THE FINAL TRANSFORMATION OF ÉTAÍN

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In the third part of the tale Tochmarc Étaíne, Midir, lord of the síd of Brí Léith, agrees to restore to the king Eochaid Airem his abducted wife Étaín. His manner of doing so, however, confronts Eochaid with a daunting challenge. Text and translation are as follows in the edition of Osborn Bergin and R.I. Best:


‘As they were there at the third hour on the morrow, they saw fifty women all of like form and raiment as Étaín. Silence fell on the hosts. There was a grey slut before them. They say to Eochaid, “Choose thy wife now, or bid one of the women to abide with thee. It is meet that we set out for home.”’

Eochaid thinks that he will be able to identify his wife by her manner of pouring drink; but he errs, and chooses his own daughter instead.

This part of the tale survives only in the fragment of the Yellow Book of Lecan that is now NLI MS G4, where the phrase translated above as ‘grey slut’ appears as gast gasatt liath, a corruption apparently based on dittography. Bergin and Best supply the preferable reading on the strength of an entry in a glossary in TCD MS 1337 (shelf-mark H 3.18), subsequently edited by A.I. Pearson, which I shall designate below as Adhart from its first lemma:3 Gast .i. caillech, ut dicitur: ba´i gast glaslı´ath rompu ‘Gast, i.e. hag; as it is said “There was a grey gast before them”’.4 Kuno Meyer commented on this entry in a brief note, published after his death:

* I am grateful to Phillip Bernhardt-House and to Kevin Murray for their scrutiny of an earlier version of this piece, and also to the editors of ÉrIU and to an anonymous reader for comments and corrections which have led to several substantial improvements of the text. All remaining shortcomings are my sole responsibility.

1 ‘Glastliath’, given here by Best and Bergin as the reading of the corresponding glossary entry (see below), is a typographic slip which they corrected when their edition was reprinted as a monograph: Tochmarc Étaíne (Dublin, 1938), 54. I am grateful to Liam Breathnach for calling the reprint to my attention.


4 A.I. Pearson, ‘A medieval glossary’, ÉrIU 13 (1942), 61–87: 72, §134. Pearson has silently corrected the manuscript’s unde to ut.

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It is the proposed analogy with Breton which presumably led Bergin and Best to translate *gast* as ‘slut’ in our story, while others have been guided by *Adhart* in rendering it as ‘hag’, ‘vieille femme’. As only the women who looked like Étain were asked to display their pouring skill, and Eochaid failed to find his wife by this method, it has been suggested that the ‘hag’ was the real Étain, magically disguised: an example, if so, of the theme of the ‘loathly bride’ which appears so frequently in what are conventionally designated ‘king and goddess’ stories.

What further evidence is there of the existence of a word *gast* in Irish? *DIL* s.v. *gast* offers two additional instances: the entry *GAST i. cailleach* in Michéal Ó Cléirigh’s *Focloir*; and the puzzling ‘*gastgaoithe*, an old woman’, from the 1864 edition of Edward O’Reilly’s *Irish–English Dictionary*. The latter collocation has arisen from the garbled conflation of the second and third of three entries which appear as follows in the editions of 1817 and 1821:

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gast, s.m. a snare, a wile

gast, s.m. a puff, a blast; *Gastgaoithe*

gast, s.m. an old woman
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O’Reilly evidently took these items from Edward Lhuyd’s *Archaeologia Britannica* of 1707, where they occur in the same sequence and with much the same wording:

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5 Kuno Meyer, ‘Zur keltischen Wortkunde X’, *ZCP* 13 (1921), 184–93: 193: ‘What is evidently in question is a loan-word from Welsh, with the word which there means “female dog” used, like English *bitch*, of a female person. Cf. Breton *gast* “femme publique”.’


