



Dangerous Liaisons

Author(s): Marion Deane

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Dangerous Liaisons

Marion Deane

Compert Conculainn (CCC) (edited by Ernst Windisch, *Irische Texte* Leipsig 1880), the tale of Cuchulainn's conception and birth, has been handed down in two recensions, generally referred to as version 1 and version 2. Version 1, belonging to the first half of the 8th century, was preserved in the lost Book of Druim Snechta.¹ It now remains in seven manuscripts, the oldest of which is to be found in *Lebor na h-Uidre* (U), which is in the possession of the Royal Irish Academy. The other six manuscripts include Trinity College Dublin H.4.22 (H); Royal Irish Academy 23 N.10 (N); British Library Egerton 1782 (W); British Library Egerton 88 (E); Royal Irish Academy D.4.2 (D) and National Library of Ireland G.7 (G). It is in *Lebor na h-Uidre* that the version of *Compert Conculainn* under consideration here is to be found.

The thesis that I put forward in this paper is that the birth-tale is radically concerned with incest, which it presents as a natural relationship that eventually becomes forbidden or taboo. The tale marks a moment of transition from the natural to the cultural worlds, illustrating how the social and cultural systems that derived from the prohibition of incest, were based on the principle of reciprocity. It shows how marriage is the first human institution in which these principles were formally established. It demonstrates how marriage is founded on the 'basic atom of kinship', and it presents the avunculate as an essential component of that basic unit. It illustrates how all other social contracts, too, are derived from the principle of reciprocity.²

The tale depicts a series of three conceptions or pregnancies that ultimately bear fruit in the person of Sétanta, the boy who will be later known as Cuchulainn, warrior hero of Ulster. It is a literary

¹ Mac Mathuna, Seamus. *Immram Brain*. Tübingen, 1985: 422. *Cín or Lebar Dromma Snechtai (CDS)* was an early manuscript predating our oldest extant ms. *LU*. It consisted of diverse materials including early Irish saga material, mostly pertaining to the old province of Ulster.

² Clarke, Simon. *The Foundations of Structuralism: A Critique of Lévi-Strauss*. New Jersey: Harvester Press, 1981.

narrative, whose structure can be illustrated to be based upon a seasonal ritual.³ This allows us to divide the tale into three corresponding episodes and a (dubious) coda,⁴ dealing with the premature death of a child, miscarriage, and a full-term child, around whom the nobles of Ulster congregate, to vie for the privilege of educating him.

It is not my intention to elaborate upon the cosmic dimension of the tale, but merely to indicate that, as a seasonal myth, it allows for over-lapping motifs, so that the conception, gestation, and birth of a child, which is its main concern, is represented as mirroring the eclipse and return of fertility in nature. For that reason, therefore, I will refer briefly to the solar theme, for the purpose of the tale is to show how the model, provided by nature alone, is insufficient as a template for sexual union between humans. As an exemplary myth,⁵ it offers a code for human behaviour. CCC builds its argument by demonstrating how the sacred marriage between sun and earth is no longer in itself adequate for agriculture.⁶ Then, based on the premise that the health and fertility of crops require active human husbandry, it illustrates how the unregulated fertility of women, too, is economically and ergo morally unsound. It needs to be formally controlled- by a husband who will undertake responsibility for it.

³ Gaster, Theodor. *Thespis: Ritual Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East*. Harper Row, New York, 1961. Deane, Marion, "Compert Conculainn: possible antecedents?" *Proceedings of the Eighth Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica* (2007): 61-84.

⁴ O'Concheanainn, Tomás. "Textual Criticism of Compert Con Culainn," *Celtica* 21 (1990). There is much disagreement by scholars about the integrity of the addition made to the original tale by an Interpolator.

⁵ Ó Cathasaigh, Tomás, "Cath Maige Tuired as Exemplary Myth," *Folia Gadelica* Cork University Press, 1983. CCC is an exemplary myth according to two criteria. It explains the origin of particular customs and it offers a model for desired behaviour.

⁶ Life in nature, of which the sun remains the ultimate father, is depicted, in episode 3, as dependent upon co-operation between humans and nature itself. The sun has not relinquished complete control of fertility, but rather serves as the catalyst, whereby the client or farmer undertakes the care of the soil.

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The narrative is as follows. King Concobar sets off with his men to drive away a bird flock that has devoured the crops at Emain. He leads them in a chariot driven by his sister, Deictire. They follow the birds until, with the arrival of night and snow, they lose track of them. The flock flies on ahead to a farmland dwelling. The king orders his men to unyoke the chariots, and sends two of them to find shelter. They come across a house and, despite its apparent frugality, they are all made welcome by a married couple who shower them with hospitality. Just then, the man of the house indicates that his wife is in labour. Deictire goes to her assistance, and a baby boy is born. The Ulstermen take the child and begin to rear him but he becomes ill and dies. Episode one, which ends at this critical moment, presents an apparent contradiction, for Deictire, who was the king's nubile companion in the chariot, is both mother and midwife to this new child. However, I will ignore these apparently irreconcilable facts at this point, for their fuller meaning will become obvious in the context of the whole tale. Instead, I will continue with an account of the equally incongruous details of the second pregnancy as related.

Deictire, as she returns from mourning the loss of her son, becomes thirsty and seeks a drink from a copper vessel. In bringing the drink to her lips she swallows a little creature and becomes pregnant again. As she sleeps, Lug appears to her in a dream explaining that he, who was the son of her first pregnancy, is both the father and the son of this second conception. This new situation instills fear among the Ulstermen, for they don't know if Deictire has a husband. They suspect that Concobar has impregnated her given that he used sleep with his sister. However, Concobar himself intervenes to betroth her to Sualdaim Mac Roich. But, as she is ashamed to go pregnant to her new husband, she brings about a miscarriage. Deictire then sleeps with Sualdaim and is soon pregnant again with Setanta.

These events remain disconnected and absurd until we begin to recognize how the tale establishes Deictire's⁷ identity as having a

⁷ Baumgarten, Rolf, "Etymological Aetiology in Irish Tradition," *Ériu* 41: 114. Deictir (sic) Deictire, Deichtir (Stowe) sister to Concobar. It is reasonable to assume that in this context we have a personification of the land *tír* in

dual reference –to the material substrata, soil or land on one level, and as goddess/consort to the sun⁸ on another. It maintains this double identity with a plethora of further substitutions for her, in either or both of these aspects *mág selb íriu/Ériu etne*.⁹ Further, although to modern consciousness the sun is considered an individual phenomenon, the tale, in conformity with mythic convention, articulates or personifies it, as not one, but many. Hence Deictire’s spouse Concoibar, king of Ulster, can also be acknowledged as a terrestrial god, *dia talmaide*, and Lug, her lover, as the all-embracing essence of light.¹⁰ From this configuration, the narrative dramatizes the movement of the sun and the corresponding

conjunction with a figure for the Irish Elysium *deg-thir* (Contributions D. p.10 ed Carl Marstrander). Proper names in medieval sources are frequently found not to be consistent in form, even when recurring in the same text. Implicit etymology is a familiar feature of Irish narrative. Names are given according to the quality and nature of the thing or person named. Analysis of a name will throw light on its bearer.

