

John Carey
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THE THREE THINGS REQUIRED OF A POET

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I

One of the most familiar episodes in the eclectic Middle Irish narrative *Macgnímartha Find* is that which describes how Finn mac Cumail acquired the supernatural enlightenment on which he depended for his poetic and prophetic gifts.¹ The young hero studies poetry (*éicse*) under a sage named Finn Éices; the latter, evidently some kind of doublet of Finn himself, has spent seven years beside the Boyne waiting to catch a particular salmon, 'for it had been prophesied of him that he could consume the salmon of Fiacc, and that after that there would be nothing which he would not know'. But in fact the prophecy applies to his namesake: the young Finn is set to cook the salmon and, when he puts his thumb in his mouth after burning it on the fish, himself receives the knowledge for which his teacher had been seeking. In the tale's own words:

Is ed sin tra dorat in fis do Finn .i. an tan dobered a ordain ina beolu
ocus no chana tria teinm laega, ocus no failisithe do iarum in ni no
bid 'na aínfis. Ro fogluim-sium in treide nemtigiús filid .i. teinm
laega ocus imus forosna ocus dicedul dicennaib.

That is what gave knowledge to Finn: when he would put his thumb in his mouth and chant by means of *teinm laedo*, what he did not know would be revealed to him. He learned the three things which qualify a *fili*: *teinm laedo* and *imbas forosnai* and *díchetal di chennaib*.²

The last sentence in this quotation lists three skills or abilities that give the *fili* or professional poet his special status: *nemthigidir*, the verb, which I have loosely rendered 'qualifies', derives from the noun *nemed*, meaning not only 'legal privilege', 'immunity', but also 'holy thing' or 'sanctuary'.³ Apart from echoing the enigmatic term *teinm laedo* in the

¹ This article is the revised version of a paper presented at the Tenth Irish Conference of Medievalists, Maynooth, on 6 July 1996. I am grateful for the comments of those who attended, as well as for those of the editors of *Ériu*; I am particularly indebted to Liam Breatnach for his suggestions regarding the sense of several of the passages which I have endeavoured to translate below. The invaluable help which I have received does not, of course, in any way diminish my own responsibility for the imperfections which remain.

² Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'Macgnímartha Find', *Revue Celtique* 5 (1881-3), 195-204: 201. The three terms *teinm laedo*, *imbas forosnai* and *díchetal di chennaib* are given many spellings in the sources. In translating I have normalized these, apart from recording the instances where *do* takes the place of *di* in *díchetal di chennaib*.

³ A useful summary of the senses of *nemed* is provided in Thomas Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly (eds), *Bechbretha* (Dublin 1983), 107-9.

previous sentence, the statement has no integral relationship with the rest of the tale: it is a good example of the ‘process of somewhat artless composition from disparate sources’ to which Pádraig Breatnach has called attention in his discussion of *Macgnímartha Find* as a whole.⁴ In this instance the author has drawn upon the legal literature, to which we may now turn.

II

Here the first source calling for consideration is the commentary to *Uraicecht Becc*, an Old Irish tract on status:

Tredi dlegar dun ollamain filed .i. tenm læghdha 7 imus forosnadh 7 dicedal do cennaib, amail adberat bretha nemeth: a tri nemtigter nemthusa fileth, tenm laeda 7 imus forosnad [7] dicedul du cennaib.

Three things are required of a master *fili*: *teinm laedo* and *imbas forosnai* and *díchetal do chennaib*, as *Bretha Nemed* states: ‘Three things qualify the entitlements of a *fili*: *teinm laedo* and *imbas forosnai* and *díchetal do chennaib*’.⁵

The commentator then endeavours to explain the three terms, interpreting them as designations for *senchas* and metrical expertise.

That this passage does not derive from the original *Uraicecht* seems clear. Only the Yellow Book of Lecan puts the opening words in larger script;⁶ even more significantly, nothing comparable appears in the version of *Uraicecht Becc* in NLI MS G.3.⁷ Several brief tracts drawing on the *Uraicecht* do include it, however: Liam Breatnach has listed and discussed five of these,⁸ and the passage also appears in isolation in TCD MS H.3.18.⁹ In this last case, a copyist has drawn upon *Sanas Cormaic* to add the names of practitioners of each of the three skills: Moen Éices for *teinm laedo*, Lugaid Dalléices for *imbas forosnai*, and Finn himself for *díchetal di chennaib*.¹⁰ It may have been some such reference as this that prompted the author of *Macgnímartha Find* to include the legal formula in his story.

The most important feature of the passage is the commentator’s citation of the eighth-century legal collection *Bretha Nemed* as his

⁴ Review of Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The wisdom of the outlaw*, in *Éigse* 24 (1990), 155–67: 164. Elsewhere on the same page Breatnach again adverts to ‘evidence that the compiler relied at various stages in his narrative on diverse, even discrepant, sources without troubling to cover traces in the process’.

⁵ D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Corpus iuris Hibernici* (hereafter *CIH*) (Dublin 1978), 1603.35–7; cf. 648.37–649.1, 2319.27–30.

⁶ *Ibid.* 2319.27.

⁷ *Ibid.* 2270.25ff. For discussion of the two versions of *Uraicecht Becc* see Liam Breatnach (ed.), *Uraicecht na Riar* (Dublin 1987), 5–6.

⁸ *Uraicecht na Riar*, 7 (cf. *CIH* 1533.26–35), 8 (cf. *CIH* 551.36–552.17), 13–14 (text on pp 154–5), 14 (text on p. 159), 16 (text on p. 166).

⁹ *CIH* 1105.35–1106.11.

¹⁰ For further discussion of references to divination in *Sanas Cormaic* see section VI below.

authority for a statement almost identical to that in the *Macgnímartha*. On the face of it, this suggests that the doctrine that *imbas forosnai*, *teinm laedo* and *díchetal di chennaib* are the *fili*'s three requirements is several centuries older than the *Macgnímartha* or the commentary; but in fact no such assertion is to be found in any of those sections of *Bretha Nemed* which have survived.

