

# Allegoresis and Literary Creativity in Eighth-Century Ireland: The Case of *Echtrae Chonnlai*

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The Old Irish tale *Echtrae Chonnlai*, 'Connlae's Faring-forth,' it has been argued, stands at the very beginnings of written Irish vernacular narrative,<sup>1</sup> and this sense of priority is undoubtedly one of the reasons scholars display such interest in it. However, it is by no means the only or indeed the primary reason for this interest. *Echtrae Chonnlai*, the text of which takes up only three pages in its most recent edition,<sup>2</sup> is a tale of enormous artistry and emotional power. The narrative focuses on a dilemma with strong affective resonances; it combines a crystalline clarity of expression with enough ambiguity and linguistic uncertainty to provide a rich ground for interpretation and argument. In this paper, I first undertake a reading of the text, which draws upon and supplements the work of other scholars, with particular emphases on wordplay, gesture, and speech. I then turn to the broader question of the role of allegory in this tale in relation to the debate concerning so-called 'exegetical interpretation' in early medieval literature in general.

The characters of *Echtrae Chonnlai* are firmly rooted within the historical-genealogical framework cultivated by the medieval Irish. They would have been understood by the medieval author and audiences as pagans living after the birth of Christ, but before the introduction to Ireland of Christianity by Saint Patrick.

<sup>1</sup>Kim McCone, *Echtrae Chonnlai and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland*, Maynooth: Department of Old and Middle Irish, National University of Ireland, 2000, 77. This volume contains the most authoritative edition of the text to date. In my translation of the title, I follow James Carney, 'The Deeper Level of Early Irish Literature,' *Capuchin Annual*, 1969, 160–171, in choosing 'faring-forth' rather than 'expedition,' 'voyage,' or 'adventure' as most sensitive to the nature of the text. This choice is, of course, an interpretive act.

<sup>2</sup>McCone, *Echtrae Chonnlai*, 121–123.

We can assume that they are also known to the tale's medieval audiences from other contexts: narrative, genealogical or annalistic, read, or heard.<sup>3</sup>

James Carney, Kim McCone, and John Carey have fruitfully examined the accomplished ways in which the author consciously and skillfully manipulates secular and Christian elements in *Echtrae Chonnlaí*, although there are serious differences of opinion between them as to these elements' proper interpretation and valuation.<sup>4</sup> The tale clearly draws on a stock of traditional imagery and possibly narrative, combining these with an overt Christian message.

#### WORDPLAY

In this regard, particularly close attention has been given to the resonances of the word *síd* in the tale, in its senses of 'peace' and '(supernaturally inhabited) mound.'<sup>5</sup> In John Carey's words,

The tale opens with a scene deriving from an inherited tradition of Otherworld narratives; but when the supernatural woman begins to speak, her language is that of the ecclesiastical culture of homily and exegesis, and she describes her home as if it were the Christian Paradise. Now this twist is counterbalanced by another. Invoking the peace of the hereafter, she uses it as a verbal bridge back to native tradition: *síd* 'peace' is equated with the *síd* inhabited by the *aes síde*.<sup>6</sup>

Much has been made of this bit of wordplay, and its essential untranslatability has further served to highlight its importance in the economy of the text. Perhaps also relevant here is Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:14 that Christ himself is peace (*Ipse Christus vera pax est*) for he 'has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.' The pacific unification of Jew and Gentile in the body of the Church indicated here may have been of significance to our author, who is attempting another reconciliation, that of Ireland's pagan past, as represented in the text, with the Christian dispensation. Furthermore, in light of Ephesians 2:14, the woman can be seen as saying that she and her companions live in Christ.

However, another word plays an even more pivotal role, and that is *éolchaire*. It appears three times: first, in the interlude between the two scenes, in one of only

<sup>3</sup>Nonetheless, I would agree with the view that, 'its traditional elements' notwithstanding, it is highly likely that the tale is 'a piece of deliberate fiction': John Carey, 'The Rhetoric of *Echtrae Chonnlaí*,' *CMCS* 30, 1995, 41–65 at 62.

<sup>4</sup>In addition to the works cited above, notable contributions include Rolf Baumgarten, 'A Crux in *Echtrae Chonnlaí*,' *Éigse* 16, 1975, 18–23; Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Semantics of *Síd*,' *Éigse* 17, 1977–1978, 137–155; and John Carey, 'Echtrae Chonnlaí. A Crux Revisited,' *Celtica* 19, 1987, 9–11.

