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Female Alterity in Medieval Gaelic Literature

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Abstract

This study is a literary critical examination of two specific instances of the alterity of women in medieval Gaelic secular prose literature: that of the foreign woman, and that of the woman warrior. Within both is seen how women are treated as outsiders in much of our literature from the period, and some more so than others. Foreign women are discussed as alluring, as mothers, and as dangerous individuals (frequently abductees) who can destabilise the society into which they enter. The repeated failures of women warriors are examined, and their interactions with weaponry, space and gender, as well as how other markers of alterity, such as foreignness, impact upon the portrayals of woman warriors in the literature. Overall, it is argued that we can understand women in medieval Gaelic literature as outsiders in general, but in specific instances certain women are made so distinctly outside the norm that they can be read as deliberately alienated.

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Introduction

Depictions of women in medieval Gaelic literature have received increasing attention in recent years, and, as a result, some notable previous assumptions regarding them have been challenged. The troubling ‘romance’ involved in the kidnapping and grooming of Derdriu has been examined by Mathis;¹ the notion of Medb as a proto-feminist icon pointing to an equal (or even matriarchal) pre-Christian Ireland has been dismantled by scholars such as Márkus;² and the Morrígan has been examined as ‘neither valkyrie nor war-goddess’ but having power over domains such as prophecy, people and animals.³ It is within this context of growing medieval Gaelic feminist scholarship that the present study seeks to explore the intersecting treatments of women and alterity within medieval secular prose literature. The extent to which women, particularly pro-active women, were shown to be outside the norm — both the norm of the producers and consumers of the literature, and of the world within the narratives — and the ways in which such women are marked out as unusual or extraordinary in the literature are worth discussing. The study takes for its focus two particular instances of women who can be seen as outsiders — foreigners and warriors.

In legal terms, the rights of women in the medieval Gaelic world were tied to men. To quote Ní Dhonnchadha: ‘Most women lived in a state of legal dependence on male guardians’.⁴ For society as a whole, the image we have from the legal texts has been summarised by Kelly:

The law-texts indicate that the basic territorial unit is the *túath*, conveniently translated ‘tribe’ or ‘petty kingdom’. [...] Except when on military service or pilgrimage or when

¹ Kate Louise Mathis, ‘An Irish Poster Girl? Writing Deirdre during the Revival’ in Willy Maley, Paddy Lyons and John Miller (eds.) *Romantic Ireland from Tone to Gonne: Fresh Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Newcastle, 2013), 263-281. See also Kate Louise Mathis, ‘The Evolution of Deirdriu in the Ulster Cycle’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2011).

² Gilbert Márkus, ‘Early Irish ‘Feminism’’, *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992), 375-388.

³ Máire Herbert, ‘Transmutations of an Irish Goddess’, in Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (eds.), *The Concept of the Goddess* (London, 1996), 141-151.

⁴ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and settled folk: women, honor, and shame in medieval Ireland’ in Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (eds.), *Constructing gender in medieval Ireland* (New York, 2013), 17–38, at 19.

attending an *óenach* [‘a regular assembly for political, social, and perhaps commercial purposes’] outside the territory, the ordinary freeman stays within his own *túath*.⁵

This will have been particularly the case for women, who were unlikely to engage in military service.⁶ As Ní Dhonnchadha states: ‘female honor and freedom to roam tended to be opposed to each other in medieval Irish sources.’⁷ Kelly, citing wisdom-texts, presents ‘Reticence, virtue and industry’ as the key traits admired in women.⁸ The ‘Feminine Norm’ in relation to historical women has most recently been examined by Oxenham. She concludes:

The present investigation suggests that, on the whole, women as a group, because of their sex, were not represented as inferior to men. They were, however, represented as different: there is ample evidence that the ‘standard unit’ of society was the free male, so women were inevitably regarded as in some way ‘other’.⁹

Oxenham presents the role of women in medieval Ireland as working side-by-side with men in an agricultural society, with their own mastery over certain domains such as embroidery.¹⁰ Oxenham also emphasises this ‘different, but not inferior’ angle regarding legal status.¹¹ The discrepancies between male and female legal status, regarding inheritance for example, have been examined by scholars such as Ó Corráin.¹² The norm for medieval Gaelic women — as settled, agricultural workers in a *túath* — contrasts then at times with the women of our secular prose tales, in which we frequently see queens, warriors, sorceresses, wanderers and foreigners. And this is not to distract from the point made by Oxenham above, reinforced by Kelly: the ‘free male’ being considered the average member of medieval Gaelic society.

This brings us to a point of methodology. The focus of this study is firmly on the texts and the world depicted to us within them; that world, though it shares locations, events and

⁵ Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), 3, 4.

⁶ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘The semantics of *banscál*’, *Éigse* 31 (1999), 31–35, at 31.

⁷ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and settled folk’, 19.

⁸ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 69.

⁹ Helen Oxenham, *Perceptions of Femininity in Early Irish Society* (Woodbridge, 2016), at 82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹² Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Women and the law in early Ireland’, in Mary O’Dowd and Sabine Wichert (eds.), *Chattel, servant or citizen: women’s status in church, state and society* (Belfast, 1995), 45–57.

individuals with it, is not medieval Gaeldom itself. Any conclusions drawn from the texts as reflecting medieval Gaelic society are done with the understanding that this is only one source of insight into that society, and it is far from the only one worth considering. The purpose of this study is not historical but literary critical. The focus is on the world of the narratives. This is an approach that has been taken in the context of medieval Gaelic material by scholars such as Künzler. As she states about her usage of key terminology in the introduction to her study of physicality in early Gaelic and old Norse-Icelandic literature:

narrated world denotes the fictional world created by and thus depicted in the text, the world that the literary characters inhabit. [...] *narrated world* also refers to the fictional setting in time and space, the structure and values of the text's society (or societies), the appearance and customs of characters, how they interact with each other and many other factors. The *narrated world* thus creates a tangible and perceptible space within the text and a meaningful sphere in which the literary characters [...] (inter-)act.¹³

In the course of any such study, questions do arise regarding how those behind the creation of the tales understood or purposed the texts. Where relevant, answers have been suggested. The emphasis, however, is on the world of these tales, rather than the world in which they were written down.

What then are the expectations regarding women in the world of medieval Gaelic secular prose literature? O'Leary's 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature' remains a key text in any such discussion.¹⁴ He highlights beauty and chastity in particular as two of the most important traits seen for women in the literature,¹⁵ while a willingness to sacrifice oneself in order to improve the prospects of male kin is also emphasised.¹⁶ O'Leary also mentions the emphasis on aristocratic characters found in medieval Gaelic literature,¹⁷ and it is worth noting that many of our characters that will be discussed are framed in the literature in

¹³ Sarah Künzler, *Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature* (Berlin, 2016), at 31-32.

¹⁴ Philip O'Leary, 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature', *Ériu* 38 (1987), 27-44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33-35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

terms of their relation to men, often royal men or men with ties to a royal court. This is most obvious in the *Banshenchas* ‘The Lore of Women’ which largely discusses the mothers, wives and daughters of famous men.¹⁸ And here may come into view the contrast between the world of the secular prose texts and the world we reconstruct as medieval Ireland through the legal and wisdom texts. For instance, Kelly discusses the emphasis on beauty in the prose tales: ‘Feminine beauty - so often enthused over in the sagas - does not count for much in the wisdom-texts’.¹⁹ The discrepancy between the norms of medieval Gaeldom and those of the world of the narratives is therefore to be considered throughout this dissertation.

This study then takes two aspects of female alterity, ways in which women are presented as being outside the aforementioned norm: women’s foreign status and women’s status as warriors. Both are areas upon which scholarship has previously touched, but about which there remains much to say. Both are also of note as characters who experience female alterity, and are women who are marked as differing not only from male society, but also from other women. The study is limited in terms of time period and in terms of genre. The language of our texts date mainly from the Old and Middle Gaelic periods. In terms of genre, the study focuses on secular prose tales, though there is reference to hagiographical, metrical and legal material where relevant.

This study is far from the first to have extraordinary women from medieval Gaelic literature as its focus. Bitel’s *Land of Women: tales of sex and gender from early Ireland*,²⁰ Findon’s *A Woman’s Words: Emer and female speech in the Ulster Cycle*²¹ and, more recently, Oxenham’s *Perceptions of Early Irish Femininity*²² are key monographs in the discussion of women in medieval Gaelic literature, as is the collection of essays *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, edited by Sheehan and Dooley.²³ Individual essays have also added numerous insights to the discussion. Across these studies, the focus tends to be on individual characters such as Medb, Derdriu, and the Morrígan, and the aforementioned Emer,

¹⁸ Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘The *Banshenchas* revisited’, in Mary O’Dowd and Sabine Wichert (eds.), *Chattel, servant or citizen: women’s status in church, state and society* (Belfast, 1995), 70–81.

¹⁹ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 69.

²⁰ Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: tales of sex and gender from early Ireland* (Ithaca, 1996).

²¹ Joanne Findon, *A Woman’s Words: Emer and female speech in the Ulster Cycle* (Toronto, 1997).

²² Oxenham, *Early Irish Femininity*.

²³ Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (eds), *Constructing gender in medieval Ireland* (New York, 2013).

as opposed to looking at women more broadly.²⁴ As will become clear in the course of this study, while foreign women and female warriors have been discussed, it has often been in the context of these character studies, as opposed to broader interrogations of the tropes as a whole.

Nor is this study the first to consider alterity, in various forms, in medieval Gaelic literature. Physical alterity as an aspect of medieval Gaelic literature has been studied in recent years by scholars such as Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan,²⁵ Jacqueline Borsje²⁶ and Sarah Künzler,²⁷ and, particularly in the context of Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad*, has been commented upon by a great deal more besides.²⁸ The extraordinary physicality of characters such as Leborcham, the *bancháinte* 'female satirist' and messenger is given space in the literature in the Middle Irish *Talland Étair* 'The Siege of Howth', and serves to further her position as outside the norm:

*Mug 7 cumal robatar itig Conchobair. isi gein rucad eturru .i. ind ingen Leborcham.
Badochraid dano adelb na ingine .i. adatraigid 7 adaglún innadiaid, adaescait 7
adásdail rempe. ISi [sic] toichled Herinn inoenló.*

A slave and a slavegirl were in Conor's house, and this is the child that was born to them, even the girl Leborcham. Uncomely, now, was the girl's shape, to wit, her two

²⁴ See, for instance, Erica Sessle, 'Misogyny and Medb: approaching Medb with feminist criticism', in James P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (eds.), *Ulidia: proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Belfast, 1994), 135–138; Máire Herbert, 'Celtic Heroine? The Archaeology of the Deirdre Story', in David Cairns and Toni O'Brien Johnson (eds.) *Gender in Irish Writing* (Milton Keynes, 1991), 13-22; Clarke, Michael, 'Demonology, allegory and translation: the Furies and the Morrigan', in Ralph O'Connor (ed.) *Classical Literature and Learning in Medieval Irish Narrative* (Woodbridge, 2014), 101-122. Of course, discussion of women in general does occur in many of these articles, but it frequently comprises background rather than the central focus of the argument.

²⁵ Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan, 'The anatomy of power and the miracle of kingship: the female body of sovereignty in a medieval Irish kingship tale', *Speculum* 81:4 (October, 2006), 1014–1054.

²⁶ Jacqueline Borsje, *From chaos to enemy: encounters with monsters in early Irish texts: An investigation related to the process of christianization and the concept of evil* (Turnhout, 1996).

²⁷ Sarah Künzler, *Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature* (Berlin, 2016)

²⁸ See, for instance, Doris Edel, *Inside the Táin: Exploring Cú Chulainn, Fergus, Ailill, and Medb* (Berlin, 2015), 38.

feet and her two knees behind her, her two hams and her two heels before her. She it is that used to travel through Ireland in one day.²⁹

Such a physical description increases her alterity, and has been discussed by scholars such as Künzler.³⁰ This stands in marked contrast to the description of beautiful female characters, a more common occurrence, as is seen with Emer's self-description in the Middle Irish *Fled Bricrend* 'Bricriu's Feast':

*“Cotomgaba-sa chéim cruth cheill congraimmim
coibliud búada báigthir cach delbh cháin chucom
conic mo rosc sóer setta dóine dom gnúis gné
ní frith cruth ná córai ná congraim
ni frith gaés ná gart ná genus.
ní frith luth serice sóerligi na celle conomthic-se”*

“I am the standard of women, in figure, in grace and in wisdom ;
None mine equal in beauty, for I am a picture of graces.
Mien full noble and goodly, mine eye like a jewel that flasheth ;
Figure, or grace, or beauty, or wisdom, or bounty, or chasteness,
Joy of sense, or of loving, unto mine has never been likened.”³¹

As mentioned, O'Leary states that beauty is one of the 'qualities recurring repeatedly in descriptions of respected female characters'.³² He points to the descriptions of Étaín in the Old Irish *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and the Middle Irish *Tochmarc Étaíne* for 'a lavish description of the Irish concept of feminine beauty'.³³

²⁹ Whitley Stokes (ed. and tr.), 'The siege of Howth', *Revue Celtique* 8 (1887), 47–64, at 54, translated on 55.

³⁰ Künzler, *Flesh and Word*, 221. See also Esther Le Mair, 'A trusted outsider: Leborcham in the Ulster Cycle' in Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna (eds), *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Berlin, 2013), 37–47.

³¹ George Henderson (ed. and tr.), *Fled Bricrend*, Irish Texts Society 2 (London, 1899), 26, translated on 27.

³² Philip O'Leary, 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature' *Ériu* 38 (1987), 27–44.

³³ *Ibid.* Citing Eleanor Knott (ed.), *Togail bruidne Da Derga*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 8 (Dublin, 1936), 1-2.

At times the trope of physical alterity as manifesting the darkness of an evil character is subverted, and the dangerous feminine figure takes the form of a beautiful woman. This can be seen with characters — who will shortly be discussed — such as Medb,³⁴ Fand, and also with Sín in the Middle Irish *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* ‘The Violent Death of Muirchertach mac Erca’:³⁵

Ní cian dia raibe ann co facaid óen-ingen chruth-álaind, chenn-fhind, chnes-solus, & brat uaine impe i suide 'na fhochraib isin fert fódmuigi, & dar leis nocon fhaca don droing banda a com-álaind ná a com-chuanna.

‘He had not been there long when he saw a solitary damsel beautifully formed, fair-headed, bright-skinned, with a green mantle about her, sitting near him on the turfen mound; and it seemed to him that of womankind he had never beheld her equal in beauty and refinement.’³⁶

These characters are beautiful and more akin to the expected norm in terms of female physicality in the world of the narrative, and at the same time are dangerous and capable of causing harm to male heroes. There is then some nuance to physical alterity: dangerous women can be beautiful *or* physically outside the norm.

We can see a thinning of the line between human and animal as another potential marker of physical alterity. This can be seen and has been discussed in the context of male characters such as Suibhne in the Middle Irish *Buile Shuibhne* ‘Sweeney’s Frenzy’,³⁷ and also

³⁴ Medb’s position as queen and outsider has been examined and challenged in recent scholarship. See Edel, ‘Part III: Ailill and Medb’, *Inside the Táin*, 207-313. She argues that Medb is a politically astute, complex character, often an outsider, who resists the simple definition to which she has been subject in some scholarship.

³⁵ Lil Nic Dhonnchadha (ed.), *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 19 (Dublin, 1964), dating on xix.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1. Translated in Whitley Stokes, ‘The death of Muirchertach mac Erca’, *Revue Celtique* 23 (1902), 395–437, at 397 and 399.

³⁷ J.G. O’Keeffe (ed.), *Buile Shuibhne*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 1 (Dublin, 1931). See, for instance, Jan Erik Rekdal, ‘From wine in a goblet to milk in cowdung: The transformation of early Christian kings in three post-Viking tales from Ireland’, in Gro Steinsland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Jan Erik Rekdal and Ian Beuermann (eds.), *Ideology and power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, (Leiden, 2011), 211–267.

in relation to lycanthropy and *fiannas* ‘warband activity’ as explored by Sharpe and McCone³⁸ — this link between human and lupine will be considered in discussion of women warriors. The blurring of the line between human and animal can also be seen in characters who are turned into animals or human-animal hybrids, and those who are capable of changing their own form. The aforementioned Morrigan’s status as such a character can be seen in her Protean combat with Cú Chulainn in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cooley’.³⁹ There is a clear difference, at least in terms of agency, between characters who are turned into animals and those who can do so to themselves. The Middle Irish *Metrical dindshenchas* features examples of women who are turned into animals such as, in the *dindshenchas* of *Faffand*, Aige turned into a doe who then travels all over Ireland before being killed.⁴⁰ For *Duma Selga* we see both men and women turned into pigs before their later death in battle.⁴¹ The connotations of supernatural transformation can also place characters outside the norm, even although we see some of our most prominent characters such as Cú Chulainn undergo changes in bodily appearance. This is of note, however: in terms of alterity and the notion of outsiders more generally, Cú Chulainn, along with Finn, dominate as figures discussed in terms of liminality⁴² and the notion of the hero within or without the tribe.⁴³

Other markers of alterity include class. In the extract above we also saw Leborcham marked out as the daughter of two slaves, and slavery and freedom can be clearly considered another marker of alterity. As O’Leary states, ‘The world of early Irish literature was dominated by aristocratic warriors in pursuit of martial honour.’⁴⁴ Ní Dhonnchadha, drawing on legal texts, has in particular emphasised that the biggest divide in the medieval Ireland ‘was between the enslaved and the free.’⁴⁵ The range in potential status of women in the medieval

³⁸ Kim McCone, ‘Werewolves, cyclopes, *diberga* and *fianna*: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (Winter 1986), 1–22, and Richard Sharpe, ‘Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech* and the Devil’s men’, *Ériu* 30 (1979), 75–92. See also John Carey, ‘Werewolves in medieval Ireland’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 44 (Winter, 2002), 37–72.

³⁹ Cecile O’Rahilly (ed. and tr.), *Táin bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin, 1976), 61, translated on 180. Henceforth *TBC I*.

⁴⁰ E. J. Gwynn (ed. and tr.), ‘Faffand’, *The metrical dindsenchas*, vol. 2 (Dublin, 1906), 66–71.

⁴¹ E. J. Gwynn (ed. and tr.), ‘Duma Selga’, *The metrical dindsenchas*, vol. 3 (Dublin, 1913), 386–395.

⁴² Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The wisdom of the outlaw: the boyhood deeds of Finn in Gaelic narrative tradition* (Berkeley, 1985).

⁴³ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Gods and heroes of the Celts*, tr. Myles Dillon (London, 1949).

⁴⁴ O’Leary, ‘The Honour of Women’, 27.

⁴⁵ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and settled folk’, 18.

Gaelic world, including slaves, is worth bearing in mind as we read tales that predominantly feature aristocratic women. This is one clear area where the position of women in medieval Gaelic society and medieval Gaelic literature contrast.

A further marker of alterity consists of how women interact with space. There does seem to be a preference that women in particular be settled and not journey forth like we see many of our male heroes doing. The interaction between women and gendered space has been most thoroughly examined by Ní Dhonnchadha.⁴⁶ She states: ‘while women might keep within the household enclosure for their own safety, male honor was also upheld by their remaining there.’⁴⁷ There was emphasis placed on women’s place as settled within the community. We might then consider this boundary-crossing or roving aspect of women characters in particular as another marker of alterity tied to occupation or a way of life.

