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Joseph Falaky Nagy

SHAMANIC ASPECTS
OF THE *BRUIDHEAN*
TALE

Among the most popular stories in Irish narrative tradition, from the literature of the twelfth and following centuries down to the oral repertoires of contemporary Gaelic storytellers, are those which center around the hero Finn.¹ He is characterized as a hunter and warrior (a *fénnid*) who lives in the wilderness and leads a band of *fénnidí* (a *fíán*). In addition, Finn is a poet and seer (a *fili*). He often encounters supernatural beings in his adventures; frequently, Finn and his men actually follow an otherworldly friend or foe into supernatural realms. Far more so than for most other heroes of Irish tradition, the encounter with the supernatural is a way of life for Finn and his band, hunters who live in the wilderness on the edge of the human world. I will attempt to show that, in this respect, Finn is a “shamanic” figure, and that some Fenian narratives reflect an archaic Irish form of “shamanism.”²

¹ Gerard Murphy presents a useful guide to the Fenian (or Ossianic) tradition in *The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 5–29 and 49–61; see also his introduction to an edition of a collection of Fenian poems, *Duanaire Finn*, vol. 3, Irish Texts Society, no. 43 (Dublin, 1953), pp. xi–lxxxvii.

² The study of Finn as a shaman was pioneered by Nora K. Chadwick in her article, “Imbas Forosnai,” *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 4 (1934): 98–135. The shamanic elements in Celtic cultures are discussed in her *Poetry and Prophecy* (Cambridge, 1942), pp. 4–6 and 11–14.

The following description is a four-part model of the “shaman,” a typological figure that can be found in ritual and narrative contexts worldwide. This definition of the shaman is based on comparative studies of shamanism by Mircea Eliade³ and I. M. Lewis.⁴

1. The shaman, unlike other members of society, can travel freely to and from otherworlds, especially the world of the dead. Shamanic ritual and narrative depict the shaman flying, climbing, or riding out of this world and into an otherworld.

2. The shaman’s primary function is to protect members of society from malignant external forces and to help them when they are afflicted by such forces. The shaman can drive away hostile supernatural creatures. He can also facilitate the passage of members of society into or out of this world at transitional points in their lives, such as birth and death. Thus, not only does the shaman travel beyond this world, but he also controls the travel of others over metaphysical boundaries.

3. Because he travels in several worlds and so in a sense belongs to all of them, the shaman is exceptionally knowledgeable. One of his functions is to inform society about the worlds beyond it.

4. While the shaman can contact and manipulate otherworldly forces in order to aid society and gather information, he himself is vulnerable to manipulation by the powerful forces that he attempts to control. Especially in his initiatory encounters with the otherworld, the shaman is victimized by it. He must learn to control supernatural forces and be accepted by the otherworldly beings whose powers he wishes to harness before he can become a true shaman.

Although a shaman transcends boundaries between worlds, he is also the guardian of the human world’s boundary. He protects society from supernatural invasion and expels extra-social agents of harm. This paradoxical combination of the transcending and the protecting of metaphysical boundaries is very much a part of the role which Finn and his men play. They are only peripheral members of human society inasmuch as they are *fénnidi*, hunters who live in the wilderness.⁵ But because their existence is so liminal, Finn and his men can perform a vital service for society. In the words of the seventeenth-century Irish writer Geoffrey Keating, who presents a traditional view of Finn’s *fían* in his history of Ireland, “It was their duty to uphold justice, and to prevent injustice, for

³ Mircea Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase* (Paris, 1951); translated by Willard R. Trask into English as *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Bollingen Series, no. 74 (Princeton, N.J., 1964). (References in this paper will be to the English version.)

⁴ I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spiritual Possession and Shamanism* (London, 1971).

⁵ Apparently, *fénnidi* in archaic Irish society were a class of social outcasts or misfits who lived a life apart from that of the members of the tribe (*tuath*); see Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Dieux et héros des Celtes* (Paris, 1940), pp. 109–21.

the kings and lords of Ireland; and also to guard and preserve the harbours of the country from the violence of foreigners.”⁶ Finn and his men form a buffer zone on the perimeters of society. These “border guards” are frequently depicted in Fenian tradition as defending Ireland from specifically supernatural invaders or expelling malevolent otherworldly beings from the human realm.⁷ Indeed, Finn can even drive away disease: Water held in his hands has curative powers,⁸ and Finn owns a cup of healing.⁹ Finn and his men, like shamans, both man the walls of the human world and drive out the sinister elements which do not belong in it.

Many of Finn’s encounters with the supernatural are opportunities for him to acquire special knowledge from the otherworld—the knowledge that makes him a poet/seer. But he pays a price for the wisdom that he wins in these encounters. In one of the medieval accounts of how he acquired wisdom, Finn burns his finger on a supernatural salmon which he is cooking; he puts the burnt finger in his mouth and thus consumes the essence of knowledge which was in the fish.¹⁰ It is as if Finn the cook acquires wisdom and becomes a poet/seer by being in part “cooked” by the supernatural food which he is preparing and by treating himself as if he were food (Finn

⁶ Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, trans. Patrick S. Dinneen, Irish Texts Society, no. 8 (London, 1908), 2:327.

⁷ In a particularly curious story from medieval Fenian tradition, three otherworldly youths come to Finn and offer to play *fian* to the *fian* itself: They will protect it from attack. When Finn and his men are afflicted by disease sent by otherworldly enemies, the three youths use magical incantation to drive the disease away. Some time later, on the anniversary of this event, Cailte, one of the *fénniú*, drives away a flock of pestilent birds from Ireland, using the same technique of magical incantation. (This story is told in the medieval compilation of Fenian lore, *Acallamh na Senórach*, ed. Whitley Stokes, *Irische Texte*, vol. 4 [Leipzig, 1900], lines 5447–514, 5555–88, 6083–141, 6146–6269. A summary and analysis of the tale is given by A. G. van Hamel in “Aspects of Celtic Mythology,” Sir John Rhŷs Memorial Lecture, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 20 [1934]: 208–13.)

⁸ *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, ed. Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, Irish Texts Society, no. 48 (Dublin, 1967), lines 1575–77. Finn can heal with his hands because he once held an otherworldly salmon—the same fish which was also the source of his special wisdom (see text).

⁹ George Henderson, “The Fionn Saga,” *Celtic Review* 2 (1905): 153. In Scottish folk tradition, Finn wins the cup as a result of a trip into the otherworld.

