Christening of the Sidhe: Are Fairies Human, After All?

The motif V331.8. “Fairies converted to Christianity” [Cross 1952: 518] is rare in the contemporary Irish oral tradition. Nevertheless, it used to be widely known in the aristocratic / clerical tradition of the Middle Irish / Early Modern Irish period, the bearers of which sought to incorporate mythology into their political and theological message.

This particular motif is more interesting for analysis than, for example, the very similar F251.8. (“Fairy professes faith in Christianity”), because of theological implications it inevitably evokes when discussed by a monastic author. According to Catholic demonology, although a fallen angel or any other non-human being is able to acknowledge the truth of Christian faith as a matter of natural fact, it cannot undergo the mystical rebirth through the rite of baptism. The latter is reserved for humans solely, which is specifically outlined in canon law.

In the following article we shall focus, firstly, on theological grounds behind this message in Catholic texts, secondly, on narratives where the motif in question is exhibited most explicitly, thirdly, on earlier texts prefacing it, and, last but not least, of adjoining approaches in Early Modern Ireland.

1. Baptism as Sacrament Reserved for Humans Only

One of the earliest Irish ecclesiastical sources, the Stowe Missal, repeatedly uses the term “human” in its baptism rite: e.g., “Domine sanctae pater omnipotens aeternæ deus expelle diabulum et gentilitatem ab homine isto…” during the initial exorcism [Warner 1915: 24]. The Missal is furthermore describing the baptized person as a physical, corporeal being via consequently expelling the Devil both from parts of their body and from their conscience (we can suppose that in case of physical disability the formulae could be modified in accordance to actual appearance of the person). Homine is not just a figure of speech: “Deus qui ad salutem humani generis maxima quaecumque sacramenta in aquarum substantia condidi sti...” follows as an immediate dogmatic underpinning, proclaiming the sacrament of baptism as God’s gift to mankind alone [ibid.].

Collectio Canonum Hibernensis, a systematic Irish collection of Latin canon law dating from late 7th or 8th century, does not concentrate specifically on this topic whatsoever. Yet Decretum Gratiani, a canon law codex vested with supreme authority since 1180, reads: “Qui ex uro et muliere concipitur, cum originali peccato nascitur, nec sive baptismate saluatur”[Decretum Gratiani. Dist. IV. C. III]. That is, “those who are conceived of man and woman, are born with original sin and will not be saved without baptism”. Thus salvation by baptism is available to human beings solely, which is also clearly stated in the current Codex Iuris Canonici: “Baptismi capax est omnis et solus homo nondum baptizatus” – “A human, that has not been baptized yet, and such a human only, can be baptized” [CIC 864].

The main point of the abovementioned excerpts is, of course, prevention of illegal repeated baptisms, but the reasoning used in these law-texts implies human nature as prerequisite to christening. Gratian reasons that the mankind, being the only class of creatures that is tainted with the original sin is, therefore, the only class of creatures in need of salvation via baptism. The teaching of the Catholic Church specifies this further by referring to St John of Damascus: “There is no repentance for the angels after their fall, just as there is no repentance for men after death” [St. John Damascene, De fide orth. 2, 4: PG 94, 877].“It is the irrevocable character of their choice, and not a defect in the infinite divine mercy, that makes the angels’ sin unforgivable”, and the dead, in their own turn, are deemed to face the consequences of whatever choice they have made in life [CCC 393]. Thus, professing faith in Christianity, as one would comment on a natural fact, does not necessarily strip a character of its demonic nature (see numerous later Irish tales of fairies mourning their inability to save their souls while describing the fully Christian path to salvation).
conversion implies a character being fully human from the theological point of view: a living and corporeal person of free will (required to make a valid and lawful commitment to God) and immortal soul (that is, the very object of the salvation). Therefore, for a Catholic narrative, converting a fairy to Christianity requires the fairy not just to be mortal, but to be human. As (which we hopefully pointed out above) prerequisite of humanity for being baptised was explicitly specified by St. John Damascene, one of the Fathers of the Church in the Catholic tradition, and while the present-day Catechism refers to exactly this excerpt when qualifying a person eligible for baptism, we may safely assume that actual church practice had been stable in this regard ever since, though maybe less explicitly worded. Yet what does the evidence from actual folklore texts say?

