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"I am no mean player myself": Games and Recreation in Irish Mythology

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"I am no mean player myself":

Games and Recreation in Irish Mythology

(TITLE)

BY

Julie Lynn Perenchio

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Abstract

Superhuman heroics in myth certainly succeed in capturing our immediate attention, but it takes a more human touch of talent and fallibility to make heroes *personally* appealing to readers. In Irish mythology, immortals and humans engage in a marvelous variety of recreational activities, and show universally-felt emotions and tendencies, like competitive spirits, creativity, and tenacity. Far from being idle entertainment, play makes significant impacts on the lives of Irish heroes, individually, socially, and culturally. For example, chess games, even between complete strangers, can cause the upheaval of one's lifestyle and test not only the intellectual powers of players, but also the value of one's promises. Chess also helps show how gender and class politics operate.

The Irish myths contain a multitude of verbal games, challenges, and celebrations. Rivals pose riddles to each other or engage in quick competitive banter for social superiority. Poetry is an elevated, spiritual form of recreation. These forms of verbal games illustrate the cultural importance and validation of one's ability to use words to perfection. On the other end of the play spectrum, physical games occur at unexpected times, often in the face of danger. They provide a release from intense circumstances and define boundaries of friendship and cultural acceptance.

Upon entering the mythological world and thus "playing" with the heroes, the reader interested in knowing more is given a number of angles to pursue. Myth theory and play theory elucidate the omnipresence of magical, intangible qualities that make both myth and play continual and important influences on humankind. Historical and anthropological studies provide evidence of how men and women have developed and

reacted to games, recreation, and the societies in which they play. Evidence from all these sources points to play as a window for observing cultural norms and progression. Whether the characters are immortals like chess strategist Midir the Proud or heroic humans like clan leader Finn Mac Cool, they represent the culture and beliefs of ancient Ireland. By their appearance in sacred mythic texts, they affect subsequent generations who interpret and internalize the myths. The prevalence of play in Irish myth shows its importance, both in a literary and a cultural sense.

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“I am no mean player myself”: Games and Recreation in Irish Mythology

Although most deeds and personalities in ancient mythology exist on a superhuman, fantastical plane, the genre still supplies readers and listeners with heroes, heroines, gods and villains who resemble us. Upon developing relationships with the mythological characters through sharing their glories and their pathos, we applaud their goodness and censure their wrongdoing, with a degree of familiarity transcending the boundaries of time and space. Because their heroics and mistakes endear them to us, we readily accept their invitation to take a break and “just play” with them. Heroes take on stronger personalities and elicit stronger sympathies from audiences when we can relate to universal traits, and play provides such a connection. Ireland’s mythological heroes prove themselves fun, fallible, and multi-dimensional in their frequent instances of recreational activity.

In addition, play and recreation receive the cultural stamp of validation because of the sacred quality of myths. The prevalence of play and recreation in the Irish mythological canon indicates its worthiness of high status. As an integral and constant part of the lives of Irish heroes, the instances of recreational activities provide more than simple plot exposition; rather, they offer historical clues about the priorities and values of the Irish. The following chapters will describe various play experiences of the heroes and analyze the recreation’s origins, duration and aftermath in the myth. The culture in which the characters live bears resemblances to the ancient culture that gave birth to the myths, and an effort will be made to show what activities and mindsets appealed to the Irish culture. Irish myth connects a small ancient world and the modern age with its ineffable qualities of play and personality.

No attempt will be made to resurrect or paint an ancient society based solely on the mythic heroes' inclination toward play. But the opportunity to analyze the texts themselves with play theory, myth theory, and historical and anthropological studies warrants investigation. Recreation of an intellectual nature obviously differs from physical games in terms of cultural significance or impact on the individual, yet the heroes perform both types with such intensity and vigor that we should explore the deep effects of play.

Myth theorist Joseph Campbell describes the phenomenon in which both myth and play cause participants to become wholly absorbed, and to depart from these activities altered people, different for having had the experience. When an individual enters a play sphere, Campbell writes,

the laws of life in time and space—economics, politics, and even morality—will thereupon dissolve. Whereafter, re-created by that return to paradise before the Fall, before the knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong, true and false, belief and disbelief, we are to carry the point of view and spirit of man the player back into life. (28-9)

Certainly numerous examples of not just play—but an *attitude* of play, both during and after the recreational act itself—greet readers of Irish mythology. Play stays with the Irish heroes after the fact, and influences them in the spheres of marriage, friendship, work and duty, and spirituality. A reading of these myths makes the omniscient influence of play difficult to deny.

Upon entering the texts of the Irish myths, one encounters instance after instance of spontaneous play, recreation, and welcome diversion. The myths to be discussed here

come from three different eras of the mythology: the Dawn of Time, the Time of Cuchullin, and the Time of Finn and the Fianna, listed in chronological order. The first era concerns the first generations of Ireland's immortals and human inhabitants. The second era, named after the most famous hero of the time, focuses on the ongoing rivalry and wars between the provinces of Ulster and Connaught. Finally, the third (from which most of these selections come) deals with Ireland's hunting and fighting party, the Fianna. These are not mutually exclusive categories, however, as immortals still make appearances in the later two eras predominantly concerned with humans.

The selected myths come primarily from four sources, all collections of Irish/Celtic stories: Jeremiah Curtin's *Hero Tales of Ireland*, Jeffrey Gantz's *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, Eileen O'Faolain's *Irish Sagas and Folk-Tales*, and Barbara Picard's *Celtic Tales*. J.E. Caerwyn Williams and Patrick Ford attempt to assign dates to the heroic literature. Tradition, they say, "places the heroes in the first century before Christ" (12). However, they cite Kenneth Jackson's study, which "compares the social customs and material culture of the society depicted in the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* [*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, the most famous myth from the Time of Cuchullin] and related tales with those of the Celts in Gaul as they are described by classical authors" (12). By virtue of his studies, Jackson believes the epic dates from after the fourth century A.D. Gantz credits two 12th century manuscripts, *The Book of the Dun Cow* and the *Book of Leinster*, as the original sources for most modern translations of Irish myths, but stresses that these sources do not date their stories. "The Wooing of Etain," for example, existed in written form by the early 8th century (21).

The daunting task of dating myths, especially myths already known to derive from three different eras, becomes further complicated when one remembers that the first written texts were not the first versions. In most cases, the myths had been passed on through centuries of oral transmission before being taken down in writing. For the purposes of this discussion, the myths will be considered as already established by the time of Saint Patrick's arrival in Ireland in the 5th century A.D. They were recorded in written form by monks, along with other valuable literature from Britain and the continent during the Dark Ages. Thomas Cahill describes the labors that went into these first versions of the myths, beginning with an amusing story of a monk who disapproved of some of the *Tain* that he copied:

It is thanks to such scribes, however cranky their glosses may sometimes be, that we have the rich trove of early Irish literature, the earliest vernacular literature of Europe to survive—because it was taken seriously enough to be written down...they loved their own tongue too much ever to stop using it. (160)

Pious Christian monks would definitely have grounds for censuring the paganism, violence, and debauchery that the myths contained, but even they recognized the myths' importance. The written versions have of course altered in the centuries of transmission, but their present forms still entertain modern audiences, which would most likely delight the characters who were entertained themselves *in* the myths.

Myth and play both endure. They may alter to suit the progression of time, technology, and popular demand, but never divorce themselves from our beings. Regarding the universal nature of play, Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* points out the

challenges that confront scholars of play's structure and history, suggesting that "since the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life [,] it cannot have its foundations in any rational nexus, because this would limit it to mankind" (3). Certainly Huizinga does not discredit the study of play, but correctly asserts that for all its rules, civilities and props, human play has its roots in something intangible that will always remain a mystery. Its enigmatic qualities form part of its alluring nature.

