

Summary of Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990), pp. 79–83.

McCone broaches the subject of allegory, mentioning its use in Christian exegesis to 'seek more rational or edifying interpretations' of parts of the Old Testament. He suggests that knowledge of allegorical techniques could have been sufficiently widespread among 'early Christian Ireland's monastic men of letters' that they might have felt able to employ allegory in composing their own narratives.

He now goes on to discuss *Echtrae Chonlai* in this light. (p. 80) He supports Carney's argument that both EC and *Immram Brain* are 'thoroughly Christian allegories'. He attacks Ponsias Mac Cana's views in 'Sinless Otherworld'. He insists that the otherworld in EC is represented by the woman as 'a sinless paradise in an obviously Christian sense'. (p. 81) Now McCone turns to interpretations of the Song of Songs, citing Gregory the Great in particular. The imagery of carnal love in the Song is allegorically interpreted as the spiritual love between Christ and the church (the bride in the Song). McCone argues that Gregory 'derives a spiritual message from ostensibly unedifying externals'. He then cites evidence for the Song of Songs being understood in this way in Ireland.

Thus for McCone the woman in EC represents the church just as does the bride in the Song of Songs. (p. 82) 'The tale revolving around Connlae is thus an allegory of the global and individual conflict between pagan iniquity and Christian virtue (druid vs. woman), the claims of this world and those of the life everlasting (Conn vs. woman).'

McCone admits that there is a 'whiff of sex surrounding the paradise of *Immram Brain*, *Echtrae Chonlai* and similar texts' but argues that it could be allegorized by any 'medieval Irish monk familiar with the idea of using discourse about carnal love to promote its spiritual counterpart.'

McCone then argues that EC is an inversion of the Genesis narrative. In EC the woman (with an apple, moreover) actually tempts the man towards virtue while the serpent (the druid) tempts him in the other direction:

'Far from calling for the hypothesis of a significant pagan native core, this tale is a prime example of an allegorical myth or, if one prefers, a mythical allegory firmly rooted in Christian ideology.'

McCone goes on to mention the concept of pre-Christian revelation, notably Isidore of Seville's remarks about the Roman sybils prophesying Christ.

In the last two paragraphs McCone interestingly admits that parts of the texts could be 'native mythological modes of thought', but that the Irish literati were well equipped by their Christian training to deal allegorically with these.

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