

THE WOOING OF CHOICE:
Prosimetric Reconstruction of the Female Journey
in Irish mythology

by Roxanne Bodsworth
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This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Institute of Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, Victoria University.

Abstract:

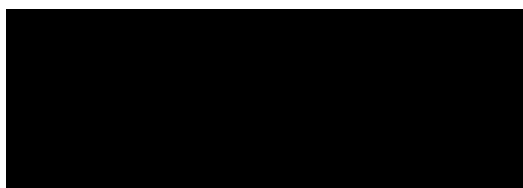
In “The Wooing of Choice: prosimetric reconstruction of the female journey in Irish mythology”, I examine the representation of female characters in Irish mythological tales where the woman chooses her lover in contravention of social expectations. In the traditional versions, the woman recedes into the background as the narrative develops around the male hero. I ask what happens to the discourse of the narrative when it is subverted so that the focus is placed upon the female experience. This is explored through a creative component, called ‘Meet Me in My World’, a prosimetric reconstruction of three Irish tales in which the woman chooses her lover and compels him to follow her. The three tales are: *Aislinge Óengusso (The Dream of Óengus)*; *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne (The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne)*; and *Longes mac nUislenn (The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu)*.

The exegetical component, comprising 50% of the thesis, is composed of two sections. In the first, I examine theories of feminist writing and remythologizing, and develop a new model for feminist reconstruction, which I apply to the creative product. In the second section, I explore the relationship between narrative and poetry, from medieval prosimetric translations to contemporary hybrid texts, and consider which form provides the best framework for my female-centred narrative and the verse. This exploration includes consideration of the traditions of Irish poetics and Irish women’s poetry, the principles of which are then incorporated into the poetic mythography that is ‘Meet Me in My World’.

Student Declaration

I, Roxanne Bodsworth, declare that the PhD thesis entitled ‘The wooing of choice: When a Woman Chooses her Lover in Irish mythology’ is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the student's signature.

Date: 3 June 2020

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Abbreviations

eDIL – electronic Dictionary of Irish Language

DF I, II, III – Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn

FDA I, II, III, IV and V – Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing

LMU – *Longes mac n-Uislenn*

OCU – *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*

TDAG – *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*

Shortened Forms

The *Tóruigheacht* – *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*

The *Aislinge* – *Aislinge Óengusso*

The *Táin* – *Táin Bó Cúailgne*

The *Ectra* – *Ectra Condla*

Prefatory Style Guide

The exegesis is written in a primarily academic style with some creative writing. The creative writing is formatted in italics and indented to clearly distinguish it from the general text. This is always my own writing.

The titles of poems are placed in single quotation marks even if they have been published as a complete book. Otherwise, the titles of books, manuscripts, and collections are placed in italics. Where there is an Irish title with an English translation, the Irish title is given first and italicized; the English translation is provided in parenthesis and is also italicized indicating that it has been published as such. After the first use in each chapter, the shortened version of the Irish title is given.

The titles of the Irish myths are first given in Irish and English, but where the titles are drawn from manuscripts in Old and Middle Irish, the Irish language title is then used in deference to Irish literary convention. The same rule is applied to the titles of the tales contained in the manuscripts, which are given in Irish and English initially, and thereafter in Irish as the correct title. Where the title comes from a translation, the title used is the same one as provided by the translation.

The names of characters from the Irish myths have variant spellings used by commentators and translators, and sometimes individual commentators and translators use different spellings interchangeably. I have chosen to use an older variant for each name to convey an archaic feel to the language. These names are:

- Derdriu (used by Vernam Hull in *LMU*)
- Finn (used by Nessa Ní Sheaghda in *TDAG*)
- Óengus (used by Jeffrey Gantz in *EIMS*)
- Medb (Old Irish for Maeve)
- Cuchulain (used by Proinsias mac Cana)

The exception to this is in direct quotations, where I use the spelling provided by the author. Where the spelling of English words in quotations is Americanised, I alter this to reflect Australian spelling for the sake of consistency.

I use the spelling of *síd* to describe the fairy mounds and the spelling of *sídhe* to describe the people who dwell in the *síd*, as this is a clearer distinction than using the same term for both (see Glossary of Irish Terms).

Dating of Irish medieval stories is an inexact science. A story from an earlier century might only be extant in a manuscript written in a later time, though language used may indicate an earlier origin, as may references to that story in other manuscripts. Because of this, I have used the approximate dates provided by scholars and have occasionally commented when there is some dissension about the dates.

For the exegetical component, references are provided in footnotes for direct correlation with a numerical annotation. However, in the creative component, I have used explanatory endnotes with references. This is because footnotes would visually detract from the arrangement of the poem on the page, and the purpose of the notes is explanatory rather than referential, providing additional material for those who might not be familiar with Irish literature. The endnotes are Roman numerical because alphabetical or standard numerical detracted from the visual arrangement.

The bibliography is divided into sections of primary source material and secondary references for both the exegetical and the creative. I provide pronunciations for the glossary, but these are approximate only to assist with reading the material for non-Irish speakers.

Glossary: Select List of Irish Terms

(Note: italicized syllables are stressed)

Aisling:

(also spelt ‘aislinge’ and pronounced ‘Ash-*leen*’)

Translates as ‘vision’ or ‘dream’. In an early classification system, this term was used to describe a genre of Irish mythology associated with a poet’s vision of a beautiful maiden. In the eighteenth century, the aisling became associated with political poetry where the beautiful woman represents Ireland and summons young men to fight for her liberty.

Cailleach:

(also spelt ‘caillech’ or ‘caillighe’ and pronounced ‘*coy-luck*’)

A term used to describe an old woman, a crone, a veiled woman, or a nun.

Dindsenchus (Lore of Places):

(also spelt dinnshenchas and pronounced ‘*din-shank-as*’)

These are the mythological tales associated with the topography of the landscape.

Feis temro:

(pronounced ‘fesh-*tavro*’)

A feast held at Tara, the court of the King of Ireland, where each guest attended with their consort.

Fenian:

Connected to the literature of the Finn Cycle.

Fénid:

(also spelt ‘fénnid’ and pronounced ‘*feen-id*’)

A member of the *féana*.

Fíana:

(also spelt as ‘fianna’ although Kuno Meyer argues that this is inaccurate. Pronounced ‘fee-anna’)¹

A group of men, occasionally women, who lived on the boundaries of society, living in the wild. Sometimes they appeared to serve a protective function, and at other times were considered outlaws.

Fíanaigeacht:

(pronounced ‘fee-an-eye-gekt’)

The stories, poems and songs about the fíana.

Fili (pl. filid):

(alt. spelling ‘filí’ and pronounced ‘fill-ee’)

A skilled and trained poet.

Filidecht:

(pronounced ‘fill-ee-dekt’)

The learned art of poetry.

Finn Cycle:

(also known as the ‘Ossianic Cycle’ or the ‘Fenian Cycle’)

One of four categories applied to the study of medieval Irish literature. Centred around stories of Finn mac Cumhaill and the *fíana*, free-ranging warrior bands. The tales are mostly set in the forest and the *fíana* travel on foot and spend their time hunting or fighting.

Gessa:

(alt. spelling ‘geisa’ or ‘geasa’ or ‘geisi’ and pronounced ‘Gay-sha’.)

Plural of ‘geis’.

¹ Meyer, Kuno. *Fianaigeacht: Being a Collection of Hitherto Inedited Irish Poems and Tales Relating to Finn and His Fiana, with an English Translation*, Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1910: v-vi.

Geis:

(alt. spelling 'geas' and pronounced 'Gay-sh')

A binding prohibition or obligation specific to an individual and given them at birth or acquired during some significant life event.

Historical Cycle:

(also known as the 'Cycle of Kings')

One of four categories applied to the study of medieval Irish literature, this cycle is a quasi-historical collection relating to the succession of kings and nobles, their deeds and adventures.

Irish Literary Revival:

A literary movement usually described as beginning in the 1880s which drew a considerable amount of its inspiration from Irish mythology and folklore in creating new works of Anglo-Irish literature in poetry and prose, and for the stage.

Middle Irish:

The Irish language of the tenth to twelfth centuries.

Modern Irish:

(also called 'Gaeilge')

The Irish language from the twelfth century to modern day.

Mythological Cycle:

One of four categories applied to the study of medieval Irish literature, and relating to the tales about the Tuatha Dé Danaan and their predecessors. Many of the tales contained in the other three cycles also contain elements of the Mythological cycle but are focused on other protagonists.

Old Irish:

The Irish language of the sixth to the tenth centuries, used in written manuscripts from that era, many of which exist only as fragments. Some of the manuscripts transcribed in the Middle Irish period make reference to Old Irish manuscripts or contain text written in Old Irish.

Red Branch:

See 'Ulster Cycle'.

Rigfénid:

(also spelt 'rigfénnid' and pronounced 'rig-fee-nid')

Leader of a fiana.

Samhain:

(also spelt 'Samain' and pronounced 'Sow-ain')

One of four Irish fire-festivals that marked seasonal transitions that falls, using the Gregorian calendar, at the end of October. Under the influence of Christianity, it became known as 'Hallowe'en' or 'All Hallows Eve', preceding 'All Saints Day'.

Síd:

(also spelt 'síde' or 'sídhe' and pronounced 'shee')

Refers to the hollow hills or the mounds to which the Tuatha Dé Danaan retreated and thereafter inhabited following their defeat by the Milesians. Regarded as otherworldly dwellings or kingdoms. Also refers to the Tuatha Dé Danaan, the people of the síd, sometimes referred to as 'sídhe' or 'sídhe-folk' or 'sídhe-woman/man'.

Táin:

(pronounced 'Toy-n')

Translates as 'the cattle-raid' and was used to classify medieval Irish literature in an early system of classification. *The Táin* is usually taken to refer to *Táin Bó Cúailgne* or The Cattle-Raid of Cooley.

Táin Bó Cúailgne:

(pronounced 'Toy-n boh Cool-ny')

The central saga of the Ulster Cycle where the hero Cuchulain holds the invading army of Medb of Connaught at bay when she seeks to steal the Brown Bull of Cuailgne.

Tochmarc:

(pronounced '*Tock*-mark')

Translates as 'the wooing' or 'the courtship' and was used to classify medieval Irish literature in an early system of classification.

Tuatha dé Danaan:

(pronounced '*Too*-aha de *Dah*-nun')

Translates as 'the children of the Goddess Dana' or 'the tribe of Dana'. Refers to the magical inhabitants of Ireland prior to the arrival of the Milesians, the first of the Celts. The Milesians drove the Danaan into retreat into the 'hollow hills' or *síd* and the people were known as the 'Danaan', or the '*sídhe*' or the 'fairy'.

Ulster Cycle:

(also known as the Red Branch Cycle)

One of four categories applied to the study of medieval Irish literature, and relating to those tales about the king Conchobar mac Nessa and his band of warriors, known as the Red Branch.

INTRODUCTION: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

It was when I was first studying Irish mythology that I identified a recurrent pattern in many of the stories: it is the woman who initiates an illicit affair with a lover of her choice but, as the story progresses, she recedes into the background and it is the male hero who comes to dominate the narrative. This disturbed me then and continued to play on my mind until, many years on from that first realization, I made it the subject of my academic research. In this thesis, I ask what happens to the discourse of the narrative when it is subverted so that the focus is placed upon the female journey that has begun with her own unconventional choice of lover. This requires a different way of reading the stories, one where I look for clues that indicate there is indeed a female journey hidden beneath the masculine, and I use poetry as a tool for the imaginative and creative excavation of this feminine experience.

I use the term ‘mythological’ when referring to those traditional tales passed on through the generations – by both oral and literary transmission – that are regarded as belonging to a specific culture and which influence the cultural identification of the social group. In Ireland, the literary mythology emerged from monastic centres from the sixth centuries onwards and so often carries overtones of patriarchal Christian ideology which directly influences the discourse of the narrative.¹ In her examination of one of the Irish sagas from the ninth century, *Táin Bó Cúailgne* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), Ann Dooley argues that a feminist way of reading needs to challenge the dominant discourse and its traditional representation of women in the text:

Techniques of feminist reading help to uncover the degree to which male heroic asseveration may be said to be subverted by women. Here the challenge lies in finding ways to get around the dominant male master narrators’ and authors’ mapping of women in order to uncover women’s voices behind and in dissonance with the dominant discourse.²

¹ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth, Ireland: National University of Ireland, 2000. 1990: 1.

² Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Tain Bo Cuailgne*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006: 5, 11.

A feminist reading is required to analyse these stories for what they can tell us about women's experiences. However, I contend that a feminist reading needs to be augmented by a feminist writing that not only challenges the phallogentric discourse but converts it to a gynocentric one. In this thesis, I demonstrate this progression from feminist reading to feminist writing with a prosimetric reconstruction of mythological tales, using prose to convey the narrative context and poetry both to excavate and to creatively express the woman's experience.

Mythological stories have long been used to perpetuate social expectations, shape cultural identity, and reinforce political power structures. When Dooley connects the *Táin* to what she calls "the mythic deposit", she is recognizing that while the text exists as its own entity, it is also interconnected with cultural tradition, allowing for a dynamic relationship between mythology and its social meaning.³ Dooley says that:

A reading of the passages in question under the rubric of myth will necessarily view them from a wider and deeper concept of the repository and the usages of culture than the idea of a purely textual tradition alone.⁴

To understand their social influence, myths need to be considered within their socio-cultural context and this means examining the minutiae which constitutes the greater work. Dooley provides a model for this interactive relationship between culture and myth by analysing the contributions of microcosmic text sequences instead of concentrating on forming them into a coherent whole.⁵ It is an approach which I can employ in my analysis and reconstruction of the traditional tales in order to highlight the women's stories that have been subsumed by the dominant masculine narrative.

In the mythological tales, when the woman initiates the love affair in contravention of social expectation, she is effectively the catalyst for the sequence of events that follow but which then revolve around the male hero. As a motif, this pattern appears in tales of *aithed* (elopements), *tochmarc* (wooings), *longes* (exile) and *aithed* (violent deaths), as well as within collections such as *Acallam na Senórach* (Tales of the Elders of Ireland) and sagas such as *Táin Bó Cúailgne* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley) and a list of examples is

³ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, 101.

⁴ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, 101.

⁵ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, 5.

provided in Appendix One.⁶ However, this freedom of choice was not the usual practice in medieval Irish society where marriages were arranged by family members for reasons of economic and social benefit, especially among the aristocracy.⁷ Perhaps it was a cultural remnant from the Indo-European practice of *svayamvara* where, in certain situations, a king's daughter was permitted to choose her suitor.⁸ There is a phrase, *tochmarc togai*, found in *Tochmarc Ailbe* (The Wooing of Ailbe), which John Carey suggests is closely related to *toga tochmairc* 'choice of wooing' that refers to a man's pick of potential wives. He says "... the implication seems to be that a maximum of freedom is granted to the woman being courted."⁹ *Toga tochmairc* may not have been the practice in reality in medieval Ireland, but the idea of it still emerged in mythological stories where the woman made her choice despite opposition from those who had authority over her life.

While the exercise of the woman's choice in Irish mythology is a phenomenon that has been frequently noted, there has been little exploration of its significance beyond the supposition that it is simply another illustration of the bestowal of sovereignty on the chosen king by the goddess of the land. Mark Hederman and Richard Kearney make this finding when considering the *aitheda* (elopement tales) and additionally conclude that:

The authoritative self-assurance of the divine heroine is thus extended to her human counterpart with the result that women characters on the whole play a more active and independent role in Irish literature than in most literatures of the medieval period.¹⁰

Yet there are as many examples of stories where the women play a passive and dependent role, such as in *Tochmarc Étaíne* (The Wooing of Étaín) and it is important to note that the greater independence demonstrated in some traditional stories did not necessarily translate into greater independence for Irish women in society.¹¹

⁶ See Appendix One for a list of examples

⁷ Gillian Kenny, "When Two Worlds Collide: Marriage and the Law in Medieval Ireland," in *Married Women and the Law in Premodern Northwest Europe*, edited by Cordelia Beattie and Matthew Frank Stevens: Boydell & Brewer, 2013: 55.

⁸ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 111.

⁹ John Carey, ed. and transl., "Tochmarc Ailbe: The Wooing of Ailbe," unpublished: 9.

¹⁰ Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney, eds., *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies* Vol. 1-5. Dublin, Ireland: Blackwater Press, 1982-85: 522.

¹¹ Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best, "Tochmarc Étaíne," *Ériu* 12 (1938): 137-96.

While the sovereignty theme can be read into almost all stories of liaisons between male and female characters, it is such a common association that Dooley says it has become metonymic rather than metaphoric.¹² It is a theme that, while according the feminine a pivotal importance, still places the emphasis on the king, or the male heroic figure. It is she who empowers the male. Surely there are much broader implications to consider in the interpretation of the power relationships between the male and female characters than determining who should be ruler.

Máire Herbert has challenged this excessive emphasis on the sovereignty theme in her consideration of *Longes mac nUislenn* (The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu), demonstrating that Derdriu instead acts as a destabilizing social agent within the narrative progression of the story.¹³ Herbert opens the way for deeper excavation of the female characters by tracing their representations from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries back to the primary sources of earlier centuries, which was a complex undertaking where “the source initially appears hydra-headed. In the nineteenth century, the scholarly activity of translating the original Irish texts of heroic legends was matched by that of popularization.”¹⁴ This popularization effectively obfuscated the connection to earlier versions and Herbert’s work is an archaeological excavation of a literary landscape. I use her example as a guide for my own exploration, tracing the representations of the women back to those early texts and considering the ways in which the representations have varied across time and how this reflects the understanding (or lack thereof) of the changing female experience. However, the feminine story is often so obscured that it requires an imaginative and creative approach to uncover its presence and this is where I have been able to use poetry as a tool of excavation of the feminine possibilities in the stories.

¹² Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, 159.

¹³ Máire Herbert, “Celtic Heroine? The Archaeology of the Deidre Story,” in *Gender in Irish Writing*, edited by Toni O’Brien Johnson and David Cairns, 13-22, Bristol, US: Open University Press, 1991.

¹⁴ Herbert, “Celtic Heroine?” 13.

American poet and academic, Alicia Ostriker, says “revisionist mythmaking” is a recognised feminist strategy employed by many writers to challenge the dominant ideologies perpetuated by mythological stories and to undermine their power.¹⁵

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with the new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.¹⁶

Reconstructing the Irish tales to highlight the stories of the women employs this strategy to subvert established social structures and undermine the dominance of the patriarchal, making room for women to enter the stage and exert their influence upon the social and political landscape.

I prefer to use ‘reconstruction’ as a term rather than ‘revision’ for two reasons. Firstly, ‘revision’ carries other connotations in Irish academic discourse where there was intense debate in the 1990s over the perceived nationalist agenda of Irish historiography which did not necessarily reflect lived reality, especially with regard to women’s experience.¹⁷ Secondly, I consider that ‘reconstruction’ is a more concrete term, about building rather than just viewing, about finding and using the old materials, looking at them from different angles, and then arranging them in a new way so they support a different structure. Reconstruction does involve standing back and analysing from a different viewpoint, but then doing something with what has been seen.

There are many examples of feminist writers and poets who employ this approach, whether it is called revisionist or reconstructionist, and Ostriker provides a comprehensive list of feminist poets from the 1960s and 70s who have written poems reconstructing myths with a feminist slant.¹⁸ There are, of course, many others. Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes of her own poetic awakening with *Eurydice* and then discovering

¹⁵ Alicia Ostriker, “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” *Signs* 8, no. 1 (Autumn, 1982): 71-89.

¹⁶ Ostriker, “The Thieves,” 72.

¹⁷ Catriona Clutterbuck, “The Irish History Wars and Irish Women’s Poetry: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Eavan Boland,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women’s Poetry*, edited by J. Dowson, 97-118, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

¹⁸ Ostriker, “The Thieves,” 89-90.

H.D.'s *Eurydice* written many years earlier.¹⁹ The same Greek myth – of a woman retrieved from the Underworld, walking behind her lover, only to be lost because of his failure to meet the conditions of her return – has inspired many feminist reconstructions with its common theme of the unreliability of the male counterpart that condemns the woman to surviving in a desolate afterlife.²⁰ Greek mythology has often provided a wealth of material for feminist reconstruction.

Irish mythology, comprising those traditional stories written down and developed by medieval authors, and those transmitted through oral folklore, evolved over time to have an enduring effect upon Irish cultural identity. The stories provide material for both feminist reading and reconstruction as rich as any derived from the Greek collection, but they have been less thoroughly mined for these purposes. There are examples of those who have made such use of the Irish collection, including Lady Gregory's 1921 play *Grania* which presented a contrast between Gráinne's love-based motivation and the egocentric manipulations of the men.²¹ If it had been more successful as a play, its sympathetic rendering of Gráinne's character may have countered the mercenary portrayal provided in Standish H. O'Grady's translation of *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmuda agus Ghráinne* (The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne).²² Also offering a more positive and romantic portrayal, Maire Mhac an tSaoi, writing in the 1940s and 50s, presented Gráinne as a caring and dutiful daughter who was unknowingly about to embark on a seditious adventure that would make her "the eternal envy of the women of Ireland".²³ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill draws on the *Táin* in her 1988 cycle of poems which focus on a contemporized depiction of the women from the story. For example, *Cú Chulainn II* is a poem which recasts the central hero as a disempowered son pleading with the single

¹⁹ Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA: The University of Alabama Press, 2006: 24.

²⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Eating Fire*, Virago, 2010: 278-280; Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), *Collected Poems, 1912-1944*, Vol. 611, New York: New Directions Publishing, 1983. 1925: 51-55; Carol Ann Duffy, *The World's Wife*, 3rd ed. London: Picador, 2015. 1999: 58-60; Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Eurydice," *boundary* 2, 4, no. 1 (1975): 250-54.

²¹ I. A. Gregory, "Grania," in *Selected Plays of Lady Gregory*, 181-214, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983.

²² Standish Hayes O'Grady, ed. and transl., *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmuda Agus Ghráinne, or, the Pursuit after Diarmuid O'Duibhne, and Grainne the Daughter of Cormac Mac Airt, King of Ireland in the Third Century*, Vol. 3, Dublin: Ossianic Society, 1857.

²³ Mhac an tSaoi, Máire. "Gráinne." Translated by Biddy Jenkinson. In *An Paróiste Míorúilteach: The Miraculous Parish*, edited by Louis de Paor, 58-9. North America: Wake Forest University Press, 2014.

mother who has raised him to give him information about his paternal parentage, which she nevertheless withholds.²⁴

There are countless other examples of the reconstruction of mythology to be found which use Norse, Christian, Roman and Asian mythology as their source material, as well as many inspired by European fairytales. The old myths can speak to the female experience but how they speak, whether it is perpetuating conformity to a patriarchal system or encouraging self-determination, is largely decided by the author. The stories can speak not only to choice, but also to the challenges within relationships, the balance between independence and need, the experience of grief and anger when a love is lost. And how a woman might survive on her own, if it is possible.

Following in this established tradition of the reconstruction of mythological tales, I bring a feminist reading and a feminist writing to three traditional tales that serve as examples of *tochmarc togai*, the three stories being:

- *Aislinge Óengusso* (The Vision Dream of Óengus), of which the central female character is Caer.
- *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne), of which the central female character is Gráinne.
- *Longes mac nUislenn* (The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu), of which the central female character is Derdriu.

In choosing these three, I have selected tales which have a clear trajectory from the woman's choice, where she does successfully compel her chosen spouse to follow her, through to the outcome that results from this choice. I could have chosen from others that each have their own particular appeal (listed in Appendix One) such as *Tochmarc Becfhola* where Becfhola considers three lovers before deciding upon the best match, or *Oenét Emire* (The Only Jealousy of Emer) where there is a remarkable negotiation that takes place between the women in the story over who will have the hero in the end, or *Ectra Condla* (The Adventures of Connla the Fair) where the otherworldly woman is silenced by druid magic yet finds a way still to reach her chosen. However, within the scope of this thesis, I could not consider in depth all of these stories.

²⁴ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta*, translated by Michael Hartnett, Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988: 114-15.

The most obvious choice for any thesis examining the woman's choice of lover in Irish mythology would seem of necessity to include Medb from the Ulster Cycle, often viewed as the epitome of a sovereignty goddess who chose her lovers on her terms, and changed lovers at will. However, Medb is such a powerful and complex figure that my thesis would have had to be devoted entirely to consideration of her power in relationships rather than exploring how the motif of *tochmarc togai* appears across a range of mythological tales. There are many stories, and fragments of stories, where Medb is a central figure playing various roles (sister, daughter of a king, lover, victim, murderer, queen, mother, friend) and it would not have been possible to accommodate all of these threads, nor feasible to separate them and take only one strand. As well, my emphasis is on the theme of the *tochmarc togai* rather than the theme of the sovereignty bestowed by the goddess on the rightful king through sexual engagement, which has already been the subject of a great deal of academic investigation and is the over-riding factor in the stories associated with Medb. While I do consider aspects of Medb's stories and representation as a powerful female character in my exegesis (in much the same way that Anne Dooley considers other stories as part of the cultural collection in *Playing the Hero*), I focus primarily on three stories that deal more directly with the motif of the *tochmarc togai*.

I have also chosen three stories from three different cycles to show how the motif recurs across the classifications: *Aislinge Óengusso* is taken from the Mythological Cycle that tells the stories of the magical race of the Tuatha Dé Danaan; the *Tóruigheacht* is taken from the Fenian Cycle that tells the stories of the *féana* led by Finn mac Cumhaill, and *Longes mac nUislenn* is taken from the Ulster Cycle that tells the stories of the Northern part of Ireland, centred on a hero called Cuchulain. All of these stories, while falling under different categories, are mythological, telling the stories of mythical heroes and their adventures even when occasionally interspersed with quasi-historical details and references.²⁵ Those stories that incorporate the *tochmarc togai* in the Historical Cycle have a more marked emphasis on political and historical detail, which draws attention

²⁵ Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018.

away from the theme and so I have not included them in order to keep the focus on the mythological representations.

The old stories are told in an old language. Some years ago, I studied Old Irish for a period of six months, and soon realised that it required years of study to develop an understanding of this highly complex language. Hence, I have happily deferred to the translations of others who do have this level of expertise and experience. However, I have also compared many of these translations with each other and noted the subtle differences between them in exploring the nuances of the stories. In “The Metonymics of Translating Marginalized Texts”, Maria Tymoczko reminds the reader repeatedly that “every telling is a retelling.”²⁶ While she specifically refers to the process of translation, I find that this principle is as true for the interpretation of texts. It is something I have been mindful of in my study of the different versions, and in the decisions I have made about what to include and exclude or reframe as I retell the stories using the established narrative material.

The *Aislinge* is a story that has received less academic consideration than many of the others yet is among the oldest of the tales (eighth century).²⁷ The central female figure, Caer, is characterised as mostly silent rather than vocal, yet not as a woman who is powerless. It provides a contrast to the other two stories, of Gráinne and Derdriu, which are among the most familiar Irish tales. In these latter two, the female characters are markedly vocal, featuring women who compel their lovers to follow them unwillingly, and the stories were frequently reconstructed by the writers of the Irish Literary Revival of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Because of their popularity, there has been a great deal of comparison between the stories of Derdriu and Gráinne, and this same popularity makes them prime material for defamiliarizing the characters, challenging preconceptions and opening up new possibilities for these two figures that have proved to be iconic female representations in the Irish cultural collection.

²⁶ Maria Tymoczko, “The Metonymics of Translating Marginalized Texts,” *Comparative Literature* 47, no. 1 (1995): 11.

²⁷ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *Coire Sois: The Cauldron of Knowledge*, edited by Matthieu Boyd, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014: 166.

The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky believed that “for literature to be literature, it must constantly defamiliarize the familiar, constantly evolve new procedures for story-telling or poetry-making.”²⁸ This defamiliarization is certainly necessary when evoking a feminist perspective, in order to disturb and destabilize commonly held assumptions about cultural stories. The character of Gráinne that is often presented as a manipulative self-interested woman can also be represented as a woman trying to find the best way to survive, for herself and her offspring, in a male-dominated world. The Derdriu that is often perceived as a victim of fate, can also be presented as a self-determinative woman within the constraints of the hierarchical and warrior-centric society into which she has been born.

One technique of defamiliarization is what the formalist Jan Mukařovský described as foregrounding. He said that when a different component is brought to the fore, it means the rearrangement of all the others.²⁹ Applying this principle to feminist reconstruction, focusing upon the woman in the story as the main protagonist involves rearranging the material to foreground the female characters, and sending the male characters to the background. This presents a particular challenge because much of the woman’s story is not told in the source texts; the purpose of the female character is to provide a foil for the male heroic journey. Sometimes the woman disappears altogether.³⁰ In addressing this challenge, I have decided not to change what Roland Barthes would call the cardinal or nuclear components of the narrative in the prose component.³¹ With each tale, I am telling an old story, and it is recognizably so, but I also use poetry to enter those gaps and crevices looking for the women’s stories and giving them expression. The prosimetric text then forms a poetic mythography, mapping the mythical narrative and highlighting the feminine aspects with poetry.

²⁸ Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, pp. 1-13, 1965. 5.

²⁹ Jan Mukařovský, *On Poetic Language*, translated by John Burbank and Peter Steiner, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. 1940. 18.

³⁰ Edyta Lehmann, “The Woman Who Wasn’t There: Preliminary Observations on the Perplexing Presence and Absence of the Character of Gráinne in the “Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada Agus Ghráinne,”” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 30 (2010): 116-26.

³¹ Roland Barthes and Lionel Duisit, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” *New Literary History*, Winter, 1975: 248.

The practice-led exegesis encapsulates the material I needed to research in order to explore the feminist nuances of the stories, to establish how I could rewrite the stories to highlight the feminine, and to create the poetry. These areas included: the way that language can be used as a tool of liberation or to reinforce oppressive ideologies; techniques for the foregrounding of female characters and their stories; mapping the path of the female hero in mythological tales; and the narrative relationship between prose and poetry historically and in contemporary literature.

With the research so closely related to the creative component of this thesis, it proved necessary to approach these areas with a creative perspective which is reflected in the exegetical writing with occasional creative prose pieces that better explain my ideas than anything written in an academic style. In this sense, the exegesis is a hybrid model of creative and academic writing to complement the creative component of narrative and poetry.

My creative process has been akin to Felix and Guattari's theorization of the rhizomatic in literary praxis.³² I am a burrower, I tunnel in among the roots, I nibble on what I find there, make new passages, borrow others. Occasionally I emerge into the daylight and clamber upon the branches and look out with a startled sense on the world that is not the same as it was the last time I climbed this story.

The stories I explore are arranged structurally, grown upwards like a tree from defined roots of historical and social and religious significance. But as I burrow I weaken the foundations, the roots of the tree, and if I'm not careful it may come tumbling down upon me. And it has stood for centuries, there is a sense of guilt in destabilizing such a structure. But then I want to lead others down the tunnels I have discovered, uncovered and created, and afterwards we can sit together in the branches and discuss our new understanding of the tree while hoping it doesn't collapse beneath us.

³² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987: 5-6.

If it is does, it is organic and will either regrow horizontally, perhaps become a seat for poets and dreamers, or it will simply decay and become part of the whole system of roots and rhizomes tangling beneath the surface; it will always be connected and never disappeared, always feeding and feeding upon.

Because of the organic process of undertaking this research, which has meant exploring many different tunnels and climbing different branches, the exegesis has formed 50% of the thesis. The exegesis is further divided into two sections. The first addresses the methods I have developed for feminist reconstruction of mythological tales. The second section addresses the relationship between narrative and poetry, speaking to the development of a poetic mythography for the application of the feminist reconstruction. In each section, I review the literature relevant to the area of research and where my project is situated within this context.

Section One: Feminist Reconstruction

In the preface to this section, I describe my positioning as a feminist and define what this means for me as a writer and poet, and an individual. I examine the feminist movement through the three waves, the gains made with each wave and the criticisms directed at each, and the importance of intersectionality with regard to including women of all races, socio-economic backgrounds, genders, political viewpoints and lived experiences of prejudice, intolerance and abuse.

The first chapter in this section, 'The Language of Feminist Reconstruction', explores how language is constructed, as the very basic unit of storytelling and poetry, and how it can challenge entrenched phallogentric conventions and thereby cause the reader to approach a text with a new perspective. As a creative writer, this has meant becoming conscious of those phallogentric patterns that have insinuated their way into my psychology, about breaking those patterns, and then taking those fragments and threads and weaving them into my poetry and storytelling to create a new tapestry from the old.

The next chapter, 'The Female Hero's Journey' examines the framing of these traditional stories which were generally focused upon the male hero's journey. In a feminist reconstruction, this focus is turned to the female journey. I suggest that the

greatest difference between the male and female journey lies with the social expectations, where the female has deviated from the anticipated trajectory of their life cycle and in so doing has disrupted social cohesion and stability.

The third chapter, 'Placing the Woman at the Centre', examines how the use of the narrative devices of voice or silence, absence or presence, can move characters to the foreground, accentuate emotional affect, or be used to designate importance and status. In order to follow the female journey, the point of view must stay principally with the main female protagonist while also allowing a stronger presence for the auxiliary female characters, demonstrating the interconnectedness of female stories.

Section Two: Narrative and Poetry

The challenge when writing poems in response to traditional stories is the need to consider the readers' familiarity with the source narrative, or their lack of prior knowledge. The first chapter of this section therefore examines the relationship between narrative and poetry. I explore the different approaches used by contemporary writers and examine the efficacy of the ways in which the two elements combine, from verse novels to hybrid texts to prosimetric forms. My experimentation leads me to decide that the prosimetric form best supports the poems as the most significant part of the text in their expression of the feminine experience while providing adequate narrative context for them to be understood.

The prosimetric form has a long history within medieval Irish literature and the second chapter elucidates my research into the traditions of Irish poetry, as well as into the women's tradition of Irish poetry, and ultimately where my poetry is situated within these traditions as a contemporary collection.

This chapter concludes with a section where I explain the application of three experimental prosimetric styles for each of the three tales which I have reconstructed. I have felt inspired in this development by my exploration of the different personalities of the female characters as they have emerged in my poetry. Their personalities have evolved from their representations in previous storytelling, with new possibilities emerging when examined from a feminist perspective.

During the course of this research journey, I have evolved as a creative academic and, in the concluding chapter, I analyse this process of change and its implications for the place of creativity in academic research. I also summarize the results of my research into developing a model of feminist reconstruction that demonstrates how the female character in mythological tales can be effectively centralized so that the discourse becomes gynocentric and thus generates a new understanding of women's stories.

SECTION ONE: FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTION

In order to explain what I mean by the feminist reconstruction of traditional tales, of mythological tales, I first need to explain what is meant by the term 'feminism', how others have defined it and how I, personally, define it.

Feminism is commonly described as coming in waves, as seemingly disparate social activity towards political change that developed into "mass-based, social movement" which gained force and power, rose, ebbed and flowed.¹ The first wave, from the mid 1800s to the early decades of the 1900s, was focused on obtaining equal rights in the law, especially the right to vote. The second wave of feminism arose in the 1960s and was more focused on the inequalities that were part of everyday life, in the home, in the workplace, in the bedroom, and on the attitudes that relegated women as Other, lesser, as Simone de Beauvoir's "second sex".² Anne Enke says that:

Issues related to sexuality were at the heart of feminist activism, including reproductive control, child care, women's economic autonomy, homophobia, and commercial representations of women.³

Feminists were actively involved in improving circumstances for women in domestic violence situations with the creation of women's refuges, as well as rape crisis centres, and advocating for changes in laws relating to rape, divorce and child custody.⁴

There were several criticisms levelled at the Second Wave feminists. They were viewed, rightly or wrongly, as enforcing a feminist ideology that was separatist in intent and lesbian in nature. As Anne Enke describes it, there was an element that believed that "only in gaining complete autonomy from men, and in simultaneously denying men the ability to treat women as objects, servants, and second-class citizens, would patriarchy

¹Susan Archer Mann and Douglas J. Huffman, "The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the Rise of the Third Wave," *Science & Society* 69, no. 1 (2005): 57.

² Mann and Huffman, "The Decentering," 76-77; Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier, London: Vintage Books, 2010. 1949. 3-17.

³ Anne Enke, "Smuggling Sex through the Gates: Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of Space in Second Wave Feminism," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2003): 640.

⁴ Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 342.

be overcome.”⁵ Feminists of this era were popularly portrayed as lesbian, radical and militant (some of them were).⁶ It was a representation which the next generation of feminists, who assumed the mantle of the Third Wave, sought to overcome by reclaiming the objectification of female sexuality as a tool of empowerment. For this, they were often criticized by Second Wave feminists.⁷

At the same time that Second Wave feminists were regarded by some critics as being separatist and lesbian-focused, a contradictory criticism accused them of being focused on issues predominantly affecting white middle-class heterosexual women. These critics maintained that the concerns of women of colour, from different socio-economic groups, and of different sexuality were not considered.⁸ The Third Wave rejected this white bias, deliberately embracing a wide variety of feminist perspectives, or feminisms, including gender fluidity, multiracial identities, and celebrating individualism instead of collectivism.⁹

While there are intimations of a fourth wave, Kathleen A. Laughlin says that “women’s historians are getting seasick these days.”¹⁰ The waves metaphor may have run its course. With an analysis of quantitative and qualitative research that examines different beliefs and perceptions, Catherine Harnois argues that feminists from the Second Wave generation and from the Third have more in common than they suppose, and that the accusations levelled by the Third Wave against the Second fail to recognise the social justice activism of the Second Wave that directly addressed inequalities related to class, racism and sexuality and “the diversity of people and perspectives within all feminist generations.”¹¹ It seems that the ‘wave’ metaphor may have developed as a divisive concept that has sharpened intra-feminist conflict rather than something which encourages inclusivity.

⁵ Enke, “Smuggling Sex,” 635-67.

⁶ Kristan Poirot, “Sexing Woman: Lesbian Identifications, Media, and “Second Wave” Feminism,” in *A Question of Sex. Feminism, Rhetoric, and Differences that Matter*: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014: 99-100.

⁷ Mann and Huffman, “The Decentering,” 73-74.

⁸ Mann and Huffman, “The Decentering,” 56-91.

⁹ Mann and Huffman, “The Decentering,” 74-5.

¹⁰ Kathleen A. Laughlin, Julie Gallagher, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Eileen Boris, Premilla Nadasen, Stephanie Gilmore, and Leandra Zarnow, “Is It Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Waves Metaphor,” *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 1 (2010): 76.

¹¹ Catherine Harnois, “Re-Presenting Feminisms: Past, Present, and Future,” *NWSA Journal* 20, no. 1 (2008): 121.

While there has been minimal broad-scale demographic research into feminist attitudes, the findings of a 1999 American Gallup Poll indicated there had been a measurable increase in diversity amongst those American women who identified as feminist with regard to race, ethnicity and education.¹² Whether this was because of the ongoing effects of Second Wave activism, where proponents were already starting to identify the need for greater plurality, or because of the activism of the Third Wave, what truly matters is that there is now a greater understanding that feminism means something very different for women depending upon their specific circumstances. It is different for women challenged with a disability that results in a physical exclusion. It is different for women from a marginalized group excluded from full participation in society and access to resources, services and social supports because of their ethnicity or religion or economic status. These inequalities intersect with gender inequalities and one is not prioritized over the other. As stated by Anamaria Deliu and Laura T. Ilea:

Intersectional feminism provides the tools for both civil activism and fierce theoretical discussions on ethics, pervasive social power dynamics, equity and equality, strategies of subversion, issues pertaining to the colonial history and so on.¹³

In short, intersectionality has been an important development in feminist theory that recognises and seeks to address the complexity of women's lives.

The recognition of this complexity can also be extended to a global level, where feminism can mean something very different for a young woman in Afghanistan asserting her right to education, or to a mother fully concerned with protecting her children from bombs and famine in Yemen, or to a woman exercising her newly-won right to drive a car in Saudi Arabia without male accompaniment. Deliu and Ilea say that:

Eastern Europe has struggled to draw level with the Western socio-cultural transformations, the Orient is still in the phase that needs to address human rights, and a world system analysis reveals that even in the so-called developed worlds there is combined and uneven development ... calling for different

¹² Harnois, "Re-Presenting Feminisms," 132.

¹³ Anamaria Deliu and Laura T. Ilea, "Combined and Uneven Feminism: Intersectional and Post-Constructivist Tendencies," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 4, no. 1 (2018): 6.

actualisations of feminisms to respond to specific issues of real people living a particular moment of economic and socio-cultural development.”¹⁴

The wave metaphor may have worked, loosely, as a description for the history of feminism in the Western world but it barely touches the shores in some third world countries.

Laughlin points out that waves do not exist in isolation as single phenomenon but are connected to multiple sets.¹⁵ Waves come in runs, in continuous motion, forming swells and tows, pushing and pulling, eroding and creating beaches and sandbars. Feminism does not exist on a linear continuum but moves back and forth, eternally mixing. Feminism has and always will be fraught with divisions because it is simultaneously about personal identity and inter-communal connections, intersecting with a range of social issues and personal experiences. That is also what makes it fertile ground for creative struggle, and the contribution of women writers across time are all equally relevant because they are about trying to find a way through the tumult to a better place, for self and others.

What feminists have in common is a conviction that there are entrenched systemic attitudes and behaviours at home and abroad which need to be challenged and overcome for women to be able to be fully able to express themselves, to make autonomous decisions about their own lives, and to be all that they can be without fear of overt or covert censure and punishment. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis states:

Feminism has the potential fundamentally to reshape the way we view the world. We wish not just to interpret women’s experiences but to change women’s condition. For us, feminist thought represents a transformation of consciousness, social forms, and modes of action.¹⁶

Yet it is also clear that what we each mean by the changes to the women’s condition varies greatly.

¹⁴ Deliu and Ilea, “Combined and Uneven Feminism,” 6.

¹⁵ Laughlin et al, “Is It Time to Jump Ship?” 78.

¹⁶ Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA: The University of Alabama Press, 2006: 26.

There is a shift in current feminist theory away from the concept of “‘freedom from’ an oppressive other to ... ‘freedom to’ act in life according to our corporeality and our experiences as women.”¹⁷ This allows for a more positive approach with offering constructive alternatives to the modes of oppression rather than always engaging with ways to dismantle or escape them. However, I believe that there is still a need for both ‘from’ and ‘to’. There are still patriarchal systems of oppression ingrained in our culture and globally which result in inequities and injustices related to race, gender and class. These systems need to be challenged, subverted, undermined, destroyed so that women are free from them. There also needs to be the creative response that develops new, more equitable and sustaining systems to heal the wounds and effectively replace, rebuild, reconstruct the old.

Creative writing can do both “from” and “to”. The challenge is that in some way, when writing as a feminist, the author is assuming an authoritative voice on behalf of other women, asserting a feminist position, when the very definition of ‘woman’ is constantly being deconstructed. Shoshana Felman iterates this well when asking:

Is she speaking *as* a woman, or *in the place of* the (silent) woman, *for* the woman, *in the name of* the woman? Is it enough to *be* a woman in order to *speak* as a woman? Is ‘speaking as a woman’ a fact determined by some biological *condition* or by a strategic, theoretical *position*, by anatomy or by culture? What if ‘speaking as a woman’ were not a simple ‘natural’ fact, could not be taken for granted?¹⁸

Shoshana is referring to the writing of Luce Irigaray, but these questions are as relevant to ask of any critic or writer claiming a feminist position. It is important to ask these questions of myself.

I will seek to define what feminism means for me but I will not seek to define nor limit what it means for others. I will explore, and am informed by, what the term has meant for others and particularly in relation to the use of language. Hélène Cixous in her

¹⁷ Deliu and Ilea, “Combined and Uneven Feminism,” 7.

¹⁸ Shoshana Felman, “Women and Madness: A Critical Phallacy,” in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997: 9.

stream-of-consciousness style often sounds as if she is speaking for all women yet also states,

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system.¹⁹

Can I write separately to patriarchal influence, to Cixous' 'phallogentric system'? Can I fully separate as she and Luce Irigaray have tried, only perhaps to further emphasize the otherness of women? I don't believe I can. But I can decide what part I take from the language and the storytelling and how I make use of it as a feminist writer. It is about becoming conscious of those dominant patterns that have insinuated their way into my psychology, about breaking those patterns where I can and then taking those fragments and threads and weaving or collating them into a different shape so they become part of the material that is interwoven into my poetry and storytelling. And that is, precisely, *my* feminist praxis.

Woman – black, red, white, yellow, brown, speckled – peel back those skins, flayed, all women bleed. If not from their wombs then from their wounds.
Woman – gay, bi-, trans-, queer as folk, intersex, transitioning, born that way.
Hetero-. Women. Women who nurture, are nurtured, open to others, closed, sewn shut. Feminism is not about what women are, it's about what women can be, which is anything they want to be. Masculine, feminine, asexual. Feminism is about dismantling the apparatus that would determine what a good woman is, what a bad woman is, that would control what women are. Feminism is not about challenging what women are; it's about challenging how women are treated, kept down, dismissed, held back, controlled, disregarded, actively ignored, silenced, kept under, held under. It's about breaking free. And because women can be and are whatever they want to be, that becomes about everyone's freedom, anyone's freedom. Operating collectively or as individuals. It's about me. About me being me and breaking free. About you. Being whoever you want to be.

¹⁹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *Signs*. Chicago, USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1976: 883.

Chapter One: The Language of Feminist Reconstruction

Language is a means of communication, obviously, which works most effectively when there is a shared vocabulary. As such, the colonization of a country and its people means that the colonizer's language over-rides that of the colonized to become the language of social and political power. The language of the colonized, on the other hand, becomes a signifier of lower social status and subjugation. This was clearly demarcated in medieval Ireland, when the area controlled by the English aristocracy and centred around Dublin became known as 'the Pale', with governmental control increasingly centred in this region. Those areas 'beyond the Pale' were the Irish speaking and thereby considered home to the uncivilized population.¹ 'The Pale' is a term that moved into colloquial usage when referring to those whose actions were considered outside of the norms of generally accepted social and moral behaviour; those who were not Anglified.

A causative link can be drawn between language and behaviour because verbal language is not simply about the words that emerge from our mouths, but the words that emerge from our thoughts, our way of thinking and processing information. Colonization happens not just externally but on a subliminal level, with language operating in symbolic and semiotic ways in constructing, establishing, and maintaining socio-cultural identity.² The reclamation of languages that have been suppressed in the process of colonization is emblematic of the reclamation of indigenous and native cultures.

Rebecca Voelkel defines colonization as:

... the context and process by which one group of people employ power and resources to subjugate, oppress, marginalize, and/or kill another group or groups of people, the land, and its creatures.³

¹ Laura O'Connor, *Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and De-Anglicization*. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006: xiii-xiv.

² Stuart Dunmore, "Language, Culture and Identities: Theoretical Perspectives," in *Language Revitalisation in Gaelic Scotland*, Edinburgh University Press, 2019: 19-21.

³ Voelkel, Rebecca M. M. "Colonization and Sin." In *Carnal Knowledge of God*, 31-42: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2017: 31.

As far as women have been subjugated, oppressed, marginalized and abused, their experience can be understood as a form of colonization.⁴ With their sexual life described by Sigmund Freud in the nineteenth century as “the dark continent”, women, like Africa, were considered frightening, mysterious, dangerous, to be controlled.⁵ As for other colonized groups, where language has been used as a tool of oppression, it may be that a women’s language can also be used as a tool of empowerment.

To find the language that best expresses my ideas and sentiments in this exegesis and in my creative writing, I have explored the concept that writing as a woman means writing differently to men, means emphasizing the bodily and subjective experience of being a woman, and of being a woman in a male-dominated world. Yet while recognising that writing differently can serve to arrest attention, I also ask if it can hold that attention, especially if it is so subjective that it drifts into the incomprehensible? Does writing in a definitively feminine way make any difference to the importance given to women’s writing or simply serve to reinforce stereotypes? And in reinforcing stereotypes, operate to exclude those who do not fit a conventional definition of what constitutes a woman?

I also explore the idea that women’s writing is actually the same as men’s but is perceived differently. Women may use language in the same way, but that does not mean they will be listened to, heard, given due attention. I have found, in the course of this research that, for me, to write as a woman means to write as myself, as an individual, writing from my lived experience and the flight of my imagination. If we can each do that, finding our personal style rather than emulating others, then we can share our individualised experiences and insights and enrich each other’s creative lives regardless of gender.

“Come out of their Language”:⁶ *écriture féminine*

Writing early in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf argued that women writers needed to find ways of writing that freed them from masculine models, which she

⁴ Voelkel, “Colonization and Sin,” 35.

⁵ E. Frances White, “The Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Constructing Science, Race, and Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century,” In *Dark Continent of Our Bodies*, 81-116: Temple University Press, 2001: 81.

⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, New York: Cornell University, 1993. 1977: 1.

effectively achieved in her own stream of consciousness writing.⁷ Woolf drew these conclusions while studying the nineteenth century literary achievements of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, among others. She recognized that they were writing novels without a preceding women's tradition to help them structure and guide their endeavours.⁸

Yet Woolf sought the freedom to write not in an identifiably feminine way but from a desire for an idealistic androgyny where there was a complementarity between the masculine and the feminine sides of the brain. She argued that:

In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating ...⁹

This androgyny was not a sexless position but one that freed the writer, male or female, from the limitations of sex and gender. However, Marilyn R. Farwell claims that Woolf's writing on this position could be ambivalent, sometimes emphasizing the complementarity of writing from differently gendered perspectives but at other times seeming to encourage the subsuming of female subjectivity within male objectivity.¹⁰

Hélène Cixous challenged this assimilation of the feminine when she wrote 'The Laugh of the Medusa', a clarion-call for women to write from their own bodily experience, as women, to escape from the cultural dominance of the masculine.¹¹ She gave the term *écriture féminine* to this new form of literary expression that would be free-flowing, subjective, vivid, effusive, and not constrained by patriarchal rules relating to grammar, syntax, or even logic. She wrote:

We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end;

⁷ Joseph Warren Beach, "Virginia Woolf," *The English Journal* 26, no. 8 (1937): 606.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1974. 9th. 1928: 76.

⁹ Woolf, *A Room*, 97.

¹⁰ Marilyn R Farwell, "Virginia Woolf and Androgyny," *Contemporary Literature* 16, no. 4 (1975): 451.

¹¹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. In *Signs*, Chicago, USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1976.

we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking.¹²

Cixous not only asserted that there was a style of language that was expressive of the feminine experience, she demonstrated the possibilities in her writing, which exhibited a clear *jouissance*, a word that means "to enjoy without fear of the cost" and which is associated with the orgasmic.¹³ This *jouissance* is infectious, engaging, and makes me want to answer Cixous' call and give my words the same freedom.

Luce Irigaray also believed that there was a difference between men's writing and women's, and this was confirmed by her research with a study group of 250 women and 100 men. Some were those attending her seminars, others were students from both Paris and the French provinces, and others from a range of socio-cultural backgrounds, not all of whom were Francophones.¹⁴ Irigaray found that women were more inclined towards using language for communication than for control of the external world; that they demonstrated more advanced linguistic and literary aptitude than did the male subjects; and that there were differences in the way that they used pronouns, prepositions and adverbs.¹⁵ Yet, her study did not show whether this linguistic difference between the sexes was hard-wired or cultural, or a combination of both.

It seems a small enough sample on which to predicate a hypothesis of women's language, but theories on all manner of women's issues have been put forward with less research. Freud's conjecture of the castration complex seems to have been largely predicated upon his analysis of the neuroses of his patients yet has formed the foundation of psychoanalytical theory applied to the general population, as have his theories of the psychiatric differences between the sexes.¹⁶ Irigaray says that:

The 'feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. Hence the all too well-known 'penis envy'.¹⁷

¹² Cixous, "The Laugh," 878.

¹³ Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of 'L'Ecriture Feminine'," *Feminist Studies*, Summer, 1981: 261.

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Key Writings*, London: Continuum, 2004: 52-3.

¹⁵ Irigaray, *Key Writings*, 52, 87.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, no. 13 (Jan 1, 1932): 281-82.

¹⁷ Irigaray, *This Sex*, 69.

While still emphasizing that women are different to men, Irigaray and Cixous dispute the psychoanalytic focus on ‘lack’ of a penis and instead reposition women as full to overflowing. This is an important reframing of a damaging psychoanalytical theory which effectively hypothesized that women were lesser than men not just physically but psychologically.

Cixous and Irigaray were two representatives of a rising movement within French feminism in the 1970s who found a “common opponent” in the entrenched masculinist ways of thinking that they believed dominated the Western world with phallogentric systems.¹⁸ It should also be considered that *écriture féminine* as a revolutionary movement in literature cannot be considered separately to the context of the Modernist movement that had only gathered in strength from the turn of the twentieth century. Modernism was, of course, another revolution in writing, yet while it was a shift in the philosophical approach to the Arts, it was also reflective of a wider change of thinking. The artistic expression of this philosophy spearheaded a social change that encompassed art, science, and all aspects of culture.¹⁹ Toril Moi says that:

The modernist poem, with its abrupt shifts, ellipses, breaks and apparent lack of logical construction is a kind of writing in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning.²⁰

Modernism even appeared to be a social revolution where women’s voices could be heard, such as those of Marianne Moore, H.D., and Gertrude Stein, who hosted salons in Paris that attracted the elite of the artistic and literary community while also producing her own literary contributions.²¹

Additionally, *écriture féminine* may simply have been a new iteration of a female way of writing that had existed in practice for centuries. Distinctive forms of women’s writing had existed with the female mystics of the medieval period – Hildegard of

¹⁸ Jones, “Writing the Body,” 248.

¹⁹ Astradur Eysteinnsson, “Modernism in Literary History,” in *The Concept of Modernism*, 50-102: Cornell University Press, 1990: 52-54.

²⁰ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 11.

²¹ Alicia Ostriker, “What Do Women (Poets) Want? H.D. And Marianne Moore as Poetic Ancestresses,” *Contemporary Literature* 27, no. 4 (1986): 482; Frederick J. Hoffman, “Gertrude Stein,” in *Gertrude Stein - American Writers* 10, 5-45: University of Minnesota Press, 1961: 5-6.

Bingen; Julian of Norwich; Margery Kempe; the beguines; the women of Helfta. Carolyne Larrington suggests that in their contributions can be found the beginnings of “an *écriture féminine* in western writing.”²² This women’s literature was distinguished by their very physical, sensual experiences of the divine.²³ And their understanding of pleasure was not just evident in their mystical writing. The celibate Hildegard of Bingen, writing in the twelfth century, delivered a quite explicit response to a question about sexual intercourse:

When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings forth with it sensual delight, communicates the taste of that delight during the act and summons forth the emission of the man’s seed.”²⁴

Hildegard of Bingen and the other mystics understood the physicality of ecstasy through their union with God and Carolyne Larrington says that because women were associated with the flesh, spiritual directors assumed that female mystical experiences would incorporate the physical.²⁵ Their language is fluid, poetic, sensual, evocative, physical and easily fits the criteria of what Cixous proposed for *écriture féminine*.

However much Cixous was positing a revolution in women’s writing, she did also recognise that it was about an ancient connectedness that could even be said to predate language. The freedom of *écriture féminine* can be equated with what Julia Kristeva describes as the semiotic stage which precedes language.²⁶ The Semiotic exists in an undefined state likened to Plato’s *chora*, the space within a vessel or container; an existence which he described as both “nourishing and maternal.”²⁷ The development of language then causes a psychic separation from this maternal state as the child enters into the social realm of the Symbolic.²⁸ The semiotic *chora* underlies the symbolic system and can be articulated through it.²⁹ However, in advocating for a gynocentric

²² Carolyne Larrington, ed., *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, London: Routledge, 1995: 124.

²³ Larrington, *Women and Writing*, 124.

²⁴ Larrington, *Women and Writing*, 124.

²⁵ Larrington, *Women and Writing*, 124.

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, translated by Margaret Waller, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984: 27.

²⁷ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 26.

²⁸ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 48-49.

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, Constance Borde, and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, "Speech, That Experience," in *Passions of Our Time*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, 208-12: Columbia University Press, 2018: 210.

system of writing, Cixous called for a rejection of the dominance of the Symbolic. As she wrote:

There's tactility in the feminine text, there's touch, and this touch passes through the ear. Writing in the feminine is passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the mother, passing on what is most archaic.³⁰

Just as the transition into the Symbolic involves a separation from the mother, the embracing of the Semiotic engenders a return to her, to dwell in the nurturing environ of the *chora*. It is the space that poets reach into, to hear again those archaic voices, and to use them in speech.

Yet those voices can be found not only in an interior unconscious world but in the external lives of everyday women. In her poem, 'The Muse Mother', Eavan Boland says of the woman in the street:

She might teach me
a new language:
to be a sibyl,
able to sing the past
in pure syllables,
limning hymns sung
to belly wheat or a woman
able to speak at last
my mother tongue.³¹

Singing the past, speaking with the mother's tongue, reconnecting. In Ireland, during the time of the prominence of the bardic schools from 1200-1600, poetry became the domain of men, while not discounting that there were women poets who provided an exception to the rule.³² But there was one strand of poetry that was always the domain of women, and that was *caoineadh*, the keening of the dead. Angela Bourke suggests that, as well as elegising the dead and performing the public service of facilitating mourning, "lament poetry... contains messages that would have been intelligible to an

³⁰ Hélène Cixous and Annette Kuhn, "Castration or Decapitation?" *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1981): 54.

³¹ Eavan Boland, *New Selected Poems*, Great Britain: Carcanet, 2013: 71.

³² Marie-Louise Coolahan, "Writing before 1700," in *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, edited by Heather Ingman and Cliona Ó Gallchoir: Cambridge University Press, 2018: 18-20.

inner circle of women but not necessarily to the rest of their audience.³³ Originally an oral art, the *caoineadh* was composed using traditional patterns of rhyme and metre even while it was also wild, emotional, evocative.³⁴ It was a woman's language.

So this experience of women's writing, connecting to old forms, finding new ways, would seem to indicate that the common women's language is loud, emotional, excessive, free-flowing, unconventional. When it is transcribed onto the page in the form of *écriture féminine*, it retains these characteristics. Or is this just when it gets noticed? How it needs to be framed in order to stand out amongst phallogentric texts?

“Writing is not a gender-neutral site”:³⁵ Making a difference

There is a danger that for all its value as a liberating process, *écriture féminine* can seem to be feeding into the stereotype of women as illogical, irrational, incapable of objectivity, not belonging in academia. Moi presents the dilemma clearly when she says:

Cixous seems in danger of playing directly into the hands of the very patriarchal ideology she denounces. It is, after all, patriarchy, not feminism, that insists on labelling women as emotional, intuitive and imaginative, while jealously converting reason and rationality into an exclusively male preserve.³⁶

Women can be practical, objective, emotionally stable, rational, intellectual, and even dryly academic without sacrificing their right to call themselves women.

Writing as a feminist in a phallogentric world, when writing not just for oneself but for a wider audience composed of both male and female readers, means making some compromises. Logically, if we are to make a difference to the world that we live in, then we must write for that world. For example, Shoshana Felman says of Irigaray that her writing cannot help but be imitative of male discourse:

³³ Angela Bourke, “More in Anger Than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry,” in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, edited by Joan Newlon Radner: University of Illinois Press, 1993: 161.

³⁴ Bourke, “More in Anger,” 165.

³⁵ Duplessis, *Blue Studios*, 51.

³⁶ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 123.

She cannot pretend to be writing in some pure feminist realm outside patriarchy: if her discourse is to be received as anything other than incomprehensible chatter, she must copy male discourse. The feminine can thus only be read in the blank spaces left between the signs and lines of her own mimicry.³⁷

While acknowledging the logic of Felman's argument, I want to respond that it still can be more than this, that reading the feminine in these blank spaces can become writing the feminine, an *écriture féminine* that unleashes a voice that storms out upon the world and changes it, changes the way women and men are perceived and understood.

