'*Bidh ionann leacht damh is dó*': Shared Graves As An Expression Of Love In Later Ulster Cycle Tales

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This paper examines Láeg, Fer Diad, and Emer's relationships with Cú Chulainn through the lens of their similar desires to be buried in his grave, a motif which creates a parallel between Cú Chulainn's marriage and these two close friendships. I argue that these relationships should be understood as sworn brotherhood, and that such readings, far from being incompatible with or an alternative to queer readings, in fact serve to dismantle heteronormative and amatonormative assumptions about the construction of relationships within these tales. In doing so, they offer new insights into gender, sexuality, and relationships in the Ulster Cycle.

Keywords: Táin Bó Cúailnge, *Comrac Fir Diad*, *Tóruigheacht Gruaidhe Griansholus*, *Oidheadh Con Culainn*, Emer, Fer Diad, Láeg mac Ríangabra, Cú Chulainn, friendship, sworn brotherhood, marriage, queer readings

What do Fer Diad, Emer, and Láeg mac Ríangabra have in common?[1] Not difficult: they all have a close, emotional relationship with Cú Chulainn, and they each express a desire to be buried in his grave. These declarations are made in three different early modern tales in three different contexts, but parallels between them invite a reconsideration of the characters who speak them and of the relationship being expressed. In these texts, Cú Chulainn's relationships with Fer Diad and Láeg are presented in terms that suggest a direct comparison between these men and Cú Chulainn's wife Emer, both emotionally and in terms of the societal function served by their bond. They may thus be productively read through a queer lens, but not solely or even primarily in relation to the homoerotic possibilities created by this overlap of friendship and marriage. In fact, this overlap principally demonstrates the construction and expression of voluntary kinship – a category of relationship neither wholly separate from nor inherently dependent on the presence of romantic love or physical desire, constructed here in terms that do not map

1 All three of these names show considerable variation of spelling across the texts and manuscripts under discussion (e.g. Fer Diad, Fear Dia, Feardiadh; Emer, Eimhir, Eimhear; Láeg, Laogh, Laoi); I am using these recognisable medieval spellings throughout my discussion for ease of reference, although quotes will of course maintain textual spellings.

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neatly onto a modern taxonomy of relationships or emotions. Although readings of non-biological kinship in these texts have often been positioned in opposition to queer readings,[2] the 'sworn brotherhood' expressed in these passages destabilises heteronormative and amatonormative hierarchies of relation,[3] re-contextualising the role of marriage within these tales and encouraging a broader re-evaluation of how interpersonal bonds are constructed within this narrative and historical context. These covenants of friendship may therefore be understood as essentially queer, not just because of the potential for readings of physical desire into these passages, but because to fully understand them we must dismantle our gendered, heteronormative assumptions of how relationships function and instead engage creatively with their emotional and narrative possibilities.[4]

Emer expresses her desire for a grave shared with Cú Chulainn in *Oidheadh Con Culainn* (OCC, 'The Violent Death of Cú Chulainn'). This tale dates to around the fifteenth century (Ní Mhaoláin 2008: 21), and consists of three parts: *Brisleach Mhór Mhaighe Muirtheimhne*, in which Cú Chulainn is killed; *Deargruathar Chonaill Chearnaigh,* in which Conall Cearnach pursues vengeance against Cú Chulainn's killers; and *Laoidh na gCeann*, a poetic dialogue between Conall and Emer naming those killed by Conall. With more than 130 manuscripts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries containing some or all of the tripartite text,[5] it is not possible to encompass all variants of the tale; my discussion will focus primarily on NLS 72.1.38, an early seventeenth-century manuscript that provides the earliest 'complete' version of the prosimetric tale, as edited by Lára Ní Mhaoláin (2008).[6] The shared grave motif appears in the poem 'Uch a chinn'

2 For example, see O'Donnell (2020: 83–95), where homoerotic readings are characterised as a misinterpretation based on a shallow understanding of fosterage and its emotional dimensions.

3 *Amatonormativity* is a term coined by Elizabeth Brake (2012: 88–89) to describe 'the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative' and the ways in which this mindset 'discourages investment in other kinds of caring relationship' and 'relegates friendship […] to cultural invisibility'.

4 See also Longman (2025) on the need for non-romantic modes of relation, like friendship, to be understood not in opposition to queerness but as queer possibilities in their own right.

5 Ní Mhaoláin (2008, 35–54) lists 127 manuscripts; Kühns (2009, 45–52) lists 105, not all of them also mentioned by in Ní Mhaoláin. By combining these lists, I have identified approximately 133 manuscripts. More than ninety include at least one of *Brisleach Mhór Mhaighe Muirtheimhne* and *Deargruathar Chonaill Chearnaigh*, and more than fifty contain both, although not all of them are complete.

6 Van Hamel (1933) edited the earliest manuscript, NLS 72.1.45, with passages from RIA 23 K 37 to repair lacunae. However, 72.1.45 contains only one of the poems, and although this happens to be 'Uch a chinn', the poem under discussion in this paper, van Hamel excludes it from his prose-only edition. See Ní Mhaoláin (2008, 30) for discussion of NLS 72.1.38 and its date.

(OCC §91), which falls within *Deargruathar Chonaill Chearnaigh*. Here, Emer addresses Cú Chulainn's body and severed head, focusing on physical details – his eyes, his mouth, his hands – and describing them as *ionmhain* 'beloved' as she mourns her loss. In the third stanza, she expresses her desire for a shared grave:

> *Uch a shúil, ón, uch a shúil,*
> *Do-radais do mheanma dhúinn,*
> *Ionann ionadh a mbia ar leachd*
> *Ionann feart claoidhfidhear dhúinn.*
>
> Alas eye, oh, alas eye,
> You gave up your spirit for us,
> Our tomb will be in the same place,
> The same grave will be dug for us. (OCC §91)[7]

Although some manuscripts of OCC do end with Emer's burial alongside Cú Chulainn, in many the wish is left unfulfilled or ambiguous,[8] including in NLS 72.1.38. Here, Emer reiterates her desire for a shared tomb by asking Conall to dig a broad grave so that she may be buried with Cú Chulainn, then speaks a final poem (§111), but there is no explicit description of any burial taking place. By contrast, in RIA 23 K 37, van Hamel's second manuscript, Cú Chulainn is unambiguously buried alone: *Do tógbadh a lia ósa lecht 7 do sgríobadh a ainm a n-oghaim* 'His [head]stone was raised above his grave and his name was written in Ogham' (van Hamel 1933: §58, translation mine). In all cases, 'Uch a chinn' is separated from the burial of Cú Chulainn – and potentially Emer – by a considerable portion of the text, such that the wish as expressed here and its fulfilment are not directly connected even when both are present.

Fer Diad's claim to a shared grave also dates to around the fifteenth century, occurring in a poem, 'Feidm is mó', found in the 'Stowe' version of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (TBC) as well as in the 'independent' versions of *Comrac Fir Diad*

7 Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from OCC are from Ní Mhaoláin (2008); translations are my own, with thanks to Máire Ní Mhaonaigh for her assistance.

