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The Power of Words: Sacred and Forbidden Love Magic in Medieval Ireland

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Everyday Life and the Sacred

Re/configuring Gender Studies in Religion

Edited by

Angela Berlis
Anne-Marie Korte
Kune Biezeveld†



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The Power of Words: Sacred and Forbidden Love Magic in Medieval Ireland

Jacqueline Borsje

When I was a student, I quickly embraced the new insight that scholarship from a neutral perspective is impossible.¹ The way we think and observe is always influenced by our context. An extra demand was added to this statement in the theological circles in which I found myself, that is, scholarship should not be neutral; one must take sides and should take the side of the poor and oppressed. I was recently reminded of all this when I read a quote from Dorothee Sölle:

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 one personally. 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.²

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- 1 This study is part of my VIDI-research project “The Power of Words in Medieval Ireland”, subsidized by The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) (<www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/research-projects/i/15/2615.html>). The correction of the English of this article has been made possible thanks to a grant from the *Vertaalfonds* of the Royal Dutch Academy/Stichting Reprorecht. I would like to thank the following scholars for their feedback and advice: Angela Berlis, Mathilde van Dijk, Fergus Kelly, Anne-Marie Korte, Helga Kuhlmann, Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes, Brónagh Ní Chonaill, Jan Platvoet, and the members of the research network *NOSTER Dwarsverband*. I dedicate my contribution to Kune Biezeveld, who (together with Angela Berlis) initiated and directed this project of the network, but died before the project was completed.
 - 2 The original text reads: “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 begebenet, daß sie mich nicht betrifft. Diese Philosophie, mit

Now many years later, I realize that, despite this passionate and earnest appeal, I for one strive for neutrality when I do research. I study religious phenomena in medieval Irish texts, and I consider my research subject like a jeweller inspects a diamond. I hold it against the light and study every side of it, and in the course of that study, I change my position regularly. Thereby, I hope to shed light on as many aspects of my subject as possible. In this contribution I want to show what this implies by analysing an episode in the *Life* of one of Ireland's great saints.³ This case study deals with “supernatural arts” in the area of love and sexuality.

Love and sexuality have always been part of daily life. What we will see in this case study is how the category of the sacred, which is represented by the saint, intervenes in the course of daily events. Saints are regarded as special people, as examples for ordinary people to follow in every aspect of life, and as intermediaries between everyday life and the divine. The extraordinary power of the divine is said to be noticeable in the feats ascribed to saints that are beyond ordinary human capacities. They are believed to both help and punish people. These beacons of holiness teach humanity how to live life in a good manner—that is, according to the ethical norms, ritual prescriptions, and other laws of the religion involved. At least, this is what their biographers want us to believe.

The biographical descriptions of the virtues and miracles of saints form the genre known as hagiography. These texts are far from neutral. They are written from the point of view that the saint is always right, represents what is good, and that people should believe for their own good what is written in such a saint's life. Thus, while we find glimpses of everyday life in a saint's life, the focus is on the sacred—on the saint's words and acts. These words and actions are part and parcel of the hagiographical message concerning the importance of the Christian faith for humanity in Christian hagiography.

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”, and is quoted in H. Meyer-Wilmes, “Dorothee Sölles Credo als Kurzformel des Glaubens oder Zwischen Gebet und Gedicht: Dorothee Sölles Ansatz einer Theopoesie,” in *Das Christentum der Theologen im 20. Jahrhundert: Vom 'Wesen des Christentums' zu den 'Kurzformeln des Glaubens'* (ed. M. Delgado; Stuttgart [etc.]: W. Kohlhammer, 2000), 222–234 (223).

3 The word *Life* referred to here is synonymous with biography as it is often used in contemporary writing.

According to the hagiographer, what a saint does or says is by definition “sacred” or “holy”.⁴ This is a common characteristic of the hagiographic genre. Indeed, elements of daily life—water and words—become “sacred”, because the saint is believed to have the capacity to transform them into something holy. To do justice to this genre, we must keep this hagiographic view of the sacred in mind while analysing the text. At a later stage in this study, in the discussion of other genres, I will step outside of this frame of reference and offer alternative views.

Not only the sacred and daily life but also gender is a point of interest in this study. The saint in my case study is a woman, who communicates with a man and indirectly with a woman. A limited survey of how women and men have been connected to supernatural arts in the area of love and sexuality runs like a thread throughout this article. Finally, I will consider how early medieval Irish data do not substantiate certain medieval stereotypes of love magic.

To return to my metaphor of the inspection of a diamond, we will first look at the episode within its hagiographic context. Then I will shift the diamond and connect the episode with similar European practices. Afterward, I return to the medieval Irish context and relate the episode from the saint’s *Life* to other textual genres. I will also describe how my position as a scholar shifted during this careful inspection of the facets of the diamond and what insights these shifts brought.

12.1 A Love Spell in a Holy Life: Saint Brigit and the Desperate Man

Our case study is a narrative from the hagiographic genre. The story takes us to sixth-century Ireland, the period when Saint Brigit is supposed to have lived her holy life. One of the earliest texts on her is the Old Irish *Life of Brigit*.⁵ The text dates back to somewhere between the early eighth and the first half of the ninth century⁶ and is bilingual in Latin and Old Irish.⁷ For the purpose of this paper, I will start with the narrative of my case study without much further ado:

4 I use the terms “sacred” and “holy” as synonyms.

5 We distinguish roughly the following periods for the Irish language: 600–900 (Old Irish), 900–1200 (Middle Irish), 1200–1650 (Early Modern Irish). For the edition and translation of this *Life*, see D. Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigitte* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978).

6 Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigitte*, xxv–xxvii.

7 R. Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 20. According to Sharpe, the *Life* was originally written in Latin and incompletely translated into Irish.

Anaiss arabarach i cCill Lasre. Do-lluid alaile Cennenses genere, fora tarat sua uxor miscuis, co Brigti da chobair. At Brigita benedixit aquam. Ille secum portavit, 7 uxore aspersa amavit suum protinus inpatienter.⁸

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.*⁹

Nothing uncommon is described here, from the perspective of the genre of hagiography. The saint, as an exemplary Christian woman, helps people in need, and her help in this specific case is in line with prescripts 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 nobody should separate these two.¹⁰

There is a similar episode in the Hiberno-Latin *Life of Columba*, written by Adomnán abbot of Iona, who lived from circa 628 to 704.¹¹ Saint Columba, or in Irish, Colum Cille, is another famous sixth-century Irish saint, and a husband in distress also visits him, together with his wife. The man says that his wife abhors him, and thus, since the beginning of their marriage, she has refused to share his bed or have sex with him. When chided by the saint, the wife 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 a legitimate form of behaviour in the ethics of Christians at that time.¹² Nevertheless, Columba persuades the wife to give it another try and suggests that the three persons involved should fast and pray. The next day, the woman reports that her feelings changed during the night 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.

8 Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigte*, 16, §45.

9 Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigte*, 32. Donncha Ó hAodha marked the use of Latin in his translation by italics.

10 See Mt 19:5–6; Mk 10:7–9 in the Bible.

11 See the edition and translation by A.O. Anderson and M. Ogilvie Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991; rev. ed.), 164–167, Book II, Chapter 41.

