

THE ORDER OF BARDS OVATES & DRUIDS
MOUNT HAEMUS LECTURE FOR THE YEAR 2026

The Twenty-Eighth Mt Haemus Lecture

The Colloquy of Brigh Ambue

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Abstract

The significant position of ‘three’ in Irish cultural traditions, of Sky, Land and Sea and the central role of triads within Druidry, is a triplicity deeply embedded within cultural patterns of thought that resurfaces in recurring motifs, in art, tales and language throughout time. This leads to querying where the ‘three’ in gender roles may have been positioned in Irish societies and ancestral culture and what may have been rendered invisible through colonisation. This includes recognition of the Irish people and of Irish language as Indigenous to the land of *Éire*.

Foundational to the process of developing the fictocritical *Colloquy* is Brigh Ambue, an historical *Bhreitheamh* (Brehon/Judge) recorded in the ancient laws of Ireland *Senchus Mór* (translated by O’ Donovan and O’ Curry, 1865) and whose name was called upon in later times as a model for formulating new ways of thinking. The *Senchus Mór* preserves the significant cultural role of *Bhreitheamh* (Brehon/Judges). To think through language conceptually requires Irish historical cultural materials. This includes texts on Ogham dating to Early Old Irish and Middle Irish (circa 7th–11th centuries) and later 12th–14th centuries manuscript commentaries in the *Auricept na n-éces* (edited by Calder 1917). To dialogue between times and places draws inspiration from the poetic patterns of question and response and the cultural role of dialogue, recorded in texts such as *Imcallum in da Thurad/The Colloquy of the Two Sages* (Celtic Literature Collective 2021) and transcriptions of relevant local oral histories and stories as documented by Ó Súilleabháin ([1942], 1963) and *The National Folklore Collection* (The Dúchas Project 2024).

This project utilises an interdisciplinary methodology, thinking with the heart and between times and places; engaging with spirit of place through journeying the land, in tandem with spirit of time in historical textual materials. Cultural studies approaches and theories from contemporary queer, trans and gender studies illuminate contemporary readings. Through use of fictocritical writing (Muecke 2002; Flavell 2004; Gibbs 2005; Haas 2017), an *experiential account of Third Gender* will be developed as a *Colloquy* between times, places and spaces, seeking to contribute knowledge of relevance and value to the repository of twenty first century Druidry and to provide a space for questioning the ontological basis of gender in Druidry.

Keywords: Third Gender, Ireland, Brigh Ambue, Ancestral Traditions, Druidry.

Introduction

This paper is an invitation to be open to where knowledge leads. Of considering what may have been rendered invisible when learning that was of an oral tradition handed on from mouth to ear of *listening, of memory, of speaking poetically* becomes altered through colonisation. Of reconsidering written accounts. There is a deep necessity awakening ancestors in this time, guiding Indigenous cultural recognitions of Sky, Land and Sea. Of questioning how ancestral customs based around sacred triple forms became binarised; that a binary is not energetically compatible with all of nature or all who seek. To be guided by the heart to find where the ‘three’ exists within ancestral Irish thought in respect to gendered embodiment.

To reconsider the roles and status of gender within ancestral Irish cultures requires questioning whether Third Gender existed in ancestral Ireland, pre colonisation. The term ‘ancestral’ is used to denote a living cultural connection, epigenetically inscribed and inherited. The term ‘Third Gender’ is used throughout this *Colloquy* as an embracing term, inclusive of a diverse and expansive range of lived experiences of gender, including, but not limited to, transgender (trans), genderqueer and nonbinary individuals.

The timeliness of this enquiry and subject is set against the background of increasingly repressive attitudes and positions on gender around the world. In the past year alone the retrograde positioning of defining gender has been experienced in both the United Kingdom and United States of America. The status of genders in the modern world is a contested site of increasing cultural, social, legal, medical and political debates and legislation. This is propelled by a misconception that to experience life and gender diversely, or as a transgender person, is a ‘new’ or ‘modern’ human experience. Yet, the potential for human life to embody gender beyond the binary of male and female, as Third Gender, is not sequestered to contemporary life experiences.

This is made clear in documents such as *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, a facsimile of the original 1942 edition composed of questions to guide field researchers in collecting oral tradition sources for the *Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann /Irish Folklore Commission* (Ó Súilleabháin [1942], 1963). From questions centred upon the potential of “change of sex” (Ó Súilleabháin [1942], 1963, p. 179), it becomes apparent that “men who were said to become women, or *vice versa*”¹ must have existed across places and times within ancestral Irish communities. The *Preface* to the *Handbook* alerts readers that:

Where a question is asked without an example illustrative of the reply being given, it may be assumed that information about the subject of that particular question is known to be available in some part of the country...*every question... indicates the type of material which is known to exist in the country.*
(Ó Súilleabháin [1942], 1963, p. ix, italics added)

Arguments against recognition of gender beyond the binary of female and male are based in essentialist notions of gender, that solely link gender to the physical. This may not reflect the full range of experiences of our ancestors throughout time, nor the ontological² experiences of *being* within Druidry. Essentialist approaches overlook and erase the significant roles and responsibilities of Third Gender that exist within diverse First Nations and Indigenous cultural traditions throughout time and across hemispheres (Ford 2021).

The twenty first century has offered the opportunity to refocus attention upon the ontological aspects of cultural gender identity, that is, to move beyond the physical to consider how *identity* is expressed and conveyed through language and the implications of this for Druidic practices. As a *Philosophy of Nature*, the ontological is embedded within Druidic thought and is central to developing lived practises. Approaching gender as socially and culturally constructed “an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 1988, italics in original), focuses attention upon the performative aspect to the expression of gender; how cultural roles are learnt, performed and become embedded into daily life. This includes cultural roles connected to sacred learning and ceremony. This shifts attention to gender as indelibly connected to a person’s *identity*, opening the way to

reconsider gender from a range of perspectives and to reconsider materials unfettered by normative ascriptions. The opportunity to refocus attention upon the ontological aspects of cultural gender identity emerges and how gendered experiences are expressed and conveyed through language, including in oral traditions and speech; in writing and folk stories.

Betwixt and Between

The early history of every country is more or less interwoven with fable, yet much of genuine history is, nevertheless, to be gleaned from it...why reject historical truths because they have been found connected with fable... (O' Kearney (ed.) 1855, pp.15,16).

Irish oral traditions record gender types such as the “fairy” for males and the “sonsy lass” (Ó Súilleabháin [1942], 1963, pp. 180–181) for women.³ In context of the field researches of *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* use of these terms are presented simply as part of the everyday language in use within communities. Men and boys identified by the term ‘fairy’ were recognised by “physical, mental, moral or aesthetic characteristics” (Ó Súilleabháin [1942], 1963, p. 180). These ‘characteristics’ may be cognisant with male temperaments embodying a gentler, or female-centred gender expression. This term may also convey individuality of self-expression, creative people and recognition of individuals who are now referred to as trans women. There is a ‘betwixt and between’ aspect in the records of the oral traditions, opening a space where Third Gender exists.

It is also possible that use of this term into the twentieth century (as recorded in the *Handbook*) represents a residual collective ancestral memory of individuals who experienced gender transformation after contact with a *sidhe* – a sacred perspective that is supported through Irish oral literary traditions that will be cited in this discussion. It is significant that the term ‘fairy’ travelled to areas where Irish diasporas migrated and was used throughout the twentieth century to denote boys and men perceived to be feminine (or effeminate), and/or same-gender attracted, including to gay male sexualities (homoeroticism). During the twentieth century this gentle word of sacred ancestral significance was misused as a derogatory, or slur⁴ and such negating uses are *not* suggested by the original *Handbook* entries.

The ‘sonsy lass’ (Ó Súilleabháin [1942], 1963, pp. 180–181) is an evocative term that did not seem to travel with the diasporas and conveys gender embodiments akin to a young butch, or masculine-of-centre female person, or perhaps even a recognition of trans male experiences. Inclusion of these terms within the *Handbook* collected during the mid twentieth century in Irish-speaking communities, provides textual evidence for gender embodiments expanding individuals beyond ‘male’ or ‘female’ *continuing to exist within communities and the oral traditions of Ireland after colonisation*.⁵

Pointing to the significance of deep consideration of original Irish source materials, this paper will present that ancestral Irish culture used affirming language in regards to the diverse experiences of people’s lives and it was not until the ecclesiastical era that negating language for gender forms became embedded into cultural thought and textual evidence.

As we move back in time, evidence is held within stories such as the fifteenth century “The Abbot of Druimenaig, Who Was Changed into a Woman” (Hillers 1995, pp. 176–178). In this tale, a man falls asleep on a hill at dusk and awakes as a young woman, living in this form for seven years, marrying a man, giving birth to seven children and being transformed back into his original form as a man again after falling asleep on the same hill. That only “one hour of the day” had passed during this gender transformation of seven years is suggestive of otherworldly time and intervention, of contact with a *sidhe*.

By the time of the writing of this story in the ecclesiastical era of Ireland, gender transformation from male to female is presented reflecting the views of the monastic era,

This story, scribed in the fifteenth century, is from the oral traditions of Ireland with ancestral figures Fionn Mac Cumhail (or Finn the Warrior-Seer) “A celebrated hero in Irish literature and folklore...continuous in the literature for well over a thousand years” (O hOgain 1991, p. 213) and Conán whose genealogies and histories are significant in County Clare. Fionn falls asleep upon a hill (O’ Kearney (ed.), 1855, pp. 120, 121) and upon awakening, instructs a warrior companion Diorraing to build a shelter for the night. Diorraing ventures into the forest for wood and finds an entrance to a dwelling (Ibid. pp. 122-123), suggesting to Fionn that they seek shelter there instead. This is the entrance to the House of Conán, located inside the *dun* (hill fort). Fionn, Diorraing and two majestic hounds are admitted with courtesy. Fionn completes a series of tests of oratory laid under *geasa* by Conán. Later in the feast, Fionn recounts the wonders of the Fennians preserved in the tale above, including the account of the ‘man who lives alternate years as a woman’.

This is significant for the text clearly records the words for ‘male *and* female’ “firrionn *agas* buinniinn” (Figure 1, line 3, italics added), modern Irish ‘fireann agus bainneann’. That is, not ‘male *or* female’ – a statement that would have reified a binary constative gender state – but an individual who innately possesses multiple genders and the capacity of transformation between gender identities and roles. In contemporary terms this is identifiable as an example of Third Gender in the historical literary traditions of Ireland.

This story survived centuries of destruction and repression of cultural heritage, to be translated in the nineteenth century from eighteenth century vellum manuscripts, by scholars of the Ossian Society in Dublin. The text provides important primary evidence that the story of ‘change of sex’ existed within ancestral Ireland.

The location of the *Feast*, inside a *dun*, positions this story simultaneously as a journey into a *sidhe* dwelling and into deeper aspects of ancestral Irish culture, where otherworldly beings are entwined with historical clan heroes and experiences. Stories are modeled upon and reflect the socio-cultural times in which they are written, keeping the lives, aspirations, hopes, dreams and fears of those alive in poetic verses.

Significantly Conán receives the story about the gender transformative person from Fionn as “sweet words” (Figure 2). Conán’s response clearly suggests that ‘shift of sex’, or what in contemporary terms could be ascribed to Third Gender, *not only was present within ancestral Irish communities, but was viewed in an auspicious manner.*

This is powerfully presented when Conán offers a traditional blessing “Beir buadh *agas* beannacht” (Figure 2, line 1) to Fionn for sharing the story. Earlier scholarly reference to this story⁶, omitted the text of this blessing by Conán for the story. Such omissions and erasures, recurrent throughout scholarly and archaeological histories, have rendered the rainbow tapestries of ancestral cultures monochromatic. Recounted here through the gaze of queer and transgender studies, the blessing provides a significant primary source and critical account of *affirmation of gender transition* in ancestral Irish thought and texts.

Stories such as these encode vital language and cultural evidence for what is now recognisable as Third Gender. An horizon of gender transformation emerges within ancestral Ireland as we read these texts and read *between* these texts. Before colonisation eroded social structures, banned the use of the Irish language⁷, and colonised the thought of our ancestors, gendered embodiments that expanded the binary of male/female were located within ancestral Irish communities.

There is a central significant position of ‘three’ in Irish cultural traditions, of Sky, Land and Sea, a triplicity deeply embedded within cultural patterns of thought resurfacing in recurring motifs, art, stories and language throughout time.⁸ The motif of the triple spiral from the portal stone of *Brú na Bóinne* (Newgrange) and the triskele seen in nature, are so well-known that a sacred three is synonymous with Ireland.

This leads to querying where the ‘three’ in gender roles may have been positioned in Irish societies and ancestral culture and what may have been lost through colonisation

and the subsequent rendering of ancestral cultural traditions through the lens of foreign languages and minds.

Erasure and omission: deliberate, incidental, subjective, even within peer reviewed scholarship, have continued throughout the centuries as archaeological finds have been written into the histories from hegemonic⁹ perspectives and ancestral lore and stories were subjected to censorship at the points of collection or translation. That these culturally vital stories survived at all is significant; as even “The Abbot of Druimenaig” was subjected to attempts at erasure, with one eighteenth century scholar leaving a handwritten margin note “*Bér úainn an sceol dona so siosana* ‘Take away from us this bad story here’” (Hillers 1995, p. 187, footnote 56).

The nuanced researches of *The Colloquy of Brigh Ambue* are underpinned by recognition of the Irish people and of Irish language as Indigenous to the land of *Éire*. In the spirit of this contemporary age and in the spirit of ancestral Irish traditions such as the *Féineachas* (Traditional Laws) and the Great Law of the *Senchus Mór* (Behon Law) literally *sen chai*¹⁰ *fis* “the old road to knowledge” (translated by O’ Donovan and O’Curry 1865, p. 33), includes recognition that the ancestral *Senchus* culture was *Sen cae fis na sen* “the old house of the knowledge of the ancients” and *tech fis na sen* “the house of the knowledge of the ancients” (Ibid.). The purpose of the *Senchus* was to ‘protect the people against injustice and against ignorance’ through a *living* code to draw guidance and sustenance from.