8 At the time of writing, I have examined fifty-seven manuscripts of the prose tale, of which forty-eight contain an ending to the story. In seventeen, Emer is buried with Cú Chulainn, such as in RIA MS 23 K 7: *do chuaigh a hanam aiste 7 do háidhnachach í féin 7 Cú Chulainn re Conall* 'her soul departed from her and Conall buried her and Cú Chulainn'. In twenty-three, there are no burials at all: six end directly after Lugaid's death, with no return to Emer; thirteen end with *Laoidh na gCeann* without explicit description of any burials; and four end with Conall returning to Emain Macha where the youths of the Ulaid are mourning Cú Chulainn, rather than going to see Emer. Six describe Cú Chulainn being buried alone. One or two, like 72.1.38, remain ambiguous as to whether any burials have taken place, though the fact that they end with a poem spoken with Emer suggests she is still alive. Thus, although Emer's burial with Cú Chulainn is often referenced (for example, Findon 2024: 75), it only occurs in about one third of the manuscripts of OCC. My work on this text is ongoing, and I hope in future to be able to provide more detailed analysis of the variant endings of the tale.

(CFD, 'The Encounter with Fer Diad'). Rutten (2006: 153–167) suggests the poem originated in this 'self-standing' tale before being incorporated into the TBC context; thus, although this discussion primarily concerns the text from 'Stowe' as edited by Cecile O'Rahilly (1961: 2689–2725),[9] reference to the independent tales is occasionally illuminating. In this poem, Fer Diad expresses regret prior to his combat with Cú Chulainn. He describes Cú Chulainn as *leth mo croidhi* 'half my heart' or 'one side of my heart' (TBC 2689), and states that if Cú Chulainn dies, *saithfidh me mo cloidemh caol | trem croidhi trem taobh trem cliabh* 'I will thrust my narrow sword | through my heart, through my side, through my chest' (2703–2704), as well as cursing Medb – *mairg do M*eid*b* (2721) – for creating this situation, and swearing revenge on her: *muir(fidh) mé M*eid*hb cona slo*g*h* 'I will kill Medb with her host' (2711). Amidst these regretful, vengeful, and suicidal feelings, he expresses his wish for a shared grave:

> *Dar mo gó*
> *da marbhar Cú Atha Cró*
> *adlaicte[r] misi ina fert*
> *bi*d*h ionann leact damh is dó*
>
> By my spear,
> if the Hound of Ath Cró dies,
> let me be buried in his grave:
> the same tomb will be for me and for him. (2713–2716)

Unlike Emer, Fer Diad is talking *about* Cú Chulainn in the third person, rather than addressing him directly; to whom his poem is addressed depends on the manuscript under discussion. Rutten (2006: 155–165) notes that the poem seems misplaced in TBC, where it occurs partway through Fer Diad's conversation with Medb, and makes more sense as positioned in the independent tale, where it falls during an exchange with Fer Diad's charioteer Idh mac Ríangabra as they prepare to encounter Cú Chulainn. In one variant, Rutten's 'IVd', it is explicitly addressed *to* Idh (Rutten 2006: 389). The desire to be buried with Cú Chulainn thus becomes an instruction to his charioteer – Láeg's brother – rather than an abstract expression of emotions made by Fer Diad to himself.

Láeg's claim to a shared grave appears in the late romantic tale *Tóruigheacht Gruaidhe Griansholus* (TGG, 'The Pursuit of Gruaidh Ghriansholus'). This tale survives in one manuscript, TCD 1399 (H 5.28), edited and translated by O'Rahilly (1922/24).[10] The manuscript is dated in a colophon to 1679, and Ó hUiginn (2009: 407) suggests that the story, too, dates from the late seventeenth century. Once again, the relevant lines occur in verse; this time, rather than a poem spoken by

9 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from TBC are from O'Rahilly (1961) and translations are my own.

10 All quotations and translations from TGG are from O'Rahilly (1922/24).

a single character to express high emotion, it is a dialogue between Cú Chulainn and Láeg, elaborating on statements already made in prose. Cú Chulainn is fighting a giant, Fearghus. Fearing that he will lose and be shamefully killed by his enemy, he asks Láeg to kill him instead, and to take the news and his head home to Emer and the Ulaid: *Iomchuir leat ann do luing, | An ceann, a Laoi, fa h-ionmhain leat* 'Take with thee in thy ship the head that thou lovest, O Laoi'. Láeg refuses, claiming that he would not kill Cú Chulainn *air maitheas an domhain go léir* 'for all the wealth in the world' (TGG 72–73). He has no desire to outlive Cú Chulainn – instead, he will fight beside him so that they may die and be buried together:

> *Do cheann díot-sa agus díom*
> *Beanfaidh Fearghus, brígh mo rúin;*
> *Iodhlaicfior misi ionnat' fheart,*
> *Bu h-ionann leacht dhuit-si is dúinn.*
>
> Thy head and mine will Fearghus cut off, in very sooth; I shall be buried in thy grave, one tombstone shall we have. (TGG 72–73)

Given the dialogic nature of the poem, this statement is addressed directly to Cú Chulainn; as it is the end of the poem, however, it remains without a direct answer from him. Unlike Fer Diad's poem, which precedes tragedy, or Emer's, which follows it, this passage has a happier outcome: Cú Chulainn and Láeg ultimately vanquish Fearghus, and neither of them is killed. The varied circumstances of these declarations thus alter their narrative and emotional impact. Emer's lament cannot bring Cú Chulainn back from the dead, but shows the endurance of her love beyond the severing of their earthly marriage bond, while Fer Diad's declaration is one of tragic irony: he would rather die than outlive Cú Chulainn, and despite his best efforts in the combat that follows, he does. Láeg's declaration of undying loyalty unto death, however, brings victory, and enables the young Cú Chulainn to establish his reputation as a warrior.

The late medieval and early modern period saw considerable social and political change in Ireland. Both OCC and (this recension of) TBC originate during the so-called 'Gaelic recovery' or 'Gaelic resurgence' in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, characterised by 'the reassertion of political independence by many Irish chieftains' and the weakening of English colonial power (Simms 2020: 110). This was a time of great literary activity, particularly in Connacht, with 'a new enthusiasm for tracking down and transcribing Old and Middle Irish texts' as well as 'producing new manuscript anthologies' (Simms 2020: 387). Many earlier Ulster Cycle tales were expanded and rewritten in this period (Ó hUiginn 2006: 147–148), including a cluster identified by Thurneysen (1921: 73) as the work of a single fifteenth-century Modernisator.[11] By contrast, TGG belongs to

11 On the dating and development of this cluster of tales, see also Mac Gearailt (1991).

a very different historical context: it postdates not only the Nine Years' War and the Flight of the Earls but also the coming of Cromwell to Ireland, and cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called 'medieval' in date. The political and cultural changes of the seventeenth century brought 'an end to the old system of patronage bestowed by the Gaelic aristocracy on people of learning' such that 'Literature and its cultivation thereafter entered a new phase' (Ó hUiginn 2013: 99). But, as Ó hUiginn (2013: 99) notes, 'literary activity associated with the Ulster Cycle' continued, including the copying and development of existing stories as well as the composition of new ones, like TGG. And while TGG may not be medieval in date, it is a deliberately *medievalist* text, carefully reworking and elaborating on elements of the earlier Ulster Cycle – particularly TBC, as I will demonstrate – to create a new composition that only occasionally reflects the altered world in which it was composed. While a fuller exploration of TGG's attitudes to issues like social organisation and sovereignty would no doubt illuminate a great deal, including the influence of its author's historical circumstances, its continuities with the medieval tradition should not be overlooked or understated because of its late date.