¹⁰ This story is from the text *Macgnimartha Finn*, ed. Kuno Meyer, in *Revue celtique* (RC) 5 (1882): 201 (there is a translation by Meyer in *Ancient Irish Tales*, ed. Tom P. Cross and Clark H. Slover [New York, 1936], p. 365). The tale of Finn and the salmon has survived in Gaelic folk tradition (see, e.g., Séamus Ó Duilearga, ed., *Leabhar Sheáin í Chonaill* [Dublin, 1948], pp. 201–2). There are parallels from other European narrative traditions to Finn’s experience in this story; these parallels are discussed by Robert D. Scott in *The Thumb of Knowledge in Legends of Finn, Sigurd, and Taliesin* (New York, 1930).

places his finger in his mouth, and from then on he becomes enlightened whenever he repeats this action). The seeming reduction of Finn to the level of food in a context of the supernatural renders him an anomaly between the categories of consumer and consumable as well as a mediator between worlds, a human who receives supernatural enlightenment.

Finn experiences other kinds of reduction, humiliation, and manipulation in other accounts of how he acquired his special knowledge. He receives enlightenment while in the awkward position of being stuck in the doorway of an otherworldly dwelling and thus accidentally coming in contact with the liquid essence of knowledge.¹¹ Or, according to another medieval account, Finn acquires knowledge in a supernatural dwelling where Finn and his men are humiliated by their hosts, who prove themselves to be stronger than the *fénni*.¹² In another medieval tale Finn is magically transformed into an old man by an otherworldly female, but as compensation he is given a drink by another supernatural figure which rejuvenates and enlightens him. Finn's hair, however, remains gray; the supernatural figure offers to change it back to its normal color, but Finn chooses to let his hair stay that way, and, ever since this adventure, a deathly chill lingers on Finn's person.¹³

Finn's penetration of the otherworld and his acquisition of knowledge in these narratives is predicated on his suffering various kinds of loss or injury. Before he receives his unique wisdom Finn is terrorized by supernatural forces. In the final tale synopsized above, Finn becomes wise as a result of a very close brush with old age and death; indeed, a deathly element is incorporated into the character of Finn as a token of his

¹¹ "Finn and the Man in the Tree," ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer, *RC* 25 (1904): 344–47; see also "Two Tales about Finn," ed. and trans. Vernam Hull, *Speculum* 16 (1941): 329–33.

¹² This story is in the late medieval compilation of Fenian lore entitled *Feis Tighe Chonáin* [The feast of Conán's house], ed. Maud Joynt, *Medieval and Modern Irish Series*, no. 7 (Dublin, 1936), lines 471–659 (a translation is provided in another edition of the *Feis* by Nicholas O'Kearney, *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* 2 [1855]: 146–57). In the house of the otherworldly Cuanna, Finn's men are deprived of their share of the meat by a ram, which they cannot control, but which a twelve-eyed man can; Finn's men are also temporarily metamorphosed into old men by a hag. Finn drinks from Cuanna's wells, one of which is Falsehood and the other, Truth; it is, presumably, by drinking from the latter that Finn acquires the *fios thoighe Cuanna*, "knowledge from the house of Cuanna" (Joynt, *Feis*, line 1336), referred to in the text.

¹³ Joynt, *Feis*, lines 1141–1330; O'Kearney, *Feis*, pp. 166–75. Not only is there a deathly coldness on Finn's skin as a result of this incident, but there is a smell of putrefaction on his offspring (*mosrughadh mairph ar do chloinn* [Joynt, *Feis*, line 1147]; see glossary, *ibid.*, s.v. *mosrughadh*).

encounter with the supernatural and of his enlightenment. Yet, while Finn in life is paradoxically somewhat dead, in death he remains somewhat alive. According to a tenth-century account of Finn's death, his severed head criticizes those who have taken it away for not feeding it and actually rearranges their portions of food.¹⁴ In a context of the supernatural (or death), Finn can seem weak, yet he also proves to be powerful when he would seem to be weakest.

A kind of Fenian narrative in which a trip to the otherworld figures prominently is the *bruidhean* tale.¹⁵ (The word *bruidhean* means "hostel," and in both Fenian and non-Fenian narrative the dwellings described as *bruidhne* are explicitly or implicitly otherworldly.)¹⁶ This kind of story features a situation in which Finn and his men are invited to a feast in the otherworld—a feast which turns out to be a trap set for Finn and his men, who find themselves being hosted by their supernatural enemies. In many respects Finn's experience in the *bruidhean*, where he is nearly killed but from which he escapes with new knowledge of the otherworld, can be viewed as a shamanic journey beyond the human world. It is in the *bruidhean* tale that we can see most clearly a shamanic ambiguity inherent in the relationship between Finn and the supernatural; for in the *bruidhean* situation Finn alternates radically between being a victimized guest and an aggressive intruder—between being manipulated by, and a manipulator of, the otherworld.

Several *bruidhean* tales have survived both in manuscripts

¹⁴ "The Death of Finn mac Cumail," ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 1 (1897): 464–65. In this tale we see an example of the motif of the talking head, which occurs elsewhere in Celtic mythology and is discussed by Anne Ross in *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London, 1967), pp. 118–26.

¹⁵ In his *Gaelic Folk-Tales and Mediaeval Romances: A Study of the Early Middle Irish 'Romantic Tales' and Their Oral Derivatives* (Dublin, 1969), Alan Bruford describes the *bruidhean* tale in both literary and oral traditions on pp. 9 and 115–18.

¹⁶ An example of a non-Fenian medieval Irish tale in which a *bruidhean* figures prominently is the *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* [Destruction of Dá Derga's hostel] (ed. Eleanor Knott, *Medieval and Modern Irish Series*, no. 8 [Dublin, 1936]; a translation by Whitley Stokes is included in Cross and Slover, eds., pp. 93–126). In this tale, as in most narratives about *bruidhne*, the *bruidhean* is a context for the explosion of tensions and for wholesale destruction; in fact, the word has a secondary meaning of "argument" in Middle and Modern Irish (see the Royal Irish Academy's *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*, s.v. 1 *bruiden* [a]). There is one Fenian tale entitled *Bruidhean Bheag na hAimhaine* [The little *bruidhean* of the hill of Allen], in *Trí Bruidhne* (ed. Nessa Ní Shéaghdha and Máire Ní Mhuirgheasa [Dublin, 1941], pp. 16–39), in which there is no otherworldly hostel and the *bruidhean* of the title refers to an argument among Finn's men.

and in the repertoires of modern Gaelic storytellers.¹⁷ The earliest extant example of the genre is preserved in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster (abbreviated as LL).¹⁸ This story has most of the elements of the typical *bruidhean* tale, and I present an outline of it as an example of the genre. The following summary is based on the LL text, with details added from other extant medieval versions of the tale, which I indicate in the footnotes.