In reflecting upon ancestral Irish traditions there is recognition that anything that did not agree with the incoming colonising way of monotheism (i.e. ‘the rule of patrick’) in the early 5th century, was specifically left out as oral traditions of the *Senchus Mór* were recorded. This erased significant aspects of sacred culture from the texts (*Senchus Mor* 1865, pp. 16–17). What returns to view from accounts such as those collected by *The Irish Folklore Commission*, is that in everyday life, the oral traditions and customs continued to be held, passing on aspects of life and ancestral perspectives that were *not* codified into the texts.

The use of *erasure* as a political tool is seen presently in the twenty first century in regards to gender embodiment and diversity, with western democratic countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America reverting official definitions of gender back to an essentialist binary of male/female. Such erasure has been utilised throughout time as a tool to maintain a centralised, normative view and control, including from the 6th century through to the 11th century (Wade 2022). This earlier time period uncomfortably coincides with when ancestral Irish traditions such as the *Senchus Mór* and the *Auraceipt na n-éces* were formalised from the living *Bearla Feini* (Language of Poets) into written texts in Early Old and Middle Irish. These texts were transcribed and annotated by Latin-trained scribes and monks (from the 5th century onwards). The *Auraceipt na n-éces* in particular spanned centuries in writing (7th–11th centuries)¹¹, through successive generations of multiple scribal hands, incorporating sections and sentiments of Continental writings known at the time (edited by Calder 1917, p. xxxi). Brutally colonisation led to it becoming a “criminal offence to be found in possession of a document written in the Irish language”, illegal to possess copies of the original texts (Gorman 1913, p. 217). This led to manuscripts of the *Senchus Mór* being concealed in sections around Ireland for preservation, with dozens of manuscripts found and subsequently reconstituted into the Brehon Laws in the late 19th century. That the precious traditions of *Filidh* and *Bhreitheamh* have been preserved *at all* through centuries of dispossession and erasure evokes the potency of Irish ancestral cultural traditions and the legacies of Learned Families, with the reminder of the necessity of reconnecting threads.

The Necessity to Reconsider History from Diverse Perspectives

The reconsideration and repositioning of historical traditions utilising contemporary cultural studies approaches, queer theories and transgender studies

perspectives has scholarly precedents (Surtees and Dryer (eds.) 2020). Irish folklore and folk stories are being reconsidered from feminist and postmodern perspectives (Robitaille and Shokouhi 2017). Across archeological and anthropological disciplines scholars are now re-evaluating textual and artefactual evidence ‘deconstructing gender binaries’ (Ghisleni, Jordan, & Fiocoprile 2016; Frieman, Teather, & Morgan 2019; Rautman 2000; Haughton 2023). These considerations provide substantive scholarly critique of the binary conception of ancient world cultures. Scholars within these disciplines are now focusing specifically upon transgender perspectives (Black Trowel Collective 2021). The necessity to reconsider history as populated with diverse genders and sexualities was highlighted through reconsiderations of material culture in museum artefacts, in the groundbreaking work of Richard Parkinson in conjunction with the British Museum (2013, 2016).

Scholars are critiquing how the material remains of previous times, unearthed in excavations that simultaneously disrupt ancestral stone sites and burials, have been used to assign fixed binary genders to the builders of sites (always male), or to the occupants of tombs (men, women; male or female children). Intersex persons have been erased from the archaeological record in these processes (Black Trowel Collective 2021).

The discovery of specific objects at sites has been interpreted using a heteronormative gender scheme, for example a find of mirrors or beads has been used to signify women, swords or daggers to signify men. Haughton (2023) has explicitly stated that “In Ireland, I found little evidence for binary gender; and old theories, such as a link between metal and masculinity..., did not stand up to the evidence gathered in overview and in detail at (sites such as) Kilcroagh. Neither did the case studies suggest an important or rigid understanding of gender as binary.”

The focus of these scholars reconstructs inclusive and expansive gender histories: Parkinson (2013, 2016) provides an accessible overview of same-sex history across a broad range of world cultures evidenced through a re-evaluation of artefacts held in the British Museum collections; Rautmann (2000) provides space for a wide range of ancient cultures to be reassessed including Egypt and Sumeria; whilst Surtees and Dryer (2020) expand gender perspectives of the classical worlds of Greek and Roman antiquity. Reassessment of a “famous ‘elite’ burial from Egtved in Denmark, becomes a community's attempt to force a queer body to fit within the confines of binary expectation” (Frieman, Teather, & Morgan, cited in Haughton 2023, p. 161).

The recent work of Haughton (2023) specifically investigated the material remains from Irish and Scottish Bronze Age burials (c. 2500–1500 BC), questioning the gendered expectations that accompany such finds. These archaeologists have provided important spaces to deeply question the implicit hegemonic assumptions of binary gender and heteronormativity that have been overlaid onto archaeological discoveries, reified in commentaries and publications and accepted as ‘history’.

The archaeological record speaks in many (often contradictory) voices because past people were not homogenous, their experiences of the world not universal and their ways of navigating personal relationships, societal power dynamics and exogenous pressures were unique to their own experiences. (Black Trowel Collective 2021).

These scholarly works foreground the necessity to question the cisgendered¹², heteronormative¹³ and masculinist lens through which ancient cultures have been recorded and interpreted. The accepted hegemonic readings of history and *sacred histories* have led to assumptions about gender normativity and lack of diversity in the ancient world. In turn this has had immense implications for the theories and practises of Druidry, which reawakened from the antiquarian movements of the 18th century.

The ‘normalising of the binary’ as foundational to society everywhere, in all times, is an essentialist approach that does not stand up to scrutiny utilising non-hegemonic approaches. Parkinson (2016) reminds us that “desire leaves very few traces” in the

historical, archaeological records and that a re-reading of cultural artefacts is required that bridges times and assumptions about the lived practises of identification. The work of Haughton (2023) foregrounded that DNA analyses of human remains *cannot reveal* whether an individual lived a binary (as in male or female), nonbinary, or transgender identity. Nor can DNA analyses reveal the sexual orientation/s of a person in their lifetime.

Pause and consider this for a few moments. What would your burial tell the future about you? If you were buried with only a small selection of personal possessions, what would you choose to depict who you were in life? – and importantly – would these items reveal anything about your lived experiences of gender or your sexuality?

There has been a lack of critical reflection that archaeological finds do *not* reveal the *lived experience of gender for the individual*, or that the experiences of gender or sexuality may change over time. Ancestral cultures were populated with people living in complex times.

The contemporary relevance and necessity of continuing such questioning is foregrounded in the recent Irish educational project *An Foclóir Aiteach – The Queer Dictionary* (Union of Students in Ireland (2018–2024)). As a spiritual-cultural philosophy that spans times and places, this questioning must expand within Druidry.

The term ‘ancestral’ is used throughout this paper to denote a living cultural connection, epigenetically inscribed and inherited. It is based in respect and recognition and that “In recent times, Ireland has developed a reputation as something of a world leader on LGBT ¹⁴ rights, particularly with the introduction of marriage equality and our groundbreaking Gender Recognition Act (Keane 2018, italics in original omitted, endnote added).

Despite these achievements, there is a widespread lack of recognition of Ireland as having an *historical basis of recognition for gender expansive rights*, with publically available maps such as “A Map of Gender-Diverse Cultures” (Independent Television Service (ITVS) 2025) completely omitting not only Ireland, but the United Kingdom from the map, whilst identifying diverse genders throughout the world.

Recognition of the term *gender* to identify an individuals’ physical embodiment and the emotional, psychological and ontological aspects of lived experiences, accords with contemporary usage. To account for the perspectives of previous generations the term ‘sex’ is encountered in Irish archival historical materials to represent an individual’s physical gender embodiment. In oral traditions the term ‘sex’ is used within materials held by the *Irish Folklore Commission*. An important distinction must be noted that *genders* (historically called ‘sex’) and *sexualities* are different, though interconnected in life experience. The use of the term ‘sex’ in transcriptions from the *Irish Folklore Commission* does *not* refer to what we now call ‘sexuality’, these accounts are referring to what we now call genders. In this paper Third Gender also does not refer to sexualities, but to *gender identity*.

Cultural changes and the *language* to express these changes must be of the time it is lived. There is the opportunity to decolonise the mind through language. Recognition that language to speak and write about Irish experiences of gender was not available in the contemporary Irish language, led to the production of *An Foclóir Aiteach – The Queer Dictionary* (Union of Students in Ireland (USI)/Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI)/ BelongTo (2018–2021b)). This was developed to provide Irish Gaelic terminology with which to name and speak diverse gender and sexual identities, as “we believed that it was right that everyone would be able to recognise themselves in any language” (Union of Students in Ireland 2018–2021b, p. 2).

Language is foundational to the process of developing this fictocritical *Colloquy* and reconsiderations of primary source Irish historical cultural materials that range across time. This includes texts on Ogham dating to Early Old Irish and Middle Irish (circa 7th–11th centuries) and later 12th–14th centuries manuscript commentaries in the *Auraicept na n-éces* (edited by Calder 1917). The Poetic intention and oral traditions of these texts is encoded in the word ‘Ogham’: *Og-uaim* meaning “perfect alliteration” (*Auraicept*, BB 308.44, pp.

272–273; pp. 30–31, lines 396–395). The ancient laws of Ireland the *Senchus Mór* (translated by O’ Donovan and O’Curry, 1865) preserves the significant cultural role of *Bhreitheamh* (Brehon /Judges), naming Brigh Ambue amongst these distinguished ancestors. The poetic patterns of question and response and the cultural role of dialogue are recorded in texts such as *The Colloquy of the Two Sages (Imcallum in da Thurad)* (Celtic Literature Collective 2021).

To complement these historical textual materials, the invaluable resources of the *National Folklore Collection* is highlighted. Documented in the mid twentieth century the *Collection* preserves

...folklore recorded from across the 32 counties of Ireland, in both Irish and English. In recognition of the ongoing decline of the Irish language, and the likely loss of tradition associated with this process...consists of *verbatim* transcripts of field recordings” (The Dúchas Project 2021–).

To provide context to the discussions about Third Gender, transcriptions of relevant local oral histories held within the *Collection* (Ibid.) and reference to the oral literatures recorded as folklore and folk stories as repositories of ancestral practises and memories will be drawn upon.

The significant intrinsic cultural values of the *National Folklore Collection*, was recognised in 2017, when the United Nations added the *Collection* to the “Memory of the World” (Unesco 2021a).

Three Genders in Old Irish

The inception point of the central research question of this paper was motivated as a gender studies scholar, through reading a tract in the *Auraicept na n-éces* that “The language of the commentary is based in Old Irish usage. It explicitly recognises *three genders* in substantives and *pronouns*” (edited by Calder 1917, Introduction p. xxiv, italics added).

When reading text that asks the question “*Innsi tra cis lir innsi dochuisín la Feni*”/“Now as to genders how many are there with the Irish?” and answers “*A tri i ferinnsci baninnsci demhinsce lasin nGaidel*”/“Three of them, i.e., masculine, feminine and neuter gender with the Gael” (Ibid. pp. 40–41, lines 520–521), attention is engaged as to what *demhinsce* may have meant ancestrally, or to *Filidhecht*. Standard translations have offered ‘neuter’ for this word, also utilised to mean ‘neither’ (as in neither masculine nor feminine).

The terms, *mascul*, *femen*, and *neuter*, are obvious loanwords from Latin, but it is worth noting that the first two are derived *not* from *masculus* and *feminius* respectively, the terms which have a grammatical sense in Latin, but from *masculus* ‘male’ and *femina* ‘woman’ (Russell [1996], 1999, p. 204, italics added).¹⁵

An historically specific human female gender term for ‘woman’ is used here to translate the meaning of the Old Irish *baninnsci* in this text. Contextually ‘male’ as translation for *ferinnsci* can reasonably also be ascribed to the human gender. That these words refer to *physical genders and not simply grammatical structures* is a profound point, easily overlooked. Building upon this statement by Russell, the third term referred to in the text *demhinsce* could also relate to “something” alive, “akin to the Old Welsh word *dim*” (as etymology for *deimh*) (Ibid. p. 206). *Dim* is a word that holds a range of meanings in Welsh from affirmative to negative including “any; anything”, through to “nothing” (Majstro 2025). Using *dim* for bridging understanding of *demhinsce* raises a relevant issue that words with affirming meanings can (and do) change over time and with usage and it is the negative meanings that become reinforced, remembered and embedded in cultures. The pattern of negation developing in languages is called *Jesperens Cycle*. Obsolescence in language also leads to words disappearing from usage over time. Translations by scholars of *demhinsce*

solely as a grammatical term ‘neuter’, or ‘non-gender’ (Ahlqvist 1982, p. 49), or as ‘lifeless’, are problematic.

Comparing *demh* to *dim*, a word that can mean ‘something /any /anything’, with *demhinsce* as a word signifying neither ‘male’ nor ‘female’, opens up a spectrum of possibilities challenging embedded negations. *Demhinsce* is experientially translated in this *Colloquy* to mean “any/gender” as an alternative to translating the word solely in a negating context.¹⁶ Ascribed this way, *demhinsce* can be *any gender* beyond the binary of male/female, a contemporary recognition reinstating space where Third Gender existed within ancestral Irish culture.

Sky

The Old Irish word *demhinsce* is also written as *neamhinsce* in the *Auraicept* (line 521). According to scholars, *neamh* is a “corruption” of the word *dem-* (eDil s.v. 2013a). As *demhinsce* became identified with (and changed by) the word *neamhinsce* in texts, further meanings of *neamh* can be considered. *Neamh* is translated and used contextually in two distinct ways; as a negating prefix (‘in/un/less/non’) and as a noun (‘sky’, ‘heaven’) (Foras na Gaeilge 2013–2024a). From a druidic perspective this positions *neamh* as an *animate living realm* ‘Sky’. In modern Irish there is a continuing use of *neamh* as a prefix for a wide range of words that carry negating/irregular connotations. There are fifty examples in the *Teanglann.ie* dictionary. Whilst *neamhinsce* is not one of these words, having been lost to modern Irish through language obsolescence, *neamh* continues in modern Irish translation as one word for ‘sky’.

