

# RE TÓIN MNÁ: IN PURSUIT OF TROUBLESOME WOMEN

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A woman's social position in early Ireland was clearly delineated within a patriarchal society which allowed divorce, bigamy, multiple serial marriages and eventually tolerated the position of the *banchomarba* 'female-heiress' under the influence of the Church. The pre-Christian culture and religion venerated a plethora of goddesses presiding over functions such as war, fertility and the arts in the person of an overtly promiscuous, sexual deity, notorious as the sovereignty goddess whose marriage to the king and her bestowal of a drink ensured his kingship. Her displeasure at a monarch's behaviour could result in his eventual or immediate demise (O'Rahilly 1943, 7; Breathnach 1982, 243; McCone 1990, 138; Wagner 1981, 22).

The unusually high profile of women in the sagas of the early period has given rise to a misconceived perception of their independence and to some discussion of the contrasting legal position. Some scholars, while admitting that women had virtually no independence under the older legal system, assert that Irish society afforded them much greater freedom than their counterparts in other cultures (Ó Corráin 1978, 1). The position is said to have improved under the influence of the Church (Binchy 1936, 209) and others believed that their independence and high social status was inherited from the pre-Celtic period (MacNeill 1935, 64). Fergus Kelly emphasizes that the law places them among those who are 'legally incompetent' and, while agreeing that women feature prominently in the literature, he rightly argues that claims regarding their power and freedom are exaggerated – the annals providing no instances of female politicians or military leaders. The *Triads of Ireland* supply the most accurate portrayal of women stressing such virtues as a steady tongue, virtue and housewifery. The traits admonished are sexual promiscuity, casting spells and illegal satires with no mention of beauty or any other of the characteristics found in the saga material (Kelly 1988, 68, 77). The perceived independence of Irish women has also given rise to matriarchal theories where women control power, property and wealth with some anthropologists concluding that women have never achieved this anywhere in the world (Fox 1967, 113) and female anthropologists refuting this view, asserting that women were accorded far greater recognition and power in primitive societies which was slowly whittled away (Reed 1975). The question has been posed whether a society which accorded women such a high status and independence in its literature would deny it in real life (Mac Cana 1980b, 1).

However plentiful or various the female roles in medieval literature this supposed independence is questionable since independence suggests freedom and these women exercise such perilous powers disastrously. Many tales contain a proliferation of subtly understated misogynist views – so subtle that modern scholars have been deluded by the dexterity of scribes and authors quietly ridiculing and disparaging women. The early sagas present two female paradigms, one beneficial, positive and passive, the second malevolent, negative and independent and it is the latter which abound. Women are generally considered a troublesome lot! Medb and Deirdre present abnormal female paradigms as recent studies of *Táin Bó Cúailgne* in particular demonstrate, identifying a conscious anti-feminist message, stressing the unacceptable autonomy of female characters (Kelly 1992, 76). This attitude to women in society as reflected in the sagas was probably brought about by the deliberate efforts of the Church.

Christianity encountered an Irish society whose religion revered a large number of goddesses whose overt sexuality must have offended their sensibilities. All Irish goddesses are recognized as having a more or less sexual nature and it has been noted that there is no single love goddess. They are also prominent in topography with placenames frequently commemorating their violent deaths (Sjæstedt 1949, 37, 49; Rees 1961, 166). The Church writers downgraded women by using saga motifs

and themes, concentrating upon the rich and varied manifestations of the pre-Christian goddess and ridiculed female sexuality to reinforce their anti-feminist teachings – that independent conduct or rebellion will be mercilessly punished and that women's sexuality is dangerous and evil. A conscious effort was made to eliminate the goddess.<sup>1</sup> The *Penitentials* also display a misogynist attitude to heterosexual intercourse with its strictures on married sex and condemnation of clerical sexual behaviour which reiterates a hatred and fear of women (Bieler 1963).