Finn and his men are invited to an assembly of Munstermen by the king of Munster. Horse races are held, and the horse of the king's grandfather wins all the races. The king offers to buy the horse from his grandfather, but he gives it to his grandson freely, and the king in turn gives the horse and other gifts to his guest Finn. He leaves the king and is invited to a feast by another Munsterman, whom Finn rewards for his hospitality with costly gifts. Finn decides to try the Munster king's horse, and along with two of his men he goes racing recklessly; this will be the most difficult race ever run by Finn and his men.¹⁹ By the end of the day, Cailte and Oisín, Finn's two companions, have outraced Finn with their horses. They all look for a place of shelter and find a house,²⁰ which Finn did not know was there, with a fire burning in it. Cailte suggests that they go to the house and find out about it. At the door they are welcomed by an ugly-looking figure who behaves as if he had been expecting them. He takes their horses away and shuts the door tight after he has invited Finn and his men inside. Their host puts elder wood on the fire, which makes so much smoke that the guests are nearly suffocated. Also in the house are a three-headed hag and a headless man with an eye in his chest. These characters begin to sing for Finn and are joined by a chorus of nine heads, which emerge on one side of the house, with their trunks appearing on the other side. The guests are perturbed by the discordant music. Their host seizes their horses, kills them, and puts pieces of horseflesh on spits of rowan wood to cook over the fire. Cailte says to Finn that he will

¹⁷ "In oral tradition all of these stories [that is, *bruidhean* tales] but *Eachtra Lomnochtáin* [see text below] can be found, but none of them seems to be nearly as popular as might be expected from the number of MSS of them" (Bruford, p. 115). Even though the Fenian *bruidhean* tale is primarily an Early Modern Irish literary phenomenon, we should not assume that the genre is a primarily literary creation. No doubt, the scribes who wrote down the *bruidhean* tales were translating into a literary form what were originally oral narratives which may have gradually died out in the oral tradition but which lived on in the literary tradition. As Gerard Murphy commented, "Literary Fionn-lore is then to be distinguished from folk Fionn-lore less by differences in tale-type than by differences in form or spirit" (*Duanaire Finn*, 3: xl).

¹⁸ The text of this narrative poem has been edited and translated by Whitley Stokes ("Find and the Phantoms," *RC* 7 [1887]: 289–307); it is this edition which has been utilized for this paper. Other versions of the poem have survived in Irish literature (see *Duanaire Finn*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Eoin MacNeill, Irish Texts Society, no. 7 [London, 1908], pp. 28–30 and 127–30; see also *Agallamh na Senórach*, ed. Nessa Ní Shéaghda [Dublin, 1942], 1:173–82), as well as prose tellings of the story (Ní Shéaghda, *Agallamh*, 1:168–72; Ludwig Stern, "Le Manuscrit irlandais de Leide," *RC* 13 [1892]: 5–7 and 12–17).

¹⁹ In the *Agallamh* Oisín tells this story in response to the question, What was the most difficult (*doilghe*) race in which you ever participated? (Ní Shéaghda, *Agallamh*, 1: 168.)

²⁰ The house is referred to as a *bruidhean* in the *Agallamh* (ibid., pp. 170–72).

avenge this insult, but Finn advises him to be still and grateful that their fearsome host has attacked their horses, not them.

While the horseflesh is still raw, the host takes it off the fire and offers it to Finn, who refuses the food, saying that he does not eat raw meat (or that he does not eat horseflesh).²¹ The host is insulted by the refusal and uses it as a pretext to assault his guests. In the ensuing combat between the *fénnidí* and the occupants of the house, the fire goes out, and Finn, along with his men, is hemmed into a dark corner, where the fight continues until the morning. At the break of day all the combatants fall in a swoon, lying on the ground as if they were dead.²² Finn and his comrades awake to find that the house and its inhabitants have vanished and that their horses are alive and whole. Finn, using his divinatory technique,²³ ascertains that his hosts were the brothers and sister of a female named Cuilenn, and that they were attempting to avenge the killing of their sister by the *fian*. Finn and his men rejoin their companions and tell them of their adventure.

This *bruidhean* tale begins with a scene of normal human interaction, as do most examples of the genre and, in fact, most Fenian tales that feature an encounter with the supernatural. Finn is in the pleasant company of the Munstermen and then in the company of his fellow *fénnidí*, with whom he has a friendly race. There is a mild, formalized kind of tension in these situations of rivalry and competition, but they conclude with gift-giving and cooperation: Valuable commodities are exchanged among the Munstermen and the *fénnidí*, and Finn, the loser of the race, searches for shelter along with his companions, the winners of the race.

This harmony is then disrupted by the appearance of the supernatural. The positive interaction between humans highlighted in the first part of the LL tale is succeeded by the intensely hostile interaction between Finn and his supernatural hosts in the *bruidhean*. This hostility, however, is not immediately apparent; at first, it seems as if Finn the guest has merely gone from one host (the Munsterman) to another. The *bruidhean* appears to be a place of normal human habitation (Finn and his men see a fire burning in it), but it is actually a distorted mirror image of proper human ways and values: Although there is a fire, it nearly suffocates the guests, and the

²¹ The horseflesh taboo is mentioned only in the *Duanaire Finn* poem (MacNeill, *Duanaire Finn*, 1:29).

²² Tuittid nél i cend cach fhir/com-bái marb arin lathir ("A swoon came into the head of each person/so that he died immediately") (Stokes, "Find and the Phantoms," p. 302).

²³ Only in the Leyden MS prose version of the tale is Finn explicitly described as putting his finger in his mouth to find out about the *bruidhean* experience (Stern, pp. 7, 16–17). In the other versions of the story, the first-person narrator (Oisín) simply reveals the identity and motivation of the otherworldly hosts at the end of the tale.

food in the *bruidhean* is served virtually raw.²⁴ The *bruidhean* host treats his human guests to meat that they cannot eat and music that they cannot enjoy. Hospitality has become a cover for animosity, and the gift a weapon that the giver uses against its receiver. The passage from the human world into the otherworld involves a radical shift from normal human behavior, on the part of both the host and the guest; for, in response to the outrages inflicted upon them by their host in the *bruidhean*, Finn and his men become bad guests, who refuse the food offered to them and fight with their host(s). The nightmarish wrongfulness of this and other *bruidhean* experiences (to be examined later) indirectly affirms the rightness of normal human ways. It is as if the otherworldly revelation granted to Finn in the *bruidhean*, and to the audience of the *bruidhean* tale, concerns primarily the nature of human society, which is being defined by contrast with the otherworld.

