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THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
School of Literatures,
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Broken Bonds: Hierarchies of Loyalty and the
Gendering of Betrayal in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

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Wordcount (discussion only): 95,385

Wordcount, inclusive of reference-only footnotes: 102,735

Doctor of Philosophy
The University of Edinburgh
2023

Abstract

Is the concept of betrayal existent in medieval Irish heroic literature, and, if so, does this concept differ in any way from the modern Western conception of betrayal? This thesis explores these questions through Recensions I and II of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. As it is the longest Irish medieval heroic text in the Ulster Cycle, it provides the largest selection of betrayal incidents. An initial list of betrayal acts was identified using a set of criteria gleaned from modern sociological materials. Examination of the language in these initial betrayal acts finds that the most common word for betrayal is *brath*, and that there are beginning, middle, and end sections to a betrayal act. Throughout these sections of the betrayal act, both betrayer and betrayed attempt to sway public narrative in their own favour, as only betrayal acts held to be betrayals by the omnipresent audience of Medb's army and the army followers are officially considered betrayals and thus able to be acted upon.

Three groups in particular proved interesting in the exploration of betrayal acts – the biological family, the groups that comprise Medb's army, and women. The primary loyalty in the *Táin* is that to biological family: this is examined through the case study of Cú Chulainn, and the contrast between the loyalty of his biological kin, who are never accused of betraying him, and his foster-kin, many of whom betray Cú Chulainn.

As seen through the case study of Fergus and the Ulster exiles, one of the greatest sources of instability in the *Táin*, and thus the place where betrayal occurs the most, is the makeup of Medb and Ailill's army. The fact the army is made up of many different groups, all with their own loyalties, weakens their position against the Ulstermen, who are largely united against an external force.

I examine also the division in reactions to betrayal between genders. While men are accused directly of betrayal acts, women are often accused of betrayal when men are attempting to de-escalate tensions between themselves, using women as scapegoats to diffuse potentially violent situations. I determine that if a man does not wish to escalate a conflict, blaming a woman allows him to retreat from the situation without dishonouring himself, as women are not held to have honour of their own and thus are not societally expected to avenge slights and accusations against themselves.

This leads to the conclusion that all accusations of betrayal are de-escalations – the primary consideration around betrayal acts is to de-escalate these situations to avoid the conflict spreading beyond the initial combatants. There are many social rituals in place within the *Táin* to keep such conflicts contained. These rituals allow a betrayed to take the anger from a publicly recognized betrayal act and use it to punish a betrayer in a publicly approved manner, while upholding the honour of the betrayed. However, if a person has a relationship so close, on a personal rather than public level, that betrayal leads to sadness rather than anger, there is no societal method through which the betrayed can deal with these emotions, leaving betrayed individuals to struggle through their sadness alone. Although betrayal is present in the *Táin* in a form recognizable to Western audiences, this is one major way in which betrayal differs in the heroic world depicted in Recensions I and II.

Lay Summary

Does the concept of betrayal exist in medieval Irish heroic literature, and, if so, does this idea differ in any way from the modern Western idea of betrayal? This thesis explores these questions through Recensions (Versions) 1 and 2 of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. As it is the longest Irish medieval heroic text in the Ulster Cycle, it provides the largest selection of betrayal examples. An initial list of betrayal acts was identified using a set of criteria drawn from modern sociological materials (studies of modern social life and expected patterns of behaviour). Examination of the language in these initial betrayal acts finds that the most common Irish word for betrayal is *brath*, and that there are beginning, middle, and end sections to a betrayal act. Throughout these sections of the betrayal act, both the betrayed person and the person committing the betrayal attempt to change the public narrative to their own benefit. This is because only betrayal acts believed to be betrayal acts by the ever-present audience of Medb's army and the army followers are officially considered betrayals and thus able to be acted upon.

Three groups in particular proved interesting in the exploration of betrayal acts. These are the biological family, the groups that comprise Medb's army, and women. The primary loyalty in the *Táin* is that to biological family. This is examined through the case study of Cú Chulainn, and the contrast between the loyalty of his biological kin, who are never accused of betraying him, and his foster-kin, many of whom betray Cú Chulainn.

As seen through the case study of Fergus and the Ulster exiles, one of the greatest sources of insecurity in the *Táin* is the makeup of Medb and Ailill's army. Therefore, the army is where betrayal happens the most. The fact the army is made up

of many different groups, all with their own loyalties, weakens their position against the Ulstermen, who are largely united against an external force.

I also examine the division in reactions to betrayal between genders. Men are accused directly of betrayal acts. Women are often accused of betrayal when men are attempting to decrease tensions between themselves. They use women as scapegoats to lessen potentially violent situations. I determine that if a man does not wish to have a conflict grow, blaming a woman lets him retreat from the situation without dishonouring himself. Women are not held to have honour of their own and thus are not societally expected to get revenge for insults and accusations against themselves.

This leads to the conclusion that all accusations of betrayal are to decrease tensions. The primary consideration around betrayal acts is to decrease tensions in violent situations to stop the conflict spreading beyond the initial combatants. There are many social rituals in place within the *Táin* to keep such conflicts contained. These rituals allow a betrayed person to take the anger from a publicly recognized betrayal act and use it to punish a betrayer in a publicly approved manner, while upholding the honour of the betrayed. However, if a person has a relationship that is close on a personal level, instead of a public level, betrayal can lead to sadness instead of anger. In these situations, there is no method the society has through which the betrayed person can deal with these emotions. This leaves betrayed individuals to struggle through their sadness alone. Although betrayal is present in the *Táin* in a form recognizable to Western audiences, this is one major way in which betrayal differs in the heroic world depicted in Recensions I and II from our modern conceptions of betrayal.

Signed Declaration

I, Dhanya Baird, hereby affirm that this thesis has been composed by me, that the work is my own, that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification, and that any included publications are my own work, except where otherwise indicated.

Dhanya Baird (electronic signature)

Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father, Doug Baird. Thanks for being my editor always. Dedication is also in order to my husband, Adam Dahmer, who kept me in tea and soup in the run-up to thesis submission; my mother, Mary Pieterse, who gave me emotional support and love throughout; my snibling, Chandri Baird, who always supported me, mocked me, and destroyed me, as is the role of a sibling; and my cat, Penny, who did nothing whatsoever to help with this piece, and at times hindered me in my progress, but who would be vengeful if I did not offer obeisance.

Thank you to my supervisory team; Anja Gunderloch, Rob Dunbar, and Abigail Burnyeat. Your assistance and patience have made this document possible. I would also like to give my thanks to my extended family, in-laws, and friends who have stood by me throughout the thesis process and who by now likely wish Cú Chulainn had died earlier, before he had the chance to fight in the *Táin*.

Abbreviations

CMCS = Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies

eDIL = Electronic Dictionary of the Irish

LL = Book of Leinster

LU = Lebor na hUidre,

TBC-I = *Táin Bó Cúalnge Recension 1*, ed. and trans. by Cecile O'Rahilly
(Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976; repr. 2006)

TBC-LL = *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, ed. and trans. by Cecile
O'Rahilly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967; repr. 2002)

YBL = Yellow Book of Lecan,

ZCP = Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie

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Chapter One: Methodology and Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 *Myth or History*

In recent years, research on *Táin Bó Cúailnge* has turned in new and oft-interesting directions towards explorations of the human motivations of characters within the *Táin*, which allows for the study of emotion in the literature. This change in the focus of literary analysis provides a way forward for the study of betrayal within the *Táin*.

From an older focus primarily on the work as a remnant of an older, pre-Christian society, we have reached a place where work on the *Táin* has diversified, with recent works frequently looking away from the divine and toward more human motivations. In doing so, one recurring question is how much can be learned from the *Táin*. How much “truth” does it contain? The majority of literature on the *Táin* has focused on the tension between a mythic or literary idea of truth and a historical idea of truth. The fact the tales are treated as dealing with events that happened in the past and that many of the heroes of the tales were also listed in genealogies “raises the question of how much historical truth one can believe is contained in the heroic tales”¹, while those arguing the text is primarily mythic or literary believe that any historical details disguise the original divine nature of the characters or that the stories are just that, stories, with the window dressings of historical fact placed upon them to inspire greater interest.

¹ J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, trans. Patrick K. Ford, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 20.

Weighing in on the mythic side of the debate, T. F. O’Rahilly believes that “the Ulidian tales are wholly mythic in origin, and they have not the faintest connexion with anything that could be called history.”² In his opinion, Cú Chulainn was originally the god Lug, while other of the human characters were also originally gods now brought down narratively to human stature. Within this mythic set of tales, only the warfare between Ulster and Connacht contains historical truth.³ Several of the key characters, including Fergus and Medb, are believed by certain branches of scholarship to have originally been gods.⁴ Based on archaeological evidence, Ó hUiginn supports the idea that the tales are “not orally transmitted tales which have faithfully and consistently preserved memories of pre-Christian civilization in Ireland, but are literary compositions” with deliberately created archaic elements.⁵

The gradual move away from the mythic model eventually leads to McCone’s observation that by observing the texts as completely mythological, the desire is to strip away any Christian elements to get at the presumed “pagan” sections believed to underlie the text. He ultimately states that “whatever native or traditional elements may have gone into its anatomy, early Irish mythology must first and foremost be described as a contemporary attribute of the aristocratic, syncretistic but predominantly Christian culture and associated ideology of those who produced the surviving written texts.”⁶ He also notes that the “boundary between history and myth is notoriously unstable” – actual

² Thomas Francis O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946), 271

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Proinsias Mac Cana, ‘Women in Irish Mythology’, *The Crane Bag*, 4.1 (1980), 7-11 (p. 9); Rudolf Thurneysen, ‘Allerlei Keltisches’, *ZCP*, 18 (1930), 108-110.

⁵ Ruairí Ó hUiginn, ‘The Background and Development of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*’, in *Aspects of the Táin*, ed. by J. P. Mallory (Belfast: The Universities Press, 1992), 29-68 (p. 53).

⁶ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Kildare: Leinster Leader Ltd., 1990), p. 54.

events may come to have the “profound ideological significance redolent of myth” while false events may “come to be accepted as literal history.”⁷ As Ní Bhrolcháin states, since manuscripts were produced in the Christian environment of the monastery, all the manuscripts we possess were created through a “Christian channel, for the monks and their monastic superiors decided what would appear in these books.”⁸

The other common way of examining the text is from a historical angle. This approach largely turns upon attempting to discover clues as to where the *Táin* was originally created and what historical events may have prompted its creation. Kelleher suggests that the *Táin* acts as an allegory for a struggle between “reformers and the traditional churchmen for the control of Armagh” and its associated monasteries. He believes that this may be the case as it was a situation important to Cuana, the abbot of Louth, whom Kelleher suggests revised the manuscript.⁹ Bruford thinks the monks of Armagh must have created the *Táin*, and left out many references to people of Tara as Tara at the time was the overlord of Armagh, and a suggestion of those from Tara being villains may have offended. In addition, he thinks that in Recension II the Connacht army is presented more flatteringly, which may have been because of the power dynamics and high status certain Connachtmen had at the time.¹⁰ Edel suggests that the Pillow Talk may contain deliberate similarities to “the succession conflict that held England in its grip from 1135” when Matilda in person presented her claim to the

⁷ Id., p. 65.

⁸ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p. 13.

⁹ John V. Kelleher, “The *Táin* and the annals”, *Ériu* 22 (1971), 107–127 (pp. 122-26).

¹⁰ Alan Bruford, ‘Why an Ulster Cycle?’, in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), 23-30 (p. 23).

throne.¹¹ Bruford believes that certain of the negative aspects of Queen Medb as she is presented in Recension II of the *Táin* may have been intended as “largely a caricature of Empress Matilda”, a claimant to the throne of England who was at times thought of negatively.¹²

Some scholars have proposed a third theory that removes the divide between historical interpretations and literary interpretations of the *Táin*. O’Connor notes that it is difficult to determine the border between histories and “literary” narratives in Irish literature, as the approaches towards and perspectives on what historical writing is differed in medieval Ireland. For example, some of the flourishes (such as appeals to the emotions) that we today think of as literary rather than historical writing at the time served a very important historical purpose, to make “the event in question memorable and meaningful for an audience.”¹³ Toner expands on how medieval literati perceived the *Táin*, noting that “the text is treated in a historical way.”¹⁴ In the earliest extant recension of the tale, there are marginal notes aware of conflicting traditions and attempting to resolve them through historical means, such as determining where the information must be wrong due to conflicts with traditions held to be definitely accurate.¹⁵ Medieval literati had their own ways of determining the factual authority of a source. For example, verse is used ‘evidentially’ to support sections of medieval writings, as it is considered to have a greater weight of authority than prose.¹⁶

¹¹ Doris Edel, ‘Medb of Crúachain and the Empress Matilda: literature and politics in 12th-century Leinster’ *ZCP* 64 (2017), 19-58 (p. 23).

¹² Bruford, ‘Why an Ulster Cycle?’, p. 23.

¹³ Ralph O’Connor, “Scélshenchus revisited: historical function and literary artistry in the Gaelic kings’ sagas”, in *Revisiting the Cycles of the Kings*, ed. by Kevin Murray (Cork: Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures, 2022), 1–24 (p. 18-19).

¹⁴ Gregory Toner, “The Ulster Cycle: historiography or fiction?”, *CMCS* 40 (Winter, 2000), 1–20 (p. 9).

¹⁵ Id., p. 10-11.

¹⁶ Gregory Toner, “Authority, verse and the transmission of senchas”, *Ériu* 55 (2005), 59–84 (p. 60).

In the present study, I wish to direct focus away from the myth/history divide, and turn to other forms of true and false. As Edel neatly puts it, despite the fact the *Táin* likely does not contain a large amount of historical accuracy in the modern sense, due to its ability to conjure details of the emotional and relational truths of the time, the epic “is essentially a ‘true’ story, peopled by ‘true’ men and women, who provide the public for which it is created/performed/redacted with models of identification.”¹⁷ As Dooley describes, the *Táin* stands in “a special site called ‘tradition,’ where readers are invited to consider perdurable and essential cultural shapes beneath the narrative skin.”¹⁸ Historical truth is not the only truth a text can contain. The truth of the relational and emotive patterns of a society – the behaviours that would be acceptable or unacceptable in a certain relationship context – may appear even when all characters, events, and technology are invented. One such unacceptable behaviour this approach allows room to explore is betrayal.

1.1.2 Betrayal in the *Táin*

Betrayal is an oft-referenced term in discussions of many aspects of the *Táin*. It occurs again and again. From a modern perspective, betrayal appears to be a recurrent theme in the *Táin*. Warriors repeatedly make decisions to honour various of their loyalties above others, resulting in tragedy and grief for those individuals to whom loyalty is not prioritized. However, while betrayal is a topic frequently mentioned in

¹⁷ Doris Edel, *Inside the Táin: Exploring Cú Chulainn, Fergus, Ailill, and Medb* (Berlin: curach bán publications, 2015), p. 14.

¹⁸ Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailgne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 17.

studies on the *Táin*, it is rarely the focus of those studies. Rather it is discussed in passing to provide justification or explanation for the points an author is intending to argue. Often, scholars use it to quickly convey their belief a character is behaving poorly. For example, Wong uses it to describe the behaviour of the central hero Cú Chulainn's foster-brother Fer Báeth, who enters an agreement to kill Cú Chulainn. Wong declares that this agreement to kill Cú Chulainn, which Wong believes is a bad choice, makes Fer Báeth a "dishonorable friend".¹⁹ Edel describes the behaviour of the hero Fergus, who left Ulster to fight for Connacht while conducting an affair with Connacht's queen, Medb, as "betraying" his countrymen for a woman.²⁰ Similarly, Patricia Kelly states that Medb "seduces Fergus into disloyalty to his kin."²¹ In all these cases, betrayal and disloyalty are negative terms used to express a strong disapproval of a character's choices, although certain of the texts attribute the fault, and thereby the betrayal, to different sources. For example, does Fergus betray his people by leaving Ulster, or did he leave due to his own feelings of betrayal at the hands of Conchobor?²² References to betrayal can also be used to show not that a scholar disagrees with a character's behaviour, but that other characters within the text disagree with that individual's conduct, or that the scholar believes the characters have such a disagreement. For example, Cú Chulainn describes his abandonment of the Ulster border at one point in order for him to engage in a tryst as a betrayal, as he cannot condone his action upon seeing the consequences it brought about. Findon believes

¹⁹ Donna Wong, 'Combat between Fosterbrothers in "*Táin Bó Cúailnge*"', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 13 (1993), 119-44 (pp. 120, 122, 128, 130).

²⁰ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 20.

²¹ Patricia Kelly, 'The *Táin* as Literature', in *Aspects of the Táin*, ed. by J. P. Mallory (Belfast: The Universities Press, 1992), 69-102 (p. 86).

²² Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 164; Edel, *Inside the Táin*, pp. 20, 28, 115, 143, 149.

that Fand, a lover of Cú Chulainn, “has fallen in love with Cú Chulainn and she feels he has betrayed her” when he seems inclined to return to his wife.²³

In other situations, the word “betrayal” is used for quite a different purpose – to emphasize the seriousness of a choice a character must make. In contrast to her analysis of Fer Báeth’s betrayal as an act that made him a “dishonorable friend”, Wong describes Cú Chulainn’s foster-brother Fer Diad’s betrayal of the hero as a difficult choice, where he is trapped between betraying his dear foster-brother or being unable to avenge the death of his uncle at Cú Chulainn’s hands.²⁴ Discussing certain of Fergus’s actions that assist the Ulstermen, Dominguez states that they “can be read, from a Connacht perspective, as a betrayal.”²⁵ Discussing ‘Aided Óenfir Aife’, a text in which Cú Chulainn kills his son, Findon explains that he has no choice but to do so, as he is placed in a position where he must either kill his son or fail to defend Ulster, and this second choice would be a far greater betrayal of Cú Chulainn’s identity than kin-slaying.²⁶ One important aspect to note is that in those samples where the word betrayal is specifically mentioned in quotes used in these texts, it is a translation from whatever word or words are used in the original manuscript. All of these scholars make use of the powerful connotations the word ‘betrayal’ has on a modern audience, yet none of them really analyze what comprises a betrayal act in the context of the *Táin*, or whether the original Old Irish words and mindset about the world can be used synonymously with the English word and concept ‘betrayal’.

²³ Joanne Findon, *A Woman’s Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 128.

²⁴ Wong, ‘Combat between Fosterbrothers’, pp. 129-20.

²⁵ Diana Dominguez, *Historical Residues in the Old Irish Legends of Queen Medb: An Expanded Interpretation of the Ulster Cycle* (Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), p. 245.

²⁶ Findon, *A Woman’s Words*, p. 87.

In studying betrayal, one of the first challenges that must be examined is whether it is actually possible to determine anything about affective behaviours in a time period and culture so different and so vastly removed from our own.

1.2 Exploring Emotion

The scarcity of research into betrayal not only in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, but in medieval texts and literature in general means that finding a proven methodological approach capable of effectively analyzing betrayal proves somewhat difficult. However, while the particular affective phenomenon of betrayal is understudied, in recent years a great deal of academic study has been conducted on emotions and how, and whether, our understanding of emotions can translate to other cultures and time periods, including the Middle Ages. These studies provide a set of approaches that I have found useful in setting up a methodological framework for a study of betrayal. Therefore, before delving into the topic of betrayal itself, it is necessary first to conduct a brief survey of the relevant literature relating to the study of emotion.

Rosenwein traces the study of emotion as its own subject to about a century ago, to the historian Johan Huizinga.²⁷ Huizinga believed emotions were quite different in the medieval period. He held that people in the middle ages were childlike in many ways, including the tenor of their emotional lives, stating that in the world “when it was half a thousand years younger” experiences “had yet to the minds of men the directness and absoluteness of the pleasure and pain of child-life.”²⁸ Later research followed along a

²⁷ Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Middle Ages*, (London: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 5.

²⁸ J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 9.

similar path, tracing emotions as evolving from a 'primitive' past to a more evolved present. The influential sociologist Norbert Elias suggested the idea that there is a "civilizing process" through which, over the course of history, human beings have become better at self-restraint so that "the more animalic human activities were progressively thrust behind the scenes of people's communal social life and invested with feelings of shame" and "the regulation of the whole instinctual and affective life by steady self-control became more and more stable, more even and more all-embracing."²⁹ He felt that in the middle ages, people were more given to expressing all emotions more passionately.³⁰

By the 80s and 90s, many competing views had challenged Elias's.³¹ Methods of approaching the study of emotion have changed significantly, largely through the opening up of this study to results from fields outside of the literary realm. Sociological and psychological studies have begun to make great strides in establishing a context for emotion that was previously lacking. Certain psychological studies, for example, suggest that certain bodily reactions connected to different emotions are not culturally dependent. Ekman and Friesen consider whether human facial expressions are universally connected to a particular emotion or whether such connections differ due to cultural programming. They conducted a study wherein they showed pictures of facial expressions to people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including some cultural backgrounds that would not have led to a great deal of media exposure (which could affect results). From this study, they conclude that certain facial expressions "are

²⁹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigation*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), p. 365.

³⁰ Id., p. 374.

³¹ Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Middle Ages*, p. 12.

universally connected with particular emotions”³², although not all facial expressions are so connected and although the factors that induce an emotional response of a certain type, and the reactions to such a response, differ between cultures.³³ In another examination of human emotion, Ekman notes that for certain emotions, there are “distinctive patterns of autonomic nervous system (ANS) activity.”³⁴ If such studies are to be believed, they suggest an underlying universally human emotive range. Such a conclusion – that emotions are connected to certain physical reactions spanning multiple cultures – allows for an assumption that there are grounds to assume emotions in cultures in the past would have shared enough with modern emotions as to allow their study to be useful.

As Scheer states, “[T]he body can evoke a certain set of words when habitualized bodily activations building on inborn and acquired programs are deeply entangled with a socially generated script.”³⁵ Dixon notes that “the history of emotions is a history of both bodies and ideas.”³⁶ In this way of thinking, the body reacts in many ways due to external stimuli, and “when such responses accompany a mental representation, or belief, [...] the experience becomes an emotion.”³⁷ The body reacts in a particular way to external stimuli, and based on the beliefs we culturally hold about what a particular circumstance means, we perceive emotion. For example, tears on

³² Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, ‘Constants across Cultures in the Face and Emotion’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 17.2 (1971), 124-29 (p. 128).

³³ Id., p. 129.

³⁴ Paul Ekman, ‘All Emotions are Basic’, in *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions*, ed. by Paul Ekman and Richard J. Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 15-19 (p. 17).

³⁵ Monique Scheer, ‘Are Emotions A Kind Of Practice (And Is That What Makes Them Have A History)? A Bourdieuan Approach To Understanding Emotion’, *History and Theory* 51.2 (2012), 193-220 (p. 213).

³⁶ Thomas Dixon, *The History of Emotions a Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 51).

³⁷ Id., p. 50.

their own have no given meaning, but tears following the loss of a loved one would be perceived as a manifestation of the emotion 'sadness'. Plamper notes that through attaching a bodily dimension to emotion, "the analysis of sources gains a new dimension."³⁸ As well as "explicitly emotional words and biographical data"³⁹, language surrounding the body can be used as a method of identifying the inner world of a person or of people. This is important in a study of betrayal, because due to the lack of first-person accounts in the works I study, emotion can frequently be detected not only through words spoken, but through the physical reactions of the bodies of heroes in the texts.

Social constructivists take the idea that certain emotions are universal and explore the idea that the ways in which these emotions are then expressed differ widely between cultures.⁴⁰ Following from this line of thought, Reddy introduces the idea of "emotives". Emotives are ways of expressing emotions, both verbal and physical which are "influenced directly by, and alter, what they 'refer' to."⁴¹ Stearns and Stearns introduce a similar idea through the concept of emotionology, which is not emotions themselves but rather the acceptable expression of underlying emotions, and which emotions are permitted, based on cultural context.⁴²

These emotives take underlying biologically produced feelings and channel them in culturally defined ways. The "'exterior referent' that an emotive appears to point at is

³⁸ Jan Plamper, *The history of emotions: an introduction*, trans. by Keith Tribe, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.269.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Middle Ages*, p. 15.

⁴¹ William M. Reddy, *The navigation of feeling: a framework for the history of emotions* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 105.

⁴² Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards', *The American Historical Review*, 90.4 (1985), 813-36 (p. 813).

not passive in the formulation of the emotive, and it emerges from the act of uttering in a changed state.”⁴³ For example, when a person says, “I am saddened”, this channels the underlying feeling into an emotion word, sadness, which is recognized by the culture. It is possible that in other cultures, such an emotion would be processed differently, or placed under an emotion word that combined feelings that in our culture we would describe as different feelings. Emotives “blank out the other possible interpretations of feelings; emotives are choices – automatic choices, for the most part – made from a huge repertory of possibilities.”⁴⁴ A society will only recognize a small percentage of these possibilities as legitimate. However, there will always be those on the outskirts of an emotional group who find a different set of emotives useful. The emotional range of a society changes over time through such fringe groups finding ways to obtain power, thus normalizing their fringe ideas of emotion.⁴⁵

Rosenwein takes on aspects of this idea, but rejects the notion that there would be so few emotional alternatives – the primary emotional grouping and the fringe grouping – in existence in a society at the same time. Instead, Rosenwein introduces the idea of emotional communities – a series of many overlapping groups each of which expresses emotions in slightly different ways. A person can be a member of many different such groups, changing emotional register slightly when moving between them.⁴⁶ Through such a system, Rosenwein presents reasonable solutions to issues

⁴³ Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, p. 105.

⁴⁴ Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Middle Ages*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ *Id.*, pp. 19-23.

⁴⁶ *Id.*, pp. 23-24.

raised by earlier scholars that there would seem to be different emotional values and expressions of emotion based on groupings such as gender and class.⁴⁷

Such arguments provide a potential way forward in the study of betrayal. In applying these general arguments about emotion to the Middle Ages, Rosenwein first uses studies outside of the field of history to provide solid backing for her arguments. She then proceeds to conduct a study of the emotional language used in her selected textual samples. For this, she explores not only key words describing emotional states, but also, having established that physical reactions to emotions are often similar across cultures, the language exploring physical reactions that can denote certain emotions. In my study of betrayal, I will take a similar approach, first examining the history of literature discussing betrayal, with a focus on sociological materials, where such study has thrived. After doing so I will turn to the texts, isolating certain words that are frequently used in potential betrayal situations and examining their usage.

O'Donnell, in his text on fosterage, offers one of the most in-depth examinations of emotional study specifically within the field of Celtic Studies. He takes Rosenwein's language of emotional communities and alters her approach in order to discuss the groups relevant to his own study. O'Donnell works with smaller groupings than Rosenwein does, exploring the emotional community of the foster family rather than of cities or regions. He notes that there are "few first-hand accounts of feeling within the foster family during the Middle Ages" but that it is possible, by examining a wide range of texts, to determine what the emotional community of the foster family would have

⁴⁷ Thomas W. Gallant, 'Honor, Masculinity, and Ritual Knife Fighting in Nineteenth-Century Greece', *The American Historical Review*, 105.2 (2000), 359-82; Stearns and Stearns, 'Emotionology', p. 830.

been like during this time period.⁴⁸ This is due to the fact that, while his sources have to do with larger-than-life adventures of heroes and other notable figures, these figures “are placed within a relatable setting and among a series of social ties that would have had resonance with a contemporary audience.”⁴⁹ Thus, while the texts cannot accurately depict what the reality of emotional communities would have been like, they can show what the expectations of these emotional communities would have looked like.⁵⁰

As I am working with similar texts lacking first-person accounts, I also acknowledge that the results of my exploration of betrayal will not demonstrate the reality of what betrayal would have looked like during the time the various recensions of the *Táin* were assembled, but hold, as O’Donnell does, that it is possible to determine what expectations were held regarding betrayal.

1.3 Betrayal

Instances of betrayal feature much less frequently than those of emotion as the primary focus of literary analysis concerning medieval texts – and even less when the focus of the analysis of literature is specifically from the time period of the *Táin*, as I indicate above. As with the field of emotional study, the study of betrayal as a literary device can be augmented by an examination of literature from outside of this field. In particular, the field of sociology has a vast range of studies on betrayal and its effects.

⁴⁸ Thomas C. O’Donnell, *Fosterage in Medieval Ireland: An Emotional History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), p. 22.

⁴⁹ Id., p. 23.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Such studies explore the reasons for and reactions to betrayal in modern societies, usually studying either betrayals in modern romantic relationships or in business and commercial relationships.⁵¹ The few works that examine betrayal as a literary phenomenon commonly assume that betrayal is a universal phenomenon that does not change a great deal between cultures,⁵² and thus focus on quite a broad area of literature. This means that there is use for a study of betrayal focused on literature that discusses how betrayal exists within a specific literary text. Those texts that do examine betrayal within literature have the potential to show the wider implications of sociological findings while exploring an often discussed but never fully analysed area of textual analysis. However, neither type of literary work about betrayal is of particular use in the study of medieval Irish literature, being so far removed from the specific social context. The ideas present in these texts, though, provide me with a theoretical background on

⁵¹ Michael W. Wiederman and Lisa Lamar, "“Not with Him You Don’t!”: Gender and Emotional Reactions to Sexual Infidelity during Courtship", *Journal of Sex Research*, 35.3 (1998), 288-97; S. C. Haden and Mahzad Hojjat, 'Aggressive Responses to Betrayal: Type of Relationship, Victim's Sex, and Nature of Aggression', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 23.1 (2006), 101-16; D. A. Lishner, Shannon Nguyen, E. L. Stocks, and Emily J. Zillmer, 'Are Sexual and Emotional Infidelity Equally Upsetting to Men and Women? Making Sense of Forced-Choice Responses', *Evolutionary Psychology*, 6.4 (2008), 667-75; Todd K. Shackelford and David M. Buss, 'Betrayal in Mateships, Friendships, and Coalitions', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22.11 (1996), 1151-64; Olivia Leeker and Al Carlozzi, 'Effects of Sex, Sexual Orientation, Infidelity Expectations, and Love on Distress Related to Emotional and Sexual Infidelity', *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 40.1 (2014), 68-91; Todd K. Shackelford, David M. Buss, and Kevin Bennett, 'Forgiveness or Breakup: Sex Differences in Responses to a Partner's Infidelity', *Cognition and Emotion*, 16.2 (2002), 299-307; Todd K. Shackelford, Gregory J. LeBlanc, and Elizabeth Drass, 'Emotional Reactions to Infidelity', *Cognition & Emotion*, 14.5 (2000), 643-59; Stanislav Treger and Susan Sprecher, 'The Influences of Sociosexuality and Attachment Style on Reactions to Emotional Versus Sexual Infidelity', *Journal of Sex Research*, 48.5 (2011), 413-22; Jason A. Aimone and Daniel Houser, 'What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You: A Laboratory Analysis of Betrayal Aversion', *Experimental Economics*, 15.4 (2012), 571-88; Daniel Houser and John Wooders, 'Reputation in Auctions: Theory, and Evidence from eBay', *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy*, 15.2 (2006), 353-69; J. Krantz, 'Leadership, Betrayal and Adaptation', *Human Relations*, 59.2 (2006), 221-40; A.R. Elangovan and Debra L. Shapiro, 'Betrayal of Trust in Organizations', *Academy of Management Review*, 23.3 (1998), 547-66; Yany Grégoire and Robert J. Fisher, 'Customer Betrayal and Retaliation: When Your Best Customers Become Your Worst Enemies', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36.2 (2008), 247-61.

⁵² See Gabriella Turnaturi, *Betrayals: The Unpredictability of Human Relations*, trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007).

the topic of betrayal that informs the rest of my research. It is important to note that a great deal of this research is taken from participants from Western cultures, and most specifically from a number of subsections of the United States, where the majority of betrayal studies have been conducted. This is important to keep in mind, particularly as certain studies suggest that participants from different cultural groups may at least have different emotional responses to betrayal acts.⁵³

Sociological research suggests that a betrayal act occurs when a trusted person (the betrayer) violates the expectations of an individual (the betrayed), which causes pain to the betrayed.⁵⁴ Sociologists Elangovan and Shapiro call betrayal a “violation of trust” – a “shadow of trust and loyalty.”⁵⁵ Trust is sometimes defined as a state wherein one individual exposes vulnerabilities to another due to positive expectations of the other’s intended behaviour.⁵⁶ Betrayal, then, is the disappointment of those expectations and the undercutting of any vulnerabilities the individual has exposed. Krantz notes that “[b]etrayal by its very nature requires transgression, violation of an agreement or trust. Actions contrary to another’s interest do not, in themselves, amount to betrayal.”⁵⁷ Due to this, betrayal can only come from someone close to and trusted by the betrayed, as it is the breaking of a specific set of personal expectations rather than a larger set of societal expectations that causes the act to be viewed as a betrayal act.⁵⁸ The literature

⁵³ Shackelford, LeBlanc, Drass. ‘Emotional reactions to infidelity’, p. 645.

⁵⁴ Haden and Hojjat, ‘Aggressive Responses to Betrayal’, p. 102.

⁵⁵ Elangovan and Shapiro, ‘Betrayal of Trust’, p. 547.

⁵⁶ Kessely Hong and Iris Bohnet, ‘Status and Distrust: The Relevance of Inequality and Betrayal Aversion’, *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 28.2 (2007), 197-213 (p. 198).

⁵⁷ Krantz, ‘Leadership, Betrayal and Adaptation’, p. 229.

⁵⁸ S. Rachman, ‘Betrayal: A Psychological Analysis’, *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 48.4 (2010), 304-11 (p. 304); Warren H. Jones, Danny S. Moore, Arianne Schratte, and Laura A. Negel, ‘Interpersonal Transgressions and Betrayals’, in *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001) 233-56 (p.235).

suggests that betrayal acts occur most frequently in times of change. Krantz posits that virtuous betrayals occur “in the crevice between the necessity for change and adaptation [...] and the need for a dependable and reliable context.”⁵⁹ There is often the need when circumstances change for personal relationships to change to fit these new circumstances, as the old relationships do not allow for function within the new system.⁶⁰

Betrayal is defined in opposition to the concept of loyalty. Where loyalty fails, betrayal exists; in fact, betrayal is the choice, when presented with a conflict of loyalties, of one loyalty over the other.⁶¹ Krantz speculates that when there is no or little trust, if an environment contains a lack of safety, individuals will turn to other areas of their lives to bestow their trust, thereby eliminating the degree of their loyalty in the high stress environment.⁶² He believes that such a change is one that has occurred in business environments recently, shifting from a focus on dependence on one another to independence and lack of loyalty in the worker/boss relationship. Krantz describes betrayal as essential for growth and adaptation. Each individual, from birth, has expectations placed upon them based on the role they are expected to fill in society. In the process of developing personal authority, certain of people’s expectations may no longer suit a person’s new identity. The rejection of these shared expectations can lead to feelings of betrayal in those who counted on the individual acting in a certain way and

⁵⁹ Krantz, ‘Leadership, Betrayal and Adaptation’, p. 222.

⁶⁰ Id., p. 226.

⁶¹ Leslie A. Baxter, Michael Mazanec, John Nicholson, Garth Pittman, Kathy Smith, and Lee West, ‘Everyday Loyalties and Betrayals in Personal Relationships’, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 14.5 (1997), 655-78 (p. 660),

⁶² Krantz, ‘Leadership, Betrayal and Adaptation’, p. 230.

continuing to honour a certain set of mutual loyalties.⁶³ This makes sense in the context of the *Táin*, which contains many elements of a coming-of-age story.

Intent is important in a betrayal act; if a person intended to betray another, the betrayed will usually feel more anger at the betrayal, and will more strongly desire revenge, than if the act was unintentional, in which case it would likely not even be considered a betrayal.⁶⁴ Due to the fact that “betrayal violates both social and personal norms regarding partners’ expected behavior” and is therefore considered by the betrayed to be an unjust form of behavior, betrayed individuals will often respond with an aggression – a common response intended to “attempt to redress the perceived injustice and perhaps to restore justice.”⁶⁵ In general, stricter penalties exist for crimes where a person was betrayed than for one in which someone was not.⁶⁶ This is likely in part due to the toll that betrayal takes on the betrayed. The effects are lasting. *Táin* Elangovan and Shapiro determined that people will remember betrayals done to them in the workplace even as much as 30 years earlier, even after they no longer work in the that same place anymore.⁶⁷ People who are betrayed frequently suffer from high levels of distress and low self-esteem.⁶⁸ Certain severe cases even suffer symptoms similar to those of PTSD.⁶⁹

⁶³ Id., p. 232.

⁶⁴ Grégoire and Fisher, ‘Customer Betrayal and Retaliation’, pp. 248-250; Rachman, ‘Betrayal: A Psychological Analysis’, p. 304; Hong and Bohnet, ‘Status and Distrust’, p. 200; Eli J. Finkel, Caryl E. Rusbult, Madoka Kumashiro, and Peggy A. Hannon, ‘Dealing With Betrayal in Close Relationships: Does Commitment Promote Forgiveness?’, *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 82.6 (2002), 956-74 (p. 957).

⁶⁵ Haden and Hojjat, ‘Aggressive Responses to Betrayal’, p. 103.

⁶⁶ Aimone and Houser, ‘What You Don’t Know’, p. 575.

⁶⁷ Elangovan and Shapiro, ‘Betrayal of Trust’, p. 548.

⁶⁸ Rachman, ‘Betrayal: A Psychological Analysis’, p. 306; Aimone and Houser, ‘What You Don’t Know’, p. 574.

⁶⁹ Id., p. 310.

However, not everyone is equally likely to be accused of and charged with committing a betrayal act. The hierarchy of a society affects how seriously an accusation of betrayal is taken. People with good reputations and high ranks are more likely able to dismiss such accusations.⁷⁰ Hong and Bohnet determine that people with higher status are more likely to avoid trusting where there is chance of betrayal, as it can be injurious to pride, while betrayal aversion is less of a motivation in trust situations for lower status individuals, who are more concerned with and distrustful of lack of inequality.⁷¹

While it is unwise to extrapolate that these concepts would necessarily apply to betrayal acts in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, I was reminded of certain elements from the sociological studies when conducting my initial research in the field of Celtic studies. Specifically, the importance of the type of relationship between a betrayer and a betrayed in defining whether an act is a betrayal act seems potentially relevant as well in an Irish context, given the well-defined legal roles of certain relationships and the hierarchical nature of such relationships. Perhaps most importantly, studying the sociological material has helped me to perceive what my preconceived notions of betrayal may be. This is important as otherwise I may start with a culturally defined notion of what betrayal is and then unintentionally attempt to prove that notion.

From this, it is possible to establish a framework of the general factors that make an act a betrayal act. There are a number of factors that contribute to a situation being identified as a betrayal act. Although not all these factors need to be in play

⁷⁰ Houser and Wooders, 'Reputation in Auctions', p. 367; Malin Åkerström, *Betrayal and Betrayers: The Sociology of Treachery*, (New Brunswick U.S.A.: Transaction, 1991), p. 111.

⁷¹ Hong and Bohnet, 'Status and Distrust', p. 209.

simultaneously for a betrayal act to occur, the majority of them will be present. In a betrayal act, generally:

- 1) There is a violation of expectations within a relationship.
- 2) This violation causes pain to the betrayed.
- 3) There are at least three recognizable parties involved – the betrayed, the betrayer, and the audience (the perspective of those outside the betrayed relationship itself).
- 4) Intent is considered important.
- 5) The betrayal situation occurs in a time of transition or change (whether on the macro or micro level).
- 6) There is a conflict of loyalties for the betrayer – one loyalty is chosen over another.
- 7) The betrayed responds in a way that is seemingly disproportionate to the offence.
- 8) The betrayed suffers physical symptoms/strong emotions due to the betrayal.

While it is possible for a betrayal to exist without checking all of the items on the list, if a situation differs too much from the above list, it would be too far from what we call betrayal to be logically considered the same thing or logically afforded the same name.

When looked at in the context of the *Táin*, certain of these criteria are not helpful. Criterium 5 certainly occurs in the *Táin*. However, due to the entire tale taking place during a “time of transition or change”, this criterium applies to all potential examples of betrayal in the *Táin*, and thus provides little assistance in finding an initial list of potential

betrayals. Criterium 5 is useful in establishing that the *Táin* itself is a likely place to find betrayal examples, but can do no more.

Criterium 7 is also not of much assistance in establishing potential betrayals. Due to the heroic nature of the *Táin*, everyone reacts to everything in a way that would be considered in modern society disproportionate to any offense. It would be presumptuous to assume that, as a member of a modern audience removed from the initial cultural context, I can establish which responses are considered more disproportionate than the rest.

It is Criteria 1 and 6 that seem to invite the easiest initial approach in choosing a preliminary list of potential betrayals. While there may be some circumstances where a medieval Irish audience has expectations of a character's behaviour that a modern reader does not, choosing all situations where characters act against expectations and choose one loyalty over another for an initial list of potential betrayals works well as a starting point. Criteria 1 and 6 are supported by Criteria 2 and 8. I interpret any strong emotional response as potentially a manifestation of pain – in the *Táin* this is usually expressed through anger. Strong emotional response can be demonstrated in many ways, although quite frequently it is not stated directly due to the heroic nature of the text. Strong emotions are sometimes shown through a character's actions in response to a betrayal, through a character's speech acts where they demonstrate disapproval of the betrayer's actions (often through anger), a character's inaction (where they cease to protect someone who has committed a betrayal, for example), and narratorial commentary expressing disapproval (whether directly or more subtly).

Using these criteria, I prioritize any seeming violations of expectations where the apparent betrayed has a strong negative emotional response. Adding Criterion 3, which states that the audience perceiving a betrayal is also important, and remembering that society tends to penalize those who commit betrayal acts, as they are considered to be acting against the good of society, I also include any seeming loyalty choice which involves those around the apparent betrayed and betrayer (including the narratorial voice of the tale) reacting negatively to the choice. These choices allow me to prioritize the voices present at the original period during which the stories were composed, who would best know what was considered unacceptable by the standards of Irish society at the time. Thus, the new list of criteria specifically for betrayals in the *Táin* is as follows:

- 1) There is a violation of expectations within a relationship.
- 2) This violation causes pain or harm to the betrayed.
- 3) There are at least three recognizable parties involved – the betrayed, the betrayer, and the audience (the perspective of those outside the betrayed relationship itself).
- 4) Intent is considered important.
- 5) There is a conflict of loyalties for the betrayer – one loyalty is chosen over another.
- 6) The betrayed and those around the betrayed (the audience) react negatively to the act.

Using these criteria, there are twelve betrayal acts that emerge. In order to explore these betrayal acts, I will turn now to the *Táin* itself and explore the storyline of this heroic epic.

Through using these criteria, there are twelve betrayal acts that emerge. In order to explore these betrayal acts, I will turn, at last, to the *Táin* itself and explore the storyline of this heroic epic.

1.4 The *Táin*

The *Táin* “occupies a place in Irish tradition analogous to that of the *Iliad* in Greek literature”⁷² – a great epic, with “evidence to suggest that the *Táin* indeed enjoyed an exalted position prior to the 12th century.”⁷³ Its importance to medieval scholars is demonstrated by its position as “the central point to which the various texts that are enumerated in the tale-lists are related.”⁷⁴ This ring of tales (the Ulster Cycle) focused on the “story of the rivalry between the provinces of Ulster in the north and Connacht in the west.”⁷⁵ The Ulster Cycle, with the *Táin* the “primary text”,⁷⁶ continued to be influential throughout the years, serving an important role during the Gaelic Revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries “by playing a role in the creation of an Irish national community.”⁷⁷ Its importance makes it a useful tale to examine when attempting to determine perspectives on betrayal during the period in which it was created.

⁷² Doris Edel, ‘Cú Chulainn on the Couch: Character Portrayal in *Táin Bó Cúailgne*’, in *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna (Berlin: curach bhán publications, 2013), 127-136 (p. 127).

⁷³ Ó hUiginn, ‘Background and Development’, p. 35.

⁷⁴ Abigail Burnyeat, ‘The *Táin*-complex in B.L. Egerton 1782’, in *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna (Berlin: curach bhán publications, 2013) 287-298 (p. 287).

⁷⁵ Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 5.

⁷⁶ Kelly, ‘The *Táin* as Literature’, p. 69.

⁷⁷ Caitlyn Schwartz, ‘Text, Paratext and Translation: the Ulster Cycle in the Gaelic Revival’, in *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna (Berlin: curach bhán publications, 2013), 315-20 (p. 315).

1.4.1 The Story of the *Táin*

While several manuscript traditions of the *Táin* exist (discussed more fully later on), each with their own idiosyncrasies, there are several story aspects that remain consistent throughout the recensions. Within the brief summary of the *Táin*'s storyline that I provide below, I emphasize the twelve betrayal acts alluded to previously. Within this summary, the betrayal acts are numbered chronologically. However, these numbers are purely for the purpose of noting where in the tale a betrayal act occurs, and in Chapter Two of the thesis these acts are divided into groupings based on theme.

In the *Táin*, the complicated and powerful Queen Medb of Connacht, along with her husband Ailill, decides to invade Ulster for the purpose of the titular *táin* (cattle raid). In some versions of the story this is due to Medb's realization that Ailill has more possessions than she does; Ailill possesses one more bull than does Medb and the only other bull fine enough to match is the Donn Cúailnge, who dwells in Ulster. After her attempt to obtain the bull through diplomacy fails, Medb resorts to battle.⁷⁸ Other versions do not include this reasoning, and audiences are left to sort out their own interpretations of Medb's actions, perhaps relying to some degree on information found in a greater network of Ulster Cycle tales on the myriad of hatreds and aggressions, small and large, that exist between Ulster and Connacht and that may drive a queen, if she be cunning (or desperate) enough, to the edge of war.⁷⁹ With Medb march many members of her kin, a great number of soldiers from all over Ireland (with

⁷⁸ *Táin Bó Cúailnge: from the Book of Leinster*, ed. and trans. by Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967; repr. 2004), ll. 1-180.

⁷⁹ *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, ed. and trans. by Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976; repr. 2006), ll. 1-3.

representatives from Tara, Munster, Connacht, and Leinster), and a contingent of men from Ulster – exiles from the province.⁸⁰ During the mustering of the army, Medb nearly murders one section of the men following and presumably loyal to her, the Gailioin. This is the first betrayal act discussed below in Chapter Two.⁸¹

Among the Connactmen is a complement of exiles from Ulster, led by Cú Chulainn's foster-father, the great warrior Fergus. Driven by loyalty to his foster-son, Fergus sends word to the Ulstermen that they are under attack. This is betrayal two.⁸² Fergus himself has complicated loyalties, as he is also having an affair with Medb, confirming the suspicions of her husband, Ailill, and forming betrayal number three.⁸³

Due to reasons also expanded on in tales outwith the *Táin*, the men of Ulster are unable to instantly muster and defend their homeland. They are in their *ces* – a state of helplessness and debility.⁸⁴ Only the young warrior Cú Chulainn, somehow unaffected by the curse, is able to stand in defence of Ulster. He stands against the forces assembled against Ulster, singlehandedly holding back the entire army.⁸⁵ At this point, in several versions of the tale Medb and Ailill ask who it is that is opposing them. The Ulster exiles, including Fergus, recount Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds, warning the queen and king what they face.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 1-8; *TBC-LL*, 147-56.

⁸¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 136-88; *TBC-LL*, 314-50.

⁸² *TBC-I*, ll. 227-55; *TBC-LL*, 361-92.

⁸³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1029-60; *TBC-LL*, 2487-91.

⁸⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 51-53; *TBC-LL*, 206-223.

⁸⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 67-397; *TBC-LL*, 393-737.

⁸⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 398-469; *TBC-LL*, 738-1217.

Eventually, Medb and Ailill strike a deal with a weary Cú Chulainn. Every day, they will find a warrior to fight him at a particular ford, and until he kills the champion, Medb and Ailill's army will advance.⁸⁷

This continues for quite some time, and during this period, Medb succeeds in her aim and captures Donn Cúailnge.⁸⁸ He is driven towards the edge of Ulster. Eventually, though, Medb and Ailill encounter a problem. Cú Chulainn, at this time, has killed an enormous number of warriors, and the warriors begin to realize there is no chance of victory against him. Driven to desperate measures, Medb and Ailill begin bribing warriors to fight Cú Chulainn. Medb and Ailill take advantage of the complex kinship networks present in the story and persuade several of Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers who are under Medb and Ailill's employ to betray and fight Cú Chulainn. These include the foster-brothers Fer Báeth and Fer Diad, whose actions against Cú Chulainn make betrayals four and five.⁸⁹ Yet certain of Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers in the enemy camp stay loyal to him, betraying their connections to Connacht. These include his foster-brother Fiacha, who defends Cú Chulainn when he is attacked by a group of twenty-nine warriors (betrayal six)⁹⁰, and Lugaid. Lugaid stays loyal despite Cú Chulainn maiming his brother after the brother chose to fight Cú Chulainn against Lugaid's wishes.⁹¹ This is the seventh betrayal act discussed in Chapter Two. Fergus, meanwhile, is enmeshed in the complex dynamics of the army of the men of Ireland, and punishes one Ulster exile, Dubthach, who, in an eighth betrayal, does not

⁸⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1280-86; *TBC-LL*, 1548-1564.

⁸⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 1487-1544; *TBC-LL*, 1756-1802.

⁸⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1737-806; 2567-3153; *TBC-LL*, 1868-905; 2607-3596.

⁹⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 2547-66; *TBC-LL*, 2546-605.

⁹¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1807-44; *TBC-LL*, 1906-61.

demonstrate loyalty to Cú Chulainn, showing Fergus's enduring loyalty to his foster-son.⁹²

The army of the men of Ireland is revealed throughout the text to be a tenuous entity, held together in part by offers of Medb and Ailill's daughter, Findabair, in marriage to multiple men. This form of loyalty relies upon the men not realizing that Findabair has been engaged to others as well. This causes troubles at one point when the Ulster warrior Reochaid, the man whom Findabair actually loves, agrees not to fight for Ulster until a final battle (a ninth betrayal act) in exchange for betrothal to Findabair. Upon hearing about this, seven kings from Munster reveal they have agreed to fight in exchange for a future marriage with Findabair. Enraged at the lies that they have been told (a tenth betrayal) the kings of Munster attack their own side.⁹³

Tensions are fraught within Medb and Ailill's army when, after a lengthy period, and much pain, Cú Chulainn sends his father to rouse the Ulstermen. Finally, Sualtam's persuasions work, and Conchobor calls on his warriors to fight. During the battle that ensues, Ailill's nephew, who is also the grandson of the king of Ulster, comes to fight for his grandfather. Due to his actions occurring against the desires of his father, this is counted as an eleventh betrayal. Fergus finally displays his true loyalties to Ulster and departs the battle field, taking a large number of troops with him in the twelfth betrayal act I shall discuss. At the end of a long battle, Medb and the men of Ireland are routed. Ulster has its victory, and at the very end of the tale the two bulls do battle, and Ailill's bull, the Findbennach Aí, is killed.⁹⁴

⁹² *TBC-I*, ll. 2367-427; *TBC-LL*, 2376-437.

⁹³ *TBC-I*, ll. 3346-65; *TBC-LL*, 3863-92.

⁹⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 3410-4160; *TBC-LL*, 3981-4918.

There is not just one story that is the *Táin* – there are several versions, created over a long period of time. The tradition surrounding the *Táin* is highly intertextual, with reasons for events occurring in the *Táin* not found within the story itself, but in a connected series of interwoven tales. In order to deal with the material of the *Táin*, it will be necessary to consider both the number of variations of the tale and on which variation of the tale this examination of betrayal will focus, as well as the Ulster Cycle as a whole and how I will approach dealing with the stories connected to but separate from the *Táin* proper.

1.4.2 Manuscript Tradition

1.4.2.1 Initial Transmission

Compared to the other tales of the same period, the *Táin*, at 4000 lines, is massive in size. There is much debate on how, why, and when the *Táin* first came to be written. Mallory notes that “there is no simple ‘date’ for the *Táin* other than, perhaps, its earliest manuscript version in the *Lebor na hUidre*” and that the question becomes how much earlier than the twelfth century the tale’s constituent elements are.⁹⁵ Mallory points out that when a text is being dated, there are actually multiple elements that are analyzed – linguistic forms, narrative elements, and archaeological elements can all be examined to date a text, and the results from each sort of dating could each be different.⁹⁶ It is therefore difficult to pinpoint exactly how the *Táin* originally came into

⁹⁵ J. P. Mallory, ‘The World of Cú Chulainn: The Archaeology of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*’, in *Aspects of the Táin*, ed. by J. P. Mallory (Belfast: The Universities Press, 1992), 103-53 (p. 151).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

being, and the influences that led to its creation. Based on the material culture present within the *Táin*, Mallory dates the tale from some point in the seventh century or onward, although using some terminology regarding objects that dates from earlier periods.⁹⁷

Thurneysen believes that its earliest perceivable form was a manuscript written in the eighth century that contained all of the primary story elements known to us today. This manuscript was then transmitted into the culture, after which different strands of the oral tradition were made into two manuscripts in the ninth century from a compilation of which the tale as we know it was formed. These two textual traditions that were drawn upon is where duplications come from within the *Táin*.⁹⁸ O'Rahilly mostly accepts this theory, and states, "The story of the *Táin*, told countless times in oral recitation, must have varied continuously with the additions and improvisations of each teller elaborating and developing a traditional theme."⁹⁹ She discusses a number of duplications in Recension I that could demonstrate the original oral traditions.

However, Carney disagrees with this theory, stating that it is highly unlikely that a fully formed literary text would pass into oral tradition and even less likely it would make it back only changed as much as the slight divergence present in doublets recorded in the TBC I.¹⁰⁰ Carney believes that, while it is quite likely that an oral past influences the tales we have today and that the characters may have been drawn from that oral past, "that early Irish written work has the character of written work." While he believes that

⁹⁷ Id., pp. 151-52.

⁹⁸ Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1921), p. 112-13.

⁹⁹ Cecile O'Rahilly, 'Introduction', in *Táin Bó Cúailnge: from the Book of Leinster*, ed. and trans. by Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967; repr. 2002), p. xvi.

¹⁰⁰ James Carney, *Studies in Irish literature and history* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1955), p. 66-67.

Táin does draw from oral tradition, the assumption that this affects our final product “in any very full sense” cannot be made.¹⁰¹ This is similar to the conclusions drawn by Ó uHiggin. He examines several stories often thought to be the earliest segments of the *Táin – Verba Scáthaige* (about Cú Chulainn’s training by Scáthach), *Conailla Medb míchura* (about Fergus’s exile), *Scela Conchobair* (about Fergus’s history with Conchobor), and the tale of the two bulls. However, he ultimately concludes that it is equally easy to argue that these tales are individual stories about the characters in the *Táin*, not tales referring to an “already-existing *Táin*.”¹⁰² He determines that, while it is necessary to acknowledge a potential oral tradition influencing the *Táin*, the *Táin* exists as a “literary creation which grew over a period of centuries.”¹⁰³

Despite there being many ambiguities in the texts that make them harder to date, it is likely that while some elements in the tales are supposed to represent archaic times and material culture, the actual cultural and political elements present in the earliest extant manuscript version date to the period during which the tale was transcribed.¹⁰⁴ It is this viewpoint regarding the political and cultural elements that I will be taking. I will assume that even if there are older elements present, from a cultural, and thus relational, perspective, the story would have to make sense to an eleventh or twelfth century audience, and that therefore any information to be gleaned from the *Táin* about the nature of betrayal would reflect the perception of and reaction to betrayal beginning from around this period.

¹⁰¹ Id., pp. 322-23.

¹⁰² Ó hUiginn, ‘Background and Development’, p. 61.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 6.

1.4.2.2 Recensions

The manuscripts that remain to us containing versions of the *Táin* are generally held to fall into three recensions – groupings of manuscript versions that resemble each other in terms of form, structure, and character presentation.

1.4.2.2.1 Recension I

Versions of Recension I are found in four manuscripts, all of which contain incomplete versions of the tale. These four manuscripts are Lebor na hUidre (LU, The Book of the Dun Cow, which was completed by 1106), the fourteenth century Yellow Book of Lecan (YBL), O'Curry MS 1, and Egerton MS 1782 (the latter two both dating to the sixteenth century).¹⁰⁵ Of these, LU contains the oldest extant version of the *Táin*, as well as being the oldest manuscript that has come down to us written entirely in Irish.¹⁰⁶

As it contains the oldest version of the *Táin* we possess, and as it is a useful study of the complexities present on the manuscript side of matters, I will discuss LU and our information on it in somewhat greater detail than the other three manuscripts. LU contains 37 texts¹⁰⁷, including an incomplete version of the *Táin* that breaks off quite close to Comrac Fergusa (in which Fergus is sent to fight with Cú Chulainn).¹⁰⁸ LU is mentioned several times in other texts which help us trace its history. It was taken to

¹⁰⁵ E. M. Greenwood, 'Some Aspects of the Evolution of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* from TBC I to LL TBC', in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), 47-54 (p. 47); Cecile O'Rahilly, 'Introduction', in *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, ed. and trans. by Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976; repr. 2006), p. vii.

¹⁰⁶ Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'Introduction', in *Lebor na hUidre, Codices Hibernenses Eximii, 1*, ed. by Ruairí Ó hUiginn (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), 9-27 (p. 9).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 323.

Connacht and re-inked there, at which time the scholar re-inking the text wrote a scribal note stating Máel Muire was involved in the initial writing of the manuscript. However, it is unsure where he got this information.¹⁰⁹ We have reference to a Máel Muire who was killed in 1106 in Clonmacnoise.¹¹⁰ This is generally believed to be the Máel Muire referenced.

Best notes that not just Máel Muire was involved in the writing of LU. Rather, he stated there were three hands involved in the process, which Best called A, M, and H. M, so named because this is the hand generally held to be Máel Muire, wrote the most, while H added sections later.¹¹¹ Bergin et al. note that the handwriting of H is extremely rough, but it is similar enough stylistically to the other hands that he did not want to put it later than 13th century. Bergin et al. believe that H erased several pages to leave room for the versions he preferred.¹¹² Oskamp expands on this theory with the idea that H found the manuscript in a damaged condition and repaired certain sections of it.¹¹³

These theories about the hands and time frame of LU have been challenged, however. Ó Concheanainn suggests that H was actually Máel Maire, which would have H dying in 1106 and means that the other two hands would have had to be writing during an earlier period.¹¹⁴ Breatnach determines, through an examination of the linguistic features of the manuscript, that “there is [...] an appreciable [...] difference in the level of attestation of innovatory Middle Irish forms between LU and Rawlinson B

¹⁰⁹ Ó hUiginn, ‘Introduction’, p. 11-12.

¹¹⁰ Id., p. 12.

¹¹¹ R. I. Best, “Notes on the Script of Lebor na hUidre”, *Ériu* 6 (1912), 161-74.

¹¹² Richard Irvine Best and Osborn Bergin, ‘Introduction’, in *Lebor na hUidre: Book of the Dun Cow*, ed. by Richard Irvine Best and Osborn Bergin (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1929), p. xvi-xviii.

¹¹³ H.P.A. Oskamp, “On the Collation of Lebor Na Huidre”, *Ériu* 25 (1974), 148-56 (p. 149-50).

¹¹⁴ Tomas Ó Concheanainn, The reviser of Leabhar na hUidhre, *Éigse* 15 (1974) 277-88.

502.”¹¹⁵ He states that, since Rawlinson B 502 can be dated to around 1130, this “gives us a terminus ante quem for the activity of H.”¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, following a paleographic study of the *Táin*, Duncan has suggested that H is not just one hand, but rather up to six hands.¹¹⁷

Translations and critical editions of Recension I often combine the two manuscripts LU and YBL to come closer to having a complete tale.¹¹⁸ This process is not without its faults – the different manuscripts, while from the same recension, do contain differences that can make the process of reading a melding of the texts jarring. For example, the Ulster hero Conall Cernach, not a major figure in the *Táin* but recurring, is on the Connacht side at the beginning of the Recension I text before fighting with his father later in the text, and it can be wondered whether this is an intentional character choice occurring in Recension I versions of the *Táin* or a discrepancy between manuscripts, wherein one had him as numbering among the Ulster exiles and the other had him safely among his Ulster kin, fighting for them.¹¹⁹

1.4.2.2.2 Recension II

Recension II is contained within the Book of Leinster (shortened to LL, manuscript name TCD Ms. 1339).¹²⁰ In a paleographic study of the LL, Duncan determines that nine scribes were principally involved in its compilation. This

¹¹⁵ Liam Breatnach, ‘Lebor na hUidre: Some Linguistic Aspects’, in *Lebor na hUidre, Codices Hibernenses Eximii*, 1, ed. by Ruairí Ó hUiginn (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), 102-137 (p. 135).

¹¹⁶ Id., p. 136.

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Boyle, ‘The Palaeography of H in Lebor na hUidre’, in *Lebor na hUidre, Codices Hibernenses Eximii*, 1, ed. by Ruairí Ó hUiginn (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), 69-101.

¹¹⁸ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 5; O’Rahilly, ‘Introduction’ *TBC-I*, p. xxii.

¹¹⁹ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 319.

¹²⁰ Id., p. 323; Elizabeth Duncan, ‘A reassessment of the script and make-up of Lebor na Nuachongbála’, *ZCP* 59 (2012), 27–66 (p. 28).

compilation took place over a longer period of time the outer limits of which could have been 1151-1224.¹²¹ Duncan determines that the *terminus ante quem* for the scribe labeled T1, who penned the majority of the LL version of the *Táin*, is 1181. However, by combining this knowledge with information about the dating of other hands who worked alongside hand T1, a date between 1151 and 1163 is likely.¹²²

An extremely similar version of the *Táin* (“generally regarded as a modernization and enlargement of the LL-Tain”¹²³) is found in the 17th century Stowe manuscript (RIA Ms. C VI 3).¹²⁴ Thurneysen dates its version of the *Táin* to the 15th century, and Edel notes that this dating is still accepted.¹²⁵ Due to its similarity to TBC II, Thurneysen and Edel refer to this version as TBC IIb, and others refer to it as a variation of Recension II.¹²⁶ However, as this is a later version, the LU-*Táin* is prioritized here.

O’Rahilly believes that Recension II draws on both some version similar to Recension I but “shorn of its variants and of its H-excrecences and other interpolations” and a variant, known as x, which is now lost.¹²⁷ It is the only recension of the *Táin* where a complete copy (LL) has come down to us.¹²⁸

1.4.2.2.3 Recension III

¹²¹ Duncan, ‘Reassessment of Lebor na Nuachongbála’, p. 59.

¹²² Ibid; Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 323.

¹²³ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 324.

¹²⁴ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 324; Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, p. 115-16.

¹²⁵ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 324; Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, p. 116-17.

¹²⁶ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 324; Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, p. 115; Hildegard L. C. Tristram, ‘What is the Purpose of *Táin Bó Cúailnge?*’, in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), 11-22 (p. 11); Esther Le Mair, ‘A Trusted Outsider: Leborcham in the Ulster Cycle’, in *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna (Berlin: curach bhán publications, 2013), 37-48 (p. 37).

¹²⁷ O’Rahilly, ‘Introduction’ *TBC-LL*, p. xlv.

¹²⁸ Tristram, ‘What is the Purpose?’, p. 47.

The language of Recension III is generally later, and it was likely compiled in the thirteenth or fourteenth century.¹²⁹ It is found in fragmentary form in two manuscripts – TCD Ms. H.2.17 and BM Ms. Egerton 93.¹³⁰ The sections overlap somewhat,¹³¹ allowing for comparison of the texts.¹³² Recension III quite often shares “virtually the same wording”¹³³ as Rec. II and seems to be a “severely trimmed down version of Rec. II” but with modernized language, although not taken from the text of the LL *Táin*.¹³⁴ However, the order of events and the interactions between characters in this recension are often quite different than that of Recension II, making it clearly a different compilation.¹³⁵ At times, the scribes who wrote it down seem to have been working from a source that shared some points in common with Recension I – there are several sections in which Recension III agrees with the H interpolation in the LU *Táin* more closely in terms of plot than it does with any other version remaining to us.¹³⁶ These sections of Recension III are stylistically different than the rest.¹³⁷

¹²⁹ Schwartz, ‘Text, Paratext and Translation’, p. 316; Uáitéar Mac Gearailt, ‘The Relationship of Recensions I and II of the *Táin*’, in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), 55-70 (p. 56).

¹³⁰ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 324.

¹³¹ Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, p. 97.

¹³² Tristram, ‘What is the Purpose?’, p. 47; Ó Béarra Feargal, ‘*Táin Bó Cuailnge* III: abach aimrid?’, in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), 71-76 (p. 71-73).

¹³³ Mac Gearailt, ‘The Relationship of Recensions I and II’, p. 55.

¹³⁴ Id., p. 57.

¹³⁵ Id., p. 55.

¹³⁶ Id., p. 58.

¹³⁷ Id., p. 60-63.

1.4.2.3 Conclusions

I will here be considering only Recensions I and II. Recension III, written later in a different form of the language, is beyond the scope of this study. Within these two recensions, the factors touched upon briefly above – differing ideas on the period of creation and purpose of the texts, questions about the identity and number of scribes working on the different manuscripts, and sheer amount of missing material – complicate our understanding and leave questions as to how to proceed in a literary examination of the *Táin*. Although acknowledging these complexities, I will treat each recension as a literary whole presented as it was designed to be presented, and, for example, assume character motivation over accident of manuscript transmission when dealing with the character of Conall Cernach and his switching allegiances. If ever there is no way to determine the characters' motivations, I will then consider external factors, such as manuscript differences and accidents of transmission, to help solve problems.

1.4.3 Comparing Recensions

Over the years, there has been considerable debate about how to treat Recensions I and II. Historically, Recension I has been considered a less readable work, with many variants where nearly the same events occur twice within the text that interrupt the flow of the tale.¹³⁸ O'Rahilly notes, "Sometimes a passage is so condensed that the full meaning is learnt only by comparison with the equivalent passage in LL."¹³⁹ Tristram believes that Recension I is what remains to us of an initial set of attempts to

¹³⁸ Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, p. 432.

¹³⁹ O'Rahilly, 'Introduction' *TBC-LL*, p. xlvi.

write down the *Táin*, while the Irish medieval writers were still developing the skill sets involved in literacy.¹⁴⁰ Dooley mentions that Recension I “shows many internal marks of reworking and later additions, so that scholars hesitate to describe it as a literary product with any high degree of finish.”¹⁴¹

In contrast, it is believed that Recension II “is a unity, that the various elements of the tale have been brought together to form a new coherent whole.”¹⁴² It contains few doublings and interpolations, presenting a more finished product.¹⁴³ Dooley agrees that Recension II is a “much more coherent narrative, providing a new beginning, eliminating reduplication of episodes, and toning down some of the rougher aspects of the old story.”¹⁴⁴

However, other scholars, particularly in more recent years, disagree with the notion that Recension I is inferior to Recension II, and that it was a product of bad writing, and instead look at the ways both recensions worked for the environment in which they were created. In particular, there have been several attempts to relook at Recension I and determine its strengths. Kelly believes that Recension I is not merely a pointless collection of episodes, but a clearly articulated story “in which consciously chosen elements are deployed in a carefully planned order” that builds to a final ending in which “the proud queen is dishonored.”¹⁴⁵ Ó Corráin does not think the elements generally held to be flaws do not exist, but suggests that LU is a workbook created for scholars, not a text intended for casual reading, and this explains its weaker literary

¹⁴⁰ Tristram, ‘What is the Purpose?’, pp. 11-12.

¹⁴¹ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 5.

¹⁴² O’Rahilly, ‘Introduction’ *TBC-LL*, p. liv.

¹⁴³ Id., p. lv.

¹⁴⁴ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁵ Kelly, ‘The *Táin* as Literature’, p. 95.

elements.¹⁴⁶ Toner explores Recension I as a history. He believes that the scribes of Recension I, and in particular H, take “a historical approach” to the writing, with the contradictory variants intentional. In this theory, the variants were specifically sought out so that they could be compared and contrasted, as is often done in historical writing.¹⁴⁷ Edel also explores the idea that the episodic nature of Recension I is important and intentional – that in such an episodic text character arcs and the literary structure to which we are more accustomed are not supposed to exist, but rather each episode relates back to certain central themes.¹⁴⁸ Edel explains that Recension II has often been held as a more unified text and a stronger literary creation, often because of influence from the Aristotelian sense of what makes a strong text (although she believes Recension II, too, does not reach “architectonic unity”¹⁴⁹) and its greater adherence to a heroic code of morality.¹⁵⁰ However, Edel argues scholars who make such arguments in preference of Recension II often fail to realize the oral beginnings of the *Táin*, and how Recension I is a semiliterate epic – a literary retelling of an oral story that “continues to function in the oral practice.”¹⁵¹ The scribe of such an epic is “constricted in his choice of plot or form by the traditional material and so tends to include matter that does not really fit into the new context.”¹⁵² The written text of Recension I found in LU was designed in such a way that it details many variants currently in circulation (preserving them), and

¹⁴⁶ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Máel Muire, the Scribe: Family and Background’, in *Lebor na hUidre, Codices Hibernenses Eximii, 1*, ed. by Ruairí Ó hUiginn (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), 28-68 (p. 63).

¹⁴⁷ Toner, ‘Historiography or Fiction?’, p. 11, 13, 20; Gregory Toner, ‘Scribe and text in Lebor na hUidre: H’s intentions and methodology’, in *Ulidia 2: proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Ruairí Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009), 106–120 (p. 107-08).

¹⁴⁸ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 13; Edel, ‘Cú Chulainn on the Couch’, p. 128.

¹⁴⁹ Id., p. 128.

¹⁵⁰ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁵¹ Id., p. 18.

