

The Phrase *troig mná trogain* in Exhortative Speech

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Abstract

The phrase *troig mná trogain* appears in a number of Irish narrative texts from the medieval and Early Modern periods. It is clearly a reference to an undesirable experience. In light of this, there has been a tendency to interpret the phrase as meaning ‘the pangs of a woman in childbirth’. Such an understanding does not seem justified, however, by the apparent semantic ranges of the words listed in *DIL* as *trog*, *trogan* or *trogain*. Building upon prior suggestions that *ben trogain*, literally ‘raven woman’, is a kenning for the Morrígain in her bird-aspect, this article asks whether the first element of *troig mná trogain* might be the word for ‘foot’ and the phrase as a whole an allusion to that defining moment in medieval Irish literature when the Morrígain alights upon the dying Cú Chulainn.

Irish literature, particularly that of the Early Modern period, attests to an intriguing, and apparently fail-safe, verbal formula for compelling someone to do one’s bidding.¹ Essentially, in the course of an exchange, one person intimates that certain adversities will befall another unless a request or recommendation is fulfilled. Almost all extant textual witnesses to this formula specify that we have to do here with the concept of *geis*, though it is sometimes unclear whether that term is being used to refer to a positive injunction or demand, or to hardships threatened should that injunction or demand be disregarded.² The adversities mentioned in our sources vary in number from one to six.³ Some allude to unfortunate or humiliating

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- 2 *DIL* s.v. *geis* (b) defines *geis* in this sense as ‘a solemn adjuration, command or prohibition from one person to another with imprecations or threats of misfortune in case of refusal’ and thus also ‘the imprecations or ill-luck which follow the disregard of the *geis*’. *Geis oirbh is troigh mhná troghain* (see (2) below) is typical of the ambiguity inherent in the verbal formulae under consideration here, for it is difficult to know whether *geis* in this instance has the same status as *troigh mhná troghain* or whether *geis* denotes the injunction which the speaker imposes through the threat of *troigh mhná troghain*. For discussion of *geis* in other senses see, for example, Greene 1978; O’Leary 1988; Sjöblom 1998.
- 3 One text alludes to nine *geasa*: *cuir naoi n-geasa for mac Roigh / mana ti let achetoir* (Mackinnon 1905–6, 24) ‘lay nine *geasa* on mac Róigh if he does not come with you

fates known from earlier literature or pseudo-history. References to *dá n-ó pill* ‘two ears of a horse’, for example, seem intended to bring to mind horse-eared literary characters such as Labraid Loingsech and Eochaid of the Uí Fhailgi.⁴ Other allusions have proved more difficult to pin down. Past interpretations of the frequently threatened *troig mná trogain*⁵ seem particularly unconvincing. Taking all known instances into account, however, it seems possible to make some headway towards a proper understanding of this phrase. Let us begin by reviewing occurrences and previous attempts at elucidation.

1. In the fourteenth-century (?) *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, Gráinne forces Diarmaid Ó Duibhne to ‘accept courtship’ from her after he has refused her initial offer. According to the edition and translation of the text produced by Nessa Ní Shéaghdha (1967, 10), Gráinne says:

cuirim-si fá gheasuibh áigh ⁊ aighmhille thusa, a Dhiarmaid ui Dhuibhne .i. troigh mná troghain ⁊ néll mhairbh ós uisge ⁊ saoghal Neóill Chaille arna chronughadh agad, muna mberir mé féin leat

I put you under bonds (lit. tabus) of strife and destruction, Diarmaid, that is, the pain of a woman in childbirth and the vision of a dead man over water and the life of Niall Caille to reproach you, if you do not take me with you.⁶

Ní Shéaghdha provided no notes to explain how she came to understand *troig mná trogain* as ‘the pain of a woman in childbirth’. Interestingly, in the longer version of this tale, edited by Standish O’Grady (1880, 9), the phrase *.i. fá gheasaibh Droma Draoidheachta* ‘i.e. under the *geasa* of Druim Draoidheachta’ replaces the list of adversities cited above.⁷ What seems to be a variation on the same phrase occurs, in similar context, in the modern folktale *Fionn mhac Cumhaill agus Seacht gCatha na Féinne* (Laoide 1913, 15, 30). The folktale is less specific about the nature of the adversity which will ensue if Fionn does not do as

immediately’. Only two adversities are subsequently listed, however (see (3) below).

4 For further discussion see Arbuthnot 2013a, 2013c.

5 For the sake of consistency and ease in cross-referencing *DIL*, throughout I use an early spelling of this phrase unless citing directly from texts or lexicographical sources.

6 For an alternative translation of this passage, see Arbuthnot 2013a, 226.

7 On the manuscripts mentioned by O’Grady, see Ní Shéaghdha 1967, xv n. 1. The manuscript which formed the basis of his edition seems to be now lost (Breatnach 2012, 139), but a closely related manuscript survives (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 23 L 27, dated to the first half of the eighteenth century) and has *.i. faoi droma draoidhiochta* at this point in the text (Ní Shéaghdha 1967, 108).

asked;⁸ nevertheless, it is intriguing to find an echo of the formula to which *troig mná trogain* belongs continuing into the twentieth century at least.

