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Borsje, J.

**DOI**

[10.1080/00393274.2011.646433](https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2011.646433)

**Publication date**

2012

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Studia Neophilologica

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Borsje, J. (2012). Love magic in medieval Irish penitentials, law and literature: a dynamic perspective. *Studia Neophilologica*, 84(Suppl. 1), 6-23.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2011.646433>

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Publisher: Routledge  
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Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Studia Neophilologica

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/snec20>

### Love Magic in Medieval Irish Penitentials, Law and Literature: A Dynamic Perspective

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Version of record first published: 16 Jan 2012

To cite this article: Jacqueline Borsje (2012): Love Magic in Medieval Irish Penitentials, Law and Literature: A Dynamic Perspective, *Studia Neophilologica*, 84:sup1, 6-23

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2011.646433>

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# Love Magic in Medieval Irish Penitentials, Law and Literature: A Dynamic Perspective

JACQUELINE BORSJE

## 1. Introduction

One of the earliest medieval European witch trials took place in Ireland, when Alice Kyteler was prosecuted for being a witch in Kilkenny in 1324.<sup>1</sup> On the whole, however, only a few witch trials took place in this country (cf. Borsje 2005). It may, therefore, be surprising to see a contribution on early medieval Ireland in a volume dedicated to early modern witch trials. In fact, when Christianity settled in Ireland in the fifth century, an attempt was made to eradicate belief in witches. We read this in *The First Synod of St Patrick*, a document concerning ecclesiastical discipline in the form of a letter, which may date from 457 CE (Bieler 1975: 2; Howlett 1998: 238, 253) or the sixth century (Hughes 1966: 44–50; Charles-Edwards 2000: 245–250). The belief in witchcraft and the public accusation of such is condemned as follows:

Christianus qui crediderit esse lamiam in saeculo, quae interpretatur striga, anathemazandus quicumque super animam famam istam inposuerit, nec ante in ecclesiam recipiendus quam ut idem creminis quod fecit sua iterum uoce reuocat et sic poenitentiam cum omni diligentia agat. (Bieler 1975: 56 §16)

A Christian who believes that there is such a thing in the world as a *lamia*,<sup>2</sup> that is to say, a witch (*striga*), is to be anathematized – anyone who puts a living soul under such a reputation; and he must not be received again into the Church before he has undone by his own word the crime that he has committed, and so does penance with all diligence. (Bieler 1975: 57 §16)

Please note the feminine forms of *lamia*, a dangerous woman with supernatural powers,<sup>3</sup> and *striga*.

This contribution analyses some early medieval Irish descriptions of beliefs related to so-called witchcraft. This material is important because it is not influenced by the manuals for ‘witch’ hunters that were current during the witch crazes. One thread in this contribution is ‘love magic’, which I define as verbal and material instruments by means of which erotic and affectionate feelings are believed to be aroused or destroyed in a supernatural way.

Another thread in this contribution is a plea for a dynamic reading of texts from multiple perspectives. This thread has its context in a debate between the disciplines of theology and the academic study of religion.<sup>4</sup> The former discipline, especially in systematic studies such as dogmatics and ethics, takes a normative stand in religious matters whereas the latter tries to avoid this. Let me illustrate this.

When I was a student, a new insight quickly gained adherence: scholarship from a neutral perspective is impossible. The way we think and observe is always influenced by our context. An extra demand was added to this statement in certain circles of theologians: scholarship should not be neutral; one must take sides, and should take the side of the poor and oppressed. The German theologian Dorothee Sölle formulates this demand as follows:

Das ist eine Grunderfahrung der Frauen, die in das fremde Land der Männer, in die von Männern beherrschten Universitäten einwandern, daß ihnen dort ein Realitätsverständnis angeboten wird, bei dem

alles darauf ankommt, die Realität zu neutralisieren, daß sie mir nicht begegnet, daß sie mich nicht betrifft. Diese Philosophie, mit der wir ständig umgehen und leben, ist dazu da, Realität zu 'objektivieren'. Daraus entstehen die falschen Wissenschaftsideale der Neutralität und Objektivität, die gerade die Tiefe der Realität und das Verlangen der Menschen nach Freiheit und Gerechtigkeit leugnen, als nicht objektiv, als nicht wissenschaftswürdig deklarieren. (quoted in Meyer-Wilmes 2000: 223)

That is a basic experience for women who immigrate into the foreign land of men, into the universities dominated by men: they are offered there an understanding of reality that is totally preoccupied with neutralising reality, so that reality neither touches nor concerns me. We continually deal and live with this philosophy that is directed at the objectification of reality. This philosophy has led to the false scholarly ideals of neutrality and objectivity. Precisely these false ideals deny the depth of reality and the human desire for freedom and justice, because they declare them to be not objective and not scholarly.

The second thread in this article is a plea for 'neutrality' in doing research, despite Sölle's passionate and earnest appeal. The attempt to be a 'neutral' scholar of religion is not only linked with methodological questions – how do we do justice to the texts? – but also with ethical ones: how do we do justice to the people mentioned in the texts? Not only the people whom we see as 'the oppressed' need our careful study but so do those whom we see as 'the oppressors'. For this, we need an 'open', multidisciplinary approach that leaves room for orthodox and heterodox views. We should search for multiple voices sounding from the apparent unity of texts from the past, and even try to listen to 'silent' witnesses. We need to stand in a dynamic relation to the texts, and look and look again. Perhaps the division line between oppressed and oppressor is not always clear, and perhaps people may be categorized in both groups, depending on their context and the perspective of the researcher.

I exemplify this striving for 'neutral' research in this study of love magic, which starts with a case study on an episode from the *Life of Saint Brigit*. Then I connect the episode with similar European practices and with the perspective of scholars on these practices. Thereafter I return to the medieval Irish context and relate the episode from the saint's *Life* to other medieval Irish genres of text. Finally, I consider the case study once more from various different perspectives with the aim of offering a new, 'open' reading of the text.

## 2. A love charm in a holy life: Saint Brigit and the desperate man

Our case study is a narrative from the hagiographic genre, extant in four versions of the *Life of Saint Brigit*. The story takes us to Ireland in the sixth century, the period when Saint Brigit is supposed to have lived her holy life. One of the sources for our case study is the Old Irish *Life of Brigit*, which dates somewhere between the early eighth and the first half of the ninth century (Ó hAodha 1978: xxv–xxvii), and is bilingual, in Latin and Old Irish.<sup>5</sup> We are concerned with the following episode:

Anais arabarach i cCill Lasre. Do-lluid alaile Cennenses genere, fora tarat sua uxor miscuis, co Brigit da chobair. At Brigita benedixit aquam. Ille secum portavit,<sup>1</sup> uxore aspersa amavit suum protinus inpatienter. (Ó hAodha 1978: 16, §45)

She [i.e. St Brigit] remained the next day in Cell Lasre. A certain man of *Kells by origin* (?), whom *his wife* hated, came to Brigit for help. *Brigit blessed some water. He took it with him and, his wife having been sprinkled [therewith], she straightway loved him passionately.* (Ó hAodha 1978: 32)<sup>6</sup>

From the perspective of the genre of hagiography, nothing uncommon is described here. The saint, as an exemplary Christian woman, helps people in need, and her help in this specific case is in line with precepts given in the so-called New Testament, in which husband and wife are said to become one flesh and to be united by God, wherefore no-one should separate these two (Mt 19:5–6; Mk 10:7–9).