<sup>5</sup>Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Semantics of *Síd*,' is the *locus classicus* for the discussion of this nexus of meaning.

<sup>6</sup>'The Rhetoric of *Echtrae Chonnlaí*,' 47.

two narratorial intrusions in which a character's internal state is reported; second, in Connlae's only speech; and finally, echoed by the woman in her response. *Éolchaire* can be etymologized as 'love for what is familiar' and is generally translated as a longing for one's own place and/or family—a homesickness or nostalgia, if you will. The paradoxical bent of mind manifest elsewhere in the tale is clearly at work here as well. Connlae should be feeling *éolchaire* at the thought of leaving his family; instead, he feels it at the thought of the woman whom he has met only once.<sup>7</sup> This paradox points to another level of meaning: Connlae is feeling that nostalgia for heaven that is reflected in passages in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>8</sup>

#### SPACE AND GESTURE

The locations of the two scenes that make up the story are noted by the author and are significant. In the first scene, we encounter the king and the son who may well be his heir on the hill of Uisnech, a location with strong overtones of centrality and political power.<sup>9</sup> This central situation is disturbed and challenged by the introduction of the woman; and in the second scene we find ourselves on a plain (not so easily identifiable) near the sea, where Connlae can be observed by sea dwellers. We are moving away from the centre of the pagan secular universe to its margins and toward the other world offered to Connlae by the mysterious woman. With his disruptive leap into the woman's boat, Connlae leaves both the physical land of Ireland and the mortal life of the flesh, and embarks upon the journey to eternal life.<sup>10</sup>

Physical movement, such as Connlae's leap, is at a minimum in the tale. As the tale begins, Connlae and his father are simply present on Uisnech. Connlae does not see the woman approach; she, too, is simply there. Physical gestures can

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, in *Immram Brain*, an equally Christian overseas voyage tale of more or less the same date, *éolchaire* is used to describe characters' longing for their terrestrial homes (McCone, *Echtrae Chomlaid*, 83).

<sup>8</sup> E.g., God 'has set eternity in the hearts of men' (Ecclesiastes 3:11): 'Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. 'Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, 'because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. 'For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 'Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. 'Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. 'We live by faith, not by sight' (II Corinthians 5:1–7).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946, 171; Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 2nd edition, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001, 58.

<sup>10</sup> I prefer the reading of *long* as 'boat' to John Carey's suggested 'bed' (*Echtrae Conlaid*, A Crux Revisited, 10.)

assume great significance in the often relatively static medieval scene,<sup>11</sup> and there are only two in this tale: the first, the throwing of the apple, and the second, Connlae's leap. These are reciprocal—the first is a movement from the other world to this world, and the latter is a return from this world to the other, and they represent in microcosm the central movement of the tale. Each scene culminates in one of these gestures.

#### SPEECH AND SILENCE, THE SEEN AND UNSEEN

The senses of hearing, sight, and, by implication, taste, are central to the tale. When the woman first appears, she can be heard by all, but is seen only by Connlae. Clearly, Connlae is in a privileged position—it is given to him to see as well as to hear. Connlae can be viewed here, at the very opening of the tale, as already a step farther along the road to the knowledge of God than those around him; his spiritual vision is functioning while the others around him are still blind.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, after his initial questioning of the woman, which serves the narrative function of alerting the other characters to the woman's presence, Connlae himself does not speak, but retreats into silence. The narrator comments upon this or, more strictly, upon another character's response to this: 'Conn thought it strange that Connlae would not give answer to anyone except when that woman should be present.' Connlae's behaviour can be seen as echoing that of the monastic novice upon taking up a vow of silence.<sup>13</sup> His fasting, or abstention from all but the otherworldly nourishment provided him by the apple, can also be seen as part of an ascetic withdrawal from this world in a contemplation of and a turning toward the next. The pivot upon which the whole text turns comes at the end of the passage describing this period of silence and abstention: 'Longing then seized Connlae for the appearance of the woman that he had seen.' As in the *Song of Songs*, a spiritual longing is manifested at the literal level of the narrative as a very earthly desire

<sup>11</sup>Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, *A Rhetoric of the Scene. Dramatic Narrative in the Early Middle Ages*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989, 109–169.