Breaking away from the old and faded convention of penis-envy and saying that women do not feel a lack, don't need to, because we have everything. *Écriture féminine*, women's writing, feminist writing, is not then primarily about rediscovering a women's language nor creating a new one; it is about making our voices heard. The Medusa laughs, and men as well as women must stand up to pay attention.

All of which sounds wonderful rhetorically but is not reflected in the reality of what has happened in the decades since Cixous wrote that pivotal essay; it could even be called a failed revolution. Further research demonstrates that women still struggle for the same level of acceptance and recognition as male writers and poets. In the 1980s, Dale Spender attempted to record women's speech to determine what made it different to men's, but eventually realised that she was operating "as an unquestioning believer in the received wisdom that women were exceedingly garrulous."³⁸ She found instead that the "salient characteristic of women's talk in conversation with men was *silence*."³⁹ What made women's language different to men was that women did not speak, and when they did they were not listened to, were not heard, and that they largely accepted this state of affairs.⁴⁰

The recent research of Natalie Kon-Yu into literary awards demonstrates that this is still the case – women's writing is not given due recognition and there is a clear bias towards men's writing that is not reflective of quality but of prejudice. She provides

³⁷ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, New York, USA: Methuen & Co., 1985: 140.

³⁸ Dale Spender, *The Writing or the Sex? Or Why You Don't Have to Read Women's Writing to Know It's No Good*, New York: Pergamon Press, 1989: 8.

³⁹ Spender, *The Writing or the Sex?* 8.

⁴⁰ Spender, *The Writing or the Sex?* 11.

examples which indicate that women's writing is more likely to be accepted for publication when using a male pseudonym.⁴¹ The same prejudices are active in Ireland (and most likely in other countries) where, despite outcries against the previous exclusion of women's writing in Irish literary collections, in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (2017) only four of the thirty poets included are women.⁴²

Spender argues that the English language is primarily under male control and that "this primacy is perpetuated while women continue to use, unchanged, the language which we have inherited."⁴³ If women are to assert themselves in academia, then they must do so using a changed language, a gynocentric language that is both intelligent and emotional, rational and intuitive, grammatical and unrestrained, sensible and obscure, a language that does not submit to the rules but refashions them so that the words are the best fit for the subject matter, not the subject matter fitted to the rules. As Irigaray says:

If we keep on speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we'll miss each other, fail ourselves.⁴⁴

While it could seem discouraging that, regardless of the quality of women's writing, it is still weighed against phallogentric measures that tip the scales in favour of the male, these measures have been in place for centuries. Mary Beard maintains that the misogyny of classical Greek and Roman myths is deeply embedded in Western culture, which has had "thousands of years" of practice in the silencing of women.⁴⁵ For decolonization to take place requires not merely external change but significant shifts in internalized psychological belief systems; it can take many generations to wear away at the old forms and create the new.

While Cixous and Irigaray were clearly focused on examining the male/female divide and seeking a language that liberated women from submission to male codes, their endeavours followed on from the revolutionary contributions of male writers employing

⁴¹ Natalie Kon Yu, "A Testicular Hit-List of Literary Big Cats," *Overland* 223 (2016): 14-20.

⁴² Fiona Sampson, "Review: The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets," *The Poetry Ireland Review* 124: 31.

⁴³ Dale Spender, *Man Made Language*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985: 12.

⁴⁴ Irigaray, *This Sex*, 205.

⁴⁵ Mary Beard, *Woman and Power: A Manifesto*, Great Britain: Profile Books Ltd, 2017: xi.

similar experimental modes, such as the stream of consciousness prose of James Joyce and the socially provocative writings of Jean Genet.⁴⁶ However, Cixous did not draw parallels between *écriture féminine* and this masculine writing, believing women had something very different to bring forward.⁴⁷ A significant point of difference, I would argue, is that it was more acceptable for men to break the rules. This inequality is illustrated by the expulsion of Irigaray in 1974 from the École Freudienne following her radical treatise, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, which challenged, among other philosophies, Freud's phallogentricity.⁴⁸ The theories of the female academic were cause for expulsion even while Jacques Derrida was being applauded for his ideas that were deconstructing (and which continue to deconstruct) all previously accepted tenets of literary and social theory.⁴⁹

Showalter wrote of the tension between those women writers who would operate outside of the academic institutions rather than conform to the established phallogentric conventions and those women who would "enter and even conquer them."⁵⁰ There is the third way, to take academic criteria and rewrite it, deliberately upsetting the establishment, being heard in the hallways if not the halls. Irigaray has done this successfully, having been expelled for her feminist challenge but welcomed back in, certainly to a substantial number of academic establishments.⁵¹

While Irigaray may have demonstrated that women use language differently, and whether that emerges from Kristeva's Semiotic or Freud's unconscious or from cultural conditioning or inherent biological impulses or is a consciously chosen mode of expression, the difference is no longer something to be hidden away, kept quiet, but rather to resound in the halls and make of it a difference that matters. Difference means that ideas and philosophies are not able to stagnate. Constant challenge leads to creativity and invention, and better communication between the sexes. And that is a

⁴⁶ Erwin R. Steinberg, "Introducing the Stream-of-Consciousness Technique in Ulysses," *Style* 2, no. 1 (1968): 49-58.

Steven Miller, "Open Letter to the Enemy: Jean Genet's Holy War," *Diacritics* 34, no. 2 (2004): 85-113.

⁴⁷ Jones, "Writing the Body," 251.

⁴⁸ Jones, "Writing the Body," 249-250.

⁴⁹ B. Putt, "Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)," in *The Essential Caputo*, Indiana University Press, 2018: 282.

⁵⁰ Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985: 255.

⁵¹ Heidi Bostic, "Introduction: The Recent Work of Luce Irigaray," *L'Esprit Créateur* 52, no. 3 (2012): 2-3.

change in culture that would ‘allow’ women to not only be accepted into academia but see them welcomed for their difference, and their sameness; a change that would see those of all genders welcomed for their contribution to a world of thought and ideology and exploration.

Entering the echelons of academia and trying not to be noticed as a woman writer, to become androgynous in the way advocated of Virginia Woolf, and therefore considered on the same terms as male writers, is just not possible even if were desirable.⁵² Rachel Blau DuPlessis says that “A woman writer is never just written, she is read, as a woman. So, as a woman, she needs to originate her own reading. Her own methods.”⁵³ If we are going to be read differently no matter what we do, then we need to write differently to make our voices heard above the inculcated muting by a patriarchal system.

Even academia, with its rejection of the subjective and intuitive in favour of rationalism and unemotive language, has had to shift to allow for the entry of *écriture féminine*. It continues to be an uneasy relationship, and may or may not become easier in time. What matters is that the laugh of the Medusa has proved contagious (perhaps some are even weeping because of this) and there is no turning back once she has been heard. Women have arrived, have stepped into the spaces, and are making a noise about it.

“woman must write herself”:⁵⁴ *écriture individuelle*

The movement of *écriture féminine* has made a difference, is making a difference, and will continue to do so and, in breaking the rules, allows men as well as women to break free of conventional literary requirements, as in the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, with the words tumbling over themselves, dipping between the highly metaphoric, poetic, rhetorical and then returning to the more logical analysis.⁵⁵ And not just for women or for men; the *jouissance* of *écriture féminine* has opened the way for writing

⁵² Woolf, *A Room*, 94-102.

⁵³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*, New York: Routledge, 1990: 97.

⁵⁴ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *Signs*, Chicago, USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1976: 875.

⁵⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

that also moves beyond the male/female dichotomy. Quinn Eades has pioneered this process, as he describes it in *All the Beginnings*:

This body wonders what would happen if *every* body (not just woman's body) ... was able to enact a form of narrative and civil disobedience; an unerasing of the corporeal from text? It wonders if there could be a proliferation of *écritures*. It imagines a vast root system (*écriture matière*), that spawns all bodies ...⁵⁶

We are each different, no matter our sex, our gender, our predilection for particular foods or artistic preferences or sporting interests or family backgrounds. We are different, but that difference is not fixed and indivisible; it is Derrida's *différance* where the meaning is deferred, nothing determined but always in a state of becoming, and writing is that becoming.⁵⁷ And it is a different becoming for each writer.

In her essay 'The Last Painting', Cixous writes passionately:

If I were a painter! I would give you each mimosa-cluster whole. I would give you my mimosa-soul, down to the most minute quivering of the yellow spheres. I would put my mimosa-soul on the canvas, before your eyes. But I don't paint. I can only speak to you of mimosas. I can sing the word 'mimosa.' I can make the magic name ring out, the mimosa word: I can give you the music of the mimosa. I can swear to you that (the) mimosa is a synonym for alleluia. And still, how fortunate that there is the word 'mimosa'! I can tell you that the mimosa mimes. I can tell you, too, that the mimosa originates in Brazil. But I can't nourish your eyes with mimosa light. So I beg you: please, see the mimosas that I see. Imagine the mimosas. See what you don't see, out of love for me."⁵⁸

I can't see the mimosa because nowhere does Cixous offer a description except to say they are clustered and yellow and Brazilian in origin. I must draw on my own memory or reach for Google to tell me that mimosa and wattle are the same thing. What I experience from this description, what is shared by Cixous, is her emotional and sensual response and I can only respond to her response. Pleasure in her pleasure, but it is her experience. She has kept the mimosa for herself; it is *écriture de Cixous*.

⁵⁶ Quinn Eades, *All the Beginnings*, North Melbourne: Tantanoola, 2015: 25.

⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978: xvi.

⁵⁸ Hélène Cixous, "*Coming to Writing*" and *Other Essays*, translated by Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jensen, Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991: 107.

Distinctively writing in her effusive style with its circumlocutory patterns and insistent repetition, Cixous opens the way for women to find their own individual expression rather than a mimesis of what some woman, some man, any person says is the way a woman should write as though it were an upside-down version of phallogocentric literary tropes. For example, when writing her poetry, DuPlessis imagines:

... a line below which is inarticulate speech, aphasia, stammer and above which is at least moderate, habitual fluency, certainly grammaticalness, and the potential for apt, witty images, perceptive, telling and therefore guaranteed 'poetic.' ... my poetry wanders, vagrant, seeking to cross and recross that line: mistaking singular for plural, proposing stressed, exposed moments of genuine ungrammaticalness, neologisms, non-standard dialect, and non-normative forms... I want to distance. To rupture. Why? In part because of the gender contexts in which these words have lived, of which they taste.⁵⁹

This *différance* matters to her and she finds a way to write it, as a woman, as an academic, as a poet, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Her journey is deeply individual, personal, yet there are also the similarities with so many women torn between pursuing their artistic predilections or fulfilling their expected role as a woman.⁶⁰

Each woman writes herself. Gabriele Schwab describes literature "as a medium that facilitates processes of 'self-making' (autopoiesis)."⁶¹ In the act of writing, the author engages with their inner life and draws that into an external expression which can then communicate that inner world to others. Schwab describes this as "a transferential exchange between cultural and personal space."⁶² So just as each woman writes herself, she also writes beyond herself because she is connected to family, culture, community, and the issues specific to each of these as well as to her own experience of body, soul, mind. For example, when writing as the first indigenous Australian poet to be published, Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 'We Are Going' gives utterance to the thoughts that the women in her poem cannot speak.⁶³

⁵⁹ DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar*, 144.

⁶⁰ Duplessis, *Blue Studios*, 19.

⁶¹ Gabriele Schwab, "Cultural Texts and Endopsychic Scripts," *SubStance* 30, no. 1/2 (2001): 163.

⁶² Schwab, "Cultural Texts," 163.

⁶³ Kath Walker, *We Are Going: Poems by Kath Walker*, Brisbane: The Jacaranda Press, 1964: 25.

Another indigenous author, Alexis Wright, writing from an international perspective, overlays the Greek myth of Leda into her novel of dispossession and colonial rape in *The Swan Book*. The collection *Ain't I a Woman! Classic Poetry by Women from around the World* draws its title from a speech delivered by Sojourner Truth, an ex-slave, to a church meeting in 1851 on giving the vote to women.⁶⁴ It is an anthology that brings together poetry of women from ancient Greece to modern Bangladesh that speaks to the female experience of childhood, marriage, sex, having babies, not having babies, death and all the struggles of life between.⁶⁵ Caitríona Ní Chléirchín writes that:

A significant strand of Irish-language women's poetry refuses to repress disorderly elements of corporeal existence, embracing the abject and exploring the place of the abject where boundaries break down.⁶⁶

Much of women's experience is deeply connected to the bloody physical experience of life and any form of *écriture féminine* must incorporate this messiness or risk being considered a sanitized version of femininity.

Rising from this messiness, women's poetry has often been expressed in oral forms and while literary forms are accorded greater status in a modern world, this was not always the case. Certainly in medieval Ireland, oral poetry was considered an authoritative performance art. Robin Stacey Chapman, in *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland*, explains that:

Especially important to a sense of the authority claimed by performance (as by public speech generally) is the sociolinguists' observation that, in many cultures, it is not only language per se, but the form and syntax of that language that matters. In other words, the power claimed for particular types of speech is in many instances directly related to the structures of which that speech is composed, just as the structures of which that speech is composed are directly related to the nature of the authority claimed for it.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ E. Jay Ritter, "Sojourner Truth," *Negro History Bulletin* 26, no. 8 (1963): 254.

⁶⁵ Illona Linthwaite, ed., *Ain't I a Woman! Classic Poetry by Women from around the World*, Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2000.

⁶⁶ Caitríona Ní Chléirchín, "Abjection and Disorderly Elements of Corporeal Existence in the Irish-Language Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Biddy Jenkinson," Paper presented at the Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium, 2010: 158.

⁶⁷ Robin Stacey Chapman, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007: 4-5.

The oral performance of poetry has found a modern incarnation in the popular Slam poetry movement that particularly evokes issues of social justice and inequality. Susan B. A. Somers-Willett says that “for many slammers, poems that make an empowered declaration of marginalized identity and individuality are a staple of one’s slam repertoire.”⁶⁸ All of this speaks not only to the diversity of lived experience of women, however they might define themselves, but also to the diversity of expression in literary and oral or performance Arts .

When there is so much diversity, is there anything that can be defined as women’s writing or is it all *écriture individuelle*? When reviewing the poetry of Stevie Smith, Jane Dowson and Alice Entwhistle note that:

The scarcity of punctuation and the mix of regular, irregular and half-rhyme along with the question mark, oddly superfluous here, are among her frequent devices and arguably typical of a renovated ‘feminine’ language.⁶⁹

Which then begs the question, is it indicative of the feminine language or the freedom to write as an individual in a way not circumscribed by sex or gender? *Écriture féminine*, the writing of women, women’s writing, means a freedom of expression that does not limit women to writing in a particular style or genre but is about finding what is meaningful for them. I needed to find what was meaningful for me as a feminist writer and poet.

“She finds not her sum but her differences”:⁷⁰ *Écriture Roxanne*

As Adrienne Rich says, we “have it in our power to ‘seize speech’ and make it say what we mean.”⁷¹ So what I mean to say and to demonstrate is that speech, that writing, that poetry, is gendered because of the expectations and burdens laid upon it. When I write consciously as a woman, I feel the weight of responsibility to do right by those women who have not been able to speak out, to live up to the standards of literary liberation set

⁶⁸ Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, “I Sing the Body Authentic: Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity,” in *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, University of Michigan Press, 2009: 69.

⁶⁹ Jane Dowson and Alice Entwhistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women’s Poetry*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 112.

⁷⁰ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 893.

⁷¹ Alicia Ostriker, “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” *Signs* 8, no. 1 (Autumn, 1982): 69.

by women such as Cixous and Irigaray and DuPlessis, to write in a feminist language, to challenge and subvert phallogentrism, to move the feminist movement forward one more step towards freedom for women socially, intellectually, practically. The burden is heavy.

I ask myself what is it that I do? Is it only when I am consciously writing on women's issues that I am a feminist writer? What difference does it make that I write, as a woman? I am not writing my body. I write to escape my body, or perhaps to transcend it because it has been a very flawed body that holds me back from experiencing life more than allowing me to embrace it. There is a greater freedom in meeting life with my mind, which allows me to imagine beyond the confines of the body. Does that make me less of a woman? I do not write as a mother, never having physically experienced that state, though I know what it is to be nurtured and to nurture. I can write using blood as my ink, but not milk. It is not the female body I write from, but the female state. Vulnerability, fear, invisibility, these are all experienced by women more so than men.

But I cannot speak for all women, even as a rhetorical device. For too long, white women and white men have spoken on behalf of women of colour and stymied their freedom of expression instead of listening to their voices. Yet, listening to them, I learn something more of the world that I inhabit and what it means for me. By listening to them, I become more than I have been in my own self-contained world. I believe that by listening to each other, we are changed, as women, as artists, as individuals. As I am changed, then I also am changed in my own identity and my ideas and my expression, especially in my poetry.

I am an educated white Anglo-Celtic-Romany-Australian whose ancestors colonized the land where I live, displacing and harming the indigenous people. This awareness can become an inhibitory factor in expressing what I think of as women's issues, but is it better not to speak? Rachel Blau DuPlessis says, "we wish not just to interpret women's experiences but to change women's condition. For us, feminist thought represents a transformation of consciousness, social forms, and modes of action."⁷² I believe language needs to be written differently to that of the dominant literature, that which is

⁷² Duplessis, *Blue Studios*, 26.

phallogentric, in order for women to be heard, especially where gender issues intersect with primary social concerns such as race, economic disadvantage, disability, and religious vilification. Yet all I can do is write as myself, *écriture individuelle*. I am not a woman before I am a poet and not a poet before I am a woman nor a person before being a woman nor a woman before being a person; they are all wrapped up in me. I do not feel a line dividing the Semiotic from the Symbolic which I must cross to draw forward images and metaphors and pieces of language; they all exist in the *chora* simultaneously and emerge in that old cliché of giving birth to the form. I do not know what that form will be until the poem or the sentence or the essay or the story emerges and then I can do my best to shape and guide it into maturity using what tools I have at my disposal. Some of those tools are man-made but if they work for me, I will use them, and will make them my own.

I do not feel the need to write in a particular form in order to engender a particular agenda. I think other feminists have already done enough of that. Rachel Blau DuPlessis says that:

It seemed that one needed, as a feminist, to invent an endless number of forms, structures, and linguistic ruptures that would cut way beyond language-business-as-usual and narrative-business-as-usual, which always seemed to end up with ‘the same’ kind of binary, ‘patriarchal’ normalcy.⁷³

Rather, the agenda of feminism, as changing and variable as women are, is integrated into my life experience and I write from that, and to that, but not as a form of propaganda so much as providing voice to the experience. I must write truthfully and the form that my writing takes emerges from that experience, breaking free of dominant patterns to find the way to tell these stories as truthfully as I can. These are stories of other women, mythological women, stories that have forged patterns of cultural identification yet stories that speak to me, to both my heritage and my becoming, and so I speak to them. It is dialogue.

I will use a dialogic style in my prose because this project is not a static artefact for a spectator to gaze upon but a conversation between myself and the reader, and between the characters and the reader, and between the characters and myself. If you who are

⁷³ Duplessis. *Blue Studios*. 28.

reading this do not understand the language that I use, then I cannot communicate my concepts to you. Yet if the language is too easy, it can just slide across the reader's mind without grasping hold. If the language requires the reader to make an effort to understand, to use their minds differently, shift their perceptions a little, then I am not only communicating my concepts but the reader is actively involved in that communication. If the reader has to reach out to understand, then they have become engaged with the words and the words can work their magic, to challenge and inspire, to create change. I will use poetic language and poetic form to verbally illustrate the experience of the women as I imagine it. I will use broken language to reveal the broken-ness of the women in the stories I tell. I will use formal arrangements when they take control.

Dominique Hecq states succinctly that “creative writing is thinking”⁷⁴. This is true for the individual writer who explores the territory of ideas using writing as a tool of research – in my case using poetry as a tool of exploration of traditional narratives – but once writing is read it becomes an exchange, a dialogue, a conversation. The reader response cannot change what is written but interpretation changes the meaning, which is always shifting.

My writing will be rational and emotional, subjective and thoughtful, hopefully insightful. Drawing upon theory, probing with poetry. I will use metaphor where image is not enough to show the layer upon layer of inherent meaning. I will use metonymic association and long-running sentences and beautiful words to make the sentences tumble over each other like a flooding waterway. And words that are short. abrupt. hard. ugly. to stop the reader in their tracks. If grammar and punctuation hold back that which I want to say then they will be sacrificed. But I won't simply reject these things because they have been used by men when they serve me well. (I will even play with the language in a formalistic sense, making it fit prescribed patterns that lend it the authority of archaic and learned poetic practice.)

⁷⁴ Dominique Hecq, *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing*, New Writing Viewpoints, Vol. 10, Bristol 2015: 15.

When will I use this language? Always, everywhere, throughout. The exegesis is separate to the creative component because the latter is intended as a stand-alone creation and its readers may be unconcerned with the academic wrestling with the theory and ideologies and philosophies that have led to its birth. Yet the exegesis also is a work of creative research from which the poetry has emerged. I have not only listened to the laughter of the Medusa but I have looked upon her and been transformed, and I would hope, in both my exegetical and creative writing, to share that experience with my readers.

Chapter Two: The Female Hero's Journey in Irish Mythology

There has been a great deal of attention given in recent studies of mythology to the trajectory of the male hero's journey. Feminist critics have searched for the relevance of this patterning for storytelling about women and have developed new gynocentric models. I needed to analyse these models in order to focus the reconstruction of the mythological tales in this thesis so that they followed the trajectory of the female protagonist's movements instead of the male hero. However, I found that this required the development of a very different model that considered the female hero's journey in the context of the social-cultural role of mythological tales.

I want to see these women as heroes in the stories, to find the heroic in them, to make them heroic. But I am not writing a new story, I am following the old, I am following tradition, I am walking backwards in time to find the fragments of the stories as they have been told in the past, gathering those fragments and bringing them back with me to tell the stories in a new world. As I follow the women down well-beaten tracks, they lead me to places I had not expected. It is not what I thought I would find, perhaps not what I wanted to find. Yet it is their story that I write and so I must follow and ask, what is the women's journey? Can the women be heroes? Can I change the way they are seen?

The first thing to say about the female hero's journey in Irish mythological literature is that there was not one. These stories were not about women becoming heroes or displaying such fantastic martial skills that their stories would be told in perpetuity to demonstrate the importance of heroic qualities. As described by Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha:

Heroines are not the female equivalent of the heroes of saga: they do not have superhuman strength or a record of extraordinary physical achievements, and their proper element is romance rather than saga.¹

The role of women in the stories was to enable the male heroic journey, perhaps even provide a reason or an impetus for the display of the hero's capacities, or to serve as an audience for the masculine achievements.

¹ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, "General Introduction: Medieval to Modern 600-1900," in *FDA IV*: 2.

The Irish mythological tales generally upheld the heroic ideal for the communities in which they were told. Yet, a number of them also told of men led astray by women who brought about the destruction of the heroic ideal and of the social structures that supported the hero. These are the stories that interest me and, though the female hero's journey is not there to be found, it can be constructed. This construction operates as a creative strategy that centres the narrative on the female and not the male protagonist, examines her personal challenges and transformation, and finds there heroic qualities of another kind, qualities that have not previously been written into the dominant male-centred discourse.

This does not mean making the female protagonist a hero in the male mould but excavating the woman's story, recognising the attributes that have enabled her to navigate her journey, and how these can be understood to enable other women. In this chapter, I argue that a female hero's journey can be mapped onto Irish mythological literature and that the primary difference between the journey of the female and male is about social expectations rather than individual characteristics. For the women to be understood as heroic requires an ideological shift in the audience so female heroes are seen not as destructive but as important agents of social change.

While the female hero's journey frequently ends in tragedy, seeming to reinforce a phallogentric ideology which punishes and excludes women who operate outside of prescribed roles, these stories can also be told in a way that potentially both undermines the patriarchal hegemony and encourages women to determine their own choices. I will use a similar approach to that described by Ann Dooley in *Playing the Hero* where she "takes up the question of how women play the heroic game from their particular gendered social codes." As mentioned in the Introduction, Dooley suggests that a feminist reading can subvert the dominant male narration "in order to uncover women's voices behind and in dissonance with the dominant discourse."² Focusing on the stories associated with the female figures of Caer, Gráinne and Derdriu, I excavate the

² Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailgne*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006: 11.

women's stories that have been buried beneath the dominant male discourse and examine what this has meant for women, and what it can be made to mean.

The hero's journey as popularized by Joseph Campbell focuses upon the male protagonist and there have been many attempts to accommodate this model for women or to develop gynocentric models. These models offer helpful insights for exploring both traditional tales and contemporary literature, including biographies of women, but they have an idealistic focus better suited to adopting a more inclusive approach for new works. They are difficult to apply in the analysis of traditional mythological tales with their pre-existing tropes, and so I propose a new model that does fit the established trajectory of the stories while changing the way in which they are read.

It is important that they be read differently, because while myth constitutes a cultural legacy that provides for community cohesion by reinforcing traditional practices and beliefs, this has often been to the detriment of the female experience. As Susan Lichtman observes in her study of the Goddess archetype:

Because for centuries, women have been defined by men, the signs, symbols, and images of women in literature and myth reflect the perceptions of a patriarchal social system built on submission, obedience, and self-doubt."³

It is significant that such ideals are primarily conveyed in storytelling, which can in turn be expressed in literature or in visual or dramatic Arts. On one level, the stories may be regarded as simply entertainment, but what can seem entertaining can also operate as an insidious form of propaganda for maintaining social and political power structures.

Heroic tales are considered especially relevant in presenting ideals to which individuals within a community can aspire. The patterning of these tales in various cultures has been located and examined from many different standpoints – Vladimir Propp with a view to the structuralist understanding of the folktale; Joseph Campbell as a mythologist; Claude Lévi-Strauss as an anthropologist; Carl G. Jung as a

³ Susan A. Lichtman, *Life Stages of Woman's Heroic Journey: A Study of the Origins of the Great Goddess Archetype*, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991: 1.

psychotherapist.⁴ Their analyses of the archetypal hero and his journey have not only enlightened a modern literary criticism but have shaped it, just as men have always shaped the direction of literary criticism. Their contribution has been immense, but it has not been enough because, as Lichtman writes:

In accepting patriarchal definitions of the feminine, women limit and confine themselves, and their lives, to the perimeters of those definitions. What we read, what we see, even the stories we tell our children are psychologically loaded with those confining and limiting definitions of the feminine.⁵

To break free of these limitations, it is first necessary to understand how they have been inculcated in women through the telling of traditional tales, and then to find ways to subvert and change these stories. It might seem easier to simply tell new stories, but the mythological has an established grasp on the individual psyche and cultural identity. To challenge and subvert the mythological can go straight to the heart of the matter, as has been demonstrated by writers such as Margaret Atwood in her verse novel *The Penelopiad* that emphasizes not the romantic return of Odysseus to Penelope but his brutality and the massacre of her handmaids. A more recent example is provided in Pat Barker's prose novel *The Silence of the Girls*, which shows the full impact of the war on women who are awarded to combatants as trophies and kept as sex slaves, effectively deglorifying the exploits of the Greeks in their siege of Troy.⁶

Mary Beard points to Classic Greek mythology as a cultural template which works to disempower women even in contemporary society. She asserts "that we are still using ancient Greek idioms to represent the idea of women in, and out of, power." Greek mythology has what she describes as "an impressive array of powerful female characters".⁷ There are remarkable similarities with the female figures in Irish literature, which is perhaps not so remarkable when it is realized that many of the literate monks composing the manuscript materials were classically educated.⁸

⁴ V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, translated by Laurence Scott, 2nd ed. USA: University of Texas Press, 1975. 3rd. 1928; Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. Novato, California: New World Library, 2008. 1949; C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, translated by M. Layton, Vol. II, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980. 5th. 1976; Carl Gustav Jung, M.-L. Franz, Joseph Lewis Henderson, Aniela Jaffé, and Jolande Jacobi, eds., *Man and His Symbols*, New York: Dell, 1964.

⁵ Lichtman, *Woman's Heroic Journey*, 1.

⁶ Pat Barker, *The Silence of the Girls*, UK: Penguin, 2018.

⁷ Mary Beard, *Woman and Power: A Manifesto*, Great Britain: Profile Books, 2017: 58.

⁸ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth, Ireland: National University of Ireland, 2000. 1990: 1-16.

While the powerful female figures of Irish mythology such as Medb, Gráinne, and Derdriu are not so well known outside Ireland, those from Greek literature are familiar across the world wherever Western culture has been taught, figures like Medea, Clytemnestra and Antigone. But always in these stories their strength is undermined because of the resultant chaos that ensues from their personal expression. Beard says that they cannot be considered as role models for women because:

For the most part, they are portrayed as abusers rather than users of power. They take it illegitimately, in a way that leads to chaos, to the fracture of the state, to death and destruction... And the unflinching logic of their stories is that they must be disempowered and put back in their place. In fact, it is the unquestionable mess that women make of power in Greek myth that justifies their exclusion from it in real life, and justifies the rule of men.⁹

Even when Irish mythology presents strong, courageous, outspoken women, this presentation is simultaneously a negative portrayal demonstrating how dangerous such deviance from the normal behaviour can be to social stability and well-being. I, however, argue that such characters are role models; they are role models for creating disobedience and disorder, for rejecting the prescribed roles for women. They bring down unjust structures and highlight the monstrosity of the male power-mongers.

The Irish stories were not simply known to the literary elite of medieval Ireland, but were popular among the common folk, and their influence was widespread. Lisa Bitel writes that:

If people could not read the theories of the literati, they certainly encountered them as repeated around the fire or told along the road. Everyone knew what women were supposed to be and do, and everyone understood that women did not always obey.¹⁰

There is something heroic in that disobedience, a display of bravery and defiance untenable to most women in a traditional society except at the safe distance of hearthside storytelling. These were stories that raised possibilities as well as warned of consequences for aberrant behaviour.

⁹ Beard, *Power*, 58-9.

¹⁰ Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996: 234.

The mythological tales are, of course, focused upon the male hero who, being male, is allowed far more leeway than the woman regarding codes of behaviour and social conformity. Beverly Sjoeste writes that:

Because his acts are legitimated in that he serves the hegemony, he may rape, murder, steal, defy the law and even do business with the enemy, and he will be praised as above the law, as a hero with more courage than other humans who takes risks others would not, and therefore, stands above us all to be honoured...¹¹

The female hero is a very different creature and is certainly not accorded the same freedoms by society. While the male hero undertakes a quest or a battle purportedly for the good of his nation or community, not for his own glorification (though he may bask in that as well), the female hero insists upon her own needs. She rejects what is asked of her by her society, often a marriage beneficial to others. The male hero in these stories is highly skilled and trained in martial arts and feats of survival. The female hero is trained in domestic duties. Often, she needs her male counterpart simply for survival outside the domestic sphere as in the *Tóruigheacht*, where Gráinne cannot even walk unassisted for much of the story.¹² The hero holds the interests of others, especially of the community, over and above his own. The female hero is self-centred, selfish even, interested in her own well-being and happiness over that of others. She is the opposite of a good woman.

Yet what most defines the hero is not to do with personal traits but the journey undertaken. For folklorist Vladimir Propp, the hero was not defined by his characteristics but by the function he performed in the tale. The hero is presented with a prohibition; he breaks that prohibition. A misfortune or lack occurs of which the hero is made aware; he is then allowed to go or is sent out on a quest with various reactions to other actants, occasions of combat, and the acquisition of the required trophy. This is followed by a pursuit and arrival home.¹³

¹¹ Beverly J. Stoeltje, "Introduction: Feminist Revisions," *Journal of Folklore Research* 25, no. 3 (Sep-Dec., 1988): 149.

¹² Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, ed. and transl., *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada Agus Ghráinne: The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*, Vol. XLVIII, Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1967. 2nd. 1855: 17, 41, 43.

¹³ Propp, *Morphology*, 26-36.

Propp paved the way for the ‘discovery’ of the archetypal hero’s journey that Campbell later extrapolated as the universal patterning of the monomyth.¹⁴ The Hero’s Journey is described by Campbell in three parts. The first is Separation and Departure, where there is a call to adventure that may initially be refused, but supernatural aid is rendered. There is the crossing of the first threshold, entering what Campbell describes as ‘the Belly of the Whale’ where he experiences a death and rebirth into a strange new world.¹⁵ The second part involves what Campbell describes as the trials and victories of initiation, called the road of trials. These include a meeting with the goddess, an encounter with the woman as temptress who may distract him from his goal; there is atonement with the father and apotheosis, a coming into his own power; and, the winning of the boon that addresses the need of the community. Having won the boon, the third part is the return with all its inherent difficulties. The hero may be reluctant to return but this is brought about by pursuit or rescue, and the threshold is crossed back into the ordinary world again, where he is lauded and rewarded, often with the hand of the princess in marriage.¹⁶

Campbell’s enunciation of the hero’s journey in such clear stages easily lends itself to a three-act play and has been developed by writers such as Christopher Vogler as a blueprint for contemporary heroic literature and film-making.¹⁷ Campbell maintained that the archetypal patterns of both the journey and the central figures within that journey held universal appeal, and was the reason the mythological stories resonated on a psychological level and retained their popularity and appeal across generations.¹⁸

Applying a Jungian perspective, Joseph Campbell understood the hero’s journey as descriptive, and perhaps prescriptive, of the transition from adolescence into adulthood, of psychological maturation. In the adventuring of the young male, in the metaphorical telling of it through the medium of myth, one of the transformative aspects is his encounter with the feminine, which allows the hero to then to take his place in the

¹⁴ Campbell, *The Hero*, 1-18.

¹⁵ Campbell, *The Hero*, 74-80.

¹⁶ Campbell, *The Hero*, 28-29.

¹⁷ Christopher Vogler, *The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 2nd ed. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998: 1-3.

¹⁸ Campbell, *The Hero*, xiii.

patriarchy. “The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world presents the hero’s total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master.”¹⁹ This is congruent with the common theme in Irish mythology of the sovereignty goddess who empowers the rightful king.²⁰ This *hieros gamos*, ‘sacred marriage’, was common in many ancient cultures where the prosperity of the society was the outcome of a successful union between the male ruler and the goddess of the land.²¹

In Campbell’s model, the male hero needs the feminine aspect for his own wholeness, even his own healing. This motif is illustrated in an episode of the Ulster Cycle, when Cuchulain repeatedly refuses the sexual advances of the feminine, but then is tricked into sucking milk from the udder of the goddess with whom he has been battling, and is healed through the interaction. Frances Devlin-Glass concludes from this episode that Cuchulain’s “warrior status cannot be maintained independently of women.”²² The hero is dependent upon the feminine just as the king is dependent upon the goddess of the land. Even while the male hero may seem to be independent and autonomous, the feminine force enables his self-completion.

Campbell speaks to this dependence of the male hero upon the sacred feminine when he writes that:

Woman ... represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters ... The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world.²³

What is deeply unsatisfactory in this account is that it is all about the hero, and what the woman means for the hero. This is the issue that arises with consideration of the

¹⁹ Campbell, *The Hero*, 101.

²⁰ Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, “Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas,” *The Crane Bag* 4, no. 1, Images of the Irish Woman (1980): 12.

²¹ Máire Herbert, “Goddess and King: The Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland,” in *Women and Sovereignty*, edited by Louise Olga Fradenburg and Emily Lyle, Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 1992. 264.

²² Frances Devlin-Glass, “The Sovereignty as Co-Lordship: A Contemporary Feminist Rereading of the Female Sacred in the Ulster Cycle,” in *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred*, edited by Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredde, 106-32. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001: 12.

²³ Campbell, *The Hero*, 97.

sovereignty motif. Such approaches may elevate the woman's status even to divinity, but it also keeps her fully dependent upon the male aspect. There is no room for finding a pathway that is about her individual experience, desires, outcomes. While a young woman, or princess, in the narrative, might be well aware that she is required to marry the man that presents the best option for her family, she is also bound to dream of making the best match for herself which would not always mean the same as her family's aspirations for her. Her family might choose the older man, known and honoured, while she may perhaps prefer the younger suitor.

When psychotherapist Maureen Murdock asked Campbell about the woman's journey, he responded that woman did not need to make the journey because all she had to do was recognize that:

She's the place that people are trying to get to. When a woman realizes what her wonderful character is, she's not going to get messed up with the notion of being pseudo-male."²⁴

Campbell's comments can be read in the context of the relationship between mythology and cultural expectations. He was deeply influenced by Jungian psychology and his views echo those of Joseph Henderson who wrote in *Man and His Symbols* that submission was an "essential attitude" in the initiation rites of girls which emphasized their passivity which was in turn "reinforced by the physiological limitation on their autonomy imposed by the menstrual cycle."²⁵ When an adolescent male is setting out on a quest to find something to make him a hero/man in the eyes of the community, the adolescent girl is focused on finding a relationship to make her a woman. From the time of her menses, signalling her capacity for reproduction, she becomes a tradeable commodity, to strengthen social ties or create new ones, a chance to elevate the social status of her family of the family she will be married into. This will be her life, not one of adventures like the life of the young male.

A contemporary audience better informed regarding feminist objectives would perhaps not so automatically link a woman's life path with her biological processes, and Campbell's response that women need to stay in their place rather than embark on a

²⁴ Maureen Murdock, *The Heroine's Journey*, USA: Shambhala, 1990: 2.

²⁵ Joseph L Henderson, "Ancient Myths and Modern Man," in *Man and His Symbols*, edited by Carl Gustav Jung and M.-L. Franz. USA: Dell, 1964: 125.

pseudo-male hero's journey is objectionable. Certainly Murdock found his answer "deeply unsatisfying". As she wrote:

The women I know and work with do not want to be *there*, the place that people are trying to get to. They do not want to embody Penelope, waiting patiently, endlessly weaving and unweaving. They do not want to be handmaidens of the dominant male culture, giving service to the gods. They do not want to follow the advice of fundamentalist preachers and return to a home. They need a new model that understands who and what a woman is.²⁶

Murdock developed a new model for the female hero's journey based primarily around the mother-daughter relationship. The journey began with breaking away from the mother and the return trip involved a redefinition and validation of feminine values and an integration of these with the masculine skills learned during the first half of the journey.²⁷

Using a circular diagram, Murdock identified the stages as Separation from the Feminine; Identification with the masculine and gathering of allies; Road of Trials with a meeting of ogres and dragons; Finding the boon of success; Awakening to feeling of spiritual aridity; Death and initiation and descent to the goddess; the Urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine; Healing the mother-daughter split; Healing the Wounded Masculine; Integration of the masculine and feminine; and, a return to separation from the feminine as the cycle begins again.²⁸ This may work as an ideological model for developing a new female-centred mythology, but it cannot be applied as a critical tool to the traditional tales which do not result, ultimately, in healing for the female hero. As a model, it is particularly hard to apply to the Irish stories where the mother is very much an absent or a fleeting figure, and where there is no distinct mother-daughter relationship.

The absence of the mother may simply reflect that these stories are about men, but it also points contextually to the earlier breaking of this bond. Part of the experience of childhood in Ireland was to foster the children of both noble and commoner families with foster-families, which created not only political bonds but also strong bonds of

²⁶ Murdock, *Journey*, 2.

²⁷ Murdock, *Journey*, 4.

²⁸ Murdock, *Journey*, 5.

affection within the foster-family.²⁹ While seven years of age was considered an appropriate age for fosterage as a time when the child was able to learn, there is also evidence within the texts that fosterage could occur from infancy with a wet-nurse who would raise the child with her own baby.³⁰ In her examination of the psychological implications of traditional practices in early Irish society, Dorothy Dilts Swartz concludes that such practices would mean that the parents “could not allow themselves to form deep attachments “ and “this emotional distantiation had to be inculcated in children.”³¹ While this may be attributing a modern understanding of the emotions attached to parenting, it is nevertheless clear that fosterage was a practice which did not encourage a strong mother-daughter bond to form between the birth mother and child.

Within the Irish tales, reflecting a patriarchal society, it is the father who figures most prominently. At the betrothal feast in the *Tóruigheacht*, there is a woman named Eithne with the king and she is named as his wife but there is no interaction between her and Gráinne – she is there not as Gráinne’s mother but as the king’s wife.³² In the *Aislinge*, all negotiations take place with Caer’s father and no mention is ever made of her mother. Derdriu’s unnamed mother makes an appearance at the start of *Longes mac nUislenn*, before Derdriu’s birth. She asks the druid what is the meaning of the noise that has emanated from her womb “because a woman does not know whatever is wont to be in [her] womb.”³³ This is a significant quote which concedes the capacity to interpret the signs of a woman’s own body to patriarchal determination and reinforces that women were not expected to have strong connections with their children.

Leborcham, the female satirist, is a more significant female figure in Derdriu’s secluded life, acting as a guide and mentor, and there are bonds of affection between them. There is also mention made of Derdriu’s foster-parents, but they are there as unnamed servant-like figures with no significance as people with whom she has a relationship. The marked absence of the mother in these stories indicates that the female heroes are not

²⁹ Bronagh Ní Chonaill, “Fosterage: Child-Rearing in Medieval Ireland,” *History Ireland* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 1997): 31.

³⁰ Fiona Fitzsimmons, “Fosterage and Gossip in Late Medieval Ireland: Some New Evidence,” In *Gaelic Ireland: C. 1250- C. 1650 Land, Lordship and Settlement*, edited by Patrick J. Duffy, David Edwards and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001: 141-142.

³¹ Dorothy Dilts Swartz, “Psycho-Social Correlates of Male-Female Relationships as Reflected in Early Irish Traditions,” *The Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 9 (1989): 108.

³² Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 7.

³³ Vernam Hull, ed. and transl., *Longes Mac N-Uislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1949: 61.

seeking a return to the mother; she was lost to them so young it would hardly seem a loss so much as just a part of life.

The mother-daughter split does not get healed even when the women transition from being father's daughters to lover's spouse to disengaged mothers themselves. Derdriu's children are not mentioned in the medieval tales, although genealogical reference is made to them in *The Prose Banshenchas* where Derdriu is named as the mother of Naoise's son, Gaiar, and of a daughter called Aeb Gréne.³⁴ They are not otherwise part of Derdriu's story. In the *Tóruigheacht*, it is told that Gráinne bears Diarmaid four sons and one daughter, Druineach Dhil, who is given her own cantred and servants.³⁵ The next reference to Gráinne's daughter is when she is mentioned as a reason for trying to make a truce between Diarmaid and Finn and Gráinne's father, the king, because Druineach Dhil is of marriageable age.³⁶ Their mother-daughter relationship has not been part of the story until that point and it can be presumed that she had been fostered out, just as her brothers had been at the time of their father's death in "the cantred of Corca Dhuibhne where they were being reared and fully nurtured."³⁷ The children do not seem to have been reared by Gráinne or to have been part of the household of their parents. The women in these stories do not appear to have significant relationships with their own mothers nor with their children, either in negative or positive ways, and are certainly not defined by them.

However, the female hero cannot escape being defined by her relationship to the men in the story. If the Hero's Journey represents the journey to adulthood in the social and familial context, then it must be different for the female because the social context is so different. Woman is seen in relation to man. Even when she separated herself from such interaction by, for example, entering the convent, she was still subservient to the male-dominated church hierarchy and to the male heads of the family who usually had significant control over convent property in medieval Ireland.³⁸ It was an illusion of separation.

³⁴ Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, "The Prose Banshenchas," PhD, National University of Ireland, 1980: 335.

³⁵ Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 79.

³⁶ Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 81.

³⁷ Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 101.

³⁸ Dianne Hall, *Medieval Women and the Church in Medieval Ireland, C.1150-1500*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001.

Whether within the social strictures of a community or on the run in the wild with her lover, the woman cannot escape that her journey is about finding that Other who will fulfil her desires rather than becoming a fully autonomous person, as in the male hero's journey. In these particular Irish tales, the woman does break free of the patriarchy but it is to form her own attachments according to her desire; she might not become fully autonomous but she asserts the right to determine on whom she will bestow her love and with whom she will share her body. When it is emphasized in the narrative that the man is her love interest, rather than she being his chosen, when it is emphasized that he is the one who enables her to escape the chains of social expectation and find a different life, then he becomes Other to her heroic quest. This is the emphasis I write into my reconstruction of the tales.

Every attempt to tell traditional stories from a different perspective has the potential to bring about different ways of thinking that contribute to women's liberation, and it is my intention to find a way to do this. Even so, the steps towards breaking the tropes of heroic storytelling to recast the female hero's journey in this manner are incremental. Murdock attempted to create a new trajectory for the female hero while others such as Dawn Duncan instead challenge the idea that the conventional hero's journey can only be applied to men. Using the examples of Lady Gregory's reconstruction of Irish mythological tales, she writes that:

Each play contains a real death and symbolic hell; each requires that the women journey ... Certainly if we remove the masculine bias, we might be able to read the journey of the female hero according to the archetypal form as a full coming to mature consciousness and establishment of the self.³⁹

When Campbell described such attempts to reinstate a female hero as 'pseudo-male', he was using a term previously coined by Henderson, who argued that modern women repress that part of the psyche that would make them into women and suffer personal conflict as a result.⁴⁰

³⁹ Dawn Duncan, "Lady Gregory and the Feminine Journey: 'The Gaol Gate, Grania,' and 'The Story Brought by Brigit,'" *Irish University Review* 34, no.1 (2004): 133-43.

⁴⁰ Henderson, *Ancient Myths*, 128-129.

It does seem to me that these attempts to simply superimpose a female hero into the place of the male hero do not adequately address the question of difference, which I maintain needs to be considered on a social as well as an individual level. The trajectory of the hero's journey is not different for the woman because she is physically less equipped for the trials and challenges encountered along the way but because she is not given the same preparation and training as the male; she is not encouraged to develop the capabilities required; she is not encouraged to set out on such a quest let alone be sent as the best person possible to defeat the monster or win the prize. If she does set out on such a quest, she has stepped outside the bounds of what is expected of women and she upsets the balance of a homogenous society; she cannot expect to be welcomed back as a hero but as someone to be feared for her destabilizing effect on the balance of male:female relationships.

Susan Lichtman proposes "a model of the hero's quest for woman which places emphasis on the interior development of her self rather than exterior social connections."⁴¹ There are others who join her in emphasizing the interiority of the female journey, including Kim Hudson in *The Virgin's Promise*.⁴² However, in the Irish stories, the women do undertake physical and external journeys. Derdriu and Gráinne, in particular, enter the wilderness (what might be considered the 'belly of the whale') for a prolonged period of exile where they encounter obstacles, friends and foes while being pursued by the rejected suitor. Though Caer cannot physically leave the loch where she is chained to fifty other maidens, she does travel through the dream-world to find her lover.⁴³ This external journeying is also evident in other Irish mythological tales. In *Ectra Condla: The Adventure of Chondla the Fair*, the otherworldly woman stands on the edges of her world, close enough for druidic spells to render her silent.⁴⁴ In *Tochmarc Becfhola: the Wooing of Becfhola*, Becfhola travels physically through many landscapes encountering a king and his retinue, wild beasts, combat situations, friends, foes and lovers.⁴⁵ These women journey outward in pursuit of their desires.

⁴¹ Lichtman, *Woman's Heroic Journey*, xi.

⁴² Kim Hudson, *The Virgin's Promise: Writing Stories of Feminine Creative, Spiritual, and Sexual Awakening*, Los Angeles: Michael Wiese Productions, 2009.

⁴³ Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, London: Penguin, 1981: 108-112.

⁴⁴ Rev. J. P. MacSwiney, S. J., "Translation of 'Ectra Condla'," *The Gaelic Journal* II, no. 13 (1884): 307-08.

⁴⁵ Máire Bhreathnach, "A New Edition of Tochmarc Becfhola," *Ériu*, 1984: 59-91.

Where the journey differs fundamentally in mythological tales for the female and male hero is in the ultimate achievement. For the male, the aim is to become a hero, a distinctive individual known to have undertaken this journey, someone who has won a prize which serves the community, and who is embraced upon his return. The female hero's journey is primarily not about finding a boon to benefit the community, nor is it about self-discovery of heroic attributes. For the female, the quest is for separation from the community to forge her own pathway. Her quest is for individuation, not for the betterment of others. Having rejected the pathway proffered by society, she cannot return to that community, not intact, virginal, still with something to offer.

This is clearly demonstrated in the *Tóruigheacht*, where Diarmaid leaves clues for Finn that Gráinne is still a virgin, by leaving salmon with no bite taken, until their relationship is consummated. Once a woman has been with another man, she is no longer considered whole and does not have the same value. The actions of the women have taken heroes away from the community, have broken ties, have destabilized the social and political structure, and they are certainly not welcomed back as heroes.

These stories, where the woman instigates the sequence of events, are about the destruction of the male hero. His capacity to return victoriously, honourably, has been destroyed by the actions of the women. Diarmaid and Naoise are killed on their return, respectively, by the jealous suitor. "Láoi Oisín Ar Tír Na Nóg: The Lay of Oisín in the Land of Youth," is another Irish tale where the woman chooses her lover and calls him to her, but at the end Oisín is left alone, with no-one who remembers him or his previous glory (although Oisín's experience is partially redeemed when he is able to relate his story to St. Patrick).⁴⁶ It is significant that Diarmaid, Naoise and Oisín also die because they have ignored the advice of their spouse. The female hero cannot save them if they won't listen to her, and so they are destroyed and, ultimately, are portrayed as male heroes defeated by their relationship with women.

⁴⁶ Micheál Coimín, "Láoi Oisín Ar Tír Na Nóg: The Lay of Oisín in the Land of Youth," Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son Ltd, 1750; Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, "The Development of the Debate between Pádraig and Oisín," *Béaloidias* 54/55 (1986): 183-205.

In the stories of Caer and Gráinne and Derdriu, the exercise of their personal choice does lead to a life of adventures, an external journey, which I seek to highlight in my reconstruction. However, it needs to be remembered that this freedom was the aberration not the rule. While Irish laws afforded protection for women in regards to marital arrangements, property rights, sick care and maintenance, the reality was that all of these were adjudicated by men, and Lisa Bitel points out that a woman was always under male guardianship and for all legal processes needed a man to act for her.⁴⁷

Some feminist theorists have sought for signs within myths of this type for evidence of a time when women were honoured and communities were matrifocal. Mary Condren found such indications in her study of Irish religion and mythology as explicated in *The Serpent and the Goddess*.⁴⁸ She challenged the underlying patriarchal assumptions about social structures in recorded, and unrecorded, history. Condren explained that her method was “synchronic rather than diachronic, and inevitably involved leaps of imagination to produce creative syntheses.”⁴⁹ While this creative approach can be criticized as lacking in tangible evidence, I have found that the female story is buried so deeply beneath the masculine that the excavation of it within mythology can only be an imaginative and creative process as well as a critical one.

In a closely related approach, others, including Lichtman, have sought to develop an approach to the female hero's journey that could empower women by focusing on stories of the sacred feminine:

The female monomyth suggested by the archetype of the Great Goddess forms a collective of woman's experience that acknowledges universal mythological patterns of female development as a progression from virgin to mother, mother to crone, and crone back to virgin again in a cycle that imitates the seasons of the year and the phases of the moon. All cultures across the world have or had at some time a mythological motif of woman in the process of transformation.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 8.

⁴⁸ Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland*, Dublin: New Island Books, 2002: 1989.

⁴⁹ Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess*, xxv.

⁵⁰ Lichtman, *Woman's Heroic Journey*, xiii.

Yet this transformation is still very much linked to a biological process of development – virgin to mother to crone – and does not allow for a pathway to break free of this biological patterning that can restrict a woman’s capacity to move freely in the world, to break free of the established patterns of the female archetypes and create new ones. And while it is tempting indeed to read these implications into the mythological texts, just as the sovereignty motif can be read into a wide variety of Irish literature, it is perhaps more useful to acknowledge and confront the less than subtle misogyny of the tales than try to re-interpret them as feminist plaudits. I do not, in either the reconstruction of the narratives nor in the poetry, attempt to present the women as feminist icons, as euhemerized goddess figures or faultless paragons, but instead acknowledge the reality of their lives and the grittiness of how they survive their situations.

The following is my description of the stages of the female hero’s journey that can be constructed for these stories. The stages are incomplete in some stories, and the boundaries between the completion of one stage and another are not always clearly demarked but intrude upon each other because it is a back and forth process, but they are the stages that are required for a complete journey. I say ‘complete’ rather than ‘successful’ because if the goal of the female hero’s quest has been to form a lasting relationship, a ‘happy-ever-after’ with her chosen, then the goal is rarely attained though the journey is ended. ‘Happy-ever-after’ belongs to those mythological tales where the male hero rescues the female, and cannot be allowed when the female has enticed the male away.

Stage One: The Extra-ordinary Life

In this stage, the female character is a woman compliant with the social roles and expectations placed upon her, preparing for marriage. These are not the stories of ordinary women; as with the male hero, there is something special that marks her from birth as a woman of destiny, even if it is just through her high-birth – Gráinne and Caer are both king’s daughters. It is not told when or how Caer’s animal nature became evident or was imposed upon her and her fifty times three companions. She is, however, marked as different when compared to the other swan-maidens through her golden chains when they wear silver. Derdriu is the most obviously marked, with the cry she makes before birth and the druid’s prediction of the destruction she will bring to Ulster.

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith found that Derdriu's story, as expressed in *Longes mac nUislenn*, largely conformed to the established pattern of a "heroic biography" from her unusual birth through her youth, elopement, exile and to her death.⁵¹

Stage Two: Disobedience

The very first step on the female hero's journey is that of disobedience, where she separates from her father, who is representative of the patriarchy. She rejects the role of compliant woman, the dutiful daughter, and rebels against the external imposition of what is required of her. When asked for Caer to be given in marriage to Óengus, her father says that he has no control over her. She has already rejected his control over her life. Gráinne ultimately rejects the man that her father deems suitable as a son-in-law. Derdriu refuses to accept the paternal authority of the king in claiming her as his bride.

Stage Three: The Winning of the Other

The role of the woman in conventional heroic tales is usually that of the Other, providing a foil for the male heroic journey. Ann Dooley notes that:

In the structuralist or binary model, the feminine achieves the level of visibility in culture by being posited as existing in dialectal tension with the patriarchy ... The feminine is defined as 'other,' as 'frame,' as 'non-representability,' as 'periphery' to the male agenda of self-justifying, signifying action, and hence of the central cultural modes of valorization.⁵²

The women in these stories confound those possibilities. They make it possible to construct the male as 'Other', as peripheral to the female hero's journey, and as antithetical to the foundations of culture.

The narrative purpose of the male protagonist is then to provide (1) the impetus for the female hero's adventure, (2) a justification for her rebellion, and (3) the boon which she seeks – a unification with the masculine which will not only validate her beauty but also

⁵¹ Caoimhín Léith Mac Giolla, ed. and transl., *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach: The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach*, London: Irish Texts Society, 1994: 14-15.

⁵² Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailgne*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006: 158.

her worth. She knows she is of economic and social value – that is evident from her desirability to men of high status – but she needs to know if she has value for one who is desirable to her. Her sense of self worth still cannot be separated from what is reflected to her by the masculine.

Derdriu does not want the king; she wants Naoise – but Naoise does not want her. Gráinne does not want Finn; she wants Diarmaid. Diarmaid does not want her. For both these female heroes, there is little time to win over their chosen spouse in the usual manner and so they force their choice upon them. Naoise, at least, has shown his appreciation of Derdriu's feminine attributes and only balks when he realises that she is the king's chosen. Diarmaid shows no signs of desiring Gráinne, quite the opposite. In a society where it has been the woman who must comply with the male wishes, this order is inverted so the man must comply with the woman. The woman takes power over the man, without consent.

The female hero also, in these cases, needs a mate to compensate for her lack of skills. Gráinne has been raised as a princess. Derdriu has been raised in isolation but presumably educated in the skills that would equip her to be a king's wife, which do not include surviving in the wild even though some authors ascribed this capacity to her in the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth early twentieth centuries.⁵³ Caer seems unable to break her chains without the intervention of a male lover.

A lot of attention is paid in the *Tóruigheacht* to Diarmaid's continued resistance to Gráinne. Proinsias Mac Cana says that her name literally means 'ugliness' or 'repulsiveness', suggesting a connection to the transformation that occurs in the sovereignty motif.⁵⁴ R. A. Breatnach supports this understanding when he states that "her name may mean 'the hateful goddess', which would well describe her true nature." He also ascribes a sovereignty link to her character, as the "loathsome crone" who transforms into a beautiful maiden when united with the sacred king. This, he asserts,

⁵³ John Todhunter, *Three Irish Bardic Tales: Being Metrical Versions of the Three Tales Known as the Three Sorrows of Story-Telling*, London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1978. 1896: 58-66; James Stephens, *Deirdre*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1923: 17-21; John Millington Synge, "Deidre of the Sorrows" in *Collected Plays*. London: Penguin Books, 1952: 216.

⁵⁴ Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 2nd ed. London: Chancellor Press, 1996. 1968: 111.

explains why the cromlechs that are referred to as *Leaba Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, the bed of Diarmaid and Gráinne, can also be known as *Leaba na Caillighe*, the bed of the crone.⁵⁵ However, the sovereignty motif is actively sought by scholars in many of the Irish tales and is not always a good fit. This supposed unattractive aspect is belied by Caoilte's response at the betrothal feast when Diarmaid asks him what he should do and Caoilte says that even though he already has a good wife, he "would rather than the wealth of the world that it were to me that she had given that love."⁵⁶ I read into this text that Diarmaid's resistance is not because Gráinne is unattractive but because of his loyalty to Finn, who would otherwise have been her spouse. Eventually, Gráinne goads Diarmaid that a drop of water on her thigh "is more daring than you are." While still saying that it is hard to trust women, he says he "will not suffer myself to be reproached by you any longer", and "made a wife of Gráinne."⁵⁷ He submits to her desires.

In other stories, such as concerns *Caer* in *Aislinge Óengusso* and the unnamed woman in *Ectra Condla*, it is a matter of the woman winning over the man and waiting for him to make up his mind. Yet always it seems that the female hero does need her male counterpoint to make sense of her journey and to achieve her liberation from convention. As the male hero in Campbell's cycle needs the female for purpose and completion, so does the female hero need the male.

Stage Four: The Wilderness

The consequence of choosing her own lover and rejecting the expectations of her family and community is that the female hero must leave that society altogether. In entering the wild, she is entering a numinous place, a world outside of society where everything is unpredictable, living in indeterminate spaces where there can be no stability. *Caer* has already left; she is already living a liminal existence in the wilderness when she attracts Óengus to be her lover. *Derdriu* and Gráinne must escape, must flee, in order to enact their choice. The pursuit by the jilted lover maintains them in this mode of flight.

⁵⁵ R. A. Breatnach, "Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada Agus Ghráinne," in *Irish Sagas*, edited by Myles Dillon, 135-47. Cork: Mercier Press, 1968:146.

⁵⁶ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 15.

⁵⁷ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 47.

In terms of Campbell's Hero's Journey, this stage can be equated with the process of initiation into adulthood. Here the female hero is faced with challenges of endurance, tests of survival, and whether she can discern if people are friend or foe. The lovers must negotiate the terms of their relationship because they are reliant solely on each other. Caer demands of Óengus that he join her in her watery existence and he responds by transforming into a swan, changing his form to match hers.⁵⁸

Diarmaid remains reluctant to negotiate. On occasions, he banishes Gráinne from the scene of action or leaves her on her own.⁵⁹ They encounter friends and foes. For a period of time, Gráinne and Diarmaid are accompanied by a man who acts as a servant, even carries the both of them when required.⁶⁰ There is another tale of the pursuit of the lovers in which they are hiding in a cave occupied by an old woman who seems to be assisting them but bargains outside with Finn to turn them over. They avoid the confrontation when Gráinne intuits that the old woman is lying.⁶¹

Once Naoise has accepted Derdriu's injunction that he must accompany her, he takes on the role of supporter and provider, and they are accompanied by his two brothers as well. Initially, they draw upon the friends of the three brothers to find safe places in Ireland, but the king is relentless in his pursuit and they flee to Scotland. While the brothers are the ones who provide for the group with their hunting, and who ally themselves with the King of Scotland, it is Derdriu who brings her wisdom to bear when the King of Scotland's messenger tries to entice her away from Naoise. She demonstrates her fidelity to Naoise and also warns the brothers when the king is planning his attack.⁶²

Stage Five: Idyll

For the couples, there is then a time of idyllic love fulfilled, of peacefulness. This is the point where romantic fairytales end, with the happy-ever-after. It is where the story of

⁵⁸ Jeffrey Gantz, ed. and transl., "The Dream of Oengus," in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, London: Penguin, 1981: 112.

