

ULSTER RISING

TEN ESSAYS ON
THE ULSTER CYCLE



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PREFACE

These essays were written during the spring of 2012 for an upper-level university course in medieval Irish Literature. Ten essays (out of about sixty) were selected for their thoughtful analysis of early Irish literature, mainly of tales from the Ulster Cycle.

We find the works discussed here to be deeply engaging, amusingly quirky, and surprisingly under appreciated in the American University setting. We hope this work encourages others to read the primary sources discussed here. The tales amply repay the effort.

T. E. Kinsella, editor
Galloway, NJ

THE ESSAYS

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Hyperbole, Subversion, and Pissing Contests: *The Táin* as Comedy

Sean Lyddon

As the hallmark epic of the Ulster cycle, the *Táin Bo Cuailnge* is a tale full of all the acts of heroism, sweeping battles, and elements of mysticism associated with the term “epic.” However, *The Táin* is also home to various scenes and tropes that seem, at first glance, dissonant with the heroics that mark the overarching conflict in the tale. While such scenes appear to be out of place, a closer analysis shows that they are frequent and consistent enough that to ignore them is to resign oneself to an incomplete understanding of and appreciation for *The Táin*. It is my contention that the hyperbolic descriptions in the text are intentionally so, that the characteristic repetition is largely a set up for subversive comedy, and indeed, the entire epic is, at its core, one long joke. Obviously, one can only guess at what the early Irish would have laughed at, but rejecting out of hand the idea that parts of *The Táin* were intended to be humorous unnecessarily limits discussion. When read with comedy in mind and scrutinized through that lens, *The Táin* reveals itself to be a work of self-awareness and subtlety. In some ways, the epic seems to parody Ulster heroics and suggests—not without precedent—that the early Irish were perfectly willing to laugh at themselves.

Prior to in-depth analysis of the various subtleties

found throughout *The Táin*, it is worth taking time to consider how the epic begins. While Medb and Ailill's pillow talk is indeed important to the plot—it is, after all, how the Cattle Raid is incited—its setting is immediately humorous. The forthcoming battle, in all its grandeur and scope, finds its genesis in the most pedestrian of circumstances, Medb and Ailill chatting in bed. This dissonance is the first indication of the subverted themes that will run throughout *The Táin*, and it is only emphasized by the dynamic between Medb and Ailill. What starts as idle chatting soon escalates into argument, and the path that argument takes highlights both the nature of Ailill's relationship with his wife and the overall tone of the coming conflict. The hen-pecked husband is an archetype still seen today in situational comedies and stand-up acts, and Medb's insistence that the power in the relationship is hers is a reflection of that trope. As the leader of the Connachtmen, Ailill is naturally assumed to be a powerful man, but the audience is immediately shown where the power truly lies. Thus, Medb and Ailill's relationship serves as a dual subversion. First, an assumedly powerful man is shown to be relatively weak, and second, it is his wife that has the power over him—a subversion of what would have been the typical dynamic in that sort of relationship.

The nature of the Cattle Raid itself is dissonant with the heroics it entails, as well. Medb's desire for the Donn Cuailnge is not tied to any properties it has, nor any sort of strategic impetus. Rather, it is her need to upstage her husband that drives her to seek

the Brown Bull and eventually cause the warfare that follows. Furthermore, the conflict begins not because of her initial request, but because a drunken messenger says a bit too much. Thus, it is a petty argument between husband and wife and an inebriated slip of the tongue that lead to a war that will engulf the whole of Ireland.

Another factor that adds to the building comedy in *The Táin* is the relative absence of Cúchulainn in the beginning portion of the epic. While one could argue whether or not Cúchulainn is indeed the primary figure in *The Táin*, he is surely the focus for most of the more “heroic” portions of the text. His early absence implies a more complex style of storytelling than would be expected from what is a typically straightforward genre. Rather than focusing immediately on the main character, *The Táin* provides us with set up from the perspectives of other characters first. The first mention of Cúchulainn is not even direct. When the poet-prophetess Fedelm comes to Medb and provides her visions of the future, she chants,

His great valour brings to mind
Cúchulainn of Murtheimne,
the hound of Culann, full of fame.
Who he is I cannot tell.... (62)

While she later confirms his identity, Fedelm’s oblique references to Cúchulainn read like a wink and a nod to the audience. It is an example of the self-awareness that pervades the text, a way for the bards to let their audiences in on the joke. Fedelm describes the mys-

terious figure that will lay waste to Medb's forces thus:

I see him hurling against that host
two *gae bolga* and a spear.... (62)

These lines in particular, along with the rest of her very specific description, would have been instantly recognizable to an early Irish audience as the hallmark of Cúchulainn. He alone could wield the *gae bolga*, so Fedelm's supposed ignorance of his identity would have been light situational irony that would certainly have been found amusing.

As Medb and Ailill marshal their forces for the impending raid, the foolishness of their endeavor becomes ever clearer, but Medb's determination grows with it. Among the warriors are the Galeoin, whose prowess is made clear when the assembled men go to hunt. With the Ulstermen still in their pangs and these great warriors at her side, Medb's position seems to be a favorable one. However, she insists the Galeoin be split up so that they do not take all the glory from the rest of the army. While the fixation on glory is not in itself humorous, it becomes so when one takes into consideration the cause for all this warfare. Medb divides up the Galeoin so that they cannot steal the glory of *her* victory in a bedroom argument with her husband.

Other examples of humor are less obvious, and only stand out as such when considered within the wider context of the Ulster cycle. For example, when Fraech is sent to challenge Cúchulainn, he says to his followers, "I'll attack him there in the water; he

isn't good in water" (93). Lacking a wider knowledge of Cúchulainn's past exploits, this would have seemed like a reasonable approach. However, previous stories—"The Death of Aife's Only Son," for example—tell us that Cúchulainn's ability to fight in the water is without equal. It is entirely possible that this discrepancy is the result of different bards telling different stories, but given the other instances of irony throughout *The Táin*, it is more likely that Fraech's unfortunate statement was intended to be a joke for an audience that would be familiar with the larger body of tales.

Cúchulainn's interactions with Orlam's charioteer, Fertedil, show a similar instance of ironic humor. When the charioteer first encounters Cúchulainn, he orders the Hound of Ulster to strip a shaft of wood to replace the chariot's broken shaft. Cúchulainn complies, tearing the bark off with his bare hands, and it is only then that the charioteer begins to understand the identity of the man to whom he is issuing orders. Cúchulainn's effortless stripping of the shaft and the charioteer's dumbfounded horror as he realizes his mistake provide another instance of humor, as the audience would naturally realize the folly of the charioteer. When Cúchulainn decapitates Orlam and orders his charioteer to return the head to camp, the image of Fertedil crawling on his hands and knees with his master's head balanced on his back drives home the ridiculousness of his mistake. He is therefore humiliated twice: first when Cúchulainn reveals his identity and then when he is forced to return with the head. That Cúchulainn kills

the man because he did not follow the orders to the letter illustrates the wordplay of which the early Irish seemed to be so fond.

The repeated underestimation of Cúchulainn—and the swift retaliation for such—continues throughout much of *The Táin*, and would have been the source of much humor. When Cúchulainn shatters the skull of one of the Maine, their jester chastises them, saying “That was a fine way to rise against him ... after all your boasting! I would have knocked his head off. At which a stone from Cúchulainn shattered his head also” (97). Here, we see that Cúchulainn is a master not only of combat, but also of comedic timing. The jester boasts that he would knock Cúchulainn’s head off, and as a result his head almost instantly explodes. The consequences of taunting or underestimating Cúchulainn having been made clear, Ailill displays an awareness that borders on genre-savvy, saying “I’ll cut in two any man who scoffs at Cúchulainn from now on” (97). This awareness serves as a humorous foil for Medb’s willful ignorance. While she disregarded Fedelm’s prophecy, Ailill seems to be catching on to the mechanism of the story itself and reacts accordingly. The inclusion of this device, which borders on meta-fictional, seems to be an admission on the part of the storyteller that the Connachtmen ought to be learning by now.

The theme of mistaken identity (as illustrated by Fedelm’s prophecy and Fortedil’s folly) later takes a bit of a twist when Cúchulainn vows to cast stones at Medb whenever he sees her. Mistaking the bondmaid Lochu for her mistress Medb, Cúchulainn kills her

with a sling stone. While this instance is not necessarily humorous in itself (depending, one supposes, on the attitude the early Irish held toward bondmaids), it sets the precedent for a repetition-subversion cycle that the epic uses later to more comedic effect. That is to say, the storyteller repeatedly invokes a trope (mistaken identity, in this case), and once its consequences become predictable, flips it on its head. Furthermore, this particular instance illustrates the way in which Cúchulainn plays by a different set of rules. When his identity is mistaken, the results are universally disastrous, but when the mistake is his, there are no real repercussions. Granted, when one takes into consideration the early Irish fixation on the origin of place-names, one could easily argue that Lochu's inclusion and Cúchulainn's subsequent mistake were in place solely to explain the origin of the name "Reid Locha," Lochu's level ground (100). Regardless of the true purpose of this otherwise inconsequential passage, however, it is illustrative of a pattern that will continue throughout the remainder of the epic.

Furthermore, the emphasis placed on place-names and the explanation of the real world through the narrative lends itself to a sense of meta-fiction that the audience must have enjoyed. Tying the events of *The Táin* to actual locations in Ireland would have given the audience a more active understanding and appreciation for the story, and—more relevant to the topic at hand—its humor. When Medb's forces attempt to cross the river Cronn, Cúchulainn prevents them from doing so, but also kills Roan and Roae,

who were chronicling the Táin: “Some say that this is the reason that the tale of the Táin was lost and had to be found again long afterward” (101). In addition to its meta-fictional qualities, this passage serves as yet another example of the irony one can appreciate only when exposed to the greater body of Irish mythology. It is funny that Cúchulainn, who was content to live a short life if it meant he would be famous, nearly obliterated the record of his own greatest feats.

The second rendering of this portion of the tale, one that focuses more heavily on Medb, is more overtly humorous. In it, one of Ailill’s men discovers that Medb and Fergus are sleeping together. The charioteer, Cuillius, instructed to bring back a sign of the infidelity, draws Fergus’ sword “out of its sheath, leaving the sheath empty” (103). It is, of course, difficult to avoid a Freudian interpretation of this scene, given the circumstances, and Fergus’ frustration drives home the low brow sexual humor implicit in “losing his sword” and the resulting “sheath left empty.” The game of *fidchell* that follows the interrupted use of Medb’s “friendly thighs” serves aptly as a metaphor for the manipulative games both Medb and Ailill are engaged in.

As the passage continues, another example of low-brow humor joins the first provided by Fergus’ sword troubles. Lugaid mac Nois goes to Cúchulainn to ask for mercy for his own men, and Cúchulainn asks if the armies fear him. Lugaid replies “I swear by the gods ... they daren’t make water in ones or twos outside the camp, but have to go in twenties and thirties” (112). While the men’s fear of Cúchulainn—a justified

fear, at that—serves to illustrate his incredible power, the image of twenty or thirty battle-hardened warriors huddling together for fear of urinating alone is one that could reasonably be assumed to have been as humorous to the early Irish as it is today. In this way, the humor serves a dual purpose. First, of course, it is funny, which has merit all its own. Moreover, it builds Cúchulainn up as the epic hero while simultaneously making his foes seem ridiculous. Further in his conversation with Lugaid, Cúchulainn mentions off-handedly that “I have something new for them ... I am taking up sling-throwing” (112). This simple line serves the same two purposes as the quotation above. For all his battle prowess, Cúchulainn is still just barely a man, in terms of his age. The casual way in which he makes this remark reads almost like a child inventing new rules to keep a game entertaining. This child-like boredom again emphasizes his power as an individual and Medb’s folly for rising against him. The humorous nonchalance that makes this warfare seem like a game is only enhanced when Cúchulainn agrees to a series of single combats.

Employing his “something new,” slinging stones, Cúchulainn slays men by the hundreds each night. In order to curtail the loss of their forces, Ailill and Medb offer bribes and, when that fails, strike an agreement for ritualized single combat. Fergus negotiates the terms of combat with Cúchulainn, and upon his arrival the latter remarks, “A big empty rudder ... it isn’t a sword, but a stick he has in his scabbard” (118). Again, the obvious Freudian connotations hint at Fergus’ impotence in the events that have so far

transpired. Fergus is accompanied by Etarcomol, a foster-son of Medb and Ailill's, and he is placed under the former's protection.

When the negotiations are complete, Etarcomol begins to insult Cúchulainn (another instance of that reoccurring trope), who stays his hand for the sake of his friend, Fergus. When Etarcomol insists on fighting, Cúchulainn holds back, first cutting the ground from beneath his foe's feet, then shearing his clothing off, before finally shaving his hair while leaving him unharmed. Again, the humor in this scene comes from the combination of imagery and the folly of one of Cúchulainn's foes. Even after Cúchulainn effortlessly humiliated Etarcomol, the latter insists on fighting. This interaction sets the tone for the following series of single combats, wherein Cúchulainn humorously defeats his foes with little to no effort.

The next day, Nadcranntail goes to the ford to engage Cúchulainn, and finds him catching birds. Despite a volley of thrown spears, Cúchulainn cannot be bothered to pay Nadcranntail any heed: "Nadcranntail let fly a spear at Cúchulainn. Cúchulainn toyed in mid-air with the point of the spear and his bird-catching never faltered" (122). Again, Cúchulainn's actions have a boyish tone; he is playing a game and is so engrossed in it that he scarcely notices that he is being attacked. When Nadcranntail claimed that Cúchulainn was fleeing from him (when in fact, he was chasing birds), the Hound replied, "If he had been carrying real weapons he wouldn't be boasting now; you know I don't kill unarmed men" (123). So great, then, is Cúchulainn's ability that he

considered Nadcranntail's charred-tipped spears to be mere playthings.

While this carries on throughout most of the remaining single combats, it is unnecessary to analyze each fight individually. Whether he is slaying his enemies with sword or thrown apple, Cúchulainn's skill is such that he barely needs to pay attention to the combat. So over-the-top are his feats, in fact, that it seems likely that at least some of the hyperbole was for the sake of comedy. While wielding the *gae bolga* or performing his various spear-feats, Cúchulainn has the air of the typical epic hero. However, some of his other actions, such as the apple-feat or the false beards, have a much more comedic tone. They're impressive in their own way, but they seem intentionally a little bit silly.

The consistent repetition of these themes throughout the single combat passages serves to make Cúchulainn's battle with Ferdia all the more climatic. While Ferdia's appearance and its attendant passages feel tonally different from the rest of the *Táin*, it still shares some of the same comedic elements that are found throughout. For instance, in trying to convince Ferdia to fight Cúchulainn, Medb makes her obligatory offer: "my own friendly thighs on top of that if needs be," to which all assembled reply, "No need!" (169). The repetition of her offer, which the audience has seen consistently throughout the epic, sets up the opportunity for a comedic subversion. Again, there is a self-awareness to this subversion, as though the characters in the narrative are as tired of hearing about her thighs as the audience might be.

Ferdia's interactions with Cúchulainn make for an interesting change in tone, but they are not devoid of comedic elements. The two trade insults prior to combat, and Laeg yells his own at Cúchulainn in order to build up his rage, "Your enemy shook you then as easily as a loving mother slaps her son! He tossed you aside as if he was rinsing a cup in a tub!" (195). The exchange of early Irish trash talking is still funny, but in a less light-hearted way than Cúchulainn's earlier boyish disinterest. This serves to emphasize how much worthier an opponent Ferdia is, as well as set up the impending melodrama that is attendant with his death. Cúchulainn's lamentations, being so different from his earlier complete ambivalence toward the fallen, have a sort of humor all their own. They are most probably intended to be poignant and genuine, but the overly dramatic lament stands out so starkly that it is, in some way, funny.