Christianity presented the female dichotomy of sexless Virgin-Mother versus desirable Demon-Whore personalized as Mary versus Eve, an image which may have been alien to a people who venerated the goddess in the guise of promiscuous lover, moving ceaselessly from king to king without care to moral or ethical behaviour. All this was anathema to the ideals of Christian marriage, fidelity and continence and the promiscuous goddess, followed by women in general, inevitably became the agent of the devil (McCone 1990, 155). The progress of this blatantly patriarchal and misogynist religion would have been hindered by a steadfast devotion to such goddesses. Brigit was christianized and so disarmed but others must also have survived (Condren 1989 47–78). The strange *sheela-na-ngig* are the most concrete revelation of misogyny, ridiculing female sexuality by exposure to all in a thoroughly unnatural way. Tales such as *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and *Bruidne Da Choca* deride female genitalia by verbal exposure (Breathnach 1982, 246; Lanigan Wood 1985, 22).

The early Irish must have been psychologically traumatized by so patriarchal a religion. Its tripartite structure was easily absorbed but the absence of goddesses must have been severely disturbing and eventually resulted in the Virgin Mary's elevation to the ranks of the gods. This did not result in elevating human women who were viewed as witches, the cause of all evil, original sin and sexual concupiscence as witnessed by the guilt-ridden poem *Mé Éabha* (Murphy 1956, 50). Karen Armstrong gives examples from the medieval Christian attitude: 'Woman then is man's deepest enemy. She is the harlot who will lure a man to his doom because she is Eve the eternal temptress. Just as Original Sin comes to be linked with sex, so woman is Eve because she is sexual. She demonstrates what the church fathers wrote and felt about women and continues by illustrating how women turn upon each other as occurs in some of our own early sagas such as *Aided Lugdach ocus Derbforgaill* (Armstrong 1986, 60). In Ireland the image of women, refracted through the male writers' perceptions, presented the duality of male (good) and female (evil) but also within the female lay the possible duality of good female (Mary) versus evil female (Eve). In the absence of female writers and image-makers women accept and view themselves through male perceptions thereby turning upon each other in jealousy and hatred. Remnants of the goddess, with her dual representation of positive sovereignty, passive and amenable (Mary) and the negative avenger, uncontrolled, sexual and dangerous (Eve) were perfect icons for Christian writers in their portrayal of human woman. The duality of the goddess, but most importantly of women as a sex, is exploited within this framework of the dichotomy of Mary and Eve (Tymoczko 1985, 22; Warner, 1978).

The most powerful females of the Irish pantheon were vilified and demonized by negating and sanitizing the ancient goddesses who were purged and transformed, with the most appalling violence in some cases, into repulsive, negative images, their powers diffused, their positive sexuality expurgated. The continued reverence of the goddesses seems certain if they suffered such treatment from Christian writers using biblical and traditional images to impact upon the population and destroy the goddesses' psychological dominance. Once reduced to 'troublesome women' their sexuality was now dangerous to human men as evidenced by Deirdre and Medb (O'Connor 1967 34; Hull 1906, 60).<sup>2</sup>

The writer's objective in the sagas seems to be two-fold: teaching women that their position in

<sup>1</sup> See also Herbert 1992a, 269 in reference to *Baile in Scáil* 'locus of power has shifted from female to male.'

<sup>2</sup> Uncontrolled female sexuality has always threatened the male, the orgasm being called *petit mort*, and saga material agrees with psychologists and others in subjugating the sexuality of women (Markale 1972, 148, 267).

society's structure was fixed and that rebellion or independent action would not be tolerated and also to negate the status of the ancient goddesses. The Church may also have intended these sagas as negative examples of the problems, in their eyes, of multiple marriage and unbridled sexuality of women in particular. When the law states that a man goes *re tóin mná*, reversing the normal mores of society, it was unacceptable to the Church. Modern interpretations of the position of women, their own fear of independence and its connection with fairy tales has been discussed by such writers as Dowling (1982) and Kolbenschlag (1979). The Irish tales exemplify the female paradigm of life, depriving women of independence of action as occurs in modern fairytales.