2. Early Modern Irish narratives

T.P. Cross’s Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature mentions two Early Modern Irish texts (Altram Tige Dá Medar and Oidheadh chloinne Lir) and one Middle Irish narrative (the famous Acallam na Senórach) as containing the motif in question. Not listed, but well-known to Cross (who did the translation of this text into English) and of interest to us, is a Middle Irish legend Saltair na Muice, or Imthecht Caenchomraic.

Altram Tige Dá Medar (The Fosterage of the House of the Two Milk-Pails), a well-known tale from the book of Fermoy, contains probably the most extensive evidence of the motif in question. This is a story of a young Tuatha Dé Danann woman, a foster-daughter of Aengus Og, who gets horribly insulted by Aengus’s half-brother Finbharr – so horribly that “the demon of Tuatha Dé Danann” leaves her and she is unable to take any Tuatha Dé Danann food but milk of two miraculous cows. At one point she encounters a Milesian cleric from whom she is able to receive food, and she later converts (but not before being parted from her kin, which results in her being lethally grief-struck and dying of sadness despite conversion).

Eithne (the protagonist of the abovementioned tale) could have been perceived as a one-of-a-kind example, as well as with the “demon” mentioned and with the fact that Eithne denounces her Tuatha Dé Danann ties. Nevertheless, there is one more Christian Tuatha Dé Danann character in the story, and this is none the less than Manannán mac Lir.

He first enters the scene as a co-ruler to Bodb Dearg and approaches Aengus with a very theologically correct (though rather cynical) attempt of catechizing him:

He convinced Aengus by his urgency for he almost understood ‘do you know, Aengus, that it is not fitting that Ealcmar. . . and that it is not for him to defend the fort or establish the mansion and the lordship. We shall sit in the house which he made before Ealchmar and do you summon him to depart, for that will bring to you good luck and prosperity and to him misfortune and adversity and exile. (That is; the luck that angels came from the king of the palace and the Creator of the universe, the luck that we took the kingship of Fodla from the Fir Bolg, the luck that the Milesians took the throne of Eire themselves again.) Warn him that he may not come to the house he leaves till ogham and pillar be blent together, till heaven and earth, till sun and moon be blent together.’ ‘God is not above our gods’ said Aengus. ‘There is one thing’, said Manannan. ‘The one almighty God is able to subdue our idol gods and they are not able to despoil Him who is the powerful Lord made heaven and earth and the sea with wonders, and made the universe complete.’

‘Do you know, Aengus’ said Manannan, ‘why mankind were first created?’ ‘I know not’ said Aengus. ‘This is the cause’ said Manannan. ‘The one God of whom we spoke fashioned ten orders of angels round Him. The lord of the tenth order grew scornful and envious in his mind and they left the heavenly plain without cause and God . . . the tenth order of his land . . . and fashioned mankind . . . and those who left His land with scorn He turned into demons and made a dungeon and prison for their torments. Everyone who does His will is brought to the palace and everyone who goes against it is put in that dungeon for torments and that is the urgent cause of creation’ said Manannan. ‘We are not of that origin’ he said: ‘but act on my advice this time’ [Dobbs 1930].

Despite disputing with Aengus on merits of monotheism, Manannán could still have been
seen here as a demonic creature. But here we have him claiming their kin’s non-demonic (as demons are synonymous to fallen angels in Catholic cosmogony – see Gen: 6) nature directly (“We are not of that origin”), which goes at odds with Scottish and later Irish tradition of perceiving the inhabitants of the síd as fallen angels. Besides, there goes another subtle, though no less significant, detail:

Manannán went away to his fort and the time came and his wife bore the fruit of her womb, a shapely lovely daughter with a tip of curly yellow-coloured hair on her head, for which reason she was baptized and called by the name of Curcog (= bushy tuft). She was given to Aengus to bring up and educate and daughters of other rulers of her own age along with her.

As to the steward’s wife: she bore a daughter at that time and she was named Eithne and Aengus took her like every other foster-child to educate [Dobbs 1930].

Manannán’s child is specifically mentioned to be baptized (which is only reasonable, since Manannán himself is presumed Christian here), while the wife of the steward (a pagan) has her child not “baptized” but only “named”, a difference very notable to a monastic author (not even to mention the very fact that Eithne’s future conversion is the very pinnacle of the saga). Therefore, we’ve already got two converted Tuatha Dé Danann individuals in the exposition of the story, and though one could be argued to fit the trope rather imperfectly (we are not presented with the conversion of Manannán, after all), the other’s baptism is mentioned literally.

