HONOUR-BOUND: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT
OF EARLY IRISH HEROIC GEIS

‘I DON’T like being put under gessi,’ says Fionn Mac Cumhaill with
 eminent good sense in Feis Tighe Chonáin. Nonetheless he
immediately accepts the obligations thus imposed on him and acts
decisively, indeed recklessly, to satisfy them and so negate the dreaded
sanctions of violated taboo! Except for his willingness to imperil life and
limb under their influence, Fionn’s ambiguous attitude to gessi here is
precisely that of the modern Celtist, a spontaneous uneasiness about
their nature and origin coupled with a keen understanding of their
imperative significance as a motive for heroic action. Efforts to calm that
uneasiness by expanding and deepening the range of our comprehension
have characterized scholarly work on geis from the publication of
Eleanor Hull’s pioneering paper ‘Old Irish Tabus, or Geasa’ in 1901,2
through John R. Reinhard’s major study The Survival of Geis in
Medieval Romance in 1933,3 Myles Dillon’s edition and discussion of
‘The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland’ in 1951,4 and the myriad and often
perceptive analyses of individual gessi in books, articles, and editorial
notes on Celtic literature.

Not surprisingly, much of this attention has been focussed on the
unique gessi of particularly significant individuals in specific, pivotal, and
highly charged narrative and thematic situations, and has thus, paradox-
ically, at times obscured the social significance of geis by accentuating its
inexorable role in the unfolding of personal tragedies more accessible,
appealing, and aesthetically satisfying to the modern literary taste.
Simultaneously obscured has been the more pervasive role of geis as a
thematic element in the development of Irish narrative, an oversight P. L.
Henry has highlighted neatly though with perhaps undue optimism as to
its ultimate correction: ‘Ní bhheidh rath ar mheas na heipice mura dtugtar
a ceart don gheis, pé áit a mbionn si, mar tá an laoch gafa ina cuing. Dá
dhiamhaires i an gheis biónn sainmhíniú uirthi, agus is féidir ceart a
bhaint di i bple na litriochta.’5 Disclaiming all intention to offer an
explanation for every geis, this paper will attempt to do justice to the

1 Maud Joynt, ed., Feis Tighe Chonáin (Dublin, 1936), lines 1202-6. All translations
in this paper are my own.
2 Eleanor Hull, ‘Old Irish Tabus, or Geasa’, Folklore 12 (1901) 41-66.
4 Myles Dillon, ed., ‘The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland’, PRIA 54 C 1 (1951) 1-36.
5 P. L. Henry, Saoithiúilacht na Sean-Ghaelge (Baile Átha Cliath, 1978) 38. Geis is by
far the most frequent term denoting such a ‘ritual prohibition’ (Radcliffe-Brown’s phrase),
although occasionally one finds airmert, often used almost appositively with geis, and even
less frequently airgart. In addition we find buaid (usually in the plural, buادة), a word
denoting ‘triumph’, ‘virtue’, ‘prerogative’, and referring to events or activities the perfor-
institution as it functions in the world of early Irish literature.

As the customary translation of geis as 'taboo' indicates, the findings of anthropological research have been used to elucidate the Irish evidence since the very inception of Celtic literary studies. Moreover the fundamental insight provided by anthropology into the function of geis has stood the test of time. Geis, like all taboo, is a means of defining and thereby restricting and to some extent controlling danger. Thus Franz Steiner writes: 'Danger is narrowed down by taboo. A situation is regarded as dangerous: very well, but the danger may be a socially unformulated threat. Taboo gives notice that the danger lies not in the whole situation, but only in specified actions concerning it. These actions, these danger spots, are more challenging and deadly than the danger of the situation as a whole, for the whole situation can be rendered free from danger by dealing with it, or rather, avoiding the specified danger spots completely'.

John Reinhard succinctly arrives at the same conclusion concerning the Celtic evidence: 'As we find them set forth in early Celtic literature it seems to have been the function of geasa to cause avoidance of dishonour, disaster, or death'.

Celticists have, however, as I suggested above, downplayed another central element in the anthropological interpretation of taboo, the notion that such 'ritual prohibitions' have profound social ramifications and are rooted in the cultural patterns of the society from which they have evolved. Thus the author of the most recent major study of taboo, Laura Levi Makarius, states: 'Le système des tabous ne peut être compris en dehors de ce contexte [what she terms 'la solidité organique du groupe], qui en est précisément l'expression. Les tabous, en effet, ont non seulement la fonction de soustraire au contact les personnes, les éléments et les objets considérés comme dangereux, mais d'éviter qu'entre les personnes qui sont source de danger, et les autres, ne s'établissent des liens qui pourraient communiquer ce danger, ou encore d'éviter que le danger ne
soit transmis par des liens déjà existants. Ces principes commandent un vaste ensemble de comportements négatifs et positifs, souvent réciproques, qui conditionnent les rapports humains et contribuent à les organiser en système. Of course such an emphasis on the origin and expression of taboo within the dynamic tension of a lived social system provides a fruitful and flexible alternative to seeing the institution as the result of what Makarius terms 'quelque finalisme providentiel': ‘Le contenu émotif dont ils sont chargés provient d'expériences quotidiennes et fournir leur motivation à des comportements qui répondent aux exigences de la vie sociale'.

The focus in this paper will be very much on the specific, concrete behavioural and emotional responses of the *dramatis personae* of early Irish literature to the 'exigences' of the society they have shaped and been shaped by. That that society is above all another way of being human, a cultural construct whose values and practices share profound similarities with the adaptations of others around the world is, of course, the seminal insight of anthropology. Yet however valuable this view, it has occasionally led at its worst to a rather monochromatic interpretation of individual societies as mere reflexes of universal principles, their idiosyncracies the raw material for catalogues of implicitly identical variants corroborating theoretical generalities. Continental drift notwithstanding, Ireland was never a Micronesian atoll, and thus while anthropological theories or specific examples from other cultures can frequently provide invaluable clues for an understanding of Irish practices, they must be used with caution rooted in a sensitive awareness of cultural integrity. Whatever their origins, Irish *gessi* as we find them have with varying degrees of consistency or success been integrated into that fascinating quasi-pagan, quasi-Christian hybrid ethos of the early literature.

Even with this caveat in mind, one must, however, acknowledge that a fair number of *gessi* look most at home in precisely such catalogues of ritual curiosities. Thus Myles Dillon writes of some of the prohibitions found in his edition of 'The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland': 'The mere sense of these prohibitions and prescriptions is not always clear, and their

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9 Makarius, pp. 24-5.
10 Thus in a different context Tomás Ó Cathasaigh writes: 'It may be said that early Irish narrative literature is not the detritus of a lost mythology, nor yet a new phenomenon, born, like Athena, fully grown. It is the creation of a society which had two sets of cultural institutions, one indigenous and oral in its medium, the other ecclesiastical and literate. These were sometimes hostile, sometimes amicable, but between them they contributed to the formation of a literature which combined matter drawn from the oral tradition with other elements and transmuted them into something new'. See 'Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative', in *Irland und Europa / Ireland and Europe: The Early Church*, ed. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Stuttgart, 1984) 307. *Geis* was one of the more potentially volatile elements in Ó Cathasaigh's alembic.
purpose is nearly always obscure." John Reinhard offers an explanation of the difficulty: 'It should not on that account be assumed that they have no explanation. It may be that the document in which they are preserved is at fault, or that at present we have no criteria for judging them. It is a truism of social history that when customs cease to be current and important the reasons behind them likewise sink beneath the surface of apprehension.' Eleanor Hull offers an even more fundamental possibility: 'The larger number of these taboos are not only quite inexplicable to ourselves, but their meaning appears to have been doubtful even at the time they were written down.'