12 See V.I.J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992; repr.), 292; see also the analysis of this episode in J. Borsje, “Women in Columba's Life, as Seen through the Eyes of his Biographer Adomnán,” in *Women & Miracle-Stories: A Multidisciplinary Exploration* (Numen Book Series; Studies in the History of Religions 88; ed. A.-M. Korte; Leiden [etc.]: Brill, 2001), 87–122 (107–110).

Just as in the case of Brigit, we see that words were integrated into the ritual. Before I examine the genre of the saint's words, it should be noted that I cannot verify the literal content, for neither Adomnán quoted what Columba and the couple prayed, nor did the anonymous author share the text of Brigit's blessing.

Despite the absence of a direct quote from the respective saints, it seems likely that words were used. This is evident in the case of the prayer. It has been suggested, however, that the blessing was wordless, presumably because the blessing was interpreted to be a gesture, such as, making the sign of the cross over the water or holding one's hand on or above the water.¹³ I think, however, that words normally accompanied these gestures, either spoken out loud or memorized by heart. The concept of a blessing has a wide semantic range, but a verbal component seems to belong to it. Hebrew בָּרַךְ means, among other things, "to bless, to greet, and to praise". The Greek word 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". The Latin word *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 was 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..."¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ What we are dealing

13 See S. Zimmer, "Weiblich? Heilig? Göttlich? Zur Diktion der Hl. Brigid," in *Kelten am Rhein: Akten des dreizehnten Internationalen Keltologiekongresses. Zweiter Teil Philologie: Sprachen und Literaturen* (Beihefte der Bonner Jahrbücher 58/2; ed. S. Zimmer; Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2001), 319–327 (325 n. 25).

14 J.G. Davies, *A New Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 93.

15 See G. Rouwhorst, "De kracht van water: De wijding van het doopwater in de Romeinse liturgie van de late Oudheid tot aan het einde van de Middeleeuwen," in *De betovering van het middeleeuwse christendom: Studies over ritueel en magie in de Middeleeuwen* (eds. M. Mostert and A. Demyttenaere; Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 1995), 129–170 (131–156); for an English, abbreviated version of this article, see G. Rouwhorst, "Baumstark's Methodology in Practice: Historical Research on the Blessing of Baptismal Water in the Roman Liturgy," in *Acts of the International Congress Comparative Liturgy Fifty Years after Anton*

with here is the transformative power of words, especially the blessing. The words and ritual are believed to transform the water. In *The Life of Columba*, for instance, objects blessed by Columba were transformed into miraculous objects, including rock salt that did not burn in a fire and a dangerous well that became curative. The transformative power was believed to be so strong that the object might even be “simply” designated “the blessing”.¹⁶ It is, therefore, not unlikely that an invocation of the divine was included in Brigit’s blessing.¹⁷ In fact, as we will see, the other versions of our episode refer to an invocation of Christ while the water was being blessed.

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”. 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 empirically verified. Such words are believed to have the power to transform reality, either through some intrinsic power that they are thought to possess or through the putative agency of a postulated supernatural entity.¹⁸ Obviously, in these two cases, the power was believed to come from God and to be mediated by the saint. The saint and couple’s fasting and prayer are said to have the same effect as the blessed water of Brigit. There is, however, one substantial difference between the two tales. Columba engaged in a theological discussion with the unwilling woman, who in the end consented to the “treatment”. The woman in *The Life of Saint Brigit* was not addressed; she underwent her “treatment” without being aware of it.

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* from about 800 or earlier¹⁹ and two texts from the twelfth century, *Vita Quarta*

Baumstark (1972–1948) *Rome*, 25–29 September 1998 (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 265; eds. R.F. Taft and G. Winkler; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2001), 963–979.

16 These and other transformation miracles by blessing are found in Book 2 of *The Life of Columba*, dedicated to his “miracles of power”, i.e. miracles effected through him and ultimately ascribed to the divine.

17 See also the collection of medieval blessings in A. Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter* (2 vols; Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1960; repr.).

18 See C. Fanger, “Things Done Wisely by a Wise Enchanter: Negotiating the Power of Words in the Thirteenth Century,” *Esoterica* 1 (1999): 97–131 (98).

19 Whether the text dates to the seventh or the eighth century is a matter of dispute; see Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives*, 15. The text is also known as Colgan’s *Vita III*; I have used Hogan’s reprint of Colgan’s edition; for the episode see E. Hogan, *The Latin Lives of the Saints as Aids towards the Translation of Irish Texts and the Production of an Irish*

S. Brigidae, a revision of *Vita Prima*,²⁰ and the Middle Irish *Life of Brigit*.²¹ These various 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. However, the Middle Irish *Life* is different on some significant points.

The two Latin versions paint a static picture just as the Old Irish tale does—the woman has a great aversion towards the man. In the Middle Irish version, the situation is described in a dynamic way—she is about to leave the man and refuses to share his table and bed. The Old Irish version simply describes the man as approaching the saint for help, while the other three versions show him addressing her with a concrete question in which he asks the saint to make his wife love him. The man sprinkles his wife with the blessed water in the Old Irish episode, without having been told to do so by the saint. In the other three versions, Brigit blesses the water and tells the man what to do with it. He must sprinkle their house, food, drink, and bed with it during the wife's absence. The result is the same in all four versions, that is, the woman now loves the man. The two Latin versions are somewhat more elaborate than the Old Irish one, but the Middle Irish version is very extensive and describes the wife as more or less glued to her husband:

Dorat in ben sheirc ndímhoir dosom conná faghbhadh bheith 'na ecmais cidh il-leth in tigi fris, acht fora leathlaim eiccín. Laa n-ann dochuaidhsium for turus 7 rofhacuibh in mnaí 'na codladh. O radhuisigh in ben atracht cohanbhfhail 7 dochuaidh a ndegaid an fhir cu bhfacuidh uaithe hé 7 gabhal mhara etarra. Roghairm sí a fer, 7 iss ed roraidh, noragad isin fairrce mina thised som cuice.²²

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.

Dictionary (TSL 5; Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1894), 78–79, §72. The relationship between the Old Irish *Life* and *Vita Prima* is debated; see Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigte*, xvii–xxv.

20 Edited in Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, 139–208 (156 §47). The redactor of *Vita Quarta* probably lived after 1185; see Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, 216.

21 Edited and translated in W. Stokes, *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), 34–53 (text), 182–200 (translation); see 44, lines 1478–1487, 192. This Middle Irish *Life* dates to the twelfth century and is older than *Vita Quarta*; compare Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, 210, 212.

22 Stokes, *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, 44, ll. 1482–1487.

She cried out to her husband and said that she would go into the sea unless he came to her.²³

Brigit's blessed water seems to have "worked" most strongly in this Middle Irish version. The most significant difference in this version is found in the concrete request for help voiced by the man. The two Latin versions describe how the man asked the saint to invoke Christ so that his wife would love him. *Vita Quarta* repeats this motif in the command of "the Virgin of Christ"—Brigit; the husband should sprinkle the water in the name of Christ. The invocation is a sign of the verbal character of the blessing of the water. The ritual performed by the man has a verbal character as well in *Vita Quarta*. In the Middle Irish *Life*, however, the man asks for a spell or a charm (*epaid* sg.; *aipthi* pl.) to make his wife love him. The occurrence 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 to be competitors with the saints, such as sorcerers, witches, and, in the Irish context, druids.²⁴ Furthermore, spells in a monotheistic context are commonly regarded as evil and associated with demons.

