UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Demonising the enemy: a study of Congal Cáech

Borsje, J.

Publication date
2007
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Proceedings of the Eighth Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica

[Link to publication](#)

JACQUELINE BORSJE

Demonising the enemy: a study of Congal Cáech

An intriguing aspect of literature about conflicts is the way in which texts may try to persuade the readers to take sides. With explicit comments, through implicit imagery or by hints, one side is shown to be evil and the other as good. Thus, we are invited, for instance, to side with David in the Old Testament tale of his battle with Goliath.[1] The latter is a huge, fully armed veteran warrior facing David, an unarmed,[2] young shepherd, who claims to fight in the name of God. Central to this article is the role of imagery concerning the 'supernatural'[3] in literary texts with an ideological intent. Sometimes a character's life starts out under auspicious signs, but in due course of time, this person is portrayed as doomed. An important factor in the portrayal of such a doomed person could be falling out of divine favour or being inspired by supernatural evil entities. A good example is the tragic King Saul. Saul is said to lose the spirit of God and to be visited by an evil spirit from God (1 Sam 16:14; see also Van der Toorn, Becking & Van der Horst 1995: 319-320).

The tendency to describe kings and other people as inspired by supernatural entities also exists in medieval Irish literature. We see this clearly in documents pertaining to Congal Cáech. This article describes the ideological dimension of the narrative tradition about Congal,[4] and focuses on the use of portrayals related to 'the supernatural'. The relevant narratives will be discussed in chronological order.

---

[1] See I Samuel 17. My biblical references are to the Vulgate, because the medieval Irish used Latin versions of the bible. This article is part of my project 'Signs of Doom. Supernatural attendants of Fate in medieval Irish texts' funded by N.W.O. (*Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*, 'Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research').

[2] David only carries the tools of a shepherd: a staff, a sling and a few pebbles from a brook.

[3] I use the term 'supernatural' as a tool to describe the a-empirical dimension of life, which is the crucial part of religious belief systems. This neutral term can be applied to notions found in any religion.

[4] For the historical dimension, I refer to Charles-Edwards & Kelly 1983: 123-131; Herbert 1989; Sharpe 1995: 315-316 n. 206, 359-360 n. 362.

1. *Bechbretha*, 'Bee Judgements'

The oldest text that mentions Congal Cáech is the Old Irish law on bee keeping from the seventh century.[5] As Congal is supposed to have died in the historical battle of Mag Rath in 637, this text is more or less contemporaneous with him. Congal apparently has been in a lawsuit about bees, which serves as a leading case in the part on 'injuries to persons' (*Bechbretha* §§27-35).

We can glean the following information from the law text. Congal Cáech, king of Tara, loses the kingship when a bee blinds his eye (§§31-32). Presumably the epithet *cáech*, 'one-eyed',[6] is given to him because of this injury. Congal sues the owner of the beehives (§33). Because nobody knows which bee is the guilty one, lots are cast and the hive on which it falls is forfeit (§§30, 34-35).

This text thus describes Congal as a party in a conflict and as a victim. We will see how the later tradition elaborates upon these two characteristics. Although Congal is done justice in this text, the tragic figure that he will become already looms in the shadows. The beekeeper loses his beehive, but Congal has lost his eye and his kingship. The loss of kingship because of a blemish is linked to the motif of sacral kingship.[7] According to this literary-religious motif, the fate of the land is connected with the king; this supernatural connection demands that the king be unblemished, courageous, generous and just. Various texts state that if these rules are transgressed, the land suffers as a consequence.

When bad things happen, people are inclined to look for an explanation, for an interpretation of evil. This is still the case today, but it was even more common in the past, before secularization, when people often adhered to an anthropocentric view on life. What happens when things go wrong? Have we angered the Gods? Have we transgressed certain rules? Or is it merely bad luck (cp. Borsje 1996: 317-334)? Famous narratives of the past have tried to answer these questions. Thus, the misery of Job is ascribed to a bet between God and Satan (Job 1:6-12) and Odysseus is said to wander for many years because of the wrath of Poseidon (Book I of the *Odyssey*).

It is not unlikely that medieval Irish authors also asked these questions about Congal Cáech. Why was he such a tragic figure? We will see how his image develops from a party in a conflict into an enemy of Ireland, but all the time he seems to be considered as a victim as well.

---

[5] Edition and translation: Charles-Edwards & Kelly 1983; for the date of the text, see pp. 13 (about the middle of the seventh century), 27 (the period c. 637 – c. 700).

[6] For a survey of the studies on the meaning of *cáech*, see Borsje 2002: 3-5.

[7] See Bremmer 1980; Charles-Edwards & Kelly 1983: 131; Borsje 1996: 67, 71, 80 n. 220, 81-82; and the literature that these works refer to.

2. The Old Irish version of *Cath Maige Rath*, 'The Battle of Mag Rath'

Carl Marstrander characterises the Old Irish version of *Cath Maige Rath*, 'The Battle of Mag Rath', as "an abridgement of several older and varying accounts", which he deduces from "its disconnected form and the discrepancy between prose and verse" (Marstrander 1911: 230-231).[8] The law text *Bechbretha* described Congal Cáech as a party in a lawsuit; in the Old Irish narrative on *The Battle of Mag Rath*, he is involved in a war, preceded by a series of conflicts. The tale also offers a variant version of the accident with the eye and the law case. Congal Cáech is now king of Ulster; his foster-father, Domnall son of Áed, is king of Tara and owner of the bees. In Domnall's garden, a bee destroys Congal's eye. The text explicitly connects this accident with his name, Congal the One-eyed. Presumably Congal is still a child,[9] because the Ulstermen are said to demand justice, and they suggest following the ancient principle of 'an eye for an eye' that the son of the king should give up his eye as well. Domnall passes judgement: he orders the destruction of the swarm so that the guilty bee is killed.

