

# Native and Christian Elements in *Echtrae Chonnlai* and *Immram Brain*

Patrick P. O' Neill

An investigation of the two earliest Irish tales about the Celtic Otherworld (*Echtrae Chonnlai* and *Immram Brain*) within the comparative context of accounts of paradise found in patristic commentary and Late Antique Christian poetry.

**Keywords :** Augustine, Bran mac Febail, Celtic Otherworld, Late Antique poetry, Manannán mac Lir, natural law, original sin, prelapsarian protoplasts, *síd*.

Readers of medieval English and French romances will be familiar with the mysterious Celtic Otherworld which often inhabits these stories, serving to provide a magical atmosphere, establish a paradisaal setting, or even drive the main plot. Beliefs about the existence of such a world were shared by the Celtic-speaking peoples of medieval Ireland, Wales, and Brittany, thus giving rise to the generic term 'Celtic Otherworld.' However, the earliest and most fully developed accounts of this alternative world are found in early Irish literature. Modern scholars had long assumed that this literature represented a more-or-less faithful record in writing of inherently oral beliefs and stories. But, as will be argued below, the Irish Otherworld tradition, as preserved in its literature, was a literary construct. In arguing this case, the present paper will focus on a nucleus of three textually-related prosimetric works dating from the early eighth century, chosen because they represent the earliest written witnesses in Irish, and indeed in any western European vernacular, to an Otherworld paradise. They are as follows: 'The Expedition of Connlae' (abbreviated *EC*; Ir. *Echtrae Chonnlai*); 'The Voyage of Bran' (*VB*; Ir. *Immram*

*Brain*); and ‘The Conception of Mongán’ (*CM*; Ir. *Compert Mongáin*).<sup>1)</sup>

The first tells of a male protagonist, Connlae, heir-apparent to the kingship of Ireland, who abandons his land, people and political prospects in favor of the paradisaical promises offered by an anonymous woman from ‘The Land of the Living.’<sup>2)</sup> The second recounts the adventures of another male protagonist (King Bran), who is also invited by a mysterious woman to the Otherworld (‘The Land of Women’), and while sailing there encounters Manannán Mac Lir, mythical god of the sea and Lord of the Otherworld, who describes the pleasures awaiting him.<sup>3)</sup> The third work tells of Manannán’s secret visit to an Irish queen of Ulster to father on her the hero Mongán, who himself would eventually find a home in the Otherworld.<sup>4)</sup>

From the outset these works demonstrate conventions suggestive of a well-established literary tradition about the Otherworld. Thus, both *EC* and *VB* begin with the mysterious intrusion into the royal palace of a woman ‘from unknown lands’, dressed ‘in strange clothing’, who fixes her attention on a particular, unmarried man of the royal household and proceeds to carry on a decidedly one-sided conversation with him.<sup>5)</sup> No explanation of the strange woman and her behavior is proffered, a tacit indication that we are dealing with a familiar narrative convention whereby a stranger from the Otherworld seeks to make contact with the human world. The motif was certainly familiar by the second half of the seventh century as evidenced by its occurrence in an unlikely source, Tírechán’s *Collectanea*, a Hiberno-Latin work of hagiographical bent composed c. 680 which purports to give an account of St Patrick’s journeys of conversion in the west of Ireland. It relates that early one morning as Patrick and his bishops rested at a well, two royal sisters approached to perform their daily ablutions.<sup>6)</sup> Stunned by the unexpected sight of an episcopal entourage of unfamiliar appearance (produced, no doubt, by

---

1) Etymologically ‘*echtrae*’ means ‘a going out’ (cognate with English ‘exit’); ‘*compert*’ means ‘a conception’; *immram*, literally ‘rowing about.’

2) Most recently edited by K. McCone, *Echtrae Chonmlai and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland*, Maynooth Medieval Irish texts 1 (Maynooth, 2000), with an English translation embedded in the textual notes (pp. 125–99).

3) K. Meyer (ed. and trans.), *The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal to the Land of the Living* (Facsimile Reprint, Felinfaich, 1994). All translations in the present article are my own.

4) *Ibid.*, appendix 1, pp. 42–45.

5) In *CM* the stranger is a male who addresses a female, but the procedure is the same, culminating with a proposition of sex or marriage.

6) L. Bieler (ed.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), pp. 142–43 (§26).

their clerical garb and tonsure) and of unknown people and country, the women assume that they are men from the Otherworld ('uiros *side*').<sup>7</sup> They express their puzzlement in much the same way as Connlae and Bran did, asking the strange apparition where it has come from. Although Patrick's response is reassuringly mundane, it is evident that the ecclesiastical author of the *Collectanea* felt free to appropriate a convention of Otherworld literature which must have been well known by the late seventh century.

