

Geis, a literary motif in early Irish literature

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Introduction:

The Old Irish tale of *Echtra Fergus mac Léiti* (the Adventure of Fergus mac Léiti, EFmL henceforth) is an interesting one as it involves many aspects highly disputed in the studies of early Irish literature and society, including the problem of pledging surety, honour and shame, and concept of kingship, etc. This essay will concentrate on one aspect that is prominent in EFmL but has been for long neglected, namely the interpretation of *geis*, pl. *gessa* which was a favourite theme in early Irish literature. After comparison with other texts where the theme of *geis* has been well-developed, we shall see that *geis* was essentially a deliberate literary motif in early Irish literature.

The equation of *geis* in early Irish literature to, or the explanation of it by the concept of taboo in modern scholarship is apt to obscure more than clarify *geis* itself.¹ If we evade the shadow of the anthropologically vague taboo together with its implicit denotation of a cross-cultural comparison in order to find out what *geis* is in early Irish literature, we could possibly interpret *geis* in two ways: as a cultural sign and a literary device. The comprehensibility of *geis* in literature to early Irish audience indicates an external link between *geis* and other social values and institutions of the world depicted or the world the audience inhabited; a network of significance which enables every element to be understood within a network of relationship. On the other hand, *geis* has its own functions in the literature text it stands, an internal role for the existence and unity of the text.

A preliminary task, however, is to delimit the range of *geis* as the object of study in this essay. It has been argued by David Greene, James Carney and proved by T. M. Charles-Edwards in detail that the usage of *geis* had spread widely from some older meanings and formulae to various other circumstances, especially from a prohibited act to a thing prohibited, and from passive prohibition to active command.² The historical-literary criticism, by comparing texts from different temporal strata, has led to this very convincing conclusion of a diffusion of *geis*, which helps us to reveal anachronism of some scholars' arguments. For instance, though the analysis provided by Philip O'Leary is very incisive, many pieces of the evidences he employs to support his claim that the conflict between *geis* and honour, especially the general outcomes of the heroes who rather infringe the *geis* at the stake of life than forfeit their honour, manifests the importance of honour in early Irish society,³ are actually of a secondary development of the semantic of *geis*, where the heroes are required to do something out of *geis*.

Such positive injunction is quite rare in earlier texts, and it reflects rather a 13th century ideology of *geis* and honour, and contemporary literary taste and technique, which is also possibly 'an author's lazy method of motivation action'.⁴ Over-explanation may be incurred, for example, the reason why Fergus in *Longes mac nUislenn* could not refuse the feast is originally that he has been insistently invited, and has guaranteed his guests' safety with his two sons' company. This motivation is sound and solid in everyday terms. However, in a later

¹ See for instance, D Greene, 'Tabu in Early Irish Narrative', *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, 1979, 9-19; Myles Dillon, 'The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 54 (1951), 1-36; Tom Sjöblom, *Early Irish Taboos: A Study in Cognitive History* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Dept. of Comparative), 54-61.

² Greene: 15-19; James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), 192-3; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Geis, Prophecy, Omen, and Oath', *Celtica*, 1999, 38-59.

³ Philip O'Leary, 'Honour Bound: The Social Context of Early Irish Heroic Geis', *Celtica*, 1988: 93-107.

⁴ Carney, 193.

recension coming to feast becomes his *geis*, a positive one,⁵ which has led O'Leary to impose a connection with honour on the '*geis*', unaware of the fact that according to his theory, Fergus should have infringed his *geis* in order to protect the guests.⁶ A lavish behaviour in feast may be a typical heroic attribute, provided that it is not a blind and foolish one, but heroic as a literary label cannot be always equated or connected to honour as a real institution in early Ireland. Here the *geis* indicates no heroic quality or honour-bound behaviour, but a rather redundant literary plot.

Therefore, I shall only discuss incidences of *geis* that have both real external and internal connotations, mostly in earlier literature where there is no evidence suggesting a later replacement of original causes or motivations by *geis*. Probably a precise demarcation between 'genuine' and 'secondary' *geis* could never be achieved, and a detailed analysis of all the *gessa* in early Irish literature is beyond the size and schedule of this essay. Though the date of a text itself does not tell the context and social cognition of a certain *geis* in it, general patterns of *gessa* become clearer and less diverse as we move backward to the older recensions and layers of the tales.

