Heather C. Key

# Otherworld Women in Early Irish Literature

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*Heather C. Key*

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# Abbreviations

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|---|---|
| *AD* | *Aided Derbforgaill* |
| *ALC* | *The Adventure of Loegaire mac Crimthainn* |
| *AME* | *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* |
| *AO* | *Aislinge Óengusso* |
| *AOA* | *Aided Oenfír Aífe* |
| *BB* | Book of Ballymote |
| *BiS* | *Baile in Scáil* |
| *CCC* | *Compert Con Culainn* |
| *CDS* | *Cín Dromma Snechtai* |
| *CMT* | *Cath Maige Tuired* |
| *CMTC* | *Cath Muige Tuired Cunga* |
| *Diii₁* | Stowe D.iii.1 |
| *Div₃* | Stowe D.iv.3 |
| *Dv₁* | Stowe D.v.1 |
| *DIL* | *Dictionary of the Irish Language* |
| *EA* | *Echtrae Airt* |
| *EB* | *Echtrae Brain* |
| *EC* | *Echtrae Chonnlai* |
| *Ecm* | *Echtrae Chormaic* |
| *EN* | *Echtrae Nerai* |
| *F* | Book of Fermoy |
| *FR* | *Fingal Rónáin* |
| *IB* | *Immram Brain* |
| *ICC* | *Imacallam Choluim Chille ocus ind Óclaig* |
| *ICMD* | *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* |
| *IDB* | *Immacaldam in Druad Brain ⁊ inna Banḟátho Febuil ós Loch Ḟebuil* |
| *L₂* | Book of Lecan |
| *LL* | Book of Leinster |
| *LGÉ* | *Lebor Gabála Érenn* |
| *LU* | *Lebor na hUidre* |
| *SCC* | *Serglige Con Culainn* |
| *TBC* | *Táin Bó Cuailgne* |
| *TBDD* | *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* |
| *TBM* | *Tucait Baile Mongáin* |
| *TE* | *Tochmarc Emire* |
| *TÉ* | *Tochmarc Étaíne* |

# Preface

The purpose of this book is to examine the ways in which Otherworld (i.e., supernatural) women interact with mortals and the mortal world. First, I establish the position of women in early Ireland so that appropriate comparisons can be made between mortal and Otherworld women throughout the book. This is accomplished primarily through use of early Irish legal and wisdom texts. I also define what is meant by the 'Otherworld' and its relevance to the early Irish.

Gender is a hot topic in today's world. What does or does not constitute a woman is beyond the scope of this book; indeed, it is the subject of many books in and of themselves. For purposes of this volume, 'woman' is meant to be understood as the society of early medieval Ireland would have understood it. That is, any person born into the female sex. I realize that this is not an ideal 'definition,' but for the scope of this book it will be adequate simply because we are attempting to look through the eyes of the audience of the time.

In the main body of the text I move to discussing the differing goals of various intermediaries in early Irish texts, and the manner in which they interact with mortals. For this purpose, I selected five of the earliest known tales containing these themes, all of which claim provenance from *Cín Dromma Snechtaí*: *Echtrae Chonnlaí*, *Immram Brain*, *Serglige Con Chulainn*, the eponymous goddess episodes from *Lebor Gabála Éreann*, and *Echtrae Nerai*.[1] Some of these women come to the mortal world for love of a certain mortal hero, some to seek help, others have the mortal world come to them. At least one seemingly comes for the sole purpose of starting a war. Near the end, I briefly look at how Otherworld male intermediaries are treated differently in the literature. Finally, I tender conclusions as to why early authors might have used women in these roles as often as they did.

I extend my thanks to Amsterdam University Press for publishing my book, and to the editors, particularly Erin Dailey, for the patience and assistance shown to me throughout the process. Thanks, also, to all who read and critiqued the manuscript, especially Prof. John Carey; it would

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not be what it is without you. Finally, my eternal gratitude to my mother, Marci Key, who supported me throughout the writing and publication of this book. Your love and support has been everything to me.

# Part I

Introduction

# 1 Women in Early Ireland

## Status of Women

There is a tendency in popular culture to think of women in early Ireland as less oppressed than their continental counterparts; to think that they had more freedoms and were treated with a higher regard than in other medieval cultures.[1] This is a fallacy based largely on the romanticization of women in the saga literature, along with misunderstandings of early Irish marriage and divorce laws caused by a lack of understanding of their cultural context.

The primary legal source on marriage was the eighth-century text *Cáin Lánamna* (Eska 61–62). While commenting on a variety of sexual unions, it recognized three primary forms of marriage: union of common contribution (*Lánamnas comthinchuir*); union of a woman on a man's contribution (*lánamnas mná for ferthinchur*); and union of a man on a woman's contribution (*lánamnas fir for bantinchur* [Ó Corráin 47–50]). In the first form, the man and woman bring equal amounts of property to the marriage; in the second, the woman might bring some property, but the primary contribution would be the man's (47). The woman's would be moveable property, such as cows, as a woman could not inherit land unless her father died without sons, and even then it reverted to her male kin on her death (52). This was the defining circumstance of the final type of marriage listed above. Here, the woman brought the property and the roles were reversed. Usually a woman would marry someone from her own kin, but occasionally she would marry an outsider. Such a man would be even more dependent on his wife. Any man who left his own *túath* – which could loosely be translated as 'kingdom' – had no rights, unless he was a king or belonged to a particular group of craftsmen, and those who did so were regarded with some contempt. In fact, it was considered acceptable under the law to refuse to pay honour price for killing

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1    This assertion can be substantiated by a simple internet search for the words 'celtic women.' This will turn up any number of sites to prove the point, often laced with just enough fact to sound convincing, e.g., http://www.celticquill.com/2017/10/16/celtic-women; http://www.celtlearn.org/pdfs/women.pdf; and http://www.sarahwoodbury.com/womens-status-in-the-dark-ages.

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one type of outsider, the *ambue* (F. Kelly, *Guide* 4–5). This being the case, it is unlikely that many left their own *túath* lightly.