At this point, I want to make a small excursus. Spells or charms are "words of power", just like 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 inherently evil, false, or part of superstitions instead of religion. We have learned from recent insights in religious, mediaevalist and anthropological studies, as well as from the primary sources themselves, that this *a priori* view of religious practices, commonly designated as "magic", is outdated and no longer tenable.²⁵

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

23 Stokes, *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, 192.

24 For a study of the druids in Brigit's *Vita Prima*, see C. McKenna, "Between Two Worlds: Saint Brigit and Pre-Christian Religion in the *Vita Prima*," in *Identifying the 'Celtic'* (CSANA Yearbook 2; ed. J. Nagy; Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 66–74.

25 See, for instance, two articles by J.N. Bremmer, "The Birth of the Term 'Magic,'" and "Appendix: Magic and Religion," in *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* (ed. J.N. Bremmer et al.; Leuven [etc.]: Peeters, 2002), 1–11, 267–271 and two by W.J. Hanegraaff, "Magic I: Introduction," and "Magic v: 18th–20th Centuries," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2 vols; ed. W.J. Hanegraaff; Leiden [etc.]: Brill, 2005), 716–719, 738–744.

sources, which is one reason to keep them. A second reason is that these terms are genre designations and therefore significant to our understanding of the relevant literary genre. Third, when terms like these are used 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 readers or audience is a different question. It was in any case not a common reading because the other versions of the tale do not use the word “spell” to designate the instrument with which Brigit worked her miracle.

12.2 Love Spells in Daily Life: Presumed Innocence and Gender

When we look at one side of the diamond, we see a holy woman doing good in a supernatural way when she heals a relationship that was on the verge of being destroyed. Man and woman live happily ever after. We have to turn the diamond, though, and then we get glimpses of other aspects, such as daily social life versus the uniqueness of holiness, a saint using a spell, and a woman who unknowingly is submitted to a supernatural art.

But before we look closely at those facets of the “diamond”, I want to discuss my position that has undergone changes while working with this material. Although the use of the term “spell” in the tale about Saint Brigit struck me, I had initially no problem with seeing this episode as a healing miracle. I saw love charms as innocent paraphernalia, such as make-up, jewellery, and beautiful clothes—just things to attract attention and feel better. When, however, I heard a fine paper by Professor Andrei Toporkov about Russian love spells, I realized how narrow my point of view was.²⁶ The tone of the texts that he had studied was violent and even sadistic.

I used this experience in a lecture at the Russian Academy of Sciences as an example of how difficult it is to study religious phenomena in a “neutral” way.²⁷ My romantic view of love charms was, in fact, a blind spot. Another eye-opener awaited me in Moscow. A young Russian man reacted after my

26 “Russian Charms in a Comparative Light,” read during the conference on “Charms, Charmers and Charming”, at The Warburg Institute, London, 23–24 September 2005, organized by Dr Jonathan Roper. This paper was published in *Charms, Charmers and Charming: International Research on Verbal Magic* (ed. J. Roper; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 121–144.

27 “Miraculous Magic in Medieval Ireland,” invited lecture at the Institute for Slavonic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia, 19 September 2006.

paper with disbelief. How was it possible that I had such a positive view of love charms? Did I not know how dangerous these texts were? At that moment, I realized how secularized my point of view was. This latter point of view is not so easy to discard as the romantic one was.

My confession has not ended yet. Another *a priori* view I held was that I associated love spells with women. This view is confirmed in various studies, such as, for instance, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* by Valerie Flint.²⁸ Toporkov, however, pointed out that men mostly used these charms. In this line, we note that in Saint Brigit's case, it is also a man who used the charm on a woman and that Saint Brigit played the role of "witch doctor", to use a term of Flint.²⁹

Where did my romantic image of love spells come from? Initially, I thought that my secularized view did not need any reconsideration, but I came to realize that this position is also due to a cause that can be pointed out. After analysing this, I will return to our diamond and connect our tale with other medieval Irish genres to throw more light on aspects of St Brigit's miracle.

12.3 Choosing for the Oppressed, Secularization, and Romanticism

Reading the article by Hedwig Meyer-Wilmes on Dorothee Sölle and her rejection of neutrality brought back many memories of the time when I studied theology and religious studies.³⁰ It was during this period that my romantic image of love spells came into being, together with the secularization of my perspective. In those days, I became aware of a certain ideology at work in portrayals of "magic". Through the work of Mary Daly, I became acquainted with quotes from the *Malleus maleficarum* (1487), known as "The Hammer of Witches", but literally "The Hammer of Female Evil-doers". This medieval manual on "witchcraft" was a tool in the European witch persecutions. One quotation became an important factor in my theoretical development. It goes as follows:

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,

28 Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 290–301.

29 See on the matter of gender also M.W. Dickie, "Who Practised Love-Magic in Classical Antiquity and in the Late Roman World?" *Classical Quarterly* 50 (2000): 563–583.

30 See n. 2.

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?³¹

The idea was so far-fetched, and of such evil intent towards the women to be persecuted that I decided to take this historical source no longer serious.³² As mentioned above, these were the days in which scholars were supposed to make choices, and I wholeheartedly chose the side of the oppressed women who died at the hand of their torturers and stopped taking the allegations seriously. This step accounts for my secularized perspective because I came to see the witch hunts mainly as a struggle for economic, social, and religious power.

The romantic view has its roots in this period of my life as well. I read books by a modern witch, named Starhawk. 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”.³³ She writes that spells work through suggestion and enable one to change one’s consciousness, which again would influence one’s behavior, and thus reality. Starhawk furthermore believes in a more direct transformation of reality through spells.³⁴ Her book *The Spiral Dance* contains the text that has influenced my view of 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

31 Quoted in M. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1978; repr. London: The Women’s Press, 1979), 199.

32 Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 199, summarizes the response to this question as “it is all done by the devil’s work and illusion.” Daly’s summary needs to be refined, however: “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,” S. Brauner, “Cannibals, Witches, and Shrews in the ‘Civilising Process,’” *Mitteilungen Zentrum zur Erforschung der frühen Neuzeit* 2 (1994): 29–54 (38). Brauner, “Cannibals,” 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 views this “magical castration” as a “relatively uncommon fantasy”. R. Kieckhefer, “Erotic Magic in Medieval Europe,” in *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays* (ed. J.E. Salisbury; New York/London: Garland Publ., 1991), 30–55 (44, cp. 53 n. 86).

33 Starhawk [Miriam Simos], *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 13.

34 Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 111–112.

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.³⁵

The above is followed some pages later on with an herbal charm to attract love.³⁶

The consciously chosen, not neutral perspectives on magic and witchcraft of Daly and Starhawk have opened the way to a “neutral” study of magic for me. Learning from them was a necessary phase, but I also needed to move on. The sources that I studied afterward made me expressly aware of this.