⁸ O Rahilly, T. F., “On the origin of the names *Érainn* and *Ériu*,” *Ériu* 14 (1946): 27

⁹ *etne* The capacity to recognize different realms of space and time is obvious too in the redactor’s depiction of the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm. In the first episode, as we journey to the *bruig* and to the house *tech* there, we are brought further in to a bedroom *cule* in which we find a woman *ben* within whose body is a child *mac*. The series works like a succession of Chinese boxes, or ever-diminishing concentric circles. Each enclosure reveals an interior, in which the focus is intensified, in proportion as it shrinks in size. The centrality and significance of this final focus, which is designated as *mac*, is expounded later in the tale. Lug explains that he is the *mac* who had been implanted in Deictire’s womb *bai in mac altae* Lug’s self-nomination is as *mac n-Ethnend*, the son of *Ethne*, i.e. the kernel of kernel. All this would seem to confirm our understanding that *birt mac*, as it appears at the end of the first episode, refers to the genesis of the ultimate essence and nucleus of life and light, the ultimate irreducible part of matter, or the basic core of all life forms.

¹⁰ Wagner, Heinrich. “Studies in the Origin of Early Celtic Civilisation,” *ZCP* 31 (1970). The king, in every situation where sacral kingship is established, is representative of the sky god on earth.

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reaction of the earth and its produce, at different phases of the sun's course.

This phenomenological infrastructure provides the basis for a tale, whose main interest concerns human behaviour. A brief outline of this infrastructural theme runs as follows. In the wake of the land having been laid waste by scavenging birds, the sun (Concobar) begins a journey towards its winter sojourn in the Otherworld. There, Mother Nature (Deictire) labours to deliver her produce *mac*, for, in the sun's absence, frequent visitations of light (Lug) had penetrated the soil and fertilized it. However, despite human efforts to sustain the newly-delivered produce, it perishes. Nevertheless, Nature desires to reproduce. She begins a search for sun and rain from which again the land becomes fertile. But the Ulstermen are alarmed, for 'they don't know their land to be in the possession of a client' *ná con fes céle for a seilb*. They suppose its burgeoning condition must have been caused by excess sky-borne rain (personified as a drunken sun) lying upon the earth. At this critical moment the sun (Concobar) returns. Its increased power obliges Sualdaim to undertake the future husbandry of the soil, and the soil, in purging itself of its produce, is restored to health and no longer a liability to them. Simultaneously, its husbandry is also regulated by the return of its earthly representative, the king (Concobar), who contracts Sualdaim to safeguard it in future sowing and harvest time: *Arneaisc iarom Concobar a fíair /fúr do Sualdaim*.

These variations in the sun's potency on earth and its corresponding effect upon fertility in nature are used analogously to signal the legitimacy of the sexual relationships between man and woman which govern the conception and birth of this particular child. In addition, terminology derived from the protocols of marriage as expressed in early Irish law and, specifically, in *Cáin Lánamna*, is appropriated to indicate the various levels of censure or approbation afforded these same sexual unions. On another parallel too, Concobar, Lug and Deictire in marital partnerships or as natural phenomena also delineate the progress of a king who seeks to repossess his territorial realm from a usurper. One could say, therefore, that the tale begins when Concobar/king/husband-brother/sun/ sets out to repossess Deictire/goddess/sister-spouse/earth from

Lug/usurper/lover/light. What is most significant, however, is that the tale offers us a new paradigm. By that, I mean that we understand that the social and political patterns, with which it is concerned, are based in nature, but in the last analysis, it is their divergence into what we call the cultural realm that is being advocated as a model for society.

On one plane, therefore, an immense mythic dimension is revealed, through an unfolding drama of migrating birds, denuded vegetation, the diurnal and end-of-year journey of the sun into the otherworld and its ensuing re-birth. However, just as we recognize how it functions at one level by personifying cosmic and natural processes, we also see that it operates at another level that interlocks with the first. Human conduct is brought into the foreground by a compelling pattern of vocabulary and image. The text has a double fold. We see that the myth is not only about nature, *per se*, but that nature is presented as a paradigm, as in the laws, for the modes of control that should operate at a social and individual level. Just as the judicious management of land facilitates recovery from seasonal or climatic damage, or from the ruin of predators, so human conduct can be directed and improved by appropriate intervention or legal decision (*compert*)¹¹ and contract.

The mapping of one world on to another is a familiar literary stratagem. In this tale, features from the natural world have been selected to represent human attributes and concerns. Thus, vocabulary, which expresses relationship between humans or animals and their biophysical environment, has been appropriated to cover relationships between humans with one another. A correspondence between the natural and the social-political has been established, by humanizing nature on the one hand, and by naturalizing humanity on the other, from which the concept and representation of Deictire, as Mother Nature, is stock.¹² The

¹¹ Dictionary of the Irish Language, RIA, *C fasciculus 2*, s.v. *compert* (a).

¹² Thin, Neil, "Environment" in *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* eds. Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer. Routledge, London and New York, 1996. Homonyms exploited to support this natural/social analogy include *torrach/tairr-recht; énlath/aenlath; fiur/für*. See Deane, Marion, "A Valedictory for the Sacred Marriage" in *Proceedings of the International*

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correspondences indicated here are also replicated in the ideology that formed the basis of traditional law, for early Irish law took its concepts from the order that exists in the cosmos. Its maxims were formulated upon the principle that forms of appropriate relationship between people should be moulded in accordance with the laws that bound the physical world.¹³

Early Irish laws spelt out in minute detail the mutual rights and duties each partner had in relation to the other. Contracts made provision for services as well as goods. The notion of matching and equivalence in service or possessions was reinforced by the dual terms *folad* and *frithfolad*, used to denote the correct discharge of reciprocal obligations. The main concern of the law was whether the *folad* of one party matched the *folad* of another, and whether one or both parties had performed or delivered the *folad* in full.¹⁴ It is a concept that is adapted into the title, and exploited in version two of the tale.¹⁵ The verisimilitude between marriage laws and laws on clientship, which are of particular interest here, reveals how all deals and agreements were grounded in common social or economic interests. As lord and client made up a 'full pair', the contract between them followed the same pattern as that for husband and wife, who also made up a 'full pair'. A transaction between a pair, in either of these or other relationships, had wide-ranging repercussions

Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Ulidia 2: forthcoming (hereafter Deane, forthcoming, (a)).

¹³ McLeod, N. "The Concept of Irish Law," *Irish Jurist* vol. xvii (1982): 364.

¹⁴ Binchy, D.A., "Irish History and Irish Law," *Studia Hibernica* No. 16. Baile Átha Cliath, 1976: 23ff.

