

‘Who is the Gael who Would Not Weep?’: The Book of the O’Conor Don, Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird, and Late Bardic Poetry of Exile

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For one in our profession the condition we call exile is, first of all, a linguistic event [...] What started as a private, intimate affair with the language in exile becomes fate – even before it becomes an obsession or a duty. A living language, by definition, has a centrifugal propensity – and propulsion; it tries to cover as much ground as possible – and as much emptiness as possible [...] hence your autonomous passage outward, into the domain of a telescope or a prayer.

– Joseph Brodsky, ‘The Condition We Call Exile’

An nídh do bhí, atá sé ann anois; agus an nídh bhías, do bhí ré ann cheana; agus íarraidh Dia an nídh do chuaidh thort.

[That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.]

– Ecclesiastes 3:15

Whether in the form of a contextual note to a poem, an anthology’s general preface or a quick summary before a close reading of a representative text, introductions to late bardic poetry tend to emphasize loss as a nearly definitional trope of the genre: loss of political status, loss of tradition, loss of land, loss of community, loss of life, etc.¹ Loss is such a regular, though amorphous, topic in late bardic poetry that one may date an unknown Irish poem to the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century with some degree of certainty simply by identifying what Seán Ó Tuama calls the cry of ‘the dispossession of an

¹ See, for example, Mícheál Mac Craith and Geraldine Parsons, ‘Reformation, Conquest, and Exile’ (1534–1611) in *Bone and Marrow/Cnámh agus Smíor: An Anthology of Irish Poetry from Medieval to Modern* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest UP, 2022); Maureen O’Rourke Murphy and James MacKillop, *An Irish Literature Reader: Poetry, Prose, Drama*. (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1987); Declan Kiberd, ‘Bardic Poetry: Loss of Aura’, in *Irish Classics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002); Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, Introduction to *An Duanaire 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1981); Osborn Bergin, ‘Bardic Poetry’, in *Irish Bardic Poetry* (Dublin: DIAS, 1970).

entire caste'.² Though the emphasis on loss as *the* defining feature of Irish literature would later become a stereotype taken to its hyperbolic end by W.B. Yeats's insistence that where 'primitive melancholy' is found in English literature, it must derive from 'a Celtic source',³ loss regularly emerges as the grounds of late bardic poetry even outside of explicit eulogies and elegies. While death, conquest and dispossession can be found in both Old and Middle Irish literature, they are nowhere near as pervasive as they are in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Loss as a near defining subject – as both a literary turn and a topical rupturing – in late bardic poetry evidences an atmospheric shift in the social conditions from which Irish bardic poetry emerged, a presentiment as visible as the silver underbelly of leaves before a storm.

In order to explore the ideological work of early modern Irish poetry in shaping a sense of collective loss, this article will turn to the 1631 manuscript known as *The Book of the O'Conor Don* (BOCD) and the poetry of Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird collected in the BOCD to argue three main points. First, that the collapse of the bardic schools and the courts in which the bards composed and performed initiated an acute awareness in late bardic poetry that a distinctly *national* literary tradition was coming to an end, even though the tradition had not necessarily been understood as national prior to its collapse. This awareness can be found in both discrete poems and the very practice of compilation in the BOCD that assembles a diachronic archive that imagines within the pages of the manuscript itself a community of poets whose work, regardless of century and political alliance, showcases a distinctly Irish literary tradition; or, as the classicist Simon Goldhill characterizes 'tradition' in a paraphrase of Martin Heidegger, as that which 'functions as a rhetorical term to make the past look self-evident, as if it were a fixed and monumental entity'.⁴ Second, that exile itself conditions the sense of an incipient national literature leading both the scribe and poet in exile to reconstitute their lost society while removed from the reality of the society in order to articulate their exilic existence. In other words, exilic poetry formally and imaginatively restores the society from which the scribe and poet were exiled without the need for grounding in reality so as to make the condition of exile sensible and able to be

² Ó Tuama, *An Duanaire*, xxvii. For instance, Pádraig Ó Macháin's dissertation, an edition of Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird's poetry, humorously (or at least humorous to me) identifies two previously unascribed poems to Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird due to their 'complimentary quatrain to St. Peter'. Pádraig Ó Macháin, *Poems by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird: Volume II*, PhD diss, University of Edinburgh, 1988, 441. When one can ascribe a devotional poem to a late sixteenth-early seventeenth-century poet by virtue of said poet's tendency to invoke Christianity's archetypal psychopomp, loss may indeed be of the period.

³ W.B. Yeats, 'The Celtic Element in Literature', in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 173; 184.

⁴ Simon Goldhill, *The Poet's Voice: Essay on Poetics and Greek Literature*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2024), xxii.

understood as such. Third, I argue that late bardic devotional poetry in particular facilitates a sense of national consciousness by ciphering historical collectivity through biblical allegory.

The Book of the O’Conor Don (BOCD) is a compilation of devotional, secular and court poetry compiled by the soldier-scribe Aodh Ó Dochartaigh in Ostend, present-day Belgium, on behalf of Somhairle Mac Domhnaill, a captain of the Irish regiment of the Spanish army posted in the Spanish Netherlands. Though Ó Dochartaigh only signs his name as ‘Aodh’ in the BOCD, the scribal hand is the same as the one found in the *Duanaire Finn* [*The Poem-book of Fionn*], which is certainly an autograph of Aodh Ó Dochartaigh⁵; later scholarship identifies Aodh Ó Dochartaigh as one ‘Don Hugo Doherty’, an infantryman of Edward Fitzgerald.⁶ Though Ó Dochartaigh seems to have been a well-trained scribe who wrote with an ‘extremely neat and pleasing hand’, he was not a scholar himself and likely had not ‘been educated in the tradition of the native schools’.⁷ This by no means implies that Ó Dochartaigh was an amateur – his steady hand and regular emendations demonstrate that he was, at the very least, ‘familiar with the material’⁸ he transcribed – but merely that his scribal skills were not formally developed alongside lessons in traditional metrical composition and rhetoric. The BOCD was composed over the course of a year. Ó Dochartaigh’s hand records two dates: 14 January 1631 near the beginning of the book and 1 December 1631 near its conclusion.⁹ Douglas Hyde identifies two additional scribal hands, one that spans 11 folios and another that appears briefly in the middle of a poem to Mary entitled ‘Fuighioll bennocht bru Mhuire’ and in some authorial ascriptions.¹⁰ Brian Ó Cuiv has suggested that the book was copied directly from family manuscripts since the later works in the BOCD are primarily divided by family, that is to say poems written on behalf of the Ó Néills, the Ó Domhnaills, etc.¹¹ Compounded with Knott’s reading that the scribal hand was not one educated in native schools, there is no reason to doubt that Ó Dochartaigh referenced family books in the possession of exiles around Ostend and the Spanish Netherlands broadly. However, with the significant presence of poems that Katharine Simms categorizes as ‘Religious and Didactic’, ‘On the Poetic and Musical Professions’, ‘Love Satire, and Miscellaneous’, and ‘On Poets and Politics’, it

