Fet, Gol, and Êigem

With a few notable exceptions, most studies of Irish lament traditions have focused on the early modern era; consequently we have a far more detailed understanding of the practice as it existed in recent centuries than during the medieval period. The present study examines a set of vocalizations, consisting of fet ‘a whistling or hissing sound’, gol ‘weeping’, and ëigem ‘screaming, shrieking’, that are associated with the goddess known as Brígh or Brigit in several medieval Irish texts. *Cath Maige Tuired* (hereafter *2MT*) and the prose *dindshenchas* on Loch Oirbsen both offer etiological accounts for the practice of cained ‘keening’ for the dead, attributing the first keen made in Ireland to Brígh. A third text, a short tract on the Túatha Dé Danann designated ‘Túath Dé Miscellany’ (hereafter *TDM*) by its editor John Carey, also connects fet, gol, and

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3 DIL, s.v. fet, gol, éigem.

4 The tract, which Carey identifies in his study ‘A Túath Dé Miscellany’, is extant only where it has been incorporated into other texts. The relevant section survives only in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, but evidently at one point was a work in its own right, and Carey
éigem to Bríg, describing them as gotha diabuil ‘demonic voices’. The passage in TDM is clearly related in some way to the two etiological accounts of Bríg lamenting, although the relationship between the three sources is not entirely clear. Finally, a fourth text, the late medieval Cath Findchorad, uses fet, gol, and éigem as names for a trio of prophesying female spectres. It is not clear whether fet is included with gol and éigem in these texts because it was also used to lament for the dead in medieval Ireland, or because there was some other thematic relationship between the three sounds. In the following essay, I argue that fet as it occurs in these texts does refer to a vocalization associated with the practice of keening for the dead; I will also attempt to situate TDM’s description of fet, gol, and éigem as gotha diabuil within the wider discourse on supernatural women in medieval Ireland. I will conclude by considering evidence for what sort of sound fet might have represented to a medieval Irish audience in the context of cainéid.

Fet, gol, and éigem appear as part of a list of information about Bríg in TDM. Unlike the other examples under consideration, the text does not supply a narrative within which to contextualize the material. The text introduces Bríg as a woman poet and the daughter of the Dagda, and then lists two kings of oxen and a king of boars that were with her. The next entry states that ‘(i)s occai ro clossa trí gotha diabuil iarn-immarbus i nÉrin. i. fet 7 gol 7 éigem’5 (‘With her were heard three demonic voices [or ‘voices of a demon/the Devil’] after transgression in Ireland, namely fet and gol and éigem’6). After this statement there are two more entries on Bríg, stating that the king of rams was with her, as was Cermna the Liar.

Bríg’s invention of lament in 2MT takes place after Rúadán, her son with the Fomorian king Bres, dies from a wound received during an assassination attempt on his uncle Goibniu, the smith of the Tuatha Dé Danann:

Immesóid didiu Rúadán ier tabairt in gáí dó, 7 geogoin Goibninn. Tíscais-side an gáí as 7 fochaird for Rúadán co lluid trít; 7 co n-érbailt ar bélaib a athar a n-oirecht na Fomore. Tíc Bríc 7 cáines a mac. Êghis ar tós, goilis fo deog. Conud and sin roclos gol 7 éigem ar tós a n-Érin. (Is sí didiu an Prich-sin roairich feit do

6 Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
caismeirt a n-oidci.)
(But after the spear had been given to him, Rúadán turned and wounded Goibniu. He pulled out the spear and hurled it at Rúadán so that it went through him; and he died in his father's presence in the Fomorian assembly. Bríg came and keened for her son. At first she shrieked, in the end she wept. Then for the first time weeping and shrieking were heard in Ireland. [Now she is the Bríg who invented a whistle for signalling at night.])

This is the better-known of the two accounts of Bríg’s inaugural lament. Here gol and éigem are presented as comprising the first act of keening, but fet appears too, in a clumsy, even jarring, aside: not only does it distract the audience’s attention from the account of the escalating war between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomoire (not to mention from the espionage, kin-slaying, attempted assassination, and treachery that lead to Rúadán’s death), but most of all, at the precise moment when the text pauses to linger on Bríg’s piercing grief for her dead son, it flinches away. The statement about fet appears to be ‘an incorporated gloss’, and it is not known whether fet was present in an earlier redaction of the text, or was added later, possibly by the MI redactor of 2MT. I will consider the occurrence of fet in this passage in further detail further below.

In the prose dindshenchas on Loch Oirbsen, Bríg laments not for Rúadán, but for Mac Gréine, slain in battle by Amergin: ‘And sin ro orddaig Brigit banfili Ʉ bandrui ingen Echach Ollathir .i. gol Ʉ caine marb Ʉ eigem fri hecin. Ʉ fet mar cach n-alchaib.’