The physically and occupationally extraordinary Leborcham is then a prime example for such a discussion. She features as both a messenger, in tales such as the aforementioned *Talland Étair*,⁴⁸ and a *bancháinte* ‘female satirist’ in the Old Irish *Longes mac nUislenn*,⁴⁹ both ways of life that involve degrees of wandering and liminality. In *Longes mac nUislenn* she famously crosses boundaries — she cannot be kept out of the enclosure.⁵⁰ This marks her as potentially dangerous but also excludes her to an extent from the ‘normal’ world of the text — she is a liminal, peripheral figure, whose narrative function may be likened to a Trickster figure.⁵¹ Leborcham is not the only female character informed by boundary crossing in medieval Gaelic literature. Ní Dhonnchadha has examined poetesses such as Líadain in her aforementioned study, positing that women presumably formed part of poets’ retinues.⁵² Here we also see the impact of class as a marker of alterity:

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁸ Whitley Stokes, ‘The siege of Howth’, 54, translated on 55.

⁴⁹ Vernam Hull (ed. and tr.), *Longes mac n-Uislenn: The exile of the sons of Uisliu* (New York, 1949), 45, translated on 62.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ See Alan Harrison, *The Irish Trickster* (Sheffield, 1989); see also Le Mair, ‘A trusted outsider’.

⁵² Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and settled folk’, 24-25.

Many references to women associated with poets describe disorderly and usually lower-class types, and a condemnatory attitude towards such women is prominent in Gaelic sources of all periods.⁵³

In addition to poetesses and satirists, and messengers, we have women set to roam, our runaways, exiles, outcasts, and those who lose their minds. Even some of our women warriors fall into this category, as will be discussed. The narrated world of medieval Gaelic literature can, as Ní Dhonnchadha states, be seen to be biased towards settled life, particularly in the context of women;⁵⁴ to cross spatial boundaries, then, marks danger and alterity. As such, within the character of Leborcham we have several markers of alterity — physical, occupational (both as a *bancháinte* and otherwise), and unfree status — pointing to a character who is very much outside the portrayed norm of the world constructed by these narratives.

With all this in mind, Chapter One discusses foreign women. It begins with analysis of tales relating to kings, and the recurrence of foreign women within them as desirable wives of rulers. The seeming allure of foreign women is explored, alongside discussion of nationhood and how Gaels saw themselves. The recurrence of foreign women as mothers is scrutinised, and reasons suggested for the allure associated with these characters. The dangers associated with or posed by foreign women in the texts are then discussed, leading to an examination of the ‘Potiphar’s Wife’ model, about which much has been written, but which may yet be further refined.

Chapter Two turns the attention to female warriors. The focus is in particular on the *banfénnid* ‘woman *fénnid* (warrior, champion, member of a *fían* ‘warband’)', examining the ways in which she interacts with weaponry, space and society, and how these interactions are gendered. The questions of gendered violence, and the lack of female martial groups in the literature are considered. There is then discussion of the areas of overlap between some of the aforementioned markers of alterity, bringing in the works cited above and our discussion from

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, 35, and above.

Chapter One. Overall, the *banfénnid* character is shown not to be idealised, to be dangerous and positioned outside (and in some ways opposed to) the norms of the world of the narrative.

Women were the most frequently depicted outsiders of medieval Gaelic literature. It is hoped, through the study of these two types of women in particular in particular, that a light might be shone on the richness still to be uncovered by analysing these characters more deeply. This study aims to better understand how women embodying different traits not seen as ‘normal’, whether regarding origins, occupations, physicalities or other aspects, are represented in the texts. Ultimately, the interrogation of alterity as it pertains to gender in medieval Gaelic literature may provide insight into both the world of the narratives, suggesting further avenues of discussion for the texts themselves, and the society in which these texts were written down.

Chapter One

‘Is tú is deise ná ban Éireann’

- *Eleanór na rún*, Irish sean-nós song.

One of the clearest ways in which a character can be considered an outsider is if they originate from outwith the main geographical setting of the narrative.⁵⁵ Such characters may enter the location (and, therefore, the narrative) of their own accord, or may be taken, willing or unwilling, across territorial boundaries by our central characters. Our protagonists may themselves play the role of stranger in a strange land; more frequent, however, particularly with regards to female characters, is the intrusion of a stranger or foreigner into the narrative. Regarding women, two tropes in particular are worth scrutinising in the context of outsiders; that of the alluring, often otherworldly, foreign wife, and that of the dangerous foreign woman, often an abductee. The two are not always mutually exclusive, and in fact are seen in combination at times. An attempt to examine the issue of foreign women must first define ‘foreign’, and such an attempt must take in the legal and socio-historical considerations in addition to the evidence of the narratives themselves.

A concern with foreigners and the denizens of the otherworld is present throughout much of medieval Gaelic prose literature. The portrayal of regions outside of Ireland, and the at-times blurred border between foreign lands and the otherworld, has been explored by scholars such as Dumville,⁵⁶ Ní Mhaonaigh,⁵⁷ and Ó hUiginn.⁵⁸ That such a concern with foreign lands and those who inhabit them permeates medieval Gaelic literature should not be surprising. A journey to a strange land or the underworld is portrayed as a stage in the heroic

⁵⁵ As such, the women of voyage literature are not discussed in this study.

⁵⁶ David N. Dumville, ‘Did Ireland Exist in the Twelfth Century?’ in Emer Purcell, Paul MacCotter, Julianne Nyhan and John Sheehan (eds.) *Clerics, Kings and Vikings* (Dublin, 2015), 115-126.

⁵⁷ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘The Outward Look: Britain and Beyond in Medieval Irish Literature’, in P. A. Linehan and J. L. Nelson (eds.) *The Medieval World*, (London, 2001), 381-97.

⁵⁸ Ruairí Ó hUiginn, *Marriage, Law and Tochmarc Emire*, E.C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures 15 (Cambridge, 2013).

biography model advanced by de Vries,⁵⁹ the model to which Ó Cathasaigh extensively refers in his own study of the heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt.⁶⁰ Such an international, comparative model suggests such a concern with far off places is not limited solely to Gaelic literature. Additionally, in the twelfth century when manuscripts such as the Book of Leinster were being compiled, Ireland was coming ‘increasingly into contact with England and continental Europe, especially through the church reform movement, the introduction of foreign religious orders, and through pilgrimage’ as Ó Corráin outlines.⁶¹ The idea of the foreigner does however give a lens through which to view the notion of an outsider.

Much like the concept of the outsider itself, what constitutes ‘foreign’ can be difficult to pin down and define adequately and accurately. Defining the ‘foreigner’ can be reliant on concepts such as borders and national identity, which change over years. That is not to say that medieval Gaeldom was without borders or notions of national identity,⁶² merely that the emphasis on territories may be more appropriate than that of the modern-day nation-state, and without a detailed understanding of the territorial boundaries of *túatha*, a definition based on geography must be reasonably broad. Kelly outlines the restricted rights of those who ventured into territories other than their own: ‘the ordinary freeman stays within his own *túath*. Beyond its borders he normally does not have rights: only the learned classes appear to be entitled to travel freely.’⁶³ He also goes on to discuss the expressly foreign *cú glas*, a ‘type of outsider’ who is ‘an exile from overseas’.⁶⁴ As Ní Mhaonaigh states:

⁵⁹ Jan de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend* (Oxford, 1963).

⁶⁰ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin, 1977).

⁶¹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland’, in T. W. Moody, *Nationality and the pursuit of national independence, papers read before the Conference held at Trinity College, Dublin, 26-31 May 1975*, Historical Studies XI (Belfast, 1978), 1-35, at 34.

⁶² See most recently Dumville, ‘Did Ireland Exist’, and Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’.

⁶³ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6. Such a definition then implies a differentiation between the outsider from one’s own landmass, and those from abroad. This may lend support to Dumville’s argument of there being an Irish national identity in the period.

a clear distinction is drawn between the *ambue* or outsider from another Irish territory and the *cú glas* [...] who is an exile from overseas. Furthermore, a third category, the *glasfine* ‘gray kin’ is used to refer to the son whom an Irish woman bears to a Briton⁶⁵

As such, we can see a clear legal concern with the status and rights of foreigners, with a distinction between outsider from another territory, and from overseas, and the liminal figure of the *glasfine* born of a union between insider and outsider. That such a figure existed to the extent as to be codified in law also points to a blurring between groups such as Gaels and Britons that can further complicate definitions of ‘foreign’.

For the purposes of this chapter then, a foreigner can be defined as a character who is expressly from outwith the territory of the central character(s). This is particularly evident in cases where characters are described as coming from Alba, Lochlann or the otherworld; but even territories within Ireland can fall under this definition. Foreign characters may also possess other markers of alterity, including kinlessness,⁶⁶ the taking up of weapons (for women), and acting as a disruptive impact upon the social order.

With this definition in mind, we may turn to the Middle Irish tale *Tochmarc Becfhola*.⁶⁷ The narrative primarily revolves around the interactions of a foreign woman, Becfhola, with three different men. Díarmait mac Áeda Sláne, king of Tara, and his foster-son Crimthann mac Áeda of Leinster, meet a royally dressed woman from the *síd* while out in Áth Trium (§1). She states she has come to seek seed for her land (§2). Díarmait marries her, offering his small brooch of little worth as a bride-price. Upon hearing this, Díarmait’s people comment upon the ‘little value’ of the brooch; Díarmait’s druid says ‘little value’, or Becfhola, will be her name (§3). Becfhola desires Crimthann, who is prevented by his family from trysting with her (§4). At her intended rendezvous with Crimthann, she meets the otherworldly warrior Flann úa Fedaich, with whom she elopes at the end of the tale (§11).

⁶⁵ Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Outward Look’, 384.

⁶⁶ See Thomas Owen Clancy, ‘The Needs of Strangers in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi’, *Quaestio Insularis* 6 (2005), 1-24.

⁶⁷ Máire Bhreathnach (ed. and tr.), ‘A new edition of *Tochmarc Becfhola*’, *Ériu* 35 (1984), 59–91. See 68-71 for the dating of the text. If not stated otherwise, I will be referring to the earlier version of the text, identified by Bhreathnach as ‘Version I’.

Critical reaction to the tale has been mixed, and fairly limited. Some, such as Carney and Mac Eoin, have interpreted the tale as containing a warning regarding the observation of the Sabbath.⁶⁸ Sims-Williams refutes such an interpretation, emphasising generosity and the lack thereof from Díarmait as a central theme upon which the tale pivots.⁶⁹ Neither interpretation therefore takes Becfhola as the focal point of its argument, though Becfhola being an expression of sovereignty is particularly present in Sims-Williams' argument.⁷⁰

Other scholars, however, have paid more attention to the character of Becfhola herself. *Tochmarc Becfhola* does not resemble other *tochmarca* or wooing tales, as critics such as Findon have commented. Findon emphasises Becfhola's active role in the text, though she concludes that the tale contains 'the possibility of multiple readings by diverse audiences'.⁷¹ And, appropriately, for a story in which a brooch serves as the foundation of a name and a marriage, Whitfield⁷² approaches the text with an emphasis on material culture. She highlights the role of Becfhola and Flann's clothing in distinguishing them as companions of equal rank,⁷³ concluding that the text features a material culture consistent with the text of the language in which it was written, as opposed to the time at which it is set.⁷⁴

An argument based on character motivation in a medieval Gaelic tale is frequently an argument from silence. However, and with that in mind, it may be illuminating to consider Díarmait's motives at the beginning of the tale. While currently examining outsiders through the lens of geographical origins, it is worth visiting Clancy's definition of 'strangers' used in examining the Four Branches of the Mabinogi:

⁶⁸ James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1955), 229. Gearóid Mac Eoin, 'The dating of Middle Irish texts', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 68 (1982), 109–137, 122.

⁶⁹ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Tochmarc Becfhola: a 'peculiar confused tale'?', in Joseph F. Eska (ed.), *Narrative in Celtic tradition: Essays in Honor of Edgar M. Slotkin*, CSANA Yearbook 8-9 (New York, 2011), 228–234, at 231.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 232-234.

⁷¹ Joanne Findon, 'Looking for 'Mr. Right' in *Tochmarc Becfhola*', in Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (eds.), *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, (New York, 2013), 57–74.

⁷² Niamh Whitfield, 'Dress and accessories in the early Irish tale 'The Wooing Of Becfhola'', in Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (eds.), *Medieval clothing and textiles 2* (Woodbridge, 2006), 1–34.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

I define strangers here primarily as those who are or who appear to be outwith those social contexts which would normally have provided them with protection (for example, kin, community, kingdom), and who are thus made dependent on the power of others.⁷⁵

Though Becfhola is possessed of (extreme) material wealth, she is presented to us without origin (spatial or kin), without protection, and nameless until she is given the ‘little value’ moniker (by the druid) through Díarmait’s action. In the vein of Clancy’s discussion of the Four Branches, it could be argued that *Tochmarc Becfhola*, rather than conveying how a king misses a chance at sovereignty or serving as a showcase of female agency, turns on an instance of the mistreatment of a vulnerable woman. The little value of her bride-price may lead to the question, why does Díarmait want Becfhola for a wife in the first instance — and, more broadly, why would a king want a foreign woman?

In order to pose such a question, one must engage with the argument that Becfhola is a representation of sovereignty. Sims-Williams, for instance, concludes that the tale serves as political exemplum, and ‘if Díarmait of Tara had been less mean or Crimthann had been less subservient, either of them might have grasped the sovereignty that Becfhola represents’.⁷⁶ However, the case for Becfhola being sovereignty has yet to be convincingly argued. Becfhola lacks some of the most prominent features of the sovereignty trope — there is no transformation from loathly lady to beautiful woman, there is no ritualistic pouring of liquid, and, most strikingly, she bestows no sovereignty upon anyone: Díarmait and Crimthann are both kings when she encounters them, her presence is not described as altering Díarmait’s reign in any way, and Flann refuses her until he has taken sovereignty of the island by himself. The argument that Becfhola represents sovereignty seems to rely upon her status as a regally-dressed,⁷⁷ otherworldly woman who first speaks in land metaphors:

‘Cid do-théig?’ or Díarmait.

⁷⁵ Clancy, ‘Strangers’, 1-2.

⁷⁶ Sims-Williams, ‘*Becfhola*’, 234.

⁷⁷ Whitfield, ‘Dress’, 3.

'Do chuindchid síl cruithneachta,' or sí.

'Atá dagithir lim 7 ním thá síl a comadais.'

*'Mad síl in tíri-sea bas áil duit,' or Diarmait, 'ní fil do dúal seacham-sa.'*⁷⁸

'Why do you come?' asked Díarmait.

'To seek seed-wheat,' said she. 'I have good arable land but lack seed which is suitable for it.'

'If it be the seed of this territory that you desire,' said Díarmait, 'your destiny does not lie beyond me.'⁷⁹

Though this is far from convincing as a sole reason for describing Becfhola as a representation of sovereignty, the overtly sexual connotations of Becfhola's self-description, and Díarmait's response, should not be overlooked.

In the face of unconvincing evidence for the sovereignty explanation, however, it may be argued that Díarmait's instant desire to wed this stranger stems from another aspect of the character — her foreign origin. While one might prefer the arguments of wealth and sovereignty as motivating factors for Díarmait in our tale, it should be noted that *Tochmarc Becfhola* has in it an interest in the foreign. At the tale's end, with Becfhola leaving him for Flann, Díarmait says:

*'Nos leicidh uaib,' or Diarmait, 'a n-urchód, ar ní feas cia théit no cia thudchaid.'*⁸⁰

'Let her go,' said Diarmait, 'the evil one, for one knows not whither she goes nor whence she came.'⁸¹

It seems ambiguous whether her indefinite origin means that they should let her go or that she is an *urchód*; in any case, not knowing whence she goes or from whence she came is grounds enough for one of the two. Either way, she is an outsider. There is also foreign influence in the

⁷⁸ Bhreathnach, '*Tochmarc Becfhola*', 72.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁸⁰ Breathnach, '*Tochmarc Becfhola*', 76.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

ways in which both Becfhola and Flann are dressed. Both of their outfits feature some Hiberno-Viking or Viking elements — according to Whitfield, Becfhola has a neck-ring ‘typical of Viking-age Scandinavia’,⁸² and Flann’s bracelets are described as ‘one type of ornament which is undoubtedly in the Hiberno-Viking, rather than native Irish, tradition’.⁸³ We might read these clear Viking influences on our otherworldly characters as a degree of othering, or, considering the detail given to their attire, exoticism. It also supports Ní Mhaonaigh’s notion of the border between Viking and otherworld becoming blurred. In discussing Finn Cycle material she states:

in the body of literature concerning [Finn] which became popular from the eleventh century onwards [...] Lochlainn ‘Scandinavia’ has merged with the otherworld and its inhabitants are awesome and mythical creatures who bear no relation to reality.’⁸⁴

Considering the Viking elements of their dress, and their otherworldly origin, we might consider Becfhola and Flann ‘awesome and mythical creatures’, with an ambiguous link to reality. This, combined with Becfhola’s self-assured and seductive use of metaphor in conversation with Díarmait, may be used to define Becfhola’s appeal as a wife.

The notion of foreign or otherworldly woman being alluring individuals in medieval Gaelic literature has been commented upon. Ní Dhonnchadha states: ‘The perennial allure of women which can undo the most stalwart rulers is intensified in the case of foreign women — the extravagantly Other’.⁸⁵ The example to which Ní Dhonnchadha refers is that of Viking women in *Caithréim Cheallacháin Chaisil* ‘The Victorious Career of Ceallachán of Cashel’,⁸⁶

⁸² Whitfield, ‘Dress’, 18. She notes, on 22, that ‘No gold neck-rings have been discovered to date in Ireland.’

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁴ Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Outward Look’, 393.

⁸⁵ Máirin Ní Dhonnchadha (ed.), ‘Gormlaith and her sisters, c. 750-1800’, in Bourke, Angela et al. (eds.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, vol. IV: Irish women's writing and traditions* (Cork, 2002), 166–249, 190.

⁸⁶ Alexander Bugge (ed. and tr.), *Caithreim Cellachain Caisil: the victorious career of Cellachan of Cashel, or the wars between the Irishmen and the Norsemen in the middle of the 10th century* (Christiania, 1905). For extensive discussion of the tale, see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil: history or propaganda?’, *Ériu* 25 (1974), 1–69.

dated to c. 1130.⁸⁷ The tale ends with Ceallachán’s triumph over the Vikings in Dublin, after which Ceallachán and his ally Donnchúan ‘reward themselves with their choice of Viking women’,⁸⁸ as do their men:

*& do bhi a rogha mna ag gach fhir dibh o sin amach. Ocus do bhatar gu cenn
sectmaine ar an seolad-sin.*

and each man of them likewise had his choice of women afterwards. They spent a week in arranging this.⁸⁹

That Ceallachán, whose triumphs are being celebrated in this tale, chooses for himself a Viking wife, that he instructs Donnchúan to, and that his men choose from them too, suggests the allure of foreign women. They are not considered lesser, they are considered suitable for partners. There is a clear parallel between the situation of these Viking women and Becfhola: kinless, vulnerable, and, presumably, alluring. We could read the taking of Viking wives by Ceallachán and Donnchúan as being politically-motivated and centre around ‘alliance’; however, that each of their men also takes a Viking wife could point to a more widespread appeal.

Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil is not the only example of foreign women being seen as desirable — after his promise of fidelity to Emer, Cú Chulainn sleeps with three women of Alba in the Old Irish *Tochmarc Emire*.⁹⁰ Ó hUiginn’s analysis, that *Tochmarc Emire* presents a world in which society is inverted, with women as the martial heroic figures,⁹¹ and Toner’s discussion of Alba as being sufficiently otherworldly to allow for such behaviour from Cú Chulainn,⁹² point again to the line between foreign and otherworldly being blurred, and of foreigners as originating in places where the regular rules (particularly regarding sexual

⁸⁷ Caoimhín Breatnach, ‘Historical tales’, in Seán Duffy, *Medieval Ireland: An Encyclopedia* (Abingdon, 2005), 221-222, at 222.

⁸⁸ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Gormlaith’, 191.

⁸⁹ Bugge, *Caithreim*, 54; translation from Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Gormlaith’, 192.

⁹⁰ Kuno Meyer (ed. and tr.), ‘The oldest version of *Tochmarc Emire*’, *Revue Celtique* 11 (1890), 433–457.

⁹¹ Ó hUiginn, *Marriage*.

⁹² Gregory Toner, ‘Desire and Divorce in Serglige Con Culainn’, *Ériu* 66 (2016), 135-66.

relations, in this case) do not apply. The otherworldly Fand in the Old Irish tale *Serglige Con Culainn*⁹³ is one of the most prominent examples of an otherworldly lover appealing to a hero, and the seemingly otherworldly (and seemingly sovereignty-based) Sín from *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*⁹⁴ also holds a significant appeal for the king of that text. The notion of abducting women, to which we will return, might also be understood as an aspect of this notion.

Foreign women are also at times featured as mothers to extraordinary characters. A large proportion of female characters in this corpus do appear in material roles in general. This is particularly true in material regarding kings and genealogy.⁹⁵ Famous kings such as Niall Noígiallach and Conall Corc have expressly foreign mothers, Cairenn the daughter of the king of the Saxons⁹⁶ and Bolce Ban-bretnach⁹⁷ the female Briton respectively.⁹⁸ This may be particularly relevant in terms of foreigners as female progenitors of population groups. Heroes having some extraordinary aspect to their parentage is internationally recurrent, as will be discussed. But the notion of the foreign woman as an accepted ‘other’, particularly desirable as a mother for an extraordinary hero, may better inform our understanding of the outsider woman as alluring.

The notion of heroes having mixed parentage is present in the international heroic biography model advanced by de Vries.⁹⁹ *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend* emphasises in particular the alterity of the father. In stage one of the pattern, ‘The begetting of the hero’, the following tropes are identified:

⁹³ Myles Dillon (ed.), *Serglige Con Culainn*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 14 (Dublin, 1953).

⁹⁴ Nic Dhonnchadha, *Aided Muirchertaig*. See also Mark Williams, ‘Lady Vengeance: a reading of Sín in *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 62 (2011), 1–32.

⁹⁵ See, for instance, the *Banshenchas*, which is primarily concerned with such women. Margaret E. Dobbs (ed. and tr.), ‘The Ban-shenchus (Part 1)’, *Revue Celtique* 47 (1930), 283–339.

⁹⁶ John Carey (tr.), ‘*Echtra Mac nEchach*: The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmédon’, in John T. Koch and John Carey (eds.), *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland & Wales*, 4th Edition (Aberystwyth, 2003), 203–208, 203.

⁹⁷ Vernam Hull, ‘Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde.’ *PMLA* 62 (4) (1947), 887–909.

⁹⁸ For discussion of this tale, and of Bolce, see Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Outward Look’, 385–388.

⁹⁹ de Vries, *Heroic Legend*.

- A. The mother is a virgin, who is in some cases overpowered by a god, or has extra-marital relations with the hero's father.
- B. The father is a God.
- C. The father is an animal, often the disguise of a god.
- D. The child is conceived in incest.¹⁰⁰

De Vries exemplifies A B and D with the conception of Cú Chulainn. In three of these tropes, there is a differentiation made between the father and the mother in terms of humanity or status. There is some out-of-the-ordinary aspect to the conception, often relating to such a difference between the mother and father. In Nutt's earlier formulation, examining the 'Expulsion-and-Return Formula' in Celtic literature, he sets out as its first three markers:

- I. Hero born out of wedlock, *or posthumously, or supernaturally*.
- II. Mother, princess residing in her own country.
- III. Father, god or hero from afar.¹⁰¹

Here we see the notion of territory and the foreigner emphasised, with the father being an outsider in geographical terms. If there is frequently a differentiation made between the parents of extraordinary individuals in terms of status, this may support our argument that foreignness was one of a number of markers of alterity employed by medieval Gaels in their storytelling.

This may be further exemplified with medieval hagiographical material concerning Irish saints. The *Vita S. Albei* describes how Saint Ailbe is born of the union between a king and a female slave,¹⁰² and the *Vita Primae S. Brigidae* shows Saint Brigit's mother also as a

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 211-212.

¹⁰¹ Alfred Nutt, 'The Aryan Expulsion-and-Return Formula in the Folk and Hero Tales of the Celts', *The Folk-Lore Record* 4 (1881), 1-44, quoted in Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac Mac Airt* (Dublin, 1977), 3.

¹⁰² W. W. Heist (ed.), 'Vita S. Albei episcopi in Imlech', in their work *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae: ex codice olim Salmanticensi, nunc Bruxellensi. Lives of the saints of Ireland, from the Salamanca manuscript now of Brussels*, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 28 (Brussels, 1965), 118-131, §1.

female slave, owned by her father.¹⁰³ Oxenham has discussed holy births,¹⁰⁴ and describes the unusual circumstances of saints' births as giving 'an aura of the extraordinary from infancy.'¹⁰⁵ In these accounts of Saint Ailbe and Saint Brigit's births, there is a clear contrasted differentiation in status involved in their parentage. Oxenham marks the difference between early Irish saints' origins and Schulenburg's investigation of Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian saints as coming from noble families,¹⁰⁶ concluding, with a few exceptions, that 'noble birth is not emphasised for early Irish saints'.¹⁰⁷ The differentiation between mother and father, and the notion of markers of alterity, are both worth bearing in mind as we return to medieval Gaelic language secular prose.

This motif of foreigners as mother recurs in the Old Irish tale *Scéla Conaill Chuiric 7 Corcu Loígde* 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde', dated by Hull to around 700 AD.¹⁰⁸ The tale begins with discussion of Conall Corc's foster-mother — a witch (*aimmit*)¹⁰⁹ — and his mother, Bolce Ban-bretnach, the female Briton, who is a female satirist (*bancháinte*).¹¹⁰ Bolce 'put an irrefutable request [upon king Luigthech] that she should sleep with him'¹¹¹ — and Conall results from that union. From the beginning, we therefore have the presence of women we can consider outsiders in the birth and upbringing of Conall, one of whom is expressly foreign.

As the tale progresses, Conall's relationships with foreigners, and foreign women in particular, is a recurrent theme. After rejecting the advances of the wife of his cousin, the king

¹⁰³ Ioannes Bollandus, and Godefridus Henschenius (eds.), 'Vita I S. Brigidae auctore anonymo', in their work *Acta Sanctorum* 3, (Antwerp, 1658), 118–134, §I.1-3.

¹⁰⁴ Helen Oxenham, *Perceptions of Femininity in Early Irish Society* (Woodbridge; Rochester, NY, 2016), 130-132.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁰⁶ J. T. Schulenburg, 'Female sanctity: Public and private roles, ca. 500-1100', in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (eds.) *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens, GA, 1988), 102-125.

¹⁰⁷ Oxenham, *Perceptions of Femininity*, 130.

¹⁰⁸ Hull, 'Conall Corc', 892. 'one may say without hesitation that this text definitely was composed before 750 A.D., that it probably was composed about 700 A.D., and that it even may have been composed as early as the last decades of the seventh century

¹⁰⁹ Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde', in Osborn Bergin, R. I. Best, Kuno Meyer, and J. G. O'Keefe (eds.), *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* 3 (Halle; Dublin, 1910), 57–63, 57.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Hull, 'Conall Corc', 892.

of Ireland, Conall is exiled to Alba, where he is given the daughter of Feradach Findfechnach, the king of the Picts.¹¹² They have children, including ‘Coirpre of Luachair of whom the Éoganacht of Loch Léin in Munster are [descended]’,¹¹³ and identified by Ní Mhaonaigh as a *cú glas*¹¹⁴ as discussed earlier in this chapter.¹¹⁵ Conall’s union with a foreign woman, the Pictish daughter of Feradach Findfechnach, is thus identified as the origin for this (sect of a) population group.

Upon returning to Ireland Conall marries ‘Áimend, the daughter of Oengus Bolg of the Darfine’.¹¹⁶ They have children, including Nad-Fraích ‘of whom the Corco Modruad are [descended]’¹¹⁷ — a clear concern with the progenitors of population groups is, as one might expect, very present in the text. Áimend then dreams herself as a bird, hatching nestlings, four of whom fly to different locations in Munster, followed by a bird who settles further west. The fifth nestling stays in the nest. She tells this to the druid, who shows the birds as her sons, listing which one will settle in each location. And he names the other — ‘The sixth namely, Coirpre of Luachair, who settled himself to the west of them is the son of the Pictish woman.’¹¹⁸ In the genealogical material edited by O’Brien in *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*,¹¹⁹ Conall’s wife is listed as Óebfhinn, daughter of Óengus Bolg, king of the Corco Luigde. She has a similar dream, where she gives birth to four wolf-cubs, who each bathed in different liquids — wine, ale, new milk, and water.¹²⁰ Then:

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 894-895.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 895. The ‘descended’ is Hull’s.

¹¹⁴ Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Outward Look’, 387.

¹¹⁵ ‘Chapter One’, 16.

¹¹⁶ Hull, ‘Conall Corc’, 897-898.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 900.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 898.

¹¹⁹ M. A. O’Brien (ed.), *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), 192-197. Translated in Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Gormlaith’, 181.

¹²⁰ For discussion of this dream, see F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (1973), 2nd ed. (Dublin, 2001), at 193, and Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Legend as critic’, in Tom Dunne (ed.), *The writer as witness: literature as historical evidence: Historical Studies XVI* (Cork, 1987), 23-38, at 33-35.

The fifth cub came to her in her bed **from without** and she bathed him in blood. This same was Cairpre Cruithneachán ‘The Little Pict’ and he turned on her and gnawed her breasts from her body.¹²¹

As Ní Mhaonaigh states of the dream: ‘For our purposes, its significance lies in the fact that it is Cairpre’s outside origins that lead to his exclusion from the inner circle.’¹²² We can see again an emphasis on the foreigner, here male, and we get a clear sense of the dangers they may pose. In *Scéla Conaill*, Coirpre of Luachair, ‘the son of the Pictish woman’, is expelled from Ireland after allowing his horses to graze in Conall’s land, and killing the steward who clears them from it.¹²³ The text as a whole is concerned with population groups, territory, and foreigners, and the impact they may have on society. Coirpre’s outsider’s misunderstanding (if we choose to interpret it in that way) of what land is rightfully his leads to death and exile, and Bolce’s transgression as a female satirist, her ability to compel the king to sleep with her, point to a concern with what is foreign, and what transgressions (knowingly or unknowingly) are made by foreigners.

In the eleventh-century Middle Irish *Genemain Áedo Sláine* ‘The Birth of Áed Sláine’,¹²⁴ Diarmait the king of Ireland has two queens, Mairenn and Mugain. We do not get an origin for Mairenn, but Mugain is described as ‘daughter of Conchrad son of Duach Donn of the Munster men.’¹²⁵ In her envy of Diarmait’s other queen, Mugain enlists a female satirist to satirise (and humiliate) Mairenn. Here the danger of her envy is counteracted by miraculous intervention, and the tables are turned when Mairenn calls upon God that Mugain ‘be disgraced for this before the men of Ireland’, which subsequently happens.¹²⁶ After clerical intervention, and her giving birth to both a lamb and a salmon, Mugain gives birth to Áed Sláine:

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, emphasis is my own. Cf. O’Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum*, 196. It was opted not to quote the original text here as it is interspersed with Latin and O’Brien’s abbreviations.

¹²² Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Outward Look’, 388.

¹²³ Hull, ‘Conall Corc’, 899.

¹²⁴ ‘The Birth of Áed Sláine’ in Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Gormlaith’, 182-184. Standish Hayes O’Grady, ‘Genemain Aeda sláine’ *Silva Gadelica*, vol. 1 (London, 1892), 82-84.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

maith tra in gen ro compred ann .i. Aed sláini. at maithi a chland .i. fir Breg .i. im ghart im allud im ordan . im chruas im chána im forlámus . im dirgi [...] ár cach maith (ocus cach) mórtheglach mórearthach doneoch as uilliu cech maith is co Aed sláne cutromaigter (iat).

Good indeed was the child that was born there [...] and good are his offspring, that is, the men of Brega, as regards generosity, glory, honour, toughness, *cáin*-laws, supremacy, rectitude [etc]. For every good thing, even the most grandly organized great household, it is to that of Áed Sláine that it is compared¹²⁷

Once again we see a woman whose origins are stressed and who originates outside the territory of her husband — hence by the definition of this chapter a foreign woman — as progenitor of an heroic figure whose line is noted and celebrated.

Overall, it seems foreign mothers are a repeated concern in such material. They are portrayed as progenitors for population groups in Ireland, and there seems to be no sense of the group being in any way lesser for having a foreign progenitor. In fact, given that population groups such as the Uí Néill and the Eóganacht are portrayed as descending from foreign women, it may even be the case that this is a desirable trait — and might serve in some way to explain why a king such as Díarmait in *Tochmarc Becfhola* desires a foreign wife. In discussing the foreigner Cairenn as progenitor of the Uí Néill, Ní Mhaonaigh states that it seems that tenth- to twelfth-century audiences would have without difficulty accepted her ‘as the founding mother of one of Ireland’s leading dynasties’.¹²⁸ She points to the foreign origin of the Irish themselves as described in the Middle Irish *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* ‘The Book of Invasions’ and that ‘in social terms, the enduring presence of Viking invaders turned settlers ensured that mixed marital alliances were an everyday reality.’¹²⁹ This, and in particular the reference to *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, may be seen in the context of Ó Corráin’s statement:

¹²⁷ O’Grady, 84; translated in Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Gormlaith’, 183.

¹²⁸ Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Outward Look’, 390.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

It would appear that the Irish had developed a sense of identity and ‘otherness’ as early as the seventh century and had begun to create an elaborate origin-legend embracing all the tribes and dynasties of the country.¹³⁰

Lest we overstate the importance of the foreign mother as a recurring motif, however, it must be borne in mind that these are texts concerned with genealogy — we should not be surprised that origins of kin groups are explained therein. We may be placing undue emphasis on it being a foreign woman progenitor as opposed to a foreign woman as the wife of a king, or mother of a hero. It also bears examining in the wider context of motherhood, or the births of extraordinary individuals, in medieval Gaelic literature and further afield — as mentioned, the parents of heroes are often portrayed as differing in some way, and we might consider the marker of foreignness being one of many ways in which the mother can be contrasted with the father.

Such a reading may be complicated by turning to other tales centring around a famous king, namely, Niall Noígiallach. Niall is the progenitor of the Uí Néill, and the son of Cairenn, daughter of the king of the Saxons, and Eochu, progenitor of the Connachta. His mother being foreign again points to the notion of the foreign mother as a trope for heroic kings. However, the similarity in this regard between Niall and Conall Corc’s mothers might also be ascribed to a large degree of basing one story on the other; Sproule argues that we can consider the heroic biography as used in the case of Niall as a starting point for the tales about Conall Corc.¹³¹ This may challenge the notion that the foreign mother was a trope at the time of writing, though the tales of Niall do have further food for thought in this regard.

A key text regarding Niall Noígiallach is the Middle Irish *Echtra Mac nEchach Muigmedóin*, ‘The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón’.¹³² It begins with the description of the Irish king Eochu Mugmedón and his sons, Brian, Ailill, Fiachra, Fergus and

¹³⁰ Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 35.

¹³¹ David Sproule, ‘Politics and Pure Narrative in the Stories About Corc of Cashel’, *Ériu* 36 (1985), 11-28, at 11-12.

¹³² Carey, ‘*Echtra Mac nEchach*’, 203-208. Cf. Whitley Stokes (ed. and tr.), ‘The death of Crimthann son of Fidach, and the adventures of the sons of Eochaid Muigmedón’, *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903), 172–207, 446 (add. and corr.).

Niall. The former four are the children of Eochu and Mongfind — the latter Niall the product of Eochu’s infidelity with Cairenn Casdub, ‘daughter of Saxal Balb king of the Saxons’.¹³³ From the beginning, then, this story of Niall Noígiallach puts him in contrast to his half-siblings, the children of his father and Mongfind. That the progenitor of the Uí Néill results as the union between an Irish king and a Saxon princess is further evidence of foreign mothers producing illustrious children. It is not, however, without its complications — what of Mongfind, and Niall’s half-siblings?

No origin is given for Mongfind in *Echtra Mac nEchach. Aided Crimthainn Maic Fidaig 7 Trí Mac n-Echach Muigmedóin .i. Brian, Ailill 7 Fiachra*, ‘The Death of Crimthann and of the Three Sons of Eochu Muigmedón, Brian, Ailill and Fiachra’,¹³⁴ a tale Dillon dates ‘perhaps to the eleventh century’, and dismisses as having ‘no literary merit’,¹³⁵ begins with Mongfind dreaming of her sons as animals, in an allegory explained to her as showing how Brian will prevail over her other sons.¹³⁶ In the tale, also Mongfind shows magical powers.¹³⁷ When Mongfind dies later in the tale, it states: ‘Conid si aided Moingfinde bansidaige’, translated by Stokes as ‘So this is *The Death of Mongfind the Banshee*.’¹³⁸ eDil lists bansídaige as ‘female dweller in a síd, fairy woman’.¹³⁹ This definitely places her as an outsider, a foreigner, though from a different foreign sphere than that of Cairenn. Sproule, however, in his discussion of Conall Corc states:

although in the story Corc’s Pictish wife is not named, in the genealogies she is called Mongfind, which, as I mentioned earlier, is the name of Crimthann’s sister: if my suggestion as to the earliest form of the plot is correct, Corc’s wife would be Crimthann’s sister.¹⁴⁰

¹³³ Carey, ‘*Echtra Mac nEchach*’, 203.

¹³⁴ Stokes, ‘The death of Crimthann’.

¹³⁵ Myles Dillon, *The Cycles of the Kings* (London, 1946), 30.

¹³⁶ Stokes, ‘The death of Crimthann’, 174, translated on 175.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 176, translated on 177.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 178, translated on 179.

¹³⁹ eDIL, s.v. ‘1 ben’, accessed 23/06/17, <http://dil.ie/5644>.

¹⁴⁰ Sproule, ‘Politics and Pure Narrative’, 17.

