

TRANSMUTATIONS OF IMMORTALITY IN 'THE LAMENT OF THE OLD WOMAN OF BEARE'

THE 'Lament of the Old Woman of Beare' is generally regarded as one of the finest surviving specimens of early Irish verse¹ – perhaps indeed, as David Greene and Frank O'Connor claimed, 'the greatest of Irish poems'.² This consensus coexists, however, with a wide diversity of interpretation: almost every scholar who has worked closely with the text has brought to it a somewhat different perspective. Kuno Meyer took the view that the poem is 'the lament of an old hetaira who contrasts the privations and sufferings of her old age with the pleasures of her youth, when she had been the delight of kings.'³ Meyer (and also Gerard Murphy) elsewhere expanded considerably on the legendary background, mediaeval and modern, of the Old Woman herself, without however looking too closely at the specific relevance of these legends to the poem;⁴ further overviews of the modern folklore by Eleanor Hull and A. H. Krappé came close to losing sight of the poem entirely.⁵ Other commentators have suggested subtler readings: thus James Carney proposed that the poet had adopted a female persona 'in his capacity as "king-lover"', and tentatively identified the author as the eighth-century scholar-poet nicknamed 'Caillech Bérré' in *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*.⁶ Seán Ó Coileáin, following a suggestion of John Kelleher's, has seen the Old Woman as personifying the sovereignty of the Corco Loígde after that group's loss of the overkingship of Munster.⁷ B. K. Martin has assigned specifically native concepts a peripheral place in the poem, and has seen it as reflecting primarily patristic (and classical) influences, citing parallels from literature of the *de contemptu mundi* type.⁸ For Proinsias Mac Cana, a pagan-Christian polarity is the poem's essential feature: it deals with 'the deep incompatibility between christianity and the world of pagan

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² D. Greene and F. O'Connor (ed.), *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry A.D. 600 to 1200* (London 1967), 7.

³ K. Meyer, 'Stories and songs from Irish mss.,' *Otia Merseiana* 1 (1899) 119–28, p. 119.

⁴ K. Meyer (ed. and transl.), *The Vision of Mac Conglinne* (London 1892), 131–34; G. Murphy, 'The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare,' *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 55 C (1952/3) 83–109, pp. 83–85.

⁵ E. Hull, 'Legends and traditions of the Cailleach Bheara or Old Woman (Hag) of Beare,' *Folk-Lore* 38 (1927) 225–54; A. H. Krappé, 'La cailleach Bheara: notes de mythologie gaélique,' *Études celtiques* 1 (1936) 292–302.

⁶ J. Carney, 'The so-called "Lament of Créidhe"', *Éigse* 13 (1969/70) 227–42, pp. 236–39; this line of analysis is developed further by Katharine Simms, 'The poet as chieftain's widow: bardic elegies', in L. Breatnach, K. McCone and D. Ó Corráin (ed.), *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney*, (Maynooth 1989), pp. 400–11.

⁷ S. Ó Coileáin, 'The structure of a literary cycle,' *Ériu* 25 (1974) 88–125, p. 109.

⁸ B. K. Martin, 'The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare: a critical evaluation,' *Medium Aevum* 38 (1969) 245–61. Cf., most recently, Kim McCone, who has suggested that the Old Woman may be modelled on such scriptural figures as the widowed Jerusalem of Lamentations, in *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth 1990), 154.

belief and the inevitable outcome of their conflict in the conquest and impoverishment of the latter.⁹ In a recent article, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has pointed out that, under the name Buí, the Old Woman was associated with the Boyne-valley tumuli; and he has argued persuasively that she is to be identified as Lug's consort and the personified kingship of Tara.¹⁰ Now that a new edition and translation of the poem have been provided by Donncha Ó hAodha,¹¹ it may not be amiss to take a fresh look at the text, considering it in the light of some parallels in the earlier literature which have not, as far as I know, been brought to bear upon it hitherto.