¹⁵ Version 2, known also as *Feis Tigi Becfoltaig*, dates to the second half of the 8th century, or to the first half of the ninth. It is preserved in two mss., British Library Egerton 1782 (W*) and Royal Irish Academy Stowe D.4.2 (D*). In both mss., Version 2 follows immediately after Version 1. The tale evolves around a sacred marriage whose contract has been breached by the king. It is only when the king acknowledges that his worldly success depends upon the flow and counter flow of resources *folud* between his actions and those of the goddess that he re-establishes himself as a just ruler'. See Deane, Marion, "From Knowledge to Acknowledgement in *Feis Tigi Becfoltaig*," *Peritia: forthcoming (hereafter Deane, forthcoming (b)).*

for their kindred. Thus, we find that parallel and intertwining rights and obligations of any one pair has a knock-on effect on any other, and on the wider community. The head of kin therefore, had a right to interfere and authorize new contracts to protect the interests of the kin, and thus to free them from the liabilities that the original illegalities incurred.¹⁶ The solution reached was that a formal contract be set in place, in which the rights and obligations of both parties were publicly ratified.

CCC deals with such issues of economic and marital interaction within a narrative frame. The flexibility of this chosen discourse integrates and sustains the parallels between woman and land (Deictire), or between husband and client (*céle*). Legal terminology which governs the contractual nature of the mutual obligations of full pairs refers to one sphere or another with equal ease and pertinence. As a result, the principles of fair play and reciprocal exchange¹⁷ governing commercial transactions or marriage stand in place of each other. A binding contract (*urnaidm*), therefore, negotiated by a male guardian with a future husband on behalf of a woman, was replicated in the binding contract undertaken by a head of kin with a client regarding land: *arnenaisc iarom Concobar a fiair do Súaldaim mac Róig*.¹⁸ In the birth-tale, the laws on marriage and on clientship coalesce, to promote the idea that human or natural processes need to have their fertility controlled by intervention, in the forms of laws,

¹⁶ Charles-Edwards, T. *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*: 39. The various responsibilities of the head of kin included, for example, the public denouncement of a kinswoman who had injured the kindred by her sexual behaviour, or the maintenance of the size and condition of kin-land.

¹⁷ Stacey, Robin Chapman. *The Road to Judgement. From Custom to Court in Early Medieval Ireland and Wales*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994: 45.

¹⁸ ‘Concobar betrothed/contracted his sister(*siur/s(i)úr*) to Sualdaim’ see Thurneysen, Rudolf, “Hierat: *Urnaidm: Aititiu*” in *Studies in Early Irish Law*: 109-28; and Dillon, Myles, “The relationship of mother and son, of father and daughter and the law of inheritance with regard to women” in *Studies in Early Irish Law* ed. Binchy (1936): 137. The senior binds kin-land *ar(a)naisc finntiu finnsru(i)th*. See also note 18.

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customs or conventions. The tale illustrates the imaginary moment in the remote past in which these essential laws were set in place.

Specific concepts from the legal lexicon (*urnaidm*, *lanamnas fir tathigthe*, *lanamnas tothla*, *ógslán*) have been given narrative expression here (*arnenaisc*, *no thathigtís*, *tatharla*, *tothlaigestar*, *ógslán*). They have been adapted grammatically for semantic purposes, and successfully re-appropriated by a literary medium, to provide an index of moral value. Human behaviour and the conduct of society at large are shown to be intelligible and acceptable, to the degree that they resemble or sought to resemble cosmic order. *CCC* illustrates how licit and illicit sexual unions were thought to follow patterns that already existed in the rhythms and phenomena of nature. In establishing this congruity between the natural and the social worlds, the salient point that the tale seems to make, is that fertility, whether it is that of a woman or that of the land, must be securely husbanded, in the interests of kin welfare.

We are not left to second-guess the import of the narrative's concern with marriage, for it presents us with the necessary interpretative assistance in a dream sequence. This elucidation is inserted at that mid-point where Deictire has become impregnated for the second time, and before the impact of this pregnancy upon society is recounted, and acted upon. It also occurs at a point that explains, after the event, the nature of the relationship which resulted in the first conception and birth. It is when Lug tells her that it was he who had led them to the *bruig*, *bá hé nudabert adochum don bruig*, that his self-identification with the *énlaith*, who had also grazed the plain at Emain, becomes intelligible. From this mythic conceit, the equation of human behaviour between man and woman with that between foraging birds and land becomes evident. The double import of the verb *no thathigtís*,¹⁹ which describes the actions of the birds/Lug or the action of Lug as man and lord (*aenfhlaithe*), elucidates the message of this opening passage. We begin to understand the correspondence and inter-relatedness between the harm caused by a predatory bird-flock to the land, and the harm

¹⁹ Dictionary of the Irish Language (DIL) (T): 56. Visiting or consorting with sexually *tathigid*.

caused to a woman by a predatory lover. Lug's behaviour in relation to Deictire's first pregnancy, therefore, may be regarded as that of a *fer tathaigthe* 'visiting man', who has committed an offence in impregnating her. He is father of the boy born in the *bruig*.

We can see now how episode one unfolds, to reveal the following theme. A repeated depletion of kin land has taken place arising out of an informal sexual union in which a visiting lover, as described in *Cáin Lanamna*, has conformed to none of the contractual obligations necessary to protect the interests of the kin.²⁰ He is negligent on two accounts. Firstly, as a frequent visitor to his partner's own home, he has neither provided service for kin land which he damages, nor accepted public responsibility for the offspring of their sexual union. These problems are inextricably connected, and can only be resolved in the context of legally binding contracts that were the duty of the kin or their delegated representatives to enforce. Concobar, as head of the *fine* and as king, succeeds in this task. Thus, the opening portion of the tale, which we have considered in terms of its cosmic scope, can now be seen to operate on a human scale. Time and place remain constants. One day in winter, the king and the Ulstermen at Emain go in pursuit of Lug, a 'visiting man' who has had sexual congress with the king's sister Deictire, without contributing wealth or service, but depleting the resources of their land, *a n-irend*, instead. They follow him to a dwelling to which he leads the way. To this man and Deictire, as married couple, *lanamain*, a son is born.

There is no doubt about the harmful impact wrought upon the land by birds devouring vegetation and denuding the soil, nor of the concurrence between their migration and the sun's periodic journey into the Otherworld *ar bá bás léu-som forim én*. Equally, there can be no doubt about the adverse effect that a 'visiting man' causes for his sexual partner, if he provides no financial contribution to the economy of the couple. The writer wants us to become aware of the latter through the prism of the former, and by extension accept remedies for the social world that correlate with the principles nature

²⁰ *Cáin Lanamna*, Ancient Laws of Ireland (ALI) ed. Hancock et al. (Vol. 2, Dublin, 1865-1901): 396. *lanamnas fir tathigthe cen targud, cen urgnam* 'the connexion of a frequenting man without acquired property, without service'.

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establishes. He does not mince his words. The actions of the man are violations. His behaviour results in deflowering the woman (*oc collud a-írend*)²¹ for her body (*mág*) has been the object of his habitual visitations (*no thathigtís énlaithe mág*).²² Sexual violation of Deictire is indistinguishable in its consequences for the kin, from the deflowering of the soil brought about by his neglect, or the stripping it of its assets, by foraging birds. Lug himself was the partner who, even though he had not lived with Deictire, had fathered her son.²³

The kin had known of the relationship, and it had been an ongoing source of vexation (*tochomracht*) for them. Nevertheless, in the absence of his father, when the boy was born, they took responsibility for him. They accepted him as one of their kindred and began to rear him (*alair leo ammac*). They also gave fostergifts to him (*ocus dobert som na lúrchuiriu do macslabri don mac*). However, the young life was fragile, and despite the best efforts of the community, the child does not survive.²⁴ Deictire then grieves the loss (*díth*) of her son, and this instils in her a desire to reproduce.²⁵ She seeks coition once more, this time from a partner, who impregnates her in secret.