Four elements in this tale (CMR I) are radically different from the law text (BB): the kingship of Tara, the judge, the penalty and the conclusion. The high kingship has moved from Congal (BB) to Domnall (CMR I). Judgement passed by the people of Ulster and the Féni (BB §33) is now ascribed to Domnall (CMR I). The procedure of lot casting and forfeiture (BB §30)[10] has been replaced by an indiscriminate death penalty for the swarm (CMR I). The most important difference is the result of the judgement: the verdict in the law text seems to lead to an equilibrium or balance, whereas the tale tells us that the Ulster people were dissatisfied. As for Congal, from this moment he harboured *fích*, meaning 'feud, resentment, anger, enmity' (Marstrander 1911: 234, l. 43-44). The conflict has not been solved by the judgement; there is now a smouldering fire.

This smouldering fire will turn into a blaze, scorching the Irish and the Scots. The scene moves from the garden of the king to the Feast of Tara.

---

[8] Marstrander edited and translated this text (1911: 232-247). Myles Dillon (1946: 65) dates the text to the early tenth century, and characterises the language as "Old Irish save for a few later forms". According to Máire Herbert (1989: 78), most of the verse parts of the text had a prior, separate existence. Roland Smith (1948: 126) dates the original of the tale, which has been lost, to the eighth century, basing his theory upon the mention of the battle of Mag Rath in the *Life of Columba* by Adomnán, and the above-mentioned tradition in *Bechbretha*.

[9] This implicit motif becomes explicit in the later text *Fled Dúin na nGéd* (for more on this text, see below): here Congal blames Domnall not only for having replaced his Ulster nurse by a woman of his own people, but also for the fact that nobody was minding him when he played in the garden and was stung by the bee (Lehmann 1964: 10; 1969: 141).

[10] The law text points out in §§34-35 that in some cases a multitude is liable for the offence of a single individual. When people are involved, they must all pay compensation; when animals are involved, they all become forfeit. It is not said that they should be killed.

Domnall curses the egg woman when he notices a missing egg. Congal admits that he ate the egg before the banquet had officially started. Domnall then insults Congal by calling this a theft. Earlier Domnall refused to give an eye for an eye, and now Congal refuses to accept a golden egg offered as compensation for the insult. He promises battle[11] and leaves for Scotland where he gains allies. After a month the battle of Mag Rath takes places in which many Irish and practically all the Scots are killed.[12] This battle also means the death of Congal.

The tale portrays Domnall as a good, kind-hearted man who loved Congal. Domnall tries to pacify Congal twice: he offers the golden egg as compensation for his rash accusation, and just before the battle, the shrines, relics and saints of Ireland are put between Congal and Domnall in an attempt to make peace. Domnall does not go into battle himself but plays *fidchell* or prays. When Congal fights a duel with Domnall's champion and loses his horse, shield and sword, Domnall offers help by giving Congal his own horse, shield and sword.[13] When Domnall at last joins the fight, he claims to do this in the name of God and then the battle is quickly over. He treats Congal's head and body with respect and composes two poems in honour of his foster-son. These poems conclude the text.

Such royal respect shows that Congal is not described as an ultimate villain. In the garden, we see a hurt, discontented child. An insulted adult rushes from the feast of Tara, stubborn and deaf to his foster-father's pleas for reconciliation. The battle at Mag Rath shows a courageous, strong fighter who is honoured after his death. It is as if the text poses an implicit question: how is it possible that these tragic events have taken place? Why was it impossible to pacify Congal? An answer is suggested at the second attempt for reconciliation, which is further emphasised in the description of what happens after Congal realises his defeat. We will take a closer look at these scenes that are vital in the development of Congal's portrayal.

After the first peace offer – the golden egg – Domnall resigns himself to the imminent battle, defining it as a divine judgement saying: "God will decide (*gléid*) between us" (Marstrander 1911: 235). After the second peace offer – sacred objects and persons – the text tells us why Congal is so stubborn. He has supernatural guidance:

---

[11] Congal announces that a life will end because of the egg, either that of Domnall or his own. The poem concluding the tale starts and ends with a reference to Congal's head: it is placed on (the mound of) the rath: *Ceand Congail so forsin raith* (Marstrander 1911: 244, l. 201). The last two lines refer to the demand of a head for a head: *Ro espa a dul dosand/ rotesta cind imon cenn*, 'His journey was in vain,/ a head is required for a head (?)' (ibid. 246-247, ll. 245-246).

[12] One Scotsman survives only to drink and to tell his king the tale of the war after which he dies.

[13] Dillon's summary (1946: 67) gives the impression that it is Dúnchad who offers his horse, shield and sword, but this is not the case.

> Tuctha scrina ₇ minda ₇ naim Erenn eturru ₇ nir fedad a corugud .i. in satan ro-
> bai a comaid Congail is ris doberead a comairli. "Na telg" ol in satan "in
> mbreithir adrubairt fiad feraib Erenn. Nicon biad do maine dia treicea. Dia
> meba immorro remad bat ri Erenn" (Marstrander 1911: 236, ll. 76-80).

> The shrines and relics and the saints of Ireland were placed between them,
> but it was impossible to pacify them, for Satan was with Congal and it was
> with him he used to take counsel. "Do not take back the word," said Satan,
> "that you uttered before the men of Ireland, for you will not obtain your
> treasures if you recant; but if you gain the victory you will be King of Ire-
> land" (Marstrander 1911: 237).

According to Myles Dillon (1946: 66), Satan had entered Congal. Mar-
strander (1911: 229) also describes Congal as being possessed by the Devil,
but this is not what the text says. Modern charismatic movements distinguish
between demonic possession and demonic oppression, referring respectively
to a demon taking over from a human being and a demon manipulating a
person by way of 'remote control' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005: 166-170). Pos-
sessed people are associated with uncontrollable behaviour; oppressed peo-
ple suffer afflictions, such as "insomnia, poor financial management, fre-
quent illness, failure to receive business contracts or even lack of academic
progress" (ibid. 167), which are ascribed to demons. Neither, however, ap-
plies to Congal.

