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‘WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS THIS HOUND?’:1 GENDER, HUMANITY AND THE TRANSGRESSIVE FIGURE OF CÚ CHULAINN

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Abstract

*The medieval Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* depicts the youthful Cú Chulainn standing alone on the borders of Ulster, defending his people against invasion. In this role, he is a liminal figure, defending and crossing boundaries, and his heroic identity is predicated on his marginality. In this paper I demonstrate how Cú Chulainn transgresses boundaries of gender and identity, disrupting categorisation in a way that highlights his liminality. In particular, I use queer theory to explore a transmasculine reading of Cú Chulainn’s unconventional masculinity, as well as drawing on theories of monstrosity to examine how his supernatural and non-human characteristics serve to marginalise him further. In doing so, I disrupt conventional readings of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* that position Cú Chulainn as a hypermasculine figure, and foreground a more fluid understanding of gender and identity within the text.*

The Cú Chulainn of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is a figure encountered on fords and boundaries, crossing rivers and blocking paths as he stands almost alone to defend his homeland against the invaders led by Medb and Ailill. In his role as watchdog, he occupies an uncertain position that straddles the boundaries between youth and adulthood, insider and outsider, human and Other. In this paper I will examine the character of Cú Chulainn using queer theory and theories of monstrosity to explore ambiguities of gender and identity and how these are inextricably tied to Cú Chulainn’s Otherness. My focus is on the first two recensions of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*TBC*), with reference to other texts only where they help elucidate aspects of *TBC*. I am working from the editions produced by Cecile O’Rahilly; the first recension (hereafter *TBC-I*) is therefore the text based primarily on

¹ “Cinnas fir in Cú” – *TBC-I*, l. 374. This paper developed out of an undergraduate dissertation entitled ‘A beardless boy: ambiguities of gender and sexuality in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and related tales’. I am grateful to Máire Ní Mhaonaigh for her supervisory guidance, and to Kevin Murray and Blake Gutt for their subsequent comments and encouragement.

Lebor na hUidre and the *Yellow Book of Lecan*,² and the second recension (hereafter *TBC-II*) is the *Book of Leinster* text.³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations given are O’Rahilly’s.

Uebel writes that a monster ‘is defined by the disruption of boundaries’.⁴ By this definition, Cú Chulainn is a monster cast in the role of a hero, and to the Connachta and their allies, that is exactly what he is: a supernaturally powerful and grotesque figure against whom they send their strongest champions, only to lose them one by one. But this is not how *TBC* portrays him: his beauty is grotesque, but it is admired, and his abilities are feared and respected. Yet Cú Chulainn still does not come across as human. His body warps itself into a new form under the force of his rage; he performs magic and curses to disrupt and confuse his enemies. He is ‘n-ílrechtach n-ingantach n-anaichnid’ (‘many shaped, strange and unrecognisable’);⁵ he is compared to a ‘drecoin’ (‘dragon’) or a ‘sirite’ (‘sprite’). As supernatural watchdog, he walks the line between monster and hero, occupying a category of his own, and his animalistic traits bring him closer to the ‘hound’ of his name and further from humanity. These transgressions of category are not to the detriment of his heroic status but essential to it, allowing him to step beyond the limitations of other men to achieve victory over his opponents. It is because Cú Chulainn crosses boundaries that he is able to defend them for others, even while his liminality makes him an outsider, unable to conform to societal norms.

Likewise, he is a figure wreathed in ambiguities of gender. *TBC* is often characterised as a series of binary oppositions—Connacht vs Ulster, Medb vs Cú Chulainn, feminine vs masculine—and Cú Chulainn has traditionally been read as a hypermasculine figure.⁶ But I would argue that these distinctions are not nearly so absolute: just as the exiles blur the line between provinces, *TBC* makes a point of undermining and problematising Cú Chulainn’s masculinity, repeatedly emphasising his failure to conform to gendered societal expectations. He is beardless, small in stature, and frequently described as beautiful, and while none of these elements in and of themselves suggest a problematised masculinity, this combination of traits in conjunction with Cú Chulainn’s societal position

² Cecile O’Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), hereafter *TBC-I*.

³ Cecile O’Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), hereafter *TBC-II*.

⁴ Uebel, quoted in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and members of Interscripta, ‘The Armour of an Alienating Identity’, *Arthuriana*, 6.4 (1996), 1–24 (p. 8).

⁵ *TBC-I*, 1. 2246.

⁶ For example, see Sarah Sheehan, ‘Fer Diad De-flowered: Homoerotics and Masculinity in Comrac Fir Diad’, in *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, National University of Ireland Maynooth, 24-27 June 2005*, ed. by Ruairí Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009), pp. 54–65.

and unsettled relationship with his own body invites further exploration of his performance of gender, or the failure thereof. Moreover, these characteristics create space for a transmasculine reading of Cú Chulainn.⁷ As Spencer-Hall and Gutt note, ““Transgender” is not just an identity, or a form of embodiment, but a way of disrupting normative and essentializing frameworks’.⁸ By proposing this interpretation of Cú Chulainn, I do not intend to impose an anachronistic modern identity on a medieval character. Nor am I implying, by highlighting the ways he fails or refuses to adequately perform socially sanctioned masculinity, that a trans male identity is false, problematic, or deceptive. Rather, I suggest that there is a disconnect between Cú Chulainn’s sense of self, behaviour, and societal role, and the expectations of those around him, in ways that resonate with modern transmasculine experiences. It is his disruption of gendered expectations that makes a trans reading of Cú Chulainn so productive—and his success in proving the limitations of those expectations demonstrates that divergence from the norm can be powerful and heroic. Crucially, others question Cú Chulainn’s masculinity in the sense of his validity as an opponent, but they are continually proven wrong by his victories; when his beardlessness causes him to be dismissed as unthreatening, this assumption is shown to be false. His ability to adopt these external markers of masculinity and subvert the expectations of those around him reminds us that gender identities are constructed rather than ingrained—and if a young, small, beardless boy can out-perform a bearded warrior, the supposed prerequisites of masculinity are not as essential as they may seem. As Lowe observes, he is ‘the ultimate expression of masculinity and therefore the proof of its absurdity’.⁹ This reading thus allows us to dismantle the conventional interpretation of *TBC* and its characters as normative, binary and rigidly gendered, and explore a more nuanced critique of the construction of identity within this text.

Táin Bó Cúailnge

There are several reasons for limiting my study to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* rather than attempting a wider overview of Cú Chulainn in medieval Irish literature as a whole. The first is that trying to incorporate readings of Cú Chulainn from across a corpus of diverse and divergent texts would suggest unity in how his character is portrayed. However, the grouping of these stories under the heading of the ‘Ulster Cycle’ is a modern

⁷ Transmasculine: somebody who was identified as female at birth, but has transitioned to a masculine identity.

⁸ Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (eds.), *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), p. 13.