There are, of course, a number of other examples of humor in the *Táin* that do not pertain directly to Cúchulainn. From Illech's naked berserker charge to Sualdam's incredibly talkative head, the over-the-top humor in the *Táin* only increases when Ulster rises from its pangs. However, they all illustrate the same point about the comedic elements of the epic: the refuge in hyperbole. A more subtle—and more interesting—sort of comedy arises when one considers the narrative as a whole.

From the story's beginning, with Medb and Ailill's bickering, through the single combats and Ulster's rise, the story of the *Táin* builds up to a conclusion that never really comes. The final battle is less an epic

climax and more of a half-hearted scuffle in comparison to the carnage that preceded it. While one could argue that this is a symptom of the medium of storytelling, that the bard was running out of steam, there is another viewpoint worthy of consideration. Taking into account meta-fictional elements that occasionally appear, the repetition-subversion cycles, and the overall amount of humor in the *Táin*, it is possible that the anticlimax that ends the epic was intentionally such. The point, then, would be less about the trials and triumphs of Cúchulainn, or the strife between Ulster and Connacht. The story would then become something of a parody, a self-aware lampoon of its own greater body of tales. Stories like “The Intoxication of the Ulaid” prove convincingly that the early Irish were not unwilling to laugh at themselves, and therefore, one could justifiably view the *Táin* as the biggest joke of all.

The Táin: Simply the Tale of Heroism or Something More?

Kim Thomas

One of the great tales of medieval Irish literature is *The Táin*, an epic tale that displays the valiant deeds of the hero Cúchulainn. *The Táin*, however, is more than some hero's biopic. The tale gives readers a glimpse into early Ireland, with references to many aspects of culture such as clientship, fosterage, and the economy—references that readers might not understand if not for Nerys Patterson's enlightening analysis, *Cattle Lords & Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland*. With Patterson's help, readers can better understand and analyze different aspects of *The Táin*, a tale that describes the war between Medb and Ailill of Connacht and the warriors of Ulster, championed by Cúchulainn. Though Cúchulainn is central to the story, there are elements of *The Táin* that seem to fit oddly into the idea that the war—the basis for Cúchulainn's gallant acts—is a justified or reasonable war. In fact, when looking closely at these elements, the opposite may be suggested. The cause of the war, the bonds of fosterage drawn into the fighting, the humor, and the last battle arguably point to a mockery of war. These key aspects of *The Táin* suggest a reading of this ancient epic that mocks rather than glorifies war.

From the very beginning of *The Táin*, there is evi-

dence that suggests the tale mocks war. It opens with Medb and Ailill comparing their riches to see who has more worth. When Medb discovers that she lacks a bull to compare to Ailill's great bull, she is prepared to do whatever is necessary to find its equal. Its match is found in the province of Ulster, but the owner refuses to give the bull up and the messengers return empty-handed. This, however, is no problem for Medb. She states, "We needn't polish the knobs and knots in this" (Kinsella 58), a statement much like "No need to cry over spilled milk." In other words, Medb was unaffected by the owner's refusal. She goes on, "It was well known it would be taken by force if it wasn't given freely. And taken it will be" (58). With this, the army is assembled and the war begins. There is no looking elsewhere for a great bull, no giving up and accepting the idea of having one less bull than her husband. No, Medb decides that obtaining the bull is enough reason for war. This alone, perhaps, suggests that *The Táin* is mocking this war. For the entire tale to be based on a cow seems absurd.

Today, cattle do not start wars, at least not in most of the modern world. Is it possible that in early Ireland a bull could be so important that a war over one was justifiable? Nerys Patterson explains the importance of cattle in *Cattle Lords & Clansmen*, stating, "... Early Irish society was generally ... supported by a mixed-farming system in which livestock production predominated" (Patterson 62). The economy depended on farming, making cattle, as members of livestock, important. But Patterson goes on to look specifically at cattle, not just livestock in general. She

mentions an Irish proverb that says, "The hound is more beastly than the pig, the pig more beastly than the cow," asserting that the value of cattle far outweighed the value of pigs or dogs (73). She states that cows were treated with care and were believed to have magical, purifying characteristics (72-73). She goes on to declare, "Next to the riding horse, the cow was also the most prized animal" (73). In a society where farming and livestock were economically essential, cattle were greatly prized.

Nevertheless, even with the established high value of cattle, Medb's war over one bull is arguably absurd. Notice that before calling the cow the most prized animal, Patterson states, "Next to the riding horse." While cattle held magical qualities, horses were at one point worshipped in early Ireland (85). So, while it seems ridiculous to start a war over an animal, it's important to note that this bull was not even the most important animal in Ireland. Additionally, Medb's status is about as high as it gets, being a queen, the wife of a Ri. Today, those with a lot of power and wealth generally have many possessions, and it was no different in early Ireland. Patterson states that the ocaire, or farmer of low status (77), had seven cows, while the rank above had ten, and a certain chieftain had twenty (72). It's safe to say that Medb, as upper class as it gets, has a lot of cattle. If she has a lot of cattle, what could one bull be to her? A bull is simply not important enough to be the cause of a war. Medb wishes to be richer than her husband. The bottom line is that it is her pride and greed that start the war, reasons that have been generally considered, univer-

sally and throughout time, adequate to start but not to justify war.

More evidence arises to suggest *The Táin* could be a diatribe against war when Cúchulainn fights his foster-brothers, Ferbaeth and Ferdia. He fights, or is set to fight, Ferbaeth first. Ferbaeth does not want this fight, saying, “Cúchulainn is my foster-brother and sworn to me forever” (Kinsella 129). Cúchulainn himself begs Ferbaeth not to fight: “Cúchulainn begged him, by their foster-brotherhood and by their common foster-nurse, Scáthach” (130). Patterson gives some insight into the significance of fosterage, saying it was an intimate contract and the preferred way to rear children in early Ireland (Patterson 189). Sons stayed with foster families from age seven to seventeen, learning from foster parents and living alongside other children for companionship (190). Though Patterson does not explicitly say that individuals had close relationships with their foster-families, there is enough evidence to suggest that such was the case. Boys essentially grew up and became men alongside their foster-brothers. Cúchulainn would have known Ferbaeth for at least ten years. They would probably have a closer relationship to each other than to their own family, which Patterson suggests by stating, “... The foster-father was the person the child called ‘dad’” (243). So, given the close relationship between Cúchulainn and Ferbaeth, their having to fight one another (again, for the sake of a bull) seems a dire consequence of war. Surely a war that pits brothers against one another is a war that should not be fought.

This dismal situation is soon offset by the humorous outcome of Cúchulainn and Ferbaeth's meeting. As they walk away from each other, Cúchulainn steps on a split holly and throws it to Ferbaeth for him to look at, but he throws so quickly and hard that it pierces Ferbaeth through his head and kills him (Kinsella 130). This may be a tribute to Cúchulainn's sheer power and force, but it might also show what happens when war pits brothers against one another. Bad things happen. Cúchulainn is strong enough to accidentally kill, but this accident occurred because of an upcoming battle: the war is still at fault. The fact that circumstances surrounding Ferbaeth's death are ludicrous again points toward storytellers who wished to mock war, or at least this war.

The fight against Ferdia is another, even more powerful example of the ties between foster-brothers and foster-families. Before Cúchulainn and Ferdia meet, Cúchulainn's foster-father, Fergus mac Roich, laments their upcoming fight and wishes to warn his foster-son. When none of his people will complete this duty, he goes himself (Kinsella 172). This shows a strong connection between foster-father and son. That Fergus mac Roich would risk the trip to Cúchulainn shows their close relationship. When he reveals to Cúchulainn who he is set to fight the following day, Cúchulainn replies, "I swear I don't want this meeting," followed by, "Not because I fear him but because I love him so much" (173). There is obviously a close relationship between the two; their fight will be a sorrowful event. And it is. It lasts several days, and in the middle of their fighting, they lament

the fight, with Ferdia saying,

Sweet Hound, if we part now
—though foster-brothers—without a fight,
think of my ill-fame and shame
at Cruachan before Ailill and Medb. (191)

Ferdia loves his “Sweet Hound” of a foster-brother and acknowledges their close relationship, but because of honor he must fight. One of Cúchulainn’s responses is,

My high heart is a knot of blood,
my soul is tearing from my body,
I’d rather face a thousand fights,
Ferdia, than this fight with you. (192)

It is heart wrenching that these two men who love each other so much must try to kill one another. How can a war that requires that be a just war? Their relationship appears even closer than that of brothers or comrades after Cúchulainn kills Ferdia and delivers and impassioned and, apparently, homoerotic speech, saying things like,

I loved the noble way you blushed,
and loved your fine, perfect form.
I loved your blue clear eye,
your way of speech, your skillfulness. (200)

Cúchulainn loves Ferdia with a love that goes beyond brotherhood:

Our famous foster-mother bound us
in a blood pact of friendship,
so that rage would never rise
between friends in fair Elga. (203)

This again suggests the bond between foster-brothers and the intent of fosterage to prevent fighting between such connected families. Whatever the type of love between the two men, be it a tie between brothers or something more, it formed because of their fosterage. The purpose of this scene could be to show Cúchulainn's strength and power, that he could kill someone close to his heroic abilities that he loved dearly, but it also shows that war, at least this war, has devastating consequences.

Other humorous scenes, similar to Ferbaeth's death, suggest mockery of war. One such scene is Cúchulainn's fight against Larene. When Cúchulainn is asked to spare Larene's life but is also given permission to punish him heavily, he does so in a low-brow but humorous way. When Cúchulainn meets Larene, the text states, "He grasped him in his two hands and ground and rattled him until the dung was forced out of him. The ford grew foul with his droppings" (Kinsella 132). It goes on to state that for as long as Larene lived, he could not relieve himself properly, nor could he eat without being in pain. He is deemed the only man to escape Cúchulainn alive, but it is called a "cruel escape" (132). There is no doubt there is humor in this scene. Cúchulainn does not cut off a limb or handicap Larene in other ways that could still

be serious. No, the storytellers use crude or “toilet” humor to describe this incident. What could be the reason behind this? It could merely be to entertain the audience, but it also could serve as a mockery of war. The humor in this scene belittles the war that is causing so many deaths, a war with questionable origins.

Humor is seen again when Ilech charges against Medb and Ailill’s army. He is Laegaire Buadach’s grandfather, so readers (or auditors) immediately picture an elderly man. The text states, “He came to take vengeance on the army in a decrepit old chariot without covers or cushions” (Kinsella 216). The horses pulling his chariot are described as old and his chariot ancient; here is an elderly man, with chariot falling apart and horses well past their prime, attacking a huge army. On top of that, he is naked. Is he crazy? The description is detailed and graphic: “The whole frame was filled with stones and clods that he flung at everyone who came up to look at him in his nakedness, with his narrow tool and his balls hanging down through the chariot floor” (216). So, this old man, with his “narrow tool and his balls” exposed, is pegging members of the army with stones as he drives his decrepit chariot. He is not a wise, powerful elder who is heroically engaging in combat with his sword. No, he is riding around naked throwing stones at people, and he ends up beheaded. What could be the reason for this scene? Is it simply to insert some humor into the story, so people will stay entertained? The nakedness, like the “dung” in Larene’s scene, is off-color humor. It may have been the norm for early

Ireland, but I would argue that it was meant to shock the audience. It contributes to the systemic mockery of the topic of war.

The humor does not end with *Ilech*. *Sualdam*, *Cúchulainn*'s father, warns the men of Ulster with cries about *Medb* and *Ailill*'s acts of war. He shouts warning multiple times—that people are being harassed, women and cattle taken, and *Cúchulainn* injured. *Conchobur*'s druids ignore the content of the warning, instead replying, "This man is annoying the king," and stating that it would be fitting for him to die as consequence (*Kinsella* 219). *Conchobor* and the rest of Ulster agree: "It would be fitting." Only after acknowledging *Sualdam*'s annoyance does *Conchobor* say anything about the war raging against him: "Still, what *Sualdam* says is true" (219).

There is humor in this passage. *Sualdam*, who believes he is bringing dire warning, is simply considered annoying. Even when *Conchobor* addresses the war, it seems more of an afterthought, a side note, to *Sualdam*'s annoyance. This war is not being taken very seriously, nor does it seem to affect *Conchobor* or his people. Is this because war was common in early Ireland? Were people slow to react back then? Or is this yet another mocking tribute to war? The scene continues: *Sualdam* does not believe *Conchobor* or his followers are doing enough, so he runs from the rath, "But he fell over his shield and the scalloped rim cut his head off" (219). This is a shocking and very odd turn of events. The audience pictures *Sualdam*, in a panicked frenzy, running in circles yelling at everyone about the war, and all of

a sudden he trips and cuts his head off. Of course, it does not end there. His head is brought back to Emain, still shouting its warning. What could be the point behind having Sualdam's head cut off as he runs around shouting warnings? Having this horrible, hilarious thing happen to Sualdam may be yet another mockery of war: the only man who took it seriously ended up with his head cut off.

The last battle, when Conchobor's armies fight Medb and Ailill's armies, could also arguably be a mockery of war, simply because as the last battle, it should be the climax of the war, but instead is an uneventful letdown. At one point in the battle, the enemies Fergus and Conchobor meet, which promises a great, entertaining battle that would be fitting in war. When Fergus asks who holds the shield he has been striking, Conchobor replies, "A better man than you" (Kinsella 247), and reminds Fergus that it was he who forced him into exile. So, the taunting has occurred; all that is left is the actual fight between the two great men. However, it does not take place. Cormac encourages Fergus not to fight his father as it would break pacts and friendships; Fergus instead strikes at three hills, and, "With three strokes he leveled the three bald-topped hills of Meath" (248). These were great blows to be sure, but nonetheless, they do not compare to what a fight between Fergus and Conchobor would have been like. It is disappointing that this war, this great war that has already cost so many lives, has a weak final battle.

A second lost opportunity contributing to this weak ending comes when Cúchulainn meets Fergus

in battle, claiming, “I swear by Ulster’s god, I’ll churn you up like foam churned in a pool! I’ll stand up over you like a cat’s tail erect! I’ll batter you as easily as a loving woman slaps her son!” (249). This “smack” talk or taunting has the audience ready for a great duel, but again, it does not occur. Cúchulainn tells Fergus to “give way” before him, and having previously agreed to do so, Fergus takes his men and leaves, providing another disappointing end for a war story.

This final battle, as weak and limping as it is, has wound down considerably when suddenly the text states, “Then Medb got her gush of blood” (Kinsella 250). To be clear, Medb was not attacked or bleeding from any wound, and she tells Fergus to stand guard while she relieves herself. It is easy enough to surmise the meaning. Again, this “lady moment” seems so strange and out of place that it is probably meant to be humorous. It very well could show the weakness of this powerful woman. While relieving herself, causing three great channels of blood (250), Cúchulainn comes upon her. The two opposing powers have met at last! A fight between the two, or even Cúchulainn’s complete destruction of Medb as she relieves herself, would be a reasonable end to this war. Yet it is not to be. Cúchulainn acknowledges that his killing her would be fitting and justified, but the text reveals that “... He spared her, not being a killer of women” (250). This is noble to be sure, but most would agree that Medb is no typical woman, but much more powerful and the ultimate cause of the war. A fight between the two, or Cúchulainn simply killing her, would further highlight his greatness, the central core of this tale, as

well as give the war a powerful and effective ending. But it does not happen, and the audience is left with an ending that is less than satisfying. Such an ending suggests that the war has not been worth it. A great number of people have died, but the war concludes without powerful battles or heroic feats that would make the whole ordeal worth the suffering and loss.