The 'Lament' makes extensive use of two natural images: the sea along the rocky coast of the Beare peninsula, and the rich plain of Femen in Tipperary. In terms of the *argument* of the poem, each has the same import, exemplifying the cyclical regeneration of nature in contrast with the linear existence of the human individual: the tide will return after every ebb, and grass sprouts again every year, but the Old Woman's youth and beauty are gone forever. In terms of the poem's *narrative background*, however, sea and land may be seen as reflecting another contrast: in age the speaker is associated with the bleak coast (as the very name 'Old Woman of Beare' and the associated local legends indicate); while her youth as consort of kings was evidently spent in the rich plain, with its chariots and royal strongholds.¹² On different levels, then, the poem presents two distinct temporal oppositions: cyclical versus linear time (plain and sea versus woman), and past versus present (plain and youth versus sea and age).

The second of these oppositions, variously developed, provides the theme of several important early Irish poems; we may now briefly consider some of these.

(a) The curious little poem 'The Dialogue of Bran's Druid and Febul's Prophetess', which James Carney assigned 'at latest to the early seventh century', consists of two allusive speeches, of which it is the second which is relevant to the present inquiry. Here the prophetess recalls her youth as a king's lover ('I was not unattractive . . . to the king of Mag Fuindsidi'), and bemoans the destruction of a prosperous kingdom beneath the waters of Lough Foyle ('white-flowered Mag Febuil is a rocky grey sea').¹³ The use of natural imagery here and in the 'Lament' is closely parallel: the rich plain represents the past, the days of the speaker's desirability; while the grey sea embodies a desolate present. The difference is that what is metaphor in the 'Lament' is concrete actuality in the earlier poem: where land once was, sea now is. In fact, as Carney demonstrated, the 'Dialogue'

⁹ P. Mac Cana, *Celtic mythology* (2nd edn, New York 1985), 93.

¹⁰ T. Ó Cathasaigh, 'The eponym of Cnogba', *Éigse* 23 (1989) 27–38.

¹¹ D. Ó hAodha, 'The lament of the Old Woman of Beare', in Breatnach, McCone and Ó Corráin, *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*, 308–31. Dr Ó hAodha did not himself undertake any comprehensive thematic analysis of the poem, confining himself instead for the most part to textual questions; he has argued cogently for a date of composition c.900. All citations from the poem will be to the quatrain-numbers in Ó hAodha's edition.

¹² It should be noted that the opposition suggested here does not rigidly dictate the poem's use of these images: even in the present the Old Woman still rides across the plain (q. 4), and in q. 17 the sea is a symbol of youth. That there may be a specific reason for the equivocal use of natural imagery will, I hope, become apparent below; at all events, the implicit context of the poem seems relatively clear.

¹³ 'The earliest Bran material', in B. Naumann and J. O'Meara (ed.), *Latin script and letters AD 400–900: Festschrift presented to Ludwig Bieler on the occasion of his 70th birthday* (Leiden 1976) 174–93, pp. 181–83.

preserves evidence of an early flood-legend, a specimen of a type of tale very common, and very important, in Insular Celtic tradition.¹⁴

(*b*) The early poem ‘Ba mol Míden midlaige’, which (as Carney pointed out) shares linguistic features with the ‘Dialogue’, again deals with a kingdom inundated by a body of water, in this case Lough Neagh. In the accompanying prose we are told that a princess named Uiriú survived the catastrophe.¹⁵ A fuller account of the eruption of Lough Neagh, and of its consequences, is provided by the Middle Irish tale ‘The Death of Echu son of Mairid’.¹⁶ Here the survivor is Uiriú’s sister Lí Ban, who lives on in the form of a mermaid until she is baptised several centuries later.¹⁷ She then dies and goes to heaven: this is a common enough ending in conversion-tales, but in the present instance seems particularly reminiscent of the prose introduction to the ‘Lament’, where it appears to be the Old Woman’s consecration as a nun which brings her series of rejuvenations to an end.¹⁸ Just before her baptism Lí Ban recites a poem in which she bewails the flood, and describes her own subsequent adventures, in terms very reminiscent both of the prophetess and of the Old Woman herself; two of its quatrains may be translated as follows.¹⁹

Much tribulation in every place,
not fortunate is the stronghold of the woman’s sons (?):
the plain where once were herds of horses –
it is a boat which voyages upon it.

