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JACQUELINE BORSJE

## The ‘terror of the night’ and the Morrígain: Shifting faces of the supernatural

### Introduction

A rich man has a beautiful but poor woman as his lover. They have two sons together. One day he tells her that he is going to marry a rich woman, chosen by his family. He will take the children with him. She weeps and wails like a madwoman, but it is to no avail.

Then she picks up the children and goes to the river, where she drowns them. She falls down, and dies in grief. In heaven, she is welcomed because she has suffered. But before they let her in, she must return to collect the souls of her children and bring them with her.

So she goes to the river. Her long hair flows over the riverbanks; her long fingers grope deep into the water and she calls out for her children.

Parents tell their children not to go to the river after dark, because the Weeping Woman might mistake them for her own children and take them with her forever.<sup>1</sup>

In this Mexican tale, we see shifting imagery of a woman. A lovely but unfortunate woman transforms into a nocturnal ghost, forever restless, lamenting, looking for her children. At the same time, we are told about a horrible creature that might harm living children. She reminds us of other mythological supernatural women, such as the Jewish Lilith and the Greek Lamia, whose children were killed, causing them to become relentless, murdering demons.<sup>2</sup> The narratives portray these women in a linear chronological development from happy to sad to horrible and from beautiful to ugly, but somehow these women never seem entirely to lose their original characteristics. Their representations in text and art shift between the various stages in a

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<sup>1</sup> For several versions of the tale, see Pinkola Estés (1992: 301–303, 490). I am grateful to John Carey for his helpful comments upon a previous version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> For more about them, see below.

non-linear way. In other words: we are dealing with coexisting, diverse images of the supernatural. We tend to emphasise one aspect,<sup>3</sup> but often there are several sides to supernatural beings that are equally ‘true’.

This tendency is sometimes also noticeable with regard to early Irish mythological beings. The subject of this contribution is the supernatural woman called the Morrígain, who is usually classified as a War Goddess. Máire Herbert (1996: 141), however, has rightly pleaded for a fresh, open-minded study of the primary sources about supernatural women, without preconceived ideas about their function. In this paper the imagery of the supernatural in the Old Irish poem *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*<sup>4</sup> will be studied. I hope to show that the poem represents not only familiar images from the Irish background of the Morrígain, but that we may also detect unfamiliar, foreign faces of this figure. This shifting of images makes the Morrígain into a more complex and a richer symbol than merely a supernatural representative of war.

### 1. The supernatural in *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*

*Reicne Fothaid Canainne* is a poem,<sup>5</sup> which Fothad Canainne—a Connacht leader of a band of warriors (*fian*)—is supposed to have uttered after his death. A prose text, extant in Old and Middle Irish, gives information on the events preceding his death.<sup>6</sup> Fothad is at war with a Munster *fian* leader, called Ailill mac Eogain.<sup>7</sup> Fothad desires Ailill’s wife, a beautiful woman whose name is not mentioned. She demands a bride price and then agrees to meet Fothad in a tryst. On the night of their meeting, however, a battle between the two *fianna* ensues, in which Fothad is killed. The woman who came to the tryst finds herself in a grave mound, listening to a poem uttered by the severed head of her lover.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This might be due to us being influenced by Classical categorisations, in which we find several gods and goddesses bound up with a single function. It should be noted, however, that this unifying system is often contradicted by, for instance, textual evidence, art and cultic details.

<sup>4</sup> *Reicne Fothaid Canainne* was edited from Dublin, Royal Irish Academy (RIA), MS B.IV.2 and translated by Kuno Meyer (Meyer 1910: 10–17). Meyer dates the poem to the end of the ninth or the beginning of the tenth century (ibid. 1), but elsewhere assigns it to the eighth century (ibid. xix). For a perceptive analysis of this poem as an example of a spectral dialogue with the past, see Nagy (1997: 299–303).

<sup>5</sup> The term *reicne* indicates a certain type of poem.

<sup>6</sup> The Old Irish version was edited from Dublin, National Library Ireland, formerly Phillips MS 9748, now G 7 and translated by Vernam Hull (1936: 401–404), who dates its archetype to the first half of the eighth century or even earlier (ibid. 400). For an edition and translation of the later recension from Dublin, Trinity College Dublin (henceforth TCD), H.3.17 (1336), see Meyer (1910: 4–9).

<sup>7</sup> He is called Ailill Flann Bec in the later recension.

<sup>8</sup> *Iss ant cechain cent Fothith in recne seo dan mnae bue isin firt*, ‘Then the head of Fothath sang this *recne* to the woman who was in the grave-mound’ (Hull 1936: 401, 403). She is described as carrying her lover’s head to his grave in the later Middle Irish recension.

In the Old Irish poem, central to this paper, it is the spectral shape of Fothad (§49), who addresses the woman on the battle field. He refers to his bloody corpse and unwashed head being elsewhere (§2). Before focusing on the supernatural beings mentioned in this poem, we will first look at its structure. A schematic survey is given below; the numbers refer to the stanzas.

- 1a. Woman, do not speak to me
- 1b–7. A lament about his death
  - 1b. I look back at what happened at [Linn] Féic.
  - 2. My bloody corpse lies beside Leitir Dá mBruach; my unwashed head is among the slaughtered warriors.
  - 3. My tryst with you was a tryst with death.
  - 4. My death at Féic was destined for me.
  - 5. Our last meeting was doomed (but I do not blame you).
  - 6. If we had known, we would have avoided this tryst.
  - 7. I was generous during my life.
- 8–19. A lament about the death of his men
  - 12–19. Description of his men
- 20. A lament about the present situation
- 21–22. The battle and death of Fothad & Ailill
- 23. Warning to the woman
  - Watch out for the terror of the night
  - Do not have a conversation with a dead man
  - Go home with my treasures
- 24–41a. Description of the treasures
- 41b–44. Warning to the woman
  - 41b–43. Watch out for the Morrígain
  - 44. I am in danger; I cannot protect you
  - Go home while parting is still fair.
- 45. His departure in the morning
  - Go home; the night is ending
- 46–47. Request for a memorial
  - 46. Remember this *reicne*
  - 47. Put a stone on my grave
- 48–49. The farewell
  - 48a. My imminent departure and the torture of my soul by a dark one
  - 48b. Only the adoration of the King of Heaven matters
  - 49a. The dark blackbird's laughter to the believers
  - 49b. My speech and face are spectral
  - Woman, do not speak to me.

The poem is addressed to the woman. The dead man contradicts himself regularly, which heightens the emotionality of the poem. His tryst with the woman turned out to be a tryst with death. The woman was the cause of this and yet, he does not blame her. His death was destined, but if he had known this outcome, he would have avoided the tryst. He speaks of his love for his men and the woman, and asks her to remember his poem and make his gravestone. If she does this, her love would not be a waste of time, because she would create two everlasting memorials for him. Yet, he concludes that earthly love is a folly—the only thing that counts is the adoration of the King of Heaven.

There are several supernatural entities mentioned in this poem, such as the spectral shape of Fothad, the terror of the night, the Morrígain, the dark one, and the King of Heaven. Three of them will be discussed in this paper: first, the terror of the night; second, the Morrígain, and third, the dark creature mentioned at the end of the poem. I will try to show that the imagery of these three is interrelated or, in other words, how the faces of the supernatural shift and mix.

## 2. The terror of the night and Irish *úatha*

Fothad starts his poem by silencing the woman. After lamenting the death of himself and his men, he warns her of danger threatening her:

Ná tuinithe aide[h]e úath  
illeircc eter lectaibh cúan,  
ní fiu cobraim fri fer marb,  
fodruim dot daim, ber lat m'fadhb (Meyer 1910: 12, §23)

Do not wait for the terror of night  
on the battle-field among the resting-places of the hosts;  
one should not hold converse with a dead man,  
betake thee to thy house, carry my spoils with thee!  
(Meyer 1910: 13, §23)

What is this 'terror of night'? Does this merely refer to the general human fear of the dark night, augmented by the presence of bloody corpses on the battlefield? The *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (DIL) translates *úatha* as 'fear, horror, terror; a horrible or terrible thing'.<sup>9</sup> Fothad does not seem to refer to merely an emotion here, but to a supernatural being that may endanger the woman. She must hurry, because it is somewhere on the battlefield.

