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# Druids, Deer and “Words of Power”

## Coming to Terms with Evil in Medieval Ireland

Jacqueline Borsje

### *Abstract*

*This contribution describes what is understood by evil, as perceived within Irish medieval texts, both by the authors and by the groups described in the texts. It attempts to include the points of view of possible audiences or readers of the texts as well. The definition of evil employed here thus covers multi-form aspects of evil as found in these texts. These manifestations of evil are represented by various kinds of perceived danger, ranging from bodily to spiritual harm. The coping strategies discussed here refer to the belief in the power of words as a form of postulated protection.*

### *Introduction*

In religion, evil is believed to be everywhere and to appear in any form. I define evil as that which is believed to cause or to represent harm.<sup>1</sup> A thought-provoking metaphor for evil is suggested in a Dutch novel from the 1980s: we should not compare the battle with evil to a heroic fight against a dragon but with the daily cleaning of our dwelling places (Meinkema 1984: 288). Dust and dirt—visible and invisible—are everywhere and there is no end to the task of cleaning up.

Despite the omnipresence and multiformity of evil, some religions have tried to name and identify evil as a category and as a part of a system. Christianity has followed Judaism in associating evil with supernatural beings and human acts. The devil and demons are said to be the supernatural representatives of evil; sin is another word for evil human deeds and thoughts.

Our focus is on medieval Irish literature—one of the earliest written vernaculars in Europe. Within this rich tradition, the face of evil changes according to genre. Heroic texts or sagas are

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to John Carey and Jan Platvoet for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

somewhat elusive when one tries to pinpoint what exactly is considered to be evil. In hagiography, however, a clear distinction between good and evil can often be found. I will discuss three related examples from different genres in order to show how the medieval Irish portrayed evil and tried to come to terms with it. We will start with a hagiographic tale. The second text is a *lorica*, which is a form of verbal protection against evil. Our third example is a so-called mythological tale.<sup>2</sup>

*The Location of Evil in Hagiography*

In the fifth century St. Patrick sailed to Ireland, in response to a vision in which the Irish asked him to return. He had been brought there earlier by force and had lived in Ireland for several years as a slave. This former shepherd becomes a spiritual shepherd for people and, if we can trust the relevant documents, his second visit changed Ireland completely.<sup>3</sup> The Christianization of Ireland is generally ascribed to Patrick, although we are now aware that this attribution is to a certain extent a symbolic one. The conversion of Ireland is described as a revolution in the supernatural world as well. Thus, in *The Tales of the Elders of Ireland* from the twelfth century, we read that “there was a demon on the bottom of every single blade of grass in Ireland” before Patrick set foot there, but, because of him, there is now an angel on every blade of Irish grass (Doolley and Roe 1999: 177).

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<sup>2</sup> A division of the sagas into four cycles (the Ulster Cycle, Historical or Kings’ Cycle, Mythological Cycle, and Finn Cycle) is common in Celtic Studies. There are, however, many overlaps between the cycles. For instance, the supernatural beings in the Mythological Cycle are found in all four cycles, and all four cycles deal with mythological aspects. For hagiography as mythology, see Nagy 1997; 2002: 124-26.

<sup>3</sup> The most important of these are the *Confessio*, generally taken to be by Patrick himself (edition: Bieler 1993; translation: Howlett 1994); two seventh-century Latin Lives of Patrick by Muirchú and by Tírechán (edition and translation: Bieler 1979), and a Middle Irish Life of Patrick (edition: Mulchrone 1939; translation: Stokes 1887). We can distinguish roughly the following periods for the Irish language: 600–900 (Old Irish), 900–1200 (Middle Irish), 1200–1650 (Early Modern Irish).

The story of how Patrick made Ireland a land of Christians is told at length in one of the earliest versions of his hagiography: *The Life of Patrick*, written by Muirchú moccu Maethéni in the seventh century. The dualistic structure, common in hagiography, was also used by Muirchú. St. Patrick and his followers represent good and the druids of the king of Ireland represent evil.<sup>4</sup> Muirchú uses the Tenach or Old Testament as a model for his description of the hostile encounters between the saint and the king with his druids. Thomas O'Loughlin rightly called this confrontation a "biblical trial of divinities."<sup>5</sup> Our first example consists of such an encounter, in which evil shows itself in the form of treason. A fierce conflict between St. Patrick and the king with his druids ends in darkness and death. Then the following occurs:

And the queen went to Patrick and said to him: "O just and powerful man, do not bring death upon the king! For the king will come and bend his knees and adore your lord." And the king came, impelled by fear, and bent his knees before the holy man, and pretended to do him reverence though he did not mean it; and after they had parted and the king had gone a short distance away, he called holy Patrick with false words, wishing to kill him by any means. Patrick, however, knew the wicked thoughts of the wicked king.<sup>6</sup> He blessed his companions, eight men with a boy, in the name

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<sup>4</sup> Muirchú states this explicitly when he describes the functionaries at the king's court: "Hic autem scivos et magos et aurispices et incantatores et *omnis malae artis inventores* habuerat, qui poterant omnia scire et providere ex more gentilitatis et idolatriae antequam essent." I.e. [The king] had around him sages and druids, fortune-tellers and sorcerers, and *the inventors of every evil craft*, who, according to the custom of paganism and idolatry, were able to know and foresee everything before it happened" (Bieler 1979: 74-75, I.10, emphasis mine).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas O'Loughlin (2003). John Carey kindly reminded me of Muirchú's apocryphal sources (in I.17), when he compares the confrontation with that between Peter and Simon Magus (*Passio ss. Petri et Pauli* and *Actus Petri cum Simone*; see Bieler 1979: 88).

