TRANSFORMING WOMEN IN IRISH HAGIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT.The transformation of women is a common motif in early Irish literature. Three aspects will be dealt with, using mainly hagiographical sources. Initially there will be an exploration of the image of the sovereignty goddess. This will be followed by a discussion of the notion of a woman possessing a masculine soul, and finally, of the evidence for the transvestite saint. It will be argued that these represent aspects of the Irish church's ideology.

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INTRODUCTION

The Lives of the saints belong firmly within the monastic framework of Irish literature. The corpus of Irish hagiographical texts is large and varied, both in time and in language, for texts were produced in two languages—Latin and Irish. Indeed, there are bilingual Lives,[1] although in these cases Irish predominates. The bulk of extant Lives range in date from the seventh to the twelfth century and after. The earliest extant Lives are in Latin, and were composed from the middle to the late seventh century.[2] However, there was a marked move to the vernacular, especially from the ninth century. Many texts date from the Late Middle Irish/Early Modern Irish period.[3] Their quantity, and the use of loose episodic structures,

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[1]Donncha Ó hAodha (ed), *Bethu Brigte* (Dublin 1978), is a good example of a mixed language life; the possibly early tenth-century *Vita Tripartita* is another, Kathleen Mulchrone (ed), *Bethu Phátraic: the Tripartite Life of Patrick* (Dublin 1939).

[2]nThe *Vita* of Colum Cille is edited by A.·O. Anderson, and M.·O. Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (2nd ed. Oxford 1991, first published Edinburgh 1961); Cogitosus's Life of Brigit in Socii Bollandiani, `Vita II [Sanctae Brigitae] auctore vt creditvr, Cogitoso', *AASS Boll*, I February (Brussels 1658) 13541; this *Vita* has been translated by Seán Connolly & Jean-Michel Picard, `Cogitosus: Life of St Brigit', *J Roy Soc Antiq Ire* 117 (1987) 527; Muirchú and Tírechán are edited by Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician texts from the Book of Armagh*, SLH 10 (Dublin 1979).

[3]Edited collections include: Whitley Stokes (ed), *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford 1890) [hereafter Lism]; Charles Plummer (ed), *Bethada Náem nÉrenn: Lives of Irish Saints* (2 vols, Oxford 1922) [hereafter BNÉ]. The principal Latin collections are: Charles Plummer (ed) *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae* (2 vols, Oxford 1910 [hereafter VSH]; W. W. Heist (ed), *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim*

led Felim Ó Briin, for example, to criticise them.[4] Yet, they are valuable witnesses to prevalent attitudes, and they give much incidental information as to the position and roles of women in their society. But these Lives have not been systematically dated, and as a result there is a certain loss of political specificity. Nevertheless, in an examination of the roles of women, approximate time frames, while not ideal, can be used within reason. *Mentalité* and images do not change over years, but through decades and centuries.[5] The Latin Lives have the same dating problems. While their role within the late medieval collections has been discussed and analysed by Sharpe,[6] their status as individual texts, has not been examined systematically, or to any great extent.

The vast bulk of material deals with male saints. However, even within the works focusing on men, there is much incidental information concerning women, often as background for the saint's miraculous career. Like all literature, hagiography deals in images, and propaganda is embedded within them. The surviving images of Irish women were filtered through a specifically male viewpoint. The voices of the women of early Ireland are lost, yet this lack of detail from women themselves is in contrast to the enormous amount of discourse concerning them, not only in Ireland but also in a Western European context.[7] Medieval writers record a fundamental bipolarity—a bipolarity that excludes, with a few exceptions, actual female discourse from the written medium. History itself is only a series of images—it is the fingerprint not the person. So it is with images of Irish women in hagiography.

The nature of hagiography as a genre may owe something to Greek romance and Classical biography,[8] and is certainly indebted to biblical models. Typically, the saint-hero often has a specific character from birth. But within these conventions the aims of hagiography are flexible. Furthermore, the boundaries between Irish saga and hagiography are fluid, and this does not presuppose a contamination of hagiography by the `secular' sagas. In the early twentieth century Charles Plummer believed that many Irish Lives, both Irish language and Latin, were influenced by paganism.[9] This is unjustified. Some Irish Lives are centred around political concerns, and some sagas, such as the early Middle-Irish *Siaburcharpat*

Salamanticensi nunc Bruxellensi (Brussels 1965) [hereafter SV]. References to these collections, where possible, will be incorporated into the text.

[4]Felim Ó Briain, `The hagiography of Leinster', in John Ryan (ed), *Féilsgríbhinn Eoin Mhic Néill* (Dublin 1940, repr. Dublin 1995) 3342.

[5]Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerrané et le monde méditerranéen à l' époque de Philippe II* (Paris 1966), identified a geological time, a political time and a social time, the *longue durée*. The *longue durée* measures changes in structures such as the family and social organisation.

[6]Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives: an introduction to the Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford 1991).

[7]For the European context: Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, `Writing the history of women', Pauline Schmitt Pantel (ed), *A history of women in the West I: from ancient goddesses to christian saints* (Cambridge MA 1992) x.

[8]Ludwig Bieler, `The Celtic hagiographer', *Studia Patristica* 5 (1962) 24345; idem, `Hagiography and romance in medieval Ireland', *Mediaevalia et Humanistica* 6 (1975) 1314; Jean-Michel Picard, `Structural patterns in early Hiberno-Latin hagiography', *Peritia* 4 (1985) 6771.

[9]VSH i, p·ixcxcii; this argument was followed, in respect of the later Lives by Felim Ó Briain, `Miracles in the Lives of the Irish saints', *Ir Ecclesiast Rec* 66 (1945) 33148; idem, `Saga themes in Irish hagiography', Séamus Pender (ed), *Féilsgríbhinn Torna* (Cork 1947) 3342; Bieler argued that the process went both ways, Ludwig Bieler, `Hagiography and romance', 1324.

Con Culainn,[10] and the roughly mid twelfth-century *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*[11] have a clear religious message. In both genres, but to different degrees, native Irish figures and specifically christian ideas merge. Shared elements form an important aspect in the interaction between saga and hagiography. McCone has argued for the independence of hagiography, especially as it draws on continental models.[12] This at least recognises that it is not a debased `secularised' genre, but such independence cannot be absolute. Irish monastic writers drew sagas and saints' Lives into an overall, but not overbearing, christian framework. Within this framework motifs were shared—motifs such as that of the transforming woman.

  I wish to deal with three types of transformation. The first is the image of woman as sovereignty, an image with social and ideological implications. In all likelihood it had pagan antecedents, but it was successfully moulded into the ideology of christian Ireland. The sovereignty figure who changes herself from an ugly hag to a beautiful woman is familiar from Irish sagas such as *Echtra mac nEchach*.[13] Thus, the figure of sovereignty often has two faces. The beautiful Mess Buachalla of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* is ugly and powerful in the sister text *De Shíl Chonairi Máir*.[14] Secondly, I will examine the idea of a woman winning a masculine soul, in effect changing her gender. Finally, I wish to look at the implications of `transvestism' in the Lives of Brigit. These transformations form aspects of the saints' Lives—transformations that reflect not only on the fluidity of genre, but on the changing nature of gender.

TRANSFORMATION AS IDEOLOGY

The transformation of the female figure of sovereignty upon sexual intercourse with the true king has clear ideological implications. It highlights the heterosexual and, by implication, male nature of kingship,[15] while presenting the woman as a *tabula rasa* upon which the competing potential kings attempt to inscribe their rule. The woman, representing the land, forms a contract with the king—a contract bound by an act of sacred sex. McCone has linked this with the Hebrew contract between God and Israel which is also expressed in heterosexual terms.[16] While the biblical exemplar may have had some influence, the image is found in many different cultural contexts, and the Irish concept is probably of independent origin. This image was politicised. The incarnate female sovereignty makes an appearance in *Baile in Scáil* which is linked to the Uí Néill sovereignty. Such a metaphor

[10]R. I. Best & Osborn Bergin (ed), *Lebor na hUidre: Book of the Dun Cow* (Dublin 1929) 27887; Osborn Bergin, *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts* iii (Dublin 1910) 4956.

