



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Medieval Creative Etymology: Ion craís

Borsje, H.J.

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Proof

Published in

Craobh eolais: A Festschrift for Ruairí Ó hUiginn

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Borsje, H. J. (2025). Medieval Creative Etymology: Ion craís. In G. Toner, L. Ní Mhaoláin, & F. de Brún (Eds.), *Craobh eolais: A Festschrift for Ruairí Ó hUiginn* (pp. 135-146). An Sagart.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

MEDIEVAL CREATIVE ETYMOLOGY: *LON CRAÍS*

JACQUELINE BORSJE
UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Aislinge meic Con Glinne ‘The Vision of MacConglinne’ is a phantastic parody about food and the lack thereof. This eleventh-century text, extant in a long and short version, represents one of the first European tales about a Land of Cockaigne.¹ The long version introduces itself as being composed in order to banish a mysterious entity, a beast/demon called *lon craís*, from King Cathal mac Finguine of Munster. Because this beast/demon was created by a scholar with spells, *The Vision of MacConglinne* (henceforth *The Vision*) contains the international motif of The Sorcerer’s Apprentice. This composite creation, devised to eliminate Cathal by the king of the North in competition for the kingship of Ireland, got completely out of hand. For the *lon craís* made Cathal so hungry for food that provisioning him threatened Munster and, eventually, Ireland with famine. This *lon craís* represents the international motif of The Bosom Serpent: an entity, usually serpent/reptile/amphibian, enters a person or animal and devours its victim or its victim’s food.² The only other medieval tale that mentions a *lon craís* is the twelfth-century *Leabhar*

1 Edition of the long version from *Leabhar Breac* (henceforth LB; Dublin, RIA, MS 1230 (*olim* 23 P 16), 1408–11): K.H. Jackson, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (Dublin 1990), for the text’s dating, see pp. xxiii–xxvi; translation: K. Meyer, *Aislinge meic Conglinne: The vision of MacConglinne: a Middle-Irish wonder tale* (London 1892), pp. 2–112; P. Ford, *The Celtic poets: songs and tales from early Ireland and Wales* (Belmont 1999), pp. 113–50, and L. Preston-Matto, *Aislinge meic Conglinne: The vision of MacConglinne* (Syracuse 2010). Edition and translation of the short version (from Dublin, TCD, MS 1337 (*olim* H.3.18), sixteenth/seventeenth centuries): Meyer, *Aislinge*, pp. 114–29, 148–55. Translations in this article are my own unless indicated otherwise. For my policy to render ambiguous and polysemous translations of terms and concepts divided by slashes, see my ‘Celtic spells and counterspells’ in *Understanding Celtic religion: Revisiting the pagan past*, ed. Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm, Cardiff 2015, 9–50, p. 10. I am grateful to Greg Toner for his comments on an earlier version of this article.

2 See Davide Ermacora et al., ‘Towards a critical anthology of pre-Modern Bosom Serpent folklore’, *Folklore* 127/3 (2016), 286–304. I thank Józsi Nagy for this reference. See also Barbara Hillers, ‘Lizards, snakes and the demon of gluttony: oral lore and literature in the *Vision of Mac Con Glinne*’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 39 (2019), 1–38.

Breac Infancy Narrative (henceforth *The Infancy Narrative*).³ Abundant in international motifs, *The Vision* is also a fine specimen of Irish literary wordcraft and artistry. This contribution will focus on its use of medieval creative etymology.

Most scholars render *lon craís* as ‘demon of gluttony’, which is an interpretation based on *The Vision* identifying the entity also as demon and Satan. Nowhere else in medieval Irish tradition, however, does *lon* mean ‘demon’. Some scholars, therefore, returned to the literal translation of *lon* and argued for ‘blackbird (or: black bird) of gluttony’.⁴ I plead elsewhere to leave *lon craís* untranslated.⁵ I argue here that this strategy may give us insight into creative etymologies at work in this Irish term and concept. Elements central to its creative polysemy are food and the lack thereof caused by an ailment, and the location and translocation of the ailment: into and out of a body(part). The creative etymologies function within a narrative, ritual, and medical context of healing by expelling/exorcising or killing the cause of illness/possession. We start with some basic facts: the location and origin of the beast/demon. Then I argue for a creative etymology and medical tradition concerning wormlike parasites, called *vermis*, *wyrm*, *míl*, and *sirem*, relevant to the *lon craís* as Bosom Serpent. I finally investigate an explicit etymology in *The Vision* that connects *lon* with *lón*. Three topics will appear to be crucial to the meaning of *lon craís* as medieval creative etymology: head, body, and food.

