

Varia de amore



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VARIA DE AMORE

1. *A BHEAN LÁN DE STUAIM* AND *QUINQUE LINEAE AMORIS*

ABSTRACT

Drawing on a sermon in the *Leabhar Breac* and other sources, I propose that the poem *A bhean lán de stuaim* attributed to Séathrún Céitinn reflects all five stages of a version of the *quinque lineae amoris* trope of the medieval literature of love.

IN his book, *Dánta Grádha*,¹ Tomás Ó Rathile included several poems which are not love poems in any real sense, such as the three humorous poems, numbers 92, 93 and 94, in which the jealous husband is mocked, and the moralising poems, numbers 98, 101, 102, 103, 105 and 106, which emphasise the impermanence of beauty and the certainty of death. A further such poem is that attributed to Séathrún Céitinn (number 100) in which sexual intimacy is refused by an elderly man who is loved by a young woman. I give it here from a more recent and better edition:

- A bhean lán de stuaim,
coingibh uaim do lámh;
ní fear gníomha sinn,
4 cé taoi tinn dar ngrádh.
- Féach ar liath dem fholt,
féach mo chorp gan lúth,
féach ar thraoch dem fhuil —
8 créad re bhfuil do thnúth?
- Ná saoil mé go saobh,
arís ná claon do cheann;
bíodh ar ngrádh gan ghníomh
12 go bráth, a shíodh sheang.
- Druid do bhéal óm bhéal —
doiligh an scéal do chor —
ná bíom cneas re cneas:
16 tig ón teas an tol.
- Do chúl craobhach cas,
do rosc glas mar dhrúcht,
do chíoch chruinngeal bhláith,
20 tharraingeas mian súl.

¹Tomás Ó Rathile, *Dánta Grádha*, 2nd ed. (Dublin and Cork, 1926), henceforth *DG*.

Gach gníomh acht gníomh cuirp
 is luighe id chuilt shuain
 do-ghéan féin tréd ghrádh,
 24 a bhean lán de stuaim.

A fhinnebhean tséimh shéaghanta shárchaoin tsuairc
 na muirearfholt réidh raonfholtach fá a ndfol gcuach,
 is iongnadh an ghné thaomannach fhásaíos uait;
 28 gé doiligh an scéal, tréig mé agus táig dhíom suas.

Do bheirimse fém bhréithir dá mbáití an slua
 san tuile do léig Vénus 'na táclaí anuas,
 a bhurraiceach-bhé mhéarlag na mbánchíoch gcruaidh,
 32 gur tusa mar aon céidbhean do fágfaí im chuan.²

Whether Céitinn was indeed the author of this poem and whether the author intended the speaker in the poem to be taken to be a layman or a priest are matters that have already been discussed by Mícheál Mac Craith O.F.M.³ I do not intend to consider them further here, and my references to Céitinn as the author of the poem are not intended to convey that I can be sure that he was its author. Neither do I propose to comment on the final eight lines as I am not convinced that they belong to the original poem and they are not relevant to the discussion which follows here.⁴

Seán Ó Tuama has discussed this poem in a number of essays. In two of them he suggested that the poem reflects the moralistic *memento mori* theme;⁵ however, in the second of these the suggestion is extremely tentative ('[the poem] seems to reflect to a limited degree the concerns of *memento mori* poems of the Catholic Counter-Reformation') while in the 1988 study upon

²Pádraig de Brún, Breandán Ó Buachalla and Tomás Ó Concheanainn (eds), *Nua-dhuanairé*, i (Baile Átha Cliath, 1971), 15–16.

³Mícheál S. Mac Craith, O.F.M., 'A bhean lán de stuaim', *The Maynooth Review* 10 (May 1984), 27–51, at 27–31. This essay, with a very few emendations and one short additional section, forms chapter 3.3, 'Céitinn agus A bhean lán de stuaim', in Mícheál Mac Craith, O.F.M., *Lorg na hIasachta ar na Dánta Grá* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1989), 83–100, 204–11 (henceforth *LIDG*).

⁴It would appear that scribes, acting on the adage *Ní maith sagart gan chléireach nō dán gan abhrán* quoted in BL MS Harley 1921, fol. 79 (see Robin Flower, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 2 vols (London, 1926), ii, 13), felt free to add accentual verses to syllabic poems. In the manuscript in which the earliest copy of the poem is found, RIA MS 23 A 12 (231), which is dated 1730, these two verses are not attached to the six syllabic quatrains but are separated from them by the first two quatrains of the poem *Beannaigh an longa, a Chríost cháidh* which is attributed to Muiris mac Dáibhí Dhuibh Mhic Gearailt. T. F. O'Rahilly has expressed doubt about the genuineness of similar verses attached to syllabic poems attributed to Muiris Mac Gearailt: see *Measgra Dánta*, 2 vols (Dublin and Cork, 1927), i, 72 ('may be a spurious later addition'), 73 ('probably spurious'), ii, 199 ('not unlikely that [the verses] are later additions'), as has Breandán Ó Buachalla about the single verse attached to *Beannaigh an longa*: see de Brún et al., *Nua-dhuanairé*, i, 96. Therefore I do not engage here with Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha's fine essay 'An bhean lán de stuaim: Véineas a tháinig go hÉirinn', *Oghma* 7 (1995), 83–91.