III

We do find something similar however in *Trecheng Breth Féne*, the gnomic collection edited by Kuno Meyer under the title *The Triads of Ireland*. Here a formidable list of threefold qualifications—for the professions of buffoon, comb-maker, carpenter, physician, blacksmith, brazier, harpist, and king—includes the group ‘Three things which qualify a *fili*: *imbas forosnai*, *teinm laedo*, *díchetal di chennaib*’ (*Tréde neimthigedar filid: immas forosna, teinm læda, dichetal di chennaib*).¹¹ The original compilation of the *Trecheng* has been tentatively dated to the ninth century.¹² These ‘professional triads’, however, belong to an extensive body of material appearing only in two manuscripts, the Yellow Book of Lecan and RIA MS 23.N.10: we may consider the possibility that they were added to the collection at some later date.¹³

Whatever the relationship of these triads to the rest of the *Trecheng*, there can be little doubt regarding their source: they have been drawn from that section of *Bretha Nemed* headed *Do nemthigud cach gráid* ‘On the qualification of every rank’. Here all of the triple requirements found in the professional triads are listed, together with more for satirists, various categories of *bard*, coppersmiths, charioteers, champions, warriors, hospitallers, tenant farmers, cupbearers, druids, and clerics.¹⁴

All of the professional triads show close verbal agreement with the corresponding material in *Bretha Nemed*, with one significant exception: the qualifications for a *fili*. These in fact come at the very beginning of the *Bretha Nemed* treatment. Liam Breatnach has translated the relevant passage as follows:

¹¹ Kuno Meyer (ed.), *The Triads of Ireland* (Dublin, 1906), 16 §123. In the manuscripts themselves the triad appears as follows: ‘T. n- filidh immas forosnad. teinm læga. dicheadal dicheannuibh’ (YBL, facs. p. 416a, line 25); ‘Tri ar neimitir filid. teinm laide. imus for osna. dicetal do cenduib’ (23.N.10, facs. p. 9a, lines 14–15). Note that the sequence in 23.N.10 matches that in *Macgnímartha Find*, the *Uraicecht Becc* commentary, and the second metrical tract (cf. n. 48 below).

¹² Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (Dublin 1988), 284.

¹³ Besides the ‘professional triads’ themselves (§§116–23, 202), the triads that Meyer numbered §§62, 105–8 and 166–220 are peculiar to YBL and 23.N.10.

¹⁴ *CIH* 2219.15–2220.19. Some of these triads are cited individually elsewhere. Thus *Cath Maige Tuired* speaks of ‘the three things by which a musician is qualified: the sleeping-strain and the laughing-strain and the weeping-strain’ (*a trédhi fora nem[th]i[g]thir cruitiri .i. súantraigi 7 genntraigí 7 golltraighi*: E. A. Gray (ed.), *Cath Maige Tuired* (Naas 1982), lines 806–7); and the three requirements of a charioteer are listed as ‘the three excellences (*buada*) of charioteering’ in *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Cecile O’Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cuailnge: Recension I* (Dublin 1976), lines 2211–12). Cf. respectively *CIH* 2219.34–5 and 40–1; in the former case the correspondence in wording is particularly close.

A Moraind a maine a mochta, abuir frium co miter nert cach naosad nemeth, ar is a nemtesaib do-ecclamar cach direch dana dligid. Imus for-osnam, dicedul do cenduib, cedul n-anomuin cethirriach cato cach suad.

O wealthy mighty Morand, tell me how the power of every lawfully established *nemed* is estimated, for it is on the basis of privileges that every lawful skilled person is chosen(?). *Imbas forosnai, dichetal do chennaib*, the singing of *anamain* of four varieties are what confer dignity on a sage.¹⁵

It is natural enough that this wording should have been somewhat recast for inclusion in a list of triads: the discussion of the qualifications of the *fili* and of several ranks of *bard* constitutes a self-contained unit in elevated diction, marked off by a *dínad* as an address to the legendary jurist Morand, while the other professions are treated in an unadorned list thereafter. More striking is the fact that the *fili*'s professional requirements are here actually different from those listed in the *Trecheng*. Instead of *teinm laedo* we find the ability to recite 'anamain of the four varieties', a verse-form named in various sources as one of the distinctions of the *ollam* or master *fili*.¹⁶

The *Uraicecht* commentary asserts that its list of a *fili*'s qualifications is drawn from *Bretha Nemed*, and the professional triads, which clearly derive from that source, contain the same list. In *Bretha Nemed* itself, however, in the section from which the triads were taken, we find not that list but a different one. These three pieces of evidence must cohere, but their relationship is evidently not entirely straightforward.

The most natural inference appears to be that the *Uraicecht Becc* commentary, and the professional triads, go back not to *Bretha Nemed* proper but to a modified version of that work, one in which the doctrine here under discussion had undergone a significant alteration. On this evidence it is reasonable to suppose that *all* examples of the formula that include *teinm laedo* derive, at however many removes, from this emendation of *Bretha Nemed*'s testimony.

IV

Something similar appears later in *Bretha Nemed*, in the course of a more detailed discussion of the qualifications of a *fili*. The end of the relevant section, together with my own tentative translation, are as follows:

...Áirdemh uaislemh anamhain,
imba ceithre ree rigther.

¹⁵ *Uraicecht na Ríar*, 36–7. I have departed from Breatnach's wording by leaving the technical terminology in Irish; he renders *imbas forosnai* and *dichetal do chennaib* respectively as 'great knowledge which illuminates' and 'extempore chanting'.

¹⁶ *Uraicecht na Ríar*, 59, 177 (Table 2), 182 (Table 5). Cf. pp 59 and 72, where the metre is called merely *anamain*; in both cases this may be due to the exigencies of verse.

Ad-sloinn airdnemhidh iomhais,
 aroslaicthe dligheadh
 dicheadal docanar
 do cholla cennaibh.
 Gach úadh, ní dligheadh deirméin,
 déach sgeo feadha:
 slan sáoi rodasuidhesttar.