These three texts are interdependent, and to be properly understood they should be read together, with the most obvious intertexual connections being between TGG and TBC. Láeg's *Iodhlaicfior misi ionnat' fheart, | Bu h-ionann leacht dhuit-si is dúinn* 'I shall be buried in thy grave, one tombstone shall we have' (TGG 72–73) is functionally identical to Fer Diad's *adlaicte[r] misi ina fert | bidh ionann leact damh is dó* 'let me be buried in his grave | the same tomb will be for me and for him' (TBC 2713–2716). The narrative and metrical context requires grammatical differences, but the wording is too similar to be coincidental, and TGG's incorporation of other details from TBC proves its reliance on the earlier text. For example, TGG (74–75) references Cú Chulainn receiving assistance from his Otherworldly friends Dolb and Indolb during his combat with Fer Diad.[12] Other details are not merely referenced but incorporated into the characterisation and plot. In TBC (3210), Láeg's brother Idh claims that he cannot beat Láeg because *is fer comlainn cet esiomh* 'he is a match for a hundred', a claim repeated in TGG (36–37) – *do bhrígh gurb fear comhlainn céad Laoi* 'for Laoi was a champion who could fight a hundred' – and elaborated into a scene in which Láeg *literally* fights a hundred men while Cú Chulainn sleeps (34–37). While these elements do appear in some versions of the independent CFD, TGG also demonstrates familiarity with plot points from elsewhere in TBC, suggesting it was not (solely) relying on the self-standing tale. Since the Stowe TBC was known in early modern Ulster, where TGG was written (Ó hUiginn 2009: 393; see also 410, note 26), the simplest and most likely explanation is that the author knew this version of TBC, including Fer Diad's poem 'Feidm is mó', and it was from

12 Discussed by O'Rahilly (1922/24: xx).

this narrative that he borrowed and repurposed these lines to highlight Láeg's faithfulness.

Another parallel between Láeg's poem and earlier iterations of this shared grave motif is found in the relationship claimed to Cú Chulainn's body. The description of his (hypothetically severed) head as *ionmhain leat* 'beloved by you' (O'Rahilly: 'the head that thou lovest') seems to echo 'Uch a chinn' and Emer's address to Cú Chulainn's beloved head and body. This does not automatically mean TGG is drawing on OCC – Emer's words belong to a broader tradition of lament, one also reflected in Cú Chulainn's lament for Fer Diad in TBC (3361–3364): *ionmhain liom do ruidedh rán* | *ionmain do cruth caom comlán,* | *ionmain do rosc glas glanbdha,* | *ionmain t'alaigh t'erlabhra* 'Dear to me was your splendid blush | dear your perfect, fair form | dear your bright, clear eye | dear your bearing, your speech'.[13] Ó Fiannachta (1973: 66) describes Cú Chulainn's lament as 'words which recall Emir's lament for Cú Chulainn himself […] Such lamentation did befit a dead warrior's wife'. But does Cú Chulainn's lament 'recall' Emer's, or the other way around? These lines are first found in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster (LL) version of TBC, which predates OCC by some way.[14] Sheehan (2009: 157–158) notes an alternative correspondence between TBC and Deirdre's lament for Naoise in *Longes mac nUislenn*: 'Anaphora on *inmain* isolates a series of intimate physical details […] Such correspondences between Derdriu and Cú Chulainn's laments reinforce the sense of this diction's connotation of desire for the lost beloved'.[15] Cú Chulainn's use of this imagery locates his relationship with Fer Diad within the same framework as Deirdre's with Naoise and Emer's with Cú Chulainn;[16] by describing Cú Chulainn's head as *ionmhain* to Láeg, TGG likewise evokes this tradition of laments and claims this status for Láeg's relationship with

13 Translation adapted from O'Rahilly (1967: 231), of LL 3448–3451. On the broader tradition of lament being utilised in TBC, see Mulligan (2018: 395).

14 Ó Fiannachta may have conflated OCC with the Old Irish story of Cú Chulainn's death, *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni*, which Kimpton (2024: 33) dates primarily to the eighth century. Although Emer does speak a lament in this tale, it differs significantly, and contains no lines resembling those discussed here. However, O'Donnell (2020: 88) does note *different* verbal echoes between this lament and Cú Chulainn's lament for Fer Diad. For a more extensive recent discussion of Emer's earlier lament, see Findon (2024: 70–86).

15 The early modern *Oidheadh Chloinne Uisneach* contains several parallels between Deirdre and Emer in OCC: Naoise has been beheaded and Deirdre drinks his blood, as well as desiring to be buried with the sons of Uisneach: *Adhlaicthear mise ina bhfeart* 'Let me be buried in their tomb' (*Oidheadh Chloinne Uisneach*, 710). However, the repeated *inmain* lines are absent from Deirdre's lament here, diminishing this parallel even as new similarities are introduced. See Mathis (2013, especially 15) and Longman (2023: 71–72, note 14) regarding the blood-drinking parallel.

16 To my knowledge, nobody has yet undertaken a detailed comparison of 'Uch a chinn' with Cú Chulainn's lament for Fer Diad. Such a study would be valuable, particularly for its elucidation of readings of gender and sexuality in these passages.

Cú Chulainn. Whether TGG is drawing on TBC or 'Uch a chinn' here is a more complex question. TGG's general reliance on TBC makes this a likely source, but Cú Chulainn's concern for his severed head and the potential shame of having it taken by his enemies hints at influence from OCC. Headhunting is rare in TBC, while OCC focuses significantly on the severed head of the defeated enemy: as well as beheading Cú Chulainn's killers, Conall goes to some lengths to reclaim Cú Chulainn's head and return it to Emer (§§81–90). Moreover, in both OCC and TGG Láeg is charged with bringing news of Cú Chulainn's death to Emer, Conall, and the rest of the Ulaid (OCC §63, TGG 70–71). Given the proliferation of manuscripts of OCC in the later period, it is not unlikely that the author of TGG also knew a version of this tale.