Moreover, as Aengus seeks to retrieve his runaway foster-daughter, the latter is defended by St Patrick, who then makes an attempt at converting Aengus himself. The attempt, just as Manannán’s sermon, is in vain; but it is not the outcome here is that I find intriguing.

‘The maid is not thy ward’ said Patrick ‘but the ward of the God of creation though she was lent by her father to thee.’ ‘I impute capability . . . to the maiden’ said Aengus ‘if she thinks it to her advantage to come to... and I lacking the power of the Lord.’ ‘I am afraid’ said Patrick. ‘If you took my advice Aengus’ said he ‘I fear not your interference in any righteous affair.’ ‘What is it?’ said Aengus. ‘Worship the true Almighty God and shun vain gods and arise in the name of the Trinity and change thy name and depart from torments.’ ‘That is not the cause for which we came from our home’ said Aengus. He then spurred his horse from the river and retired sadly and sorrowfully, and his ward perceived his reluctance [Dobbs 1930].

Though Aengus prefers deserting his foster-daughter over deserting his gods, he is not denied salvation a priori, and St. Patrick is willing to baptize him, if he wishes. Aengus is not denied salvation after his refusal to convert either; the matter is dropped because he is clearly not inclined to discuss it at the moment, but neither damnation nor banishment follows and nothing refrains him from changing his mind one day. Such type of interaction with a cleric would be rather typical for a stubborn pagan king, but is definitely unheard of for a fallen angel of later Gaelic lore. Moreover, if Aengus had indeed converted, St Patrick would have gladly handed Eithne over to the very síd she came from, not fearing any unwanted consequences for her well-being.

So why is the “demon of Tuatha Dé Danann” required for Eithne to take in fairy food, while it does not interfere with the Christian Curcog and would not have interfered with Eithne as well, provided her guardian Aengus converts? A common Catholic doctrinal judgement, medieval as well as Early Modern, was that diabolical possession was frequent in pre-Christian nations due to the very nature of their beliefs; worshipping “vain gods” would definitely cause spiritual corruption if not outright possession [O’Donnell 1911]. This concept was no doubt present in the Early Irish church as well. In surviving Irish missals (both Bobbio Missal and Stowe Missal) baptism is preceded by exorcism rites (the modern Catholic baptism rite does not require any exorcism formula anymore). Curcog and Manannán, as Tuatha Dé Danann Christians, reside in síd safely, for the demon haunting the Tuatha Dé Danann was either not living in their physical environment but in their initial beliefs or would otherwise lose power over a baptised Tuatha Dé Danann. Therefore, conversion of Aengus, Eithne’s legal guardian, would have ensured proper observation of Eithne’s
new faith and would have shielded her from the “demon”.

In the light of all this, it is not surprising that the inhabitants of the síd are portrayed here as fully human, though having dangerous beliefs and engaging in improper activities. They are, nevertheless, able to denounce their delusions, be christened and achieve ultimate salvation. Christening does not change their physical nature, nor does it remedy bodily harm inflicted by starvation or shock:

When Eithne heard Aengus’ people weeping her heart leapt in her bosom and from that start came grief from one breast into the other. She asked Patrick for baptism and remission of sins and received it from him and was named after him. But one thing: for a whole fortnight the maiden grew steadily worse and was praying to God and to Patrick who with his clerics was much grieved [Dobbs 1930].

Though Eithne feels compelled to leave síd, this, in my opinion, represents leaving secular world in favour of monastic vocation (e.g., Eithne describes Church as her new family, which is typical for both tales of conversion and Christian rhetoric in general). Curcog, a Christian, dwells in the síd without coming to any supernatural harm, and so does Curcog’s father Manannán.

Another relevant Early Modern Irish story is, of course, the tragic tale of the children of Lir. Half-siblings to Manannán and grandchildren (or foster grandchildren) to Bodb Dearg, they fall prey to the jealousy of their aunt / stepmother Aoife, who transforms them into swans for 900 years. When they are finally free of the spell, the siblings find themselves in the land of the Sons of Mil, away from the lifespan-prolonging conditions of síd, so their age catches up with them and they die. But before the siblings perish, a friendly priest converts them.