¹⁵² Ibid.

also provides easily laid out access to various tale segments to any oral performers seeking literary means to improve their repertoire. The purposes for which Recension I was designed are different than those of Recension II, but it is well-designed for its seemingly intended purposes. Edel believes that Recension II, in contrast, achieves the unity for which it is preferred by eliminating many of these valuable variations, and a tendency to eliminate any scenes that may portray the heroes of the tale negatively.¹⁵³ Providing a fair reckoning of both texts, Schwartz observes that Recension I “has a powerful sparseness and brutality” while Recension II has a greater sense of continuity and a stronger narrative, although “it has its own drawbacks in its length and repetitiveness.”¹⁵⁴

In this study, I accept the merits of the later literary approach wherein Recensions I and II are treated as equally of merit. I will acknowledge, where necessary, the differences in form and function between the two recensions, but will not judge one over the other, accepting that different purposes and designs may have gone into the making of each recension. I will often examine each Recension separately for this reason, so that I can establish whether two Recensions with different literary goals may have different approaches to betrayal.

1.4.4 The Ulster Cycle

Before beginning an examination of the *Táin*, it is also necessary to examine how I will treat the additional material featuring the characters on whom I will focus. There

¹⁵³ Id., p. 19.

¹⁵⁴ Schwartz, ‘Text, Paratext and Translation’, p. 316.

are about 75-80 tales included in a so-called Ulster Cycle.¹⁵⁵ The Ulster Cycle is a group of stories that includes both the *Táin* and a group of additional tales that take place either before or after the *Táin* and “tell the story of the rivalry between the provinces of Ulster in the north and Connacht in the west.”¹⁵⁶ The *Táin* is generally presumed to be at the centre of the cycle.¹⁵⁷ For the most part, the tales share a common time, place, and dramatis personae – the cast of characters and location being held in common is one way stories are commonly united into a cycle.¹⁵⁸ Usually, the tales are either about people from Ulster, or about people connected to Ulstermen. They are frequently opposed by warriors from Connacht, most notably Queen Medb and her husband, about whom there are also several tales in the Ulster Cycle. Most of the stories are set during the period where Conchobor is king of Ulster and deal with him, his warrior class, and their enemies. Some of the many recurring characters including Fergus, Conchobor, Medb, Cú Chulainn, and several other Ulster and Connacht heroes of the time.¹⁵⁹ Geographically, the centre for many of the tales is Ulster, and more specifically Emain Macha, where Conchobor lives.¹⁶⁰ Temporally, the tales belong to an “unhistoric primitive past.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Ó hUiginn, ‘Background and Development’, p. 29; Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p. 41.

¹⁵⁶ Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁷ Ó hUiginn, ‘Background and Development’, p. 29; Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p. 45; Fangzhe Qiu, ‘The Ulster Cycle in the law tracts’, in *Ulidia 4: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Mícheál B. Ó Mainín and Gregory Toner (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 9-22 (p. 10); Findon, *A Woman’s Words*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁸ Erich Poppe, *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters: Some Issues in Medieval Irish Literary History and Criticism*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures, 9 (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2008), p. 8.

¹⁵⁹ Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, pp. 15-17; Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p. 41.

¹⁶⁰ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p. 41; Qiu, ‘The Ulster Cycle in the law tracts’, p. 10; Hillers, Barbara, ‘The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle’, in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), 99-106 (p. 99).

¹⁶¹ Christophe Vielle, ‘The Oldest Narrative Attestations of a Celtic Mythical and Traditional Heroic Cycle’, in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), 217-228 (p. 217).

These Ulster Cycle tales were likely written down by Christian monks working as scribes in a variety of monasteries at some point between the eighth and twelfth centuries.¹⁶² They are primarily written in prose, with poetry sections at moments of intense emotion and drama.¹⁶³ The largest collections of the tales are found in *LU*, *The LL*, and *YBL*.¹⁶⁴

It is important to remember that the division of Irish stories into cycles is not an ancient but a modern way of grouping the texts.¹⁶⁵ However, there are some hints that scribes writing at the time were deliberately attempting to draw together some of the texts as part of an overarching unit. One such set of clues are attempts by certain scribes to make contradictory elements of texts coalesce more smoothly. It is possible to see the struggle to make things internally consistent among texts perhaps not at first joined by the scribe in *LU* who tries to set various events chronologically in relation to each other even though the chronology is often strange in the texts.¹⁶⁶ Qiu observes that “the intertextual cohesion within the Ulster Cycle is surprisingly high.”¹⁶⁷ There are also “numerous verbal echoes” between stories in the Ulster Cycle that would have evoked other stories for audiences at the time of composition – some tales likely were created first in a different form and later altered so that they would work better linked together.¹⁶⁸

Among these Ulster Cycle tales, there is a smaller subset known as the *remscéla*. These *remscéla* are pre- or foretales – tales that are supposed to precede the

¹⁶² Ó hUiginn, ‘Background and Development’, p. 29; Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 5.

¹⁶³ Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁴ Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁵ Hillers, ‘The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle’, p. 99.

¹⁶⁶ Poppe, *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁷ Qiu, ‘The Ulster Cycle in the law tracts’, p. 10.

¹⁶⁸ Findon, *A Woman’s Words*, p. 17; Poppe, p. 11.

Táin and usually introduce plot points, motivations, or characters found in the *Táin*. They are often about events that lead to the cattle raid and influence its eventual outcome.¹⁶⁹ Unlike the designation ‘Ulster Cycle’, the idea of the *remscéla* is based on ways the writers of ancient texts categorized their own works. There are lists of *remscéla* in various manuscripts, including LL and RIA D iv 2. B.L. Egerton 1782 contains a group of *remscéla* before its copy of the *Táin*¹⁷⁰, while *The Finding of Táin Bo Cuailnge* found in LL contains a list of ten *remscéla* (that is found in a different section of the manuscript than the *Táin* itself).¹⁷¹ In the manuscripts that have lists of *remscéla*, not all of the *remscéla* in the lists are actually in the manuscripts and some tales are told that are not on the list.¹⁷² Burnyeat notes that “the tale lists construct a complex network of intertextual relationships” The tale lists provide us with a clue as to how these tales were originally held to be connected and as to how original audiences would have engaged with the material.¹⁷³

Due to constraints of time and space, I shall only occasionally reference the greater Ulster Cycle – choosing instead to rely on information given to me within the text of the *Táin* alone. I will only take information from the rest of the Ulster Cycle when a person’s actions within the *Táin* are impossible to explain without drawing on external texts. I think in particular of the character of Fergus, and his exile.

¹⁶⁹ Bruford, ‘Why an Ulster Cycle?’, p. 23; Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p. 45; Martina Maher, ‘De Gabáil int Sída: remscél or remremscél?’, in *Ulidia 4: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Mícheál B. Ó Mainín and Gregory Toner (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 150-161 (p. 150); Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 4.

¹⁷⁰ Maher, ‘De Gabáil int Sída’, pp. 150-151; Burnyeat, ‘The *Táin*-complex’, p. 287.

¹⁷¹ Maher, ‘De Gabáil int Sída’, pp. 151-152.

¹⁷² Id., p. 151.

¹⁷³ Burnyeat, ‘The *Táin*-complex’, p. 287.

When drawing on external sources, I shall privilege tales found in the *remscéla* lists, as their inclusion in such lists suggests audiences at the time were expected to have reference to these stories in order to make sense of character actions and obtain character motivations. I shall also draw upon external information sources if there is a brief mention to an event in the *Táin* that is more fully explored in external texts – ‘Aided Óenfhir Aífe’, for example, which contains the death of Cú Chulainn’s son at his own hands.

1.5 Relationship Dynamics

As suggested by the sociological materials, the study of betrayal seems to necessitate the study of relationships. While it is common, at least in English texts, to hear of people betraying themselves or their own expectations in some way, the sort of betrayal that I wish to examine in this study is that where individuals are betraying others. In order for this sort of betrayal to take place, at least two individuals, a betrayer and a betrayed, are required, and they must have some type of relationship – they must have some connection, however distant. Thus, in order to reasonably explore the concept of betrayal, it is useful to have some understanding of the cultural expectations the original audiences of my selected texts would likely have had about various types of relationships. Without understanding cultural expectations about what the normal state of a particular sort of relationship should be, it is more difficult to detect when the relationship goes wrong through a betrayal act. As well, since different relationships often have different societal expectations, it is possible that factors surrounding betrayal, such as what sort of action constitutes a betrayal act or what sort of betrayal

act is unforgiveable, may also differ depending on the sort of relationship involved. By understanding different sorts of relationships, it is also possible to see if there are patterns of certain relationship types being prioritised above others or certain relationship types most frequently ending in betrayal.

There are numerous texts written about the relationships between characters in the *Táin*. These pieces focus on multiple types of relationship. Several focus on Cú Chulainn's relationship with his kin (both maternal and paternal blood relationships and foster-kin).¹⁷⁴ Others discuss marriage, such as that of Medb and Ailill or that of Cú Chulainn and Emer.¹⁷⁵ While these academic pieces detailing relationships differ largely in purpose, the majority of such writing focuses on familial relationships.¹⁷⁶ These works are extremely useful in providing a solid foundation in understanding how the relationships specific to the *Táin* function. However, to find overarching societal relationship expectations, it is convenient to examine the surviving legal texts from the early Irish period. Several of the referenced studies on relationships in the *Táin* use these texts as a basis for their examinations. Ó Cathasaigh examines the legal terminology Medb and Ailill use to describe their relationship in the LL version of the *Táin*, with Medb claiming they have a marriage where the man is legally dependent on his wife and Ailill claiming the opposite. All of their arguments are based around which one of them is legally entitled, through line of descent, to the land they rule.¹⁷⁷ Jaski

¹⁷⁴ 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*, ed. by Ruairi Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009), 54-65; Bart Jaski, 'Cú Chulainn: gormac and dalta of the Ulstermen', *CMCS* 37 (1999), 1-31.

¹⁷⁵ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'Ailill and Medb: A Marriage of Equals', in *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Ruairi Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009), 46-53; Findon, *A Woman's Words*.

¹⁷⁶ See for example Edel, 'Cú Chulainn on the Couch' and *Inside the Táin*.

¹⁷⁷ Ó Cathasaigh, 'A Marriage of Equals', pp. 46-51.

analyzes the specific legal connotations of the kinship terms used to describe Cú Chulainn's relationship with his maternal kindred, in particular his maternal uncle Conchobar.¹⁷⁸ It is clear from these examples that many of the sections of the *Táin* employ legal terminology and thus that using these legal texts as an avenue for analysis is a productive and viable option for research.

While examining the information found in these legal texts, it is important to keep in mind the difficulties that come with examining the material. Surviving law tracts do not contain the results of actual lawsuits, instead detailing the procedures and decisions expected in particular legal situations.¹⁷⁹ This means that the texts are not necessarily reflective of the actual state of society at the time, but rather an ideal of behaviour. As well, the surviving legal material is a small portion of what originally existed, with surviving fragments often contradicting one another.¹⁸⁰ Whether this contradiction is due to texts being written at different time periods, texts coming from differing legal schools, or some other factor is uncertain.¹⁸¹ Many surviving texts can only be dated approximately.¹⁸² All of these factors must be taken into account when using the information found in legal materials.

The ancient Irish law codes describe a highly stratified society, and relationships seem highly hierarchical and codified. Kelly notes that “[n]ative Irish law never

¹⁷⁸ Jaski, 'Cú Chulainn: gormac and dalta', pp. 1-31.

¹⁷⁹ Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 8.

¹⁸⁰ Stacey, *Dark Speech*, pp. 7-8; Liam Breatnach, *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, Early Irish Law Series, V (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2005), p. 373; Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series, III (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988; repr. 2016), pp. 1-2.

¹⁸¹ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 2.

¹⁸² Breatnach, *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, pp. 354-55.

subscribed to the Roman principle of all citizens being equal before the law.”¹⁸³ Those considered more important in the legal rankings are given more in compensation for offences committed against them than those considered less important.¹⁸⁴ Clear and distinct roles are defined for kings, for different ranks of lords, clergymen, and craftsmen, for farmers, for men and women, for children and adults, for those considered mentally competent and those not, and for many other types of people.¹⁸⁵ In order to ensure that people of different social groups remained within the bounds of their class, those certain classes were often marked by highly visible symbols of their rank. For example, when in fosterage, children of different social classes were required to wear different colours, with distinctions between the children of free-men, nobles, and royals.¹⁸⁶ It was possible but difficult to change rank either through public shame (for example, the reaction to a king revealed to be cowardly during a fight) or public acclaim (for example the accolades given to a person particularly skilled in a craft).¹⁸⁷ The oaths of more powerful people are given more legal weight than those less powerful.¹⁸⁸ Ultimately, this leads to a society within the *Táin* where shame and acclaim drive behavior, and where a person’s social stature can protect the individual from charges of betrayal. Powerful friends make powerful allies, and people fight to obtain the loyalty of these allies. The powerful have more resources available to them and are able to choose how they like in loyalty decisions. However, in such a loyalty decision, the

¹⁸³ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 7.

¹⁸⁴ *Id.*, p. 8.

¹⁸⁵ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 17-98; Neil McLeod, *Early Irish Contract Law*, Sydney Series in Celtic Studies, I (Sydney: Centre for Celtic Studies, 1955), pp. 62-80.

¹⁸⁶ Bronagh Ní Chonaill, ‘Fosterage: Child-Rearing in Medieval Ireland’, *History Ireland*, 5.1 (1997), 28-31 (p. 29).

¹⁸⁷ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁸⁸ *Id.*, p. 7.

opposite of loyalty is betrayal. As previously established, betrayal is the choice, when presented with a conflict of loyalties, of one loyalty over the other.¹⁸⁹

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

Prior to discussion of the relationship aspects of the text, it is necessary to examine betrayal itself, and form a linguistic and conceptual framework specific to the *Táin* by which I can more easily study betrayal as it occurs in more limited relational contexts. To this end, Chapter Two will be an analysis of the language used during betrayal instances in the *Táin*. Based on the above list of betrayal acts, I analyze the language used throughout the scene describing each act. While I examine language use in the *Táin*, and have a rough count of times each word is used in the text, this study is not a statistical analysis of language in the texts examined. While conducting this study of language use in the *Táin*, and throughout the rest of the thesis, I will primarily use the translation of the *Táin* by Cecille O’Rahilly. I will alter this translation only if needed to clarify a word or phrase that affects my analysis.

Based on my findings, I create a list of words commonly used during betrayal acts. From the patterns I observe throughout this process I come to a final list of betrayal acts in the *Táin*, and divide these acts into three categories of relationship aspects that feature prominently in the text and strongly influence the likelihood of betrayal. These three categories are the differences in loyalty decisions between biological kin and foster kin; the making of loyalty decisions in the tempestuous

¹⁸⁹ Baxter and others, ‘Everyday Loyalties and Betrayals in Personal Relationships’, p. 660,

environment of Medb and Ailill's army, where kinship is not the only factor holding together the army; and the role women play in betrayal situations.

In the remaining three body chapters (chapters three to five), I conduct an examination of specific case studies related to these three social groupings. The society depicted in the *Táin* is complex and comprised of many different social groupings – each of which influence the loyalty decisions made by the people occupying the world of the *Táin*. In order to understand the factors influencing loyalty decisions, it is necessary to unravel these social factors. The majority of the body chapters will work to do this, with each taking a social aspect of the society depicted in the *Táin* and discussing the aspect and its relationship to betrayal.

As I explore in Chapter Two, four characters in particular are present for the majority of betrayal situations – Cú Chulainn, Fer Diad, Fergus, and Medb. Each of the remaining body chapters will focus on one of these characters and how they relate to a specific social grouping. In short, the remaining three chapters will be themed as follows:

Chapter Three: Cú Chulainn, Fer Diad, and the role of kinship ties in betrayal acts.

Chapter Four: Fergus and the loyalties and loyalty complications present in the amorphous units of the army.

Chapter Five: Medb and the role of women and gender within betrayal acts.

Before delving into the rest of the complex web of relationships making up the *Táin*, it seems useful to determine how differing loyalty considerations can lead people to multiple different courses of behaviour even when all people involved have the same

formalized relationship to one another. Thus, in Chapter Three, I will first examine the case study of Cú Chulainn and those of his foster-brothers who appear in the *Táin* (such as Fer Diad), determining what loyalties each chooses when torn between loyalty to a foster-brother and loyalty to some other consideration. This will lead naturally into a discussion of biological family in the *Táin*, and how biological family is treated comparatively to foster-kin. I will examine the loyalty decisions present for family of differing degrees of relatedness. The primary loyalty in the tale is shown to be loyalty to biological family, with foster-brothers often betraying each other if there are not other reasons beyond foster-kinship not to do so, while biological kin very rarely betray one another.

After discussion of kinship ties, in Chapter Four I turn to one of the less clearly defined and more scattered social groups in the *Táin* – the soldiery in Medb and Ailill's army. As they are the unit around which the plot revolves, they deserve attention. I will examine how the boundaries of the army, less clearly defined than other social groups, present opportunities for strategies that would not be present in today's more rigid army camps, while the army's indiscriminate melding together of many kinship groups and nation groups also presents greater scope for competing loyalties. Men in the army need to exercise caution in their dealings with others, as one wrong move can very easily lead to accusations of betrayal. However, with judicious planning, it is possible to maintain loyalty connections even in this environment. This will be shown through the case study of Fergus. This chapter expands on Chapter Three, revealing that in the larger unit of an army held together by a varied assortment of loyalty ties, loyalty to biological family is still foremost. The chapter explores the complex measure that those

present in a world of complex loyalty ties like that of Medb and Ailill's army need to use in order to simultaneously defend their honour and avoid hurting their kin. The chapter concludes that it is only by having trust in each other and engaging in private dialogue outside of the larger public sphere that warriors are able to maintain all of their loyalties simultaneously.

Next, I will examine the place of women in the *Táin*. Their presence is notably absent when examining the family ties present in Chapter Two – they act as conduits connecting men, with few kinship relationships between themselves really having any focus in the heroic literature. I pull them out from their place of hiding and show that, while often ignored, their presence is more significant and with more power than is generally held. My examination of women will centre around Medb, and I will examine how the position and purpose I believe women have in the *Táin* affects how we should perceive the betrayal language focused on Medb. While women are frequently accused of betrayal, it is shown that there are deeper factors involved in women being so accused, and that often women frequently function in these situations as convenient targets for men's anger so that it does not need to be directed against other men and lead to social disorder.

Finally, Chapter Six will summarize all of the arguments presented in the body chapters and come to some overall conclusions as to the nature and function of betrayal in Recensions I and II of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Accusations of betrayal are shown to be a means by which people can de-escalate situations and keep conflict contained within a small group, rather than spilling out to affect the social grouping.

Chapter Two: Betrayal in the *Táin*

2.1 The Sections of a Betrayal Act

When engaging with the *Táin*, one aspect that must be taken into consideration is the culture of honour that drives a great deal of character behaviour. In this cultural context, honour is the ultimate reward while shame is avoided at all costs.¹⁹⁰ A person's reputation is of extreme import, but honour and good reputation are not self-reported. They are "publicly declared valuations put upon [a hero] by those who know him."¹⁹¹ Personal honour is maintained through fierce competition, as the hierarchy of honour is ever-changing and mercurial, judged by an ever-watching audience. As O'Leary states, "At virtually every key moment in that literature explicit reference is made to a vigilant and judgmental audience intent on assessing a person's actions by the most rigorous standards, but with little knowledge of – and less interest in – his or her motivation."¹⁹²

This public valuation extends to betrayal acts. Throughout the *Táin*, the heroes are constantly watched by an audience of their peers¹⁹³ – often camp followers and warriors from Medb and Ailill's camp. This audience judges what is appropriate behaviour and who has honour. They also judge, based on what they observe, which acts should be considered betrayal acts. Thus, when a betrayal act is committed, it takes public opinion to tarnish someone's name with the infamy of being a betrayer, or to preserve a positive reputation as someone who has never betrayed. This fact of life in

¹⁹⁰ Philip O'Leary, 'Jeers and Judgments: Laughter in Early Irish Literature', in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 22 (1991), 15-30 (p. 28); Philip O'Leary, 'Fír Fer: An Internalized Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', in *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 22 (1987), 1-14 (p. 1).

¹⁹¹ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 14.

¹⁹² Philip O'Leary, 'Choice and Consequences in Irish Heroic Literature', in *CMCS*, 27 (1994), 49-60 (p. 49).

¹⁹³ Id., p. 49.

the *Táin* alters how we should perceive certain of the criteria mentioned in Chapter One. For Criterion 1, the relationship betrayed does not need to be a personal relationship with actual emotion behind it, it merely has to be a relationship where public perception expects there to be actual emotion. For example, it does not matter if Cú Chulainn cares about his foster-brothers or not, the eternally watching audience expects foster-brothers to care about one another. It also means that for Criterion 2, the betrayed's feelings do not actually have to be adversely affected by the betrayal – the audience merely needs to believe that the feelings are so affected. Perhaps most importantly, Criterion 4 – that intent is important – could be more accurately phrased that perceived intent is important. Thus, for example, if Fergus can act innocently enough when Medb accuses him of betrayal, the audience will perceive no intent to betray and, because of this, Medb is unable to act against him, as she would appear to be in the wrong. This also means betrayal can be committed freely so long as the wording to the audience protects those involved. How likely the audience is to believe an individual depends on several factors including rank and gender.

Due to this, the majority of characters in the text are constantly performing, and the betrayal act becomes a courtroom, where potential betrayers are given an opportunity to defend their position and explain how their actions have been misconstrued, while those betrayed attempt to explain why their position is correct. At times, this drama accords with how the betrayed actually feels, but not always. Largely it is about what will best persuade the audience.

In one example, at the very end of the final battle, Fergus retreats from Cú Chulainn. As stated above, he has been specifically tasked by Medb and Ailill to attack

the enemy, and reminded by them how much they have given him, and thus how much he should give back to them. Thus, Fergus's retreat should be viewed as a betrayal, yet he is never rebuked. This may partially be because they are in the middle of a battle, but it is also because Fergus previously made a private agreement with Cú Chulainn, publicly unknown until this time, that if Cú Chulainn retreated from Fergus, Fergus would do so in return at some future point.¹⁹⁴ Thus, when Cú Chulainn tells Fergus to depart, Fergus says, "Maith [...] Romingabais-[s]iu in tan basat tretholl-sa" ("I agree [...] for you refused to encounter me when you were pierced with wounds").¹⁹⁵ This gives Fergus an excuse to retreat with his honour unaffected, and with no public accusations of betrayal. Whether a man with lesser social standing could have gotten away with such a stunt is arguable, but Fergus has such social status and so many allies that those around him are willing to accept the truth of his statements.

This obsession with public perception and need to have the audience hear a hero's reasons for acting in a particular way influences the structure of how betrayal acts are described. There are specific words used to describe the moment of the betrayal act itself, as will be examined below, as well as words in several different categories of meaning that are used to contextualize such acts. Not all the categories of words found in the section of story surrounding a betrayal act have to do with the act itself. In fact, it is possible to divide these words into three categories – words said prior to a betrayal (often describing the loyalty decisions that have occurred for a betrayal to take place), words to describe the actual betrayal act, and words to describe what occurs after a betrayal act (often explaining the consequences of betrayal – including

¹⁹⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2495-522, *TBC-I*, ll. 4097-114, *TBC-LL*, ll. 2473-509, *TBC-LL*, ll. 4787-820.

¹⁹⁵ *TBC-I*, l. 4107.

the reactions of the people around the betrayer to the act and any punishments the betrayer faces). The act of betrayal becomes a story played out for the audience, with individuals describing their own narratives of how the audience should perceive the beginning, middle, and end of a betrayal act. These details (loyalty decisions and consequences that could occur if something is judged a betrayal) are enormously important in the performative aspect of betrayal. I shall here describe the three sections of a betrayal act – from the beginning, to the middle, to the end.

2.1.1 Before Betrayal

Before a betrayal act is conducted, there is generally a large and very public production about why the act is occurring, and what loyalty decisions are coming into play. The betrayer explains what is being chosen above the relationship they are betraying, attempting to frame the act as an act of loyalty to another, rather than of betrayal of the betrayed. At times the betrayed attempts to persuade the betrayer that the betrayer's relationship with the betrayed should be more important. There is sometimes the opportunity at this stage in the process for the betrayer to back out of the betrayal, usually if they are unable to argue that it would not be a betrayal.

One frequent category of words used to describe the loyalty decisions that influence a betrayal act are words for personal relationships. Many of these describe familial relationships (both biological and foster relationships). Fergus, for example, leaves his meeting with Cú Chulainn quickly so as not to be judged as betraying the men of Ireland for his *dalta* ("fosterling").¹⁹⁶ Similarly, Fergus's attempts to assist the

¹⁹⁶ *TBC-LL*, l. 1606.

Ulstermen are often explained in familial terms – Fergus wishes to assist the Ulstermen because “táinic ell condailbi im Ultaib dó” (“a feeling of affection [for kin] for the Ulstermen seized him”).¹⁹⁷ However, his relationship with Connacht is such that Medb is able to prove the greater claim to his loyalties, claiming, “mór de maith fuarais i fus ar do longais” (“much wealth did you get here in your exile”)¹⁹⁸ and that due to this, Fergus’s act would be seen purely as betrayal. Fiachu, as well, is drawn by the love of kinship into helping Cú Chulainn – the text states that “táinic a ell chondailbi fair” (“he was filled with [affection for kindred]”).¹⁹⁹ Erc’s rallying to the aid of the Ulstermen is described in similar terms – “dodechaid [...] d’fóirithin a senathar din chur sa” “[he] has come on this occasion to succour his grandfather”²⁰⁰, unable to betray his maternal kin, in particular his grandfather.²⁰¹ In his appeals to Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn speaks of his kinship with Fer Diad, exclaiming, “Tú mo chocne cride, / tú m’aiccme, tú m’fine, / ní fúar riam bad dile, / ba dursan do díth” “You were my loved comrade, my kin and kindred. Never found I one dearer. Sad will be your death.”²⁰² Cú Chulainn appeals to his shared foster relationship with both Fer Báeth and Fer Diad in an attempt to persuade them not to betray him (or to remind the ever-watching audience that their actions do constitute a betrayal). Both Fer Báeth and Fer Diad are given the opportunity in this moment to change their minds and choose to side with their foster-brother. As previously mentioned, “Ocus conattech Cú Chulaind in caratrad 7 in commund 7 in comaltus friss, 7 nír fáemastar Fer Báeth cen in comrac do dénam” (“Cú Chulainn adjured him by their

¹⁹⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 366-67. “For kin” added due to the definition of *condalbae* in eDIL. eDIL s.v. *condalbae*

¹⁹⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 389-90.

¹⁹⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2572-73. Translated as ‘emotion’ by O’Rahilly.

²⁰⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4548-49.

²⁰¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 3829-30.

²⁰² *TBC-LL*, ll. 3006-09.

friendship and intimacy and brotherhood, but Fer Báeth did not consent to relinquish the combat”).²⁰³ In the example of Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad, as well as Fergus and the Ulstermen, terms of kinship are combined with words indicating feelings of affection and friendship.

Other relationship words describe bonds that are non-familial. When explaining why he opposes Medb’s killing of the Gailioin, Fergus reveals, “Nímaricfe, úair is áes comhchotaig dúinni 'nar n-Ultaib, acht má non gontar uli” (“It shall not happen unless we are all killed, for they are allies of us Ulstermen”).²⁰⁴ Fergus makes his loyalties known to anyone watching, at the same time putting into even greater contrast Medb’s intended betrayal. This plan works – Medb eventually backs away from her initial intent – she would be unable to prevent being accused of betrayal if she did not back down, and this would fracture her already tenuous hold over her army.

As seen in the example of Fergus and the Gailioin, loyalties in Medb’s army do not seem to be, for the most part, familial. In these circumstances, a number of other words come into use – words for legally ordained relationships between individuals and words for promises.

Another example of such occurs in Recension II, where Fergus focuses on the legal terminology of sureties and guarantees when talking about the Gailioin, mentioning, “Messi dano as chor 7 as glinni 7 trebairi friu ó tháncatar ó críchaib dílsib fadesin” (“I myself am bond and surety and guarantee for them since they came from their own lands”).²⁰⁵ Right after this comes an explanation of Fergus’s own past which

²⁰³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1895-97.

²⁰⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 164-65.

²⁰⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 343-45.

contextualizes why Fergus may have such a strong reaction to those he has offered such assurances being targeted for violence. Fergus, after all, is in Medb's service because "marbad mac nUsnig fora faísam 7 fora chommairgi" ("the sons of Usnech had been slain in despite of his guarantee and surety")²⁰⁶, which so infuriated Fergus that he left Ulster and joined Ulster's enemy. This also means that, when Fergus tells Medb he will not allow her actions to go unpunished should she attack the Gailioin, she knows he means it.

Sureties come up several times as well while Medb persuades Fer Diad to fight Cú Chulainn. Fergus refuses to battle Cú Chulainn without sureties, saying, "Ní rag-sa gan rátha / do chluchi na n-átha" ("I shall not go without sureties to engage in the battle of the ford").²⁰⁷ These sureties being offered is enough for Fer Diad to give up his loyalty to Cú Chulainn. Each of the kings of Munster was offered sureties that Findabair would be married to him, showing that sureties can not be enough to ensure loyalty in some circumstances.²⁰⁸

2.1.2 Betrayal

2.1.2.1 Brath

Upon examining the initial betrayal examples, it is apparent that there is one word in particular that occurs repeatedly in betrayal situations – *brath*. This noun has several different additional forms: *mraith*, *mbrath*, *braith*, *bráth*, *bratha*, *braith*.²⁰⁹ *Brath*

²⁰⁶ *TBC-LL*, l. 363.

²⁰⁷ *TBC-LL*, l. 2663-64.

²⁰⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 3354-56.

²⁰⁹ eDIL s.v. *brath*

occurs in only one of the betrayal acts listed above in Recension I, but in three of the betrayal acts listed in Recension II (several times in certain of these betrayal situations). In Recension I, it is used by Medb when she accuses Fergus of leading the army astray and by Fergus when he defends himself against this accusation.²¹⁰ In Recension II, it is used by Fergus when he defends himself against Medb's accusation that he is leading the troops astray, by the text when it is describing Dubthach's desire to betray Cú Chulainn and by Fergus when he criticizes Dubthach's behaviour, and it is used a number of times by Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad when talking about a variety of individuals during their battle.²¹¹ *Brath* also appears in a number of other situations in the *Táin* where people are worried about appearing to betray another.

The situations where *brath* is used demonstrate that the word has several contexts in which it can appear. Betrayal in the form of *brath* can occur in the contexts of 1) a physical action, 2) a speech act, 3) a lack of action, and 4) an abandonment.

1) Betrayal often involves an action. One example of *brath* being used in this context is when Medb makes her accusation that Fergus is leading the troops astray, saying, "Atotágathar dia m(b)rath / Ailill Aíe lía slúagad" ("Ailill of Mag Aí with his army fears that you will betray him").²¹² Betrayal here is the action of Fergus leading Medb's army along the wrong trail. Another such example is Dubthach's betrayal of Cú Chulainn where "dabert comairle braith 7 trécthi Con Culaind dona slúagaib .i. cathetarnaid imme far cach leth ar co táetsad leó" ("he advised the hosts to betray and

²¹⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 235, 245.

²¹¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 389; 2377; 2401; 3368; 3436; 3440.

²¹² *TBC-I*, ll. 235-36.

abandon Cú Chulainn, that is, to lay an ambush around him on every side that he might be killed by them”).²¹³ *Brath* is connected explicitly to ambush in this instance.

2) While Dubthach’s suggested betrayal involves taking physical action against Cú Chulainn, Dubthach’s actual betrayal of Cú Chulainn is the speech act in which he makes this suggestion. Fergus recognizes this, as “ba dimbág leis comairle braith Con Culaind do thabairt do Dubthach dona slúagaib” (“it grieved him that Dubthach should advise the hosts to betray Cú Chulainn”).²¹⁴ The reason for Fergus’s intensely negative emotions towards Dubthach is Dubthach’s suggestion, not an actual ambush. The speech act itself is enough. Another example of *brath* being connected to something said in speech is when Fergus goes to speak with Cú Chulainn in order to bring his foster-son a message from Medb. Fergus delivers his message and “ní baí ní ba siriu ná sain ac comlabra arná ráditis fir Hérend a mbrath nó a trécun do Fergus fria dalta” (“he delayed no longer than that conversing lest the men of Ireland should say that Fergus was betraying [or abandoning] them to his fosterling”).²¹⁵ While Fergus does nothing other than what he was directed to do, he realizes that if he stays longer, the men of Ireland may think that he is speaking words of betrayal to his foster-son. This is not in itself an example of a betrayal, but it provides valuable information about what would be considered a betrayal and about how public opinion about whether an act was a betrayal act means more than whether the betrayal actually took place. In this case, it also demonstrates Fergus’s knowledge of the precarity of his position, especially after

²¹³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2377-78.

²¹⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2401-02.

²¹⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1605-06. ‘nó a trécun’ is untranslated in O’Rahilly’s translation.

his earlier betrayal acts of leading the army astray. This statement regarding potential doubt by Medb's host in Fergus's actions is not made in Recension I.

3) At times, it seems as though there are no good options in order to avoid betrayal, for as well as actions (both physical and speaking) often being construed as betrayals, inaction can be so construed as well. One example of this is found after the Ulster warrior Cethern has attacked the men of Ireland and been sorely wounded by them. Medb's host attacks Cethern, and he is brought away to recuperate. In conversation with Cú Chulainn, he discusses the men who attacked him, and Cú Chulainn tells him who each attacker was. Cethern describes one man who gave him but a slight wound. In response to this, Cú Chulainn says, "Ratafetammar in fer sain ale [...] Illand Ilarchless mac Fergus a sain, & níba dúthracht leis do thuttim-siu dá láim. Ac[h]t rabert in ngúfargam sain fort arná hapraitis fir Hérend rapa dá mbrath nó dá trécun muni thardad" ("We know that man [...] That was Illand Ilarchless the son of Fergus, and he had no desire that you should fall by his hand but gave that mock-thrust at you lest the men of Ireland should say that he was betraying or abandoning them if he did not give it").²¹⁶ If Illand, who is in exile with his father and thus officially on Medb's side, did not appear to side with the men of Ireland through his actions in battle, he would be accused of betrayal. Despite the fact he would not be acting directly against Medb and Ailill's host, the fact that he was not acting with them would demand such an allegation.

4) Frequently tied to the word *brath* are words for abandonment. There is a constant tension between Fergus and Medb that Fergus may abandon the men of

²¹⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3671-74.

Ireland and return to the Ulster side. It is seen in every potential betrayal that Fergus commits. Such fear of abandonment also appears in Fergus's actions against Dubthach. The Ulster exiles have already physically abandoned Ulster, and Dubthach's suggestion to ambush Cú Chulainn is a suggestion that he is willing to also emotionally abandon Ulster. This is supported by the fact that in nearly every instance of *brath* that appears in Recension II, it is found in conjunction with the word *trécud*, which frequently means to abandon or forsake.²¹⁷

Another example of *brath* being used in conjunction with a word for abandonment is found in Cú Chulainn's allegations that the men of Ireland, and Medb, have betrayed Fer Diad. Cú Chulainn says, "Maith a Fir Diad [...] is mór in brath 7 in trécun dabertatar fir Hérend fort do thabairt do chomlund 7 do chomruc rum-sa dáig ní réid comlund ná comrac rum-sa bar Táin Bó Cúailnge" ("Ah Fer Diad [...] greatly did the men of Ireland betray and abandon you when they brought you to fight and do combat with me, for to contend and do battle with me on the Foray of Cúailnge was no easy task").²¹⁸ From Cú Chulainn's perspective, Fer Diad was given the promise of reward by people who had no care for Fer Diad's life and were acting against his best interests. They sent him alone against Cú Chulainn armed only with the information they had given Fer Diad – misinformation that stated he could defeat his friend, even when no one believed this possible. He was emotionally and physically abandoned by those on his own side during the hardest battle of his life – an action Cú Chulainn repeatedly states he would never have done to Fer Diad.

²¹⁷ eDIL s.v. *trécud*

²¹⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3435-38.

2.1.2.2 Additional Words for Betrayal

There are also a number of betrayal acts that do not include the word *brath*. In such betrayal acts with no clear word used to demarcate a betrayal act, there are often other types of words indicating that a betrayal act has taken place. These words differ from *brath* in that while *brath* refers to a betrayal act the majority of the time that it appears, these other words can be used in betrayal situations, but are not used exclusively in this way. Words that occur during betrayal acts often fit into one of several broad categories of meaning. These include 1) words expressing violation (something done without permission or consent), 2) words that indicate there has been a negative speech act (that someone has been verbally false to another – a context in which *brath* occurs as well), and 3) words indicating abandonment (such as those *brath* is frequently paired with). This section does not seek to explore all examples of these categories present in the betrayal sections, serving more as a brief illustration of how such categories of words are often used. Thus, it does not cover all of the words used to express the above categories of meaning.

1) There are a few words used during betrayal acts that specify some form of personal violation. One of these is the verb *sáraigid*,²¹⁹ frequently used to describe Fergus's exile from Ulster. In Recension I, Fergus declares, “Mé tharclaim na slúraig sea soir, / lúach mo sáraichthi d' Ultaib” (“It was I who, in requital for the [violation] done me by the Ulsterman, collected and brought these forces to the east”).²²⁰ Recension II has a

²¹⁹ eDIL s.v. *sáraigid*.

²²⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 2786-87. Translated as ‘wrong’ by O’Rahilly.

similar statement, as well as the longer explanation where Conchobor, describing who he is, says, “[F]er rat sáraig im tríb maccaib Usnig do marbad far th'einech fecht n-aill” (“[O]ne who [violated] you on one occasion by slaying the three sons of Usnech despite your safeguard”).²²¹

Some other examples of words declaring a form of violation are a few terms for “without permission” or “against the wishes of”. The first such term is *díchmairc*,²²² found in the scene where Erc comes in aid of Conchobor, and Fergus notes, “Dichmairc a athar dodeachaid in fer sin do chobair a senathar” (“Without asking permission of his father, that [man] has come to the assistance of his grandfather”).²²³ Another term used to show violation of a person’s expectations through disobedience is *terthogu*,²²⁴ used when Lugaid explains his brother’s plan to fight Cú Chulainn. Lugaid tells Cú Chulainn not to kill this brother, “Maith lem chena cé no slaiss co léir ar is dar mo therthogu théite” (“But I am willing for you to give him a sound thrashing, for it is against my wishes he goes”).²²⁵

2) There are a number of words suggesting a negative speech act. As mentioned above, at times *brath* can be used in this context, such as in the scene where Fergus visits Cú Chulainn but cannot stay for long for fear of being accused of betraying the men of Ireland. There is also the noun *athchairdes*,²²⁶ and associated words, which is used in many of the scenes where a foster-brother decides to fight Cú Chulainn. When

²²¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4754-55. Translated as ‘outraged’ by O’Rahilly.

²²² eDIL s.v. *díchmairc*.

²²³ *TBC-I*, ll. 3829-30. Translated ‘boy’ by O’Rahilly.

²²⁴ eDIL s.v. *terthogu*.

²²⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 1834-35.

²²⁶ eDIL s.v. *athchairdes*; eDIL s.v. *athchor*; eDIL s.v. *ad-cuirethar*.

Fer Báeth approaches Cú Chulainn for this purpose, the text states, “Ní tharrasair Fer Báeth co mmatin itir acht luid fo chétóir d'athchur a charatraid for Coin Culaind” (“Fer Báeth waited not until morning but went at once to renounce his friendship with Cú Chulainn”).²²⁷ Fer Diad does the same thing – the text says, “Acus iss and sin ferais cehtar n-aí díb athc[h]ossán n-athgér n-athcharatraid ráraile” (“And then each of them reproached the other bitterly as they renounced their friendship”).²²⁸ Often translated as “renouncing friendship”, this word is a verbal acknowledgement that a betrayal act has been arranged and that the foster-brother will not back down from his betrayal.

3) Words of abandonment are often used in betrayal acts. One of these – *trécut* – is mentioned above as being used frequently in conjunction with *brath*. Another word used in similar contexts as the noun *brath* is the verb *mairnid*.²²⁹ Fer Diad uses this word in Recension II to relieve Cú Chulainn of any responsibility for their battle, saying, “A Chú Chulaind, tólaib gal, / ní tú acht Medb rar marnestar, / béra-su búaid & blaid, / ní fort atát ar cinaid” (“O Cú Chulainn—many deeds of valour—not you but Medb betrayed us. You will have victory and fame. Not on you is our guilt”).²³⁰ In this scene, Fer Diad finally articulates what Cú Chulainn has said before – that Medb and Ailill betrayed Fer Diad by persuading him to fight Cú Chulainn and abandoned him, without assistance, to his fate.

²²⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1894-95.

²²⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2944-45.

²²⁹ eDIL s.v. *mairnid*

²³⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3215-18.

Using the context clues that are examined above, there is one more scene in Recension II that seems to fit the criteria of a betrayal act. This is a scene where Cú Chulainn laments the Ulstermen's lack of involvement in the battle. The entire lament is a cry of loneliness. Cú Chulainn despairs, "M'óenurán dam ar éitib / acht nís léicim, nís étaim / Atú im ulc, ním fuil im maith, / m'óenur dam ar iláthaib" ("I am here all alone guarding the flocks, not only do I not let them not go, but neither can I hold them. In evil plight I am and not in good, as I stand alone at many fords").²³¹ Later, he comes very close to blaming the Ulstermen of betrayal, saying, "Cid d'Ultaib nach fegat cath / d'Ailill is d'ingin Echach? / Tráth atú-sa sund i n-ach / is mé créchtach crólinnech" ("Why do not the Ulstermen give battle to Ailill and the daughter of Eochu? While I am here in sorrow, wounded and bloody as I am").²³² However, he cannot quite bring himself to accuse the Ulstermen of betrayal, instead finishing his lament with the knowledge that the Ulstermen, and Conchobor, will join him when they can. This is an intriguing instance, given that it contains all the elements of an accusation of betrayal, yet no accusation occurs, and instead the betrayed seems to feel only pain. Yet Cú Chulainn does, in his cry for help, seem to be questioning the intent of the Ulstermen who do not join him, even though they are in their debility.

2.1.3 The Consequences of Betrayal

The final section of a betrayal act deals with the consequences of the betrayal. This consequence is often a shift in public opinion – where a betrayer is regarded in a negative way, and made to feel shame. Several categories of word exist here. These

²³¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2028-31.

²³² *TBC-LL*, ll. 2072-75.

include 1) words declaring an act or person harmful or morally wrong, 2) words indicating an act or person to be wrong or in error, 3) words describing the shame the betrayer feels for the betrayal act. Below, I explore some of the words that describe the consequences of betrayal. This is not a comprehensive study of such words, but rather an indication of trends.

1) Many words indicating an act or person are morally wrong are used during Fer Diad's fight with Cú Chulainn, where the scene is filled with language of negative morality. In one example, Fer Diad declares, "A Chú na cless cain, / ní r d e s s d a i t m o g u i n . / L e t t i n l o c h t r o m l e n , / i s f o r t r a f e r m ' f u i l " ("O Hound of the fair feats, it was not fitting that you should slay me. Yours is the guilt which clung to me. On you my blood was shed").²³³ The noun *locht* frequently means "fault" or "vice".²³⁴ Here, Fer Diad describes his complicated emotions about his feud with Cú Chulainn, explaining how wrong it seems to him that Cú Chulainn, his dear friend should be the one to wound him, and uses a word indicating that Cú Chulainn is somehow morally abhorrent to have committed the actions he did.

This is not the only time Fer Diad makes such an accusation. In Recension I, he tells Cú Chulainn "A C[h]ú C[h]ulaind Cúalinge / r o t g a b b a i l e i s b ú a i d r e / r o t f í a c a c h n - o l c ú a i n d í / d á i g i s d a i t a c [h] i n " ("O Cú Chulainn of Cúailnge, frenzy and madness have seized you. All evil shall come to you from us, for yours is the guilt").²³⁵ Fer Diad's attempt to place the blame of their encounter on Cú Chulainn involves the noun *cin*

²³³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3363-66.

²³⁴ eDIL s.v. 1 *locht*

²³⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 3077-80.

(“guilt”),²³⁶ describing the moral culpability Fer Diad believes Cú Chulainn bears in the situation.

2) Another common category of words used around betrayal acts are words denoting the error or wrongdoing of a person or act. One common type of phrase used in such situations uses the word *cóir*, which can be either an adjective or a noun, and says that something is not *cóir* (“right”).²³⁷ For example, this is one of the terms that Cú Chulainn uses to tell Fer Diad he does not approve of Fer Diad choosing to battle at the ford. Cú Chulainn tells Fer Diad, “[N]ír chóir duit-siu tíachtain do chomlund 7 do chomrac rum-sa trí indlach 7 etarchossaít Ailella 7 Medba” (“[I]t was not right for you to come and fight with me by reason of the strife and dissension stirred up by Ailill and Medb”).²³⁸ This adjective is also used in one of the previously mentioned examples of lack of intent. Fergus grows angry at Cú Chulainn for killing a boy under Fergus’s protection, until Cú Chulainn explains that he did not wish to kill the boy, but was provoked. At this point, Fergus forgives Cú Chulainn of any wrongdoing. However, in his initial anger at Cú Chulainn, Fergus declares, “Nírbu chóir ém [...] don serriti síabarda mo sárgud immontí thánic for m'[f]oísam” (“It was not right [...] for that distorted sprite [Cú Chulainn] to outrage me concerning him who came there under my protection”).²³⁹

The adjective (and sometimes substantive) *éccóir*²⁴⁰ (a negation of *cóir* meaning “wrong” or “inaccurate”) is also used regarding betrayal acts. After Dubthach attempts to betray Cú Chulainn, Fergus is furious “[o]cus ra faismis fair na huli ulcu 7 écóra 7 fell 7

²³⁶ eDIL s.v. cin

²³⁷ eDIL s.v. cóir

²³⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3018-20.

²³⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1669-70.

²⁴⁰ eDIL s.v. éccóir, éccáir

mebol doringni ríam 7 íarum ra Ultaib” (“[a]nd Fergus brought up against him all the wrongs and injustice and treachery and evil deeds that he had ever at any time done to the men of Ulster”).²⁴¹ Medb uses the same word when chiding Fergus for leading her host astray, telling him, “Écóir duit amles ar slúaig, / a Ferguis meic Rosa Rúaid” (“It is wrong of you to betray our host, O Fergus mac Rosa Rúaid”).²⁴²

A number of particularly harsh judgements regarding truth and falseness lie in the treatment of women who are believed to have betrayed others. This is shown in some of the wording in the Recension II section where Cú Chulainn attempts to tell Fer Diad not to fight against him. Cú Chulainn repeatedly attacks both Findabair and Medb by saying that they have used false words against Fer Diad. Cú Chulainn says about Findabair, “Findabair ingen in rí, / in dráth atberar a fír, / sochaide 'ma tart bréic / 7 do loitt do lethéit” (“Findabair, the king's daughter, when the truth of the matter is told, she played many men false, she destroyed such as you”).²⁴³ He has similar words to say about Medb, declaring it is unfortunate Fer Diad did not speak to Fergus or the warrior Conall, “Dáig ní adiartaís ind fir sein de fessaib ná dúlib ná dálib ná briathraib brécingill ban cendfind Connacht” (“For those men do not follow the messages or desires or sayings or the false promises of the fairhaired women of Connacht”).²⁴⁴ Both Medb and Findabair have, in Cú Chulainn’s mind, betrayed Fer Diad by sending him into battle through promises they never mean to fulfill.

²⁴¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2404-05.

²⁴² *TBC-LL*, ll. 387-88.

²⁴³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3041-44.

²⁴⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3424-25.

3) A third consequence of betrayal involves the betrayer acknowledging that the act was a betrayal, and feeling shame for having committed the betrayal act. This occurs but rarely in the *Táin* – only once, in fact, and notably focused on a female character. Yet although it occurs only once, it is significant as a rare occasion on which a character takes responsibility for another’s actions. Findabair feels shame after the kings of Munster fight due to her parents’ betrayal of them in engaging her to multiple men at once, and, Recension I states, “Rochúalai Findabair annísín .i. apthain na secht cét triana fochann. Atbail ar féili and sin” (“Findabair heard of this, namely, that seven hundred men had died because of her. She fell dead there of shame”).²⁴⁵ Recension II states the same, that “Atchúala sain Findabair ingen Ailella 7 Medba in comlín sain d’feraib Hérend do thuttim trena ág 7 trena accais, 7 ro maid cnómaidm dá cride 'na clíab ar féile 7 náre” (“Findabair, the daughter of Ailill and Medb, heard that this number of the men of Ireland had fallen because of her and on account of her, and her heart cracked like a nut in her breast through shame and modesty”).²⁴⁶

In my consideration of examples, there were two important categories that I did not ultimately deem betrayal acts, due to their divergence from the criteria listed above. These two categories are 1) violations of agreements between those with no formalized bonds to one another (what I will call acts of trickery) and 2) violations of expectations where there was no intent to violate said expectations (which involves the importance of Criterium 4 – intent). I will discuss both of these categories in detail before proceeding to my initial list of betrayal acts, as they provide some evidence of the importance of the

²⁴⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 3364-65.

²⁴⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3886-88.

criteria, as well as eliminating confusion as to why some of these story segments (many of which involve the violation of some form of agreement or relationship) are not found in my eventual list of potential betrayals.

2.1.4 Acts of Trickery

In an act of trickery, Criteria 1 and 6 are not found, leading them not to be classified as acts of betrayal. There is often an action being done that is generally considered wrong, often involving an initial agreement being ignored by one party, but due to no societally recognized relationship existing between the person ignoring the agreement and the other person involved in the agreement, it is clear in such situations that there is no real expectation that the original agreement will be honoured.

One example of this is in Recension I, where Medb has Cú Chulainn agree to meet her unarmed, as she will meet with him surrounded only by female attendants. Cú Chulainn's charioteer warns Cú Chulainn that Medb will not uphold her end of the deal, and persuades Cú Chulainn to go to the meeting armed. This proves a wise decision, as Medb lies in ambush for Cú Chulainn with many of her warriors.²⁴⁷

Another example is in Recension II, where Medb continually sends more than one opponent against Cú Chulainn despite a previous agreement made with Cú Chulainn that she would send her warriors to fight against him one on one.²⁴⁸ Cú Chulainn himself laments that Medb's host does not fight fair against him.²⁴⁹ In another example from Recension II, two female satirists are sent by Medb to sit near Cú

²⁴⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1940-1949.

²⁴⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2095-2102.

²⁴⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3996-4008.

Chulainn's sick bed after he is injured and tell him that the Ulstermen have been defeated.²⁵⁰ This is not a kind act and does not meet previously created agreements to engage in fair play, but it is not a betrayal.

In such situations, while there is an agreement that can be voided, there is no formalized relationship between the characters involved. Medb and Cú Chulainn are officially enemies, on opposite sides in the cattle raid, and they do not have any sort of publicly recognized relationship with each other. Thus, while there can be less than honourable actions taken in such situations – trickery, as I call it – it does not seem to function as a betrayal act, as this necessitates there being a relationship between two characters that can be violated through the choosing of different loyalties. There is no initial loyalty in any of these examples to betray. Medb and Cú Chulainn are enemies and there is no initial bond of trust for them to destroy through their actions.

2.1.5 Lack of Intent

Other situations that lead to a clearer understanding of the criteria are times where a person seemingly violates the boundaries of a relationship, but when the act is examined more closely, there is no intent to do so involved. Intent is considered important. If there is none, it seems that it is much harder to hold someone responsible for their actions. One example of this in Recensions I and II is when Fergus goes to talk to Cú Chulainn and brings with him Etarcumul, a youth in Medb and Ailill's household. Etarcumul taunts Cú Chulainn to the point where Cú Chulainn's honour demands he kill the boy, despite earlier promises to Fergus that he would not do so. When Fergus finds

²⁵⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4596-4599.

out, he is very angry, as one would expect after a betrayal. However, when he finds out that Cú Chulainn was provoked, he forgives him and no longer blames Cú Chulainn for this act.²⁵¹

2.2 Initial List of Betrayal Acts

Using eight initial criteria, it is possible to find a list of betrayal acts in the *Táin*. Within these betrayal acts, the word *brath* occurs most frequently as a word indicating betrayal, but there are several other categories of words that also occur frequently. Several of these categories of words deal with the time periods just before and just after a betrayal took place. Due to public perception determining what is and is not a betrayal act, most of these words are orchestrated to appeal to public opinion and manipulate an ever-watching audience to either declare an act a betrayal or decide that it is not. Within these persuasions, three themes emerge that are of particular interest to me. In the words people use before betrayals to explain their loyalty decisions, there are many words detailing personal relationships. Many of these relationships are familial. Another subset of the words deals with other relationships and bargaining units that are of importance within the army. In words used regarding the consequences of betrayal acts, there is a clear difference in expectations based on gender. It is possible to divide up the initial list of betrayal acts according to these three categories – exploring betrayal and familial relationships, both biological and not; betrayal in situations where multiple loyalties are in conflict; and betrayal and gender.

²⁵¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1565-1695.

2.2.1 Betrayal and biological vs. foster family

2.2.1.1 Betrayal one: Foster Family (Fer Báeth)

2.2.1.1.1 Recension I

Eventually, Ailill and Medb attempt to bribe people into fighting against Cú Chulainn, since Cú Chulainn has killed so many of the initial warriors sent against him. Cú Chulainn's foster-brother Fer Báeth agrees to fight Cú Chulainn. He has trouble with the idea, but agrees anyway, saying, "Ní haccobor lem [...] Comalta 7 fer bithchotaig dam Cú Chulaind. Ragat-sa ar apa ara chend i mbárach co topachtur a chend de" ("I do not wish to go [...] Cú Chulainn is my foster-brother and bound to me by solemn covenant. Nevertheless I shall go and oppose him tomorrow and cut off his head").²⁵² There are strong oaths between the two that Fer Báeth ignores for profit, and it is clear that observers of Fer Báeth's actions disapprove of what he has done. Lugaid, a friend of Cú Chulainn's from inside the Connacht camp, explains who is coming to fight Cú Chulainn, saying, "Ar cocéle díb línaib amin, mallacht a gascid fair, is é théte ara chend i mbárach, Fer Báeth" ("It is Fer Báeth—bad luck to him in his fighting!—who goes to meet him tomorrow, Fer Báeth, the comrade of us both").²⁵³ Lugaid clearly disapproves of Fer Báeth's actions, as he wishes him bad luck in his fighting, and it seems, from Lugaid's comment about both Fer Báeth and himself being comrades of Cú Chulainn, that the main source of his objection is the violation of Fer Báeth's bond with Cú Chulainn.

When Fer Báeth arrives to renounce his friendship with Cú Chulainn, Cú Chulainn gives Fer Báeth the chance to back out of his agreement – "Attaich Cú

²⁵² *TBC-I*, ll. 1757-59.

²⁵³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1745-46.

Chulaind friss a chomaltus 7 a mummi díb línaib Scáthaig” (“Cú Chulainn adjured him by his foster-brotherhood and by their common foster-mother Scáthach”),²⁵⁴ reminding his foster-brother of all of the bonds they share that should be unbreakable. However, Fer Báeth decides to continue in his actions against Cú Chulainn. It is at this point that Cú Chulainn seems to develop the strong negative emotions common in betrayed individuals, as “[l]uid Cú Chulaind fo luinni úad” (“Cú Chulainn went away from him in anger”)²⁵⁵ and then he murders Fer Báeth before the two of them can face each other in fair combat, presumably due to the rage he feels.

2.2.1.1.2 Recension II

A similar scene appears in Recension II of the *Táin*. Lugaid is also the one to pass along information regarding Cú Chulainn’s next opponent in this recension, saying, “Mallach[t] a chommaind 7 a chomaltais 7 a charatraid 7 a chardessa fair, a derbchomalta díless dúthaig fadessin .i. Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend” (“The curse of his intimacy [and his foster-brotherhood] and familiarity and friendship on him [who comes]! It is his very own foster-brother, Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend”).²⁵⁶ As in Recension I, Lugaid is not happy with Fer Báeth, as seen by him cursing Fer Báeth. The cause of Lugaid’s displeasure appears to be the shared bonds Fer Báeth shares with Cú Chulainn – his foster-bond and his friendship with Cú Chulainn. Láeg, Cú Chulainn’s charioteer, who gathers the information from Lugaid, uses nearly the same phrasing when he passes along the information to Cú Chulainn. Yet even before Láeg tells him who will next come

²⁵⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 1772-73.

²⁵⁵ *TBC-I*, l. 1776.

²⁵⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1874-76. “And his foster-brotherhood” not translated in O’Rahilly’s translation.

to oppose him, Cú Chulainn guesses that it is a foster-brother of his who comes. The text says, “‘Is cendtromm n-imthursech n-anfáid n-osnadach dotháet mo phopa Láeg dom indsaigid-se,’ bar Cú Chulaind. ‘Is nech trá écin dom chomaltaib dotháet dom fúapairt.’ — Ar ba messu lais-sium fer a chomgascid andá láech anaill” (“‘Crestfallen, sad, joyless and mournful my friend Láeg comes to me’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘It means that one of my fosterbrothers comes to attack me’.—For Cú Chulainn disliked more that a warrior of the same training as himself should come to him rather than some other warrior”).²⁵⁷ Cú Chulainn is also distressed by the breaking of the foster-bond, and Fer Báeth’s betrayal act has caused Láeg great emotional distress due to how much he knows it will hurt Cú Chulainn.

Fer Báeth goes to renounce his friendship with Cú Chulainn, and as in Recension I, Cú Chulainn gives him the opportunity to back out of his agreement to fight Cú Chulainn. “Luid Cú Chulaind tria feirg úad” (“Cú Chulainn left him in anger”)²⁵⁸ and, being injured by a piece of holly as he walks away, Cú Chulainn plucks the plant and throws it behind him, not caring what it does. It ends up hitting and killing Fer Báeth. The fact that this recension does not have Cú Chulainn killing Fer Báeth intentionally due to Fer Báeth’s betrayal (as occurs in Recension I) suggests that perhaps killing a foster-brother is considered a negative act whether or not a person has been betrayed by that foster-brother. This may be a difference between the moral code present in Recension I compared with Recension II.

²⁵⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1882-86.

²⁵⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1897-98.

2.2.1.2 Betrayal two: Foster Family (Fer Diad)

2.2.1.2.1 Recension I

One of the longest sequences in the *Táin* is the story of Cú Chulainn's confrontation with his dear friend and foster-brother Fer Diad. This story is present in both Recension I and Recension II, although each recension explores the incident in slightly different ways.

In Recension I, the men of Ireland decide that Fer Diad is the natural next choice to face Cú Chulainn at the ford, as Fer Diad shares much of Cú Chulainn's training. That this confrontation is considered unacceptable is demonstrated by the fact that initially Fer Diad refuses to accompany the messengers. It is not until “[d]obretha Medb filid 7 áes dána 7 áes glámtha grúaidi ara chend co nderntais a áerad 7 a aithised & a ainffialad” (“Medb sent to fetch him poets and artists and satirists who might satirise him and disgrace him and put him to shame”)²⁵⁹ that Fer Diad chooses to proceed to Medb's camp. Once there, Fer Diad refuses to comply with Medb and Ailill's wishes, despite the fact that they ply him with alcohol and make him many promises, including offering their daughter Findabair in marriage to Fer Diad. It is only through trickery that Fer Diad finally agrees to fight. Medb makes up lies about Cú Chulainn, telling Fer Diad, “[N]ípad furáil leis do thuitim-siu ina airigid gaiscid leis isin chóiced i rragad” (“He said [...] that he thought you should fall by his choicest feat of arms in the province to which he would go”).²⁶⁰ This seems to be a powerful intersection of violations of expectations. Medb betrays Fer Diad – a man of her own province of Connacht – by providing him with false information that will eventually lead to his death in order to solve her own problems. As

²⁵⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 2578-79.

²⁶⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 2609-10.

established earlier with the Gailloin, acting against the best interests of the warriors following her seems to be perceived as a betrayal. Medb enacts this betrayal by persuading Fer Diad that Cú Chulainn has grossly violated their relationship by slandering Fer Diad's honour. All of this is done to persuade Fer Diad to betray Cú Chulainn, hopefully killing him in the process. As I will demonstrate, all three of these actions – saying negative comments that offend a friend's honour (had Cú Chulainn actually done this), agreeing to fight a foster-brother, and sending Fer Diad to his death – also meet the other criterium for betrayal – condemnation and strong emotional response by either the public observing the act or by the betrayed.

Fer Diad responds to Cú Chulainn's supposed remarks with fury that is not evidenced by any words used in the text for anger, but by his sudden change in his willingness to fight Cú Chulainn. He says, "Nírbo c[h]óir dó-som a rád ón dáig ní hé mo t[h]ríamnass ná mo midlochóis ríam i lló nách i n-aidchi rofidir orm. Toingim-sa et reliqua corob misi cétfé roficfa isin maitin imbárach co háth in chomlaid." ("It was not right for him to say that for he never found weakness or cowardice in me, day or night. I swear by my people's god that I shall be the first man to come tomorrow morning to the ford of combat").²⁶¹ While until this point Fer Diad refuses to fight Cú Chulainn, after Medb's words he instantly wishes to kill his foster-brother. He has perceived Cú Chulainn's supposed actions as a betrayal.

After Fer Diad makes this agreement, it is clear from the negative reactions of many around him, including Cú Chulainn, that this is also seen as a betrayal act. Cú Chulainn himself bemoans Fer Diad's decision to fight, saying, "Dar ar mbréithir ám

²⁶¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 2611-14.

nochon ina dáil is dech lend no ragmais [...] 7 nochon ara omun c[h]ena acht ar mét a gráda lind” (“I vow that he is not the one we would prefer to meet [...] not through fear of him indeed, but rather because of our great love for him”).²⁶² This wording suggests that Cú Chulainn’s emotion is primarily sadness at having to fight his former comrade. Even Fer Diad’s charioteer believes his actions are inappropriate, reminding Fer Diad of a time when Cú Chulainn fought one hundred soldiers to retrieve Fer Diad’s lost sword and then returned it to Fer Diad. Although the charioteer’s final point is that Fer Diad should recall this incident to remember that Cú Chulainn is the superior warrior, this story also explores how close Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn were, how they always protected each other, and thus how foolish Fer Diad was to believe Medb’s words about Cú Chulainn.

This leads to the third betrayal – that of Ailill and Medb. Their first duplicitous action was tricking Fer Diad to fight in the first place, but that is not all they do. In a private conversation held as they watch Fer Diad leave for his battle, they show how little they think of Fer Diad, despite his position as a Connachtman and his willingness to die for their interests. Medb says, “[L]uigim-sa a luigend mo t[h]úath ná tic arna cosaib cétna chucaib-si in fer dogní in celebrad út” (“But I swear my people’s oath that he who is so bidding you farewell will not return to you on his own feet”).²⁶³ Despite her fine words to Fer Diad as she persuades him to fight, she has no faith in his abilities. Ailill responds in kind, saying, “Ar aba ina tairtemar dá deigc[h]leamnas didiu [...] acht co táethsad Cú Chulaind lais, fó linn cémad chomthuitim dóib. Ane robad ferrdi lind Fer Diad do thérnom” (“Because of what we have gained by this marriage [...] we care not if

²⁶² *TBC-I*, ll. 2744-46.

²⁶³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2871-72.

both of them fall, provided that Cú Chulainn is killed by him. But indeed we should be the better pleased if Fer Diad escaped”).²⁶⁴ They openly confess their complete apathy towards those who fight for them as long as they are left in a better strategic position through their schemes after these deaths.

Interestingly, given that it is Medb and Ailill who sent Fer Diad to his death, it is primarily Cú Chulainn that Fer Diad seems to blame, saying, “A C[h]ú C[h]ulaind Cúalinge/ rotgab baile is búaidre / rotfía cach n-olc úaindi / dáig is dait a c[h]in” (“O Cú Chulainn of Cúailnge, frenzy and madness have seized you. All evil shall come to you from us, for yours is the guilt”).²⁶⁵

2.2.1.2.2 Recension II

Recension II has many of the same story elements as Recension I, but not all, and often emphasizes different themes. Fer Diad is summoned in much the same way as Recension I, and similarly refuses to accompany Ailill and Medb’s messengers until threatened with satire. However, when he arrives in Medb and Ailill’s camp, he does not require any trickery to agree to fight Cú Chulainn. Fer Diad gives in because of bribery and the effects of alcohol – not nearly as honourable a decision. When Fer Diad leaves the camp, Medb and Ailill also do not watch him leave. Thus, their dishonourable behaviour is reduced. While it is assumed that they do not care if Fer Diad dies, they do not announce this.

In Recension II, Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad’s battle is a long, many-day affair. During this time, there is an underlying feeling that this fight is wrong, and that in order

²⁶⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2873-75.

²⁶⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 3077-80.

for it to have occurred, someone was betrayed. However, the two warriors rapidly toss the burden of blame from person to person during these three days. In the end, it is the victor who is able to set the narrative and have the final word on who has betrayed whom.

Cú Chulainn launches the first attempt to accuse of betrayal. When Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn first meet in the text, Fer Diad welcomes Cú Chulainn with a one of a few phrases of welcome (*mo chen do thíchtu*) used throughout the text between warriors wishing to indicate that, although they are fighting on different sides, they do not wish to cause each other harm in that moment. Cú Chulainn responds by lambasting Fer Diad's actions, saying:

'Tarissi lim ní ind fálti mad costráthsa [...] 7 indiu ní dénaim tarissi de chena.

Acus a Fir Diad. [...] rapo chóru dam-sa fálti d'ferthain frit-su ná dait-siu a

ferthain rum-sa, dáig is tú daríacht in crích 7 in cóiced i tú-sa, & níra chóir duit-

siu tíchtain do chomlund 7 do chomrac rim-sa 7 rapa chóru dam-sa dol do

chomlund 7 do chomrac rut-sa, dáig is romut-sa atát mo mná-sa & mo meic &

mo maccáemi, m'eich 7 m'echrada, m'albi 7 m'éiti 7 m'indili (Until now I trusted

that welcome [...] but today I trust it no more. And Fer Diad [...] it were fitter

that I should welcome you rather than that you should welcome me, for it is

you who have come to the country and province in which I dwell, and it was not

right for you to come and fight with me, rather should I have gone to fight with

you, for driven before you are my womenfolk and youths and boys, my horses

and steeds, my droves and flocks and herds).²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2929-37.

Fer Diad has attempted to arrange the encounter as though the two men are still friends, and as though he is offering a brief respite to Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn immediately rejects this offer, letting Fer Diad know that he will not allow Fer Diad to control the narrative of their encounter. Instead, Cú Chulainn offers a conflicting narrative – Fer Diad betrayed Cú Chulainn by agreeing to fight and Fer Diad has done wrong simply by being a part of Medb’s army, the men who have ravaged Cú Chulainn’s lands.

It is at this point that the two renounce their friendship, with similar wording to that used when Cú Chulainn and Fer Báeth renounced theirs.²⁶⁷ Yet from what has occurred prior to this moment, there is already a significant difference between the two scenes. With Fer Báeth, Cú Chulainn reminded him of their bonds and urged him not to continue with his actions, and became angry only when Fer Báeth refused to change his behaviour. In his talk with Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn is clearly displeased before the friendship is renounced, and does not provide Fer Diad with any opportunity to change his behaviour. It appears that Fer Diad’s betrayal is more powerfully felt than Fer Báeth’s – with Fer Báeth it was the destruction of the formal, publicly acknowledged bond they shared that caused Cú Chulainn’s anger, but with Fer Diad it seems to be the destruction of a private, personal bond before any official bond is severed that causes Cú Chulainn pain.

This pain affects even Cú Chulainn’s attempted narrative control – he is unable to stay consistent in his story. He weaves back and forth between blaming Fer Diad and expressing how much greater his own loyalty to Fer Diad is than Fer Diad’s to him and

²⁶⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2944-45.

turning the blame towards Medb, thereby preserving the innocence of his dear friend even as Fer Diad attempts to kill him. At the same time, Fer Diad is also clearly going through complex emotions, which affect his attempts to sway the narrative. He wavers between agreeing with Cú Chulainn that the entire decision is Medb's fault (which would allow Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn to keep some measure of closeness even as one of them dies) and blaming Cú Chulainn (which would allow Fer Diad to be free of any sense of guilt and which also may be driven by fear, due to Fer Diad's knowledge that Cú Chulainn is the better warrior and will inevitably kill Fer Diad).

In one example of this complex emotionality, Cú Chulainn laments that he is saddened Fer Diad will die. Fer Diad states that he will kill Cú Chulainn and do all manner of evil to him, and for his reasoning states, "[R]ot ffa cach olc úanne, / dáig is dait a chin" ("All evil shall come to you from us, for yours is the guilt").²⁶⁸ In order to talk about killing Cú Chulainn, Fer Diad has to shift the burden of blame away from himself. Cú Chulainn responds with two counterpoints, saying first, "[N]ír chóir duit-siu tíachtain do chomlund 7 do chomrac rum-sa trí indlach 7 etarchossaít Ailella & Medba" ("[I]t was not right for you to come and fight with me by reason of the strife and dissension stirred up by Ailill and Medb")²⁶⁹ and then, "Findabair ingen in rí, / in dráth atberar a fír, / sochaide 'ma tart bréic / 7 do loitt do lethéit" ("Findabair, the king's daughter, when the truth of the matter is told, she played many men false, she destroyed such as you").²⁷⁰ Rather than allow Fer Diad to blame him for their battle, Cú Chulainn shifts the blame,

²⁶⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3016-17.

²⁶⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3018-20.

²⁷⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3041-44.

not just to Fer Diad, but also to Medb, Ailill and Findabair, all of whom persuaded Fer Diad to fight.

