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Fate in Early Irish Texts¹

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Abstract. When writing about the concept of Fate in early Irish texts in 1910, Edward Gwynn made a distinction between the passive and the active notion of Fate. The lexical approach to this subject, which he suggested but was unable to apply, is carried out in the present study, and it brings the predominance of the passive notion to the surface. An explanation for this predominance is offered here, which takes the problems and possibilities of the reconstruction of the pre-Christian past by the Christian composers of early Irish literature into account.

Keywords: fate, destiny, charms, lot-casting, sorcery, supernatural beings, Moirai, Furies, Latin literature, early Irish literature (Old and Middle Irish), sagas, annals, hagiography, dindshenchas, *Pharsalia* (Lucan), *Thebaid* (Statius), Old-Irish charm from Codex Sancti Pauli, *Cétnad n-aise*, *Aislinge Óenguso*, *Tochmarc Étaíne*, *Baile in Scáil*, *In tenga bithnua*, *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*, *Compert Conchobuir*, *Betha Adamnáin*, 'The miracle of Saint Ciarán's hand', *Acallam na senórach*, *Tochmarc Luaine ocus aided Athairne*, *Scél Baili Binnbértaig*, *Togail na Tebe*, *In cath catharda*.

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Not so long ago there was a conversation between two men on the Dutch radio. They were making fun of several phenomena associated with religion, as typical representatives of Dutch secularised society often do. Then, suddenly, one of them became serious. He started to tell about the feeling he had when driving to work in the morning. It was his view that the day ahead would be good and successful for him if all traffic lights were green. The habit of this man may be described as one of examining empirical facts for messages about the future or things hidden. In other words, we may define what he was doing as divination. If asked who or what put those traffic lights on green, he would certainly not answer 'God' or 'the gods'. But what of Fate? Fate is so vague and elusive a concept that there is room for it in both theistic and secularised society.

In 1910, Edward Gwynn published his pioneering article on Fate in which he distinguished 'two principal notions':

1. An earlier version of this paper was read on 23 November 2002 at the Tionól of the School of Celtic Studies (of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies). I would like to thank John Carey, Mícheál Ó Cearúil, Jan Platvoet, Tom Sjöblom and Gregory Toner for their helpful comments on this earlier draft. It should be noted that the contents of this paper are part of a larger project of a study of Fate in early Irish literature, which is still work in progress, but which I hope to publish in the form of a monograph entitled *Signs of doom: supernatural attendants of Fate in early Irish texts* at some stage in the future. Translations in this paper are mine, unless stated otherwise.

There is the *passive* usage, in which we mean by a man's 'fate' that course of life which is marked out for him, and which conducts him to a certain pre-determined goal. And there is the *active* usage, which we employ when we think of Fate as a power, independent of man's will, which marks out this course for him and determines his goal.²

If we apply this distinction to the example with which I started this paper, then we see the passive notion clearly: the green traffic lights serve as a marker of what the man believes is in store for him, a good, successful day. The question I formulated afterwards has to do with the second notion: is there also a belief in a supernatural entity that takes care of these markers and determines the course of the day? My concern here is, of course, not what the man on the radio believed but what we can find in early Irish texts. Gwynn was mostly interested in 'the notion of active Fate as a guiding or driving power, apart from the human will',³ because of its relation to religious and moral concepts. The first notion, however, is also a religious concept, because the whole idea of a certain predetermined pattern to life is a human interpretation, which we usually classify as 'religious'.

The subject 'Fate' can and should be approached in many ways,⁴ for it is a complex concept, ranging from ideas about chance to notions of predestination. As a result, belief in Fate is expressed in many different forms, from intuitive ideas to elaborate philosophical systems. One way to investigate the concept of Fate is, for instance, to study how people who were reputed to have insight into the future (such as druids, seers, prophets, saints, and so on) were described in the literature and what methods (e.g. divination, prophecy) they were said to have applied. Gwynn started his study with a lexical approach, but after an initial attempt he abandoned this method.⁵ The Irish words for Fate that he found in the then existing dictionaries either did not express the 'metaphysical notion' (I presume he means the active notion here), or were late forms or did not designate Fate at all. Gwynn only accepted the term *trú* as a valid descriptive word for 'someone who is under the sentence of fate'.⁶

Fortunately, we now have the Dictionary of the Irish Language, which was not available to Gwynn. There appear to be several terms connected with Fate. There-

2. E. J. Gwynn, 'On the idea of fate in Irish literature', *J Ivernian Soc* 2 (1910) 152–65: 152.

3. *ibid.*

4. For other preliminary studies of Fate in early Irish texts, see A. G. van Hamel, 'The conception of Fate in early Teutonic and Celtic religion', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 10 (1936) 202–14; J. Borsje, *From chaos to enemy: encounters with monsters in early Irish texts: an investigation related to the process of christianization and the concept of evil*, *Instrumenta Patristica* 29 (Turnhout 1996) 66–86; Tom Sjöblom, *Early Irish taboos: a study in cognitive history*, *Comparative Religion* 5 (Helsinki 2000) 97–107, and the literature cited in these works.

5. Gwynn, 152.

6. *ibid.* 152–54. The idea of someone being *trú*, 'doomed, fey', is to be classified as an expression of the passive notion of Fate: it refers to someone's personal fate—that which is in store for the

fore, it is now possible to apply Gwynn's lexical approach, which is a legitimate one. By looking for examples of Irish words related to Fate, we may obtain a collection of early Irish texts representing medieval Irish views on Fate.⁷ Other than Gwynn, I take the view that all these examples fall within the category 'metaphysical' (as defined above), although the degree to which this is so, may differ. On the other hand, I have become intrigued by Gwynn's distinction between the passive and active notion of Fate. Having constructed a corpus of texts about Fate from numerous references I collected on the basis of relevant entries from DIL, I found that Gwynn's distinction is a useful instrument for getting a deeper insight into the ways how the concept of Fate was employed by composers of early Irish literature. This paper attempts to give a selective and, one hopes, representative survey of the ways in which Fate is literally referred to in early Irish literature. Moreover, a preliminary theory will be offered about the way in which the concept of Fate was used by some of the authors of early Irish texts.

1. PASSIVE FORMS

The first group of references to Fate to be discussed are verbal forms of either **tocaïd*⁸ or *cinnid*. The first example is an Old-Irish charm from Codex Sancti Pauli, a manuscript from the ninth century.⁹

*Adgúisiu fid nallabrach 7 arggatbrain etir tenid 7 fraig.
Adgúisiu na tri turcu tercu.
tairi siabair mochondáil con ith 7 mlicht neich arindchuiur.
ma rom thoicthersa inso rop ith 7 mlicht adcear
manim rothcaither ropat choin altai 7 ois 7 imthecht slebe 7 oaic féne adcear.*¹⁰

person who is *trí*—and not to the entity that lays the doom upon the person involved.