Instead we see Satan as an adviser and deceiver: he conjures up treasures
and the high kingship as rewards for Congal's stubbornness and battle. Ex-
amples of this role are found in the New Testament, when Satan promises
wealth and rulership to Jesus in the desert (Mt 4:8-10; Lk 4:5-8 (cp. Mk
1:13). We could also think of the Old Testament myth of the serpent in Para-
dise, promising Eve a god-like existence but delivering humanity into the
hands of death instead (Gen. 3:1-5). This serpent is later explained as a form
of Satan (Rev. 12:9; 20:2).

Therefore, according to this version of Congal's tragedy, he is deceived
by Satan and not possessed. It is, however, important to note the imperfect
tense that is used: Satan is described as the regular consultant of the Ulster
king.

Congal's demise is described in two phases. First, his prowess in battle
suddenly collapses when he hears the battle noise of the northern Uí Néill
(Marstrander 1911: 238-241, ll. 119-122).[14] Secondly, he realises that he is

---

[14] Between this realisation and the meeting with the fool, Congal goes to Domnall to submit.
Domnall suggests waiting a while for a new divine judgement: "We have sent two hostages to
the house of the King of truth because of our contention, that He may pass judgement for us
and that we may submit to the new judgement of God" (Marstrander 1911: 241), which
Congal declines. Does the author mean that Congal is afraid of this new judgement of God?
He abandoned the fight and thus did not undergo the first divine judgement (as it was phrased

doomed when he meets the royal fool (*óinmit*)[15] on the battlefield, who prophesies about his death in poetry. Congal corrects the quatrain and then rushes towards his death:

> "Bid fír" or se "dofuithebsa and." IS andsin tra imidrubart forsin sluag amail rotharb ndasachtach dia tabar drochbem (Marstrander 1911: 240, ll. 148-149).

> "It will be true," said he, "I shall fall there." Now he hurled himself upon the host like a huge mad bull, who has received an evil blow (Marstrander 1911: 241).

The evil supernatural guidance and the battle fury are described as part of two distinct scenes: the first is mentioned just after his return to Ireland from Scotland, just before the war, and the second takes place during the war, when Congal realises that all is lost.

3. *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, 'The Feast of the Fort of the Geese'

These two elements – the evil supernatural guidance and the battle fury – are combined in one scene in the late Middle Irish *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, 'The Feast of the Fort of the Geese',[16] during the feast of the High King. In this tale, the battle fury is also brought on by poetry. The poem in this version, however, does not refer to Congal's doom, but states that King Domnall has insulted Congal by making improper seating arrangements and serving improper food to him. When the poem is uttered (by a servant of Congal), Congal reacts as follows:

> Ro ling dásacht ₇ mire menman a Congal fri haithesc in óclaig sin ₇ ro ling in fúir demnach .i. Tesifone a cumgaise a chride do c*h*umniugad cecha droch*h*omairli dó. Ro érig di*diu* ina sheasam ₇ ro gab a gaiscead fair ₇ ro érig a bruth míled ₇ a én gaile for folúamain úasa ₇ ní tharat aichne for charait ná for nemcharait in tan sin amail ropa dúal dó óna sheanathair .i. ó Chonall Cernach mac Amairgin (Lehmann 1964: 9-10, ll. 289–296).

> Frenzy and madness of mind sprang up in Congal at the speech of that young man, and demonic[17] fury (that is, Tesiphone) sprang into the depths[18] of his

---

by Domnall; see line 59), and now he refuses the second one. In the end, he submits to the first divine judgement, while going 'berserk' into the battle.

[15] His name is Conall Clocach. He is not mentioned in *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, but does play a role in the Early Modern Irish version of *Cath Maige Rath* (for more on these texts, see below).

[16] Edition: Marstrander 1910; Lehmann 1964; translation idem 1969; Dillon (1946: 57) dates the text to the eleventh century, Lehmann (1964: xx) and Herbert (1989: 75) to the late eleventh or the early twelfth century.

[17] Lehmann translates 'devilish'.

heart to recall every evil counsel to him. Then he stood up and took his weapons and his soldier's ardor arose, and his bird of valor flying above him, and he did not recognize friends or enemies at that time as was natural to him from his grandfather, that is, from Conall Cernach, son of Amairgiu (Lehmann 1969: 140).

This text is a treasure trove of intertextual reference; a study of how it uses its many sources will be very worthwhile (see e.g. Dillon 1946: 57-64; Herbert 1989), but I will concentrate upon two things: the demonic inspiration and the ideology involved. My main question is: why did the author replace Satan by Tesiphone?

The author of *Fled Dúin na nGéd* wanted to present his tale correctly. He mentions the well-known tradition about Saint Ruadán of Lothra cursing Tara, and in his version, therefore, the feast does not take place at this royal site (cmp. Herbert 1989: 79). He replaces Satan by a personified emotion: *fúir demnach* and links this up with the state of being *dásachtach*. In a gloss, he explains the demonic fury as one of the Furies or Erinyes, violent Goddesses from Classical mythology. He kept the motif of ongoing supernatural guidance, but instead of using the imperfect tense, he refers to the recollection of every evil counsel. In the older tale Satan makes Congal look forward when he promises wealth and high-kingship, whereas 'Tesiphone' offers a look backward: all the injustices, the neglect and the insults that Congal had to endure.