[11]Whitley Stokes (ed), `The death of Muirchertach mac Erca', *Revue Celtique* 23 (1903) 395438; Lil Nic Dhonnchadha (ed), *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 19 (Dublin 1964).

[12]K. McCone, *Pagan past and christian present in early Irish literature* (Maynooth 1990) 180.

[13]Stokes, `The death of Crimthann son of Fidach and the adventures of the sons of Eochaid Mugmedon', *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903) 172207; Standish Hayes O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (2 vols, London 1892), i 32636; for general criticism of the motif: R.·A. Breatnach, `The Lady and the King: a theme of Irish literature', *Studies* [Dublin] 42 (1953) 32136; Proinsias Mac Cana, `Aspects of the theme of king and goddess in Irish literature', *Étud Celt* 7 (195557) 76104, 8 (1958) 5965; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, `Historical need and literary narrative', in Evans et al (ed), *Proceedings of the seventh international congress of Celtic studies* (Oxford 1986), 14158; McCone, *Pagan past*, 10737, esp. 131; Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, `Women in early myths and sagas', *Crane Bag* 14 (1980) 1219.

[14]Lucius Gwynn, `De síl Chonairi Móir', *Ériu* 6 (1912) 130—43.

[15]Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law*, Early Irish Law Series 3 (Dublin 1988) 6869.

[16]McCone, *Pagan past*, 146158, esp. 15455.

influenced the portrayal of women in Irish saga. Medb, who is never `without one man in the shadow of another' is an example, although her active rulership is anomalous.[17] The anomaly is criticised, and indeed the Lives contain the same ideology and sometimes similar motifs. It finds a hagiographical reflex in the Middle-Irish Life of Finnchua. Mongfhinn, the queen of Ulster, persuades her husband to attack Munster and she herself dies in the battle. This failure is explicitly linked to her status as a woman (Lism 9293). However, in the sagas, the promiscuity of the sovereignty goddess is often specifically linked to her function within the text.[18]

In the Lives functional promiscuity becomes merely sinful. Furthermore, the church's ideology concerning illicit sex has alchemically altered the significance of the pattern. The early church Fathers divided the world into the polarities of the spiritual and the carnal. On some occasions they associated the former with men and the latter with women,[19] although the distinction is not always absolute. In this scheme it was the nature of women to be inconstant. The Irish sovereignty goddess with her many sexual partners and her changing appearance, was transmuted to match this particular view.

Promiscuity sometimes expresses itself as adultery. A clear example of this process is contained in an anecdote that is found in all four important Lives of Ciarán of Saigir. The two Irish Lives and the two Latin *Vitae* share many details, the first Irish Life being closest to the Latin *Vita* in the Dublin collection, and perhaps derived from it.[20] The recensions may go back to an early original, now lost.[21] This certainly seems to be the case with the Second Irish Life which, as it stands, is a late production. In general, the Dublin Life is the most detailed and in comparison with it the Salamanca Life is much abbreviated. The four versions contain the tale of the potentially adulterous Munster queen, Eithne Úathach, wife of Óengus mac Nad Fraích. Eithne is familiar from the saga account of the *Expulsion of the Dési*, an account that was well-known and popular. Its older version dates back to the second half of the eighth century.[22] In the *Expulsion* Eithne is an important figure, and it is through her that the Dési win land in Munster. In the Lives, Eithne lusts after Conchraid, king of Osraige (BNÉ 107, 118; VSH i 224; SV 350). She feigns illness, a love sickness (BNÉ 10708; BNÉ 118; VSH i 224; SV 350), and demands blackberries. Her demand,

[17]Cecile O'Rahilly (ed), *Táin bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin 1984) 2; for a discussion of the critiques of active women, Ní Bhrolcháin, `Women in early myths', 1219; Patrick Ford, `Celtic women: the opposing sex', *Viator* 19 (1988) 41738; Patricia Kelly, `The *Táin* as literature', J.·P. Mallory (ed), *Aspects of the Táin* (Belfast 1992) 69102.

[18]For examples of such sovereignty figures, Stokes, `Echtra mac n-Echach', 198200; a similar case involving Lugaid Loígde, Whitley Stokes (ed), `Cóir Anmann', *Irische Texte* iii (Leipzig 1891) 31623; Étaín in R.·I. Best & Osborn Bergin (ed), `Tochmarc Étaine', *Ériu* 12 (1938) 142196, esp. 162.

[19]Joyce Salisbury, *Church Fathers: independent virgins* (London 1991) 1213; Peter Brown, *The body and society, men, women and sexual renunciation in early christianity* (New York 1988).

[20]First Irish Life in BNÉ 103112; Second Irish Life, ibid. 113124; Latin Life edited from Marsh's Library and Trinity College MSS, VSH i 21733; edited from Codex Salamanticensis in SV 34653; for a discussion of the relationship of the various Lives, Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives* 29395; Sharpe argues that the Latin Life in the Salamanca codex has the Dublin collection Life as one of its ultimate sources.

[21]Sharpe, loc. cit.

[22]There are two recensions. The older is contained in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B 502 and Laud 610. The later in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, Lebor na hUidre and other MSS. Both copies of the first recension are edited by Kuno Meyer, `The expulsion of the Dessi', *Y Cymmrodor* 14 (1901) 10435 (Rawlinson); idem, `The expulsion of the Dessi', *Ériu* 3 (1907) 13542 (Laud); for the later version, R.·I. Best & Osborn Bergin (ed), *Lebor na hUidre: book of the Dun Cow* (Dublin 1929) 13741. References will be to the Rawlinson text.

which parallels her sexual demands on Conchraid, is cured by the magical blackberries of Ciarán:

> Set interrogata regina ait: `sana essem a dolore modo, si moros inuenirem commedere'. Putabat enim quod nullo modo tunc mori inuenirentur. Dux autem, timens eam in suo castello post discessum regis manere, cucurrit ad patronum suum sanctum Kyranum, et indicauit ei hec omnia. Omnis enim regio Osraighi parrochia sancti Kyarani est. Et audiens episcopus ducem, misit ad ueprem sub sindone candido tenentem in silva moros ab auptumpno usque ad Aprilem; et uas plenum moris regine inde allatum est. Et commedens eos ilico sanata est a dolore suo, id est ab amore ducis Conchrid; quia statim non curabat de eo. (VSH i 224)

Eithne's desire is only controlled through the dominance of a male religious figure. This desire is unexplained in the First Irish Life and in the Latin *Vitae*. However, in the Second Irish Life, the character of Eithne undergoes a subtle, but significant, change. Eithne desires Conchraid because he is young, and Óengus, her husband, is old (BNÉ 117). This is surely a reflex of the theme of the sovereignty goddess, who replaces old impotent kings with younger and more virile suitors. Eithne is also the typical young wife married to an older man. While this Life is a late witness, it may go back to the original from which the two Latin Lives drew. Furthermore, Eithne's epithet, `Úathach', meaning `horrible' or `dreadful' suggests the ugly hag awaiting transformation. In the *Expulsion of the Dési* her epithet is explained by reference to the fact that she is fed the flesh of young boys, so that she might grow more quickly and win the Dési their inheritance.[23] Interestingly, she is clearly linked with sovereignty in the saga. On the night of her birth the druid Brí prophecies:

> `Ind ingen ro genair innocht', ar Bri, `rosfessatar fir hErenn uili ₇ ardaig na hingine sin gebait a maithre in tir artrefat'. (108)

> `The girl that was born tonight', said Brí, `all the men of Ireland will know her and because of this girl her maternal kindred will seize the land they will possess'.