<sup>12</sup>For the concept of the spiritual senses and their use in the representation of inner transformation, see Bernard McGinn, 'The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism,' *Spiritus. A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1:2, 2001, 156–171 at 157: 'Gregory [of Nyssa]'s passionless passion is what we can call a master metaphor for unlocking his understanding of the spiritual senses, which is based upon a "perception of God" (*aisthêsis theou*) as a paradoxical state in which every enjoyment of God is also at one and the same time the kindling of a more intense and unfulfilled desire. . . .'

<sup>13</sup>James Carney, 'The Deeper Level,' 162–164, was the first to suggest that this text might have been appropriate for use by novice monks in its original context, although he does not actually claim that it was written for that purpose.

of one human for another. As the fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa explains,

The most acute physical pleasure (I mean erotic passion) is used as a symbol in the exposition of these teachings [i.e., in the Song]. It teaches us the need for the soul to reach out to the divine nature's invisible beauty and to love it as much as the body is inclined to love what is akin to itself. The soul must transform passion into passionlessness so that when every corporeal affection has been quenched, our mind may seethe with passion for the spirit alone. . . .<sup>14</sup>

In our text, the unusual use of the word *éolchaire* at this juncture (rather than *dúil* or *sant*, for example, which would be more appropriate in a sensual or lustful context) points to the spiritual meaning to be accorded to Connlae's desire for the unknown woman. The intense desire here is for something that the soul once possessed and hopes to regain, rather than for something other and alien to it.

Another point can be made about the sensory aspect of this tale, relating to the dyadic reciprocity between the woman and Connlae, and his dependence upon her. She is heard and not seen; he is seen and not heard. Connlae is only both seen and heard, only fully present, when the woman is also there—he does not exist fully without her or, it could be said, he exists fully only in relation to her. He is already receding from this world before he actually leaves by absenting himself from the world of the natural senses. However, in their dyadic mutuality, Connlae and the woman are both fully audible and visible to one another throughout the tale.

The woman's utterances clearly dominate the tale. She speaks four times, to Conn's once and Connlae's twice; and her speeches, in their heightened rhythmical form and with their prophetic content, convey an air of authority and power. The use of Latin tags (*mulier respondit* or *dixit mulier*) to introduce three of her utterances underlines her authority and association with the Church. Conn's speech is poignant in its sense of bewilderment and loss of control. As Robin Chapman Stacey observes,

[T]he association between speech and power was so pervasive in Irish society that disputes over access to authoritative speech became for the elite a way to characterize and experience the jurisdictional conflicts that simply must have accompanied the assimilation of the old faith into the old regime. For the literati, imagining particular persons as speaking while others listened or were forced into silence was a way in which to express both the reality of power relationships and the tensions inherent in jurisdictional struggles. It is no coincidence that there are so many extant Irish texts depicting individuals attempting to limit or deny altogether rights to public speech to others.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Saint Gregory of Nyssa. Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. Casimir McCambley, Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987, 49, cited in McGinn, 'The Language of Inner Experience,' 157.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech. The Performance of Law in Early Ireland*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, 140–141.

The druid's speech, significantly, is not represented as direct discourse, but in summary form. The druid is the only character not allowed to speak for himself, and this reflects his lower valuation in his role as adversary of Christian revelation in the tale. Although his (textually silent) words temporarily triumph, the Christian *logos* ultimately silences him.<sup>16</sup>

#### WHO AM I?

The woman in this text has been given two primary valences by modern scholars: that of the sovereignty goddess of Irish tradition and that of a personification of the Church.<sup>17</sup> A nod in the direction of Eve (and implicitly Mary) has been made.<sup>18</sup> However, her resonances are surely fuller than that, and the figure of Wisdom (*Sapientia*) must also be taken into consideration. She is named in Proverbs as the firstborn of God's creation,<sup>19</sup> is identified closely in the New Testament with Jesus,<sup>20</sup> and in the early medieval period becomes the focus of a 'liturgical and exegetical tradition poised uneasily between Christ and Mary.'<sup>21</sup> It is during the seventh and eighth centuries that the celebration of the four Marian feasts became established in the Western church,<sup>22</sup> and the 'lessons for these feasts were drawn largely from the sapiential books.'<sup>23</sup> Among the lessons that Alcuin's lectionary provides for the feast of the Assumption is Wisdom 7:30–8:4:

Evil does not conquer Wisdom:  
she reaches from end to end mightily  
and orders all things sweetly.  
Her I have loved and searched out from my youth;  
I sought to take her as my bride

<sup>16</sup> See Carey, 'The Rhetoric of *Echtrae Chonlat*,' 62–63, for a thoughtful consideration of the 'verbal choreography' of the speech acts in the tale.