There is a similar episode in the *Life of Columba*, written by Adomnán abbot of Iona who lived from circa 628 to 704 (Anderson and Anderson 1991: 164–167, II.41). Saint Columba, or in Irish: Colum Cille, is another famous Irish saint from the sixth century, and he is also visited by a husband in distress. His wife abhors him: from the beginning of their marriage she has refused to share his bed and have sex with him. When chided by the saint, she suggests remaining with her husband as a celibate woman or going across the sea to live in a nunnery. Her solution – neither divorce nor remarriage but separation – was legitimate according to ethical views of Christians at that time (Flint 1991: 292; cf. Borsje 2001: 107–110). Nevertheless, Columba persuades her to give it another try, and suggests that the three persons involved pray and fast. The next day, the woman reports that during the night her feelings have changed from hate to love. Adomnán tells us that she remains closely ‘glued’ in love (*in amore conglutinata*) to her husband until the day of her death.

Just as in the case of Brigit, we see a combination of a ritual with ‘words of power’. I define ‘words of power’ as words by which people believe themselves capable of influencing reality in a material sense, albeit not through methods that can be verified empirically. Such words are believed to have the power to transform reality, either through some intrinsic power that they possess or through the agency of a supernatural entity (Fanger 1999: 98). In these cases, we cannot establish their literal contents, for neither did Adomnán quote the prayer(s) of Columba and the couple, nor did the anonymous author provide us details of Brigit’s blessing.

Despite the absence of a direct quote from the respective saints, it seems likely that words were used. This is evidently true in the case of the prayer(s). Stefan Zimmer (2010: 325, n. 25) has suggested, however, that Brigit’s blessing was wordless, presumably because the blessing was interpreted as a gesture: for instance, making the sign of the cross over the water or holding one’s hand on or above the water. I think, however, that these gestures will normally have been accompanied by words, either spoken out loud or silently in the ‘heart’. The concept of a blessing has a wide semantic range, but a verbal component seems to have been central to it. Hebrew בָּרַךְ means, among other things, ‘to bless; to greet; to praise’; Greek εὐλογέω signifies ‘to speak well off, praise, extol; to bless, i.e. call down God’s gracious power; (with God or Christ as subject) to provide with benefits’; *benedico* is translated ‘to speak well of anyone, to commend, to praise; to bless, praise or adore; to bless, consecrate, hallow’. Someone who seemed to enjoy divine favour would be seen as being ‘blessed’ by the divine.

People may also perform the act of blessing. They might bless other people, but also non-human recipients. Thus, a “blessing can also be a verbal formula for the sanctification of objects, which include the water at baptism, oil for exorcism or for the anointing of the sick . . .” (Davies 1986: 93). When we look, for instance, at the rite for the consecration of the baptismal water in ancient liturgies, we see that verbal formulae for exorcising and blessing the water were accompanied by gestures, such as making the sign of the cross and changing the inflection of one’s voice. The emphasis in the earliest forms (between the fourth and seventh or eighth century) was, however, on the words (Rouwhorst 1995: 131–156; 2001: 963–979). What we are dealing with here is the transformative power of words, especially the blessing. The water is believed to be transformed by the words and ritual. In *The Life of Columba*, for instance, objects blessed by Columba were transformed into miraculous objects: rock salt did not burn in a fire and a dangerous well became curative. The transformative power was believed to be so strong that the blessed object might even be designated ‘simply’ as ‘the blessing’.<sup>7</sup> It is, therefore, likely that an invocation of the divine was included in Brigit’s blessing. In fact, the two Latin versions of our case study (see below) refer to an invocation of Christ during the blessing of the water.

If I am right about the verbal component of the blessing, then both Columba and Brigit make use of what I call ‘words of power’. The fasting and prayer of the saint and the couple have the same effect as the blessed water of Brigit. There is one substantial difference,

though, between the two tales. Columba engages in a theological discussion with the unwilling woman, who consents in the end to the ‘treatment’. The woman in *The Life of Brigit* is not spoken with; she undergoes her ‘treatment’ without being aware of this.

There are three variant versions of the episode in the Old Irish *Life of Brigit*, two in Latin and one in Middle Irish. They are found in *Vita Prima S. Brigitae* (Hogan 1894: 78–79, §72) from about 800 CE or earlier;<sup>8</sup> and two texts from the twelfth century: the Middle Irish *Life of Brigit* (Stokes 1890: 44, ll. 1478–1487, 192) and *Vita Quarta S. Brigidae*, a revision of *Vita Prima* (Sharpe 1991: 156 §47, 216). The Middle Irish *Life* is older than *Vita Quarta* (Sharpe 1991: 210, 212). These variant versions supply more details than the Old Irish tale. The order in which they describe these details may vary, but structurally, they tell a similar story. The Middle Irish *Life* is different, however, on some significant points. In this text, the man does not ask for help in general, but he asks something specific: a spell or a charm (*epaid* sg.; *aipthi* pl.)<sup>9</sup> to make his wife love him. The reference to a charm or spell is remarkable, because the genre of hagiography usually shows a dichotomy between saints and spells, in which spells are associated with pre-Christian or non-Christian people. This is especially the case with religious functionaries who were considered as the saints’ competitors, such as sorcerers, witches and, in the Irish context, druids.<sup>10</sup> In a monotheistic context, spells are, furthermore, commonly regarded as evil and associated with demons.

Spells or charms are ‘words of power’, just as prayers and blessings, and in my research I bring them all together under this umbrella term. I do this in order to be able to study all these forms of verbal power in a ‘neutral’ way, and thus to move away from the stereotype advocated in biblical, patristic and other theological texts that regard verbal forms such as spells as intrinsically evil, false or part of superstition instead of religion. Not only recent insights in religious, medieval and anthropological studies but also primary sources show that this a priori view of religious practices, commonly designated as ‘magic’, is outdated and no longer tenable (see e.g. Bremmer 2002a, 2002b; Hanegraaff 2005a, 2005b).

Even though I apply the term ‘words of power’ as a neutral tool, I use the terms ‘spell’ and ‘charm’ as well. These terms are present in the primary sources, which is one reason to keep them. Furthermore, these terms are genre designations and therefore important to our understanding of the relevant literary genre. Finally, when terms like these are employed in a positive way in a hagiographic context, they serve as a signal that the text shows something that looks odd to our modern eyes. The dichotomy that is the norm in hagiography is then contradicted. Whether Saint Brigit and her spell seemed odd to the medieval Irish is a different question. It was in any case not a common reading: the other versions of the tale do not use the word ‘spell’ in this context.

The man sprinkles his wife with the blessed water in the Old Irish version. In the other three versions, Brigit blesses the water and tells the man to sprinkle their house, food, drink and bed with it during the wife’s absence. The result is the same in all four versions: the woman now loves the man. The Middle Irish version is more extensive on the result and describes the wife as more or less ‘glued’ to her husband:

... dorat in ben sheirc ndímhoir dosom *comá* faghbhadh bheith `na ecmáis cidh il-leth in tigi *fris*, *acht fora* leathlaim eiccín. Laa n-ann dochuaidh-sium *for* turus ᵹ rofhacuibh in mnaí `na codladh. O radhuisigh in ben *atracht* cohanbhfhail ᵹ dochuaidh a ndegaid an fhír cu bhfacuaidh uaithe hé ᵹ gabhal mhara *etarra*. Roghairm sí a fer, ᵹ iss *ed* roraídh, *noragad* isin fairree mina thised som cuice. (Stokes 1890: 44, ll. 1482–1487)

... the wife gave exceeding great love to him, so that she could not keep apart from him, even on one side of the house; but she was always at one of his hands. He went one day on a journey and left the wife asleep. When the woman awoke she rose up lightly and went after the husband, and saw him afar from her, with an arm of the sea between them. She cried out to her husband and said that she would go into the sea unless he came to her. (Stokes 1890: 192)

Brigit’s blessed water seems to have ‘worked’ most strongly in this version, which used the term for ‘spell, charm’.