Locating the *lon craís*

The textual tradition is not uniform on the location of the *lon craís*. The short version and *The Infancy Narrative* refer to the belly, in the latter case of another king: Herod. The long version, however, mentions the throat in an interlinear gloss:

3 Martin McNamara et al., *Apocrypha Hiberniae I: Evangelia infantiae*, Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum 13 (Turnhout 2001), pp. 32–3 (date), 297–439 (text and translation). Other relevant manuscript-witnesses of *The Infancy Narrative* are the Book of Fermoy (Dublin, RIA, 1134 (*olim* 23 E 29), fifteenth century) and London, BL, Egerton 1781, c. 1484–7. In ‘From punished tyrant to enchanted king’ (forthcoming in *Tyrants, heroes, prophets, and martyrs—shifting images from the past to the present*, Festschrift for Jan Willem van Henten, ed. Jacqueline Borsje and Caroline Vander Stichele et al.; (Leiden 2024)), I analyze the *lon craís* as affliction of King Herod and King Cathal.

4 Scott James Gwara, ‘Gluttony, lust and penance in the B-text of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*’, *Celtica* 20 (1988), 53–72, p. 56, n. 13; Maria Tymoczko, ‘The semantic field of early Irish terms for black birds and their implications for species taxonomy’, in *Celtic language, Celtic culture: a Festschrift for Eric P. Hamp*, ed. A.T.E. Matonis and Daniel F. Melia (Van Nuys 1990), 151–71, pp. 157–62, 169 n. 23; Kristen Mills, ‘*Demna aeóir* “demons of the air”’, *Éigse* 41 (2021), 1–30, p. 27.

5 See Borsje, ‘From punished tyrant’.

Short version (H.3.18)	Long version (LB)	<i>Infancy Narrative</i> (LB)
Lon craís	(.i. lon craís	Lon craís didiu
robóe ina medón. ⁶	boí i n-a brágait ⁷	boí ann. ⁸
It was a <i>lon craís</i>	(that is: a <i>lon craís</i>	It was, therefore, a <i>lon craís</i>
that was in his inside/ abdomen.	that was in his throat)	that was inside him.

In Herod's case, 'inside him' signifies his extremely painful belly, which Herod cuts open, thereby killing himself. In Cathal's case, the *lon craís* appears to move through his body, lured upwards from Cathal's intestines at the end of the long version, with the end of the short version mentioning the throat as its location.⁹ Its origin-tale, only given in the long version, indicates Cathal's belly as the location where the *lon craís* comes into existence. Cathal is forced with an oath-formula to eat kernels or nuts, apples, and other delicacies enchanted by incantations (*túaithe, gentliucht*). This enchanted food turns into spell-beasts (*mila eptha*) in his inside or abdomen (*i n-a medón*) that somehow conglomerate in the belly (*brú*, 'abdomen, belly; bowels, entrails') of an animal that lives in Cathal's throat (*brága*).¹⁰ In one sentence, the long version combines the phrase from the short version (*i n-a medón*) with its own previously-mentioned location, the throat.

Why do we see this emphasis on the throat (or the head) as opposed to the belly (or the body) as location? The belly is the common location in the many versions of the international Bosom-Serpent motif. I think that this emphasis represents our first creative etymology. *Cráes* in *lon craís* signifies both a body-part (maw, mouth, gullet) and feelings or behaviour (gluttony, greed, excessive eating), just like its Latin equivalent *gula*, 'gluttony; gullet, throat'. The location equals the problem: in Cathal's *brága=cráes=gula* (throat, gullet) lives *cráes=gula* (gluttony), envisaged as an animal/demon.¹¹

Moving 'worms'

Although Herod also suffers from an insatiable hunger for food, *The Infancy Narrative* does not reflect the ambivalence of *cráes*: Herod is gluttonous but his throat is not highlighted. There is no sign that his *lon craís* is envisaged

⁶ Meyer, *Aislinge*, 114.2–3.

⁷ Jackson, *Aislinge*, 1.13–14.

⁸ McNamara et al., *Apocrypha*, p. 417.