Later, Cú Chulainn emphasizes that he would never harm Fer Diad in the way Fer Diad attempts to harm him, saying, “Noco tard bíad dá bélaib / 7 noco móo ro génaír / do rí g ná rí gáin can chess / bara ndernaí nd-sea th'amles” (“He has not yet put food to his lips nor has he yet been born of king or bright queen for whom I would consent to do you harm”).²⁷¹ Fer Diad replies, “A Chú Chulaí nd, tólaib gal, / ní tú acht Medb rar marnestar, / béra-su búaid 7 blaid, / ní fort atát ar cinaid” (“O Cú Chulainn—many deeds of valour—not you but Medb betrayed us. You will have victory and fame. Not on you is our guilt”).²⁷² Despite his earlier words of blame, in this moment, as Cú Chulainn describes how much he loves Fer Diad, Fer Diad does not denounce his foster-brother, but rather finds a different target to blame the betrayal act on – Medb. This is a version of events with which the text itself seems to agree – the text states that the two heroes come together “tri indlach 7 etarchossaít Ailella 7 Medba” (“through the sowing of dissension and the stirring up of strife by Ailill and Medb”).²⁷³

Despite the text’s endorsement, Fer Diad changes his mind yet again as to who is to blame as he is lying on his death bed. He cries, “A Chú na cless cain, / ní r dess dait mo guín. / Lett in locht rom len, / is fort ra fer m’fuil. / Ní lossat na troich, / recait bernaid mbraith” (“O Hound of the fair feats, it was not fitting that you should slay me. Yours is the guilt which clung to me. On you my blood was shed. Doomed men who reach the gap of betrayal do not flourish”).²⁷⁴ Once more, as he dies in agony, Fer Diad

²⁷¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3211-14.

²⁷² *TBC-LL*, ll. 3215-18.

²⁷³ *TBC-LL*, l. 3291.

²⁷⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3363-68.

shifts to blaming Cú Chulainn for their fight and its bloody end. He does so using the word *brath*, although it is unclear from his wording at whom he is directing this accusation of betrayal. He could mean that Cú Chulainn betrayed him, and this is the point of betrayal in which Fer Diad did not flourish, or he could mean that he betrayed Cú Chulainn, and that at that point of betrayal, he, Fer Diad, did not flourish. The statement is ambiguous, as Fer Diad's own emotions seem to have been throughout.

In response to Fer Diad's death, Cú Chulainn changes his opinions as well. Where before he often blamed Fer Diad for betraying him, after Fer Diad's death, Cú Chulainn gives up any idea that Fer Diad betrayed him and focuses all of his anger on Medb, Ailill, and their host. He declares, "[I]s mór in brath 7 in tréacun dabertatar fir Hérend fort do thabairt do chomlund 7 do chomruc rum-sa dáig ní réid comlund ná comrac rum-sa bar Táin Bó Cúailnge" ("[G]reatly did the men of Ireland betray and abandon you when they brought you to fight and do combat with me, for to contend and do battle with me on the Foray of Cúailnge was no easy task").²⁷⁵ In this statement, Cú Chulainn takes the term used by Fer Diad in his ambiguous last words and makes it unambiguous. He blames the men of Ireland for betraying Fer Diad and sending him against Cú Chulainn himself. Mulligan sees in Cú Chulainn's lament a powerful critique of the heroic system that set him up to fight one of his dearest friends, stating that "we might read such appropriation as valorizing female-coded poetic practices as part of a critique of spectacular violence."²⁷⁶ Yet Cú Chulainn's purpose in his words after Fer Diad's death also seem partially restorative. After murdering a man he seemed to love

²⁷⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3436-38.

²⁷⁶ Amy C. Mulligan, 'Poetry, Sinew, and the Irish Performance of Lament: Keening a Hero's Body Back Together', *Philological Quarterly* 97.4 (2018), 389-408 (p. 395).

immensely, Cú Chulainn seems to have no heart to destroy his friend's reputation as well. Rather, he takes the pain that Fer Diad has caused him and turns it back on his enemies. In this way, the "twisting poetic mode [of lament] also becomes the means to weave words that restore Fer Diad's integrity, physical and otherwise."²⁷⁷ Fer Diad is changed from "mercenary flesh" sent by Ailill and Medb back into the noble warrior Cú Chulainn knows him as "through the lamenting words of his very executioner."²⁷⁸ As the survivor, Cú Chulainn is able to achieve final control over the narrative surrounding their battle.

2.2.1.3 Biological Family (Cú Chulainn against twenty-nine)

2.2.1.3.1 Recension I

After Cú Chulainn frustrates Medb and Ailill's plans numerous times, they decide to send twenty-nine men against him – Gaile Dáne (Calatín Dána in Recension II), his twenty-seven sons, and his nephew Glas mac Delgna. As they attempt to kill Cú Chulainn, "tic Fiacha mac Fir Febe ina ndedhaid asin dúnad" ("Fíacha mac Fir Fébe came after them out of the encampment").²⁷⁹ Fiacha, one of the men in exile from Ulster with Fergus, has a clear obligation to side with the army of Ireland, for the same reasons about which Medb has reminded Fergus numerous times. Medb and Ailill took in the exiles, and so to some extent Fiacha seems bound to help Connacht, yet he does not. Fiacha helps Cú Chulainn, even though he is fighting for Medb and it breaches his agreement. That this is seen as wrong is apparent in the concerns Fiacha expresses.

²⁷⁷ Id., p. 399.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 2551-52.

He tells Cú Chulainn, “A mbec sa [...] is tar cotach dúindi ar nUltaib. Día rí neach díb a ndúnad, regma-ni ar tríchait cét fo gin claidib” (“Even this little [...] is in breach of our covenant for us Ulstermen. If any one of them reach the encampment (to tell of it), our whole division will be put to the sword”).²⁸⁰ Fiacha has made a clear loyalty decision, and while Cú Chulainn prevents any one of the twenty-nine opponents from reaching Medb’s camp, Fiacha was willing to risk quite a lot for his betrayal.

2.2.1.3.2 Recension II

The same scene plays out similarly in Recension II, with additional details that make Fiachu’s actions even more evidently a betrayal. In this version, Cú Chulainn’s peril is even more apparent. The name of his adversary is different in Recension II – here it is Calatín Dána, his twenty-seven sons, and his grandson Glas mac Delga. The men of Ireland send them on a rather dubious technicality – they claim that the twenty-nine men count as one due to their familial ties, and that therefore this counts as fair play against Cú Chulainn. This claim seems so tenuous that it is likely to already rankle for anyone torn in their loyalties between Medb and Cú Chulainn.

Whatever the moral value of this plan, it nearly works. Calatín Dána and his kin come closer than nearly anyone to defeating Cú Chulainn. They force his head to the ground until “Rabert-sun a rucht míled bar aird 7 a iachtad n-écomlaind connach baí d’Ultaib i mbethaid do neoch donárbo chotlud ná cúala” (“Cú Chulainn uttered his hero’s cry and the shout of one outnumbered and no Ulsterman alive of those who were awake but heard him”).²⁸¹ This seems a direct cry to those most likely to help him – the only

²⁸⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 2557-58.

²⁸¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2569-71.

Ulstermen not suffering from debility – the exiles. By uttering this cry, Cú Chulainn in many ways demands a loyalty decision be made. Fiachu hears the cry – “dariacht Fiacha mac Fir Aba dá saigid 7 atconnairc aní sin, & tánic a ell chondailbi fair” (“Fiachu mac Fir Aba came towards him and saw how matters were, and he was filled with [affection for kindred]”).²⁸² Due to love of kin, Fiachu is unable to resist helping, despite the same stated danger to the Ulstermen as in Recension I, at which point events transpire as in Recension I. At the end, no one is left alive who would be angry about this betrayal, and so Fiachu is never accused of betraying, but love of kin is one of the very specific claims made against Fergus in previous examples where Medb used the word *brath* to describe Fergus’s actions. It seems logical to assume the same word would define the actions of another exile of Ulster working against Medb and Ailill’s interests in favour of Cú Chulainn.

2.2.1.4 Biological Family (Erc)

2.2.1.4.1 Recension I

During the final battle of the *Táin*, Fergus describes the various Ulstermen who are approaching Medb and Ailill. One of these is a grandson of Conchobor, Erc. On his father’s side, Erc is the son of Ailill’s brother. Fergus tells Medb and Ailill, “Dichmairc a athar dodeachaid in fer sin do chobair a senathar” (“Without asking permission of his father, that [man] has come to the assistance of his grandfather”).²⁸³ He explains that it will be because of Erc that the Ulstermen will win, as they will run to him to protect their young kinsmen from danger. Yet, in prioritizing his maternal kinsmen over his paternal,

²⁸² *TBC-LL*, ll. 2571-73. Translated as ‘emotion’ by O’Rahilly.

²⁸³ *TBC-I*, ll. 3829-30. Translated ‘boy’ by O’Rahilly.

Erc has violated the expectations of his paternal kinsmen, including, according to the text, his own father. That this aspect is mentioned makes it clear that this is not considered normal, although no one is present who expresses anger about the betrayal.

2.2.1.4.2 Recension II

This same situation arises in Recension II, and is dealt with in nearly the same way. Ailill asks Fergus who one group of warriors Mac Roth observed are, and Fergus says,

“Nád fetar-sa ám ale [...] innass na budni sin ná in mac bec fil inti d'fácáil ri Ultaib dar m'éis, acht óen bad dóig lim-sa and comtis iat fir Themra im Ercc mac Fedilmi Nóchruthaigi, mac-side Carpri Nia Fer, & más íat, nímo carat anairich and so, dóig 's a dichmairc a athar dodechaid in mac bec sain d'fóirithin a senathar din chur sa, 7 mad síat, bud muir conbáidfea dúib-si in buden sain dáig is tri [d]agin na buidni sin 7 an meic bic rafail inti conmáe foraib-si in cath sa don chur sa” (“I know not indeed [...] that I left behind me with the Ulstermen such a company as that or the little lad who is with them, and yet I should think it likely that they were the men of Tara with Erc the son of Fedilmid Nóchrothach, who is also the son of Cairbre Nia Fer, and if it is they, for this little lad has come on this occasion to succour his grandfather without asking permission of his father, and if it is they, this company will overwhelm you like the sea, for it is by reason of this company and the little lad among them that ye will be defeated on this occasion”)²⁸⁴

²⁸⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4545-47.

Emphasis is on the fact that Erc's coming will destroy the men of Ireland.

2.2.2 Betrayal and the successful navigation of loyalty conflicts

2.2.2.1 Betrayal five: Fergus warns the Ulstermen

2.2.2.1.1 Recension I

As the forces of Ireland head into Ulster, Fergus sends a warning to the Ulstermen and then, as he has been put in the lead of the army, guides them astray in order to give the Ulstermen time to prepare. The text states, “Ar chondailbi doróniseom sin” (“This he did out of affection for his own kin”).²⁸⁵ At this point, Medb and Ailill notice they are proceeding in the wrong direction and Medb approaches Fergus. Interestingly, she accuses Fergus of betraying the army but only does so indirectly. She says that Ailill is afraid a betrayal will take place, rather than directly saying Fergus is currently in the process of betraying them (“Atotágathar dia m(b)rath / Ailill Aíe Iáa slúagad” [“Ailill of Mag Aí with his army fears that you will betray him”]²⁸⁶). By mentioning Ailill and herself, Medb also indirectly reminds Fergus of his obligation to the two of them, which his current actions would violate, and raises the specter of the disapproval and potential violence that could follow from any official accusation of betrayal. Additionally, she uses the noun *brath*,²⁸⁷ the word used most commonly in these examples for an act of betrayal. Medb follows up by suggesting that if Fergus is unable to resist his familial obligation, he should allow someone else to guide the army. Fergus denies Medb's accusation, declaring, “[C]id not medraisiu / ní cosmail fri mrath

²⁸⁵ *TBC-I*, I. 229.

²⁸⁶ *TBC-I*, II. 235-36.

²⁸⁷ eDIL s.v. *brath*

inse” (“[W]hat perturbs you? This is not anything resembling treachery”).²⁸⁸ Fergus then proposes a different reason for his behaviour – he wishes to avoid Cú Chulainn, and in this way protect the army. Yet Fergus does step down from his position as guide. This is an interesting example as there is never any question of who is right in this situation. Fergus is lying the entire time. It is not conjecture that he is acting due to the ties of kinship, which Medb clearly states would be a betrayal; the text itself makes this clear. Yet Fergus is repeatedly given chances to reverse his decision to betray, and a guarantee that if he does so, his behaviour will be forgiven. Thus, a betrayal occurs in this instance but is never penalized.

2.2.2.1.2 Recension II

There is a similar scene in Recension II. As in Recension I, in Recension II Fergus is asked to guide the host. In this version, Fergus is granted this responsibility due to his own hostility with Ulster. The men of Ireland seem to believe that Fergus has better reason than any of them to want Ulster destroyed, with the text relating:

[A]r bíth ba slúagad bága dó in slúagad, dáig is é boí secht mblíadna i rrígu Ulad 7 iar marbad mac nUsnig fora faísam 7 fora chommairgi, tánic estib, ‘7 atá sec[h]t mblíadna déc fri Ultu ammuig ar longais 7 bidbanas’ ([B]ecause the hosting was a hostile hosting for him, for he had been seven years in the kingship of Ulster, and when the sons of Usnech had been slain in despite of his guarantee and surety, he had come from there, ‘and he has been seventeen years in exile and in enmity away from Ulster’).²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 244-45.

²⁸⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 361-64.

The expectation seems to be that the actions of the Ulstermen in killing men under Fergus's protection would reasonably have destroyed the loyalty Fergus had for Ulster, as Fergus felt this as a betrayal act. Fergus begins to guide the host, "& tánic ell condailbi im Ultaib dó 7 dobretha cor n-imruill fothúaid 7 fodess dona slúagaib & urthatar techta úad co rrobthaib do Ultaib & ro gab ic fostud 7 ic imfuiriuich in tslúaig" ("but a feeling of affection [for kin] for the Ulstermen seized him and he led the troops astray to the north and to the south, and messengers went from him with warnings to the Ulstermen and he began to delay and hold back the army").²⁹⁰ Fergus's actions in Recension II seem less premeditated than in Recension I. The wording suggests that Fergus first agrees to guide the army in good faith and only then is seized by an affection for his kin that takes control of him, rather than in Recension I, where he appears to perform his actions out of a prior known sense of obligation to kin.

Medb, noticing Fergus has led the army astray, says, "Ardattágar co ngail / Ailill án cona slúagaib" ("Ailill, the splendid, with his army, fears that you will betray him").²⁹¹ He attempts to deflect, saying that he did not lead the army astray in order to harm it, but when Medb continues, saying, "Écóir duit amles ar slúaig,/ a Fergus meic Rosa Rúaid,/ mór de maith fuarais i fus / ar do longais, a Fergus" ("It is wrong of you to betray our host, O Fergus mac Rosa Rúaid, for much wealth did you get here in your exile, O Fergus")²⁹², Fergus realizes that he will be unable to persuade public opinion that this is not a betrayal act and steps down from his position as guide.

²⁹⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 366-69. "For kin" added due to the definition of *condalbae* in eDIL. eDIL s.v. *condalbae*

²⁹¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 379-80.

²⁹² *TBC-LL*, ll. 387-90.

As they proceed further in their raid, the men of Ireland discover a forked pole thrown down by Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn has left a message stating that it is tabu for any of the army to pass this point until they find someone to remove the pole. Medb suggests that Fergus do so. Fergus attempts to do so, but shatters chariot after chariot in the attempt. After seventeen chariots have been destroyed, Medb says:

Ale léic ass, a Ferguis [...] na bris dúin cairptiu ar túath ní as siriu, dáig ar bíth meni bethe arin tslúagud sa a chur sa doraismis Ultu co n-airnelaib braiti 7 bóthánti lind. Rafetamar-ni aní dia ndénai-siu sain d'fostud 7 d'immfuiriuich in tslúaig co n-érsat Ulaid assa cess 7 co tucat cath dún, cath na Tána (Give over, Fergus [...] do not break any more of my people's chariots, for had you not been on this hosting now, we should already have reached the Ulstermen and had our share of booty and herds. We know why you are acting thus: it is to hold back and delay the host until such time as the Ulstermen recover from their debility and give us battle, the battle of the Táin).²⁹³

Given his actions in the very recent past, and the fact that in his first attempt after Medb says these words, Fergus succeeds in removing the pole, it seems Medb is correct that this is another betrayal act that Fergus is committing, and that he was previously pretending to pull free the pole. In Recension I, Fergus also removes such a pole, but there is no hint in the text that he is unsuccessful the first number of times he tries to do so out of love for his kin in Ulster.

²⁹³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 647-51.

2.2.2.2 Betrayal six: Lugaid's brother Láiríne

2.2.2.2.1 Recension I

After killing his foster-brother Fer Báeth, Cú Chulainn is approached again by Lugaid. Lugaid informs Cú Chulainn that Lugaid's own brother, Láiríne, has been convinced to fight Cú Chulainn. Lugaid requests that Cú Chulainn not kill Láiríne, as Lugaid does not wish his brother killed, but states, "Maith lem chena cé no slaiss co léir ar is dar mo therthogu théite" ("But I am willing for you to give him a sound thrashing, for it is against my wishes he goes").²⁹⁴ Láiríne is never stated in the text to have any relationship with Cú Chulainn, and thus Láiríne's action cannot be construed as a betrayal of Cú Chulainn; however, Láiríne does seemingly disobey his brother's request and agrees to kill someone with whom his brother is allied. This, particularly with Lugaid's reaction to it – that Cú Chulainn may beat Lugaid's brother for this disobedience – suggests that Láiríne's actions are a betrayal of Lugaid.

2.2.2.2.2 Recension II

In Recension II, Lugaid's brother, Láiríne, is also sent to fight Cú Chulainn. He has no revealed loyalty to Cú Chulainn, but, as in Recension I, Lugaid does. Lugaid has so much loyalty to Cú Chulainn that he reveals he would not fight Cú Chulainn even if Cú Chulainn killed Láiríne. Lugaid declares, "Ocus arin ccompántas fil edrainn aróen, ná marb-sa mo brát[h]air-si. Dar ar ccubus ámh [...] cid tánaisde báis dusbéra dó, as ced liom, úair dar mo s[h]árugadh téid it haghaidh-si" ("And by the friendship that is between us both, do not kill my brother. Yet I swear, that even if you all but kill him. I grant you

²⁹⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 1834-35.

leave to do so, for it is in despite of me that he goes against you”).²⁹⁵ Láiríne breaks his ties to his brother, putting his brother into a spot where he need either betray his foster-brother or betray his brother. This reads as a betrayal on Láiríne’s part, not of Cú Chulainn, but of Lugaid.

2.2.2.3 Betrayal seven: Fergus’s affair with Medb

2.2.2.3.1 Recension I

At one point during the cattle raid, Ailill becomes suspicious of the relationship between Medb and Fergus and has his charioteer spy on them. His suspicion is proven correct – Medb and Fergus are engaged in sexual activity. Ailill’s charioteer steals Fergus’s sword as proof. The fact that this is done in secret and Ailill must spy to discover the information suggests that Fergus and Medb are involved in behaviour that breaks the bonds they share with Ailill. Ailill himself seems blasé about their encounter, stating, “Is dethbir disi [...] Is ar chobair ocon táin dorigni” (“She is [reasonable] (to behave thus) [...] She did it to help in the cattle-driving”).²⁹⁶ So far the encounter does not meet the second category I used to discover betrayal acts – disapproval from the betrayed or the audience. In fact, this example breaks the pattern slightly in that disapproval does not come from either of these sources. Rather, it is Fergus himself, rising after his sexual encounter and discovering that his sword is missing, who expresses his disappointment in himself, crying, “Aill amai! [...] Olc gním dorignius fri Ailill” (“Alas! [...] I have wronged Ailill”).²⁹⁷ This is one of the very few examples in the

²⁹⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1927-29.

²⁹⁶ *TBC-I*, l. 1053. ‘reasonable’ translated as ‘right’ in O’Rahilly’s translation.

²⁹⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1057-59.

Táin where someone admits to their own wrongdoing rather than having others accuse them of betrayal. Ailill has the power to press his advantage and publicize Fergus's misdeed, but does not, although he clearly continues to hold power over Fergus in the form of his sword, which Ailill does not return.

2.2.2.3.2 Recension II

The affair between Fergus and Medb is also referenced in Recension II, although the details differ somewhat. The text explains why Fergus does not have a sword with which he could attack Cú Chulainn if he so chose, declaring:

Bliadain riasin sceol sa tarraid Ailill Fergus ic techt i n-óentaid Medba arsind lettir i Crúachain 7 a chlaideb arsind lettir 'na farrad, & tóipacht Ailill in claideb assa intig 7 dobretha claideb craind dia inud, 7 dobert a bréthir ná tibred dó co tucad lá in chatha móir (A year before these events Ailill had come upon Fergus together with Medb on the hillside in Crúachu with his sword on the hill beside him, and Ailill had snatched the sword from its sheath and put a wooden sword in its place, and he swore that he would not give him back the sword until he gave it on the day of the great battle).²⁹⁸

In this telling of the act, there is no implication that Medb has slept with Fergus to further her and Ailill's plans. The tryst does not occur during the cattle raid, and thus its strategic implications are lessened, although still implied in Ailill's vow. As well, there is no directly stated condemnation of their actions from Ailill, but his seizing of Fergus's

²⁹⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2487-91.

sword is a suggestion that in Recension II, Ailill takes the action much more personally than in Recension I – that the act is a betrayal.

2.2.2.4 Betrayal eight: Dubthach and Fergus

2.2.2.4.1 Recension I

At one point, Cú Chulainn, who wishes the men of Ireland to view him as a handsome man, not the monstrous creature he becomes when he is angry, parades before Ailill and Medb's camp and all the women come out to see him. Dubthach, one of the men exiled along with Fergus from Ulster, is angered by this display, and says, "Díambad mé bad chomarlid / bíad slóg imme di cach leith. / [coro gartigtis a ré / mása é in ríastarde]" ("Were I your counsellor, then warriors would lie in ambush all around him so that they might cut short his life, if this is the distorted one").²⁹⁹ Given Dubthach's rather confusing status – both Ulsterman and exile – it is difficult to instantly declare that this is a betrayal, as perhaps his greater loyalty should at this point be to Connacht, given all that Connacht has done for the exiles. However, Fergus shuns Dubthach for wanting Cú Chulainn dead by treachery, declaiming his actions and declaring, "Ber ass Dubthach nDóeltengaid / iar cúl in tslóig na srengaid" ("Take Dubthach Déoltengaid away. Drag him to the rear of the army").³⁰⁰ Fergus provides a long list of actions Dubthach committed against the Ulstermen prior to exile that make Dubthach objectionable in Fergus's eyes. The interesting part of this is that there is no response from Ailill and Medb. Fergus's anger seems socially acceptable even though he is defending the enemy. This indicates Dubthach's suggestions regarding Cú Chulainn's

²⁹⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 2388-91.

³⁰⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 2393-94.

death are considered betrayal – a violation of formalized loyalties he is not fully expected to have renounced despite his current placement.

2.2.2.4.2 Recension II

In Recension II, Dubthach's motivation is more apparent than in Recension I. He is angry that, during Cú Chulainn's strutting for the men of Ireland, Cú Chulainn attracted the eye of Dubthach's own wife. Due to this, the text states that "dabert comairle braith & tréthi Con Culaind dona slúagaib .i. cathetarnaid imme far cach leth ar co táetsad leó" ("he advised the hosts to betray and abandon Cú Chulainn, that is, to lay an ambush around him on every side that he might be killed by them").³⁰¹ Once again, *brath* is used, in conjunction with *trécun*. The text itself describes Dubthach's actions as a betrayal of Cú Chulainn, despite Dubthach's loyalties to Medb and Ailill.

Fergus grows furious at Dubthach for all of the things Dubthach has done to Ulster and "ba dimbág leis comairle braith Con Culaind do thabairt do Dubthach dona slúagaib" ("it grieved him that Dubthach should advise the hosts to betray Cú Chulainn").³⁰² Once again, the text describes Dubthach's actions using the word *brath*. Fergus kicks Dubthach and drives him to the back of the camp. This is despite the fact that Fergus is currently on the Connacht side. No one argues with this, which suggests – interestingly – that it is treated as an internal matter within the exile grouping. The conflict of loyalties has not wounded Medb or Ailill, and has no potential to do so, and thus seems tolerated.

³⁰¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2377-78.

³⁰² *TBC-LL*, ll. 2401-02.

2.2.2.5 Betrayal nine: Fergus and the final battle

2.2.2.5.1 Recension I

Fergus's confrontation with the Ulstermen during the final battle contains intense loyalty decisions. In this fight, Fergus appears to have no good options. He has agreed to a bond of loyalty with Medb and Ailill – as has been shown in earlier examples, if he acts to assist the Ulstermen, this is viewed as a betrayal. However, Fergus also clearly still has loyalty to the Ulstermen, as shown by the fact he has already betrayed Medb and Ailill several times for the sake of the Ulstermen. That Medb and Ailill are aware of Fergus's internal conflict is obvious in the way they talk to him about fighting on their behalf. Cú Chulainn's charioteer tells him "bith do Ailill 7 do Meidb og guidhi Fergus a im thecht isin cath 7 asbertadar fris nárbo chol dó ar doradsad mór do maith dó fora lonnges" ("that Ailill and Medb were begging Fergus to go into battle. They said that it was not wrong of him to do so for they had shown him great generosity in his exile").³⁰³ Fergus's decision is not an obvious one. Medb and Ailill feel the need to remind Fergus of the reasons why he should choose them and not their enemies for a reason. Fergus appears to agree with their arguments, telling them that if he had his own sword (taken during his dalliance with Medb) he would fight for them. The sword is brought to him and Ailill delivers a fascinating request to Fergus, saying, "Mád la fír n-einech nád bad fornn n-imbrae do barann borrfad barainn fiad n-Ulad errathaib" ("For honour's sake do not wreak your fierce anger on us in the presence of the chariot-fighters of Ulster").³⁰⁴ Fergus promises that he will not, but the fact Ailill had to make the request in the first place underscores the lack of trust Medb and Ailill have in Fergus at this time.

³⁰³ *TBC-I*, ll. 4003-05.

³⁰⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 4024-25.

Fergus attacks the Ulstermen, culminating in a fight with Conchobor. This is an interesting instance because, while Fergus still feels loyalty to Ulster, it is clear that Conchobor is not included within this loyalty, as Conchobor was the reason for Fergus's exile. This is a fight where Fergus's loyalty decisions become more complicated. He is betraying the Ulstermen by fighting them (as shown by the fact even Medb and Ailill feel the need to convince Fergus he is not doing wrong) but in the moment of his battle with Conchobor, he is showing his rage at having himself been betrayed by Conchobor many years ago. Conchobor plays on this rage, emphasizing the actions he committed against Fergus by saying, in response to Fergus's query as to whom Fergus was fighting, "Fer as ferr [...] 7 rodatuc for longes i nn-adba con alltai 7 sindach 7 dotningéba anndiu ar gail gaiscid fiad feraib hÉrend" ("One who is better (than you) [...] One who drove you into exile to dwell with wolves and foxes, one who today will hold you at bay in the presence of the men of Ireland by dint of his own prowess").³⁰⁵ While Fergus seems to be considered in the wrong to fight the Ulstermen, he also has every reason to wish punishment on Conchobor.

It is at this point when Conchobor's son Cormac becomes involved. His words emphasize that Fergus's initial action of attacking the Ulstermen is considered a betrayal. Cormac says, "Náimtidí in chairdine, huise for náimde. Ro called for cairde. Olcai bémend benai, a popa a Fergais" ("Friendship proves hostile. Behold your enemies, your friends have been destroyed. Wicked are these blows that you strike, friend Fergus").³⁰⁶ Cormac reminds Fergus that he is destroying his own friends, and that despite Fergus's hatred of Conchobor, Conchobor's death would adversely affect

³⁰⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 4050-52.

³⁰⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 4057-59.

those Fergus does consider friends. Fergus listens, and strikes at a hill instead of Conchobor. Yet, this action could also be considered a betrayal, this time of Medb and Ailill.

2.2.2.5.2 Recension II

Recension II has a similar situation occur in the final battle. Fergus is approached by Medb, who says, “Ba bág ám dait-siu ga dobertha do greimm catha gan díchill lind indiu dáig r’indarbbad as da chrích 7 as t’orbba. Is acainne fúarais crích 7 ferand 7 forbba 7 mórmathius mór do dénam fort” (“It were indeed fitting for you to give us your aid unstintingly in fighting today, for you were banished from your territory and your land and with us you got territory and land and estate and much kindness was shown to you”).³⁰⁷ In Recension II as in Recension I, Fergus agrees to this and is given his sword. He asks whom he should kill and Medb replies, “Arna slúagaib immut immácúaird [...] Ná bered nech mathim ná hanacul inniu úait mani bera fírchara” (“On the hosts that surround you on all sides [...] Let none receive mercy or quarter from you today except a true friend”).³⁰⁸ Unlike in Recension I, there is no strong implication that Fergus would attack Medb and her host. However, Medb presents the interesting idea that she cannot prevent Fergus from sparing the life of a true friend, so it is better to grant permission in advance so that she does not need to critique Fergus later when he has done something she always knew he would anyway.

³⁰⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4704-07.

³⁰⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4722-23.

Fergus continues on to fight the Ulstermen, and, as in Recension I, comes up against Conchobor. Conchobor's betrayal of Fergus is much more clearly articulated in Recension II than I. Conchobor says, in response to Fergus's query as to who he is,

“[F]er rat indarb át chrích 7 át ferand 7 át forbba, fer rat chuir i n-adba oss 7 fiadmíl 7 sinnach, fer nára léic leithet da gabail badéin dit chrích ná dit ferand dait, fer rat chuir ar bantidnacul mná, fer rat sáraig im tríb maccaib Usnig do marbad far th'einech fecht n-aill, fer rat dingéba indiu i fiadnaisi fer nHérend, Conchobor mac Fachtna Fáthaig meic Rossa Rúaid meic Rudraigi, ardrí Ulad & mac ardríg Hérend” (“[O]ne who banished you from your land and territory and estate, one who drove you to dwell with deer and hare and fox, one who did not permit you to hold even the length of your own stride in your land and territory, one who made you dependent on a woman of property, one who [violated] you on one occasion by slaying the three sons of Usnech despite your safeguard, one who today will ward you off in the presence of the men of Ireland, namely, Conchobor mac Fachtna Fáthaig meic Rossa Rúaid meic Rudraigi, the high king of Ulster and the son of the high king of Ireland”).³⁰⁹

In Recension II, Conchobor does not just mention his exile of Fergus, but also the reasons for the exile – the great betrayal of Fergus where Conchobor had the sons Usnech slain despite Fergus's promise to them that they would be safe. This is clearly a violation of expectations, as Fergus and Conchobor were on the same side – both Ulstermen – and Conchobor had made Fergus believe he could be trusted. Fergus's reaction to Conchobor's words in this scene point to the enormous amounts of emotion

³⁰⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4751-57. Translated as 'outraged' by O'Rahilly.

typical in the betrayed after a betrayal act – Fergus is prepared to attack the Ulstermen to such a degree that their dead will outnumber their living because of Conchobor’s words. His rage at seeing Conchobor again is clearly compounded by the fact that Conchobor’s speech seems deliberately inflammatory, mocking Fergus with Conchobor’s betrayal of him with the sons of Usnech.

As in Recension I, Cormac intervenes to remind Fergus that his current actions are as great a betrayal of the Ulstermen as Conchobor’s actions were of Fergus. Fergus accordingly turns aside his sword blows against hills, going against his word to Medb, as she requested that Fergus only spare close friends and he has now spared his most hated enemy on the Ulster side.³¹⁰

2.2.3 Betrayal and the role of gender

2.2.3.1 Betrayal ten: Medb and the Gailioin

2.2.3.1.1 Recension I

Towards the beginning of the *Táin*, Medb is troubled by the presence of one division of warriors, the Gailioin. The Gailioin are completing their work much more quickly than any of the other divisions of the army, and Medb believes that due to this they will take credit for everything the army does, leaving no social rewards for the other warriors and taking away from her own accomplishments. She suggests killing the Gailioin. There is immediate resistance to this notion even from those most closely connected to Medb. Ailill reminds her of her own connection to the Gailioin, saying, “Is airiund arbáget dano” (“Yet it is for us they fight”).³¹¹ While this could just be reminding

³¹⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4758-4779.

³¹¹ *TBC-I*, l. 155.

Medb that since the Gailioin are working for Medb and Ailill, Medb and Ailill will receive the credit for any deeds the Gailioin do, the statement also reminds Medb of her formalized relationship with the Gailioin, which would be violated if she were to kill her own warriors. When Medb refuses to change her decision, citing fears that the Gailioin will turn on the army in an attempt to persuade her audience, Ailill continues to protest, saying, “Ní chélam as banchomairle” (“I shall not deny that is a woman's counsel”).³¹² Fergus also protests, and unlike in other situations where Medb uses her kindness to Fergus in taking him in after his exile from Ulster to control Fergus's movements, here she does not even attempt to leverage her power over him, indicating that she has taken up a position for which she truly has no defence – a position with which enough people following her would disagree to potentially discredit her. Fergus, in fact, disagrees so strongly that he is willing to go to war with Medb to dissuade her from her plan, saying, “Ní ‘maricfe, úair is áes comhchotaig dúinni 'nar nUltaib, acht má non gontar uli” (“It shall not happen unless we are all killed, for they are allies of us Ulstermen”).³¹³ Fergus eventually suggests dividing up the division, a solution to which Medb agrees, meaning that while her decision seems to be a betrayal of the Gailioin, the betrayal is never actually realized.

2.2.3.1.2 Recension II

The version of this scene in Recension II is quite similar to that in Recension I. Medb wishes to destroy the Gailioin due to their superiority as warriors, and Ailill and Fergus both object to her scheme. There are a few differences in the way Recension II

³¹² *TBC-I*, I. 163.

³¹³ *TBC-I*, II. 164-65.

frames Ailill and Fergus's objections. Ailill's objection is less focused on gender. Rather than saying that Medb's idea is what should be expected in the counsel of a woman, he says, "Mairg atber ón omm [...] ar abba dúnad 7 longphort do gabáil dóib co hellom 7 co héscaid" ("Woe betide him who speaks thus [...] because of their having pitched their tents and set up their stronghold quickly and promptly").³¹⁴ Rather than insulting Medb's judgement due to her gender, he insults it due to the reasons she is desiring to kill the men – for performing their duties as Medb and Ailill's warriors better than their other warriors. Fergus's response to Medb explores his relationship with the Gailioin more fully than the relationship is explored in Recension I. Fergus describes his legal connections to the Gailioin, saying, "Messi dano as chor 7 as glinni 7 trebairi friu ó tháncatar ó críchaib dílsib fadesin, 7 lim congébat 'sind ló bága sa" ("I myself am bond and surety and guarantee for them since they came from their own lands, and me shall they uphold in this day of battle").³¹⁵ This explains even more fully than in Recension I why Fergus's loyalty decision is to side with the Gailioin when Medb wishes to betray them, especially with Fergus's history of giving sureties to people who are then murdered, most famously the sons of Uisliu.³¹⁶

2.2.3.2 Betrayal eleven: Findabair and Reochaid

2.2.3.2.1 Recension I

One of the earliest men to recover from his debility is Rochad (Reochaid in Recension II) Rigderg mac Faithemain of Ulster, who approaches to fight the Connacht

³¹⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 332-333.

³¹⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 343-345.

³¹⁶ *Longes mac n-Uislenn: The exile of the sons of Uisliu*, ed. and trans. by Vernam Hull (New York, 1949)

army. Findabair reveals to her parents that Reochaid is her true love, and they tell her to sleep with Reochaid and persuade him to leave until the final battle. Reochaid agrees to this, which seems a betrayal of his ties and responsibilities to Ulster. Even the text seems to suggest that Reochaid is making a questionable choice (a decision to betray), as the text specifies “[d]ogníth uile cen corbo réith a breith fair” (“All this was done, though it was not easy to get him to come”).³¹⁷ If this were a decision that did not come with some sense of the forbidden, there would be no reason for the text to provide this detail. There seems to be some variance on whether this is considered a betrayal or a reasonable business deal – Recension II does not contain anything that would suggest Reochaid is behaving badly. Rather, in that recension there is the much more neutral line: “Fáemais Reochaid mac Fathemain anísein 7 fáeiss ind ingen dádaig leis” (“Reochaid mac Faithemain agreed to that and the girl spent that night with him”).³¹⁸ He is not shown to be in any moral quandary.

2.2.3.3 Betrayal twelve: The seven kings of Munster

2.2.3.3.1 Recension I

After Reochaid sleeps with Findabair, information about their union makes its way through the camp. At this point, it is revealed that in engaging herself to Reochaid, Findabair violated the expectations of many other men. She was already betrothed – to all the seven kings of Munster. Upon hearing of her new engagement, one of the kings says, “Dobrethai dam-sa an ingen sin [...] for cóic aítirib déac ar tuideacht in t-sluaigid sea” (“I was promised this girl on the surety of fifteen men, in requital for coming on this

³¹⁷ *TBC-I*, l. 3352.

³¹⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3871-72.

hosting”).³¹⁹ The other kings then explain that they too were promised Findabair. Apparently this was the first they had conversed on this subject, as they are all furious. This is shown through their instant desire to get revenge. The text says, “Tíagait dia dígail íarom for maccu Ailella i nGlenn Domain” (“So they went to take revenge for it on the sons of Ailill in Glenn Domain”).³²⁰ In the fight that follows, many men are slain. Even Findabair is aware that these actions, perceived as hers despite the fact that they are machinations of her parents, appear unfaithful. She dies of shame that the men were all tricked by her offer of marriage and that this led to so many deaths – she and her parents have betrayed all the men to whom she was betrothed.

2.2.3.3.2 Recension II

Potentially part of the reason Recension II does not present Reochaid’s behaviour as unusual is because it means all the anger about Findabair’s engagement to Reochaid falls on her and her parents, rather than any deflecting to Reochaid. After finding out that Findabair is engaged to Reochaid, the kings of Munster feel in Recension II, as in Recension I, that they have been treated badly in being offered Findabair if she is also offered to others. One of the kings asks, “Cid dúnni 'no [...] ná ragmais-ni do dígail ar mná 7 ar n-ainig arna Manib fuil ac foraire dar éis in tslúaig ic Imlig in Glendamrach” (“Why then [...] should we not go to take vengeance for the woman and for our honour on the Maines who are keeping guard in the rear of the host at Imlech in Glendamrach”)?³²¹ This leads, as in Recension I, to an enormous loss of

³¹⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 3355-56.

³²⁰ *TBC-I*, l. 3358.

³²¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3877-79.

life. Findabair cannot handle the strain from this. The text relates, “Atchúala sain Findabair ingen Ailella 7 Medba in comlín sain d'feraib Hérend do thuttim trena ág 7 trena accais, 7 ro maid cnómaidm dá cride 'na clíab ar féile & náre” (“Findabair, the daughter of Ailill and Medb, heard that this number of the men of Ireland had fallen because of her and on account of her, and her heart cracked like a nut in her breast through shame and modesty”).³²² As in Recension I, Findabair cannot live with the toll that her betrayal has exacted.

2.3 Conclusion

Looking at betrayal acts within the *Táin*, three themes are evident. Betrayal acts can be split up into betrayals committed by or for natal family. Several of Cú Chulainn’s foster-brothers betray him, while several others betray Medb and Ailill in order to remain loyal to him. This division seems largely based around whether the foster-kin also have a biological connection to the hero. There are also several betrayal acts which show off a non biologically related character’s considerable skill in avoiding a betrayal. Fergus is never accused of betrayal but also never betrays Cú Chulainn, while Lugaid manages to save both his brother’s life and his relationship with his foster-brother. Finally, several betrayal acts involve women being accused of betrayal. Thus, my next three chapters will focus on these three social groups – family groupings (both biological and foster kinship groupings), the groupings found in the army, and groupings by gender.

³²² *TBC-LL*, ll. 3886-88.

Chapter Three: Betrayal in the Family Unit in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

3.1 Introduction

At the center of the *Táin*, singlehandedly defending Ulster against an entire invading army, stands Cú Chulainn. His connection to Ulster is strong, and his loyalty seems absolute. A great deal of this loyalty stems from Cú Chulainn's relationship with his maternal uncle Conchobor. In both Recension I and Recension II of the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn states that he will never exchange his uncle for another king.³²³ His loyalty is so strong that it affects how Cú Chulainn views his own actions and their consequences – he is so strongly connected by his personal loyalties to the Ulstermen that, in Recension I, he even accuses himself of betraying the Ulstermen when a tryst Cú Chulainn embarks on causes him to be late in the defence of Ulster and the people of Ulster.³²⁴ This is the sole example of a self-declared betrayal, and therefore seems worthy of close examination. Such examination indicates that a potentially useful starting point is to look at the close relationship Cú Chulainn has with his kin, particularly as many of the betrayal acts listed in Chapter Two center around loyalty conflicts in different kinship relationships. Cú Chulainn's family members within the text fall into two primary groups – his biological family (both maternal and paternal) and his foster-family (both his foster-father and his foster-brothers). These two groups overlap extensively, as he was fostered by his maternal kin. The two groups are extremely important to consider when looking at betrayal and at loyalty decisions, as an examination of Cú Chulainn's family network demonstrates that without fail loyalty to the maternal kin is

³²³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1264-65; *TBC-LL*, ll. 1404-05.

³²⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 315.

prioritized above loyalty to other kinship groups, while loyalty to non-biologically related foster-kin is not prioritized as highly as loyalty to biological family.

As suggested by the sociological materials, the study of betrayal necessitates the study of relationships. Criterium Three opines that in order for a betrayal act to take place, at least two individuals, a betrayer and a betrayed, are required, while Criterium One indicates the individuals involved must have some type of relationship – they must have some connection, however distant. Thus, in order to reasonably explore the concept of betrayal, it is useful to have some understanding of the cultural expectations the original audiences of the texts would likely have had about various types of relationships. Without understanding cultural expectations about what the normal state of a particular sort of relationship should be, it is more difficult to detect when the relationship goes wrong through a betrayal act. As well, since different relationships often have different societal expectations, it is possible that factors surrounding betrayal, such as what sort of action constitutes a betrayal act or what sort of betrayal act is unforgiveable, may also differ depending on the sort of relationship involved. By understanding different sorts of relationships, it is possible to examine patterns where certain relationship types are prioritised above others more closely. Thus, in order to contextualize the study of Cú Chulainn's family units, I will examine the institution of fosterage, as this institution affects so much of Cú Chulainn's family dynamic, before going into a more thorough description of Cú Chulainn's particular family situation.

3.2 Fosterage

Fosterage was an important institution in medieval Ireland. Legally, this fosterage usually lasted until a boy was 17, during which time the boy would be taught all of the skills necessary for someone of his particular rank to function in society.³²⁵ Parkes notes that during this period “separable duties of nursing and education could be subcontracted to successive fosterers.”³²⁶ It is often indicated that a child could have multiple foster-parents and thus multiple foster-siblings.³²⁷ However, O’Donnell questions whether multiple fosterage was actually as wide-spread as is sometimes thought. He believes that the multiple fosterage situation of Cú Chulainn is a result of his heroism – he is larger than life. O’Donnell states, “In almost every way Cú Chulainn’s character is one of dramatic overblown plenitude: he is a precocious child, kills men by the hundred and performs more heroic traits than all the heroes in Ulster or Connacht. The same is true for the number of his foster fathers.”³²⁸

Frequently, children were fostered with their maternal kindred, particularly if the maternal kindred had greater influence and power than the paternal, in order to amplify the connection.³²⁹ As primogeniture was not a system widely used, children would often be in competition with their blood siblings, which meant that the maternal kindred often played an important role in supporting a child born to a mother of their bloodline. This also meant that foster-siblings, particularly ones from the maternal family, were natural

³²⁵ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 86-88.

³²⁶ Peter Parkes, ‘Celtic Fosterage: Adoptive Kinship and Clientage in Northwest Europe’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48.2 (2006), 359-395 (pp. 362).

³²⁷ Ní Chonail, ‘Child Rearing in Medieval Ireland’, p. 31.

³²⁸ O’Donnell, *Fosterage in Medieval Ireland*, p. 58.

³²⁹ T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, (Oxford, Clarendon, 1993), p. 100.

allies whereas the siblings were not.³³⁰ This is a point of particular interest in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, as Cú Chulainn is fostered by his mother's kin and has a very close bond with them, particularly his uncle Conchobor, as the role of sister's son had significant meaning.³³¹

Within the last fifty years, there have been two large examinations of fosterage in Medieval Ireland. Sheila Boll has conducted a thorough examination of fosterage in Medieval Ireland, focusing on conflict in foster-brother relationships. In her work, she examines the roles that foster-kin are expected to play in high stakes situations such as the Tain. Boll determines that foster-kin are presented both as being both allies and enemies to those with whom they fostered, depending on circumstance. Within the Tain specifically, she notes that far more scholarly focus has attended those of Cu Chulainn's foster-kin who become his enemies. To counter this, she calls attention to the figures of Fergus, Lugaid, and Fiachu, arguing that their continued assistance of Cu Chulainn from within the enemy camp show "equally power displays of foster-kinship as a character motivation, especially since each act runs the risk of reprisal from their allies among the men of Ireland."

Boll notes that, in each case of foster-kin becoming enemies, "some force is presented as causing former foster-kinsmen to turn against their former friend and kinsman."³³² Boll identifies five motivations that are present in these instances of enmity – material concerns, honour, women, contracts and biological kinship.³³³ From the Tain,

³³⁰ Nerys Patterson, *Cattle Lords & Clansmen: Kinship and Rank in Early Ireland*, (London: Garland, 1991), p. 221; Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 182-86.

³³¹ Jaski, 'Cú Chulainn: gormac and dalta'.

³³² Sheila Marie Boll, *Foster-kin in conflict: fosterage as a character motivation in medieval Irish literature*, (PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge: 2002), p. 175.

³³³ Ibid.

Boll uses Fer Diad as an example of this, describing how he turns against Cu Chulainn for rewards in Recension II and to increase his honour in Recension I.³³⁴ Boll determines that “it generally takes more than one motivating factor to turn foster-kinsmen into enemies.”³³⁵ Boll notes that foster-kin are often ambivalent about turning on their former allies, but does not delve deeper into the emotional reasonings or ramifications of foster-brother enmity.³³⁶ Boll also mentions the particular significance of biological kinship in opposition to foster-kinship, determining that “the place of fosterage within a hierarchy of character motivations remained contested”, with biological kinship often, but not always, proving dominant.³³⁷ She states that at times it can be difficult to differentiate between the motivations of biological and foster-kin, as the two categories “frequently overlap.”³³⁸

Thomas O'Donnell approaches fosterage from a different angle. His study of fosterage (first in his thesis, then in his book based on the same) is focused upon tracing the emotions involved in the foster-family and detailing “how the bonds of fosterage were formed and how they fell apart.”³³⁹ He proposes two different models of fosterage – the nutritive and the educative.³⁴⁰ The nutritive model is fosterage begun when the fosterling is young enough to require breastfeeding, and refers to the bonds formed through the providing of nutrients to the fosterling through the medium of the foster-mother's breast. The educative model can be paired with the nutritive, as fostering was an institution formed in part for educational benefits, but a child could also

³³⁴ Id., pp. 176, 179.

³³⁵ Id., p. 192.

³³⁶ Id., p. 194

³³⁷ Id., pp. 222-23.

³³⁸ Id., p. 216.

³³⁹ O'Donnell, *Fosterage in Medieval Ireland*, p. 14.

³⁴⁰ Id., p. 21.

begin an educative fosterage later on in life. Children were frequently fostered with their maternal kin, and O'Donnell stresses the importance of this bond, which has also been discussed by Jaski. Of the maternal uncle bond, Jaski notes that “[i]n (early) medieval literature there is a general tendency to stress the affection, loyalty, and solidarity between uncle and nephew, while the relationship between father and son is detached and cool.”³⁴¹ Based on the close relationship between Cú Chulainn and his uncle Conchobor, as well as an analysis of the terminology used to describe their relationship, Jaski determines that Cú Chulainn is the son of a non-Ulsterman – an alien – and thus under the protection of his maternal kin rather than his paternal.³⁴²

While foster bonds begin with a legal arrangement, O'Donnell determines that within the foster family that is thus formed, it “is the care and affection, the passing on of education, and the ongoing responsibility for the fosterling that makes a foster father.” This care and attention leads to bonds of emotion which sustain the foster relationships after they are legally ended.³⁴³ O'Donnell notes that a nutritive foster-sibling bond was initially created vertically – the key bonding point between foster-siblings was through the foster-parent. O'Donnell states, “The intimate connection between the foster-siblings is a passive result of the action of the parents taking in the child.”³⁴⁴ However, later it is up to the foster-siblings to prioritize the emotional foster-bond created during either the nutritive or educative process. The foster-sibling bond “is then reaffirmed and repeated throughout the lives of the participants and in this way the foster siblings themselves

³⁴¹ Jaski, ‘Cú Chulainn: gormac and dalta’, p. 29.

³⁴² Id., p. 7-10.

³⁴³ O'Donnell, *Fosterage in Medieval Ireland*, p. 35.

³⁴⁴ Thomas Charles O'Donnell, *The Affect of Fosterage in Medieval Ireland*, (PhD Thesis, University College London: 2016), p. 139.

create their own bond without the presence of a foster parent.”³⁴⁵ In his discussion of foster-bonds, O’Donnell examines the examples of Fergus, Fer Báeth, and Fer Diad, and analyzes their interactions with Cú Chulainn. He notes that Cú Chulainn’s foster-brothers within the text (Fer Báeth and Fer Diad) resort to fighting their foster-brother. He explains this by saying, “They come from different families and their bond is forged later in life, while learning with Scáthach. They represent the second way the foster sibling bond was created, through a shared education.”³⁴⁶ This bond is more easily broken. In contrast, “[s]uch is the affection that Fergus feels towards his fosterling, the prospect of fighting is never raised.”³⁴⁷

While both Boll and O’Donnell’s examinations of fosterage address certain figures within the Tain, they do not have that work as a sole focus, and thus do not conduct a systematic study of all of Cu Chulainn’s foster-family mentioned within the text. They provide broader analyses of Irish literature. As well, while Boll focuses on the motivations of those foster-kinsmen who turn into enemies, she does not examine the motivations of those who stay loyal. Similarly, O’Donnell explores how certain foster-family betray Cú Chulainn while others remain loyal, but only focuses on how the emotional elements of the relationship affect their dissolution, not on other factors that can influence foster-family in making loyalty decisions. In fact, loyalty to foster-kinsmen is not the default state of the relationship. All of Cu Chulainn’s foster-brothers face what I will describe as loyalty decisions, not just those who betray him, and those who stay loyal usually do so because they have more loyalties that align with their loyalty to Cu

³⁴⁵ O’Donnell, *Fosterage in Medieval Ireland*, p. 76.

³⁴⁶ Id., p. 71.

³⁴⁷ Id., p. 63.

Chulainn than they have loyalties that align against him. These loyalty decisions involve factors discussed by both Boll and O'Donnell – material concerns, biological family, honour, and emotional considerations. Cú Chulainn has more foster-kin than discussed by either O'Donnell or Boll, and it is possible in most instances to divide their loyalty decisions by whether they are biologically related to Cú Chulainn or not. Those who are biologically related to him never betray him. However, this can sometimes place them in the uncomfortable position of choosing against other loyalty ties and betraying other individuals. Meanwhile, those who do not have a biological tie to Cú Chulainn have a harder time staying loyal to him. However, through an examination of their loyalty considerations, it is possible to determine how and why those who remain loyal to him yet have no biological ties to him do so.

Family plays a large role in both Recension I and Recension II of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. While many of Cú Chulainn's family members play an important role in the text, I will focus my discussion primarily upon his foster connections, as these ties describe most of his non-biological ties as well as the majority of his maternal biological family ties. In particular, my discussion will focus around Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers, as many previous studies pick and choose which foster-brothers to include and as these foster-brothers form the majority of Cú Chulainn's family who are mentioned beyond in passing. As well as an important relationship with his foster-father Fergus, Cú Chulainn has a number of foster-brothers (*comaltai*) named in the *Táin*. However, not all of the *comaltai* mentioned or playing a major role in one recension of the *Táin* appear in the other. As well, not all of his mentioned *comaltai* fostered with him during the same period in his life, although the same term is used to describe them.

3.2.1 *Cú Chulainn's Biological Family*

3.2.1.1 *Cú Chulainn's Paternal Family*

The number of *Cú Chulainn's* paternal family members mentioned in the *Táin* is small. Rather, in Recension II *Cú Chulainn's* father *Sualtaim* is the only paternal family member who makes an appearance, while in Recension I he is given two fathers – *Sualtaim* and *Lug*. *Sualtaim* is nothing but loyal to Ulster, and in particular to his son. In both recensions, *Cú Chulainn's* first appearance is with *Sualtaim*.³⁴⁸ In Recension II, *Sualtaim* warns *Cú Chulainn* that going to meet his mistress before engaging the enemy army will result in shame for *Cú Chulainn*.³⁴⁹ *Sualtaim* does not appear to be much respected. In both recensions, when *Cú Chulainn* is facing *Medb* and *Ailill's* army and *Sualtaim* comes to assist him, *Cú Chulainn* is displeased. The reasoning behind this displeasure is similar – Recension I states that “*Ba h-olc la suide tuidhecht dó chuccai. Cia nongonta ní mbiad-som nert dia dígail*” (“*Cú Chulainn* was not pleased that he should come to him, for though he was wounded, *Sualtaim* would not be strong enough to avenge him”),³⁵⁰ while Recension II declares that:

[n]írbo míad 7 nírbo maiss ám ra Coin Culaind anísín, Sualtaim do écgáine nó d'airchisecht de, dáig rafitir *Cú Chulaind*, géara gonta 7 géara créchtnaigthe é, nábad gress dá dígail *Sualtaim*. Ór is amlaid ra boí *Sualtaim* acht nírbo drochláech é 7 nírbo degláech acht múadóclách maith ritacaemnacair (*Cú Chulainn* liked not that *Sualtaim* should lament and pity him, for he knew that

³⁴⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 217-19; *TBC-LL*, ll. 442-44.

³⁴⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 452-55.

³⁵⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 3417-18.

though he was wounded and injured Sualtaim would be no protection to avenge him. For the truth was that Sualtaim was not a coward but neither was he a valiant fighter but only a middling one).³⁵¹

In both recensions, Sualtaim dies by accidentally cutting his head off with his own shield after he loses control of Cú Chulainn's horse. However, he does manage to rouse the Ulstermen by warning them Cú Chulainn needs their help.³⁵² Lug is the other father to Cú Chulainn in Recension I. He appears when Cú Chulainn is particularly badly wounded to heal his wounds and stand guard while Cú Chulainn gets some rest. Asked by Cú Chulainn who he is, he says, "Iss messe do athair a ssídib .i. Lug mac Ethlend" ("I am your father, Lug mac Ethlend, from the fairy mounds").³⁵³ The same healing figure also appears in Recension II, but with no name and no claim of paternity.³⁵⁴ In both recensions, Cú Chulainn's paternal family is on the periphery of his life. They are concerned about his health, but unable to assist in any significant martial capacity. With so few members of his paternal family present, the majority of Cú Chulainn's attention is occupied by his maternal kin and their doings, who provide the majority of assistance to Cú Chulainn and are much more significantly involved in his life. However, it is interesting to note that while his maternal kin have a larger hold on Cú Chulainn's life and are able to provide more assistance, it is those in his paternal family who, unaffected by the weakness afflicting the Ulstermen, are able to come through for Cú Chulainn when he is most alone.

³⁵¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3991-96.

³⁵² *TBC-I*, ll. 3410-53; *TBC-LL*, ll. 3981-4052.

³⁵³ *TBC-I*, l. 2109.

³⁵⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2137-66.

3.2.1.2 Cú Chulainn's Maternal Family

The majority of Cú Chulainn's kin mentioned in the *Táin* is his maternal family. All of these members of Cú Chulainn's kindred seem to have the same central homeplace. Even his mother herself and his exiled family members all seem to have been raised for a majority of their lives within the main court in Ulster. Therefore, they have this strong bond tying them together, a sort of bond that, as seen with the example of Cú Chulainn's *comaltai*, is often harder to break than ties created later in life. It makes sense that there would be strong loyalty connections between these sections of Cú Chulainn's family, and that he would be particularly attached to them, especially as he is tied to them not only by bonds of biological kinship, but also by fosterage.

The central figure in Cú Chulainn's maternal family is his uncle Conchobor, who spends much of his time in Emain Macha in Ulster. It is through terms demonstrating their relationship to Conchobor, rather than their relationship to Cú Chulainn himself, that most of Cú Chulainn's maternal kindred can be identified. For example, his cousin Follomain is described as "Follomain mac Conchobuir" and his aunt, Fedlimid Nóchruthach, is described as Conchobor's daughter.³⁵⁵

Conchobor has a number of sons and grandsons, all of whom are relatives of Cú Chulainn. In Recension I, he has five sons and two grandsons mentioned. In Recension II, he has four sons and one grandson mentioned. In Recension I, the druid Cathbad is also related to Cú Chulainn, as he is Conchobor's father.³⁵⁶ The majority of these individuals also live in Ulster and seem to spend much of their time near Conchobor.

³⁵⁵ *TBC-LL*, l. 768; *TBC-I*, l. 421; *TBC-LL*, l. 4110-11; *TBC-I*, l. 3828.

³⁵⁶ *TBC-I*, l. 610.

Due to this, the majority of these individuals are not differentiated in their approach to loyalty decisions. Rather, they operate as part of the mass of Ulstermen loyal to Conchobor and Ulster, and through these ties to Cú Chulainn. The exception is Fiachu, discussed above.

Conchobor also has a number of women mentioned as being biologically related to him. Cú Chulainn's mother, Conchobor's sister Deichtire, married as she is to Sualtaim, lives on the borders of Ulster territory, while his mentioned daughter seems to have left Ulster and joined a family unit outside of Conchobor's territory. This daughter, Fedlimid, seems to be on good terms with her natal families – she allows Cú Chulainn to visit her to have his tryst with her handmaiden.³⁵⁷

Yet there is another character, raised outside of Ulster, also related maternally to the Ulstermen, who also comes to the defence of Ulster in the final battle with Medb and Ailill's forces. This is Erc, mentioned in the betrayal acts of Chapter Two, the son of Conchobor's daughter who comes to support his grandfather. Recension I states, "Dichmairc a athar dodeachaid in fer sin do chobair a senathar" ("Without asking permission of his father, that [man] has come to the assistance of his grandfather")³⁵⁸, while Recension II has Fergus say, about a swiftly approaching group of men:

acht óen bad dóig lim-sa and comtis iat fir Themra im Ercc mac Fedilmi
Nóchruthaigi, mac-side Carpri Nia Fer, & más íat, nímo carat anairich and so,
dóig 's a dichmairc a athar dodechaid in mac bec sain d'fóirithin a senathar din
chur sa, 7 mad síat, bud muir conbáidfea dúib-si in buden sain dáig is tri
[d]agin na buidni sin 7 an meic bic rafail inti conmáe foraib-si in cath sa don

³⁵⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 222-24; *TBC-LL*, ll. 450-51.

³⁵⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 3829-30. Translated 'boy' by O'Rahilly.

chur sa (I should think it likely that they were the men of Tara with Erc the son of Fedilmid Nóchrothach, who is also the son of Cairbre Nia Fer, and if it is they, ... for this little lad has come on this occasion to succour his grandfather without asking permission of his father, this company will overwhelm you like the sea, for it is by reason of this company and the little lad among them that ye will be defeated on this occasion).³⁵⁹

Both recensions attribute the eventual defeat of the Ulster forces to Erc. In Recension I, “[b]ith condalb donuapérat laíth gaili fer nUlad in díáirmi” (“[m]indful of their kinship with the boy, the warriors of Ulster will attack the vast (enemy) host”).³⁶⁰ In Recension II, “[b]át bágaig, bat condalbaig confúarcfet flaithe fer nUlad ar n-úair. Is ferda conbúrfet in damrad dermór oc tessargain laíg a mbó issi[n] chath issin matin se imbárach” (“[f]illed with affection for their own kin, the chiefs of the men of Ulster will in due course smite (you). Bravely will those powerful bulls roar as they rescue the calf of their own cow in the battle on the morrow’s morn”).³⁶¹ Interesting is the identification of Fedlimid as “a mbó” (“their own cow”) to the Ulstermen. Despite how she has physically left the family grouping, she is still considered a member of her natal grouping, and through her, her child is as well. While the fact that Erc has come without the permission of his father raises the idea that perhaps such unwavering support of the maternal kin is not fully endorsed in the society of the *Táin* unless supported by the paternal side of the family, loyalty to the maternal kinship group seems vitally important in the *Táin*.

³⁵⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4545-51.

³⁶⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 3837-38.

³⁶¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4557-59.

3.2.2 Fergus

3.2.2.1 Recension I

Cú Chulainn's foster-father Fergus mac Roeich is dealt with intensively in the following chapter. However, in order to be able to draw conclusions about Cú Chulainn's family, it is necessary to discuss Fergus briefly here. This discussion will deal primarily with Fergus's relationship to Cú Chulainn himself.

In Recension I, Fergus and Cú Chulainn's relationship is expressed by the word *dalta* (fosterling). Cú Chulainn is described three times as Fergus's *dalta*. In the first instance, Cú Chulainn is not directly stated to be the *dalta* of Fergus. Rather, Conall Cernach calls Cú Chulainn *dalta* to all of the Ulstermen gathered telling tales of Cú Chulainn, stating, "Rafetammár é in n- gilla sin [...] & ní messaite fria fis is dalta dún" ("Indeed we know that boy [...] and we know him all the better in that he is a fosterling of ours").³⁶² In the other two instances, Cú Chulainn is referred to directly as Fergus's *dalta*, first by the narrator to provide a reason Fergus does not want to fight Cú Chulainn, and second by Fergus himself when he is concerned that Cú Chulainn will be killed by Fer Diad.³⁶³ Fergus is traditionally described in other tales of the Ulster Cycle to have been made Cú Chulainn's foster-father early on in the hero's life. He is not, like the warrior woman Scáthach, a teacher from later in the boy's life. This is shown through Fergus's knowledge of Cú Chulainn's youth, which allows him to describe Cú Chulainn's childhood amongst the Ulstermen.

Fergus is one of the most powerful people in the army, with a myriad of loyalty ties. He seems to have obtained some of his power from Medb and Ailill. Medb and Ailill

³⁶² *TBC-I*, ll. 542-43.

³⁶³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2502, 2691.

mention that they have been extremely generous to Fergus in his exile,³⁶⁴ and he is treated like a man of high rank by the Connachtmen. As mentioned previously, he is given key positions, like leading the army.

As well as the loyalty tie he has with Medb and Ailill, and the power he receives in exchange, Fergus has a number of other allies among the men of the army. Both recensions say that Fergus brings a division of Ulstermen with him (the other exiles), showing that a large number of men opposed his exile.³⁶⁵ As well, all the provinces of Ireland besides the Connachtmen seem ready to follow him over Medb if enough provocation is given. Counting the division numbers given, Fergus actually seems to have effective control over half the army. In Recension I, Fergus says:

Atát secht ríg sund din Mumu & trícha cét la cech n-áe comchotach dúinni 'nar n-Ultaib. Dobér-sa cath duit [...] for lár in dúnaid h-i tám cosna secht tríchtaib cét sin & com thríchait chét fadéin & co tríchait chét na nGalión (There are here seven kings from Munster, allies of us Ulstermen, and a division with each king. I shall give you battle in the middle of the encampment where we now are, supported by those seven divisions, by my own division and by the division of the Gailiún".³⁶⁶

Medb says, “[A]tú-sa sund mo sainteglach díb tríchtaib cét [...] & atát na secht Mane .i. mo secht meic secht tríchait cét” (“I have here with me my own household retinue numbering two divisions, and the seven Maines are here, my seven sons, with seven divisions”).³⁶⁷ This gives Medb nine divisions and Fergus nine divisions.

³⁶⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 4003-05.

³⁶⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 57-58, 1274-86, 3545870.

³⁶⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 172-75.

³⁶⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 166-68.

The independent power that this set of alliances gives to Fergus allows him always to maintain loyalty to Cú Chulainn. As the list of betrayal situations in Chapter Two (in which Fergus features several times) suggests, Fergus always maintains his loyalty to Cú Chulainn. There are several times where, in doing so, Fergus nearly comes to the point of being publicly declared a betrayer by Medb and Ailill, as when he leads the men of Ireland astray to give the Ulstermen time to defend themselves.

Like many other of Cú Chulainn's foster-family within Medb's army, Fergus is called upon in Recension I to fight his foster-son. After being plied with alcohol, he agrees to do so, but from the beginning he does not plan to fight. Cú Chulainn remarks that Fergus has not come bearing a sword, to which Fergus responds that even if he did have his sword, he would not use it against Cú Chulainn.³⁶⁸ His loyalty is to his *dalta*.

3.2.2.2 Recension II

In Recension II, Fergus is referred to as Fergus mac Róig. As in Recension I, there are several instances where Cú Chulainn is referred to as Fergus's *dalta* in Recension II. When introducing Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds, Fergus calls him "mo *dalta*-sa & *dalta* Conchobuir" ("my fosterson and the fosterson of Conchobor").³⁶⁹ Both he and the narrative refer to Cú Chulainn as his *dalta* several other times.³⁷⁰ In Recension II, as well as Cú Chulainn being referred to as Fergus's *dalta*, Fergus is also called Cú Chulainn's *aite* (foster-father), including on occasion by Cú Chulainn himself.³⁷¹ In this way, the fosterage relationship is shown to be acknowledged by both

³⁶⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 2495-518.

³⁶⁹ *TBC-LL*, l. 718.

³⁷⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1606, 2481, 2491, 2724, 4807.

³⁷¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1282, 1638, 1723-24.

Cú Chulainn and Fergus. As in Recension I, the foster relationship between Cú Chulainn and Fergus appears to be of long duration, formed when Cú Chulainn was young. Due to this, Fergus is able to describe Cú Chulainn's boyhood to Medb and Ailill.³⁷²

In Recension II Fergus has obtained a great deal of power from Medb and Ailill, who mention their generosity to Fergus in his exile.³⁷³ His tent's location is beside that of Medb and Ailill.

In Recension II, Fergus has a number of strong allies from the other provinces of Ireland.³⁷⁴ Recension II gives similar numbers to those in Recension I, saying:

'Ní rim-sa is ráite duit-sin sain, a Fergus,' ar Medb, 'dáig itó-sa lín do gona & t'airlig co tríchait cét Galían immut, dáig atát na secht Mani cona secht tríchtaib cét & meic Mágach cona tríchait cét & Ailill cona tríchait cét & atú-sa com thegluch 'no. Atám and sain lín do gona-su & t'airlig cot tríchait cét Galáan immut.' 'Ní comadas a rád frim-sa sain,' ar Fergus. 'Dáig atát lim-sa sund na secht n-airríg do Mumnechaib cona secht tríchtaib cét. Faillet sund trícha cét a n-as dech di ócaib Ulad. Fail sund a n-as dech dagóc fer nHérend, trícha cét Galían' ('Not to me should you say that, Fergus', said Medb, 'for my army is numerous enough to slay and kill you with the thirty hundred Leinstermen surrounding you. For I have the seven Maines with their seven divisions of thirty hundred and the sons of Mágu with their division and Ailill with his division, and I myself have my household guard. Our numbers are sufficient to

³⁷² *TBC-LL*, ll. 738-819.

³⁷³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 389-90.

³⁷⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 154-56, 1594-604, 4278-599.

slay and kill you with the division of the Leinstermen around you'. 'It is not fitting to speak thus to me' said Fergus, 'for I have here the seven underkings of the Munstermen with their seven divisions. Here too is a division of the best among the noble warriors of Ulster. Here are the finest of the noble warriors of the men of Ireland, the division of the Gaili6in).³⁷⁵

This gives Medb nine divisions as well as her household guard and Fergus nine divisions. Although this recension gives Medb a slight advantage in numbers, given her household guard, in both recensions Fergus has the superior talent, in the form of the Gaili6in, who do everything better than the other divisions. As in Recension I, this power that Fergus has outside of that given by Medb and Ailill gives him the security he needs to thwart their orders when in defence of his *dalta*. As shown in Chapter Two, Fergus pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable in order to protect Ulster and Cú Chulainn. He leads Medb and Ailill's troops astray and delays them on multiple occasions.

As in Recension I, Fergus is called upon to fight Cú Chulainn. In this version, he is not intoxicated, but simply cannot resist the pleas of Medb. Upon going to fight, he assures Cú Chulainn that even if he had his sword, it would never be used against Cú Chulainn.³⁷⁶

3.2.3 Cú Chulainn's Foster-brothers

In Recension I of the *Táin*, the word *comalta* or some variation thereof is used nine times, eight of which describe Cú Chulainn's foster relationships.³⁷⁷ Three people are described as Cú Chulainn's *comaltai* – 1) Láeg mac Ríangabra, 2) Fer Báeth mac

³⁷⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 334-343.

³⁷⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2473-2509.

³⁷⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1757-59, 1772-73, 2208-10, 2569-76, 2603-05, 2688-96, 2740-48, 3110-13.

Fir Bend, and 3) Fer Diad mac Damáin. As well, 4) Lóch Mór mac Mo Febis, while never declared *comalta* to Cú Chulainn, is described using other words that indicate the same foster relationship. Láeg assists Cú Chulainn throughout the text while the other three are among the warriors sent by Medb and Ailill to fight against Cú Chulainn at the ford. In Recension II of the *Táin*, nine people are described with terminology that indicates a *comalta* relationship with Cú Chulainn.³⁷⁸ This version introduces seven of the nine *comaltai* in a list that Cú Chulainn provides Láeg of *comaltai* currently in Medb and Ailill's camp whom he wishes Láeg to greet for him.³⁷⁹ These seven *comaltai* are 1) Fer Báeth mac Báetáin, 2) Fer Diad mac Damáin, 3) Lugaid mac Nóis, 4) Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend, 5) Lugaid mac Solamaig, 6) Fer Det mac Damáin, and 7) Bress mac Firb. Of these, only Fer Diad mac Damáin, Lugaid mac Nóis, Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend, and Fer Báeth mac Báetáin are mentioned at any other point in the text. As all of these four were trained by Scáthach, it seems safe to assume that all of the people on the list know Cú Chulainn through Scáthach, and that is why they are grouped together, particularly as the list does not contain other foster-brothers of Cú Chulainn who know him from a different period in his life. Although Lóch appears in Recension II of the text, and knows Cú Chulainn through Scáthach in the Recension I version, he does not appear on this list. Two other people are also described as *comaltai* to Cú Chulainn – 8) the warrior Fiachu mac Fir Aba and 9) Cú Chulainn's charioteer Láeg mac Ríangabra; they appear to be Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers due to their joint raising during childhood in Conchobor's court. As well as these nine, 10) Conall Cernach is mentioned

³⁷⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1858-1867, 1874-76, 1882-89, 1894-97, 1910-14, 2224-26, 2578-79, 2617-21, 2726-30, 3080-86, 3187-91, 3203-06, 3207-10, 3419-20, 3422-23, 3478-85.