Sproule states this introduces another layer of cross-over between Niall and Conall Corc,¹⁴¹ and that in Coirpre being the child of Conall Corc and his Pictish wife, ‘a genealogical device’ was being used to differentiate septs with regards ‘the inheritance of sovereignty.’¹⁴² While Ní Mhaonaigh states that ‘The foreign slave-woman, Cairenn, [...] is being deliberately exalted at the expense of her native free counterpart, Mongfhinn’,¹⁴³ in light of Sproule’s interpretation, and the description *bansidaige* given in ‘The Death of Crimthann’, one might argue that Mongfind can be read to be, *like* Cairenn, made explicitly foreign (albeit elsewhere). The degree to which this bestows sovereignty upon their children differs, however.

Mongfind (whether rendered foreign by the sea or the *síd*) has sons with an Irish king, and these sons do not go on to become such heroic royal figures as Conall Corc and Niall. This may challenge the notion of foreign mothers being a requirement for extraordinary offspring. However, it must be remembered that Mongfind’s children are no ordinary laymen — in *Echtra mac nEchach*, Brian, while not achieving as highly as Niall, pulls hammers from the burning smithy,¹⁴⁴ and Fiachra, once again while not reaching Niall’s achievement, does give the sovereignty hag a kiss.¹⁴⁵ Both acts symbolise their distinction among the Gaelic nobility. It is equally worth bearing in mind that Mongfind and Eochu’s children are credited with establishing significant population-groups, the Uí Fiachrach, Uí Briúin and Uí nAillello, though they are not as successful groups as the Uí Néill are portrayed to (be fated to) be.¹⁴⁶ Striking is the fact that both of Eochu’s wives are in some respect foreigners, and this supports both this idea of female foreign progenitors for population groups, and the notion of foreign women as alluring.

We turn then to instances where foreign women are portrayed not as the ideal wife or mother, but instead, as dangerous. The ‘Potiphar’s Wife’ model, the motif of the patriarch’s (intended) wife or partner desiring his son or underling, crosses cycles in medieval Gaelic

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴³ Ní Mhaonaigh ‘Outward Look’, 389.

¹⁴⁴ Carey, ‘*Echtra Mac nEchach*’, 204.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁴⁶ See Stokes, ‘The death of Crimthann’, 200, translated on 201, for the people descended from Fiachra, and their future twice taking of the Uí Néill kingship.

literature. We find it in some of our earliest Finn Cycle material such as ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’,¹⁴⁷ the Ulster Cycle’s *Serglige Con Culainn* ‘The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn’,¹⁴⁸ the Cycle of the Kings’ *Fingal Rónáin* ‘Ronan’s Kin-Slaying’,¹⁴⁹ *Tochmarc Becfhola*, and other tales specifically identified by scholars such as Carney as belonging to the ‘Tristan’ type, such as *Longes mac nUislenn* and the Early Modern Irish tale *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* ‘The Pursuit of Diarmaid agus Gráinne’.¹⁵⁰ *Lebor Gabála Érenn* discusses Ireland’s first adultery between Parthalón’s wife Delgnat and his soldiers, another example of this situation,¹⁵¹ in which, as Ní Dhonnchadha describes, ‘Anxieties about virility and accusations of female frailty are brought together as foundational’ to Ireland.¹⁵² The recurrence of such a plotline may be sufficient grounds to consider it a trope. Carney, in his discussion of Gaelic tales and their relation to the tale of Tristan, states: ‘It is the function of the jealous king, whether he be called Mark, Conchobar or Finn, to bring about the death of the hero.’¹⁵³ As such, we might not be surprised at the recurrence of the plotline — the king against hero conflict comprises two powerful individuals usually seen on the same side taking up arms against one another. Such an outline could describe the 2016 comic-book films *Batman v Superman* or *Captain America: Civil War* as much as it describes *Longes mac n-Uislenn*. Even with Cú Chulainn and Conchobar, conflict is almost raised between them in

¹⁴⁷ Kuno Meyer (ed. and tr.), ‘Finn and the man in the tree’, *Revue Celtique* 25 (1904), 344–349. See Kuno Meyer, *Fianaigecht: being a collection of hitherto inedited Irish poems and tales relating to Finn and his Fiana*, Todd Lecture Series 16 (London, 1910). The language of the text is Old Irish with some Latin, Meyer dates its composition to ‘the late eighth or early ninth century’, *Ibid.*, xviii–xxix.

¹⁴⁸ Dillon, *Serglige*.

¹⁴⁹ David Greene (ed.), *Fingal Rónáin and other stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 16 (Dublin, 1955). The language of the text is Late Old Irish: see *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵⁰ Nessa Ní Shéaghdha (ed. and tr.), *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne: The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*, Irish Texts Society 48 (Dublin, 1967). James Carney, ‘The Irish Affinities of Tristan’, in his book *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1955), 189–242.

¹⁵¹ R. A. S. Macalister (ed. and tr.), *Lebor Gabála Érenn, The Book of the Taking of Ireland, Part III* (Dublin, 1940), 60–72.

¹⁵² Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Gormlaith’, 222–224, at 222. See also Thomas Owen Clancy, ‘Fools and Adultery in Some Early Irish Texts’ *Ériu* 44 (1993), 105–24, at 108–109.

¹⁵³ Carney, ‘Irish Affinities’, 219. Carney in all likelihood referring to Finn’s role in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*. It is interesting however to consider this statement in the context of ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’, in which Finn does fit ‘the jealous king’ role Carney suggests, but whether Derg Corra is a heroic character is more ambiguous than in the cases of Diarmaid, Noísi or Tristan.

*Tochmarc Emire*¹⁵⁴ until the dangerous situation of Conchobar having *jus primae noctis* rights over Emer is resolved.

While the aims of this thesis do not include the reconstruction of proto-tales, it is worth briefly considering Carney's arguments of a common ancestor for the tales he lists as being of the Tristan-type; namely *Longes mac nUislenn*, *Tochmarc Treblainne*, *Tochmarc Becfhola*, *Comrac Líadaine ocus Cuirthir*, *Scéla Cano mac Gartnán*, *Scél Bailí Binnberlaig*, *Toruighecht Diarmada agus Gráinne*, and the Icelandic *Kormáks saga*.¹⁵⁵ While other scholars in similar discussions have favoured the notion of analogues as opposed to direct copying or borrowing,¹⁵⁶ Carney is clear in his proposal of a primitive 'Tristan' tale that predates and has informed these tales.¹⁵⁷ Even if one finds oneself in total agreement with Carney's far-reaching argument, tales such as 'Finn and the Man in the Tree' and *Serglige Con Culainn*, which have not been notably linked to a Tristan type, point to a more extensive use of this trope throughout medieval Gaelic literature.

Though the link between these tales and Tristan has undergone scrutiny, with few exceptions such as Derdriu and Gráinne the wives and partners themselves as individual characters have yet to receive such attention. The proportion of these women who are, by this chapter's definition, foreigners, has, for example, gone unmentioned upon. Almost all of the tales mentioned above feature some degree of geographical 'othering' with regards to their primary female character, whether it is Becfhola's otherworldly origins, Ingen Echach's foreign family who feature in one of *Fingal Rónáin*'s final scenes,¹⁵⁸ the abducted Déisi woman of 'Finn and the Man in the Tree',¹⁵⁹ or even Derdriu's existence on the fringes of

¹⁵⁴ Kuno Meyer (tr.), 'The wooing of Emer', *Archaeological Review* 1 (1888), 68–75, 150–155, 231–235, 298–307.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 190–191.

¹⁵⁶ W. J. McCann, 'Tristan: The Celtic and Oriental Material Re-Examined', in Joan Tasker Grimbert *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook* (New York, 2002). For a comparable approach with regards another tale type, see Pfannenschmidt re-evaluating the connection between *Aided Con Roí* and the Mabinogion. Sarah L. Pfannenschmidt, 'From the Shame You Have Done': Comparing the Stories of Blodeuedd and Bláthnait.' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 29 (2009), 244–67.

¹⁵⁷ Carney, 'Irish Affinities', 240–242.

¹⁵⁸ Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, 9.

¹⁵⁹ Meyer, 'Finn and the Man', 346, 347.

society.¹⁶⁰ As Herbert states of the latter character: ‘Her depersonalization is reinforced by her being reared apart, separated from family and society.’¹⁶¹ That there is a clear linking of kings and heroes with foreign women might again add to the argument that foreign women were considered alluring, though it is worth noting in the case of Derdriu that her position of outsider to the community is not based in a foreign origin. We then have an example of how someone who might not have foreign origins can be made an outsider through their upbringing or way of life, an idea to which we will return.

If we are establishing that foreign women were considered alluring partners for kings, such a frequency of foreign women might not be altogether surprising. The lack of attention to this aspect of the pattern thus far is however, notable. In building on the patriarch-wife-son model then, we might specify of the wife figure that, in addition to the danger she poses the society into which she enters (in turning prominent father (figure) against son), and the fact that she frequently takes the initiative in (the illicit) love as Carney highlights,¹⁶² she is from a foreign territory to the central male characters, or at least there is some facet of her character, rooted in geography, that (further) contrasts her with these men and makes her an outsider.

The dangers of such women are clear:¹⁶³ Ingen Echach’s actions in *Fingal Rónáin* spell death for both king and prince, as well as her family and herself;¹⁶⁴ Fand causes a madness in Cú Chulainn and Emer resolved only by ‘divine’ intervention;¹⁶⁵ and the negative side effects of Derdriu’s actions in *Longes mac nUislenn* are felt throughout the Ulster Cycle, given the resulting exile of Fergus and several other of the Ulster heroes to Connacht. In this context, we can read *Aided Derbforgaill* ‘The Violent Death of Derbforgaill’,¹⁶⁶ dated by Ingridsdotter to around the tenth century,¹⁶⁷ as a careful navigation of this trope. In the tale, the foreign

¹⁶⁰ Hull, *Longes mac nUislenn*.

¹⁶¹ Herbert, ‘Celtic Heroine?’, 18.

¹⁶² Carney, ‘Irish Affinities’, 221. The fact that the woman takes the initiative in trying to establish a relationship in these situations where a relationship should not exist further adds to the sense of her being a transgressor.

¹⁶³ See Clancy, ‘Fools and Adultery’, 122.

¹⁶⁴ Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, 7-11.

¹⁶⁵ Dillon, *Serglige*, 29.

¹⁶⁶ Kicki Ingridsdotter (ed. and tr.), ‘*Aided Derbforgaill* ‘The violent death of Derbforgaill’: a critical edition with introduction, translation and textual notes’, PhD dissertation, Uppsala University, 2009, 82-87.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

Derbforghaill (*ingen rí Lochlainne* ‘daughter of the king of Lochlann’)¹⁶⁸ desires Cú Chulainn, but he partners her with his foster-son. This can be seen as an inversion of ‘Potiphar’s Wife’, in that the son’s partner desires the father.¹⁶⁹ Notably, destruction still comes as a result of her actions, as will be discussed in the next chapter, though it would be going rather far to apportion blame to her.

The prevalence of foreign women in this trope adds to — or may even be an origin for — the notion that foreign women more generally are alluring but dangerous in medieval Gaelic literature. In *Aided Muirchertaig*¹⁷⁰ it has been argued that Sínn’s seemingly otherworldly origins are shown as false when her more mundane tragic backstory is revealed.¹⁷¹ As Williams states: ‘The ending of the tale makes it clear that Sínn is as human as Muirchertach, and is what other texts would call a *bandruí* or *banthúaithech*, a druidess or witch.’¹⁷² But if we read *Aided Muirchertaig* as one character’s careful exploitation of expectations and features that would make her desirable, as is ‘tentatively’ suggested by Williams,¹⁷³ it is then noteworthy that she invokes an otherworldly origin. Moreover, the conflict between her kin and Muirchertach, a conflict between territories, is given as the reason for her causing Muirchertach’s downfall.¹⁷⁴ The questionable loyalty of foreign women is a notion to which we will shortly return.

The dangers posed by alluring foreign women to Gaelic men can at times be seen in the female abductees present in the literature. Abducted women feature throughout medieval Gaelic prose. The abductee may be willing, such as Cú Chulainn’s abduction of Findchóem in the late Old Irish *Fled Bricrenn 7 Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait* ‘The Feast of Bricriu and the Exile of the Sons of Doél Dermait’.¹⁷⁵ In that narrative, the wishes of the individual seem of less import to the community than the consent of kin — as Medb states:

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁶⁹ See *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁷⁰ Nic Dhonnchadha, *Aided Muirchertaig*.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁷² Williams, ‘Lady Vengeance’, 31.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁷⁴ Nic Dhonnchadha, *Aided Muirchertaig*, 32.

¹⁷⁵ Kaarina Hollo (ed. and tr.), *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuíl Dermait and its place in the Irish literary and oral narrative traditions*, Maynooth Medieval Irish Texts 2 (Maynooth, 2005), 53; 98.

Mod-génair doss-ucc masa deóin a máthar 7 a hathar; mairc dosn-ucc masu asa timchell.

It is well for the one who took her if it is the will of her father and mother; woe to the one who took her if it was in their absence.¹⁷⁶

The emphasis on the consent of kin is reflected legally in the term for such a marriage — the *lánamnas foxail* ‘she allows herself to be abducted’, a term not used within the tale itself but the relevance of which is apparent.¹⁷⁷ There seems to be a differentiation between willing and unwilling abduction; though, presumably unwilling abduction would fall under union by rape. As Kelly notes, there is a difference between the *lánamnas foxail* and the “‘mating by forcible rape or stealth’ (*lánamnas éicne nó sleithe*).”¹⁷⁸

Unwilling abductees are indeed present, although arguing for their unwillingness is often argument from silence: it might better be stated that in cases such as Findchóem’s, and even Derdriu’s, the character speaks to their affection for the abductor. In other cases where we do not hear from the abductee, it is easier to ascribe unwillingness to the situation. Indeed, we might read the love for another individual besides their intended partner, such as the love for the son or underling in the love triangle, as an expression of the unwillingness of their situation.

Returning to ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’, we can see that the woman whom Finn desires but whose love for Derg Corra sets up the ‘Potiphar’s Wife’ triangle is expressly an abductee:

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 53-54; 98.

¹⁷⁷ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 70. See also Charlene M. Eska (ed. and tr.), *Cáin Lánamna: an Old Irish Tract on Marriage and Divorce Law* (Leiden, 2010).

¹⁷⁸ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 134.

Cinn ree iarom dobertatar mná braite a Dún Iascaich a tír na nDésea. Dobreth ingen álainn léo. Atecoboride menma Find in ben dó. Focairdd sí menmain for in gilla búí léo .i. Dercc Corra mac húí Daigre.

Some time afterwards they (i.e. the *fían*) carried off captive women from Dún Iascaig in the land of the Déisi. A beautiful maiden was taken by them. Finn's mind desired the woman for himself. She set her heart on a servant whom they had, even Derg Corra son of Ua Daigre.¹⁷⁹

The love of the woman for Derg Corra causes a rift in the *fían* and Derg Corra's exile; conflict between men arises from the abductee brought into their midsts.¹⁸⁰

The dangerous abducted woman also is clear in Bláthnait/Bláthine in *Aided Con Roí*. *Aided Con Roí* is an Ulster Cycle tale depicting the conflict between Cú Chulainn and Cú Roí, in which Bláthnait or Bláthine plays a crucial role. Thurneysen dates the first recension of the tale, *Aithed I*, featuring Bláthine, to the ninth century, and the second, *Aithed II*, to between the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁸¹ In *Aithed I*, Bláthine is the daughter of Conchobar, and is abducted at the beginning of the tale. Cú Roí aids the Ulaid in the rescue, they withhold his reward, and so he abducts Bláthine. Cú Chulainn tells Bláthine it is her father's desire she betray her husband to the Ulaid, and so she discovers and reveals the location of Cú Roí's hidden soul, which leads to Cú Chulainn's triumph over Cú Roí. In *Aithed II*, a raid is carried out upon Iuchna, the King of Falga, and his daughter Bláthnait is taken in the raid. Once again, the Ulaid refuse Cú Roí his share, he defeats Cú Chulainn, and takes Bláthnait. A year later,

¹⁷⁹ Meyer, 'Finn and the Man', 346, 347.

¹⁸⁰ The 'Potiphar's Wife' model is male-dominated. The Old Irish tale *Táin Bó Fraích*, which will be discussed in Chapter Two, is here briefly of interest in that it is the closest we come to seeing anything approaching a female-dominated love triangle, with a mother (Medb) and daughter (Findabair) both desiring a male hero (Fraoch). This is admittedly much less prominent in the prose tale than in the later lays. I have yet to come across a true gender inversion of the 'Potiphar's Wife' model — a daughter-figure eloping with her mother-figure's intended husband — in medieval Gaelic literature. See Donald E. Meek, 'Táin bó Fraích and other 'Fráech' texts: a study in thematic relationships: Part I', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 7 (Summer 1984), 1-37; and Donald E. Meek, 'Táin bó Fraích and other 'Fráech' texts: a study in thematic relationships: Part II', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 7 (Winter 1984), 65-85.

¹⁸¹ Rudolf Thurneysen (ed. and tr.), 'Die Sage von CuRoí', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 9 (1913), 189–234.

Cú Chulainn finds Bláthnait, they conspire and arrange a future meeting, and Bláthnait lies to Cú Roí, convincing him to send away his army, and giving the Ulaid access to the fortress. *Aided II* ‘ends with a quatrain on the evil nature of Bláthnait’s actions’.¹⁸² In both tales then, the Bláthnait figure is twice abducted — once from Conchobor or Iuchna, and once by Cú Roí — and her abduction proves fatal for her second abductor. In fact, as Hellmuth points out, *Aided Con Roí* ‘also provides the background to Cú Chulainn’s own death’¹⁸³ — the abducted foreign woman over whom the men fight leads ultimately to death for both. It is notable that it is in *Aided II*, where Bláthnait is not Conchobar’s daughter, that she is treated more harshly by the narrative, both through a more graphic and violent death,¹⁸⁴ and through her condemnation in verse at the tales end:

*Roort Bláthnad ingen Mind/
la hozcain os Aircedglind.
Mór gním do mnái bráth a fir
dáig is fris rodamidir.*

Bláthnait the daughter of Menn was slain
in the slaughter above Argat-glenn.
A great deed for a woman to betray her husband,
since it is at him that she aimed it.¹⁸⁵

Bláthnait’s motivations differ in these two recensions, and examining them may be useful in examining the motif of the dangerous abductee. In *Aithed II*, the emphasis is on the relationship between herself and Cú Chulainn, bringing to mind the love triangles already discussed. Indeed, Hellmuth mentions the parallels between the tale and ‘an early version’ of

¹⁸² Pfannenschmidt, ‘Bláthnait’, 264.

¹⁸³ Petra S. Hellmuth, ‘Cú Roí mac Dáiri’, in Koch, John T. (ed) *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol 2 (Santa Barbara, 2006), 508-509, at 508.

¹⁸⁴ R. I. Best (ed.), ‘The tragic death of Cúroí mac Dáiri’, *Ériu* 2 (1905), 18–35, at 30, translated on 31. Discussed by Pfannenschmidt, ‘Bláthnait’, 262, who attributes the most brutal ending to Bláthnait’s more active role here than in *Aided I*.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 30, translation in Pfannenschmidt, ‘Bláthnait’, 264.