⁵ Douglas Hyde, ‘The Book of the O’Conor Don’, *Ériu*, 1916 (Vol. 8), 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7; Benjamin Hazard, ‘New Troy: The Irish at Oostende in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century’, in *The Book of the O’Conor Don: Essays on an Irish Manuscript*, (Dublin: DIAS, 2010), 172n42.

⁷ Eleanor Knott, *A Bhuil Aghuinn dár chum Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn*, Vol. 1, xciv.

⁸ Pádraig Ó Macháin, ‘An Introduction to The Book of the O’Conor Don’, in *The Book of the O’Conor Don: Essays on an Irish Manuscript* (Dublin: DIAS, 2010), 31.

⁹ Ó Macháin, ‘Introduction’, 6.

¹⁰ Hyde, ‘The Book of the O’Conor Don’, 79.

¹¹ Brian Ó Cuiv referenced in Hector McDonnell, ‘Responses of the McDonnell Clan to Change in Early Seventeenth Century Ulster’ in *Irish Migrants in Europe After Kinsale, 1602–1820* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 76n35.

is unlikely that Ó Dochartaigh simply copied directly from these family books without any other thought than replication.¹² In fact, of the 342 preserved poems (including duplicates and one later addition), over half are not directly related to any family whatsoever, with the number of devotional poems nearly double the poems written for the Ó Domhnaills, who have the most amount of discrete poems of any family in the collection. The vast majority (72%) of the poems in the BOCD are from the 16th (37%) or 17th (35%) centuries,¹³ though any grouping based on composition date seems to be entirely coincidental. The primary divisions of the BOCD – devotional, secular and court poetry – each subdivide further into thematic categories: poems to Mary tend to be grouped together within the larger ‘devotional’ grouping of poems, the poems to the Ó Néills are contained to one section, etc. Similarly, the criteria for division in the second half of the BOCD reflect the territorial division between prominent Irish families and have accordingly been seen to evidence that the poetry within the BOCD develops from and conforms to the strictures of a clan-based, dynastic society even as that society headed towards collapse. However, this reading of a clan-based bias in the BOCD undervalues how the second-largest category of poems in the BOCD after the dynastic is devotional, separate from any specific family/regional context, and that even within the family-based division of the second half of the book, no single family is given primacy within the collection. Like a map of Ireland that divides territories based on clan dominance, the BOCD presents not an Ireland divided by clans, but clans unified by Ireland. Through his method of compilation, Aodh Ó Dochartaigh has, in Ruairí Ó hUiginn’s formulation, ‘transformed material that would have been found in localized *duanairí* [poembooks] into the national *duanaire* [poembook]’.¹⁴

Though regularly used as a comparand, interpretations of the BOCD as a compilation *per se* remain rare, and the BOCD primarily serves as a storehouse of unique poems or of alternate versions of poems useful for collation and later editorial emendations. Lambert McKenna, Osborn Bergin and Eleanor Knott, three titans of early twentieth-century Irish philology, regularly reference the BOCD in their own editions but have little to say on the manuscript itself, bolstering the BOCD’s reputation as an important collection but never quite explaining its importance beyond its function as a vehicle of reception. Their work, along with that of Douglas Hyde, established the trope of later scholars noting how the manuscript holds nearly 20% of the surviving corpus of late bardic poetry before leaving it for their own object of study. However, focus on the work of individual poets and

¹² Katharine Simms, ‘The Selection of Poems for Inclusion in the Book of the O’Conor Don’, in *The Book of the O’Conor Don: Essays on an Irish Manuscript* (Dublin: DIAS, 2010), 32.

¹³ Ó Macháin, ‘Introduction’, 27.

¹⁴ Ruairí Ó hUiginn, ‘Irish Literature in Spanish Flanders’, in *The Ulster Earls and Baroque Europe* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 355.

poems decoupled from the site of their transmission (i.e. the manuscript itself) tends to artificially evidence bardic poetry's alignment with feudal or dynastic social relations contra the collective abstraction of national consciousness. That is to say that the critical and editorial act of treating poets and poems as discrete nexuses of cultural production mirrors presuppositions of a fractured and clan-based Gaelic Ireland. Just as Edmund Spenser found the Irish bards to be an active hindrance to the cultivation of a civil Irish society, so too does this exercise of fracturing the sites of production and reproduction of late bardic poetry inadvertently present Ireland as internally fractured in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, producing a vision of myopic, purblind people whose own calcified traditions pervaded politics and poetry alike until they were pacified by a more unified, modern power.¹⁵

To demonstrate how the idea of an Irish nation precedes both its establishment and an actual political movement that seeks to establish it, let us consider 'A bhean fuair fail lar an bhfeart', otherwise known as 'Mac an Bhaird's Elegy on the Ulster Lords'.¹⁶ The poem was composed by Eóghan Ruadh Mac an Bhaird, a poet who regularly composed works for the Ó Domhnaill clan and fled to the European continent in 1607 with the other Ulster earls. The poem's immediate occasion is the deaths of Rudhraige and Catharr Ó Domhnaill in Rome on 28 July and 23 September 1608, respectively, but their deaths quickly become synecdochical of the passing of all the Ulster lords to this point who have died in battles, transit and exile. The majority of the poem's quatrains are dedicated to outlining the events of legendary and contemporary Irish lords alike, and, in so doing, compose not a genealogical poem for a particular clan, but a genealogy of Ireland's lords vis-à-vis their shared exploits. Though at first glance an elegy, the poem reads far more like the Irish annals than it does a poem of mourning. At the poem's climax in Quatrain 31, the speaker asks:

Cia an Gaidheal nach guilfeadh libh
bláth fréimhe maicne Mílidh?
bhar n-oire cia ar nach cuirfeadh?
cia an croidhe nach criothnuighfeadh?