A common factor running through many, though by no means all, such gessi is a reference to a specific time or place. Royal figures are particularly subject to such prohibitions. Thus Cormac Conloinges is bound by geis to avoid among other things 'hunting the birds of Mag-Dá-Ceo, swimming against the birds of Loch Ló, meeting a woman at Sen-Áth Mór.' The king of Tara is to avoid 'alighting on Wednesday in Mag Breg', 'entering north Tethba on a Tuesday', or 'striking his horses at Fán Cum- mair'. The king of Leinster is not to 'go across Bealach nDuiblinne on a

11 Dillon, 'Taboos', PRIA 54 C 1, p. 4.
12 Reinhard, p. 106.
13 Hull, 'Old Irish Tabus', p. 46.
14 The fact that royal gessi are both more numerous and often more puzzling than those binding lesser mortals led Myles Dillon for one to see them as perhaps qualitatively different from other restrictions. Indeed he suggested that other gessi might ultimately derive from those binding the king: "The notion of geiss, an absolute prohibition from doing certain things which attached to individual heroes, is a commonplace of Irish saga, but these royal taboos seem to belong to an earlier stratum, and it may be that the wider application of geiss in the literature derives from them" (PRIA 54 C 1, p.2). Makarius flatly rejects any claim that regal taboos have a distinct origin or differ fundamentally from other prohibitions, all of which she sees rooted in fear of blood pollution: 'Ces tabous, qui investissent les rois, en effet, ne leur sont pas particuliers; ils s'appliquent également à des individus qui n'appartiennent pas à la catégorie des souverains et qui n'ont rien de "divin" ni de "sacré" ' (p. 143). In my opinion, the wide range and frequent incomprehensibility of regal gessi is explicable in terms of the virtually all-embracing and extremely conservative nature of the king's ritual responsibility. The only justification that many of these prohibitions required for transmission was the entirely compelling one of sacred antiquity. Warriors, on the other hand, had, or took, some freedom to adapt the restrictions tradition imposed on them. Here it is useful to recall Georges Dumézil's contrast between warrior innovation, however dangerous, and regal stasis. A comparison of the gessi of king and hero suggests an interesting confirmation of Dumézil's insight from a different angle. See Héir et malheur du guerrier: aspects mythique de la fonction guerrière chez les Indo-Européens (Paris, 1969) 96-8; and Mitra-Varuna: essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la souveraineté (Paris, 1940) 81-3.

15 Whiteley Stokes, ed., 'Buiden Da Chocae', RC xxi (1900) 153, §6. Actually in this tale the general incomprehensibility of Cormac's gessi creates a central aesthetic flaw in the narrative in that his violation of them seems as arbitrary as the prohibitions themselves, and his doom correspondingly avoidable and even accidental. In the truly tragic Togail Buidne Da Derga, on the other hand, Conaire is compelled to violate socially meaningful gessi to fulfill even more pressing regal obligations simultaneously facing him.
Monday'.6 The list is a long one, and it is tempting to classify if not explain such gessi under the respectable rubric of taboos concerning sacred times and places.7

Other baffling gessi concern seeing certain sights or hearing certain sounds. Thus Cormac Conloinges must avoid 'listening to Craiphtine's hole-headed harp', 8 while Cú Chulainn must not see 'the stud-team of Mac Lir' nor hear 'the harp of Manan's son', even when played 'soothingly, sweetly, plaintively'.9 Any explanation of such gessi will probably always be conjectural. Possibly, as in the gessi of Conaire mac Eterscéli not to allow 'three Reds to precede him to the house of Red', the answer lies in a mythological scheme to which we do not now have the key.10 We certainly, for example, lack such a key to unlock the mystery of why the Ulstermen cannot 'go past a red wall (mūr derg) in Talland Étar'.11 Other gessi may well be what John Reinhard has labelled 'fortuitous rules of prudence', writing: 'They seem to have arisen, in some cases, from the experience of bad luck or disaster following certain actions or certain lines of conduct'.12 Some insight into how such a process could be set in motion is provided by the entry for 756 in The Annals of Clonmacnoise: 'Echtigin B. was killed by a Priest at St. Bridget's altar in Kildare, as he was celebrating of mass, which is the reason that since that time a Priest is prohibited to celebrate Mass in Kildare in the presence of a Bushopp'.13 One wonders whether pneumonia had once

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6 Dillon, 'Taboos', PRIA 54 C 1, p. 8, §1, lines 2-4; p. 12, §2, line 13.
7 See Reinhard, chapter 3, 'Geasa Imposed upon Things, Animals and Places', and chapter 8, 'Temporal Geasa'.
10 Eleanor Knott, ed., Togail Bruidne Da Derga (Dublin, 1936) line 177.
11 'Talland Étar', in LL Vol. II, ll. 13417-8. I personally find this the most significant inexplicable gessi in the early literature, since it imposes an extraordinary restraint on a group of warriors engaged in precisely the sort of activity in which they should be engaged. DIL offers, without explanation, the suggestion that this is 'prob. a technical term', since the Connachtmen in another instance also erect such a wall against the Ulstermen. See DIL, M, col. 203. Reinhard writes: 'It does not seem that the wall is composed of the bloody corpses of the slain. The protective power of red is well known' (p. 168). But the protective power of red derives from its association with blood, and mūr is found in the sense of heaped bodies. Of course the one kind of blood one would expect battling warriors to have no fear of would be that of slaughtered foes.
12 Reinhard, p. 166. P. L. Henry also sees such factors of 'taithi is tuaiplis' playing some role in the origin of many gessi (Saorthiúilacht, p. 16). Apparently Maartje Draak see such memories as the root of most, if not all, such prohibitions. See 'Some Aspects of Kingship in Pagan Ireland' in La Regalita Sacra (Leiden, 1958) 662-3. See also Hull, 'Old Irish Tabus', p. 47. For a list of what the Irish considered lucky and unlucky days, see Cath Mhuighé Lé, ed., Eugene O'Curry (Dublin, 1855) 74.
13 Denis Murphy, ed., The Annals of Clonmacnoise (Dublin, 1896) 120, entry for 756. See also the Four Masters, entry for 755. Henri A. Junod provides a documented example of a taboo arising from such circumstances in South Africa, where a prohibition regulating the planting of new fruit trees was explained by 'the coincidence of the desolation of a
claimed a Munster king who spent ‘a wet autumn night before winter in Letrecha’.\textsuperscript{24}

We are, it would seem, on firmer ground with several gessi apparently based on sound commonsense. The gessi of Cormac Conloinges against ‘wandering from one province to another’\textsuperscript{25} seems logical enough, as does that to which the boy Cú Chulainn draws the attention of Conall Cernach in \textit{Táin Bó Cuailnge}: ‘It is gessi for you Ulsterman to run risks (techt dar éclind) in your chariots’\textsuperscript{26}. Perhaps a combination of such good sense precaution coupled with the memory of a past disaster explains the gessi of Cormac against ‘driving his horses over an ashen yoke’.\textsuperscript{27} Reasonable caution certainly seems to provide a self-evident explanation for at least one of Conaire’s gessi in \textit{Togail Bruidne Da Derga}: ‘You must not spend the night in a house from which firelight is visible from the outside after sunset’.\textsuperscript{28} Similarly, however unheroic, Fráech’s gessi not to fight Cú Chulainn would no doubt have lengthened his life had he observed it.\textsuperscript{29}

Several gessi have often been classified as totemic in nature. Cú Chulainn is, of course, gessi-bound not to eat dog, and his eventual doing so partially paralyzes him prior to his final battle.\textsuperscript{30} In \textit{Togail Bruidne Da Derga}, Conaire mac Eterscéi is informed by Nemglan, the king of his father’s birds, that he must not cast at birds, ‘for there is not one here who should not have a claim on you through his father or mother’.\textsuperscript{31} In \textit{Tóruigheacht Dhiarmaid agus Ghráinne}, Diarmaid unwittingly violates his gessi against hunting a particular boar and forfeits his life as a result.\textsuperscript{32}

ruined village with the presence of such trees’. Junod comments: ‘Such coincidences, amounting to bad omens, have no doubt given birth to numerous taboos. If misfortune has followed a certain act two or three times, a hasty generalization is made by the primitive mind: post hoc ergo propter hoc! So the act is tabooed.’ See \textit{The Life of a South African Tribe}, volume 2, \textit{Mental Life} (New Hyde Park, 1962) 577-8.