In Calder (1917) an example of how translation affects meaning and understanding is shown in the discussion of three genders “*A tri i-ferinnsci 7 baninnsci 7 demhinsce*” translated as “masculine/feminine/neuter”, whilst the same paragraph uses “*i ise in fear, isi in bhean, ised in neam*”/“he, the man; she, the woman; it, the heaven” (pp. 40–41, lines 521, 525, italics added).

Whilst the first two terms for gender “masculine/man” and “feminine/woman” remain, the term *demhinsce* loses all gender context in the translation, even though gender is the second part of the word *demh/insce*. Translation of *neam* without reference to the earlier word *demhinsce* is made in this section, in accord with nineteenth century views uses the word for “heaven”. A modern translation of *neam* may instead use the word ‘sky’, or ‘universe’, positioning *neam* as a living elemental realm (or a living realm beyond the sky). This is supported in the *Auraicept* through further sentences such as “*Nemh im talmain*”/ “*Neamh, heaven round earth*”, “*neamh im usce*”/ “*neamh, with reference to water*” (Calder 1917, pp. 100–101, lines 1295).¹⁷ *Neamh* is also used in related sentences such as ‘all beneath the sky’ (Ibid., Foras na Gaeilge).

Issues raised by these sentences centre upon why *demhinsce* is overlooked in the translations as a third gender term as highlighted earlier in the *Colloquy*, with use of an inadequate word “it” that completely erases gender. The further issue is why scholarship combines translations of terms deriving from actual genders of ‘male’ and ‘female’ (as per Russell [1996], 1999), failing to query into the term *demhinsce* beyond grammatical uses, or to provide any alternative physical translation for *demhinsce*.

The words used in this text “*Issé, isse, issed*” (translated as ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘it’ / ‘the heaven’) are archaic Irish terms “attributed to...early pre-Irish invaders of Ireland... the Maic Miled” (Russell [1996], 1999, p. 208, citing Calder 1917, pp. 116–117, lines 1493–1496). In this text the *Maic Miled* would be synonymous with the *Mac Mil*, or the Sons of Mil, invaders and settlers of Ireland at the time of the *Tuatha dé Danaan*. Histories place this migration/invasion at around 3,500 BC.

The first two words *ise/Issé* and *isi/isse* are clearly related to the later modern Irish words *sé* (‘he’) and *sí* (‘she’). The third word ‘*ised*’ or ‘*issed*’ seems strikingly similar to the modern Irish third person plural pronoun *siad / iad* (‘they’/‘them’). Whilst the first two

words have been translated as ‘male’ and female’, the third word ‘ised’ or ‘issed’ continues to evade translation as anything alive, or connected to the human and is again translated as ‘it’ (or ‘heaven’).

What if *demhinsce* (‘issed’) is a third person plural pronoun ‘they’/‘them’? It is noted that *demhinsce* is identified as a third gender word for “pronouns” in the *Auraicept*, but is then translated as ‘it’. Some insight into the intellectual resistance of scholars to ascribing to *demhinsce* the possibility of being a living word, attributable to human life, may be understood through the difficulties that are encountered by gender diverse people in the twenty first century to the personal use of a third person pronoun ‘they’/‘them’, as an alternative to the binary of being called ‘he’ or ‘she’. This leads to further questioning of how can Latin grammar effectively be imposed/overlaid upon the archaic Irish language, predating Latin by millennia and compounded with subsequent translation issues using the English language.

Translating the word *demh* or *neamh* as ‘it’ in conjunction with the words for ‘male’ and ‘female’ and also as ‘sky’ or ‘heaven’ (Calder, 1917, p. 41), or simply as the prefix ‘non’ (Ahlqvist 1982) creates a multiple problematic. The translation renders as ‘lifeless’ what may be an Old Irish reference to an actual living third gender designation and/or to what in ancestral Irish traditions and from a Druidic perspective is also an animate realm of the Sky, one of the three sacred realms of Life (Sky-Land-Sea).

Is there is possibility that the original *Filideacht* were poetically expressing life encompassing more than one meaning in using this word? Given the time period when translations were made in the early twentieth century, the mindset of scholars may not have been to seek a comparative word for the third gender *demhinsce*, in the way that there was simple ascription of *ferinnsce* and *baninnsce* incorporated into the text through the Latin ‘loanwords’ words ‘masculus’ (‘male’) and ‘femina’ (‘female’). Hegemonic reading and subjective transcription of material must be considered in the times in which texts are translated.

Reading/reinstating the Irish word *demhinsce* (or *neamhinsce*) to denote a third word in Old Irish for gender accords with cultural patterns of triplicity. Three decades ago linguistic scholar Russell bleakly stated about the word *demhinsce* “The possibility of an alternate native explanation apart from *deim* ‘dark’ and *dibeo* ‘not alive’...has not really been considered” ([1996], 1999, p. 204, italics added). This statement reifies the necessity for further enquiries, providing a additional motivation for this *Colloquy* and for considering a multiplicity of possibilities that may have been erased. The Irish language embeds multiple meanings for words spelt the same depending upon context, with a simple example including words such as *sé* (‘he’) and *sé* (the number 6). *Demhinsce* and *neamh + insce* (gender) may be seen as examples of Third Gender terms in Old Irish that both convey potential beyond ‘male’ *ferinnsce* or ‘female’ *baninnsce* that was lost through time, questioning whether recurrent translation of the words *demhinsce/neamhinsce* ossified Third Gender out of the language into non existence?

From the researches of this *Colloquy* applying an interdisciplinary methodology and twenty first century gender studies perspectives, an approach emerged that may offer an alternate reading in consideration of this passage. Building upon the suggestion by Russell, and allowing ‘the possibility of a native explanation’ to arise requires removing layers of colonising influences, to simply read and think about the ancestral Irish traditions ontologically as Indigenous to the land.

Reconsidering *demhinsce* from this perspective offers the potential for this to be an Early Old Irish term for an *actual* Third Gender that has been lost/erased/overlooked, in the way that the Latin translations for *ferinnsce* and *baninnsce* refer to constative genders of male/female (Russell [1996], 1999). The possibility of Third Gender *as* gender is presented. Once we begin considering *demhinsce* (or *neamhinsce*) as a word for ‘Sky’, ancestral cultural respect for three *living* sacred realms of Sky-Land-Sea *must* be taken into account. *The term*

cannot be considered as ‘lifeless’, or as ‘it’, when considered in context to the words for ‘male’ and ‘female’. As in the words for ‘man’ and ‘woman’, *demhinsce* may simultaneously be used as a grammatical term and be understood to refer to a living Third Gender. This requires thinking and acknowledging multiple perspectives.

Through cross-cultural reflection and transgender studies approaches further possibilities for translation of the term *demhinsce* into contemporary language open up. Use of the word *demh/neamh/inscne* may be comparable to a range of gender expansive terms including Nonbinary: *Neamh-dhénártha*, Genderqueer: *Inscne-aiteach*, Agender: *Gan inscne*, or the term *Neutrois* (‘neutral/three/third gender’) *Neodrach ó thaobh na hinscne de* (Union of Students in Ireland (USI) 2018–2024) as used by individuals who self-identify as ‘non-gendered’ (Nonbinary Wiki 2024).

Pointing to multiple definitions depending upon context, the word *demhinsce* may be compared to contemporary use of the asterisk* originating in Boolean search engine terminology, where adding the * at the end of a search term will present everything related to the term/indicating all possible meanings of the term that may not be specified. As an example, this is used at the end of the contemporary Third Gender word *trans** (Ford 2021, pp. 116–117), with *trans** including “...folks...who do not identify as the gender they were assigned at birth and/or are “queering”...gender expectations and assumptions” (Jones 2013). This includes folks who would use terms such as nonbinary, agender, or genderless and *third person pronouns* such as ‘they, them’ to identify their gender identity in conversation and writing.

Experiential interpretation of the term *demhinsce* as a similar ‘umbrella term’ for Third Gender that contains an expansive potential of gender possibilities beyond the binary of ‘male’ and ‘female’ is offered. Simultaneously this term bridges between the realms of existence and non-existence ontologically, offering the possibility of non-gender as recognised in contemporary terminology such as *Neutrois / Neodrach ó thaobh na hinscne de* used by individuals with a “gender identity that is neither male or female, but neutral” (Nonbinary Wiki 2024). *Neutrois* is strikingly similar to one grammatical interpretation of *neamhinsce* as ‘neuter/gender’. This further contextualises how *neamhinsce* may have referred to that which is *living*.

Viewed from these perspectives *demhinsce/neamhinsce* offer multiple ontological possibilities as terms from Early Old Irish for Third Gender that encompass *being beyond ‘male’ and ‘female’*. Multiple uses of these words as a noun and a pronoun, point to the necessity to reconsider what is recorded. In offering these reflections, the potential to expand meanings of language that bridges between times and places arises. To be kept in mind is that gender identity is personal and socio-cultural and that there is no attempt to superimpose onto any person’s gender identity an Early Old Irish word (or any word) that for some may have meanings of ‘nonbinary’ or ‘neutral’ gender; this point is highlighted in recognition that trans people may simply identify *as men, or as women*.

The use of words such as ‘it’ in the translation of the *Auraicept* for *demhinscne* renders this as an inanimate ‘lifeless’ pronoun, highlighting how grammatical patterns from Latin colonise translations of Early Old and Middle Irish. Consequential to contemporary accounts and to transgender studies is that the word ‘it’ is a dehumanising term that removes agency from an individual’s life. Historically such derogatory words have been used against transfolks. In the *Auraicept* there is a sense that Early Old Irish held living potential, that it was a bright palette. The “dissonance” (Engesland 2021, p. 483) in the text between the topics covered and the languages of Irish and Latin, have been highlighted by linguistic scholars in recent exegesis of the *Auraicept*. This has included the issue “that vernacular languages were held to *lack grammar rules unlike the classical languages*” (Ibid. p. 480, italics added). This heightens awareness of the potential difficulties in overlaying Latin grammar onto Old Irish. If the *Auraicept* text was “the product of a bilingual community” (Ibid.), this would (hopefully) point to awareness of the *cultural contexts* in the choice of

words by scribes fluent in both languages. From an ancestral cultural perspective the Poetic meanings that were embedded in the original spoken language of the *Bearla Feini* have undoubtedly become obscured through the use of Latin language ‘loanwords’ and grammatical rules to transcribe Indigenous Irish thought.

The *Auraicept* has 106 references to gender (pp. xxvi, xlvii, 1, 35, 41, 43, 45, 46, 47, 55, 63, 67, 69, 115, 125, 127, 133, 137, 140, 145, 147, 149, 151, 153, 157, 161, 164), centralising the role of gender *insce* to nouns and pronouns (edited by Calder 1917, Introduction p. xxii). From a linguistic point of view the use of grammatical gender to classify nouns is part of many extant (such as Latin) and modern (such as French or Spanish) languages. The Early Old Irish word for gender “innsci” (*Ibid.* p. 54) is also written as “inisci” and “indsci”¹⁸ (*Ibid.* p. 55). From this term and the grammatical practises of the *Auraicept*, during these researches a further word *Atriinnsci* to denote Third Gender was developed. Visually this word is reminiscent of an English language word ‘intrinsic’, defined as “being an extremely important and basic characteristic of a person or thing” (Cambridge Dictionary 2021); “valuable or interesting because of its basic nature or character” (Collins Dictionary 2021). These are definitions that aptly fit an ontological perspective of Third Gender.

Ancestral thinking processes, concepts and articulate words of *Filidh* are embedded within the original Irish code of law *Senchus Mór* and the Judgements of Poets, the Brehon. As a *Poet’s Primer* – a training manual in language skills for *Filidh* – the *Auraicept* is a text to be read with the heart of a Poet and the intelligence of a Scholar, an approach aspired to within the fictocritical methodology used within this *Colloquy*. An example of this is when the origin of Ogham is named with Fenius and “Fenius’ school”, named as “25 persons, the noblest” (edited by Calder 1917, p. 21). Upon close reading it is apparent that the ‘25 persons’ are the letters, vowels and semi-vowels (diphthongs) of the Ogham alphabet, anthropomorphised as masculine *persons* and substituted *place* names for the Ogham—and many of these persons/places are Near Eastern/Hebrew in origination. Similarly the words *ferinnsce*, *baninnsci*, *demhinsce* may be ascribed as three genders *and* also as utterances.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this *Colloquy* to analyse the multiple cultural layers presented within the *Auraicept* (and these include ancient Egyptian, Roman, Hebrew, Latin) it is critical to highlight the presence of multiple and parallel layers; textual and subtextual meanings. Engesland (2021, p. 478) discusses that one of the “preoccupations” of the text is to “demonstrate the superiority of Irish over the three sacred languages (Hebrew, Greek and especially Latin)”, without considering that Irish and the Ogham *are also sacred languages* used in the training of the *Filidh* (a central purpose of the *Auraicept*).

The subjectivities, training and varying periods of the numerous commentaries/ translations by multiple generations of scribes were embedded into the texts over the 7th–11th centuries, as Latin became a primary language of learning and scholarship throughout Europe. A thoughtful comparison of the *Auraicept* commentary, with original Ogham manuscripts presented (BB 311, BB 312, BB 313, BB 314, edited by Calder 1917, pp. 300–313), visually and philosophically ideate a range of cultural influences/differences and in the manuscripts these expand Ogham to African, Scandinavian and Viking inscriptions/forms. The translations and commentaries on the text in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also reveal the subjectivities of the times in which they were written. This *Colloquy* is also of the time it is written in the twenty first century, a time when decolonising ancestral traditions is foregrounded as a living scholarly concern.

If a cultural intention of the *Auraicept* is to train Poets who are empowered to perform complex roles within their clan communities, a clear rationale for continuing to add layers of language would be to update and refresh the training in each generation, whilst maintaining core elements *between* generations. This points to language as a living repository of the socio-cultural times in which it is spoken. A point similar to this was noted when *An Foclóir Aiteach – The Queer Dictionary* was launched:

Joe McHugh, Government Chief Whip, Minister for Gaeilge, An Gaeltacht and the Islands and Donegal TD, launched an *Foclóir Aiteach* at DCU, “It is important to keep the language alive and there’s something nice about bringing it from the bottom up. I think it’s very clever, an *cliste*, way of doing it,” the minister said. “You are adding to the language, strengthening it. This kind of initiative does keep the language alive, and close to the heart. (Keane 2018, italics in original).

