

The Lyric of Lafracoth

(Or: Love among the Hostages)

Act I.

Scene 1. A Small Lecture Hall. *Later: 'The Archives', present day.* The Archivist and an Assistant.

The Archivist: There were portents recorded
in the various annals of medieval Ireland,
many worthy of our own tabloid versions
like The National Enquirer.
They appeared along with headline news
of predatory excursions and expeditions;
burnings and drownings of books;
of churches, burnings only;
hostage-taking, beheadings, of course;
blindings of kings ousted by external forces
or simply become unpopular;
on occasion a poet murdered
who had lost his muse;
peacemakers of the time
managing mayhap a year's truce
between warring factions;
inspiring obituaries of saintly souls;
ecclesiastical reforms and actions
and other more natural calamities.

For instance, in The Four Masters we find—
(*To Assistant*) Would you be so kind?

Assistant (*reads M1066§11**):

A star appeared on the seventh of the Calends of May--

The Archivist: Listen, even in translation, for traces of the cadence

* Translations of the Irish Annals are from **CELT Corpus of Electronic Texts, University College Cork**, unless otherwise specified. The following abbreviations for the Annals appear parenthetically in this manuscript: **M= The Annals of the Four Masters**, **AU=The Annals of Ulster**, **AI= The Annals of Inisfallen**, **LC= The Annals of Loch Cé**, **MCB=Mac Carthaigh's Book**. For each entry, the year followed by the month appears after the abbreviation. In recitation of lines, passages may be preceded with identification made aloud by Annals, year and month. Translations of all primary sources used in this manuscript, when directly quoted, appear in red italics. When known the translator and the representation of the translation are foot-noted, with complete reference information available in the bibliography.

left behind—

Assistant (reads M1066§11):

A star appeared on the seventh of the Calends of May, on Tuesday after Little Easter, than whose light the brilliance... of the moon was not greater; and it was visible to all in this manner till the end of four nights afterwards.

The Archivist: An entry further on suggests the significance originally intended:

Assistant (reads M1066§14):

William the Conqueror took the kingdom of England on the 14th of October.

The Archivist: Here is another snippet from the chronicles

recording a dynasty brutally upended

affording illustration, with double effect:

An unexpected minor occurrence,

which leaves the listener estranged

from familiar time and space,

prepared to be prescient:

Assistant (reads M1073§6):

The head of Conchobhar Ua Maeleachlainn¹ was forcibly carried off by Toirdhealbhach Ua Briain², on the night of Good Friday; but it was brought back from the South again, with two rings of gold along with it, through the miracles of God and Ciaran³. A great disease seized the king, Toirdhealbhach Ua Briain, which caused his hair and beard to fall off, through the miracles of God and Ciaran, for when the head of Conchobhar was brought in his presence, a mouse issued from it, and went under Toirdhealbhach's garment, which was the cause of his disease.

The Archivist: Portent? Not for certes.

Simply a causal misattribution?

A droll account?

Or some combination thereof?

Scrolling down thirteen years later, we find:

Assistant (reads M1086§9):

Toirdhealbhach Ua Briain, King of Ireland with opposition, after having suffered from long illness (for he was not well since the head of Conchobhar Ua Maeleachlainn had been brought from Cluain-mic-Nois⁴ till this time), died at Ceann-coradh⁵, in the thirty-second year of his reign, and in the seventy-seventh of his age, on the day before the Ides of July precisely, after long suffering, after intense penance for his sins, and after taking the body of Christ and his blood; and Tadhg⁶ Ua Briain and his son died in the same month. In commemoration of the death of Toirdhealbhach was said:

Eighty years without falsehood,

And a thousand of great extent,

And six years, from the birth of the dear Son of God,

¹ The approximate pronunciation is **KRU hur (OO) mal Lach lan**. The form **Conor O'MacLaughlin** may be substituted.

² The approximate pronunciation is **TUR a lakh (OO) BREE un**. The form **Turlough O'Brien** may be substituted.

³ The approximate pronunciation is **KEE a rawn**.

⁴ **Clonmacnoise** may be substituted.

⁵ **Kincora** may be substituted.

⁶ The approximate pronunciation is **TYG**. The form **Tad O'Brien** may be substituted.

*To the death of the modest Toirdhealbhach.
The night of Tuesday, on the pridie of the Ides of July,
Before the festival of Jacob of pure mind,
On the twenty-second, died the
Mighty supreme King Toirdhealbhach.*

The Archivist: Not all is ominous, not by any means,
some take up the reins of power without a heavenly sign,
In England after conquest, a father's nod seemed enough
behest to an ambitious son
though another of his progeny
heir only to ducal remnants in Normandy
might have taken umbrage
and raised an eyebrow,
like a comet on his visage
a signal, inconstant and deniable,
for his adherents
to raise some viable form of resistance
to the status quo.

But such matters as contested succession
to head of state merited little attention in Eriu.
England was across the water
with news of limited local interest—
unless it were spread of plague or famine
affecting trade—
who might there hold dominion:
inferior fodder for political opinion
nor generating buzz beyond ports
Waterford and Dublin—
for certes not the Irish hinterland.
Only cursory mention is made
in The Four Masters
a single entry concisely states:

Assistant (*reads* M1087§13):

William Rufus assumed the kingdom of England on the 9th of September.

The Archivist: From the Annals of Ulster,
which take a northern point of view,
this is gleaned:

Assistant (*reads* AU1087§8):

A great harvest of mast this year.

The Archivist: Nearly null *per annum* by our standards
Not so for an economy perched precariously
above subsistence
this was a headline not to be spurned.
But human patience with good news
cannot last for long.

Like mast, the gatherer's harvest
from oak and beech,
it is too monotonous, dull a diet,
fine for swine;
for humankind
wholesome fare, but bland,
and apt to choke
especially if paired
with indifferent drink.
In the scriptorium no less
than in our modern press,
Good news alone,
however lilting,
was considered waste of ink.
The reader, it was deemed,
must not shrink
but discern a rhythm of life,
composed of opposing valences
conveyed within the chronicles
tilting always towards the latest strife.

Assistant (*reads* M1088§10):

*An army was led by Domhnall, the son of Mac Lochlainn, King of Ireland, and the people of the north of Ireland with him, into Connaught; and Ruaidhri Ua Conchobhair¹, King of Connaught, gave him the hostages of all Connaught. Both proceeded with their forces into Munster; and they burned Luimneach², and plundered the plain of Munster, i.e. as far as Imleach-Ibhair, Loch-Gair, Brugh-Righ, Dun-Aiched, and Druim-Ui-Cleirchein; and they carried off the head of the son of Caileach Ua Ruairc³ from the hills of Saingeal; and they broke down and demolished Ceann-coradh⁴; and they obtained eight score heroes, both foreigners and Irish, as hostages and pledges, and then returned to their houses. The chief of these hostages were the son of Madadhan Ua Ceinneidigh⁵; the son of Conghalach Ua hOgain; and the son of Eochaidh⁶ Ua Loingsigh. Cows, horses, gold, silver, and flesh-meat, were afterwards given in ransom of them by Muirheartach Ua Briain. (*reads* AU1089§1):*

Lusca was burned, and nine score persons in its stone church, by the men of Mumu--

The Archivist: -- elsewhere defined in lore, Muman now Munster.

The Munstermen
however termed, were
persons called to predatory violence
and violation,
no less than those of Ulidh⁷,
Leinster

¹ Rory O'Conor, also called Rory Yellowspear, father of Turlough O'Conor, grandfather of Roderick O'Conor

² Limerick

³ O'Rourke. From this lineage: Tiernan O'Rourke, king of Brefney married Dervorgilla, who is encountered later.

⁴ Kincora

⁵ Kennedy

⁶ Eochy, pronounced **YEO Hee**

⁷ An alternative spelling is **Ulaid** for which the approximate pronunciation is **UL ad**.

Connaught and Tara.

Assistant (reads AU1089§2): *Cell Dara—*

The Archivist: --literally the Church of Oak, now Kildare, where the successors of St. Bridgit spoke their vows— which, the Annals of Ulster declare:

Assistant (reads): *--was burned thrice in this year.*

The Archivist: --three times: a careless ember or, I fear, the iterative process of hurt and depredation?

Let us go on.

Assistant (reads AU1090§3):

The stone church of the Fert was burned, with a hundred houses around it.

(pauses, looks expectantly at **The Archivist** who says nothing. **The Assistant** proceeds):

A meeting was held between Domnall¹ grandson of Lochlann²—

The Archivist: --whose house dominated in the North—

Assistant (reads): *and Muirchertach ua Briain³,*

The Archivist: --one of three sons of the same Toirdhealbhach eventually laid low by that fatal mouse,

Assistant (reads): *king of Caisel⁴ –*

The Archivist: --seat of power in Muman—

Assistant (reads): *--and the son of Flann ua Mael Sechainn⁵, king of Temair⁶, and they all gave their hostages to the king of Ailech⁷*

The Archivist: -- Hostage-giving was a time-honored sign of submission, however temporary.

Let's return now to The Four Masters.

Begin with M1090§6.

Assistant (reads M1090§6):

Muircheartach Ua Briain afterwards went into Meath upon a predatory excursion; and a battle was fought between Domhnall, King of Meath, and Muircheartach, with their forces, at Magh-Lena.

Assistant (reads AU1091§2):

The western half of the Raúth of Ard Macha—

The Archivist: -- *rath*, a sort of fortified settlement.

In Armagh, where the successors of St. Patrick warily held sway—

Assistant (reads): *--was burned.*

The Archivist: 'Cremate sunt' in Latin. However:

Assistant (reads AU1091§6): *This was a fruitful year with good weather.*

The Archivist: So—not so bad that year, after all.

¹ The approximate pronunciation is **DUN nal**. The form **Donal** may be substituted.

² The approximate pronunciation is **LAKH lin**.

³ Various spellings of this name appear in the Annals and elsewhere. The approximate pronunciation is **MWIR char tach (OO) BREE un**. The form **Murtagh O'Brien** may be substituted.

⁴ **Cashel** may be substituted.

⁵ The approximate pronunciation is **FLAN (OO) mal SHACH lan**.

⁶ An alternate spelling, found elsewhere is **Teamhair** approximately pronounced **TA wur**. The form **Tara** may be substituted.

⁷ The approximate pronunciation is **Aw leh**.

Assistant (reads AU1092§2):

Cluain Moccu Nois

The Archivist: Clonmacnoise again.
Note well the variation in sound and spelling
A centuried place of dwelling and learning
—established five hundred years prior,
in response to the voice of St. Ciaran,
whom we’ve already heard
the rueful Annalist invoke,
called now Clonmacnoise
upon the Shannon
between Leinster and Connacht
early on poised for repeated ruination
its remnants subject to examination
in Offaly of the present day—

Assistant (reads): *--was ravaged by the men of Mumu.*

The Archivist: Read on.

Assistant (reads AU1092§7):

The Raith of Ard Macha with its church was burned on the fourth of the Kalends of September.

(reads AU1093§3):

The Síl Muiredaigh¹ were expelled from Connacht by Muirheartach ua Briain but came back again.

The Archivist: What can one say?

Ua Briain had not the resources to garrison troops
and make an occupying force
in perpetuity.

He resorted instead to mustering men
from his dependencies
in order to make occasional hostings,
taking hostages as security—
so that he’d still be acknowledged suzerain,
with all rights and customary tribute appertaining,
once he had done his plundering and laying to waste
and had returned to his throne in Cashel.

To tell the truth and make no lie,
that was the political concoction of the day.

Yet we read the Síl Muiredaigh,
who were expelled, came back again.

It was often so, in spite of hostages.

As the saying goes,

‘When the cat’s away, the mouse will play’

--Forgive me, I had forgotten:

For Muirchertach, the son of Turlough, a sensitive subject.

¹ The approximate pronunciation is **Sheel MWIR ray**. The form **Siol Murray** may be substituted.

For the hostages involved, a deadly game.

Assistant (*reads AU1093§7*):

A great harvest of mast in this year.

The Archivist: Ah, well.

Assistant (*reads AU1094§2, §6 and §8*):

An army was led by Muircheartach ua Briain to Áth Cliath and he expelled Gofraidh Méranach from the kingship of the foreigners

The Archivist: That is to say, they were foreign to Muman.

Godfrey was one of those descendants of Vikings

who had been established in Dublin

where Muirchertach himself

had once been installed to rule

by the high king, his father....

(pause)

My lovely assistant,

more able and attuned

to modern day methods than I,

has posed the question

based on evidence from DNA:

Are we not entitled to wonder

how came the Vikings to be called ‘foreign’

when with Celt and Saxon so many genes were shared?

To which I felt need wax on, as I am apt to do,

with a question or two of my own.

Did not Cain and Abel have of *semina* sown

full fifty percent in common?

Is not kin *de*-selection, a phenomenon

for which we can adduce as much proof

as altruism encased somewhere in a double helix?

Assistant (*reads AU1094§6*):

Domnall, successor of Patrick, was on a visitation of Mumu for the first time, and he brought away his full fixed tribute, as well as voluntary offerings.

The Archivist: Yes, yes, yes.

And then are lettered

an unrelenting series of catastrophes

both man-made and natural

with scarcely a pause between

but how were these adversities

to be causally contra-distinguished

in the medieval

any better than in

the post-modern mind?

Assistant (*reads AU1094§8*):

Extremely bad weather throughout Ireland, which gave rise to want.

(*reads AU1095§1 and §5*):

Great snow fell the Wednesday 3rd after the first of January and killed men and birds and beasts.

Cenannas with its churches, Dermagh with its books, Ard Srathra with its church and many other churches also were burned.

The Archivist: Cennannas— that is, Kells, where the great masterpiece, was brought from Iona for safekeeping but where, at dawn of the millennium, The Book of Kells, itself, could not find sanctuary and was subject to depredation.

Assistant (*reads* AU1095§8):

A great sickness in Ireland that killed many people, lasting from the first of August until the following May Day, i.e. the year of the mortality.

(*reads* AU1097§4):

The bell tower of Mainister with its books and many treasures was burned.

(*reads* AU1097§6):

An expedition was made by Muirchertach ua Briain and by Leth Mogha¹ to Mag Muirtheimhne². An expedition was made by ... ua Lochlann also with the north of Ireland to Fiel Concill³ to give them battle

The Archivist: After this spate of calamities, respite for the reader and listener at last:

Assistant (continues to read): *Domnall, successor of Patrick, restrained them in a semblance of peace.*

(*reads* AU1097§8):

A great harvest of nuts in this year, thirty years since the other harvest of nuts to this harvest, i.e., the year of the white nuts. A sixth of nuts could be had for one penny

The Archivist: It had been a long time between celebrations and unplanned treacle.

Assistant (*reads* 1099§1, §2, §4 and §7):

A great epidemic throughout all Ireland.

Cenannas was destroyed by fire.

Half of Cell Dara was burned.

An expedition was made by Muirchertach ua Briain and Leth Mogha to Sleab Fuait⁴ and Domnall, successor of Patrick, made a year's peace between them and the north of Ireland.

The Archivist: *Fin de siècle.* The first century of the new millennium nearly turned

What next to learn about the people and their royals?

(**He exits**)

Assistant: Dear old sage...hmm.

All too loyal to his Department keen

on revenue generativity

and replacement faculty

less long in tooth and tenure.

¹ The approximate pronunciation is **Leh MOW-a**.

² The approximate pronunciation is (**Maw MWIR in**).

³ The approximate pronunciation is (**FEE ul KUN cil**).

⁴ The approximate pronunciation is (**SHLEEV** Fwee it).

More is owed you
than to be loaned out to commercial interests
for a meticulous search of impoverished archives,
prospecting in mines remote from the mother lode
of meaningful scholarship,
left in the lurch
and obliged to dust off an old lecture or two
to deliver according to their specifications.
What will this attraction be?
How many dioramas and hands-on activities?
How many sponsors
with subtle advertisements and monopolies?
How many eateries and gift shops?

(Turning fully to the audience)

Listen. I know so much seems
chapter and verse that could have been skimmed....
But believe me, this is not nearly the worst
in scholarly excess
either to be heard from
or seen in him.
He gets caught up, you see....
in a time spanning beyond
the beginning and end of lighted day
at work in the bowels of the library—
He may as well make the place residential
with furniture more at home
than that cot in the corner.
Sometimes he is on a page for over an hour
stymied by an anaconda line—
powerless to proceed beyond
that first intimation of something more.

(Lights fade on the Assistant. Lights reveal The Archivist in the Archives)

The Archivist: ‘What more?’ you want to ask,
skeptical of any answer
an archivist’s assistant may give—
I understand:
You are wary of even this amanuensis
whose hubris is to put aside
secretarial modes and tasks,
and, while proper in credentials,
nonetheless seeks and finds occasion
a fantastical *quodlibet* to advance.

I must confess I have been
medieval mind-reading, again.
My *apologia* I make beforehand.
What will follow may violate
the better sensibilities
of those who remain convinced
truth is to be found somewhere
deeper within the literature,
or via a more extensive search,
with some ever more sophisticated engine—
fields and parameters specified
in accordance with scholarly rigor.

They're right of course.
scholars must not be easily deceived,
must take pains to relieve themselves
of any felt-burden
that incontrovertible truth is at hand,
and must not become aggrieved
when an essential souliness
successfully eludes
their scrutiny.

Therefore I do beg forgiveness
for my intrusions now and yet to come,
calling in defense my firm belief
against any doubt:
here is a story to be told
out of the clear mystery
of moral imagination,
an all-about story
about story-telling itself
where pages are turned
without pagination
and contributions made
to an anthology
writ entirely between the lines.

Scene 2. Glendalough; September, 1100.

Lafracoth and Conor at a Bullaun Stone, a boulder with concave depressions to hold water for blessing and curing.

Lafracoth: There is such a stone in the west,
more ancient by far.

I was told that stone had been cupped out
to hold water in seven places
spaced just so
to secure a like number of lights
from cerulean heaven,
as in a mirror.

Conor: Not then for healing or blessing?

Lafracoth: Hmm. To capture a configuration of stars
at some propitious time and appoint the calendar.
I cannot say for what purpose.

Yet it too was only a stone's throw from a cemetery.

Conor: I would select one less impressive in size
to lift and hurl and make traverse the necessary distance.

Lafracoth: I am glad of your discretion.
For consider the encumbrance otherwise.
Herculean tasks such as these
needs be are ill advised,
foisted upon us by flattery and self deception.
Should you undertake to hoist this worthy up
the best end you could make would be
to carry yourself in a truss.

Conor: Had I Archimedes' point and a lever long enough,
think then of my contribution-

Lafracoth: It is ever more fuss to move the world than to be moved by it.

Conor: A nearby pebble would, I suppose, suffice as emissary
from this comfortable rock who enables reverent ablution
to yonder brethren
hewn and shaped *in memorium*.

Lafracoth: So once again you make me smile with witty conversation.
I am put aright seeing you again, friend of my soul.

Conor: As I am whole again to have you before my eyes.

Lafracoth: Whatever its arch-aged origin, this stone of Glendalough has,
by countless pilgrims such as we,
been custom made to bestow benediction.

Conor: Derbforgaill's¹ death laid all of us low-

Lafracoth: Awash in lonely thoughts

¹ This may be pronounced **DER val**. Either the form **Dervla** or **Dervogilla** may be substituted

for my father's mother
 and also for my own, Dubhchobhlaigh¹.
 She was the more prescient of mortality
 preceding her elder,
 impatient of genealogy's protocol,
 but only by the shortest while, her soul hovering
 until they could resume the company
 each enjoyed before my mother parted.
 Both, you know ensured my education
 calming the fury of Muirchertach,
 in short, mastering each and every objection
 mustered by his proponents for him,
 who now fulfills the irony perhaps *mes dames* intended,
 by calling upon me to prove the writings
 of his court historians.
 I am indebted to those ladies
 beyond the full extent of
 my honor price.
Conor: I knew your mother best for her kindnesses to me.
 Save for her, I would have been uneasy attending
 to my priestly assignments in Cashel.
 Myself, close-kin and namesake
 of your father's enemy
 became a presence too close-by his royal ambit,
 which kept churned afresh in memory
 how tenuous his grasp on peace.
 Save for her intervention, I would have been
 hostage sooner to the father
 than later to fair Lafracoth.
Lafracoth: Do you presume, man of cloth,
 the one I'd draw closer to me than any fabric
 held by me against his will?
Conor: It is anguish to be misconstrued.
 That person of whom you inquire
 by the rubric 'Lafracoth's Own'
 would gladly be subsumed
 And bear whatever yoke you gave him.
Lafracoth: Dear friend, keep me well informed.
 Tell me, does he languish in captivity?
 No, stay. Do not tell me!
 I never aspired to be a hostage-taker-
 that is the proclivity of war-like folk.
 He is my love and not a vanquished foe.
Conor: So he is- and wanting to be wed.
 To that end, ready to mount unrelenting campaigns,

¹ The approximate pronunciation is **DOO kov la**

which would win your hand.

Lafracoth: To be wed? Then he must surrender his militant metaphor.
And find instead expressions of passion less cruel.

Conor: Well then, he will steadily oblige his lady
and eschew a call to any arms but hers.

After all is said and done he is a prayerful supplicant
who joins with God to give his heart to Lafracoth.

Lafracoth: Prayerful and playful too.

I am again indebted to the ladies whom we commemorate.

They must have been considerate of the time for keening
when last they leaned their heads together,

and determined there should be more convenience
for mourners if their passings were approximate.

Conor: Who could confirm your wry suspicion
and empower belief that such efficiency might reside

beside whatever wonders worked

to ensure the contemporary condition
of two so generous and beneficent souls?

My evidence is more mundane.

I am loath to leap to conclusions

and yet hope

the renewal of my suit will not now be scorned.

There has been a near full circuit of seasons
since scholars have hied themselves here
to learn from Lafracoth, Magister.

Lafracoth: Magister? Fie. Describe me lover
first of learning, if thou will,

second of learners who likewise love

and nothing else, or if it pleases thee, Conor,

style me a sobriquet that subtly joins

Lafracoth and luminous Glendalough,

whereupon, by thy hand,

I am made joyously secure

encircled by the richest lore and enlightenment we may ever know.

Conor: A sweet intrusion when thou speakest 'thou' to me.

I would hear those endearments numerous times more

and so should welcome any interruptions so finessed.

But, I pray thee, permit my discourse to move further on.

Blessings unforeseen are heaped upon us with the accrual of time,

allowances made for coping with losses sustained,

and the conversion of love's objects mourned

into memorable ladies

who become the legends of our lives.

Meanwhile the weaning of thee from thy doubled grief

has been sufficient to return thee to teaching.

As I discern thou art enabled by Grace

to resume thy profession,
I strive to take courage
and renew my profession to thee in kind.

Scene 3. The Lecture Hall.

Lights reveal The Archivist helping the Assistant, to attire herself as, and assume the person of, John Scotus Eriugena.

The Archivist: I am pleased to introduce John Scotus Eriugena: “Born of Ireland,” he flourished on the Continent in that pre-Renaissance dubbed Carolingian. It has been said of Eriugena’s mind: a towering mountain rising in bold relief from an otherwise featureless plain. Well, so it is— and occupies a lone promontory, with a vista behind of Augustine, and hints of distant Aristotle. Aquinas is there, just beyond the horizon. Others below feast on the lotus of various *insolubilia*, not yet irked by universals and contemplate the hosts of angels over-crowded on heads of pins.

Eriugena.
In some odd way, akin to Mencius, though remote in time and space; At his peril, heretic, more than a bit at home with Pelagius, emphasizing a moral nature, like a *synderesis à la Jerome* upon which the Grace of God might build. He saves both face and hide by leaving aside an argument against hell and earns kudos by devoting energy instead to translation of the Syrian, pseudo-Dionysius called the Areopagite, falsely presumed a disciple of St. Paul: a case of mistaken identity empowering withal platonic fountains to spring forth mightily and sing anew strains unheard since ancient Greece.

Like St Gregory of Nyssa before him,
Eriugena after,
this pseudo-Dionysius
treads both avenues to the divine
via affirmativa
via negativa,
showing a predilection for the latter.

(**The Archivist** recites from memory of Mystical Theology by the pseudo-Dionysius):

*...by denying or removing all things that are—
just as men who, carving a statue out of marble,
remove all the impediments that hinder
the clear perception of the latent image
and by this mere removal
display the hidden statue itself
in its hidden beauty.*

So the mind cleaves away from
the idea of God conceptions
all inadequate
and enters the '*Darkness*—
on another mediaeval's view, perhaps less ominous,
a '*Cloud— of Unknowing*'
*...renounces all the apprehension of the understanding
and is wrapped in that which is wholly intangible
and invisible ...united...to Him
that is wholly unknowable....*¹

Periphyseon, John's own, bespeaks
a system of circle and hierarchy,
a dialectic process operating within:
In all Nature, God's immanence,
of four species comprised,

Natura quae creat et non creatur
Natura quae et creatur et creat
Natura quae creatur et non creat
*Natura quae nec creat nec creatur*²

Deity in each: beginning, middle and end,
rising in movement, remaining still
and Hidden.

Creator, Uncreated
Created, creative forms
Creations thereby bidden with no creative concern,
Eventual return of all in all to God,

¹ This translation of Pseudo Dionysius appeared in an edition by CE. Rolt, 1920 and is represented in F. Copleston, SJ (1950/1993): A History of Philosophy II, p. 95. See bibliography for complete citation.

² Ibid, pp 116-27.

Endless End
Not created, nor creating.

There are *theophanies*—
revelations, for certes, but in The Book of Nature
or shall we say brute facts of divinity,
undeniable, incomprehensible,
beyond dispute,
beyond mere telling of what God is not.

Eriugena (*reading aloud while writing*): *Therefore in God there is not one thing, which is being and another making, but for him being itself is also making....Therefore when we hear that God made everything, we ought to understand nothing other than that God is in all things, that is, subsists as the essence of all things. For only he himself truly is per se, and only he himself is everything which is truly said to be in those things which are. For nothing of those things which are, truly is per se. But whatever is truly understood in him receives by a participation of him, the one who alone truly is per se.*

*Therefore God is rightly called love, because he is the cause of every love, and he is diffused through all things, and collects all things into one, and returns to himself by an ineffable regression, and terminates the amatory motions of the whole creature in himself.*¹

The Archivist (to **Eriugena**): Thank-you.

John's message is being transcribed reverently
in native Eriu during the century we consider now,
three removed from when he lived.
A century more it will be declared anathema
for pantheistic tendencies
and ordered burned
by Pope Honorius the Third.

The twelfth, however,
is still a century in intellectual foment
and therefore liberty may be found
in the interstices of
a social network loosely weaved—
something like today's Web
My assistant tells me—
wherein even peripatetic iconoclasts
and sophists are suffered.
A loose weave, then,
in which ideas have leave to accrete and synthesize.
Even so, some lengths are joined

¹ This translation of Eriugena by C Schwartz in 1940 is represented in WT Jones (1969): [A History of Western Philosophy II](#), pp176-177.

at times to make a noose.

Abelard, deprived of else,
his active mind has bent
on compromise in the argument
about what be real and what lies only in a name
All in good time he will make the claim
for conceptualism and abstraction,
an early notion of theory of mind,
only to be undone at end of life
by antipathy from a church
more in thrall to a different mind
embodied in Bernard of Clairvaux,
whose concept of unassailable orthodoxy
keeps close company with urges to sow
the seeds of invasion and crusade.

Yet the next medieval mind and character,
I would portray is neither Abelard
nor Bernard but St. Anselm,
upon whom the sainthood conferred
might be attributed
only in part to his holy manner
and possibly more to that most curious
of the arguments he advanced —
eschewed by many a theist and atheist alike
and yet persistent in our own day
— I mean, of course, the Ontological Argument
for the Existence of God.

(The Assistant helps The Archivist, to attire himself as, and assume the person of, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury).

Anselm: *... I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, --that unless I believed, I should not understand.*

And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe. And, indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived....

... And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality, which is greater....

... There is, then, so truly a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; that this being thou art, O Lord, our God....

*I thank thee, gracious Lord, I thank thee; because what I formerly believed by thy bounty, I now understand by thine illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that thou dost exist, I should not be able now to understand this to be true.*¹

Scene 4. Glendalough; a short time afterwards.

Lafracoth and Scholars in an outdoor setting, conducive to learning, stone church and round tower in the distance; later joined by **Gerald of Windsor** and his company, including **Religieux** who keep their distance at first.

Lafracoth: Put once more the newer argument of Anselm.

First Scholar: God is that being of which none greater can be conceived.

Lafracoth: Illimitable treated as limit:

a proposition seeming simple and neat,

presenting an asymptote which already overwhelms.

How does its wording make me uneasy?

Does anyone else share my distress?

Second Scholar: If you please, Magister.

I confess my own unease springs from wording, any at all,
so enforced upon mystery.

Lafracoth: So you vote to preserve the ineffable
by passing over it in silence.

But perhaps that is not the intent of the Most High Poet,
as the Lord Archbishop in Canterbury discerns.