Inasmuch as shamanic types are depicted in many cultures as riding into the otherworld, it is significant that Finn and his men come across the *bruidhean* after a horse race in this tale.²⁵ According to another medieval Fenian text, the horse that Finn received from the Munster king (which, in the LL tale, survives the race but dies in the *bruidhean*) was ridden so hard by Finn that it died.²⁶ Clearly, beyond this extraordinary race there lies an alien reality, outside the human realm and beyond life itself. The *bruidhean* of the LL tale is a place of

²⁴ Also, the food which is given to the guests is not really a "gift," since it is the meat of their own horses!

²⁵ There are several Fenian tales in which Finn and his men encounter the supernatural during the activity of hunting (which involves riding on horses) or just after they have hunted (see, e.g., the story of Finn and the princess summarized below; Kuno Meyer, *Fianaigeacht*, Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series, no. 16 [Dublin, 1910], pp. 56–59; and poems 61 and 62 in *Duanaire Finn*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Gerard Murphy, Irish Texts Society, no. 28 [London, 1933]). In the Early Modern Irish tale *Tóraidheacht an Ghiolla Dheacair* [Pursuit of the lazy lad] (ed. Standish H. O'Grady, in *Silva Gadelica*, vol. 2 [London, 1892], 292–311; trans. O'Grady, in *Silva Gadelica*, vol. 1 [London, 1892], 257–75), some of Finn's men are kidnapped into the otherworld on the back of the Lazy Lad's horse, to which they magically adhere. In a poem by the eighteenth-century poet Micheál Coimín (*The Lay of Oisín by Micheál Coimín*, ed. and trans. Tomás Ó Flannghaile [London, 1896]; translation reprinted in Cross and Slover, eds., pp. 439–56), Finn's son Oisín is taken to an otherworld across the sea by a woman on the back of her magical horse; Oisín returns once for a visit to this world on the horse, but he loses it as soon as his feet touch the ground. The motif of riding into the otherworld in Fenian and other narrative traditions is discussed by Alexander H. Krappe in "La Poursuite du Gilla Dacker et les dioscures celtiques," *RC* 49 (1932): 96–108. Eliade cites examples of equine symbolism in shamanic ritual and narrative in *Shamanism* (n. 3 above), pp. 467–70.

²⁶ Stokes, *Acallamh* (n. 7 above), lines 1595–1618.

death,²⁷ where the guests are nearly killed, and their horses actually killed, by hosts bent on avenging the dead (their sister Cuilenn). Here, the horses of Finn and his companions function as both the “vehicles” by which they attain the otherworld and also their substitutes in a quasi ritual of initiation: It is the horses, and not the metaphysical travelers themselves, who are slain, cooked, nearly eaten, and reborn—in a word, *processed*—in the otherworld.

As supernatural hospitality becomes hostility in *bruidhean* tales, the cannibalistic threat to the guests, which is only implicit in the LL tale (Finn expresses relief that the host slays the horses, and not the guests),²⁸ is occasionally expressed explicitly. In a *bruidhean* tale from Scottish oral tradition, Finn is seized by his supernatural hosts and placed on a cooking griddle, where his legs are burnt off; the crippled guest is then impaled on a stake, like a piece of cooked meat to be eaten.²⁹ In another oral *bruidhean* tale, which is from Ireland, Finn’s men are invited to an otherworldly dwelling where many of them are thrown into a pot of boiling water, as if to be cooked.³⁰ In a *bruidhean* tale that has survived primarily in manuscripts, *Eachtra Lomnochtáin* [The adventure of Lomnochtán] (hereafter referred to as *Eachtra*), the savage otherworldly host threatens to remove their flesh from the *fénnidí* with red-hot pincers and feed it to his dogs; the host’s wife, however, simply wants to eat the guests raw herself.³¹

In his study of shamanism, Eliade gives several instances from different cultures of the motif of the shaman being cooked and consumed by supernatural beings in the course of his metaphysical journey.³² The shaman is thus metaphorically transformed by the otherworld, or he is even “swallowed” by

²⁷ In some folk *bruidhean* tales, the sinister otherworldly feast to which Finn and his men are invited is in commemoration of a deceased supernatural figure (see *Béaloideas* 3 [1932]: 450–54 [the corpse actually comes to life in the *bruidhean* and attacks the guests], and *Béaloideas* 6 [1936]: 104–7). The interpretation of the *bruidhean* as a kind of underworld was proposed by Alexander Krappe in his review of Reidar Christiansen’s *The Vikings and the Viking Wars in Irish and Gaelic Tradition* in *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen* 8–9 (1932): 344–45.

²⁸ *Maith lind dia ndama duin féin* (“Good with us if he spares us [if not the horses]”) (Stokes, “Find and the Phantoms,” p. 300).

²⁹ “Fionn’s Enchantment,” ed. and trans. John F. Campbell, *RC* 1 (1870): 196–97.

³⁰ *Béaloideas* 3:390–92.

³¹ *Eachtra Lomnochtáin*, ed. Osborn Bergin and Eoin MacNeill (Dublin, 1905), secs. 22–23 (a translation of the *Eachtra* is provided by these editors in the *Gaelic Journal*, vols. 8–9 [1898–99]).

³² Eliade, pp. 41–44.

it and so experiences the supernatural in a most intimate way. This is what appears to be reflected in these details from various *bruidhean* tales. The reduction to the level of food which is to be cooked and consumed that Finn and his fellow guests (or, in the LL tale, their horses) experience in the otherworld is a rite of passage, just as it is in the story of Finn cooking, and being cooked by, the supernatural salmon. Passing through this ordeal, the metaphysical traveler becomes a different person from what he was, with an intimate knowledge of the otherworld.

In the LL *bruidhean* tale the injury done to the horses disappears along with the otherworldly dwelling and its occupants. So too in the Scottish *bruidhean* tale referred to above, Finn's legs, which had been burnt off by his hosts/captors, are magically restored at the end of the adventure.³³ In an episode of the *Eachtra*, which is really an extended chain of *bruidhean* tales, the *fénnid* guests lose their arms in an otherworldly dwelling, but they are rescued by their comrades, and their lost limbs are magically restored.³⁴ Escape from the *bruidhean* in these narratives means a return to well-being and physical wholeness: The metaphysical traveler returns to this world intact, even renewed. But in the *Bruidhean Chaorthainn* [*Bruidhean* of Rowan], a tale which has survived in both literary and oral versions, the *Eachtra*, and the *Bruidhean Eochaidh Bhig Dheirg* [*Bruidhean* of big-red Eochaidh] (hereafter referred to as *Bruidhean Eochaidh*), a prominent member of the group of *fénnid* who go to the otherworldly feast is left conspicuously marked and "incomplete" at the end of the *bruidhean* experience. This is Conán, who in the *Bruidhean Chaorthainn* loses the skin off his head and back in the process of escaping and thus becomes known as Conán Maol, "Conán the Bald."³⁵ In the *Eachtra* Conán's head is once again skinned, here during his fight with the savage cannibalistic wife of the otherworldly host who wanted to feed the *fénnid* to his dogs. To cover up the wound on his head, the *fénnid* make a sheepskin covering for Conán.³⁶ In the *Bruidhean Eochaidh* one of

³³ Campbell, pp. 200–202.