Such texts as *Echtra mac nEchach* (Stokes 1902a, 190) use the image of the goddess as a harmless, even Christian, symbol where the woman submits to the king and makes no unusual demands. The hideous hag/beautiful young woman image concurs with Christian biblical depiction of cities as women (McCone 1990, 155) whose appearance changes according to the pleasures of God or king but who has lost her own overwhelming powers. They do not sleep together, the mere mention of the possibility of the event is sufficient. Étaín/Mess Buachalla, (Bergin and Best 1938, 137), Eithne (Greene 1955, 27) and Emer (van Hamel 1933) wait for their proper prince to come like the docile Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty of the fairytales. This is how it should be, the positive, passive woman behaving in the 'proper' socially acceptable fashion. The image has been continued into our own century which is why these sagas have much to teach concerning the position of women today (Kolbenschlag 1979, 5 and *passim*).

When women behave inappropriately and reverse their roles with men they may be killed and sacrificed or rehabilitated socially as displayed by Bláthnat wife of Cú Rói and Nessa wife of Cathbad respectively in the tales *Aided Con Rói* and *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa*. In the first, despite the variant versions of the tale (Thurneysen 1913a, 189), the woman takes the initiative, rebels against her capture by the monster Cú Rói and through Cú Chulainn's love destroys her abductor. One rendition of the saga (Best 1905b, 20) states quite clearly that the death of Cú Rói occurs because of Bláthnat daughter of Mend. He abducted her as payment for aiding the Ulstermen and in retribution for their unjust reward to him, insulting Cú Chulainn in the process by placing him in the earth up to his armpits, cutting his hair and rubbing cow-dung into his head. As a result, Cú Chulainn does not speak to the Ulstermen for a year.<sup>3</sup> He determines to seek revenge, using his love for Bláthnat as the route to the monster's dwelling, a fortress which she has persuaded Cú Rói to build. By agreement with Cú Chulainn she pours milk into the river indicating that she is washing Cú Rói during which, in an episode reminiscent of Samson and Delilah, she ties his hair to the bedposts, takes his sword and opens the door of the fort. Her death at the hand of Ferchertne, Cú Rói's poet, is as brutal as Deirdre's when she is smashed against the rocks at Cenn Bera, her ribs crushed into her back. Bláthnat wreaks some vengeance taking Ferchertne with her down the slope.

Another version (Thurneysen 1913a, 190) has Bláthnat daughter of Conchobar loving Cú Rói, increasing her treachery in betraying him to Cú Chulainn and the Ulstermen. She reveals that his external soul is hidden in a golden apple within a salmon which appears every seven years. The apple can only be split by Cú Rói's own sword, which feat Cú Chulainn achieves (Baudis 1914, 200). Bláthnat dies even more violently at the hands of Ferchertne with a sword between her breasts. Different as the details may be the anti-feminist message is clear – he is brought to death by the treacherous woman rebelling against her husband and dying a violent death as a result (Markale 1975, 161).<sup>4</sup>

In the longer version of Conchobar's birth, his mother Nessa's rebellion is contrasted with

<sup>3</sup>This saga is one of the sources for *Serglige Con Culainn*.

<sup>4</sup>See also Meyer 1883, 87 which contains a verse similar to that in *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó. He amrae fet gae geirlosnad mór móрмаic Néillmúin ar mug, rún do mnáilmairg dogní cechtar n-aí*, compare with *As-bert Crimthann Nia Náir, ní tardda do rúin do mnáibí/ rún mná ní maith con-celar, maín ar mug ni-aithenar* (Thurneysen 1975, 3).

Bláthnat's, ending in proper social rehabilitation and marriage (Stokes 1908, 18). Faced with the murder of her twelve fosterers by Cathbad son of Ross she becomes the avenging male, not only taking arms but espousing *fennidecht* 'fenianism', a highly unsuitable occupation for a young woman. As the identity of her enemy was unknown to her she devastates all tribes and ventures into Ulster, behaving in typical fenian or *díberg* 'plunderer' fashion (McCone 1986, 1). She is brought to reality by social and sexual rehabilitation on meeting her enemy Cathbad the *fénnid* 'fenian'. He comes between her and her sword, she becomes his 'loving wife' and bears his son Conchobar. Nessa's behaviour contrasts directly with that of Bláthnat who, faced with abduction, the equivalent of the *lánamnas foxail* 'union by abduction' of the laws, chooses to submit to her abductor and bears the most famous of Ulster kings – Conchobar. Later in the same saga however, her capacity for treachery is revealed when she betrays her new lover Fergus mac Róich so that Conchobar might be king of Ulster.