⁵Seán Ó Tuama, 'The lineage of Gaelic love-poetry from the earliest times', in Robert O'Driscoll (ed.), *The Celtic Consciousness* (Mountrath, 1982), 289–306, at 297; Seán Ó Tuama, 'Love in the medieval Irish literary lyric', in Seán Ó Tuama, *Repossessions: Selected Essays on the Irish Literary Heritage* (Cork, 1995), 164–95, at 189.

which that essay was based his comment is quite dismissive ('níl aon trácht cruinn ar pheaca na collaíochta ná ar eagla an bháis sa téacs mar a bhíodh ag filí a chleacht an téama *memento mori*.').⁶ Ó Tuama says that the speaker in the poem refuses to engage in sexual activity with the young woman 'ar chúis éigin nach ndeimhníonn an dán le húdarás'. He then proposes some reasons for supposing that the speaker rejects carnal love, '[...] toisc gur gníomh mímhórlá é'.⁷

While accepting that the poet may have intended his poem to be read as expressing a moral concern, I believe that he may also have intended that it reflect the embarrassment felt by the elderly speaker which caused him to be reluctant to engage in sexual activity which would entail revealing to the young woman the wasted condition of his body and perhaps even make her aware of his difficulty in achieving satisfactory intercourse. This seems to me to be the insistent drift of lines 5–7 of the poem: *Féach ar liath dem fholt, / féach mo chorp gan lúth, / féach ar thraoch dem fhuil* 'Observe how much of my hair has greyed; / observe my vigourless body; / observe how much of my blood has become exhausted.' There is no reason to think that any of that might have carried any weight with the young woman, but the man finds this hard to understand, saying in line 8: *créad re bhfuil do thnúth?* 'what is it that you hope for (expect, desire)?' Nevertheless they are in love with one another (line 11: *ar ngrádh* 'our love'). He is aware that she loves him (line 4: *cé taoi tinn dar ngrádh* 'though your love for me makes you ill' and he has sympathy for her (line 14: *doiligh an scéal do chor* 'your plight is distressing';⁸ and he is attracted by her beauty, aspects of which he describes in lines 17–19 (her hair, her eye, her breast), and mentions what he will do for love of her (ll. 21 and 23: *gach gníomh [...] / do-ghéan féin tréd ghrádh* 'every act [...] I shall do for love of you'.⁹

In all of this the word *gníomh* is used repeatedly (ll. 3, 11, 21). In every case except one (l. 21), the word is used in a negative context of refusal or rejection: l. 3 (*ní fear gníomha sinn* 'I am not a man of action/not a man to act (perform)'); l. 11 (*bíodh ar ngrádh gan ghníomh* 'let our love be without action'); l. 21 (*acht gníomh cuirp* 'except a physical act (deed of the body)'). That the phrase *gníomh cuirp* is used in a sexual sense is clear from Old Irish glosses on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans 8.12–13, in which the O.Ir. plural of the first word, *gnīmu*, and a synonym of the second, *colno* (genitive of *colainn*,

⁶Seán Ó Tuama, *An Grá i bhFilíocht na nUaisle* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1988), 49.

⁷Ibid., 49–50, 76, n. 70.

⁸This reference to love as a sickness places this poem firmly in the context of *amour courtois*. For further examples of the theme in the *dánta grádha* see references in Seán Ó Tuama, *An Grá in Amhráin na nDaoine* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1960), 112–15. Though most frequently it is the male lover who is suffering, there are also early and later instances in which it is the female beloved who is afflicted: see Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-lyric*, 2 vols, 2nd ed., Oxford 1968, i, 31–2, ii, 500.

⁹Mícheál Mac Craith finds in the poem a note of regret for ability no longer present: 'A bhean lán de stuaim', 39, 'aiféala faoin acmhainn nach ann di feasta ainneoin an toil a bheith chomh láidir is a bhí riamh.' Having earlier stated that the poem was one of regret rather than repentance, he went on to refer to the speaker's embarrassment: *ibid.*, 32, 'Níl uaidh ach a éagumas féin a cheilt, gan ceap náire a dhéanamh [de] féin os comhair na mná.'

flesh, body) are used.¹⁰ Thus, *ut secundum carnem vivamus* ‘so that we should live according to the flesh’ of v. 12 is interpreted as *congnemmis gnímu colno* ‘that we should do deeds of flesh’, and *si [...] facta carnis mortificaveritis* ‘if you shall have put to death the deeds of the flesh’ of v. 13 is glossed *mamarbitir facta carnis* ‘if the deeds of the flesh be put to death (mortified)’, where the Latin *facta carnis* is left untranslated, presumably because a translation of the phrase had already been given in the gloss on v. 12.¹¹ It is of interest to note that the Modern Irish version of the same phrase, *gníomhartha na colla*, is used in Uilliam Ó Domhnaill’s 1602/3 translation of the New Testament: *achd má mharbhtháoi gníomhartha na colla leis an spioruid, do gheubhtháoi beatha* ‘but if with the spirit you kill the deeds of the flesh, you will obtain life.’¹²

The unqualified use of *gníomh* in lines 3 (genitive singular, *gníomha*) and 11 of Céitinn’s poem may also have been intended to mean ‘sexual intercourse’. In the trope of the *quinque lineae amoris* in which poets ‘recite a five-step erotic progression’¹³ and which ‘became a favourite device in Medieval Latin and passed into vernacular literatures’,¹⁴ the final stage of love is *factum* or *actus* ‘deed’; ‘act, action’, which in a fifteenth-century instance in a Parisian manuscript is interpreted as *cohitus* ‘coition, sexual intercourse’,¹⁵ and in an instance in the *Leabhar Breac* is referred to as *in gnīm fēn fa-deōid* ‘the deed itself at last’.¹⁶

The canonical version of the trope is exemplified in lines such as *Visus et alloquium, / tactus, post oscula factum* ‘Looking, addressing, touching, kissing, then love’ from two Munich manuscripts (from the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries).¹⁷ Not infrequently the trope is used in cases in which the

¹⁰*Thes.*, i, 517.