⁹ *a n-indib inmedónachaib Cathail* (Jackson, *Aislinge*, 39.1222-3) 'from the inner bowels of Cathal'. For the short version (Meyer, *Aislinge*, 128.5–10), see [below p.22-23](#) [*sub* 'Food-Cauldrons'].

¹⁰ Jackson, *Aislinge*, 1.20–2.59.

¹¹ The short version refers once to the problem as *cráes* and thrice as *ginach* 'greed, voracity' from *gin* 'mouth' (Meyer, *Aislinge*, 119.16; 116.6, 128.19, 129.15).

as a demon or beast. Although Herod is not enchanted but divinely punished, his narrative tradition nevertheless offers clues to better understand Cathal's *lon craís* as form of the Bosom Serpent. Elsewhere I have argued that *The Infancy Narrative* used the *lon craís* from *The Vision* to replace two typical biblical divine punishments of tyrants and sinners – fire and worms – that were present in its sources.¹² Based on the sources of *The Infancy Narrative* equating an internal fire that tormented Herod with his insatiable hunger and on the variant spellings *lon/lón/lúan*, I suggested that Herod's *lon craís* should be read *lúan craís*, freely rendered as 'the fire of hunger/gluttony'. The only animals among Herod's divine punishments in these sources are 'worms'. The motif 'worms' (*vermes* in the Vulgate and the Latin translations of the sources of *The Infancy Narrative*) throws light on the origin-tale of the *lon craís* in *The Vision*.

Worms were seen as a common cause of various diseases in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Their location could be anywhere in human and animal bodies, but they were especially linked with the head, teeth, and belly. Numerous historical worm-treatments and incantations are extant from many cultures, including the Irish tradition.¹³ The concept 'worm' overlaps with that of 'serpent' and 'dragon'; terms for 'worm' refer to various kinds of animal.¹⁴ Latin *vermis* 'worm, maggot, grub; vermin' may also apply to a flying insect.¹⁵ People feared to ingest such beasts,¹⁶ or that they might enter one's mouth during sleep or penetrate one's skin. This fear is reflected in the Bosom-Serpent motif. Such beasts entering and leaving bodies have a thematic parallel in diseases and demons entering and leaving bodies.

Not only general terms, such as *péist*,¹⁷ but also more specific terms may indicate such parasites. I build my case on Irish *míl* and *sirem*, Old-English *wyrm*, and Latin *vermis*. Crucial for my theory is an Old-Irish incantation

12 See Borsje, 'From punished tyrant'.

13 In Irish tooth-charms, the 'worm' may be indicated by *cruim* 'worm, maggot', in *Cormac's Glossary* equivalent to Latin *vermis* (Kuno Meyer, 'Sanas Cormaic: An Old-Irish glossary', *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts* 4 (1912), 20.212). See e.g. *Ordu Thomais* 'Thomas's Thumb' (also in Leabhar Breac; Whitley Stokes, 'Irish folklore I: the cause of toothache', *Revue celtique* 5 (1883), 391–2; Kuno Meyer, 'Anecdota from Irish MSS XIV (Leabhar Breac p. 177 "Ordu Thomais togaide." Against toothache)', *Gaelic Journal* 7 (1896), 116–17; Borsje, 'Digitizing Irish and Dutch charms', in *Oral charms in structural and comparative light*, ed. Tatyana Mikhailova et al., Moscow 2011, 128–37) and *Spell/charm against the teeth-disease* (James and Maura Carney, 'A collection of Irish charms', *Saga och Sed* (1960), 144–52, p. 152), with the line *is crum cré*, 'It is an earth-worm/maggot'.

14 Compare Lucille B. Pinto, 'Medical science and superstition: a report on a unique medical scroll of the eleventh–twelfth century', *Manuscripta* 17 (1973), 12–21, pp. 14–15.

15 *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British sources—online database of Latin dictionaries* (Turnhout 2023).

16 Several medieval Irish narratives attribute extraordinary pregnancies to swallowing a little animal while drinking, but our concern here is diseases.