³⁷⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1858-67.

in places in such a way as to suggest a *comalta* relationship was intended between himself and Cú Chulainn, although the term is never used to describe him.

3.2.3.1 Cú Chulainn's Foster-brothers from within Ulster

3.2.3.1.1 Recension I

3.2.3.1.1.1 Láeg mac Ríangabra

Cú Chulainn's charioteer and *comalta* Láeg mac Ríangabra first appears in Cú Chulainn's company,³⁸⁰ helping him in his fight against Ailill and Medb's forces, and throughout the remainder of the *Táin*, Láeg supports and encourages Cú Chulainn. The text of Recension I provides no details about Láeg's background or how he and Cú Chulainn became *comaltai*, but it is likely, as Láeg seems quite loyal to Ulster, that this foster relationship was formed during Cú Chulainn's youth in Ulster, before he left to train with the warrior woman Scáthach. In the version of 'Compert ConCulaind' found in Royal Irish Academy Manuscript D IV 2 (translated by Thurneysen), Láeg is Cú Chulainn's *comalta* and the two nurse at the same breast. In this version, Láeg's parents are Cet mac Magach's foster-parents, whom Cet leaves to care for the infant Cú Chulainn.³⁸¹ Hollo notes that in this tale, after Cet leaves for Connacht, Láeg's parents stay in Ulster to continue to look after Cú Chulainn,³⁸² which would support a reading of the *Táin* where Láeg knows Cú Chulainn from a childhood spent together in Ulster.

³⁸⁰ *TBC-I*, I. 1148.

³⁸¹ Rudolf Thurneysen, 'Compert ConCulaind nach D. 4. 2.', *Zu irischen Handschriften und Litteraturdenkmälern*, (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912), 41-48.

³⁸² Kaarina Hollo, 'Cú Chulainn and Síð Truim', *Ériu*, 49 (1998), 13-22 (p. 16).

In the text, Láeg is referred to as Cú Chulainn's *comalta* only once. After Ailill and Medb's forces slaughter the youths of Ulster, Cú Chulainn sets out to avenge their deaths. Before they proceed into the battle, the text notes that Láeg "focheird bricht comga dara echraid 7 dara chomalta connárbo léir do neoch isin dúnud 7 corbo léir dóib-seom cách issin dúnud" ("cast a protective spell over his horses and over his [foster-brother], so that they were not visible to anyone in the camp, yet everyone in the camp was visible to them").³⁸³

Láeg's relationship with Cú Chulainn is the easiest of all his relationships with his *comaltai* in terms of loyalty decisions. His loyalty is never tested. He remains close enough to Cú Chulainn throughout the text that there is never an opportunity for other loyalties to interfere. Cú Chulainn and Láeg clearly know each other extremely well, and have a great amount of trust in each other. Láeg is constantly with Cú Chulainn, witnessing the majority of his fights and sitting out of the action with Cú Chulainn during periods where Cú Chulainn is wounded.³⁸⁴ The only time Láeg is mentioned as being separate from Cú Chulainn is when he is sent by Cú Chulainn as a messenger, which shows Cú Chulainn trusts him to convey Cú Chulainn's intentions accurately to those on the enemy side – thus entrusting his own self-image to Láeg's care.³⁸⁵ While Cú Chulainn frequently does what others would prefer him not to do, he is willing to alter his planned behaviour on Láeg's advice. For example, at one point Cú Chulainn plans to meet with Medb unarmed, at her assurance that she, too, will come unarmed. However, he heeds Láeg's advice that Medb will behave treacherously during the meeting and he

³⁸³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2208-10. The word *comalta* is translated by O'Rahilly in this instance as 'companion'.

³⁸⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2083-2203, 3985-96.

³⁸⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 1738-56.

chooses to bring a weapon along.³⁸⁶ While Cú Chulainn may receive support from others of his *comalta*, Láeg is the only one allowed to insult Cú Chulainn. When Cú Chulainn is forced to fight Fer Diad, he asks Láeg to urge him on.³⁸⁷ He trusts Láeg to shame him only for his own good – an important gesture given the power of satire in Cú Chulainn’s society, and the ability of satire to inspire even the most beloved of Cú Chulainn’s *comaltai* to betrayal. Láeg is also loyal to Ulster, as are, seemingly, his family members, meaning loyalty to a larger political entity, loyalty to family, and loyalty to foster-family all drive him in the same direction – in opposition to the forces invading Ulster and fighting Cú Chulainn. He benefits in terms of all of his loyalties by aiding Cú Chulainn.

However, while examining Láeg’s position as Cú Chulainn’s *comalta*, it is important to remember that it is not the only role he plays in Cú Chulainn’s life. He is also Cú Chulainn’s charioteer – a position that comes with its own set of expectations. The charioteer is often of lower status than the warrior who rides in the chariot, which inequality would create its own reasons to remain loyal to a warrior who treated one well.³⁸⁸ Nagy discusses the idea that the charioteer, existing in such a close partnership with a warrior, can act as a symbolic twin of the warrior, replacing relationships with other warriors that can become dysfunctional when they are forced to come into conflict.³⁸⁹ All of Cú Chulainn’s other *comaltai* have a struggle with this, with various of

³⁸⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 1918-37.

³⁸⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 3081-82.

³⁸⁸ Alf Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda: Studies on the Mahābhārata*, (Boston: Brill, 2011), p. 468.

³⁸⁹ Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: literary myths of medieval Ireland*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), pp. 223-26.

their loyalty ties conflicting. Láeg's role as charioteer prevents him from ever needing to be a competitor of Cú Chulainn's, as he fills a different role than the warriors.

Láeg also appears as Cú Chulainn's *comalta* in Recension II of the *Táin*.

3.2.3.1.2 Recension II

3.2.3.1.2.1 Fiachu mac Fir Aba

Fiachu mac Fir Aba first appears as one of the men pitching tent near Ailill and Medb as they march on Ulster.³⁹⁰ He appears to be a part of the large group of Ulster exiles fighting for Medb, as he is frequently mentioned in conjunction with them and is called "Fiachu mac Fir Aba di Ultaib" ("Fiachu mac Fir Aba of the Ulstermen") in the text.³⁹¹ He is frequently sent as a messenger to Cú Chulainn by both Medb and Fergus. Medb sends him to parley with Cú Chulainn, while Fergus sends him to provide advice when he feels Cú Chulainn is not acting as a proper warrior should.³⁹² As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, when Cú Chulainn is in danger after being attacked by Calatín Dána, his twenty-seven sons, and his grandson Glas mac Delga, Fiachu betrays Medb and Ailill to rescue him.³⁹³

Of the foster-brothers of Cú Chulainn mentioned in this recension, he is one of the few who is not in the list of friends, foster-brothers, and coevals Cú Chulainn asks Láeg to greet for him in the Connacht camp. As all the foster-brothers who appear in the text and are on this list trained with Scáthach, it is likely Fiachu is not on the list because he did not. Given his description as an Ulsterman, it is likely that Fiachu's foster

³⁹⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 301.

³⁹¹ *TBC-LL*, l. 1388.

³⁹² *TBC-LL*, ll. 1383-1406, 1696-742.

³⁹³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2532-2605.

relationship to Cú Chulainn arises from this connection. He did know Cú Chulainn as a child – he is one of the Ulstermen in Medb’s camp who describe Cú Chulainn’s boyhood deeds.³⁹⁴

Fiachu is described as Cú Chulainn’s *comalta* once. When Fiachu comes to Cú Chulainn’s aid in the fight with Calatín Dána, Cú Chulainn declares, “Is teóir i n-éim, a derbchomalta” (“It is timely aid, my [reliable] foster-brother”).³⁹⁵ This is the point where Fiachu replies that, although the action was convenient for Cú Chulainn, his actions on Cú Chulainn’s behalf, if discovered, would endanger all of the Ulstermen currently in Medb’s camp.³⁹⁶ It is notable that even when acting as a messenger for Medb, Fiachu is bringing positive terms to his *comalta*. He never does anything to injure Cú Chulainn, even when acting to assist Cú Chulainn could injure Fiachu himself.

In the Recension I *Táin*, Fiachu is more explicitly one of the Ulster exiles – when Cú Chulainn attempts to find medical assistance for his friend Cernach, “foídis Cú Chulaind Lóeg úad isin duibdúnad co Fiacha mac Fir Febe do chuindchid legi” (“Cú Chulainn sent Láeg to Fiacha mac Fir Fébe in the encampment of the banished Ulstermen to seek physicians”).³⁹⁷ In other respects, Fiachu’s role in the Recension I version remains the same as that in Recension II. He continues to assist Cú Chulainn, including in the attack by Calatín Dána (here called Gaile Dáne).³⁹⁸ However, Fiachu’s relationship with Cú Chulainn is never explicitly described as that of a *comalta* in Recension I. Instead, Fiachu is described as the son of Conchobor’s daughter.³⁹⁹ Thus,

³⁹⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 921-22.

³⁹⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2578-79 ‘derb’ untranslated in O’Rahilly.

³⁹⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2579-83.

³⁹⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 3176-78.

³⁹⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 2547-65.

³⁹⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 143-44.

he is still related to Cú Chulainn. It may be that he is still expected to be recognized as Cú Chulainn's *comalta* – the text does not say anything that would prevent the possibility, and many of Cú Chulainn's Ulster relations, such as Conall Cernach, are usually considered foster-kin to him. However, the blood relationship through Conchobor is prioritized.

In Recension II, the emotions of both *comaltai* during Fiachu's rescue of Cú Chulainn are more apparent than in Recension I. The text declares that “táinic a ell chondailbi fair” (“he was filled with [affection for kindred]”).⁴⁰⁰ In contrast, Recension I does not describe Fiachu's emotional state. It simply describes his actions after he sees the danger Cú Chulainn is in, not how he feels about the action, or why he chose to commit to it.⁴⁰¹ The motivation presented in Recension II, the sense of “alternative loyalty” that Fiachu needs in order to go against Medb and Ailill, is emotional. He does more than fulfil his duty, he cares about the Ulstermen he is fighting.

Cú Chulainn's response is also more detailed and emotional than in Recension I. He has a moment of weakness after being rescued where all he can do is sigh wearily and get his breath back after his face was ground into the gravel of the ford. It is only after this moment of weakness that he sees who saved him and identifies him aloud as his *comalta*, saying, “Is teóir i n-éim, a derbchomalta” (“It is timely aid, my [reliable] foster-brother”).⁴⁰² The entire scene is emotionally charged, and revolves around the emotions the two *comaltai* feel towards each other. This fits with the change in how Fiachu is described. He is never mentioned as Conchobor's grandson in Recension II,

⁴⁰⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2572-73. Translated as ‘emotion’ by O’Rahilly.

⁴⁰¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2547-65.

⁴⁰² *TBC-LL*, ll. 2578-79. ‘derb’ untranslated in O’Rahilly.

only Cú Chulainn's *comalta*. The two are described in relation to each other, not in relation to anyone external.

3.2.3.1.2.2 Láeg mac Ríangabra

Láeg mac Ríangabra's role in the text is the same as that in Recension I – a loyal charioteer and faithful messenger for Cú Chulainn. However, Recension II does provide a few more clues about Láeg's potential background. During Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds, Conchobor gives the boy Conchobor's own chariot, as no other chariot is strong enough to support him. Along with the chariot, Conchobor allows the use of his charioteer, Ibar mac Ríangabra – seemingly a brother of Láeg.⁴⁰³ Hildebeitel has noted that Láeg's two brothers appear as charioteers for the men of Ulster in additional Ulster Cycle material,⁴⁰⁴ perhaps indicating a family affinity for the job and seemingly situating his family firmly in Ulster.

There is only one occasion where Láeg is referred to as Cú Chulainn's *comalta*, in a sentence that very nearly mirrors Láeg's description in Recension I. In this instance, Láeg “focheird bricht comga tara echraid 7 tara chomalta connárbo léir do neoch issin dúnud íat 7 corbo léir dóib-sium cách issin dúnud sin” (“cast a spell of protection over his horses and over his [foster-brother] so that they were not visible to anyone in the camp, yet everyone in the camp was visible to them”).⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 964-77.

⁴⁰⁴ Hildebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda*, p. 468.

⁴⁰⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2224-26. The word *comalta* is translated by O'Rahilly in this instance as 'companion'.

Láeg's loyalty decisions remain the most straightforward of Cú Chulainn's *comaltai*, as they do not change between versions. His reasons for making these decisions are also the same, as are the reactions of those around him.

3.2.3.1.2.3 Conall Cernach

Conall Cernach is barely present in Recension II of the *Táin*. He appears in one of Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds as the warrior guarding the border of Ulster, and is included in the call to muster people for the final battle towards the end of the tale.⁴⁰⁶ However, his performance in that final battle is not detailed.

Conall is also never directly referred to as Cú Chulainn's *comalta*. However, there is one section that implies that the compilers of the text were aware of the tradition in which Conall was Cú Chulainn's *comalta*, and that he is considered to be such by the narration. When Cú Chulainn has just killed Fer Diad, he laments his death and declares that it is too bad for Fer Diad that he did not consult either Láeg, Fergus, or Conall before attempting to battle Cú Chulainn.⁴⁰⁷ While all three of these figures are traditionally quite close to Cú Chulainn, this hardly proves Conall is considered *comalta* to Cú Chulainn, particularly given the inclusion of Fergus. However, the phrasing for Fer Diad's lack of assistance from Láeg and Conall is different from that of the phrasing for Fergus. With both Láeg and Conall, Cú Chulainn says that it is sad Fer Diad did not receive their advice "ar comaltais" ("about our [foster-brotherhood]"),⁴⁰⁸ while this is missing from Fergus's section. The lack of this phrase in the section describing Fergus,

⁴⁰⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1003-05, 4076.

⁴⁰⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3419-23.

⁴⁰⁸ *TBC-I*, l. 3419-23. Translated as "about our comradeship" by O'Rahilly.

who is certainly not a foster-brother of Cú Chulainn, combined with its addition in the description of Láeg, who is described as *comalta* to Cú Chulainn, along with the ambiguity about whether “comaltais” describes Cú Chulainn’s *comalta* relationship with Fer Diad, or with Láeg and Conall, suggests that Conall is meant to be perceived as *comalta* to Cú Chulainn.

This could perhaps be considered different than Cú Chulainn’s relationship to Conall in Recension I, where Conall describes Cú Chulainn as “*dalta dún*” (“a fosterling of ours”).⁴⁰⁹ However, while it is unclear from the context whether he means that Cú Chulainn is his own fosterling or a fosterling of the Ulstermen in general, I believe that this passage can be best interpreted through the use of O’Donnell’s work and is not contradicting a *comalta* connection between Cú Chulainn and Conall. O’Donnell has gathered together a number of instances in which *comaltai* begin to refer to a foster-sibling by *dalta*. His examination of the literature in which this happens suggests that this switch in terminology generally occurs when a *comalta* is in a position of feeling responsible for his foster-sibling.⁴¹⁰ One of his examples is another featuring Conall, where Emer refers to Conall avenging his *dalta* after Cú Chulainn’s death. O’Donnell states that the change in terminology “arises from Conall taking responsibility for his dead foster brother. In all these examples power is not the only focus, the power comes with a set of duties and responsibilities that the ‘foster father’ has to discharge.”⁴¹¹ This idea of Conall feeling responsible for Cú Chulainn would also apply in the context of the original quote from the *Táin*, where Conall is telling Medb and Ailill about Cú Chulainn’s

⁴⁰⁹ *TBC-I*, l. 543.

⁴¹⁰ O’Donnell, *Fosterage in Medieval Ireland*, pp. 111-12.

⁴¹¹ *Id.*, p. 112.

childhood deeds, uniting with the other Ulster exiles in defence of Cú Chulainn's honour. However, Cú Chulainn's *comalta* connection to Conall is not directly stated in Recension I of the *Táin*, despite Conall's greater presence in that version of the story.

Conall Cernach only appears in flashbacks in Recension II, where he is loyal to Ulster, shown guarding the border.

3.2.3.2 Cú Chulainn's Foster-brothers from outwith Ulster

3.2.3.2.1 Recension I

3.2.3.2.1.1 Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend

Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend first enters the story when Cú Chulainn sends Láeg to ask Lugaid mac Nóis who will be the next to fight Cú Chulainn at the ford. Lugaid responds that the next warrior will be Fer Báeth, who has succumbed to Medb's bribery and cajolery.⁴¹² Fer Báeth is seemingly from Connacht or at least an area directly controlled by Medb, as when she is persuading him she offers him "rígi a cheniúil" ("control over his own people") as one of her incentives, along with marriage to her daughter Findabair.⁴¹³ Unless he was her subordinate, it would not make sense that Medb would have the power to do this. Fer Báeth agrees to fight against Cú Chulainn and goes the same night to renounce his relationship with Cú Chulainn.⁴¹⁴ In a fit of anger, Cú Chulainn hurls a holly shoot at him and kills him.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹² *TBC-I*, ll. 1745-47.

⁴¹³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1746-47.

⁴¹⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 1770-73.

⁴¹⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 1780-82.

Fer Báeth is described twice as Cú Chulainn's *comalta* – once by himself and once by Cú Chulainn.⁴¹⁶ The first description comes when Fer Báeth responds to Medb's persuasions – he declares that “Comalta 7 fer | bithchotaig dam Cú Chulaind. Ragat-sa ar apa ara chend i mbárach co topachtur a chend de” (“Cú Chulainn is my foster-brother and bound to me by solemn covenant. Nevertheless I shall go and oppose him tomorrow and cut off his head”).⁴¹⁷ This description of their tie suggests that there is some form of legal arrangement that binds the two, whether this is descriptive of their status as *comalta* or something beyond this. However, Fer Báeth's quick acquiescence to the idea of killing Cú Chulainn does not seem to indicate a great deal of affection within the relationship, reinforcing the idea that betrayal in the *Táin* does not have to violate a personally significant relationship, but a publicly acknowledged relationship.

Láeg provides further details about their relationship when he explains that the fact both men were trained by the same warrior woman, Scáthach, is a key component in Ailill and Medb's reasoning when they send Fer Báeth against Cú Chulainn.⁴¹⁸ They feel this will give Fer Báeth the martial skill he needs to defeat Cú Chulainn, since if Cú Chulainn is such a superlative warrior, another person who trained in the same place would ideally know everything he knows and be able to counter his manoeuvres. Cú Chulainn seems to agree with this assessment, declaring, “Olc dia sin [...] nícon beó-sa i mbethaid di sudiu. Dá chomaís sind, dá chomsolam, dá chutrummae, co comairsem”

⁴¹⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 1757-59, 1772-73.

⁴¹⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1757-59.

⁴¹⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 1750-53.

(“It is an evil day [...] shall not survive this encounter. We two are of equal age, of equal swiftness and of equal weight”).⁴¹⁹

In the second description of the relationship as a *comalta* relationship, “[a]ttaich Cú Chulaind friss a chomaltus & a mummi díb línaib Scáthaig” “Cú Chulainn adjured him by his foster-brotherhood and by their common foster-mother Scáthach” but Fer Báeth persists with his insistence on fighting Cú Chulainn.⁴²⁰

As a *comalta* who seems one of the least attached to Cú Chulainn, Fer Báeth does not need much provocation to turn him against Cú Chulainn. His conflicting loyalties do not need to be strong for them to be stronger than the connection he feels to his *comalta*. He is won over by Medb’s bribes, in part due to his seeming position as a Connachtman, which gives Medb control of his people and the ability to offer the relinquishment of this control to Fer Báeth should he do as she desires.

Fer Báeth also appears as Cú Chulainn’s *comalta* in Recension II of the *Táin*.

3.2.3.2.1.2 Fer Diad mac Damáin

Fer Diad mac Damáin is mentioned twice before his first introduction into the text – the only foster-brother to receive such foreshadowing. The first mention is after the appearance of the deadly warrior Cú Ruí mac Dáire.⁴²¹ The second mention is to inform the audience that Mand Muresci, the son of Dáire, is the brother of Fer Diad’s father.⁴²² Mand’s death at Cú Chulainn’s hands provides a potential motivation for Fer Diad’s later

⁴¹⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1765-67.

⁴²⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 1772-73.

⁴²¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1624-25.

⁴²² *TBC-I*, ll. 2524-26.

eventual acquiescence to Medb's request that he fight Cú Chulainn.⁴²³ The number of times Fer Diad is mentioned prior to his first appearance emphasizes his importance in the text and in Cú Chulainn's life.

The third mention of Fer Diad – and his introduction into the text – is when Medb and Ailill's forces debate whom they should next send to attempt Cú Chulainn's defeat. As mentioned in Chapter Two, they decide upon Fer Diad. Fer Diad, like Fer Báeth, is selected to fight Cú Chulainn as he is assumed to have a similar skill set to his *comalta*.⁴²⁴ However, unlike Fer Báeth's nearly instant acceptance that he should kill Cú Chulainn, Fer Diad at first refuses to come with the messengers sent to bring him to Medb. He resists until Medb threatens to shame him if he does not come before her, as has been previously established.⁴²⁵ He is plied with alcohol and promised a huge array of rewards if he manages to kill Cú Chulainn, but refuses until Medb lies and says that Cú Chulainn has said Fer Diad would die if the two ever fought.⁴²⁶ Seemingly he is from Connacht, as Medb asks him “Cid córo dó-som sochur Ulad do dénam ar apa a máthar díb indás dait-siu sochar chóicid Connacht, dáig at mac ríg Connacht adcaémnacair?” (“So is it any more fitting for him to work for Ulster's weal since his mother was of Ulster, than for you to seek the good of Connacht, for you are the son of a Connacht king?”).⁴²⁷ After he agrees to the battle, Fer Diad then goes to the ford to fight Cú Chulainn. The battle between the two is extensive, but eventually Fer Diad is killed. Cú Chulainn uses the *ga bulga* on him and he has no defence against it.⁴²⁸ This is the second time Cú

⁴²³ Wong, 'Combat between Fosterbrothers', pp. 129-30.

⁴²⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2568-76.

⁴²⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 2577-82.

⁴²⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 2582-605, 2606-14.

⁴²⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 2617-19.

⁴²⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 3095-100.

Chulainn uses the weapon in the story, and the only other time after Lóch's death that the *ga bulga* is used.

In Recension I of the *Táin*, Fer Diad is referred to as Cú Chulainn's *comalta* five times.⁴²⁹ When considering the next worthy competitor who should fight Cú Chulainn, Medb and Ailill's forces:

[a]trubartadar uili corb é in Conganchesach a hlrrus Domnand, in feidm nach fuilingther 7 in bairindlecc brátha, a derbchomalta dil díchra fodeisin. Ní baí ic Coin C[h]ulaind cles ná beth aice acht mad cles in gaí bulgai nammá, 7 cid indar leó-som baí aici-seom a sechna 7 a imdegail fair, dáig cnes congnaidhi imbi, noc[h]onisgébdís airm ná ilfáebair (all declared that it was the horn-skinned man from Irrus Domnann, the one whose attack cannot be endured, the battle-stone of doom, Cú Chulainn's own dear foster-brother. Cú Chulainn possessed no feat that Fer Diad had not, except only the feat of the *gáe bulga*. And they thought that Fer Diad could avoid even that and protect himself from it, for he had a horn-skin which weapons and swords could not pierce).⁴³⁰

Even in this first introduction, Fer Diad is linked to Cú Chulainn by the amount of training they have both received, hinting at a common teacher.

The next use of the term *comalta* is by Fer Diad, who when offered rewards to fight says “Is fír ón [...] Isat móra, 7 cidat móra chena, a Medb, is acot-so fodeisin fáicfidther mad dula dam-sa i n-aigid mo chomalta do chomrac” (“That is true [...] [t]hey are indeed great. But great though they be, Medb, you will keep them yourself if I am to

⁴²⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 2569-76, 2603-05, 2688-96, 2740-48, 3110-13.

⁴³⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 2569-76.

go and fight with my foster-brother”).⁴³¹ This offers an indication of the importance of the *comalta* bond – one expectation is that *comaltai* will not fight one another, even for rewards.

After this, the term is used twice by Fergus. These examples offer an interesting contrast to Cú Chulainn’s earlier fight against Fer Báeth. In the earlier conflict, Cú Chulainn was worried that Fer Báeth would defeat him. Here, Fergus is worried Fer Diad will defeat Cú Chulainn, and engages in a conversation with his men about his fears:

“Trúag lim-sa in gním dogníther isin maidin sea imbáarach,” or Fergus. “Cia gním and sin?” for lucht na pupla. “Mo degdaltán Cú Chulaind do marbad.” “Maith aile, cia nadmaídenn ón?” “Ní anse. A chomalta dil díchra fodeisin .i. Fer Diadh mac Damáin. Cid ná berid mo bendachtain,” ar Fergus, “7 táet nech úaib co robud 7 co n-airchisecht do Choin Chulaind dus in fácbad in n-áth isin maitin imbáarach?”

(“Woe is me for the deed that will be done tomorrow morning!” “What deed is that?” asked those in the tent. “The killing of my noble foster-son, Cú Chulainn.” “Why, who makes such a boast?” “His own dear foster-brother, Fer Diad mac Damáin. Why do ye not take my blessing and one of you go with a friendly warning to Cú Chulainn in the hope that he might not come to the ford tomorrow morning?”)⁴³²

Fergus is worried enough that he is even willing to suggest Cú Chulainn not fight, which is a sure way to incur scorn and shaming. However, Cú Chulainn himself does

⁴³¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 2603-05.

⁴³² *TBC-I*, ll. 2688-96.

not react, as he did to news of Fer Báeth's intentions, with any doubt in his own abilities. Unlike with Fer Báeth, Cú Chulainn does not express fear, but regret based on love. Explaining who will come to fight Cú Chulainn next, Fergus says, "Do chomalta fadéin .i. Fear Diad mac Damáin" ("It is your own foster-brother, Fer Diad mac Damáin") to which Cú Chulainn replies, "Dar ar mbréithir ám nochon ina dáil is dech lend no ragmais [...] 7 nochon ara omun c[h]ena acht ar mét a gráda lind" ("I vow that he is not the one we would prefer to meet [...] not through fear of him indeed, but rather because of our great love for him").⁴³³ After Cú Chulainn has killed Fer Diad, he uses a noun related to the word *comalta*, *comaltas*, to once more describe their relationship, as he mourns his fallen *comalta*. He exclaims, "Ar comaltus cóem / a airer na súl" ("Our [foster-brotherhood] was fair, O delight of my eyes!").⁴³⁴ This speech, and in fact the entirety of Cú Chulainn's reaction after Fer Diad's death, is far more extreme than his behaviour after Fer Báeth's death, when Cú Chulainn was glad of his death. During his mourning, Cú Chulainn reveals another detail about their relationship, that they were both trained with the warrior Scáthach, exclaiming, "Dá mbámar ic Scáthaich / a llos gaiscidh gnáthaig / is amaráen imríaghmais / imtíaghmais cach fích" ("When we were with Scáthach, by dint of our wanted valour we would fare forth together and traverse every land").⁴³⁵ This difference in the level of reaction between Fer Diad and Fer Báeth's deaths demonstrates that there can be a distinct difference in emotional range in *comalta* relationships, even those formed in the same context.

⁴³³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2743-46.

⁴³⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 3110-11. Originally translated by O'Rahilly as 'friendship'.

⁴³⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 3057-61.

Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn seem to have the strongest emotional tie of any of the *comaltai* – it takes the most effort to persuade him to be disloyal to his *comalta*. As Wong notes, Medb has Cú Chulainn kill Fer Diad’s uncle Mand earlier in the *Táin*, providing one conflict in loyalties.⁴³⁶ Fer Diad is also explicitly said to be a Connachtman, giving Medb a great deal of power over him. With natal family and larger political affiliations both weighing against loyalty to one *comalta*, even Fer Diad’s love for Cú Chulainn and the advantages he gains from their strong relationship do not benefit him more than family and loyalty to a larger political body. Due to his strong emotional ties to Cú Chulainn, Fer Diad require more stacked pressures than figures such as Lóch Fer Báeth to choose disloyalty to Cú Chulainn.

Fer Diad also appears as Cú Chulainn’s *comalta* in Recension II of the *Táin*.

3.2.3.2.1.3 Lóch Mór mac Mo Febis

The first mention of Lóch Mór mac Mo Febis describes how Ailill and Medb summon him in order to attempt to bribe him.⁴³⁷ Nothing in this list of bribes offers any additional information about Lóch or his relationship to Medb and Ailill. However, he refuses their bribes, as he feels Cú Chulainn is too young to be a worthy opponent, so they persuade his brother, Long, to fight Cú Chulainn. Long dies, and Lóch agrees to fight Cú Chulainn, although only after Cú Chulainn pretends he has grown a beard, making Lóch believe he is old enough to be worthy of the fight.⁴³⁸ The two battle – a process complicated by the presence of the Mórrígan, who transforms into the shapes

⁴³⁶ Wong, ‘Combat between Fosterbrothers’, pp. 129-30.

⁴³⁷ *TBC-I*, l. 1875.

⁴³⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 1875-909.

of many animals and assists Lóch.⁴³⁹ Finally, Cú Chulainn is victorious, but only through the use of his *ga bulga* – the first use of it in the text, although it is previously foreshadowed as one of Cú Chulainn’s most dangerous abilities.⁴⁴⁰ Cú Chulainn agrees to honour Lóch’s final request and retreats one step from him as Lóch lies dying.⁴⁴¹

Unlike Cú Chulainn’s other foster-brothers, the term *comalta* is never used to describe Lóch. Rather, the term *óenmummi* is used to establish that Lóch and Cú Chulainn were fostered by the same woman. This foster-mother is also said to have taught both of them the arts of war, which makes it likely that Scáthach is meant, but Scáthach is never directly named. The relationship between Lóch and Cú Chulainn is not codified by either of the two. Rather, it is mentioned in one brief line by Medb, who declares:

“Mór in cutbiud dait [...] in fer ro marb do bráthair do bith oc díthugud ar slóig cen techt do chomrac fris, ar is derb lind ní déma siriti bras birda na letheti út fri bruth 7 feirg niad do let[h]eti-siu, 7 dano is óenmummi forcetail conrotacht dán dúib” (“It is a great shame for you [...] that the man who killed your brother should be destroying our army and that you do not go to do battle with him. For we are sure that a sharp, boastful lad like yonder fellow will not stand out against the rage and fury of such as you, and anyway it was the same foster-mother and teacher who taught you both the arts of war”).⁴⁴²

The relationship between the two is mentioned much later in the episode than in either of the other two adversarial encounters with *comaltai*, where the relationship was

⁴³⁹ *TBC-I*, II. 1975-2027.

⁴⁴⁰ *TBC-I*, II. 89-92.

⁴⁴¹ *TBC-I*, II. 2028-30.

⁴⁴² *TBC-I*, I. 1971-74.

dwelt upon and described as a main reason the fight should not occur. No one ever attempts to tell Lóch he should not fight Cú Chulainn because they are *comaltai*. In fact, Cú Chulainn goes out of his way to change his appearance so that Lóch will fight him, which is much different than his behaviour with either Fer Báeth or Fer Diad, where he wished not to fight them and appealed to their shared time together. Cú Chulainn seems to think Lóch a worthy opponent, but does not demonstrate the same sense that he is emotionally affected – either by sadness or anger – that he displays upon killing Fer Diad and Fer Báeth.

There are a few potential reasons for this difference. One reason would be if Lóch indeed trained with Scáthach, but at a different time than Cú Chulainn. Thus, they would share the same foster-mother and training, but not any of the affection or sworn bonds that should prevent the two fighting later. This would support O'Donnell's assertion that "[a]fter the formal education is over, it is the friendship that was created that forms the basis of the ongoing foster-brother relationship."⁴⁴³ Another, perhaps simpler, answer is that Lóch may not have generally been considered a *comalta* of Cú Chulainn, and that the line giving them their shared training was added only to explain why a particularly powerful opponent of Cú Chulainn was such a threat.

This second reason seems to receive support from the Recension II version of the *Táin*, in which Lóch appears in a similar capacity. As in the Recension I version, he is summoned to fight Cú Chulainn but refuses until after Cú Chulainn has killed his brother.⁴⁴⁴ However, his relationship with Cú Chulainn is never described as that of a foster-brother in Recension II of the *Táin*. As there is a list of Cú Chulainn's *comaltai*

⁴⁴³ O'Donnell, *Affect of Fosterage*, p. 144.

⁴⁴⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1962-83.

who trained together with him under Scáthach in this version of the tale, the lack of description of Lóch as a *comalta* anywhere in the text points to him not being considered to have such a relationship with Cú Chulainn in Recension II, rather than it being assumed the audience would simply know about the relationship and relationship descriptors being omitted for this reason.

Lóch and Cú Chulainn do not seem to have a particularly emotional tie, although as Wong notes, there is respect in their relationship.⁴⁴⁵ Thus, Lóch needs somewhat more cajoling before he is persuaded to fight Cú Chulainn. However, when Cú Chulainn kills Lóch's brother, this is the conflicting loyalty tie that it takes to persuade Lóch to fight his *comalta*. He needs to avenge his brother.

3.2.3.2.2 Recension II

3.2.3.2.2.1 Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend

Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend first appears in the list of Cú Chulainn's *comaltai* who trained with Scáthach. This is the only way to determine he did train with Scáthach, as she is never mentioned in connection with him, unlike in Recension I. His role is largely the same in Recension II as Recension I. He agrees to fight Cú Chulainn due to Medb's cajolery and is subsequently killed by him.⁴⁴⁶ However, it is never directly stated what Medb offers Fer Báeth, meaning that this recension does not provide information about Fer Báeth's connection to Connacht. Medb could still have control over his people, but it is not stated. As established previously, Cú Chulainn's murder of Fer Báeth is much less direct. Rather than becoming angered and throwing a shoot of holly at Fer Báeth in

⁴⁴⁵ Wong, 'Combat between Fosterbrothers', p. 128.

⁴⁴⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1868-905.

order to hurt him, Cú Chulainn becomes angry and throws a shoot of holly over his shoulder, not caring if it hits him.⁴⁴⁷ This changes the dynamic between the two characters, removing a great deal of potential blame from Cú Chulainn.

After the list, Fer Báeth is described as Cú Chulainn's *comalta* on three occasions –by Lugaid mac Nóis, Láeg, Cú Chulainn, and the narrative.⁴⁴⁸ When Lugaid is letting Láeg know Fer Báeth will come to fight Cú Chulainn, he declares, “Mallach[t] a chommaind 7 a chomaltais 7 a charatraid 7 a chardessa fair, a derbchomalta díless dúthaig fadessin .i. Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend” (“The curse of his intimacy [and his foster-brotherhood] and familiarity and friendship on him (who comes)! It is his very own foster-brother, Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend”).⁴⁴⁹ The vehemence of his declaration indicates that Fer Báeth's decision to fight his *comalta* is considered unusual and monstrous – a betrayal. This version of the tale does not provide Fer Báeth with the chance to defend his reasoning, or even explain what he is thinking, so Lugaid's interpretation is the one with which the reader is left.

When Láeg arrives to deliver this information to Cú Chulainn, Cú Chulainn detects that Láeg is saddened by the news he has acquired, and ascertains from this that “[i]s nech trá écin dom chomaltaib dotháet dom fúapairt” (“[i]t means that one of my foster-brothers comes to attack me”),⁴⁵⁰ as Cú Chulainn dislikes fighting against warriors whom he has trained with more than fighting against anyone else. To this, Láeg responds, “Mallacht a chommaind & a chomaltais & a charatraid & a chardessa fair, do chomalta díles dúthaig fadessin .i. Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend” (“The curse of his intimacy

⁴⁴⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1899-901.

⁴⁴⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1874-76, 1882-97, 1894-97.

⁴⁴⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1874-76. “And his foster-brotherhood” not translated in O’Rahilly’s translation.

⁴⁵⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1884-85.

and brotherhood, of his familiarity and friendship be upon him! It is your very own foster-brother, Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend”).⁴⁵¹ Once again, Fer Báeth is presented in an extremely negative light, while Cú Chulainn’s thoughts are left unsaid. While he could dislike fighting those who have the same training as he does because he feels it to be a perversion of the *comalta* bond, it is equally likely that this is the closest the text comes to Cú Chulainn’s fear of defeat by someone trained alongside him, a fear expressed much more directly in Recension I.

After Fer Báeth comes to relinquish his friendship, “conattecht Cú Chulaind in caratrad 7 in commund 7 in comaltus friss” (“Cú Chulainn adjured him by their friendship and intimacy and brotherhood”) but Fer Báeth refuses to be persuaded.⁴⁵²

Compared with the Fer Báeth in Recension I, Recension II Fer Báeth remains mysterious. Since he never speaks for himself about his motivations, and his speech with Medb and Ailill is only indirectly reported, it is hard to say what exactly he feels his priorities are. Nor is his status as a Connachtman, or otherwise, ever mentioned in this version. Rather, all that is mentioned is that he is plied with alcohol by Medb’s daughter, with the implication that he is promised much during this period.⁴⁵³ What exactly he is offered is never detailed. This makes it seem as though Fer Báeth’s only conflicting loyalty to his relationship with Cú Chulainn is greed. Certainly the quickness of his decision to fight Cú Chulainn does hint at a lack of emotional connection between the two. Yet the main focus is less on why Fer Báeth makes the choice he does and more on the emotional effects on Cú Chulainn. It is initially stated that “Ar ba messu lais-sium

⁴⁵¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1887-89.

⁴⁵² *TBC-LL*, ll. 1895-96.

⁴⁵³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1881-93.

fer a chomgascid andá láech anail” (“Cú Chulainn disliked more that a warrior of the same training as himself should come to him rather than some other warrior”).⁴⁵⁴ Then, when he faces Fer Báeth, he appeals to him by their relationship, an appeal which Fer Báeth rejects. While Cú Chulainn makes a similar appeal in Recension I, the lack of other details in Recension II provides more emphasis on Cú Chulainn’s attempt to salvage the relationship. After he is rejected, the text focuses on Cú Chulainn’s anger, which causes him to kill his *comalta*.⁴⁵⁵ Yet this interaction, too, hints at a weakness of the connection between the two, especially when compared with Cú Chulainn’s emotional expression towards other *comaltai*. As in other of Cú Chulainn’s *comalta* relationships, the Recension II relationship between Cú Chulainn and Fer Báeth is described without reference to others. Unlike in Recension I, Scáthach is never directly described as his foster-mother – the only way Fer Báeth is connected to her is in the list. Rather, the focus is completely on how Fer Báeth relates to Cú Chulainn.

3.2.3.2.2.2 Fer Diad mac Damáin

Fer Diad mac Damáin first appears in the list of Cú Chulainn’s *comaltai* who trained with Scáthach. His next mention is when the men of Ireland attempt to determine whom they should send to fight next against Cú Chulainn.⁴⁵⁶ Fer Diad fulfills a similar role in Recension II to that played in Recension I – he is a *comalta* of Cú Chulainn from during his time with Scáthach and he is extremely reluctant to fight Cú Chulainn. He eventually agrees to fight, proceeds to do so, and is killed.⁴⁵⁷ However,

⁴⁵⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1885-86.

⁴⁵⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1894-905.

⁴⁵⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2609-10.

⁴⁵⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2607-3596.

his reasons for fighting are much different. As previously discussed, while in Recension I he will not fight until he believes Cú Chulainn has spoken badly about him behind his back, in Recension II, Fer Diad gives in to Medb's bribery and agrees to fight in exchange for land, Findabair, and other rewards.⁴⁵⁸ Although it is not as directly stated, it is a logical assumption that Fer Diad is still the son of a Connachtman, as one of Medb's offers to him is freedom "gan chain [gan chobach]" ("from tax and tribute").⁴⁵⁹ Were he not her subject, he would not need to provide her with taxes at all. In Recension II, Fer Diad also does not have an uncle whom Cú Chulainn kills. In fact, the only implied family member mentioned in the text is Fer Det mac Damáin.

Out of all of Cú Chulainn's *comaltaí*, Fer Diad has the most mentions of their relationship – he is referred to in terms of this relationship nine times, along with numerous references to a shared foster-mother in Scáthach.⁴⁶⁰ When he is first approached about fighting Cú Chulainn, Fer Diad refuses absolutely, as he knows they want him to fight "re charait, re chocle 7 re chomalta, re Coin Culaind mac Sualtaim" ("with his friend and companion and foster-brother, Cú Chulainn mac Sualtaim").⁴⁶¹ As in Recension I, the *comalta* relationship is important and should not be broken.

After Fer Diad accepts the challenge, Fergus proceeds to tell Cú Chulainn that his next opponent is "[d]o chara féin 7 do chocle 7 do chomalta, t'fer comchliss 7 comgascid 7 comgníma, Fer Diad mac Damáin meic Dáire, in mílid mórchalma d'feraib Domnand" ("[y]our own friend and companion and foster-brother, the man who is your equal in feats of arms and prowess and great deeds, Fer Diad mac Damáin meic Dáire,

⁴⁵⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2617-2720.

⁴⁵⁹ *TBC-LL*, l. 2632.

⁴⁶⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2617-21, 2726-30, 3080-86, 3187-91, 3203-06, 3207-10, 3419-20, 3422-23, 3478-85.

⁴⁶¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2620-21.

the brave warrior of Fir Domnand”).⁴⁶² Cú Chulainn expresses dismay at this, saying, “ní 'na dáil dúthracmar ar cara do thuidecht” (“it is not to encounter him we wish any friend of ours to come”).⁴⁶³ While in Recension I Cú Chulainn did not wish to fight Fer Diad because of his love for him, in Recension II it seems to be apprehension over Fer Diad’s skill in battle that Cú Chulainn feels first.

The majority of other uses of the term *comalta* occur when Cú Chulainn attempts to persuade his friend not to fight and during the battle for control of the narrative between Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad that is mentioned in Chapter Two. For example, Cú Chulainn declares, “Tú fodera a fail de, / a meic Damain meic Dáire, / tiachtain ar comairle mná / d'imchlaibed rit chomalta” (“You are the cause of all that happens, O son of Damán mac Dáire, that you should come at woman’s behest to cross swords with your foster-brother).⁴⁶⁴ The killing of *comaltai* seems to be considered a very negative thing, for which Cú Chulainn is unwilling to accept responsibility should he be the victor.

In one of Fer Diad’s attempts at putting the narrative blame for the betrayal act on Medb and Ailill, he says, “Dá scaraind gan troit is tú, / gidar comaltai, a cháemChú, / bud olc mo briathar is mo blad / ic Ailill is ac Meidb Chrúachan” (“Should I part from you without a fight, O gentle hound, though we are foster-brothers, my word and my name would be held in ill esteem by Ailill and Medb of Crúachu”).⁴⁶⁵ The term also occurs in a moment where Fer Diad directly absolves Cú Chulainn of any blame, stating, “A Chú Chulaind, tólaib gal, / ní tú acht Medb rar marnestar” (“O Cú Chulainn—many deeds of

⁴⁶² *TBC-LL*, ll. 2727-29.

⁴⁶³ *TBC-LL*, l. 2730.

⁴⁶⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3203-06.

⁴⁶⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3207-10.

valour—not you but Medb betrayed us”).⁴⁶⁶ The word *comalta* is then repeated in Cú Chulainn’s assumption of the same belief in Medb and Ailill’s guilt after Fer Diad’s death, when he says, “[I]s mór in brath 7 in trécun dabertatar fir Hérend fort do thabairt do chomlund 7 do chomruc” (“[G]reatly did the men of Ireland betray and abandon you when they brought you to fight and do combat with me”).⁴⁶⁷ He also mourns his friend in fosterage terms, exclaiming that “Ar comaltus caín / radarc súla saír” (“Our true [foster-brotherhood] was a delight for the eye of a nobleman”).⁴⁶⁸ When it goes well, the *comalta* relationship is beautiful, but the relationship has been betrayed and destroyed.

The text actually provides the list of promises Medb makes Fer Diad in order to persuade him, one of which is freedom from taxes. Thus, one conflicting loyalty to his relationship with Cú Chulainn could still be his identity as a Connachtman. However, the main force that is blamed for pushing Fer Diad to accept Medb’s offer is alcohol. When he first arrives at Medb’s tent, it is said that “á daríacht, ra fíadaiged 7 ra fritháled é & ra dáled lind soóla sochaín somesc fair gurbo mesc medarchaín é” (“he was greeted with honour and served, and pleasant-tasting, intoxicating liquor was poured out for him until he was intoxicated and merry”).⁴⁶⁹ Later, it is only after he sleeps and is no longer drunk that Fer Diad is able to recognize that his decision was a bad one.⁴⁷⁰ Beyond drunkenness and general flattery, Fer Diad has few competing loyalties mentioned in the text. Rather than focusing on the external competing loyalties that might persuade Fer Diad to make his decision, the text focuses more on the psychological and physical

⁴⁶⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3215-16.

⁴⁶⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3436-37.

⁴⁶⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3478-79. Translated as ‘comradeship’ by O’Rahilly.

⁴⁶⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2628-29.

⁴⁷⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2798-803.

state to which Fer Diad is brought and how this is the primary factor in his decision. Then, during the section where Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn fight – much longer than in Recension I – there is an emphasis on how each of them feels, and after killing Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn is unable to go on fighting.⁴⁷¹ As with other *comaltai* Cú Chulainn faces in Recension II, the focus is once again less on why Fer Diad made his loyalty decision and more on the ramifications and emotional aftermath of his decision.

3.2.3.2.2.3 Lugaid mac Nóis

Lugaid mac Nóis is first mentioned in the list of Cú Chulainn's *comaltai*, indicating that he is Cú Chulainn's *comalta* from his time with Scáthach. This appears to be borne out by a later section of the tale, where in a description of Cú Chulainn's exploits during his time with Scáthach, Lugaid is mentioned as one of Cú Chulainn's companions in a fight.⁴⁷² He is Cú Chulainn's major source of information within Medb's camp throughout the *Táin*; Cú Chulainn calls him the only man who remains faithful to Cú Chulainn on the hosting.⁴⁷³ In the text, Lugaid assists Cú Chulainn consistently, letting Cú Chulainn know which warriors are coming to fight him.⁴⁷⁴ As mentioned previously, at one point Lugaid is nearly trapped into fighting his *comalta* – Medb sends his brother, Láiríne mac Nóis, to fight Cú Chulainn, knowing that if this brother is killed, Lugaid would be forced to fight Cú Chulainn to avenge his brother's death. However, Lugaid requests that Cú Chulainn not kill his brother and Cú Chulainn obliges.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3375-84.

⁴⁷² *TBC-LL*, ll. 3503-06.

⁴⁷³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1863-66.

⁴⁷⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1868-88, 1906-61.

⁴⁷⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1906-61.

Outside of the list, Lugaid is described twice as Cú Chulainn's *comalta*. Immediately after the list, Cú Chulainn asks Láeg to take a "féin béus dom derbchomalta, do Lugaid mac Nóis" ("special greeting to my foster-brother Lugaid mac Nóis").⁴⁷⁶ Later, after Cú Chulainn has killed Fer Báeth, he sends Láeg to ask Lugaid if Fer Báeth reached Medb and Ailill's camp. When asking, Láeg appeals to Lugaid's fostership with Cú Chulainn, saying, "Dot hagallaimh táncus-[s]a ót c[h]omalta co nn-innisi dam in ráinic Fer Báoth (an longphort)" ("I have come to speak with you on behalf of your fosterbrother that you may tell me if Fer Báeth reached the camp)."⁴⁷⁷ To this, Lugaid replies, "Ráinic ón [...] 7 bendacht arin láim dusfaraill úair torchair marb isin gleand ó chianaibh" ("He did [...] and a blessing on the hand that smote him for he fell dead in the glen a short time ago."⁴⁷⁸ It is interesting that Lugaid, apparently Fer Báeth's foster-brother as well as Cú Chulainn's, approves so wholeheartedly of Cú Chulainn's actions, perhaps because Fer Báeth broke a bond that Lugaid clearly respects. This exchange also occurs just before Lugaid's brother, who is persuaded to fight Cú Chulainn, is mentioned, so bringing up the fact Lugaid is a foster-brother adds textual weight to Lugaid's following appeal to Cú Chulainn to merely maim, not kill, his brother.

Lugaid is mentioned in much the same way in Recension I of the *Táin*. He assists Cú Chulainn and acts as his informant within Medb's camp. Somewhat more biographical information is provided on Lugaid in this version; he is described as a King of Munster.⁴⁷⁹ However, he is never referred to in terms that explicitly indicate he is Cú Chulainn's *comalta*, although there are suggestions this relationship may still be

⁴⁷⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1864-65.

⁴⁷⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1910-12.

⁴⁷⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1912-13.

⁴⁷⁹ *TBC-I*, l. 1818-20.

assumed. When Lugaid tells Láeg that Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend is the next who will fight Cú Chulainn, he calls Fer Báeth the comrade of both Cú Chulainn and Lugaid himself.⁴⁸⁰ This suggests that although their relationship is not as clearly defined, the two still have a history of association that would match with Lugaid having trained with Fer Báeth and Cú Chulainn. This could be an indirect reference to Cú Chulainn and Lugaid's training by Scáthach alongside Fer Báeth, which would make Lugaid Cú Chulainn's *comalta*. Yet when reminding Lugaid of his obligations to Cú Chulainn, Cú Chulainn does not mention the foster-bond. Rather he mentions Lugaid's ties to Ulster, saying, "Bid adas dait, a Lugaid, in chocéli-si fil dait la hUltu dianom tí-sse bríg cach fir" ("If every man's strength is put forth against me, it will be right for you, Lugaid, (to remember) your alliance with the men of Ulster").⁴⁸¹

Many of the loyalties Lugaid is said to have in Recension I are never mentioned in Recension II. He is never mentioned to be a king, or to be from Munster (although there is never any evidence that contradicts this). He is also never said to be an ally of the Ulstermen. Rather, the entirety of his role revolves around Cú Chulainn. He is introduced as Cú Chulainn's closest contact in the Connacht camp – the one *comalta* who remains fully loyal. Throughout the text, his primary role is assisting Cú Chulainn. This is different than Recension I, where Lugaid clearly has motivations and obligations outside of his relationship with Cú Chulainn. For example, when he first meets with Cú Chulainn, it is not to further Cú Chulainn's interests but his own and those of his people. He asks Cú Chulainn for a deal that will allow his own men to go unharmed during Cú

⁴⁸⁰ *TBC-I*, l. 1745-46.

⁴⁸¹ *TBC-I*, l. 1184-85.

Chulainn's devastating attacks on the Connacht camp.⁴⁸² There is a give and take, where Lugaid asks for things from Cú Chulainn while giving him other things that he needs. In the Recension II text, the only thing that Lugaid asks for Cú Chulainn to do is not to kill Lugaid's brother. Even in this, his request is more focused around his relationship with Cú Chulainn than it is in Recension I – he mentions that he will remain loyal to Cú Chulainn even if Cú Chulainn kills his brother, which is something Lugaid never states in Recension I.⁴⁸³ That fact that Lugaid is willing to do so much for Cú Chulainn and hold him above all his other loyalties changes their dynamic enormously, and makes the *comalta* relationship seem much more important than its representation in Recension I.

3.2.3.2.2.4 Fer Báeth mac Báetáin, Lugaid mac Solamaig, Fer Det mac Damáin, and Bress mac Firb

Fer Báeth mac Báetáin is only mentioned in one section after the list of Cú Chulainn's *comalta*. When Cú Chulainn reminisces about his past training with Scáthach, he mentions Fer Báeth as among those who accompanied him on one military adventure.⁴⁸⁴ This Fer Báeth does not appear at all in the present of the *Táin*, only in retrospect.

Lugaid mac Solamaig, Fer Det mac Damáin, and Bress mac Firb are never mentioned again after the list. No more information is provided on them, although Fer Det appears from his name to be Fer Diad's brother.

⁴⁸² *TBC-I*, ll. 1165-92.

⁴⁸³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1906-30.

⁴⁸⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3503-06.

Fer Báeth mac Báetáin appears only in Cú Chulainn's memories of his past, is only ever loyal to Cú Chulainn, fighting alongside him during their training with Scáthach. Although Fer Báeth, along with Lugaid mac Solamaig, Fer Det mac Damáin, and Bress mac Firb, is said to be in Medb's camp, and thus is presumably fighting for her, these men do not appear in the text to the extent where it can be said they have recognizable motivations. Nor are they ever placed in a position where their other loyalties come into conflict with their relationship with Cú Chulainn.

None of these four appear in any capacity in the Recension I version of the text.

3.2.4 Loyalty Decisions

In both recensions, there are some clear expectations of how foster-kin should behave towards one another. Given Cú Chulainn's reactions to all of his foster-kin who decide to fight him, it is obvious that there is the expectation that foster-kin are not supposed to behave in such a manner – such actions are all in the list of betrayal acts established in Chapter Two. Cú Chulainn's indignation that Lugaid is his only supporter in the camp suggests that loyalty is held to be the norm in such a relationship. At the same time, Cú Chulainn is aware that his foster-kin are in the enemy camp, so while direct confrontation is not expected, there is the suggestion that being on opposing sides in a larger conflict is not necessarily a betrayal. And given the differing levels of reaction Cú Chulainn has when different *comaltai* die, a uniform level of affection is not expected between foster-kin – there are obligations in place, but these obligations do not require positive emotions to be present. Betrayal within the foster-kin grouping is consistently determined as a betrayal of the obligations attendant upon an established role, not of personal emotional closeness.

Yet even within the group of foster-kin, Cú Chulainn's family fall into two categories, with their own sets of expectations. There are those Cú Chulainn was fostered with during his childhood in Conchobor's court (Fergus, Fiachu, Láeg and Conall), many of whom are also his maternal blood relatives, and those with whom he trained during his tutelage with Scáthach (those on the list in Recension II, Fer Báeth, Fer Diad, Lugaid, and Lóch). O'Donnell breaks down these two categories in great detail, defining foster-kin relationships as occurring in two types – a nutritive type that is formed through being nursed by the same women when children and an educative type that is formed through being educated together under the same tutor at some point later on in a child's life.⁴⁸⁵ He also notes that "education is of central importance in the fosterage bond" and that this can lead to "some blurring of the line between pupil, nursling, and fosterling."⁴⁸⁶ Therefore, while it is not always clear whether someone addressed as *comalta* is a foster-sibling or a fellow-pupil, given that one component of fosterage was educative it is useful to consider all uses of the term to fall into a wider fosterage bracket and simply understand that fosterage came in different forms.

As O'Donnell states, within the *Táin* the nutritive model does not necessarily apply to Cú Chulainn, as he was raised by his parents and only came to Conchobor's court later on. He was never breastfed by a foster-mother as far as the text describes. However, an early fosterage versus later fosterage model still works very well to describe the loyalty decisions made by the majority of Cú Chulainn's foster-kin in the *Táin*, and particularly to describe the decisions made by his *comaltai*. In other tales in the Ulster Cycle Cú Chulainn is fostered from birth, and the emotional closeness

⁴⁸⁵ O'Donnell, *Affect of Fosterage*, pp. 135-36.

⁴⁸⁶ *Id.*, p. 28.

O'Donnell suggests this nutritive model of fostering can create seems to be present in the *Táin*.

The differing reactions to Cú Chulainn by his *comaltai* – some hostile, some helpful – can largely be broken down along the lines of this division. Those who support Cú Chulainn in the text are primarily those with whom he was raised during his younger formative years. Those who betray Cú Chulainn and fight him are those who trained with Cú Chulainn later in his life under Scáthach's tutelage. Parkes explains that "Irish legends seem to have retained a moral partitioning of differential degrees of adoptive kinship," with early foster ties remaining strong while "remoter ties of foster-kinship" are more easily destroyed "under the strain of alternative loyalties."⁴⁸⁷ This would make particular sense in Cú Chulainn's case, given that he has not only foster-kinship but also consanguine kinship with many members of his early foster-family. However, the presence of certain *comaltai*, such as Lugaid, who break this pattern, as well as the absence of certain *comalta* relationships from Recension I of the *Táin* complicate matters, indicating a piece is missing from the puzzle.

The sociologists Baxter et al. argue that loyalty must always exist in opposition to an act of disloyalty.⁴⁸⁸ There is no loyalty unless a person is choosing one set of priorities (a person, a country, a set of values) over another. In that case, in order to understand a person's loyalty decisions or disloyalty decisions, both the object of disloyalty and the object of loyalty must be identified in order to make sense of the individual's priorities. Elangovan and Shapiro suggest that choosing a set of loyalties is

⁴⁸⁷ Peter Parkes, 'Fosterage, Kinship, and Legend: When Milk Was Thicker than Blood?', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46.3 (2004), 587-615 (pp. 602-03).

⁴⁸⁸ Baxter and others, 'Everyday Loyalties and Betrayals in Personal Relationships', p. 660.

not typically an impulse decision - individuals choose the option that will benefit them most in some way (although what sort of benefit is preferred is clearly an individual decision).⁴⁸⁹ Thus, the information of whether a *comalta* supports or acts against Cú Chulainn represents only one half of each *comalta*'s decisions – their choice of loyalty or lack of it to Cú Chulainn. But what is the other half of each decision? What “alternative loyalties” do each of Cú Chulainn’s family members face? And do these loyalties change depending on which recension is examined?

In Recension I, the divide in differing reactions between named *comaltai* Cú Chulainn knows from Ulster and those he knows from training with Scáthach is absolute. Fer Báeth, Fer Diad, and Lóch – *comaltai* who trained with Scáthach – all fight Cú Chulainn, while Láeg – the lone named *comalta* Cú Chulainn appears to know from Ulster – stays loyal throughout the text. The one member of Cú Chulainn’s foster-family he has known from Ulster who agrees to fight him is Fergus, who has more conflicting loyalty pressures on him than Láeg, as Fergus has joined Medb’s army. This division of Cú Chulainn’s *comaltai* is particularly interesting when the list of *comaltai* in Recension I is contrasted with Recension II. All of Cú Chulainn’s *comaltai* who break this trend in Recension II do not appear in Recension I, while all of the (prominently mentioned) *comaltai* appearing in Recension II who follow this trend do appear in Recension I. Fer Diad, Fer Báeth, and Láeg are all described using foster-brother terminology. In contrast, Lugaid, Conall, and Fiachu are not described as *comaltai* in Recension I – interesting, as Lugaid is the lone *comalta* in Recension I who both trained with Scáthach and remains loyal to Cú Chulainn, while Conall and Fiachu are the only two *comaltai* to

⁴⁸⁹ Elangovan and Shapiro, ‘Betrayal of Trust’, pp. 547-66.

know Cú Chulainn from Ulster and stay loyal to him while still siding with Medb and Ailill (at least for part of the Recension I *Táin* in the case of Conall). While it could simply be coincidental that all of the *comaltai* whose existence creates a more complex dynamic are not identified as *comaltai* in Recension I, despite appearing in nearly identical roles to Recension II, the fact that there are hints that this relationship could still exist suggests that this erasure was deliberate. The language that is used about Fiachu and Lugaid is particularly illuminating in suggesting why this may have occurred. Lugaid is described as an ally of the Ulstermen, while Fiachu is described as Conchobor's grandson – descriptions that do not exist in the Recension II text. This combined with the lack of their other descriptor as *comaltai* indicates that in Recension I, the *comalta* relationship was not thought sufficient to explain ambiguities in character reactions to Cú Chulainn. The *comalta* bond in Recension I is one of the easiest ties to betray – Lugaid needs to be described as an ally to the Ulstermen rather than a *comalta* to make his loyalty make sense, while Fiachu's relationship to Cú Chulainn is described in terms of his link to the maternal side of Cú Chulainn's family rather than through his *comalta* tie with Cú Chulainn himself. *Comalta* seems to be used in Recension I to describe the intensity of a bond between Cú Chulainn and someone else only when there is no other suitable reason for the intensity of a bond. However, this bond is often introduced only to have it broken by betrayal – contextualizing the negative emotions stemming from particular battles. This lack of prioritizing of foster-relationships would agree with Edel's interpretation of Fergus's relationship with Cú Chulainn in Recension I. She suggests,

based on the infrequent mention of Fergus's relationship to Cu Chulainn that the foster-relationship between the two "belongs to a later phase of development."⁴⁹⁰

The Recension I text focuses a great deal on the way relationships outside of that between two individuals ends up affecting those individuals. There is complexity in kinship descriptions – often such ties are mentioned only once and then have an enormous effect on characters' actions later in the story. This complexity is present when examining most of the *comaltaí*'s alternative loyalties in Recension I.

All of those clearly identified as Cú Chulainn's *comaltaí* who trained with Scáthach choose loyalty to Medb's cause over loyalty to Cú Chulainn. Yet their underlying loyalties are different. In part, this seems due to differing underlying levels of affection. Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad, for example, were so close that scholars such as Sheehan see elements of homoeroticism within their interactions, while others have deemed their relationship so important that even Fer Diad's name is connected to his relationship with Cú Chulainn – in this interpretation 'Fer Diad' translates to 'One man of a pair'.⁴⁹¹ This is certainly a different impression than what one receives, for example, from Cú Chulainn's interactions with Fer Báeth, who needs barely any convincing to fight his *comalta* and whose death Cú Chulainn does not seem to regret in the slightest. Broadening the discussion to other foster-kin, Fergus's relationship with Cú Chulainn means so much to both of them that, while Fergus goes to fight his *dalta*, he does not even arm himself before engaging on this mission and refuses to fight when he is there.

⁴⁹⁰ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 95.

⁴⁹¹ Sheehan, 'Fer Diad De-flowered', pp. 54-65; Mícheál Ó Flaithearta, 'The Etymologies of (Fer) Diad', in *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Ruairi Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009), 218-25 (pp. 221-22); Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, pp. 166-69.

Clearly, personal loyalties and emotional ties play a role in influencing how difficult a loyalty decision each of Cú Chulainn's foster-kin makes and how much each actually loses in choosing something else over Cú Chulainn. Those who are closer to Cú Chulainn would lose not only a close friend through his death, but also a powerful ally who could be of great assistance to them later on in other contexts. The amount of affection felt by each member of Cú Chulainn's foster-kin also affects the amount and strength of the competing loyalty ties that each member needs in order to choose disloyalty to Cú Chulainn.

In Recension II of the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn has more people directly addressed as *comaltai* than in Recension I. These *comaltai* do not as strictly follow the pattern of which type of *comalta* fights Cú Chulainn (those who trained with Scáthach) and which type does not and also maintains loyalty to Ulster (those he knows from Ulster). Fiachu and Lugaid, as well as all of Cú Chulainn's *comaltai* who are only mentioned once in the text, break this pattern. However, the alternative loyalties that lead them to these decisions differ in certain key ways from those presented in Recension I. The reasons for loyalty decisions in Recension II focus quite a bit less on external factors and more on the internal, emotional factors and reactions to their loyalty decisions. Just as the Recension I text had hints that it recognized certain characters as *comaltai* who were not named as such, part of the complexity in Recension II is that it has similar moments hinting that it recognizes certain biographical details about Cú Chulainn's *comaltai* that in Recension I act as key loyalty conflicts. For example, Fer Diad is still suggested to be a Connachtman. When Medb is bribing him, one of her persuasive tactics is to offer Fer Diad freedom from taxes, hinting at his status as a Connachtman, but not addressing it

in nearly as much detail as Recension I. This suggests a deliberate focus away from the importance of external motivations in order to focus on internal, emotional factors. Cú Chulainn's *comaltai* are stripped of many of their loyalties so that their lives and relationships revolve much more around Cú Chulainn, their loyalty decisions and emotions regarding him, and his emotional reactions to their decisions. The increased number of named *comaltai* also helps to contextualize Fergus's behavior, as the only member of Cú Chulainn's foster-kin from his time in Ulster who goes to fight Cú Chulainn. All of Cú Chulainn's other family members in Medb's camp who know him from Ulster are also Cú Chulainn's biological family members. Conall Cernach and Fiachu are his cousins. Fergus, the only man of Cú Chulainn's Ulster kin called upon to fight him, is also the only one not biologically related to Cú Chulainn. However, even in this case the early foster connection is powerful and both Cú Chulainn and Fergus walk away from the encounter unharmed.

Another difference in the depiction of loyalty decisions between Recensions I and II of the *Táin* is the way each version deals with the relationships Cú Chulainn's foster-kin have with their consanguine family members. As Wong notes, in Recension I, a great deal of the tension between Cú Chulainn and his *comaltai* is caused (at least in part) by the deaths of their relations at Cú Chulainn's hands.⁴⁹² Cú Chulainn kills Fer Diad's uncle Mand and Lóch's brother Long, as well as nearly killing Lugaid's brother Láiríne. These deaths place Cú Chulainn's *comaltai* in a position where their loyalties to their blood relatives come into conflict with their loyalty to their foster-kin. This is another factor in Fergus's ability to walk away from his fight with Cú Chulainn; Cú Chulainn has

⁴⁹² Wong, 'Combat between Fosterbrothers', pp. 127-28, 129-30.

killed none of his biological kinsfolk and thus he is not motivated to seek revenge on Cú Chulainn.

Recension II never places Cú Chulainn's foster-kin in such a situation. Lugaid still comes close to being placed in such a situation, as Cú Chulainn fights his brother, but as in Recension I, Cú Chulainn does not kill Láiríne, thus avoiding the potential for conflict. This means that Lugaid's statement that even were Cú Chulainn to have killed Láiríne, it would not have meant Lugaid would have fought Cú Chulainn is never disproved. Cú Chulainn does still kill Lóch's brother, but in this version Lóch is fairly definitively not Cú Chulainn's *comalta*, so the effect it has upon their relationship does not say anything about the *comalta* bond. In the case of Fer Diad, Recension II does not give him an uncle, and Cú Chulainn is not mentioned as killing any of his family members. Interestingly, the only blood relative of Fer Diad's in this version is his brother, Fer Det, who is also in the enemy camp but who is never asked to fight Cú Chulainn. Fer Det is on the list of Cú Chulainn's *comaltai* who trained with Scáthach, thus making him Cú Chulainn's foster-kin as well. This means that in Recension II Fer Diad's family member who can be used against Cú Chulainn (his uncle) is replaced by one who has his own familial ties with Cú Chulainn and thus is less likely to be used as a target against him, as Fer Det has his own loyalties towards Cú Chulainn. Such a lack of focus on the family members of Cú Chulainn's *comaltai*, and particularly on Cú Chulainn's murder of them, makes the *comalta* bond in Recension II appear much stronger, as it is never placed in competition with genetic family ties.

Taken alone, then, each recension offers a significantly different picture of fosterage bonds and how important they are held to be. Recension I includes many

more external factors that influence loyalty decisions, while Recension II focuses more on internal factors and emotional complexity. The different versions have differing views on where foster relationships fit in a hierarchy of relationships. In Recension I foster relationships are of quite low priority and often other loyalties are chosen above foster ties. Agreements between larger political units are more important than individual ties. In Recension II the foster relationship has more variability in its place in a loyalty hierarchy, and it is frequently chosen above other loyalty considerations.

Cú Chulainn's family (foster and biological) are a perfect group to look at to examine disloyalty and loyalty ties, since they can show, as a group, the multiple loyalty contests that can take place within individuals. While certain patterns can be deduced and certain loyalty decisions are more frequently chosen than others, there is still room for manoeuvrability and variability in the ways people navigate opposing loyalty claims, and which set of loyalties people choose to honour. In general, Cú Chulainn's family from his childhood side with him, as they have the advantage of many loyalty ties coming together for them in that instance, making the decision easier. By supporting Cú Chulainn, not only are they supporting their foster-kin, but their wider family and their underlying political loyalties. These conflicting ties mean that even among those who choose to be disloyal to Cú Chulainn, their individual reasons for turning against Cú Chulainn are vastly different. Each of the relationships is fully drawn, with multiple factors and multiple conflicting loyalties testing each relationship. Differences between recensions (the focus on complex external relationships versus internal factors), the complexities of kinship terms, and the variability in how people navigate social ties and betrayal situations are all important elements to keep in mind when examining kinship

groups. However, in both recensions foster bonds are presented as stronger if they were formed earlier in life and connected to the natal family, whereas the bond formed during a person's later education is easier to betray. In neither version are Cú Chulainn's *comaltai* from his childhood even asked to fight him or put in a position where their loyalty to him or to Medb could be tested in such a way. Among his foster-kin from his early childhood, only Fergus is called upon to fight him. However, unlike the majority of his *comaltai* from that period of his life, Fergus is not stated to be biologically related to Cú Chulainn in the *Táin*. Loyalty to biological kin is prioritized. Yet all of his kin from the early portion of his life remain loyal to him – Fergus manages to avoid the fight with Cú Chulainn.