(‘Then Brigit, the woman poet and woman druid, daughter of Eochu Ollathair, ordained weeping and keening for the dead and shrieking on account of violence and great fet for each …’) The condition of the folio of the Book of Leinster on which this passage occurs is very poor, and it is difficult to make out the last few words of the text; in his edition Whitley Stokes has set instead of fet, but the more recent edition of the Book of Leinster corrects to fet. According to DIL, alchaib is a hapax legomenon, and no definition is

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10 *DIL* suggests taking this occurrence of éicen as referring to sexual violence, but the context and the parallel in 2MT do not support such an interpretation. *DIL*, s.v. éicen.
suggested, but the syntax indicates that the *fet* is part of a list along with *gol*, *caine*, and *éigem*, and it would make sense that the items in the list correspond thematically to one another. Given the uncertainty concerning the meaning of *alchaib* it is not possible to rule out entirely the possibility that *fet* is presented here as an aside as in 2MT, but that does not appear to be the case.

In all three of these texts Bríg is associated with *fet*, *gol* and *éigem*. 2MT and the *dindshenchas* on Loch Oirbsen explicitly describe *gol* and *éigem* as elements of the ritual of *cained*; the latter text probably also associates *fet* with the practice. 2MT presents Bríg’s invention of *fet* as an unrelated event, whose inclusion appears to be prompted by the reference to her invention of keening. *TDM* makes no mention of lament, and does not explain why Bríg should be associated with *fet*, *gol* and *éigem*; it is possible (and in my opinion, highly probable) that these terms were intended to be understood as referring to lament, but the text does not unequivocally state as much. Of particular interest is the description of *fet*, *gol* and *éigem* as *trí gotha diabuil*, a statement that I believe supports the argument that this section of *TDM* also refers to Bríg’s association with lament. I will return to this point below.

The presence of *fet* in 2MT has received scant attention in the scholarship on the passage, and most critics pass over without comment the MI redactor’s claim that in addition to having invented keening, there was also a tradition that Bríg invented the custom of using whistling to signal at night—despite such an association being, to the best of my knowledge, otherwise completely unattested. As far as I am aware, the only scholar who has looked closely at Bríg’s association with *fet* in these passages is Carey, who examined the grouping of *fet*, *gol* and *éigem* in *TDM* and 2MT in his edition of *TDM*; while I do not share all of his conclusions, his arguments worth looking at in detail.

In his view, the ‘attribution to [Bríg] … of *gol* 7 *éigem* reflects traditional belief, while the addition of *fet* is a learned elaboration’, and he observes that *gol* and *éigem* appear to have been a traditional pairing: the phrase ‘*gol* 7 *éigem* 7 *ilach*’ is used in *Bethu Phátraic*, and ‘*golfadach* 7 *éigmech*’ occurs in a homily on Doomsday; to Carey’s examples may

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12 *DIL*, s.v. *alchaib*. An inflected form of *allcaille* ‘ghost, spectre’ would be reasonably close to *alchaib* and would make sense within the passage, as might *álaid* ‘habit, behavior, practice’.
be added an occurrence of ‘gol 7 egmech’ in the same homily. He suggests that 2MT may have been the source for the inclusion of gol 7 éigem in TDM; furthermore, he posits that 2MT’s description of Brigit’s invention of fet is a later addition by a MI redactor, who introduced into 2MT material drawn from Lebor Gabála Érenn, into which TDM had been incorporated. As to why fet came to be bundled into a triad with gol and éigem in TDM, Carey argues that:

fet’s inclusion is to be explained in terms of semantic theory. The grouping together of wailing and whistling may be traced to Priscian’s Institutiones grammaticae I.1, where sound or ‘voice’ (vox) is discussed under four headings: 
(a) sounds which can be transcribed and understood, i.e. normal human language, 
(b) sounds which cannot be transcribed, but are nevertheless significant, e.g. human whistlings and groans (sibili hominum et gemitus). … I would argue that in TDM fet corresponds to sibili hominum, and gol 7 éigem to gemitus …—in other words, that our text is linking class (b) with the Tuath Dé.

Priscian’s work was certainly well-known in medieval Ireland, and Carey’s explanation elegantly accounts for fet’s being grouped with gol and éigem, but I have a few reservations with this line of argument. There is nothing in the text to support the idea that fet, gol and éigem were attributed to the Túatha Dé Danann as a whole, and indeed another section of TDM does attribute the invention of ilach ‘war-cry’, éigem ‘outcry’, and airsaire ‘tumult’ to the collective Túatha Dé Danann. Furthermore, while there is a more general association between women of the sid and the practice of keening, the first section of TDM is concerned specifically with Brig. There were probably competing etiological narratives accounting for the practice of keening, but if it is indeed keening that is being referred to here—and at least two, if not all three of the terms listed indicate as much—then TDM is promoting the version that attributes its establishment to Brig.