Why did Satan not fit in? Since medieval ideas about Satan link up with motifs and narratives in the Bible, we may start here with our attempt to find an answer. There are several examples of mad or misguided kings to be found, but the role of Satan in this is complicated. For instance, concerning Saul we note the tradition that it is not Satan, but an evil spirit of God that disturbs (*exagito*) this tragic king and drives him mad (I Sam. 16:14-16; 18:10; see Van den Toorn and others 1999: 319-320). Similarly, God is said to misguide King David. Thus, the oldest tradition of King David counting

---

[18] Lehmann reads here *cumgaise*, whereas Marstrander reads: *cumgaire* (based on the text of the Yellow Book of Lecan: *7 roling in fúir demnach .i. Tesifone a cumgaire a chride do c[h]umniugad cecha drochcomairli dó*; Marstrander 1910: 10). Variant readings from RIA, Stowe MS 23 K 44 and RIA, B iv 1 are: *goroling in uir* (*úr*; B iv 1) *dhemhnachdha .i. Tisiphonæ i ccogúas a chroidhe* (Marstrander 1910: 10), 'so that the demonic Fury, that is: Tesiphone, sprang into the hollow/conscience of his heart'. *Cocúas* means both 'cavity, hollow', and 'conscience' (see DIL s.v. 1 *cocúas* and 2. *cocúas, cocubus*). Lehmann (1964: 49) translates *cumgaise* as 'nearness, closeness (?)', adding that Marstrander read *cúmgaire* with the same meaning. The Dictionary of the Irish Language, however, s.v. *cumgaise* refers to *comcaisiu*, which is translated 'act of examining, viewing; examination, diagnosis, opinion, advice'. This would lead to the following translation: 'and the demonic fury, that is: Tesiphone, erupted after the inspection of his heart…'. The description in these manuscripts could be seen as possession, which interpretation is further supported by the sequel: Congal's uncontrollable behaviour.

his people (i.e. his warriors only) qualifies this deed as evil and yet ascribes it to divine inspiration (II Sam. 24:1). In the later version of this tale, however, it is Satan who is said to urge David to count his people (I Par. 21:1; see also Van den Toorn and others 1999: 729-730).

The belief in Satan as a force of evil became part of the Jewish religion during and after Israel's exile in Babylonia in the sixth century BC, and is thus a post-exilic development (see Van den Toorn and others 1999: 244-245). It is in Christian sacred scripture, the New Testament, however, that we find a model for the motif of demonic fury that sprang into (or erupted in) Congal's heart, but there it obviously is not connected with the Classical Fury but with the personification of evil in Jewish and Christian religion. The Gospel of Luke describes how, just before the Jewish Feast of Easter, Satan enters Judas:

> Intravit autem Satanas in Iudam (Lc 22:3)

> Satan now entered Judas.

This gospel seems to refer to possession; the Gospel of John first hints at diabolical advice, which is then followed by an image of possession:

> Et cena facta cum diabolus iam misisset in corde ut traderet eum Iudas Simonis Scariotis (Io 13:2)

> And when supper was done, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray him

> et post bucellam tunc introivit in illum Satanas (…) (Io 13:27)

> And after the morsel, Satan entered into him (…).

Judas is not said to go mad, however, by having Satan inside him. His behaviour is supposed to be under satanic influence but does not become uncontrollable.[19]

The Epistles ascribed to the apostle Paul also mention Satan, and in some cases the Old Irish glosses on these letters explain being in Satan's power as being mad or *dásachtach*.[20] Thus, in I Corinthians 5 St Paul chides the Christian community. He pronounces a verdict on a Christian man cohabiting with the wife of his father: the Christian community should expel the culprit, which St Paul phrases as follows:

---

[19] Further examples are Satan's purported influence on the behaviour of Peter (Mk 8:33; Lk 22:31), and Satan is furthermore said to have tempted the heart of Ananias (Acts 5:3). Possession is usually indicated in the Gospels as someone having a demon (*daemonium*) or demons (*daemonia*) or being vexed by spirits. This can take the form of madness.

[20] Cp. I Tim. 1:20 and its gloss; Stokes & Strachan 1901: 680.

> Tradere huiusmodi (1) Satanae (2) in interitum carnis ut spiritus salvus sit (3) in die Domini Iesu (I Cor. 5:5)

> To deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

In other words: banishing a sinner from the Christian community equals the banishing of someone into the realm of Satan, which is done with the ultimate goal of saving the soul of the sinner. Interestingly, the interpretation as found in the Irish glosses on this verse is allegorical:

> (1) Iudicavi ǽm tradere dondnindinsinse ł. dodnindnastise [leg. dondnindnaste J.S.] vós. Aliter isdo dásact asberar athindnaculsa [leg. atindnaculsa or athindnaculsom] istresodin bidslán á animsom in die domini rl.
>   (2) satane .i. donfresndid .i. pænitentiæ .i. iscotarsne dondúalig insualig darahési.
>   (3) .i. condipslán áanim (Stokes & Strachan 1901: 551.26-30).

> *Iudicavi* indeed *tradere*, that I should deliver him; or that ye should deliver him. *Aliter*, to madness it is said that he is given up: through this will his soul be saved *in die Domini*, etc.
>   *Satanae*, i.e. to the adversary, i.e. *poenitentiae*, i.e. opposed to the vice is the virtue which takes its place.
>   i.e. that his soul may be saved (Stokes & Strachan 1901: 551.43-48).

The commentary found in the Old Irish glosses explains this condemnation in an allegorical way by applying the penitence doctrine of Cassian and of other Fathers of the Church. Hence, the term 'adversary', which is a good translation of Hebrew 'Satan' (Van den Toorn and others 1999: 726, cp. 244),[21] is taken as referring to the idea of the 'contrary' or 'opposite'. With this word-play, the doctrine that vices can be healed by the remedies that are their contraries is brought on board.[22] The punishment of exile is explained as 'madness', which is qualified as 'penance' in the second gloss. Accordingly, the view is expressed that the body suffers madness in order to save the soul. Madness would then be compulsory penance which purpose is be-

---

[21] Other allegorical interpretations of Satan are e.g. these two examples: following Satan (I Tim. 5:15) is glossed as following worldly desires (Stokes & Strachan 1901: 686). Hindrance by Satan, mentioned in I Thess. 2:18, is explained as the tribulations of persecutions or every adversary (ibid. 657).