\textsuperscript{24} Dillon, ‘Taboos’, \textit{PRIA} 54 C 1, p. 14, §3, line 18.
\textsuperscript{25} ‘Bruiden Da Chochae’, \textit{RC} xxi. 394. This gessi is found in the H.1.17 text of the tale which adds three gessi to those found in H.3.18.
\textsuperscript{26} Cecile O’Rahilly, ed., \textit{Táin Bó Cuailnge from the Book of Leinstier} (Dublin, 1967), lines 1034-5. The earlier recension of the \textit{Táin} is less precise here: ‘And it is a custom (bés) of you Ulstermen that you do not drive recklessly (tar églinde)’. See O’Rahilly, ed., \textit{Táin Bó Cuailnge: Recension I} (Dublin, 1976), line 684. This gessi must refer specifically to the driving of mechanically impaired chariots, for the Ulstermen routinely career around the country in a breakneck fashion.
\textsuperscript{27} ‘Bruiden Da Chochae’, \textit{RC} xxi. 153, §6.
\textsuperscript{28} Knott, \textit{Togail Bruidne Da Derga}, lines 175-6.
\textsuperscript{29} Kuno Meyer, ed., ‘Tochmarc Treblainne’, \textit{ZCP} xiii (1919) 167, lines 8-14. We are told that Fráech found this and his other three gessi, one of which restricted his free use of weapons, ‘a torment of mind and spirit (crádh mienmæl ocus acintú).’ Thurneysen sees this tale as ‘keinesfalls älter als das 13.-14. Jahrhundert’. See \textit{Die irische Helden- und Königsgage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert} (Halle, 1921) 296.
\textsuperscript{30} ‘Brísilech Mór Maige Murchtimmí’, \textit{LL} 13887-93.
\textsuperscript{31} Knott, \textit{Togail Bruidne Da Derga}, lines 145-7.
\textsuperscript{32} Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, ed., \textit{Tóruigheacht Dhiarmaid agus Ghráinne} (Dublin, 1967), lines 1448-566.
A more general prohibition is referred to by Cú Chulainn in his riddling conversation with Emer in *Tochmarc Emire* when he mentions that chariot warriors must forego entering their vehicles for a certain period after eating horsemeat.  

At the moment, the very concept of totemism seems to be undergoing a radical re-assessment among anthropologists, and the existence and extent of Celtic or specifically Irish totemism has always been a source of some controversy, with most scholars seriously questioning if not entirely dismissing the significance of totemism in the Celtic world as known to us through classical and indigenous sources. Thus S. Czarnowski wrote in 1919: ‘L’hypothèse d’un totémisme irlandais ne peut être pris en considération . . . En somme il peut y avoir eu des totems en Irlande. Il n’en subsiste point de traces certaines’. Seán Mac Suibhne, the author of the sole monograph on the subject, arrived at the same conclusion forty years later: ‘Anois, má ghlaictar leis an sainmhníú cúng ar an tótamas .i. é a cheangal go docht doscartha le córas fialasach, tig linn a rá go neamhbalbh nach bhfuil dearbhfhianaise ar bith ann go raibh an tótamas i réim riamh sa tír. Má ghlaicaimid leis gur féidir an tótamas a bheith ann d’uireasa córtais dá leithidé – rud is leasc le heitneolaith an lae inniu a admháil – féadtar bheith dearfach den méid seo: níl aon riachtanas orainn glacadh leis go raibh sé ann óir ní rud sainníil ann féin an phiseogacht i leith aoinmithe . . . Ná ní miniú leordóthanach an tótamas óir is lèir anois go bhfuil na gnásanna agus na piseoga céanna á gceachtadh go forleathan i measc pobal réamh-thótamacht.

Non-totemic explanations of various kinds have also been suggested for these gessi. For example, Czarnowski and Françoise Le Roux both remind us that birds in Irish literature frequently serve, as do those in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, as messengers from the supernatural, while Le Roux, Czarnowski, Hubert, and most recently Kim McConne have written of the wide range of beliefs and proscriptions dealing with dogs

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33 Kuno Meyer, ed., ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften: Tochmarc Emire la Coingulaínd’, *ZCP* iii (1900) 229, 240, §32. In the LU text Cú Chulainn simply employs a kenning, reporting that a ‘chariot’s violation (*col carpait*)’ had been cooked for him on his journey to see her. See *Lebor na hUidre*, ed. Best and Bergin (Dublin, 1929), line 10243.

34 See, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston, 1963). Lévi-Strauss states (p. 45) that ‘it is the very idea of totemism that is illusory . . .’


36 Seán Mac Suibhne, *Tótamais i nÉirinn* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1961) 79.

and their canine kin throughout the Celtic (and non-Celtic) world.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed in her discussion of ritual practices among the North American Dakota, Makarius refers to the eating of dogmeat as ‘un acte délibéré d’impureté’ which is, in a phrase almost as vague as Mac Suibhne’s ‘piseogacht i leith ainmhithe’, ‘assimilable à une violation d’interdit’\.\textsuperscript{39}

Of course labels, even those with as venerable a ring as ‘totemism’, are not explanations, and in this area it seems that more credible or at least suggestive elucidations of some of these gessi may be accessible through further research like that of McConé into comparative Celtic and Indo-European linguistics and mythology.\textsuperscript{40}

To this point we have been primarily concerned with vestiges, the often distorted or inadequately preserved survivals of shucked beliefs and rituals, the stuff of academic guesswork. We may, however, take some consolation in noting that the vast majority of these problematic or downright incomprehensible gessi are peripheral to the main course of Celtic narrative. Such gessi characteristically turn up in catalogues of taboo, like that edited by Dillon, or in similar lists said to govern the lives of characters in narrative tales. Even in the latter instance, however, such gessi rarely play a really significant role in the action, with even their violation usually being treated, as in Bruiden Da Chocae, briefly and perfunctorily. Distortion and debasement are not, of course, the fate of all taboos in ethnically evolving societies. Salomon Reinach, a French social scientist who occasionally applied the skills of his discipline to Celtic studies, thus distinguishes the potentially vital taboo from the fossilized survival: ‘Heureusement, chez les peuples énergiques et bien doués, il s’est produit une sélection dans le domaine des tabous: ceux dont l’expérience a montré l’utilité sociale ont subsisté, tantôt sous la forme de règles d’étiquette, tantôt sous celle de préceptes moraux et de lois civiles; les autres ont disparu ou ne survivent qu’à l’état de basses superstitions’.\textsuperscript{41}

At this juncture we may at last rejoin our main line of argument. As noted earlier, taboo is a profoundly social institution, undoubtedly having its ultimate roots in the inherent fears, obsessions, and aspirations


\textsuperscript{39} Makarius, p. 286.

\textsuperscript{40} I have not yet seen McConé’s most recent contribution in this area, ‘Hund, Wolf und Krieger bei den Indogermanen’ in a recent volume of Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft entitled Studien zum indogermanischen Wortschatz.

\textsuperscript{41} Salomon Reinach, Orphee, histoire générale des religions, nouvelle edition (Paris, 1926) 31.
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shared by all human beings, but achieving its actual living expression in terms of the concrete conceptual, ritual, and ethical universe of specific societies. People are the same the world over and therefore anthropology can offer startling insights from the most unexpected places. The societies people create are, however, extraordinarily diverse, and geis entwined in the social fabric can rarely be extricated and restored to a hypothetically pristine state intact. In the following discussion the emphasis will be on geis as an Irish institution, a vital force defining, challenging, and sustaining the value system of that energetic and talented society depicted in the early literature.

Such a discussion of course presupposes a clear understanding of the ethos so sustained. Early Irish literature depicts a heroic warrior society for which honour was a virtually absolute value, providing a universally accepted and shared standard of ideals and behaviour and serving as a profound emotional force for social cohesion. Definition and interpretation of this standard was traditional, external, and public, directed and imposed by the society, with shame and disgrace the major sanctions and acknowledged honour and posthumous glory the ultimate rewards. These rewards had, moreover, to be earned and maintained through almost ceaseless aggressive competition, particularly the exercise of physical prowess at the expense of others. It was a world in which warriors needed all the help they could get. Taboo was molded by their society to serve that purpose.