While I would disagree that fet is included in the grouping with gol and éigem in TDM as a result of ‘learned elaboration’, I am however in complete agreement with Carey that there is something decidedly odd going on with fet in 2MT, and I concur that

15 For a list of examples, see Carey, ‘A Tuath Dé Miscellany’, 33.
Priscian’s *Institutiones grammaticae* may be in some way involved. I would argue that rather than the author/compiler of *TDM*, it was a redactor of *2MT* (or one of his sources) who was influenced by Priscian’s grammar, and that the route of influence was via the Old Irish glosses to the text found in the St. Gall manuscript, or a glossary containing this material. The relevant section of the Latin text reads: ‘quaedam, quae non possunt scribi, intelliguntur tamen, ut sibili hominum et gemitus: hae enim voces, quamvis sensum aliquem significant proferentis eas, scribi tamen non possunt’¹⁷ (‘those sounds, which cannot be written, nevertheless can be understood, such as the whistling [or: ‘hissing’] of people and weeping: for these sounds, however much they convey some meaning for those producing them, nevertheless cannot be written’). *Sibili* is glossed ‘.i. is cosmart do rétaib ind fet’¹⁸ (‘.i.e., the whistling is a signal for things’). The use of *caismert* in conjunction with *fet* in the gloss is strikingly similar to what we find in *2MT*, where it is stated that ‘Is sí didiu an Prích-sin roairich feit do caismeirt a n-oidci’, and I suggest that the statement regarding *fet* in *2MT* could plausibly be the result of an overly literal reading of the St. Gall gloss. If the MI redactor of *2MT* understood the gloss to mean that *fet* is literally a signal—when surely, judging from the content of the Latin, it was meant to explain that *fet* signifies something, i.e., it conveys a meaning that can be understood, despite being a sound that cannot be written—this could explain the awkward aside in which he introduces *fet* to the account of the first lament.

If I am correct in attributing the source of this statement to the OI glosses, the nature of the confusion over *caismert* would suggest that the gloss has been detached from the source text. The inclusion of *fet* in this passage could have occurred in several ways: *fet* could have been included in the earlier version of *2MT*, and then revised by the MI redactor in light of the gloss. This would allow for Carey’s theory that the Bríg-section in *TDM* was influenced by *2MT*. Alternatively, if the original text in *2MT* omitted any reference to *fet*, and if the MI redactor was familiar with both the triad of sounds from *TDM* and the gloss describing *fet* as a *caismert*, he could have inserted the comment

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about *fet* as a detail of antiquarian interest.\(^\text{19}\)

The second part of Carey’s argument is concerned with the phrase *tri gotha diabuil*, which he translates as ‘three voices of the Devil’.\(^\text{20}\) He observes that this statement ‘may simply reflect the recurrent identification of the Tuath Dé as demons or fallen angels,’ but tentatively suggests that the text may be implying that the fallen angels were ‘deprived by God of articulate speech’ after they were cast out of heaven, and that *immarbus* in this passage may refer to the Fall.\(^\text{21}\) It is worth noting that neither 2MT nor the *dindshenchas* on Loch Oirbsen draw any explicit correlation between Brig’s keening and the demonic, nor is there an association with the Fall. To be sure, as Carey points out medieval Irish literati vacillated on whether or not the Túatha Dé Danann were fallen angels/demons, but to my knowledge there is no evidence of a tradition in which God deprived the rebellious angels of their ability to speak. While inarticulate wailing and screeching is characteristic of some supernatural and demonic beings in medieval Irish texts, the beguiling eloquence of demonic speech is also a commonplace. Furthermore, if the statement were a reference to the fallen angels losing their ability to use language, it

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\(^{19}\) *DIL* cites one instance of *caismert* being used to mean ‘lamentation’, in the fifteenth-century Irish version of the Bevis of Hampton romance. In the romance, Bevis is believed to have been slain whilst fighting a dragon, and upon his return to the city he is greeted by a scene of public mourning. The Middle English text reads: ‘*þanne herde he belles ringe,* / Prestes, clerkes loude singe’. Puzzled, Bevis asks a man what is the cause, and he is told ‘Hit is Beues dirige’!\(^\text{19}\) The Irish version, which is based on Middle English sources, renders this passage ‘*ni clos ãenni isin cathraigh acht àengair clog 7 comhurc 7 caismirti*’ (296) (‘there was no sound heard in the city save the ringing of bells and outtries and *caismert*’). In his translation of the text Fred N. Robinson renders *caismert* as ‘lamentation’ (318); however, earlier in the text *caismertach* is used to describe signal bells that have been affixed to a bridge and ring whenever anyone crosses over, and the ringing of bells must surely be what *caismirti* refers to in the later scene. Admittedly this is repetitive, as we already have *àengair clog* in the same sentence, but this is in keeping with the overall style of the text. Eugen Kölbging, ed., *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, Part 1, EETS Extra Series 46 (London: Early English Text Society, 1885), 131, ll. 2893-94, 2902; Fred. N. Robinson, ‘The Irish Life of Bevis of Hampton’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 6 (1908): 273-338, at 296 and 284. For discussion of the translation strategy employed by the author of the Irish *Bevis*, see Erich Poppe and Regina Reck, ‘Rewriting Bevis in Wales and Ireland,’ in *Sir Bevis of Hampton in Literary Tradition*, ed. Jennifer Fellows and Ivana Djordjević (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 37-50: 45-50.