We become gradually aware, too, from Lug's conversation with Deictire, of the different facets which contribute to the illegality of

²¹ *Íriu* is a doublet of *Ériu*, O Rahilly, T.F. *Early Irish History and Mythology*. Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies 1957:196.

²² Sayers, William. "Concepts of Eloquence in *Tochmarc Emire*," *Studia Celtica* 26/27: 131 explains the homology of the Irish landscape and the human body; the plain is the girl's abdomen.

²³ Patterson, N. *Cattle-lords and Clansmen: the Social Structure of Early Ireland*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame. 1994: 296. The woman did not live with the man, and he did not provide anything for her support.

²⁴ The narrative maintains the correspondence between the organic and human world. *Birt mac. Alt Deictire in mac. Da fuabair galar. Atbail de*. A boy/seed was born. Mother/earth nurses/nurtures him/it. Illness/disease affected him/it. He/it died/perished from it.

²⁵ Hughes, Kathleen. *Early Christian Ireland*. London: Camelot Press. 1972: 47. The desire for children which comes out clearly in the law-tracts was probably dictated by economic pressures.

the union from which her second pregnancy has occurred. It was he who had impregnated her, after she had solicited him. The fact that she had both instigated and won his sexual favours without the knowledge of her kin put the union into a category which could be termed a connexion of secret elopement (*lanamnas tothla*).²⁶ The most striking word that introduces this section is *tothlaigestar*. 'She asked' is its general application, but it is to the specific nature of the request that the secondary meaning of the word alerts us.²⁷ Its other import 'she desired sexually' opens up an extended allegory, in which images of coition are invoked.²⁸ The soil needing water as a preliminary to growth provides a parallel to a woman needing sperm as a preliminary to conception. In this context the liquid which she desires takes on the significance of semen (*lind*)²⁹ which, each time it was brought to her body, literally labia (*dia bélaib*), is accompanied by the invisible life form that results in conception.

The compatibility of this final analogy resides in the contemporary understanding of the roles of the male and female, as principles and as persons, in the reproductive process.³⁰ If the male seed is taken as life itself and the female body a mere receptacle, then the *mil mbeo* as the living germ, which is ejaculated with the male seed, semen or sperm, seems a possible explanation for this passage, which has its counterparts in other insect-derived

²⁶ *Cáin Lanamna* 402. *lanamnas tothla* .i. *cen fis dia fine* the connexion of secret elopement i.e. without the knowledge of the kin. It was he who had come into her womb. On *tatharlae* and *totharlae* see van Hamel, 1933: 5 § 11.

²⁷ DIL (T): 266 - desires sexually; See *tothlugud vb.n. do- thuchethar*.

²⁸ Patterson: 297. Irish law depicts marriage as a relationship in which the woman no less than the man is expected to have sexual desire for the other spouse.

²⁹ DIL (L): 164. *lind* semen. See also Greene, Miranda. *The Sun Gods of Ancient Europe*. London: Batsford. 1991: 123. Sky and fertility are connected in terms of rain, which, like the sun's rays, fertilize the earth like an allegory of semen.

³⁰ Rees, Alwyn and Brinley. *Celtic Heritage*. Thames and Hudson. 1995: 227. The power of the soul which is in the semen fashions the body.

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pregnancies, as related in early Irish tales³¹ (*dolinged míl mbeac iarsin lind dochum a bél*). The possibility that it is ejaculation that the author has in mind is further supported by a verb that identifies the final act as a sudden emission which successfully impregnates. It gushed forth (*scéinti*). Deictire then sleeps the night (*contuli*) with Lug.³² She is pregnant (*torrach*) again.

However, this second pregnancy is of graver concern. Lug's union with Deictire is not merely informal. The sexual intercourse about which he speaks to her was completely invalid, as it was a union of which the kin had no knowledge whatever (*na con fes*).³³ Deictire had instigated it, and it bore the stigma of an abduction or elopement.³⁴ The child of this cohabitation posed a real liability for them.³⁵ Who was the father? Who would take responsibility for a child begotten of such a union? As they did not know her to be affianced, literally, in possession of a husband (*na con fes céle for a seilb*) nor alternatively, to have a landholder for her property,³⁶ the situation is now critical. Their previous distress (*tochomracht*), which had been occasioned by a marriage that contributed nothing to their economy, has grown even more acute. Impelled now by fear (*ba hóman leo*),³⁷ they hazard a guess (*dumet*) as to the paternity of the child. But even this poses further problem. If the union has been

³¹ Sayers: 130. Sexual symbolism of worm or insect is to be found in many supernatural conceptions.

³² *contuli* also suggests cohabitation, which would cast further aspersions on the nature of the relationship. However, this is difficult to reconcile with the fact that a single night is mentioned. Conception, not merely cohabitation, was the aim of most sexual partnerships. Cf. footnote 25, Hughes: 48.

³³ Patterson: 273. This forbidden union was forced upon the kin without their will.

³⁴ *Cáin Lanamna* ALI, vol.2: 402. *ar imta lanamnas tothla* i.e. *cen fis dia fine* the connexion of secret elopement is similar (to abduction) i.e. without the knowledge of the kin.

³⁵ Patterson: 296. The union had no status in law, but created liabilities such as child care if pregnancy ensued.

³⁶ Etchingham, Colmán. *Church Organization in Ireland A.D. 650-1000*. Maynooth: Laigin Publications, 1999: 274. *selb* (landed) property.

³⁷ *Ba hóman leo* may be an incorporated gloss on *dumet*. The latter however, in its context, implies deliberation arising out of a difficult situation.

contracted under the influence of drunkenness (*trémesci*), it could have no legal standing either.³⁸

In terms of liability, the prospect of an illegitimate child was as real a problem for them as was the secret alienation of kin-land or even the usurpation of the king's fief itself, or the unregulated growth arising out of the sun's influence upon the earth, with which they all run in parallel.³⁹ Radical action was imperative. Concoobar as king, and as head of kin, must attempt to alleviate the burden with which the Ulstermen are faced.⁴⁰ As brother and legal guardian, he must protect his own kin against losses that might accrue from his sister's informal or illicit unions, which provide neither service nor contribution to the economy, or worse, as is in this latter case, collude with the secret alienation of kin-land.⁴¹ A turning point is reached. Concoobar takes action. He binds his sister in legal marriage to a husband, as he binds the land in a legal contract to a client, thus establishing responsibility for both (*arnenaisc iarom Concoobar a fiair do Súaldaim mac Róig*).