17 See below, on the *péist* inhabiting Saint Fursa.

in the Anglo-Saxon *Lacnunga*, a late-tenth-to-mid-eleventh-century compilation of medical ‘Remedies’. This incantation is prescribed for people or animals who – when drinking – swallowed a *wyrm* ‘crawling animal: e.g. worm, snake, insect, mite, or the disease caused by these creatures’ or who have a wound, due to a penetrating *wyrm*.¹⁸ The incantation refers to such a *wyrm* in Irish as *míl* ‘animal’ (also used for worms and Satan in serpent-form) and *sirem* ‘mite, tick, worm’:¹⁹

Manuscript-readings ²⁰	Reconstructions ²¹	Translation ²²
Gonomil	Gono míl	I wound an animal
Orgomil	Orgo míl	I slay an animal
Marbumil	Marbu míl	I kill an animal
marbsai ramum	marb sirem(um?) ^{23[1]}	A <i>sirem</i> (is) dead ^{24[2]}
tofeð tengo do-	tofed tenga dó	Its tongue will fall out(?)
cuillo biran	coilliu birán	I destroy a little point/spear/spike
Cuidæær cæfmiil scuiht	cuið ar-géb míl scoith [or:] ar-gaib míl scoith	<i>cuið</i> (?) I will seize the animal’s point/edge Or: An animal seizes a point/edge
cuillo scuiht	coilliu scoith	I destroy a point/edge
cuib duill	<i>cuib duill</i> (?)	<i>cuib duill</i> (?)
marbsiramum.	marb sirem(um?) ^{25[1]}	A <i>sirem</i> (is) dead ^{26[2]}

18 Edward Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon remedies, charms, and prayers from British Library MS Harley 585* (Lampeter 2001), vol. 1, xxix–xxxiii, 14–17, 271 s.v. *wyrm*.

19 Or: *sirem*, ‘vermin, parasite, (parasitic) skin-disease’; see David Stifter, ‘Zur Bedeutung und Etymologie von altirisch *sirem*’, *Die Sprache* 45/1–2 (2005), 160–89, for *sirem* (sometimes in combination with forms of *míl*), Scottish *syroms*, and Modern-Irish *siorán* or *során* as examples of the harming ‘worm’ inside people and animals.

20 Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon remedies*, vol. 1, p. 14.94-5. I have altered the layout of the text; the manuscript gives the words in lines running on.

21 I base the reconstructions on David Stifter, ‘*Gono míl* und *gweint míl mawrem*’, in *Iranistische und indogermanistische Beiträge in memoriam Jochem Schindler (1944–1994)*, ed. V. Sadovski and D. Stifter (Wien 2012), 377–402.

22 Tentative translation based on Stifter’s (‘*Gono míl*’) linguistic analysis; Rudolf Thurneysen, ‘Grammatisches und Etymologisches: 6. Ir. *marbu* “ich töte”’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 13 (1921), 106; Howard Meroney, ‘Irish in the Old English charms’, *Speculum* 20 (1945), 172–82, pp. 177–8.

23 ^[1] Stifter also suggests *mairb *siremuin* ‘Dead are the sirems’ or *marbu *siremuin* ‘I kill a *sirem*’. According to Meroney (‘Irish’ p. 176 n. 6), the non-Irish ending in -um might be quasi-Latin; he lists more examples from other Old-English/Irish incantations.

24 ^[2] Alternatively, this line might signify: ‘You/He killed it before me’ or ‘Kill a *sirem*’.

25 ^[1] Stifter also suggests *mairb *siremuin*, ‘Dead are the sirems’ or *marbu *siremuin* ‘I kill a *sirem*’. According to Meroney, the non-Irish ending in -um might be quasi-Latin; he lists more examples from other Old-English/Irish incantations (‘Irish’, 176 n. 6).

26 ^[2] Alternatively, this line might signify: ‘You/He killed it before me’ or ‘Kill a *sirem*’.

This ‘worm’-charm constitutes a verbal fight in Irish against a *mil* or *sirem*. We have encountered the first word that represents the *wyrm* – *mil* – in *The Vision* in the plural as the spell-beasts (*mila eptha*), which were ingested with enchanted food, resulting in the *lon craís*. There are two further examples of *mil* in *The Vision*: one plural and another singular. The first refers to lice (*mila*) and fleas inhabiting a blanket in a guest-house of a monastery in Cork, where the main protagonist MacConglinne stays, suffering from their bites and a lack of sufficient food.²⁷ His satire on the monastery’s inhospitality leads to him being condemned to crucifixion from which he saves himself by offering to heal Cathal with his vision. The second example occurs in another eating-scene when MacConglinne begins to treat Cathal. Cathal has been fasting and is tied to the wall when MacConglinne starts narrating his vision of a land full of food while roasting meat. MacConglinne offers Cathal a first particle of food on a spit, while saying: *A thosach ar mil firend so*²⁸ ‘This is the beginning for a male beast.’ This ‘beast’ (*mil*) might simultaneously refer to both Cathal and the *lon craís* inside him but the morsel goes into a third male’s mouth: MacConglinne himself.