Whether I was human or a water-creature,
the princes of Mag Breg loved me.
It was no (mere) nickname: I was a paragon (*lí*);

¹⁴ Carney, ‘The earliest Bran material’, 189–92; cf. J. Carey, ‘Origin and development of the Cesair legend’, *Éigse* 22 (1987) 37–48, for further instances and discussion. Ammianus Marcellinus cited Timagenes as his authority for the Gaulish druidic doctrine ‘re uera fuisse populi partem indigenam, sed alios quoque ab insulis extimis confluxisse et tractibus transrhenanis, crebritate bellorum et *alluione feruidi maris* sedibus suis expulsos’ (15.9.4).

¹⁵ K. Meyer (ed.), ‘The Laud genealogies and tribal histories’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 8 (1912) 291–338, p. 307.32–33.

¹⁶ R. I. Best and O. Bergin (ed.), *Lebor na hUidre: Book of the Dun Cow* (Dublin 1929), 95–100; cf. W. Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé: the Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London 1905), 52–54.

¹⁷ The sequence of events is intriguing in detail: ‘Then Lí Ban was for a full year in her sun-room (*grianán*) beneath the lake, together with her lapdog; and God was protecting her from the waters of Lough Neagh. Then one day she said, “O Lord, fortunate would be the one who could be in the shape of a salmon, so as to be swimming through the seas!” Then she was changed into the shape of a salmon, and her dog into the shape of an otter; and he followed her beneath the waters and the seas, wherever she went in every direction’ (R. I. Best and O. Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre*, 99). This state of affairs continues throughout the three centuries preceding her conversion. It is interesting to compare the events of *Tochmarc Étaíne*: Étaín is transformed into a ‘pool of water’ (*lind n-uscí*), which then becomes a purple fly; the fly is blown for seven years ‘upon rocks of the sea and waves of the deep’ until Oengus puts her in a *grianán*; she is then blown away again, swallowed by a mortal woman, and born as a human child (R. I. Best and O. Bergin (ed.), ‘Tochmarc Étaíne’, *Eriu* 12 (1934/38) 137–96, pp. 152–56).

¹⁸ Ó hAodha, ‘The Lament’, 309: ‘She passed into seven periods of youth (*secht n-ais n-aited*), so that every husband used to pass from her to death of old age, so that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were peoples and races. And for a hundred years she wore the veil, after Cuimíne had blessed it and placed it on her head. Then age and infirmity came to her. . .’.

¹⁹ R. I. Best and O. Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre*, 96–97.

the King who moves the sea has guarded me.

Again, the association *land : water :: past : present* finds concrete embodiment in a flood-legend; and again it is the supernaturally prolonged memory of a female persona which provides the basis for a lament.

(c) There is evidence of a belief in more recent times that fairies still lived in the flooded region beneath Lough Neagh;²⁰ and there are other indications that the happy antediluvian realms of the distant past were equated with the blissful Otherworld thought to exist underground or underwater in the present.²¹ We may accordingly posit a threefold symbolic parallelism: *land : water :: past : present :: Otherworld : this world*. A striking example of this chain of analogies is provided by the well known poem recited by Manannán in *Immram Brain*; here the contrast between fertile plain and barren sea, reflecting a *temporal* hiatus in the ‘Dialogue’, becomes a matter merely of *perception*.²²

For Bran it is a wondrous delight
to go across the sea in his little boat;
for me, in my chariot from afar,
it is a flowery plain which he traverses.

What is clear sea
to the beaked ship in which Bran is
is Mag Mell abounding in flowers
to me in my two-wheeled chariot.

Bran beholds
many laughing waves across the clear sea.
As for me, I behold on Mag Mon
flawless red-topped flowers.

The radiant land of the immortals, and the sea traversed by the human voyagers, are *simultaneously* real; but only the eyes of the god can discern their coexistence. Evidence that this poem was influenced by an earlier text, which in fact dealt with the bursting of Lough Foyle, draws the web of associations still tighter.²³

Poetic use of the images of sea and plain can, therefore, be seen to have far-reaching connotations in Irish tradition – but how relevant are these

²⁰ Thus Lady Wilde, *Ancient legends, mystic charms and superstitions of Ireland* (London 1888), 248–50. Cf., for example, the legend of Lough Gur paraphrased by D. Fitzgerald, ‘Popular tales of Ireland’, *Revue Celtique* 4 (1879/80) 171–200, pp. 185–86, 190.