2. Poem XXXVI in Gerard Murphy's edition of *Duanaire Finn*, beginning *Sgríobh sin, a Brogáin* and better known as 'The Lay of the Smithy' (c. 1400?), tells how a gigantic one-eyed, one-footed warrior identified as Lon mac Liomtha induced the *fianna* to visit his smithy. This is the only instance I have come across where the injunction or demand originates with a man.⁹ The key to Lon's success lies in the verse:

*Geis oirbh is troigh mhná troghain
a lucht thosaig gach teamnta
muna leantaí bhar n-ochtár
me go dorús mo cheardcha* (Murphy 1933, 6 § 19).

Murphy's prose-translation of the above lines is: 'a *geas* and the pangs of a woman in travail (?) be upon you, ye leaders in every strait, if the eight of you do not follow me to the door of my smithy' (*ibid.*, 7). Clearly, from the outset, Murphy had reservations about the translation of *troig mná trogain* as 'the pangs of a woman in travail', for he inserted a question-mark into the English text. By the time he came to compile the Glossary to *Duanaire Finn*, published two decades later, his misgivings had increased and he now expressed the opinion that this interpretation, although 'based on Dinneen and on an etymological connection with *trogais .i. tusmis* "gave birth to", LU 10588', was 'improbable' (Murphy et al., 1953, 336–37, s.v. *trogan*).¹⁰ He went on to discuss other possibilities (see below).

3. In the Early Modern version of *Táin Bhó Flidhais*, Fearghus mac Róigh is persuaded to raid the kingdom of the Gamhanraigh and steal Flidhais, wife of Ailill Fionn, after Bricne conveys a message from Flidhais, instructing him to do so. Below I cite the key quatrain from the Glenmasan Manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS 72.2.3, c. 1500) as published by Donald

8 The key passages in *Fionn mhac Cumhaill agus Seacht gCatha na Féinne* are: *cuirim thú ... faoi na deasaibh droma draoidheachta, laithe is measa agus is mithreoraighe, do choimhéad beatha agus báis a bhaint díod, mur rabh thú fhéin agus seacht gcatha na Féinne thall ag Rígh na Fraince ionnsa' mheadhon lae i mbárach* (Laoide 1913, 15) and *cuirim-sa thusa ... faoi na deasa droma draoidheachta, a' lá is measa agus is mithreóraighe, do choimhéad beatha agus báis a bhaint díod, mur dtéidh tú reir 'un a' Domhain Thoir* (*ibid.*, 30).

9 In addition to the four instances discussed in this paper, which include the phrase *troig mná trogain*, I take into account here also Derdriu's initial interaction with Noisiu in *Longes Mac nUislen*. See further Arbuthnot 2013a.

10 On p. 88, there is a further note on *troig mná trogain* which states that 'the translation suggested in Part II is probably wrong'.

Mackinnon (1905–6, 106–7). The first lines of the edition and the translation are emended here in accordance with the recommendations of Kuno Meyer (1919, 98; see also Arbuthnot 2013b, 55):

*Dá n-ó pill ar do gnuis gloin,
geis ort is troig mná trogain;
mana thuga let o a tigh
rigain Oilella echtaigh*

Two ears of a horse on your fine form,
a taboo is upon you, and the pangs of a woman,
if you do not carry away from her home,
the queen of feathful Oilill.

In support of his translation of *troig mná trogain* as ‘the pangs of a woman’, Mackinnon (1905–6, 107 n.) referred to Patrick MacSweeney’s edition of *Caithréim Conghail Cláiringhnigh* (see 4 below).

4. The earliest surviving fragment of *Caithréim Conghail Cláiringhnigh* seems to be that preserved in Edinburgh, NLS MS 72.1.31 (sixteenth-century?), though this witness was not used by MacSweeney in his edition for the Irish Texts Society. In this tale, Bricne describes an encounter with Beiuda, daughter of the king of Lochlann, as follows:

*do chuir si geasa , airmid oruinn an choibhce din d’fhagháil dhi .i. da n-o
phill for buáilidh bhar mbertha , bar [n-airm] faona frithnocht fuibh; gurrob
sleamhuighther re h-omh eascoinne gach fferann] for a salteorthaoi; troigh
mhna troghuin foruibh; saoghal neoil chaille ar ... chrotmughadh aguibh;
nior thiomhle sibh nomhaidhe muna bhfagthaoi an coibh[ce sin] do h-iarradh
oruibh*

she placed a bond and pledge upon us to find that dowry for her, i.e. two ears of a horse over the pen of your shaving, and your weapons prostrate beneath you; that every [land] you tread be as slippery as the raw-flesh of eel; the pangs of a woman in childbirth by yours; the life of a cloud of a wood ... (?) be yours;¹¹ may you live no time unless you find that dowry asked of you (MacSweeney 1904, 112–14).