Let us learn more.

First Scholar: It is to say that God owns perfection itself.

A being with all the attributes-

Lafracoth: All the perfections-

First Scholar: Of God, save one only-

Second Scholar: That being existence,
which must needs count toward perfecting perfection.

Lafracoth: Note my inflection:

Is it so and, if it is, *must it be*?

Do we speak of something needful or only just so?

Perhaps after all, existence will ever be
at antipodes with perfection,

which requires a non-existent mode of being-
but leave that issue in abeyance and proceed.

First Scholar: A being with all the attributes of God save one,
can be conceived.

Then, blessed Anselm abjures us, think upon it:

nothing prevents the notion

there be One with ownership as full

but, in perfect abundance, possessing one attribute more:

¹ This translation of St. Anselm by SN Deane in 1903 is represented in [Jones](#), pp 201-02.

which is existence.

Quod erat demonstrandum:

God exists.

Lafracoth: Hmm. This is not Anselm's first foray to champion the livelihood of the Most High.

Betimes he began with common observations that goodness, greatness and being all perceived implied a standard

by which comparison could be made.

Hence a life lived in pursuit of greater goodness would eventuate by degrees in appreciation that the standard implied at every point could only be God's essence.

Second Scholar: Then understanding is not anointed supreme in the earlier argument.

Lafracoth: Nor even seeks hegemony over faith in what later is rendered a syllogistic reduction.

Here is the question to be asked:

Why presume that human mind is so shaped no mystery of God's universe can long escape its comprehension?

First Scholar: If not adequate in the daylight of continuous experience to make descriptions susceptible of improvement and ever finer tuning, how it be embedded in all that is, and finally in itself, then what place has understanding?

Second Scholar: Not to grasp surely. For faith is the sole means of true apprehension.

The mode of understanding endures labor in an adjacent vineyard, lower on the slope, toiling over what is comprehensible in order to make it comprehended.

Lafracoth: Yielding perhaps wine from an inferior grape?

Second Scholar: Not so, Lady. There need be no such condescension.

Understanding will add flavor in a judiciously proportioned blend, whose mainstay be faith.

First Scholar: Or else by hopeful increments, allowing these to be exquisitely fine in their customary division only on occasion huge in astonishment, faith will be replaced with clear reason.

Second Scholar: What! Not even a lodging among the dregs to be poor faith's ultimate abode?

Lafracoth: My good friends and companions in mind, with what regularity you two come to loggerheads.

I dread not conflicts like yours
so long as they remain encoded in words
chary of attaining such volume
that might rock the serenity of Glendalough
and perchance occasion an exchange of blows.
It is good to recall that which calls us to elenchus:

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

That said, for now, let us strike a deeper *aporia*
by standing Anselm's argument upon its head.
Begin with God's mode of being.

First Scholar: Which needs be eternity.

Lafracoth: An eternal mode of being
cannot be accounted positively:
To say it is endurance in any familiar domain,
would be untoward.

It can neither be timed nor otherwise dimensioned.

As Creator of time and space,
God is outside both.

Second Scholar: God, Creator, indeed is without history.

First Scholar: That is creed straightforward from Genesis.

Lafracoth: Consider this as well:

Christ is God made man
conditioned by time and space,
subjected to suffering and love.

Have we not encountered, *simpliciter*,
a conceptual impossibility?

That who is outside time and space,
in no wise constrained by either
exists in both and enters history:
P and Not-P.

Is not our reason sufficient to tell us this,
above all else, cannot be?

A proposed contradiction we must rue.

Second Scholar: It is revealed truth.

Surely you allow the inspired word
attains inerrancy?

Gerald (*approaching*): I say you are an errant knave
for asking her highness the question
that could bring her downfall.

Lafracoth: Hmm. There is no highness here but frank discussion.
You, sir, appear a well-traveled Norman.

Gerald: I do not deny it. I am Norman, lately of Pembroke Castle,

most recently bestirred by my lord to venture here.

Lafracoth: I know of a place called Pembroke, in Cymru—
forgive me—*Cambria* is the Latin—
in Dyfed, I think. I do not recall a castle,
but perhaps it is new and purpose-built?

Gerald: It has purposes to be sure.

Lafracoth: Subjugation for example?

Gerald: More likely spreading civility along the frontier.

Lafracoth: Then I received misinformation.

I thought Rhys ap Tewdr had managed
there a very mannerly court,
that is, before he fell at Brycheiniog¹.
six years ago at Easter.

Norman castle builders were then also busy
in the vicinity of Wales, it would seem.

Gerald: Lady, I am all agog with your erudition
in recent politics no less than theology,
though the latter might, by some, be deemed anathema.

Lafracoth: As worldly as you seem,
you may not know in parts of Eriu,
we have not so many ecclesiastical constraints
on free inquiry.

Perhaps, in travels, you have seen

The Book of Lindisfarne.

There is an illumination on its frontispiece,
a figure of a man holding a book
who peeps from behind a curtain.

Gerald: The book of which you speak is fabled
for its artful presentation of God's word.
Soldier that I am, I would I were able someday
to view that sacred tome.

First Scholar: What is intended by that figure, which touched your mind's eye?

Lafracoth: I think to conjure for the looker a conspiratorial image.
To convey *caveat emptor* in the marketplace of ideas, even holy ones.
As much to say there are mysteries only hinted at in books,
whose truths consist in partial revelations just as in nature,
only they be paginated.

I imagine the division between book and nature a false dichotomy,
for all that, one still worthy of serious meditation.

We are writ down by The Most High Poet
composed along with every other atomy
purposed by prevenient grace to carry forth Her Lyric.
What means it to say of a poem, 'It is inerrant,'
when all its meaning depends

¹ may be pronounced **BRECK-NOCK**

upon the language of contradiction?

Gerald: And this be my lady's answer to Anselm,
who has put on firm ground of reason
what faith already upholds?

(The Two Scholars are drawn away by the Religieux in Gerald's company)

Lafracoth: Good and learned soldier, listen.
It begins in my mind a kind of dialectic
with warrant for a warrior's approval
since it consists of ideas defended, then put down
by the issue of opposing forces
whose sources are Anselm and Eriugena.

Gerald: I have heard Eriugena
declared a heretic

whose works should be banned
for espousals of pantheism
in Christian disguise.

Lafracoth: Pray sir, for a moment
do not despise what less generous souls
may have managed to misconstrue
but suspend your judgment
as I describe further the working of my mind.

Gerald: Lady, proceed.
You are in no jeopardy
from me who ventures only to admire
a woman reputed to be
both comely and a gifted teacher.

Lafracoth: Sir, it were ill-advised in the extreme
to divert our formal discourse
in order to carry on a sort of suit.

Gerald: In dreams only might I rise so high.
But, Lady, even of that notion, pray, be disabused.
Scarce a sennight has passed
since I had the promise of one whose beauty exceeds
any else I've known. With her I am beyond content.
Indeed, she is Nest, daughter to Rhys ap Tewdr
of whom you've spoken
with scarcely concealed admiration.

Still I would have you abjure
doctrinal errors of all shades and hues
for my lord's sake and your own.

Lafracoth: What stake in my beliefs can have your lord?
Who are you and your lord to make this mischief?

Gerald: I am Gerald of Windsor, Constable of Pembroke,
who serves my Lord Montgomery.

Lafracoth: 'Montgomery'? It is oddly familiar.
Was it not Roger of that name who prepared the armada
for William who styled himself Conqueror?

Gerald: The same, my Lady.

Lafracoth: And for his pains was made a marcher lord.

Gerald: I believe he eschewed that peculiar encomium.
The connotations were not to him particularly agreeable.
Among many privileges and entitlements
for the service he rendered to his king
he was made the Earl of Shrewsbury.
I serve his son, Arnulf.

Lafracoth: And how styled is that Norman gentleman?

Gerald: In all but formal appointment, he is the Earl of Pembroke,
which he holds with all due diligence for his liege.

Lafracoth: And that would be William Rufus, I suppose,
or else the elder brother....

What said you was his name?

Gerald: The eldest of House Montgomery is Robert of Bellême.

He succeeded to Shrewsbury
when his brother Hugh
was slain during Norway's late incursion.
They say the mortal wound sustained
was to his eye from an arrow
aimed by Magnus, the pirate king himself,
bane of Cambria and Eriu too.
Then passed Hugh's earldom
to Robert with lordly honours
already in Bellême.

Lafracoth: As I think on recent events
I do remember a story of sacrilege
told by foreign merchants
returning from the Cambrian shore.
Of this Hugh, had I not heard
of grave impiety when he converted
a sacred house of God into a kennel
and an aged priest who counseled Hugh's enemies
was dismembered according to his command?
Wales could not have mourned his passing very much.

Gerald: I was myself aggrieved to hear of Hugh's excesses
and justifications upon the heels of such torture
too easily attributed to the exigencies of war.

In my marriage, I hope to secure
a modicum of forbearance if not affection
from that priest's countrymen.

Lafracoth: Well, then. Now there is Robert empowered

as an earl upon the margin of Powys.
And young Arnulf ascendant in Deheubarth.
But unlike his brother not formally reckoned
nor esteemed by royalty, nor invested
by Rufus, a grudging sire who rests uneasily in the east,
wondering ever about marcher lords
who conspire for hegemony.
Without being afforded entitlement
comparable to his brother Robert
might not your lord Arnulf
be in dire need of his own dignity
and hence disposed to misperceive Eriu
beckoning from the west?

Gerald: Lady, Arnulf intends no mischief. He means you very well,
and considers how you may best thrive
in an era where uncertainty must be forfeit.
You may think me blunt as any soldier
adopting at once too familiar
yet too ominous a tone.

Know then, I travel with *religieux*.
Among them are those who harbor views,
likely for you less sanguine even than my own,
on departures, clear or not, in their specifics,
from an orthodoxy become established
but a little ways across the water.

Charged by Anselm, my Lord Arnulf in turn,
made me proxy to escort this same retinue to Cashel,
where, they, with fervor that may hardly be mistaken
will beseech God with prayer, unswerving,
and the king of Muman, who would be higher still,
and whose daughter you are, subject to suasion
adorned with moral arguments
on a canonical entablature
set firmly upon the pillars of God's truth
but crafted for all that, to be shrewdly politic
until Muirchertach acquiesce and prepare a synod
that will quicken a greater chastity
in all the churches of Eriu.

Scene 5. The Lecture Hall.

The Archivist *with the Assistant.*

The Archivist Let us delve a little into
Cur Deus Homo—

Why God Became Man.

There will be need, beforehand,
to understand
that when Anselm refers to God's *honour*,
it is a feudal concept.
Notwithstanding, we can appreciate
the argument advanced:
that violation had occurred,
debt accordingly was owed
but could in no way be recompensed
by the violator to which the debt accrued.

This indeed was novel for its time:
in its presentation,
not dependent upon revelation
but only upon belief that
postlapsarian humans
were in the throes of original sin,
requiring redemption.

For the purpose, Anselm resorted to a dialogue,
like Augustine or like Plato,
though skeptics will detect
a straw man in opposition
dubbed 'Boso,'
a former pupil and fellow monk of Bec.

Follow in Book I chapter 20: "That the recompense should be proportioned to the size of the sin, and that a human being cannot, of himself, make this recompense."

(He hands a simple medieval scholar's hat, distinct from the magister's hat of Eriugena, to the Assistant soon to be addressed as Boso, for this exchange abbreviated 'B')

The Archivist (assuming character of **Anselm**, for this exchange abbreviated 'A'): Come good Boso, let us continue—
We have plenty before us of which to make sense.

A. Another thing about which you will have no doubts, I imagine, is that recompense ought to be proportional to the magnitude of the sin.

B. If it were not so, the sin would remain to some extent unregulated, which cannot be the case if God leaves nothing unregulated in his kingdom. But it has previously been stipulated that no inappropriateness, however small, is possible where God is concerned.

A. Tell me, then: what payment will you give God in recompense for your sin?

B. Penitence, a contrite and humbled heart, fasting and many kinds of bodily labour, the showing of pity through giving and forgiveness, and obedience.

A. What is it that you are giving to God by all these means?

B. Am I not honouring God? For out of fear and love of him I am rejecting temporal happiness in heartfelt contrition; in fasting and labouring I am trampling underfoot the pleasures and ease of life; in giving and forgiveness I am exercising generosity; and in obedience I am making myself subject to him.

A. When you are rendering to God something which you owe him, even if you have not sinned, you ought not to reckon this to be recompense for what you owe him for sin. For you owe to God all the things to which you refer. For, in this mortal life, your love and your yearning— here prayer is of relevance— to reach the state of being for which you were created; your grief because you are not yet there and your fear that you may not arrive at it: these feelings should be so strong that you ought not to feel any happiness except in things which assist you to reach your journey's end and give hope of arriving there....However, you ought to reckon that what you are giving is in the payment of a debt. You ought likewise to understand that the things you are giving are not your property but the property of him whose bondsman you are, and to whom you are making the gift. And nature teaches you to act towards your fellow-bondsman, that is as a human towards a fellow human- being, as you wish to be treated by him.... Now, concerning forgiveness, what I say, in brief, is that acts of vengeance are none of your business, since you are not your own man, nor is a person who has done wrong owned either by you or by himself. Rather you are both the bondsmen of one Lord, having been made by him out of nothing, if you take vengeance on your fellow-bondsman, you are arrogantly presuming to exercise over him the justice which is the prerogative of the Lord and Judge of all. And in obedience, when truth is told, what are you giving to God that you do not owe him, seeing that it is your obligation to give him, at his command, all that you are and all that you have and all you are capable of?

B. I do not dare say that, in any of these actions, I am giving to God what I do not owe him.

A. What payment, then, are you going to make to God in recompense for your sin?

The Archivist (*breaking character in aside to his audience*). Well, you see how it is.

As my assistant
told me over tea
in no uncertain—
if very post modern— terms:
“The poor bozo knows he’s got nuthin’.”

Yet consider there is a subtle intrusion
of **nature**, that is to say **moral nature**,
into Anselm’s considerations.
In relation of one person to another,
in his words, bondsman to bondsman
He is explicit that it is nature which teaches
the golden rule.
Then is here an implicit admission
of goodness
even in the presence of original sin?

(**He resumes the character of Anselm**).

B. If, in order that I may not sin, I owe him my own being and all that I am capable of, even when I do not sin, I have nothing to give him in recompense for sin.

A. What, then, will become of you? How will you be saved?

The Archivist (*in another aside to his audience*): Skip the intervening chapters and proceed to twenty-three: “What it was that man stole from God when he sinned—something which he cannot give back.”

(**He resumes the character of Anselm**).

A. Here is something else again—no less impossible—without which there is no way for mankind to be justly reconciled.

B. You have already put before us so many things which we are under an obligation to do that nothing that you add could make me more terrified.

A. Listen, nevertheless.

B. I am listening.

A. What did man steal from God when he allowed himself to be conquered by the devil?

B. You do the talking, seeing that you have begun—for I do not know what he could have done additional to those evils which you have been disclosing.

A. Did he not steal from God whatever he planned to do with regard to the human species?

B. This is undeniable.

A. Subject the matter to strict justice, and judge accordingly whether man may give recompense for his sin to a level commensurate with his sin, if he does not give back, by conquering the devil, what he has stolen from God by allowing himself to be conquered by the devil....

B. One can imagine nothing stricter or more just.

A. Do you think the supreme justice capable of violating this justice?

B. I dare not think so.

A. Man, therefore, neither ought nor can receive from God what God planned to give him, unless man returns to God all that he has taken away from him. In this way, just as God incurred loss through man, similarly, through man’s agency, God would recover what he had lost. the only way in which this can be put into effect is as follows. Because of the man who was conquered, the whole of humanity is rotten and, as it were, in a ferment with sin—and God raises up no one with sin to fill up the complement of the renowned heavenly city. Correspondingly, supposing a man were victorious, because of him as many humans would be brought out of sin into a state of righteousness as would make up the full number to which I have referred, for the completion of which mankind was created. But a man who is a sinner is in no way capable of doing this, for one sinner cannot make another sinner righteous.

B. Nothing could be more just and, equally, nothing could be more impossible. Rather, what appears to be the case from all these considerations is that the mercy of god and the hope of man are dead, so far as the state of blessedness is concerned for which mankind was created.

The Archivist: Here from Boso
a perfect depiction of overwhelming despair—
comparing most admirably with anything Søren Kierkegaard

will later have his pseudonyms embed
in Sickness Unto Death or The Concept of Dread—
the deep psychological lore
on our state of sinful indebtedness.

In those savage times it took little persuasion
that all human beings were fatally flawed,
outlawed from the heavenly city,
but hopeful still of being culled
to fill positions eternally vacated
by fallen angels.

And yet, like Juliet-- who sued her comfortable friar
eschew catastrophe and adopt
modes of cognitive behavior more meet
to problem solving needs,
alternative thinking and a means to an end--
we might entreat:
“Tell me not, friar, that thou hear’st of this,
unless thou tell me how I may prevent it.”
Or in this case find effective remedy.

Thence to Chapter 25: “That it follows as a necessary consequence that mankind is saved by Christ.”

B. How, then, will man be saved, if he does not himself pay what he owes, and is bound not to be saved if he does not pay? What effrontery it is on our part to assert that God, who is ‘rich in mercy’ ...beyond human understanding, cannot do this merciful thing?

A. You ought to demand an answer now from those people, on whose behalf you are speaking, who do not believe that Christ is necessary for the salvation of mankind. They should state by what kind of means mankind can be saved without Christ. If they are in no way able to do so, let them cease mocking us, and come and join those of us who have no doubt that mankind can be saved through Christ, or alternatively let them despair of the notion that salvation can ever happen by any means whatsoever. If they are horrified at the thought, let them believe, with us, in Christ, so that they be capable of being saved.

B. ...You should explain for what reason it is that mankind is saved through Christ.

A. Surely it is sufficient proof that it is through Christ that mankind can be saved when even unbelievers affirm that there is some way in which man can become happy, and it has been adequately demonstrated that, if we posit the non-existence of Christ, the salvation of mankind cannot be effected by any means? For these are the alternatives: it will be possible for mankind to be saved through Christ, or by some other means, or by no means. Therefore, if it is untrue that this can happen by no means, or by some other means, it is necessary that it should come through Christ.

B. Suppose someone were to see the validity of the reasoning that salvation cannot

happen by any other means, while not understanding why it could happen through Christ. He would wish to assert that salvation could not happen through Christ or in any way at all. What shall we say in answer to him?

A. What answer is one to give to someone who, out of an inability to understand why it is, concludes that an inevitable fact is an impossibility.

B. The answer that he is a fool.

A. And so, what he says deserves contempt.

B. True. But one needs to make clear to him the reason why the thing he reckons impossible is actually the case.

A. Do you not understand, on the basis of what we have already said, that it is a necessity that some human beings should attain happiness? For let us assume that God created mankind without stain with this state of bliss in view and thus that it is unfitting for him to bring to this state a human being who is in any way stained— otherwise he might seem to have regrets about his good undertaking and to be incapable of bringing his plan to fulfillment. If this is the correct assumption, the incongruity referred to makes it even more impossible that no human being can be brought forward to the state for which he was created. Consequently, one either has to look outside the Christian faith –and this is something for which no logic can offer demonstrative support –for the satisfaction for sin which, as we have demonstrated earlier, needs to come about, or, alternatively, one should have an undoubting belief in that faith. for something which is truthfully deduced to be the case by unavoidable logic ought not to be subjected to doubt, even if the reason why it should be the case is not perceived.¹

The Archivist: That, in essence, is Book One.

I hope you appreciate how novel
an approach Anselm took—
like no one before him had done—
by making Original Sin the lynchpin
of an exclusive system of salvation.

Notice, too, the message conveyed
that among God's 'omni-s'
'all-logical' holds greatest weight
even if a singularity
defying "why" be permitted
as a brute fact.
God's actual Creation
or engagement therein,
diremt of Clear Mystery,
admits no conceptual impossibility,
no Absolute Paradox,
that would appeal to Christian mystic
or existentialist alike.

Finally, a psychological observation:

¹ These are excerpts from the translation of St Anselm's Why God Became Man by J Fairweather which appears in Anselm of Canterbury The Major Works, ed. B Davies and G Evans 1998, pp 260-315.

the mood in this dialogue shifts
from making suitable
answer to one who mocks
Christian creed
to conceding the contestant be a fool,
whose challenge
deserves contempt.

Are there questions?

Assistant (reads to **The Archivist** one of the written questions among those collected from participants in the seminar): “Do you consider the discipline of moral psychology to be modern pelagianism?”

The Archivist: Semi-pelagianism perhaps. It posits an innate moral nature, though some, *à la* Chomsky, say grammar, operating at unconscious, procedural levels not unlike *synderesis* which term, incidentally, comes from an error of transcription from St. Jerome’s thesis that Cain retained a spark of goodness even after fratricide.

Some branches of the discipline seem more focused on *conscientia*, literally ‘coming to know together’ the call to moral consciousness, divisible into domains susceptible to the bevels of psycho-biological investigation. Each domain with intrinsic value pushing and pulling development along.

Does this enterprise suffer
the soul the indignity of scientific inquiry
and trespass thereby on theology?

For certes, a question for further discussion.
Those interested may expand their readings
beyond those assigned in the bibliography.
See me after class.

Assistant (reads *another question*): “Did Anselm have more than one argument for the existence of God?”

The Archivist: To that inquiry
you may have my response ‘pronto’—
as they say.
The answer is ‘yes’ most assuredly.
Though aught but the Ontological

is forgotten by most.

Alvin Plantinga has contributed considerably to
the Ontological's perpetuation,
by a learned use of 'possible worlds'.
Anselm's other argument is *a posteriori*
from goodness, greatness and being.
For comparison see your Swinburne,
hmm... the chapter crafting an argument
from consciousness and morality,
in accordance with Baye's theorem—
though I stand by my caveats
regarding the coherence of his theism:
Is Logos to be constrained by logicity,
and is existence to be considered
God's only mode of being?

Scene 6. Glendalough; *that evening.*
Lafracoth and Conor.

Lafracoth: "Quicken a greater chastity
in all the churches of Eriu."

It grates cruelly upon the ear.
It lodges in my stomach's pit
and I am sickened to think further on it.
Can there not be true catholicity
in the ecclesiastical embrace
practiced by a venerable institution
which ought joyfully to bear
diverse professions of our faith?
I fear they mean to again curtail
the role of worthy women
and make our *religieux* celibate.

Conor: Thou hast voice.
Thine must be joined by mine and others:
let us at least be heard by thy father
who will so entail the synod of Cashel
when it convenes.

Lafracoth: Stay, my love.
It is dangerous for thee to leave the sanctuary
conceded thee at Glendalough.
I will to Cashel alone,
there find my father and engage him
in all these matters and in one thing more.

Conor: What more, my love?

Lafracoth: The announcement of our marriage,
if I am still to thy liking.

Conor: Can this be? Have I heard thee
aright or am I elsewhere,
poor wretch who early succumbed
before he was even aware
of the latest epidemic,
in the throes of some fever-dream,
his most fond hope attained
which however usurps a final comfort
and incites him to revival.

God of joyous love,
I am chosen *anam cara*.
The song of my soul is composed this evening.
There is storm in it and grandeur and sweet repose.
There is timeless sanctuary
and so it aches to be sung in Glendalough,
blessed vale,
whose various waters,
pale vapors no less than darksome lakes,
have privilege of first hearing.
Yet such a song becomes an anthem—
cannot long remain
jealously enclosed by mountains.
It wants resounding declaration.
By all means, I must make haste to Cashel
there to ask king and second father for thy hand.
Lafracoth: Nay, upon hearing this one petition
all else would be disparaged
and the king unmoved except by rage
raised up most royally
with deadly force at its disposal.

Our union must be *un fait accompli*.

Listen, my love, in this sacred place
shall be our ceremony
trees as witnesses,
solemn processions upon the slopes,
silent vows plighted at Kevin's den,
our clasped hands plunged in the icy brook,
naked embrace upon the promontory
that overlooks the upper lake,
thence astonishment
and afterglow in one another's arms.

Act II.

Scene 1. Cashel, Ireland; December, 1100.

Muirchertach and **Maol Muire Ua Dúnáin**, Archbishop of Midhe, later joined by **Lafracoth**

Muirchertach: Three years and more on this very rock of Cashel,
We took stock and counted it good fortune
our *anam chara*
had joined a pilgrimage to Rome.
Now we are elated
Archbishop of Midhe
noble senior of Eriu,
the new pope has designated you
his first legate to our shores.
Welcome home.

Maol Muire: I thank thee, Sire.

Muirchertach: Tell us of the world,
at least the part that declares
we are barbarians who press
the very margins of *outré mer*.

Maol Muire: That world alone is too large to compass,
but then they are barbarians to Byzantium.

Muirchertach: Come. At least about earth's mystery,
let us be clear,
and impose upon *terra incognita*
as secure a boundary as may be.

Maol Muire: It was the journey of my life,
an interdiction of all I premised
about human souls given to Our Lord.

Those with whom I traveled from Languedor
to Languedoc
became my dearest friends—
folk, common and courtly,
mingled as never before.
A hosting
to inspire heroic lore—
Christ's warriors amassed from
many coasts and hinterlands
wending in procession to Jerusalem
in answer to the call of Urban,
second of that name.

I heard him proclaim the Holy War
as he had at Clermont
only one year before.

We kept company until he parted for Rome,
I followed him soon after.

Muirchertach: Pope Urban cannot but be admired.
His predecessor was mired in this controversy
of investiture and so squandered political capital
while bent on making vassals of emperors
instead of the faithful.
What power Gregory might have reached.

But how did Urban move so far beyond
reconciling the church with Just War
to sanctify this violence?

Maol Muire: I will tell then what he preached to the Franks:

*A race absolutely alien to God has invaded the land of Christians,
has reduced the people with sword, rapine and flame. These men have destroyed the altars
polluted by their foul practices....*

*On whom, therefore, does the task lie of avenging this, of redeeming the situation , if not on you ,
upon whom above all nations God has bestowed outstanding glory in arms , magnitude of heart ,
litheness of body and strength to humble anyone who resists you.*¹

Muirchertach: No denying it's a fine exhortation,
aimed at fear
with much appeal to grand delusions
of Norman and Frank alike
but not enow to transform pacific creed
which espoused The Peace and Truce of God
(at our expense and greater frustration)
and mobilize such an expedition
of men and women and children
more perilous than any in history.

Was there not more to his strategy?

Maol Muire: Indeed there was, for he proclaimed:

*Let those who in the past have been accustomed to spread
private war so vilely among the faithful advance against the infidels...Let those who were
formerly brigands now become soldiers of Christ, those who once waged war against their
brothers and blood relatives fight lawfully against barbarians; those who until now have been
mercenaries for a few coins achieve eternal rewards.*²

Muirchertach: Ah. No earthly king could make this promise.
It is inspired. Many knights for hire

¹ This translation of Robert the Monk's version of Pope Urban II's sermon at Clermont is represented in T Asbridge (2004): The First Crusade, p 1.

² This translation of Fulcher of Chartres' account of Pope Urban II's proclamation by FS Ryan is represented in Asbridge, p 36.

would take the cross
for the remission of their deadly sins.

Maol Muire: Would that I remained in company
of those right brave souls
evinced in faces alight by simple faith
moved to venture in hostile places
so far from home
captained by their own courage
while leaders more remote
connived in complex treachery.

I remember one especially,
no mercenary he,
a visionary dreamer,
a noble so learned he was called Grammarian,
aspiring cleric,
attached to Duke Robert's band.
He missed his wife and daughter terribly –
could speak of nought else
save little Matilda
but had been made to understand
the holiness of the cause
and goodness of the sacrifice—
so it seemed to all of us then,
and urged them on with prayer and huzzahs:
“God's Will! God's Will.”

He did not return—

‘Twas said he served honorably,
succeeded in single combat
against a Saracen,
only to die in Antioch's siege.

I miss our talks.

Muirchertach: Some perished thus at Antioch,
Others from cold and starvation
before it fell to Bohemond,
who now makes himself a city-state
abandoning the crusade.

Hmm.

What of his soul?

Maol Muire: I cannot know.

Muirchertach: And what of Duke Robert,

if he should gain his soul
by this holy gambit
but lose all Normandy
to ambitious brothers?

Maol Muire: An excellent joke, majesty.

Muirchertach: Heh, do you think so? Well—please continue,
“From Languedoc”—

Maol Muire: From Languedoc
I proceeded to Rome,
there to advise how matters
really did stand in Eriu,
as was my duty.

Muirchertach: We are ever grateful
that after Urban died
Pope Paschal commissioned you as papal legate
and created an avenue for reform,
a little removed from Canterbury.

Maol Muire: Archbishop Anselm was occupied
with too much else my appointment to contest:
he was in exile, his quarters not far from my own
his days spent in writing

Why God Became Man
or soliciting support
in his dispute with King William, Rufus called.
And Urban, still Pope, enlisted him in hope
he’d mend the Great Schism
between East and West.