<sup>6</sup> Although Bieler uses "wicked" in connection with thoughts as well, *pessimus* is actually used only once in connection with the king.

of Jesus Christ, and started on his way to the king, and the king counted them as they went along, and suddenly they disappeared from the king's eyes; instead, the pagans merely saw eight deer with a fawn going, as it were, into the wilds. And king Loíguire, sad, frightened, and in great shame, went back to Tara at dawn with the few who had escaped. (Bieler 1979: 91, I.18)

The king thus feigns subservience but in fact secretly plans to kill the saint. His false words are contrasted with "the good words"<sup>7</sup> of the saint. Patrick's blessing in the name of Jesus Christ saves lives: the clerics disappear and deer are seen escaping into the wild. The king's evil plan fails and Muirchú describes his emotional reaction: Loegaire experiences sadness, fear and humiliation. The first two kinds of feeling are understandable, but why would he be ashamed?

Joseph Nagy suggests an answer to this question in his brilliant monograph on the religious and cultural changes in Ireland brought about by Christianity and literacy, which arrived hand in hand. Nagy connects this episode with Celtic kingship mythology, in which a hero may become king through successfully hunting deer (Nagy 1997, p. 88; also see: Bromwich 1961). This explains why Loegaire feels humiliated: the escape of the saint and his followers signifies not merely a failed plan but also exposes a failed king. How serious this is should be understood in the light of the fact that kingship was seen as sacred in medieval Irish ideology (see, e.g. Draak 1959; Wormald 1986; McCone, 1990: 107-37). In Celtic kingship mythology, deer are often transformed supernatural beings (Nagy 1997: 88). These are the *áes síde*, "the people of the [hollow] hills," sometimes called fairies or elves. It is possible that these were the ancient gods of pre-Christian times.<sup>8</sup> Another tradition tells about harpers who become transformed into deer when pursued by the king's men. They are also identified as druids with great super-

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<sup>7</sup> The Latin *benedicere*, "to bless," literally means "to speak good, well."

<sup>8</sup> For more information on this theory see Carey 1999 and Borsje 2003. The latter provides another example in which Saint Patrick is associated with the *áes síde*.

natural knowledge (O'Rahilly 1976: 30, 151). It is fascinating that St. Patrick is associated with this specific image, just as the elves and the druids are.

There is, moreover, another element in this tale that appears to have a counterpart in the sagas. Muirchú tells us that the king counts the approaching saint along with his followers. This element of trying to count opponents also occurs in the Old Irish *Battle of Mag Muccrama* from the early ninth century. Supernatural swine (*mucca gentliuchta*) come out of the cave of Crúachan and lay the land waste. The earth they touch becomes barren for seven years. They cannot be killed, but the text suggests another way to put an end to this evil: counting the pigs would make them leave the land. This, however, turns out to be impossible: nobody arrives at the same number. Then the king and queen try to count them. When one pig jumps over their chariot, the queen grabs a leg, but the pig leaves it in her hand together with his skin. As a result, the pigs disappear forever (O Daly 1975: 48-49; cf. Stokes 1894: 470).

The king and queen are portrayed here in their sacral function of protecting the land, and counting is their method. Evil "invaders" destroy the fertility of the land. Where does this evil come from? The only information we have is the place where the swine come from and the adjectives that describe them. The *Battle of Mag Muccrama* identifies the cave of Crúachan as "Ireland's Gate to Hell" (O Daly 1975: 48-49). The Old Irish *Adventurous Journey of Nera* describes the cave as an entrance to the world of the *áes síde* or elves (Meyer 1889). The adjective used for the pigs is *gentliucht*, a term derived from Latin *gentilis*, and means "gentilism, heathenism; especially heathen lore, wizardry, heathen spells etc." (Quin 1983). A variant version of the tale calls them "a herd of druidic swine."<sup>9</sup> In the form of these swine, evil is thus difficult to categorize: the possibilities range from fairy to supernatural to druidic to demonic and infernal.

Returning to Muirchú's tale, we can conclude that just as the king and queen tried to banish the destructive invaders by counting, so King Loegaire tried to count the evil invaders who

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<sup>9</sup> *Muctret drúidechta* (Stokes 1894: 470). This variant version describes the acts of the king and queen to protect their land as a hunt (*selg*) as well.