Eventually, through her marriage to Óengus she is able to fulfil this prophecy, giving possession of land to her *máithre*—her Dési maternal kindred. Eithne's association with sovereignty seems to have influenced the Lives. Yet here, Eithne is not an all-powerful symbol of sovereignty, although echoes of that role are important. To some extent the text has subsumed this mythic level into the actual. She fails to win Conchraid, and submits to the authority figures of Óengus and Ciarán. Furthermore, the younger Conchraid does not wish to replace Óengus, although a schematic reading of the function of the sovereignty goddess would suggest that he has been chosen to replace Óengus. Instead, he is a loyal follower of the church, represented by Ciarán.

  The incident must be placed in the context of the surrounding episodes in the four versions. This approach heightens the underlying significance of Eithne Úathach. Despite divergences in detail, the accounts in the First Irish Life and in the *Vitae* are close. In them, Ciarán prophesies the death of Eithne and Óengus in battle against the Leinstermen—the

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[23]Meyer, `Expulsion', 108.

Latin versions adding the detail that the victor would be the Uí Dúnlainge king, Illann (BNÉ 108; VSH i 225; SV 350). Significantly, the episode is missing from the Second Irish Life. Here, there is no mention of the battle, and it is stressed that Ciarán makes peace between Conchraid and Óengus—a detail stemming, perhaps, from the original source (BNÉ 118).

These differences may reflect Osraige's anomalous position within the province of Munster. Osraige had early links with the Corco Loígde.[24] Ciarán's mother was of the Corco Loígde, perhaps a hint at the early relationship. The materials in the Lives contain several strata. The relationship with the Corco Loígde, articulated through Ciarán's maternal genealogy is early, while the tension between Munster and Osraige—at least in the form presented in the First Irish Life and the *Vitae*—dates from a later period. In the late ninth century the Osraige king, Cerball, played a prominent role in Leinster politics. During this period the genealogical link between the Laigin and the Osraige may have been fabricated.[25] By 1036 Donnchad mac Gilla Pátraic was king of Osraige and the Laigin, but Osraige hegemony was short-lived. The uncertain status of Osraige is reflected in the Lives. The Second Irish Life, despite its lateness, is the most conservative for the subjection of Eithne brings peace between the kings. This makes sense when seen within the context of the sovereignty goddess motif, however much it has been diluted. There is a touch of political allegory in the situation—Óengus standing for Munster, Conchraid for Osraige, and Eithne for the potential conflict between them. Moreover, Eithne is strongly anti-Osraige in the *Expulsion of the Dési*, where she is portrayed as an ally of the Eóganacht and the Dési.[26] Clearly Irish clerics were willing to adapt earlier material. Here, hagiographical conventions have made Eithne not just a figure of sovereignty, but a person—even if a stereotypical one. This resembles the `incarnational literature' described by Graham Hough who argues that in this type `theme and image are completely fused and the relation between them is only implicit'.[27] In this sense, the Munster queen is a development on the more naive allegory of the pure sovereignty goddess: she is both a sinful woman and a barometer of relations between Munster and Osraige.

The other versions are more ambivalent about Osraige's Munster status. The First Irish Life describes an assembly of the men of Munster and Leinster in Ciarán's neighbourhood within Osraige (BNÉ 108). Thus, the border nature of the kingdom is emphasised. Furthermore, Conchraid's rejection of Eithne, and Óengus's defeat in battle at the hands of Leinster, suggest that Osraige's political stance is volatile. In the Dublin Latin Life the account of the defeat is rounded off with a brief genealogy of the queen. Eithne is the daughter of Crimthann, the son of Énda Cennselach (VSH i 225).[28] By the late eleventh-century the Uí Chennselaig were beginning to dominate Leinster politics and this gives the genealogy an added significance. Osraige was part of a Leinster sphere of influence. Moreover, this *Vita* locates Osraige on the `plaga Laginensium' (VSH i 217). The two faces of Eithne, symbols of sovereignty and of sinful female nature are central to an interpretation of these episodes.

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[24]Francis John Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973) 18081.

[25]ibid. 16264.

[26]Meyer, `Expulsion', 11033.

[27]Graham Hough, `The allegorical circle', *Critical Q* 3/3 3 (1961) 199209, esp. 20405; Hough is indebted to Northrop Frye, *The anatomy of criticism* (Princeton 1957) 91.

[28]This detail is also contained in Meyer, `Expulsion', 108.

For Eithne there are two implied potential transformations. The symbolic transformation of hag into beautiful woman is rejected. Instead, her basic transformation is from a sinful woman—*úathach* indeed—into a woman who obeys the church's rules. This transformation is the favoured one in the Lives. Turning lust into spiritual love is a common enough miracle. In these cases the woman's lust is turned into a spiritual love which expresses itself in virginity. In *Vita Tripartita* Ercnat has to die before her love for Benén transforms itself into a spiritual love for God.[29] Although the episode is short it contains an important symbolic level. Ercnat dies of a wasting sickness, and her sexuality metaphorically dies of this also. When she is resurrected she has the equivalent of a new body, and her new body is no longer sexual. Her interests become spiritual and she embarks on a religious life.

There is another hint of the pattern of sovereignty and sexual validation in the Irish Life of Finbarr. In this respect it differs considerably from the two Latin Lives.[30] The *Vitae* are independent of each other, but derive from a common source dated to the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth by Ó Riain.[31] The Irish Life of Finbarr does not derive directly from the Latin texts.[32] Ó Riain argues that this redaction was composed between 1215 and 1230, but that it draws on the ultimate common exemplar of the *Vitae*.[33] However, the noticeable differences in the birth tale, when compared with the *Vitae*, suggest that this episode may have an independent source. In the Irish Life the saint's mother is a *cumal*, a slave-woman, belonging to the king of Eóganacht Raithlenn, while his father, Amairgen, is a descendant of Eochu Mugmedón. Finbarr is conceived out of wedlock:

> Ro bái dino cumhal sochraidh i ttigh in righ. Ro forcongair an rí dia mhuinntir na ro áentaigedh neach dibh lé i llánamhas. Ni cúalae dino Amhairghin inní sin. Ro áentaidh iaromh an gobha ⁊ an chumhal go hincleithe, ⁊ ro fes forra iarttain, úair ro coimpredh an chumhal. (BNÉ 11)

> There was a shapely bond-maid in the house of the king. The king told his household that none of them should sleep with her. Amairgen did not hear this thing. The smith and the bond-maid united together secretly, and this was known afterwards, for the bond-maid conceived.

Thus, Finbarr is illegitimate, but this illegitimacy serves to set him apart from his contemporaries. The role of the bond-maid is interesting. On the one hand, she seems to

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[29]Mulchrone, *Bethu Phátraic*, 13839.

[30]Latin Life edited from M f·132 and T f·109, VSH i 6574; Irish Life in BNÉ 1122; there are also three breviary accounts edited by Paul Grosjean, `Les vies de S. Finnbarr', *Analecta Bollandiana* 69 (1951) 32747; idem, `Les vies de S. Finnbarr de Cork', *J Cork Hist Archaeol Soc* 58 (1953) 4754; for a possible stemma, Pádraig Ó Riain, `Another Cork charter: the life of St Finbarr', ibid. 90 (1985) 2.

[31]For studies of Finbarr and a late twelfth century date, Pádraig Ó Riain, `St Finbarr: a study in a cult', *J Cork Hist Archaeol Soc* 82 (1977) 6382; idem, `Another Cork charter', 113; idem, *Beatha Bharra: saint Finbarr of Cork, the complete life*, ITS 57 (London 1994).

