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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.”’2

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:

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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 Breatnach 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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*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.

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Es handelt sich augenscheinlich um ein Lehnwort aus dem Kympischen, indem das dort ‘Hündin’ bedeutende Wort wie engl. bitch von einer Weibsperson gebraucht wird. Vgl. bret. gast ‘femme publique’.\(^5\)

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’.\(^6\) As only the women who looked like Étaín 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 Étaín, 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.\(^7\)

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;\(^8\) 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.\(^9\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{gast}, & \text{ s.m. a snare, a wile} \\
\text{gast}, & \text{ s.m. a puff, a blast; Gastgaoithe} \\
\text{gast}, & \text{ s.m. an old woman}
\end{align*}
\]

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:

\(^5\) 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”.’


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

Gast, A snare: Deagla ngabhthaoí a ngaiste leis, least thou be ensnared thereby; als[a] 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 Focloír 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

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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 wile; a puff, a blast.’ Armstrong acknowledges his debt to ‘the Irish dictionaries of O’Brien and O’Reilly’ on p. x.

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

14 Archaeologia Britannica, 311.


that probably related to status in the skilled professions (§40); caem ‘precious’ is glossed beg ‘small’, with reference to a passage in Táin Bó Cúailnge 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 druís ‘lust’, citing a phrase dochraidh in chuirk 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 luímmig, 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 Catharada (§§72, 89), Fled Duín 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 Dafhach (Ó Dálaigh (§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 Étaíne 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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{gast} in the \textit{Catholicon}, at the end of the fifteenth century; the only word for ‘bitch’ in the sense of a female dog (‘chienne’) is \textit{kiez}, the feminine form of \textit{ki} ‘dog’.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{26} Although current Cornish dictionaries give both ‘bitch’ and ‘whore’ as meanings of \textit{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 \textit{Lexicon Cornu–Britannicum}.\textsuperscript{27} Earlier, the words used for a prostitute in Cornish are \textit{druith} and the English borrowing \textit{h\text{"o}ra}.\textsuperscript{28}

Among the examples of Welsh \textit{gast} provided by \textit{Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru}, the earliest that is applied to a woman dates from the later fourteenth century: in the final line of Madog Dwygraig’s celebrated misogynistic satire \textit{Afallen Beren}, the object of his condemnation is called \textit{gast lemgul} ‘a sharp skinny bitch’.\textsuperscript{29} Thereafter there is nothing until 24 April 1762, when William Morris of Anglesey used the expression \textit{map gast o’r Iuddew ‘the son of a bitch of a Jew} in a letter to his brother Lewis.\textsuperscript{30} The latter instance, like the current colloquial use of \textit{gast} as an insulting term for a woman, presumably reflects the influence of English ‘bitch’. This seems less likely in Madog Dwygraig’s case, however. Was \textit{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.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{24} The cluster \textit{st} is consistently simplified to (s)s in Irish. While this is often also the case in Brittonic (thus *\textit{glasto-} becomes \textit{glas} ‘blue/green/grey’ in both branches of Insular Celtic), it is not always so (thus Irish \textit{clitas} ‘ear’ contrasts with Welsh \textit{chlist}). The reasons for this variation in treatment are not clear: \textit{VKG} i 78–80; \textit{SNG}, 75.

\textsuperscript{25} Jehan Lagadeuc, \textit{Catholicon} (Tréguier, 1496–1512), s.vv ‘Gast’, ‘Qui pe Quies’.

\textsuperscript{26} Archaeologia Britannica, 14, 46, 241; also Lhuyd’s handwritten \textit{Geirlyver Kyrnweig}, now National Library of Wales MSS Llanstephan 84, p. 74. The form in which Lhuyd consistently gives the Cornish word is \textit{ge\text{"o}st}. On Lhuyd as our only evidence that this noun belonged to the traditional Cornish lexicon, see Ken George, \textit{Gerlyver Kernewek Kemmyn: an gerlyver meur} (Callington, 1993), 106.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Lexicon Cornu–Britannicum} (Llandovery and London, 1865), s.v. ‘GEST’: ‘In Arm. \textit{gAst}, pl. \textit{gosti}, is now used to designate a harlot, or common prostitute’.

\textsuperscript{28} Thus William Pryce, \textit{Archaeologia Cornu–Britannica} (Sherborne, 1790), s.vv.

\textsuperscript{29} Huw Meirion Edwards, \textit{Gwaith Madog Dwygraig} (Aberystwyth, 2006), 43.


\textsuperscript{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 \textit{bram} ‘a farte’, \textit{kachy} ‘shyte’ and \textit{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, \textit{gast} refers not to a woman but to a scrotum: Dafydd Johnston, \textit{Canu Maswedd 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 Étaíne* 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 mnai 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 *aman asberat eolaig in tsencha* ‘as the learned in ancient lore say’, with *asb-t* as a plural verb.33

If we do take *gast glası´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[al] [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 Étaíne’, 190, §22; the edition here expands the verb as ‘asberat’.
34 TBC 1, lines 1862–3; Johan Corthals, Táin Bó Regamna: Eine Vorerzählung zur Táin Bó Cúailnge, Veröffentlichungen der keltischen Kommission 5 (Vienna, 1987), 33 line 79.
Tochmarc Étaine. Such a transformation may have been particularly appropriate to the ‘king and goddess’ theme: in the Middle Irish Rígad Néill Noigellaig os Clann Echach, the personified sovereignty of Ireland is said to have appeared as a woman with the head of a dog.

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 Rhymhí’ (deu geneu gast Rymhi), are included in the list of Arthur’s warriors, 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 gast Rhymhí that she is ravaging cattle ‘in the form of a she-wolf’ (yn rith bleidast), along with her two whelps; when the three are captured, God restores them to their own (presumably human) form. 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 Étaitín’s early transformations has already been noted.

Another bitch has a crucial role later in Tochmarc Étaitín. 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 (sod) of a herdsman, and is nursed together with the dog’s own puppies. 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.

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

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

37 Cenn con fuirri (Liber Flavus Fergusiorum fol. 25ra line7); for this reference I am grateful to Clodagh Downey, who is producing an edition of the text. Cf. Echtra Mac nEchach Muigmedóin, where the sovereignty in hag form is called con(n)da ‘dog-like’ (Whitley Stokes, ‘The Death of Crimuth son of Fidach, and the Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedón’, RC 24 [1903], 172–207: 200). Further discussion in Phillip A. Bernhardt-House, Werewolves, magical hounds, and dog-headed men in Celtic literature: a typological study of shape-shifting (Lampeter, 2010), 313.

38 Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, Culhwch ac Olwen (Cardiff, 1988), lines 315–41.

39 Bromwich and Evans, Culhwch ac Olwen, lines 929–41.

40 On Rhymhí, see the careful analysis by Bernhardt-House, 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 Odruad are changed by God to wolves, and their mother to a she-wolf (bleiddiast); in this account, it is Saint David who restores their human form. The text is in Dafydd Johnston, Iolo Goch: Poems (Llandysul, 1993), 121.


42 As the anonymous reader has noted, dogs are also prominent in the attempts to recover Êtain from the sid: two ravens and two hounds appear during the first attempt to excavate Brí 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

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.