threatened his land. Looking at it from this perspective overturns the usual hagiographic ideology, in which the saint symbolizes “good” and not “evil.” There is, however, another aspect of evil that we should consider: not only is beauty in the eye of the beholder, but evil is as well.<sup>10</sup> What is evil to me may be good to another. The demons of today may be the gods of yesterday or tomorrow. Muirchú explicitly states that Patrick’s advent means evil to the king and the status quo. In a flashback he tells about the druids who have been prophesying the revolution that will be brought about by Christianity and Patrick. A foreign way of life and a new kingdom will come. This new teaching will “overthrow kingdoms, kill the kings who offer resistance, seduce the crowds, destroy all their gods, banish all the works of their craft, and reign for ever” (Bieler 1979: 77; I.10). Muirchú translates a druidic poem on St. Patrick, which declares that he will chant impiety (*incantabit nefas*; Bieler 1979: 77; I.10). Thus, St. Patrick is described as an evil invader who brings death and destruction.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting that Muirchú, despite the dualism that is common in hagiography, gives expression in some ways to the perspective ascribed to the druids. We notice this perspective also in the terminology used for the supernatural beings venerated by the pre-Christian Irish. When Muirchú writes as the narrator, he refers to them as “false gods” and “idols” and veneration of them as “idolatry,” but when he has the druids speak for themselves, they call these supernatural beings “gods” (Bieler 1979: I.1, I.10, I.13, I.15, [I.10, I.16]). In a description of a con-

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<sup>10</sup> With regard to the metaphor of dirt for evil (see above), compare Mary Douglas who plays with this saying as follows (1991: 2): “So primitive religious fear, together with the idea that it blocks the functioning of the mind, seems to be a false trail for understanding these religions. Hygiene, by contrast, turns out to be an excellent route .... As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear .... [It is because] Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is ... a positive effort to organise the environment.” I am grateful to Jan Platvoet, who reminded me of this passage.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. also the darkness and death that St. Patrick called forth prior to the king’s ambush.

test in signs (*signa*) between a druid and Patrick, Muirchú is, however, unambiguous with respect to his own view of these supernatural beings. In this episode, the druid is first said to utter magic incantations (*incantationes magicae*) that bring snow. When they are up to their waists in snow, the saint challenges the druid to remove it again, but this turns out to be impossible for the next twenty-four hours.<sup>12</sup> Patrick comments that the druid is only capable of doing evil; he cannot perform supernatural acts that produce good (Bieler, 1979: I.20: *Potes malum et non bonum facere*). His blessing then makes the snow disappear. The druid creates a second sign—a very dense darkness—by invoking demons. With this choice of words, Muirchú is writing from the Christian perspective once more but acknowledges the supernatural entities that the druid invokes. The source of his power are the "demons" who are defeated in this "trial of divinities."<sup>13</sup> Patrick's prayer and blessing dispel the darkness.

In this contest, both the druid and Patrick use words as instruments, just as Patrick's blessing is a verbal instrument by which he is able to escape the king's ambush. Words are thus used in the perceived confrontations with evil: as an instrument in a contest and as a form of postulated protection against physical violence. Our second example is another instance of presumed verbal protection.

#### *Protection against Evil by Using Words of Power*

In medieval Ireland, a certain type of rhetorical prose was used for protection against evil. This type of text was known as a "breastplate," *lorica* in Latin and *lúirech* in Irish (see Gougaud 1911-1912). James Kenney describes these texts as "litany-like prayers," "strange pieces" in which "the ideas and *formulae* of

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. the second section of this paper as well.

<sup>13</sup> Muirchú also refers to Satan and the devil when describing a supernatural attack and evil inspiration. In the first instance, St. Patrick suffers from an experience that we might call sleep paralysis or a nightmare and, in the second instance, a king is said to commit suicide at the devil's instigation (see Bieler 1979: I.2, I.12). Patrick's *Confessio* also contains a description of Satan's nocturnal attack.



pagan incantations were converted to the use of Christian devotion" (Kenney 1979: 254). He also suggests an inverted development, in which "genuine hymns" were used as *loricae* with "magical properties."<sup>14</sup>

The name *lorica* probably owes its existence to biblical descriptions of spiritual armor. One could think of the following passage from the New Testament<sup>15</sup> (since the medieval Irish used Latin versions of the Bible, we will translate from the Vulgate here):

Put on the armor of God,  
 that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil,  
 For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood  
 but against principalities and powers,  
 against the rulers of the world of this darkness,  
 against the spirits of wickedness in the high places.  
 Therefore take unto you the armor of God,  
 that you may be able to resist in the evil day,  
 and to stand perfect in all things.  
 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth,  
 and having on the breastplate (*lorica*) of justice,  
 and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace:  
 in all things taking the shield of faith,  
 wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the  
 most wicked one.  
 And take unto you the helmet of salvation,  
 and the sword of the Spirit,

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<sup>14</sup> Also see Draak 1955: 10. The origin and development of this genre needs further study, especially in the light of recent insights in Celtic and religious studies.

<sup>15</sup> Predecessors of this imagery can be found in the Tenach or Old Testament. See, for instance, Psalm 90 in which God's shield protects the believer from the terror of the night, the arrow flying by day, the pestilence walking in darkness and the midday demon (the Hebrew original refers to destruction that devastates at noon); and see the imagery in Isaiah 59:17: God putting on justice as a breastplate, a helmet of salvation, the garments of vengeance, and zeal as a cloak.

which is the word of God.

By all prayer and supplication praying at all times in the Spirit.