[Who is the Gael that would not weep with thee for the flower of the race of Mil's sons? On whom (of them) would thy burden not weigh? Whose heart would not quiver?]¹⁷

¹⁵ This is not to say that this problem pervades all editions of Irish poetry, but is an unintended effect of single-author editions (when the manuscripts consulted are not single author), anthologies and online databases. These forms of editions have their own strengths that come at the cost of this attention to the poems *in situ*.

¹⁶ Eleanor Knott, 'Mac an Bhaird's Elegy on the Ulster Lords', *Celtica*, 5 (1960), 161–71.

¹⁷ Knott, 'Mac an Bhaird's Elegy', 168–9, Q. 31.

Marc Caball convincingly reads this section of Eóghan Ruadh's elegy as the moment where the lines between clans dissolve, and, by providing a litany of aristocratic heroes from throughout Ireland, a collective abstraction emerges as the poem's unifying principle.¹⁸ While the poem reinscribes regional distinctions – the early catalogue of battles and deaths are painstakingly localized – the deaths are unified as 'maicne Milidh' [the descendants of Míl, that is Míl Easpáine]. Though the 'race of Míl' or 'children of Míl' is a common bardic kenning for Irish people generally, here its use is pointed. In the ancient genealogy of the Gaelic people, Míl had two sons: Éibhear and Éireamhón. Traditionally, the descendants of Éireamhón (the Eremonian Gaels) are conflated with the north of Ireland, while the descendants of Éibhear (the Eberian Gaels) are conflated with the south.¹⁹ Though it is perfectly reasonable to read Eóghan Ruadh's reference to the 'race of Míl' as little more than a kenning fossilized within the traditional bardic style, within the context of the poem, the invocation of Míl's descendants at the moment the speaker asks what Gael would not weep for the Ulster lords (i.e. one branch of Míl's descendants) reads as a conscious call back to the legendary genealogy from which all Gaels supposedly hail, ignoring the division of north and south in the face of a loss that should move Eremonian and Eberian Gael alike. After cataloguing glorious battles and crushing defeats all within a poem of mourning, even the most calcified kennings seem to shake off the generic and find new life in the present.

Still, the poem's final address is not to the Gaels or the descendants of Míl, but to Nuala Ó Domhnaill, sister of Rudhraighe, the woman whom the poem first addresses as the 'woman that hast found the tomb unguarded' (1). The poem's invocation of Nuala qua Mary Magdalene reaches its (theo)logical conclusion and final address as the speaker instructs Nuala not to seek hope in the churchyard clay, but to 'Ponder the Cross by thy side', (34), so that both she and the speaker may intercede on behalf of Ireland:

Tóguibh láimh, a Mheic Muire,
le taighdeadh do thrócuire,
a n-aghaidh na tuinne a dtám,
do chabhair luinge ar leanbán!

[Lift up Thy hand, O Son of Mary, with the guidance of Thy mercy, against the wave in which we are (engulfed), to rescue the ship of our babes!]²⁰

¹⁸ Marc Caball, 'Faith, Culture, and Sovereignty: Irish Nationality and Its Development, 1558–1625', in *British Consciousness and Identity: The Making of Britain, 1533–1707*, eds. Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Robins, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998). See also Pádraig Ó Macháin, 'The Flight of the Poets: Eóghan Ruadh and Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird in Exile', 43.

¹⁹ Leerssen, 'New Introduction' to McKenna's *The Contention of the Bards, Part I*, xlvi.

²⁰ Knott, 'Mac an Bhaird's Elegy', 170–1, Q. 36. For context, the poem concludes with three interwoven conceits: (1) Ireland as a ship, (2) God's wrath as a storm and (3) the exiled (and specifically in the final quatrains, Eóghan Ruadh and Nualla) as castaways.

Ultimately, even if the descendants of Míl did weep for the loss of the Ulster lords, their tears could not save the ship – only divine mercy can rescue the true children of Míl, and thus, it is through Christ’s mercy that the nation can find legitimacy through peace: ‘that His wrath against thy *kindred* continue no longer, obtain from God’ (34). Just as the collective quatrains of Eóghan Ruadh’s ‘Elegy for the Ulster Lords’ create the image of a unified Ireland that may one day find legitimacy through divine grace, so too does the BOCD allow the national *duanaire* to emerge through the manuscript’s assemblage of poems and their *post hoc* intertextuality.

The compilation of the BOCD demonstrates the production of a national consciousness through the creation of its own textual universe in the very act of showcasing an albeit constructed literary history of bardic poetry that shapes an Irish national literature through a diachronic collection of texts. The BOCD, thus, is also an anachronistic project as it removes the immediate, historical context of individual poems and recontextualizes them as a compendium of Irish national texts. This reading accords with Ruarí Ó hUiginn, who has argued that the exiled Irish community’s need to contend with ‘a modern Europe in which the national was of greater importance [than the locality of a late medieval society]’ occasions the particular nationalism of the BOCD.²¹ This is not to say that the formation of a national literature means that the literary subject of the period was becoming more homogenized and that all local politics dissolved in order to rally support behind a unified defence against invasion; national consciousness in literature need not equate to a political reality. The phenomenon of the Contention of the Bards (a sort of literary debate between the remaining northern and southern bards between 1616 and 1624) crystallizes how none of ‘that scorn and hatred of the foreigner which glows in the writings of many of the poets who lived at the same time’ was operative, and furthermore, if the poets taking part in the Contention considered an Irish nation, it was a future place whose literary production both parties were vying to shape.²² But even this Contention, supposedly disinterested in anything but ‘foolish local patriotism’,²³ took up the task of determining what exactly an Irish literary style was and should be. As interclan politics became more and more antiquated (and largely irrelevant in the face of conquest and plantation), the turn to the national did not flatten the local, but rather imagined local politics as part of a collective struggle, thus removing the political power that any one family could claim. The roll-call of family names that constitute the second half of the BOCD’s arrangement, for instance, contains not only native Irish family names but those of Anglo-Norman as well. Irish national literature, the BOCD seems to argue, is not dependent upon some sense of Gaelic purity where only the most ancient families or most

²¹ Ó hUiginn, ‘Captain Somhairle and His Book Revisited’, 100.