⁵⁹ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 23, 75-77.

⁶⁰ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 31.

⁶¹ "The Hiding of the Hill of Howth," in Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 130-137.

⁶² Hull, *LMU*, 64-65.

Caer comes to a close with her unification with Óengus, and where *Ectra Condla* closes as well, with Connla departing to the otherworld with his sídhe lover. But in the stories of Derdriu and Gráinne, the journey continues. The idyll is especially apparent when Derdriu and the brothers live on their island off the Scottish shore with no-one else to answer to, with no pursuit, living off what the brothers hunt, and in peace. This time is described beautifully in Derdriu's lament for the brothers after their death as she mourns for the life they shared.⁶³ For Gráinne, the idyll is when they are able to negotiate a peace where they are accorded their own lands and live prosperously and well. For the female hero, this idyll is the culmination of her journey – she has achieved what she has desired.

But such peace when it is still life lived outside of society is not sustainable. The idyll ends when Naoise is enticed back to Ireland with false promises from the king and Derdriu this time must follow him to try to give what protection she can.⁶⁴ For Gráinne, the idyll ends when she desires a greater re-entry into society for the sake of her daughter's marriage prospects.⁶⁵

Stage Five: The Return (Loss of the Lover)

In the female hero's journey, there can be no happy return. The male hero may be lauded and the community grateful for what he has brought back, perhaps victory, freedom, or a tool that will bring healing. The female hero comes back with the man who still wants to be a hero but whose heroic capability has been diminished by her transgression. Even for the time that he lives, the female hero is more alone than ever before. There is no community of women to accept her and help her to reintegrate. Gráinne had thought to return to society but found that until there was peace made between the men, they were still living on the outside.

Derdriu finds out that where she thought to be a true partner with her lover, the closer they get to society the less he listens to her wisdom. Naoise will not heed Derdriu's warnings about Conchobar's duplicity; Diarmaid will not heed Gráinne's advice to

⁶³ Hull, *LMU*, 66-68.

⁶⁴ Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 95-113.

⁶⁵ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 81.

ignore the sounds of hunting, and will not heed her when she advises on which weapons he should carry when he does go to join the hunt.⁶⁶ When the lover is killed, as with Naoise and Diarmaid, then the female hero is truly alone for the first time in her life and must determine who she is and what her response will be.

There was a strong honour code for men within Irish society and Philip O’Leary maintains that this was equally important for women, “seeming to define their own honour as virtually a reflection of that of their husbands.”⁶⁷ Without their husbands, in Naoise and Diarmaid, Derdriu and Gráinne have no claim to honour. Their pre-marriage worth was associated with their maidenly status and that is long past. O’Leary further associates female honour with chastity and fidelity and argues that Derdriu’s death in *Longes mac nUislenn* was not as a result of her grief over the death of Naoise – she had, after all, survived a year with the king – but to avoid the “ridicule and disgrace” of being passed over to another man.⁶⁸

However, this assertion does not match with the portrayal of Derdriu in *Longes mac nUislenn* as a tragic, grieving figure, unable even to lift her head from her knee. Quite probably she is the king’s unsatisfactory sex-slave. It seems more than she can bear when the king threatens to pass her to the man who actually struck the blow that killed Naoise, and it is then that she throws herself from the chariot and strikes her head on a rock so that she kills herself rather than be passed on from one man to another, seemingly more an act of despair than a concern over her honour. She has none of that left to sacrifice. In *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*, Derdriu throws herself into the grave of the three brothers and dies.⁶⁹ Without her male counterpart, Derdriu is no-one, or no-one that she wants to be.

Gráinne, however, is a survivor. She transforms from grief-stricken widow who is not even accorded the comfort of burying Diarmaid’s body, to a warrior-queen calling their children to arms. In an alternative ending popularly reinforced through Standish O’Grady’s translation, Gráinne even marries Finn and makes a peace between him and

⁶⁶ Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 109-127; Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 81-83.

⁶⁷ Philip O’Leary, “The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature,” *Ériu* 38: 27-44. 28

⁶⁸ O’Leary, “The Honour of Women,” 42.

⁶⁹ Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 139.

her children.⁷⁰ Ní Shéaghdha asserts that this ending, used by O’Grady, resembles a late addition to the story found in only one of the forty-one manuscripts.⁷¹ It is not consistent with the representation in the tale of Gráinne as a strong-willed and indomitable female hero. Even so, the other versions do not go beyond the point of calling the children to arms to what becomes of Gráinne as a woman on her own with no male hero at her side.

As well as considering the trajectory of the narrative, it is crucial to consider the ending. DuPlessis says that “Once upon a time, the end, the rightful end, of women in novels was social – successful courtship, marriage – or judgmental of her sexual and social failure – death. These are both resolutions of romance.”⁷² Where the woman has been socially transgressive in these tales, as with Gráinne and Derdriu, they end with the death of the lover, and for Derdriu, her own death.

Therefore, the end of the female hero’s journey is about death and survival, not about achievement. It is not about being recognised by the community as a hero, not about bringing home the prize. Instead, it demonstrates the transience, and the intransigence, of life. Life is always followed by death. In these stories, in order to mature as a woman, the female hero must pursue the dream, of love, of freedom, of independence, but that dream is elusive, and sometimes growing up is about losing the dream, realising that society as it is will not accord a woman the same autonomy and rights as a male hero. The myths do, in this sense, reflect the reality of life and perhaps prepare a woman for that reality.

Despite the intersections and the complexities of the women’s lives as they unfold in these stories, the traditional narration is focused on the relationships of men with men, not the relationships between women. The traditional focus of the narrative is on who wins the prize (the woman) at the end, who triumphs. In a feminist reconstruction where I ask what happens when the focus is placed upon the female journey, there must be

⁷⁰ Standish Hayes O’Grady, ed. and transl., *Toruiheacht Dhiarmuda Agus Ghrainne, or, the Pursuit after Diarmuid O’Duibhne, and Grainne the Daughter of Cormac Mac Airt, King of Ireland in the Third Century*, Vol. 3, Dublin: Ossianic Society, 1857. 209-210.

⁷¹ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, xviii.

⁷² Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985: 1.

further consideration of the progression of the woman's story at the end. As DuPlessis explains, "writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative."⁷³ When the dominant narrative is a phallogentric one, then taking the story beyond the dominant narrative means that it ends not with the male hero but with the female, and in order to do this I depart from the content of the traditional stories because there is no material to draw upon except my imagination.

In some ways, Derdriu's ending in suicide is the most powerful statement she can make about her life, and I feel I should honour that. I want to also highlight that she was already dying, wasting away as she refused sustenance and that also is suicidal behaviour. Leaping from the carriage simply hastened what she had already chosen as her pathway. But perhaps also there were moments where she considered how her life could have been different, how she might escape, if it were possible to choose another way. Certainly, other authors from the Literary Revival imagined her death in different ways, though none as escape. In my poetry, I show Derdriu pondering on the ways that storytellers have invested in her death, while considering her options and arriving at what she regards as her sole choice if she is to retain her independence. There is a freedom that comes with her death, as she is finally liberated from her designated fate.

The *Tóruigheacht* finishes with the death of Diarmaid and the subsequent mourning of his family and those who loved him. It is not a story about Gráinne, though Gráinne has compelled the narrative forward as a vocal and self-centred woman; it is a story about Diarmaid, and without him, Gráinne disappears. What becomes of her is unknown except in one version where there is an unlikely ending where Gráinne makes a peace with Finn and they are, after all, married.⁷⁴ I imagine what became of Gráinne after Diarmaid's death, remembering that in one chapter of the *Tóruigheacht*, Gráinne eats magical rowanberries that bestow eternal health, if not protection from being killed. I imagine that Gráinne lived on beyond even her children, but that it was a lonely life as a widowed woman with her reputation for destruction, still paying the price for being held responsible for Diarmaid's death. I imagine even that she may have returned to living in

⁷³ DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 5.

⁷⁴ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, xiv.

the wild, outside of society and all its expectations, reliving those pathways she once trod with Diarmaid in their great adventure.

Writing beyond the ending returns the story to the woman's ownership; that the story does not end with the hero. *Aislinge Óengusso*, *Tochmarc Becfhola* and *Ectra Condla* are stories more sympathetic to the women, with positive romantic outcomes. The silences have worked for them, but still their stories end at the romantic resolution as though there is nothing more to their lives. In the *Aislinge*, the story ends where the couple romantically circle the lake and then fly to his home where their music puts everyone to sleep for three days; it has been a successful courtship. From a feminist perspective, this is a deeply unsatisfying ending. Nothing more is told of Caer. Unlike many figures in the Irish stories, she does not reappear in any other tale and is never mentioned again. There is nothing beyond the romantic ending, as though it is a happy-ever-after tale and there is nothing more to be told. It is certain that Óengus would not have stayed changed as a swan, and not expected that they would retain their form as wild creatures.

Every woman knows that the story does not end with a happy marriage; for Caer and Óengus it is just the real beginning of a relationship that will require ongoing negotiation to accommodate their different natures. Does Caer fully forego her wild nature and settle into domesticity? Does she return to the water? Was their song that cast the people of Brú na Bóinne into such a deep sleep actually their swan song signalling Caer's demise? Or does she return to the loch, choosing instead her female companionship and the deep peace of their existence there? The story as it is written finishes with the male acquisition of his dream lover. I wondered about the other maidens who had been such a significant part of Caer's life and whether they might also return for her, and whether Óengus can satisfy her longing for female companionship. I reconstruct the story accordingly.

It is customary for the author to provide an ending that will satisfy the reader, bring the story to a sound resolution. Leaving it at the happy-ever-after is a comfortable flourish. I have found that, without altering the trajectory of the story, it is possible to discomfort the reader, render them unsettled and unsure, while leaving it open to their own imagination for questions that have never been asked before of the narrative. That, to

me, is a more satisfactory ending that reflects the indeterminacy of women's lives and reminds us that there is life beyond the ending.

Stage Six: Beyond the Journey

There is yet another stage, one that does move beyond the ending of the journey to where the stories of these women are told over in such a way that other women can make their own choices, take their own journeys, and return to a society that does embrace them as strong and courageous women who present role models for how to live in a phallogentric world, and for how to change the structure of that society. Marina Warner says that:

We continue to demand that stories be *told over and over*, we want them to metamorphose themselves from the recipes of the manuals into drama and poems, into novels and texts, we want them not only for themselves, but for how they seed storytellers' imaginations, how they make other stories, how they change in different poets' or novelists' or playwrights' hands into works – into opera, and indeed operas, into *poesis*.⁷⁵

Just so, the writers of the Irish Revival, including Lady Gregory, reshaped the stories to suit their own personal agendas and ideology. From a feminist perspective, it is an act of *poesis* when something new arises from the traditional mythological bases to reshape what seemed once to have been ingrained cultural phallogentricity to make room for a woman-centred mythology. This thesis is my contribution to that act of *poesis*.

Lichtman says that “individually, woman's quest for self actualization can empower growth and development while collectively augmenting that personal power to that of her sisters.”⁷⁶ The stories tell us that women can act as autonomous individuals and make their own choices. In the stories, they may have failed in their quest, been destroyed or lost, and the society disturbed and destabilised. But the story is unfinished because other women, real women, like myself, are still following after, telling stories, shaking up the patriarchy, undermining power structures, encouraging women to make their own choices. Eventually, this is the female quest, the victory, precisely because it

⁷⁵ Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002: 211.

⁷⁶ Lichtman, *Woman's Heroic Journey*, xiii.

has caused disruption, has caused the society to unravel, has provided enticing possibilities to other women and, across centuries perhaps of telling the stories, the move towards a hero's welcome home.

Chapter Three: Placing the Woman at the Centre

Voice, silence, presence, absence; each serves a narrative purpose in storytelling. They can be used to accentuate emotional affect, to designate importance and status, and to focus the story on particular characters. In traditional stories, it is almost always the male character that holds centre stage, dominates the action and the sequence of events, overshadows the other characters through sheer strength of personality and presence. The female characters subside, only to rise when they are required to support the hero, or to serve as an accessory. Otherwise, they are predominantly silent and even absent. If they are vocal, this is often portrayed as a negative attribute and one that is disruptive to social cohesion.

The ninth century *Tochmarc Becfhola* (*The Wooing of Becfhola*) stands apart from other traditional Irish tales with its complete focus on the female character.¹ The third-person perspective remains with the female protagonist and the male figures fall into the background. There are battles framed within the story, but the only battle that is described is where Becfhola is witness to it. It is the journey of the female protagonist that is followed and the male journey is only mentioned when it affects the course of Becfhola's movements. She bargains for herself (not well, initially), initiates conversation, speaks verse, and makes her own choices. I have found no other Irish mythological tale from the medieval collection that accords the female protagonist such a clear centrality. It is true that Derdriu can be said to occupy a prominent position in *Longes mac nUislenn* (*The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*) and *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach* (*The Violent Death of the Sons of Uisneach*), but these two stories tell what happens to the sons because of her, as clearly demonstrated in the titles.

In this chapter, I explore the narrative techniques demonstrated in *Tochmarc Becfhola* and consider how they can be applied in my reconstruction of the stories associated with Caer, Gráinne and Derdriu. I use *Tochmarc Becfhola* as a guide for how to keep the perspective with the woman, following the female journey while keeping the male in the background; how to make her silences speak; and how to write the woman's voice so it carries the authority of verse.

¹ Máire Bhreathnach, "A New Edition of *Tochmarc Becfhola*," *Ériu*, 1984: 59-91.

Keep the Perspective with the Woman

The medieval tales that encapsulate the mythological and literary traditions of Ireland are, as Joanne Findon points out, mediated by male authors. She says that the woman is regarded as Other, as “the object rather than the subject of the narrative, reflecting the projected desires and fears of the male author and his audience rather than her own.”² So what happens when the woman becomes the subject under consideration rather than an object within the stories? What happens when the story is mediated by a female author such as myself? Firstly, I need to read them through a feminist lens.

To read such stories with a feminist perspective means to read into the silences of the female characters, to notice when their personae has been subsumed by the male hero, to excavate their story, and listen when they speak. Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes that “putting the female eye, ego, and voice at the centre of the tale” causes a displacement which asks “how do events, selves, and grids for understanding look when viewed by a female subject...”³ To then reconstruct such stories with a feminine perspective means shifting the narrative from a traditionally heroic model centred on the male protagonist, bringing the woman to the foreground, focusing on her presence, moving with her into the absent places in the story, demonstrating that there is purpose to both her speech and her silence. This can be further emphasized by leaving the male character behind, as occurs in *Tochmarc Becfhola*, relegating him to the background, to be only present when he serves to enhance the narrative of the woman.

During combat scenes in the *Tóruigheacht*, Gráinne is physically removed from the scene, and from the story, by Diarmaid’s *sídhe* foster-father, Óengus. She is literally lifted out of the story so that there can be a more complete focus upon the male heroics; thus rendering her not only silent but also invisible.⁴ When reconstructing the

² Joanne Findon, *A Woman’s Words - Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle*, Toronto, USA: University of Toronto Press, 1997: 4.

³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985: 109.

⁴ Edyta Lehmann, “The Woman Who Wasn’t There: Preliminary Observations on the Perplexing Presence and Absence of the Character of Gráinne in the “*Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada Agus Ghráinne*,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 30 (2010): 119.

Tóruigheacht, I have kept the perspective at all times with Gráinne so that if she has been lifted away from the action, the reader goes with her and the male heroic action is only revealed when Gráinne learns about it in a second-hand account, from either Diarmaid or other witnesses. This approach to storytelling contravenes phallogocentric conventions – it is usual for the storyline to follow the male hero into battle – and this deviation can be a discomfiting experience for the reader. It may feel like it leaves holes in the narrative but this creates a parallel experience for the holes that can be found in the feminine story in conventional mythological tales. This subversion of the narrative structure is a deliberate strategy I have adopted to keep the focus on the female hero.

Secondary male characters in narrative are usually afforded greater prominence than secondary female characters, further centring the stories on the male experience. There are many examples in Irish medieval literature where the narrative is diverted to follow secondary male characters into other adventures, such as the account in the *Tóruigheacht* of the killing of the worm that grows in the head of Cian, a character who has no relation to the trajectory of the central narrative.⁵ In this reconstruction, the narrative is diverted to follow secondary female characters, recognising they are on their own journey. Women's stories connect with and intersect with other stories. I excavate what can be known of these characters, the maidservants and companions, or guides and helpers, gleaning my information from the interconnected literature and folklore. When there is nothing to be found regarding these women, as is the case with Caer's companions, I explore the possibilities with poetry.

Make her silences speak

When I consider the silence of women in stories, whether they be fictional, factual, or myths as cultural artefacts, I do almost instinctively associate it with repression. I think of women who have been silenced, who have never been allowed to speak out, who have been rendered incapable of doing so. Or who speak so quietly that their voices are never heard. When the woman's voice is left out and excluded, or pushed to the

⁵ Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, ed. and transl., *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada Agus Ghráinne: The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*, Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1967, 2nd. 1855: 57-65.

background of the story, or where the silencing of the vocal woman is part of the story, it tells us something of how women are perceived in the society and by the individual storyteller. Or perhaps how the storyteller wants them to be perceived.

Yet, in listening to the women in these stories, I have come to understand that silence does not always signify repression. Yes, it may be representative of women having been silenced, forbidden from speaking, constrained and disempowered. It can also be demonstrative of the lower status of women in society. As Robin Stacey Chapman says of early Irish society, “not everyone is allowed to speak in all situations; not everyone’s words are given the same degree of weight.”⁶ However, silence can also be restful, soothing, reassuring even. Or it can be very loud, the message and meaning conveyed by behaviour and mannerisms instead, where silence can speak stronger than words. The look, the body language, the physical response and action, or lack thereof, can communicate their own meaning. By reading the silences in the text we can discover new meanings and possibilities, and demonstrate that silence can mean many things.

In *Tochmarc Becfhola* (*The Wooing of Becfhola*), there is silence which works to establish a rapport between the man and the woman and establish their companionship until it is time for the woman to negotiate her terms. It involves a period of extended silence that seems to be about communicating on a deeper level, two people recognising each other as a perfect match, before there is any verbal negotiation.

This is in marked contrast to Becfhola’s initial relationship in the story. Her marriage with the king is negotiated through verbal interaction, but it is clear that he does not place any great value on her.⁷ Nor does she place any great value on their relationship, undertaking instead to arrange a tryst with the king’s foster-son. The son fails to meet her and instead the story moves on to her strange encounter with the warrior Flann. She finds him at a campfire and sits beside him silently. This passage is translated by Brian O’Looney as “he bestowed no attention on her”, as though Flann was ignoring her presence. O’Looney’s translation is accepted by Rudolf Thurneysen even while he

⁶ Robin Stacey Chapman, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007: 98.

⁷ Joanne Findon, “Looking for “Mr. Right” in *Tochmarc Becfhola*,” in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, edited by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley, 57-73. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013: 60.

translated the phrase as “she bestows attention on it”. Thurneysen’s translation puts a different slant on the encounter, one where Becfhola has more control and actively looks at the situation.⁸ Máire Bhreathnach translates it as “he looked but was unconcerned.”⁹ When the warrior leaves, Becfhola follows him into the boat that carries them to an island, goes with him to his house where he brings out food and drink, still with no verbal exchange, and then she sleeps beside him beneath his cloak. They seem to understand each other without words.

Joanne Findon suggests that the silence between Becfhola and Flann in *Tochmarc Becfhola* indicates that silence is valorised over speech because the woman is shown to gain more when she conforms to the expectations of silence and acquiescence than when she tries to arrange her own affairs.¹⁰ Bhreathnach estimates the dating of the original version as likely to have been early ninth or tenth century, which would place it in the same period of time that saw the production of so-called Wisdom Texts such as *Tecosca Cormaic* (*The Instructions of Cormac*), where in a long diatribe the author described women as all the same: “shameless on visits,/ tedious talkers... prattling... dumb on useful matters, / eloquent on trifles.”¹¹ How influential these texts were cannot be determined but certainly the *Tecosca* was highly regarded.¹² Nor was it the only text to present such misogynistic ideology. Findon also points towards *Senbriathra Fíthail* (*The ancient sayings of Fíthail*) which she says detail “the dangers of female counselors and garrulous women.”¹³

So Findon’s assertion would certainly be supported by the attitudes to women apparent in the law texts and the wisdom texts. However, I would counter that what Becfhola gains in her silence is a relationship that would bestow a lower status than that which she has as the wife of Díarmait, the greater king. Silence does not benefit her socially or economically, nor does it give her any security. The story can be read as challenging the idea that the most important thing a woman could do was to be sensibly silent and make

⁸ Bhreathnach, “Tochmarc Becfhola,” 88.

⁹ Bhreathnach, “Tochmarc Becfhola,” 78.

¹⁰ Bhreathnach, “Tochmarc Becfhola,” 57-75.

¹¹ Kuno Meyer, “Tecosca Cormaic,” in *FDA IV*, 199-200.

¹² Lisa M Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996: 30.

¹³ Bhreathnach, “Tochmarc Becfhola,” 59.

a good marriage for herself. Instead, it presents the value of a marriage that offers a more satisfying companionship with someone who recognises her value and treats her with honour.

Becfhola only breaks the silence to find out why this companionship between them should not be continued, forthrightly suggesting that they could become lovers. If she had maintained her silence at this point, she would have lost this relationship, simply returning to what she had before, because Flann thought she was better off with the king. Rather than the type of silence that would be “valorised”, Becfhola offers a model of a woman dissatisfied with one union who actively seeks another until she finds what she wants, and then takes it. This was not antithetical to Irish laws regarding marriage where there was allowance made for separation in marriage when the woman had just cause.¹⁴ Becfhola accepts Flann’s reasoning that he will not be a suitable lover for her with nothing to offer unless he wins back his lands. She returns to being the king’s wife until such time as Flann arrives, fresh from victorious battle and she goes with him.

This story illustrates that effective communication is not always about vocalisation. In *Feminist Messages*, Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser examine the strategies developed by women that enable them to not only survive systems of repression but to develop creative and subversive ways of communicating.¹⁵ For example, distracting hearers from the defiant message contained in the words of a song by emphasizing the sound of the accompanying music. Or disguising the truth in metaphor and ambiguity. Or using feigned incompetence as a form of passive resistance.¹⁶ I consider that silence can also be employed as a strategy and this is illustrated in a number of the Irish stories when they are read through a feminist lens. A story that is read differently is then told differently; representations can be subverted to create new possibilities and this is what I will demonstrate in both *Aislinge Óengusso* and *Longes mac nUislenn*.

¹⁴ Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2003, 5th, 1988: 73-74.

¹⁵ Joan Newlon Radner, *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 1993: 10-20.

¹⁶ Radner, *Feminist Messages*, 10-20.

The silence of Caer, the female protagonist in *Aislinge Óengusso*, can be read as a deliberate and strategic silence on the woman's behalf. Caer uses silence to powerful effect to achieve her desire.¹⁷ She appears to Óengus as he rests upon his bed. She refuses physical contact, and instead plays a tympan until he falls asleep. Listening to her in this way, without dialogue, without knowing anything about her background or her status, he learns to love her in a way which Brenda Gray describes as more spiritual than erotic, more pure than carnal.¹⁸

When she no longer visits, Óengus falls into a wasting sickness and he cannot speak to anyone of the cause.¹⁹ The woman may be absent but her power over him is not, and it silences him. Only when his affliction is diagnosed as love-sickness is Óengus released, able to speak, to describe his visitor and how he feels. While the focus of the story has shifted to the male protagonist, it is still Caer's absence that compels the onward momentum of the story. A search for her is commenced by his parents, Bóann and the Dagda.

Caer is located and Óengus identifies her among three times fifty maidens chained together, but there is no mention at this point of any interaction between Caer and Óengus, not even an attempt at communication. It is as though Caer and her companions are being viewed on a television screen rather than being within touch, within calling distance. Or perhaps viewed at a market where the silence of the subjects is indicative of their powerlessness. This objectification seems a likely reason for this narrative aberration because, having been identified, the next step is to negotiate for Caer to be given to Óengus as though she is a commodity that belongs to her father, as was the case in medieval Irish law.²⁰

There is the requisite war that ensues in which her father is defeated and commanded to surrender the girl, but he claims it is not in his power to do so, "for her power is greater

¹⁷ Jeffrey Gantz, ed. and transl., "The Dream of Oengus," in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 108-12, London: Penguin, 1981.

¹⁸ Brenda Gray, "Reading *Aislinge Óengusso* as a Christian-Platonist Parable," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 24/25 (2004): 16-17.

¹⁹ Gantz, "The Dream of Oengus," 109.

²⁰ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 76.

than mine.”²¹ This would suggest that Caer’s autonomy is not, after all, illusionary. Her father goes on to explain that Caer is one year in the form of a swan and one year in the form of a human. It is significant that Caer is not just any wild animal but a swan. Swans are highly symbolic story-creatures, representing beauty, grace, at their ease on water or in flight, and they were once believed to mate for life. There are different varieties of swan but the most common is the mute swan which is usually silent though capable of vocalisation. And when in flight, its wings create a throbbing sound that can be heard for miles.²² As with Caer, the mute swan can make its presence known without using its voice.

From the description given by Caer’s father, her transformation from swan to human and back again would seem to be of Caer’s own doing. The Dagda challenges this claim. Perhaps the Dagda cannot conceive of a woman electing to live in this manner, half-wild half-human, though it seems to me that such independence fits with the portrayal of Caer as a self-determining young woman. In her visitations to Óengus, she refuses to be drawn to his bed, sets the manner of their communication, and while she is linked to three times fifty companions, there is something in her animistic nature that has liberated her also from her father’s control. Her silence does not necessarily indicate passivity.

And sometimes non-verbal communication can be the most powerful kind. In *Longes mac nUislenn*, when Naoise and his brothers have been killed on their return from Ireland, the king claims Derdriu as his prize, but she does not accept his victory.

A year, now, she was with Conchobor, and during that time she did not smile a laughing smile, and she did not partake of her sufficiency of food or of sleep, and she did not raise her head from her knee.²³

Coming from a modern perspective, this could easily be understood in mental health terms as Derdriu being consumed by her grief for Naoise and in despair over her situation as a captive of the king. She appears as a passive victim, and this is largely how she was also portrayed by the writers of the Irish Literary Revival, and therefore

²¹ Gantz, “The Dream of Oengus,” 111.

²² W. Geoffrey Arnott, “Swan Songs,” *Greece & Rome* 24, no. 2 (1977): 151.

²³ Vernam Hull, ed. and transl., *Longes Mac N-Uislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1949: 66.

how she has become popularly known as ‘Deirdre of the Sorrows’.²⁴ Yet silence can serve many purposes in narrative, and while it is commonly used to negate the importance of female characters, it can also be used strategically to bring characters to the forefront. I incorporate the latter purpose.

I do not see Derdriu as a passive victim nor do I portray her as one. In medieval Ireland, fasting had an added significance. It was a deliberate act of shaming used against those of high standing, such as kings and judges. In more recent times, it was even used by Irish prisoners in British jails to protest not just their incarceration but their claim to special status as political prisoners.²⁵ Derdriu’s refusal to engage in conventional speech is also her refusal to accept her captor’s claim to her body and her personhood. Derdriu’s fasting, and her reticence, can be read as an active form of protest that served as a further indictment on the king whose authority was already diminished by his betrayal of the sons of Uisliu, and I give recognition to Derdriu’s use of silent protest in my reconstruction. A king’s right to rule was based upon his wise and just behaviour, and this king was serving his own interests above those of the province.²⁶

Additionally, my refusal to give a voice to the king, or any other male character in these tales, is my protest against the silencing of women in story. This has been a challenging exercise, because the male speech act often provides the catalyst for the progression of the narrative and so is important for the context of the female experience. I orchestrate this by telling the reader about the speech act but not showing it in dialogue. Occasionally, it is the female character who relates the speech act and reflects upon its meaning for her. The focus is on the woman’s response.

When the king tries to engage her in conversation, Derdriu denies him the privilege of conventional response. If she responds, she does so with elegiac verse, pointedly claiming her position as a grieving widow and further distancing herself from a

²⁴ John Millington Synge, “Deidre of the Sorrows,” in *Collected Plays*, 211-65, London: Penguin Books, 1952.

²⁵ Chapman, *Dark Speech*, 27-28.

²⁶ Máire Herbert, “The Universe of Male and Female: A Reading of the Deidre Story,” in *Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples: Proceedings of the Second North American Congress of Celtic Studies*, edited by Cyril J. Byrne, Margaret Harry and Pádraig Ó Siadhail, Nova Scotia, Canada: St. Mary’s University, 1992: 55.

relationship with the king.²⁷ It is only when she is asked by the king who she hates the most that Derdriu breaks her silence, answering it is both the king and also the man who killed Naoise. When the king attempts to pass her across to the other man, she leaps from the chariot and dashes her head against a rock, a course of action and manner of death that is more often interpreted as suicidal than accidental.²⁸

On her examination of various viewpoints and the linguistics of the Irish version, Kate Mathis finds that:

The death of Derdriu occurs as an unanticipated consequence of her departure from the chariot shared with Conchobor and Eogan mac Durthacht, and does not result from a deliberate intention to end her life.²⁹

The portrayal of a suicidal ending is even more tenuous in *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach* where Derdriu wanders upon the battlefield until she finds the grave of her lover and his brothers, whereupon she leaps into it and dies.³⁰ It can be assumed that in texts transcribed by religious authors that they would have avoided naming Derdriu's action as suicide, when suicide was regarded as a mortal sin. However, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha notes that there were occasions of exculpation where female suicide was associated with sexual violence.³¹ Derdriu is portrayed, in the medieval texts and the adaptations of the Literary Revival, as a sympathetic figure and not deserving of eternal damnation.

Yet no matter how it is framed, Derdriu dies as a result of deliberate action that is likely to result in death, which can accurately be called suicidal. Her suicide is usually linked to grief, though O'Leary relates it to a loss of honour. I propose that Derdriu deliberately chooses a course of action which leads to the ultimate silence in protest against the death of her lover and her own captivity. It is a tragic ending, but one that communicates her strength of feeling.

²⁷ Hull, *LMU*, 68-69.

²⁸ Hull, *LMU*, 69.

²⁹ Kate Louise Mathis, "The Evolution of Deirdriu in the Ulster Cycle," PhD, University of Edinburgh, 2010: 114.

³⁰ Caoimhín Léith Mac Giolla, ed. and transl., *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach: The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach*, London: Irish Texts Society, 1994: 139.

³¹ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, "Gormlaith and Her Sisters C. 750-1800," in *FDA* IV, 169.

The silences in these tales can be read for the woman's experience, not the man's, and refocused to highlight the women's story. Even when the women are silent, their stories can still be heard. DuPlessis says that "the choice of the teller or the perspective will alter its core assumptions and one's sense of the tale."³² In telling these tales, I ask the reader to listen to the silences. The reader can then discern this other layer of the story which is where it all begins, with the woman, and which is the story that needs to be heard above the tumult of lust and war and ownership of property, whether that be kingdoms or women's bodies.

Give her voice the authority of poetry

While acknowledging the significance of silence and how it can be reframed to focus upon the woman, a primary tool of feminist reconstruction is not only to bring these women present, foreground them in the story, but also to give them a voice when their silence has worked as a repressive tool.

In traditional storytelling, when women speak it usually acts to enhance the male story. In the *tochmarc*, the tales of wooing or courtship, the woman's voice is sometimes given more prominence, and even considered a positive attribute. Joanne Findon comments that it is Emer's "eloquence and quick wit" that convince the Ulster hero Cuchulain that she is the right choice for him as mate.³³ Similarly in *Tochmarc Ailbe*, Finn is won over not by Ailbe's beauty but by her cleverness in their game of riddles.³⁴ However, in both those presentations, the woman has been approached by the male hero rather than initiating the flirtatious interaction, which perhaps makes their vocal skill more acceptable.

In these *tochmarc*, word play has worked in the women's favour, but in the Irish tales of *aithed*, meaning 'elopement', where the women are often very vocal, it is presented as a disturbing attribute. Lisa Bitel suggests that:

If saga writers depicted women eloping with handsome warriors, it was because some young women and men rejected the marriages planned for them, arranging

³² DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 109.

³³ Findon, *A Woman's Words*, 49.

³⁴ John Carey, ed. and transl., "Tochmarc Ailbe: The Wooing of Ailbe," unpublished: 1.

their own loves and rendezvous. With effort, then, we may be able to hear the faint echo of women's own voices calling from the documents with self-definitions and outlining survival strategies.³⁵

That the *aithed* did not end well, serving perhaps as a warning against such aberrant behaviour, did not negate the romance of the attempt to live out their dream outside of socially determined arrangements. It might not reflect the reality of what life was like for women in medieval Ireland, but it may have reflected something of what they fantasized about. Such longings could not be spoken of directly, but they could be told in story, especially when the stories also warned of dire consequences for those who put their own interests above those of the community.

In the *Tóruigheacht* and the ninth century *Longes mac nUislenn*, both Gráinne and Derdriu, respectively, face impending marriages to powerful figures but each circumvents these arrangements by initiating a conversation with her chosen lover then coercing him to elope with her.³⁶ They break all the rules of what is expected of a high-born woman, upsetting not only the jilted suitor but also damaging bonds of friendship and loyalty. There is a common theme to these stories: that the vocal woman is dangerous not only because she undermines social stability but also because she destroys the best of society as epitomized in the male hero.

In the *Tóruigheacht*, Gráinne's words are often represented as indicative of an ambivalent nature, especially in the early stages where she seemingly agrees to a betrothal to Finn but then elopes with Diarmaid.³⁷ However, this representation of Gráinne in this seventeenth century version is very different to that found in the tenth century *Finn and Gráinne*, where Gráinne is Finn's wife. In *Finn and Gráinne*, when Finn learns of Gráinne's unhappiness, they part amicably.³⁸ Her unhappiness was seemingly not something that Finn was aware of until he overheard her in conversation with her father, so Gráinne presents as a young woman who has tried to bear her suffering in silence believing it is her duty as the king's daughter. When Gráinne is able to speak of her feelings, she is heard, and a separation is negotiated, illustrating that

³⁵ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 16.

³⁶ Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 63.

³⁷ Lehmann, "The Woman Who Wasn't There," 120.

³⁸ Ó Corráin, Donnchadh, ed., "The Separation of Finn and Gráinne," in *FDV IV*: 36-37.

Irish law allowed for separation in marriage under intolerable situations.³⁹ This is not a story of a woman who should be silent; it illustrates that a woman can justly be heard.

Finn and Gráinne is part of the collection of material known as the *Fíanaigecht*, which encompasses the stories and lays associated with Finn and his band of warriors known as the *fiána*.⁴⁰ Not all of these *fíanaigecht* stories survived and the seventeenth century *Tóruigheacht* is likely to have been influenced by oral versions and folklore, as well as by manuscripts that are no longer extant. The story was well known in both Ireland and Scotland where dolmens were reputed to be the beds of the lovers as they fled.⁴¹ This points to a folkloric pursuit narrative perhaps known before the *Tóruigheacht* emerged as an amplified literary development.

However, the older version of *Finn and Gráinne* and the intervening versions have been overwritten by the *Tóruigheacht*, especially when Standish O'Grady's 1855 translation became the predominant version that informed and inspired later adaptations by the writers of the Irish Literary Revival.⁴² Something happened to the way that the story of Gráinne was told between the tenth century, where Gráinne was simply portrayed as an unhappy wife whose expressed dissatisfaction was respected and acted upon, to the seventeenth century depiction of her as demanding, complaining and manipulative. In my reconstruction, I shift between the versions to illustrate that the way the story is told by different authors can work to emphasize different aspects of both the story and the female character.

There are at least forty-one manuscript versions of the *Tóruigheacht*, with some noteworthy differences between them, but they all largely relate the same narrative sequence.⁴³ In the early chapters, Gráinne is asked if she will agree to a marriage with Finn, indicating she has some level of autonomy, and she seems to give her consent.

³⁹ Ó Corráin, "Finn and Gráinne," 36.

⁴⁰ Kevin Murray, *The Early Finn Cycle*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017: 19.

⁴¹ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *Coire Sois: The Cauldron of Knowledge*, edited by Matthieu Boyd, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014: 466.

⁴² Standish O'Grady, *The Pursuit after Diarmuid O'Duibhne, and Grainne the Daughter of Cormac Mac Airt, King of Ireland in the Third Century*, Dublin: The Ossianic Society, 1857; R. A. Breathnach, "Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada Agus Ghráinne," in *Irish Sagas*, edited by Myles Dillon, Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press, 1985: 135.

⁴³ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, xiv.

There is then a betrothal feast where Gráinne sets her sights on Diarmaid as a more suitable companion than the elderly Finn. She renders the company at the feast silent by drugging all but Diarmaid and three of his companions with a poisoned cup in an inversion of the usual trope of men silencing women; here it is the woman enforcing a male silence. Gráinne asks Diarmaid to go with her but when he refuses, she lays a *geis* upon him, a verbal injunction, which compels him to go. By invoking the *geis*, she uses words in a way that is undeniably authoritative.

A woman's honour was bound up with her sexual behaviour, described by Philip O'Leary as "chastity and fidelity"; Gráinne's breach of her agreement to marry Finn by compelling Diarmaid to elope with her in the *Tóruigheacht* also irretrievably undermined her own social status.⁴⁴ As they leave the castle, the power of her words gradually diminishes and Diarmaid becomes the more active character, and in command. It is when Gráinne, in the early stages, complains that her feet are too sore to walk, insisting that Diarmaid find horses for them to ride, that Edyta Lehmann marks as the point where the focus of the story moves from Gráinne as the dominant figure to Diarmaid.⁴⁵ From this point on, the story no longer centres around Gráinne but around the male hero.

Eventually, a truce is negotiated, and the two lovers are living a prosperous and settled life when Gráinne decides that the truce should become a peace so that her daughter can find a husband. She persuades Diarmaid to host a feast at which Finn and the king will be present as guests. Throughout the *Tóruigheacht*, when Diarmaid has listened to her words, they have led him to places and situations he would rather not be in, but then he fails to listen to her when he should. When Diarmaid wakes to the sound of a boar hunt, Gráinne tries to warn him firstly not to go, then advises him on which weapons to take; he ignores her advice. When Diarmaid is gored by a boar, an attack engineered by Finn who is travelling to the feast, Diarmaid regrets that he did not have the sense to listen to the "counsel of a good wife."⁴⁶ But Gráinne has never been presented in the story as a wise counsel, rather as a harrying one, and Diarmaid has never before described her in

⁴⁴ Philip O'Leary, "The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature," *Ériu* 38 (1987): 35.

⁴⁵ Lehmann, "The Woman Who Wasn't There," 116-26.

⁴⁶ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 89.

such complimentary terms. It is a final concession he makes that the two of them have, despite all his obstinacy, had a good and prosperous life together.

In *Longes mac nUislenn*, the female hero, Derdriu, has a powerful voice. She cries out from her mother's womb even before she is born. Her vocality continues into maturity and, in a contrived meeting with Naoise, she threatens shame upon him unless he takes her with him. Then, as happens to Gráinne, she is displaced in the narrative as the male hero and his brothers take precedence. Kate Mathis suggests that the ensuing silence of Derdriu in this literary tale is indicative of her passivity, but the omission of speech does not indicate there was none, just none that was considered worthy of commentary by the male authors of the texts.⁴⁷ That Derdriu speaks truthfully and wisely is shown during the episode when the king of Scotland repeatedly sends his steward to woo her. She relays all of these conversations to Naoise and his brothers, both warning and advising them when the king plans to attack. Her advice is heeded.⁴⁸ Then an envoy comes from Ireland to entice the brothers back with promises of peace from the king of Ulster, and the brothers disregard all of Derdriu's subsequent warnings about the treachery of the kings of Ulster.

In the later version of the story, known as *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach* (*The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach*) and written in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, Derdriu gives voice to a number of prophetic utterances which are couched in verse. Chapman says that:

The choice to use a particular type of poetic language, especially in a context in which other types of language also occurred, must surely have been intended to communicate to the reader/listener something specific and important about what was being said.⁴⁹

Derdriu uses the authoritative form of poetry in her speech but still her warnings go unheeded in much the same way as Gráinne's warning to Diarmaid not to follow the sound of the hounds is ignored.⁵⁰ Both women are speaking against the call of the male

⁴⁷ Mathis, "The Evolution of Deirdriu," 87.

⁴⁸ Hull, *LMU*, 64.

⁴⁹ Chapman, *Dark Speech*, 101.

⁵⁰ Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, ed. *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach: The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach*, London: Irish Texts Society, 1993: 111-113; Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 81-82.

to male in a warrior culture where a man's honour was determined not only by rank but also by the recognition of his achievement and skills.⁵¹ That call proves stronger than the female voice.

Philip O'Leary says that only occasionally was the honour code questioned by women and the strongest example of this is in *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach* where "it is Deidre's failure to fully comprehend or accept the dictates of that code that lends the tale much of its poignancy."⁵² It is understandable if Derdriu is lacking in some social awareness and a comprehension of the importance of honour to Naoise and his brothers. When she cries out as an unborn child in *Longes mac nUislenn* and it is prophesized that she will be a beautiful but destructive woman, the warriors want her killed at birth but the king has her raised in isolation until he can take her as his consort.⁵³ This keeps her invisible and silenced, her voice only heard by her foster parents and Leborcham, the female satirist who visits her. Gráinne, on the other hand, was raised as a king's daughter who would have understood the honour code very well, and in the *Tóruigheacht* would have known that her actions would impeach Diarmaid's honour, and her own. Elopement dishonoured both the man and the woman, and was an offence to the jilted lover.

This dishonour attached to the woman may be illustrated by the relationships with other women in the stories. Most of the female figures in the *Tóruigheacht* are unsympathetic to Gráinne. In an adjunct tale, *Uath Beinne Etair* (*The Cave of Howth*), the old woman who offers them hospitality also betrays them.⁵⁴ In a tenth century story about Gráinne's sister, Ailbe, who is subsequently wooed by Finn and marries him, Ailbe's wordplay indicates her contempt for her sister's behaviour.⁵⁵ The other woman in Gráinne's life, who is only mentioned towards the end of the *Tóruigheacht*, is their daughter, for whom Gráinne wants to provide the feast that will allow her entry into society.⁵⁶ It seems that

⁵¹ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, "Travelers and Settled Folk: Women, Honor, and Shame in Medieval Ireland," in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, edited by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley, New York: Springer, 2013: 18.

⁵² O'Leary, "The Honour of Women," 33.

⁵³ Hull, *LMU*, 61-62.

⁵⁴ Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, ed. and transl., "Uath Beinne Etair: The Hiding of the Hill of Howth," in Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 131-37.

⁵⁵ Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 10.

⁵⁶ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 79-81.

despite the truce there are still social ramifications that have been imposed upon them, preventing a complete social acceptance, and so Gráinne seeks to remedy this. The clear message is that women should not speak their desires, and that they endanger their men and themselves by doing so.

But that is not always the case. When Becfhola finally speaks to Flann in negotiating their relationship, she asks “why they should not become lovers.” He first alludes to her marriage to the king but when she dismisses that as a reason, says that they should not marry until he has something to offer her, acknowledging her worth in a way the king has not. Becfhola returns to the king, not having been missed, but she speaks quatrains that those present do not understand. The obscurity of the verse form provides a way for her to give utterance to her truth while otherwise seeming compliant with social expectations. In a year’s time, Flann arrives, having won his battles, and she goes with him.

When it was simply Caer and Óengus in the dreamworld, Caer controlled their encounters. Once others become involved, social conventions over-rule any direct negotiation between the two lovers or even with them. It becomes about territory and ownership and who has the rights over Caer’s personhood, be that the king and queen who have oversight over the territory, or her father, Ethal, who refuses to give her over. Caer’s silence in these negotiations can be read as exclusionary, demonstrative of the lack of autonomy granted to women whose future would be decided by others.

Yet just as Becfhola speaks to Flann for the first time in negotiation of their relationship, Caer speaks when Óengus visits the loch and calls across to her, something he seems unable to have done when he found her in the first instance. Caer asks who it is that calls to her and when she learns it is Óengus, clearly states her terms, saying, “I will come if you promise that I may return to the water.”⁵⁷ It does not matter what the families have decided, Caer is half-wild and independent. If she knows anything of the wars that have been fought for her or the negotiations that have taken place, all this has happened without her consent and she is not automatically compliant.

⁵⁷ Gantz, “The Dream of Oengus,” 112.

Óengus accepts Caer's terms, puts his arms around her and they both transform into swans. There is a similar metamorphosis in the story of *Tochmarc Étaíne* (*The Wooing of Étaín*) which may have been an earlier tale with some of the manuscript language pointing to the ninth century.⁵⁸ However, in *Tochmarc Étaíne*, the transformation into swans is an imposition upon Étaín by the lover that abducts her and renders her silent and compliant.⁵⁹ The positions of power are reversed for the metamorphosis in the *Aislinge*; Óengus changes his nature to unite with Caer rather than compelling her to change for him. They sleep together as swans and when they wake, circle the lake three times, symbolically fulfilling his promise to her, and then they fly to his home where they sing until the people fall asleep for three days and three nights. In love, Caer has seemingly found both her liberation and her voice.

While I maintain the narrative trajectory of these stories, I also take the opportunity with my poetry to introduce the woman's voice, or sometimes the woman's thoughts, or simply enter a reflection on the woman's story. As previously mentioned, poetry was regarded in Irish society as special speech which carried a performative authority. I use poetry, in line with Irish literary tradition, to demonstrate that the women's voices are important and what they have to say must command attention. The poetry set in the context of the prose narrative can cause the reader to pause in the progression of the narrative and give greater consideration to the woman's perspective.

The Other Women

What happens to the other women in the story, those who are perhaps not so exceptional, not so gifted or privileged as the female hero? The ordinary women, the servants, the companions, those who are perhaps dragged along unwillingly in the female hero's journey because of her choices, or those who are loyal in their support for her, or those who are there just as a supporting cast in the same way that the female protagonist is usually just part of the supporting cast for the male hero. In a feminist reconstruction, if feminism is considered as a position of social justice for all women including those who have been designated as being of lower social status, then these

⁵⁸ Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best, "Tochmarc Étaíne," *Ériu* 12 (1938): 139.

⁵⁹ Bergin and Best, "Tochmarc Étaíne," 185.

auxiliary female characters must also be considered, brought present, listened to, given a voice, given a name.

In some of the Irish medieval tales, the female protagonist is not named, existing only as a functional persona rather than a recognizable character. This absence of a name is barely noticeable when reading the story, such as in *Fingal Rónáin* (*Rónán's Act of Kin-Slaying*) where for the entire tale, the female protagonist is referred to simply as the daughter of Echaid.⁶⁰ I am ashamed that I did not notice the absence of her name until it was pointed out in a lecture delivered by Máire Herbert at University College Cork in 2004. I have since become more conscious of the importance of names and, as a deliberate feminist strategy, all female characters are named in my creative work even when they have not been named in the source material. However, in order to stay consistent with my aim of not changing the narrative components, I have used Irish language to create names that both fit their role but also provide them with a distinct identity. Furthermore, in a seditious reversal of Irish tropes, the secondary male roles are unnamed, indicating their diminished importance. The male characters are only named when their identification serves a purpose for the female character. As mentioned previously, the male hero becomes the 'other' to the female, providing the foil for her character and the support for her decisions and activity.

Of those women who are named in the original stories, many still play a passive role. In the *Tóruigheacht*, the king's wife, Eithne, sits beside him but she is not named as Gráinne's mother and there is no interaction between them.⁶¹ (In a Fenian lay, she is named as Gráinne's mother.)⁶² There is also an unnamed maid at the feast who does Gráinne's bidding, and presumably knows that the drink she distributes contains a sleeping potion, but she is simply enacting Gráinne's will and there is no other communication between them.⁶³ It is not surprising that the secondary female characters simply serve their auxiliary function and have neither voice nor personality, considering

⁶⁰ Ó Cathasaigh, *Coire Sois*, 377.

⁶¹ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 7.

⁶² Eoin MacNeill, ed. and transl., *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn*, Part I, Lay XVIII, London: David Nutt, 1908: 149.

⁶³ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 9-11.

that Gráinne, as the central female character in the *Tóruigheacht*, does not maintain a presence and a voice but disappears from the narrative at intervals.

A more active secondary role in the *Tóruigheacht* is played by Dear Dubh, who serves as a female messenger for Finn, but she is supporting one of the main male protagonists and as such her voice is not repressed.⁶⁴ Similarly, in the *Aislinge Óengussa* (*The Dream of Óengus*), the secondary female characters are acting on behalf of the male protagonist, Óengus. His mother, Boánn, instigates the search for the dream-woman.⁶⁵ Queen Medb also helps in both the search and the warring on Caer's father.⁶⁶ They are presented as strong women who play an active role in the narrative, but it is to help the male hero attain his goal.

Of the women who offer some symbolic support to Caer, there are the fifty companions who are completely passive. Their chains fall from them when she departs with Óengus but it is unclear whether that represents only her freedom or theirs as well.⁶⁷ The chains may perhaps be reflective of her status as the daughter of a king, someone who should have companions, or it may be a test to see if Óengus can identify her as one among many in the same way that in *Tochmarc Étaíne* (*The Wooing of Étaín*) there is a test set to see if the king, Étaín's husband, can distinguish Étaín among fifty other lookalikes.⁶⁸ Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best place the language of *Tochmarc Étaíne* as ninth century, making it contiguous with the *Aislinge*.⁶⁹ Once the choice is made from among the many, by Óengus and by Étaín's husband in their respective tales, these lookalikes serve no further narrative purpose (although in *Tochmarc Étaíne*, when the king learns that he has chosen wrongly, there are generational ramifications told in subsequent stories).⁷⁰

In *Tochmarc Becfhola*, Becfhola's only narrative interaction with another woman is the companionship of an unnamed handmaid who is killed when they are travelling to what

⁶⁴ Ní Shéaghdha, *TDAG*, 41.

⁶⁵ Gantz, "The Dream of Oengus," 109.

⁶⁶ Gantz, "The Dream of Oengus," 111.

⁶⁷ Gantz, "The Dream of Oengus," 112.

⁶⁸ John T. Koch and John Carey, ed. and transl., "The Wooing of Étaín," in *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, Aberystwyth, Wales: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003: 162.

⁶⁹ Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 162.

⁷⁰ Ó Cathasaigh, *Coire Sois*, 183.

Becfhola anticipates is a tryst with the king's foster-son.⁷¹ Becfhola goes on to meet the otherworldly suitor, Flann, and when she leaves him, unwillingly, to return to the king, she expresses distress at returning without her handmaiden, indicating some level of affection between them. She then learns that she will find the handmaid alive at the place where she left her and they both return safely to the king's palace.⁷² This occurrence may indicate that female companionship is part of Becfhola's temporal existence, or it may be further evidence of Becfhola's otherworldly nature, that her human handmaid cannot follow her into another realm. Regardless of the reason, the verbal expression of some level of attachment to her servant companion is unusual in the Irish medieval collection.

Derdriu's story provides another type of exception, in that there are maternal and mentorial female characters who figure prominently in her life. At the beginning of *Longes mac nUislenn*, Derdriu's mother, while unnamed, makes her appearance as the heavily pregnant wife of the king's storyteller. She distributes food and drink to the king's company who have visited unexpectedly. When the child in her womb cries out, it is Derdriu's mother who asks the druid to read her child's fate.⁷³ However, when Derdriu is passed into the king's care, her mother disappears from the story. In Todhunter's nineteenth century adaptation, *The Three Sorrows of Story-Telling*, Derdriu's mother is described as having died in childbirth.⁷⁴

Derdriu is raised in isolation by nameless foster-parents who remain shadowy figures, but she is visited by Leborcham who could not be prevented because "she was a female satirist".⁷⁵ When Derdriu daydreams about a black-haired pale-skinned red-cheeked man, it is Leborcham who tells her that the description fits the warrior Naoise and she seems to deliberately encourage Derdriu to go against the king's plans.⁷⁶ In Derdriu's first meeting with Naoise, she grasps him by the ears and threatens him with shame, which Róisín McLaughlin describes as a verbal trick played by satirists, because the ear

⁷¹ Bhreathnach, "Tochmarc Becfhola," 79.

⁷² Bhreathnach, "Tochmarc Becfhola," 79.

⁷³ Hull, *LMU*, 61.

⁷⁴ John Todhunter, *Three Irish Bardic Tales: Being Metrical Versions of the Three Tales Known as the Three Sorrows of Story-Telling*, London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1978, 1896: 52.

⁷⁵ Hull, *LMU*, 62.

⁷⁶ Hull, *LMU*, 63.

has no bone and so this action insinuates no honour.⁷⁷ There is scholarly debate over the translation of *da n-o mele 7 cuitbiuda* as two ears of shame and derision (or synonymous words) and whether it can be related to the satirist's ritual. Some suggest, as a possible translation, that Derdriu threatened two horse's ears, drawing parallels with other similar texts.⁷⁸ Maria Tymoczko contributes to the debate by relating the phrase to other animal imagery present in the tale.⁷⁹ Even with these differences in translation, Derdriu's action and words still evoke a deliberate symbolic tone. When Derdriu makes this ritualised utterance, and when she uses elegiac verse in *Longes mac nUislenn*, and with her prophetic utterance in *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*, it can be inferred that she has received instruction in poetry and satire by Leborcham as the only person in her life who could have taught her these skills.

In *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*, it is Leborcham who is sent by the king to spy upon Derdriu and her company where they have been housed on their return from exile in Scotland, to see if Derdriu is still as comely as she had been. Leborcham warns Derdriu of the king's duplicity and reports back to the king that Derdriu has indeed lost her looks – but he later sends another envoy who reports otherwise.⁸⁰ Yet Leborcham remains unpunished for her lie, seemingly made invulnerable by her satirical skill. Hers is an ambiguous position, having influence with the king while surreptitiously working to aid and abet Derdriu, but the position of a *bancáinte*, a female satirist, was an ambivalent one. Chapman writes that:

The threat posed by the biting words of a satirist was both real and potent. So serious were the effects of public verbal ridicule believed to be that the Irish sources imagined it as actually causing traumatic physical injury to the person in question.⁸¹

While the *filí*, the poet, had a revered status in Irish society, there was little affection for the *cáinte*, the satirist, and laws were instituted in the seventh to eighth centuries to

⁷⁷ Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, School of Celtic Studies, 2008: 4.

⁷⁸ Sharon J. Arbuthnot, “‘*Da n-ó Mele 7 Cuitbiuda and So*’: What Did Derdriu Say to Noísu?” in *Ulidia 3: Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, edited by Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna, 221-30, Berlin: Curach Bhán Publications, 2009.

⁷⁹ Maria Tymoczko, “Animal Imagery in *Longes Mac N-Uislenn*,” *Studia Celtica* 20, no. 1 (1985-6): 151-52.

⁸⁰ Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 115.

⁸¹ Chapman, *Dark Speech*, 107.

manage their satirical activity and prevent the abuse of their powers.⁸² So what appears in this tale to be the privilege granted to Leborcham is double-edged; she had access where no others did but she was without friendship, except perhaps for that of Derdriu who seems to have also been her pupil. According to Muireann Ní Dhonnchadha, the *bancáinte* was one of the most reviled figures in society.⁸³ If Derdriu has learned this craft, as it seems she has, then it is possible that, unless she remains hidden and maintains her silence, she is unlikely to be welcomed by those outside of her previously sheltered existence.

Derdriu's story, more so than the others, connects with other women's stories and women's traditions. There is Medb who preceded Derdriu as Conchobar's wife and Luaine who followed Derdriu before she, too, came to a tragic death.⁸⁴ There is brief mention of Naoise's infidelity with the daughter of the Earl of Dún Treóin when Derdriu laments Naoise.⁸⁵ The earl's daughter is not otherwise mentioned and certainly not heard, but still Derdriu is ashamed that she laments Naoise alone and knows that if the Earl's daughter were there, they would lament him together. Miriam Uí Dhonnabháin notes that "it was a source of shame to the bereaved if no more than one woman could be found to lament the dead. This was called *gol mná aoinair*, the weeping of a single woman."⁸⁶ Keening the dead was a time when women were expected to be vocal, loudly and dramatically so, serving to vocalize the community's grief.⁸⁷

In conclusion, there is a great deal of complexity in using the narrative devices of silence, speech, absence and presence to focus the stories upon the women and resist being diverted into what is happening for the male protagonist. This is especially challenging when I am using the narrative components of the traditional stories, taking them apart and putting them back together with a different perspective rather than just

⁸² McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, 1, 49.

⁸³ Ní Dhonnchadha, "Travelers and Settled Folk," 32.

⁸⁴ Joanne Findon, "Nes, Deidriu, Luaine: Fated Women in Conchobar's Life," in *Gablánach in Scélaigeacht: Celtic Studies in Honour of Ann Dooley*, edited by Sarah Sheehan, Joanne Findon, and Wesley Follett, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013: 156.

⁸⁵ Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 131.

⁸⁶ Miriam Uí Dhonnabháin, "Patrons, Poets, Scribes and Singers – Some Examples of Participation by Women in the Later Gaelic Literary Tradition," *The Australasian Journal of Irish Studies* 14 (2014): 103.

⁸⁷ Angela Bourke, "More in Anger Than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry," in Radner, *Feminist Messages*, 160.

creating a new story. The stories then have the appeal of the traditional myth while incorporating a new way of envisioning them that will speak to the modern reader. They are old stories for a new world. Just as in life, there is a time for speech and a time for silence, a time for activity and a time to sit and wait. These narrative devices can serve to accentuate the women's story or be used to subjugate it. I choose to do the former.

SECTION TWO: NARRATIVE AND POETRY

Chapter Four: The Relationship Between Narrative and Poetry

The challenge when writing poems in response to traditional stories is the need to consider the readers' familiarity with the source narrative. Folktales and mythology, even when written in literary form and so carrying an author's distinctive traits, are stories that are considered to belong to a culture more so than to an individual author. In belonging to that culture, the stories are part of what shapes it, what enables its people to construct a cultural identity. When a poet takes material from these sources and re-constructs that into their own expression or interpretation, the creation is more vulnerable to criticism generated by the audience's preconceptions and their cultural investment in the narrative.

Tymoczko says that early Celtic poets would don the mask of a known mythological or historical figure to provide a vehicle for emotional expression rather than conveying this with a direct personal lyric. In this way, "a poet shares with the audience a field of imaginative experience that the poet evokes and reanimates, but does not essentially define or create."¹ In evoking the narrative, the poet was also evoking cultural memory and social identity. There was a presupposition of audience knowledge regarding both narrative and character, and with that knowledge there were also expectations of the narrative.

However, when the story is not known, then this relationship does not come into play. The poems speak to the narrative and one side of the conversation is missing if the myth is unknown or unfamiliar to the reader. It therefore becomes essential to find methods to familiarize the reader with the narrative context in order for them to be able to more fully appreciate the poetry that is written in response to the story. Gabriele Schwab writes that:

Literary texts may operate through a whole variety of literary devices such as, for example, narrative, plot, imagery, rhythm and style. While narrative provides

¹ Maria Tymoczko. "A Poetry of Masks: The Poet's Persona in Early Celtic Poetry," in *A Celtic Florilegium: Studies in Memory of Brendan O Hehir*, edited by Kathryn A. Klar, Eve E. Sweetster and Claire Thomas, Massachusetts: Celtic Studies Publications, 1996: 196.

a cohesive structure for psychic elaboration, the formal aspects of literary language are equally important as evocative agents because they determine the ways in which a narrative or a network of images engages the reader.²

It would not be enough for me simply to retell the story – the shape and style and form must be evocative of the poem, echoing the way that the narrative had evoked my poetic response. I wanted to find the best arrangement to engage the reader and create this experience for them.