\(^{20}\) Carey, ‘*A Tuath Dé Miscellany*’, 30.

\(^{21}\) Carey, ‘*A Tuath Dé Miscellany*’, 34.
would be rather odd to attribute these sounds to a single member of the Túatha Dé Danann—especially to Bríg, the patron deity of poets, whom we might expect to be one of the more articulate members of the Túatha Dé Danann. I would understand the *immarmus* that precedes *fet, gol*, and *éigem* not as a prior event but as their direct cause, and rather than taking the noun as a referring to the Fall of humankind, I would understand it more generically as ‘crime’ or ‘transgression,’ in this case probably to be understood as killing or violence (compare ‘éigem fri hecin’ ‘shrieking on account of violence’ in the *dindshenchas* on Loch Oirbsen). In his edition of *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, R. A. Stewart Macalister translates *immarmus* variously as ‘plunder’, ‘rapine’, and ‘ravaging’, and I think that he is correct in situating this particular reference to *immarmus* within the mundane sphere.

However, whether we interpret the *diabul* in this passage as ‘a devil’ or ‘the Devil’, the text is still associating these vocalizations, and by extension Bríg, with demons. It is sometimes asserted that the reason for the restrictions on keening stemmed from an association with paganism. The discussion of keening in the Irish penitentials makes it evident that the practice was met with some disapproval by the Church in early medieval Ireland, though I think that the degree of antipathy is often overstated in the scholarship. The passage on keening falls under the heading *Ira*, and directly follows the passage describing the penance for shouting at someone in anger. A *cetmunter* or a *caillech aithirgi* lamenting over a layperson incurred a penance of fifty nights, while the penance for lamenting the death of a king, bishop, confessor, or ‘ruler of a chief town’ lasted a mere fifteen nights. Societies sought to curb and control the practice of lament long before the advent of a pagan/Christian divide, and it is possible to read the evidence from the penitential as an effort to redirect lament towards ‘appropriate’ individuals—i.e., to those residing near the top of the societal hierarchy. An association between lament and *ira* might plausibly be connected with the potential for lament to

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22 DIL, s.v. *immarmus, immormus, immorbus*.
25 E. J. Gwynn, ‘An Irish Penitential’, *Ériu* 7 (1914), 121-95, at 170.
incite violence.  

*Cath Findchorad*, the fourth text that presents *fet, gol, and éigem* as a triad, also depicts them as demonic. The text survives only in a defective copy that was preserved in an assortment of paper leaves and fragments (MS. B IV 1a, R.I.A.) that had been bound with a seventeenth-century paper manuscript (MS. B IV 1, R.I.A.). Its subject matter is a battle between the Ulaid and the men of the other provinces.  

The fragments comprising MS. B IV 1a are tentatively dated to the seventeenth century in the RIA catalogue. The text has received little scholarly attention. The battle of Findchorad is referred to in the Book of Leinster version of *Cath Ruis na Ríg*, but we do not know at what point a version of *Cath Findchorad* first existed, or when the text as we have it was composed.

Prior to the battle, the Munster army is visited by two trios of apparitions. Three red men, named Accais, Ágh, and Neimh, appear, declaring themselves to have come from the Sid of Bodhb. They recite a poem foretelling slaughter and then depart. Another spectral trio approaches, strikingly marked, like the red men, by color: ‘Teóra monga forghlasa forsgaoilte forra, eich glasa fotha, tri gáoi glasa leo, glasa uile itter eocha 7 éccosg iád’ (‘Three very grey unconfined manes spreading over them, grey horses under them, three grey spears with them, entirely grey both their horses and their

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27 While a direct causal relationship between lament and (future) violence is not to my knowledge ever explicitly pronounced in medieval Irish sources, for lament’s ability to provoke rage we need look only as far as Conchobor’s reaction to Deirdriu’s refusal to cease lamenting her dead lover. Vernam Hull, ed. and trans., *Longes Mac n-Uislen: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1949), 48-51. We do find the following statement on lament and revenge in a Middle Welsh legal triad: ‘Tri chyffro dial yssyd: diaspedein karesseu, a g6elet elor eu kar, a g6elet bed eu kar heb yndiu6yn’ (‘There are three incitements to revenge: the wailing of female relatives, and seeing the bier of their relative, and seeing the grave of their relative without compensation’.) Sarah Elin Roberts, *The Legal Triads of Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 107, Q25.


29 Kathleen Mulchrone, Thomas F. O'Rahilly, Elizabeth FitzPatrick, and A. I. Pearson, eds., ‘236a B iv 1a’, in *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. 1, (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy,1926), 593-4.


The men of Ireland ask them why they have come, and they reply: “‘Tri dearbhsethracha diabhalta ind,” ar iat “et Fet, Eighemh, 7 Gol ar n-anmanda et a Sith Buidb tangamur alle’” (‘We are three demon sisters of the same blood,” they said, “and Fet, Eighemh, and Gol are our names, and we have come to this place from the Sid of Bodhb”). The women recite a poem in which they claim to have incited the coming battle, and repeat the information that they are three demonic sisters (‘Seinde tri sethracha diabalta’) and declare their names again (‘Fet isí in tres ban/ Eigem 7 Gol’).