Tristan and Isolt.¹⁸⁶ This could be read as the uncontrollable sexuality of the foreign woman that makes her so appealing also makes her so dangerous. In *Aithed I* however, Bláthine's decision is based on familial relations — she is told it is her father's wish for her to betray Cú Roí. This difference in motivation is emphasised and explored by Pfannenschmidt in her discussion of the tales.¹⁸⁷ This introduces an aspect largely absent from the discussion thus far, in terms of fear of the foreigner and of abductees: being unsure of where their loyalties lie, and the possibility of them still being loyal to the family or population group from which they originate. This can also be seen in the aforementioned *Aided Muirchertaig*, where Muirchertach dies as a result of Sínn's actions, and her actions are motivated by Muirchertach's murder of her family. Clancy highlights 'conflicts of loyalty' as one of the aspects of tales of 'illicit love' in medieval Gaelic literature;¹⁸⁸ Bláthine is of note because here we see the notion of a woman's conflict of loyalty as opposed to the conflicts of male characters such as Noísi — and the conflict is between family and partner, as opposed to king and partner.

This stands in stark contrast to one possible reason for the allure of foreign women. The notion of females given in marriage as increasing the stability and cohesion of a society is present in and outwith medieval Gaelic literature. The notion of 'peace weavers' has been discussed particularly in the context of Old English literature by scholars such as Davidson¹⁸⁹ and Belanoff.¹⁹⁰ The literary depiction of the exchange of women being used to cement peace, however, pre-dates Old English literature as it is also found in Genesis 34:21:

These men are peaceable with us; therefore let them dwell in the land, and trade therein; for the land, behold, it is large enough for them; let us take their daughters to us for wives, and let us give them our daughters.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ Hellmuth, 'Cú Roí', 509.

¹⁸⁷ Pfannenschmidt, 'Bláthnait', 250-256.

¹⁸⁸ Clancy, 'Fools and Adultery', 106.

¹⁸⁹ Mary Catherine Davidson, 'Speaking of Nostalgia in Beowulf', *Modern Philology* 13 (2) (November 2005), 143-155, at 153-154.

¹⁹⁰ Pat Belanoff, 'The Fall(?) of the Old English Female Poetic Image', *PMLA* 104 (5) (October, 1989), 822-831.

¹⁹¹ Gn 34:21 (KJV).

In *Cath Ruis na Ríg*, dated by Mac Gearailt to the twelfth century,¹⁹² Cú Chulainn does the same with his own daughter Fínscoth, marrying her off to secure peace with Erc mac Cairpri:

*Doringned síd eter Erc macc Cairpri 7 Coinculaind. Et tucad Fínscoth ingen
ConCulaind do mnái do-som.*

Peace was made between Erc, son of Cairpre, and Cu Chulaind; and Fínscoth, Cu Chulaind's daughter, was given to him for wife.¹⁹³

This must be considered one possible explanation for the allure of foreign women as wives: alliance.¹⁹⁴ The ultimate example of a successful alliance with the other may be the sovereignty goddess as encountered by Niall Noígiallach.¹⁹⁵ *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil* may also suggest such a motivation. But the portrayal of the dangers of foreign women in tales such as *Serglige Con Culainn* and *Aided Muirchertaig*, and their wavering loyalties, particularly with abductees such as in *Aided Con Roí* and ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’, undermines separate attempts at portraying foreign alliance through marriage as advantageous. These tales of foreign women and abductees, whom patriarchs have intended to marry or bed, proving dangerous and disastrous to society may be the other side of the coin as it were from the allure of the foreign woman.

Overall, foreigners comprise a good deal of the characters in medieval Gaelic literature, both male and female. In the case of foreign women, however, a few things in particular stand out. The repeated interest of kings in foreign women is noteworthy and worth considering. We see foreign women as the progenitors of kin groups, and as desired wives. Ultimately, as mothers and wives, they are still fitting the roles seen as appropriate for women to fit in the literature — this is a concept which will be further explored in the next chapter. Marriage with foreign women is useful in terms of alliance, and this might be considered one

¹⁹² Uáitéar Mac Gearailt, ‘*Cath Ruis na Ríg* and twelfth-century literary and oral tradition’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 44 (1991), 128–153, at 129.

¹⁹³ Edmund Hogan (ed. and tr.), *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn*, Todd Lecture Series 4 (Dublin, 1892), 56–57.

¹⁹⁴ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (*Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté*), Rodney Needham (ed.), James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (trs.) (Boston, 1969).

¹⁹⁵ Carey, ‘*Echtra Mac nEchach*’, 206.

reason for their allure, their potential to build a cohesive, diverse society. However, often we see them destabilising society through their actions, or through the actions (they make) men undertake in order to be with them. Their foreignness marks them as outside the realm of the main characters, both geographically and socially. As such they may be 'allowed' to subvert expectations and flaunt social norms, without risk of this being seen as the behaviour of 'normal' women. Medieval Gaelic literature might then be said to be in the process of a balancing act between the fear of the outsider and exoticism, where the foreign woman is desired and desirable, but also capable of great harm.

Chapter Two

Following on from the discussion of women made outsiders by their origins, we turn to a category of women whose occupations mark them as outside the norm: women warriors. How they are portrayed and reacted to might inform our understanding of texts and the attitudes within and behind them. Some of our most iconic female characters, such as Medb and Emer, engage in violence or arm themselves, and the image of the female warrior is present in some of our earliest surviving prose. Though these characters are present, they are vastly outnumbered by male martial figures in the corpus, and, as discussed,¹⁹⁶ warrior prowess is not a trait praised in women in medieval Gaelic texts. The repeated failures or undermining of female warriors within the narratives may point to a disapproving attitude from those behind the texts towards women taking up arms. We continue to consider, however, that the society and societies presented in the texts and their norms do not necessarily equate the norms of medieval Gaelic societies.

One way in which we can establish the alterity of women warriors is by establishing the extent to which weaponry is equated with masculinity in medieval Gaelic literature. The equation of weaponry with masculinity points to women warriors as transgressing a gender boundary as semi-masculine female figures. Writers such as Oxenham have discussed spears as ‘a symbol of lay masculinity’.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, in Cú Chulainn’s boyhood deeds in the *Táin*, there is considerable space given to his taking up of arms, through overhearing Cathbad’s predictions of glory (and a short life) for whomever should take up arms that day, to his breaking of all the spare sets of weapons until only King Conchobar’s own weapons suffice.¹⁹⁸ In what has been described as a literature fond of brevity, with a sparse style,¹⁹⁹ we get several lines devoted to this moment. Nagy has examined similarities between the Cú Chulainn’s

¹⁹⁶ ‘Introduction’, 5-7.

¹⁹⁷ Oxenham, *Perceptions of Femininity*, 26, in reference to Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha (ed.), ‘Mary, Eve and the Church (c. 600-1800)’, in Bourke, Angela *et al.* (eds.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, vol. IV: Irish women's writing and traditions* (Cork, 2002), 45–165, at 116.

¹⁹⁸ O’Rahilly, *TBC I*, 20, translated on 142-143.

¹⁹⁹ See Myles Dillon, *Early Irish literature* (Chicago, 1948). 1-4.

boyhood deeds and the Middle Irish *Macgnímrada Finn* ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Finn’,²⁰⁰ and Murray concludes: ‘there is a strong case to be made that the sole surviving text of *Macgnímrada Finn*, as it stands, is modelled on literary versions of *Macgnímrada Con Culainn*.’²⁰¹ In Finn’s boyhood deeds, he commissions spears be made for him after sleeping with a woman for the first time.²⁰² This might support a reading of weapons as being tied to masculinity and rites of passage. There is also the fact that men have weapons with specific names or weapons with elaborate backstories, as is particularly evident in the lay tradition, with lays regarding Finn’s shield²⁰³ and Caílte’s sword²⁰⁴ in the *Duanaire Finn (DF)*.²⁰⁵ We rarely spend enough time with women warriors — or they are rarely warriors long enough — to learn of any names of weapons, should they have named weapons. As such, it would seem weapons of renown feature as a male possession. The possible exception is the *gae Bulga*, the weapon whose use is taught to Cú Chulainn (and Cú Chulainn only) by Scáthach. However, we do not get any narrative space given to this teaching in *Tochmarc Emire*;²⁰⁶ rather it is cited in retrospect in other tales such as the *Táin* when it is stated it was taught only to Cú Chulainn.²⁰⁷ The *gae Bulga* is also called *gae Aífe*, sometimes in the same text (such as in *TBC LL*)²⁰⁸ introducing a degree of ambiguity as to whom the spear belonged, and who precisely taught Cú Chulainn. The spear now, unequivocally, belongs to the male hero Cú Chulainn, however.

²⁰⁰ See Joseph Falaky Nagy, ‘Heroic destinies in the *Macgnímrada* of Finn and Cú Chulainn’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 40 (1984), 23–39, and Nagy, *The wisdom of the outlaw*, 7.

²⁰¹ Kevin Murray, *The Early Finn Cycle* (Dublin, 2017), 120.

²⁰² Kuno Meyer (ed.), ‘*Macgnímartha Find*’, *Revue Celtique* 5 (1882), 195–204, at 200.

²⁰³ Eoin MacNeill (ed. and tr.), *Duanaire Finn: The book of the lays of Fionn*, vol. 1, Irish Texts Society 7 (London, 1908), 34–38, translated on 134–139.

²⁰⁴ Gerard Murphy (ed. and tr.), *Duanaire Finn: The book of the lays of Fionn*, vol. 2, Irish Texts Society 28 (London, 1933), 124–41.

²⁰⁵ Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn: The book of the lays of Fionn*, vol. 3, Irish Texts Society 43, (London, 1953), cxvi–cxvii. Both lays mentioned here are dated to the twelfth-century by Murphy: see *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁰⁶ Scáthach is given very little narrative space in terms of descriptions of her as a warrior or in action; she is denied the full literary warrior identity that male heroes are given, and also the long descriptions of her beauty and grace given to many of our key female characters. As a woman warrior, she is unable to access narrative space as fully woman or fully warrior.

²⁰⁷ Cecile O’Rahilly (ed. and tr.), *Táin bó Cúalnge: from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1967), 71, translated on 211. Henceforth *TBC LL*.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 56, translated on 196.

Furthermore, weapons have been read as having a role in the emasculation of men. A misplaced or replaced weapon occasionally appears as symbolic of fault or bad judgement in its owner. This is famously seen in the *Táin* where Ailill, upon discovering Fergus sleeping with Medb, has Fergus's sword stolen and replaced with a wooden one.²⁰⁹ In his discussion of the twelfth-century²¹⁰ 'Caoilte's mischief-making' in *DF*,²¹¹ Murray writes: 'As part of his mischief-making (§§ 14-15), [Caílte] swaps Cormac's wife with another lady, and substitutes his own sword for that of the king's, symbolically emasculating him in the process.'²¹² As such, it may be stated that weaponry, as it may call masculinity into question, is intrinsically bound up with notions of the masculine and the male martial ethic in medieval Gaelic literature.

Where, why and how women interact with weaponry is, then, of interest in examining female alterity. As stated, while uncommon, women warriors are not exceptionally rare in medieval Gaelic literature. Murray, drawing on more than solely Finn Cycle material, lists several 'female *fian*-members, *banféinnidí*' including Scáthach (Búanann), Finn's two foster mothers, Creidne, Findabair, and Ness,²¹³ though he is careful to cite Ní Dhonnchadha's argument, supported by the legal evidence she examines, that 'women's active role in warfare was in reality extremely limited.'²¹⁴

If weaponry is borne in mind as a marker of alterity, we might first examine Findabair, and in particular her role in the Old Irish *Táin Bó Fraích*, 'The Cattle-Raid of Fraoch', where she arms her husband-to-be Fraoch in a critical moment against the monster her parents had tricked him into fighting.²¹⁵ This scene may be read as an example of a woman supporting her man in his heroic deeds, a notion not unfamiliar in this literature.²¹⁶ However, in light of the role of weapons in masculinity, we might read this interaction (which undermines her parents'

²⁰⁹ O'Rahilly, *TBC I*, 33, translated on 154.

²¹⁰ Murphy, *DF III*, 130.

²¹¹ MacNeill, *DF I*, 19-21, translated on 116-118.

²¹² Murray, *Early Finn*, 134.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 63.

²¹⁴ Ní Dhonnchadha, '*banscál*', 31.

²¹⁵ Wolfgang Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 22 (Dublin, 1974), 8-9.

²¹⁶ Philip O'Leary, 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature', *Ériu* 38 (1987), 27-44, at 32.

wishes) as directly emasculating her father Ailill. It does serve to undermine Ailill, whose unusually active role in this tale has been commented upon.²¹⁷ However it is read, whether as the emasculation of the father, or the empowering of the masculine martial hero via the feminine partner, the interaction between women and weaponry in this text runs to only a few lines:

*Íar sin gataid Findabair a hétach dí, & focheird bedg issin n-uisce cossin chlaidiub.
[...] Dotháet Findabair assind uisciu & fácbaid in claideb i lláim Fráech, & comben a
chend den míl co mbaí fora thóeb, & dobert a mmíl leiss dochum tíre.*

Findabair, however, threw off her clothes and leapt into the water with a sword. [...] Findabair came out of the water, but she left the sword in Fróech's hand, and he struck off the monster's head and brought it with him to land.²¹⁸

Turning then to Ness, whom Murray singles out as one of the two most famous *banfénnidí*,²¹⁹ we see a similar brevity of contact between woman and weapon. In the earliest version of *Compert Conchobuir* 'The Conception of Conchobar', Ness is not a *banfénnid*,²²⁰ there is no *fianas* or 'fian-activity' on her part.²²¹ This depiction of the union between Cathbad and Ness is voluntary, in contrast to later versions. Cathbad tells Ness the day is good for a union, and, with no other men around, Ness chooses to have sex with Cathbad.²²² This is comparable with the aforementioned Bolce Ban-bretnach; both women proposition a man and an extraordinary son results of the union. However, in the opening of the LL *Scéla*

²¹⁷ Jeffrey Gantz (tr.), *Early Irish myths and sagas*, (Harmondsworth, 1981), 113.

²¹⁸ Meid, *Fráech*, 8-9. Translation in Gantz, *Early Irish myths*, 121.

²¹⁹ Murray, *Early Finn*, 62-63.

²²⁰ Kuno Meyer (ed. and tr.), *Hibernica minora, being a fragment of an Old-Irish treatise on the Psalter*, Mediaeval and Modern Series 8 (Oxford, 1894), 50.

²²¹ For a discussion of *fianas* and *diberga* see Kim R. McCone, 'Werewolves, cyclopes, díberga and fianna: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (Winter 1986), 1-22.

²²² See Joanne Findon, 'Mother knows best: the role of Nes in *Compert Conchobuir*' in Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna (eds.) *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Berlin, 2013), 25-35, at 25-26.

Conchobuir meic Nessa ‘The Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa’,²²³ which is shared with the later longer Stowe text of *Compert Conchobuir*, Ness takes up arms against the unknown assailant (Cathbad) who has killed her tutors:

*Luid iarum iar suidiu ind ingen for fennidecht 7 gabaid gaisced ocus luide trib nonbaraib fo Herind, co ffessed nech ro marb a haiteda, ocus ro chrín na túatha. Is cumma nos-crínad uili daig ni fitir sainriuth a bidbada.*²²⁴

After this the girl became a *fénnid*, and took up arms and went with twenty seven others²²⁵ through Ireland to learn of the one who had killed her fosterers, and she devastated the tribes. She devastated all equally, because she did not know the characteristics of the one who was guilty (of killing her fosterers).²²⁶

However, Cathbad achieves the upper hand:

*Luid-si didu for fiannas i cocrich n-Ulad. Luid-si laa and didu a hoenur dia fothrucud, conid-tecmaing cucci in fennid cétna .i. intí Cathbad, contudchaid-side etarru 7 cranna, 7 ardagaib' commanarnaic dóib, 7 co mbái-si do mnái gradaigthe oco-som, 7 combert mac dó. Ba hé in mac hí sin didu .i. Conchobar mac Cathbad.*²²⁷

Then she went a-soldiering into the province of Ulster. She went one day there alone to bathe, when to her happened the same champion, Cathbad. He came between her and (her) spearshafts and seized her, and they forgathered, so that she became his beloved wife and bore him a son. That, then, was the son, Conchobar son of Cathbad.²²⁸

²²³ Whitley Stokes (ed. and tr.), ‘Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa’, *Ériu* 4 (1910), 18–38.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

²²⁵ While *nónbar* does in the earlier language refer specifically to nine men, it goes on to mean ‘a group or number of nine persons’. Without further information on when exactly this development takes place, it has been opted to keep the translation of this word gender-neutral; given its context in a chapter discussing women taking up arms, it would be disingenuous to assume without solid evidence that this is referring to a group of men. Cf. *eDIL* s.v. ‘nónbor’, <http://dil.ie/33300> [accessed 01/10/17].

²²⁶ Translation is my own, cf. Stokes, ‘Tidings’, 23.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

In the longer, later, more romanticised²²⁹ Stowe version, this section is expanded with Cathbad forcing three conditions upon Ness (including that they be wed), as opposed to solely forcing himself upon her.

We see in these examples a few things. For one, Ness the *banfénnid*'s approach is one of indiscriminate harm. She does not know who killed her tutors, though we as readers do, and so unleashes herself on every side. Cathbad, the original perpetrator who caused this, ultimately restores the normal social order (of peace without *banfénnid*) when he rapes her, or has her agree at swordpoint to be his wife in the later version. We get a glimpse of female martial power as chaotic, frenetic, undisciplined, not unlike the transformed Cú Chulainn in the *Táin* and elsewhere.²³⁰

Secondly, Ness is powerless without her weapons. This may not be altogether surprising, in the face of the deadly Cathbad. However, other martial figures like Cú Chulainn do fight at times unarmed, such as in Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds in the *Táin*²³¹ and as will shortly be discussed in the context of *Tochmarc Emire* 'The Wooing of Emer'. There is no combat between Ness and Cathbad, though there is male-on-female sexual violence. Also absent from this encounter is Ness's wit. We see after this how her plotting dethrones Fergus and crowns her son Conchobar, but here her cleverness is absent.²³² She is simple outdone, by the loss of her weapons. It is reminiscent of Medb, another woman warrior, at Cú Chulainn's mercy at the end of the *Táin* in the Book of Leinster.²³³ Ness's power as a *banfénnid* is in her weapons — the loss of them marks the same vulnerability as Fergus's loss of his sword, though the two play out very differently. For Fergus, and Cormac in the aforementioned lay 'Caoilte's mischief-making', it is a more comedic moment, the men being tricked as opposed

²²⁹ See Joanne Findon, 'Fabula, story, and text: the case of Compert Conchobuir', in Joseph F. Eska (ed.), *Narrative in Celtic tradition: essays in honor of Edgar M. Slotkin*, CSANA Yearbook 8-9, (New York, 2011), 37-55, at 51.

²³⁰ O'Rahilly, *TBC I*, 14, translated on 137.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 13-26, translated on 136-148.