Whether they are drawing on shared motifs or directly influencing each other, it is plain that intertextual echoes between these poems may valuably inform our readings. In expressing a desire to be buried in Cú Chulainn's grave, Fer Diad and Láeg claim a relationship with Cú Chulainn that is equivalent to Emer's: like his wife, they are bound to him in such a way that they may claim a place beside him even after death. This parallel may encourage a homoerotic reading of Fer Diad and Láeg's relationship with Cú Chulainn, and the emotional intensity of Fer Diad's claim that *leth mo chroidhe in Cú cen col | is leth croidhi na Con me* 'the faultless Hound is one half of my heart | and I am one half of his' (TBC 2699–2700) certainly suggests a profound and intimate love. Although valuable and worth exploring, however, such readings rely initially on two assumptions: one, that Cú Chulainn's marriage to Emer represents 'romantic love' as we would understand it, and two, that marriage as a romantic partnership represents the pinnacle of interpersonal bonds, such that when similarities exist between marriage and other relationships, it is marriage that creates or defines the model, rather than that marriage resembles or imitates other bonds. In fact, I believe the relationship being claimed by Fer Diad and Láeg is sworn brotherhood, understood not simply as a close friendship between men in a homosocial environment, but a formal structure of what Bray (2003: 104) calls 'voluntary kinship' – 'kinship created not by blood but by ritual or promise', a category to which marriage also belongs. A recurring element of the late medieval and early modern period in both literary and historical sources, sworn brotherhood parallels marriage in rhetoric and terminology, and the shared graves of friends and sworn brothers that survive in the archaeological record often feature so-called 'marital' imagery such as the 'impalement' of coats of arms and representations of kissing.[17] Crucially, the resemblance was not merely rhetorical: formed by pledge or covenant, such bonds 'gave friendship a formal and objective character markedly different from friendship in modern society' (Bray 2003: 25), and functioned alongside baptism and betrothal as a way to unite individuals and families. Becoming brothers in

17 See Bray (2003), especially 15–22.

the pre-modern world, as observed by Boswell (1995: 24), 'meant becoming a joint socioeconomic unit, recognized by and important to both society and the economy, with material and juridical consequences. In this sense it was much more closely related to modern marriage, in which the two parties form a new household unit of mutual responsibility'. Sworn brotherhood is not merely a pale imitation of a more normative marriage bond – instead, sworn brotherhood and marriage coexist as legally, emotionally, and narratively significant forms of kinship.

Most readings of these texts which emphasise the role of brotherhood do so primarily or solely with reference to Irish laws and traditions of fosterage. Although this may be informative, an exclusive focus on fosterage obscures the close parallels with late medieval and early modern romances and ballads of sworn brotherhood that situate these characters within a broader European tradition. Bray (2003: 30–31) recounts the *Ballad of Bewick and Graham*, a story of two sworn brothers 'caught in the mortal dilemma created by the quarrel of their fathers', so that Christy Graham must kill either his sworn brother or his father. He does fight his brother Bewick, but after mortally wounding him, kills himself; Bewick requests that they 'dig a grave both low and wide, | and in it us two pray bury'. This sixteenth-century English ballad, which contains a number of similarities to CFD, is only one iteration of a theme found across a wide range of literary texts. Other tales of sworn brothers include the popular and widely translated *Amys and Amylion*, and the story of *Guy of Warwick*, an Irish translation of which survives in the fifteenth-century TCD MS 1298 (*Bethadh Sir Gui o Bharbhuic*). Such stories are not 'realistic depictions of social life', but 'highly coloured stories of the love between sworn brothers and the testing of the fidelity of their oaths to each other in the most extreme of circumstances' that evoked contemporary understandings of 'the ideals of sworn brotherhood' (Bray 2003: 30). This could be a description of CFD – a tragic tale where these oaths, once tested, prove inadequate to avert disaster amidst competing demands of obligation and honour – or TGG – a romantic adventure in which the faithful companion remains steadfast in the face of mortal danger and victory is ultimately achieved. In developing and emphasising this theme, these early modern Irish tales are responding to and participating in a literary trend of their day. Recognising this not only illuminates aspects of this motif's development relative to earlier iterations of these narratives, but also demonstrates that Irish material, far from being isolated or unique, is engaged with literary trends and ideas popular in England and Continental Europe. Moreover, although fosterage is certainly an important component in Cú Chulainn's relationship with Fer Diad, their friendship appears to have a distinct quality which is not shared with Cú Chulainn's other foster-brother relationships in TBC, suggesting that there may be an additional kinship structure at work. As O'Donnell (2020: 31) acknowledges, foster-siblings 'could build on and nourish their connections by adding bonds of

freely chosen friendship and sworn brotherhood to the fosterage tie', and there is strong evidence that this is the case here.

On what grounds might we read these relationships as sworn brotherhood of this type? Láeg's relationship with Cú Chulainn is usually assumed to be one of service and hierarchy, that of a warrior and charioteer, but its characterisation actually differs somewhat across texts. Sometimes, Láeg is identified as a foster-brother of Cú Chulainn's (Longman, 2022: 29–30),[18] but TGG characterises their relationship as follows:

> *do bhrígh gurb fear comhlainn céad Laoi agus gur a gcomhrac aoinfhir do chlaoidh Cúchulainn é roimhe sin, agus go dtug bith-mhuintearas air féin do Choingculainn mar ghrádh air [a] ghaisgeadh agus air a dheagh-bhéasaibh*
>
> for Laoi was a champion who could fight a hundred and Cúchulainn had overthrown him in single combat before, and he himself had undertaken perpetual friendship towards Cúchulainn through love of his valour and virtue. (TGG 36–37)

Rather than a fosterage bond from infancy, this episode evokes the passionate friendship of chivalric romance; there are echoes of Galehaut's surrender and fatal devotion to Lancelot in the Prose *Lancelot*.[19] But where Galehaut's love of Lancelot can never be fully requited, Cú Chulainn and Láeg's relationship is mutual, and they are *an dias rérbh-annsa a chéile san domhan* 'the two who held each other dearest of all the world' (TGG 74–75). In OCC (§63), Láeg addresses Cú Chulainn as *a chomhdhaltáin 7 a thighearna 7 a trénchompánaigh* 'foster-brother, lord, and companion', encompassing fosterage, service, and friendship at once. Cú Chulainn responds with the claim that *ón ló tarla dochum a chéile ár gcumann araon, ni tharla ár n-imreasán do ló nó d'oidhche ó shoin* 'since the day our mutual affection/companionship towards one another began, we have never quarrelled by day or by night'. In the earliest manuscript, however, the wording is slightly different:

> *do-berim briathar óntís* ***do chenglamar aráen re chéile*** *in cétlá, nach tarrla ar n-imscarad ná ar n-imrisin re chéile do lá nó d-oidchi riam co háes na huairi so*
>
> and I give my word that since the first day **we bound ourselves together**, we never before separated or quarrelled, day or night, until this very moment. (van Hamel 1933: §38, emphasis and translation mine)

18 Cú Chulainn is also described as Láeg's *comalta* in TBC (2267), not mentioned in this discussion.

19 Notably, Lancelot has Galehaut buried 'in what will be his own tomb' so that they will be 'united as a couple in death' (Mieszkowski, 1995: 42). See also Cohen (1999: 181–183).

