in this instance (save in so far as the king’s servant has restrained her) although, equally, her family is not involved in her decision to sleep with the king. In *Esnada Tige Buchet*, on the other hand, a king is stated to have forcibly taken a woman: “Then a message was sent

from Cormac asking Buchet for her but Buchet did not bring her, for it was not his right to give her (in marriage) but her father's. They say, then, that it was by compulsory force she was brought to Cormac that night.... And she (Eithne) was Cormac's queen after that.... Now Eithne did not take him without her bride-price going to Buchet afterwards."⁴⁶ The introduction of this extract with the word *iarum* [then] implies that this event happened directly on from what is described in the immediately preceding paragraphs when Cormac met Eithne "sunna hi Cenannus" [here in Kells], a royal site described in the Annals of Ulster as a *civitas*. In this case, Eithne was taken by force, her bride-price was transferred to her foster-father and she ended up as Cormac's official partner. The canon lawyers would have found such an outcome extremely satisfactory.

The interest in virgins as prospective partners was not limited to those captured by force. For official marriages, sponsored by the protagonists' families, a woman's virginity was also prized by Irish churchmen (if not by Irish society in general) as the following canon dictates: "*Augustine*: This is necessary for a wife, if she is to be had according to the law; that is, if she is a morally pure virgin, if she is betrothed in virginity, if she is provided with a legitimate dowry and handed over by her parents, she should be accepted by a husband and his *paranymphes*. Thus following the law and the Gospel, she is taken in public celebrations, honorably in a legitimate union and all the days of her life unless with consent and reason she is to be freed by God, she is never to be separated from her husband except for the reason of fornication. If, however she commits fornication, she should be left but while she is still living, another should not be led (to her place) for the kingdom of God will not contain adulterers."⁴⁷ A political historian of early Ireland might find this ruling somewhat surprising given that texts such as *Banshenchus* state explicitly that, certainly by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, many high status women had

children by multiple partners.⁴⁸ A literary description of the exchange of married partners is found in *Reicne Fothaid Canoine* and appears to show similarities with the rules governing abduction:

Fothad's shape was more marvellous than that of Ailill but Ailill's wife was more marvellous and delightful than Fothad's wife. Then Failbe was sent by Fothad to woo Ailill's wife in disregard of her husband. She said that she would not go with them until he should give her bride-price to her. She fixed her bride price, even a bushel of gold and a bushel of silver [sic] and a bushel of white bronze.... So she came to a tryst with Fothad and he carried her off.... The woman who comes to a tryst with Fothad carried his head to him in the grave where it is.⁴⁹

Even though Ailill's wife already has a husband, the development of the narrative appears to follow the same prescriptions involved in attacking virgins although, in this instance, the woman apparently retains the financial compensation. Her adultery is, however, punished in the immediate loss of her paramour who is killed by Ailill.

The most famous example of exchange of partners in early Irish history is probably that of Derborgaill and Diarmait mac Murchada. Lahney Preston-Matto has argued strongly that it is the Anglo-Norman sources which have most shaped the later portrayal of this relationship as an adulterous escapade for which Derborgaill is primarily blamed. Preston-Matto points out that, in contrast, the earlier Irish-language sources place much greater emphasis on political motivations and the importance of Derborgaill's relatives in organizing her departure. Despite this, she still sees the event as a *lánamnas fochsail* or "union by abduction."⁵⁰ Unlike Fothad and his tragic end, however, Diarmait and Derborgaill's union dissolved relatively peacefully and she subsequently returned to her previous partner, Tigernach.

What I would like to suggest here is that the literary use of abduction is one of the devices adopted by Irish vernacular writers to bring the canon law prescriptions against adulterous females into line with the social reality of divorce. As found throughout the *Collectio*'s book on matrimony, a formal marriage, once consummated, was considered by the churchmen to be indissoluble except by death. They did, however, have an escape clause:

Ch 32: Concerning the reception of an adulterous woman after penance and of the size of the penance. *Synod*: We have decided that a woman who has been joined to another man for reason of adultery should be excommunicated until she performs penance and after penance she shall be reunited with her man. *Patrick*: If any wife should become a fornicator with another man, he should not marry another wife for as long as the first wife is living; if, however, she has been converted and does penitence, she shall be received and shall serve him as long as she is alive, as a maid-servant and she shall do penance for a full year on bread and water in proportion nor should they continue in one bed. *According to another synod*: She shall do penance for seven years, three under a severe regime and four under a relaxed one. The same for a man with understanding, if he should commit adultery.

