The Apple in Early Irish Narrative Tradition: A Thoroughly Christian Symbol?

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Echtrae Chonnlai is regarded as being one of the earliest extant tales in Irish, dating from the eighth or ninth century A.D. (McCone 2000, 29). It describes a meeting which takes place at the royal seat of Uisneach, between Connlae, mortal son of Conn Cétchathach and a supernatural woman who describes herself as coming from *tír inna mbéo* 'the land of the living ones'. Before departing for the Otherworld, she gives him an apple which miraculously stays whole no matter how much he eats. On the woman's departure, Connlae is filled with longing for her. When she returns, he leaves his people in order to join the woman in the supernatural realm.

The tensions which existed between the indigenous pagan tradition and the nascent Christian Church in Ireland are evident in this tale. We are faced with 'the opposition of two philosophies, the first being the native, the druidic, the doomed… The other embodies a prophecy of the coming of Christianity' (Carney 1969, 165). The woman's arrival is a clear portent of the overthrow of the indigenous pagan tradition. Connlae's decision to leave behind all that he knows and loves symbolises the retreat of this culture in the face of the might of the new religion. Furthermore, there is a complex interplay between pre-existing motifs and Christian teachings in this tale. It is clear that the otherworld country described by the strange woman is an amalgam of the pre-Christian concept of the *síd* and a biblically-inspired paradise (Mac Cana 1976, 95). The apple which she throws to him has been interpreted by McCone (1990) as 'the converse of the fruit given by Eve to Adam, namely an apple from the tree of life mentioned in Genesis 3:22-4' (ibid., 80).[1] While this is undeniably true on one level, I will attempt to shed further light on the combination of indigenous and foreign concepts which are responsible for the depiction of the apple in Irish narrative tradition.

Carey (1995) paralleled the meeting of Connlae and the *síd*-woman with that of Rhiannon and the hero in the Welsh tale *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet*.[2] McCone rejected this comparison on the grounds that there is 'no mention of marriage or mating

1 The 'forbidden fruit' of Genesis is frequently depicted as an apple, though the Hebrew translation of the original Aramaic word is the ambiguous *tappuach*, or *fructus* 'fruit' in Latin. Having been deceived by a snake, Eve offers this fruit to Adam, leading to their loss of immortality and their expulsion from Paradise.

2 He stated that there could be 'little doubt that we have here two realizations of a single story pattern: a prince, on the summit of a hill associated with sovereignty, sees a mysterious woman wearing remarkable clothing. He asks her whence she has come, and in the course of

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in any of the woman's or Connlae's utterances' (2000, 55). However, there is reason to believe that the gift of the apple is itself an erotic act. Before the woman leaves for the first time, she gifts Connlae with an apple thus: *do:corastar ubull do Chonnlu* (ibid., 122, § 7) 'she threw the apple to Connlae'.

The formula *do-cuirethar* + *do* also appears in *Immram Brain* (Mac Mathúna 1985) [3], where the Otherworld woman throws a ball of wool to Bran mac Febail, which entwines his hands and binds him to the *síd*:

> *Do-cuirethar in ben certli do Braun tara gnúis cach ndíriuch. Fo-ceird Bran a láim forin certli. Lil in certle dia dernainn. Boí in sná(i)the inna certle i lláim inna mná. Con-sreng in curach dochum poirt* (ibid., 44, § 62, ll. 270-4).
>
> The woman throws a ball of thread to Bran, directly over his face. Bran puts his hand on the ball. The ball clung to his palm. The thread of the ball was in the woman's hand. She pulled the coracle towards the harbour.

In both of these examples, the act of throwing an object results in a mortal being drawn to the *síd* in different ways. As a result of eating the apple, Connlae immediately falls in love with the woman: *Gabais éolchaire íarom Connle immune deilb inna mná ad:condairc* (McCone 2000, 122, § 8) 'Longing then seized Connlae for the shape of the woman that he had seen.' Consequently, Connlae is struck dumb for the love of her (ibid., § 10). Thereafter, the woman asks him to join her in her land of the living (*tír inna mbéo*). This causes him to vacillate between her and his own people, whom he loves (ibid., 123, § 13). In the end, the intoxicating power of his love for the woman is too strong to resist, and he leaves with her to become immortal (ibid., § 15). It is clear that the gift of the apple is crucial to Connlae's transformation.