In betrothing Deictire to Súaldaim, Concoobar elevates the status of Deictire's sexual union to one that both families accept. He thus protects the entitlements of the future child, for betrothal ensures that Súaldaim, as father, recognizes his son as heir. Deictire may have been promoted to the status of chief wife to Súaldaim, but encumbered as she is with a child, that is not his, she feels shame at this defect. There is a discrepancy between her present pregnant state and the publicly accepted standard demanded of a chief wife. So that a son born to her may achieve a prime position on the inheritance ladder, she must come intact to her new union. Only as a

³⁸ McLeod, Neil. "Early Irish Contract Law," *Sydney Series in Celtic Studies* 1. Sydney, 1993: 56. Drunkenness temporarily negated the capacity to contract and thus prevented the conclusion to binding agreements.

³⁹ *Tothla* (DIL s.v. *to-tu*, 265) refers simultaneously to harmful secretive behaviour, whether sexual, social, or political.

⁴⁰ *Cáin Aicillne* ALI vol. 2: 279. *Imdich cach corp a meamra* - every head defends its members.

⁴¹ The narrative does not distinguish between Lug's entry into the 'womb' of the woman and entry onto the 'surface' of kin-land *ocus ba hé tatharla inna broind*.

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‘pure’ woman could she grant status to her husband’s child as a *mac óighe*, as inheritance law prescribes.⁴² To this end, she brings about a miscarriage (*brúctis bí a croith*).⁴³ She is now not only free from physical imperfection, but is legally immune. She is a person capable of making a sound (marriage) contract, and is exempt from liability.⁴⁴ Her morality is not based on sexual mores *per se*, but on the economic and political repercussions that derive from the illegal status of the union. Deictire’s shame arises not out of guilt about sullied purity, but from the public disgrace arising out of an infringement against kinship.⁴⁵

The whole scope of version one embraces extremes. It moves from a situation where a kinsman exploits the land without providing any service towards its cultivation, to a situation where the king binds it to a client to till it, to provide it with seed. It moves also from an informal union in which a woman’s lover made no provision for her offspring, to a formal union in which the king betrothed her to a husband, to guarantee that the seed of her womb would be properly protected. In this network and circularity of themes the symbiosis between woman and land is maintained. Informal sexual union (with Lug), like human despoliation of land (by Lug), which is the *sine qua non* of its not being responsibly serviced, is akin in its effects for the kindred, to natural ravages wrought by birds (Lug) or by (diminished) sun-light (Lug).⁴⁶

⁴² Jaski, Bart. *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2000 :148. The son of a pure woman then, it is he who takes the inheritance i.e. who takes the land. *mac óigh tra is e-side focoisle orba .i. foxlas seilb* as cited from *Bretha for Macshlechteaib*. The ‘pure’ woman is defined as the first (betrothed) wife *mac óighe.i. mac cetmuintire*. 146

⁴³ Van Hamel, A.G. *Compert Con Culainn and other Stories*. Dublin. 1933:161 *croth* belly. ‘Conjectural. I have no other instance of this word’.

⁴⁴ ógslán; ALI vol. 6: 595. *Glossary to Breton Laws*.

⁴⁵ Needham, Rodney. *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1971: 28.

⁴⁶ Mac Neill, Máire. *The Festival of Lughnasa – A study of the survival of the Celtic festival of the beginning of the harvest*. (Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann; Oxford University Press, London 1962). Mac Neil’s summary of the depiction of Lug provides a persuasive interpretation for the distinction between

The urgency of these problems is highlighted by the fact that, without intervention, the early conditions actually worsened. The first conception had resulted in a child for whom Deictire's own kin had accepted responsibility post-hoc. But, to their collective grief, the young life had been prematurely ended, and its potential lost. In the second conception, Deictire had instigated a clandestine relationship, and there was no-one to undertake responsibility for the child. If the tale casts such opprobrium upon informal or illegal unions, which threaten the stability of the kin, how much more is that opprobrium when the relationships in question are incestuous? The resolution to these problems is the crux of the tale, and is dealt with unambiguously and conclusively in the closing episode. Intervention is crucial.

Society and reciprocity

The tale is much more revolutionary in its result, if not in its intent, however, than to create solutions for these immediate crises only. Taking the problems that beset the Ulstermen as a basis, it shows how all other social and legal contracts, determining social alliance, property exchange and procreation, which were the main concerns of the jurists, came about. It illustrates, further, the hypothetical moment in the remote past, in which these essential laws were set in place.

To understand the evolution of these ideas, as dramatized within the tale, we must return to the infrastructural seasonal pattern. It is necessary, in particular, to consider its corresponding rituals, together with their significance for inauguration ceremonies. Seasonal dramas enacted the struggle for existence between good and evil, or between benign and malign forces. After a mimic death and resurrection, the hero or god, usually impersonated by the king,

Concobar and Lug, which we find here. Both are personifications of sun and sky/light, with their literal shading into individual degrees of presence or absence of sun/light. When the tale opens, a conflict between two rivals for the possession of the earth has already begun. Cf. Deane, 2007, 65-66.

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was victorious.⁴⁷ The tale maintains this synthesis between the natural and political elements, although, as yet, for purposes of this paper, I have referred, in the main, to the marriage theme only. However, *CCC* also illustrates how absence or decline in power, whether cosmic or royal, such as that of the sun in its seasonal cycle or of the king in his earthly career, parallel each other.⁴⁸ They both posed a threat to the welfare of the community. It reveals too how the failure and eventual return of fertility in nature were but parallel aspects of the deposition, temporary absence and return of the king, or of the induction of his successor. It followed therefore that as the king's ordination, like the return of the sun, ushered in a new era of prosperity, his inauguration, which was thought to replicate the primeval union between sun and earth, would take the form of a sacred marriage. Significantly, however, in this tale, which climaxes at episode three, a new situation is introduced. It is one in which the sun's or the king's potential or traditional union with his spouse is replaced by another kind of contract.

As it was believed that all matter was derived from an original primary substance, of which all elements were components, many cosmogonic myths represented the beginning of things as a division of the original whole into two, sun and earth, male and female, for example. From this concept of primeval unity, the division of matter could be figured as the first couple, as brother and sister.⁴⁹ Thus, the model of the sacred marriage, formulated upon the union of sun and earth as brother and sister, was essentially an incestuous one. The representation of Concoabar as the sun, as well as king and brother; Lug as light, essentially another face or brother of the sun; and Deictire as land or earth, sister-wife to her brothers, Concoabar and Lug, adheres to this paradigm.

⁴⁷ James, E.O. *Comparative Religion: An Introductory and Historical Study*. London/NY: Methuen, 1961: 95.

⁴⁸ The corresponding myth involving the king expresses the following situations:- the removal or temporary absence of the king, followed by an interregnum (Lug as usurper), a contest (for Deictire) in which Concoabar is ultimately victorious, a public contract (originally a sacred marriage) followed by the induction of a successor, and finally a feast.

⁴⁹ Rees and Rees: 233.