3.3 Conclusion

Erc's inclusion in his maternal kin group, despite having been born outside of the primary seat of his maternal family's power, raises the question of how distant – in geographical location or distance from a common ancestor – family members have to be to stop officially being considered family or to stop having expectations placed upon them. Studies into primarily legal material by scholars such as Charles-Edwards suggest that Irish kinship systems in the medieval period were only calculated back a certain number of generations. The exact amount of generations differs in different texts, but at most the system calculates four generations down from an original man (the man and then his sons, grandsons, after-grandsons, and end-sons).⁴⁹³ In the *Táin*, Recension I never mentions family names for family members more distant to a man

⁴⁹³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 46.

than his grandson, while Recension II never mentions further than a great grandson. This, and the existence of systems which only counted up to such a degree of kinship in the legal texts, indicates that individuals related more distantly than that degree would no longer have counted themselves related. This also presents a potential limit for which relationships could be betrayed. Betrayal appears to require a personal connection. Although it would be possible for people to have non-familial relationships with those more distantly related, it is likely that these present the limits of what would count as familial betrayal. Within the bounds of this structure of kinship, loyalty to the maternal family is the absolute loyalty in the *Táin*. It is never betrayed – not back to a relationship of great grandfather. This is true not only for the Ulstermen but also in Medb's camp, where her own kin never act in any way against her.⁴⁹⁴ Loyalty to natal kin on the maternal or paternal side is extremely important – it is only in situations, such as that of Erc, where loyalty to the maternal side conflicts with that to the paternal side that the paternal kinship bond is betrayed. Below this loyalty to natal kin is the loyalty to foster-family (excepting where the two combine).

This hierarchy of relationships is evident to the characters in the *Táin*. It is what Medb uses so often in Recension I. She deliberately utilizes the bonds of natal family to force Cú Chulainn's *comaltai* to turn against him. At the same time, she never even attempts to place him in conflict with those of his foster-family who are also natal kin from his Ulster kinship group.

The absolute loyalty to the maternal kinship group also explains Cú Chulainn's self-accusation of betrayal in Recension I after he abandons the men of Ulster for his

⁴⁹⁴ See Chapter 4.2.1: Medb and Ailill's Kin

tryst.⁴⁹⁵ As O’Leary explains, the honour code present in the *Táin* is highly hierarchical, and public. Heroes have no inner sense of merit; honour is about gaining peer approval.⁴⁹⁶ Yet Cú Chulainn does not attempt to blame others for his actions – he has wounded his maternal family and this is such an important tie that he cannot attempt to sway public opinion away from his actions. Rather, he accepts any harm to his honour that his actions have incurred. This is also the reason for Cú Chulainn’s reluctance, during his lament described in Chapter Two, to go the final step and accuse his natal family of betrayal when they do not appear to assist him as he continues to weaken from constant onslaught. He uses the language frequently found in betrayal situations, but he cannot actually level such a horrible accusation at them.⁴⁹⁷

O’Leary states that “generosity was, then, often used as a means of asserting power in ancient Ireland.”⁴⁹⁸ Cú Chulainn was taken in by his mother’s kin – by Conchobor – potentially from a situation where his father could not provide him with any of the benefits of rank that Conchobor can.⁴⁹⁹ Cú Chulainn is so deeply indebted to his mother’s kin that he does not even think to sway the audience against them – taking control of the narrative during their weakness by publicly accusing them of betrayal. They have provided him with everything, his honour is entirely bound up with theirs, and if anything occurs to damage their honour, it will damage his own as well. Therefore, he will do all he can to prevent such destruction, even if it means accusing himself of betrayal in order to keep their reputation safe.

⁴⁹⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 315.

⁴⁹⁶ Philip O’Leary, ‘Contention at Feasts in Early Irish Literature’, in *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 20 (1984), 115-27 (p. 115).

⁴⁹⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2012-92.

⁴⁹⁸ O’Leary, ‘Contention at Feasts’, p. 125.

⁴⁹⁹ Jaski, ‘Cú Chulainn: gormac and dalta’, p. 2.

Chapter Four: Fergus and the Formation of Armies in the *Táin*

4.1 Introduction

Like Cú Chulainn, Fergus is frequently involved in the betrayal acts listed in Chapter Two – either as betrayed or betrayer. However, he is never publicly charged with betrayal – he always knows when to switch course if his actions have angered others. In the *Táin* itself, there is fragmented information given about Fergus and his placement in the Connacht camp. It is known that Fergus is from Ulster, and that he is not alone in Medb's camp. He is part of a group of exiles from Ulster. Due to his relationships with those in both Ulster and Medb's camp, Fergus – and the Ulster exiles he commands – presents a perfect case study on the complicated social dynamics present in Medb's army. In particular, a study of Fergus can reveal how an individual caught between multiple conflicting loyalties can navigate those conflicting ties without breaking any of them.

4.1.1 Background

How does an Ulsterman find himself in the position of perfectly representing the complicated interpersonal relationships and conflicts that drive Medb's army (and much of the action in the *Táin*) during her campaign against the very place whence Fergus came? In Recension I, Medb states, “& atá Fergus mac Roeich meic Ehdach lenni sund for longais co tríchait chét imbi” (“[A]nd Fergus mac Roeich meic Ehdach is here

in exile with us with three thousand men”).⁵⁰⁰ Later on, Fergus mentions that it was Conchobor that exiled him, saying:

Ár bít trí chócait mac and [...] oc cluchiu. Is amlaid domel Conchobar a flaith: trían ind laí oc déscin na macraide, a trían n-aill oc imbirth fidchille, a trían n-aill oc ól chorma conid gaib cotlad de. Cia bem-ni for longais ríam, ní fil i nÉre óclaig bas amru (For [...] thrice fifty youths are usually there engaged in play. This is how Conchobor spends his time of sovereignty: one third of the day spent watching the youths, another third playing fidchell, another third drinking ale till he falls asleep therefrom. Though we have been exiled by him, (I still maintain that) there is not in Ireland a warrior more wonderful).⁵⁰¹

Conchobor later corroborates this statement, declaring that he is “rodatuc for longes i nn-adba con alltai 7 sindach” (“[o]ne who drove you into exile to dwell with wolves and foxes”).⁵⁰²

Recension II contains more detailed reasoning for the exile. In this recension, Fergus left Ulster after seven years as king of Ulster because “iar marbad mac nUsnig fora faísam 7 fora chommairgi” (“the sons of Usnech had been slain in despite of his guarantee and surety”).⁵⁰³ This led him to enter exile “& atá sec[h]t mblíadna déc fri Ultu ammuig ar longais 7 bidbanas” (“and he has been seventeen years in exile and in enmity away from Ulster”).⁵⁰⁴ Conchobor confirms this, telling Fergus:

⁵⁰⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 57-58.

⁵⁰¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 401-05.

⁵⁰² *TBC-I*, ll. 4050-51.

⁵⁰³ *TBC-LL*, l. 362-63.

⁵⁰⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 363-64.

Gilla iss ó 7 iss imláne and so andáe ale, 7 rap ferr máthair 7 athair, fer rat indarb át chrích 7 át ferand 7 át forbba, fer rat chuir i n-adba oss 7 fiadmíl 7 sinnach, fer nára léic leithet da gabail badéin dit chrích ná dit ferand dait, fer rat chuir ar bantidnacul mná, fer rat sáraig im tríb maccaib Usnig do marbad far th'einech fecht n-aill, fer rat dingéba indiu i fiadnaisi fer nHérend, Conchobor mac Fachtna Fáthaig meic Rossa Rúaid meic Rudraigi, ardrí Ulad 7 mac ardríg Hérend” (“There is a man here younger and mightier than you, and whose father and mother were nobler, one who banished you from your land and territory and estate, one who drove you to dwell with deer and hare and fox, one who did not permit you to hold even the length of your own stride in your land and territory, one who made you dependent on a woman of property, one who [violated] you on one occasion by slaying the three sons of Usnech despite your safeguard, one who today will ward you off in the presence of the men of Ireland, namely, Conchobor mac Fachtna Fáthaig meic Rossa Rúaid meic Rudraigi, the high king of Ulster and the son of the high king of Ireland”).⁵⁰⁵

In this case, although it is not a strategy employed frequently in this study, it is useful to examine other existing tales in the Ulster Cycle about the reasons for Fergus’s exile. As they conform to the broad details already provided in the *Táin*, it is reasonable to assume that these tales, or similar versions, were known to audiences of the *Táin* and were intentionally being referenced. As the details contribute to a knowledge of Fergus’s motives in the *Táin*, it is worth bringing such tales in, since they contribute to

⁵⁰⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4750-57. Translated as ‘outraged’ by O’Rahilly.

an understanding of whether Fergus's actions can be construed as betrayal. In 'Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa', which is in the LL as is Recension II, Fergus is king of Ulster until Conchobor's mother, Ness, tricks him, telling him that she will be his wife if he gives Conchobor kingship of Ulster for a year. Fergus agrees, but Ness is clever and by the time the year has elapsed, she has ensured that a majority of the people want Conchobor to remain their king.⁵⁰⁶ In the LL tale 'Longes mac n-Uislenn', Conchobor falls in love with a woman named Deirdre. She does not love him and instead runs away with Naisi, one of the titular sons of Usnech. He and his brothers take Deirdre and leave Ulster in order to avoid Conchobor's anger. However, Conchobor tricks the couple, luring them home under the pretence of forgiveness and then killing Naisi and Naisi's brothers. In order to accomplish this trickery, Conchobor has Fergus and a few other men of Ulster (Dubhtach and Cormac, Conchobor's own son) stand as surety that Conchobor is telling the truth. Thus, when the brothers are murdered, Fergus's honour is wounded.⁵⁰⁷ After this, "[a]t-chúas do Fergus iarum an-í-sin ocus do Dubthach ocus do Chormac. Tánccatar side co-ndernsat gníma móra fo chétóir" ("[t]hat, then, was related to Fergus and Dubthach and Cormac. They came and performed at once great deeds").⁵⁰⁸ They burn Emain and "[i]s ed lotar iarum co Ailill ocus co Meidb ar ro-fetatar is sí lánamain foda-róelsat ocus dano ni-bu chúil serce do Ultaib. Tricha cét ba é lín na lloingse. Co cenn sé m(dot)blíadna déc niro-an gol na crith leu i n-Ultaib acht gol ocus crith leu cech n-óen-aidchi" ("[t]hereupon they went to Ailill and to Medb, for they knew that that couple would be able to support them; and for the Ulstermen, moreover, it was

⁵⁰⁶ Whitley Stokes, 'Tidings of Conchobar Mac Nessa', *Ériu*, 4 (1910), 18-38.

⁵⁰⁷ *Longes mac n-Uislenn*.

⁵⁰⁸ *Longes mac n-Uislenn*, ll. 190-95.

not a refuge of love. Three thousand was the number of those exiled. To the end of sixteen years neither weeping nor trembling ceased in Ulster through them, but each single night there was weeping and trembling through them”).⁵⁰⁹

Interestingly for the study of betrayal, the Connachtmén believe the fact Fergus was exiled by Conchobor is a good reason to put Fergus in charge of leading them to Ulster, deciding that, as he had suffered such harm (betrayal, even?) from the men of Ulster, Fergus would wish revenge – “atbertsat combad é Fergus, ar bíth ba slúagad bága dó in slúagad” (“they said that it should be Fergus, because the hosting was a hostile hosting for him”) and that “[i]s aire sin bad chomadas a dul ria cách do eólas” (“[t]herefore it would be fitting that he should go before all to guide them”).⁵¹⁰ This is perhaps drawing on the above tradition, wherein Fergus and the exiles continue to kill Ulstermen even after their exile.

Fergus is caught between Connacht and Ulster. As revealed by the betrayal situations discussed in Chapter Two, Fergus still feels loyalty to his kinsmen in Ulster. Yet he has obtained power and influence in Connacht – enough that he is entrusted to lead the army. At the same time, as will be discussed below he has ties to the majority of other sections of Ireland represented in Medb and Ailill’s army, as they are allies of Ulster. All of these connections have their own loyalty expectations of Fergus, many of which conflict. Unlike several of Cú Chulainn’s family members, he has no named individuals within the text to whom he is biologically related, thus simplifying his loyalty decisions. Many of Cú Chulainn’s foster-brothers, when put in a similar situation with even fewer loyalty conflicts, are shamed as betrayers and killed due to their eventual

⁵⁰⁹ *Longes mac n-Uislenn*, ll. 195-205.

⁵¹⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 361-65.

loyalty decisions. Yet although he has more loyalty expectations in conflict than the majority of other characters in the text, Fergus never has any accusations of betrayal stick to him. At the end of the text, he has managed to maintain his position of power in Connacht while his loyalty to Ulster, and in particular Cú Chulainn, has never wavered. An analysis of Fergus's actions leads to an understanding of what a very few characters who are not biologically related to Cú Chulainn do differently that allows them to maintain their loyalty even from within the camp of the men of Ireland.

4.1.2 Fergus historiography

Over the years, scholars have had varied approaches to discussing Fergus. He is a polarizing figure – opinions on him range from early perceptions of him as fertility god or sexual deviant to more recent views of him that focus on his complicated relationships with others. He is a character who is frequently held up as a betrayer within scholarship – however, he is held up this way as a betrayer of both Ulster and Connacht depending on the other opinions of the scholar. His loyalty decisions perplex. Scholarship is uneasy on the topic of Fergus; he is a man who plays both sides in the conflict so well that it can be hard to determine his true loyalties.

Nitze observes that descriptions of Fergus's massive phallus lead to his identification as a fertility god.⁵¹¹ Loomis discusses Fergus's "enormous sexual organs", believing their presence to be one of a number of surviving hints at pagan spring fertility rituals that used to exist in the British Isles. He believes that such symbols show a

⁵¹¹ William A. Nitze, 'The Fisher King and the Grail in Retrospect', *Romance Philology* 6.1 (Brepols: University of California Press, 1952), 14-22 (p. 17).

“reverence for the vital mysteries of reproduction” that also manifests itself in the idea of the divine king, upon whose sexual capability and prowess the fertility of the entire land depends.⁵¹² These scholars see Fergus’s sexual capabilities as an oddity that needs to be explained, in this case through the idea that Fergus is a divine figure.

Often discussions of Fergus’s sexual proclivity are tied to his relationship with Medb. Ní Bhrolcháin describes Fergus as one of Medb’s consorts in her role as goddess of sovereignty and also goddess of death (as Medb is swimming with Fergus when he dies).⁵¹³ Through this, she explains away the “moral turpitude” of Medb’s relationships with men who are not her husband, as well as providing a role for Fergus (that of consort) which is required within the story of the goddess of sovereignty and thus absolves him of any wrongdoing for his actions sleeping with a married woman. Woodard explores the idea of an Indo-European fertility figure connected with boundaries, who is usually connected to a female prosperity figure. He sees Fergus, with his giant member, as a manifestation of this “male figure of fertility”, while Medb, with her “voracious sexual appetite”, represents the female prosperity figure.⁵¹⁴ While Woodard writes positively about Medb and Fergus, several of the episodes he discusses, such as how Medb has on a few occasions married a new husband only after he has slain her previous husband, contain actions that are frequently considered less appealing when viewed from the perspective of mortals engaging in mortal behaviour, rather than god and goddess manifestations. It does not seem to be a

⁵¹² Roger Sherman Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1997), p. 266.

⁵¹³ Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas’, *The Crane Bag*, 4.1 (1980), 12-19 (p. 18).

⁵¹³ Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas’, p. 13, 18.

⁵¹⁴ Roger D. Woodard, ‘The Disruption of Time in Myth and Epic’, *Arethusa*, 35.1 (2002), 83-98, pp. 83, 87-88, 92.

coincidence that it is in the process of describing Medb's long list of consorts that Schlegel calls Fergus "the Divine Fergus."⁵¹⁵

Sayers also accepts a divine interpretation of Fergus. He frames his discussion through the lens of cosmology and states that Celtic myth is Christianized but you can find the "truth" underneath it. He thinks Fergus is a euhemerized deity (due largely to Fergus's enormous appetites and sexual desires) who has entered into a relationship with Medb, a sovereignty goddess, but is unable to gain the powers of this role due to his displacement by Ailill, who fills the role of consort. Sayers sees Fergus's "ambivalent relationships" and complicated loyalty decisions as directly caused by this displacement, and sees Medb as Fergus's "undoing", as she leads to military losses for him and eventually to Fergus's death.⁵¹⁶ In theories where Fergus is perceived of as divine, his sword, stolen by Ailill, can also take on a sexually symbolic dimension. Due to its ability to become the size of a rainbow when Fergus swings it, Puhvel states that Fergus's sword is a god-slaying celestial sword and sees it as following a tradition of lighting weapons found in Celtic myth.⁵¹⁷ Sayers states that "Fergus is 'contained' by the king-proxy, Medb's consort, Ailill, who takes his sword."⁵¹⁸ Through Medb and Ailill's machinations, Fergus the god is constrained and this forms the center of any disloyal or immoral actions he may undertake. Discomfort with Fergus's sexuality, and moreover with his relationship with Medb, is explained through his divine nature.

⁵¹⁵ Donald M. Schlegel, 'Reweaving the Tapestry of Ancient Ulster', *Clogher Record*, 17.3 (2002), 689-750 (p. 717).

⁵¹⁶ William Sayers, 'Fergus and the Cosmogonic Sword', *History of Religions*, 25.1 (1985), 30-56 (pp. 36, 49-52).

⁵¹⁷ Martin Puhvel, 'The Deicidal Otherworld Weapon in Celtic and Germanic Mythic Tradition', *Folklore*, 83.3 (1972), 210-19 (pp. 212-13).

⁵¹⁸ Sayers, 'Fergus and the Cosmogonic Sword', p. 52.

In another interpretation of Fergus that is not focus on the mythic potential of his character, Fergus is not seen in a positive light, usually due to his sexual transgressions and excesses, excused in other interpretations by his godhood. Dobbs states that Fergus abandoned the men of Ulster for “a woman’s war”, choosing for the sake of a woman to fight “against his own race.”⁵¹⁹ In his perspective, this abandonment led to the creation of three families Fergus fathers outwith Ulster. Yet despite Dobbs’ interpretation being written primarily in a neutral tone, Fergus’s actions invoke judgment. He is the only figure presented whose actions are presented negatively. Fergus has betrayed Ulster. Writing nearly a quarter of a century later, Melia presents the slightly different view of Fergus as transgressor not against Ulster, but against Ailill. His argument is that in “tribal” societies, if an individual’s personal obligations and desires come into conflict with societal obligations, as is the case with Fergus, the conflict leads to the individual’s death, whether this punishment is justified or not. He describes Fergus’s eventual death at Ailill’s command, and believes that Ailill was “justified in having Fergus killed” due to Fergus’s affair with Medb, as Fergus has knowingly and willingly trespassed against Ailill.⁵²⁰ Fergus is portrayed depending on scholarly interpretation as betrayer of both the sides of the *Táin*, Ulster and Ailill. However, interpretations such as those that focus solely on Fergus’s sexual exploits frequently miss much of the nuance of his character. The *Táin*, for example, while it references Fergus’s sexual appetite, does not dwell upon it. And interpretations determining that Fergus’s sexuality must be an negative aspect of his character in need of explanation

⁵¹⁹ M. E. Dobbs, ‘The Dispersal of the Ulaid’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 84.2 (1954), 182-86 (p. 184).

⁵²⁰ Daniel F. Melia, ‘Remarks on the Structure and Composition of the Ulster Death Tales’, *Studia Hibernica*, 17/18 (1977/78), 36-57, pp. 49-50.

frequently miss some of the subtle, but not negatively framed, manipulations that sexual behavior is used for in the *Táin*.

Alternative branches of scholarship complicate the picture of Fergus. Rather than focusing primarily on his relationship with Medb and his sexual appetites, scholars begin to examine his relationships with other characters, in particular his loving relationship with Cú Chulainn and his contentious relationship with Conchobor. When modern scholarship does examine Fergus's sexual relationships, it is done without the assumption that sexual activity itself is negative, and contains more examination of the effects Fergus's sexual exploits have on both himself and those around him. Opinions on Fergus's morality do not become wholly positive, but the reasons for considering him immoral are expanded upon, and those who do consider him a positive figure often consider him more betrayed than betrayer.

Ní Mhaoileoin looks into the earliest versions of the exile story and argues that they suggest that Medb was central to the original tale of Fergus's exile, whether due to "evil contracts" with her that Fergus was forced to abide or whether due to Fergus's lust for Medb. She concludes that later versions introduced Fergus's complicated relationship with Conchobor as the primary reason for the exile rather than the "abandoned" narrative of a love story between Medb and Fergus. Even in this newer narrative, though, Ní Mhaoileoin observes that Fergus continues to be characterized as a man who makes "poor decisions when it comes to women", explaining that it is Fergus's complicated relationship with Conchobor's mother Ness, who traditionally persuades Fergus to relinquish his throne to Conchobor, which starts off the heated

relationship between Fergus and Conchobor.⁵²¹ Different tales and different versions of tales also present Fergus with differing levels of morality. Mathis, studying different versions of the story of Deirdriu and the sons of Uisneach, observes Fergus's reputation in certain versions of the story "for dishonourable conduct and sexual excess" and that Fergus fails, through abandonment, to protect the sons of Uisneach, although other versions may attempt to temper this negative view.⁵²² These viewpoints further complicate Fergus's character, but also acknowledge that Fergus's loyalty decisions can be vastly different depending on the text in question. They also provide different instances where Fergus is viewed as a betrayer, as in certain tales he has betrayed the sons of Uisneach through his negligence. As ó hUiginn aptly states in his biography of Fergus, within the Ulster Cycle "in some cases [Fergus] is shown in an extremely favourable light, while in others he is castigated as the king who betrayed his own people."⁵²³

In contrast to others, Boyd sees Fergus as a source of moral authority in the *Táin*. He also focuses not on Fergus's loyalty to Ulster, but his opposition to it. Boyd describes Conchobor negatively, as the sort of person whom no one would ever want to support, and is quite sympathetic to Fergus's reasons for leaving Ulster – cast out by Conchobor, whom Boyd indicates has betrayed Fergus.⁵²⁴ He is not alone in this negative interpretation of Conchobor. Ní Mhaoileoin identifies Conchobor as a betrayer

⁵²¹ Patricia Ní Mhaoileoin, *The heroic biography of Fergus Mac Róich: A case study of the heroic-biographical pattern in Old and Middle Irish literature*, (PhD Thesis, NUI Galway: 2015), pp. 55-57.

⁵²² Kate Louise Mathis, *The Evolution of Deirdriu in the Ulster Cycle*, (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh: 2010), pp. 175-76.

⁵²³ Ruairi ó hUiginn, 'Fergus, Russ and Rudraige: A Brief Biography of Fergus Mac Róich', *Emania*, 11 (1993), 31-40 (p. 38).

⁵²⁴ Matthieu Boyd, 'The timeless tale of Bricriu's feast', *North American journal of Celtic studies*, 1.2 (2017), 151-172 (p. 166).

twice, once for his role in taking the kingship from Fergus and once for his role in the death of the sons of Uisliu, who were under Fergus's protection, which leads to Fergus's exile in Connacht.⁵²⁵

Edel brings together a number of interpretations regarding Fergus, as she considers Fergus "a composite figure [...] in whom various and occasionally conflicting traditions come together. Consequently his portrayal has something of a patchwork: depending on the situation, he displays different facets of his character." She also makes a sharp demarcation of his presentation in Recensions I and II of the *Táin*, stating that his character has more nuance in Recension I. Edel is quite focused on his loyalty ties, describing him as "torn [...] between his warrior's honour and his love for his countrymen" and as permanently an outsider due to his exile, constantly held in suspicion by both sides in the conflict of the *Táin*. She interprets Fergus as constantly thinking about his position in Connacht, which is his future, and how his current actions will affect his future there. Edel views this future as being quite tentative and easily destroyed depending on Fergus's current actions. However, his role as outsider to both sides of the conflict in the *Táin* allows him to act as mediator in many conflicts. Edel sees Fergus as acting in this role in the matter of the Gailioin, as well as "the single combat agreement between the Connacht ruler and Cu Chulainn, whose enforcement depends on Fergus's influence on the strategy of the army." Due to his desire to protect his position in Connacht, Edel views Fergus's interactions with Cú Chulainn as always fraught. Fergus wishes to protect the Ulstermen, including Cú Chulainn, but also wishes to protect himself (which Edel sees as Fergus's highest driving loyalty in Recension I).

⁵²⁵ Patricia Ní Mhaoileoin, 'Patterns and Problems in the Heroic Biography of Fergus mac Róich', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 32 (2012), 214-28 (pp. 221-22).

She believes that this uncertainty in Fergus's loyalty decisions may lie with the fact that in Recension I, Cú Chulainn is infrequently addressed as Fergus's foster-son, and therefore the relationship may be a later addition not reflected in the rest of the text. However, as Chapter Three illustrates, Recension I tends in general to avoid using foster terminology frequently found in other recensions and to prioritize other relationship terminology when possible. Yet these relationship dynamics still remain underlying character behaviours and motivations within Recension I.

Other scholarly interpretations view Fergus's loyalties as more clearcut, and lying with Cú Chulainn. In his exploration of fosterage, O'Donnell writes in very positive terms about Fergus's relationship with Cú Chulainn. Rather than focusing on Fergus as a betrayer or a man with conflicted loyalties, he focuses on Fergus's consistent loyalty to his foster-son, stating that during the section where Fergus is sent to fight Cú Chulainn, "Such is the affection that Fergus feels towards his fosterling, the prospect of fighting is never raised."⁵²⁶ He does not interpret this scene as a tense loyalty conflict, as Edel does. Through his actions, Fergus maintains the loyalty ties and bonds of love created through his early fosterage of the young hero. Ó Cathasaigh says something similar, declaring that Fergus is very attached and completely loyal to Cú Chulainn and it seems to be kin-feeling that eventually allows Ulster to win over Connacht.⁵²⁷ Dukes-Knight has a similar interpretation of Fergus's character, positing that Fergus removes any blame for his actions by explaining they were done for the love of kin. She says, "Throughout the tale, the integrity of the bond of kinship and affection is maintained perhaps most

⁵²⁶ O'Donnell, *Fosterage in Medieval Ireland*, p. 63.

⁵²⁷ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion to Early Irish Saga*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 232.

overtly though Fergus and Cú Chulainn, even as it breaks down among others.” At the same time, Dukes-Knight critiques other aspects of Fergus’s life, stating that “his relationship with Medb has in reality caused him to be rendered impotent and divested of his manhood.”⁵²⁸ He is a hero in decline who has lost control of his surroundings. In this way, much modern scholarship applauds Fergus both for his role against Ulster and his support of Ulster. When factors outside of Fergus’s sexual behavior are explored, different interpretations of his loyalty ties also come into play. After an analysis of betrayal situations, whatever tensions Fergus feels in making his decisions, his loyalty decision is always to aid and protect Cú Chulainn, whatever his relationship to Cú Chulainn may be. This loyalty is strong enough that in certain traditions, such as that given in the genealogies, Fergus is actually believed to be biologically related to Cú Chulainn – a paternal uncle, brother to Sualtaim – although there is no hint of this relationship given in the *Táin*.⁵²⁹

Fergus is clearly a complicated figure, and opinions on him largely seem to depend on people’s views of the cast of characters surrounding him. Those who disapprove of Medb, or feel the text does, tend to have negative views on Fergus, while those who disapprove of Conchobor support Fergus for leaving Ulster but maintaining his close ties with his foster-child. Fergus is often regarded as a traitor, but opinions differ as to whether he is traitor to Ulster or to Connacht. However, within the *Táin* Fergus’s loyalty when pressed is always to Cú Chulainn.

⁵²⁸ Jennifer Dukes-Knight, ‘The Wooden Sword: Age and Masculinity in “*Táin Bó Cúailnge*”, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 33 (2013), 107-122 (pp. 109-112).

⁵²⁹ ó hUiginn, ‘Fergus, Russ and Rudraige’, p. 32.

Much of this dissent within interpretations arises from knowledge of Fergus obtained through tales in the Ulster Cycle outside of the *Táin*, where Fergus's loyalty decisions may conflict with his actions in the *Táin*. However, some of the questions around Fergus's character and loyalty choices also stem from how smoothly he manipulates social situations around him to prevent his loyalty ties from clashing in a disastrous manner. Fergus is a master observer of the thousand factors at play in the army upon which loyalty decisions are based. And thus, in order to understand Fergus's choices and the skillfulness with which he navigates the social world around him and the loyalty expectations that world contains, it is necessary to examine these factors at play in the army. These factors are the many factions present in the army and all of the geographical and social elements influencing people's behavior within Medb and Ailill's camp.

4.2 Factions

Such confusion over Fergus's loyalties makes sense when viewed in the light of his environment. Of all of the characters in the *Táin*, Fergus is the one caught between most conflicting bonds of loyalty, expected to honour all of the conflicting demands upon him while attempting to find a way through the cattle raid that keeps his honour intact. Fergus is an exile living in Connacht, and thus has multiple sets of loyalties – owing certain fidelity to Medb and Ailill for allowing him to stay with them, but also not forgetting his connections to certain friends and families back in his home of Ulster. Among these connections is his strong tie to his foster-son Cú Chulainn. While these are the obvious tensions that exist for him, there are other less obvious loyalties that

also pull him. As well, the army itself has certain expectations of behaviour. The army itself is fractured and encourages a certain level of communication to the enemy across its borders that modern troops often do not cultivate, and this casts confusion on whether certain of Fergus's choices would even count as betrayals, or just normal behaviour in the disjointed and permeable army environment of the *Táin*. In order to better determine his culpability, an examination of the army and its expectations, as well as the problems involved in a campaign the size of that Medb is conducting, is required.

Although presented as one force, referred to as the "men of Ireland" ("fer n-Érend"), Medb's army does not have a great deal of internal cohesion. She has assembled an enormous array of men, but her own homeland clearly cannot support an army of the size she has envisioned for invading Ulster. Thus, the army is assembled from numerous factions drawn from varied geographical locations, each faction with its own complicated internal politics and set of relationships to the rest of the units that make up the overall force. Due to the fact these men come from all over Ireland, loyalty decisions are not based solely on biological family ties, which are shown in Chapter Three to be the strongest ties. Due to the complex loyalties present, there is much division and many weaknesses within the camp of which people can take advantage. An examination of an assortment of these factions provides a clearer picture of the difficulties with which Medb (and Fergus) are dealing in the army camp.

4.2.1 Medb and Ailill's Kin

One of the factions consists of those most closely connected to Medb and Ailill – their blood and foster-kin. Included amongst this group are the sons of Mágu and the

seven Maines. The seven Maines are sons of Ailill and Medb, all of whom go by the name Maine. Throughout both versions of the *Táin*, the Maines primarily operate as a group. The seven sons of Mágu are a group of warriors fighting for Medb and Ailill. In the LL version of the *Táin*, in which the sons of Mágu have a far more prominent role, they are seemingly related to Ailill, as Ailill's mother Máta is a daughter of Mágu and thus is the sister of the sons of Mágu.⁵³⁰ Along with the seven Maines, the sons of Mágu and their numerous divisions of troops act as some of the main battle forces of the Connacht army, and are frequently sent against enemies from Ulster. In Recension I, “foíte techta ó Ailill co secht macu Mágach .i. co hAilill , co Ánlúan , co Moccorb, co Cet, co Én 7 Bascall 7 Dóche, trícha cét la cach n-áe” (“Ailill sent messengers to the seven sons of Mágu: Ailill, Anlúan, Moccorb, Cet, Én, Bascall and Dóche, each with his fighting force of three thousand”)⁵³¹ before he summons any other men, although these sons of Mágu do not play much of a further role in this recension.

The seven Maines are far more important than the sons of Mágu in Recension I. They are the first to arrive to the attack in several instances. On one occasion where Cú Chulainn is terrorizing Medb and Ailill's army, “Téit Mane mac Ailella 7 Medba ria cách” (“Maine, the son of Ailill and Medb came forward before the others”)⁵³² to face him. In another instance where Medb's forces approach Cú Chulainn, “[t]íagait na secht Mane mílid i tosoch conid n-accatar for brú ind átha aníar” (“the seven Maines, the warriors, went first and saw him on the brink of the ford to the west”).⁵³³ The sons of Maine are used as messengers to Cú Chulainn, although they are too close to Medb

⁵³⁰ *TBC-LL*, l. 50.

⁵³¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 3-5.

⁵³² *TBC-I*, l. 1165.

⁵³³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1886-87.

and Ailill for Cú Chulainn to accept them as messengers. One of the Maines approaches Cú Chulainn to pass along the messages of Ailill and Medb. After a frustrating encounter with Láeg, in which Maine was forced to ask three times whose vassal Láeg is, Maine finally encounters Cú Chulainn. Recension I explains, “Asbert Mani dano ón mud chétna fris-side fo t[h]rí cia díambo chéli.’ Céli Conchobair, 7 nacham forraig. Díanam forgea immorro ní bas síriu, bíthus di chend dít amal tíscar di lun.’ ‘Ní réid,’ ‘ol Mani,’ ‘acallaim na desi seo.” (“Maine asked him three times in the same way whose vassal he was. ‘Conchobor’s vassal, and do not plague me. If you bother me any more, I shall cut off your head as the head is cut off a blackbird’. ‘It is not easy to speak to these two,’ said Maine”).⁵³⁴ After this, Medb and Ailill are forced to send one of Cú Chulainn’s foster-brothers to talk to him instead – a messenger Cú Chulainn will accept.⁵³⁵ In the final battle, after the majority of Medb’s forces abandon the field, it is only those divisions belonging to Medb, Ailill, and their seven sons that are left in the battle.⁵³⁶

In Recension II, the Maines and sons of Mágu are frequently mentioned in connection with one another. The Maines are the first people Medb calls to aid her, and the sons of Mágu the second. When Fergus threatens Medb based on her treatment of the Gailioin, she retaliates by saying:

‘Ní rim-sa is ráite duit-sin sain, a Ferguis, [...] dáig itó-sa lín do gona 7 t’airlig
co tríchait cét Galían immut, dáig atát na secht Mani cona secht tríchtaib cét 7
meic Mágach cona tríchait cét & Ailill cona tríchait cét 7 atú-sa com thegluch

⁵³⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 1580-84.

⁵³⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 1585-92.

⁵³⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 4097-4110.

'no (Not to me should you say that, Fergus [...] for my army is numerous enough to slay and kill you with the thirty hundred Leinstermen surrounding you. For I have the seven Maines with their seven divisions of thirty hundred and the sons of Mágu with their division and Ailill with his division, and I myself have my household guard).⁵³⁷

The sons of Mágu and the seven Maines are her two choices for groups who will definitely be on her side after her own household and that of her husband. After certain of Medb's forces realize that she promised to marry her daughter Findabair to all of them, a clear impossibility, it is the Maines that they choose to attack as representative of their anger at Medb, saying, “Cid dúnni 'no' [...] ná ragmais-ni do dígail ar mná 7 ar n-ainig arna Manib fuil ac foraire dar éis in tslúaig ic Imlig in Glendamrach,” (“Why then [...] should we not go to take vengeance for the woman and for our honour on the Maines who are keeping guard in the rear of the host at Imlech in Glendamrach”)?⁵³⁸ It is Medb, Ailill, and the sons of Mágu who rise up with their divisions in defence of the Maines.⁵³⁹ In the final battle, Cormac chooses to change sides to defend his father, “[a]traacht Ailill cona tríchait chét dó-som. Atraacht Medb cona tríchait cét. Atraachtatar na Mani cona tríchtaib cét. Atraachtatar Meic Mágach cona tríchtaib cét” (“to meet him rose Ailill with his thirty hundred, and Medb rose with her thirty hundred. The Maines arose with their thirty hundreds and Meic Mágach with their thirty hundreds”).⁵⁴⁰ The seven Maines and the sons of Mágu are the first mentioned as rising after Medb and Ailill – they are the closest line of defence for Ailill and Medb.

⁵³⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 334-38.

⁵³⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3877-79.

⁵³⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3880-83.

⁵⁴⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4265-67.

In both Recensions, the seven Maines are mentioned fighting in close connection with their father against Cethern, and cause Cethern some of his deep wounds.⁵⁴¹ When Cethern is maddened by trickery from the men of Ireland and demands that someone from the army wears Ailill's diadem, thus becoming a target for Cethern, it is one of the Maines who takes this risk in order to ensure Ailill remains safe. This draws Cethern out and he is killed.⁵⁴²

While the seven Maines and the sons of Mágu are not the same entity and operate separately from each other at times, their interests are consistently the same as those of Medb and Ailill. They exist primarily as executors of Medb and Ailill's will, and they side with them whenever there is any sign of internal fracturing within the army. While they are often on Fergus's side in larger conflicts due to his alliance with Medb and Ailill, they often oppose him when relations inside the army break down.

4.2.2 Leaders and Warriors

As well as Medb and Ailill's kin, there are numerous other people along on the cattle raid who have their own distinct interests they are upholding. One other set of factions within the larger army is the leaders of smaller groups of men in one of the provinces of Ireland, powerful warriors who seem to have quite a bit of autonomy from Ailill and Medb.

As one example of such autonomy, the border of Medb and Ailill's camp seems quite permeable by such men. There are many examples of comings and goings from

⁵⁴¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 3270-75; *TBC-LL*, ll. 3724-35.

⁵⁴² *TBC-LL*, ll. 3800-10.

those areas of Ireland from which the men of the camp come. New characters occasionally arrive from outside of the original grouping, either deciding part way through the cattle raid that they wish to be a part of events or being summoned by Medb and Ailill. The powerful leader Cú Ruí, for example, continuously enters and exits the men of Ireland's camp. In Recension II, initially:

Racúas dó-saide óenfer ac fostod 7 ac immfuireach chethri n-ollchúiced Hérend ó lúan taite samna co taite n-imboilg. Acus ba dimbág laisium anísein 7 ba rochían leis bátar a munter 'na écmais, 7 tánic reme do chomlund 7 do chomruc ra Coin Culaind" ("Cú Ruí was told that a single man had been holding the four great provinces of Ireland in check from the Monday at the beginning of Samain until the beginning of spring. He was grieved by this and he thought that his people had been without him for too long, so he came forward to do battle and combat with Cú Chulainn").⁵⁴³

Upon realizing Cú Chulainn has already been so badly wounded by Fer Diad that it would be impossible, should Cú Ruí kill Cú Chulainn, for people to determine whose blow had actually led to the death, Cú Ruí proceeds to go and fight Amargin, who is throwing large rocks at the men of Ireland.⁵⁴⁴ In Recension I, this is the second time that Cú Ruí enters the camp. After the warrior Munremar begins throwing rocks at the men of Ireland, they notice that there are rocks coming towards them from their other side as well. It is revealed that:

⁵⁴³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3945-49.

⁵⁴⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3945-80.

Ecmaic immorro iss é Cú Ruí mac Dáiri dorigni insin. Dodeochaid do chobair a muntiri 7 boí hi Cotail for cind Munremair mac Gerrcind. Doluid-side ó Emain Macha do chobair Con Culaind co mboí i n-Ard Róich. Rofitir Cú Roí ní boí fer fulaing Munremair insin tslóg” (“[i]n fact it was Cú Ruí mac Dáire who had done this; he came to help his followers and he was in Cotail facing Munremar mac Gercinn. Munremar had come from Emain Macha to Ard Róich to the assistance of Cú Chulainn. Cú Roí knew that there was no one in the army who could withstand Munremar”).⁵⁴⁵

Many of the warriors that Cú Chulainn fights are also summoned to the camp.

Recension II states (with the details the same in Recension I):

Is and sin ra fáittea fessa 7 techtaireda ar cend Fir Diad. Ra érastar 7 ra éittchestar 7 ra repestar Fer Diad na techta sin & ní thánic leó dáig rafitir aní 'ma rabatar dó, do chomlond 7 do chomrac re charait, re chocle 7 re chomalta, re Coin Culaind mac Sualtaim, 7 ní thánic leó. Is and sin fáitte Medb na drúith 7 na glámma 7 na crúadgressa ar cend Fir Diad ar co nderntaís teóra áera sossaigthe dó 7 teóra glámma dícend go tócbaitís teóra bolga bara agid, ail 7 anim 7 athis, murbud marb a chétóir combad marb re cind nómaide, munu thísed. Tánic Fer Diad leó dar cend a enig, dáig ba hussu les-sium a thuttim do gaib gaile 7 gascid 7 engnama ná a thuttim de gaaib aire 7 écnaig 7 imdergtha” (“Then messengers and envoys were sent for Fer Diad. Fer Diad refused and denied and again refused those messengers and he did not come with them, for he knew what they wanted of him, which was, to fight with his

⁵⁴⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 1617-21.

friend and companion and foster-brother, Cú Chulainn mac Sualtair, and so he came not with them. Then Medb sent the druids and satirists and harsh bands for Fer Diad that they might make against him three satires to stay him and three lampoons, and that they might raise on his face three blisters, shame, blemish and disgrace, so that he might die before the end of nine days if he did not succumb at once, unless he came with the messengers. For the sake of his honour Fer Diad came with them, for he deemed it better to fall by shafts of valour and prowess and bravery than by the shafts of satire and reviling and reproach”).⁵⁴⁶

As another example, after realizing Cú Chulainn posed an enormous threat to their army, Medb and Ailill spend much time deliberating who should be sent to fight Cú Chulainn. At one point, after a truce has been arranged with Cú Chulainn, Ailill enquires who they should send next to fight. Medb replies, “Ní fil i nÉire [...] adchotar dó mani thuicther Cú Roí mac Dáire nó Nad Crantail fénnid” (“There is no one in Ireland to be got for him [...] unless Cú Roí mac Dáire or Nad Crantail the warrior be brought”).⁵⁴⁷ They decide to ask Nath Crantail, and send messengers to him. Recension I describes that “[t]éit Mane Andóí cucí. Adfiadat a scéla dó. ‘Tair lind di giull di inchaib Connacht.’ ‘Ní rag-sa,’ ‘ol sé,’ ‘inge má doberthar Findabair dam.’ Totáet leó íarom. Doberat a gaisced hi carr a hairthiur Chonnacht co mboí isin dúnud. ‘Rotbía Findabair,’ ‘or Medb,’ ‘ar dul ar cend ind fir uccut.’ ‘Dagén,’ ‘or sé” (“Maine Andóí went to Nad Crantail. They related their tidings to him. ‘Come with us for the sake of the honour of Connacht.’ ‘I will not,’ said he, ‘unless Findabair is given to me.’ He came with them then. They brought his

⁵⁴⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2617-27.

⁵⁴⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1396-97.

weapons in a cart from the east of Connacht to the encampment. ‘You shall get Findabair,’ said Medb, ‘as a reward for encountering yonder man.’ ‘I shall do so,’ said he”).⁵⁴⁸

These summons are interesting for a few reasons. Both the example of Fer Diad and that of Nath Crantail show how the composition of the army changes over time, with new warriors entering the army after it has already set off on the cattle raid, but they also show how limited is the amount of authority Medb and Ailill have over the leaders and warriors supposedly under their command. In Recension II, Nath Crantail is a Connachtman (“And sin atraacht láech prósta mór do muntir Medba, Nath Crantail a chomainm, & tánic do fúapairt Chon Culaind” [“Then there rose up a great and valiant warrior of Medb's household, called Nath Crantail, and he came to attack Cú Chulainn”]⁵⁴⁹) which indicates that, outside of her kinship groups, even those who logic suggests should be the most directly under Medb’s control have a great deal of power in their dealings with her. Medb is unable to simply order Nath Crantail or Fer Diad to fight – she must negotiate terms with them, and it is only when these terms are acceptable to them that they agree to face Cú Chulainn.

Such terms seem to be the norm for warriors sent to face Cú Chulainn. At one point after the men of Ireland have been discussing who should face Cú Chulainn next:

[i]ss ed ra ráidsetar uile combad é Calatín Dána cona secht maccaib fichet & a úa Glass mac Delga. Is amlaid ra bátar-saide neim ar cach fir díb & neim ar cach arm dá n-armaib, & ní theilged nech díb urchor n-imraill, & ní fuil bara fuliged nech díb, manbad marb a chétóir, rabad marb ria cind nómaide.

⁵⁴⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 1402-08.

⁵⁴⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1696-97.

Doragelta comada móra dóib arin comlund & arin comruc do dénam ([t]hey all agreed that it should be Calatín Dána with his twenty-seven sons and his grandson Glas mac Delga. Now there was poison on each man of them and poison on each weapon that they carried; none of them ever missed a throw, and anyone whom one of them wounded, if he died not at once, would die before the end of nine days. Great rewards were promised them for this fight and they undertook to engage in it).⁵⁵⁰

Calatín Dána is not fighting for Medb's interests. He has negotiated terms with Medb that will reward him and his descendants. Cú Chulainn's foster-brother Lugaid tells Laeg that Lugaid's own brother is being sent to fight Cú Chulainn, explaining:

“Atáthar agá rádha fri bráthair fil agam-sa toidhecht ina aghaidh, drúthóglach sotal soisil & bailcbémnech buanaisech, & is uime curthar do chomrac fris é da thuitim les (&) co ndechaind-si dá dhíogail fair-siomh, & ní rach-sa ann go bruinne mbrátha” (“They are asking a brother of mine to oppose him, a foolish youth, proud and arrogant, but a strong smiter and a victorious fighter. And the reason he is sent to fight him is that he may fall by Cú Chulainn and that I might then go to avenge his death on Cú Chulainn, but I shall never do that”).⁵⁵¹

In this case, this may simply reflect Lugaid's feelings towards Cú Chulainn and the loyalty he shows towards Cú Chulainn. However, given the fact there are so many instances of men needing to be offered rewards in order to fight Cú Chulainn, Lugaid may also assume that this refusal is a power he by rights possesses.

⁵⁵⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2534-40.

⁵⁵¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1915-18.

All the warriors in Medb's camp seem to have such a power to look out for their own interests above Medb and Ailill's. At one point in Recension II:

Rádis Medb fria muntir ara tíastais i comruc & i comlund fri Coin Culaind. 'Níba messi,' & 'níba mé,' ar cách assa magin. 'Ní dlegar cimmid dom muntir. Giano dlestea, ní mé no ragad i n-aid Con Culaind dáig ní réid comrac ris' (Medb ordered her people to go and fight and do combat with Cú Chulainn. 'It will not be I' and 'It will not be I', said one and all from the place where they were. 'No captive is due from my people. Even if he were, it is not I who would go to oppose Cú Chulainn, for it is no easy task to encounter him').⁵⁵²

The wording "dom muntir" ("from my people") suggests that many of the warriors in the men of Ireland's camp do not consider their foremost loyalty to be to Medb. She is a leader of a fragmented assembly of people, many of whom prioritize, and are allowed to prioritize, other larger groups or their own interests. In this example, Medb does order the troops, as opposed to her interactions with Fer Diad and Nath Crantail, suggesting her power is supposed to be greater over the general army than over leaders and particularly well-known and influential warriors, but even more regular warriors are disinclined to obey her orders if she pushes them too far or if they feel she is giving commands that only their own leader could give, which limits her capabilities.

Leaders and powerful warriors seem to have more autonomy than the ability to enter and exit the camp at will and to refuse to fight in single combat for Medb. When Cú Ruí is considered as a candidate to fight Cú Chulainn, one of his followers explains, "Ní therga Cú Roí. [...] Is leór leiss dodeochaid d'á muntir and" ("Cú Roí will not come.

⁵⁵² *TBC-LL*, ll. 1362-65. A similar scene occurs at *TBC-I*, ll. 2495-500 – the warriors in Medb's army all refuse to fight, although in this version she does not order them to do so.

[...] He thinks that enough of his people have already come”).⁵⁵³ Despite sending men to fight for Medb, Cú Ruí seems to owe her no loyalty and is able to pursue his own interests. When he later arrives to assist his men, he does not coordinate with Medb and Ailill as to how he will attack the enemy. He simply starts throwing rocks at Amargin, which ends up sending rock dust and debris over the men of Ireland. Medb has to request he stop, saying, “Ar fír do gascid fritt, a Chú Ruí, [...] scuir dún díburgun dáig ní furtacht ná fóirithin tic dún de acht is mífurtacht tic dún de” (“By the truth of your valour, Cú Ruí [...] cease from this stone-throwing, for it is no help to us but a hindrance”).⁵⁵⁴ He then chooses to depart.

In both recensions, Medb’s power is shown to be limited. She can influence the leaders and warriors within her army, and persuade them to do what she wants, but she cannot order them to do everything that she wishes. A higher loyalty for many of Medb’s men is their own self-interests and their loyalty to leaders who may or may not be under Medb’s influence. This lack of centralized power complicates Medb and Ailill’s position. However, unlike the groups discussed below, leaders and warriors, at least those from Connacht, do not ever choose to side against Medb in times of strife. They can choose not to engage, but do not choose to fight against Medb.

4.2.3 The Five Sections of Ireland

As well as the individual leaders who make decisions about their men, whom they will send to support Medb, and their own personal degrees of involvement in Medb

⁵⁵³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1399-400.

⁵⁵⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3962-64.

and Ailill's fight, there are larger groups with their own loyalties. Key among these are the groups that comprise the four sections of Ireland that Medb and Ailill have supporting them – Tara, Connacht, Munster, and Leinster. While Medb and Ailill ostensibly have the support of every section of Ireland but Ulster (and even some Ulstermen in the form of the Ulster exiles), each section also has its own assortment of loyalty ties to the other sections of Ireland and has its own at times conflicting priorities.

The men of Munster, led by the seven kings of Munster, join Medb's cattle raid after each of the seven kings is promised Findabair in marriage. After Findabair is engaged to another man:

Rachúala sein airrí de Mumnechaib ra boí 'sin longphurt. Báesium 'gá rád ria muntir: 'Banassa dam-sa ind ingen út uair chéin ám,' bar ésiú, '& is aire thánac-sa in slúaged sa don chur sá.' Cid trá acht airm i mbáatar na secht n-airríg de Mumnechaib, iss ed ra ráidsetar uile conid aire-sin táncatar ([o]ne of the underkings of Munster who was in the camp heard of this and said to his people: 'That girl was betrothed to me long ago and that is why I have come now upon this hosting'. However, as for the seven underkings of Munster, they all said that that was why they had come).⁵⁵⁵

This is their reason for joining Medb's army, but it is not enough to ensure their complete attention to Medb's goals. This potential future bond with Connacht is not enough to erase their other current loyalty ties to other groups. Munster has strong ties to Ulster. Fergus references these ties when describing how much of the army is allied with him, stating, "[A]tát secht ríg sund din Mumu 7 trícha cét la cech n-áe comchotach

⁵⁵⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3873-77.

dúinni 'nar nUltaib" ("There are here seven kings from Munster, allies of us Ulstermen, and a division with each king").⁵⁵⁶ The ties between Ulster and Munster include kinship ties, according to Recension I, where, as previously established, Cú Chulainn's foster-brother Lugaid is a king of Munster.⁵⁵⁷ Therefore, in every instance of conflict between the sections of Ulster in Medb's army, discussed later in greater detail, the men of Munster side with Fergus and the non-Connacht sections of Ireland. In turn, when the kings of Munster realize they have each been promised the same woman in marriage – a clear impossibility – and attack Medb and her loyal kinsman, all the men of Ireland outside of those from Connacht rise up and violently support the men of Munster. After one king explains that he had been promised Findabair seemingly in a legally binding way (" 'Dobrethai dam-sa an ingen sin [...] for cóic aitirib déac ar tuideacht in t-sluaigid sea" ["I was promised this girl on the surety of fifteen men, in requital for coming on this hosting"]⁵⁵⁸) and the other kings realize they were all promised the exact same prize, the kings of Munster decide, "'Cid dúnni 'no [...] ná ragmais-ni do dígail ar mná & ar n-ainig arna Manib fuil ac foraire dar éis in tslúaig ic Imlig in Glendamrach,'" ("Why then [...] should we not go to take vengeance for the woman and for our honour on the Maines who are keeping guard in the rear of the host at Imlech in Glendamrach?").⁵⁵⁹ In response:

Atracht Ailill dóib cona tríchait chét. Atraacht Medb cona tríchait chét.

Atraachtatar meic Mágach cona tríchtaib chét. Atraacht in Galéoin & in

Mumnig & popul na Temrach. Acus fogníthea etargaire eturru co ndessid cách

⁵⁵⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 172-73.

⁵⁵⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1818-19.

⁵⁵⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 3355-56.

⁵⁵⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3877-79.

díb i fail araile & i fail a arm ([t]hen Ailill rose to oppose them with his three thousand. Medb rose with her three thousand, and the sons of Mágu with their divisions. The Gaileóin and the Munstermen and the people of Tara rose. Intervention was made between them so that each man sat next to the other and beside his weapons).⁵⁶⁰

While it is not clearly stated which groups are sided against which, given the way the text separates Medb, Ailill and their kin from the rest of the sections of Ireland, it seems apparent that the two groups are against one another in the ensuing fray.

Both the other non-Connacht sections of Ireland already have kinship ties to Connacht – Ailill’s brothers are the kings of Tara and Leinster – he had “acht dá bráthair, fer díb for Temraig & fer for Lagnib .i. Find for Lagnib & Carpre for Temraig” (“two brothers, one of them reigning over Tara, the other over Leinster, namely, Find over Leinster and Cairbre over Tara”).⁵⁶¹ However, this level of connection does not mean that the warriors of Tara and Leinster prioritize Connacht over their own interests, although each group of warriors approaches their relationship with Connacht somewhat differently.

There are few mentions in Recension II of a group of warriors present in Medb and Ailill’s army from Tara, but enough mentions to determine that Tara seems to have sent warriors to support Medb and Ailill’s efforts. No such mentions occur in Recension I, perhaps indicating a difference in loyalties in this recension. When such warriors are mentioned, it is in passing a few times when tensions rise in the camp – they, along with

⁵⁶⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3881-85.

⁵⁶¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 45-46.

the men from the other sections, rise up to do battle.⁵⁶² From their location in these lists of combatants (they are mentioned immediately after the Munstermen and the Leinstermen, with Medb and Ailill's kin mentioned as their own unit) it appears they tend, if tensions mount, to side with the Ulster exiles, the Leinstermen, and the Munstermen. In a few instances, after Medb and Ailill arose, "Atraachtatar na Mani cona tríchtaib cé. Atraachtatar Meic Mágach cona tríchtaib cé. Atraacht in Galeoin & in Mumnig & popul na Temrach" ("[t]he Maines arose with their thirty hundreds and Meic Mágach with their thirty hundreds. The Leinstermen and the Munstermen and the people of Tara rose up").⁵⁶³ However, despite their presence alongside the other sections of Ireland, the men of Tara are never described as having a full division of men present during the cattle raid.

The men of Tara also have other complications in their loyalty decisions. While the king of Tara is Ailill's brother, his wife is Conchobor's daughter, Feidilmid Noíchruthach.⁵⁶⁴ She remains close enough to her natal family that Cú Chulainn, her cousin, visits her early in the *Táin*, as "i n-dáil a hinailte boí i comair Con Culaind i ndormaineacht" ("he meant to tryst with her handmaiden who was secretly Cú Chulainn's concubine").⁵⁶⁵ This suggests frequent visits to Tara for Cú Chulainn to have arrived at such a point of intimacy with this handmaiden. In the final battle, Erc, the son of the king of Tara, Cairpre, and of Feidilmid, arrives at the battle with a large grouping of men from Tara.

⁵⁶² *TBC-LL*, ll. 3881-85, 4265-69.

⁵⁶³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4266-68.

⁵⁶⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4110-12.

⁵⁶⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 223-24.

It appears as though Cairpre has not chosen sides against his brother, as Erc comes without his father's permission. Fergus specifies, "Dichmairc a athar dodeachaid in fer sin do chobair a senathar" ("Without asking permission of his father, that [man] has come to the assistance of his grandfather").⁵⁶⁶ The maternal kinship tie wins out and Erc comes to his grandfather's aid, in a move that is suggested to be the turning point of the battle and the reason Ulster is victorious. Fergus says:

[M]ás íat, nímo carat anairich and so, dóig 's a dichmairc a athar dodechaid in mac bec sain d'fóirithin a senathar din chur sa, & mad síat, bud muir conbáidfea dúib-si in buden sain dáig is tri dāgin na buidni sin & an meic bic rafail inti conmáe foraib-si in cath sa don chur sa.' 'Cid de-side?' bar Ailill. 'Ní handsa,' bar Fergus, 'dóig ní faccéga in mac bec sain úath ná húamain gabar slaidi-si & 'gabar n-essarggain co tora lár far catha chucaib. Concechlastar rucht claidib Conchobuir mar glimnaig n-archon i fathad ná mar leóman oc techt fo mathgamnaib. Concichre Cú Chulaind cethri múru móra de chollaib dóene immon cath sechtair. Bát bágaig, bat condalbaig confúarcfet flaithe fer nUlad ar n-úair. Is ferda conbúrfet in damrad dermór oc tessargain laíg a mbó issin chath issin matin se imbárach'" ("[I]f it is they, for this little lad has come on this occasion to succour his grandfather without asking permission of his father, and if it is they, this company will overwhelm you like the sea, for it is by reason of this company and the little lad among them that ye will be defeated on this occasion'. 'How is that?' asked Ailill. 'Not difficult to say' answered Fergus, 'for this little lad will experience neither fear nor dread when slaying

⁵⁶⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 3829-30. Translated 'boy' by O'Rahilly.

and slaughtering you until he comes to you into the middle of your army. The noise of Conchobor's sword shall be heard like the baying of a watchdog or like a lion attacking bears. Outside the line of battle Cú Chulainn will cast up four great ramparts of men's corpses. Filled with affection for their own kin, the chiefs of the men of Ulster will in due course smite you. Bravely will those powerful bulls roar as they rescue the calf of their own cow in the battle on the morrow's morn").⁵⁶⁷

The kinship ties that bind Tara to the various other sections of Ireland end up proving of far more use militarily to Ulster than to Connacht.

Leinstermen also participate in the cattle raid. They comprise the division of the Gailioin. The Leinstermen support the men of Munster in their conflict with Medb and Ailill over Findabair, likely in part because they received the assistance of the Munstermen at an earlier point in the tale. Medb conducts a survey of her troops and “[t]ic Medb iar n-déscin in t-slóig & asbert ba n-espá do chách dul in t-slógaid dían téset in trícha cét Galíon” (“[a]fter she had surveyed the host, Medb came back and said that it would be vain for the rest to go on that expedition if the division of the Gailíoin went also”).⁵⁶⁸ Medb decides that the Gailioin are too successful and skilled – they are quicker to set up their camp and cook their dinner than any other division in the army and Medb believes that this will cause dishonour to the rest of the troops. She suggests that the Gailioin be slaughtered.⁵⁶⁹ Fergus opposes this action, as the Leinstermen are

⁵⁶⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4547-59.

⁵⁶⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 147-48.

⁵⁶⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 147-62.

allies of the Ulstermen and, in Recension II, he stands as bond and surety for them.⁵⁷⁰

After Medb threatens the Gailioin, Fergus states:

Nípa fír són [...] atát secht ríg sund din Mumu & trícha cét la cech n-áe
comchotach dúinni 'nar n-Ultaib. Dobér-sa cath duit, [...] for lár in dúnaid h-i
tám cosna secht tríchtaib cét sin & com thríchait chét fadéin & co tríchait chét
na n-Galióin” (“That will not be. [...] There are here seven kings from Munster,
allies of us Ulstermen, and a division with each king. I shall give you battle in
the middle of the encampment where we now are, supported by those seven
divisions, by my own division and by the division of the Gailiόin”).⁵⁷¹

The conflict is avoided – Fergus suggests that rather than killing the Gailioin, they be separated and attached in small groups to other divisions of the host.⁵⁷² Yet the initial tense interactions involving the Gailioin reveal a great deal about the loyalty ties present in the camp, demonstrating the obvious tie between Ulster and Leinster, which continues throughout the rest of the *Táin* as the men of Leinster support Fergus’s decisions and as Fergus supports their continued actions.

At the end of the *Táin*, when Fergus departs the battlefield, the men of Tara, Leinster, and Munster all depart with him, leaving Medb, Ailill, and their kin to fight alone. Fergus encounters fierce vocal opposition from one of the warriors, and asks who faces him. He hears:

‘Cúchulaind mac Soaltaim & mac sethar Conchobair,’ ‘ol Cú Chulaind,’ ‘&
immomimgaib-sea,’ ‘or sé. ’ ‘Ro gellas-sa cid ed ón,’ ‘ol Fergus.’ ‘Dó duit didiu,’

⁵⁷⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 339-45.

⁵⁷¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 172-75.

⁵⁷² *TBC-I*, ll. 175-83.

'ol Cú Chulaind.' 'Maith,' 'ol Fergus.' 'Romimgabais -siu in tan basat tretholl-sa.' 'Luid Fergus as íarom in tan sin cona thríchaib cét. Lotar didiu in Gaileóin & na Muimnich, & fácbaid nóí tríchaid cét Medba & Ailella & a secht mac isin chath ('Cú Chulainn mac Suáltaim, the son of Conchobar's sister,' said Cú Chulainn, 'and hold back from me now.' 'I have promised to do that,' said Fergus. 'Begone then,' said Cú Chulainn. 'I agree,' said Fergus, 'for you refused to encounter me when you were pierced with wounds.' So at that juncture Fergus and his division of three thousand went away. The men of Leinster and the men of Munster went away too, and nine divisions, those of Medb and of Ailill and of their seven sons, were left in the battle).⁵⁷³

Recension II states, "Atchúala Fergus sain & ra impá & tucastar a thrí coscémenda láechda lánmóra, & óra impá-som, ra impátar fir Hérend uile. Da maid d'feraib Hérend dar tilaig síar. Tarrassaid inn irgal im chend Connacht" ("Fergus heard that, and he turned and took three mighty, heroic strides, and when he turned, all the men of Ireland turned and were routed westwards over the hill. The conflict was centred against the men of Connacht").⁵⁷⁴ Fergus's departure is "the turning-point of the battle" due to the number of men who leave with him.⁵⁷⁵ The loyalties of Munster, Leinster, and Tara to Ulster, even in the form of the exiled Ulstermen, overpowers their loyalty to Connacht.

⁵⁷³ *TBC-I*, 4103-10.

⁵⁷⁴ *TBC-LL*, 4812-15.

⁵⁷⁵ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 198.

4.2.4 Ailill and Medb

In the midst of all of these factions, not even Medb and Ailill always seem unified in their decision making, leading to a complex internal set up with complicated rules, which Fergus must navigate in order to keep himself and Ulstermen who follow him safe in their exile. The incident with the Gailioin reveals not only the relationship between the Gailioin and the Ulstermen, but also the tie between Ailill and the Gailioin.

In Recension I, Ailill stands up for the Gailioin against Medb after she decides they are harmful for the army saying, “‘Is airiund arbáget dano,’ [...] ‘Ní regat lend,’ ol Medb. ‘Anat didiu,’ ol Ailill” (“‘Yet it is for us they fight. [...] They shall not go with us,’ said Medb. ‘Let them stay here then,’ said Ailill”).⁵⁷⁶ After Medb declares the best decision would be to kill the Gailiún, Ailill tells her, “Ní chélam as banchomairle” (“I shall not deny that is a woman's counsel”).⁵⁷⁷ Dominguez notes that “historically, the Gailioin are associated with [Ailill's] home province of Leinster”⁵⁷⁸ and that due to this, killing the Gailioin would be kin-slaying for him. Edel also discusses the connection between Ailill and Leinster, examining the idea proposed by a number of scholars that Medb's suggestion to kill the Gailioin is not about the Gailioin, but about Ailill. According to Recension II, Medb is already preparing for battle because of politics to do with Ailill – she needs the bull because otherwise Ailill will have more goods than her in the marriage and thus have power over her. The Gailioin, “[a]s her husband's household troops, [...] are a danger to the power balance in her marriage.”⁵⁷⁹ Eliminating them

⁵⁷⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 155-57.

⁵⁷⁷ *TBC-I*, l. 163.

⁵⁷⁸ Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 231.

⁵⁷⁹ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 224.

solves her problem. This means that even at the uppermost level of the power structure in Medb and Ailill's army, there is division. Medb and Ailill are not always a united front.

4.3 Disunifying Factors

Acting on these disparate and only partially unified forces are a number of those real-world problems to which any invading army is subject. Such forces act to further complicate Medb and Ailill's job of holding together their troops.

4.3.1 *Morale*

One such factor the text hints at as affecting the troops is low morale. Not all of the men wanted to be there in the first place – at the beginning of the hosting, Medb journeys among the troops to find out “cía lasmboth scíth & lasmboth laind techt in t-slógaid” (“who among them was reluctant and who was glad to go on the hosting”).⁵⁸⁰ This puts some stress on the operation from the beginning, especially as, as shown above, certain groups have no objection to leaving the hosting or refusing to fight if they feel they are not being treated correctly. Medb and Ailill must negotiate this. There is not the instant loyalty and determination to protect one another that is demonstrated in earlier chapters in familial relationships.

In addition, the men are constantly under attack by Cú Chulainn, but have no clear target to attack much of the time, especially after Cú Chulainn agrees to fight only a warrior at a time at the ford. A strange mixture of fear and boredom emerges, neither

⁵⁸⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 138-39.

of which contributes to the positive functioning of the army. This is shown in part by how much of a focus Medb and Ailill place on entertainment. There are multiple instances of them bringing entertainers into the camp in an attempt to ease tensions. For example, in Recension II, Ailill at one point declares:

‘Sáditer sosta & pupaill lind [...] & déntar urngam bíd & lenna lind & cantar ceóil & airfítí lind & déntar praind & tomaltus. Dáig is comtig ara fagbaitis fir Hérend ríam nó iarum aidchi ndúnaid nó longphuirt mad mó dód nó doccair dóib andás ind aidchi se arraír.’ Ra sádit a sosta & ra suidigit a pupla. Darónad urngam bíd & lenna leó & ra canait ceóil & airfítí leó & darónad praind & tomaltus” (“Let us pitch our tents and pavilions, and let us prepare food and drink and let us make music and melody and let us eat and take food, for it is unlikely that the men of Ireland ever at any time experienced a night of encampment that held more hardship and distress for them than last night.’ Their encampments were set up and their tents pitched. Food and drink was prepared by them, music and melody played, and they ate a meal”).⁵⁸¹

However, the men become extremely sensitive to fear of attack. When a group of harpers arrives to entertain the men, “[i]ndar leó ba du thoscélad forru ó Ultaib. Doberat toffund forru co l-lotár reppo i n-delbaib oss íarom isna coirthib oc Líac Mór antúaid, ar roptar druíd co móreólas” (“they thought that the harpers had come from the Ulstermen to spy on them. So they hunted them until they went before them into the pillar-stones at Lía Mór in the north, transformed into deer, for (in reality) they were druids possessed of great occult knowledge”).⁵⁸² The text does not make clear whether this transformation

⁵⁸¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 685-91.

⁵⁸² *TBC-I*, ll. 943-45.

means that the men had true reason to fear the harpers, but as the passage follows a segment where Cú Chulainn has been harassing Medb and Ailill's army and has come very close to killing Ailill, the passage does seem to indicate that the men of Ireland are experiencing heightened tensions that lead them to be quick to attack if there is even suspicion of danger.

4.3.2 Bickering and difficult personalities

The boredom the men feel is also partially displayed by the personality disputes and bickering that occurs in Medb and Ailill's camp – an occurrence not replicated among the Ulstermen. That she will have a hard time is evident to Medb at the beginning – problems of this kind seem common to a hosting. In Recension I, Medb says, “[B]ít imserga & círgala & fuili fordergga i cach slúag & i cach thaurchomrac dúnaid móir” (“[I]n every muster and in every army assembled in a great encampment there are quarrels and strife and bloody woundings”).⁵⁸³ In Recension II, Medb says something similar, but attributes much of the violence to the warriors constant struggle to prove themselves the best among their equals. She says:

Ni bá lim-sa aní dá tá lat-su sain, dáig ó condricfat fir Hérend óenbaile, betit debtha & irgala & scandlacha scandrecha eturru im chomríctain tosaig nó derid nó átha nó aband, im chétguine muicce nó aige nó fiada nó fiadmíla” (“I care not for your reasoning, for when the men of Ireland gather in one place, among them will be strife and battle and broils and affrays, in dispute as to who

⁵⁸³ *TBC-I*, ll. 61-62.

shall lead the van or bring up the rear or first cross ford or river or first kill swine or cow or stag or game”).⁵⁸⁴

Combined with this normal bickering and competitiveness is the presence of people who may be excellent warriors, but cause tension merely by being disliked. When Cú mac Da Lóth is asked to fight Cú Chulainn there is general agreement, in both recensions, that the men of Ireland would win whether Cú kills Cú Chulainn or is killed himself.⁵⁸⁵ Recension II states, “[D]áig amlaid buí Cú níba súairc comlepaid nó comáentu friss. Ocus atbertatar cid sé Cú táetsad, ba dingbáil trommad dona slúagaib; diambad é Cú Chulaind, bá ferr són” (“For such was Cú that it was not pleasant to be his bedfellow or to be intimate with him, and they said that if it were Cú who fell, it would mean a lightening of oppression for the hosts, and that if it were Cú Chulainn, it would be still better”).⁵⁸⁶

Such problems are logical given the number of different groups called together to form the host and their multitude of differing goals and loyalty ties, which must be compounded by the fact that on top of the tension of their task, the opposition they face from Cú Chulainn provides them with no outlet for their aggression – Medb and Ailill have a group of warriors whom they are unable to distract from infighting by pointing them at a clear target.

⁵⁸⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 226-29.

⁵⁸⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 1695-1699; *TBC-LL*, ll. 1816-20.

⁵⁸⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1818-20.

4.3.3 Supply Lines

While never directly discussed, there is evidence throughout both recensions of the *Táin* that supply lines are an unseen but very important factor for Medb's forces. Supplying an army the size of Medb and Ailill's is a massive undertaking – armies throughout history have struggled with this issue. In the *Táin*, this problem is indicated by how rare some items are, and thus how valuable to the assembled forces. Medb and Ailill are able to bribe many men into fighting Cú Chulainn partly through the offer of alcohol, as only a certain number of containers of the liquor had been brought along. In Recension I, “Doberar fín dó íarom corbo mesc, & asber fris bá cáem leó-som a l-lind sin, ní tobrad acht ere cóecat fén leó” (“Fer Báeth was plied with wine until he was intoxicated. He was told that they prized that liquor for only fifty wagon-loads of it had been brought by them”).⁵⁸⁷ In Recension II, Findabair explains, “Ní do chách berar la Meidb an lionn dáilter for Láiríne [...] Ní tucc acht eri cáogat fén de dochum an loncphuir” (“Not to all and sundry does Medb give the liquor that is served [...] to Láiríne. [...] She brought only fifty wagon-loads of it to the camp”).⁵⁸⁸ While in Recension II this is never suggested to be anything but the truth, in Recension I a comment by Ailill indicates that certain such luxury items were brought along deliberately to ensure good behaviour by those following Medb and Ailill. He says:

Ní faigéibthar-side etir [...] acht má dorónaid céill occai. Nách fer dotháeti chucaib, tabraid fín dó corop maith a menma, & asberthar friss' ' iss ed nammá fil dond fín tucad a Crúachnaib, rosáeth linni do bith-siu for uisciu isin dúnad

⁵⁸⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1753-55.