The second representative of the *wyrm* – the *sirem* – has an important medieval etymology. This creative art of explaining words plays with the sight and sound of the letters that form a word. *Cormac’s Glossary* explains *sirem* as follows: *sirem .i. tarsinnī sires ō luc do luc in capite et in toto corpore*²⁹ ‘*sirem*, that is: since it wanders through from place to place in the head and in the whole body’. This Irish/Latin etymology explicitly relates *sirem* to the verb *sirid* ‘ranges, traverses, wanders through; (of disease:) spreads through’. Implicitly, I suggest, Cormac’s etymology plays with the sight and sound of *sirem* and *vermis*, and is based on medieval ideas concerning the illness-causing *vermis hemicranius/micraneus/migraneus/migranea*. Traceable to Greek and Latin vocabulary for migraine (or: headache in half of the head; *hemicranium*), this *vermis* or, alternatively, *gutta* (*migranea/emigranea*) ‘drop, something minute, spot, disease’, occurs in medieval European healing-charms.³⁰ This terminology may also play with *migrans* ‘migrating’, referring to this *vermis* or *gutta* entering the body and traveling through it, from ear, to head, to tooth, to belly, to skin. The ‘headache-worm’ was also considered to cause different diseases in other body-parts.

²⁷ Jackson, *Aislinge*, 5.123, 134, 7.204.

²⁸ Jackson, *Aislinge*, 24.765.

²⁹ Meyer, ‘*Sanas Cormaic*’, 100.1138.

³⁰ Alfons Barb, ‘Der Heilige und die Schlangen’, *Mitteilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 82 (1953), 1–21, pp. 7–8. Compare a tenth-century recipe from Trier, Stadtbibliothek, Cod. 40/1018, fol. 29v.: *Emigraneus duplex est aut ex verme aut ex gutta* ‘Migraine is twofold, [it comes] either from a worm, or from the drop’ (Pinto, ‘Medical science’, p. 15).

The verbal/ritual treatment concerned killing or expelling the ‘worm’.³¹ The above-quoted Old-Irish incantation wants to kill the beast: after declarative speech-acts in which the ‘I’ wounds, slays, and kills a *mil*, the line *marbsiramum* ‘Dead is [the] *sirem*’ follows, which is also the incantation’s final line. We may compare this declarative speech-act with the final line in another verbal-battle spell (*epaid*) against *sirem*: *Slān crū marb in trū bis a ceand. N.*,³² ‘Healthy [is] a wound/gore; dead [is] the doomed one/villain that is in N’s head’ (with *.N.* for Latin *nomen* ‘name’, which was to be inserted when the spell is spoken). The declarative speech-act that kills the *sirem* has multilingual equivalents in medieval European ‘worm’-incantations that include and may end in variants of ‘Dead is the worm’ (“*mortu(u)s est vermis*”; “*der wrm is tōt, tōt is der wrm*”; “*ded is the worm*”).³³ Expulsion-incantations may represent a verbal banishing of the ‘worm’ from place to place (compare Cormac’s etymology), e.g. from marrow to bone to vein to flesh to skin to somewhere outside the body. Alternatively, the ‘worm’ is adjured so that it no longer harms a person or animal in listed body-parts.³⁴

In *The Vision* the beast is expelled from the body. Just as the incantations tell the ‘worm’ to move out or translocate, so does the *lon craís* move from place to place, first within Cathal’s body and then outside of it: from and into body-parts and onto and under objects. Thus, Cathal is healed from his ailment, but Herod is not so lucky. Herod dies by his own hand in *The Infancy Narrative*, whereas its sources have him expire from his diseases. Herod, the unsatisfied eater, has become food for the worms. The adage ‘Eat or be eaten’ is also relevant for the final etymology given by the long version, to be discussed below.

Food-cauldrons

There are four different versions about what happens when the *lon craís* is expelled from Cathal: the narrative central to the long version (1), two

31 My examples are medieval but the paradigms here described are as old as the *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda*; see A. Kuhn, ‘Indische und germanische segensprüche’, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete des Deutschen, Griechischen und Lateinischen* 13/1 (1864), 49–74, 113–57, pp. 66–71, 135–41.