All writers on early Irish society have stressed the importance of geis in safeguarding honour, with Myles Dillon expressing the connection with force: ‘The basis of geis is honour. If a man violates his geis he loses honour’.42 While Dillon seems here to blur the distinction between the causes and effects of geis, he is correct in stressing that an understanding of the Irish notion of honour just defined makes possible a coherent and consistent explanation for a remarkably wide range of these prohibitions, including many previously dismissed as incomprehensible or interpreted in unnecessarily narrow terms as prohibitions governing restricted areas of life like sex, speech, or hygiene. The Irish heroic world view offered no resting places; all aspects of human life were potential arenas in the incessant competition for enhanced prestige.

Indeed many geis are clearly designed to eliminate any such resting places or times, imposing on heroic life a series of challenges, the meeting of which promotes if not guarantees the acquisition of honour. Thus

42 Myles Dillon, The Archaisim of Irish Tradition (London, 1948) 8. See also Hull, ‘Old Irish Tabus’, p. 61; Thurneysen, Heldensage, p. 80; and Reinhard, chapter 14, ‘Geasa Sustaining Personal Honor’, pp. 170-93. Reinhard is a marvellous guide to resources and considers some, but by no means all, of the geis discussed here, though his perspective is quite different and often unduly restricted by a narrow view of the role of honour in the early tales.
among Cú Chulainn’s gessi we find ‘to stray a foot from his path before single combat; to refuse combat to a single man . . . to go to Emain without having fought a combat’. Of course his imposition of a similar geis on his son Connla sets in motion the tragic developments that lead to the boy’s death by his hand. Connla’s other geis, not to name himself to a single opponent, is obviously another means of ensuring a life of challenge, conflict, and glory. Cú Chulainn’s king, Conchobar, shares his geis against sidestepping opposition, as does ‘Beard’, the generic warrior of Geisi Ulchait: ‘Geis for it to flee. Geis for it to refuse combat with a warrior’. A similar awareness of the shamefulness of avoiding a fight undoubtedly underlies Diarmaid Ua Duibhne’s geis against ‘going through any escape door at all’. Furthermore, it seems plausible that Conall Cernach’s puzzling geis ‘to go into [or come out of] a ford without its being strained after him’ is an injunction obliging him to literally stir things up and so require their subsequent filtering in one of the innumerable fights that erupt at fords in the early tales. Of course willingness to face battle is a pre-requisite for the fulfilment of a geis of Fothad Canainne: ‘It was, however, geis for Fothad Canainne to drink ale without dead heads in his presence’. The parallel between this geis and Conall Cernach’s boast ‘I have never slept without a Connachtman’s head under my knee’ is obvious, and indeed Reinhard points out that Conall’s boast may well be rooted in some such geis.

As these examples illustrate, honour gessi frequently involve the

44 For Connla’s gessi, see Van Hamel, ed., ‘Aided Œnfin Aife’, in Compert Con Cúลานnn, p. 11, §1.
45 ‘Cath Ruis na Rig, LL 22983.
47 Ni Shéaghdha, Tóirgheacht Dhiarmaida agus Ghráinne, line 197. A more positive expression of this mentality, also probably geis-rooted, is found in Welsh heroic tradition, despite the language’s lack of an unambiguous term for ‘taboo’. In Canu Aneirin we are told that the kynneddyf (‘custom’, ‘peculiarity’) of one warrior is ‘to mount at the border / to bend the best [spear] shaft before dismounting’; while we learn that the kynneddyf of another is ‘to dismount / in front of nine champions / to challenge them / in the presence of the armies’. See Ifor Williams, ed., Canu Aneirin (Caerdydd, 1961) 39, stanza LXXXI, lines 912-9; and p. 39, stanza LXXX, lines 982-5. I follow Williams’s suggestions in my translations here.
48 Kuno Meyer, ed., ‘Goire Conailh Chernag i Crúachain ocos Aided Ailella ocos Conailh Chernag’, ZCP i (1897) 105, lines 7-8. I agree with Reinhard’s view that ‘the statement about the miners seems like an interpolation; the MS, Edinburgh XL, is of the sixteenth century’ (p. 165, note 1). Reinhard does not, however, offer an explanation of the geis.
50 Rudolf Thurneysen, ed., Scélà Mucc meic Dathó (Dublin, 1969) 16, §16. See Reinhard, p. 217. A geis of Fionn is also of interest here: ‘It was geis for Fionn to see a dead person unless weapons had killed him’. See S. H. O’Grady, ed., ‘Acallamh na Senórach’, Silvia Gadelica 1 (London, 1892) 207. Reinhard (p. 174) suggests ‘such a taboo may have ghost fear behind it’. It also, of course, provides a powerful motivation for heroic violence.
imposition, or self-imposition, of tasks whose fulfilment either produces honour or averts shame. It is, however, essential to note that while the dramatic focus in these situations is clearly on the act of imposition, the alacrity with which the challenge is almost invariably accepted suggests that in effect the hero is being reminded of an acknowledged geis-supported standard he should maintain rather than being burdened with a brand new one. We can get a good idea of the response to such an attempted creation of an arbitrary new geis rather than the aggressive confirmation of an existing one from the scornful rejection by Fear Caille’s troops of his bid to charge them with what they regard as a particularly frivolous geis in Buile Shuibhne: ‘I put gessí on every one of my lord’s people that none of them should come to battle unless wearing silk clothes so that they would be conspicuous over all others for splendour and arrogance’. There was, of course, nothing wrong with either splendour or arrogance, and both qualities were encouraged by other, more valid gessí. Thus in Táin Bó Cúalnge Cú Chulainn unites the challenging withe left on a pillar stone by the sons of Nechta Scéne and casts it contemptuously into a stream, ‘for that was a violation of geis for the sons of Nechta Scéne’. In the Book of Leinster text the nature of this challenge is spelled out, as are the precise terms of the taboo: ‘This is how the green of the dún was. There was a standing stone on it with an iron ring around it, and that was a ring of valour with ogham writing on its peg. And the writing on it was: If anyone who was a weapon-bearing warrior came onto the green, there was geis on him not to leave the green without offering challenge to single combat’. Cú Chulainn himself makes use of such withes in the Táin, one of which is interpreted for Ailill and Medb by Fergus: ‘It is geis for the men of Ireland to go to the bed of the ford until one of you takes it [the forked stick planted by Cú Chulainn] up with the tip of one hand just as he threw it down a short while ago’. Indeed it seems that such ogham inscriptions, of necessity of course erected by talented and powerful folk, were inherently chal-

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51 J. G. O’Keeffe, ed., Buile Shuibhne (Dublin, 1931), lines 1532-8. This interpretation of the imposition of geis as the recalling of existing obligations rather than the creation of new ones also explains why almost anyone can invoke geis in the literature. In later texts and folktales this motif does degenerate into the arbitrary imposition of entirely new gessí, often little more than curses. In Fionn’s confusion in Fíéis Tighe Chonain with which this paper opened we can see the beginning of this process.

52 O’Rahilly, TBC: Recension I, 712-3.

53 O’Rahilly, TBC from LL., 1069-72. In the Welsh tale Gereint Vab Erbin a golden chair serves the same function as the withe here. Gereint is told not to sit in the chair, for ‘the man who owns that chair has never allowed another to sit in his chair’. When he does so, the owner is outraged at the ‘shame and disgrace (kywillid a gwhealth)’ he has suffered thereby and insists on combat. See J. Gwenogvryn Evans, ed., Lyfr Gwyn Rhydderch: Y Chwedlau a’r Rhamiantau (Caerdydd, 1973), columns 449-50.

54 O’Rahilly, TBC from LL., 634-6.
lenging and thus geis-bound. In *Auráicept na nÉces* we learn that Bres mac Elatha is under geis ‘not to pass an ogham without reading it’, a prohibition turned against him by the Túatha Dé Danann: ‘This ogham was thrown onto his breast as he was going to the battle of Mag Tuired. The battle was then won over him while he was reading the ogham’. While lacking the literary flair necessary for the production of ogham, a hag confronts Fionn with a predicament similar to that facing the men of Ireland above by imposing on him ‘gessi to give her her fill of single combat’.