12.4 Love Magic in Medieval Irish Legal Texts

Love spells are mentioned in various medieval Irish genres. Given our overall theme of everyday life and the sacred, it makes the most sense to look at law texts and their commentaries. I do not mean to imply that legal texts are more “real” than narrative texts. They may portray ideal or unrealistic situations just as literary texts do. They may, for instance, be based on literary sources, which the researcher needs to analyse.³⁷ Nevertheless, the legal texts describe many aspects of daily life, and as such, they were the main basis of the standard work on medieval Irish farming by Fergus Kelly, who carefully assembled and assessed the material.³⁸ Catherine Rider aptly remarks in her discussion of continental European legal and medical texts between 1200 and 1400:

Canonists and physicians...dealt with systems of thought that were designed to be used in practice, but they were not primarily interested in reforming lay attitudes to magic. Therefore they may reflect popular ideas about magical cures more accurately than either the theologians or the pastoral writers.³⁹

35 Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 115.

36 Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 122.

37 See C. Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30.

38 F. Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: A Study Based Mainly on the Law-Texts of the 7th and 8th Centuries AD* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997).

39 Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, 133.

The legal tradition of medieval Ireland is immensely impressive. This is not only the largest corpus of legal texts extant in Europe before the twelfth century, but it also represents a highly sophisticated level of juridical reasoning. 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 to clarify the Old Irish law texts, a good many of which can be described as obscure and difficult to understand. We owe the extant texts to monastic scriptoria. The influence of the Church on the content is sometimes strong.⁴⁰ The texts not only reflect practices of daily life, but also have connections with medieval etymologies, Irish literature, and biblical traditions.⁴¹

Love magic is mentioned in two law tracts.⁴² The first to be discussed here is a list of offences in the Old Irish tract, called *Cethairshlicht Athgabálae*, “The Four Divisions of Distrain”, from *Senchus Már*, “The Great (Legal) Tradition”, the best-preserved collection of medieval Irish law, which was probably organized as a unit *circa* 800 CE.⁴³ Four items in the list of offences are relevant to us.⁴⁴

40 See, for instance, D. Ó Corráin et al., “The Laws of the Irish,” *Peritia* 3 (1984): 382–438.

41 See F. Kelly, “Law Texts,” in *Medieval Ireland: An Encyclopedia* (ed. S. Duffy; New York: Routledge, 2005), 264–266. For more about these law texts, see F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Early Irish Law Series III; Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988); L. Breatnach, *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Early Irish Law Series v; Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2005) and R.C. Stacey, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

42 These law tracts are more extensively discussed in J. Borsje, “Rules & Legislation on Love Charms in Early Medieval Ireland,” *Peritia* 21 (2011): 172–190.

43 The corpus of legal texts was edited by D. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum* [henceforth CIH] (6 vols; Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978); translated in W. N. Hancock et al., *Ancient Laws of Ireland*. (6 vols; Dublin: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1865–1901). See further Kelly, “Law Texts,” 264; Kelly, *Guide*, 279, nr 66; Breatnach, *Companion*, 286–287.

44 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

There are three manuscript versions of this list,⁴⁵ but in the context of this contribution, an analysis of Version B will suffice.⁴⁶ Version B is the most extensive version, which was also translated in *Ancient Laws of Ireland*—henceforth referred to as ALI.

The first item in the list of offences that deals with “supernatural arts” is *fubae n-imda*. In ALI this item is translated 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:⁴⁷

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, but then crossed out)
- (5) .i. *conabi* tualaing lanamnus
- (6) .i. cnamcosait.⁴⁸

I. THE [SUPERNATURAL] ATTACK OF A BED

- (1) i.e. sorcery in the bed,⁴⁹
- (2) i.e. for which honour-price is due,⁵⁰

charmed morsel for a dog, carrying away the hero's morsel from the person to whom it belongs”. See W.N. Hancock et al., *Ancient Laws of Ireland, Senchus Mor, Introduction to Senchus Mor, and Athgabhair: Or, Law of Distress, as contained in the Harleian Manuscripts Vol. I* (Dublin and London, 1865), 175, 177.

45 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, *Companion*, 272, 287).

46 For a survey and discussion of all versions of the law text and the glosses, see Borsje, “Rules & Legislation,” 172–190.

47 See Kelly, *Guide*, 226, and Plates 1–4.

48 CIH, 387–388.

49 *Piseóc* or *pisóc* means “charm, spell”, and in the plural form it may signify “sorcery, witchcraft”.

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

- (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 *cosait*-bone/the bone (of) contention (?).⁵¹

What the glosses of item “1” describe is in fact “negative love magic”, which we find in other cultures as well.⁵² Someone may try to estrange marriage partners from each other, and this is purportedly done through “supernatural arts”. This third party could be a person who desires one partner of the couple or it could be 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 of the couple. Instead of a third party, the destructive agent may be one of the marriage partners, who uses the “supernatural arts” to have a ground for divorce.⁵³

In our case, the third gloss appears to refer to a third party who wants to estrange the woman from the husband. Gloss no. 4 seems to be misplaced. It has been crossed out, and we will encounter it again below, in the context of testing a charm.⁵⁴ The fifth gloss seems to imply that the sorcery was believed to incapacitate the husband, which might refer to “supernaturally” induced impotence. What *cnamcosait* means, is unclear. *Cnáim* means “bone”, and it should be noted that the long list in the Old Irish law under discussion mentions as the second item: *i cosait tuilche*,⁵⁵ “for disturbing the meeting hill”.⁵⁶ *Cosait* signifies “act of setting at variance; dispute, strife”. If the glosses use the same word, it seems as if the sorcery contains some kind of “bone (of) contention”.⁵⁷ This is not certain: *cnám* means “gnawing”; the compound could

51 This is my translation, based on Hancock, *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, vol. 1, 181.

52 See, for instance, S. Golopentia, “Towards a Typology of Romanian Love Charms,” in *Charms and Charming in Europe* (ed. J. Roper; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 145–187. For the concept of “negative love charms”, see Roper, *Charms and Charming*, 153. For more examples of negative love magic, see Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, *passim*.

53 For instance, women were allowed to have a divorce when their husband was impotent, see Kelly, *Guide*, 74.

54 See the glosses on item IV.

55 CIH, 386.20.

56 Compare n. 44.

57 Compare *cnaim cocaidh*, mentioned in the *Annals of Connacht* 1315.8–9, which the editor translates as “the bone of contention”, A.M. Freeman, *Annála Connacht: The Annals*

also refer to complaining, nagging, and grumbling.⁵⁸ This might refer to the complaints of the couple about their sexual life. On the basis of continental references to negative love magic,⁵⁹ however, I suggest that primarily a bone is meant and that this bone might be an object placed in the bed, which may thus be literally the sorcery that is in the bed (gloss 1). Therefore, this bone may represent the material form of the attack on the bed (law item 1). This object is then believed to create the sexual problems in the bed, that is, the impotence that the man suffers from (gloss 5), on the grounds of which the woman may demand a divorce (gloss 3).