[32]Ó Riain, `Another Cork charter', 1.

[33]For differing arguments, Ó Riain, ibid. 24, who links the Life with the decretal letter of 1199; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, `Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland', T·W. Moody (ed), *Nationality and the pursuit of national independence* (Belfast 1978) 31, associates the Life with the ambitions of Cormac mac Carthaig and the diocese of Cork during the church reform.

mirror the women in Irish sagas who move from an older king to a younger suitor.[34] The text does not specifically state that the king of Raithlenn is old and/or impotent, but the detail where he orders none of his household to sleep with the *cumal* is suggestive. The decline of the old king is one of the aspects which lies behind this episode. Here, the woman only serves to measure the virility of the competing men. But Finbarr's mother does not pass on sovereignty to Amairgen, her chosen sexual partner. Rather, under the influence of the Gospel figure of Mary, the *ancilla Domini*, the important figure is the yet unborn child. The mother's subordination to her offspring is graphically expressed in the episode where Finbarr speaks from the womb, a detail contained in both Irish and Latin Lives (BNÉ 1112; VSH i 66). Here, a female voice is less important than that of a male child.

An ideological emphasis on the sovereignty of the child, as opposed to the male suitor is a common hagiographical pattern. Yet, despite this pattern, there are similarities with the sagas delineating the heroic king, delineations which are part of the international heroic biography.[35] *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* contains an account of a *tairbfheis*, or bull-feast, a ritual involving the slaughter of a bull and the divination of druids. The aim of the *tairbfheis* is the identification of the true king. The saga is found in recensions not earlier than the eleventh century, but it probably contains significant ninth-century material,[36] making it roughly contemporary with *Bethu Brigte*. *Serglige Con Culainn*, a highly composite text, includes a similar but fuller description of the *tairbfheis*.[37] As this episode has no actual role within the saga, it is likely to have come from the same materials that went into the construction of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Symbolically and structurally the bull-feast embodies the same function as the encounter with the sovereignty goddess. Although the act of sex, in this encounter, is displaced into one of prophecy, it remains an underlying factor.

This pattern finds a hagiographical interpretation. The reflex involves the widespread motif of the resounding chariot.[38] The earliest extant example is in the eighth-century *Vita Prima*.[39] The extraordinary nature of Brigit's conception is revealed when Dubthach, accompanied by the pregnant Bróicsech in his chariot, passes a druid:

> Audiens autem magus sonitum currus, dixit seruis suis: `Videre, quis sedeat in curru: currus enim sub Rege sonat'. (118)

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[34] A good example is Derdriu in *Longes mac n-Uislenn*: Vernam Hull (ed), *Longes mac n-Uislenn: the exile of the sons of Uisliu* (New York 1949); Jean-Michel Picard in `The strange death of Guaire mac Áedáin', Ó Corráin, Breatnach and McCone (ed), *Sages, saints and storytellers*, 36775, has noticed the remains of this pattern in an incident in the *Vita Columbae*.

[35] For a sometimes dubious application to Irish material, T.·F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology* (Dublin 1947); Alwyn and Brinsley Rees, *Celtic heritage: ancient tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London 1961); Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *The heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin 1977); idem, `Between god and man: the hero of Irish tradition', *Crane Bag* 2 (1978) 7279.

[36] Eleanor Knott (ed), *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 8 (Dublin 1975) 4.

[37] Myles Dillon (ed), *Serglige Con Culainn*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish series 14 (Dublin 1953) 89.

[38] There are many examples, including the unborn Ciarán of Clonmacnois, Lism 119; Comgall, VSH ii 4; Máedóc, VSH ii 141. A druid is not always present. It is Íte who makes the characteristuc statement in relation to Mo Chóemóc, VSH ii 166.

[39] For different views on the date and priority of VP in the Brigidine stemma, Mario Esposito, `On the early Latin lives of St Brigid of Kildare', *Hermathena* 49 (1936) 12065; Felim Ó Briain, `Brigitana', *Z Celt Philol* 36 (1978) 11237, esp. 120, 12627; Richard Sharpe, `*Vitae S. Brigitae*: the oldest texts', *Peritia* 1 (1982) 81106; K. McCone, `Brigit in the seventh century: a saint with three Lives?', *Peritia* 1 (1982) 12831.

Binchy believed that the origin of the chariot resounding under a king could be linked to a passage in *De Shíl Chonairi Máir*, where the Lia Fáil screams when it comes into contact with a future king's chariot.[40] This tract contains an early version of Conaire's accession, and may come from a similar time and milieu as *Vita Prima*. Bieler argued that the motif was pagan, and that this paganism is proved by the participation of a druid.[41] The argument is not conclusive. A druid's presence does not prove that the origin of a motif is pagan. Brigit's Life is, after all, played against the backdrop of an only partly christianised Ireland, and the druids are not in all cases portrayed as evil. In general, they are described as evil only if they encounter christianity and reject it. The sagas adopt a similar policy.[42] Binchy, in fact, is right to note the correspondence between the resounding chariot and sovereignty rituals. Indeed, the resounding of the chariot and the scream of the Lia Fáil are reminiscent of each other. However, I believe that there are additional parallels. The druid, in some accounts identified as a prophet, mirrors the druid of the *tairbfheis*. The oracular resounding of the chariot points up his prophetic role, whilst the presence of Bróicsech and Dubthach in the chariot hint at the function of the sovereignty goddess. Indeed, if Ó Broin's analysis of the female nature of the screaming Lia Fáil is accepted, the link with the sovereignty goddess and the resounding chariot is even stronger.[43] But, in these narratives, the receiver of the sovereignty is the unborn child. The woman's transformation from child-bearer to a foreshadowing of the coming sovereignty is suggested by the resounding chariot. The sovereignty goddess has been transmuted into the mother of a saint. The saint is the king under which the chariot resounds.

The Irish church, then, was able to take the basic image of woman as sovereignty, and use it in a variety of ways. This complex use involved the conscious identification of a woman as symbol of true kingship in some of the sagas, and concomitantly of sanctity in some Lives. Overtly christian ideology is expressed in a criticism of the promiscuity associated with the sovereignty figure, although it must be remembered that christian monks also composed the sagas.

TRANSFORMATION AND LIMINALITY
Femaleness is sometimes presented as a liminal category in the Irish Lives. This categorisation has cultural implications. The Irish invested sacred places with a liminal quality.[44] The ancient neolithic tumuli were regarded as symbolic gateways to the Otherworld, particularly Newgrange, the Brug na Bóinne of Irish literature. Similarly, the monastic enclosures are imbued with a sacred quality in some Lives.[45] Such a sacred

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[40]D. A. Binchy, a private communication cited in Bieler, `Hagiography and romance', 17; Tomás Ó Broin, `Lia Fáil: fact and fiction in the tradition', *Celtica* 21 (1990) 393401, argues that the identification of the Lia Fáil with a stone phallus in `De Shíl Chonairi Máir' is unique, and that the Lia Fáil is, in fact, a flagstone representing a female principle of the land and sovereignty.

[41]Bieler, ibid.

[42]McCone, *Pagan past*, 5483.

[43]Ó Broin, `Lia Fáil', 39596.

[44]Pádraig Ó Riain, `Boundary association in early Irish society', *Studia Celtica* 7 (1972) 1229; for a discussion of the very international idea of liminality and the sacred, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The raw and the cooked: introduction to a science of mythology*, translated by John and Doreen Weightman (London 1970).