TDM concludes with a list of sixteen triads with allegorical names: thus ‘Fis 7 Fochmarch 7 Éolus’ (‘Wisdom and Inquiry and Knowledge’) are the names of three druids of the Túatha Dé Danann; their three lookouts are ‘Féig 7 Rosc 7 Radarc’ (‘Keen-Sighted and Vision and Eyesight’). These lists of names occur in close proximity to the material about Brigit, and it would not require a great imaginative leap to apply the principle that governs the list of triads to the Brigit-section. Given the prominence of name triads in this section, it is not out of the question that the author of Cath Findchorad may have misunderstood the presence of the tri gotha diabuil in TDM, taking them as personal names, rather than vocal utterances, and as a result borrowed fet, gol, and éigem as names for the grey ladies, but it may just as well have been an intentional modification. The heavy emphasis on the demonic nature of the grey ladies is further evidence in favour of a direct borrowing from TMD.

We might find support for an author who thoughtfully borrowed and modified his source material in his choice of names for the trio of red men who also appear to the king and his warriors: Accais, Ágh, and Neimh. This triad also appears in a MI cosmological poem that has recently been edited by Carey; there, Neim, Agh, and Acois are the names

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32 I have followed Dobbs in translating glas as ‘grey’ in this passage, though of course glas has a much broader semantic range, encompassing shades of green and blue, as well as lividity, wanness, fading, discoloration, etc. DIL s.v. glas. Long grey or white hair, worn loose, and white or grey clothing are characteristic of the death-messenger as represented in later Irish folklore. Patricia Lysaght, The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death-Messenger (Dublin, 1986, repr. 1996), 89-90, 99, 101, 103, 105.
of three rivers of hell, which are located, according to the different versions of the poem, in hell’s cave, on hell’s border, or in the kingdom of hell. Carey suggests that the names of these infernal rivers influenced a redactor of Bruidhean Chaorthainn, where Nimh, Ágh, and Aithis are the names of the three sons of the king of Inis Tuile. Inis Tuile, of course, is a reference to the fabled northern island Thule, and as Carey points out, hell was often thought to be located in the north in the Middle Ages. Perhaps then it is no coincidence that during the animal sacrifices performed at the beginning of Cath Findchorad, the officiants face ‘thuaidh ar ifreand’ ‘north towards hell’. Both the cosmological poem and Bruidhean Chaorthainn are plausible as potential sources of the names of the three red men in Cath Findchorad.

Whether he took Accais, Ágh, and Neimh from the poem or the tale, or another text altogether, we have an author who is drawing on a range of sources to create his narrative, potentially including the Ulster and Fenian cycles, cosmological texts, and pseudohistorical material. Assuming that the author of Cath Findchorad did borrow the names of the grey ladies from TDM, what does this tell us? While this cannot explain the motivations of the author who compiled TDM, it does bring us closer to how a later medieval author might have interpreted the passage. If these terms were borrowed as names for three demons associated with, for example, gluttony, then we would probably be safe in viewing the borrowing as somewhat haphazard, but I think it is very telling that the author of Cath Findchorad chose these three particular terms as the names for the demonic sisters in his text: that he borrowed these three terms and used them for spectral women prophesying battle strongly suggests that he saw a connection between these demonic ‘voices’, Bríg, and the practice of keening. For the use of fet, gol, and éigem as personal names for women with dangerous, supernatural connotations, compare Sín’s naming of herself in Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca: ‘Osnad, Easnadh, Sín, Gaeth Garb,

Gem-adaig, Ochsad, Iachtad, Taetean\textsuperscript{40} (‘Sigh, Moan, Storm, Rough Wind, Winter Night, Groan, Shriek, Silence\textsuperscript{41}). Though none of the titles that she claims for herself overlap directly with the names given by the gray ladies of \textit{Cath Findchorad}, Osnad, Easnadh, Ochsad, Iachtad, and (arguably) Taetean are all terms for vocal utterances associated with sorrow or pain, and thus correspond thematically. Êgem is among the thirty-one names declared by the seeress Cailb to Conaire in \textit{Togail Bruidne Da Derga}; Cailb also names herself Nemain and Badb.\textsuperscript{42} The author of \textit{Cath Findchorad} appears to be working along similar lines in his choice of names for his spectral women.