Item 11, translated as “neglecting cohabitation” in ALI, literally means “the destruction of birth”. It could very well be that this refers to abortion, but the glosses interpret this item differently.⁶⁰ This transgression is connected with the previous item and explained in a sexual way:

II. *COLLUD MBRETHI*

- (1) .i. iss *ed* asas de-side
- (2) .i. *gabail cumaing* † *clainde*
- (3) .i. na.s.⁶¹ *uriata coimperta*
- (4) .i. a *lemadh*
- (5) .i. *nemdul cuice* 'na imda.⁶²

of Connacht (A.D. 1224–1544) (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970), 234, n. 2.

58 I am indebted to Liam Breatnach for this suggestion.

59 For instance, Hincmar, Archbishop of Rheims between 845 and 882, discusses impotence, which he believes to be caused by women who perform supernatural arts. Among their tools he mentions the bones of the dead. Rider points out that Hincmar supplies more details than the literary sources he uses; see Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, 31–38, especially 33. For the practice of placing of objects in, under, above the bed, or in the bedroom that were supposed to induce impotence, see below.

60 I am indebted to K. McCone for this suggestion; for more about this, see Borsje, “Rules & Legislation.”

61 *Sét* is a unit of value; the plural form *seoit* is abbreviated here. The fine is to be paid by the third party, the person who has meddled with the couple by “supernatural art”, *airíadad coimperta*, “barring of procreation, i.e. the incapacitation of either husband or wife for cohabitation by the act of a third party”, according to E.G. Quin (ed.), *Dictionary of the Irish Language: Based mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1983), henceforth DIL, s.v. “*airíadad*”. Compare D.A. Binchy, “Bretha Crólige,” *Ériu* 12 (1938): 1–77 (31–33), §§38–40 (66–67).

62 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.⁶³

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, and he would be guilty of “neglecting cohabitation” (the ALI translation for *collud mbrethi*) and “listlessness” (the ALI translation for *a lemad*).⁶⁴ 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, *fuba n-imda*, “a (supernatural) attack of the bed” or to its last gloss—the *cosait*-bone.

It is possible that this “supernatural transgression” is also mentioned in a *Tract on Marriage and Divorce* from which citations are found in *O’Davoren’s Glossary*.⁶⁵ *Fuba* is explained in this glossary as follows:

Fuba .i. fubthad nó fodiubadh. Feis .i. druis, ut est fuba co fessaib .i. a fubthad co fessaib .i. a leamad nó pisoga do [dénum dó].⁶⁶

Fuba .i.e. terrifying or undermining. *Feis*, i.e. lust, ut est “*fuba co fessaib*”, i.e. terrifying him with charms, i.e. rendering him impotent, or to practice enchantments upon him.⁶⁷

63 My translation, based on ALI.

64 Hancock, *Ancient Laws of Ireland* 1, 181.

65 Breatnach, *Companion*, 306. In this different context in the *Tract on Marriage and Divorce*, the offence is presumably not committed by a third party, but by a woman against her husband, compare Breatnach, *Companion*, 136, n.142.

66 W. Stokes, “O’Davoren’s Glossary,” in *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie* 11 (1904): 355.

67 Stokes, “O’Davoren’s Glossary,” 355.

Fuba or “attack” is explained here as “frightening or intimidating” (*fubthad*) or as “cutting off, deprivation or diminution (?)” (*fodiubad*). The glossator then mentions *feis* in the sense of “spending the night, coition”, which equals *drúis*, “lust”. Consequently, the glossator associates *feis* with *fis* in the dative plural, “knowledge, occult knowledge” (here translated as “with charms”), which is the instrument with which the attack (*fuba*) and the frightening (*fubthad*) are done. Finally, the glossator mentions the result. The person attacked is made impotent, and “sorcery” is once more mentioned as the cause, but now by using the term *pisóga*.⁶⁸ This term is used in gloss 1 of item I for the “sorcery in the bed” as the explanation for “the (supernatural) attack of the bed”.

The translators of ALI translated item III as “carrying love charms”.⁶⁹ Literally, however, we should translate “carrying charms/spells”. “Casting charms /spells” is another possible translation, because “casting, throwing, plying, and 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 AUPTHA

- (1) .i. cipe dogne
- (2) .i. letfiach ann o tiucfa fogal, 7 anfot sin uili.⁷⁰

III. CARRYING/CASTING CHARMS/SPELLS

- (1) i.e. whoever does so,
- (2) i.e. (he shall pay)⁷¹ half fine for it where injury results: and all this is without evil intent.⁷²

The glossators indicate that the carrying or casting of spells is a transgression for everybody (gloss 1). They only mention a penalty, however, 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*). These charms

68 *Fuba* is furthermore mentioned in the legal texts as a “supernatural attack” on horses (see Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 174), but this is beyond the scope of this article.

69 Item III is only extant in Version B.

70 CIH, 387–388.

71 The phrase between square brackets is added by the translators.

72 Hancock, *Ancient Laws of Ireland* 1, 181. The translation of the law item is mine.

or spells are thus different from the ones described in items I and II, which were believed to be used as an attack and be harmful to procreation. Items I and II represent destructive supernatural arts, whereas item III appears to refer to neutral or positive “supernatural arts”, which are nevertheless forbidden.

Item IV, rendered in ALI as “setting a charmed morsel for a dog”, literally mentions “a bad or dangerous morsel”, which is given to a dog.⁷³ The glosses explain why and discuss the consequences.

IV. MIMIR DO COR DO COIN.

- (1) .i. da promad
- (2) .i. im smacht in coin ł ineclainn
- (3) .i. froma uptha dus inbud amainsi; lethdiri ind, uair ni fo fath marbtha
- (4) .i. fromad felmais
- (5) .i. fromad na pisoc, 7 anfot indethbiri he.⁷⁴

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

- (1) i.e. to test it;
- (2) i.e. concerning the *smacht*-fine [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 *díre*-fine 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.⁷⁵

The glossators appear to connect item IV with item III in gloss 1 by indicating that the morsel is offered to the dog to test “it”. “It” not only refers to the edible portion but also to something supernatural, referred to as *epaid* (charm/spell) in gloss 3, *felmas* (enchantment, sorcery; a spell or a charm) in gloss 4, and *pisóca* (sorcery) in gloss 5. Gloss 3 connects thus item IV with item III because the term *epaid* in the plural is used there in the interdiction on casting or carrying charms or spells. 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 power (gloss 3). Presumably, this person

⁷³ See also Kelly, *Guide*, 146 and *Early Irish Farming*, 175.

⁷⁴ CIH, 387, 388.

⁷⁵ My translation, based on ALI.

has not used their dog but someone else's. Hence, a fine system is given with two alternatives in gloss 2, perhaps dependent on the seriousness of the charm or spell or the intention of the experimenter. Another fine connected with the absence of intention to kill is mentioned in gloss 3. The actual 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 glossator ends by stating once more that the act of killing was unintentional and, moreover, unnecessary (gloss 5).