Play avoids fully disclosing itself to us and eludes our full understanding. Myth must also retain meaning that we cannot fully grasp, otherwise the very concept of "myth" becomes nullified. Myth fascinates us because it challenges our imaginations, relating settings and events we will never experience firsthand. But our attempts at connection with mythic societies and people are part of the fun of myth. Alexander Eliot, author of *The Global Myths*, takes a similar attitude toward myth as Huizinga does toward play. His recommendations help us see the positive rather than the frustrating sides of myth's mysterious qualities:

It's a little inhuman, I think, to view primitive myth as having merely academic or anthropological interest. If, on the other hand, we approach this subject warmly, in a seeking way, we're practically certain to come upon stories which reconnect us with our ancestors. Wherever one may find them, some few primitive myths appear especially designed to mesh with one's particular psyche. (48-9)

Eliot's sentiments seem especially appropriate because play theoretically meshes with *everyone's* psyche. In addition, an analysis of play should retain a degree of childlike wonder and curiosity. We should enter the Irish myths fully aware of the impossibility of

understanding either myth or play completely (let alone understanding both), but with interest in how play stories from an ancient time affect us even today.

The first chapter will discuss the timeless game of chess and its place in Irish mythology. The myths do not illuminate actual chess-playing strategy, but the games always involve the sacred, unwritten understanding that the loser must do whatever the winner asks. Results of chess games literally alter lives. From the Dawn of Time era comes the story of “Midir and Etain” (so called by Picard, and “The Wooing of Etain” in Gantz’s translation) about the immortal couple Midir the Proud and his beautiful wife Etain, and their separation by jealousy and sorcery. Etain, reborn a mortal, marries Ireland’s High King; she remembers nothing of her life with Midir, who comes in search of her and challenges King Eochai to play chess for stakes. Midir requests the ultimate stake upon winning—a chance to kiss Etain. The other chess matches take place in the time of the Fianna and the heroic leader Finn Mac Cool (whose name is spelled different ways in separate collections). Curtin’s versions of “Fin MacCool and the Daughter of the King of the White Nation”, “Fin MacCool, Ceadach Og, and the Fish-Hag”, and “Fin MacCool, Faolan, and the Mountain of Happiness” each provide fascinating fodder for gender and class studies. Chapter one sheds light on chess’s important role in ancient Irish society and on its status as enabler of action and emotional revelation.

Chapter two will explore the recreational and competitive use of language. Verbal ability abundantly graced the Irish heroes, who honed and displayed their talents in linguistic celebrations and contests. The stories chosen for this chapter suggest that social status and military might are affected by one’s ability to dazzle with speech, wit, and poetry. The first tale in this chapter, “The Story of Mac Dathó’s Pig,” is a translation

from N.K. Chadwick's *An Early Irish Reader*. Here we find warriors in a tense situation; they need to decide who gets to carve the pig for dinner. Gracious deference is not considered an option; they must decide the winner by verbal challenges to each other's heroism and worth. This exchange, or "flyting," follows conventions paradoxically playful and grave.

Chapter two continues with an adolescent Finn Mac Cool's celebration of words as he composes a May Day poem. Finn's poem marks the beginning of his acceptance into his culture, provides a wonderful example of poetry as play, and illustrates the legendary Irish love of the land. "The Young Finn" from O'Faolain's collection serves as the primary text for this section. Finally, the recreational and cultural use of riddles will be explored, using Picard's version of "The House of the Rowan Trees." In this myth, the adult Finn takes as a ward a boy called Mioch, whose father and brothers were killed upon their violent invasion of Ireland. Mioch secretly resents Finn and the Fianna for his family's defeat and grows up plotting revenge. Years later, after a separation from Finn, Mioch approaches him and presents him with two poetic riddles, both of which Finn answers correctly. Mioch's motives are far from friendly, but the trusting Finn does not realize this, and therefore treats the riddling, appropriately, as a game.

Chapter three concerns physical games, sport, and diversion. Superhuman feats place the heroes in situations of cultural significance, and the amusing tendency for sport and leisure to distract them from quests rings true even with modern readers. The first story describes how "The Young Finn" quickly awakens his culture to his presence with his staggering abilities at hurling. But not all his fame is positive; the sport marks his introduction to a society fairly alien to his upbringing in nature. Next, in "The Pursuit of

the Hard Man” from Picard’s collection, the adult Fianna leader Finn and a party of his men set off on a quest to rescue sixteen Fianna members carried off on the ugly horse of a surly giant. The mission to save the kidnapped men takes a secondary place, however, as not once but *twice* people in the rescue party put courtly entertainment and new friendships before the task at hand. Their propensity for physical leisure causes no harm, and the story maintains a lighthearted tone throughout. Last, “The Battle of Ventry,” found in Curtin’s collection describes the battle that decimates the Fianna and initially does not seem one in which recreation will play any role at all. War and play share some common properties, and when a champion opponent called Dealv Dura performs dexterous feats after besting 200 men, play becomes undeniable.

These myths all include, if not focus on, spontaneous play, organized games, and most importantly, men and women engaged in play. Each individual, regardless of his or her strategy and motive, wants to say truthfully, as Midir does to Eochai, “I am no mean player myself” (Picard 41).

Chapter One—Chess

Although theoretically “only a game,” chess plays an important, catalytic role in the lives of many Irish mythological heroes. These characters use the intellectual and strategic game to obtain another person’s favors, servitude, or alliance, and the way to accomplish this is to bind them in unbreakable promises. Chess also affects families; marital bonds form as a result of games and heroes discover disloyalty and treachery as the sentences on the loser are carried out. In focusing on chess in Irish myths, we learn a great deal about gender and property politics, and the lengths to which people will go to assert superiority. A game on which players are willing to stake their entire existence is bound to reveal some fundamentals of human nature.

What’s at stake, what the loser must do in order to be viewed as honorable to the winner, remains conspicuously unstated and absent until the game has been decided. Sometimes characters agree in vague terms to play “for a sentence,” a cryptic description that could mean practically anything. Midir and Eochai give the bond a more defined parameter: “Let the loser do whatever the victor may demand of him” (Picard 41). No one has the opportunity to refuse a game based on the severity or unreasonable nature of someone’s demands. When one player passes the sentence, it is binding. Normally, chess opponents must risk everything they have, as it would be perfectly acceptable for a victorious opponent to demand something quite dear to the loser, such as personal freedom.

Just as capturing the king has always been the ultimate goal of a chess game, players in the Irish myths use chess to capture members of royalty and high-status individuals for their own purposes. Finn Mac Cool, although not an actual king of

Ireland, enjoys almost kingly status as leader of the Fianna, protectors of Ireland and famed hunting party. Quite literally, when Finn plays chess with the daughter of the King of the White Nation, he himself becomes player and prize, competitor and spoil of victory. After Finn wins the first chess game and requests horses for himself and each of his men, the strange woman wins the second game. Her sentence: “I put you, O Fin, under bonds of heavy enchantment, to be my husband till a shovel puts seven of its fulls of earth on your head” (Curtin 409-10). She loves him not, but instead brings him back to her homeland and has him imprisoned, intending to give her father Finn’s head as a gift. Finn’s status as a commodity, enabled and enforced by a chess game, certainly speaks significantly about the extent to which games could affect lives. After a long ordeal, Finn escapes his bond of marriage as his rescuer Dyeermud throws seven shovels full of earth on Finn’s head.

Indeed, he escapes the severity of his sentence on a technicality—the exact phrasing of the woman’s sentence leaves him an escape clause. One not only needed intelligence to win a chess game, but also needed to remember not to become caught up in victory and nullify one’s opportunity to get the full benefit of one’s demand. Verbal ingenuity comprises another aspect of the intellectual power necessary to be a true winner at chess—both of the game and of the aftermath.

In another Mac Cool story, the Fenian chief again plays chess with a strange woman who sails into one of the Irish ports. This woman, upon winning the game, requests of Finn, “I put you under bonds of heavy enchantment...to take me for your wife” (Curtin 485). This time, the victorious woman intends Finn no harm. He marries her, and she returns to her homeland, where she bears him a son named Faolan. Finn’s

progeny shows as much childhood promise as his father did, demonstrating greatness in physical games. Such important matters as paternity, the bloodlines of great and renowned heroes, result from chess games. Women are not shy or weak in their demands upon defeating Finn in chess.

Chess transcends all subjective judgments; intellectual skills and strategy alone decide the winner. No referee oversees the game and makes judgment calls that can be swayed by social pressures. Given this theoretical situation, a game of chess provides a level playing field for men and women. Play scholar Roger Caillois classifies chess as a game “in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner’s triumph” (14). And as we have seen, in Irish mythology women are often worthy competitors to great men. When the time comes to pass the inevitable sentences, however, subjectivity comes back into the picture, and the social disparity between women and men widens.