Of significant interest is that *An Foclóir Aiteach – The Queer Dictionary* used a process of “translating terminology into the Irish language” (Keane 2018). This is a different approach than the path taken in this *Colloquy*, of experientially envisioning Third Gender from *within* ancestral Irish thought and cultural artefacts. In this, self-reflexive consideration of the word *Atriinnsci*, experientially developed during these researches from contemplations on the *Auraiccept*, seems to be close in spirit to the words subsequently found in *The Queer Dictionary* in modern Irish for Third Gender *Tríú Inscne*. In the word *Atrinnsce*, use of the letter ‘A’ at the start may correspond to an Irish grammatical practise¹⁹ that “uses a gender-neutral possessive pronoun ‘a’...” (Nic Fhlannchadha, Hickey 2021. p. 7). This could render the word *Atriinnsci* as a gender neutral, nonbinary term.²⁰

An Foclóir Aiteach, *The Queer Dictionary*, provides a compelling voice for contemporary gender and sexual diversity in the Irish language. Of the over 100 words available, there are terms including for Queer: *Aiteach*, Third Gender: *Tríú Inscne*, Trans: *Tras* and Transgender: *Trasinscneach*; Genderqueer: *Inscne-aiteach* and for Two Spirit: *Dhá-Anamúil* or *Dé-anamúil* which literally means “Two”, “Lively, Spirited” (*Foras na Gaeilge* (2013–2024b, 2013–2024c), in addition to the gender terms Nonbinary: *Neamh-dhénártha*, Genderqueer: *Inscne-aiteach*, Agender: *Gan inscne* and *Neutrois* (‘neutral/three/third gender’) *Neodrach ó thaobh na hinscne de* (Union of Students in Ireland (USI) 2018–2024).

A significant point providing cultural continuity in these terms is that the word for gender *inscne*, has remained in use from Early Old Irish to the twenty first century and that *neamh* is used in conjunction with the gender term for nonbinary individuals. This strengthens and supports the possibility suggested in this *Colloquy* that *demhinscne* was referring to an actual gender expression that evaded translation (or was mistranslated) and subsequently lost through language obsolescence or erased from meaning, when Latin was used to overlay Early Old Irish.

The Queer Dictionary has eloquently embedded Third Gender into the contemporary Irish vocabulary. This provides a meaningful pattern for current and future generations and also provides language that can be incorporated into *Druidic thought and practises*. Realising that nothing is born in a vacuum, attention turns to how the concept of Third Gender has appeared in this time. Or could this be considered as a ‘reappearance’ of an epigenetic cultural trait/language that was suppressed through colonising thought?

There is respectful recognition that for First Nations ‘Two Spirit’ is a cultural term that holds deep meaning and may be denoted using language specific to each Tribe or Clan, originating with Indigenous peoples in territories now known as the USA. Within these cultural traditions there are concepts for lived genders that simply do not exist within the English language such as the Navajo word *nádleehí* in a system that embraces four genders (Epple 1998; Estrada 2011). Such names are bestowed with honour, used only by persons of that Tribe and carry specific cultural obligations and responsibilities in regards to fire and water (Ford 2021, p. 113).

The dual elemental orientation of Two Spirit people holds meaning for *Druidic thought and practises*. Providing an Irish equivalent for this term is empowering to those who identify as Two Spirit and in discussions about Two Spirit people. The sacred cultural role of Two Spirit provides a point of deep reflection to the Irish cultural patterns of thinking, ancestrally based in ‘threes’. This is accompanied with profound recognition of the central sacred cultural roles of fire (including as hearth, *tinne* and forge) and water (in sacred wells, springs and forge-water) within Irish ancestral traditions of enduring

significance to modern Druidry. For Bards, Ovates or Druids who identify as Two Spirit/Third Gender, the sacred lore of fire/water is eloquently preserved in the ceremonial cycle of the Irish triple Bride, central to this *Colloquy*.

Methodology

The *Colloquy* utilises an interdisciplinary methodology, engaging with place and time, of journeying the land, of rethinking historical textual materials, engaging cultural studies approaches, theories from queer, trans and gender studies and fictocritical writing.

Through use of fictocritical writing (Muecke 2002; Flavell 2004; Gibbs 2005; Haas 2017), an *experiential account* of Third Gender developed within this project as a fluid *Colloquy* between times, places and spaces. This draws upon the historical patterns of dialogue and response and of alliteration, including the use of question and answer between students and teachers and between poets. This pattern of question (or challenge) and response is preserved in the *Auraicept*, the *Senchus Mór* and texts such as *The Colloquy of the Two Sages*. In these texts the authors and speakers are presented in dynamic exchanges of knowledge. The exchanges move between ancestral forms of knowledge and stories (often referred to as ‘myth’ or ‘legend’) and didactic forms of knowledge such as grammar and sentence construction. Whilst the *Auraicept* focuses on teaching the skilled class of professional Poets language skills, the *Senchus Mór* focuses on use of these skills in speaking judgements, providing a comprehensive land-based legal system for the people based upon restorative justice. In the *Imcallum in da Thurad* there is an example of how the language skills of Poets and legal rights merge.

Fictocritical writing embeds *self-reflexivity* as a creative practice, that “must...focus on risking the self” (Flavell 2004, p. 256). This provides a methodological space to incorporate autoethnographic writing within the research text. This is a postmodern and poststructuralist approach “...between genre subversion and marginalised speaking positions” (Haas 2017, p. 6). In these processes, the established Irish literary sources are the genre of texts that are respectfully ‘subverted’ through the ‘speaking positions’ of queer and trans theory. In this process the historically privileged male speaking positions are repositioned by identifying the voice of the female *Breitheamh* (Brehon) Brigh Ambue and my autoethnographic voice as a twenty first century genderqueer Druid scholar. In this context, a performative postmodern reading of ancestral Irish texts through the use of fictocriticism may not be as out of place (or time) as it may initially appear. Surprisingly the *Auraicept* alludes to this form and style of writing, rhetorically asking “what is text and what is commentary” (edited by Calder 1917, p. xxiii).

In the *Colloquy* use of the term ‘me’ by Brigh Ambue is an Irish word without the diacritical (*fada*) literally ‘I’/‘me’ (1st Person Singular, pronoun)(Foras na Gaeilge 2013–2024d), *mé* is a word that is also used as the subject of a verb/action.

When Brigh Ambue as the senior cultural figure enters the *Colloquy*, identified by the term *forme* the addition of the Irish word *for* alters the grammatical form of ‘me’ and could be interpreted as a compound of the prefix *for* meaning “Over, superior, super-; outer, external; great...” (Foras na Gaeilge 2013–2024e) and *me* (literally ‘I’/‘me’). This is a point of emphasis, establishing the position of the *Breitheamh* in respect to the *Colloquy* and could also be read in terms of English, literally as ‘forme’ (i.e. for Brigh). In the English language ‘me’ is also a pronoun denoting the person speaking.²¹

Significantly the *Auraicept* also lacks diacritical marks throughout the text. This is synchronous with the early origins of the lessons in the *Primer*, with Gaelic letters used throughout the texts of the *Senchus Mór*. In oral cultures sound is conveyed with differences in meaning enunciated, visibly supported through body posture and physical gestures of the face and hands. When oral culture moves to written forms, words spelt with the same

letters require to be written with visual cues to indicate differences in pronunciation (and in meaning). There is evidence that Irish scribes began adding notations (diacritical marks known as *fada*)²² to the written language from the 7th century on, following external cultural influences (Saenger 1997, p. 55). The processes of colonisation continued into the twentieth century, when Gaelic typefont was officially replaced by English letters.²³

Foundational to all discourses is that the author/speaker are clearly positioned within the text. This is presented through a delivery/recitation of the “Time, place, person and cause of writing” in the *Auraicept* (edited by Calder 1917, p. xxxiii). This presentation format of *Place* (location of authoring), *Time* (linked to known events/personnages), *Person* (naming their genealogy, generally patrilineal), *Cause* (a clear statement of intention in the utterance) is seen in numerous sections of the text. Examples of this practice include in naming the origins of the Gaelic language and of the origins of the *Auraicept* (edited by Calder 1917, pp. 5, 7). Such a statement is not dissimilar in intention to the writing of an author–researcher Positionality statement, foundational to research in Cultural Studies. The ancestral Irish practise of naming “Time, place, person and cause of writing” (Ibid.) has been followed within this *Colloquy*.

The sense of the original conveys that once the speaker had presented the meaning, the hearer understood what was to follow²⁴, there was no need to repeat the meaning this is of significance in the fictocritical writing of this *Colloquy*. There is a circular style and format to the text, where critical interpretation and the poetic are combined. In such uses *Foghar* (sound, sound of speech) (Foras na Gaelige 2013–2024f) and the repetitive pattern of the alliterative sounds that follow creates and perpetuates momentum, interiorising language *within the hearer*.

A similar experience takes place with reading, the mind conveying words as written sounds encoding meanings. Repetition of sound is a superbly effective mnemonic device. Patterns and rhymes are at the basis of folk stories and the remnants of these are in children’s rhymes and verses. The rigorous program of learning for *Filidh* and the requirement to memorise vast sequences of cultural history, stories and genealogies, within an oral culture of story telling and presenting judgements in Poetic verse “*breathaibh nemedh*” (edited by Calder 1912, p. 100, line 1298), support the effectiveness of tools such as alliteration.

Recognition of the issues in translation from the oral culture language of the *Filidh* to old Gaelic, then to English extends to the *Senchus Mór* and were highlighted in 1894 by Lawrence Ginnell, in a time prior to the translation of the *Auraicept*. Ginnell states the original language of the *Law* was *Bearla Feini* ‘old classical Gaelic, the language of the *Filidhecht*’ (Library of Ireland 2005–2020a). As one example of mistranslation, the lowest form of land payment in the *Senchus Mór*, the “*ciss*”, was incorrectly translated as “rent” in English, when the meaning is closer to *tribute* to the Clan Chieftain, paid by every clansman in regards to land that he (or she) lived on/utilised (Library Ireland 2005–2020b). This highlights how cultural subjectivities, particularly colonising perspectives, impact interpretation/s of a subject. This bears directly upon considerations of how/why Third Gender may have been rendered invisible/erased/overlooked/misinterpreted as colonising thought and language processes overtook ancestral ways.

The *Colloquy* is a living text. Throughout this dialogue, autoethnographically positioned as a petitioner–student, I respectfully approach and petition Brigh Ambue for wisdom on the role of genders. Enfold the old writings as they speak to the heart.

Brightness of Judgement

Brigh Ambue holds a high cultural status in ancestral Irish history and is a female *Bhreitheamh* (Brehon) renowned for her ethical and just judgements, preserved in the *Auraicept* (edited by Calder 1917, p. 19, 23) as a “female author of wisdom and prudence

among the men of Eriu. From her is named Briathra, Brighi²⁵, &c” (Ibid. p. 23) and in the *Senchus Mór* renowned as “a female author of judgements” (translated by O’ Donovan and O’Curry, 1865, pp. 19, 23, 310). Brigh Ambue, daughter of *Sencha*, is literally the Daughter of Law/Knowledge, emerging from an hereditary Learned family of distinguished women honoured with the intergenerational name/title *Brigh*. The *Senchus Mór* (Ibid.) preserves genealogical details of this distinguished family of female *Bhreitheamh*, naming three women with this first name/title: “Brigh, the female Brewy, the mother of Sencha, and Brigh Brethach²⁶, his wife. As decided by Brigh Briug, i.e. the female author of the men of Erin, i.e. full judging” (Ibid. pp. 154, 155). In Gaelic these names are spelt ‘*Brig ban Briugarb / Brig Bretac / Brig Briugaib*’ (Ibid. p. 154).²⁷ As a *Bhreitheamh*, Brigh Ambue would have been trained in *Filidheacht* and a Druid.

The naming of Brigh Ambue within the histories is immensely important from the perspectives of enquiry about gender roles in ancestral Irish society. *Brigh* provides evidence that women were within the trained and Learned classes of ancestral Ireland and served their communities in distinguished and respected roles, as *Filidh* (Poets) and *Bhreitheamh* (Brehon /Judges).²⁸ Such knowledge provides a counterpoint to the almost monumental positioning of men in context to the histories and writings, not only as the authors and speakers of wide renown as Poets and Judges, but as the scholars translating the ancient texts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The potency of Brigh, as personal identification and as a title is suggested by her name, which holds the etymology of *Brí* “strength, vigour” (Foras Gaelige 2013–2024g) and “power” (Thompson 2014). Brigh Ambue is translated to mean “Brigit of the Cowless” (Thompson 2014). ‘Ambue’ is very significant, given the central role and status of cattle in ancestral Irish *túath* socio-cultural economy. The Cow *bó*, especially milk cows *bleachtach* (Foras na Gaelige 2013–2024h) were among the traditional compensatory animals in the *Senchus* (Brehon Law) and foregrounded in the specified payments to *Filidh* in training²⁹ as preserved in the *Auraicept* (edited by Calder 1917, pp. xx).

The designation ‘Ambue’, that is ‘cow-less’, means that a person designated this way existed outside the protection of the ancestral legal system, was “worth no cows/non-native, person outside the *túath*, one without possessions, without legal connections” (eDil 2013b). This is a person without access to resources and sustenance. Gerald Kelly (2014) translates ‘Ambue’ as “non-person” further defining the “status under law” of the Ambue as unprotected, “i.e. a Gael could wound or kill them without having to pay *éaic*” (that is, without needing to pay the compensation accorded to each person under ancestral Irish law based upon rank). Clearly an hereditary *Bhreitheamh* such as Brigh Ambue was not without legal status or ‘cowless’. This suggests that one of the cultural functions of Brigh Ambue was to advocate for the disenfranchised, those who were ‘cowless’, that is, ‘landless’ “a class of people with no property” (Thompson 2014), rent-paying, including persons who were non-native (foreigners), and who had either not been given legal rights within *Senchus Mór* (Brehon Law), or whose rights had been removed (as in subject people).