8 *Focloir nó Sanasán Nua* ([Louvain], 1643); I cite from A.W.K. Miller, ‘Ó’Clery’s Irish Glossary’, *RC* 4 (1880), 349–428; *RC* 5 (1881), 1–69: 1.

Gast, A snare: Deagla ngabhthaoi a ngaiste leis, least thou be ensnared thereby; also [sic] a blast: Gast gaoithe, a blast of wind.

Gast, Cailleach, An old woman.10

Lhuyd’s entries for gast had also been taken over, nearly verbatim, in John O’Brien’s Focalóir Gaoidhilge–Sax-Bhéarla, published in Paris in 1768; O’Brien added the information that gast is used to mean ‘whore’ in Breton.11 The same entries found their way into the lexicon of Scottish Gaelic via the 1825 dictionary of R.A. Armstrong,12 from which they were taken into the still standard dictionary of Edward Dwelly.13

The information provided by O’Reilly, O’Brien, Armstrong and Dwelly, accordingly, goes back to Lhuyd. Lhuyd, in turn, almost certainly took his ‘Gast, Cailleach’ from Ó Cléirigh, whom he acknowledges as a source.14 And Ó Cléirigh evidently had access to a version of the glossary material preserved in Adhart: his Foclo´ir shares with Adhart many entries (including this one) which appear in no other glossary,15 and in several of these cases he provides the same passage to illustrate the word in question.16

As in other similar compilations, Adhart’s entries for the most part originated as attempts to explain words in the passages cited. Many of these reflect an impressive familiarity with the earlier language; and some indeed offer superior readings (such as gast glaslı´ath vs. the Yellow Book of Lecan’s gast gasatt liath). But some of Adhart’s explanations appear to be conjectures suggested by the passages from which the words are cited, as I am proposing is the case with the entry for gast. Thus airechus ‘nobility’ is glossed ealadha ‘art’, on the strength of a line attributed to Bretha Nemed.

10 Archaeologia Britannica, vol. 1: Glossography (Oxford, 1707); this section of the book is not paginated. None of these items is to be found in the standard Irish dictionaries now in use. Gast ‘snare’ is evidently a ghost-word extrapolated from gaiste ‘noose, trap’; while gast ‘blast (of wind)’ looks like a borrowing of English ‘gust’ (cf. current Irish gusta).


12 Gaelic dictionary in two parts (London, 1825): ‘GAST, s.f. (Arm. gasd, a whore. Ir. gast) An old woman: a whore; a snare; a wife; a puff, a blast.’ Armstrong acknowledges his debt to ‘the Irish dictionaries of O’Brien and O’Reilly’ on p. x.

13 Faclair Gaidhlig air son nan sgoitean, 3 vols (Camus-a’-Chorra, 1902), and subsequent editions: ‘gast,** s.f. Old woman. 2. Whore. 3. Snare. 4. Wife. 5. Puff, blast.’ The double asterisk is Dwelly’s siglum for words taken from Armstrong.


that probably related to status in the skilled professions (§40); caem ‘precious’ is glossed beg ‘small’, with reference to a passage in Táin Bó Cuailnge in which Medb and Ailill apologise for having brought only fifty cartloads of a particular wine, explaining that this was because ‘that drink was precious to them’ (bá cáem leó-som a llind sin), not because they thought little of it; dochraidh ‘ugly, base’ (sometimes ‘ugliness, baseness’) is glossed drúis ‘lust’, citing a phrase dochraidh in chuíp which closely resembles, and may be a version of, wording from a passage in Saltair na Rann in which Adam and Eve’s sudden nakedness arouses disgust in them rather than desire (§95); and fola luimnig, from a quatrain uttered by an impoverished poet in one of the Mongán anecdotes, is taken to mean ‘scarcity of garments’, when the actual sense appears to be ‘a garment of rough cloth’ with preposed genitive (§116). These are all intelligent suggestions; but they do not reflect prior knowledge of the meaning of the passages in question.