The phrase *do chenglamar aráen re chéile* suggests a formal oath or promise binding Cú Chulainn and Láeg. Both manuscripts place emphasis on the lack of quarrels between them, positioning this as a partnership 'without strife' as emphasised in ecclesiastical rites of brotherhood (Rapp 2016: 83, 163, 229) – in other words, they have kept to the terms of the oath they swore to each other.[20] Conventions of sworn brotherhood may also explain why Emer, following Cú Chulainn's death, asks Láeg *nár athain Cú Chulainn mise dhíot, nó an dtug teagasg dá theaghlach*? 'did Cú Chulainn not entrust me to you, or did he give instructions for his household?' (OCC §92). Láeg's response that Cú Chulainn asked only for her not to take another husband unless he is one of the Ulaid implies that Emer is asking whether Cú Chulainn intended Láeg to provide for her now that she is widowed – a puzzling expectation if Láeg is read as a mere servant. However, Rapp (2016: 30) notes that sworn brothers in the medieval West 'took responsibility for each other on the battlefield, […] inherited each other's quarrels and feuds, and **were prepared to take care of each other's kin**, should the necessity arise' (emphasis mine). This is demonstrated in fifteenth-century England by the promises made by Nicholas Molyneux and John Winter (Bray 2003: 115–116), as well as in English lyric poems of the same period, where the friendship of Jesus and St John is represented as sworn brotherhood and this bond is positioned as the reason Christ entrusts his mother's care to John (Bray 2003: 116–122). Given the Christian imagery apparent at various points in OCC, it would not be surprising if Láeg were being deliberately framed here as Cú Chulainn's 'beloved disciple', but even outside of this specific parallel, it certainly appears that he is being positioned as someone to whom Cú Chulainn's family may be entrusted – i.e. as his sworn brother.

Similarly, TBC portrays Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad not solely as foster-brothers courtesy of their mutual training with Scáthach, but as sworn brothers who have bound themselves to one another with oaths and some kind of formal ceremony. Immediately before 'Feidm is mó', Fer Diad describes Cú Chulainn as his *fear cadaigh 7 cumainn*, a significant phrase. *Cadaigh* is a genitive of *cotach*, 'covenant, pact, treaty of friendship' (eDIL s.v. 1 cotach), while *cumainn* similarly has connotations of 'alliance, pact' as well as 'friendship, affection' (eDIL, s.v. commann). In the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, Gwynn (1924: 102–103) translates *fer cotaig* as 'partner' in the sense of 'husband'. Bray (2003: 82) describes the Middle English term 'wed' as 'a pledge or a covenant', such that 'the vows of sworn brotherhood and of a betrothal alike – as binding promises – were "weddings"'. With this in mind, we might translate *fear cadaigh* as 'wedded man', with similar

20 Although no Western ecclesiastical rites survive to directly parallel the Eastern ones discussed by Rapp, what we know of monastic conceptions of friendship and secular brotherhood covenants in the West (see Rapp 2016: 30–37) suggests it is not unreasonable to assume similar expectations of behaviour from 'brothers'.

flexibility in the exact nature of the bond described. Later in TBC, during his lament for Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn describes this covenant in more detail: *Do naisc ar mbuimi co mbladh | ar ccro cadaigh is áontadh* 'Our renowned fostermother bound our blood of covenant and unity' (TBC 3440–3441).[21] This detail is expanded upon in *Foglaim Con Culainn*, another tale dating possibly to the fifteenth century (Ó hUiginn 2002: 43), where Scáthach frames the pledge as necessary to prevent the exact outcome of CFD:

> *Nocha tteighirse léo, ar si, no go gcenglarsa cro cadat 7 caradraidh eattraibh uile, ionnus nach cuirfedh fir an domain a gcenn a cheile sibh dochum comhraic no comhlainn, ar ní baoghul daoibh nech oile isan doman dabur mbáoghlugudh muna ttiasar úaibh fein fribh.*
>
> 'Thou shalt not go with them,' says she, 'until I bind a covenant of honour and friendship between you all, so that the world's men may never put one of you against the other to conflict or combat, for you are in no danger of any one else in the world imperilling you, unless it come from yourselves against you.' (*Foglaim Con Culainn*, §58)

Here, however, the bond seems to be formed between the entire group of warriors-in-training, not between Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad alone. This is less supported by TBC, where Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad's relationship appears to be of a different order to that of Cú Chulainn and his other foster-brothers, none of whose deaths in single combat have anything like the same emotional impact on him. Indeed, if this oath or covenant was formed only between the two of them, then this may explain *why* this relationship is different. Fosterage is an important form of fictive kinship and may have a powerful emotional component, and perhaps Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad were simply closer than their other foster-brothers because of their near-equality in skill. However, as well as the unique intensity of Cú Chulainn's grief at Fer Diad's death, most of his interactions with other foster-brothers contain no reference to covenants or oaths. The closest comes in his encounter with Fer Báeth, where he appeals to *in comann 7 in caratradh boi etarra* 'the alliance and friendship that was between them' (TBC 1929–1930), but although this might imply a similar pact, it appears somewhat weaker, with no explicit reference to an oath or 'wed',[22] and no reference to any drinking of blood (see below). This suggests that Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad's relationship is a narrower, more specific relationship than that which is shared between the

21 Translated with reference to eDIL s.v. 1 *cotach*; see also Hodges (1927: 115, 138–139).

22 This is not the case in the first recension, where Cú Chulainn asks Fer Báeth to *Doselba do chotach* 'Renounce your bond of friendship' (TBC1 1775) if he will not refuse to fight. This fits with the broader pattern of the second recension placing greater emphasis on the combat with Fer Diad as the emotional climax of the tale, including distinguishing him more from Cú Chulainn's other foster-brothers.

larger group: they are foster-brothers, but they have *also* chosen to become sworn brothers.

What form did Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad's oath of brotherhood take? In the stanza following this phrase (TBC 3445–3447), Chulainn claims that Fer Diad is *in cara | dar dailes digh ndergfhola* 'the friend to whom I served a drink of red blood'.[23] This statement is somewhat ambiguous. It can be read as a reference to the fatal injury Cú Chulainn has dealt Fer Diad, particularly through comparison with the *deoch thonnaidh* 'drink of death' in *Aided Meidbe*, where the *crú fola* 'clot of blood' in the king's mouth is a 'vomit from a ruptured heart' (Boyd 2019: 84). However, as it follows directly after the reference to *ar ccro cadaigh*, it may instead reference the brotherhood ritual or covenant. This is certainly how Hodges (1927: 117–125) interprets it, outlining a number of parallels between this 'blood covenant' and others in the Irish tradition. But although this line may well suggest a ritual in which blood-drinking played a role, the extent to which this should be read as evidence of a historical *pagan* ceremony of blood-brotherhood is more doubtful. Hodges assumes that references to relics and priests as part of such ceremonies must be a later imposition, but none of his cited examples are in any way pre-Christian, and some explicitly involve Christian participants.[24] Moreover, it is worth noting that the Eucharist – a drinking of (Jesus') blood – played an important role in Christian ceremonies of ritual kinship, which were certainly taking place in late medieval Ireland. Could we, therefore, read this moment as evoking a *Christian* ritual of kinship, or at least a Christian conception of what such ceremonies would entail?