The three red men of \textit{Cath Findchorad} have a close analogue in the comparably appareled ‘three Reds’ who precede Conaire to the hostel of Da Derga,\textsuperscript{43} and they and the three grey women are clearly related to the numerous supernatural beings who appear to prophesy bloodshed, incite battle, and gloat over slaughter in medieval Irish texts, such as the Morrigan in \textit{Reicne Fothaid Canainne}.\textsuperscript{44} This is significant in that it may provide a link, however seemingly tenuous at first blush, to Brig in her role as the inventor of lament, potentially illuminating the reference to the \textit{tri gotha diabuil} in \textit{TDM}. Patricia Lysaght has argued that the supernatural death messenger of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish folk tradition, appearing as the \textit{bean sí}/banshee, \textit{bean chaointe}, and the \textit{badhb}, can be traced back to medieval sources describing the grieving women of the \textit{síd} and the Badb/Morrigan. Lysaght argues that etymological evidence of the names given to the supernatural death-messenger in Irish folklore, the \textit{bean sí} (banshee) and \textit{badhb}, ‘seem(s) to point to two main earlier strata of the death-messenger belief in Ireland, termed here the \textit{si}-woman stratum and the \textit{badhb}-stratum’. These ‘strata’, in Lysaght’s view, ‘represent the duality of aspects within the person of a single deity’, which she

\textsuperscript{40}Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca, ed. Lil Nic Dhonnchadha, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 19 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1964), 2.

\textsuperscript{41}Taetean is only attested in this text. I follow the suggestion of the editors of \textit{DIL} in associating \textit{taethen} with \textit{tóethenach} ‘silent’. \textit{DIL, s.v. taethen, tóethenach.}

\textsuperscript{42}Eleanor Knott, ed., \textit{TogailBruidne Da Derga}, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 8 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1936), 17.

\textsuperscript{43}Knott, \textit{Togail Bruidne}, 9.

relates to female figures identified as the sovereignty of Ireland; according to Lysaght the two strata have sharp distinctions in how they depict the attitude of the death-messenger towards the individual who dies. She suggests that ‘the two strata were coming closer together as the centuries went by’ and that their ‘interaction’ would over time produce the later character of the death-messenger. Lysaght argues that one may trace the evolution of Fedelm, the prophetess of Sid Chruachna who appears to Medb to foretell the destruction of the Connaught army, in successive recensions of the Táin from a more ‘Badb-like’ figure to one in which her ‘sí-woman attributes’ are emphasized. Fedelm, according to Lysaght, ‘exemplifies the fundamental nexus in which the seemingly contradictory characters of the beings in the badbh and the sí-woman-strata come together’.

Lysaght sketches out a trajectory in which these two initially distinct, if related, strata undergo a ‘process of harmonization’, which she posits can be observed already happening in the fourteenth century, and is complete by the eighteenth century. Lysaght does not discuss Bríg’s laments in her examination of the development of the Irish death-messenger tradition in the medieval period, but I think that it is reasonably within bounds to propose that Bríg in her role as the founder of the keening tradition would have been viewed as analogous in some ways to the other mná side who lament over the dead; in her role as a grieving mother in 2MT, Bríg is especially close to the account of Bé Find keening for her wounded son, Fráech, in Táin Bó Fraích. This account also provides an etiological explanation for medieval mourning rituals: the text states that ‘Is de atá golgair ban síde la áes ciúil Hérenn’ (‘Because of this the lamentation of the ban síde is with the musicians of Ireland’). I would suggest that the accounts of Bríg keening for dead youths and the seemingly incongruous description of fet, gol, and éigem as gotha diabuil are to be understood as existing along the binary outlined by Lysaght. If I am right in connecting Bríg’s gotha diabuil in TDM to the death-messenger tradition, and if Carey’s proposed dating of TDM is correct, this process of harmonization would seem to

47 Lysaght, The Banshee, 205.
have been already in effect as early as the tenth- or eleventh-centuries.

It is possible that another early juxtaposition of these two strata may be seen in the Old Irish glossary on *Bretha Nemed Déidenach*. The relevant sections are the glossary entries on *gládomuin* and *gúdemain* and their related marginal notes:

Gládomuin .i. sindaigh a†l mac tıre. Gudomhuin .i. fennóga Ʌ bansigaidhe; ∼Ut est glaidhomuin. g. .i. na demuin. goacha, na morrigna. Ʌ go conach deomain iat na bansighaidhe, go conach c demain iffírin iat s. d. e aoir na fendóga. Ʌ eamnait a nglaedha na sinnaigh, Ʌ .e. f a ngotha na fennoga

a‐a added above line. b‐b in marg. sup. c nach added under line by different scribe, with caret mark. d i.e. demain. e‐e in marg. dext. 50

(Howlers, that is: foxes or a wolf.

*Gudomuin* (Gúdemain, false demons), that is: scald crows or women of the *síd*.

(In the upper margin:)

*Ut est*: false (?) howlers, that is the false demons, the *morrigna*; or it is a falsehood so that the women of the *síd* are not demons; it is a falsehood so that the scald crows are not demons of hell, but demons of the air.

(In the right-hand margin:)

Or: the foxes double their howls and the scald crows double their sounds/vowels. 51 [Borsje’s translation])

*Bansigaidhe* here could simply refer to women of the *síd*, but the juxtaposition with *morrigna* and *fendóga* indicates that the text refers to a more specialized class of being.