### 3. Witchcraft, secularization and romanticism

When we look at this tale from one perspective, we see a holy woman doing good in a supernatural way: she heals a relationship that was on the verge of being destroyed. Man and woman live happily ever after. We get, however, glimpses of other aspects, too, such as a saint using a spell and a woman unknowingly exposed to supernatural influence. The phrase ‘a holy woman doing good in a supernatural way’ is in fact a normative one, stemming from the hagiographic perspective of the text itself. Had Brigit lived several centuries later, her interfering in matters of life and death in a supernatural way might have resulted in an accusation of witchcraft. Love magic was attributed to so-called witches in the later Middle Ages, and women accused of this faced persecution, torture, trials and death. The tendency within Christianity to see ‘magic’ as something intrinsically evil and sinful reached a climax during the periods of the European witch hunts in the Middle Ages and later.

Twentieth-century scholarship studied this violent part of the European past; this section deals with two important North-American representatives of this scholarship, who – to a certain extent – sided with ‘the oppressed’ in their publications. The phrase ‘a holy woman doing good in a supernatural way’ is now scrutinized from these later historical perspectives, focusing on gender, ethical evaluations and the supernatural dimension.

The sixth chapter of Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1979) incisively analyses the European witch hunts. She supplies a shocking image of the oppressed women who died at the hand of their torturers and makes a good case for seeing the witch hunts mainly as a struggle for economic, social, political and religious power.

One of the sources that she discusses is the *Malleus maleficarum* (1487), known as ‘The Witches’ Hammer’, but literally ‘The Hammer of Female Evil-doers’. This medieval manual on ‘witchcraft’ was an important tool in the European witch persecutions. The following quotation concerns the accusation of castration, attributed to witches:

And what, then, is to be thought of those witches who in this way sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird’s nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report? (quoted in Daly 1979: 199)

Such far-fetched ideas with such evil intent towards the women to be persecuted make it difficult to take historical sources like this seriously.<sup>11</sup> A focus on the power struggle in the religious language in which the current ideology concerning witchcraft is clothed accords better with a modern, secularized perspective: for us, a power struggle is more recognizable as a human incentive than belief in castration tales as quoted above.

The modern perspective on witches given by Starhawk (Miriam Simos), a modern witch, is not secularized. Her position is one of identification with the persecuted witches, and she outlines the history of witchcraft in her book *The Spiral Dance* (1979) as that of the pre-Christian religion(s) that persisted despite persecutions. She describes magic as “the art of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational” (Starhawk 1979: 13). Spells work through suggestion, she writes, and enable one to change one’s consciousness, which again would influence one’s behaviour and thus reality. Starhawk (1979: 111–112) furthermore believes in a more direct transformation of reality through spells. Starhawk takes supernatural arts seriously and writes the following about love spells:

Magic should not be used to gain power over others – it should be seen as part of the discipline of developing “power-from-within.” Spells that attempt to control another person should be avoided. This particularly applies to love spells focused on a specific person. More than any other form of spells, these work far more strongly on the person who casts them than they do on the intended object. . . . General spells to attract love

create fewer problems, although they tend to be more effective for attracting sex than love per se. Love itself is a discipline, requiring an internal readiness. Unless you yourself are open to love, no spell will bring it into your life. (Starhawk 1979: 115)

Starhawk does not describe spells as intrinsically good or evil but locates the moral responsibility in the person who applies them. This opens up the possibility to have a romantic view of love magic, with love charms as innocent paraphernalia, such as make-up, jewellery and beautiful clothes: just things to attract attention and feel better.

Daly emphasizes the gender of the victims of the witch hunts; spells appear to be neutral tools to change and influence the world in Starhawk's view. From these consciously chosen, non-neutral perspectives on magic and witchcraft of Daly and Starhawk, we need to return to historical sources in order to put these modern views in a different perspective for the sake of a dynamic analysis.

The view of witches and specifically performers of love magic as women is confirmed in various studies, such as, for instance, Valerie Flint's *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (1991, see pp. 290–301). In a fine study of Russian love spells from the seventeenth century onwards, however, Andrei Toporkov (Toporkov 2009) points out that these charms were mostly used by men. Moreover, the texts that he had studied were violent and even sadistic in tone. Textual witnesses of male use and aggressive language in love magic stem also from the Classical and Late-Antique periods of Mediterranean cultures (Gager 1992: 78–115; Dickie 2000).

Although the analysis of witch hunts as economic, religious, political and social power struggles is valid, we need to keep an open mind for the religious beliefs of the people involved, no matter how far-fetched these may seem to us. Furthermore, the stereotype of 'the witch' stemming from the late Middle Ages and the centuries thereafter should not blind us to the role of men in beliefs about love magic. In Saint Brigit's case, for instance, it is also a man who used the charm on a woman, and Saint Brigit played the role of 'witch doctor', to use one of Flint's terms.<sup>12</sup> Finally, we need to remain open minded concerning the tools people use in their attempts to influence each other. What were people doing when they wanted to interfere in matters of love and sex? Let us now have a look at the Irish material from the early Middle Ages. Love spells are mentioned in various medieval Irish genres.

#### 4. Ecclesiastical rules

Magic is forbidden in the Bible; hence, love magic is listed among the sins in the penitentials. The oldest Irish penitential, the *Penitential of Finnian* written at some time before 591 CE (Bieler 1975: 4), refers to 'magic' by the term *maleficium*, which literally means 'an evil deed'. The word itself thus condemns the beliefs and practices that it encompasses. Interestingly, love magic is deemed less serious a transgression than magic in general (*maleficium*), according to this penitential. We read this among the following rules:

18. Si quis clericus uel si qua mulier malifica uel malificus si aliquem maleficio suo deciperat,<sup>13</sup> inmane peccatum est sed per penitentiam redimi potest; sex annis peniteat, tribus cum pane et aqua per mensura et in residuis .iii. annis abstineat a uino et a carnibus. 19. Si autem non deciperat aliquem sed pro inlecebrosos amore dederat alicui, annum integrum peniteat cum pane et aqua per mensura. 20. Si mulier maleficio suo partum alicuius perdidit, dimedium annum cum pane et aqua peniteat per mensura et duobus annis abstineat a uino et a carnibus et sex quadragessimas <ieiunet> cum pane et aqua. (Bieler 1975: 78, 80)

18. If any cleric or woman who practises magic have led astray anyone by their magic, it is a monstrous sin, but it can be expiated by penance. (Such an offender) shall do penance for six years, three years on an allowance of bread and water, and during the remaining three years he shall abstain from wine and meat. 19. If, however, such a person has not led astray anyone but has given [something]<sup>14</sup> for the sake of wanton

love to someone, he shall do penance for an entire year on an allowance of bread and water. 20. If a woman by her magic destroys the child she has conceived of somebody, she shall do penance for half a year with an allowance of bread and water, and abstain for two years from wine and meat and fast for the six forty-day periods with bread and water. (Bieler 1975: 79, 81)

The performers associated with love magic are thus said to be evildoing clerics and evildoing women or sorceresses. Love magic appears to be aphrodisiac. The Latin text does not specify the nature of the object given to obtain love. The term *maleficium* is implied but not used for this love-inducing object. Various things were (rightly or wrongly) believed to be aphrodisiacs: herbs, plants, roots, mushrooms, animal parts, human body hair and secretions, text on parchment, baptismal oil, communion wafers, or mixtures of these, and other materials.<sup>15</sup>

It is significant that the item of love magic is preceded by magic in general (*maleficium*) and followed by abortion by magic (*maleficium*). A similar order of arrangement of the transgressions is given in *The Penitential of St Columbanus* (after 591 CE; Bieler 1975: 3–4). Destruction by magic (*maleficium*) is followed by love magic that does not involve destruction, and the paragraph ends with abortion (Bieler 1975: 100–101, §6). A difference with Finnian is the focus on gender: Columbanus uses only masculine forms for the performers: clerics, laymen, deacons and priests.