Convention also seems to have dictated that in such encounters between Otherworld women and human men, the woman should succeed in her quest to lure him away from the human world. No doubt magical power played a part in her success. In *EC* the woman gives Connlae an apple which satiates him for a whole month—a not-so-subtle symbol of the Otherworld's plenty. In *VB* another Otherworld woman bestows on Bran an apple-tree branch of silver with white blossoms, which when shaken lulls him to sleep.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, sexual attraction also plays a part: twice in *EC* [§§8, 13] it is mentioned that the human protagonist Connlae is seized with physical longing for the woman. Ultimately, however, both women achieve their purpose not by means of magical accoutrements but by the rhetorical skills they employ to portray the Otherworld as a seductive paradise. Their speeches (and that also of Manannán) extolling the attractions of the Otherworld are so compelling that one human male protagonist (Connlae) surrenders his closest human relationships, while the second (Bran) embarks on a dangerous voyage into the open sea. The speeches are designed to persuade, blending auditory, visual and verbal appeals. Thus, the descriptions of the Otherworld are sung or chanted in rhyming verse,<sup>9</sup> a heightened medium which contrasts with the laconic prose of the narrative framework; they are replete with sumptuous images likely to appeal to the tastes of the Irish nobility and, remarkably (as will be discussed below), they are grounded in a novel ideology of prelapsarian origins. Whatever about the first feature, the second probably, and the third certainly, seem to be quite independent of mainstream western European descriptions of Paradise.

Yet that evidence would hardly suffice to justify the conclusion that *EC* and *IB* represent the pure milk of native Irish oral traditions about the Otherworld, independent of both Christianity

---

7) *Ibid.*, p. 142, line 14. *Side* (genitive singular of *sid*) is the vernacular term for the Otherworld; see discussion below, pp. 6–9.

8) As expressly explained in another Old Irish story, *Echtra Cormaic*.

9) At least in *VB*, which uses the verb *cachain* ('he/she sang'; §§2, 32).

and western literature. Their probable date of composition in the late seventh century tells against that supposition, since by that date Ireland had not only been thoroughly Christianized but had also come under the influence of Late Antique literature, including accounts of an earthly paradise combining biblical and eschatological topoi. For example, the Irish Otherworld shares with continental descriptions such paradisaical characteristics as flowing milk, honey, mead and wine, feasting that requires no preparation, weather consistently balmy,<sup>10)</sup> trees producing fruit all year long, and birds frequenting these trees, singing heavenly music.<sup>11)</sup> Complementarily, both genres envisage a paradise free from the ills, physical and mental, that beset the mortal world, such as sickness, disease, discord, old age and ultimately death. Such topoi abound in depictions of the earthly Paradise composed by Late Antique poets (4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) such as Prudentius, Caelius Sedulius, Claudius Marius Victorius, and Avitus.<sup>12)</sup> In the matter of these topoi at least, foreign influence is a real possibility.

However, compared with its Continental counterparts the literary Irish Otherworld reveals distinctive features. One is its location. In contrast to conventional western treatments which, under the influence of the biblical Genesis, locate the earthly paradise in the East, and portray it as a walled garden,<sup>13)</sup> the two Irish tales position it off the west coast of Ireland on an island far out in the Atlantic Ocean. When the Otherworld woman invites Connlae to join her, she envisages a voyage in her crystal boat to a land lying in the direction of the setting sun [*EC* §14]. Likewise, the anonymous faery woman beckons Bran to 'a distant island in the ocean to the west of us' [*VB* §§ 4, 25]. In the Celtic cultures of both Ireland and Wales, the west in a seaward direction was associated with the land of the dead, a gateway to the Otherworld. For example, the Middle Welsh tale *Branwen* (c. 1100), a branch of the *Mabinogi*, recounts that the retainers of the dead king Bran Bendigeidfran carried his head to Gwales (Grassholm), an island off the coast of south-west Wales, where their stay of seven years seemed to them but a day, a motif

---

10) While mainstream European descriptions characterize paradisaical weather as perpetual spring, the Irish works—in deference to the realities of their own climate—change it to summer.

11) In the Irish accounts, they sing the canonical Hours.

12) Many of which go back to the *topos* of the *locus amoenus*; see E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York, 1953).