⁹ Jeremy Lowe, ‘Kicking over the Traces: The Instability of Cú Chulainn’, *Studia Celtica*, XXXIV (2000), 119–30 (p. 128).

distinction, and does not necessarily reflect medieval approaches to the material.¹⁰ Although there is a level of interconnectivity between the stories, particularly between *TBC* and its *remscéla* or fore-*tales*, they are not a consistent and continuous narrative, and there is considerable variation in how characters are portrayed in different texts. The second is that *TBC* in particular invites examination of Cú Chulainn's identity because its very premise relies upon his exclusion from the category of 'men of Ulster'. He is defending the province alone because of the curse or debility that renders the men of the Ulaid unable to fight, weakened like 'a woman in labour'.¹¹ There is no explanation for the debility given within *TBC* itself, but *Noínden Ulad* tells of how Macha curses the men of Ulster as revenge for being forced to compete in a race while heavily pregnant.¹² Cú Chulainn is not affected by this debility, and Sheehan argues that this emphasises his masculinity since he is untouched by the 'feminisation' of the province imposed by the curse,¹³ although elsewhere she cautions that *Noínden Ulad* is only 'one available intertext whose gendered implications are not necessarily authorized by the *Táin* itself'.¹⁴ Even within the context of *Noínden Ulad*, I would argue that Cú Chulainn's exemption suggests the opposite: it casts doubt on his masculinity. Macha's curse specifically affects the men of the Ulaid: 'non-men', such as women and young boys, are not afflicted. Cú Chulainn's implicit inclusion in this category invites further interrogation. His exemption appears to be unique—it does not seem to be solely due to his youth, as he is named separately from the young boys, and while many have suggested that it is because his status as one of the Ulaid is in doubt, in the 'Macgnímrada' ('Boyhood Deeds') section of *TBC* he is explicitly identified as 'di Ultaib dó' ('of the Ulstermen').¹⁵ The plot of *TBC* relies on Cú Chulainn's exemption, yet it is never explained, and this mystery disrupts his easy categorisation as 'man' and asks us to consider the ways in which Cú Chulainn might be classified as 'non-man'.

Finally, *TBC* is a narrative which emphasises the instability of Cú Chulainn's identity and position. It is a text in which conventional social

¹⁰ Erich Poppe, *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters: Some Issues in Medieval Irish Literary History and Criticism*, E.C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures 9 (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, 2008), p. 39.

¹¹ Jeffrey Gantz (trans.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 129.

¹² An alternative explanation is offered in *Ces Ulad*, but this is only found in one late manuscript; *Noínden Ulad* appears to have been a more widespread tradition.

¹³ Sheehan, 'Fer Diad De-flowered', p. 56.

¹⁴ Sarah Sheehan, 'Gender and Sexuality in Early Irish Saga' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2009), p. 54. I am grateful to Sheehan for making her thesis available to me.

¹⁵ *TBC*-I, l. 422. See also *TBC*-II, l. 778: 'rofetammar is do maccaib ánróth Ulad sút' ('we know that he is the son of an Ulster chieftain'). Here, both Cú Chulainn's high status and his position within the Ulaid are confirmed.

structures are being tested and brought into conflict: Cú Chulainn faces four of his foster-brothers in single combat (Fraech, Lóch, Fer Baeth, and Fer Diad), and only narrowly avoids fighting his foster-father, Fergus. Meanwhile, Fergus and the Ulster exiles find themselves in opposition to their own people, forced to decide where their loyalties truly lie. The breakdown of these bonds of loyalty and kinship destabilises the societal structures within which identity is formulated, and Cú Chulainn's role as the focal point of these conflicts only serves to marginalise him further. Cohen notes that 'specific formulations of masculinity like heroism cannot be isolated from the complex of social relationships that imbue gender with meaning',¹⁶ and that identity 'is partly or wholly contingent on community'.¹⁷ In *TBC*, Cú Chulainn is an outsider, even an outlaw: 'is cuid foglada acum-sa' ('I have an outlaw's portion').¹⁸ He is socially isolated for months at a time with only his charioteer Láeg for company, and interacts more frequently with his enemies than with his own people. As a result, he becomes defined by opposition, in the form of single combat, more than by community—by what he is not, rather than by what he is. His role as watchdog both symbolically and physically pushes him to the margins and destabilises his identity. Like the chivalric heroes who flee in madness to the forest, he exists in a feral state, and 'without a social context to imbue personal identity with a signification and without a communally sanctioned arena of performance, "things fall apart; the center cannot hold," masculinity loses its self-awareness and devolves into mere and senseless being'.¹⁹ As a result, Cú Chulainn in *TBC* is at his most ambiguous, transgressing and disrupting identity categories and what it means to be masculine, to be human, or to be a hero.

A beardless boy

One of Cú Chulainn's most distinctive characteristics is his beardlessness, often remarked upon by his opponents. A beardless hero is not especially unusual or unexpected, and this trope situates Cú Chulainn within a broader literary tradition of the beautiful heroic youth. Beardless knights populate Continental romances: Parzival is described as beardless even after having children, while other knights do not grow beards until they are nearly thirty,²⁰ and in *Lancelot du Lac*, the seventeen-year-old

¹⁶ Cohen, 'The Armour of an Alienating Identity', p. 7.

¹⁷ Cohen, 'The Armour of an Alienating Identity', p. 9.

¹⁸ *TBC*-I, l. 2733.

¹⁹ Cohen, 'The Armour of an Alienating Identity', p. 16.

²⁰ James A. Schultz, 'Bodies That Don't Matter: Heterosexuality before Heterosexuality in Gottfried's *Tristan*', in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. by Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 91–110 (pp. 93–94).

Lancelot is described as a ‘young, beardless boy’.²¹ But by far the most famous beardless hero is Achilles, a character with whom Cú Chulainn has been compared by numerous scholars since Alfred Nutt’s description of him as ‘the Irish Achilles’ in 1900.²² This classical parallel is significant: *TBC* makes use of deliberate classical allusions and displays influences from *Togail Troí*, the Irish telling of the Trojan War.²³ Brent Miles believes that medieval Irish audiences would have primarily encountered Achilles through Statius’s *Achilleid*,²⁴ a text which emphasises Achilles’ beardlessness. He notes that although ‘some obvious motifs, such as beardlessness, are bound to recur’ in any text about boy warriors, ‘[t]he density and quality of this imagery in Statius and in the *Táin*’ is ‘out of the ordinary’.²⁵ However, there is one way in which Cú Chulainn is distinct from all of these intertextual parallels: his adoption of a false beard in order to ‘prove’ his masculinity and legitimise his role as defender and combatant. Rather than disprove the necessity of a beard as a marker of a legitimate opponent, shaming his enemies with defeat at the hands of a beardless boy, he disguises himself. This occurs a number of times in the first recension of *TBC*.²⁶ Nad Crantail is the first to question Cú Chulainn’s beardlessness, declaring ‘ní ber do chend ngillai n-amulaig’ (‘I shall not take back your head which is the head of a beardless boy’).²⁷ With Láeg’s help, Cú Chulainn makes a false beard of blackberry juice, and the duel goes ahead. The second false beard occurs in the fight with Lóch, one of Cú Chulainn’s foster brothers, who hesitates to fight Cú Chulainn until he has ascertained that he is bearded and therefore a valid opponent. Cú Chulainn’s response is intriguing: ‘Gabais iarom Cú Chulaind lán duirnd dind feór 7 dichachain fair, combo hed domuined cách combo ulcha baí lais’ (‘Then Cú Chulainn took a handful of grass and chanted a spell over it and they all thought that he had a beard’).²⁸ Here, it is not only a physical disguise, but what seems like a magical illusion in order to satisfy Lóch’s requirements for masculinity.

This insecurity about beardlessness and desire to be correctly categorised according to societal norms of manhood is not apparent in any

²¹ Corin Corley (trans.), *Lancelot of the Lake* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2000), p.126.

²² Michael Clarke, ‘An Irish Achilles and a Greek Cú Chulainn’, in *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, National University of Ireland Maynooth, 24-27 June 2005*, ed. by Ruairí Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009), pp. 238–51 (p. 238).