Two related Old Irish texts – the Old Irish penitential dated to the end of the eighth century (Gwynn 1913a: 130–131; Bieler 1975: 258) and the *Law of Adomnán* (Meyer 1905; cf. Ní Dhonnchadha 2001)<sup>16</sup> – do not mention love magic. The term for Brigit’s charm – *epaid/ aipthi* – is present in these texts, but these ‘charms, spells’ are mentioned as a possible cause of death (Gwynn 1913a: 168–169, V §7; Meyer 1905: 30–31, §46). In the Irish laws discussed below, we encounter this term again in the sense of a tool for love and as a cause of death.

Lastly, we are totally in the dark about the way the supernatural aim was thought to be accomplished. Finnian seems to refer to an object given ‘for very enticing love’ (*pro inlecebrosio amore*), whereas Columbanus refers to someone who becomes a sorcerer ‘for love’ (*pro amore*). The Old Irish texts seem to imply the giving of an object, and secrecy appears to be part of the context. Both tangible, visible objects and invisible words may have been part of the performance with which one tried to influence reality.

## 5. Love magic in medieval Irish legal texts

The legal tradition of medieval Ireland is immensely impressive. It is not only the largest corpus of legal texts extant in Europe before the twelfth century, but it represents also a highly sophisticated level of juridical reasoning (Kelly 2005). The Old Irish law texts were written in prose, (alliterative) verse and legal maxims; some are extant in their complete form, but many survive only as fragments. Numerous glosses and commentaries were added mainly in the Middle Irish period and later in order to clarify the Old Irish law texts, a good many of which can be described as obscure and difficult to understand. The essential features of the Irish legal system go back to the common Celtic period (*circa* 1000 BCE), but we owe the extant texts to monastic scriptoria. The influence of the Church on the content is sometimes strong (see e.g. Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen 1984). The texts not only reflect practices of daily life but also have connections with medieval etymologies, Irish literature and biblical traditions (Kelly 2005).<sup>17</sup> Many Irish legal texts were translated in the *Ancient Laws of Ireland* (by Hancock *et al.* 1865–1901) from the nineteenth century. These translations are sometimes problematic, as we will see.

Love magic is mentioned in two law tracts.<sup>18</sup> The first to be discussed here is the Old Irish tract, called *Cethairslícht Athgabálae*, ‘The Four Divisions of Distraint’. This tract is part of *Senchus Már*, ‘The Great [Legal] Tradition’, the best-preserved collection of medieval

Irish law, which was probably organized as a unit *circa* 800 CE (Kelly 1988: 279 nr 66, 2005: 264; Breatnach 2005: 286–287). Four items in a list of offences are relevant to us.<sup>19</sup> There are three manuscript versions of this list.<sup>20</sup> I discuss these three versions elsewhere (Borsje 2010 [2011]); in the context of this contribution, an analysis of Version B will suffice. Version B is the most extensive version, which was also translated in *Ancient Laws of Ireland* (henceforth the *Ancient Laws*).

The first item in the list of offences that deals with ‘supernatural arts’ is *fubae n-imda*. The *Ancient Laws* translate this item as ‘bed witchcraft’, but it literally means ‘the [supernatural] attack of a bed’. The meaning of this item in the law text is then explained in the glosses. Please note that text in capitals represents law text and normal print commentary. This reflects the layout of the manuscripts, in which law texts were sometimes written in a large minuscule and glossed in smaller script (Kelly 1988: 226, and Plates 1–4):

I. *FUBA NIMDA*

- [1] .i. pisoca isin lepaid
- [2] .i. a ndlegar eneclann
- [3] .i. a ben do breith uad
- [4] [*followed by: .i. froma uptha dus which is crossed out*]
- [5] .i. *conabi tualaing lanamnus*
- [6] .i. *cnamcosait*. (CIH 387, 388)

I. THE [SUPERNATURAL] ATTACK OF A BED

- [1] i.e. sorcery in the bed,<sup>21</sup>
- [2] i.e. for which honour-price is due,<sup>22</sup>
- [3] i.e. to take away his wife from him,
- [4] (the testing of a charm/spell to find out)
- [5] i.e. so that he is not able to have sexual intercourse,
- [6] i.e. the bone [of] contention (?).

What the glosses of Item I describe is in fact ‘negative love magic’, something we find in other European cultures as well (see Golopentia 2004: 153; cf. Rider 2006: *passim*). Someone may try to estrange marriage partners from each other, and this is purportedly done by ‘supernatural arts’. The third party may be a person who desires one partner of the couple or a rejected lover who tries to destroy the relationship. The third party may also be a professional in supernatural matters, hired by the person who expects to gain from the disruption of the relationship. Instead of a third party, the destructive agent may be one of the marriage partners. Women were allowed to have a divorce when their husband was impotent (see Kelly 1988: 74). One of the marriage partners might use ‘supernatural arts’ for this purpose.

The third gloss appears to refer to a third party who wants to estrange the woman from the husband (which may or may not implicate the wife’s complicity). Gloss nr 4 seems to be misplaced; it has been crossed out and we encounter it again in the context of the testing of a charm (see below, the glosses on Item IV). The fifth gloss seems to imply that the sorcery was believed to incapacitate the husband, and this may refer to ‘supernaturally’ induced impotence. I tentatively translate *cnamcosait* (mentioned in gloss nr 6) as ‘bone [of] contention’ (see Borsje 2010 [2011]). This bone might be an object placed in the bed, which may thus be literally the sorcery that is in the bed (gloss 1) and represent the material form of the attack on the bed (Law Item I). This object is then believed to create the sexual problems in the bed, i.e. the impotence that the man suffers from (gloss 5), on the grounds of which the woman may demand a divorce (gloss 3).

Item II, translated as ‘neglecting cohabitation’ in the *Ancient Laws*, literally means ‘the destruction of birth’. It could very well be that this refers to abortion,<sup>23</sup> but the glosses

interpret this item differently. This transgression is connected with the previous item and explained in a sexual way:

## II. *COLLUD MBRETHI*

- [1] i.e. *iss ed asas de-side*
- [2] i.e. *gabail cumaing † clainde*
- [3] i.e. *na .s.<sup>24</sup> uriata coimperta*
- [4] i.e. *a lemadh*
- [5] i.e. *nemdul cuice 'na imda. (CIH 387, 388)*

## II. THE DESTRUCTION OF BIRTH

- [1] i.e. this results from the just-mentioned thing;
- [2] i.e. the taking of power or of [the ability to have] offspring (?);
- [3] i.e. the fines for the barring of procreation;
- [4] i.e. to render him impotent;
- [5] i.e. not going to her in her bed.