32 Carney, ‘A collection’, p. 145.

33 See e.g. Karl Sudhoff, ‘Codex medicus Hertensis (Nr. 192) Handschriftstudie’, *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* 10/6 (1917), 265–313, p. 272 (twelfth century); H.E. Sigerist, ‘A summer of research in European libraries’, *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2/10 (1934), 559–610, p. 579 (twelfth century); Tony Hunt, *Anglo-Norman medicine* (Woodbridge 1997), vol. 2, p. 232 (thirteenth/fourteenth century); Monika Schulz, *Beschwörungen im Mittelalter* (Heidelberg 2003), pp. 44–50 (twelfth century and onwards); Thomas R. Forbes, ‘Verbal charms in British folk medicine’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 115 (1970), 293–316, p. 312 (c.1400).

34 Kuhn, ‘Indische’, pp. 63–74, 135–51; Schulz, *Beschwörungen*, pp. 35–66; Forbes, ‘Verbal charms’, pp. 310–12.

alternative tales mentioned by the long version and indicated by first, ‘storytellers’ (2) and second, ‘the books of Cork’ (3), and finally, the narrative in the short version of *The Vision* (4). I start with discussing the first version that is central to the long version of *The Vision*.

When MacConglinne finishes with the telling of his vision to the king – which the long version indicates by *Ind Aislingthi ind sin anuas, et reliqua*³⁵ ‘That is The Vision above, etc.’ – the *lon craís* comes into action. After hearing the delicious vision, *in t-anmunna indligthech* ‘the lawless animal’ comes forth from Cathal’s inner bowels (*a n-indib inmedónachaib*) and licks its lips outside Cathal’s head. When another piece of meat is offered, *in mac mallachtan* ‘the son of malediction’ jumps forth grabbing it with its two paws/claws, taking it towards the other side of the fire-place, where the *lon craís* puts the meat under the cauldron. This cauldron is then overturned on the *lon craís*. A significant etymology, presented as a proverbial expression, follows:

Conid de as-berair ‘lón-choire’ .i. don c[h]raes-lon boí i mbrága
C[h]athail meic Fhingine do beith foi.³⁶

So that it is from this that is said *lon-choire* [*lon-cauldron*], that is: from the *cráes-lon* [gluttony/throat *lon*], which was in the throat (*brága*) of Cathal mac Fingine, being under it (‘it’ refers to *coire* ‘cauldron’).

The *coire*/cauldron is renamed due to its connection with the *lon craís* whose designation is inverted to give *cráes-lon*, thereby emphasizing the *cráes*/throat/gluttony part that is linked up with its location in Cathal’s *brága*/throat. Jackson calls this sentence an ‘absurd attempt at an etymology’,³⁷ but by adding the length mark on the first *o* in *lon-choire* he starts to decipher the creative etymological puzzle. The words central to the etymology – *lon*, *cráes/brága*, and *coire* – are also central to the tale about the demise of the *lon craís* in the long version. Let us first consider the other three variant versions and then return to the etymology and the version central to the long version.

Immediately after the proverbial expression containing the etymological puzzle, the long version refers to two alternative variant versions. Version 2 attributed to ‘storytellers’ mentions *brága*; version 3 attributed to ‘the books of Cork’ mentions *coire*. First, we are told that some storytellers tell something different: the beast/demon went into the throat (*brága*) of the gillie of a priest, who subsequently drowned in a millpond. The long version immediately

³⁵ Jackson, *Aislinge*, 39.1219

³⁶ Jackson, *Aislinge*, 40.1230–2.

³⁷ Jackson, *Aislinge*, p. 70.

gives a second variant version, now from ‘the books of Cork’: the beast/demon was put into the cauldron (*coire*) and was burned under it.³⁸ Version 2, according to the storytellers, shows the typical parasitical behaviour of the *lon craís*, moving from one victim’s throat to another.³⁹ Version 3, according to the books of Cork, implicitly describes a *lon-choire*, a cauldron with a *lon* (*craís*) in it. Presumably, this respective drowning or burning means the end of the beast/demon.