²³ Brent Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), p. 211.

²⁴ Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic*, p. 35.

²⁵ Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic*, p. 174.

²⁶ Sheehan observes that there is a lacuna in *TBC*-II during the fight with Lóch, which may have resulted in the loss of this instance of the false beard motif from the second recension. See Sheehan, ‘Gender and Sexuality in Early Irish Saga’, p. 142.

²⁷ *TBC*-I, l. 1450.

²⁸ *TBC*-I, ll. 1904–05.

of our non-Irish beardless heroes mentioned above, but neither is it unique to Cú Chulainn. Similar false beards occur in a number of other medieval Irish texts, including *Immacallam in Dá Thúarad*, where the young poet Néide uses grass and magic, in much the same way as Cú Chulainn, to create a beard and establish his eligibility to become an *ollam*.²⁹ This then begins to look like a distinctly Irish motif, reflecting culturally-specific ideas of masculinity and adulthood. Irish laws state that majority is attained at ‘beard-encirclement’, considered to be at age twenty.³⁰ Although demonstrably capable of performing the roles to which they aspire, Néide’s and Cú Chulainn’s lack of beards denies them access to the gendered social category of ‘adult’, requiring them to find a loophole.³¹ In both cases, this is not their own idea, but a response to the imposition of normative standards by a third party: Néide is responding to Bricriu’s instructions, and Cú Chulainn to the doubt of his opponents. It seems that in Irish texts, a beard is a gender marker required to gain access to the identity of ‘hero’ or ‘*ollam*’, though it has no bearing on the individual’s ability or fitness for that role. Both characters are sufficiently familiar with the need to navigate expectations that neither objects—they pick their battles, and do what they need to do to tick the ‘bearded’ box in the eyes of observers. By contrast, beardless heroic youths in Continental and classical texts are not bound by the same expectations, which is why we never see Achilles wearing a false beard.

We have then an easy explanation for Cú Chulainn’s beardlessness (he is too young) as well as for the emphasis which is placed on it (it reflects Irish legal categories). However, while this may *explain* the motif, it does not remove the ambiguity of gender it creates. In fact, Dukes-Knight argues that his youth is what creates this uncertainty: ‘His figure destroys the integrity of the transition from boyhood to manhood in a way that blurs the lines between masculine and feminine and exposes the mutability of the masculine state.’³² Neither man nor boy, he straddles the divide between the two in a way that calls both into question. This is further highlighted by Medb comparing Cú Chulainn to an ‘ingen macdacht’, a marriageable young woman,³³ which Sheehan suggests ‘constructs the

²⁹ Mikhail Kiselev, ‘Some Notes on the Origin of the Motif of the Ulaid’s False Beards in Cáth Áenaig Macha and Cóir Anmann’, *Studia Celtica Fennica* 14 (2017), 85–93 (p. 86).

³⁰ Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series III (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), p. 82; Kiselev, ‘The Ulaid’s False Beards’, p. 87.

³¹ Néide’s exact age is not specified, but he is described as ‘náidenta’ (‘youthful’), and it seems reasonable to assume he is a similar age to Cú Chulainn. See Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), ‘The colloquy of the two sages’, *Revue Celtique* 26 (1905), 4–64 (p. 12).

³² Jennifer Dukes-Knight, ‘The Wooden Sword: Age and Masculinity in “Táin Bó Cúailnge”’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 33 (2013), 107–22 (p. 108).

³³ Such a comparison has implications not only for Cú Chulainn’s gender, but also for Finnabair’s: as the only ‘ingen’ to play a significant role in *TBC*, Medb’s daughter is thus presented as occupying a

hero's youth as feminine'.³⁴ A youth of Cú Chulainn's age may have masculine potential, but is not yet conceptualised as wholly male until certain criteria have been met.

Cú Chulainn's ability to adopt external gender markers in order to appear as a legitimate member of the group considered worthy opponents—i.e. men—poses a problem for others within that group. As Sheehan puts it, 'Cú Chulainn's masquerade is a masculine performance that draws attention to itself as performance' and 'attributes an exteriority and contingency to gender, destabilizing and denaturalizing masculinity'.³⁵ If all that is needed to be counted as a man is a handful of grass or some blackberry juice, what value does that proof of masculinity have? Cú Chulainn's ability to falsify a beard may 'rob it of its significance' as a marker of male identity, and the fact that he goes on to overcome enemies who belong far less ambiguously to the category of 'man' further destabilises the category and undermines 'the capability of that manhood'.³⁶ Despite being an outsider to the group, he outperforms its members at their prescribed role: he is 'the man who is not a man but defeats all men'.³⁷ Dukes-Knight's reading of Cú Chulainn is that he is precocious to the extreme, pushing the envelope of social convention to take on a man's role before he is ready. Even before he creates a false beard, he makes similar use of loopholes to advance through the milestones of masculinity, taking up weapons and mounting his first chariot by claiming to act under Cathbad's instructions, when in fact he was merely eavesdropping.³⁸ Possibly, she suggests, his actions are 'not only precocious, but premature'.³⁹ This is supported by *TBC-II*, where both the boy troop and Conall Cernach object that it is 'romoch' ('too soon') for Cú Chulainn to take arms.⁴⁰

Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds further highlight the instability of his male identity. After riding out in Conchobar's chariot and proving his skill as a hunter and a warrior, he returns 'unable to control the masculine warrior energy that he has aroused', so the women of Ulster bare their breasts to shame him and prevent him from attacking.⁴¹ This shame and frenzy is marked by a masculine physicality, producing heat powerful enough to boil water.⁴² Medieval medical beliefs, largely deriving from

similar societal niche to Cú Chulainn.

³⁴ Sheehan, 'Gender and Sexuality in Early Irish Saga', p. 140.

³⁵ Sheehan, 'Gender and Sexuality in Early Irish Saga', p. 143.

³⁶ Dukes-Knight, 'The Wooden Sword', pp. 117–18.

³⁷ Dukes-Knight, 'The Wooden Sword', p. 119.

³⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 611–52.

³⁹ Dukes-Knight, 'The Wooden Sword', p. 114.

⁴⁰ *TBC-II*, l. 987 and l. 1009.

⁴¹ Dukes-Knight, 'The Wooden Sword', p. 114.

⁴² *TBC-I*, ll. 814–16.

classical sources like Galen and Aristotle, held that men were physically hotter than women,⁴³ and the noun *gal* ‘connotes heat as well as valour’.⁴⁴ The resulting belief in a correlation between heat and masculinity results in extreme body temperatures for heroes. Thus in the Welsh tale *Culhwch ac Olwen*, Cai is described as radiating heat,⁴⁵ and later in *TBC-I*, Cú Chulainn’s mere presence melts the snow around him.⁴⁶ His boiling shame here then suggests extreme, uncontrolled masculinity being radiated from a young age, and the ‘precocious’ argument reads Cú Chulainn as too immature to cope with adult sexuality, despite his skill with weapons. He certainly seems unready or unable to control his own response, but his shame is not necessarily sexual. Edel suggests it is a response to the reminder that he is faced not with enemies but with family, those who suckled and raised him.⁴⁷ I propose an alternative reading: that his response represents an overwhelming need to assert a masculinity which is in flux, and which is being questioned—or even mocked—by external figures, in this case the women of Ulster. This insecurity triggers a powerful overreaction, which manifests here, as elsewhere, as a lack of bodily control and an explosive power.