Still he could not have been especially pleased.

Muirchertach: Of course he was not pleased.
He wants Canterbury to have hegemony—
and not just over the Viking See of Dublin,
already *un fait accompli*,
but the country entire,
a proposition to every Rí, most alarming.
Nay, the reforms he advocates for Eriu are too draconian;
while the panoply of armor which you would fit
on God’s island warriors
more malleable far.

(Enter **Lafracoth**)

Muirchertach: Ah. Here is my daughter. Much grown we think
since you made known to her the catechism.

Lafracoth: Noble Sir. Your Grace.

Accept my gratitude
for thy safe return home.

Maol Muire: Can this Great Lady be her?

Muirchertach: Are you not astonished?

Maol Muire: I am indeed.

She has, I am informed by fellow clerics,
outstripped her teachers
including me,
who were once pleased to acquaint her
with rudiments of Christian faith.

(*to Lafracoth*)

I understand you have helped transcribe John Scotus,
providing erudite commentary.

Lafracoth: Not all find his ideas congenial.

Maol Muire: A pity. He has such native vitality.

He may indeed fall out of favor,
especially in foreign lands—

Lafracoth: Then let us savor and save his grand vision whilst we can.

Maol Muire: I fear we must acknowledge anon
the universal governance of more exclusive canon.

Lafracoth: On that matter I would confess myself—

Maol Muire: Knowing thee, I suspect ‘profess’
is verb more apt.

That said, I am as eager as ever
to hear thy learned opinion.

Lafracoth: Then I shall be Guanilo to thine Anselm?

Maol Muire: Perhaps no longer an analog apropos.

Of late, instead of esoteric argument on God’s perfections,
Anselm is bogged in the controversy of investiture
and for his comfort pretends an opponent in his cell
he might more easily quell than William Rufus;
he’s named ‘Boso’

and examines the Archbishop closely on doctrinal matters.

Lafracoth: Be it so? Well, after all,
it is a matter of doctrine I mean to submit
for our consideration.

Maol Muire: Bless me.

Like the fabled philosopher’s stone thou art.

Thou had always power enow to stir my doubts—
by some insistent alchemy,
transform my perspective
if not my core belief.

Say on, but know good lady I am wary
of further entrapment,
like a unicorn already in
captivity, however sweet.

Lafracoth: Then, I earnestly entreat, thou would give heed
as would the best of steeds
within the mythic bestiary.

Maol Muire: Good lady, I will listen.

Lafracoth: Contrary to interpretation of gospel passage
made lucid during my indoctrination,
must I now believe whilst in Gethsemane,
Jesu meant Peter only to sheath his sword
from present defensive rage
keeping himself,
disciples then and in a future age
continent from violence—

only until such time
they be called as vassals
to unleash a holy war?

This goes farther than Augustine.

Muirchertach: Ah. She is opposed to the crusade,
even though God's warriors
now consolidate victory in Jerusalem.

Maol Muire: Nay my king, she speaks truly
there has been change.
One John of Mantua
created just such a spin
on Our Lord's acts within the Garden.

Lafracoth: It is a vicious masquerade
of hatred, greed and fear disguised as Christian.
It is ill-will empowered over all Christendom—
and beyond—
with iron clad muscle and merciless militancy.

Oh tell me, will this new creed
permit the smallest bit
of blessing
for the peacemaker?

Muirchertach (to Lafracoth): Ah thy tongue slips its reins

and occasions darkness
upon our dear priest's visage.

Maol Muire: I fear am tired from my journey
and have little wit left to sustain
my contribution to worthy argument.

Lafracoth: Forgive me my dear,
good priest of my childhood,
braving our inattention to thy comfort.

Maol Muire: There is no offense to forgive.
Nor does bravery consist in exchanging
views made frank but not acerbic,
with one so gracious
and generous in concession
to an enfeebled cleric.

Lafracoth: My youth's confessor
surely must crave leave
to withdraw for now.
and in truth gladly I do give it
on condition I elicit
before he goes,
his solemn vow to return
another time.

Muirchertach: Aye. We will talk anon,
and annex from each other
more conceptual territory—

Lafracoth (*to Maol Muire*): -- but dear heart,
only when thou art fully rested and refreshed—
may thou call for me next, and at thy leisure.

Maol Muire: I will right gladly take my leave
and seek such repose as may be given me.
But grant me first I make a kind of answer
to the latest question posed
now weighty on my mind
and so, a little relieved,
I may hope to rest me better.

Muirchertach: Which question do you mean?

Lafracoth: Why father, mine:
'Will there be blessing for the peacemaker?'

Maol Muire: Aye, Lady. The very one.
I fear no blessing henceforth
save when the peace is made
among orthodox Christians
warring with themselves,
then only if papal authority

be acknowledged supreme.

In truth,
my own doubts about this holy war
bestir me with anguished dreams—
have done—
long before today's encounter
with my Lady Catalyst.

In the hours between Matins and Lauds
I am at odds with that burnished day
when furnished we a pilgrimage with bloody sword,
and holy purpose embraced with one accord.

Muirchertach: It is commonplace:
the disabling dreams
confessions of warriors
make for their confessor
though once confessed and penance assigned
each man in arms sleeps like a babe.

Maol Muire: I have heard no confessions
only rumors of atrocity.

I learned from itinerants—
more gaunt and grim than
I had ever seen before—
how throngs of common folks
amassed for crusade
and hope of penance
in the north
were persuaded to enact
their role, scourge of God,
long before attaining the Levant,
ere even they came upon Cologne
and Worms and Mainz—

Muirchertach: Well and what of it?
There can scarcely be a hosting without
foraging, a little pillaging
if not depredation
of one or two villages
along the way.

Maol Muire: Sire—

Muirchertach: Were the clans
of the Rhineland
not prepared to give
hostages and tribute
to the advancing lords?

It could only have been expected,
though the right of sanctuary
should have afforded some protection—

Lafracoth: Sire—

Muirchertach: Nay it is how war be waged—

Well do not let it vex thee more,
nor devote it time meant for rest.
It is, God willing,
one war remote from us.

So mindful of thy condition,
we conclude this audience
my friend.
Another day,
hear thy pilgrimage to its end.

(**Maol Muire** *exits*)

Muirchertach: Remind me, daughter, why you style yourself, ‘Lafracoth’?

Lafracoth: It is my *nom de plume*, if you will, when I am invited to scribe
or else my presentation to like-minded scholars, of lesser degree,
who should not be daunted
by my royal heritage,
and presume to shrink from challenging me fully in elenchus.

Did you know there is talk of a Book of Glendalough?
An exciting prospect, if and when,
though none will rival Kells.

Muirchertach: Well, well. And can you tell me how
goes the important work you oversee of our court historians?

Lafracoth: Slanted, father. I do not mean the letters.

It is eulogy, unabashed, to thy great grandfather,
Brian Bóruma.

As hero-worship, it has enchantment.

As history, there is more to recommend the royal trash.

Muirchertach: Mór, A splash of propaganda
for clan Uí Briain does not aggrieve me,
nor, by God, should it my daughter.
They write it thus at our insistence.

We borrow Bóruma’s tale,
vying with Vikings,
at Clontarf, where he lost his life,
to inspire partial adherents
as well as modern foes at striking distance

and by such poetic means legitimize our claim
to be Ard Rí of Eriu, entire.

We are subject to divisions,
petty but intractable,
and so are vitiated,
unready to withstand
Norman intrusions or Norway's expansion,
sanctioned by the demands of Rome.
We will, in days to come rue our disunity.
Ah well, confusion to our enemies, daughter.

Lafracoth: I do gladly drink thy cheer, dear father,
but I am ever mindful of lessons learned at thy knee
that alliances need shift
to ensure the balance of power.
Who then should I consider enemy
when yesterday's foe is tomorrow's friend
admitting no rift in close relations
and patching over an indelicate history?

Indeed, I have a matter very near this topic
to submit to my Lord's attention
and so propose a toast deemed less myopic:
non omnis confundar
let us not be wholly confounded.

Muirchertach: Why that is well said, my daughter.

I should not be astounded by the message you now convey
regarding matters most politic.
Ever have you been keenly perceptive
of who at any moment is in play
who it is that postures only,
who constrains real power,
and what be the less apparent stakes
in whatever game's afoot.

Was it not you, after all who, sought out
the successor of Patrick
to intercede between Muman and the north?
I, deprived of my due time for bereavement
at the loss of two mothers in so short a span,
was in a state of high dudgeon
incited by our enemy's most recent incursion
and not disposed to any semblance of peace.

Lafracoth: The successor of Patrick

was ever a friend to Eriu, entire.
He holds a holy vision in which hosting,
burnings and hostage-taking might cease.
Muirchertach: Ah. Domnall, this same patriarch,
now six years past, first traveled to Cashel
from Armagh to collect his full fixed tribute
and receive other such offerings
he deemed voluntary
but were indeed bribes vouchsafed him
from our coffers.
Satisfied on this account,
he nonetheless did not refrain to rebuke,
mustered bedizened affect on his wizened face,
which made the desired impression
upon all present save this skeptic king,
and declaimed:
“In annals too often I see inscribed the words
Cremate sunt.”

He has ever since been the thorn in our side.
We have worried about his influence on you
but for now let that point be moot.
You were patient and persuasive
tended us though our rage
and by counsel good and true
enabled us to see the folly of maintaining
so many men in arms upon the northern frontier.

Lafracoth: That very theme, I must evade no longer.
I will disclose the means by which an enemy is made friend,
a frontier more secure,
a daughter’s heart and mind husbanded
beyond the excellent husbandry
her father extended to her in childhood.

Muirchertach: Heh? What then, good daughter?
Would thou believe we have lived so fully
we are inured to any surprise?
Do not leave us thus suspended. Say on.
Nay do not.

Wait a while
upon further elaboration,
for though it will truly please us
to learn the details of how our learned Mór
has taught her heart to conform
to our greater ambition,
we are father, as well as king,
who through the lens of his misgivings

cannot help but discern
the threat of further loneliness
impending.

Lafracoth: Astute father, shrewd sire,
I should not marvel my conceits
are found out so readily.
Yet there be no need for this regret.
We shall post a steady correspondence,
And I will be apprised of how Muirchertach
carves his niche in history
with many brave hostings, to be sure—
and just decrees—
more urgently, letters he must fill:
how he thinks
a synod should be conducted
which preserves
the best of our traditions
and mounts unwavering defense
for freedoms in our faith,
while embracing reforms that improve
the lives and lots of all his people.
Yet still in each letter
must he leave room sufficient to tell
how my brother fares in governance of Áth Cliath,
the latest high-jinks of my young sister,
the ladies most appealing at court
and each and every reverie he has
on the struggle of the *Gaedhil* and *Gaill* ¹
by his warm hearth in Cashel.

Nor is the kingdom to which my love
will be restored so remote
to prohibit frequent visitation.

Muirchertach: Dear Mór, take and hold fast
thy doting father's promise
our correspondence will be abundant
as any harvest of mast.
Thy father's wishes on this score
comport well with thine own;
but, pray, have no expectation that king and retinue
will ever resort to the distant shore
in Cambria.
True, it is not so many leagues across the sea;
but thou knowest full well
absence of the king affords sport,

¹ The approximate pronunciation is **Gay-ill** and **Guy-ill**

for all sorts of mischief makers
in extra- and intra-mural varieties,
not least of which is insurrection.

Lafracoth: Father, I speak not of Cambria—
Why have us so far removed?

But I remember me now. Mayhap I am in love
but I am also in my king's presence
where, in accordance with his prudence
in statecraft and sovereignty,
my head must rule and my heart abide.
Muirchertach's presentiment of power,
how it is distributed and curbed,
brooks no disturbance in the field
of his political perceptions,
resists corrupting affections,
affords him no leisurely best wishing
with heart-felt glow in heaving breast
nor shedding of a joyful tear,
nor bestowing his blessing in advance of nuptials
which perforce have royal implications.
Poor father become a terrible king,
behold I am thy dutiful daughter,
sensible of the burden of the crown
on that dear hard head beneath.

Here is thy Mór, loyal servant to the Ard Rí
who even for love would not have thee
put aside those instincts upon which thou hast relied.
They have served thee faithfully.

Therefore, if he be married to my liege lord's daughter
yet seems this Conor still too popular and potent in Midhe,
then let me share his exile in Glendalough.

Muirchertach: Daughter. Hold there.
Give thyself pause. Take heed.
Thy father is reproved
by thy good sense and eloquence
in pleading so heartfelt a cause.

Consider this person, thy father:
betimes bold,
on occasion passing for wise,
hard-headed but in fine fettle,
at his peak,
prepared to overreach himself,
God willing,
for the sake of Eriu.
Yet he is not all cunning and strategy

as thou imply.
He remains devoted to thy mother,
for instance.

Yet we admit thy early utterances
carried promises of a surprise
not altogether agreeable,
and, therefore, did serve
to put us on our mettle.
As thine arguments evolved,
we were confirmed
in our surmise, all doubt removed:
that thou had made an attachment
we cannot sanction.

The young man—
Conor, though no heir-apparent,
is respectable enough, we suppose,
mayhap too bookish and devout,
but still the means of a suitable alliance,
as thou claimed, with Midhe,
especially now,
that the old king is deposed.
We agree on the major point:
thou would not be married
beneath thy station.

What has not been configured
in thy considerations is the wider world
that presses closely upon our shores.
Norway has been on the move
and winters even now in Man,
heart-set on more than forays against us.
That much is widely known.
Ah well, we have vied with Vikings before.
What disturbs our rest is England
and its uneasy Norman king
whose lordlings' appetite for conquest
remains unappeased
and will propel them either outwards
or else towards him.
Ensuring the latter trajectory
must be our aim.

Lafracoth: Rather let us buttress ourselves against
these onslaughts.

Do not permit the opportunity to slip away
Make a working peace between south and north

Muircheartach in Leth Mogha
and Lochlann in Leth Cuinn.
Make a hosting around the lands thy kingship serves
not for plunder and hostage collection
to achieve temporary consolidation of power
under one high king
but to erect the means of mutual protection.

Muircheartach: Do these things: strengthen our connections
and give unswerving support
to our daughter in her choice of mate?
It is not our plan.

Lafracoth: It is *un fait accompli*
in thy daughter's eyes
and in the eyes of God.

Muircheartach: The matter is already settled.

(**He signals for Guards** who enter and approach)

Whatever attachment you believe you have made
will be annulled.

By matins, bring here all you will need
to board ship and journey across the sea,
include a suitable gown,
for you are to wed Lord Arnulf.

We will dispatch warriors to Glendalough
to secure anew our former hostage
whose safekeeping now is in your hands.
You will not oppose your father and your king.

(**Lafracoth** is escorted away by **Guards**. **Muirchertach** still present. Lights reveal **The Archivist** as **Anselm**. At the opposite end of stage, in shadows, the **Assistant** is standing behind **Maol Muire**, who is seated on a cot.)

The Archivist as **Anselm** (reading a letter to **Muirchertach**):

*One thing is said to be common among the people whom you have undertaken to rule, Which is urgently in need of correction as being altogether contrary to Christian religion. It has been said to us that men exchange their wives for the wives of others as freely and publicly as a man might exchange his horse for a horse or any other property; and that they abandon their wives at will and without any cause. How evil this is, any man who knows the law of Christ will understand. If Your Excellency is unable himself to read the passages in Holy Writ which condemn this wicked traffic, give an order to the bishops and religious clerks in your kingdom to expound them to you: so that, having known their teaching, you may know with what zeal you must be vigilant to correct this abuse.*¹

¹ This translation of Anselm appears in A Gwynn, SJ (1980/1992): The Irish Church in the 11th and 12th Centuries, p 108.

(Lights fade on **Muirchertach** and **Anselm**; rise fully on **Maol Muire** and the **Assistant**)

Assistant: Thomas Asbridge,
modern day historian of the First Crusade,
cites one Latin who was contemporary:
(puts on a medieval scholar's hat):

I know not whether by a judgement of the Lord, or by some error of mind, they rose in a spirit of cruelty against the Jewish people scattered throughout these cities and slaughtered them without mercy....asserting it to be the beginning of their expedition to Jerusalem and their duty against the enemies of the Christian faith.¹

and another Rhineland historian
not far removed from events in Mainz,
by name, Albert of Aachen:

Breaking the bolts and doors, they killed the Jews, about 700 in number, who in vain resisted the force and attack of so many thousands. They killed the women, also, and with their swords pierced tender children of whatever age and sex....Horrible to say, mothers cut the throats of nursing children with knives and stabbed others, preferring them to perish thus by their own hands.²

(Lights fade first on the **Assistant** and then on **Maol Muire**)

Scene 2. The Lecture Hall.

The Assistant, alone.

(reads M1101§5): *A meeting of Leath-Mogha was held at Caiseal by Muircheartach Ua Briain, with the chiefs of the laity, and Ua Dunain, noble bishop and chief senior, with the chiefs of the clergy; and on this occasion Muircheartach Ua Briain made a grant such as no king had ever made before, namely, he granted Caiseal of the kings to religious, without any claim of layman or clergyman upon it, but the religious of Ireland in general.*

Scene 3. An Abbey in Cashel.

Lafracoth at work, alone in a Scriptorium.

Lafracoth: My soul
and my perception of me
are too much askew.

But maybe he did not think
we were quite so blurred as that—
maybe in his eyes, whilst we loved,

¹ This translation of Albert of Aachen appears in Asbridge, p 85.

² Ibid, p 88.

we coincided enough to allow
the pretense there could be
no discrepancy.

In my dream of him last night
the cornering of his lips
was my sole concern
and filled me up with a flourish

I was nourished on that bit of him
discovering there a line
of once familiar poetry
reading it anew
and for the first time
trembling before the revelation
that things skimmed over before
could suddenly acquire such import.

I read the verse over and over
until its intimations of his body
were clear to me.

Wretched thought
that he lies there without me,
sleepily concealed
beneath the coverlets
the kiss I left to mark my place
no longer subject to renewal.

How can I survive
the wrenching from his side?
Merciful God. I fear I cannot.

No part of me shall endure
further mention, nor report
save as political expedient,
Lafracoth become a kind of soldier
rushed off into alien prospects,
to lodge herself, unwilling,
in a Norman fort.

*(A **Messenger** appears in the Scriptorium and receives a sheet of vellum from **Lafracoth**. The **Messenger** crosses over to **Muirchertach** in the throne room and delivers the first of the illuminated capitals: L. The **Messenger** bows and retreats hastily.)*

Muirchertach: How now, what is this vellum?
A letter from Anselm,
flattering me with the appellation
Rex Hiberniae?
An ultimatum from Magnus?
Nay it is none of these.

It is an “L”
a single capital,
but well crafted
in majuscule
and adorned with pretty illuminations.
Let me examine each more closely.
These figures at the lower reaches,
conjure an image of scholastic endeavors
a magister surrounded by clever scholars....
Up a little, outside the vertical of the letter,
a man and woman in ardent embrace.
On the other side atop the horizontal
a woman in fetters
cast down, disgraced
a knight standing over her,
in manner conveying
he thinks him her better
holding a banner with a dragon motif
gazing at a distant mast on a stormy sea.
Above it all, leviathan with a crown,
an inscription engraved for his renown.....
Rex Hiberniae.

Act III.

Scene 1. Pembroke, Wales; 1101.

Nest and Lafracoth, both pregnant.

Nest: My Lord Arnulf, your husband,
had as mother one named Mabel
who afforded hospitality more toxic
than a weasel deprived of its babes.

Lafracoth: I cannot pretend to understand
the allusion. Weasels have no venom.

Nest: Do they not in Eriu? Welsh weasels do for certes.

Prepared am I with ineluctable proofs.

Why, once in Pembroke, the Constable
discovered baby weasels in a sheepskin.

These he removed, with no intent to harm,
to a safer place, but one unbeknownst to their dam.

Occupied outside, Sir Gerald had heard
such frenzied scampering and scurrying
within and whimpering too, he was alarmed
and hastened to investigate the matter,
but, like the cunning soldier he is wont to be,
delayed re-entry and observed all that transpired
whilst hidden behind the door he'd left ajar
which enabled him to peer from the crevice.

It was Mother Weasel who thought her brood dead,
became bereft, and, seeing in the deed the hand of my husband,
sought revenge by spitting her venom
into milk set aside in a jug for Maurice, our son.

Straightaway came Gerald and disclosed the marvel to me.

A portent for our family, I affirmed.

I urged that he make amends

and by reparative stratagems ensure there be no hostility
between our emergent clan and that of the weasel.

I bid him, therefore, make haste to return the sheepskin
with the squirming babes,

which charge Gerald quickly dispatched
ere the mother came

to visit once more the scene of her despair.

Upon her return, *Mère Belette*

rejoiced that the hostages were released.

In relief and gratitude, herself eased

from fretting by the comfort

she provided her recovered babes

she was inclined no longer

to invoke *lex talionis*

set forth by animal nature,

weasel no less than human.
She spilled the infected milk
on to the rug on the floor,
where it was absorbed, no longer a menace
that could sicken and kill our son.¹

Lafracoth: Good Nest, a story ably told
I must confess.
Yet do not keep me longer in suspense
For there was to be another application
of this fable,
or so I believe.

Nest: Bless my soul, there was another tale
I had scarcely commenced
before I permitted my own digression.
And that story holds much import for thee
in understanding thy husband better.
Know then that Arnulf's mother was Mabel
whose ancestry
was that of the house Alençon.

Lafracoth: I know scarcely more than her name.
From the subject, my husband holds himself aloof
and will not speak much of her at all;
but it contented him
to show me a copy of her epitaph,
which he stipulated
should to memory be committed:

“Sprang from the noble and the brave,
Here Mabel finds a narrow grave;
But above all woman's glory,
Fills a page in famous story,
Commanding, eloquent, and wise,
And prompt to daring enterprise;
Though slight her form, her soul was great,
And, proudly swelling in her state,
Rich dress, and pomp, and retinue,
Lent it their grace and honour due.
The border's guard, the country's shield,
But love and fear her might revealed,
Till Hugh, revengeful, gained her bower,
In the dark December's midnight hour.
Then saw the Dive's o'erflowing stream
The ruthless murderer's poignard gleam.
Now, friends, some moments kindly spare,

¹ The story of the mother and baby weasels told here by Nest was adapted from one actually recorded in Gerald of Wales: The Journey Through Wales translated by L Thorpe in 1978, p149.

For her soul's rest to breathe a prayer.”¹

Nest: Those lays were tailor-made
by persons she knew in nearby Troarn
whether they were true in friendship
or sycophants, I cannot say.
Doubtless, her enemies would alter the couplets some,
would leave “commanding”
and “prompt to enterprise”
but would favor “evil” over “daring”
and stitch a different embroidery altogether,
There is no question whether the monks
of St. Evroul esteemed her:
not at all, judging from the character
they recorded
within their monastery walls:
“wicked, unnatural and cruel.”
The Hugh of the poem, others would say
had cause for enmity.
He was styled Seigneur de la Roche Igé
despoiled of his rights
and deprived by Mabel
of his castle-home.
They say her body was found mutilated,
the assassin and his brothers fled
from Normandy,
Mabel's sons in lathered pursuit.
which ended in futility
for the fugitives escaped.

Lafracoth: I have learned her sons' names and titles:
Robert of Bellême, who succeeded his father to the Norman estates,
and his brother Hugh, as Earl of Shrewsbury and Arundel.

Nest: Dread that one, my lady,
a dragon in his lair.
He has acquired power
beyond belief
but dares to dream of more.
Why he is scarcely able, for two months together,
to contain his cruel ambitions
on the marches of
Gwynedd and Powys,
yet, contain them he must
and rein his hostile nature

¹ This translation by Forester of Ordericus Vitalis is represented in T Montgomery (1863): A Genealogical History of the Family Montgomery p20 n 5.

in order to effect an unholy alliance
with those Welsh kings.

Once before, when the Conqueror died,
he favored the Duke of Normandy
in succession to the crown of England.
For love of the father who yet lived,
had served his own so well,
and who was willing to make an intercession
with William Rufus,
and as concession to the Duke
that new monarch, though much vexed,
forgave House Montgomery
their indiscretion, deposing none.
Yet now I fear Robert draws his brothers
into novel schemes and seditious
as they pronounce "Henry Rex"
in tones of derision
and oppose "a pretender" who will succeed
in spite of their machinations.
This time their opposition will not be brooked
nor treason over-looked.
I know Henry Rex too well to doubt it.
He took me to see the tapestry
woven by subject hands
that celebrates
how commenced
his father
across the Channel
to conquer English lands,
and so with this exhibition of power
Henry commenced to conquer me.

As concubine, I bore him a son.

Lafracoth: And Gerald, thy husband? Is he complicit?

Nest: He is loyal. I know not to whom other than me.

(A Guard, passing by, pauses. Nest falls silent)

He keeps his own counsel
and declares he will mind
his duty to his rightful lord.

Lafracoth: A shrewd declaration worthy of a soldier,
whose fealty needs be fluid.

Nest (*whispers*): Lady pray thee say no more,
I have misgivings
and fancy a glimpse of shadow
receding cautiously from our door.

Lafracoth: Come practice me further
in my new family history.

Let me see, next be
Roger, who has his father's name,
Earl of Lancaster, and Count of Marche by his marriage.
Phillip and Arnulf,
Of these eldest, middle and youngest only survive.

Nest: There are four sisters too, are there not?

Lafracoth: There are. Let me recall them:

Emma, an abbess—

Nest: Aye, her position fixed
through her father's endowment
of the convent called Almenèches,
at Mortrée,
which lies twixt Argentan and Sées
in Normandy.

Lafracoth: Maud who married Cornwall's Earl,
appointed since the ouster of the Britons there.

Nest: Earl of Moretan too, across the Channel,
and half-brother to the Conqueror.

Lafracoth: Mabel upon whom her mother's
own name was conferred,
who married Hugh de Château-neuf;
and Sybille—

Nest: —whose husband has from William Rufus
the civil honour of Gloucester.

*(The **Guard**, who has been lingering just out of sight beyond the threshold, finally continues on his way. **Nest** and **Lafracoth** both rise, look to the door, reassure themselves of their privacy)*

A formidable family.

Lafracoth: For certes, but how came thee
to say of their dam she was toxic as a weasel?

Nest: I fear I will earn from thee
an appendix to my name
Nesta Rhys ap Tewdr,
not would-be queen deposed
but *Quidnunc*,
disposed to shameless gossip.

Ah, well. Here is the full account.

Mabel had nought but hatred
for a certain family Giroie,
in Normandy before William
deployed his ships of conquest.
Her enmity for them gave her no rest
she even ensured miseries
for the monastics who
receiving beneficence
from Giroie
were endowed and invested
as, I mentioned, at Evroult.
It was an ongoing feud, I surmise,
with enmity lying mostly on Mabel's side,
for, in truth, now and again Montgomery
and Giroie kept cordial company.
So it was that a scion of the latter House,
recently returned from Apulia—
Ernauld d' Echafour was his name—
was flattered with an invitation
to visit Mabel and her Count
and accepted,
perhaps hoping fences to mend.
He arrived in the company of Gilbert
who was brother to Count Roger,
and likely guaranteed his safety.
But Mabel wanted no reconciliation
with House Giroie,
Her intent was not to entertain
and make amends but rather to destroy.
Accordingly she had poisoned both food and drink.
Forewarned of treachery and therefore wary,
Ernauld declined the proffered wine.
Gilbert, his companion, remaining uninformed,
innocently took and drained the cup,
ere he had dismounted his steed
ere even Mabel could intervene or plead
or devise excuse
he should not drink that fatal draught.
In pain and convulsed agonies
thy husband's uncle took to bed
dying three days later in Ernauld's stead.
Lafracoth: I think herein be explanation
of my lord's dread of dining
and hesitation in sipping any wine.
Nest: 'Tis true he mounts an oral defense
against flavors he deems odd

and oft defers partaking
until another agrees
to taste and test the peril;
but once assured,
he seems to make sufficient haste
through dishes he has come to savor.
Indeed in every sensory mode
he is highly defended.

His pedigree hardens him with
anticipation of threat at every turn.

Yet withal, betimes he seems
to boyishly expect
emergence of eternal beauty in nature
and so defects from Norman efficiency
in favor of cultivation,
a vexation to his brother.

To this paradox add another:
he risks impiety by taking amiss
the orthodox declaration of God's plan,
that heaven awaits the warrior
whose cruelty be directed against an infidel.

Nor can he be content save some durable good
be effected in this life
and not deferred unto the next.

Lafracoth: Tsk. There is no impiety in presuming
what, by right, ought to be.
Are we not so composed that we might find our way
in moral imagery,
though at every juncture we risk
malevolent transformation
into misdeeming wights
who savage one another
with too harsh judgments?
My sister, do not doubt we have within us
a moral nature,
susceptible of sculpting
by time and place, it cannot be denied,
but mostly by tender connections
in which we were betimes secured.
Circumstances of birth do but proportion
the contours of conscience

distinctly within the personhood,
never beyond recognition.