[45]For an application of this to *Vita Columbae*, A.·D.·S. MacDonald, `Aspects of the monastery and monastic life in Adomnán's Life of Columba', *Peritia* 3 (1984) 29497.

quality draws on ideas similar to those contained in the eighth-century Irish canon law compilation, *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, which in turn ultimately drew on biblical ideas of pollution and the sacred.[46] In some cases this sacredness is gendered. The boundary world of the monastery can, in certain Lives, be inhabited only by men.[47] This did not reflect the reality of the Irish church. Cogitosus describes a Kildare which is very much a monastic proto-urban centre (14041). The Irish churches were places of considerable wealth, and were inhabited by men and women. The sacred monastic space of the Lives is essentially ideological. It is a place where the ascetic saint is set apart from the unchristian world outside, a world symbolised by women.[48] This association stems from male-inspired constructs of gendered difference. Men read women as part of an `otherness'.

  Some elements of christianity linked women with sexual sin.[49] The association is also found in Irish hagiography. The mature female is a strong symbol of sexual temptation, and the ascetic saint must constantly battle against her. The link between women, sin and liminality is made very specifically in an anecdote in the Middle-Irish *scholia* of *Féilire Óengusso*.

No laigdis dano da ingin chorrchíchecha immi cach naidchi comad móide in cath dó fri Demon, cor' himraided a ailiugud trit sin. Co tainic Brénaind dia derbad, co nderbairt Scoithin: `Loighed am lepaid-sea in cleirech anocht', ar se. O ro siacht iarum co huair chumsanta and tecait na hingena issin tech a raibe Brenaind ⁊ a nutlaige do grissaig ina caslaib, ⁊ ní ro loisc in teine iat, ⁊ doirtid i fiadnaisi Brénaind ⁊ tiagait issin lepaid chuice. `Créd so'? ol Brénaind. Is amlaid dogniam cach naidchi, ar na hingena. Loighit im Brénaind, ⁊ ní choemnacair sidhe cotlad etir lasin élscoth. `Is anforbthe sin, a cleirig', ar na hingena: `intí bis sunn cach naídchi ní mothaig ní etir. Cid tái nach eirge isin dabaig, a cleirig, damad usaidhe duit? Is minic athaigis in cleirech .i. Scoithín'. `Maith, tra', ol Brénaind, `is cair duind in derbad so, is ferr intí seo itamni'. [50]

Now two girls with pointed breasts used to lie beside him (Scoithín) every night so that the battle with the demon might be greater, and it was proposed to accuse him about this. Brénainn came to test him. Scoithín said: `let the cleric lie in my bed tonight'. So when it came to the hour of resting the girls came to the house where Brénainn was with lapfuls of glowing embers in their chasubles, and the fire did not burn them, and they spill them in front of Brénainn, and they went into bed to him. `What is this'? said Brénainn. `It is thus we do every night', said the girls. They lie down with Brénainn, and he was not able to sleep with desire. `This is imperfect O cleric', say the girls. `He who is here every night, he feels nothing. Why do you not go into the tub O cleric, if it

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[46]CCH 44 §1: `Cantabitur alleluja per civitatem et vicos ejus et plateas, et postea dicitur: Omnis immundus non transibit per eam'.

[47]Some hagiographical examples include the monastic foundations of Finnchua, Lism 90; Ailbe, VSH i 58; Máedóc, VSH ii 151, BNÉ 186; Mo Lua, SV 136, VSH ii 216; Senán, Lism 7373; Íte advises Brendan to keep away from women, Lism 103, VSH i 102, BNÉ 47; in his Life of Brigit Cogitosus describes a sexual and social segregation, AASS 141; segregation is also expressed in CCH 44 §5e.

[48]The probably eighth-century Old-Irish *Lorica* of Patrick, preserved in the *Book of Armagh*, contains a good example of such an ideology. The poet calls for divine aid `fri brichtu ban ⁊ gobann ⁊ druad' (TP ii 357).

[49]Joyce Salisbury, `The Latin doctors of the church on sexuality', *J Mediev Hist* 12 (1986) 27980.

[50]Whitley Stokes (ed), *The Martyrology of Oengus the culdee*, HBS (London 1905) 4041.

should be easier for you? It is often that the cleric, that is Scoithín, goes to it'. `Well, it is wrong for us to try this test' said Brénainn. `It is he who is better than we are'.

These women are not in any sense individualised. Individualisation is subordinate to their function. They arrive to test the cleric's power of sexual abstinence. They come from nowhere, and this gives them an otherworldly quality, an otherworldliness that is combined with christian ideology. It was believed in the Middle Ages that only virgins could carry lapfuls of live coals without being burnt.[51] These women are christian virgins, but in a very special sense. They are holy temptresses. They do not seduce Brénainn, but they highlight his imperfections. The women are not `real' but are purely symbolic of female sexuality—a sexuality which the church perceived as dangerous. Yet, in this account, the danger is only illusory. The women serve to measure the competing saints' powers of abstinence, much as the sovereignty goddess measures the virility of possible kings. There is no danger that Brénainn will fall into sin. These women are the structural opposites of the sovereignty goddess.

  Sometimes female liminality was viewed in active terms, allowing certain select women to share in masculine virtues. This mirrored patristic theories of masculinity and femininity. The Life of Mo Ninne in the *Codex Salamanticensis* makes a classic, and unusually explicit, reference to such beliefs.[52] Heist has argued that the Salamanca *codex* has suffered the least revision and contains the oldest materials, when compared with the other great medieval Latin collections of Irish *Vitae*.[53] Sharpe is in substantial agreement with this, and he believes that the compiler of the Salamanca *codex* was largely faithful to his earlier sources.[54] The collection does seem to be conservative, especially in details concerning places and personal names. The *Vita* centres the saint's activities in Ireland, and especially in her foundation of Cell Shléibe, Killeevy in county Armagh. A second version exists, that of Conchubranus. His life is eleventh-century and is associated with the English church of Burton-on-Trent.[55] Appropriately Mo Ninne's activities have been expanded to include long journeys to England and Scotland. However, the core of material in the two Lives is similar, and Esposito, in one of the few detailed discussions of the Lives, argued that a lost X, a seventh-century Latin Life, lay behind the two *Vitae*.[56] He dates X precisely to 600 624. The Salamanca Life was, he argued, based more or less directly on X.[57] However, I believe that a more likely date is around the late seventh and early eighth century. Between ca 665 and 690 Gnáthat abbess of Kildare was also the ninth abbess of Killeevy.[58] In the

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[51]cf. for this miracle: Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria confessorum,* MGH SRM i/2, 7575 (Simplicius the bishop and his chaste wife), *Historia Francorum* ii 1 (St Bricius of Tours). These are based on Proverbs 6:2732, but the belief was widespread.

[52]SV 8395.

[53]W.·W. Heist, `Introduction', SV p·ix; also Charles Plummer, `Introduction', p·xxii.

[54]Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, 24346.

[55]Mario Esposito, `Conchubrani Vita Sanctae Monennae', *Proc Roy Ir Acad (C)* 28 (1910) 20238; reprinted in Mario Esposito, `Conchubrani Vita Sanctae Monennae', in M. Lapidge (ed), *Irish books and learning in mediaeval Europe* (London 1990) 20238.

[56]Mario Esposito, `The sources for Conchubranus' Life of St Monenna', Mario Esposito, *Irish books and learning*, 7378.

[57]ibid. 7576.

[58]Francis John Byrne, `Comarbai Brigte', in T.·W. Moody & F.·J. Byrne (ed), *A new history of Ireland: IX maps, genealogies, lists* (Oxford 1984) 25961; Esposito, `Conchubrani Vita', Appendix C 245.