In light of his extraordinary body heat, it is all the more surprising that Cú Chulainn is beardless. While women were understood to dispose of ‘humoural excesses’ through menstruation, for men it was thought to be ‘cooked’ or processed into beards and other body hair.⁴⁸ Cú Chulainn certainly has plenty of heat, to the point where ‘we would expect [him] to be bearded by age five and father to an extensive brood by thirteen’.⁴⁹ The fact that he is not implies a failure to ‘biologically internalise’ this body heat in a typically masculine fashion, which Amy Mulligan argues is because it is externalised instead: ‘his energies are channelled to benefit others’.⁵⁰ This, however, would suggest no physical manifestation of these humoural excesses within his own body, which is not the case—Cú

⁴³ Joan Cadden, ‘Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy’, in *The Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York and London: Garland, 1996), pp. 51–80 (p. 62).

⁴⁴ Sheehan, ‘Gender and Sexuality in Early Irish Saga’, p. 112.

⁴⁵ Sioned Davies (trans.), *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2007), p. 189.

⁴⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 1579–80.

⁴⁷ Doris Edel, *Inside the Táin: Exploring Cú Chulainn, Fergus, Ailill, and Medb* (Berlin: Curach Bhán, 2015), p. 41.

⁴⁸ Amy Mulligan, ‘The Erasure of a Warrior’s Body: Cú Chulainn, Isidore of Seville and Irish Independence’, in *From Enlightenment to Rebellion: Essays in Honor of Christopher Fox*, ed. J. Buickerood (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2018), pp. 33–46 (p. 39).

⁴⁹ Mulligan, ‘The Erasure of a Warrior’s Body’, p. 39.

⁵⁰ Amy Mulligan, ‘Cú Chulainn and the Heroic Grotesque’, in ‘Form and Function of the Grotesque Body in Medieval Irish and Norse Literature’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford University, 2004), pp. 129–57 (p. 149). I am grateful to Mulligan for making this chapter of her thesis available to me.

Chulainn's *ríastrad*, the transformation that he undergoes in his battle-fury, can be read as an expression of these excesses, albeit one that falls outside of the gendered terms delineated above. Notably, it causes him to produce blood, which dots the spikes of his hair and 'intensely spurts from his head'.⁵¹ This bears little resemblance to menstruation, but seems to fulfil a similar function: his body is disposing of excess humours by shedding blood, albeit in a bizarre and unusual fashion. In this way, Cú Chulainn's body defies the boundaries of gender and sex, his humours manifesting as a mixture of intense heat and violent haemorrhaging.

Cú Chulainn's beauty is another trait that, on the surface, appears normative within its context and according to literary convention, but presents a more complicated picture when examined more closely. In both recensions of *TBC*, Cú Chulainn makes a point of displaying to Medb's army 'a chrotha álgín álaind' ('his gentle beautiful form'), here presented in opposition to his *ríastrad*.⁵² In *TBC-I*, Fedelm describes him as 'álaind' ('beautiful').⁵³ A beautiful hero is par for the course in medieval Irish literature—physical beauty is 'a gift of the gods, proof of divine selection for kingship and an essential attribute of the hero'.⁵⁴ Indeed, beauty is so often understood as a masculine and heroic trait that the poem *Clann Ollaman Uaisle Emna*, when comparing various classical figures to their medieval Irish counterparts, connects Noisiu mac Uisliu with Paris because 'rena néim Troí ocus Táin' ('their beauty caused Troy and the *Táin*').⁵⁵ Sheehan observes that even when descriptions of beauty seem feminising in their use of language, 'being the object of scopophilia does not detract from a warrior's masculinity but, rather, helps constitute it'.⁵⁶ Again, however, there is an insecurity about Cú Chulainn's identity that marks him out from other heroes. He has a clear understanding of the image he wants others to have of him: his parade past the Connacht army to ensure that it his beautiful appearance rather than his 'ugly' distorted form that they associate with him suggests that he is 'painfully aware of his own change' and uncomfortable with how he might be perceived during the *ríastrad*.⁵⁷ There is a noticeable emphasis on clothing, in

⁵¹ Mulligan, 'Cú Chulainn and the Heroic Grotesque', p. 147.

⁵² *TBC-II*, l. 2339. See also *TBC-I*, l. 2337.

⁵³ *TBC-I*, l. 77.

⁵⁴ Damien McManus, 'Good-looking and Irresistible: the Hero from Early Irish Saga to Classical Poetry', *Ériu* 59 (2009), 57–109 (p. 74).

⁵⁵ F.J. Byrne, 'Clann Ollaman Uaisle Emna', *Studia Hibernica*, 4 (1964), 54–94 (quoted in Sarah Sheehan, 'Feasts for the Eyes: Visuality and Desire in the Ulster Cycle', in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, ed. Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 95–114 (p. 95)).

⁵⁶ Sheehan, 'Feasts for the Eyes', p. 101.

⁵⁷ Sarah Kunzler, 'Inside Out... and Upside Down', *Helden E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen = Heroes = Héros*, 1:1, (2013), 53–63 (pp. 58–59).

contrast to other descriptions of male heroic beauty—for example, Fráech in *Táin Bó Fraích* is depicted naked, and the description of his beauty emphasises his body, form and skin,⁵⁸ while the descriptions of Noisiu in *Longes mac nUislen* similarly focus on body parts and physical traits.⁵⁹ Cú Chulainn, however, is dressed in his finest battle raiment and armour, and although there is some description of his natural features—if ‘natural’ is the word when he has ‘cethri tibri cehtar a dá grúad’ (‘four dimples in each of his two cheeks’) and ‘secht ngemma de ruithin ruise cehta a dá rígrosc’ (‘seven gems of brilliance of an eye in each of his royal eyes’)⁶⁰—this is focused on his face and hair, with a brief description of his hands and feet. His body is obscured, and the emphasis shifted to the clothing which conceals it. This is a *conscious* presentation of his physical form: an attempt to ‘exercise some control over [...] other people’s reading of his body’⁶¹ and define his own beauty. His deliberate self-definition is distinct from the glimpses of male beauty we see elsewhere, where the beautiful figure exerts no narrative control. Within *TBC*, it can be contrasted with Cú Chulainn’s mourning verses for Fer Diad, and his description of Fer Diad’s ‘splendid blush’, his ‘perfect and fair form’ and his ‘bright clear eye’.⁶² Fer Diad lacks agency in this representation of his body—he is, after all, dead—and the focus is on his physical attributes and the effect that they have on the beholder, in this case Cú Chulainn. Meanwhile, although Cú Chulainn’s beauty is being constructed for the benefit of an audience (the women of Connacht), he retains narrative agency, leading the spectators and therefore the audience of the text to control how he is perceived.

As Dukes-Knight observes, ‘[t]he masculinity of the *Táin* is not a secure masculinity. It is not a birthright of genetic maleness’.⁶³ Cú Chulainn, whose martial—i.e. masculine—skill is superior to that of grown warriors but whose appearance constantly causes his opponents to underestimate him, comes to represent this mutability. His complex relationship with masculinity and with his own body means that he can be read without much difficulty as a character who has transitioned to a male identity not merely *before* it was expected, as Dukes-Knight suggests, but without it having been expected at all. He goes to the boy-troop unbidden, refusing to wait for protection on the journey.⁶⁴ He is given a new name

⁵⁸ Sheehan, ‘Feasts for the Eyes’, pp. 100–01.

⁵⁹ Sheehan, ‘Feasts for the Eyes’, pp. 103–04.

⁶⁰ *TBC-II*, ll. 2352–54.