⁵⁸⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1933-35.

(No one will be got [...] unless ye employ some trickery in this matter. Give wine to every man that comes to you until he is gladdened in mind, and tell him: 'That is all that is left of the wine that was brought from Crúachain. We are grieved that you should have only water to drink in the camp).⁵⁸⁹

This also clearly suggests that by the time they arrive in Ulster, obtaining supplies takes a long enough time that the general soldiery has only water to drink.

There seems to be an equal trouble with the acquisition of food. Hunting is shown as a very valuable skill, and when given the opportunity to collect more food, the army takes it. For example, in Recension I, when the men of Ulster encounter:

ocht fichit oss n-allaid and i n-óenalaim. Cúartait impu. Nos gonat íarom. Nách airm thrá i m-buí fer donaib Galiónaib is h-é arddaánaic, acht cóic oss arránic in slóg ule díib. Dotháegat iar sudiu i m-Mag Trego & scurit and & arfogant dóib (eight score deer in a single herd. They encircled them and killed them. Wherever there was a man of the Gailioin, it was he who got a deer, for the rest of the host got only five of the deer. They came on then to Mag Trego and there they encamped and prepared food for themselves).⁵⁹⁰

The order of events also suggests that it is the deer that are prepared after setting up camp, which may mean a very limited supply of longer-term victuals have been brought along. The same is true in Recension II, where the same event occurs. The text notes that:

[a] haithle na laíde sin: Táncaitar cethri ollchóiceda Hérend dar Móin Coltna sair in lá sain & da 'marallsatar dóib ocht fichtiu oss n-allaid. Sernsat & immsit

⁵⁸⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1809-12.

⁵⁹⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 184-88.

na slóig impu & ros gonsat conná bátar élódaig díb. Acht atá ni, garbat díscáiltig trícha cét Galían. Cóic aige in amáin ba hé cuit fer nHérend díb. Rodasfuc in t-óentrícha cét uli na hocht fichtiu oss ([a]fter that lay: the army of the four great provinces of Ireland came eastwards over Móin Coltna that day and there met them eight score deer. The army spread out and surrounded them and killed them so that none escaped. Yet though the division of the Gailíoin were dispersed, only five deer fell to the men of Ireland. The one division of the Gailíoin carried off the rest of the eight score deer).⁵⁹¹

The issue of supplies is shown even more starkly in the case of Cú Chulainn. While Medb and Ailill planned for their cattle raid, and seem to have supply trains and people along to prepare food, Cú Chulainn has no such options nor such time to prepare. His food is such that when Fergus comes to visit, despite the limited supplies in the camp of the men of Ireland, he rejects Cú Chulainn's offer of food, saying, "Is tarise lim [...] ní do biad dorochtamar. Rofetamar do threbad sund" ("I trust your welcome [...] but it is not for food that I have come. I know what provisions you have here").⁵⁹² Recension II provides more information. When Cú Chulainn is battling Fer Diad, for the first number of nights they share resources and:

Cach bíad & cach lind soóla socharchaín somesc raberthea ó feraib Hérend do Fir Diad, ra hidnaicthea comraind úad díb dar áth fothúaithe do Choin Chulaind, dáig raptar lia bíataig Fir Diad andá bíataig Con Culaind, dáig raptar bíattaig fir Hérend uile d'Fir Diad ar dingbáil Con Culaind díb. Raptar bíataig Brega 'no do Choin Chulaind ([o]f all the food and palatable, pleasant, strong drink which

⁵⁹¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 436-41.

⁵⁹² *TBC-I*, ll. 1317-18.

was brought from the men of Ireland to Fer Diad, an equal amount was sent by him northwards across the ford to Cú Chulainn. For Fer Diad's purveyors of food were more numerous than those of Cú Chulainn as all the men of Ireland were purveyors of food to Fer Diad for warding off Cú Chulainn from them, but only the men of Bregia were purveyors of food to Cú Chulainn).⁵⁹³

It seems as though the men of Ireland agree to give the best of their resources from their limited supply to Fer Diad, acknowledging the difficulty of his task in repelling Cú Chulainn, while Cú Chulainn does not have enough food to make sharing worthwhile for Fer Diad.

The combination of men already uncertain, quarrelsome, and, in many cases, with no direct allegiance to Medb and Ailill leads to troubles, and the constant threat of no food does not help. Their opinions and their loyalties are ready to be swayed, and they are ready for the entertainment that any betrayal spectacle would cause.

4.3.4 The Construction of the Ulster Army

A final factor facing the men of Ireland is the difference in the makeup of the Ulster army. The Ulstermen stand in considerable contrast to the men of Ireland in regard to these factors that break down armies. They are not the instigators of the aggression, rather working at defending themselves, and thus have far less work to hold themselves together as a unit. They have every reason in the world to band together, even ignoring past aggressions, such as that between Eogan mac Durthachta and Conchobor, in order to repel invaders to their lands. The Ulstermen also do not need to

⁵⁹³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3171-76.

engage in a long campaign, as Medb and Ailill do. They only really come together to fight once in the *Táin* – at the final battle in which Medb and Ailill’s forces are defeated.⁵⁹⁴ Before this they were debilitated, and thus unable to fight, but it does mean that when they do battle, there is a very clear objective. Therefore there are no examples of local leaders deciding not to join the final battle – local leaders have every personal reason to wish Medb and Ailill gone, given that the men of Ireland have been pillaging women and cattle from the Ulstermen.⁵⁹⁵ The Ulstermen also have many strong kinship ties, and are well-integrated in a sense of local community.

Many of the primary leaders on the Ulster side are Conchobor’s sons or grandsons and thus display loyalty to kin, but even men seen to be enemies at certain points in the *Táin* fight alongside the Ulstermen with no apparent conflict. At the end of Recension II, Ailill asks who one of the warriors approaching his forces are and Fergus responds, “Is cur lám for debaid sin. Is cathmílid bar níth. Is bráth bar bidbadu cách tánic and. Eogan mac Durthachta a fosta Fernmaige atúaid and sin” (“The men who came there is the starting of strife, a warrior for conflict, doom of enemies. That was Eogan mac Durthachta from the north, the steadfast ruler of Farney”).⁵⁹⁶ Eogan is mentioned similarly in Recension I, where there is also information on his past with the Ulstermen. Fergus mentions that “Boí imnisse chatha eter Ultu & Eógan mac n-Durthacht. Tíagait Ulaid don chath. Fácabar-som inna chotlud. Maiti for Ultu. Fácabar Conchobar & Cúscraid Mend Macha & sochaide mór olchena” (“There was strife between the Ulstermen and Eógan mac Durthacht. The Ulstermen went to battle while

⁵⁹⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 3410-4160; *TBC-LL*, ll. 3981-4920.

⁵⁹⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4021-23.

⁵⁹⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4373-75.

Cú Chulainn was left behind asleep. The Ulstermen were defeated. Conchobar and Cúscraid Menn Macha and many others besides were left on the field”).⁵⁹⁷ Cú Chulainn rescues Conchobar and Cúscraid from the battlefield, and the conflict between Eogan and Conchobar is left unresolved.⁵⁹⁸ However, Eogan is there in the final battle fighting to preserve his homeland.⁵⁹⁹

4.3.5 Loyalty Lures

The fact that the men of Ulster are so cohesive as a unit means that the men of Ireland need to be united. However, due to their own complicated and fractured group dynamics, and the destabilizing factors present in Medb and Ailill's camp, the men of Ireland are a complicated group to keep organized and obedient. Medb and Ailill have the difficult task of persuading people, many of whom have no real initial reason to hate Ulster or desire to be a part of the army, to fight for them. As they are not ultimately the only decision-makers in the camp (they have the assistance of too many other leaders for this), the two cannot rely solely on ordering those following them to do what they wish. Instead they must rely on an assortment of means of persuasion (many of which have been described already in passing), as seen with Ailill holding back the most delectable alcoholic drinks to persuade men to fight Cú Chulainn.

Bribery through gift-giving, as in the case of these drinks, is quite a commonly used method of persuasion. This can take many forms. A number of men are offered Findabair's hand in marriage – and through her a connection and alliance to the power

⁵⁹⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 482-85.

⁵⁹⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 486-523.

⁵⁹⁹ *TBC-I*, l. 3640.

of her family. Many of the men asked to fight Cú Chulainn are bribed with other rewards, as detailed earlier. They are promised land, freedom from taxes, and equipment, as well as marriage to Findabair.

As well as using her daughter's marriageability as a means of social control, Medb uses her own. In Recension I, one of the items she offers to Fer Diad as a means of having him fight Cú Chulainn is *slíasait* (sexual intercourse).⁶⁰⁰ As mentioned in the list of betrayals in Chapter Two, she also sleeps with Fergus. While Fergus treats his own behaviour in this matter as a betrayal of Ailill, Ailill does not seem troubled by Medb's behaviour, saying, "Is dethbir disi [...] Is ar chobair ocon táin dorigní" ("She is [reasonable] (to behave thus) [...] She did it to help in the cattle-driving)."⁶⁰¹ More so than with any other man in the army, it is logical to assume that Medb wants control over Fergus. Approximately half of the forces in the army seem to have ties to Fergus, and as is seen in the final battle, it is ultimately these loyalties that divide Medb's forces, when many of the other provinces of Ireland follow Fergus and the other exiles when they depart the field of battle. These tensions seem present in Medb's decision to sleep with Fergus, and in Ailill's reaction to it, where he uses Fergus's betrayal as an excuse to weaken the man by taking his sword. The text states:

Bliadain riasin sceol sa tarraid Ailill Fergus ic techt i n-óentaíd Medba arsind
lettir i Crúachain & a chlaideb arsind lettir 'na farrad, & tópaht Ailill in claideb
assa intig & dobretha claideb craind dia inud, & dobert a bréthir ná tibred dó co
tucad lá in chatha móir (A year before these events Ailill had come upon
Fergus together with Medb on the hillside in Crúachu with his sword on the hill

⁶⁰⁰ *TBC-I*, l. 2601. Translated as 'intimate friendship' by O'Rahilly.

⁶⁰¹ *TBC-I*, l. 1053. 'reasonable' translated as 'right' in O'Rahilly's translation.

beside him, and Ailill had snatched the sword from its sheath and put a wooden sword in its place, and he swore that he would not give him back the sword until he gave it on the day of the great battle).⁶⁰²

While this is justified due to Fergus's betrayal, it seems done not in a moment of passion as a result of Ailill's anger at the betrayal, but rather as a strategy to prevent Fergus from developing greater influence in the army.

Medb and Ailill's strategy in dealing with Fergus highlights one of the key strategies that they use to keep their forces loyal – the threat of public shaming over betrayal acts. Yet this alone would not be successful in achieving their goals, and therefore they employ it alongside exploiting the permeability present in their camp.

4.4 Permeability

The boundary lines of Medb and Ailill's camp are permeable. As previously established, men from the many factions present in Medb's camp come and go from the camp quite freely during the course of the cattle raid – many of them coming from their own holdings in order to fight or returning to their holdings after deciding not to fight. Some of these comings and goings, such as that of Fer Diad, are directly solicited by Medb and Ailill in an attempt to recruit new men who can assist them in their struggles. However, there is a different side to this permeability as well. As well as there being entry into and out of the camp by Medb and Ailill's allies to and from their homelands, there is movement and interaction between the men of Medb and Ailill's camp and those of Ulster. These interactions take many forms.

⁶⁰² *TBC-I*, ll. 2487-91.

4.4.1 Advice, Information, and Conversation

Frequently, warriors from the men of Ireland's camp (particularly from the Ulster exiles) offer advice and information to Cú Chulainn. Often, this comes in the form of information about Cú Chulainn's next opponent. For example, in both recensions Fergus visits his foster-son after Fer Diad agrees to fight in order to warn Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn also frequently either sends Láeg to talk to Lugaid in the camp of the men of Ireland or is himself visited by Lugaid.⁶⁰³ This is never said to be done secretly, and no one seems to object to this behaviour. In fact, at times Lugaid is requested by Medb and Ailill to visit Cú Chulainn.⁶⁰⁴

Cú Chulainn also receives advice from the Ulster exiles. For example, at one point Cú Chulainn appears to avoid a fight with Nath Crantail, wandering away when he is being attacked because he does not realize the other man is attacking him. This allows Medb and Ailill to begin to say that Cú Chulainn is cowardly. The text notes that "rádis Fergus fri Fiachu mac Fir Aba ar co ndigsed do acallaim Con Culaind. 'Ocus ráid-siu friss fíal dó bith forsna slúagaib cian gar dorigéni gnímrada gaile forro & ba féile dó a immfolach oldás teched ria n-óenláech díb'" ("Fergus told Fiachu mac Fir Aba to go and speak with Cú Chulainn. 'And tell him that it was seemly for him to attack the hosts as long as he performed deeds of valour upon them but that it were fitter for him to hide himself rather than to flee before a single warrior from among them").⁶⁰⁵ Fiachu does

⁶⁰³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1168-70, 1409-11, 1545-47, 1586-87, 1686-87, 1737-48, 1761-70, 1812-44; *TBC-LL*, ll. 1858-67, 1906-30.

⁶⁰⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 1545-47; 1585-92; 1686-68.

⁶⁰⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1718-21.

this, and Cú Chulainn welcomes the advice, asking Fiachu to tell Nath Crantail to meet Cú Chulainn again the following morning so that they can properly fight.⁶⁰⁶

As well, sometimes warriors with a close relationship to each other from the two camps seem to meet each other just to talk. One very interesting example of this is found in the a story told in Recension I:

‘Fíacha Fíaldána Dimraith dolluid do acallaim meic sethar a máthar .i. Mane Andóe a ainm. Dolluid Dócha mac Mágach la Mane n-Andóe. Dolluid Dubthach Dóel Ulad la Fíachaich Fíaldána Dimraith. Docorastár Dócha gaí for Fíachaig co l-luid i n-Dubthach. Focheird dano Dubthach gaí for Mane co l-luid i n-Dócha. Dí fieir immorro máthair Dubthaig & Dóche (Fíacha Fíaldána Dimraith came to have speech with the son of his mother's sister, whose name was Maine Andóe. Dócha mac Mágach came with Maine Andóe and Dubthach Dóel Ulad came with Fíacha Fíaldána Dimraith. Dócha cast a spear at Fíacha and it went into Dubthach. Then Dubthach cast a spear at Maine and it went into Dócha. The mothers of Dubthach and Dócha were also two sisters).⁶⁰⁷

The family dynamics present in this scenario, and what the interactions say about the dynamics of the army in the time of the cattle raid, are fascinating. Maine Andóe is the son of Medb, the leader of the men of Ireland, and yet his cousin (the son of Medb's sister) is present on the Ulster side during this fight. Dócha mac Mágach is Ailill's maternal uncle, who seemingly also has family on the Ulster side. As previously stated, in other areas of the text the primacy of the maternal kin is demonstrated. This example shows exactly how seriously hurting maternal kin is taken – the throw present in the title

⁶⁰⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1722-55.

⁶⁰⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 2456-62.

is a mis-throw because both Dubthach and Dócha attempt to kill the man present on the opposite side and fail, instead hitting their own relatives. The accidental nature of the event prevents any element of betrayal, but the text does make a value judgement on the event and it is not viewed positively. Yet the episode also shows the difficulty so many of those in the army must encounter – kinship divisions do not run neatly along provincial lines, and in the context of a war it is nearly impossible to guarantee that one does not harm kinsfolk on the other side. However, the initial encounter between kin does not seem to be considered at all odd – no one disagrees to Maine and Fíacha meeting, nor does the eventual violence seem to be at all caused by disapproval of this initial action – it is opportunistic violence caused by chance proximity to the enemy.

4.4.2 Verbal agreements

Verbal agreements that run contrary to anything that would be of use to Medb and Ailill often cross the boundary line between Medb and Ailill's camp and the Ulstermen. These agreements go both ways, and are usually established between allies or family members. For example, Cú Chulainn agrees to his friend Lugaid's request that Cú Chulainn will not harm men of Lugaid's company so long as they do not harm him, saying, "Rot bía acht ro pé comarthaé furri. Ocus apair frim popa Fergus bíd comardae fora m-budin. Apair frisna legi bíth comardae fora m-budin & toinget anmchoméit frim & domiced bíad cach n-óenaidche úadib" ("You shall have that provided that they bear a special sign (that I may recognize them.) And tell my friend Fergus that his company too should bear a special sign. Tell the physicians to make their company also bear a sign

and let them swear to preserve my life and send me food every night”).⁶⁰⁸ When his friend Cethern is injured, “Is and fódis Cú Chulaind Lóeg úad isin duibdúnad co Fiacha mac Fir Febe do chuindchid legi & asbert nosmaifed-som uile cid fo thalmain no betis isin dúnad mani ríastais chucai-som do chomchisin Cethirn” (“Cú Chulainn sent Láeg to Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe in the encampment of the banished Ulstermen to seek physicians, and said that he would kill them all even if they were to take refuge underground in the encampment unless they came to him to cure Cethern”).⁶⁰⁹ Cú Chulainn takes advantage of the arrangement that he makes with those of his allies in Medb’s camp, an arrangement that Medb and Ailill have done nothing to prevent. So long as the assistance is not outside of certain boundary lines, it seems Medb and Ailill cannot prevent those fighting for them from honouring kinship ties. In Recension II, Lugaid does not make such an agreement with Cú Chulainn, making Cú Chulainn’s abduction of the physicians have quite a different significance.

Another example of a verbal agreement between Ulster and a man of Medb and Ailill’s camp occurs when an aging Ulsterman, Íliach, the grandfather of one of the primary Ulster warriors, Láegaire, attacks the men of Ireland. Recension II, when he first attacks, “Barrecgaib Dóche mac Mágach dó-som & firis fáilte friseom” (“Dóche mac Mágach met him and welcomed him”).⁶¹⁰ This is interesting, as the set phrases used here usually occur in situations where Cú Chulainn talks with his foster-kin but in this instance occur between an Ulsterman and one of Ailill’s own kinsmen. Dóche welcomes him and Íliach responds that he trusts that welcome.⁶¹¹ Íliach knows he is old and that

⁶⁰⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 1187-90.

⁶⁰⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 3176-79.

⁶¹⁰ *TBC-LL*, l. 3913.

⁶¹¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3914-15.

eventually his strength will wane. He makes an agreement with Dóche that will benefit them both, saying, “[T]air chucum mán úair innossa in tráth scáigfit mo gala & sergfait mo gala, corop tú benas mo chend dím & nárop nech aile d'feraib Hérend. Acht maired mo chlaideb acut chena do Laígaire” (“[C]ome to me presently when my weapons are exhausted and when my valour has diminished so that you may be the one to behead me and not any other man of the men of Ireland. But keep my sword for Láegaire”).⁶¹² Dóche will receive the glory of killing the wily old warrior, but Íliach arranges for Láegaire to gain that which should rightfully be his, and for Íliach himself to have some dignity in death, since it is done by a friend. There is no indication from the text that this agreement is seen as betraying either man’s allegiance to his own larger political unit. In part this may be because Íliach is going to die no matter what arrangements he makes, so this agreement does not materially affect anyone.

This making of agreements is also seen in some of the personal arrangements both Ulstermen and men of Ireland make with their enemies to stop fighting for a certain time and only return for the final battle. One example of this is the earlier discussed incident when the warrior Amargin, fighting for Ulster, is hurling rocks at the men of Ireland and Cú Ruí, fighting for Medb’s side, enters the fray and begins throwing rocks back, causing discomfort for all other warriors involved, as the rocks slew their debris all over the war camp. Medb asks Cú Ruí to stop in his attack, but he only does so by his own agreement, not sanctioned by Medb, with Amargin. After Medb asks him to stop, he says, “Tiur-sa bréthir [...] ná scuriub-sa co brunni brátha & betha coro scuirea Amargin” (“I swear [...] that I shall not cease till the day of doom until Amargin cease

⁶¹² *TBC-LL*, ll. 3915-18.

too”).⁶¹³ Amargin replies, “Scoirfet-sa [...] & geib-siu fort ná ticfa d'fortacht ná d'fóirithin fer nHérend ní bas mó” (“I shall do so [...] and do you undertake not to come again to help and succour the men of Ireland”).⁶¹⁴ At this point Cú Ruí departs, showcasing once again Medb’s limitations in controlling the leaders working with her in the army.

Men on the Ulster side make similar agreements, such as when Reochaid agrees to sleep with Findabair, becoming engaged to her and due to this promising not to attack again until the final battle. As previously discussed, Recension I treats this example as potentially morally troubling, with the text mentioning that it was not easy to persuade Reochaid to go to the place where he makes the agreement.⁶¹⁵ Recension I also has a duplicate of this scene in which Reochaid needs to be forcibly abducted before he will agree to these terms.⁶¹⁶ However, Recension II seems untroubled by any such moral quandaries in this situation.

For the most part, passive actions against the army for which a warrior is fighting (refusing to fight, agreeing not to kill cared-about warriors on the other side) seem unobjectionable and are not treated as betrayals.

For many of these occasions when warriors from one side give advice to the other and make verbal agreements, the conversations seem to be held in private. There is some suspicion around the fact no one knows what is said during such discussions, such as when Fergus has to leave a meeting with Cú Chulainn quite quickly in order to avoid being accused of betraying the Connacht camp.⁶¹⁷ However, the privacy also

⁶¹³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3964-65.

⁶¹⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3966-67.

⁶¹⁵ *TBC-I*, l. 3352.

⁶¹⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 1659-84.

⁶¹⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1605-06.

means that warriors can discuss matters of import more openly than when there is an audience and they must uphold the standards of honour.

4.4.3 Actions against the Army

One form of permeability is directly prohibited at all times – direct military action that aids kin on the other side. This is evident from the example of Fiachu, who saves Cú Chulainn after he is attacked by Calatín Dána and twenty-eight of Calatín Dána's relations. Hearing about the many men who are scheduled to attack his foster-son, Fergus is grieved and says, “[N]í fuil digsed dá físs dam-sa bad fiadnaisi don chomlund & don chomroc & da berad a físs dam mar da mairbfithea Cú Chulaind, ná tibrind mo bennachtain & m'eirred” (“[T]here is not man who should go to witness the encounter for me and bring me news if Cú Chulainn should be killed, to whom I would not give my blessing and my gear”).⁶¹⁸ Fiachu agrees to these conditions, and there is no hint in the text that this is considered objectionable. Information is an acceptable form of permeability. However, after Fiachu intervenes and saves Cú Chulainn, there are stated consequences. Fiachu explains:

Cid teóir i n-éim duit-siu é, níba teóir a n-éim dúnni, dóig ra fuilemm trichait chét i n-as dech clainne Rudraige i ndúnud & i llongphurt fer nHérend & rarbérthar uile fa gin gae & chloidib, cid bec lat-su in béim ra benas-sa, mad dia festar forund é (Though it be timely aid for you, it will not be so for us, for though you think little of the blow I struck, yet if it be discovered, the three

⁶¹⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2553-55.

thousand men of the finest of Clann Rudraige that we number in the camp of the men of Ireland will be put to the sword).⁶¹⁹

While there are many forms of exchange permissible between the men of Ireland and Ulstermen, the exchange of martial favours is not one of them.

4.5 Permeability or Betrayal?

Unless direct martial assistance is provided to their enemies, Medb and Ailill do very little to stop these interactions and the interchange of assistance between their own men and those of Ulster. This is likely in part due to the fact that most of the interactions between soldiers in their camp and the Ulstermen are interactions between kinsmen. Seemingly, there is no way for Medb and Ailill to prevent such interactions. Loyalty to kin is the most significant loyalty, as previously established, and Medb and Ailill know they would be foolish to try and compete with loyalty to family. Therefore, they pursue two joint policies to manage such behaviour. The first is not to control the behaviour, but instead to use it to their advantage. The second is to use the threat of public shaming for betrayal whenever such interactions cross any lines of what is acceptable in Irish heroic culture at the time, or at least in its literary presentation. With the audience constantly watching heroes as they fight, any sign of weakness or dishonour can ruin a man's reputation entirely.

⁶¹⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2579-83.

4.5.1 Permeability

Medb and Ailill typically use both the permeability of the army boundary lines and the family ties present in their camp to their advantage. They have a comprehensive knowledge of the family relationships held by those in their army. At times this is explicitly mentioned as useful. For example, when Cú Chulainn has begun to kill men by the ford, but they do not yet know who is doing the killing, they use family connections in an attempt to find out. The text details that:

Ra cruthaiged comairle occu & ba demin leó combad slicht sochaide sút & gomba tadall mórslúaig & gondat Ulaid ardastráinic. Ocus ba sed a comairle ra cruthaiged leó, Cormac Cond Longes mac Conchobuir do lécud úadib dá fíiss cid baí sind áth, ar bíth ciano betis Ulaid and, ni gonfais mac a rríg dílis fodessin ([t]hey held counsel, and they decided that was the track of a multitude and the approach of a great army and that it was the men of Ulster who came to them thus. And this is what they decided on: to send Cormac Conn Longes to find out who was at the ford, for if the Ulstermen were there, they would not kill the son of their own king).⁶²⁰

On another such occasion, Maine, the son of Medb and Ailill approaches Cú Chulainn to send a message and Cú Chulainn threatens to cut Maine's head off if he does not leave. Ailill decides to send Lugaid to Cú Chulainn instead to deliver the message, and as an ally (and in Recension II a foster-brother) of Cú Chulainn's, Cú Chulainn does not harm Lugaid.⁶²¹

⁶²⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 587-92.

⁶²¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1578-97.

Medb and Ailill's knowledge of family connections is also seen in their usage of Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers, most of whom have received the same special training Cú Chulainn has, to fight against him. They also manipulate a number of his foster-brothers into fighting through playing on the familial ties they know these foster-brothers to have. This is seen, for example, in the way Medb and Ailill frequently do not send a foster-brother to fight immediately. As discussed in Chapter Three, they first send that foster-brother's relatives to fight, as in the case of Fer Diad's uncle, Mand, and Loch and Lugaid's brothers. Only after Cú Chulainn has killed these relatives, who have no loyalty to him and thus no reason not to fight, do Medb and Ailill goad the bereaved family member to battle Cú Chulainn, as natal kin commands a greater amount of loyalty than a foster-sibling.

Yet in knowing all of Cú Chulainn's family members, Medb and Ailill also know which family members never to send against him. They never send any of his natal kin in exile within their camp against him – only ever foster-kin. Only Lugaid and Fergus manage to find ways out of this trap.

One way in which Medb and Ailill utilize the free communication that occurs between family members on the two sides of the cattle raid is in the sending of messages. This occurs many times when they wish to send messages to Cú Chulainn.⁶²² For example, it is Fergus who brings Cú Chulainn Medb and Ailill's bargain to only send one warrior each day to fight.⁶²³

At times, Medb and Ailill also use Cú Chulainn's allies and relations to provide him with false information and lies. For example, at one point Lugaid is sent to Cú

⁶²² *TBC-LL*, ll. 1398-406.

⁶²³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1262-86; *TBC-LL*, ll. 1573-604.

Chulainn to offer Cú Chulainn Findabair's hand in marriage. Cú Chulainn says, "A poba Lugaid [...] is bréc sin" ("Friend Lugaid [...] this is a trick").⁶²⁴ However, Lugaid, persuaded by Medb and Ailill, assures Cú Chulainn, "Is bríathar ríg assidrubairt [...] Ní bía bréc de" ("It is the word of a king [...] There will be no trickery").⁶²⁵ While Lugaid does not know it, Ailill's plan is actually trickery – to have a jester betroth Findabair to Cú Chulainn so that Ailill does not need to be present.

4.5.2 Betrayal

Medb and Ailill are able to utilize the permeability of the army quite effectively in many scenarios. However, there are certain instances in which this strategy does not work and they need other more forceful means to keep control of the army. One way in which they do this is to use the dishonour that comes with being publicly viewed as a betrayer to keep people obedient to them. Although they allow private communications between the men in their camp, it seems as though there are limits to this. When Fergus meets with Cú Chulainn he does not stay long and "ní baí ní ba siriu ná sain ac comlabra arná ráditis fir Hérend a mbrath nó a trécun do Fergus fria dalta" ("he delayed no longer than that conversing lest the men of Ireland should say that Fergus was betraying [or abandoning] them to his fosterling").⁶²⁶ This shows that while there seems to be no boundary in place preventing conversation from taking place between family across enemy lines, that private conversations are suspect if they continue for too long.

⁶²⁴ *TBC-I*, l. 1588.

⁶²⁵ *TBC-I*, l. 1589.

⁶²⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1605-06. 'nó a trécun' is untranslated in O'Rahilly's translation.

Medb and Ailill, or the other men of Ireland, have the power to hurl accusations of betrayal at those who tarry, thus protecting the army's interests.

Medb and Ailill also use accusations of betrayal to protect the army from any direct action on the part of their warriors to protect kinsfolk in Ulster. If members of the army choose to protect Cú Chulainn, Medb and Ailill remind the warriors publicly that they chose Medb and Ailill first and they are prepared to shame the warriors for not honouring this choice. When Fergus leads the army astray, Medb brings up how this could be construed as a betrayal. She does not directly accuse Fergus, but warns him that such an accusation could come if he does not stop in his actions.⁶²⁷ Even an accusation of betrayal, if picked up by the audience as the primary narrative, has the power to severely damage Fergus's honour, so he complies with Medb's demands and steps aside in leading the army.

4.5.3 Complications

Medb's indirect manner of dealing with permeability in the army may be forced. Beyond even the strictures of her society, which expect loyalty to family to be respected, she herself would be placed in an awkward position if she determined family ties should not be honoured. Medb seems to have quite a lot of family on the Ulster side – her sister appears to be Conchobor's wife. This is attested in one of the wider Ulster Cycle tales, *Cath Boinde*.⁶²⁸

⁶²⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 214-255; *TBC-LL*, ll. 365-92.

⁶²⁸ 'Cath Boinde,' trans. O'Neill, Joseph, *Ériu*, 2 (1905), 173–85 (p. 177).

That this is also true in the *Táin* is found in the line, “Fíacha Fíaldána Dimraith dolluid do acallaim meic sethar a máthar .i. Mane Andóe a ainm” (“Fíacha Fíaldána Dimraith came to have speech with the son of his mother's sister, whose name was Maine Andóe”).⁶²⁹ Maine Andóe, Fíacha's relative in the men of Ireland's camp, is the son of Medb, so his mother's sister could well be Mugain, Medb's sister and Conchobor's wife, making Fíacha Fíaldána Conchobor's son.

Due to her own relations being present in key positions in Ulster, Medb must be careful in her treatment of family ties in the army, as she likely does not wish to draw attention to the fact that her act of aggression against Ulster may lead to the death of her own close natal family members. She distances herself somewhat from much of the direct aggression until the final battle, and this may be why.

4.6 The Ulster Exiles

In the middle of all of these factions stand Fergus and the Ulster exiles. Even compared to the groups surrounding them, the exiles have a particularly difficult balance to maintain. This is most apparent in Fergus's complicated relationship with those around him in Medb and Ailill's army.

As stated in Chapter Two, Fergus is one of the most powerful people in Medb and Ailill's army, and is given a place of prominence by Medb and Ailill. Fergus is one of Medb and Ailill's primary sources of information during the cattle raid, and is largely the force responsible for them being able to engage in it at all – he is the one to make a deal with Cú Chulainn that prevents the army's decimation, he gives information about

⁶²⁹ *TBC-I*, l. 2456-57.

the Ulstermen, and he brings with him a large number of men to fight. In fact, the allies he has make up nearly half of the forces assembled by Medb and Ailill. These men, who include Leinstermen, Ulstermen, and Munstermen (and the fearsome Gailioin) are all seemingly willing to follow Fergus rather than Medb when forced into a loyalty decision.

Besides Medb's previously mentioned complicated relationship with Ailill, this is likely a primary reason why she wishes to destroy the Gailioin. By killing them, she would decrease the power of both Ailill and Fergus, two men who could oppose her. Truly, this increases the significance of Medb's warning to Ailill about the Gailioin, "Níba lind ragait & níba erund conbágfat" ("It is not with us they will go nor for us they will fight").⁶³⁰

Interestingly, for many of these groups who follow Fergus, it seems to be loyalty to Fergus as an Ulsterman that drives them. He says the Munstermen are allies of the Ulstermen, and that the Leinstermen are also allies of the Ulstermen.⁶³¹ Despite his exile, Fergus continues to refer to himself as an Ulsterman, and seemingly still has the social ties of an Ulsterman to draw on.

This accords with Fergus's actions throughout the text. He is always loyal to his kin group in Ulster – which makes sense, given that the biological kin of all the Ulstermen seem to be located in Ulster.

Fergus communicates his loyalty through a great many speech acts. One of these occurs in Recension II when Medb and Ailill attempt to persuade Fergus to tell Cú Chulainn their new terms – that they will send a single man to fight Cú Chulainn each day. Fergus declines to do so, and when asked why he will not, he says, "Co tartar cuir

⁶³⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 327-28.

⁶³¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 164-73.

& glinni, rátha & trebairi imm airisium arna comai sin & 'ma tabairt di Choin Chulaind” (“Let pledges and covenants, bonds and guarantees be given for abiding by those terms and for fulfilling them to Cú Chulainn”).⁶³² It is only after his terms have been fulfilled that Fergus is willing to carry word to Cú Chulainn of Medb and Ailill’s proposal.⁶³³ These pledges and covenants are likely why there are as few attempts as there are to get around the ‘one man at a time’ rule at the ford. Fergus is in a position where, if Medb and Ailill go against their word, Fergus can retaliate. If Medb and Ailill are seen to do wrong, as in the situation with the Gailioin or the Munster kings and the violation of their expectation to marry Findabair, then half of the army will assist Fergus in attacking them. Extracting these promises from Medb and Ailill gives Fergus the power to defend his foster-son.

This same sort of arrangement is utilized by Fergus in Recension I as well. After five men are sent against Cú Chulainn while he is weak after his fight against Loch and the Morrigan, “Is and sin dosiacht Fergus fora glinne arná bristé fír fer for Coin Culainn” (“Fergus demanded of his sureties that Cú Chulainn should get fair play”)⁶³⁴ and afterwards men are sent against Cú Chulainn one at a time again.⁶³⁵

Another example of Fergus attempting to use his influence in the Connacht camp to assist Cú Chulainn comes when Calatín Dána and his twenty-eight relatives are sent against Cú Chulainn. The text says:

[B]ad fiadnaisi d'Fergus ra naidmthea sain, & ra fémmid tiachtain taris. Dáig iss ed ra ráidsetar corbo chomlund óenfir leó Calatín Dána cona secht maccaib

⁶³² *TBC-LL*, ll. 1562-63.

⁶³³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1563-64.

⁶³⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2056-57.

⁶³⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 2057-59.

fichet & a úa Glass mac Delga, dáig iss ed ra ráidset corbo ball dá ballaib a mac & corbo irrand dá irranduib & combad ra Calatín Dána sochraiti a chuir fadessin (This agreement was made in the presence of Fergus but he was unable to dispute it; for they said that they counted it as single combat that Calatín Dána and his twenty-seven sons and his grandson Glas mac Delga should all engage in the fight, for they asserted that his son was but one of his limbs and one of his parts and that the issue of his own body belonged to Calatín Dána).⁶³⁶

This suggests that Fergus attempted to dispute the fight, and had the influence to do so. However, Medb and Ailill were able to twist the public narrative in a different direction with their assertion that this still counted as single combat and their reasons why. Fergus has power, but only if Medb and Ailill are unable to control the narrative.

Fergus also verbally assists Cú Chulainn, and thus Ulster, by sending messengers to let Cú Chulainn know that he is being declared a coward due to the fact Cú Chulainn seemed to run when fighting Nath Crantail⁶³⁷, by going himself to warn Cú Chulainn that Fer Diad is being sent to fight Cú Chulainn⁶³⁸, and by having one of the other Ulster exiles watch Cú Chulainn's fight with Calatín Dána and bring him any information.⁶³⁹

As mentioned in the second chapter, Fergus's assistance to Ulster is often about to cross the boundary line of what he can do while still being held loyal to Medb and Ailill. He attempts to lead the army astray and is warned repeatedly that this will lead to

⁶³⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2540-45.

⁶³⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1696-721.

⁶³⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 2688-805.

⁶³⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2546-56.

a public narrative where he is in the wrong, allowing Medb to act against him. Yet in this situation, when he chooses to back down and leave his position leading the army, Medb does nothing.⁶⁴⁰ She is placed in the awkward position of needing Fergus's help, but clearly knowing that his loyalty is not to her and also knowing, as previously stated, that biological kinship will overpower nearly every other loyalty, so the circumstances must be very grim to attempt to use a person's kin against them.

Rather than loyalty to Medb, a complicated set of circumstances seem to motivate Fergus in his assistance of Medb and Ailill. Fergus is held in check by the agreements he has made to Medb and Ailill and the obligations he owes due to the help they have rendered him. He is also afraid of public shaming if he crosses these boundary lines – he never expects help from his allies in such instances, which suggests that if Fergus is publicly declared to be in the wrong, his allies will not assist him. He knows betrayal of Medb could mean death not just for him but for all the other exiles. If Fergus is not very careful and does not give every appearance of loyalty, he could lose both his honour and his life.

As well, Conchobor was the reason Fergus was exiled and he clearly despises Conchobor. If Conchobor, not Ulster, falls to Medb and Ailill's forces, it would actually be in Fergus's best interests. After all, Conchobor did, in one recension at least, take Fergus's kingship of Ulster away from him.⁶⁴¹ Thus, he has every reason to help Medb so long as it does not endanger those of the Ulstermen for whom he cares. Fergus is expected to honour all of his loyalties simultaneously and does his best to do so.

⁶⁴⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 351-92.

⁶⁴¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 360-69.

Fergus and Medb have an equal amount of forces loyal to them, and thus their main defence is words. Throughout the text, they go back and forth in terms of who has more power in the dynamic, depending on who has publicly done wrong. They attempt to shift the public narrative constantly in their own favour. She shames him for leading the troops astray, he shames her for her desired treatment of the Gailioin.⁶⁴² A balance is maintained. Fergus continues to officially follow and obey Medb while simultaneously attempting to save as many of the Ulstermen as he can and to cause Conchobor's destruction. Just as Medb and Ailill are aware of the true underlying loyalties that those within the army camp have, so is Fergus. He, too, uses these loyalties to affect the dynamics within the camp (as in his readiness to threaten Medb and Ailill if they engage in behavior that could be described as betrayal).

However, while the balance that Fergus's power within the army camp allows him to maintain allows him to defend his homeland of Ulster the majority of the time, at times he is still placed in a situation where he is unable to manipulate the narrative successfully and needs to draw on alternative solutions.

4.7 Conclusion

The army environment of the *Táin* is full of tensions and conflicting loyalties that lead to betrayal acts. Betrayal is both inevitable and to be avoided in the environment of the army – men need to avoid it but it is nearly impossible. Many people fall into situations where one loyalty is exploited to arrange conflict with another. For example, all of Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers are put into positions where they must choose

⁶⁴² *TBC-I*, ll. 147-83, 227-42.

between loyalty to Cú Chulainn or loyalty to other areas of their lives. Medb uses this chaotic environment to her own advantage – bribing people, using their biological kinship ties against them, and using her and daughter’s sexuality. She is excellent at swaying public opinion to agree with her – in many cases dictating what is seen as betrayal and what is not. Those who publicly oppose her often lose.

In a world dominated by public opinion, Fergus often uses the power of the private. This can be seen when Fergus is persuaded to fight Cú Chulainn. It is logical that Medb would turn to Fergus in this way – he shares a foster-bond with Cú Chulainn like Cú Chulainn’s foster-brothers, and thus may seem like a weak spot in Cú Chulainn’s defences. In Recension I, Fergus only agrees to fight because he is intoxicated. Fergus, having agreed to the fight, approaches Cú Chulainn with no sword in his scabbard (as it was previously taken by Ailill in punishment for Fergus sleeping with Medb), signalling his lack of willingness to make this a real fight right from the beginning.⁶⁴³ In Recension I, with the entire spectacle of Fergus and Cú Chulainn’s fight unfolding before an appreciative audience, Fergus has a private conversation with Cú Chulainn, and makes a deal. “Teilg traigid dam, a C[h]ú Chulaind” (“Retreat a step from me, Cú Chulainn”), Fergus requests.⁶⁴⁴ Cú Chulainn responds that he will do so if Fergus does the same at some later date. Fergus agrees. Cú Chulainn follows through on his bargain and retreats a certain distance before Fergus, but despite the cries of the watching throng to pursue Cú Chulainn, Fergus refuses.⁶⁴⁵ Recension II follows much

⁶⁴³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2501-10; *TBC-LL*, ll. 2478-93.

⁶⁴⁴ *TBC-I*, l. 2510.

⁶⁴⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 2511-22.

the same plot, except that Fergus volunteers the terms of the agreement himself, again in a private conversation, saying:

Acht arinn airer & arinn altrom rabertus-sa fort & rabertatar Ulaid & Conchobor, teich romum-sa indiu i fiadhaisi fer nHérend.' 'Is lesc lim-sa innísín ám,' bar Cú Chulaind, 'teiched ria n-óenfer for Táin Bó Cúailnge.' 'Ní lesc ám duit-siu ón,' bar Fergus, 'dáig techfet-sa remut-sa inbaid bus chréchtach crólinnech tretholl tú bar cath na Tána, & á theichfet-sa m'óenur, teichfit fir Hérend uile (But for the sake of the honour and nurture I and the Ulstermen and Conchobor gave you, flee before me to-day in the presence of the men of Ireland'. 'I am loath to do that' said Cú Chulainn, 'to flee before one man on the Foray of Cúailnge'. 'You need not shrink from doing so' said Fergus, 'for I shall flee before you when you shall be covered with wounds and blood and pierced with stabs in the battle of the Táin, and when I alone shall flee, then all the men of Ireland will flee).⁶⁴⁶

Given such a potentially useful future advantage, Cú Chulainn retreats, but Fergus refuses to follow him. Not knowing of the reason for Cú Chulainn's retreat, the men of Ireland call out, "Ra theich romut! Ra theich remut, a Fergus!" ("He has fled from you! He has fled from you, Fergus!").⁶⁴⁷ Fergus claims that the few steps Cú Chulainn has taken are more than anyone else has managed to make Cú Chulainn retreat over the entire course of the invasion, and thus feels no need to follow him.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2493-99.

⁶⁴⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2502-03.

⁶⁴⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2503-09.

This incident has a number of interpretations within scholarship. O’Leary⁶⁴⁹, discussing the “unwillingness to share the honour created by success” within heroic literature, sees this incident as a rare example of magnanimous behaviour within heroic literature. He focuses on the unwitnessed nature of the agreement between Fergus and Cú Chulainn and states that, through their private agreement, the two men “affirm the profound value of their personal relationship over the competitive imperatives of the heroic code, and thereby to a meaningful extent free themselves from it, if only briefly.”⁶⁵⁰ O’Leary sees this behaviour as an exception to the normal heroic rule, and quite an extraordinary act motivated by emotion, showing that Cú Chulainn has “glimmerings of ethical awareness” that his fellow heroes seldom share.⁶⁵¹ Edel takes a different approach, believing both heroes to be motivated by pragmatism (at least within Recension I). At this point in the *Táin*, Fergus has lost his sword to Ailill. Thus, he does not have a weapon with which to fight Cú Chulainn at this time. It is in his best interests to ask Cú Chulainn to flee, as any other option would reveal Fergus’s lack of weapon (which Edel states is only known to Fergus, Ailill, and Cú Chulainn) and thus weaken his position in the army camp. Edel believes that Cú Chulainn is motivated similarly by self-interest. He knows that Fergus has been advocating for the Ulstermen within Medb and Ailill’s camp, and is responsible for the upholding of the single combat agreement. He is also aware that, if Fergus is revealed not to have his sword, Fergus may no longer have the social standing within the camp to uphold this agreement. The level of exhaustion that Cú Chulainn is feeling would not allow him to survive if the single combat

⁶⁴⁹ Philip O’Leary, ‘Magnanimous conduct in Irish heroic literature’, in *Éigse*, 25 (1991), 28-44 (p. 37).

⁶⁵⁰ *Id.*, p 39.

⁶⁵¹ *Id.*, p 44.

disappeared. Thus, he follows Fergus's play and retreats in the best interests of them both.⁶⁵²

I believe that a mixture of the two theories listed above describes the situation the best. As seen in previous examples, agreements arising from private discussion are not actually uncommon within the *Táin*. This is particularly true between kinsmen. And while such an action would usually compromise Cú Chulainn's honour, the relationship between the two is strong enough that they make the deal anyway. Cú Chulainn gives up a little of his honour, but it is in good hands. Fergus says, "[N]achas linub-sa secha so, dáig cid bec lib-si in cutrumma techid út rabertus-sa fair, ní thuc óenfer do feraib Hérend in neoch conarnecar ris ar Táin Bó Cúalnge" ("I shall not pursue him any farther, for though ye may belittle that flight I put him to, yet of all who encountered him on the Foray of Cúailnge not one man of the men of Ireland did as much")⁶⁵³, seemingly giving his reasons for not pursuing Cú Chulainn, but also providing everyone present with a reminder of his foster-son's epic performance throughout the cattle raid. In a moment of potential weakness for Cú Chulainn, Fergus reminds men of his great exploits, providing safety for his foster-son's reputation by shifting the narrative away from the idea of a cowardly flight. As a reward for this tiny loss of honour, Cú Chulainn gains an advantage for Ulster, and both extract themselves from a situation where they will be asked to fight again – before everyone, Fergus states that he has done his duty and will only fight his foster-son again when everyone else has done so in single combat.⁶⁵⁴ Medb cannot claim Fergus is not loyal – he did what she asked and did it better than any other has

⁶⁵² Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 186.

⁶⁵³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2504-07.

⁶⁵⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2507-08.

done. Yet she comes away from the encounter with nothing. The heroes' actions are both based on their love for each other and also based upon pragmatism. They know each other well enough to know that they can each be relied on to play act a predetermined script that is the only way both of the parties involved can maintain the majority of their honourable standing.

The final consequences of this arrangement occur during the final battle. Encountering Fergus again in the centre of the fighting, Cú Chulainn reminds him of their agreement and asks Fergus to retreat before Cú Chulainn. Fergus does so, and as promised, he takes those parts of the army he controls (half the forces assembled) with him.⁶⁵⁵ This allows Fergus to deescalate the final tension without loss of honour to himself – the deal made with Cú Chulainn is revealed and thus it would be dishonourable for Fergus, in fact, to behave other than he does. He needs to follow through on the word he gave to Cú Chulainn. It allows Fergus and Cú Chulainn to create the public narrative – Fergus made an agreement with Cú Chulainn and kept his side of the bargain, rather than Fergus running away, or Fergus betraying Medb. This works in part because both men involved are upholding the same narrative. They each lend their considerable might and societal influence to creating this idea of the truth in the situation. Thus, despite the fact he left the field of battle, Medb does not seem able to accuse Fergus of any betrayal.

These sorts of agreements seem common – there are many such private arrangements made when someone trusts another person enough to ask if they can share honour in a situation and resolve the situation so that perhaps both people have

⁶⁵⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 4036-113; *TBC-LL*, ll. 4727-4820.

slightly less honour, but neither has to fully give up their honour. Both people in such an arrangement get something out of it and both win against their enemies if they stick to the agreement, but they have to be very close friends because there is no situation where betrayal could be easier.

Hong and Bohnet discuss that there can be no trust without a willingness to be vulnerable before another person.⁶⁵⁶ Unlike many relationships, such as that of Cú Chulainn and Fer Báeth, where the relationship is one with formal expectations placed on it by society, this means that the relationships in which the degree of communication and trust necessary to risk one's honour is found seem to involve genuine emotional fondness between the members, not just the fulfilment of societally expected obligations to the other. Those who master private communication are the only ones able to navigate the complex power dynamics of the army – they can make private arrangements that allow them to save their kin yet, due to having such an arrangement, present a united front to the audience about what the narrative will be.

Another example of this occurs with Cú Chulainn's foster-brother Lugaid, who asks Cú Chulainn privately not to kill Lugaid's brother. Cú Chulainn, having made a deal in advance with Lugaid, only maims Lugaid's brother, thus ensuring that Lugaid cannot be pressured by Medb into fighting Cú Chulainn to avenge his brother.⁶⁵⁷

Lugaid also uses such a strategy when he privately asks for a truce for his own men from Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn agrees to this, saying, "Rot bía acht ro pé comarthaé furri. Ocus apair frim popa Fergus bíd comardae fora m-budin" ("You shall

⁶⁵⁶ Hong and Bohnet, 'Status and Distrust', p. 198.

⁶⁵⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1807-44; *TBC-LL*, ll. 1906-61.

have that provided that they bear a special sign (that I may recognize them.) And tell my friend Fergus that his company too should bear a special sign”).⁶⁵⁸

This is in contrast to the majority of Cú Chulainn’s other foster-brothers in Medb’s camp. They make no effort to privately resolve potential issues with Cú Chulainn, and thus there is no way to avoid Cú Chulainn’s eventual killing of them all. It is forethought that preserves and thoughtlessness that kills. This is true not only for Cú Chulainn’s foster-kin who side with him. Fiachu crosses the boundary lines of the amount of assistance he can render a kinsman without it being considered a betrayal. He rushes into action to save Cú Chulainn but in the meantime endangers all of the Ulster exiles. It is only luck and Cú Chulainn’s warrior prowess that saves them.

Forethought is necessary, particularly in order to maintain non-biological connections, as they are so frequently tested. It is only by trusting in a personal relationship strongly enough to entrust their honour to another that those living in the complicated world of Medb’s army camp are able to avoid having their loyalties come into conflict, and ultimately to avoid betrayal. Only by utilizing private back channels to jointly agree on a narrative can the power of the public and the constant audience be undercut. After making such agreements, heroes’ actions for the audience become purely performative, as they are acting according to a joint script prepared in private but designed to be viewed in public.

⁶⁵⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 1187-88.

Chapter Five: Women and Betrayal in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

5.1 Introduction

A number of the betrayal acts discussed in Chapter Two have women as betrayers, and described in particularly unflattering ways. To summarize, in one betrayal act Medb betrays Fer Diad by tricking him into fighting Cú Chulainn despite the fact that Fer Diad is a Connachtman (see Fer Diad section in Chapter Three). Only Medb and Findabair are accused of this, despite it seeming to be a mutual decision Medb and Ailill have made. In Recension II in particular, Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad comment on Medb and Findabair's involvement in unflattering ways, although not directly to the two women. For example, Cú Chulainn says, "A Fir Diad, mása thú, / demin limm isat lomthrú, / tidacht ar comairli mná / do chomlund rit chomalta" ("O Fer Diad, if this is you, sure I am that you are one utterly doomed, that you should come at a woman's behest to fight with your foster-brother").⁶⁵⁹ Cú Chulainn rebukes Fer Diad for coming to fight him without talking to such men as Conall or Fergus, "[d]áig ní adiartaís ind fir sein de fessaib ná dúlib ná dálib ná briathraib brécingill ban cendfind Connacht" ("[f]or those men do not follow the messages or desires or sayings or the false promises of the fairhaired women of Connacht").⁶⁶⁰ Elsewhere, Fer Diad states, "A Chú Chulaind, tólaib gal, / ní tú acht Medb rar marnestar, / béra-su búaid & blaid, / ní fort atát ar cinaid" ("O Cú Chulainn—many deeds of valour—not you but Medb betrayed us. You will have victory and fame. Not on you is our guilt").⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3187-90.

⁶⁶⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3424-25.

⁶⁶¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3215-18.

In a second betrayal act involving women, Medb nearly betrays the Gailloin, but is stopped by Fergus's threats. In Recension I, Ailill brings Medb's gender into the situation after her suggestion to kill the Gailloin, saying, "Ní chélam as banchomairle" ("I shall not deny that is a woman's counsel").⁶⁶² In this case, Medb is threatened with the shame of her betrayal to her face, so she is able to defend herself.

In betrayal act three, Medb sleeps with Fergus, betraying Ailill. However, in Recension I this act seems potentially planned between Ailill and Medb.⁶⁶³

The fourth betrayal involving women has Findabair promised by her parents to each of the Munster kings but with no intention to marry any of them. She kills herself from shame when she learns there has been bloodshed due to this betrayal.⁶⁶⁴

As is also shown in Chapter Two, these examples demonstrate a trend in the *Táin* for women to receive harsher criticism after betrayal acts than men, and for women to be accused of betrayal behind their backs, while men are accused directly to their faces, giving them the opportunity to defend themselves.

Since Medb is involved in all these betrayal acts featuring women, it is useful to examine the way she is positioned in the text, and the perspective it seems likely we are supposed to have of her.

5.1.1 Historiography

Medb has received a number of negative interpretations throughout years of scholarship, several of which describe her character in such terms that it would be

⁶⁶² *TBC-I*, I. 163.

⁶⁶³ *TBC-I*, II. 1030-55.

⁶⁶⁴ *TBC-I*, II. 3346-65; *TBC-LL*, II. 3862-92.

understandable why those around her treat her more negatively than the men around her who are in similar positions. Thus, in order to fairly study her position as a potential betrayer, it is first necessary to contextualize Medb's behaviour within the text, and whether her treatment and that of her daughter is justified due to their deviance from the norms for women in society at the time of the text. Åkerström states that age and, historically, gender play a role in the way betrayal acts are viewed, with children and women being less likely to be held responsible for betrayal acts as they were thought to have little agency.⁶⁶⁵ This agrees with the perspective on women in early Irish society. Kelly states that women were considered to have "no independent legal capacity",⁶⁶⁶ with the men in a woman's life paying the fines for any offences committed by a woman, as she was considered under the responsibility of these men.⁶⁶⁷ Therefore, it is important to examine Medb and the way that her gender both adheres to and differs from the gender norms presented in the *Táin*, as well as the way this affects her relationship to betrayal.

Women in Irish literature are often assumed to take on a passive role – with a notable point about them often being their absence from a scene. O'Leary observes that a woman's honour seems linked to that of her husband – her honour is dependent upon his status.⁶⁶⁸ As proof of this statement, O'Leary cites the fact that "the man's proof of his pre-eminence automatically validates his wife's claim to precedence."⁶⁶⁹ He states that women "are allowed little scope for direct, active personal involvement in the

⁶⁶⁵ Åkerström, *Betrayal and Betrayers*, p. 12.

⁶⁶⁶ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 68.

⁶⁶⁷ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 78.

⁶⁶⁸ Philip O'Leary, 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature', *Ériu*, 38 (1987), 27-44 (pp. 27-28).

⁶⁶⁹ *Id.*, p. 29.

warrior honour code.”⁶⁷⁰ Mikhailova goes even further, suggesting that women have only in the modern era “gained the right to live a public life” and that women in these texts were not supposed to be gazed at – a woman’s place “was in the home and with family, removed from the public gaze.”⁶⁷¹ Sheehan examines a particular scene in the *Táin* – that of Fer Diad’s death – and notes the presence of women in the scene “only *in absentia*.”⁶⁷² Sheehan argues that the text equates femininity with weakness by having the cause of the Ulstermen’s debility be the weakness of a woman in childbirth⁶⁷³, and reads Fer Diad’s death scene as a symbolic domination of the masculine over the feminine - an enactment of rape “positioning [Fer Diad] as ravished bride to Cú Chulainn’s bridegroom.”⁶⁷⁴ In this interpretation, women are further removed from the text because it is not Fer Diad’s female relatives who lament him, but rather Cú Chulainn, removing women from the text yet again from a position they should inhabit.⁶⁷⁵

The role of women as lamenters, and as possessing an important facility for speech, comes up a great deal. Larson identifies three key uses of women’s voices – mourning, bewitching, and mothering.⁶⁷⁶ Women often provide good advice, whether or not the advice is taken.⁶⁷⁷ Frequently this provides a way for texts to examine the

⁶⁷⁰ Id., p. 31.

⁶⁷¹ Tatyana A. Mikhailova, ‘Portraying a Person: description devices in Ulster saga narrative’, in *Ulidia 4: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Mícheál B. Ó Mainnín and Gregory Toner (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 95-115 (p. 114).

⁶⁷² Sheehan, ‘Fer Diad De-flowered’, p. 55.

⁶⁷³ Id., p. 56.

⁶⁷⁴ Id., p. 64.

⁶⁷⁵ Id., pp. 54-65.

⁶⁷⁶ Heather J. Larson, ‘Keening, Crooning, and Casting Spells’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 18/19 (1998/99), 134-49 (p. 149).

⁶⁷⁷ Gregory Toner, ‘Wise Women and Wanton Warriors in Early Irish Literature’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 30 (2010), 259-72 (p. 260).

soundness of the heroic ethos, with women's voices clashing with this code of behaviour.⁶⁷⁸ In the same sort of role, women may occupy the role of "peaceweaver."⁶⁷⁹ As they are positioned in between their natal households and their conjugal households, women have at times the ability to draw these households into a closer unity. However, this role can also turn the other way, revealing another aspect to women in Irish literature – that of the woman as cause of war and participant in violence.⁶⁸⁰ Ford believes there is a tradition of "bellicose and sexual aspects of dominant and dominating women" in Celtic literature.⁶⁸¹ He believes that women were initially more equal to men in these cultures and then became lessened through the introduction of Christianity, although traces of the original tradition still exist.⁶⁸² However, even in this belief, Ford thinks that while women are permitted to take charge of battlefields and tutor warriors, they themselves are not warriors, stating that "Irish culture acknowledged women as the custodians of military prowess but did not allow them to fight."⁶⁸³ Although in a more violent way, women once again fill the position of advisors and teachers, guiding action but not participating in it as directly themselves. However, this is not how Medb is presented in the *Táin*.

No matter the position scholars take on Medb, she is never portrayed as passive. In fact, most research focuses on the very active nature of Medb's sexuality and her leadership. Despite the fact the image of who Medb is and what motivates her has

⁶⁷⁸ Toner, 'Wise Women and Wanton Warriors', p. 272; Findon, *A Woman's Words*; O'Leary, 'Honour of Women', p. 44.

⁶⁷⁹ James Doan, 'Sovereignty Aspects in the Roles of Women in Medieval Irish and Welsh Society', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 5 (1985), 87-102 (p. 92).

⁶⁸⁰ Id., p. 93.

⁶⁸¹ Patrick K. Ford, 'Celtic Women: The Opposing Sex', *Viator*, 19 (1988), 417-438 (p. 430).

⁶⁸² Id., p. 432.

⁶⁸³ Id., p. 428.

undergone many changes over the years, these aspects of her character remain relevant to nearly every interpretation, with some interpreting these qualities as negative while others see Medb as positively presented in the *Táin*. One scholar who influenced the direction early scholarship about Medb would take was Tomás Ó Máille, who in 1928 proposed the idea that Medb was a representation of the sovereignty goddess. Ó Máille felt that divinity explained Medb's promiscuity; the sovereignty goddess mated with many men in turn, conferring sovereignty upon them for as long as each remained in her favour.⁶⁸⁴ Many agreed with Ó Máille. Mac Cana felt that such a solution solved many problems, as Medb's "moral misdemeanours [of sexual conduct and military involvement] were all performed as it were in the line of duty and had a sound mythological motivation."⁶⁸⁵ In this interpretation, Medb followed the proper path of the sovereignty goddess, who becomes ugly when she is unmated to the proper king, as such goddesses were expected to take many lovers. Thurneysen agreed that Medb was a goddess, but felt her to be less an allegorical representation of sovereignty and more an early pre-Christian goddess figure who gradually had lost some of her power.⁶⁸⁶

The interpretation of Medb as divine gained great traction and has continued down to the present century.⁶⁸⁷ Several arguments have been made to support the validity of the goddess interpretation. Many scholars interpret Medb's name as

⁶⁸⁴ Tomás Ó Máille, 'Medb Chruachna', *ZCP*, 17.1 (1928), 129-146 (pp. 129-146).

⁶⁸⁵ Mac Cana, 'Women in Irish Mythology', p. 9.

⁶⁸⁶ Thurneysen, 'Allerlei Keltisches', *ZCP*, pp. 108-110.

⁶⁸⁷ Mary MacKenna, 'The Irish Mythological Landscape and the *Táin*', in *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Ruairi Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009), 262-74 (p. 264); Ní Bhrolcháin, 'Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas', pp. 12-19; Matthias Egeler, 'Some Thoughts on 'Goddess Medb' and Her Typological Context', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 59.1 (2012), 67-96.

something akin to either “intoxicated one” or “intoxicating one.”⁶⁸⁸ Ní Bhrolcháin and Bevill state that this is significant because a number of sovereignty goddess figures in other texts dispense drinks to their chosen kings, and Ní Bhrolcháin observes that several such figures have names connected to themes of libation and drink.⁶⁸⁹ Egeler suggests a potential etymological meaning of “mead-woman” for Medb, and further discusses the “Irish association between sovereignty and intoxicating liquor”, explaining that sovereignty is called ‘good ale’ in Cormac’s Glossary.⁶⁹⁰ Egeler also posits that the names of Medb’s husband and daughter support the argument that she was originally some form of goddess. Ailill’s name may mean something like ‘the spectre’ while Findabair may mean ‘white phantom’, which Egeler believes may show a supernatural connection for the family – a suitable family setting for a goddess figure brought down to human scale.⁶⁹¹

Underlying analyses of Medb, there seem to be a few sources of discomfort with Medb’s character that repeatedly occur – discomforts that are assuaged by identifying her as a goddess figure and must be addressed in different ways in scholarship that does not place Medb in such a role. Among these sources of discomfort are Medb’s sexual nature and her leadership and military roles.

Many scholars use Medb’s sexual relationships with men, as well as the many marriages she is said to have had, as a source of proof that she must either be or at

⁶⁸⁸ Egeler, ‘Some thoughts on ‘Goddess Medb’’, p. 68; Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘Women in Early Irish Literature’, p. 15; Robert Scott Bevill, *Goddess, King, and Grail: Aspects of Sovereignty within the Early Medieval Heroic Tradition of the British Isles*, (Masters Thesis, Clemson University: 2009), p. 59.

⁶⁸⁹ Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas’, pp. 14-15; Bevill, *Goddess, King, and Grail*, p. 59.

⁶⁹⁰ Egeler, ‘Some thoughts on ‘Goddess Medb’’, p. 68.

⁶⁹¹ Id., pp. 69-70.

one point have been a sovereignty goddess figure.⁶⁹² In *Táin* studies, this view is often reinforced by Medb's line that when choosing Ailill as her husband, she searched for a man who had no jealousy, and selected one lover quickly after another.⁶⁹³ If there was no sovereignty element connected to this statement, there is a general discomfort as to what that would mean for Medb's character, as was touched upon in discussion of Fergus. Doan states that Medb's criteria for choosing a husband are not to be taken as a sign of "gross moral turpitude in the *Táin* society" as Medb is simply explaining that each king must be linked to her as goddess.⁶⁹⁴ Mac Cana's belief that Medb's "sexual indulgence" is a problem outside of the context of sovereignty, and that "her moral misdemeanours were all performed as it were in the line of duty and had a sound mythological motivation, since the primary function of a goddess of sovereignty was to mate *en série*" also expresses a discomfort with Medb's character outside of a belief in her divinity.⁶⁹⁵ A belief in Medb's divinity is often paired with the idea that, if she be divine, this makes her act of cheating on Ailill with Fergus unobjectionable, either because, as Mac Cana holds, Medb's role as a sovereignty goddess requires her to take many partners, or because Fergus is believed to be mythologically linked to Medb in a way that makes their partnership an inevitability and a remnant of an older story.

⁶⁹² Bevill, *Goddess, King, and Grail*, pp. 57-59; Egeler, 'Some thoughts on 'Goddess Medb'', pp. 72-72; Ní Bhrolcháin, 'Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas', p. 13; Doan, 'Sovereignty Aspects', p. 87; Elva Johnston, 'Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 197-220 (p. 200); Mary Pat Kelly, *The Sovereign Woman: Her Image in Irish Literature from Medb to Anna Livia Plurabelle*, (PhD Thesis, City University of New York: 1982), pp. 158-59; Mac Cana, 'Women in Irish Mythology', p. 9.

⁶⁹³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 26-37.

⁶⁹⁴ Doan, 'Sovereignty Aspects', p. 87.

⁶⁹⁵ Mac Cana, 'Women in Irish Mythology', p. 9.

For example, Parker sees Fergus as originally appearing as Medb's "otherworldly lover", although downgraded to mortal in the *Táin*.⁶⁹⁶

Similarly, the interpretation of Medb as a goddess operates under the assumption that her power to command is unusual for a woman, but normal for a goddess. Parker, for example, sees Medb as having the customary sovereign power of a goddess "all but lost" by the time of the *Táin*.⁶⁹⁷ Bevill believes that Medb is more dominant than Ailill, and ascribes this power imbalance to Medb's divinity.⁶⁹⁸ Mary Pat Kelly sees the death of the bull at the end of the *Táin* as a symbolic death of the king and a symbolic return of the nature goddess (Medb) to her properly enthroned place. She believes that male arrogance is responsible for the cattle raid, not Medb, and believes that Medb is just an innocent figure proving she can defend what is hers, and that she has "maternal, life affirming aspects of her character that coexist with the warlike ones."⁶⁹⁹

For the study of betrayal, interpretations looking at Medb as a goddess do not provide much useful information for the very reasons that often cause scholars to favor them. If Medb is seen as a mythical figure acting out a fertility story, discussing human motivations in connection with Medb is a futile endeavor. Goddesses are not required to behave in mortal ways with respect to betrayal acts. However, critiques of the goddess theory, along with additional ways of thinking about Irish literature, have gradually led to new ways of examining Medb. These theories have had to develop new ways of

⁶⁹⁶ Nancy Ann Parker, *The Mythological and Mortal Crone: Recollecting and Reclaiming the Sacred Regeneratrix*, (PhD Thesis, Pacifica Graduate Institute: 209), p. 148.

⁶⁹⁷ Id., p. 147.

⁶⁹⁸ Bevill, *Goddess, King, and Grail*, p. 60.

⁶⁹⁹ Kelly, *The Sovereign Woman*, pp. 170-71.

handling the previously determined problems of Medb's sexuality and leadership abilities. Often these new ways are more interesting for a study of betrayal, as they envision a human Medb with human motivations.

One different interpretation of Medb holds that Medb is not a goddess figure but a treacherous figure whose flaws eventually lead to her downfall. Patricia Kelly states that Medb's "exercise of power is unlikely to reflect the reality of early Irish society."⁷⁰⁰ She believes that the central purpose of the *Táin* is to demonstrate Medb's flaws.⁷⁰¹ In her opinion, Medb, by removing herself from the usual areas of expertise of women, acts as a "negative manifestation" of the sovereignty goddess, with the entire text of the *Táin* acting as an inversion of the sovereignty myth.⁷⁰² In support of this theory, Kelly focuses on Medb's defeat in the final battle, and how one of the last instances we see of Medb is Fergus's negative line that this is what happens when one follows the buttocks of a mare.⁷⁰³ In this way, "[t]he final verdict of the narrative on Medb is therefore that she has usurped a man's function, and this is what has doomed the expedition from the start."⁷⁰⁴

MacKenna, for example, describes Medb as the "root cause of much of the tragedy that ensues."⁷⁰⁵ Mikhailova believes Medb is famous for her "arrogance and self-admiration."⁷⁰⁶ Lehmann sees Medb as a figure of "insatiable greed" due to her desire for the bull, as well as her "vigorous and self-destructive behavior".⁷⁰⁷ Lehmann

⁷⁰⁰ Kelly, 'The *Táin* as Literature', p. 77.

⁷⁰¹ Id., p. 78.

⁷⁰² Id., p. 81.

⁷⁰³ Id., p. 80.

⁷⁰⁴ Id., p. 79.

⁷⁰⁵ MacKenna, 'The Irish Mythological Landscape', p. 264.

⁷⁰⁶ Mikhailova, 'Portraying a Person', p. 112.

⁷⁰⁷ Edyta Lehmann, "'And thus I will it': Queen Medh and the Will to Power', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 28 (2008), 142-51 (p. 147).

feels the narrative is ambiguous when it comes to Medb – she achieves several accomplishments that the text doesn't comment on, seeing her as an “overly possessive and terrifying female”.⁷⁰⁸ This interpretation is influenced by the earlier goddess theory of Medb – in this later negative interpretation Medb is still a creature of large appetites and destructive capabilities, but in this way of considering the narrative traditions, she has no excuses for her actions. Rather, this negative interpretation holds that Medb's unpredictability and tendency to excess often lead her to weaknesses in her leadership. The theory also frequently connects Medb's failures of leadership to her gender, believing the narrative tradition to be misogynistic and therefore ready to tear down a woman in a position of power. Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh describes the scene at the end of the *Táin* where the men of Ireland are retreating and Medb has to stop to urinate. She sees Medb's urination as a negative thing, stating that it is “perceived as female weakness, which prohibits action even in retreat” while Cú Chulainn bleeding is seen as strong and manly. She indicates that the excessive urination during retreat is a symbol of how Medb's leadership is not going well.⁷⁰⁹ Lehmann believes the narrative ultimately undermines Medb, because she fails her mission, thus being neither a good leader nor a good military commander.⁷¹⁰ Lehmann mentions that Medb takes on a “traditionally masculine role of a military leader, but refuses to adhere to the established tradition associated with that role” as she is willing to go and fight even when prophecy is against her.⁷¹¹ She thinks Medb has “insatiable greed” because she wants the bull, as well as

⁷⁰⁸ Lehmann, “And thus I will it”, p. 144.

