

A riddle in Latin about an incestuous Irish family in London, British Library, MS Harley 913

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London, British Library, MS Harley 913, a product of the Anglo-Norman colony of Ireland in the first half of the fourteenth century of likely Franciscan origin, consists of a variety of texts, secular and religious, in Latin, French and English. Among them is a riddle in Latin about an incestuous Irish family. Although similar familial conundrums are well attested in medieval literature, such as the Old English riddle about Loth, the Harley riddle has unique features. This paper examines its significance in the context of Anglo-Norman and Gaelic relations in medieval Ireland.

キーワード : MS Harley 913, family riddle, Latin, incest, Gaelic names,
medieval Ireland, Anglo Normans

London, British Library, MS Harley 913, a product of the Anglo-Norman colony of Ireland in the first half of the fourteenth century,¹⁾ consists of a variety of texts, notably, religious works, satires and Franciscan documents in Latin, French and English.²⁾ This paper discusses one of the five riddles in Latin found on fo 49v about an incestuous Irish family, and examines its significance in the context of the Anglo-Norman colony in Medieval Ireland.

The text reads as follows:

Nota de muliere que peperit puerum qui fuit filius eius, frater eius, et auunculus, filius auunculi, et filius aui, et nepos .i. filius fratris. Exponendum sic:³⁾

Quidam Comdinus nomine cum esset .xv. annorum genuit ex matre sua filium nomine Slaní. Que cum esset .xiii. annorum dictus Comdinus genuit ex ea filiam quam uocauit Saynín. Que cum esset .xu. annorum idem Comdinus genuit ex ea filium qui fuit filius et frater; que filius Comdini auunculus; que frater matris et filius auunculi, que filius Comdíní et filius aui que Comdíní.

A brief entry about a woman who gave birth to a boy who was her son, her brother, and an uncle, son of an uncle, and son of a grandfather, and nephew (that is, son of a brother). It is to be explained as follows:

A certain person named Comdinus, when he was 15 years old, begot by his mother a son called Slani. And when Slani was 14 years old, the said Comdinus begot by her [his mother] a daughter whom he named Saynin. Furthermore, when she [Saynin] was 15 years old, the same Comdinus begot by her [Saynin] a son who was a son and a brother. Also the son of Comdinus was an uncle, and brother of the mother, and the son of an uncle

1) Alan Fletcher dates the manuscript to the 1330s (Alan J. Fletcher, "The date of London, British Library, Harley 913 (The Kildare Poems)", *Medium Ævum* 79 (2010), 306-10).

2) Neil Cartlidge, "Festivity, Order, and Community in Fourteenth-Century Ireland: The Composition and Context of BL MS Harley 913", *Yearbook of English Studies* 33 (2003), 33-52; A. G. Little, *Materials for the History of the Franciscan Province of Ireland A. D. 1230-1450* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1920), pp. 122-126; Angela Lucas (ed.), *Anglo-Irish Poems of the Middle Ages* (Dublin: The Columba Press 1995), pp. 14-21; Thorlac Turville-Petre, *Poems from BL MS Harley 913 "The Kildare Manuscript"*, EETS o.s. 345 (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), pp. liii-iv.

3) Because of faded ink, the reading of "sic" is uncertain.

and also son of Comdinus, and the son of a grandfather as well as of Comdinus.

The opening sentence is phrased as a generalized riddle; the main section provides specific details evidently intended to explain the riddle, though doing so in a manner no less difficult to comprehend. A proposed interpretation of the main part is as follows:

- (1) There was a man named Comdinus.
- (2) When he was 15 years old, he begot a son, Slani, by his mother.
- (3) When the son (Slani) was 14 years old, Comdinus got a daughter, Saynin, by his mother.
- (4) When she (Saynin) was 15 years old, Comdinus got a son (I would call X) by her (Saynin).
- (5) X is a son of Saynin as well as a brother of Saynin (because Comdinus is the father of Saynin and X).
- (6) Comdinus' son (=Slani) is an uncle of (X's) mother (because Slani and Comdinus have the same mother and therefore are brothers); Slani is Saynin's uncle since Slani is a brother of Saynin's father (=Comdinus).
- (7) Also, Slani is Saynin's brother (because they share a common father Comdinus).
- (8) X is a son of his uncle (=Comdinus, because Comdinus is a brother of X's mother).
- (9) X is a son of Comdinus as well as a son of X's grandfather (X's grandfather=Comdinus, because the father of X's mother (=Saynin) is X's grandfather).

Based on this genealogical schema the opening sentence could be explained as follows:

A brief entry about a woman (=Saynin) who gave birth to a boy (=X) who was her son, her brother (because Saynin and X share the same father); and an uncle (because X is a brother of Saynin's father); son of an uncle (because Comdinus is a brother of X's mother); and son of a grandfather (because the father of X's mother (=Saynin) is X's grandfather); and nephew (that is, son of a brother)....