The laws recognized two types of men who resided outside their native *túath*. One was the above-mentioned *ambue*, which has been translated as 'stranger' or 'outlaw' (Charles-Edwards, "Social Background" 52; F. Kelly, *Guide* 5). The other was the *cú glas* or 'grey dog.' Whereas the *ambue*, while an outsider to the *túath*, was still from within the island of Ireland, the *cú glas* came from overseas and seems therefore to have been held in even lower regard than the *ambue* (Charles-Edwards, "Social Background, 52–53).

The grounds for divorce were many and varied, for both men and women – which is one reason for the aforementioned misconception. Heptad 3 lists seven types of men a woman could divorce without penalty: a barren man; and unarmed man; a man in holy orders; a church man; a 'rockman'; a very gross man; and a man who discloses the events of the bedchamber (Binchy, *Corpus* 4.33–5.32; Hancock 5.132–4.137). Heptad 52 adds seven more: a man who spreads lies about her; one who makes satire about her; a man who marked her during a beating; a man who deserted her for another woman; a man who preferred to sleep with boys when he had no cause to do so; a man who excited her to fornication; and one who did not meet her needs in the marriage (Binchy, *Corpus* 47.21–48.26; Hancock 5.292–5.197). Polygyny was widely practised, but only for men. Men could have several wives through different types of unions, as long as he could afford them (Binchy, *Bretha Crolige* 44–47). However, as cited above, a woman could choose to divorce her husband if he repudiated her for another woman. According to a gloss on § 44 of *Gúbretha Caratniad*, a man could divorce his wife if she betrayed him, if she was unfaithful, if she had an abortion, if she disgraced him, if she was barren due to disease, if she committed infanticide, or if she spoiled her domestic work (Binchy, *Corpus* 2198.24–2198.26).

At first glance, then, it looks like women are allowed twice as many reasons to divorce as men – giving the false impression, as referenced in the first paragraph, that women in early Ireland had more rights and freedoms than their continental sisters. However, this system was not developed for the benefit of the women, but out of political expedience for their families. As noted by Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, it would be rare for women of the lower classes to divorce as they would have no means of support other than to throw themselves at the mercy of their male kin (Ní Bhrolcháin, "Banshenchas" 73.). The upper classes could and did make use of the liberal divorce laws – not the women themselves, but their male kin. In this way, families could make and break alliances with other noble families easily and quickly (72).

In point of fact, women were included among those who were considered mentally incapable (*báeth* or *nach/nacon/ni túalaing*) by law in early Ireland (Binchy, "Legal Capacity" 211–215 §§ 1, 3, 5, 10, 11). According to the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (*DIL*), *túalaing* indicates ability or capability, so *nach/nacon/ni túalaing* would indicate a simple lack thereof. *Báeth*, however, has a range of meanings including 'foolish,' 'stupid,' 'silly,' 'thoughtless,' and 'reckless'; D. A. Binchy tends to render it as 'senseless,' which could indicate any of the above meanings (211 §§ 1, 3). This class of people also includes the child, the 'son of the living father,' the insane, the slave, and the unransomed captive (F. Kelly, *Guide* 68; Binchy, *Corpus* 351.24–351.28; Meyer, *Triads* 20–21 §§ 150, 151).

Like the rest of this class, women were – with a few exceptions – unable to make their own contracts. In fact, the law tract known as the *Díre* text says:

> The worst of transactions are women's contracts. For a woman is not capable of selling (alienating) anything without [the authorization] of one of her "heads." Her father watches over [?] her when she is a girl; her *cētmuinter* watches over her when she is the wife of a *cētmuinter*; her sons watch over her when she is a woman with children; her kin watch over her when she is a woman of the kin (i.e., with no other natural guardian, father, husband, or son); the Church watches over her when she is a woman of the Church. She is not capable of sale or purchase or contract or transaction without one of her [aforementioned] heads, save a proper gift to one of her heads, with agreement and without neglect.

> *Messom cundrada cuir ban. Air ni tualaing ben roria ni sech oen a cenn: adagair a athair imbi ingen; adagair a cetmuinter imbi be cetmuintere; adagairet a mme[i]c imbi be clainne; adagair fine imbi be fine; adagair eclais imbi be eclaise. Ni tualain[g] reicce na creice na cuir na cunruda sech oen a cen, acht tabairt bes techta d'oen a cenn cocur cen dichill.* (Binchy, "Legal Capacity" 211–215 § 10)[2]

Any contract made by a woman had to be perfected, or authorized, by the man responsible for her as outlined in the above passage. Otherwise, it would be overturned as a matter of law, regardless of whether it would benefit either party: "The *fuidirs* of a lord, unfree church clients ... women ... neither overreaching nor bad (disadvantageous) contract nor good (advantageous) contract is made fast against them without their rightful guardians

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2    Here *cētmuinter* means 'head of household'; elsewhere, as below, it can mean 'chief wife.'

authorizing their contracts" (*Fuidre flatha, daermanaig ec*alsa ... *mna* ... *ni astaith*er *saithiud na docur na sochur foraib cen a fircodnachu oc forngaire a cor* [212 § 7]).[3] Likewise, most women were bound by the contracts of the men over them, regardless of how disadvantageous these were. The exceptions to this were the 'chief wife' (*cétmuinter*), who could impugn any of the contracts of her husband, and the subordinate wife with sons, who could impugn certain types of contracts (Eska 196–203 §§ 21–22).

Women were also presumed to be incapable of making oaths – and were therefore barred, in most cases, from being legal witnesses: "There are seven grades in Irish law, none of which is capable of giving legal evidence in a *túath* ... woman-evidence ... ." (*Tait UII. Ngraid lā nacon tualuing nach æ fiadnaise do denum i tuaith ... Banfiadnaise* ... [Binchy, *Corpus* 45.1–45.5]).[4] A gloss in one text gives the reason; a woman's evidence was considered to be 'partial and unworthy' (*ecoitcenn eisinnruic* [45.11.].[5] Again, there were certain exemptions, but these were considered exceptional. These include a woman on sick-maintenance regarding the number of menstrual periods she had during that time; a woman at childbirth; a nun's testimony against a cleric; and the testimony of a female examiner on sexual matters (F. Kelly, *Guide* 201–207; Binchy, *Corpus* 145.30–145.4, 996.2–996.7, 2197.5–2197.6, 2296.29–2296.331; Meyer, *Triads* 22–23 § 165).