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<sup>9</sup> See DIL, s.v. 1. *úatha*.

There are several descriptions of *úatha* in early Irish literature, of which I give a selection here.<sup>10</sup> *Úatha* are extremely frightening beings, often associated with battle. The *Lebor na hUidre* (LU) version of *Fled Bricrenn*, ‘The feast of Bricriu’, supplies the following portrayal of *úatha*:

No sgrechat na geniti dó. Immacomsinitar dóib. Brúitir a gai 7 bristir a sciath 7 rebthair a étach immi. 7 nos curat 7 nos traethat inna geniti hé. Amein a Cu *Chulaind* or Láeg. a midlach thruag. a siriti lethguill dochóid do gal<sup>7</sup> do gaisced in tan ata urtrochta<sup>11</sup> not malartat. sía[ba]rthar co urtrachta<sup>12</sup> im Choin *Culaind* andaide 7 imsoi cusna húathaib ocus nos *cerband* 7 nos bruend iat combo lán in glend día fulriud (Best & Bergin 1929: 268, ll. 8875–8882).

The *geniti* screech at him. They wrestle with each other. His spear is fragmented and his shield is destroyed and his clothes are torn around him. And the *geniti* beat and subdue him. ‘Well then, Cú Chulainn’, said Lóg, ‘wretched coward, one-eyed sprite, your fury and your valour have gone since it is spectres that ruin you’. Thereupon Cú Chulainn is contorted in a spectral way and he turns towards the terrors and he hacks and fragments them so that the valley was full with their blood.

Apparently, the terms *urtrochta* or *airdrecha*, ‘spectres’, and *úatha* were seen as suitable synonyms for *geniti*, ‘(female?) creatures’. Previously in the text at line 8872, the supernatural fighters are referred to as *geniti glinne*, ‘(female?) creatures of the valley’.<sup>13</sup> After the fight, they are referred to as ‘dark enemies’ (*lochnamait*; line 8894). Their spectral nature seems to be expressed by the term *airdrecha*. It could be that the term *geniti* indicates their female gender, because a gloss in *Lebor na hUidre* by scribe H (see below) and glossaries explain *genit* and/or *gen* as ‘woman’.

It is worthwhile to have a closer look at this lemma in the glossaries. We read in *O’Mulconry’s Glossary*:<sup>14</sup>

gen .i. benglynnon .i. foglaid .i. banfoglaid bid anglinn

genit glinde .i. ben inglinn<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A comprehensive description of this and other kinds of supernatural being will be given in my monograph *Signs of Doom. Supernatural Attendants of Fate in Medieval Irish Texts*; for more about *úatha*, see Borsje (2005 [2006]).

<sup>11</sup> London, British Library, Egerton 93 reads: *urtraig*; DIL lists the term s.v. *airdrech*. See *Fled Bricrenn* §§66–68 (edition and translation: Henderson 1899; the readings from Egerton 93 are to be found in Henderson’s edition); the extant text is dated to the eleventh century, but has older layers (Mac Eoin 1982: 119, 121).

<sup>12</sup> Egerton 93 reads: *hurtracha*; see DIL s.v. *airdrachda*.

<sup>13</sup> For more about the *geniti glinne*, see Borsje (1999: 234–238), and the literature mentioned there in footnote 57, especially Breatnach (1994).

<sup>14</sup> O’Mulconry’s Glossary (edition from Dublin, TCD, Yellow Book of Lecan = H.2.16 (1318)), and partial translation: Stokes 1900) is an Old Irish compilation with a few Middle Irish entries (Mac Neill 1932: 119); nr 640 belongs to the first stratum, dated to the middle of the seventh century (ibid. 113).

*gen*, that is: a *glynnon* [valley?] woman; that is: a robber; that is: a female robber, who is in a valley

*genit glinde* [creature of a valley], that is: a woman in a valley.

The lemma *genit glinne* is thus explained as a woman in a valley, whereby *genit* is explained as *ben*, ‘woman’. The interlinear gloss, however, explains *gen* as ‘woman’, albeit a special type: the rather mysterious *glynnon* woman. The latter in its turn is glossed as a robber, to be precise, as a female robber dwelling in a valley. The additional gloss that explains *gen* as *ben*, ‘woman’, seems to be inspired by the two previous lemmata in the glossary (nrs 638–639), in which *gene*—representing the Greek word for ‘woman’ *γυνή*—is explained with Latin *mulier*, ‘woman’.

In another glossary, found in Dublin, TCD, MS H.3.18 (1337), *genit glinne* is explained as *gen* and then two further explanations are given, one seemingly in Latin and one in Irish:

Genit glinde .i. gen .i. mulier<sup>16</sup> glynoon; ben bid hi nglinn (Binchy 1978, II: 628, l. 17)

*Genit glinne*, that is: *gen*, that is: *glynoon* woman; that is a woman who is in a valley.

It seems to me that *glynnon* and *glynoon* are fake Latin (or Greek?) terms (cp. Welsh *glyn* = Irish *glenn*) which are used here to specify *gen*, which does not simply refer to ‘woman’ as it did in lemmata 638 and 639 of O’Mulconry’s Glossary, but which is here used to explain *genit*, a supernatural type of woman. The main lemma of O’Mulconry’s Glossary, however, directly explains *genit* as woman, just as *genaiti* is glossed *mná*, ‘women’, in Lebor na hUidre, line 3520. This latter use of the word *genaiti* also refers to supernatural women, who, moreover, are said to laugh in an ominous way (for more on these *genaiti* with their ominous laugh (*gen*), see below). The examples of *geniti* in the literature confirm their supernatural nature.

What we can deduce from the episode in *Fled Bricrenn* about these *úatha*, *geniti glinne* and *airdrecha* is the following. They are very powerful, possibly female, supernatural fighters. Three excellent Ulster heroes are sent to them to test their valour and two of them return naked and defeated. Cú Chu-

<sup>15</sup> This is a transcription from the Yellow Book of Lecan, for which I am indebted to Eoghan Ó Raghallaigh. The edition of Stokes is as follows: *Genit glinde .i. ben i nglinn. (gen .i. ben, glynnon .i. foglaid .i. banfoglaid bid a nglinn)* (Stokes 1900: 264, nr 640). His interpunction seems to indicate that he took the gloss as *gen=ben*, *glynnon=foglaid*. The explanation of *glynnon* as *foglaid* is difficult to make sense of. It seems that Stokes’s interpunction is misleading.

<sup>16</sup> Binchy has a comma here, perhaps influenced by Stokes, who had Irish *ben* followed by a comma. I think that this is misleading. Compare also O’Curry reproduction of the gloss: *Genit ghlinne, .i. gen .i. mulier glynoon. ben bid hi nglinn* (O’Curry 1855: 120–1, n. c).

lainn, the most formidable hero, is able to overcome them, but only when he is roused to his extraordinary martial fury, brought about by the taunts of his charioteer Lóeg. The *úatha* are screaming, fighting, nocturnal apparitions, associated with a valley. The word 'spectre' gives the impression that they are made of thin air, but it should be noted that they appear to have a body that can be grasped and fought with. Moreover, their valley is covered with their blood after the fight.