(Ephesians 6:11-18)

With these divine attributes, the readers are exhorted to defend themselves against spiritual enemies. These postulated demonic adversaries are not of flesh and blood. We see here a clear dichotomy, just as in hagiography: God and good versus evil spirits and darkness. The second sign of the druid, the calling forth of *tenebrae*, with St. Patrick praying for sunlight can, therefore, be seen as a symbolic statement as well. Darkness was associated with evil, and hence, the night was also connected with evil. Thus, in I Thessalonians 5:8, Christians are placed in the category of the day:

But let us, who are of the day, be sober,

having on the breastplate (*lorica*) of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

A famous Irish specimen of this spiritual armor is the eighteenth-century *Faíd Fiada*, "The Deer's Cry" (Binchy 1966: 234-37; Carey 1998: 128). Before studying its contents, I will first discuss its reception history.

The title "The Deer's Cry" stems from a Middle Irish preface to the text in the *Liber Hymnorum* from the eleventh century. According to this preface, St. Patrick composed "The Deer's Cry" in order to escape from the ambush laid by King Loegaire and his men (cf. the episode discussed above).<sup>16</sup> The preface not only calls this text a hymn but also credits it with supernatural power. Two claims were made: first, the text protected Patrick and his followers by their transformation into deer or by illusion.<sup>17</sup> Second, the text will protect anyone who recites it from danger.

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<sup>16</sup> "Saint Patrick's Breastplate" is an alternative, later title. As Draak (1955: 9) points out, an earlier but uncertain link between the text and St. Patrick is found in the Book of Armagh (an Irish manuscript dated 807). There are four honors due to Patrick from all Irish monasteries and churches; the fourth is: *canticum eius Scotticum semper canere*, "to chant his Gaelic [i.e. Irish] canticle always" (Bieler 1979: 166-67).

<sup>17</sup> See the third section of this paper as well.

Maartje Draak connects this text with early Irish spells that are said to work for a day and a night (Draak 1955: 9-12). One of her examples is the abovementioned magic incantation by the druid who could not remove the snow until the same time the next day. Similarly, she argues, it was believed that the person who recited this *lorica* would be protected from harm for twenty-four hours. Draak points out that not only does the preface prescribe daily recitation but the text itself also refers regularly to "today." The preface calls the text a hymn, but Draak sees it as a charm. She is aware of the New Testament background of the term *lorica* but points out that this genre is part of the twilight zone between the pre-Christian and the Christian worldviews.<sup>18</sup> Although Christian elements form a part of it, she rejects the term "prayer" for this text. Her argument is that the text does not ask for protection but accomplishes it. Uttering the words causes protection. Nobody is addressed; there is no Thou. The only exception is the final stanza in Latin (*Salus tua, Domine, sit semper nobiscum*), which she assumes to be a later addition (Draak 1955: 10-11).

Draak sees "The Deer's Cry" as the most pagan representative of the genre of *loricae* (Draak 1955: 10). John Carey, however, sees the text as rising "well above the semi-magical pragmatism of many of its other surviving representatives" (Carey 1998: 127). Carey's qualification of "semi-magical pragmatism" seems to refer to the same phenomenon that Draak emphasized: texts that are believed to offer protection when they are voiced. Carey compares the genre with incantations. The postulated efficacy of both kinds of text depends on exhaustive enumeration (Carey 1998: 127). Supernatural protective entities, body parts to be protected and dangers from which one wants to be protected are listed. The person who utters "The Deer's Cry" does not seem to invoke supernatural beings or natural phenomena but to gird oneself with their presumed power and virtues. Nonetheless, Carey defines *loricae* as "protective pray-

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<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Wolfgang Meid (1990: 27) writes: "The transition from a 'druidic' to a Christian worldview is clarified by two poems, both belonging to the category of magical armor called *lorica* ('breastplate'): they are the invocations for protection from enemies and dangers" (translated from the original German). See also Gougaud 1912: 115-22.

ers” and calls the reciter a “suppliant,” who is “suspended in prayerful submission to an ubiquitous Deity” (Carey 1998: 127).

The basis for this different reading of the text is found in the Middle Irish preface. We saw that Draak focused on the exhortation to recite the *lorica* daily. Carey, however, takes the essential feature of spiritual engagement into account, which is demanded during recitation. This removes the grounds for qualifying the postulated process of protective efficacy as automatic. We find, embedded between references to the legendary origin of the text,<sup>19</sup> a declaration of its ongoing, daily use and miraculous effect:

And it is a breastplate of faith,  
to protect body and soul against demons and people<sup>20</sup> and vices.  
If anyone recites it every day, with his mind fixed wholly upon  
God, demons will not stand against him,  
it will protect him against poison and envy (=the evil eye),<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The structure of the preface is as follows. We first read about the author, time and cause of the hymn. Then the quoted declaration follows, after which the preface concludes with the description of the miracle worked by Patrick’s singing the hymn called “The Deer’s Cry.”

<sup>20</sup> Carey translates this as “men.”