By the same token, women were much more limited than men in their ability to offer pledges and sureties. A pledge is some object of value given into the keeping of another to ensure fulfilment of a claim. A person can make a pledge on their own behalf, or on behalf of another. If one made a pledge on behalf of another, they were entitled to interest on the item for the period of time it was pledged (F. Kelly, *Guide* 165–166). With a surety, on the other hand, the person giving the surety took responsibility for the enforcement of the contract or claim. A surety could be made with the pledger's personal property (*ráth*), his personal bond (*naidm*), or by hostage (*aitire* [167–173]). A woman could not give sureties, and could only pledge something that was specifically hers – not anything owned by her husband. An embroideress, for example, could pledge her needle, or a queen her work-bag (Binchy, *Corpus* 464.1–464.12).[6] If a woman did attempt to offer a pledge of her husband's property, he could either repudiate or authorize the pledge. If he did authorize

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3    *Fuidir*. Usually translated as 'semi-freeman' or 'tennant-at-will'; however, his actual status could vary considerably. The lord was responsible for maintaining his *fuidir*, but the *fuidir*, in turn, was required to perform any service requested by his lord. See F. Kelly, *Guide* 33–35.

4    Translation mine, with assistance from John Carey.

5    Translation mine.

6    Translated and summarized by me from *Bretha im Fuillema Gell*.

it, however, the interest went to him, and its amount was reduced because it was a woman who initiated the pledge (464.26–464.29).[7] The only exception to these rules would be the *banchomarbae*, or female heir, who would have inherited her father's property on his death if he had no sons (F. Kelly, *Guide* 76).

Another area of the law that illustrates women's status in early Ireland is the question of honour price (*lóg n-enech*, literally 'the price of a face' [8]). Any offence against a person's honour required the payment of this price, which was dependent on status. A person's ability to make contracts and oaths was generally dependent on his honour price, though, as we have seen, these rights did not apply to women. Honour price was usually given in *cumals*, a *cumal* being the equivalent of three milch cows or one female slave (xxiii, 8–9). A woman's honour price was usually half of her husband's, though, again, rare exceptions did exist:

> For as regards every condition [of man] in Irish law, half his honour- price is [assigned] to his wife, except for three men alone, namely, a man without land, without property, who has a female heir [to wife] – he is paid honour price according to the honour of his wife; and a man who follows his wife from across the border (i.e., a member of another *túath*) – he is paid honour price according to the honour of his wife; and a *cū glass* ('grey wolf,' i.e., and outlawed stranger?) – he is paid honour price according to the honour of his wife … . These three women are capable of impugning the contracts of their spouses, so that the latter are not competent to sell or buy without their wives, but only what these authorize.

> *Ar cach rect la* Fēniu *acht oentriar, is letlog a enech dia mnai: ferson cen se[i]lb cen t(h)othcus lasmbi bancomarba, a inchuib a mna direnar side;* ⁊ *fer inetet toin a mna tar crich, direnar a inchuib amna;* ⁊ *cu glas, direnar side a inch(a)uib a mna … . It [t]ualaing na teora mna so imoicheda cor a cele, connatat meise recce na crecce sech a mna acht ni forcongrat.* (Binchy, "Legal Capacity" 215)[8] If the woman was injured by a third party, the honour price was payable not to her, but to her husband or kin (Binchy, *Crith Gáblach* 5, lines 121–127).

*Bretha Crólige* adds twelve women who would be given their honour price instead of being brought away on sick-maintenance; for three of these, the

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'sharp-tongued virago,' a 'werewolf,' and 'a vagrant (?) woman [one who is 'half-witted']' the glossator gives the reason, "[f]or nobody dares to undertake responsibility for them, for their crime, on account of their audacity in committing crime" (Binchy, "Legal Capacity" 27–29 §§ 32, 34).

In addition to the laws, the wisdom texts are helpful in providing an understanding of the early Irish view of women. These texts seem to present a strong duality, which can be referred to as the pedestal versus the pit: women are seen either as a necessary and beneficial part of society, or they are wicked and undermine its very fabric. Take, for example, Triad 75: *Trí cóil ata ferr folongat in mbith: cóil srithide hi folldeirb, cóil foichne for tuinn, cóil snáithe dar dorn dagmná.* "Three slender things that best support the world: the slender stream of milk from the cow's dug into the pail, the slender blade of green corn upon the ground, the slender thread over the hand of a skilled woman." The hand of a skilled woman is similarly named as one of the three best hands in the world in Triad 76. On the other hand, if a woman acts badly, she is vilified: *Trí buidir in betha: robud do throich, airchisecht fri faigdech, cosc mná báithe do drúis.* "Three deaf ones of the world: warning to a doomed man, mocking a beggar, keeping a loose woman from lust" (Meyer, *Triads* 10–11 §§ 75, 76, 83). Triad 185 and Heptad 15 enumerate lists of women whose conduct has deprived them of a payment for their honour price, including loose women, female thieves, women who use magic, female satirists, gossips, adulteresses, and women who refuse hospitality (24–25 § 185). In addition, in *Tecosca Cormaic* (*TC*), when Cormac is asked his opinion of women, he spends more than one hundred lines declaiming their faults – without a kind word for any of them (Meyer, *Instructions* 28–35).

## Anomalous Women

One might well ask, then, why so many prominent women are represented in early Irish literature. This is a complex question, to which there are multiple answers and the issue must be examined on a case-by-case basis. However, it must be kept in mind that the fact that such women are present in the literature of a culture does not necessarily mean that they were deemed admirable or even desirable in the everyday life of the society. This point will be explored further later.