In the saga *Aided Lugdach ocus Derbforgaill* (Marstrander 1911, 208) the heroine suffers a horrific violent death as a result of other women's jealousy. Having been spurned by Cú Chulainn she married Lugaid Riab nDerg. One winter the womenfolk climb pillars of snow built by the men and urinate to see whose urine will reach the furthest. Derbforgaill is called and she surpasses them all. On seeing this, the women wreak their terrible and jealous revenge by plucking her eyes from her head, cutting off her nose, ears and hair so that she will not be the exclusive love of the men (another copy also includes the flesh of her thighs). Following this monstrous torture and sacrifice she dies, Lugaid dies of grief and Cú Chulainn kills one hundred and fifty queens in revenge. Women have turned upon their own kind.

It has been shown that Medb's character in the *Táin* was deliberately rewritten to accentuate her ineffectiveness as a leader of battle and cattle-raids and the inappropriateness of following a woman – even the young bull left her herd and joined Ailill's since he felt it an insult to be connected with a woman's herd of cattle! Her position, originally as mother and sovereignty goddess, now a *bancho-marba*, is undermined and ridiculed when she is caught menstruating at the most inopportune time (Kelly 1992, 69).

When Mac Cana discusses Deirdre's character in *Loinges Mac nUislenn* he concludes that it gives 'a concise yet utterly convincing image of the female' and that 'her character is a remarkable blend of the eminently human qualities of love and loyalty, self-will and sexual seductiveness', continuing with the comment that Deirdre and Medb are adaptations of the archetypal sovereignty goddess and that their 'authoritative self-assurance' derives from their divine roots (Mac Cana 1980b, 10). Whatever the truth of his assessment of Deirdre's character it is the manner of that adaptation which is at issue – the original goddess figure is refracted and her independence declares that a woman as leader of the chase leads only to tragedy, rebellion is fatal.<sup>5</sup> This is the archetypal *aithed* 'elopement tale' (Rees 1961, 279–96) where the woman exchanges places with the male by instigating the illicit union and the flight from outraged authority (Mac Cana 1980a, 74). Abduction by the man would have been in perfect keeping with the *lánamnas foxail* 'union by abduction', an action admissible by law (Thurneysen 1936, 16, 68).

This writer invents Deirdre as the typical 'troublesome' woman whose rebellion against convention and insistence on Naoise's flight to the *díthreb* 'wilderness' has no extenuation, neither *geis*, nor love draught nor love spot. Even before birth Deirdre refuses to conform to the strictures laid upon her by the patriarchal society into which she is born. Screaming her rebellion from within the womb she reaches beyond the boundaries which law and tradition force upon her. Her threat to the stability of the province and her destructive influence on the male relationships between Conchobar, Fergus and

<sup>5</sup> The Rees brothers describe elopements as the mythological inversion of marriage from the female point of view: the man is the innocent lover approached by the woman so possessed with passion that there is no question of the guilt or innocence in her case – a strangely sexist, misogynist view which seems to see women as sexually dangerous and out of control (Rees 1961, 291–93).

Naoise are central to the writer's search to rehabilitate Fergus mac Róich to his descendants and to replace his less honourable desertion of Ulster for the goddess Medb in earlier sources and to explain his position within the Connacht army during the *Táin*: 'the fiction-writer who created the Deirdre story has done a first-rate job of whitewashing' (Carney 1983, 125).<sup>6</sup>

Deirdre's negative initiative is highlighted by contrasting the music, food and drink of the wilderness which she has imposed upon the Sons of Uisliu in Scotland with the civilization which she has forced them to abandon.