²³² See Findon, 'Mother knows best', 25-35.

²³³ O'Rahilly *TBC LL*, 133, translated on 269-270. For a recent discussion of this scene which challenges previous assumptions regarding Medb's vulnerability within it, see Edel, *Inside the Táin*, 292-298.

to conquered, and does not spell defeat, ultimately, for either.²³⁴ The loss of weaponry is a vulnerable moment, and shows a moment of weakness we read as emasculating in the context of male heroes. Its impact on female characters is more ambiguous — are we to consider them as occupying a liminal space between masculine and feminine? Or does the reading of Fergus and Cormac as emasculated owe much to modern sensibilities of vulnerability being unmasculine?

Ness's time spent as a *banféinnid* is short-lived, then. This is not the only such case. In his discussions of *fianna* and *fénnidí*, Nagy has commented on there being two distinct types of *fián*-members: those for whom *fiannas* is a temporary transitive period, and those for whom it becomes a permanent way of life — characters such as Finn, for example.²³⁵ Ness would clearly fall into the former category, as would another *banféinnid*, Creidne. She is the central character of an 'Early Middle Irish anecdote, preserved in genealogical material', to which Ní Dhonnchadha gives the title 'Creidne the She-Warrior'.²³⁶ Creidne takes up arms after her sons were exiled; her father's queen, Aífe, is none too pleased that Creidne's children result from his incestuous union with Creidne.²³⁷ Thus:

*Doluid Creidne iarsin for fiannas do fogail a hathar 7 a lesmáthar ar bith a mmacc sechtar a mbunad-chenel. Trí nónbuir dí for fiannas. Cúlmong fichthi furri. Cumma nofíched de muir 7 tír, is aire at berthar di Creidni ba féinnid.*²³⁸

Then Creidne went on the warpath [*fiannas*] to despoil her father and her step-mother on account of her sons being outside their proper kindred. She had three bands of nine men with her on the warpath. She used to wear the hair of her back plaited. She would fight equally on sea and on land. Hence she was called [']Creidne that was a *fénnid*['].²³⁹

²³⁴ O'Rahilly, *TBC I*, 77, translated on 194.

²³⁵ Nagy, *The wisdom of the outlaw*, 20-21. See Murray, *Early Finn*, 60-63.

²³⁶ Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Gormlaith', 179.

²³⁷ Kuno Meyer, *Fianaigeacht*, xi-xii.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, xi.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, xii.

This ends with reconciliation between Creidne and her father, and the prophecy that their sons will have land and be prosperous in future. As with the *fían*-member for whom *fíanas* is a transitory phase, and as with Ness, the temporary phase as a *fénnid* is followed by a return to normality at the end, and normality means a narrative world in which *banfénnidí* do not exist. Unlike the path outlined by scholars such as Nagy, for Ness and Creidne *fíanas* is not just a phase when one comes of age; their *fíanas* is reactionary to a (male) triggering action. There is also a different dynamic — when they desist from *fíanas*, they will not settle and inherit their father's lands. Rather, Ness returns to society as wife and mother, and it is the property and prosperity of her sons for which Creidne returns to society. Both examples of female *fíanas* here end in mother figures acting in the interests of their sons, Ness after *fíanas* and Creidne through *fíanas*. This notion of female *fían*-activity being linked to motherhood is worth bearing in mind as we continue.

One of the most prominent tales for the discussion of women warriors and *banfénnidí* is the aforementioned *Tochmarc Emire*. It is also one of the most well-discussed in such terms. It is one of the four cornerstones of Findon's study of Emer,²⁴⁰ and is used by Bitel in her examination of women warriors.²⁴¹ Recently it has been studied, with particular attention paid to the women warriors in it, by Ó hUiginn in his discussion of twelfth-century church concerns with marriage laws and their impact on the Middle Irish version of the text,²⁴² and by Miller in his examination of concepts of masculine and feminine battle skills as pertaining to Cú Chulainn.²⁴³ The oldest version of the text we have, dated by Meyer and Thurneysen to around the eighth century,²⁴⁴ contains the elements most pertinent to our discussion of women warriors, namely three characters: Scáthach, to whom Cú Chulainn is sent to learn martial feats; Úathach, Scáthach's daughter who sleeps with and counsels Cú Chulainn; and Aífe,

²⁴⁰ Findon, *A woman's words*.

²⁴¹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 214.

²⁴² Ó hUiginn, *Marriage*.

²⁴³ Jimmy P. Miller, 'The feminization of the early Irish hero', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 67 (Summer 2014), 1–31.

²⁴⁴ Meyer, 'The oldest version of *Tochmarc Emire*', 439. Thurneysen, Rudolf, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle, 1921), 381.

Scáthach's enemy, the 'hardest woman-warrior in the world',²⁴⁵ who beats Cú Chulainn in combat, breaking his sword, before losing the upper hand to him through deception.

The oldest version of *Tochmarc Emire*, discussed by Ó hUiginn as *TE*¹, is missing its beginning. It tells of Cú Chulainn's journey abroad to learn from Scáthach. He originally sets out with two others, but Dornoll, the daughter of Cú Chulainn's Irish-based martial teacher Domnall, and whom Cú Chulainn rejects, conjures visions which leave him on his own travelling east. On his travels Cú Chulainn encounters a lion and a woman with whom he apparently once studied, though he does not seem to remember her. Upon arrival at Scáthach's, Cú Chulainn and Úathach meet. Úathach comes to him disguised as a servant, and Cú Chulainn breaks her finger, which Miller takes as an expression of Cú Chulainn's martial masculine frustration on seeing through her deception.²⁴⁶ Her shrieks of pain call forth Scáthach's warrior, Cochor Cruife, whom Cú Chulainn bests, and whose place as her warrior Cú Chulainn takes. Reconciled with Úathach, she instructs him on how to earn Scáthach's teachings. Cú Chulainn follows her advice, attacking an unaware Scáthach, pointing his sword between her breasts, and extorting three wishes from her. After learning from Scáthach, her enemy Aífe attacks. Cú Chulainn is fed a sleeping draught that quickly wears off, and he joins the fray, killing Aífe's (male) champions. Aífe bests Cú Chulainn in combat before Cú Chulainn distracts her, grabs her by the breast, and at sword-point extorts three wishes from her. On his way home he encounters a hag, the mother of three of Aífe's now-deceased champions, who attempts to kill Cú Chulainn but fails. He returns home, the events of the *Táin* take place, and then he abducts Emer and her foster-sister.

Cú Chulainn's three demands of Aífe, including that they sleep together and she bear him a son, are not unfamiliar to us in the context of Ness and Cathbad's aforementioned interactions in the Stowe manuscript version of *Compert Conchobuir*. And, as discussed, though the wishes are absent, the rape itself is also present in the earlier longer version of *Compert Conchobuir* and *Scéla Conchobuir mac Nessa*. The alarming repetition of women warriors 'recivilised' through rape has been commented upon by Bitel. In her discussion of

²⁴⁵ Meyer, 'The oldest version of *Tochmarc Emire*', 451.

²⁴⁶ Miller, 'Feminization', 14-15.

female warriors she states, ‘every one of these militant, manly women was threatened with forcible sex or actually raped.’²⁴⁷ She discusses these women as representing ‘potential threats to lordship’ as ‘women were excluded from rule, but marriage and sex with them secured rule for men.’²⁴⁸ Ergo, women ruling themselves, as opposed to fitting into a system of men’s rule, was a threat. The man restoring woman’s senses through sexual union more broadly is also seen in the tale of Mis and Dub Ruis, also discussed by Bitel.²⁴⁹ The parallel between Ness and Aífe poses the question: are we to assume Aífe is now, like Ness, no longer a woman-warrior, and instead assumes role of ‘mother’? There is no sense in the remainder of *Tochmarc Emire*, or in *Aided Óenfhir Aífe*,²⁵⁰ that the animosity between Aífe and Scáthach is ongoing — however, neither character is the protagonist of either story, and so such a detail in epilogue might not be expected.

Scholars have commented upon the liminal space in which Cú Chulainn learns from Scáthach, and, in particular, its female aspect. Miller states that ‘only in the female-dominated shadowy realm can [Cú Chulainn] obtain the skills necessary’ for the *Táin*.²⁵¹ For Ó hUiginn, this is an antithetical world to Ireland:

Warlike women, unencumbered by male figures of authority and devoid of any familial loyalty, live in a social system in which the laws of marriage or sexual union do not function.²⁵²

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that while Aífe is at the head of tribes,²⁵³ and Scáthach has her students, all their warriors are male. This ‘female-dominated shadowy realm’ is a land of Medbs as opposed to one of Amazons. While the role of female characters in this land is far greater than that of the males, the women warriors even here are outnumbered by male martial figures. This does not contradict Miller or Ó hUiginn’s statements regarding how Alba is

²⁴⁷ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 215.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁵⁰ A. G. van Hamel (ed.) ‘*Aided Óenfhir Aífe*’ *Compert Con Culainn and other stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 3 (Dublin, 1933), 11-15, dated to the late ninth or early tenth century on 9.

²⁵¹ Miller, ‘Feminization’, 27.

²⁵² Ó hUiginn, *Marriage*, 29.

²⁵³ Meyer, ‘The oldest version of *Tochmarc Emire*’, 448.

represented as different from Ireland in this text, but is an aspect of the tale worth bringing to the fore in this discussion.

This brings us to an aspect of female *fíanas* that separates it from male *fíanas*. The homosociality of Finn's *fíán* has been discussed,²⁵⁴ and one of the defining features of the Finn Cycle, as Murray states, is the failed and frayed relationships which the *fíán*, and Finn in particular, have with women. Indeed, Murray identifies 'Finn's inability to form lasting relationships with women'²⁵⁵ as a key theme from early Finn material. The male-female domains are separate. The *banfénnidí* we have examined thus far do indeed have fraught relationships with men. However, they are also surrounded by men in their *fíanna*: Scáthach and Aífe have male champions. While *banfénnidí* exist in the tales, there is no discernable *banfíán*. There is no female homosocial peripatetic warband. The closest we might find to an expressly female *fíán* may be in the Middle Irish *Togail Troí*, where the Amazons are referred to as *banfénnidí*.²⁵⁶ However, the Amazons are not referred to as a *fíán*. Given the scholarly consensus that the existence of *banfénnidí* and women warriors in tales are not a reflection on early Irish society in reality,²⁵⁷ the absence of any such group, and the recurrence of solo *banfénnidí* in predominantly-male *fíanna*, poses the question as to why such a group is not seen.²⁵⁸ This may be a wider anthropological question as to why there is a cross-cultural institution of *Männerbund* and no such *Frauenbund*.²⁵⁹ However, we have already established there are discrepancies between the *Männerbund* model as a stage of life, and the reactive *fíanas* our *banfénnidí* undertake.

We might reinforce this notion by examining violence as it pertains to gender.

Violence as a subject of study has been examined most thoroughly in the context of the Ulster

²⁵⁴ See Nagy, *The wisdom of the outlaw*.

²⁵⁵ Murray, *Early Finn*, 92.

²⁵⁶ Whitley Stokes, 'The destruction of Troy', in Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes (eds.), *Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch*, vol. 2:1 (Leipzig, 1884), 1–142, at 53.

²⁵⁷ See Ní Dhonnchadha, '*banscál*', 31, and Bitel, *Land of Women*, 212.

²⁵⁸ This may also be a question of assumption and translation. As discussed with *nónbur* and Ness, an assumption is at times made in translation that groups of people, particularly in discussion of warriors, refers to males only.

²⁵⁹ For discussion of the *Männerbund* in the context of *fíanna* see Murray, *Early Finn*, 62-63, and McCone, 'Werewolves'.

Cycle, particularly as it pertains to Cú Chulainn.²⁶⁰ Of interest particularly after discussing Ness is Moore’s examination of Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad* in *TBC I*, where she discusses ‘types of violence’: ‘Specifically, the first recension details a series of interactions between restrained violence and unrestrained violence. Only the latter of these two types is particularly destructive’.²⁶¹ With the predominant focus on Cú Chulainn the notion of gendered violence in the Ulster Cycle is still to be fully examined. If female-on-male violence is treated as less common and/or less threatening than male-on-female violence, we can understand violence as a domain of female alterity, where the rules are different for men and women, with the latter underpowered, unable to express agency through violence. The trope of ‘re-civilisation’ through sexual violence, as already discussed, may be seen as an example of this. Ness and Aífe have their agency taken from them in acts of directed male-on-female violence that immediately follow (or react to) their attempts at female-on-male violence. The repeated failures of female violence discussed earlier in this chapter take place time and again while women are attempting violence against men. Female-on-male violence is largely unsuccessful and ruinous for the perpetrator, being answered with further (male) violence.

This contrasts with moments of female-on-female violence. In *Aided Derbforgaill*, after Derbforgaill outperforms the women of Ulster in a urination competition, they brutally maim her and leave her to die:

“Dia fessatar trá ind fhir so nícon grádaigfíder i fail na hoímná. Gatair a súile assa cind 7 a sróna 7 a da n-ó 7 a trilis. Níba so-accobraite ón.”

Do-gníther a pianad amlaid sin 7 berair iar tain dia tig.

“If the men discover this then, no (one) will be loved in comparison with this woman. May her eyes be snatched out of her head, and her nostrils, and her two ears, and her locks. She will not be desirable then.”

²⁶⁰ See Jeremy Lowe, ‘Kicking over the traces: the instability of Cú Chulainn’, *Studia Celtica* 34 (2000), 119–129, and Jeremy Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence and the Spectacle of Death in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*’, in Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland, *Language and tradition in Ireland: continuities and displacements* (Massachusetts, 2003), 84-100.

²⁶¹ Elizabeth Moore, ‘*In t-indellchró bodba fer talman: a reading of Cú Chulainn’s first recension ríastrad*’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 29 (2009, 2011), 154–176, at 154

Her torture is done thus and she is brought to her house afterwards.²⁶²

Notably, considering our earlier discussion, there is no mention of any weapons used. This is manual violence, the actual perpetration of which is afforded minimal space in comparison to its anticipation and aftermath: *Do-gnúther a pianad amlaid sin* ‘Her torture is done thus’.²⁶³ And the act of violence is rooted in femininity (or non-masculinity, or dependence on masculinity), stemming from jealousy of Derbforgaill and her potential to steal the desire of the men of Ulster from their women. This violent act is answered by Cú Chulainn, who slays all of the women of Ulster present:

As-berat dano ba marb Lugaid a chétóir oca déscin. Luid immorro Cú Chulaind isa tech cosna mná co tarat a tech forthu conná tudchid fer ná ben i mbethaid assin tig sin .i. dona trí cóicdaib rígan acht ros-marb uile.

They say then that Lugaid died immediately upon seeing her. Cú Chulainn went then into the house to the women so that he knocked down the house upon them so that no man or woman came out alive from that house, that is, of the three fifties of queens but he killed them all.²⁶⁴

Though ‘no man’ is mentioned as coming out alive, it is only the queens who are expressly stated as being in the house. Cú Chulainn’s murder of 150 women (and possibly more besides, then) is left without comment or reaction.

A further Ulster Cycle example comes in the Middle Irish *Aided Meidbe* ‘The Violent Death of Medb’.²⁶⁵ Medb commits sorricide, killing her pregnant sister Clothru, in another example of female-on-female violence:

²⁶² Ingridsdotter, ‘*Aided Derbforgaill*’, 82, translated on 83.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86, translated on 87.

²⁶⁵ Vernam Hull (ed. and tr.), ‘*Aided Meidbe: The Violent Death of Medb*’, *Speculum* 13:1 (1938), 52-61, dated at 52.

As-berat-sum trá is Medb ros-marb-si et is triana táib tucsat na claidib in Furbaide mac Conchobair.

They say indeed that Medb killed her and that through her side the swords brought forth Furbaide mac Conchobair.²⁶⁶

Much like what happened to *Derbforgaill*, this act of female violence is then retributed with male-on-female violence; Furbaide kills his aunt, Medb.²⁶⁷ This also forms a counterexample to the notion of female-on-female violence being primarily manual as opposed to armed, particularly when the weapons, *claidib*, are specified.

In both this tale and *Aided Derbforgaill*, it could be said the world of the narrative is once more ‘set to rights’ by acts of male violence; while the murder of 150 women might not be considered ‘justice’ by modern readers, these acts of male revenge do punish the wrongdoers. Alternatively, however, the repeated male-on-female retributive violence near the end of these Ulster Cycle texts may support the argument, advanced by Radner, that the Ulster Cycle shows a ‘tragic breakdown’ in societal relations, including male-female, and that, ‘Behind the immense vitality, humor and imagination of the Ulster stories is a picture of society moving to dysfunction and self-destruction.’²⁶⁸ This might allow us to reconsider or balance our previous assertion of the world being set to rights — in Cú Chulainn’s reaction in particular, we see a weakening of the society of the Ulaid.²⁶⁹ Whether interpreted as restoring order to the narrative world or as part of the breakdown of that society, what is clear for our purposes is the pattern whereby female violence is answered with male-on-female violence, and the greater impact of male violence in these instances.

As in *Aided Derbforgaill*, in *Serglige Con Culainn* jealousy is the motivating factor behind what is almost another example of female-on-female violence. Therein, Emer arms her

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 55, translated on 60.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 56, translated on 61.

²⁶⁸ Joan N. Radner, ‘“Fury destroys the world”: historical strategy in Ireland’s Ulster epic’, *Mankind Quarterly* 23/1 (Fall 1982), 41-60, 47.

²⁶⁹ This is not, of course, the only time Cú Chulainn’s actions in the Ulster Cycle are not in the Ulaid’s best interests.

maidens and makes for her husband Cú Chulainn and the Otherworld woman Fand.²⁷⁰ The threat of imminent violence seems not to faze (or even be worth consideration by) Cú Chulainn: the threat is to Fand. She even expressly states so: *is mé ro báeblaiged ó chéin* ‘it is I who was threatened just now.’²⁷¹ Here male intervention responds to and negates female violence, though both Cú Chulainn and Manannán act as mediators or objects of desire as opposed to violent avengers.²⁷² There is legal precedent for Emer’s proposed violence against Fand. Citing *Corpus iuris Hibernici*, Kelly states:

In certain circumstances a woman may injure another woman without incurring liability. Thus, injuries inflicted in a female fight are not actionable. Similarly, a chief wife is allowed to inflict injury on her husband’s second wife (*adaltrach*). The texts do not make it clear for how long this right lasts, but a gloss says that the chief wife is free to inflict any non-fatal injury for a period of three days (presumably after her husband’s second marriage). In retaliation, the second wife can only scratch, pull hair, speak abusively or inflict other injuries.²⁷³

In the context of discussing gendered violence, we here have an example of female-on-female violence codified in law.²⁷⁴ We do also, briefly, get a glimpse of an armed group of women; Emer’s maidens possibly serve to show how society has been upset and put on its head by Fand’s intervention. In light of the absence of *banfianna* in this literature, we can assume that Emer’s maidens being armed is a temporary state of being.

²⁷⁰ Dillon, *Serglige Con Culainn*, 24.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 25. Gantz, *Early Irish myths*, 175.

²⁷² Dillon, *Serglige*, 24-29; Gantz, *Early Irish myths*, 175-179.