In Graeco-Roman literature, the apple was used as a metaphor for beauty and love. Sappho likened a young bride to an 'sweet apple' (*gluku'malon*) (Powell 2007, 27). The word *μήλων (mēlon)* was a widely-used metaphor for courtship and marriage rites in Greek art and poetry (Winkler 1996, 104). The gift of a fruit (particularly an apple) was a symbol of courtship in many cultures, such as Greek, Roman and Byzantine (Littlewood 1967; 1993). It symbolised fertility, by means of the distribution of seed through the sharing of the fruit. In Greek poetry and

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the conversation which ensues she says that she loves him and has come seeking him as her mate' (Carey 1995, 43).

3 The writing of these two tales appear to be practically contemporaneous – indeed Alfred Nutt suggested that they were the work of the same author (Meyer and Nutt 1895, 148-49). McCone (2000, 47) concluded that *Echtrae Chonnlai* may have been composed slightly before *Immram Brain* and Carey (1995, 85) agreed that the former impacted on the writing of the latter.

visual art, the gift of the apple represented 'the favorite offering of lover to beloved' (Carson 1988, 88). The motif of the apple as a projectile appeared as a wooing ritual in classical tradition (Lawson 1910, 558). The phrase *μηλο-βολέω* 'to pelt with apples' is a metaphor which Aristophanes defined as 'to become enamoured or sexually excited' (Humphreys 2004, 180, l. 997). In the story *Daphnis and Chloe* (Turner 1956, 93) by Longus, the archetypal lover throws an apple to his beloved, cementing their union.

The 'apple of discord' of Greek tradition also appears to be an erotic symbol. Apollodorus described the scene of Peleus and Thetis' wedding, where jealous Eris throws an apple (*mêlon*) amongst the revellers (Frazer 1921, 3:2). The goddesses Hera, Aphrodite and Athene squabble over the apple and are forced to submit to the judgement of Paris, who awards the prize to Aphrodite, who promises him Helen as a bribe. The apple becomes a token of love, though in this case offered not to the object of the hero's affection, but to the mediator. The tale of Atalanta also features the motif of the dropping of an apple to gain a lover's affections. Under pain of death, her suitor Milanion is compelled to race her and throws down three golden apples (*erripten*) (ibid., 3.9.2). She slows to pick them up, causing Milanion to overtake her and win the race, and consequently her hand in marriage.

The gift of an apple as a token of love is also apparent in Norse tradition. In the thirteenth-century *Skírnismál* (Dronke 1997), the goddess Freyr sends eleven golden apples (*epli*) to Gerðr as an offer of marriage (ibid., 380, § 19). The late thirteenth-century Icelandic epic *Völsunga saga* (Grimstad 2000) tells of King Rerir and his wife who pray to the gods for a child. Hearing their prayers for a child, the gods Frigg and Oðin send the valkyrie Ljod to them with the gift of an apple: *Hún tók við eplinu… Hún lét falla eplið í kné konunginum* (ibid, 78) 'She took the apple… She let the apple fall into the lap of the king.' The similarity between this incident and examples mentioned above suggests the existence a ritual performed to encourage fertility. The lateness of these texts suggests that the motif may have been influenced by Graeco-Roman tales in the aftermath of the arrival of Christianity to Northern Europe. However, the discovery of buckets of apples left as a votive offering on the Oseberg Viking ship (c. 850 A.D.) (Ellis Davidson 1988, 117) suggests that they were considered to be a divine food in Scandinavian tradition.

In Irish tradition, there are suggestions of the apple displaying such an erotic function. In the 11th century tale *Aisling Meic Con Glinne* (Jackson 1990), Lígach, daughter of Máel Dúin sends gifts to show her love for Cathal Mac Finguine: *Do-bertis iarum ettne 7 ubla 7 il-blassa … for a sheirc 7 immaine* (ibid., 2, § 5, ll. 35-7) 'Then kernels and apples and many sweets used to be brought … for his love and affection.' However, these apples are used for a malevolent purpose. They are mischievously filled with *tuathi 7 gentlecht* (ibid., § 6, l. 48) 'charms and heathen

spells'. This is an example of the motif of the gift of the apple being used to convey a Christian message: to illustrate the perils of gluttony. Nevertheless, the theme of the gift of the apple to inspire love is still in evidence. Whether or not this motif is the product of classical influence is of course a vexed question. However, the appearance of such a complex and richly rendered motif in this early tale suggests that the erotic nature of the apple might have originally been an indigenous concept in pre-Christian Ireland.