It should be noted that several times before they are baptized (and before they even return to human shape), the children of Lir profess their Christian beliefs, thus amplifying non-identity of professing Christian beliefs and conversion:

After a time, Finola spoke to them and said, "My dear brothers, believe in the great and splendid God of truth, who made the earth with its fruits, and the sea with its wonders; put your trust in Him, and He will send you help and comfort."

"We believe in Him," said they.

"And I also," said Finola, "believe in God, who is perfect in everything, and who knows all things."

And at the destined hour they all believed, and the Lord of heaven sent them help and protection; so that neither cold nor tempest molested them from that time forth, as long as they abode on the Western Sea [Joyce 1879: 27-28].

It is very important to note that the siblings perish not because they have converted and therefore are no longer subject to the benevolent magic of Tuatha Dé Danann: their age catches up with them as soon as they return to human form, and the baptism rite is administered as their death is already imminent:

The king had proceeded only a little way, when suddenly the white feathery robes faded and disappeared; and the swans regained their human shape, Finola being transformed into an extremely old woman, and the three sons into three feeble old men, white-haired and bony and wrinkled.

When the king saw this, he started with affright, and instantly left the place without speaking one word; while Kemoc reproached and denounced him very bitterly.

As to the children of Lir, they turned towards Kemoc; and Finola spoke:

"Come, holy cleric, and baptise us without delay, for our death is near. You will grieve after us, Kemoc; but in truth you are not more sorrowful at parting from us than we are at parting from you. Make our grave here and bury us together; and as I often sheltered my brothers when we were swans, so let us be placed in the grave Conn standing near me at my right side, Ficra at my left, and Aed before my face."

<...>

Then the children of Lir were baptised, and they died immediately. And when they died, Kemoc looked up; and lo, he saw a vision of four lovely children, with light, silvery wings, and faces all radiant
with joy. They gazed on him for a moment; but even as they gazed, they vanished upwards, and he saw them no more. And he was filled with gladness, for he knew they had gone to heaven; but when he looked down on the four bodies lying before him, he became sad and wept.

And Kemoc caused a wide grave to be dug near the little church; and the children of Lir were buried together, as Finola had directed Conn at her right hand, Ficra at her left, and Aed standing before her face. And he raised a grave-mound over them, placing a tombstone on it, with their names graved in Ogam; after which he uttered a lament for them, and their funeral rites were performed [Joyce 1879: 34-36].

Thus, just as in Altram Tige Dá Medar, baptism does not alter their nature, so the Otherworldly characters are perceived as human and mortal per se. Nor does conversion play any part in their liberation from the curse – the latter takes place in accordance to the conditions named by Aoife.

3. Earlier Narratives

Now I shall try to show that these Early Modern narratives stem from the earlier tradition attested in written form. A number of Tuatha Dé Danann conversions are listed in Acallam na Senórach, Tales of the Elders of Ireland. Here we meet Aillenn, a full-blooded member of the Tuatha Dé Danann and a daughter of Bodb Dearg himself. She is willing to marry the king of Connaught, who used to be her fiancé before she retreated to her father’s síd for a while. But the king had converted and wedded another woman during that time. When Aillenn first encounters St. Patrick and the king of Connaught, she is informed that a Christian marriage does not function like a pagan one, and she cannot marry her beloved until his spouse dies (neither is she allowed to kill her). Aillenn then retreats back to her father’s realm to wait; and when the king is finally a widower, she re-emerges. St Patrick agrees to marry them on condition that she converts; not only Aillenn herself accepts Christianity gladly, but also her retinue of one hundred and fifty Tuatha Dé Danann women. Marrying Aillenn to the king of Connaught is reported then to be the first marriage rite performed by St. Patrick in Ireland. The proper consummation of the marriage is also deliberately stated.

Though intercourse and even de facto marriage between humans and non-human creatures is very well known to Irish lore, only a living human person of free will and full sanity is entitled to be wed under the Catholic doctrine, both modern and medieval (symbolic marriage to a dead had been largely unfamiliar to Catholics, and although coercion into marriage surely happened, a formal statement of free will had to be given nevertheless to make a marriage valid [CIC 1057]). Besides, Aillenn does deliberately argue her corporeality and her abstention from witchcraft:

‘[…] Well, dear woman,’ said the king, ‘do you wish to be seen by the nobles of the province?’ ‘I do indeed,’ she said, ‘for I am not a bewitching woman of the síd. Though I am of the Túatha Dé Danann, I have my own body about me.’ Aillenn showed herself to the host, and never had they seen before or after a lovelier woman [Dooley, Roe 2008: 179f].