Nest: Yet, sister, there be no lack of those
who seem fully inured to compunction,
convicted entirely by raging passions
and self-serving aims.

Lafracoth: I cannot contest your claim.
Evidence for my sister's assertion
abounds both in Eriu and in Cambria.
But if anguish caused by men,
vicious and close-by, were insufficient to convince,
ample world remains where suffering
entailed by that ilk's design
too easily can be found
lending countless examples to cinch the argument.
Civilitas is a thin veneer.
Yet this be no proof against
readiness for moral engagement.

The Montgomeries, for example:
Mabel's mischievous brood
poised to exploit
vicissitudes in royal succession
or do they also harbor loyalty
to an overlooked and under-lauded
Lord Normandy
making common cause against
Henry, his brother and usurper?

Nest: To aver that one innate capacity
takes its place along with many others
in no way excludes the possibility
it will be repudiated
or simply allowed to languish.

Of the causes of House Montgomery
and their adherents
how these should be sorted
into categories of base motive
and noble reason
I cannot say.
Gerald is versatile enough, I must admit.
Arnulf is a handsome man who acquits himself well.
He seems to have mastered comportment
at least in the manner of Normans
and commits to bettering himself when he can.

I hope for your sake he is able in the bedchamber
and exhibits his passion uncorrupted
by continental modes of dalliance.

Lafracoth: Hmm. In truth, I have not encouraged
further demonstrations of *amour*
since we met our nuptial obligation.

Indeed I have no assurance of his affections
or sense even that I am betimes desired.

Nest: But what is discovered when you eavesdrop
whilst he composes for his scribe?

He seems always to enjoy correspondence
making rhyme and chronicling his adventures
but disdains his own hand
in preferment of more practised eloquence in lettering.

Lafracoth: Eavesdropping seems unworthy, Nest.

Nest: *Au contraire*, it is time honored in Cymru.

Stop me if you've heard already
the hearth tale of Gruffyd ap Llewelyn
how he shucked his lackluster pursuit
of creature comforts

and became, by eavesdropping,
fired with great ambition.

He after became king of all four realms,
empowered in Gwynedd and Powys too,
master of Morgannwg

dreaded in my own Deheubarth,
not to mention more distant lands
where dwelt Harold with his English brethren
before the full-blooded Normans came.

Lafracoth: Was he not betrayed by bluff and ruse, and when he fell,
was not his head sent to this same Harold to betoken peace?

I am ashamed to tell, my family history is likewise spoken:

Grand-père demanded such proof
that his rival was really dead.

I wonder though,
like the one delivered Tairdelbach,
did Gruffyd's head contain a wee mouse,
portending doom for Harold in future battle?

Forgive me, sister, and thank thee
for thy patience with unmannerly prattle.

As thou needs see,
in truth, I have hearth tales
of my own too ready to relate
when for my own improvement,
I should assuage my tongue,

thine estimable lessons on lore
 more perfectly to heed.
 In short, I have not heard any account
 of Gruffyd emerging from his boyhood
 and therefore beg thee to proceed.
Nest: Joy! Good sister Lafracoth,
 That both of us be storytellers
 who, accordingly, will while away confinement
 with minds enlarging as much as bellies.
 Spoke thee of an omen for Tairdelbach.
 I will tell thee of another.
 Gruffyd in his youth was said to be a sluggard
 insensible to any adventure which beckoned him.
 He eschewed the rugged out of doors
 to be sated on stew and ale at any pleasant hearth
 the closest one available.
 He had, however, a sister,
 whose unassailable determination
 was to have her brother spend himself
 among the elements on a new year's eve
 when those to signs attuned
 might learn how they will be fated.
 Gruffyd gravitated to a company
 intent on their cauldron
 where boiled morsels of beef.
 The cook declared how one particular piece
 surfaced persistently to the top
 no matter how oft driven down.
 To Gruffyd it augured his rising star,
 which stirring belief in royal destiny,
 brooked no further resistance
 but made him banish that habitué
 disposed to creature comforts
 and admit aught but prompt desuetude
 of former dissipations and derelict pursuits.¹
Lafracoth: Well-known the name Gruffyd Llewelyn
 and the reaches of his power
 before his house was put down.
 Not even in defeat was he ever grudged the acclaim
 he deserved from his enemies.
Nest: Just so and to this present time his memory
 cannot contribute to,
 but rather undermine, détente
 keeping alive hope of a nation's resurgence

¹ The hearth tale of Gruffyd rendered by Walter Map from which this has been adapted may be read in J Lloyd (1911/2004): [A History of Wales from the Norman Invasion to the Edwardian Conquest](#) pp 2-3.

and renaissance.

Come closer,
I will make thee *confidente*
and tell what happened
in the glint of torchlight
on the very tapestry that Henry showed
to make his conquest complete
over a loyal sister of a royal hostage held
by minions of the Norman crown.

Amidst coerced surrender of virgin body
I floundered, desperate to prevent my rising panic,
somehow endure.

Among depictions of Norman domination
my frantic eye searched until suddenly arrested,
and fixed upon
a woman who lore says fate contested
and, for awhile, dominated:
Aelfgiva of Northampton called,
who disdained not to use her sex
like an elvish gift
which so enthralled Canute
the Dane who bedded her.
She endured –
even triumphed for a time—
in disputes with her rival,
the wedded queen;
ensuring in Aelfgiva's time
her sons should survive
each of them
to wear a crown.¹

My aim in yielding
to the yoke of concubine,
than this Aelfgiva's
was, at first, more modest
and less contrived,
I admit:
merely to ensure the survival
of a dear brother.

Henry seems often to tire

¹ Argument for this identification of the mysterious Aelfgyva in the Bayeux Tapestry (upon which the above account relies), is presented in A Bridgeford (2004): [1066 The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry](#), pp 246-69.

of trophies won
and quit deed of his passion
will, temporarily, submit
to an estimable and favored retainer
whilst he moves on to savor
conquest of yet another.

He eventually saw fit
to marry me to the very Constable of Pembroke
who in Arnulf's keep had secured my brother.

Lafracoth: Oh Nest—I cannot but weep—

Nest: Nay, my Lady,
I must gainsay
sentiments I perceive to be
from thy heart already upon thy lips.

This be no confession,
by which I seek sympathy
nor by any other means
tip the scales and thereby
bitterness suppress—
it needs be nurtured still,
allowed to simmer like the stew
in Gruffyd's cauldron.

I mean only to convey
thou may find withal
to contain a conqueror
by dint of lover's arms
if not by else.

Scene 2. Pembroke; a short time afterwards.

Arnulf with a **Scribe**. *Later joined by Lafracoth who eavesdrops from a place of concealment.*

Scribe (*reading from notes*): Title this “In Saecula Saeculorum”
but add a *nota bene*, ‘no irreverence be intended’.

Designate he who crafts the poem,
Arnulph de Montgomery, Earl of Pembroke.

Arnulf: Nay, I am after all no earl,
though I have an earldom for my yoke.

Style me instead ‘The Castellan’

Scribe (*reading back the dictation*): *En delire, with febrile curiosity*

*soldier and savant
demurs before such prospects....*

Arnulf: It conveys a condition worse
and weakness more
perhaps than I should represent.
Leave that for now.

Proceed to the next verse.

Scribe: *Lo this sallow castellan,
whose quivering arrow
cleaves the concourse of winds....*

Arnulf: Do you think ‘sallow’ or ‘hallowed’ best suits
the theme here struck?

Scribe (*aside*): Luckless scribe to be charged
with complicity in this enterprise.

(to Arnulph) My lord, ‘sallow’
strengthens overall
the image of vitiation and plight
salient in one *leitmotif*
while ‘hallowed’, contrariwise, channels attention
to the station of nobility
attained in glory, to be sure,
ready for celebration and entry
into lyric and historic annals
for which *nihil obstat* no sooner was secured
than *imprimatur* was forfeit in the turn of events.

Arnulf: Why, that is a saying exceeding fine.

Scribe: Which, my lord?

Arnulf: “ready for entry...*nihil obstat*...” etcetera
Add then the line-

Scribe (*aside*): Now am I asked to conspire in the verse itself,
contributing to his bid for immortality
become a confederate for whom
anonymity through the eons
will not, tomorrow, prevent punishment
by those who will claim the victory
over House Montgomery.

Still it is cozier than the scriptorium,
where hunger vies with frostbite
for prominence among the sufferings
that crave relief.

I have had my fill of food and wine
and have only now to ward off
successive waves of drowsiness
to keep from dozing
in the caesura between his speeches.

Arnulf:

*Beneath sidereal smatterings,
wreathed in lunar glow,
he shivers for the warmth of stones
and presses close on rough creneaux*

*Before the lapse of heaven,
and the gods' attrition,
before mists convened
and layered between them,
she was auburn and autumn,
a prelude to his dreams.*

*His memory serves up
an amber scene-
a tambourine-
a view of ivy
scandent on russet walls
and cadescent torchlight,
manteled in the halls.*

*A beguiling pet
in an ornamented quince,
a marmoset's mischanter
evokes a smile,
a laugh, a wince
and invites her to its game.*

(Arnulf notices the Scribe has fallen asleep)

False, unworthy scribe,
are you in the House of Morpheus
or Montgomery?
How much have you omitted?
Let me look at what you've written.
Gobbledygook to me,
who, all unlettered,
is bettered by one of lower birth.
Get you gone out of my sight.

(Scribe exits).

*Of chattering frolic, enow.
Melancholy
the dame will not allow*

*folly to suborn.
The lady's dreams are shattered.
Furrows fix stubbornly on her brow.
Unhurried now her keening
no pause in mourning
no fear of interruption,
unless by tiny murmured gratitudes
for timely re-supply of tears.*

*Was there once an angelus
within this enclave
before the rending
as lords and thralls
prayed a fervent mass
to gain for him her favor?*

Lafracoth (*out of hiding*): Good my lord,
this night let me be thy learned scribe.

Arnulf: My lady?

Alice— is she unwell?

Lafracoth: Be not alarmed. All is well.

Our—my daughter—

Alice slumbers peacefully in her crib.

Arnulf: Then why, my lady,

will ye stumble about in the dark so late?

I intended for my spouse a lighter, warmer lair.

There is an evil draught, come from Powys,

and the corners of this castellany

are chock full of chill air.

Lafracoth: Afford me an opportunity to write down
the verses thou composest,

Begin again, “*an amber scene...*”

and as I write I will also discern

the deeper meaning concealed even as I have been.

Arnulf: Lady, I am grieved to be thus discovered.

My unschooled lettering is my shame.

You must take me for a fool.

Lafracoth: I take thee for a soldier-poet
who wants a scribe.

Arnulf: How for a soldier?

I am as thou sees me:

without armament or emblem.

Lafracoth: Socrates declared devotees were few
though many sported the emblem.

True thou hast no badge or banner,

but how thyself comports

with martial manner
were emblem enow.
Thy devotion to duty goes undisguised,
and upon that artful brow,
a frieze depicts high hopes of conflict.
So hast thou adorned the place of worship
wherein the cruelest deity abides
beyond pronaos of profoundest eyes.

Muirchertach was soldier once
and sailor too:
He was named 'sea-battler'
and given the governance of Dublin
when I was young.
His father Turlough saw his worth—
and conscripted Muirchertach's soul
to serve that city.
I doubt not my father- father's urgency
in having his son's conscience closed
and all pity effaced
for foes of sept Ua Briain.
Nor did my father fail to add
from the alembic of his imagination
his own love of stratagem and glorious deed
marvelously compounded
with great mettle
together with baser elements
of raging violence and cursed greed.
At length, he became a king with cattle,
land too and chattel property
earned from investment in my mother:
since her death, become
disposable income
to be leveraged by my liege
against his greater ambition.
Arnulf: He surrendered his daughter to a stranger.

Lafracoth: They coupled but made no rhyme.

Yet in fire-lit time since—
The soldier of fortune
En delire and febrile curiosity,
his family's motto *Garde Bien*
importuned a bit
with sentiments seldom evinced
in House Montgomery

and so off-guard and unawares—
found ways to please the lady in the grotto:
her ear took in the rough and tender verse
of his creation—
Whereupon the stranger
looked to her a little less strange.

Arnulf: Shall thou hear more of this man thy husband?

In a battle once of an early hour
I witnessed our infantry annihilate another....
A splendid field ripe for harvest,
enveloped with mist;
and the sun spilled gold largess on the terrain.
I was among a legion strong
possessed of a single will,
fighting for House Montgomery
(and then a rightful king)
wielding fisted sword against glinting shield—
What magic stilled the cowardice
of human flesh and bone
to yield that brave array?
How did my brother Robert, lately Earl,
engineer, command
and send that splendid juggernaut
hurtling against killing spray
of arrows and catapulted stone
to sweep the foe before it and win the day?
I long for aught
but one repetition more
before I'm dead—
a nearly precise refrain
vouchsafed a single variance:
God willing, Arnulf attaining glory
in his brother's stead.

Lafracoth: And only afterwards
would thou have thy soul confessed
for craving such sensations,
be deemed to make a good contrition,
blessed and sent to do thy penance.

Sir, these words to me
are too familiar
from dinner talk
at many an Ua Briain feast.

Arnulf: Are there not
among the ancient philosophers
of thine acquaintance
some, at least, who commend thy father's kind of service
as suitable preparation
for enlightened guardianship?

Lafracoth: Aye, there are, indeed.
Yet in reading them I cannot but conclude
if fitter service were rendered
than hewing a limb or two from an enemy,
the enlightenment at the end might be less dim.

There have been in both our worlds,
persons magnificently brave as warriors
whose hearts became sickened by perpetual war:
your father, my great uncle
who went on pilgrimage to Rome,
there to die.

Other souls there are among us
who do not need first to prove
their valor by dint of arms
before they abide by non-maleficence.

They profess to do no violence
indeed they strive to do no harm.
They say: mayhap fortune's foot
lays heavily on the treadle of my life,
and weaves me in a conspiracy of events
effecting outcomes injurious to me;
or again, that small part of the universal design
which I hitherto perceived
but dimly in outline, is a reticule
too modest in dimension to contain
my burgeoning despair;
or again those grand aspirations
youthfully conceived
to which time's passing has not inured me
but permitted to dwindle
to insubstantial points of reference;
or again and likely, thorns in the flesh disturb
my concentration on the difficult task
of sustaining my presence
among those in need;
yet do no violence. . . .
Though there be diriment impediment

to the consecration of my desires,
there is no treacle to be delivered
from a bloodied hand
that acts against my brother or myself
dripping venom
into the rivers of humanity
already outraged with pollution.

Arnulf: Thinks my lady there is a wellspring
somewhere spared by our countless generations?
A water that is borne unsullied
from an inviolate fountain,
or that denied, the means
by which one single stream might once more be pure?
Wherever we ladle our drink,
the drought is heady with accumulated poison
and violates each sense in turn.

Lafracoth: Yet, prithe allow,
some can, by painstaking discipline,
distill a fluid more palatable, less deadly,
still retaining essence enow
to sustain an abstemious life.
My good husband, wisdom seeks no more.

Arnulf: I have dreams I need to tell thee.
In the first, I glimpsed that pale steed
whose eyes gleam with sorrow.
I had but turned from the clamor and din
that passed somehow for merriment
and from the flow of wine and mead
that rendered arguments of both court philosopher
and courtesan loose and tedious.

Lafracoth: How confused we become in dreams.

Arnulf: Pray, does it lose its thread so soon?

Lafracoth: Why yes, my lord, for should it not be
the philosopher presented an argument tightly reasoned?
As for the courtesan, if she were loose,
she must also have been brief
and her argument the more provocative—

Arnulf (*laughs*): My clumsy telling provokes thy smile
and piques thy wit.

Lafracoth: Forgive me, it is the game I play with ideas,
I should not indulge had I better sense.
It was among my faults that most incensed Magnus
who had me expelled from court
and sent me packing back to Eriu.

Arnulf: Wit? It is no fault to have this charm.

Lafracoth: I am much relieved that I amuse
when in past I spoke and gave offense;
but I have failed in presence
and so, I fear, do harm the story of thy dream
an account thou suspended
for sake of my joke.
I would hear thee through right willingly
if thou would proceed.

Arnulf: In the dream, I disdain the feast
and direct my steps out to the parapet
Whereupon I espy the distant beast
poised atop a snowy embankment.
Motionless he seems
save when he wields his glinting horn
or stamps his cloven hoof to scatter
icy atomies amid the warp and woof
of an embroidering horizon.
Thereupon unfold scenes as in a tapestry.
Each completed frame
depicts mortals in *theomachy*
as single combatants and as a race
led forth by a champion
concealing his face.

Some mindful of apostasy
will wage this war no longer
and resign themselves to a jealous god
whose anger they cannot assuage
by mere surrender.

This unicorn intercedes
pleading restoration by a grace they had abused
and chooses their condign punishment for himself.

At once this clear image dissolves
and I am transported to higher ground
beyond the palace walls.
Bewildered I turn to see a harlequin with horrid features,
dight in fawnskin, instead of wreath it wears a crown,
a sword for its thyrsus but else inconstant in its form.
We are set above myriads of corvine creatures
amassed in rotor clouds, ready forth to storm.

This vision dissolves and is replaced:
I come upon artisans

in a desert place
who have wrought amphorae,
laid over with images of the unicorn.
These they fill with water—
but brackish and foul
could never be consumed—
and carry to a circle of stone.

Lafracoth: A semblance of human vessels
containing dross that must be deeply delved
and emptied out to make them fit again?

Good my husband,
these are penitentiary dreams
and not premonitions
yet ever riven with dread
of unbelief
and inevitability of sin.
Arnulf: They speak to our indebtedness
for promise undeserved.

Some declare
the moment at hand
when this unicorn will appear,
brandishing argent horn to break
such pottery into shards, shards into dust—
will strike hoof against sand
and a fountain will thrust up
in torrential reckoning
of water with air,
leap and plummet from towered mists,
make clean the broken earthen-work
mustered round,
re-form and redeem
the vessels newly made
with pure waters of enduring life.¹

I had a brother, Phillip by name,
most educated of all Roger's children.
We called him 'Grammarians'
or sometimes 'The Clerk.'

¹ Note: While The Unicorn Tapestries displayed at the Cloisters in New York City were not woven (in France) until later than the period of this drama, the presumption here is that familiarity with the lore and use of the symbology would have occurred much earlier in medieval times. At one time Deuteronomy 36:17 was interpreted as describing a unicorn.

and did not envy him
his scholarly pursuits.
Our mockery was fond,
and did not occasion his rebuke.
He was the best of us, and true,
nor did he shirk
Urban's call
to holy war.
He put aside his books
to accompany Duke Robert
on crusade to Jerusalem.

He died in Antioch.

Our father,
himself turned to God,
preceded him by three years,
Hugh by four
and so was spared the shock
of two sons lost in arms.

Lafracoth: Thou still grievest
the accrual of thy losses
of Phillip most especially, I think.

Arnulf: I own I oft think of him,
as I sink into my reveries
and barter with my destiny.

Lafracoth: When son we make,
in our next season
I should like him Phillip called.

Arnulf: Why then: because my brother
was martyred in the holy war?

Lafracoth: Nay for no other reason
than he was a grammarian who knew thy love.

Scene 3. The Lecture Hall

The Assistant.

Assistant (*reads from M1101§6*):

Muircheartach went round all of Ireland in the space of a fortnight and a month without battle, without attack, and he returned to his house by Sliagh Midhluachra. The expedition was called "the circuitous hosting."

Scene 4. Pembroke; Spring, 1102.

Nest and Lafracoth, the latter pregnant again, nearing her term, each nursing a babe en face. In the course of this dialogue **Gerald**, unobserved by either lady, enters and conceals himself in shadow.

Lafracoth: Alice, whilst I suckle thee,
thy gaze compels me with sweetest suasion
and in one single stroke,
raises, buckles and cinches the argument
there be intrinsic good:

‘From these avid eyes I infer
a precious soul, *simpliciter*’

Nest: Why lady, that is well said.
A pretty speech to a babe,
Will thou teach it me
so I am able to whisper it to my own?

Lafracoth: Lady, right willingly.

Lafracoth and Nest (together): ‘From these avid eyes I infer
a precious soul, *simpliciter*’

Nest: Thou makest gifts with words. I do thank thee.

(Enter **Nurses** who show respect, receive the babes and exit.)

Lafracoth: Dear Nest, let me pour thee
fresh wine and bid thee tarry over each sip
whilst I make unremitting complaint
of these, the bitter dregs of my latest confinement.

Nest: Merry, my lady carries this one with more ease,
and ripens well.

Lafracoth: I am made nearly mad
by this winter drear.

I long to stretch my legs
somewhere beyond the sight
of Pembroke’s keep.

Nest: Kind and gentle Mór,
Boreas’ invective and winter’s icy spit
will submit once more. Runnels long silent
already tunnel and roister
beneath their rimy clutch.

Those frozen crofts
the foal doth love betimes,
there to gambol or rimple the clover,
will once more in winnowed verdure
be arrayed. And there will parade

before our unaccustomed eyes
such excellent pageantry:
the gleaming spill of life,
excess everywhere,
unchecked extravagance,
licentious, reckless growth
filling vales, leaving rimose hills
unseamed.

Oh Lady.
We must make ourselves aright from giddiness
and draw back from an abyss.
Are we not on the very verge
of pagan invocation—

Lafracoth: Aye to some Cymric Dionysus
not quite the Areopagite converted by Paul.

Nest: Lo the suffering god
who rises against the tyranny of order
as snow must melt
and hiemal borders recede.
Witness the flowering bryony
proclaiming triumphant resurrection.
Rites we bring from the mountain
and sprays of oak and fir
to festoon the fountains of joy.
Rain rides roughshod
over spring spawned seed
and drowns ennui to unleash the soul.

Lafracoth: For aestival escapades maidens plead:
thyrsis, fawnskin, beaten drum
and ivy crowns
in nocturnal festival,
there to touch each part related to the whole....
Though unrequited love makes us restive,
far worse, far worse be unsatisfied need.

Nest: Goldhammers rise
from a bed of dittany
through windjamming pine—

Lafracoth: --pursued by the litany
of neighboring fowls
roused from watchful rest:
at sound of our joy,
jealous of their nests—

Dear Nest, my Nest, I fear,
this conjured vernal scene
becomes vertiginous
and quite unsteadies my gaze.
Pray help me to my quiet bed.

(**Gerald** *advances out of the shadows to help Nest support Lafracoth*)

Sir, I thank you.

Scene 5. Same; later.

Gerald *and Nest.*

Gerald: Nest, my wife, the exchange I overheard
was like a knife plunged into my breast.
At best it was unseemly and lacking virtue
at turns reflecting
a wantonness in both souls
which, by all that's holy,
should be expunged.
Thy lady and friend should sing the lays
of a once valiant knight
beleaguered by self reliance
in emulation of a brother,
which first made him champion
and then sustained him
on the sweetmeat of delusion
that his emptiness could be filled
by conduct under arms
and bids him anon
to undertake an ill fated quest.

For thy part,
hast thou pared thy virtue to minimum
in impotent self-consumption?

Nest: Aye, and have labored mightily for extinction
whilst accursed with indestructibility;
resolved to defiance and deliberate decline—
clear landmarks of my licentiousness.

Look beyond thy revulsion, husband;
it but masks profound hypocrisy.
Ask thyself whence came that gaze
appreciative of thin veils
and contours cunningly draped,

a demure affect and elegant gait,
tresses orchestrated around a stunning face,
practiced complexion and cultivated grace.
Dost think these enhancements
a gift from god or goddess
to render mortal intercourse more savory
and so secure for human males
some brief felicity?

Look to thine own gender
and thine own complicity with those
who fashioned woman to be possessed
depriving themselves of companionship.
For by these effects man has wrought a mirror
in which he sees the image
of his own voluptuous nature
thus magnified and isolated from his identity.
And woman dight in man's alterity
nevertheless breathes into it life
virtuously matured
in heartfelt suffering and anguish
that dignifies cosmetic artifice
with character and depth
that incites man to covet
her genuine creativity
and become jealous
of inessential fabrication.
Moved by lust, he paints himself
the apparition of his vanity.
Must I recount to one
whose inattentive ear
though it be marvelously attuned
to nuances in a feminine voice
is deaf by natural mechanics
or else by choice
to the outcry of tormented souls
whose sensuous compromises
enraged their incorporeal selves
and rallied too late
their phlegmatic wills
to make an effort more desperate
than voluntary
hastily contrived and ill compounded
from morality's depleted armory:
their forces at once confounded by the foe—
dispersed in thousands of atomies

upon collision with the fact of flesh—
yet have they more integrity than thee
who greets them with pious derision.

So if we are dight in fawnskin skirts
and our hair is done in ringlets
or else in braids
and we douse neck and nipple
with fragrant scents befitting comely maids
we are not women after all
though we comport ourselves in female frenzy.
Nay, we are ill-formed denizens
emerged from an abyss
man-shaped but woman-minded
who have no gender
save that which pleases those
whose brides indeed we are.

Scene 6. The Lecture Hall.

Lights reveal The Archivist in the Lecture Hall; the Assistant sitting while he speaks

The Archivist: With an understanding tempered
by the foregoing considerations,
one can envision an *ethos*,
perhaps in less idealized and pervasive form,
not unlike the one in which Novelist Tremayne
situates the fictional Fidelma.

Such an *ethos*,
one holding promise for fulfillment
may have operated to shape the expectations
of the woman history knows only as Lafracoth.
If so, her thwarted ambitions
might have brought to her mind the *mythos*
of an earlier time in bitter counterpoint.

Among the tales of the *Tuatha De Danaan*,
preserved in the *Ultonian Cycle*,
there is the striking story of Macha,
who is forced to race on foot
the king's prize winning horses
because her husband boasted she could best them:

So messengers went for Macha, and she was brought before the assembly; and she was with child. The king bade her prepare for the race. She pleaded her condition. "I am close upon my hour," she said. "Then hew her man in pieces," said the king to his guards. Macha turned to the bystanders. "Help me," she cried, "for a mother hath borne each of you! Give me but a short delay till I am delivered." But the king and all the crowd in their savage lust for sport would hear of no delay. "Then bring up the horses," said Macha, "and because you have no pity a heavier infamy shall fall upon you." So she raced against the horses, and outran them, but as she came to the goal she gave a great cry, and her travail seized her, and she gave birth to twin children. As she uttered that cry, however, all the spectators felt themselves seized with pangs like her own and had no more strength than a woman in her travail. And Macha prophesied: "From this hour the shame you have wrought on me will fall upon each man of Ulster. In the hour of your greatest need ye shall be weak and helpless as women in childbirth, and this shall endure for five days and four nights – to the ninth generation the curse shall be upon you." ¹

Perhaps, while close upon her hour in Pembroke,
all the time fearful of retributions
to be exacted by Henry I
because her husband, Arnulf,
had backed the wrong horse,
Lafracoth had occasion to recall Macha,
and envy her the potency
of her talionic curse.

Assistant (*reads M1101§12*):

*Maghnus, King of Lochlann, came to invade Ireland, as this quatrain testifies:
A year above one hundred and a thousand,
Without any danger of miscalculation,
From the birth of Christ of the pure religion,
Till the coming of Maghnus to Ireland.*

The Archivist: We should not begrudge a different point of view in sympathy with Magnus the Norwegian sovereign, put forth clearly enough in The Chronicle of Man and the Sudreys, (albeit the time-span is hard to reconcile with The Four Masters). On the Isle of Man, Magnus was poised to menace whomever he pleased, or to render assistance if he chose, as he might have done once when unruly Dubliners, Muircheartach aimed to subdue and install his son as Dublin's king instead of Godfrey. Why Magnus should support Mumu against a monarch from Viking stock, we have no clue. Suffice to say a pirate's loyalty blows with the wind

¹ This rendering of the Curse of Macha is represented in T Rolleston (1911/1990): Celtic Myths and Legends, pp178-80.

or seeks a course according to the strongest currency.
Magnus Barefoot is the same who harried the Normans in Wales,
themselves in expansion mode of manifest destiny.
It was Magnus, anchored off shore
who met the advancing Norman salient
quite by accident
and carried the day in Anglesey Sound:
disastrous day which ending found
Hugh the Proud poked mortally in the eye, drowned and dead
his troops routed in confusion and his retinue fled.

Assistant (reading from The Chronicle of Man): *[Magnus] sent his shoes to [Muircheartach], king of Ireland, commanding him to carry them on his shoulders through the house on Christmas day.*¹

The Archivist: It is a matter of speculation if Magnus came by the epithet 'Barefoot' by virtue of his habit of sending his sandals to be worn like epaulettes by former clients he deemed should formally submit. Now, let us continue our exercise in perspective taking. This time assume a Norman point of view drawn from the account contained in The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis.

A caveat is in order regarding Orderic, confused in temporal sequence conflated three expeditions of Magnus in the Irish Sea.