It is important to translate this item and its glosses literally. If we follow the published translation, we are inclined to identify the husband as the guilty party: he would be guilty of ‘neglecting cohabitation’ (*collud mbrethi*) and ‘listlessness’ (*a lemad*; Hancock *et al.* 1865–1901: Vol. I, 181). The text, however, seems to say something else. Law Item II on ‘the destruction of birth’ is explained as making it impossible for the couple to have offspring (glosses 2 and 3). The woman cannot conceive because the man has been rendered impotent (gloss 4). Because of this ailment, he does not go to her to have sex with her (gloss 5). Last but not least, it is a third party who does the damage (either in collaboration with the wife or independently), because the glossators connect this item with the previous one (gloss 1). The ‘just-mentioned thing’ that causes the harm may refer to Law Item I, ‘the [supernatural] attack of the bed’, and/or to its last gloss: ‘the *cosait*-bone’.

The *Ancient Laws* translate Item III as ‘carrying love charms’.<sup>25</sup> Literally, however, we should translate ‘carrying charms (or spells)’. ‘Casting charms (or spells)’ is another possible translation, because ‘casting, throwing, plying, practicing’ are further meanings of *immarchor*. We do not actually know whether these are in fact love charms, although the context seems to argue for it. The preceding items concern procreation, sexuality and sexual violence. Item III is glossed as follows:

## III. *IMARCHOR AUPHTA*

- [1] i.e. *cipe dogne*
- [2] i.e. *letfiach ann o tiucfa fogal, † anfot sin uili. (CIH 387, 388)*

## III. CARRYING/CASTING CHARMS/SPELLS<sup>26</sup>

- [1] i.e. whoever may do so,
- [2] i.e. [he/she shall pay] half fine for it where injury results: and all this is without evil intent. (translation based on Hancock *et al.* 1865–1901: Vol. I, 181)

The glossators indicate that the carrying or casting of spells is a transgression for everybody (gloss 1). They mention, however, only a penalty when the presence or the use of the charms turns out to be harmful and provided that the harm was done inadvertently or by negligence (*anfót*; gloss 2). These charms or spells are thus different from the ones described in Items I–II, which were believed to be used as an attack and be harmful to procreation. Items I and II represent destructive supernatural arts; Item III appears to refer to neutral or positive ‘supernatural arts’, which are nevertheless forbidden. This second gloss reminds us of the Hiberno-Latin penitentials that were milder in tone and penalty on supernatural arts performed ‘for love’.

Item IV, rendered in the *Ancient Laws* as ‘setting a charmed morsel for a dog’, literally mentions ‘a bad or dangerous morsel’, which is given to a dog (see also Kelly 1988: 146, 1997: 175). The glosses explain why and discuss the consequences:

IV. MIMIR DO COR DO COIN.

[1] .i. da promad

[2] .i. im smacht in coin † ineclainn

[3] .i. froma uptha dus inbud amainsi; lethdiri ind, uair ni fo fath marbtha

[4] .i. fromad felmais

[5] .i. fromad na pisoc, ⁊ anfort indethbiri he. (CIH 387, 388)

IV. PUTTING/CASTING A BAD/DANGEROUS MORSEL FOR/TO A DOG

[1] i.e. to test it;

[2] i.e. concerning the *smacht*-fine<sup>27</sup> [for] the dog or the honour-price;

[3] i.e. to test a charm/spell (*epaid*) to find out if it has supernatural craft (*amainse*); half *dire*-fine<sup>28</sup> for it, because it was not intentional that he was killed;

[4] i.e. to test an enchantment (*felmas*);

[5] i.e. to test the sorcery (*pisóca*), and it is the inadvertence of an unnecessary act.

The glossators appear to connect Items III and IV by using the term *epaid*, ‘charm, spell’, in the commentary on the bad morsel, which is part of Item III. Version B explicitly connects III and IV, by referring to *epaid* in Item III as ‘it’ in gloss 1 on Item IV. The edible portion is in the law item qualified as something bad or dangerous; the glosses interpret this as something supernatural, referred to as *amainse*, ‘supernatural cunning or craft’, in gloss 1/3; *epaid*, ‘charm, spell’, in gloss 1/3; *felmas*, ‘enchantment, sorcery; a spell or a charm’, in gloss 4; and *pisóca*, ‘sorcery’, in gloss 5. By letting a dog eat the morsel, purportedly transformed by supernatural arts, someone tries to find out whether the transformation is effective and possesses supernatural craft (gloss 1/3). Apparently, people who perform such tests do not use their own dog but someone else’s. Hence, a fine system is given to compensate for the damage in gloss 2. Another fine based on the absence of the intention to kill is mentioned in gloss 3: the reason for the test was not to see whether the morsel was lethal but whether it worked in a different way, presumably whether the dog would be aroused to sexual acts. The last gloss concludes with the statement that people are inadvertent when they perform such an unnecessary act (gloss 5).

Law item III thus states clearly that carrying or casting *aipthi* is an offence. Strictly speaking, we do not know at all whether love charms are meant, but the context seems to imply this. Whether these *aipthi* are objects or words, or whether words were written or spoken on such an object to transform it into a supernatural tool is also unclear. The commentary is not quite explicit on the illegal character of this act. It names a fine that is applicable only when this act causes harm. Moreover, the intention of the performer is presumed to be innocent in Items III and IV. In other words, the commentary is more neutral on the use of charms. If Items III and IV are indeed connected, as the glossators imply, we can be sure that an object is meant, because it is something edible in Item IV. We do not know whether this object was made from parchment, herbs, mushrooms or something else or whether words were spoken to make the edible portion more powerful. The commentary describes the practice of experimenting with the dog as the guinea pig. It is too bad when the dog dies, because that was not the intention.<sup>29</sup>

We do not know the gender of the performer(s) of Law Items I and II: it is clear, however, that we are dealing with a third party who tries to damage a couple (with or without the help of the wife). The man is the direct victim, with sorcery as the instrument to render him impotent. The result of this is that his wife is estranged from him (Item I) and that they will not have offspring (Item II). We know neither the gender of the person who casts or

carries spells or charms (Item III), nor the gender of the person who tries a charm out on a dog (Item IV).

The second law tract to be discussed here is, however, clear on the nature of charms and the gender issue. Our text is part of the collection known as the Heptads, or in Irish *na Sechtae*, ‘the Sevens’. This collection is, as the previous text, included in *Senchus Már*, ‘The Great [Legal] Tradition’, and consists of legal material arranged in sixty-five groups of seven. It was assembled in the Old Irish period (Kelly 1988: 266). Heptad 52 deals with seven kinds of woman who were entitled to a divorce because of transgressions by their husbands.<sup>30</sup> These women could leave their marriage whenever they wished<sup>31</sup> and they might take their bride price with them.<sup>32</sup> The law text and its commentary, with a similar layout as the law text discussed above, run as follows:

BEAN DIA TABAIR A CEILE UPTA OCA GUIDE CO MBEIR FOR DRUIS

.i. in *inbaid* bis aca cuingi is and *dobeir* na upta do urail a seirci fuirre .i. coibchi ᵹ eirc fo aicne a cineoil uptha; re tiachtain a ndlígi lanamnais tucadh di na uptha ᵹ a ndlígi lanamnais tancatar ria, ᵹ smacht lanamanda uaidhe and, ᵹ coibchi ᵹ eineclann ᵹ coirpdíri di, ᵹ imscar frís, † eirc fo aicned an cineoil uptha ᵹ a rogha di an imscarad dodena †<sup>33</sup> a ndlígi lanamnais bias. (CIH 48.11–20)

A WOMAN TO WHOM HER COMPANION GIVES/UTTERS A CHARM/SPELL WHEN SOLICITING HER, SO THAT HE BRINGS [HER] TO LUST

i.e. when he is entreating her, it is then that he gives/utters the charms/spells to press his love upon her; i.e. bride price and *éric*-fine, according to the nature of the type of charm/spell; it was before entering the law of marriage that the charms/spells were given/uttered to her and it was in the law of marriage that they came to/against her (?) (the *Ancient Laws* translate: [the effect] became [apparent] to her); and the *smacht*-fine applicable to the marriage contract from him for it, and bride price and honour-price and body-fine to her; and separation from him; or *éric*-fine, according to the nature of the type of charm/spell and her choice to her whether it is mutual separation that she will do or it is in the law of marriage that she will be.