The Ambue have also been described as returning “outlaw Fian warriors”, that required purification and reintegration into the clan (Lupus 2011; Thomspson 2014). In acknowledging preexisting clan kinship affiliation for the warriors, it is becomes apparent that the designation of these Fianna as ‘Ambue’ would have been temporary, seasonal, or age-based.³⁰ It is to be noted that in the *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, Fionn is out hunting with his Fianna, before they leave and he falls asleep on the hill with only one warrior to stand guard. Fianna were an elite rank of warriors sourced from within specific tribes/families, educated as *Filidh* as a prerequisite prior to becoming warriors and living in their communities during the winter months.

The designation of ‘Ambue’ could also have been applied to persons whose legal rights/status had been lost or removed, whether temporarily or permanently (for example breaching a law and not paying the *éaic*). In this context a *Breitheamh* such as Brigh Ambue

would have been responsible for making judgements on reinstating their legal status and performing the ritual purifications enabling reintegration into their tribes. Whilst this is a role that directly aligns with Imbolc, the ceremonial purification of ‘cattle’ that took place at Samhain, could also usefully have been a time for the ceremonial purification of the returning warriors before they were housed for the winter with local families.

Highly prized, physically restorative and symbolically potent products of the cow milk and butter were used in the purifications of warriors.³¹ Sacred to the lore of Bride and to *Imbolc* (February 1st Northern Hemisphere/ August 1st Southern Hemisphere), this is a festival named for the *Im* (‘butter’) and *bó* (‘cow’); also for the *Im* (‘butter’) *bolc/bolg* (‘belly/bag’) – a leather bag used to churn butter, or perhaps even simply referring to ‘in the belly’, the process of ingesting the fresh milk products of Spring at this time. The centrality of milk as sacred to Bride is embedded in the name of *Imbolc* going back through ancestral times and earlier forms of the Festival name as *Oimelc*, directly connected to the spring season of milking commencing (eDil 2013c). Later forms of this festival have also derived from etymology connected to milk including *Óimelg/ommlegg* (Ewes’/Sheeps’ Milk). In the ceremonial use of milk products or ‘white meat’ *bánbhia* (Foras na Gaeilge 2013–2024i) there is tonic for body, mind and spirit.³²

From the histories it becomes clearer that the designation ‘Ambue’ was applied to multiple categories of disenfranchised people across generations of time. In contemporary society, the ‘Ambue’ would equate to all those who have been excluded or minoritised, who have been (or continue to be) placed outside the structures and/or protections of society. That people of diverse genders and sexualities have been – and continue to be – the subject of vilification and prohibition in many places in the world, with ongoing restriction of rights in even western democratic countries, provides a rationale for embracing Brigh Ambue as a Patron of Justice within Druidry for gender-based tribes.

This returns thoughts to the significance of Brigh Ambue as an historical personage, who in one account is married to *Cú Chulainn* the preeminent Ulster warrior hero. This places Brigh Ambue in the time period of the 1st century BC, when *Filidheacht* and *Breitheamh* lore was centralised, around 700 years before compiling/writing of the *Auraceipt* began in the 7th century. Connected to the Hound (through his name) *Cú Chulainn* died after violating his *geasa* (taboo) to never eat the flesh of a dog. In the *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, Fionn accompanied by two great hounds, enters the House of Conán.

Cú Chulainn (Cuchulain), ‘Culann’s Hound,’ is mentioned here, as *Cú* (Hound) was a “common designation for a warrior” (O hOgain 1991, p. 131) and Lupus (2011) suggests that the ‘outlaw warrior Fiana’, were also known as ‘wolves’, an interchangeable term for a dog/hound. *Cú Chulainn* was named after killing the impressive dog that guarded the Smith Culann who was his tutor. This places *Cú Chulainn* in the sacred cycle connected to Bride’s lore, as Patroness of Smithcraft (and of Smiths), with warriors using the weapons forged. In addition to being a person/personal name, O hOgain (1991, pp. 131–138) suggests that this was also a term denoting a class of warriors, that is ‘Hounds (*Cú*) of *Culann*’, an ancestral Smith God who forged chariots called *cul*, or *culu* in archaic Irish (eDIL 2013d). Culan is married to Bride as Solar Goddess, Patron of Smithcraft, upon whom he is dependent for the sacred Flame of the Forge, forming a sacred/ceremonial cycle of lore.

The Dog (Hound)/Wolf are totemic transformations in the lore of warriors and significant to the cycle of the Triple Bride and to Brigh Ambue. In connection to the subsequent death of *Cú Chulainn* and violation of the clan totem the *Cú*, Brigh Ambue appears in Old Irish stories fulfilling a role similar to a Goddess of Justice. In two accounts, Brigh is connected to the deaths of men who violate their personal *geasa* (taboos), that is, the hosteler Blai and Cuchulain.

There are profound intergenerational links between these cycles of Fianna; Bride and Brigh Ambue; and stories including the *Feis Tighe Chonáin* and the account by Fionn of

the ‘man who lived alternate years as a woman’. Such transformations and potentiality for Third Gender resonate deeply in the twenty first century. The interconnection between the Irish historical legacy of the warrior, masculinity and the Wolf has been integrated into contemporary transmasculine gender identity for some trans men (Wolf 2025).

Throughout these cycles, Brigh Ambue holds a direct kinship to the Clan Goddess Bride (or Bridget in later times), a Goddess of creativity, Patron of Fire Arts, of the Word and Sword, of Wordcraft and Smithcraft and of life-giving waters. The role of Brigh in relation to the Ambue invoked three primary attributes of the Clan Goddess Bride, that is, of *protection; healing and renewal* (early Spring); and of *purification* (life-giving fluids, milk and rain). Fire is central to understanding Bride. A potent cultural practice is the enduring legacy of the perpetual fire of Bride that peacefully maintained at *Cill Dara* (Kildare/ Church of the Oak) by female Druids.

As a *Breitheamh* named for strength and vitality, connected to the living fires of creativity, of forge and inspiration and of justice, Brigh Ambue is the cultural embodiment of Bride in the human sphere. With the potency of the Word and Sword comes a living legacy of connection to justice; as both word and sword can be used as tools *and* weapons; of protection/peace *and* of warriors and war. The *Filidh* and *Breitheamh* were skilled in the art of peacemaking. The *Bretha Brígi Ambue* or “The Judgments of Brig Ambue” was an ancestral pattern of justice, called upon by Irish Judges into the medieval period. The name of Brigh Ambue was called upon when a law was considered unfair, or new laws required to be made (Thompson 2014).

There is further potency and reflection in “Brigit’s title as the golden-haired Bride of the Kine. She may originally have had the power to *become* a cow, and she was often portrayed in a cow’s company” (Dames 1992, p. 256). In this capacity, empowered by and representative of the Triple Goddess Bride, Brigh Ambue *embodied* the sacred Cow bringing the light and warmth of the sun and the power and authority of the sacred law/lore to the ‘cowless’, those in need of restorative healing and recuperative justice.

Thinking about Bride *as* Cow, *as* ‘golden-haired’ in relation to the ancestral Irish quarter day Festival of Imbolc (February 1st) leads to cross-cultural reflection, including where practises centralising sacred cattle/cows continue to be documented. A powerful example of the sacred and ceremonial role of cattle is preserved with the Masai in Kenya, who continue to count their wealth in cattle, use an age-based structure for young male warriors who live apart from the tribe and in the use of milk in ceremonial purification and blessing of warriors (a fine mist of cow’s milk is sprayed over the warriors’ heads during rites). Cross-cultural examples such as this can be productively cited to refocus our contemporary understanding of ancestral Irish thought and clann practises, as cultures that flourished in parallel time periods.

Significantly, Egypt located in the North-East of Africa and Kenya in the East of Africa (as two examples) provides meaningful reference points in consideration of the ancestral Irish texts and cultural practices.³³ The *Auraicept* (edited by Calder 1917) preserves multiple references to Africa and to Egypt (Ibid. pp. xxxiii, 3, 19, 83, 313) including in stating the origins of the Gaedel: “Query, in what land was Gaedel born? Not hard. In Egypt” (Ibid, p. 3). The ancestral connections of the Gaelic tribes to Egypt (whether literal and/or literary) are also preserved through the ‘marriage of Scota Daughter of Pharaoh to Nel, son of Fenius’, one of the named Persons (authors) of the *Auraicept* (Ibid. 1917, pp. 136-137).

As a living pattern of ancestral wisdom and inspiration, in contemporary contexts Brigh Ambue is regarded as a Patron of Justice and social activism, as “the daughter of Tradition is the willingness to challenge Tradition in the name of justice” (Thompson 2014) and an Irish cultural figure that provides a source of gender empowerment.

In contemporary terms Brigh may be considered in the position of an eminent distinguished Judge and feminist legal scholar.

Changing Forms

Ubiquitous within Irish legends, lore and tales are accounts of changing forms. Irish ancestors embedded the fluidic cyclical nature of life into their thinking and customs. Widely known incantations such as the Poem/Song of Amhergin, the first Druid to step foot upon *Éire*, *Am gáeth I m-muir/I am Wind of Sea* ³⁴ encode shifting between the three realms and beings of Sky-Land-Sea. On one level this Poem is a dynamic statement of the oneness of life, an evocation of the animate living Spirits of *Éire* into being. On another level, this is a personal statement by Amerghin of identification with the sources of life and the ability of moving between forms in a limitless cycle. Amhergin transforms into ‘Wave on Ocean’, ‘Lake in Pool’, ‘Wind’, ‘Ox’, ‘Salmon’, ‘Mountain’, to weapons ‘Spear’, and into thought processes as ‘Fire in Head’.

Shifting between species and realms leads to consideration of *what happens to gender amidst transformations such as these* in ancestral Irish lore? Shifting between waves and wind and forms of cattle and fish does not imply that a constative binary (male or female) form of gender is embodied or retained throughout any/all of the transformations. Do transformations in ancestral traditions such as this Poetic invocation suggest something about the perspectives on *shifting* in ancestral Irish cultural thought? For example, is the ability to change between forms suggestive of an ontological third space?

That Amhergin arrived by boat to *Éire* and shifted into Poetic utterance and transformations of forms as he stepped foot upon the land is of profound significance. Ancestral story-telling traditions enfolding the narrative of transformation, or changing forms, particularly between human and other-than-human-species, are widely used in Irish ‘Wonder Tales’ (O hOgain 1991, pp. 421–426). There are also numerous stories of ‘shifting’ and specifically of “The Shift of Sex” (Ready 2021), of gender transformation, referred to in this paper as Third Gender. These accounts have continued within the Gaelic oral storytelling traditions of both Ireland and Scotland, including stories that were not documented outside Scotland until late twentieth century scholarship.³⁵

Two types of story close in narratives of relevance to this *Colloquy* on Third Gender have been located within the Irish tradition. Discussed in Hillers (1995), these are known as “The Man Who Had No Story” (pp. 180–181), which is a story of gender transformation during a boat trip between Scotland and Ireland and “Pay Me For My Story” (Ibid. p. 182), where the ‘payment (for a pipe) turns out to be a blessing’; “Twenty four versions of this story have been recorded, two of which are from Scotland...hardly any have been published” (Ibid. footnote 31).

In “The Man Who Had No Story” it is the request of the host for a story to be told that *leads to a journey to gain a story to tell*, during this ‘*a man turns into a woman* on a boat trip to Ireland’ (Hillers 1995, pp. 180–181, italics added). Whilst in Ireland *she* ‘meets a young man who falls in love with her, they marry and have children’, *turning back into a man* ‘on a boat trip back to Scotland’ (Ibid.).

Three key motifs in this story of ‘shifting’: of a boat journey, of water and of landing upon Ireland, are shared with the Song of Amhergin. This suggests that ‘to shift’ or transform—whether between species or genders—is a journey, fluidic, that has a destination. In contemporary accounts of trans lives, ‘journey’, ‘movement’ and ‘migration’ narratives are foregrounded (Cotton 2011). This makes the reading of Irish and Scottish gender transformative ‘journey’ and ‘migration’ stories remarkably recognisable from contemporary experiences and postmodern perspectives. Movement ‘between’ was well-known in ancestral Ireland. There was a migration of people and of stories between Alba (Scotland) and North *Éire* (Ireland) and also from *Éire* to Alba and a movement between worlds experienced at times such as Samhain. Recognition of shared traditions is evidenced

through the work of the *Irish Folklore Commission* that extended collection of stories to Scotland.

Reconnecting shared patterns between diverse Gaelic storytelling traditions assists in repositioning contemporary thinking about ancestral Irish cultural traditions. Shifting between species, and shifting between genders are *not* completely separate stories. Hillers (1995) identified “In ten Irish versions a distinct subpattern emerges in which the hero *not only changes species, but gender* (p. 183, italics added). In a version of the story type of “Payment for Services” (Ibid. pp. 182-183) from **Mayo**, it is offering ‘a blessing upon the dead’ that releases a man from the transformations of species *and* gender he has undergone; having been transformed into a white gelding, a hare and an old crow.

In another version of this story from **Dingle** (Ibid. pp. 183-185) a man is transformed into a mare (that subsequently has three foals); then into a woman (who bears three sons), then finally into a crow (that has three fledglings), before transforming back to a man, *after offering the ‘payment’* in the form of a blessing upon the dead. The outcome of this story is that the man now has three boons: of three horses, three sons and three crows as he looks for a wife. Hillers’ calls this a “riddle motif”, for it is now “three men on three horses looking for a *wife for their mother.*” (Ibid. p. 186, italics added).

Place, time and elemental realms provide keys to understanding ancestral Irish patterns of thinking and where/how Third Gender was accounted: “The Rennes Dindesenchas mentions three daughters of Daire Léithe, Doe, Caechne and Fadat, who were turned into men when *bathing in a lake*” (Hillers 1995, p. 193, footnote 23, italics added). Further stories of a girl changing into a boy through the *use of water* continue into the ecclesiastical period, when through the ‘miracle of a saint and baptism’ around the mid 6th century in Antrim, a girl child is transformed to a male child to provide a needed son for a King.³⁶ In “The Abbot of Druimenaig”, through falling asleep on hill at dusk without recognition of sacred place/time/ancestral *sidhe* inhabitants, the abbot transgresses the sacred and is transformed through magic from male to female.