[22] This doctrine is reflected, for instance, in the Prologue to the *Penitential of Cummean*: "And so they [i.e. the Fathers of the Church] determine that the eight principal vices contrary to human salvation shall be healed by the eight remedies that are their contraries" (Bieler 1963: 111, §15). The same idea is found in the Old Irish Penitential (ibid. 259). In the Prologue to *The Penitential of Cummean*, I Cor. 5:5 is quoted as an example of the sixth 'medicine': affliction of heart and body (ibid. 108-109, §7). See O'Loughlin (2000: 48-67) for a discussion of the Penitentials; on the links between Cassian and the *Penitential of Cummean*, see pp. 60-65.

lieved to be leading the sinner back to reconciliation with God. Rendered freely, the sinner who did not want to be controlled by rules is made uncontrollable, which ultimately might lead him to harmony with the divine.[23]

In the Middle Irish *Pais Partholoin*, 'Passion of Bartholomew', possession by the devil is also equated with madness. A man possessed by a demon ("*duine demnacda*") is driven to madness ("*for dásacht*") by this demon; the same fate has befallen a daughter of a king (Atkinson 1887: 96-97, 341). Demon and devil seem to be interchangeable in this text. The interpretation of this affliction as penance seems to be absent; its function as punishment seems to be emphasised. We see this especially when, as revenge for the murder of the Apostle Bartholomew, a king and priests are driven to fury and madness:

> Tanic din Astriages in rig, hi cind mís iar n-adnocul Partholoin, ₇ in uli sha-cart ar-oen fris, ₇ demnu oc a n-imluad, ₇ siat for mire ₇ dasacht, co hadnocul Partholoin, co n-id ed atbertis: –"Trias-in apstal doberair in díl-sa foirn," ol siat (Atkinson 1887: 101.2158-2161).

> At the end of a month after the burial of Bartholomew[24] came the King Astri-ages, together with all the priests, harassed by demons,[25] and driven to fury and madness, to the tomb of Bartholomew, and crying:–"For his sake is this doom brought upon us" (Atkinson 1887: 346).[26]

Despite these examples of human madness ascribed to Satan or demons, the author of *Fled Dúin na nGéd* removed Satan. I suggest he did this because *dásacht* in his source text (CMR I) referred to battle fury. He describes Congal not as simply mad but as being in a state of heroic fury.[27] Satan was not suitable in that context. If he wanted to follow biblical examples he should have made use of divine inspiration. The biblical Samson with his

---

[23] A good literary example of the notion of madness as penance is the tale about King Suibne. According to the tale, a saint punishes Suibne by cursing him. During the battle of Mag Rath, when Suibne fights on Congal's side, he becomes mad, due to the curse. Suibne's body suf-fers vehemently during his madness, but in the end, he confesses his sins, receives the Eucha-rist, dies and his spirit goes to Heaven (*Buile Suibhne*; O'Keeffe 1913).

[24] Atkinson translates 'his burial'.

[25] Atkinson translates 'fiends'.

[26] Hereafter they fall down and die. Their souls and the demons are said to depart to Hell. The Latin source text mentions neither madness nor Hell: *factum est autem tricesimo die deposi-tionis eius, arreptus daemonio rex Astriges venit ad templum eius, et omnes pontifices pleni daemonibus passi sunt ibi confitentes apostolatum eius, et sic sunt mortui* (Bonnet 1898: 149, ll. 9-12).

[27] Interestingly, Patrick L. Henry (1982: 235) describes the concept of *furor heroicus* as "ob-viously *possession* of the warrior by a martial fury so intense as to change his whole form" (the emphasis is his). Elsewhere (ibid. 237), he states that Cú Chulainn and Grendel "have pronounced demonic characteristics". He does not elaborate, however, upon this idea of pos-session.

famous heroic fury is said to owe this supernatural battle capacity to the spirit of God.[28] God, however, was not suitable for the purposes of the author either. His source referring to Satan made this solution impossible and so did early Irish battle portrayals. Supernatural beings, often interpreted as demons, are said to interfere in early Irish wars,[29] and yet, he did not choose such a 'native' specimen as the evil supernatural guide of Congal either.

We need to consider now why the author chose a Fury from Classical mythology in this role of devious instigator of the enraged king. Once more, the key term *dásacht* from his source text (CMR I) may lead us to an answer. Old Irish glosses explain forms of *furor* and *furio* with forms of *dásacht* (Stokes & Strachan 1901: 79) and *dásachtaigidir* (id. 1903: 4). *Dasactaide* is furthermore used to translate *Eumenides*, a euphemism for the Erinyes or Furies (see Stokes 1909: 312, ll. 4179-4180).[30] There is thus not only an association between being *dásachtach* and Satan or demons, but also between being *dásachtach* and the Furies. We now need to find out why the author chose Tesiphone specifically.

I suggest that he recognised parallels between his source text (CMR I) and the tragic tale on Thebes by Statius (Mozley 1928), of which an early Middle Irish version exists (Calder 1922: xi). These parallels can be schematically outlined as follows:

Destruction of Thebes	CMR I	Fled Dúin na nGéd
1. curse king/father on sons	curse king/fosterfather on egg woman	curse hermit (egg-man) on feast falls on foster-son
2. sons obsessed by *fích*	fosterson obsessed by *fích*	grudges held by foster-son
3. sons//mad bulls	fosterson//mad bull	
4. Fúir demnach dásachtach	Satan & tarb dásachtach	dásacht & fúir demnach
5. difficult relationship father & sons	difficult relationship fosterfather & fosterson	difficult relationship fosterfather & fosterson

The first parallel is the cursing of sons or a fosterson by a (foster-)father. King Oedipus curses his two sons who have insulted him (Mozley 1928:

---

[28] See Idc 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14.

[29] See Henry 1958-59; Sayers 1991 & 1994; Borsje 1999.