... Loftiest, noblest, is *anamain*,
 when four varieties are composed.
 A chant which is recited
 from heads of bodies (?)
 characterizes the exalted privilege of *imbas*,
 which opens up entitlements.¹⁷
 He should not forget the requirement of every metre,
 of syllable and letter:
 sound is the sage who has set them in place.¹⁸

In this case, of course, the three terms in question are not grouped together in a triad; nevertheless, I think that it is significant that an enumeration of the qualifications of the *ollam filed* or *suí* culminates with references to ‘*anamain* of four varieties’, *imbas* (*forosnai*), and *díchetal di chennaib*. The last of these expressions appears here in an expanded form which—if *cholla* is indeed to be interpreted as representing *cholnae*, genitive plural of *colainn* ‘body, corpse’—might be taken to point to some kind of necromantic ritual. Elsewhere in *Bretha Nemed*, however, the presumably equivalent phrase *do chennaib* is employed without any such implication: payment to a sage is urged *do chennaib*, evidently here meaning ‘at once’;¹⁹ it is required of a satirist that he be able to compose ‘a defamatory demand *do chennaib*, so that cheeks are reddened’;²⁰ and the status of *fili* is denied to one ‘who cannot (compose) a *nath* or an *anair* or an *anamain*, who cannot chant properly *do chennaib*’.²¹ In all of these instances, a rendering ‘extempore’ would give the easiest sense, and later evidence can be adduced pointing in the same direction.²²

¹⁷ A play on words associating *ar-osailci* ‘opens’ with *for-osnai* ‘illuminates’ may be present here.

¹⁸ *CIH* 1114.41–1115.2.

¹⁹ *CIH* 1119.38. The passage is cited in ‘O’Davoren’s Glossary’, ed. Whitley Stokes, *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie* 2 (1904), 197–504: 335 §828, where the phrase in question is glossed *continuo* ‘at once’.

²⁰ *CIH* 2219.32.

²¹ *CIH* 1114.2; the Irish of the final phrase is *nad coir canad do chennaibh*.

²² Most of this evidence takes the form of attempts to interpret the phrase *díchetal di chennaib* itself; some of these will be cited in section IX below. Another example appears in the commentary to *Amra Coluim Chille*: ‘Then Dallán the chief *ollam* of Ireland came to speak with Colum Cille. And it is then that he recited the prologue to him, and he did not permit him to compose anything more than that, so that he composed it at the time of his death. For Colum Cille said that it was for a dead man that that was appropriate; and it is *do chennaib* that Dallán had attempted to compose his poem’ (Whitley Stokes (ed.), ‘The Bodleian Amra Coluimb Chille’, *Revue Celtique* 20 (1899), 31–55, 132–83, 248–89, 400–37: 132–4). This could be taken to mean that Dallán was moved to compose

It may be that the phrase carried *both* senses: that *díchetal di chennaib* was a type or technique of spontaneous composition which came to be associated with the supernatural properties attributed to severed heads in Celtic tradition. The lore attaching to such heads was so potent and pervasive, not least in mantic contexts, that an expression like *díchetal di chennaib* could hardly help being affected by it.²³

Alternatively, *do cholla cennaibh* (< *di cholnae cennaib*) may originally have been intended as no more than an alliterating embellishment of *di chennaib*—‘heads of bodies’ being simply another way of saying ‘heads’, much as ‘forever and a day’ is simply a poetic way of saying ‘forever’. Such a phrase would inevitably have suggested magical associations to later readers, but such associations need not necessarily be ascribed to the authors/compiler of *Bretha Nemed* itself.²⁴

V

Another legal text of comparable date, the introduction to the *Senchas Már*, also mentions some of the attributes of a *fili*:

Is i Senchas Mar ro airled comdíre do rig 7 epscop 7 agu rechta litre 7 suid filed forcan di c[h]ennaib, forn-osnai imbos, 7 briuguid direnar cétaib.

It was determined in the *Senchas Már* that the same honour-price (pertains to) a king; and to a bishop; and to a pillar of the law of Scripture; and to a sage of poetry who chants *di chennaib*, whom *imbas* illuminates; and to a hospitaller who is paid (on account of his) hundreds.²⁵

Here the author is not concerned to give a definitive list of qualifications, but merely to furnish a brief characterization. The only two faculties or abilities alluded to are *imbas forosnai* and *díchetal di chennaib*: the passage does not speak of *teinm laedo* on the one hand, nor of *anamain* on the other. As in the two citations from *Bretha Nemed*, the *ollam* is here called a *suí*.

Let us cast a quick glance back over the ground covered thus far. We have seen that the familiar triad of *imbas forosnai*, *teinm laedo*, and *díchetal di chennaib* is a secondary fabrication, deriving from a modification of the text of *Bretha Nemed*. In *Bretha Nemed* proper, *anamain* occupied the place later taken by *teinm laedo*, and indeed we

the elegy on the spot but was forestalled by the saint; whatever the precise sense may be, it evidently has nothing to do with ‘heads’ concretely understood.

²³ For an extended survey of the Celtic ‘cult of the head’ see Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London 1967), 61–126. The relevance of severed heads to prophecy and inspired utterance is discussed by Nora Chadwick, ‘Imbas forosnai’, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 4 (1935), 97–135: 120ff.

²⁴ I am grateful to Damian McManus for this persuasive suggestion.

²⁵ Rudolf Thurneysen, ‘Aus dem irischen Recht IV’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 16 (1927), 167–230: 175–6.

have no reason to believe that this was not standard doctrine in the eighth century.

Anamain is simply a type of metre, with no evident supernatural associations; as we have just seen, *díchetal di chennaib* too appears originally to have lacked any such associations. The triple qualification in its original form may have been intended to reflect the range of abilities required of the *fili*: technical expertise (*anamain*), improvisational facility (*díchetal di chennaib*), and inspiration (*imbais*). With the substitution of *teinm laedo* and reinterpretation of *díchetal di chennaib*, however, it took on a very different character: it now appears to be exclusively concerned with the prophetic powers and magical techniques associated with the *fílid*.²⁶ The antiquity of such traditions is not in question; I wish to emphasize, however, that this evocative and often-cited formulation of them is innovative, and represents a doctoring of early sources in order to present a more pagan, more supernatural picture of the poetic profession. It is important to pay close attention to such romanticizing tendencies whenever they can be identified: their existence has potentially radical implications for the use of medieval evidence in reconstructing a picture of the pagan past.²⁷