¹¹Romans 8:12–13 is the conclusion of a passage beginning at 7:13 in which concupiscence as the root of sin is discussed. The full text of these two verses reads: *Ergo, fratres, debitores sumus non carni, ut secundum carnem vivamus. Si enim secundum carnem vixeritis, moriemini; si autem spiritu facta carnis mortificaveritis, vivetis* (Joseph M. Bovier (ed.), *Novi Testamenti Biblia Graeca et Latina* (Madrid, 1969)). In the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible this reads: ‘So then, brethren, we are debtors not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.’

¹²*Tiomna Nuadh ar dTighearna* . . . (Baile Átha Cliath, 1602/3), Rom. 8.13.

¹³Miller Krause, ‘The *quinque lineae amoris*’, in George Hinge (ed.), *Classica et mediaevalia* 65 (2014), 55–85, at 55.

¹⁴Dronke, *Medieval Latin*, 488.

¹⁵*Ibid.*; the same and much earlier in the commentary on Terence’s *Eunuchus* by the fourth-century Roman grammarian, Donatus: see Krause, ‘The *quinque lineae amoris*’, 78–9.

¹⁶For the *Leabhar Breac* (RIA MS 23 P 16 (1230), A.D. 1408–11), see Tomás Ó Concheanainn, ‘The scribe of the *Leabhar Breac*’, *Ériu* 24 (1973), 64–79, at 64. For the text, see Robert Atkinson, *The Passions and the Homilies from Leabhar Breac*, Todd Lecture Series, ii (Dublin, 1887), 259, ll. 7808–9.

¹⁷Dronke, *Medieval Latin*, 488. While Dronke traces the origins of the trope to Ovid and the grammarians, Donatus and Porphyry, Krause (‘The *quinque lineae amoris*’, 56–7) points out that an earlier form occurs in Plato (who, however, ‘only presents up to four steps at any given time’), noting, for example, that ‘in [Plato’s] *Phaedrus*, Socrates speaks of the beloved who wishes [...] “to see, to hold, to kiss, to lie together [...]” with his lover.’ (*ibid.*, 57). On the other hand there are six steps in some instances of the trope, e.g. *Visus et alloquium, contactus, basia, risus* [...] *cohitus*, ‘seeing, conversing, contact, kisses, laughter [...] coition’ (Dronke, *Medieval Latin*, 488).

final stage is declined or refused, both of which occur in the *Carmina Burana* of the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries:

Volo tantum ludere – id est: contemplari,
Presens loqui, tangere, tandem osculari;
Quintum, quod est agere, noli suspicari.

‘I just want to play – that is: to contemplate, speak face to face, touch, and finally kiss; don’t suspect the fifth (namely, doing it).’¹⁸

Visu, colloquio,
contactu, basio
frui virgo dederat;
sed aberat
linea posterior
et melior
amori.¹⁹

‘The maiden has allowed (me) the enjoyment of beholding, conversing, touching, kissing; but the final and best stage was absent from (my) love.’

Seán Ó Tuama has very tentatively suggested in his 1982 essay that Cécitinn’s poem was influenced by ‘the doctrine of *quinque lin[e]ae amoris*’. Having proposed that the anonymous poem *Meabhraigh mo laoidh chumainn-se* (DG poem 95) ‘has some relationship’ with this doctrine, he went on to say that ‘a slight echo of the same feeling may be present in the poem [A *bhean lán de stuaim*]’.²⁰ On the contrary, I believe that the *quinque lineae* are deeply embedded in Cécitinn’s poem, though not in the sequence of the canonical version of the trope. The first stage, *visus* ‘looking, seeing’, is referred to in lines 17–20 where it is clear that the speaker is included among those for whose eyes the beauty of the young woman is the cynosure (l. 20: *mian súl*). *Alloquium/loqui* ‘addressing, speaking’ is involved in the fact that the poem itself is presented as words spoken by the old man to the woman. *Tactus/tangere* ‘touching’ of various kinds is mentioned in the poem: being touched by the woman’s hand (l. 2, *coingibh uaim do lámh* ‘keep your hand away from me’), being together naked (l. 15, *ná bíom cneas le cneas* ‘let us not be skin to skin’), and indeed kissing (l. 13, *druid do bhéal óm bhéal* ‘take away your mouth from mine’) which is also the fourth stage, *oscula/osculari* ‘kisses, kissing’. Touching is also involved in the final stage, *factum/actum*, which is referred to in line 21 (*gníomh cuirp*) and perhaps also in lines 3 and 11 (*gníomh*), as already discussed.²¹

¹⁸Krause, ‘The *quinque lineae amoris*’, 55.

¹⁹Latin text by Peter de Blois (c. 1130–c. 1203) from Fleur Adcock, *The Virgin and the Nightingale* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1983), 46. My translation.

²⁰Ó Tuama, ‘The lineage of Gaelic love-poetry’, 297. He made no reference to this in his later essays.