These *úatha* may be female; another episode in the *Lebor na hUidre* version of *Fled Bricrenn* describes a male Úath (see §§75–78). This Úath mac Imomain (Terror son of Great Fear) possesses great supernatural power, is a shape-shifter and functions both as a test (like the *geniti glinne* or *úatha*) and as a judge (unlike them) of the three contestants for the hero's portion.<sup>17</sup>

Another encounter with *úatha* is found in an adventure of Finn mac Cumaill. This narrative has come down to us in the form of a prose tale and two poems, usually referred to as 'Finn and the Phantoms'.<sup>18</sup> Finn, Oisín and Cailte are lured to a mysterious house in a valley, where they spend the night in a gruesome, spectral company. A churl, a three-headed old woman,<sup>19</sup> a headless man with one eye in his chest, and nine bodies with nine loose heads make 'music' for them by shrieking horribly. The churl kills their horses<sup>20</sup> and roasts the flesh on spits of rowan. When it is still raw, it is offered as a 'meal'. Finn refuses to eat, which is taken as an insult. The fire is extinguished, and Finn and his companions are beaten up during the dark night. At sunrise the house and its inhabitants vanish, and the human victims and horses are well again. Finn discovers the identity of their enemies through a mantic procedure:<sup>21</sup> they were the three or nine Terrors of Yew Valley. It should be noted that the prose version mentions three *úatha*, Poem I three *fúatha* and Poem II nine *fúatha*. In the Middle Irish period, it is difficult to distinguish *úath* from *fúath*, 'form, likeness; hideous or supernatural form, spectre', because even though *fúath* is a different word, semantically *úath* and *fúath* converge (Mac Cana 1980: 95, n. 72). The *úatha* are thus por-

<sup>17</sup> For more on this Úath mac Imomain, and the place of this episode in the *Fled Bricrenn* tradition, see Borsje (2005 [2006]).

<sup>18</sup> The prose version (ed. & tr. from Leiden, Codex Vossianus by Stern 1892: 5–7, 12–17, 274; cp. Stern 1897: 503; Pokorny 1921: 194) is dated to the eleventh or twelfth century (Murphy 1953: 26); Poem I starting with *Oenach indiu luid in ri* (ed. & tr. from the Book of Leinster: Stokes 1886: 289–307) is dated to 1100–1140 (Murphy 1961: 20, n. 19); Poem II, starting with *Aonach so a Moigh Eala in ri* (ed. & tr. of this poem from *Duanaire Finn*, Dublin, University College, OFM, A20, formerly in Killiney: Mac Neill 1908: 28–30, 127–130) is dated to the second half of the twelfth century or later (Murphy 1953: 25). It should be noted, however, that John Carey (2003: 16–18) has recently argued on the basis of these poems that Murphy's dates may often have been too late.

<sup>19</sup> This woman is not mentioned in Poem II.

<sup>20</sup> In the prose version, it is only Finn's horse that is being killed.

<sup>21</sup> Nora Chadwick (1935: 116–118) interprets the whole tale as dealing with mantic processes, but her line of reasoning is rather speculative. I am grateful to Gregory Toner for sending a copy of the article to me.



trayed as nocturnal, shrieking, fighting and frightening shapeshifters, associated with a valley.

These terrifying beings also appear in hagiography. *Fúatha* threaten the seventh-century Saint Moling in his youth, according to the Middle Irish *Geinemain Molling ocus a bethae*, ‘The birth of Moling and his Life’.<sup>22</sup> When the saint is sixteen years old, he wanders through Luachair, singing his prayer. Suddenly, he sees an ominous company on his path: an unshapely, ugly monster (*torathar*)—explained by the text as the *Fúath aingeda*<sup>23</sup>—and his dark, ugly, unshapely household—explained as people in the shape of spectres (*arrachta*). The whole company consists of the Wicked *Fúath*, his wife, his servant, his dog and a group of nine persons (§15). St Moling manages to escape from them by making three enormous leaps. The *fúatha* cry loud and pursue him, but it is to no avail.

The main *fúath* in St Moling’s *Life* is male. Whitley Stokes (1906: 269, 306; 1907: 15, 60) translates *in Fúath aingeda* as ‘the Evil Spectre’, taking *aingeda* as *andgedae*, sister form of *andgid*, derived from *andach*, ‘evil’. Proinsias Mac Cana (1980: 96) points out that the first title of the *úath*-group in Tale List A is *Uath Angeda* and suggests that this refers to an earlier form of the Moling tale. According to Mac Cana (1980: 95–96), the original tale may have been about a hag. He bases this upon a Middle Irish poem ascribed to Moling,<sup>24</sup> in which the saint has a female adversary, called Aingid.

These *fúatha* share the following characteristics with the *úatha* that were described above: residence in a wild place,<sup>25</sup> their loud shouting, and their fighting habits. Interestingly, the spectres are said to be engaged in *fogal*, ‘attack, injury, damage; plundering’, and *díberg*, ‘marauding, freebooting, pillaging’ (Stokes 1906: 268; 1907: 14), which occupation is also ascribed to *geniti glinne* in the above-quoted gloss on the relevant lemma in *O’Mulconry’s Glossary*.

Finally, two poems use the term *úath* to describe the ugly appearance of the Sovereignty. The poem *Temair Breg, baile na fian*, extant in the Book of Leinster (LL) and Rawlinson B 502 (ed. & tr.: Joynt 1910), ascribed to Cuán Ó Lothcháin (†1024) tells of the meeting of the five sons of King Eochu Muigmedón with an old, female seer (*écess*) in the wilderness, who guards a well. When the son who is destined to be king kisses her horrible mouth, she turns into the beautiful appearance of the Sovereignty. The second poem, the

<sup>22</sup> The text is edited and translated by Stokes (1907) from Dublin, RIA, 476 olim 23 O 48 al. Liber Flavus Fergusiorum (LFF); Brussels, Royal Library, MS 4190–4200; the *Life* is dated to the twelfth century but it contains older material (Mac Cana 1980: 96, n. 75).

<sup>23</sup> The Brussels MS reads here a corrected form *aingidh* and LFF has *aingide* (Stokes 1906: 268; 1907: 14). See DIL s.v. *an(d)gaid*, ‘wicked, cruel, merciless’.

<sup>24</sup> From Brussels, Royal Library, MS 5100–4, starting with *Is feta in t-airiughadh* (ed. Stokes 1908: 32); dated to the eleventh century and later (Kenney 1929: 463).

<sup>25</sup> The episode about the *fúatha* takes place at “the extensive marshy rush-land of Luachair in the Sliabh Luachra area which today covers parts of the three counties Cork, Kerry and Limerick” (de Paor 2001: 67).

metrical *dindshenchas* on Carn Máil (Gwynn 1924: 134–143), also describes king’s sons in the wilderness after a hunt. They are visited by an old, ugly woman, characterised as *úath olair abbáeth*, ‘obese lustful terror’ (ibid. 140–141). She threatens to eat them and their dogs, but when one of them says that he will yield to her sexual desire, she transforms into a radiant, young beauty. These *úatha* are dark, ominous appearances, who function as tests for the sons of a king, and the right reaction of the young man destined for royalty brings about her transformation into a radiant, promising figure. Again, an *úath* turns out to be a shape-shifter, and this specific type has the gift of prophecy as well.

Thus far, I have discussed humanoid *úatha*. There are also bestial terrors, of which I will only mention an example from a text in Old Irish. The previously described *úatha* turned out to be a test for kings-to-be. The *úath* in *Echtrae Fergusa maic Leiti* (ed. & tr. Binchy 1952) forms a test for a ruling king. When King Fergus mac Leite sees a monster (designated water beast, *muidris* and *úath*) under water, his face becomes deformed by fear. This ‘loss of face’ makes him unfit to be a king and in the end, he also loses his life (see also Borsje 1996: 17–91).

As our poem is Old Irish, our main focus is on texts that are contemporaneous with it. Therefore, we should take our clues from *Fled Bricrenn* and the lemma on *genit glinne*, which belongs to the Old Irish stratum of *O’Mulconry’s Glossary*.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that Fothad warns his lover of one of these frightening, screaming, utterly destructive fighters, possibly robbers living in a valley, operating at night. Some readers may have associated the terror of the night with these supernatural beings.

### 3. A demon called ‘terror of the night’

There is another possibility that should be considered as well. Readers who were acquainted with the Bible may have made a different identification. In the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, there are two references to a harmful supernatural being, associated with the night and with a sudden attack. It is called *paḥad laylâ* or ‘the terror of the night’.