Assistant (reading Orderic Vitalis): *About that time Magnus, the mighty king of Norway, sailed round the islands of Britain and with a vast fleet occupied the uninhabited islands as far as Ireland....The Irish conceived a great distrust for him and tried to harm him by every means in their power, plotting to destroy their enemies by force or guile. So the noble minded king prepared an expedition against the Irish and approached the Irish coast with his fleet. Greatly alarmed by the king's might, the Irish sent for the Normans and Arnulf hurried to their aid with his retainers. But when they had all assembled they still feared the might of Magnus; they dared not engage in close battle with him, but instead applied themselves to plotting foul treachery against him.*

The Archivist: Orderic then attributes Magnus' death to the treachery of Muirchertach.

Assistant (resumes reading): *Finally some plausible and ready tongued envoys went to [Magnus] deceitfully, misled him with specious promises, and persuaded him to disembark with only a few men in order to inspect the province and receive its subjection. He, foolishly trusting the traitors, left his mailed squadrons on the shore and followed the scoundrels for two miles, inviting his own destruction. there he found huge troops of his enemies lying in ambush; they sprang from their hiding places and the bold Norwegian, who scorned flight, put up a valiant resistance. A few men could not fight off thousands. King Magnus turned to stand with his back against a tree and, protected by his shield, wounded many with darts he hurled; but he perished alas! overwhelmed by numbers.*²

¹ This translation of The Chronicle of Man and The Sudries by the Right Reverend Dr. Goss appeared in 1874 with historical notes by P Munch.

² Orderic Vitalis Vol. XI, book xi. pp 49-51, translated by M Chibnall, 1978.

The Archivist: An account worthy of Tolkien.
Heroic hyperbole aside,
here modern scholarship finds
Orderic quite mistaken—
in terms of where and when and why
Norway's king died.

It occurred in Ulaid in '03.
He and Muirchertach
had forces combined
in land and sea operations
against the North—
but these allies, uneasy no doubt,
experienced a great rout in battle
with Mac Lochlainn at Magh Cobha.
In our revised version,
Magnus was on predatory excursion
to capture cattle
and re-victual his ships
when his time-line was abruptly clipped
in the attack.

Assistant: *When the Irish had tasted blood by killing King Magnus and his companions they grew more unruly and suddenly turned to kill the Normans. Their king took his daughter away from Arnulf and gave the wanton girl in marriage to one of his cousins. He resolved to murder Arnulf himself as a reward for his alliance, but the latter, learning of the execrable plots of this barbarous race, fled his own people and lived for twenty years afterwards with no fixed abode.*¹

The Archivist: If, as we now believe,
Magnus was not killed until '03,
what earlier transpired in Ath Cliath?
In hope of finding a clue,
let us widen our scope to admit
concurrent events in England and Normandy.

Assistant: *In the year of our Lord 1101, the ninth indiction, Henry king of England was confirmed in his authority in the kingdom after making peace with his brother, Robert [Duke of Normandy, Robert Curthose]. Little by little he took steps to punish the traitors who had infamously deserted him in his hour of need. He summoned to judgement Robert Malet, Ivo of Grandmesnil, Robert of Pontefract the son of Ilbert of Lacy, Robert of Bellême, who was mightier than all these, and various others, and charged them, not all together but individually at different times, with the offence of violating their pledged faith in many ways. He imposed large fines on some of them who were unable to clear themselves of the crime laid to their charge, and disinherited and drove into perpetual exile others whom he considered still more suspect.*²

¹ Orderic Vitalis Vol XI. book xi p 51

² Ibid p 12.

(**The Archivist** appears to be in physical distress. **The Assistant** stops to help him.)

The Archivist (to his audience): Forgive me, a momentary discomfort. Embarrassing—
I beg your pardon (*laughs weakly*). Nothing so glorious as Magnus' last stand

Nor, I trust, so vitiating as the Curse of Macha—

(*lights fade*)

ACT IV

Scene 1. Áth Cliath; 1102

Enter Arnulf followed closely by Lafracoth, engaged in argument.

Arnulf: Disabuse yourself of the notion
that they deserve any consideration
beyond what menial tasks suit them
and how each is to be prudently employed.
These are Welsh, by heaven,
and scarcely remote from savagery.
For those who contest our rule:
should I devise the worst imagined torture
it would be but condign punishment.

Lafracoth: Are you become your brother's mouthpiece,
misshapen for effect, spewing invective I thought peculiar to him?
You are not so cruel as your spoken words.

Arnulf: My lady's empathic arousal was betimes congenial,
no worse than inconvenient until late.
This day it has become a dangerous extravagance.

Lafracoth: Husband, your theory of my mind needs much work, a major shift in paradigm.

Arnulf: Do you deny such sentiments engage your heart
as favor those who would bring us ruin?

Lafracoth: Not favor. Pray, let me convey my thoughts compleat.
I entreat you to do so and in so doing, understand me a little.
I do attest there are those declared our enemies
who nonetheless belong within the ambit of my conscience
and in whom, I believe, there resides something akin:
a happy condition favorable to compromise
if not yet common flourishing.
Acknowledging this salient among my beliefs,
I also profess there are contours of my character
less convivial, promoting my deep engagement
in the calculus of egoistic motivations
attuning me to outcomes wholly politic,
that might ensure the survival of our children.

Scene 2. The Lecture Hall.

The Archivist in a wheelchair and the Assistant who helps him to stand

The Archivist (to the Assistant): Thank you, no, I am quite capable –
still—

(reads from Orderic Vitalis pp. 21-23):

In the year of our Lord 1102, the tenth indiction, King Henry summoned the mighty earl, Robert of Bellême, to his court and after charging him with forty-five offences in deed and word committed against him and his brother the duke of Normandy, commanded him to answer publicly to each one. For a whole year he had had Robert watched assiduously and all his evil

deeds thoroughly investigated by private spies and noted down fully in writing. When Robert had asked for permission to go and consult with his men, as is customary, and on receiving it had left the court, he recognized that he could not possibly clear himself of the crimes laid to his charge. Quickly springing to his horse he fled, panic –stricken and breathless to his castles. The king waited with his barons for an answer until a royal servant brought back the news that Robert had fled without ceremony. The king was vexed at the deception, but knew for certain that the day of vengeance would come. He therefore publicly condemned Robert as a man who had been openly accused and had failed to clear himself by process of law, and pronounced him a public enemy unless he returned to do right and submit to justice. Once more he summoned the rebel to court, but Robert flatly refused to come. Instead he strengthened the ramparts and walls of his castles everywhere, and called on his fellow Normans, the alien Welsh, and all his neighbours to assist him. The king, however, summoned the army of England, laid siege to Arundel castle, which stands near the sea-coast, built siege-castles, and left officers there with his household troops for three months....

The king ... mustered all the troops of England in the autumn, and led them into the province of Mercia, where he besieged Bridgnorth for three weeks. Robert himself had withdrawn to Shrewsbury....

He ...had made a treaty with the Welsh, and formed an alliance with their kings, Cadwgan and Iowerth... whom he sent on frequent forays to harass the king's army¹

(to the Assistant): Oh I – I am quite out of breath. I do believe you must spell me.

Page 27.

Assistant (*helps The Archivist into his chair, returns, reads*):

The earls and magnates of the kingdom [England] met together and discussed fully how to reconcile the rebel with his lord. For, as they said , ‘ If the king defeats a mighty earl by force and carries his enmity to the point of disinheriting him, as he is now striving to do, he will from that moment trample on us like helpless slave-girls. Let us make every effort to reconcile them, so securing the advantage of our lord and our peer alike within the law, and at the same time, by quelling the disturbance, we will put both parties in our debt.’

[The king] withdrew, confounding the schemes of the seditious lords. Then he sent for the Welsh kings... and, by disarming them with gifts and promises, cautiously won them and their forces from the enemy's side to his own....

When Robert heard that his strong fortress of Bridgnorth in which he had placed his trust had surrendered to the king he was in despair; almost insane with grief he did not know what course to take. The king commanded his troops to go by way of Huvel hegen [translated ‘the evil hedge’ and naming a road the terrain around which offered frequent opportunities for ambush] The wood was cleared and many hands levelled out a very wide road....

When the news reached Robert he was greatly alarmed; seeing disasters all around him, he was brought to his knees and forced to beg for mercy from the unconquered king. The stern king, however, remembered all his wrongs and resolved to hunt him down with a huge army, and grant no quarter until he surrendered unconditionally. Robert, gnawed by anguish at his wretched fate, took the advice of friends and went out to meet the king as he approached the town, confessed his treachery, and handed over the keys of the town to the conqueror. The king confiscated Robert's whole honor and the estates of the vassals who had stood by him in his

¹ Orderic Vitalis, Vol. XI, book xi. pp 21-23.

rebellion, allowed him to leave unharmed with his horses and arms, and granted him a safe-conduct through England to the sea-coast. All England rejoiced as the cruel tyrant went into exile, and many flatteringly congratulated King Henry, saying, 'Rejoice, King Henry, give thanks to the Lord God, for you have begun to rule freely now that you have conquered Robert of Bellême and driven him out of your kingdom.' Robert crossed to Normandy, bursting with rage and grief, and savagely attacked those of his compatriots who had attempted to help their weak lord, leaving a trail of fire and slaughter behind him. Like the dragon of whom John the apostle writes in the Apocalypse, who was cast out of heaven and vented his bestial fury by warring on the dwellers on earth, the fierce disturber of the peace, driven from Britain, fell in wrath upon the Normans. He pillaged their estates, burning all behind him, and tortured to death or mutilated the knights and other persons whom he was able to capture. He was so cruel that he preferred tormenting his prisoners to growing rich on fat ransoms offered for their release. Robert's brothers, Roger the Poitevin and Arnulf, were wealthy earls in England, and had been richly endowed with great honors through the efforts of their father, Earl Roger.... Because of Robert's evildoing the mighty king of England withdrew his favour from all his progeny and kinsfolk and determined to root them all out from the kingdom. He therefore looked for grounds of complaint against the two brothers, exploited to the full whatever grievances he found, disinherited them, and drove them out of Britain. So ruthless was he in his vengeance that he pitilessly deprived the nuns of Almenèches of the land which the first Earl Roger had given them, because the abbess, Emma, was a sister of the earls Robert, Arnulf, and Roger....

The Archivist: Now continuing on p. 33—

Assistant (reads):

...Robert was clever and powerful, and had already amassed great wealth in the thirty-four powerful castles that he built to further his rebellion. He alone enjoyed the inheritance of his ancestors, allowing no share to the brothers who had been disinherited on his account. So Roger withdrew to the castle of Charroux, which was his wife's patrimony and remained there until he grew old and died, leaving honourable sons to succeed him.¹

Scene 3. Áth Cliath; sometime later.

Enter Muirchertach followed closely by Lafracoth, engaged in argument.

Muirchertach: Must you provoke my fury?

You are a princess rescued from a coward—

Or were you not told?

Verily, Mór, he hurried into disguise,

a makeshift habit, they say

and scurried like a rabbit to the quay

there to board the first boat lifting oar.

Lafracoth: Nay, not a coward, sire.

In land battle and sea skirmish

my husband was bold as any of our blood

¹ Orderic Vitalis Vol XI book xi, pp 27-33.

could wish to be. I urged him flee
a dire situation, spun out of control,
in which hatred of all foreigners,
even Normans recently wooed and allied,
was abetted by disappointment,
holding universal sway
among the hosted Munstermen
left unsated by lackluster engagement
which boasted scarcely any hacked or hewn limbs,
or gushing wounds,
even fewer rapes and yield of plunder
deemed altogether insufficient.
Hence our countrymen were loath
to retire shield and sword without
a modicum of martial exercise.
Conditions thus ripe for mayhem,
were somehow allowed to devolve
further into chaos
when soldiers mustered but unused
found authority conspicuous in its absence
whereupon some were incited to riot
against the Normans
still others were urged to murderous treachery,
against a target highly profiled: my lord Arnulf.
It is even rumored the opportunity was devised
by one who should have loved a son-in-law better.
Muirchertach: Do not presume further upon relations
peculiar to father and daughter
having no place in affairs of state.
Your marriage failed
together with an ill-fated alliance.

We have contrived one stronger
and more effective.

Lafracoth: I am fearful to listen longer,
but must summon will to hear all that remains
as evidence of this king's mendacity and machinations.
Dread suspicion.

Enthroned malevolence.
Your henchmen schemed to kill Arnulf
to free his wife for someone else's bed.

What— would you have your Mór
become a whore for Eriu?
O tyrant. What has become of my gracious father?

When was his moral sense so utterly cast down
by corrupted dreams of nation-building?
Where is that conscience-less prison
you ordered purpose-built to keep him?
I will storm its walls and make a breach
with the war engines of moral reason
framed with solid principles
imbued by his own precepts;
tearful resort to moral emotions
his own women, mother and wife
stepwise taught me
to tenderly nourish and cultivate;
and shameless appeal
to the greatest and noblest virtues
that flourished in his line.

Muirchertach: Speak no more treason
even if it be with the eloquence of Lafracoith.
Avail yourself of silence.
Words meant for moral suasion
have carried you close to an abyss,
your peril sidles up to the very tip
of that unbridled tongue.
Mark, it yet may slip and so pronounce your demise
though each syllable intoned
would grieve us sorely.

Know that ere your father ruled Leth Mogha
he was not saintly for certes
yet he would strive at least
to be counter-vicious
and limit the hurts he dealt to others.

You are right that personal rectitude
suffered when he was declared
ri Muman
and joined himself to a people
ready to rise further in power.

Use of the royal *we* cannot exist for long
without a reduction to survival values.
The suspension of right vs. wrong
eventually reprehended
by the individual, who thereupon
sends for the confessor,
becomes indispensable
in crafting a larger polity.

In another union, the *we* was drafted differently
When first we wed, I was chary not to overmaster
your mother with my immodest passions
little knowing her own lusty fantasies would
soon make me, a warrior, blush.
Gazing upon your mother
even as she finished her days
I still felt the rush in my loins,
undiminished in spite of many years of loving—
but also meeting her eyes countless times,
in greeting her and taking leave
I ever encountered there the allure of value,
a reckoning of justice with mercy,
the beckoning of virtue.

No order was given
save my daughter be retrieved.

Lafracoth: Aye.... No order was issued
in writing by your hand?

Muirchertach: That is the truth.
Bring the successor of Patrick—
bring me the Book of Kells—
and I will swear before God.

Lafracoth: I do believe it, I...
Nor uttered you any word of command?

Muirchertach: None

Lafracoth: So far I am in accord, sovereign sir.

Yet knowledge that a knight
dislodged from his demesne
turned errant
who would by right of marriage
make claim to lands in Muman
for himself or heir apparent,
is knowledge of the kind
that action must have spurred.

How then was my grace's desire conveyed?
How was his design inferred,
by ruthless myrmidons
gathered closely round
on the darkened dais
behind the shuttered doors?
Was it a meaningful gaze

directed at the captain of the guard?
Nothing so banal as a mere wink,
I should think.
A subtle signal must have been devised:
mayhap a jutting of the royal chin
across two pensive fingers upraised?

I hear no protest of innocence.
No defensive rant and rage....
Well then, through all this vexed cant
we have reached
a higher stage of understanding—
still I wonder
whom did you mean for me to marry next
when you had pulled my *we* asunder?
You do not answer—
What means your silence?
Arnulf escaped alive:
You cannot count on my compliance
nor that of the ecclesiastics
you sedulously court
for they will not sanction
another divorce—

You have a different union in mind.

Nay, I am incredulous,
it is repugnant, it cannot be—
my sister, your daughter, is not yet nine.
Were our mother Dubhchobhlaigh
yet alive, you would not dare—
Muirchertach: Spare us these
infernal words
prepared with barbs
of her beloved memory.
We will have none.
Censure from an unbridled tongue
is an annoyance
we will do without.

For the comfort and nurture thou provided thy sister
when Dubhchobhlaigh departed,
we do thank thee....

Bebhinn is not yet nine, as thou said—
We are ever mindful of her tender years....

We are loath—
O have a care, Mór
and delve no further into a matter,
no longer thy concern....

Let it comfort thee
to consider her betrothed.

This Sitric is scarcely twelve,
a slip of a boy entering manhood.
Think of him:
He too is cast from a father's ship
upon untested waters
to sink or swim.

It may seriously be queried:
be he endowed with wick enow
to enter any lady's chamber,
however obliging she might be?
Be that as it may, Magnus can have no doubt
in Bebhinn he receives unspoiled goods.

Yet already his boy will be king of Man
and the other Isles.
How old was I when I was anointed in Cashel?
Six and fifty? And Sitric only twelve....
It is, in truth, another annoyance
we had hoped do without,
yet we will find a way to force our smile
while Sitric and Bebhinn wed—
allowing it to spread fully into a grin
over the new alliance
twixt Eriu and Man
and later still to fix it fast: a rictus of anticipation
as latter-day Norsemen, by Magnus led,
lend hand at last to make an end
of Lochlann and Leth Cuinn.

Lafracoth: Diarmait, my father's brother and erstwhile rival,
deprived of his portion of power
would surely be glad to raise concerns in council
that by this marriage you introduce yet another foreigner
who surely will lay claim to governance of Cashel,
iure uxoris, as is common on the continent.
You will be opposed by your own sept—

he will ensure it.

Muirchertach: Our promise to Norway will be scrupulously kept as you will be... remote from harm and from the means to cause alarm among our kinship.

(Lafracoth is escorted away by a Guard. Muirchertach is joined by The Archivist, who rises from his wheelchair hands him the slippers of King Magnus. Muirchertach regards The Archivist, the slippers extended to him, accepts them, then puts them on his shoulders.)

Scene 4. The Lecture Hall

The Assistant, alone.

Assistant (*reads M1102§11*):

A hosting of the men of Ireland to Ath-cliath, to oppose Maghnus and the foreigners of Lochlann, who had come to plunder Ireland; but they made peace for one year with the men of Ireland; and Muircheartach gave his daughter to Sichraidh, son of Maghnus, and gave him many jewels and gifts.

Scene 5. An Abbey Scriptorium and the Throne Room in Cashel; early in 1103.

A Messenger appears in the Scriptorium and receives a sheet of vellum from Lafracoth. The Messenger crosses over to Muirchertach in the throne room and delivers the second of the illuminated capitals: E. The Messenger bows and retreats hastily.

Muircheartach holds the illuminated capital E to the light, which fades.

Muirchertach: Come ye, Scribe. Do ye know the abbey where our daughter lately took refuge from our wrath?

Scribe: Aye, lord, I learned to letter there before I came to court.

Muirchertach: Is it a good place and secure?

Scribe: It is a good place, sire, safe as any, with few amenities.

Muirchertach: Ah.

We would like to ensure she has warm baths and that she wants for no other creature comforts; Do ye recall,

during your matriculation, a short, flabby abbot installed there?

Scribe: Sire, several have been thus described.

Muirchertach: This one had charge of the scriptorium.

Scribe: Sire, I do know him, his duties have not varied but I cannot now retrieve his name.

Muirchertach: Yet, all the same, ye would recognize the man?

Scribe: At a glance, my lord.

Muirchertach: That is well. Deliver to this abbot
a message we will send that tells on what terms
he should treat with the haughty lady Mór.

Scribe: Shall the daughter of my lord
be denied access to the library?

Muirchertach: Denied? By no means.
Quite the contrary.

We can expect neither redress
nor contrite expressions
from one so strong and proud.
She is, after all, Ua Briain composed.
While in the matter of her exile
we have acquiesced,
though in truth, it was self-imposed,
None the less she should be allowed
to pursue harmless interests—
not engagement in elenchus, to be sure:
that is apt to be seditious—
but she has other talents and skills
that could be strengthened and matured
while she remains enclosed.

Scribe: Does the lady mean to be
an *inclusus*, then,
walled up from the community?

Muirchertach: I do not pretend to know
all of her intentions.

Our deft diplomacy became *casus belli*
for our eldest daughter,
who's kept herself
entirely incommunicado
save that she's left 'scriptomachy':
written word against royal command,
encrypted for us to decipher—
as though she aspired to be
the conscience of her king.

Brief communiqués,
comprised of single letters,
An 'M', for her lord Montgomery,
in spite of cowardice displayed.
An 'A' for Alice, by our honor;
A 'P' for Philip.
A 'C' methinks, embellished for Conor.

But what of 'E' –
unless it be for Eriu?

Scribe: Sire, for deep interpretation,
I deem myself ill-equipped,
yet here seems a form, most intense,
of capital punishment.

Muirchertach: What say ye? Ah—
Ever a clever scribe.
perchance meant to be fool as well.
Ward your flippancy at our expense.

She adds insult to injury
audaciously appending
requests for more vellum.

See that she has a generous supply,
and as ye take leave, instruct the guard
to bring our hostage for his audience.

*(Lights fade, return to reveal **Muirchertach and Conor**)*

Conor: Where is my lady? Where is my wife?

Muirchertach: Can you not once be silent
before a movéd prince?
We are more and more convinced
that our upstart daughter has lent you her tongue.

By Patrick's Breastplate,
you are the most presumptuous
hostage we ever held.
You say 'wife'—
We must calm down.

As if you could ever rise to that estate—
such an aspiration alone
should seal a humble cleric's fate.

You are out of your depth
leagues below her
and like to drown.

There we are able to control our breath
and so by methods our good wife taught
assuage our royal rage.

Well, be assured that she you love
is in safe keeping,

though not for you.

She believes you escaped to Armagh
there receiving sanctuary with strongest guarantee,
since it lies within the ambit of our enemy.
She does not know you returned to Cashel
of your own volition,
to surrender and render such service
as we discussed.

We will tell you a story
of a hostage.

Long he had been in Anselm's good graces.
And so, invaluable to Eriu.
In short we determined then
he would be hostage no more to be detained
but treated him as trusted retainer
and granted such freedom as he would need
for missions to and fro
across the Irish Sea.
He accepted commission
to be our interlocutor.
We did not truly expect his return
as he had then a taste of new found freedom.
Yet, fantastical as it seemed, he did return,
more learned than when he departed
and quickly earned respect
for the sage advice
on matters ecclesiastical
he gave our court.

On Anselm's correspondence,
we marveled at the *non sequitur* he appended
in which he asked for this monk by name,
that we forego our claim
and restore him
to comfort that bishop's future infirmity.
Anselm's exile ensued.
He was obliged to hie himself to Rome,
precluding this plan.

Whilst much deceived
about his motives to stay
we indulged him
with indefinite sanctuary at Glendalough

pending Anselm's return.

Conor: Sire, have I not owned this deception,
though in truth, my only fault
was to keep in confidence an honest love—

Muirchertach: Of which further expression
is now forbidden.

Although its presence
harbored silently in your bosom
agrees well with our conception
of how you might serve your love.

Conor: Sire?

Muirchertach: The Archbishop of Canterbury, we understand
was able to return to England upon William's death.

He is a man of peculiar tenacity.

So far, he has not with Henry
overplayed his hand
and demanded for the church
the same prerogatives of investiture
that earned him exile.

He has immense integrity.

We doubt it will take him long
to commit the same offense
and be again sent packing
back to Rome.

While he enjoys still
the English king's forbearance
we have an opportunity
to acquit ourselves of
some—by no means all –
the guilt burden
inevitably acquired
in the course of royal rule,
and so abbreviate the penance
we will be obliged to undertake
upon retirement from the throne.

Conor: I have repented of my own deception
and will not condone further mendacity.

Muirchertach: Currently there is no need.

You will take these letters
and proceed to Canterbury.
One petitions the Archbishop to intercede
on behalf of Lord Arnulf
the other to name among your duties

the protection of our progeny,
Alice and Phillip
ensuring they are safe and well attended
as fosterlings.

Conor: Sire, I am indebted
to have this charge. Alice—

Muirchertach: Say no more, their needs
loom large and may be dire—
far outweigh the malice we must bear—
and so conspire to spare your life—

Be gone.
do not another moment wait upon
our indulgence.

(**Conor exits**)

Hmm. We dismissed him before a mention
that we commend him to Anselm
for priestly ordination
in a chapter that requires
a life of service, celibate.

Scene 6. The Lecture Hall.

The Assistant sitting by The Archivist who is lying down.

The Archivist: According to Connellan's annotations
in The Four Masters
there were, in the fourth century anno Domini,
three princes called the Collas:
The Noble, The Famous
and The Chief of Two Territories;
together they conquered
Louth, Monaghan and Armagh.
These lands, over which they held dominion
were subsequently called Orgialla,
from the Irish *Or* for gold and *Giall* for hostage,
because the princes stipulated to the Ard Ri
for themselves and their posterity
that if any chiefs of Clan Collas
should as hostages be demanded, and if shackled,
their fetters should be made of gold.¹

¹ The account of Orgialla upon which these lines are based may be found in Conellan's 1846 annotations to the Four Masters, p 2.

I am worried about you.

Assistant: About me, my dear? What a notion. I am fine.

The Archivist: Of course, of course.

I thank you for the reassurance,
ready-made though it be.
So why have my fears on your behalf
not entirely vanished?

Early in my career,
I backed the wrong horse—
like poor Arnulf –
but I was not banished
only passed over for promotion
and told by the Chair-apparent
of our Department:
'It's not what you know but who you know.'
These days, with so much intrigue,
that old saw merits some revision:
'It's what you know about whom you know'
that really counts in ways of preferment.

Assistant: Well, this has no substance.
I know you and something of you too.
Whatever you may say, you were never compelled
by baseness either in motive
or in methods for attaining any arguable good.
You are a gifted teacher
with the esteem of your colleagues
For myself, I do not dare to dream of more.

The Archivist: But is it not this way with you:
instead of taking the academic plum
you were offered
you've come to spend
the summer session helping me.
Methinks, you lack the ruthless drive
upon which our hierarchy thrives
and may end like me a *forme fruste*
of who was meant to be.

Ah the learners are arriving.

(**They** take positions to lecture)

The Archivist (*recites from memory M1103§10*):

A great war broke out between the Cinel-Eoghain and the Ulidians; and Muircheartach Ua Briain, with the men of Munster, Leinster, and Osraighe, and with the chiefs of Connaught, and the men of Meath, with their kings, proceeded to Magh-Cobha, to relieve the Ulidians. Both parties went all into Machaire-Arda-Macha, i.e. to Cill-na-gCornaire, and were for a week laying siege to Ard-Macha. Domhnall, grandson of Lochlainn, with the people of the north of Ireland, was during this time in Ui-Breasail-Macha, confronting them face to face, so that he prevented the people of the four provinces of Ireland from committing depredation or aggression any further in the province. When the men of Munster were wearied, Muircheartach proceeded to Aenach-Macha, to Eamhain, and round to Ard-Macha, and left eight ounces of gold upon the altar, and promised eight score cows, and returned to Magh-Cobha, and left the people of the province of Leinster and numbers of the men of Munster there. He himself afterwards set out on a predatory excursion into Dal-Araidhe, with the King of Meath and the King of Connaught; and Donnchadh, son of Toirdhealbhach Ua Briain, was slain on this expedition, as were the son of Ua Conchobhair Ciarraighe, Peatadeamhain Ua Beoin, Donnucuan Ua Duibhcinn, and a great many others of the nobility along with them. Domhnall Ua Lochlainn, with the Clanna-Neill of the North, proceeded to Magh-Cobha, to attack the camp of the Leinstermen; and the Leinstermen, the Osraighi, and the Munstermen, assembled together all the forces they had, and fought a spirited battle in Magh-Cobha, on Tuesday, the Nones of August, on the eighth day after their coming into that plain. The people of Leath-Mhogha were, however, defeated, and slaughter made of them, viz. the slaughter of the Leinstermen, with Muircheartach Mac Gillamocholmog, King of Leinster, with the two Ua Lorcains, i.e. Murchadh, King of Ui-Muireadhaigh, and his brother, and with Muircheartach Mac Gormain, with a great number of others besides them; the slaughter of the Ui-Ceinnsealaigh, together with the two sons of Maelmordha, and Rian, lord of Ui-Drona, and many others also; the slaughter of the Osraighi in general, with Gillaphadraig Ruadh and the chieftains of Osraighe; the slaughter of the foreigners of Ath-cliaith, with Thorstan, son of Eric, with Pol, son of Amann, and Beollan, son of Armunn, with a countless number of others; the slaughter of the men of Munster, with the two Ua Bricc, i.e. two tanists of the Deisi; and with Ua Failbhe, Tanist of Corca-Dhuibhne and Erri of Leinster; with Ua Muireadhaigh, lord of Ciarraighe, with his son, and many others of the nobility, which it would be tedious to enumerate. The Clanna-Neill of the North, namely, the Cinel-Eoghain and Cinel-Conaill, returned to their forts victoriously and triumphantly, with valuable jewels and much wealth, together with the royal tent, the standard, and many other precious jewels.

Assistant (*reads M1103§11*):

Maghnus, King of Lochlann and the Islands, and a man who had contemplated the invasion of all Ireland, was slain by the Ulidians, with a slaughter of his people about him, on a predatory excursion.

The Archivist (*reads M1103.12*):

A woman brought forth two children together in this year, having but one body from the breast to the navel, and all their members perfect, with that exception, and their faces turned to each other; and these were two girls.