²¹ I have presented supporting evidence for this view in ‘Time, space, and the Otherworld’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 7 (1987) 1–27, pp. 8–10.

²² A. G. Van Hamel, *Immrama* (Dublin 1941), 14 §§33–35; cf. S. Mac Mathúna (ed.), *Immram Brain: Bran’s Journey to the Land of the Women* (Tübingen 1985), 39.

²³ I refer to the anecdote *Immacallam Coluim Chille 7 ind Óclaig i Carn Eolaig*, in K. Meyer (ed. and transl.), ‘The Colloquy of Colum Cille and the Youth at Carn Eolaig’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 2 (1899) 313–17; also P. Grosjean, ‘S. Columbae Hiensis cum Mongano heroe colloquium’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 45 (1927) 75–83; extensive discussion by P. Mac Cana, ‘On the “prehistory” of *Immram Brain*’, *Ériu* 26 (1975) 33–52. Colum Cille asks a mysterious youth, ‘What was it formerly, this lake which we behold?’, and is answered with a description of a fertile and prosperous kingdom, followed by an account of metamorphoses echoed in Manannán’s prophecy of the career of Mongán.

connotations to the poem under consideration here?²⁴ More specifically, have we any clearer evidence for associating the Old Woman of Beare with the corpus of Gaelic flood-legends?

In fact we have; the evidence is to be found, however, not in mediaeval literature but in the folklore collected in the course of the last few generations. Popular tradition concerning the Old Woman is very rich, and much more can be done with it than will be attempted here;²⁵ for the present, I wish only to call attention to those aspects of her legend which can be associated with the Lough Foyle / Lough Neagh complex.

(a) A point emphasised in all accounts of the Old Woman is her extreme age;²⁶ this may be expressed by statements that she has witnessed momentous transformations of the landscape, including the replacement of land by sea.²⁷

(b) Lady Wilde recounted a legend of the 'Cailleach Biorar', said to live on or near a lake which she protected from being drained. Its water was believed to turn hair white – perhaps in this instance an echo of the association of water with time and old age.²⁸

(c) In Scotland, the Old Woman is credited with having formed Loch Awe and Loch Ness by leaving magical wells uncovered;²⁹ it is in just the same way that an unnamed woman in Ireland was said to have released the waters which became Lough Neagh.

(d) Another Scottish legend describes the Old Woman's periodic rejuvenations as taking place once every hundred years, associating them specifically with immersion in the waters of Loch Bá on the island of Mull. She was obliged to bathe in the instant at daybreak before any bird or animal had made a sound: her death came when she failed to seize this moment.³⁰

This is a selective presentation, based on a very imperfect acquaintance with the evidence; but the kinship of this material with the legends discussed above seems fairly clear. Here too we find a link between water and time, the idea of an

²⁴ An example of the same imagery's use with no demonstrable legendary background is afforded by the puzzling little poem 'Gas lossa', edited and translated by J. Carney in *Éigse* 13 (1969/70) 99–103; note especially the stanza 'Happy he who is equally at home on the ebbing sea (*muir aithbech*) and the fruitful land' (*ibid.*, p. 101).

²⁵ Thus, for example, Gearóid Ó Cruallaich's recent study, 'Continuity and adaptation in legends of Cailleach Bhéarra', *Béaloidéas* 56 (1988) 153–78. I am grateful to Joseph Nagy for calling this article to my attention, and for sending me a copy of it.

²⁶ See, for example, D. Ó Fotharta, *Siamsa a' Gheimhri* (Dublin 1892), 116–17.

²⁷ Thus K. W. Grant, *Myth, tradition and story from Western Argyll* (Oban 1925) 4, cites the couplet '*An uair a bha 'mhuir 'na coill 's 'n a crìonaich, | bha mise 'n sin am nàonaig òig*,' 'When the sea was woods and timber, I was a young maiden.'

²⁸ Wilde, *Ancient legends*, 149; but water is of course credited with the power to turn hair white in other contexts (thus Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hiberniae* II.40). Intriguingly, the Cailleach Biorar is said to have had Finn's famous dog Bran as a companion. Cf. Lí Ban's lapdog, mentioned above; Uiriú is also said to have had a dog who escaped from the flood (Meyer, 'The Laud genealogies', 307.32). We may perhaps compare the account in *Sanas Cormaic* of the drowning of Breccán mac Maini and all his followers in the famous whirlpool of Coire Breccáin; only his lapdog (*oirce*) escaped, and its skull subsequently revealed the event to a seer (K. Meyer (ed.), *Sanas Cormaic in Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* 4 (1912), 28 §323).