Often when they would forego demanding marriage or possession of the men, the women demanded feats of strength and prowess from them, forcing the heroes, or perhaps providing them valuable opportunity, to prove themselves valiant, strong, and heroic. Perhaps, psychologically, these women add to their own positive feelings of winning by taking control of the men and taking partial credit for their feats. A natural ego boost would likely occur upon such thoughts as “I won a game of chess against a man who is talented, brave, and who, for a while, lives to fulfill my wishes. What does that say about me? I must be pretty clever and important.”

But while the women players of chess seek possession of great renowned men like Finn and send them on quests for valuable objects and knowledge, the male players in Finn Mac Cool myths demand harsh and essentially useless deeds from the women they defeat at chess. The men act as if the women have nothing of value to offer and ill-treatment of them is somehow justified. We learn about the politics of gender from an analysis of chess in Irish myths.

In two separate tales, Finn plays with a “Fish Hag,” and his son Faolan plays against Finn’s conniving wife Grainne, and the men place essentially the same sentence on the losers. Finn phrases the hag’s sentence in an unambiguous way:

I place you under bonds of weighty druidic spells to stand on the top of that gable above there, to have a sheaf of oats fixed on the gable beyond you, and to have no earthly food while I’m gone, except what the wind will blow through the eye of a needle fixed in front of you. (465-6)

Faolan’s sentence on Grainne, no less harsh and almost identical, further illustrates the discrepancy between men and women. The men place the women in physically high and conspicuous places, presumably visible for long distances, to serve the duration of their sentences. Their defeat then made public, the women visibly illustrate the victory of the men. This helps the victory to be perceived as a collective as well as singular one on the parts of Finn or Faolan. Huizinga describes multiple results of winning a game:

[the winner] has won esteem, obtained honour; and this honour and esteem at once accrue to the benefit of the group to which the victor belongs.

Here we have another very important characteristic of play: success won readily passes from the individual to the group. (50)

Whether this victorious identification is bestowed upon the whole of the male gender or, more specifically, to the Fianna, the males certainly manifest the results of their victories to the world more than the women. Male superiority solidified, they can now go off on their quests.

Interestingly, the sentences that Finn and Faolan pass on the hag and Grainne, respectively, come *after* the women as chess victors have named the quests the men must fulfill. The women request that Finn and Faolan bring them relics from animals or the truth about mysterious, legendary circumstances. The hag orders Finn, “you bring me the head of the Red Ox, and an account of what took the eye from the Doleful Knight of the Island, and how he lost speech and laughter” (Curtin 465). Grainne requires of Faolan “the tallow of the three oxen on Sliav Sein [Mountain of Happiness]” (491).

The inestimable value of these requests shows an ambition and propensity to greatness on the part of the women. Finn and Faolan, however, stand to gain nothing from their sentences on the women, save a sadistic satisfaction that their opponents suffer. Materially and intellectually, the men do not benefit one iota. Grainne does have ulterior motives, and the hag might be feared for being an “Other,” but the men only consider the degradation of the women an option. Could it possibly be sour grapes, that these great men resent losing and take out their frustrations by issuing ridiculous sentences? Would their resentment lead them to punish an opponent even if the men themselves were the losers? This actually seems likely when we find Finn returned from the quest on which the Fish-Hag sent him. As with the incident when Dyeermud shovels dirt on his head to help him escape a marriage sentence, he uses the hag’s words very

literally to avoid fulfilling the sentence to the woman's satisfaction. He returns to the hag who requests the head of the Red Ox:

"You will give it to me," said the hag.

"I will not," answered Fin. "If I was bound to bring it, I was not bound to give it."

When she heard that, the hag dropped to the earth, and became a few bones. (Curtin 483)

Finn originally lost the chess game that spurred his adventure, but ultimately he wins. He gets to keep the valuable head and the tale of the Doleful Knight all to himself; his opponent receives nothing but pain. Perhaps sexist society deemed it appropriate for men to seek revenge against women who dared to assert equality with men in a mentally strategic game like chess, and furthermore proved that women indeed possess brains, logic, reason.

Clearly, equal intellectual prowess does not guarantee equal treatment, although this is hardly surprising in the society that produced the myths. According to historian P.W. Joyce, women had essentially equal voices in marriage, property, and law, but were still stigmatized as inferior in general. Joyce cites tracts of law from ancient times which specify that "it is proper indeed that [the *Senchus* of the Men of Erin] should be so called, so as to give superiority to the noble sex, i.e. to the male: for the man is the head of the woman, and the man is more noble than the woman" (13). With such sentiments propagated by societal leaders and lawyers, women could not expect the level playing field of chess to extend one minute past the game's conclusion. The myths, in a hyperbolic manner, validate the social norms of male domination over women.

This inequality between men and women persists as we move (backwards) to myths from the Dawn of Time. We find that chess also allows men to make commodities of women, yet this is not as disturbing as the punishing sentences just discussed. At least in *The Wooing of Etain* the men intend good things for the woman in question and treat her with a degree of respect and affection not present in the Finn Mac Cool chess stories. In this older myth containing one of the most fascinating chess sequences in all Irish mythology, Midir the Proud attempts to win back his beautiful wife, who was taken from him by enchantment, reborn mortal and married to Ireland's High King. Midir challenges King Eochai to several games and loses all of them. Eochai's sentences for Midir's losses seem particularly harsh, as Midir must "clear away all rocks and stones from the plains of Meath...remove the coarse rushes...cut down the Forest of Breg" (Picard 40-1). Not only are his sentences physically demanding, but Eochai fails to take advantage of Midir's status as an immortal. He could have required of Midir goods or services much more rare than manual labor.

Yet even after these daunting tasks, Midir comes back for more. His defeats, apparently, comprise part of his carefully orchestrated plan. When he finally wins at chess, he brags that "had I wished it so, I could have won the first game, and all the others, also" (44). Midir's appropriately prideful comment to Eochai suggests that he lost the previous chess games deliberately, so he would have justification for requesting another game with the High King (after all, he is not a character to take defeat lightly, given his title "the Proud"), and so his requirement upon winning would seem less unreasonable compared to Eochai's demands. He asks "that I may hold the queen in my arms and kiss her once" (44). Little has been said so far about Etain, Midir's eagerly

sought wife, but she provides the motive for his strategy. He plays *for* her, and although regarding the embrace and kiss she has no choice, the outcome is best for her as well as Midir. Etain fares much better in the aftermath of a high-stakes chess game than do the Fish Hag and Grainne.

Since such high stakes have been waged by Finn, Midir, Eochai and the others, anthropologist Clifford Geertz's analysis of "deep play" merits discussion and application to the Irish myths. In his "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," Geertz analyzes Bentham's theories on the calculated risks of play. He writes about monetary wagers, but we can substitute freedom, property, and time investments to apply to the Irish myths' chess players. To one waging pounds, writes Geertz, "the marginal utility of the pound he stands to win is clearly less than the marginal disutility of the one he stands to lose. In genuine deep play, this is the case for both parties. They are both in over their heads" (433). So indeed are the mythological characters in their chess games. Geertz's discussion of deep play centers around Balinese men betting on cockfights; the methods for deciding wagers are decided systematically, taking into consideration one's assets and the equality of the competing cocks. The Irish myth characters take it a step farther—they stand to lose things they do not even have. For example, Midir desires Etain, but has nothing that (in his mind) is equal to her to give Eochai should he lose. The players leave the realm of certainty, boldly throw down the gauntlet, and proceed into competition where the sky is the limit of what they could lose.

Here preparation, confidence, and social status become psychological factors that influence one's real potential for victory. Those who enter a chess game knowing they must fulfill a sentence upon losing *must* believe themselves capable of winning, and they

accept the calculated risk. Never let *timidity* be used as a word that characterizes the men and women of Irish mythology.