The relationship between narrative and poetry has been explored by many contemporary writers, using different approaches that either heightened the importance of narrative to the poetic or which pushed it to the background. In this chapter, I consider different models for such combinations and how I might shape my poetry and feminist reconstruction accordingly, so that it is comprehensible for those familiar with the mythology (while presented in a new way) and also for those for whom it is new territory. It becomes a poetic mythography, tracing and uncovering the storyline of the myth with the tools of poetry.

There are four primary arrangements I have considered:

1. Poetry collections with referential material such as footnotes and glossaries.
2. Verse novels.
3. Hybrid texts.
4. Prosimetric texts.

There are cross-over points between each of these, between verse novels and hybrid texts, between hybrid texts and prosimetric ones, but it is useful to consider them each separately for the techniques used and the attributes of each.

Referential Poetry Collections

Since Classical Greece, it has been commonly understood that there are three categories of poetry: narrative, dramatic and lyrical, with various combinations and subsets.³ I contend that all poetry is narrative in nature if not in form; poems may be standing-still

² Gabriele Schwab, "Cultural Texts and Endopsychic Scripts," *SubStance* 30, no. 1/2 (2001): 172.

³ Frederick J. Ruf, "The Consequences of Genre: Narrative, Lyric, and Dramatic Intelligibility," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 3 (1994): 800.

moments within a larger story that is supplied by the reader's imagination rather than by the poet, but they are still moments that are narrated. Heather Dubrow says that "when lyric and narrative interrelate, the ontological status of the latter may vary considerably."⁴ She demonstrates that lyric poetry frequently meets the conventional criteria used to define narrative, while it can also be used to both destabilise and enhance narrative.⁵ To take three famous poems as examples, there is a story about "The Red Wheelbarrow" (it is standing there, it has been rained upon, it belongs on the farm with the chickens); and about the haunted faces "In a Station at the Metro" (haven't we all stood on these railway platforms, coming from and going somewhere); and Matsuo Bashō's haiku about a frog jumping in the pond (it has character, setting and action).⁶ The poems may seem to stand alone but their images connect to other narratives, other paradigms, and this is what gives them their metaphorical power. The reader must stop to wonder and make the connections, place the poems within the context of their own interpretation. (My interpretation about the Red Wheelbarrow was flawed, because I associated the chickens with farm life whereas Williams was drawing on an image from a suburban backstreet.)⁷

I would also contend that no poetry is separate to the story of its inception and conception and maturation just as these three poems have become part of an ongoing discourse about the meaning and structure of poetry, an ongoing narrative of poetic investigation. Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests we "think of the poem as having an inside and an outside." The inside is the subject material including pronouns, characters, speakers, and the narrated events. The outside is "the whole thing on the page as a work or text within language..."⁸ The material of a poem is laid out differently to conventional text and draws the eye, requiring a different sort of reading than

⁴ Heather Dubrow, "The Interplay of Narrative and Lyric: Competition, Cooperation, and the Case of the Anticipatory Amalgam." *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 256.

⁵ Dubrow, "Narrative and Lyric," 258-263.

⁶ William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow," in *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Margaret Ferguson, Tim Kendall and Mary Jo Salter. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2005: 1274; Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro," in *The American Tradition in Literature*, edited by George Perkins and Barbara Perkins, New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc, 1994: 1366; Donald Keene, "Matsuo Bashō," in *Finding Wisdom in East Asian Classics*, edited by William Theodore de Bary. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011: 289.

⁷ William Logan, "Pound's Métro, Williams's Wheelbarrow," in *Dickinson's Nerves, Frost's Woods*, Columbia University Press, 2018: 192.

⁸ Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Blue Studios: Piety and Its Cultural Work*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA: The University of Alabama Press, 2006: 102.

conventional prose, one that pays greater attention to the arrangement of the words, and the sound of the words. In this way, the poem also stands apart within the narrative, creates a type of standing-still moment, pause to be affected by the poem, to feel and reflect.

Some poems speak directly to the inspirational narrative and the challenge then is how to convey this to the reader, how to contextualise the poem within the narrative without losing that reflective stillness. Each of the poems in Anne Sexton's *Transformations*, which are retellings of Grimm fairytales, begins with a prelude that situates the reader in a contemporary world.⁹ She positions the reader to understand that the story is going to relate to real people in real situations, and then she provides a complete narrative poem. It is not essential to have read the foundational fairytale, though there are gaps in some of the poems that benefit from this extended reading. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill also uses the technique of introducing many of her collections with an anecdotal reflection that sets the scene for the poetry that then interweaves Irish mythological and folkloric material with contemporary realism.¹⁰

Dianne Fahey's poetry collection *Metamorphoses* provides precise, illustrative poems reflecting the Greek myths.¹¹ I remembered only fragments of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and found many of Fahey's poems difficult to comprehend unless simultaneously reading the myth she referenced. She helpfully supplied a glossary with summaries of the relevant myths, but I found I needed more information. With that added information, I was able to understand the poems and appreciate them as the insightful renditions that opened up new spaces in the stories. But a contiguous reading with the inspiring mythology was required in order to fully appreciate the poem. The source stories were more familiar to me in Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* and so no glossary was required. The poems encompassed fairytale characters such as 'Little Red Cap' and 'Mrs Aesop', historical figures such as 'Frau Freud' and 'Mrs Darwin', some from

⁹ Anne Sexton, *Transformations*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972, 2nd, 1971.

¹⁰ Frank Sewell, "Irish Mythology in the Early Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 8, no. 1 (2002): 39.

¹¹ Diane Fahey, *Metamorphoses*, Marickville, NSW: Dangaroo Press, 1988.

popular culture such as ‘Queen Kong’ and ‘Mrs Midas’, as well as those from Christianity and Greek mythology.¹²

Other poets are more directive in the referential material provided. T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* is as famous for the notes explaining the poem as it is for the poem with its many mythical and literary allusions.¹³ In Peter Hay’s introductory notes to ‘Physic’, which tells the story of the closing of a pulp mill in Tasmania, he states that there are relevant notes at the back of the book and “there may, in some instances, be a case for reading the relevant note in advance of the poem.”¹⁴ Michelle Leber avoids the need for this in *The Yellow Emperor: A Mythography in Verse* by providing an explanatory prologue that describes the historical characters and suggests how best to approach the poems. There is also a glossary of terms at the end for further clarification though I found this unnecessary with the narrative introduction.¹⁵

The danger of using footnotes or glossaries or introductions is that it can make for a fragmented reading experience. Going back and forth to find the notes or wading through a copy of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* can interrupt the enjoyment of the poetry rather than enhancing it. Sexton with her complete narrations, and Leber and Ní Dhomhnaill with their introductory material were more successful in orientating the reader to the poems from the outset. That is not to suggest that the others are not excellent poetry; they are. But when an understanding of the narrative is essential to an understanding of the poem, the absence of a more direct interweaving with the narrative means the poems can be, in some ways, disconnected. I wanted to create a more direct connection that also followed the trajectory of a complete narrative.

The Verse Novel

The verse novel provides the most complete marriage of poetic expression and narrative material, and originally I thought it would be the best form for the creative component

¹² Carol Ann Duffy, *The World’s Wife*, 3rd ed., London: Picador, 2015: 1999.

¹³ Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, “Disciplining the Waste Land, or How to Lead Critics into Temptation,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 44, no. 1 (1998): 83.

¹⁴ Pete Hay, *Physick*, Nottingham, UK: Shoestring Press, 2016: 1.

¹⁵ Michelle Leber, *The Yellow Emperor: A Mythography in Verse*, Five Islands Press, 2014.

of this thesis. The verse novel is considered a modern genrification, encompassing a diversity of texts in contemporary Australian literature such as Lisa Jacobson's futuristic *The Sunlit Zone*, Les Murray's historio-fictional *Freddy Neptune* and Dorothy Porter's murder mystery *The Monkey's Mask*¹⁶ However, the origins of the genre can be located in much earlier texts such the 14th century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and further back to the epic poetry of *Beowulf*, which was written down around the tenth century, or the ancient Greek epics of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which can be dated to the eighth century.¹⁷ The earliest literature, including *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World*, was inscribed on stone tablets dated to the second millennium BCE.¹⁸ These epics may well have emerged from oral tradition before being transcribed in verse that told a long, contiguous, fully resolved narrative as a good novel does. There is a clear sequence of events; a sense of place and social context; characters that evolve, meet challenges, and complete their journey, ending in triumph or tragedy.

And they are written in verse. The narrative and poetry are inseparable, with the poetry intentionally telling the story that could be told in prose but would then lack the added textuality provided by the verse. Indeed, the ancient stories have been frequently translated as prose, much to the detriment of the narrative. Yet while the marriage of narrative and poetry is epitomized in the verse novel, this is not an easy relationship. Clare Kinney explains that:

The perceived tension in a poetic fiction between its local schemes of elaboration and recapitulation and the more linear thrust of its discursive structure makes it harder to apprehend such a work simultaneously as poem *and* narrative.¹⁹

¹⁶ Lisa Jacobson, *The Sunlit Zone*, Five Islands Press, 2012; Dorothy Porter, *The Monkey's Mask: An Erotic Murder Mystery*, Arcade Publishing, 1994; Les Murray, *Freddy Neptune*, Potts Point, NSW: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1998.

¹⁷ William Raymond Johnston Barron, ed. and transl., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998; Seamus Heaney, transl., *Beowulf*, London: Faber & Faber, 2009; Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald, Oxford Paperbacks, 2008; Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Emily Wilson, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

¹⁸ N. K. Sandars, transl., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971, 8th, 1960: 8-9; Samuel Noah Kramer, "'Inanna's Descent to the Nether World' Continued," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 94, no. 4 (1950): 361-63.

¹⁹ Clare Regan Kinney, *Strategies of Poetic Narrative: Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Eliot*, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1992: 7.

A verse novel can become difficult to read when the requirements of plot and setting and character development overwhelm the poetic structure; it loses the aesthetic appeal of the poetic. Or conversely, the regularity of the poetic form can become monotonous and the richness of the narrative can be lost in it. John Jenkins' *A Break in the Weather* is a richly metaphoric verse novel driven by climate change, written in well-balanced octaves, but the structural requirements of the octaves do not easily accommodate shifts and changes in the pace and direction of the narrative; the narrative is subsumed by the verse.

What is most crucial for the verse novel is that while it is the narrative that propels the story forwards, the poetry needs to enhance the narrative without becoming subordinate to it. Paradoxically, it does this by impeding the flow of the narrative, making it swirl and eddy. Robert Scholes writes that "poetry deliberately opposes the linear, ongoing, diachronic qualities of speech with spatial, obstructive, synchronic qualities."²⁰ This deliberate slowing of the narrative momentum adds the dimension of drawing the focus onto the aesthetics of the language. The poetry can unpack the density of the story and allow the reader a more fully sensual engagement with the text while accommodating the narrative coherency.

The question of what is poetry and what is segmented prose becomes particularly relevant to the verse novel. Rachel Blau DuPlessis states "that segmentivity – the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments – is the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre."²¹ She describes poetry in terms of the selective sequencing of lines that may or may not have a syntactical relationship. What is significant is the gap, the line break, the line ends.²² This segmentation of the prose, its arrangement into lines, slows the reading experience, necessarily lays more emphasis upon the words themselves, creates pauses that emphasize and accentuate the meaning or the significance of moments in the narrative progression. Kinney says that:

We should not underestimate the role of the distribution of a poem across a page in directing our experience of it: even prose passages with no claims to the

²⁰ Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction*, London: Yale University Press, 1975: 28-29.

²¹ Rachel Blau Duplessis, "Manifests," *Diacritics* 26, no. 3/4 (Autumn - Winter 1996): 51.

²² Duplessis, "Manifests," 51.

pressures of rhyme or meter in their generation acquire surprisingly different emphases if they are rewritten as lines of free verse. The redeployment and interruption of syntactical units releases the language of the text into a different kind of semantic space, where new relationships of form and signification, no longer solely defined by syntax and punctuation, may be perceived.²³

When the syntax is broken up into lines, attention is especially given to the line break and how this adds emphasis or pause to different words, and it becomes essential to trim away excess words that detract from this attention. And such trimming away then requires rearrangement to augment the aural pleasure, the tone of the language.

Yet simple segmentation of the prose does not render it poetry. Segmentation prolongs the narrative material but the visual impression is not enough and the aural effect can quickly disappear. Linda Weste says that:

The text is prosaic and remains so, after being segmented to resemble a poem. Once the reader intuits this, there is a tendency to read against the segmentation, to ignore the gaps, and read the text as its prosaic imperatives demand.²⁴

It no longer slows the reading nor causes the reader to pay closer attention to the words than to the narrative progression.

DuPlessis modifies her position on segmentation in *Blue Studios*, when she explains that while poetry is distinguished by segmentivity, those lines are then made meaningful “by the negotiation of kinds of temporalities (speech, meter) and kinds of markers (such as rhyme, hinge, blaze, bridge, or gap) in interplay with syntax and statement...”²⁵ The quality of the poetry in a verse novel must make it stand apart if it is to be read as poetry, and if it is not read as poetry it might as well be prose.

When I attempted to impose a poetic form on the traditional narratives, too often they sounded more like segmented prose that quickly lost its superficial poeticism. At other times of writing in response to the mythology, there were poems that arose in the voice of the character which stood apart from the narrative and the two were difficult to marry

²³ Kinney, *Strategies of Poetic Narrative*, 11.

²⁴ Linda Weste, “Segmentation: From Prose Novel to Verse Novel,” Nineteenth conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, Wellington, 2014: 12.

²⁵ Duplessis, *Blue Studios*, 209.

together. It felt almost like a resistance, the woman standing against the way the story was told. I needed to explore other forms than the verse novel.

Hybrid Texts

A more recent development in blending narrative and verse is that of the hybrid text, which deliberately challenges coherency. Lisa Weste shows that the term “hybrid form” was first applied to the merger of poetic and narrative elements in verse novels in the Victorian era.²⁶ However, the term has come to mean something more, especially when used in reference to inter-cultural influences on writing. Patricia DeRocher explains that in transnational hybrid writing:

Their collage-like, fragmented narratives allow room for the backward and forward processing of interpersonal memories ... and model the possibility of a kaleidoscopic consciousness in their very structure.²⁷

The use of the term “hybrid literature” has further evolved to include those texts that tend to defy the boundaries of genre, which are perhaps more closely aligned with what Caren Kaplan refers to as “out-law” because of the way that they deliberately break the “most obvious rules of genre”.²⁸ These texts play with the arrangement of prose and poetry, how they are laid out on the page, and even with changing styles such as shifting between academic language and creative.

As an example, in her autobiographical *The Faraway Nearby*, Rebecca Solnit lifts the prose out of a creative but conventional non-fiction genre with a mythopoetical thread underwriting the text.²⁹ The reader can take control of how they journey through the narrative, reading the prose in its entirety, moving between the prose and the poetry, reading solely the poetical/mythological and wandering back into the narrative. It is a tantalising way to read, challenging because there is no roadmap for how it ‘should’ be

²⁶ Linda Weste, “Productive Interplay: Poetic and Narrative Strategies in the Late-Twentieth and Early-Twenty-First-Century Verse Novel,” PhD, Melbourne University, 2012: 2.

²⁷ Patricia DeRocher, “Constructing Feminist Transnational Bridges through Polyvocal Praxis,” in *Transnational Testimonios*, The Politics of Collective Knowledge Production: University of Washington Press, 2018: 64.

²⁸ Caren Kaplan, “Resisting Autobiography: Outlaw Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects,” in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson. Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1992: 119.

²⁹ Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*, New York: Penguin Books, 2013.

done. Instead, the onus is placed on the reader, and it can be unsettling as you find your own rhythm, take responsibility for the way you travel. It demands that you pay attention to the way the text is arranged on the page, not just on the narrative but on how it is presented, and on the resonance of the words used. As Roland Barthes states in *The Pleasure of the Text*:

We do not read everything with the same intensity of reading: a rhythm is established, casual, unconcerned with the *integrity* of the text; our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or to skip certain passages (anticipated as ‘boring’) in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote ... we boldly skip (no one is watching) descriptions, explanations, analyses, conversations ... And yet, it is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of the great narratives.³⁰

And when this is enhanced in a hybrid text such as Solnit’s, the reader is forced into a self-consciousness of their reading style which adds another layer of pleasure and engagement.

In his verse novel *Keepers*, Philip Slalom uses a similar approach to Solnit but with the elements reversed. He provides a prose narration that runs along the base of the page while the poems dominate above, just as his narrator dwells in the basement of the School of Arts speaking to what happens in the esteemed halls overhead.³¹ It adds a visual enhancement to the story. Slalom’s work has been described as hybrid, which is also how Quinn Eades qualifies his approach in *all the beginnings*, which weaves together autobiographical narrative, literary theory, reflexive exegesis and poetry into one text.³² It is completed by its companion poetry collection *Rallying*, which can be read alone but is also the richer for having read the narrative from which it emerges.³³

The style of *The Nearby Faraway* with the separated mythopoetic narrative, *Keepers* with its separate prose narrative that forms an underpinning thread, the chronological circularity of *all the beginnings* that often causes the reader to go back and forth in the

³⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, London: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976: 10-11.

³¹ Philip Salom, *Keepers*, Glebe, NSW: Puncher and Wattmann Poetry, 2010.

³² Quinn Eades, *All the Beginnings*, North Melbourne: Tantanoola, 2015.

³³ Quinn Eades, *Rallying*, Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia, 2017.

narrative, all of these encourage the reader to skim and skip, and then to pause in the reading. As Barthes describes it:

Whence two systems of reading: one goes straight to the articulations of the anecdote, it considers the extent of the text, ignores the play of language; the other reading skips nothing; it weights, it sticks to the text ... it is not (logical) extension that captivates it, the winnowing out of truths, but the layering of significance ...³⁴

Reading is an act of the intellect; it requires skills of literacy at the very least, and benefits from the application of logic, analysis, skills of comprehension. Narrative allows the reader to submerge themselves in an experience that is familiar and comfortable and pleasurable, that follows known parameters and pathways. Reading is also a subjective experience, an activity that provokes an emotional response, that engages the reader on a physical level, engages the senses, evokes taste, touch, smell, sound, sight.

Reading can then be undertaken not purely as an intellectual exercise but as a sensual engagement with the text. Poetry defamiliarizes the language, lifts the text out of the narrative, unsettles and causes the reader to pay attention to the word itself instead of simply flowing along on the narrative progression. Poetry creates pause, adds weight, “sticks to the text”. The combination of prose and poetry, pulling against each other, one linear, syntagmatic, contiguous, and the other metaphoric, paradigmatic, circuitous, is problematic and yet it is also compelling and can result in a powerful marriage of opposites. The tension I experienced between the narrative and the poems that evoked the persona of the female character could work to enhance the feminist subversion of the traditional tales.

Historical Prosimetric Texts

Yet while the hybrid text is considered a modern invention, deviating from conventional genre formats, the combination of poetry and prose has a much older history. The prosimetric form was employed in early Irish literature and some scholars drew a link to Indo-European origins, comparing the patterns of early Irish literature with the

³⁴ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 11.

prosimetric nature of ancient Hindu texts. However, these theories have been largely discounted and replaced, according to Proinsias Mac Cana, by a consideration that the prosimetric may have emerged under biblical influence.³⁵ While there is certainly a considerable amount of prosimetrum in the Old Irish period (sixth to tenth centuries), Geraldine Parsons says that “the frequency with which the form was employed increased greatly in the Middle Irish period, as did the amount of poetry present in the prosimetric texts.”³⁶

While any combination of prose and poetry can be defined as prosimetric, these previous studies of the Irish texts demonstrate many different ways in which the two, prose and poetry, communicate with each other.³⁷ Two quatrains relating to the love story of Diarmaid and Gráinne are written into the margins of the eleventh-century prosimetric text that is *Amra Choluim Chille: Lament for Colum Cille*.³⁸ The poetry is not connected to the narrative of the manuscript but shows an interaction between literary pursuits and creative content. In the ninth century *Longes mac nUislenn*, poetry is used to emphasize the significance of the utterance, especially in prophecy and lament. This emphasis is also demonstrated in *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*, a later development of Derdriu’s story that was probably composed in the fourteenth or fifteenth century.³⁹ There is little poetry in the seventeenth century *Tóruigheacht* which is written largely as a prose novel, with only two poems in the end stages of the narrative but those two poems are laden with emotion.⁴⁰

An important characteristic of the poetry in both the modern hybrid and the traditional prosimetric text is the way in which it is used to add weight, to add significance, to cause the reader to pause and ponder the moment in the narrative.

³⁵ Proinsias Mac Cana, “Prosimetrum in Insular Celtic Literature,” in *Prosimetrum: Cross Cultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, edited by Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997: 122.

³⁶ Geraldine Parsons, “Acallam Na Senórach as Prosimetrum,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 24/25 (2004): 86.

³⁷ Parsons, “Acallam Na Senórach,” 86.

³⁸ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *Coire Sois: The Cauldron of Knowledge*, edited by Matthieu Boyd, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014: 484.

³⁹ Hull, Vernam, ed. and transl., *Longes Mac N-Uislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1949; Caoimhín Léith Mac Giolla, ed., *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach: The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach*, London: Irish Texts Society, 1993.

⁴⁰ Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, ed. and transl., *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada Agus Ghráinne: The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*, Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1967, 2nd, 1855: 98-105.

The final composition

Having considered the four different arrangements between narrative and poetry – poetry collections with referential material such as footnotes and glossaries; verse novels; hybrid texts; and prosimetric texts – for the possibilities they offered for my poetic mythography, I needed to make decisions about the final composition. I wanted, in my own combination of narrative and poetry, to achieve the bliss spoken of by Roland Barthes:

Now the subject who keeps the two texts in his field and in his hands the reins of pleasure and bliss ... simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture (which permeates him quietly under cover of an *art de vivre* shared by the old books) and the destruction of that culture: he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse.⁴¹

With even greater perversity, I wanted to marry the various versions of Irish mythological stories as recorded in the medieval manuscripts, in oral literature, and in modern translations and adaptations. My reasoning – I was not creating an original story but an original approach. I wanted to retain the existent narrative content in all its myriad versions while using poetry to enter the spaces in the narrative and excavate the women's story. I was not writing a new story, but creating a gynocentric discourse which would use poetry to open up new possibilities for engaging with the traditional story.

I regard the collection of events and the characters who enact those events as described in the medieval texts as the raw material, the *fabula*, for this reconstruction of the tales. The way of telling the story, or presenting the materials to the reader and highlighting different aspects while shadowing others, equates to the *sjuzet*. This articulation of the *fabula* creates the discourse, what I want to say with the story. The terms *fabula* and *sjuzet* were applied by the formalists from the early twentieth century, who privileged *sjuzet* over the *fabula* as the artistic rendering.⁴² The structuralists reversed this order to

⁴¹ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 14.

⁴² Walsh, Richard. "Fabula and Fictionality in Narrative Theory," *Style* 35, no. 4 (2001): 592.

privilege *fabula*, or the chronological sequencing of events, over *sjuzet*, the way they were arranged.⁴³ Further literary criticism challenges this dualistic analysis but I find the terms useful for describing my approach.⁴⁴

Some of the details of the *fabula* in the different versions are contradictory, even incompatible, and I do not attempt to resolve these but rather treat them as variants of the same events just as events within history can be told very differently depending upon the perspective of the storyteller. As Kevin Murray points out, narrative consistency was not a mark of medieval storytelling.⁴⁵ Yet allowing for these variations meant there was too much circularity in the *fabula* to lend itself well to the linearity needed in a verse novel, which is perhaps more crucial than in other novel forms because of the sparsity of the words. When a story is told with such aesthetic brevity, it needs to be exacting. I could simply select the versions that were most commonly known, and therefore had the most popular impact on the culture, but I preferred to seize an opportunity to further defamiliarize the dominant version. The contradictions and paradoxes within the texts provided the lacunae which could be explored imaginatively and poetically, and I did not want to sacrifice this to narrative consistency.

I also preferred to present the *fabula* with a diegetic approach, positioning myself as the narrator telling the story. This creates what I consider a necessary emotional distance for the reader which enables a greater emotional and sensual impact with the mimetic poetry that then opens spaces, enters spaces, creates spaces, in the narrative (I address this further in the following chapter).

Ali Alizadeh takes this approach in *The Last Days of Jeanne d'Arc* when reconstructing that particular historical tale, by introducing questions into the text about what was recorded, what was possible, what was known, presumed, or changed in the various retellings.⁴⁶ He reads into Jeanne's life (and writes into it) a homosexual love affair for the cross-dressing martyr but also makes it clear that there is no evidence for this, that it

⁴³ Walsh, "Fabula and Fictionality," 593.

⁴⁴ Walsh, "Fabula and Fictionality," 593.

⁴⁵ Kevin Murray, *The Early Finn Cycle*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017: 101.

⁴⁶ Ali Alizadeh, *The Last Days of Jeanne d'Arc*, Sydney: Giramondo, 2017.

is his own musings on her life. He then presents Jeanne's dialogues with the saints in poetic structure, as the more mimetic element of the narrative. Clare Kinney writes that:

The poet accepts the authority of his sources, but *represents* their significance in the terms of his own art and his own experience: remembering is achieved at the price of a somewhat radical re-membering.⁴⁷

This is what Alizadeh achieves in *The Last Days*. In a similar way, I wanted to treat the source material of previous versions as historical documents in their iteration of the narrative while simultaneously questioning their veracity and opening the way, with the insertion of poetry, for other interpretations and experiences of the text. In this way, I would be accepting the authority of the source material but representing it on my own terms as a poet and narrator.

I experimented in my work with many hybrid forms of narrative and poetry, wrestled with them, as I tried to find a form of narrative exposition that supported the poems as the most significant part of the text without overwhelming them with the narrative, or rendering the narrative meaningless. While I did consider the poetry written in response to the narrative to be the most significant part of this project, the poetry was also important because of what it revealed about the narrative. James Matthew Wilson observes that:

If modern art sought with a spirit of rebellion to escape narrative but succeeded only in rendering it exogenous, we should not cling to its tattered battle flag. Exogenous narratives in artworks are intrinsically less comprehensible and indeed less interesting than internal ones.⁴⁸

The narrative was intrinsic to the poetry, each working to enhance the other, rather than the narrative working as an exogenous shell.

The underwritten style demonstrated by Philip Salom seemed appropriate, but the mythological narratives, particularly when considering the different versions, proved too convoluted and kept swelling upward on the page, pushing away the poem without making the connection I was hoping for. Instead, I tried to insert the poem into the prose, with the prose wrapped around the poem like a blanket, so the reader could move

⁴⁷ Kinney, *Strategies of Poetic Narrative*, 26.

⁴⁸ James Matthew Wilson, "Mnemosyne: Mother of the Arts," in *The Vision of the Soul*, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2017: 257.

between the two. The poem visually appeared as an oasis then, drawing the eye of the reader, but was surrounded by context, and the reader could move between the two at will. However, there was an uneven-ness between the amount of prose and the poetry that needed to be contained for it to work as a longer text and it became difficult to read. I suspected readers would too easily give up on the longer narratives.

So I tried placing the prose on a separate page with the poem on the opposing side, but then again there were the problems of the uneven-ness of the prose and poetry. They did not always match up, which required the reader to then retrace their steps in order to find the place where the poem should sit. I did not want to write additional prose simply for the sake of more adequately filling the spaces.

While I wanted to create a work of art with my collection of poetry, I also wanted to effectively and comprehensively communicate the narrative and different possibilities within those narratives. I wanted to use the aesthetics of poetry to heighten the experience of the mythological tale, to raise questions, to communicate my own feminist experience of the stories. Poetry is both art and communication. While moving back and forth between prose and poetry afforded the reader an intriguing control over their progress through the text, if I was getting lost in the combinational format of the prose and poetry, chances were that my reader would get lost as well. Being lost can be an adventure, but only if it draws you onward, as was achieved in Solnit's essay. I suspected my readers would just retreat.

I was, however, resolved on the prosimetric form, drawing not just upon the *fabula* of the mythological tales but upon the forms used within the Irish literary tradition, thus acknowledging the value of the source material. Prosimetrum provided the potential for a marriage of poetry and narrative that allowed for many possible arrangements. In *Meet Me in My World*, the prose component delivers the narrative context while the poetry provides the stop-feel-think moment instead of letting words rush over the reader, through and around. At times, the poems even turn the story about, undermine it, or underline it. The poems speak to the narrative and the narrative speaks to the poetry, and the reader can still focus on one, or the other, or both, as they feel inclined. Realising that I was working with three separate stories, I chose three different styles of

prosimetrum and my reasoning for this will be addressed further in the next chapter which focuses upon the development of the poetry.

Chapter Five: Poetry

Poetry has been the tool of my exploration of the women's journeys in these narratives, the creative way in to explore the spaces and gaps within the stories, and it has also been the way out, the creative expression of what I have discovered there. In this chapter, I explore the different influences on the poetry I have developed, journeying through my exploration of the Irish tradition of poetry and the Irish women's tradition of poetry. I explain how this exploration has affected the writing and the crafting of the poems that have been centred on the women's experience, and conclude with my positioning as a feminist poet writing from Irish tradition in a contemporaneous style.

The narrative of the Irish tales forms the context for the poetry, the background setting for what becomes a literary *relievo* where the poems are the focus of attention, the fine artistic rendering of the subject material. This is achieved by writing the narrative as diegesis, where I am positioned as the narrator, and the poems as mimesis, frequently in the voice of one of the female characters. Using the example of *The Cattle Raid of Cuailgne*, Hildegard L. C. Tristram suggests that "frequent switches between the two modes (and their respective discourse strategies) dynamize the narration. They enhance the narrative *relievo* and avoid monotony."¹ The direct diegesis of the narrative prose creates an emotional distance, being told to the reader rather than directly experienced by them. The mimesis of the poetry draws them into the experience of the characters and highlights the poems as the most significant part of the overall text.

By structuring this mythography as a prosimetric text, I pay homage to a medieval Irish tradition which created a dynamic interplay between prose and poetry. It is important to me that while writing poetry that can speak to a modern audience, I also incorporate the accumulated knowledge of the past. T.S. Eliot says "the most individual parts of his [a poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets ... ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."² We are not separate from a past that we have inherited in our literature and our storytelling; it is part of us and our contemporary artistic creations.

¹ Hildegard L. C. Tristram, "Mimesis and Diegesis in *Cattle Raid of Cuailnge*," in *Ildánach Ildírech: A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana*, edited by John Carey, John T. Koch and Pierre-Yves Lamber, Andover & Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 1999: 266.

² T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 37.

Even more so when we consciously consider past traditions and how we can relate to them in the present.

An Irish tradition of Poetry

The traditions of poetry from the Early (eighth to tenth centuries) through the Middle Irish period (tenth to twelfth centuries), were about precise learning and a disciplined creativity. The prosimetric texts were carefully composed and constructed by highly skilled writers firmly entrenched in cultural traditions that may have originated in an oral culture but were refined, in the early period, by the scholarly discipline of the monasteries. As the power of the monasteries declined, the craft of poetry, *filidecht*, became formalised in schools of training, and the poets, or *filid* (sing. *fili*), were supported by learned families.³

Liam Breatnach says that “Old Irish texts appear in three forms: prose, rhyming syllabic verse and *rosc*.”⁴ Prose allowed for logical, explanatory, contiguous communications. Rhyming syllabic verse demonstrated the poetic traditions of the *filid*. Then there is the third category, of *rosc*, a form of verse, generally non-rhyming, that has caused much debate regarding its origins, formulation, and meaning. Scholars such as Brendan O Hehir believe that *rosc* is indicative of an oral tradition where the heavily alliterative and syllabic patterns were used as a mnemonic device by the professional poet.⁵ Breatnach describes it as typified by archaic linguistic features.⁶ However, the archaism of the language may also have been a deliberate literary device. Proinsias Mac Cana believes that rather than provide evidence of an earlier oral source, *rosc* was used “to invest their narratives with a certain air of antiquity and primal authority.”⁷

³ Proinsias Mac Cana, “The Rise of the Later Schools of Filidheacht,” *Ériu* 25 (1974): 127-134.

⁴ Liam Breatnach, “Canon Law and Secular Law in Early Ireland: The Significance of Bretha Nemed,” *Peritia* 3 (1984): 452.

⁵ Brendan O Hehir, “Traces of Orality in an Irish Literary Text,” in *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, edited by John Miles Foley, J. Chris Womack and Witney A. Womack, New York: Garland Publishing, 1992: 380.

⁶ Breatnach, “Canon Law and Secular Law,” 453.

⁷ Proinsias Mac Cana, “Prosimetrum in Insular Celtic Literature,” in *Prosimetrum: Cross Cultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, edited by Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997: 108.

These two positions do not seem, to me, to be mutually exclusive. *Rosc* may deliberately reflect an oral form or simply hark back linguistically to an older literary tradition. What is clear is that *rosc* inserted into the prose amplified the importance of the verse, indicating that these words carried more weight than simple narrative. Robin Stacey Chapman says that:

Rosc implied learning, status, authority and social standing not merely for poets, but for jurists and kings acting in their judicial role, a juxtaposition that suggests that the ability to command this difficult code evoked for the listener not only aristocratic birth or specialist training, but the darker realms of prophecy, wisdom, and otherworldly insight.⁸

The precise linguistic and formalistic technicalities of *rosc* are beyond my capacity because the patterns require a thorough understanding of Old Irish and its translation. Chapman describes the specific format of *rosc* when used to deliver a judgment: heptasyllabic, heavily alliterative, with trisyllabic cadences. These technicalities in the poetry do not translate easily into English. Nevertheless, Chapman also emphasizes that it is the form and syntax of the language that matters most, as poetry where the language is formal, heightened and authoritative.⁹ These are qualities I can attach to the poems that express judgment, prophecy and oracular insight in the voices of the women.

Chapman draws a clear relationship between the authority of the jurors and the practice of poetry, explaining that “law was conceptualized as having evolved as a discipline out of one (or both) of the two most important performance traditions of the day: religion and poetry.”¹⁰ When written in literary form, this verse, which may have been constructed for oral delivery, retained the sense of performativity, the drama of the presentation.¹¹ The formal nature of *rosc* is about embroidering the language, adding textuality that is not just decorative but creates layers, depths, light and shadow, and is a sign of skills learned, crafts deployed, and mastery achieved. I have aimed for this performative dynamism in the verse.

⁸ Robin Stacey Chapman, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007: 226.

⁹ Chapman, *Dark Speech*, 68.

¹⁰ Chapman, *Dark Speech*, 57.

¹¹ Chapman, *Dark Speech*, 4.

It is important to aim for this quality because I consider that all medieval poetry was performative, if not all to the heightened level of *rosc*. It was a highly skilled verbal art form even when transcribed into literature. The poet's social role was ritualistic and powerful. J. E. Caerwyn Williams explains that the poet "gave instruction (*forcetal*), he uttered prophecies (*tairchetal*), he recited satirical insults (*aiccetal*), he cast spells (*tinchetal*), even extemporaneous spells, *díchetel di (do) chennaib*, literally, 'chanting from heads'."¹² Words were considered powerful tools and the poet knew how to wield them to maintain social cohesion through fear or favour.

Cormac's Glossary lists three things that were required of the poet, *imbas forasnai*, *teinm legdo*, and *díchetel di chennaib*.¹³ According to the electronic Dictionary of Irish Language (eDIL), *imbas forasna(i)* is literally "knowledge which illuminates".¹⁴ *Teinm* means breaking down, cracking open, chewing, gnawing.¹⁵ When Finn chewed on his thumb to acquire knowledge, it serves well as a metaphor for the gnawing away that poets must do to reach the essential knowledge that they require.¹⁶ The *teinm laeda* was applied as a divinatory incantation used by poets.¹⁷ John Carey equates these three functions with inspiration, technical expertise; and improvisational facility.¹⁸ A contemporary poet still requires these traits. Sometimes, in my experience, the inspiration comes as an illuminating force but more often it is about gnawing away, chewing on the matter until it breaks open and lets you in, and at other times it is using whatever comes to hand to create something new.

Sometimes what came to hand in medieval times were the stories that reflected the poet's emotional interests and subjectivity. As previously mentioned, Maria Tymoczko writes of early Celtic poetry where poets adopted the mask, or persona, of familiar characters to express emotions such as love and despair projected onto historical or

¹² J. E. Caerwyn Williams, "The Celtic Bard," in *A Celtic Florilegium: Studies in Memory of Brendan O Hehir*, edited by Kathryn A. Klar, Eve E. Sweetster and Claire Thomas, Massachusetts: Celtic Studies Publications, 1996: 217.

¹³ John O'Donovan and Whitley Stokes, eds., *Cormac's Glossary*, Calcutta: OT Cutter, 1868: 94-5.

¹⁴ *imbas, imbus*, dil.ie/27294, in Gregory Toner, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Sharon Arbuthnot, Marie-Luise Theuerkauf, and Dagmar Wodtke, eds., *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, 2019, www.dil.ie

¹⁵ *teinm*, dil.ie/40393

¹⁶ Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985: 156.

¹⁷ *teinm*, dil.ie/40394

¹⁸ John Carey, "The Three Things Required of a Poet," *Ériu* 48 (1997): 47.

mythological figures such as Derdiu, Líadan and Cuirithir, and Gráinne.¹⁹ Tymoczko says that the adoption of a mask operated by:

... conferring the freedom of anonymity and by enabling projection, the mask liberates the wearer to express emotions such as pain or anger, as well as to express ideological positions such as social criticism or violation of taboo without incurring for the speaker social or religious restraint or censure.²⁰

The dramatic lyric created distance from the poet's subjective experience while projecting it onto the characters of the story where the audience could still share in that experience. The poets of the Irish Literary Revival such as W.B. Yeats, AE, John Todhunter, and William Larminie continued in this tradition when they immersed themselves in these stories of the mythical past and brought forward these characters for their audience.²¹ The beauty of this carriage for the lyrical form is that it becomes less about the individual and more about the community. T.S. Eliot believed that the progress of an artist was demonstrated by "self-sacrifice, a continued extinction of personality."²² It becomes about what is written not who has written it.

In addition to the use of mythological figures from earlier Irish literature, these poets of the Literary Revival also actively evoked the romantic associations of the Celtic Fringe, the territories that lay beyond the Pale, where the Anglicized identity:

... begins to fray and merge into otherness, an archaic fragmentary past, and a subliminal sense of loss ... consistently associated with liminality: twilight zones, misty horizons, chimerical visions, and vanishing lore.²³

This ephemeral feel to the myths and folklore that the poets reframed for an avid audience only added to their appeal, allowing that dramatic projection not only onto the characters but into another world.

¹⁹ Maria Tymoczko, "A Poetry of Masks: The Poet's Persona in Early Celtic Poetry," in *A Celtic Florilegium: Studies in Memory of Brendan O Hehir*, edited by Kathryn A. Klar, Eve E. Sweetster and Claire Thomas. Massachusetts: Celtic Studies Publications, 1996: 195.

²⁰ Tymoczko, "A Poetry of Masks," 94.

²¹ Gregory A. Schirmer, "Celticism and Romanticism," in *Out of What Began, 177-93*: Cornell University Press, 1998.

²² Eliot, "Tradition," 39.

²³ Laura O'Connor, *Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and De-Anglicization*, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006: xiv.

The romantic idealisation of the Celtic Fringe eventually wore thin even for the poets who had worked so hard to restore this sense to the Irish cultural identity.²⁴

Nevertheless, they and their peers had revived the literature of the past which had seen Ireland renowned as “the land of saints and scholars” with the oldest vernacular literature in Europe.²⁵ As described by Laura O’Connor:

The historical fact that the Irish and Scots Gaelic had once enjoyed literate parity with English was of the first importance to de-Anglicizing modernists, who cite it as evidence that the vernaculars were not intrinsically less literary or cultured than the English but were reduced by barbarous means to abject status.²⁶

Paradoxically, the writers of the literary revival primarily worked with the English language though there was a concomitant Gaelic Revival led by Douglas Hyde that was breathing life back into what had been a dying vernacular language.²⁷ These movements both served to bring the literary heritage of Ireland back into intercontinental awareness and it became renowned again, in the nineteenth century and beyond, with four Irish writers awarded the Nobel Prize from that time to this.²⁸

How much of the earlier poetics was able to be carried through into the emergent Anglo-Irish literature is questionable when it was the mythology the poets took as their inspiration rather than the linguistics. While also being a monoglot, I hope to still carry through something of the principles of the Early Irish poetics as well as the mythological content into my writing. Próinséas Ní Chatháin describes the main features as being an economy of words; images; ambience of natural world; and rhymed quatrains.²⁹ Eleanor Knott provides a systematic analysis of the poetic structures, explaining that:

The Irish syllabic poems, although they were undoubtedly recited with some kind of instrumental accompaniment, are not in song-metres. There is no

²⁴ Schirmer, “Celticism and Romanticism,” 178, 192.

²⁵ Seamus Deane, “The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing,” *boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (1994): 139; O’Connor, *Haunted English*, 7.

²⁶ O’Connor, *Haunted English*, 7.

²⁷ O’Connor, *Haunted English*, 34.

²⁸ William Pratt, “Missing the Masters: Nobel Literary Prizes in English, 1967-1987,” *World Literature Today* 62, no. 2 (1988): 227; Seamus Heaney, “The 1995 Nobel Lecture,” *World Literature Today* 70, no. 2. (Spring 1996): 257.

²⁹ Próinséas Ní Chatháin, “Some Themes in Early Irish Lyric Poetry,” *Irish University Review* 22, no. 1 (Spring, Summer 1992): 4.

regularity of stress; in fact, regularity of stress was probably considered as a thing to be deliberately avoided.³⁰

Knott describes classifications of imperfect rhyme, different positions of rhyme as internal, final, or the first word of the following line, the use of assonance and consonance, and describes the common form of the quatrain, or *ran*, as a stanza with a fixed number of syllables with two closely related couplets.³¹ She acknowledges that the earliest written poetry was rhythmical, alliterative, could be without rhyme, and that the syllabic metres were most likely influenced by Latin hymn-poetry from the fifth and sixth centuries.³²

Irish is a complex and inflected language, and was even more so in its Old (600-900AD) and Middle (900-1200AD) forms.³³ Alliteration came easily when the positioning of one word caused the nearby words to assume more consonants or undergo lenition, and the phenomena of vowel attraction extended the assonantal fluency. Every inflection on a letter affected the fluency of the rest of the sentence. In Eoin MacNeill's 1908 translation of *Duanaire Finn*, he wrote that the Irish metres required each line to be complete and each quatrain to be perfect with the "mannerisms, repetitions, chevilles ... peculiar to Middle-Irish poetry." He said these could not be omitted from the translation and yet "in a translation, all the advantages of the metre and its familiar concomitants are lost; all the disadvantages are accentuated."³⁴ As Clive James found when translating Dante's *Inferno*, moving from a naturally rhyming language into the more prosaic English can result in rhymes and metrical patterns that are rather more staid and heavy than naturally flowing.³⁵ In response, James lengthened the metrical count, as well as making other changes such as incorporating the footnotes into the verse novel format. Similarly, I found a strict pattern in English sounded too formal and contrived rather than obtaining to the natural lyricism implicit in the Irish language. The formulaic poems I wrote had a better flow if I elongated the syllabic

³⁰ Eleanor Knott, *An Introduction to Irish Syllabic Poetry of the Period 1200-1600*, 2nd ed., Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1994, 1928: 1.

³¹ Knott, *Irish Syllabic Poetry*, 8-10.

³² Knott, *Irish Syllabic Poetry*, 1.

³³ Vincent Morley, "The Irish Language," in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, edited by Richard Bourke and I. A. N. McBride: Princeton University Press, 2016: 321-22.

³⁴ Eoin MacNeill, ed. and transl., "Lay XVIII. The Daughter of Diarmaid," in *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn Part I*, London: David Nutt, 1908: xxiii.

³⁵ Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Clive James, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013: xiv.

count from seven to nine, and used half-rhymes, near-rhymes, assonance, alliteration and repetition to create the echoes of sound.

I attempted this firstly when reconstructing the tale of *Aislinge Óengusso* in a verse novel format:

This is the story of a woman
who was a swan who was a woman
who lived then upon Loch Béal Dracon
drifted with fifty other maidens.

Fifty other maidens all alike
lookalikes with chains strongly linked,
lake's surface rippling with silver weights,
while she held to them with those of gold.

Yet while this style would allow for the production of a verse novel, the arrangement of the text placed the emphasis on the visual appearance, the segmentation into lines, the alliteration and part-rhymes, focusing on the poetic function to the detriment of the narrative progression. Robert Scholes states that “by emphasizing resemblances of sound, rhythm, image, poetry thickens language, drawing attention to its formal properties and away from its referential significance.”³⁶ In verse novels, in hybrid novels, in prosimetric texts, the challenge is to find the balance between the aesthetic function of poetry, where the emphasis is upon the word itself, on the play of language, the look the sound the feel, rather than on a message to be conveyed, which is the central function of narrative. There was a danger in over-versification of losing the attraction of a forward-moving narrative for the reader. The story could get lost in the poetry rather than the poetry enhancing the story. The impact, both visual and textual, of the mimetic lyrics would be lost.

Just as segmentation can serve to enhance the poetic in the prose, so there is a process of de-versification. Linda Weste describes this practice in the thirteenth century where

³⁶ Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction*, London: Yale University Press, 1975: 26.

prosifiers stripped away certain poetic elements and rendered the verse into “event-centred narrative prose.”³⁷ I wondered what would happen if I removed the segmentation from the quatrains but retained the poetics of subtle rhyme, syllabic count and alliteration.

This is the story of a woman who was a swan who was a woman who lived then upon Loch Béal Dracon, drifted with fifty other maidens. Fifty other maidens all alike, lookalikes with chains strongly linked, lake’s surface rippling with silver weights, while she held to them with those of gold.

This seemed to me a good balance which did not make the poetics dominant but still gave it more texture and resonance than ordinary prose. This was a principle I could apply to the narrative component of the project to support and contextualise the lyric poems that in turn would augment the narrative.

Yet, the paradoxical challenge arose that incorporating traditional formalism belied the freedom of expression of a feminist style of writing, an *écriture féminine* that decried patriarchal rules. There was also a tradition of Irish women’s poetry to be considered.

Irish Women’s Tradition

Eavan Boland wrote in ‘Outside History’ of a need to locate herself “in a powerful literary tradition in which until then, or so it seemed to me, I had been an element of design rather than an agent of change.”³⁸ In examining the tradition of women’s poetry within the framework of an Irish tradition, I realised that I needed to do the same if I was to write poetry that did not just reinforce iconic female representations that perpetuated romantic and disempowering ideals, but which focused upon the nuances and depths of female experience as it was reflected in historical narrative, imaginative storytelling and, most importantly for me, in poetry.

That would mean firstly understanding the iconic portrayal, not just for how such representations have benefited or deprived women but also for how they both inspire me with their romantic appeal and simultaneously repel me with their unreasonable

³⁷ Linda Weste, “Segmentation: From Prose Novel to Verse Novel,” Nineteenth conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, Wellington, 2014: 5.

³⁸ Eavan Boland, “Outside History,” *The American Poetry Review* 19, no. 2 (1990): 34.

expectations. There is the initial romantic response, the nostalgic subjectivity, and then there is the realization of how these images are used to perpetuate injustices, uphold impossible ideals, wrap women in age-old strictures while working to ensnare them with longing for a romanticized world. There is both beauty and terror in these images and ideals, and my poetry does not provide the answers, because every woman must find these for herself, but does seek to undermine the power of these tropes by asking questions and offering alternative representations. If I can do this much, then I can claim to locate myself within this literary tradition that is not just an Irish one but is also a women's tradition.

In analysing the women's tradition, I undertook a historical survey of women's poetry in Ireland which is almost occultic in the way it is hidden beneath layers of history and culture that obscure any sense of reality. Early Irish poetry was often anonymous, and it was commonly presumed that this indicated male authorship even if the poem itself was in a female persona.³⁹ Additionally, there was oral poetry that had a performance value for the community but went unrecorded, or was written but faded away on the page. Irish women's poetry was largely hidden and unacknowledged, and further excavation is required.

I start with an intuitive belief that women in Ireland have composed poetry, have been poets, from early times continuously through to the modern era, whether in oral or written forms. Their involvement in this creative art form may have ebbed and waned at different periods but it never disappeared altogether despite attempts to subdue and disappear their influence. It is also true that a large part of their contribution to the literary landscape has, as Mary N. Harris says, gone "unnoticed and unpublished."⁴⁰ This is not the same as saying it was not present. A great deal of women's poetry, and indeed of all Irish poetry, was oral in nature and publication a secondary consideration, so the lack of textual evidence does not indicate that women were not composing poetry.

³⁹ Thomas Owen Clancy, "Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland," in *The Fragility of Her Sex? Medieval Irish Women in Their European Context*, edited by C. E. Meek and Katherine Simms, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996: 44.

⁴⁰ Mary N. Harris, "Beleaguered but Determined: Irish Women Writers in Irish," *Feminist Review*, Autumn, 1995, 26-40: 34.

There is clear recognition of women as poets and of their poetic skill within the mythological tales. However, as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill states so succinctly:

We have to make a very important distinction between (a) a woman poet producing a text, (b) a woman character described in a text written by a man and (c) a woman described as a poet in a text written by a man.⁴¹

The women characters in the mythological tales were described by male authors, yet it is worth considering that in these descriptions there is no sense that the character of the female poet is aberrant or even unusual. They are present as an accepted part of the kaleidoscope of the story's cultural tapestry, reflective of the Irish socio-cultural landscape of the privileged and literate classes. Perhaps these representations can be taken on face value.

In the *Táin*, the heroic epic of Ulster, compiled in the twelfth century but with linguistic indications that the story existed much earlier, Fedelm is introduced as a female poet who has been “learning verse and vision in Alba” and who possesses the *imbas forasnai*, the Light of Foreknowledge. Her prophecy, however, is disbelieved and Medb continues on her warpath despite Fedelm's warnings of dire consequences.⁴² In the twelfth century *Accallam na Senórach* (*Tales of the Elders of Ireland*), Cael woos the *sídhe* woman, Créde, with a poem written by his *sídhe* foster-mother, Muirenn. When he is subsequently killed in battle, Créde constructs a lament before herself dying of sorrow.⁴³

Women also use the construction of verse in significant ways in other tales, such as in the tenth century *Fingal Rónáin* (*The Kin-Slaying of Rónán*), where the daughter of Echaid entraps Rónán by encouraging him to complete her half-quatrain, a game they have played every evening, and she also later responds to Rónán's father with a quatrain after he has slaughtered her family. In the eighth century *Tochmarc Becfhola*, Becfhola

⁴¹ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, “What Foremothers?” *The Poetry Ireland Review*, no. 36 (1992): 21.

⁴² Thomas Kinsella, ed. and transl., *The Tain: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cúailgne*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 1970: 60-61.

⁴³ Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, ed. and transl., *Tales of the Elders of Ireland: A New Translation of Accallam na Senórach*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008: 25-38.

uses obscure quatrains to hint at her secret activities.⁴⁴ While the poetry of women in these mythological tales is the result of male authors creating poetic women and so cannot be considered evidentiary of the existence of women poets, it does seem to indicate an acceptability of the nature of poetry as integrated into their lives.

Separate to the formal education of the *fili*, poetry had a part to play in women's everyday lives in all classes of society. As Heather Larson says:

They mourned the dead (and during the mourning they were not supposed to sleep), they practiced magic and folk-religion (which included producing magical sleep), and, of course, they put their children to sleep. Each of these three roles – mourning, enchanting, and soothing – had a specific kind of verse attached to it: the lament, the charm or spell, and the lullaby.⁴⁵

These were traditionally women's areas that not only fulfilled their social function but allowed for their creative expression, both personally and on behalf of the community.

Angela Bourke says that "in many parts of the world, death is as much women's responsibility as birth is."⁴⁶ This encompasses not just the preparation of the body and the care for other mourners, both practically and emotionally, it is also the lamenting of the dead. In Ireland this was called the *caoineadh*, from which comes the term, 'keening'. It was loud, it was public, and it was a practised art form with traditional verbal formulas that honoured the dead, enabled the grieving process, and created a memorable poem that could be "quoted for generations."⁴⁷

That these poetic constructions were part of women's lives is again reinforced by the mythological tales. In *Longes mac nUislenn*, from the eighth or ninth century, Derdriu delivers a moving *caoineadh*, not just for her lost lover, Naoise, but for the three brothers.⁴⁸ In the twelfth century *Codail Beagán, Beagán Beag* (Lullaby of Adventurous

⁴⁴ Joanne Findon, "Looking for 'Mr. Right' in Tochmarc Becfhola," in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, edited by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013: 58.

⁴⁵ Heather J. Larson, "Keening, Crooning, and Casting Spells," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 18/19 (1998): 136.

⁴⁶ Angela Bourke, "More in Anger Than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry," in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, edited by Joan Newlon Radner: University of Illinois Press, 1993: 160.

⁴⁷ Bourke, "More in Anger Than in Sorrow," 160.

⁴⁸ Vernam Hull, "Longes Mac n-Uislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu," New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1949: 67-8.

Love), Gráinne sings a protective lullaby over the sleeping Diarmaid.⁴⁹ This was poetry specifically attached to women's roles and each one had its own cadences and formulation.

However, such compositions were rarely written down, perhaps, as suggested by Patricia Lysaght, because they served a functional and performative purpose rather than a literary one.⁵⁰ The lament for the dead had been noted by visitors to Ireland since the twelfth century though they were not collected and published until the nineteenth.⁵¹ The most famous of them is '*Caoineadh Airt Uf Laoghaire*' ('The Lament for Art O'Leary'), composed by Eibhlin Ní Chonaill when her husband, Art, was shot dead in County Cork in 1773. Parts of her lament were remembered and recited in Gaeltacht areas of Cork and Kerry, and it was written down during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ní Dhomhnaill writes that the two most complete transcripts were taken, with an interval of some seventy years between them, from a West Cork woman by the name of Norry Singleton.⁵²

The lament, the charm, the lullaby, all had their particular forms and cadences. Maire-Louise Coolahan says that the metrical form of the *caoineadh* was based on accentual sounds that reflected the rhythms of speech rather than syllabic schemes, with a rhyme maintained by the final stressed vowel of each line.⁵³ It had resonances of ancient *rosc* and was perhaps as ancient an art form.⁵⁴ Additional to the practiced composition of the *caoineadh*, there was also an intense emotionalism and a physicality (Eiblin Ní Chonaill drinks the blood from her dead husband's corpse) that easily fits into what Cixous termed *écriture féminine*. Gerard Murphy described it as having a "wild metre and unrestrained style ... drawing on a stream of oral tradition proper to their sex and wholly neglected by the learned custodians of the manuscript tradition."⁵⁵ This was poetry that emerged from women's experience and I wanted to convey this same

⁴⁹ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ed., "Codail Beagán, Beagán Beag (Lullaby of Adventurous Love)," translated by David Green and Frank O'Connor, in *FDA IV*: 225-26.

⁵⁰ Patricia Lysaght, "Caoineadh Os Cionn Coirp: The Lament for the Dead in Ireland," *Folklore* 108, no. 1-2 (1997): 79.

⁵¹ Lysaght, "Caoineadh os Cionn Coirp," 65.

⁵² Ní Dhomhnaill, "What Foremothers?" 23.

⁵³ Marie-Louise Coolahan, "Writing before 1700," in *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, edited by Heather Ingman and Cliona Ó Gallchoir, 18-36: Cambridge University Press, 2018: 2.

⁵⁴ Lysaght, "Caoineadh os Cionn Coirp," 71.

⁵⁵ Gerard Murphy, "Notes on Aisling Poetry," *Eigse* 1 (1939-40): 48.

intensity of emotion and physicality through poetic language when the women cried out or sang lullabies or uttered curses in my reconstruction.

Yet Thomas Owen Clancy warns against assuming “that women will necessarily write a certain way, that language is gender specific.”⁵⁶ It may generally be expected that women might mostly write of “love-poems and laments” but women were also accomplished and trained poets within the formalistic Irish tradition and Clancy asserts that “women poets clearly did exist in early medieval Ireland.”⁵⁷ There is a story from *Sanas Cormaic*, written around c. 900, about the daughter of the úa Dulsaine who had been on a circuit of poetry and encountered tragedy in which her companions were killed. She is found gathering bladderwrack on the Isle of Man and, after uttering half-quatrains which are then completed by a strange young man who has joined the party of the poet Senchan, she is restored to her sanity and able to rejoin society and resume her place as a poet.⁵⁸ There are women poets named in a prose introduction to the poem *Aithbe Damsa*, also entitled *The Lament of the Caillech Béirre*, and which was written around 900.⁵⁹ The preface describes the speaker of the poem as a *caillech* named Digde, from the people of Corco Duibne. The preface names three other *caillecha* from the Corco Duibne, two who are known to have been poets: Líadain, and Úallach.⁶⁰

Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha writes that the female authorship of this poem was, until more recently, “ignored or disbelieved.”⁶¹ The female personification of the *Cailleach Béirre* was identified as a goddess of the land, a sovereignty figure.⁶² James Carney pointed out that Irish bardic poets, when writing praise poetry, would sometimes assume the feminine role of “king-lover” and that this poem could be one of the finest examples of that genre. He did, however, also allow that the poem could be taken “at its face value, that is, as having been written by a woman.”⁶³

⁵⁶ Clancy, “Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland,” 50.

⁵⁷ Clancy, “Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland,” 50.

⁵⁸ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, “The *Prull* Narrative in *Sanas Cormaic*,” in *Cín Chille Cúile: Texts, Saints and Places: Essays in Honour of Pádraig Ó Riain*, edited by John Carey, Máire Herbert and Kevin Murray, 163-77, 2004.

⁵⁹ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ed., “Digde (*Fl.* 900),” in *FDA IV*, 111.

⁶⁰ Clancy, “Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland,” 46.

⁶¹ Ní Dhonnchadha, “Digde,” 111.

⁶² Ní Dhonnchadha, “Digde,” 111.

⁶³ James Carney, ed. and transl., *Medieval Irish Lyrics*, Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1967, xxv-xxvi.

Ní Dhonnchadha believes that the specificity of the details provided in the preface material makes for a strong case that *Aithbe Damsa* was composed by Digde, not just because it positions Digde as the author, but because it mentions the other female poets.⁶⁴ While only a single quatrain of Líadan's survives, the love story between Líadan and Cuirithir is told in the tenth century "*Comrac Lídaine Ocus Chuirithir (The Union of Líadan and Cuirithir)*" where the two poets forego the consummation of their love because of their devotion to God.⁶⁵ The other woman named in the preface to the *Aithbe Damsa* is Úallach, daughter of Miumnechán. In her death-notice in the Annals of Innisfallen under the year 934 she is described as *banfhile Herend*, 'Ireland's woman-poet'.⁶⁶ Clancy says that it is not possible to know if any of the anonymous poems from that period were written by her, though none are attributed.⁶⁷

Yet when we move into the period of Irish history defined by the Anglo-Norman ascendancy, beginning in the twelfth century, there is a marked change in the Irish cultural landscape and an apparent dearth of women's writing. The great monastic centres had been plundered by the Anglo-Norman incursions, church reform "helped drive a wedge between Latin and native learning", and poets adapted by moving to a more secular and conservative basis.⁶⁸

Thomas Clancy says that there was a general assumption that all poems, unless proven otherwise, were written by men:

This is based partially on the male-exclusive attitudes of the bardic establishment, and partially on the absence, by and large, of women poets from the period during which our knowledge of poets and poetry becomes more detailed: the classical Irish period, from c. 1200-1600.⁶⁹

Yet, although the poetic contribution of women seems to have diminished during this time, they did find other ways to be actively engaged in literary culture, especially

⁶⁴ Ní Dhonnchadha, "Digde," 111-15.