*Cid bindi lib in cach mí  
cuslennaig is cornairi,  
is sí mo chobais in-diu:  
ro-cúala céol bad bindiu.*

*Bind la Conchobor for rí  
cuslennaig is cornairi,  
ba bindiu lem-sa – cloth n-ell –  
sían no-gebtis maic Uislenn.*

*Fogur tinne toirm Noísi;  
ba céol bind a bith-chlóisi.  
coblach Arddáin ro-po maith,  
andord Aindli dia úar-baith.*

Though melodious you deem at all times  
Pipers and hornblowers  
This is my confession today  
I have heard music that was more melodious.

Melodious used to deem Conchobor, your king,  
Pipers and hornblowers.  
More melodious I used to deem – fame of hosts –  
the strain which the Sons of Uisliu used to sing.

Noisiu's voice was like the sound of a wave  
To hear him always was like melodious music  
The baritone of Arddán was good –  
The tenor song of Aindle on his way to his shieling (Hull 1949, 48–49, 66–67).

Male liminal life may be acceptable for men like Suibne and Fionn but it was not considered a reasonable permanent state for women who should marry and have children. Neither should it be the path chosen for a king's warrior by a female. Women like Nessa who live in the wilderness usually conform unless they are the shadowy, acceptable, Otherworld figures who train such heroes as Cú Chulainn and Fionn. Early Irish law states that a married woman attacked while in a drinking house alone was not entitled to compensation (Kelly 1988, 134).

Deirdre steps outside her proper role as obedient daughter/wife and refuses the archbull Conchobar for the young bull Naoise. This is a man *re tóin mná*, legally and socially reversed by the 'troublesome' woman who brings him to the wilderness of outlaws. Conchobar is not alone in his

<sup>6</sup> See also Ó hUiginn 1992, 60–61.

fixation upon his youthful bride-to-be; the king of Scotland hearing of her presence sends his servant to woo her, further endangering the Sons of Uisliu and resulting in their return and final annihilation at the hands of Eogan mac Durthacht. Deirdre spends her life hidden in secluded places and never manages to escape unlike Mess Buachalla of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and Rapunzel of the fairy tale. She is fostered apart, brought to the 'wilderness' and concealed in Scotland. When the Sons of Uisliu are taken into service by the king ... *do-rónta na tige connachaced nech leo hí ar dáig naró-marbtais impe* 'the houses were made so that no-one with them might see her in order that they might not be killed with respect to her' (Hull 1949, 46, 64).

Her choice of young man should have brought luck and prosperity to the province if she had been a true sovereignty goddess and the marriage to an aging Conchobar would have resulted in desolation and mayhem. Her refusal to conform with Conchobar's final request, that she live with her lover's killer, leads to her ultimate destruction as she commits the only independent act remaining to her – smashing her head unceremoniously against a rock. Conchobar's stubborn insistence that his wishes be followed results in the otherwise prudent king behaving uncharacteristically because of a rebellious, independent woman.<sup>7</sup>

Deirdre's negative effect is immediate as demonstrated by Niall Buttimer's exploration of the use of sound in the tale; the beneficent effects of the *andord* 'humming' of the Sons of Uisliu is immediately negated by her presence. Their song usually has a beneficial effect upon the province (McCone and Ó Fiannachta 1992, 105–06). *Ba bind immurgu a n-andord mac nUsling. Cech bó ocus cech míl ro-chluined, no-mbligitis dá trian blechta d' immarcraid úadib. Cech duine rod-chluined, ba lór síthchaire ocus airfítiud dóib. Ba maith a ngaisced dano.* 'Melodious, however, was the singing of the Sons of Uisliu. Each cow and each animal which heard it, two thirds of surplus milk always was milked from them. Each person who heard it always had sufficient peace and entertainment' (Hull 1949, 45, 63). The contrast following Deirdre's approach to him is immediate: *At-racht la sodain a andord n-ass. Amail ro-chúalatar Ulaid in-nunn in n-ardord, at-raig cech fer díb di alailiu.* 'Thereupon, his song arose from him. As the Ulstermen yonder heard his song, each man of them arose from the other' (Hull 1949, 46, 63). Following their flight their gift of hunting abandons them: *Ónd úair ro-scáich dóib fíadach in t-shlébe, do-elsat for cethra fer nAlban do thabairt chucu* 'After the mountain game failed them, they turned aside upon the cattle of the men of Scotland in order to appropriate it to themselves' (Hull 1949, 46, 64).<sup>8</sup>