At times, gessi are used to invoke heroic honour and thus ensure the performance of daunting tasks other than combat. The honour of the Ulstermen is obviously challenged in Bricriú’s ominous speech after Cú Chulainn has tilted his house in *Fled Bricrend*: ‘It is geis for you now to drink or to eat or to sleep until you leave my house as you found it on your arrival’. A similar geis compelling the accomplishment of a formidable and dangerous task is imposed on Iubdán by Esírt upon his return from Emain in *Aided Fergusu mhic Léide*: ‘I put you, Iubdán, under gessi that warriors will not endure that you yourself go to see the land from which we have come . . .’. Likewise, when in *Eachtra Airt meic Cuind* Bécuas places Art under geis to play fidchell with her for stakes, and when each imposes geis on the other after victory, it is clear that the prowess and so the honour of each is being actively tested through the games. Prowess, this time that of poets, is again threatened by geis in *Tromdámh Guaire*. Having humiliatingly failed to provide Marbán with his fill of the type of singing known as crónán, the poets find themselves under geis to perform an even more startling feat: ‘I put you under gessi that you relate the Táin to me, and I put the entire burdensome bardic company under gessi not to stay two nights in the same house until they get knowledge of the Táin’. Thus reminded of an unforgivable lacuna in their professional repertoire the poets set off in quest of the epic.

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54 George Calder, ed. *Auráicept na nÉces* (Edinburgh, 1917) 304, lines 5943-6.
55 O’Grady, ‘Acallamh na Senórach’, *SG* 1, 309.
56 *Fled Bricrend*, *LU* 8387-8.
59 Maud Joynt, ed., *Tromdámh Guaire* (Dublin, 1931), lines 1017-20. Senchán and the other poets are confronted with another challenging geis when a man forbids their landing on his island until they cap a verse of his composition (lines 1181-3). In both these instances their poetic prowess and thus their honour is being tested. Furthermore, turn-about is fair play here. The poets themselves were quick to enlist geis in the service of their hierarchical prerogatives. See, for example, the metrical tracts edited by Thurneysen in ‘Mittelirische Verselehren’, *Irische Texte* 3, 1 (Leipzig, 1891) 59, §112; 65, §136. Here geis is used to set standards, enforce payment, and ensure their proper acknowledgement: ‘Geis to call the poet “ollamh” until he has studied them [the twelve poetic divisions discussed in the text]’.
Most honour-linked *gessi* simply mandate heroic behaviour for which any reminder would seemingly be redundant. For example ‘Beard’ is enjoined to forego all sorts of mundane, unheroic labor: ‘A burden is *geis* for it, except for its shield protecting its forearm’. More significantly, the warrior’s commitment to his role as guardian and protector of his people is fortified by *geis*. Thus ‘Beard’ is *geis*-bound not to hear ‘a cry of distress without helping if it is made to him’. Not surprisingly Cú Chulainn bore even greater responsibility and needed no such summons: ‘For it was one of Cú Chulainn’s *gessi* that even a woman should leave his land unless he knew. It was one of his *gessi* for birds to plunder his land unless they left something with him. It was one of his *gessi* that warriors from another tribe should be in his land without his confronting them before morning if they came at night and before night if they came during the day. Every marriagable girl and every unmarried woman in Ulster was under his protection until they were betrothed to men’. The function of *geis* in ensuring a warrior’s fulfilment of his role as protector— and the ability to provide protection was one of the prime expressions of power and thus honour—is made explicit in the Macgínimrada section of the *Táin*, when Conchobar’s son Follamain challenges the boy-troop with an invocation of *geis* upon seeing Cú Chulainn arrive unknown and unannounced at Emain: ‘It is *geis* for you for a youth to enter your game without putting himself under your protection’. It should also be noted here that the *geis* prohibiting naming himself compels a hero to claim the protector’s role, as does Cú Chulainn, his son Connla, and the incognito son of the king of Scotland in *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, by denying others the power over him that knowledge of his name would give.

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61 O’Looney, ‘Geisi Ulchái’, p. 193. Irish kings were, of course, also prohibited from performing menial tasks. Thus, although *geis* is not mentioned, *Crith Gablach* lists among the ‘four findings that bring a vassal’s *dire* to a king’ his being ‘found alone or with a maul, axe, or spade’. See Binchy’s edition (Dublin, 1970) 21, lines 530-4. Makarius (pp. 181-2) explains taboos restricting kings from working in terms of fears concerning their possible injury and consequent bloodshed. If she is right we have here an excellent example of how far *geis* has come from its primitive origins. For both Irish king and hero what is in danger is his status, not his body.


63 Kuno Meyer, ed., ‘Echtra Nerai’, *RC* x (1889) 222, §13. One can compare here the *kynneddf* of a warrior whom Gereint encounters in the Welsh tale: ‘For it is his *kynneddf* that no knight comes into his country whom he does not insist on encountering’. See Evans, *Llyfr Gwyn Rhudderch*, col. 433. Two similar *gessi* binding Cú Chulainn are reported in the late tale Tórugeacht Gruaidhe Griansholus (ed. C. O’Rahilly, Dublin, 1924): ‘It was one of Cú Chulainn’s *gessi* for his opponent to go unscathed from him’ (p. 14); and ‘It is *geis* for me to be a single day facing a foe without spilling blood’ (p. 38).

64 O’Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, 776-7.

Apparently geis demanding protection could be invoked as part of a set ritual in early Ireland. In *Echtra Fergus a maic Léti*, the hero defeats a dwarf in battle, and the text reports: 'This was the dwarf who sucked Fergus’s breasts and seized his cheek to ensure protection (ana cul)'. Asked by Fergus to explain his behaviour, the dwarf replies 'This is fir fer with us', whereupon the narrator comments: 'It is from this that today there is seizing of men’s breasts and cheeks to seek to test their honour/protection (do dénum fir dia inchaib)'. Emer performs a similar ritual on Lugaid mac Nois, to whom her father hopes to marry her before Cú Chulainn’s return from Alba. No doubt she is here not only demanding that Lugaid forego his claim, but also enlisting his aid against her father’s authority: 'She seized his two cheeks and charged him on the truth of his honour (fir a enig) and his life, and confessed to him that it was Cú Chulainn she loved and that she was under his protection (gess), and that it would be a violation of honour (coll enig) for whomever would take her as wife'. This ritual for demanding protection is also referred to in *Tecosca Cormaic*, where the king warns against 'a black-mouthed surety of little honour (becenech) who sells his cheek and his knee and his hand and his breast and his heart and the truth of his family and his tribe and his valour (fir a chlainc ocus a cheneoil ocus a gaisced)'. Although none of the Irish words denoting taboo appears in any of these passages, the nexus of aggressive challenge, threatened honour, and instinctive acquiescence all indicate that geis is at work.

This ritual invocation of geis is, moreover, central to one of the best known and most aesthetically successful tales in the early literature. Indeed a proper understanding of geis in its social context restores to the work its narrative and thematic integrity. Eager to compel Naisi to elope with her, Deirdre ‘sprang at him and seized the two ears on his head. “Two ears of shame and ridicule are here” she said, “unless you take me with you”’. With Deirdre thus claiming his protection and thereby challenging his honour, the doomed Naisi can only howl. In

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44 D. A. Binchy, ed., *Echtra Fergus a maic Léti*, *Ériu* xvi (1952) 38, §5.
47 ‘Longes Mac nUslenn’, *LL* 34408–10. This evidence obviously invalidates Jean Markale’s assumption that Deirdre must originally have seized Naisi’s testicles. See *La Femme celtique* (Paris, 1972) 322.
Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne, Gráinne foregoes the ritual in her equally successful if less dramatic manipulation of Diarmaid, and in this instance the appeal to geis is made explicit: 'I put you under gessi of strife and total destruction, Diarmaid Ua Dubhne, that is, the pangs of a woman in childbirth, and the pallor of a dead man on water, and the life of Niall Caille rebuking you, unless you take me with you out of this house tonight'.