There is no doubt *The Táin* is a tribute to the great hero Cúchulainn. He performs many valiant acts and single-handedly defeats most of Medb and Ailill's army. However, to focus on his exploits alone would be to do a great disservice to the richness of the tale. The argument that *The Táin* is a mockery of war may not be definitively proven—the original storytellers died centuries ago—but it is strongly suggested by a close reading of the text. *The Táin* might have simply been another great war story; however, the causes for this war, the heartbreaking situations of brother pitted against brother, the humor, and the ending, all seem to suggest otherwise. The war is pointless and unnecessary. Yes, there had to be a reason for Cúchulainn's heroism, and a war is the perfect setting, but *this* war was not justifiable. While some vehicle was necessary for Cúchulainn's story, this war suggests why war is wrong and unnecessary. Perhaps this is a twenty-first century reading wrongly imposed upon an ancient tale—perhaps it is not—readers would do well to perform their own in-depth analysis of *The Táin*.

Heroism in Medieval Irish Literature and Culture

Jessica Walkowich

The prevalence of hero imagery is a significant literary point when considering the nature of early Irish myths and sagas. While the supernatural feats of heroism in many of these tales are clear inflations of reality, they serve undoubtedly as a reflection of the value system of medieval Irish culture. The depiction of several characters within these works is representative of an ideal that the medieval warrior class was encouraged to uphold and aspire to.

Perhaps the most significant figure in early Irish literature is Cúchulainn, the dominant hero in tales from the Ulster Cycle. From birth he is described as an important and unique force. His birthright as son of a god and noblewoman is asserted in “The Birth of Cúchulainn,” and early on it is established that he will be a significant figure to the Irish people. In adolescence, he is recognized for his supernatural abilities. In “The Boyhood Deeds of Cúchulainn” he asserts dominance over his peers and later assigns himself the role of protector after slaying Culann’s massive guard hound. His resistance against the alpha males of his peer group and his promise to personally guard Culann after slaying the hound depict a character who, even from a young age, is greatly concerned with the preservation of honor. The adolescent Cúchulainn exemplifies qualities that medieval Irish society

valued in their warriors, specifically in regards to possessing honor and serving as a protector. The representation of Cúchulainn in “The Boyhood Deeds of Cúchulainn” is the beginning of a series of parallels that can be drawn between the literature and the value system of medieval Ireland.

Cúchulainn’s desire to maintain his sense of honor follows him into adulthood and is observed in several tales. His submission to defeat in “Bricriu’s Feast” after beheading Cú Roí mac Dáire only to have him return to life is revealing of Cúchulainn’s true nature. While Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach flee from Cú Roí, fearful and only concerned with preserving their lives, Cúchulainn accepts the result of the bargain he has made and prepares for death. His acceptance of his fate and his honoring of the agreement he made with Cú Roí, although it would result in death, is ultimately what saves him from death. The decision by Cúchulainn to submit to death rather than dishonor reflects the social beliefs of the time: the life of a warrior, without honor, is valueless. The story not only paints Cúchulainn as an honorable and dignified warrior, it also casts a shadow over the character qualities possessed by Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach, who demonstrate cowardice and a preference for life over honor. Raymond J. Cormier writes, “It has long been affirmed that the archaic setting of the Ulster tales ... preserve for us a glimpse of prehistoric Ireland ... In the context of an early Irish Heroic Age ... Cúchulainn is again justified as a great figure in the fictional cycle of his entertaining adventures” (119-20). “Bricriu’s Feast” served in its time as

medieval Irish social commentary, warning against cowardice and the shame that comes to a person without honor, a message that spoke particularly to the warrior elite.

Cúchulainn is not the only character in early Irish literature whose decisions are driven by the desire to preserve honor. “The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu” introduces Noisiu, a young and dedicated warrior who catches the attention of the earth goddess Derdriu. Noisiu initially refuses to marry Derdriu; however, upon her threat to take away his honor, he immediately agrees to the union. As a warrior, Noisiu engages in something he does not want to do—knows he should not do—solely in an effort to maintain his honor. This allows the audience to understand that honor is his most important attribute. Near the story’s conclusion, Noisiu is killed because of his marriage to Derdriu, but he maintains his sense of honor until death. The brief tale of Noisiu and Derdriu demonstrates once again how highly esteemed the concept of honor was in medieval Irish culture. A warrior was expected to sacrifice anything, even his life, in order to defend it. The qualities of bravery and self-sacrifice that underline many early Irish myths and sagas are crucial in understanding the societal value system of the time.

While honor was considered a primary trait of warrior excellence, the warrior code of early Irish society was multi-faceted. Bravery, strength, ruthlessness, and cleverness were all considered important qualities present in the ideal warrior. Once again, the most significant character to

consider in such a discussion is Cúchulainn. The most obvious way that Cúchulainn exemplifies these qualities can be seen in the physical changes his body undergoes during times of confrontation. This is first seen in “The Boyhood Deeds of Cúchulainn” when he is attacked by the boys on the playing field. He is depicted as an unstoppable physical force. Furthermore, he frequently comes into contact with objects that cannot physically contain him, symbolizing both his physical power and his supernatural nature. This is seen in “The Boyhood Deeds of Cúchulainn” when he is wrestled into the barrels of cold water which explode and boil before finally cooling the immense heat radiating from his body. Furthermore, Cúchulainn is shown as the victor in nearly every story he appears in, violently slaying foes while remaining mostly unscathed. His defeat of the three sons of Nechta Scéne is significant, as no other warrior was able to defeat them. Cúchulainn’s actions in many of the stories represent a warrior mentality that was an undeniable cultural reality. Medieval Irish society valued warriors who were virtually unstoppable, inherently brave, and ruthless in battle.

“The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel” introduces another strong warrior figure, Conaire Mór. Conaire demonstrates superhuman endurance and strength during the attack on the hostel, killing hundreds of warriors singlehandedly. Even after beheading by his enemies at the conclusion of the tale, Conaire is somehow still able to speak, and praises Mac Cécht for his loyalty, bravery, and skill in battle. Conaire depicts a warrior who is fearless,

ruthless, and virtually unstoppable in battle. He has loyal followers and is able to kill hundreds of men even without weapons. Furthermore, he has a supernatural quality that allows him to speak after being beheaded. These were all qualities that were sought after, in one capacity or another, by the warrior elite in medieval Irish society.

The depiction of warriors in early Irish myths and sagas also reflects the importance of loyalty in Irish culture. Cúchulainn, Conaire Mór, Mac Cécht, Noisiu, and countless other warriors from Irish myth are characters who are aggressive, unstoppable, brave, honorable, and deeply loyal to their origins. These are warriors who endure insurmountable odds and violent battles in defense of anything from their *derbfhine*, their homeland, their leader, to their *geasa*. Whether engaged in a one on one battle or a vicious bloodbath, Irish warriors, at least in myth, have a strong set of values that they will die defending if necessary. These values range from maintenance of one's *geasa* and defense of one's honor to loyalty to one's geographical territories. These were values that also had a strong presence in the reality of early Irish culture, especially when considering the tribal nature of Irish society and the importance that was placed on one's *derbfhine*.

Hero imagery is an important part of much of the medieval Irish literature that survives today. The qualities and behaviors of early Irish heroes serve not only to buttress the characters of these tales, but also to hold up a mirror reflecting qualities that were respected and sought after by the early Irish warrior class.

The Three Loves of Cúchulainn: The Impact of Warrior Relationships in *The Táin*

Cat Mount

The opening of *The Táin* seems to promise that Medb and Ailill will be the main characters—that it is their story. It becomes clear very quickly that such is not the case. While they are present throughout and are important characters, the story is really about Cúchulainn. He is the character the audience sees most and it is his reactions to Medb and Ailill that are important. What *The Táin* provides is a character study of Cúchulainn through his interactions with the other characters. Perhaps, most fascinating is the fact that the audience is not only exposed to the feats of a hero: *The Táin* presents Cúchulainn's emotions as well.

Cúchulainn's relationships with Fergus, Laeg, and Ferdia demand attention. Each is different not only because each man is different, but because they depict separate types of relationships. The relationship with Fergus is based in the familial, while the relationship with Laeg is one of friendship. The relationship with Ferdia falls somewhere between the other two and, yet, is neither. Romantic is a term that can be used to describe this friendship. The expression of each relationship serves to make Cúchulainn a far more accessible character.

Before discussing the relationship between Cú-

chulainn and Fergus, fosterage in medieval Ireland must be understood. The fostering of children was common in the early middle ages. It entailed sending children away from their birth parents to be raised in comparable households until about the age of seventeen (Patterson 189-90). This system was important for both the families and the children who were fostered. It “provided for children’s educations and socialization by placing them in suitable homes with adult supervision, including teachers for upper class children, and the companionship of other children” (190). There was also the chance that important alliances would be formed during a child’s fosterage. These were serious agreements that families entered into and required a fee to be paid to the host family. Children were “entitled to a standard of living and education appropriate to the father’s status” (190). This standard, based on status, instilled the societal class system into children from an early age. Fosterage forged bonds between the foster family and the child being fostered. It appears that foster parents and siblings were considered as important as blood relatives. The bonds thus made were not meant to be broken.

With this in mind, the relationship between Cúchulainn and Fergus can be examined. Fergus finds himself in a very odd position when Medb and Ailill march on Ulster. He is the former Ri of Ulster and Cúchulainn’s foster father (Kinsella 172). Certainly Fergus does not want to fight his foster son and, as the story progresses, he never does. Cúchulainn is cordial and generous when it comes to Fergus. When

he is speaking to Lugaid, Cúchulainn tells him that he will spare his men and then instructs him to “tell my friend Fergus to show a sign among his men too” because he has no intention of killing Fergus or his men (112). This is not the last time the reader gets the sense that he cares greatly for Fergus. Later, when Fergus arrives with a message, Cúchulainn politely offers him food (118). These moments, though small in comparison to the larger scope of the war, are important. They show a softer Cúchulainn, not just a victorious hero. He cares for Fergus and wants to do the right thing by him. These are the reactions a man would have toward his father or, in this case, foster father.

Fergus also expresses care for Cúchulainn’s well being. While the hero lies in the waters of the ford, unable to rise as Lóch attacks him, Fergus shouts, “Urge him on!” and follows with “Let someone put heart in Cúchulainn or he will die for want of encouragement” (135). Cúchulainn is the only warrior on the battlefield that Fergus encourages. Of course, there could be several reasons for his instruction. It could be that it is not considered honorable for Lóch to kill a man upon his back in the water or that it is shameful to let Cúchulainn die in such a way. It could be that Fergus’ loyalty is truly with Ulster and he knows that his foster son is the only hope Ulster has. It is far more likely that it is a combination of these things and his relationship to Cúchulainn. Given their friendly and cordial conduct, Cúchulainn and Fergus clearly care for each other. Technically they are enemies supporting opposite sides. But as

Cúchulainn sees Fergus first as his foster father, it is likely that Fergus views him first as his foster son, second as a hero, and lastly, if at all, as a potential enemy. Fergus' priority is to keep his foster son alive.

The extent of Fergus and Cúchulainn's affection for one another is seen one simple moment. When asked to fight Cúchulainn, Fergus refuses. Medb gets him drunk and sends him out anyway, but upon facing his foster father, Cúchulainn submits on the condition that Fergus return the favor in a future battle (164-65). The moment is both touching and telling. Fergus must become drunk before he dares to face Cúchulainn; while sober he refuses on the grounds that they are foster father and son (164). Fergus also banks on his relationship with the Cúchulainn to keep them from battle. Cúchulainn, for his part, will not fight Fergus and quickly compromises with him. Notorious for his warp-spasms, the man who slew a charioteer because he stood up too soon, Cúchulainn will not fight this challenger because they are, essentially, family (96).

In the end Fergus keeps his promise to Cúchulainn and yields to him in the final battle, standing down and going "off with his troop of three thousand men" (249). This, essentially, ends the battle. Without Fergus' troops Medb and Ailill do not stand a chance against Cúchulainn. It seems likely that Fergus is aware of this, but his promise to Cúchulainn overrides any need to stay on the battlefield. Keeping this promise may have something to do with honor price. Honor price is "the amount payable to a person as díre, reparation, for any assault that lessened

his/her social esteem” (Patterson 181). Since refusing to uphold his end of the bargain could have caused Cúchulainn harm, Fergus might have been forced to pay for the infraction both monetarily and with “social esteem” of his own. However, this seems too simple and does not fit with the relationship the reader has seen between Fergus and Cúchulainn. The reader knows they are close and respect each other and would do anything to avoid one another in battle. With this in mind, Cúchulainn’s demands appear to be a way to remove Fergus from the battle and Fergus’ immediate removal feels like a way to give Cúchulainn the advantage.

This relationship suggests that Cúchulainn values the men he considers family. Fergus, as his foster father, is the closest thing to a father the reader sees in Cúchulainn’s life. His relationship with Cúchulainn is far more convincing than the relationship depicted between Cúchulainn and his actual father, Sualdam. Fergus and Cúchulainn will not kill each other; they will not even face each other in battle. The reader is reminded that, despite Cúchulainn’s supernatural conception and his strength, he is still a man who still loved and respects his foster father.

A second important relationship depicted in *The Táin* is between Cúchulainn and Laeg, his charioteer. “I have no quarrel with charioteers,” Cúchulainn remarks to a charioteer of the enemy (Kinsella 95). This simple comment informs the reader that he has some respect for charioteers. They are probably of lower rank than the warriors as they are not engaged in combat in the same ways that men like Fergus and

Cúchulainn are. His treatment of charioteers may derive from the class structure, which was determined by birth, age, gender, and social achievements (Pater-son 197). He knows this man is not a threat to him and thus offers him no threat in return. However, his relationship to his own charioteer goes beyond the expectation of rank and class.

This is not a familial relationship as with Fergus; this is a friendship. The depth of friendship is seen in the casual way Laeg speaks to the warrior. The first time the story describes their interaction, Cúchulainn asks Laeg to look at tracks and calculate how many men marched through an area. When Laeg cannot do it Cúchulainn takes his place, claiming he will not have any trouble. When it takes him some moments, Laeg comments, “Even you don’t find it easy” (Kinsella 72). This exchange feels like a conversation between friends. It is comfortable and filled with light taunting. Laeg is both observing and mocking, but it is good-natured and clear that it was not meant in anger. Though Cúchulainn brushes off the comment, it is easy to imagine the pair sharing a laugh or an amused look. Another testament to their comfortable friendship appears when they are playing buanbach and Laeg calmly describes the men who are approaching from behind (118). The game is barely interrupted by the approach of hostile warriors. The fact that they are playing a game at all is telling. They are relaxed enough with each other that they can play a game while an army masses nearby. It should also be noted that although Cúchulainn is one of the most famous warriors in all of Ireland, Laeg

does not treat him differently than he would treat any other warrior. Their relationship is a close one. They are comfortable with each other, not cordial. Where Fergus and Cúchulainn act very much like a parent and child, Laeg and Cúchulainn act like friends.