⁶⁵ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ed., "Comrac Lídaine Ocus Chuirithir (The Union of Líadan and Cuirithir)," translated by Seamus Deane, in *FDA IV*, 115-18.

⁶⁶ Ní Dhonnchadha, "Digde," 111-15.

⁶⁷ Clancy, "Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland," 46.

⁶⁸ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ed., "Courts and Coteries I, 900-1600," in *FDA IV*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2002: 294.

⁶⁹ Clancy, "Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland," 44.

through patronage of the Arts.⁷⁰ Ní Dhonnchadha says that, during this time, women were usually the subjects rather than the authors of texts.⁷¹ In T. F. O’Rahilly’s collection of courtly love poetry from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *Dánta Grádha*, number 54 in the collection is attributed to Isibéul Ní Mhic Cailín and a small number of others are either ascribed to or written as though by women, but Ní Dhonnchadha points out that O’Rahilly still speaks of the poetry as exclusively male.⁷²

The bardic schools themselves became unsustainable in the seventeenth century under English rule, but there were anthologies of non-professional verse maintained in *duanairí*, family poem-books and anthologies, which were often maintained by women of the family.⁷³ These included genealogies, praise poems, and elegies, some of which may have been written by women. A pencil note on manuscript 23 B19 in the Royal Irish Academy, claims that the poem ‘*Coilte glasa na Triucha*’ was composed by Maire Nic Aliondain using the name of her brother, Patrick. Which, for M. N. Harris, and others like myself, raises the question of how many other poems by women were written but ascribed to men.⁷⁴

It does seem that at some point it had become unacceptable to be a female poet in Ireland, and there were those who were vocally opposed to such endeavours. Marie-Louise Coolahan generously allows that the professional *fili*:

... trained for years in bardic schools, becoming adept in the forms and rules of literary composition – history and genealogy as well as poetry – which were precise and demanding in their codification of metres and rhyme schemes. They were, perhaps understandably, inhospitable to lower-class, untrained versifiers who composed *amhráin* (popular songs).⁷⁵

This latter category would have included those women who were part of the somewhat carnivalesque retinue that accompanied a poet. Though these women were socially

⁷⁰ Ní Dhonnchadha, “Courts and Coteries I,” 293.

⁷¹ Ní Dhonnchadha, “Courts and Coteries I,” 293.

⁷² Thomas Francis O’Rahilly, ed. and transl., *Dánta Grádha: An Anthology of Irish Love Poetry (A.D. 1350-1750)*, 2nd ed. Cork: Cork University Press, 1926. 1916; Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, “Two Female Lovers,” *Ériu* 45 (1994): 113.

⁷³ Coolahan, “Writing before 1700,” 20.

⁷⁴ Mary N. Harris, “Beleaguered but Determined: Irish Women Writers in Irish,” *Feminist Review*, Autumn, 1995: 35.

⁷⁵ Coolahan, “Writing before 1700,” 19.

unacceptable, sometimes referred to as “walking women”, they were also afforded a level of protection as the companions of poets.⁷⁶ They may also have been of the poorly regarded classes of “bards ... satirists, jesters, purveyors of doggerel, and other entertainers” which Chapman says included female performance.⁷⁷ While female poets may have been excluded from the formal training of the *fili*, and were regarded with some disdain, it is evident that they still found ways to make their creative contribution. It is inspiring that women, historically and in a modern world, find ways to express their creativity even when it is actively opposed by social institutions.⁷⁸

Perversely, Coolahan demonstrates that the antipathy of the *fili* towards such performers “has left us some tantalizing glimpses of female authorship.”⁷⁹ In the fourteenth century, Giolla na Naomh Ó hUiginn publicly disparaged ‘*abhrán ban agus bhachlach*’, ‘the song of women and churls’ while the sixteenth-century *fili* Feidhlim Mac Dhughghaill claimed to ‘*fuath liom cliar ara mbí bean*’, to ‘hate a poet-band that includes a woman.’⁸⁰ Coolahan tells us that we know of only one Irish woman, Brigid Fitzgerald (ca. 1589-1682), who composed poetry in *óglachas*, the amateur syllabic verse regarded as a lesser form of the elite poetry of the *fili*.⁸¹ It seems to me that if there was one, there could have been more. If I was to position myself within the Irish women’s tradition, I needed to believe there was just such a tradition. The more I looked into this history, the more I realised there were parallels between uncovering the stories of the women in the mythology and uncovering the existence of female poets within Irish literary history. It was about acknowledging the women, seeing them, hearing them, giving them a voice and a presence.

And they were there. Miriam Uí Dhonnabháin describes a network of Munster poets who met regularly to share their poems, and shared their poems by sending a messenger who had memorized their compositions. One such messenger was a woman called Anna

⁷⁶ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, “Travelers and Settled Folk: Women, Honor, and Shame in Medieval Ireland,” in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, edited by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley, New York: Springer, 2013: 34.

⁷⁷ Chapman, *Dark Speech*, 157.

⁷⁸ Joan Newlon Radner, ed., “Preface,” in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*, USA: University of Illinois Press, 1993: viii.

⁷⁹ Coolahan, “Writing before 1700,” 19.

⁸⁰ Coolahan, “Writing before 1700,” 19.

⁸¹ Marie-Louise Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language in Early Modern Ireland*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010: 39.

Priar who dressed in men's clothes so the poets referred to her as 'Seón' (John), or as 'Seón-Eana,' (John-Anna).⁸² Clíona Ó Gallchoir writes of another circle of Irish-language scholars and writers active in Dublin in the first half of the eighteenth century which fostered two female poets, Úna Ní Bhroin and Máire Ní Reachtagáin. Ní Reachtagáin's poem on the death of her brother adapts the oral genre of *caoineadh* (keening), traditionally performed by women, into a reflective, literary form."⁸³ Ó Gallchoir demonstrates that, as Ireland moved out of the medieval period, women were being recognised as poets, with the example of the praise poems from many male poets for Máire Ní Churalaoich on her death in 1761. Ní Churalaoich was known as *Sáppho na Mumhan*, 'the Sappho of Munster', although none of her poems have survived.⁸⁴

Despite their exclusion from the schools of the *fili* in the classical Irish period, these later examples would all seem to indicate an increasingly inclusive positioning for female poets. Yet these women were still the exception rather than the rule. Women have always, in Ireland as elsewhere, needed to push back against the strictures of domesticity and expected social roles, and in Ireland there was an antipathy to female poets that was associated with iconic representations of the feminine that were incompatible with a woman who did not fit the prescribed image.

The sovereignty goddess, who took the shape of an ugly crone who became young and beautiful when united with the rightful king, was the most powerful of the iconic ideals.⁸⁵ While the goddess of the land is an archetypal image in many cultures, it was a particularly potent symbol for the colonized nation of Ireland. It was an image that easily became politicized, particularly by the *aisling* poets of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the *aisling* being a type of dream-vision.⁸⁶ W.B. Yeats also drew on this tradition when he gave the title 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' to his poem where a man gives up everything to search for a shape-shifting woman who has

⁸² Miriam Uí Dhonnabháin, "Patrons, Poets, Scribes and Singers – Some Examples of Participation by Women in the Later Gaelic Literary Tradition," *The Australasian Journal of Irish Studies* 14 (2014): 98-99.

⁸³ Clíona Ó Gallchoir, "Eighteenth-Century Writing," in *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, edited by Heather Ingman and Cliona O Gallchoir: Cambridge University Press, 2018: 39.

⁸⁴ Ó Gallchoir. "Eighteenth-Century Writing." 38.

⁸⁵ Lia Mills, "'I Won't Go Back to It': Irish Women Poets and the Iconic Feminine," *Feminist Review*, no. 50 (1995): 73.

⁸⁶ Yuichi Midzunoe, "'Aisling' in 'The Nation'," *The Harp* 2 (1987): 6.

appeared to him as a vision, echoing the story of *Aislinge Óengusso* and also connecting the poem to Fenian literature.⁸⁷ With the rise of nationalism, the image of the goddess of the land, the Irish mother, the maiden in need of rescue, became the inspiration not just for poets but for rebellions.

This iconic portrayal was also adopted by women poets in Ireland who supported the nationalist political agenda. Ellen Dempsey, Mary Kelly and Jane Elgee published their ballads and lyrics in the *Nation* and other journals in 1845 using the pseudonyms of Mary, Eva and Speranza, but Antoinette Quinn asserts that “their use of a female signature was to prove instrumental in asserting women’s right to participate in the nationalist movement.”⁸⁸ It was also asserting their right to express themselves in poetry and there were limited opportunities for this. While my political agenda is different to that of these pioneers, being more consciously feminist, it is still about asserting the right of women to express themselves, be heard, and fully participate in the history-making movements of the time.

However, Lia Mills says that more specifically feminist struggles were underway elsewhere, such as the battle for suffrage and education and there was a predictable tension between feminism and nationalism. While increasingly vocal, women in Ireland were not united in their political agendas and the focus on nationalism could be at the expense of the struggle for women’s rights. Mills argues that the poetry “written by the turn of the century nationalist women was framed in and by a political agenda and stayed within the canon of imagery allowed by the leaders of the movement.”⁸⁹ This meant that while the political poetry of women was welcomed, they were also restricted to that subject matter and the expectations of the ethos of that genre of poetry. Women were caught up in the male-dominated ideologies of what nation and women were supposed to be and this permeated Irish society into modern times. It is what Eavan

⁸⁷ W.B. Yeats, “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, edited by Peter Allt, and Alspach, Russell K., 149-50. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1957. Reprint, 20th; Laura O’Connor, *Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and De-Anglicization*, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006: 73-4.

⁸⁸ Antoinette Quinn, ed., “Ireland/Herland: Woman and Literary Nationalism, 1845-1916,” in *FDA V*, 897.

⁸⁹ Mills, ““I Won’t Go Back to It,”” 73.

Boland referred to as a “rhetoric of imagery which alienated me: a fusion of the national and the feminine which seemed to simplify both.”⁹⁰

The idealization of women extended beyond the representation of sovereignty – she who empowered the king but was never ruler herself – to the Catholic veneration of Mary as the virgin mother to whom all other women should aspire, if not in their virginity then in their maternal embodiment.⁹¹ The cult of Mary had been on what Ní Dhonnchadha described as “a rising tide” across the Catholic world since about c. 200 and had been a large part of the Irish landscape since Christianity was first introduced.⁹² This idealization of the role of women was even enshrined in the 1937 Constitution, which stated in Article 40.1 “by her life within the home, a woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.”⁹³ All of this was about women inspiring and empowering men. Such an ideology did not make room for individualist expression and the work of reclaiming this right to expression is ongoing, and I hope my work both contributes to it and encourages others to do the same.

The right of a woman to write poetry outside the limitations of a male-determined agenda has been an ongoing battle. Patrick Kavanagh argued in 1967 that “the body with its feelings, its instincts, provides women with a source of wisdom, but they lack the analytic detachment to exploit it in literature. The great writer is the man who has in him some of this feminine capacity for perceiving with the body.”⁹⁴ Others maintained that the woman’s contribution to poetry was to serve as the muse, the one who inspired the male poet in much the same way as the sovereignty figure empowered the rightful king. This attitude culminates in ‘*Banfhile*’/‘Woman-poet’ written by Irish language poet Seán Ó Ríordáin where he insisted that “*Ní file ach filíocht an bhean*”, “a woman’s not a poet but a poem.”⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Boland, “Outside History,” 32.

⁹¹ Ivana Bacik, “From Virgins and Mothers to Popstars and Presidents: Changing Roles of Women in Ireland,” *The Irish Review*, no. 35 (2007): 101.

⁹² Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ed., “Mary, Eve and the Church, C. 600-800,” in *FDA* IV, 47.

⁹³ Margaret O’Callaghan, “Women and Politics in Independent Ireland, 1921-68,” in *FDA* V, 131.

⁹⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Pruse*, Martin Brian & O’Keeffe, 1973: 27.

⁹⁵ Seán Ó Ríordáin, *Selected Poems Rogha Dánta*, New Haven, USA: Yale University Press, 2014: xxv-xxvi.

In 1989, Boland published *Outside History*, writing a very personal account of the difficulty of being a female poet in a male-dominated nationalist cultural landscape.⁹⁶ It stimulated a cross-Atlantic dialogue with a response written in the *P. N. Review* by American poet, Anne Stevenson, who challenged Boland's negative portrayal of the place of women in Ireland and asked why Boland's imagination was not excited by the "long healthy chain of foremothers" that were part of her heritage as an Irish woman poet.⁹⁷ Ní Dhomhnaill's response 'What Foremothers?' passionately encapsulates the history of an Ireland that had effectively obliterated a women's tradition of poetry from the literary canon.⁹⁸ Everything she says in her essay rings of heartfelt truth and is backed up by clear examples of how women poets in Ireland have been ignored, denigrated, and disempowered.

However, I would contend that attempts to obliterate and silence the women poets of Ireland have always failed. Female poets continued operating as an aberrant force to the culture and are now no longer invisible. Boland asserts that "over a relatively short time, certainly no more than a generation or so, women have moved from being the subjects and objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them. It is a momentous transit. It is also a disruptive one."⁹⁹ If, as Ní Dhonnchadha writes, women were the subject more than the object as far back as the twelfth century, it has taken more than a generation to reclaim that space, and change still comes slowly.

When the three volumes of *The Field Day of Irish Writing*, purportedly covering the canon of Irish literature but including only a few women, was published in 1991, the outcry that followed resulted in the sizeable collation of Volumes IV and V on women's writing and contribution to Irish literature.¹⁰⁰ However, a decade later the 2017 *Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* still only included four women among the thirty-one poets.¹⁰¹ Irish women's writing has been disregarded, excluded, not noticed,

⁹⁶ Boland, "Outside History," 32-38.

⁹⁷ Ní Dhomhnaill, "What Foremothers?" 18.

⁹⁸ Ní Dhomhnaill, "What Foremothers?" 18-31.

⁹⁹ Boland, "Outside History," 32.

¹⁰⁰ Bourke, Angela, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain, Gerardine Meaney, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Mary O'Dowd, and Clair. Wills, eds., "Preface," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Vol. IV*, xxxii-xxxvi. Cork: Cork University Press, 2002.

¹⁰¹ Fiona Sampson, "Review: The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets," *The Poetry Ireland Review* 124: 30-33.

regarded as unimportant. It has been a pervasive cultural attitude that effectively hid women's writing from public view, and against which women writers struggled to break free.¹⁰²

This attitude is answered by women like Eithne Strong who stridently breaks free with her verse novel *Flesh*, a powerful indictment upon the burdens of guilt and oppressive duty which Catholicism placed upon Irish women.¹⁰³ Women have made their presence felt and have changed the literary landscape of Ireland, and this is often done by challenging the idealization of women and the expectations placed upon them, and I hope my poems will not only issue this same challenge but do it with something of the power and conviction of Irish poets such as Strong.

Other poets such as Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Eavan Boland have written the experience of women – of women in the home, women on the street, women in the workplace – into the narrative of Irish history.¹⁰⁴ Irish language poets like Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Mhaire an mac tSaoi and Biddy Jenkinson have rejected the language of the colonizer and instead have found their liberation in the native language and shown that it fits equally well in the present as in the past. That people like me with only a passable knowledge of the Irish language can only read them in translation (which means being unable to read Jenkinson, who has rejected translation) puts us in our place as the outsiders.¹⁰⁵ Then there is Medbh McGuckian's poetry that is firmly and quite bluntly centred in the home and the female bodily experience rather than the nation.¹⁰⁶

So I will claim all these women, the contemporary Irish women poets, the dedicated nationalists and revivalists, the folklorists and collectors, the unrecorded women poets (and the recorded) of medieval Ireland, the keeners, the spell-makers and the crooners,

¹⁰² Dennis J Hannon and Nancy Means Wright, "Irish Women Poets: Breaking the Silence," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 16, no. 2 (Dec., 1990): 57-65.

¹⁰³ Eithne Strong, *Flesh – the Greatest Sin*, Dublin: Attic Press, 1993, 2nd, 1980.

¹⁰⁴ Catriona Clutterbuck, "'The Irish History Wars and Irish Women's Poetry: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Eavan Boland,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, edited by J. Dowson, 97-118, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Mary N. Harris, "Beleaguered but Determined: Irish Women Writers in Irish," *Feminist Review*, Autumn, 1995: 26-40.

¹⁰⁶ Michaela Schrage-Früh, "An Interview with Medbh McGuckian," *Contemporary Literature* 46, no. 1 (2005): 1-17.

all of them I will claim as my forebears. And in writing poems located in a mythological past, I hope to bridge the great gap where female poets were written out of history and denied their creative inheritance. Boland wrote about what it was like to be in the shadow of W.B. Yeats and how this made it hard for the poets that followed him.¹⁰⁷ I write of being in the light of these women and of doing my part in creatively changing absence into presence.

Mo Thraidisiún (My Tradition)

Immersed in the study of the poetic traditions, I hope their strengths have permeated the poems I have produced. T.S. Eliot says that it is not repetition of the way things have been done in the past that is important but rather the historical sense developed by the poet:

A sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer more acutely conscious of his [her] place in time, of his [her] own contemporaneity.¹⁰⁸

My poems are new creations for a modern diasporic world written as a creative response to the old and with full appreciation of the richness of the traditions that have gone before.

The marriage of tradition and innovation is a complex one to enact, and the deciding factor in the formulation of the poems was how best to deliver the poem. I have tried to push and pull the poetry and the prose of this project into all sorts of shapes and sent it in many different directions. I have experimented with segmentation and quatrains and patterns of syllabic verse and internal rhyme with alliteration and assonance – but in the end I have had to let go and follow the lead of these women as they have taken shape in my imagination.

And while they shared some things in common, being women who made choices that set them outside of society, they each had their own stories. It is their stories that I tell

¹⁰⁷ Marilyn Reizbaum, “An Interview with Eavan Boland,” *Contemporary Literature* 30, no. 4 (1989): 121.

¹⁰⁸ Eliot, “Tradition,” 37.

and it is their voices that speak in the poems, sometimes directly addressing an audience or another character, sometimes solipsistic, and sometimes it is the narrator (myself) who intrudes when their story becomes mine. Like any woman, like any person, their voices (and mine) are distinctive, recognisable, but also heteroglossic, their language varying according to situation and addressee.

For example, I could not find a voice for Caer in *The Swan Maiden* and eventually realised that silence, and communicating through silence, was her strength (as has been explored in the chapter on ‘Placing the Woman at the Centre’). Therefore, I tried to write what I observed of her and tried to draw closer to her in that way, and in so doing I drew closer to her companions and found their voices. As I followed the other women in the stories, I found their voices as well and they drew me into other stories connected to the main narrative. There are times when their experience is unspeakable and then I can use poetry to speak for them, as in the horrendous drowning of Boann, which seemed to me to hold all the hallmarks of abuse. Angela Bourke reminds us that “women do not usually speak in the first person, and Ní Dhomhnail’s poems, where a woman speaks in her own voice, breaking this silence, are revolutionary.”¹⁰⁹ When the women tell their stories, something shifts. There may be a desire for romance, for these are love stories, but there is also the corporeality that must be spoken; it is a bodily experience to which I give voice.

The desegmented quatrains worked well for the prose narrative in *The Swan Maiden* where Caer, as the central character, maintains a formal silence. The same technique did not work for the other stories which demanded a more vigorous style in keeping with the refusal of the women to be silenced. Gráinne’s voice is strong, as a woman who knows what she wants, passionate and even carnal as she is drawn along by her desires, vulnerable as a woman who knows how tenuous the bonds of life are. There are so many versions of Gráinne’s story, but I found the same woman in each one; it was the external situation that had its variations. In writing Gráinne’s story, it flowed more easily back and forth between the versions when I wrote the prose in a free flowing but

¹⁰⁹ Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Women Poets*, Dublin: Attic Press, 1996: 192.

conventional format and inserted the poems to express heightened emotion or an important moment.

Derdriu's voice ranges between highly impassioned speech and that which draws down power into her words as someone trained in the poetic arts by Leborcham, her mentor and a *bancháinte*. Writing the narrative as segmented prose enhanced the emphasis on the importance of poetry in her life. The segmented prose is left-aligned and the poetry right-aligned to set each apart from the other, but also to reflect the two parts of the storytelling, as though they are in dialogue with each other.

In all three of the stories, there are words of love and desire, of distress, of confusion, of the bodily experience, of lullabies and laments, of satire. I have still, in all these stories, incorporated poetics in the prose, particularly the use of repetition, sometimes creating a sense of strophe and antistrophe, and with alliteration, assonance, internal rhymes and half-rhymes, to create a sense of rhythm and connectivity in the language, while still maintaining the diegetic distance.

I have written these poems by immersing myself in the stories of these women, and as I have felt their experiences I have written the poems and as I have written the poems I have felt their experiences. Poetry is simultaneously the method of my research into the women's journey, and the creative product that gives it expression. It is the way that I enter imaginatively into the *fabula* of the story and it communicates to me, and to others, what I have discovered. But poetry is a broad term for this process. As a tool it can sometimes feel like a pick, sometimes a shovel, sometimes a digging stick, sometimes a jackhammer, sometimes the brush that gently sweeps away the encrusted dirt to reveal the treasured artefact.

*It is the dirt that you dig up,
that you crumble with your bare hands,
searching, sifting
for that hard rock,
whose tell-tale sediment
hides the gem.*

*Writing is prospecting, most of it
is dull, dreary, back-breaking work
but the rewards... all weariness drops away
in the pleasure that reinvigorates a tired body
when the precious gem emerges
because until then
they can't see what you see*

*and still it needs to be washed
and still it needs to be tumbled
and still it needs to be cut
and polished*

*until they cannot but understand
how precious is that which you have uncovered*

how precious.

I hope that with these poems the reader can see what I see, and can look beyond to find other places, other spaces, other possibilities in these traditional stories, and other mythographies, that then speak to them in the contemporary world (as they have for me). M. M. Bakhtin argued that contemporaneity occurred when there was a temporal shift that placed “the author and his readers (on the one hand) and the world and heroes described by him (on the other), making them contemporaries, possible acquaintances, friends, familiarizing their relations.”¹¹⁰ These stories are not just ancient relics that speak to the past but dynamic stories that speak to the present. They will speak to each reader in different ways, and that may well be very different to what I have posited here depending on the individual perspective of the reader.

My poems demonstrate how the stories have spoken to me and I hope this will influence how they speak to others. A changed outlook creates a changed mind creates a changed

¹¹⁰ Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996, Reprint, tenth: 27.

world where the woman's voice is not only heard but it is looked for, asked for, desired for what it can contribute to understanding that the stories we tell, and the way we tell them, are the way we create the world of story that propels the way we walk and talk in the world.

CONCLUSION OF EXEGESIS: THE JOURNEY ENDS

When I was first studying the mythological stories of Ireland, there seemed to me a glaring injustice in the way that even when women were the prime catalysts of action, they were relegated to a secondary position in the narrative. It also seemed that this was reflective not just of the status of women in the medieval period when these stories were written or transcribed, but reflective of the status of women in contemporary society. Because stories are powerful, especially those stories which are deeply embedded in our psyche, such as fairytales that we learn as children, or those which are part of the mythological and literary canon that informs our cultural identity as we mature. I wanted to know what happened to these women, and what would happen to them if the stories were reconstructed so the women were brought to the forefront.

There has been a great deal of study considering the social and psychological impact of fairytales and myths on the status of women since the second wave of feminism beginning in the 1970s and Alison Lurie's ground-breaking article on what she termed "fairy tale liberation."¹ The greater focus has been on fairytales, but mythological literature has also been closely considered by writers and mythographers such as Marina Warner whose field of study has ranged from the ancient Greeks to the fiction of Lewis Carroll to the popularity of the zombie cult.² With the rising awareness of how these stories impact not only the individual psychological development of girls and women, but also the socio-political structures of society, creative writers have responded with what Alicia Ostriker terms "revisionist mythmaking," offering subversive versions in poetry and storytelling.³

Yet these stories in their traditional format still have the power to evoke a nostalgic longing for a time and place of romantic love, of heroes and chivalry and great

¹ Alison Lurie, "Fairy Tale Liberation," *The New York Review of Books* 15, no. 11 (1970): 42-44; Amy DeGraff, "The Fairy Tale and Women's Studies: An Annotated Bibliography," *Merveilles & contes* 1, no. 1 (1987): 76-82.

² Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002.

³ Alicia Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature & Theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985: 72.

adventures. Nostalgia was seen as an emotive longing for a past that was romanticised beyond the reality of the lived experience that had been left behind (usually for good reasons).⁴ Eavan Boland warned that if you did not have a sense of the reality of the past with its conflicts and traumas, “you may fall into the nostalgia for an Ireland which never really existed, and reject the present for an unreachable past.”⁵ In this way, nostalgia could almost provide a way to avoid dealing with the real issues of the present, whatever place was the focus of that feeling.

As Helen Dell notes, “it is that futile attempt to go back to a time that no longer exists which invites the linear historian’s contempt.”⁶ The emotional romanticism of nostalgia was considered incompatible with academic study, though it has come under such consideration in more recent years.⁷ Dell recognizes that, as a musician, nostalgia also feeds her creativity. Rather than rejecting nostalgia as part of our academic research, she suggests that “it is precisely one’s own desire (including nostalgia) – recognising it, working with it and reflecting on it – that drives the rigorous practice that our work requires.”⁸ This is echoed in my own practice and in my practice-led research.

My stronger attraction to Irish mythology rather than to Greek or Roman or other national collections is because of a nostalgic connection that I have discovered through the exploration of my family’s heritage. Joseph Falaky Nagy writes that nostalgia was originally used in the sense of a disease but he finds an equivalent yet more positive Irish term in *éolchaire*. Instead of home-sickness, *éolchaire* is a remembering, “an awareness of a home, a people, and a time that one has not forgotten, despite temptation or distraction.”⁹ I cannot claim to ‘remember’ our Irish past going back three generations but nevertheless I do experience a sense of awareness of an ancestral place of origin and an inherited memory. It is alike to what O’Connor describes as a “Platonic

⁴ Tobias Becker, “The Meanings of Nostalgia: Genealogy and Critique,” *History and Theory* 57 (June 2018): 234-50.

⁵ Eavan Boland and Pilar Villar, “‘The Text of It’: A Conversation with Eavan Boland,” *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 10, no. 2 (2006): 55.

⁶ Helen Dell, “What to Do with Nostalgia in Medieval and Medievalism Studies?” *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* 2, no. 2 (2018): 284.

⁷ Ethan Kleinberg, ed., “Forum: Historicizing Nostalgia,” *History and Theory* 57 (June 2018): 234-85.

⁸ Dell, “What to Do with Nostalgia,” 291.

⁹ Joseph Falaky Nagy, “The ‘Romance’ of Nostalgia in Some Early Medieval Irish Stories,” in *Timely Voices: Romance Writing in English Literature*, edited by Goran Stanivukovic: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017: 192.

concept of anamnesis (remembrance of what one has never consciously known).”¹⁰ I do not even have the memories of stories told because I grew up with no exposure to Irish stories, not even from our Irish priest. There was no overt linkage of our Catholicism to Irishness. There was a distinct absence of connection to our land of origin.

It was only when I was older and my identity was fragmented through trauma, when I was trying to reconstruct my self-identity, that I began to look deeper into the characteristics of my family and into my ancestral heritage. Asking questions about where we came from awoke a nostalgic yearning for identity, for a sense of belonging, of having belonged somewhere, of being connected to a place rather than just having landed in it. Gabriele Schwab writes that “narrative is not only necessary for a sense of self but for a sense of culture.”¹¹ Discovering our narrative took me on a journey that not only changed the way that I see myself, but also the way my family views our Irish heritage. It has become a construction of culture.

I knew that there was a romanticism associated with this nostalgia that would not match the reality of lived experience, which is why I wanted to live the experience. When I travelled to Ireland, it felt like a homecoming. It felt like something fell into place that I had not known was missing until then, as though I had been walking around all my life with a section of lung missing and could suddenly breathe more deeply. Nothing in my journey was easy as I hitched around the country (both North and South) and met its people, worked on farms, got lost in cities, found relatives and places where my family’s stories had played out, and followed the mythological storylines that were carved into the landscape. There was a great deal that was antagonistic to my nostalgic imaginations of a magical and mystical country; there was a great deal that was conducive to those imaginations. While also wounded by the experience of my travels, I nevertheless felt more whole, restored to my self, and this sense stayed with me when I returned to Australia, as though I could relate to this country, this place, in a more complete way. I am more Australian because I am more Irish.

¹⁰ Laura O’Connor, *Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and De-Anglicization*, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006: 5.

¹¹ Gabriele Schwab, “Cultural Texts and Endopsychic Scripts,” *SubStance* 30, no. 1/2 (2001): 170

I also have a greater empathy for the colonized experience, for those peoples who have experienced oppression and dispossession, displacement, diaspora, fractured familial relationships, a loss of connection to country. I acknowledge that in my family's distinct conglomeration of Irish-Scottish-Romany-English DNA, landed in a colonized country, we have been the stranger, the invader, the 'other' to the indigenous people and there is an ongoing need for reconciliation to apologize for our presence and find a way to dwell together. As we must learn to dwell together with the multiplicity of ethnicities that constitute the multi-cultural society of Australia in a creative engagement. To dwell here as an Irish-Australian means bringing all that I am into relationship with this land and its people, understanding "all that I am" is more alike to Derrida's *différance* where meaning is never quite achieved, but always an ongoing and dynamic becoming.¹² A creative becoming.

So, writing as an Irish-Australian, I have made an original contribution to the internationalism of Irish writing with this poetic mythography. Alongside the nostalgia and the romance of the stories, I point to the reality of lived experience. As one of my readers commented, the prose tells the story but the poems tell the reality. While the traditional stories have nostalgic appeal for those with connections to Ireland, myself included, they remain phallogentric stories. By changing the way these specific stories are read and told, I also heighten the awareness of how other traditional stories are understood and encourage readers to question their themes and underlying messages, especially with regard to the implications for women in the world.

When I commenced this thesis, I asked what happens to the discourse of the narrative when it is subverted so that the focus is placed upon the female journey that began with her own unconventional choice of lover. I understood that this required a different way of reading the stories, one that looked for clues to indicate there is indeed a female journey hidden beneath the masculine. I planned to use poetry as a tool of imaginative and creative excavation of this feminine experience.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978: xvi.

I achieved this by using a prosimetric form where the poetry creates a disturbance in the narrative progression that encourages the reader to pause and consider more carefully the layers of meaning contained in a storyline. I have also, in the three variants of prosimetric writing, demonstrated a widened scope for considering the relationship between narrative and poetry from medieval to contemporary literature. Along with writers such as Quinn Eades and Ali Alizadeh, I have shown that literary endeavour does not need to be restricted to established forms and genres, however disturbing this might be for readers. The different way of reading undermines the conventional understandings of the narrative and requires the active development of a new awareness.

I developed a comprehensive model for feminist reconstruction of traditional stories, with particular emphasis on a new approach to the female hero's journey that extends the analysis beyond the journey of the individual character to the social change that is stimulated by aberrant female behaviour. By providing an original model for the reconstruction of traditional tales, and demonstrating how this can be done with my creative work, I hope others will follow my example, as I have been inspired by the examples of others before me.

I know that the reconstruction of traditional stories can result in personal change because I have been changed by the writing of them, beyond what I anticipated. I have become far more aware of how patriarchal patterns of thought have insinuated themselves into my psychology, of my own personal prejudices about gender and social status, of my own self-identification. In having to express my personal beliefs about feminism, I have had to become far more informed about the way others define their ideologies, and have had to argue them out either with others or with the multiple voices in my head. Writing stories and poetry has a personal cost, it draws from the soul, causes personal change that can feel momentous. I know I have read books and poetry that have had this effect upon me, and I can only hope that those reading this mythography will be similarly moved, disturbed, challenged, changed.

This is the goal of my own female hero's journey: that a social change of consciousness brought about by hearing the stories in a new way, seeing the women and hearing their voices, will mean the female hero is acknowledged and welcomed home and may even lead the way forward into a world that is more equitable for all.

SECTION THREE: MEET ME IN MY WORLD

MEET ME IN MY WORLD

Preface: Location In-Between

Instead of gathering around firesides to listen to storytellers and poets tell us of the stories drawn from our cultures, stories that tell us who we have been, who we are, who we want to be, most of us turn to the television of an evening. There we have the stories of the world, so many we cannot possibly form a personal connection to them all. We are warmed mostly by electric or gas devices not the soft, flickering flames. If we read, we do so under a bright, electrical glare, and it is a lonely journey the reader takes as the words on the page lead into other places, other worlds, away from this one, maybe into a past faraway to a world where the veil between the worlds is thin and people, or other creatures, move between them as easily as walking through an automatic glass door that opens when it senses your presence and then closes behind, separating lives but still allowing each to be viewed. Inside. Outside. Where is the in-between?

Where it has always been. Always, not back to the beginnings of time because it has always been there, in no-time. The in-between lies in our imagination, in our dreaming, in the world we create inside ourselves. It's not a mind-alone thing, because we find it also in our bodies, in the prickling of our skin, the deepening of our breath, the tensing of our muscles, or the sudden release, the beating of our hearts, the sound of our laughter, the taste of our tears. It's not body-alone, because we are most aware of it in our thoughts, in our dreams, in our wonderings. It's not just mind and body either, because there is something essential that responds or awakens, despite essentialism being a reject from a post-modern world, but some life force or essence deep inside stirs, wakens like a dragon disturbed in the cave, flaring and brightening when the words penetrate the depths. It is soul.

And it is more than mind and body and soul; it is that between us, around us, moving in and out of us like the air we share and contaminate and purify with our every movement. The in-between is between us as well as inside us.

This is where I found these stories. I did hear something of them around campfires in Irish fields, accompanied by travellers' harps and bodhrans, or wandering country lanes with children as my guides like *puca*. And in the classroom and lecture halls with bright lights and grey walls with photocopied handouts of contemporary translations. And in the books I read

late into the night, pencil in hand to underline those passages that leapt out into my mind so I could find them again when my mind had moved on.

And the stories found a place inside me so that while I walked, I listened to them, listened as the people moved off the page and shared the life-source and became alive in the in-between. I walked with the people, walked with them into my outer world and found them there as well, in the journey people take to find the perfect lover, the games they play to win their chosen, the binds they put people in to work their will, the battle to gain precedence over attachments to mates and social status, the tensions between living in a structured society and longing for the wild and the unfettered, the idealism and the disillusionment and the betrayals, the fading of love and passion, the compromises, the sacrifice of the dream to the reality. The death of the dream.

And knowing the stories, I begin to tell them. These stories are not my own, yet they are my own, they are ours, for those who can still feel the warmth of an Irish hearth in their ancestral memory or the cold of wandering lost on an Irish bog, feeling the pull of the hungry sod. And they are for those who have no such memories but who take the journey, or want to take the journey, to find love and adventure and escape the pressures to conform. As I tell these stories that dwell in my in-between spaces, as I have come to know them in my inner world, I hope to lead you off the page and through the veils and into an Other World that might just find a place in your own in-between.

Chapter Six: The Dream Lover

Caer Ibormeith, the yew berry, you appear in my dreams, still silent, silenced, waiting for your story to be told because you cannot speak it, so no-one speaks it.ⁱ A story without an end; at least I can give you a beginning.

This is the story of a woman who was a swan who was a woman who lived then upon Loch Béal Dracon, a lake so named for the dragon's maw. With three times fifty other maidens, all drifting upon the dragon's lake, lookalike swans linked with silver chains, lake's surface rippling with silver weights. While Caer, swan-daughter of a *sídhe*-king, wore chains that were made of burnished gold, linked to three times fifty companions, the maids bound to her every move.

Chained.
Not free.
Links that bind.
Silver links that shimmer.
Gold that glows.

Chained

to maidenhood
in excessive maidenhood.
A beautiful life
floating upon a lake.

Chained.

Caer was the daughter of a king. Was she daughter of a queen as well? Perhaps she sprang from her father's head, ready for battle and fully grown.ⁱⁱ More likely that she was woman-born, though her mother has no storied place, has no status, a woman unnamed, perhaps she was never even known. Perhaps another truth underlies this missing motherly storyline, a strange nature in the relation that placed on Caer the shape of a swan. Was her mother human

or a bird? No mother known, Caer drifts on the loch, floating on the wind-troubled water with her many feathered companions.

Everywhere I look
I see my reflection
no escaping
no other
only me and me and me
drifting along, coasting so elegantly,
going nowhere we haven't been before,
my reflections and I.

What do I see?
Bright white feathered birds
Powerful wings curled against round bodies
Thin necks snake-curved
Hard red eyes glaring back, then

changed. Tall, thin, white-skinned women
of blinding white hair
taut arms folded against their breasts
muscle thighs buttocks
and hard red eyes glaring back

and I see chains, wrapped
around every neck, every neck
dressed in chains shimmering

if I close my eyes
what do I hear?
Only the sighing of the breeze
among the alder leaves
and the slap of wind-driven waves
against the rocky shore.

A bird might sing, another
answer. Not I, not we,
we are silent.

Who were these maidens? Had they no names? Companions to Caer, a king's daughter.
A privilege to share this changing life, this half-world of human and bird-form? All born of
women? All born of swans? Or free from such ties and from such needs? Did their thoughts
find a way to fly free? How did Caer seem to her companions?

The weight of silver,
silver links around my neck,
not so heavy as gold.

Ornamental, accentuating
my slim elegance, our slim elegance,
mine no more than three times fifty others,
mine the same as three times fifty others,

held by this chain
to the movement, the whim, the will
of the one who wears the golden chain.

What
if I were to break this chain
from around my neck?
It is only soft silver
and my beak is strong.

What
if I were to fly away?
Stop moving in unison
with the other swan-like maidens
echoing the golden-chained?

Where
would I go? Who
would I be? Could I be
anyone without them?
Without her?

When darkness rested on the quiet loch, when they moved as white ghosts on its surface,
Caer found a way to escape her chains, to free herself from the other swans. She closed her
eyes, glided into dreams, moved as a woman in that dream world, sought for herself a love, a
lover to release her from this chained life.

When I close my eyes
against my reflections
I dream myself alone
I dream myself away
to a place of stillness

where my eyes open
to see my reflection
in the eyes of another
who lifts himself to rest
on one arm, reclining on his bed,
no white covering of down or feathers
to hide chest, flank, arms, thighs
that please my sight
and I do not feel like a dream,
I feel like I am flesh
and I could touch this man

I see an other, and
an other world
where I could be more
than a swan upon a lake.

Sees the world of one called the Young Son, born of Bóann, whose name means White Cow, and son of the Good God, the great king, known for his enormous appetites. The god's appetite was for Bóann and it mattered not to the Good God that Bóann was wed to another. The Good God took what he wanted.

Willingly did she, Bóann, the White Cow
go to the arms of the Dagda? Willingly?

When a god of his magnitude,
his bulk and his power,
takes you in the cage of his arms,
white udders pressed against his great belly,
senses filled with the stink of him
– overfed underwashed overdrunk –
is it wiser to grow still and compliant,
suppliant, flowing like a river
around his mountains?

Willingly did she, Bóann, the White Cow
go to the arms of the Dagda? Willingly?

Thus the Good God sent Bóann's husband to go hunting, to go travelling, and while he was distant, far away, came together with Bóann the Cow. The Good God made time stand still, timeless, and their son was conceived in no time, born even before the world resumed, so is called the Young Son, God of Youth. Bóann returned then to her husband when her husband returned to their home. Her husband noticed no change on her, and she neither showed nor told of such.

How would I tell?
How could I tell?
In the time you have been gone
which has been no time at all
I have lived another life.

I have slept with a god,
my body merged to his,
and a child grew within my belly,
skin stretched taut across my frame
while my breasts swelled with milk
and then was born this child, boy-child,
who fed upon me,
who slept in my arms,
who grew strong
until I gave him to another
and returned to you,
my body healed as though
I had not lived any other life
but that of your wife waiting
at home for your return.
How could I tell?
You would think it but a dream,
yet a dream that would earn your jealousy
thinking I dream of another life
apart from you.

When the Young Son left his fosterage, learned his father was the Good God, he demanded a full heritage, property to be his own domain. The Good God tricked Bóann's husband, stole his lands and gave them to the boy, lands which would be called Brú na Bóinne, banking a river named for Bóann.

This Bóann, or another so named, forbidden from the Well of Knowledge, a place for druids, a place for men, a place forbidden to all women. Bóann went there, walked around its edge that was shaded by nine hazel trees, looked into its dark deep secret depths. The waters rose, swept her to the sea.ⁱⁱⁱ

floods of druidic anger
tear an arm from its socket

rip a leg from her hip
pummel an eye from its orbit

battered, borne, bleeding
rivers of anger bear her to the sea
cast out upon the waves
lifeless

floods recede and a river remains
her limbs her blood her sight
flow around the mounds
and heal the wound

The Young Son makes his home in this place. While he sleeps, Caer appears in his dreams, as a white-skinned woman, golden-haired, no blemish on her radiant form. The first time that Caer visits his sleep, the Young Son moves, reaches for her hand, to draw her to his bed and his embrace. Caer fades, disappears into the night.

Caer stays beyond his reach,
while her gaze rests on his body

lithe as a willow wand.
Skin white, smooth as alabaster
were she to touch him,

hair golden as the furze,
eyes shadowed as hazel leaves,
he watching her.

Hands soft as they reach out,
as she stays beyond their reach,
touches him with her gaze.

Caer returns on the following night, and holding a t mpan in her hand.^{iv} He does not reach for her but lies back, watches as she plays her gentle tunes. The music is dream-like, beautiful, quietening the restless Young Son. She plays and he listens, lies back, still, until it sends him to dreamless sleep.^v

fingernails pluck
the strings of brass, tremor
soft as a thousand tiny cymbals

fingers softly strum the leather,
thrum, like a bodhr n, thrum
hum like earth's heartbeat

language of lovers
of knuckle beat softly
on goatskin stretched taut

and many tiny cymbals
shimmying the air
with each touch

played soft, slow and steady,
walking on a soft-trodden path through woods
with the tap of the staff to guide

played hard, fast, horses on the gallop,
rhythm aligned to the heartbeats
of lovers on the rise

Quiet, the Young Son reclined on his bed, watched Caer, listened to the t mpan's sounds, and nothing else held meaning for him. Each night he waited for the dream's return. He did not eat, nor drink ale, nor speak. Perhaps words would destroy the vision. For a year she visited him this way and the Young Son grew weaker the while.

It was Grá-tinn, love-sickness, on him, no cure but to find the maiden, find where she had gone from his dream-life.^{vi} Surely, Caer knew that he would come searching.

love born in a dream
a tight-curved bud
slowly opening
to the moonlit sky

ripens before greedy eyes
golden succulence
anticipated sweetness
on the tongue

a harsh wind
reaching too early
torn from the limb
teeth graze the flesh

soured
on the tongue
roughly tossed aside
to the sunlit ground

The Young Son was able to speak now, told others of the woman he dreamed. His parents started the search for his dream to save their son from his grá-tinn. He was devoid of will and purpose, limp like a hack unfed and abused. The Young Son faded on his sick-bed, wasted away while his parents searched.

Curve of the sinewy neck
great round swell of the breast
feathered in bridal whiteness
such as disguised
the hook of a cartilaginous beak
and the gleam of ruby-red eyes

that belied the maidenly fairytale
and a lover's dream

The Good God and Bóann learned this truth: a daughter of a king in the North, the maiden was a swan for one year, then a woman for the next that came. Swan-maiden dream-woman shape-shifter, she would be found on Loch Bél Dracon, that had been called Loch Crotta Cliach, and then had been called Loch Bél Séad.^{vii}

It was called Loch Crotta Cliach.
Cliach was the harper who had played
to woo Conchenn, daughter of the *sídhe*,
he played on that land for a full year.

Conchenn would not come out of the *síd*.
Still the harper played his tunes for her.
He played until the ground burst open
and so was made Loch Crotta Cliach.^{viii}

It was later called Loch Bél Séad.
Caer Ibormeith and three times fifty maids
each Samhain transformed into white birds
with silver chained in pairs, one to one.

Each chain ended in a ball of gold,
a precious thing. Those who saw would say
'Many is the séad, precious thing,
at the mouth of Loch Crotta this day.'

It was called later Loch Bél Dracon.
Fursa, foster-mother to a recluse,
there ensnared a quick fiery dragon
which took on the shape of a salmon.

Fursa threw the dragon in the lake,
thus called the lake of the dragon's mouth.
It will arise at the end of days
to wreak its vengeance on the people.^{ix}

It was to this lake they brought the son yet warned he could not make contact; they had no authority to act, only determine Caer was the one. The Young Son looked on the chained maidens, three times fifty, moved the same, but one, who stood above them and wore her gold. He knew the woman of his quiet dreams.

The country of water
dips and rises
like the blessed plains
of Tír na nÓg
the Land of the Ever Young
sudden valleys, soft rising hills,
recede again beneath the still surface,
a radiant mirror
struck with broken shards of sunlight

and some there are
can walk upon it.

They looked. They left. Had she turned to look would she have known this dream love of hers? Golden locks become straw, pale skin, face sunken, lithe body weak, wasted. He wore the finery of a prince, tunic embroidered with crimson thread, and fastened with a fine golden brooch. Cáer had seen him unadorned, undressed.

She would not have known his voice, no words, no words passed between them then, no words, no words passed between them now, no words. It was not time to break the silence. Now was time for words between families. Now was time for wars between families. Now was time for wresting the maiden from her father's command and control.

She is not mine to give, he said,
though who could believe that.

He said she had her own power,
but who could believe that.

He said she was beyond his control,
but who could believe that.

The Good God called out the lie,
said he knew what Caer's father

had laid upon the girl.
Had he laid upon the girl,

sent her half-wild with his demands,
sent her to the wild?

Or had Cáer flown away
of her own accord

beyond his reach
and his touch?

Her father refused and war was made – none refused the will of the Good God – he claimed this woman for his young son. Had Caer claimed the Young Son for herself? She who had visited the son's dreams, refused his touch, wrapped him in music, causing him to fall into *grá-tinn*, then disappeared from his quiet nights.

Now the *sídhe*-mounds were riven apart in the war to win this love for him. Women are known to cause wars for love, and men are known to fight wars to win.

Sail on smooth waters
without a care

while the world around
is hung with smoke-haze

the ground heaves
under the onslaught of fire and iron

coming faintly on the breeze
the war-cries of men

the weeping of women
the wailing of children

Sail on smooth waters
without a care

Her father lost, was made to submit. Her father said the power to change, from woman to white swan to woman was Caer's power, not his. She was strong. Still he would give to the maidens the brew he made for them each Samhain. Was it this brew that kept them chained? They would not let him give it to them.

Where she would be at the next Samhain, her father told this to the Young Son. She would be a swan, among others, on the waters of Loch Bél Dracon. The Young Son's appetite returned then, for eating well, drinking good ale. He readied to find his dream maiden, bring her to his home at Brú na Bóinne.

The Young Son called his love from the bank, called to her by name, Cáer Iborneith. Three times fifty white birds turned to him, reflections of his dream, and one true.

Who calls my name?
No-one calls my name
in this half-life. No-one dares.

The Young Son calls to me,
calls me to come to his home
and dwell there as his wife.

Only if I can return to the water,
only if I can return
to the waters.

Meet me in my world,
join me in the waters
if you would be with me

swim with me then
if you can change
so we can be the same

perhaps we will fly
together

He had thought to claim her; she claimed him. He dropped his cloak, removed his tunic, removed his boots, stood before them white, unblemished as any cob could be. He breathed in the cold, chill, misty air, raised his arms to become great white wings, arched his lengthening neck, bowed to her, lifted his beaked head with rubied eyes.

As he swam to her, Cáer's feathers bloomed, wings rustling like opening flowers. Their beaks touched and necks twined together, perfect symmetry of swan met swan. Beaks, necks, bodies twining together, cob to hen, hen to cob, become one. Two together, rise into the air. Three times they circle Loch Bél Dracon.

Spread my wings
to fly beside another
no need for these chains
holding me to the company of maidens
Let them fall into the water

Gold loops for the fish to play amongst
brightness in the turgid mud
glimmers in the shadowed waters
We fly together
We sleep enfolded by our wings
He with me, I with him,
no more a dream.

When they woke, they flew to his abode. The maidens watched, freed from each other,
at last they were free to go their way, or to stay upon the dragon's lake.

Do we
fly away together
to find our own loch?

Do we
stay here together
waiting for her return?

Do we
step upon the shore
shedding feathers and become women?

Do we
want to be birds
or to be women or both?

Do we
hold together as a flock
or depart seeking our own mate?

Do we
forge new links of silver
to hold us together again?

Do we
Do I
Do you become?

The Young Son and Caer fly to his home, singing, for three days and for three nights. People slept to their dream-making song, woke to the joy of a dream come true.

Beyond the dream, what happens to Caer? One story ends, no other begins. Cáer disappears into Brú na Bóinne. What happens when woken from the dream?

Am I
after all
only a dream

if there is nothing
more to be told

men must follow their dreams
or waste away to nothing

no dream no life

seek to hold me
only if you enter my world
and can fly

It is told she stayed with the Young Son. It is told she washed his cloak one time, washed it in Loch Riach, the Grey Lake, washed it in colours unknown to man.

This is the mantle of my lover
who is the Young Son of the Good God
who is the Young Son of the White Cow
who is the Lord of Brú na Bóinne

I return to the water with his mantle
I hold it fast in my hands
as I wash the soil from its fibres
as I wash the smell of him from its weave
as I wash the old brightness away

back and forth, I wash,
back and forth through the water
gathering in the colours of the lake
colours unknown to the world^x

so none who look upon it
can say what colour this cloak is
can say what colour this cloak has been
can say what colour this cloak might become

My lover can hide within this cloak,
can wrap it around him as I have wrapped him
in my arms and hidden him from the world
and I can hide wrapped in his hold
and the waters of this lake

Caer has known the freedom of the Loch. Caer has known the freedom of the skies. Caer has known the freedom of the dream life, and now she knows the freedom of a wife.

She listens to the river rushing past. She listens to the wind in the alder leaves. She listens to the silence that would sing, and waits to hear what she knows will come.

Mute, words unspoken
form chains
between them

and when they fly
wings beating on the air
like drums of war
they can be heard coming
for miles

coming to take her home
to Loch na Séad, like a jewel
in the land of the North^{xi}

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Caer Ibormeith is translated as “silly berry” in Tom Peete Cross and A. C. L. Brown, “Fingen’s Night-Watch,” *The Romantic Review* 9 (Jan. 1918): 41.

The name can also be translated as ‘yew berry’ or ‘bitter berry’. See cáer ‘berry’ dil.ie/7644, ibar ‘yew’ dil.ie/27126, meth ‘blight’ dil.ie/32096 in Gregory Toner, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Sharon Arbuthnot, Marie-Luise Theuerkauf, and Dagmar Wodtke, eds., *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, 2019, www.dil.ie.

ⁱⁱ Athene was a Greek goddess born out of her father’s head and fully armed. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Combined Edition*, London: Penguin Books, 1992, 1955: 46.

ⁱⁱⁱ This episode of the well refers to Bóand, wife of Nechtan, who may be a different person to Bóand, described as the wife of Elcmar in the *Aislinge*. Máire Herbert, ed. and transl., “From: The Dindsenchas of Bóand,” in *FDA IV*: 254-55.

However, she is referred to as the same person by various scholars. For example: Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 2nd ed., London: Chancellor Press, 1996, 1968: 32.

^{iv} According to Joyce, the títman was a small drum with a short neck and a few strings, probably brass, which was played with a bow, plectrum or fingernail. Patrick Weston Joyce, *A Smaller Social History of Ancient Ireland: Treating of the Government, Military System, and Law; Religion, Learning, and Art; Trades, Industries, and Commerce; Manners, Customs, and Domestic Life, of the Ancient Irish People*, London: Longmans, Green, & Company, 1908: 255-256.

It was possibly constructed of a willow frame with metal strings. It is suggested in *Cormac’s Glossary* that the word derives from *tympanum* which is a type of drum or cymbal. John O’Donovan and Whitley Stokes, *Cormac’s Glossary*, Vol. 8, Calcutta: OT Cutter, 1868: 163.

^v Francis Shaw translates *con-tuil friss* as “it (the music) put him to sleep”. Francis Shaw, *The Dream of Óengus: Aislinge Óenguso*, Browne and Nolan, 1934: 778.

Kevin Murray translates *Con-tuil friss* as “she sleeps with him” and then *tháinig leagha Éireann le chéile agus ní raibh a fhios acu cad a bhí air* as “for a full year she was visiting him in that manner”. Kevin Murray, transl., “Aislinge Óenguso: The Dream of Óengus,” Cork: Corpus of Electronic Texts, 1976, <https://iso.ucc.ie/Aislinge-oenguso/Aislinge-oenguso-background.html>.

Müller translates it as “she played a song to him that he fell asleep” although he also goes on to further translate that “she went on to visit him in his bed so that he fell in love.” Eduard Muller, “Two Irish Tales, from Egerton 1782,” *Revue Celtique* III (1876-1878): 247.

However, it has been translated in Gantz as “she played for him until he fell asleep” and then “the girl continued to visit.” Jeffrey Gantz, ed. and transl., “The Dream of Oengus,” in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, London: Penguin, 1981: 108.

While recognising that there are often discrepancies in medieval texts, the translations provided by Shaw and Gantz seem most consistent with the narrative sequence where she disappears when he reaches for her, reappears with an instrument, plays for him so he lies back and falls asleep, and continues to visit him in this manner. It is also consistent with Brenda Gray’s persuasive argument that the tale is a depiction of a spiritual, platonic love. Brenda Gray, “Reading Aislinge Óenguso as a Christian-Platonist Parable,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 24/25 (2004): 16-39.

^{vi} Óengus uses the past tense to refer to the woman’s visits when speaking to the physician, indicating that the visits have ceased.

^{vii} This poem is written as a syllabic poem imitative of the dindsenchus. Laura O’Connor explains that “*Dinnsheanchus* (place lore), a prominent feature of Irish folklore, translates the local landscape into a mythical terrain.” Laura O’Connor, *Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and De-Anglicization*, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006: 37.

Ní Dhomhnaill explains the etymology of the word: “‘*Dinn*’ thus early involved itself with the numinosity of the place and the values of blood and soil which are fundamental tenets of cultural nationalism, indicating to us how or why a place comes to be ‘notable’. The second element of the word, ‘*seanchas*’, is usually – and inadequately – translated as ‘lore’.” Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, “Dinnsheanchas: The Naming of High or Holy Places,” in *Selected Essays*, Dublin: New Island, 2005: 25.

^{viii} Whitley Stokes, “The Prose Tales in the Rennes Dindsenchas,” *Revue Celtique* 15 (1894): 441.

^{ix} For a detailed explanation for how the loch acquired its names, see Eugene O’Curry, *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*, James Duffy, 1861: 426-27.

^x ““Caoer Abarbaeth (Silly Berry) from the elf-mound of Feadal Ambaid washed the mantle of Mac in Og with a multitude of colors unknown (to the world), so that it is variously coloured and so that it showed a variety of colour upon it every hour, although the men of Erin should be looking at it at one time.”” Cross and Brown, “Fingen’s Night-Watch,” 41

^{xi} Loch na Séad is located near the centre of government in Emhain Macha in the north of Ireland. Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in Pre-Christian Ireland*, Cork: Boydell Press, 1999: 44.

Chapter Seven: The Wilful Princess

This is the story of a princess who was a bride who fell in love with one not her husband. Or, this is the story of a princess who preferred a younger man to the old one who had been chosen for her. Or, this is the story of a princess who did not love any of them but cared only for herself. Or, this is the story of a woman whose story has been told wrongly because she dared cross a hero. It is a story told in many ways around stone dolmens and fireplaces and on roadsides and in books and in manuscripts and on scraps of parchment. Who knows the truth of any story told by so many different voices? The story I tell is of a woman hunted, pursued, haunted, so she could never rest and when she did... but on with the telling.ⁱ

What must it be like to be raised as a princess, accorded all luxuries, all indulgences, revered for your beauty from childhood – and then be married off to an old man like Finn, leader of the *fiána*?ⁱⁱ Of course, Gráinne knew her role in life, as a king's daughter, the greatest thing she could proffer for the well-being of the kingdom was to form, through marriage, a peace-making alliance. Her father, the King of Ireland, thought it a good match and one that would bring peace between their peoples. Most likely her mother, Eithne, also thought it a good match.ⁱⁱⁱ Finn might be an outlaw, a fringe-dweller, something of a ruffian who had never fully accepted the social tenets, but is not that the sort of romantic hero that appeals to a young heart?

Draw him close, closer
Bring him in from the shadows
Teach him to dwell in a home
not a forest,
fill his head with thoughts
of hearth fires and children's stories
and hens in the rafters
and a courtyard with stables
for the horses and the dogs.
Bring him in from the wild.
This is what a good wife can do.

Still, no matter what her mother might say of the match, no matter what her father might say of the match, or her sisters or companions, Gráinne did not like this match. She set an impossible bride-price, thinking to make it herself unattainable.

Two of every animal in Ireland.
The red deer, I know, he will hunt them easily enough,
and the wild boar, brought down by the hounds
who are his family, with whelps aplenty.^{iv}
The fox is cunning
but Finn is more so,
the badger is strong
but not so strong as this man.
He'll bring a bull and a cow,
drive the sheep and goats before him,
lead the donkeys,
coax the cats,
snare the mice,
run down the hares,
grasp the marten though it bites him hard.
He will trade for horses,
raid for cattle,
swap for donkeys,
dig up the worms,
net the squirrels and otters,
bring down the pheasants, ducks and swans
with a stone's cast
to stun but keep alive.

Yet surely the seals will evade him,
escape beyond the ninth wave,^v
and I will escape with them.

In asking such a bride-price, Gráinne thought to delay Finn, distract him, deter him, but Finn gave the task to one of his men, who did not fail, and so Finn paid the bride-price and

Gráinne was sworn to him. She knew her duty and, as many women before her, set her mind to make of this a good marriage. She would bring him in from the wild and teach him to dwell in a home. But he had been a wild man for all of his life and there was no changing him now.

It was not so much that he was old but he was grubby and unkempt. Not that he was wild but he was ill-mannered. Not that he was uncouth but he was rude. Gráinne grew to hate him. Not at first. She tried to love this man who was a legend, a hero revered, king in his own right of the *fiána*, tried to see the glory in his manner, to bask in the stories told of his exploits, wrap herself in the hero's cloak. But the more she tried, the more her hate grew and, each time he touched her, she gathered inside herself to keep something of her own.

Skins touch
If I hold still
the abrasion is less
as the scales of a snake
sliding over silk
leaving frayed threads
and scars on the shimmer

Slides deep inside
searching out the undiscovered caverns
but he can't go deep enough
to where I hold the mysteries
and the cavern lights

Move apart
begin to breathe again
a rhythm that belongs to me
not him, but I can't remove
the taste of him
the smell of him

It clings to me like fox-scent
until I hate the smell of myself
as much as I hate him

Is any peace worth this? Her beauty dims, her golden light dims. Others notice. Her father notices. Finn hears them talking. This is not his way with women. They are honoured to lie by his side, lie beneath him. But not Gráinne. He has felt her silk turn to coarse linen, her liquid softness become a dried waterway, and she lies unmoving beneath him as though he fucks a corpse. It is time for us to part, he says. Only do not speak ill of me, he says, and take only what is yours.

She took the light in the window
and the warmth of the hearth,
left him to dwell again
in the shadows of the deep forest.
She took the children's stories
and the hens in the rafters,
but left the horses and the hounds
who had never liked her well.