³⁴ Bergin and MacNeill, *Eachtra*, secs. 117, 121.

³⁵ *Bruidhean Chaorthainn*, ed. Pádraic Mac Piarais (Dublin, 1908), sec. 35.

³⁶ Bergin and MacNeill, *Eachtra*, sec. 29. Conán is similarly covered in folk versions of the *Bruidhean Chaorthainn* (see Murphy, *Duanaire Finn* [n. 1 above], 3:xxviii–xxix; other narrative parallels to Conán's plight are mentioned in *ibid.*, pp. xxx–xxxii, n. 1).

the supernatural figures in the dwelling where Finn and his men are being hosted offers to wash Conán; at Finn's advice he puts only his toe in the tub, where it dissolves.³⁷

These losses which Conán suffers in various *bruidhean* situations are reminiscent of the injuries and losses which are incurred by Finn in the stories about how he gained his special knowledge. We have seen that Finn's finger gets burnt or bruised in the process of his becoming wise or that he loses his youth and consequently acquires supernatural wisdom. These losses signify—or even make possible—Finn's penetration of the otherworld.

Conán's incompleteness becomes a part of his character: He acquires the nickname Maol after the *bruidhean* experience, almost as a symbol of his intimate contact with the supernatural. It is important to note that Finn himself, in a twelfth-century account of his childhood deeds, becomes bald and acquires the nickname Maol. Once, while in the company of craftsmen (types associated with the supernatural in Celtic traditions),³⁸ Finn, known as Demne in his youth, is afflicted with a mangelike disease, so that he is called Demne Maol afterward.³⁹ The otherworldly connotations of being *maol* ("bald," "shorn") in Irish tradition are apparent when we consider that druids and druidic types are often described as *maol* in medieval Irish literature.⁴⁰ A bald or shorn head suggested an affinity with the supernatural and the possession of supernatural wisdom.⁴¹ Demne/Finn Maol does gain knowledge from the otherworld (although, in the text, not as a direct result of his having become bald), and, while Conán is never explicitly enlightened in the *bruidhean*, his baldness would seem to indicate a special relationship and familiarity with the otherworld that Finn and his fellow guests acquire as a result of the *bruidhean* adventure.

In the *Feis Tighe Chonáin* [Feast of Conán's house], a medieval compilation of Fenian lore, one of the stories which

³⁷ Ní Shéaghda and Ní Mhuirgheasa, *Trí Bruidhne* (n. 16 above), pp. 60–61.

³⁸ One of the most prominent classes among the *des cerda* ("people of crafts"), also known as the *des dána* ("people of arts"), was the class of poets, whose inspiration was believed to come from the otherworld (see Thomas O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* [Dublin, 1946], pp. 318–40).

³⁹ Meyer, *Macgnimartha Finn* (n. 10 above), p. 199.

⁴⁰ The associations of baldness in Irish tradition are presented in my article, "Demne Mael," *Celtica* (in press).

⁴¹ The supernatural connotation of baldness in Celtic cultures was discussed by John G. McKay in his notes to *More West Highland Tales* (Edinburgh, 1940), 1:468–71.

Finn tells his supernatural host Conán (no apparent relation to the *fénnid* Conán) is a *bruidhean* tale where Finn actually wins the knowledge that makes him a seer in the context of a sinister otherworldly feast. This is the story already described, in which Finn and his men are humiliated by their hosts, who, however, also give him a drink of truth. There is no other instance of Finn consuming a drink or food that is explicitly described as giving knowledge in any other *bruidhean* tale extant. Yet it should be noted that there is a basic similarity between the variant accounts of how Finn acquired the knowledge of a poet/seer and the *bruidhean* tales. In both kinds of narrative Finn comes upon an otherworldly context of feasting where he meets with supernatural hostility but from which he escapes, sometimes with a new physical feature. This pattern is clear in the *bruidhean* tale, if we assume that Conán, at least in this particular genre, functions as Finn's "alter ego."⁴² In the story of Finn stuck at the supernatural doorway, Finn is shut out by a female carrying a vessel, the contents of which she has just distributed to those in the dwelling. He is thus disrupting a feast, where a liquid of knowledge is being consumed. Some of the remaining fluid in the vessel drops upon his finger, and so Finn acquires supernatural knowledge;⁴³ his finger, as well as his identity, are radically changed. In the story of Finn and the salmon, he prepares a feast of otherworldly food and ends up consuming it himself; in oral versions of the tale, the intended consumer of the salmon attempts to slay Finn in revenge for his having accidentally consumed the essence of knowledge.⁴⁴ In the tale of Finn's premature aging, it is an implicit hostility between him and an otherworldly female that leads to his aging and ultimately to the situation in which an otherworldly "host" treats Finn and his men to a

⁴² Elsewhere in Fenian tradition, Finn and Conán represent diametrically opposed qualities: Finn is generally wise and liberal (see, e.g., the description of Finn in Stokes, *Acallamh* (n. 7 above), lines 113–17), while Conán is foolish, irascible, and selfish (see, e.g., poem 22 in MacNeill, *Duanaire Finn*, vol. 1 [n. 18 above]). Occasionally, however, it is these opposing qualities in the two figures that work together to make the *bruidhean* experience possible for Finn and his men: Finn, out of his keen sense of etiquette, is forced to accept the sinister-sounding invitation to the *bruidhean*, while Conán is eager to go because he has such a desire to eat (see, e.g., Bergin and MacNeill, *Eachtra*, sec. 14).