This is what is called a relationship riddle. It is to be noted that we have an Old English riddle

in a similar vein, preserved in the Exeter Book of the late 10th century.⁴⁾ This Old English riddle is about Lot who had incestuous relationships with his two daughters, based on the story in the Book of Genesis (19: 30–38). While Lot begets two sons by his two daughters, Comdinus begets a son and a daughter, Saynin, by his mother; subsequently, Comdinus has another son, but this time by his daughter Saynin. In Lot’s case the complicated family line starts from Lot, although according to the story his daughters hatched the plot to retain the male line. Whereas in our riddle Comdinus’ mother, a woman instead of a man, initiates the complicated female line. More importance seems to be attached to the agency of women in our riddle. In fact, the riddle as given above starts with “Nota de muliere,” i.e. a note about a woman. Possibly this emphasis reflects conventional medieval anti-feminism which had as its basis the claim that as descendants of Eve women were prone to immorality. This bias recalls a short poem in the same manuscript about the five most evil things, one of which is identified as the “woman ssamles” (=a shameless woman).⁵⁾

A significant feature of the present riddle is the identification of the three main agents by name, two of which are certainly, and the third possibly, of Irish (Gaelic) origins. First, Comdinus. The name is attested in other Irish sources contemporary with Harley 913. For example, a Dominican document dating c. 1266 refers to a subprior at the Friary of Roscommon as ‘Comdinus,’ almost certainly a latinization of the Gaelic name *Gilla-in-Coimded*⁶⁾ Nor was the name confined to ecclesiastics; the Close Roll 18 Edward II (dated 1325) orders payment to William Comyn for the capture of Gaelic Irish rebels, among them a certain Comdinus McTothowill.⁷⁾ Evidently, the name Comdinus is a latinized form of the Irish name *Coimded* (“[servant] of the Lord,” genitive of Old Irish *Coimdiu*).

The second Irish-derived name is *Slani*. However, unlike the previous one, it does not seem to have been employed in Ireland as a personal name. The only example I can find occurs in a literary context, a Middle Irish compilation known as the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, “The Book of the

4) Richard Gameson, “The origin of the Exeter Book of Old English poetry”, *Anglo Saxon England* 25 (1996), 135–85.

5) Turville-Petre, *Poems*, p. 9; Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems*, pp. 56 and 181.

6) J. O’Heyne, *The Irish Dominicans of the Seventeenth Century*, rpt. with English translation by A. Coleman, 2 vols. (Dundalk, 1902), I, p. 106.

7) <https://chancery.tcd.ie/document/close/18-edward-ii/80> (accessed on 14 November, 2020).

Invasions of Ireland.”⁸⁾ As its title suggests, this pseudo-historic work gives an account of the different waves of invaders who came to Ireland. The fourth such people were the Fir Bolg, led by the five sons of Dela, the eldest of whom was a certain Sláine/Sláini:

“Sláini was the eldest of the sons of Dela; he held the kingship of Ireland for one year, for no one with the title King of Ireland ruled until the Fir Bolg came.”⁹⁾

Thus, we learn that Sláini’s claim to fame was that he was the first king of all Ireland, ruling (we are told) from the kingdom of Meath in the centre of Ireland. At first glance the likelihood that this Gaelic text would have been known among the Anglo-Norman community, who even after more than a century of occupation still had generally hostile relations with their Gaelic neighbours, seems remote. Yet, we find that the work was drawn upon by no less a person than the official historian of the colony, Gerald of Wales. In his *Topographica Hibernica, Distinctio* iii, chs 4-5, he recounts the story of the five sons of the Fir Bolg, as follows:¹⁰⁾

“Cum enim predicti fratres quinque, uidelicet Gandius, Genandius, Sangandius, Rutheraigus et Slanius, in quinque partes insulam diuisissent...” (“When the aforesaid five brothers, namely Gandius, Genandius, Sangandius, Rutheraigus and Slanius had divided the island into five portions...”)

And just as in his Irish source, Gerald singles out Slanius (the latinized form of Ir. Sláini) in a separate chapter entitled, “De primo Hybernie monarcha, scilicet Slanio,” relating that “Processus uero temporis...Slanius solus tocius Hibernie monarchiam optinuit. Vnde et primus Hibernie rex nominatur.” (“As time went on...Slanius became the sole king of Ireland. As a result he is called the first king of Ireland.”¹¹⁾

It is tempting to conjecture that the author of the Harley riddle borrowed the name Slanius from Gerald. Seen in that context the choice of *Sláine/Slani*, Ireland’s legendary first king, would be appropriate as an ethnic slur since Sláni of the riddle is a child born of incest. Another possibility is that Sláni derives from a place-name rather than a personal name. In County Meath lies a town known to the Irish as *Sláine* and to the Anglo-Normans as *Slane*. Given its

8) R. A. S. Macalister (ed. and trans.), *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, Irish Texts Society, vol. 41 (London, 1941).