²² McKenna, ‘Introduction’ to *Contention of the Bards, Part I*, viii.

²³ *Ibid.* This critique of the Contention was near-contemporary with the Contention itself and is taken up by most early twentieth-century critics like Lambert McKenna, Eleanor Knott, and then, later, Joseph Th. Leerssen.

devout true believers had a legitimate claim but instead on a shared literary tradition of which the Fitzgeralds had as much of a claim to as the O'Neills.

A BLESSING WESTWARD

During the early days of the Nine Years' War (1593–1603), Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird, Eóghan Ruadh's brother, composed 'Beannacht siar uaim go hÉirinn' ['A blessing westward from me to Ireland'],²⁴ a relatively lengthy poem found in the BOCD expositing the 'love and longing of the exile, so common in modern Irish verse'.²⁵ 'Beannacht' alternates between registers of longing as it moves from the symbolic to the geographic to the demographic before finally turning to the poet himself, expelled from his home and isolated from his community. As 'Beannacht' moves between different subjects for its benedictions, the boundaries between tenor and vehicle collapse and the national emerges from the disintegration of the particular, a move characteristic of Fearghal Óg's treatment of 'individual, national, and personal' loss as inseparable from each other.²⁶

Fearghal Óg begins his list of blessings with one to Ireland as both 'buime ar n-oileamhna' ['the mother who nursed us'] and 'críoch mín sleachta saoir-Fhéilim' ['smooth land of the progeny of noble Féilim']. Fearghal Óg immediately begins to blur the line between the local and the national as he specifies Ireland as the matriarch of the progeny of 'saoir-Fhéilim'. Feidhlimidh Mac Daill, one of potentially several mytho-historic figures to which 'Féilim' might refer,²⁷ was the father of Deirdre (or Dardriu), the tragic heroine of the Ulster Cycle whom the druid Cathub prophesizes will have both 'fame and beauty' but, Helen-like, will cause Ulaid (the medieval kingdom consisting of parts of present-day Counties Antrim, Armagh and Down) to 'suffer on [her] account'.²⁸ Lusted after by Conchobar mac

²⁴ Translation from Bergin's *Irish Bardic Poetry*, 37–40; 225–7.

²⁵ Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, 37. Mac an Bhaird composed 'Beannacht' while in Scotland.

²⁶ Pádraig Ó Macháin, 'The Iconography of Exile: Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird in Louvain', in *Léann Lámhscríbhinní Lobbhain: The Louvain Manuscript Heritage*, eds. Pádraig A. Breathnach, Caoimhín Breatnach and Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail (Dublin: Dundalgan Press, 2007), 77.

²⁷ In Fearghal Óg's poetry composed for Aodh Mág Aonghusa, like 'Beannacht siar uaim go hÉirinn', references to 'Féilim' are palimpsestic, regularly referencing an assemblage of mytho-historic figures: Éllim mac Conrach, King of Ulster in 56 CE; Feidhlimidh Reachtmar, high king of Ireland in 111 CE; and Feidhlimidh mac Crimthainn, King of Munster by at least 825 CE all per *The Annales of the Four Masters*. References to Féilim, regardless, become, per Pádraig Ó Macháin, 'a common synonym in [Fearghal Óg's] verse for the Irish [and, in other forms] Ireland itself'. In other poems Fearghal Óg composed for Mág Aonghusa, especially 'Lubhghort fíneamhna fuil Ír' ['The stock of Íor are as a vineyard], Fearghal Óg emphasizes Mág Aonghusa's genealogical connection with the 'protagonists' of the Ulster Cycle. Considering the variant references already held within Fearghal Óg's deployment of 'Féilim', the established relation between Mág Aonghusa and the Ulster Cycle, and the perspective of Fearghal Óg composing this work while in Scotland, it is reasonable, and, at worst, generative, to add Feidhlimidh Mac Daill to the catalogue of 'Féilims' in Fearghal Óg's verse. See Ó Macháin, *Poems by Fearghal Mac an Bhaird*, especially 226, 241, 371.

²⁸ 'The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu', in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, trans Jeffrey Gantz (New York: Penguin Classics, 1982), 259.

Nessa, then king of Ulster, Deirdre flees with her lover Naoise to Scotland. Conchobar eventually pursues the couple, has Naoise killed and forces Deirdre back to Ulster where she commits suicide. Fearghal Óg's blessing to Ireland, the land of Féilim's progeny, begins ironically with an invocation of and association with the 'noble/free' descendants of an Ireland that eats her farrow. The ambivalence of this kenning, simultaneously dynastic and mythological, takes on a particular weight when penned by an Ulster native exiled first to Scotland, like Deirdre herself, then eventually Louvain. In 'Beannacht', Ireland is both a matriarch and the land itself; the progeny of this matriarch-cum-land/land-cum-matriarch are both 'free' ('saoir') and yet doomed to exile as descendants of Féilim. In two densely allusive lines, Fearghal Óg takes an episode of the Ulster Cycle and transforms it into a fate inherited by all of Ireland. This reading may seem contradictory at first to Osborn Bergin's commentary that the poem was composed at a time when 'the Irish cause was still flourishing in Ulster',²⁹ that is sometime before the siege of Kinsale (1601–1602) but after the second Desmond Rebellion (1583). If the Ulster cause was not yet hopeless, then why begin a blessing to Ireland with such a tragic genealogy and layers of defeat?