Law item III thus clearly says that carrying or casting *aipthi* is an offence. Strictly speaking, we do not at all know whether love charms are meant, but the context seems to imply this identification. 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 nature of this act. The commentary only names a fine when this act causes harm. Moreover, the performer's intention is presumed to be innocent. In other words, the commentary is more neutral on the use of charms. If law items III and IV are connected, we can be sure that an object is meant, because it is edible in item IV. We do not know whether such an object was made from parchment, herbs, mushrooms or something else. Whether words were spoken to make the edible portion more powerful is something else about which we are left in the dark. The commentary describes the practice of experimenting with the dog as a guinea pig. The death of the dog is apparently not the intention of the experiment.⁷⁶

We can deduce the following about gender: we do not know the gender of the performer of law items I and II, but it is clear 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 and sorcery appears to have been used 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.

76 Kieckhefer, "Erotic magic," 37. Here is a discussion of historical cases in which love charms appear to be dangerous. One of them, which actually was a murder attempt, took place in 14th century France. An uncle gave his nephew powder, which he should 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". See B.W. Tuchman, *The Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (London: MacMillan, 1979), 344. The unfortunate boy did not live to see the end of the day.

The second law tract to be discussed here is, in comparison, clear on the nature of *aiþthi* and on the gender issue. Our text is part of the collection known as the *Heptads*, or in Irish *Sechtae*, “Sevens”. This collection is, just as the previous text, included in *Senchus Már*, “The Great (Legal) Tradition”, and consists of legal material arranged in sixty-five groups of seven and assembled in the Old Irish period.⁷⁷ Our text is part of *Heptad* 52, which deals with seven kinds of women who were entitled to a divorce because of transgressions by their husbands.⁷⁸ These women could leave their marriage whenever they wished, and they might take their bride price with them.⁷⁹ The law text and its commentary, with a similar layout as the law text discussed above, run as follows:⁸⁰

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 7 eiric fo aicne an cineoil uptha; re tiachtain a ndligi lanamnais
 tucadh di na uptha 7 a ndligi lanamnais tancatar ria, 7 smacht lanamanda
 uaidhe and, 7 coibchi 7 eineclann 7 coirpdiri di, 7 imscar fris, † eiric fo
 aicned an cineoil uptha 7 a rogha di an imscarad dodena †⁸¹ a ndligi lanamnais
 bias; 7 is e-sin an dara inadh isin berla a fuil smacht lanamanda o
 duine isin fogail dorigne ria tiachtain a ndligi lanamhnais.⁸²

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

77 See Kelly, *Guide*, 266.

78 For the translation, see Hancock, *Ancient Laws of Ireland* v, 293, 295, 297; see also Kelly, *Guide*, 73–75 on divorce, and on impotence and divorce see B. Ní Chonaill, “Impotence, Disclosure and Outcome: Some Medieval Irish Legal Comment,” <www.arts.gla.ac.uk/scottishstudies/earticles/legalconcern.pdf> (2007): 9.

79 See Ní Chonaill, “Impotence,” 9–10, 12. Compare for further information on the time frame within which a woman might leave marriage.

80 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, see Breatnach, *Companion*, 97, 291. Version A is quoted here.

81 The editor adds here: “supply *in?*”

82 Binchy, CIH 48.11–20.

in the law of marriage that they came to/against her (?) (ALI has: [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; and that is the second place in the language [of the Laws] in which there is *smacht*-fine applicable to the marriage contract [demanded] from a person for the damage he did before his entering the law of marriage.⁸³

The law and its commentary are clear that with *epaid* a supernatural instrument is meant, which was used for sexual arousal. We are not certain what kind of charm is meant. *Do-beir* has a wide range of meanings; although primarily it means “to give”, it can also mean “to utter, pronounce” and so on. According to the law, women were believed to become the victim of this supernatural art and men to be the ones who performed it in order to have 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 could leave the marriage and take her dowry and fines with her.⁸⁴

These two law texts thus forbid the use and possession of *aipthi*. The second, *Heptad* 52, refers to men as the performers and women as the ones who become “enchanted”. The first law, 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 the law texts. The commentaries seem to forbid abuse to ensure that *aipthi* should be safe; in fact, no injury should come from them,

83 My translation is very literal. Compare Hancock, *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. v, 295, 297. “A WOMAN TO WHOM HER MATE HAS ADMINISTERED A PHILTRE WHEN ENTREATING HER, SO THAT HE BRINGS HER TO FORNICATION i.e. at the time that he was entreating her, he administered the philtres to press his love upon her, i.e. [he pays] dowry and ‘eric’, according to the nature of the philtre. It was before entering the law of marriage the philtres were given to her, and it is when in the law of marriage [the effect] became [apparent] upon her; and he pays the ‘smacht’-fine of cohabitation for it; and there are due dowry and honour-price and body-fine to her, and [liberty] to separate from him; or ‘eric’ according to the nature of the philtres, and she has her choice either to separate or to remain in the law of marriage. And this is the second place in the Brehon law in which there is ‘smacht’ fine of cohabitation paid by a person for the damage he did before coming into the law of marriage”.

84 Compare Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 292. On Christian marriage Flint writes, “The original Christian marriage contract depended for its validity upon the free will of both contracting parties.”

either to people or to dogs. Nor should they be used to lure someone into marriage. Perhaps they kept the possibility open of safe aphrodisiacs for consenting partners within marriage.

Before I return to Saint Brigit, I will describe two further examples from different genres. We will look at ecclesiastical rules and a literary example. These examples are not exhaustive, but for the purpose of this article, the following two will suffice to give an impression of the variety of love charms and spells in the different medieval Irish textual genres.

12.4.1 *Love Magic: An Example from the Penitentials*

The oldest extant Irish penitential is the *Penitential of Finnian*, which was written at some time before 591.⁸⁵ This penitential refers to love magic in canon 19:

18. Si quis clericus uel si qua mulier malifica uel malificus si aliquem maleficio suo deciperat, inmane peccatum est sed per penitentiam redimi potest; sex annis peniteat, tribus cum pane at aqua per mensura et in residuis .iii. annis abstineat a uino et a carnibus. 19. Si autem non deciperat aliquem sed pro inlecebrosio amore dederat alicui, annum integrum peniteat cum pane at aqua per mensura.

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 (a potion) for the sake of wanton love to someone, he shall do penance for an entire year on an allowance of bread and water.⁸⁶

The penitential is unambiguous in its condemnation of the use of “magic” either to lead someone astray or to induce lust. The term used for “magic” is *maleficium*, which means literally “an evil deed”. We could, therefore, deduce that magic was seen as evil in itself, in line with biblical, patristic, and hagiographical ideology, as we have seen above. The instrument used remains unidentified; Bieler adds “a potion”, but what exactly is given “for very enticing

85 Edition and translation in L. Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials* (SLH V; Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 74–95; for the date, see p. 4.

86 Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, 78–79. Bieler emended the first line of Canon 18; for the textual problem there, see Borsje, “Rules & Legislation.”

love” is not mentioned in the Latin text. The persons who are associated with this transgression are clerics and women.⁸⁷ It is interesting that this act was not seen as leading someone astray and was judged to be less serious than the sin in Canon 18. There is no mention of the context in which the love charm is used; such a supernatural act of seduction is seen as a transgression anyhow.