VI

We may now consider the testimony of *Sanas Cormaic*, generally held to have been compiled by, or under the aegis of, Cormac mac Cuilennáin at some point before his death in 908. That he functioned in fact as author, not merely as patron or project director, would appear to be now confirmed by Liam Breatnach's persuasive arguments that he also wrote *Amra Senáin*, a composition containing several words otherwise attested only in the glossary. I shall therefore follow general usage and refer to the compiler as 'Cormac' in what follows.²⁸

Many of the glossary's entries deal with poetics and the poetic profession. There are also a few extended accounts of divination: the blind poet Lugaid determines the identity of a dog's skull by touching it with his staff;²⁹ the poet Moen performs a similar feat through *teinm laedo*;³⁰ Finn uses *teinm laedo* to identify the headless corpse of his

²⁶ Thus Calvert Watkins observes of the triad that 'No better illustration of the ancient interdependence of poetry, prophecy, and magic could be found. T. F. O'Rahilly ... demonstrates the connexion of all three terms with the remote pagan past' ('Indo-European metrics and archaic Irish verse', *Celtica* 6 (1963), 194-249: 216). He goes on to note the references to *anamain*, suggesting on etymological grounds that this term can be rendered 'psychic inspiration'; there appears, however, to be no indication that any such sense survived even vestigially into the historic period.

²⁷ For further reflections on this theme see my paper 'The uses of tradition in *Serglige Con Culainn*', in J. P. Mallory and G. Stockman (eds), *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Belfast 1994), 77-84.

²⁸ Liam Breatnach, 'An edition of *Amra Senáin*', in D. Ó Corráin et al. (eds), *Sages, saints and storytellers* (Maynooth 1989), 7-31: 20-3. Some further considerations pointing to Cormac's authorship are noted by Paul Russell, 'The sounds of a silence: the growth of Cormac's Glossary', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 15 (1988), 1-30: 10-15.

²⁹ *Sanas Cormaic*, 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

jester;³¹ and the article on *rincne* recounts yet another of Finn's divinatory exploits, linked in another source with *imbas forosnai*.³² It is the article specifically devoted to *imbas*, however, which is most frequently cited in this context, and its final paragraph has a direct bearing on the present inquiry.

Atrorbe Patraic anisin, 7 an teinm laoda, 7 fotroirgell a briathar na bad nimhe na talman nach aon dogenai, ar is diultad bathis. Dic[h]etal do c[h]ennaib *imorro*, fodracbad son i corus c[h]jerdae, ar is soas fodera son: ni ecen audbairt do demnaib oca, acht aisneis do c[h]ennaib a chnamae fochedoir.

Patrick rejected that (*imbas forosnai*), and also *teinm laedo*, and pledged his word that whoever performed it would belong neither to heaven nor earth, for it is a rejection of baptism. *Díchetal do chennaib*, however, was left in the canon of art. For inspiration is the cause of that; no offering to demons is necessary at it, but an instantaneous recital from the ends of his bones.³³

There has been a fair amount of discussion regarding the evidential value of Cormac's account of *imbas*,³⁴ and I will certainly not be trying to address all of the issues involved in that question here. But it seems safe to say that the story of Patrick's condemnation of *imbas forosnai* and *teinm laedo* on the grounds that they were fundamentally pagan and involved offerings to demons represents a significant departure, at least as far as *imbas forosnai* is concerned, from the position taken by most earlier sources. As we have seen, both *Bretha Nemed* and the introduction to the *Senchas Már* saw *imbas* as an essential qualification for the highest rank of *fili*, a figure both highly esteemed and fully integrated in Christian society. The testimony of the so-called 'Caldron of Poesy', another eighth-century treatise, is also instructive in this connection. In this arcane work's classificatory system the most exalted of three allegorical cauldrons is the *Coire Sofhis*, the 'Caldron of Knowledge', which can be attained either through 'divine joy' or 'human joy'. 'Divine joy', not surprisingly, is the result of grace; 'human joy' is further subdivided, the last of these divisions being *imbas* from the Otherworldly sources of the Boyne.³⁵ *Imbas* is thus, by an interesting distinction, both secular and supernatural: subordinated to the gifts of God, but still good in its own right and a legitimate source of inspiration.

Cormac may have drawn his negative view of *imbas* from the glossary *Dúil Dromma Cetta*: here the word is derived, as in Cormac, from an

³¹ Ibid., 87–8.

³² Ibid., 97; cf. n. 29 above.

³³ *Sanas Cormaic*, 64.

³⁴ See, for instance, the statements of Thurneysen, 'Imbas forosndai', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 19 (1932), 163–4; Chadwick, 'Imbas forosnai', 127; and T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology* (Dublin 1946), 339.

³⁵ Liam Breatnach (ed.), "The Caldron of Poesy", *Ériu* 32 (1981), 45–93: 66–9.

alleged ritual in which the *fili* put his palms (*basa*) around (*im*) his face before experiencing a visionary sleep; a concluding sentence appears to state that this ritual is not or should not be performed because it involves the invocation of demons.³⁶ The significance of this evidence is difficult to assess owing to the complexity of *Dúil Dromma Cetta's* relationship with *Sanas Cormaic*: at one point it cites Cormac directly;³⁷ elsewhere Cormac seems to have created a single entry by combining separate items which he found in it.³⁸

Whatever the direction of derivation may have been in this instance, it should be stressed that Cormac is the earliest datable source to bear witness to the triad of *imbas forosnai*, *teinm laedo*, and *díchetal di chennaib*—the grouping which, as we have seen, came to be attributed to *Bretha Nemed*. Did he too draw upon the modified *Bretha Nemed* used by the *Uraicecht Becc* commentator and by the man responsible for including the professional triads in *Trecheng Breth Féne*? Or does that modified version itself reflect his influence?

The weight of probability seems to me to favour the second of these alternatives. If the modified *Bretha Nemed* were Cormac's source for the triad, he might reasonably be expected to invoke its authority: there are in fact eleven citations from *Bretha Nemed* in *Sanas Cormaic*, several of them from parts of the collection close to the section *De neimthigud cach gráid*.³⁹ Admittedly, Cormac sometimes quotes from *Bretha Nemed* without identifying it as his source;⁴⁰ in the present case, however, he is evidently attempting to give a full and authoritative account of the *filid's* mantic practices, and would scarcely have failed to cite such an apposite passage had he been aware of it. It seems far likelier that the copy of *Bretha Nemed* which he used did not contain the modified version of a *fili's* qualifications.