²⁹ Hull, 'Legends and traditions', 249–50; Grant, *Myth, tradition and story*, 9.

³⁰ Hull, 'Legends and traditions', 251, citing information received from 'Mr. G. J. McKay, who is making an exhaustive collection of the Cailleach traditions'.

ancient woman who has witnessed past ages, and a connexion between this woman and the formation of specific lakes.

If we bring this diverse material together, we can, I think, fill in much of the conceptual background of the 'Lament'. The Old Woman is associated on the one hand with catastrophic floods in the distant past; on the other with periodic rejuvenation, and the miraculous recovery of youth and beauty. As I have suggested above, the happy antediluvian state could be thought of as continuing, magically concealed, beneath the surface of mundane existence: the Old Woman, a survivor from a former age who is able to return to her own former condition, seems to incarnate this ideological complex.³¹

The poem takes the Old Woman as its persona and makes sensitive use of the associated imagery of land and water; but its perspective is radically different from that of the tradition on which it draws. The Old Woman is christian here, not pagan; she looks toward death, not rebirth; and she sees the cycles of nature, whether on land or sea, as phenomena contrasting with and alien to her own condition as a specifically human being. Something of considerable interest is happening: poetic and symbolic conventions inherited from paganism, employed in ways which reflect a perceptive understanding of their earlier meaning, are then rejected in favour of the christian vision. It is here, I think, in this dynamic and informed confrontation of two belief-systems, that we may find much of the poem's power – perhaps indeed its central message.

Almost all of the poem's images are drawn from the secular sphere; and their associations are with values and ideas which, because bound up with the impermanence of mortality, are in the last analysis seen to be inadequate to the human spirit. The 'eternity' of the native Otherworld, immanent in the landscape and closely linked with seasonal festivals and the fertility of crops and herds, is challenged by the christian eternity, an unimaginable condition in a kingdom which 'is not of this world'. The poem's christian argument is expressed almost wholly in negative terms, in the laying bare of the tragic character of the merely temporal. Its conception of the world, where the visible is a snare and only the unseen is of lasting worth, is reflected on the level of structure and diction: what is most important is what we do not see and are not told. It is this deliberate obliqueness, I think, which has misled some commentators into seeing nostalgia as the essential theme of the 'Lament';³² while the vivid portrayal of regret is clearly an important feature of the whole, I think that the poet's eyes were directed beyond the vanished pleasures which the Old Woman recollects.

A few indirect scriptural allusions scattered through the text point in the same direction.

(a) Quatrain 7 may be rendered 'My body bitterly desires to go to a habitation where it may be recognised; when the Son of God thinks it timely, may he come to

³¹ The recurrent rejuvenation of the 'sovereignty goddess', pertinently adduced in this context by Ó Cathasaigh ('The eponym of Cnogba', 32), expresses the same idea: her youth and immortality are those of the Otherworld with which her union with a mortal king aligns his kingdom. For further discussion of this theme, and of the homology of 'Golden Age' and Otherworld, see Ó Cathasaigh's perceptive study 'The semantics of *sid*', *Éigse* 17 (1977/79) 137–55.

³² Thus Greene and O'Connor called the poem a 'great song in praise of worldly joy' (*A Golden Treasury*, 8).

recover his deposit.³³ There are two levels here, I think. Most obviously, the Old Woman is saying that everyone who once knew her is dead, and that her dying body is now tending toward the grave which already holds her contemporaries; but then she speaks of a ‘deposit’ (*aithne*), which Christ is to return to redeem. This *aithne* has been variously interpreted:³⁴ but the primary allusion is almost certainly to the saving and indwelling *depositum* rather mysteriously mentioned in 2 Timothy 1:12 and 14. As Richard Sharpe has pointed out to me, Adomnán has Colum Cille refer to his own soul as a *depositum*, retrieved by an angel at the time of death.³⁵

(*b*) In quatrain 22, comparing her luxurious youth with her cheerless old age, the Old Woman interjects the statement ‘Every acorn is mortal’ (*Cech dercoin is erchraide*). This can be read simply as another expression of the pathos which pervades the poem; its full significance, however, emerges more clearly when it is juxtaposed with a celebrated pronouncement of St Paul: ‘Foolish one, that which you sow is not brought to life, unless first it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but only the seed.’³⁶ Here the Old Woman’s complaint evokes a biblical passage which answers it – a particularly striking example of the presence-in-absence of christian doctrine in this poem.