Another episode from the same narrative features St. Patrick encountering Donn, son of Midir the Proud and grandson of Eochaid the Daghda. Donn seeks consolation from the saint (as we know from the earlier part of the story, Midir had revolted against his brother Bodb Dearg who was the high king of all the Tuatha Dé Danann, which did not go too well for Midir himself and Midir’s family), rests his head on the saint’s bosom, and afterwards Donn and his Tuatha Dé Danann subjects kneel before St. Patrick, which liturgically implies either christening or blessing (which, in turn, requires christening).

Another Middle Irish text is a life of a late 9th century bishop, who, according to the Four Masters, died in 898 and is referred to in several other early Irish documents, e.g., in the Annals of Ulster, the Martyrology of Gorman, the Martyrology of Donegal, etc. [Cross 1920: 443-444]. This
Disappearance of Caenchomrac is a local version of the life of the saintly cleric, who retires into hermitage with only two monks for company. One day, while he is praying in solitude, these two disciples go out to look for some provisions and are lucky enough to come across the local tuath’s hunt:

There the Ui Fannain were, hunting, and they killed a number (?) of wild pigs. They gave a pigling to the clerics. Then the clerics carried the pigling with them to Inis Endaim. They placed it on the fork that was over the fire. They on their part go about the island to chant their psalms. Caenchomrac is left alone in the oratory. He was not long so till he saw a great phantom coming toward him out the bottom of the water. [The phantom] saluted the cleric; the cleric saluted him. "Whence hast thou come, O cleric?" said Caenchomrac. "Out of the water," said the big man. "What brought thee here?" said Caenchomrac. "[I have come] for the pig yonder," said the former, and sighed . . . . (?) . "What’s that?" said Caenchomrac. "Not hard to answer," said he. "We have a monastery in the .... (?) ."

"What’s that ?" said Caenchomrac. "Not hard to answer," said he. "We have a monastery under this lake now. And the young men of the monastery committed sin, so that they have been put out in the form of pigs, and it is they who were killed in Slieve Leitrim. And one of them is he on the fork yonder, and I am his mortal father. And here is his psalter in my hand, and to thee I give it, O Caenchomrac, . . . . (?) of our union and for the soul of the person whom it served until to-day, for if he himself now lived, it is well he would have arranged the psalm-singing." Thereafter it was called the Psalter of the Pig, and it remained for a long time in Clonmacnoise. Eogan was called in Banbh, for he was the pigling with a boar’s mouth(?). The cleric permitted the big man to take his son with him to bury him. He consented. "Why not come with me, O Caenchomrac, to see the monastery?" They went together under the lake into the monastery. Caenchomrac remains in it from one canonical hour till the corresponding one next day performing canonical service and mass. He wonders at the place (?) and its delightfulness. "It is as easy for God," said the cleric, "[to cause us to dwell (lit., our dwelling)] under water as in other places." [And] on the morrow Caenchomrac [goes] home, and he [covered with] lake wrack. And he used often to visit that monastery as long as he lived (?); nothing was hidden from him therein from that time forth [Cross 450-451].

St. Caenchomrac thereon tends to visit his Tuatha Dé Danann colleagues regularly, until at some point he is gravely disappointed by his disciples’ breaking of a fast and then either retires to sïd permanently or is taken to Heaven alive:

Afterwards the clerics of Loch Ree used to go every Easter Thursday to Inis Endaim to [visit] Caenchomrac that he might consecrate oil for them. He used to celebrate canonical service and mass and . . . preaching every Easter Thursday. A banquet [was usual] on that day after the celebration of the hours [and mass]. Thereupon food and drink [is given] to the clerics [as it was always given (?)]. Caenchomrac went out [from them] and was absent from them during the greater part of the day. Thereafter he comes to them while they were at meat. He greeted them; they greeted him in the same manner. Then he sees the platters full of bacon, and them eating it. Thereupon he took to chiding them for eating the bacon in Lent, and he reproved them severely. And great anger and indignation seized him so that his wrath increased mightily, and they could not look him in the face because of the brilliancy of the godliness in his countenance. Then Caenchomrac goes out from them, and he was never seen afterwards. And it is not known whether he went to dwell under the lake in the monastery so as to shut himself off from the reveling of the world and of the clerics or whether the angels took him up to Heaven [Cross 451-452].