Having identified *dá n-ó pill* ‘two ears of a horse’ as an allusion to the disfigurement borne by Labraid Loingsech, MacSweeney (ibid., 113 n. 4) proposed a link between *troig mná trogain*, which he took to mean ‘the pangs of a woman in childbirth’, and the tale *Noinden Ulad*, in which Macha, wife of Crunnchu,

11 MacSweeney’s translation is obviously in error here and *saoghal neoil chaille*, which occurs also in (1) above, is to be taken as a reference to ‘the life of Niall Caille’. For an alternative translation of the passage, see Arbuthnot 2013a, 227.

prophesied that, when they had most need to defend themselves, the Ulaid would be afflicted with the pains endured by a woman in childbirth.¹² Two items from this phrase made their way into MacSweeney's Glossary (ibid., 221): *troghuin* 'child-bearing' and *troigh* 'pangs (of childbirth)'.¹³

On closer inspection, one wonders just how *ben trogain* could mean 'a woman in childbirth' or *troig mná trogain* 'the pangs of a woman in childbirth'. According to *DIL*, *trog* was an *o*-stem, and so the first word of *troig mná trogain* might be nominative plural of this.¹³ The senses listed are '(a) parturition' and '(b) offspring', however, so 'birthpangs' would represent an seemingly otherwise-unattested (though not impossible) extension in meaning.¹⁴ The final word of our phrase presents greater problems. In his *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla*, Dinneen (1927) lists *troghan* 'parturition' and the phrase *troigh mná troghain* 'pangs of a woman in travail', but he describes this as an 'early and cryptic word'. Ó Dónaill (1977) gives *troghan* 'travail' as a word in literary usage.¹⁵ It is difficult to think other than that both listings are based ultimately on the verse and prose sources under discussion here. *DIL*, meanwhile, has *trog* 'parturition', *trogach* 'prolific', *trogaid* 'gives birth to' and *trogmar* 'having offspring (?)' but gives no reason to assume the existence of related *trogan*.¹⁶ In fact, in *DIL*, examples of *troig mná trogain* are given s.v. 2 *trogan* 'raven', the editors following the instincts of Kuno Meyer (1919, 98), who deemed the translation of *troig mná trogain* as 'birthpangs' to be 'aus der Luft gegriffen':

2 trogan n. raven: 'trogán' ar bhraintíach, Met. Gl. 11 § 14. luaidhi do gabair gripnigh grip | for faighthib andre trogain tric, BB 297b5 . Conaire ... is e do-

- 12 It may be of interest at this point to note that, in the earliest recension of *Noinden Ulad*, the phrase used to mean 'woman in childbirth' is *ben séolae: intan bas ansam dúib, nicon bia acht nert mná séolae lib do neuch thaircellae cóiced-sa* 'when things shall be most difficult for you, all those of you who guard this province shall have only the strength of a woman in childbirth' (Hull 1968, § 7).
- 13 Ní Shéaghda (1967, 108) records the variant *troid*, although *troig(h)* is the majority reading. The scribes responsible for *troid* may have been thinking of *troit* 'fight, battle, quarrel' or this form may reflect simply the late scribal interchange of *-dh* and *-gh*.
- 14 Accounts of childbirth in medieval and later Irish texts actually employ a number of different terms for 'pangs'. The word *idu* seems to be preferred in *Noinden Ulad*: *atú álacht co n-idnaib* 'I am pregnant with the pangs of childbirth', *atú-sa co n-idnaib* 'I am in the pangs of childbirth' (Hull 1968, 39, 47). The phrase *teinnes lenib*, literally 'the pain of children', appears in *Betha Colaim Chille* (O'Kelleher & Schoepperle 1918, 38.6). *Acallam na Senórach* makes use of yet another phrase: *gúrlámnad* 'painful parturition' (Stokes 1900, 13.433, cf. 152.5553).
- 15 The dictionaries compiled by O'Rahilly (1877) and O'Brien (1832) have no listing for *troghan* in the sense 'parturition', 'travail' or similar.
- 16 That the word in question in our phrase is *trog(h)an* (with short *-o-* and *-a-*) seems confirmed by the rhyme between *troghain* and *thosaig* in 'The Lay of the Smithy', between *gloin* and *troguin* in *Táin Bhó Flidhais* and between *teinnes lenib* and *tograin* in the Middle-Irish verse-extract on the Uí Echach which is cited below.

