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Images of ageing in the early Irish poem *Caillech Bérrí*¹

The Irish poem *Caillech Bérrí*, also known as ‘The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare’, was written in Old Irish possibly around 900.² The narrator of the poem claims to be the old woman of Beare, a peninsula in West Cork in Ireland, lamenting her lost youth and the pains of old age. It is not known, however, whether the author of the poem actually was a woman or a man adopting a female persona. Nevertheless, the poem was included in the volume IV of *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, titled as *Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*. For clarity’s sake I am here going to refer to the poem’s author as a she, although the question of her gender has not been conclusively solved. Despite the poem’s popularity as one of the best known and most loved poems of early Ireland, the interpretation of its meaning still entails several problems.³

The poem is written in a highly literate style with frequent use of alliteration and repeated words and motifs. It has survived to us with a very unusual transmission history. The poem exists in five manuscripts, four from the 16th century and one from the 17th. It is typical for early Irish texts to survive in much later compilations, but it is quite unusual for an early Irish poetic text to be preserved in multiple copies. All five manuscripts are very close textually, but the stanzas occur in a different order, which distinguishes the two manuscript traditions. The editors have also dismissed certain stanzas as interpolations, but it seems safer to treat the medieval evidence as it stands, with the possible exception of §27, to which I will return later.⁴

Several attempts have been made to interpret the poem from different perspectives ranging from folkloristic to mythological and historical. There is no consensus, however, either on the exact dating, author, or meaning of the poem. One aspect of the poem that has not been discussed in detail, although it is taken as an obvious fact in all the studies, is that the poem’s main topic is the feelings

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² There exist several editions and translations of the poem. The most widely used currently is Ó hAodha 1989, he also lists the earlier editions in p. 308 and discusses the dating of the poem in p. 310.

³ Many of the ideas in this paper came originally from the participants of a seminar on *Caillech Bérrí* at the Department of Old Irish at University College Cork during term 2002–3. I wish to thank all the participants of the seminar and especially Caitriona Ó Dochartaigh who organized it.

⁴ I am greatly indebted to Harriet Thomsett who let me have a copy of her paper ‘Reassessing the Poem of the Caillech Bérré’ given in the Irish Conference of Medievalists in Kilkenny in June 2005.

connected with being old. The poem is a lament of old age, and thus it is natural to consider it from the viewpoint of what it means to be an old woman in early medieval Ireland. This means taking the literal level of the poem and the feelings expressed in it seriously, instead of using a specific interpretative mode to read some kind of deeper meaning into the words. The problem is that none of these interpretative modes have been able to satisfactorily explain the poem as a whole. I will start, however, by evaluating the different approaches used by scholars in reading this poem and then return to the feelings of old age expressed in it.

The first problem affecting the interpretation of the poem as a whole is caused by the translation of the word *caillech* in the first line of the second stanza where the speaker identifies herself saying *Is mé Caillech Bérré Buí*, ‘I am the *Caillech Bérrí* (or Old Woman of Beare) of Buí’. Buí is the name of Dursey island located right at the end of Beara peninsula.⁵ The word *caillech* is derived from Latin *pallium* meaning ‘veil’ and its primary meaning is ‘veiled one’. However, in Old and Middle Irish it has a range of meanings from ‘old woman’ to ‘nun’ or ‘hag’ (Ní Dhonnchadha 1994–5, 71). Thus it is not clear whether the poem should be seen in a religious context reading *caillech* as a nun or as a purely secular text with possible mythological allusions.

There are few overtly Christian stanzas in the poem, namely stanzas 7, 24, 31 and 33, where either Jesus or God is mentioned. In stanzas 31 and 33 Jesus is cited as *Mac Muire*, ‘son of Mary’. In stanzas 7 and 33 there is a reference to a deposit which is due to be paid back to Christ. The word used for deposit is a legal term, *aithne*, but the image is biblical, from 2. Tim. 1:14 ‘Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.’ The idea of a soul being a deposit from God also occurs in hagiographical writings, including the well-known Latin translation of *Vita Antonii* by Evagrius (20(15)) and *Vita Columbae* of Adomnán (iii.23).⁶ Also stanza 26 includes biblical allusion and a reference to the Christian afterlife alongside with legal terminology. There the reference to the eyes that have been taken in order to secure the ownership of land is an allusion to Matt. 18:9 ‘And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.’⁷ Other Christian allusions in the poem include a reference to a chapel or oratory in stanza 22, and possibly the reference to the