As Fearghal Óg enumerates his blessings, it becomes clear how 'Beannacht' is not limited to a region or clan or patron, but instead sees the land itself combined with a common literature as the basis from which an Irish national consciousness might form in the context of exile and dispossession; or, put another way, 'Beannacht' demonstrates how a shared literary tradition (in this case, the tragedy of Deirdre) becomes the imaginative grounds for the plantation of Munster and the long-established 'Dubhghoill' [Dark Foreigners] in County Meath to be understood as theatres of a single conquest. Following the exile of Féilim's progeny to Scotland himself, Fearghal Óg situates his speaker-self as gazing towards Ireland 'Westward from Alba' and seeing 'an ancient land like to the Land of Promise' (2). This refocus dislodges the speaker from 'mother Ireland' and orients his view both spatially as gazing westward and symbolically as gazing towards the promised land.³⁰ The catalogue of geographic blessings begins away from Ireland and then returns through the subjects of benediction: 'A blessing to Patrick's city', 'to Royal Derry' (3), 'To Donegal with sincerity I send a blessing' (4), 'A blessing to Assaroe', 'to the River of Sligo', 'to the

²⁹ Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, 37.

³⁰ In keeping with the tone established in the first ironic stanza, Fearghal Óg is likely playing with the overlap between 'thir tarngoire', the Pre-Christian Irish realm of spirits and the dead (akin to the more common *tír na nÓg*) and the Promised Land of the Hebrew Bible. Read as a Judeo-Christian reference, Ireland as 'thir tarngoire' offers hope to the exile – though he currently wanders, the Lord shall one day allow him to return. Read as the pagan 'thir tarngoire' Ireland already is the land of the dead and to return to it would be to die. Considering how the final stanzas of the poem see both Fearghal Óg sending his letter of blessing back to 'the grave of Conn Ó Ruairic' (25) while he is 'bound to go' to St. Peter's bosom in 'the Mansion of Blessings' (26), the ambiguity of 'thir tarngoire' seems both intentional and perfectly in tone with the rest of the poem.

ancient Moy', 'the River Bonnet' (5), 'A blessing from me to Loch Erne', 'and to Loch Gill', 'and to Loch Foyle' (6), 'A blessing to them one by one, the estuaries of Ireland' (7). From cities to waterways, Fearghal Óg maps his own return to Ireland as he wanders northwestward from Armagh up to Derry, from Derry southwest to Donegal, then south to Assaroe, south to Sligo, still further south into Connacht and to the River Moy, then back north to the Bonnet, then to Lough Erne in Fermanagh, Gill in Sligo, and, finally, out through Lough Foyle. Other than a double back from Lough Erne to Lough Gill, quatrains three through six logically trace a path through Ireland from east to west, west to south and then south to north and out to the sea (Lough Foyle being a sea lough) as though the speaker's eyes slowly crept along a map, halting to write a blessing whenever his sight crossed something he recognized. This is, of course, a conjurer's trick; the procession from place to place does not describe a map, it draws one. Fearghal Óg's blessings are anything but random – they are, if nothing else, a progression of locales, a literary itinerary, that when followed, brings the reader through Ulster and then out again. It is only after his imagined journey through the cities and waterways of Ulster and (briefly) Connacht that Fearghal Óg turns back to Ireland as a whole and blesses the waterways that he may not be able to map himself, but that nevertheless stand in for rivers and lakes throughout Ireland of a similar type to the rivers and lakes with which he's familiar. A reflection on the local opens up to the national, and through the estuaries, Fearghal Óg's blessings open to other provinces.

When Fearghal Óg offers benedictions to already established polities (i.e. the provinces of Ireland) and the people who live within those polities, the differences of the locales dissipate to recognizable types of people who can be found throughout Ireland. In Quatrains 8–12, Fearghal Óg praises Ulster and Connacht as lands of warriors (8–9), laments Munster (which is 'not strange' to blessings Fearghal Óg assures his audience), for having been already conquered by the English (10), and blesses Leinster as a land of unseen warriors who had long been subdued by the 'Dark Foreigners' in Meath (11–12). After the provinces, Fearghal Óg blesses the women of Ireland (13), the poets who write eulogies (14) and genealogies (15), the physicians (16), the clerics (17) and the musicians (18). Other than one musician, *Ciothruadh*, who is mentioned by name, Fearghal Óg keeps 'these companies' (19) untethered to anywhere other than Ireland generally, which is referred to both as *Érin* and through two kennings. Like estuaries, these learned people of Ireland can be found anywhere, and the nation of Ireland becomes populated not with a particular clan from a particular glen, but with types of people defined by their profession. The particular is once again set aside in order to emphasize the similarities that lead not to discrete communities, but general demographics. The particular praises or lamentations ascribed to any one province – Connacht's brave warriors, Munster's conquered lords – cannot stand as unique qualities while everywhere throughout Ireland boasts the same types of people; even if someone from Armagh knew nothing

about Sligo, they could be sure (per 'Beannacht') that they would find people recognizable to their own local professionals. This is not to say that Fearghal Óg saw himself as an 'Irish' poet, but that he saw himself as an Ulster poet in community with strangers of a similar kind to himself.

'Beannacht' ends, however, by shattering any sense of a national community as the poet returns to his present position in Scotland, longing for Ireland with a renewed intensity now that he's finally articulated the object of his desire. The final few stanzas of the poem turn away from describing what has been left behind, and instead attempt (and fail) to come to terms with actual leave-taking.

Triall uaithe as adhbhar doghra,
snoighthe a cúirte clárgorma,
grádh fíre aca uaimse,
míne a slata saoruaisle.

A fágbháil is fáth maoithe,
binn foghar a fannghaoithe,
an ghormBhanbha fá bhfill fíodh
's is binn orlabhra a haibhníodh.³¹

[To depart from her is a cause of misery, well carved are her blue-timbered courts – I love them truly, smooth are her noble roads.
To leave her is ground for weakness, sweet is the sound of her gentle wind – green Banbha enclosed by woods – and sweet is the voice of her rivers.]