In addition to providing grounds for gender studies, chess games in the myths also bring demonstrations of classist and materialistic attitudes from the players. Apparently, the game was most appreciated and played in ancient Ireland by “the higher classes,” according to Joyce. He writes in *A Social History of Ancient Ireland* that “to be a good player was considered a necessary accomplishment of every man of high position” (477). Truly, most of the chess players in this selection of myths enjoy high or royal status, and those who do not are Otherworldly creatures to whom the rules do not apply as strictly.

In keeping with their social class, players fuss over the quality and ownership of the chessboards and pieces they use. King Eochai, willing to postpone his game with Midir, says his own chessboard is inaccessible. Midir responds, “I have with me a chessboard which I do not doubt is the equal of yours.” His equipment, “a jewelled, silver chessboard and a bag of gold chessmen,” suffices for Eochai (Picard 41). One gets the distinct impression that anything less would have been rejected and the game put off until the King could retrieve his own.

The characters insist upon top quality chess equipment, and also show some groundless superstitions regarding ownership. In his chess encounter with the Fish-Hag, Finn Mac Cool seems to forget about chess’s inherent objectivity, and insists on a level of comfort that, in theory, should have no bearing whatsoever on the game:

“I would [play chess],” answered Fin, “if I had my own board and chessmen.”

“I have a good board,” said the fish-hag.

“If you have,” said Fin, “we will play; but if you win the first game, I must go for my own board, and you will play the second on that.”

The hag consented. They played on her chessboard, and the hag won that game.

“Well,” said Fin, “I must go for my own board, and do you wait till I bring it.”...Fin brought his own board; and they played, and he won.(Curtin 465)

Fin, whether he believes that the Otherworldly hag has supernatural powers over her own board, or that his own board would make a victory more likely, should not be faulted for his superstition. In either case, his actions support the evidence that quality and ownership ranked as high priorities in ancient Irish culture. Joyce’s statement that chess was mostly enjoyed by the upper class gains credibility in the stories of Finn and Midir, as who else but higher class people could make such snobbish demands without having the demands seem inappropriate?

For the sake of faithfulness to the myths, it is useful to differentiate between chess and *fidchell*, a similar game often used interchangeably with chess, depending on the translator and version of the myths. William Sayers includes *fidchell* in his list of local terminology common to Irish antiquity: “this is the most frequently mentioned Irish board game and its name has been interpreted as ‘wood intelligence’...The game is thought to have involved a centrally placed king figure, attacked and defended by other pieces” (113). Another similar aspect to chess, *fidchell* was “part of the education of well-born children.” The two games will be treated here as essentially the same, because of their similar properties of play and attached social mores. Furthermore, in Gantz’s version of the Midir and Etain story the matches between Midir and Eochai are *fidchell* games, and

the men play “chess” in Picard’s version of the same myth. If the games are indeed different, the idiosyncrasies are marginal. The players, not the specific properties of the game, make up the chief source of fascination regarding chess in Irish mythology.

Although most of the players we have thus far studied have been high-status individuals, servants and other lower-class people could still get in on the action. Usually the players do not voice stakes or sentences when playing with inferiors, but as this next story indicates, they still take the game seriously. In the tale of “Bricriu’s Feast,” Ulster hero Cuchullin engages in a game of *fidchell* with his charioteer, Loeg:

A messenger went to him and said ‘Come and speak with the king and queen.’...

‘You mock me,’ [Cuchullin] said to the messenger. ‘Try your lies on another fool’, and he threw a *fidchell* piece at the man so that it entered his brain; the

messenger returned to Ailill and Medb and fell dead between them. (Gantz 240)

This incident brings to mind the concentration and focus that the characters pour into their board games. Interruptions are obviously not viewed with patience or understanding. In fact, only this one example of a chess/*fidchell* game is interrupted by a third party. We have seen that outcomes of chess games alter lives in dramatic ways; therefore, intense concentration should be expected.

The dichotomous nature of chess as a game, yet an intensely serious one, exists in theory as well as in Irish mythology. A game never forgotten to be a war game, chess forces us to wrestle with its duality. Hans and Siegfried Wichmann write that

the most impressive factor in chess mythology would seem to be the conciliatory, ethical content which, however, it is difficult to reconcile with the actual imagery of the game. How can war, which can hardly be credited with such positive

educational functions, even metaphorically serve as a humane example?...the war-game must be regarded as a purifying mirror, raised to a sphere of contemplation, in which active happenings are reflected purely symbolically. (13)

Later in chapter three, the connection between play and war will be further explored, but in the case of chess we have a prime example of their similarities centering in a board game. Truly, in the Irish myths chess is seldom actual war, nor is it a game to sit down to in idleness “to pass the time.” Characters in the myths only regard chess as a casual game when it is a component of more elaborate entertainment, such as a feast or gathering spanning several days. In the games discussed here, changes in public perception, marriages, paternity, quests and physical toil could all result from the game. It brings people together who otherwise would most likely have no contact with each other, but as long as both competitors have a willingness to offer their mental prowess and their entire existence, the game is on.

Chapter Two—Verbal Contests, Celebrations, and Games

The concept known today as “Irish wit” does not derive from any recent source.

Mythological characters of Ireland frequently celebrate their verbal dexterity in poetry, riddles, and challenges to rivals. Poignant words, eloquent phrasing, dexterous timing, and unrehearsed yet perfect delivery can defeat a game rival, just as physical strength or strategic intelligence can.

Myth scholar Alexander Eliot cites a section of Plato’s *The Republic* in which the great philosopher takes a stand regarding poetry and sides with sense rather than sensibility. “So long as poetry be given freedom of the streets, be sure that pleasure and pain are going to rule your city, instead of law” (189-90). Poetry, the ability to paint, dazzle, and subdue with words does indeed take precedence over law in the myths discussed herein; the characters allow their verbally-inspired emotions to dominate their actions. They give themselves wholeheartedly to the joys and consequences of poetry, riddling, and verbal jousting. In most cases, law certainly plays a secondary role to Irish impetuosity and abandonment.

Certainly words bring about strong reactions, as we discover in *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*. Selfish Queen Maive needs a man to fight one-on-one against Cuchulainn, the mortal Herculean hero of the story. She considers all the Connaught warriors and sets her sights on Ferdiad, a childhood friend of Cuchulainn. Try as she might, her efforts to persuade and bribe him fail, as he replies, “There is only one thing I will not do, and that is, fight with my old friend and fellow-pupil” (Squire 70).

But Maive knows men, knows the world, and knows how to get her way. The tale itself describes her strategy—to win with words:

There was one thing the men of ancient Ireland were more afraid of than the loss of life or limb, and that was ridicule. A sharp-witted poet, by making a lampoon

upon his enemy, showing up his weak points to the cruel laughter of other men, could kill him. (70)

Ferdiad consents to break his word and fight with Cuchulainn rather than suffer an indefensible attack of words. He and his old friend fight for several days, retiring at the end of each day of exhausting competition to have fellowship and relaxation with each other. Cuchulainn kills Ferdiad on the fourth day and laments the circumstances that forced him to do it. Although honor is paramount, and actual lives are at stake, verbal challenges still constitute recreation in other Irish myths. The incompatible nature of life-and-death scenarios and playful settings boggles the mind, but the Irish heroes somehow unite them. Sometimes a scene of recreation progresses into utter seriousness, and other times players know from the beginning that they are entering “deep play.”

The best example of verbal prowess as a competitive game is found in "The Story of Mac Datho's Pig," another myth from the Time of Cuchulinn cycle, wherein warriors from rival provinces Ulster and Connaught exchange words and challenges for the privilege of carving the dinner meat. The warriors possess the talent of *sprezzatura*, raising their speech to the level of art.

Bitter and lifelong rivals, the participants seem to easily abandon their animosity and, indeed, the task at hand—only to adopt another subject for competition. Originally they come together because each side seeks the famous hound of Leinster from King Mac Datho, but the dinner pig takes precedence. This is another example of the ready distractibility of the Irish myth heroes to be discussed in the next chapter. The carving, a social act, turns competitive in accordance with the standards of the ancient culture. Joyce states that “in the time of the Red Branch Knights, it was the custom to assign the choicest joint or animal of the whole banquet to

the hero who was acknowledged by general consent to have performed the bravest and greatest exploit” (109). So it is not only the carving act itself, but the “hero’s portion” which also makes up part of the stake. When the eventual winner Conall makes his appearance, he exclaims arrogantly, “I am glad that *my portion* is in readiness” (Chadwick 22, emphasis mine). With attitudes such as Conall’s, it is clear that the Ulster and Connaught warriors will not arrive at any “general consent”—they will compete for the honors.

