The late medieval religious world was fascinated by the abject suffering humanity of Christ and, as noted many years ago by Émile Mâle, his passion became the “great preoccupation of souls.”¹ This manifested itself in ever more graphic depictions of Christ’s wounded, bloody, and broken body in devotional works, artistic representations, and popular prayers. Over time, this interest evolved into a plethora of devotional cults: the Five Wounds of Christ; the arma Christi (the various instruments which caused them or were associated with the larger story of Christ’s passion); cults associated with Christ’s holy blood, as specifically celebrated in a number of important shrines across Europe; and devotions that centred on the precise number of Christ’s wounds and their respective sizes.² This was, indeed, a devotional world in which Christ’s blood was ubiquitous. A facile reading of the Middle Ages might posit a discernible shift of emphasis from a victorious and kingly crucified Christ in the early medieval period to the victim-figure and image of pity of the later Middle Ages; yet, as Celia Chazelle has argued, contemplation of Christ’s suffering was much valued in its own right during this earlier period, which was not devoid of its share of depictions of Christ’s wounds and blood loss.³ Neither was the suffering Christ-figure of the later Middle Ages allowed to eclipse the motif of Christus triumphans entirely. Rather, the paradox of the victor-victim

² It should be noted, of course, that the style and intensity of representations of Christ’s sufferings varied widely across Europe in the later Middle Ages, with northern Europe becoming particularly well known for their graphic nature. See especially: Caroline Walker Bynum, Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
was perpetuated through the various sets of newly-emerging devotions that were a feature of late medieval passion piety.

In an Irish context, the late medieval fascination with Christ's wounds can best be explored by examining a source that is, even yet, insufficiently known in medieval scholarship. It is a corpus of poetry composed by families of professional poets in Gaelic Ireland over a period of some four hundred years, from the thirteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. Of some 2,000 poems that survive, roughly 20% are of a religious nature. They were composed at the behest of chieftains of the native Irish aristocracy or, in the case of some religious poems, commissioned by important ecclesiastical figures or foundations. Some religious poems were composed towards the end of a poet's life, when he (and it was, invariably, a "he") might retire to a monastery and use his compositions as payment for bed and board. At other times, it seems, professional poets composed works simply as exercises in the complex metres for which bardic poetry was renowned. It is clear, however, that in most instances, the poems were designed to respond directly to the wishes and particular tastes of the patron. Where poems and poets are dateable, this can serve as a valuable indicator of the evolution of devotional fashions, as patrons routinely wished to demonstrate their familiarity with the very latest important cults emerging in continental Europe. Devotion to the wounds of Christ is a very useful example of this, and the development of the cult can be traced through an increasingly elaborate set of images utilized in bardic compositions over time. However, it should be remembered that the majority of poems composed by these professional versifiers were addressed to earthly and not heavenly patrons. It is hardly surprising, then, that a poet's depiction of the perfect Gaelic chieftain or secular lord should influence the portrayal of his heavenly ruler, Christ. But this also worked in the other direction; when a motif associated with Christ became well established, it could then be utilized as part of an encomium composed for a secular patron. This dynamic is evidenced in the treatment of the wounds of Christ and those of Gaelic chieftains whose battle exploits were routinely celebrated by the professional poets whom they employed.

Late medieval devotion to the Passion and death of Christ, which provides the context for the preoccupation with his individual wounds, was the heir to

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