⁵ Buí as a place name is discussed in Ó hAodha (1989, 318). The other approach is to take Buí as a personal name. That is the name of the wife of the ancient Celtic god Lugh and it is also connected with the megalithic monument in Knowth, Co. Meath. See Ó Cathasaigh (1989, 27–38) and MacCana (1968, 92). There is also a variant reading of this line: *Is mé Caillech Bérré boi* ‘...Caillech Bérrí that was to be found in Ní Dhonnchadha (2002, 111).

⁶ The identification of 2. Tim. 1:14 as the source of this idea was also made in Ó hAodha (1989, 321). The association with *Vita Columbae* and *Vita Antonii* was also noted in Carey (1999, 36).

⁷ For a brief discussion of the legal terminology used here see Ó hAodha (1989, 327–328). See also DIL: *diles*. The reference to the biblical passage was also noted in Carey (1999, 36). For the use of legal language in another poem put into the mouth of a woman, *Isucán*, see Clancy (1996, 61–64).

veil, *caille*, over the speaker's head in stanzas 11 and 12, which could mean a nun's veil. References to kings in stanzas 6 and 21 could also possibly be understood as referring to God. This interpretation seems especially plausible in stanza 21, where the reference to a king spreading a green cloak over the hills and thus replacing a coarser one could be taken as meaning the change of seasons from winter to summer.

B.K. Martin has interpreted the poem as representing *de contemptu mundi* – type of literature thus connecting it to themes known from patristic and classical literatures. According to him the temporal kingdom of the world is opposed to the true and eternal kingdom of God in the poem. Thus its main theme would be contempt towards the present world, which is shown to be 'transient, mutable, and false' (Martin 1969, 245–261). In my mind, however, the contrast in the poem is rather between the present and the past of the narrator than between the worldly present and the future kingdom of God. The author is not denying her past or giving a moral lesson on the transient nature of worldly goods, but rather fondly remembering her youth and contrasting it with her miserable state at the present as can clearly be seen from stanzas 2 to 5 and 23. The aspect of Christian afterlife seems to be phrased in the poem by the allusions to the soul as a deposit. The waiting for heaven is expressed especially clearly in stanza 7: 'My body desires to go fiercely, to a dwelling where it is known, when it is timely with the Son of God, he may come judging his deposit.' The theme of afterlife, however, is not present in most of the stanzas, and the author's focus is not directed forward towards it but rather towards the lost past. Thus I cannot see *contemptus mundi*, or any other clearly Christian themes for that matter, as explaining the meaning of the poem as a whole. As Christian themes can be found in some of the stanzas the poem can be said to be a Christian one but not a religious poem as such.

A second approach to the poem includes folkloristic and mythological readings. This approach has been brought about by the fact that there exists in later folklore both in Ireland and Scotland a figure known as *Caillech Bérrí*.⁸ She is an extremely complex figure with a multiplicity of forms and functions and her cluster of roles includes those of a divine ancestress, an epitome of longevity in passing repeatedly through the cycle of youth and age, a sovereignty symbol, and a geotectonic role in landscape formation. As it is not at all clear how this figure relates to the woman with the same name in the poem, scholars have tried to consolidate these two in various ways.

⁸ Many of the folklore traditions pertaining to *Caillech Bérrí* are related in Hull (1927, 225–254). She does not discuss the poem at length, but nevertheless she sees the *Caillech Bérrí* of the poem as a pagan goddess who reappears in later days as a Christian nun. Krappe also discusses the folklore traditions pertaining to *Caillech Bérrí* using comparative material from other Indo-European cultures (1936, 292–302).