⁶¹ Künzler, ‘Inside Out’, p. 58.

⁶² ‘Inmain lenn do ruidiud rán, | inmain do chruth cáem comlán, | inmain do rosc glass glanba, | inmain t’álaig is tirlabra.’ *TBC-II*, ll. 3448–3451.

⁶³ Dukes-Knight, ‘The Wooden Sword’, p. 121.

⁶⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 406–14.

after an early act of martial strength, and assumes along with it a new identity, one that will define his role as protector.⁶⁵ He is known for his beauty, although even this idealised body contains elements of the grotesque.⁶⁶ He is both precociously virile and yet beardless, the size of an adolescent girl and yet consistently able to defeat warriors who underestimate him. Notably, it is not only his enemies who describe him as small: he refers to himself as a ‘míl bec’ (‘little creature’),⁶⁷ a statement the proud Cú Chulainn would be unlikely to make unless it were true. If Cú Chulainn is an outsider whose masculinity is constructed in opposition to social expectations and obligations, then we may read his enemies’ hesitation to recognise him as a legitimate opponent in a new light: their fixation on his beardlessness and Medb’s disparaging (and gendered) remarks take on a new significance. While many see Cú Chulainn’s youth or liminal status as the reason for his unconventional masculinity, the value of a transmasculine reading is that it highlights the mutability of gender categories within the text and offers an alternative lens through which we might understand Cú Chulainn’s character and role.

A little creature

Cú Chulainn’s self-description as a ‘little creature’ highlights the fact that if he does not fully belong to the category of ‘man’, it is not solely because of ambiguities of gender, but also because of the ways he subverts and goes beyond the definitions of ‘human’. The word ‘míl’ is primarily defined by DIL as ‘an animal, used in wide sense of all lower creatures, but never of human beings’.⁶⁸ By choosing to use it to refer to himself, Cú Chulainn situates himself in the margins of what it means to be human.⁶⁹ In part, this is represented by his supernatural traits and abilities, a characteristic not unique to Cú Chulainn—many heroes, both classical and medieval, have a connection to the supernatural. In Cú Chulainn’s case, his relationship to humanity is further complicated by his position as ‘watchdog’, both symbolically and physically, so that his unique nature and marginal status become central to the formulation of his identity within the text.

Not uncommonly for heroes, Cú Chulainn has Otherworldly parentage, although its exact nature varies slightly between recensions. *TBC-I*

⁶⁵ Tatiana Mikhailova, ‘Cú Chulainn: A Watch-Dog of Ulster’, in *Ulidia 3. Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales. University of Ulster, Coleraine 22-25 June 2009*, ed. G. Toner and S. Mac Mathúna (Berlin, 2013), pp. 149–58 (p. 155).

⁶⁶ Mulligan, ‘Cú Chulainn and the Heroic Grotesque’, p. 133.

⁶⁷ *TBC-II*, l. 1612.

⁶⁸ eDIL s.v. 1 míl.

⁶⁹ The same word is used of the ‘little creature’ swallowed by Dechtire in *Compert Con Culainn*, understood to be Lug. It is possible that Cú Chulainn’s use of the term here deliberately evokes or echoes his supernatural conception.

presents Cú Chulainn as having dual human-Otherworld heritage, with a human father, Súaltain, as well as a divine father, Lug mac Ethlenn. The complicated story of his conception and birth is told in *Compert Con Culainn*.⁷⁰ Within *TBC*, Cú Chulainn is usually identified as ‘mac Súaltain’,⁷¹ but Lug comes to his aid when he is wounded fighting his foster brother Lóch, introducing himself in *TBC-I* as ‘do athair a ssidib, .i. Lug mac Ethlend’ (‘your father from the fairy mounds, that is, Lug mac Ethlend’).⁷² The exact nature of Cú Chulainn’s connection to the Otherworld seems to be a cause of some confusion, however, and Súaltain’s own humanity is thrown into doubt by Fergus’s reference to him as ‘a sídaib’ (‘from the fairy mounds’) in *TBC-I*,⁷³ and *TBC-II*’s use of the epithet ‘sídech’ (‘belonging to a *síd*’, ‘fairy’).⁷⁴ *TBC-II* lacks *TBC-I*’s direct identification of Lug mac Ethlenn and tantalising reference to his participation in the battle of Sesrech Breslige,⁷⁵ but offers other Otherworldly associates for Cú Chulainn: there are several direct allusions to the *Túatha Dé Danann* helping him during ‘Comrac Fir Diad’, both with healing herbs⁷⁶ and in enabling him to inspire fear.⁷⁷ These are developed further still in the ‘Stowe’ version of *TBC-II* (sometimes called ‘recension 2a’) with the inclusion of two Otherworldly helpers for Cú Chulainn, Dolb and Indolb.⁷⁸ It has been argued that these helpers may originally have been present in *TBC-I*, but were lost due to the lacunae in *Lebor na hUidre*.⁷⁹ Even if they were not, it is clear that both recensions connect Cú Chulainn to the Otherworld, with varying degrees of specificity.

TBC-I also portrays Cú Chulainn as capable of performing magic. As well as the spell he uses to create the impression of a beard, discussed above, he has some level of control over the elements. Pursued by Medb’s army, he seeks help from the landscape itself: ‘Adeochosa [...] inna husci do chongnam frim. Ateoch nem 7 talmuin 7 Cruinn in tsainrethaig’ (‘I beseech the rivers to come to my help. I call upon heaven and earth and

⁷⁰ A.G. Van Hamel (ed.), *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), pp. 1–8; Gantz (trans.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, pp. 130–33.

⁷¹ For example, see *TBC-I*, l. 102.

⁷² *TBC-I*, l. 2109. Lug is not explicitly named in *TBC-II*, nor identified as Cú Chulainn’s parent—an individual from the Otherworld comes to Cú Chulainn’s aid, but is described only as ‘cia dom chardib sídchaire-sa sein’ (‘that is one of my friends from the fairy mounds’). See *TBC-II*, l. 2148.

⁷³ *TBC-I*, l. 3860.

⁷⁴ *TBC-II*, l. 443.

⁷⁵ ‘Iss ed atberat araili ro fich Lug mac Eithlend la Coin Culaid Sesrig mBreslige’ (‘Other versions say that Lug mac Eithlend fought beside Cú Chulainn in the battle of Sesrech Breslige’). *TBC-I*, ll. 2316–17.

⁷⁶ *TBC-II*, ll. 3612–13.

⁷⁷ *TBC-II*, ll. 2846–49.

⁷⁸ Cecile O’Rahilly (ed.), *The Stowe Version of Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1961), ll. 3162–89.

⁷⁹ O’Rahilly, *The Stowe Version*, pp. xxiv–xxix.

especially the river Cronn to aid me’).⁸⁰ His call is answered: ‘La sodain cotnócaib in t-uisci súas co mboí i n-indaib crand’ (‘Thereupon the river rose in flood as high as the tree tops’).⁸¹ Cú Chulainn is not alone in having supernatural abilities: Láeg later casts a ‘protective spell’ to render them and their horses invisible to their enemies,⁸² an action which is portrayed as unremarkable. Either *TBC-I* is presenting magic as common enough for both characters’ abilities to be unsurprising, or Láeg’s use of magic reflects that he, too, is a liminal figure who transgresses many of the same boundaries as his master.⁸³ Although Láeg’s magic-working is also present in *TBC-II*,⁸⁴ Cú Chulainn’s elemental control is absent, in keeping with the diminished role of the Otherworld in this recension, and only his *ríastrad* remains as a sign of his supernatural traits.