One reason for using a strong female figure in a narrative can be to express ideas that might not otherwise sit well in an heroic setting. As Maria Tymoczko has said, "[w]here the heroic ethic hung on and was slow to die,

feelings of love, grief, dismay over societal disintegration and defeat, fear of ageing, and self-pity were charged; by putting on a mask and projecting these feelings outwards, particularly onto females, the poet could free himself – and his audience – to consider and express aspects of life that were, if not forbidden, then at least difficult" (Tymoczko 203). Notably, Emer is sometimes used in this way. Her speech in *Aided Oenfir Aífe* (*AOA*) is a good example of this. In this tale, a young boy appears in a marvellous boat off the coast of Ulster, performing incredible feats. He proceeds to defeat the first two champions sent to meet him, and when Cú Chulainn sets off to confront him, only Emer seems to recognize that the boy is Connlae, Cú Chulainn's son by the warrior- woman Aífe. "It is a son of thine that is down there. Do not murder thy only son! ... It is not fair fight nor wise to rise up against thy son ... Turn to me! Hear my voice! My advice is good" (Meyer, "Death" 119). Indeed, Emer seems to be the only voice of reason in an assembly of men who are more concerned with their honour than with who the child is and what his presence might mean for them. Cú Chulainn's reply encapsulates the heroic ideal that imprisons them: "Forbear, woman! Even though it were he who is there, woman ... I would kill him for the honour of Ulster" (119). This is despite the fact that kin-slaying (*fingal*) is one of the greatest crimes in early Irish law, one whose "horrendous character ... strikes at the heart of the kin-based structure of early Irish society" (F. Kelly, *Guide* 127). As Joanne Findon points out when discussing this tale, there are other stories in the Irish corpus that mirror the father–son conflict problem presented here, but these manage to neatly avoid *fingal* through some mechanism of recognition, for example, Finn revealing himself to Oisín in *The Quarrel Between Finn and Oisín*, or the ring left by Elatha for Bres in *Cath Maige Tuired* (*CMT* [Findon, *Woman's Words* 86–87). Strikingly, a similar ring left for Connlae by Cú Chulainn in *Tochmarc Emire* (*TE*) does not figure at all in *AOA*. Neither of the other texts features an intervening female, however – not even the son's mother. This seems a significant absence, as the three texts appear to be roughly contemporaneous, each deriving from the ninth century (Meyer, "Death" 113; Meyer, "Quarrel" 23; Gray 11–21). In *AOA*, Emer – concerned for Connlae despite the fact that he is her husband's son by another woman – is the only source of recognition, and her testimony is ignored. Of the three stories, only *AOA* seems to focus on the problems inherent in the heroic ideal. This seems to illustrate the scenario described above. Emer, being a woman and therefore not expected to subscribe to the heroic ideal, is the perfect person to express the author's anti-heroic sentiment. The results of ignoring her are tragic not only for Connlae but for the heroic paradigm itself, as there will now be no new hero to take Cú Chulainn's place after his death.

Mothers of significant historical or legendary figures such as saints and sovereigns were also greatly revered in their own right, and therefore often appear to advantage in the early texts. Simone de Beauvoir explains this tendency for mother reverence as follows:

> On account of the influence the mother has over her sons, it is advantageous for society to have her in hand: that is why the mother is surrounded with so many marks of respect, she is endowed with all the virtues, a religion is created with special reference to her, from which it is forbidden to depart at the risk of committing sacrilege and blasphemy. She is made guardian of morals; servant of man, servant of the powers that be, she will tenderly guide her children along appointed ways. (De Beauvoir 173).[9]Here, De Beauvoir is speaking specifically of the relationship between the mother and the hero gone to battle, but the analysis is equally applicable to the heroes and saints of early Irish literature.

In this way women such as Nes, Conchobar's mother, come to prominence. Indeed, Nes' only appearances are in stories relating to Conchobar. She strategically manipulates Fergus and the men of Ulster to ensure that Conchobar gains and retains the kingship, even though she already has Cathbad's assurance that he would be a great king based on the day of his conception or birth, depending on which version is read (Stokes, "Tidings" 22–23; Koch and Carey, *Celtic Heroic Age* 59–63).

In one account, she asks the druid Cathbad what that day was good for – and he responded that it would be good for getting a king. She therefore decides to sleep with him to gain that assurance for her child (Kinsella 3). In another version, she even holds back from giving birth – thereby prolonging her labour – for a day to ensure that Conchobar is born at the most propitious time possible (Koch and Carey, *Celtic Heroic Age* 61–62). Later, she convinces Fergus, who is by now her husband, to give up his throne for a year in favour of Conchobar. During that year, she causes her son to give so generously that when the year is up, the people are not willing to part with their new king, and Fergus loses his crown for good (Stokes, "Tidings" 24–25). Between lying with Cathbad at the 'propitious' time, and marrying Fergus, the king of Ulster, thereafter, Nes grants the ongoing use of her body in an attempt to ensure the kingship of her son – effectively living through him to bolster her own prominence.

9    Original edition 1949.

This is not Nes' only claim to fame, however. She is also a female *fénnid* (or *banfhénnid*), a type of warrior outlaw, which is an unusual occupation for a woman in early Ireland (Koch, *Celtic Heroic Age* 60). A band of *fíanna* had killed her foster fathers, and she chose to become one herself in order to avenge them (Stokes, "Tidings" 22–23).

This brings us to a third category of women in early Irish literature: those who are simply out of the ordinary. Their absence from the surviving records points to the likelihood that there were no historical *banfhénnidi*, so stories involving female warriors, such as Nes in her *banfhénnid* role, certainly fit this category. Other *banfhénnidi* in the literature are Creidne and Scáthach, whom we can now consider.

According to an anecdote included in a genealogical tract, Creidne was the daughter of a king, and had borne him three sons. The king was ashamed of this, and exiled the three boys from his *túath*. Creidne, angry with her father's actions, became a *fénnid* and, in vengeance, ravaged his *túath* for seven years before finally coming to terms with her father (Meyer, *Fianaigecht* xi–xii). Scáthach, on the other hand, did not seem to be directly associated with the *fíanna*, but instructed warriors – most famously, Cú Chulainn – in Alba (Miller 179 & 184). These examples suggest that, even in the literature, women only became warriors under extreme circumstances – at least in Ireland.