Apparently long distance did not impair the force of such gessi, for in the version of Táin Bó Flidais contained in the Glen Masán Manuscript Flidais successfully imposes gessi on the absent Fergus via Bricriu (here Briene): 'Put nine gessi on Mac Roich/Unless he comes with you at once'.

Mayhem predictably ensues. In a somewhat different vein, Beuida, the daughter of the king of Lochlann in the late saga Caithréim Conghaill Clárínghnigh invokes geis not to compel a man to marry her, but to challenge him to prove his worthiness to do so by acquiring a particularly exotic dowry.

Formidable women in quest of worthy or desired mates seem then to have had a uniquely deft mastery of the potential of geis. Indeed T. M. Charles-Edwards has suggested convincingly that one of the most formidable of all, the wife of Rónán in Fingal Rónáin, owes her deadly authority over the fate of Mael Fothartaig to the power of geis.

The central importance of the warrior's role as guardian of his people also provides an alternate explanation for a geis found several times in the early literature. Among the gessi of the king of Tara is 'the rising of the sun on him lying in his bed on the plain of Tara'. Heinrich Wagner has interpreted this prohibition in mythological terms, seeing it as an indication that 'the king, like the Pharaoh, was considered the representative of the sun-god on earth'.

However an identical geis binds Cú Chulainn: 'Geis for him for the sun to rise on him in Emain Macha, but it should be he who rises before it'. Followers of T. F. O'Rahilly's mythological scheme may seek solace here, but it should be noted that that generic warrior 'Beard' is similarly encumbered: 'Geis for the sun to rise on it lying down'. It thus appears that while this geis may well have mythic resonances, it can be understood equally well as a quite pro-
saic injunction to be up and doing, constantly on guard to prevent defeat and preserve honour. One wonders how many fish could enter Cú Chulainn’s estuaries undetected while he lie abed.78

Ceaseless vigilance was, then, the price of honour in early Ireland, and, as has been previously noted, there were no resting places. Thus the feast, instead of offering even temporary respite from the struggle, frequently provided the arena for especially virulent competitive outbursts. Predictably geis was therefore interwoven in Irish notions of generosity and hospitality. In a 1984 paper in Éigse I discussed those notions, pointing out that a potlatch mentality pervades Irish heroic literature, whereby wealth is transmuted to status via domination over others.79 In such a system gift-giving becomes a mandatory element of the competitive zero-sum game in which there can only be winners when there are visible losers. For the Irish the feast was not only the occasion for the display of wealth, but also the most logical forum for assessing victory and defeat. Thus the hosting of important feasts was itself a sign of pre-eminence, and as in Mesca Ulad, a source of strife.80 It is a major expression of Conchobar’s authority that he has exclusive right not only to display his munificence at Samhain, but also to call forth supernatural sanctions to compel all to come to experience his literally obliging hospitality: ‘It was Conchobar himself who would give the Samhain feast to them because of the assembly of the great host. It was necessary to provide for the great crowd because every Ulsterman who did not come to Emain on Samhain night would be deprived of his senses and his grave-mound and his grave and his standing stone would be put in place on the morrow’.81 The geis, though implicit, is unmistakable. This same injunction to attend a royal feast is found in the dinnsenchas of Carn huI Neit, in which the king of Munster prepares a treacherous meal for Bres, and ‘it was geis for the Irish not to come there at the same time’.82

Obviously the lavishly conspicuous generosity so common in Irish tales is not only comprehensible, but even mandatory, in light of this view of wealth.83 Overwhelming hospitality was another route to victory.

78 Such geis bind other heroes as well. Fionn, for example, is geis-bound not to be ‘ten consecutive nights in Almu without being one night away from it’. See Ní Shéaghdha, Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne, lines 1456-7. The geis of ‘Beard’ requires a dose of gore every few days: ‘Ges di nomine na deargfaidear le rìnd’ (p. 190).
80 See, for example, the crisis that arises in Feis Tighe Chonáin when Cairpre Lifeachar arrives at a feast being held by Fionn: ‘For it is geis for us to break up our drinking house until we are tranquil and merry, and the son of the king of Ireland will feel it necessary that the drinking house in which he is should be seated around him’ (lines 1614-7).
83 No doubt we have here the explanation for Fear Caille’s botched imposition of geis in Buile Shuithne. See note 51 above.
But in order for there to be winners there must be a contest, and herein lies the explanation of an otherwise somewhat surprising geis shared by several prominent Irish heroes, Cú Chulainn, Fergus, Fionn, and Bres, all of whom are bound never to refuse a feast. Fergus’s geis, one of the most dramatically significant in the early literature, hardly needs restatement here. Cú Chulainn’s geis, availed of by the sinister hags to force him to consume dog meat, is also well known. Similarly disastrous consequences result from the gessi of Fionn and Bres as their prohibitions are manipulated to compel them to drink poison. Yet these tragic outcomes should not blind us to the honour-based function of such a geis as a challenge to take on all comers on any terms in any arena for glory, the one prize worth having in the heroic ethos.44

In order for such competitions to take place and produce clear and meaningful results, it was necessary to preserve the integrity if not always the harmony of the public assemblies which witnessed and validated them. The mayhem had to be restricted and defined, and geis was enlisted in the cause. Thus among Cú Chulainn’s gessi listed in Aided Guìl meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rigi we find that he is forbidden ‘to come into an assembly without permission (cen airiasacht); to come to an assembly with a single warrior’.45 While the latter restriction may, however uncharacteristic for the impetuous Cú Chulainn, be a cautionary requirement to seek strength in numbers, the former is immediately comprehensible when one sees the near riot that follows his violation of the geis later in the tale.46 The most prestigious assembly site in the early literature is protected from such threats of chaos by its own gessi. A law tract from Lebor Aicile states: ‘And it is geis for Tara to bring a warrior’s arms into it after sunset, except for the arms which happened to be in it already’.47 The metrical dinnsenchas for Slige Dála offers a sensible variant of the geis: ‘After sunset it is geis to go / to Tara with strong (i.e. violent) behaviour . . .’.48 It should also be remembered

44 I discuss these gessi in more detail in ‘Contention at Feasts’, pp. 125-6. In The Archaisch of Irish Tradition Dillon refers to a parallel to this geis in Indian literature and explains it from the point of view of fate (p. 8). His alternate interpretation of the prohibition in note 4 on the same page is in my opinion more convincing.


46 In Oided Mac nUsnig, we learn that Naisi is somewhat similarly bound: ‘It is among the vows (a freithighb) or among the gessi (do gheasaibh) of Naisi not to come to Ireland in peace except with three, that is Cú Chulainn son of Sualdam, Conall son of Amergin, and Fergus son of Ros . . .’ See W. Stokes, ed., ‘Oided Mac nUsnig’, Irische Texte 2, 2 (Leipzig, 1887), 123, lines 42-4. The two readings are from the principal ms., the Glen Masain MS., and from Highland Society LV1. As we know from the narrative itself, the idea is not for Naisi to come with all three, but to be sure of the assistance of at least one of these men should he return to Emain to make terms with Conchobar.