The *ríastrad* is a physical transformation, wrought by battle fury—a literal and exaggerated version of classical *furor*, akin to Germanic berserkers, in which ‘everything that is normally stable is rearranged or entirely dislocated’.⁸⁵ It is phenomenally disruptive, undermining our understanding of Cú Chulainn as a human or a hero, yet it exists within a traditional heroic context: on the battlefield, for the benefit of society, within his own body. Lowe describes the horror of this juxtaposition, in which ‘the reassuring face of the hero [is] ripped away to reveal the body within [...] Cú Chulainn is quite clearly represented as the pre-eminent Ulster hero, yet almost simultaneously appears as a terrifying force beyond anything that is recognizably human’.⁸⁶ These identities do not exist as discrete or clearly demarcated entities, and Cú Chulainn is never solely one or the other: they overlap, blur, transgress each other. The explosive potential of the *ríastrad* is always present, and brings with it the threat of disruption.

On all levels, Cú Chulainn’s ‘distortions’ mark him out as something other than human, but the use of animal imagery gives shape to his transformations. Perhaps most significant on a symbolic level is how ‘táncatar [...] a glúne co mbátar dá éis’ (‘his knees came to the back’),⁸⁷ collapsing the physiological distinction between his humanity and the hound for which he is named. Mulligan writes that ‘his warped body becomes a site where canine traits and modes of defence merge with those of a human warrior’, demonstrating ‘his physical and behavioural

⁸⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 1158–59.

⁸¹ *TBC-I*, l. 1164.

⁸² *TBC-I*, ll. 2208–10.

⁸³ Láeg’s possibly Otherworldly origins are discussed in Karina Hollo, ‘Cú Chulainn and Síð Truim’, *Ériu* 49 (1998), 13–22.

⁸⁴ *TBC-II*, ll. 2226–29.

⁸⁵ Lowe, ‘Kicking over the Traces’, p. 123.

⁸⁶ Lowe, ‘Kicking over the Traces’, p. 122.

⁸⁷ *TBC-II*, ll. 2266–67.

proximity to the hound'.⁸⁸ Canine imagery is not uncommonly used to describe warriors in medieval Irish literature, such as the association of *fian* bands with wolves,⁸⁹ but Cú Chulainn is specifically a hound rather than a wolf—a protector, not a menace.⁹⁰ He takes on this identity after killing the original hound of Culann, promising to fulfil the role of protector until a replacement hound is reared, and it is because of this that he is renamed *Cú Chulainn*.⁹¹ The name subsequently shapes his role, particularly in *TBC*. As Butler says, 'the name, which installs gender and kinship, works as a politically invested and investing performative. To be named is thus to be inculcated into that law and to be formed, bodily, in accordance with that law'.⁹² When *Sétanta* becomes *Cú Chulainn*, he is formed bodily to fulfil that function: he becomes the defender of the homestead (Ulster, and more specifically, Mag Muirthemne) until such a time as its proper defenders (the Ulaid) can take over. This non-human, canine role defines him both metaphorically and in the transformation that allows him to defeat his enemies, and Mikhailova argues that it is the reason for his exemption from the Ulaid's debility.⁹³ As the Ulaid's 'watchdog', his humanity is sufficiently in question to disrupt his status as part of the community. 'A watchdog socially, Cú Chulainn is also a watchdog totemically', and so, because a dog's status 'is closer to that of a slave, and hence, strictly speaking, is not a member of the tribe', Cú Chulainn likewise cannot be considered an insider.⁹⁴ Thus, Mikhailova posits, he may be of Ulster, but he is not an *Ulsterman*: he is either a dog or a servant (or both), and so excluded from their curse. Once again, we return to the idea of Cú Chulainn as 'non-man', this time not because of his youth or gender, but because of his marginality. Paradoxically, it is this marginal status which affords him the opportunity to defend the province, just as it is the *ríastrad* which grants him victory where ordinary skill does not suffice—it is because of his ability to cross boundaries that Cú Chulainn fulfils his heroic role. Were he more human, more male, more of an insider, perhaps he would likewise be afflicted by the Ulaid's debility and unable to defend them.

Cú Chulainn's bestial traits are not limited to the hound with which he shares his name. The description of the *ríastrad* describes the spikes of his hair as fierce enough to impale apples—an odd detail, but one that may be

⁸⁸ Mulligan, 'Cú Chulainn and the Heroic Grotesque', p. 142.

⁸⁹ Kim McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, Díberga and Fianna: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (1986), 1–22 (p. 16).

⁹⁰ Mulligan, 'Cú Chulainn and the Heroic Grotesque', p. 142.

⁹¹ *TBC*-I, ll. 540–604; *TBC*-II, ll. 856–914.

⁹² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge Classics, 2011), p. 41.

⁹³ Mikhailova, 'Cú Chulainn: A Watch-dog of Ulster', p. 158.

⁹⁴ Mikhailova, 'Cú Chulainn: A Watch-dog of Ulster', p. 158.

explained by Mulligan's Isidorean reading of the *ríastrad*, in which she explores how the transformation reflects medieval physiological beliefs as expressed by Isidore of Seville.⁹⁵ Isidore claims that the hedgehog stiffens its quills when threatened, but also uses them to impale grapes to carry home to its young. This was a popular belief, and similar claims are found in various bestiaries as well as Pliny's *Natural History*.⁹⁶ The *ríastrad* appears here to merge the hedgehog's fruit collection with its defensive strategy: Cú Chulainn's hair is a defence against attack that also allows for the collection of fruit. In a description of Cú Chulainn's 'beautiful' form we are told that he has 'secht meóir cehtar a dá lám co ngabáil ingni sebaic, co forgabáil ingne griúin arc ach n-aí fo leith díib-sin' ('seven fingers on each of his hands with the grasp of a hawk's claws and the grip of a hedgehog's claws in each separate toe and finger'),⁹⁷ and the translation of 'griúin' as 'hedgehog' alongside their shared spikiness prompts Mulligan to speculate that there was an 'earlier link' between the hero and the hedgehog.⁹⁸ However, the term 'griúin' is not unambiguous: the hedgehog interpretation is based on an entry in O'Cleary's glossary, which equates it with 'gráinéog', but the word might also mean griffon.⁹⁹ The similar word 'criun' is glossed as 'wolf',¹⁰⁰ another plausible option for the canine Cú Chulainn. But regardless of the exact meaning, this comparison shows that even in his undistorted form, Cú Chulainn maintains a physical otherness. A description of his beauty, presented seemingly in opposition to the monstrosity of his transformed body, nevertheless reveals bestial characteristics that are not limited to canine traits.

Stranger still than the hedgehog is the comparison Fedelm makes between the distorted Cú Chulainn and a dragon. Her prophecy is the first reference to the *ríastrad* in both recensions, and its supernatural monstrosity is emphasised: 'tadbait delb drecoin don chath' ('in battle he shows a dragon's form').¹⁰¹ This prompts questions about what the word 'drecoin' meant to a medieval Irish audience, and what would have been evoked by the image. The term is sometimes used figuratively to refer to warriors, but here the word 'delb' suggests a physical comparison rather than a metaphor. The warped, inverted body of the transformed Cú

⁹⁵ Mulligan, 'The Erasure of a Warrior's Body', pp. 34–35.

⁹⁶ Badke (ed.), *The Medieval Bestiary: 'Hedgehog'* (2011) <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beastsource217.htm>> [accessed 12 February 2023].