Proinsias MacCana sees the poem as a product of a monastic literati who has adopted the persona of *Caillech Bérrí*, the mother-goddess, shaper and guardian of the land, and a consort of kings. According to him the monastic author avails himself of the semantic ambiguity of the word *caillech* inventing the fiction that the legendary figure had taken a nun's veil at the end of her days. In MacCana's view the real subject of the poem is 'the deep incompatibility between Christianity and the world of pagan belief and the inevitable outcome of their conflict in the conquest and impoverishment of the latter' (1968, 92–93).

Tomás Ó Cathasaigh concludes that the woman's apparent promiscuity in the poem is of the political kind and thus it reflects the *caillech*'s role as a goddess of sovereignty. According to him 'she is a *caillech* who is destined to die because she will never again be transformed into a beautiful young woman.' Ó Cathasaigh adds that the poem clearly has a Christian dimension in addition to the mythico-political one, but does not explicate the relationship between the two further (1989, 36–37).

Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch sees the ideological ambiguities between *Caillech Bérrí* as the lingering representation of a profane, native eternity and as the Christian nun finally embracing the prospect of the heavenly eternity as the key to understanding the poem. He states that it is clear that the Old Woman of Beare has been the consort of kings and thus the embodiment of the sovereignty of the kingdom as can be seen from stanzas 8 and 23.⁹ This tradition forms the literate, learned level of traditions pertaining to *Caillech Bérrí*. According to Ó Cruaíoch there is also a separate popular and unlearned level of traditions which contains a range of manifestations of an ancient divine with general characteristics of the Old European *magna mater*. At the level of popular tradition the connotations of *Caillech Bérrí* are primarily those of a wilderness figure which has associations with the storms of winter, the storm clouds, the winter sea, and other manifestations of wild nature.¹⁰

Also Katharine Simms sees *Caillech Bérrí* as the embodiment of the sovereignty principle. According to her the message of the poem is that her association with kings is past and she has now uneasily been recruited into the Church. She finds a historical context for the poem in a revolt between 793 and 803 when the Corcu Duibne, the people with whom *Caillech Bérrí* is associated with in a prose introduction of the poem, rose against their overlords, the Eoganacht. Therefore the poem would call to mind the glories of a decayed local sovereignty that has been eclipsed by another dynasty.¹¹

⁹ Also Kim McCone touches upon *Caillech Bérrí* in his discussion of the sovereignty principle; albeit he finds for it biblical models in Isaiah 54 and Lamentations 1.1. in addition to the native Irish tradition (1990, 154).

¹⁰ Ó Cruaíoch (1988, 153–178). See also Ó Cruaíoch (1994, 147–162).

¹¹ Simms (1988, 400–411). The dynastic connections have also been discussed in Ó Coileáin (1974, 108–110).

John Carey connects the poem with Irish flood legends where a land that is now under water is recalled by a survivor. He sees a similar kind of temporal opposition between the Old Woman's youth spent in the plain and her present by the sea as there exists in the legends between what used to be a plain and now is covered with water. He finds evidence for the association of the Old Woman of Beare with the Gaelic flood-legends in the later folklore where her age is expressed by statements that she has witnessed momentous transformations of the landscape, including the replacement of the land by sea. According to Carey the poet has taken the Old Woman as her persona but changed the perspective by making her into a Christian who looks forward to death instead of cyclical renewal as in nature. In Carey's view the poem touches on the Christian doctrine of the resurrection, the expectation of a future realm of blessed ever-living ones, which is contrasted with the lost antediluvian kingdoms and the otherworld hidden under water (1999, 30–37).

The characteristic of *Caillech Bérrí* that clearly features both in the poem and the folklore traditions is her extreme old age. It is her longevity that explains why she would be the plausible voice for a poem about the pains of old age. Her association with longevity is clearly expressed in a proverb which states that the longest-lived creatures are the yew tree, the eagle, and the *Caillech Bérrí*. In the Irish legends her longevity, however, is finite with a beginning and an end (Ó Cruaíoch 1994, 156–158).

Some traditions about her must have existed prior to the poem for the audience to be able to recognise her name right away and to see the connection between her figure and the message of the poem. She is mentioned as one of the famous figures in Armagh in the 12th century tale *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, but we do not have any earlier evidence for traditions pertaining to her.¹² Therefore the poem gives the earliest evidence for her existence and it has to serve as our primary evidence for the early traditions of *Caillech Bérrí*.