<sup>17</sup> Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990, 157–158.

<sup>18</sup> Carney, 'The Deeper Level,' 162–165. The figure of the Sibyl is another possible influence, particularly in her popular medieval role as prophetess of Christianity.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses. Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, 191.

<sup>20</sup> Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 192.

<sup>21</sup> Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 193.

<sup>22</sup> Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 195. By the mid-eighth century, the four Marian feasts were on the Roman pattern and were well-established in the Anglo-Saxon church; see Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 29. The works of the eighth-century Irish poets Blathmacc (in Irish) and Cú Chuimne (in Latin) bear eloquent witness to Irish devotion to Mary at this time. In our oldest extant Irish liturgical calendar, the late eighth-/early ninth-century *Féilire Óengusso*, all the Marian feasts are noted.

<sup>23</sup> Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 195.

and fell in love with her beauty.  
Her intimate fellowship with God glorifies her noble birth  
and the Lord of all has loved her,  
For she is a teacher of the discipline of God  
and chooses what his works shall be.<sup>24</sup>

Here, the speaker (Solomon) uses the language of earthly love to speak of his desire for Wisdom,<sup>25</sup> just as in *Echtrae Chonnlai* the protagonist yearns for union with the mysterious woman. 'Evil does not conquer Wisdom,' just as in our tale the druid's attempts to silence and banish the woman are in vain. In the figure of Sapientia, which no doubt played a part in the spiritual and intellectual formation of our author, we encounter a way of talking about an aspect of the Christian divinity that resonates with the depiction of the unnamed woman in *Echtrae Chonnlai*.

#### ALLEGORY OR NOT?

My reading of *Echtrae Chonnlai* (like those of most others who have written on the subject) is clearly an allegorical one. Over a decade ago, Mary Dove wrote:

Since the 1960s, Christian allegoresis has regrettably been a cause of division among scholars of the literature of the Middle Ages. Those scholars who have chosen to interpret medieval imaginative literature in the light of interpretive practices developed for the reading of the Bible have been accused of intruding allegory into the interpretation of texts which were never intended to be read as though they were *sacra scriptura*.<sup>26</sup>

The question of the applicability of allegoresis to nonbiblical literature, described more recently as 'perhaps the most contentious issue in the interpretation of medieval literature in the latter part of the twentieth century,'<sup>27</sup> is at the heart of the debate between two of the foremost scholars of *Echtrae Chonnlai*, Kim McCone and John Carey, with the former arguing for an allegorical reading and the latter against.

What is really at stake here, of course, is not simply a reading of the text. The modern reader is free to interpret a medieval text as he or she chooses, allegorically

<sup>24</sup> Newman, *God and the Goddessess*, 198.

<sup>25</sup> Note here the intended identification of the participant in the Mass with the male lover. John Carey, 'The Rhetoric of *Echtrae Chonnlai*,' 64, has objected to Kim McCone's suggestion that the patristic exegesis of the erotic imagery in Song of Songs might have served as a model for the author of *Echtrae Chonnlai* on two grounds, one of which was that 'the Christian reciting or contemplating the Song of Songs was encouraged to identify himself with the bride, not with her lover.' Clearly, this objection cannot be raised against the sapiential liturgical readings.

<sup>26</sup> 'Sex, Allegory and Censorship. A Reconsideration of Medieval Commentaries on the Song of Songs,' *Literature and Theology* 10, 1996, 317–328.

<sup>27</sup> David A. Wells, 'Friedrich Ohly and Exegetical Tradition. Some Aspects of Medieval Interpretation,' *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 41, 2005, 43–70 at 47.

or otherwise. The question really concerns the text's primary interpretative community, its author(s), scribes, and intended readership/audience. In this case, we are asking whether or not *Echtrae Chonnlai* was constructed in such a way that an allegorical reading was not only possible but also desired within that primary context.