feith trogain , ba he bert troghain tar Breghae, Thurn. Zu Ir. Hdschr. i 27.23 (but see Ériu xxxiv 192, CMCS xx 95). According to Meyer the expression *ben trogain* is connected with this and means female of the raven, being wrongly translated ‘birthpangs’ by P. O’C. (s.v. *troigh*) and others: *co nāch beith troigh mná troghain | for a ccollaib dia tograim ‘auf dass bei ihrer Verfolgung das Rabenweibchen den Fuss nicht auf ihre Leiber setze,’ Sitzb. 1919, 93 § 19. garbae adbae innon fil | ... | i llúaidet mná trogain tress ‘wo Rabenweibchen Kampf führen,’ 98 § 19 = O’C. 150 (H. 3.18, 82b). Used as an imprecation: *troigh mhna troghuin foruibh ‘pangs of a woman in childbirth,’ ITS v 112.z. geis ort is troigh mná troguin, Celt. Rev. ii 106.22.**

The current *DIL* entry on *trogan* ‘raven’ does not immediately inspire confidence. Of the three citations which do not have to do with *ben trogain*, one is from a glossary (*trogán ar bhraínfiach*, Met. Gl. 11 § 14), one has been queried as properly *torgain* < *to-orcun*, vn. of *to-org-* (*Conaire ... is e do-feith trogain , ba he bert troghain tar Breghae*, Thurn. Zu Ir. Hdschr. i 27.23),¹⁷ and the third (*luaidhi do gabair gripnigh grip | for faighthib andre trogain tric*, BB 297 b 5 = Mittelirische Verslehren) seems to contain the genitive singular of *ainder* ‘woman’ and thus represent *ainder trogain*, a phrase roughly equivalent in meaning to *ben trogain*.¹⁸ It seems likely, then, that the present *DIL* entry on *trogan* is supported only by the explanatory *trogán ar bhraínfiach* and examples of the related phrases *ainder/ben trogain*.

There is, however, a separate listing in *DIL* for ‘*drogain*’. The only example comes from a heavily glossed quatrain in the upper margin of Lebor na hUidre, p. 50a. This ends: *ugail (.i. súli) troga (.i. cend) dír drogain (.i. fiaich)*. Much is uncertain here but *dír* may provide evidence of a neuter substantive meaning ‘one’s right or due’¹⁹ and *drogain* (seemingly glossed by the genitive of *fiach* ‘raven’)²⁰ may be a pronunciation spelling of nasalized *trogain*, genitive of *trogan*.²¹ Following the glosses, the line might translate as ‘the eyes of the head (of heads?) [are] a

17 See Baumgarten 1983, 192–93; West 1990, 95.

18 Note, however, the variants *andrutrogaínd tric* and *andri dreccuin tric* which appear in other manuscript witnesses (Thurneysen 1891, 10, 40). Róisín McLaughlin has pointed out to me that there is yet another copy of this verse in NLI MS G 53, p. 32, ll. 6–7, which reads at this point *andri dreccuin tric*. Clearly, the scribes of these copies were uncertain as to what was in question.

19 At present, however, *DIL* has only one (possible) example of 1 *dír* used substantively: *Lind mná féile . . . | ainm na linde ‘nar báided | is é a d. (díl, v.l.) maras dise* ‘this is its proper title inherited from her’, Met. Dinds. iii 294.

20 Stokes (1875, 22; 1893, 113–14) read the gloss as *fiach* and thus translated *dír drogain* as ‘a meet/just word’.

21 The anonymous reviewer of this article has suggested that ‘the initial *d-* of *drogain* is secondary, having been made on an earlier *t-*’. This may well be the case, although the appearance of the first two letters of *drogain* is quite different from the *tr-* of *troga* in the same line. Perhaps the scribe originally wrote *t-* but changed this to *d-* before the *r* was written.

raven's due',²² which makes reasonable sense as the poem seems to be an account of the aftermath of battle.²³ *DIL* has, then, at least two citations which might be marshalled into service to support *trogan* explained as *fiach* or *branfhiach*.

Trogan 'raven' seems rare but possibly genuine. The question remains as to whether the phrases *ben trogain* and *troig mná trogain* are properly accommodated under this headword in *DIL*.²⁴ It may be useful at this point to separate examples of *ben trogain* from the more complex *troig mná trogain*. The *DIL* entry on 2 *trogan* throws up the following illustration of the shorter phrase, here in the nominative plural as *mná trogain*: *garbæ adbae innon fil ... i lluaiget mna trogain tres* (Binchy 1978, ii 632.21–23). Occurring in a verse-extract, attributed to Dub Ruis, which is incorporated into a glossary under the headword 'Maiche',²⁵ these lines have been variously understood. Gregory Toner (2010, 103) suggested 'rough the dwellings in which we are ... where women in childbirth stir up strife'. Donncha Ó hAodha (1991, 227 n. 76) considered Dub Ruis' verse alongside *for faithchib andre trogain tricc* in the *Mittelirische Verslehren*. Taking care to note that 'there is great

22 Borsje (2007, 86; cf. Clarke 2014, 107) translates this line as 'eyes, heads belonging to a raven' but offers no insight into how she understands the form *drogain* to have come about. Importantly, however, Borsje (2007, 86 n. 51) stresses that her translation is tentative as 'some of the words are obscure and it is uncertain whether the interpretations proposed by the glossator are identical with the intentions of the author'.