Scene 7. Lafracoth's First Reverie; The Abbey Scriptorium in Cashel.

*In the Scriptorium, discover Lafracoth engaged in conversation with imaginary companions
These are: a **Religieuse/ Bard/ Scribe** (according to the requirement of the dialogue).*

Bard: How splendid the mantle of night
that falls in shadowy folds on a world
which is its mannequin.

The cairns are done-up in misty drapery
cleverly curled or wimpled round them;
and there is smoke
from distant campfires weaving brocade
while hilltop pines
make flounces from verdant finery,

Lafracoth and Bard (*whose voice recedes as Lafracoth's strengthens*):
all delicately pinned to yon darkling cloak
with the precious gems Orion hath displayed....

Lafracoth (*solo*): Am I returned to you, Glendalough?
Pray, let me stay a moment more. Too late...the memory fades.

Scribe: What say Lafracoth, what say ye all to this maid?

Lafracoth: What? Oh I...Nay, it is to a soul
younger than mine she sings.

Imperial evening hands down her decree,
despising the arguments marshaled against her:
he is ill-advised who fails to observe
the curfew she declares on this night of the soul.
Here are the writs, the ordinances,
the articles of succession,
scrupulously prepared,
that banish sweeter dreams
and call despair from slumber.

Religieuse: True. Sleep encumbers the eye
that would behold despair clearly illumined
and glimpse an outward sign of underserved promise.

Scribe (*showing a work in progress and pointing to the sky*): Sleep and dreams are forfeit.
Do ye not fathom
the matter here set down, or do you eschew it
as immaterial?

Then marvel awhile at the scroll itself
where upon but a few characters are fixed
and none easily deciphered.

Come Princess, apply yourself to this task

which, though less in compass,
more modest in scope,
is by no means meager in degree of virtue.

Lafracoth: If only there could be detected
how ought these myriad points to be connected
in iron clad proof
of some perfected timelessness
not wholly set apart
from abbreviated hopes
of human heart.

Bard: Already her face, I see, betokens
an astonished mind;

Religieuse: Her very tongue is stilled
by paralytic wonder.

(lights reveal **Nest**)

Lafracoth: Elaborate conceit must bow to mute admiration.
Yet I make an effort by quivering lips
to put an end to cataplexy and wrest
a query from ambiguous depths
that would discover what grand calligraphy
spreads upon illimitable void.

Scribe: Not content but presentation arrests the eye,
not text but its accompaniment
of majestic arabesques and ornaments
richly contrived
and endued overall with a subtlety
nigh impenetrable; free of pigments
derived from beast and weed and ore;
graceful glittering spirals with color more
than books adorned with lapis lazuli
stolen from the orient,
glazed over with indigo
and intermixed with verdigris and orpiment.

Lafracoth: Yet the text need be studied;
The Author is too unknown.

Nest (to the Scribe): A most lyrical effusion....

Lafracoth: Aye, Nest, to hide vexation and clothe
the nakedness of confusion.

Nest (to the Bard, Religieuse and Scribe): It crosses the boundaries
of tidy disciplines, does it not?

Lafracoth: Nest, what said thee next? Help me recall.

Nest: Sisters and friends, why pay heed to that remote scrawl

beset with improbable devices, empty symbol—
and inkblots that only magnify the faults
they are meant to conceal,
calling to account The Author's integrity, if
Author indeed there be?

Lafracoth: O Nest. Oh, good my friend
beautiful and true, most politic of her sex,
I know these sentiments do not govern thy heart entire.
I know thee for errant sisterhood
and fierce devotion to many children,
though they were sired by powerful men
who had thy body without
the knowledge of thy soul.

I pray thee, conspire as thou was wont to do
and find thee some means
to send me the precious cargo
who I pray God consigned to thy care:
my Alice, my Phillip.
Or if thou dare not test Henry's embargo on Eriu
At least send word of my own,
of whom I have not heard since their father's banishment.
Good Nest, do not permit they slip away from me
and vanish from my life.

Bard (*reads: AI1105§7*):

In the above year a camel, an animal of remarkable size, was brought from the king of Alba to Muirchertach Ua Briain.

Scribe (*reads: M1105§8*):

Donnchadh Ua Maeleachlainn was deposed by Muircheartach Ua Briain; and he proceeded into Airghialla, and plundered the greater part of East Meath from that country. Muircheartach Ua Briain, with the greater part of the men of Ireland, went in pursuit of Donnchadh to Magh-Conaille, but he effected nothing but the burning of the corn; and he afterwards divided Meath between the sons of Domhnall Ua Maeleachlainn, he and Donnchadh having refused to come on terms of peace with each other.

Religieuse (*reads M1105.14*) :

Domhnall, son of Amhalghaidh, chief successor of Patrick, went to Ath-cliath, to make peace between Domhnall Ua Lochlainn and Muircheartach Ua Briain, where he took his death's sickness; and he was carried in his sickness to Domhnach-airthir-Eamhna, and he was anointed there. He was afterwards removed to the Daimhliag of Ard-Macha, where he died on the 12th of August, being the festival of Laisren of Inis-Muireadhaigh; and he was buried with honour at Ard-Macha.

Scribe (*reads M1106§12*):

Muircheartach Ua Maeleachlainn was deposed, and the kingdom of Meath was assumed by Murchadh after him.

Religieuse (*reads M1107§2*):

Ceann-coradh—

Scribe: *--and Caiseal—*

Religieuse: *--were burned by lightning, between the two Easters—*

Bard: *--with sixty puncheons of mead and beer.*

Assistant: Anselm sent encouragement to Bishop Gilbert, in the form of these words:

The Archivist (*as Anselm*): *'I now learn that by God's grace you have been advanced to episcopal dignity, and I venture to give you advice according to what I have understood to be needful. God has raised you to this great dignity in Ireland, and has appointed you that you may be zealous for the welfare of religion and the good of souls. Be careful and earnest in the correction of abuses among the people, and in planting the seed of good morals. As far as in you lies, with the king and the other bishops and all others you can influence for this good cause, showing them the joys which are prepared for the good and the punishment prepared for the wicked. May you deserve to receive from God the reward of your labours and the good works [f]or others. I thank you for the gift you sent me.'*¹

Scene 8. The Archives

The Archivist *alone.*

The Archivist (on a telephone): No really I am much better lately.

Thank you for covering the material....

And please enjoy your holiday—
after so much scholarship, your time off is well deserved,
please convey my regards to your mother,
yes, you too, good bye.

(**He hangs up**)

But don't set her teeth on edge by conveying
anything beyond the simplest greeting.
A grand child must be exceedingly patient in treating
the estrangement of daughter and father.

¹ This translation appears in Gwynn, pp112-13.

(to the audience)

I actively discourage my mentees from resorting
to any but sources most proximal to events,
though that occasions discontented grumbling
in the form, or semblance thereof:

‘Reliable translations
can already be found
from the Irish, Welsh or Latin;
and whilst we are on the subject
insightful commentaries
also abound
making it patently absurd
we should employ precious time
to reinvent the wheel.’

Well, enough said. You heads of research
who deploy assistants
to their quotidian tasks
are familiar with the spiel.

I suspect in the case at hand,
it does not owe to my assistant’s
lack of will and/or imagination,
but solicitude for my well being.
She would not have me exhausted utterly.

Still, in all candor, among the historians
there are those whose contributions
can make one feel quite humbled,
who are equipped to enliven a story
without abusing the impressionable reader
with unfounded fictions
and who manage mostly to avoid
tumbling into sensationalism
with ensuing risk
being accused of spreading gossip
under the guise of scholarship.

Such, for the most part,
was the leader in his field, J.E. Lloyd
who in enviable prose, wrote of events
after the Montgomeries were banished
and the Geraldines arose to power,
first in Cambria and thence in Eriu:

*The first disturber of the peace
was Cadwgan's own son Owain,
whose bold and romantic abduction of Nest in 1109
was an act of reckless defiance to the English king;
fascinating as is this story of passion and daring,
which breathes the spirit of the early heroic age,
and which Homer might well have told,
its other aspect is not to be forgotten,
as a reckless escapade which was fraught with misfortune
for Owain's father and his fellow-countrymen of Powys.
At a great feast which Cadwgan gave this year
in one of the courts of his land of Ceredigion,
Owain heard much of the beauty of Nest,
the wife of Gerald of Pembroke,
and as the lady was his own second cousin,
he resolved to pay a visit to the castle...
where she was at the time
in residence with her husband,
and see with his own eyes the graces
of form and feature
which were the occasion of so much eloquence.
He found them not a whit less marvelous
than were reported, and left the castle
with the determination,
in spite of all the laws and regardless of the risk,
to become the possessor of the fair one
who has been not inaptly styled
the "Helen of Wales."*

Now I ask you: do not nights
sequestered among the archives
with such enlivened tales,
divulging saucy secrets
have their compensations?
Especially if there be
a snifter of armagnac,
from a flask I keep back
behind the sixth volume of Ordericus.
Though, mind, I should not want you
to think I indulge
in either concupiscence
or libations over much.

*One dark night he
and some fifteen companions*

*stealthily worked their way
into the stronghold
by burrowing under the gate;
directly they were within the wall
they rushed with wild cries
upon the sleeping inmates
and added to the alarm
and confusion
by setting fire to the buildings.*

*By the advice of his wife,
Gerald attempted no resistance,
but made a hurried escape
through a garderobe;
thus the raiders found their task
an easy one, and having burnt
and dismantled the castle,
Owain carried off Nest and her children
to Ceredigion.*

Lloyd concludes:

*The story suggests that the heroine
did not play an altogether unwilling part
in the affair; at any rate, she did not disdain
to use her influence over her lover
to bring about the return of Gerald's children to their father's roof.
None the less, the outrage was a challenge to the king,
of which Henry did not fail to take prompt notice....¹*

From conjectures that Nest somehow colluded,
we should doubtless remain aloof.
Of the origins of Henry's royal ire,
it is mere speculation that it was fired
as much by his memory of Nest,
upon whom he once had sired
an illegitimate son,
as it was by *noblesse oblige* he must have felt
towards Gerald, late of Windsor, who held
the key castellany in southern Wales
in steadfast loyalty to the English crown.

As for the rest, we can only guess

¹ Lloyd, p 45.

why Nest sent her children back
down to Pembroke to a spouse
who had coerced their marriage
by holding her brother hostage,
and whom, though she might not detest,
might have regarded with some ambivalence
nevertheless.

I tell learners every day
'Avoid embroidery
and stitch with facts.'

Heh-heh. Am I drunk?
A sip too much armagnac
in gossip sunk
become brazen
as any post-grad *quidnunc*
embellishing history.

Scene 9. The Abbey Scriptorium, Cashel; 1109.

Lafracoth. *Lights reveal* **Conor.** *Behind him, a Guard.* **Conor** approaches **Lafracoth.**

Conor: Soul.

Lafracoth: And mine. Art thou so near me now?

Conor: Gladly I am brought to thee.

Would I had come sooner, of my own will;
now here, that I could be closer still.

Lafracoth: Would this moment be eternalized.

Conor: I have much to tell, my heart—
dear eyes, kind face—

News with import to convey—
Nay, love, stand a little apart—
I am by guards attended;
they will not permit me
to stay long in thy cell,
not at all, should we embrace.

Lafracoth: At least give me thy hand,
and tell me of thy journey
since Glendalough.

Conor: O Soul,
how much can thou hear of purgatory?
Cursed memories,
residua of daytime longing

fomenting un-restful dreams,
intrusive imagery nigh awakening,
wherein thou art revenant—
a mirage,
not susceptible to touch:
leaving me always unappeased—
worse much worse
than thirst un-slaked
that takes possession of nomadic souls
whilst they are teased by virga
and tormented without mercy
by dervishes in a desert place.

Lafracoth: All effaced. Thou art with me now.

Conor: When I received word from thee
in Glendalough
that the king would not
recognize our union
and meant to eliminate
any inconvenience I might
continue to present,
I feared our sanctuary
would no longer be respected
by a monarch whose murderous fury
could place him in jeopardy
of gravest sacrilege.
So under cover of darkness
made haste to Armagh
to seek protection there
from the successor of Patrick.

There was frequent exchange
of messengers between
Armagh and Canterbury,
so that I had news,
far too occasional, always precious
of my lady in Pembroke.

One brother spoke of Alice
born whole and well
almost as newly arrived in Wales
as the Lady Montgomery,
herself.
Glad tidings, spare in details,
these fell upon the eager ear

of a remote
but secretly doting father.

Lafracoth: Our Alice is beautiful,
Conor.

Conor: Well I know the wonder of her looks,
I have seen her. In every aspect she is her mother's.
Thy boy is handsome too and quick—

Lafracoth: How hast thou seen our daughter?
And Phillip? When and under what auspices?
Are they safe? Good my husband,
incessantly I have prayed—
is it possible they are here?

Conor: Nay, love, too much to hope—
they live in Wales, in fosterage,
within the scope of those dear to thee
but who also enjoy the close confidence of Henry,
the new English king,
who has been provided by thee
a new generation of hostages
held against House Montgomery
which, reduced in circumstance,
still poses a threat in banishment.
And though it be not declared outright
it is still implied
thy children are a hedge against
Muirchertach's habit of harboring
persons with antipathy to Henry's crown.

(His Guards move closer)

They bestir themselves
who are charged,
on peril of their lives,
to watch and ward me
and return me anon to thy father—

I must be brief.

Normandy's duke
gave up his contest
for the English throne,
in consequence of which
Arnulf shared with Bellême
his rebuke and reversal of fortune.
I learned at Armagh,
how all this befell them

and shortly after received word too
of thine abduction by thy father.
I then determined
to surrender myself to Muman's king
and offer such service as I could render
in the guise of courier to Anselm,
beseeching him to intervene,
on behalf of this beleaguered family,
mother from children torn asunder
by whirlwind and upheaval
and hurled hundreds of miles
from one another,
each deposited in a separate lurch.
It was thy father, Muirchertach
who penned the petition
in his own hand,
and charged me search out Anselm
and speak further
on his— and our— behalf.

The Archbishop of Canterbury,
whilst misguided by a Roman church,
which would have hegemony
over Christendom made uniform,
still a saintly man, Anselm,
himself no stranger to exile,
was overwhelmed with compassion
and gratitude to thy father
for his pledge of further reforms.
He bravely took the helm
in the squall and spindrift
of failed insurgency,
and piloted that slim and flimsy
curragh of our hope in the dangerous swells
of King Henry's wrath
to ensure Arnulf's safe passage
back to Normandy
and Alice and Phillip, their security
in fosterage.

Lafracoth: Oh thou art good beyond measure,
yet what price was exacted from thee, my love?

Conor: I am much in Anselm's debt. The Archbishop asks
nothing but company from me,
having already assurances of another synod from thy father.

Lafracoth: He is a blessed man, though we have disagreed.

Thou said thou had seen them.

Oh, I am too greedy, hoarding the treasure of thy words
but first tell me, are they well and in good homes?

Conor: They are under the protection of Sir Gerald and the Lady Nest.

Lafracoth: Oh sweet and good, the news my love brings.

I will have no more rest,
until our reunion is complete.

We should ensure
their earliest arrival here,
or else ourselves contrive to be smuggled across the water
to meet them in Pembroke.

Conor: Thou cannot. Lest thou endanger thyself or them.

Lafracoth: I am no danger to my children.

How a danger? Explain.

Conor: My lady shares in Arnulf's banishment
and, like him, cannot return to Wales
on pain of death
for thyself and thy progeny.

Lafracoth: Oh friend of my soul,
nay, my soul itself.

is there no remedy for this evil?

Tell me what can be done.

Conor: There is this hope.

Anselm envisions my frequent returns,
under the aegis of Canterbury,
to carry his commissions to Pembroke
as well as Cashel.

In the sequence of events,
he would I visit the children often
and carry news of their flourishing
both to him and to thee.

In time,
through the Archbishop's
intercession with the English King,
Arnulf may be reconciled to the crown
and the ban upon his return and thine be lifted.

Lafracoth: In these renderings from thy lips
consist hardships every moment,

but thanks to thee, all leavened with hope.

See? I am not put down.

With surety of thy love
and anticipation that my father's embargo
upon our show of affection

may also be dissolved
I will find means to cope withal.

Soul, in thy look I discern
there is more to be disclosed.

Conor: When first thy father dispatched me
with letters of salutation and entreaty
to Anselm
he enclosed his secret nomination
as part of the scheme he hatched
that I be ordained a priest in Canterbury,
under the canon law of Roman Rite.

I was tormented by the prospect
of life-long burning in desire for thee—
our separation by conviction and vow—
yet for our child's sake
myself allowed begin
prayers and preparations in earnest.

I fear I so overwhelmed my confessor,
Anselm himself, with frequent
admission of many lapses,
he suspended my appointment
and sent me to a retreat and steadfast prayer.
Whilst I was there,
exile was again imposed upon
the good Archbishop,
who has only now returned.

He's learned of Nest's abduction
by her cousin
and fears that Henry's jealous wrath
on behalf of his Castellan
would put in jeopardy the children.
I am here because he wants first to ensure
thy father's approval
for the enterprise he's conceived
and consult what measures might be taken.

In agreeing to my mission,
thy father requires that
I finally take the vow of celibacy
under his supervision
and be duly consecrated
by the new Bishop of Luimneach.
Thereby ensuring forever

the dissolution of our bond.

Then he means to marry thee again.

Lafracoth: Whereupon, he has us doubly wed
each with obligation to forsake our souls' true bed.

(lights fade)

Scene 10. Glendalough; sometime later.

Enter Lafracoth and Conor.

Lafracoth: I am blessed
to have been here again with thee.

Conor: For neither of us
was this interlude made easy
and only long enough
to make the longing more.

Lafracoth: Here is a gift in token of our late reunion:
a slim volume for you to carry where you will:
words writ in miniscule,
in lines eighteen or so upon a page
to recompense so many endearments:
'darling's and 'dearest's and 'beloved's,
innumerable in my mind
that were never spoken aloud.

Conor: How well thou knowest thine art
making manifest imperishable ideas.
Age-less words in folios
gathered in quires, lovingly.
I am astonished by their beauty.
Every serif will be for me
a sturdy bridge
across each rift
contrived by fate
or human hand
to keep us solitary
in times meant for us together.

Lafracoth: Thou art hope beyond hope
and heart inside my heart.
In thee I am given
a peerless compendium
of all the human understanding,

loving kindness
and glorious conjunction
any person should ever acquire
as gifts from God.
This missal is little enough in exchange.

Conor: I thank thee, love.

Lafracoth: O Glendalough.
Redolence of times all but effaced.
Here we declared what nature,
other than human,
left as tacit assumption:
“In the beginning was the Word...”
No sooner the declaration is made
then, all amazed,
some strive to make it vivid
while others arrange
to make it march
uniformly across the page
conscripted for human purpose.

Scene 11. The Archives. **The Archivist and the Assistant.**

The Archivist: May I detain you longer?
Assistant: Of course but when will you rest?
The Archivist: I want to bring to your attention
“An Irish Missal of the Eleventh or Twelfth Century”
an essay by Aubrey Gwynn, S.J.
within which he cites descriptions
by various scholars of that work by hand
which figures in his title.

Will you read to me?

Assistant (*reads*):

*‘A volume of small dimensions,
being about six and a half inches in length
by five in breadth....
Its outer pages are blackened with age.
It was originally bound in strong wooden covers,
portions of which remain,
polished by long wear.*

*It is preserved in its ancient leather satchel,
the back of which is ornamented
with diagonally-impressed lines and circles
now nearly obliterated by constant use....'*

The script we are to understand,
appears "*slightly irregular
[in] very large Irish miniscule'* "

The Archivist: Before you so graciously
continue, be assured
it is no wish of mine to fuel
idle speculation
-or occasion collegial diatribes-
whether one or more than one scribe
made this wonderful contribution
creating both words and illuminations.

Nor will I comment upon the French scholars'
presumption of the scribes' masculine gender
except to note here, in passing,
we should not scoff at the other possibility.

In the office for Holy Saturday, after all,
the litany of saints renders—

Assistant (*reads*):

*... a double invocation
of Our Lady: sancta Maria
sancta Dei generix.*

The Archivist: Then it proceeds in ritual wording,
quite unlike the Roman rite, to affix
only three of the twelve apostles
but among revered confessors—
no less than five women:

Assistant: Mary Magdalen, Felicitas, Margaret,
Petronilla *and* Bridgid.

The Archivist: Again a word of caution
(though I doubt it will fend off those critics
fixed rigidly in preconceived notions):

I have not yet a scintilla of evidence
for the contention
that a woman of uncommon education
practiced in letters and illustrations
might then have flourished
whose legacy could be thus characterized.

Assistant (*reads*):

*... Elaborate capital letters which appear on practically every page
'are made all the more striking by the intensity of the colour scheme-
bright blue, deep reddish purple, and golden yellow
on a background of sealing wax red.
They are... obviously the work of a painter
of strong individuality who deals with all patterns,
whether traditional or foreign inspired,
in his own way
and is able to remodel them
into a rather fierce but extremely effective decoration....
All the chief elements of the... style are there:
the emphasis given to the large ribbon bodies of the beasts
in contrast to the thin network of snakes,
and the general rhythm of the composition
based on sinuous lines. But the heads of the beasts
are not the flattened disquieting heads
of Scandinavian monsters.
They have the sturdy, active, barking and biting heads
of the Irish initials turned to new purpose'....¹*

Exciting to wonder—

The Archivist: Yes. Yes. Wonder. Speculate.

I must confess

I waited too long to let my academic conscience
go flying with the wind.

Assistant: It deserves serious investigation—

The Archivist: By all means. Be my guest. Do some detective work.

I'm all for ratiocination. Consider deeply, dear,
but above all, have fun.

Tomorrow for Seminar,

we should return to Orderic's tale of the Montgomeries.

Let's see.... How far had we come? Oh yes p. 33:

As for Arnulf, outraged at all the struggles he had endured to no purpose on his brother's behalf, he went over to the duke, seized the castle of Almenèches by surprise, and surrendered it to him, and took with him a number of his brother's supporters. At that time the region of Séez was greatly disturbed. Many men of the province took Arnulf's part and deserted Robert, handing over their castles to the duke's supporters. Robert abandoned by his own brother, was full of fears and scarcely dared trust anyone; since he himself was a figure of terror to almost everyone he doubted the loyalty even of those who still stood by him.

¹ Gwynn, pp 17-33. The French scholars named in this essay are Dr. Françoise Henry and Madam G.L. Marsh-Micheli.

Scene 12. Almenèches, Normandy and Pembroke, Wales; 1109.

Arnulf, *in armor; also present a Gonfalonier with banner suggesting a campaign is about to begin in stage-space representing Almenèches*

Arnulf: Steadfast star, how truly you are named.
O bright cynosure, you are best equipped
of all your kind with certain perspective;
therefore share with me your learned counsel.
Around your axle wheels a sevenfold team
liveried to haul the churl's cumbersome wain
and reined to lathered haste by Bootës' whip.

O lodestar, be that northern wagoner
himself in purposive employ to One
who knows wherefore he makes his nightly trip?

Inform me of the reason the Cygnet
seasonally slips across the depthless main;
say what monarch reigns for Hyades to crown
and why the Pleiades so cherish
their imperishable chastity.

(Discover Nest in stage space representing Pembroke)

Nest: Hmm. We are deceived by splendid ornament
amid the plethora of squalor
and therefore try divine
an underlying grammar with moment for humankind –
some single rule of syntax
that will not overtax us with incredulity.

Poor Arnulf, why not say of night,
she is lepered with myriad sores
and gleaming lesions visible to all
as on the flesh of some lurdan courtesan
who bellies out over your horizons?
Do ye not wish a gibbous and congenial moon
her apothecary's art apply
to yon swart, disfigured whore,
who straddles priapic wonder—
lewdly athwart, teasing desire to rapacious yearning
with feigned salaciousness?
She is a cruel leman that never intended
to render satisfaction.

Arnulf (*still gazing upwards at the sky*): In Cambria, I dared the minatory precipices of mountains rimmed with ice.

There winds dirled and conjured snowy dervishes even as the shimmering scarab hied hence leaving but the dimmest trail of saffron slime to mark the impediments of my ascent.

In the dark, I stumbled and tumbled down to a frozen croft with nought upon it to soften winter's impervious grimace.

I lay motionless, my gaze uplifted from mountain peaks humbled as they lay beneath the celestial array of lights.

Nor ocean nor brooding wood could astonish my eye, nor have they jeopardy to paralyze as does that abyss strewn with bright atomies.

So too, the wonderwork of the sparry antre that slowly sculpted dragon teeth hem: sheer walls begirt with gleaming gems and obsidian pools that darkly mirror their dusky enclosure—

these are still inferior to the diadem that enamors my dross laden soul, insinuating into my favor with hints of truth to allay suspicion that the ruth of incessant striving avails us nought.

Whereupon, among them all, one light taught me best to hope: Philip, whose cause I now espouse and tip the scales once more in favor of House Montgomery whose noble line, eschewed by England, becomes ascendant with kings in Eriu. To this end, will, by brother, brother be deposed, whose unchecked treachery in Normandy has to all been fully exposed.

*(Lights fade on **Arnulf** and **Gonfalonier**. Discover Nest writing, **Conor** and the boy **Philip** standing nearby)*

Nest: I am informed that in Almenèches you made a stand against your brother,

and delivered the ground
consecrated for a nunnery
made holier still by the devotion of women there,
among them your good sister and niece,
into the demesne and care of Normandy.
I rejoice in your rebellion against Bellême.
Would that it had been sooner.
Better still that Normans had never come to Cambria,
Had never deposed the rightful rulers
putting one brother to flight, another in fetters,
and a loving sister ever after on her mettle.

In the safe hands of this good priest
I send a hostage freed,
a son by your one-time wife, wronged
in marriage and shared banishment,
who became my life-long friend.

Scene 13. The Archives.

The Archivist, alone.

The Archivist: p. 35:

In the month of June the duke's retainers gathered together in the nunnery and rapaciously preparing to plunder the region, turned the consecrated buildings into stables for their horses. Getting word of this, Robert rushed to the spot and, setting fire to the buildings, burnt the nunnery to the ground....

p. 37:

After the nunnery of Almenèches had been burnt... the defenceless community of nuns was scattered in great distress. Each one retired to the home of kinsfolk or friends as chance and opportunity allowed. Emma, the abbess, fled with three nuns to Saint-Évroul and lived there for six months in the chapel where the blessed father Évroul had devoted himself in solitude and heavenly meditation. The following year she returned to her own church and, with the help of god and good Christians, toiled to restore the ruins. She lived for about ten years afterwards and in that time patiently rebuilt both the church of the Virgin and Mother and conventual buildings, and brought back to the monastic enclosure all the nuns who had been dispersed. After her death Matilda, the daughter of her brother Philip, succeeded her, and laboriously restored the monastery with all its buildings after it had been unexpectedly burnt a second time.

Scene 14. Almenèches and Glendalough; afterwards.

*Light reveals a **Courier** and a nun, **S. Matilda** who carefully wipes away stains of blood from Conor's satchel, fondly wraps the Missal in cloth and replaces it in the satchel, She gives the satchel to the Courier and blesses him as he departs. Light reveals **Lafracoth** and then the **Courier** from whom **Lafracoth** accepts the satchel. **She** withdraws from it the Missal she had given Conor. She recognizes at once the meaning of its return. Lights fade on **Lafracoth**.*

Scene 15. Lafracoth's Second Reverie.

(Lights appear *first* on **Lafracoth** and then **The Archivist**).

The Archivist: Hello. I do not mean to intrude.

Lafracoth: Who is this stranger I encounter
among familiar reveries?
Are ye a misdeeming wight from Faerie,
or a Danaan, on urgent errand
crossing from the land of the young
via the rim of my dream, lending me prescience
before I wake or vision before I die?

Come closer.

With jolt of recognition, I do know thee now.
Are we not cut from the same bolt?
On that basis alone thou art most warmly welcome.

Why mortal or im—

I look upon no stranger.

I surmise thy role—

I should say 'roles'
which are doubtless many,
yet none of them could seem strange to me.

Thou hast the mark
of an amanuensis
who hearkens
to some exacting magister.

Is it not so?

The Archivist: I suppose it is, after all.
So far, my contributions are subsumed by '*et al.*'

Lafracoth: Ah well, most value is contributed
anonymously and in amounts quite small.

Of sophists and aporetics I have known not a few.
I myself was skeptic once
and held daily commerce with those of divers persuasions
in the marketplace of ideas...
some indeed were overpriced—
and I laugh to think how often I was swindled or robbed outright....
but the evenings of my youth were spent
like counterfeit currency in company
with bards and artists....

Scraping vellum of fat and gristle adhering,
is a particularly smelly task,

would you not agree?

There is wrack and ruin in copy work,
pursued without surcease,
in posture bent over,
conforming to an invisible box.
Therein, the head and shoulders
too readily assume an awful angle
acquiring permanence
for the sake of steady fingers.
'Tis hardest in the hollow of the back,
methinks, which gradually loses
nature's contour.