48 Edward Gwynn, ed., ‘The Metrical Dindshenches’, RIA Todd Lecture Series 10, 3 (1913) 280, lines 57-60. Gwynn translates: ‘There was a ban against going to Temair / to
that although the geis is not made explicit, in both Cath Maige Tuired and the Welsh tale Culhwch ac Olwen, night admission to important public gatherings is restricted to presumably peacefully-intentioned artisans and craftsmen.\(^9\)

Once successfully admitted to the feast, the hero might still find his behaviour regulated by geis\(^{9}\) ensuring that he never allow his prerogatives to be infringed. For example the champion of the king of Scotland is, no doubt redundantly, geis-bound to do battle with any opponent who tries to claim his curadmir, the choicest portion of food ceded to the pre-eminent warrior at a feast.\(^{90}\) Apparently even the dead resented slights where food was concerned. Thus the decapitated head of Lomna protests being denied the \(\text{dantm\text{\textperiodcentered}}\), the ‘tooth-bit’ which DIL defines as ‘a piece of food which according to old custom was put between the teeth of the dead’.\(^{91}\) We are informed that offering the \(\text{dantm\text{\textperiodcentered}}\) was obligatory through geis among the Fianna, and the almost instinctive violence with which Fionn reacts to Lomna’s protest leaves little doubt that he feels the infraction of the geis has endangered his honour by implicating him in an act of disgraceful niggardliness.\(^{92}\) Ironically Fionn must again intercede, this time posthumously, to assure that he himself will receive the \(\text{dantm\text{\textperiodcentered}}\) in a fragmentary alternate version of his death tale.\(^{93}\) On a

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90 DIL, D - degóir, col. 97.
91 Kuno Meyer, ed., ‘Sanas Cormaic’ in Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts 4, ed. Bergin, Best, Meyer, and O’Keefe (Dublin, 1912) 86-8, entry 1018, ‘Orc tréith’. The reading \(\text{la fiann}\) in lieu of \(\text{la Find}\) is from Laud 610.
92 Kuno Meyer, ed., ‘The Death of Finn Mac Cumaill’, ZCP i (1897) 464-5. Although geis is not mentioned here, the magical occurrences afflicting the food denied Fionn indicate it is at work.
less gruesome note, the kingly prerogative to be properly attended at table is protected by one of the gessi of Conn recorded in Echtra Airt meic Cuid. Offered food in the Otherworld, Conn refuses, for ‘it was geis for him to eat alone’.

Hunger was not the only human drive hedged by prohibition. A significant number of gessi involve sexual behaviour, an area which has spawned some of the more esoteric taboos worldwide. Interestingly, however, whatever their ultimate origins, the majority of these Irish prohibitions are explicable within the context of the heroic ethos. Cú Chulainn’s sexuality is particularly restricted. He is, of course, bound not to look at naked women, although this prohibition is not specifically called a geis except in the late Tóruigheacht Graudhe Griansholus. In Aided Guil meic Carbada he is rather inconveniently barred from ‘sleeping among women without men with them’, and even from ‘living (com-maid) with a woman’. No doubt his awareness of having violated such gessi contributes to his anguish in the Táin on realizing that the Connacht host has entered Ulster while he was with Fedelm Noichride: ‘Would that we had not gone there nor betrayed the Ulstermen’. It is, of course, a widely held belief in martial societies that women drain the strength and

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44 Best, ‘Echtra Airt meic Cuid’, Ériu iii, 58, §10.
45 This is by no means to deny the role of taboo in the shaping of early Irish sexual attitudes and behaviour, particularly in areas like incest, menstruation, and parturition which have universally generated a wide range of ritual prohibitions. Although the word geis does not appear in accounts of incest, the practice was viewed by the Irish with exactly that compound of awe and abhorrence which lies at the heart of taboo. See, for example, the reference to the incest of Oengus Tuirmchech with his daughter in Lebor Gabála (ed. Macalister, vol. 5, p. 284, §568); that of the sons of Eochaid Feidilech with their sister Clothru in Aided Meidbe (ed. V. Hull, Speculum xiii. 1938, p. 55) and the Rennes dinnessen chaoch of Cuchulainn, even that alleged of Conchobar with his sister Deichtre in Con-cuspert Con Culann. Dread of menstrual blood no doubt plays some atavistic role in saving Medb from Cú Chulainn at the climax of the Táin. (See Makarius, pp. 211 and passim.) In addition we should see Athirme’s predilection for women in labour as not only an expression of cruelty but also as an attempt to put himself in touch with supernatural forces through the deliberate violation of taboo. Again, see Makarius, pp. 35-6, 86, 247. Discussing the trickster as a figure who, like incestuous kings, practices the conscious violation of social taboo, an act which while remaining extraordinary and abhorrent brings essential social benefits by making mana accessible to human beings, Makarius describes him as one whose power lies in ‘démureuse’, who is given to ‘sensualité effrénée’ and ‘les diverses formes de l’impureté’, including childbirth (p. 250). She could well be speaking of Athirme here. See also the comments of Dumézil in Loki (Paris, 1948), 272-3.
47 ‘Aided Guil meic Carbada’, LL 12572-3. Thurneysen suggests the line be read ‘nicht mit einer (seiner?) Frau zusammenwohnen’ (Heldensage, p. 485). The geis Cú Chulainn mentions in De Fogluim Chonculain (ed. Stokes, RC xxix, 1908) seems more common-sensical, although no doubt warrior dread of the debilitating influence of feminity is at its core: ‘Do you not know, girl, that it is a violation of geis for one who is sick to have intercourse with a woman’ (p. 133, §42). Fionn’s geis ‘to sleep with the daughter of Bodb Derg on the longest evening over the hillside’ (‘Acallamh na Senarach’, SG 1, p. 157) is obviously considerably more involved with time, space, and the si.
48 O’Rahilly, TBC: Recension I, 315.
sap the will of warriors. Referring specifically to the Irish fear of ‘cette vertu “paralysante” des organes féminins’, Jacques Moreau writes: ‘C’est que les pudenda muliebra n’ont pas seulement une valeur apotropaique: leur mana s’oppose au mana de l’homme, et spécialement du guerrier . . .’ 99 In this light, Cú Chulainn’s various sexual gessi serve to simultaneously shield him from this debilitating force and to keep his mind on his proper business, the acquisition of glory through the exercise of heroic prowess.

Other sexual gessi clearly function to sustain the honorific prerogatives or mark the special significance of prominent characters. Thus in Tochmarc Emire we learn that Conchobar’s ius primae noctis is confirmed by gesis, even when the woman in question is to become the wife of Cú Chulainn.100 Other men have similar gesis-dictated sexual claims on women. Indeed Conchobar’s own conception is the result of such a mandated union in the brief narrative episode Co Slondud Uladocus Maíne Uladocus Rudruigí. Fachtna sleeps with Nes ‘in spite of Cathbad’, ‘so that the king’s gessi would not be violated after winning the battle over the four provinces of Ireland, for it was gesis for him to sleep with the first woman he would encounter after coming from a battle’.101 This gesis not only confers or confirms a prerogative, but also stresses, as does the at first glance diametrically opposed gesis of Cú Chulainn, the irreplaceable importance of a man whose peaceful re-integration into the social fabric must be guaranteed through the invocation of sex to assuage heroic frenzy. In Aided Cechtchair maic Uthechair, the bizarre and tragic action of the tale is all set in motion as a result of another such sexual gesis challenging a man to assert his prerogative. Blai Briuga is bound by gesis to sleep with any woman coming to his guest-house unaccompanied by her husband. Despite his evident dismay, he fulfills this gesis and ultimately pays with his life.102

102 Kuno Meyer, ed., ‘Aided Cechtchair maic Uthechair’, RIA ;odd Lecture Series 14 (1906) 24. Inability to assert this prerogative could be seen as symptomatic of regal unworthiness. Thus Cumascach, a son of the king of Ireland, loses his life in an attempt to assert such a claim. In Beatha Mædóc Ferna we are told that while on his ‘princely circuit’ (cuairt rioghdamnachta) he expected that ‘the woman of every place would be at his disposal (fora cumus) while he was in the place’. When he insists that the wife of Brandub, the king of Leinster, yield to him, he is killed by the outraged husband with the approval of Mædóc. See Charles Plummer, ed., ‘Betha Mædóc Ferna (II)’, Bethadh Náem nErenn (Oxford, 1922) 1, 230-1. His father was no less aggressive but considerably more successful in asserting his claim, although again there is no explicit appeal to gesis. Lebor Gabála informs us that a concrete expression of his tyranny (anfir flatha) over his subjects was his insistence on his right to sleep with the wife of his host while on a regal visit. I am here following Brian Ó Cuív’s correction of Macalister’s misreading of this passage in Lebor Gabála 5, 370. See Ó Cuív’s, ‘Some Items from Irish Tradition’, Éige xi (1964-6) 185.
Among the more intriguing gessi of Irish kings are those which seem to impede rather than incite the pursuit of honour, prohibitions binding them to behave with a caution anathema to their heroic followers.\(^{103}\) Thus while Irish warriors swap boast and blame with utterly thoughtless abandon, Conchobar is under geis to reserve his judgment until his druids have spoken.\(^{104}\) Indeed in *Lebor na Cert* we learn precisely how many advisors one Irish ruler, the king of Thomond, was enjoined to consult. It is geis for this man to have as few as three in his ‘(secret) consultation (cocar)’, one of his búada specifying nine as the proper number.\(^{105}\) Conaire’s geis against intervening in a dispute involving his subjects provides another example of such limitations on royal speech, and in addition imposes an even more problematic restriction on the king’s ability to act in a potentially dangerous situation: ‘It was geis for him to go to arbitrate between them before they came to him’.\(^{106}\)