7. If we use, for instance, Tom Peete Cross's *Motif-index of early Irish literature* (Bloomington IN 1952), the references to Fate are mainly based upon a modern view of Fate as applied by the compilers of the index. Moreover, as Gwynn (154 and further) pointed out, the idea of a predetermined fate of some main protagonists of the tales is also to be found in the texts in the absence of any explicit mention of a term for Fate (although the word *trí* may be a marker that Fate is at work). The analysis of such texts is needed, as are other approaches to Fate, but it seems that the lexical approach brings us to the heart of the matter, viz. what early Irish composers of the literature associated with, and understood by, Fate. It goes without saying that this lexical study should be complemented by the approaches mentioned here and by a study of terms for Fate in Hiberno-Latin texts. These are beyond the scope of this paper.

8. Of the verb **tocaïd* only passive forms are extant. On the reconstruction **tucaid*, see Stefan Schumacher, 'Old Irish **tucaid*, *tocad* and Middle Welsh *tynghaf tynghet* re-examined', *Ériu* 46 (1995) 49–57: 50.

9. Note that some poems in this manuscript are considerably earlier (TP ii, p. xxxiii).

10. TP ii 293.

'I wish for the wood (wooden board?) of notice (?) and of silver raven (chief?) between fire and wall.

I wish for the three thin boars.

May a fairy attend my encounter with cereal and dairy produce of whatever I move it for.

If I be granted good luck here may it be cereal and dairy produce that I see.

If I be not granted good luck let it be wolves (lit. "wild dogs") and deer and traversing of mountains and young warriors of the *fian* that I see'.¹¹

Another translation and interpretation is given by John Carey:

'I desire the wood of *allabair* and *argatbran*, between fire and wall.

I desire the three lean boars.

May a phantom come to meet me with the grain and milk of whoever it is on whom I cast it.

If this is destined for me, let it be grain and milk that I see.

If it is not destined for me, let it be wolves and stags and wandering on the mountain and young warriors that I see'.¹²

This is the most complicated text among my examples, but it is clear at least that the sentence which gives the passive present subjunctive (3rd sg.) of **tocaïd* refers to divination. It is uncertain¹³ whether the charm is a form of lot-casting, which interpretation is given by Kim McCone, or whether it is a spell,¹⁴ which view is voiced by

11. Kim McCone, *Pagan past and christian present in early Irish literature*, Maynooth Monographs 3 (Maynooth 1990) 207. McCone ('Werewolves, cyclopes, *diberga*, and *fianna*: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland', *Camb Mediev Celt Stud* 12 (1986) 1–22: 12) translated the latter part of the charm previously as follows: 'Let a phantom come to my wolf-tryst with cereal and dairy produce from everything for which I cast it. If this is destined for me, let it be cereal and dairy produce that I see. If it be not destined for me, let it be wolves and deer and mountain-wandering and youths of the *fian* that I see', but owing to his later interpretation of the charm as connected with a board game, the present translation was given (see further McCone, *Pagan past*, 207–09).

12. John Carey, 'Téacsanna draíochta in Éirinn sa mheánaois luath', *Breis faoinár ndúchas spioradálta*, Léachtaí Cholm Cille 30 (Maynooth 2000) 98–117: 115. I am quoting from the unpublished English version ('Magical texts in early medieval Ireland', 18), which John Carey kindly sent to me. See also Hans Oskamp, 'The Irish material in the St. Paul Irish codex', *Éigse* 17 (1978) 385–91, and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early medieval Ireland 400–1200* (London & New York 1995) 88, 99.

13. The word *fid* in the first line can be connected with both. It means 'tree, wood', and is in that sense a synonym of *crann*, which may also designate 'a wooden piece (used in casting lots)' (DIL, s.v. *crann* (d)). *Fid* is used in this sense in the word *fidlann*, meaning 'a piece of wood used in divination', or 'the divination' itself. *Fid* is also part of the compounds *fidba*, 'some kind of malefic spell or sorcery (?)' (see DIL s.v. 2. *fidba*) and *fithnais(e)*, 'some kind of sorcery or malefic magic'.

14. Compare the Welsh phrase *mi a dynghaf dynghet*, 'I destine a destiny', which functions as a spell (see Schumacher, 'Old Irish **tucaid*'; and T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Mi a dynghaf dynghet and related problems', in Joseph F. Eska, R. Geraint Gruffydd & Nicolas Jacobs (ed), *Hispano-*

John Carey. The board game would be an alternative form of gambling, by which one settles something. In this case, McCone argues that the grain and milk products are a symbol for the possible future occupation and hence the destiny of the gambler. In John Carey's interpretation, the grain and milk refer to concrete desired objects, which the person who casts the spell wants to steal by means of the charm. There are indeed early Irish law fragments in which milk and butter are supposed to be stolen by casting the evil eye upon someone else's cow or butter production.¹⁵

In both interpretations, the seeing of milk and grain is interpreted as a message about what is in store for the performer of the charm, either as a symbol for his or her future occupation or as a sign of his or her success in stealing farm products. There is no indication in the charm who or what makes a decision on the destiny of the performer. Lot-casting is, like Fate, a phenomenon that is compatible with theistic and non-theistic world views. The result can be seen as pure chance, with which the performer has to comply or as being guided by a supernatural entity, be it Fate, God or the gods.¹⁶ In Carey's interpretation, the vision serves as a sign meaning 'yes' or 'no', related to the question whether the charm will work.¹⁷ It is thus implied that a supernatural entity gives an answer. We are, however, in the dark about its identity. The only supernatural being mentioned in the charm is the *siabair*. It seems to me that this phantom functions as a servant or, in Gwynn's terminology,¹⁸ an 'attendant' of the supernatural entity. The *siabair* is not addressed but is part of the vision that the performer asks for.

The second example is from the Old-Irish *Dream-vision of Óengus*,¹⁹ dated to the

Gallo-Brittonica: essays in honour of Professor D. Ellis Evans on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday (Cardiff 1995) 1–15. Charles-Edwards (ibid. 11) points out that the active form only occurs in this phrase; all the examples in the early Welsh poetry are in the passive, just as the Irish examples of **tocaíd*. Compare also Latin *fatum*, 'that which is said', implying that what has been uttered will be fulfilled (in an oracular context); see George Stock, 'Fate (Greek and Roman)', in James Hasting (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics* (Edinburgh 1912, repr. 1937), v 786–90: 786.

15. J. Borsje & Fergus Kelly, 'Examples of "the evil eye" in early Irish literature and law', *Celtica* 24, forthcoming.

16. Lot-casting is, for instance, used in the bible (e.g. Lv 16:8–10; Nm 26:55–56; Acts 1:26).

17. Carey ('*Téacsanna draíochta*', 106) refers to Greek magical papyri as a possible parallel. We could also think of the signs asked by Gideon of God (Jgs 6:11–14, 36–40). Despite the fact that God has sent an angel to Gideon to let him know that he is destined to be Israel's liberator, he wants a sign that this is really true. He puts a fleece of wool on the ground and asks that the fleece will be wet with dew the following morning, and the ground around it dry. This happens, but he is still not convinced and asks for the opposite to happen the next morning. God again gives him this sign.