Both stanzas begin with a verbal noun that describes the now calcified action of exile: 'triall' [departing/journeying] and 'fágbhail' [leaving]. Up until this point, the poem has been full of action with almost every stanza having, at the very least, a blessing sent by the speaker. Here, however, when Fearghal Óg actually confronts his state of exile, subjectivity disappears. It is in this state that 'departing' and 'leaving' linger as completed to such an extent that they have themselves become nouns, no longer past actions but present states of being. Fearghal Óg begins his conclusion in kind by sending his epistolary poem off to 'the grave of Conn Ó Ruairc',³² a Franciscan friar martyred for refusing to swear fealty to Elizabeth I. Here, Fearghal Óg functionally invents a new kenning, a new bardic name for Ireland from its

³¹ Q. 21–22.

³² Just as in the opening of Ovid's *Tristia* – 'Parve—nec invideo—sine me, liber, ibis in urbem, ei mihi, quo domino non licet ire tuo!' [Little book, you will go without me—and I grudge it not—to the city, whither alas your master is not allowed to go!] (Tr. I.i-ii) – the invocation to one's poem as a letter that leaves the miserable poet for a happier place (either home or a place that may offer relief to the exiled poet) is a common convention in late bardic poetry. Cf. Fear Feasa Ó an Cháinte's 'Gluais a litir go Lunndain' [Go, my letter, to London] and Giolla Brighde Ó hEódhasa 'A sgríbhíonn luigheas tar lear' [O writing that speedest over the sea].

new, shared reality. Just as the tragedy of Deirdre conceptually unifies Ireland under a shared (if cursed) literary history, ‘the grave of Conn Ó Ruairc’ unifies Ireland under a new but still very much shared history of conquest. But even this imagined nation turned grave is still beyond Fearghal Óg’s reach, and so he concludes by taking solace in his only friend, St. Peter. Just as in Quatrain 2 where his position in Scotland precludes anything more than an imaginary journey that dissolves particulars into a general ‘Ireland’, so too is Ireland qua grave forbidden from him, leaving Fearghal Óg to turn to the Christian arbiter of the dead for community. In the end, ‘Beannacht’ demonstrates that both the particular and the collective are empty in their current state, and though the poem may imagine a national community, it nevertheless remains an inert abstraction when viewed from a distance. Thus, to understand Fearghal Óg’s conception of exile and the exiled subject, we must not look only what the exile has lost, but to the theology of benediction; not to the objects of blessing, but to the one who blesses.

TO MOURN NOTHING MORE THAN THE WORLD ITSELF

Bardic poetry – and Irish language literature generally – has never quite escaped the critical eye of the historicist. It is difficult to survey academic work on bardic poetry without coming across methodologies that conceive of the bardic tradition as little more than an archive of historical facts, fossilized forms, and philological finds. Cecile O’Rahilly’s introduction to her edition *Five Seventeenth-Century Political Poems* (1952) emblemizes the tone of this criticism even for today: ‘As a rule, the Irish poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, writing of the sufferings of their fellow countrymen, are vague and rhetorical. [...] Their value is above all documentary. From the literary standpoint, the interest of the poems lives in their form’.³³ The emphasis placed on the documentary aspects of bardic poems transforms them into ruins and the critic into an archaeologist, leading to a scholarly bias (admittedly perpetuated in my own archive) towards occasional poetry (elegies, eulogies, genealogies, etc.) and what Seán Ó Tuama has called ‘filíocht shocho-pholaitiúil’ [socio-political poetry] since these genres most readily document social networks and contemporary responses to political events. This selection criterion tends to undervalue devotional poetry due to the mistaken perception that said poems are little more than form without substance – prayers whose presence matters more than their utterance.³⁴ Lambert McKenna, who was himself a Jesuit, even goes as far as to claim that ‘the esoteric quality of the Bardic [religious] composition lessens the value for the lover of poetry. It also disappoints the historical

³³ Cecile O’Rahilly, *Five Seventeenth-Century Political Poems*, (Dublin: DIAS, 1977), viii.

³⁴ Ó Macháin, ‘Iconography of Exile’, 84–5.

inquirer'.³⁵ Indeed, those who argue that bardic poetry never escaped the myopic regionalism of interclan politics tend to focus only on the most polemic genealogies and panegyrics that explicitly demonstrate feudal factionalism. But late bardic elegies, as I've shown thus far, are very much poised to question any sense of a divided people whose communal imaginings cannot extend beyond the holdings of local lords; and devotional poetry of the period almost definitionally is even less interested in community bound by political boundaries alone.

Late bardic poetry's awareness of the threat (and, later, consequences) of England's conquest and plantation helps to form the beginnings of a national consciousness; then, the devotional poems of the bardic corpus demonstrate a clear sense of not just an early Irish nationalism, but of an international imagining of Ireland as part of Catholic (or, perhaps more precisely, Counter Reformation) Europe. 'Indeed', Salvador Ryan observes, 'one can discern a significant degree of variation between both poems and poets, highlighting the development of subjects and themes over time in line with the changing contours of European religious devotion as a whole'.³⁶ The compilation of religious poems in the BOCD is of particular interest due not only to what Ryan identifies as the 'development' of religious themes laid bare by the BOCD's compilation of poems – the BOCD is a compilation where medieval and early modern texts speak to each other as though contemporaneous, thus recreating a sort of progression or development of style from early to late bardic poetry – but also because of their association with the exiled Irish community in the Spanish Netherlands. This is not to say, however, that the devotional poems of the BOCD are gifted their awareness of socio-religious identity formation by the transformative power of compilation alone – this socio-religious identity formation is native to many devotional poems irrespective of their compilation in the BOCD. Colm Lennon ends his history of sixteenth-century Ireland by noting that 'the elements of Irish Catholic nationalism which emerged in the seventeenth century were being put into place' by a new found fervour of native Irish defence of Catholicism after the excommunication of Elizabeth I in 1570 and that the poetry of the time led the way for this Irish Catholic nationalism.³⁷ Even if the devotional poems compiled in the BOCD were merely mindless mumblings of medieval, fossilized forms unaware of their own political implications, the context of their composition as part of a

³⁵ Lambert McKenna, 'Introduction' to *Dán Dé: The Poems of Donnchadh Mór ó Dálaigh and the Religious Poems of in the Duanaire of the Yellow Book of Lecan* (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1922), xii.