Such gessi are by no means random, but rather serve as sanctions sustaining an all-embracing Irish ideology of kingship that mandated for the ruler, as both guarantor and symbol of the political, social, and even cosmic harmony of his realm, a commitment to restraint and moderation even in the exercise of the most unquestioningly accepted values of the heroic ethos. Recent anthropological scholarship on taboo offers invaluable insight into the origins of this ideology. Working from her belief that all taboo has its source in fear of the inherent power of blood, Makarius has analyzed a wide range of regal prohibitions enjoining behaviour she categorizes as ‘non-violence’, all designed to protect both the king and his people from the danger of the pollution caused by bloodshed: ‘Il s’agit, là aussi, d’une relation réciproque: l’individu tabou ne peut exercer la violence, car s’il fait couler le sang d’autrui il risque de voir couler le sien. À plus forte raison ceux qui trouvent en sa présence – qui, en elle-même, les met en danger – doivent éviter que le sang ne coule, tout épanchement sanglant étant dangereux quand on se trouve en imminence de danger de sang. Enfin, par une extension de la crainte qu’inspire la personne tabou, son sang apparaît comme l’agent principal du danger qu’on redoute, et il faut à tout prix éviter qu’il ne se répande’.\(^{107}\) Brilliantly building on this insight, Makarius is able to provide a coherent and unified explanation of many facets of regal modera-

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\(^{103}\) I have discussed this subject, including the relevant gessi, in some detail in ‘A Foreseeing Driver of an Old Chariot: Regal Moderation in Early Irish Literature’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 11 (Summer, 1986) 1-16.


\(^{107}\) Makarius, pp. 61-2. Makarius’ work was unfortunately unknown to me when I wrote ‘A Foreseeing Driver’.
tion, including the king's potential role as peacemaker and judge, the restrictions on his involvement in warfare, and a seemingly disparate range of behaviour, including the *ius primae noctis*, whereby the king either oppresses others or is himself imposed on by them, in either case with impunity.¹⁰⁸ Here the anthropological evidence can restore essential pieces of the puzzle otherwise irretrievably lost.

One of the most dramatic and agonizing ethical crises in early Irish literature occurs when a hero is torn between two conflicting social obligations. Not surprisingly such a dilemma frequently involves *gessi*, as when Fergus must decide between obedience to his *geis* binding him to accept all invitations to a feast and his duty to protect Naísi and his brothers, or when Cú Chulainn and Conna face off in their deadly dance of *geis*, glory, and blood ties. In such situations the moral resources of the native code are tested to their limit. At other times, the hero is confronted with an equally disastrous but more precedent and thus clearer and less profoundly tragic decision between a personal *geis* and one with broader social implications, or between a personal *geis* and adherence to the expected code of behaviour as formulated and mandated by the court of public opinion. In virtually all such instances it is the personal *geis* which is sacrificed, the very act of violation thus dramatically validating the social code. Cú Chulainn eats dog meat rather than forfeit his place in the potlatch game by refusing a proffered meal, however humble.¹⁰⁹ Conaire mac Eterscéí respects the dictates of honorific hospitality at the expense of a private prohibition against admitting single women to his household after sunset.¹¹⁰ He also violates his individual *geis* against intervening in disputes rather than fail in what he sees as his larger duty to maintain the harmony of his realm, a duty directly imposed on him by another *geis* to prevent plundering in his territory.¹¹¹ In *Eachtra Airt*

¹⁰⁸ Makarius, p. 194. Again it must be stressed that we should not expect to find pristine taboo in the sophisticated literature of sophisticated societies. More than mere prevention of royal bloodshed is involved in such prohibitions against intervening in disputes. We should, for example, keep in mind that pairs of combatants are frequently found in patently liminal situations in medieval Celtic literature, a fact which no doubt helps explain the *geis* of the quintessentially non-regal Fionn forbidding him to come between adversaries in the late tale *Brughean Eochaidh Bhig Dhearg* (ed. Pádraig Ó Briain in *Bláth/feasg de Mhílaidinibh na Gaoidheilge*, Baile Atha Cliath, 1893, p. 142.) One also recalls the disastrous results of Cú Chulainn’s intervention between combatants in his death tale, as well as examples of the motif from Welsh literature like the battle between Gwyther in *Culhwch ac Olwen* (Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch, col. 496) or that witnessed by Peredur (Llyfr Gwyn, cols. 127-8).

¹⁰⁹ ‘Brislech Mór Maige Murthenni’, *LL* 13883-93.


¹¹¹ See ‘A Forseeing Driver’, pp. 15-6. According to *Lebor na Cert*, the king of Leinster was also bound by similar *gessi* which might seem out of his control, but which clearly challenge him to maintain ceaseless vigilance and dominance. See Dillon, *Lebor na Cert*, p. 134, lines 2006-9.
meic Cuindic Segda Sáerlabraid agrees to break a geis prohibiting his people from eating in company lest he appear churlishly inhospitable to the visiting Conn.  

The decision to uphold personal geis in lieu of fulfilling broader social obligations was, quite simply, wrong, as is clear in the brief tale of Caier and Néde, the one unambiguous instance in which a man makes such a choice. Tempted by Caier's treacherous wife, the poet Néde demands from the king a knife which it is geis for him to hand over. When the king denies the poet's request, Néde utters a satire which raises the inevitable disgraceful blisters on Caier's face, forcing him to flee his kingdom. Sought by the remorseful Néde a year later, the former king again flees, only to die of shame crouched in the hollow beneath a flagstone. If Néde's abuse of his poetic power is the main theme of this anecdote, Caier is also found wanting. Confronted with a cruel but clear choice, he makes the wrong decision and as a result his death is merely pathetic, and not, like those of Cú Chulainn and Conaire, stirring, indeed exemplary.

Blind obedience to an incomprehensible extraneous force was not, then, the sole appropriate response to taboo in early Irish literature. Instead, as is nowhere more evident than in the examples just discussed, geis was almost entirely assimilated within and subordinated to the coherent, honour-based ethical code of that literature. Startling and tantalizing vestiges of primitive origins do, of course, survive, and anthropology can provide invaluable assistance in their reconstruction, but geis as we have it is not the unadulterated raw material of the fieldworker, but rather an evolving social institution reshaped in the image of a specific and vividly realized ethos, in terms of which alone it is adequately comprehensible. In their sophisticated manipulation of the primordial power of taboo the creators and reductors of early Irish literature have vitally and vibrantly incarnated Salmon Reinaich's dictum, 'Le passage du tabou à l'interdiction motivé, raisonnée, raisonnable, c'est presque l'histoire des progrès de l'esprit humain'.

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112 Best, 'Eachtra Airt meic Cuindic', Ériu iii. 158.
113 Meyer, 'Sanas Cormaic', Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts 4, pp. 58-60, entry 698, 'gaira'. It could be argued that Blai Briuga likewise incorrectly elevates adherence to personal geis over social obligation. His death, like that of Caier, is utterly unheroic. The case of Fergus is more ambiguous. His feasting geis is, of course, not purely personal, but rather serves to confirm the importance of aggressive generosity in the competitive structure. Nevertheless one could argue that he chooses to affirm a secondary heroic virtue, generosity, over a primary one, protection. The virulence with which Deirdre reproaches him makes plain her opinion of his choice.
114 Reinaich, Orpheus, p. 6.