<sup>21</sup> Another *lorica*, associated with Saint Brendan (Moran 1872: 27-44), mentions the evil eye explicitly after poison and envy in a list of evils: “... defende me Domine ab igne, a fulgure, a tonitruo, a grandine, a nive, a pluvia, a periculis, a terraemotu, ab omnibus malis, a veneficiis, ab invidiis, et a malis oculis, auribus, et a periculis lacu et tenebrarum, a demonio, et a sagitta volante in die, a negotio perambulante in tenebris (Moran 1872: 42). I.e. “... defend me, Lord, from fire, from lightning, from thunder, from hail, from snow, from rain, from dangers, from earthquakes, from all evils, from poisons (or: magic potions), from envies and from evil eyes, ears (?), and from the dangers of the pit and of darkness, from the demon, and from the arrow that flies by day, from the trouble (or: pestilence) that walks through the darkness.” This last part quotes Psalm 90:5-6, which was traditionally sung at night for protection against danger (cf. above). Incidentally, Gougaud (1912: 103) quotes from a different manuscript, which reads *ab omnibus hominibus malis et veneficiis* and which refers to the midday demon from the Greek (and its Latin) translation of Psalm 90.

it will guard him against sudden death,  
it will be a breastplate for his soul after death.<sup>22</sup>

Once more, the biblical background is clear: a breastplate of faith (and love) is mentioned in I Thessalonians 5:8 and a similar exhortation on spiritual engagement during prayer is found in Ephesians 6:18 (see above). The latter text suggests divine armor against spiritual enemies; the preface to the Irish text promises safety not only from spiritual danger but also from enemies of flesh and blood. The protection of body and soul against demons, people and vices has been taken over from the *lorica* itself. The demarcation between spiritual and corporal danger is not always easy to draw, as we can see, for instance, concerning the danger “envy.” It should be noted that *format*, “envy” (which Carey translates as “jealousy”), could also be translated as “the evil eye” (see Borsje and Kelly 2003: 3, 29-31). People who looked at something with admiration or envy were believed to be able to do physical damage to the object or person at which they were looking (cf. also Latin *invideo*). The evil eye was very much feared and people took verbal and ritual precautions against its effect. The mention of *format* in the preface may be based upon the *lorica* itself, although *foirmdechaib aicnid* is difficult to translate (see below).

Is this *lorica* a pre-Christian charm with Christian interpolations (Draak) or a prayer for protection in the form of an incantation (Carey)? I propose that the terms attributed later to the text, such as hymn, charm and prayer be left aside and that more neutral terms be used. We are dealing with “words of power”: words that are believed to be capable of influencing reality in a material sense, although not through empirically verifiable methods. These words are believed to have the power to transform reality either through some intrinsic power they possess or through the agency of a supernatural entity (Fanger 1999: 98). Turning now to “The Deer’s Cry,” we notice a diverse range of presumed entities whose postulated protective power is drawn upon:

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<sup>22</sup> Carey 1998: 130. For an edition of the Irish text, see Stokes and Strachan 1987: II. 354.

1. Today I gird myself  
With a mighty power:  
invocation of the Trinity,  
belief in the Threeness,  
confession<sup>23</sup> of the Oneness,  
in the Creator's presence.
2. Today I gird myself  
With the power of Christ's birth together with his baptism,  
With the power of his crucifixion together with his burial,  
With the power of his resurrection together with his ascension,  
With the power of his descent to pronounce the judgment of  
Doomsday.
3. Today I gird myself  
With the power of the order of the cherubim,  
With the obedience of angels,  
With the ministry of the archangels,  
With the expectation of resurrection for the sake of a reward,  
With the prayers of patriarchs,  
With the predictions of prophets,  
With the precepts of apostles,  
With the faith of confessors,  
With the innocence of holy virgins,  
With the deeds of righteous men.
4. Today I gird myself  
With the strength of heaven,  
Light of the sun,  
Brightness of the moon,  
Brilliance of fire,  
Speed of lightning,  
Swiftness of wind,  
Depth of sea,  
Firmness of earth,  
Stability of rock.

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<sup>23</sup> Carey translates the Irish term (*faisitiu* in the dative singular) as "affirmation" here and in stanza 8 as "proclamation." I have replaced his translations with the primary meaning given in Quin 1983.

5. Today I gird myself  
 With the strength of God      to direct me.  
 The might of God              to exalt me,  
 The mind of God                to lead me,  
 The eye of God                 to watch over me,  
 The ear of God                 to hear me,  
 The word of God                to speak to me,  
 The hand of God                to defend me,  
 The path of God                to go before me,  
 The shield of God              to guard me,  
 The help of God                to protect me,
- Against the snares of demons,  
 Against the temptations of vices,  
 Against the envious ones by nature (?),<sup>24</sup>  
 Against everyone who wishes me ill,  
 Far and near,  
 Among few and among many.
6. Today I interpose all these powers between myself  
 And every harsh pitiless power which may come against my  
 body and my soul,  
 Against the incantations<sup>25</sup> of false prophets,  
 Against the black laws of paganism,  
 Against the crooked laws of heretics,  
 Against the encirclement of idolatry,

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<sup>24</sup> The edited text reads *foirmdechaib*, which Carey emends as *foirm-thechtaib*. Carey translates this as "against the tendencies (?) of nature." The manuscripts read *irnechtaib*, *foirmdechaib*, *formdechaib*. I base my tentative translation on the translation of *formtech* in the dictionary (Quin 1983) as "envious," where this text is quoted as an example. Presumably, *format*, "envy," or "the evil eye," in the Middle Irish preface may have been influenced by this phrase. What is mentioned here might refer to people who possess the evil eye and, therefore, are envious by nature. Specific possessors of the evil eye are mentioned in a Middle Irish commentary on an Old Irish law fragment (see Borsje and Kelly 2003: 31, 34-39).