³⁶ Salvador Ryan, 'Florilegium of Faith: Religious Verse in the Book of the O'Conor Don (1631)', in *The Book of the O'Conor Don*, (Dublin: DIAS, 2010), 63.

³⁷ Colm Lennon, *Sixteenth Century Ireland, The Incomplete Conquest*. (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 2005), 318–27.

Counter Reformation refutation of English Protestantism could not help but breathe new life into the old strictures.

The BOCD contains a suite of devotional poems by Fearghal Óg that share with his exilic elegies an indirect articulation of the Irish nation while remaining deeply personal and, at times, autobiographical; it is in this space of devotional intimacy that Fearghal Óg closes the loop on his poetry of loss, tracing not only the form and substance of loss as he did in his elegies, but revealing how Ireland might be regained through divine grace. Fearghal Óg's religious poetry in general may not at first seem rooted in imaginings of the nation; indeed one cannot approach late bardic poetry assuming that named reality necessarily precedes its rupture into verse. The nation does not (or, perhaps more accurately, could not) occasion Fearghal Óg's devotional poetry, yet the ends of his devotion, the desire of his prayers, is a world where God's wrath that first damned Ireland to conquest and dispossession has been quelled and that God's mercy may extend to all of Ireland, thus blessing the nation and Fearghal Óg simultaneously.

Of his devotional pieces collected in the BOCD, 'Ni maith altuighim mh'onáir' [Not well do I give thanks for my honour]³⁸ is Fearghal Óg's most autobiographical and theologically dense work. Here, perhaps more than any other of Fearghal Óg's poetry, Biblical allegory predicated, in Marc Caball's terms, an 'emergent sense of Irish nationality' that itself is constellated between 'insular territorial sovereignty, Gaelic cultural hegemony, and allegiance to Roman Catholicism'.³⁹ As Fearghal Óg reads his own state as coeval with Job only to eventually turn to the Passion as the source of salvation, his biblical exegesis leads him to the conclusion that he ought not mourn his current state of exile except incidentally through mourning the world itself. Through proper emulation of Job, Fearghal Óg hopes that Ireland may be restored and that he may return in glory to this restored Ireland, his own glory founded precisely in Ireland's restoration. Fearghal Óg's initial identification with Job transforms the personal sorrows of exile into a community of mourners as the poem replaces Job's sorrow with the realized eschatology of the Passion. The poem's 'opening statement'⁴⁰ is a type of prostration in verse: while in Ireland, Fearghal Óg had not given 'thanks for what [he] received from the noble company of the bank of the Boínn'. This was foolish since 'All men are [God's] agents' and that his 'reward from the sons of Míl', was his reward from 'the Prince of Princes' (1–2). As Fearghal Óg chastises himself for his 'olc an sduaim' [a bad strategy] (4) of not properly giving thanks for honours bestowed on him by God, he specifies that the cause of his failure is accidental, and not divine

³⁸ Translations from Ó Macháin, 'The Iconography of Exile: Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird in Louvain', 94–109.

³⁹ Caball, 'Faith, Culture, and Sovereignty', 112–13.

⁴⁰ Ó Macháin, 'Iconography,' 85.

punishment of overindulgence in worldly riches or an obsession with honour. One may have expected Fearghal Óg to blame the nature of his exalted position in Ireland for his insufficient piety, that one cannot serve God and Mammon, as it were. But Fearghal Óg disrupts this expectation by clarifying that what he received from the sons of Míl was merely a mediated blessing from the Lord and his situation could not be the source of his sinful negligence – the Lord's blessings cannot be the cause of sin. While a seemingly insignificant turn, Fearghal Óg's preservation of the legitimacy of Ireland's social order prior to his exile is absolutely crucial for the poem's conclusion. Though 'every lord is illusory save the Lord of Creation' (40), the lords of Ireland were, before his exile, *agents* of the Lord of Creation. If Fearghal Óg has fallen from grace, he has not fallen from a place of sinful decadence to one of pious destitution, but has, like Job, merely fallen accidentally (or, perhaps, incidentally) from God's blessing and thus hopes to return to that same blessing – the salvation of Fearghal Óg (and, by extension, the people of Ireland) is not revelation, but recuperation. Even when Job receives his worldly possessions back at the end of the apologue, Fearghal Óg assures his audience that 'His [Job's] surplus wealth [after it was restored to him] did not increase his sorrow' (19). What Job received from the lord was 'aisiog' [restoration] of land, progeny and possessions (17), and thus, it is restoration that Fearghal Óg seeks. This is why Ó Macháin through Fearghus Ó Fearghail convincingly reads the poem as not plainly eschatological, but informed by a 'realised eschatology', an approach to eschatology that deemphasizes the apocalypse and foregrounds the revelation of the city of God through earthly ministry, a belief evidenced explicitly in one of the poem's final quatrains: 'from Him we received all that we have got, from Him we received all that we will get' (52).⁴¹

Fearghal Óg relates his case to Job starting at Quatrain 6 and takes up Job's example throughout the remainder of the poem, acknowledging that it is only through submission that he may be restored to his former state: 'Job said, through ardent submission: "God gave, God took again"' (10). Taking Job's supplication as exemplary, Fearghal Óg begins to relate his own sorrowful state through a catalogue of misfortunes expressed throughout a series of quatrains each prefaced with a call to prayer like verses in a hymn: 'Eadamur is dom [fheagain/fheasgain]' [It is certain that/Certainly it was to test me] (24–26), 'Go n-altaighior a Rí ribh' [May I give thanks to you, O King] (27–29), 'Ionann is altaighthe dhamh/dhuinn' [I should give equal thanks for] (30–35), 'Ní fáth faoilti, ní fáth bróin' [It is no cause for joy, no cause for sadness] (36–37). Ó Macháin reads an 'ironic tone' in the poem between Quatrains 22 and 38,⁴² but if we are to describe the poem