The apple which Connlae receives in *Echtrae Chonnlai* (McCone 2000) has the power to regenerate itself and nourish him for a whole month:

> *Boí Connle íar sin co cenn mís cen dig cen biad, nabu fiu leis nach tóare do thomailt acht a ubull. Na nní do:meled, nícon:dígbad ní dend ubull acht ba hóg-som beos* (ibid., 122, § 8)
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> Thereafter Connlae was without drink (and) without food until the end of a month, to him no sustenance was worth consuming save his apple. Nothing that he ate took anything away from the apple but it remained whole.

This is a common motif in many cultures, where supernatural food does not diminish no matter how much is eaten (Thompson 1955, 35). The regenerative properties of the supernatural apple are reminiscent of the cauldron in tales such as *Fled Dúin na nGéd* (Lehmann 1964), where the *caire ainiscen* 'cauldron of return' leaves nobody unsatisfied (ibid., 16, ll. 501-3). This regenerative aspect is also apparent in *Immram Brain* (Mac Mathúna 1985),[4] which features a classic example of an otherworldly paradise in which the inhabitants remain forever young: *i mbruig mbrecht óas ma(i)sse mét, ní-frescat aithbe ná éc* (ibid., 37, § 23, 99-100) 'in the varicoloured land of greatly surpassing beauty, they expect neither age nor death.'

In order to entice Bran to the Otherworld island, a *síd* woman gives him *cróeb n-aircit fua bláth* (Mac Mathúna 1985, 33, § 2, ll. 9-10) 'a silver branch in white bloom'. This branch is described as being: *cróeb dind abaill a hEmain* (ibid., § 3, l. 17) 'a branch from the apple-tree of Emain'. Emain Macha was occasionally known by the epithet Emain Ablach (Toner 1988, 32-5, esp. 33).

In the tenth century Irish tale *Immram Curaig Maíle Dúin* (van Hamel 1941), the eponymous hero comes across a branch on which apples magically sprout. The apples sustain him and his companions for forty days and nights (ibid., 32, § 7, ll. 215-6). There is a similar episode in the later tale *Echtra Thaidg mheic Chéin*

4 The Christian nature of this tale has been argued by Carney (1955), whereas Oskamp (1970) suggested that while the author had a knowledge of Christian literature, and 'made use of the literary formulas of his own time, based upon classical and Christian literature … his material is not necessarily Christian in origin' (ibid., 40-41).

(O'Grady 1892), where the hero journeys to the *síd*-island of Fresen to rescue his abducted kin. After a stormy crossing, he and his company are overcome with the fragrance from an orchard of apple-trees (ibid., 346). The mere scent of these apples is enough to sustain the men: *ba lór do bhiud ocus do shásad dóib bolad craeb cumra corcarghlan na críche sin* (ibid.) 'the scent of the sweet red branch of that land was sufficient food for them.' In this tale, the apple has nourishing and replenishing characteristics. Tadg encounters an Otherworld youth who offers him a magical apple:

> *no chaithed tres de ocus ní fa lugaide é gach a caithed. ocus ba hé sin biad no imfhuilnged iat a ndís tré bithu* (ibid., 350)
>
> he would eat a third of it and it would not be less and for all he ate. And that was the food that supported the pair of them.

In addition to nourishing Tadg, eating the supernatural apple causes him to remain young: *ocus ní théiged aes ná urchra air ná orrosom iarna chaitium* (ibid., 350) 'And age nor decay did not come on him or them after eating it.' It transpires that the youth who presents Tadg with the apple is Connlae, who has lived there since he departed from his earthly kingdom in Ireland. This segment is clearly based on Connlae's encounter with the woman in *Echtrae Chonnlai* (McCone 2000, 80). It is apparent, therefore, that the regenerating apple is the result of a combination of a Christian theme with an indigenous motif.