⁹⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 2351–53.

⁹⁸ Mulligan, 'Cú Chulainn and the Heroic Grotesque', p. 152.

⁹⁹ eDIL s.v. ? 2 griúin. The word 'gráinéog' may mean 'little horrible thing', which would make it an unexpected choice of comparison in the context of Cú Chulainn's beauty.

¹⁰⁰ eDIL s.v. criun

¹⁰¹ *TBC-II*, l. 245. In *TBC-I*, the equivalent line reads 'dofeith deilb ndracuín don chath' (l. 78): '[he] looks in battle like a dragon'.

Chulainn bears little resemblance to our modern expectations of dragons born of decades of fantasy media, but it prompts us to rethink our classification of Cú Chulainn as the heroic human (or demigod) facing monstrous dangers.¹⁰² Looking for parallels in chivalric romance and other heroic narratives, we find them not in the figures of knights and dragon-slayers. Instead, Cú Chulainn seems to have more in common with giants—the monsters against whose ‘out-of-control body’ the ‘normative masculinity’ of the knight is contrasted.¹⁰³ By describing Cú Chulainn as a ‘drecon’, Fedelm creates space for a reading of *TBC* in which Cú Chulainn is a monster. After all, from the Connacht perspective it is a tragedy, and one almost expects a narrative in which, after many heroes have been lost fighting the supernaturally powerful Hound, a Beowulf-like warrior arises to slay him once and for all. But here no victor emerges—the monster triumphs. It is a subversive narrative: as Cú Chulainn ‘struggles with the abject on the borders of society, his body in turn appears to those within the borders as similarly abject, monstrous and terrifying’,¹⁰⁴ and yet ‘he is both monster and man simultaneously, and the name “Cú Chulainn” refers both to the beautiful boy and to the transformed body of the warp-spasm’.¹⁰⁵ The narrative rejects a clear delineation between *monster* and *hero*; instead, the two are allowed to collapse together. Cohen observes the conflation of monster and hero in various texts,¹⁰⁶ but this is usually in scenarios where heroes encounter monsters and the monstrosity of heroism is revealed. By contrast, Cú Chulainn’s monstrosity is shown through encounters with humans. Once again, he is defined by opposition, an identity that is less about what he *becomes like* and more about what he is *revealed to be unlike*.

The climax of these encounters with humans is Cú Chulainn’s combat with Fer Diad, his foster brother, which articulates the tension between what Cú Chulainn is and is not. Fer Diad is his beloved foster brother: they trained together, and are equal in skill. But this equality means that in order to achieve victory, Cú Chulainn must embrace his own monstrosity in the

¹⁰² Tumblr user incomingalbatross writes, ‘That first Polish-language encyclopedia was right about dragons. “It is hard to defeat a dragon, but you have to try.” That is in fact a definition of “dragon” that cuts to the heart of the matter and covers all the essentials. A dragon is something that A) is very hard to defeat and B) must be fought. That’s it. That’s all you really have to know when approaching the subject.’ See incomingalbatross, ‘That First Polish-Language Encyclopedia...’, *Cozy Moments Cannot Be Muzzled*, 2023 <<https://incomingalbatross.tumblr.com/post/706637536128368640/that-first-polish-language-encyclopedia-was-right>> [accessed 12 February 2023]. This is perhaps how we should interpret Fedelm’s statement: if a dragon is defined by its role and relationship to humans, rather than by specific taxonomic traits, the term may encompass any monstrous being. Cú Chulainn is something that is very hard to defeat and must be fought; as such, he is a dragon.

¹⁰³ Cohen, ‘The Armour of an Alienating Identity’, p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Lowe, ‘Kicking over the Traces’, p. 125.

¹⁰⁵ Lowe, ‘Kicking over the Traces’, p. 122.

¹⁰⁶ Cohen, ‘The Armour of an Alienating Identity’, pp. 14–15.

form of the *ríastrad* and the *gae bolga*, a monstrosity that Fer Diad, as ‘man of the pair’¹⁰⁷ and the human counterpart to Cú Chulainn’s strangeness, cannot match. The *gae bolga* is a brutal, desecrating weapon, inflicting damage from the inside that violates and disrupts the demarcation between internal and external: ‘co ndeachaid dar timthrecht a chuirp and gorbo lán cach n-alt 7 cach n-áge de dá fhorrindib’ (‘[it] entered his body through the anus and filled every joint and limb of him with its barbs’).¹⁰⁸ Its phallic nature, which has been explored by Sheehan,¹⁰⁹ creates another parallel with the giants of Arthurian narratives: Cohen describes the giants’ ‘sexual lack of control’ as ‘part of a political wildness—an aggressive violation of boundary that does not stop at the physical body’.¹¹⁰ Sheehan reads the *gae bolga* as symbolic of Cú Chulainn’s ‘pre-eminent masculinity’, emphatically asserted against those he sees as ‘dangerous doubles’.¹¹¹ I read it slightly differently: Cú Chulainn relies on the *gae bolga* when his male identity and heroic masculinity is under threat. Lóch questions his beardlessness and his validity as an opponent; Fer Diad not only evokes a time when he was ‘young and small’ and in a subservient position, but also comes the closest to defeating him. Cú Chulainn’s masculinity is intrinsically linked to his status as a hero, so he cannot lose his martial pre-eminence without losing some crucial aspect of his identity. The *gae bolga* is a violent reassertion of that identity, one that is externally constructed and relies upon the complicity of a third party—first Scáthach, who bestowed it, and then Láeg, whose participation is required for Cú Chulainn to use the weapon, as he needs his charioteer to throw it to him. That it was a woman who taught him the use of this penetrative weapon may reflect the misogynistic idea that “‘having the phallus” is much more destructive as a feminine operation than as a masculine one [...] there is no other way for women to assume the phallus except in its most killing modalities’.¹¹² Scáthach then becomes this ‘phallic mother’, who is able to give Cú Chulainn access only to the ‘devouring and destructive’¹¹³ aspects of masculine power.¹¹⁴ Láeg’s

¹⁰⁷ Eric Hamp, ‘Varia VII’, *Ériu* 33 (1982), 178–83 (p. 178).

¹⁰⁸ *TBC-II*, ll. 3357–59.

¹⁰⁹ Sheehan, ‘Fer Diad De-flowered’, pp. 61–62.

¹¹⁰ Cohen, ‘The Armour of an Alienating Identity’, p. 12.

¹¹¹ Sheehan, ‘Fer Diad De-flowered’, p. 62.

¹¹² Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 66.

¹¹³ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 66.

¹¹⁴ Miller reads Cú Chulainn’s training with Scáthach as a process of ‘feminization’ during which the hero learns to ‘successfully [appropriate] the skills of the other gender’ (Jimmy P. Miller, ‘The Feminization of the Irish Hero?’ in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 67 (2014), 1–31 (p. 22)). While I agree that Cú Chulainn’s pre-eminence seems to rely on his ability to transgress gender boundaries and utilise intelligence, deception and cunning as well as brute strength, I am not convinced he learns these skills only from Scáthach, particularly as his boyhood deeds reflect his capacity for tricks and misdirection; if anything, his training with her seems to hone a capability he

participation, meanwhile, reflects that without a third party to recognise him as a hero, Cú Chulainn can never feel secure in that identity. The same is true when he displays his beauty to the women of Connacht or, to look outside *TBC*, when he seeks recognition for his deeds in *Fled Bricrenn*: ‘without any absolute guarantees of his role or capabilities, what is he?’¹¹⁵ His victory over Fer Diad is as insecure as his identity, and highlights his contradictions: he may be the only one who can win such a fight, but he cannot achieve it alone.