Some sense of the date of Adhart is given by the sources on which it drew. Several of these belong to the later Middle Irish period: In Cath Catharda (§§72, 89), Fled Dúin na nGéd (§153), the later recension of Mesca Ulad (§142), a Passion homily preserved in An Leabhar Breac (§124), and the second recension of In Tenga Bithnúa (§109). Others are still later: a poem composed in 1213 by Muireadhach Albanach Ó Daíligh (§258), another attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh (died 1244; §256), and a poem from the Duanaire of Gearóid Iarla (died 1398; §132); while the final entries include references to the Anglo-Norman Roche family (§302) and (apparently) to the fourteenth-century bishop Stephen de Valle of Meath (§303). It may accordingly be the case that some five centuries separate Tochmarc Étaine from the glossary that is the lone source for all assertions that there was a Gaelic word gast meaning ‘hag’. While this does not of course mean that the glossator is incorrect, it does leave room for the possibility that this definition, like others in Adhart, is a guess based on context.

Meyer, as we have seen, took gast to have been borrowed into Irish from Welsh: such a word is in fact well attested in the latter language, while its
final -st indicates that it cannot be native to Irish.24 Given the slenderness of the evidence for the word’s meaning on the Irish side, it will be useful to consider the usage in Brittonic.

In Breton, ‘putain’ is already the single meaning given for gast in the Catholicon, at the end of the fifteenth century; the only word for ‘bitch’ in the sense of a female dog (‘chienne’) is kiez, the feminine form of ki ‘dog’.25 The situation is different in Cornish: the sole pre-revival attestations of the word are in the writings of Lhuyd, for whom it designated only a female dog.26 Although current Cornish dictionaries give both ‘bitch’ and ‘whore’ as meanings of gast, the latter sense appears to have been adopted on the analogy of Breton, and I am not aware that any instances antedate 1865, when Robert Williams noted the meaning of the Breton cognate in his Lexicon Cornu–Britannicum.27 Earlier, the words used for a prostitute in Cornish are druth and the English borrowing hóra.28

Among the examples of Welsh gast provided by Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru, the earliest that is applied to a woman dates from the later fourteenth century: in the final line of Madog Dwgrayg’s celebrated misogynistic satire Afallen Beren, the object of his condemnation is called gast lengl ‘a sharp skinny bitch’.29 Thereafter there is nothing until 24 April 1762, when William Morris of Anglesey used the expression map gast o’r Iuddew ‘the son of a bitch of a Jew’ in a letter to his brother Lewis.30 The latter instance, like the current colloquial use of gast as an insulting term for a woman, presumably reflects the influence of English ‘bitch’. This seems less likely in Madog Dwgrayg’s case, however. Was gast already a conventional word of contempt in his time, or was he making derisive use of an animal term on his own initiative? Either seems possible; but it is a potential weakness in the former hypothesis that the postulated sense appears to be otherwise unattested for the next few centuries.31