The contest appears distinctly recreational. It is not hard to picture a bunch of drunk, rowdy men talking smack to each other in a dining hall. One gets the distinct impression the warriors enjoy a rollicking good time, especially those on the side of Cet Mac Matach, who dominates the verbal game for the majority of the time.

Up until the point of dissolution into violence, the exchange of words follows the conventions of traditional “flyting.” Without attempting to portray the cleverness and spontaneity of the warriors as formulaic, I would like to employ the assistance of Ward Parks, whose study of flyting structure helps clarify the competitive purposes. The verbal jousting begins with some rather morbid name-dropping, as the imperious rivals boast about men from the other province that they have killed. They take care to point out whose son or brother the dead men were, as a special insult to the best fighting families of the rival province.

This seems to serve as a preface to *identification*, a normal initial occurrence in flyting matches. Both competitors must recognize their opponent, because, as Parks explains, “we should bear in mind flyting’s *personal* orientation. If the contestant is to land an *ad hominem* attack satisfactorily, he must know whom he is dealing with” (287). The aforementioned Cet, who soon becomes the man to beat, channels his responses to his challengers according to his identification of them. “Whom have we here?” he asks, and upon receiving the competitor’s

name, Cet says, “I have seen him before.” Some he acknowledges without aid: “Is that not Munremor?” (20). He makes sure a proper ID has been made before launching into the most tantalizing section of the tale—roasting his opponents.

Cet begins *retrojection* of the Ulstermen, and “tries to establish what a man is by ‘casting back’ and summoning into the...present that man’s past deeds and ancestry” (Parks 287). He also uses *comparison*, weighing his own merits against his rivals’. Cet’s delicious responses to the men of Ulster become increasingly insulting and personal, much to the certain delight and enjoyment of the Connaughtmen. Although Cet insults the Ulstermen with true accounts of how he defeated and embarrassed them in the past, the tone and actions remain civil, if not cordial:

“Further contest!” said Cet.

“That you shall have,” said a grey, tall, very terrible hero of Ulster...

“Stop a bit, Celtchair!” said Cet, “unless we are to come to blows at once...[at one time] you cast a spear at me. I cast another spear at you so that it pierced your thigh and the upper part of the fork of your legs...Since then neither son nor daughter has been begotten by you. What could encourage you to fight with me?”

Thereupon the other sat down. (Chadwick 21)

Cet maintains this derisive yet accepted banter until the late arrival of an Ulster warrior. When Conall Cernach enters, Cet greets him enthusiastically, as if happy to have a worthy opponent: “Welcome, Conall! Heart of stone, / Fierce glowing mass of fire, brightness of ice, / Red strength of wrath!” (22). Conall returns the greeting and offers similar compliments to Cet’s heroism. Their identification of each other extends beyond Cet’s previous opponents whose names only were mentioned, and indicates to the reader that here something different and pivotal will happen.

At this point, then, to use the modern vernacular, the gloves come off. The game takes a serious turn, as Conall brags about his war prowess and Cet concedes to his rival's superiority: "It is true...you are a better hero than I am." Theoretically, the game is won; Cet now laments that his brother Anluan is not present to offer further challenge to Conall. He engages in what Parks terms *projection*, "the pure, extracted content of future eventuality" (288). In other words, "if" or "if only" preface threats, proposals, and challenges.

Back in the story, Conall assures Cet that Anluan is indeed present, "taking the head of Anluan from his belt, and throwing it at Cet's breast with such force that a gush of blood burst over his lips" (23). From this point on, ceremony and civility strain, not surprisingly. Conall has progressed to the fourth step in Parks' flyting model: *evaluation*. His non-verbal cue quite explicitly "brings this [retro- and projective] material to bear on the hero's [Cet's] state of honor" (289). The decision has been made; evaluation has taken place.

The verbal banter ends, regrettably, with bloodshed, which illustrates the tendency for spontaneous, emotion-driven action rather than submission to law and protocol that Plato had predicted. Despite the somber outcome, the flyting of Cet, Conall, and the others operates as a game like any chess match or physical activity. The rivals named a goal; the right to carve the pig would be given to the winner. They had been following the rules ("playing nicely"), and Cet was clearly enjoying himself: when Conall entered the room, Cet was "making flourishes about the pig with a knife in his hand" (22). Ultimately, the game ends badly, though, given the all-encompassing and high-risk elements of many forms of recreation in Irish mythology, it is not in this sense unique. The fun simply could not last.

Finn Mac Cool's May Day poetry

The next two examples of recreation concerning words and language both center around Finn Mac Cool, and each contains an unusual play element such as solitude or ambiguous purpose. In the first example, Finn is a young man studying poetry and the old tales with a wise bard. When he feels ready to leave his teacher and become a member of the Fianna, Finn shows his readiness by the spontaneous composition of a May Day poem.

Poetry held an important position in ancient Irish culture, and although high standards and countless rules ensured its impressive quality, it was far from being a laborious task. Finn demonstrates utter maturity in his ability to create, extemporaneously and joyfully, this verbal art form in accordance to the standards of his culture. P.W. Joyce describes “the laws of Irish versification” with which Finn and any poet would have been familiar in the old society. Finn’s poem contains the following elements in Joyce’s list:

- (1) each stanza to consist of four lines making complete sense;
- (2) in each line seven syllables;
- (3) alliteration in at least two principal words of each line;
- (4) the lines to rhyme, the rhymes being greatly varied...
- (5) the last word of the second line to have one syllable more than the last word of the fourth line... (497)

Naturally, since the original version would have been in the Irish language, the version included below does not conform exactly to the standards for “direct metre” poetry. We can imagine, however, the flawlessness and fluidity that likely exist in the first versions of the poem, given the near-perfection of an English translation. Also in adherence to Irish tradition and values, Finn’s poem reveres the season and the land, and May’s effects on the living things surrounding him:

Men grow mighty in the May,
Proud and gay the maidens grow;
Fair is every wooded height;
Fair and bright the plain below.

A bright shaft has smit the streams,
With gold gleams the water-flag;
Leaps the fish and on the hills
Ardour thrills the leaping stag. (O'Faolain 133)

Finn clearly receives much joy from his recitation, and he means the words sincerely. The poem's exalted tone and the circumstances surrounding its creation, Finn's new freedom and knowledge, suggest happiness. Culturally speaking, Finn's adherence to the standards and quality of poetry composition indicates his readiness to assume (in steps) a leadership role in the society he does not yet fit into, a society discussed further in chapter three.

But more than merely using poetry to serve aims of social advancement, Finn undergoes a deeply personal experience. His poem, because of its lack of definite audience and its "rite of passage" qualities, stands alone as a private celebration, unlike the other forms of recreation we see in Irish myth. Finn makes the transition from student to man, something he must do to become a valued leader in his culture. But he does it with pleasure; his poetry composition is not akin to hazing and other rite of passage activities that the inductee looks toward with dread.

Even though Finn has been raised without familial stability, he can rejoice in the history he shares with his otherwise estranged culture. May Day in Irish history is said to be the day Ireland came to be inhabited by the "Tuatha De Danann," or the people of the goddess Dana.

Joseph Nagy, in *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, calls these Tuatha De Danann “the inhabitants of Ireland before the advent of mortals...the supernatural race [with whom] Finn and the rest of the Fenians are continually interacting” (37). These immortals sired some of the gods that subsequently sired some humans, and were therefore the universal ancestors of many Irish mythological heroes. (Picard 9-10) Such deities, along with their choice of habitation—Ireland—deserve praise, and Finn offers it. In doing so, he supports play theorist Josef Pieper’s assertion that “if ‘celebration’ is the core of leisure, then leisure can only be made possible and indeed justifiable upon the same basis as the celebration of a feast: and that formation is *divine worship*” (71). Finn may not fully comprehend the magnitude and scope of May Day, but the significance of the deities remains, even if only in the background of his now cultivated brain. Pieper continues: “however dim the recollection of the association may have become in men’s minds, a feast ‘without Gods’, and unrelated to worship, is quite simply unknown” (71). We as 20th century readers of myths may find difficulty in imagining the life and times of Finn Mac Cool, but we forget that Finn himself may not fully grasp his own extensive history. Nonetheless, he displays the reverential attitude necessary for true celebration.