## Magical Women

Devaluation and demonization of women's magic appears to have been quite prevalent during the Old and Middle Irish periods, though not universal. *DIL* lists no less than nine words used throughout these periods that refer in some way to women with magical powers, whether mortal or Otherworldly. Of these, *ammait* is the one most consistently used in this way, and it can mean 'a fool' or 'a foolish woman' as well as 'witch' or 'hag.' In his article "Notes, Mainly Etymological", T. F. O'Rahilly indicates that the former was the original meaning, and that the word gained its association with witches because "the speech of a crazed person was regarded as divinely inspired" (151). None of the references listed in *DIL* for *ammait* under the meaning of 'witch' generates a favourable picture of magical women. Take, for example, the story of Conall Corc:

> Conall Corc [<*corc* 'purple']: how did it come about? It is not difficult. Once when the king, i.e., Lugaid son of Ailill Flann Bec, was in his house in Feimen, a female satirist came to the king's house. Her name was

Bolc Bainbretnach [>*Bretnach* 'Briton], i.e., she was a satirist belonging to the Britons. The satirist demanded that the king sleep with her. The king agreed to that and he went to bed with the satirist. The satirist was made pregnant by the king at that time and she bore him a son, i.e., Conall son of Lugaid.

Láir Derg daughter of Móthaire, son of Clithaire, from Corcu Oiche of the Uí Fidgeinte, and Torna Éices, the aforementioned poet, reared Corc son of Lugaid. And he is called Corc mac Láire after that Láir. Feidlim daughter of Móthaire was Láir's sister. She was a witch. And she went to the king's house the night Corc was born. The witches of Mumu came to the house that same night that Conall was brought forth. They were witches who used to engage in witchcraft and injure little children. And Feidlim daughter of Móthaire, the witch, was one of them. Those who were in the house were very afraid when they heard the other witches at the door. They all hid the little boy under the mouth of the [upturned?] cauldron that was in the house and put him under the protection of Feidlim the witch. The witches had been entitled to an assurance from Feidlim that she would not take refuge from them wherever they might meet together. For that reason Feidlim the witch ordered the little boy to be put under the cauldron to conceal him from the [other] witches. But that was revealed to the witches. One of them said: "Whom, of those inside, would she destroy?" Her companion answered: "The one who is hidden under the cauldron." After that another of them shot a flame from the fire onto the little boy so that it burnt his ear and turned it purple. For that reason he is called Corc.

*Conall Corcc, cidh día dá? Ni ansa. Fecht día mboí in rí.i. Lugaid mac Oililla Flainn Big, inna thaigh a Femiun doluid bancaínti do Bhretnaibh issidhe. Dolád in benchainti ailgis forsind righ im feis lé. Faemaís in rí inní sin, ₇ luid a comlebaid na banchainti. Ba torrach in bhanchainti ón rí intan sin, ₇ ruc mac dó .i. Conall mac Luigdech. Lair Derg ingen Mothaire mic Clithaire de Chorca Oiche a Húi[b] Fidh[g]inti ₇ Torna Eigis in fili remráiti, is síat rus-ail Corc mac Luigdech. Ocus is ón Láir sin aderar Corc mac Laíre frís. Bá síúr don Laír ssin Feidlim ingen Mothaire, ban-aimit issidhe, ₇ luidh sidhe do thigh in rígh i n-aidhchi rogenair Corc. Tangadar aimdidihi Mumhan gusin tech a n-aidhchi cétna rucad Conall. Ban-aimiti íatsidhe nóbhíth aga imitecht ₇ agá idhmilled mac mbeg. Ocus ba díbh sin Féidlim ingen Mothaire, inn amait. Ro hómhnaighedh co mór a mbai astigh odchualadar na hamaide aili isin dorus. Docuiredh in mac beg a fuin la cách fo bhel*

*in choire bhoí sisin tigh ₇ for faesom Féidlimid na hamaide. Rodhlighsit*
*na hamaide forcell di gin chumairci do ghabháil forra gibé maighin a*
*coimhreígdís fri araile. Conad aire sin rofuráil Fedlim in amait in mac*
*beg do chur fón coire día folach for na hamidibh. Rofoillsighedh tra dona*
*hamidibh in ní sin. Isbert amait díbh: "Cía choillfedh día fil astigh?" Asbert*
*a sétchi: "a fuil a fuin fon coire". Iársin bruinnith araile díbh bréo don teni*
*forsin mac mbeg, gurus-loisc a eó ₇ gurus-corcc. Is aire sín asberar Corcc*
*friss.* (Arbuthnot, *Cóir,* Part 2 16–17, 92–93).

Though Feidlim is portrayed here as protecting Conall, this does not redeem
her character from the fact that she keeps company with a group of witches
who are known for their propensity to attack small children. Indeed, the
statement in the text that she was not allowed to "take protection against
them in what place soever they should meet with each other" makes it
appear as if the other witches came to meet with her, which would make
her presence at the birth the factor that places Conall in danger in the first
place. However, it is interesting to note a slight difference in the Book of
Ballymote version of the story:

Láir Derg of Corcu Oiche was Corc's mother. She demanded that the king,
Lugaid son of Ailill Flann Bec, sleep with her. And she bore him a son,
i.e., Corc. There was a witch in the house of the king, i.e., of Lugaid. She
was Feidlim daughter of Nóchaire. And Corc's mother put him under the
protection of this witch.

*Lár Derg di Corco Oiche máthair Cuuircc. Dobertside ailgis forsan rig, for*
*Lugaid mac Oilella Fland Big, im feis lee. Ocus rug mac do .i. Corc. Ro bai*
*banamaid i tig in rig .i. Lugdech. Feidlimi ingen Nochairi isidhe. Ocus dobert*
*a máthair Corc for fæsam na hamaide.* (Arbuthnot, *Cóir*, Part 1 93 & 132).

Here, Láir is Conall's mother, rather than the female satirist Bolc, and Feidlim
herself was his foster mother. At first blush, it seems strange that a witch
would be given a child to foster if witches have such a poor reputation.
However, the latter text does not indicate whether Feidlim was known by
those around her to be a witch at the time – unlike the previous text, which
seems to imply it. It is even less strange if we assume, as is explicitly stated
in the first text, that Feidlim and Lár are sisters.

Similarly, it is three witches who are partly responsible for Cú Chulainn's
ultimate downfall. In *Aided Con Culainn*, these three invite Cú Chulainn
to dine with them.