The correlation drawn between shrieking, howling, bestial beings and women of the *síd* in the note suggests that the ‘*si*-woman stratum’ and ‘*badbh*-stratum,’ as outlined by Lysaght, were already potentially subject to considerable blurring. The slipperiness between benign and malign categorizations of supernatural women in medieval Irish sources has frequently been noted, as has the ambivalence with which women of the *síd* were viewed. 52 Like the shifting nature of Fedelm, the equivocation in the *gúdemain*

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glossary entry reflects a mutable, malleable view of the speech and cries of women from the otherworld, whether they be bansigaidhe or morrigna. The same view would explain why the vocal utterances with which Brig inaugurates the Irish keening tradition are also described as gotha diabuil in TDM. The gotha are demonic not because the Túatha Dé Danann in general were thought to be fallen angels (although this is sometimes the case), but because keening and crying out over the dead were associated with a class of beings which, within the Christianizing framework of early medieval Irish learning, were easily assimilated within the category of the demonic. Given the evidence of TDM and the *Bretha Nemed Déidenach* glossary, it may then be more accurate to say that in the medieval period there were attempts to impose discrete categories onto the spectrum of behaviours that characterized the supernatural death-messenger, but that this was never an entirely successful venture, and over time in the popular tradition these categories blurred together once more.

The semantic range of the related noun fetgaire, a compound formed of fet and gair ‘a shout, a cry, a call’, supports the argument that fet was at times associated with lamenting. The primary definition of fetgaire is ‘a swishing, hissing, or whistling sound’, and we see this meaning, for example, in Finn’s description of the sound of a hunt, when he recalls listening to the ‘fetgaire na fer fiadaig’ (‘the whistling of the hunters’). The secondary meaning is ‘of a shrill, longdrawn wail’, and a post-medieval source, Peter O’Connell’s *Irish-English Dictionary* (transcript in RIA) defines feadghaire as ‘lamentation, wailing… more lamentable’. The textual examples given by DIL for the second definition associate the sound with pagan gods and demons. The ùathbasacha aeoir ‘terrors of the air’ who drive Suibhne to flee the battle of Mag Rath for the trees are described as ‘ic faeidib, ocus ic feadgairi’ ‘shrieking and howling’ as they teem above the fighting warriors. In *Togail Troi*, when Hector seizes of the *Sigen Satuirn* (‘standard of Saturn’) held by the god’s statue, ‘Ra érig fetgaire na ndea 7 golgaire na n-aidemna adiú

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54 DIL, s.v. fetgaire.
7 anall 7 cechtar dib taebib di impi⁵⁶ (‘There arose the wailing of the gods and the lamenting of the chief demons everywhere and from both of the two sides of it [i.e., the statue]’). The weapon was prophesied to be borne by a great warrior, and it is not clear here why the gods and demons cry out. Is it sorrow at the desecration of the statue? Do they have foreknowledge that taking up the weapon will lead to Hector’s death, and grieve for his demise? Do they lament the fall of the city? Their motivation for crying out is obscure, but it is interesting that fetgaire is paired with golgaire in this passage, and with faeidib in Cath Maige Raith, in that we seem to have the alteration between types of sound that also occur in the passages on keening discussed above.

If I am correct in arguing the texts under consideration present fet as one aspect of the medieval Irish keen, then what sort of vocalization would fet signify for a medieval Irish audience in the context of cained? As Kaarina Hollo adroitly reminds us at the start of her excellent study of medieval Irish lament, all of our evidence for lament in the medieval period comes from written sources,⁵⁷ and thus we have nothing resembling an ethnographic description of Irish keening in medieval period. However, in the early modern period the Church increased its efforts in Ireland to eradicate keening for the dead, and the decrees prohibiting the practice can give us some indication as to what sounds might be included in a keen, as they frequently describe the sounds made by the women keeners, typically in less than flattering terms. In 1660 the Synod of Armagh decreed that all priests should ‘strenue laborent in impediendis clamoribus et ululatibus quae prophano modo adhuc in usu sunt in sepulturis’⁵⁸ (‘strive to impede the cries and wails which are still performed at funerals in a profane manner’). This was not, apparently, effective, for in 1670 the Synod of Armagh decreed that priests were not permitted to officiate at funerals where prohibited behaviours, keening among them, took

place, on pain of suspension from the parish.59 Two months prior the Synod of Dublin
had also issued a decree attempting to curb the practice of keening: ‘Decernimus ut
omnes Parochi toto conatu procurent ut clamores, et vociferationes fæminarum
comitantium corpora defunctorum impediuntur’60 (‘We decree that all parish priests are
to make every attempt to impede the clamors and outcries of women who attend the
bodies of the dead’). Around the year 1800 Thomas Bray, Archbishop of Cashel, issued a
pastoral letter written in English, condemning ‘the very indecent practices, and shameful
abuses at Wakes and Funerals’, including ‘all unnatural screams and shrieks, and
fictitious, tuneful cries and elegies, at wakes, together with the savage custom of howling
and bawling at funerals’.61

It is difficult to tell whether Bray is actually describing six distinct types of
vocalization or merely elaborating for effect, but it is interesting that he divides into three
categories those behaviors that would fall under the category of keening: high-pitched
sounds (‘screams and shrieks’), poetic or verbal art (‘tuneful cries and elegies’), and
mournful, drawn-out cries, perhaps alternating with sobs (‘howling and bawling’).
Clamor, ululatus, vociferatio- we cannot know what, precisely, were the sounds indicated
by these terms, but is clear that, like the clamor of the supernatural creatures attending
battle, traditional keening was understood to involve a range of loud, unpleasant, and at
times even aggressive, vocal utterances.