18. Gwynn, 165.

19. Eduard Müller (ed. & tr.), 'Two Irish tales', *Revue Celtique* 3 (1876–78) 342–60; Francis Shaw (ed.), *The dream of Óengus: Aislinge Óenguso* (Dublin, Belfast etc. 1934); Kenneth H. Jackson (tr.), *A Celtic miscellany* (London 1951) 93–97; J. Gantz (tr.), *Early Irish myths and sagas* (London 1981), 107–12; Maartje Draak & Frida de Jong (tr.), *Van helden, elfen en dichters: de*

eighth century.²⁰ Óengus, one of the *des síde*, has fallen in love with a woman who appears to him during his sleep. His desire for her makes him ill, but a human healer reassures him:

*rotogad*²¹ *duit cairdes frie*²² 'Love with her has been destined for you'.

This story presents the interesting detail that a human physician has insight into the future of a supernatural being. There is no indication of a supernatural entity that has destined the love between Óengus and the woman Caer.

The next Old-Irish example is from the Second Tale of *Tochmarc Étaíne*,²³ dated to the ninth century.²⁴ This example shares some characteristics with the previous one: for instance, love causing illness, a healer who diagnoses this, connections between the human and the *síd*-world, and the setting of the tales is pre-Christian Ireland. Ailill Ánguba has fallen in love with Étaín, the wife of his brother. Like Óengus, Ailill becomes ill with desire, but in this case the enamoured man is ashamed of his love. When he is on the brink of death, Étaín looks after him while her husband is away from home. Her presence makes his health return, and she notices this. When she asks him what ails him, he declares his love. They make a tryst outside the house, which will heal him completely. During the night, however, Ailill falls asleep at the time of the tryst and Étaín meets a man outside who looks like him. When she returns to his room, Ailill sadly concludes:

*Is suachnid ní rodochadh*²⁵ *mo iccsa*.²⁶ 'It is obvious that my healing has not been destined'.

The variant reading is somewhat less dramatic:

Is fir na rom icadsa fos.²⁷ 'It is true that I was not healed yet'.

Ailill's healing will indeed not come about through having sex with the woman he loves, as happens in the case of Óengus. Their love was not destined, but Ailill was wrong when he concluded in desperation that his healing was not destined: he is in

oudste verhalen uit Ierland (Amsterdam 1979) 202–07.

20. Shaw, *Dream of Óengus*, 37.

21. Shaw emended the reading of London, BL, Egerton 1782 to *do-rogad*.

22. Shaw, *Dream of Óengus*, 47.

23. Osborn Bergin & R. I. Best (ed. & tr.), 'Tochmarc Étaíne', *Ériu* 12 (1938) 137–96: 162–73.

24. ibid. 139; Myles Dillon, *Early Irish literature* (Chicago 1948) 54.

25. Prototonic *ro*-preterite passive 3rd singular of **tocaíd* (Vernam Hull, 'Notes on some early Irish verbal forms', *Language* 23 (1947) 422–26: 425–26).

26. Best & Bergin, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 168 (reading Dublin, Trinity College Library, YBL 1). The variant reading in LU 10761–2 is 'Isuachnid ní rrodchad mo iccsa' (Best & Bergin (ed.), *Lebor na hUidre* (Dublin 1929) 327).

27. Best & Bergin, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 168 (YBL 2)

fact healed when Étaín has been three nights with the well-known supernatural Midir. It appears that it was Midir who made Ailill fall in love, fall asleep, and be healed after the three nights. This example of Midir influencing the events approaches the active notion of Fate closely. However, he appears not to be so powerful over Étaín, whose love he seeks. Moreover, he was apparently powerless against the sorcery (*fiithnaisi*) and spells (*brechta(i)*) that parted them in a previous life.²⁸ Therefore, we should probably see him, too, as an attendant of Fate.

The next example is from *Baile in Scáil*,²⁹ a text with an Old-Irish stratum, perhaps of the ninth century, which was revised in the early eleventh century.³⁰ This narrative tells how Conn Cétchathach steps on a stone that cries out under his feet. Either a *fili* or a druid—depending on the manuscript³¹—explains after 53 days of divination³² that it is the stone of Fál. The number of cries it has uttered matches the number of descendants of Conn who will be king over Ireland. In Rawlinson B. 512, Conn asks: 'Tell them to me'. There is no question in Harley 5280. Both manuscripts now mention 'the druid', who answers:

*'Ní dam rothocad a rád frítt', ol in drúí*³³ "It is not to me that their telling [i.e. to tell you the names of the kings] to you has been destined", said the druid'.

*'Ní ba mé nodsloindfe det', ol in drái*³⁴ "It will not be me, who will name that to you", said the druid'.

Another being appears, to whom the telling of the names apparently has been destined, namely, the *scál*, who reveals the time of Conn's reign and the names of the kings after him.

This text is a good example of how the vague concept of Fate will have suited the composers of early Irish literature. As the narrative takes place in pre-Christian Ireland, most of the protagonists are not supposed to adhere to a Christian world view, and yet this world view was a main concern of the scribes.³⁵ Conn is presented

28. Best & Bergin, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 170–71.

29. Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'Baile in Scáil', *Z Celt Philol* 3 (1901) 457–66; idem, 'Das Ende von Baile in Scáil', ibid. 12 (1918) 232–38 (corrections, ibid. 13 (1921) 150); idem, 'Der Anfang von Baile in Scáil', ibid. 13 (1921) 371–82; partial translation and paraphrase of the version in London, BL, Harley 5280 in Eugene O'Curry, *Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history* (Dublin 1861) 387–89; see also Dillon, *Cycles of the kings*, 12–14.

30. Máire Herbert, 'Goddess and king: the sacred marriage in early Ireland', Louise Olga Fradenburg (ed.), *Women and sovereignty* (Edinburgh 1992) 264–75: 273 n 4; compare Kevin Murray, 'Baile in Scáil and Baile Bricín', *Éigse* 33 (2002) 49–56: 54–55.

31. In Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B. 512, Conn consults his *fili* (Meyer, 'Der Anfang', 372 §3) and in London, BL, Harley 5280 his druids (Meyer, 'Baile in Scáil', 458 §3).

32. The divination is explicit only in Rawlinson B. 512.

33. Kuno Meyer, 'Der Anfang', 372 §4 (Rawlinson B. 512).

34. Meyer, 'Baile in Scáil', 459 §4 (Harl. 5280).

35. The idea of a predetermined pattern to life is also part of Christian doctrine. The use of the term Fate (*fatum*) for this idea has been disputed by St Augustine in *De civitate Dei*, 5.1: *Prorsus*

with his prophetic staff of druids and *fílid*, who inform him through divination about an oracular stone. The main body of hidden knowledge, however, is revealed by the *scál*, who bears the name of one of the well-known Irish supernaturals, Lug. At the same time, however, he classifies himself within the Christian view of the world: he is dead, but his origin lies among the humans, as a descendant of Adam. According to the scribes, the world is pre-ordained by God, but the narrative takes place too early in Ireland's history to reveal that. Therefore, the passive notion of Fate suits the context very well: there is knowledge that things in life have been destined, but its active source remains hidden. The *scál* as supernatural attendant of Fate is shown as having a deeper insight into the world's destiny than the druid: he knows about Adam and predicts the advent of St Patrick.³⁶ These words are mysterious to his audience within the text, but not to the readership of the text.