That this adaptation was itself due to Cormac's influence is suggested by the evidence of *Sanas Cormaic* as a whole. As I have already mentioned, Cormac's *imbas* article is our earliest datable source for the collocation of *imbas forosnai*, *teinm laedo*, and *díchetal di chennaib*, and for the close association of all three with the *filid*. Furthermore, Cormac is our earliest source for the expression *teinm laedo* in any context: he employs it of various kinds of divination, some of which are elsewhere

³⁶ *CIH* 615.24–6, 1074.18–23.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 618.30, 1076.11–12. The other copies of the glossary lack the relevant section, so we cannot tell whether or not they also contained the reference to Cormac.

³⁸ Thus Russell, 'Sounds of a silence', 29–30. I am grateful to Dr Russell for allowing me, prior to its forthcoming appearance in *Études Celtiques*, to read a note in which he discusses the significance of *Dúil Dromma Cetta's imbas* entry.

³⁹ Using Meyer's numbering for the articles in *Sanas Cormaic*, and page- and line-references to *CIH* for *Bretha Nemed*, these are: §142 = 2223.21, §149 = 1115.28, §304 = 2223.32, §430 = 2217.27, §436 = 1118.2, §536 = 2223.25, §689 = 2214.18–20, §876 = 2217.8, §971 = 2223.28, §1135 = 1131.31. I have been unable to find the passage from which Cormac took the phrase *barr Buaise* (§148).

⁴⁰ Thus the phrase 'Droch do drochaib, dag do dagaib' (§483) appears also at *CIH* 1118.13.

attributed to *imbas forosnai*.⁴¹ It appears, in fact, to be the case that nowhere, apart from instances of the triad whose background I am attempting to elucidate, do the terms *teinm laedo* and *imbas forosnai* appear together: Cormac, familiar with tales of *teinm laedo* and writing a description of *imbas forosnai*, could easily enough have made the connection.

The proposed scenario may be summarized as follows. (i) *Bretha Nemed* stated that the three principal qualifications of a *fili* were *imbas forosnai*, *díchetal di chennaib*, and *anamain*. (ii) *Díchetal di chennaib*, originally simply a term for spontaneous composition, acquired magical connotations through reinterpretation of *di chennaib* 'extempore' to mean 'from heads'. (iii) Cormac, taking both *imbas forosnai* and *díchetal di chennaib* to be mantic practices, associated them with the *teinm laedo* known to him from other sources: *imbas* and *teinm laedo* were to be rejected, but *díchetal di chennaib* remained 'in the canon of art'. (iv) A redactor of *Bretha Nemed* took the three types of divination discussed by Cormac to be another version of the triple qualification given in *De neimthigud cach gráid*, and substituted it accordingly. (v) This redaction of *Bretha Nemed* was used by the *Uraicecht Becc* commentator and an interpolator of *Trecheng Breth Féne*.

Various attitudes to native magic are reflected in these developments. The original *Bretha Nemed* exhibits the relaxed, flexible approach so strikingly exemplified by 'The Caldron of Poesy': *imbas forosnai* has an honoured place, but is not seen as being significantly different in kind from talent or professional knowledge. Cormac focuses on the supernatural aspect, only to repudiate it: pagan prophecy is the work of demons. Finally, in the revised *Bretha Nemed*, Cormac's formulation is adopted but his negative assessment is ignored: we find rather a romanticizing desire to emphasize the *fili*'s mantic expertise at the expense of everything else.

This admittedly convoluted story represents, I think, the best explanation of the evidence which we have for the antecedents of the triad cited in *Macgnímartha Find*. In what remains of this paper I will try to give some account of that triad's further influence.

VII

The new doctrine is asserted with exceptional vigour in the tale *Airec Menman Uraird Maic Coisse*, a text which may well be the work of the poet Urard Mac Coisse himself (ob. 990).⁴² The story revolves around a

⁴¹ *Sanas Cormaic*, 77, 88. Note that where Finn is said to divine through the agency of *imbas forosnai*, *teinm laedo* is not mentioned: *Scéla Moshauluim* in M. O'Daly (ed.), *Cath Maige Mucrama* (London 1975), 84; Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'Finn and the Man in the Tree', *Revue Celtique* 25 (1904), 344–9: 346, 348.

⁴² On the plausibility of this attribution see Proinsias Mac Cana, *The learned tales of medieval Ireland* (Dublin 1980), 33–8, 83; Liam Breatnach has noted that he 'can see no objection to a date in the second half of the tenth century' (*Uraicecht na Ríar*, 92).

fili's successful efforts to secure the king of Tara's intervention on his behalf, and concludes with a formal enunciation of the compensation due to an *ollam*. This states that 'Good is *teinm laedo* of full speech, a complete pressing (?) which elucidates the flowing liquor of supreme inspiration; most victorious for him is *díchetal do chollaib cenn*' (*Fo theinm laodha lanfocail lantoinnseim soillsighis sruthlinn mbarr mbuais buadhchu dó dichetul do chollaibh cend*).⁴³ The very end of the text affirms the triad's crucial importance more explicitly, and in plainer language:

Is amlaid sin ro ordaighset: do tabairt da cach ollamain 'na einech ocus 'na tsarughadh co brath, acht co tisa de iomus forasna ocus dicetal do chollaib cenn ocus teinm laoga, coimeneclann fri rígh Temra do, acht co tisa de in treide sin.

They ordained it thus: to grant to every *ollam* forever, (in payment) for his honour and outrage, provided that he could perform *imbas forosnai* and *díchetal do chollaib cenn* and *teinm laedo*, an equal honour-price with the king of Tara, provided that he could perform those three things.⁴⁴

The emphasis on the threefold qualification is so pronounced here as to be repetitive and somewhat awkward: as in other texts drawing on the modified *Bretha Nemed*, the triad is presented as the primary requirement for the highest poetic status. The expanded phrase *díchetal do cholla cennaib*, discussed earlier, appears here as *díchetal do chollaib cenn*, literally (and rather bewilderingly) 'chanting from bodies of heads': presumably the change simply reflects the commonplace disappearance of a preposed genitive.