The friendship is strengthened as the story progresses into the battlefield. Instead of trying to keep the other alive, they trade pep talks and encourage each other. Before they ride into battle Laeg says,

I swear to the god
I'll do great deeds
before these warriors

and Cúchulainn replies

Now friend Laeg
set our course headlong
into the crush
for Macha's great triumph. (110-11)

They are steeling one another for the coming battle; they are encouraging each other. This is something one would expect friends to do. They are allies willing to fight together, and they are taking steps to see that the other is prepared for battle. The speeches they give are not designed for individual victory but a mutual triumph. This recalls the easy and casual conversations they share. They have no doubts they will survive. This shows that, though he is one of the greatest warriors in Ulster, Cúchulainn is aware that he is not fighting alone. He knows that Laeg is

with him. They will fight together as companions, as friends.

One of the most touching moments in *The Táin* is when Cúchulainn has fallen injured beside a deceased Ferdia and is mourning him. Laeg comes and demands, “Get up, now, Cúcu!” (197). There are two things that strike the reader here. The first is Laeg’s desperation. He is determined to get his friend up and fighting again because an army is about to swarm upon them. He is worried and concerned. The second is the nickname he gives Cúchulainn. He calls him “Cúcu” as though he is trying to soothe him or distinguish himself as a friend. There is something gentle in the nickname. This speaks volumes about their friendship, which is so much more than the pseudo family that Fergus represented. Laeg is his friend and his battlefield companion. He takes it on himself to give a rousing speech explaining that Cúchulainn should be proud of his defeat of Ferdia and that he should stand and fight once more (198). This is Laeg’s way of comforting his friend and rousing him from mourning. Laeg is a good friend and a faithful ally who did not leave Cúchulainn’s side despite how fierce the battle with Ferdia had become. Their friendship is powerful.

What the reader sees in the relationship with Laeg is a hero who is a man. Cúchulainn is capable of sustaining friendships and keeping companions. He is such a good man that this companion will follow him into battle and will rouse him from a stupor, encouraging him to keep moving, and he will do it gently. Laeg cares greatly for Cúchulainn who returns the

sentiment. They both speak to each other of victory and are comfortable with one another—so comfortable that Laeg can say anything without fear of Cúchulainn's wrath. This is yet another way of showing Cúchulainn's humanity.

The final relationship, and the most complex, involves Ferdia. This relationship is quite different from the others. Though they are foster brothers through Scáthach, their relationship feels less like brotherhood and is far deeper than the friendship with Laeg (178). The best way to describe the relationship is to suggest that it is romantic. It is important to note that romantic is not meant to imply that there is a sexual connection between the two, although there is a vaguely homoerotic tone to much of the dialogue between them. Romantic describes a relationship that is too deep to be a friendship and too close to be defined as family. Though Ferdia is only present in the section titled "Combat of Ferdia and Cúchulainn," the relationship between the two warriors is one of the strongest depicted in the whole of *The Táin*.

The first time Ferdia is introduced he is described as "Cúchulainn's very own ardent and adored foster-brother" (169). This could be saying that the other men adored Ferdia, but it seems more likely to mean that Cúchulainn adored him. Immediately this relationship is different from the others. Cúchulainn cares for Fergus and Laeg, but he adores Ferdia. A depth of connection is implied that is not present in the other relationships. This depth is important in understanding the relationship and why Cúchulainn reacts so fiercely to the outcome of the battle.

Early in their meeting, Ferdia makes a comment that suggests the depth of their relationship. He reminds Cúchulainn that while training under Scáthach, “you were only my body-servant, who fixed my spears and made my bed” (181). The knowledge that Cúchulainn was Ferdia’s “body-servant” is very interesting. There is a homoerotic connotation that implies physical closeness and, thus, emotional closeness. Again, one cannot forget that Ferdia is “adored.” This implied physical closeness discounts the claims that they feel something brotherly toward each other. It also suggests a connection that is deeper than family. Theirs is an innately physical relationship. This is seen literally in the battles they have, but also in how they act when they put down their weapons. At the close of the first day’s fighting, they fling down their weapons, and “they came up to each other and each put his arm round the other’s neck and gave him three kisses” (188). This is repeated again the next night (189). In fact, they spend the nights camped together as though they do not wish to part.

When the battle finally comes to a head and Ferdia loses his life, Cúchulainn does not take the death well. He runs to the fallen Ferdia, grabs him, and carries him from the ford, and when he can no longer run, he “set Ferdia down on the ground and there, by Ferdia’s head, fainted away in a cloudy trance” (197). It seems as though Ferdia’s death brings about Cúchulainn’s death. He has lost all will to live and is seemingly content to die next to his companion. It is despair that has affected him as he asks Laeg, “My friend, why should I rise?” (197). Once Laeg finally gets Cúchulainn

up, he cannot stop the lamentation of “Alas Ferdia! Woe for you, before we fought together, that you didn’t listen to somebody who knew my high, brave deeds” (199). This is Cúchulainn at his most dramatic moment in *The Táin* (discounting his warp spasms). He is beside himself with grief, giving one speech of mourning and lamentation after another.

It is important to note that the poetic eloquence Cúchulainn summons is for Ferdia alone. Laeg and Fergus do not receive such heartfelt speeches or beautiful descriptions. One of the most beautiful passages in the text comes as Cúchulainn mourns. He says,

I love the noble way you blushed
and love your fine, perfect form.
I loved your blue clear eye,
your way of speech, your skillfulness. (200)

The depth of emotion he feels for Ferdia cannot be matched against his relationships with Fergus and Laeg. Instead, his detailing of items that he loved about Ferdia is both an expression of love and an expression of Ferdia’s high rank. According to Patterson, “there are seven things by which a man is judged: appearance and family origins, land and homestead, craft (or profession) and treasure, and lawfulness” (211). Therefore, by listing the features of Ferdia he loved the best, Cúchulainn is expressing his emotions and showing the reader exactly how noble Ferdia was. In a way, it is as though Cúchulainn does not want Medb’s lies to taint Ferdia in any way: he is

listing all the things that made him a noble warrior and good man.

What this relationship shows about Cúchulainn is the true depth of his humanity and heart. He does not escape the battlefield unscathed—he loses the people he loves just as all men do. He mourns them. Then he picks up his weapons and returns to the battle because he is a good warrior and a good man. Hurt both physically and emotionally, he must still protect Ulster. At this point the audience views him as a man; his superhuman abilities aside, he is a man who feels and loves and mourns like the rest.

This is the true masterpiece of *The Táin*. It tells the story of a god-like hero who is really just a man. It implies that all men have the ability to be god-like by showing the emotional depth of Cúchulainn. The reader sees him interact with a man who is a father figure, with a friend, and with a romantic companion. His actions are understandable; his relationships, complicated. *The Táin*, so full of Cúchulainn's tremendous feats of strength and bravery, is also where the world finds him the most human.

Women of Ancient Ireland and the Ulster Cycle: People or Property?

Edward J. Horan

Ancient Ireland was, in comparison to other lands of the time, a fairly organized and advanced civilization: without a police force, the early Irish depended on an elaborate system of honor to keep each other in line; without insurance or welfare, they depended on kin to help each other through tough times; they even permitted divorce—even if the dissatisfied partner was the wife. So, not only were they legally advanced, but they were socially advanced as well.

A certain level of power to and equality of women, then, flows logically from the legal and social advances of the early Irish. Historical sociologist Nerys Patterson claims, for example, that Irish women had many rights and powers and that scholars who claim otherwise have either failed to consider the full texts of the laws (when full texts are available, of course) or have relied upon insubstantial translations; some, she argues, even ignore the laws altogether because of their incomplete or seemingly incorrect nature (Patterson 9-10). Patterson, then, through her own studies, makes her own claims. She says about women: “[They], though socially diminished as compared to men of the same rank by birth, nevertheless held property, had honor, and could take

limited autonomous steps to protect or enhance their social position.” She goes on to explain the modifier “limited” in terms of the legal actions women could take: in order to take legal action, women essentially had to be represented by a male relative (23). Clearly, then, women were not completely equal to their male counterparts, but they were close in those abilities and properties that the law granted them.

In the stories of the Ulster Cycle, one of the four major tracts of early Irish literature, this idea of women as “equal but not really” is apparent. In *The Táin*, we see the robust, demanding, powerful nature of Medb, wife of Ailill, the king of Connacht, along with her slue of belongings and wealth. We see Medb explain her reasons for choosing her husband, yet we also see Medb and Ailill repeatedly betrothing their daughter Finnbair to countless men to bait them into fighting Cúchulainn, bolstering the idea that Irish law lacked total equality for women. While Finnbair seems to play along with her parents’ schemes, there is another character of the Ulster Cycle, Derdriu, who is pursued by a man she does not love—to the point that her lover is killed. There is also the struggle between Etain and Fuamnach for Mider’s love, a struggle in which a purchased wife seems almost to fall in love with her husband—or owner, it may seem. So, while we see reflected in the literature of the Ulster Cycle some of the equality and power of women as prescribed under Irish law, we see also a certain inequality, helplessness, and objectification of women that seem also to come from the law.

Medb, Queen of Connacht, is perhaps the most

powerful of the women of the Ulster Cycle. Aside from her power, she even possesses much wealth independent of that of her husband. While reading *The Táin*, we see that Medb seems to hold these facts over Ailill's head. Within the first few lines of the story, Ailill tells Medb, "you are [much better off] today than the day I married you," but Medb disagrees immediately, citing the thousands of soldiers over whom she ruled before marrying Ailill and over whom she still rules. She also cites the whole province of Ireland that her father gave to her (Kinsella 52-53). Of course, this reflects the equality of Irish women with their male counterparts: as the laws state, women were allowed to own property (Patterson 21), and we can infer from Medb and Ailill's dialogue—and their married life in general—that Irish law did not require women to remain subservient to their husbands.

We even see a discrepancy between Medb and Ailill's marriage and what Irish law seems to tell us about this institution: while Patterson's evidence points to possible equality between husbands and wives, the way in which Medb describes her union with Ailill points to her dominant position. She explains all that would have been wrong if she had married certain types of men and that these hypotheses led her to get "the kind of man [she] wanted" (Kinsella 53). She did not get the type of man that her father wanted for her, and she did not get an unappealing man who courted her ceaselessly—and we can imagine that there were many men courting Medb, with her friendly thighs and all. Medb got the man she wanted; and, with all the gifts that

she brought to her marriage, she tells Ailill, “you’re a kept man” (53-54); in a sense, then, Medb owns her husband.

This step above her husband is not the only way in which Medb departs from what seems to have been the norm of her times. As already stated, Patterson believes that women could choose to take legal action, but only if a male relative (probably a husband) would agree to do it for them (21). However, the whole story of *The Táin*, although it does not describe exact legal actions, surely involves the legal sphere: Medb, in an effort to prove herself equal to or better than her husband, starts the whole bloody raid simply to steal the Brown Bull of Cuailnge. So, not only does she not ask her husband’s permission to perform this task that would render her value above his, but she is the raid’s primary leader, and she even has the support of her husband and his men.

While control of the raid seems, from time to time, to shift from Medb to Ailill, Medb is the overall leader of the operation—that is to say, she makes most major decisions, which leads to the utter destruction of her men and power. (Interestingly, for this reason *The Táin* may even be interpreted as a story that warns against allowing women to grow too powerful: just look at what Medb’s thirst for power and wealth did to her and her allies. In this sense, *The Táin* may be taken as a reminder to ancient Irish men to keep their wives in check.) Just before Medb and Ailill’s army sets out, Fedelm, a young and beautiful seer, approaches, and Medb—not Ailill—addresses her. Despite Fedelm’s assurance that the end of the raid

looks dismal, Medb and her army move forth anyway (Kinsella 60-63). Think about this again: Medb addresses Fedelm. Ailill, we can imagine, stands back quietly, used to his wife's habit of taking the reins and allowing her determination to force her forward. He permits his wife, a woman, to take control.

One may even take Fedelm herself to be a symbol of feminine power, but of a kind different from Medb's: Medb's is a sort of overzealous thirst for control, whereas Fedelm's is a voice of reason within the torrent of Medb's plan; it is a first and final plea for sanity before Medb and her army set out for the Brown Bull of Cuailnge. So, in this sense, while one may read Medb's actions as perfect examples for the case against permitting women to obtain or seek too much power, one must also examine Fedelm and balance her reason against Medb's delusion.

Medb, as ruler, makes a handful of other decisions along the way. Early on the journey, she expresses to Ailill and Fergus her concern over the three thousand Galeoin men, whom she believes are the best soldiers they have. They are so good, in fact, that Medb is concerned that they would receive all the credit for their army's success. The only plausible solution she could come up with? Kill the Galeoin (Kinsella 65-66). However, this is one occasion on which Medb cannot get her way: Ailill insists that the murderous plan is "a woman's thinking." While Fergus does not necessarily agree with that sentiment, he does agree that it would be wrong to kill friends and fine soldiers, so they agree to disperse the Galeoin among the army instead of destroying them (66-67).

It is important to note Ailill's words—his way of saying that choosing to kill the men is “woman's thinking”—because they allude to the idea of Irish women as nearly but not completely equal. Of course, Ailill could mean something slightly different; he could mean not that wanting to kill the Galeoin would be a woman's decision, but rather that the fact that Medb's idea to do so came from extreme pride: she did not want the Galeoin to receive credit for what she believes will be a successful raid. In that sense, Ailill could be saying that Medb's proud thinking is typical of women. Either way—whether it be pride or rashness that lies behind Medb's plans—Ailill effects a differentiation between male and female thinking; and by claiming that Medb's “woman's thinking” is morally wrong, he puts his own “men's thinking” on a level superior to that of women's thinking, thereby keeping men at a level above women.

Medb and Ailill together objectify their daughter Finnbair repeatedly in order to bait men into battling Cúchulainn. This starts with Maine Andoe claiming that he will go after Cúchulainn if Finnbair is added to his compensation. Medb readily agrees (Kinsella 122).

Medb and Ailill do the same thing in the section titled “Combat of Ferdia and Cúchulainn,” which was almost certainly added to *The Táin* between two and three hundred years after the rest. When Medb and Ailill finally succeed in luring Ferdia to their camp—before even addressing him—they throw Finnbair on him: “She handed him the goblets and cups, with three kisses for each cup. And at the neck-

opening of her shirt she offered him certain fragrant sweet apples, saying that Ferdia was her darling and her chosen beloved of the whole world.” It is only after “Ferdia was full and in good humor” that Medb brings up fighting Cúchulainn, and it is only after Medb and Ailill offer Finnabair as a bride for Ferdia that he finally accepts their request to battle Cúchulainn (Kinsella 168-72). This is clear objectification of Finnabair, and the intriguing part is that Medb, a woman, gladly objectifies her own daughter—essentially using her as a whore—just to assert her rank and station.

One may argue that Medb and Ailill certainly wanted Ferdia to battle Cúchulainn, but they also wanted him as their daughter’s husband. However, there is a brief exchange between Medb and Ailill that erases this possibility. Ailill says to his wife, “We have done well with the marriage agreement, anyhow, if he kills Cúchulainn. It is all the same to us if they both die. Still, it might be better if Ferdia escaped” (Kinsella 177). Ailill, therefore, is certainly not unhappy with the possibility of having his daughter marry Ferdia, but this sentiment clearly comes as an afterthought; his primary concern is Ferdia’s battle with Cúchulainn; Ferdia’s survival and marriage to Finnabair would merely be an acceptable secondary outcome of the battle.

In *The Táin* we also see one particularly interesting example of the less than equal status of women, although this event may actually be only an example of chivalry. Towards the end of the story, Medb is hit with “her gush of blood” and must back up from

the battle to relieve herself. “Cúchulainn found her like this, but he held his hand. He wouldn’t strike her from behind. ... he spared her, not being a killer of women” (Kinsella 250).