Salamanca Life Brigit is represented as sympathetic and superior to Mo Ninne. The text contains the significant statement:

> Quantum vero ipsa se humiliabat, tantum Deus meritis virtutum eam pre omnibus aliis exaltabat, ut etiam post Brigidam vite sanctitate et morum honestate et virtutum gratia secunda putaretur. (SV 84 §4)

In a sense she is only a *secunda Brigida*. Furthermore, the saint begins her career under the inspiration of Patrick. This background suggests that the Life was formulated around the time of the genesis of the *Liber Angeli*.[59] Patrician and Brigidine interests are both served in the Life. Moreover, Conaille concerns are prominent. Killeevy lay on the border between the Airgialla, Conaille and Uí Echach Cobo. During the first half of the eighth century, and after, two members of the Conaille royal dynasty, Femen and Allabuir governed Killeevy.[60] In Conchubranus, on the contrary, Brigit's role is subservient, reflecting a milieu of Armagh dominance. Indeed, Ailbe, the *comarba* of Mo Ninne (1077, AU) was the wife of the king of Airthir, and the daughter of `ind abad', perhaps the abbot of Armagh. Further Airgialla influence is suggested by the name of the leader of Clann Sínaig—a family which dominated the abbacy of Armagh—who was killed in a battle against the Ulaid (1086, AU). His name was Gilla Mo Ninne, the `servant of Mo Ninne'. This is the political situation, which forms a backdrop to Conchubranus's Life.

  The dates of the two Lives are an important consideration, for the way Conchubranus deals with his sources reveals something of both continuity and change in Irish attitudes towards women. The Salamanca Life describes Mo Ninne's masculine soul—a masculinity linked with physical labour. She sows the female earth with seeds, metaphorically adopting a masculine function:

> Ita namque priorum heremitarum vestigia secuta fuit ut proprio labore terram fodiens, eam seminasset; virilem enim animum in femineo gerebat corpore. (SV 89 §19)

The idea of a masculine soul is not uncommon in hagiography. Brigit is described as being `uiriliter' in the hymn `Audite uirginis laudes'.[61] The church Fathers believed that ascetic virgins could transcend the feminine state and be transformed, in a spiritual sense, into men. For Jerome and Ambrose their very designation as women would be changed to that of men. Spirituality and asceticism are sometimes associated specifically with maleness. But this maleness was not complete. Women were still expected to be subordinate.[62] Mo Ninne's masculine soul and her manual work are not a threat to the male world, for this work is done within the confines of her own monastery. She may transcend her gender, but she does not upset the male hierarchy. Furthermore, as a saint, her power is not a paradigm of female power, but of sanctity.

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[59]Text in Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 18491; McCone, `Brigit in the seventh century', 10745 argues that the *Liber angeli* dates from the eighth century; Richard Sharpe, `The Patrician documents in the Book of Armagh', *Scriptorium* 36 (1982) 1928, argues for an earlier seventh-century date.

[60]For the year AU 752 records `mors Foidmin m. Fallaigh regis Conaile Muirteimhne'; Femen daughter of Fallach was the twelfth abbess of Killeevy, while Allabuir daughter of Foidmin was the thirteenth, Esposito, `Conchubrani Vita', Appendix C 245.

[61]J. H. Bernard & R. Atkinson (ed), *Liber hymnorum*, HBS 1314 (London 189798), i 15.

[62]Salisbury, `The Latin doctors', 28.

Conchubranus makes this implicit reference to christian beliefs explicit. In the episode following that describing Mo Ninne's masculine soul (228), Conchubranus, quoting Gal. 3:28 remarks: `In Christo enim neque masculus neque femina, sed omnia in omnibus Christus' (229). Greater explicitness is typical of Conchubranus's approach throughout the Life. Indeed, the intense ideology of virginity displayed in this Life may partly reflect the monastic reform movement of the tenth and eleventh centuries. By the latter half of the tenth century it was making inroads in England—a significant point given Conchubranus's connections with Burton-on-Trent. European influences fed into the image of the transforming Irish woman.

A merging of influences is best exemplified in an episode found in Conchubranus's Life. It concerns Orbile's transformation. When Mo Ninne leaves to found Killeevy, Orbile remains behind to govern the older foundation of Fochairt. However, Orbile remarks that she greatly fears young men, and Mo Ninne transforms her into a hag with her girdle:

> Tunc surrexit Sancta Monenna et oravit, et post orationem insufflavit super capillos capitis, et statim facti sunt candidi sicut nix, quasi in senectute. (210)

The transformation of Orbile from beautiful woman to hag reverses the usual process of hag to beautiful woman. In the sagas the woman is a metaphor for the sovereignty, who can only be rejuvenated by sleeping with the rightful king. In Mo Ninne's *Vita* Orbile is a metaphor for her church, and she must resist sexual contamination. In a sense she inhabits a female sacred space. The church's purity was a concern of the eleventh-century reformers. The patristic attitude, particularly Tertullian's, towards female adornment and physical beauty might also have played a part in this episode.[63] Here, it is cleverly fused with the Irish metaphor of female physical transformation. Furthermore, Orbile is the daughter of a king—a significant link with the idea of sovereignty. However, she is renamed Servile, with its connotations of servitude. She is a slave to the saint's will. Conchubranus has borrowed a further element from the trope of the transforming female sovereignty. Orbile remarks `quae valde timeo presentiam iuvenum' (210), as a reason for not staying at Fochairt. Her transmutation into an old woman is for the sake of avoiding sex, not seeking it. The hagiographer has reversed the paradigm of the ugly deranged woman who is cured and civilised by sex.[64] Here, sex is associated with the wilderness and it is condemned. Conchubranus is drawing on an image from his native culture and loading it with reform-minded ideology. It is this flexibility which accounts for the continuity of genre and narrative imagery throughout the early christian period. It is noteworthy that this episode is not in the other *Vita*. The evidence points to Conchubranus being an innovator, using old materials to express new ideas.

The liminality of femaleness is expressed in its most positive form in women such as Mo Ninne who attain masculine virtue, or women like those in the *scholia* anecdote who validate masculine virtue. Only in this way was it permissible for women to invade the sacred spaces set aside for men. The Irish hagiographers have adopted this set of ideas into

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[63]Tertullian, `On the apparel of women', translated by S. Thelwall in James Donaldson (ed), *The ante-Nicene fathers* iv (Michigan 1989) 1517.

[64]For another example, Brian Ó Cuiv (ed), `The romance of Mis and Dub Rois', *Celtica* 2 (195254) 32527.

their own literary culture. They adapt the images of sexually promiscuous transforming woman—itself a striking example of liminality—to a christian ideology.

FEMALE TRANSVESTISM

Legends of transvestite saints form part of the hagiographical tradition of Western Europe, although specifically condemned by the church hierarchy.[65] The most popular early example was the text known as the *Acta Pauli et Theclae*.[66] It describes Thecla's conversion by Paul, and her subsequent cross-dressing which allows her both protection from assault by men, and the ability to preach. This was not the only example. Legends of the cross-dressing Eugenia and Pelagia were also in common currency. An extreme form involves the bearded female saints,[67] popular later in the Middle Ages. The Irish certainly knew and, as I will argue, drew on the motif of the transvestite. The Middle-Irish *scholia* of *Féilire Óengusso* include the story of Eugenia the daughter of Philip, who disguised herself as a man to enter a monastery.[68] I believe that the legend of Brigit's ordination owes something to this tradition of transvestism, but in a subtle way.