The law and its commentary are clear that by charm (*epaid*) a supernatural instrument is meant which was used for sexual arousal. We are not certain what kind of charm or spell is meant. Women were believed to become the victim of this supernatural art, men to be the ones who performed it in order to obtain sex. The commentary explains that men used these charms or spells in order to delude women into marrying them. If such a woman discovered the deception afterwards, she might leave the marriage and take her dowry and fines with her.<sup>34</sup>

These two law texts thus forbid the use and possession of charms (*aipthi*). The second, Heptad 52, refers to men as the performers and women as the ones who become ‘enchanted’. The first law tract, as discussed above, is not clear on the gender of the performers. The commentaries seem more lenient on the use of these charms or spells than do the law texts. The commentaries seem to forbid abuse in order to ensure that charms or spells (*aipthi*) should be safe: no injury should come from them, either to people or to dogs. Nor should they be used to lure someone into marriage. Perhaps they keep open the possibility of safe aphrodisiacs, used by consenting partners within marriage.

## 6. Love magic in narratives

A love charm was used on a woman in the *Life of St Brigit*. A famous hero and leader of warrior bands, called Finn Mac Cumail, is the intended target in another narrative example, which stems from the traditions on place names (*dindsenchas*). These texts are narrative traditions that explain why a place has received a certain name. The explanation is based upon medieval etymology, and often more than one explanation is given. The tradition relevant to us is extant in prose and poetry. One of the explanations of the place name Ráth Cnámrossa mentions love charms or spells (*aipthi*). The prose version goes as follows:<sup>35</sup>

Aliter Cnamros. Mær ben Bersa a Berramain dorad seirc do Find mac Cumail, co ro delb nái cna Segsa co n-epthib seirce indib, ⁊ focart hIbuirni mac Deduis dia n-adnacol do Find, ⁊ asbert fris a teimn ⁊ a tomoilt. “Ni tó”, ol Find, “ar nidat cna rois, *acht* is cna amrois, ⁊ ni fes cid dia filet *acht* dolba[d] fri hol serci anno”, ⁊ ros-adnacht Find traig i talmain, et unde Cnamros *dicitur*. (Stokes 1894: 333)

Otherwise *Cnámros*: Maer wife of Bersa of Berramain fell in love with Find son of Cumall, and she formed nine nuts of Segais with love-charms, and commanded Ibuirne son of Dedos to deliver them to Find, and told Find to cut and eat them. “Nay”, says Find, “for they are not nuts of knowledge, but nuts of ignorance (*cna-amrois*), and it is not known for what they are, unless an enchantment (*dolbud*) for drinking love”. So Find buried them a foot deep in the earth. Whence *Cnámros* is said. (Stokes 1894: 334)

The well of Segais is described in the literature as the source of the Boyne and a supernatural source of knowledge (Hull 1962–1964). Hazel trees surround the well, and salmon eat the nuts that fall into the well (Stokes 1894: 456–457; Gwynn 1913b: 286–291). As a boy, Finn tasted a salmon of knowledge and thence was capable of divination. This could be why he realized that he should not eat the nuts. Finn’s refusal to eat them contains an etymology of the place name Ráth Cnámrossa. This text confirms the view of Heptad 52: love charms can delude a person’s clear thinking. Finn therefore calls them nuts of ignorance and contrasts them with the true nature of the nuts that should lead to knowledge of hidden things. A woman has ‘transformed’ the nuts with spells (*co n-epthib*) of love (*serc*), because she wanted to use these love charms or spells (*aipthi*) to influence a man. They seem, therefore, to be the kind of love charm that the law forbids in Heptad 52. The Heptad refers to men who use them; here, we have an instance of their use by a woman.

At this point, it is interesting to note that there were various sorts of love charms or spells. The commentary to Heptad 52 makes the fine dependent on the type of love charm used. Finn refers to a love potion, but the woman clearly commanded that he (cut and) eat the nuts. This may be another trace of different traditions on various types of love charms. From a Christian point of view, the acts of the woman are illicit because she is married. The tale deals, however, with the pre-Christian era of Ireland’s history, and, according to the tales, the lovers of Finn are many. It is not illicit sex that he fears, but the unwanted influence on his brain.

## 7. Saint Brigit and ‘witchcraft’ – concluding remarks

Returning to our case study, we consider the narrative about St Brigit again from various perspectives while adducing the above-mentioned texts. From a biblical perspective, there is nothing wrong with Brigit’s behaviour. Brigit acted according to New Testament principles (Mt 19:5–6; Mk 10:7–9). Those principles were voiced by St Columba, for he quoted the Bible as direct speech in order to convince the other unwilling woman that she had become of one flesh with her husband and should not leave him. Columba’s ‘treatment’ consisted of fasting and prayer, Brigit’s of a ritual with blessed water. Both saints took care that husband and wife stayed together. In the context of the marriage ethics of medieval Christianity, Brigit acted legitimately.

Her behaviour is problematic, however, from a medieval Irish legal perspective. The Old Irish laws and penitentials are clear: (love) charms (*aipthi*, the plural of *epaid*) are forbidden. Brigit and the man transgressed these laws and rules. There are two further points of concern: firstly, the effect of the charm with the woman becoming ‘glued’ to her husband and, secondly, the fact that she underwent the ritual unwittingly. We have seen that the Middle Irish legal commentaries seem to allow love magic as a safe aphrodisiac within marriage, but what if the recipient is unaware of having undergone this influence? Again, the law as expressed in the Heptads states that such actions when perpetrated before marriage are a ground for divorce. In order to understand what is going on in this tale, I am going to look for clues outside Irish culture.

The effect of the charm – becoming ‘glued’ to her husband – is comparable to love magic as described in Classical and Late Antique texts. For example, a man called Posidonius uses a spell to bring it about that the woman “Heronous shall have no life of her own apart from Posidonius and that she shall be utterly subordinate to him sexually for the rest of her or his days” (Dickie 2000: 570). There are quite a few extant texts of this nature called ‘binding spells’ that were believed to ‘bind’ one person to another (Gager 1992: 78–115).