[30] The author of this text – the late Middle Irish *In Cath Catharda*, 'The Civil War [of the Romans' – supplied their names ("Alecto, Dissipone ₇ Megaera"), which are not mentioned in the parallel passage in the Latin source text (*The Civil War* (*Pharsalia*); Duff 1928: 354, l. 695). *In Cath Catharda* is dated to circa 1100 or the beginning of the twelfth century (Sommerfelt 1920-21: 39).

344-347; Calder 1922: 10-13). The curse on the egg woman by King Domnall in CMR I, when he sees that an egg is missing at the beginning of the feast, seems to be transferred to the fosterson. When Congal confesses that he was the one who ate the egg, Domnall stays angry and calls him a thief (Marstrander 1911: 234-235), and then, in this tale, the conflict is out in the open. We could interpret that by his rash accusation, the curse on the egg woman is now meant for the foster-son. This is all tied up in FDG, which removes the act of cursing from Domnall. This Middle Irish tale developed the motif into a hermit cursing the feast, when his goose eggs are stolen by men of King Domnall (Lehmann 1964: 5; 1969: 136).[31] Congal becomes the victim of this curse when he tastes a little piece from an egg. The general curse on the feast by the hermit is later on in the tale explained by inside information of the king himself as a specific curse for the first one who eats of the banquet. This person will destroy Ireland and disobey the king (Lehmann 1964: 7; 1969: 138).

The second parallel is the motif of (foster-) sons bearing a grudge. The description of Congal in *Cath Maige Rath* I as obsessed by *fích*, 'feud, resentment, anger, enmity', has a parallel in the portrayal of Oedipus's sons in *Togail na Tebe*. In both cases they are described as a mad bull, which is the third parallel. Thus we read in *Cath Maige Rath* I:

> bai fích immorro la Congal on uair sin (Marstrander 1911: 234)

> There was strife with Congal thenceforth (ibid. 235).

> IS andsin tra imidrubart forsin sluag amail rotharb ndasachtach dia tabar drochbem (ibid. 240)

> Now he hurled himself upon the host like a huge mad bull, who has received an evil blow (ibid. 241).

The following descriptions are found in *Togail na Tebe*:

> Co raerig fich marthanach ₇ im[fh]ormad adbul imon flaithius it*er* na da m*a*c sin tre aslach Tesifone, am*al* da tharb trena thuathmeara thnuthacha ua chuing adbail imfhulaing (Calder 1922: 14.209-212).

> So that a lasting feud and intense mutual jealousy about the sovereignty arose through Tisiphone's instigation between those two sons, like two strong, vicious, envious bulls under a huge intolerable yoke (ibid. 15).

---

[31] It should be noted that the woman in CMR I delivered hen eggs, whereas the hermit in FDG saw himself robbed of goose eggs. A further curse is uttered in FDG by the saints of Ireland when they are unable to pacify Congal.

If we compare this with FDG, we see that the image of the bull has been discarded, but the idea of being *dásachtach* is kept. The grudge has been developed into a long list of grudges, uttered under the guidance of Tesiphone, who is also said to instigate a feud between the two sons of Oedipus. The connection between becoming *dásachtach* and becoming inspired by the Fury in FDG is made explicit by the repetition of *ro ling*:

> Ro ling dásacht ₇ mire menman a Congal fri haithesc in óclaig sin ₇ ro ling in fúir demnach .i. Tesifone ... (Lehmann 1964: 9.289-290).

Supernatural inspiration is the fourth parallel. The Fury Tesiphone fulfils the curse of the father and instigates the sons to war and fratricide in *Togail na Tebe* (Mozley 1928: 346-351; Calder 1922: 12-15). The description of Tesiphone in *Fled Dúin na nGéd* verbally echoes those of *Togail na Tebe*:

> co Teissifone *cus*sin mbandea n[d]eamnaig n[d]asachtaig (*Togail na Tebe;* Calder 1922, 10.151-152)

> Tessifone (…) in Fhuir (vl. Fuir) demnach dasachtach (ibid. 12.181-182)

> in fhiuir (vll. Fuir, fhnuir) aduathmar ifirnaidi .i. Tesifoné (ibid., 222.3447)

> an ba*d*b gr*a*[n]na geranach thin*des*nach thuasanach .i. Tisipone (ibid. 278.4314-4315)

> an ba*d*b demnach das*acht*ach (ibid. 284.4418)

> in fúir (vll. uir, úr) demnach .i. Tesifone (vl. dhemhnachdha .i. Tisiphonæ; *Fled Dúin na nGéd*; Marstrander 1910: 10).

Tesiphone, a 'demonic' Fury instigating and guiding kings and kings's sons, sowing feud and causing martial frenzy, avenging evils and fulfilling curses was a very suitable candidate to supplant Satan. By identifying the tragic tale of Thebes as one of the author's sources, we see even clearer that a difficult relation between fathers and sons (fifth parallel) is a dominant theme of *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, as Máire Herbert (1989: 82) has pointed out.

   If I am right that *Togail na Tebe*, the tragic tale about a war rising from a family feud, was a source of inspiration for the author of *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, then we can conclude that this author applied details from this text in a creative way, using for instance inversion: King Oedipus, the father, lists the wrongs he has done due to the instigation by the Fury when he invokes her. King Congal, the son, lists the wrongs his fosterfather has done to him, and the Fury aids him by instigation and reminding him of the past. We could even add that the subtheme of envy and feud between brothers, present in the

part of the tale that describes Congal's adventures abroad, is paralleled by the envy and feud between the two brothers in *Togail na Tebe.*

Máire Herbert (1989: 83, 86) furthermore states that *Fled Dúin na nGéd* sides with the fathers. This is true, but not unambiguously so in the case of Domnall. He ignores his warning dream and the advice of his clerical brother. His people steal goose eggs from the hermit, and the latter's curse is said to lead to all kinds of evil, such as an ominous visit by an infernal couple,[32] and the unfortunate events surrounding the feast. Congal, incensed by his regular consultant Tesiphone, lists the evils done to him by Domnall. As I noted above, this climax could be a creative echo of Oedipus in *Togail na Tebe* listing the evil things he has done himself, incited by his educator Tesiphone. What is important concerning the portrayal of Domnall, though, is that none of Congal's complaints are contradicted or otherwise proven to be unjustified. As we would say, he may very well have a case.