There are two sides to this example: the first is straightforward chivalry; Cúchulainn would not kill Medb simply because she is a woman. She may have played unfairly throughout the whole ordeal; she may have had a fiery desire for the death of Cúchulainn; but Cúchulainn will not kill her because he thinks that it is wrong for a man to kill a woman. A second approach to this situation suggests that chivalry itself puts women at a lower level because it implies that they need special care. Ironically, given that Cúchulainn has killed thousands of men, it is almost as if his failure to act says that thousands of men are not worth quite the same as one woman.

Outside the literature of *The Táin*, we see further examples of a sort of inequality between early Irish men and women. In “The Wooing of Etain,” the Macc Oc purchases Etain, daughter of Ailill (who in this story does not work under the influence of his wife), for Mider, his foster father. Etain has no say in the matter: she is simply passed around like any other inanimate good (Gantz 43-44). This situation, although in it the daughter of Ailill has a different name than that found in *The Táin*, echoes the objectification of Finnbair: both women are treated as objects of desire, although Finnbair seemed almost to welcome such treatment or at least seems willing to endure it; by comparison, Etain’s situation seems worse because she remains silent while the

men make her decision for her.

After Mider brings Etain home, his wife, Fuamnach, grows jealous (Gantz 45), even though Irish men of the time were permitted to have more than one wife. Fuamnach does not accept this, so she magically turns Etain into a puddle of water, which, through a series of events, became a fly “the size of the head of the handsomest man in the land.” This enlarged fly version of Etain makes a point of staying with Mider, and Mider would not take another wife as long as the fly was around. The fly “would awake him when anyone approached who did not love him” (45-46).

Etain and Mider’s behaviors are complex and somewhat puzzling. First of all, there is the issue of Etain-the-Fly’s devotion to Mider: Etain had been purchased for Mider; she is completely objectified. However, the way that Etain acts as a fly makes it seem as though she, like Finnabair, is okay with her objectification (it is intriguing, by the way, that she is less passive as a fly than she is as a woman). If that is not the case, then she must simply accept that her role as a woman is to serve a husband and make him happy. Etain, although she lost her human form, seems entirely content to be a serving, if not loving, wife: she devotes all her insect energies to fighting against Fuamnach to remain with Mider and protect him.

Mider’s behavior too is complex because it is inconsistent. When Fuamnach was his only woman, he desired to have another, so Etain was purchased for him. He did not, it seems, have any emotional connection to her; he simply wanted another woman.

However, once Etain is his and becomes a fly, he wants no other woman: he is more content with the fly version of Etain than he was with the human form of his wife Fuamnach. However, since Etain was purchased for Mider, is it not fair to say that he probably did not truly love her? After all, such a businesslike transaction does not point to love. If that is the case, why would Mider be so attached to a woman whom he did not love? Perhaps the answer lies with Etain's objectification: because the Macc Oc purchased her, it is almost as though Mider sees not the value of the woman, but the value of the dollar, so to speak; he is simply concerned with preventing the Macc Oc's transaction from becoming a waste.

Perhaps the greatest example of questionable treatment of women in the Ulster Cycle is Derdriu and her experience in "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu." When Derdriu's mother was pregnant with Derdriu, the druid Cathub explained that Derdriu would grow to become extremely beautiful and that because of her there would be much slaughter among the Ulaid. Because of this, Conchubur decided that he would take care of raising Derdriu, so that no man would see her before Conchubur got to sleep with her (Gantz 258-59).

Derdriu grows up and meets Noisiu and realizes from the moment she first lays eyes on him that he is the man for her. He refuses to take her as his own, citing Cathub's prophecy; however, Derdriu essentially puts a geas on him so that he must take her. He does, and before long each is madly in love with the other, but they must remain in hiding, as Conchubur

is surely vengeful about the situation (260-61).

While Conchubur's greed-based decision to hide Derdriu from infancy points to his objectification of women, Derdriu's behavior points to no such thing; rather, it points to the complete opposite: she takes actions into her own hands, selecting for herself the man she knows that she wants, giving him no choice despite the horrors that will arise because of it. Derdriu's behavior is like that of Medb: it is cunning and powerful. She knows what she wants and how she can use herself to best obtain it.

Things do not remain peachy, however, for Derdriu and Noisiu and the other sons of Uisliu. For a number of years, many spent outside Ireland, the group hides successfully from Conchubur. Eventually, though, he finds them, kills the sons of Uisliu, and "Derdriu [is] taken to stand beside Conchubur, her hands tied behind her." Naturally, Derdriu is miserable, and the people of the land—as Cathub prophesied—blame her for the many exiles and long-lasting suffering. Understandably, Derdriu is never kind to Conchubur, for he destroyed her husband and her happiness. In the end, when Conchubur is going to pass Derdriu to Eogan mac Durthacht, Derdriu finds her chance to escape: rather than continue to be objectified by these men, she takes her life by smashing her head against a boulder (Gantz 261-67).

First of all, the war that Conchubur fomented exists merely because he desires Derdriu, much as Medb desired the bull. The difference, however, is that while people may consider animals, like bulls, to be possessions, they cannot consider other humans

to be possessions. Again, this is a prime example of Ulstermen's objectification of women. That the people would blame Derdriu for Conchubur's war is shocking. She may have chosen to be with Noisiu, but she did not choose to have Conchubur wreak havoc because of his desire for her. The fact that the people blame Derdriu shows how much more willing the people are to blame a woman than they are to blame a man. (Granted, of course, Conchubur is their Ri, but given the value of honor to the Irish, it seems that they would or should recognize even their Ri's misguided and dishonorable behavior.)

Derdriu's escape may be viewed two ways. On one hand, it is beautiful: she finds her chance not only to save herself from the miserable life that Conchubur has created for her, but also to cease Conchubur's objectification and disrespect of her. She is so willing to do this, in fact, that she sacrifices her own life. On the other hand, one may argue that Derdriu's suicide is merely the outcome of the objectification of women: Conchubur treated her like an object to be pursued and kept for himself, and this continued pursuance pushed Derdriu to suicide.

Patterson's interpretation of early Irish law envisions a society in which women could be treated similarly to men, yet nowhere does the law say that women may not be pursued as though they were possessions or purchased as brides—in fact, some who researched before Patterson suggested that this was the first way in which a man would take a wife (Patterson 22). The literature of the Ulster Cycle seems to reflect this dual nature of the law and to

capture just how laws might have been interpreted and how women might have been treated because of these interpretations. It would seem, because of this connection between the literature and the law, that Nerys Patterson's theories about early Irish culture are accurate.

A Hard-Headed Woman

Eileen Echikson

Throughout history, and across numerous cultures, women have generally been dealt a meager hand, securing less rights than their male counterparts. Keeping this in mind, the freedoms that the women of early Ireland possessed may come as a surprise. Author Nerys Patterson claims, “Women, though socially diminished as compared to men of the same rank by birth, nevertheless held property, had honor, and could take limited autonomous steps to protect or enhance their social position” (21). Even though women still had to depend on a father, brother, or husband for legal support and the inheritance of property, Irish law-tracts afforded them rights that a nineteenth-century (or early twentieth-century) American woman might envy.

These law-tracts and all other forms of historical data have relied upon a centuries-old oral tradition as their means of transport. As a result, very little exists in the way of historical texts that explain early Irish customs. This incomplete history may be better understood if one combines the work of historians with an educated interpretation of medieval Irish folklore. *The Táin*, as close as Irish literature comes to an epic, offers some insight into various aspects of its earlier culture, such as medieval Irish marriages within the upper class. Ailill and Medb’s marriage is in

many ways both a model of success and a psychological study on ancient gender relations. Furthermore, the complexly characterized Medb is the only female in the story for whom the storyteller offers significant focus. Thus, it appears that her words and actions, though exaggerated and bizarre, offer a historic male perspective on the female persona. This perspective seeks to find a reasonable place for women in a fragile society that is maintained and dominated by males.

The Táin opens with the section titled “Pillow Talk.” Here, the reader sees Medb in a rare state of vulnerability. She is lying in her husband’s arms, while he reminds her, in a soft whisper, that she is his inferior. Ailill instigates what appears to be a lighthearted quarrel when he says, rather casually, “It is true what they say, love. It is well for the wife of a wealthy man” (Kinsella 52). Whether this line is said in jest or with male-chauvinist sincerity, Ailill appears to be putting Medb in her place. Either way, his wife immediately disagrees, and the two proceed to a showdown of personal wealth and importance.

The tale reads, “Their herds of sheep were taken in off the fields and meadows and plains. They were measured and matched, and found to be the same in number and size” (54). This passage seems to suggest that the royal couple have abruptly risen from their bed for the sole purpose of proving each other wrong. Metaphorically speaking, however, this humorous image is quite similar to traditional preparations that existed within early Irish culture. Patterson asserts that “the matching of the spouses’ assets was a key feature of both Gaulish and Irish marriage” (25).

And so, though this matching of sheep, clothing, and goblets may seem ridiculous to a modern audience, it is also mimicking the early stages of marriage, when man and woman were carefully examining what their potential mate was worth. However, in this couple's case, the two have already married, yet both are revisiting this marital ritual. The intensity with which Medb strives to match her husband may be interpreted on a psychological level: Medb may indeed feel inferior to her husband, and so she is overcompensating in an attempt to regain control.

While debating with her husband, Medb states, "I asked a harder wedding gift than any woman ever asked before from a man in Ireland—the absence of meanness and jealousy and fear" (Kinsella 53). The mention of a wedding gift in this way is rather peculiar, for Medb is speaking not of a physical object, but rather of certain attributes, which she eventually found her husband to possess. Within the context of medieval Irish culture, marital gifts were known as *coibche*—a gift "paid by the intended husband to the father of the bride." This marital gift was equal in value to the bride's honor-price, and it served as "the establishment of a legal instrument" (Patterson 297-98). From this definition, one can see that Medb's concept of a marital gift was unconventional. Furthermore, the fact that she *demand*s it of her husband places her in a position of power, in which it is not just Ailill's choice but hers as well that they marry. At the same time, there is a hint of romance in Medb's request. For the first time, she looks to Ailill rather than her personal possessions.

Medb continues, as she says, "It would be an insult if I were more generous than my husband, but not if the two of us were equal in this" (Kinsella 53). Here, the queen is expressing the idea that a successful marriage cannot simply depend on the structure of Irish law-tracts, but that a like-mindedness, a chemistry must also exist between husband and wife.

While material possessions play a key role in forming an acceptable marriage, family lineage was important as well. Medb asserts that as the daughter of Eochaid Feidlech, the former Ard Ri of Ireland, she is of equal status to her husband. Ailill acknowledges his wife's royal lineage when he replies, "I never heard, in all of Ireland, of a province run by a woman except this one, which is why I came and took the kingship here" (54). Here, Ailill's statement reveals a sort of strategic thoughtfulness that he took into consideration when deciding whether Medb would make a fitting wife. This element of strategy existed within Irish marriages of the time period. Patterson writes, "For the upper stratum of society, marriage was an aspect of politics" (322). Ailill did indeed employ some political strategy when he married Medb, for before that he was not a king. Knowing this, then, it is confusing that Medb is not accusing Ailill of being better off after marriage.

Ultimately, this scene contributes to an understanding of the couple's dynamic in an insightful way. Medb reacts in a way that suggests her pride has been injured, as she states, "It still remains that my fortune is greater than yours" (Kinsella 54). This statement is rather empty, almost pathetic, in that Medb has

stopped offering solid evidence to support her position as Ailill's equal. Instead, she throws out this somewhat childish retort. Medb's words imply that her weakness has been revealed: her marriage forced her to hand over at least some power to her husband. This detail is pleasing to Ailill, although deeply unsettling to his fiery wife. Ultimately, his comment provokes the couple's final challenge.

One aspect of Medb's character that is demonstrated throughout *The Táin* is her use of sexuality as power. This is shown when the queen devises a bargain to win her the "Brown Bull of Cuailnge," the only bull in all of Ireland that will match that of her husband. Medb sends a messenger offering the following to the bull's owner, Daire mac Fiachna: "I'll give him a portion of the fine Plain of Ai equal to his own lands, and a chariot worth thrice seven bondsmen, and my own friendly thighs on top of that" (55). Here, Medb appears to be using every last resource she can muster to triumph over her husband. Significantly, Ailill appears to be absent from the scene, which is somewhat amusing. It seems telling that the storyteller would have the female character of highest status be associated with adultery, adding more weight to the importance of the negotiation.

Furthermore, this flaunting of one's sexuality is presented as one of Medb's strengths, for she uses it throughout the tale to convince men to fight for her own selfish cause. Ultimately, the casual and frequent appearance of Medb's "friendly thighs" serves to stress that marriage was seen, first and foremost, as a contract; adulterous affairs seem to have been as

expected and perhaps even as socially acceptable in historic Ireland as they were in Irish folklore.

Medb's "friendly thighs" appear later on in the tale, after many of the Connacht warriors have been sacrificed in an attempt to defeat Cúchulainn. The queen chooses Ferdia, Cú's foster-brother, as a fitting warrior; and again, she offers an abundant and varying award. Toward the end of her extravagant list, she adds, "and Finnabair, my daughter and Ailill's, for your wife. And my own friendly thighs on top of that if need be" (Kinsella 169). In addition to offering herself once again, Medb mentions her own daughter as another form of payment. This can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, Finnabair has been offered to numerous men before, and none have spent so much as a night with her. So, perhaps Medb understands what she must say to motivate young warriors, though she never intends to fulfill her end of the bargain. On the other hand, Medb appears to have no problem making use of her own sexuality, and so perhaps she feels all women may make use of this strength.

When Ferdia does not accept the offer, as Medb expected, she does not flinch. Instead, she proves to be both resourceful and manipulative when she tricks Ferdia into agreeing to fight. She says, "What Cúchulainn said was true ... he wouldn't count it any great triumph if his greatest feat of arms were your downfall." This instance shows that Medb appears to be very familiar with the opposite sex; for while she has only just met Ferdia, it takes little effort for her to turn this legendary warrior against his own foster-

brother. The storyteller says of Medb, “She knew well how to stir up strife and dissension” (169). In other words, this queen is so powerful that, with just a few words, she can destroy a life-long bond between two men. This scene offers a perspective that was shared by men of this time period: that women possessed a strength in clever scheming and, more importantly, that they posed a threat to male relationships.

Medb’s threat toward males is made obvious on a larger scale in her dealings with the Connacht army. In one passage, Medb unflinchingly suggests to both Fergus and Ailill that one of their troops, consisting of three thousand men from Leinster, be murdered. She explains that due to their excellent skills, they “would get all the credit for [the] army’s triumph” (66). And, if they were abandoned, she claims they would plunder her royal land. At this point in the story, Medb’s power is presented through inhumane and destructive reasoning. In one way, also, this scene mimics the royal couple’s argument at the opening of the story. Just as Medb sought to show her husband she was his equal, her main concern in the army is not that it be powerful and successful, but that each warrior within her army possesses an equal amount of skill. From the perspective of the tale this is presented as *female* logic, for both Fergus and Ailill strongly disagree with Medb’s strategy. Both men are aware of a male bond that exists between themselves and all men who have taken up arms with them (from which Medb is naturally excluded). Ailill states, “That is a woman’s thinking and no mistake! A wicked thing to say” (66). Again, Medb’s chief and most threat-

ening characteristic appears to be her disregard for male relationships; although this time, the males mentioned are not foes, but her own followers.