9) Macalister, pp. 18-19 (§288), with some modifications to his translation.

10) J. J. O’Meara (ed.), “Giraldus Cambrensis in *Topographia Hibernie*: Text of the First Recension,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 52C, no. 4 (Dublin, 1949), pp. 113-78 at 159.

11) J. J. O’Meara, *Gerald of Wales: The History and Topography of Ireland*, (Bungay, Suffolk, 1982), p. 97.

location some 12 kilometers to the west of Drogheda, a major Anglo-Norman town which is referenced elsewhere in Harley 913, it is possible that the author of the riddle might have used a place-name well known to the colonial community. Whatever the explanation, it seems likely that *Slani* of the riddle has Irish origins.

If these identifications of Irish onomastica are true, then the present riddle adds to the list of works in Harley 913 which express strong antagonism toward the native Irish. The most notable of these are: *The Land of Cokaigne* (in English) which satirizes degenerate Irish monks¹²; *Pers of Bermingham* (in English) which celebrates the mass murder of the Irish committed by Anglo Normans on Trinity Sunday in 1305¹³; *Satire* (in English) which describes low-class Irish peddlers by a lake selling candles, bowls, black pots, tripe, cows' feet and sheep's heads, whose stalls are polluted with filthy "tromcheri" (an Irish word for liver)¹⁴; *Sarmun* (in English) which mocks the death-bed conversion of the Irish Archbishop of Cashel¹⁵; and *The Walling of New Ross* (in French) which explains that the walls are intended to protect the town from the Irish.¹⁶

12) fos 3r-6v. Turville-Petre, *Poems*, pp. 3-9 and 95-9; Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems*, pp. 46-55 and 174-80; P. L. Henry, "The Land of Cokaygne: Cultures in Contact in Medieval Ireland", *Studia Hibernica* 12 (1972), 120-41; T. J. Garbáty, "Studies in the Franciscan 'The Land of Cokaygne' in the Kildare MS", *Franziskanische Studien*, 45 (1963), 139-63; Yoko Wada, "Seue yere in swineis dritte: a penance in the Middle English satirical poem, *The Land of Cokaygne* in London, British Library, MS Harley 913", *Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University*, 50 (2017), 51-60.

13) fos 50r-51v. Turville-Petre, *Poems*, pp. 69-73 and 124-7; Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems*, pp. 150-7 and 207-9; Michael Benskin, "The Style and Authorship of the Kildare Poems (1) *Pers of Bermingham*" in J. Lachlan Mackenzie and Richard Todd (eds.), *In Other Words* (Dordrecht: Foris Publications 1989), pp. 57-75 and pp. 68-71; John Scattergood, "Elegy for a Dangerous Man: Piers of Bermingham" *Occasions for Writing: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature, Politics and Society* (Dublin: Four Courts Press 2010), pp. 85-106; Yoko Wada, "Hero or Villain? —an Anglo-Norman context for the poem *Piers of Bermingham* in London, British Library, MS Harley 913", pp. 73-94 in Yoko Wada (ed), *Trends in Eastern and Western Literature, Medieval and Modern* (Osaka: Kansai University Press, 2020).

14) fos 7r-8v; Turville-Petre, *Poems*, pp. 9-13 and 100-4; Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems*, pp. 58-65 and 182-4; Yoko Wada, "The poem known as *Satire* from London, British Library, MS Harley 913 : a new interpretation", *Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University*, 46 (2013), 83-100.

15) fos 16r-20r; Turville-Petre, *Poems*, pp. 22-9 and 107-11; Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems*, pp. 74-89 and 187; Patrick P. O'Neill, "The unidentified 'Wlonchrgan' of the Middle English poem *Sarmun* in British Library, MS Harley 913", *Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University*, 50 (2017), 61-8.

16) fos 64, 61, 55 and 56. Turville-Petre, *Poems*, pp. 76-83 and 130-2.

The present riddle was evidently meant for an Anglo-Norman audience, combining the fun of unweaving a nexus of familial relationships even more challenging than the one about Lot and his daughters with some snide humour at the expense of the native Irish.¹⁷⁾

17) I am very grateful to Professor Patrick P. O'Neill for useful information and suggestions. This research was financially supported by MEXT (the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research or KAKENHI: 20K00428 for 2020).