The Middle Irish tale is thus not so positive about Domnall as the Old Irish text is, although in the end, Domnall 'in his truth' is praised unambiguously.[33]

Conclusion: The Early Modern Irish version of *Cath Maige Rath*, 'The Battle of Mag Rath'

Congal Cáech started out as an unfortunate king of Tara,[34] who won a lawsuit but lost his eye and his kingship, according to the Old Irish *Bechbretha.* Then we see a stubborn king of Ulster, misguided by Satan and in conflict

---

[32] According to Herbert (1989: 79), these supernatural personages curse the feast, but the text does not state this. In FDG, the sequence of events is as follows. The hermit curses the feast, after which a strange couple arrives at the place of the feast. They bring a tub full of goose eggs, as if to mock the theft from the hermit with a gift, which is followed by their devouring the quantity of food and beer that would have satisfied 300 people. Then they announce that their eating first before the feast will have evil consequences for the Irish, because they are from Hell. This eating and drinking before the official start of the feast could just as well be interpreted as violating a custom, or, worse, a *geis*, 'tabu' (especially because their description seems to hint at the description of Fer Caille and Cichuil, whose visit to King Conaire signifies the breaking of a *geis* in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*; see Knott 1936: 11.345-73). The whole description is a further development of Congal eating before the official start of the banquest in CMR I, which the author of FDG expands.

[33] This praise is part of a piece, known as the virtues of the battle of Mag Rath. It is quite possible that this tradition goes back to older sources. Among these virtues, two are constant: firstly, the defeat or death of Congal in his falsehood by Domnall in his truth, and, secondly, the number of poems composed by mad Suibne (see *Auraicept na nÉces* (Calder 1917: 6-7); the early Middle Irish commentary on *Bretha Étgid* (Binchy 1978: 250.36-41; Hancock and others 1873: 89); *Fled Dúin na nGéd* (Lehmann 1964: 30.928-932; Lehmann1969: 159).

[34] There are other texts on Congal Cáech (such as the Annals and *Buile Suibne*) that do not describe him as a victim of the supernatural (either deceived by Satan or possessed by one or more Furies), which are outside the scope of this paper.

with his kind fosterfather Domnall in the Old Irish *Cath Maige Rath*. A first hint at Congal Cáech being possessed by a demon is found in the late Middle Irish *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, in which Domnall does not seem to be faultless either. In the Early Modern Irish *Cath Maige Rath* (CMR II), the portrayal of Domnall surpasses the good press he got in the earlier texts. Domnall is praised to the skies. He is, for instance, described as a sacral king whose good rule is said to cause fertility, wealth and peace for the land (O'Donovan 1842: 100-107). His rising from his bed and his face are compared with the rising of the sun and the face of the sun and the Divinity (ibid. 114-115). The negative portrayal of Congal, however, also reaches a climax: he is doomed, tragic and, as the enemy of Ireland, an ultimate villain. Familiar images are used to condemn him:

> uair ni dligh tarbh tnuth-mear, trodach a thesargain, na duine co n-oll-ghnímaib diabail dilgud, muna taidligthea o trom-chraide (O'Donovan 1842: 122).

> for a furious, enraged bull is not entitled to protection, nor a man with the daring deeds of a devil[35] to forgiveness, unless, indeed, he is purified by repentance (ibid. 123).[36]

He is, moreover, fully demonised when the text describes his possession by the three Furies for all of his life:

> re h-aslach na n-amaidead n-ifernaidi ag furáil a aimlesa air; uair nír treicset na tri h-úire urbadhacha, ifernaidi eisium o uair a thúismid co trath a thiugh-bá, .i. Eleacto, ocus Megera, ocus Tesifone, conad h-e a siabrad ocus a saeb-forcetul sin fadera do-sum duscad cacha droch-dála, ocus imrad cach a io-marbhais, ocus forbad cacha fír-uilc; uair is ann ro-thaigestar in úir indled-hech, esidan, aidgill Electó ar cert-lár cleib ocus craide Congail, ic maidem cach miruin, ocus ic fiugrad cacha fír-uilc. Ocus din in mairg miscnech, mírunach, mallachtnach Megera do chosain a calad-phort comnaidi ar cert-lar charbait Congail, ic tagra á taiblib a thengad, ocus ic buadnaisi a bunnsachaib a briathar; ocus din in chenn cleasach, chosaidec, chonntrachta, thromda, thurrachtach, thuaith-ebrach Tesifóne tarraid sein ard-chomus airechais ar cuig cedfadaib comlana corparda Congail, comdís comdícra sein re forbad cacha fir-uilc. Gur ub trés na h-úirib ifernaidi sin tuicther na tri pecadha pudracha aimsiges cach aen, .i. scrúdud, ocus imrádud ocus gnim, feib asbert Fothud na Canóine:

> Electo sgrudus cach col,
> Megera fri h-imradud,

---

[35] O'Donovan translates 'demon'.

[36] This judgement is repeated: *nocha dlig demun dilgod*, 'a demon is not entitled to forgive-ness' (O'Donovan 1842: 134-135); *nocho dlig deman dilgud*, 'a demon is entitled to no for-giveness' (ibid. 136-137).