12.4.2 *Love Magic: A Narrative Example*

Another unambiguous love charm is found in the traditions on place-names (*dindshenchas*). These texts are narrative traditions that explain why a place has a certain name. The explanation is based upon medieval etymology. More than one explanation is often 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*):

Aliter Cnamros. Mær *ben Bersa* a Berramain dorad seirc do Find mac Cumail, co ro delb náí cna Segsa co n-ept[h]ib seirce indib, 7 focart hIbuirni mac Deduis dia n-adnacol do Find, 7 asbert fris a teinm 7 a tomoilt. “Ni tó”, ol Find, “ar nidat cna rois, *acht* is cna amrois, 7 ni fes cid dia filet *acht* dolba[d] fri hol *serci* annso”, 7 ros-adnacht Find traig i talmain, et unde Cnamros *dicitur*.

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.⁸⁸

Finn Mac Cumail is a famous hero and leader of warrior bands. The well of Segais is described in the literature as the source of the Boyne and a supernatural source of knowledge. Hazel trees surround the well, and salmon eat the nuts that fall into the well.⁸⁹ As a boy, Finn had tasted from a salmon of

87 For more about this, see Borsje, “Rules & Legislation.”

88 W. Stokes, “The Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” *Revue Celtique* 15 (1894): 272–336, 418–484 (333–334).

89 See e.g. Stokes, “The Prose Tales,” 456–457; E. J. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas* III (T.L.S. x; Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913), 286–291.

knowledge, and hence, he 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 that 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 sort of love charm that the law forbids in Heptad 52. The *Heptad* refers to men who use them; here, we have an instance of its 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 about 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. A similar story is told in the *Metrical Dindshenchas*:

Hiburni mac Deduis daill
doriacht sund co mac Cumail
co cnóib seirce Segsa arsain
ó mnái Bernsa a Berramain.

And asbert Find flaith na fer
fri Hiburni ndaith ndorn-mer,
nachdat cnói dag-ruis dálaig
acht cnói amruis anshádail.

Ó na cnóib dar fál-gus féig
dogarar Cnámrus comréid;
foscross Find fo thalmain traig
ní fess adbair ardosfail.

Hiburni, son of Dedos the blind,
came hither to the son of Cumall
with love-nuts of Segais thereafter
from the wife of Bernsa from Berramu.

Then said Find, prince of the warriors,
to the active, the nimble-handed Hiburni,
that they were not nuts of the famous wood of meetings
but nuts of doubt and uneasiness.

From these nuts, stronger than eager strength of chieftains,
is named level Cnamros;
Find embedded them a foot under earth,
the cause why they came was not known.⁹⁰

The strength of the nuts is emphasized in the poem. We do not know how they were made into “love-nuts”; the term *epaid* is not used in the poem. It seems likely that spells were uttered to make them work as a strong aphrodisiac, but we cannot be certain of this.

12.5 Concluding Remarks

Let us consider the diamond symbolizing our episode and look at its sides from various perspectives. We start by focusing on Brigit’s behaviour. From a biblical perspective, there is nothing wrong with Brigit’s behaviour. Brigit acted according to New Testament principles expressed in Matt 19:5–6 and Mark 10:7–9. From a hagiographical perspective, we saw that her colleague Columba voiced those principles. He quoted the Bible directly to convince the other unwilling woman that she had become one flesh with her husband, and therefore, should not leave him. Columba’s treatment consisted of fasting and prayer, while Brigit’s was a ritual with blessed water. Both saints took care that husband and wife stayed together. In the context of medieval Christian marriage ethics, Brigit acted legitimately.

We shift the diamond. From a medieval Irish legal perspective, Brigit’s behaviour is problematic. The Old Irish law and Penitential are clear: (love) charms (*aipti*, the plural of *epaid*) are forbidden. Brigit and the man transgressed this law/rule. The Middle Irish commentaries seem to allow love magic as a safe aphrodisiac within marriage. Would the commentary also permit giving it without the recipient’s consent? Unfortunately, there is no reply to this question.

Let us now focus on the woman treated by Brigit. From a medieval Irish narrative perspective, we saw that Finn refused to undergo a strong aphrodisiac.

⁹⁰ Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, 130–131.

The woman in the *Life of St Brigit* receives it without being aware of it and becomes more or less glued to her husband. Her silence in the tale is rather frustrating. We modern scholars would like to ask her to tell us what was wrong. Did you find a new lover? Did your old love grow cold or was your husband violent? The hagiographical perspective ends with the tale—the saint has solved the problem by saving the marriage. The non-hagiographical perspectives, however, show that questions remain.

We shift the diamond once more. We will now look at the episode from the viewpoint of the non-Irish antique and medieval past. Matthew Dickie's study of Classical and Late Antique love magic describes a spell used by a certain man called Posidonius, who wanted to achieve 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".⁹¹ Suddenly the image of the woman from the Middle Irish *Life of Brigit* looms on the brink of the stretch of water, calling out to her husband, whom she cannot miss for a second. This is the version that uses the term *epaid*, "spell, charm", causing our attention to become focused on this particular miracle. We need to look again at the elements in our episode; and herewith, our main point of concern is that the woman underwent the treatment from the Saint unwittingly.

Another excursion to a non-Irish context supplies us with a clue. Perhaps not informing the recipient was 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)*.⁹² Constantine appears to have been a Muslim who studied medicine in North Africa. Later on, he became a Christian and lived as a monk in Monte Cassino.⁹³ In his tract on impotence, Constantine mentions several objects that were believed to cause sexual harm. They were put in, above, or under beds,⁹⁴ above, or under thresholds, or were elsewhere hidden in houses, or on the sides of a road. For instance, the testicles and blood of a cock were put under a bed, and needles that had been used for the last care of the dead were stuck in a mattress or pillow. Furthermore, mention is made of

91 Dickie, "Who Practised Love-Magic?" 570.

92 G. Hoffmann, "Beiträge zur Lehre von der durch Zauber verursachten Krankheit und ihrer Behandlung in der Medizin des Mittelalters," *Janus* 37 (1933): 129–144, 179–192, 211–220; H.E. Sigerist, "Impotence as a Result of Witchcraft," in *Essays in Biology in Honor of Herbert M. Evans* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1943), 541–546; Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, 215–228. Consider especially parts 1, 2 and 3a in Rider.

93 Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, 46.

94 Compare the supernatural attack on a bed in the Irish law text discussed above.

letters written in bat's blood, and of nuts, acorns, and beans—all which 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 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 he adds that the bridegroom and bride should know nothing about it.⁹⁵ A remedy to liberate a house from spells is to sprinkle the walls of the house with the blood of a dog. Another means of purification is to sprinkle a house with the bile of a (black) male dog.⁹⁶ If all remedies listed do not work, Constantine advises the couple to go to a bishop or priest and confess their sins. If this does not work either, he describes yet another ritual, which among other things consists of a blessing by the cleric and receiving a piece of parchment with powerful words—that is, a variation on Psalm 28:3 in Latin.⁹⁷

This treatise does not stem from Constantine's Arabic sources. Some of his literary sources appear to be the biblical, later apocryphal, *Book of Tobit*, Pliny's *Natural History*, and a medical work by Sextus Placitus. The information about the dog, for instance, stems from Sextus Placitus's book on healing treatments from the fourth or fifth century, who borrowed in his turn from Pliny's *Natural History*.⁹⁸ Pliny describes aphrodisiacs and antaphrodisiacs in 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 an aphrodisiac.⁹⁹ It is furthermore possible that Constantine also describes ideas from his contemporary culture.