²¹In the poem *Tógaibh eadrad is Éire* composed by Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (1550–91) for Conn Ó Domhnaill (d. 1583), edited by Eleanor Knott in *The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn*

All three final stages are rejected by the speaker in Cétinn's poem since they involve physical contact. I would suggest, however, that the *tactus/tangere* of the third stage of the canonical trope was most probably the touching by hand that is rejected by the speaker in the second line of the poem, *coingibh uaim do lámh* 'keep your hand away from me.'

The text in the *Leabhar Breac* to which I have already referred is a sermon on the ten commandments which, according to a colophon on fol. 245 of the manuscript, was transcribed in Cluain Mac Nois. The text represents the final stage of a 'process of translating and adapting Latin texts'.²² In the final section of the sermon, on the tenth commandment, *nā sanntaig ben p[h]ōsta do chomarsan* 'covet not thy neighbour's wife',²³ the author insists that since adultery is regarded with abhorrence, what leads to it must also be avoided:

Ó tharla in grāin-si er in adaltras, is cōir duit aderait na heolaig na nethe-si as bud dōig algus a dēnma do shechna co maith .i. silled na sūl (cf. Atkinson, *The Passions*, 258, ll. 7793–5).

'Since adultery is seen to be so loathsome, the sages say that you should carefully avoid the things which would likely engender an irresistible desire to commit it, namely gazing.'

The steps which lead to adultery are then enumerated and the author insists that each is a mortal sin:

(1550–1591), 2 vols, (London, 1922–26) (henceforth *TD*), poem 1, the poet, in urging the Donegal lord to court Ireland, follows the canonical order of the first four of the *quinque lineae amoris*: (1) *visus*, *Sill go meinic a gruadh gheal / claon do dhearc uirre os íseal; / tug th' aghaidh ar a slios slim* 'Look frequently on her bright countenance, bend thine eye upon her in secret; approach her graceful form' (q. 12abc); (2) *alloquium*, *labhair gan fhios re hÉirinn* 'speak covertly with Ireland' (q. 12d); (3) *tactus*, *Glúthaigh ria, luigh 'na leaba, / [. . .] / téigh re cneas chéile Logha* 'Embrace her, go to her bed [. . .], warm to the skin of the spouse of Lugh' (q. 13ac) (this chimes perfectly with the wording of ll. 15–16 of Cétinn's poem: *nā bíom cneas re cneas: / tig ón teas an tol*, 'let us not be skin to skin: desire comes from warmth'); (4) *oscula*, *póig* (qq. 14c, 15c, 16a, 17c, acc. of *póg* 'a kiss'). Although, in line with the long apologue which is part of the poem (qq. 19–38), the kiss is what is ultimately required of Conn, I would suggest that the fifth *linea* is also envisaged in Ó hUiginn's poem, inasmuch as Conn is required to save Éire from celibacy (*suil bheas Éire i n-aontomha* 'lest Ireland be left unwedded', q. 13d) and to share her bed naked (q. 13ac, and most particularly in qq. 1abd, 2ab: *Tógaibh eadrad is Éire, / fada atá ar tí aoinchéile; / [. . .] / gan fhear n-aoinleabtha d'fhagháil; Fada nár fhéad Inis Bhreagh / tógbháil idir í is éinfhear* 'Let you and Ireland be naked together; for a long time she has looked for a spouse [. . .] and has found no man to share her bed. For a long time the Island of Bregia has been unable to be naked with a man.')

²²Roisin McLaughlin, 'A text on almsgiving in RIA 3 B 23 and the *Leabhar Breac*', *Ériu* 62 (2012), 113–83, at 115. In this stage '[...] the Latin has been almost or entirely omitted, leaving only the Middle Irish.' (ibid.). In the sermon on the commandments all that remains of the Latin original are: names of sources, such as, in *Eclesiastico*, *Hieronimus*, in *Leuitico*, in *libro Prouerbiorum*; a very few words, such as *lex*, *serpens*, *aspa* and *locusta*, together with a gloss on this last one (7 *brucus a hainmsin, co fhāsait sciathana forri, 7 mar fhāsait, is locusta, quasi longa hasta atberar fria* 'and its name is *brucus* till wings grow on it, and when they do, it is called *locusta*, as if it were a long spear, *longa hasta*' — this comparison, based on the insect's long hind legs, being taken *verbatim* from Albert the Great's *De animalibus*); and the final quotation from Ezechiel in the conclusion followed by *Finit, amen*.

²³Cf. Atkinson, *The Passions*, 257, ll. 7764–5.

silled, 7 comrād iarum, tadall na lām iar-sin, in gnīm fēn fa-deōid;
7 bid a f[h]is acut co fhil cech cēim dīb sin maille re rūn cena ina
peccad marbtha (cf. Atkinson, *The Passions*, 259, ll. 7808–9).

‘gazing, and then conversation, touching with the hands after
that,²⁴ the act itself at last; and be it known to you that every step
of those together with an intention of sinning is a mortal sin.’

That the omission of the fourth step is a scribal mistake is made clear by comparison with another, somewhat later, copy of the same sermon in RIA MS 3 B 23 (1227), p. 79b,²⁵ which reads: *an silled 7 an comrād 7 taghall na lām 7 na póga 7 an gnīm ann sein* ‘gazing and conversation and touching with the hands and kisses and then the act.’