> Tesifóne fein co fir
> Cuireas cach cair i corp-gním (O'Donovan 1842: 166-168).

in consequence of the temptations of the infernal witches[37] who were pressing his destruction upon him; for the three destructive infernal furies Electo, Megaera, and Tesiphone, had not forsaken him from the time he was born until the period of his final dissolution, so that it was their influence and evil suggestions that induced him to stir up every evil design, meditate every contention, and complete every true evil; for the snare-laying, impure, and wicked fury, Electo, took up her abode in the very centre of the breast and heart of Congal, suggesting every evil resolution and pointing out every true evil to him. And also the woeful, ill-designing, wicked Megaera placed her resident fortress in the very middle of Congal's palate, to hurl defiance from the battlements of his tongue, and to threaten with the scourges of his words. And the tricky, evil-teaching, cursed, morose, backbiting Tesiphone assumed absolute sway over the five corporeal senses of Congal, so that they (the three Furies) were diligent to accomplish every true evil. By these three infernal Furies is understood the three evils which tempt every one, viz., Thought, Word, and Deed, as Fothadh na Canoine said:

> "Electo thinks of every sin,
> Megaera is for reporting,
> And Tesiphone herself truly
> Puts every crime into bodily execution." (ibid. 167-169).

Foreign Furies possess Congal, whereas above Domnall hovers a native one: the Morrígain:[38]

> Fuil os a chind ag eigmig,
> Caillech lom, luath ag leimnig
> Ós eannaib a n-arm sa sciath,
> Is i in Morrigu mong-liath (O'Donovan 1842: 198).

> There is over his head shrieking
> A lean, nimble hag, hovering
> Over the points of their weapons and shields:
> She is the grey-haired Morrigu (ibid. 199).

The next stanza tells us that it is only God who can repress this marvellous King Domnall. The contrast between Domnall and Congal is in this text at its height, and divine and the demonic images are extensively used to emphasise whom the readership should see as good and whom as evil.

University of Ulster and University of Utrecht

---

[37] O'Donovan translates 'agents'.

[38] For associations between the Morrígain and the Furies, see Borsje 1999: 242-247 and the literature there referred to.

Bibliography

Asamoah-Gyadu, J. K. (2005) *African Charismatics. Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana.* Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Atkinson, R. (1887) *The Passions and the Homilies from Leabhar Breac: text, translation, and glossary.* TLS II. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.

Bieler, L. (1963) *The Irish Penitentials.* SLH V. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Binchy, D.A. (1978) *Corpus Iuris Hibernici ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum.* Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Bonnet. M. (1898) *Acta apostolorum apocrypha* II.1. (Reprinted 1959.) Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Borsje, J. (1996) From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts. An Investigation Related to the Process of Christianization and the Concept of Evil. *Instrumenta Patristica* XXIX. Turnhout: Brepols.

Borsje, J. (1999) Omens, ordeals and oracles: On demons and weapons in early Irish texts. *Peritia* 13, 224-248.

Borsje, J. (2002) The meaning of túathcháech in early Irish texts. *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 43, 1-24.

Bremmer, J. N. (1980) Medon, the case of the bodily blemished king. In *Perennitas. Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich.* Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 67-76.

Calder, G. (1917) *Auraicept na n-Éces. The scholars' primer.* Edinburgh: John Grant.

Calder, G. (1922) *Togail na Tebe. The Thebaid of Statius.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Charles-Edwards, T., and F. Kelly (1983) *Bechbretha. An Old Irish Law-Tract on Bee-keeping.* EILS I. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Dillon, M. (1946) *The Cycles of the Kings.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Reprinted 1994, Four Courts Press, Blackrock.)

Duff, J. D. (1928) *Lucan. The Civil War.* Cambridge (MA), London: Harvard University Press.

Hancock, W. Neilson, T. O'Mahony, and others (1873) *Ancient Laws of Ireland.* Vol. III. Dublin: Alexander Thom, Hodges, Foster & co., and London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer.

Henry, P. L. (1958-59) The goblin group. *Études Celtiques* 8, 404-416.

Henry, P. L. (1982) Furor Heroicus. *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 39, 235-242.

Herbert, M. (1989) *Fled Dúin na nGéd: a reappraisal.* Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies 18, 75-87.

Knott, E. (1936) *Togail Bruidne Da Derga.* MMIS VIII. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Lehmann, R.P.M. (1964) *Fled Dúin na nGéd.* MMIS XXI. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Lehmann, R.P.M. (1969) The banquet of the Fort of the Geese. *Lochlann* 4, 131-159.

Marstrander, C. (1910) *Fleadh Dúin na nGéadh ocus Cath Muighe Ráth. I. Fleadh Dúin na nGéadh.* Christiania: Dybwad.

Marstrander, C. (1911) A new version of the Battle of Mag Rath. *Ériu* 5, 226-247.

Mozley, J. H. (1928) *Statius: Silvae – Thebaid – Achilleid.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London. William Heinemann.

O'Donovan, J. (1842) *The Banquet of Dun na n-Gedh and the Battle of Magh Rath. An Ancient Historical Tale.* Dublin: Irish Archaeological Society.

O'Keeffe, J. G. (1913) *Buile Suibhne (The frenzy of Suibhne) being The Adventures of Suibhne Geilt.* London: Irish Texts Society.

O'Loughlin, T. (2000) *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings.* London: Continuum.

Sayers, W. (1991) Airdrech, sirite and other early Irish battlefield spirits. *Éigse* 25, 45-55

Sayers, W. (1994) Supernatural Pseudonyms. *Emania* 12, 49-60.

Sharpe, R. (1995) *Adomnán of Iona. Life of St Columba.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Smith, R. M. (1948) The dating of Cath Maige Rátha. *Modern Language Notes* 63, 122-126.

Sommerfelt, A. (1920-21) Le Système Verbal dans in Cath Catharda (suite). *Revue Celtique* 38, 25-47.

Stokes, W. (1909) In Cath Catharda. The Civil War of the Romans. An Irish Version of Lucan's Pharsalia. In Stokes, W., and E. Windisch (eds.). *Irische Texte.* Vol. IV.2. Leipzig: Hirzel.

Stokes, W., and J. Strachan (1901) *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus.* Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Reprinted 1987, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin.)

Stokes, W., and J. Strachan (1903) *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus.* Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Reprinted 1987, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin.)

Van der Toorn, K., B. Becking, and P. W. van der Horst (eds.) (1995) *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible.* Leiden, Boston and Cologne. (Reprinted 1999.)