Episode one depicts this relationship, with emphasis on the fertilizing power of the sun upon the earth, and in the potency of the king/brother in impregnating his sister. Episode two concerns the earth's craving for the sun, and the sister's sexual desire for her brother. The produce in both counts, as we have seen, was deficient, by putting extra (economic) burden on the brother's own kindred, and causing them grief and concern. In episode three, a process of deliberation evolves, making it explicit that the incestuous element of Deictire's pregnancy contributed greatly to their problem (*ar bá leis no foied a fiúr*). The reader is presented, step by step, with the situation, which confronts the Ulstermen (*ba torrach din ind ingen*). The effect it produced on them (*ceist*), and the reason for it (*na con fes céle for a seilb*), are given. This is followed by a rehearsal of the possible contributory factors, drunkenness or past behaviour, that could have brought things to this pass. The first episode, too, infers that the harm caused to the kin is exacerbated by this same factor. The semantics of *oc collud* alert us to the incestuous component of the relationship. As the harm or violation (*col*) accredited to Lug also denotes infringement against the laws of consanguinity, the opprobrium attached to his irresponsible behaviour is transferred to the incestuous nature of the relationship itself.⁵⁰

Episode three makes a quantum leap. It depicts the brother-sister relationship or incestuous model, upon which the sacred marriage between the king and his realm was based, as no longer desirable or appropriate as a template, either for kingship, which it transmutes into a clientship contract, or for human marriage. In this sense, the effect of episode three is considerable. The basis-biophysical and mythological-of the system founded on incest, is established in episodes one and two. But the need to go beyond this, in a political sense, is what episode three sets out to establish.

The question it raises is not simply the production (*mac*) generated by the relationship. Not only is it (economically) insufficient, but it also needs someone to decide on its allocation or distribution. Thus, the role of the sun, the king or the brother must be

⁵⁰ *col* DIL (C fasciculus 2): 321 degree of kinship as impediment to marriage; incest.

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modified, whereby they operate in another function, one in which they may be described to act, not as impregnators, but as regulators. Concobar, in allocating the land or sister to Sualtair, maximizes resources for the good of the kin, by extending the familial alliance. Common welfare depends on his capacity and authority to pass beyond the confined spaces of the incest code.

The passage from the natural to the cultural involves the making of a taboo—the taboo of incest. Comfert Conculainn is in effect a story of the inauguration of those institutions that emerge as a consequence of the declaration or establishment of the taboo. After this, civil society, as portrayed in early Irish law and dramatized in the latter sections of the tale, appears.⁵¹ This is not just a birth tale in the accepted sense. It is a foundational narrative that is concerned with the critical moment in which the transition from nature to culture is achieved. As an origin story, it identifies the moment of transition as the crucial date or action of the making of the contract, dramatized here as Concobar's betrothal of Deictire to Súaldaim (*arnenaisc iarom Concobar a fíair do Súaldaim mac Róig*).⁵²

We have already noted how through an interplay of metaphor and metonymy, the tale establishes an equivalence between marriage and other kinds of contract, especially those involving land. This equivalence is maintained in the key moment of making the contract. However, a differentiation between the natural world and society is established by the prohibition. The development of the political system is seen to expand beyond its original base. The base does not disappear, but the forms of alliance and familial extension deriving from it, in their shift from endogamous to exogamous unions, effectively disguise the purely biological nature of the elementary unit, from which it is derived. Although the whole structure of civil society, as manifested in its legal system, remains deeply indebted to the mythical hierarchies (which are essentially dramatic representations of cosmic and natural phenomena), and to the beliefs in which it originated, the taboo is the notional point which marks

⁵¹ i.e. the third episode and the rudimentary debate. The debate in version 2 gives a clearer account of early Irish institutions.

⁵² Clarke, 51. The exchange of women is the most fundamental expression of the principle of reciprocity, without which society is impossible.

both the conjuncture and the separation of the natural and the civil realms.⁵³ Hereafter, the modes of relationship, the system of corresponding rights and duties, within marriage and within the political and social orders of clientship, will be homologous one with the other; yet will maintain correspondence with the natural order of things.

In conformity with ancient and modern social contract theory, this origin story is depicted as occurring within the horizons of time.⁵⁴ The present therefore is seen to take its value from being sequent to a remote and distant past, yet different to it. The event implies a before (*isind amsir anall*) and an after, which are separated by a crucial date or action, the date of the making of the contract, the moment of transition. However, as the tale, in its adaptation of legal terminology, has graphically illustrated, the author is not dealing with a remote idea or theory only. He is dealing with a series of practices pertaining to marriage and to agriculture that are grounded in beliefs about the relationships between the cosmic order of the world, the social-political system of civil society, and the structures of obligation and rights that define the territory of early Irish kinship relations.

This is a symbolic fiction, a juridical fiction. There is, of course, no such contract or historical moment intended in the literal sense. A concept is being realized in a narrative such as this. The cultural is shown to be a replication of the natural in its principles of organization. The wide array of reciprocal relationships that I have alluded to in marriage or clientship has been shown to have both a high degree of coherence in their respective internal systems, and an equally high degree of similarity between one another. In other words, the analogies between these institutions are remarkably

⁵³ Clarke: 59. The prohibition of incest compels people to reciprocal exchange.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Freud, S. *Totem and Taboo*. transl. James Strachey (Ark Paperbacks London and New York 1991) Rousseau, Jean Jacques. *Social Contract and other Political Writings*. (Cambridge University Press 1982). Plato. *The Republic*. translated A.D.Lindsay (J. M. Dent and sons ltd. London 1961).

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consistent, and this consistency derives from their systems of reciprocal exchange, which are sourced in nature.⁵⁵

Yet, such an account has to be symbolic rather than historical, because the systems of human society, in their relational structures, are manifestations of the structure of human consciousness itself. It is a society or culture in which all the reciprocal relationships, that were in effect intuitive to universal human nature, are seen to re-appear. They are expressions of an original and spontaneous response to the human being's co-existence with others.⁵⁶ The origin of society is to be found in the individual psyche, arising out of a need for security and co-operation with others. The response to this need has been institutionalized as exchange.⁵⁷ It is presented in the narrative as Concoabar's exchange of Deictire in marriage. Concoabar's elevation in stature as a human being is depicted as being derived from his ability to re-organize and to re-order the rules of nature, and by his establishment of a contract, to make them responsive to his own needs and to the needs and interests of the kin.

In assigning this task to Concoabar, as king, the narrative creates a scenario, whereby systems such as marriage and clientship are shown to have merely institutionalised already existing principles of reciprocity, for reciprocity is a relational or structural principle which is prior to the social organizations in which it is manifest.⁵⁸ Its origin is the human mind, in the individual unconscious. This dramatization of the key event, which presents society as emerging from individual need, or from the action of an individual king, corresponds with the theory advanced by Daniel Binchy in his analysis of the structure of early Irish society.⁵⁹ He explains how the diverse roles undertaken by multiple functionaries at a later period have evolved from the various functions invested in and exercised by

⁵⁵ Freud: 135. The members of the kin in a pre-social age, were so closely bound that they could be treated as a physical unity, or as parts of one common life.

⁵⁶ Clarke: 60. For elaboration of this passage in relation to the charisma of kingship, see Deane, forthcoming (a).

⁵⁷ Clarke: 63.

⁵⁸ Clarke: 48.