24 The cluster st is consistently simplified to (s)s in Irish. While this is often also the case in Brittonic (thus *glasto- becomes glas ‘blue/green/grey’ in both branches of Insular Celtic), it is not always so (thus Irish cluás ‘ear’ contrasts with Welsh clust). The reasons for this variation in treatment are not clear: VKG i 78–80; SNG, 75.
26 Archaeologia Britannica, 14, 46, 241; also Lhuyd’s handwritten Geirlyver Kynnevor, now National Library of Wales MS Llanstephan 84, p. 74. The form in which Lhuyd consistently gives the Cornish word is gest. On Lhuyd as our only evidence that this noun belonged to the traditional Cornish lexicon, see Ken George, Gerlyver Kernewek Kemmyn: an gerlyver meur (Callington, 1993), 106.
27 Lexicon Cornu–Britannicum (Llandovery and London, 1865), s.v. ‘GEST’: ‘In Arm. gást, pl. gist, is now used to designate a harlot, or common prostitute’.
28 Thus William Pryce, Archaeologia Cornu–Britannica (Sherborne, 1790), s.vv.
31 Thus it is not reflected in the dictionaries of William Salesbury (1547), Sir Thomas Wiliems (1604–7) or John Davies (1632); although Salesbury, for instance, includes six entries designating sluts and prostitutes, together with several associated expressions, and such terms as bram ‘a farte’, kachy ‘shyte’ and tin ‘an ars’. In the only other pre-modern instance of its use as a term of insult that I have encountered, in a composition by the fifteenth-century poet Dafydd ab Edmwn, gast refers not to a woman but to a scrotum: Dafydd Johnston, Canu Masweddr yr Oesoedd Canol / Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry (Caerdydd, 1991), 124.
If, then, there is such scant evidence for a Gaelic word *gast* applied to women, and so little evidence of such a usage in pre-modern Welsh, we are confronted with an obvious alternative: might the instance of *gast* in *Tochmarc Étaine* have the word’s undoubted original meaning in Welsh? Might the fifty counterfeit Étaíns have been accompanied, not by a grey ‘slut’, but by a grey dog?

A further detail in the wording of the passage must be considered at this point. We are told that fifty identical women appeared at the designated time, causing the men of Ireland to fall silent. The grey *gast* is mentioned, followed by the words *Asb-t Eoch-*: ‘Togai do mnaí din chur-sa...’. As the text stands in the sole surviving manuscript, accordingly, Eochaid himself is portrayed as uttering the speech beginning ‘Choose thy wife now’—which obviously makes no sense. Bergin and Best, as we have seen, removed the problem by supplying the preposition *fri*, and by taking the verb to be 3 pl. present *as-berat* rather than 3 sg. preterite *as-bert* (the form which abbreviated *asb-t* would normally be taken to represent):32 this yields a translation ‘They say to Eochaid’, with ‘they’ to be understood as the fifty women, or perhaps as Eochaid’s own followers. But subsequent translators (Guyonvarc’h, Gantz, myself), while following Bergin and Best in supplying *fri*, have preferred to understand a singular verb *as-bert*. If singular, however, the speaker could scarcely be other than the *gast*: not surprising if she were an old woman ostensibly chaperoning the fifty beauties, but more curious if she were a dog. Bergin and Best’s reading is, however, vindicated, as the anonymous reader of this article has pointed out, by a second instance of the same form later in the text: here *am-asb-t eolaig an tsencasa* must represent *amal asberat eolaig in tsenchasa* ‘as the learned in ancient lore say’, with *asb-t* as a plural verb.33

If we do take *gast glaslı´ath* to mean ‘grey bitch’, the phrase finds a close counterpart in *sod glas*, one of the three animal forms assumed by the Morrígain when she opposes Cú Chulainn in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and *Táin Bó Regamna*.34 Even more striking is the parallel afforded by the story of the origin of Find mac Cumaill’s two hounds: their mother is said to have been a woman who was changed to a dog by the jealous wife or mistress of the man who had taken her as a mate,35 a situation corresponding to that which brings about Étaín’s initial transformation in the first part of

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32 The phrase in question appears in their edited text as ‘Asber[alt] [fri] Eocháid’: for the verb, this notation is intended to denote the silent expansion of the suspension mark as *er*, leaving the following *a* to be supplied.
33 Bergin and Best, ‘Tochmarc Étaine’, 190, §22; the edition here expands the verb as ‘asberat’.
Tochmarc Étaine.\textsuperscript{36} Such a transformation may have been particularly appropriate to the ‘king and goddess’ theme: in the Middle Irish Rígad Néill Noigiallaig ós Clainn Echach, the personified sovereignty of Ireland is said to have appeared as a woman with the head of a dog.\textsuperscript{37}