A similar motif occurs in Babylonian mythology, where Adapa refuses to partake of the food of heaven and thus remains mortal (Gaster 1969, 29). Similarly in the Ugaritic 'Poem of Baal', the god of fertility is enticed to eat the food of his rival Mot, god of death and sterility, and is subsequently held captive by him (ibid., 30). In the Greek myth of Persephone, she is tricked by Hades into eating the seeds of a pomegranate. As a result of this, she is forced to be his prisoner in the Underworld for half of each year (Melvill 1986, 115, v.535). This is an example of 'the widespread belief that the living may visit the underworld and return provided that they abstain from the food of the dead' (Allen et al. 1936, 169). This abstinence is necessitated by the fact that, by eating the food of the dead, a bond is formed between humans and immortals (ibid.). This is mirrored in *Echtrae Chonnlai*, where the hero becomes inextricably bound to the *síd*-woman after eating the apple.

Supernatural food is also depicted as possessing regenerative powers in many pre-Christian traditions. One example appears in the Gilgamesh Epic (George 2003) which is believed by some scholars to be one of the sources of certain episodes in Genesis (Sandars 1972, 18). Gilgamesh is a king who fears death so

much that he embarks upon a quest for immortality. While on this journey, he comes across a garden whose entrance is guarded by scorpion-men (ibid. 71, IX.42). This garden contains the trees of the gods, from which hang wondrous fruit (ibid., 75, IX.172-4). Later, Gilgamesh finds a divine plant at the bottom of the ocean which Utnapishtim promises will return to him his youth (ibid., 98, XI.282). The quest for fruits of immortality is also seen in the Greek tradition, where the apples (*μήλα*) of the Hesperides are sought by Heracles. They are guarded by a snake named Ládon (Seaton 1916, 389) and have the power to render their owner immortal.

The motif of the apple which acts as a supernatural food of healing and rejuvenation appears in Norse tradition. The ninth-century poem *Haustlong* (North 1997) by Thjóðólf of Hvin recounts Iðunn's rejuvenating medicine (*Þá er ellilyf ása ... kunni*) (ibid., § 8) which is brought to the land of the gods to save them from their debility. Although this text does not mention apples, later accounts identify them as being the medicine in question. In the thirteenth-century *Skáldskaparmál* (Young 1964), Iðunn possesses magical apples which 'the gods love to eat, when they grow old, to become young again' (ibid., 54). Subsequently, the giant Thiazi bears Iðunn away with her apples (ibid., 98), causing the divine Aesir to become aged and withered. Similarly, in *Skírnismál* (Dronke 1997), Skírnir offers Gerðr *epli elli lyfs… algullin* (ibid., 380, § 19) 'apples for age-healing … all of gold'.

McCone regarded Connlae's apple as 'biblical through and through by virtue of constituting a deliberate inversion of the narrative of the fall in Genesis' (1990, 82). This fruit (*fructus*) appears to be a direct progenitor of the apple of *Echtrae Chonnlai*. However, the apple that Connlae consumes has the opposite effect to that of the fruit (*fructus*) of Genesis. As a result of eating the apple, Connlae gains immortality and joins the woman in her everlasting *tír inna mbéo* (McCone 2000, 123, § 15). Conversely, as a result of eating the 'forbidden fruit', Adam loses his immortality (Gen. 3:19) and is driven from the paradisiacal Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:23). On one level, it could be argued that this episode in *Echtrae Chonnlai* is a simple reversal of the Biblical theme. It is clearly modelled on the passage in Genesis for the purpose of delivering a Christian message about the inevitability of the destruction of the pagan tradition. However, it appears that this is not merely a simple inversion of the Genesis motif. As I have argued in the context of Irish and other traditions, the apple in this context appears to be an example of the paradigm of supernatural food. As a result of eating this food, a mortal is sustained and often made immortal. Indeed, Connlae abandons his earthly family for the sake of the *síd*-woman (McCone 2000, 123, § 13). Furthermore, the gift of the fruit is charged with meaning in many cultures, and whether its appearance in this story is due to a theme common to many traditions, or can be attributed to later influence due to the spread of Christianity – its erotic symbolism is clear. The apple therefore represents a mediation between the indigenous pre-Christian

tradition and the teachings of Christianity. The pre-Christian concept of the apple as an erotic symbol is utilised for a didactic purpose – to demonstrate the triumph of Christianity by mirroring the forbidden fruit of Genesis. In *Echtrae Chonnlai* the apple is no longer solely a demonstration of the concerns of an agrarian society which were focused on fertility (both human and natural) (Mac Neill 1962, 424). It is now a redemptive symbol, leading Connlae (and by extension Ireland) away from the earthly life to eternal life.

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