⁵⁹ Binchy, D.A. *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship*. O Donnell Lectures for 1967-68 (Oxford University Press, 1970): 15.

the person of an individual king in the ‘primitive’ era. Kim Mc Cone too elaborates on this point, demonstrating how the main divisions of society follow the same ideological lines as those of the king’s own person.⁶⁰ The dubious provenance and truncated nature of the coda to this tale makes it difficult to know whether, or if, this point could have been developed further in this version of CCC. Version two, on the other hand, not only exploits this phenomenon more fully, but its central thrust is to illustrate how social arrangement derives from the person of the ruler. The Ulstermen, who debate the fostering of Sétanta, take their character from their leader Concobar, and not vice versa.⁶¹ They are portrayed as acting in co-operation with him in the socio-political world. They are also portrayed as symbolic representations of the mind of a sacral figure. In this office, for which he undergoes rigorous testing, Concobar, as an individual king, is shown to acquire and to embody personally the diversity of their social, moral, martial and intellectual traits.⁶²

Binchy identifies the opposition between *folad* and *frithfolad*, by which early Irish law denotes the correct discharge of reciprocal obligations between any two partners to a contract, as a reflex of the primitive system of gift/counter-gift on which, “the entire structure of obligations—legal, political, religious and domestic—was based”.⁶³ His theories concur with those of Marcel Mauss.⁶⁴ Mauss’s

⁶⁰ McCone, Kim. *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*. (National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2000): 127.

⁶¹ In version 2, it is Concobar who undertakes the *echtra*, and organizes a meeting with his political rival etc. In this version, he takes upon himself a decision to negotiate a contract on behalf of his people, in exchange for the burden of his office. See also Charles-Edwards, T. “A Contract between King and People in Early Medieval Ireland? *Crith Gablach* on Kingship,” *Peritia* 8. Charles-Edwards takes up this same question of reciprocity between king and people, which he explains in terms of the benefits accrued by the king through royal ordination, and his corresponding duties towards his people for electing him.

⁶² Despite the near-identical opening passage, version 2 of the birth-tale, in which the king’s relation to society is measured by a test, is very different in theme and intent to version 1. See Deane, forthcoming (b).

⁶³ Binchy, D. A. (Irish Hist.) 22.

⁶⁴ *The Gift*, translated by W. D. Halls (Routledge, London and New York, 1990).

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pioneering work was the point of departure for Lévi-Strauss, whose own exploration of the principles of reciprocity provides the criteria for analysis of the birth-tale. It is from Lévi -Strauss⁶⁵ that one finds a paradigm that is repeated in this particular tale. In his seminal work on reciprocity, he illustrates how society itself comes into being and maintains existence, by virtue of the principles of reciprocity which the structure of the human mind imposes and projects onto institutions in which these principles are manifest. The institutions of marriage and clientship as they appear in the text include relationships of subordination, for subordination itself is reciprocal. The “priority which is gained by the moiety at one level is lost to the opposite moiety on the other.”⁶⁶

The fundamental social and political units of early Ireland were the *fine* (kin) and the *túath* (kingdom) respectively. The latter comprised a number of *fine* forming a distinct political entity under the authority of the king.⁶⁷ The former was an agnatic kin group on which the ownership of land and property, and the legal standing of individuals were dependent. Lévi-Strauss describes the elementary unit of kinship which makes society possible, and in which the principles of reciprocity are expressed.⁶⁸ In *Compert Conculainn*, we find that all the components of the basic unit which he identifies are established in episode three. According to his scheme, three types of family relationship must always be present. There is a relationship of consanguinity, specifically expressed in that between Concobar and Deictire, as brother and sister (*Concobar dana hi suidiu inna charput ocus a fiúr Deictire*). There must be a relationship of affinity as illustrated by Deictire’s coming to bed to Súaldaim (*techt cosin fer in-imdai*) in a husband and wife partnership. The third element is that of descent, illustrated by the relationship between Súaldaim and Sétanta, as father and son (*birt*

⁶⁵ *Structural Anthropology: Language and Kinship*. translated Claire Jacobson and Brooke Schoeph, (Penguin, London, 1969).

⁶⁶ See also Stacey chap. 3 on the social context of personal suretyship and on subordinate relationships.

⁶⁷ Aitchison, N.B. ‘Kingship, Society and Sacrality: Rank, Power, and Ideology in Early Medieval Ireland’, *Traditio* 49, (New York, 1994): 46.

⁶⁸ Lévi-Strauss: 46.

mac). Moreover, the relationship, involving four terms or four essential constituents of the unit, consisting of brother, sister, father and son, appear as the main characters in the narrative, in the persons of Concoibar, Deictire, Súaldaim and Sétanta, and are central to the framing motif of the text.

How are we to understand this basic structure as resulting from the prohibition of incest? In the birth-tale, the relationship between Concoibar/Lug and Deictire is not merely a matter of consanguinity. It is one of incest. It is a union the very supposition of which awakens apprehension and anxiety (*ceist*) in the Ulstermen. It is only when the prohibition is imposed and obeyed, as illustrated in the shift from a biologically-defined sexual union between brother and sister, which begins the narrative, to a marriage between the brother's sister and a member of an exogamous group, that marriage as a social institution comes into being.

The emergence from nature of culture itself, as represented by the double movement envisaged in the tale, from wilderness to agriculture, or from illicit union to formal marriage, reveals the prohibition of incest as corollary to those transitions (*arnenaisc iarom Concoibar a fíair do Súaldaim mac Róig*). In the first, as revealed in the explication of the seasonal cycle, randomness of environmental nature is curtailed and regulated by good farming, when Súaldaim is appointed to manage the soil. In the second, as evident in the formal betrothal, a biologically-determined consanguinity between Concoibar and Deictire is replaced by a socially-determined affinity between Súaldaim and Deictire. Furthermore, this moment also establishes the essential and defining role of the avunculate in early society. This merits further explanation.

It is upon the initial circulation of woman that the dynamic of all other transactions were originally formulated, for a woman has both a real and a symbolic value. A taboo governing the sexual use of a sister necessitates that she be given to another man. Marriage is instituted only in order to guarantee and establish, directly or indirectly, immediately or mediately, an exchange.⁶⁹ In *Compert*

⁶⁹ Clarke: 57.

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Conculainn the object of exchange, whether in business or in marriage, is Deictire. In giving his sister in marriage, Concoobar ensures future security and profit for himself, for he stands personally to gain from the network of alliances which the partnership between Súaldaim and Deictire creates, for this exchange sets up a continuum based on the premise that the “initial disequilibrium produced in one generation can only be stabilized . . . by the counter prestations made in future generations.”⁷⁰ It is this circulation of resources, that the ideal-typical formulation of marriage or clientship, as found in *Cáin Lanamna* or *Cáin Aicillne*, wish to define and to preserve, and which also provides the climactic conclusion to the birth episodes.

I draw attention again to the way in which one sentence in the text marks the key moment of transition: *arnenaisc iarom Concoobar a fúir do Súaldaim*. This time, however, it becomes obvious that the transition, which marks the marriage contract, is the prototype for all other transitions. Reciprocity is the principle by which such social institutions are defined and sustained. We can summarize therefore to say that *Compert Conculainn* provides a cameo portrait of the moment of transition from nature to culture—in a manner that wishes to assert the primacy of culture. This is explicit in regards to agriculture and marriage, which is shown to be founded on the prohibition of incest and generally applicable to culture *per se*.