13) For example, Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XIV. iii. 2, locates paradise in the east [Asia]; trans. S.A. Barney *et al.*, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 285.

commonly found in Irish Otherworld tales.<sup>14)</sup> The Irish counterpart is the island Tech Duinn (Bull Rock, Co. Kerry), off the south-west coast of Ireland,<sup>15)</sup> named after Donn, a chthonic deity said to be the ancestor of the Irish people.<sup>16)</sup> This belief in a western location for the gateway to the afterlife, and ultimately the Otherworld, passed into the European literary imagination, so much so that medieval and early modern cartographers marked its location as an island in the Atlantic with the Irish-derived name Hy Brasil.<sup>17)</sup>

The nomenclature for the Irish paradise employs a considerable corpus of terminology, most of it patently native. The traditional western terms, 'Paradise' and 'Eden,' which became known to western writers from the Genesis description of the Garden of Eden as a *paradisum uoluptatis* (Gn 2: 8), literally 'a paradise of pleasure,' have no direct counterparts in the Irish tradition. Admittedly, some features of the Genesis Paradise, notably abundant vegetation and fruit, rivers, precious stones and minerals etc. may have influenced Irish perceptions of the Otherworld, possibly with corresponding nomenclature. Thus, in describing the land from which they come, the three Otherworld messengers employ Irish terms such as *Mag Meld* ('the Plain of Delights'; *EC* §5, *VB* §§ 34, 39), *Mag Findargat* ('the Plain of Gleaming Silver'; *VB* §5), *Aircthech* ('the Bountiful Land'; *VB* §12), *Ildatach* ('the Multicolored Land'; *VB* §24), all of which have possible biblical or Late Antique resonances. But the most common Irish names for the Otherworld, *Tír inna mBan* ('The Land of Women'; *VB* §60, 62), *Tír inna mBéo* ('the Land of the [eternally] Living'; *EC* §3), and *Mag Mon* ('the Plain of Games/Contests'; *VB* §§14, 23, 35), point to native notions of a paradise unlike that depicted in Genesis.

Note that all of these terms are descriptive, based on different aspects of the Otherworld. This may well be because they convey images and representations likely to appeal to predictable human appetites. But among themselves the Otherworld denizens employed another term for their world. When Connlae asks the faery woman where she comes from, she replies:

"I have come from the Lands of the Living,

---

14) See below, p. 14.

15) See A. and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1961), p. 179.

16) P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London, 1970), pp. 41-44.

17) For example, Jan van Doetecum's map of the North Atlantic, c. 1594, locates 'Brazyl' to the s.w. of Ireland and n.w. of Spain; P. Whitfield, *Mapping the World: A History of Exploration* (Bath, 2000), p. 107.

in which there is neither death nor sin nor crime.

We enjoy perpetual feasts which need no preparation.

Harmony exists among us—no contention.

We live in a great *síd*/peace,

so that from this we get the name ‘the people of the *síd*/peace.’” (*EC* [§3])

Leaving aside for now the first three lines in which the woman promotes the attractions of the Land of the Living (eternal life, sinlessness, perpetual feasting), her definitive answer to Connlae’s question, supplied in the last three lines, is that she comes from the *síd*. This is the proper, defining name for the Otherworld, denoting the dwelling place of the faery people.<sup>18)</sup> Old Irish *síd* has another meaning, ‘peace/harmony,’ with the same etymological origins as the first,<sup>19)</sup> a semantic circumstance which allows the faery woman to pun on *síd*, the dwelling of the faery people, and *síd* ‘harmony.’ But the deeper implication of her pun is that the two complement each other. Hence the woman’s statement that she belongs to a world in which there is no strife, verbal or physical. Likewise, Manannán describes his marine Otherworld on the floor of the sea as a place of harmony where the salmon behave like calves or lambs, “with friendliness, without mutual slaughter” (*VB* §38). Of course, peace and harmony are a commonplace of other paradisaic settings, but in an Irish context the word for this harmony had social connotations, conjuring up a golden age of political stability and material plenty. So, when the woman promises Connlae the ‘peace’ that defines her world, she is tempting him not so much with a life without aggravation as one in which he will perpetually enjoy kingly status without the internecine conflicts common to Irish kingship.

One could also argue that the harmony of the *síd* has a sexual dimension. Its inhabitants enjoy sex that is free from strife and complications, untrammelled by either biological imperatives, societal strictures, or Christian chastity. Its women do not bear children; couples are free from the vexing complications of the different grades of sexual unions envisaged in

---

18) Compare its use in Tírechán’s *Collectanea*, noted above, p. 2.