Much of *The Táin* consists of numerous repetitive and structurally similar scenes in which one of Medb's warriors battles Cúchulainn and is killed. Despite this, Medb fails to gain the kind of respect for Cúchulainn that is exhibited by Ailill and others. Toward the beginning of the tale, after Cúchulainn has killed several men who dared taunt him, Ailill warns, "I swear by the god of my people, I'll cut in two any man who scoffs at Cúchulainn from now on" (Kinsella 97). Perhaps Medb heard this warning and disregarded it because it was only male-inclusive. Nevertheless, if Ailill had warned Medb with the same threat, it seems unlikely that she would have obeyed.

Medb's indifference toward the all-powerful Cú must have been both shocking and hilarious for ancient auditors. One scene that was surely intended to be humorous occurs before Loch and Cúchulainn fight. In an attempt to conceal his deceptively boyish looks, the Ulster warrior dons a beard made of grass so that his teasing opponent, Loch, may fight him. The crowds surrounding Cúchulainn fall for this disguise. The storyteller explicitly mentions a group of women who say, "Look. Cúchulainn is bearded. A warrior may fight him now" (Kinsella 134). Neither the group of females mentioned here, nor the frightened warrior, Loch, dare mock Cúchulainn's artificial stubble. Medb, however, offers some motivating words to Loch. She says, "It is a great shame on you

... Surely a peppery overgrown elf like him can't resist the fiery force of a warrior like you" (134). One wonders, reading this remark, whether it represents a loss of sanity. Scores of her men have gone before Cúchulainn and died horribly. And so it is a wonder that Medb could anticipate any other outcome for Loch. One may also interpret this passage by coming to the conclusion that Medb does not have a strong brotherly bond with any of her men. She views all of them as expendable, and she seems more than willing to dispose of them—either by her own hand or Cúchulainn's.

Throughout *The Táin*, Medb expresses an imperishable stubbornness that is shown to be destructive toward all things. Often, it appears that Medb is not only challenging the confines of marriage, but also the foundations of Irish culture, and even nature itself. As Medb, Ailill, and her army assemble and prepare for the capture of Donn Cuailnge, the tale reads, "The Monday after Samuin they set out" (63). There are two ways to interpret this statement: that the army set out on the Monday after the day of Samuin (our Halloween) or that they set out following the *season* of Samuin, thus after the winter season. If the first interpretation is adopted, Medb is beginning her cattle-raid at a time when no Irishman would think to do so. The season of Samuin is a time of conservation and quiet.

If we interpret the statement to suggest the raid began after the season of Samuin, the storyteller's choice of season remains significant when juxtaposed with Medb's character. Imbolc, the season

following Samuin, takes place in early spring. It is strongly associated with women and, more specifically, fertility. Patterson describes a “ritual emphasis on women’s interests and on milk” (130). This detail seems to suggest that, though Medb was not of the farming class, her decision to lead an army in a bloody and violent quest for a cow was not a typical feminine activity. At the same time, however, the phrase “women’s interests” is rather broad. There is a slight chance that this phrase could be alluding to any single woman’s interest, rather than the concerns which women conventionally had (such as milking, grinding wheat, or giving birth) (130).

Patterson continues her commentary on this season by stating, “Springtime warfare was secondary to summer campaigns because it was less profitable” (133). In the context of *The Táin*, this comment suggests that Medb’s stubbornness went against the very core of old Irish life. She chose to embark on a destructive mission at a time when her fellow people were focused on productive tasks that would enable their survival through the harsher parts of the year. The countless warriors’ deaths that follow Medb on her single-minded mission only underline her discord with nature: she is a woman initiating battle at a time when the Irish soil is flowering.

In conclusion, *The Táin* presents the audience to two characters, Medb and Ailill, whose marriage was carefully structured by Irish law. Despite their legal arrangement, however, there was plenty of room for chaos. Medb’s indifference toward men and their relationships can be interpreted as mere careless-

ness; or, it can be seen as a woman's overcompensating attempt to regain the power which she obediently handed over to her husband upon their marriage.

In addition, Medb's character in many ways presents certain feminine traits that are celebrated by many different cultures, such as sexuality and companionship. At the same time, the queen's character may be interpreted as an unconventional woman who is going against what is natural. *The Táin* contains an image that continues throughout the tale, unable to be overlooked: Medb, a woman, travels down a blossoming landscape, leading men toward imminent death. She ignores the womanly duties that arrive with the spring. And with each warrior's passing, she treads on steadily and stubbornly, ever expecting progress, whether the earth agrees or not.

Medb: Callous and Stubborn or Shrewd and Strong?

Kevin Reilly

The Táin is the most influential tale of the Ulster Cycle. It touches on a multitude of themes including the invincibility of Cúchulainn, the depth of foster-brother relationships, and the massive casualties sustained in the name of war. However, the most interesting theme may well be the role of women in the epic tale, mostly shown through the central role of Medb, queen of Connacht. Medb is the driving force of the story; she initiates the war, is rival to Cúchulainn in terms of importance in the tale, and allows thousands to die in the name of her vanity and stubbornness. She may be viewed as impetuous and immature. But a strong case can be made for Medb as an outstanding example of a very strong female character. The medieval Irish, it seems clear, held women in much higher regard than other cultures of the historical period. In order to create a woman with such vast power and intelligence in such a pivotal role—in order to have her be taken seriously—the Irish must have held women in high respect. Medb's role in *The Táin* is firm evidence that the Irish believed women could have powerful influence in their society.

Medb's importance is established in the first scene of *The Táin*. She and her husband Ailill have a lover's quarrel over who brought more wealth and power

into their marriage. Ailill argues that no one is his rival in affluence, and that Medb was lucky to marry into such a prosperous life. Medb, however, disagrees, saying that since her father was the Ard Ri of Ireland, the high king, she had more wealth than even Ailill did, and she accepted his marriage proposal only because he was neither mean, jealous, nor fearful (Kinsella 53). This important exchange shows the reader a number of things. First, Medb does not appear to be in any way subservient to her husband. She argues with him, and essentially claims that she, not he, is the breadwinner in the family. This conversation is strikingly modern. One might think that in marriage the unmatched wealth of the man goes without saying, especially during medieval times, but in *The Táin*, this is not the case. As the conversation continues, the two list their treasures, soldiers, and clients, and it is discovered that they are almost dead even in terms of wealth. Ailill scratches by with one treasure that Medb does not count within her possessions: a massive prize bull unrivaled by every other bull in Ireland with the exception of one, an equally giant bull in the possession of the men of Ulster. Having seen that Ailill has the upper hand in their marriage, even by this slight majority, Medb decides that she will amass an army and invade Ulster. She will take the bull and show Ailill that she is just as wealthy and powerful as he is.

The second thing that this conversation shows is that women in Ireland could choose whom they would marry. According to Patterson, "Irish law consistently depicted marriage as a relationship

requiring the willing participation of both partners” (297). Medb boasts that she had received marriage proposals from many very powerful *Ris* and cattle lords, and she denied them all, waiting until she found a suitable match. This shows that women were not regarded as property; they could accept or reject proposals at their own discretion. If this were not true of actual Irish women of the time, the story would not have made sense at this point to those who heard it. The ability of women to choose their marriage partner was incredibly forward thinking on the part of the Irish. There are women in the world today who still do not hold that right.

One line in this first scene is particularly suggestive. Medb argues to Ailill that since she has the most wealth in the relationship, “If anyone causes you shame or upset or trouble, the right to compensation is mine ... for you are a kept man” (Kinsella 53-54). Medb is stating that if her husband came into harm’s way, she would be entitled to his honor price—in effect, she owns him, not the other way around. Ailill denies this, but he is not horrified by or furious at the claim. In early Irish society, the person with more wealth in the relationship *was* more important, irregardless of their gender. This idea is supported by the Irish law tracts: “If their status in the marriage is equal as to rank and equally proper, the wife in this case is a ‘woman of the condominium.’ The contract made by either party is not a lawful contract without the consent of the other” (Patterson 299). This meant that if the wife brought in an equal or greater share of wealth to the marriage, she would be regarded as

her husband's equal, the highest rank of wife. In such a case, the husband would not be allowed to make business decisions—or, in the case of a Ri, political ones—without his wife's full consent. Being a strong, intelligent woman, Medb would of course want this power of equality in her marriage, and without an equal amount of wealth to her husband, she would not be able to claim it.

This common sense, egalitarian way of doing things seems to be consistent throughout early Irish culture. One was not appointed Ri by birthright or lineage, but by clan election, and cultural status was largely based on wealth. If invaders overran the wealthiest Ri in Ireland, and all his cows were stolen, he would be reduced to the rank of an average farmer. In the same way, if an affluent woman were to marry a less well-off man, she would take the more powerful role in the marriage.

This sliding scale of wealth and power is the driving force behind *The Táin*. Medb is not particularly interested in a very large bull, or in sticking it to the Ulstermen. She wants to be in control of her marriage. If she does not go after the bull with everything that she's got, she would be admitting that Ailill is richer, and therefore more powerful, than she is. It is easy to lose sight of this while reading *The Táin*. The opening pillow talk fades into memory, as battle after battle is lost against Cúchulainn, the demi-god, sole defender of Ulster. However, it is important to remember Medb's true motivation in the tale, to see why she is willing to send so many of her own countrymen to slaughter over a bull.

After this first scene, Medb's story takes a back seat to that of Cúchulainn, the hero and main character of *The Táin*. Although he is just seventeen, his prowess in battle is unparalleled by any other Irishman, and he spends the majority of the story single-handedly killing hundreds and thousands of Medb's allies, most often in single combat. Medb and Ailill remain visible within the story; they are given a few lines here and there, mostly discussing how hard it is to beat Cúchulainn. About two-thirds of the way through the tale, Medb resurfaces in a different capacity: she must convince men to go and fight Cúchulainn, even though they have seen him slaughter hundreds of their peers with ease. It is crucial that one man go on this suicide mission each day in order to keep Cúchulainn from engaging in a more general slaughter. Tactically, this is Medb's best option: sustaining one casualty each day is better than being at the mercy of a hail of stones from Cúchulainn's sling.

However, as the story progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult for her to find volunteers. No one in their right mind would fight Cúchulainn after seeing him dispatch men twice as strong as they are. Medb has to get creative to keep up the stream of ill-fated soldiers. The first tactic that she tries is a simple one: bribery. She calls warriors into her tent and presents them with an offer similar to the following:

A chariot worth three times seven bondmaids,
with war-harness enough for a dozen men,
and a portion of the fine Plain of Ai equal to
the Plain of Murtheimne. Also the right to

stay forever in Cruachan, with your wine supplied, and your kith and kin free forever from tax and tribute. And this leaf-shaped brooch of mine that was made out of ten score ounces and ten score half-ounces and ten score cross-measures and ten score quarters of gold. And Finnabair, my daughter and Ailill's, for your wife. And my own friendly thighs on top of that if needs be. (Kinsella 169)

This offer is exceedingly tempting, including wealth, land, tax perks, and the promise of sex from two beautiful and influential women. Medb offers it to repeatedly to warriors, and it is enough for them to agree to fight Cúchulainn. Naturally, he kills them all, and Medb never has to make good on her promise. This particular set of incentives was promised to Ferdia, Cúchulainn's foster-brother, the warrior who comes closest to being Cúchulainn's equal. Unlike many before him, however, Ferdia refuses these treasures, preferring to live without them rather than betray his beloved foster brother. Medb is forced to think quickly, and being an intelligent and cunning woman, she appeals to the one thing that a warrior cannot tolerate: an attack on his honor. Medb casually suggests that she heard Cúchulainn say that beating Ferdia in single combat would not be a great challenge. Of course, this is a boldfaced lie, but Ferdia cannot let it go unchecked. He agrees to fight Cúchulainn, not for the tempting prizes, but to defend his own honor. Medb knew that this approach would work, and used it without flinching to keep the battle going.

This seems like a pretty standard action on the part of Medb, but a few pages later the reader is given another brief glimpse into Ailill and Medb's private life that makes the situation a little more complicated. As Ferdia passes Medb and Ailill's tent on his way to face Cúchulainn, she sees him and comments to her husband, "I swear by the vow of my people that the man making his farewell there won't be coming back to us on his own feet" (Kinsella 177). Medb is well aware that the fight against Cúchulainn is one fought in vain. Out of all of the warriors in *The Táin*, Ferdia comes the closest to defeating Cúchulainn by far. Their fight, rather than being over in seconds, lasts for days. If Medb doesn't have faith in Ferdia to destroy Cúchulainn, she can't possibly hope that anyone else will.

This raises an interesting dilemma. It shows that Medb is aware that she is fighting a losing battle. If she doesn't believe that her best warrior might defeat Cúchulainn, then she should give up hope, cut her losses and return home. However, Medb is strong-willed and stubborn, and she would rather see eighteen thousand men die one by one at the hands of a teenager than admit to her husband that he is in control of their marriage. While this scene is very short—only a few lines long—it is incredibly significant to the development of Medb's character. Rather than giving up and allowing Ailill to know that he has the upper hand, she brazenly continues to sacrifice the lives of hundreds of warriors. She is the most powerful woman in Ireland, and she is not about to admit under any circumstances that she was wrong.

Doing so would prove that men are superior to women in terms of strategizing and wisdom, and Medb can't let that happen. Although she seems callous, Medb is really fighting for equality in the eyes of her husband and peers. Some may see her actions as foolish, but they are a strong woman's last, desperate attempt to hold onto her power. She knows that she cannot win the battle she fights, but she'd rather see everyone die than lose her own honor.

After Ferdia dies at the hand of Cúchulainn, things go from bad to worse for Medb. It becomes harder and harder for her to find a willing participant to fight the boy, and she ends up promising Finnbair to scores of different men, in order to get them to go to battle. Eventually, her cunning backfires. Seven of the greatest Ris in Ireland begin to squabble, because they each claim that Finnbair was promised to them, as indeed she was. Medb's deceit is brought to the surface, and seven hundred men are killed by their own allies. This is the last thing that Medb and her waning supply of warriors needs. At this point, the men of Ulster have risen from their pangs, and are attacking the invading army in sporadic groups. Cúchulainn alone was able to hold off the army for months, and kill about two thirds of the fighting men; now that an army rivaling Medb's in size is beginning to form, her warriors have all but lost hope.

At this point Medb should have thrown in the towel: she is squarely beaten by the Ulstermen, and there is no need for further bloodshed in the name of a single cow. However, she has gone too far to turn back now. Medb knows that her attacks are in vain,

but she continues to keep her soldiers together. She needs this final battle to keep her honor. Without it she will be reduced to just another Ri's wife, instead being the only female at the time to rule a province of Ireland.

Medb's actions are desperate, but she knows that the final battle is her last chance to make off with the bull and reassert her dominance over Ailill. While some may read this as the last ditch effort of a stubborn woman to win an argument, it is more than that. With her army on its last legs Medb knows very well that there will be a massacre, but she clings to the hope that the bull will be brought back to her lands in the confusion, and though she will most certainly lose the battle, she will win the war for her own independence. Her motivations are complex, and she is willing to sacrifice all to get the respect that she believes she deserves.

The final battle turns out as the reader expects it to. Medb's army is completely defeated, and Cúchulainn himself accepts her surrender in exchange for sparing her life. Of course, the entire fiasco is blamed on Medb's strong will and feminine stubbornness. Fergus says to her, after she admits that they have been defeated, "We followed the rump of a misguiding woman. It is the usual thing for a herd led by a mare to be strayed and destroyed" (Kinsella 251). This misogynistic line places all of the blame on the woman, and contributes largely to the reading that Medb's character is more the caricature of stubborn women than an example of a strong, independent one.