⁴³ It is not explicitly stated in any surviving version of this story (see n. 11 above), that the liquid dripped upon Finn's stuck finger, but this detail can be assumed on the basis of a comparison of this tale with a close variant, summarized in text below, at n. 58.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Ó Duilearga (n. 10 above), pp. 201–2, and other versions of the tale, referred to in the bibliography, *ibid.*, p. 427.

drink of knowledge.⁴⁵ The similar combining of the motifs of otherworldly feasting and otherworldly hostility in both the enlightenment stories and the *bruidhean* tale would suggest that the end result is the same for Finn in both kinds of narrative: that implicitly in the *bruidhean* tale Finn is acquiring the same kind of supernatural knowledge that he acquires in the tales explicitly about his becoming a poet/seer. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, in most *bruidhean* tales, Finn uses the mantic technique which marks him as a seer—as one who acquires knowledge from the otherworld—at some point during his *bruidhean* experience to find out who his supernatural host is or how to escape from his predicament.⁴⁶ Finn in the *bruidhean* places his finger in his mouth as a reaction to the supernatural, just as in the stories of the otherworldly salmon and Finn at the doorway of the otherworld he places his finger in his mouth after he has confronted the supernatural. Consequently, Finn is enlightened in all of these analogous situations. The humiliation which Finn undergoes in the *bruidhean*, where he is definitely not treated as a guest and is even reduced to the level of food, is parallel to the humiliation of Finn appearing to “eat” his own finger and the other kinds of reduction which he experiences in tales about how he became a poet/seer. Such degradation, however, like that which the shaman experiences in his otherworldly quest, makes it possible for Finn to become familiar with the otherworld and to gain access to its knowledge.

In the LL *bruidhean* tale Finn and his men are deprived of their horses, with which they came to the supernatural hostel, and they are trapped in the dwelling, where they must fight back against their hosts to protect themselves. As in several other *bruidhean* tales, Finn saves his life, and acquires a

⁴⁵ It is not clear in the *Feis Tighe Chonáin* why the otherworldly female lures Finn into the lake that makes him into an old man; perhaps because he spurned her love (see Joynt, *Feis*, lines 1149–1216; O’Kearney, *Feis*, pp. 166–71). In any case, Finn and his fellow *fénndi* attack an otherworldly dwelling in response to what was done to Finn, and thus they receive the magical drink from the proprietor of the dwelling, who wishes to appease them (Joynt, *Feis*, lines 1259–68; O’Kearney, *Feis*, p. 173).

⁴⁶ E.g., Mac Piarais, *Bruidhean Chaorthainn* (n. 35 above), sec. 16 (Finn puts his finger in his mouth to find out who his captors are and how he and his men can escape); *Bruidhean Eochaidh*, in *Tri Bruidhne*, ed. Ní Shéaghdha and Ní Mhuirgheasa, p. 50 (once again, Finn uses his divinatory technique to find out about the *bruidhean* situation); *Cuireadh Mhaol Uí Mhananáin ar Fionn agus Fianaibh Éirinn* [The invitation of Maol to Finn and the *fian*], ed. “An Craoibhin” [Douglas Hyde], *Lia Fáil* 3 (1930): 112 (it is not stated explicitly that Finn uses his divinatory technique, but at the end of the *bruidhean* adventure Finn and Diarmaid intuit the true identity of their host); see also n. 23 above.

familiarity with the otherworld, through his own power to survive in a supernatural context or with the help of his fellow *fénndi*. But there are *bruidhean* tales in which Finn is saved from his otherworldly predicament by supernatural figures whose sympathy is aroused, or by Finn's otherworldly hosts themselves, who turn out to be friendly after all. In the *bruidhean* tale, referred to above, which is a version of the story of how Finn acquired special knowledge, Finn and his companions are physically overwhelmed by their mysterious hosts and are totally at their mercy. Yet they are not only released from the *bruidhean*, but the metaphorical significance of the various events which they witnessed during the night in the otherworldly dwelling is explained to Finn in the morning by the chief host.⁴⁷ Thus, at least in this particular *bruidhean* tale, Finn's otherworldly experience is an extended initiation into a state of enlightenment supervised for Finn's benefit by his otherworldly "mentors."

In those *bruidhean* tales where Finn or his men receive supernatural aid, the helper is usually female. But the relationship between human guest and otherworldly female in these and all other *bruidhean* situations is very ambivalent, as is the relationship between Finn and the supernatural altogether in this genre. Diarmaid and Oscar, two of the *fénndi* who have a whole series of *bruidhean* adventures in the *Eachtra*, win the affection and help of women who make it possible for the *fénndi* to escape from various otherworldly entrapments; these two heroes win wives from the otherworld in the process of penetrating and getting out of it.⁴⁸ On the other hand, Conán is the guest who has to fight with various hag captors in the same series of *bruidhean* situations, so that when the *fénndi* finally come back to this world, Diarmaid and Oscar return with wives, but Conán only with a hatred and fear of all women.⁴⁹ Yet even the misogynist acquires a wife in the

⁴⁷ As explained by Cuanna the host, what Finn and his men had witnessed during the night was a demonstration of the power of the world (represented by the twelve-eyed man, who proved to be stronger than Finn's men) and the power of old age (represented by the hag who transformed Finn's companions into old men). Also explained to Finn is why his two drinks had tasted different: one was a drink of falsehood, and the other a drink of truth (Joynt, *Feis*, lines 599–625; O'Kearney, *Feis*, pp. 154–57).

⁴⁸ Bergin and MacNeill, *Eachtra*, secs. 24, 118.

⁴⁹ At one point in the *Eachtra*, Conán runs away from a stone pillar, thinking that it is a huge hag (*ibid.*, sec. 124). When the wandering *fénndi* return home to Finn, he mocks Conán for coming back scarred and wearing a sheepskin cap, while Diarmaid and Oscar return with wives (*ibid.*, sec. 141).

Eachtra; on a vacation from heroics at the home of yet another supernatural host, Conán falls in love with his host's wife, slays her husband, and finally wins her.⁵⁰ In the *Bruidhean Eochaidh* a similar combination of sexual hostility and attraction is associated with Conán, a character who clearly is pivotal in the delineation of the relationship between human guest and supernatural host in the *bruidhean* tale. Once again, Conán, on behalf of the *fénnidi*, fights with a formidable female in the *bruidhean*. She overwhelms him but spares Conán because, she claims, he once wooed her; Conán denies this, gains the upper hand in the contest, and spares her only after she promises to help the *fénnidi* escape from the *bruidhean*.⁵¹

Not only do females occasionally function as a means of escape for Finn or his men in the *bruidhean* tale, but they also are sometimes the goal of Finn's quest in the otherworldly hostel—or even his captors. The host of the *Eachtra* manages to lure the *fénnidi* to his *bruidhean* by offering them his fair daughter.⁵² In the *bruidhean* tale *Cuireadh Mhaoil Uí Mhanáinín ar Fionn agus Fianaibh Éirinn* [The invitation of Maol to Finn and the *fian*] (hereafter referred to as *Cuireadh*), Finn and Diarmaid fall in love with the host's wife, who serves her guests more food when her husband takes their portions away.⁵³ Yet the three-headed hag in the LL *bruidhean* tale certainly is not on the guests' side, and the villains of the story *Bruidhean Chéise Corainn* [The *bruidhean* of Keshcorran] (an untypical *bruidhean* tale inasmuch as the *fénnidi* are not invited but just kidnapped by their otherworldly enemies) are three hags who magically bind and nearly kill Finn and his men.⁵⁴ Perhaps the best illustration of the ambiguous and multifaceted relationship between Finn and the otherworldly women of the *bruidhean* tale is to be found in the following example of the genre:

After a hunt in which Finn and his men mysteriously lose all of their hunting dogs, they meet a lovely woman who brings them an invitation to a feast from the daughter of the king of Greece. Finn goes with his men only

⁵⁰ Ibid., secs. 143–47. The widowed female, reluctant to marry the slayer of her husband, has other supernatural warriors fight with Conán before she finally relents.