While most discussions of *Airec Menman* have concentrated on the extended tale-list which dominates its opening section, some attention has more recently been accorded to these final statements. Thus Proinsias Mac Cana remarks of the allusion to the triad:

Its particular use in the *Airec Menman* is well calculated: at one stroke the author contrives to assert the professional status of the *filid* and their corporate solidarity and exclusivity. The evidence suggests that it was Urad Mac Coisse himself who delivered himself of this essay in vocational propaganda. He was acting as the defender and spokesman of his own order in thus vindicating its traditional dignity and privileges in the face of certain tides of change that threatened to erode the basis of social usage and ideology on which they had been erected through the passing of endless centuries.⁴⁵

⁴³ M. E. Byrne (ed.), 'Airec Menman Uraird Maic Coisse', *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts* 2 (1908), 42–76: 75.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, 38.

‘Endless centuries’ is, of course, to be taken ironically here. The triad which *Airec Menman’s* author so resoundingly endorses was probably not yet a century old when he wrote; as Liam Breatnach observes, it is most likely that ‘the purpose of *Airec Menman Uraird Maic Coisse* was to further advance the status of the poets’, rather than to maintain a venerable tradition.⁴⁶ As is so often the case in medieval Irish literature, however, innovation and conservatism (or at least alleged conservatism) are difficult to disentangle. On the one hand, the tale describes a legal assembly convened in the tenth century as granting every properly qualified *ollam* the same honour-price as the king of Tara: this does indeed take a dramatic step beyond the placing of *ollamain* on the same level as kings in general which we find affirmed in the introduction to the *Senchas Már*, and one must doubt that any such enactment ever made itself felt beyond the domain of fiction. On the other hand, the qualifications themselves evoke the *fili’s* pagan background: use of the phrase *di chollaib cenn* instead of simple *di chennaib* would presumably have left no doubt in the audience’s mind that it was mantic rituals that were in question. In seeking to elevate the *fili’s* status, the author takes the same position that I have attributed to the *Bretha Nemed* redactor: poetic status is made dependent on supernatural powers, and the profession’s legitimacy is implicitly derived from its pre-Christian origins.

VIII

More ambivalent attitudes are reflected in the second and third of the Middle Irish metrical tracts edited by Thurneysen, both perhaps datable to the eleventh century in their extant form.⁴⁷ Tract II, a description of the *fili’s* twelve-year curriculum, opens its account of the eighth year of study as follows:

Is hí dano foglaim na hochtmaide bliadna .i. fiscomarca filed .i. duili berla 7 clethchor choem 7 reicne roscadach 7 laíde .i. tenm laída 7 immas forosnai 7 dichetal do chennaib na tuaithe 7 dínshenus 7 primscéla Hérend olchena fria n-aisnéis do ríghaib 7 flaithib 7 dagdhoínib.

These are the studies of the eighth year, that is, a *fili’s* catechism (?): that is, *dúili bérla* and *clethchorchoem* and *reicne roscadach* and the lays (*laíde*), that is, *teinm laedo* and *imbas forosnai* and *dichetal do chennaib na tuaithe*; and *dindshenchas* and the chief tales of Ireland besides, to recite them to kings and princes and nobles.⁴⁸

Here there is nothing to indicate that our triad has supernatural associations. On the contrary, its members appear (perhaps on the

⁴⁶ *Uraicecht na Ríar*, 92.

⁴⁷ On dating see Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish metrics* (Dublin 1961), v–vi.

⁴⁸ Rudolf Thurneysen (ed.), ‘Mittelirische Verslehren’, *Irische Texte* 3.1 (1891), 1–182: 49–50 §91.

strength of the second element of *teinm laedo*) to be classed as types of poem or *laíd*;⁴⁹ and the expanded phrase *díchetal do chennaib na tuaithe* ‘chanting to the chiefs of the people’ reflects a matter-of-fact interpretation in pointed contrast to the magical nuances which might have been conjured up by the earlier *díchetal di cholla cennaib*. While the triad is still firmly in place as a necessary part of the *fili*’s training, therefore, it has been rationalized in such a way as to render it innocuous: another swing of the cultural pendulum, perhaps encouraged by reformist tendencies in the church at home and abroad.

The tract may also reflect the legacy of Cormac: the course of study for the twelfth and final year includes a type of composition called *cétal di chennaib*, which it is difficult not to associate with *díchetal di chennaib*;⁵⁰ but here no mention is made of *imbas forosnai* or *teinm laedo*. It is surely no coincidence that it is precisely *díchetal di chennaib* which Cormac claimed had been permitted by Patrick, while the other two were condemned. Interestingly, the example of *cétal di chennaib* given is the famous composition ‘Am gaeth i mmuir’, attributed to the legendary *ur-poet* Amairgen mac Míled and alleged to be the first poem composed by him in Ireland: reinterpretation as a metrical term has not shorn the phrase of all its numinous potency.⁵¹ The tract appears, then, to be seeking a compromise between the importance assigned to the triad by the modified *Bretha Nemed* tradition and the denunciation of two of its members found in Cormac.

Imbas forosnai and *teinm laedo* do feature, however, in Tract III, not a curriculum but a catalogue of metres; again, we find the terms applied not to rituals but to verse-forms. The example given of *teinm laedo* is a jingling satiric stanza: for *imbas forosnai*, by contrast, we have the often-anthologized little nature poem which begins ‘Fégaid uaib/ sair fothuaid/ in muir muaid/ mílach’.⁵² I doubt that any significance is to be attached to these choices: the terms had evidently become stray tags, and the only scrap of tradition still attaching to them is the fact of their collocation. Saint Patrick’s fictitious excommunication has taken its toll.

IX

It remains to consider the discussions of the triad in Middle Irish legal commentaries. As we have seen, the commentator in the main version of *Uraicecht Becc* cites the testimony of the modified *Bretha Nemed*. He then

⁴⁹ Alternatively, as Liam Breatnach suggests to me, the three clauses introduced by *.i.* could be taken to be coordinated, each referring independently to *foglaim na hochtmaide bliadna*. In this case, there would be no question of our triad being classed as *laíde*.