²⁷³ Kelly, *Early Irish law*, 79. See also D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Corpus iuris Hibernici: ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum* (Dublin, 1978), 7.29, 8.15-19, 289.16, 289.31.

²⁷⁴ Breatnach has recently challenged the definitions of *cétmuintir* and *adaltrach* used by Kelly and Ó Corráin, amongst others, arguing that *cétmuintir* can apply to men and women. This does not detract from the notion of female-on-female violence being codified in law, as the *cétmuintir* and *adaltrach* can be women, but this recent development is worth acknowledging in this context of violence as it pertains to marriage laws. Liam Breatnach, ‘On Old Irish Collective and Abstract Nouns, the Meaning of *Cétmuintir*, and Marriage in Early Mediaeval Ireland’ *Ériu* 66 (2016), 1-29, see 25 in particular.

Serglige Con Culainn is also noteworthy in that it shows female-on-male violence that can be considered successful²⁷⁵ — Fand’s attack on Cú Chulainn leaves him bedbound for a year. Toner has discussed this episode at length recently, stating: ‘While female violence is not unknown in early Irish literature, the shocking thing here is the intensity of the attack’ and that even Cú Chulainn is ‘so easily overcome by two women.’²⁷⁶ Toner argues that Cú Chulainn’s *serglige* ‘wasting sickness’ is not the lovestruck pining of other characters in the literature but a direct use of Otherworldly power to hold the hero in Fand’s thrall, directly resulting from his flogging at Fand’s hand.²⁷⁷ The success of this attack makes it an illustrative counterpoint to much of what has been discussed. It is clearly the exception rather than the rule. As Toner states: ‘Proactive, resolute female lovers are also common in early Irish literature [...] but even the most transgressive of them uses guile rather than force.’²⁷⁸ Fand’s attack causing illness may then push it further into the territory of sorcery than traditional combat. We might here consider her Otherworldly origins as ‘allowing’ this defeat of Cú Chulainn; alternatively, that Fand is portrayed as foreign and magical — the ‘extravagantly Other’, to return to Ní Dhonnchadha’s phrase²⁷⁹ — in order that we understand Cú Chulainn would not have been bested by an ‘ordinary’ woman. This is an idea to which we will return shortly.

We might glean from the extremely limited successes and recurring failures of women employing violence a sense that behind the texts, in the forms in which we have them, lies a disapproval of the notion of female violence. Specifically, this is not present for male-on-female violence, as we have seen with Cú Chulainn in *Aided Derbforgaill*. In addition to the previous examples of limited successes for women who employ violence, and Medb’s exploits in the *Táin* as (in)famously encapsulated by Fergus in the *Táin*,²⁸⁰ we have further examples such as Cathach in the Middle Irish *Tochmarc Ferbe* ‘The Wooing of Ferb’.²⁸¹ Cathach’s

²⁷⁵ ‘Successful’ is a subjective term, but here it is meant in that the act is not answered with male violence, and the aims of the attacker, unlike those of Ness, are met. Ultimately, the story ends in sadness for the attacker and the attacked, but for the better part of this tale Fand’s attack can be considered successful.

²⁷⁶ Toner, ‘Desire and Divorce’, 138.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 144-146.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁷⁹ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Gormlaith’, 190

²⁸⁰ O’Rahilly, *TBC I*, 124, translated on 237.

²⁸¹ Ernst Windisch (ed. and tr.), ‘*Tochmarc Ferbe*’, in Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes (eds.), *Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch*, vol. 3:2, (Leipzig, 1897), 445–556.

prowess in combat is outlined for us before her quick beheading at the hands of a male hero.²⁸² Even the Morrígan's combat with Cú Chulainn leaves her the worse off for it in the *Táin*.²⁸³ Time and time again, physical violence by women against men is shown as fruitless. If women aim to cause men harm, the deceptions of characters such as Bláthnait and Sín seem more effective than outright physical violence. We might read into these repeated and widespread failures a distaste for female violence on the part of the producers and/or consumers of medieval Gaeldom.

Before the case is overstated, it could also be ascribed to the fact that our heroes are predominantly male, and, if they are to face any antagonist, male or female, they will generally win. A fairly even duel is generally reserved for highly important characters — Cú Chulainn's long, drawn-out combat with Fer Diad in the *Táin*, for example²⁸⁴ — whereas the quick dispatching of a character such as Cathach makes her not unlike several other enemies quickly dispatched by heroes in the literature. At this point it may be relevant to raise Miller's assertion that *fír fer* 'fair play (in combat), single combat'²⁸⁵ is impossible, and its rules do not require following, in *Tochmarc Emire* as Cú Chulainn faces no *fer*, 'man'.²⁸⁶

This does raise a question of narrative, however — in *TBC* and *Tochmarc Ferbe*, the modern reader's sympathies generally lie with the Ulaid and the (male) heroes. *Scéla Conchobuir*, however, centres around Ness as a protagonist. Even the four texts that Findon discusses involving Emer, in none of them is Emer the protagonist.²⁸⁷ *Scéla Conchobuir*, then, problematises the above reading of the repeated failures of women as stemming purely from narrative perspective. Ness is clearly the protagonist in the text. She is a reactive protagonist but a protagonist nonetheless. Even though Conchobar appears to be the tale's eponymous hero, and its function may be seen as explaining Conchobar's extraordinary conception, birth and rise to kingship, Ness is our consistent main character throughout. And yet, her narrative

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 480.

²⁸³ O'Rahilly, *TBC I*, 57-63, translated on 176-182.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 78-95, translated on 195-208.

²⁸⁵ *eDil*, s.v. '1 fír', accessed 16/09/17, <http://dil.ie/22171>.

²⁸⁶ Miller, 'Feminization', 16. See Philip O'Leary, 'Fír fer: an internalized ethical concept in early Irish literature?' *Éigse* 22 (1987), 1-14.

²⁸⁷ Findon, *A Woman's Words*.

primacy does not make her immune to defeat or suffering at the hands of, or for, male heroes — far from it. As such, *Scéla Conchobuir* contests the idea that men defeat women as our protagonists are always male, and will generally defeat their foes regardless of gender. The repeat triumph of male over female indicates that the motif appears even when male characters do not dominate the action of the narrative.

Women can best men, however. We have already examined examples where women have caused men's downfall. It is more the case that physical violence does not work for them to achieve their aims, generally — of course, Creidne is an exception to this. Creidne succeeds in her goals, after seven years, though we might bear in mind Ní Dhonnchadha's disclaimer which she exemplifies using Creidne:

There are occasional accounts of remarkable strength or violence on the part of women outside the domestic sphere, but these tend to be fantastical and to have expressive connotations of indulgence, ridicule, or scorn.²⁸⁸

In fact, in certain texts, there does seem to be an explicit gender divide in terms of types of violence. In both *Aided Con Roí* and *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* we see women associated with more indirect forms of attack — deception, subterfuge and magic as opposed to outright explicit physical violence. As discussed, the first of these, deception and subterfuge, are explored by Miller as a feminine talent in the context of *Tochmarc Emire*.²⁸⁹ The latter, magic, and the propensity of women in particular for it is made clear in the beginning of the Old Irish *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni* 'The Death of Cú Chulainn':

Ro: foghluinnsett na mic druighecht 7 coimlecht (.i. cocud) 7 admilliudh 7 tosúgud.

Ro: foghluinnsett na hingina fessa 7 dúile 7 amaidecht (.i. glicus).

²⁸⁸ Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Travelers and settled folk', 20.

²⁸⁹ Miller, 'Feminization'.

The sons studied [the arts of] druidry and slaughter/conflict (i.e. war) and great destruction and [magical] enticement. The daughters studied [occult] knowledge and lore and sorcery (i.e. witchcraft).²⁹⁰

This points to a gender divide in learning, even for ‘evil’ boys and girls. This is a divide made very clear in this particular text at least. Bitel has written on the prospect of women magicians being seen as more dangerous than women warriors at the time at which these texts were being written down, copied and shared, as the former, unlike the latter, were considered a real threat.²⁹¹ She goes on to state, ‘In the past, warriors had attacked men directly with spears; sorceresses of the Christian Middle Ages aimed their magic not only at men but at their progeny, their animals, and their love.’²⁹² Sorceresses and deceivers may be seen then as somewhat more successful in their conflicts with men than *banfénnidí*, though there are also limits to their successes. Sín and Bláthnait do both cause the deaths of their men, but also both die soon afterwards as a consequence, the latter in an act of male-on-female violence.²⁹³ Likewise in *Fingal Rónáin*, Ingen Eochaid’s deception sees her stepson and object of her affection Mael Fhothartaig, her husband Rónán, her family and herself dying.²⁹⁴

Miller has written in the context of *Tochmarc Emire* on feminine deceit and trickery;²⁹⁵ we can see illusion- and manipulation-based magic (as seen with Sín and as Miller identifies in the characters of Dornoll and arguably Úathach) as a (super)natural extension of these abilities. It is not too large a leap from Úathach’s disguise and the visions Dornoll causes to Cú Chulainn’s companions in *Tochmarc Emire* to Sín’s supernatural trickery in *Aided Muirchertaig*. We might then see the sorceress as another example of female alterity: the dangerous supernatural feminine figure. Less dangerous supernatural figures who uphold the social order do certainly appear, the most obvious example being Saint Brigit. Saint Brigit has

²⁹⁰ Bettina Kimpton (ed. and tr.), *The Death of Cú Chulainn: A critical edition of the earliest version of* *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni* (Maynooth, 2009), 11, 35.

²⁹¹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 216.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁹³ Rudolf Thurneysen (ed. and tr.), ‘Die Sage von CuRoi’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 9 (1913), 189–234, 193.

²⁹⁴ Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, 7-11.

²⁹⁵ Miller, ‘Feminization’, 25-27.

been and continues to be discussed in light of gender within medieval Gaelic studies. Johnston has written on transvestitism and the blurring of lines between masculine and feminine in terms of sanctity,²⁹⁶ though the view that Brigit is a masculine figure has recently been challenged by Oxenham.²⁹⁷ Oxenham's analysis of Brigit emphasises sanctity:

Brigit's female sex is acknowledged, where necessary, but on the whole is definitely a saint before she is a woman. There is little indication, if any, that during this early period in Ireland there was a defined 'saintly feminine' distinct from a 'saintly masculine'. Sanctity itself was key.²⁹⁸

Sanctity defines Brigit, as opposed to gender, which is rarely the basis of her characterisation. With *banfénnidí* and sorceresses, however, gender is intrinsically tied to these characters' ways of life. Women are deceitful tricksters; hence manipulative sorcery is associated with women. And while *banfénnidí* may occupy a 'masculine' space, they may only do some temporarily, and, mainly, unsuccessfully.

While not always the case, as characters such as Ness show, there does seem to be a recurrent aspect to certain women warriors: foreignness. Cú Chulainn's interactions with the Otherworldly Fand, the 'divine' Morrígan, and the trio of Scáthach, Úathach and Aífe show such a recurrent trend, and Cathach's foreign origin is also expressly stated:

*Bangaiscedach amra i-side, a iathaib Espáni tánic ar seirc Conculaind co Emain.
Dochuaid issin sochraite sin aroen ri Conchobar.*²⁹⁹

She was a wonderful warrior, and she came from the lands of Spain to Emain for her love of Cú Chulainn. She joined that army together with Conchobar.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁶ Elva Johnston, 'Transforming women in Irish hagiography', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 197–220.

²⁹⁷ Oxenham, *Perceptions*, 152.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁹⁹ Windisch, '*Tochmarc Ferbe*', 474.

³⁰⁰ Translation is my own, cf. A. H. Leahy (tr.), *The courtship of Ferb: an old Irish romance transcribed in the twelfth century into the Book of Leinster* (New York, 1902), 14.

Foreign warrior women are also definitely present outside the Ulster Cycle, such as in *dindshenchas* material. In the *Metrical Dindsenchas* we have Tephi, described as daughter of Pharaoh, and of her is said: *Atchúala i n-Espáin uilig/ingin lesc-báin láech-buillig/[...] Tephi a hainm* ‘I have heard in many-cornered Spain/of a maiden fair and indolent, heroic in fight/[...] Tephi was her name’.³⁰¹ The invocation of Spain recurs here, as in the description of Cathach, and we have a male warrior, Becloinges, described as hailing from Spain in the *dindshenchas* also, who also dies at the hands of a male Irish hero.³⁰² This is an important time to note that foreign alterity, while being examined here in the context of gender, is not solely female. In addition, we also have in the example of Carmun, from Athens:

<i>óen-ben dían díbergach,</i>	one fierce marauding woman—
<i>glúair a tarmun is a tairm</i>	bright was her precinct and her fame—
[...]	[...]
<i>ond Athain sidben anair,</i>	from the East out of distant Athens,
<i>ocus Cairmen am-máthair.</i>	they and Carmun their mother. ³⁰³

While far from the only women engaging in physical violence in the *dindshenchas*, both Tephi and Carmun are presented to us in terms of their foreign origins.

The pairing of foreign and warrior is open to interpretation. It allows for the use of warrior-women as a trope without advocating or acknowledging any such presences originating in Gaelic areas. The trope of the foreign warrior woman can add to the general construction of foreign lands as different, as places where even, or especially, women fight, as the antithesis, therefore, of the male-dominated Gaeldom of the narratives. The trope also makes these figures, as Johnston has discussed in the context of Brigit’s divinity and martial power, an unreachable goal for medieval Gaelic women:

³⁰¹ E. J. Gwynn (ed. and tr.) ‘Temair II’, *The metrical dindsenchas*, vol. 1 (Dublin, 1903), 6-13, at 8-9.

³⁰² E. J. Gwynn (ed. and tr.), ‘Loch Semtide’, *The metrical dindsenchas*, vol. 4 (Dublin, 1924), 288, translated on 289. The issue of whether Spain would be considered foreign in medieval Gaelic discourse is of interest; however, the broad definition of ‘foreigner’ employed by this dissertation means Spain is sufficiently ‘foreign’ to be considered here. The question of the alterity of Spain, and if Spain has particularly militaristic connotations, given the Míl Espáine, would be worth further consideration elsewhere.

³⁰³ Gwynn, ‘Carmun’, *The metrical dindsenchas* 3, 1-25, at 4-5.

The Irish have combined the figure of the warrior woman with that of the transvestite saint. Yet, this combination, by implication, denied other women the transforming powers of Brigit. The women of early Ireland could not aspire to be warriors, or hold episcopal status. Brigit's uniqueness maintained the status quo.³⁰⁴

However it is interpreted, it is clear that we are seeing, in characters such as Fand and Cathach, multiple markers of alterity in play. The extent to which these dangerous female characters are presented as outside the norm may be grounds to go so far as to examine the literature as attempting the conscious alienation of violent female figures. This argument is further reinforced by the repeated failures we have discussed — women warriors are a recurrent motif, although not the default martial figures of the literature, but they are not idealised. They fail, they wreak havoc, they are not even Gaelic much of the time. If we are to take Johnston's argument as a point of reference, these women are difficult to emulate in their martial prowess. That said, men too are so-rendered by many of their feats. The difference may lie in that, even as unattainable, few if any would listen to a tale featuring a woman warrior and seek to emulate one.³⁰⁵ Their conclusions are frequently — though not always — despair, rape, or death. No matter the pedigree or previous feats of these women, they can be, and are, overcome. For none of the women considered in this discussion is there a way of coming back from defeat like Cú Chulainn manages to do when he avenges his humiliation by Cú Roí in *Aided Con Roí*. As Bitel states of both sorceresses and women warriors: 'Either way, women were doomed to failure.'³⁰⁶

Further markers of alterity can also be seen in the context of warrior women. One such marker, not limited to warrior women alone, is physical alterity. Women warriors are at times monstrous where male martial figures, and female non-martial figures, are fair and beautiful. Where characters such as Étaín and Emer are given a degree of textual space in which their beauty is described (either by themselves or by the narrative), our descriptor for Cathach is

³⁰⁴ Johnston, 'Transforming', 220.

³⁰⁵ And this only applies if — and it is not an insubstantial if — we think of the purpose of 'heroic' tales as to inspire emulation.

³⁰⁶ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 221.

Catutchend,³⁰⁷ ‘hard-headed’ or ‘harsh-headed’.³⁰⁸ The *dindshenchas* of Dun Gabail features Gablach, who is described as *cóica cubat ina fat/ocas a leth ’na lethat* ‘fifty cubits she was in height/and the half of that in breadth’.³⁰⁹ She comes *anair* ‘from the east’,³¹⁰ and goes on to kill the warrior Fuither mac Forduib in battle.³¹¹ The Morrígan can also be seen as an example of the combination of physical alterity and physically violent female figure.³¹² We see her in various physical forms, including that of a young woman,³¹³ a hag,³¹⁴ a bird,³¹⁵ an eel, a wolf and a heifer³¹⁶ in the *Táin*. The Morrígan is also further considered outside the norm as being capable of causing these physical changes within herself, and as being ‘divine’. All three female figures here discussed are framed as capable of causing (male) death through violence, and as physically different to the praised norm for women in the world of the texts. Notably, also, only Gablach is successful in her violence.

One specific aspect of physical alterity worth examining in the context of gender is hair. Hair and its connotations in medieval Gaelic literature have been examined by scholars such as Sayers³¹⁷ and McCone,³¹⁸ and Sheehan has examined masculinity and hair in medieval Welsh literature.³¹⁹ Facial hair is seen as a sign of coming-of-age and subsequently of

³⁰⁷ Windisch, ‘*Tochmarc Ferbe*’, 474.

³⁰⁸ See *eDIL*, s.v. ‘cotut’, accessed 14/09/17, <http://dil.ie/12700>, and *eDIL*, s.v. ‘crúaidín’, accessed 14/09/17, <http://dil.ie/13193>.

³⁰⁹ Gwynn, ‘Dun Gabail’, *metrical dindsenchas* 3, 78-83, at 78, translated on 79.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82, translated on 83.

³¹² See Hennessy, W. M., ‘The Ancient Irish Goddess of War’, *Revue Celtique* 1 (1870), 32-55; Carey, John, ‘Notes on the Irish war-goddess’, *Éigse* 19/2 (1983), 263-275; Clark, Rosalind, ‘Aspects of the Morrígan in early Irish literature’, *Irish University Review* 17/2 (1987), 223-236; Herbert, ‘Transmutations’; Egeler, Matthias, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen: Gedanken zur religionsgeschichtlichen Anbindung Nordwesteuropas an den mediterranen Raum*, Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde – Ergänzungsbände 71 (Berlin, 2011); Clarke, ‘Demonology, allegory and translation’.

³¹³ O’Rahilly, *TBC I*, 57, translated on 176.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63, translated on 181.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30, translated on 152.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61, translated on 180.

³¹⁷ William Sayers, ‘Early Irish attitudes towards hair and beards, baldness and tonsure’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 44 (1991), 154–189.

³¹⁸ Kim R. McCone, ‘Werewolves, cyclopes, *díberga* and *fianna*: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (Winter, 1986), 1–22.