23 The reviewer of this article writes: 'it seems unlikely that *troga dir trogain* (*sic*; see n. 21 above) is unrelated to *troig mná trogain*'. It seems to me there are some difficulties in reconciling the extract from *Lebor na hUidre*, as it stands, with *troig mná trogain*, but given the surface similarity in form, certainly the suggestion warrants a closer look. In *Lebor na hUidre*, the excerpt in question seems to be part of a four-word statement: *ugail (.i. sili) troga (.i. cend) dir drogain (.i. fiaich)*. The glossator apparently took *ugail* to be a noun (*DIL* s.v. refers to Latin *oculus*) and so *troga* here may be genitive (singular or plural). This sits uneasily with nominative (singular or plural) *troig*. In addition, for there to be a relationship between *ugail troga dir drogain* and *troig mná trogain*, we have to assume *dir* is a word for 'woman' (presumably genitive plural to account for following nasalisation). This word is the only one in the line without a gloss, which suggests that the scribe took it to be readily understood. *Der* 'daughter, girl' is attested, mainly in glossaries, and we have seen *aider* 'woman' in the phrase *aider trogain*, a parallel for *ben trogain*. One begins to wonder, then, if the underlying reading might be **trog ander trogain*. Against this, alliteration (present in all lines of the verse) points to the division *troga dir drogain* and, following the glosses, the line can be reasonably well understood as consisting of two phrases (*urgail troga* 'the eyes of the head (of heads?)' and *dir drogain* 'a raven's due'). Borsje's comments on the general obscurity of the verse and the possibility that the glosses do not accurately reflect the intentions of the author (see n. 22 above) must be borne mind, of course, but the possibility of understanding the statement in this way suggests at least that to claim it is 'unlikely' that *troga dir trogain* is unrelated to *troig mná trogain* is overstating the case.

24 Baumgarten's comments (1983, 192–93) suggest that he did not think so: of 2 *trogan*, he says 'the only evidence for this word is *Met. Gl.* 11 § 14 '*trogán' ar bhrainfhiach*; and possibly a couplet quoted in *Mittelirische Verlehren*'.

25 This is the glossary which has been referred to most recently as the '*Irsan* Glossary'. See the Early Irish Glossaries Database (www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/irishglossaries/).

uncertainty ... about the precise signification of *trogain*, he concluded nevertheless that the translation ‘war-goddess’ would suit both citations.²⁶ That *ainder trogain* and *mná trogain* are ‘connected with war’ in the contexts in which these phrases appear had been noted previously in the Glossary to *Duanaire Finn* (Murphy et al. 1953, 336–37, s.v. *trogan*).²⁷ More usefully, Murphy built upon Meyer’s proposal that the second element of *mná trogain* is *trogan* ‘raven’, by suggesting that this may be a ‘symbol of’ the war-goddess.

Murphy was referring, of course, to the widely represented tradition that the war-goddess, the Morrígain, could take the form of a bird to instigate battle or gloat over the dead. He did not address the issue of how singular *ainder trogain* and plural *mná trogain* might refer to the same entity, but it seems likely that the forms reflect, on the one hand, the Morrígain alone and, on the other, the ‘sisterhood’ of war-goddesses (generally, Macha, Badb and the Morrígain).²⁸ Fascicule T of *DIL* was published, in two parts, in 1943 and 1948; thus, Murphy’s suggestion regarding *ainder/mná trogain* was not available to the compilers of the Dictionary. Interestingly, though, in a discussion of parallels between the Furies and the Morrígain, Michael Clarke (2014, 105) translated the last line of Dub Ruis’ verse as ‘where the raven women instigate battle’, without comment or reference, as if the meaning were unproblematic.

Two factors probably encouraged Clarke in his understanding of *mná trogain* as ‘raven women’, a kenning for the war-goddesses. One is the wording of the glossary material which precedes the verse-extract attributed to Dub Ruis. This runs: *Maiche .i. bodb; nó isi in tres morrigan .i. maiche ,bodb ,morrigan* (Binchy 1978, ii 632.20; cf. Stokes 1900, 271) ‘Macha, i.e. a scaldcrow (or ‘i.e. Badb’); or she is one of the three *morrigna*, i.e. Macha and Badb and Morrígain’. Thus, the glossary entry binds the verse containing the phrase *mná trogain* to a prose statement in which the war-goddesses are named and Macha is glossed *.i. bodb*, a word which as a common noun can mean ‘scaldcrow’. Clarke (2014, 107) mentions also the phrase *mían mná tethrach*, glossed *.i. badb*, which occurs in the stanza from which the *DIL* entry on *drogain* derives. Jacqueline Borsje (2007, 86) took *mían mná tethrach* here to mean ‘the desire of the scaldcrow woman’, assuming *tethrach* to be genitive of the word listed in *DIL* as 1 *tethra* ‘scaldcrow’ and pointing out that Badb/*badb* and Macha are substituted for *ben tethrach* in corresponding phrases preserved in *Táin Bó Cúailgne* (*mían Macha mochtrád más*

26 Meyer (1917, 41) translated *for faichthib andre trogain* as ‘upon a woman’s lawns in the early morning’ (taking the final word to be that listed in *DIL* as *trogain* ‘daybreak, sunrise’).