⁷⁰⁹ Ailís Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh, ‘VARIA I. The modus operandi of the author of TBC-LL as exemplified by Mellgléó nlliach and Medb's fúal’, *Ériu*, 58 (2008), 169-180 (179).

⁷¹⁰ Lehmann, “And thus I will it”, p. 142.

⁷¹¹ Id., p. 146.

demonstrating “vigorous and self-destructive behavior”, neither of which qualities are the ideal qualities of a leader.⁷¹² However, all of these theories, while moving away from the idea of a sovereign goddess, are still formed around the notion that certain of Medb’s qualities – leadership and sexuality – are uncommon for women in the world of the *Táin*.

Another school of thought grew up in contradiction to the idea that Medb should be perceived negatively in the *Táin*. This school of thought believes that Medb is a complex figure who does have flaws, but is ultimately a good leader and rational rather than a creature of mindless excesses. Dominguez feels that female rulers were not historically considered as unusual as people now seem to think them, and thus there was more of a realistic backing for such a woman as Medb in the real world than has popularly been decided in literature about the *Táin*.⁷¹³ She believes that Medb is no better or worse morally than the men around her, and that she adopts the rules men in her environment do, but also uses her distinctly feminine advantages to get ahead when necessary.⁷¹⁴ Dominguez expresses the view that Medb is not a bad leader, but rather a careful and shrewd one who uses her resources well and has built strong and stable alliances with other groups.⁷¹⁵ Speaking of that same urination scene where Medb asks Cú Chulainn to no longer attack the men of Ireland, Dominguez says, “It is possible to see Medb’s humiliation by Cú Chulainn – especially his refusal to give Medb warrior status because she is a woman – as a deliberate tactic of subversion that, ultimately, comes back to haunt Cú Chulainn. Her humiliation can be viewed as a sacrifice on her

⁷¹² Id., p. 147.

⁷¹³ Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 12.

⁷¹⁴ Id., p. 17.

⁷¹⁵ Id., p. 224.

part, one that will allow her to live and, therefore, wreak vengeance on her greatest enemy. Her acceptance of humiliation, once again, leads her enemies to underestimate her because they have accepted, at face value, that she has been effectively neutralized.”⁷¹⁶ Dooley believes Medb’s urination is an example of a female tactic of using “a direct language of the body” to stop male action “in its tracks” when the woman is in a particularly dangerous situation. She feels Fergus and the “male professionals” then take this power back from Medb and are the ones to lead the retreat, saying negative things about her.⁷¹⁷ Edel believes that Cú Chulainn’s sparing of Medb’s life at the end, despite having “the moral (and legal) right to kill her” is a matter of magnanimity, feels the remark about him not killing women has a misogynistic sound to it “considering the woman in question.”⁷¹⁸ She feels that in the middle ages women could hold political power without “appearing to transgress the natural order”, and that interpretations that use negative words in translation for certain attributes of Medb are erroneous.⁷¹⁹ Edel states that Medb asking for Cú Chulainn’s protection at the end is her being sensible rather than cowardly. She thinks the society of the time would have understood her actions (like Fergus’s retreat) as a way out that saved lives, and feels the texts usually present her interaction with Cú Chulainn in neutral terms.⁷²⁰ Of Medb’s leadership, Edel says, “All in all she is a competent, considerate warleader with a sharp eye for the mental condition of the troops.”⁷²¹

⁷¹⁶ Id., p. 227.

⁷¹⁷ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, pp. 180-82.

⁷¹⁸ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, 137.

⁷¹⁹ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 230.

⁷²⁰ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, pp. 290-91.

⁷²¹ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 222.

It is these more nuanced views of Medb, which do not assume her actions should be viewed through a negative lens, that align with a study of female behavior in the *Táin*. Which perception of Medb is accepted affects how Medb's betrayals should be viewed. If she is a weak leader driven by emotion and used as a symbol of misogyny, it is likely that she has committed all of the betrayals she is accused of. However, if the more positive views of Medb hold true, it is possible there is a more complicated set of motivations that fuel any betrayal acts with which Medb is involved. An examination of women in the *Táin* suggests that, as scholars such as Edel and Dominguez believe, Medb's actions are not unusual in the world of the *Táin*. While women are not largely the focus of the *Táin*, there are enough women acting in the background of the text to analyze and compare with Medb's actions, and such an examination proves that her behavior is consistent with other women in the text. Such an analysis raises the question of why, then, she is seen in so much scholarship as a negative figure.

5.2 Women in the *Táin*

There are therefore many different perceptions of Medb, most of which focus on two parts of her identity: 1) her sexuality and 2) her role as a female leader in a military context. In order to analyze the context of Medb's relationship to betrayal acts, I will first examine the general position and behaviour of women in both Recensions I and II of the *Táin*. I will then examine specifically the ways in which 1) women's sexuality and 2) women in military or leadership roles are handled by the text. This will allow a comparison with Medb and her behaviour in each role. This examination proves that Medb's actions are not unusual, and that thus different explanations outside of moral

depravity should be sought for why Medb is implicated so frequently in betrayal situations.

5.2.1 Passive women

5.2.1.1 Recension I

Unlike Mikhailova's theory, women in Recension I of the *Táin* are not "removed from the public gaze."⁷²² A number of women do occupy more passive roles, but they still manage to drive the action of the text without ever speaking or, in some cases, even appearing as actual characters within the narrative.

Women act as one of the primary assets at stake during conflict situations. Although Cú Chulainn fights many men from Ailill and Medb's army, when he is made seriously angry, women are also among his victims. For example, when Cú Chulainn must finally rest after his long defence of Ulster, the youth of Ulster, including Fallamain, lead a charge on Medb's forces. They are slaughtered. On discovering this, Cú Chulainn prepares to take vengeance.⁷²³ In order to have his vengeance, "[d]eich ríog ar secht fichtib ríog ro bí Cú Chulainn i m-Bresslig Móir Maigi Murthemni. Dírim immorro olchena di chonaib & echaib & mnáib & maccaib & mindaínib & drabarslóg" ("[s]even score and ten kings did Cú Chulainn slay in the battle of Breslech Mór in Mag Muirthemne, and a countless number besides of hounds and horses, of women and boys and children, and of the common folk").⁷²⁴ The wording is interesting in this

⁷²² Mikhailova, 'Portraying a Person', p. 114.

⁷²³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2116-79.

⁷²⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2328-30.

section, as Cú Chulainn's usual targets – the leading men – are set apart from those who seem to be considered non-combatants (after all, Recension I does specify that Cú Chulainn tends not to kill women).⁷²⁵

On the Ulster side, in many cases when the men of Ireland win a victory, Ulster women are carried away amongst the spoils of war. For example, speaking of Medb the *Táin* states, “dosbert cócait ban iar togail Dúin Sobarchi furri h-i crích Dáil Ríatai” (“[a]fter the destruction of Dún Sobairche in the territory of Dál Riada against Findmór she carried off fifty women captives”).⁷²⁶ In another section, “[d]oinólat a m-baí di mnáib & maccaib & ingenaib & búai hi Cúalngiu h-i teclom co m-bátár h-i Findabair uli” (“[t]hey gathered together all the women, boys, girls and cows that were in Cúailnge and brought them all to Findabair”).⁷²⁷ These women were divided among the men of the attacking army. This plundering of women is one of the primary lines of incitement used by those attempting to rouse the Ulstermen. Súaltaim declares that “[f]ir gontair, mná brattar, baí agthar” (“[m]en are slain, women carried off, cattle driven away”) during his persuasive speech to the Ulstermen.⁷²⁸ Cú Chulainn negotiates for these abducted women when Medb and Ailill attempt to negotiate with him. He refuses anything less than the return of all the women of Ulster, and half of the cattle.⁷²⁹ When he finally is roused to action, Conchobor announces, “Muir ara cendaib, in nem h-úasa m-bennaib, talum foa cosaib, dobér-sa cech m-boin ina h-indis díb & cach m-ben & cech mac dia tig iar m-búaid chatha” (“(I swear by) the sea before them, the sky above them, the earth

⁷²⁵ *TBC-I*, l. 4117.

⁷²⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 1533-34.

⁷²⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 979-80.

⁷²⁸ *TBC-I*, l. 3425.

⁷²⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1549-51.

beneath them that I shall restore every cow to its byre and every woman and boy to their own homes after victory in battle”).⁷³⁰ It is frequent that the women are paired with abducted livestock in this way. As with the possession of cattle during a cattle raid, the possession and destruction of women’s bodies are seen as primary symbols of dominance in the raid, motivating the heroes on both sides of the conflict to do better in order to protect the women associated with their side.

Other women act as links between different families, creating ties of loyalty between those who would otherwise be unconnected and helping to shape the identities of the men appearing in the *Táin*. These women do not need to appear to serve this function – a mention of their existence is enough to influence the behaviours of those related through them. Two such women are the mothers of Conchobor and Ailill. Ailill and Conchobor are frequently identified in Recension I as being “son of Máta” and “son of Ness.”⁷³¹ It may be that both of these men are identified by a matronymic because they hold the land they do through the female line. Ness is in some tales said to have gained Ulster for Conchobor, and Recension II states Ailill’s tie to Connacht is through the maternal line. Cú Chulainn, too, is frequently linked to his mother’s line of descent. When a young Cú Chulainn arrives at Conchobor’s court, it is his mother, Conchobor’s sister, that he references when indignant about the violent treatment he has received, saying, “Sétanta mac Súaltaim atomchomnaic-se & mac Dechtere do phethar-su. Níba dóig mo chompére sund” (“I am Sétanta the son of Súaltaim and of Deichtire, your sister. It was not to be expected that I should be tormented there”).⁷³² This tie to his

⁷³⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 3448-50.

⁷³¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 610, 1217, 3431, 3539, 3769, 3914, 3946.

⁷³² *TBC-I*, ll. 444-46.

mother's brother affects Cú Chulainn's behaviour throughout the text, as he refuses to change his allegiances due to it: "Ní r-riri bráthair a máthar ar rí n-aile" ("He will not exchange his mother's brother for another king").⁷³³ It is Cú Chulainn's tie to the same foster-mother as many of the heroes on the Connacht side that causes him great difficulties when negotiating his loyalties. Other warriors are also driven in their behaviour by their relationships to women. In the middle of the conflict between Ulster and Connacht, Fíacha Fíaldána Dimraith, a warrior on the Ulster side, goes to talk with a Connacht warrior, Maine Andóe, the son of his mother's sister. This relationship is the only reason given for such a crossing of conflict lines. In a tragically misaimed spearthrow, when the warrior Dubthach accidentally hits the warrior Dócha, this is considered notable because the mothers of the two are sisters.⁷³⁴ Kin-slaying, of maternal or paternal kin, was considered a horrendous offence, "which [struck] at the heart of the kin-based structure of early Irish society."⁷³⁵ At the end of the text, the young hero Erc comes to side with the Ulstermen due to his mother being Conchobor's daughter – this without consulting his father.⁷³⁶

1.1.1.1 Recension II

As in Recension I, women in Recension II of the *Táin* drive the text through their roles both as one of the spoils of war and as linking entities. When angered by the death of the youths who were his childhood companions, "[d]eich rí ar sé fichtib rí ro

⁷³³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1264-65.

⁷³⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2455-82.

⁷³⁵ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 127.

⁷³⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 3826-30.

bí Cú Chulaind issin Bresslig Móir Maige Murthemne. Díríme imorro archena di chonaib & echaib & mnáib & maccaib & mindóenib & drabarslóg” (“[t]en and six score kings did Cú Chulainn slay in the Breslech Mór in Mag Muirtheimne, and a countless number besides of hounds and horses and women and boys and children and the common folk”).⁷³⁷ As in Recension I, the women and other less commonly targeted victims of Cú Chulainn’s rage are separated from the more often targeted kings.

In Recension II, Ulster women are quite frequently looted along with cattle and other Ulster possessions. On different occasions, both Medb and Ailill note (with nearly exact wording), “Tucsam a mná & a meicc & a maccáemi, a n-eich & a n-echrada, a n-ailbi & a n-éiti & a n-indili” (“We have carried off their women and their sons and their youths, their horses and their steeds, their herds and their flocks and their cattle”).⁷³⁸ When they try to reach a deal with Cú Chulainn, Medb and Ailill offer him half of the women they have abducted, either the low-born women or the free-born women.⁷³⁹ He rejects both offers, saying, “noco géb co tartar dam cach bó blicht, cach ben Gáedel” (“I shall accept no terms until I am given every milch cow, every woman of the Gael”).⁷⁴⁰ Later, Cú Chulainn chastises Fer Diad on the topic of abducted women. After Fer Diad welcomes Cú Chulainn, Cú Chulainn declares: a Fir Diad [...] rapo chóru dam-sa fálti d’ferthain frit-su ná dait-siu a ferthain rum-sa, dáig is tú daríacht in crích & in cóiced i tú-sa, & níra chóir duit-siu tíchtain do chomlund & do chomrac rim-sa & rapa chóru dam-sa dol do chomlund & do chomrac rut-sa, dáig is romut-sa atát mo mná-sa & mo meic & mo maccáemi, m’eich & m’echrada, m’albi & m’éiti & m’indili (Fer Diad [...] it were fitter

⁷³⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2332-35.

⁷³⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4576-77, see also *TBC-LL*, ll. 4166-58.

⁷³⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1441-44.

⁷⁴⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1447-48.

that I should welcome you rather than that you should welcome me, for it is you who have come to the country and province in which I dwell, and it was not right for you to come and fight with me, rather should I have gone to fight with you, for driven before you are my womenfolk and youths and boys, my horses and steeds, my droves and flocks and herds).⁷⁴¹

When attempting to rouse the Ulstermen to fight, Cú Chulainn's father Sualtaim uses the abducted women as a primary reason the men should rise, saying, "Fir gontair, mná berdair, bae aegdair, a Ultu" ("Men are slain, women carried off, cattle driven away, O Ulstermen")!⁷⁴² Conchobor vows, "dobér-sa cach bó & cach ben díb cá lias & cá machad, co'aitte & co'adbai fadessin ar mbúaid chatha & chomlaind & chomraic" ("I shall bring back every cow to its byre and enclosure, every woman to her own abode and dwelling, after victory in battle and combat and contest)."⁷⁴³ At one point Conchobor and Celtchair come across and kill a large amount of men in the service of Ailill and Medb, each of whom holds prisoner one Ulster woman as a share of the plunder obtained from Ulster.⁷⁴⁴ As in Recension I, maintaining the integrity of the women in their group is a primary motivation for the heroes in the *Táin*.

Unlike in Recension I, in Recension II Conchobor and Ailill are not identified by reference to their mothers. However, Ailill does use his link through his mother to his mother's family to justify his inheritance of Medb's province, saying, "ní chúala chúiced i nHérind ar bantinchur acht in cúiced sa a óenur. Tánac-sa dano, gabsus rígi sund i tunachus mo máthar. dáig ar bíth Máta Murisc ingen Mágach mo máthair" ("I heard of

⁷⁴¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2931-37.

⁷⁴² *TBC-LL*, ll. 4011-12.

⁷⁴³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4046-47.

⁷⁴⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4117-4122.

no province in Ireland dependent on a woman except this province alone, so I came and assumed the kingship here in virtue of my mother's rights for Máta Muirisc the daughter of Mága was my mother").⁷⁴⁵ Cú Chulainn's mother continues to be an important figure, linking Cú Chulainn and his loyalties to Conchobor. As in Recension I, when Cú Chulainn arrives at Conchobor's court, he is attacked by the other boys, and tells Conchobor, "Sétanta bec missi mac Sualtaim, mac-sa Dechtiri do derbsethar-su, & ní lat-su fo dóig lim-sa mo chrád d'fagbáil samlaid" ("I am little Setanta mac Sualtaim, the son of Deichtire your sister, and not through you did I expect to be thus aggrieved").⁷⁴⁶ When offered a great reward by Medb and Ailill if he is willing to change sides, Cú Chulainn says, "Ní recfaind-se bráthair mo máthar bar rí g n-aile" ("I would not exchange my mother's brother for another king").⁷⁴⁷ It is because of his link through his mother that Cú Chulainn expects a certain type of treatment (lack of hostility) and expects himself to have a certain level of loyalty to Conchobor. Such links through the maternal line also dictate the behaviour and expectations of other warriors. When Fiacha throws a spear and it goes through Maine Andóe, his mother's sister, the men of Ireland say, "Is imroll díbairgthi [...] a tarla dona feraib, cách díb do guin a charat & a choibnesaim badessin" ("A badly aimed cast [...] was what befell the men, each of them wounding his own friend and relation").⁷⁴⁸ As in Recension I, Erc comes to the defence of Ulster based on his mother's parentage, but in Recension II this decision seems even more important, as his father is identified as Ailill's brother.⁷⁴⁹ Thus, Erc's ties through his

⁷⁴⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 48-50.

⁷⁴⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 796-97.

⁷⁴⁷ *TBC-LL*, l. 1405.

⁷⁴⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2456-58.

⁷⁴⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 45-46, 4543-51.

mother guide his action even above any loyalty to his paternal kin. In both recensions, women influence men's loyalty decisions by linking them through family ties.

1.1.1.2 Medb

While Medb is a very active figure, certain of the passive functions of women in the *Táin* also appear in the case of Medb. Just as Erc and Fiacha prioritize their mother's kin, Medb's sons side with her above all other loyalties. They are introduced by Medb in Recension I with the line "& atát na secht Mane.i. mo secht meic secht tríchait cét" ("the seven Maines are here, my seven sons, with seven divisions")⁷⁵⁰, while in Recension II they are referred to as "dá mac Ailella is Medba" ("the two sons of Ailill and Medb").⁷⁵¹ Since many men are introduced only as sons of their fathers, both of these modes of address show the Maines' connection to their maternal line.

While Medb in the present of the *Táin* is a decision maker and active figure, her past, as presented in many of the tales in the Ulster Cycle, shows her in many of the same types of danger other women suffer in the *Táin*. It can be argued that this past treatment motivates the entirety of her story in the *Táin*. Retzlaff describes that in 'The Wooing of Ferb', Conchobor kills Medb's son. In the same tale, it is revealed that Mugain, Conchobor's wife, is Medb's sister, and that Medb at one time was married to Conchobor herself. As Retzlaff states, "[t]here is more at play than a vain woman involved in a tiff with her consort."⁷⁵² Dominguez brings in more motivations for Medb,

⁷⁵⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 167-68.

⁷⁵¹ *TBC-LL*, l. 3734.

⁷⁵² Kay Retzlaff, 'Pretext and Context: The Remscéla and the *Táin*', in *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. by Ruairi Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009), 285-95 (p. 291).

stating that the tale *Cath Boinde* reveals “a strong emotional motivation (her rape by Conchobor) for the cattle raid in the *Táin*.”⁷⁵³ If it is true that Medb’s actions in the *Táin* can be understood by looking at Ulster Cycle material outside of the *Táin*, then the same traumas experienced by the women of the *Táin* – rape and separation from their own lands – inform much of Medb’s behaviour.

Ó Cathasaigh argues that in the Pillow Talk scene of Recension II, Medb is stating that Ailill is dependent on her, as a man who brought little to nothing into the marriage. He suggests that based on Ailill’s argument in response, it is more likely that Medb and Ailill have a marriage of equals, where both of them need the other in order to maintain power.⁷⁵⁴ This would then mean that one of Medb’s primary motivations in the *Táin*, as well as attempting to get revenge on Conchobor, is to avoid Ailill’s control of her due to having more possessions. Medb’s actions speak to a woman who, as much as any of the women in the text, has been used and wounded by heroic society and is unwilling to let it use her again. This is clear from her description of Ailill at the beginning of Recension II where she says, “[D]áig is mé ra chunnig in coibchi n-ingnaid nára chunnig ben ríam remom ar fer d’feraib Hérend .i. fer cen neóit, cen ét, cen omon” (“[F]or I demanded a strange bridegift such as no woman before me had asked of a man of the men of Ireland, to wit, a husband without meanness, without jealousy, without fear”).⁷⁵⁵ While this is often read as a sexually liberated or deviant statement, speaking to Medb’s desire for a partner who would allow her to cheat on him, it can just as easily be read as a rape survivor’s frank assessment that she wants a partner who is

⁷⁵³ Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 66.

⁷⁵⁴ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘A Marriage of Equals’, pp. 46-53.

⁷⁵⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 27-28.

not able to ever hurt her. If Ailill gains more possessions than her, it is possible for her to lose this sense of safety from her husband, as he will then have more power in her own land than Medb herself does.

5.2.2 Active women

5.2.2.1 Recension I

Not all women in Recension I are so removed from the narrative. Medb and Ailill's force contains large numbers of women. When setting up camp, tent positions of a significant amount of both men and women are described. For women, besides Medb, both Flidais (Fergus's lover and wife to Ailill Find) and Medb's daughter Findabair are mentioned.⁷⁵⁶ Later, Fergus reveals, "Secht tríchaith chét déac lenni h-i sund [...] iss é lín ar n-dunaid cenmothá ar n-dáescorslúag & ar mná — ar itá a rígan la cach ríg sund h-i comaitecht Medba" ("Seventeen divisions [...] is the number here in our encampment, not counting the camp-followers and our boys and our women- folk—for each chief here in Medb's company has brought his wife").⁷⁵⁷ There are many women in Medb and Ailill's camp. Quite a bit of information can be gleaned about some of the functions that these women fill during the cattle raid. The women travel behind the main army, while the cattle are driven ahead. There are enough women along with the army that they have a specific position they take when the force is advancing.⁷⁵⁸ While along on the cattle raid, at least some of these women act as attendants for Medb, often

⁷⁵⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 144-46.

⁷⁵⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 177-78.

⁷⁵⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 1134-36.

travelling in groups. In one section, these women accompany Medb to a meeting with Cú Chulainn.⁷⁵⁹ They are allowed along as their presence is not considered a threat. The women also take care of some camp chores – in one section of the text a group of women goes to gather water.⁷⁶⁰

One of the women's primary roles is as observers, and in this role they are extremely entwined with the functioning of the army. During many of Cú Chulainn's interactions with the men of Ireland he has spectators, many of whom are women. Cú Chulainn plays up to these spectators. After he appeared in his horrific battle form:

[d]otháet Cú Chulaind arna bárach do thaidbriud in t-slóig & do thaisbénad a chrotha álgín álind do mnáib & bantrochtaib & andrib & ingenaib & filedaib & áes dána, úair nír míad ná mass leiss in dúaburdelb druídechta tárfás dóib fair ind adaig sin reme (Cú Chulainn came on the morrow to survey the host and to display his gentle and beautiful form to women and girls and maidens, to poets and men of art, for he held not as honourable or dignified the dark magical appearance in which he had appeared to them the previous night).⁷⁶¹

The women know what they want and express their opinions loudly and expansively - many women in the *Táin* are defined primarily by their relationship with words. When Cú Chulainn appears in a form they like, “frisócbat mná Connacht forsna buidne & fordringtís mná firu do déscin crotha Con Culaind” (“the women of Connacht climbed up on the hosts and the women of Munster climbed on men's shoulders that they might behold the appearance of Cú Chulainn”).⁷⁶² When Lóch refuses to fight Cú

⁷⁵⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1922-25.

⁷⁶⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 974-75.

⁷⁶¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 2336-40.

⁷⁶² *TBC-I*, ll. 2367-68.

Chulainn, believing him a beardless youth, the women first advise Cú Chulainn that he should give himself a beard made of blackberry juice in order to fool Lóch into fighting him. They then proceed to goad Lóch until he agrees to the fight.⁷⁶³ This suggests that the women do not just observe, they are able to pass some form of judgement on the men. This judgement does not always run along army lines – they are just as willing to judge Lóch for not fighting as they are willing to judge Cú Chulainn's beauty. The men respond to this – Lóch agrees to fight and Cú Chulainn deliberately shows himself off, desiring just such attention. In this way Recension I seems to demonstrate a sort of female power structure that runs alongside but separate to that of the men – although the possession of women acts as an ultimate goal for the men, the women's continued approval acts as an ultimate goal for the men. Women quite frequently are among the audience that judges men of actions such as betrayal.

In another segment of the text, during a period of time when the Ulstermen are struck by their debilitation, the women cry out in warning when an attack occurs.⁷⁶⁴ They observe and act upon their observations in what they feel to be their best interests, in this case to protect both themselves and their families. This accords with women's loyalty decisions throughout the text. In other cases, this speech intervention is even more direct, and in certain cases almost martial. The prophetess Feidelm appears, with a lengthy physical description provided, just as the army is setting forth. She carries the equipment of a weaver, a traditionally feminine activity, and is also armed. Despite repeated protestations from Medb that what Feidelm prophesies cannot come to be, Feidelm perseveres in delivering her warning to Medb, whose subject Feidelm appears

⁷⁶³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1899-908.

⁷⁶⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 530-36.

to be. Feidelm prophesies the slaughter Cú Chulainn will enact on the men of Ireland and foreshadows his use of the *ga bulga*. She states, “Slaidfid for slúagu slána / fochiuchra for tiugára / fáicfidi leis míli cend / ní cheil in banfáith Fedelm” (“He will lay low your entire army. He will slaughter you in dense crowds. Ye will leave with him a thousand severed heads. The prophetess Feidelm does not conceal your fate”).⁷⁶⁵

Later, two handmaidens are sent by Medb to fool Cú Chulainn into believing the Ulstermen have been defeated and Cú Chulainn’s foster-father Fergus has been killed due to Cú Chulainn’s absence from the battlefield. They are supposed to lament over him and in this way reopen his wounds – a form of psychological warfare. Cú Chulainn treats them in the same way he treats all such employers of the trade of satire – he violently murders them, in this case by smashing in their heads.⁷⁶⁶

Sometimes women’s involvement does not just involve speech and observing, but direct action. Find Bec, wife of the warrior Cethern, arrives when her husband has been wounded in battle and is on the point of reengaging with his enemies. Cethern asks who is approaching and Cú Chulainn answers, “Cosmail lim bid h-é carpat Finde Becce ingine Ehdach do mná-so dotáesad cucund” (“I think it is the chariot of your wife Find Bec, the daughter of Eochu, coming towards us”).⁷⁶⁷ The text then explains that “[c]onacatar ní : in mnaí cosin ngaisced isin charput” (“[t]hey saw the woman bringing Cethern’s weapons in the chariot”).⁷⁶⁸ Find Bec has her own chariot and appears comfortable carrying weapons, indicating some competency in military matters. It is interesting that Find Bec appears before any message is sent to her asking for

⁷⁶⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 103-06.

⁷⁶⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 4086-93.

⁷⁶⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 3310-11.

⁷⁶⁸ *TBC-I*, l. 3312.

Cethern's weapons. She does not fight, but has a valuable supporting role, anticipating her husband's military needs and providing him with the tools he needs to protect their home and their people. There are other women who, while they do not directly engage with martial matters, still show the close connection women have with war in Recension I, and the expectations society places upon them in dangerous situations. Mugain, wife of Conchobor, is such a woman. During a description of Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds, there is one occasion where he goes into a frenzy after his first military adventure. In this state, he returns home and declares, "Tongu do dia toingte Ulaid mani étar fer do gleó frim-sa, ardáilfe fuil lim cach áein fil isin dún" ("I swear by the god by whom Ulstermen swear that, unless some man is found to fight with me, I shall shed the blood of everyone in the fort").⁷⁶⁹ Conchobor commands instead that naked women be sent to him, after which "[t]othéit bantrocht n-Emna ara chend im Mugain mnaí Conchobair meic Nessa, & donnochtat a m-bruinni friss" ("the women-folk of Emain came forth to meet him led by Mugain, the wife of Conchobor mac Nessa, and they bared their breasts to him").⁷⁷⁰ Mugain tells Cú Chulainn, "It é óic inso condricfat frit indiu" ("These are the warriors who will encounter you today").⁷⁷¹ Cú Chulainn cannot look at the women, providing a distraction during which the warriors of Ulster can grab him and submerge him in cold water, breaking him out of his frenzy. In this case, there is a situation that cannot be solved by the men of Ulster. Their solution of sending the women into a potentially violent and dangerous situation is telling. The men do not feel a need to protect the women despite the futility of that action, which would suggest a

⁷⁶⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 808-09.

⁷⁷⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 811-812.

⁷⁷¹ *TBC-I*, l. 813.

worldview where women were not thought to need such protection. Rather, the women are expected to fill in the gap in Emain's defences. Moreover, the women, with no apparent hesitation, are willing to do so, suggesting this is a mindset they are familiar with, not an unexpected type of decision on Conchobor's part. Where the men are unable, the women will protect themselves and their home. While not put on the front lines in the way the men are, women are connected to most aspects of war and the war effort – in both offensive and defensive efforts. Their loyalty is frequently seen to be to the protection of themselves and of their families.

5.2.2.2 Recension II

In Recension II of the *Táin*, women are also brought along in Medb and Ailill's forces. It is mentioned that “[f]a dolig dóib frithairle in tslúaig romóir lotar forsin fecht frisna iltúathaib & frisna ilmaicnib & frisna ilmílib dosbertatar leo co 'mmanactís & co 'mmafessaitis combad chách cona cháemaib & cona chairdib & cona chomdúalas forin tslúagud” (“[i]t was difficult for them to attend to that mighty army, which set forth on that journey, with the many tribes and the many families and the many thousands whom they brought with them that they might see each other and know each other and that each might be with his familiars and his friends and his kin on the hosting”).⁷⁷² Women are along as part of the family group so that kin need not be separated for the long duration of the cattle raid. These women are involved in camp tasks. At one point, “[r]ádis Medb fria cáeminailt comaitechta dá muntir techt ar cend usci oóil & innalta dochum na haba di” (“Medb told a handmaid of her household to go to the river and

⁷⁷² *TBC-LL*, ll. 351-55.

fetch her water for drinking and washing”).⁷⁷³ The handmaiden, Loche, does so accompanied by fifty other women.⁷⁷⁴ Unlike in Recension I, where the women are implied to provide water for the entire camp, here the narrative focuses specifically on Medb, a focus on named characters over larger groups that has been seen before in Recension II.

Women are implied not to be the primary ones fighting. During the battle between Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn, when both heroes are straining their utmost and the intensity of their battle has caused such diverse effects as inducing madness in the Irish horses and forcing the river from its course, it is said that the “goro memaid de mnáib & maccáemaib & mindóenib, midlaigib & meraigib fer nHérend trisin dúnud síardess” (“women and boys and children and those unfit to fight and the mad among the men of Ireland broke out through the camp south-westwards”).⁷⁷⁵ Women are placed in a separate category from the warriors, clearly not among those whose typical function such fighting is.

As in Recension I, women are observers in Recension II. After he has terrified the army with his horrific battle appearance, Cú Chulainn:

[d]otháet arnabárach do thaidbriud in tslóig & do thasbénad a chrotha álgín
álaind do mnáib & bantrochtaib & andrib & ingenaib & filedaib & áes dána, uair
nír miad ná mais leis in dúaburdelb druídechta tárfás dóib fair in adaig sin riam
reme (came on the morrow to survey the host and to display his gentle,
beautiful appearance to women and girls and maidens, to poets and men of

⁷⁷³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1341-43.

⁷⁷⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1343-44.

⁷⁷⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3336-37.

art, for he held not as honour or dignity the dark form of wizardry in which he had appeared to them the previous night).⁷⁷⁶

Cú Chulainn cares what the women, although they are on the opposing side, think of him. As in Recension I, the women are vocal as to their likes and dislikes. They insist on being raised above the heads of the men so that they can see Cú Chulainn better. Unlike Recension I, Recension II provides a slight critique of this behaviour. Dubthach Dáel Ulad says, “Atchíu forthócbat far mná / a n-aidche ósna urgalá” (“I see how your womenfolk raise their heads above the battle”)⁷⁷⁷, using this as a reason why Ailill and Medb’s forces should hate Cú Chulainn and kill him through treachery and ambush. However, given that his primary message is instantly contested by Fergus and that his primary motivation is said to be jealousy because his wife is one of those who finds Cú Chulainn attractive, it is unwise to take this as a complete condemnation of the women’s actions.

Women are mentioned as being present at many of the encounters Cú Chulainn has at the ford, where they affect many of the fights. In Cú Chulainn’s fight with Lóch, the women advise Cú Chulainn to put on a fake beard of blackberry juice in order to make Lóch fight him, “Úair ní fiú la dagláoch isin loncphort techt do chomrac frit & tú gan ulchain” (“For no great warrior in the camp thinks it worth his while to go and fight with you while you are beardless”).⁷⁷⁸ Cú Chulainn complies with this suggestion. During the same fight, “[d]obertsat in bantracht gesa & aimberta for Coin cCulainn dá ttísadh úadh gan fhosdadh gan aidmilledh fuirre” (“the womenfolk put Cú Chulainn

⁷⁷⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2338-42.

⁷⁷⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2393-94.

⁷⁷⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1976-77.

under tabus and prohibitions not to let the Morrígan go from him without checking and destroying her”)⁷⁷⁹, a form of verbal power they do not display to such an extent in Recension I. Unlike in Recension I, the women do not goad Lóch to fight. However, they do jeer at Lugaid’s brother Láiríne during his fight with Cú Chulainn, suggesting that in Recension II women are as likely to mock the men on their own side as on the other, should the men seem mockable. Láiríne is presented as quite an object of scorn – “Ní ba fiú la dagláochaibh in dúnaidh nó an longphuirt techt d’féchain chomraic Láiríni acht mná & giollanradh & ingena d’fochaidbedh & d’fanamad ima comrac” (“The mighty warriors in the camp did not think it worth their while to go and watch Láiríne’s fight, but the women and boys and girls scoffed and jeered at his fight”).⁷⁸⁰ In contrast, Lóch is generally presented as a noble warrior, which could suggest a tendency in Recension II not to wish to present noble heroes in a bad light, whereas men like Láiríne, who never has a chance against Cú Chulainn and who came to fight him against the protestations of his brother Lugaid, are acceptable for the text to present in a negative way. In this way, women’s voices reflect the values of the text and the judgements the text passes on each warrior, while still representing a power structure outside of the utilized by men – a power structure that complements the honour system of the warriors and can also tear down warriors if they do not adhere to the system. As in Recension I, women are a vital part of the audience external to a primary conflict that can accuse men of dishonorable actions, such as betrayal.

Women appear with important speaking roles in a number of different contexts. The prophetess Feidelm appears in much the same role as Recension I. In Recension

⁷⁷⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1994-96.

⁷⁸⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1946-48.

II, Feidelm is also important for her skill at prophecy. She appears similarly when the army is about to depart, but in this case just after Medb has consulted her druid about what will occur in the cattle raid. He has not told her much – merely that “Cipé [tic] nó ná tic, ticfa-su fessing” (“Whoever comes or comes not back, you yourself will come”).⁷⁸¹ Medb’s concern when inquiring was primarily for herself. In contrast, Feidelm does not consider Medb’s particular desires in knowledge. She gives Medb the complete truth – saying, “Silfid crú a cnessaib curad, / bud fata bas chianhuman; / beit cuirp cerbtha, caínfit mná, / ó Choin na Cerdda atchíu-sa” (“Blood will flow from heroes' bodies. Long will it be remembered. Men's bodies will be hacked, women will lament, through the Hound of the Smith that I see”).⁷⁸² Although Medb herself may return, that is not the complete story. Feidelm attempts to provide the truth to the army – and to warn them about their future. Unlike Feidelm in Recension I, this Feidelm is not mentioned to carry any weapons, only the tools for weaving.⁷⁸³ Also as in Recension I, two women are sent to fool Cú Chulainn into believing the Ulstermen have been defeated, although here the women are identified as female satirists rather than handmaidens. They use a form of traditionally female speech – weeping and lamentation – but use it in a weaponized way. While their use of words as their form of attack is similar to their male counterparts, this focus on lament is unique to the female satirists.⁷⁸⁴ All the mentions of male satirists have them directly attacking a man’s honour in order to affect his behaviour. As well as these references, Recension II also has a woman named Leborcham who is largely involved in the war effort. She is a messenger and the first to observe Cú Chulainn

⁷⁸¹ *TBC-LL*, I. 182.

⁷⁸² *TBC-LL*, II. 272-75.

⁷⁸³ *TBC-LL*, II. 183-96.

⁷⁸⁴ *TBC-LL*, II. 4594-797.

when he returns from his first chariot ride crazed by battle lust and prepared to attack his own people. She relays her message, starting with the basic details (that there is a single warrior approaching in a chariot) and proceeding to her conclusions and suggestions (“Ocus meni fritháalter innocht é, dosfaíthsat óic Ulad leis” [“If he be not met tonight, the warriors of Ulster will fall at his hand”]).⁷⁸⁵

Women in Recension II also have a number of roles that involve direct action. Cethern’s wife appears in Recension II. In this recension her name is Finda. The text explains that as Cethern prepared to return to battle, “[i]s í sain amser luid a banchéile atúaid á Dún Da Bend & a chlaideb lée dó .i. Finda ingen Echach. Tánic Cethern mac Fintain d’indsaigid fer nHérend” (“[t]hat was the time when his wife Finda daughter of Eochu came from the north, from Dún Da Benn, bringing him his sword. Cethern mac Fintain came towards the men of Ireland”).⁷⁸⁶ The story presented in this recension is nearly the same as that in Recension I. Finda still appears quite competent at carrying weapons and still anticipates her husband’s military needs. However, she is not described as arriving in her own chariot. Thus, she is slightly more distanced from direct connection to military action than the Finda of Recension I. Scannlach is Conchobor’s wife in Recension II (as opposed to Mugain). In Recension II, she leads the women of Ulster to stand naked before a rampaging Cú Chulainn, allowing him to be seized while distracted. The text states that:

ba sed in chomairle ra cruthaiged leó in bantrocht da lécud immach do saigid in meic .i. trí cóicait ban .i. deich mnáa & secht fichit díscir derglomoicht i n-óenfecht uili & a mbantóesech rempo, Scandlach, do thócbáil a nnochta & a

⁷⁸⁵ *TBC-LL*, I. 1182.

⁷⁸⁶ *TBC-LL*, II. 4787-89.

nnáire dó. Táncatar immach in banmaccrad uile & túargbatar a nnochta & a nnáire uile dó (the plan they devised was this: to send the womenfolk out to meet the boy, thrice fifty women, that is, ten and seven score women, all stark naked, led by their chieftainess, Scannlach, to expose all their nakedness and shame to him. All the young women came forth and discovered all their nakedness and shame to him).⁷⁸⁷

Interestingly, in this recension it is not Conchobor alone who makes the decision for the women to go out and face Cú Chulainn. Rather, it is not specified who is involved in the planning. This suggests the possibility that the women themselves had some say in this recension, particularly since it was a woman who brought word of Cú Chulainn and thus at least one woman is definitely there during this discussion. Overall there is less detail provided than in Recension I, and Scannlach, unlike Mugain, never speaks. However, there is still definite acceptance of the potentially dangerous idea by the women, found in the fact that all of the required group of young women follow the plan. This presents a variety of women in many of the key non-martial or semi-martial roles that men take in during war situations. The women are an important form of support for martial efforts, and present in a number of key positions. Their loyalty is to their families and they show this loyalty in many capacities.

5.2.2.3 Medb

Medb shares some aspects with the women in this section who influence events through words and not directly martial acts. In both recensions, part of her power comes

⁷⁸⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1186-90.

through speech acts. Like other women in the *Táin*, Medb attempts to protect herself and her family through many means, including some that do not involve pure military control. As seen above, this is typical of women's loyalty decisions in the *Táin*.

In Recension I, Medb is often mentioned in conjunction with other women. In the camp of the men of Ireland near the beginning of the text, Medb's tent is next to Ailill's, and beside her tent are the tents of the other important women along on the cattle raid.⁷⁸⁸ Medb is also nearly always present when her daughter is speaking to men.⁷⁸⁹ When communicating with Cú Chulainn that he should come and negotiate with her, “[f]oíti-si techta úadi dia saighin arco tíasad 'na coinni, & bad amlaid tíasad & sé anarma fo déig ní ragad-si acht sí cona bantrocht dia áil-seom” (“[s]he sent a messenger to him asking him to come and meet her, and stipulated that he should come unarmed for she herself would come to him accompanied only by her women attendants”).⁷⁹⁰ Among the other women, Medb is at times part of the audience for whom the men perform. For example, towards the beginning of Cú Chulainn's harassment of the men of Ireland, she is one of the women who climb on the shoulders of the men in order to look at him.⁷⁹¹

Medb is also quite frequently involved in persuasive speech acts. She taunts both Loch and Fer Diad in an attempt to have them try to kill Cú Chulainn. The text indicates that she is deliberately attempting to manipulate their feelings and incite them. For Loch, “Gabais dano Medb for gressacht Lóich andaide.’ ‘Mór in cutbiud dait,’ ‘for sí,’ ‘in fer ro marb do bráthair do bith oc díthugud ar slóig cen techt do chomrac fris” (“Medb

⁷⁸⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 140-46.

⁷⁸⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1737-60; 1807-21; 2577-619.

⁷⁹⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 1922-25.

⁷⁹¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1886-97.

began to incite Lóch. ‘It is a great shame for you,’ said she, ‘that the man who killed your brother should be destroying our army and that you do not go to do battle with him’).⁷⁹² Medb eventually manages to persuade Loch to attempt to kill Cú Chulainn, despite it being Medb herself who led to Loch’s brother’s death by persuading him to fight Cú Chulainn. With Fer Diad, Medb constructs a narrative counter to the truth. The text states:

‘A firu trá,’ or sí or Medb, trí chóir n-indlaig & imc[h]osaídi, ‘is fír in bríathar asbert Cú Chulaind,’ mar ná cloised Fer Diad itir. ‘Cé guth éiside, a Medb?’ ‘or Fer Diad. ‘A drubairt, a m’anom,’ or sisi, ‘ní pad furáil leis do thuitim-siu ina airigid gaiscid leis isin chóiced i rragad.’ (‘O my men,’ said Medb, intending to stir up strife and dissension and speaking as if she had not heard Fer Diad at all, ‘what Cú Chulainn said is true.’ ‘What did he say, Medb?’ asked Fer Diad. ‘He said, my friend, that he thought you should fall by his choicest feat of arms in the province to which he would go’).⁷⁹³

This is a lie – Cú Chulainn has never made this statement. Medb’s words are persuasive and destructive for all of the men she sends against Cú Chulainn. Yet her words are similar to the words of other women in the text – they represent an alternative power structure the words of which are the primary goad for the men in the text. As a woman, she has the power to persuade men to her side because if they did not fight on her command, she could spin a narrative that presented them in a negative, cowardly light, or present them as betrayers. In this same capacity, as well as the capacity of lover, Medb is the one who persuades Fergus to stop leading the army astray when he

⁷⁹² *TBC-I*, ll. 1969-72.

⁷⁹³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2606-10.

feels kinship for the Ulstermen.⁷⁹⁴ There is also an undercurrent in that conversation which suggests that if Fergus had not stopped in his attempt, Medb could have publicly shamed him for his betrayal. She wields power in her words.

Medb has similar roles in Recension II. She is frequently found among her group of camp women. Within the camp, tents are set up so that “Medb Chrúachan immorro do chlí Ailella. Findabair fora lám-ide. Flidais Foltcháin ben-side Ailella Find arna” (“Medb Chrúachan was on Ailill's left with Findabair beside her. Then came Flidais Fholtcháin, the wife of Ailill Find”).⁷⁹⁵ The important women of the camp cluster together. Medb is also frequently in the company of her female attendants. She has these women run errands for her, such as the handmaiden she sends to fetch water.⁷⁹⁶ It is Medb who sends the women to tell Cú Chulainn that if he applies a false beard made of blackberries, he will be taken more seriously.⁷⁹⁷ This represents just one occasion on which Medb utilizes the power of judgement a woman wields. In another instance, after Cú Chulainn has not realized a man was attempting to attack him and left the area of the fight, seemingly running away, Medb declares, “Rafetammar [...] rapad fír, acht condarístaís daglaích & dagóic, ní gébad fri féta in serriti óc amulchach sain, ár in am dosfarraid dagláech, ní riss ra gabastar acht is riam reme ro madmastar” (“We knew [...] that that would happen, and that if only goodly heroes and warriors came to meet him, the young and beardless sprite would not withstand resolute men. For when a goodly warrior came to him, he did not hold out against him but was routed by

⁷⁹⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 235-42.

⁷⁹⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 305-07.

⁷⁹⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1341-44.

⁷⁹⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1973-79.

him”).⁷⁹⁸ The power of the message she proclaims prompts Fergus to find Cú Chulainn and let him know that his reputation is under attack.

Medb uses the same power of ridicule and shame to persuade Fer Diad to talk with her. At first Fer Diad refuses to come, so:

[i]s and sin fáitte Medb na drúith & na glámma & na crúadgressa ar cend Fir Diad ar co nderntaís teóra áera sossaignthe dó & teóra glámma dícénd go tócbaitís teóra bolga bara agid, ail & anim & athis, murbud marb a chétóir combad marb re cind nómaide, munu thísed (then Medb sent the druids and satirists and harsh bands for Fer Diad that they might make against him three satires to stay him and three lampoons, and that they might raise on his face three blisters, shame, blemish and disgrace, so that he might die before the end of nine days if he did not succumb at once, unless he came with the messengers).⁷⁹⁹

As in Recension I, Medb understands the power of words.

However, in Recension II, Medb does not only use her words to shame or accuse of acts such as betrayal. Before she ever decided to attack Ulster, she attempted to gain the bull through peaceful persuasion. She sent messengers to Ulster to ask for the use of the bull, and it is through the messengers own injudicious and indecorous use of speech that her bid is rejected and the texts turn to violence as a solution.⁸⁰⁰

⁷⁹⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1713-16.

⁷⁹⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3621-25.

⁸⁰⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 75-146.

5.2.3 Women as Sexual Partners

5.2.3.1 Recension I

In Recension I, several women besides Medb are seen in the role of sexual partners or potential sexual partners for assorted men, including Medb's daughter Findabair and several women who are or desire to be sexual partners of Cú Chulainn. These examples are suggestive of how women are perceived when they engage in sexual activities.

When Medb's army first approaches near enough to pose a danger to Ulster, Fergus sends a warning to the Ulstermen. Cú Chulainn receives this warning and stands watch, but before the host appears, Cú Chulainn leaves because "i n-dáil a h-inailte boí i comair Con Culaind i n-dormainecht" ("he meant to tryst with her handmaiden who was secretly Cú Chulainn's concubine").⁸⁰¹ This tryst lasts quite a while – Cú Chulainn takes the time to bathe himself before he leaves and does not leave early. When he does arrive, the enemy army has already had time to advance. Cú Chulainn laments, exclaiming, "Ní má lodmar dó [...] ná mertamar Ultu. Ro léicsem slóg forru cen airfius" ("Would that we had not gone thither nor betrayed the men of Ulster! We have let the enemy host come upon them unawares").⁸⁰² The unnamed handmaiden appears only in reference and is not mentioned again. It appears that when sexual desire interferes with duty and with martial affairs, the partner hindering this duty is the one negatively viewed by the text. When Cú Chulainn's tryst with the handmaiden

⁸⁰¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 223-24.

⁸⁰² *TBC-I*, ll. 315-16.

leads him to be late to battle, nothing is said against her, but Cú Chulainn laments his own behaviour in the affair, his own betrayal of his people.

Cú Chulainn does have one more tryst, this time with his wife, Emer. The encounter happens just before Cú Chulainn first fights Fer Diad. Láeg states:

Is amlaid doraga Fer Diad dot indsaigid-so fo núamaisi figi & bertha & foilcthi & fothraicthi, & ceithre cóicid h-Érenn lais do fégad in chomlaind. Rob áil dam-sa do dula-su co h-áit a fuigbigthea in córugud cétna fort co tici fail h-i fil Emer Foltchaín, co Cairthenn Clúana Da Dam h-i Slíab Fúait (Fer Diad will come against you freshly beautified, washed and bathed, with hair plaited and beard shorn, and the four provinces of Ireland will come with him to watch the fight. I should like you to go to where you will get the same adorning, to the spot where Emer Fholtchaín is, to Cairthenn Clúana Da Dam in Slíab Fuait).⁸⁰³

Cú Chulainn agrees with this logic and spends the night with his wife. Their night is not described; the narrative moves to Fer Diad, who spends the night in an ever-increasing state of anxiety. Come the morning, this time Cú Chulainn departs in a timely manner, waking before Láeg and desiring the chariot to be made ready as “[m]á tá Fer Diad acar n-irrnaidi, is fada lais” (“[i]f Fer Diad is awaiting us, he will deem it long”).⁸⁰⁴ Emer is never mentioned again, but Cú Chulainn is described as arriving to his fight, which he eventually wins, looking very stylish, so Emer’s beautification was seemingly successful. There seems to be very little care if women have sexual contact with men, at least within the boundary of marriage, so long as it does not interfere with military endeavours. Emer is encouraged to beautify Cú Chulainn.

⁸⁰³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2808-12.

⁸⁰⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2910-11.

A third figure frequently appearing in the context of sexual partner is Medb's daughter, Findabair. Throughout the course of the text, she is offered in marriage to many men. Cú Chulainn, Fer Báeth, Láiríne, Fer Diad, Reochaid, Nath Crantail, and all of the seven kings of Munster are promised her as a wife at various points in the text.⁸⁰⁵ After Cú Chulainn has killed enough warriors, few people are willing to volunteer to fight him. Ailill devises a new strategy, saying:

Ní faigéibthar-side etir [...] acht má dorónaid céill occai. Nách fer dotháeti chucaib, tabraid fín dó corop maith a menma, & asberthar friss 'iss ed nammá fil dond fín tucad a Crúachnaib, rosáeth linni do bith-siu for uisciu isin dúnad,' & doberthar Findabair fora desreth & asberthar 'ragaid chucut día tuicce cend ind ríastairthe dúinni' (No one will be got [...] unless ye employ some trickery in this matter. Give wine to every man that comes to you until he is gladdened in mind, and tell him: 'That is all that is left of the wine that was brought from Crúachain. We are grieved that you should have only water to drink in the camp.'—and let Finnabair be placed at his right hand, and tell him: 'You shall have her if you bring back to us the head of the distorted one).⁸⁰⁶

This is done. When offered to Fer Báeth, Láiríne, Fer Diad, and the multiple other warriors lured in by Ailill's scheme, Findabair merely sits beside them while the warrior of the moment is told he is her chosen husband. They are killed before anything can come of these engagements.⁸⁰⁷

⁸⁰⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 1587; 1659-84; 1745-47; 1807-24; 1389-408; 2567-87; 3346-65.

⁸⁰⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 1809-14.

⁸⁰⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1737-806; 1807-44; 2567-3153.

A few of Findabair's other engagements grow more complicated. First, Ailill has Findabair offered to Cú Chulainn in what is advertised as the arrangement of a truce, but is truly part of a trap for the hero. Cú Chulainn is worried there will be a trap, but is assured by his friend Lugaid (who is seemingly unaware of the true idea) that no such trap will occur. Findabair is sent with a jester disguised as Ailill to produce the engagement, with the intent being trickery. Ailill says:

Táet in drúth im richt-sa [...] & mind ríog fora chind, & fasisidar di chéin Coin Culaind arnacha n-aithgné. Ocus téiti ind ingen leis & ara naiscea dó h-í, & tecat ass ellom fón cruth sin. Ocus is dóig immérthai ceilg fón cruth sin fair conná fostba sib céin co tí la h-Ultu don chath (Let the jester go disguised as me [...] wearing a king's crown on his head. And let him stand far away from Cú Chulainn that he may not recognize him. And the girl shall go with him and he shall betroth her to Cú Chulainn. They shall come away quickly then and very likely you will deceive Cú Chulainn in that way and he will not hinder you until such time as he comes with the Ulstermen to the great battle).⁸⁰⁸

However, Cú Chulainn recognizes the man is a jester and kills him, after which “[t]ic dochum na ingini. Benaíd a dí trilis di & sáidid liic tríana brat & tríana léinid” (“[h]e came to the girl. He cut off her two plaits and thrust a stone through her mantle and her tunic”).⁸⁰⁹ No truce is produced.

On another occasion, Cú Chulainn enlists the help of Reochaid mac Fathemain, who seemingly recovers from his debility before many of the other Ulster warriors, in fighting Medb and Ailill's army. Findabair is apparently in love with Reochaid. Learning

⁸⁰⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 1593-97.

⁸⁰⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1601-03.

this, Fergus suggests that Findabair propose a meeting with Reochaid, at which meeting point Reochaid will be seized, saving the army from attack by Reochaid's men. This happens, and Reochaid is only released when he has promised not to attack again until the final fight. In exchange for this “[d]orairngired dó dano Findabair do t/habairt dó, & immásoí úadib íar sudiu” (“[h]e was promised that Finnabair should be given to him, and then he went away from them”).⁸¹⁰

Reochaid returns once before the final battle. On this occasion, Ailill and Medb tell Findabair, “Má rodcarais didiu, [...] guid ossad dó co tí la Conchobar don chath, & foí lais ambárach d' adaig” (“If you have loved him [...] crave a truce of him until such time as he comes with Conchobar to the great battle, and spend tomorrow night with him”).⁸¹¹ She spends the next night with Reochaid. Unfortunately, one of the seven kings of Munster learns of the incident and is troubled by it, saying, “Dobrethai dam-sa an ingen sin [...] for cóic aitirib déac ar tuideacht in t-slúaid sea” (“I was promised this girl on the surety of fifteen men, in requital for coming on this hosting”).⁸¹² At this point, all the other Munster kings reveal they were offered the same reward. They start a large fight to attempt revenge for this, in which seven hundred men die. Upon hearing of the incident, Findabair drops dead because she is so ashamed, despite the fact that this betrayal seems to have been orchestrated by her parents, not her.⁸¹³ Findabair remains outside of the action, seemingly dead, before reappearing without explanation at the very end of the text to remain in Ulster with Cú Chulainn after the *Táin*.⁸¹⁴

⁸¹⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 1682-83.

⁸¹¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 3350-51.

⁸¹² *TBC-I*, ll. 3355-56.

⁸¹³ *TBC-I*, l. 3365.

⁸¹⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 4157-59.

The tragic ending of Findabair after ruining the prospects of so many men indicates that a woman's marriage potential, and her potential for sexual behavior, is viewed negatively when she is involved in trickery, as are most of the military strategies that employ such tactics. No word is said against Findabair's engagements to so many men. Rather, it is the tricks that surround many of her engagements that lead to problems. Her family kidnaps Reochaid, gives sureties to all of the seven kings of Munster, attempts to deceive Cú Chulainn, and lies to the men they are sending against Cú Chulainn about such details as the amount of wine left (in order to make each man feel particularly special). It is hard to separate the sexual nature of certain of Findabair's encounters from the tricks used in them, and thus hard to determine anything further from her example, particularly since she is often symbolizing the power that men would obtain through marrying her. The sense of betrayal her suitors feel seems to come from the tricks Findabair's family employ, not a sense that the suitors believed in sexual exclusivity.

5.2.3.2 Recension II

There are a number of differences in Recension II both in the women who are presented as sexual partners and in the language used to describe them – fewer women are presented as partners for Cú Chulainn, while both Fergus and the warrior Dubthach acquire sexual partners. This leads to a somewhat different set of suggestions compared with Recension I as to how women are perceived in sexual situations.

When Medb and Ailill's host is assembling, one of the women described as being along on the cattle raid is Flidais Fholtchaín, who is "ben-side Ailella Find arna feis la Fergus ar Táin Bó Cúailnge & is sí no bered in sechtmad n-aidchi ingalad d'feraib Hérend forin tslúagad do lucht eter rí & rígain & ríghomna & filid & foglaimthid" ("the wife of Ailill Find, who had slept with Fergus on *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, and it was she who every seventh night on that hosting quenched with milk the thirst of all the men of Ireland, king and queen and prince, poet and learner").⁸¹⁵ Flidais's dalliance with Fergus is only referenced as a side comment – a minor detail about her – while the main focus is on how Flidais is of benefit to the military effort. Her abundance of milk is useful for the host, while her sexual contact with a man not her husband does not incur censure.

In Recension II, Cú Chulainn has one woman with whom he carries out a tryst. When the enemy army is approaching, Cú Chulainn does not initially fight because he is called away to a previous engagement with the handmaiden of Feidilmid Noíchruthach. His father tells him, "Mairgg théit ón ám [...] & Ulaid do lécud fo chossaib a nnámat & a n-echtrand ar thecht i comdail n-óenmná" ("Woe to him who goes thus [...] and leaves the Ulstermen to be trampled underfoot by their enemies and by outlanders for the sake of going to a tryst with any women")⁸¹⁶ but Cú Chulainn defends his absence by observing, "Amm écen-sa trá techt, dáig meni digius, gúigfitir dála fer & fírfaitir briathra ban" ("I must go however, for unless I do, men's contracts will be falsified and women's words be verified").⁸¹⁷ After his tryst, Cú Chulainn takes his time returning to fight, making sure to eat and clean himself before his departure. Upon seeing how far Medb's

⁸¹⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 306-309.

⁸¹⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 452-53.

⁸¹⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 453-55.

forces were able to advance while he was distracted, Cú Chulainn laments, “Amae, a phopa Láeig [...] ní ma lodmar dar mbandáil arráir. Iss ed is lugu condric ó neoch bís i cocrích éгим nó iachtad nó urfócra nó a rád cia thic sin sligid ní tharnic úan do rád” (“Alas, my friend Láeg [...] would that we had not gone to our tryst with a woman last night. The least that one who is guarding a border can do is to give a warning cry or shout or alarm or tell who goes the road. We failed to announce it”).⁸¹⁸ Láeg has no sympathy, responding, “Forairngert-sa duit-siu, a Chú Chulaind, sain [...] cia dochúadais it bandáil co ragad méla a mac samla fort” (“I foretold for you, Cú Chulainn [...] that if you went to your tryst, such a disgrace would come upon you”).⁸¹⁹ Both Láeg and Sualtair believe Cú Chulainn is making a mistake. Although Cú Chulainn attempts to put the blame on his female companion, stating he cannot let women’s words be verified, the fact that Cú Chulainn is shamed for his actions after his return from his tryst, while his female companion is never again referenced, suggests that his justification is inadequate. As in Recension I, when sexual contact gets in the way of martial efforts, the person who has been distracted from their martial duty is the one negatively viewed. Cú Chulainn was the one shirking his responsibilities, and he is thus the one disgraced.

Similarly, at one point Dubthach grows angry because his wife demonstrates attraction to Cú Chulainn’s physical form. Cú Chulainn is showing off his beauty after he killed many in Medb’s army in his horrific battle form, and “ra attchetar in ingenrad firu Hérend 'ma tócbáil bar lébennaib sciath ás gúallib feróclách do thaidbriud chrotha Con Culaind” (“the women begged the men of Ireland to lift them up on platforms of shields

⁸¹⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 532-35.

⁸¹⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 536-37.

above the warriors' shoulders that they might see Cú Chulainn's appearance").⁸²⁰

Dubthach's wife is one of these women. Dubthach is unable to handle this – “ra gab ét & elcmaire & immfarmat Dubthach Dáel Ulad imma mnaí & dabert comairle braith & trécthi Con Culaind dona slúagaib” (“Dubthach was seized with envy and spite and great jealousy concerning his wife, and he advised the hosts to betray and abandon Cú Chulainn”).⁸²¹ However, in reaction to this Fergus grows angry at Dubthach and delivers a lengthy monologue shaming him and proving all of his points wrong. In this situation of jealousy, the actions of the party who would harm his people's martial efforts (Dubthach being one of the Ulster exiles) are looked upon as wrong, while his wife, who is looking at another man but does not harm the war effort, is given no more thought. Dubthach's actions, which would defend his own sexual standing but is not helpful to the larger Ulster martial action, are forcibly rejected. He is not entitled to his sexual jealousy when his actions disturb greater military gains.

As in Recension I, Medb's daughter Findabair is a prominent example of a woman presented in a sexual light, but Findabair's story is presented quite differently in Recension II than in Recension I. In this version as well she is offered in marriage to many potential opponents of Cú Chulainn in order to persuade them to fight Cú Chulainn. These opponents include Fer Báeth, Lugaid's brother Láiríne, Lóch's brother Long, and Fer Diad. For all of these opponents, Findabair serves goblets and gives kisses at each drink.⁸²² Rather than the men being told that these drinks are the last of the alcohol brought from Connacht, as in Recension I, in Recension II it is Lugaid who

⁸²⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 5371-73.

⁸²¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2376-78.

⁸²² *TBC-LL*, ll. 1868-80; 1931-43; 1962-72; 2606-35.

relays the information to Cú Chulainn that “[n]í do chách la Meidb in lind dálder for Fer mBáeth. Ní thucad acht aire coícat féin de dochum longphuir” (“[n]ot for all and sundry does Medb intend the liquor which is served to Fer Báeth, for only fifty wagon-loads of it were brought to the camp”).⁸²³ As Lugaid is Cú Chulainn’s ally and the rest of his information is accurate, this suggests that the statement is in this case a truth. Fer Báeth is being given preferential treatment in order to persuade him to help Medb and Ailill, but they seem to be using resources that are actually scarce in order to bribe him rather than inventing resource scarcity in order to make liquor seem more valuable. Unfortunately for the men, the lack of trickery does not produce a different end result from Recension I – each of these men Findabair is offered to is slain by Cú Chulainn.⁸²⁴

In Recension II, Findabair is never offered to Cú Chulainn. Her most complicated relationship is with Reochaid mac Faithemain, who in Recension II only comes to fight Medb’s forces once before the final battle. She tells her mother:

Ra charusa in láech út úair chéin ám [...] & iss é mo lennán é & mo roga tochmairc” (“I loved yonder warrior long ago and he is my beloved and my chosen wooer”).⁸²⁵ Medb replies, “Má ra charais, a ingen, fáe leis dádaig & guid fossad dún fair dona slúagaib go tí chucaind do ló in mórchatha airm condricfat cethri ollchóicid Hérend for Gárig & Ilgárig i cath Tána Bó Cúalnge (If you loved him, my daughter, spend tonight with him and ask him for a truce for us with the host until he come to us on the day of the great battle where the

⁸²³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1879-80.

⁸²⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1868-905; 1906-61; 1962-72; 2606-3596.

⁸²⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3866-67.

four great provinces of Ireland will meet at Gáirech and Ilgáirech at the battle of the *Foray of Cúailnge*).⁸²⁶

Reochaid agrees to this deal and he and Findabair spend the night together.⁸²⁷

One of the underkings of Munster hears of this and notes a problem with this, saying, “Banassa dam-sa ind ingen út uair chéin ám [...] & is aire thánac-sa in slúaged sa don chur sá” (“That girl was betrothed to me long ago and that is why I have come now upon this hosting”).⁸²⁸ After this, it is revealed that Findabair was in fact offered to each of the seven underkings of Munster. Angered, they decide to take their revenge by attacking Medb and Ailill’s sons – the seven Maines. This leads to bloodshed.⁸²⁹ Upon hearing how many men died because of her, Findabair dies of shame, and in this Recension does not come back to life later to be with Cú Chulainn.⁸³⁰

There is a notably different amount of trickery in Recension II – or a different sort of trickery. Cú Chulainn tells Fer Diad, “Findabair ingen in rí, / in dráth atberar a fir, / sochaide 'ma tart bréic / & do loitt do lethéit” (“Findabair, the king’s daughter, when the truth of the matter is told, she played many men false, she destroyed such as you”).⁸³¹ Similarly, the underkings of Munster perceive the multiple betrothals of Findabair as trickery. However, there are none of the kidnappings and attempted murders using Findabair as bait that are present in Recension I. Rather, all trickery is of a sexual nature. Findabair is also spoken about more negatively in a sexual context than in Recension I – as in Cú Chulainn’s speech to Fer Diad. These two points – the increase

⁸²⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3868-70.

⁸²⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3871-72.

⁸²⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3874-75.

⁸²⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3875-86.

⁸³⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3886-88.

⁸³¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3041-44.

in focus on sexual trickery and the increase in negative focus on Findabair's sexuality – seem to be related. Findabair's hypothetical sexual actions interfere with various men's military goals, and when this occurs, she is blamed for her interference, despite most of the trickery around her marriage potential having been arranged by her parents. The rest of the time, the text itself is relatively neutral about her behaviour.

The text itself usually does not condemn sexual actions in the narrative – most condemnations come from characters and thus reflect the characters' own motivations rather than necessarily reflecting some larger overarching perspective. However, patterns can be detected in the forms of sexual contact that are presented negatively. Sexuality can be presented as dangerous, but this is usually only done by a character in an attempt to preserve his honour or when sexuality threatens military endeavours. This ties in with other patterns of behavior that are judged as betrayals, such as when Fergus's loyalty to his kinsmen leads him towards betrayal. Actions against the army that the men have chosen to assist are considered betrayals.

5.2.3.3 Medb as Sexual Partner

Medb's sexuality is treated like other women's in both recensions. In Recension I, Medb sleeps with Fergus, and the text implies this is a betrayal, but it is Fergus who is punished for it by having his sword removed. Medb faces no consequences and in fact, Ailill says, "Is dethbir disi [...] Is ar chobair ocon táin dorigni." ("She is [reasonable] (to behave thus) [...] She did it to help in the cattle-driving").⁸³² Medb engages in trickery, but it is trickery that benefits Ailill militarily, so he approves. Medb also suggests that if

⁸³² *TBC-I*, l. 1053. 'reasonable' translated as 'right' in O'Rahilly's translation.

Fer Diad fights Cú Chulainn, he will have her “comaid dom sliasaid-sea” (“intimate friendship”)⁸³³, but this is not what persuades Fer Diad. As in many other cases of sexuality in Recension I, it does not seem to be the sexual aspect of the situation Medb is judged for, but the trickery she engages in at the same time. As discussed in chapter two, she lies to Fer Diad and tells him that Cú Chulainn criticized Fer Diad’s ability as a warrior, and it is this that both persuades Fer Diad to fight and that the text seems to judge.⁸³⁴ The text attributes negative motives to her speech, saying that she speaks “tri chóir n-indlaig & imchosáidi” (“intending to stir up strife and dissension and speaking as if she had not heard Fer Diad at all”).⁸³⁵ As with other women in Recension I, sexual behaviour is secondary to tricking someone into behaviour in which they otherwise would not engage. Sexuality is not a problem if it does not compromise military goals and men’s honour.

In Recension II, Medb’s sexuality is addressed in much the same way as in Recension I. When first attempting to gain the bull Donn Cúailnge, she offers Dáire lands and chariots, as well as her own “sliasta-sa” (“intimate friendship”).⁸³⁶ These offers please Dáire, and it is the later gossiping of the messengers, not Medb’s sexual advances, that ruin the peace with Dáire.⁸³⁷ This matches the way sexuality is approached throughout the text – Medb is not engaging in trickery in this moment, and thus the text makes no negative comments.

⁸³³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2600-01.

⁸³⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2606-14.

⁸³⁵ *TBC-I*, l. 2606.

⁸³⁶ *TBC-LL*, l. 87.

⁸³⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 88-146.

Medb's dalliance with Fergus is addressed in a similarly passionless manner.

The tale states:

Bliadain riasin sceol sa tarraid Ailill Fergus ic techt i n-óentaid Medba arsind lettir i Crúachain & a chlaideb arsind lettir 'na farrad, & tóipacht Ailill in claideb assa intig & dobretha claideb craind dia inud, & dobert a bréthir ná tibred dó co tucad lá in chatha móir (A year before these events Ailill had come upon Fergus together with Medb on the hillside in Crúachu with his sword on the hill beside him, and Ailill had snatched the sword from its sheath and put a wooden sword in its place, and he swore that he would not give him back the sword until he gave it on the day of the great battle).⁸³⁸

Recension II's telling of the story does have some suggestions of anger, with Ailill snatching the sword, but the anger is primarily towards Fergus, and Medb is not stated to experience any repercussions. In fact, Cú Chulainn has more negative words addressed to him about his sexuality than Medb does in Recension II. Medb's sexual actions do not get in the way of military goals, and thus are not commented on.

Edel agrees with this approach, stating that despite the Pillow Talk conversation where Medb says she always has one man in the shadow of the last, Medb only dallies with Fergus in the *Táin*, with occasional offers of her "friendship" that vary between recensions. She thinks the Pillow Talk section is at odds with the rest of the text, because Medb's "alleged wantonness" is nowhere prominent in the rest of the text.⁸³⁹ In fact, in both Recensions, Medb only ever offers sexual relations in exchange for something that would benefit her. She uses her sexuality strategically in a way that, for

⁸³⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2487-91.

⁸³⁹ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 216.

example, Cú Chulainn does not. However, while Fergus's actions are considered a betrayal, Medb's do not conflict with the military action and do not seem to be thought of in this light.

5.2.4 Women as Warriors and Leaders

5.2.4.1 Recension I

As well as the other functions they fill in the text, there are a number of women who appear as warriors. Some of these are generic fighters of different types. For example, among the lists of opponents sent by Medb and Ailill to fight Cú Chulainn are a number of women. On one occasion, Cú Chulainn is said to kill “dá Roth, dá Lúan, dá banteolaid, deich n-drúith, deich n-deogbaire, deich Fergusa, seser Fedelmthe, sé Fiacraig” (“two men called Roth, two called Lúan, two female thieves, ten jesters, ten cupbearers, ten men called Fergus, six called Fedelm and six called Fiachrach.”).⁸⁴⁰ Later on, when another wave of people attempt to kill Cú Chulainn in single combat, the text states that, “Geogain Cú Chulaind dano Traig & Dornu & Dernu, Col & Mebul & Eraise, for Áth Tíre Móir de síu oc Méthiu & Cheithiu. Trí druíd insin & a teóra mná” (“Cú Chulainn also killed Traig and Dorna and Derna, Col and Mebal and Eraise at Méthe and Cethe on this side of Áth Tíre Móir. These were three druids and their wives”).⁸⁴¹ In Recension I, then, women fill at least two different fighting roles (the two female thieves and the three wives of the druids). Their casual inclusion breaks down assumptions that all of the other women brought along during the cattle raid are necessarily there in a

⁸⁴⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 1558-1560.