Kim McCone sees *Echtrae Chonnlai* as a 'deliberate inversion of the narrative of the fall in Genesis' and argues that 'the otherworld woman symbolizes the Church in accordance with an allegoristic principle undoubtedly familiar to early Irish monastic men of letters.'<sup>28</sup> John Carey responds:

I do not believe that the Otherworld woman is merely a cipher used to represent the Church. . . . More generally, I am uneasy with the premise that early medieval exegetes (in Ireland or anywhere else) would have felt comfortable in applying the same hermeneutic methods to pagan imagery or traditions as to the Christian scriptures. It seems simpler to see the woman as a pre-Christian harbinger of Christian revelation, unfallen and divinely inspired.<sup>29</sup>

In McCone's response to this critique, he suggests that the real sticking point for Carey seems to be the use of the anagogical level of exegesis in relation to this text, as the latter's suggestion that the woman be seen as a 'harbinger' of Christian revelation seems to suggest an acceptance of a typological reading.<sup>30</sup> This is perhaps a misreading of Carey, who is, I think, proposing that the intended audience of this text would have read the woman *ad litteram* as an unfallen prophetess of the coming of Christianity to Ireland, but not strictly as prefigurative of the advent of Patrick or the Church.

Carey's attitude is puzzling. Admittedly, attitudes toward pagan literature in the late antique and early medieval periods were various and at times complex, but it is undeniable that authors such as Augustine and Jerome, for example, considered it an appropriate object of study within certain parameters.<sup>31</sup> In the words of Friedrich Ohly,

medieval theology . . . adhered to the principle that the spiritual sense of the word distinguishes the Bible from all profane literature and is not applicable to it. In practice, however, the principle could not be upheld, since in the Middle Ages—as already

<sup>28</sup> McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Rhetoric of *Echtrae Chonnlai*,' 64–65.

<sup>30</sup> McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> It could even be argued that reading, as taught, was inextricably intertwined with allegoresis. In such a foundational work as Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, a 'theory of language and signification is first established as a set of logically constructed principles and then applied to scripture. For this reason [Augustine's] principles invite application in other contexts, such as the interpretation of texts other than scripture, and also to the creation of new texts': Daniel Knauss, 'A Summary of Augustine's Hermeneutic,' <http://web.archive.org/web/20021217100755/http://home.earthlink.net/~faerspel/dknauss/augustinian+hermeneutics.htm>, consulted 9 January 2008.

in Classical antiquity—the allegorical method of textual interpretation was applied also to extrabiblical and pagan texts such as Homer, Virgil and Ovid. . . .<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, we have some direct evidence for the Christian allegoresis of pagan literature in the early medieval Irish context. As Michael Herren explains,

A set of late antique scholia to Vergil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, based upon the work of the fifth-century Roman grammarian Philargyrius (plus other sources), was either compiled in Ireland, or had come there, by around 700. The archetype of this compilation contained additions of Christian material and grammarians known to the Irish, and was glossed, probably contemporaneously, in Old Irish.<sup>33</sup>

Herren convincingly argues that 'the Christian editor . . . was an Irishman of the late seventh or eighth century.'<sup>34</sup> This editor at several points in his preface and commentary to the Fourth Eclogue explicitly refers to Christian allegorical readings, as follows (translations my own unless noted otherwise):

Saturni regnum aureum sub Octauiano adulanter restauratur, quod secundum Christianos ad nouum testamentum per Christum et Mariam de prauato conuenit.<sup>35</sup>

The golden age of Saturn is restored under Octavian and greatly praised, which, according to the Christians fits the new covenant restored from the Fall by Christ and Mary.<sup>36</sup>

*Non omnis arbusta iuant, allegorice ac si diceret: non omnes populi laudem amant . . . ideo regnum Octauiani et consules laudabo et cantabo; vel omnia ad Christum referuntur.*<sup>37</sup>

*Orchards do not delight all men, and if allegorically it would mean: not all people love praise of the crowd . . . therefore, I will praise and sing of Octavian's reign and his consuls; or indeed all [these] things refer to Christ.*

*Cymaei, quia Sibylla quattor deorum descripst regna; quae Cymaea dicitur de monte Cymo, et haec est Sibylla, que de Christo cecinit multa; sed melius 'Hesiodei carminis' qui Cymaeus de Cyme, Asiae ciuitate dicitur.*<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> 'The Spiritual Sense of Words in the Middle Ages,' trans. David A. Wells, *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 41, 2005, 18–42 at 30.

<sup>33</sup> 'Literary and Glossarial Evidence for the Study of Classical Mythology in Ireland A.D. 600–800,' in *Text and Gloss. Studies in Insular Learning and Literature Presented to Joseph Donovan Pheifer*, ed. Helen Conrad O'Brien, Anne Marie D'Arcy, and John Scattergood, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999, 49–67 at 55. There are three extant recensions of this compilation: the 'Explanatio Iunii Philargyrii,' the 'Scholia Bernensia,' and that preserved in Vatican Library, Reg. Lat. 1650 (55–56).