The later folklore can give us clues that help in interpreting the much earlier poem, but there is a danger of circular argumentation when the poem is interpreted in the light of the later tradition resulting in scholars superimposing their own ideas based on much later evidence on the early material. Therefore I would suggest taking the poem as our starting point and trying to read it as it is instead of starting with a preconceived idea of its meaning.

Usually *Caillech Bérrí* is interpreted as a supernatural character in one way or another, but is there anything in the poem itself that would require this mode of interpretation? In my mind *Caillech Bérrí*'s supernatural character is far from clear. For example stanza 8, which has been used as the primary evidence for the sovereignty theory, does not necessitate any kind of supernatural meaning but can be taken as referring to her youth in the royal court. The same can also be said of

¹² Carney has even tentatively suggested that the author of the poem is the *Caillech Bérrí* of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (1970, 237).

stanza 23. I do not see any evidence either to support the view that she has led an unnaturally long life and experienced cycles of renewal finally coming to the end of her time in the poem. This theory is supported only by the prose introduction, where it is stated that she passed into seven periods of youth outlasting in the process seven husbands in age and becoming the progenitor of several peoples. The prose introduction, however, cannot be taken as part of the original poem since it is found only in one of the manuscripts.¹³ The poem itself contrasts the cyclical time of nature and the linear time of man without giving any clues that the Old Woman would have previously experienced renewal herself. Thus there is no evidence in the poem that she would be like the sovereignty figures that are renewed from hideous old hags into beautiful young maids with the coming of a new king. The Old Woman of the poem is rather stating the fact that a man's time is finite unlike nature's where the decay of winter is followed by renewal in spring as can be seen from stanza 13 where a reference is made to the crops yellowing at the plain of Femen, and stanza 19 where the ages of man are paralleled with the seasons of nature.¹⁴ As there is nothing necessitating a supernatural reading of the poem I would suggest that perhaps we should read it as it is as a lament of an old woman. I am not denying the fact that *Caillech Bérrí* as a folkloristic and mythological figure has supernatural dimensions, but rather suggesting that the poem can be read in many ways and has several layers of meaning, including the genuine feelings of an old person.

When we look at the sentiments connected with ageing expressed in the poem we find them to be very human and very universal. The physical symptoms of age in the poem include skin turning yellow, thinness, bony and thin arms, hair being sparse and grey, need to wear clothing even in the sun, grey hair growing through the skin, and loss of eye-sight. Already this list of physical symptoms should alert us to the fact that we are dealing with the genuine feelings of an old person, although there may be a mythological dimension to the poem as well.

The poet is using some repeated terms and images to express ageing throughout the poem. The first of these can be found already in the first stanza, where the poet is watching the sea ebbing away and paralleling the movement of the sea with her life which she feels to be similarly running out. The image of ebb is repeated towards the end of the poem in stanzas 28 and 29 where it is paired with the floodtide. These stanzas can be grouped together with stanzas 27 and 30 that all feature the image of flooding. Stanza 27 is commonly taken as an interpolation since it also appears in the Irish place name lore, *dindshenchas*, and in *Acallam na Senórach* from 12th century (Ó hAodha 1989, 328). It would appear to have been incorporated into the poem from an external pre-existing source because of its first line which reads *Tri*

¹³ The prose introduction is found in Dublin, Trinity College, MS H.3.18. There is also a shorter version of it in the Book of Lecan. The introduction is edited and translated with some discussion in Ó hAodha (1989, 309–310). On the introduction see also Carney (1970, 236–237).

¹⁴ The poetic images used here are discussed in Martin (1969, 250–257).

thuile, ‘Three floods’, fitting it well together with the three following stanzas which all start with the words *Tonn tuili*, ‘Wave of flooding’. The poet returns to the image of the sea right at the end of the poem in stanzas 32 to 35. Stanza 34 explicitly states the connection between the sea-images and ageing, as well as between the cyclical time of nature and the linear time of man, when the poet says: ‘Happy the island of the great sea, the flooding comes to it after its ebb, as for me, I do not expect to come to me, the flood after the ebb.’