⁸⁴¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 2064-66.

purely non-military capacity, separate from the purpose for which the men are there. Through its normalization of the female opponents of Cú Chulainn, the text implies that it is common for at least some women to have some martial ability (at least in heroic literature), although they are called upon less often to engage in military action. However, the women called upon to fight are also women in unconventional roles in society (living a life of thievery or married to druids).

Other women appear not just as warriors, but as leaders of warriors. Perhaps the most notable of the female warriors mentioned in the *Táin* is Cú Chulainn's teacher and foster-mother Scáthach. She was Cú Chulainn's primary military instructor, and thus the reason for his martial strength. Her training is also thought to make several of Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers potentially his equal in battle. The men of Connacht believe that Cú Chulainn's foster-brother Fer Báeth is the best choice to fight Cú Chulainn due to Scáthach's training. The text states, "Ba h-é fer a dingbála leó ar ba cuma dán díb línaib la Scáthaig" ("They considered that he was a match for Cú Chulainn for they had both learnt the same art of war with Scáthach").⁸⁴² When Cú Chulainn fights Fer Diad it is said that they "ind ro múin Scáthach dóib díb línaibh" ("did all that Scáthach had taught both of them").⁸⁴³ Recension I does not mention any instances of Scáthach herself engaging in battle. She is a trainer of warriors, but it is unclear from the text how extensive her actual practical experience in the area is. Scáthach operates from a position of authority – she is the teacher and her students clearly obeyed her or they would not have learned the valuable skills she had to teach. She is a leader of men.

⁸⁴² *TBC-I*, ll. 1752-53.

⁸⁴³ *TBC-I*, ll. 3088-89.

Findmór, the wife of the Ulster warrior Celtchar mac Uthidir, also appears in a military leadership role. She is mentioned in only one instance in the text. Medb “ó ro fich cath fri Findmóir mnaí Celtchair meic Uthidir, & dosbert cócait ban iar togail Dúin Sobarchi furri h-i crích Dáil Ríata” (“fought a battle against Findmór the wife of Celtchar mac Uthidir. After the destruction of Dún Sobairche in the territory of Dál Riada against Findmór she carried off fifty women captives”).⁸⁴⁴ It is unclear in Recension I what happens to Findmór after her defeat. Unlike the previous examples of named women involved in military life, Findmór fights, and the phrasing implies she leads the defence of her territory. As this fight causes the destruction of Dún Sobairche, it seems unlikely that this is a single combat situation. In that case, Medb and Findmór are likely the ones mentioned because they are the commanders of each side, meaning Findmór is also a female leader of considerable importance. The fact that the text deals with this incident so briefly suggests that neither Findmór’s martial capabilities nor her leadership is considered unusual enough to require further explanation. The inclusion of Findmór demonstrates the expectation in Recension I that women will be connected to battle in certain capacities, and goes further by suggesting that a woman was responsible for leading the home defence, at least when her husband was unable. Once again, women’s loyalties are to the protection of themselves and their families.

5.2.4.2 Recension II

Women also appear in both warrior and military leadership positions in Recension II of the text. A few different groups of female warriors are mentioned. There

⁸⁴⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 1532-34.

is a brief mention of Cú Chulainn having fought the Amazons in his past. When Fergus is attempting to persuade Medb and Ailill that the opponent they will face is a true danger, he lists several impressive feats that his foster-son has already achieved. One of these is that Cú Chulainn “ra chuir ár na Cíchloiste” (“slaughtered the Amazons”).⁸⁴⁵ The Amazons are presented as quite a difficult challenge for Cú Chulainn – fighting them is a deed thought mighty enough to persuade Medb and Ailill that Cú Chulainn is dangerous. As in Recension I, certain of the opponents sent by Ailill and Medb to face Cú Chulainn are also women. Recension II states that “faítti Medb in sessiur úadi i n-óenfecht do fúapairt Con Culaind .i. Traig & Dorn & Dernu, Col & Accuis & Eraísi. Tri ferdrúid & trí bandrúid. Basrópart Cú Chulaind síat co torchratar lais” (“Medb sent forth six together to attack Cú Chulainn, to wit, Traig and Dorn and Dernu, Col and Accuis and Eraíse, three druids and three druidesses. Cú Chulainn attacked them and they fell by him”).⁸⁴⁶ This does not seem to be the single combat implied in Recension I, but rather a concerted group effort made by the six. It is interesting that the women here are not wives of the male druids, but druidesses themselves. Given that there are fewer female opponents sent against Cú Chulainn in this recension, it is possible that this identification of the women who are sent against him as special in some way (druidesses, who would likely possess some power of their own, as opposed to wives) indicates that this version is less likely to see ordinary women as able to fight.

Recension II provides two more names of foster-mothers Cú Chulainn gained during his training. As well as Scáthach, he was trained by Úathach and Aífe. The three are linked together multiple times when Cú Chulainn and his foster-brothers’ training is

⁸⁴⁵ *TBC-LL*, I. 1292.

⁸⁴⁶ *TBC-LL*, II. 2095-98.

discussed. Recension II says of Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn that “óenmummib darónsat gnímrada gaile & gascid do foglaim, ac Scáthaig & ac Úathaig & ac Aífe. Ocus ní baí immarcraid neich díb ac araile acht cless in gae bulga ac Coin Culaind” (“[w]ith the same foster-mothers, Scáthach and Úathach and Aífe, had they learnt the arts of valour and arms, and neither of them had any advantage over the other save that Cú Chulainn possessed the feat of the ga bulga”).⁸⁴⁷ The two are relatively equally matched in martial talent.

Úathach is only ever mentioned in conjunction with others in lists of Cú Chulainn’s foster-mothers. However, both Scáthach and Aífe are mentioned individually. Scáthach appears to be the primary instructor, as she is mentioned most often and given the greatest level of authority. As in Recension I, Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn are said to have travelled a great deal during their time with Scáthach. However, Recension II indicates that much of this travel may have been on Scáthach’s orders. For example, Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn were in an eastern location with Scáthach and Úathach at one point in order to engage in battle.⁸⁴⁸ During this battle, it is Scáthach who gives the commands. She orders Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn, “Érgid uli don chath chass, / barficfa Germán Garbglass” (“Go ye all to the swift battle. Germán Garbglas will come”).⁸⁴⁹ After defeating Germán, they bring him alive to Scáthach, indicating that it is Scáthach who has the responsibility of deciding what is the best course of action and whether Germán should be killed.⁸⁵⁰ Rather than having her students kill Germán, Cú Chulainn says, “Da naisc ár mummi go mblad / ar cró cotaig is óentad, / conná betis ar ferga / eter fini

⁸⁴⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2611-14.

⁸⁴⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3495-502.

⁸⁴⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3501-02.

⁸⁵⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3523-26.

findElga” (“Our foster-mother imposed on us a pact of friendship and agreement that we should not grow angry with the tribe of fair Elg”).⁸⁵¹ This gives a number of different insights into Scáthach’s character. She is a leader, something the narrative does not present as negative. Unlike in Recension I, ample evidence is given of Scáthach actually engaging in battle, although it is unclear if she herself fights or leads only. Scáthach is also a merciful leader – rather than killing Germán she thinks to the future and has all participants in the battle swear not to fight again. This is a farsighted approach to the situation, ensuring that no future feuds will ensue based on the actions of the day.

Aífe’s independent mentions are in quite a different vein. She is mentioned separate from Scáthach and Úathach only twice. When battling Lóch mac Emonis, Cú Chulainn has to resort to using his most powerful weapon – the *ga bulga* – which only he has been instructed in the use of (traditionally by Scáthach). This weapon is referred to as “in gae Aífe” (“Aífe’s spear”)⁸⁵², implying that the weapon originally belonged to Aífe and was eventually gifted to Cú Chulainn during his training with Scáthach, Úathach, and Aífe. The other instance of only Aífe being mentioned is after Cú Chulainn has killed Fer Diad – the only other instance in the text where Cú Chulainn uses the *ga bulga*. As he stands staring at the fallen body of his friend, Cú Chulainn says, “Ní tharla rumm sund co se / á bacear Óenfer Aífe, / da mac samla” (“I have never met such as you until now, since the only son of Aífe fell”).⁸⁵³ This is the sole allusion in Recension II to the story of Cú Chulainn’s son, Connla. Connla, the son of Cú Chulainn and Aífe,

⁸⁵¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3527-30.

⁸⁵² *TBC-LL*, l. 2068.

⁸⁵³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3456-58.

also falls victim to the *ga bulga* – it is Cú Chulainn who kills him.⁸⁵⁴ Given Aífe’s connection to scenes where the *ga bulga* is used and no others, it is tempting to read her presence in both of these scenes as an indictment of Cú Chulainn’s use of the weapon; if this is the case the mentions of Aífe are meant both times to invoke the story of Connla, and in this way call to mind the role of women in mourning the men in their families. While any women in Fer Diad and Lóch’s lives are not present to mourn them and thus shame Cú Chulainn for his actions, the spectre of Aífe, who shared the same pain these hypothetical women would have felt, fills the same function. Even more interestingly, in both cases it is Cú Chulainn referencing Aífe, indicating a certain amount of self-blame. This indicates Cú Chulainn himself does not consider the use of this particular weapon to be particularly sporting. This shows the extent to which the women in these sections can fill several roles. Although Scáthach, Úathach, and Aífe are all warrior women, Scáthach is also important as a leader, while Aífe’s primary role is as a wife and mother; these additional functions are never shown to decrease Aífe’s importance as a warrior.

As in Recension I, in Recension II Findmór appears as a military commander. It is revealed that “[r]a chuir trá Medb din chúaird sin cath fri Findmóir mnaí Celtchair for dorus Dúni Sobairchi & ro marb Findmóir & ra airg Dún Sobairchi” (“[o]n this expedition Medb gave battle to Findmór the wife of Celtchair in front of Dún Sobairche, and she slew Findmór and ravaged Dún Sobairche”).⁸⁵⁵ There are a few differences in the details compared with Recension I. Findmór’s fate is more clearly defined here – she dies. However, what exactly the ravaging of Dún Sobairche entails is less clearly laid

⁸⁵⁴ J. G. O’Keefe, “Cuchulinn and Conlaech”, *Ériu* 1 (1904), 1–32.

⁸⁵⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1792–94.

out. There is no information as to whether Medb abducts other women from the area after defeating Findmór. This continues a tendency noticed in the section on foster-brothers in Recension II which focuses very closely on the relationships between central (named) characters and focuses less on the details of relationships and what happens to those outside the central narrative focus. The lack of detail provided once again indicates a certain level of normalcy in this sort of female behaviour. Findmór is protecting her family and herself, and these loyalty decisions are normal for women in the *Táin*, seemingly regardless of what actions they need to take to protect their homes.

5.2.4.3 Medb as Warrior

Medb's fighting skills are not considered negatively. Both recensions are quite casual in the way they discuss this aspect of Medb's life. There is no judgement in either recension of the *Táin* over Medb fighting against others during the cattle raid.

At one point in Recension I, Medb fights against Findmór, another woman who is Celtchar's wife. As previously established, this is presented as neutrally as any of the other small fights between the warriors in Ulster and Medb's forces.⁸⁵⁶ Medb is also the first to wound the warrior Cethern in Recension I. The text states:

Domáinic ben máethainech bánainech lecanfata chainmar. Mong find fuirri, & dá én óir fora gúalaind, & brat tlachtgorm corcarrda h-i cennfait impe.

Cóicdornn fuillechta di ór ara druim. Craísech foráith faébrach étrom ina léim.

Claideb benndornach iarna imdae osé amulach. Is mór a delb. Is é rombí &

cetadomthánic (There came to me a tall beautiful woman with pale, tender face

⁸⁵⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 1531-36.

and long cheeks. She had long fair hair and two golden birds on her shoulder. She wore a dark purple hooded mantle. On her back she carried a shield five hands in breadth and overlaid with gold. In her hand a javelin, keen, sharp-edged and light. A sword with pointed hilt across her shoulders. Great was her beauty. She it was who first came to me and wounded me).⁸⁵⁷

Medb's wounding of Cethern is presented in the same pattern as the other warriors who wounded him.⁸⁵⁸ A third instance of Medb's fighting ability is during the final battle in Recension I, when "[g]abais Medb íarom a gaisced & forfóhair isin chath & maidter rempi fo thrí conad ed rosoí in cúal gaí fora cúlu" ("Medb too, took up her weapons and rushed into battle. Thrice she was victorious until a phalanx of spears turned her back").⁸⁵⁹

In Recension II, within the context of her own social sphere, Medb's fighting prowess is normalized. When talking with Ailill at the beginning of Recension II, Medb mentions that she had six sisters, saying, "Bam-sa ferr im chath & comrac & comlund díb" ("I was best of them in battle and fight and combat").⁸⁶⁰ This implies that, within the context of the noble family to which Medb was born, the expectation is that women will have some military ability. The text, and Ailill, says nothing to indicate that this is peculiar. This normalcy is reinforced by later events in the text, such as Medb's previously discussed fight with Findmór, which ends with Findmór defeated and the ravaging of Dún Sobairche.⁸⁶¹

⁸⁵⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 3205-10.

⁸⁵⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 3212-82.

⁸⁵⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 4037-39.

⁸⁶⁰ *TBC-LL*, l. 16.

⁸⁶¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1792-94.

Just as in Recension I, Medb fights Cethern in Recension II and wounds him. The text states, “Ben chaín bánaineach leccanfata mór. Mong órbuide furri. Bratt corcra gen daithi impi. Eó óir isin brutt ósa brunni. Sleg díriuch drumnech ar derglassad 'na láim. Rabert in fuil sin form-sa. Ruc-si fuil mbic úaim-se 'nó” (“There came to me there a woman, tall, beautiful, pale and long-faced. She had flowing, golden-yellow hair. She wore a crimson, hooded cloak with a golden brooch over her breast. A straight, ridged spear blazing in her hand. She gave me that wound and she too got a slight wound from me”).⁸⁶² Medb is the only warrior who wounds Cethern described as also being wounded by him, which is perhaps a way of saying that female warriors are considered less skilled than their male counterparts. However, her martial efforts are not denigrated. And later in the text, Medb’s charge during the final battle is presented in exactly the same way as Ailill’s. Recension II state, “Gebis Ailill a gasced. Gebis Medb a gaisced & tánic don chath. Coro maid in cath fo thrí ríam rompo fathúaid condanimmart cúal gae & claideb for cúlu doridisi” (“Ailill seized his arms. Medb seized her arms and came to the battle and three times they were victorious in the battle northwards until a phalanx and swords forced them to retreat again”).⁸⁶³

As with other female warriors in the *Táin*, Medb’s skill with weapons and willingness to engage in battle is considered unremarkable. She uses her skills to protect herself and her kinsmen, as do the other women in the text, by attacking her enemies.

⁸⁶² *TBC-LL*, ll. 3677-81.

⁸⁶³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4724-27.

5.2.4.4 Medb as Leader

Medb's leadership differs significantly between the two Recensions. In Recension I, Ailill is primarily leader of the men of Ireland, while in Recension II Medb is prominent over Ailill. In neither Recension is Medb's leadership unusual given the previously discussed roles of women. Edel states, "In the Middle Ages, when politics were to a large extent family politics, and political structures rooted in the domestic sphere of the ruling family, a woman could wield political power without appearing to transgress the natural order."⁸⁶⁴

As Edel has noted, in Recension I, Medb's leadership is not as extensively highlighted as in Recension II.⁸⁶⁵ She does participate in the leadership of the army. Quite often her decisions involve troop deployment, an area for which Findmor is also implied to be responsible. For example, Medb is frequently the person to order men to attack Cú Chulainn. At times, she breaks pacts that she and Ailill have previously made with Cú Chulainn in order to do this. For example, at one point, speaking of Cú Chulainn, Medb orders, "Berid grem catha chuci [...] tarsin n-áth aníar co n-digsid taris, & brister fír fer fair" ("Attack him vigorously [...] over the ford from the west, so that ye may cross the river, and let terms of fair play be broken against him").⁸⁶⁶ Medb also considers the cattle raid to be her idea, saying at one point, "Cach óen scaras sund trá indiu [...] fria chóem & a charait, dobérat maldachtain form-sa úair is mé dorinól in slúagad sa" ("All those who part here today from comrade and friend will curse me for it

⁸⁶⁴ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 230.

⁸⁶⁵ Id., p. 285.

⁸⁶⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 1884-85.

is I who have mustered this hosting”).⁸⁶⁷ However, the text itself disagrees with Medb’s culpability in this matter, since at the very beginning it is said that both Ailill and Medb mustered the army. The text states, “Tarcomlad slóiged mór la Connachtu .i. la h-Ailill & la Meidb” (“A great army was mustered by the Connachtmen, that is, by Ailill and Medb”).⁸⁶⁸

The fact that Medb’s primary form of decision making in the Recension I *Táin* is sending men against Cú Chulainn makes sense for the goals and loyalties of women in the text. Women are primarily seen to be acting to protect themselves and their families, and the majority of Cú Chulainn’s early targets in the Recension I *Táin* are Medb’s foster-children, children, or in-laws. Cú Chulainn has slaughtered, among his earliest victims, Medb’s son-in-law Fráech, her foster-son Etarcumul, and her son Órlám.⁸⁶⁹ He has apparently also killed some of Ailill’s foster-sons, potentially Eirr and Indell, the sons of Nera mac Núada.⁸⁷⁰ His violence is at a level where a number of the men in the camp talk about how, “[b]a foróil leu a n-dorigni Cú Chulaind .i. dá macdalta ind ríg do goin & a mac & crothad in chind frisin slog” (“they thought Cú Chulainn had gone too far in doing what he had done, namely, killing the king’s two foster-sons and his son and brandishing his son’s head before the host”).⁸⁷¹ When Medb shouts, “Is cuillend dúnd ém guin ar muintire” (“Indeed we deem it a crime that our people should be slain”)⁸⁷² it makes a great amount of sense, given the early victims of Cú Chulainn’s campaign. By

⁸⁶⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 25-26.

⁸⁶⁸ *TBC-I*, l. 2.

⁸⁶⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 834-57; 1289-387; 869-906.

⁸⁷⁰ They are killed in *TBC-I*, ll. 256-335. They may be the foster-children mentioned in *TBC-I*, ll. 910-12, as they are among Cú Chulainn’s few victims at the time that this quote is uttered, and it is the sons of Nera rather than the king’s foster-sons mentioned in a similar quote in Recension II, indicating that the sons of Nera are the foster-sons in questions.

⁸⁷¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 910-12.

⁸⁷² *TBC-I*, l. 2070.

later targeting Cú Chulainn, and by making sure to send against Cú Chulainn those warriors in the men of Ireland's camp who are emotionally closest to him⁸⁷³, Medb is only attempting to do to Cú Chulainn what he has already done to her. Her actions could be interpreted as those of a wrathful mother.

In this way she is very close in her behaviour and motivations to the naked women who stop Cú Chulainn or any of the women aiding in the war effort, because the reality that lies behind everything women do in the text is that they, unlike the men who are fighting death, are fighting to avoid being captured and raped. Medb cannot fully be looked at sympathetically when viewed through male motivations, because her motivations are not the same as theirs. She may wish to destroy Conchobor in order to get revenge, but she is also defending herself by destroying those (at this point both Conchobor and Cú Chulainn) who have proven to be a threat to her safety and that of her children. The men in the *Táin* are fighting for their honour, while the women are fighting for their children and themselves to survive and remain unviolated. Like the other women in the text, Medb's loyalty decisions all revolve around this.

There is only one of Medb's decisions that directly contradicts Ailill's wishes. That is on the occasion of the Gailioin, where Medb wants to kill them. Ailill, who is biased towards the Gailioin as they are his kinsmen, instantly attacks Medb's judgement, saying, "Ní chélam as banchomairle" ("I shall not deny that is a woman's counsel").⁸⁷⁴ Yet it is notable that, while rarely wielded, Medb does have power in Recension I. While the Gailioin are not killed, Medb does succeed in having their group split up.⁸⁷⁵ As

⁸⁷³ *TBC-I*, ll. 1736-806; 1806-45; 1875-2037; 2568-3153.

⁸⁷⁴ *TBC-I*, l. 163.

⁸⁷⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 164-83.

previously determined, given her seeming goal to maintain her own power, this decision of Medb's was also not foolish when viewed from her perspective, but rather a necessity. Medb seeks to protect herself. She will not hurt Ailill directly, but her primary loyalties seem to be to herself and her biological kin. This is similar to the other key figures in the *Táin*.

Whenever other women are involved, Medb is also generally the one to speak to them and interface between them and the army. For example, she is the one to speak to Feidelm the female prophetess.⁸⁷⁶ She is also frequently present when Findabair is being offered in marriage to a man.⁸⁷⁷ Medb seems to be responsible for the command of the camp women. For example, several of them act as her attendants and it is implied that Medb's handmaiden Lócha is in charge of those gathering water presumably for the camp.⁸⁷⁸ In this way, Medb fulfills a very traditionally feminine role, directing the household side of the army.

Medb is also the one responsible for talking to Fergus whenever he is attempting to give advantages to Cú Chulainn and to his other friends and family in Ulster. She is the one to tell Fergus to stop leading the army if he is unwilling to guide them directly to their target, saying, "Atotágathar dia m-brath / Ailill Aíe lía slúagad. / ní tharat menmain co se / do thús inna conaire. / Másó chondalbi dogní / ná tuíd inna echraidí. / Bés adchotar nech aile / do thosach na conaire" ("Ailill of Mag Aí with his army fears that you will betray him. Until now he heeded not where the path led. If you feel the pull of kinship, do not lead horses any longer. Perhaps someone else may be found to guide

⁸⁷⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 41-112.

⁸⁷⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1737-60; 1807-21; 2577-619.

⁸⁷⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 974-75.

us on our way”).⁸⁷⁹ It is likely that Medb is sent to stop Fergus because she is sleeping with him. Her affair with Fergus is implied by Ailill to be conducted in order to help Medb and Ailill in the cattle raid.⁸⁸⁰ Seemingly, his sexual bond with Medb is considered one of the ways in which the royal couple can control Fergus. However, even in this instance, Medb concedes authority to Ailill, stating that it is Ailill who fears the betrayal, not herself. By having Medb address Fergus instead of Ailill, Fergus is able to keep honour, since he is addressed by a woman.

The majority of the large decisions in Recension I are made by Ailill. He is the one to decide Cú Chulainn’s terms of one-on-one combat are advantageous.⁸⁸¹ He is also responsible for engaging Findabair to Cú Chulainn, and having a jester perform this engagement so that Ailill himself remains safe.⁸⁸² Ailill is the one who both orchestrates the removal of Fergus’s sword and returns it.⁸⁸³ He is frequently the one to discuss the battle situation with other men, asking Fergus whom they are facing when Cú Chulainn first attacks and then later asking Mac Roth and Fergus to describe each of the Ulstermen gathering to face them in the final battle.⁸⁸⁴ Before the final battle, it is Ailill who rallies the troops.⁸⁸⁵

For the majority of the text, it is Ailill whom the Ulstermen hold responsible for the cattle raid. For example, when asked who it is that has been attacking Ulster, Cú Chulainn’s father Sualtaim says, “Nos m-ben [...] nos gata, no m-brata Ailill mac Máta la h-eolus Fergusa meic Roíg” (“Ailill mac Máta slays them, carries them off, drives them

⁸⁷⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 235-42.

⁸⁸⁰ *TBC-I*, l. 1053.

⁸⁸¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1285-86.

⁸⁸² *TBC-I*, ll. 1593-97.

⁸⁸³ *TBC-I*, ll. 4023-26.

⁸⁸⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 361-72; *TBC-I*, ll. 3545-870.

⁸⁸⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 3946-81.

away, with the guidance of Fergus mac Róig”).⁸⁸⁶ When the warrior Cethern attacks the men of Ireland, it is Ailill and Ailill’s diadem that he targets, screaming, “Nícon aniub-sa díb ém [...] conidnacor for duine in mind se Ailella” (“I shall not cease to attack you until I see this diadem of Ailill on one of you”).⁸⁸⁷

It is only at the end of the text, when defeat looks likely and then when Medb and Ailill’s army has been routed, that Medb is held responsible for the cattle raid. She, not she and Ailill, are accused of betrayal, despite her traditional female loyalties throughout the text and despite Ailill being credited for the raid from the beginning of the text. Edel sees this as being Ailill’s quite cleverness coming into play – he “fades out of the picture” when defeat is inevitable.⁸⁸⁸ However, I see this removal of the male leader as following a pattern of an emphasis on women guilt in moments of duress.

When attempting to persuade Fergus to turn aside from attacking Ulster during the final battle, Conal Cernach tells Fergus, “Ba ramór in bríg sin [...] for túaith & cenél ar thóin mná drúithi” (“Too great is that force which you exert against (your own) people and race, following a wanton woman as you do”).⁸⁸⁹ Fergus later accuses Medb of having destroyed them, saying, “Is básad [...] do cach graig remitét láir, rotgata, rotbrata, rotfeither a moín h-i tóin mná misrairleastair” (“That is what usually happens [...] to a herd of horses led by a mare. Their substance is taken and carried off and guarded as they follow a woman who has misled them”).⁸⁹⁰

⁸⁸⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 3431-32.

⁸⁸⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 3320-21.

⁸⁸⁸ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, 260.

⁸⁸⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 4068-69.

⁸⁹⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 4123-24.

This same blame is assigned to Findabair after the death of many men once the Kings of Munster discover she has been engaged to all of them, despite the fact that it seems most of the trickery in the text was Ailill's doing. For example, he was the one who suggested saying they only had a small amount of wine in order to make the men to whom Findabair was engaged feel special.⁸⁹¹

In Recension II, Medb takes on a much more substantial leadership role. She is still not alone in leadership of the army – Ailill makes several decisions. For example, after first encountering Cú Chulainn, Ailill is the one to decide to set up camp for the night, saying:

Sáiditer sosta & pupaill lind [...] & déntar urngam bíd & lenna lind & cantar ceóil & airfite lind & déntar praind & tomaltus. Dáig is comtig ara fagbaitis fir Hérend ríam nó iarum aidchi ndúnaid nó longphuirt mad mó dód nó doccair dóib andás ind aidchi se arraír (Let us pitch our tents and pavilions, and let us prepare food and drink and let us make music and melody and let us eat and take food, for it is unlikely that the men of Ireland ever at any time experienced a night of encampment that held more hardship and distress for them than last night).⁸⁹²

Ailill is also often the one to speak to men in order to gather information – he is the one to ask Mac Roth for information on the opponents they face in the final battle and the one to ask Fergus for details on Cú Chulainn.⁸⁹³

When spoken of by others, it is frequently Medb and Ailill together who are blamed for the events of the *Táin*. Cú Chulainn tells Fer Diad, “[N]ír chóir duit-siu

⁸⁹¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1809-14.

⁸⁹² *TBC-LL*, ll. 685-89.

⁸⁹³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4175-593; *TBC-LL*, ll. 691-721.

tíachtain do chomlund & do chomrac rum-sa trí indlach & etarchossaít Ailella & Medba” (“[I]t was not right for you to come and fight with me by reason of the strife and dissension stirred up by Ailill and Medb”).⁸⁹⁴ During his speech to rouse the Ulstermen, Sualtaim, in contrast to blaming Ailill alone for the cattle raid in Recension II, blames both Medb and Ailill, saying, “Rabar n-airg Ailill & Medb” (“Ailill and Medb have ravaged you”).⁸⁹⁵ On occasion, people acknowledge Medb alone as having power. For example, Fer Diad tells Medb, “A Medb co mét mbúafaid, / nít chredb caíne núachair, / is derb is tú is búachail / ar Crúachain na clad” (“O Medb, great in boastfulness! the beauty of a bridegroom does not touch you. You are assuredly the master in Crúachu of the mounds”).⁸⁹⁶

This attribution of sole responsibility to Medb can occur in Recension II because frequently Medb is the one to make decisions in the text. As in Recension I, Medb is the one who is always expected to deal with Fergus when he attempts to help the Ulstermen. She does this in a similar way as in Recension I, telling Fergus his actions could be seen as a betrayal of Ailill.⁸⁹⁷ In this way, she mediates without Fergus having to lose honor through a direct confrontation from another man. In Recension II, this is not the only time that Ailill acts against the interests of the men of Ireland. Later on, Cú Chulainn has stuck a forked pole in the ground and told the men of Ireland not to progress on their journey until they can pull it out. Fergus has attempted to do so several times, but never using his actual strength. Medb confronts his behaviour even more directly in this instance, saying:

⁸⁹⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3018-20.

⁸⁹⁵ *TBC-LL*, l. 4021.

⁸⁹⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3695-98.

⁸⁹⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 379-82.

Ale léic ass, a Ferguis [...] na bris dúin cairptiu ar túath ní as siriu, dáig ar bíth meni bethe arin tslúagud sa a chur sa doraismis Ultu co n-airnelaib braití & bóthánti lind. Rafetamar-ni aní dia ndénai-siu sain d'fostud & d'immfuiriuich in tslúaig co n-érsat Ulaid assa cess & co tucat cath dún, cath na Tána (Give over, Fergus [...] do not break any more of my people's chariots, for had you not been on this hosting now, we should already have reached the Ulstermen and had our share of booty and herds. We know why you are acting thus: it is to hold back and delay the host until such time as the Ulstermen recover from their debility and give us battle, the battle of the *Táin*).⁸⁹⁸

Immediately after hearing this, Fergus asks for his own chariot and pulls the pole free.

In Recension II, Medb is also involved in sending men against Cú Chulainn, as she does in Recension I. As in Recension I, she sends many loved ones against Cú Chulainn. This occurs after Cú Chulainn has killed several of her loved ones. One of Cú Chulainn's first actions in the *Táin* is to kill Ailill and Medb's son Órlám.⁸⁹⁹ He has also killed Medb's foster-son Etarcumul.⁹⁰⁰ Medb retaliates by sending many of Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers against him.⁹⁰¹ Yet even though there may well be some desire involved in Medb's decision making to gain revenge against Cú Chulainn, the warriors she chooses to fight him are also logical choices. They are men trained in the same place as Cú Chulainn, and thus do have the greatest chance of defeating him.

⁸⁹⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 647-51.

⁸⁹⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1218-46.

⁹⁰⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1565-695.

⁹⁰¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1858-905; *TBC-LL*, ll. 1906-61; *TBC-LL*, ll. 1962-2012; *TBC-LL*, ll. 2606-3595.

Unlike in Recension I, Medb “is more active.”⁹⁰² She makes many decisions for the army outside of those involving Fergus and the men fighting Cú Chulainn. Medb is the one who summons the men to the cattle raid at the very beginning of the text.⁹⁰³ She is the one who sends men to negotiate with Cú Chulainn and the one to agree to Cú Chulainn’s terms of single combat, saying, in response to Ailill’s, “Is í ar cubus [...] is coma dímaig” (“By my conscience [...] those are grievous terms”), “Is maith an condnaig [...] & atetha-som na comai sin, dáig ar bíth iss assu lind óenláech úaind cach laí dó-som oldás cét láech cach n-aidchi” (“What he asks is good [...] and he shall get those terms, for we deem it preferable to lose one warrior every day rather than a hundred warriors every night”).⁹⁰⁴ Later on, she sends more than one warrior against him, breaking the terms of this agreement.⁹⁰⁵

Medb’s decision to kill the Gailioin is not as surprising in Recension I as Recension II, as it is but one in a series of independent decisions that Medb makes. However, it is the decision she makes that most seriously contradicts how Ailill would like to handle the situation. Interestingly, in this text where Medb has more clearly demonstrated authority, Ailill’s response is less gendered than in Recension I. He says, “Mairg atber ón omm [...] ar abba dúnad 7 longphort do gabáil dóib co hellom 7 co héscaid” (“Woe betide him who speaks thus [...] because of their having pitched their tents and set up their stronghold quickly and promptly”).⁹⁰⁶ This appears to be an appeal to Medb’s reason, reminding her that she has no reason that would be approved in the

⁹⁰² Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 286.

⁹⁰³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 147-56.

⁹⁰⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1557-59.

⁹⁰⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2095-103.

⁹⁰⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 332-33.

court of public opinion to kill the Gailloin. Ailill's reaction suggests that the power dynamic leans more heavily in Medb's favor in Recension I – Ailill needs to negotiate.

Perhaps most importantly, given the title of the text, Medb is the one to make all key decisions about the bull and where the army goes in relation to obtaining it. As established earlier, she first attempts to deescalate any tension by obtaining the bull peacefully, but is forced to abandon that plan when male egos impede her progress.⁹⁰⁷ Dominguez notes that this attempt at peaceful negotiation comes even after everything Ulster (through Conchobor) has done to hurt her.⁹⁰⁸

At one point later on, Cú Chulainn encounters the men driving the bull before them. He prioritizes fighting the leader of the men, as he often does, and while he is doing so, Medb's men carry off Donn Cúailnge. The text says, “Conid ésin méla 7 meratain 7 meraigecht is mó tucad for Coin Culaind forsin tslúagud sa” (“That was the greatest reproach and grief and madness that was inflicted on Cú Chulainn in this hosting”).⁹⁰⁹ This shows a difference in Medb and Cú Chulainn's thinking. Cú Chulainn is a warrior, focused on his honor and the fight. Medb is a leader, and her thinking is longer-term. She does not appear to be bound by thinking of honor, but instead is thinking of the larger goal she set out with – to capture the bull. The text seems to support Medb's goal rather than Cú Chulainn's. Cú Chulainn is driven to self-reproach due to prioritizing his honor over the bull.

As in Recension II, several men blame Medb (and her daughter) for their losses. She is the one accused of betrayal, despite actions being decided by both her and Ailill.

⁹⁰⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 75-146.

⁹⁰⁸ Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 204.

⁹⁰⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1787-88.

Upon the loss of Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn cries out that Fer Diad has been betrayed, and that it is a pity Fer Diad did not listen to any of the men who would have warned him not to listen to the false promises made by the women of Connacht.⁹¹⁰ He declares, “A Fir Diad, mása thú, / demin limm isat lomthrú, / tidacht ar comairli mná / do chomlund rit chomalta” (“O Fer Diad, if this is you, sure I am that you are one utterly doomed, that you should come at a woman's behest to fight with your foster-brother”).⁹¹¹ Cú Chulainn also pushes blame onto Findabair, declaring, “Findabair ingen in rí, / in dráth atberar a fír, / sochaide 'ma tart bréic / 7 do loitt do lethéit” (“Findabair, the king's daughter, when the truth of the matter is told, she played many men false, she destroyed such as you”).⁹¹² Findabair similarly takes the blame after the discovery that the Kings of Munster have all been betrothed to her, and the bloodshed that ensues. The text states that “Atchúala sain Findabair ingen Ailella 7 Medba in comlín sain d'feraib Hérend do thuttim trena ág 7 trena accais, 7 ro maid cnómaidm dá cride 'na cíab ar féile 7 náre” (“Findabair, the daughter of Ailill and Medb, heard that this number of the men of Ireland had fallen because of her and on account of her, and her heart cracked like a nut in her breast through shame and modesty”).⁹¹³ Medb is blamed by Fergus after the rout of the men of Ireland from Ulster. He states, “Ra gattá 7 ra brattá in slúag sa indiu. Feib théit echrad láir rena serrgraig i crích n-aneóil gan chend cundraid ná comairle reppo, is amlaid testa in slúag sa indiu” (“This host has been plundered and despoiled today. As

⁹¹⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3419-25.

⁹¹¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3187-90.

⁹¹² *TBC-LL*, ll. 3041-44.

⁹¹³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3886-88.

when a mare goes before her band of foals into unknown territory, with none to lead or counsel them, so this host has perished today”).⁹¹⁴

While in Recension I this is a strange declaration because Ailill did most of the leading that Fergus blames Medb for, in Recension II it is logical that Medb is given the majority of blame for the army’s failings, as she is the one who made most of the decisions. However, what makes Fergus’s statement strange in Recension II is that Medb does not, in a key way, lose to Ulster. As previously determined, the possession of the bull is determined to be Medb’s primary objective and the losing of the bull is one of Cú Chulainn’s greatest shames. Yet at the end of the Recension II *Táin*, even throughout the rout of the men of Ireland, Medb keeps possession of the bull.⁹¹⁵ By appealing to Cú Chulainn that the army be under his protection as they retreat, Medb mitigates any bloodshed that would have occurred to her troops.⁹¹⁶ To some extent, her rout is a strategic retreat, since she has already accomplished her primary objective. She does not lose to Ulster, and it is in the line right after Fergus declares that she has destroyed them that the text says, “Imthúsa Medba sunna innossa, ra timsaigit 7 ra timmairgit fir Hérend lé-si go Crúachain go factis gleicc na tarb” (“As for Medb, she gathered and assembled the men of Ireland to Crúachu that they might see the combat of the bulls”).⁹¹⁷ Fergus may have his opinions, but the text supports the idea that Medb has achieved her victory. However, she is still very publicly blamed in ways that men never are.

⁹¹⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4849-51.

⁹¹⁵ Dominguez, *Historical Residues*, p. 247.

⁹¹⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4821-42.

⁹¹⁷ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4852-53.

5.2.5 Analysis

There is a wide variety of roles that women possess in the *Táin*, and women are far more present in the heroic society of the *Táin* than generally believed. There is no separation of women from military matters. This is logical – for many of the women present in the text (such as Findmor, Find Bec, Conchobor’s wife, and Medb), the battles are being fought too close to home for that to be possible.

On both sides of the conflict, women are an integral part of the cattle raid process. The Connacht troops take their wives along, while the Ulster warriors are close enough to home that their wives can reach them. Women are connected in all levels of military matters, and thus all levels of the cattle raid. They are strategists, leaders, warriors, camp followers, loving and supportive wives, providers of sage advice, and the defenders of households.

Both recensions are similar in that the majority of women mentioned are not discussed in great detail – the camp followers, or the groups of women who are among those fighting Cú Chulainn, for example, are only mentioned in passing. This suggests the audience the texts were written for would consider the accounts of these women’s actions to have some degree of normalcy – at least for the heroic realm. Their loyalties to family and self-protection are never critiqued in the *Táin*. These women are not dwelt on like some of the more fantastical characters such as Scáthach. The majority of women are also not called out in moments of military involvement for their actions, suggesting that such involvement was considered unexceptional. In both recensions, many of the women mentioned as involved in the cattle raid are involved in a protective role.

Ordinary women fight less often in Recension II than in Recension I. There are many women who do fight, but nearly all of them are exceptional in some way – mysterious figures from outwith Ireland like Scáthach and the Amazons or women with special abilities like the druidesses and Feidelm the prophetess. The more ordinary women who do fight are often those filling in for their husbands' lack of ability to fill a certain role – Findmór, for example, is defending her home, and it is likely her husband is still in his debility. Women are fully capable of filling in where men cannot and seem to be in charge of noticing any weaknesses in the defences of their territory and shoring them up, as when the women protect Ulster from Cú Chulainn. This difference in the sort of warrior women present in the text does not equate to a lack of women near battle. Women are still expected to face danger bravely and to protect their homes and those for whom they are responsible where they can. They are simply presented as less likely to fight outside of necessary circumstances unless they are in some way extraordinary. However, Recension II also features more women in leadership positions than Recension I; they are just not as frequently active on the field of battle.

It is also logical that women should be involved in martial efforts because women know what the consequences are if they are unable to defend themselves – kidnap and rape. The majority of women's actions are defensive in some capacity, and this accords with Medb's actions as well. She uses her powers of persuasion and her leadership in an attempt to keep herself safe. Medb utilizes resources used by other women to achieve her aims, including the power of shame, which seems feared by men and is rarely utilized by them. This fear at times presents itself in the form of suspicion of what seems to be a separate power structure possessed by women existing parallel to the

honor-driven power structure used by the men. In this parallel structure, women are both victimized by men but also the arbiters of honor, an ever-present audience able to judge a man's actions and determine how positively his reputation is perceived.

Similarly, while there are a number of negative comments about female sexuality in both recensions, these comments never seem fully focused on sexual intercourse per se, but rather on the interruption of military duty and the perceived unnecessary escalation of military acts caused by trickery in sexual relations. It is this trickery that is viewed negatively – where no trickery is involved there are few comments negative or positive about women engaging in sexual relations.

Medb's actions follow this pattern. She engages in sex to fulfill her own purposes, just as all the women in the text do. When these actions align with heroic goals, nothing is said about these actions, while when they interfere with military aims, something is said. As the central female figure Medb demonstrates the complicated nature of this arrangement, as one side's military interference can be the other side's military aim. However, her actions are entirely in keeping with the other women.

Despite Medb's accordance with normalized female roles, there are a number of points where she is blamed for actions that objectively she does not seem to have committed. Several of these actions are connected to the betrayal acts with which Medb is involved.

5.3 Medb and Betrayal

Medb does not stand out as peculiar among women given her actions in the *Táin*. She is not monstrous as much early scholarship declares, but rather seems to fit

the patterns of women in the heroic society around her in terms of her loyalty decisions, her sexuality, and her leadership and military actions. There is internal consistency in the treatment of women within the literary context of the *Táin*. This suggests that Medb is not treated differently than men such as Fergus and Ailill in betrayal situations purely because she is viewed within the text as deviant or wrong. Since it is not deviance that inspires such accusations, and it is not obvious that she is guilty of many betrayals due to bad character, it is important to ask why she is so often found involved in betrayal acts, and why the way in which Medb is accused of those acts differs from the way men are accused.

As previously established, Medb is a potential betrayer in four of the betrayal acts mentioned in Chapter Two – killing the Gailioin, sending Cú Chulainn’s foster-brothers to their deaths, sleeping with Fergus, and giving Findabair in marriage to many men at once.

In Recension I, Medb’s betrayal of Ailill to sleep with Fergus is hinted to be done for loyalty to her kinsmen and her own interests. Seemingly Ailill believes this, given that he says, “Is dethbir disi [...] Is ar chobair ocon táin dorigni.” (“She is [reasonable] (to behave thus) [...] She did it to help in the cattle-driving”).⁹¹⁸ In both recensions, Medb is unpunished for her action. Rather, Fergus is shamed for sleeping with Medb, and it seems to be used as a control mechanism by the royal couple to keep Fergus in check.⁹¹⁹ Both Ailill and Medb choose loyalty to the family unit they are a part of rather than to Fergus. In some ways, Medb actually betrays Fergus in this way, by pretending to give him sexual attention for his own sake, but truly doing so as a way to use him.

⁹¹⁸ *TBC-I*, l. 1053. ‘reasonable’ translated as ‘right’ in O’Rahilly’s translation.

⁹¹⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 1054-63; *TBC-LL*, ll. 2487-91.

Medb plays at betrayal of Ailill, but if Ailill seems complicit in the act, it may not truly count as a betrayal of him.

The Gailioin present an interesting inversion of this. While it may initially seem that Medb is acting in Ailill's best interests, saying in Recension II, "Níba lind ragait 7 níba erund conbágfat" ("It is not with us they will go nor for us they will fight")⁹²⁰ and in Recension I, "Ficfit fornd iar tiachtain dúin [...] 7 gébtait ar tír frind" ("They will overpower us when we have come back and seize our land").⁹²¹ However, as previously discussed, the Gailioin are actually Ailill's kinsmen, and thus would likely not turn against him. However, they may turn against Medb. Her loyalty does not even truly extend to Ailill. This makes sense, in a world where loyalties rarely seem to extend to spouses above one's family of birth and one's children.

Two of these betrayals are ones in which Medb is not alone in her role as betrayer – as the other leader of the troops, Ailill is equally involved in decisions that lead to the deaths of Cú Chulainn's foster-brothers and Findabair's many engagements. In these two betrayal acts, Ailill is not accorded equal responsibility with Medb and Findabair. This is particularly true in Recension II.

In Recension I, Medb is the one who lies to Fer Diad, telling him that Cú Chulainn questions his honour. Ailill and Medb then watch Fer Diad leave the camp to fight Cú Chulainn, both of them clearly believing that they will never see Fer Diad alive again. However, Fer Diad gives most of the blame for the betrayal to Cú Chulainn, saying, "A C[h]ú C[h]ulaind Cúalinge / rotgab baile is búaidre / rotfía cach n-olc úaindi / dáig is dait

⁹²⁰ *TBC-LL*, ll. 328-29.

⁹²¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 158-59

a c[h]in” (“O Cú Chulainn of Cúailnge, frenzy and madness have seized you. All evil shall come to you from us, for yours is the guilt”).⁹²²

In Recension II, Cú Chulainn exclaims, “A Fir Diad, ardotchlóe brath” (“O Fer Diad, you have been betrayed”) ⁹²³ and adds more detail that Fer Diad should have listened to other men close to Cú Chulainn, “[d]áig ní adiartaís ind fir sein de fessaib ná dúlib ná dálib ná briathraib brécingill ban cendfind Connacht” (“[f]or those men do not follow the messages or desires or sayings or the false promises of the fairhaired women of Connacht”).⁹²⁴

By sending Fer Diad, who is seemingly a Connachtman, knowingly to his death in order for a potential victory over Cú Chulainn, Medb chooses loyalty to her own interests and her own kin over more distant members of her army. She never sends any of her kinsmen to fight Cú Chulainn. Medb also chooses her enmity towards Cú Chulainn due to the death of her kin over any loyalty she should have had to her countryman. However, Medb does not make either Fer Diad or Cú Chulainn fight. They, too, choose where to place their loyalties and what priorities each has. She is not the only one to betray – Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad betray their friendship, but it is Medb who is blamed. Medb is not present during Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn’s conversation and the accusations it contains. She is therefore unable to defend herself against accusations of betrayal.

In both recensions, it is Findabair who takes on the public blame for betraying the Kings of Munster, after an outbreak of violence and death within the camp caused by

⁹²² *TBC-I*, ll. 3077-80.

⁹²³ *TBC-LL*, l. 3440.

⁹²⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3424-3425.

the kings' realization that they have been fooled. In Recension I, "Rochúalai Findabair annísín .i. apthain na secht cét triana fochann. Atbail ar féili and sin" ("Finnabair heard of this, namely, that seven hundred men had died because of her. She fell dead there of shame").⁹²⁵ Recension II is similar, declaring, "Atchúala sain Findabair ingen Ailella 7 Medba in comlín sain d'feraib Hérend do thuttim trena ág 7 trena accais, 7 ro maid cnómaidm dá cride 'na cíab ar féile 7 náre" ("Findabair, the daughter of Ailill and Medb, heard that this number of the men of Ireland had fallen because of her and on account of her, and her heart cracked like a nut in her breast through shame and modesty").⁹²⁶ In this case, Findabair is doing what all the men do, putting her family and her own self-protection above the interests of those more distantly related. Her parents acquire strong allies in the Munster kings. However, this becomes problematic because it threatens one of the areas in which the role of men and those of women overlap - the bringing of new members into a family unit through marriage. Kimpton observes, "As the woman normally married into the husband's home, she was considered an outsider, and for this reason constituted a threat."⁹²⁷ However, a woman's role was also essential, as she would produce the children needed to continue the family line. This bred tensions between a woman being valued, but also distrusted, since she came from another natal family and her loyalty to her new family could also be in question. As the Kings of Munster discover, with Findabair, this loyalty is never in question. She is unquestionably loyal to her maternal line. This follows the same pattern as the young warrior Erc, who is

⁹²⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 3364-65.

⁹²⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3886-88.

⁹²⁷ Bettina N. Kimpton, "'Blow the House down': Coding, the Banshee, and Woman's Place", *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 13 (1993), 39-48 (p. 39).

loyal to his mother's family above his father's wishes, or the majority of other people in the *Táin*, who tend to put loyalty to the maternal kin above all else. Yet Findabair concedes the legitimacy of the accusations of betrayal, which none of the men do. She is also never directly accused to her face of betrayal. Accusations are seemingly made about her and make their way back to her, upon which she falls dead.

Medb and Findabair's behaviour seems consistent with that of other women in the *Táin* in both Recension I and Recension II. Moreover, the ways in which Medb and Findabair choose to betray also seems consistent with the behaviour of men in the text. They choose loyalty to their children and their maternal kin. However, the way in which people react to several of these betrayals is different from the way in which people react to the betrayal acts of men. Medb and Findabair are not given the opportunity to defend themselves against betrayal allegations, which often occur outside of their earshot. The two also show a willingness to concede that they have done wrong when allegations reach them. This is a willingness the men do not show. Despite the level of accusations against them, there is very little violence directed at Medb and Findabair despite the blame they are accorded. This again differs from, for example, the way Cú Chulainn treats Fer Diad for his betrayal or the way Fergus treats Conchobor when he encounters him. Given Medb and Findabair's lack of societal deviance, it is interesting to consider why the response to their behavior deviates so much from the norm.

5.4 Conclusion

The answer as to why Medb and Findabair are treated the way they are seems to lie less with them and more with the men accusing them. The men accusing them of

betrayal all seem to be in a situation where they have escalated to a point of extreme violence. Cú Chulainn is in the process of killing his closest foster-brother. The Kings of Munster have just taken part in a massacre. The scope of this violence could easily turn into blood feud or cycle of violence.

These betrayal acts are not the only times in which women are blamed when violence has escalated. In Recension II, Cú Chulainn blames his bedmate for his absence during the beginning of the cattle raid.⁹²⁸ And as previously established, in both recensions Medb is blamed when the men of Ireland are routed at the end of the final battle. She is blamed by Fergus, whose retreat from Cú Chulainn took half of their forces from the field.

These attributions of blame or betrayal seem to be less about whether the women have actually done the act they are accused of, and more about how blaming them can alter the martial landscape. In every instance where a woman is blamed, tensions ease. After Findabair dies, the men stop fighting, and there do not seem to be any continued ramifications of her multiple engagements. After Medb is accused of betraying Fer Diad, no one comes to avenge Fer Diad, and Cú Chulainn maintains his honor, rather than being forced to bear the burden of having killed kin. In the final battle, rather than the Ulstermen and the men of Ireland continuing to kill each other, Medb's surrender to Cú Chulainn permits the men of Ireland to safely escape without repercussions. All of the situations deescalate from further bloodshed. This supports conclusions reached by Edel, who states that "there is a tendency in modern scholarship to overemphasize the violence inherent in heroic societies. It is overlooked

⁹²⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 453-55.

that in the society depicted by the *Táin* [...] violence needs to be reined in by prudence.”⁹²⁹

The two power structures of the men and women seem to complement each other. Women are often the audience for men’s martial efforts. They can shame men, inciting them to violence that will protect the women. In exchange, when the violence becomes too intense, the men can blame the women, who are held differently accountable within the honour system, as they are legally considered “senseless.”⁹³⁰ Men are unable to both shame each other and be blamed for their actions in the context of an honour society without it making relationships not just between them but between their entire families too fraught. However, blaming women allows the violence an outlet, after which the men can return to peace. All women act like the naked women who stood before Cú Chulainn to stop his battle rage. By exposing themselves to verbal castigation, they sap the anger from the men and allow martial energy to subside. Women are able to act as a buffer zone between men, and when honour is at stake, tensions can be absorbed by their bodies.

Medb seems to recognize this and use it at the end. She offers herself up, and in fact makes demands of Cú Chulainn. This act is not without risk. Cú Chulainn has not proven himself sensible throughout much of the text. His actions have been criticized even by other men within the text. He has been described as nearly killing naked women of his own kinship group due to his berserk rage. This is the danger of the woman’s role. There is always the possibility that this is the time when a man will be unable to control his anger enough to deescalate. In this particular instance, Cú

⁹²⁹ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 165.

⁹³⁰ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 68.

Chulainn recognizes the sense of Medb's offer and is able to agree to her terms, which include taking the raiding party out of Ulster, by saying he does not kill women, a statement at no time corroborated by the text. He has killed many women throughout the combat, many of whom did nothing and had no interactions with him. Fergus, on the other hand, acting as a male on Medb's side who could take offense, accepts this retreat, blaming Medb's leadership so that none of the men on her side need to respond with violence due to Cú Chulainn's treatment of their queen. Medb continues to lead the retreat, but her presence allows a de-escalation of tensions and a prevention of further violence. Thus, the blaming of a woman for a betrayal act is never a neutral act in the *Táin*. There is always a narrative of de-escalation playing under the surface.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

After examining betrayal in so many of the different relational contexts in which it appears, one striking observation is that while – as the sociological materials attest – betrayal is an innately destabilizing act,⁹³¹ and while the society portrayed in the *Táin* focuses on martial might above all else, reactions to betrayal in the *Táin* seem structured in such a way as to deliberately de-escalate any tensions that may exist. There are formulae that exist both to mitigate and contain the potential damages of betrayal and that use accusations of betrayal to prevent other large-scale societal damage. The majority of characters act to de-escalate as frequently as possible. This de-escalation strategy is seen in every relational context previously examined. The de-escalation of Irish society in the heroic tales is previously discussed in part by Edel, although not in relation to betrayal.⁹³²

This reluctance to allow betrayal to destabilize society is shown in how, before reacting to a betrayal act with strong emotion, individuals usually present an argument and accusation of betrayal, giving the betrayer a chance to back down. These accusations often provide the betrayer with a chance to create their own narrative that explains how they were never intending to betray, allowing everyone to leave the situation unharmed. There is an enormous amount of posturing in these exchanges and the implicit threat of future violence, with both parties telling the other they would win if a fight should occur, but the usual result is the betrayer backing down. Violence is not the typical result of these altercations. When the danger of escalation grows too large,

⁹³¹ Krantz, 'Leadership, Betrayal and Adaptation', p. 229; Haden and Hojjat, 'Aggressive Responses to Betrayal', p. 103.

⁹³² Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 165.

threatening to spill out from one-on-one combat to army-on-army, de-escalation is usually chosen as a method of dealing with conflict.

This is evident in Medb's interactions with Ailill and Fergus regarding the Gailloin. She wishes them dead, Ailill and Fergus express their outrage with this, and Medb backs down when faced with the possibility of both public shame over her decision and an escalation to violence, as Fergus states he would engage in battle with her if she should carry through with this decision.⁹³³ Such de-escalation through the betrayer backing down is also seen in Fergus's many dealings with the Ulstermen. When he guides the army astray near the beginning of the *Táin*, or delays in his assistance in removing the forked pole set in the ground by Cú Chulainn, he is confronted by Medb. She states that his actions look like betrayal, reminding him that betrayal acts, if the narrative that this is a betrayal act is accepted by a wider audience, are accompanied by public shame and a loss of honour.⁹³⁴ Due to the precarious position of the Ulster exiles, such a public admission of wrongdoing would also allow Medb to slaughter them, as their allies would have difficulty defending them after such obvious malfeasance. Through her warning, Medb gives Fergus the opportunity to back down and renounce his actions before such an accusation of betrayal becomes public. In both cases, he stops his actions of betrayal. In these situations, it is usually an implied threat of violence combined with potential shaming, and through this a loss of honour, that de-escalates the betrayal situation.

In other examples, the betrayal act itself is used as a means to de-escalate tensions. Ailill and Medb use Fergus's affair with Medb (a betrayal of his relationship

⁹³³ *TBC-I*, ll. 147-83; *TBC-LL*, ll. 314-50.

⁹³⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 210-55; *TBC-LL*, ll. 351-92, 598-662.

with Ailill) in such a way. Ailill takes Fergus's sword during one of Fergus's sexual encounters with Medb and Fergus cannot say a word about it because he knows he was wrong in his actions.⁹³⁵ If he approached Ailill about the sword, Ailill could verbally destroy Fergus and his reputation before an audience. The removal of his sword removes quite a bit of Fergus's power, thus (from the perspective of Ailill) removing some of the tensions present in the army.

It is difficult, in an environment as heavily charged as a cattle raid, particularly one where one side is a thrown-together alliance containing many different loyalties and rapidly switching allegiances, always to avoid betrayals. People do their best on the individual level, as in the examples above, but there are also societally constructed mechanisms to prevent the worst of the fallout from such betrayal acts, to prevent betrayal acts from causing ripple effects of violence, and, ideally, to prevent betrayal from occurring in the first place.

In some cases, despite entreaties and accusations of betrayal, the betrayer feels there is no way to back down without greater harm to their honour than would occur through the act of betrayal. For example, Fer Diad has entered into a legal contract with Medb that includes sureties.⁹³⁶ There is no way to extract himself. Fer Báeth makes a similar decision that he will not back down from betrayal.⁹³⁷ In these examples, there appear to be formulaic, ritualized expressions to end a publicly acknowledged relationship. This is found, for example, when "Ní tharrasair Fer Báeth co mmatin itir acht luid fo chétóir d'athchur a charatraid for Coin Culaind" ("Fer Báeth waited not until

⁹³⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 1030-58.

⁹³⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 2620-85; *TBC-LL*, ll. 2636-714.

⁹³⁷ *TBC-I*, ll. 1737-69; *TBC-LL*, ll. 1881-93.

morning but went at once to renounce his friendship with Cú Chulainn”).⁹³⁸ As well, in Fer Diad’s encounter with Cú Chulainn “iss and sin ferais cehtar n-aí díb athc[h]ossán n-athgér n-athcharatraid ráraile” (“then each of them reproached the other bitterly as they renounced their friendship”).⁹³⁹ This renouncement is never explained, but, as it appears to end the formalized relationship between the two, it makes sense that it exists to contain one-on-one personal conflicts before they escalate beyond the level of the two people already involved. Cú Chulainn and both of his foster-brothers are at a point where they need to kill each other, but none of them are ever accused of kin-slaying for this. It appears that this renunciation of their relationship may, by removing their official relationship status, remove any legal penalties that would occur by killing someone so closely tied to an individual, thus avoiding pulling a man’s family into his personal conflicts to obtain compensation. There is never such a mechanism presented in the text to remove a biological kinship tie – another sign of the prioritization of biological family.

Another such mechanism exists that seems aimed to prevent conflict from reaching a point where violence occurs at all. This mechanism is a formula spoken by people who have historically been allies but are on opposite sides of a conflict when they encounter each other and wish a temporary truce, within which their allegiance to the opposite side may be forgotten. In this formulaic greeting, one person welcomes the other to his territory. The other says, “Is tairisi lind inn fáilti” (“I trust that welcome”)⁹⁴⁰, which is followed by “Is tairisi daid-se ón” (“you may well trust it”).⁹⁴¹ This is said by both

⁹³⁸ *TBC-LL*, ll. 1894-95.

⁹³⁹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2944-45.

⁹⁴⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 2727.

⁹⁴¹ *TBC-I*, ll. 2728.

Fiachu and Fergus when they come to parley with Cú Chulainn or bring him advice.⁹⁴² It is also begun once by Fer Diad, but rejected by Cú Chulainn on the basis that it was not Fer Diad's right, coming into Cú Chulainn's territory, to provide such a welcome.⁹⁴³ In all other instances, though, such a formulaic welcome appears to create a bond of trust between two warriors and welcome them into a private space where they can engage in council with one another and jointly create a plan moving forward to avoid harm to either party – a cooperative attitude not often anticipated by those writing about heroic literature, but that actually occurs quite a bit in the *Táin*. Despite the usual focus of the *Táin* on personal honour, within this truce space it is not always just personal honour that is prioritized. Honour is important unless great societal chaos, and potential personal loss, can be avoided by trusting in a friend and splitting the honour won or lost. This is an important mechanism for protecting relationships that are non-biological, and thus at risk of having competing loyalties that should be stronger.

This is seen in Cú Chulainn and Fergus's previously discussed deal that Cú Chulainn will retreat from Fergus, but only if Fergus later retreats from Cú Chulainn in turn.⁹⁴⁴ When Fergus later does run from Cú Chulainn⁹⁴⁵, this gives him the excuse he needs to publicly declare his deal with Cú Chulainn and thus avoid any accusations that he has betrayed Medb's forces. He can stay true to his true allegiance to his family in Ulster while not further destabilizing the wider political situation.

⁹⁴² *TBC-I*, ll. 2727-28, 1317; *TBC-LL*, ll. 1399-1400, 1595-96, 1722-23.

⁹⁴³ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2928-37.

⁹⁴⁴ *TBC-I*, ll. 2495-522; *TBC-LL*, ll. 2473-2509.

⁹⁴⁵ *TBC-I*, ll. 4097-113; *TBC-LL*, ll. 4799-820.

Formulaic ways to break relationships or indicate a relationship is still in place make room for social maneuvering when members of society would otherwise be at an impasse or cast into inconvenient blood feuds.

Not all tensions can be alleviated in this manner. As another way to de-escalate tensions, gender is used. In situations where two men have not managed to stand aside from conflict before it gets to a point where their honour would be affected if they should not engage in violence, women fulfill a valuable role in de-escalating the situation. If one of the men involved in the situation should place the blame on a woman, and the other man involved agrees it is her fault, the men can then stand aside from the otherwise unavoidable path to conflict towards which they had been tending. The woman takes on all the blame for tensions that arise in society, or all the blame for an act of betrayal. Since women operate in a different sphere when it comes to the way they interact with the concept of honour, there is no need to kill the woman as it would be necessary to kill a man who was accused of the same acts. The woman acts as a buffer space between the men, into whom all the tensions of betrayal can flow without requiring redress. This allows the men to posture, with each of them stating they would have won should they have chanced to fight, without actually having to fight.

This system of blame is likely the source of the declaration in Recension I of the *Táin* that Cú Chulainn does not kill women. Recension I states, “Tarraid Cú Chulaind íarom Meidb oc teacht isin cath.’ ‘Nomanaig!’ ol Meadb. ‘Cid guin nodgonam ba deithbir dam,’ or Cú Chulaind. Rosnanacht íarom húair nád gonad mná” (“Then Cú Chulainn overtook Medb going from the battle-field. ‘Spare me!’ cried Medb. ‘If I were to kill you, it would be only right for me,’ said Cú Chulainn. But he spared her life then because he

used not to kill women”).⁹⁴⁶ However, Recension I is full of instances where Cú Chulainn kills women. On one occasion, he even kills a handmaiden of Medb’s because he thinks she is Medb. Despite her gender, Cú Chulainn “[s]raíthius di c[h]loich a Cuinc[h]iu conda ort ina réid” (“threw a stone at her from Cuinche and killed her on her plain”).⁹⁴⁷ After the youths Cú Chulainn played with as a child are slaughtered by Medb’s army, “[d]eich ríog ar secht fic[h]tib ríog ro bí Cú Chulainn i mBresslig Móir Maigi Murthemni. Dírimme immorro olchena di chonaib 7 echaib 7 mnáib 7 maccaib 7 mindáinib 7 drabarslóg” (“[s]even score and ten kings did Cú Chulainn slay in the battle of Breslech Mór in Mag Muirthemne, and a countless number besides of hounds and horses, of women and boys and children, and of the common folk”).⁹⁴⁸ Cú Chulainn clearly does kill women, but stating he does not allows him to use this excuse when killing a woman is politically inadvisable and would create a more chaotic societal situation. Such a situation is present at the very end of the *Táin*, when Medb is retreating from the final battlefield.

When looked at from the perspective of de-escalation, it is logical for Cú Chulainn to spare Medb at this moment as she is retreating and killing her would likely result in a higher death toll. Letting her live and blaming her for all the violence that has thus far occurred (despite the equal involvement of her husband) allows Cú Chulainn, and all the other Ulstermen, the chance to say they have won while not pursuing Medb’s army any further. As well, all of Medb’s army can blame Medb for their loss, as Fergus does in his cutting comment about following the rump of a woman,⁹⁴⁹ without needing to

⁹⁴⁶ *TBC-I*, ll. 4114-17.

⁹⁴⁷ *TBC-I*, l. 976.

⁹⁴⁸ *TBC-I*, ll. 2328-30.

⁹⁴⁹ *TBC-I*, ll. 4123-24; *TBC-LL*, ll. 4846-51.

engage the Ulstermen in combat. In Recension I, Cú Chulainn also keeps Findabair with him (after her previous death), providing a way that future altercations would perhaps be minimized between the two groups.⁹⁵⁰

Recension II functions in much the same way, with Cú Chulainn sparing Medb's life and both armies blaming her for their failures, except that Cú Chulainn uses a different excuse. Recension II states:

Ruc Cú Chulaind furri ac dénam na huropra sain 7 níra gonastarsum; ní athgonad-sum 'na díaid hí. 'Ascaid dam-sa úait indiu, a Chú Chulaind,' bar Medb. 'Gia ascaid connai?' bar Cú Chulaind. 'In slúag sa bar th'einech 7 ardo chommairgi go rrosset dar Áth Mór síar (Cú Chulainn came upon her thus engaged but he did not wound her for he used not to strike her from behind. 'Grant me a favour today, Cú Chulainn' said Medb. 'What favour do you ask?' said Cú Chulainn. 'That this army may be under your protection and safeguard till they have gone westwards past Áth Mór').⁹⁵¹

Again, this excuse is clearly manufactured. In the same recension, Cú Chulainn has no trouble potentially striking Fer Báeth from behind when Fer Báeth angers him.⁹⁵² Yet in Recension II, Cú Chulainn's logic functions the same as in Recension I – sparing Medb is more practical at the moment of her retreat than killing her, so he does. He even goes so far as to protect her and her army as they leave. While there may be a gender difference in Cú Chulainn's treatment of Medb compared with his treatment of Fer Báeth, his action is also the most practical he could take in the moment from the

⁹⁵⁰ *TBC-I*, ll. 4156-59.

⁹⁵¹ *TBC-LL*, ll. 4833-37.

⁹⁵² *TBC-LL*, ll. 1894-905.

perspective of saving lives. De-escalation is prioritized, and it is enabled through blame for the battle and all the failings that occurred during the battle falling on Medb.

This approach of de-escalation makes sense given the level of interconnectedness between the Ulstermen and the men of Ireland that was previously discussed. When most people on each side have someone on the other side to whom they are either related or allied, there is a large incentive to resolve problems peacefully, especially given the previously discussed prioritization of biological kin, who could be on either side of a feud. The strategies outlined work two-fold, allowing individuals to prevent large-scale feuds, which would destabilize entire regions, while also allowing the illusion of a society built entirely on violence to persist, thus preventing harm being done to anyone's honour.

While from a practical standpoint this system works, it does create one set of issues. It creates a system where, to the greatest extent possible, the harm from a betrayal act is defused and rendered harmless. This works on the level of the public and of society. However, the system assumes betrayal of formalized relationships acknowledged publicly, and makes no allowance for betrayal of a personal nature. Honour is satisfied by this system, and a method is provided whereby anger from betrayal can be satisfied on a one-on-one level between two combatants without others being pulled into the conflict, avoiding an increase in societal chaos. Yet since the threat of betrayal is normally used as a tool for de-escalation, there seems to be no formal mechanism or support system by which people can recover from a deep personal betrayal – a betrayal that does not lead to anger, but to a sense of pain, after not just a

publicly recognized relationship is betrayed, but a personally chosen and truly beloved connection is damaged.

This is seen in Cú Chulainn's reaction after he kills Fer Diad. According to the ritualized means of dealing with betrayal, Cú Chulainn has done everything correctly. He and Fer Diad formally renounce their friendship, Cú Chulainn fights Fer Diad in single combat and refutes all of Fer Diad's attempts to blemish his honour, and then, after Fer Diad dies, Cú Chulainn gains control of the narrative in his own favour.⁹⁵³ Yet Cú Chulainn collapses after Fer Diad dies, in a way that those around him during the scene describe as unusual. Laeg declares, "Níra chóir dait a chaíniud, / córu dait a chommaídium. / Rat rácaib in rúad rinnech / caíntech créchtach crólindech" ("It was not fitting for you to mourn him. Fitter for you to boast in triumph. The strong man armed with spears has left you mournful, wounded, bleeding").⁹⁵⁴ Cú Chulainn does not listen and continues to lament his *comalta's* death.⁹⁵⁵ He is truly grieved and does not know what to do, although all formal mechanisms have been followed.

Similarly, he does not know what to do and nearly collapses after the fight with the Morrigan, when his family does not come to assist him.⁹⁵⁶ As previously established, his family are too closely related for him to attack them and their honour, as their honour is tied to his own. Yet this means that the system in place in Cú Chulainn's society for dealing with the emotions tied to betrayal leaves him with no outlet to deal with these emotions of sadness, which are private and, for reasons of family solidarity, cannot be

⁹⁵³ *TBC-I*, ll. 2567-3153; *TBC-LL*, ll. 2783-3596.

⁹⁵⁴ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3394-97.

⁹⁵⁵ *TBC-LL*, ll. 3398-596.

⁹⁵⁶ *TBC-LL*, ll. 2012-91.

publicly expressed. There are no mechanisms to unburden a person of private emotions.

Anger is the language of betrayal in the *Táin*, and those who experience privately felt betrayals are left to feel their grief alone and unsupported. In this way, studying occasions of betrayal can expose the emotional and psychological weaknesses present in the warrior society of the *Táin*.

The study of betrayal is but one of numerous studies that could be done about the complex emotional landscape that makes up the *Táin*. My research suggests that minor characters within the *Táin* are often connected to the primary characters' reactions to events – often such minor characters are previously referenced in brief as having a close relationship to a central character. For example, several minor characters are mentioned as having foster relationships to Medb and Ailill, and the death of these characters may increase their anger towards Cú Chulainn within the text. As well, the character of Mand Muresci is introduced as Fer Diad's paternal uncle, and this relationship makes sense of certain of Mand's actions. No more than these brief references exist, yet it seems likely that such minor characters provide essential motivations for central characters' actions, even without exploring the ways in which certain minor characters are presented in other tales in the Ulster Cycle. There is much further that could be written about kinship dynamics and how they affect emotional responses (not just emotional responses due to betrayal) within the *Táin*. As well, there are many minor characters in the *Táin* who would benefit from more in-depth analyses of their characters, as there is much information to find about them when delving deep into the intricacies of the text.

Also absent from this current text is a more in-depth consideration of the differences between the audience perceiving characters' actions within the text and the audience who would have been perceiving the characters' actions when reading the texts. Further examination of these differences would be an intriguing and fruitful line of inquiry, but outside the scope of this current thesis.

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