27 The former is so slight, though, that it is difficult to be sure of the context.

28 See further Carey 1982–83, 269–71; Heijda 2007, 24–28; Toner 2010, 102–4.

ar búaiB Cúail[n]gi; O’Rahilly 1976, 3934) and *Acallam na Senórach (ticfa mian na mbadb do’n bher*; O’Grady 1892, i 230).

In *DIL*, *tethra* and *badb* are explained as ‘scaldcrow’, whereas *trogan* is glossed with *fiach* and *branfhiach* (both ‘raven’).²⁹ Maria Tymoczko (1990, 154) has pointed out, however, that in medieval Irish sources ‘virtually every word for black birds is used for several different species or in a generalized or generic way’.³⁰ *Ben tethrach* and *ben trogain* may be roughly equivalent, then. A little-noticed passage from the *Annals of Roscrea* potentially offers support also for *ben trogain* as a reference to the Morrígain. These *Annals* are preserved only in Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 5301-20 and were probably transcribed in 1641 (Jaski & McCarthy 2012, 1). The passage in question has to do with the battle of Móin Trogaide, the essentials of which are told also in, for example, the *Annals of the Four Masters* (O’Donovan 1851, i 58) and *Do Fhlaithusaib Érenn* (Best & O’Brien 1967, 75), though the section of greatest interest to us does not occur in either of those sources. I give here the relevant material as it appears in Bart Jaski and Daniel McCarthy’s facsimile edition (2012, 13); the matter in bold type (supplied for the purposes of this article) seems to be unique to the *Annals of Roscrea* account of the battle:

Imusteclansat fir hÉrenn iarum do cath fri
Lugar mac Lugaíth di cloind hÉbir. Is he
cat Móna Trogdeí la Ciannact insin.
Ambatar iarum oc immarlúth an catha to-
fuirmi tam forru derbaltatar sloigh
vel troguin
fer nÉrenn de **is hi in bé trogdai insin**
is de asberar trog aided-so. Bit annad
luid dib Ernbas berta in duine ba im Moríga
cona lin:-

There are indications that this portion of text has not been transmitted particularly well. The form *derbaltatar*, for example, is an obvious garbling of *co nderbaltatar* (< *co n-erbaltatar* ‘so that they died’). Nevertheless, the initial part of the above extract seems straightforward: we are told that the men of Ireland went into battle against Lugar mac Lugaíth of Clann Ébir and that, during that battle, a *tám* ‘plague, pestilence, disease’ wiped out the hosts of Ireland. The text continues then

29 Accepting that the word which is subject of the *DIL* entry on *drogain* is a pronunciation spelling of the nasalized genitive singular of *trogan*.

30 *Bran*, for example, is equated with *fiach* in *Sanas Cormaic* (Meyer 1912, 11 § 105). In *O’Clery’s Irish Glossary*, *teathra* is glossed *i. badhb, no feanóg* (Miller 1881–83, 54), but elsewhere *fennóc* and *fiach* are grouped together (*in fiach* , *in fhennóc*, O’Grady 1892, 56.19). In the Egerton Glossary, *badhbh* is paired with *fiach garb* ‘vulture’ (Stokes 1906–7, 148, § 59).

with an etymology of the name Trogaide,³¹ the second element being derived from *aided* ‘death’ and the first hinted at in the statement *is hi in bé trogdai (vel troguin) insin*. Of course, *bé* is ‘woman’ and *trógdae* is ‘miserable, wretched’, so the main-text reading seems to be ‘she is the *bé trógdae* “wretched woman”’. Above the line, however, *troguin* is offered as an alternative to *trogdai*, and, semantically, *bé trogain* corresponds to *ainder/ben trogain*. Logically, one would assume that the subject of a statement running *is hi ... insin* would have been named previously in the text, but there is no obvious preceding subject here. Instead, two women are mentioned subsequently: Ernmas, mother of the Morrígain, and the Morrígain herself, in the alternative form *Moríga* (Morrígu).³² To whom *bé troguin* refers is uncertain, then, but the *Annals of Roscrea* provide evidence at least for a phrase *bé trogain*, seemingly yet another variation on *ainder/ben trogain*, in a context which mentions the Morrígain and Ernmas, her mother.