Thus, Tuatha Dé Danann are not only portrayed as obviously converted, but go as far as taking monastic vows and setting up a monastery (of a much more rigid and respectable sort than the human one nearby). Such activity requires not only being human and Christian, but also certain moral superiority in following the vocation: the otherworldly monks are shown clearly superior in their faithfulness to Jesus in comparison to their earthly compatriots, thus serving as a didactic example.

Local tradition accepted those otherworldly brethren in faith well: a legend attested not far away from Loch Ree where St. Caenchomrac used to reside, portrays the inhabitants of an underwater otherworld seeking spiritual consolation from a priest, which is normally expected from
Christians (and, moreover, from Catholics specifically, for the legend is attributed to the times of fierce persecution, so that would be unreasonably dangerous for a non-Catholic to pose as Catholic):

There is said to be a submerged city, Kilkokeen, in the Shannon river. It was said that, in 1823, a boat’s crew of fifteen men were seen in church, who came from this subaqueous village, to receive spiritual consolation. Legend further relates that a ship came into the river one night, and anchored here at the wharves of a fine city. The next morning, one of the inhabitants came aboard, and engaged them to go to Bordeaux; and the day after their return with a rich cargo, the city sank and never reappeared [Bassett 2013 (1885): 480 (481)].

The writer of the *Disappearance of Caenchomrac*, according to Cross, was well-acquainted with the monastic tradition; therefore, the fairy monastery had been included into the story by an educated cleric, obviously on some purpose [Cross 1920: 446].

What could be the reason for composing such tales, since any dispute between Christianity and paganism had long been over? Tuatha Dé Danann characters point out their human nature deliberately in these texts; some parts of *Acallam na Senórach* that I do not cite here, for they are not exactly relevant to the motif in question, involve St. Patrick guaranteeing Christian salvation to a Tuatha Dé Danann musician [Dooley, Roe: 105-106]. The aspects of corporeality and mortality of the Tuatha Dé Danann are either emphasized openly or implied via descriptions of inherently restrictive rites performed over the Tuatha Dé Danann characters.

There are numerous indirect evidences of Tuatha Dé Danann conversions, which I could gladly further elaborate on (like Manannán swearing on the name of the Holy Trinity), and a number of Victorian fairy tales mentioning the same matter. I believe the emergence of such motif, which takes some considerable space in *Acallam na Senórach*, could be triggered by St. Malachy’s reforms, as unification of Church practice required a renewed stance on euhemerism as well, bringing official clerical opinion on the Otherworld to a certain order. This stance is supported by the fact that the earliest known examples of texts explicitly expressing this motif date from late 12th century (the above-mentioned *Acallam na Senórach*). There is a still earlier example indeed – namely, *Echtra Chonnlai*; but, while a Tuatha Dé Danann character in *Echtra Chonnlai* expresses disdain of druidry and rather gladly predicts the arrival of St. Patrick, this text still lacks an explicit conversion and, therefore, does not qualify for our query.

4. Authorized Clerical Comment

This was rooted well in Irish theology, since Franciscan brother Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, as late as in 17th c., deliberately argues human nature of Tuatha Dé Danann in his version of *Lebor Gabala Erenn*:

As for lobath son of Beothach, son of larbanel, son of Neimhedh, after his leaving Ireland with his people after the conquest before described, they settled in the northern islands of Greece. They were there till numerous were their children and their kindreds. They learned druidry and many various arts in the islands where they were, what with fiothnaischect, amaitecht, coinhliocht, and every sort of gentilism in general, till they were knowing, learned, and very clever in the branches thereof. They were called Tuatha De; that is, they considered their men of learning to be gods, and their husbandmen non-gods, so much was their power in every art and every druidic occultism besides. Thence came the name, which is Tuatha De, to them [LGE K 90: 143].

Ó Cléirigh then quotes Eochaid Ua Floind:

Of men by lawful right,
was the freeman whose strong seed it was;
Bethach, of noble warrior origin and nimble,
son of larbanel, son of Neimhedh [LGE K 105: 157].