One form of ritual kinship known in late medieval Ireland was *gossipred*, or godparenthood. Alongside fosterage and marriage, gossipred was sufficiently effective at forming emotional and political bonds across cultural and ethnic boundaries that there was an attempt to outlaw such relationships between Anglo-Irish and Gaelic communities in the Statutes of Kilkenny in 1367 (Parkes 2006: 368). The fact that tract-writer H.C. was still condemning these three forms of alliance c.1600 suggests that the Statutes were unsuccessful in eliminating them (Fitzsimons 2001: 138–139). Revolving around baptism, godparenthood or *gossipred* was a specifically Christian form of spiritual kinship, named in Irish sources as *cairdes Críst*, but seems to have been broader in scope and function than its literal definition: Parkes (2006: 372) notes that it 'may have had looser extensions to ritual partnerships apart from baptismal sponsorship (*baithes*), even being associated with blood-brotherhood pacts'. In his tract, H.C. refers to a form of gossipred created 'by abusinge the holy sacrament of the comunion', which Parkes (2006: 373) interprets to refer to 'blood-brotherhood consecrated with the Eucharist', perhaps the same practice condemned by Gerald of Wales four hundred

23 Translation from O'Rahilly (1967: 233) of LL 3533–3534.

24 For further discussion of Hodges, see Kicki Ingridsdotter (2009: 21–22).

years earlier. In the *Topographia Hibernica* (III, XXII: 167), Gerald describes a ceremony to form *compaternitatis fœdera* 'a covenant of compaternity', in which men *ter cica ecclesiam se invicem portant* 'carry each other three times around the church',[25] make oaths before a church altar, and *tanquam desponsatione quadam indissolubiliter fœderantur* 'are joined indissolubly as if by a betrothal' through the celebration of Mass; at the end of this they drink each other's blood. Such rituals, he says, rarely succeed in creating a peaceful alliance – likely to have been the official intention[26] – instead often ending in *sanguinolentum divortium* 'a bloody divorce'.[27] As always, Gerald's account must be read with caution, and, given his vested interest in portraying the Irish as barbaric, it is difficult to know how much credence to give to his claim that this drinking of blood was a practice *de ritu gentilium adhuc habent, qui sanguine in firmandis fœderibus uti solent* 'they retain from the custom of the pagans, who use blood in the sealing of oaths' (*Topographia Hibernica* III, XXII: 167). Indeed, Oschema (2006: 286) believes it 'should be read as part of a strategy with the aim to compromise a nation

25 Rapp (2016: 75) notes that 'triple circling' formed part of Byzantine baptismal rituals, with 'the priest leading the godfather who carried the child', before becoming part of brotherhood and marriage ceremonies from the fourteenth century. The inclusion of this detail in conjunction with Gerald's use of the term *compaternitatis* suggests that the description is modelled on a real ritual deriving from baptismal/godparent ceremonies, and is not pure invention.

26 I interpret this ritual as a form of peace treaty effected through the creation of voluntary kinship of some kind. However, the intent as stated in the opening line is ambiguous: *Sub religionis et pacis obtentu ad sacrum aliquem locum conveniunt,* ***cum eo quem oppetere cupiunt*** (*Topographia Hibernica* III, XXII: 167, my emphasis). O'Meara's (1982: 108) translation of 'Under the guise of religion and peace they assemble at some holy place **with him whom they wish to kill**' may suggest that the whole ritual is a pretence and there is no intention of 'peace'. Alternatively, it may simply mean meeting with someone who is currently an enemy, in order to form a truce. Bray (2003: 23), on the other hand, translates this as 'with the man with whom they are eager to be united', suggesting a ritual motivated by a desire for sworn brotherhood. DMLBS does offer 'to seek to win or acquire (a person as friend or ally)' as a meaning for *oppetere*, but this passage is the only attestation, and Bray's translation seems to skew the line too strongly towards his chosen interpretation. Boswell (1995: 259) renders the phrase more neutrally as 'the man they want to join', encompassing the possibility of a desired union or friendship, but also potentially something as simple as 'the man they intend to meet'. The ambiguity in Gerald may be deliberate, and seems to echo the Irish term *comrac*, which can be used for a meeting, combat, legal confrontation, or sexual encounter (eDIL s.v. 1 comrac). Perhaps a similar semantic range is at work here. I am grateful to Eleanor Smith for her assistance in translating and interpreting this passage. Note that Cú Chulainn and Láeg's 'perpetual friendship' in TGG develops from an agreement made after combat – a sworn friendship emerging from a peace treaty may still be emotional and significant.

27 All translations of *Topographia Hibernica* are from Bray (2003: 23), except for *compaternitas fœdera*, where I have followed Parkes (2006) as the most neutral rendering. Bray translates this term as *covenants of spiritual brotherhood*; Boswell (1995: 259) as *pacts of kinship*. O'Meara (1982: 108) translates it as 'a treaty on the basis of their common fathers', which seems incorrect and misleading.

whose members take part in this kind of barbarian activities', in keeping with a broader pattern for such blood rituals to be attributed by ancient and medieval authors 'to peoples or people whom they consider to be barbarians or villains' (Oschema 2006: 282). Even Gerald, however, acknowledges the role of saints' relics and priests in this ritual, however blasphemously used, and the Christian dimension to such bonds is firmly established. In the Annals of Loch Cé for 1277, meanwhile, there is a reference to the creation of 'cairdessa Criost' through the comingling of blood and the exchange of (Christian) vows, in a context where it is clearly functioning 'beyond its canonical prototype of co-parenthood by spiritual sponsorship' (Parkes 2006: 372–373).

There is thus some overlap between rituals which involved the Eucharist and those involving the mixing of participants' blood, as well as in bonds created for spiritual purposes and those intended to form secular alliances. *Gossipred* in its most basic form of co-sponsorship at baptism may well have served to create 'pacts of alliance', but it seems that such covenants referenced in the annals could also 'sometimes refer to sworn brotherhoods in the absence of godparental sponsorship, connoting ritual confraternity rather than spiritual compaternity' (Parkes 2006: 373). As such, it may provide a closer historical parallel to literary sworn brotherhood than fosterage, which we have seen to be an overlapping but not synonymous relationship. Crucially, while the ceremonies described above may have been condemned by hostile observers as a blasphemous abuse of the Eucharist, they are nevertheless still operating within a Christian ritual context, with communion playing an essential role – as it did in other rituals of brotherhood in Europe from the twelfth to at least the fifteenth century (Bray 2003: 25). A ceremony of brotherhood culminating in a shared 'drink of blood' should therefore not *automatically* be read as implying pagan ritual: it might just as easily be an echo of a contemporary practice, archaised with a pagan gloss by TBC's Christian author to suit the self-consciously pre-Christian setting, but nevertheless recognisable to his audience with all the emotional and political weight that knowledge of real-world alliances would add to the scene.