God as the source of the order of the world is undoubtedly the view point of *In tenga bithnua*. Yet, in this Old-Irish text, dated to the ninth century,³⁷ we find the passive notion of Fate as well:

*Tipra Shíon i tíríb Ebra sund nocon rodcad*³⁸ *ar in da fogbad nach baeth*³⁹ 'Of the spring of Zion, here in the lands of the Hebrews, it is not destined that any fool should find it'.⁴⁰

Another example of the passive notion is found in the late Old-Irish *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*.⁴¹ Binchey dated this text, which was revised in the Middle-Irish period, to the second half of the ninth century.⁴² The protagonist Cano says at a certain point in the story:

divina providentia regna constituuntur humana. Quae si propterea quisquam fato tribuit, quia ipsam Dei voluntatem vel potestatem fati nomine appellat, sententiam teneat, linguam corrigat 'Without any doubt, it is by divine providence that human kingdoms are set up. If any one ascribes them to "fate" because he uses that term for the will or power of God, let him maintain his conviction but correct his language' (William M. Green, *Saint Augustine. The city of God against the pagans* (Cambridge MA 1963) 134–35). Internal Christian debates about God's providence, predestination and human free will (see, for instance, J. J. O'Meara, *Eriugena* (Oxford 1988) 32–50) are beyond the scope of the present study.

36. Meyer, 'Baile in Scáil', 463 §20; idem, 'Der Anfang', 379 §21.

37. John Carey, *King of mysteries: early Irish religious writings* (Dublin 1998) 276.

38. For this form, see Hull, 'Notes', 425–26.

39. Whitley Stokes (ed. & tr.) 'The evernew tongue', *Ériu* 2 (1905) 96–162: 114 §39.

40. Carey, *King of mysteries*, 83.

41. D. A. Binchey (ed.), *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*, MMIS 18 (Dublin 1963, repr. 1975); R. Thurneysen (tr.), 'Eine irische Parallele zur Tristan-Sage', *Z Roman Philol* 43 (1923) 385–402, repr. in Rudolf Thurneysen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, i–iii, ed. Patrizia de Bernardo Stempel & Rolf Ködderitzsch (Tübingen 1991), ii 706–23; compare R. Thurneysen & J. Pokorny, 'Zeitschriften-schau', *Z Celt Philol* 16 (1927) 281–83.

42. Binchey, *Scéla Cano*, xiv.

*Ma ra-tocad dam-sa, as mé do-méla(d) a n(d)-argat-sa.*⁴³ 'Wenn es mir (durch Gott) bestimmt ist, so werde ich den Gebrauch von diesem Silber haben'.⁴⁴

Rudolf Thurneysen adds the active notion that ordains by inserting 'durch Gott'. It is not unlikely that God is the one who destines things, because the setting of this tale is christianised, seventh-century⁴⁵ Ireland. The text, however, does not mention God here and we should translate instead: 'If it has been destined for me ...'.⁴⁶ The silver that Cano mentions originally belonged to his parents, but their killer took it from its hiding place. Cano fled from Scotland to Ireland, where it appears that his enemy now tries to bribe Cano's hosts with the same silver so that they will kill him. Cano is, however, told of this plan by a woman who has fallen in love with him. He returns to his men and tells them about this danger that threatens them. Their reaction is as follows:

*Bés is ed ro-c[h]indead dún' ar an óic.*⁴⁷ 'Indeed it is this, which has been destined for us', the warriors said.

Another meaning of *cinnid* is 'decides'. It is, therefore, possible to translate with Thurneysen: 'Das ist vielleicht über uns beschlossen'.⁴⁸ I have two reasons to offer a different translation from Thurneysen's. First, the reaction of the men in his translation has no function in the story. It is a bland affirmation, whereas the reaction as translated above is a fatalistic resignation.⁴⁹ This is contrasted with the behaviour of Cano, who immediately makes a plan to escape this fate and thus appears as the admirable hero of the narrative. My second reason is the comparable construction that we find in our next example, in which *cinnid* is replaced by **tocaíd* in some manuscripts.

In the second recension of *Compert Conchobuir*,⁵⁰ dated to the tenth or eleventh

43. *ibid.* 5 §9, line 137.

44. Thurneysen, 'Irische Parallele', 392 §9.

45. *ibid.* 386–8, 402.

46. Compare 's'il m'a été donné par le destin' (J. Vendryes (review of Francis Shaw, *The dream of Óengus*), *Études Celtiques* 1 (1936) 159–62: 162); 'if it has been fated for me' (Binchy, *Scéla Cano*, 64, s.v. **tocaíd*).

47. Binchy, *Scéla Cano*, 4 §7 line 94.

48. Thurneysen, 'Irische Parallele', 391 §7. The translation of *bés* as 'vielleicht' or 'perhaps' (compare the translation 'perhaps it is this that has been designed', Binchy, *Scéla Cano*, xi) is problematic: in this sense, it should go with the subjunctive, but our example gives the indicative. See GOI §§384, 803; and Pádraig Ó Fiannachta (review of *Scéla Cano meic Gartnain*, edited by D. A. Binchy), *Éigse* 11 (1964) 76–79: 76, 78, who translates: 'Verily! that is what has been decided for us'.

49. Compare also 'it looks as if that was to be our fate' (DIL s.v. 2 *bés*).

50. Kuno Meyer (ed. & tr.), 'Anecdota from the Stowe MS. N° 992', *Revue Celtique* 6 (1883–85) 173–86: 173–82. This MS is now Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 1223 olim D iv 2. For the recensions and MSS of this tale see Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle a.S. 1921, repr. Hildesheim & New York 1980) 273–76.

century,⁵¹ the druid Cathbad demands that the female warrior Ness will fulfil his three wishes, when he conquers her in battle. He introduces his demands with a phrase in which a passive form of *cinnid* is used. Meyer translates this as 'For this I have determined',⁵² but I suggest the following translation:

*'Ar is ed ro cinded dam, inillius frim', ol Cathbad.*⁵³ 'For it is this that has been destined for me, safety from⁵⁴ me,' said Cathbad.

I base this translation upon the variant readings in three other manuscripts:

*bes ro thacath dim .i. inilli frimm, ol se.*⁵⁵ 'Certainly it has been destined for me, that is: safety from me', said he.

Or, alternatively:

*bes ro togad inilli frim olse.*⁵⁶ *bes rotogadh inilli frim olse.*⁵⁷ 'Certainly it has been destined: safety from me', said he.⁵⁸

The other two wishes are that there be a peaceful treaty between himself and Ness, and that she should become his only wife. Cathbad marries Ness, but she becomes pregnant by the king of Ireland, Fachtna Fáthach.

This example is comparable with *Baile in Scáil*: the setting is pre-christian but prophecies are uttered that pertain to christianity. Cathbad combines the functions of the druid and the *scál*. He prophesies on the mundane level, when he advises Ness to postpone the birth by a day so that her son Conchobor is born on the day that a king of Ulster or Ireland will be born. Moreover, on the level of the christian view of life, Cathbad predicts that both Conchobor's birth and death will be connected with Jesus Christ: he is born on the same day as 'the king of the world' and he will die 'avenging the pitiable god'.⁵⁹ Because an active source of destiny is not mentioned, the readership of this text may fill in God as the supernatural entity that rules the events and grants prophetic insight. The vague concept of Fate, as expressed in these pas-

51. Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, 274.