To Irish comparanda may be added an intriguing instance from medieval Wales. In the tale Culhwch ac Olwen, Gwydrut and Gwyden Astrus, ‘the two whelps of the bitch Rymhi’ (\textit{deu geneu gast Rymhi}), are included in the list of Arthur’s warriors,\textsuperscript{38} subsequently, however, obtaining them is one of the tasks that are to be performed in order that Arthur’s cousin Culhwch can marry the maiden Olwen. At this point it is said of the \textit{gast} Rymhi that she is ravaging cattle ‘in the form of a she-wolf’ (\textit{yn rith bleidast}), along with her two whelps; when the three are captured, God restores them to their own (presumably human) form.\textsuperscript{39} Here the transformation of a woman into a bitch, and her having two canid offspring, recalls the story of the birth of Find’s hounds, a story whose resemblance to the account of Étain’s early transformations has already been noted.\textsuperscript{40}

Another bitch has a crucial role later in Tochmarc Étaine. As we have seen, when Eochaid fails to identify his own wife, it is his daughter whom he chooses instead. When he learns who she really is, she is already pregnant by him, and in his revulsion he orders that their offspring be thrown to wild beasts. Instead, the infant is left with the bitch (\textit{sod}) of a herdsman, and is nursed together with the dog’s own puppies.\textsuperscript{41} A bitch accordingly takes the place of Eochaid’s daughter in mothering the child; while earlier (if I am correct), Eochaid had chosen his own daughter as his wife when he should have chosen a bitch.\textsuperscript{42}

To conclude: the interpretation of \textit{gast} in Irish as ‘slut’, ‘hag’ or ‘old woman’ depends upon a single glossary entry, fortified by the supposition that the semantic development of \textit{gast} in Breton had an unattested

\textsuperscript{36} I have called attention to this resemblance in ‘Werewolves in medieval Ireland’, \textit{CMCS} 44 (Winter 2002), 37–72: 39. For the particular association of women with lycanthropy in Ireland see pages 64–8 of that article.


\textsuperscript{38} Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, \textit{Culhwch ac Olwen} (Cardiff, 1988), lines 315–16.

\textsuperscript{39} Bromwich and Evans, \textit{Culhwch ac Olwen}, lines 929–41.

\textsuperscript{40} On Rymhi, see the careful analysis by Bernhardt-House, \textit{Werewolves, magical hounds, and dog-headed men}, 218–21. Bernhardt-House also calls attention to a poem by Iolo Goch (c. 1340–98), which alludes to a version of the story in which two men named Gwydre Astrus and Odrud are changed by God to wolves, and their mother to a she-wolf (\textit{bleiddiast}); in this account, it is Saint David who restores their human form. The text is in Dafydd Johnston, \textit{Iolo Goch: Poems} (Llandysul, 1993), 121.

\textsuperscript{41} Bergin and Best, ‘Tochmarc Étaine’, 188, §20.

\textsuperscript{42} As the anonymous reader has noted, dogs are also prominent in the attempts to recover Étain from the \textit{sid}: two ravens and two hounds appear during the first attempt to excavate Bri Léith; and blind puppies and blind cats are used when the attempt is repeated (see Bergin and Best, ‘Tochmarc Étaine’, 185, §16).
counterpart in Old Welsh. Giving the word its primary Welsh sense ‘bitch, female dog’, on the other hand, can be justified with reference to comparable transformations elsewhere in Irish (and Welsh) narrative. Why such an isolated borrowing from Welsh into Old Irish was made in the first place is another question. The word may have come to Ireland in the context of importing dogs: according to an anecdote in Sanas Cormaic, British dogs were prized in Ireland, and indeed all of the lap-dogs in Ireland were said to be descended from a pregnant bitch brought from Britain.  

43 Kuno Meyer, ‘Sanas Cormaic ... edited from the copy in the Yellow Book of Lecan’, Anecdota 4 (1912), 75–7; discussion in Fergus Kelly, Early Irish farming (Dublin, 1997), 149.