Finn’s poem has no definite human audience, but because of its panegyric qualities, he could be communing with the deities around whom May Day implicitly revolves. If this is the case, myth scholar Mircea Eliade accurately describes his poem:

all poetry is an effort to *re-create* the language; in other words, to abolish current language, that of every day, and to invent a new, private and personal speech, in the last analysis *secret*. But poetic creation, like linguistic creation, implies the abolition of time...and tends toward the recovery of the paradisiac, primordial situation... (36-7)

Again, this communion with the gods might not be acknowledged by Finn, but in praising things the Tuatha De Danaan stand for, he praises the gods themselves. In their immortal, omniscient state, they can of course hear him and most likely smile.

But even more important than the entertainment Finn gets from celebrating the ancient immortals is the opportunity to glorify a concrete, tangible source of happiness. The Fianna's warrior poet (and Finn's own son) Oisín backs Finn's legendary love for nature: "Finn's favourite sleep music was / The cackling of the wild ducks... / The scolding of talk of the blackbird... / The lowing of the cows..." (126). Nature is, and will continue to be, Finn's favorite recreational setting.

Johan Huizinga elucidates the unbreakable connection between poetry and play, which, given what we already know about Finn Mac Cool, is entirely applicable here. Huizinga writes that play takes place "according to rules *freely accepted*, outside the sphere of necessity or material utility...sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion" (132, emphasis mine). Then, he compares the above qualities with poetry:

the rhythmical or symmetrical arrangement of language, the hitting of the mark by rhyme or assonance...the artificial and artful construction of phrases—all might be so many utterances of play spirit. To call poetry, as Paul Valéry has done, a playing with words and language is no metaphor: it is the precise and literal truth.
(132)

Finn, in his May Day poem, experiences growth, maturity, and confidence, but these are simply marginalized in comparison to how he experiences *joy*.

Riddling in “The House of the Rowan Trees”

From the uninhibited solitude and elated emotion of Finn’s May Day poem, we move to a challenge of verbal riddles offered to the adult Finn and his comrades. This story finds Mioch, a secretly revengeful ward of the Fianna, first offering to recite poetic riddles for Finn, then placing him under bonds to hear and interpret them. Again, the poems center around the physicality and nature of Ireland. The second of the two riddles, more picturesque and allegorical, contains a personification:

In the east there lives a queen,
 With a throne of crystal and a gown of green.
 Small and shining, bright and gay,
 Her countless children about her play.
 Slowly, slowly she runs her course,
 Yet she outstrips the swiftest horse.

What is the name of this glorious queen,

With her throne of crystal and her gown of green? (Picard 91)

Structurally, Mioch’s riddle falls into the category that folklorist Jan Brunvand calls “true riddles,” which “usually [have] two parts, a rather general and straightforward part...followed by a more precise, but contradictory part.” The contradictory section of Mioch’s riddle, “Slowly, slowly she runs her course, / Yet she outstrips the swiftest horse” actually serves to clarify rather than confuse the mind of Finn, as we will see in his response.

The reader guesses that for Finn not to know the answer to this riddle would be both insulting and inconceivable. Finn knows nature; he lives and breathes hunting and outdoor exercise as part of his daily life. He also possesses one intellectual weapon of which Mioch is

likely not aware. When Finn was studying poetry with the bard Finnegas, he lived on the banks of the River Boyne, a river of historical interest from the earliest times. In this river lived the Salmon of Knowledge, which Finn accidentally tasted (“...when I was turning it on the spit it burned my fingers, so I put my thumb into my mouth to ease the pain”) and therefore fulfilled a prophecy (O’Faolain 132). He had, from that point on, “the eternal knowledge” of the Salmon.

Therefore, Finn’s intellectual ammunition to answer this riddle enables him on two counts. First, he has the Salmon’s knowledge, and second, he has lived directly on the river that Mioch metaphorically describes! He takes indisputable delight in replying to Mioch, “That also is easy...the queen of whom you speak is the River Boyne.” He explicates the poem perfectly, and his response is almost poetry in itself: “And though the waters of the river flow slowly, yet in seven years they can cross the oceans of the whole world—and what horse could do that?” (Picard 91) He wins and the game ends, but questions still remain.

Never are we truly certain of Mioch’s motives for posing these poetic riddles to Finn. Whereas the competitive banter in the “Story of Mac Dathó’s Pig” and Finn’s May Day poem serve cultural and social purposes, we can only guess at Mioch’s intentions. In chess, another intellectual form of recreation, we saw that the players competed for stakes, even if the stakes remained unknown until the conclusion of the game. Mioch provides no indication of his ultimate goal. If he wishes for the men of the Fianna to attend his dinner, he only has to say (as he later does), “I have a feast prepared for you, and I put you all under bonds not to refuse it” (92). The riddles gain him nothing.

Nonetheless, we must ask ourselves what significance this riddling game has in the ancient Irish culture and to the participants. Whether or not we believe Mioch has a right to feel revengeful toward Finn, we must consider the possibility that he uses riddles to attempt a

reversal of his and Finn's social roles. If this is the case, the riddling although clearly unsuccessful, fits nicely into Victor Turner's discussion of ritual and hierarchy. Turner writes in *The Ritual Process* that "rituals of status reversal make visible in their symbolic and behavioral patterns social categories and forms of grouping that are considered to be axiomatic and unchanging both in essence and in relationships to one another" (176). This ritual leaves Mioch unfulfilled, and according to Turner's theory above, was almost doomed to fail from the start. Nothing remains to be proven by Finn; he knows that now he not only belongs to a group, but *leads* it. He does not fear the outcome of Mioch's challenge and therefore treats the riddles as a game.

As to the ramifications for Finn and his societal solidarity, the riddling game only strengthens his position. He addresses Mioch with friendliness after answering both riddles and receives the aid of his men when they realize Finn's good nature and mode of playfulness prevent him from recognizing Mioch and potential danger. Finn is too culturally important to risk losing, as we find from the speech of Conan the Bald. He says, after watching his leader Finn and Mioch "carefully and frowningly", "you may be the wisest of all men, Finn, but today you have not the wisdom to know a foe from a friend" (91). Conan's words are not hard to interpret, and he affirms both his and Finn's place in a tight-knit, watchful group. His manner is typically gruff, but Conan treats Finn in a manner that Sir James George Frazer describes in *The Golden Bough*. Frazer examines the veneration of some individuals in primitive stories and societies:

there are often found men to whom the superstition of their fellows ascribes a controlling influence over the general course of nature...Naturally, therefore, the life and health of such a god-man are matters of anxious concern to the people whose welfare and even existence are bound up with his; naturally he is

constrained by them to conform to such rules as the wit of early man has devised for averting the ills to which flesh is heir, including the last ill, death. (305-6)

Frazer could be referring to Finn in his analysis; although Finn is purely a man, he does have some supernatural (or god-like) qualities such as the Knowledge of the Salmon. Who could now deny his importance to the Fianna and to Ireland?

Riddling allows those involved to decide who belongs to a group and who does not. The answers usually require a broadly-based knowledge (so that logic and metaphor can be analyzed), and also a more localized, immediate knowledge. Finn has both types, the backing of his men, and now the riddle-solving victory.

Verbal talents abound in Irish myths. As with chess games, recreational activities involving words also contain varying degrees of seriousness—they could be life and death situations or blissful celebrations. The myth-tellers and listeners appreciated eloquence and the results of quality education, and verbal abilities demonstrated in this chapter did not simply appear in the heroes' brains and mouths. The myths explicitly detail the training and instruction the heroes normally underwent. Finn studies with a wise bard, Cuchulinn is raised partially under the tutelage of a druid, and most other heroes have foster-parents that help give them a well-rounded upbringing and education. They work for their intelligence, and display it in situations important to them. Ulstermen and Connaughtmen conduct their verbal competition with no holds barred because their rivalry is the defining characteristic of each man involved. Finn Mac Cool, the eternal nature lover, uses his talents to celebrate the land he loves and to demonstrate his knowledge of the land. Verbal games mean submitting to emotions for guidance, and the supremacy of poetry and language over law speaks volumes about the values of Irish mythological culture.