This then is clearly a version of the *quinque lineae amoris*, but one in which the third stage consists of the specific *tadall na lām* rather than the non-specific *tactus* of other versions to which I have made reference. And it is the version which seems to have inspired not only Céitinn’s opening half-quatrain (*A bhean* [...] *coingibh uaim do lámh* ‘Woman [...] keep your hand away from me’), but also the third verse of a poem composed by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647–80) in which the speaker is a young woman whose words, as Mícheál Mac Craith has suggested, might well serve as a ripost to the old man of Céitinn’s poem.²⁶ In that third verse Wilmot’s young woman, though initially protesting her genteel nature, ultimately, with quite pornographic frankness, insists that her ‘reviving hand’ will ensure that the ‘Ancient Person’ of her heart shall not fail to be a *fear gníomha*:

Thy Nobler parts, which but to name
In our Sex would be counted shame,
By Age’s frozen grasp possest
From their Ice shall be releast;
And sooth’d by my reviving hand
In former Warmth and Vigor stand.

Céitinn’s speaker is well aware of his young lover’s competence in that regard, as is clear from his acknowledgement of her *stuaím* (line 1).

DIL’s entry on the word *stúaím* has the following:

(a) *ingenuity, cleverness, ability*: [...] lámha lámhdaighi (ón sdúaím) *skill, IGT Decl. §3 (44.13) [...] olc an sduaím [...] an ill-advised procedure* DDána 46.4. duine gan stuaím, O’Gr.

²⁴Atkinson’s translation of *tadall na lām* ‘paddling with the hands’, though attractive, is unwieldy as it is to some extent tautologous, since the verb ‘to paddle’ means ‘to use the hands or fingers in a caressing way’, and as the verb is no longer generally used in this sense, being regarded as archaic.

²⁵The scribe of this manuscript, Tadg Úa Rigbardáin, was active in 1473: see Kathleen Mulchrone and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy*, fasc. 27 (Dublin, 1943), 3365.

²⁶Mac Craith, ‘A bhean lán de stuaím’, 39–40, where the complete text of the poem is quoted.

Cat. 590.34.^[27] cha ferr sdúaim *what better art?* Rel. Celt. ii 289.17. do bhreith éoluis air gach uile stuáim da ccuirfightheair chuige ‘*to find out every device which shall be put to him*’, 2 Chron. ii 14 (Eg. Gl. 540).

(b) Of a lady’s charms *beauty, grace, dignity, modesty* (?) [...]

I do not believe that the meanings given in (b) are supported by the quotations (which include Céitinn’s poem),²⁸ and it is surely significant that *DIL*’s entry on the adjective *stúamda*, while giving meanings corresponding to those in (a) above, gives none corresponding to those in (b). Nevertheless Mícheál Mac Craith seems to suggest that the word *stuaím* in the first line of the poem should be taken in sense (b): ‘is fiú a mheabhrú go luaitear an líne áirithe atá á plé againn [in *DIL*] mar shampla de bhrí eile ar fad, “*beauty, grace, dignity, modesty*”’.²⁹ I, however, believe that the first editor of the poem, Eoin Mac Giolla Eáin, was correct in taking the word in sense (a),³⁰ but I would suggest that, rather than taking it in a general sense of ‘ingenuity’, ‘cleverness’, ‘ability’, or ‘skill’, it should be taken in the specific sense of ‘dexterity’ or ‘manual skill’. This is supported by the entry in the Irish Grammatical Tract on Declension, *lám dha lám dhaighi (ón sdúaim)*,³¹ which is quoted in the *DIL* entry and in which the meaning of the two words derived from *lám* ‘hand’ is explained by reference to *stuaím*, meaning that some part of the semantic range of *stuaím* corresponds to the meaning of those words. *DIL* s.v. *lám dha* ‘Also *lám(d)aige*’ translates these two words as ‘handiwork’, ‘manual skill’, and comments that they are often used with reference to needlework, etc., quoting, for example, ‘cen lamda deg-mná deimne, “*without the handiwork of true-born dame*”, Met. Dinds. iv 332.31’.

²⁷Standish Hayes O’Grady, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 2 vols (London, 1926), i, 591, translates this as ‘a headstrong man’, but the adjective could also be ‘witless’ or ‘foolish’.

²⁸The final quotation, which is from Torna’s *Saothar Filidheachta an Athar Pádraigín Haicéad* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1916), has been superseded by Máire Ní Cheallacháin, *Filíocht Phádraigín Haicéad* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1962), V.9–10: *Ón sdúaim — riocht-íslán do bhá — níor mhalartaigh nós, an chuanna* ‘as a result of her good sense, the beautiful woman — whose form was flawless — did not change her manner.’

²⁹Mac Craith, ‘A bhean lán de stuaim’, 29, and further, 31–2: ‘má ghlacaimid leis an bhfocal *stuaím* de réir na céille a thugann Foclóir an Acadaimh dó [...] cén difríocht a dhéanann sé sin don mheabhair is féidir a bhaint as an dán fré chéile? An chodarsnacht idir tuarascáil an fhir i rann a dó agus tuarascáil na mná i rann a cúig is suntasaí a thagann chun tosaigh [...] Is léir gur caidreamh idir seanfhear caite agus ógbhean álainn atá i gceist.’

³⁰Eoin Mac Giolla Eáin, *Dánta Amhráin is Caointe Sheathruín Céitinn* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1900), 191, where the word is glossed ‘ingenuity, wiles’. The first is unproblematic; the second is not so. *OED* glosses the noun ‘wile’ thus: ‘a. A crafty, cunning, or deceitful trick; a sly, insidious or underhand artifice; a stratagem, ruse ... Chiefly *pl[ural]* (in *sing[ular]* now *arch[aic]* or *poet[ic]*). b. Without implication of deceit: A subtle contrivance; a skilful device or scheme ... *obs[olete]* ... c. In lighter sense: An amorous or playful trick ...’ A meaning of *stuaím* in the sense of ‘wile’ a. could not have been intended by Céitinn as it would be entirely inappropriate in the context of the poem, and sense b. is obsolete; however, Mac Giolla Eáin may have intended ‘wiles’ as an interpretation in sense c., but not a translation.