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 93.

here as 'ironic', it is far from a postmodern irony that robs the poem of sincerity; if the poem is ironic at all, it is the irony baked into the Christian imperative that benedictions ought to be offered even during one's most desolate moments. Indeed, Fearghal Óg's poetry is filled with hyperbolic descriptions of his own sorrowful state; other than his tendency to conclude his poems with a quatrain to St. Peter, one may attribute an unknown poem to Fearghal Óg by virtue of its hyperbolic sorrow. But this expression of sorrow is not a rote habit, but crucial to Fearghal Óg's understanding of his place as a true believer in exile. Consider the climactic moment of 'Fúarus iongnadh, a fhir chumainn', [I have found a marvel, my friend], another poem of Fearghal Óg's compiled in the BOCD. After relaying the sorry state of his exile to the Franciscan Flaithrí Ó Maolchonaire who co-founded St. Anthony's College in Louvain, Fearghal Óg imagines himself arriving at the court of King Arthur. Alluding to the custom in the Arthurian corpus that Arthur would not eat on a feast day before some adventurous thing happened or an uncouth tale told,⁴³ Fearghal Óg claims that Arthur 'would not go fasting to bed a single night. [...] He would take his meal when he heard how the children of robbers are full of merriment' (10; 12).⁴⁴ Even in 'Fúarus iongnadh, a fhir chumainn', a far less religious poem than 'Ni maith altuighim mh'onáir', Fearghal Óg fears that his sorrow transgresses the teachings of the Apostles and that if he continues with his 'practice of constant evils' then 'Peter may drive me from his society' (22); that is to say he fears that the hyperbolic mourning occasioned by his exile may further exile him from heaven itself. Thus, if unqualified lamentations may potentially commit him to a double exile from both faith and fatherland, then to read his lamentations as ironic is to read Fearghal Óg as dismissing the will of the Lord, who, in all other circumstances, is his only hope for salvation.

After modelling Job and giving thanks to the Lord for his current state, the poem concludes by turning to salvation, and, in so doing, Fearghal Óg offers his universal theory of mourning. Immediately after he finishes his repetitious suite of hardships for which he thanks the Lord, Fearghal Óg reaches total destitution: 'Every body on earth is [but] clay: the birth or death of anyone is cause for neither joy nor sorrow; from the start no-one should be mourned' (38). From his own state of exile, Fearghal Óg concludes that life, both its beginning and end, is meaningless in and of itself, and that its meaninglessness comes into focus with the misguided inclination towards joy or sorrow on behalf of another person. Being of the earth is the cause of universal destitution; the natural state of humans, and thus humanity, is unified in its

⁴³ Here, my language is borrowed from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: 'he wolde never ete/Upon such a dere day ere him devised were/Of sum aventurus thing an uncouth tale, Of sum mayn mervayl that he might trowe, Of alders, of armes, of other aventures'. (*Gawain*, 91–5), though it is Chretien de Troyes' *Perceval* that initiates this tradition.

⁴⁴ Translation from Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, 41–4; 227–9.

destitution. The only one who deserves to be mourned, and thus the one who brings mourning into the world as a concept, is the Lord of Creation, whose blood was spilt in the Passion: 'it is for Him that one should weep' (40). Fearghal Óg then returns to his invocation of humanity by transferring his own failure to properly worship the Lord: 'Woe to him who would not mourn the world: His death was not the death of one person – He was completely every man; he who would not understand [this] is not human'. (41) At this point 'world' is synecdoche for 'Triath na nDúl' [the Lord of Creation]; as Christ died, so the world died, and so while 'Every body on earth is [but] clay [and] no-one should be mourned', the world itself, which has died in the Passion, must be mourned. Through the Passion, the poem minimizes individual death – and individual life for that matter – while also exalting the Passion as the sole event that gives meaning to the world, and thus Christ as the only thing that gives meaning to those who are of the world. As both the poem and its audience live after the Passion, there is hope for Christians who worship the Lord and mourn the world properly to discover the grace bestowed on them by the Passion. Having established the grounds for humanity's transcendence of life and death through Christ, Fearghal Óg finally returns to himself, unifying the poem entirely as a coherent account of exile from Ireland: 'On this account I left the isle of Breagha' (58). Having discovered through biblical exegesis both the cause of his sorrows and the path to his salvation, Fearghal Óg concludes with a final thought towards Ireland:

Teach na n-ógh is na n-easbal,
 teach daoineach an Duileamhan,
 easbal is tréan an tighé
 Peador fréamh na fírinne.

[House of the virgins and the apostles, populous house of the Creator, the apostle who rules the house is Peter the source of truth.]⁴⁵

As he does in 'Beannacht', Fearghal Óg conflates Ireland with the afterlife. Any anxiety that he may be banished from St. Peter's company has been alleviated as he incorporates his sorrow into a larger mystery of divine providence. What we're left with is a return to the isle of Bhreagh, literally the fair country that surrounds the Hill of Tara; almost literally, a return to the city on the hill.

Conflict of Interest Statement. No conflict of interest to report.

Data Availability Statement. Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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⁴⁵ Q. 59.

Abstract

This article examines how late bardic poetry transforms the condition of exile into a literary mode that reimagines community and tradition. I argue that poetry of lament, blessing and devotion articulates a broader literary consciousness that anticipates modern notions of a national consciousness. The compilation of bardic verse in manuscript form, particularly that of *The Book of the O'Conor Don*, creates a textual community where diverse voices that were once linked to local patrons and dynasties are reframed as part of a shared tradition. Within this context, elegiac poetry expands from mourning individual figures to envisioning collective memory mediated through the convention of bardic forms, while devotional verse reconfigures displacement through biblical allegory, aligning cultural survival with spiritual restoration. By reading elegiac mourning alongside devotional poetry, exile emerges not merely as a biographical condition but as the occasion for compositions that reimagine both geography and community. By attending to the interplay of form, theology and cultural memory, this article demonstrates how bardic poetry participates, even if unconsciously, in the creation of a national literature before the existence of a political nation.