The fourth version, the beast’s demise central to the short version of *The Vision*, is somewhat similar to the second version according to ‘the storytellers’: the *lon craís* jumps out of Cathal’s throat (*brága*) onto the spit, from the spit into the throat of the gillie of the priest of Cork who was near the cauldron, and from his throat onto the spit again. MacConglinne puts the cauldron on the spit; the house is emptied and consequently burned. Whether this burning kills the *lon craís* is uncertain because the last thing we hear are his three shrieks.⁴⁰ This version demonstrates not only his parasitical behaviour in going from throat to throat (*brága*) but also that the *lon-choire* is present, with a spicy detail: the *lon craís* is located on the food-spit, together with a piece of meat, prepared and roasted by MacConglinne.

We return to the long version that gives a different account. After the inversion *cráes-lon*, the designation *lon craís* is not mentioned anymore: in addition to various designations, such as devil and demon, the beast is twice simply referred to as ‘the *lon*’ in sentences that also mention the cauldron (*coire*). First, MacConglinne orders that the house should be emptied ‘but for the cauldron that was around the *lon*’s head’ (*acht in cori boí imm chend in luin*). When they put the house on fire, the demon jumps on the roof and moves to a neighbouring house. A conversation with MacConglinne follows, in which the devil relates that he is a ‘demon by nature, of unbreakable matter’ (*Am demon-sa aicenta co n-adbar nem-brisc*). He lists the virtues because of which he is unable to jump into MacConglinne’s throat (*brága*) or kill Cathal and carry his soul to hell. Then he flies away into the air among the

38 Jackson, *Aislinge*, 40.1232–7.

39 This motif of a parasitical Bosom Serpent jumping into the throat of someone is also found in the Middle-Irish glosses on the Old-Irish *Félire Óengusso Céli Dé* ‘The Martyrology of Óengus the Culdee’. The seventh-century Saint Fursa, who became famous for his visions, exchanged ailments with a friend. He thus received a beast or monster (*péist*) that lived inside the friend. To keep the beast at peace, he fed it three pieces of bacon each morning. When travelling, he was chided for this consumption of food by a bishop. By way of explanation, Fursa allowed the bishop to experience his ailment temporarily: *Lingid iarum in peist fochétóir a mbraigt in espuic* (Whitley Stokes, *Félire Óengusso Céli Dé: The Martyrology of Óengus the Culdee*, London 1905, p. 46; Stokes translates *péist* as ‘reptile’) ‘The beast then jumps at once into the throat of the bishop’. Just as in the case of Cathal, the emphasis is on this parasite being an illness: the word *treblait* ‘tribulation, illness, suffering’ is employed, and the disease is exchanged for headache and piles, which formerly bothered Fursa.

40 Meyer, *Aislinge*, 128.3–15, 154.

infernal company. Second, MacConglinne orders a cauldron (*coire*) of milk with butter and honey as a special drink for Cathal so that the king will have his last indulgence to fill his belly with a huge quantity of food because of the *lon*.⁴¹ In this way, *The Vision* lets the etymology of *lon-choire* echo twice.

But there is more. Jackson made the implicit etymology explicit by adding the length mark to *lon*. The etymology of *lon-choire* plays with 1. *lón* (also spelled *loon*, *loan*, *lán*) ‘fat; provisions, food, victuals, sustenance; feast’ and 2. *lón* (also spelled *luan*) ‘haunch, rump, buttock, hip’. As a compound, *lón-choire* means food-cauldron. The double meaning of *lón* as food and as body-part reminds us again of the adage ‘Eat or be eaten’. *The Vision* has prepared its listeners and readers for this etymology because it has given preludes to it in compounds starting with *lón-*. These compounds are food-descriptors or food-descriptors serving as names. Thus, they consecutively have heard or read *lón-fheiss* ‘food-feast’ (descriptor), *Lón-Loingén* ‘gullet, edible part of an animal’s belly, side, sausage?’ (name), *in dá Loan* ‘the two Fatties’ (name), *Lón-Loingén* (name), *in dag-mac Lón-Chorén* ‘the good son of Little Food-Cauldron’ (name), *Fás-Taib mac Lón-Longén* ‘Empty-Sides son of Gullet/Sausage?’ (name), *lón-charna* ‘rump steak’ (descriptor), *lón-longén bós[h]aille* ‘gullet/side of salted beef’ (descriptor), and finally there is a list, starting with little cauldrons followed by numerous descriptors, including compounds containing forms of *lón-*: *co lúna hitha* ‘to the feasts of fat’, *co lúnu messi* ‘to the feasts of rams’, and *cosin lón-longín bós[h]aille* ‘to the gullet/side of salted beef’.⁴² When the etymology comes up, everybody could see that a *lon*-cauldron could be a *lón*/food-cauldron. The eater could end up being eaten. The short version also gives this message: in the scene with the *lon craís* ending up on the spit and in the cauldron, while people set fire to the surroundings, this could well be an image of food being prepared.