19) The semantic connection between the two concepts has been teased out by T. Ó Cathasaigh, “The Semantics of “Síd”, *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies* 17, ii (1977-8), 137-55 at 153-55. A similar ambiguity seems to underlie the medieval Welsh cognates, *sedd* (‘abode of the gods’) and *hedd* (‘peace’), both ultimately derived from Indo-European *\*sed-*.

contemporary early Irish law—not to mention the even more oppressive dictates of ecclesiastical law. The accounts of the Irish Otherworld (*síd*) portray sex as uninhibited and ubiquitous. In *EC* the faery woman sums up her appeal to Connlae by telling him that the land to which he will sail

gladdens the mind of everyone whom it encircles.

The only people living there  
are women and maidens. [*EC* §14].

She seems to be implying that in the Otherworld Connlae will be granted sexual favors not only by her—she has already declared her love for him—but also by countless other women. In the same vein Manannán describes an Otherworld where

Men and elegant women under a tree,  
with intoxicating wine before them,  
engage in a beautiful, most delightful sport,  
free of sin and transgression.<sup>20)</sup>

The ‘sport’ here is surely sexual, couples openly making love under the trees, and apparently doing so promiscuously,<sup>21)</sup> the implication being that their behavior needs no concealment and involves no shame. Elsewhere in *VB* the availability of women is emphasized: “Emne by the sea...in which are many thousands of women in variegated colors” [§19]; “a small band of women will come from a height to the plain of sport” [§20]. When Bran and his men arrive at the Land of Women they are hosted by a bevy of women, with a bed for each couple [§62]. Sexual permissiveness is an essential feature of the Irish Otherworld, depicted not only in the present works but elsewhere in early Irish literature, which often refers to that land as *Tír inna mBan* ‘the Land of Women.’

The most remarkable feature of this sexual activity is not so much its promiscuity as its

---

20) *VB* §41; Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran*, pp. 20–21.

21) As suggested the plurality of actors; cf. the comment of the woman in the previous quotation.

sinlessness. The faery woman in *EC* begins her encounter with Connlai by declaring, “I have come from the Lands of the Living in which there is neither death *nor sin nor transgression*” (*na peccad na imarmus*).<sup>22)</sup> While freedom from death is a commonplace of paradisaic descriptions, the woman’s anachronistic focus on the absence of sin in the Otherworld is exceptional. Manannán, in the quatrain quoted above, makes the same point, even employing the same collocation (*cen peccad...cen immorboss*).<sup>23)</sup> The comments of both are declarative; they make no effort to excuse this ethos by recourse to mitigating circumstances, such as invincible ignorance or observance of the natural law, which might be concocted by an author addressing a Christian audience about deviant ancestral behavior. Excuses of this kind were often employed by the Irish learned classes when addressing the awkward problem of whether pre-Christians of moral goodwill could be saved, such as the patriarchs of the Old Testament or, closer to home, their own ancestors. In favor of redemption they argued that any non-Christian who adhered to the natural law (*lex naturae*; Ir. *recht aicnid*) was essentially following a way of life in harmony with Christianity.<sup>24)</sup> At first glance, the denizens of the Otherworld might seem to qualify for this accommodation; however, their insouciant enjoyment of indiscriminate sex surely excludes them.

Instead of an appeal to the natural law, the author of *VB* (in the mouth of Manannán) offers a more ingenious explanation of the Otherworld’s sinless sexual activity:

We exist from the beginning of Creation—  
 No aging, no resting in the ground;  
 We do not anticipate loss of vigor for ourselves,  
 The Fall did not come down on us. [*VB* §44]

---

22) *EC* §3; McCone, *Echtrae Chomlai* (as in n. 2), p. 121.

23) Both are Christian-based terms in Old Irish, the first a borrowing from Latin *peccatum*, the second a native formation etymologically derived from the verbal root *\*med-* meaning ‘to think, plan,’ which in its compounded form may denote ‘to make a wrong/hasty decision,’ as suggested by H. Pedersen, *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen* 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1976), II, §780.7 (p. 579) s.v. *imm-rimdethar*.

24) Except, of course, in the matter of faith. For examples and discussion, see C. Donaghue, “Beowulf, Ireland and the Natural Good,” *Traditio* 7 (1949–51), pp. 267–68; and “Beowulf and the Christian Tradition: a reconsideration from a Celtic Stance,” *Traditio* 21 (1965), 55–116.