A story of gender transformation titled *Ciapógai an Aistir Aistigh* is told by the renowned **Donegal Seanchai** Anna Nic an Luain in *Síscéalta Ó Thír Chonaill /Fairy legends from Donegal* (Ó hEochaidh [1956], 1977, #120, pp. 286-291).³⁷ The title of the story translates to mean “The Marvelous Journey Illusion”³⁸, and begins when a man had planted corn, but was slow to harvest the crop and needing help, called for men to arrive on Saturday. Delayed, the men did not arrive until Monday and as no bread nor water were prepared to feed them, necessitated going to a nearby stream

So the man went out, put the pail under the flow and stood while it was filling.

When he looked down the sea was rising up towards him and on it the prettiest little boat he had ever seen. There was a little old red-haired man sitting in the stern of the boat: he was dressed in speckled clothes and juggling three little yellow balls. (Ó hEochaidh [1956], 1977, #120, p. 287)

The boat approached and hitting his shins, the man kicked the boat; this contact led to the man being transported into the boat and crossing the sea to a different place. Coming ashore he finds himself transformed, wearing women’s clothes. Approaching a nearby house, ‘he’ is greeted as a woman by a young boy and girl who “asked if ‘she’ would like to go with them” to a wake nearby in town for a “woman that had died in childbirth” and “he” replied that he would (Ibid.).

The gender shifting in this opening scene of the story is significant as it involves contact with two sources of water: fresh water from a stream in the *pail of water* being collected for the men coming to help with the harvest and salt water in the rising *waves of the sea*. The language of the story also shifts between identifying the man, now seen by onlookers as a woman, but as continuing to identify as ‘he’ when replying to the children.

At the wake for the woman who died in childbirth, her infant cries inconsolably, until handed to the “strange woman” (Ibid. p 289). In this passage the original words by

Anna Nic an Luain are “*bhean’ choimthíoch*” (Ibid. p. 288, line 2) conveying the meaning of a female ‘stranger’ or ‘foreigner’ (Foras na Gaeilge 2013–2024j). The translation of this into English as “strange woman” renders the gender transformation in a different tone than the original. The following morning, the child is placed into the care of the visiting woman, after the “man of the house” speaks what can be interpreted as a type of spell over her stating that “she was not to leave without the child” (Ibid. p. 289). This deepens the gender transformation that is being experienced, leading to ‘the man forgetting about his own home and only wanting to care for the child’. Of significance to stories shared in this genre such as “The Abbot of Druimenaig”, is the temporal duration of the journey: “He stayed there until the girl was seven years old” (Ibid. p. 289). The journey of seven years is recognisable as a *sí* encounter. Similarly, both these stories fit within a motif category utilised by scholars for classification of folktales and stories of “D12 Transformation: man to woman” (Thompson [1955–1958], 2016, p. 505).

The use of the masculine pronoun *sé* / ‘he’ for the gender transformed individual, who is presenting as and being accepted by others in the community as *a woman* at the wake, requires a nuanced view of gender within ancestral Irish cultural traditions. Gender is a fluidic embodiment that changes in place, space and time and is subject to magic, to ‘enchantment’. In one place an individual may embody one gender, in another place and time, embody another gender and these times may overlap.

In *Ciaþógáí an Aistir Aistigh* it not until one day thinking of home when walking with the child “by the *seaside* and a great loneliness came over him” (Ibid. p. 289, italics added), that the return journey is enabled. The boat reappears and repeating what had initially happened, as the boat approaches he kicks it; in making contact both adult and child are taken into the boat and *transported back to the pail of water under the stream*. Taking the pail into the house, the maid comments that he has taken a while to collect the water. It is then that the realisation of a ‘strange’ experience comes over the man. After two sleepless nights, an elderly local woman interprets the man’s journey:

You never moved from the place you were standing!..You thought you did, but you were under enchantment, as many others have been. The airy host came upon you...Go back home now and never mention their name without saying that you shun their company, and they will never trouble you again! (Ibid. p. 291).

Whilst the ending of this story could be interpreted as presenting a negative view towards who had been encountered and what had occurred, with the advice to “never mention their name without saying that you shun their company”, it is to be noted that encounters with ancestral beings in Irish stories are frequently hedged with warnings, especially around the speaking of the word, or name, with alternate names used such as ‘The Good People’ to avoid direct reference to *sí* beings. This may be interpreted at the most primal level as expressing the concerns of each generation to respect the realms and beings thinly veiled nearby where humans briefly live.

Sea

Water as the element of transformation is shared between these stories of gender transformative shifting, holding the power of otherworldly life and ancestral magic throughout time. Through ‘bathing in a lake’, the three daughters of Daire Léithe experience transformation from female to male. In moving between land and water in sea journeys including from Scotland to Ireland there is gender transformation from male to female and in returning across the sea, gender transformation from female back to male takes place. Water appears in the story from Anna Nic an Luain as a ‘pail of water’, ‘a stream’, ‘waves rising’ and a ‘boat journey’, with gender transformation experienced from a man to a woman, returning to being a man once home. Transformations between female

and male and male and female are told in multiple ancestral Irish stories. Whilst this may be considered as shifting between constative gender forms (that is, as a man, or as a woman) rather than as examples of a Third Gender such as *demhinsce*, the multiple gender identifications and gendered embodiments within the texts are recognisable as transgender stories.

The significance of water in ancestral Irish stories is recognised “for the poets deemed that on the brink of water it was always a place of revelation of science” (Celtic Literature Collective 2021). This experience of gender transformation is catalogued in Motif number “D10.2. Change of sex after crossing water” (Thompson [1955–1958], 2016). Ancestral waters of magical power continue to hold transformative power in the ecclesiastical era, now as the ‘water of baptism’, effecting a celebrated ‘miracle’ of gender transformation from girl child to boy child, providing a genealogically beneficial outcome of a son and heir for a King. The time frame of ‘seven years’ recounted in the “Abbott of Druimenaig” is also of consequence in the Donegal story.

Documented in the Aarne–Thompson Catalogue (Uther & Folklore Fellows 2004), there is specific reference to a cross-cultural Tale Type ATU 514 “The Shift of Sex”, that is being reread and repositioned from a transgender studies perspective. Recalling that ‘sex’ in these historical tales and accounts is what we now refer to as ‘gender’, twenty-six variants of ATU 514 have been located. This is described as a “folktale type that has been continuously told for about 3,000 years, across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas” (Ready 2021). The potential for characters in these stories to unsettle normative notions of history, brings into view the possibility of gender diverse ancestors in otherwise hegemonic horizons.

In the *Motif–Index of Folk Literature* the code of “D10 Transformation to person of a different sex” is assigned under the ‘D. Magic’ series of Motifs (Thompson [1955–1958], 2016), with “D11 Transformation: woman to man” specified to be in “Irish myth” and “D12 Transformation: man to woman” (Ibid. p. 505). In addition to ATU 514, Thompson also notes Tale Type 406 for stories that centralise female to male narratives. The use of ‘Shift of Sex’ narratives documented in Tale Type ATU 514 and motif D10 provide further textual evidence that gender transformation was widely known from Northern Europe, to India.

The story narrative of Tale Type ATU 514 involving a female character, dressing in men’s clothes to begin a journey, during which she transforms into a man, presents a *pattern of journey and gender transformation* identifiable in ancestral Irish stories. The significance of this Tale Type is enhanced through comparison with the story of the man who transforms into a woman after going on a ‘journey’ of falling asleep on a hill as in “The Abbott of Druimenaig”, or across the sea in *Ciaþógai an Aistir Aistigh*. In the account of Fionn in the *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, after ‘falling asleep on a hill’ the shift in space-time is provided for the setting to enter the *dun* and recount the ‘wonders of the Fennians’, including the man that ‘lived alternate years as a woman and a man’. Despite the cultural significance of these stories, at the time of researching this paper ATU 514 was not available as a Tale Type in the *Irish Folklore Collection* (The Dúchas Project 2024g),³⁹ even though the story from Ana Nic an Luain is cited as part of the *Folklore Collection*.⁴⁰

Consideration of tales such as ‘Wonder Tale’ ATU 325, raises further questions on the underlying assumptions around gender and sexuality in Irish cultural traditions that have been routinely encoded into translations and readings over time. One example that alerted my scholarly attention is the story of a magician and apprentice transforming during a spell-fight (O hOgain 1991, p. 423, ‘Tale’ Type 325).⁴¹ Whilst on the surface appearing to be a magical battle between two males, what becomes of the gender of the apprentice who takes the form of a ‘grain of corn’ that is eaten by his master in the form of a ‘cock’ (rooster) in one of these transformations? If a constative (that is unchanging) binary male gender is implied throughout the transformations in these Tales, what does this also

suggest about the ancestral Irish relationship and thinking about genders and sexualities? For if the male magician eats a grain of corn that his male apprentice has transformed into, is this not clearly an homoerotic act?

Layers of Poetic meaning are encoded within the texts and stories, containing ontological meanings, that cannot be overlooked by contemporary Druids.

The Knowledge of Our Ancestors Is Wisdom of Trees

Foundational to the considerations that the *Colloquy* engages is *Fidh.i.Fedh* ‘Wood Wisdom’ deriving from an Indigenous Irish cultural perspective that inseparably connects language to the living Land. That is, *Fid* is Wood (*Fedh*) a Tree (edited by Calder 1917, p. 30, line 40, p. 31), or for *Filid*, a Letter to be spoken/written. This is the language of Poets. In recognising the layers of influences, historical experiences of trade/travel/migration and of the colonising influences from the 5th century onwards both religious and political, the documentation of the Ogham manuscript sections of the *Auraicept* are seen as even more precious in ascertaining Indigenous Irish thinking patterns.

Whilst the *Auraicept* is a literary source documenting uses of language and the training of the learned class the *Filidh*, the text contains and conveys an ineffable way of *thinking* about life and the natural world and is a philosophical text. The rank of *Filidh* (Poet) is stated within the *Auraicept* to be “from the word philosopher”, literally describing the role of Poetic verse as “*fi* that which satirises and *li*, that which praises” (edited by Calder 1917, p. 51). Whilst the word ‘philosopher’ is Greek in origin literally meaning ‘lover of wisdom’ (attributed to Pythagoras 6th century BC) with Wisdom a Goddess Sophia), the Wisdom of *Filidh* is embodied within nature, sustaining a living knowledge within Trees. Using the Greek terminology of philosopher for *Filidh*, points to the incoming vocabularies of learning and scholarly knowledge (including the colonising languages Latin and English) that the scribe translators and subsequent editor/s brought to the task of translating the *Auraicept*.

Of significance to re-evaluating the role of gender in the *Auraicept* is that the *commentaries* from the Book of Leinster date to the 12th century, whilst the *Book of Ballymote* and the *Yellow Book of Lecan* date to the 14th century, placing these texts between 700 to 900 years *after* the incursion of monotheistic religious thought and practise into the Irish way of life. This also positions the use of Latin grammatical structure to analyse Old Irish concepts (pre 5th century), as holding distinct differences foreign to ancestral Indigenous Irish cultural ways.

Land

There are sections of the *Auraicept* that focus attention on the way in which the living natural world was ascribed specified genders, or gender roles by the *Fili*.

“The flagstone is he, a feast that has flamed,
According to the threads of sages is the history;
A block is it, according to nature, a rock,
A stone is she according to artificiality.”

(edited by Calder, p. 42, lines 550–555/p. 43, lines 550–555 translation)

Significantly three genders are referenced in this passage in regards to ‘stone’:

‘flagstone’ ‘he’ *lia* (*Auraicept*, p. 43, line 553; Foras na Gaeilge 2013–2024k).

‘block’ ‘rock’ ‘it’ *ail* (*Auraicept*, p. 43, 554; Foras na Gaeilge 2013–2024l).

‘stone’ ‘she’ *cloch* (*Auraicept*, p. 43, line 555; Foras na Gaeilge 2013–2024m).

Whilst linguists or philologists may ascribe the use of ‘genders’ in these passages simply as examples of grammatical rules in attribution of nouns (animate/natural ‘she, he’; artificial/inanimate ‘it’), in this text *three genders are applied to stone*. This again suggests the inadequacies of the translation of ‘it’ for gender in the context of Old Irish. Thinking through the ancestral Irish poetically suggests that ascriptions such as these supercede the linguistic and convey a non-linear, fluidic relationship to the living world.

Irish folklore preserves a trove of ancestral cultural memory of stones changing between forms and especially of “people...changed by magic into the form of stones” (The Dúchas Project 2024d).⁴² This includes a “father, mother, and the seven children” turned into stone by a Druid on May Eve, returning to the form of human to dance again every May Eve (The Dúchas Project 2024e)⁴³ and stories such as Three Sisters, where two of the girls are transformed into stones, but are transformed back into girls when the third sister uses a “sally-stick...and hit each of the stones three times” (The Dúchas Project 2024f).⁴⁴ Transformations between human and stone are cyclical, with change from human to stones ‘when fighting for Ireland’ (The Dúchas Project 2024d); seasonally, as in the May Eve story; or temporarily in the story of the Three Sisters. In each of these stories ancestral Irish magic is embedded. There is a use of intentionality, numerical patterns of seven and three and temporality, aligned to significant times and places.

These intergenerational stories of stones changing form, link human life with the realms of all beings. In sacred lore stone has transformation as Giants/Warriors (m); as Goddesses such as the *Cailleach Béara*, the Hag of Beara (f), the sacred westerly point of *Éire* where the land is married to the sea; and as the solar Goddess *Áine* and the Sun Stone of *Áine* the ‘Fair-Haired Girl’ at Bohonagh Stone circle, in Cork.

Within ancestral Irish culture, the Land is alive, Three Sisters, a Triple Goddess *Ériu* and *Fódla* and *Banba*. In past times this sacred living kinship between the living earth/land and human was celebrated in kingship rituals centralising marriage of the High King to the Land, embodied in the form of a White Horse to ensure the ongoing fertility of all life. It would be naive and culturally disrespectful to suggest that the Land/White Horse/*Ériu* was ever considered as a ‘merely linguistic construction’, that is, as a grammatical example of a ‘gendered noun’ (land/she). The *Auraceipt* denotes *gabur* ‘White Horse’ as female.