To begin with, the narrative makes clear that the relationships between Concoobar/Lug and Deictire are incestuous. They come within a degree of kinship that is an impediment to marriage. It causes concern to the Ulstermen that she is pregnant, for it was surmised that Concoobar had impregnated her (*ba torrach din ind ingen*), as it was his wont to sleep with his sister (*no foied a fúir*). There is only one solution to this problem, and it is Concoobar himself who addresses it. He takes upon himself the responsibility of marrying his sister to Súaldaim, a member of an exogamous kin (*mac Róig*). In the process, he breaks the incestuous tie between his sister and himself. It is only in this way that the continuation and perpetuation of the kinship system itself can be maintained.

⁷⁰ Lévi-Strauss: 47.

Deictire's and Súaldaim's marriage, to be consolidated by the birth of their son Sétanta, has all sorts of political and economic repercussions for them, and for their extended kin reaching into future generations. Concobar himself, as uncle, stands to gain from the alliances and contacts that this exogamous union creates. The birth of his sister's son is the ultimate and teleological object of Concobar's action. A nephew by definition confers the distinction of maternal uncle upon him, thus illustrating the 'original' maternal uncle as crucial to the formation of kinship.⁷¹ Scholars,⁷² in dealing with Concobar, in particular, have explained the importance of the maternal uncle as a political entity in early Irish society. However, in the paradigm just offered, it is obvious that this role had its origins beyond mere political opportunism or affective bonding. "The maternal uncle does not emerge. He is present initially."⁷³ He was absolutely radical to the basic atom of kinship, and was a prerequisite for the existence of the kinship structure, and for culture itself.

The tale offers an 'original' moment, from which cultural advances were made, in Ireland. However, near the beginning of the tale, in what appears almost as an authorial aside, we hear that in the historical period, one dynasty above others can be credited with the realization of this ideal. This implies a certain kind of reader, one who is assumed to be conversant with the topography and geography of S.E. Ulster, to be able for example to visualize the flight of the birds across a familiar landscape. So too, there seems to be an assumption that the reader has at least a general acquaintance with recent historical events... to recognize the reference to SílnÁedo Sláine, the leading kin of the southern Uí Néill from the mid-seventh to the beginning of the eighth century,⁷⁴ and to query the relevance

⁷¹ Lévi-Strauss: 47. The mother's brother is not an extrinsic element, but an immediate 'given' of the simplest family structure.

⁷² See, in particular, Ó Cathasaigh, Tomás. "The Sister's Son in Early Irish Literature," *Peritia* 5 (1986).

⁷³ Lévi-Strauss: 46.

⁷⁴ Mac Shamhráin, Ailbhe "*Nebulae discutiuntur?* The emergence of Clann Cholmáin, sixth-eighth centuries" in *Seanchas* ed. Alfred P. Smyth (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2000).

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of these recent events in relation to the events described within the body of the tale itself. The implied reader is also expected, at an intellectual level, to map one period or sequence onto another, so that the era of SílnÁedo Sláine, though diachronically remote from the era of Súaldaim mac Róich, is understood to be synchronically related. Each ushers in a new exemplary epoch of cultural improvements, which the tale is advocating as a model for the current age.

The tale credits the SílnÁedo Sláine with all sorts of social improvements. Under their jurisdiction, the wilderness (*andaim*) has been domesticated, and communal settlements (*treb*) supplied for farmers, to replace an earlier more nomadic way of life. It was in their era, that boundaries were established in Ireland (*iss aire conopartatar cócricha i n-Ére*). For what reason were these territorial boundaries imposed upon the landscape? Was it simply a question of meeting the conditions of increased population (*treb*)? Were they purely a mark of economic progress arising out of a fear of warfare? Or do we have a narrative device reminding us of the more radical or necessary limits or boundaries (*cócricha*) upon which all cultural progress depends? The whole tale works along an axis whereby a bare sequence of events, which just happened in the distant unrecorded past (*isind amsir anall*), has been superseded by events that demand a more complex rationale. Cause and effect are now understood to be connected (*iss aire conopartatar cócricha*). In the final birth episode, in particular, the awakening of intellectual reasoning and the weakening of mere customary practice is highlighted.⁷⁵ The Ulstermen are no longer ricocheted into a reaction, driven by the demands of nature (*no thathigtís énlaithe---ba bés léu-som forim én*). They have acquired a deductive logic from which they consider their problem (*ceist*). They know that they don't know (*na con fes*) how Deictire has become pregnant again. She didn't have a husband (*céle*), so who could be responsible? They take as their premise that Concoibar has behaved in a certain way in the past (*no foied a fiúr*), and it is surmised (*dumet*) by them, that he could have done so again.

⁷⁵ Hawkes, Jacquetta. *Man and the Sun*. (The Cresset Press, London, 1962): 69.

Furthermore, they realized that there were additional reasons for them to fear this, for the situation could have arisen as a result of Concoibar's drunkenness (*trémesci*). The tale gives a glimpse of other forms of progress into the cultural domain. History and genealogy converge in nomenclature (*doberar Sétanta (mac Súaldaim) fair*),⁷⁶ to confer distinction on a child who had been a mere biologically defined boy (*mac*) in the early conceptions.⁷⁷ Natural terrain or soil (*íriu*) has acquired economic value. It has become a possession (*selb*), and the gender-determined status of a human being (*fer*) has been publicly elevated to that of a client (*céle*), by virtue of the social contract.

Thus, with all these mutations, the text indicates how customary practices grew out of beliefs about the nature of the bio-physical and metaphysical world; and how those practices themselves then were consciously adapted later to meet the requirements of an emerging social and political order. In this tale, we encounter a complex narrative in which the workings of this process are dramatically rendered. Remembering that *céle* is both husband and client-farmer, we can note the paradigm shift within the tale. No longer is Concoibar/sun/king/brother sleeping with Deictire/earth/sister. Instead, Concoibar/sun/king/brother regulates the fertility of Deictire/earth/sister as husbanded by Súaldaim/client-farmer/husband (*arnenaisc iarom Concoibar a fiair do Súaldaim mac Róig*). When the brother no longer impregnates, but regulates his sister's fertility, it is then we can say that the shift from nature to culture has been made.

⁷⁶ Clarke 78. Marriage rules, nomenclature and the system of rights and obligations are indissociable aspects of one and the same reality.

⁷⁷ Charles-Edwards, T. 87. Children of supposedly less respectable unions were referred to, merely in terms of their biology, and given no genealogical nor social status. Thus, children of the unbetrothed recognized woman were referred to merely as womb-kin *bronn-fine* while those of a woman who was in an irregular and secret relationship were denoted belly-kin *tarr-fine*. These latter were automatically excluded from inheritance, for the law categorically stated that belly-kin gets no share without invitation (*ni saig tairrfine cen tocuired*) (*Do Fastad Chirt ocus Dligid*, ALI v.456).