Here, in embryo, is the origin myth of the Otherworld people. They exist “from the beginning of Creation,” a phraseology which recalls the Genesis account of creation, culminating in the creation on the sixth day of humankind: “God created man to his own likeness...male and female he created them...And God blessed them, saying: ‘Increase and multiply, and fill the earth’” (Gn 1: 27-28). Placing their origins in the primal creation is a deliberate ploy; it separates them from the subsequent (second) account of the particular creation of Adam and Eve (Gn 2), which culminated in the Fall and original sin. Manannán and his Otherworld companions (‘we’) are admittedly the progeny of Adam and Eve—in the quatrain following [VB §45] he refers to Adam as ‘father’ (Ir *athir*)—but, crucially, they claim to have been born at the earliest stage of creation, before the protoplasts committed original sin—“the Fall did not come down on us.” Herein lies the justification for their sexual behavior: because they precede the Fall, they are free of the original sin which inflicted all subsequent humans. Consequently, their sexual activity is morally untainted, it is a purely physical act of pleasure, just like the intoxication from wine which accompanies it.

I have not been able to find any account, biblical, apocryphal or patristic, to support this extraordinary claim that Adam and Eve parented a race of children at the earliest stage of Creation before the Fall, who thereby inherited the primeval state of innocence which their parents subsequently lost.<sup>25)</sup> Patristic writers did speculate about the condition of Adam and Eve in their original, prelapsarian state, emphasizing that they were graced with the highest level of moral integrity, while also enjoying concomitant benefits such as physical immortality, imperviousness to suffering, and happiness. This notion of a *status naturae purae* was apparently familiar to Irish literati. For example, an Irish gloss in a copy of the Pauline Epistles,<sup>26)</sup> commenting on ICor 5: 8, “Let us feast, not with the old leaven...but with the unleavened bread

---

25) It is also found in other, later old Irish works. For example, in *Serglige Con Cualainn*, the hero’s charioteer recounts his visit to the Otherworld, where he meets the beautiful faery woman Fand: “*Atbér, úair is lim ro clos/síl nÁdaim cen imarbos/delbaid is Fainne rem ré/ná fil and a llethéte* (“In the race of Adam [which is] free of original sin, the beauty of Fand is without equal before my time”); ed. M. Dillon, *Serglige Con Cualainn*, Medieval and Early Modern Irish Series, 14 (Dublin, 1953), p. 19, lines 557-60. Likewise, in the ninth-century tale, *Tochmarc Étaíne*, King Midir of the Otherworld attempts to persuade Étaín to join him, using the same techniques of the faery women of *EC* and *VB*, with a vivid description of “a wondrous land where harmony presides...stately people without fault, sexual unions without sin or lust”; ed. O. Bergin and R. I. Best, “Tochmarc Étaíne,” *Ériu* 12 (1934-38), pp. 137-96, at 180.

26) Würzburg, Universitätsbibliothek, MS M.p.th.f.12 (last quarter of the eighth century).

[*azymis*] of sincerity and truth,” explains *azymis* as referring to the sincerity and righteousness possessed by Adam before the Fall (Ir. *ré n-immarmus*),<sup>27)</sup> contrary to the conventional medieval interpretation of the unleavened bread as ‘good works’. In the same manuscript, in response to Ephesians 2: 3, “in the desires of our flesh... (we) were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest (of mankind),” another gloss states: *ní ó aicniud na cétné tuisten act is o aicniud pectho doforchosalsam ó Adam* (‘it [the tendency to sin] comes, not from the nature of the first/original engendering, but from the sinful nature which we have inherited from Adam’). If read this way,<sup>28)</sup> the gloss sets up a dichotomy between human nature at the time of the first begetting of children and the subsequent sinful condition it inherited from Adam’s Fall, thus implying that there might have been prelapsarian, sinless humans who belonged to the original creation of Gn 1: 27-28.

The notion of a prelapsarian Adam with supernatural abilities occurs in a Hiberno-Latin grammatical tract of the early-eighth century, the *Anonymus ad Cuimnánam*. Discussing the origins of the human *artes* (such as music, grammar, agriculture, medicine, etc.) it declares that “all arts and all languages and all knowledge were for the first time and by divine agency present in Adam who, it is written, possessed the spirit of wisdom,”<sup>29)</sup> adding further on that the great variety of *artes* which Adam’s descendants invented were inseparably, originally and even causally possessed by him.<sup>30)</sup> The implication seems to be that Adam in his prelapsarian state possessed within himself the totality of human arts and wisdom,<sup>31)</sup> which—because of the Fall—had to be recovered by his descendants (including Solomon, Plato, Pythagoras) through a

---

27) See S. Kavanagh, *A Lexicon of the Old Irish Glosses in the Würzburg Manuscript of the Epistles of St. Paul*, ed. D. S. Wodtke (Vienna, 2001), p. 532 (Wb 9b16).