To consider the status of genders in ancestral Irish cultures requires thinking philosophically, with an ontological approach to life, from the embodied perspective of *Fidh.i.Fedh* where human and other-than-human species share life in a numinous world, where all have an in-dwelling living force. In this animism: “A stone is she...” (edited by Calder 1917, p. 43) may be interpreted as natural extensions of the body of the land, a living Triple Goddess. Standing stones throughout the land clearly identify specific aspects of ancestral Irish Beings of *all* genders. The livingness of stone is evidenced through the immense effort that went into sourcing, moving, erecting and venerating stones as monumental records in the landscape. These practises of celebration and reverence continue and are central to Druidry.

The examples in this *Colloquy* are all offered as connections to move between realms and to ‘shift’ considerations of gender in ancestral Irish culture to thinking with the heart, reconsidering the inscribed epigenetic fragments of Indigenous Irish thought and culture that survived colonisation.

Read with the heart, these texts and traditions all speak of an animistic way of living in and thinking about the world. That stone may transform into and be *all genders* is encoded into these stories and is a further example of deep meaning within Druidry.

Consideration of ancestral Irish cultural perspectives brings into focus the necessity for Latin grammatical structures and translations of Irish historical literary and legendary texts to be carefully reconsidered. Whilst the commentaries on the *Auraceipt* incorporate a Latin grammatical framework that was in use as a language of learning throughout Europe

at the time of the writings, the subjectivities of who transcribes texts and produces commentaries must be considered.

A central issue for this *Colloquy* is *language*: how knowledge has been preserved, stories retold, what has been lost, erased or obscured and how the embedding of exterior cultural *thought processes* into Irish texts and translations may have affected the readings of these cultural materials throughout the centuries. In this process, it is acknowledged that this *Colloquy* is a product of a specific time and place and the mind of a genderqueer Druid scholar who has lived thirty-four years within Druidry at the time of this writing; it was the triplicity of the Druid way that first called to my heart. To some, the queer and transgender readings of these texts may be considered unnecessary. Yet all those who use ancestral cultural traditions can productively rethink approaches and in doing so, see how ‘thinking with the land’ preserves and provides renewal in understanding knowledge, as did the *Filidh* who embodied a forest of learning in the Art of ‘cutting wood’, constructing words, sentences and verses from Trees.

As references to Third Gender are encountered, whether in the *Auraicept* or in stories, to be kept in mind is that the *Auraicept* preserves a ‘training manual’ in the Art of *Filidheacht*; as folkstories provide archives of ancestral lifetimes.⁴⁵ These words were used to convey ceremonial traditions and judgements of the *Féineachas* and of the *Senchus Mór* (Brehon Law).

Conclusion

The presence of *three words for gender in the Old Irish language* did not arise in a vacuum. Revolving around the sacred three, the triplicity at the heart of ancestral Irish cultural patterns, points to an understanding of life and of gender as more than a binary. The knowledge of Third Gender, now being openly discussed in the twenty first century, did not appear for the first time in the generation we are alive. Generations of First Nations and Indigenous cultures, including the ancestral Irish, have preserved cultural traditions, stories, memories and names for Third Gender people throughout time. All we need to do is ‘shift’ our ways of thinking to access ancestral cultural perspectives.

The researches of this *Colloquy* suggest that, as one example, the word *demh* has been obscured and with *neamh*, problematically translated from the *Auraicept na n-eces* as an inanimate neuter Latin ‘it’, solely as a grammatical term, without questioning whether these are Early Old Irish terms for an actual embodiment of third gender known as *demhinsce* (or *neamhinsce*).

Dehmhinsce is experientially translated to be inclusive of *any gender* beyond the binary of male/female; a contemporary recognition of space where Third Gender existed within ancestral culture. The *Colloquy* also suggests that *demhinsce* (‘*issed*’) may be Early Old Irish for the third person plural pronoun ‘they’/‘them’. As erased and obscured ancestral ways of thinking emerge when texts are reconsidered, contextual translation of *demh/neamh* as the Sky can no longer be ‘neuter’/‘neither’/devoid of life, but one of three living sacred realms. Whilst Modern Irish grammar no longer uses a third gender term grammatically and the word *demhinsce* vanished into obsolescence, gender beyond the binary is a lived reality that has always existed within society.

In stories across a wide timeframe over a thousand years in Irish history, there is a legacy of oral storytelling, of folk traditions and tales that speak of gender transformations, of ‘shifting’ and of the ‘shift of sex’ experienced in girls transforming to boys; of women transforming into men; of men transforming into women; of persons living alternately as male and female and giving birth in each gendered embodiment. *In each of these accounts gender transformation is recounted as an experience that simply happens.* These are all identifiable as accounts of Third Gender. Whether in the earlier or ecclesiastical era, when offspring

result from, or are encountered during the gender transformative journey, the child/children are “brought back” and are integrated into the Irish family structure. *This tells us a lot about our ancestral ways of thinking and living. There was an inclusivity and acceptance of people and of gender that we can learn much from today.* Further, stories of ‘shift of sex’ are celebrated, seen as auspicious and blessings are bestowed upon the Prophet–Poet for the oratory of the story as in the *Feis Tighe Chonáin*.

Third Gender is clearly locatable and existed in ancestral Irish culture and communities. There is also the narrative of ‘shifting’ between genders and species; a productive area for deeper consideration and research and of relevance to contemporary Druidry, as specific animals/birds encountered in these stories, including Horses, Hares, Crows and Wolves may be sheltering spaces for Third Gender persons, in addition to established meanings. This would follow ancestral Irish cultural patterns that include Hound/Dog/Wolf as interchangeable animal forms for human warriors.

The important point is that we cannot simply dismiss ‘shift of sex’/gender transformation narratives as fictitious accounts. To be kept in mind is that ancestral cultural times were before news media and social media and films and television; stories were where ‘news’ and information was stored and retold. Some may debate that the ‘stories’ are journeys into otherworldly places, or on another level, into the collective creative genius of intergenerational Irish storytellers; rendering the ‘shift of sex’ character as fictitious. But it is beyond debate that other ‘characters’ that share time–space with humans in these stories, including an endless variety of cattle, horses, hounds, wolves, birds, fishes, mountains, streams, trees, sky all exist as living realities in Ireland. So why should we dismiss narratives such as ‘The Man Who Became A Woman’ as no less real? O’Kearney (1855) eloquently reminds us that what was in life, is in the stories, that these are filled with history.

This *Colloquy* foregrounds the training and mindset of the original curriculum of the *Filidh* (Fili) Poets, as a Learned class in ancestral Ireland, who utilised the Ogham in construction of metaphorical and allegorical metres, rhymes and verses, as tools of education and satire in society. The Clan world of the *Filidh* was vastly different from the colonising monotheistic worldview of the incoming Roman. Texts such as the *Feis Tighe Chonáin* and *Am gáeth I m–muir / Song of Amergin* preserve how different the worldview was and continues to be. The mindset of contemporary Druids likewise needs to reflect a multiplicity of perspectives, celebrating the sacred three wherever this is found in life.

Could an ontological positioning of Third Gender as sacred *being, connected to specific realms* also be incorporated into Druidic thought/practises? Sky and Sea (and water) are seen as having especial meanings in these discussions. The Land provides a living house for us all. There are spaces between light and dark, dusk and dawn. Where Sea meets Land; where Sky meets Sea, there are liminal places, a horizon where these meet and reawaken.

There is a living space for Third Gender in twenty first century Druidry.

But then what is the living and what is the dead?

When thinking of words all are alive in the act of speaking and dead once spoken.

In the act of writing, words are alive as they are written and dead once the page is closed.

And so our *Colloquy* commences

Place: A sunlit meadow, a Valley, Wide branches filled with Birdsong. *Time:* In the winding towards Imbolec, In a Year of Pandemic, In a Century that is a Babe in the arms of a Millenium. *Person:* (first author speaks) Speak fornow forme mychild, In the Dust settling, I have already spoken. (second author speaks): I am a Child of Time, Many–Named, A Branch of Oak, Filled with Wonderment. *Cause:* All Lessons are Three, What then of that which lives between named as man and named as woman? I ask you Wise One, Vital in Strength, of Fire Bright and Kindled, To Name and Tell of stories sung that lead beyond the veil.

And the Sage Speaks: beside the fires bright, I will lead you to a Place of Hope.

Deep peace
the call of the Druidubh loud and clear
amidst the songs of morning
petals stirring
softly life rising

in the asking for Place
I give 'Hope'
the Time: By fire light & bright
the Person: Brid or Brigh 'Ambue'
but as you are not 'cowless'
say Bride
home & hearth & tinne light
protected & preserved by day & night
that is a place of 'Hope'
& Healthful might
say I rightly where you sit (you are seated)
is Hope
By Harp & Art & Stringless Bow
By Arrow not in the air
The sword of Peace forged
in the (my) heart by firebright
& firelight you are home

there is neither one nor three
in the seeking
(or) All are made in the making
(of) Life that is lived worth(y)
of creating
The Cause: a question of what is
'three' is it in you, him, or me?

By Art & Heart & Lore & (S)word
None of it matters to 'me'.

Be one. Be none. Be free.

& so ends the
Colloquy of Brigh Ambue
given at Imbolec
in a year in Time
so far from life
rewinding that
Time has no
meaning there.

Acknowledgements

Beannacht, thank you and respect are offered to Eimear Burke, Chosen Chief of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids for the opportunity to present this research.

An especial thank you and *beannacht* to Dwina Murphy-Gibb, Patroness of the Order, for generous support of The Mount Haemus Award; such Patronage provides a vital encouragement to research scholars.

Respect is offered to the Bundjalung Nation traditional custodians and to the lands, seas and skies where this *Colloquy* was written; to the Gadigal peoples of the Eora Nation traditional custodians of the land where I was born and to Elders Past, Present and Emerging. I offer respect and remembrance to the lands, seas and skies of my ancestors and to all the places they have dwelt through time.

Is cuimhin liom mo shinsear. In memory of my ancestors, of my maternal line, born in Ireland. Embracing the rainbows born since.

Endnotes

¹ Research using the identical phrase and terms yielded '0' results in the online collection in 2021 (The Dúchas Project 2021b, 2021c). An email query was subsequently sent to the *Project* regarding this and whether the material is deemed as 'Sensitive material' and so restricted access and if so, how to access. (07 August 2021). A reply to this enquiry has not as yet been received. It is also possible that there may simply be a logistical answer to this query, that is, the material has not, as yet, been digitised into the online collection.

² The philosophical enquiry into the nature of being, a metaphysical branch of philosophy.

³ Whilst I could not locate a direct term in Irish for 'sonsy lass', the English seems to combine the idea of 'mac' (son)/'sonsy' (male, like a son) and *caílin* (an unmarried/young female). Use of the term was located in an ethnographic account of Irish Tinker communities the "owner introduced his daughter, an open-countenanced strong-looking girl of about fifteen (a "sonsy lass", Robbie later said)..." (Morrisby 1989, p.31). Here the description of 'strong-looking' and the age of 'fifteen' provides some context for the term. The researcher quotes the observation of Fyfe Roberston, a reporter that had accompanied him to meet the Tinkers. Fyfe, or 'Robbie', is identified as a Scotsman. It is unclear from Morrisby what connection Robbie had to Ireland (e.g. born in Scotland/lived in Ireland?), or whether the term 'sonsy lass' was known and in use in both Ireland and Scotland. The era of this ethnographic account is 1959/1960, placing this in a similar twentieth century timeframe to *The Irish Folklore Commission*. The 'sonsy lass' is a different term than the Irish word for 'tomboy' *báire* (Teannglainn.ie).

⁴ Throughout the twentieth century the word 'fairy'/spelt as 'faery' was subsequently revitalised and consciously reclaimed, used with pride by gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer (GLBTIQ) communities. There are different versions of this shorthand, including LGBT, LGBTIQ+, LGBTT, or LGBT2 (for Two Spirit). A specific use of the term has been by gay men spiritually seeking *Radical Faeries* (Conner, Sparks & Sparks, 1997, p.26).

⁵ An ongoing sequence of invasions and decimation of Irish cultural structures, clan formations, land uses and language culminating in the imposition of the English legal system and language and the total banning of Irish as a spoken language.

⁶ Hillers (1995, p. 193, footnote 23) provides transcription of the first part of the text only, where Fionn speaks, entirely omitting the next section where Conán replies with the blessing. This omission was encountered in returning to the 1855 Ossian Society text for the researches of this paper.

⁷ 'The first British Law enacted in Ireland which specifically banned the use of the Irish language was Article III of The Statute of Kilkenny from April 19, 1367...to break this Statute was treason and punishable by death' (<<https://www.irishpost.com/history/on-this-day-in-1367-britain-passes-statute-of-kilkenny-which-banned-irish-language-and-culture-in-ireland-209985>>). Almost three hundreds years later "in the year 1612, the ninth year of the reign of James 1, the common law of England became the jurisprudence" of Ireland (Gorman 1913, p. 221). This rendered the Irish unprotected in their own land under the English 'substitute' law.

⁸ Examples of the use of three as a significant motif from Irish “Popular Oral Literature” recorded in the *Handbook* include ‘three sons’, ‘three daughters’, ‘three brothers’, ‘three gifts’, ‘three successive days’, ‘three successive nights’ (Ó Súilleabháin, Seán ([1942], 1963, pp. 558–654). Further ‘three’ motifs cited in this article have included ‘three foals’, ‘three fledglings’.

⁹ The dominant normative perspective in society. This includes assumptions that binary gender and heteronormativity are the norm for everyone.

¹⁰ The spelling used in the passage of the *Senchus* is included. The word ‘chai’ is also rendered as ‘cai’ and ‘cae’ in this section (“a way”).