It has been shown that the animal imagery of the *Táin* depicts men and women as bulls and cows respectively (Kelly 1992, 76); its use continues in the dialogue between Deirdre and Naoise (Hull 1949, 46, 63) which results in their elopement, but the bull/cow relationship is contrasted with the ram/sheep imagery when Conchobar says to Deirdre: *súil chaérach eter dá rethe gní-siu etrum-sa ocus Eogan* 'it is a sheep's eye between two rams that you make between me and Eogan' (Hull 1949, 51, 69). There is a derogatory element within this reference which has no echo in the overtly sexual overtones of the encounter between Deirdre and Naoise.

A further negative device employed by the writer is the draught of sovereignty which emphasises Deirdre's adverse affect in the lament at the end of the tale.<sup>9</sup>

*Noísi co mmid chollán chain –  
folcud lim-sa dó 'con tein –*

<sup>7</sup> Leborcham is also a woman blamed, the *bancháinte* who introduces the lovers and fosters their escape.

<sup>8</sup> See also Lysaght 1985, 25.

<sup>9</sup> The negative use of such liquor abounds within the saga material; I hope to return to this theme at a later date.

*Cid milis lib a mmid mas  
ibes mac Nesa níth-mas,  
baíthium riam – rén for brú –  
bíad menic ba millsiu.*

Noisiu with good hazel-mead –  
him I washed at the fire –

Though sweet you deem the goodly mead  
which the battle-glorious Mac Nessa drinks,  
I had heretofore – ocean over its brink –  
frequent refection that was sweeter (Hull 1949, 48, 66).

Deirdre blames herself for Naoise's death, saying that she dealt him the drink of death:

*dó ro-dálius – ...  
in dig tonnaid dia n-érbalt.*

For him I have poured out –  
the deadly draught of which he has died (Hull 1949, 49, 67).

The depiction of women as 'troublesome' characters seems to derive from two sources: firstly the Christian wish to present the duality of good Mary/evil Eve combining the use of biblical images of cities as changing females at the will of God combined with the refracted ideology of the sexual goddess – a perfect combination to denigrate and downgrade women whose sexuality appears to have been an infinite source of male fear and apprehension. By distorting the bifurcation of the sovereignty goddess in particular, women are warned that independence and rebellion are unacceptable, leading to disaster. Secondly, social change in women's position may have prompted this teaching, advancements such as the status of the *banchomarba*, increased power within marriage and the legal system resulting in greater wealth which produced greater power and a possible challenge to male authority. The clerical scribes may also have had a vested interest in downgrading the practices of divorce and multiple and serial marriages in Ireland. Were women stepping out of the mould and making choices that became anathema to the Church or to men in general? (O'Connor 1967, 255).

The threat that women posed to clerical chastity has been omitted but examples are legion. Perhaps one of the most savage is the brief tale where Mo-Ling pierces his organ with an awl, impaling himself upon a *lestar* 'vessel' because his neighbour's wife reveals her *gabul* 'crotch' to him. In revenge he threatens: *ro-riastrat droch-dóine do gobol combat saíthech dít* 'Evil people will distort your crotch until they have had enough of you'. She is subsequently gang-raped by twelve *díbergaig* 'brigands' despite Crón's belief that her dogs will be her protection (McCone 1990, 207). Mo-Ling declares with a vicious, sexist use of the word *tóin* and connotations of bestiality:

*Coin Cróne  
mat he oc imdegail tóne  
cid dia mbiathaiter la Cróin  
coin nad-gabat ica tóin?*

Crón's dogs,  
if they defend a rear,  
why are dogs fed by Crón  
who did not defend a rear? (Hull 1930, 90).