28) Kavanagh, *ibid.*, p. 900, translates *ó aicniud na cétné tuisten*, ‘from the nature of (our) original creation.’

29) *Anonymus ad Cuimnánam: expositio latinitatis*, eds. B. Bischoff and B. Löfstedt, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 133D (Turnhout, 1992), p. 2, lines 42-44: “omnes artes et omnes linguas et omnes scientias primitus fuisse ac diuinitus in Adam, qui spiritum sapientiam habuisse scribitur.”

30) *Anonymus ad Cuimnánam*, p. 2, lines 62-65: “multa genera artium, in Adam quae indiuisibiliter aut originaliter uel etiam causaliter inerant, in sua postea posteritate multiuarie et multis modis orta atque sunt acta.”

31) A Middle Irish poem in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (‘the Book of the Taking of Ireland’) states that, while Adam was sleeping (before the creation of Eve), “God filled him forthwith with a spirit of wisdom and of prophecy”; R. A. Stewart Macalister (ed. and trans.), *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, pt. 1, *Irish texts Society* vol. 34 (London, 1938), p. 61.

gradual, piecemeal process. The gifts conferred on Adam in his perfect, prelapsarian state would presumably have been passed on to any putative offspring which he fathered during that time. This scenario would, as interpreted by Irish literati, explain some of the uncanny skills enjoyed by Otherworld people, such as being able to see into the future, cure all injuries, and make themselves invisible in the presence of mortals (as in *EC*).<sup>32)</sup>

The licentious behavior of the Otherworld people is more problematic. It can hardly be explained by reference to Late Antique poets and patristic exegetes who discussed Adam and Eve's state of prelapsarian innocence. For one thing, their subject was a single, monogamous couple, a situation sharply contrasting with the promiscuous relationships envisaged in the Otherworld. Besides, their speculations about the protoplasts' sexual activity were either restrained by Christian modesty or limited by doctrinal assumptions. Foremost among those who adopted a doctrinal approach was Augustine. In his commentary on Genesis (*De Genesi ad litteram*), while conceding the possibility that Adam and Eve might have begotten children before the Fall, he argued that any such sexual intercourse would have been rational and free of carnal desire and he ultimately concluded that it never happened.<sup>33)</sup> Descriptive accounts of prelapsarian Adam and Eve are common in Late Antique biblically based poems, that of the fifth-century Gallican poet, Claudius Marius Victorius, being typical. In his *Alethia* he emphasizes their monogamy and freedom from all earthly vices, but says nothing about their sexuality.<sup>34)</sup>

---

32) In *Tochmarc Étaíne* ('the Wooing of Étaíne') the Otherworld king, Midir, says: "We see everyone on every side, and no one sees us; the darkness of Adam's sin makes it impossible for humans to see us"; Bergin and Best, "Tochmarc Étaíne," 180-81 (§10). I have modernized their translation.

33) *De Genesi ad litteram* ix.3 (ed. J. Zycha, *Sancti Aureli Augustini De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 28 (Vienna, 1894), pp. 271-72): "Quamquam enim iam emissi de paradiso conuenisse et genuisse commemorantur, tamen non uideo, quid prohibere potuerit, ut essent eis etiam in paradiso honorabiles nuptiae et torus immaculatus...ut sine ullo labore ac dolore pariendi fetus ex eorum semine gigneretur.... Potuit hoc fieri, si non praecepti transgressio mortis subplicium mereretur." ('Although they are recorded as having had intercourse and children after they had already been ejected from Paradise, nevertheless, I do not see what could have prevented them from experiencing while still in Paradise an honorable marriage and undefiled intercourse...so that a child could have been born from their seed without no labor and pain of childbirth.... That could have happened, were it not that [their] transgression of God's command merited mortal punishment').

34) *Alethia*, Bk I, lines 387-95: "iam una duos in carne manere/aeternam pariter uitam ducentibus esset...nam dum terrarum uitii et labe carerent..."; ed. C. Shenkl, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 16, 1 (Vienna, 1888). See E. Dekkers, *Clavis Patrum Latinorum (CPL)* (Turnhout, 1995), no. 1455.