Another recurring motif in the poem is the image of clothing that is in some cases used as a metaphor for the body. In stanza 2 the speaker says that she used to wear an ever-new tunic, but now her body is so thin that she cannot wear out even a threadbare garment. The words for wearing clothing are *do-meil* in line 2 and *meilid* in line 4 of the stanza. These words are repeated throughout the poem both in the meanings of wearing clothing and spending time.¹⁵ The verb *meilid* also has the meaning of grinding and crushing in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (DIL). This range of meanings and the repeated use of these words bring into mind the idea of time being a mill that crushes everybody eventually. Similar sentiments are also expressed in stanza 1 where the poet says that old age devours her body joyfully. In stanzas 11 and 12 the Old Woman says that there is a poor white veil over her head: an image which is usually taken to refer to a nun’s veil. A plausible context for this would be a woman who has led a secular life and joined a monastery only at old age.¹⁶ This idea is supported by stanza 22 where her previous life feasting in brightly lit halls is contrasted with her present in the darkness of a chapel. In stanza 13 she says that she has worn out her old covering, which can be taken as a metaphor for her skin. In stanza 18 she states the need to wear a cloak even in the sun, and in stanza 21 cloaks are used as a metaphor for grass covering the plains. In stanza 25 a cloak is again used as a surrogate for the body, when the poet states that she sees on her mantle spots of age and compares her skin with the bark of an old tree. There is a similar use of a cloak also in stanza 20: ‘First I consumed my youth, I am glad that I so decided, although my leap over the wall was small, the cloak would still not be new.’ Here she states that even if she had spent her youth differently, her body would still not be young. Thus she is not regretting anything she did, but accepting the fact that there is time for everything and that age comes to everybody eventually. Similar sentiments are also expressed in stanza 12 where she states that her present state is not bad with her because once things were differently and stanza 19 where she says that youth is eventually followed by old age as surely as summer is followed by autumn and winter.

The author is not quite so resigned in all the stanzas, however, but her feelings seem to alternate between acceptance and miserable self-pity. In stanzas 10 and 11

¹⁵ For a brief discussion of the use of these verbs in the poem see Ó hAodha (1989, 318–319).

¹⁶ Women who joined monastery later in life are discussed with a reference to *Caillech Bérrí* in Harrington (2002, 158–163).

for example she is comparing her state with that of young girls and stating that grief and a poor veil across her hair are fitting for her since she is a miserable old woman. There is a sense of nostalgia about the past when she was feasting with kings as in stanzas 8, 9, and 23, as opposed to her present when she is drinking whey-water with old women instead of mead and wine. Nostalgia is also present in stanzas 3, 4, and 5, where she acts as a *laudatrix temporis acti*, contrasting the good old days when people were generous and did not boast, with the present time when people are boasting and love riches.

The linear timeline of the poem is completed by the glimpses of the resurrection offered by stanzas 7 and 26. Here we get the Christian dimension to the poem's time frame. Although the miserable Old Woman has nothing more to expect from her earthly existence, as stated in stanzas 11 and 15, she still has a reward awaiting her in the Christian heaven of the Son of Mary.

This is a very complex poem with different layers of meaning and some metaphors and references that do not readily open to a modern reader. At the level of emotions, however, it is a surprisingly modern and universal poem that can be appreciated by audiences of all times. This must have been the case also in the 16th and 17th centuries when it was copied into the manuscripts for it to have survived for us in as many copies as it did. This emotional identification also explains why it is such a popular poem in modern anthologies. Ageing is expressed in the poem through the image of the body, which makes it immediately universal since the bodily and mortal condition of man is a universal state and thus it is possible for all men to identify with the poet's alienation from her body and her ambivalent feelings towards ageing and approaching death.