The forgiveness of sin following penance is a key precept in Christian teaching and one particularly favored in early Ireland where it facilitated engagement with the native system of penalizing criminals through financial compensation for victims. Building on the work of Nancy Power, Preston-Matto has noted how frequently a *lánamnas fochsail* resulted in the return of a wife to her original man.⁵¹ In one of the most famous cases of a temporary union, in *Serglige Con Culainn 7 Óenét Emire*, the final upshot for the virile hero is a period of fasting and isolation followed by the elimination of his unfortunate affair:

When Cú Chulaind saw the girl going from him to Manannan he spoke to Lóeg. ‘What is this?’ said he. ‘Not difficult’ says Lóeg. ‘Fand is going with Manannan mac Lir because she was corrupting something pleasing to you.’ At that, Cú Chulaind leapt three high leaps and three southerly leaps to Lúachra so that he was for a long time wandering throughout the mountains without food or drink and during that time he slept every night on Sliab Lúachra. . . . He was then asking for a drink from them after that. The druids gave him a drink of forgetfulness to him. When he took the drink, he had no memory of Fand and everything he had done. They then gave drinks of forgetfulness to Emer to release her from her jealousy because it would be better for her.⁵²

It is not difficult to see this as a vernacular equivalent to the canon lawyer’s prescription of a period of penance and followed by forgiveness and restoration of the *status quo ante*.

This paper began as an exploration of female characterization in early Irish prose literature. It is suggested here that the authors of this literature were often schooled in a deeply Christian environment that took much of its inspiration from the Bible and from the early Church Fathers. The sagas they created concentrated on secular men and women but, at a fundamental level, their depiction of personalities and events were shaped by the underlying structures and beliefs of the society in which they were brought up. It is hoped that by examining their work through the prism of contemporary Irish canon law and biblical commentary, aspects and perspectives which today might seem strange to us can be highlighted. In so doing, we replace Yeats’ housewives with weak, submissive, traitorous, frightening, and deeply sensual women whose power lay in their perceived ability to manipulate their men-folk against their will.

1 *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, 54–55.

2 Lady Gregory, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, 16, 5–9.

3 This type of analysis is a strong feature of North American scholarship. Examples include Nagy, *Wisdom of the Outlaw*, Herbert, “Fled Dúin na nGéd”; Kelly, “The *Táin* as Literature,” 70–94; Bitel, *Land of Women*; Findon, *A Woman’s Words*.

4 Carney, “The Irish Bardic Poet,” in his *Medieval Irish Lyrics*, 109.

5 Etchingham, “Early Medieval Irish History,” 124–25, citing Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 14.

6 Ó Corráin, “Nationality and Kingship in Pre-Norman Ireland.”

7 Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar*, 80–82; Breatnach, “Canon Law and Secular Law.”

8 McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*.

9 Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 00:250–51; O’Donovan, *Banquet of Dun na n-Gedh*, 280–82; McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 23–24; Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 194; Ní Bhrolcháin, *Introduction to Early Irish Literature*, 8.

10 The following list is based on the edition of Kuno Meyer, *Hibernica Minora*, 41–42 with emendations following DIL s.vv. ‘airscél’, ‘aithscél(e)’, ‘bithecht’, ‘doéndacht’, ‘éscus’, ‘maigister’, and ‘mod’.

11 Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: the prose works*, 140, 154, Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar*, 102 §2, Ó Corráin, Breatnach, and Breen, “The Laws of the Irish,” 400–405.

12 For summary of literature on sovereignty goddesses in Irish literature, see Koch, *Celtic Culture*, 4:1621–22.

13 The edition by Whitley Stokes and John Strachan in *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, 00:700 gives an abbreviated version of the Latin Vulgate without accompanying translation but in the manuscript St Paul’s letter is written out in full; see <http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/celtica/wbgl/wbg131v.jpg> (accessed 21 September 2010). The Latin

translations in this essay are my own, but I would like to thank Dr. David Woods for his kindness in answering various queries.

14 Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus*, 700 f.31c3, 7.