It is worth noting that *geis* seldom appears in contemporary historical accounts, i.e. annals and law-texts,⁷ despite its flourish in literature, including sagas, tales, poems and a tract named 'the Taboos of the Kings of Ireland'.⁸ Thus even the oldest description of *geis* in literature we have may not record a current custom or institution in Ireland. However, there must have been sources in real life that offered to construct such an image as *geis*. These sources could be norms, customs, rituals, omens, oaths, contracts or any other things that have a prohibitive power over individuals.⁹ But the raw cognitive materials would not enter literature as an integral element called '*geis*' without selection, transformation and composition. Many of the modern studies on *geis*, in fact, fail to discern the distinction between the social basis of *geis* and the *geis* itself as a literarily refined unit, a meaningful integrity which only exists in literature. This is nevertheless not a new obscurity, as it must be firstly ascribed to the later literature in Medieval Ireland which already confused fine literary *geis* with its sources and replaced the former with the latter, as discussed above.

Binchy has argued that *Echtra Fergusua maic Léti* originated from an earlier date than Thurneysen has assumed, the text of which in H.3.18 might date back to 8th century.¹⁰ There is another evidence to support this claim. In Paragraph 4, the prohibition for Fergus' going into Lake Rudraige is stated thus: *rotbia ar int abacc acht aen ar[a]cuillimm airiut loch rudrige fil ad crich ni dechais fai*. 'Thou shalt have it, save one that I bar to thee: thou shalt not go under Lake Rudraige which is in thy own territory.'¹¹ The verb here is *ar-chulli* (ban, prohibit), which shares a similar formation with *air(i)mbert*, and the same semantics. According to Professor Charles-Edwards, the word *airmit* from *ar-imm-bert* appears in earlier text in the meaning of the prohibition itself rather than the prohibited act, and then *geis* has not yet encroached upon the territory of *airmit* or *airchuillte*.¹² The text shows an original distinction between the prohibition and the prohibited act, and hence indicates its earlier provenance.

⁵ Charles-Edwards: 57.

⁶ Protecting the guest was an obligation of the host and any harm happened to the guests was regarded as an insult to the host's honour in early Irish law. See O'Leary: 101.

⁷ Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), 20; Daniel A Binchy, *The Linguistic and Historical Value of the Irish Law Tracts* (London: H. Milford, 1943), 28-9.

⁸ Dillon, 1-36.

⁹ The injunctive type of *geis* is generally later than the prohibitive one. See Charles-Edwards, 38-59.

¹⁰ D. A. Binchy, 'The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti', *Ériu*, 16 (1952): 35.

¹¹ D. A. Binchy: 38.

¹² Charles-Edwards: 47, 52; There is another word *argarad, urgarad* 'forbidden act', see Whitney Stokes, *Togail Bruidne da Derga*, 2nd ed (Paris: Librairie Emile Bouillon, 1902), 16; Dillon: 8.

Several factors make this prohibition not merely a term of contract but also one that contains a developed literary *geis*. To reveal these I would like to collate it with a text full of also well-composed *gessa*, namely *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* (the Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel, henceforth TBDD), often referred to by scholars.

Fergus mac Léiti was banned by the dwarf (Leprechauns!) from going into a certain Lake Rudraige which lies in his kingdom. This emerged from the dwarves' subjection to him after being caught at trying to attack him in sleep. Fergus required the dwarves' magical ability to pass under water. The dwarf chief promised him in exchange for life but laid a prohibition for him to go under Lake Rudraige. The tale here is somehow inconsistent, as Fergus said he would like three wishes and the dwarf did agree, but all we know from the latter part is only one wish of the underwater ability, and the reason why Fergus suddenly violated this prohibition is not told.¹³ However, we can expect on fair basis that Fergus does not want the ability for entertainment. A supernatural or extraordinary ability increases a hero's prestige and thus his legitimacy as king, not to mention the extension of his actual control and strategic significance. The other two wishes, perhaps preserved in some older text with their role active in the story but already lost now, may be associated with kingship as well, in the view that the whole story is integral about the magical strengthening and loss of the kingship, and the hero's effort to defend his honour as a proper king. In the process of time, I assume, the two other wishes which were not the direct cause of his loss of legitimacy of kingship were dropped off, and only the dramatic third wish remained.