This insecurity underpins Cú Chulainn’s relationship with the *ríastrad*, and his attempts to control the uncontrollable. As well as being intensely physical, the transformation affects his mind and ability to reason. There is one reference in *TBC-I*¹¹⁶ and two in *TBC-II* to specialist armour in the form of twenty-seven waxed shirts or tunics, worn ‘arnacha ndechrad a chond céille tráth doficfad a lúth láthair’ (‘in order that his sense might not be deranged when his fit of fury came upon him’).¹¹⁷ This parallels broader medieval traditions of shapeshifting where clothing is closely associated with reason, civilisation, and humanity itself, such as in French texts like *Yvain* and *Bisclavret*.¹¹⁸ For Cú Chulainn as much as for other medieval heroes, armour represents the physical manifestation of the gendered identity that is heroic masculinity (the ‘armour of an alienating identity’),¹¹⁹ but his is unusual in that it controls and conceals as much as it protects. Künzler describes Cú Chulainn’s twenty-seven waxed shirts as ‘reminiscent of modern straight-jackets [sic]’.¹²⁰ The comparison is appropriate on two levels. Straitjackets are used to contain and delimit those whose mental instability makes them dangerous; the *ríastrad* certainly represents both danger and instability. But mental stability, like gender, is contextually defined, and forced conformity to a specific ideal always reflects issues of class and culture. In a discussion of one ‘humane’ approach to madness, Foucault observes that while less cruel than the punishments of earlier asylums, the focus was still on forcing patients to conform to a particular bourgeois societal ideal, such as behaving correctly at a tea party.¹²¹ Stability is therefore not an objective state, but requires

already has. Moreover, in bestowing upon Cú Chulainn his martial identity and the *gae bolga*, Scáthach functions as the gateway to masculinity, which for Cú Chulainn seems to require a transition through femininity and the world of women. Further analysis of gender in *Tochmarc Emire* in relation to queer and trans readings would be valuable, as it is a text that functions as the construction of a heroic male identity, but is beyond the scope of this discussion.

¹¹⁵ Lowe, ‘Kicking over the Traces’, p. 128.

¹¹⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 2218–19.

¹¹⁷ *TBC-II*, ll. 1483–84; the second instance is at ll. 2234–35.

¹¹⁸ Miranda Griffin, *Transforming Tales: Rewriting Metamorphosis in Medieval French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 116.

¹¹⁹ Lacan, quoted in Cohen, ‘The Armour of an Alienating Identity’, p. 1.

¹²⁰ Künzler, ‘Inside Out’, p. 58.

¹²¹ Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.

the constant policing and enforcement of societal norms, either by an external observer or by the individual themselves.

Cú Chulainn's use of armour is a form of self-policing, but its function as a 'straitjacket' is only one dimension of this rigid curation of self. It serves also as a reflection of his desire to adopt external markers of masculinity, at least when required by others. Just as he dons false beards to conform to his opponents' expectations of a warrior, so is his armour used to delimit his physical body in order to conform *and perform* in such a way that he might be understood by others as both beautiful and masculine. In this capacity, his armour fulfils a similar function to a chest binder or compression garment worn by a transmasculine individual to give the body a more masculine silhouette. While frequently painful and restrictive, such a binding enables the individual to 'pass'—to be correctly read and categorised as 'masculine' by observers, in accordance with their sense of self.¹²² Being incorrectly read or interpreted may give rise to feelings of gender dysphoria and shame.¹²³ Cú Chulainn seems to experience a similar need to be correctly interpreted, and a considerable degree of shame and preoccupation with the external perception of his body: the image he wishes to present can only be maintained through the suppression of some aspect of his physical self. He can counter shaming remarks with a false beard and martial superiority, but the socially aberrant nature of his own body is more challenging to negotiate. As a result, he carefully curates his 'beautiful form' before parading it past the Connachta, hoping that his looks will be 'acknowledged and approved' long enough to be understood by others as the (male) hero he is supposed to be.¹²⁴ In other words, he is binding his body in order to be read as a warrior.

Despite his apparent shame, it is Cú Chulainn's 'socially problematic' traits which allow him to claim, retain and constitute his identity as a hero. His marginal status on the borders of masculinity, manhood and form enables him to avoid the Ulaid's debility and defend his homeland, and while the *ríastrad* and the *gae bolga* are monstrous, they allow him to perform otherwise impossible feats. Lowe writes that '[t]he name Cú Chulainn stands in for the uncontrollable flesh [...] which constantly pulls free of its moorings and escapes into a state of bodily excitation that is far from redemptive',¹²⁵ but Cú Chulainn *is* redeemed by these transgressions

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¹²² See 'Pass; Passing' in 'Trans and Genderqueer Studies Terminology, Language, and Usage Guide', appendix to Spencer-Hall and Gutt, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects*, pp. 308–09.

¹²³ See 'Gender Dysphoria; Gender Dysphoric' in 'Trans and Genderqueer Studies Terminology', pp. 297–98.

¹²⁴ Künzler, 'Inside Out', p. 58.

¹²⁵ Lowe, 'Kicking over the Traces', p. 128.

of category, transforming the uncontainable and abject into a tool in service of society. At the same time as he feels the need to bind his uncontrollable body in armour and police his own relationship with societal norms, he is undermining binaries, disrupting expectations, and disproving the necessity of conformity. His transgressive and marginal nature is—ironically—central to the formation of his heroic identity.

Conclusion

Queer theory and theories of monstrosity together inform our readings of Cú Chulainn, not because queerness is inherently monstrous or monstrosity is inherently queer, but because both are defined by disruption of category and the crossing of boundaries. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Cú Chulainn exists in the margins, transgressing and blurring borders in order to defend them. By examining his monstrosity, we can how he transcends the limitations of humanity, becoming Other to fulfil the societal role required of him, while a queer reading, and particularly a transmasculine one, shows us how Cú Chulainn's masculinity transgresses and subverts norms, both undermining and supporting his heroic status. By interrogating these ambiguities, we can explore the unique nature of Cú Chulainn as a character and as a hero, freed from 'previously unquestioned socio-cultural norms'.¹²⁶ It is these unquestioned norms which have led to Cú Chulainn being interpreted as a hypermasculine figure, but by presenting this transmasculine reading, I have disrupted some of these conventional assumptions and paved the way for a more fluid comprehension of gender within the text.

Queerness is often discussed as a deliberate act of transgression, a stubbornly unproductive way of existing within society by refusing to conform to expectations.¹²⁷ But in the case of both his masculinity and his humanity, it is by overstepping these boundaries that Cú Chulainn is most able to serve the Ulaid and fulfil the role of a hero. Freed from the limitations of the Ulstermen—because of his youth, because of his gender, because of his dubious humanity—he is able to fight when they cannot and win when they would not. A transmasculine reading of Cú Chulainn is one of deliberate heroism, a mantle taken up rather than imposed at birth. His identity as a hero is constructed not by societal expectations but by himself, and perhaps this is why it is so difficult to delineate along conventional lines. Cú Chulainn is not born, but made: renamed and recreated through his own actions, from a child into a hound into a hero.

¹²⁶ Spencer-Hall and Gutt, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects*, p. 13.

¹²⁷ Blake Gutt, 'Transgender Genealogy in Tristan de Nanteuil', *Exemplaria* 30:2 (2018), 129–46 (pp. 130–31).

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