In Jewish sources and liturgy, *Psalm 91* (*Psalm 90* in the Vulgate) is called ‘a song for evil encounters’, which should be recited before sleep.<sup>27</sup> What people feared were attacks by harmful supernatural beings. The Psalm lists several demons<sup>28</sup>—among them we find the terror of the night:

<sup>26</sup> I will later include *Echtrae Fergusa maic Leiti* in the discussion as well, but as candidate for identifying a frightening being on the battle field, the water monster is obviously not suitable.

<sup>27</sup> See the article ‘Terror of the night’ by M. Malul (in Van der Toorn, Becking & Van der Horst 1995/99: 851–854: 852; see also the index s.v.).

<sup>28</sup> In fact, we find a kind of demon catalogue: verse 5 describes demonic attack at night and in the morning, and verse 6 mentions the same danger in the evening and at noon (for a survey

Scuto circumdabit te veritas eius  
non timebis a timore nocturno (PsG 90:5)<sup>29</sup>

His [i.e. God's] truth shall surround you with a shield  
You will not be afraid of the terror of the night.

This Psalm was not only used by Jews in their daily rituals, but was also part of medieval Irish liturgy. Psalm 90:5 is quoted in 'Gloria in Excelsis' in the Irish *Liber Hymnorum* and paraphrased in the *Antiphonary of Bangor*.<sup>30</sup> We know that these texts were sung or recited at night, and thus one prayed for protection from demons and dangers.

The second reference to the 'terror of the night' is in the *Song of Songs*. The text tells of sixty strong men surrounding the bed of King Solomon:

omnes tenentes gladios et ad bella doctissimi  
uniuscuiusque ensis super femur suum propter timores nocturnos  
(Ct 3:8)<sup>31</sup>

All holding swords and most expert in war  
Every man's sword upon his thigh because of terrors of the night.

A scene of warriors with swords on their thighs is also known in early Irish literature. In *The wasting sickness of Cú Chulainn*<sup>32</sup> men are thus said to swear as testimony to the truth of their boasts upon battle deeds. Even though the context is completely different, it is interesting that this statement was put in a 'demonic' context by a gloss explaining that a demon used to talk from the sword. Elsewhere, I have tried to argue that if we want to iden-

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of rabbinic and patristic interpretations, see De Fraine 1959; with thanks to Niek Schuman for sending me a copy of the article). Cassian refers to these verses when he writes in *Conlatio VII.32: nocturnos quoque siue diurnos ac meridianos daemones similiter scripturarum auctoritas docet* (Petschenig 1886: 212), 'In the same way the authority of Scripture teaches us that there are demons of the night and of the day and of the noonday'. Similarly, the Milan Glosses to the Psalms ascribe these attacks to either enemies or demons lurking at their favourite times (Stokes & Strachan 1901, I: 379).

<sup>29</sup> Quoted is the Latin translation from the Septuagint; the Latin translation from the Hebrew text is somewhat different but this is not relevant here. *Timor nocturnus*, 'terror of the night', translates Greek φόβος νυκτερινός, 'terror of the night' (Ps 91:5 Septuagint) and Hebrew *paḥad laylā* 'terror of the night' (Ps 91:5 Hebrew Bible).

<sup>30</sup> For the Irish *Liber Hymnorum* Manuscript T; see Bernard & Atkinson 1898, I: 51; for its originally being sung at night, see *ibid.* II: 136); (*ut non timeamus a timore nocturno*) in the *Antiphonary of Bangor* (Warren 1895: 21, nr 34) occurs in a prayer for peace spoken after the office of nightfall (see Curran 1984: 179–80).

<sup>31</sup> The Hebrew Bible reads here *paḥad ballêlôt* 'terror in the nights', and the Septuagint *θάμβος εν νυκτιν*, 'fear in the night'.

<sup>32</sup> *Serglige Con Culainn* (see §2; edition: Dillon 1953a; translation: idem 1953b) is considered to be the conflation of a ninth-century text with an eleventh-century one (Thurneysen 1921: 413–416; Dillon 1941–42; and T. K. Salberg 1992).

tify these 'demons', we should think of supernatural women, such as the Morrígain (Borsje 1999).

Apparently, demons and weapons were associated with each other, but there is a contrast between the biblical and Irish texts in the function of armour within this association. In Irish texts, demons are sometimes said to dwell *in* armour (i.e., helmets, shields and weapons). As we saw, in Psalm 90 God's truth functions as a shield and thus as a way of protection *against* demons. A similar function is attributed to the swords held by the strong men around the bed of King Solomon. This scene reflects the belief, widespread in the Ancient Near East, that a couple was vulnerable to the attacks of evil spirits and night demons during the wedding night, especially when the marriage was consummated. This is why armed servants are present in the room — as a protection against demonic attacks. This type of harm to newly-weds was in particular ascribed to 'Terror of the night' (Malul in Van der Toorn, Becking & Van der Horst 1995/99: 854).

If the author of *Reicne Fothaid Canainne* knew of this belief, then the expression 'terror of the night' in the context of the poem is well suited to the occasion. The lover, already killed, warns his beloved woman of this 'terror' in the night that should have been the start of their marriage. This supernatural attacker of newly-weds could thus have been assumed to be nearby.

It is, however, uncertain to what extent the author of our poem was aware of the mythological and cultic background of the terror of the night as referred to in the *Song of Songs*. What we badly need is knowledge about which Jewish traditions were known to medieval Christians (Kieckhefer 1989: xii–xiii; 1998). A channel of transmission that is still traceable today is represented by the writings of the Church Fathers. In their comments on these two biblical passages, they explain the 'terror of the night' in a sexual and demonic way.<sup>33</sup> Thus far, I have not found an exposé on the cultic background of the verse in the *Song of Songs*, but we could surmise that if the author of *Reicne Fothaid Canainne* was acquainted with the Bible, the demonic nature of the terror of the night is obvious from Psalm 90. What should be noted is that some Jewish theologians identified this demon as Li-

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<sup>33</sup> To name just a few examples: Jerome (c. 341–420) associates the terror of the night from Psalm 90 without further ado with the Devil, who is always in the darkness, attacking the innocent in secret (Morin 1958: 129, ll. 60–62). Gregory the Great (c. 540 – 604) warns against sudden passion in his *Pastoral Rule* III.32 (Judic, Rommel & Morel 1992, II: 490–495). He quotes 'Solomon' (Prov. 23:35) as an example of someone who sleeps while being beaten. Gregory interprets the scene in an allegorical way: when the soul is asleep, it feels no pain and sees no threatening evils. This is why the strong warriors in the *Song of Songs* have swords on their thighs. Again, he interprets this in an allegorical way as holy preaching (the sword) that should be used against the evil temptation (terrors of the night) of the flesh (the thigh). The terrors in the night are invisible threats that one should be prepared to fight with during the night. The Venerable Bede (672/673–735) associates the swords from the *Song of Songs* with the spiritual armour of God needed against the forces of darkness, mentioned in the *Letter to the Ephesians* (Eph 6:11–12, 17), and the thigh he explains in a sexual way as the procreation of the flesh, quoting *Exodus* 1:5 (Hurst & Hudson 1983: 238–239).

lith (Langton 1949: 47–48; Malul in Van der Toorn, Becking & Van der Horst 1995/99: 853).<sup>34</sup> As will become clear in this paper, the question whether (Irish) Christian exegetes also linked the nocturnal terror with this *succubus* demon is an intriguing one. The fear of nocturnal temptation expressed by the Church Fathers seems to hint at a similar identification (see also Youngs & Harris 2003: 139–140).

We return to the Old Irish poem. There is a third possible way to interpret the terror of the night. Looking at the structure of the poem (see above), we observe that the warning to the woman is interrupted by the command to take away the treasures. Then an elaborate description of Fothad’s treasures is given, which breaks off in the middle of quatrain §41. It is as if the spectre takes up the warning again, by focusing on a supernatural being nearby: the Morrígain. It might be the case that ‘the terror of night’ already refers to her.