“Of men by lawful right” here is justly remarked upon as open profession of human, not
divine, nature of Tuatha Dé Danann.
Ó Cléirigh keeps stressing that via Tanaidhe O Maol-Chonaire:

Of the kings of the Tuatha Dé Danann was this said; Tanaidhe O Maoil-Chonaire composed it –
a The Tuatha Dé Danann under mystery,
a people without performance of religion,
whelps of the portion that has withered, people of the flesh and blood of Adam [LGE K 120: 173].

As we see here, fully human nature of Tuatha Dé Danann is habitually accompanied by their
heathen beliefs; the latter shall not, though, prevent a good Catholic from holding on to Tuatha Dé
Danann heritage:

Every secret of art, every subtlety of knowledge, and every diligence of healing that exists, from the
Tuatha Dé Danann had their origin. And although the Faith came, these arts were not driven out, for they are
good [LGE K 119: 173].

Yet beyond general historiography, in Early Modern Ireland this euhemeristic tradition made
possible Gaelic and Gaelo-Norman genealogies stem from Tuatha Dé Danann. Of these genealogies
the most notable examples are: that of Mongán mac Fiachna (claimed descent from Oirbsen mac
Alloit); that of the Luigni (claimed descent from Lugh Samildanach); that of the Cianachta (claimed
descent from Cian son of Dian Cecht); that of the Campbells of Argyll (claimed descent from
Aengus Óg); that of the Eoganachta (claimed descent from Eogabal via his daughter Áine); and that
of the O’Shea of Iveragh (claimed descent from Lén Linfiachlach of Loch Léin).

Fr Geoffrey Keating, no doubt the most prominent Irish theologian of 17th
century, exploited
that willingly in his History of Ireland. He points out, in line with Ó Cléirigh, that the Tuatha Dé
Danann had to learn magic, therefore, they were not magical / supernatural creatures per se. Fr
Keating also takes time to explain that, despite being called “gods”, even the gods of Tuatha Dé
Danann were, in fact, human, and provides multiple etymologies as proof:

Some antiquaries say that it is from the three sons whom Danann, daughter of Dealbhaoth, bore, the
Tuatha Dé Danann were called, to wit, Brian, Iuchar and Iucharbha, i.e. three of the children of Dealbhaoth,
son of Ealatha, son of Néd, son of Iondaoi, son of Allaoi, son of Tat, son of Tabharn, son of Enna, son of
Bathach, son of Iobath, son of Beothach, son of farbhnoineol Fáidh, son of Neimheadh: because that the
aforesaid three were so accomplished [as that] in heathen arts, that these tribes with whom they were wished
to style them gods, and to name themselves from them. <...> Others say that it is why they are called Tuatha
Dé Danann, because it is in [their] three orders they were, of those who had come into Ireland on this
expedition. The first order of them, which is called Tuath, used to be in the rank of nobility and headship of
tribe: called tuathach, <...> The second order (to) which used to be called Dé, such are their druids, whence it
is the above three used to be called the three gods of Danann. Wherefore they were called ‘gods’ (is) from
the wonderfulness of their deeds of magic. The third order which was called Danann, namely, the order
which was given to dán, or to crafts; for dán and céard are equal [Keating 2010 (1723): 215].

Fr Geoffrey is not just mindlessly borrowing the concept from the Book of Conquests; Tuatha
Dé Danann are an integral part of his narrative, and his (rather harsh) critique of Cambrensis is
mostly in defense of their heritage:

And Cambrensis, who undertook to supply warrant for everything, it is likely in his case that it was a
blind man or a blockhead who gave him such a shower of fabulous information, so that he has left the
invasion of the Tuatha Dé Danann without making mention of it, although they were three years short of two
hundred in the headship of Ireland, and that there were nine kings of them in the sovereignty of Ireland: and (yet) he had recounted the first invasion of Ireland, although it were only the invasion of Ceasair, and that the antiquaries do not regard it for certain as an invasion, notwithstanding that it is mentioned by them in their books. Truly I think that he took no interest in investigating the antiquity of Ireland, but that the reason why he set about writing of Ireland is to give false testimony concerning her people during his own time, and their ancestors before them...<...> It is not for hatred nor for love of any set of people beyond another, nor at the instigation of anyone, nor with the expectation of obtaining profit from it, that I set forth to write the history of Ireland, but because I deemed it was not fitting that a country so honourable as Ireland, and races so noble as those who have inhabited it, should go into oblivion without mention or narration being left of them: and I think that my estimate in the account I give concerning the Irish ought the rather to be accepted, because it is of the Gaels I chiefly treat [Keating 2010 (1723): 75-77].