A Christian reading of CFD is encouraged by the role of kissing in this encounter. At the end of the first two days of their combat, Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad mark the end of hostilities by exchanging *teora póga* 'three kisses' (TBC 2948; 2988).[28] These kisses create a temporary reconciliation, reasserting the bonds of brotherhood that have been repudiated so that the pair may share resources and sleep beside each other. In doing so, they function not simply as a greeting or expression of affection, but as a Christian 'kiss of peace', evoking the brotherhood ritual that might have created their bond in the first place. Ritual kisses form part of brotherhood ceremonies in a number of romances and ballads of the later medieval period (Bray 2003: 17), and kisses had played

28 These kisses are also present in the twelfth-century LL text (3120, 3163).

a significant role in Christian liturgy since antiquity.[29] Kissing in early Christian thought is fundamentally connected to ideas of spiritual kinship and unity with Christ, 'a unity which made brothers and sisters of persons unrelated by blood' (Phillips 2020: 15), and becomes intrinsically linked to the sharing of peace, *pax* – indeed, the Irish word *póc* is a Latin loanword originally from *pax* (eDIL s.v. *póc*). In the twelfth century, Aelred of Rievaulx wrote that the corporeal kiss should be offered for 'worthy reasons' such as 'as a sign of reconciliation, when they become friends who were previously at enmity with one another' (*Spiritual Friendship* 2:24) – which is exactly the purpose the kisses serve here. Rapp (2016: 31–32) describes a fourteenth-century brotherhood agreement achieved through ecclesiastical intervention to end 'bitter fighting', 'sealed by the celebration of communion' and 'the ritual exchange of a kiss of peace', which was then 'made public through displays of familiarity such as sharing table and bed, and affirmed through their mutual address as "brother"'. Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad similarly signal their temporary truce through the sharing of resources and such household as is possible in their circumstances: following their exchange of kisses, we are told that *Tucsat a n-e[i]ch i n-enscor an oidchi sin 7a n-araidh im éntenidh* 'That night their horses were in one paddock and their charioteers at one fire' (TBC 2949).[30] On the third night, however, when kisses are not exchanged, *ni rabatar a n-e[i]ch i n-enscor an oidhchi sin (no a n-araidh acc eintheinidh)* 'their horses were not in the same paddock that night, nor their charioteers at one fire' (TBC 3061–3062). The shared household created by the kiss of peace – the brotherhood – has splintered, and the violent, tragic ending of the episode becomes inevitable. Thus, while to a modern audience the immediate association of kissing may be with erotic or romantic potential, to a Christian audience of this period, these kisses function as a sign of Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad's decision to suspend their combat and enter once more into a bond of brotherhood, declaring both reconciliation and union. It foregrounds their kinship in the present moment, emphasising that their brotherhood was not a childish association left behind in maturity, but a bond they are choosing to reassert even on the cusp of its utter destruction – heightening the tragedy of Fer Diad's death. Perhaps, too, it may be read as a critique of destructive violence that undermines Christian society and turns brothers into enemies.

Despite the need for care and caution in interpreting expressions of physical intimacy like kissing within their historical context, however, the fact that the erotic or romantic is not *automatically* implied by such details does not mean that it should be excluded from consideration altogether, and a comparison of these relationships with marriage means such aspects warrant examination. There is

29 See Phillips (2010) on the development of the kiss from an exchange of spirit to an expression of unity and radical kinship in the early church.

30 Translation from O'Rahilly (1967: 223), of LL 3121–3122.

a tendency for modern readers to assume that marriage not only contains but is predicated on physical desire or love between the individuals in the relationship – that 'romantic love and marriage are inextricable, causally interrelated, and largely coterminous' (Boswell 1995: xx). This has not, however, historically been the primary motivation for marriage; Boswell (1995: 171) notes that 'until the twelfth century marriage was not connected, in law, theology, or the popular imagination, with erotic or romantic fulfillment. Indeed, marriage *should not* be based on sexual attraction according to the church'. As a form of voluntary kinship, marriage served many legal functions (the joining of families, the transfer of territory, peace between warring factions) that have nothing to do with physical desire between the individuals in the relationship. And yet as modern readers, we take for granted that it could or perhaps *should* also encompass such desire, and assume that the procreative and dynastic intentions of marriage are central to distinguishing it from other forms of voluntary kinship, which do not inherently involve sexual activity. Is this, in fact, how marriage is depicted here, and if so, what possibilities and ambiguities does this introduce for sworn brotherhood?

Although marriage laws positioned sex as an expected part of medieval Irish marriage, little emphasis is placed on sexual activity between Cú Chulainn and Emer in these texts, or even more broadly in the Ulster Cycle, and the reproductive potential of marriage is rarely foregrounded. For Cú Chulainn, procreation occurs only (and repeatedly) outside of marriage,[31] and one of the only explicit references to sex between Cú Chulainn and Emer concerns a time when it is *not* happening: in *Serglige Con Culainn*, Emer complains that Cú Chulainn's infirmity has prevented *chotlud fó chomríagail* 'sleeping in wedlock' (*Serglige Con Culainn* 384). Though this implies that they sleep together at other times, I am aware of no on-page references to this, even though sex is more explicitly referenced in Cú Chulainn's interactions with other women. Findon (1997: 47) notes the emphasis placed on Emer's chastity and purity in *Tochmarc Emire*, possibly as a result of 'clerical influence' in the construction of an idealised female character; the fact that this sexlessness seems to continue after marriage might suggest a continuation of this Christian emphasis on chaste relations, positioning Emer as a figure of restraint. Furthermore, none of my three focus texts shows significant concern for procreation, biological children, or inheritance; the closest we come is Emer's comment in OCC (§92) that Lugaid Sriabh nDearg will not have a foster-father to fight for him or assist him after Cú Chulainn's death, shifting the emphasis to non-biological kin. The idea that marriage in these stories is automatically or primarily a sexual relationship for reproductive purposes – and so fundamentally

31 Cú Chulainn's children by other women include Connla, Finnscoth, Cairpre Cláen, Bé Tuinne, Caulnia, and Condluan (Leenane, 2014: 195). Finnscoth is once tentatively connected with Emer, but on the whole the marriage is not depicted as producing children, a detail 'not presented as problematic' (Leenane, 2014: 180–181).

different from other forms of kinship or what we might label 'friendship' – may be too simplistic.

When it comes to identifying what we might call 'romantic love', the picture becomes even more complex, as this concept is itself a modern one. An examination of the vocabulary used to express affection and describe relationships in medieval and early modern Irish literature reveals that many of the same words – such as *cara, caratrad,* and *cairdes* – are used to describe relationships from military alliances to friendship to marriage to casual or illicit sex, and the overlap is not merely linguistic. The modern delineation of emotions that separates 'romantic love' or 'desire' from 'platonic friendship' and 'familial love' is not a universal ontological truth, but a construction specific to our contemporary Western society and understanding. This is not to suggest that these relationships were interchangeable to the medieval mind, but that the medieval boundaries between these categories were fluid, and rarely drawn where we as modern readers might assume they should be drawn.[32] As in the English sources examined by Bray,

> different kinds of kinship terminology overlap and shade into each other and are not clearly distinguished from friendship. To select one element as the substance – or to discount others as mere rhetoric – would be to fail to do justice to the plain insistence of these expressions, however confusing or conceptually difficult they may now appear to us. (Bray 2003: 83)

Housley (2022: 161–163) writes that, 'because the epistemology of emotion was conceptualized differently in the middle ages, and a whole range of emotion words that may or may not fit modern conceptions of the emotions must be translated, there is a danger of ignoring medieval constructions of emotion in favor of modern concepts' – a danger that is often cited as a reason to avoid 'anachronistic' readings such as queer readings. Alongside the compelling arguments Housley then offers for the value of such anachronistic approaches despite this issue, it is worth pointing out that this danger is equally present in many 'normative' readings. As noted by Brown (1997: 378) in response to Boswell's famous characterisation of ritual brotherhood as a form of proto- 'gay marriage',[33] 'Although I think

32 Boswell (1995: 76) makes a similar observation about the ancient world: 'the distinction between a "friendship" and a "love relationship," so obvious, intuitive, and important to modern readers, would have seemed odd and unproductive to most ancient writers. […] a consensual physical aspect would have been utterly irrelevant to placing the relationship in a meaningful taxonomy.'