³¹*IGT* ii, 44.

Lambert McKenna had inclined towards this view in his editions of an early seventeenth-century poem composed by Gofraidh Mac an Bhaird for Rudhraidhe Ó Domhnaill. In his first edition of the poem, having translated *lucht a lámhdhaighe* in q. 16f as ‘the folk who do his work (?)’,³² he referred to the *IGT* entry in a note on that line. Subsequently in the glossary of the work in which his second edition of that poem is found, his entry *s.v. lámhdhuighe* and *lamhda* reads, “‘sduaim’ > “seirbhís” (?)’.³³ His question marks would seem to suggest that he wished to reject the sense ‘work’/‘service’ in general, which implies that he would prefer ‘handiwork’ or ‘craftmanship’, which means that he accepted that this was one of the senses of *sduaim*. The glossary *s.v. lámhdhuighe* and *lamhda* in the latter work also refers to a poem by Tadhg Mór Ó hUiginn for Fionnghuala (d. 1310), daughter of Maghnus Ó Conchobhair, in which these lines occur: *Id bhruidhin bhric / bídh re béalaibh bhan lámhdhaidhe / fion fuar finngheal* ‘In your painted palace cold bright wine is before women engaged in handiwork/needlework/embroidery’.³⁴ In this instance ‘seirbhís’ would be unsuitable as an interpretation of *lámhdhaidhe*, as it is highly unlikely that servants would be served wine; hence the women to whom the poet was referring were Fionnghuala’s upper-class companions (the *deg-mná deimne* of the Metrical *Dindsenchas*, referred to above), who were engaged in handiwork/needlework as a past-time appropriate to their status. Here again it would seem that the *lámhdhaidhe/stuaim* equivalence is the one being suggested by McKenna.

It is not surprising then that in his English-Irish dictionary McKenna has *s.v. skill*: ‘s[kill], ingenuity *rinne ... sé é le stuaim a lámh*’,³⁵ while Patrick S. Dinneen in his Irish-English dictionary gives ‘dexterity’ as one of the meanings of *stuaim*,³⁶ and Niall Ó Domhnaill in his Irish-English dictionary under the heading *stuaim* gives: ‘2. Ingenuity, steadiness, (patient) skill. **Rud a dhéanamh le [stuaim]**, to do s[ome]th[ing] with skill and patience. **Le [stuaim] láimhe**, by skill of hand; with a steady hand [...].’³⁷

I would suggest, therefore, that it is valid to take it that Céitinn intended the speaker of his poem to be understood to be commenting in his first line, not on his lover’s skill in general, but on her manual skill (in patient fondling). The word *lámh* of the second line should be understood then to be silently anticipated to qualify the word *stuaim* of the first line. Thus *stuaim (láimhe)* refers to the third stage of the *quinque lineae amoris* which is given as *tadall*

³²Lambert McKenna, ‘Poem to Rudhraidhe, Earl of Tirconnell’, *The Irish Monthly* 49.580 (October 1921), 418–22, at 421–2.

³³Láimhbheartach Mac Cionnaith, S. J., *Dioghluim Dána* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1938), 579.

³⁴Ibid., poem 114, ‘Slán fat fholcadh’, q. 31a–c.

³⁵Láimhbheartach Mac Cionnaith, S. J., *Foclóir Béarla agus Gaedhilge* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1935), s.v.

³⁶Rev. Patrick S. Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1927, repr. 1934), s.v.

³⁷Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1977). On a recent visit to Inis Oírr, Árainn, together with a friend who is a native of the island I walked past a site where two islanders, father and son, were building a house. When I commented on the fact that the men had not employed a contractor, my friend replied: ‘Ó, tá stuaim iontu sin.’

na lám in the *Leabhar Breac*. Having acknowledged in the first line his lover's high level of skill in this regard (*A bhean lán de stuaim* 'Woman full of manual skill'), the old man then proceeds to demand in the second line that she desist from fondling him (*coingibh uaim do lámh* 'keep your hand away from me'), revealing his awareness of the danger that that poses for him in view of his unwillingness to engage in sexual acts which he expresses in line 3 (*ní fear gníomha sinn*) and throughout the poem.

2. A BHEAN FUAIR AN FALACHÁN

ABSTRACT

I propose that the wording in the reference to Absalom's hair in the anonymous poem *A bhean fuair an falachán* (DG 13, lines 3–4) was influenced by confusion of the English verbs 'disteyne' (outshine *etc.*) and 'disdeyne' (despise *etc.*).

IN Second Book of Samuel in the Old Testament King David's third son, Absalom, is described as follows:

In the whole of Israel there was no man who could be praised for his beauty as much as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was not a blemish on him. When he cut the hair of his head — and he would cut it every year; he would cut it then because it grew too heavy for him — he would weigh the hair; two hundred shekels, king's weight.