He saw something: three witches, blind in their left eyes, waiting for him
on the path. They were cooking a lap-dog with poisons and spells on spits
of rowan. It was one of Cú Chulainn's *geissi* to not visit a cooking pit to eat.
It was also *geis* for him to eat the flesh of his namesake. He runs and was
for going past them. He knew they were not there acting in his interest.
Then a witch said to him, [Come] visit, Cú Chulainn.

> *Co n-accai ní na teora ammiti túathchaecha ara chind forint sligid. Orce*
> *co nemib ⁊ epthaib fonoíset for beraib cairthind. Ba do gessib Con Culaind*
> *cen adall fulachta dia chathim. Geiss dó dano cárna a chomanma do*
> *ithi. Rethid ⁊ ba do dul seccu. Rufitir níbu co denam a lessa ro bass and.*
> *Conid dé asbert friss ind ammait, Tadall latt a Chú Chulaind.* (Kimpton
> 18 & 19).

These three, in catching Cú Chulainn between conflicting *gessi*, deliberately
weaken him so that his enemies can kill him. And, as if their actions did not
speak loudly enough, the author is careful to specify that they are blemished:
each is *túathcháech*, which Kimpton translates as 'blind in the left eye.'
Jacqueline Borsje, while challenging the assumption that *túathcháech*
always means 'blind in the left eye,' also discusses the fact that having a
single eye is often associated with the power of the evil eye – also known
as the destructive or angry eye – and that this power is often attributed to
witches. She points out, however, that while the two overlap, the fact of a
character having a single eye does not guarantee that they are possessors of
the evil eye, and such an evaluation must be taken on a case-by-case basis
(Borsje & F. Kelly 3,7, 12, 21).

This idea of the witch as blemished or ugly is echoed in the description in
the late Middle Irish or early Modern Irish Fenian tale *Acallam na Senórach.*
In the version found in the Book of Lismore, Cáilte describes the Fianna's run-
in with an *amait chaillige corrluirgnige cirdhuibe* (O'Grady 181.8.); O'Grady
translates this as 'a crooked-shinned grimy-looking hag,' taking *amait* and
*chaillige* together. However, it would be literally rendered as 'a witch of a
hag.' So, here again, we have the witch presented as an unsavoury – and,
in this case, a downright revolting – character.

In both *Acallam na Senórach* and *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (an eleventh-
century account of Norse invasions and the Battle of Clontarf), the term
*ammait* appears in a list of evils. In the former, Finn mac Cumaill advises
Mac Lugach and warns him against various types of misconduct, including
associating with witches: "Mac Lugach … neither have anything to do with
either a witch or a wicked one … " (*ar am[m]aid ná ar drochdhuine* [107

(vol. 1), 115 (vol. 2)]).[10] In *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, the witches seem to be a part of a group of supernatural fiends inciting armies against each other:

> And there arose also the satyrs, and the idiots and the maniacs of the valleys, and the witches, and the goblins, and the ancient birds, and the destroying demons of the air and of the firmament, and the feeble demoniac phantom host; and they were screaming and comparing the valour and combat of both parties.

> *Ro eirgetar am bananaig, ocus boccanaig, ocus geliti glinni, ocus amati adgaill, ocus siabra, ocus seneoin, ocus demna admílti aeoir, ocus firma-minti, ocus siabarsluag debil demnach, co mbatar a comgresacht, ocus i commorad aig ocus irgaili leo.* (Todd 174–175).

This is especially interesting as *ammait* is also used in a quatrain from the Dindshenchas to refer to the Morrígain:

> The milker of wealthy fair Buchet,
> [who was] a freeman of handsome noble Cormac:
> Odras her name, gentle quick;
> The witch [Morrígain] drowned her.

> *Bligrióir Buchet búasaig báin*
> *boaire Cormaic caemnáir.*
> *Odras a hainm tláith trait.*
> *ros baid in benammait.*[11]

This quatrain follows a prose section in which the Morrígain has turned the woman referred to into a puddle of water. The reason this is interesting is that the Morrígain is well-known as a war-goddess, along with other Otherworld women with whom she may or may not be synonymous: the three Machas, Anann/Dianann, and the Badb, the latter of whom is also known for inciting warriors to battle (Carey, "Notes" 269).

Similarly, *ammait* is used to refer to the Furies of Classical Greek mythology, in stories of both countries. It is, for example, used this way in *Cath Muighe Rath*:

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10   O'Grady's translation of ammaid as 'mad man' corrected by Stokes.
11   *LL* lines 22312–22315. Translation mine, with assistance from John Carey and Esther LeMair.

Whoever felt dejection for the battle, it was not the arch king of Ulster that was sorrowful, dejected, or pusillanimous at the approach of this final defeat; and it was in vain for his druids to make true magical predictions for him, and it was not profitable for his tailginns [clergy] to seek instructing him; for his friends might as well converse with a rock as advise him, in consequence of the temptations of the infernal agents who were pressing his destruction upon him; for the three destructive infernal furies Electo, Megæra, 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...

*Cid cia ar ar cuirestar ceist in catha, ni he aird-rig Ulad do bi co dubach, dobronach, ná co beg- menmnach, re bruinne na bresligi brátha sin; uair ba dimain da dráithib derb faistine demin do denum do, ocus nir tharba do thailgennaib triall a thegaisc; ar ba corad re carraic dá chairdib comairli do Congal, re h- aslach na n-amaidead n-ifernaidi ag furáil a aimlesa air; uair nír treicset na tri h-úire urbadacha, 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 iomarbhais, ocus forbad cacha fín-uilc; uair is ann ro-thaigestar in úir indledhech.* (O'Donovan 166–167).

John O'Donovan translates *n-amaidead n-ifernaidi* here as 'infernal agents,' rather than the more literal 'infernal witches,' possibly to avoid the appearance of redundancy – though it is impossible to say for sure as he does not make a note of it. An early Irish audience, however, seems likely to have understood the phrase in terms of figures like the Morrígain and Badb, as described above.[12]

*Aupthach*, another word that can be translated as 'witch' or 'sorceress,' is also frequently found in lists. It appears in § 185 of the *Triads*:

Three women that are not entitled to a fine: a woman who does not care with whom she sleeps, a thievish woman, a sorceress.

*Trí mná ná dlegat díri: ben lasma cuma cipé las fái, ben gatach, ben aupthach.* (Meyer, *Triads* 24–25, § 185).