Chapter Three—Physical Games and Diversions

Just as Irish mythological characters sometimes determine group membership and social acceptance by the results of intellectual recreation like riddling, they also use physical games to establish (and exploit) cultural status and belonging. Games can decide an individual's worth, prophesy one's future cultural importance, and solidify boundaries of social groups. However, these are not the only purposes of playing. In most cases, physical games provide pure and simple fun.

By this point, Finn Mac Cool has been discussed in his adult life, along with his symbolic transition from adolescent to man, and his intellectual and verbal talents demonstrated in play. As a child, however, Finn's salient characteristic is his separation from the culture he will later influence heavily. Physically, he stands out. Raised in nature by adults who are not his biological parents, Finn makes everything look easy in play—like a twin of the legendary King Arthur in another time and place. Finn's attributes, typical of young heroes, serve as measuring devices of his future greatness.

For example, as a youth he encounters "some boys of his own age playing hurling," a game rumored to date back almost as far as Ireland itself. The boys give Finn a hurley and "asked him to play with them. In the game that followed there was not one that could equal his speed in running, and very soon, as he learned the rules of the game, he could play as well as any, and even take the ball from the best on the field" (128). Finn's accomplishments then take on Herculean proportions, as he single-handedly wins games against as many as twelve opponents.

Hurling, still wildly popular in Ireland today, receives such superlatives from Paul Healy as "awesome, gracious, and sublime" (44). It is not a game based only on brute strength; instead,

it takes skills that most people would not acquire their first time playing. Finn, though, is not most people. We can picture the prodigious boy performing as Healy describes: “the top players have a fantastic ability to score from long distances with sweet strikes of the ball [or *sliotar*]...striking the ball is in itself a skill, years of practice being necessary before accuracy and the required power are perfected” (49). Undoubtedly Finn impresses, but at a cost to his already average social status.

The attention Finn receives for his success in hurling further separates him from society and causes him to be labeled as an “Other.” The boys he defeats give him the name Finn because his fair hair and complexion and hair distinguish him. His original name, Demna, is discarded, not necessarily by Finn’s own choice. The public’s perception of him grows beyond his control, as “rumours of Finn’s skill and daring now spread throughout the country...and so it was everywhere Finn went, people suspected, either from the beauty and dignity of his person, or from his skill and knowledge in the hunt or in the contest, that he was no common youth...” (O’Faolain 128-30). Notoriety and fame are not necessarily equal to belonging, however, as we see in people’s reactions to Finn.

His recreation has set a precedent for his later deeds. The culture in which he lives seems unable to accommodate him in his youth, as demonstrated by his (not unkind) dismissal by the King of Kerry, with whom Finn had taken up service. The king knows that the usurpers who killed Finn’s father now seek Finn himself, and tells him “you must not stay here any longer, for those that seek to kill you may be too powerful for me to protect you against them” (128). His culture ostracizes him as a child, but we as listeners or readers of the Irish myths suspect where the action leads. Finn will be great. His skill at games is no coincidence; it relates directly to the talents that make him special and an eventual leader of his culture, one that continues to

remember the importance of games and recreation. Only as an adult, Finn participates in physical games without negative publicity. He has firmly established himself in his society and can approach life and play with confidence in his belonging. As this next story illustrates, games dominate the minds and actions of Finn and his followers.

An opportunity to show manly prowess and enjoy the entertainments of court life diverts these Irish heroes from their missions. In *The Pursuit of the Hard Man* story, their choice of play over duty certainly supports Huizinga's assertion that "you can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play" (3). And indeed, the Irish heroes do just this. They even temporarily forsake life-saving quests to play.

The main plot begins when sixteen men of the Fianna are kidnapped by a giant and taken across the sea. Naturally, Finn, Dermot O'Dyna (a different spelling of the rescuer Dyeermud, who saved Finn from his chess-induced marriage obligation), and a retrieval party set off to follow and rescue the men. Dermot climbs to the top of some high cliffs to investigate while Finn and the rest wait in a boat below. The inhabitants Dermot finds fight with him, but another man wakes him from sleep and invites him to "come with me and I can offer you a soft bed and better entertainment" (Picard 79). Apparently heedless of either his kidnapped and potentially endangered friends, or his fellow rescuers waiting for him, Dermot goes

willingly with him...to a fine, large house, where they were greeted by a company of warriors and fair women...some were playing chess and others were listening to the music of harps.

In this house, Dermot bathed and refreshed himself, and his many wounds were healed in an instant with sweet-smelling herbs; then, clad in rich garments like theirs, he joined the gay company in the hall and they feasted together. (80)

Dermot then takes up military service with his host, a displaced king who asks for Dermot's help in regaining his kingdom, Underwater Land.

But lest any readers become too incensed about Dermot's abandonment of Finn and the other rescuers, they only must progress a bit further into the myth to find that Finn and company have also climbed the cliff and presumed Dermot dead or captured in battle. They then meet a "handsome man with a majestic and noble manner," who invites them to his house. "The best of food and drink, with good songs to hear, were their lot in his fine house" (81). The guests forge an alliance with their host, also a king, when his land comes under sudden attack. Now, we have two examples of the Irish heroes receiving kind and lavish entertainment from kings, and also taking advantage of the opportunity to display their fighting skills. Diversion takes precedence over their serious labors.

At this point in the tale, it is not necessarily easy to remember their original goal, but we are soon reminded. Finn and Dermot reunite, and Dermot has news of the location of their kidnapped friends. At the house of the giant (who Dermot has learned is actually Avarta the enchanter), "their surprise was great when they found the sixteen men of the Fianna, well and happy enough in their captivity, amusing themselves with games and feats of strength on the green plain before Avarta's house" (83). Clearly, a seemingly dangerous situation in reality posed no danger.

The distractible nature of Finn, Dermot, and the rescuing party can now be easily forgiven, since they had little to worry about regarding their kidnapped friends. Likewise, we

can forgive the sixteen men taken by Avarta for not sending word to Finn of their safety.

Everyone seems a bit shortsighted in the face of entertainment. A good time is had by all, and this tale beautifully illustrates the sense of leisure and ease pervading times of adversity. For all their mission-driven intensity, these Irish myth heroes refuse to turn their backs on fun, hospitality, and new alliances.

The function and psychology of the Fianna's play in this story runs deeper than mere hedonism and neglect. The urge to play appears deeply rooted in the human condition—possibly unperceived and completely natural. In a collection of essays on anthropological perspectives of play, John R. Bowman writes that

play is fun and euphoric to the extent that participants can spontaneously achieve and maintain the authorized rules for transforming serious action into playful action. Individuals can be said to achieve this when they are fully engrossed and carried away by the activity. Spontaneous participation suspends reflections about what it is that the participants are doing. (247)

Any conjecture about what Finn and his men thought about when deciding to take a playful sabbatical become pointless if Bowman is correct. If people do become “carried away” and “suspend reflection” in play, they then act on inborn impulses. Play in this case seems inevitable, despite the pressing reality facing the men of the Fianna.

Physical play evokes all kinds of emotional reactions from individuals and societies, especially when it intermingles with the tests of strength that come from war. To Huizinga, play and war share an important connection. He writes that “all fighting that is bound by rules bears the formal characteristics of play by that very limitation. We can call it the most intense, the most energetic form of play and at the same time the most palpable and primitive” (89). Warfare

in Irish mythology certainly abides by rules, and men who excel in combat also take great pleasure in what can only be classified as play and termed “showing off.” Following is one more story of physical recreation in the setting of a dire situation.