⁵¹ Ní Shéaghda and Ní Mhuirgheasa, *Trí Bruidhne*, pp. 56–57.

⁵² Bergin and MacNeill, *Eachtra*, sec. 5.

⁵³ "An Craoibhín," *Cuireadh*, pp. 111–12.

⁵⁴ *Bruidhean Chéise Corainn*, in *Trí Bruidhne*, ed. Ní Shéaghda and Ní Mhuirgheasa, pp. 3–15; O'Grady, trans., *Silva Gadelica*, 1:306–10.

to find that the princess is a hag who wants Finn to marry her in exchange for gifts. But Finn, knowing that it was she who destroyed the *fián's* dogs, refuses her offer. She then sings with a voice that deprives Finn and his men of their strength. They are powerless against her, and the princess' female guards hold the guests captive. Goll, one of Finn's men, comes to their rescue and fights with the princess. During the struggle Diarmaid wins the aid of a female guard by proposing marriage to her; she frees the *fénnidi* and their strength is restored. As soon as he is released, Conán slays the guests' female benefactor; to an enraged Diarmaid Conán explains that, even if it had been his own mother or daughter, he would have killed her for the humiliation which the *fénnidi* have suffered at the hands of these women. The liberated Oscar comes to the aid of the beleaguered Goll and slays the princess. As she lies dying, the princess tells the *fénnidi* that she wanted to marry Finn in order to have a child by him and thus have vengeance on her father; for, he had divined that the child which his daughter would bear would kill his grandfather, and, in fear of this eventuality, the king of Greece had magically transformed his daughter into a hag, so as to render her unmarriageable.⁵⁵

The villainess in this *bruidhean* tale is a very complex and confusing figure. She was once a beautiful young woman but has been changed into a hag; she is both an enchantress, who manipulates and victimizes Finn, and yet also a victim of enchantment herself, who wants Finn to help her escape from the king's magical domination. She offers Finn gifts and wants to bear his child, but she destroys his dogs and takes away his strength. Just as the otherworldly female has many faces, the reaction to otherworldly women varies drastically among the *fénnidi*. For Diarmaid the female is potentially a means of gaining freedom and strength in the otherworld; for Conán, in contrast to Diarmaid (as in the *Eachtra*),⁵⁶ the otherworldly female is an enemy who deprives her guests and must herself be deprived of her life if they are to survive.

Whether they are friendly or hostile, wives or enemies, females are obviously important figures in the *bruidhean* tale, as they are in many other Fenian narratives. The otherworldly women in these tales are often supernatural prizes that Finn seeks to win or the means by which he can penetrate the otherworld. In a medieval tale the young Finn makes an extraordinary leap over a chasm separating a lovely woman of the otherworld from her human wooers; it is in order to win her that Finn makes the jump.⁵⁷ Most of the extant variant

⁵⁵ This is a summary of an Early Modern Irish Fenian poem entitled *Seilg Ghleanna an Sínóil* [The hunt of thrush glen], ed. and trans. John O'Daly, *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* 6 (1861): 74–102.

⁵⁶ In the *Eachtra* Conán once again wants to slay the female liberator of the *fénnidi*, but Diarmaid dissuades him (Bergin and MacNeill, *Eachtra*, secs. 30–31).

⁵⁷ Joynt, *Feis*, lines 154–204; O'Kearney, *Feis*, pp. 128–33.

accounts of how Finn acquired his special knowledge and became a poet/seer feature supernatural females prominently. The one who closes the door of the otherworldly dwelling upon Finn's finger and spills some magical liquid on it is a female holding a vessel. In another account three women struggle to close the door of a supernatural dwelling against Finn and his men, who are trying to get to the well of knowledge within; but one of the women accidentally spills some of the magical liquid in a vessel that she is holding into the invaders' mouths, and thus they acquire knowledge.⁵⁸ Finn's premature aging, which leads to his receiving a drink of knowledge from the otherworld, is brought about by a supernatural female.⁵⁹ In these tales the women do not directly help Finn acquire wisdom: indeed, they try to harm Finn or they oppose his entrance into the otherworld. Despite their opposition, however, women are instrumental in Finn's winning of supernatural knowledge. This ambiguity of the female figure in the stories about how Finn became a poet/seer—the way that women are both his enemies and unwitting allies—is similar to the ambiguity of the female figure in the *bruidhean* tale, where women are simultaneously perceived as friend and foe. Here we have yet another parallel between the stories of Finn's acquiring supernatural wisdom and the *bruidhean* tale which suggests that all of these narratives are multiforms, and that, explicitly or implicitly, Finn is winning knowledge from the otherworld in both kinds of narrative.

The women in the *bruidhean* tale and some other Fenian narratives are symbolic of the rapport as well as the hostility that exists between the shamanic traveler and the supernatural realms in which he travels and learns. The female represents both the prize of knowledge to be won by Finn from the otherworld and also the danger to Finn of becoming himself a "prize" to be won by his otherworldly enemies. Finn's relationship with these supernatural females, who can function as either helpers or obstacles in his shamanic experience, is highly unstable, going from one extreme to another; women can aid him in his search for knowledge, but his helpers can easily become his persecutors. In his relationship with supernatural women, as in the entire *bruidhean* experience, Finn endures constant and severe testing by the otherworld—an ordeal

⁵⁸ Joynt, *Feis*, lines 1331–76; O'Kearney, *Feis*, pp. 174–77.

⁵⁹ See n. 45 above.

through which his knowledge of the supernatural is renewed.