<sup>34</sup> 'Literary and Glossarial Evidence,' 59.

<sup>35</sup> *Scholia Bernensia ad Vergili Bucolica atque Georgica*, ed. Hermann Hagen, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1867, 105.

<sup>36</sup> Herren, 'Literary and Glossarial Evidence,' 60 n. 65.

<sup>37</sup> Hagen, *Scholia Bernensia*, 106.

<sup>38</sup> Hagen, *Scholia Bernensia*, 106. This is not itself an allegorical reading, but rather a mention of the practice of reading material attributed to the sibyl(s) as referring to Christ.

*Cymaei*, because the Sibyll describes the reign of four gods; *Cymaea* is said of Mons Cymo, and this is Sibyll, who sang much of Christ; but better according to Hesiod's poem, where it is said that this *Cymaeus* is from Cyme, a city of Asia.

*Virgo*, iustitia, quae redire decreuit propter hominum conversiones, vel Terra, quae nunc frugifera, sicut et tunc, vel secundum nos Maria.<sup>39</sup>

*Maiden*, Justice, who is decreed to return after the conversion of men; or Terra, who is now fruitful, as at that time; or according to us, Mary.

*Progenies*, Saloninus vel Augustus vel Christus vel Marcellus, Octaviae filius.<sup>40</sup>

*Progeny*, Saloninus or Augustus or Christ or Marcellus, Octavianus' son.

*Sceleris vestigia*, . . . vel corpus liberatum a peccatis significant, quia tempore Augusti Salvator venit.<sup>41</sup>

*Vestiges of sin* . . . or they signify the body liberated from sins, because in the time of Augustus the Saviour appears.

*Reget*, Octavianus orbem, Saloninus Dalmatas, vel Caesar Romanos, vel Christus Christianos.<sup>42</sup>

*He will rule*, Octavius the earth, Saloninus the Dalmatians, or Caesar the Romans or Christ the Christians.

*Iam legere*; fecit enim Pollio noua carmina, faciens velut Christus in templo.<sup>43</sup>

*Now able to read*; Pollio has indeed made a new song, doing just as Christ in the temple.

*Nec deus*, Iuppiter, quia de convivio eum trusit, vel Hercules de mensa sua. Hoc allegorice ad Saloninum refertur, quasi in convivio deorum non esset, cum cito obisset; nonnulli ad Christum.<sup>44</sup>

*Nec deus*, Juppiter, because he thrust him . . . from his banquet, or else Hercules . . . from his table. This refers allegorically to the boy of Asinius Pollio as one who was not at the banquet of the gods since he died prematurely. Others hold that it refers to Christ.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Hagen, *Scholia Bernensia*, 107.

<sup>40</sup> Hagen, *Scholia Bernensia*, 107.

<sup>41</sup> Hagen, *Scholia Bernensia*, 108.

<sup>42</sup> Hagen, *Scholia Bernensia*, 108.

<sup>43</sup> Hagen, *Scholia Bernensia*, 109.

<sup>44</sup> Hagen, *Scholia Bernensia*, 113.

<sup>45</sup> Herren, 'Literary and Glossarial Evidence,' 60 n. 66.

One is perhaps right to characterize the degree of allegorization in this work as 'restrained'.<sup>46</sup> However, one is also justified in describing it as representing 'the first attempt of an early medieval European to create a Christian redaction of a commentary to a classical text'<sup>47</sup>; and this in the same cultural context and period that saw the composition of *Echtrae Chonnlai*.

From a slightly later period<sup>48</sup> comes a revealing marginal gloss to the Servian Virgil commentary that provides evidence that

the Irish could find Christian morals in pagan myths. . . . [W]e find the story of how Apollo promised the Sybil a long life provided she leave the island of Erethria and never see it again. A comment in the margin reads 'ut mac Ciallain,' almost certainly a reference to the peregrination of an Irish monk.<sup>49</sup>

This gloss indicates the willingness of an Irish scholar to read the pagan myth tropologically, to extract a moral sense from a nonbiblical text. If, then, the pagan literary monuments of the classical world could be read *allegorice* by early medieval Irish commentators, why not, too, motifs and narratives drawn from or representing Ireland's own pagan past? It is not, in the culturally confident atmosphere of early medieval Irish learning, such a big step from reading classical pagan works in this way to using elements from one's own tradition in the composition of texts designed to be read as a Christian allegory. Indeed, I would argue that an early medieval Irish reader confronted with *Echtrae Chonnlai* would have had great difficulty in preventing him- or herself from reading the text allegorically.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Herren, 'Literary and Glossarial Evidence,' 60.