An industry I enjoyed was preparing paints,
until I discerned poisonous effects at first vague,
but leaving over time
signatures unmistakable,
among the artisans,
brethren and sisters I served,
in nails and gum and hair,
become—unaccountably—
more paroxysmal in their children:
quaking sinew and tremulous nerve....
Those who survived
the pox and plague,
I later nursed in their final miseries
from prolonged
exposure to toxins.
Gleaming illuminations were wrought at our peril.

Well, itinerant scholar—
and revenant too—
whose peregrinations are to and fro in time
I deem thine own work must be no less hard.

Knowing Fortuna's next card is never wisdom
or in itself a means to goodness.
Conscience striving amid mystery
is more precious than any prescience
which guarantees arrival at future facts
without moral meaning.
Yet, stay, esteemed colleague,
fellow scholar-in-a dream, I pray thee, do not fade.
Divulge before thou recedes in mist
if posterity hath been a little kind to my children

and if thou will indulge a whim—
'tis but vanity from which my question proceeds—
what was my contribution?

The Archivist: O lady, I am ashamed to say,
thy name was not preserved save as 'Lafracoth'
and upon that vestige was lamely attached a slur.

Lafracoth: *C'est vrai?* But do not shrink from telling me.
Nor remove this chalice from my lips.
Perhaps it is a pronouncement
with which I can heartily concur.

The Archivist: The matter appears in Norman history
by Orderic whose ancestor
may have been known to thee. He writes:

*Arnulfus enim filiam regis Hiberniae
nominee Lafracoth uxorem habuit,
per quam regnum optinere concupiuit*

Lafracoth: So much I believe is true.
Arnulf took me as wife in hopes
he would secure Muirchertach's kingdom.
How power would be distributed
upon my father's death,
he sadly misunderstood.
Even after he himself
became inured to ambition
to rule in Muman,
he harbored hope still for our progeny,
fancying Philip, Muirchertach's grandson,
might someday rise to be Ard Ri.
It made my uncle uneasy.

The Archivist: Mistiming was ever thy husband's watchword.
He was Montgomery. Robert's brother. His name a threat.
His motives for reconciliation with either king
on either side of the sea
must have been suspect, his movements eyed warily.
No new dynasty could be allowed to take root.

Lafracoth: It could not have been accomplished.
Even had he the cruelty of his brother,
Robert of Bellême, been imbued withal.

The Archivist: At that, Arnulf was too ahead of time,
caught in an undertow that would not break surface
for six decades hence
when a tide unstemmed of Anglo-Normans

follow Flemish folk from Pembroke.

Lafracoth: How now? Flemish in Pembroke?

What other wonders are foretold?

The Archivist: One called Strongbow,

will effect the invasion

by Montgomery only imagined

with blessings mixed with envy

from a second English Henry,

who embraces Rome's *Laudabiliter*,

which justifies conquest

of unorthodox Eriu

for the sake of ecclesiastical reform.

Lafracoth: Surely, these are prophecies I do not doubt.

An exposition more clear from thee than any rendered by St. Berchan:

I glimpse therein the shape of things to come,

hitherto foreseen in vagaries, only.

But, Dream,

the epic sweep of thy tale

leaves things of moment

both out and in:

the vivid details most craved have been excluded

but keep my son and daughter as much in the lurch

as I once did when I was banished from Wales.

Nor do I find

what besmirched my reputation.

The Archivist: By Orderic, this account follows:

Irenses sanguine Magni regis sociorumque eius gustato truculentiores effecti sunt, et ex improviso ad interimendos Normannos conuersi sunt.

Lafracoth: How now.... this tale of Magnus' death can hardly be authentic.

Oh, my father's aptitude for political expediency

is represented well enow. And, I readily attest,

more than once had he given voice to fantasy

in which he envisioned old Norway dead.

Mayhaps, Muirchertach would have authored his demise,

had he not despised his northern rival more.

Perforce, he married my sister to Norway's son instead

and so enlisted Vikings of a latter day

in one more military venture

that proved my father's and his allies' ruin.

Magnus was no fool to entrust his safety to my father.

He required provisions and seeking them

died in a remote foray

his lines overextended.

Soft. This history, albeit oft mistaken
assigns no discredit to Lafracoth
nor aspersion casts in her direction.

The Archivist: Lady, forgive me, I indulge
curiosity that is current in my day among historians.
Here is matter more meet:

*Rex siquidem eorum filiam suam Arnulfo abstulit,
ipsamque petulantem cuidam consobrino suo illicite coniunxit.*

Lafracoth: Hmm. *Rex siquidem*... Abducted by the king from Arnulf, 'tis true.
Consobrino... Given to one of Muirchertach's cousins,
I can further vouch.

Aye, I was parted from Arnulf
by Brehon law with no regard
for the canon
from the continent
and was married to ri Midhe—
He values my counsel as my father had
and makes efforts upon my behalf to buttress
that failing chief—

Illicite coniunxit. Unlawfully?
If that law were couched in a Norman ecclesiastical court,
for certes—
and Montgomery claims to Muman, thereby,
would receive no hurt, I warrant.

Hmm.
Think upon it, Dream. Herein consists an irony
in oddly turned events:
At synod in Cashel,
the learned of Eriu lent support to Anselm's reforms,
precluding divorce,
which course my father espoused
whilst local statecraft required
he take an opposite tact.

This *consobrino* to whom I was married
knew well and liked my Conor, his kinsman,
and mourned with me that loss.
We have a son so named, especially dear to him.

He knows our history,
our bond across time and space
and still is kindly to me, loves me, I believe,

and holds me in esteem.

Well, it's all one, after all.
Or does this Orderic peer deeper
to see the violated rule of my own heart?

Dream. I think I dreamed thee
a scholar of antiquities.
Then thou must know
Glaucon's tale
of the rings
that Gyges found?

The Archivist: That is The Republic, lady.
A rubric for conscience.

Lafracoth: Then tell it me, to thy best recollection.

The Archivist: It is from *the Prelude*.

Imagine now that two such rings existed and the just man put on one, the unjust the other....

Forgive my crude retrieval

I was quicker in my younger day—

To begin with the unjust man. [With his ring on,] he must operate like a skilled professional- for example, a top-class pilot or doctor, [who] must be perfect in his wickedness; he must be able to commit the greatest crimes perfectly and at the same time get himself a reputation for the highest probity, while if he makes a mistake he must be able to retrieve it, and if any of his wrongdoing comes to light, be ready with a convincing defense....

Lafracoth: Why that is a translation most sensible,
eminently rendered.

The Archivist: *Beside our picture of the unjust man let us set one of the just man... 'Who wants to be and not seem good.' [With his ring on, the just man] is not allow[ed] to seem good.... No, [he is stripped] of everything except his justice... [is given] an undeserved and lifelong reputation for wickedness, and [made to stick to] his chosen course until death....*¹

Lafracoth: Hmm. *Petulantem*.

Well, 'a wanton' put down in history
and nothing of the rest?

This will be Mór's entry
in the *Lore of Women*
'Lafracoth the Wanton'?

¹ rendered from passages 359a-361d in the Prelude to **Plato's Republic**: the story of Glaucon's rings, translated by Desmond Lee, Penguin Books, Middlesex England, 1974.

‘Wanton’—
at first supposed
animadversion too brief, too solitary
an attachment to a name.

Yet consider how efficient the dismissal
from such a sobriquet—
sufficing a life so neatly enclosed
‘Lafracoth the Wanton’
and nothing more.
So be it, I say.

I thank thee Dream, I have that ring
which fits me best.

(*The **Courier** returns in the company of the **Scribe***)

Courier (*reads* U1109§4):

An army was brought by Muirchertach ua Briain to assist Murchad ua Mael Sechlainn, and he plundered some of the Uí Briúin.

Scribe (*reads* U1109§5):

An army was brought by Domnall grandson of Lochlainn also, with the north of Ireland, to Sliab Fuit, and Cellach, successor of Patrick, made a year's peace between ua Briain and ua Lochlainn, and the north of Ireland went after that to Mag ua mBresail against the Ulaid who were in Mag Coba, and the Ulaid gave them the three hostages they themselves chose.

ACT V

Scene 1. Cashel; late in 1110.

Muirchertach and **Maol Muire Ua Dúnáin**, Archbishop of Meath.

Muirchertach: Ten years ago on this very rock of Cashel,
We took stock and counted it good fortune
that you had joined a pilgrimage to Rome.

Maol Muire: I fear too little progress
has been made since the Synod of Cashel.

Muirchertach: Now we are faced with a juggernaut
of new ideas.

This Bishop Gilbert, Legate in Limerick
is Anselm's man and Rome's.

And this new Successor of Patrick in Armagh
Cellach, suits us even less well than the old—
how possible?

By collaborating with
my emboldened daughter—
who has her husband's ear—
and our 'loyal' archbishop, to us once dear,
and succeeds thereby in foiling us
with another makeshift peace.

Maol Muire: Sire, neither I nor Mór deserve censure
for ensuring a semblance of peace.

The land and people to which any king is indentured
fails to prosper when highnesses
will not their warring cease.

Muirchertach: Forgive us friend,
We do but speak in vexation—
next these same bishops dare
beseech this king
another synod to convene.
Where will it be conducted
and to what end?

Maol Muire: Good my king, many will come.

Some indeed will be adherents of Gilbert
and espouse a tight hierarchy.

There will also be those who heed a different voice,
eloquent as antiquity, pleading for tolerance
and choice in Christian rite and doctrine.

That voice, though not my own,
I insist be heard at Aengus Grove
before the Synod at Rath Breasail.

(**Muirchertach** gives **Maol Muire** leave to go. **Maol Muire** bows and exits)

Muirchertach:

Seven years since banishment
of the Norman magnates
from the marches of Wales,
Henry aggrandized,
Eriu embargoed.

Six years since we laid siege a week to Armagh
left gold upon the altar and promise of cattle,
for all that, bested in battle at Magh Cobha
by Mac Lochlainn and Leth Cuinn
who celebrated victory in our royal tent;

Six years spent from the death of Magnus
on his most fateful excursion,
put down in ambushade;

From abandonment of Bebhinn
and military alliance
by Sitric, chit of a boy
jealous of Norway's crown;

Six years ambitions delayed,
recovering strength,
licking our wounds,

Sedulously courting Henry
for sake of trade
while in diplomacy
supporting his rival Alba
engaged on the teeter-totter
of power.

Four years, without any chance of miscalculation,
since Domnall,
Successor of Patrick,
who my daughter thought visionary,
died in his last mission of peace.

Three years since
we once again changed regime in Meath
making Murchadh king.

Two years since we married him our learned Mór
and so made secure our northern frontier
and deemed the stage

finally set for preemptive strike
and dealing a fatal blow;

So, we had retrieved high hope of conflict
that would decide
in favor of Leth Mogha,
Mac Lochlainn reduce to vassalage
and our authority leave undisputed.

Then would we effect the church reforms
at Cashel, first imagined.

Scene 2. Aengus' Grove: The Synod of Rath Bresail; 1111. *A Religieuse, alone.*

Religieuse (*reads AI1111§3*):

A great assembly of the men of Ireland, both clergy and laity, in Fiad Mac nAengusa, i.e. in Ráith Bresail, including Muirchertach Ua Briain, high-king of Ireland, Ua Dúnáin, eminent bishop of Ireland, Cellach, coarb of Patrick, and other Irish nobles, and they enacted discipline and law better than any made in Ireland before their time.

The number of the pure clerical order

In the synod of Ráith Bresail

Three hundred priests—a perfect festival—

And a fair fifty bishops.

(*Enter Maol Muire Ó Dúnáin, Archbishop of Meath and Lafracoth*)

Lafracoth: Your Excellency. Would thou were leading this synod
as thou did in Cashel.

Maol Muire: My Queen, I wonder thou would wish it so.
For wert thou not absent at that Synod,
though thy disapprobation had presence enow,
and to be frank—

Lafracoth: Thank thee, I will complete thy thought:
'we have been at loggerheads so very often'—
but always with mutual esteem I think,
and fond regard, on my part, for my father's friend.

Maol Muire:—and, on mine, for his daughter,
who's oft caught me on the horns of her dilemmas
sharper than could be found
on the Brown Bull of Quelgny.

Lafracoth: Sometimes foes in elenchus.
we have also been allies in making peace.

Maol Muire: Aye. Tell no more about our misbegotten alliance:
neither thy father nor thy husband will forgive me

my foreknowledge of thy journey among Leth Cuinn
to Armagh to seek audience with Mac Lochlainn,
thy father's arch rival.

Lafracoth: There demanding justice for my husband
under threat by Connaught's upstart king
who would have him deposed
and put in question Midhe's survival.

Maol Muire: And presented thyself hostage for the taking—
or worse.

Lafracoth: I had safe conduct from Cellach,
The Successor of Patrick
and sanctuary at Armagh.

Maol Muire: Tsk. dear child,
surely to thee the risks were known.

At Armagh or elsewhere
respect for sanctuary
is proportioned inversely
to worth of quarry.

Thy *tuatha* may be awed by thine audacity,
I can only be glad of thy safe return.

Lafracoth: Then I have not earned thine own approval?

Maol Muire: Thou might have if thine inner states
were more transparent.

Lafracoth: Illustrious Reverend,
disingenuous remarks ill suit thy purpose.
Thou knowest me to the core.

Maol Muire: I am acquainted with thine experiences and thine ideas,
I even know thy heart sometimes.

Nor do I begrudge thee *amor fati*—
Still, my approval be contingent
upon the greater affirmation
thou yet will make.

Lafracoth: What else can be affirmed but life,
a portion to be fathomed
all else clear mystery—
in aspects good in others evil,
one embraced with joy
the other met with courage?

Maol Muire: Ah. It is my turn to pose dilemmas.
Describe to me the Cross of St. Galls.

Lafracoth: It is earliest of all,
among artifacts disseminating our faith.

Jesu, broken, nailed upon it.
Scribing angels stopped

in mid-stroke above.
 Below him on his right,
 one who offers a sop of sour wine
 in mockery, some say, else to ease his suffering,
 but he accepts this offering,
 though wine with drug
 more potent for pain
 earlier he had declined—
 some say this accomplished prophecy.
 Whilst on his left a soldier pierces him with his spear,
 to hasten death.
 Mercy little enow, I fear, or else
 nought intended but an efficient thrust
 to shorten the executioners' working day.
 Double effects observed by lookers-on
 Motives base mixed with reasons best,
 prevailing intentions only guessed.
Maol Muire: There is more depicted.
Lafracoth: His arms affixed in resignation
 to his Father's will?
Maol Muire: Or: outstretched
 in posture of gratitude on one side
 forgiveness on the other,
 describing his circle of redemption
 around indebted souls,
 whose helping and harming
 alike make them hostage,
 until the ransom is exacted
 and each be wretched no more,
 convicted by joy
 in Love new found
 allowing *caritas* to grow
 where *amor fati*
 once held ground.
Lafracoth: Bless me, father. Thy words are in my heart,
 there to take root and there find nurture;
 but I have others full grown that must be declared.
 I will make my mind known to this assembly
 at Aengus Grove:
 where the verdure of our spring begins softly,
 close to earth,
 'ere greenery is detected
 aloft in canopies
 against the sky.
 So neither does our worth proceed
 from mandates,

handed down,
with condescension from human beings
who have set themselves on high.

Maol Muire: Go on, engage thyself with thy contemporaries,
but beware: among beliefs,
tolerance of diversity
is often judged
the gravest form of heresy.

(**He** blesses **her**. **Lafracoth** exits)

What difference can it make?
what dereliction in clerical duty?
God may yet forgive each of us
our most strongly held convictions,
unless these be: love thy God
and neighbor as thyself.

Scene 3: The Lecture Hall.

The Archivist: As to the question raised by our astute reader:

“Was there a synod at Aengus Grove?”
Historians once strove mightily with this issue.
Moore wrote that indeed a synod was there
near the famed hill of Uishnech^ξ
where, of old, the Druids held their rites.
His claim was later disputed by Gwynn
who adduced evidence in the form
of ‘an interlinear explanation’
added to the Annals of Inisfallen.

But why an afterthought, after all?
What need to later clarify
that something did not exist?
Unless to represent
broad consensus when there persisted
deep division?

Was there impending schism of a kind
that Anselm addressed without success
‘twixt West and East at pope’s behest,
Now fretful in another form:
Celtic versus Romish Church
conflict emergent

^ξ Pronounced ISH-nah.

then suppressed in synod
and traces consigned
to an oubliette in the scriptorium?

Even if Gwynn we defy and credit Moore,
and allow an assembly at Aengus Grove did occur,
neither its objects nor its acts were clearly specified.

Leaving speculation in abeyance,
let us turn to consider what programme
of reform

was promulgated at Rath Bresail.

To begin, Historian Gwynn:

Assistant (reading from p.108): *In the earlier of our two extant manuscripts (Durham, Chapter Library B.ii.35) this imago is somewhat primitive in character, and seems to be more or less a faithful copy of the text which was circulated in Ireland at the time of the synod of Rath Breasail. The later of the two manuscripts (Cambridge Univ. Ff.1.27. pp. 239-42) contains a very much more attractive drawing, which is plainly a Gothic elaboration of the earlier imago. It illustrates very vividly the division of the Church's members into married laity, monks and canons; with a series of 'pyramids' designed to show the subordination of each degree in the whole hierarchy. On one side of the imago is the parish, with its priest, deacon, subdeacon, and four minor orders; and there is a three-fold division of the parishioners into those who pray (oratores), those who plough (aratores) and those who fight (bellatores). All three divisions are marked as including men and women, since women, who neither plough nor fight, are married to ploughmen and to soldiers. A second pyramid illustrates the monastic community, with an abbot at its head, and beneath him the same six degrees as in the parish. The abbot is a priest; and his community includes only oratores, not aratores or bellatores. There is a special note that it is not the duty of monks, save in cases of necessity and on orders from a bishop, to baptize, give communion or administer any sacrament (aliquod ecclesiasticum) to the laity. Their vocation is to withdraw from all worldly cares and pray to God. Bishop Gilbert is here plainly thinking of the predominantly monastic character of the earlier Irish church.*

Above these two pyramids there rises a loftier pyramid, entitled pontificalis ecclesia. At the top of this pyramid stands the bishop; and the imago indicates he has the jurisdiction over various degrees included in the two lower pyramids. Gilbert is careful to point out that this does not mean that the bishop's authority is limited to two churches; on the contrary he should have at least ten, and at most a thousand churches within his jurisdiction. The plan is continued with two bishops subject to an archbishop, whose church is described as a diocese. As a rule he has at least three, at most twenty bishops in his diocese (or in our more usual terminology, his province). The archbishop in turn is subordinate to a primate, who has at least one archbishop beneath him, and at most six. And at the head of the whole pyramidal structure stands the Roman pontiff, with at least two primates under him, and with authority over the whole Church (generalis ecclesia).¹⁷

Imagine it in Power Point.

The Archivist: In his commentary that follows (pp. 113-114), Historian Gwynn writes:

The final stage of reaching a full Irish hierarchy was not reached for another forty-five years. The Irish reformers of Anselm's day were planning a division of Ireland into two ecclesiastical provinces, Armagh and Cashel, each with twelve suffragan bishoprics as had once been planned for the two English provinces of Canterbury and York. That plan was put into effect at the national synod which met at Rath Breasail in 1111. Anselm had died two years before that date, but he could fairly claim to have done much to make the synod's work possible. Gilbert the papal legate who presided over its sessions, was the bishop of Limerick whom Anselm had met at Rouen, probably in 1106, and to whom he had sent his letter of instruction and encouragement in 1107. Malchu, whom Anselm had consecrated as bishop of Waterford in 1096, was chosen in 1111 to be the first archbishop of Cashel. Muirchertach Ua Briain, with whom Anselm had maintained a fatherly correspondence for many years, was present as king of Ireland at the synod of Rath Breasail. His powerful support must have done much to assist the great change from monastic to diocesan government. His death in 1119 was to prove a sore blow to the work of the reformers. Bishop Gilbert, though he remained as papal legate in Ireland for the next thirty years, was unable to make any notable advance during those years. The lack of a powerful support from a friendly king of Munster was no doubt one reason for his failure.

**Scene 4: Lismore; 1114: Muirchertach: Ill, Deposed—
A Soldier, a Scribe and Religieuse.**

Soldier (*reads* AI1111§8):

Muirchertach went on an expedition to Áth Cliath [and was away] from the Feast of Michael [September 29]. until Christmas.

Scribe (*reads* M1113§12):

A salmon was caught at Cluain-mic-Nois this year, which was twelve feet in length, twelve hands in breadth without being split, and three hands and two fingers was the length of the fin of its neck.

Religieuse (*reads* AI1114§2):

The king of Ireland was struck down by disease this year in the middle of summer. Alas, indeed, we find it impossible to relate the multitude of these evils: battles and fights, raids and murders, violations of churches and holy places throughout Ireland, both of laity and clergy! Woe to him who brought upon us this sickness of the king of Ireland!

Soldier (*reads* MCB1114§1):

...Diarmaid. Diarmaid Ó Briain came after that to Limerick and drove Muircheartach Ó Briain, king of Ireland, from his sick-bed and his own encampment, from Limerick to Killaloe, under guard.

Scribe (*reads* AI1114§4):

Diarmait Ua Briain took the kingship of Mumu, and banished Muirchertach from Luimnech to Cell Da Lua.

Religieuse (*reads* MCB1114§2) :

Diarmaid Ó Briain made peace with Brian son of Murchadh an Sgéith Ghirr son of Donnchadh son of Brian Boramha, and with Domhnall son of the son of Muircheartach son of Tadhg son of Brian Bóramha, and he captured them both in violation of the relics of Ireland.

Soldier (*reads* MCB1114§3):

Muircheartach Ó Briain enjoined the Galls of Limerick ... to take Diarmaid Ó Briain prisoner, and he came to them from Killaloe to Limerick and freed Brian. son of Murchadh [Ó Briain] and Domhnall, his own son, and he took possession of his kingship again. And he went with the nobles of Munster on a hosting against Leinster, and he took the hostages of Leinster and of the Galls, and left Domhnall Ó Briain, his own son, in the kingship of Dublin.

Scribe (*reads* MCB1115§2):

The Leinstermen turned against Muircheartach Ó Briain. Domhnall son of Muircheartach Ó Briain went to avenge this on the Leinstermen.

Religieuse (*reads* MCB1115§5) :

A fleet [was brought] on the Shannon by Toirdhealbhach son of Ruaidhrí [Ó Conchobhair]. He cleared Buinne an Bheithe against the Munstermen, and after that he had a conference with Murchadh son of Domhnall [Ó Maoil Sheachlainn], king of Midhe, at Clonmacnois, and they made peace and an alliance there. Great forays by Toirdhealbhach son of Ruaidhrí in that maritime expedition, and he plundered a great portion of the Connhaicne, and he came to Clonmacnois, where he fasted and gave a drinking-horn ornamented with gold and a silver goblet ornamented with gold to God and Ciaran.

Soldier (*reads* MCB1116§1):

The year before this, Diarmaid Ó Briain turned against Muircheartach son of Toirdhealbhach Ó Briain, his own brother, and took the kingship of Munster from him, in violation of [the security of] the relics and sanctuaries of all Ireland, at Cashel and Lismore.

Scribe (*reads* MCB1115§6):

A foray by Domhnall son of Muircheartach Ó Briain from Midhe into Ormond against Diarmaid, to avenge the deposition of his father twice. Diarmaid Ó Briain overtook him and defeated him, and captured Domhnall himself, and the son of Donnchadh Mac Murchadha, king of Leinster, was killed, with slaughter of the Leinstermen and Munstermen about him. Diarmaid went after that with a great force to Limerick, and made an encampment against Muircheartach and Brian son of Murchadh [Ó Briain], and he threatened to blind Domhnall son of Muircheartach unless Muircheartach submitted to his terms. Muircheartach Ó Briain submitted to the terms of Diarmaid, his own brother, for the sake of Domhnall, his son.

Religieuse (*reads AI1116§5*):

Muirchertach Ua Briain went to Les Mór and assumed the pilgrim's staff.

Scene 5—And Restored; 1115 or 1116.

Muirchertach and **Lafracoth**.

Muirchertach: I am an old sinner
who must make concession to a body
beleaguered by the procession of years
and the prospect of worm ridden decay.
Often I am delayed, constrained to rest
so long as I can bear the retribution of tired flesh
or to propound the theme of my life
in yet another variation,
phrased now according to hollow respirations
and played out upon careworn, aching heartstrings—
yet not without joy...not without joy....

Lafracoth: Thine is an ancient race
whose elders are as mute as the mountains
that harbor them.

Muirchertach: There they make a habit of solemnity,
forfeiting the excess and frenzied commotion of life.
There they assemble in perpetual devotion in a desert place
which in bygone days beckoned them.

Lafracoth: It is a courtesy—a courtesy and nothing more—
to listen with deepening care
to the slow evolving song of stillness.

Muirchertach: Once or twice I have heard the music
they wait for, but could not refrain
from introducing my own figures after all...
Whether for temperament or merely mood
I could not keep them company
nor share their solitude and so moved on.

Lafracoth: Tarry yet awhile, my dear,
And eschew thy cruel title of skeleton king.
Have I not a story to repeat
of Finn mac Cumhal
that once thou told thy children,
Domnall, Mór and Bebhinn?

It is the Chase of Slievegallion
when Finn comes upon
a mountain lake...

(Lights fade on **Lafracoth and Muirchertach**. Lights rise on *the Assistant and The Archivist*)

Assistant:

...and saw by its brink a lady of wonderful beauty, who sat there lamenting and weeping. Finn asked her the cause of her grief. She explained that a gold ring which she dearly prized had fallen from her finger into the lake, and she charged Finn by the bonds of geise^s that he should plunge in and find it for her.

Finn did so, and after diving into every recess of the lake he discovered the ring, and before leaving the water gave it to the lady. She immediately plunged into the lake and disappeared. Finn then surmised that some enchantment was being wrought on him, and ere long he knew what it was, for on stepping forth on dry land he fell down from sheer weakness, and arose again a tottering and feeble old man, snowy-haired and withered, so that even his faithful hounds did not know him, but ran around the lake searching for their lost master.

Meantime Finn was missed from his palace...and a party soon set out on the track on which he had been seen to chase the deer. They came to the lake-side on Slievegallion, and found there a wretched and palsied old man, whom they questioned, but who could do nothing but beat his breast and moan. At last, beckoning Keelta to come near, the aged man whispered faintly some words in his ear, and lo, it was Finn himself! When the Fianna had ceased from their cries of wonder and lamentation, Finn whispered to Keelta the tale of his enchantment, and told them that the author of it must be the daughter of Cullan the Smith, who dwelt in the Fairy Mound of Slievegallion. The Fianna, bearing Finn on a litter, immediately went to the Mound and began to dig fiercely. For three days and nights they dug at the Fairy mound, and at last penetrated to its inmost recesses, when a maiden suddenly stood before them holding a drinking horn of red gold. It was given to Finn. He drank from it, and at once his beauty and form were restored to him, but his hair remained white as silver. This too would have been restored by another draught, but Finn let it stay as it was, and silver-white his hair remained until the day of his death.

Scene 6. The Lecture Hall.

The Assistant, alone.

Assistant: I have just come from hospital,
he remains comfortable,
in stable condition.
He thanks you for the many kind notes and flowers,
but hopes choosing among floral arrangements
did not distract too long from studies.

I hope to have more information

^s Spelled today: ‘Geis’ in **Foclóir Póca [Irish Dictionary]**. Pronounced: ‘Gaysh’, in plural ‘gaysha’ meaning, according to Rolleston (p. 165): “a bond, a spell, a prohibition, a taboo, a magical injunction, the violation of which led to misfortune and death.”

on his progress
to share with you after the break.

Let us proceed according to his wishes.
We will take up the thread from **MaCarthaigh's Book**.

(reads MCB1117§1):

Maol Muire Ó Dúnáin, the archbishop of Ireland over the bishops and clergy of all Munster, left Munster to wreak vengeance on Diarmaid Ó Briain for the violation [of his security] through the taking of the kingship of Munster from his brother, Muircheartach Mór son of Toirdhealbhach Ó Briain.

Lights fade on the **Assistant**, reveal **Religieuse**, **Soldier** and **Scribe**.

Religieuse (reads MCB1117§2):

A great famine in Munster after Diarmaid Ó Briain had taken the kingship in violation of the relics and the clergy....

Soldier (reads MCB1117§7):

A very great plague in Leinster and Munster which caused great mortality in Dublin.

Religieuse (reads MCB1117§10):

That Diarmaid Ó Briain son of Toirdhealbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Bóramha died at Cork after a victory of penance...