However, these naysayers fail to take one thing into consideration: although Connacht lost to Ulster, Medb got what she set out for. Both bulls were killed—Ailill's by Medb's, and Medb's from exhaustion. This means that neither Ailill nor Medb has a prize bull, and in terms of wealth they are once again equals. Ailill cannot claim to own Medb, just as she does not own him. At the end of the day, although thousands died, and the army went home empty-handed, Medb won. No man owns her, and she has the same right to rule her province as Ailill does. This was her goal throughout the story, although most lose sight of it through the endless battles. At story's end she has attained her goal.

Although she does not admit that she has won a great victory, even in losing, it is clear that she is aware of the significance of both bulls dying. Medb set out from Cruachan in a quest to maintain equality, and she returned an equal ruler. Losing the war makes no difference in that matter. Although slightly buried for a modern reader, the early Irish audience would have fully understood the significance of message, since they were well versed in the laws and customs of their own time. Medb may have lost the war, but in the end, she came out on top.

In essence, *The Táin* is a story of a woman struggling to be recognized as the equal of her husband. While Medb can seem stubborn, irrational, and downright wrong at some points, one must remember why Connacht is going on this particular cattle raid. It is not for glory, or for wealth; it is in order to ensure that Medb and Ailill are equals in their

marriage. *The Táin* is not a male-chauvinist text; it is a feminist text. Women that heard this tale in early Ireland would have been filled with joy, believing that if a woman is strong enough and smart enough, she can accomplish anything, even if the legendary Cúchulainn is standing in her way.

In Style and In Form: Repetition in *The Táin*

Kaitlyn Odgers

The use of repetition is common across the field of medieval Irish literature. In Thomas Kinsella's translation of *The Táin*, it is a rhetorical device used many times throughout the tale. This literary technique is expressed through several different forms such as anaphora, mesarchia, and anadiplosis, which each serve a unique purpose. Through a close examination of the text, the repetition of numbers, people, places, and plot in *The Táin* is clear, characterizing the writing style of early medieval Irish literature. Evaluation of individual cases of repetition, while subjective, may also determine when it is successful and when it becomes redundant within the text.

Before discussing *The Táin*, it is first necessary to examine the history of repetition within early medieval Irish literature and its overall significance. As a rhetorical device, repetition can be utilized for a number of different reasons. Within medieval Irish literature, repetition is primarily a facet of the oral tradition. Joseph Falaky Nagy describes the evolution of Irish literature from its oral roots in his article, "Orality in Medieval Irish Narrative: An Overview": "The *filid* had relied on oral transmission in pre-Christian Ireland, but after the coming of Christianity and the Latin alphabet, more and more they came to articulate their learnedness in terms of literacy and

book-learning" (273). He states that many episodes in *The Táin* are "notorious for [their] inclusion of "doublets," that is, redundant episodes and details" (278). With the development of Christianity and literacy, words and phrases that were repeated within oral tales were then transcribed onto paper.

Patterson offers further details of the oral tradition by explaining the importance of storytelling during the feasts that were held between Samuin and Easter. She writes, "The political sensitivity of the winter season is echoed in mythic conflicts set at this time of the year, conflicts that were recounted at story-telling sessions throughout the season" (127). It is clear that the use of repetition within oral tales influenced the writing of early medieval Irish literature. Thus, repetition is a major component within *The Táin* due to its genesis in the oral tradition of early Irish storytelling.

One example of the use of repetition is found in the "The Last Battle" episode of *The Táin*. The following is stated by Fergus, "with elbows on wrists, wrists on fists, fists on fingers, fingers on nails, nails on skulls, skulls on trunks, trunks on thighs, thighs on knees, knees on calves, calves on feet, feet on toes and toes on nails" (246). Fergus's words are written in the form of anadiplosis, or the repetition of the last word of one clause or phrase at the beginning of another. When spoken aloud in Irish, perhaps at an early Irish feast, these phrases roll off of the tongue to create a fast-paced rhythm. As an aspect of exciting storytelling and as a writing technique, repetition creates a rhythmic flow within the story.

Within *The Táin*, repetition appears most commonly in numerical figures. The number five and the number three appear frequently throughout the text. Each number holds its own significance within the history of Irish culture, justifying its repetition. The number five is related to the Irish law-tracts. Historically, in Ireland, both social and royal units were composed of men in units of five. As Patterson describes in *Cattle Lords and Clansmen*,

Units of five (individuals, households or other groupings) are commonly encountered in the law-tracts ... It took five base-clients and five free-clients to support the lowest grade of lord, the *aire déso*, and that to achieve an additional increment of rank, a lord had to obtain the contracts of an additional group of five base, and five free-clients. (207)

Additionally, Patterson indicates that the number five relates to both groups of *gelfhine* and *comaithches*. A *gelfhine* was comprised of a kin's innermost circle of five individuals, while the *comaithches* was comprised of four tenants and a leader in an agrarian group. Throughout *The Táin*, the number five is used nineteen times in a number of separate episodes. In the episode, "Ulster Rises From Its Pangs," the number five is repeatedly used to describe the weapons of the Ulstermen, "Two five-pronged spears, banded plain and silver"; (209) "He carried a curved scallop-edged shield, with a five-pronged spear in his hand" (227). Due to its ties to Irish law-tracts, five is a significant

number that reoccurs within early medieval Irish literature.

The number three plays an important role in Irish culture as well and is frequently found in *The Táin*. Dating back to around 430 AD, the number three has held a great significance within Irish tradition. St. Patrick used the three-leaf clover, better known today as the shamrock, to represent the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity. Each of the clover's leaves symbolized God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as separate parts of one entity ("The Shamrock" 12). Three has remained a magical number within Irish mythology. In *The Táin*, the number three appears eighty-nine times. Three is most commonly used in the text to describe the number of thousands of men in a fighting troop, the number of sons that a man has, the number of times that a task is repeated, or to describe the amount of days that pass between certain events—such as three days and three nights. The text portrays the destruction of Cúchulainn in terms of three in "Single Combat Cúchulainn." Kinsella translates, "He circled them three times more in the same way, and left a bed of them six deep in a great circuit, the soles of three to the necks of three in a ring around the camp" (155). As illustrated in this passage, Cúchulainn's actions are grouped into units of three. The repetition of the number three signifies its importance within Irish mythology and Irish culture overall.

The repetition of names occurs throughout *The Táin* in order to emphasize the power of a Ri and his following, to display the strength of Cúchulainn, and

to add rhythm to the tale. In “Ulster Rises From Its Pangs,” the size of Conchobor’s war troop is highlighted. Conchobor’s son, Finnchad Fer Benn, is asked by his father to make an announcement in an effort to gather Conchobor’s men for battle. The authority and influence of Conchobor is reflected in this section of the text by the number of men that are listed as members within his troop. Patterson offers support of this assertion by explaining that the power and social status of a Ri heavily depended upon the number of clientships he established. In a free-clientship, labor service, known as *fer cacha samaisce*, states that the fief of three heifers “would thus obligate the client to go once a year on some customary labor service, such as construction, harvesting, or military service” (157). Therefore, after reading this long listing of names, the audience is able to gather the multitude of Conchobor’s army and his authority as a Ri.

In “Single Combat Cúchulainn,” the repetition of names is seen through the form of mesarchia, or repeated words that appear at the beginning and middle of successive sentences. Kinsella lists the nobles and chiefs that were slaughtered by Cúchulainn in this way. While the following is a translation into English, the rhetorical effect of the original Irish is essentially the same:

Two called Cruaid, two named Calad. Two named Cír, two named Cíar, two named Ecell, three named Crom, three named Caur, three named Combirge, four named Feochar, four named Furechar, four named Cass, four

named Fota, five named Aurith, five named Cerman, five named Cobthach, six named Saxan, six named Dach, six named Dáire, seven named Rochad, seven named Ronan, seven named Rurthech, eight named Rochlad, eight named Rochtad, eight named Rinnach, eight named Coirpre, eight named Mulach, nine named Daithi, nine more named Dáire, nine named Damach, ten named Fiac, ten named Fiacha and ten named Feidlimid. (155-56)

This record of names emphasizes Cúchulainn's enormous feat against the chiefs and nobles as well as his strength in defeating this multitude of respected warriors. Due to the repetition of similar words and phrases, there is a momentum that builds at the end of this tale. A rhythm is created that makes the process of reading through these names less difficult and drives the story toward its end.

Repetition is additionally used to present locations within *The Táin*. In "The Pillow Talk," the route that Medb and Ailill take with their troop to Finnabair in Cuailgne is transcribed in the form of anaphora. Kinsella states, "Through Delind, through Sailig, through Slaibre of the herds, through Slechta, where they hewed their way, through Cúil Sibrille" (64). This type of repetition continues over a span of three pages. Once again, this technique is being used in order to illustrate the strength of the warriors. By repeating the words "through" and "by" within this section, the extent of Medb and Ailill's travels

are stressed. Each individual land that the warriors pass through is listed. If the text simply stated that Medb and Ailill's troop journeyed from Cruachan Ai to Finnabair in Cuailnge, the strength and force of this group would not be expressed in addition to the significant distances that they are traveling.

Repetition helps to develop plot within several episodes. At the point that Ferdia and Cúchulainn join battle, the story's plot is repeated, and continues in a similar pattern, throughout the lengthy episode. The cycle begins at daybreak with the assembly of Ferdia and Chuchulainn. One of the men asks, "What weapons will we use today?" After the weapon is decided upon, the two foster-brothers fight until one states, "Let us break off now with these weapons" (187). The use of repetition here adds to the suspense of the story. Up until this point in *The Táin*, Cúchulainn has not yet met his match; his strength and ability overpowers each warrior that challenges him. Therefore, when Cúchulainn's vigor is finally tested by his foster-brother Ferdia, the only man who has ever been able to do so, the battle scenes are repeated so as to delay the outcome of the combat. This repetition of plot is eventually broken by Cúchulainn's use of his *gae bolga*, or spear, in order to close the battle. This seemingly unfair advantage is what allows Cúchulainn to bring the episode to its conclusion. Otherwise, the combat between Ferdia and Cúchulainn would continue perhaps endlessly due to the equivalent combat skills of both men.

In an effort to determine the value of repetition within *The Táin*, it is necessary to identify which cases,

previously mentioned, are successful or unsuccessful. The repetition of names throughout *The Táin*, found in episodes such as “Ulster Rises From Its Pangs,” and “The Last Battle,” is unnecessary. The reiteration of Irish titles is extensive and tedious. There are several pages within the text that are simply composed of the names of Irish men who are supposedly great warriors. Yet, the reader is not given any background information or additional proof of the feats of these men to support their alleged high status. Their credibility is nonexistent and therefore the lists of names are meaningless to the reader. Repetition is additionally ineffective when used to list Irish locations in *The Táin*. Episodes such as “The Pillow Talk” include lengthy sections of Irish territory that become redundant. In both cases of repetition, there is a lack of style; names and location are simply listed. Furthermore, within these lengthy sections, the plot does not develop.

Unlike the examples above, the repetition found in “The Last Battle” is both harmonious and noteworthy. The combination of continuous pattern and rhyme scheme found in Fergus’s outburst (246) captures the attention of the audience and provides an element of entertainment. This section of the text also contains an element of humor. In a tense moment before Fergus enters into battle with Conchobor, this paragraph lightens the mood of the tale with its silly imagery. In “Single Combat Cúchulainn,” the repetition of names (155) is different from that of “Ulster Rises From Its Pangs” (220). Instead of simply listing the names of Irishmen, a tempo is created by

the repetition of the phrase “two named.” Similar to several other tales, the audience has no connection to or interest in these names; yet, with the cadence created in “Single Combat Cúchulainn,” these names are more bearable to read than the lists of titles that are written without the use of rhythm or literary technique. Finally, the repetition of plot within “The Combat of Ferdia and Cúchulainn” is stylistic. Unlike the repeated plot in myths such as “The Pillow Talk” when Fedelm describes her *imbas forasnai*, in “The Combat of Ferdia and Cúchulainn” repetition is used for suspense. The audience is invested within this specific reoccurring plot because the repetition is tied to the objective of the story: to trick readers into believing that Cúchulainn might finally lose in battle. With this intention in mind, the combination of anticipation and repetition in “The Combat of Ferdia and Cúchulainn” work successfully together. In each example outlined above, the duplication of words or phrases compliments the story due to the use of additional literary techniques.

Repetition is used to develop rhythmic and sonic patterns within many works of medieval Irish literature. Historical roots in oral tradition provide an explanation for its presence. To modern audiences the repetition of numbers, people, places, and plot, especially in *The Táin*, seem foreign and often unnecessary. At times, however, these strategies dramatically and effectively increase the impact of the stories.

**Blood, Death, and Skulls:
An Analysis of the Gruesome and Morbid
in Early Irish Literature**

Richard Stickley

Reading through tales in the Mythological and Ulster Cycles, vivid imagery and descriptions of highly imaginative, even fantastic events are found throughout each story. It would be pretty difficult not to notice them. From the Túatha Dé Danann god Lug leaping out of a drink to bring about the birth of Cúchulainn, to the way that Fuamnach, needing to take care of her romantic competition in “The Wooing of Etain” simply “struck her with a wand of scarlet rowan and turned her into a pool of water” (Gantz 45), there is no shortage of amazing incidents and incredible imagery. This comes as no surprise either, as these stories derive from oral traditions, twisted, exaggerated, and passed down for centuries before they were committed to writing.

These stories were also the product of a culture with a deep-rooted mythology. They are filled with beautiful images such as “flying over the lake two birds coupled by a red-gold chain” (Gantz 157). Yet, there is something else that is hard to miss in these stories, something a bit more unsettling. I first noticed it when hearing about “The Red Hand of Ulster” while visiting Northern Ireland, and the stories within Geoffrey Gantz’s *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* greatly enforced

what I noticed while abroad. Take, for example, this line from “The Destruction of De Derga’s Hostel”: “as numerous as hailstones or blades of grass or stars in the sky will be your cloven heads and cloven skulls and heaps of entrails after he has scattered you about the ridges” (85). It is difficult to ignore the thread of gore and death that runs through most of the stories featured in these tales. In fact, some of the most in-depth and important moments in these stories seem to be ones where great violence and gore take center stage. Nevertheless, it is important to not pass off these tales as merely crude or tasteless as western culture often does with slasher movies or heavy metal (even if slasher movies and heavy metal actually *are* crude and tasteless). There are good explanations why these Irish tales are so gruesome. Further, these moments of gore, blood, and death tell us something not only about the stories of the Ulaoid, but the people who listened, told, and passed the stories from one generation to the next.

Part of the explanation for why these stories seem so bloody and grim may have something to do with who was telling them. The Druids, who made up the intelligentsia of Ireland during the time period that these tales were created and first told, were a group comprised of story tellers, healers, and religious leaders. This meant that alongside telling these tales, Druids were also practicing animal sacrifice and tending to the sick and injured. In the earliest times, they were even practicing human sacrifices. In his book entitled *A Brief History of Ireland*, Paul State claims that in early Irish society, “prisoners of

war were sacrificed to war gods and newborns to the harvest god" (14). Keeping this in mind, it makes sense that their tales would at times be bloody and gruesome. The Druids spent their fair share of time around blood, guts, and dying; these things were simply occupational hazards for them.