After the lighthearted tale of the Hard Man, the heroes who so loved to play find themselves at war with the High King of the Great World. “The Battle of Ventry,” a myth describing the near-destruction of the Fianna, finds a champion doing serious damage to the numbers of Ireland’s fighting men and then demonstrating his power in recreation. The derisive, competitive manner in which this champion, Dealv Dura, behaves physically resembles the verbal flyting that dominates “The Story of Mac Dathó’s Pig.” After he kills two hundred men of the Fianna, Dealv,

taking a hurley and ball...threw up the ball, and kept it in the air with the hurley from the western to the eastern end of the strand, without letting it touch the ground even one time...Next, he put the ball on his right knee, sent it up with that, caught it on the left knee, and kept the ball in the air with his two knees while he was running from one end of the strand to the other. Last, he put the ball on one shoulder, threw it up with that shoulder, caught it on the other, and kept the ball in the air...while he was rushing like a blast of March wind from one end of the strand to the other.

When he had finished, he walked back and forth on the strand vauntingly, and challenged the men of Erin to do the like of those feats. (Curtin 535-6)

Victory in competition results in a rush of adrenaline, so we should not find it strange that Dealv would desire a celebration. He feels invincible, and his actions fall under William Sayers’ description of feats that “unlike interactive games and sports...are individually performed

exercises, the confrontational and competitive dimension being in the performer's superiority over his...enemies or accomplishment against an abstract standard" (108). Certainly Dealv is, in Sayers' words, "parading to gain psychological advantage." His actions provide one more example of the tendency for games to be included in all aspects of Irish mythology, and of the games' revered nature.

The word "revered" is appropriate because the watching members of the Fianna could easily have rushed in and killed Dealv in his otherwise engaged state. But, whether or not the Fianna approved of Dealv, they certainly respected him, and offered their unspoken reverence by allowing his insulting celebration. Huizinga helps clarify why such a breach of war etiquette as attacking Dealv during his display would have been unthinkable:

We can only speak of war as a cultural function so long as it is waged within a sphere whose members regard each other as equals or antagonists with equal rights; in other words *its cultural function depends on its play-quality*. This condition changes as soon as war is waged outside the sphere of equals, against groups not recognized as human beings...(89, emphasis mine)

Although Dealv most likely infuriates the Fianna, he stays perfectly within the boundaries of war behavior—playing by the rules, as it were. The properties of war so closely resemble those of play that the same rules must be maintained. Dealv's humanity forces Finn and his men to submit to his derisive behavior and to acknowledge as Huizinga describes, "the play-quality."

Physical games, in the case of virtually everyone in "The Pursuit of the Hard Man" and also in Dealv Dura's situation, provide a release from otherwise tense situations. In a literary and social sense, play is shown to help define bonds of comrades and draw lines of animosity. Unlike chess and verbal games, physical recreation usually requires direct contact with the land,

and its natural setting calls for spontaneity and abandonment to impulses. No clear pattern of cultural acceptance or rejection emerges; physical play must be entered without presumption. One may amaze others yet still remain miles away from them socially, as young Finn does after demonstrating his physical prowess and dexterity. One might find the reward of play to be tenfold what was expected, as the playful men of the Fianna do when they discover the comrades they abandoned have been all along playing themselves. One could even find oneself in a situation so emotionally volatile that it only escapes a complete breakdown by its connection to play's implicit structure, like Finn and his men as they watch Dealv Dura taunt them. The physical realm of play shows more of play's intangibility and unpredictability than do intellectual or verbal games.

Conclusion

Many types of play have been explored here, and although play's presence in the myths is undeniable, its overall function remains more difficult to surmise. The cultural validation of (and enthusiasm for) play provides clues about the priorities and attitudes that bring the ancient Irish heroes closer to our own personalities. We may be separated from them by an ocean and at least two millennia, but we share their glory and pain as we witness them play. Recreation has its place in the very soul of the Irish myth heroes; it is as inevitable as the most basic life functions, and to imagine the heroes without play is to visualize hollow characters.

To a degree, life is a game. We earnestly seek control over our lives and consistently fail to attain control to a degree that pleases us. By playing, we give to others and ourselves the illusion of control as we manipulate rules and try to predetermine a favorable outcome. Play comforts us, because if we can have (or at least simulate) control in games, then we can do it in life. This is why we can understand mythic heroes, even though they exist in a world and have adventures of which we can only dream. We are not unlike them.

Because play evokes so many ineffable circumstances and reactions, we should consider its magical qualities, since little else suffices to explain certain aspects of it. Malinowski, indebted to Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, provides a list of magic's definitions and locations that applies to several examples of play in Irish mythology. He says, "We find magic wherever the elements of chance and accident, and the emotional play between hope and fear have a wide and extensive range" (81). Indeed, chance often is the catalyst for play—chance brings a displaced king into Dermot's path and enables

them to ally and play together in “The Pursuit of the Hard Man,” and in “The House of the Rowan Trees,” chance brings Mioch back into Finn’s company in the great outdoors with watchful friends surrounding Finn. And certainly, both hope and fear figure into the recreational activities of the heroes. Midir fervently hopes to win back Etain with a kiss; Eochai fears losing her, but both are willing to put their aspirations and apprehensions on the line in play.

Malinowski continues: “We do not find magic wherever the pursuit is certain, reliable, and well under the control of rational methods and technological processes.” Although societal rules and standards accompany play, the outcome is never a foregone conclusion. Games, inherently uncertain, have the mystery element that eludes external control. Perhaps this is why we pour so much effort into our games—we want control, but it remains a mirage liable to evaporate at any given moment. In “The Story of Mac Dathó’s Pig,” Cet masters most of the competition but loses his superiority faster than he gained it. Young Finn takes on the challenge of hurling, although a novice at the game. The laws of probability seem nullified in play’s magical qualities.

From these assertions, which Malinowski calls “psychological factors,” he moves to the sociological functions of magic:

Magic...provides the main controlling power in the pursuit of game. The integral cultural function of magic, therefore, consists in the bridging-over of gaps and inadequacies in *highly important activities* not yet completely mastered by man. (81, emphasis mine)

What else but magic can close gaps in something equally mysterious like play, which for all our efforts eludes our mastery? Of course we can master specific games if blessed

with extraordinary talents exceeding other people's. We tend not to question Shakespeare's mastery of language and poetry, Olympians' athletic abilities, or the intellects of chess Grandmasters. But we cannot, and likely even these individuals could not express precisely why they play at their respective games—what drives them, what initially motivated them, or where play inherently begins or ends. Such is also the case with the players in Irish mythology. Their frequent and intensive play adds another layer of complexity to the mystique of their ancient culture.

Connection with the mythical past in modern Ireland remains a priority, but it is not belabored or cumbersome. The Irish, in their haunting folk songs, make references to the ancient world and heroes and show a desire, not wholly describable, to retain the country's emotional and historical past through their present forms of recreation. An apt phrasing of these observations comes from William Doty's *Mythography*, wherein he describes how play affects culture:

The health of a people may be read off from how they play, and that means here: from how they participate in their myths and rituals, exploring their leads toward understanding the universe, heeding their alternate explanations of reality, and giving metaphoric shapes to social and individual experiences. (130)

In terms of establishing a modern culture's relationship with its past, social interactions can supply clues that are as equally valuable as those acquired in academic research. During a long-term stay in Ireland in 1998 and another visit in 1999, I had, in the words of Bronislaw Malinowski, "a host of authentic commentators to draw upon; still more...the fullness of life itself from which the myth has been born" (17-18). To

Malinowski's comments I would only add that one interacting socially with a culture can discern a continued interest in the issues that captured the attention of their mythic heroes. Modern Ireland continues to appreciate intellectual and creative games and revere physical sports, which indicates their myths have ongoing value—they are indeed living myths.

The connection between a culture and its mythology depends on the inexplicable link between the myth-tellers and their audience. A great deal of intuition and awareness of the human condition is required of the tellers to envelop their listeners in bonds of community with the mythic characters. Northrop Frye succinctly and accurately phrases a key point of this study of games and recreation in Irish mythology:

besides the internal fiction of the hero and his society, there is an external fiction which is a relation between the writer and the writer's society...there can hardly be a work of literature without some kind of relation, implied or expressed, between its creator and its auditors. (52-3)

The myth-tellers always have considered the myths important enough to take with them throughout all the changes of their land, language, and people. They continue to do so now. Myth remains a constant influence in a shifting world, yet it must also adapt and change or risk becoming irrelevant. Likewise, the rules of play develop as new games and players enter the scene, but the fundamental drive to involve play in our lives will likely never die.

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