12    For other references to *ammait*, see Mac Mathúna, "Duibheagháin" 325–343.

And again in *Fís Adomnáin*:

> It is they, then, who are in that torment, i.e., thieves and liars and treacher-
> ous folk and slanderers and plunderers and despoilers and falsely judging
> judges and contentious folk; spell casting-women and satirists. Brigands
> and teachers of heresy.

> *Is iat iarom filet isin phéin sin .i. gataige ₇ ethgig ₇ áes braith ₇ écnaig ₇*
> *slataige ₇ crechaire ₇ brethemain gúbrethaig ₇ áes cosnoma mná aupthacha*
> *₇ cánti. aithdibergaig ₇ fir légind pridchait eris.* (Stokes 187–188, § 27).[13]

In these texts, as in *Acallam na Senórach* and *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*,
no real description is given of the women designated as 'witches.' Instead,
we must deduce their character from the company in which the texts place
them. The *Acallam* names the witch as someone to be avoided, while the
other three include them in lists of various evil-doers, both supernatural
and mortal. Indeed, *Fís Adomnán* enumerates them among those who will
suffer the tortures of Hell. In these texts, the magic of women is not only
devalued, but demonized.

   Another form of the same word, *ipthach*, is even more obscure with
respect to the nature of the 'witches' it references. The one attestation in
*DIL* that actually seem to refer to a woman with magical powers comes
itself from a spell:

> Against disease of the urine.
> I save myself from this disease of the urine, ... save us, cunning birds,
> birdflocks of witches save us. This is always put in the place in which
> thou makest thy urine.

> *Áŕgáláŕ fúaill;~*
> *Dumesurcsa diangalar fúailse dunesairc éu ét dunescarat eúin énlaithi*
> *admai ibdach;~ Focertar inso dogrés imaigin hitabair thúal.* (Stokes &
> Strachan 248.12).

Apart from the rather singular expression 'birdflocks of witches,' which I have
not encountered elsewhere, the most interesting thing about this excerpt is
that it is one of the few references to witches I have found that treats them
relatively favourably – and the only one of this kind that refers to a mortal

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13   Translation mine with assistance from John Carey.

witch. Whereas elsewhere witches are generally people to be avoided, here they are being called upon to prevent – or cure – illness in the petitioner.

There are several other words or phrases listed by *DIL* as meaning 'witch' or 'hag,' in reference to a woman with magical powers: (*ben*) *cumachtach*; *caillech*; (*ban*)*túathech*; and *túathaid*. There is a further curious commonality among these words – all of the uses of these terms in Old and Middle Irish, which carry a supernatural sense, designate Otherworld women.

While in Modern Irish the most common meaning of *caillech* is witch,[14] in Old and Middle Irish this was not the case. According to Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, it evolved from earlier references to veiled women (*caill* + *ach* 'veiled one'). She argues that the earliest meaning was that of a spouse, in reference to the veils worn by betrothed women to indicate that they were 'spoken for.' From there, it came to refer to a 'spouse of Christ' or 'nun,' who was also veiled by virtue of the fact that she was 'spoken for.' This could be the case whether she was a virgin nun, one who renounced a former marriage in favour of becoming a nun, or a widow who took the veil. In any case, the woman in question was an adult. Ní Dhonnchadha goes on to suggest that there was a shift in meaning from an adult spouse to an older woman, and eventually this degenerated to to modern meaning of 'witch.' In fact, of the references in *DIL*, there is only one which might refer to the supernatural, though Ní Dhonnchadha questions it as well. This excerpt is from *Cath Muighe Rath*:

> 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

> *Fuil os a chind ag eignig,*
> > *caillech lom, luath ag leimnig*
> > *ós eannaib a n-arm sa sciath,*
> > *is í in Morrigu mong-liath.* (O'Donovan 198–199).

Of interest here, though, is that we have a woman who is possibly a witch – this time the Morrígain herself – hovering over a battlefield (Ni Dhonnchadha 71–96). There is another in *Silva Gadelica*, which also references Otherworldly, rather than mortal, women. In *Bruiden chéise Chorainn*, while Finn and his *fíanna* are hunting, they enter the land of Conaran, the ruler the local *síde*.

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14   For modern Irish uses of *caillech* (or *cailleach*), see Ó Crualaoich, *Book*.

In anger, Conaran sends his three daughters – described as *caillecha* – to work dark magic on the *fíanna*. The three sisters disable the warriors in small groups, until they are overcome by Goll mac Morna, the only one not to have fallen into their trap (O'Grady vol.1 306–310, vol. 2 343–347).[15]

*Cumachtach* ('powerful') is also used to refer to women of the *síde*. In *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, it is used (with the gender descriptor *ban*) of a *síd*-woman named Cáineog, who is turned to stone by a saint for attempting to abduct the king's son:

> Cáineog, a fairy witch,
> Followed the king's son thither;
> She and her company of women, (turned) into stone,
> Are there above the lough of the churches
>
> *Cáoineocc ban-cumachtach sithe*
> *Do len mac an righ anall;*
> *Ata sa banntracth na cclochaibh*
> *Tall os cionn locha na cceall.* (Plummer 151.33).

To some extent, this recalls the group of witches who destroyed little boys in *Cóir Anmann*, though, of course, 'fairies' carrying off children is a widespread phenomenon in literatures worldwide. Indeed, it has been suggested by James Carney that echoes of this may be seen in *Echtrae Chonnlai* (*EC* [Carney, "Deeper Level" 165]).

*Cumachtach* is also found in Mongfhind's death scene in *Aided Crimthainn*, along with its near-synonym *túathaid*.

> To her brother's house Mongfhionn repaired therefore; betwixt Crimthann and her children she patched up a fraudulent peace, and conducted him to the feast. When they had made an end of the entertainment Mongfhionn put into her brother's hand a poisoned cup, but: "I will not drink," he said, "until thou first shalt have drunk." She drinks, and Crimthann after her. Subsequently Mongfhionn died, on *samhain's* very eve, and this constitutes [the tale called] Mongfhionn the Sorceress's Tragical Death; and the reason for which *samhain*-tide is by the common people called the Festival of Mongfhionn is that she, so long as she was in the flesh, had [occult] powers, and was a witch: wherefore it is that on *samhain*-eve women and the rabble address their petitions to her.