¹¹ Because of the multiple generations of authoring, scholars have noted the absolute dating of the *Auraceipt* is as problematic; with Engesland (2021) offering the 9th century as the likely time period for the writing. This dates the text about a century later than previous scholarship (including Calder; Alqvist). The “*Auraceipt na n-éces*: the scholars’ primer; being the texts of the Ogham tract from the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow Book of Lecan, and the text of the Trefhocul from the Book of Leinster” (edited by Calder 1917) are commentaries on Knowledge that recorded the language and training of *Filidh* the professional skilled rank of Irish Poets. The *Filidh* held a revered status within ancestral Irish society, and utilised a multiverse language based around an alphabet system called *Ogaim* or Ogham, to construct and convey complex cultural and literary traditions

¹² A term used to denote a person who identifies as/with the gender of birth. The gender identity of a transgender (or trans) person does not align with the gender of birth.

¹³ The socially constructed perspective that heterosexuality is the norm for everyone.

¹⁴ Short for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender’.

¹⁵ In this section the previous statement about the origin of the words as being from actual ‘male’ and ‘female’ gender terms in Latin appears to be changed by the author; Russell ([1996], 1999, p. 202) then positions the “*indscne*-group...as being formed in reaction...with clear indication that they are referring to grammatical gender” (i.e. rather than physical/biological genders).

¹⁶ The word *aon* (similar to the word for the number ‘1’) is used in Modern Irish for ‘any’.

¹⁷ Sky/water meeting; air in water.

¹⁸ Russell ([1996], 1999) expands translation of the word *indsc(n)e* from gender to include “utterance”, “speech” (p. 204) by removing the ‘n’. Demonstrating how different words *insce* “speech/utterance”; *inscne* ‘gender’ are connected in thinking (and so by extension, gender as an identity)

¹⁹ “1.4.3. Third-Person Possession: Third-person possession in Irish uses a gender-neutral possessive pronoun ‘a’...” (Nic Fhlannchadha; Hickey 2021. p. 7).

²⁰ Using the Third Person. Non-binary language for gender uses the words ‘they’, ‘them’, ‘their’, as an alternative to ‘he’, ‘she’.

²¹ In the *Colloquy* Brigh uses specific grammatical constructions and words: ‘you’ (pronoun) referring to a person being spoken to; and ‘him’ (pronoun) the Object of a verb (in this case of speaking/writing).

²² Diacriticals known as *fada* (lengthening) were added to the Irish language as a form of scribal shorthand to denote the sound of vowels. The *fada* was shorthand for writing two vowels: aa, oo, uu, ee, ii – denoting lengthened vowel sounds (á, ó, ú, é, í). The *fada* is the only remaining ‘shorthand’ in the Irish language from this time period. The sound of the vowel (either short or long) on either side of a consonant determines the sound of the consonant/s. With thanks to teacher Gearóid Ó Ceallaigh of the *Cumann Carad na Gaeilge* (The Philo-Celtic Society).

²³ English letters were not adopted until the mid twentieth century in Ireland with the advent of uses of typewriters with English letter keyboards.

²⁴ As an example: The Poetic use of alliteration *Og-uaim* (*Auraceipt* Ibid. BB 308.44, pp. 272–273) and a specific oratory style of ‘five words to a breath (Ibid. p. xxxv) do not so readily translate in the English language version of the text, which has also been interpreted through the minds of scribes trained in Latin. Alliteration is frequently seen in the original Gaelic text as a Poetic strategy with examples such as “genmota forfeda a fail defoghur na nguta 7 dono do sainigedh *foghur forsna fedhaibh*,” (edited by Calder 1917, p. 100, lines 1298–1299, Italics added for emphasis). This is approximately translated as “sounds upon the vowels” (edited by Calder 1917, p. 101); with *fedhaibh* (plural form of the word *fedh* = tree = letter) translated as ‘vowels’ (i.e. trees = letters) and *forfedaibh* in the ensuing lines translated as ‘diphthongs’ (i.e. emphasis of the sound/trees = letters), using the grammatical construction of adding *for* at the beginning of a word for emphasis, or to alter the meaning. This can be read in the text, indicated with the word for Ogham, spelt as “Ogaim” (edited by Calder 1917, p. 100, line 1297) and the Ogham sign for the diphthong ‘Ea’ following²⁴ (Ibid., line 1300).

This passage in the *Auraceipt* is a lesson about the sounds of vowels in comparison to the sounds of diphthongs in Ogham, with diphthongs requiring a different vocal emphasis. The meanings of these words is approximated in English, as a literal translation of the word for diphthong in Old Irish *forfedhaibh* may be closer to meaning ‘of soft woods’ (i.e. soft letters). This translation may contain more of the Poetic meaning in time, as the words of *Filidh* were ‘cut’ from trees of a forest alphabet. In attempting to understand and

convey some of the meanings of the ancestral *Filidh*, the use of English translations from over a century ago holds limitations, use of the phrase ‘approximately translated’ highlights the inadequacies inherent in the process of moving from Gaelic, an ancestral language (and way of thinking) into English. Clear indications of some of the issues encountered include (in this passage as one example) that the word for Ogham, ‘Ogaim’, is actually only written once in the original text passage (edited by Calder 1917, p. 100, line 1297) and yet it appears in the English translation on the following page four times (Ibid. p.101). There was no need to repeat this, as the entire passage is about the Ogham,

²⁵ Footnote 2 in the *Auraicept* (p. 24) defines these as “Certain incantations by which the poet’s mind was supposed to be made prophetic. See *Battle of Magh Rath*, pp. 46, 47.” The tone here implies disrespect for cultural traditions (“supposed”) and so further demonstrates the necessity to approach these cultural materials with a different and pre-colonial mindset.

²⁶ Identified as Brigh Ambue, daughter of Sencha (Thompson 2014, following O’Curry).

²⁷ Brigh Briughaidh “a female author of laws” (*Senchus Mor*, pp. 145, 147, 151, 155). In the margins of the translation there is a handwritten note beside the words ‘Brig ban Briugarb’, “one wd expect banbrethem” (spelling and underline in the original). i.e. a female (*ban*) judge (*brethem*). The margin note: “one wd expect” (i.e. ‘would’), raises the embedded issues and necessity for re-reading scholarly translations made in eras when masculine heteronormative perspectives were ‘the norm’. Potential issues with subjectivities impact texts.

²⁸ The poetic training of a *Filidh* being foundational to the role of Brehon and the necessity to author construct complex judgements in the form of metrical verses.

²⁹ As two examples of these practices, a *Filidh* with the junior rank of *Focloc* in the first year of training, received the compensation of a “three year old heifer”; whilst a *Filidh* in the sixth year of training ranked as an *Anruth* (Silver Branch), received the highly symbolic compensation of “five cows” (five being used in oratory; also in periods of waiting time for judgements; based upon the land pattern of five provinces). In the *Senchus Mór*, value was ascertained using two forms of measurement, the *cumhal* and the *sed*. The central cultural role of cattle is reflected in these practices as “Land was measured by the number of cows it was capable of feeding”; and when “applied to other things than land *cumhal* meant a value of three cows”; and “five *sed*s equals three cows” (Library of Ireland 2005–2020b).

³⁰ The Masai of Kenya continue a social structure of age-based warrior classes of young men, who live apart from the community, learning their skills and hunting together for specified periods of time. The return of the warriors is greeted with ceremonial reintegration.

³¹ Compassionately presenting a clear rationale for the necessity of the purification and reintegration of the warrior class returning after battle, Lupus (2011) highlights how the lack of such processes in the modern world has created soldiers suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), frequently taking their own lives after returning from war fronts. There are higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol in people following physical, emotional and cognitive danger and in survivors of such events. Use of milk in the ceremonial cycle lore of Bride is significant as milk is known to contain high levels of natural stress relief substances. These include lactium, known to combat high levels of cortisol (Gopi 2018) and the sleep-inducing tryptophan, one of the eight essential amino acids that metabolises into serotonin and melatonin, known as “mood stabilizers” (Murphy 2019).

In this regard it is sobering to consider people within minoritised communities who have been subjected to exclusion, violence, vilification and the high statistics of violence against, and suicide rates of, transgender persons around the world (Human Rights Campaign 2024).

³² Further connections to cattle in the Festival name *Imbolc* is contained in the word ‘bolc’ connected to the Old Irish word ‘bolg’, a leather bag, made from the hide/skin of cattle. Butter can potentially be churned from milk and/or stored in such a leather bag.

³³ This includes from ancient Egypt and the lore of specific *neterw* (Middle Egyptian, translated into English the meaning is akin to creative energy). In this cosmology *hwt hr* (Hathor) is identified through golden horns and solar disc headdress and in the form of a celestial cow, providing a significant comparison to Bride as ‘the Golden Haired’. The name of Hathor means ‘House of Heru’ identifying the Eastern Sky in particular as being sacred to this *neterw*. There are a range of ritual titles of Hathor that are of significance to consideration of Bride, including that the praise title *ntr nbt nbw* in Middle Egyptian (hieroglyphs) literally means ‘Mistress of Gold’.

Here the deep ancestral connection of Bride to the home and hearth can also be discerned as the human counterparts to the solar House of Life (the sun in the sky) and to Gold as ‘the golden-haired’ (sunlight). There is only one sun, one celestial planet that radiates light and warmth to earth, so throughout times and places it is not surprising that repeated generations in divergent locations would identify similar ways of thinking and communicating about the powers of life. There are further links ripe for consideration between these goddesses of fire and life. These include the connection of gold (a metal considered to be the body of the sun to the Egyptians), and to the use of gold in jewelry and weaponry (spectacular examples of

gold sheathed daggers are in museum antiquities collections), the use of metals requiring the Art of firecrafts, that is, goldsmiths.

In the lore of Bride and in the lore of Hathor there is a sustaining ancestral solar legacy connected to creativity and as Patrons and inspirers of artistic pursuits that require fire/light. Whilst the traditional cultural role of Smiths continues centrally to the lore of Bride, the Triple nature of both these goddesses leads to further considerations. Bride as Healer requires plants. Hathor is connected to Bast (the early morning sunlight) linked to flowers/plants/essences in the art of perfumery. In the twenty first century the patronage could be expanded to include a wide range of fire and light-dependent artforms including bakers and patissieres; those who work with flowers (including herbalists, florists, distillers); artists in photography, cinematography, filmmaking; designers of lights, kitchens and firepits. Once the role of sun/light/fire is recognised, how these connect to daily occupations may be identified in myriad places and by extension to the sacred/ceremonial cycles in Druidry.

³⁴ Ó Ceallaigh, Gearóid /Jerry Kelly, Jerry (translation, 2024), *Philo-Celtic Society*. Ó Ceallaigh cites original text sources: <<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G800011A.html>>, <<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/irish/lebor.html>> (also working with MacAllister's 1956 translation, *Irish Texts Society*).

³⁵ School of Scottish Studies archives (Hillers 1995, footnote 25). Readers are recommended to the Hillers' article for these sources.

³⁶ Hillers (1995, footnote 15) "In an early Irish genealogy there is a mention of a certain Loingseach, who was born a girl and was transformed into a boy during baptism through the blessing of Bishop Cathub. M. E. Dobbs, "The History of the Descendants of Ir," ZCP13 (1921), 308-59; vide tsp. 358. Although most of the genealogy is in Irish, this particular episode is in Latin. A Cathub who was Bishop of Achad Cinn in Antrim died in 554. Loingsech's mother is said to be a daughter of the British King Vortigern. Obviously, the historicity of this section of the genealogy is rather dubious".

³⁷ Hillers (1995), pp. 181-182, footnote 28, uses the title "Ciapógaí an Aistir Amach". In the 1977 text, the story is titled with the word 'Aistigh'. Both words convey a 'journey' (*aistigh*), or as used by Hillers, a 'going out' (*amach*).

<<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=qzXaAAAAMAAJ&dq=editions%3AUOM39015005912368&focus=searchwithinvolume&q=120>, accessed 16 March 2024.

³⁸ With thanks to Jane Miller, Research Librarian at the State Library Victoria (Australia), for assistance in accessing a rare copy of the story by Anna Nic an Luain. The title also enfolds the sense of a journey that is 'bewitching, strange'.

³⁹ The "Index of International Folktales" in *The Irish Folklore Collection* online progresses from AT0513, AT0513A to AT0516 <<https://www.duchas.ie/en/aath?SearchText=>>, accessed 16 March 2024.

⁴⁰ Hillers (1995 footnote #28) "originally Irish Folklore Commission 1667: 181-3). At the time of writing this paper, the original Volume number does not correlate to current duchas.ie archive searches.

⁴¹ Uther (2004). Aarne-Thompson catalogue, 'Tales of Magic'.

⁴² From Schools' Collector location Treannaglearagh, County Mayo (School: Trian na gCléireach), story located in "a field down near Shanaghy called "Finlin".

⁴³ From Kilgarvan, Co Wexford; Kilmore Co. Wexford; Templetown, Co. Wexford; Whitechurchglynn, Co. Wexford.

⁴⁴ From Schools' Collector location Lissyviggeen, Co. Kerry (School: Lios Uí Bhigín B.) Possibly an origin story of the local stone circle: 'The Druid Circle'.

⁴⁵ "The Yearly Studies of the Fili" are specified within the *Auraicept*, with the full training of *Filidh* involving twelve years of intensive instructions encompassing a vast and detailed curriculum of learning including specified stories, construction of verses, poetic delivery (oratory), genealogy, ascending yearly through specified grades up to the rank of Ollamh (Professor) (edited by Calder 1917, pp. xx, xxi, xxvi). The Ollamh held all previous Knowledge and in addition was adept in the use of divinatory/prophetic/visionary skills in oratory, learnt in the eighth year of *Filidh* training (year eight was also the second of five years of Ollamh training). The training and focus of the *Filidh* was embedded within the cosmologies of the living ancestral cultural ways of Éire and served a polytheistic and animistic worldview.

Figures

Figure 1: Fionn speaking, original Irish text from *Feis Tighe Chonáin Chinn-Shléibe* (Conán, O'Kearney (ed.) 1855. Public domain. Reproduced from: digitised by Google Books.

Figure 2: Conán offers a blessing to Fionn for the story, original Irish text from *Feis Tighe Chonáin Chinn-Shléibe* (Conán, O’Kearney (ed.) 1855. Public domain. Reproduced from: digitised by Google Books.

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Dedicated to all *aiteach* Druids
Inné-Inniu-Amárach