In fact, Cathal had become a cauldron himself into which the people had to deposit the food of gluttony (*lón craís*), but it was the *lon craís* that benefitted from the food: a little cauldron within a big cauldron. Such a cauldron that demands endless food provisions is the opposite of the motif of the cauldron of plenty that supplies endless portions of food. When the *lon* ends up in or under a cauldron or on a spit, he might end up as *lón*/food and thus becomes the subject of a joke, while the preceding fasting by Cathal plays a joke on Satan: the personification of evil was forced to undergo the penance for the vice of gluttony.

41 Jackson, *Aislinge*, 40.1244–7, 40.1259, 41.1283–5.

42 Jackson, *Aislinge*, 11.334, 13.388, 29.906–7, 29.913–14, 35.1100, 36.1107, 38.1188–91; see pp. 55–56, 63.

Conclusion

The point of this contribution was to show why it is better to leave *lon craís* untranslated, for the common interpretation ‘the demon of gluttony’ and the literal translation ‘the blackbird of gluttony’ obscure the literary and conceptual depths of this Irish term and concept. This contribution discussed a threefold etymology at work in *lon craís*. I will now argue for my conclusion: we should treat the designation as the name of the beast/demon: the Lon Craís.

The first etymology present in the term and concept concerns the place of the ailment/beast/demon which equals the problem of the king and thus the land: in Cathal’s *brága/craés/gula* lives *cráes/gula*. Location=problem. Both meanings – throat and gluttony – are linked with *lón*/food and the lack thereof. We also saw that the throat/gullet is edible in the name/descriptor *Lón Loingén*. Cathal’s problem – the vice *cráes/gula*/gluttony – however cannot be solved by its penance alone, namely fasting from food. The solution is translocation: the *lon* needs to be removed.

The second, implicit etymology concerns translocation. In addition to the *lon craís* as Bosom Serpent, I have suggested that we see him as a kind of *vermis/wyrm/sirem*. The explanation of *sirem* in *Cormac’s Glossary* explains the *sirem* as translocator, just as medieval spells and medical texts take specimens of the *vermis* (*hemicranus/micraneus/migraneus/migranea*). I built my case on an Old-Irish incantation against a swallowed or penetrated *wyrm*, addressed as *mil* and *sirem*. The movement from place to place, from body-part to body-part, by a (mythical) parasite/beast/disease/demon is paralleled by verbal/ritual incantations that remove or kill this entity, which international paradigms go back to Antiquity. The *lon craís*, developed from *mila* and addressed as *mil*, fits into the expulsion paradigm.

The third etymology – *lon-choire* – is a joke on the parasite: translocated in a cauldron and onto a spit, the *lon* becomes *lón*/food, and the empty cauldron turns into a food-cauldron. Thus, the joke is also on Satan: first being forced to do penance by fasting, he then may turn into food himself instead of killing all the Irish by famine. The wordplay on *lon* and *lón* is preceded by a list of descriptors of food-products containing *lón* that also serve as funny names. The *lon craís* fits into this pattern: we may see the term as descriptor, but by taking the term as a name (The Lon Craís), we preserve its polysemy.

Using a descriptor-designation of a disease, a (mythical) ‘worm’/beast/parasite, or other ailment, as a name for a demon is an international phenomenon as well, stretching back to Antiquity and living on in later times.⁴³ The Lon Craís in *The Vision* appears to belong to this phenomenon.

43 See e.g. Alfons A. Barb, ‘Animula Vagula Blandula ... notes on jingles, nursery-rhymes and charms with an excursus on Noththe’s sisters’, *Folklore* 61 (1950), 15–30.

The *lon craís* in *The Infancy Narrative* seems to be a descriptor alone: the ‘light/fire/flame’ (*lon/lúan*) of gluttony reflecting Herod’s insatiable hunger that torments his belly as an internal fire. My reading of this second example of *lon craís* does not preclude the possibility that readers and listeners associated Herod’s *lon craís* with the Lon Craís that plagued Cathal.