<sup>25</sup> Carey translates this plural form of *tinchetal* as "predictions," but Quin (1983) defines the term as "the act of casting spells, incantation." Many of the examples in this dictionary ascribe this act to druids.

Against the spells of women and smiths and druids,  
 Against every knowledge which harms one's<sup>26</sup> body and soul.

7. May Christ protect me today  
 Against poison,  
 Against burning,  
 Against drowning,  
 Against wounding,<sup>27</sup>  
 That many rewards may come to me.  
 May Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
 Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
 Christ to my right, Christ to my left,  
 Christ where I lie down, Christ where I sit, Christ where I  
 stand,  
 Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me,  
 Christ in every eye which looks on me,  
 Christ in every ear which hears me.
8. Today I gird myself  
 with a mighty power:  
 invocation of the Trinity,  
 belief in the Threeness,  
 confession of the Oneness,  
 in the Creator's presence.
- Salvation is of the Lord, Salvation is of the Lord, Salvation is  
 of Christ,  
 may your salvation, Lord, be always with us.

(Carey 1998: 130-35)

The text consists of eight stanzas in Irish; the first and the last are identical. The conclusion is formed by an adaptation of the

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<sup>26</sup> Carey translates “a man's.”

<sup>27</sup> It is tempting to see this list reflected in the Middle Irish preface: poison would refer to poison and envy (= the evil eye; for the association of the evil eye with poison, see Borsje and Kelly 2003: 5-9); burning, drowning, and wounding—this trio is well known as the motif of three-fold death (see, e.g. Ward 1970; Radner 1983; Wiley 2001: 277-78)—would refer to sudden death.



last verse of Psalm 3 in Latin.<sup>28</sup> Each stanza covers a certain meta-empirical or empirical field of which the perceived powers are called forth for the sake of protection: stanza 1 refers to the Trinity; 2 to events from the life of Christ, 3 to angelic and human orders, 4 to nature, 5 to God, 7 to Christ and 8 to the Trinity again, rounding off with the Latin prayer to Christ. Stanzas 5, 6 and 7 enumerate the evils from which one wants to be protected.

Applying Claire Fanger's definition of "words of power" to this text, I conclude that these words are not regarded as having an intrinsic power but constitute an appeal to the strengths of supernatural entities, such as the Trinity, God and Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is as if the text surrounds the evils listed literally with divine protection: they are enclosed by a description of God as an anthropomorphic guard with a shield (stanza 5) and by a portrayal of Christ as an invisible force surrounding the speaker on all sides, perhaps comparable to an enveloping mist (stanza 7). Stanza 5 gives the general outline of "evil": the traps ascribed to evil supernatural beings, the seduction of sinful behavior, and people thought to be harmful. Stanza 6 puts the invoked powers as a kind of shield between the speaker and the presumed evil powers. Interestingly, stanza 6 describes verbal and conceptual danger. What the speaker fears are incantations; wrong kinds of laws either within or outside of Christianity; "words of power" from women, smiths and druids; and "fatal knowledge," thought to lead people astray, thereby ruining one's life on earth and one's soul after death. Stanza 7 enumerates mainly physical evils.

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<sup>28</sup> Carey 1998: 129, 135. This psalm, which describes God's protection against one's enemies, is traditionally part of the night office (Taft 1986: 118, 134, 169, 199, 221, 230, 279). The last verse reads: "Domini est salus et super populum tuum benedictio tua"; i.e., "Salvation is of the Lord and your blessing upon your people." Verse 4 of the translation of the Hebrew psalm also refers to divine, spiritual armor: "tu autem Domine clipeus circa me"; i.e., "but you, O God, are a shield around me." This psalm is one of the "maledictory psalms" (see Wiley 2001: 265). I am indebted to Martin McNamara, who drew my attention to this alternative ritual medieval Irish use of the psalm.

Again, we see druids described as people associated with evil, casting spells. Women are also mentioned in this context: this may refer not only to human representatives but also to supernatural women.<sup>29</sup> The exact same expression (*brechta(eli) ban*, "the spells of women")—is used in the Old Irish *Adventure of Connlae* (see McCone 2000). A king calls his druid when a woman from the *síd* threatens to lure his son away. He complains about a deceitful contest with invisible beings: his son will be abducted by evil moves and women's spells (McCone 2000: 149-56). The woman is invisible to human beings, but they can hear her. The only one who sees her is the son of the king and he falls in love with her. The chanting of the druid expels the woman temporarily.<sup>30</sup> After a month,<sup>31</sup> her voice is heard again. Ironically, she now warns the king of druids' spells in a prophecy on the coming of St. Patrick:

His law will soon come to you.

He will destroy *the spells of the druids (brichtu druad)* of base teaching

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Carey 1998: 133, n. 13. The possibility that women of flesh and blood are meant should not be ruled out, despite the verbal parallel in the Old Irish tale mentioned below. In another eighth-century *lorica*, called *Cétnad n-Aise*, "A Chant of Long Life" (Carey 1998: 136-38), dangerous women are mentioned among thieves and warriors: *Nim-millethar teól, ná cuire ban, ná cuire buiden*, "May no thief destroy me, nor a company of women, nor a company of warriors" (Carey 1998: 137). Another *lorica* in Irish from Klosterneuburg, Codex regularum Ms. 587, from the eleventh or twelfth century also refers to women's spells (Zeuss 1871: 954-55; Stokes 1873-1875: 112-15) and possibly another mentions women's judgements (O'Kelleher 1910: 236-37, 239).