We learn from the Old Irish *Glossary of Cormac* that the supernatural beings called *úath* and Morrígain have something in common:

Gúdemain .i. úatha ⁊ morrignae (Meyer 1912: 58).

False demons, that is: terrors and Morrígnae.

Apparently, both ‘terrors’ and *morrígnae* were good equivalents for the word *gúdemain*, translated as ‘spectres’ in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*. This translation is presumably based upon the somewhat popular translation by John O’Donovan: ‘.i. spectres and fairy queens’, to which Stokes added: “*Guidemain* seems to mean ‘false demons’, from *gó*, *gúa* (= W. *gau*) ‘false’ and *demain* for *demuin*, n. pl. of *demon*, a demon, *daemonion*, (Corn. *gevan* or *jevan*), gen. s. *demuin*” (O’Donovan & Stokes 1868: 87).<sup>35</sup> As we will see, the meaning ‘false demons’ is indeed more likely, because this is one of the interpretations offered by another gloss (see below). It should be noted, moreover, that the last name of the red woman *alias* the Morrígain in the Yellow Book of Lecan version of *Táin bó Regamna* is *Úath* (Corthals 1987: 30, l. 34). What is important to us now is that both the Morrígain and the terror of the night could be classified as terrifying demons. It is possible that Fothad’s warning is not a double but an interrupted warning about a supernatural being nearby on the battlefield, known as the terror of the night *alias* the Morrígain.

<sup>34</sup> The Hebrew word for night, *laylá*, has also been connected with Lilith in folk etymology.

<sup>35</sup> T. F. O’Rahilly (1942: 156–158) has pointed out that the plural of *demon*, *demun* is irregular. Besides *demna*, we find *demain* and *demuin* attested as nom. pl. in e.g. an anecdote on Coirpre Cromm mac Feradaig and St Ciarán of Clonmacnoise in the Book of Ballymote (Meyer 1905: 226, ll. 8 & 10: *demain*) and in Brussels, Royal Library, MS 5100–4 (Stokes 1905: 372, ll. 4 & 7: *demuin*, *deamuin*).

#### 4. Supernatural women and demons

Fothad describes the Morrígain as follows. He calls her 'an evil guest'. She visits, stirs up and frightens people. She is washing entrails and spoils. She laughs and throws her long hair over her back. All these characteristics deserve further study.<sup>36</sup> For the purpose of the present paper, I have selected one in particular: her laughter.

The laughter of the Morrígain is described as follows:

Dremhan an caisgen tibhes (Meyer 1910: 16, §42).

Horrible the hateful laugh she laughs (ibid. 17, §42).<sup>37</sup>

The ambiguity of laughter in Irish has been noted previously: Joseph Vendryes (1938) points out that *tibid* not only means 'laughs, smiles' but also 'to beat, hit, push'; Philip O'Leary (1991) discusses the danger of laughter as a literary motif; and, most recently, Liam Mac Mathúna (2006) displays the full spectrum of laughter in his survey of Irish lexical expressions for laughing and smiling.

The expression used in our poem—*tibid gen*, 'to laugh a laugh' or 'to smile a smile'—is also found elsewhere in early Irish literature. Especially interesting for a comparison with the description of the Morrígain are examples of supernatural women laughing in an ominous and dangerous context.<sup>38</sup> I selected an example from *The wasting sickness of Cú Chulainn*, the text

<sup>36</sup> For a full discussion, see my forthcoming monograph.

<sup>37</sup> *Cais* in *caisgen* means both 'love' and 'hate'; DIL *s.v.* *gen* suggests here the translation 'a short sarcastic laugh'. David Greene & Frank O'Connor (1967: 92) translate 'dreadful the twisted laugh she laughs'. The last two lines of stanza 42 are connected with the last two lines of stanza 41 by the Morrígain's washing activity and the word *dremun*, applied both to the human entrails and to the Morrígain's laughter (§41b: *Dreman inathor dimar, Nodusnigh an Mórríoghan*; §42b: *Is mór do fhodboibh nigius, Dremhan an caisgen tibhes*). *Dremun* means literally 'furious, frantic, precipitate'. We should perhaps translate the sentence on the laughter as 'Furious the sarcastic laugh she laughs' and interpret *dremun* in the first instance as referring to the Morrígain washing frantically or furiously.

<sup>38</sup> Another interesting example would be a poem from the early eighth century, which uses similar phrases: a woman (representing the sea?) is described who throws her long white hair in a small boat and who laughs a sarcastic laugh at a sacred tree (Stokes 1896: 175). This woman is described as follows: *Ind ben ru-lá a moing find/ ine churach fri Coning/ is cass ru-tibi a gen/ in-díu fri bile Torton* (Pokorny 1923: 5), which David Greene and Frank O'Connor (1967: 109) translate thus: 'The woman has tossed her white mane at Conaing in his curragh. It is crookedly that she has smiled today at the tree of Tortu'. One should compare this with the Morrígain, of whom Fothad says: *Rolá a moing dar a hais* and *Dremhan an caisgen tibhes* (see also Muhr 1999: 194–195). Similarly, a supernatural woman called Lí Bán seems to warn of the dangerous sea, personified as a woman, in a poem in the *Lebor na hUidre* version: *is mairg frisi tibi gen in ben di thonnaib tuli* (Best & Bergin 1929: 96, ll. 2977–2978), 'Woe the person to whom the woman from the waves of the flood laughs a laugh'. This poem is part of the Middle Irish *Aided Echach meic Maireda*, 'The Death of Eochu Son of Mairid' (edition and translation: O'Grady 1892, I: 233–237; II: 265–269). I am indebted to Ranke de Vries for sending me her unpublished edition and translation of the text.

with the scene of warriors with swords on their thighs, mentioned above. This is the well-known tale about Cú Chulainn and his relationship with a woman of the *síd* called Fand, which means ‘tear’. The story ends indeed in a sad way for Fand and to a certain extent for Cú Chulainn, but laughter is part of the first meeting between Cú Chulainn and representatives of the Otherworld. It is, however, ominous laughter, which is expressed by the words *tibid gen*. Two women approach Cú Chulainn, who lies asleep against a pillar stone. They both laugh at him and then almost kill him by beating him with horsewhips:<sup>39</sup>

Dolluid in ben cosin brot úane chucai, 7 tibid gen fris, 7 dobert béim dind echfhleisc dó. Dotháet alaili cucai dano, 7 tibid fris, 7 nod slaid fón alt chétna (Dillon 1953a: 3, §8, ll. 74–76).

The woman in the green mantle came to him and laughed at him, and struck him with her horsewhip. The other came to him, too, and laughed at him, and struck him in the same way (Dillon 1953b: 50).

These two women are Lí Ban and Fand from the *síd*, who first visited Cú Chulainn in bird form but were attacked by him, despite his wife’s warning against this, because of the supernatural power (*cumachtae*) she perceives behind the birds.

At first sight, the contrast could not be greater when we compare the Mor-rígain as described in our poem with the beautiful, enticing women of the *síd* in this tale. If we look closer, however, there are some similarities. The laughter combined with the beating might be seen as a sign of the sinister side of the *áes síde*. A similar hint is found in a poem, uttered by Cú Chulainn’s charioteer Lóeg, when he calls the women *genaiti*:

Mór espa do láech  
 Laigi fri súan serglige,  
 Ar donadbat genaiti <sup>i. mná</sup>  
 Áesa a Tenmag Trogaigi <sup>i. a Maig Mell</sup>  
 Condat rodbsat,  
 Condot chachtsat,  
 Condot ellat,  
 Eter bríga banespa (Dillon 1953a: 11, §28, ll. 316–323).

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<sup>39</sup> Readers who knew the *Pastoral Rule* of Gregory the Great are offered an allegorical interpretation of this scene on a silver platter. Not only does Gregory give such an interpretation of a scene of men with swords on their thighs, which occurs both in the *Song of Songs* and in the beginning of *The wasting sickness of Cú Chulainn*, but also does he connect this with someone lying asleep while being beaten from *Proverbs*, interpreted as the soul unaware of pain and threatening evils. Thus, one could interpret Cú Chulainn as a symbol for the soul, attacked by evil temptation (compare footnote 33 above and see below on the interpretation of the women of the *síd* as demons).