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15   See also Mac Mathúna, "Duibheagháin," 327–329.

*Tic diu Moingfionn iarum do thaig a bráthar. Ocus doróine síth ceilge
etorro ocus a clainn ocus beirid léi a bráthair do saigid na fleide. Ó ro scaich
iarum tesbénad na fleide dobert Moingfionn copán neime illáim a bráthar.
Nocho nib ar Crimthann nó co nebasa ar tús. Ibid Moingfionn dig ocus ibid
Crimthann iarum. Atbail iarum Moingfionn aidche samna do sonnrad.
Conid sí aided Moingfinne bansídaide. Conid de garar féil Moingfinne frisin
samain ocon daescarshluag. Ár ba chumachtach side ocus bantuathaid
céin bái i colainn. Conid de cuindgit mná ocus daescarsluag itcheda aidche
samna fuirri.* (O'Grady vol. 1 332, vol. 2 374–375).

O'Grady translates the name of this tale-within-a-tale as "Mongfhionn the
Sorceress's Tragical Death." However, the word he translates as 'sorceress'
is actually *bansídaide*, or 'woman of the *síd*,' and her supernatural nature is
confirmed in the populace's subsequent worship of her. In addition, according
to *DIL*, the two copies of this story exemplify the only extant use of *túathaid*.

This brings us, finally, to consider *túaithech*, which is also used exclusively
of *síd*-women. It is used twice in reference to Nár, wife of Crimthann: in *Cóir
Anmann* and the prose Dindshenchas. The latter text runs:

A fort which was constructed on Benn Étair (Howth) by Crimthann
son of Lugaid who was also called Nár's *nia* i.e., man, and who reigned
thirteen years.
Tis he that went on an adventure from Dún Crimthainn or from Dál Uisnig,
as he himself said, with the witch Nár the banshee. With her he slept a
month and a fortnight. And to him she gave many treasures including
the gilt chariot and the draughtboard of gold, and Crimthann's *cétach*, a
beautiful mantle, and many other treasures also. And afterwards, after
his adventure, he died on Mag Étair and was buried in his fort.

*Dun conrótacht la Crimt[h]an mac Luig[d]ech i mBend Etair, qui et Nia [.i.]
fer Naire dicebatur: tredecim annos regnavit.
IS é docuaid i n-echtra a Dun Cremt[h]ainn nó a Dail Uisnigh, ut ipse dixit,
la Nair tuaidhigh in bandsidhe, coma fæ caictighis ar mís [and], dia tubairt
na seotu imdai, imon carpat n-oir ⁊ imon fi[d]chill n-óir ⁊ imon cétaigh
Crimthainn .i. lend sainemail, ⁊ aroile séotu imda olchena; ⁊ atbath iarsain
ahaithle a echtra im-maig Étair, ⁊ roadnacht ina dún.* (Stokes, "Prose Tales"
272–356, 418–484).

Here, we have one of the rare references to witches that seems favourable
– though, in this case, the reference is, again, to an Otherworld woman,

rather than a mortal witch. A more neutral portrayal of the same woman is found in *Cóir Anmann* 106:

> Crimthan *Nía – Náre: nía* champion, that is Nár's champion. For Nár the witch, from the elfmounds, was Crimthan's wife. Tis she that took Crimthan with her on the famous adventure from Dún Crimthain on Howth.

> *Crimthan Nía Nár. níadh.i. trén.i. trénfear Naíre .i. Nár thúathach a sídhibh, ben Chrimthain. Is sidhe rug Crimthan lé a n-echtra n-ordhairc a Dún Chrimthain a n-Édur.* (Arbuthnot, *Cóir* Part 1 89 & 128).[16]

The final examples of this term – using the prefix *ban* – are similarly neutral. Here, again, we are restricted to lists, but these are lists of names subsequently said to be those of witches or sorceresses, giving no further information on the nature of their bearers beyond that they are of the Túatha Dé Danann. The *Banshenchas*, for example, yields the following:

> Nemain, Danannd, Bodb and Macha, Morrigu who brings victory, impetuous and swift Etain, Be Chuilli of the north country, were the sorceresses of the Tuatha De. It is I who sing of them with severity.

> *Nemain, Danand, [Bodb] is Macha, Morrígu nobered búaid, Etain co luinni is co lluathi, Be Chuilli na tuathi thúaid: ban-tuathecha Tuathe De Danand, is me nos canand co crúaid.* (Dobbs 292 & 318).

It is unclear from the context whether *crúaid* 'severity' is meant as a reproach toward the women, or to signify the seriousness of the subject. In addition, *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (*LGÉ*) lists "Be Chuille and Dianann, the two witches" (*Be Chuille & Dianand na dí bantuathig*) as two of the daughters of Flidais (Macalister 122).

## Conclusion

Contrary to popular belief, women in early Ireland were no more emancipated than their continental sisters. They were considered incapable under the law, and the general view was that they were 'senseless' or 'foolish.'

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16   See also Borsje 153–191.

They were not allowed to make their own contracts or oaths, and were therefore unable to serve as witnesses. Their ability to make pledges or sureties was severely curtailed. Except where the husband was *ambue* or *cú glas*, a woman's honour price was only half that of her husband or closest male relative. The wisdom texts largely reinforce this view of women, except on occasions where women are behaving 'properly' or usefully (for example, as embroideresses), resulting in a confusingly dualistic view of women.

Strong women are represented – both positively and negatively – in the early Irish tales. Sometimes, they are used to express ideas that the author wanted to get across, but would be inappropriate to a heroic male figure. Mothers of saints and sovereigns were also revered in their own right. Occasionally, women who were simply anomalous to early Irish society appear, such as *banḟennidi* and witches. Women of magic seem to be almost invariably represented as evil. They are often depicted as attempting to trap a hero to his detriment. Even those who are amiable may become dangerous if spurned. Sometimes, the various appellations for 'witches' would be applied to Otherworld women as well, but with consistent enmity. There are, of course, other types of exceptional women in early Irish literature – female saints, female poets, the heroines of tragic love tales, and the like. These, however, are beyond the scope of the present enquiry.

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