Of course, stories don't last for thousands of years simply because of who first told them. The audience must be taken into consideration as well. The early Irish must have liked these tales, including the gore and death within them, or they would not have lasted so long. This is hardly because they were just crude, dark, or sadistic. It is clear that the early Irish were very "close to the earth." They did not live a pampered or pretty life. They slaughtered their own meat, mended their own wounds, and had to do battle against others when their clientship agreements or *derbfhines* required it of them. In other words, they saw a lot of blood. They also probably delivered their own young, and the young of their livestock. Therefore, when modern readers consider the two infant or prenatal deaths involved in Cúchulainn's birth narrative, including one where Deichtine "crushed the child within her" (Gantz 133), we must understand them as reflexive of the high risk that accompanied child birth for the early Irish.

Paul State claims that in early Irish society, "Violence suffused society and battling was omnipresent" (14). He also asserts that "The soul dwelled in the head, [the early Irish] believed, and so the heads of their enemies could be found prominently on display—stuck on palisades and laid out in

temples—and used as ceremonial drinking bowls and ornaments” (14). In other words, the early Irish were pretty fierce and blood-thirsty warriors. It is reasonable then that they would have been more immune to gruesome details in their literature than modern-day readers. It also means that in “The Tale of Mac Da Tho’s Pig,” when Cet says, “It is not six days since I took three warriors heads about the head of your first-born son from your land” (Gantz 184), he is actually giving a surprisingly accurate picture of at least one aspect of early Irish life.

This idea of life being dangerous, rough, and short permeated nearly every aspect of early Irish life. The climate and geography of Ireland made farming hard, keeping starvation a constant threat and life expectancy low. The threat of raids and attacks from other clans was frequent. The sciences of medicine and health were not what they are today. In other words, the early Irish were pretty tough, even off the battlefield. Even the games played by early Irish youths, such as hurley, were violent and dangerous. This hardness is reflected in their stories and mythology. The suggestion in “The Cattle Raid of Froech” that music could be so beautiful that “The harpers played, then, and twelve men died of weeping and sorrow” (117) would not have seemed quite as ridiculous to the early Irish as it does to us today. It would have been an imaginative stretch, but when dying is a common every-day occurrence, happening frequently all around you, it is not such a great stretch.

However, just because the early Irish faced substantially worse odds than modern westerners in

the prospect of year-to-year survival does not mean that life held no value for them. In fact, life had a very real and tangible economic value to them. Wealth and economic trade were carried out predominantly with livestock, with three cows being equal to one cumal, which was the worth attributed to a single female slave. Further, a death would have weakened a derbfhine, left a family without a substantial portion of the labor needed for survival, and even left a Ri or cattle lord with that much less military support. All of this would have been a pretty big deal to the early Irish, not only socially, but economically as well. Life, in a very real way, was currency for the early Irish. Keeping this in mind, the claim that “men will die from hearing their music” (118) shows not that the early Irish are obsessed with death, but that the value and quality placed upon music is of the highest order. Since the economy was based largely on objects whose values were derived from their ability to sustain life, all this gore and death in early Irish literature puts a nearly monetary value on the events in each story. This everyday value rests alongside the spiritual and emotional value that death has in nearly all literature.

It is also important to remember that a work of literature being grizzly or morbid does not always hinder its ability to be poetic, metaphorical, or insightful. At the end of “The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu,” for example, Derdriu takes her own life in order to escape her suitors and to protest what they have done to her. Suicide, keeping in mind the canon of Western Literature, is not incredibly grizzly. However, Derdriu doesn’t merely jump off

a cliff or drink poison, “She let her head be driven against [a boulder], and the boulder made fragments of her head” (267). She splattered her own face, the most beautiful face in Eriu, all over the very men who ruined her life. This gives her suicide a much more vengeful and empowering tone. It also reflects the reason that she died. Her beauty is what led her life down its tragic path, along with the reign of the Ulaid, if you believe the Druid’s prophecy. Therefore, she was only able to escape this fate by destroying her beauty.

Another example of the existence of deeper meaning in the gruesome and morbid can be found in “The Death of Aife’s Only Son.” At first reading one may be shocked and appalled that Cúchulainn, the great hero of the early Irish, would kill his own son. However, there is a positive message, and that is that Cúchulainn is willing to do *anything* to protect the Ulaid, that his loyalty to his people is absolute and unquestionable. Only by describing the grim and bizarre moment when Cúchulainn “rose out of the water and deceived the boy with the gae bolga” (151) could such an incredible loyalty and ability to protect be portrayed. One might argue that the message of “The Death of Aife’s Only Son” is that Cúchulainn can even save the Ulaid from himself, and such a twisted and grim way of portraying this message emphasizes it all the better.

Of course, some of the gruesome and morbid elements of early Irish stories may have been shocking, horrific, and outlandish to the early Irish (despite my arguments that they are not only acceptable, but

important, and of great meaning and insight too). That, however, really isn't very shocking, horrific, or outlandish at all. While life was certainly different for the early Irish than it is for us today, people at their core are people, and violence, blood, and guts are exciting to a great deal of them. Even if we are repulsed, we are still enthralled. Many people today slow down to look at car accidents while driving, and pay money to see *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Why would the early Irish be different? One can imagine a bard taking great pride in getting everyone to gasp or grab their stomachs when telling his audience: "taking Anluan's head from his wallet he threw it at Cet's breast so that a mouthful of blood spattered over the lips" (186). After all, these stories were not only meant to be informational and important; they were meant to be entertaining and captivating. The early Irish did not pass these stories down through the centuries so we could analyze and extract socio-historical information from them; they wanted to tell a compelling story. What is perhaps most important about this point is that despite how different the lives of the early Irish were from modern experience, and how long ago they lived, their culture was not as different from modern culture as some might think. These tales were their *Star Wars*; their *Nightmare on Elm St*. They may have looked to these tales for some degree of escapism. One can imagine a group of early Irish listening to "Bricriu's Feast":

The churl rose, gathered his head and his
block and his axe and clutched them to his

chest, and left the house, blood streaming from his neck and filling the Craebruad on every side. (253)

Wrapped up in the gruesome details, they may have for a while been able to forget about their own tedious and difficult lives.

So then, were the early Irish merely blood-thirsty gore-mongers? Perhaps the answer is both yes and no. The blood and death that permeates much of the tales certainly does reflect violent and grizzly aspects of early Irish life, particularly in their religious practices and their strong tendencies toward fighting and war. This is in many ways similar to other great civilizations throughout history. The Aztecs, for example, were very war-like and practiced human sacrifice. This does not mean, however, that these cultures were unremarkable in other ways. Further, the severed heads and piles of entrails strewn about much of Irish mythology may be compared to the modern tendency to escape the daily grind through shocking entertainment. Finally, a close look at the gruesome details of Irish mythology provides insight into ways that the early Irish valued both life and death.

I Want Your Sex: Copulation, Procreation, and Ireland's Ulster Cycle

Stephanie Allen

Your neighbors do it. Your mailman does it. Your parents (perish the thought) do it. Even Adam and Eve stopped pruning bushes in the Garden of Eden long enough to sneak off into a shady glen every once in a while. Sex has been a part of human existence from day one, and trying to separate one from the other would be the ultimate exercise in futility. The medieval Irish more than understood this fact, they embraced it. As a result, the selection of stories found in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* and *The Táin* are filled with both male and female characters who are fully aware of and comfortable with their own sexuality and with the sexuality of those around them. The physical expression of attraction between the sexes, in moderation, was seen as natural, normal, and very necessary—the next generation of farmers, cattle lords, and *Ris* were not going to produce themselves, after all. For those living in medieval Ireland, that ages-old connection between sex and the human condition could not have been any greater; it not only dictated their survival, it governed their thoughts and actions, as well.

The early Irish had a fairly progressive view of sex; the amount of copulation that pervades their stories makes that fact abundantly clear. There was

something to be said about the theory of honor in purity, but the reality is that only a very small number of stories in the Ulster Cycle are lacking in lasciviousness. The level of inclusion may vary, but that corporeal component rarely disappears completely. Sometimes it is in the forefront as in “The Wasting Sickness of Cúchulainn and The Only Jealousy of Emer,” where nearly the entire plot revolves around Cú’s desire to sleep with a woman other than his wife. Other times it is more peripheral as in “Bricriu’s Feast,” where the only thing that can move the men of the Ulaid to action is the threat of their women being stricken with “foul and putrid” breasts (Gantz 222). But regardless of degree, their interest in the physical act of love is made plain. Yet that interest does not overwhelm the collected tales. Sex may have been a good thing, but apparently it was possible to have too much of it.

One character who seems to have too much of it, or at least think too much about it, is Medb, wife of Ailill and queen of Connacht. Throughout *The Táin* there are references to her habit of sharing her bed with just about anybody who will take her up on it; she is sleeping with her husband (Kinsella 52), she is sleeping with Fergus (95), she is willing to sleep with Dáire (55) and Ferdia (169). In fact, she “never had one man without another waiting in his shadow” (53). She is in full control of her body and desires, but she also attempts to take charge of her daughter’s. Medb repeatedly offers up Finnabair as a reward for those who will fight for her cause and, in regards to Rochad, even goes so far as to tell her to “sleep with

him tonight and ask him for a truce for our armies until he comes against us with Conchobor on the day of the great Battle" (215). And while her radical embrace of the power of feminine wiles is not exactly frowned upon, it is precisely that femininity that leaves her vulnerable in the end, squatting in the dirt, at Cúchulainn's mercy (250). Her hyper-sexuality causes her very womb to revolt, an act that leaves her in the most precarious of positions.

In her article "Conceived in Sins, Born in Delights': Stories of Procreation from Early Ireland," Lisa M. Bitel suggests that the early Irish saw moderate sex as healthy, but that, like anything in excess, too much sexual activity could actually be harmful to one's health (184). What exactly constitutes "excess" is left open to interpretation, but she points out the "persistently disturbing theme in both religious and secular literature" (185) to support that claim: "men and women [who] copulated their way into illness and even to death" (185). But she is also careful to point out that those kinds of severe effects occurred only in the most extreme of cases. When men and women acted upon their physical desires in a reasonably temperate manner, they were generally free to do so openly and with very little risk of moral judgment from the surrounding community.

That lack of judgment makes a certain amount of sense when viewed in light of how close to nature the Irish were living at the time. They were deeply connected to their environment and the other living things around them. The animals on the farm were encouraged to breed, but they were not permitted

to have sex whenever they wanted, wherever they wanted, and with as many partners as they wanted; neither were their owners. That kind of indiscriminate self-indulgence could have dire consequences for both man and beast alike. However, when the cows and sheep and pigs were brought together, with a modicum of forethought, there was nothing in the world more natural or more right. Why, then, should it be any different for people? Sex was a vital part of life and nothing to be ashamed of. Therefore, in many instances when a man or woman saw someone they were sexually attracted to, they were not compelled to be shy about their feelings or subtle in their advances.

There are several points in *Myths and Sagas* and *The Táin* where this kind of straightforward sexual propositioning is highlighted. In “The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu” we see the feminine perspective—Derdriu is wildly aggressive when first encountering Noisiu, calling him a “young bull” (Gantz 260) and literally throwing herself at him when he attempts to reject her advances (261). “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel” provides the male counterpart; the first words out of Echu Feidlech’s mouth when he sees Etain are “Will there be a time for me to sleep with you?” (63). However, unlike Noisiu she is immediately receptive to the invitation and responds in kind: “It is that [I] have come for” (63). Then, of course, there is Medb and her famously “friendly thighs”; she offers them up boldly and frequently, without the slightest hint of shame or embarrassment (Kinsella 55, 95, 169). There are no games on either side, no playing coy, and the only question left unanswered is

“Your rath or mine”?

Indeed, the rath question could sometimes be a tricky one, because oftentimes the pursuer and/or the pursued were already married. And while the practice of having more than one wife, at least among the upper class, seems to have been fairly common in medieval Ireland, not all women were as accommodating as others. For some men, nothing could put a damper on a night of budding romance quite like bringing a new, young girl home to meet the wife. Take Fuamnach, who is married to Mider in “The Wooing of Etain.” Gifted with the power of the Túatha Dé Danann, she turns the competition into a fly upon hearing she will be forced to share her husband (45). Emer reacts just as badly to Cúchulainn’s newfound interest in Fand in “The Only Jealousy of Emer.” However, not being of the *Síd* as Fuamnach, she is forced to find a more earthly solution to her problem: “... she prepared knives with which to kill Fand. Fifty women accompanied Emer to the place of the meeting ... a troop of clever, capable women, glittering sharp knives in their right hands ...” (174). The actions and reactions of these two women prove that regardless of whether it was the norm, the idea of share and share alike was obviously not for everyone.

What did seem to be for everyone, however, was an interest in procreation. For the early Irish, the creation of heirs was important business and something they spent a great deal of time thinking about, talking about, and trying to explain. Bitel suggests that although Irish culture was intimately familiar with sexuality, the flesh-and-blood mechanics of

reproduction remained largely mysterious (192); Derdriu's mother all but confirms as much in "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu": "... though it cried out in the cradle of my body / no woman knows / what her womb bears" (Gantz 258). Getting pregnant and giving birth were inexact sciences at best; in an attempt to shed light on the uncertain nature of conception and gestation, they created several procreative models designed to demystify the process.

Not surprisingly, most of these models recognized the fact that in order to conceive, engaging in sex was a necessary (un)evil—cattle farmer meets the most beautiful woman in Ireland, they go off to "pick bilberries" together, and the rest is history. However, what is surprising, in a culture so decidedly open about its sexuality, is the fact that there was one model where carnal knowledge of another human being was not a required element. This method relied on acts of symbolic sex and entailed "drinking liquids in which tiny creatures floated, swallowing the creatures and thus conceiving" (Bitel 197). And while it is questionable whether the early Irish actually believed that such conception was possible, it is nevertheless a procreative model that is found several times throughout early Irish tales.

The first appearance of this type of symbolic sex comes in "The Wooing of Etain" where the wife of Etar inadvertently drinks from a cup into which the fly has fallen: "Etar's wife swallowed Etain along with the drink that was in the vessel; Etain was conceived in the woman's womb and was born as her daughter" (Gantz 47). Even Deichtine, the mother of the greatest

warrior in the Ulster Cycle, is subjected to a similar fate in “The Birth of Cúchulainn”: “Every time she put the vessel to her mouth, a tiny creature would leap from the liquid towards her lips ... thereafter, Deichtine indeed became pregnant” (132-33). These instances of pregnancy without physical contact—the Irish version of immaculate conceptions—seem slightly out of place when looked at in context of the culture that spawned them. That is, they seem that way at first. Upon closer inspection, the tales in this procreative model might be seen as nothing more than a convenient way for a mother to explain a pregnancy she would be reluctant or even unwilling to explain otherwise; the liberated land of early Eriu undoubtedly has a few of those in its oh-so-storied history.

Your neighbors do it. Your mailman does it. And in medieval Ireland, just about everybody was doing it—from the Ris to the cattle farmers to the Túatha Dé Danann. Sex was natural, and as long as it was not an all-consuming obsession, there was nothing wrong with a little pleasure every now and again (and again and again). And although what exactly constituted a reasonable amount is slightly ambiguous, the fact that it had more positive than negative potential is perfectly clear. It could be good for your health, and—even better than that—it led to babies. That alone could account for the high level of cultural interest; the medieval Irish did not just want sex, they wanted heirs, too. Whatever the reason, whether it was actual or symbolic, out of wedlock or with one of several wives, with a mere mortal or a member of

the *Síd*, the act of physically giving and receiving love is indelibly woven through the stories of the Ulster Cycle. Perhaps that thread, as much as the children those unions produced, is the legacy of early Ireland.

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AFTERWORD

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