We have seen that in some *bruidhean* situations Finn and his men need the help of otherworldly figures, especially women, in order to escape from their predicament. But the *fénnnidi* are not always depicted as completely helpless in the otherworldly hostel; sometimes they work actively for their survival, and their actions have a definite effect. In the LL *bruidhean* tale Finn and his companions stave off their supernatural enemies until the morning, when the mysterious house and its occupants disappear. In the *Bruidhean Chaorthainn* the *fénnnidi* are saved by Diarmaid, who had stayed behind and not gone along with Finn to the otherworldly feast. By placing his finger in his mouth Finn divines that he and his men will be released from the *bruidhean*, where they are all magically stuck to the ground, only by having the blood of the magicians who laid this trap sprinkled over them; Diarmaid finds the magicians, slays them, and with their blood frees his fellow *fénnnidi*.⁶⁰ Thus, the guests escape from this *bruidhean* through Finn's great knowledge and the solidarity of the *fían* (Finn's men come to his aid in his moment of need).⁶¹ The savage host in the *Eachtra* who was about to feed his human guests to his dogs is attacked by one of Finn's own dogs, who rips his ear off and thus exposes his one vulnerable spot; another of the dogs tears out the heart of the host's cannibalistic wife, who wanted to eat the *fénnnidi* raw.⁶² In the *bruidhean* of the *Bruidhean Eochaidh* Finn and his men are challenged by various supernatural figures, and their challenges are met by Conán, who, although at first he may be bested by his adversaries, defeats them all.⁶³ After he loses his toe in the magical tub, Conán throws its treacherous owner into it, and he dissolves completely.⁶⁴ Such victory through ironic reversal also occurs in the folk *bruidhean* tale, already described, in which the human guests are thrown into a boiling pot; one of them finally picks up the man throwing them in and tosses him into the cauldron, which bursts and spills its scalding contents onto the savage supernatural hostess.⁶⁵ Similarly, the sinister host who has Finn's legs burnt

⁶⁰ Mac Piarais, *Bruidhean Chaorthainn*, secs. 20, 34–35.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, sec. 22 (not hearing anything from Finn, some of the *fénnnidi* who had stayed behind go to look for him and his companions).

⁶² Bergin and MacNeill, *Eachtra*, secs. 27–29.

⁶³ Ní Shéaghda and Ní Mhuirgheasa, *Trí Bruidhne*, pp. 54 ff.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶⁵ *Béaloidéas* 3:390–92.

off on a griddle and Finn skewered on a stake in a Scottish *bruidhean* tale suffers the same grisly fate when Diarmaid comes to Finn's rescue.⁶⁶

In all of these *bruidhean* situations where Finn or his *fénnid* rescuers must act aggressively in order to free the guests from the otherworld, it is as if the humans are "turning the tables" on their supernatural hosts/enemies. They counter otherworldly violence with their own violence, slay those who wish to slay them, "cook" those who wish to cook and eat them. They must humiliate and exploit the otherworld to the same degree that the guests have been abused and manipulated. This strategy of reversal adopted by the visitors in the otherworld is a complement to the sometimes overlapping turn of events in the *bruidhean*, whereby Finn and his companions are aided by supernatural figures.⁶⁷ The two different, but by no means mutually exclusive, solutions to Finn's *bruidhean* predicament—being rescued through his own (or his men's) efforts, as opposed to being released by sympathetic supernatural beings—together express the shamanic paradox in Finn's relationship with the otherworld: He is both its invader and its guest, both its beneficiary and its victim.

Thus it appears that in many respects the *bruidhean* tale is distinctly shamanic, in the sense defined at the beginning of this paper. As one who is "elected" or invited into the otherworld and can leave it unharmed and enlightened, Finn demonstrates his familiarity with the supernatural and his ability to travel in supernatural realms. Finn comes to experience and know the otherworld in the *bruidhean* context, and this knowledge is transmitted to the audience of the *bruidhean* tale; the narrative tradition functions as the fictional shaman's organ, transmitting a vision of alternate reality.

As defined previously, a shaman both penetrates the otherworld and protects this world from malignant supernatural penetration. These two functions are intimately connected, since the shaman uses what he learns in the otherworld for the defense of human society. We have already noted that Finn and his *fían* are depicted in the Fenian tradition as the defenders of society against disruption, human or otherwise. Even in the

⁶⁶ Campbell (n. 29 above), pp. 200–201.

⁶⁷ In the *Bruidhean Eochaidh*, as in some other *bruidhean* tales, the *fénnid*i both must fend for themselves in the *bruidhean* (see text above, at n. 63) and also receive aid from a supernatural ally (see text above, at n. 51).

bruidhean tale, which is about a penetration of the otherworld by the *fénnidi*, the motif of Finn and his men protecting the human world is occasionally apparent. The host of the *bruidhean* in the *Bruidhean Chaorthainn* is the son of an otherworldly king who had tried to conquer Ireland but had been defeated by Finn and his *fían*; the final battle between Finn's *fían* and the host's forces is virtually a reenactment of the original battle for the control of the human world.⁶⁸ In the *Eachtra* Finn's men receive the invitation to the *bruidhean* while they are guarding the coastline against an attack by a sea monster which Finn had divined was imminent.⁶⁹ Instead of an overt attack, however, the *fénnidi* encounter a subtler expression of otherworldly hostility. By being there to meet the bearer of the supernatural invitation and accept it, Finn and his men are put in a position to acquire knowledge from the otherworld and also thereby to shield society from supernatural penetration. These "buffer" figures have the responsibility of interacting with the supernatural on human society's boundaries, and they ultimately benefit from such dangerous interaction.

The intense and sometimes even savage hostility between worlds which underlies the genre of the *bruidhean* tale is by no means characteristic of all Fenian tales about the supernatural. There are narrative situations in which the relationship between Finn and the otherworld is extremely amicable and reciprocal.⁷⁰ This is not to say that the rest of the Fenian tradition contradicts the metaphysical hostility characteristic of the *bruidhean* tale; rather, I would say that this particular genre of Fenian narrative presents a special perspective on what I have called the shamanic ambiguity inherent in Finn's relationship with the otherworld. The state of possessing supernatural powers and the state of being possessed by them are simultaneously operative for a shaman, and it is this paradox which we see reflected in the *bruidhean* tale. Finn is both the guest and the victim of his supernatural host and the powers

⁶⁸ Mac Piarais, *Bruidhean Chaorthainn*, secs. 1–7, 38–39.

⁶⁹ Bergin and MacNeill, *Eachtra*, secs. 1–3.

⁷⁰ For instance, in the *Acallamh* there is a story about Finn's intervention in an otherworldly civil war; at the end of the story, the narrator Cailte says, "Ní mó chaithdis fianna Eirenn fialach na trebaire na Túaith dé Danann óssin amach" ("From that time on, the members of the *fían* spent no more time in the company of human folk [literally, "band of husbandry"] than they did in the company of the Túatha Dé Danann [i.e., the people of the otherworld]") (Stokes, *Acallamh* [n. 7 above], lines 5369–70).

which the host represents; the otherworld manipulates Finn, who in turn can manipulate and exploit it. At the end of the *bruidhean* tale, as in the stories about Finn's enlightenment and his death, Finn emerges both strong and weak in the face of the supernatural.

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