52. Meyer, 'Anecdota', 179.

53. *ibid.* 175, lines 32–33.

54. It is difficult to decide how the preposition *frí* should be translated in this case. It could mean 'from me' and thus refer to Cathbad's protection of Ness in the future, but it could also signify 'for me', which would imply that Ness should abandon her violent quest and promise safety for Cathbad in the future. This very moment, Ness is naked and without arms, which is why I choose for the former option, but the latter option is also possible.

55. London, BL, Egerton 1782, cited in Meyer, 'Anecdota', 175.

56. Yellow Book of Lecan, cited in Meyer, 'Anecdota', 175. Meyer's edition omits *olse*.

57. Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, Book of Ballymote, 259^b38.

58. This phrase is missing in the versions in the Book of Leinster (106^a: Whitley Stokes (ed. & tr.), 'Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa', *Ériu* 4 (1908) 18–38) and in the Book of Lecan (191^a42–^v67). The reference to fol. 181^v in Thurneysen's *Heldensage* (274) is an error.

59. Meyer, 'Anecdota', 175–77, 180–81.

sive constructions leaves room for this christian view on the events without distorting the image of the pre-christian past as constructed in this text.

As we have seen in *In tenga bithnua* and *Scéla Cano meic Gartnain*, the vague concept was also used in texts, which have a christian setting. Another example is supplied by the *Life of Adamnán*, a text from the early part of the Middle-Irish period, somewhere between 956 and 964.⁶⁰ Adomnán receives a message from an anchorite (Colmán of Cruachan Aigle) that explains his own prophecy about an affliction to the Irish and British at the feast of St John. The affliction will be caused by Adomnán's death. Adomnán reacts affirmatively to this⁶¹ and sings a song, of which the first line goes as follows:

*Má ro-m-thoiccthi écc i n(dh)í*⁶² 'If death in Iona be destined for me'.⁶³

A strange young man (*óccláech anaithnidh*) supplied this explanation of Adomnán's prophecy to the anchorite. We could define him as a 'supernatural attendant'. He is contrasted with another young man (*ócclach*) earlier in the *Life*, who appears to be a demon.⁶⁴ Therefore, the prophetic young man may very well be an angel.⁶⁵ The active entity that ordains is not mentioned, but God is certainly to be understood.

The last example is an exception to the rule shown so far: it concerns an active form of *cinnid*. In an anecdote about St Ciarán, we are told how there is no death for someone, whose time has not come yet.⁶⁶ A man commits perjury when he swears a false oath, while Ciarán's hand rests on his neck. On that place a tumour grows and his head falls off. The Book of Leinster text, which belongs to the first recension,⁶⁷

60. Máire Herbert & Pádraig Ó Riain (ed. & tr.), *Betha Adamnán: the Irish Life of Adamnán*, ITS 54 (London 1988); for the date see 6, 8.

61. "Dóigh bas fhir inn sin", *ol Adhamhnán*. "Ascnam(h) i n-ainm Dé ocus Choluim Chillí diar taigh" 'It is likely that it may prove true', said Adamnán. 'In the name of God and Colum Cille, let us make for home' (Herbert & Ó Riain, *Betha Adamnán*, 60 §17 (13) lines 242–43, 61).

62. Herbert & Ó Riain, *Betha Adamnán*, 60 §17 (13), line 245.

63. Herbert & Ó Riain (*Betha Adamnán*, 61 §17 (13)) translate: 'If I be destined to die in Iona', suggesting (at 86) that one should read *má ro-m-thoiccthi* as *má ro-m-thoiccther*, based on the form (pres. subj. pass. 3 sg) extant in the charm from Codex S. Pauli quoted above.

64. *Betha Adamnán* §2 (Herbert & Ó Riain, *Betha Adamnán*, 48–9, lines 35–48).

65. cp. Herbert & Ó Riain, *Betha Adamnán*, 67, 85.

66. Kenney (*Sources* §168) refers to the anecdote as 'The miracle of Ciarán's hand—*Echtra Ambacuc*'. The text of recension I was edited and translated by Standish H. O'Grady (*Silva gadelica* (London 1892), i 416, ii 453, from the Book of Leinster), and by J. Fraser ('The miracle of Ciarán's hand', *Ériu* 6 (1911) 159–60, from Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, Liber Flavius Fergusiorum, LFF i). The text of recension II was edited by Fraser ('The miracle', 160; LFF ii) and by Paul Grosjean ('Textes hagiographiques irlandais', *Études Celtiques* 2 (1937) 269–303: 269–73, from Dublin, University College Library, OFM, MS A. g; and from Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, XXVI).

67. The other version, belonging to the first recension, has a different reading. Here it is St Ciarán who decides how long the unlucky man will be the guest of the monastery: *Rugadh an fear cin cenn la Ciaran co Cluain iardain dia lesugud anert* (read: an oirid?) *rocinneadh a bethugud*

reads then:

Rucad in dichennach la Ciarán co Cluain iar sain dia lessugud airt no chindfed dia a bethu.⁶⁸ 'The headless person was taken by Ciarán to Clonmacnoise then for his maintenance for as long as God would determine [the length of] his life [to be]'.⁶⁹

This is the only example with an active form of *cinnid* that refers to God as the explicit supernatural entity that destines life.⁶⁹ All the other Old- and Middle-Irish examples have passive verbal forms and represent Gwynn's passive notion of Fate.

The limits of this article dictate that the remaining material must be dealt with in a more concise manner. Another variation belongs to this group of passive constructions. This construction is formed with the preposition *i*, either the verbal noun of *cinnid*, the verbal noun of **tocaíd*, *dán*, *tairngire* or *scoth* and often the preposition *do*, and is translated as 'is fated for, is in store for', and so on. An example with *cinniud* is given in a poem in the late Middle-Irish *Acallam na senórach*.⁷⁰

Ata i cinnedh dhamh dhul ann.⁷¹ 'It is fated for me to go there'.⁷²

An example with the verbal noun of **tocaíd* is found in the Middle-Irish *dindshen-*

(LFF i; Fraser, 'The miracle', 159 line 10–160 line 1), 'The man without head was taken by Ciarán to Clonmacnoise afterwards for his maintenance for the length [of time] that he (Ciarán) would determine/decide that he would be nourished'.