Likewise, Avitus of Vienne (fl. 490–518) in his *Carmina de spiritalis historiae gestis*, preempts any potential speculations about the protoplasts' sexuality by having God, immediately after Eve's creation, solemnize their union in language redolent of Christian marriage.<sup>35)</sup>

An exception to these treatments is the Carthaginian poet, Dracontius (fl. late fifth century), author of a paraphrase of biblical history in epic verse (*De Laudibus Dei*), which describes in highly charged language the sexual attraction between Adam and Eve. Some aspects of his account invite comparison with Manannán's Otherworld. Thus, both portray Adam and Eve as coming together sexually immediately after human creation. As already noted, Manannán claimed that "we exist from the beginning of creation," having been fathered by Adam. Compare Dracontius who relates that Eve was created, fully formed and nubile, on the evening of the same day as Adam. The descriptions of lovemaking in both works combines sexual innocence and freedom. Manannán describes Otherworld sex as sinless and playful, unimpeded by shame. Dracontius, likewise, portrays a fervid scene of Adam and Eve mingling open kisses with sexual desire, "their bodies naked and their hearts unconscious of shame," convinced that nothing was forbidden to them. He justifies their behavior on the grounds that "still inexperienced, how could they know what was proper sexual behavior?"<sup>36)</sup> Dracontius' account comes closest to the depiction of sexual innocence in the Irish Otherworld.

Such an unapologetically frank account of the Otherworld's promiscuity, at variance with both the highly influential, rationalist view of Augustine and the puritanical culture depicted in the Irish penitentials raises interesting questions about its origins. An appeal to the polygamy practiced by contemporary Irish nobility hardly provides an adequate explanation; after all, the denizens of the Otherworld are presented not as polygamous, but promiscuous. A more likely explanation, though beyond proof, is that Irish literati were dealing with a long-held, native concept of the Otherworld as 'the Land of Women,' and so they pragmatically attempted to reconcile it with Christianity by recourse to a strained reading of Genesis 1. Certainly, a

---

35) "Taliter aeterno coniungens foedere vota/ Festivum dicebat hymen castoque pudori/Concinit angelicum iuncto modulamine carmen."; ed. J-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 59, 328A ("In this way God united them by vows in an eternal contract, declaring a festive marriage; an angelical hymn with melodious harmony sang of their chastity and modesty.")

36) corporibus nudis et nescia corda ruboris/Quid pars membrorum secretior esset habenda/unde rudes scirent quid moribus esset honestum? Bk I, lines 439–42, ed. James F. Irwin, *Liber I Dracontii de Laudibus Dei* (Philadelphia, 1942), pp. 46–47. I have used Irwin's translation with some modifications.

strategy of accommodation would fit well with their construct of the *lex naturae* (see above), which allowed for their righteous pagan ancestors to be regarded as proto-Christians.

But the defining feature of the Irish Otherworld, what makes it so different from mainstream western depictions of paradise, is that its inhabitants constantly intrude on the human world. By contrast, the western tradition depicts a paradise whose fortunate denizens are either angels or beatified humans separated from, untouched by, and indeed uninterested in the mortal world. Significantly, the biblically derived walled garden in which they typically live constitutes a statement of physical and symbolic exclusion. One might have expected the same to obtain for the Irish Otherworld, given its location far out to sea, remote and inaccessible. On the contrary, the evidence from Irish literature and folklore offers a narrative of constant engagement with the human world.

For one thing the Otherworld, albeit somewhat loosely, is modelled on the human world. At first glance this might seem counter-intuitive, since humans normally think of a paradisaical Otherworld as an escape from all that defines their own world. Yet the Irish works under study reveal fundamental similarities to early Irish medieval society (in its upper echelons), as depicted in contemporaneous sources, both secular and religious. All three portray the Otherworld as having a king or leader whose benevolent and just rule brings harmony and fertility to the land [*EC* §5]—an ideal enunciated (if not practiced) in contemporaneous Irish literature, secular and religious. The inhabitants of the Otherworld enjoy perpetual feasting [*EC* §3], listening to music as they drink the finest wine [*VB*, §§13, 24, 41], and engaging in boat and chariot racing [*VB*, §5], precisely the activities cultivated by their Irish counterparts. The faery woman in *EC* [§5] makes much of her own great beauty and noble lineage—as did her aristocratic female counterparts in the Irish sagas.<sup>37)</sup> She regards Connlae's stereotypical yellow hair and ruddy skin as an aesthetic boon which will be enhanced in her world [§5]. Evidently, Otherworld women had tastes in male beauty similar to those of their mortal counterparts. When Manannán begets a son on a mortal woman he foretells that he will be 'a handsome man in a white body, ferocious in battle' [*VB* §55, 'he will cut down battalions'] endowed with the battle fury of Cú Chulainn. Despite the inherent anachronism, Otherworld interlocutors seem to