³¹⁹ Sarah Sheehan, ‘Giants, Boar-hunts, and Barbering: Masculinity in “*Culhwch Ac Olwen*”’, *Arthuriana* 15 (3) (2005), 3-25.

manhood and masculinity. As such, we see warriors such as Cú refusing to engage in combat with the beardless Cú Chulainn in the *Táin*.³²⁰ Cú Chulainn's beardlessness has been extensively examined by Künzler,³²¹ and Sheehan states more generally that in 'medieval Celtic literature, beards — aside from the whiskers of loathly ladies — are the preserve of male characters.'³²² This reference to loathly ladies is pertinent for our discussion as it serves as a repeated image in terms of potentially dangerous female physical alterity.

If facial hair is a marker of masculinity, in what ways can hair and gender be seen to interact in the context of women? There is a dichotomy between beautiful and ugly women, the latter with negative connotations. These negative connotations mark such women with alterity, for while extraordinarily beautiful women may not have been the norm in medieval Gaeldom — extraordinary presupposes an ordinary — they are presented so frequently as to be the norm of the world of the narratives, as 'extraordinary but expected' characters. Sayers states of women's hair in comparison to men's in the literature, 'Descriptions of women's hair do not display the same range of social stations [as men's hair], and stereotyping is even more pronounced', with 'the goddess' and 'the *cailleach*' at either end of the scale.³²³ We see flowing locks of golden hair from certain characters; conversely, we see hags in particular, the aforementioned 'loathly ladies', with shaggy or unruly hair. A key and well-discussed example of contrast between the two is to be found in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel': the beauty of Étaín has already been discussed, but the text also features two monstrous female characters, Cichiul and Cailb. The antithesis between them has been extensively examined by O'Connor, with the beautiful and 'hideous' characters' physicalities being interpreted as metaphor for sovereignty.³²⁴ O'Connor, in particular, mentions Étaín's hair:

³²⁰ O'Rahilly, *TBC I*, 52, translated on 172.

³²¹ Künzler, *Flesh and Word*, 126-141.

³²² Sheehan, 'Giants', 4.

³²³ Sayers, 'Early Irish attitudes', 169.

³²⁴ Ralph O'Connor, *The destruction of Da Derga's hostel: kingship and narrative artistry in a mediaeval Irish saga* (Oxford, 2013), 146-151. For discussion of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* in terms of physicality see also Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan, 'Togail bruidne Da Derga and the politics of anatomy', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 49 (Summer, 2005), 1-19, and Jacqueline Borsje, 'Approaching danger: Togail Bruidne Da Derga and the motif of being one-eyed', in Joseph Falaky Nagy (ed.), *Identifying the 'Celtic'*, *CSANA Yearbook 2* (Dublin, 2002), 75-99.

She is likened to three kinds of flower (iris, foxglove, hyacinth), and here specifically with reference to the fertility of the natural world: her hair is compared with *barr n-ailestair hi samrad* ('the flowering of the iris in summer').³²⁵

This brings to mind Sayers' argument of hair being cosmologically tied to the natural world.³²⁶ This contrasts with our description of 'black-haired' Cichiul,³²⁷ and our experience of Cailb:

Sithir cloideb ngarmai ceachtar a dá lurcan. Batir dubithir dethaich. Brat ríabach rolómar impi. Tacmaicead a fés in t-íchtarach co rrici a glúin. A beóil for leith a cind.

As long as a weaver's beam were each of her two shins. They were as black as smoke. A very woolly striped cloak was about her. Her pubic hair hung down to her knee. Her mouth was on the side of her head.³²⁸

Cailb's physical alterity extends beyond hair, with her mouth on one side of her head and her disproportionately large shins. But the description of hair in her context ties into another aspect of sovereignty and makes it, rather than alluring, possibly even monstrous:

Grotesque female sexuality was hinted at in the ambiguous wording of Cichuil's description [...] but Cailb's description recasts the epithet and makes the hint explicit. [...] Étaín's sexuality is emphasized by the male gaze of the narrator, whose eye steadily descends her body and offers alluring lyric epithets for each part. Cailb's sexuality, however, is emphasized crudely, briefly, and explicitly.³²⁹

Sayers too comments on this incident and others relating to it: 'the sight of female pubic hair seems to have had a profoundly disruptive social impact in early Ireland as in other

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

³²⁶ Sayers, 'Early Irish attitudes', 155.

³²⁷ O'Connor, *The destruction of Da Derga's hostel*, 134.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 135, translated on 137.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 146, 149.

cultures.’³³⁰ The reflection of the contrast between Étaín and Cailb upon Conaire’s disintegrating reign, of which hair is a part, conveys how physical alterity can inform our female characters, and act as metaphor for our male characters’ situations.

Hair, then, can clearly be tied to gender and concepts of masculinity, and can also be highly symbolically resonant. With this in mind, we might return to Creidne. Creidne’s hair when she becomes a *fénnid* is specifically not the flowing locks of Étaín: *Cūlmong fichthi furri*. ‘She used to wear the hair of her back plaited.’³³¹ This may then be a use of alternate physicality to denote a change in status in our character, her being made to stand further out from the expectations of women of the world of the text. It is specifically stated in the context of her *fíanas*, being preceded by the description of her warband and followed by the description of how she fought on land and sea, and so does seem to have relevance to the concept of her becoming a *banfénnid*. Sayers discusses Cú Chulainn getting his hair plaited before his battle with Fer Diad in the *Táin*: ‘Fergus, for example, warns Cú Chulainn that Fer Diad will come against him with hair washed and plaited [...] and recommends that he go for similar treatment’.³³² We might then read this as a similar example of preparation for combat, given where it is situated within the text. Ní Dhonnchadha describes Creidne’s tale as ‘play[ing] on the attractiveness of a young woman named Créidne who went on the warpath’³³³. *Cūlmong* is translated above by Meyer as ‘the hair of her back’, implying that her back hair is so long as to be plait-able. This would clearly convey her having an unusual physicality. However, Meyer’s translation is questionable here. It is possible that *cūlmong* simply refers to her hair, the *cūl* being the ‘back’ of anything as opposed to solely the anatomical ‘back’, including the back of one’s head or neck; *cūl* can also mean ‘hair’ rather than ‘back’, just as *cùl* in modern Scottish Gaelic can mean both back and hair.³³⁴ Even in the medieval period *cūl* is listed with *cuilbuidhe* ‘fair-haired’ and *chulfind* ‘with fair back hair’ as examples of its use.³³⁵ With *mong* being listed as ‘orig. lock or tuft of hair’,³³⁶ might it be

³³⁰ Sayers, ‘Early Irish attitudes’, 171.

³³¹ Meyer, *Fianaigeacht*, xi, translated on xii.

³³² Sayers, ‘Early Irish attitudes’, 161.

³³³ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and settled folk’, 20.

³³⁴ Edward Dwelly, ‘cùl’, *Faclair Gàidhlig agus Beurla le dealbhan* (Glasgow, 2011), 314.

³³⁵ *eDIL*, s.v. ‘cùl’, accessed 18/09/17, <http://dil.ie/13749>.

³³⁶ *eDIL*, s.v. ‘mong’, accessed 18/09/17, <http://dil.ie/32532>.

argued that this phrase could be summed up as ‘hair in locks’, or hair at the back of her head, rather than necessarily her back hair; at the very least, there is ambiguity in the word *cūl* worth considering. Such a reading may also bring it into line with the later notion of the *cúlán* hairstyle as discussed by Simms, who suggests the possibility that ‘partially shaving the scalp and growing the back-hair long was a traditional quasi-berserker hairstyle affected by those whose lives were dedicated to rapine and murder’ whose influence was felt in 13th-century England.³³⁷

Creidne is not the only example of a woman taking up arms and having it affect their hair. In *Táin Bó Fraích*, when Findabair leaps into the water to bring Fraoch a sword, her father Ailill throws a spear after her:

Dolléici a hathair sleig cóicrind dí anúas rout n-aurchora co lluid treda triliss

Her father cast a five-pointed spear at her so that it went through her two tresses.³³⁸

The spear going through her hair could be read solely as emphasising how close Ailill comes to committing *finjal* ‘kin-slaying’, or as an expressing of public shaming. However, given the context of Creidne, and of the later *cúlán* shaving of hair as signifying a military lifestyle, we might understand this instance as more symbolically relevant than has ever been discussed. For some the evidence for such a suggestion would be rather scant; however, it should be considered that the producers of medieval Gaelic literature, as Sayers explores, do seem to be invested in the symbolic relevance of hair, and that Ailill’s reaction comes only after Findabair has explicitly taken up a sword.

The thin line between human and animal and those who cross it was also raised in the introduction.³³⁹ We also see this line blur in the context of female characters. In the legal text

³³⁷ Katherine Simms, ‘Gaelic warfare in the Middle Ages’, in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffrey (eds.) *A military history of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), 99-115, at 101.

³³⁸ Meid, *Fraích*, 8-9. Translation in Gantz, *Early Irish myths*, 121.

³³⁹ ‘Introduction’, 10-11.

Bretha Crólige we have female werewolves mentioned,³⁴⁰ and we do see women capable of turning themselves into wolves in texts such as *Acallam na Senórach*.³⁴¹ These characters are of note here as they are women going into animal shape, particularly that of a wolf, in order to do harm they cannot do in their human female form. At this point it may be relevant to invoke another tradition, that of the suckling she-wolf raising Indo-European heroes.³⁴² Such a figure has been discussed in the context of Cormac mac Airt.³⁴³ It might be considered then, given the links between *fíanas* and the lupine, whether this she-wolf figure could be another expression of the female fosterer who trains the males in *fíanas* such as Finn's fostermothers or Scáthach's training of Cú Chulainn.³⁴⁴

We can see this clearly in returning to the subject of this chapter's opening: *banfénnidí*. The *banfénnid* is not solely of interest because of her interaction with weaponry. The peripatetic aspect of *fíanas* is also of note. Liminality has been thoroughly discussed in terms of the Finn Cycle and male heroes such as Fionn and Cú Chulainn in particular.³⁴⁵ Women wanderers also exceed the bounds of what is expected of women generally, as we have examined in the context of Ní Dhonnchadha's study.³⁴⁶ We might then consider the *banfénnid* as constituting an area of overlap between markers of alterity, geographic and occupational (militaristic). These areas of overlap between markers of alterity serve to create a clear distinction between the character in question and the established norms of the narrative universe. This can be seen as a process of alienation — to return to Johnston on Saint Brigit, we see women made so outside the norm as to be impossible to emulate, or 'unattainable'. Unattainable is then potentially unusual, attractive, exotic, and, at times most of all, dangerous, as we have discussed in the context of foreign women.

³⁴⁰ D. A. Binchy, 'Bretha Crólige', *Ériu* 12 (1938), 1-77, at 26, translated on 27. See Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Travelers and settled folk', 21 for further discussion on werewolf women.

³⁴¹ Whitley Stokes (ed. and tr.), 'Acallamh na senórach' in Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes (eds.), *Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch*, vol. 4:1 (Leipzig, 1900), 1-438, at 215.

³⁴² J. P. Mallory and Douglas Q. Adams (eds), *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* (London, 1997), 647.

³⁴³ Ó Cathasaigh, *Heroic Biography*, 34.

³⁴⁴ See Nagy, *The wisdom of the outlaw*, 102-111.

³⁴⁵ See in particular *Ibid.* See also R. Mark Scowcroft, 'On liminality in the Fenian cycle', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 13 (Summer, 1987), 97-100; Alexandra Bergholm, "'Betwixt and between': theorising liminality and sacredness in Buile Suibhne', in Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm (eds.), *Approaches to religion and mythology in Celtic studies* (Newcastle, 2008), 243-263.

³⁴⁶ 'Introduction', 11-12.

Overall, women warriors are shown to be outside the norm, and to be (generally) unsuccessful in their aims and punished for their behaviour. They can at times represent the dangerous uncontrolled violence discussed by Moore and exemplified by Cú Chulainn in his *ríastrad*, being a blight upon all those around them, before they are stopped and, often, ‘re-civilised’ through directed sexual violence at the hands of men. Female physical violence, in the Ulster Cycle in particular, while capable of dealing harm to other women, is shown to be largely ineffectual against men. This contrasts with certain instances of non-physical violence, involving magic and deception, being employed by women successfully to undermine or destroy men. Magic, as opposed to physical violence, has been discussed as comprising a threat considered more potent at the time of these texts as we have them. Sorcery may contrast with martial violence in that it can be seen to stem from talents discussed by Miller as seen as feminine: deception and trickery. Despite their repeated failures and punishments, *banfénnidí* were clearly still of interest to the producers and presumably consumers of medieval Gaelic literature. Their alienation is then noteworthy in how it informs our readings of the texts, and what we theorise about the individuals and communities behind the texts.

Conclusion

This study set out to ‘interrogate alterity’ in two specific instances as it pertains to the women of medieval Gaelic literature. It was a literary critical study of the ways in which women in medieval Gaelic literature are presented as outside the norm, focusing particularly on female foreigners and warriors. These areas were identified as thus far relatively neglected in the scholarship, with the focus tending to be on individual characters as opposed to groups. Throughout the emphasis has been on the world of the narratives as opposed to trying to reconstruct a reality of medieval Gaeldom. Further nuance has been added to the discussion of both groups and some of the many topics surrounding them have been explored.

Chapter One’s discussion of foreign women centred around three aspects: foreign women as alluring, foreign women as mothers, and foreign women as dangerous. In exploring the allure of foreign women, support has been found for the argument that the boundaries between the foreign and the otherworldly were at times blurred, and that foreignness was not considered off-putting. This latter notion is strengthened by the discussion of foreign women as mothers, particularly as progenitors of famous heroes and/or kin-groups. The reasons here suggested for foreign women’s allure — motherhood, cementing or creating alliance, beauty outshining the women of medieval Gaeldom — are contrasted by examples of foreign women proving the downfall of male characters. This is particularly worth considering in context of abductees who can often cause, if not a hero’s death, at least strife between them and their men. The addition of foreignness in our discussions of the ‘Potiphar’s Wife’ model might then prove fruitful going forward. Here we best see the foreign woman portrayed as dangerous, with the potential of posing a threat to kingship, whether through ignorance, family ties, fickleness or vengeance. There is nuance, then, to the portrayal of foreign women in medieval Gaelic literature.

There is certainly scope for further research into foreignness and women in medieval Gaelic literature. The deliberately broad definition employed by this study could be narrowed, and ‘degrees of foreignness’, as it were, explored: if the story is set in, say, Connacht, is a

woman of the Ulaid as foreign as a woman of Lochlann, or as foreign as a woman from the otherworld? The definition used here also left voyage tales out of the discussion, and the women of the voyage tales could provide further insight into the notion of foreign women in medieval Gaelic literature. Furthermore, the blurring of lines between population groups could be examined with more nuance than is done here, not only in terms of Gaelic peoples but also regarding ethnic groups such as Gaels, Scandinavians, and Anglo-Normans. The aforementioned ending of *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil* for instance, where the men of Ireland take the women from Lochlann for their wives, can be read as implying a future generation of children with mixed Gaelic and Scandinavian parents. Approaching the material with less concrete boundaries of ethnicity in mind is an approach very recently employed by Márkus in a Scottish context,³⁴⁷ and it would no doubt add further nuance to discussions of foreign women in medieval Gaeldom.

Chapter Two focused on female warriors and the *banfénnid*. Weaponry is closely tied to notions of masculinity that instances of women interacting with weapons and arming themselves are worth exploring. Bringing gender into the conversation regarding ‘restrained vs unrestrained’ violence in medieval Gaelic literature adds another lens through which to consider our characters, both male and female. The absence of any sort of named *banfían*, or armed female group, is interesting considering the existence of *banfénnid*, though this may be a larger question than solely limited to medieval Gaelic literature. That being said, if we are open to the notion of women warriors being in *fianna*, and we do not presume the gender of groups of people, we leave more space for them in the literature than they are currently being afforded. The recurrence of foreign women warriors, and the geographical alterity of the *banfénnidí* further mark women warriors as outside the norm, as outsiders in the world of the texts and, presumably, outside the norms of medieval Gaelic society. The repeated, consistent failures of women warriors, with few exceptions, make them undesirable; while the argument regarding ‘attainability’ can be questionable in the context of the secular prose literature, it is clear women warriors are not to be idealised. Women warriors are dangerous, not to be emulated, and clearly conveyed as outside the expected and lauded norms of the world of the narrative.

³⁴⁷ Gilbert Márkus, *Conceiving a Nation: Scotland to AD 900* (Edinburgh, 2017).

There are several avenues for further research on women warriors. The discussion of violence and gender has great potential in this regard. One could study the motivations behind female violence as opposed to male violence; in this study we have examples of women taking up arms out of jealousy, family (one might say to defend male honour, in the case of Creidne), and vengeance. And it is not only the taking up of arms that such motivations cause, as we have discussed women using magic or enlisting others (such as satirists) to achieve goals centred around these motivations. How these contrast and complement male motivations for taking up arms could be of interest. Furthermore, the gendering of violence can without a doubt be broadened beyond the Ulster Cycle; even within the Ulster Cycle, it is worth considering what this might then mean for our ‘unrestrained’ male heroes such as Cú Chulainn. Also, the *dindshenchas* material is rich in terms of women, particularly female killers and warriors (amongst various other kinds of female outsiders), and deserves further analysis than it has had thus far. A more thorough analysis of how women are represented in the *dindshenchas* and the ways in which they interact with the environment would only serve to better inform our discussions of women in medieval Gaelic literature.

The introductory discussion of alterity has informed much of this study. Ultimately we often see an interplay of multiple markers of alterity with these characters, especially when we consider gender to be the most frequent and most influential marker of alterity of them all. Aspects such as physicality, way of life or occupation, origin, or class, in addition to gender, further exclude dangerous women from the masculine dominative narrative world and mark them as outside the norm. They are alienated, made unattainable and impossible to emulate. Though definitely relevant in the context of foreign women, this is particularly true in the case of women warriors. It is not impossible to read this alienation as deliberate, and to sense at times an attitude of deep disapproval behind the texts towards these transgressive women. However, before overstating the case, this is a literature of the extraordinary, often the extraordinary male; but we do not see in certain of our male characters such as Cú Chulainn and Finn consistent models of good behaviour. The difference may lie in that, even though Cú Chulainn and Finn may act in ways harmful to society, they frequently are allowed by the narrative to succeed in their aims; this is not afforded to many of our alienated women.

Overall, however, the women of medieval Gaelic literature are outsiders because of their gender. This study does not challenge that view; it is at the root of their character and, largely, does not stop defining them. However, the ways in which they are further made outsiders or marked with alterity is at times unique and distinctly female — the man who takes up arms in one of these tales is not remarkable; the woman who does is. Both foreign women and women warriors are presented to us as outside the norm. There is nuance to how the foreign woman is presented, as both alluring and capable of great harm. The depiction of women warriors is generally less ambiguous; they are dangerous to all around them, and doomed to failure. In either case, these women were frequently framed as mothers, wives, or daughters, which can be read as highlighting femininity as their defining essence. In studying these two areas that can be considered understudied it is hoped old topics have been approached with fresh insight, and new ways of discussing these characters have been advanced, particularly in terms of alterity. Ultimately, there is nuance to these characters that can easily be missed. Discussing them in terms of alterity allows the extraordinary women of medieval Gaelic literature a space in a conversation that, at times, is much like the material on which it is based: primarily concerned with free men.

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