68. BL v 1204 lines 35722–23.

69. This idea is also found in the second recension. Here, the text refers once more to God, who will destine how long this man's life will be. The detail is added that he goes to Clonmacnoise for the care of his soul—a scribe probably realised the difficulties involved when nourishing a headless person: 7 *condeach la Ciaran co Chuainmicnois do leasugud a anma gein do cinnfeadh Dia beatha dho* (LFF ii; Fraser, 'The miracle', 160), 'and so that he went with Ciarán to Clonmacnois for the care of his soul as long as God would determine [the length of] his life for him [to be]'; *Co ndechat la Ciaran co Cluain Mic Nois do lesugadh a anma an oirid do cinnfedh Dia a betha do* (Dublin, OFM, MS A; Grosjean, 'Textes hagiographiques irlandais', 271), 'So that he went with Ciarán to Clonmacnoise for the care of his soul for the length [of time] that God would determine life for him [to be]'; *Asan aenach la Ciaran co Cluain Mic Nois do lesugadh a anma an oirid do cindfeadh Dia a beth do* (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, XXVI; Grosjean, 'Textes hagiographiques irlandais', 271), 'Out of the assembly with Ciarán to Clonmacnoise for the care of his soul for the length of time that God would determine the length of his life for him [to be]'.⁷⁰

70. Standish O'Grady (ed. & tr.), *Silva gadelica*, i 94–233, ii 101–265; Whitley Stokes (ed. & tr.), 'Acallamh na senórach', in Whitley Stokes & Ernst Windisch, *Irische Texte*, iv 1 (Leipzig 1900) 1–224, 225–71; Ann Dooley & Harry Roe (tr), *Tales of the elders of Ireland (Acallam na senórach)* (Oxford 1999). This text was written at about the end of the twelfth century (Dillon, *Stories from the Acallam*, MMIS 23 (Dublin 1970) ix).

71. Stokes, 'Acallamh na Senórach', 22, line 774 (cp. 'Atá i cinniud dom dul ann', Dillon, *Stories from the Acallam*, 13, line 349).

72. 'It is appointed to me to go thither' (O'Grady, *Silva gadelica*, ii 120); 'Fate brings me there' (Dooley & Roe, *Tales of the elders*, 25).

chas.⁷³

'Innocht,' ar Assal, 'mu brath,
itá i tuchthín mo marbath'.

'To-night', said Assal, 'comes my betrayal:
my death is fore-ordained'.⁷⁴

Two other synonyms are found together in the late Middle-Irish *Tochmarc Luaine* 7 aided Athairne:⁷⁵

Ro baí i ndán 7 i tairngiri in aided úd diar mbreith do réir fháistine in druid⁷⁶ 'That yon death would carry us off was fated and promised according to the wizard's prophecy'.⁷⁷

Instead of 'promised' we could also translate 'prophesied' or 'destined'.⁷⁸

73. Thurneysen (*Heldensage*, 501) dates the *dinshenchas* on Druim n-Assail to the twelfth century.

74. Gwynn, *The metrical dindshenchas*, iv (Dublin 1924, repr. 1991) 348–49.

75. Whitley Stokes, 'The wooing of Luaine and death of Athirne', *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903) 270–87 [partial edition & translation]; Liam Breatnach, 'Tochmarc Luaine agus aided Athairne', *Celtica* 13 (1980) 1–31 [edition and partial translation]; Breatnach dates the text to the second half of the twelfth century (ibid. 4–6).

76. Breatnach, 'Tochmarc Luaine', 13, line 247.

77. Stokes, 'Wooing of Luaine', 281.

78. For the translation 'prophesied', see DIL s.v. *tairngire* (c); for 'destined' see DIL s.v. *dán* VIII (b). Looking at another example with *tairngire* (for which I am indebted to John Carey), we see again that three different translations are possible at the same time. We read in the Middle-Irish *Macgnimartha Finn: air do buí a tairngire do eo Feic do tomáilt* (Kuno Meyer (ed), 'Macgnimartha Find', *Revue Celtique* 5 (1881–83) 195–204: 201 §18), 'For it had been prophesied to him that he would eat Fecc's salmon' (Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The wisdom of the outlaw: the boyhood deeds of Finn in Gaelic narrative tradition* (Berkeley CA & London 1985) 214). Possible is also: 'it had been promised to him' or 'it had been destined for him'. An interesting point which awaits further investigation is brought up by this semantic range of *tairngire*. Although most instances may reflect the common view that some people are believed to have special knowledge about future events and therefore are able to prophesy, could it be that some instances reflect the idea that spoken words influence reality in a supernatural way (e.g. Borsje, *Chaos*, 67)? Should we perhaps see some of the promises, threats and predictions uttered in early Irish literature as literally 'self-fulfilling prophecies'? The etymological connection between *fatum* and speaking by Saint Augustine is noteworthy, although in his view this is limited to God speaking (*De civitate Dei*, 5.9): 'Ordinem autem causarum, ubi voluntas Dei plurimum potest, neque negamus neque fati vocabulo nuncupamus, nisi forte ut fatum a fando dictum intellegamus, id est a loquendo; non enim abnuere possumus esse scriptum in litteris sanctis: ... [Vulgate Ps 61:12–13 iuxta LXX is quoted here]. Quod enim dictum est: *Semel locutus est*, intellegitur "inmobilitér," hoc est incommutabiliter omnia quae futura sunt et quae ipse facturus est. Hac itaque ratione possemus a fando fatum appellare' (Green, *City of God*, 174), 'Moreover, as for the order of causes in which the will of God is all powerful, we neither deny it nor do we call it by the name "fate," unless perchance fate be understood as derived from *fari*, that is, from speaking. For we cannot deny that it is written in the Scriptures' [Ps 61:12–13] The words "Once God has spoken" mean "God has spoken un-

Scoth is used in only one narrative text. We read in *Scél Baili Binnbérlaig*⁷⁹ about the tryst of a man called Baile and a woman named Aillinn, but because of the interference of a male supernatural being, functioning as a supernatural attendant of Fate, they do not meet. Kuno Meyer points out that the version of this tale in manuscript Harley 5280 has Latin, Hebrew and archaic Irish words, where the version in H. 3. 18 has ordinary Irish words.⁸⁰ We see this also in our example: *scoth* is otherwise an unusual word, and manuscripts H. 3. 18 and 23 N 10 give the common variant *i ndán do*, when the fate of the couple is referred to:

ar ní fuil a *scoth doib*⁸¹ coristais a m-bethaid no nech dib d'faircsin aroili ina m-biu⁸² 'for it is not their fate to meet in life, nor that one of them should see the other alive'.⁸³

This construction (*in+ cinniud/tocad/dán/tairngire/scoth (+do)*) again represents Gwynn's passive notion.

II. POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS, ADJECTIVES, ADVERBS AND NAMES IN COMBINATION WITH TERMS FOR FATE

The second group consists of expressions of fate in combination with an adjective, an adverb, a possessive pronoun, a name in the genitive or preceded by the preposition *do*. Fate should be spelled with a lower-case letter in the translation in these cases. In the subcategory with adjectives, we find expressions such as 'an evil fate',⁸⁴ or:

*truag in garg-dil rognid and
for ingin ard-rig hErend.*

moveably," that is, unchangeably, even as he knows unchangeably all things that will come to pass and all things that he himself will do. With this explanation we might use the word fate as derived from *fari*, "to speak," ... (ibid. 175).