---

37) Cf. the beauty contest in the ninth-century Irish saga, *Fled Bricreann* ('the Feast of Bricriu'), between the three most famous wives in Ulster; G. Ganz (trans.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Bungay, Suffolk, 1981), pp. 226–29.

be well versed in Christian themes and monastic tropes. For example, the faery woman describes the Otherworld birds calling their hearers to the Hours of the Divine Office and singing the psalms in harmony [VB §7], while Manannán, speaking anachronistically (and incongruously) as might a monastic homilist, exhorts Bran to avoid 'the pride of life' which leads to believing in creatures, forgetting God and ultimately destroying one's soul. [VB §§47–8].

Yet another reflection of the Irish Otherworld's involvement with the human world is its exquisite awareness of the range of human time in contrast to conventional western descriptions of paradise. The latter sources employ imagery which conveys a sense of a perpetual present in which nothing changes; for example they frequently conjure up images which capture the beauty of a balmy season, but there is never a hint of seasonal changes. By contrast, the representatives of the Otherworld constantly move between past, present, and future. For example, in justifying to Bran why the sexual pleasures of the Otherworld are innocent, Manannán goes back to the beginning of human time, recounting the Genesis story of creation and Adam's Fall, while carefully distinguishing chronologically between the two. Mention of the Fall prompts him to speak of the future; he foretells the coming of Christ [VB §48], as well as the birth of his own son, Mongán [VB §§49–59]. Likewise, when Connlae's father attempts by means of druidic magic to ward off the faery woman who seeks his son, she threatens him by foretelling the arrival of a new religion (Christianity) in Ireland which will overthrow the native druidic culture and undermine his own rule [EC§11].<sup>38)</sup> Human and Otherworldly notions of time seem to coalesce in the description of the birds whose singing announces the canonical Hours:<sup>39)</sup>

A sacred tree with blossoms exists there,  
on which birds summon to the canonical Hours;  
habitually in chorus  
all of them call each Hour.

From a human perspective the birds are minutely marking the passage of time in accord with

---

38) Note that all three Otherworld messengers foretell the eventual arrival of Christianity.

39) VB §7; Meyer *Voyage of Bran*, p. 7.

medieval monastic custom, yet paradoxically their quotidian activity conveys a sense of timelessness through endless repetition.

Judging by these Irish tales, human fascination with the Otherworld is more than matched by the faery people's interest in the mortal world. Although Otherworld people seek out humans for a variety of reasons (invariably driven by self-interest), in the present tales their interest is romantic. Such is the interest of Otherworld people in the human world that they continually monitor their mortal counterparts, often under a cloak of invisibility. In *EC* the faery woman, though heard by those present, can only be seen by Connlae, leading his father to complain bitterly about the "invisible shapes" and "womanly spells" that are conspiring to take his son away from him [§6].<sup>40)</sup> Recall that the faery woman confessed to Connlae that she had already fallen in love with him [EC §5], presumably before she made herself visible.<sup>41)</sup> She also tells him that the "people of the sea" (another name for Otherworld denizens) had watched and admired him as he moved about among his friends:<sup>42)</sup>

You are a champion in the eyes of these people of the sea,  
who watch you every day,  
in the gatherings of your ancestral land,  
among your close friends.

Although not specifically noted, the same was probably true of the woman who courted Bran. When he reaches the Otherworld Land of Women, he is greeted from the shore by a woman who already knows him, addressing him as "Bran son of Febal" [*VB* §62]. Likewise, Manannán in *CM* knows about the imminent threat of death facing the King of Ulster and exploits this information to persuade his wife to sleep with him.<sup>43)</sup>

To sum up: for their depiction of the Celtic Otherworld as a prelapsarian paradise *EC* and *VB* may have been influenced by biblically inspired Late Antique literature. But the narrative

---

40) See n. 32.

41) The perfect tense of the verb (*ro-carus*) indicates action prior to the surrounding contextual preterites of the narrative.

42) *EC* §9.

43) Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran*, pp. 43–45 (appendix).

dynamic of the Irish stories whereby Otherworld actors (usually women) make direct contact with individually chosen humans, deploying skills of magic, rhetoric and manipulation to lure them away, appears to be an entirely native construct.