15 Ní Dhonnchadha, “*Caillech* and Other Words for Veiled Women.”

16 On the use of *airle*, see Kelly, “The *Táin* as Literature,” 78–79.

17 1 Corinthians 14:34.

18 Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus*, 582, f.13a 19, 640 f22c 9-10, 19.

19 I am grateful to Reverend Michael Wall for this information.

20 The canonist gives Agustinus as the source of this etymology in *Die irische Kanonensammlung*, ed. Wasserschleben, 46.25, 191–92, but see Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* XI.ii.17.

21 Jerome, *Against Jovinian* I.47.383.

22 Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 73–75; Eska, *Cáin Lánamna*.

23 Ó Corráin, “Women and the Law in Early Ireland,” quoting *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 00:2230–

31. Liam Breatnach identifies this quote as *Bretha Nemed Toísech*; see Breatnach, *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 89.

24 Charles-Edwards, “The Pastoral Role of the Church,” 64.

25 Ó Corráin, “Marriage in Early Ireland.”

26 Smith, “The *Senbriathra Fithail*,” 58.

27 Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 00:2198, 1–2 as emended by Liam Breatnach in his unpublished edition of *Gúbretha Caratniad*; Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 00:827, 5–7.

28 O’Connor and Greene, *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry*, 202–3. The editors understood that Eithne was drinking but the form *oca n-esbius* is literally “at their drinking” and thus ambiguous.

I am grateful to Dr. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin for bringing this poem to my attention.

29 O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 125—his translation of Bk 46:7 of *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*.

30 White, *Compert Mongáin*, 71, 78 (§§3–7).

31 O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 125–26.

32 Ó Dónaill, *Talland Étair*, 43–44 (ll. 26–29), 53.

33 Ó Dónaill, *Talland Étair*, 44 (ll. 30–35), 53.

34 See note 12.

35 O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, ll. 1051–53; trans. 154–55. Hereafter *TBC I*.

Ciaran Carson points out that the charioteer’s name means ‘loathsome fly’ in *The Táin*, 219.

36 *TBC I* 1082–85; trans. 155. On the possible meanings of *for* see DIL s.v. ‘for’.

37 Binchy, “So-Called ‘Rhetorics’.” (I am grateful to the editors for drawing this article to my attention); Olsen, “The Cuckold’s Revenge.”

38 *TBC I* 4123–40; trans. 237.

39 Wasserschleben, *Kanonensammlung*, 46:20.

40 Wasserschleben, *Kanonensammlung*, 46:2. The ascription to Jerome was deemed apocryphal by Ó Corráin, “Marriage in Early Ireland,” 9.

41 Deuteronomy 24:28 (New Revised Standard Version).

42 Gaudemet and Basdevant, *Les canons des conciles mérovingiens*.

43 Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Dergae*, 1–2 (ll. 1–5, 45–48). The translation is that of Whitley Stokes, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 11.

44 See discussion by Dennis King on <http://www.sengoidelc.com/category/1/11?page=1> (consulted 8 January 2011).

45 Swift, “Local Context of Óenach Tailten,” 28–33; Bhreathnach, “The *tech midchúarta*.”

46 Byrnes, “An Edition of *Esnada Tige Buchet*,” 100, 103.

47 Wassersleben, *Kanonensammlung*, 46.2. In his article “The normal paradigms of a woman’s life in the Irish and Welsh law texts”, 9-10 Christopher McAll suggested that Irish secular law was not concerned with virginity on the grounds that a fosterage system whereby a girl would not live at home between seven and fourteen would not allow her kin to testify as to her status as happened in Welsh law. He does however, state that this is “a conclusion arrived at *e silentio*.”

48 Connon, “*Banshenchas* and the Uí Néill Queens of Tara.”

49 Meyer, *Fianaigecht*, 7, 8.

50 Preston-Matto, “Derbforgaill’s Literary Heritage.”

51 Preston-Matto, “Derbforgaill’s Literary Heritage,” 88; Power, “Classes of Women,” 90.

52 Dillon, *Serglige Con Culainn*, 28–29 (ll. 826–32, 838–41). In DIL the verbal form *nocorb* attached to Fand is left untranslated and instead they suggest simply “because she is not pleasing to you”; DIL s.v. ‘adlaic’. This suggestion is followed by Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 178. See however DIL s.v. ‘ar-corpai’.