It is great frivolousness<sup>40</sup> for a warrior  
 To lie in sleep of wasting sickness,<sup>41</sup>  
 For it shows *genaiti*<sup>42</sup> i.e., women  
 Folk from Tenmag Trogaige,<sup>i.e., from Mag Mell</sup>  
 And they have subdued<sup>43</sup> (?) thee,  
 They have confined thee,  
 They torture thee  
 in the toils of female frivolousness<sup>44</sup> (Dillon 1953b: 59).

We have seen that the word *geniti* is used for supernatural frightening female fighters, also called terrors (*úatha*), who beat and subdue Cú Chulainn in *Fled Bricrenn*; and this is consistent with the image that Lóeg paints in this poem. They have subdued and tortured Cú Chulainn, who is confined to his bed. It should be noted that a gloss explains *geniti* here as ‘women’ (*mná*), which reminds us of *O’Mulconry’s glossary*, quoted above: a *genit* is a woman (*Genit glinde .i. ben i nglinn*). The well-known colophon at the end of the text tells the readers that they should call these women<sup>45</sup> ‘demons’.<sup>46</sup>

One could wonder now what this has to do with the Morrígain. The only two points of comparison are 1) ominous laughter in a battle context and 2) supernatural women associated with fighting. At this point we need to pay attention to an obscure, heavily glossed poem that accompanies the text of *The wasting sickness of Cú Chulainn* in the manuscript margin. We read in the upper margin of *Lebor na hUidre* folio 50a:<sup>47</sup>

Mac Lonan<sup>48</sup> dixit  
 Mían mná Tethrach<sup>i. badb</sup> a tenid<sup>i. gae 7 arm</sup>  
 Slaide sethnach<sup>i. táeb</sup> iar sodain.  
 Suba<sup>i. fuil</sup> luba<sup>i. corp</sup> fo lubaib<sup>i. fó feraib</sup>  
 Ugail<sup>i. súli</sup> troga<sup>i. cend</sup> dír drogain<sup>i. ffaich</sup> (Best & Bergin 1929: 124)

<sup>40</sup> Dillon translates ‘idleness’. I have replaced this by the alternative ‘frivolousness’, because in this way *espa* can be translated in the same way in the first and the last line.

<sup>41</sup> DIL (*s.v. lige 1b*) translates ‘to yield to the sleep of wasting sickness’.

<sup>42</sup> Dillon translates ‘demons’.

<sup>43</sup> Dillon translates here ‘injured (?)’ and refers elsewhere (Dillon 1953a: 82) to DIL *s.v. rodbad*, where the translation ‘subduing, overpowering’ is suggested.

<sup>44</sup> Dillon translates ‘women’s wantonness’.

<sup>45</sup> Admittedly, the colophon equates demons with the *áes síde*, but as I have argued elsewhere (1999: 231–232) the colophon links up closely with the narrative and makes a more subtle connection between the demons and the female supernatural protagonists on three counts: first, the use of the word *cumachtae* in text and colophon; second, the showing of pleasures; and third, the showing of secret places. The reference to fighting probably refers to male dwellers in the *side*.

<sup>46</sup> Such an identification would make perfect sense to readers of the *Pastoral Rule* of Gregory the Great (see above), in which both a scene of someone asleep who is being beaten and a scene of swords on thighs are allegorically explained in the context of attacks on the soul by demons.

<sup>47</sup> I am deeply indebted to Joanne Findon for sending me the text of her fascinating article on this quatrain, which is forthcoming.

<sup>48</sup> For more on the poet Flann mac Lonáin († 891, 896 or 918), see Mac Mathúna (2003) and Findon (forthcoming).



The desire of the woman of the scaldcrow<sup>49</sup>i.e. *badb* are her fires<sup>i.e. spear & armour</sup>  
 The slaughter of a body<sup>i.e. side</sup> thereafter  
 Juices<sup>50</sup>i.e. blood, body<sup>i.e. body/corpse</sup> under bodies<sup>i.e. under men</sup>  
 Eyes<sup>i.e. eyes</sup>, heads<sup>i.e. head</sup> belonging to a raven<sup>i.e. of a raven</sup><sup>51</sup>

Joanne Findon emphasises the fact that this poem is found on the page where an emotional poem is written, uttered by Fand, in which she says farewell to Cú Chulainn. Findon (forthcoming) points out that one's eyes are, however, drawn to the upper margin of the page first, where the scribe (M) "has boxed in the quatrain and its glosses with dark lines, as if to highlight it particularly". The quatrain speaks of the desire of the scaldcrow woman, and this is glossed by the words: 'that is: Badb'. Findon states that the bloodthirsty desire of the Badb in the marginal quatrain is here in fact juxtaposed with the sexual desire of Fand in the poem in the main text. In her opinion this comparison "is an outrageous textual distortion that completely misrepresents [Fand's] Otherworld nature as it is configured in *this* text" (Findon forthcoming). Findon (ibid.) suggests that this poem might be a Christian warning against fascinating Otherworld portrayals, and especially the moving description of female desire as expressed by Fand.

Just as readers in the Middle Ages could have different readings of the same text, so can we. Even though I admire Findon's reading that focuses on

<sup>49</sup> *Tethrach* also means 'of the sea', and 'of Tethra'. We should perhaps translate 'the scaldcrow woman', i.e. the supernatural woman in her bird- and battle-aspect. This desire (*mian*) is also elsewhere in the literature connected with the Badb, Macha and the Badb in plural. A *ros* in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* Recension I reads: *Comérgid, rig Macha mórglondaich. Muintir fial. Miandaighther Bodb bú Imbial. Insernd crú cridi. Inreith nith niaba nertaíd gal cridi crú for telaib nó for tinn teched .i. for toind teiced tercbaid nó teilefíd isnis nithu. Ni frith fri Coin Culaind cosmail Con Culaind conben mian Macha mochtrád más ar búaiB Cúail[n]gi. Comérgid* (O'Rahilly 1976: 118, ll. 3930–3935). A poem in *Acallam na Senórach* mentions the desire of *badba*: *tiċfa mian na mbadb do'n bherth/ niam na narm acá nimert* (O'Grady 1892, I: 230), 'that for which the ravens (lit. *badba*) lust shall come of the event, when there is glint of weapons in their play' (ibid. II: 261). The Badb, the Morrígain and Macha are sometimes identified with each other, as we can read in e.g. *O'Mulconry's Glossary: Machæ.i. badb. Nó así an tres morrígán, unde mesrad Machæ .i. cendæ doine iarna n-airlech* (Stokes 1900: 271, nr 813), 'Macha, that is: Badb. Or she is the third Morrígain; unde Macha's nut harvest, that is: the heads of people after the slaughter'. A similar gloss is found in H.3.18, where the three Morrígna are identified as Macha, Badb and Morrígain (Binchy 1978, II: 632, l. 20).

<sup>50</sup> *Sub*, '(wild) strawberry, raspberry', was also spelled *sug*, *sum*. *Subae* means 'joy, pleasure, happiness'. *Súg* (in the nom. pl.), 'juice, sap', also used for the fluids of the body, such as blood, milk, tears, and urine, fits the context better. On the other hand, perhaps we should translate 'The strawberries of plants under plants' taking the red fruit of the plants on the ground as a metaphor for the red blood from the men on the ground. I am indebted to Johan Corthals for this suggestion.