And she took Diarmaid, third-best among the *fiána*.^{vi} She took what was Finn's, not hers, and that Finn would never forgive. Gráinne had no mind for an old man's vengeance only for her new freedom and the love she and Diarmaid would share. Diarmaid was irresistible to a princess, a princess desperate to escape an old man's touch. Finn had grown too much like the forest, wearing its dirt and leaves and mulch in his skin and hair until it was part of him no matter how he washed. Diarmaid washed and was white, bright and gleaming. To have smooth hands on her silk, not hands rough like the bark of a pine tree.

Walking away, walking away
with each step, with each breath,
the filth peels away from my skin,
the poison leaches away from my body,
the weights are removed.

Walking towards youth,
a golden-haired hero waits for me^{vii}
at the forest's edge
and we begin a new life.
Sleeping beneath the tall trees,
wrapped in each other's arms
like a blanket keeping us
from all bad weather, all wrath,
all creatures that might wish us ill.

Though Gráinne was a princess born and unready for life lived in the forest, still she was with a man she could love, a man who could love her. Together, they left all that they had been behind and held only to each other.

There is a man on whom I would gladly gaze,^{viii}
his hair is gold and his cheek is soft,
his eyes alight with the blue of days,
his limbs are lean, and his arms are strong.

I would give the bright and shining world to him,
though still it would not equal his worth,^{ix}
and I have naught to give but my own self.
We thus become each other's world.

So I will watch him as he sleeps,
guard his peace with a careful eye,
keep my pace with him by day,
And match my dreams to this lullaby.

And Gráinne did sing her lullabies, watching over Diarmaid while he slept. She sang of famous lovers, of their elopement to the woods, of their great loves, of their trust and their beauty. She sang also of the watchfulness of the deer and the bird and the hound, that never

rested when their loved ones might be in danger.^x Did Diarmaid know she sang, or did he only dream of the lovers, or perhaps of the hunting of the deer?

Now hear another story, with a wedding feast and dogs fighting and the force of irresistible love. Diarmaid had been endowed with a *ball seirc* by a fairy woman.^{xi} Every woman who saw it fell in love with Diarmaid so he soon found it more curse than blessing and kept it covered.^{xii} But on the night of the wedding feast for Gráinne and Finn, the dogs set to fighting for the scraps from the tables and Diarmaid leans down to separate them. His covering falls away and Gráinne sees the *ball seirc* and falls under the spell of the fairy; she wants only Diarmaid from that time on.^{xiii} Diarmaid resists her. Diarmaid says he will not go with her unless she comes to him neither clothed nor unclothed, neither on foot nor on horseback, neither by night nor by day.^{xiv}

Gráinne finds her own fairy woman to cast a different spell, and she comes to Diarmaid as a woman in-between, as a woman in-love, as a woman ready to cast off the world and run away with him.

I come at dusk
between night and day,
robed in *canach an-tsleibh*,
garments woven of mountain down,
of moss and lichen and cotton-grass,^{xv}
woven by the hands of the *bean sídhe*, the fairy woman,
I come riding astride a donkey like the Virgin Mother,^{xvi}
or it may be a stinking he-goat, some hairy creature,^{xvii}
and my feet do not touch the ground.

Neither clothed nor unclothed.
Neither by day nor by night.
Neither on foot nor on horseback.
Neither in company nor without.
How could he refuse me now?

Diarmaid does not refuse her. They go. They go to Uamh Mhór, the Great Cave and seek refuge there from Finn's pursuit. Caves provide sanctuary, shelter and secrecy, but they are cold, greasy-walled, dark and secluded. They are places to hide in, not places to live, not when you have been a princess used to comfort as well as shelter. Yet some there are still inhabit the caves and they were visited by just such a being, a Ciuthach Mhór, a wild man.^{xviii}

We come as strangers, thinking this place empty
but it is home to a giant of a man,
a cave-dwelling man who fills this space
with an immense presence. He welcomes

me. Few women come this way. Fewer still
who are like me, of noble breeding.
As strange to me, I have never seen such a man,
the height and breadth and weight of him,

the sound of his laughter and his thickened words.
He wears a pelt that is yet his own,
hair on legs and arms and front and back,
like being wrapped in a coarse-hair cloak.^{xix}

Diarmaid does not wrap me around
as this cave-man would, and more,
the Ciuthach is a willing enough lover
who would treasure my warmth

above any love for another man.
Diarmaid is my chosen, yet I am not his.
And the Ciuthach is a no more than a cave-man.
I would not willingly live in such darkness.

I remind myself,
 Diarmaid
 is my chosen.

When it was sleeting outside, the Ciuthach drew his boat into the cave and he played a board-game, *tailesg*, with Diarmaid. Gráinne watched as they played. Perhaps she watched with a hand on her throat for premonition of what was to come. Perhaps she was bored with the games of men and watched through half-closed eyes. Perhaps she turned away. But when the Ciuthach defeated Diarmaid, and when he claimed Gráinne as his prize, and when Diarmaid rose then and slit his throat, her eyes were open wide and a lament spilled from her lips.

Cave-man, Ciuthach, pelt-haired giant,
when I brought a young and shining *fénnid*^{xx}
into your dark and shadowed halls
how could I know he would do this?

How could I know he would use his blade
to spill your bright beautiful blood across
these grey-slicked floors? Ciuthach,
how could I know?

How could I know, cave-man,
that I would hold you even at the last
as your life surged away like an outgoing wave,
washing over me so I will never be clean again?

Ciuthach, you thought I came like the *Tuatha Dé*,^{xxi}
sought my favour but I did not know
Diarmaid saw this, he was blinded
by anger, thinking I belonged to him,

though he has not claimed me, not held me,
not watched or admired me, but still would own me.
Ciuthach, cave-man, *tá bron orm*, sorrow is on me,
I wear it as I wear your blood soaked into my garments.

You were good, a giant of a man, our welcoming host,
destroyed now by Diarmaid who had no right,
and need I fear, with the blood-lust on him,
Diarmaid must mark me as his own.

Do I want him still, bloodied, his blade in hand?
When he has killed, for me? Murdered, for me?
Does he want me, covered in the Ciuthach's blood?
Ciuthach, I would rather want you.

Perhaps I could seize the murdering blade
and bury it in his own thigh, and
let him roam, suffering,
until I pull it free.^{xxii}

But the Ciuthach is dead, gone. Gráinne continues on their path with Diarmaid, evading Finn who continues his pursuit.

Another story is told of these lovers, and in this story, Finn pined with the loss of his most recent wife (it seems he had trouble keeping wives, alive or dead he had trouble keeping them) and he was lonely.^{xxiii} Two of his men told Finn they knew of a suitable bride, the daughter of the king of Ireland. Gráinne. So, Finn sent the two men to ask for her hand, and in this story the king said that it was up to Gráinne and, as she had refused all other suitors, why would she take this one? In this story, she is someone who will not be told what to do. She does not bow to her father's will. She waits for the one that she desires.

It was not as though Finn was high-born. He was a *fénid*, the son of a *fénid*, and though he was named their chief it was because he had outlived them all, because he was elder. Boys joined the *fiana* when they were no longer counted as children but not yet counted as men. They lived in the forests and lived the life of brigands sometimes in service to a king but only of their own will. They were heroes of sorts, but they were wild men, outside society.^{xxiv} Yet here, Gráinne, a princess, seems to accept Finn's proposal delivered by his two messengers. She seems to accept.^{xxv}

If
he is a good enough son-in-law
for you, my father, my king, if
he is good enough
for you then he is
a good enough
husband
for me.
If.

He brings a hero's reputation
when others bring their bloodline,
He brings a band of brigands
when others bring a *túath*, a realm,
He brings an empty stomach
while others bring cattle.

If
he is a good enough son-in-law
for you, my father, my king, if
he is good enough
for you then he is
a good enough
husband
for me.
If.

Gráinne is as confusing as she is confused as she is confusing. Having seemingly accepted Finn's proposal, she yet does not understand that she has accepted. When they gather for a feast, she looks at the company and asks Finn's druid what brings the *fiana* there. He tells her that it is a betrothal feast for her and Finn. She looks at Finn then and sees him for the first time. She sees a battered old man.

A great wonder
that Finn would consider himself
more suitable as a match
for me
than his son, Oisín,
who is closer to me in age.^{xxvi}

Druid, you would
counsel me against
such comment
but I would ask instead

who is that beside Oisín,
and who beside that man,
and who beside that man,
and who beside him?

And Druid,
who is that one marked for love?

Who is
that bright-faced young man
with curling, jet-black hair,
two crimson cheeks,
white-toothed?^{xvii}

What woman would not gaze
What woman would not desire
What woman would not swoon

to have his eyes turn upon her,
win him to her side
at any costs?

He was called Diarmaid ó Duibhne. He came from a royal line, an ancient family, and he was called the best beloved of all the young women of Ireland. Gráinne knows of him, knows there is only one man so pleasing to the eye – Gráinne recalls that she has seen him before. When she was a girl, when the *fíana* played at hurley on her father's grounds, Gráinne saw him, saw the *ball seirc*, loved him. Loves him still.

His hair, black as a crow's wing.
His skin, soft as a newborn.
Roses bloom upon the cheeks
of one who bears the *ball seirc*,
marked with the fairy's touch
and his lips, they make me shiver.
Look away. Look back,
to his shoulders broad,
his arms strong like the branches of the beech,
fine hands roughened by the weapons
he has laid at the door.

He does not look my way.
I cannot mark the colour of his eyes
yet I know they will be as endless as the sky.

Gráinne calls on her serving maid, whom I call Banóglach, has her bring a sleeping draught prepared before the feast. Why had Gráinne already prepared a sleeping draught? If you ask those who tell the story, they might say that it shows she planned what would come next. Princesses were known to keep poisoned chalices for when the need arose.^{xxviii} It would have contained belladonna to be so potent, and other calmatives, and perhaps some little sorcery. Banóglach brings the cup and Gráinne tells her which men to serve, and smiles at the men as the maid takes around the drink.

My hands are not the soft, white hands of the princess,
as I pour the draught into the serving cup,
glowing gold as the dark liquid seeps in,
a night-clad lake surrounded by sunlight.

My hands are not the soft, white hands of the princess,
wrapped around the cold gold, feeling it draw in my warmth,
jewelled ornaments pressing their shape into my skin
so I might always be marked by the memory of them.

My hands are not the soft, white hands of the princess,
as I offer this cup to warrior men and their companions,
as I offer this cup to the king and queen
and their noble hands touch on mine

My hands are not the soft, white hands of the princess,
but I can pretend that they are, I can smile at each one
though they do not seem to see me
and I can smile as they fall asleep

My hands are not the soft, white hands of the princess,
but they have served her purpose well.

One by one the company falls asleep until only five men of the *fiána* remain awake and Gráinne approaches them. She sits herself among them, tells them that Finn is not a fit consort for her. Playfully, perhaps, she first asks Finn's son Oisín if he will accept courtship from her. He will not because she is betrothed to Finn. Gráinne offers courtship then to Diarmaid, but he will not go against Finn nor take that which has been offered firstly to Finn's son. Gráinne rejects Diarmaid's rejection. She lays a *geis* upon him that compels him to her will.^{xxix}

Wicked bonds of strife and destruction,
the pain of a woman in childbirth,
sharing the first curse ever laid upon a woman
and wished by women upon men
ever since they were cast out of Eden,
this I will place upon you.

The vision of a dead man over water,
the drowned man floating face-down
into the salty waters of the ocean
with an open-eyed gaze,
blind to the plains of Mag Mell,
the Plains of Delight,
with its promise of eternity.^{xxx}

The life of a high king to reproach you,
the words of a judge to deride you,
unless you take me from this place
before Finn and the king
waken from their wine.

Did Gráinne want Diarmaid so badly, when she could have any of the many suitors who sought her hand before Finn? Or having found herself betrothed to Finn, did she so desperately seek escape and, needing a hero's aid, choose from the best of the champions of the *fiána*? Being raised as a princess had not equipped her with the skills she would need to

escape on her own. Her soft dress, her soft shoes, her soft body were not fit for a midnight flight into the wilderness. When Diarmaid tells her she is wicked and asks why she has chosen him, she tells Diarmaid then that she has seen him before and she fell in love with him then.

I watched a champion,
fixed the keenness of my hawk's eye,
my sight on you that day was fixed
and my love has been given to no other
from that time to this.^{xxx}

I have watched for you.
With my hawk's eye I have watched,
in my sunny chamber I have waited
and whispered my love only for you
and that, my love, is why

I will watch for you
with a hawk's eye trained on its mark
as we fly through our life together,
because you are the one I call my love
and there will be no other.

Here can be found the reason that Gráinne rejected all suitors; she was waiting for Diarmaid. Did she accept Finn's proposal thinking it would bring her closer to the man who had captured her heart yet had not come close enough to hold? Finn did bring her closer to Diarmaid. All women gazed at Diarmaid, how could they not? He not only had the reputation of being Finn's third best hero but he looked the part.^{xxx} Thick, dark curly hair and fair unblemished skin with the bloom of roses on his cheeks and his deep-blue eyes with their thick long lashes, and the endowment of the *ball seirc*. Diarmaid had only to look at a woman and her knees would weaken, her thighs grow moist, her heart beat faster. And he looked often, of course. But he had not looked at Gráinne and she was not his choice.

Diarmaid tries to evade her, tells her the exits are all locked but Gráinne says there is an exit from her chamber. Diarmaid claims it is taboo for him to leave the castle through any of its gates while Finn is in residence. So Gráinne tells him not to use the gates but to do his hero-feat and leap the ramparts, while she goes to make her own exit from the castle to the wild.

Diarmaid asks his four companions, that did not take the cup, what he should do. They tell him he has no choice for she has bound him. One hero even tells Diarmaid that he wishes Gráinne had chosen him for such a burden; even though he is happily wed he would gladly go with one such as she. With no more excuses, Diarmaid goes, goes to meet Gráinne on the other side, where Gráinne is waiting with open arms.

Leap to me, Diarmaid, leap to me,
fly to my arms, fly to me, Diarmaid,
leaving behind castles and armies and men,
leaving behind the trappings of such life
and making our escape.

Leap to me, Diarmaid, leap to me,
and we will fall to the ground
tumble upon the grass like tangled animals
until we free our limbs and escape,
leaping and running to another world

well-known to you, Diarmaid, in the wild
where I have never been but will trust to you,
I will trust to you in the wild forest
and you will trust to me.

I imagine she sees him leaping over the ramparts like a deer over a log and would catch him in her arms only he twists away before landing. It would have been something to see such a high leap. This was the age of heroes when men were taller, stronger, and capable of remarkable feats – and bound to each other in the way that only happens when men have fought together in wars, slept together beneath the stars, hunted, eaten, shared all things together. An age of heroes is always an age of combat.

Gráinne, though, would have had no thought on how to dress for such a journey, having never made such a journey before. She would likely still have been wearing her royal dress as she moved in front of him, a gold-embroidered tunic and woollen cloak dyed purple, and máelassa, soft leather sandals.^{xxxiii} The garments would have weighed heavily upon her. They had gone hardly any way at all before her feet were hurting in their confinement.

The ground is hard
beneath my feet,
unforgiving. Not soft turf
like the palace grounds
but hard rock
and sudden bogs between
and fallen branches
that catch at my legs
like the hands of the dead
reaching up to stop my path.

Gráinne knew where there were horses nearby and prevailed on Diarmaid to steal them. He did so reluctantly. Everything, he did reluctantly. He had not asked to be the consort of his leader's bride and he did not want to be. Trained to endless hunts, Diarmaid had little patience for a woman who grew so quickly tired and sore. He said it was not too late to turn back. There was no turning back for Gráinne. Was there ever more reluctant a lover?

He does not want
to go with me.

He does not want
to leave the castle.

He does not want
to steal the horses.

He does not want
to leave his pack.

He does not want
to be with me...

Horses leave tracks to follow that are more marked than a soft footfall. Even when Gráinne and Diarmaid have crossed the river, the hoofprints show clearly. So they send the horses in different directions but even so, with daybreak, Finn and his *fiána* soon find their trail.

As soon as he found they were missing, Finn had ordered a pursuit, could not be dissuaded by the *fiána* who did not want to hunt down one of their own like a fox, and knowing Diarmaid had done no wrong. They had told Finn that Diarmaid had no choice but to go with Gráinne under the bonds she had laid upon him. It made no difference to Finn; he only wanted his prized bride returned. And the one who had stolen her, he wanted his death.

Diarmaid and Gráinne reached a ford on the Shannon River, named for yet another disobedient woman. Her story should be told here. Sionann went to the pool of wisdom even though women were forbidden to do so by the druids. She wanted to drink from the water, like Eve wanted to taste the fruit of knowledge. It was forbidden. Forbidden to women. The salmon that lived in the pool rose up in anger against her and she was swept into the wave of the waters that kept rising and rising and rising, flowing out over the land, falling between the folds of land to form the longest river in the land, and Sionann, the drowned woman, was carried out to sea.^{xxxiv}

A drowned woman
is not a beautiful thing,
hair strung in wet ropes
like duckweed,
tangled with detritus,
soft, supple skin
turned to white wrinkled rubber,
fish-eyed, dull and flat,
body smashed purple and red
by rocks and trees
that did not willingly give way
when the waters rushed through.
No. A drowned woman
is not a thing of beauty.^{xxxv}

Diarmaid and Gráinne left the horses on either side and continued on foot until they reached the place called Doire Dá Bhaoth, the oak grove of two fools. Some would say it was a fitting place for Diarmaid to make a shelter for them.^{xxxvi}

He made our first home,
cut the grove around us,
made seven doors of oaken wood,
a bed of soft rushes and birch tops
for me to sleep upon
in the centre.
Alone.

Alone.

He slept apart from me,
no bed but the soft ground
when I would have been softer,
warmer, willing
were he not
such a fool.

They were both woken when one of Finn's hounds came into the enclosure and laid its head upon Diarmaid's chest. The hound was the offspring of Uirne, who was Finn's aunt that had been transformed into a bitch by a jealous *sídhe*-woman.^{xxxvii} The *fíana* had sent the hound to Diarmaid to warn him, knowing that the hound loved Diarmaid best and would find him. Gráinne told Diarmaid to heed the warning but he said he would not because Finn might as well capture him now as later.

On a sleeping man's chest
the great hound lays his beautiful head,
warns of the danger,
to save his life
tells of the love borne him
by hounds, by the *fíana*, by many.

I, Gráinne, would lay my sorrowing head
upon his chest, listen to his heartbeat,
would heed the hound's warning,
but a man is a man is a man
who will not run
though the baying draws close
and chills my entrails,
sets my heart racing as fast
as a deer that flees
before the chase.

Diarmaid sent the hound back to the *fiána* and, wide awake now, Diarmaid and Gráinne waited. Then came a great shout, echoing around them, through the hills and valleys. Diarmaid said that he knew that shout, it belonged to one who could be heard in three cantreds and it was meant as a warning for him. But Diarmaid would not heed this warning either and while Gráinne had been able to force him to accompany her, she had no power to force him to leave now for safety. When Finn arrived, he called out to Diarmaid. Diarmaid, who had not touched Gráinne before this moment, seized her now and kissed her three times in full view of Finn, and Finn said it would cost his head.

Three kisses,
three insults.
He may just as well have slapped me
as lay his lips on mine,
not in love but in provocation,
not in tenderness but like cold stone.
Those three kisses
broke my heart
more than all his rejections
until this time.
Three kisses intended
for another man
but stamped upon me
in shame.

And here comes Óengus mac Óg, arriving on a cold wind. He was foster-father to Diarmaid and he swept through the *fiána* arranged around the enclosure, swept through them all to reach Diarmaid and ask what he had done. Diarmaid blamed it all on Gráinne and told Óengus to take her away and if he survived the fight with Finn he would find them, and if he didn't then Óengus should return Gráinne to her father and let him do with her as he would, whether good or evil he cared not.

I am nothing to him.
What have I done
that I am nothing to him?

What have I not done?
I have destroyed his life.
Taken him from his beloved Finn,
the wild champion of the *fiána*,
and he does not want
that which I offer.

I am nothing to him.

Hidden beneath a corner of Óengus' mantle, they left, and Finn did not know she was gone. The story tells nothing of Gráinne as she waits with Diarmaid's foster-father, himself royalty among the Tuatha de Danaan. Does Óengus tell her of his great love stories, of the love-sickness he suffered for Caer and the wars that were fought so they could be together? Or does he tell the story of Étain, the most beautiful woman in Ireland, whom Óengus had won for another and who was born again and again to be fought over, belonging always to others but never herself. Does Óengus tell of swans in flight, of following the call of your lover? Or does he sit sullenly with her, by the fire (there is always a fire), learning to hate her because she has brought Diarmaid to this? In the laws of hospitality, he would offer her bread and broth, perhaps something stronger to sustain them. He put a boar on the spit ready for Diarmaid's return. And they waited.

Women wait
for men to return from warring
wait

for their lives to resume,

wait

so their breath draws easily again
and they do not transgress
the anxious heart when they smile.

Hands clasped tight, wring each other
like warring seals.

Eyes that cannot focus on flames of the hearth
look instead into the imagination,
see the flames of fighting.

When bread tastes like blood
and the mind cannot be still,
like a wildbird trapped in a noose.

Women wait
while men make war.

Diarmaid found Gráinne and Óengus in Ros Dá Ró-shailleach, the hidden place between two willows, sitting before a great fire with a boar roasting on a spit. And it is told that the life-spirit nearly went out of Gráinne's mouth with the joy she felt on seeing her beloved safe.

First the breath leaves my body
carrying with it an explosion of joy
such that I am left empty
breathless, collapsed inward.

Then I can breathe again.
Then I can live again.
Because Diarmaid ó Duibhne
is returned to me.

He had said it was better to die now, at the start, than at the end, and as he tells his story to Óengus and Gráinne, it seems that was his intent. Diarmaid tells them that at each of the seven doors, he asked who waited on the other side. If it was friend, he moved on until he found Finn outside the door, an old warrior but still the greatest warrior. He left by that door and leapt over the old man and ran, but it was in victory not in defeat because he had bested the best. He had proved to the men that he was not afraid of Finn and the *fiána*. Now he was returned, Gráinne could admire his courage. Women love men for such heroic displays. Gráinne loved Diarmaid.

If any would call Diarmaid
a *cairiún*, a gelding, for being
led by a woman,
they have only to be told
how he leapt over the old man
just to show he could,
and then ran away.
Not running from Finn
as a coward would do,
but running over him,
a hound leaping
over an old dog
and baying with delight.

Gráinne stays quiet as she listens to Diarmaid tell his story and her eyes shine on him. He tells it from the beginning to the end while the flames flicker and dance before them, forming shapes of leaping warriors, falling warriors, never still, never at peace. The roasted boar was sweeter on their tongues for Diarmaid's liveliness and, when they slept, Gráinne laid on one side of him and Óengus on the other that no harm would come to the man they both adored.

He lies
curled between us,
curled like a child
between two parents
who would shield and protect.

So tired,
worn from his leaping,
worn from his warring,
warmed by our bodies,
soft blankets to wrap him 'round.

Alive
am I to every movement,
the twitch of his muscle,
the rise and fall of his chest,
the warmth rising like baking bread.
I curl closer into him.

I lie
against a sleeping man,
as I have never done before,
but he is well-guarded from me
on his other side
by his foster-father,
the man who has loved him
longer than I, longer than any.

Óengus left them the next morning and said to Diarmaid that they should be careful and cunning. When Finn was a boy he had burned his thumb on the barbecued skin of the salmon of wisdom and put it in his mouth, thus being the first to taste its flesh. It was said, because of that, all knowledge was his when he chewed upon his thumb.^{xxxviii} In this way, Finn could

learn where they went and where they had been and they would have to do more than hide their tracks.

Do not go into a tree of one trunk
Do not go into an underground cave
with only one entrance
Do not go into an island of the sea
with only one way leading into it
Do not eat where you cook your food
Do not lie where you eat
Do not rise where you lie^{xxxix}

do not do not do not
find peace find love find joy
in these wild pathways

you are pursued by a *geilt*
a man made mad by lust and shame
who will not halt. He will not halt

Gráinne knew there would be no rest and be no home and be no place to make a home, that Finn's pursuit of Diarmaid would be relentless. They travelled along the Shannon and across the fields of weeping grass, and from there to the broad mountain. And still Gráinne's feet hurt, though she no longer complained.

My feet are clad are máelassa,
embroidered, tanned leather, soft
and light to wear upon my soft feet.
They are made for easy walking
on smooth, slated floors
and flagstoned courtyards,
though I might sometimes trip
on a sharp edge, a broken stone,
a fallen timber or spill of market goods,

step inadvertently in manure
or dog excrement and complain loudly then,
for the law requires men to clean up
their own messes and excesses.^{x1}

Máelassa are not made
for escaping the palace into wild ways,
stepping out upon the spongy bog
so the soft leather soaks up the water
like a thirsty dog that finds a spring
and my toes squelch as though I am barefooted
and the rim of fine stitching
gnaws at my finer skin like tiny teeth
until there are patches raw and oozing,
and I would remove this footwear,
let my feet make direct contact
with an earth both soft and yielding,
but the soles of my feet that are tender,
would wrap themselves around every stone and thorn
until I would cry out, ashamed.

I am not born to this.
My feet need to be washed, dried,
swathed, tended, wrapped
but I have no maidservant to do this
and Diarmaid has no understanding
of women's feet. I tear the skirt,
make bindings as I have seen some do
and wrap my feet like swaddling a babe,
yet like a babe I do not know how to walk,
do not know how I can take the next step,
and he offers me no arm to lean upon.
He is a *fíana* – warriors
who race barefoot through the forest

removing thorns without breaking stride^{xli}
and womanly concerns are not of his world.

Diarmaid, will you hold this for me?
Diarmaid, will you tie this for me?
I dare not ask and his gaze goes outward
towards the path we must travel.
If my feet need to be wrapped,
there is none to do it but myself.

Diarmaid killed a salmon and they smoked it on a spit on one side of the river and they crossed the stream to the other side to sleep, but Diarmaid left behind a spit of the cooked flesh that had no bite taken as a message for Finn.^{xlii} Even still, after all this travelling, Diarmaid resisted Gráinne. Yet this was the same Diarmaid who welcomed the gift from the fairy that made him irresistible to women, who had enjoyed his irresistibility. Not that he needed any extra magicking with his thick night-black hair, fair skin still unblemished for all his battles, his warrior's body, tall and lithe and muscled, and young. Gráinne yearned for his touch but it was not enough to yearn. She had made him come with her, she would make him be with her.

Women everywhere are abducted
and, after they are raped,
they are called wed.
I was not stolen.
I stole. I abducted.
Unwillingly, he came.
And I will make him wed.^{xliii}

Willing or unwilling? It depends on who is telling the story. Two verses in an old text tell another tale, one where Gráinne says she would give to her love the whole world though it be an unequal bargain. Diarmaid tells her, far better is her life with him in the wilds, eating of wood grouse and drinking honeyed mead, than she could have in any palace.^{xliv}

The soft leaves of the forest
make our bed, soft
with fecund odour of damp earth
sweet-rotting leaves
– the incense of our love-making –

The fresh salmon stolen from the river
scales seared on the coals
pink flesh falling apart
at our touch
as though eager to sustain
– the taste of our love-making –

Spring water is our wine
Our blood runs cleaner for it
like waterways in our bodies
spilling over when we join
– the juices of our love-making –

If we return to the story where Diarmaid is unwilling, we find them travelling west to a wide bog where they met a strong young nobleman who offers himself as a young warrior seeking a lord and Gráinne tells Diarmaid that he should accept the offer.

He will be the first of many.
Men will follow you, Diarmaid, as your right
and a great Lord needs to learn the ways
of leading. Here is one to serve
a man of good fate.^{xlv}

You will be wed to a princess
and be the father of many,
a ruler of your own cantred
and there will be plenty
for you and your own.

The time for following is past.
It is your right, Diarmaid ó Duibhne,
to lead warriors and command servants,
and it is the daughter of the king of Ireland,
who tells you it is so.

Diarmaid accepts her advice, as though she were a wise wife, as though she had the gift of foresight, and the strong nobleman served them both. At a ford of the river, he carried them both across, from one side to other he carried them easily.

We are too heavy
yet still he carries us
as easily as if we were his children

and we let ourselves be carried thus,
upon his back, and our feet are dry
when we reach the other side.
It is good to have dry feet.

In a cave, he makes our bed
of soft rushes and birch tops,
he makes one bed for us –
though still Diarmaid does not
reach out to touch me.

The strong nobleman
cuts a rod, ties a hook and line upon it,
casts it into the sea.
He catches one fish, two fish, three,
and cooks them on a spit.

Their juices hiss on the coals,
sweet smell to raise our own juices

and when the fish is cooked,
he asks Diarmaid to divide it.

Diarmaid will not.

Would he keep the best for himself
if he did? He asks me.

I would give Diarmaid the best
but I will not divide it between us.

This strong-man, he gives to me the best,
the next to Diarmaid, the least for himself,
as a servant should. He tells us
he knows it is what we would have done,
to show that we put the needs of the other
above our own.

I would that this were true.

I do not believe it so.

Diarmaid would give his best
to his king, not his wife,
if I were even that.

He took a spit of uncooked flesh,
left it by the shelter of the tree
to show our stalker
that I was yet uneaten
 unbitten
 untasted
 unbroken

still fit for a chief
to take to bed as a wife,
not anyone's leavings,
whole. We are both whole.

Finn hastened after them when he found these clues, hastened after them while the fish was still whole, but Diarmaid still did not take Gráinne to wife. The strong-man kept watch while they slept until daybreak and then Diarmaid told Gráinne to stay and watch for the strong-man. He, Diarmaid, would check the countryside.

It is not hard to watch for this strong man
with a breadth like the mountain plateau
on which he might carry us
and we feel the strength in him
beneath the weight of our bodies.

It is not hard to watch for him.
He does not have the golden hair
nor the soft bloom on his cheeks
but it is good to feel a man
like a mountain
and ride him across
the sod, across the water,
across the land.

It is not hard to watch for him.

Each night and day the same thing happened. The strong-man would re-make their bed, using fresh heather they carried from the mountainside to fool Finn if he sucked on his thumb that they were on the mountains not by the sea.^{xlvi} After remaking their bed, the strong-man would keep watch all night. Diarmaid would wake and tell Gráinne to watch for the strong-man who would take a turn at sleeping, and Diarmaid would go off on his own adventures where he was proving himself a hero.

What does a woman do
who sits in the cave
and watches, waiting
for the return of a warrior.

What is there
for her to do?
No weaving
No embroidery
in the deep recesses
of a cave, there is only
herself.

One man sleeps
at the back of the cave
while I watch at the front,
watch the mist rolling in off the sea,
watch the waves swelling and subsiding,
watch the birds wheeling and wailing,
Watch, watch, watch.

I cannot imagine Gráinne just sitting and waiting with no company, nothing to do. She was no recluse, not a hermit to devote great silences to God. She was a princess raised, was used always to attendance and activity. Surely she roamed. Surely she grew curious of the cuts and bruises that Diarmaid tended to himself of an evening, or allowed the strong-man to soothe, for Diarmaid would not let her touch him. I imagine Gráinne would have followed while the strong-man slept, if only for a way. Watched Diarmaid as he tricked those sent in pursuit, foreigners from across the sea answering Finn's call, watched as he challenged them to tests of their strength and agility, displaying his own skill even as they were defeated each one. Had she seen bloodshed before? Seen men impaled on swords or crushed by a tun. She would have followed and watched and waited for Diarmaid to tell her what he did.

My man
goes out to meet our enemies
sailing ashore from strange islands.
They are strangers
but they come to kill him
and restore me to the master of hounds

Like a magician
he turns his tricks upon them
and I watch them destroy
themselves, without a blow from him

My man
is cunning as a fox
leaping lightly as a fox
twists and turns and pivots
rolls the tun
dances on the sword
pivots on the spear
and when they try to do the same
they die

I am not afraid
that my man will die
I am only afraid
that he will not
chance his destruction
upon my body

I am his greatest threat

After three days, Diarmaid told Gráinne that her enemies were near. He called them her enemies because it was she who had caused the enmity with Finn. And he told her there were chieftains among them and that they came from another land and they had venomous hounds. Gráinne and Diarmaid and the strong-man left the cave in the morning and went back along the path to the wide bog. Gráinne was tiring, so the strong-man put her on his back and carried her to the mountain and they stopped by a stream where Diarmaid washed his hands and pared his nails, and when Gráinne asked for a loan of his knife he gave it to her. She turned it in her hands and watched him.

What do I not want to do to you, Diarmaid?

You who turn away from me
even while you have followed me
into wild places, then led the way?

I want to bury a knife in your side
and I want to drink the blood
that pours from your wound,
want to wash myself in your blood
until I am covered like a warrior,
hair clotted, matted, great smears
wiped across my face and arms and breasts
like war-paint, stinking of it,
stinking of men's blood

and then you might love me.

Then you might hold to me,
rest your weakened weight in my arms,
succumb to my support, cry
my name and reach for me,

then you might love me.

And I would hold you to me
and we would lick each other clean like dogs
and beyond the metallic taint of blood we would learn
the taste of skin, the flavours of bodily juices,
until we feasted on each other,
sank our teeth into each other's flesh
like tearing chunks from a salmon freshly caught,
and clung to each other like eagles in a spiral to the earth.

Then you might love me
as I have loved you
all along.

While they rested by the stream, Finn sent his black-haired female messenger, Dear Dhubh, to the warriors and when they described to her the slaughter of their champions by a man with curling jet-black hair and crimson cheeks, she told them the challenger they described was the same man they would hunt, Diarmaid ó Duibhne. So they let their hounds loose upon Diarmaid's track and the hounds led them to the cave with the bed of Diarmaid and Gráinne at the back, and then across the bog and to the mountain. Diarmaid and Gráinne saw them coming, led by three great poisonous hounds, and Gráinne was as filled with hatred as the hounds were filled with poison.

Slavering beasts,
I roar in response,
anger rising in my throat,
I see myself reflected in their eyes
burning with red malice
and my voice roars like a furnace
that would engulf them all,
gnashing and clenching my teeth
and spitting poison.
We are all beasts.

Ahead of their enemies, some marked distance ahead, was a beautiful youth garbed in green of one shade. His manner of dress marked him as a prince, and Diarmaid was jealous of him. Many princes had sought Gráinne's hand before it was given to Finn. Perhaps there was some history between this youth of the green garb and Gráinne, the king's daughter. Or perhaps Diarmaid was just jealous to see another as young, and finer in dress, than he himself.

As Gráinne returned his knife, Diarmaid did not sheath it but left it lying upon his thigh, a bright and dangerous blade pointed towards her, as he accused her of love for the youth of the

green garb. With Diarmaid's knife unsheathed, Gráinne denied his accusation and bitterly proclaimed that she wished she loved no-one on this day.

Returned to him,
his blade points my way,
not a tool for paring nails
but a weapon

as he questions my love
for him, I dare not look
towards the green-garbed youth
who strides forward towards us
before the enemy's horde.

Poison fills me
venomous as any hound
and I spit it at Diarmaid,
spitting my love away

Diarmaid sheathes his knife and goes on, and the strong-man carries Gráinne until a hound is loosed upon them. He places Gráinne on the ground and kills the first hound. And Diarmaid kills another and after that came the third hound and Gráinne warned him it was the best, but Diarmaid saved her from it by bashing its brains out. He did not ask how she knew it was the best but went on to kill the youth of the green garb and the other chieftains so the host turned away. But Diarmaid held his hand from Dear Dhubh and Gráinne saw her running away, like a hound with her tail between her legs, running to tell Finn of the great defeat.

Dear Dubh, black daughter,^{xlvii}
Finn's mangy black-coated bitch messenger
returns to him slathering,
saliva flinging from her teeth,
foaming droplets flying,
eyes white-ringed and wild,
mane bristling,

pads of her feet torn and bleeding,
so swiftly has she run
across sea-shale,
through thorny woods,
down rocky mountain sides,
to bring a message of defeat
to her grey-haired master.

If Gráinne had seen battle before, she had never been so close to it, so close she might almost have taken part in it. She was not a warrior-woman nor had any wish to be. So many dead bodies torn apart and the crows already descending to feast upon them. The green-garbed youth amongst them and she kept her eyes averted from his corpse so Diarmaid would not see her weep.

All this death,
it is not why I left
my father's care and sought
the protection of Diarmaid ó Duibhne.
I wanted for love,
for freedom, for delight,
and though I have eaten
wild grouse spit-roasted
as we have roamed great tracks of country,
though Diarmaid has proven brave,
all this killing, it twists in my mind,
turns in my gut, pummels at my heart.
Though unwounded, are we
blood-poisoned
and changed?

The threesome went east back across the mountain and through the weeping grass with the Shannon at their left, to the place of two willows. There Diarmaid killed a deer and they feasted and rested and in the morning the strong-man said that he would leave them and they

could not dissuade him. They did not know where he had come from and they did not know where he would go but he had carried them like his own children and he had their love.

Gone, my gentle strong-man
who carried me high on his shoulders
like being carried on a mountain,
who carried us both.
My mountain,
solid beneath my thighs,
strong and immutable
and who shall follow Diarmaid now?
And who shall carry Gráinne now?
Who shall be our bridge
from one riverbank to the next?

They mourned for the departure of their strong companion but they kept moving until they reached the dark forest. Gráinne tired but with no man to carry her but Diarmaid, and he had not offered, and with no horse to ride, Gráinne lifted her spirits and strode beside Diarmaid, laughing.

I can walk alone.

I need no horse beneath me,
no beast to carry me above
the treachery of a hard ground
or an oozing bog.
I can walk alone.

I can walk alone.

I need no man to carry me,
not upon his back,
not within his arms like a child
to keep my feet clean and soft.

I can walk alone.

I can walk alone.

I need no god of the Tuatha
to sweep in with winged speed,
grasp me by the shoulders
like an eagle carrying off a lamb.
I can walk alone.

I can walk alone.

Gráinne walked alongside Diarmaid. Her máelassa had long since worn away and she simply wrapped her feet in linen strips and leather pieces to give them some protection, but her soles had hardened and learnt to curl around the uneven ground. When it was warm enough and the ground was soft, she liked the feel of it, like the grasp of a good friend. As they walked, some water splashed onto her leg and she showed Diarmaid, laughing, and said the water had been braver than he, for all his battles.

A drop of water,
light splash upon my thigh,
cold upon my skin,
sweet shiver of delight,
as a lover's touch
could bring me
if one were braver than
a drop of water.

Diarmaid told Gráinne that he had held back from loving her because of his fear of Finn. He said he had held back because it was hard to trust women. He said he had held back because still he did not trust her. He said also that he would not hold back now, would not bear further reproach from her.

The bread it is broken,
the salmon it is eaten,
Nothing is whole, untouched.

He takes me,
penetrates me,
leaves me bleeding,

but I have taken him,
wrapped myself around him,
and never again

will he belong to any man.

Yet still Finn followed in pursuit and still they must find their hiding places in forests and in caves.^{xlvi} And though Finn could not catch them, he knew where they had been because in each place where they slept and made love, great dolmens rose to mark the place, pillars of stone rising from the ground with a capstone to show that they were joined.^{xli}

The lovers came to a cave in a headland that was the dwelling place of a wrinkled crone, Mala Llee.¹ She welcomed the lovers, shared her fire with them, listened to their stories that brought her dreams of youthful romance to ease the loneliness of her exile in this place. She made them welcome.

Why was she there? Who was she? Tumbled stones and wedge tombs and caves across Ireland were homes to such crones, dwelling alone for whatever reasons, pushed away from their homes when their menfolk were gone, or rejected by their children. People did not want strange old women living too closely among them, they were ones who were too close to the Otherworld, ones who walked alone in the hills gathering their wild foods and herbs and muttering all the time to the Old Folk, the Fairy. So these old women lived apart, sheltered in places of stone and cold earth, but the local folk would bring them offerings of food, maybe a knitted shawl or a piece of sheepskin, for it paid to curry favour with those close to the Otherworld.^{li}

Old woman,
no husband no family,
wanders the hills,
gathers wild foods,
cow parsley, flowering heather,
hawthorn berries, nettles, parsnips, acorns,
muttering incantations
to make friends with the fairy
and keep evil at bay.

To keep the old woman at bay,
To keep her in caves and graves,
feed her offerings of bread and cheese curds,^{lii}
give her a woollen wrap to keep her warm,
that she not disturb the lives
of good folk, common folk.
To keep her away.^{liii}

With her old head filled with the musky scent of their romance and her worn shawl wrapped around her, Mala Llee left them and ventured out into the daylight gathering her stores. There she encountered an old but still very handsome warrior and something forgotten stirred in her nether regions. She learned it was Finn, the same one searching for Gráinne and Diarmaid, but she knew it was the blow to his pride that was greater than his love for his bride, and there was still a chance for an old woman like her.

Old Fox,
with the cunning of his years,
shakes out his coat
until it glows red-gold,
turns those long-lashed eyes
upon the old craven woman
and lets her stroke him,
promising he will be hers

and she will be his,
she will be his wife
if she leads him to his prey.
Cunning.

Mala Llee returns to the cave. She could have taken Finn straight there but she still has some cunning herself. She will not anger the old fox with his sharp bite when she knows she is no true bride for one like him. She must play her part carefully. Though it is a clear, sunny day, one of those days where everything, the hills, slopes, trees, even the sea, everything is light-washed, she dips the corner of her cloak in salt water before she re-enters the cave.

On the promise of a man
I dip my cloak in the ocean,
bedraggled, like a mermaid,
and 'tis well-known
that creatures of the sea
are not to be trusted.

Young lovers believe
that everyone believes in them
especially old women, not so old
they can't remember
when love first overtakes.

Young lovers don't realize
that for most of us, love
didn't stand a chance, was
only found in sea-tales
and we all know
that even then, love
always escaped back to the sea.

Yet when one man promises
to take me to his side

I am ready to betray them...
does Finn think me so weak?

When I look to the sun-streamed goldness
of the king's daughter, even when
she has fled through forest and fen
and not laid in a bed for many a moon,
nor washed in any but a muddy brook,
I know Finn would not turn his eyes
to such as I. And I know
that though history may record my betrayal
Gráinne will be forewarned.
No fool is she.

Mala Lee shows them how wet is the hem of her garment and she tells them the rain is
drenching and they should shelter yet one more day in this place before going on their way.

The wind is high,
there is no shelter to be found
by hawk or by raven
by blackbird or by wren.

The frost has spread over the hills,
snow builds on the mountain,
the deer cannot reach its grass,
the horses cannot cross the ford.

Each stream becomes a river,
each river becomes a lake,
each lake becomes a sea
roiling with wild waves.

Wolves neither rest nor sleep,
yet here we can do both,

our cauldron is warm and full,
there is shelter from the icy rain.^{liv}

Gráinne watches Mala Lee as she tells them how terrible the weather is outside, and then, as she ventures out again, leaving her cloak behind, Gráinne wonders.

What might I read
in an Old Woman's rheumy eyes
if she lifted her gaze from the cold ground,
woman-to-woman?

Would I read of desire,
of all that a woman might do
to win the admiration of a handsome man?

Or would I read the despair
of ever knowing wild love like ours

or the memory of what love
was once hers?

Gráinne knows truth is hidden like clear vision behind cloudy cataracts. She looks at the cloak laid out to dry beside the fire and wonders that in drenching rain it is only wet on one corner. She sees a drying crust upon it, white crystalline shimmers. Gráinne lifts it to her lips and tastes the salt upon the old wool.

She fawned on Diarmaid,
spoke incessantly of the cold outside,
the wind, the rain, the storms
barely unusual in this place,
barely unusual for a cave
on a headland by the sea
in Eriu's land.

Her cloak, though, is soaked.
She showed us the edge
dripping with water, enough
to persuade us to keep inside
by the fire, by the warmth,
an elderly caring hag
to fawn on us, or on him,
at least.

But when she turned away,
how did I scent the salt
when everything in this place
smells of brine, tastes of brine?
Seaweed forms our carpets,
salt renders the walls,
refractive of sea-mist
creeping like the hordes
we seek to escape...

they come closer. I take her
cloak, put it to my lips
in caress and it tastes
of sea-water, not rain and storms,
it tastes of betrayal. And we have
been too long sheltered here.
We must leave the cave,
and the old woman,
behind.

Even as Finn approaches with his hounds, Gráinne and Diarmaid depart. They are close enough to look on Finn and his warriors approaching across the sand as they step into Óengus' boat, for Diarmaid's foster-father arrives to help them escape across the waves. They are close enough to the shore still to see Finn's hatred as he watches them escape.

I tasted salt
upon her cloak,
sea-salt, like it had been dipped
in the bay

Salt. the taste of desire
 the taste of want
 the taste of old age
 the taste of betrayal

She, Old Woman, wanted Finn
and glory and beautification,
transformation from hag to young lover,^{lv}
more than the friendship
of two fugitives cowering
in an ancient sea-cave
beside a driftwood fire
even if we gave her
a tale to tell of how she helped
the lovers on the run.

But Finn is old, 'tis why I ran,
and perhaps in him she sees
not a reflection of the young beauty
she could be, but
of old-age companionship.
An old woman, living alone
in a sea-cave.

Of course she would
 dip her cloak
 in the sea
 and lie to us.
Perhaps I would do the same.

Gráinne grew tired of constantly moving, and perhaps Diarmaid longed also to just stop and rest. They sought a place where they could roam rather than run, where hunting and fishing were plentiful, a place of safety. There was one such place, by the swampy lake that was Loch Leana.^{lvi} It was a place well-guarded by a surly giant who had been entrusted by the Tuatha de Danaan to protect the magical Quicken Tree that grew on Dubhros, a dark promontory that reached over the loch. Diarmaid gained permission from the giant that they might live and hunt on his land as long as they did not touch the berries of the Quicken Tree.

Living quietly, eating well, loving every chance they could get, Gráinne felt the life beginning within her. But did she, as so many woman before her, fear for the life of her unborn, and for her own life if she were to give birth unassisted in this wilderness?

a quiet thrum
a quickening in my womb
a stirring like bubbles in a cauldron
a crackling like the splitting of a seed
when the shoot pushes through its casing

these things I feel when I touch
myself, when I lay my hand
upon my belly

when I lay my hand
upon my belly

dark dreams
where music falls silent, unheard
where the cauldron cools, food untasted
where the shoot is stolen by the blackbird
before it can grow

There was to be no peace when Finn had neither forgotten nor forgiven the betrayal of his betrothed and his warrior, as Gráinne and Diarmaid learned when two warriors appeared at

their hunting booth. It was two grandsons of the *fiána* chief who had been defeated by Finn when he claimed chieftain status. Or it was two young men whose father had defeated Finn's father in battle. It was two brothers who sought to join the *fiána* as was their birthright. Finn set them impossible tasks – to either bring him the head of Diarmaid, or a handful of berries from the Quicken Tree of Dubhros.

Diarmaid told them that neither of those things would be easy to obtain. But first Diarmaid argued that what Finn demanded of them was unfair, Finn having killed their father. Yet young men will defend their heroes and attack the naysayers; they argued that Diarmaid should not slander Finn when he himself had taken Finn's wife. Gráinne watched this arguing between the men who paid her no regard, and she wondered about the berries and how their value was equal to Diarmaid's head in Finn's mind, and why it was so impossible to get them.

The measure of worth is

a lover's beautiful golden head
fair cheeks made paler by death
head severed from the flawless body
eyes fixed as blue beads
pinned upon a doll

or

a handful of berries
each one small and round as a pearl
red like droplets of blood
frozen in solid form
a handful would equal the worth
of the life of my beloved

small worth indeed

So Gráinne asked about the berries and Diarmaid told the story of the Quicken Tree and the giant set to guard it. The Quicken Tree had grown from a seed lost by the Tuatha de Danaan and it had magical powers so that any who ate of the berries suffered no disease nor old age and it was as though they had drunk excellent wine or aged mead. The tree's roots spread out into many stories.

One story told of two sisters, Aoife and the pleasant Aine. They were the daughters of the sea-god but their mother is left unnamed and unknown. Aoife and Aine each had a suitor, and a hurling match was arranged to tell which of their suitors was the strongest, to be played upon the plain by Loch Leana. The Tuatha brought with them crimson nuts and catkin apples and fragrant berries and as they passed through, one of the berries fell and from that grew the magical tree.

a berry falls upon the ground

a Quicken Tree grows
roots into the underworld
of *síd*-dwellings
and the heart-source of holy wells
branches swinging high
into a sky oft dark and gloomy
but that silvers the leaves
with the glint of an occasional sun

berries on the branches
bright red jewels
tempting promise
no disease shall touch me
no illness no old age

only the exhilaration
of good wine
and aged mead
and for this
men would risk their lives

The Tuatha heard about the Quicken Tree and knew it to be theirs and would jealously guard the gifts of immortality and eternal beauty, so they sent the swarthy giant to stand over it.

Diarmaid told them this story but there was another to tell as well.^{lvii} The fairies of the lake which was Loch Leana and the fairies of the land were to have a hurling match to decide upon territory where they would be allowed to play. First they feasted and danced and ate rowanberries, and their king made them promise not to lose a berry outside their fairylands because from such a berry would grow such a tree as to make an old woman young and a young woman beautiful. But one of the fairies drank too much mountain dew and lost a berry and from that berry sprung up a tree of many branches.

Now, the king planned to marry a queen of fairyland and she wanted her dress to be remarkable.

A dress like no other,
no silks or lace or seed pearls or cut-glass jewels,
no gold or silver thread embroidered,
nothing will do but to be robed
in butterfly wings, for myself
and for all my darling maids.
Those who wait upon me
will reflect my beauty.

I shall look the fairy-queen.

Butterfly wings of red and orange,
blue, and white, and silver,
softest hues and vivid brights,
better on me
than on a fluttery insect,
an honour for them to surrender
the wings that give them flight
and crawl upon the ground.

The queen sent her maids to look for such creatures and, when they entered the woods, they heard a great noise of bees and birds and saw they were gathered around a beautiful, many-branched fairy-tree. They went to the tree and caught the butterflies among the birds and bees, tore off their wings, left them flightless scattered across the grounds, and returned to their queen to tell her of what they had discovered. So she told the king, and the king called his people to find out who had lost the berry.

When the king discovered which fairy had lost the berry, he sent that fairy to find a guard for the tree in the lands of the giants. As he went, the queen gave to the fairy a handful of berries to give to the giant.

These berries
gift of the fair folk
only to be consumed
by the chosen ones.

These berries
so the giant might feast on them
and sleep in the branches of the rowan-tree at night
and so his breath might be poison
to the birds and the bees.

These berries
are not for the common folk
nor common creatures
sharing the magic of our lives.
The world would be too beautiful
and too everlasting.

So the fairy met his first giant and the giant ate the berries. He said he would guard all the trees in the wood if it meant he could eat more of those berries, and so he went with the fairy to Dubhros and became its guardian.

Did Diarmaid know this story? Did the fairies whisper in the breezes that surrounded he and Gráinne and the two brothers and tell them there was yet another tale to be told, and one that held a warning about those berries that so intrigued Gráinne and were so dear to Finn.^{lviii}

There were two kings who wanted the same province. The rightful king had been slain and his son and daughter taken captive by the invading king. The invader's adviser warned him that their death would mean his death so he told the king to take the son and set him adrift on the sea and have the witch of the castle cast a spell of ugliness on the daughter, Rosaline. Rosaline was then left outside the castle walls and shunned because of her ugliness.

To think on the life lived before
does not help to survive
outside the castle walls,
where no doors open to me,
where no arms welcome me.

I do not think on the life lived before
but on the kindness of those
who toss me a dried bit of bread
or a passing smile, a glance
that falls on my shunned face
like a mother's caress.

I do not think it is true that I lived a life before,
but only that I dreamed of being a princess
where people loved me
and thought me beautiful.

This, the real world
on cold slate stones,
wrapped in cast-off rags,
feeding on scraps like the town dogs
and so filthy that even if my face were lovely,
it could not be seen beneath the grime.

One evening, Rosaline shared some of her crumbs with a robin. The robin was so happy that she sang a beautiful song that lifted Rosaline's spirits a little, but the robin saw still how sad and desperate she was. The robin of the castle flew to the robin of the woods and shared the plight of Rosaline, the spell of ugliness, and that she wanted to get a berry from the famous Quicken Tree to help her. The robin of the wood told the robin of the castle that every day the surly giant battled with one or other warrior, and when he saw a warrior coming he would break a branch from the tree to put in his belt so that when he tired he could eat some berries and that would restore him. So, perhaps when the surly giant was fighting a warrior there might be a chance to pluck a berry from the branch in his belt, but to remember that the breath of the giant would be death for any bird.

I would give a hundred lives
for Rosaline, for her heart is lovely
though her face is not
and she should be a princess
in the castle, not an outcast
crying herself to sleep
curled up cold against the stone.
One red berry stolen by one red robin
and her life may be restored.

So the next day, they saw a warrior coming, saw the giant pluck a branch with berries on it and stick it in his belt, saw that when he tired in the fighting he ate some berries and it revived him so he continued the fight. But then he fell to his knees and when he did so the branch fell out of his belt and the robin darted in and picked one and made her escape. As the robin was flying back to the castle, she saw warriors led by a prince, and she flew past them to where Rosaline sat on the steps outside the castle walls. The robin lit on Rosaline's shoulder and put the berry between her lips and as beautiful as Rosaline had been before the witch's blight, twice as beautiful was she after she had eaten the berry.

one bird
to steal a berry
one berry
to make one beautiful

one prince
to love one princess
all it takes is one

The visiting prince from the Sunny Valleys saw her at the gates and he saw her beauty and not the rags she wore and believed that she was the princess he sought but he asked where were her maids of honour for none attended her. She could not tell him that the king within the castle had cast her out so instead she slipped away from him and then followed him quietly. At the feast, the prince spoke of the beautiful princess; the king's daughter thought he spoke of her and not the outcast princess. At the same time, there was a great disturbance outside the castle as the rightful son returned to claim his throne. The people called him their king, and the false king was put to death.

The prince from the Sunny Valleys saw Rosaline rush to her brother. The prince caught her in his arms and asked to marry her. Rosaline's father was dead and her brother was now king in his place so she told the prince from the Sunny Valleys to ask her brother because she belonged to him now; but her brother told her to speak for herself and so she gave her own consent and was married to the prince. And when they travelled to the Sunny Valleys, she took the robin of the castle with her and fed him always.

How long does a robin live
who has stolen a berry
from the Quicken-tree?
Not long, for the robin
did not steal it for herself
but to feed another's beauty.

How long does a princess live
who has eaten a stolen berry
from the Quicken-tree?
She never grows old,
never sickens and dies,
beauty that lasts forever.

How long does a prince live
who knows nothing of a stolen berry
from the Quicken-tree?
He grows old, like any man
or else dies young in battle.
Age or destruction, both lack beauty.

And a princess sits
on a step outside the castle wall,
waits again for a robin
who might magically restore
what had been, for a little while,
such a happy-ever-after life.

So many stories told but this was the first that Gráinne had heard of the magical powers of the berries. She told Diarmaid that she was carrying their child and would not live unless she had those berries that bestowed life and health, and she would not love with him again unless he were to get those berries for her. Diarmaid pleaded with her not to make him break faith with the surly giant but Gráinne would not be appeased.

a life within my life
but when separating
life from life
like egg white from the yolk
there will be death
a death within my death
death from death^{lix}

The surly giant, of course, refused Diarmaid's request, replied that even if there were no children born from Gráinne, and even knowing the baby would kill her as surely as a spear through her side, he would not relinquish the berries, not a one. And Gráinne watched from the side, with the two brothers, as Diarmaid and the giant fought until the giant fell.

With the giant lying dead upon the ground, his brains leaking out of his battered skull, the two brothers bring Gráinne to the tree where Diarmaid sits upon the ground, weak and weary. He tells her to pluck some of the berries. But this will be their child, the life between them, and Gráinne will only take the berries that Diarmaid plucks himself.^{lx} Diarmaid plucks the berries for Gráinne and himself and the two brothers and she feels strength renewed and that this child within will survive beyond the separation of their lives.

Take the hard red berries
Slip between lips
cracked and dry

Lips parched, cracked
like the bed
of a bypassed stream
still waiting for the flooding rain
to waken sweet green scents
over-riding the stench of mud

Lips crack open, beads of blood,
wrap around hard red berries
fruit for wild birds
not feral women

Crunch between white teeth
rockfall on crimson flesh
pounded into juice
leaching down the fissure
into the cavern of the belly
painting the walls crimson
seeping through into the bloodstream
and like the flood in the dry river-bed
sweet scent of life renewed
over-rides the mud

When the two brothers were sent on their way with their burden of berries for Finn, told to claim the giant's death as their triumph, Diarmaid and Gráinne climbed into the Quicken Tree and the sweetness of the berries in the upper branches made the berries lower down seem bitter. It was in this place that the surly giant had slept, on guard in the tree even when sleeping.

The boughs knitted together
to make our bed,
the sough of the breeze,
whispering luis, luis, luis,^{lxi}
lullaby.

Feathered leaves touch our faces,
in sleep like a mother's soft fingers
caressing her babes,
best-loved at sleep
when untroubled and calm.

And when they woke, arms wrapped around each other holding each other aloft high in the tree, the army of the *fiána* had gathered at the base. Arms still wound around each other, they listened as Finn told the men that when they found the tree unguarded, he knew Diarmaid was in the branches above, as he knew most things. Knowledge can be flawed, and no matter how he sucked his thumb, Finn still did not know that Gráinne would never be his.

Does your thumb tell you
how I despise you
as a fox hates the hound?
Does it tell you
that even if you win me from Diarmaid
you will never win me for yourself?

Chew upon your own flesh
and forget the taste of my own.

Just as you smelt the hand of Diarmaid
on the berries brought you by the brothers,
so the smell of the Ó Duibhne
is ever upon my flesh,
seeded within my womb.

The voice of Oisín floated upward to them as he argued with his father that Diarmaid would not stay in the tree knowing Finn would seek him there. Did you know this, Gráinne whispered to Diarmaid? Sssh, the leaves shook round her. Finn pulled out his *fidchell* set and laid it upon the ground beneath the tree and challenged Oisín to a game.^{lxiii} Peering down through the dark leaves, they watched as Oisín and his companion warriors sat on one side of the board, aligned against the cunning of Finn on the other. And they played against him so well that there was but one move, Finn said, and he would be defeated and he defied all that were with Oisín to show him that move. And high in the tree Diarmaid spoke, unheard for the sougning of the wind, saying he could tell Oisín what move to make and he was sorry he was not there to advise him. Gráinne shushed him.

Worse for you, son of Ó Duibhne,
than Oisín should lose this game,
worse for you that you lie with Finn's wife
in the bed of the Searbhán Lochlannach
in the top of the Quicken-tree
and beneath you lie
seven battalions of the standing army
of the *fíana*, the lawless ones,
there to kill you on Finn's command.

Worse for me, son of Ó Duibhne,
that though you lie with the princess of Ireland
in a bed in the top of the Rowan Tree
that has bestowed life and health
upon me and our unborn,
and below a standing army
whose purpose is your death,

worse for me
that you would rather be there
than here with me.

The game of fidchell was no simple game to pass the while away. The twists and turns, the chance to outfox the fox, the feel of the carved pieces, their weight in your hand, the quiet and complete concentration, the collective intake of breath at a wrong move, the collective sigh at a good one. A rowanberry landed on the piece that Oisín should move. There was an outward breath from the *fiána*, and a sharp inward one from Gráinne as she laid a staying hand upon Diarmaid's. But he would not look at her, only shook her hand away as he cast another berry with unerring accuracy in his quest to see his friend Oisín defeat Finn, and again and again and again as each move was made. But Finn knew that Oisín won with Diarmaid's help. Finn called up into the branches and Diarmaid called down saying that he was with Gráinne in the bed of the surly giant. Now Diarmaid looked at Gráinne, grinned at her until he was as fox-like as Finn, wrapped his arms around her and he swung her low so Finn could see that he kissed her, once, twice, thrice.