(*c*) In quatrain 26, the Old Woman is made to say ‘My right eye was taken from me in exchange for a land which will be my perpetual possession (*ar thír mbithdiles*);³⁷ and the left eye was taken to confirm my claim to it.’³⁸ The reference here is clearly to Matthew 5:29: ‘If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is better for you that one of your members should perish, than that your whole body should be thrown into Hell.’³⁹ The Old Woman has lost *both* her eyes, presumably to the blindness of old age – again, the failure of the physical body in this life is linked with hopes of a transcendent immortality. It may be that the specific emphasis on blindness reflects an idea that salvation lies in separation from the senses.⁴⁰

³³ Ó hAodha, ‘The Lament’, 311: ‘*Tócair mo chorp co n-aichri / dochum adba diar aichni; / tan bas mithig la Mac nDé / do-té do breith a aithni*’.

³⁴ Cf. Ó hAodha’s note, *ibid.*, p. 321; *aithne* recurs in quatrain 33.

³⁵ A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (ed. and transl.), *Adomnán’s Life of Columba* (2nd edn, Oxford 1991), 520 (III.23): ‘Noster uero patronus sanctam propriam a deo sibi commendatam animam depositum nuncupauit’. The usage apparently derives from Evagrius’s Latin version of Athanasius’s *Life of St Antony*.

³⁶ 1 Cor. 15:36–37: ‘*Insiptens, tu quod seminas non uiuificatur, nisi prius moriatur. Et quod seminas, non corpus, quod futurum est, seminas, sed nudum granum*’.

³⁷ On the sense of *bithdiles* see Ó hAodha’s remarks, ‘The Lament’, 327–28; note further in *Tochmarc Étaíne* use of the term *bithdísli* to designate perpetual possession of the Otherworld dwelling of Síd in Broga (Bergin and Best, ‘Tochmarc Étaíne’, p. 146.4).

³⁸ Ó hAodha, ‘The Lament’, p. 314 q. 26: ‘*Rucad úaim-se mo shúil des / da reic ar thír mbithdiles (sic leg.) / oculus rucad int shúil chlé / do fbornach a fhoirdíle*’.

³⁹ ‘*Quod si oculus tuus dexter scandalizet te, erue eum et proice abs te: expedit enim tibi ut pereat unum membrum tuorum, quam totum corpus tuum mittatur in gehennam*’.

⁴⁰ Cf. quatrain 24, where the line ‘*Ropo toil Dé cecham-theirp*’, translated by Ó hAodha as ‘May whatever hinders me be God’s will’, might perhaps be better rendered as ‘May whatever cuts me off/separates me be God’s will’; cf. E. G. Quin et al. (ed.), (*Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials* (Dublin 1913–76) (*DIL*), s.v. *do-eipen*).

All three of these passages touch allusively on the christian doctrine of the resurrection: the expectation of a future realm of blessed ever-living ones, contrasted with the lost antediluvian kingdoms and the hidden Otherworld which seem to have played so important a part in the world-view of the pagan Irish. In the 'Lament', christian spirituality defines itself by contrast with beliefs of which it retains a sophisticated understanding – a fascinating dialectic which seems characteristic of the intellectual culture of early mediaeval Ireland.

I have here suggested a reading of the 'Lament' which may, I think, recover some of the ideas governing its composition; even if I have been successful, however, these remarks do not even begin to exhaust the significance of what is, finally, a beautiful and deeply moving poem. The last word may be left with James Carney, who qualified his own comments on the 'Lament' by observing that it is 'many-faceted and deserving of more discussion; like many another great poem it may not allow any single and exclusive interpretation, and my effort to interpret it here is subject to this reservation.'⁴¹

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⁴¹ Carney, "The so-called "Lament of Créidhe"', p. 236.