⁵⁰ That *cétal* rather than *díchetal* is used here may probably be attributed to parallelism: *cétal di cennaib* appears in a list of six *cétla*.

⁵¹ It is also interesting (whatever we are to make of the statement) that the copy of the tract in the Book of Ballymote claims that ‘Am gaeth i mmuir’ is to be found in *Bretha Nemed*: ‘Mittelirische Verslehren’, 61–2 §123.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 102 §§186–7.

proceeds to analyse the three terms individually, in an anodyne manner reminiscent of the second metrical tract: *teinm laedo* is rendered ‘his understanding of poetry through his poem’ (*a tuicsin uad trena laid*), and explained as referring to genealogical expertise; *imbas forosnai* is ‘abundance of knowledge learned from the master by the pupil’ (*imud fesa na fogluma on oidi dun dalta*), and is taken to refer to ‘the four parts of the knowledge of *filedacht*’ (*ceitri ranna fesa na filidechta*).⁵³ The commentator’s remarks on *díchetal di chennaib* are worth citing at length, as they seem to take for granted an understanding of *di chennaib* in the sense ‘extempore, instantaneous’:

Dicedul du cendaib .i. dul do a cend a dana fo .c.oir, in cendaiacht, amail adberr: Asinedat gun imradudh, tidhnagar do diri; [.i.] aisnetsium imradad na rann gin smuaineth, gin smuaintecadh.

Díchetal di chennaib, i.e., he goes ‘into the head’ of his art at once, ‘in trafficking’ (?), as it is said: ‘He used to relate without thinking; payment is granted to him’; i.e., he relates the sense (?) of the stanzas without thinking, without reflecting.⁵⁴

In all of this there is no hint of the supernatural; but the magical connotations of the phrases were not forgotten, and creep back thanks to later copyists. I have already mentioned that the version of this paragraph in TCD H.3.18 alludes to the mantic feats of Moen, Lugaid Dalléices, and Finn; the gloss on *díchetal di chennaib* in H.2.15A prefaces the passage just quoted with some more exotic information:

Dícedal do cennaib .i. adhbhal-cantain do cennaib na tulach go tabraid a n-infoilghi airgid dó nó co roinnisidh a n-indsencas; nó adhbhal-chantain do cennaib na marb co tic a n-imdergad. Iar pedarraig sin. Madh iar nuafiadhnaisi immorro, is ed is dícedal do ceannaib ann .i. dul do a cenn a dána fó .c.oir...

Díchetal di chennaib, i.e., great chanting to the tops of the hills so that they give their silver treasures to him, or so that he may relate their *dindshenchas*; or great chanting to the heads of the dead until they blush.⁵⁵ That is according to the Old Law. If it be according to the New Testament, however, this is *díchetal di chennaib*: he goes ‘into the head’ of his art at once...⁵⁶

These details are intriguing and colourful, and we can conjecture what traditions suggested them to the writer’s mind. It seems, however, unlikely that we are dealing here with anything more than inspired

⁵³ I cite the text as it appears in *CIH* 1603.38–1604.1; for other copies see the references in nn 5–9.

⁵⁴ *CIH* 1604.1–4. I am grateful to Liam Breatnach for pointing out to me that the quotation in this passage is from *Bretha Nemed Déidenach*:...*iaramh as indeadadh gan iomradhadh, tiodhnagar dho dire* (ibid. 1113.17–18).

⁵⁵ Cf. the passage in *Bretha Nemed* cited in n. 20.

⁵⁶ *CIH* 552.3–6.

guesswork, reflecting the same romanticizing tendencies already observed in earlier treatments.⁵⁷

A considerably more extensive body of comment is attached to the reference cited earlier from the introduction to the *Senchas Már*, in TCD H.3.18 and Harleian 432; the copy in H.3.18 preserves several readings preferable to those in Harley, but appears to comprise only fragments of what we find in the latter. Below I offer a translation of the Harley text, punctuated with a few remarks of my own:

SUAD FILED FORCAN DI CENDAIB FOROSNA IMBAS .i. in sui file da fursannand *nó* da faillsigend imad a sofesa, co ndenand rand can smuained; int *ollam* filed iarna uirned [ag rig tuath] .i. dofuarascaib a soas.

‘A sage of poetry who chants extempore, whom *imbais* illuminates’; i.e., the sage of poetry whom the abundance of his knowledge illuminates or enlightens, so that he composes a stanza without thinking; the *ollam* of poetry who has been ordained by the king of a *tuath*, i.e., his knowledge exalts him.

The bland etymologies here are commonplace enough, and closely akin to those in the commentary to the *Uraicecht*; note in particular the recurrence of the phrases ‘abundance of knowledge’ (here *imad* (*a sofesa*)) and ‘without thinking’ (here *can smuained*).

... .i. cen imradud indiu, is do cendaib colla tall, co findud slondud trit beos; 7 is amlaid donithe son .i. in tan adchid in filid in duine anall ina dochum, *nó* int adbar, dognid comrac do fo cetoir do cendaib a cnama *nó* a menman cen scrutain, 7 is imale no canadh 7 dognid.

That is, ‘without thinking’ nowadays, and ‘from the heads of bodies’ then, in order to find out the name thereby. And this is how it used to be done: when the *fili* used to see the person or the thing approaching at a distance, he would encounter him at once from the ends of his bones, or of his mind without thinking, and it is at the same time that he recited it and performed (the divination).

Several things are going on in this paragraph. First, we see the acceptance of both interpretations of the phrase *di chennaib*, the explanation being that one is its sense now (*indiu*) while the other was its meaning formerly (*anall*). *Díchetal di chennaib* is used to discover names,

⁵⁷ One detail worth calling attention to is the commentator’s use of the terms *petarlaic* ‘Old Law’ and *nuafhiadnaise* ‘New Testament’ to refer to Irish paganism and Christianity respectively; compare the tradition, attested in *Sanas Cormaic* and elsewhere, that the first judge of the Gaels was a pupil of Moses (*Sanas Cormaic*, 14). This interpretive stance was further articulated in the later Middle Irish period; thus version ‘C’ of the ‘Pseudo-historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*’ ascribes the Old Testament *lex talionis* to the pagan Irish (discussed among others by Carey, ‘The two laws in Dubthach’s judgment’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 19 (1990), 1–18: 10).

as in the various divination anecdotes in *Sanas Cormaic*; and the rather perplexing description of the ritual involved appears to be an attempt to visualize what Cormac meant when he spoke of its being performed *do c[h]ennaib a chnamae fochedoir* (cf. Harley: *fo cetoir do cendaib a cnama*).