Vendryes was prepared to accept Meyer’s suggestion that *ben trogain* contained *trogan* ‘raven’ (though, like *DIL*, which offers ‘female of the raven’, he understood the term to refer to the female of the species and rendered into French as ‘femelle du corbeau’). Perplexingly, however, he translated *troigh mhna troghuin* from *Cáithréim Conghail Cláiringnig* as ‘douleurs (?) d’une femme en couches’ (Bachelery & Lambert 1978, T-147-48). It seems unlikely that two different phrases, both realised as *ben trogain*, are in question. We can probably take genitive *mná trogain* to be a reference to the Morrígain, then, but if *troig* is not a term for ‘birthpangs’, how is this to be understood? Meyer (1919, 98) thought *troig* in this phrase was the word for ‘foot’ (*DIL* 1 *traig*). Lenition after this word in ‘The Lay of the Smithy’ and in *Cáithréim Conghail Cláiringhning* (see (2) and (4) above) is consistent with a feminine noun (as *traig* is). In addition, witnesses to the phrase are almost exclusively from the Early Modern period and so *troigh*, rather than earlier *traig*, is the expected form. Further support for *troig* ‘foot’ comes from a Middle Irish verse-extract on the Uí Echach:³³

*ná tóebhat Aod mac Domnaill
co nách beith troigh mná troghain
for a ccollaib dia tograim* (Meyer 1919, 93 § 19)

-
- 31 This etymology can be found also in *Do Fhlaithusaib Érenn* (Best & O’Brien 1967, 75 note to l. 2393) and in *O’Clery’s Irish Glossary* (Miller 1881–83, 60).
- 32 Capital initials in the extract cited from the *Annals* were supplied by the editors (see Jaski & McCarthy 2012, 20). As ‘*Moríga*’ seems to be in the nominative, perhaps preceding *im* represents the definite article (cf. O’Donovan 1842, 198.4; Stokes 1900, 2496).
- 33 Given the proposed date of this verse (late tenth-century, according to Meyer 1919, 89), one wonders if the spelling ‘*troigh*’ here might have been influenced by following *troghain*. It is important to bear in mind also that the sole surviving copy was made by Michael O’Clery in 1628 (*ibid.*).

‘laßt die Menschen sich nicht an Aed, den Sohn Domhnalls, heranwagen, auf daß bei ihrer Verfolgung das Rabenweibchen den Fuss nicht auf ihre Leiber setze’ (*ibid.*, 95).

This verse is a useful addition to the corpus under consideration for two main reasons. One concerns context. As in the examples (1)–(4) above, here *troig mná trogain* suggests a fate to be avoided, but rather than threatening that this will ensue if a certain condition is not met, this praise-poem employs the phrase as a shorthand way of suggesting that association with Aed mac Domnaill will lead to disaster. The second point of interest in this extract is the phrase *for a ccollaib*. In the sources we have examined thus far, *troig mná trogain* is associated with conjugated forms of the preposition *for* (later *ar*), which usually governs the object of figurative curses or imprecations (*geis oirbh is troigh mhná troghain, geis ort is troig mná trogain, troigh mhna troghuin foruibh*). The verse-extract concerning Aed mac Domnaill, however, seems to envisage a physical entity, for the speaker warns against behaviour which might result in *troig mná trogain* being specifically *for a ccollaib* (‘on their bodies/corpses’).

Amongst corpses (*dinib collaib*) is actually where the Morrígain is located when she calls to the young Cú Chulainn in *Táin Bó Cúailgne* (O’Rahilly 1976, 499). Indeed, Cú Chulainn may be the key to unlock the phrase *troig mná trogain*. As mentioned above, some of the exhortative verbal formulae under consideration here contain allusions to earlier literature and history. Apparently, *troig mná trogain* is a fate which Diarmaid Ó Duibhne, Fearghus mac Róigh and the *fianna* would do anything to avoid. The phrase occurs as part of a longer list of adversities but it can also stand alone as in Lon mac Liomthan’s speech in ‘The Lay of the Smithy’. We can probably safely assume, therefore, that *troig mná trogain* refers to something deep-seated in the Irish imagination. MacSweeney thought that it might be a nod in the direction of the tale *Noínden Ulad*. I am tempted to speculate that the literary allusion invoked in this phrase is not the curse of Crunnchu’s wife but the death of Cú Chulainn, specifically the scene in which the war-goddess, in bird-form, finally alights as Cú Chulainn succumbs to his wounds. The early version, *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirthemne*, which may be as early as the eighth century (Kimpton 2009, 8–10), handles the significant event of the landing of the bird in a single statement: *conid iar sin do:lluid ind ennach fora gúalaind* ‘after that a scald-crow came onto his shoulder’ (*ibid.*, 24, 43). Any alighting involves setting foot, but the (fifteenth-century?) Early Modern version of the episode is more explicit:

do bí a inathar rena chosaibh ann sin, ,do thúirn in branfiach badhbha³⁴ forsna hindaibh, co tarrla camlúb dona cáelánaibh fo chosaibh in brainshiaigh (van Hamel 1933, 110)

34 Van Hamel edits as *in branfiach Badhbha*, but I have taken the final word to be the adjective *badba* ‘appertaining to war; Badb-like, deadly, fatal’.

Cú Chulainn's guts were about his feet then and the fatal scaldcrow descended onto the extremities, so that a loop of the intestines were under the scaldcrow's feet.