Not informing the recipient may have been a vital part of the ritual. Constantine of Africa († 1087), who translated Arabic and Greek medical texts into Latin, produced a tract about impotence caused by *maleficia*, ‘spells (lit.: evil deeds)’, in his *Pantechne* (‘The total art’), or in Latin: *Liber Pantegni* (Hoffmann 1933: 129–144, 179–192, 211–220; Sigerist 1943: 541–546; Rider 2006: 215–228). Constantine was a Muslim who studied medicine in North Africa; later on he became a Christian and lived as a monk in Monte Cassino (Rider 2006: 46). In his tract on impotence, Constantine mentions several objects that were believed to cause sexual harm. They were put in, above or under beds, above or under thresholds or were elsewhere hidden in houses or at the side of the road.<sup>36</sup> For instance, the testicles and blood of a cock were put under a bed and needles used for the last care of the dead were stuck in a mattress or pillow. Furthermore, mention is made of letters written in bat’s blood, and of nuts, acorns and beans – all these were believed to cause impotence. Constantine also describes remedies. The couple should sleep in a different bed in another house, to see whether the cause is material or spiritual. A material cause would be the just-mentioned objects that need to be removed in order for the afflicted person to heal. A reed pen filled with quicksilver and sealed off with wax and lead would protect the place where it is put against spells, and Constantine adds that the bride and groom should know nothing about it (cf. Rider 2006: 68–69, and see Kieckhefer 1991: 43).

This information on different forms of love magic makes it possible to see Brigit’s charm as a counterspell: blessed water is used to purify the house of negative influences. The fact that the woman is not told anything could now be seen as an important part of the healing ritual. Moreover, the objects that are to be sprinkled with the blessed water – house, food, drink and bed – could perhaps refer to acts believed to have been made impossible by binding spells. These spells express the wish that the person thus bound will not be able to eat, drink, sleep etc., until he or she succumbs to the desire of the person who wants to benefit from the spell (Gager 1992: 78–115; Toporkov 2009). The healing ritual in the Old Irish version could be an exorcism of the woman herself, and the ritual in the other three versions might be a loosening spell: those places associated with desire and love need to be purified from an interfering substance or presence in order to heal the woman and restore the love. The tale does not say anything of the reason for the marriage problem. Supernatural disruption of the relationship could have been a possible diagnosis in those days, and the similar structural elements that we know from binding spells leave open the possibility of the presence of such beliefs.

Following Sölle’s political appeal to ‘take sides’ turns out to be difficult. Does Brigit force the woman under the yoke of marriage or does she liberate her from an aggressive binding spell? The question concerning oppression is not static and deserves a dynamic study where much depends on the perspective that one takes. Part of this dynamic study is the analysis of theological, political, economic and other ideologies that may be present.

The position of the researcher is not static either. Reading new textual material and encountering different points of view are factors that change this position again and again. There is no a priori validation of ‘love magic’; we need information on the context of its use and its results to arrive at an ethical conclusion.

The idea that love magic was mainly performed by women is another idea that should be contextually positioned. We have seen that love magic is not specifically related to a particular gender in early medieval Ireland. Matthew Dickie (2000: 577) has shown the importance of a meticulous study of this ‘supernatural art’, when he established that this

art was equally practised by men as by women in Classical and Late Antique cultures, and – contrary to views from previous studies – that the reference to gender was not determined by literary genre.

Although both men and women were active in using love magic, a disproportionate number of the people tried for love magic were women (Kieckhefer 1991: 30). Somewhere in the Middle Ages, women were increasingly associated with magic (see also Rider 2006: 208–209). Hincmar, archbishop of Rheims (between 845 and 882 CE), accused women of meddling in love magic in the ninth century.<sup>37</sup> Especially women practice these ‘diabolical spells’, writes Constantine of Africa in the eleventh century. Catherine Rider (2006: *passim*) has demonstrated that many others copied this point of view in penitentials, ecclesiastical law texts and pastoral literature. A climax is the *Malleus maleficarum* in the fifteenth century when the full-blown stereotype of the ‘witch’ becomes the ideological basis for the witch persecutions. This volume describes and analyzes various ethnic European and colonial contexts in which witch trials and hunts took place, with Ireland as an exception to the rule. The ideas found in the manuals for witch hunters may have a long history, which needs to be uncovered. This contribution hopes to have unveiled some of the older ones.

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## NOTES

- 1 This study is part of my VIDJ-research project ‘The Power of Words in Medieval Ireland’, subsidized by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (N.W.O.). This contribution is an updated conflation of two other articles (Borsje 2010 [2011] and forthcoming). Translations are mine, unless stated otherwise. I am indebted to my colleague Peter Forshaw for the correction of the English language of this contribution. I would also like to thank Gordon Ó Riain for the suggested improvements.
- 2 Bieler (1975: 57) translates ‘vampire’, but argues elsewhere (Bieler 1953: 98, n. 11) for the meaning ‘witch’ in this context.
- 3 For more on *lamia* in a medieval Irish context, see Borsje 1999, 2007 and Egeler 2008–2009.
- 4 ‘Religious studies’ is variously named the academic study of religion, *Religionswissenschaft*, *Godsdienstwetenschap*, *l’histoire des religions*, the history of religions and comparative religion.
- 5 We distinguish roughly the following periods for the Irish language: 600–900 (Old Irish), 900–1200 (Middle Irish) and 1200–1650 (Early Modern Irish). According to Richard Sharpe (1991: 20), the *Life* was originally written in Latin and incompletely translated into Irish.
- 6 The editor Donncha Ó hAodha marked the use of Latin in the *Life* in his English translation by italics.
- 7 These and other transformation miracles by blessing are found in Book 2 of his *Life*, dedicated to his ‘miracles of power’, i.e. miracles effected through him and ultimately ascribed to the divine.
- 8 Whether the text dates to the seventh or the eighth century is a matter of dispute; see Sharpe 1991: 15. The text is also known as Colgan’s *Vita III*. The relationship between the Old Irish *Life* and *Vita Prima* is debated; see Ó hAodha 1978: xvii–xxv.
- 9 The Irish term *epaid*, ‘charm, spell’, is variously spelled as *epaid*, *aupaid*, *aupaith*; the first syllable may also be *ai-*, *i-* and, most frequently, *u-*; see the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Quin 1983; henceforth *DIL*): s.v. *epaid*, *aupaid* and Vendryes 1981: s.v. *aupaith*.
- 10 For a study of the druids in Brigit’s *Vita Prima*, see McKenna 2002.
- 11 Daly (1979: 199) summarises the response of the authors [*sic*] to this question as “it is all done by the devil’s work and illusion”. This summary needs to be refined: “Kramer takes great care, however, to point out that whatever witches seem to do, does not actually take place. Witches have no real power and are not able to displace penises and render men impotent. Instead, impotence is effected by the devil who deludes the imagination of men with lustful thoughts; the witch only acts as the devil’s helpmate by seducing men” (Brauner 1994: 38). Brauner (1994: 32, n. 11) points out that despite the general attribution of the work to Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, only the former is the author. Richard Kieckhefer (1991: 44, cf. 53 n. 86) views this “magical castration” as a “relatively uncommon fantasy”.
- 12 On the matter of gender, see also Dickie 2000.
- 13 This line reads literally: ‘If any cleric (*clericus*) or if any evildoing woman (*mulier malifica*; i.e. sorceress) or evildoing man (*malificus*; i.e. sorcerer) has led someone astray by their evil deed (*maleficium*; i.e. sorcery)’. Bieler’s translation is, however, correct. His edition is based upon Vienna, National Library, lat. 2233 (Theol.

lat. 725), c. 800, which reads: *clericus uel si qua mulier malificacus. Malificacus* is a non-existent word. The scribe wrote *l* (*uel*, ‘or’) in the margin of the manuscript. As Anthony Harvey kindly pointed out to me, the scribe intended to write a kind of shorthand for the feminine and masculine forms. We would nowadays write this as *malefi-ca*, *-cus*. There is another example of this shorthand in the same manuscript, where the scribe wrote *peccatrix*, with *tor* above *trix* and *l* in the margin, hereby meaning *peccatrix vel peccator*, ‘female or male sinner’ (Bieler 1975: 86, l. 10). I thank Ingrid Sperber, Anthony Harvey and Jane Power for discussing this passage with me. The readings of the other manuscripts are: *clericus maleficus uel si qua mulier malefica* (St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek 150, s. ix); *clericus maleficus uel si qua mulier malefica* (Paris, BN, lat. 12021 [Sangermanensis 121], s. x); *clericus uel si qua mulier malefica* (Paris, BN, lat. 3182 [Codex Bigotianus], s. x).