... 7 is iar nuafiadnaise in sin; et ni amlaid-son do bui ria Patraic, acht dobeired in fili aurland forsin colainn no forsin cend, 7 rofinnad a ainm 7 ainm a athar 7 a mathar, 7 dofinnad cach anfis docuirthea chuire co de nomaide nó da la nó tri. Is teinm læga nó is imus forosna i-sin, ar is inand ni dofailsigthea treotha, 7 ba sin immorro amal dognithe cehtar de .i. saincinel n-udbart dognithe oc cehtar de.

That is according to the New Testament; and it was not thus before Patrick, but the *fili* would place the end (of his staff) on the body or on the head, and would know his name and the name of his father and his mother, and would know every unknown thing that was put to him until the end of a *nómad*, or of two or three days. That is *teinm lædo* and *imbas forosnai*, for the same thing was accomplished through (both of) them, but the manner in which each was performed was different: a different kind of offering was made with each of them.

The sequence of ideas at the beginning of this paragraph is rather perplexing. I suggest that the statement ‘That is according to the New Testament’ refers not to the immediately preceding paragraph (which I take to be an insertion) but to the one before it; and that ‘New Testament’ refers here, as in the passage just cited from H.2.15A, to the Christian dispensation. The remainder reflects the direct influence of Cormac: placing the end of a staff (*aurland*) on a head to learn the owner’s identity recalls the story of Lugaid Dalléices;⁵⁸ the reference to ‘the body’ may allude to Finn’s identification of his decapitated jester;⁵⁹ and the phrase ‘until the end of a *nómad*, or of two or three days’, together with the statement that the rituals involved offerings, come from Cormac’s account of *imbas*.⁶⁰

Ro indarb Patraic immorro an treide-so onaib filedaib in tan ro cretset, uair rob anidan, ar ni denta teinm læga na imus forosna gin udbairt do deib idal ocaib... Ro facaib acu iar sin genelaige fer nErenn 7 aisti cach airchetaill 7 duili sluinnti 7 duile feda 7 scelugud co laidib... et brethemnus firon a corus a cerde, amal rogab: ‘A ro chet, a ra clais, a ra corad’. Ro facaib in sin ocna filedaib; 7 adubairt Patraic nach catu forfogain doib a nErinn in tan dognitis a treidi remepertaid, a tabairt doib iarum; ar is ferr an ro gabsat oldas an ro threicset.

⁵⁸ *Sanas Cormaic*, 28: here the word used for the end of the staff is *cenn*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 87–8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 64; with Harley *co de nomaide nó da la nó tri* compare Cormac’s *co cend nomaide no a dou no a tri*.

Patrick forbade those three things to the *filid* when they were converted, for they were impure; for neither *teinm laedo* nor *imbas forosnai* was performed without an offering to idols... He left to them after that the genealogies of the men of Ireland, and the metre of every poem, and the lore of names and letters, and storytelling with lays... and true judgement in the canon of their art: 'What had been sung, what had been heard, what had been established'. He left (all) that with the *filid*; and Patrick said that every honour which they had had in Ireland when they used to perform those three things aforesaid should be accorded to them thereafter; for what they had taken up was better than what they had abandoned.⁶¹

In the first sentence of this concluding paragraph, the commentator again follows Cormac closely; note however that he extends Patrick's condemnation to include all three members of the triad. For these discredited criteria he substitutes a purely literary repertoire of poetry, language study, storytelling, and certain areas of the law, explicitly asserting that this is a change for the better which in no way diminishes the *filid*'s social standing. The revisionism which we saw in the second metrical tract has been taken a step further: now even the old names have been rejected.

X

In this paper I have been primarily concerned with demonstrating that the triad *imbas forosnai* – *teinm laedo* – *díchetal di chennaib* can scarcely have come into existence before the end of the ninth century. In concluding, I should like to highlight some of the other points which have emerged in the foregoing pages.

That the triad is mentioned by a broad range of texts, covering a span of perhaps four centuries, might be seen as evidence that it belonged to a widespread and deeply rooted tradition; I believe, however, that it has been possible to show that none of these sources presents testimony independent of the others. In any attempt to ascertain what lies behind the written record, the scholar must first try to understand the dynamics and interrelationships of the documents themselves. In the end, it is these which constitute the most legitimate object of our study, and they are best appreciated when not seen merely as means to some ulterior goal.

The idea that *teinm laedo* was one of the things which qualify a *fili* and the reinterpretation of *díchetal di chennaib* as a sort of divinatory ritual are doctrines that may not pre-date Cormac. It is worth emphasizing that *imbas forosnai*, by contrast, is a prophetic faculty directly associated with the practice of *filedacht* in at least three Old Irish sources: *Bretha Nemed*, the *Senchas Már* introduction and 'The Caldron of Poesy'. We should beware of reading more into this than the generally laconic and allusive

⁶¹ CIH 348.29–349.24; the corresponding material in H.3.18 appears at 878.37–879.22.

testimony of the sources can sustain; but it would also be perverse to ignore or downplay these statements, and what they imply for the ethos and antecedents of the *filid*.

For me, one of the most intriguing features of this inquiry has been the spectrum of attitudes that it has brought to light: a romantic desire to exaggerate the poetic profession's pagan background; a resolutely orthodox condemnation of any such pagan or quasi-pagan survivals; a lexical strategy that reinterprets troublesome terminology in unexceptionable ways; and a historicist strategy that excuses an interest in exotic magical lore by firmly confining it to a distant past. Middle Irish literature vibrates with the tension between such contending rationales, enthusiasms and anxieties; in the nature of things, none of them ever fully prevailed over the others. As we seek to interpret texts composed or transmitted in this period, it is against this background that we should read them.