79. E. O'Curry, *Manuscript materials*, 466, 472–75 [edition & translation of the version in Dublin, Trinity College Library, 1337 olim H. 3. 18]; Harley 5280 (Kuno Meyer (ed. & tr.), 'Scél Baili Binnbérlaig', *Revue Celtique* 13 (1892) 220–27 [from London, BL, Harley 5280]; corrections in *Revue Celtique* 17 (1896) 319); the version in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 967 olim 23 N 10 has not been edited. The text is dated to the tenth or eleventh century (Dillon, *Cycles of the kings*, 27). There is also a fragment in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B 512 (Kuno Meyer (ed), *Hibernica minora, being a fragment of an Old-Irish treatise on the psalter*, Anecdota Oxoniensa (Oxford 1894) 84), but the relevant phrase about fate is not part of the fragment.

80. Meyer, 'Scél Baili Binnbérlaig', 220.

81. 'ar ní fuil andán dóib' (H. 3. 18: O'Curry, *Manuscript materials*, 473); 'ar ní fuil andan doih (?)' (R. I. Best (ed), *Facsimiles in collotype of Irish manuscripts. VI. MS. 23 N 10 (formerly Betham 145)* (Dublin 1954) 130, line 2).

82. Meyer, 'Scél Baili Binnbérlaig', 222, lines 39–40.

83. ibid. 225.

84. *Olc dil i torchair mac Duind* 'Evil the fate by which fell the son of Dond Des', in the *dindshenchas* on Belach Conglais (E. Gwynn (ed. & tr.), *Metrical dindshenchas*, iii (Dublin 1913, repr. 1991) 150–51, line 9.

'woe for the violent fate that was then contrived
for the High King of Erin's daughter'.⁸⁵

This example from the *dindshenchas* shows that the supernatural aspect does not need to be strong in some of these expressions. The princess is killed by her husband out of jealousy; hence her 'violent fate'. This type of expression falls into the passive category of what is in store for someone: a personal fate, which is qualified by an adjective.

Very similar to this are the expressions in which a possessive pronoun or a name in the genitive is combined with a term for fate. An instance from the early Middle-Irish *Togail na Tebe* is:⁸⁶

'Is truag am linde', ar se, 'an toicthe (vl: in toicthe) Thiabanda' ⁸⁷'Sad indeed are we', said he, 'at the fate of the Thebans'.⁸⁸

An instance of a possessive pronoun together with the verbal noun of **tocaoid* is given in the Middle-Irish adaptation of Lucan's *Civil war*:

Tallsat muintir Césair a céill annsin do conach catha tire, 7 is i comairle dorónsat, a toicthe mara do innsaigid 'Caesar's people then lost hope of success in fighting on land; and this is the plan they formed, to try their luck at sea'.⁸⁹

In this instance, the source text reads *fortuna*,⁹⁰ but it should be noted that the author of *In cath catharda* used the verbal noun of **tocaoid* to translate both *fortuna* and *fatum*.⁹¹ Strictly speaking, these two concepts are mutually exclusive, because nothing is destined and everything is pure chance in the case of Fortune, while everything is determined in the case of Fate.⁹² As both concepts are used within one text, such a strict definition was apparently not adhered to. It is even more difficult to distinguish

85. Gwynn, *Dindshenchas*, iv, 328, lines 39–40 (text), 329 (trans.).

86. George Calder, *Togail na Tebe: the Thebaid of Statius* (Cambridge 1922) xi. These translations or adaptations of Latin writings dealing with classical antiquity (see Barbara Lisa Hillers, *The medieval Irish Odyssey: Merugud Uilixis meic Leirtis*, unpublished PhD diss., Harvard University (Cambridge MA 1997) 38), dating from the Middle-Irish period, are not only witnesses of Ireland's classical heritage, but they are also themselves part of the corpus of early Irish literature; moreover, they inspired other early Irish texts as well (ibid. 11). An interesting aspect is that we can easily extract the Irish additions and changes when comparing them with the foreign source texts.

87. Calder, *Togail na Tebe*, 296, lines 4595–96.

88. ibid. 297. This phrase, incidentally, has no parallel in the source text.

89. Whitley Stokes (ed), 'In cath catharda: the civil war of the Romans, an Irish version of Lucan's *Pharsalia*', in Stokes & Windisch (ed), *Irische Texte*, iv 2 (Leipzig 1909) 144, lines 1905–06 (text); 145 (trans.).

90. J. D. Duff, *Lucan. The civil war* (Cambridge MA & London 1928) 150, line 510 (book III).

91. See, for instance, footnote 97 below.

92. Stock, 'Fate', 786.

between these two concepts in early Irish texts, because this verbal noun is used for both.

A variation is found in this group, in which the belief is expressed that not only someone's fate influences what will happen, but also the gods influence the future course of events. Interestingly, this is said of foreigners, who apparently were considered to be more 'pagan' than the pre-Christian Irish. A Danish chieftain thus says in the Middle-Irish *Fragmentary Annals*:⁹³

biaidh do berad ar ndee 7 ar dtoicthe duin 'we will have what our gods and our fate will give to us'.⁹⁴

Likewise, according to the Middle-Irish *History of Philip and Alexander*, the Persian emperor Darius owes his defeat to the decision of the idle gods and his own fate.⁹⁵

III. THE ACTIVE NOTION OF FATE

The majority of the examples of Fate that I have found in Old- and Middle-Irish texts are representations of the passive notion of Fate. They are part of passive, possessive, adverbial and adjectival constructions. I will now finally turn to specimens of the active notion.

As far as I am aware, there are two forms of this active notion in the literature. First, we find references to Fate, which I would write with a capital F, in the Irish translations or adaptations of Latin literature. We read, for example, in *Togail na Tebe*:

Acht chena is dimain duit-si sin, uair tainic crích tsaogail an gille sin, 7 ní fetann tiachtain ri toicthe 'Yet that is vain for thee, for the end of that lad's life is come, and he may not go against fate'.⁹⁶

This is a good example of the active notion: Fate is an external supernatural entity, from which one cannot flee.⁹⁷ It is significant that we find this form of Fate in this

93. Joan Newlon Radner (ed. & tr.), *Fragmentary annals of Ireland* (Dublin 1978) xxvi) suggests the middle of the eleventh century as a possible date for the composition of these Annals.

94. ibid. 92–93.

95. *ár búí comairle na n-dee* [sic] *n-dhéinnech 7 a thóicthe féin oc brissead fair* 'denn es war der Ratschluss der feindseligen Götter und seines eigenen Schicksals, dass er besiegt werden sollte' (Kuno Meyer (ed. & tr.), 'Die Geschichte von Philipp und Alexander von Macedonien', W. Stokes & E. Windisch (ed), *Irische Texte*, ii 2 (Leipzig 1887) 1–108: 30 §18). Meyer (ibid. 6) dates the text to the eleventh century.

96. Calder, *Togail na Tebe*, 240, lines 3717–19; 241 (trans.). I read 'Fate' for 'fate'.

97. Compare also *gach conair rosn-imluaidfed in toictiu tre airimbirt in cat[h]a moir* 'wherever Fortune would cast him in preparing for the great battle' (Stokes, *In cath catharda*, 88, lines 1156–7; 89). This is not a literal translation from the source text, but it should be noted that *Pharsalia*, ii 351 refers in the same context to *fatum*: *iam fato in bella vocante* 'when Fate called men to arms' (Duff, *Lucan*, 82–83). Compare further the Early Modern-Irish *Stair Ercuil ocus a bás*, lines 744–45: *Ní heidir dul sech an cinneadh* 'There is no avoiding destiny' (Gordon Quin (ed. & tr.),

genre of texts: they are non-Irish stories from external sources.⁹⁸ They deal with foreign 'pagans', whom, as we have seen, the scribes considered to be not so enlightened as the pre-Christian Irish.