Soldier (reads MCB1118§3):

Muircheartach son of Toirdhealbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Bóramha with [the men of] Thomond, Toirdhealbhach son of Ruaidhrí [Ó Conchobhair], king of Connacht, Murchadh Ó Maoil Sheachlainn, king of Midhe, and Aodh son of Donnchadh Ó Ruairc, king of Uí Bhriúin, came with their forces to Gleann Maidhir to avenge Brian son of Murchadh and to take the kingship of Sliocht Edghain Mhdir again for Muircheartach. Sliocht Edghain went to meet them at the other side of Gleann [Maidhir]. Toirdhealbhach Ó Conchobhair, Murchadh Ó Maoil Sheachlainn, and Aodh son of Donnchadh Ó Ruairc came into the assembly of Tadhg son of Mac Carthaigh and made an enduring treaty with him and with Cormac, his kinsman, against Muircheartach son of Toirdhealbhach and Síol Briain. It was then that Muircheartach Ó Briain was parted from the kingship of Munster and Ireland.

Scribe (reads M1118§8):

A mermaid was taken by the fishermen of the weir of Lis-Arglinn, in Osraighe, and another at Port-Lairge.

Scene 7. Lismore and Almenèches; 1119.

Lafracoth arrives at Lismore in order to attend **Muirchertach**.

On the way to her father, **she** receives word of the death of **Arnulf** at his nuptials in Normandy. She envisions **Celebrants** each with a flagon of wine, **A Veiled Bride** and **Arnulf** at the wedding banquet.

(**Arnulf** embraces the **Bride**. As they recite the Epithalamium, each **Celebrant** takes a turn pouring wine into goblets for the **couple** to drink)

(**Arnulf** is distracted from his **Bride** when he hears the **First Celebrant** speak)

First Celebrant: Lo, the delicately spun chrysalis
that Nature cunningly entwists in spirals.
Human artifice cannot rival it, nor an alchemist
perform such marvelous transmutations.

Arnulf: Revenant form—

Lafracoth: Arnulf, ever the soldier of misfortune.
Ever enamored of starry nights.
Never my soul, yet once near to me
in my loneliness on an alien shore.
Becoming man, who copied great ambitions
but stopped excess with honor
and a courageous heart.

Second Celebrant: Mortal alembics, benefited,
are not emptied but brim over
when, with libations no longer self possessed
out-pour themselves
one into the other, with generousness
beyond measure and proportion.

Arnulf: —Sound—

Third Celebrant: No magic can astound one more
or more defy attempted explanation.

Arnulf: — Embodiment—

First Celebrant: Therefore, this invocation we now raise:
Terpsichore, lend these lines thy dancing feet;
Erato, marry in rhyme our humble lays
All else, look kindly on this song of praise.

Arnulf (upon looking closely at the **Second Celebrant**):

Am I bewitched?
In each there be a semblance
of my mother: in look, in speech, in moves
and so these three may her composite uncannily.
Is this Mabel's tardive malediction or blessing
on a son whose boyhood, like his uncle's life,
was felled by effect of assassin
else intended?
Be this grudging approbation
for entry into what she deemed true manhood
or censure for treachery to kin that parallels her own?
How am I judged? By whom besides my God?
Mother? Brother? Sister? Father? Son?
Lafracoth: Welcome father of our welcome son,
who thrives in Alba,
by dint
of an unlikely alliance:
entered upon by four, fathers all:
The first, thy father no more, though mine still
so long as he breathes—
and beyond that breath
I know too soon will be his last—
jealous of his own estate,
who once hated thee
and harbored intent to have thee killed,
but relented and sent support
to ensure a new generation's survival.

This Muirchertach accomplished
by a courier, most special to me, a father as well
by whose arrival at Canterbury,
came a letter of intercession on thy behalf,
renewed promises of church reform in Eriu
and the courier's own priestly vows
of celibacy and service to God
bowing to correction by Anselm.
Then Muirchertach courted Scotland's king,
and made friendship steadfast
by mutual exchange of gifts and intelligence
of common enemies.

Third among these fathers,
that very primate of the Roman Rite
seeking supremacy,
yet moved by a family in exile and near extinction
found himself disposed to kindness

even towards the children of a heretic.

Thou, Arnulf. The last *pater*, not least,
a noble lord left *sans demesne*
and no patrimony other than his virtues
to bequeath,
save freedom of a son
from a makeshift crèche in Wales
and a life too closely constrained,
more easily abbreviated
by watchful enemies.

Thou left few hints and details
of thy later journey,
beyond Almenèches.

Arnulf: Am I a cursed wretch or blessed soul?
Where is the truth in these apparitions to be found?

Third Celebrant: Discursive shades of night retreat
from vermeil-rimmed horizons.
Sunbursts vie for place upon the palisades
and hint at laid up troves
whence gleaming shafts ply the awns
of barley and wheat
and canopies of oaken groves.

First Celebrant: Let blithely slip the shimmering veil.
Awaken the betrothed!

Second Celebrant: The thrush finesses a sweet aubade
meet for a festive day.
Handmaidens and groomsmen quickly dress.
To the ceremony straightaway
there assemble for promenade
and practice ye the roundelay.

Lafracoth: In the fullness of thy time, I learned
thou had become upright in refusal
further to champion thy savage brother
and, in moral outrage, by dint of arms
upheld the rights of an oppressed people.

First Celebrant: Yet what melody could evoke the thrill
of two descanting hearts
whose earnest song of faith is never still,
but strengthens at each refrain and disparts
all reserve or doubt?

Second Celebrant: So may this convivial union endure
life's sinuous labyrinth
to outshine the guiding cynosure
yet form below a sturdy plinth
as can be found in Love's most sacred shrine.

First Celebrant: Come all ye celebrants,
pay homage to noble lives this day combined.

(**A Crusader** *appears among the Celebrants. Takes the wine from them and carries it to Arnulf*)

Lafracoth (*to Arnulf*): O stay, await the unicorn
to dip its horn into
this mix thou made of good and ill
and so dispel the poison.

Arnulf (*to Lafracoth*): Nay, good wife. Our son is safe.
Safer still if father gone.

On my life, there be no hard lien
and now I am invited
by Mabel for ill and Phillip for good
to free departure with assistance:
to join my family's venerable shades
charged by God and House Montgomery:
Garde Bien.

(*to the Crusader*):

Beloved Phillip, Grammarian
first of us to learn the language
I am unlearned still,
but no longer afraid to slake my thirst
and so do thank thee for the courtesy
of this drink before my lesson

(**Arnulf** *drinks*)

I pray thee, brother,
escort me to where
I may wait upon the Word.

(*Lights fade on all but Lafracoth*)

Lafracoth: There was no news less welcome.
It was to be a nuptial
and not an execution in disguise.

Who is culpable?
O spiteful plot devised by jealous monarch,
malevolent prince,
or was it brother who called thee traitor?
All one.

He meant to be complicit
as any Socrates
and assented to his own demise
enabling, thereby,
one hostage more be freed.

Indeed, I know another,
close on his heels
champing at the bit,
eager to follow Arnulf's heroic lead.

Muirchertach *on his death bed.* **Lafracoth's** *illuminated capitals scattered on the bedclothes about him.* **Lafracoth** *enters.*

Lafracoth: Father.

Muirchertach: Good, my daughter,
thou art beside me one last time.
My heart has wearied and complains.
It longs to cease its rhythms.
Still it leapt against my chest
upon word of thine arrival.

Lafracoth: Most valiant heart. Do not speak more.
It is a blessing to be here.

Muirchertach: Nay not so valiant in heart
nor great in spirit as thee,
who has endured much for my sake.
O heart, soul, conscience of a wayward king,
confess me.

I cannot make my peace
nor find my rest
until I am persuaded, at least, of thy forgiveness.

Lafracoth: My lord, it is the office of the priest—

Muirchertach: Nay it is not. I have not harmed the priest,
not, at any rate, the one thou meanest. Another priest—
thy priest – I did grave injury
as did I thee
and thy children.

Lafracoth: Father, thou cannot best me in this elenchus.

My beloved is ever present with me,

though for a time out of memory

I grieved sorely.

My children,

thy grandchildren, survive

through the efforts that he,

Arnulf and thou joined to make

to secure them against their enemies.

Father, rejoice in their well-being, as I rejoice:

they thrive.

Is that not, at last, more a matter of gratitude

than of forgiveness

though these two be often intermingled

in our tears, scarce to be distinguished?

Muirchertach: Thou hast blessed me

But how have I not suppressed thee?

Thy teaching, thy truest calling

was proscribed for

the sake of higher polity—

Lafracoth: I protest these slanders against thyself.

Muirchertach: Nay, peace, I will brook no protest
against my self-examination.

Was it not this man

who should have been foremost thy father

who had thee heisted from thy scholarship

for that was how, as king, he deemed matters.

Yet what disservice

this doctor to have disengaged from her learners

and separated from her books.

And now, more to my shame,

Like Socrates, like Christ, thou hast put none of thee on paper-

Lafracoth: By these comparisons,

I see thou intendest for me the best company.

Perhaps by leaving nought but ciphers behind,

I will be less misinterpreted than they have been.

Muirchertach: None of thee on paper-

Lafracoth (*holding an illuminated capital for him to see*): -or else all of me
but in such anonymity

that makes self abnegation nigh complete.

Muirchertach: Where is thy frown of righteous indignation?

I had thee expunged from the Annals.

Lafracoth: And risked thy crown to protect thy heretic daughter.

Why, being expunged -that can be judged no worse than being writ down
in a book destined to be drowned

or set in flames

Muirchertach: The synods. I had hoped for clarity,
a proclamation of authoritative community.

It emerged distorted

a clarion call:

all must succumb to procedures,
the exigencies of rites and holy war.

But I am forgiven that as well. I see in your eyes I am.

How can there be such love?

(pause)

Well then, we too are words, writ small it is true
and done in with beginnings and ends
that escape self reflection.

Writ small, if at all,

scarcely traced,

or left as mere utterances.

Lafracoth: For my part I now believe we are more written down
than apt to write our lives.

God teaches us hand over hand as we put our ink on paper.

So gentle that touch without constraint, we think we may be permitted
an occasional flourish as we scribe.

Disingenuous, self indulgent thought!

One scapegrace's hand

God had scooped below Her Own

elopes to hazard a selfish loop,

a willful swirl, a slippery slope,

and leaves aught behind

but stray marks and sloppy scrawls,

Muirchertach: Another hand presumes to master

the shape of words by sheer force

but is easily vexed by his *x*'s

or crossed by his *t*'s

then falls upon them with such brutality

and leaves only angry tears and vicious scars upon the scroll.

Lafracoth: It would stand forever as testimony

of ingratitude and *akrasia*

save that Grace capably guides

the wayward back to task

to model on the templates God provides.

Muirchertach: And even those errata on the page,

if left to God,

will be transformed into illuminations,

intricate in design, exquisite to behold.

(He dies. She blesses him, looks awhile at the illuminated letters on his breast, rearranges them

to spell P-A-C- E- M, below this she places the illuminated L).

Lafracoth (*in prayer*): Dona Nobis Pacem.
(*Lights reveal Scribe, Soldier and Religieuse*)

Scribe (*reads MCB1119§4*):

Muircheartach son of Toirdhealbhach son of Tadhg son of Brian Bóramha, high-king of Ireland, died at Killaloe after penance and anointment, and having received the Body of Christ, in the fifth year of his tribulation, and he was buried with honour in the church of Killaloe.

Soldier (*reads M1133§6*):

Conchobhar, son of Murchadh Ua Maeleachlainn, royal heir of Teamhair, was slain by Donnchadh Mac Gillamochoimog, royal heir of Leinster; and Donnchadh himself was killed by the men of Meath, i.e. by the people of Aedh Ua hAedha, at the end of a month, in revenge of Conchobhar.

Religieuse (*reads M1133§7*):

Lusca, with its church full of people and relics, was burned upon the Fine Gall by the same party, in revenge of the son of Murchadh, i.e. Conchobhar.

Soldier (*reads M1133§8*):

A great depredation was committed by Murchadh Ua Maeleachlainn, in revenge of his son; and he plundered Fine-Gall and the east of Leinster.

Scene 8. Lafracoth, Inclusus: Final Reverie.

Lafracoth is revealed in a barely furnished room which is nearly entirely enclosed by a **Mason** on the side of the wall opposite from her. The **Mason** finishes the enclosure but leaves an aperture, through which is cast the shadow of a crucifix. **She** blesses the **Mason** who completes the task and makes ready to depart.

Lafracoth: This Cross.

Divine vertical redeeming from sin,
raising up the horizontal bar
of moral response.

At its extremes
vision is distorted,
and we purport to see truths.
Top-down
or bottom-up
or else from either side
and bend the holy rood
accordingly
to exert leverage—
make of it
an implement to power.

Imposition of hierarchy
modes of dominance
and submission
or else a bar that cannot be raised
from self and other at antipodes.

Here be the intersection,
silent center...circle of peace,
beckoning from the heart of things,
how souls come to it
no matter for the ecumene
God intended.

Dona nobis pacem

*(Lights reveal **The Archivist**)*

Lafracoth: Dream. Nay, do not speak.
I will mutter enough for two.

You must marvel
at the change in my circumstances
since our last conversation.
As you see,
I am shuttered and hemmed by stone.

A son, heir of Tara, has been slain
and my lord put in such grievous pain,
he cannot be consoled or counseled
but visits his vengeance unrelenting
upon others, costing innocent lives,
and the countryside
subjects to depredation.

I am weary now and abject with
losses, accumulated with the years
lonely for my sons
and my daughters;
I am become a woman
whose sole thought of good:
to use such powers she possesses
to pare this evil
to bare minimum

and so arranged with the Abbess

here to be *inclusus*
until my lord shall cease his slaughter.

But I must according to the rule,
not indulge in company even with a Dream.

Wait.

I do thank thee for thy full account
and for the efforts it would seem thou hast made
to undo my ill-repute.

(Lights fade on Lafracoth.)

The Archivist:

I am only a story-maker
conversant with antiquity.
Betimes I have been a little garrulous I admit—
not always lacking in wit nor the integrity
of circumspection.

If not my entire being
at least my body remains articulate
and noisily creaks in the face
of the silence
begging me make
a small contribution
and take my place in the swelling chorus of my forebears—
I am not entirely content to do so....

Too many mistakes
left in history
in fact and interpretation
whose indelibility
must be defied
with proper emendation...

Too much wrongful
in a person's life
crying for amends and reparation...

Too much lovingkindness,
after all,
escaping attention
or else appreciation,
longing to enfold.

*(Separate lights reveal the **Assistant in the Archives** and **Lafracoth in her cell**. They exchange a single sustained glance)*

“Yet even those errata on the page,
if left to God,
will be transformed into illuminations,
intricate in design, exquisite to behold”.

*(Lights fade on **The Archivist**).*

Lafracoth: This only can be held in fervent hope
for being sometime writer and always
written down we cannot be reader too.
Our contribution is merely threefold:
first to learn the penmanship,
then to attempt fair copy--
forgiven perhaps an occasional flourish
as one word is connected
unexpectedly to another--
next, though it seem unworthy and profane,
to rough out honest marginalia for the work in progress--
how we are tired, cold and hungry, old and ill and dying--
believing all will be redeemed by the Poet Most High
in Her Goodness Out of Time
and incorporated in the text of Her Theophany.

Soldier *(reads M1135§5):*

Domhnall, son of Muircheartach Ua Briain, who had been lord of the foreigners, and previously of Leinster, died in clerical habit, at Lis-mor, at an advanced age.

Scribe *(reads M1135§22):*

Lightning struck off the head of the Cloictheach of Cluain-mic-Nois, and pierced the cloictheach of Ros-Cre.

Religieuse *(reads M1137§11):*

Mor, daughter of Muircheartach Ua Briain, the wife of Ua Maeleachlainn, died at Dearmhach Choluim-Chille, after penance.

Scene 9. The Lecture Hall.

Assistant: I would like to conclude by conveying my gratitude
for the kind thoughts and prayers expressed in recent days
by those whom he taught across generations
and for the spirited defenses I have heard
of my grandfather's scholarship
mounted by colleagues
against a league of critics
who apparently had brooded long in silence.
I do not blame them for biding their time
until now when he can no longer make an answer.
He was apt to choose his weapons judiciously
from stores of learning he kept by
that rivaled any medieval armamentarium.
With each he was proficient:
incisive inquiry,
barbed wit or
sesquipedalian lance.
He was a word-wielder, a hard-dinter,
apt to splinter helms.
And he could ream.
All knew he deserved
an esprit medallion
for the chances he'd take
in melees of academe.

He was veteran of scholarly sieges.
Though he was never accorded fame
of first authorship
on any celebrated document
nor principality
on any prestigious grant,
he always made a contribution.
Conceptual castellanies
too many to name
ultimately yielded their mysteries
because of his ingenuity.

He's not likely to have a *festschrift*,
for having himself left little
that was scrutinized in peer review.

He was a teacher first and foremost
who treated
his undergrad hostages well,

though they became familiar
with his mask of irony.
The doctoral candidates were those
for whom the iron maiden was reserved,
during close examination.

Few knew him well outside the class,
but I can tell you in my girlhood
he was tender to me,
a lover of limerick,
a punster from Munster
an outrageous rascalion thoroughly read
who read aloud
my favorite children's stories
at bedtime
and helped me find their morals
during the day.

Well, several of you congratulated me before class
on my tenure and promotion to Associate Professor.
Thank-you.
I am glad to have the honor of course,
but I'm finding now the many strings
of new expectations attached.

What with the lurid accounts scarcely cached
in our present day Annals,
there can be no secret of the on-going scandal in our department
and the resignation of our Chair.
I have been asked to temporarily assume
the usual administrative duties,
as well as those amendatory ones
proposed by our ethics committee,
and organize the search for his replacement.

Still, I am glad to report
a condition of my contract
was the continuation of this unique lecture series
launched by my grandfather
in medieval humanities.
With apologies to him, but not to you,
I hereby disclose
I will be adding
dimensions to our study
including applications of genetics
to anthropology.

So you may expect an overview
how mitochondrial
and Y chromosomal DNA
may be used to detect
the flow and transformation
of peoples across time and space.

Even so,
there will be an hiatus before we can resume.
When we do,
The Syllabus you have for Part II
will no longer be accurate.
It currently takes up the chronology of events
from 1137
and proceeds through the crucial decades,
of Anglo –Norman invasion
to King Henry’s landing
at Waterford in 1171
and concludes with the account
how Tiernan O’Rourke, rí of Breifne
was attacked in ambush, captured and beheaded.

Instead,
I would like to backtrack somewhat
in order to discuss
my grandfather’s conjectures
and seminal investigation
on the subject of women’s
contributions to transcription
of medieval philosophy, scripture
and illumination,
and the efforts they made towards
peace and truce.

Epilogue. On the Eve of an Invasion; Almenèches; 1169.

S. Matilda: Good, my lady. It is an immense stone
to have brought all the way from Glendalough.
I wonder the vessel that carried it across the sea
did not founder in the storm imperiling the souls
who were charged with its transport.
But God granted thee safe passage and brought thee to us in Almenèches.
What stories must this ancient know but tell to no one?
Look here at this surface: it is ringed and cupped.

Alice: It is marvelous to behold it here
yet consider its origin.
I have heard of such a thing before.
Did not the Stone of Scone
on which Irish kings were once proclaimed
become dislodged
and incur a pilgrimage
not yet concluded?

Dervorgilla: Thou hast thy history aright,
good lady from Wales.
This is no Stone of Scone, however.

(to S. Matilda)

It is called a bullaun stone,
and it is cupped to hold water for blessings—
baptisms too, I trow.
My mother had long wanted
it to be brought here,
I surmise more than I know her reasons.

For my part, the delivery seemed fit penance,
and was acceptable to my lord,
Tighearnan Ua Ruairc, ri Breifne,
who approved this journey.

Alice: I cannot pretend ignorance of the gossip
and allegations of complicity that have burgeoned
around your recent abduction, lady.

Dervorgilla: Mac Murrough is a boastful man
who thinks far too well of himself,
and whilst marshalling support for his cause,
restoration of the crown of Leinster,
likes now and again to portray
his *amour* as such can be found only in legend.

Alice: Whereas, having made his acquaintance,
I would be astonished at any mutuality
in affection beyond that contrived
for your survival.

But there, I have said too much
and fear now
I have offended.

Dervorgilla: Your sympathetic addresses suit me well
for they are both honest and heartfelt.

I can in no way be offended
and should be grateful to know thee better
my lady.

Sister. I pray thee, come: this Welsh lady matches
thy kindness to me in kind.

Tell me how shall I be induced to further penance
if I will receive no shaming in Almenèches?

Alice: Thou will have no shaming from me, Queen of Breifne
as will be made plain in an account of me made fuller.

I am the wife of Maurice fitz Gerald.

His good mother was also the only mother
I, a fosterling, really knew.

The mother and father of my birth
in absentia from Wales were banished by Henry
first king of England to take that name.

My parents vanished from my part of earth
before I could put words to things.

I was left an infant brother.

We grew together but one year apart in age.

I suppose we seemed to all else hostage from the start.

And 'tis true our guardian,

Lord Gerald kept always upon us
a careful eye.

He had been my father's captain,
and for his loyalty to the crown
was awarded my father's demesne,

The lady, Nest, became my mother.

Whatever else be said, she was, like thee, highly favored
and beautiful,

in no way vain,

gifted with intuition,

and with her smile,

empowered to making others radiant too,
who thought themselves plain.

Though she was no logician,

she would oft repeat a pretty argument:

'From these avid eyes I infer
a precious soul *simpliciter*'

to cheer me in a lonely moment—
Dervorgilla: It is exceeding strange.

I know that lyrical refrain,
spoken from my own mother's lips
when I was little.

But my surprise equips me
with eagerness to hear more.

Alice: Then know in Nest's day,
as it had been late with thee,
her looks and her abduction
invited comparison
to Helen of fabled Troy.

My mother Nest, always kind to me,
was afterwards subject to merciless slurs
upon her character.
'Complicit' was an adjective
I quickly learned from whisperings around me.
Yet I was there among her children that night
when she urged her husband escape with his life.
I know the children she protected from all harm,
and negotiated with her captor
their safe return to Pembroke—all but my brother.

Caught by one man
she was at liberty awhile from another.
For though her devoted husband
Gerald was overwrought with jealousy.
So she enjoyed a kind of freedom even in captivity.

Nest saw an opportunity
to fulfill a promise to my mother.
It happened this way.
A worthy priest arrived one day
at the stronghold of our captors
with letters of introduction and safe conduct
from saintly Anselm,
at that time, alive
(but earthly not much longer)
and archbishop still,
in Canterbury, goodly Becket's current post.
This priest spent much time with me and my brother,
gave us his friendship and encouragement,
and enjoyed a deep confidence with Nest.
It was decided that he would convey my
brother out of Wales to Almenèches,

where now we stand and talk over this stone.

Dervorgilla: Did thou accompany them here?

Alice: Nay, I would not be separated
from the woman I looked upon as mother.

Indeed, she became twice my mother when I married her son,
Maurice, who was friend from my childhood.

In truth, I did not want to be parted from either one.

Dervorgilla: Pray, how was the woman of thy birth called?

Alice: I do not know.

My lord Gerald forbade any mention of her
in his presence. Well I remember the horrid beatings
meted my brother
whenever he importuned our guardian with inquiries.

And my lady Nest was no less chary
to provide aught but the briefest sketch
of character—that only on rare occasion
and never coupled with her name—
though methinks each time with fond regard
and wistful countenance.

I could not ascertain rhyme or reason to keep
us in such darkness,
but dared not ask those wags
who might tell more.

For certes, there was threat
my lady, into whose protection we came,
must always have been
on her mettle to manage.

We were children of the king's enemy,
reduced, but menace still
to his power extended across the Channel.

There was more, however,
that ensured our ignorance.
From exchanges otherwise submerged
in hushed and hurried tones
among those in service to the house
there sometimes surfaced
rumors of wantonness or worse,
practice of pagan rites,
and heretic opinions
attributed to the woman who gave us life.
Such strife did this cause,
that many who had been liveried by my father
were dismissed from his successor's service.
Only lately has this good Sister, Matilda
who is my cousin, been able to apprise me

of something like a name: 'Lafracoth'.

S. Matilda: More an appellation than a proper name

I must aver,
appearing as a singular item
in notes of one who once provided counsel
to House Montgomery
now in archives passed to that man's son,
a monastic putting down ecclesiastic history.
He makes no mention of heresy
but it suits him to let "wanton" stand against her,
as I think for a celibate chronicler
concupiscence is sometimes appeased
by including an entry in the annals
which permits now and again
vicarious pleasure in forbidden fruit,
though this be at some lady's expense.
Scant intelligence, I fear:

The real woman remains a mystery.

Dervorgilla: Like you I would know her better.

By what name did thou know the priest who
conducted thy brother to this shore?

Alice: No address more familiar than 'Father'
he ever encouraged from myself or any other,
but did seem well pleased to hear me call him so.

Dervorgilla: Sister, is this the same priest of whom thou wrote?

S. Matilda: The same. His story is sad to tell.

Almenèches had been wrested by one brother
from the hands of the other.

I mean the father of Lady Alice's birth,
Arnulf, who found in time the courage to defy Bellême.

Their blessed sister abided here already,

having been commissioned lands

by their father Count Roger.

She was the abbess of the convent here established.

Dervorgilla: Good sister, this lady's cousin,
was Robert of Bellême then thy father?

S. Matilda: Nay, my own father was his brother

Philip who died at Antioch on crusade,

the first of too many, I fear, yet to come.

It was for my father that Arnulf named his son.

He was sometimes called The Grammarian,

in envy of his education.

Once Almenèches was secured from Bellême

Arnulf and Emma, his sister our abbess,

were of one accord:

his only son would be granted sanctuary here
and provision made for his education.
Whereupon he came in company of that
nameless priest,
who delivering his charge to my aunt
stayed to take his rest.
He was knowledgeable about Canterbury,
and many other places besides.
One who seemed of high breeding
but whose sole possession he drew
from a scholar's satchel
at eventide: an Irish Missal,
in art and design unsurpassed,
which evoked astonishment
among the sisters assembled
who handed it round with such reverence.

My uncle, Robert of Bellême, always ill-tempered
found new surplus of wrath
at Arnulf's disloyalty
and, in consequence, the gain of territory
by the Duke he much despised,
and would depose
though once he would have made him king.
He descended upon Almenèches in fury.
There was scarce time to sound alarm
less to find safety,
all from the nunnery were dispersed,
but God willed my cousin Philip escape
without harm from an uncle who was, in rage, unhinged.
A disguise in nun's habit was his deliverance.
He found welcome at the monastery of Tiron,
where he received his education,
and, I believe,
came to know more of his father.

Alice: And from thence Philip went to Alba—
had been my early and latest intelligence—
with knights recruited for service to David,
first of that name to be a Scottish king.

S. Matilda: Aye.

One more deed of thy father I will tell:
Robert Bellême was jealous
as much as vengeful
and caused his wife Agnes
to be imprisoned.
Though she was but slightly known

to Arnulf
her plight seemed of special consequence
and though himself impoverished,
he wandered Normandy and Anjou,
a knight errant,
until he collected a purse,
sufficient
to bribe her guards
and allow her escape.

Alice: I thank thee cousin.
That story I had not heard,
but will preserve it
among the precious scraps,
left me from the tapestry
of my father's life.
Scant information
upon which to rely
and form an opinion,
yet better, I think,
than the innuendo that
is my mother's only memorial.

(to **Dervorgilla**)

Thine own must have had
deep conviction
to become an *inclusus*.

Dervorgilla: Hmm. Maman.

She also made the dear pronouncement
on intimations of soulish sentience
from her child's gaze
thou also heard from Nest
in thy rearing
and treasured.

I had not thought of it in years,
and do welcome its retrieval,
though with surprise
I thought it
as unique as signature.

I believe she was
courageous,
though I cannot fathom
her deepest motives.
But think not she resorted
to such privation
and austerity

to become closer to God,
not at least by means of shutting herself away.
She saw perhaps a means to peace
by her separation,
that would restore sense
to my warlike father,
become as incensed
as any Bellême,
intent on revenge and depredation
for my brother's death.

I would thou had known her.
She engaged in the world.
Engaged her children as well
when we were young,
and taught us what goods
and services
could be contributed:

how a hospital supported;
a plague defied;
a famine relieved;
a book of truths protected
copied and disseminated—
contents respected
but never deemed

impervious
to just criticism
nor thought so serious
to be given exemption
from lusty witticism;
S. Matilda: An abbey rebuilt in
Norman Almenèches,
though remote from her concerns
a votive stone from Glendalough
rededicated—
these among her works
though mysterious in motive
are nonetheless known.

Alice: And occasion women,
whose countries
and husbands divide them,
to meet awhile as sisters.
I would I had known her.
And desire that emptiness be relieved,
before we part.
In her daughter

I embrace as sister
I think I make a start.

Dervorgilla: And, even as I,
she would have discerned in thee,
my lady,
a precious soul, *simpliciter*.

One lesson more
by her imparted:
sustain the hope
peace and not its semblance
some day might be achieved.