<sup>30</sup> This is another example of the motif of spells being effective for a certain period of time.

<sup>31</sup> During this month Connlae, the son, neither eats nor drinks. The only thing he digests is an apple thrown to him by the woman. This miraculous apple stays whole, no matter how much he eats from it. One could compare this narrative motif with the special diet of Ethne of the Túatha Dé Danann described in part 3 of this paper. Both Connlae and Ethne are going to migrate from one world to another. For a study on similar motifs as representing *rites de passage*, see Wiley 1995.

In front of the black, bewitching Devil.  
(McCone 2000: 181 (cf. 122); emphasis mine)

At the end of the tale the woman and the young man disappear in a crystal ship,<sup>32</sup> never to be seen again. This text dates from the eighth century (McCone 2000: 29). It illustrates the dangers attributed to spells by women and druids, and refers to Patrick's law. Such spells and pagan and heretical laws are called evils in "The Deer's Cry," which is also from the eighth century. The narrative, however, is not as clear in distinguishing between good and evil as the *lorica* is.<sup>33</sup>

*The Forces of Darkness, Mist and Invisibility*

In the first part of this paper I pointed out a similarity between Patrick, druids and elves: their talents as described in the literature include their transformation into deer. The textual tradition is, however, rather subtle on this point. Muirchú merely refers to what witnesses have seen: the king no longer sees the clerics and the Irish see deer disappear. Both invisibility and transformation seem to be implied. The motif of the fawn strengthens the idea of transformation: it would refer to Patrick's young pupil Benignus. His name in Irish, Benén, moreover, hints at *bennán*, the Irish word for "fawn, calf." The double motif of transformation and invisibility is also present in the Middle Irish *Life of Patrick*. According to this text, Patrick's blessing calls forth a *dícheltair*, "a covering, concealment, disguise, invisibility, an invisibility spell." The text, however, also explicitly identifies the deer and the fawn as Patrick, his men and the boy (Mulchrone 1939: 30-31; Stokes 1887: 46-47). The Middle Irish preface to the *lorica* says that Patrick and his men looked like deer in the eyes of their enemies.<sup>34</sup> This seems to

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<sup>32</sup> For the motif of boats from diverse materials and their symbolic meaning, see Wooding 2001.

<sup>33</sup> There are many ways to view this tale; for a survey of the literature and the discussion, see McCone 2000: 47-119.

<sup>34</sup> Stokes and Strachan 1987: II, 354: "Conid annsin atchessa fiad lucht na netarnade comtis aige alta 7 iarróe ina ndiaid .i. Benen"; Carey 1998: 130: "so that it seemed to those who lay in wait that they were wild

hint that the transformation was a matter of simple illusion. The title, *Fáid fiada*, "The Deer's Cry," might also contain a word play on *féth fia(da)*. This concept refers to invisibility and is connected with druids, elves and the Túatha Dé Danann in Middle Irish and later texts.<sup>35</sup>

The Túatha Dé Danann are supernatural inhabitants of Ireland. There are many medieval and modern speculations on their nature and origin. According to the Early Modern Irish tale "The Fosterage of the House of the Two Vessels" (Dobbs 1930; Duncan 1932),<sup>36</sup> the Túatha Dé Danann live in the hollow hills of Ireland. Each hollow hill has a leader. Just as the Irish are said to have a high king, so do the supernatural beings. Their high king is called Manannán mac Lir, who lives elsewhere, in the Land of Promise. He is more powerful and knowledgeable than the others. Interestingly, the Túatha Dé Danann are also said to venerate gods.<sup>37</sup> In fact, this text shows a clear hierarchy. The Túatha Dé Danann are powerful beings (*cumachtaig*, § 3), but Manannán is superior to them: he is very powerful (*mórcumachtach*, §§ 2, 9). There is, however, someone who is superior to him, someone who is almighty (*uilechumachtach*; §§ 4, 9): God the high king who created heaven, earth, sea and the four elements (§ 4). Manannán knew of this superior God long before the arrival of Christianity. He tells his protégé Oengus of the ten orders of angels and of the fall and banish-

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deer with a fawn following them (that was Benén)."

<sup>35</sup> According to a legal commentary (Binchy 1978: V, 1612, ll. p. 8-9), druids are said to practice the *féth fia*. *Fé* or *féth fiada* (or *fia(d)*) is said to make the hollow hills (*side*) and their inhabitants (*áes side*) invisible to human eyes, except on Samain, the feast of the beginning of winter, as described in e.g. "The Boyhood Deeds of Finn" (Meyer 1881-1883: 202; Nagy 1985: 216) and "The Tales of the Elders of Ireland" (Stokes 1900: 143, 318; Dooley and Roe 1999: 145-46). An example concerning the Túatha Dé Danann is discussed in this third part of the paper.

<sup>36</sup> The text dates from the fourteenth century (Murphy 1961: 32).