According to the hagiographical evidence, and this is evidence which gained wide currency, the abbess of Kildare held a rank equivalent to that of a bishop. This view is not explicit in the earliest Lives. Cogitosus simply describes Brigit's veiling by Mac Caille, and though the events surrounding it are miraculous, there is no clear hint of later developments (136). In the *Vita Prima* this account is embellished, but it seems likely that the bishops Mel and Melchú are added to show Brigit in harmony with the Patrician cult (120). Both ecclesiastics were associated with Patrick. This harmonious association of two great cults is an important aspect of the politics behind *Vita Prima*. *Bethu Brigte*, while it draws on many of the same sources as *Vita Prima*,[69] introduces a significant variation. Most of the same protagonists are present. Yet, the effect is altogether different. Brigit is made a bishop by Mel:

> Ibi episcopus Dei gratia inebreatus non cognovit quid in libro suo cantavit. In gradum enim episcopi ordinavit Brigitam. `Haec sola', inquid Mel, `ordinationem episcopalem in Hibernia tenebit virgo'. Quandiu igitur consecraretur columna ignea de vertice eius ascendebat. (6)

Although the ordination is accidental, it is not reversed. Mel is drunk with the grace of God, `gratia inebreatus'. In this version, the fortuitous element dominates. The bishop makes an important remark, to the effect that Brigit alone `sola', of all Irish women, could receive this honour. Whether the account emanated from a Kildare source or not, and given its implications it probably did, it was certainly adopted by the Kildare propagandists. It continued to be used in later Lives. The author of *Bethu Brigte* is careful to stress that Brigit

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[65]John Anson, `The female transvestite in early monasticism: the origin and development of a motif', *Viator* 5 (1969) 132; Vern L. Bullough, `Transvestites in the middle ages', *Am J Sociol* 79 (1974) 1381394.

[66]R.·A. Lipsius & M. Bonnet (ed), *Acta apostolorum apocrypha* (Leipzig 1891), i 25372; translated by M.·R. James, *The apocryphal New Testament, being the apocryphal gospels, acts, epistles and apocalypses* (Oxford 1953) 27281.

[67]For an examination of some of the literature associated with the female bearded saints, Bullough, `Transvestites', especially 1387394.

[68]Stokes, *Martyrology*, 98.

[69]McCone, `Brigit in the seventh century', 10745.

does not have sacerdotal functions. Patrick ordains Brigit's charioteer as her priest (15). A woman, no matter how high her rank, cannot be a priest. Nevertheless, Brigit's high status is certainly emphasised, and the incident blossomed in later accounts. In the late Middle-Irish *Betha Bhrigdi*, contained in the Book of Lismore, it is implied that Brigit's successor as abbess of Kildare, could also enjoy episcopal status, for Brigit stands in for this successor:

> IS edh dorala ann tria grasa in Spirto Nóibh gradh nesbuic do eirleghiunn for Brigit. As bert Mac Caille nar' bho ord gradh nespuic for bannscail. Adubhairt espoc Mel: `Ni leam a commus. O Dhia doratad in anoir-sin do Brigit seoch cach mbannscail', conidh anoir espuic doberat fir Eirenn do comarba Brigte o sin ille. (40)

> It came to pass through the grace of the Holy Spirit, that the grade of a bishop was read out over Brigit. Mac Caille said that the grade of a bishop should not be given to a woman. Bishop Mel said: `the power is not mine. That honour was given to Brigit by God, beyond every other woman'. Therefore the men of Ireland from that time to the present day give the honour of a bishop to the successor of Brigit.

The differences between this account and the earlier *Bethu Brigte* are telling. In the Lismore Life, the episcopal ordination is clearly not accidental in nature. The materials in this Life were probably assembled in the twelfth century. The reform of the Irish church made this claim to a type of female quasi-episcopacy untenable. At the same time the introduction of diocesan bishoprics was a major aim of the reformers. This created a tension. While Kildare was clearly of high episcopal status,[70] it had two episcopal ancestor figures, one male the other female—an anomalous situation. However, bishop Conláed's importance in Cogitosus declined in later hagiography.[71] Furthermore, the monastery of monks seems to have disappeared in the tenth century, and there are no further annalistic references to the abbot of Kildare after this point.[72] Moreover, the *comarba Brigte* was a woman, and indeed the office was much sought after, not only among the Fothairt, Brigit's supposed kindred, but eventually by the Uí Dúnlainge and their Uí Chennselaig rivals. In a sense the Life is trapped by its hagiographical predecessors. The legend of Brigit's veiling/ordination was too strong to be eliminated. The action of God in the saint's ordination had to be emphasised. This excuse, unsurprisingly, did not wash. At the synod of Kells-Mellifont in 1152, the abbess of Kildare was deprived of her status.[73]

There are transvestite undertones to the entire episode. Brigit, in a very specific sense, cross-dresses and gains the functions of a man. She is not a literal transvestite, but she is a role transvestite for she adopts a male role. Admittedly, the Irish example does not involve the element of deception that is so often integral to the continental accounts. Given the

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[70]In the *canones Hibernenses*, Ludwig Bieler (ed), *The Irish penitentials* (Dublin 1963) 170, an *excelsus princeps* is equal in status to a bishop; *Uraicecht Becc* accords the same status to an *ollam mórchathach*, such as the abbots of Cork and Emly, as to a bishop, CIH 1590618, 63455, 2318335; translation by Eoin Mac Neill, `Ancient Irish law: the law of status and franchise', *Proc Roy Ir Acad (C)* 36 (1923) 27281, esp. 275.

[71]The *scholia* of the *Féilire Óengusso* present an account of his death. The bishop is devoured by wolves: Whitley Stokes (ed), *On the calendar of Oengus*, Trans Roy Ir Acad (Dublin 1880) p·lxxxiiilxxxiv.

[72]Byrne, `Comarbai Brigte', 25962.

[73]ibid. 259.

unique position of the successor of Brigit, it is understandable that the abbacy was sought with such vigour and prized so highly. Yet, there is one thing that these different accounts of Brigit's episcopal ordination make clear: she was alone among Irish women, as was her successor. This only served to highlight the generally lower status of Irish women *vis à vis* men. If Brigit was a model, she was for most women a completely unattainable one.

This transvestite element of the Brigit biography had political implications. It is not merely a literary motif. The Fothairt emphasised their kinship link with Brigit. Ó Corráin has argued, that the Fothairt used the link to hold on to several important clerical offices, including that of the abbess of Kildare.[74] The evidence from the genealogies bears this out. The genealogies refer to a Muirenn daughter of Suart mac Duinechda, who is provided with a bloodline linking her to the Uí Chúilduib Cille Daro. The Uí Chúilduib claimed descent from Cian Cúldub, a son of the eponymous Eochaid Find Fuath nAirt.[75] The death of this Muirenn receives an annalistic notice for the year 918. However, the Uí Chúilduib did not monopolise the abbatial office. The office passed to a different branch of the Fothairt. Another Muirenn, Muirenn daughter of Flannacán, has a place in the Rawlinson genealogies of the Fothairt.[76] She possesses a fairly full pedigree tracing her descent to the Clanna Óengusa through Dub Dúin. The Clanna Óengusa claimed descent from Óengus, another son of Eochaid Find Fuath nAirt. This Muirenn is the anonymous *banairchinnech* `female head' whose death notice is recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* in 964. She is named in the *Annals of the Four Masters* and the *Chronicon Scotorum*. The abbatial succession provides a valuable pointer to a dynastic group maintaining its power and prestige through its female members.