<sup>51</sup> My translation is based upon Stokes (1873–75: 491) and Findon (forthcoming). It should be noted that this translation is tentative. There is room for doubt because some of the words are obscure and it is uncertain whether the interpretations proposed by the glossator are identical with the intentions of the author.

the contrast, I want to look at the similarities between the Badb and Fand, and include the Morrígain in my reading.<sup>52</sup>

The tale is clearly a moving love story, but there is more to it. There is a good reason why Lóeg called Fand and Lí Ban *geniti*. *Geniti* shriek, fight, and hover above fighting armies, inciting or frightening warriors. Some of them help Cú Chulainn by making him more dread-inspiring in battle; others oppose him or are even involved in his downfall (Borsje 1999: 234–238). Looking again at the role of Fand and Lí Ban in *The wasting sickness of Cú Chulainn* we note that they not only overpower Cú Chulainn and beat him up, but they also incite him to fight in the Otherworld, on the side of Lí Ban’s husband. Schematically, Lí Ban and Fand represent: first, an approach to Cú Chulainn in a different—bird—form; second, a threat represented by the beating; third, an offer of sex; and fourth, an incitement to fight. This is similar to what the Badb and the Morrígain represent for Cú Chulainn in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* Recension I.

As a boy of five, Cú Chulainn is on the battlefield on a dark night, fighting with a spectre (O’Rahilly 1976: 15–17, 138–39). The Irish word is *aurddrag* (DIL *s.v.* *airdrech*), the term also used for the *úatha* or *geniti glinne* that Cú Chulainn fights with in *Fled Bricrenn*. The spectre overpowers him, but then the voice of the Badb from among the corpses incites him to fight:

Immasínithar dóib. Doscartar Cú C[h]ulaind. Co cuala ní, in [m]boidb dinib collaib. “Olc damnae laích fil and fo chossaib aurddrag!” (O’Rahilly 1976: 16, ll. 497–500).

They wrestled then and Cú Chulainn was thrown. He heard the Badb<sup>53</sup> crying from among the corpses. “Poor stuff to make a warrior is he who is overthrown by phantoms” (ibid. 139).

This spectre seems to personify the terror experienced on the battlefield. It seems as if Conchobar hints at this terror (*úath*) by using the word *úathbás* when Cú Chulainn has found him after conquering the spectre:

“Cid día tánac isin n-ármag,” ol Conchobar, “co ndeochais úathbás and?” (O’Rahilly 1976: 16, ll. 506–507).

‘Why have you come to the battle-field’ said Conchobar, “where you may die of fright?” (ibid. 139).

Moreover, in the same epic text, it is the Morrígain who approaches him in female human form with an offer of assistance in the fight and of sex, fol-

<sup>52</sup> Findon’s conclusion is similar to John Carey’s reading of the colophon at the end of the tale (Carey 1994). For a different reading of the colophon see Ó Cathasaigh (1994).

<sup>53</sup> O’Rahilly translates ‘the war-goddess’; the text uses the older form *Bodb*.

lowed by a threat and a fight when he refuses her (O’Rahilly 1976: 57, 61–62, 176–177, 180–181).

These similarities make me wonder: was the quatrain perhaps added as a reminder of other supernatural women, who are closely related to Cú Chulainn? This comparison, moreover, highlights non-stereotypical sides of supernatural females. The Morrígain is not only dangerous, but also sensual. The Badb is not only an enemy but also helpful. Fand is not only beautiful but also connected with violence.<sup>54</sup> Even though we find them sometimes lumped together in a single category as demons, yet early Irish literature with its many voices has kept differentiation alive.

The glossaries not only apply the common denominator of demons to supernatural beings but also supply different names and nuances for them. This seems to be another instance of the shifting of the faces of the supernatural. In the area of classification there appears to be some flexibility as well. For instance, we have seen that *Cormac’s Glossary* brought *úatha* and *morrígnæ* together as *gúdemain*. In another glossary on ‘The last *Bretha Nemed* or judgments of privileged (or professional) persons’,<sup>55</sup> *gúdemain* are explained as scald crows and women of the *síd*, which are then connected with the Morrígain in a plural form in a gloss in the upper margin:

Glaidomuín .i. sindaigh <sup>† mac tīre</sup>.  
 Gudomuín .i. fennóga † bansigaidhe;  
 In marg. sup.:  
 ut est glaidhomuín .g. .i. na demuín. goacha, na murrígna. † go conach deamain  
 iat na bansighaide, go co<sub>nach</sub> demain iffri<sub>n</sub> iat *acht* .d.<sup>56</sup> aeoir na fendóga.  
 In marg. dext.:  
 † eamnait a nglædha na sinnaigh, <sub>γ</sub> .e.<sup>57</sup> a ngotha na *fennoga* (Binchy 1978:  
 604.1–4).

Howlers, that is: foxes <sup>or a wolf</sup>.  
*Gudomuín* (*Gúdemain*, false demons), that is: scald crows or women of the *síd*.  
 (In the upper margin:)  
*Ut est*: false (?) howlers, that is the false demons, the *murrígna*; or it is a falsehood so that the women of the *síd* are not demons; it is a falsehood so that the scald crows are not demons of hell, but demons of the air.  
 (In the right-hand margin:)

<sup>54</sup> John Carey (1982–83: 273–274) suggests that this connection of two distinguished qualities either within one supernatural woman or expressed by contrasting figures within a group is to be considered as a conscious paradox.

<sup>55</sup> For more about *Bretha Nemed déidenach* and the glossary, see Kelly 1988: 268–269. The glossary is found in Dublin, TCD, MS H.3.18 (1337) (see Binchy 1978, II: 603–604, 725–726).

<sup>56</sup> Binchy explains this as *demain*. [Before .d. the *s* with suprascript stroke has been expanded as *acht*. Ed.]

<sup>57</sup> Binchy explains this as *eamnait*.

Or: the foxes double their howls and the scald crows double their sounds/vowels.<sup>58</sup>

The word *gúdemain* apparently needed explanation and it is interesting to note that both marginal comments connect the term with the previous lemma on *gláidemuin*. The gloss in the right-hand margin etymologises both words as having to do with sound. *Gláidemuin* is explained from *gláéd*, 'howl, shout, call', and *emuin*, 'pairs, twins'. *Gudomuin* is split up in *guth*, 'vowel, sound', and *emuin*, 'pairs, twins'.

The gloss in the upper margin is concerned with classification. It is possible that the author took inspiration from *Cormac's Glossary*, because false demons are here explained as *morrígná*. Perhaps this glossator also added the wolf to the explanation of howlers as foxes, because this is the explanation of howlers in *Cormac's Glossary: Gláidemain .i. maic tíre gláidaite .i. focerdait hualla* (Meyer 1912: 58, nr 696), 'Howlers, that is: wolves that howl; that is: they utter wails'. At first sight, it may seem that the glossator added a third category to the howlers and false demons: false howlers. Demons are, however, also infamous as producers of horrible sounds, screams and shrieks (see Carey 1992: 33–36; Borsje 1999: 231–236). It looks, therefore, as if the foxes and wolves should be seen as the true howlers, and the others perhaps as screamers but not as true howlers. The glossator then goes on speculating about other 'false' classifications and seems to suggest that women of the *síd* are not really demons. Scald crows, furthermore, are demons of the air and—he seems to say—thus not really demons either, because the true demons are located in Hell.

I have thus tried to make sense of the comments in the upper margin, and my views remain of course tentative.<sup>59</sup> There is one aspect that is absent in my interpretation, and that is etymology. What etymological basis did the author of the gloss in the upper margin have for connecting *gláidemuin* with *gudomuin* other than that they appear in the same order in *Cormac's Glossary*? The only thing I can think of is that the author saw *gláidemuin* as consisting of *gláéd*, 'cry, shout, howl', and *demain*, 'demons', just as *gúdemain* was possibly formed from *gú*, 'false', and *demain*, 'demons'. Thus, the lemmata on 'howl demons' and 'false demons' would have led to an explanation starting with 'false howlers' in order to distinguish the howlers<sup>60</sup> from the shriekers.

The classification of scald crows as demonic in Irish texts is well known, but is it also possible to put foxes and wolves in the same category? I hope to address this question in a future study because it needs further research but is

<sup>58</sup> My translation is based upon Hennessy (1870–72: 36).