If we take the poem as a starting point without any preconceived idea of its meaning based on the later evidence of folklore and look at it as a whole instead of concentrating on certain stanzas that are open to a mythological interpretation, it can be read simply as a lament of an old woman. It seems that the reason the author has adopted the persona of *Caillech Bérrí* is her connection with longevity, but she has used the persona to convey her genuine feelings of ageing. The sentiments portrayed in the poem are mixed. She is both lamenting her lost youth and accepting the fact that age comes eventually to everybody. Furthermore her vision is directed at the same time longingly back towards her youth and almost joyously forward towards the Christian hereafter. What connects the vision of the past and the future is the feeling of liberation, being free of the ailing and ageing body in which she is currently trapped. It is the mixed feelings in the poem that make it so readily accessible to modern readers at an emotional level and explain its allure, although we may not be able to understand the meaning of every single image in it.¹⁷

¹⁷ Martin repeats the old image of the passionate and imaginative Celts in his assessment of the literary appeal of the poem: 'It is at least partly in the Irish literary genius for the dramatic, the concrete, and the passionate that the success of the poem lies' (1969, 255).

There has been some consideration of the author's gender. Sometimes it has been suggested that the author is a male who has adopted a female persona,¹⁸ while some scholars have taken the author to be a woman.¹⁹ The strongest argument supporting the suggestion that the author would be a male is obviously the fact that men were more likely to write, although there is some evidence for the existence of female poets in early medieval Ireland.²⁰ I am not going to speculate here on how likely it would be for a female poet to work in early medieval Ireland and for her poem to survive. My modest contribution to the discussion is just to consider if there are any internal grounds in the poem for determining the gender of the author. The poem is written from the point of view of a woman but the gender aspect is not overtly pronounced in it. The metaphor of clothing and the image of the ageing body are not gender specific and the feelings expressed in it seem to be universal. I cannot find in the poem anything that would be applicable only to the female gender since men could also join the monastery in old age after spending their youth in the court. Therefore we can ask why a male author would adopt a female persona if he was going to write a poem about his own feelings of ageing. If the author's message concerns both sexes equally and not specifically women, why would a male author choose a female persona? The only obvious reason for this would be the author's desire to use the persona of *Caillech Bérrí* to convey his message. However, if we accept that the poem concerns genuine feelings connected with ageing, it seems more likely that the author is writing from her own point of view and thus from the point of view of her own gender.²¹

I will finish with the words of the poet that seem to me to sum up the sentiments of the poem in a beautiful way. This is stanza 19: 'Summer of youth in which we were, I have spent with its autumn, winter of age drowns everybody, its harvest has come to me.'

¹⁸ See for example MacCana (1968, 92); Carney (1970, 236). Carney, however, presents a contradictory opinion in (1967, xxiv–xxvi).

¹⁹ See for example Clancy (1996, 46–47, 64–67) and Ni Dhonnchadha (2002, 111).

²⁰ The prose introduction of the poem names the author as a woman called *Dígde*. There are also three other famous old women or nuns of her family named, two of which we know from other sources to have been poets. For this and other evidence of female poets working in early medieval Ireland, see Clancy (1996, 43–72).

²¹ Clancy has come to the same conclusion in his assessment of the poem stating that 'it is hard to avoid the sense of a person behind the persona in this poem: it seems too heartfelt, too much an internalized meditation. Once one has discarded the legendary figure from the persona in the poem, it is difficult to see why a man would choose this particular character...' (1996, 64–65).

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*Caillech Bérrí**

1

Aithbe damsá bés mara;
sentu fom-dera croan;
toirsi oca ce do-gnéo,
sona do-táet a loan.

Ebb to me in the manner of the sea
old age causes me to be yellow
although I may grieve at it
it comes to its food joyfully

2

Is mé Caillech Bérré Bui;
do-meilinn léne mbithnuí;
indíu táthum dom shémi
ná melainn cid athléni.

I am the *Caillech Bérrí* beside Dursey
I used to wear an ever-new tunic
today I have for my thinness
that I may not wear out even a worn-out garment

3

It moíni
charthar lib, nidat doíni;
ind inbaid i mmarsamar
batar doíni carsamar.

It is riches
that are loved by you, not men
the time when we lived
it was people we loved

4

Batar inmaini doíni
ata maíge mad-ríadam;
ba maith no meilmis leo,
ba bec no moítis íaram.

They were excellent people
in whose fields we ride happily
it was a good time we spent with them
it was little they boasted afterwards

5

Indíu trá cain-timgarat,
ocus ní mór nond-oídet,
cíasu bec do-n-idnaiget,
is mór a mét no-moídet.