<sup>47</sup> Herren, 'Literary and Glossarial Evidence,' 60.

<sup>48</sup> The ninth-century Berne MS 363 (whether the gloss originated in this manuscript or was copied from an exemplar cannot be established).

<sup>49</sup> Michael Herren, 'Classical and Secular Learning Among the Irish Before the Carolingian Renaissance,' in *Latin Letters in Early Christian Ireland*, Aldershot: Variorum, 1996, 1–39 at 33 n. 142. The actual substance of the story itself and the glossator's response to it are of great interest in this context. It could be posited that the basic plot of *Echtrae Chonnlai*—a young man lured away from home by an otherworldly woman—is based on a traditional Irish tale-type. Alternatively, or perhaps supplementally, could this anecdote as reported here be a source? The instinct of the glossator seems to be to equate the Sybil's situation (stay and die, or set off and attain eternal life) with that of a Christian pilgrim, who is also hoping to attain eternal life through sacrificing his attachment to his homeland. Connlae, too, finds himself in exactly this predicament. Another text against which *Echtrae Chonnlai* could perhaps profitably be read is the second-century vision *The Shepherd of Hermas*; more generally, the notion of *Echtrae Chonnlai* itself as vision literature might be worth investigating.

<sup>50</sup> This would not be unparalleled in an early medieval Insular context. In a very convincingly argued article, Stephen J. Harris proposes that the vignette of Pope Gregory the Great and the young Angles in the slave market in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiae* is constructed as allegory, and that 'learned readers of [Bede's] HE expected his historical narrative both to engage a symbolic language and to reproduce allusively the traditional discourse of Christian faith': 'Bede's and Gregory's Allusive Angles. The Venerable Bede and Pope Gregory the Great,' *Criticism* 44, 2002, 271–289.

The great interest taken by Irish authors in the etymology not only of Latin but also of Irish words (there is nothing comparable to it in the other vernaculars) shows a marked inclination toward reading individual words, if not entire texts, on levels other than that of the surface form.<sup>51</sup> To quote Ohly again,

[T]he Middle Ages pursues a speculative etymology which is part of theology, serving to illuminate the sense encoded in the word. . . . The spiritual sense of the word with its world and space of meanings contains a Christocentric interpretation of meaning and accordingly a direction for life. . . .<sup>52</sup>

In other words, medieval etymology can be seen as a form of exegesis, in which words are read for not only their literal but also their spiritual meanings. The early medieval Irish—alone in Europe in their manifest level of interest in the nonliteral meanings of their own language and supremely confident in its validity as a written medium from the sixth century onward—seem very well placed to have, by the eighth century, followed the model given them by available allegorical interpretations of classical literature, and to have composed and read a vernacular text such as *Echtrae Chonnlaí* in the ways suggested in this paper.

#### CONCLUSION

*Echtrae Chonnlaí* is a didactic text. It drives home the points that Christianity triumphed and triumphs over paganism and that our mortal life on earth is of no value compared to that of the immortal soul. Yet there are many ways in which these points could be made and they are hardly sufficient to 'explain' the text, as it were. The tale, made vivid by its scenic structure and expressive direct speech, lives in the moment of Connlae's choice: 'It is not easy for me and besides, I love my people. Yet a yearning for the woman has seized me.' The emotional weight of this moment stands at the heart of *Echtrae Chonnlaí* and must have resonated at some level with any medieval reader or listener. It is the affective force of *Echtrae Chonnlaí*'s embodiment of this complex of emotions, its containment of this force within an elegant and efficient structure, and the harnessing of that power in a richly textured multivalent and allegorical fashion to the central message of Christian salvation that make this tale such a high point of medieval narrative art.

<sup>51</sup>Indeed, *Echtrae Chonnlaí* itself is framed as the answer to an etymological question. See Frank Borchardt, 'Etymology in Tradition and in the Northern Renaissance,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 29, 1968, 415–429 at 420.

<sup>52</sup>'The Spiritual Sense,' 26–27.