<sup>59</sup> I consider my previous interpretation of this gloss (see Borsje 1999: 242) to be partly mistaken.

<sup>60</sup> DIL translates *gláidem* with 'a wolf (?) (lit. a howler)'; the only instances cited are the lemmata in the two glossaries central here.

beyond the scope of the present paper. It suffices within the context of this study to point out that supernatural beings, birds of prey and wild beasts are associated with demons, because all of these may howl or shriek, and they may inhabit similar places that are wild or deserted. We encounter collections of these creatures as an evil omen for the battle to come in, for instance, *In cath catharda* (Stokes 1909: 64–73), the Middle Irish adaptation/translation of Lucan’s *Civil War* (Duff 1928: 40–45). Thus, the centre of Rome is described as becoming a night lair for wild beasts; nocturnal birds fly around at day time; phantoms and shades from the Underworld terrify the human inhabitants at night; the Badb of battle (a Fury in the source text) goes around, and many other abnormal phenomena are described. The Irish text adds the loud howling of hounds and wolves at night to the description.<sup>61</sup> Biblical visions of destruction also portray deserted cities, inhabited by wild beasts, birds of prey and frightening female and male demons. There are several examples of such scenes; one of them will be discussed below.

## 5. Black birds and demons

We move on now from the study of the terror of the night and the Morrígain to the third supernatural being. The first two entities are said to be a threat to the living woman. The supernatural being to be discussed now is said to be a threat to the dead man. Toward the end of the poem, Fothad announces that soon his soul will be tormented:

*Scarfid frit céin mo chorp toll,  
M’anum do pienad la donn,  
Serc bethu cé is miri,  
ingi adradh Rígh nimhi* (Meyer 1910: 16, §48).

My riddled body must part from thee awhile,  
My soul to be tortured by the black demon.  
Save (for) the worship of Heaven’s King,  
Love of this world is folly (ibid. 17).

Kuno Meyer translates *donn* as ‘the black demon’. In a later publication (Meyer 1919: 542), he corrects this into *Donn*, the proper name of an ancestral deity of the Irish, the presumably pre-Christian Death God. David Greene and Frank O’Connor (1967: 92) likewise translate ‘the death god’. As this line is immediately followed by Fothad’s sudden insight that only the adoration of the King of Heaven matters and love for this world is foolish,

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<sup>61</sup> *No feartais coin 7 cuanarta 7 meic tìre na hEtaili ualla mora sechnon na cathrach gach n-oidhchi*, ‘The dogs and hounds and wolves of Italy used to utter great howls throughout the City every night’ (Stokes 1909: 68–69, ll. 884–885).

we can safely conclude that an infernal demon is meant here by *donn*, which literally means 'a dark one'.<sup>62</sup>

'Dark' (*teimen*) is also used to describe a blackbird, which is mentioned in the final quatrain:

Is é in lon teimhen tibus  
 imc[h]omarc cáich bes hires,  
 Síabra mo c[h]obra, mo gné,  
 a ben, náchamaicillé! (Meyer 1910: 16, §49).

It is the dusky ousel that laughs  
 a greeting to all the faithful:  
 My speech, my shape are spectral –  
 hush, woman, do not speak to me! (ibid. 17).

Initially, I took this description as another reference to the dark tormentor of the soul, for *lon* can also signify 'demon'. A dangerous demon, laughing at dead people would supply a nice parallel with the terrifying Morrígain, laughing at living people. The lines even rhyme together:

Is mór do fhodboibh nigius,  
 Dremhan an caisgen tibhes (on the Morrígain).

Is é in lon teimhen tibus  
 imc[h]omarc cáich bes hires (on the blackbird).

Meyer translates *imchomarc* as 'greeting', but it may also signify 'enquiry, interrogation', and thus it could be connected with the Devil, the challenger and accuser of human beings.

I have, however, come to a different conclusion. *Lon* means 'demon' in two texts only, and then it is always part of a compound, as *lon crais*. This demon of gluttony is found in the Middle Irish *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*<sup>63</sup> and 'The Death of King Herod'.<sup>64</sup> Clearly, this is something different from what is portrayed in our poem. The blackbird in this poem seems to represent the biological species.<sup>65</sup> Blackbirds start to sing half an hour before sunrise,

<sup>62</sup> According to Meyer (1919: 542), the pre-Christian Donn amalgamates here with the Christian Devil. Meyer (1919: 544) furthermore refers to a now lost poem on the torments of Hell, ascribed to Fothad Canainne. One stanza is extant in *Lebor Brecc*. Incidentally, Death is sometimes also personified as a demon in the Bible and, for instance, climbs into the houses to snatch away youths (see Cathcart 1978: 45, n. 21).

<sup>63</sup> Edited and translated by Meyer (1892); more recently edited by Jackson, who dates Version B of the text to the end of the eleventh century (Jackson 1990: xxvi).

<sup>64</sup> This tale is found in *Lebor Brecc*; for an edition and translation, see McNamara, Breatnach, Carey and others 2001: 412–433.

<sup>65</sup> I am indebted to my friend Erik van Triest for information on blackbirds and other birds. It should be noted, though, that according to Alexander Krappe (1927: 96–97), "Blackbirds and

which is earlier than the other birds. Its song is, therefore, the messenger of the start of the day. Immediately after its mention, Fothad says that his speech and face are spectral, and—as we all know—when the day begins, phantoms must vanish.<sup>66</sup> The song of the blackbird is melodious and melancholic, but does not resemble laughter. We should, therefore, see the laughter in the poem symbolically, and it could help to combine this laughter with that of the Morrígain. People doomed to go to hell will fear the sound of the blackbird, but the faithful can enjoy it. They are protected from danger, just as those who recite before sleep ‘the psalm for evil encounters’. Neither the terror of the night nor the laughter of the Morrígain nor the dark demon will affect them.

## Conclusion

The supernatural beings in *Reicne Fothaid Canainne* overlap to a certain extent. The terror of the night could represent a nocturnal, frightening female, from Irish or Jewish tradition, and the term might also hint at the Morrígain. The Morrígain threatens the woman on the battlefield; a dark one threatens Fothad as an infernal tormentor. The laughter of the Morrígain is both paralleled by and contrasted with the laughter of the dark blackbird. Diverse details are visible in the imagery of the supernaturals, even though the category ‘demonic’ serves as an umbrella.

It could very well be that another demon hovers in the background of this imagery: the Jewish Lilith, seducer of men, killer of babies. Like the Morrígain, she is a nocturnal terror, she has long hair and she howls (see e.g. Patai 1964; Krebs 1975; Fauth 1982). She lives in deserted places, among other demons, birds of prey and wild beasts. In this habitat she is described in the *Book of Isaiah*. Jerome replaced Lilith by Lamia in his Latin translation of the Bible:

et occurrent daemonia onocentauris  
 et pilosus clamabit alter ad alterum  
 ibi cubavit lamia (Hebrew: *lilit*) et invenit sibi requiem (Is. 34:14).

And demons will meet ass-centaurs  
 and the hairy creature shall cry out, the one to the other  
 There the Lamia has lain down and found rest for herself.

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thrushes, in Ireland, are human souls condemned to stay on earth to expiate their sins. Ravens, crows and owls are generally thought to be animated by lost souls”. He refers to *The Gael (An Gaodhal)* 1902, p. 397. It is uncertain whether this belief goes back to medieval times.

<sup>66</sup> Compare also, for instance, the above-mentioned tradition on ‘Finn and the phantoms’.

A gloss on this verse in Vatican Library, Codex Reginae Lat. 215, written in 876 or 877, ascribed to Eriugena (Contreni 1976; Ó Néill 1986), explains Lamia as 'the Morrígain':

Lamia monstrum in feminae figura .i. morigain (Stokes & Strachan 1901–1903, I: 2).

Lamia is a monster in the form of a woman, that is: a *morrígain*.

Lilith, the terror of the night according to some Jewish thinkers, is thus equated with the Morrígain, who seems to be described as another nocturnal terror in the Old Irish poem *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*.

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