Today indeed, well they claim
and it is not great what they grant us
although it is little they bestow
its magnitude is great that they boast of

6

Carpait lúaith
ocus eich do-beirtis búaid,
ro boí, denus, tuile díb:
bennacht ar ríge roda-úaid.

Swift chariots
and horses that used to bring victory
for a while it was abundance to them
a blessing upon king who granted it

7

Tocair mo chorp co n-aichri
dochum adba diar aichni;
tan bas mithig la Mac nDé
do-té do breith a aithni.

My body desires to go fiercely
to a dwelling where it is known
when it is timely with the Son of God
he may come judging his deposit

8

Ot é cnámacha cáela,
ó do-éctar mo láma –
ba hinmainiu, tan, gnítis:
bítis im ríge ána.

And they bony, thin
when my arms are seen
it was dearer what they used to do
they used to be around glorious kings

* This edition is that of Donncha Ó hAodha in *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of professor James Carney* (Eds. D. Ó Corráin, L. Breathnach & K. McCone. Maynooth: An Sagart 1989, 308–331). It is reprinted here by his kind permission. The translation is based on a collective effort made during a seminar on *Caillech Bérrí* at the Department of Old Irish at University College Cork during term 2002–3.

9

Ó do-éctar mo láma
ot é cnámacha cáela,
nidat fiú turcbáil, taccu,
súas tarna maccu cáema.

When my arms are seen
and they bony, thin
they are not worth lifting indeed
up over the beloved boys

10

It fáilte na hingena
ó thic dóib co Beltaine;
is deithbiriu damsá brón:
sech am tróg, am sentaine.

The girls are joyful
when it comes to them to Beltaine
sorrow is more fitting for me
moreover, I am miserable, I am an old woman

11

Ní feraim cobra milis;
ní marbtar muilt im banais;
is bec, is liath mo thrilis,
ní liách drochcaille tarais.

I do not pour our sweet speech
rams are not killed for my wedding
it is sparse, my hair is grey
a poor veil over it is no cause for sorrow

12

Ní holc lim
ce beth caille finn form chinn;
boí mór meither cech datha
form chinn ic ól daglatha.

It is not bad with me
although there may be a white veil on my head
there was a great many-coloured covering
on my head at drinking good ale

13

Nim-geib format fri nach sen
inge nammá fri Femen;
meisse, ro melt forbuid sin,
buide beus barr Femen.

I am not envious of anything old
except only of Femen
me, I have worn out an old covering
still yellow is the hair of Femen

14

Lia na Ríg i Femun,
Cathair Rónán i mBregun:
cían ó ro-síachtsat sína
a llecne, na senchrína.

The stone of the kings in Femen
dwelling of Rónán in Bregon
a long time since storms have reached
their cheeks (that are not) old and weathered

15

Is labar tonn mara máir,
ros-gab in gaim comgabáil;
fer muid, mac moga, indíu
ní frescim do chéilidiu.

The wave of the great sea is noisy
the winter-storm has begun raising it
a man of office, a son of a slave, today
I do not expect to visit

16

Is éol dam a ndo-gniat,
rait ocus do-rraat;
curchasa Átha Alma,
is fúar in adba i faat.

It is known to me what they do
they row and they row back
the reeds of the ford of Alma
the dwelling in which they sleep is cold

17

Is mó láu
nát muir n-óited ima-ráu;

testa mór mbliadnae dom cruth,
dáig fo-rromled mo chétluth.

It is more than a day
that it is not the sea of youth on which I row
around
many years of my beauty are lacking
because that my wantonness is used up

18

Is mó dé
damsa indíu, ce bé-de;
gaibthium étach cid fri gréin,
do-fil áes dam, at-gén féin.

It is more than a day
for me today, however it may be
clothing upholds me even if it is under sun
age is coming to me, I myself know it

19

Sam oítid i rrabamar
do-melt cona fhogamur;
gaim aís báides cech duine,
domm-ánic a fhochmuine.