Prohibitions within the terms of supernatural support of kingship are prominent in TBDD. Conaire is told not to hunt birds because his biological father belonged to the bird-people, in turn of his recognising of which he gets the support from this folk and his 'bird-reign', whose prosperity is ensured.¹⁴ However, TBDD is a far more complicated story than the single-string EFmL. Besides this prohibition, there are many other *gessa* imposed on him and infringed by him one by one. Conaire passed unjust verdict on the robbers, and rapines occurred during his later reign, which directly led to destruction of his reign, which Prof. Charles-Edwards terms as breach to *erchuillti a fhlatha*, 'the prohibitions attached to his reign'.¹⁵ The verb *ar-chuilli* appears again here. These prohibitions do not come from magical folks, but from perhaps very ancient advices recited at the inauguration of kings.¹⁶ They are rooted in abstract universal order and justice rather than magic. Nevertheless, the execution of the penalty of breaching prohibitions was then carried out by supernatural power.¹⁷

In EFmL, there is no such distinction as in TBDD between personal *geis* (as not to kill birds) and regal *geis* (as not to permit marauding).¹⁸ But the two tales share a similarity that personal *geis* is imposed by magical folks subjecting to the hero's power and promising him supernatural support for his reign. The bargain is not the life of the subjugated in exchange of an absolute magical power, but of a power not to be abused. These prohibitions are both linked with certain places in the territory the hero reigns, and thus creating a spatial and temporal sphere where the hero becomes extremely vulnerable, where his extraordinary trait becomes exactly his Achilles' Heel. But unlike later literature where a mere appearance of place or phenomenon could be *geis*, in these two stories vulnerable place and time must be

¹³ D. A. Binchy: 37-8.

¹⁴ Stokes, 16-7.

¹⁵ Charles-Edwards: 52.

¹⁶ As they are similar in form and function to those listed in Dillon: 8-36.

¹⁷ Charles-Edwards: 49-50.

¹⁸ Both *gessa* are not, like a Taboo, imposed on a whole group of people or a specific age/ gender sub-group in them. This is the most salient difference between a *geis* and a taboo, there is no personal taboo in ethnography.

enacted by the hero's own action. Fergus was scared to distortion when he dived into Lake Rudraige using the magic, and Conaire was killed exactly as the description of his *gessa*, by the enemy of his reign, those he spared in unjust verdict which is also one of his *gessa*.

A literary *geis*, as shown above, comes from various sources: exchange with magical folks, kingship justice, omen, etc., but is carefully reformed and adapted into the story. A good folk story may be satisfied at a magical gift being retrieved because of the greedy protagonist's abuse of it, but a well-knit literary *geis* surpasses that simplicity by complicating causes and consequences, by many infringements inevitably entwined together leading to the final destruction of the hero. Even in the single-lined EFmL we can see that, instead of instant death by the Muirdris monster under Lake Rudraige, Fergus survived to reach the shore but distorted to such a dreadful extent that he is not fit for kingship anymore. This led to a concealing of his face even to himself by his wise men in the court, until the bondwoman revealed the awful fact to him. She, at this stage, is motivated both by the earlier incident that she was compensated as a *cumal* (female slave) for the murder of Eochu to Eochu's protector Fergus, and Fergus' scold when she washed his head. Obviously Fergus is an enemy to her brothers and son. This scene of the final realisation of penalty is firmly bedded in early Irish law, i.e. law about homicide, protection and regal qualification; honour, i.e. violation of Fergus' honour, and the resentment in the bondmaid who previously enjoyed great honour among the Féni people but was humiliated in Fergus' court; and history, i.e. the intervening of Ulster power into the conflict with Féni (Midland Irish?).

After Fergus has realised his blemish, he rushed into the lake to combat with the monster that he was formerly severely afraid of. It is an act to prove his prowess and power as a qualified king. In an honour-bound society he has no other choice to regain his decency but to revenge it. Honour is not the basis of his *geis*, but a prompter to its realisation. In this sense, Fergus is not destroyed by the supernatural power which knows his *geis* and is doomed give him the lethal blow alone, but by a complex process interwoven with magic, heroic honour, social norm, emotion and self-motivation.¹⁹

Like in TBDD, *gessa* appear at the beginning episodes of the tale as a prophecy of the hero's destiny. Any reader will realise his destruction in the end, and these *gessa* are, paradoxically, doomed to be infringed. But they would not be breached as a dumb fact; in contrast, they would be 'offers that he cannot refuse', because he is a hero, a king, one who must act prominently and who would like to act so. Therefore a literary *geis* should have its full realisation during the process of the narrative, and its realisation should be interknit with various aspects of the world depicted. It sets up a limit for the otherwise inconvincible heroes,²⁰ granting them special powers and at the same times their very reason of destruction. It is a designed literary unit that gives some early Irish literature their unique complexity, intensity and beauty. And when we regard such a *geis* as a literary archetype, the problem of distinguishing 'true' from 'false' *geis* no longer exists, rather, it would be a problem of how this archetype was copied, imitated, transplanted or diffused, as in the actual cases of later Irish literature.



¹⁹ This thus invalidates Greene's argument that the penalty of breaching *geis* is automatic. See Greene: 1.

²⁰ M W Pepperdene, 'Grendel's Geis', *The journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 85 (1955): 189.