(*Jerusalem Bible*, 2 Sam. 14.25–6)

However, the account of relationships between David and Absalom is very much at odds with that attractive picture of the young man. When his elder half-brother, Amnon, raped his sister, Tamar, Absalom murdered him, thus causing a breach with his father who could not forgive him for committing fratricide. Eventually David allowed Absalom to appear before him; but Absalom then embarked on a conspiracy to dethrone his father and take the kingship for himself. When a battle between them loomed, David, who still loved his son, ordered his forces not to kill Absalom, saying 'For my sake treat young Absalom gently' (2 Sam. 18.5) or 'For my sake spare young Absalom' (2 Sam. 18.12). David's forces were victorious, and when Absalom was fleeing, his head became trapped in the branches of a great oak tree and he was killed by David's commander, Joab, and his men.³⁸ David was overcome with grief and pathetically mourned his rebellious son with the words, 'My son, Absalom! My son! My son, Absalom! Would I had died in your place! Absalom, my son, my son!' (2 Sam. 19.1).

³⁸Some versions (e.g. the NIV [New International Version] Bible), evidently harking back to 2 Sam. 14.26, take it that his long locks of hair became entangled in the branches of the tree.

This tragic narrative undoubtedly gave Absalom a status on a par with other famous characters in life and literature, and would have drawn attention to the initial description of his beauty, and particularly of his hair. As a result he became 'a medieval archetype of physical beauty and its hazards'.³⁹ So, for instance in Geoffrey Chaucer's *ballade* in honour of the goddess Alceste in *The Legend of Good Women* (late fourteenth century), in which the lady is compared to some twenty-one famous individuals to the detriment of each and every one of them, Absalom and his fine head of hair take pride of place, appearing in the first line of the poem:

Hyd, Absolon, thy gilte tresses clere;
 Ester, ley thou thy mekenesse al adown;
 Hyd, Jonathas, al thy frendly manere;
 Penelopee, and Marcia Catoun,
 Make of youre wifhod no comparysoun;
 Hyde ye youre beautes, Ysode and Eleyne;
 My lady cometh that al this may disteyne.⁴⁰

An anonymous Irish poet, in praising an unnamed woman's hair, was content to claim in the first quatrain of his poem that it was more beautiful than the hair of Absalom alone:

A bhean fuair an falachán,
 do-chiú ar fud do chiabh snáithmhín
 ní as a bhfuightheach achmhasán
 d'fholt Absolóin mhic Dháivídh. (DG no. 13)

'Lady who has got the covering, I see all over your tresses which are fine as thread something from which an insult to the hair of Absalom, son of David, is received.'

The earliest copy of this poem is found in the Book of the O'Connor Don, which was written in Ostend in 1631, fol. 27r. This provides a *terminus ad quem* for the poem, but, given that it is anonymous, it may be significantly older, since it may have taken quite some time for the name of the author to have fallen out of the record. However, since fol. 26 of the manuscript is missing and the poem is acephalous, it is possible that the name of the author was originally recorded in the manuscript, but is now lost.

³⁹John H. Fisher, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1989), 625, note on the first line of the verse below. As for Ireland, the story of Absalom is found in TCD MS H.2.16 (1318), 121b–122a, ed. Kuno Meyer, 'David und Absalon' and 'Absalons Tod' in *ZCP* 13 (1921) 177–8, trans. Máire Herbert in Máire Herbert and Martin McNamara (eds), *Irish Biblical Apocrypha* (Edinburgh 1989), 22; and there is in the Book of Fermoy, RIA MS 23 E 29 (1134), 83, dated *circa* 1457, a partly illegible version of the opening section of the same text which starts with a reference to the beauty of Absalom's *del[b]* (appearance) and to *tormach a fhuilt* (the increase/ burden of his hair), and a further, partly illegible copy in Bodl. Lib. MS Rawlinson B 512, part IV, ff. 142va9–vb7.

⁴⁰Fisher, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 625, lines 274–5; hyd 'hide'; gilte 'golden'; clere 'shining'; ley 'lay'; Marcia Catoun 'Marcia wife of Cato'; wifhod 'womanhood'; Ysode 'Isolde'; Eleyne 'Helen'; disteyne 'outshine'.

In his ‘Introduction’ to *DG*, Robin Flower noted ‘the delight in the beauty of hair which finds constant expression in the poetry of Ireland in all periods’ and he quoted two examples from the early literature and referred to the *dánta grádha* and in particular to *DG* poem 13.⁴¹ There are stunning examples of the celebration of beautiful hair among the compositions of the professional poets too, e.g. the first 13 quatrains of Tadhg Mór Ó hUiginn’s *Slán fat fholcadh* ‘I celebrate (?) your bathing’,⁴² the first 22 quatrains of Niall Ó hUiginn’s *Eire trom trillse Saidhbhe* ‘A heavy weight (are) the tresses of Sadhb’,⁴³ and all 35 quatrains of Maol Pádraig Mac Naimhin’s *Folt Eimhire ar inghin mBriain* ‘Brian’s daughter has hair like Eimhear.’⁴⁴ There was much, then, in the native tradition to inspire a poet such as the author of *A bhean fuair an falachán*. His word-play in qq. 2, 4 and 5 would undoubtedly have pleased many of the bards.