Summer of youth in which we were
I have spent with its autumn
winter of age drowns everybody
its harvest has come to me

20

Ro milt m'oítid ar thuus,
is buide lem ro-ngleus;
cid bec mo léim dar duae,
níba nuae in brat beus.

First I consumed my youth
I am glad that I so decided
although my leap over the wall was small
the cloak would still not be new

21

Is álainn in brat úaine
ro scar mo Rí tar Drummain;
is saer in Fer rod-lúaidi,
do-rat loí fair iar lummain.

The green cloak is splendid
that my king had spread out over Drummain
it is a craftsman the man who fulfilled it
he has put a woollen cloak on it after a coarse one

22

Aminecán morúar dam
- cech dercoin is erchraide -
íar feis fri condlib sorchaiB
bith i ndorchaib derrthaige.

Woe indeed to me
all acorns are perishable
after feasting against bright candles
being in the darkness of a chapel

23

Rom-boí denus la ríga
ic ól meda is fína;
indíu íbim medcuisce
itir sentanaib crína.

I have had a time with kings
at drinking mead and wine
today I drink whey-water
among withered old women

24

Robat mo chuirn coidin midc,
ropo toil Dé cecham-theirp;
ocot guide-si, a Dé bí,
do-rata cró clí fri feirg.

May my ale cups be cups of whey
may it be the will of God, whatever hinders me
praying to you, O living God
may it give a body wound against anger

25

At-chíu form brat brodrad n-aís;
ro gab mo chíall mo thogaís;
líath a finn ásas trim thuinn,
is samlaíd crotball senchroinn.

I see on my cloak stains of age
my sense has begun to deceive me
grey is the hair which grows through my skin
the bark of an old tree is thus

26

Rucad úaim-se mo shúil des
dá reic ar thír mbithdíles;
ocus rucad int shúil chlé
do fhormach a fhoirdíle.

My right eye has been taken from me
for its selling for land to be owned perpetually
and the left eye has been taken
to increase its complete ownership

27

Tri thuile
tascnat dún Arda Ruide:
tuile n-ooch, tuile n-ech,
tuile mílchon mac Luigdech.

Three floods
approach the fort of Ard Ruide
a flood of warriors, a flood of horses
a flood of hounds of the sons of Lugaid

28

Tonn tuili
ocus ind í aithbí áin:
a tabair tonn tuili dait
beirid tonn aithbí as do lám.

Wave of flooding
and that of the swift ebb
that which the flood-tide brings to you
the ebb-tide carries out of your hand

29

Tonn tuili
ocus ind aile aithbí:
dom-áncatarsa uili
conda éolach a n-aichni.

Wave of flooding
and the other ebb
all have come to me
so that I know how to recognize them

30

Tonn tuili,
nicos-toir socht mo chuili;
cid mór mo dám fo-déine,
fo-cres lám forru uili.

Wave of flooding
so that it will not reach the silence of my pantry
although my own retinue was great
a hand was put on them all

31

Ma rro-feissed Mac Muire
co mbeth fo chlí mo chuile:

cinco ndernus gart chena,
ní érbart 'nac' fri duine.

If the Son of Mary had known
that he would be under the house-post of my
pantry
although I have not done hospitality without it
I have not said 'no' to anyone

32

Tróg n-uile
dairib dúilib, do duine,
ná déccas a n-aithbesi
feb ro-déccas a tuile.

Everything miserable
(compared to) ignoble creatures for man
that this ebb was not seen
as the flood had been seen

33

Mo thuile,
is maith con-roíter m'aithne;
ro-sháer ísu Mac Muire
conám toirsech co aithbe.

My flood-tide
it is well that it has guarded my deposit
Jesus, son of Mary has delivered it
so that I am not sorrowful until the ebb

34

Céin-mair ailén mara máir,
dos-n-ic tuile íarna tráig;
is mé, ní frescu dom-í
tuile tar éisi aithbí.

Happy the island of the great sea
the flooding comes to it after its ebb
as for me, I do not expect to come to me
the flood after the ebb

35

Is súaill mennatán indiu
ara tabrainnse aithgne;
a n-í ro boí for tuile
atá uile for aithbe.

There is hardly a dwelling today
that I would recognize
that which was in flooding
is all in ebb