This information gives a new twist to our diamond. Looking at Brigit's prescription for the ritual to be performed by the husband from this perspective seems to cast the entire performance in the light of a counter spell. Blessed water is used to purify the house of negative substances, while the man—according to *Vita Quarta*—should invoke Jesus Christ. The fact that the woman is not told anything can now be seen as an important part of the healing ritual. The objects that are to be sprinkled with the blessed water—house, food, drink

95 Compare also Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, 68–69; and see Kieckhefer, “Erotic Magic,” 43.

96 The characteristic “black” is absent in Sigerist's manuscript, Sigerist, “Impotence,” 542, 544.

97 This is Psalm 29:3 in the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

98 Hoffmann, *Beiträge*, 141–144; Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, 24, 45–51.

99 W.H.S. Jones, *Pliny: Natural History*, vol. VIII (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 368–371.

and bed—could perhaps refer to acts, which were believed to be impossible due to binding spells. These formulae express the wish that the person thus bound will not be able to eat, sleep, and drink, etc., until he or she succumbs to the desire of the person who wants to benefit from the spell.¹⁰⁰

Following Sölle's political appeal on "taking sides" is 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 a static question but a dynamic study in which 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.

This brings us to the position of the person who holds the diamond—the researcher. My previous image of love magic was formed by my preference of the oppressed—the victims of the witch-hunts—and by distancing myself from the negative ideology surrounding the concept of "magic". Beneath this, secularization played a role. The position of the researcher, however, is not static either. Textual material and encountering different points of view are factors that change this position again and again.

We saw how several texts contradict a romantic view of love magic. Love magic may lead to the death of dogs, or women having sex or entering marriage against their will. These examples make one think of contemporary drugs associated with enforced sexual activities, which cause damage to the brain or other parts of the body. The phenomenon of negative love magic is a further example associated with aggression and damage by means of objects and/or words that were believed to be harmful to people. On the other hand, love magic was probably also used without causing harm and with no evil intent as we see in the commentary on item III in the list of offences in *Senchus Már* and Brigit's miracle.¹⁰¹ There is no *a priori* validation of "love magic"—we need information on the context of its use and its results.

The idea that women mainly performed love magic is another thought that should be contextually positioned. In the early medieval Irish texts, love magic is not specifically related to a particular gender. Sometimes men were the ones

100 See Toporkov, "Russian Charms". I will discuss our episode in relation to binding spells more extensively in an article on "Celtic Spells and Counterspells," in: *Understanding Celtic Religion: Revisiting the Pagan Past, New Approaches to Celtic Religion and Mythology 1* (eds. K. Ritari and A. Bergholm, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015) 9–50: 29–38.

101 It should be noted that when non-Irish medieval manuscripts of a later period "give magical formulas for engendering love, they almost always specify that the intent is to ensure—or more commonly to restore—love between spouses," see Kieckhefer, "Erotic Magic," 34.

who used love magic on women, for instance in *Heptad* 52, but the references are mostly non-gender-specific. According to the *Penitential of Finnian*, even clerics are said to have used love magic. Because this contribution does not give a full survey of all textual examples, we cannot draw any firm conclusions about a distribution of gender roles in the use of love charms according to literary genre. I suspect, though, that when more examples are adduced, the image will prove to be diverse, just as the close reading of the legal texts in this contribution corrected my initial impression that in medieval Irish law, men used love charms, and women were the recipients. It is now obvious that we cannot draw such a clear-cut conclusion. Matthew Dickie showed the importance of a meticulous study of this “supernatural art”, when he established that this art was equally practiced 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.¹⁰²

Although both men and women were active in using love magic, a disproportionate number of the people tried for love magic were women.¹⁰³ Somewhere in the Middle Ages, women were increasingly associated with magic.¹⁰⁴ Hincmar of Rheims accused women of meddling in love magic in the ninth century. Especially women practice these “diabolical spells”, writes Constantine of Africa in the eleventh century. Catherine Rider demonstrates that many others copied this point of view in penitentials, ecclesial legal texts, and pastoral literature. A climax was the *Malleus maleficarum* in the fifteenth century when the full-blown stereotype of the “witch” became the ideological basis for persecuting “witches”.¹⁰⁵

We return to our diamond. The woman in the *Life of Brigit* continues with her life, overflowing with love. Some people would say that the aim sanctifies the means, and in this way, the love charm—the blessed water—would be holy. Looking from the perspective of Brigit’s hagiography, this happy end is what we would expect. In her *Old Irish Life*, we read that there was always enough bread in the house where she cooked. None of the pigs that she herded went missing even though robbers took two. The bacon she had to cook for a

102 Dickie, “Who Practised Love-Magic?” 577.

103 Kieckhefer, “Erotic Magic,” 30.

104 See also Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, 208–209.

105 Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, *passim*. It may be significant that the witch-hunts that were so destructive in continental Europe were virtually absent in Ireland with its sophisticated legal system, with non-gender-specific legal texts on love magic, neither in the old laws—*circa* 8th–9th centuries—nor in the later commentaries. Compare Borsje, “Witchcraft and Magic,” in *Medieval Ireland: An Encyclopedia* (ed. S. Duffy; New York: Routledge, 2005), 518–520.

guest, she gave to a hungry dog, and yet, when it was time for the guest to eat, the same amount as before was in the pan. She supplied a vast quantity of ale for Easter and changed water into milk. She fed the poor and healed the sick. She blessed the face and speech of the man who came to woo her and sent him to the woods where a beautiful girl awaited him. Brigit, saint of bounties, is a cornucopia of generosity and good things. In this way, she symbolizes sacredness in daily life.

This is, however, only one side of the diamond. A thread of violence goes through this article as well. People who cannot let go of their desires and thus want to restrain and restrict others to their wishes; they want to force others to have sex with them or delude them into consenting to a marriage contract. They do certain things, which they believe will render men impotent or force women to stay within the marriage contract through the use of words and other means. All these practices and beliefs were part of daily life, and when they have to do with force and violence, we certainly would not call them “holy” nowadays. We have seen that the old dichotomy of “saints” versus “spells” does not equate with “good” versus “evil” for us. What we see as good or bad very much depends upon our context—these are not absolute, static entities, but relative, dynamic points of view, because our context is something that continually changes over time. I have tried to show in this contribution how my point of view concerning love magic regularly changed. My attempt to be a “neutral” scholar of religion is not only linked with methodological questions—how do we do justice to the texts? It is also connected with ethical ones—how do we do justice to the people mentioned in the texts? 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. In this way, we can truly enjoy the glittering of the diamond.¹⁰⁶

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