14 Bieler translates ‘a potion’.

15 See e.g. Long 1973. Examples from Irish narratives are blessed water, nuts transformed with *aipthi* (plural of *epaid*), ‘charms’, and herbs from the *side*, ‘hollow hills’ or Otherworld (the first two examples are here discussed; for the last reference, which I owe to Józsi Nagy, see Stokes 1900: 28, ll. 984–995; Dooley and Roe 1999: 31–32). Texts that are said to induce love are e.g. the insular Celtic Leiden *lorica* (Herren 1987: 90–93) and the Hiberno-Latin text *O lux nostra* which has an Irish prescription on its use (Best 1952: 28–29). A spell for impotence is part of Richard Best’s collection of Irish charms (32).

16 The text was written in the ninth century but may contain documents from the end of the seventh or the beginning of the eighth century (Kenney 1929: 246). For more on these two texts and supernatural arts, see Borsje (2010 [2011]).

17 The corpus of legal texts (*Corpus Iuris Hibernici*) was edited by Binchy 1978 (henceforth *CIH*). For more about these law texts, see Kelly 1988, Breatnach 2005, and Stacey 2007.

18 My tentative translation of these law texts and their glosses is as literal as possible. I am deeply indebted to Fergus Kelly, who discussed my translations and interpretations of these difficult fragments with me. Any errors in them are entirely my own responsibility.

19 The nineteenth-century translation of the whole list goes as follows: “Distress of three days’ [stay] for stripping the dead, for disturbing the meeting-hill, for quarrelling in a fort, for slandering, for satirizing, for a [visible] blemish, for a concealed blemish, for mutilating, for stripping the slain, for stripping the slain in battle, for circulating false reports, for scaring the timid, for carrying a boy on the back into a house, for the longed-for morsel, for the oath of a woman in childbirth, for getting a woman with child notwithstanding being forbidden when death ensues, violating a mad-woman, incapacitating a woman for her work, bed witchcraft, neglecting cohabitation, carrying love charms, setting a charmed morsel for a dog, carrying away the hero’s morsel from the person to whom it belongs” (Hancock *et al.* 1865–1901: Vol. I, 175, 177).

20 Version A of the list (Dublin, Trinity College, MS H.3.18; *CIH* 890.38–891.4) is an Old Irish fragment of the original law text; the glosses in this version are also Old Irish. Version B (London, British Library, Harley 432; *CIH* 387.30–33 law text, *CIH* 387.34–388.17 glosses) is part of a continuous copy of the law tract. Version C (Dublin, Trinity College, MS H.3.17; *CIH* 1692.15–37) stems from longer extracts with later glosses and commentaries (Breatnach 2005: 272, 287).

21 *Piseóc* or *pisóc* means ‘charm, spell’, and in the plural form (as here) it may signify ‘sorcery, witchcraft’.

22 ‘Honour-price’ refers to the payment of compensation for an insult, loss or injury.

23 I am indebted to Kim McCone for this suggestion; for more about this, see Borsje (2010 [2011]).

24 *Sét* is a unit of value; the plural form *seoit* is here abbreviated. The transgression *airiudad coimperta*, ‘the barring of procreation’ (mentioned here), also occurs in §§38–40 of the Old Irish law tract *Bretha Crólige*, ‘The judgements of blood-lying’, which is part of *Senchus Már* and is dated to the first half of the eighth century (Binchy 1938: 1). Binchy (1938: 66–67) explains that this transgression signifies “the incapacitation of either husband or wife for cohabitation by the act of a third party”. In this law tract, the incapacitation is caused by (bloody) injuries, and the fines are to be paid by the third party. The law tract associates supernatural arts with death and women in §44: the *baislec aupta*, ‘the basilisk of a charm/spell (*epaid*)’, is not entitled to nursing or to fines. The glosses explain the term etymologically as *.i. ben basaiges nech i lluc*, ‘a woman who does to death somebody in a spot’ and as *in piseogac*, ‘the user of charms’ (Binchy 1938: 34–35). This item was taken over without the etymology and its death association in the Old Irish *Triads of Ireland* as *ben auptach* (Meyer 1906: 24), ‘a spell-[working] woman’.

25 Item III is only extant in Version B.

26 The translation of the law item is mine.

27 The term *smacht* refers in the medieval Irish laws to a certain penalty or a fine for breaking the law, such as trespassing and not paying one’s debt (see *DIL* s.v. *smacht* II a).

28 *Dire* means ‘payment (especially of honour-price), penalty, fine’ (Kelly 1988: 309 s.v.).

29 Richard Kieckhefer (1991: 37) discusses historical cases in which love charms appear to be dangerous. One of them, which actually was a murder attempt, took place in fourteenth-century France. An uncle gave his nephew powder, which he had to sprinkle on his father’s food. His parents would be reconciled because of this but it had to be done secretly; otherwise it would not work. The father, the Count of Foix, discovered the powder and fed it to one of his dogs, “which promptly expired in painful convulsions” (Tuchman 1979: 344). The unfortunate boy did not live to see the end of the day either.

- 30 See Kelly (1988: 73–75) on divorce, and Ní Chonail (2007: 9) on impotence and divorce.
- 31 See Ní Chonail (2007: 9–10, 12) for further information on the time frame within which a woman might leave marriage.
- 32 There are two versions of the text relevant to our subject: Version A (*CIH* 47.21–48.26) is part of a continuous copy of the whole tract and Version B (*CIH* 1848.11–36) is a long extract from the original Old Irish text with later glosses and commentary (Breatnach 2005: 97, 291). Version A is quoted here, accompanied by my literal translation. For the published translation, see Hancock *et al.* 1865–1901: Vol. V, 293, 295, 297.
- 33 The editor adds here: “supply *in*?”.
- 34 Cf. Flint (1992: 292) on Christian marriage: “The original Christian marriage contract depended for its validity upon the free will of both contracting parties”.
- 35 The metrical version is given in Gwynn (1913b: 130–131) and quoted in Borsje forthcoming.
- 36 The practice of placing of objects in, under or above the bed or in the bedroom with a supernatural aim is also mentioned in older European sources. For instance, Pliny describes aphrodisiacs and antaphrodisiacs in his *Natural History* Book XXX, chapter XLIX: among them, he mentions cock’s blood and testicles under a bed as inhibiting desire, and wool with bat’s blood under the head (presumably the pillow) of women as aphrodisiac (Jones 1963: 368–371) and Marcellus ‘Empiricus’ of Bordeaux wrote between 395 and 410: *Si quem voles per noctem cum femina coire non posse, pistillum coronatum sub lecto illius pone*, ‘If you wish someone to be unable to have intercourse with a woman at night, put a garlanded pestle under his bed’ (Rider 2006: 23–24). Cf. also the above-mentioned Irish ‘attack of a bed’ and the ‘bone [of] contention’.
- 37 Hincmar discussed impotence, which he believed to be caused by women performing supernatural arts. Catherine Rider points out that Hincmar supplies more details than the literary sources he uses (Rider 2006: 31–38, especially 33).

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