Lysaght divides the sounds ascribed to the Irish death-messenger into two rough
categories: sounds denoting ‘sorrow and grief’ and sounds that are ‘fierce and
frightening… connoting loud, sharp, shrill, or piercing qualities’, and she points out that
both categories of sounds are also represented in early modern accounts of the practice of
keening.62 In addition to the whistlings of birds or pipes, fet can also refer to the sound of
the wind, and indeed a derivation of fet from Proto-Celtic ‘winto’ - ‘wind, whistling’

59Daniel McCarthy, ed. Collections on Irish Church History, from the MSS of the Late V.
Rev. Laurence F. Renehan, D.D., President of Maynooth College, vol. 1, Irish
Archbishops (Dublin: C. M. Warren, 1861), 158.
60Patrick Francis Moran, ed., Memoirs of the Most Rev. Oliver Plunkett, Archbishop of
Armagh, and Primate of All Ireland, who Suffered Death for the Catholic Faith in the
Year 1681 (Dublin: James Duffy, 1861), 116.
61Thomas Bray, ‘Pastoral’, in Statuta Synodalia pro Unitis Dieæsisibus Cassel et Imelac
(Dublin: H. Fitzpatrick, 1813), 105-8, at 105, 107.
(which also yields MW gwynt ‘wind’) has been proposed.\textsuperscript{63} As seen above, terms for the sounds made by the wind occur in the list of names given for Sin, and perhaps a cry resembling the sound of the wind was what was intended in the passages where fet is associated with Brig, though whether that would indicate a high-pitched, shrill shrieking sound or something lower in pitch, more akin to the moaning or roaring of the wind moving through the trees, cannot be known.\textsuperscript{64}

To conclude, that the circumstances under which Brig first laments vary considerably between 2\textit{MT} and the \textit{dindshenchas} demonstrates not only that there was a tradition depicting Brig as the originator of lament that was independent of \textit{TDM}, but also that there were multiple variants of the etiological narrative circulating in medieval Ireland. Fet, gol, and éigem must have been attributed to Brig in \textit{TDM} because she was already associated with lamentation, and perhaps with some, if not all, of those specific sounds. Even if \textit{TDM} were the source for the inclusion of fet, gol, and éigem in 2\textit{MT} and the \textit{dindshenchas} on Loch Oirbsen, if Brig were not already independently associated with the practice of keening, and if these vocalizations were not already conceivable as forming part of the lamenters’ repertoire, then it would be very strange indeed to import them from \textit{TDM} into 2\textit{MT} and the \textit{dindshenchas} on Loch Oirbsen, as the passage in \textit{TDM} does not explicitly describe them aspects of cained. Bríg’s keen for Rúadán is the best-known example of fet occurring in conjunction with gol and éigem, and it is therefore not surprising that 2\textit{MT}’s description of fet as a signal has dominated what little discussion there has been on the topic. Admittedly the available sources are very limited, but what scant evidence there is indicates that the description of fet in 2\textit{MT} is anomalous, and that fet could be used as a term for a lamenting the dead. I certainly do not wish to imply that cained in medieval Ireland always had a fixed form; obviously an oral art form will vary considerably both temporally and regionally, nor will the terms used for specific types of vocalizations necessarily represent particular sounds in a consistent manner. It may then

\textsuperscript{63}Ranko Matasović, \textit{Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic} (Leiden: Brill, 2009), s.v. \textit{Winto}.

\textsuperscript{64} It is tempting to speculate whether a folk etymology linking fet with the onomatopoeic interjection fé ‘woe’ (cognate with Latin vae, Middle Welsh gwae, Old English wa) ever developed, but I have found no evidence that the two were ever linked. For discussion of fé see Fergus Kelly, ‘Onomatopeic Interjections in Early Irish’, \textit{Celtica} 25 (2007), 88-107, at 95-6.
be more accurate to state that when *fet, gol*, and *éigem* appear together in *TDM* and the *dindshenchas* on Loch Oirbsen, it is reasonable to assume that *fet* is intended to represent a vocalization that could be utilized during *cained*. The semantic range of the compound noun *fetgaire* supports this interpretation of *fet*, as well as its potential association with the demonic. Neither 2*M* nor the *dindshenchas* on Loch Oirbsen describes *fet, gol*, or *éigem* as demonic, and while the possibly demonic nature of the Túatha Dé Danann was the subject of much speculation in medieval Ireland, the passages describing Bríg’s invention of lament are not explicitly invoking this particular association; rather, the description of *fet, gol*, and *éigem* as ‘demonic voices’ in *TDM* may be understood as stemming from their association with what may be loosely termed the ‘supernatural death-messenger’ tradition.