Tuatha Dé Danann are of much importance to Fr Geoffrey, and so is the humanity of their nature. They are, according to Keating, not just a human race that had once inhabited Ireland, but, in fact, a race of Gaelic descent, as Keating argues that their mother tongue was none other than Irish:

At Srú, son of Easruacute, Partholóon and the children of Neimheadh separate from each other: and at Seara the Firbolg, the Tuatha Dé Danann, and the sons of Míleadh separate. And it is the Scotic language every tribe of these had. That is evident from (the occasion) when Ith, son of Breegan, came into Ireland; for it is through the Scotic language he himself and the Tuatha Dé Danann spoke with each other... [Keating 2010 (1723): 175].

The stories of conversions that we have considered earlier, as well as family lore of nuptials between the Irish and the Tuatha Dé Danann, portray the latter as humans and often Christians, though nevertheless foreigners; the two peoples are two civilizations very unlike each other. Keating here makes a further step, arguing that the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Gaels share the same genesis.

The discourse of conquest, Gaeldom, and myth in Keating’s writing demands, of course, a paper of its own. We shall remark, though, that within the resulting narrative both Reformation and English rule over Ireland were perceived as naturally illegitimate. As Keating’s views on history of Ireland had been officially accepted by the Holy See, his position regarding the Tuatha Dé Danann was granted the same authorization. The 1910 Catholic Encyclopedia doubts whether the Tuatha Dé Danann really existed, but is at the same time sure that the Fir Bolg and the Sons of Mil are historical. Provided that, according to Keating, these three are basically sub-ethnic divisions of a single human population, a Catholic who sticks to the letter of the law is therefore to consider the Tuatha Dé Danann humans of flesh and blood.

Conclusions

Based on the analysed evidence we are able to outline several characteristics of the distribution of V331.8. in Irish written tradition:

1) the motif belongs exclusively to Middle Irish and Early Modern Irish corpus, written by clerics and aimed at local lords;

2) either the Tuatha Dé Danann themselves or other characters specifically state their human and mortal nature. Their unnatural longevity is carefully rationalized either via medication (Goibniu’s ale, magical berries, etc.) or via the very nature of the realms they dwell in (children of Lir, Oisin’s return, etc. – this is also specifically outlined in Echtra Chonnlai, where a Tuatha Dé Danann woman advertises Tír na nÓg to Connlae by stating that he shall become immune to ageing simply by entering that realm);

3) the later authorized clerical comment, including the official stance of the Holy See, does not cover any Tuatha Dé Danann conversions, but the human nature of the Tuatha Dé Danann is postulated outright.
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Therefore, I find it reasonable to believe that the ultimate pragmatics of V331.8. (“Fairies converted to Christianity”) in the Irish tradition is portraying the Tuatha Dé Danann as regular humans, though inhabiting an Otherworld. Considering this, we shall conclude that this motif, though appearing in a relatively modest number of Irish texts, does find its continuation not only in remnants of local lore, but also in Ó Cléirigh’s and Keating’s writings. While both these authors do not mention any Tuatha Dé Danann conversions, they dedicate significant amount of effort to proving fully human nature of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Thus, I believe, both motif V331.8. and Ó Cléirigh’s and Keating’s views diachronically represent the same tradition, aimed at full humanization of Otherworld’s inhabitants.

By Mariia Morris, Moscow

References


Summary

This essay regards the Middle Irish and Early Modern Irish motif of christening a fairie [V331.8. “Fairies converted to Christianity”] from a theological perspective, dwelling at some length on onthological implications assigned to an act of baptism by Catholic theology. The author demonstrates how both in Early Modern and Middle Irish narratives the motif in question is utilized to portray the fairies as humans, entitled as such to Christian salvation. These pragmatics, according to the author, survive well into Modern Irish clerical comments, becoming an instrument of political speculation via attributing Irish sovereignty to a continuous bloodline shared by the fairies and Irish Gaelic nobility. Therefore, the said motif should not be considered as just a Christian rendition of pre-Christian mythology, but a representation of much wider pattern represented in Irish aristocratic and clerical tradition.

Keywords

baptism; Catholicism; Early Modern Ireland; euhemerism; fairies; Irish mythology; Tuatha Dé Danann; sidhe

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