<sup>37</sup> The tale refers to this idea as follows: they swear by "the beautiful gods of adoration"; Oengus asks whether there is "a god over our gods" (§ 4). Later, Patrick tells Oengus to "shun vain gods" (§ 12). In this text, the Túatha Dé Danann are, therefore, neither gods nor demons, but in other texts they may be identified as the former or the latter.

ment of the tenth order through pride (see McCone 1990: 149-51). These angels are now demons. Here we find a fascinating weaving together of traditions. Manannán does not call his own people demons, but there is a well-known tradition that does indeed identify the Túatha Dé Danann with these fallen angels (Carey 1990: 32, n. 8).<sup>38</sup>

Manannán is portrayed in this text as a prophet, high king and a culture hero. He instructs the Túatha Dé Danann about their dwellings and teaches them powerful supernatural arts. These include the *féth fiada*, by means of which the Túatha Dé Danann became invisible to human eyes (§ 2). The *féth fiada* is mentioned again at the end of the tale where the protagonist is a beautiful, charming, modest girl of the Túatha Dé Danann, called Ethne. After a visitor insults her, she suddenly cannot eat and drink any more. The only thing that she is capable of digesting is the milk from two special cows from India, milked by her into a golden vessel (§ 7). Oengus owns one cow and Manannán the other. Ethne lives alternately in their houses so that she can have access to this special food. Manannán explains that the insult changed her nature: she has become different from the Túatha Dé Danann on two counts. First, an angel has taken the place of her accompanying demon. Second, she now venerates the Trinity instead of the arts of druids and devilry (§§ 8, 9).

This text associates the Túatha Dé Danann with demons in a creative way: they are portrayed as possessed by demons and their religion is characterized as “magic” connected with druids and devils.

Ethne lives in this way until the time of King Loegaire (§9). St. Patrick arrives and, the text tells us, he banishes the druids and demons from Ireland (§ 10). The Irish become Christians, but the Túatha Dé Danann live on as if nothing has changed.

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<sup>38</sup> Another interesting detail in this part of the text is that God needed words of power to drive the evil angels from heaven. This charm (*sén*) was also used by the Túatha Dé Danann to take Ireland from previous inhabitants (the Fir Bolg), and the Irish used it to take the kingship from the Túatha Dé Danann (§ 4). Manannán teaches the charm to his protégé, who uses it to take over the most impressive hollow hill in the land (§ 5), which caused envy among all the powerful Túatha Dé Danann (§ 3).

One day, Eithne is swimming with her friends in the River Boyne. They are all invisible, but Eithne suddenly loses her *féth fiada*. She does not notice that her friends have left. A cleric sees her and they talk together. She tells him that from now on she belongs to the people of God and no longer to the Túatha Dé Danann. His psalms sound more beautiful to her than the wonderful music from the Land of Promise. When she bends over his book, she is suddenly able to read (§§ 10, 11).

After a while, the Túatha Dé Danann come to look for her. She sees them, but they remain hidden to the cleric because of the *féth fiada* (§ 11). The cleric summons Patrick to the scene to protect her, and Oengus and Patrick quarrel over her. When Oengus threatens to abduct the girl, Patrick replies: "The strength and the power of the Lord from me against you" (§ 12).<sup>39</sup> God's power is thus invoked verbally and used as a shield, according to the tale. The girl stays with Patrick but dies of sadness, after which her soul goes to heaven.

The tale is concluded<sup>40</sup> with a promise by Patrick that the telling of this tale will bring many blessings to those who listen to it carefully. Here again, words are credited with tremendous power: telling the tale of the girl from the Túatha Dé Danann would bring success in enterprises and family life, safety during journeys across water, during law suits and hunts and protection from fights and weapons (§ 12).

Invisibility was traditionally associated with supernatural beings. St. Patrick also used it, according to the older texts that I have discussed. In this Early Modern Irish tale, however, the invisibility of the Túatha Dé Danann became a symbol of its incompatibility with Christianity. The text states that the Túatha Dé Danann could join this new religious order, whereas, unambiguous representatives of evil, in this tale druids and demons, must leave the land.

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<sup>39</sup> *Nert 7 cumhachta in Choimdedh uaimsi att agaidh* (Duncan 1932: 201). The word *nert* in the dative singular is often used in "The Deer's Cry" to indicate the powers that are invoked.

<sup>40</sup> It ends in the usual medieval Irish fashion by giving the title of the tale at the end. The promise of Patrick is, therefore, clearly an addition to the tale.

### *Conclusion*

In an earlier study, I noted that there were at least two options for dealing with evil according to medieval Irish texts (Borsje 1996: 331-34). The first was to look for safety and security by formulating rules that allow people to locate and avoid evil. The second was to interpret the meaning of evil and give it a place in one's worldview. The way to cope with the evil that we have discussed in the present paper is to utter "words of power." The texts credit such words with some kind of supernatural power that was believed to be capable of transforming reality and bringing about safety.

Being confronted with evil may cause feelings of despair and lead to passivity and depression. Coping mechanisms help one fight these feelings. The belief in words of power was probably such a source of support for medieval Irish people when faced with evil.

To return to the metaphor with which we began: this is a first step in our continuous task of cleaning. In our secularized view of the world and with our knowledge of the monstrous evils of our day and age, we realize only too well that it is just a first step.

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