Once, twice, thrice
three kisses like a firebrand
scorch my mouth
with shame, because those three kisses
are meant for him
that my lover loves more
than ever he could ever
love
me.

Finn swore that Diarmaid would lose his head for those kisses. And Finn arranged the men around the tree, hands linked together and warned them not to let Diarmaid escape and he made promises of great reward for whoever would kill the son of Ó Duibhne. There was no mention of what should be done to Gráinne.

Hands interlocked like great chains
around the trunk, a pillar

with its roots in the Otherworld
shaken by the weight of heavy armed men.
Bodies pressed against its bark,
however unwillingly
they might violate this tree,
it stays strong
though its leaves have stopped
whispering, and now, and now
they wait, as do we.

Óengus came again to help his foster-son and, as each man climbs, Óengus kicks him back down the tree, but when each man falls upon the ground he has the appearance of Diarmaid on him and the others leap upon him and slay him and only when the man is dead does his own likeness return. Óengus says then he will take Gráinne with him to his home at Brú na Bóinne and Diarmaid says he will follow if he lives but if he dies then to send Gráinne back to her father, but keep and rear her children by him.

This he says to me
even now, he would say

Get you back
Get you gone
Get you home
to where you came
from your father's castle

not here among the giant men
not here among the warring men
not here among the famous men
not here among the wilds

Get you back
Get you gone
Get you home

to where you came from
your father's castle

Óengus wrapped his cloak around Gráinne and lifted her away to the place he had shared with his great swan-love who was now gone. And Óengus set the fire while they waited once more for Diarmaid's return. And when Diarmaid came, they feasted while Diarmaid regaled them with how he used his javelins to sail over the top of the *fiána* and then, wearing his shield on his back as he ran away, deflected all their blows.

Gráinne knew these were the stories men told to make themselves great. They had not climbed the Quicken Tree with javelins to hand though it was true that Diarmaid wore his shield. She did not know how he escaped the hordes, all that mattered was he did. She knew that in the stories told by men to make themselves great, there are always armies arraigned against them, not single combatants. They are always the finest warriors, not a raggle-taggle group of landless adolescents led by an old man so wild he could no longer live in civilized places. It is always an amazing feat of athleticism and boldness that enables the hero to overcome adversaries, not simple trickery. Gráinne would have told the story differently.

We hid in the branches
of a tall tree, so tall
it seemed to have roots
in *Tír na nÓg*,^{lxiii}
so high we climbed
it seemed none could touch us
and nestled in the branches
like another's arms around us
we were able to sleep

while on the ground beneath
gathered our enemies
shoulder to shoulder
pressed against the trunk
trying to shake us from the tree
like over-ripened fruit

but we held tight to one another
and would not fall

and none would climb
because not all could climb
and we were above
and could cast them down
like shaking off a beetle

There had been enough fighting. Diarmaid's foster father brokered a peace for them, made terms with Finn, made terms with Gráinne's father, made terms with Diarmaid. And the terms were all about land and property and wealth. No mention was made of Gráinne, considered the cause of conflict but not the cause of peace. She stayed where she belonged, unseen and unheard. Did Gráinne seek peace knowing her child was soon to be born? Imagine if her child, her daughter, were born in the wild.^{lxiv}

Another cave, echoes
a cave within me
The sea-surges that wash
these walls smooth and sharp
surge through my body
battering, the force of
an ocean to suck me under
roll me, drown me, batter me
down down down
to a floor of coral sand
tears at me, sends
me upward on another surge
throws me down again
down and around, and
the cave yawns wider, darker,
wetter, as an ocean inside
pours to an ocean outside

and through the yawning chasm
that splits rock asunder

she arrives, delivered
from one cave into the next
and cries, she cries,
dives into the chasm
where the hands of her father,
warrior become midwife, his hands
receive her, hold her,
no others to receive
this sea-born daughter.

where is my mother? where
are my mothers? where are
my midwives? none
to witness this cave-born daughter
washed in brine, first breath
drawing in sea-spray. No softness
for her, no cradling. Will
she grow up harsh as the salt,
strong as the endless wave?

I want women around me.
It is a man's hands that catch her
as she slides out on that last wave
thrown to shore, caught
by a warrior's hands
and for a moment, I see,
marked as a warrior's daughter.

Some of us
are not made
to be princesses.

When the peace was brokered, Gráinne and Diarmaid chose together where they would live, named Ráith Ghráinne, the fort of Gráinne, built at a good distance from both Finn and her father. Peace is easier to maintain when there is distance between past enemies, who might still be enemies if they were closer, but did not the king wish to see his daughter settled and meet his grandchildren?

Or was it loyalty to a more dutiful daughter that caused him to keep his distance?^{lxv} Gráinne had younger sisters who were filled with the tales of her adventures, dreaming of great romantic adventures of their own. Fearing what their marriages would bring, hoping they were married to young, dashing, handsome warriors not decrepit old men. Or perhaps dreaming of just being married, of making a good match, of a comfortable life, or a life of great prestige. Of making a better match than Gráinne. They used to ask the druid to read their future.

Tell me, druid, tell me, wise one,
Tell me of love that comes my way
Tell me of love and children and laughter
Tell me of a strong, fine man
Tell me
the truth
of what is to come

The king convened the *feis temro*, a feast at Tara where none came alone, but king with queen, champions, weaklings, publicans, young lads, all came with their lover and received nuts and stags and boars and were served and entertained by female and male. But when Finn and his *fíana* came, Finn was not so accompanied. He had a wife, Gráinne, and she had deserted him for another.

So the king went to meet Finn and told the old warrior that none entered without a consort. But Finn said he had made fifty wooings for the *fíana* and only he had a bed half empty so if there was a lady in the court, and one not false (as Gráinne had been) then she should be given to him. So the king said to speak to the ladies of the court himself and see if any would play the game, and those ladies were the king's daughters.

When his daughter, Ailbe of the Freckled Cheek, had asked the druid what sort of man she would go to, he told her to bring him a glass vessel and in that glass vessel the foam of true ale and into that he would place a sleeping-spell and in her dreams she would see the likeness of the man to whom she would go.

In a blaze of light,
in a purple flame,
I saw a golden warrior
wearing a red cloak,
men around him,
black and red and fair,
troops behind him
of lads with curly hair,
champions singing to him
under the treetops,
honouring him with horse races,
hunting of stags,
birds sing around him.

Better to share with him
the roasted pig
than sip the golden mead of Tara.
Better with him to sleep
with birch-twigs against my skin
beneath a canopy of oak
than on my bed of pure feathers.
Better to listen with him
to the chorus of birds in the forest
than all the taut harps of the courts
and the hollow-mouthed horns.

What I have seen is health to my body.
I would give up the stronghold

in which I was raised
in exchange for the treasures I have seen.^{lxvi}

The king did not know of Ailbe's vision. He was gazing on his daughters, wondering which one, if any, would go with Finn, and then came the sigh of the *fiána* where the band raised their spears and swung them like instruments of the wind and created a great musical sound, and Ailbe was the one who raised her head from her needlework and her breath quickened as though to answer.

What sigh is that?
A thousand trees bowing to the wind,
the longing of a thousand warriors
for wild breath and release of their loneliness.
A thousand spears swung in salute
create their own sighing wind.
A great sigh, sadness and beauty
and all together, none alone,
but such loneliness
and in the wind, I hear one sigh
above all the others,
the sigh of a greybeard
who has seen more death than any other,
who has caused more death than any other,
who has courted more death
yet longs, longs, longs for life
and youthfulness restored.
I could restore his youth.

The king saw Ailbe, his freckle-faced daughter, raise her head. He tried to tell her not to let her wits be turned by the sounds of the *fiána*. He tried to tell her that while Finn might be good with the humming, the sigh of the *fiána*, theirs was not a life of luxury, for the *fiána* were always negotiating new alliances and trades. They had no wealth of their own, no property. That did not matter to Ailbe. She wanted her own story to tell. Gráinne had the tale

of her elopement with Diarmaid; Ailbe would have her story of how she won Gráinne's first husband with clever words and a willing heart.

Finn entered the courtyard where the king's daughters were at their crafts, weaving and embroidery.

Maidens all arranged,
heads bowed to their work,
cloths of colour upon their laps
like clusters of tropical birds
covered with rainbow feathers
as the fingers darted in and out,
glimmering with threads
of silver and gold,
making magnificent garments
not to be worn by this travel-stained warrior
with moss on his trousers,
mud on his boots,
twigs in his cloak.

Yet do not bright-coloured birds
look to make their nests
in such places...

He asked riddles of the maidens but it was Ailbe who answered him and showed her wisdom, for hidden in his riddles were questions about her sister and how Ailbe could be different. Ailbe showed also what she expected of a man and how well-versed she was in matters of the world. ^{lxvii}

Dew is a lake wider than the sea.
The cock rises earlier than the sun.
The blush of a noble kindred is redder than blood.
Trustworthy conversation is sweeter than mead.

Death is blacker than a raven.
Truth is whiter than snow.
Thought is swifter than wind.
Sense is sharper than a sword.

A hospitaller with nothing to give his guests
is hotter than fire, the shame is great.
Yet cold weighs heavier than heaps of fuel,
and leaves the heart blacker than charcoal.

More brittle than a nut is the nature
of a flighty woman between two men.
Lighter than a spark is her mind
between two men, as it flits.

Fatter than the bacon of a boar raised on acorns
is the hatred of a man if his love is rejected
and he can feed on it for a lifetime.
Harsher than the shore is a rock.

More beautiful than foxglove
is the cheek of treachery,
when its wish is to betray you,
it turns its sweetness towards you.

No lock nor chain can hold a pretty girl's eye.
More bitter than poison is the mockery of an enemy.
The mind or advice of a foolish man
scampers quicker than a weasel.

The best speech is wisdom, brevity.
The best look in an eye is cool, long, hidden.
The worst look in an eye is heat, hostility, anger.
Best among treasures is a knife, for it is like intelligence.

Best in a warrior is the high deed and low pride,
Such things show a trustworthy man.
Best in a woman is gentleness,
steadiness, modesty, silence, eloquence.

Softer than dew is a hand against a cheek.
The best food is milk, it is good now,
good old, good thick and thin,
it nourishes the baby, sustains the old man.

Finn describes to Ailbe the life she would have if she went to bed with him.^{lxviii} She would wake to the sound of the baying of the dogs, her days would be filled with the noises of the cooking-pit, the smells of meat roasting on the spit and the sizzling of the fat upon the coals. She would see fawns chasing after their mothers in the forest and the men chasing after the stags, and glimpses of foxes or of martens hiding behind the oak, and badgers. She would learn to track the sound of barnacle geese crying out. She would learn to cast a stone at birds to bring them down, how to catch the leaping salmon, find eggs, pick strawberries and buttercups, whortleberry, raspberries, blackthorn sloes, apples and acorns, and wild onions all to flavour their meals and please their palates. In the evenings, there would be friends with reddened swords drinking together, playing at fidchell and other games, and enjoying the sport of love-making. They would sleep on birch tops beneath the canopy of leaves and be warmed by bonfires, drinking hazel mead from silver cups.

It sounds better to Ailbe than a life endured embroidering gold and silver thread into fine-coloured garments and playing the games of court. Does it not seem so romantic, the idea of exchanging the comforts of a castle for the wonders of living in the wild? Ideas and dreams are like a fine veil that lies across the harsh reality.

It is hard to set a fire to roast a wild pig
when all the wood and twigs are damp through
from soaking rain. And pigs are not always easy to hunt.

There are days of hunger
gnawing leftover bones like dogs,
chewing on stalks of wild leek
to stave off the hunger pangs.

The song of the birds can be more beautiful
than the sound of harps and manmade instruments,
but there is also the owl that hoots all through the long night
and the woodpecker in the early hours
hammering away overhead
while some wild thing, man or creature,
rustles outside your bower.

And there are the midges. Never forget the midges,
thick clouds of ravenous insects
wrap around a body like some descending miasma,
pepper the skin with thousands of sharp bites,
and in the wild there is no cover but mud and soot
and layers of thick cloth, even when it is so warm
the sweat soaks through the layers and you smell
like the creatures that surround you.

Ailbe knew nothing of this, yet. Finn tells her that he doubts the king will be pleased but he will take her anyway. Ailbe says the choice is hers. When her father tries to tell her that the old man's wits are slow, she says an old man's wits are wiser. Her father tells her he has heard of a young heifer leaving the old bull who loves her, (Derdriu left the old king in the North to go with the young bull), yet Ailbe thinks to go with a great ox. Ailbe answers that it is the ox who fills the barn and makes the farm suitable for piglets.^{lxi}

The knotty tree has the best acorns.
The taste of their meal is the sweeter,^{lxx}
greater the crop
and more leaves to shelter under
and it is the tree that will last still

when all others have shrivelled
around it. There is shelter
in its branches, and beauty
in the twisted bark.

Still the king tries to persuade her otherwise, warning of the decay beneath the oak's shadow and that once she has made her home in its boles there will be no way out.^{lxxi} But Ailbe says it is no trap, that she would not enter any such snare. Ailbe thinks Finn is ready to make a home, that she can tame the wild man as once her sister thought before her. But her father does not want her to make the same mistakes, tells her that gazing on the grey man rather than a youth will lead to a hard marriage, that a young girl going to an old warrior will only make for more enmity between he and Finn. Even though he promised Finn if any of his daughters agreed, he did not think it would be his freckle-faced Ailbe. Still, it is the *tochmarc togai*, the wooing of choice, and Ailbe chooses.^{lxxii}

Yet immediately she goes with Finn, there is contention between them as Finn tries to best her in their word-games. He tells her she should not take the seat of honour until it has been earned, that she would be best employed in embroidery to show her skill, and that he does not have time to argue with her. Ailbe tells him that his speech is empty if he speaks alone with no-one to answer.^{lxxiii}

I will not be one of your dogs
slavering at your heels
offering my body's warmth
then kicked aside
to make room for another.
As I embroider my cloth,
so my path is seen,
and though I be a quern-stone
beneath you,^{lxxiv}
one without the other
leaves the stomach empty.

In Ailbe, Finn found someone who would answer him back, who would challenge and test him, who would match him in wordplay, and it could be a well-made match. Her quickness of wit and her wisdom soon drew acclaim and she became known as the best woman judge in Ireland. She awarded swords, made peace in conflict, determined what reparation was due when a goat trespassed on another's land, and her judgments were praised by men.^{lxxv} She also bore him three children.

A good woman makes a good man.
A princess makes a wild man into a king.
Bejewelled, bedecked, he becomes
 golden-maned and golden-trained
 with a kingsmark upon his breast.^{lxxvi}

A good man makes a good woman.
A *rigféinid* makes a princess into a judge.^{lxxvii}
Unjewelled, unadorned, she becomes
 wild-maned and wild-trained
 and stretchmarks upon her breast.

And there the story would have ended, Ailbe with Finn, Gráinne with Diarmaid, but Gráinne could not let it rest and still the past festered in Finn fatter than the bacon of a boar.

Gráinne was no longer a maiden, she was the mother of three sons and a daughter. She was the mistress of her household and married to a hero who now was no reckless warrior within a *féina* band but a married man, a father and the lord of the lands where they lived. All around them prospered, their cattle were fertile and gave good milk, their crops grew tall, the deer flourished in their forests and there was good hunting. Trees were laden with apples in autumn and their halls filled with mead and feasting. After the hard years on the run, everything was good. Gráinne knew Finn had taken another wife and was happy with Ailbe. Could there not be peace between them all now? Could her own daughter, Druineach Dhil, not be welcomed into the king's halls and perhaps a good marriage made for her? Let the past be put aside.

Druineach Dhil held her own cantred with her own hospitallers and warriors but still she had not been made welcome at the courts of kings, and Gráinne may have worried that her daughter was too man-like to find a husband.^{lxxviii} Gráinne spoke to Diarmaid, shared her concerns with him.

Our house is great, our lands are great,
gold and silver, cattle and horses and hounds.
Our home is warm and wide
but empty of the two great men of Ireland,
the leader of the *ǫ́iana* and the king himself.^{lxxix}
We should offer them our hospitality
and our daughter should then offer hers
and well she might find a husband and mate
when the households meet.

Diarmaid did not understand why Gráinne would want to invite his enemies. Gráinne thought that they might not be enemies but rather become friends, or at least not enemies, if invited to their household for a feast. Diarmaid agreed to the wisdom of that and they sent messengers to their daughter so she would also hold a feast inviting the king of Ireland and Finn and among their entourage might be a future husband for her. Druineach Dhil, was she conceived in the wild? Was she sustained in the womb by the rowanberries? Taught the warrior arts by her *fénid* father? It would be a strong man who could match her as a spouse.

Rise when the sun rises
Don the warrior garb
in the lightening day
practise thrusts and parries

As the sun grows stronger
my muscles respond
ready for a day working
among cattle and swine

When the sun reaches full height
I stretch my arms upward
like the spears of the *féiana*
I focus my will

When the sun sets
I take rest in my abode
wine and victuals with my warriors
a good life for the daughter of a *fénid*.

Druineach Dhil could surely find her own husband if she wanted one. The daughter of proud Gráinne who had chosen her own lover, lived alongside him in the wild, Gráinne who had ridden horses, climbed trees, scaled mountains and rivers, slept in caves by the sea, lived by her wits and her determination. There would be no man to match Druineach Dhil, but perhaps Gráinne thought there might be one to soften her. So Gráinne and Druineach Dhil spent a year preparing the feasts, fattening the livestock, putting stores aside, and the king was sent his invitations, and also to Finn (and Ailbe). The two best men in Ireland accepted, but Finn had no real intention of sitting at a table with Diarmaid and Gráinne.

At the end of the year of preparation, Diarmaid and Gráinne lay sleeping at Ráith Ghráinne but Diarmaid's sleep was disturbed by the voice of a hound and he went to leap up, only Gráinne caught him and asked what he heard. He said he heard the voice of a hound and he wondered at hearing it in the night. Gráinne held him still and spoke her words into his ear.

May safe keeping be on you, my love.
It is the *Tuatha Dé Danaan* who disturb your sleep
because they know of your foster-father's protection
and would turn you away from him.
Do not be led away
by the noises of the *sídhe*
but lie in your own bed
in the soft bed of our homestead
with my arms to hold you here
and do not listen to their call.^{lxxx}

Diarmaid lay back down but when he heard the voices of the hound again, he could not be still; it was like a battle-cry to him, the sound of hounds on the hunt. Gráinne caught hold of him and laid him down again until, with the first lightening of day, he heard again the sound of the hound and he rose and said that with night passed he would follow the hound's voice.

All these years
he has heeded my counsel
for what did Diarmaid know
of the settled life
and I was his teacher
but now the hounds bay
and he would heed their call to the hunt
like it was his mother calling him to her knee
and he a child. He will not heed me now.

So Gráinne told him which weapons he should take with him but he would make his own choice and take also his own hound, Mac an Chuill, and she knew that who else but Finn would have hounds in the night on these lands where he had been forbidden until now, now when he had been invited for the feast. She knew that Finn knew that Diarmaid could never resist the call of the hounds for the hounds of the fíana had always loved Diarmaid best. Gráinne waited at their stronghold knowing this and listening to the baying of the hounds. She waited and watched from the ramparts, thinking sometimes she could see a flash of movement, a dark shadow that flashed and faded but the music of the hounds told her Diarmaid was alright, and perhaps it was a good thing if he and Finn hunted together.

women watch while
men hunt with hounds
across hills across
valleys across
across

chasing deer
and wild boar

and red foxes
and their enemies
men hunt

women wait while
men hunt with men
across hills across
valleys across
across

But Gráinne wondered if the hounds and Diarmaid hunted the same prey as Finn. The day grew long and cold and she stood at the ramparts keeping vigil as though for a dead man and her hands rested on the babies rolling in her womb and she wished he had taken the weapons of combat rather than the weapons of the hunt.

As the evening drew down and the hounds drew silent, she saw a company of men walking towards the castle, and she could tell by the manner of their stride that they were warriors, and she could tell by the manner of their stride that there was no sense of victory about them. And as they drew closer, she could see that it was Finn walked at the front and that he held Diarmaid's hound in his hand.

If Diarmaid ó Duibhne were alive
it is not in Finn's hand
that Mac an Chuill
would be walking home.

If Diarmaid ó Duibhne were alive
it is not this company
that would be approaching our home
with no host alongside.

If Diarmaid ó Duibhne were alive
it is not this place

I would be watching from
but running to greet him home.

Gráinne fainted and fell forward and over the stonework and she did not scream but others there were who screamed, and screamed louder when she hit the ground and her body broke open like a great egg and three sons that would have been the sons of Diarmaid and Gráinne were spilled on the ground and if they breathed, if they breathed at all, it was not for long. Yet Gráinne breathed still and did not know to what she woke.

Where is my husband?
This blood is his.
Or the blood of our children.
Are these children whose bodies
lie cast around me
like fledglings fallen from the nest,
not their blood but mine
clotting around them?
Children born
at their father's death
should learn to cry
from the beginning.
My children do not cry.

Oisín saw Gráinne's distress and sent Finn and the *fiána* away, but Gráinne lifted her head and asked that they leave Mac an Chuill. Finn refused, claiming this much of Diarmaid ó Duibhne's inheritance – but Oisín took the hound from Finn's grasp and gave the chain into Gráinne's hand before following after Finn and the *fiána*.

All I have left is a dog
Mac an Chuill
to lick my hand
lie by my side
lay his head on my thigh

and I know Mac an Chuill
loved Diarmaid ó Duibhne
as much as I
perhaps more
and together we will mourn

Gráinne's people carried her into the fort. What did they do with the dead babies, babies that had never cried? None but their torn mother wasted breath on a lament for those who had never breathed, it would hold their memory too close. But still they would be given burial in a stone-lined grave that could not be dug up by the dogs.^{lxxxix}

Diarmaid, though, Diarmaid would have a proper burial and a true keening. Gráinne sent out her household to bring Diarmaid's body to her, for the *fiána* had borne only the news but they had not carried Diarmaid home. Gráinne learned that he was left lying where the great boar they had hunted had gouged him deep so he had bled to death while Finn watched. Finn watched and did nothing though Oisín pressed him to bring Diarmaid water from the spring which, carried in Finn's hands, would have saved Diarmaid's life. It was told to her that Diarmaid had reminded Finn of the many times he had served Finn well, but Finn could think only of Diarmaid's betrayal with Gráinne and each time Finn went to fetch the water, he let it run away between his fingers.

Gráinne sent her the people of her household to bring Diarmaid's body home that she might wash him one more time and have him buried on the land of their peacetime, but they returned without him. They told her that when they reached the place where Diarmaid's body lay, Óengus was already there with an equal household. And the two households met while Diarmaid's foster-father raised his lament. When he had finished his lament, Óengus asked Gráinne's household why they had come. When he learned it was to collect the body of Diarmaid and bring it to her, he told them that he would take it instead to his home and while he could not restore Diarmaid to life, he could put an aerial life into him so he could still talk with him each day. Her people brought no body home to Gráinne and she lamented alone.

Where are the women who loved Diarmaid now?

The best loved man in all of Ireland,

that was how they named him,

Diarmaid of the love-spot.

Where are his lovers?

Why do I keen alone

like a solitary curlew on the moors?

There are men who loved him

that would mourn as deeply as I,

with the hollows that have opened inside them.

Oisín, Caoilte, Osgar, I name his companions of the *fiána*,

would mourn alongside them,

all bar Finn the murderer.

The hounds would mourn him.

I hear their voices lifting to the sky,

led by the howl of Mac an Chuill,

to let loose their loss and disbelief

that one they loved so well has fallen,

to a pig's snout.

Our sons, will you weep with me

or do you fear to sound like women wailing?

Daughter, will you wail

that your father who raised you as a man

to take strong arms against your enemies,

your father now is weaker than a corpse,

kept captive by a magical foster-father,

as a companionate dead body that talks.

I have no body to hold in my arms,

cannot touch those lips with mine one more time,

cannot sip of the blood that seeps from his wounds.^{lxxxii}

Diarmaid, even in death others lay claim to you,
though I am your wife, your lover,
your life was never mine
to hold, neither is your death.

Neither do I have babes to hold against me
to give me as much of your love as I could hold.
They, too, have been cast from my body
and I cannot find them, their little arms and legs,
their soft bodies and smooth downy heads.
My body could not hold them anymore than I could hold you.
O Diarmaid, you have left me alone, alone,
and I do not know who to hold to now.

There is Mac an Chuill, I hold his lead in my hand,
given me by Oisín. Finn would have kept him.
He is not Finn's; he is yours and now he is mine
and we will raise our voices together,
Ochone! Ochone! Ochone!
My heart tears apart in my grief
like rocks on a mountain tumbling down from the peaks.

How high we climbed, you and I, how high
and we sheltered in lowlands and woods,
and we knew every cave, every soft place
to sleep in the wilds, Diarmaid.
For all our fine living now, if I could have you back
I would willingly sleep in those cold places,
if I could just feel your warm strength against me,
side by side as we slept.

It was only the two of us then, no others,
none of these women that say they loved you

for no-one loved you as fiercely as I,
as strongly as I, as truly as I,
though there are those who would say otherwise.
Where are they now, Diarmaid?
Where are the women who loved Diarmaid now?
Where is the daughter of the king of Leinster
who bore you a son, that I have loved as my own,
she would mourn you, Diarmaid, and surely she knows,

feels you taken from this world,
yet still I keen alone.^{lxxxiii}

Gráinne knew that Óengus would hear her lament and she imagined him saying to the corpse before him that it was not as though he were unsympathetic to her plight. He considered Gráinne a brave woman, bold. If she had chosen any other, he would have admired her along with all the folk that had helped them to hide away throughout the countryside. If she had chosen any other. Why did she choose you, my beloved boy? he would say. Why ruin your life?

Gráinne could ask Óengus if any of us have a choice of who we love? Did Óengus have a choice when he loved Caer? Gráinne could tell Óengus that she had no choice, that she had seen the *ball seirc* for which all women loved Diarmaid. But Gráinne knew that Óengus had always been jealous of her and that he would be telling the corpse that she was to blame. Even if Diarmaid, roused to speak as an airy spirit, told his foster-father at last that his love was with Gráinne, Óengus would not believe him. Even if Diarmaid asked that Óengus watch over her and their children, his foster-father would only nod, but then would let her make her own way as she had always made her own way. It was Diarmaid that he loved, not those that Diarmaid loved. Not her.

Diarmaid was never mine.
He belonged to the fair folk,
to the people of the *sídhe*.

From the time he walked,
he walked between worlds
until he found me

and turned away
and turned back
and turned away

towards the man he loved
more than any other before

or any other after,
better even than his dogs,

(perhaps not better than his dogs)

but better than me.

He was never mine,
though he unsheathed his knife,
and took a bite from the salmon,
broke the bread,
bred children with me,

he was never mine.

Her body still bleeding, no lover to fill her arms, no babies to hold close for comfort, Gráinne sent for their children to come from where they were being raised in Diarmaid's homeland, and Diarmaid's son, too, by the daughter of the king of Leinster. These were the children of Diarmaid and they returned to her as their mother. Did their sister come also? She would have been travelling there already for the feast to welcome Finn and the king, and instead found a gathering to mourn her father's death.

I am Druineach Dhill
I am the firstborn of Diarmaid and Gráinne
I am the ruler of my own cantred

and I have come for the feast that would be famed
as the reconciliation of Finn and my father, and the king,
and my mother.

I have come for the feast that would have seen
my entry into the society of the famed and wondrous.
Instead I find, what do I find,
not my father's body because it has been carried
into the world of the Tuatha de Danaan
and I have no entry there
to weep over his powerful form
that would throw me high into the air
as a child and even now as a grown woman,
for his love for me was like no other.

I have not found new brothers, new sisters,
as I thought to when my mother sent her news
that there would be more children borne.
Instead, their bodies lie within a cist
of dirt and turf and rocks
to hide them from this world
into which they never arrived.

I do not find my mother rejoicing
that all discord will be buried
beneath ale and mead and roasted meats
of deer and boar and swan and salmon
and acorn meal to remind us of why we gather.

I find her bleeding but she will not weep.
She has wept for my father many times
and now will weep no more,
and I stand with her

to welcome my brothers
and feast my father farewell.

Gráinne welcomed the sons of Diarmaid, and the feast that had been made ready for reconciliation of enemies became instead the feast of Diarmaid's demise. And when the feasting was done, Gráinne's voice rose above them all and they fell silent to listen to her words.

Children of Diarmaid ó Duibhne,
your father was killed by Finn mac Cumhaill
who broke the bonds of peace between us
and you would do well to avenge that upon him.

This I give to you as your inheritance,
the weapons of Diarmaid ó Duibhne,
Ga Derg, the red spear, for Eochaid,^{lxxxiv}
Moraltach, the righteous sword, for Donnchadh,^{lxxxv}
his breastplate for Iollan,
his shield for Connla.

Use these to avenge your father,
kill women and children
when it harms Finn of the *féana*,
make strife where you will,
without treachery or deceit.

Drinking horns, goblets, cups
– what else for a woman without pleasure?

What else for a woman
who once served men a poisoned cup
and so began this story?

Alone I shall have
the drinking vessels

and alone I shall drink from them,
I shall serve men no more.

The sons of Diarmaid came forward to claim their weapons with which they would revenge their father, the enmity with Finn their inheritance and pronounced as such by Gráinne. But for Druineach Dhil, Gráinne did not call her name. The weapons allotted to the sons and the cups to the mother but for the daughter there was no inheritance.

I have ironmongers of my own
I have weapon-masters of my own
I will forge my weapons

I will leave my cantred
for the wilderness creeps closer
I will run along the paths through the forest
I will find the *fiána*
I will revenge my father

who taught me the hero's leap
who taught me the sigh of the spear
who taught me mastery of weapons
so it is as easy to swing a sword
as to pour a cup of ale

I will revenge my father

Gráinne did not see the wilderness creeping closer in her daughter's eyes, filled now with a dark hatred and a hot fury. Gráinne felt only the hollowness in her womb and in her chest and she held a cup up to catch the flicker of candlelight in its metal.

Mine, mine alone
will be the drinking vessels
the horns, the goblets, the cups,
empty as they are of wine
I shall fill them
and alone I shall drink from them
for there is none now
to take his place
with whom I shared
the golden mead

drinking alone
surrounded by their sheen
like sunlight in the shade
penetrating the darkness
softening the cold touch
of my loneliness
I drink alone
from these vessels
filled with my tears

And so the story ends there, leaving Gráinne with her cups and their children armed for battle with Finn.

But when others tell the tale, it ends with Diarmaid's death because a woman's mourning was thought of no account. And one telling says that Finn continued to pursue Gráinne until she gave in and married him and made a peace between Diarmaid's children and Finn.^{lxxxvi} It must have been hard for a woman on her own, understandable to marry again, but inconceivable to marry her husband's killer. In all of the stories, she could not bear to look at

him when they were engaged; she could not bear to look at him when they were married; she could not bear to look at him after Diarmaid's death and the death of her triplets. If she did look upon him it would have been with eyes that burned with hate.

Still, Gráinne was a woman of beauty and the inheritance of the property passed to his sons unless she was able to hold it in her own right.^{lxxxvii} It would have been expected that Gráinne return to her father's place, or wed another.^{lxxxviii} But her love for Diarmaid had been absolute, all-consuming. There could never be another, though others tried. And if Finn was among those who tried?

Would I turn my eyes on any other
when the bright-countenanced Diarmaid ó Duibhne
is ever in my memory's eye?
Would I turn from limbs
warm as smooth beech,
to a hoary, hairy-legged goat?
I would rather die.
I am too strong to die.
I survive this, as I survive all else.

Druineach Dhill did not survive, and in the lay that is told of her, she is called Eachtach, for she was dangerous as a sword.^{lxxxix} She honed her warrior skills and proved again and again that she was her father's daughter, skilled and swift with the hefting of the sword, the casting of the spear, the turn of a body that sent a man spinning to the ground. It was said that no man could withstand her. With her three brothers, they laid siege to Finn where he sheltered in a fort. She called Finn to join her in single combat, as surely as he would any man.

Finn, thumb-sucking seer,
hands too weak to carry water,
as trustworthy as a friendly fox,
hunter of unwilling women,
will you face this woman,
daughter of your enemies
and meet your death,

more honourable than death by swine-hunt,
more honourable than death by thirst,
more honourable than death by deceit?

Eachtach made music with her spears spinning around Finn, and she stroked him with her hazel wands so they dripped red, and she split open his shield like tearing fruit in half. But Finn did not face her alone and another warrior came between her blade and their chieftain though she hewed that warrior in two and still made three cuts to the chest of Finn. As Eachtach beat him down, Finn grew smaller until he seemed but a boy and his warriors could not bear to see Finn made so small and they came to his aid, and one among them slayed Eachtach.^{xc}

I am my father's daughter
with spear and sword and blade
swift as wind
strong as steel

I am my mother's daughter
have learned her strength of will
shed no tears
choose my path

and

I am dead.

Finn lived but he was never healed of his wounds, though he was seven years in the house of the physician and he was no hero from that time, just a pathetic old man. A hero is only a hero when seen through the eyes of another and those eyes that looked on him no longer did so with awe or reverence but with disdain, even hatred. Surely Ailbe, true judge, could no longer warm the bed of the man who had killed her sister's husband, who had shown he was still obsessed with Gráinne. Ailbe had been a good helpmate for Finn, had matched him in wit and cunning, given him sons, but his were an animal's instincts and she could not compete with Gráinne for unattainable beauty. Ailbe the freckle-faced. Her story ends, or the end has not been written. I write it here.

Ailbe was proud, and shamed. Proud to have won Finn, shamed at the man he proved to be. Proud to have become the woman she was, renowned in Ireland for her judgments. Shamed that she had judged so poorly in the man to whom she had given her love. Her tongue grew as bitter as her skin grew hard and spotted from raw exposure to wind and fires and sun harsh off the sea. The wild deer and boar fattened her and she did not care for her dress, did not care to draw the eye of any other of the wild men of the *fíana*. Her children were raised in the wilds with Finn's band, what was left, and when Finn died she returned to her father's house but her hands were too coarse for embroidery and her heart too hard for hospitality and she swore at the servants and was more comfortable riding the horses with the hounds alongside and perhaps she still dreamed sometimes of what it had been like when she was younger and shared a bed of birch beneath the canopy of oak with the best and the finest of warriors.

Gráinne's story also needs an ending and I imagine that all others died around her but she could not escape the curse of the red berries that slowed the aging of her body even while they did not slow the ageing of her heart and her mind.

I am Gráinne. I am Old.
I am Older than the Old Woman of Beare.^{xci}
I am Older than the tales you tell
of Fenian heroes past and present.
I am Old as the Otherworld
whose fruit I stole
to keep the life in my body,
the life that is still there,
that will not leave me,
but it is not the life of youth,
that has come and gone with my children,
gone now while I live on

as does Diarmaid. Though dead,
he still converses every day
with his foster-father.
But not with me.

I would be too old now
to draw his eye, to hold his heart.
Would he converse with me?

Red berries I craved, for red berries
we broke trust, killed a giant,
slaughtered warriors, for red berries.
I craved as a pregnant woman craves
the promise of life, defeating death,
blood-red that sustains
and does not bleed away
into the end of all dreams.

Red berries that I might feed
health into the unborn, might

live to feed breast's milk
and the promise of life sustained.

Red berries kept her alive, my daughter. Then.
Kept her alive only to be killed
by a Fenian blade.
I will not speak of that.
It is hard to live on.

Red berries kept us all alive
until the boar's tusk took Diarmaid.
It may as well have been a sword.
Finn's sword.

I hold still the bottomless cup
that swallows my life
and the taste of sweet berries
is long-forgotten, but their curse

keeps me alive.
Alive, and alone.

Her daughter died by the sword, her sons aged and died in the way of men, their children forgot about her as they raised their own families and aged themselves. Her lands had passed to them. What was there for such a woman but to return to wandering the routes that had been travelled by she and Diarmaid, because they were pursued but also because they loved, to relive the youth she shared with him.

Here I lie,
myself, alone
upon the cold dew-wet turf,
soaking in my tears
as it soaks in the droplets of mist
while the world grows lighter around us
and the great sentinel stones
that once formed our lying-in places
emerge from the fog

like our strong-man come to carry me
on his shoulders again
across rivers and bogs

until I learned to walk alone,
alone, beside you, walking
from one bed to another
as stones rose above us
protecting us in our sleep
and marking where we had been

now I visit the stones again, these dolmens,
searching, perhaps, though
none search for me now,
they are all gone

and here I lie,
myself, alone,

all that is left
of all we shared, and still
I do not know what that was.
Our bodies called to each other.
I sang lullabies above your sleeping
body, you nourished mine,
not all my demands, and yet

still I yearn
and lie, here, beneath the stone
with the mist blanketing my memories,

wondering if it were real
that we lay here together
making all the promises lovers make
and keeping none.

Do I hear you come to me here, searching
or is it the voices of young lovers
come seeking the dolmen
as though lying together beneath the ancient stones
might bequeath something of what we shared,
we who have become legends,

but I would not bless them
with all we shared, the hunger,
the pursuit, the hunt, the killing,
all that blood, all that killing,
and now all are gone.
Dead.

I linger on, alone,
cannot wipe the taste of rowanberries
from my mouth, and there
were so many wanted me dead
but none would render me so.

Perhaps I should end this,
dash my head against the stone
as others have done before me,
so the stones bloom red, so I die
in the red blooming.
Would I find you in death?
Or would it mean losing
all I have left, the memory
within these stones
where we lay. Here I lie,
remembering. It's all I can do.

And lovers come, and might bring
a crumb or two to share
with the wild, scary, grey-haired woman
wrapped in frayed cloaks
that yet still shimmer with golden threads.
Cloaks that keep me neither warm nor dry
but I huddle into the shelter of the stones,
and feel at home, as though
your arms
are wrapped around me again, so

here I lie, alone.
Perhaps, not alone.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ The source material for the following section is drawn primarily from Kuno Meyer, transl., “Finn and Grainne,” *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 1, (1897): 458-61.
- ⁱⁱ Commonly spelt as *fianna* but Kuno Meyer argues convincingly that *fiana* is more accurate. Kuno Meyer, *Fianaigeacht: Being a Collection of Hitherto Inedited Irish Poems and Tales Relating to Finn and His Fiana, with an English Translation*, Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series, Vol. XVI, Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1910: v-vi.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gráinne’s mother is identified as Eithne in Lay XVIII, though she is simply called the king’s wife in the *Toruiheacht*. Eoin MacNeill, ed. and transl., “Lay XVIII. The Daughter of Diarmaid,” in *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn Part I*, London: David Nutt, 1908: 149; Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 7.
- ^{iv} Finn’s aunt, Uirne, was changed into a dog and gave birth to twins who became two of Finn’s hounds though Uirne was returned to her human form. Gerard Murphy, ed., *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn Part III*, Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1986. 1953: 103-104; Murphy, Gerard. ed. “Lay XLIV. Lugh’s Kinship with Certain Members of the Fian,” in *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn Part II*, 115-17. London: Irish Texts Society, 1991.
- ^v The ninth wave is a recurrent motif in Irish stories. Pamela Hopkins, “The Symbolology of Water in Irish Pseudo-History,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 12 (1992): 82.
- ^{vi} John Gregorson Campbell, *The Fians: Or, Stories, Poems, & Traditions of Fionn and His Warrior Band*, London: David Nutt, 1891: 54.
- ^{vii} In some versions, Diarmaid is golden-haired and in others he is black-haired, for example in Campbell, *The Fians*, 54; Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 8-9.
- ^{viii} This poem is derivative of the stanza from ‘Amra Choluim Chille’: “There is one / On whom I should gladly gaze, / To whom I would give the whole world, / O son of Mary, though it be an unequal bargain.” Paul Russell, *In Aliis Libris: Adaptation, Re-Working and Transmission in the Commentaries to Amra Choluim Chille*, in *Authorities and Adaptations: The Rewriting and Transmission of Textual Sources in Medieval Ireland*, edited by Elizabeth Boyle and Deborah Hayden, Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 2014: 73.
- ^{ix} In this quatrain, the meaning of *diupert* translates as an unequal bargain indicating an overpayment. Neil McLeod, *Early Irish Contract Law*, edited by Aedeen Cremin. Sydney: University of Sydney, 1995: 46. My interpretation is that the use of this legal term may indicate that Gráinne knows it is a marriage of inequality between she and Diarmaid, with Diarmaid as the lesser spouse because she has greater social status and wealth. However, Grainne would still give Diarmaid everything because of the value she puts upon their union. For a description of the various forms of marriage, see Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2003, 5th, 1988: 70.
- ^x Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ed., “Codail Beagán, Beagán Beag (Lullaby of Adventurous Love),” translated by David Green and Frank O’Connor, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions* Vol. Máirín IV, edited by Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain, Gerardine Meaney, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Mary O’Dowd, and Clair Wills, eds., 225-26, Cork: Cork University Press, 2002.
- ^{xi} The common translation of *ball seirc* is ‘love-spot’ but *ball* is also associated with limb, member, organ. ‘ball’ dil.ie/5299 in Gregory Toner, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Sharon Arbuthnot, Marie-Luise Theuerkauf, and Dagmar Wodtke, eds., *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, 2019, www.dil.ie
- ^{xii} I. A. Gregory, “How Diarmuid Got His Love-Spot,” in *Complete Irish Mythology*, London: Octopus Publishing Group, 2000: 216-18.
- ^{xiii} J. G. Campbell, *The Fians*, 54.
- ^{xiv} J. G. Campbell, *The Fians*, 52.
- ^{xv} *canach* dil.ie/8122
- ^{xvi} The insertion of Christian references is consistent with Irish medieval literature which reflected the collection, development and dissemination of the Irish stories by religious monks. Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth: National University of Ireland, 2000, 1990: 1-27.
- ^{xvii} J. G. Campbell, *The Fians*, 52-53.
- ^{xviii} Ciuthach could mean “naked wild men living in caves.” J. F. Campbell, ed., *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, Vol. III, Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1862: 55.
- ^{xix} Ciuthach could be derived from *ciuth* meaning ‘long hair behind’ and referring to a type of pigtail. J. F. Campbell, *The West Highlands*, 55.

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- ^{xx} A *fénid* is a member of the *fiana* (see Glossary). Meyer, *Fianaigecht*, xi.
- ^{xxi} The *Tuatha Dé Danaan*, sometimes referred to as the *sídhe*, lived underground in fairy mounds, also called *síd*, alongside human inhabitants. They were a magical, immortal, god-like race of people. Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 2nd ed., London: Chancellor Press, 1996, 1968: 63-4.
- ^{xxii} In an oral Scottish story, Gráinne snatches the blade from Diarmaid when he tries to kill the Ciuthach and buries it in his thigh. He wanders wounded until he returns to them with his hair and beard overgrown, but Gráinne recognises him still. This time he kills the Ciuthach and Gráinne follows him and draws the knife out of his thigh and they continue together. J. F. Campbell, *The West Highlands*, 41-2.
- ^{xxiii} The source material used for the greater part of this version is drawn primarily from Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*.
- ^{xxiv} Some members of the *fiana* may have been youths who had not yet come into their inheritance who then returned to society on maturity; others seem to have chosen membership as a permanent way of life. Kevin Murray, *The Early Finn Cycle*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017: 60.
- ^{xxv} Poem is derivative of quote: “If he is a fitting son-in law for you he is a fitting husband and true mate for me.” Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 5.
- ^{xxvi} Poem is derivative of quote where Gráinne says “It is a great wonder to me ... that it is not for Oisín son of Fionn that Fionn seeks me, for it would be more proper to give me such as he than a man who is older than myself.” Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 7.
- ^{xxvii} Poem is derived from Gráinne’s dialogue with the druid: Gráinne asks, “Who is that blooming, sweet-spoken man ... upon whom is the curling jetblack hair and the two crimson red cheeks ...” The druid responds, “That man is the white-toothed, bright-countenanced Diarmaid ó Duibhne ... that is, the best beloved of women and maidens in the whole of Ireland.” Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 9.
- ^{xxviii} For a description of the concept of the sacred libation in Irish literature, see R. Mark Scowcroft, “Abstract Narrative in Ireland,” *Ériu* 46 (1995): 130-37.
- Koch and Carey note also that certain features such as “a queen closely connected with a goddess, a honey drink that proves poisonous, an unnatural death instead of a wedding feast ... a love triangle ... a woman who brings great evil to those close to her through no fault of her own – resonate widely through the Celtic literary traditions and may be viewed as elements in its inherited preliterate substance.” John T. Koch and John Carey, ed. and transl., “The Poisoned Libation,” in *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, Aberystwyth, Wales: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003: 40-42.
- ^{xxix} This poem is derivative of: “‘Then,’ said Gráinne, ‘I put you under bonds (lit. tabus) of strife and destruction, Diarmaid, that is, the pain of a woman in childbirth and the vision of a dead man over water and the life of Niall Caille to reproach you, if you do not take me with you out of this house to-night before Fionn and the king of Ireland rise out of that sleep in which they are.’” Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 10-11.
- ^{xxx} *Mag Mell* dil.ie/31274 and dil.ie/31898.
- For a description of Mag Mell, see Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover, eds., “The Adventures of Connla the Fair,” in *Ancient Irish Tales*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996. Reprint, 2nd: 488-89.
- ^{xxxi} This poem is derivative of: “And I was in my own sunny chamber that day watching you, and I fixed the keenness of my eye and of my sight upon you that day, and I did not give that love to any other person from that time to this.” Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 13.
- ^{xxxii} I. A. Gregory, “Diarmuid and Grania,” in *Complete Irish Mythology*, 232-67, London: Octopus Publishing Group, 2000, 1904 as *Gods and Fighting Men*: 254.
- ^{xxxiii} While this reference relates to the tale of Becfhola, it provides a discussion of medieval dress and I have used it as an example of the type of dress that Gráinne would have worn. Niamh Whitfield, “Dress and Accessories in the Early Irish Tale ‘The Wooing of Becfhola,’” in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles 2*, edited by Robin Netherton and Fale R. Owen-Crocker, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2006: 5-6.
- ^{xxxiv} Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, New York: Infobase Publishing, 2014: 420.
- ^{xxxv} For consideration of the erotic and aesthetic appeal of images of the drowned woman, see Anne-Gaëlle Saliot, *The Drowned Muse: Casting the Unknown Woman of the Seine across the Tides of Modernity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- ^{xxxvi} Thomas Owen Clancy, “Fools and Adultery in Some Early Irish Texts,” *Ériu* 44 (1993): 109.
- ^{xxxvii} “Lay XLIV. Lugh’s Kinship,” in *DF II*, 115-17.
- ^{xxxviii} For a description of how Finn acquired his thumb of knowledge, see Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985: 156.
- ^{xxxix} This poem is derived from: “‘I leave this advice with you, not to go into a tree of one trunk in fleeing from Finn, and not to go into an underground cave which has only one entrance, and not to go into an island of the sea

which has only one way leading to it ... whatever place you shall cook your meal do not eat it there, and whatever place you shall eat do not lie there, and whatever place you shall lie do not rise there.” Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 29.

^{xl} For laws relating to dog excrement, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, “The Manuscript Transmission of *Bretha Comaithchesai*,” in *The Reworking and Transmission of Textual Sources in Medieval Ireland*, edited by Elizabeth Boyle and Deborah Hayden, Dublin: Dundaglan Press Ltd, 2014: 116.

^{xli} Derived from Standish H. O’Grady’s description of the tests of the *fiána*, quoted in Joseph Falaky Nagy, “Fenian Heroes and Their Rites of Passage,” *Béaloideas* 54/55 (1986): 169.

^{xlii} The Tóruigheacht refers only to what Diarmaid did. I have changed this to include both Gráinne and Diarmaid.

^{xliii} Union by abduction (*lánamas foxail*) was recognised as one of the nine forms of marriage. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, 70.

^{xliv} This prose is derived from the quatrain: “Good is thy share, o Gráinne, / better for thee than a kingdom, / the dainty flesh (*sercoll*) of the woodcocks, / with a drop of smooth mead.” Whitley Stokes, ed., “The Bodleain Amra Choluim Chille,” *Revue Celtique* 20, no. 1 (1899): 265.

^{xlv} Poem derivative of quote: “for you will not always be without followers” from Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 31.

^{xlvi} This anecdote of using heather to trick Finn comes from oral folklore; sometimes it was also carrying a bag of sand from the shore to trick him that they were still by the sea. Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, xx.

^{xlvii} *dear*: “*pref.* a daughter, common in the ancient names of women ...”; *dub*: “*n.* anything black, a spot or stain; blackness ...” Patrick Stephen Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge Agus Béarla: An Irish-English Dictionary, Being a Thesaurus of Words, Phrases and Idioms of the Modern Irish Language, with Explanations in English*. Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1904: 318, 374.

^{xlviii} The following episode is primarily drawn from Nessa Ní Shéaghda, ed. and transl., “Uath Beinne Etair: The Hiding of the Hill of Howth,” in *TDAG*, 131-37.

^{xlix} Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 111.

^l The name ‘Mala Lee’ is taken from J. F. Campbell, ed., “LXI The Lay of Diarmaid,” in *The West Highlands*, 55.

^{li} Gearóid Ó. Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2003: 71-75.

^{lii} Cherie N. Peters, “‘He Is Not Entitled to Butter’: The Diet of Peasants and Commoners in Early Medieval Ireland,” in *Food and Drink in Ireland*, edited by Elizabeth Fitzpatrick and James Kelly: Royal Irish Academy, 2016: 86-90.

^{liii} ‘Away’ is a folklore term for being taken by the fairy. Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, London: Pimlico, 1999: 62.

^{liv} This poem is derivative of the poem delivered by the old woman: “higher the snow than the mountain, the deer cannot get at its food ... a river is each furrow upon a slope, / a full pool is each ford. / A great sea is each lake which is full, / and a full lake is each pool; / horses do not get over the Ford ... The wolves ... do not find / rest nor sleep in the lair of wolves, / the little wren cannot find / shelter for her nest ... the blackbird does not find a bank she would like ... Comfortable is our two-handled cauldron ... The eagle ... from the wind gets grief “in Nessa Ní Shéaghda, ed., “The Hiding of the Hill of Howth,” 133-4.

^{lv} The goddess of the land often presented as an old woman who regained her youthfulness when united with her sovereign. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, “Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas,” *The Crane Bag* 4, no. 1, Images of the Irish Woman (1980): 12.

^{lvi} Patrick Weston Joyce, *The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places*, Vol. 2, Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1883: 401.

^{lvii} The following episode is primarily based upon Leland L. Duncan, “The Quicken-Tree of Dubhros.” *Folklore* 7, no. 4 (Dec. 1986): 323-30.

^{lviii} The following story comes from a tale in: Duncan, Leland L. “The Quicken-Tree of Dubhros.” *Folklore* 7, no. 4 (Dec. 1986): 326-30.

^{lix} For a discussion of the awareness of the dangers of childbirth in Early Ireland see Lisa M. Bitel, “‘Conceived in Sins, Born in Delights’: Stories of Procreation from Early Ireland,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 2 (1992): 191.

^{lx} According to an eighth century law tract, a man could be fined for withholding the food craved by a pregnant woman. See Peters, “‘He Is Not Entitled to Butter’,” 91.

^{lxi} *Luis* is the name for the quicken-tree (Rowan) in the ogham alphabet. Charles Graves and C. Limerick, “The Ogham Alphabet,” *Hermathena* 2, no. 4 (1876): 458.

^{lxii} Fidchell is a game of strategy likened to chess. Joseph Falaky Nagy, "The Sign of the Outlaw: Multiformality in Fenian Narrative," in *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: A Memorial for Milman Parry*: Slavica Pub, 1987: 469.

^{lxiii} For a description of *Tír na nÓg*, the Land of Youth, see Micheál Coimín, "Láoi Oisín Ar Tír na Nóg: The Lay of Oisín in the Land of Youth," Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son Ltd, 1750: 15-19.

^{lxiv} According to the *Tóruigheacht*, Gráinne bore to Diarmaid four sons and one daughter, she being named Druineach Dhill. The daughter of Diarmaid and Gráinne who seeks revenge on Finn for her father's death, as described in Lay XVIII, is named as Eachtach. In my poem, I have imagined the possibility that their daughter was born while they still lived in exile. This is based on the chronological sequence of events because Gráinne was heavily pregnant at Dubhros and may have given birth before a truce could be negotiated. Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 79; MacNeill, "Lay XVIII. The Daughter of Diarmaid," 149-151.

^{lxv} The following episode is primarily based upon: John Carey, ed. and transl., "Tochmarc Ailbe: The Wooing of Ailbe," 1-14, unpublished.

^{lxvi} The poem borrows phrases, images, colours and themes from Carey's translation. In particular, the last quatrain is a direct quote: "I saw a warrior, with abundant valour: / welcome beyond any is the mighty, kingly warrior! / A blaze of light dappled him; / a purple flame filled him." [...] "What I have seen is health to my body ... / I would give up the stronghold in which I was raised / in exchange for the treasures which I have seen." Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 3-5.

^{lxvii} The following poem is derivative of the riddling exchange between Finn and Ailbe in which he asks his riddles and she responds. I have incorporated the two speakers into one voice. Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 9-11.

^{lxviii} The following description of the life Ailbe would live with the fian is extrapolated in "Tochmarc Ailbe" in a poem delivered by Finn. Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 11.

^{lxix} Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 6-7.

^{lxx} This poem is derivative of the poem which describes an exchange between Ailbe and her father where Ailbe says that "the knotty tree's acorns are best". Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 7-8.

^{lxxi} The king says that: "Is the fresh branch of the *diurmel* well placed / in the shadow of the oak? / Even in hot weather plants decay / beneath oak trees laden with acorns. / There will be no way out for you, / like a bird around which a snare closes." Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 8.

^{lxxii} John Carey writes that "the phrase *tochmarc togai* 'wooing of choice' closely resembles *toga tochmairc* 'choice of wooing'; the latter apparently refers to a man's pick of potential wives ... the implication seems to be that a maximum of freedom is granted to the woman being courted." Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 9.

^{lxxiii} This description is derived from the exchange between Finn and Ailbe where he instructs her on appropriate behaviour and she challenges him that, "I do not act thus to oppose you and contend with you; but your speech is empty if you speak alone, with no one to answer you." Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 13.

^{lxxiv} This poem is derived from: "If I found an upper quern-stone, I would become a lower quern-stone." Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 13.

^{lxxv} Gerard Murphy, ed. and transl., "Lay XLVII Caoilte's Sword," in *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Finn Part II*, London: Irish Texts Society, 1991: 125-41.

^{lxxvi} One of the wonders that happened to Finn after his marriage to Ailbe was the appearance of a swelling like a carbuncle below his breast. Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 14.

^{lxxvii} A *rigféinid* is a leader of a *fiána* (see Glossary).

^{lxxviii} When Eachtach, the daughter of Gráinne and Diarmaid, hears of her father's death, the Lay tells that "into her came a quick spirit of manhood." This tendency may have been evident earlier as, in this Lay, she is clearly a weapons-trained warrior. MacNeill, "Lay XVIII. The Daughter of Diarmaid," 149-51.

^{lxxix} Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 81.

^{lxxx} This poem is derived from Gráinne's words to Diarmaid that "it is the Tuatha Dé Danann who are doing that to you because of Aonghus's protection over you. And lie down in your own bed and do not heed it." Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, 81.

^{lxxxi} For an investigation into the manner of infant burial in Christian and pre-Christian Ireland, see: Nyree Finlay, "Outside of Life: Traditions of Infant Burial in Ireland from Cillin to Cist," *World Archaeology* 31, no. 3 (2000): 413-417.

^{lxxxii} Drinking the blood of the deceased is common motif in both Irish and Scottish literature, see Derick S. Thomson, "The Blood-Drinking Motif in Scottish Gaelic Tradition," in *Indogermanica Et Caucásica: Festschrift Für Karl Horst Schmidt*, edited by Roland Bielmeyer and Reinhard Stempel, 415-24. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994.

A graphic fictional account of the ritualistic connection between *caoineadh* and drinking blood, provided by Edmund Spenser, is quoted in Laura O'Connor, *Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and De-Anglicization*, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006: 3-4.

^{lxxxiii} It was considered shameful to keen alone. Miriam Uí Dhonnabháin, "Patrons, Poets, Scribes and Singers – Some Examples of Participation by Women in the Later Gaelic Literary Tradition," *The Australasian Journal of Irish Studies* 14 (2014): 103.

^{lxxxiv} *Gae* means a small spear, dart or arrow. *Gae* dil.ie/25080 *Derg* means "of colour, red, ruddy." dil.ie/15626 The *Gae Derg* was a red-coloured spear, or perhaps its name was gained through its bloody reputation. Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge Agus Béarla*: 501.

^{lxxxv} Gráinne describes the *Móraltach* as "the sword of Manannan" that was gifted to Diarmaid from the sea-god on another occasion. The word *móraltach*, according to eDIL, is adjectival for morality, a definition supported by Dinneen. I have therefore described it as a righteous sword. Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge Agus Béarla*, 762; dil.ie/32557

^{lxxxvi} Ní Shéaghda describes five different endings in the *Tóruigheacht* endings, including that Gráinne marries Finn in one manuscript and in O'Grady's translation. Ní Shéaghda, *TDAG*, xvii-xviii.

^{lxxxvii} There were situations in which women could legally hold land, depending upon whether the land was acquired through inheritance or acquisition for other reasons. In general, land was held by male relatives. That Gráinne distributes Diarmaid's possessions after his death implies that she retains ownership of property. De Oxenham, Helen, "The Powerful Feminine," in *Perceptions of Femininity in Early Irish Society*: Boydell and Brewer, 2016: 113-17; Bitel, Lisa M., *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996: 114-15.

^{lxxxviii} "The laws reveal a society in which a woman is generally without independent legal capacity" and could not make a contract "without the permission of her superior (usually her husband or father)." Kelly further goes on to explain that in the old law texts it was shown that a woman's sons had charge over her when widowed. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, 75-76.

^{lxxxix} While eDIL provides no definition for the headword, *eachtach*, it is associated with swords and destruction. dil.ie/19549.

^{xc} MacNeill, "Lay XVIII. The Daughter of Diarmaid," 150-51.

^{xci} This poem is derivative of 'I Am Ireland' by Patrick Pearse in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, edited by Seamus Deane, Andrew Carpenter and Jonathan Williams, 558. Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991.

Chapter Eight: The Woman of Fate

Derdriu, how do I tell your story?
So many have already told of you,
spoken of you as though you were their own heartbreak.
Sometimes my heart breaks for you.
Sometimes I scorn the sacrifice of your life
for love of a man,
no matter how worthy or how handsome.
You could have been so much more.

But perhaps that's not true,
perhaps you were all you could be
in a world defined by prophetic utterances
and the desires of men. You escaped for a while,
and that was its own heroic feat.

Unborn. The world you are about to enter
is a world of kings and warriors and druids,
where your father is the king's poet, or his bard,
or his storyteller, his *scélaigi*,
and the son of a blind man.ⁱ

The blind are often those touched by fairy,
gifted by the fairy, and does this gift,
passed down to your father,
sing also in your blood?
The gift of prophecy, of insight,
the gift of the poet? Gift, curse, blight ...

Unborn. In the world you are about to enter
the king has arrived unexpectedly
to visit the household of your father,
where your mother, whom I call Bean-Torach,
she is the woman of the house.

How to feed a king and his retinue
when they arrive without warning?
How to feed all these people?
No simple trip to the supermarket, no fast food outlet,
and it must be royal fare.
I imagine animals were slaughtered,
a pig that was being fattened
suddenly led to the chopping block,
a goose plucked from the company of others.
Someone sent to catch salmon or trout.
Herbs and vegetables from the garden, from the cool store.

It was the task of the woman of the house
to make sure everyone was provided for.
Especially the king. Especially this king.
He wants more than food,
he has sexual appetites as well,
he wants to sleep with the woman of the household,
no matter to him that she is pregnant, fully pregnant.ⁱⁱ

Rock and sway,
the cradle in my belly
spreading my legs wide,
balancing her weight and mine.
A wide pelvis, a strong frame,
will keep this restless child safe,
if only for a time.