33 Boswell (1995) studied the Byzantine ecclesiastical rite of *adelphopoiesis* ('brother-making') and concluded that similarities between these rites and marriage rituals meant these were intended to sanctify and legitimise same-sex unions. It is not possible here to summarise the historiographical responses to this argument, which have been extensive, but the bibliography compiled by Paul Halsall for the *People with a History: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans* History Sourcebook* offers a starting point: https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/pwh/index-bos.asp (accessed 14/08/25).

Boswell justified in arguing that different relationships in different periods may lead to sexual intimacy and intercourse, and that some are more likely to do so than others, it seems to me dangerous to assume such intimacy, homosexual **or heterosexual**' (emphasis mine). We need to look not only at how non-normative and unfamiliar relationships are being constructed within these texts, but *also* how normative and seemingly familiar ones like marriage are portrayed. When we do so, it begins to look less as though Fer Diad or Láeg's relationship with Cú Chulainn is *like Emer's*, and more that Emer's is *like Fer Diad or Láeg's*.

Does such a reading preclude queer possibilities? Quite the opposite. Firstly, 'romantic love' and physical desire may not define marriage in these tales, but it does not follow that they cannot be present within it; thus, just because they do not define sworn brotherhood, that does not mean they cannot also be present there, even if they may be unusual or atypical. Secondly, such an approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the gender dynamics at play. Rather than defining relationships primarily according to the sex of the participants – and therefore the heterosexual desire they are assumed to involve or exclude – we may look more closely at how relationships are *actually* constructed and expressed, including the power dynamics at work and the legal status of participants. This in turn may illuminate not only gender but also how it intersects with class.[34] Thirdly, the idea that similarities in these relationships *must* signify either the presence of homoerotic desire in the male/male relationships or male characters' rhetorical appropriation of the language of marriage without its substance rests on an amatonormative assumption about the role and centrality of marriage in the construction of interpersonal bonds. 'Marriage', as a sexual union between a man and a woman, is taken as the template, with all other relationships understood in relation to it – as a form of marriage, an imitation of it, or a purely linguistic echo. Such a hierarchy undermines the substance and sincerity of Láeg and Fer

However, in what Halsall lists as 'by far the most important book on "brother making ceremonies"', Rapp (2016) analyses Byzantine *adelphopoiesis* further and concludes that these rites are more likely to have developed in the context of Christian initiation and monastic partnerships, and that they do not resemble or function like marriage rituals as much as Boswell thought. Tulchin (2007), meanwhile, discusses late medieval Mediterranean *affrèrements* as a potential inheritor of the *adelphopoiesis* tradition and another formal structure of non-nuclear family, this time with a strong economic component absent from the ecclesiastic unions. Both acknowledge that these unions may have potentially included or facilitated a romantic/sexual component to the relationship, but are not defined by or designed for this. Further comparative work exploring parallels between these Irish texts and the historical and literary brotherhoods of different countries and cultures would be rewarding, especially as Irish material is rarely included in broader European studies.

34 It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this aspect in detail, but such analysis is sorely needed. I will note in passing that Emer is arguably much closer to being Cú Chulainn's equal than Láeg is, though these dynamics shift in different texts and circumstances.

Diad's declarations unless they can be understood in the context of something 'more' than friendship, the elevation of affection by proximity to marriage. In fact, both sworn brotherhood and marriage can be understood as equally important and socially sanctioned possibilities within a spectrum of bonds of voluntary kinship. These relationships do not exist in a hierarchy of intimacy but are all interrelated, narratively and emotionally significant, and neither dependent on nor incompatible with physical desire. As a relationship that disrupts heteronormative readings and encourages greater interrogation of the (potentially minimal) role of gender and sexuality in defining interpersonal bonds, friendship in the form of sworn brotherhood may thus be understood as a queer possibility in and of itself.

In this paper, I have offered four main arguments. First, that the similarities of these shared grave motifs highlight underlying parallels between the relationships being expressed, which may be understood as 'voluntary kinship', expressed variously as marriage or sworn brotherhood. Second, that sworn brotherhood is a theme found across romances, ballads, and courtly narratives of the late medieval and early modern period, an idealised form of a historical institution, and that in developing and emphasising this theme, these early modern tales situate Irish characters within a broader narrative context. Literary sworn brotherhood may overlap with historical Irish institutions like fosterage and gossipred, but it is not *uniquely* Irish, nor is it primarily a remnant of some kind of pagan blood brotherhood: these relationships should be understood through the lens of ritual brotherhood in the explicitly Christian context of later medieval Europe. Third, that 'friendship' or 'kinship' is not a category that excludes all possibility of desire, such that to prove a 'friend' or 'brother' is to disprove a 'lover', but neither is physical desire a necessary prerequisite for exploring queer possibilities and challenging heteronormative assumptions. When we are open to the possibility that the relationship between a man and a woman may have direct social and emotional parallels in the relationship between two men, we gain greater insight into how relationships function narratively and emotionally, often in terms that transgress and blur modern categories. And finally, that however interrelated these texts may be, Láeg and Fer Diad's declarations are not merely rhetorical echoes of Emer's claims, but a reflection of their genuine role in Cú Chulainn's life.

'If there is a term that characterizes those whom humankind has thought it appropriate to bury together, it is that word "conjunctissimi",' writes Bray (2003: 94). This word, he explains, 'implies a formal and binding union, one created alike by friendship or by kinship – a "conjunx" is for example a husband or wife – a term like the "wedded" of Middle English, which could be used comfortably both for a "wedded" or sworn brother and for a "wedded" wife.' We are reminded again of Fer Diad's description of Cú Chulainn as his *fhear cadaigh.* Cú Chulainn may not have been married to Fer Diad and Láeg as he was to Emer, but he was

wedded to them – and perhaps, had circumstances been different and their wishes fulfilled, he would have been buried with them, too.

Abbreviations

CFD	Comrac Fir Diad
DMLBS	The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources
eDIL	An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language
LL	Trinity College Dublin MS 1339 (olim H 2.18), The Book of Leinster
OCC	Oidheadh Con Culainn (Ní Mhaoláin 2008)
TBC	Táin Bó Cúailnge (O'Rahilly 1961)
TBC1	Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension 1 (O'Rahilly 1976)
TGG	Tóruigheacht Gruaidhe Griansholus (O'Rahilly 1922/24)

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