The term used to denote the foot of the bird in this text is *cos* 'foot, leg (of human beings and animals)', not *crob*, *crúb* or any Irish word which might be more readily associated with a bird. This seems significant in considering *troig mná trogain*. According to *DIL*, *traig/troig* refers to 'the human foot (occas. also of animals)'. Thus, it might be argued that *troig mná trogain*, like *fó chosaibh in brainfhaigh*, was deliberately chosen to suggest that the Morrígain is not a bird proper, but a person in bird-form. Noteworthy also is the fact that, in the lines cited above, the term used for the bird is *branfhiach*, which bears comparison with the glosses on *trogan* and *drogain* cited in *DIL*.

The tradition that Cú Chulainn's death was signalled by the Morrígain, in her bird-aspect, coming to rest on him predates the earliest surviving attestation of the phrase *troig mná trogain*. In light of the strong visual impression and significance of this scene, it is not difficult to imagine how a phrase translating roughly as 'the foot of the Morrígain on you' might have served as the direst of imprecations in medieval and Early Modern Ireland and why people might have been warned against associations which could lead to 'the foot of the Morrígain on their corpses' (*troigh mná troghain for a ccollaib*). Unfortunately, unlike *dá n-ó pill*, wording which is so well-attested in stories of horse-eared kings that any appearance of the phrase points unambiguously in this direction, *troig mná trogain* does not actually occur in any extant version of the death of Cú Chulainn. Elsewhere, however, we do have an allusion to the Morrígain in what, judging by the appearance of *inde dicitur* in the extract in question, seems to be a well-established ill-wish. The *Sanas Cormaic* entry dedicated to *Bé néit runs: Bē nē[i]t (.i. badb) .i. bē ben , nēt cath ... inde dicitur: 'bé nēt fort'* (Meyer 1912, 16 § 168) '*Bé néit*, i.e. a scaldcrow (or 'i.e. Badb'), i.e. *bé* means "woman" and *nēt* means "battle" ... whence is said *bé néit fort*'. At this distance, it is impossible to be certain of the connotations of *bé néit fort*, which might be strictly figurative ('may the woman of battle afflict you') or more literal ('may the woman of battle alight upon you'). If the latter is intended, then *bé néit fort* would seem to be more or less equivalent to *troig mná trogain fort*. In either case, the phrase *bé néit fort* seems instructive in confirming the use of kennings for the Morrígain, as if the Irish dared not speak her name,³⁵ and in demonstrating also her usefulness to purveyors of malevolent verbal formulae.

To sum up, then: over the past century, Irish scholars have their inched their way towards an understanding of the phrase *ben trogain*. In 1919, Meyer suggested that this referred to the female raven and this position was adopted in *DIL* s.v. 2

35 Borsje (1999) discusses other obscure circumlocutions, including *geniti glinne* 'female creatures of the valley (?)', which might refer to the Morrígain.

trogan. In 1953, Murphy observed that the phrase occurred in contexts associated with war and that the raven could represent the war-goddess. Murphy's comments were buried in the Glossary to *Duanaire Finn*, however, and largely failed to filter through into lexical scholarship. Vendryes' *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien*, published in 1978, stuck to Meyer's suggestion that *ben trogain* was a hen bird, and, in 1991, Ó hAodha seems to have independently come to the conclusion that the war-goddess was in question here. In 2014, Clarke translated *mná trogain* as 'raven women' rather than 'female ravens', but frustratingly provided no record of his reasoning. While our understanding of *ben trogain* has been progressing, albeit slowly, this has not transferred to the related phrase *troig mná trogain*. In his insightful note of 1919, Meyer took the meaning of this to be 'the foot of a female raven', but in editions of texts in which the phrase appears in formulaic exhortative speech, *troig mná trogain* has been consistently rendered into English as 'the pangs of a woman in childbirth'. If, as now seems to be the case, *ben trogain* is the war-goddess, an alternative explanation must be sought. I have proposed here that *troig* is 'foot', as Meyer thought, but I have taken *troig mná trogain* to be specifically 'the foot of the Morrígain'. As some of the adversities mentioned in Early Modern exhortative speeches are drawn from earlier literature or pseudo-history, I have suggested further that *troig mná trogain* is intended to bring to mind the death of Cú Chulainn, a literary episode in which the Morrígain, in bird-form, alights upon the dying hero. Although the actual foot of the bird is mentioned only in the later version of the episode, the wording of the early version—*do:lluid ... fora gúalaind* 'came onto his shoulder'—clearly implies that the bird set foot upon Cú Chulainn. It seems to me, then, that just as a character threatened with *dá n-ó pill fort* 'two ears of a horse on you' would recall immediately the fate suffered by horse-eared literary characters such as Labraid Loingsech, so the threat of *troig mná trogain fort* 'the foot of the Morrígain on you' would prompt thoughts of the death of Cú Chulainn and impress upon the victim that, in order to avoid something equally terrible happening to himself, he should act in accordance with the speaker's wishes.

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