The play in q. 2 is on the homonyms, *cuach* ‘cuckoo’ and *cuach* ‘curl (of hair)’: on the lady’s hair (*ciabh*) there is a flock (*ealta*) of cuckoos which (because they are really curls) are in a state of debility and do not sing (ll. 6–7, *ealta chuach i gceas naoidhean; / ní labhraid an ealta-soin*). This is found elsewhere, e.g. in Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn’s *aisling*, *An tusa an bhean do bhí sunn?* ‘Are you the woman who was here’: *Atá ar chiomhsaibh do chiabh dtiugh / ealta nách gnáth i ngeimhriudh* ‘On the ends of your luxuriant tresses are bird-flocks not usual in winter’, *TD* 40.7a–b; in Ó Géaráin’s *Féach orm, a inghean Eóghain* ‘Look at me, daughter of Eoghan’: *a chiabh fhionnfholtach éan gcrúinn* ‘o you of the fair-tressed hair of the round birds’, *DG* 16.47; and in Pádraigín Haicéad’s *Dála an nóinín* ‘Like the daisy’: *a [ceann] [. . .] / fánar cóirigheadh borddhlaoi [. . .] / do tháin na n-eón bhíos ó shín gheimhridh tréith* ‘her head around which was arranged a border of tresses (formed of) a flock of the birds which are debilitated by winter weather’.⁴⁵

The *idh órdaighthe* in line 15 is a golden engagement or marriage ring, whereas its synonym *fáinne* in *céad fáinne* in line 16 refers to ringlets of hair, and *idh* in line 19 refers to a fetter to restrain a captive, so that the ringlets around her throat (*brágha*) in line 16 make a captive (*brágha*) of the throat in lines 19–20. The use of these latter synonyms is particularly clever since they are historically the same word.⁴⁶

However, though this poem was published in *DG*, it is not a love poem. Its five quatrains are concerned solely with the lady’s hair. There is nothing in

⁴¹ Flower apud *DG*, xx–xxi.

⁴² Ed. Mac Cionnaith, *Dioghluim Dána*, poem 114.

⁴³ Ed. Lambert McKenna, S. J., *The Book of Magauran* (Dublin, 1947), poem XVI.

⁴⁴ Ed. *ibid.*, poem IX.

⁴⁵ Ní Cheallacháin, *Filíocht Phádraigín Haicéad*, 4.14–16.

⁴⁶ See T. F. O’Rahilly, ‘Some instances of vowel-shortening in Modern Irish’, *Ériu* 13 (1942), 128–34, at 129–30.

it about the lady's character or personality,⁴⁷ nor does the poet say that he is attracted to her or that he is in love with her.

In *LIDG* Mícheál Mac Craith cogently argued that much sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Irish verse was influenced by contemporary English literature. I would suggest that the first quatrain of *A bhean fuair an falachán* echoes an earlier English source, viz., the verse by Geoffrey Chaucer quoted earlier in this note, and I would refer in particular to what seems to be a misunderstanding on the part of the Irish poet of the verb 'disteyne' with which each of the three verses of Chaucer's poem ends. The third line of the Irish poem, *ní as a bhfuighthear achmhasán do* 'something from which an insult is received to', seems to me to involve a rather awkward construction, while *achmhasán* 'reproach, rebuke, insult' is a surprisingly strong and inappropriate word to use in the context: both issues smack of amateur translation.

The Middle English verb *disteyne* (also *desteign*, *disteign*) is from Old French *disteindre*, from Latin *dis* + *tingere*: '1. to discolour etc.; 2. to defile, sully, dishonour, etc.; 3. to cause to pale or look dim, to outshine etc.'⁴⁸ That the last option, 'to outshine', is the one intended by Chaucer in the text I have quoted is confirmed by another couplet in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*:

For as the sonne wole the fyr disteyne
So passeth al my lady sovereyne.⁴⁹

'As the sun will outshine the fire, so my sovereign lady surpasses all.'

A second verb in Middle English which is also derived from Old French is *disdeyne* (also *desdaine*, *desdeigne*): this came from *desdeignier*, *desdeigne* from *des* < Latin *dē* + *dignare*, *dedignare*: '1. to think unworthy of oneself, or of one's notice; to regard or treat with contempt, to despise, scorn etc.'⁵⁰

I would suggest that the author of *A bhean fuair an falachán* read or heard Chaucer's 'disteyne' as 'disdeyne' and accordingly used *achmhasán* as a suitable equivalent to provide *comhardadh briste* (imperfect rhyme) with *falachán* in the first line.

NOTE

The words given as *lámdae*, *lám(d)aige* and *stúaim* in *DIL* are spelled as they are found in the texts being quoted.

⁴⁷This is very much at odds with Niall Ó hUiginn's *Eire trom trillse Saidhbhe*. Having given twenty-two quatrains to the praise of the lady's hair, he ends that section with a *dúnadh* and follows with this declaration: *Do Shaidhbh féin is neasa a-nois, / canfad maith re mnaoi nDurlais; / ro ba breath olc gan duain di — / fuair a folt leath na laoidhe* 'What I am about to say now more intimately concerns Sadhbh. I will sing a good (song) for the lady of Durlas; it would be foolish not to devote a poem to her — for half of this lay has been given to her hair.' The second section of the poem is somewhat shorter than the first.

⁴⁸*OED* s.v. *distain*.

⁴⁹Fisher, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 626, lines 274–5.

⁵⁰*OED* s.v. *disdain*.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>DG</i>	Tomás Ó Rathile, <i>Dánta Grádha</i> , 2nd ed. (Dublin and Cork, 1926).
<i>LIDG</i>	Mícheál S. Mac Craith, <i>Lorg na hÍasachta ar na Dánta Grá</i> (Baile Átha Cliath 1989).
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> (online).
<i>TD</i>	Eleanor Knott, <i>The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn (1550–1591)</i> , 2 vols, ITS (London, 1922–6).

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