This genealogical importance of the abbesses of Kildare, allied to their high ecclesiastical prestige, is one reason that the office gets such regular notice in the Annals. Only women who impinged on the public male world were recorded in these documents. Such a role was not left to the Fothairt uncontested. The death of Muirenn, the daughter of Cellach, the Uí Dúnchada dynast and king (76076), and sister of Finsnechtae also king (795808), is recorded for AU 831. The Uí Dúnchada kingship of Leinster was bolstered by having a relative in the abbacy of Kildare—that this relative was an abbess rather than an abbot does not seem to have mattered. Kildare was virtually the seat of the North Leinster kingship. Uí Dúnlainge collapse is signalled by the intrusion of Gormlaith daughter of Murchad into the office. Murchad was the son of Diarmait mac Maél na mBó, the Uí Chennselaig king of Leinster. Her death notice is given in AU 1112. This also marks the virtual eclipse of the Fothairt. From this point onwards, various dynastic leaders fought to put their close female relatives into the prestigious office of abbess of Kildare. The church and its patron had a symbolic significance. The seat of the patron of the Laigin was metaphorically and actually a place of secular power. With the weakening of the Uí Dúnlainge and their allies, the office was open to more people than heretofore. The notice in the *Annals of Ulster* marking the deposition of the daughter of Cerball mac Fáeláin, the Uí Fháeláin king, in 1127 summarises these developments:

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[74]Donnchadh Ó Corráin, `The early Irish church: some aspects of organisation', D. Ó Corráin (ed), *Irish antiquity* (Cork 1981) 32930; Ó Briain, `The hagiography of Leinster', 3342, consistently downplays the importance of the Fothairt link, in favour of the Uí Dúnlainge.
[75]CGH 86.
[76]ibid. 85.

Cearball m. m. Fhaelain ₇ ár H. Faelain ime do thuitim la h- Uibh Failghi for lar Cille Dara i cosnum comorbuis Brigte.

Cearball the grandson of Fáelán and a slaughter of the Uí Fháeláin about him, fell by the Uí Fhailgi in the middle of Kildare, in contention for the succession of Brigit.

Apparently both Donnchad Ua Conchobair, the king of Uí Fhailge, and Cerball mac Fáeláin believed that the position was worth fighting for, and in Cerball's case dying for. The anomaly of the quasi-episcopal Brigit is surely a factor in this.

This quasi-episcopacy is not the only male role ascribed to Brigit. She is unusual, even compared with the other female saints. There has been considerable speculation that Brigit is the christianised descendant of an identically named pagan goddess, but it seems unlikely that a major ecclesiastical foundation, such as Kildare, could have flourished solely on the basis of a christianised pagan cult.[77] No doubt, the cult of the saint gained an added boost from the identity of her name with the goddess,[78] but this element would have been of minimal importance by the seventh century, although extremely useful in the initial phases of the cult's expansion. Whatever the reasons, Brigit's attributes are exceptional.

Brigit adopts the typically male role of the warrior. Generally, the idea of women participating in battle was frowned upon. Brigit's participation in battle is an essentially `unfemale' thing. Medb, for instance, is heavily criticised in the *Táin* for this reason.[79] The ecclesiastical establishment, through *Cáin Adomnáin* represents the participation of women in battle as a perversion. *Cáin Adomnáin* which aimed to introduce stiff penalties for the injury of `innocents', particularly women and children, was sponsored by the influential seventh-century Iona abbot Adomnán. While the law was promulgated in 697, the text as it is now preserved contains several later strata.[80] However, they are unified by theme. Christian law is presented as a force for improvement in the possibly ninth-century pseudo-historical prologue:[81]

In ben ba dech de mnáiph, ba sí opair dogniid, techt ar cenn catha ₇ cathrói, dáil ₇ dúnaid, fechta ₇ slógaid, gonae ₇ airligh. A tiaigh looin for indara táib di, a llenbán for in tóib nailiu.

The work which the best of women had to do, was to go to battle and to battlefield, encounter and camping, expeditions and hosting, wounding and slaying. On one side she would carry her bag of provisions, on the other her babe.[82]

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[77] Whitley Stokes, `Preface', *Three Middle Irish homilies*, viiviii; Ford, `Celtic women', 422; Pádraig Ó Riain, `Sainte Brigitte: paradigme de l'abbesse celtique', in G. Duby et al (ed), *La femme au moyen-âge* (Mauberge 1990) 31.

[78] Byrne, *Irish kings*, 155

[79] O'Rahilly, *Táin*, 134. Fergus remarks, `Feib théit echrad láir rena serrgaig i crích n-aneóil gan chend cundraid ná comairle rempo, is amlaid testa in slúag sa indiu'.

[80] Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, `The guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin*', *Peritia* 1 (1982) 178215; John Ryan `The *Cáin Adomnáin*', Binchy & Thurneysen (ed), *Studies in early Irish law* (Dublin 1936) 26976, identified several different strata.

[81] Ryan, ibid. 271.

[82] Kuno Meyer (ed), *Cáin Adamnáin: an Old-Irish treatise of the law of Adamnán* (Oxford 1905) 2 §3 (text); 3 (translation).

The role of women in the battle is seen to conflict with their maternal role. In effect this argues that the mother and the child should remain apart from the public world of politics and warfare. Brigit as a saint, and as the specific protector of her Leinster kinsfolk, transcends the normal female state.

Her warlike role is most clearly developed in the saga of the Battle of Ailenn, fought in 722. It is probably based in part on the annalistic account, and may, according to Ó Riain, originate in the early Middle-Irish period.[83] The battle of Ailenn was one of a series of encounters between the Laigin and the Uí Néill. In this battle the Uí Néill suffered a reverse, and AU records a sizeable list of Uí Néill allies, who fell beside Fergal mac Maéle Dúin, the Uí Néill high-king. Interestingly, Brigit's hagiographical role as Laigin patron is emphasised in *Cath Almaine*. She is seen above the hosts of the Laigin, and she is far more effective than Colum Cille, who comes to the aid of his Uí Néill kinsmen:

> As bert co ffacas Brighid ós cionn Laigin: ad ches dano Colum Cille ós cionn Úa Néill. Ra mheamhuidh iaramh an cath ría Murchadh mhac mBrain, 7 re nAodh Mend mac Colgan rí Laigen Deasgabair. Ro marbadh Feargal ann.[84]

> It was said that Brigit was seen above the Laigin: then Colum Cille was seen above the Uí Néill. Then there was victory in battle for Murchad mac Brain and Áed Mend mac Colgan, the king of Laigin Deasgabair. Fergal was killed there.

In the recension contained in the Yellow Book of Lecan, Brigit's implicit role above the hosts of Leinster, is made even more active and obvious. She goes on the offensive and is described as `ós cath Laigen ac fubdad slóig Lethi Cuind'.[85] Brigit is celebrated as a supernatural warrior *par excellence*.

Brigit's appropriation of male functions made her image as patron of the Laigin formidable. The Irish have combined the figure of the warrior woman with that of the transvestite saint. Yet, this combination, by implication, denied other women the transforming powers of Brigit. The women of early Ireland could not aspire to be warriors, or hold episcopal status. Brigit's uniqueness maintained the *status quo*.

CONCLUSION

The Lives of the Irish saints do not portray a single, or indeed simple, image of women. The category of the transforming woman, whether she is transformed physically, spiritually or in terms of the roles that she adopts, relates to the distinctive `otherness' that many men saw in the female gender. Some of these women are more symbols than persons. This is the status of the holy temptresses in the *scholia* of *Féilire Óengusso*. They sometimes represent the forces of disorder—forces which the saint must combat. Patristic attitudes toward the inherent carnality of women play a part, particularly in tandem with the Irish trope of the promiscuous sovereignty goddess. This, placed in a hagiographical context, reduces such women to sinners. Transformation is not always negative. Brigit, and the masculine-souled

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[83]Pádraig Ó Riain (ed), *Cath Almaine*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 25 (Dublin 1978) p·xxiiixxvii.

[84]Ó Riain, *Cath Almaine*, 67.

[85]ibid. 28.

Mo Ninne are objects of veneration. However, this veneration did not redound to the credit of ordinary women. Ideologically, the metaphor of the transforming woman, whether negative or positive, was firmly controlled by the male church establishment—an establishment that articulated the variegated culture of early medieval Ireland.[86]