Interestingly, the source text—the *Thebaid* by Statius—not only refers to *fatum*⁹⁹ here but also to 'the Fates' (*fata*), which is a form of Fate personified.¹⁰⁰

This is the second type of reference to the active notion. In the Old-Irish *Chant of long life* (*Cétnad n-aise*), dated to the eighth century, there is reference to the seven daughters of the sea who are forming the thread of life.¹⁰¹ This image of a thread being spun by female supernaturals, symbolising the fate of humans, has several parallels in Indo-European literatures.¹⁰² Furthermore, the names of the three Fates, known from Greek and Latin mythology, are mentioned in the Middle-Irish glosses to *Amra Coluim Chille*. Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos are identified here with the three Gorgons and the three Furies.¹⁰³ The three Furies are closely connected with the

Stair Ercuile a bás: the life and death of Hercules, ITS 38 (Dublin 1939) 40–41).

98. There may be one exception to the rule: the poem beginning with 'A Emain idnach óebind' in *Do fhlaithusaib hÉrend* in the Book of Leinster (BL i 80–82, lines 2560–623) might refer to the active form of Fate as well, when it says: *Da mbátar na rig rádim / fri fátal fir adfedim* (lines 2576–77) 'When the kings whom I mention were subject to Fate (?)—what I relate is true'. This poem was written in praise of the royal fortress Emain Macha and its kings. It describes the time before Christianity came to Ireland (compare the successive *Do fhlaithusaib 7 amseraib Hérend iar creitrim* (ibid. 94–99), dealing with reigns after the coming of Christianity). There is some external influence: the poem refers to Troy (line 2573) and *fátal* is a Latin loan word, deriving from *fātāle* (Kuno Meyer, 'Zur keltischen Wortkunde, VI', *Sitz-Ber K Preuss Akad Wiss* 35 (1914) 939–58: 945; cf. DIL s.v.). The occurrence of this loan word is rare in early Irish texts: it is found in three poems, everywhere rhyming with *bátar*. The other two examples are Middle Irish and they belong to my second group, representing the passive notion of fate. First, there is a cheville in *Immram Snédgusa ocus Meic Riagla: sochla fátal* (Thurneysen, *Zwei Versionen der mittelirischen Legende von Snedgus und Mac Riagla* (Halle 1904) 10 §20), 'an honourable fate'. Secondly, in *Saltair na rann*, we read: *batriug afatal cenbrig* (Whitley Stokes (ed), *The Saltair na rann: a collection of early Middle Irish poems* (Oxford 1883) 52), 'sad was their powerless fate'. It is, however, possible, that the first example also belongs to the second group, if we take *fir* as an adjective that belongs to *fátal*. The kings would then have been subject to a just or true fate, and the instance would not reflect the active notion at all.

99. *Finis adest iuveni, non hoc mutabile fatum* 'the youth is near his end, 'tis fate immutable' (Mozley, *Statius*, ii 300, line 661; 301).

100. *Fida rogat genetrrix: utinam indulgere precanti fata darent!* 'His [i.e. the youth's] faithful mother begs thee: would that the Fates might grant her prayer!' (Mozley, *Statius*, ii 300, lines 652–53; 301).

101. Kuno Meyer (ed. & tr.), 'An Old Irish prayer for long life, in: *A Miscellany presented to John Macdonald Mackay* (Liverpool 1914) 226–32; Carey, *King of mysteries*, 136–38; for the date, see Meyer, op. cit. 226–27.

102. See, for instance, George Giannakis, 'The "Fate-as-spinner" motif: a study on the poetic and metaphorical language of Ancient Greek and Indo-European', *Indogermanische Forschungen* 103 (1998) 1–27; 104 (1999) 95–109.

103. Whitley Stokes (ed. & tr.), 'The Bodleian *Amra Choluimb Chille*', *Revue Celtique* 20 (1899) 30–55, 132–83, 248–89, 400–37: 414–17 §141.

three Fates in classical literature.¹⁰⁴ There are several references to the Furies in early Irish literature, and they are often identified with the so-called war goddesses.¹⁰⁵ With them, we have returned to Gwynn, who calls them 'attendants on the steps of Fate'.¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

Gwynn's distinction between a passive and an active notion of Fate appears to reflect what we find in a corpus of early Irish texts, which literally refer to Fate (i.e. a corpus based on a lexical approach). The active notion of Fate is found in Middle-Irish adaptations of classical texts, and in the representation of supernatural beings who may either personify Fate or function as attendants of Fate. The passive notion, however, is almost omnipresent in early Irish literature. I hope to have shown how well the passive notion suited the purposes of the early Irish composers of the texts: it is compatible both with the reconstruction of the pre-Christian past and with the Christian view of life. The pre-Christian Irish are shown to have a belief that life is meant to follow a certain course. The source that determines this course remains invisible, unmentioned, and anonymous. For the readership of the literature, however, it was possible either to identify the source as the God of the Christians or to agree with the religious feeling that some things in life are just meant to be in a certain manner.

104. Stock, 'Fate', 787–88.

105. J. Borsje, 'Omens, ordeals and oracles: on demons and weapons in early Irish texts', *Peritia* 13 (1999) 224–48: 242–48.

106. At this stage, I need to add two corrections to Gwynn's views. Gwynn, 165, contrasts the so-called war goddesses with the Erinyes or Furies, which is contradicted by the literature itself (see above). Moreover, Gwynn (ibid.) says that they 'are not so much Fate's agents, avenging spirits like the Erinyes, as rather attendants on the steps of Fate, who scent blood from afar and gather to the slaughter'. If we look at the rôle of the Morrigan, however, in, for instance, *Táin bó Cúailnge* Recension I, we see that she intervenes in the events. She attacks in animal form the warrior Cú Chulainn, when he is fighting with an opponent, thereby diminishing his strength (see Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin bó Cúailnge. Recension I* (Dublin 1976) 61–62, lines 1977–2030; 180–81). On the other hand, she cannot be identified with Fate either. When she wants to stop Cú Chulainn from going into battle in *Brisleach mór Maige Muirtheimni* and breaks his chariot to that end, she fails to attain her goal (see BL ii 443, lines 13814–16; Maria Tymoczko, *Two death tales from the Ulster cycle: the death of Cu Roi and the death of Cu Chulainn* (Dublin 1981) 37–107: 42; Carey, 'The death of Cú Chulainn', in John T. Koch & John Carey (ed), *The Celtic heroic age: literary sources for ancient Celtic Europe and early Ireland and Wales* (Andover MA 1994) 124–33: 125). The relationship between early Irish supernatural beings and Fate represents another important area of investigation, which is beyond the scope of this article but which will be central to my future monograph about Fate.