He would have me
spread my legs wider as though birthing,
would press his weight upon my swollen body.
This pelvis only has room for my child, yet unborn.

I can carry no other weight upon my frame,
and must keep this restless child safe
if only for a time.

The king is denied. So, with great care,
careful not to disturb and raise his ire,
Bean-Torach walks among them, soft-footed,
filling their bowls, filling their cups,
filling with fear in her insides
that her child will be born
into such a world.
And the child wakes,
wakes in the fear-filled womb.

Bean-Torach leaves the company
of the king and his strong-armed men
and as she bites down upon her own cries,
the world is crushing in on the unborn
and it is no world she wants.
The unborn child screams.

Shush, child!
Quiet, child!
Keep your silence.
Shoosh, you do not want
these men to hear your cry.
I will teach you what you need to know,
I will teach you the value of silence
in this world of men, only
shush now, quiet now,
keep your silence.

But in this world full of men,
leaning sated and drunken against the walls,

the scream of the unborn wakes them, frightens them, alerts them.
They rise to their swords,
ready for battle.

Is it a gift of foresight,
too early she is giving voice
to what all infants feel as they are rejected
from their mother's womb into a world
that is cold, loud, full of shifting shades of light and dark, and danger?
The men of Ulster hear it as more than a child's cry,
hear it as clearly as the wail of the *bean sídhe*ⁱⁱⁱ
and every man present knows
a doom has been pronounced,
every Ulsterman has risen to his feet,
sword in hand to slay the enemy.

But the only enemy brought before them
is Bean-Torach, swollen with child,
sweat-drenched and restless with labour pangs,
frightened for the baby who, unborn,
frightens them all.

When they call Bean-Torach forward,
she knows to give all authority to Cathbad the druid,
knows only his words will lower the swords
so the child will not be sliced from her womb.

O Cathbad, oh Cathbad
what is this that cries from my womb?
With your learning, your wisdom, your skill,
You are one to interpret the unborn's cry.
O Cathbad, oh Cathbad,
no woman can know
what her womb holds

so will you tell me, tell us all,
what it is I bring into the world
that sets warriors so to trembling?^{iv}

*(I know. I know. I know.
All these moons
I have felt the restless tides
of her ebb and flow,
her twists and turns
away from this world.
I know.
Shhh. Do not tell them
I know.)*

O Cathbad, O Cathbad,
with your learned wisdom
tell me what it is I carry,
what it is I bring
into this world.

The druid is sure of himself.
He lays his hand upon the woman's stomach,
Feels the infant resonate under his touch,
the scream still echoing in the womb.

I am a foal trembling
under the breaker's hand,
not knowing what is to come
but that this touch is unknown,
I do not think this touch is to be trusted.

I am a wave breaking on a rock,
broken running back out to sea,
unformed until joining the next wave,
returning again to wreak my havoc.

I am a speechless infant
echoing in his mind,
a wind that whips the trees into a frenzied dance
until their branches break, and fall,
smash upon the ground.

The druid says that the girl's name will be Derdriu^v
and there will be great evil because of her,
she will cause the destruction of the king,
she will cause the destruction of the province,
such is the power of this unborn child.^{vi}
This is what he tells to Bean-Torach,
this is the doom he pronounces on her child.

My child, my daughter,
will be the one who
brings down the world
of this proud, cruel man,
this robber-king.^{vii}
She will bring down
this man's world.
Nil brón orm.
I am not sorry.

The druid has yet more to say.
Beauty. Beauty he pronounces on this baby,
describes her height, her hair,
her skin, her eyes, her teeth, her lips.

Says she will be a woman so beautiful
that warriors will slaughter each other
and queens be jealous.^{viii}

Will this Derdriu spring from my womb
fully-formed, never a child?
He speaks of her as a tall woman
with yellow curls tumbling down,
grey-blue eyes, the blush of foxglove
on her cheeks, teeth spotless as snow,
lips already stained red as though
she has drunk blood?^{ix}

Is this how she will be born,
never an infant, never a child,
a woman fully-formed?

Cathbad, man that you are,
this is no woman in my womb
and her hair will be a dark pelt
and her eyes full blue because
all babies are covered in fur at birth
and all baby's eyes are blue,
and she will be gummy
as you in your old age
and there will be no biting down
when I nurse her against my breast,
and she will have no reddening of her lips
until she is full-grown.

Cathbad, I do know, this is an infant
in my womb, and if the men of Ulster
fall to slaughtering one another,
well, that has always
been their wont
and is no fault of hers.

I wonder at such prophecies.
The king had grown in stature and arrogance
by equal measures, he had climbed high and would fall hard.
It needed no great druidic foresight to know this.
But to offer up a woman,
a woman who could be held to blame,
that was clever. The druid who offered this prophecy
was also the king's father, so it was said.^x The druid
made it known that the destruction of Ulster
would be the woman's fault,
not the fault of son the king.
The fault of a woman not yet born.

I feel you inside me
resting beneath my heart
curled up like an unfurled bud
and once your petals taste the air
they will open, and tear,
and be broken, scent strong
enough to send men wild

but when the beauty fades
with age will they recall
what they were fighting for?

And then the child is delivered
into this world, but that is not part
of the story, the delivery, the arrival,
goes untold. It can be supposed
it was no different to any other,
messy, bloody, painful for the woman
and the screams that could be heard
were those of Bean-Torach.

Each birth the same,
a child born fluids leaking away
that had sustained.

Each birth different,
a newcomer to the world awaiting their name,
their promise revealed.

Each birth the same,
a child born who will change the world
for better or for ill.

Bean-Torach is left behind in the story,
never mentioned again.
Perhaps it is that once born
the baby is no longer hers but the king's.
Perhaps she dies after birthing her child.

blood explodes
reddened hair lips skin
bathed in mother's blood
bathed in mother's lifeblood
blood flows away

away from the beating heart

away from the living source

redly flows away

Concerning the child there would be great evil.
The druid says it is so and so it will be.
When Derdriu is born, she is
not a tall golden-haired woman but

a ruddy wrinkled downy-haired baby.
The druid tells the infant her fate,
that she will destroy much,
that the men of the province will suffer,
no matter how demure she grows,
because of the jealousy she will cause,
and she will bring about
the exile of the three sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn)^{xi}
who are the druid's nephews.^{xii}
It will be a famous tale.
O Woman of Destiny, he calls her.
If the child listens,
she cannot yet understand.

The baby turns,
a weight is upon her mother
a hard, heavy imprint

the mother turns, twists
away, the baby's cry
has subsided
but the echoes remain

A child barely born,
already being told that
she would destroy the world,
destroy their world, that
warriors would demand her death.
No crime yet committed
but why wait for the destruction
if it could be averted?
The Ulster warriors call for her death
but the king will not allow it.

To the king belong the finest treasures,
the most beautiful woman among them.
Though his men want Derdriu killed at birth,
the druid's words do not serve to warn the king but to entice him.
Not just to command men, but to command fate.
When a woman grown, she will be his bride
and until then be kept in a court apart.

So the king kept her for himself,
reared apart from all others
like a penned calf. Into that pen
were allowed her foster mother and father.
What is a young child to learn
from a foster-father, a foster-mother?
All that a child would learn from its parents.
How to behave, how to do duties,
perhaps how to sing and play,
but no other children to sing and play with.

Into that pen
would come the king to visit.
What does she learn from a king
who sits her upon his lap
and kisses her hair and cheeks and lips,
and smooths her golden locks,
and watches her beauty unfold
even as her weight grows heavier in his lap
and he rises to meet her weight.
She learns to hold herself still,
to smile and acquiesce when coaxed,
and to shudder when he lets her down
but to let no-one see that she does.

Into that pen
comes Leborcham, she
who could not be prevented from entry anywhere
because she was a female satirist.^{xiii}
Because she had a sharp and dangerous tongue.
Because her words had power.
Because she was feared. She may also
have been despised but fear was her shield.

What does Derdriu learn from a female satirist?
She learns the power of words,
the shape of them, the sound of them,
how they might be fitted together
to form weapons that destroy
or make tapestries whole,
where words come from
and where words go
and how to send them there.

Leborcham brought the world to Derdriu.
The satirist could travel the whole of Eire
in one day, and learn of all happenings,
which she would tell to the king,^{xiv}
and perhaps to a young girl
longing to look out on the world
but hidden in this place.
A young girl who did not know enough
to see that Leborcham was hideous, only
that she filled Derdriu's mind with gossip
and adventures and dreams.

They say I, Leborcham,
am slave-born
swift

furious
 wretched
 vehement
 hard
 quarrelsome.
 Such things as are true,

and
black-eyed beetle-browed
dark tufts of hair spiking pig-like skin
skinny breasts and big crooked shanks
fat-bellied (I eat the food of armies) but thin-lipped,
feet that point backwards because I fly forward so fast.
Such things are true.

That
I scream as I eat
because of the size of the pieces I consume,
great lumps of meat and loaves of bread
such that my entrails can be seen
through my blackened broken teeth,
these things are exaggerated.

That
I am hideous is true
but to a young girl kept penned,
I am all she knows of the world,
all she loves of the world,
and she is all I love.^{xv}

Leborcham feeds Derdriu's curiosity,
tells her tales of the world beyond,
of the king of Ulster and his Red Branch warriors.

What matter that the girl could not see these things
when they were poured into her imagination?
Leborcham knows all the secrets of the court.
Leborcham can tell the young girl
of the king's wives and their lives, and deaths,
of Mess Búachalla and Derdraigen,
and three sisters, Mugain, Eithne and Medb.^{xvi}

When the hero known as the hound of Ulster
returned in a warped frenzy from his adventures,
it was Mugain who led the women of Ulster to strip bare-chested
so the frenzy fell from him and they bathed him
in a vat of iced water.^{xvii}
She was called Mugain Aittenchaithrech,
Mugain of the furzy hair,^{xviii}
and it was because she was found with her poet-lover
that she was slain by the men of Ulster.^{xix}

Eithne was the sister of Mugain
who drowned in the river while pregnant
and the king's son was cut from her belly
after her death, and he lived.
The river is named for her.^{xx}

Medb was the other sister,
and the king was her first husband
but she left him and returned to Tara,
where her father was the High King,
and then she was given the rulership
of Connacht, taken from her sister, Clothru,
who Medbh killed with a sword.^{xxi}

Not satisfied with his own wives,
the king of Ulster also demanded the right of first night
from all those who would wed in his kingdom,^{xxii}
and once, when he was drunk, he had slept
with his mother Nessa and impregnated her.^{xxiii}

It is clear to me, when she speaks of him,
Leborcham loves this king.
She has carried food to him
when he has been under siege
and perhaps he has been kind to her.^{xxiv}

Perhaps he is not a bad man,
but when I hear the stories
of wife after wife after wife,
and he sleeps with every bride,
and he sleeps with his mother
and all of them bear children to him,

and I am like a heifer calf in the herd
waiting to be grown enough
for the bull to mount me and thrust
his much-used pizzle in my cunt.

Will he wait until I am grown enough
that I can bear the tearing of my flesh
and carry his bulk upon my frame?

He does not seem like a man who will wait.

It is a fate I must ready for,
as have all the other wives
who have laid beneath him before me,
then have left him, sometimes in death.

From Leborcham, Derdriu has learned all manner of things,
the ways of words and the ways of the world.
Her mind is wakened, strengthened
like a warrior's body at practice every day,
and she learns to see the patterns in all things,
sees the patterns of the past and the present and the future
all weaving together, and her hand at the loom.

Derdriu sees the patterns
when she watches her foster-father
slaughter a weaner, a calf, outside on the snow,
meat for her supper.
Derdriu sees the patterns
as the weaner's blood
runs out upon the snow,
bright red soaking into the crisp whiteness,
red blooms on the white drifts,
and when a crow drops down,
sips of the blood, drinks of the blood,
she puts the patterns together.
She is pleased by what she sees.

Beloved, he would be
one man of three colours
with body white as snow
with hair black as the raven
with cheek red as blood^{xxv}

Beloved, he would be
if I could see such a man
if I could touch such a man
if I could make such a man
as real as my dreams

Leborcham does not hesitate,
Leborcham does not hold back,
Leborcham has been waiting.

There is such a one
fitted to that description
a man of three colours
hair black as a raven's wing
cheeks red as blood
body white as snow

the man of three colours is Naoise,
one of three sons
of Uisliu, of Innlenn,
and he is as near to us
as the blood upon the snow.

Derdriu declares
that she will never be well
again until she has seen this man,
until then she would suffer *grá-tinn*,
the sickness of the heart would be on her.^{xxvi}

No food no fare
shall settle in my stomach
and the flesh will fall
from my hips and my arms
and I will sicken
and I will ail,
until I see his face
and my love-sickness
will melt like the snow

Did Leborcham
tell Derdriu more about Naoise?
Having awakened the girl's curiosity,
Derdriu having seen the portents of her perfect mate,
(she was never the king's, since before her birth she had cried against him),
Leborcham would surely have told her more.
Told her that Naoise and his brothers
could sing in such harmony
that cows produced more milk
and men were soothed to peacefulness,
though the brothers themselves were not peaceful.
When armed, together they could stand against all Ulsterman,
back to back they could not be defeated,
having learned from the best of the warrior-women,
fostered by Aife, trained by her sister, Scáthach,^{xxvii}
learning alongside Uathach, the daughter of Scáthach.^{xxviii}

Leborcham could have told Derdriu
that as huntsmen the brothers were swift as hounds
and sure of the mark as would be an eagle.^{xxix}

Derdriu, though, needed only to know
of raven's wings and drops of blood
and a body white as snow.
Derdriu stole away from the confines of the court,
she found the secret ways, or knew them all along.
What child does not find secret passages to the outside world
through which they might escape
the confines of their mundane world?
Especially she would escape the attention of the king,
who was perhaps already her husband, some tell it so.^{xxx}
Perhaps the king had already made his mark upon her.
Perhaps she had long planned her escape.

There is always a way of escape,
become a bird to fly above the walls,
a mouse to chew through their supports,
a badger to burrow beneath.
Or charm the guards until they let you past,
or sneak the keys from your foster-father's pocket
while he sleeps, thinking you an obedient child.
Follow the shapes of the clouds in the sky above
while you lie silently on your back, pressed
against a yielding earth, dream
of flying away, far away,
you can dream.

Derdriu found Naoise alone. She knew
where to find Naoise, alone, by the palace walls.
With her gift of foreknowledge, or with
Leborcham's help? She knew.

Naoise had no hope, not
when Derdriu sauntered past him, hips swaying,
sun-brightened hair streaming down her back,
limbs long and graceful as the willow.
Where did she learn to move in such a way,
a slow sway, shaking her hair behind her,
low glances from beneath her lashes.
Not skills learned from foster-parents,
and it was not the art of Leborcham,
but perhaps she had learned to please the king.
She pleased Naoise. A heifer
he called her, he who was a warrior
and knew the value of cattle best.
A woman's worth measured in cattle.

Fair is the heifer that goes past me (he said).
Heifers are bound to be big, (I said to him)
where there are no bulls
heifers can grow to full flesh.

A heifer bulling (such as I)
sends a lonely mournful calling
echoing over the wakening land,
travels in search of a mate (such as you)

A bull heeding (will you heed my call?)
sends a rumble like thunder
rolling over the deep valleys
as he gallops to her call (so you should).

But Naoise saw that she belonged to the king
as clearly as if he saw a brand upon her.
He would have turned away, he was a king's man,
he knew the prophecy, they all did.

Derdriu says there have been no bulls,
that she has grown alone, and big,
and is now ready to find her bull.
Derdriu says this to Naoise
and hides the mark upon her flank.

Can I tell him how
when a heifer is branded
she is held tight in a crush,
or rope-tied, limb to limb,
no struggle possible,
no kicking allowed.

The owner takes a branding iron,
a long shaft with the mark
on the end like a knob,
heats it in the coals
until red-hot,
presses it against her flesh,
the acrid smell of burning hair
and burnt flesh mingling
with the bellow of pain

only an instant
the hot iron removed
the ties released
she stands and shakes herself
shrugs against the wound
blistered on her haunch,
turns away to graze.

Can I tell this to him?

Naoise knows, perhaps he smells it on her.
You are the king's heifer, he tells her,
you have worn his brand since you were born,
and none can go against him. I will not.

He told me I had the bull of the province,
he told me I had the king himself,
he told me.

I told him, I told him, I told him
I would choose, I would choose
a young bull like him
over the old
any day.

He did not want my choice,
reminded me of the prophecy,
words spoken at my birth,
spoken before my birth,
and he would hold me to them
as my doom pronounced.
If the druid's words are true,
then my doom is his, my doom is the doom
of the sons of Uisliu and Innlenn,
exile because of me.

Coward! Afraid of a baby.
A woman now, I leap
across the divide between us,
take both his ears in my grip,
shake him as a child
who does not listen, listen,
Naoise, son of Uisliu and Innlenn.
You will wear this shame
unless you take me with you.

These two ears
will hear only
shame and derision,
satire burning your ear lobes,
plugging the canals,
drumming in your head,
if you do not heed
my words, if you
do not heed my words, if you
do not follow my call.^{xxxi}

He told me to be gone, then,
as he would tell me many times,
so I went and behind me
I heard his tenor voice rise out,
his song to cover the province in warring men
and I knew he would take me away.^{xxxii}

When Naoise sang
the Ulstermen rose fighting
as they had at Derdriu's birth
but it was only his brothers, Ardán and Anlann,
that came to his side, unhappy
when they heard what Derdriu had done.
Yet they said that though evil would come of it,
they would not see their brother disgraced while they lived,
and they would go with him, to another land if needs be.
So they stood with their brother as they always would,
and now that meant they would stand also with Derdriu.

They left on the next day, they
and one hundred and fifty warriors
and women and dogs and servants
so that the king would not know
Derdriu was disguised among them.

Ardán and Anlann had wives.^{xxxiii}
Maybe they were among this company as well,
maybe their children too, unless
those children were already fostered out.
Or maybe the wives of the brothers
were still at home on their holdings
waiting for their husbands to return.

It is always thus
for those wed to a hero
and for one wed
to a son of Uisliu
there is no separation
between the brothers
and if we would be
with our husband
we must be with
the crowd
who adore him
who adore them

Yet when he comes home
he comes only to me
and it is my arms
that hold him in our bed
and my body that bears his children
and it is myself that keeps the house
and waits for his return.
Always waits for his return.

Derdriu had thought to claim Naoise for herself,
but he was inseparable from his brothers
and there was such a large company
they travelled with, such a large company
for one who had known only a solitary life,
such a large crowd for a young heifer.

I wanted one man
but he came with brothers,
not one man but three,
sons, brothers, lovers
born together

learned together
fought together
sang together
loved together.
There are three
where I wanted one
but they stand back to back
and are an unbreakable shield.

The band travelled around Eire
and everywhere the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn)
were welcomed, and Derdriu, too,
because she came with them,
but the king's pursuit was relentless.
Everywhere he set snares for them
until nowhere in Eire was safe.

We will hear the fury of the bull's bellow
thundering like hooves over the plains
in search of the stolen heifer.

An old bull has a thickly muscled neck
unbreakable like the trunk of an old oak tree,
a battering ram that crushes any defences;

his horns will be lowered to charge
into the thieves of his beloved prize,
spread their remains over the plains.

It is best to seek shelter behind friendly walls.
The bull will not approach another bull's territory
but will wait until his prey has left the enclosure.

So the three brothers and Derdriu
travelled across the sea to Alba,
lived upon the land and hunted all they needed,
hunted until there was no more game left to hunt,
and so began then hunting the cattle of the men of Scotland.
To satiate their appetites for the kill, they were called
into the service of the king of Alba
but built their houses apart from the other warriors
in such a way that Derdriu could be kept hidden
and no-one might be killed because of her beauty
that would tempt kings and make queens jealous.

What have I done to him?
What have I done to them?
What have I done to a king,
to a kingdom?

I have only followed my own dream
of a three-coloured man who
won my heart when yet unseen,
who I took hold of and forced to my will
not knowing others would follow
as he led me away from my cattle pen
into forests and glens and hidden homes,
not knowing his brothers would follow,
not thinking the king would follow so endlessly,
until we crossed the sea. A sea between
and we should be safe.

Yet can we be safe?
I thought to follow my own will
Yet have only followed
the fate decreed at my birth?

Their names were spoken then
– Naoise, Ardán, Anlann –
there is no escaping
your fate, nor mine.
They are the same.

Three brothers living in three houses
upon the open green fields,
in houses arranged to hide their activities,
drew the interest of the king's steward.
Early one morning, when the brothers were away,
the steward made a circuit of their houses.
He saw Derdriu.

What was she doing?
Cooking breakfast for the brothers,
oatcakes cooked over the coals,
a touch of black on the toasted crusts,
while their morning brew steeped in a cauldron?

Or perhaps she was washing herself,
using a wooden dipper to scoop
cold, clear spring water from a wooden pail
to sluice over her face and arms,
to freshen herself for the day.

Or perhaps she sat and gazed,
empty-eyed at this, her home,
she who had been destined to be a king's wife
in a castle with servants waiting on her every need.

Or perhaps she played with their two children.
In their time in Alba, she bore a son, Gaiar,
and a daughter, Aeb Gréne, she of the sunny-face.^{xxxiv}

Did their children's laughter carry
across the grounds and fall on the ears of some passer-by
like the sound of bells from the Otherworld?

Or if they cried, or howled with temper,
were they quickly shushed, made to keep quiet?
It was no life for children. Likely
they were fostered out,
fostered as soon as they were weaned.^{xxxv}

Children,
bright with love
of the swiftest warrior
and the Woman of Destiny,
bright flowers of fate

cannot grow in their mother's arms
when great men gaze hungrily
to be held against her breast,
would use swords to slice children away
like cutting fungus from a tree.

Arms left empty,
only the memory of a baby's smells,
echoes of their voices in dreams,
a never-ending love
for their bright beautiful faces.

We do not know what the steward saw, it is not told.
Only that he saw the tall, golden-haired beauty
with the bluest eyes and reddest lips,
a woman fit for a king.

So he told his king of this woman,
advised him to kill Naoise,
take her for himself.
But the king of Alba would not do this.

Instead, the steward came daily
to speak to Derdriu on the king's behalf,
beseeching her to leave Naoise,
to live as a royal consort instead.
Though the king wanted her to come to him willingly,
still every day he also sent Naoise and his brothers
into great dangers and battles. Derdriu knew
this was in the hope they might be killed
and then he could claim her.

Derdriu told this to Naoise every night,
of the king's attempts to woo her and have them die
but the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn) were too skilled,
too fast, too strong, and they overcame every challenge.
The king grew impatient. Derdriu
warned Naoise and his brothers
and they fled to an island off the shore.

There were forests to roam,
valleys to shelter in, inlets to fish,
lochs for fresh, crisp water.
On that island they hunted and ate
and told their stories to each other
around the fire every evening
and Derdriu and Naoise slept
wrapped in each other's arms.

But sometimes Naoise went far from her,
for days and nights he was away from her,

and she did not know where he went
and when he returned
there was no scent on him
for he would be newly-washed.

Derdriu listened when he spoke in quietness,
spoke to his brothers as the only men to hear,
she listened and learned of his secret,
learned of one that I call Fèidh, a deer,^{xxxvi}
the daughter of the Earl of the strong fort^{xxxvii}
who had kissed Naoise while they drank with Alban's nobles.
Derdriu learned that Naoise had sent this woman gifts,
had visited her when returning from the assembly of nobles.

He sent her a wild deer,
a frisky doe with her fawn afoot,
this man from the wilds,
this horny man.

I am no frisky doe,
I am a woman grown tired,
breasts sagged from children,
skin of my belly stretched and scarred,
hands coarsened by the wild life
I have led these brothers into.

He seeks another,
young and beautiful
and untamed.

My heart breaks.
I am nothing without Naoise.
I am nothing to Naoise.

There is no life for me
to live in this place.

Derdriu pulled her currach from the shore,
a round boat made of deerskins
stretched taut as she was stretched taut,
and she cast out upon the waves.
Naoise's brothers swam out after her,
naked bodies like pallid fish
against the waves that rocked and rolled
and pushed back against them,
but they reached her currach
and she pulled them in,
for her arms were strong these days,
and they rowed her back to shore.

Naoise, when he heard what she had done
swore three times upon his sword and his shield
that never again would he cause her distress
until he joined the ranks of the dead.
Fèidh swore her own oath
that until Naoise went to his death
she would go with no other man.

I, Fèidh, who am the Earl's daughter,
I lament, I lament for a lover
who has not yet died
yet who has died to me
for he has returned to her arms
that would never let him go
but hold him like a vine
wrapped around a fir tree.

I won him with my kiss,
among all the nobles I won him.

He sent me such gifts as a man sends only
to the woman who has captured his heart,
the deer and the fawn were his promise to me.

He has broken that promise now,
returned to the woman who forced him from his homeland,
forced him to leave the life of champions that he led with his brothers,
forced him to follow her and do her will, and still he will
follow her and not return to me. We have had our time.

There is no other man when a woman
has loved a champion such as Naoise.
There will never be another man for me
as long as Naoise lives, he will have my heart
and I will wait for his return, a deer without her mate,
and will raise my lament because of my empty arms,
until the day he dies, I will lament.

On the island, Derdriu and Naoise were playing *fidchell*
 when they heard a cry like one a great warrior
 might make to let others know he was coming.
 And Naoise recognised something
 which made him say he heard the cry of a man from Eire.
 Derdriu, too, heard the cry, recognized the cry of the man like a horse,^{xxxviii}
 but she kept her silence though her heart was beating louder than ever.
 And when the horse-man let out a second cry
 and Naoise again said
 it was that of a man from Eire,
 she said there was no difference
 between the cry of a man from Eire or a man from Alba.
 On the third cry, the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn) recognized the horse-man's cry.
 One brother went to find him because they knew this man was their friend.
 And then Derdriu told Naoise that she had known it was the horse-man
 but had kept her silence because of a dream
 which warned her they would be betrayed.

This is the dream that came to me
 as I lay in the arms of the night
 and it is a true dream.

Three birds come
 from Emain Macha^{xxxix}
 three birds with honey in their bills

The horse-man comes
 with a message of peace
 sweeter than honey

three sips of honey
 one for each of the brothers
 tasting the nectar of Emain

three birds leave
taking three sips of blood
returning to Emain

with the three sons of Innlenn
tasting the sweet message of peace
travelling to their betrayal

this is my vision
I know it to be true
as night has become day
and the horse-man calls to you

But the brothers were unhappy with her words.
Their hearts had risen at the cry of their old comrade-in-arms,
he who once been their king, displaced by this one that pursued Derdriu,
and it was not honey from the mouth of Derdriu but sour words.
They preferred to hear their friend and Ardán was sent to meet him.
This was the first time they ignored the advice of Derdriu
which had kept them safe in Alba, and happy,
where they dwelt on the shores of the loch
where Naoise was Lord.

When Ardán returned it was with the horse-man
and his two sons, the Fair and the Fiery,
and others with them.
The horse-man told them that he came from the king
with an offer of peace, brought the message himself
to show good faith. He told them
the men of Ulster had said to their king that it was shame
the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn) were made to live in exile
because of an evil woman
and they should be allowed to come home.

So the horse-man came to the island with sureties
for their safe passage, and it was not
that the men of Ulster wanted Derdriu returned
but they wanted the brothers,
who said they would return
if the horse-man and two trusted warriors
came as surety.

Derdriu reminded Naoise
he was greater in Alba than he could be in Eire.

Listen to me.
You should not go there,
Here you are a greater man.

Listen to me.
You may not go there,
Here you have a better life.

Listen to me.
Three drops of blood
become a flood in my fear.

Listen to me.
Three drops of honey
only sweetens the poison.

But the horse-man countered, saying
a native land was better than anything, saying
they could depend on him to guarantee their safety, saying
if all the men of Eire were to betray them
the horse-man would hunt them down.

The three brothers had more faith
in the horse-man's strength and protection

than in Derdriu's prophecies and warning,
so they gathered what they had together
and departed for the shores of Eire.

Derdriu lamented as they pulled away
returning to the land that had been their home.
Derdriu sang of all the places
they had lived while in exile,
where they had built dwellings
and sheltered and eaten meat
caught by the brothers in the wild.

Eastwards is where I see Alba
with the fair rocks and fine fortresses,
the tall mountains like sentries

where the island of blackthorns gave us shelter^{xl}
where we would sleep safely
above the grassy estuary

where the water runs cleanly
over white sands and pebbled beaches
where tall herbs reach up in the bright glen

where our daily fare
was fish and venison and badger
caught by the sons of Innlenn,

where we built the home we shared
wattle and daub warm in the morning sun
and everything was bright,

where the cuckoo was a sweet sound
on the bending branches of the willow
that trailed its limbs in the deep stream

where Naoise stood tall and proud
in the straight, fair-ridged glen,
sunlight on his black head

I would not have come away
from the sheltering shores of Alba
but Naoise travels westwards

as the honey draws him home
where our fate awaits with open arms
and I, I travel with him

They were to travel straight to Emain
when they reached the shores of Eire
but they came first to the fortress of the fish-king.
He gave three kisses like honey to the brothers
and for the horse-man he had a feast prepared,
reminding their protector that he was under a geis
not to leave a feast before it was finished,
though the horse-man told the fish-king
it was wrong for him to have done this,
for the horse-man would be breaking
both his promise to the king of Ulster
and his surety to the brothers
who had vowed not to eat until they reached Emain.

So many promises to wrap them around,
trussed around like barrels on a raft
to stop them being washed overboard
but instead making sure they would all roll at once.
The horse-man asked Naoise what he should do
but it was Derdriu that replied.

You will do
as the fish-king desires.

You will
consume the feast,
desert the sons of Innlenn
for your own geis.

High price for a feast
of slimy sea-fare and salty ale
and false friendship.

As you consume,
so you will become.

The horse-man maintained he was not deserting the brothers
because they would travel with his sons, the Fair and the Fiery.

Naoise was angry and said they had never
needed any protection but themselves.

Derdriu went after Naoise
and departed with his brothers
and the sons of the horse-man
towards Emain.

She tried to warn them against travelling on
without the horse-man who had been their king
though she knew they would not listen.

She wanted them to go to an island
between Eire and Scotland to wait there
where Naoise could still be a lord, wait there
until the horse-man had finished his feasting.

The horse-man's sons felt she cast a slur upon them,
that they were not adequate to fulfil their father's promise.
They accused Derdriu of speaking evil.

Derdriu knew it was not the words she spoke
but the truth of what she envisioned.

They tell me not to say so,
not to speak so,
they want me to be beautiful as the sun
and cast no shadows on their heroic lives.

They say that the horse-man will come,
but I am sad for them, sons of Innlenn,
beautiful men who have come
as lords from the land of red stags.

There will only be grief,
sadness, woe, tears, salt-water rivers
will flow because of this.

But they do not heed my words.
My words are not beautiful enough for them,
casting shadows on their dream of home.

They ignored the words of the only woman amongst them.
They ignored the words of the poet's daughter,
they ignored the protégé of Leborcham,
they ignored the poem.
As they travelled on to Emain,
Derdriu, overcome with sleepfulness,
was left behind.

When Naoise noticed her absence,
he traced back the steps to find her,
asked why she had lagged behind.
It was because she dreamed.

In that dream, the brothers had each been beheaded
as had the Fair, though the Fiery
still had his head
and gave no aid.

These words you do not want to hear.
They are not words of peace but betrayal
and because I give voice to what is done,

to that which you do not want to know,
you are angry with me.
I am not the one who betrays.

I would rather this were on me
than see your white shoulders
mounting a waterfall of blood,

see the three sons of Innlenn
who I have loved for so long
lose their beautiful heads

and the Fair son of the horse-man,
while his brother the Fiery
keeps his on wide shoulders

you have a dream of peace
so strong a dream
that you will not hear

a woman's voice
a woman's plea
a woman's truth

Did she reach him for a moment?
He asked for her counsel, what should they do?
She said they should go to the hound of Ulster^{xli}
who had been their good and loyal friend
and there wait for the horse-man, their protector,
or go then to Emain under the hound's safeguard.
But Naoise rejected this counsel, too.

He comes back to me
He comes back for me
He lifts me from the road
He asks me what I dream

but his eyes follow the path
walked by his brothers, walked
by the sons of the horse-man
and he does not hear me
with his heart

Shall his doom be upon me
if I cannot make him listen
to the words of the poet?
But I am just a woman to them
now they are in the company
of warriors again
and walk on Eire's soil

The closer they drew to Emain Macha,
the stronger became Derdriu's visions
until they overwhelmed her
so she could not walk
so she could only speak
the words of warning
that the sons of Innlenn

would not hear,
could not hear.

Naoise, look at the cloud,
above green Emain,
a great cloud of crimson blood
hanging like a moth-eaten cloak in the air,
a thin, heavy, terrible cloud.

Beautiful sons, brothers,
there is danger before you,
let us go to the hound
and wait for protection.

Naoise says in anger
that the brothers are unafraid
and will not heed my counsel.

The brothers have always stood
back to back, undefeated,
my caution is an affront.

But I tell him still,
they have always heard my counsel
until now, set upon their doom

and it hangs above,
a thin, red, cloak-like cloud,
lowering as a
red veil over my eyes

Naoise, I lose sight of you
in this cloud of blood
that thickens the closer we draw

to Emain, to the king,
to the end.

They would ignore prophetic poetry
but perhaps she could reason with them,
telling them it would be a sign
that the king meant them no harm
if he allowed them into the same house
where he and his nobles dwelled,
treating them as honoured guests.

But if the king sent them
to the House of the Red Branch,
to the house of the warriors,
it would be a sign he wished them ill.

My visions worry me
but their vision is filled
with dreams of old glory.

Their vision shows them home
among the warriors of the Red Branch,
welcomed by their king.

Their vision is false,
born of their desire not their truth.
The Red Branch will fall, they with it.

My visions worry me,
I am a bone gnawed by the dog,
shattered to the marrow.

It is told that when they reached Emain,
the women were arrayed on the ramparts

to watch the spectacle,
yet quickly it was over.
An enemy of the brothers met them,
with all his troops. An enemy of the brothers
but an ally of the king.

The brothers who had never been defeated
stood back to back against their enemy
and fought the army arraigned against them

and when their enemy thrust his spear at Naoise,
the fair son of the horse-man stood between them,

yet the spear passed through the Fair
and through Naoise, and his brothers,
and so they fell.

Derdriu, keening their deaths,
was brought to the king
with her hands bound behind her back.

I see the green plains of Emain
redden with the blood of heroes
spilled in my name,

because of me. And finally
the prophecy is proven true
that was spoken at my birth.

No man of Ulster raised a hand
against their shining sons

so the king can claim
the deed was done
not by their own kind,
but by the enemy's strike

yet I see the king's hands red
as the hands of Pontius Pilate
before he washed them clean.

His heart, too, is stained
and he claims me now
as his prize.

His lies
will yet bring him undone
and I will not be won.

The horse-man who had stood as surety
for the safe return of the brothers
came then, late to the fight,
but fighting all the same.
In the fighting, the king's son was killed,
and the king's grandson.
It was Ulsterman fighting against Ulsterman,
friend against friend, brother against brother.
Women were slaughtered
and Emain burnt to the ground.

Three thousand left Ulster
because of the murder of the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn),
left to join the army of Medb
who hated the king as much as did Derdriu.
He had been Medb's first husband
one she could not forget, though she had left

and never after belonged to any man
but chose her own mates.

My father gave me to a king.
Upon his bed was I laid.
I gave the king a son
and then no more would stay.

I took away my treasures,
my gold, my goods, my guards,
my garments and my servants.
The leaving was not hard,

for this place where I am Queen,
with a drunken festive life
where the choice is always mine
when my thighs are opened wide.^{xlii}

Medb had left the king of Ulster,
and though she left him with their son,
he had not forgiven her the insult of leaving.
At the *feis temro*, when all the kings and queens
gathered for their great feast,
he watched her still,
he followed her still,
and when he found her alone by the river,
he took her, violated her, raped her
as though she still belonged to him.

I
bleed into the river
from wounds that show
where we fought. He bled, too.

I

wash the wounds
soothe the bruises
know they will fade away

but I
will always watch for him,
never again unguarded, knowing
he will always watch for me

because I
will come for him
at a river crossing,
destroy him

He
thinks he has won
a victory over me
but he has only begun

He
has begun a war
that will not cease before
one of us concedes, in death.

And the story of Derdriu is said to explain
why so many Ulstermen,
the horse-man amongst them
deserted Ulster for Medb's army,
that it because of a beautiful woman
whose name would resonate
through all their history,
because of Derdriu.

And what became of Derdriu?
Another story tells that the brothers
did not meet their enemy immediately
upon their return to Emain, but they were met
by the king. Yet, as Derdriu had predicted
the king did not offer the hospitality of his house,
sent them instead to the house of the Red Branch
and when Derdriu said this was a sign
they should leave, the men chastised her
for seeing them as too timid and afraid.

So they went to the house of the Red Branch
but there was so much feasting
all their servants became drunk and loud.
Not so Naoise and his brothers, not so Derdriu,
nor the horse-man's sons.
Maybe they were too tired from their travelling,
maybe they were too wakeful from their travels,
but Naoise asked that the king's headboard
be sent so they could play upon it,
which Derdriu and Naoise did, it is said, intently.
How do you play intently
while your servants feast and party around you,
and you know that your doom is imminent,
when you are waiting for your world to explode?
Or is it a way to focus on the game,
to clear the mind, to think of strategies?

The playing board laid out
between us the playing board.

The pieces are placed on
the playing board that belongs

to the king, but we move
the pieces and thus control

the unfolding of the game
though the game, board and pieces,

belong to the king,
perhaps by playing

we only

prolong

the end-game.

Leborcham had waited
the return of her beautiful girl, her Derdriu.
She was old now,
but her tongue was still quick,
her words of biting wisdom still feared.
She still held her place in the court of the king
and no paths were barred to her.
When the king asked which of his warriors
would go to spy upon Derdriu
to see if she had retained her beauty,
Leborcham stepped forward
before any other could speak,
said she would go.

Mine own girl,
raised from a babe
under my tutelage
under my guardianship
though none knew it
but the two of us.

Mine own girl,
I will cast my eyes on you,
see if you still hold to
the golden locks and green eyes
and lips Parthian-red
that all men long to kiss. ^{xliii}

Mine own girl,
I will see if you are still
lean of limb, and soft-formed
like a pigeon's breast,
warm and soft to settle against,
agile and graceful like the deer
that hunters stalk with spears and dogs,
who are hungry for a taste
of that pale lean meat.

Leborcham went to the house of the Red Hand
where Derdriu and Naoise
played their board game.
She wept to see them all
so beautiful and beloved.

She is not unchanged.
She has borne two children
and I know silvery stretch marks will
trace along her thighs and belly and breasts
like a map of the land
they sheltered in, a map
of their travels drawn in silver
upon her flesh, marks unseen
but Naoise will have traced them,
many times, with his fingers

with his lips, with his tongue,
tracing the tracks of their journey of love.

She is not unchanged.
Her hands are strong and hard
enough to pull the hide from a hare,
enough to split the flesh
with a sharpened hazel stick,
enough to hold it over
the roasting coals
and not shy from the heat.

She is not unchanged.
Chorded muscles ripple
beneath skin like satin,
arms and thighs strong like a man's,
lean like a boy's.

She is not unchanged.
Her back is straighter,
her voice is deeper,
her eyes are crinkled with lines
of laughter, though now
they are wide with fear,
and her cheeks are freckled brown
where once they were fair as clouds,
her hair is tangled and torn
and she weeps as though
she has already been keening.

Still, though her skin be brown,
it shines, it begs to be touched.
Her eyes, though crinkled,
hold the sky in their depths.

Her earthen-red lips
as ready to be kissed
as when she first met Naoise.

She is no heifer now
waiting on the bull of the province.

She has borne her calves,
udders once filled with milk
that now rest empty,
hanging lower on her chest.

But she still surpasses all
in beauty, form and figure,
and she will while she lives.

Leborcham told them
she had been sent to find
if Derdriu was still as beautiful,
but she came also to warn them
of the coming treachery.
And sad was Leborcham that the brothers would be slain.

Tá bron orm, sorrow on me
that this night three brothers
will come to their death

they will say on account of a woman
but it is a man will wield the sword
and a man command its thrust

still they will say
it is on account of a woman
and that is how the story will be told

Leborcham loved the brothers,
as all people of Ulster loved them,
and knowing Derdriu's doom, too,
knows Derdriu will be held to blame,
knows Derdriu is to blame.

Leborcham loved the brothers,
and knowing their doom and Derdriu's
was the first to tell her young charge
where she would find the man of her dreams,
but it was Derdriu sought him out.

Leborcham loved the brothers, loved Naoise.
Leborcham helped them find each other.
Leborcham helped them escape the king,
knowing he could not be escaped forever.

Leborcham meets with them now,
warns them of what the king will do.
She who has always held the favour of the king,
she has always held this dear.

I have knitted together
one woman
three men
and a king.

Derdriu will bring undone
all I have knitted together.

This pattern I have made, unravelling,
like falling leaves cannot be put back in place,
these stitches cannot be remade

yet there is always a new pattern
can be made from
the unravelled threads.

Leborcham says it is grievous to her
that the shining sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn)
should be slain on account of one woman.
Leborcham is old,
they had been away from her as she has grown old,
living in their paradise
while she roamed the halls of the king
and waited for their return.

Leborcham tells them
to keep the doors and windows closed,
wishes them well should they be attacked.
And when she returns to the king,
she tells him that the brothers are in good form
and it was a boon for Ulster that they had returned,
that with them in his ranks of fighting men
the king would have the strongest force in Eire,
and she tells him that Derdriu
no longer has her form and figure.

Derdriu is changed, changed utterly.^{xliv}
You will not find beauty in her.
You will not find your queen.
Her youth is faded as yours is gone.
As a tree sheds its leaves in autumn, her beauty falls.
There is naught of the foxglove on her cheek
to stop the heart, nor the bluebell in her eyes to quicken it.
No beauty for you, my king,
no beauty for you.

The king relaxed then,
his desire lessened,
but when he had a few more drinks,
he wondered again if Derdriu still had her looks,
not trusting the word of one such as Leborcham
who was cunning with words.

The brothers did as Leborcham had warned,
closed all the doors and windows,
but still did not heed Derdriu's warnings,
went about relaxed while Derdriu stayed alert,
which is how she was the first to see the face looking in,
the face of the king's spy.

Derdriu nudged Naoise
who looked where she pointed.
Naoise had a game-piece in his hand
and made a true throw with it,
it struck the spy's eye
so it fell out onto his cheek
and the spy fled from that place.

He is looking for me.
I feel him looking for me.
There are eyes beyond the walls
searching for an image of me,
a glimpse of the woman
I have become.

If he had invited us to his house
to feast at his table
among his other nobles,
he could look upon me himself.

Instead, he borrows the eyes of others,
of Leborcham, of his warriors, of his spy,
eager to see the woman
who has wrought such evil,
red woman, blood-woman
am I.

The eye at the window
sees me, like a familiar spirit
tracking back images
to the king who keeps a safe distance,
lest the brothers turn on him.

Naoise turns on this one
with a dead-man game-piece,
makes a cast strong enough
to take out an eye,
one less eye to look upon me
and report to the king.

But Naoise took out one eye, not two,
and it only takes one to see.

The messenger has seen enough
to tell the king that Derdriu has the best form in the world
and Naoise would be king of the world
if she were left to him.

Kings are made by beautiful women,
not beautiful women made by kings.^{xlv}

Before long Derdriu and the brothers
were surrounded by the king and his army.
The brothers challenged the king's honour,
for they were under the surety of the horse-man
and had been guaranteed safe passage,

but the king said it was shame they brought him,
that they had his wife. Derdriu said this was true,
the king had been her first husband,^{xlvi}
and she said the brothers had been betrayed
by the horse-man who had left them for his feast,
left them with no protection.

Seven years in exile dwelling with
the three brothers, sons of Innlenn,
cooking and eating their fare,
caring for each other.

Two children I have borne to Naoise,
a son and a daughter, bright lights,
named Gaiar and Aeb Gréne.

Yet still the king lays claim to me,
laid claim to me before my birth,
laid claim to me after my birth,
laid claim to me after my birth,
laid claim to my youth.
He is our king, my husband,
he lays claim to me now.
How can this be so?

To prove the horse-man's trustworthiness,
the fiery son went out and killed many
but then Derdriu heard him make terms with the king,
trade them for a piece of land and a place in court.
When Derdriu told this to the others,
the Fair said he would not desert them
and he also went out and fought
and he made no deals,

and he did this while Naoise and his brothers
played upon the king's board.
Then the king sent his own son against the Fair,
and the Fair defeated the king's son
and forced him to lie beneath his shield.
And the shield roared, three waves of Eire roared.^{xlvi}
Derdriu heard the waves roar and knew their meaning.

The sea rises.
The three waves cry aloud.^{xlvi}
The battle that is waged
disturbs the plains and shorelines
and echoes in the mountains.

The roar of Cliodna
as she is carried away from her mortal lover
and forced to live beyond the shores.
Cliodna, I hear you roar.^{xli}

The roar of Tuadh
the wave that slams down
hard and sharp as an axe to divide.^l
Tuadh, I hear you roar.

The roar of Rughradh
Fir Bolg, great chieftain of Ulster
coming to reclaim his victory.^{li}
Rughradh, I hear you roar.

Will warriors come now,
roaring, to our aid,
when they have not heard our cries before?

A champion of Ulster knew the roar of the wave
called him to defend the king
and he slew the Fair
but not before that son said he had done wrong
because the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn)
were under protection of the Fair,
and so the champion slew also the king's son.
And there was a night of continuous fighting
through to the morning.

it will not be known
how many fell^{lii}
(how can I count them?)

until the sand of the sea
and the leaves of a forest
and the dew of the grass
and the stars of heaven
can be counted

it will not be known
how many fell
(no one can count them)

until the tears of the women
and the cries of the children
and the moans of the wounded
and the howling of the dogs
can be counted

(I cannot count them)
it will not be known
how many fell

Derdriu did not see the glory in this,
she saw the shame.
And when Naoise returned
she told him
it was all because
they had not listened to her.

I saw red in my dreams
a cloud like a moth-torn cloak of blood
hanging above you
but you would not listen
and the men of Ulster
are dead at your hands
and they will say it is because
of a woman, but it is always
because of a man.

Still they did not listen to her,
but made an enclosure with their shields
and placed Derdriu between them
and leapt out again over the walls
and slew a hundred or more.

Wrap your shield around
like the walls of a fortress
and we shall shelter within them
and leave this place, leaping
alive still and beyond its walls,
no need of any fortress
but the one we form together.

Yet while they were so formed in combat
and Derdriu hidden between them,

they found themselves swimming
in a great, viscous sea,
until they were defeated by enchanted waves
rising around them, clasping their limbs
loosening the weapons from their grasp,
pulling them apart,
and it was a sea that smelt of the druid
but they had no weapons against magic
and Derdriu cried aloud
as the protection of the brothers fell away
and she stood alone.

a fortress
can withstand
the assaults of men
but not the assaults of a sea
raised by druid magic

the druid does not care
for the woman whose cries
have brought Ulster undone
since before her birth

he does not care for my cries

The king ordered that the brothers be slain
but no Ulsterman would agree to do that,
so instead he found an enemy of Naoise.

This enemy had been one of three brothers,
but now because of Naoise there were only two,
himself and one other. He would kill Naoise and be glad.

Each of the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn) asked to be slain first
but it was agreed that they be slain with one blow,
and so it was that the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn) were slain,
three brothers beheaded with one stroke of the sword,
three brothers died as three brothers had been born.
Derdriu's lament rose above
the lamentation from the men of Ulster.
Weeping and pulling at her hair,
tearing it from her scalp,
scraping her fingernails down her flesh,
weeping and wailing,
and screaming of the treachery
done to them all.

Derdriu cried that the brothers
Were the pillars of Eire's heroism,
declared loudly that they were broken down
not by skill but by evil sorcery of the servant
of the wrongful king of Ulster, by a druid's trickery.

Gentle Ardán with the cornsilk hair,
Loyal Ainnle of the bright smile,
both could have been kings,
Eire and Scotland would have been theirs.^{liii}

And for Naoise the whole world
west and east, north and south,
the whole world would have been yours.

The whole world is the less
because of this evil deed
that will never be forgiven.
There is no world for me now.

Let my grave be with the brothers,
since I shall die anyway
in waiting for those
who will not come again.
Let this be made so.

Derdriu wandered the battlefields,
from which rose the iron-rich stench
of spilt blood and raw flesh hanging
on the miasmic mist
that still obscured her vision.

Derdriu wandered among the dead and the injured
and she cried her lament for the slain brothers,
lamenting alone, longed for the other who had loved Naoise,
Fèidh, the daughter of the Earl, to join in the *caoineadh*.^{liv}

There was no other man
for the daughter of the Earl
and no other man for me.
No woman who had loved Naoise
could love another even beyond his death

Ochone! if Fèidh were to hear tonight
that Naoise had gone into the earth,
she and I would weep together,
seven times over we would weep,
but instead I weep alone for the both of us.^{lv}

Scotland was our safe harbour.
Once we had left the shores of Eire,
we should never have returned,
we should have stayed living
among the horses and the gold.^{lvi}

Derdriu walked across the green fields,
met with the hound of Ulster,
told him what had happened, and mourned with him,
told him the brothers had been beheaded.
The hound found the one who had slain them
and beheaded him in revenge.

I walk with the hound
as he hunts his prey
and avenges the death
of those he loved like brothers.

Head for a head
broadsword swipe
severs neck and spine,
muscles and arteries
in one mighty sweep,
another head lies upon the ground
and, if it would speak,
tell us that he also had only taken
a head for a head.

Naoise had killed his brother
when there had been three of them
and then there were only two
and now one will live on to hate

but that head upon the ground
cannot speak his truth
nor could it have been heard
above Ulster's weeping.

I walk with the hound
and I do not lament

those who have been slain
in revenge for the death of Naoise,
in revenge for the death
of the sons of Innlenn.

And then Derdriu and the hound
came to where the children of Uisneach (and Innlenn)
lay upon the grassy plains of Emain
and Derdriu unbound her hair,
and Derdriu lay upon their grave,
and Derdriu put her mouth to Naoise's wounds
and drank his blood.

I am the crow
sipping of my lover's blood
as it pours onto the green
and his cheeks are white
grown white as the snow
that drank the blood of the calf.

To feed me, this death, all for me,
black as the crow's wing
his hair is grown long, falls
as a curtain across his
beautiful face.

But the shadow is mine,
black night I have brought
to the bright lives
of the three brothers,
the sons of Innlenn.

I sip of his blood,
it is life. I sip
of his life
before the earth
has greedily drunk it all.

I will have some still,
of this life lived for me,
this life butchered for me.
I am the crow.

Men loved to fight and hunt
alongside the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn),
who were as the three hawks of the steep mountain,
keen-eyed and swift in flight,
as three bears in strength,
three stags in pride.

Yet Derdriu declared that pride
made the three pillars fall, who were
the three heroes of the Red Branch,
by warrior-women taught their skills,
Aoife, Scáthach, Uathach.
By women-warriors taught,
by men betrayed.
And now Derdriu was alone.

There will be weeping on Scáthach's island,
Uathach will rend her hair and her skin,
Fèidh will never marry, never love again.
Bean-Ainnle and Bean-Ardán will weep forever.

I left my first husband, the high-king of Ulster,
for love of Naoise and now my life will be short,

no longer than his funeral rites.
I will bury him and then be buried myself.

Let nobody suppose
that I should live after Naoise
or after Ainnle and Ardán.

There is no life in me
beyond that I have shared with them.^{lvii}

When the wives of the brothers, Bean-Ainnle and Bean-Ardan,
heard the news of the return of the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn),
and of Derdriu the wife of Naoise, to Eire's shores,
they would have heard the larks singing the news,
would have sent word to their children fostered elsewhere,
rushed to meet each other, gathered
each other in their arms and wept for joy.
They had thought their husbands gone forever,
vision filled always with the most beautiful Derdriu,
with long golden hair, grey-blue eyes stormy as the sky,
white hands fluttering like doves.
Keeping them far from home.

Did they hate Derdriu for keeping their men in exile,
knowing she could be wife enough for three?
Did they hate the bond of the brothers that kept them tied together,
moving like conjoined triplets? Did they long
to take a knife and separate each from the other,
then hearing of their return forget everything
but the need to make their homes ready,
the beds soft and welcoming,
to put dew on their faces,
comb each other's hair,
grow soft and moist again like brides.

And when Bean-Ainnle and Bean-Ardan
heard of their husbands' deaths
did they rend their hair and weep their sorrow,
keen aloud the end of dreams,
keen it to sea and sky and soil?
Did they strip the beds,
rub dirt on their faces,
send word to their children
and then return to a life
where they still sometimes
dreamed of their lover's return?
They did not join Derdriu in her lamenting.

In the company of the three warriors,
I roamed Eire and Alba,
living without house and hearth.
I was not without sorrow or pain.
I was not without joy.

Our children
fostered to a good king,
though they will know nothing
of their mother, their father, their uncles
except the tales that will be told.
What will they be told
of our deaths?

Guaire, you will be king.
I know not what will become
of Aeb Gréne, sunny-faced, golden girl.
Children born in the wild.^{lviii}
Do not let yourselves be lost.

Derdriu sighed for the three hounds and three hawks
that would be without their huntsmen now.
She had minded them for the three brothers,
and now lamented for their loss as well as her own.^{lix}
Derdriu had never been alone
though often lonely.^{lx}

Their shields and their spears
were often her bed. Now she cried
for their swords to be placed over their grave
and she would lie down upon them
one more time.^{lxi}

Though all of Ulster will mourn the brothers,
there will be none to mourn me.
Where is my father?
Where is my mother?
I was taken from them
as soon as I was born;
they will not grieve,
if they grieved then.

Where is my foster-father?
Where is my foster-mother?
Among the crowds
on the plains of Emain?
Do they watch and see me covered
in blood, my hair torn,
my skin scoured,
my heart broken like a shattered gem?

Leborcham, do you watch, do you see?
I know you mourn the beloved sons.

Will you also mourn for me
who led them away, who left you
to your clever words
and empty passages?

Would that I had died before them,
that I already lay in the grave
and did not then see their heads fall
and roll upon the green plains.

They did not hear my words
on the road to Emain, listening
only to the words of the trusted horse-man
and longing to rejoin the Red Branch

from which they had fallen because of me.
I should have used sweet words
to persuade them, entice them,
but I, too, wanted to believe.

I left all comfort for Naoise,
the life of a queen I had forsaken for him,
for life lived in the wilds of Alba,
but my pleasure was in the company
of the three brothers, my three heroes, most beloved,
and now, my life will not be long,
after them, I am alone.

How can there be life for me now?
None would welcome me to their courts
lest men abandon their wives
and fail in their duties.

I am Derdriu without darkness^{lxii}

I am Derdriu without blemish

I am Derdriu without blame

I am Derdriu without sin

Do not cast a shadow of darkness
on my fated name.

The druid cursed Emain
because the king had promised
the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn) would not be harmed
if the druid made his magic.

Now the druid said Emain
would not belong to the king
nor to anyone from his line,
and Ulster was thus cursed a second time,
the first time being when the king
made the *sídhe-woman* called Macha
race against his horses
when she was heavily pregnant

and the twins had fallen from her womb
and so the place was named Emain Macha
and Macha had cursed Ulster
that in the hour of their greatest need
the men of Ulster would be helpless
as a woman in labour.

Both these curses
were true words spoken.
No other of this king's line
would succeed him,
but Gaiar, son of Derdriu,

son of Naoise, Gaiar served
as king. And the old king's rule
was undone when the horse-man,
and Red Branch warriors, deserted Ulster
because of the murder of the sons of Uisliu (and Innlenn)
over a woman and they gave their allegiance instead
to Medb, She Who Intoxicates.
Now Derdriu would add her curse.

Is it true?
Did I scream from the womb?
So the witnesses would have it.
But who amongst them would dare
dispute the story of Cathbad the Druid,
king's dog, or of the king himself?
Is it true that I screamed from the womb?

So it is told
of the first time
my voice was heard,
raised in opposition
rebellion
dread
against the will of the king.

My mother, I never knew her to ask,
I never met her to ask,
or to know if she lived,
have wondered of times if she
ever gave thought to the daughter
hidden away from all eyes but
those of nurse and king, if she
ever sought to see me herself once
I was taken from her.

When could she? From the moment
I emerged from the king's entrapment,
joined the world, enjoined Naoise and his brothers,
we were not of this world
we were in our own.

Perhaps, like so many others, she waited
our return, our ill-fated return,
waited then for a glimpse
of the beauty that unravelled kingdoms,
destroyed friendships, caused good men
to break their promises.

Among the red flames and red blood
and red sparks of combat flying,
did she see me then, outlined
in a scarlet nimbus like
one of the Ancients set aglow? Mamaí,
know I am just a woman like you
and would tell you so and know
that if I had kept my silence in your womb
I could tell you so, but now that Naoise is taken
from me and his brothers so cruelly slain
and all betrayed, what good is silence?

What good is silence now? I will still wail
and scream and cry my grief
for all the world to hear
because this is the grief
that all the world should hear
and every girl-baby yet unborn
should scream out against
the strong-armed self-proclaimed
masters of their fates.

So hear me now, Mother, as
you heard me then, and hear me,
druid and king, and
beyond the grave, hear me,
O Sons of Innlenn, and hear me,
Warriors of Ulster who raised your arms
in treachery against your own.

Let your kingdom fall.
Let your beds be empty.
Let your friends be your enemies
and your freedom your cage.
You think it ends here,
with all in the grave,
as I fall into the grave and die,
lie beside my lover for all time.
You think it all ends here
but it only just begins.

That is one way her story is told.
In another, she was brought captive before the king.
Derdriu was a year with the king
but she was not the bright vivid beauty
he had so desired, for she would never be that for him.

A year
she did not smile a laughing smile,
lips pressed tight together,
a trap closed over bitter words,
all prayers kept in silent places.

She did not take of her sufficiency
of food or of sleep, no sustenance
for her body or rest for her soul
blackened with shame and guilt.

Her arms withered, breasts slackened,
belly sagged, eyes became like caverns
with bluelight for shadows,
her hair thinned and broke,
beauty like a dying rosebush.

She did not raise her head from her knee,^{lxiii}
a head too heavy to bear the burden,
bowed always in defeat,
neck bared for the axeman's blow
to deliver justice for wrongs done
to the ones she loved, served.

I will not
raise my head above my knee.

I will not
take my sustenance
in food or drink.

I will not
move my body beneath his
when he mounts me.
I will not converse
with my captor
nor his retinue.

My voice will rise only
in lament for my lover
and longing for the Scottish wilds
where we lived our dream,
or was it only my dream?
How could Naoise be so ready
to return to this king?

I will endure, but
I will not live.

Only when they brought musicians to her
did Derdriu utter her lament for the sons of Uisliu
and for her lover, Naoise.

None nobler, none fairer,
than the three sons of Innlenn
marching on their return
from battle or the hunt.

Naoise, sweet as hazel mead,
him I washed by the fire.
Ardán with a stag or pig,
Ainnle with a load on his back.^{lxiv}

Sweeter by far the food and water
than any fare at Emain's court,
the cooking hearth on the forest floor
with the meat the brothers brought.

Their singing was sweeter music
than any piper or horn played.
Naoise's voice like the sound of a wave
and the baritone and tenor of his brothers.

Naoise is in his grave, I weep,
my keening the harsh music
that sent him to his sleep,
his brothers beside him in death as in life.

Beloved his yellow hair,^{lxv}
his desire, his justice,
the grey eyes women loved
and foes feared.

I do not sleep now,
I do not redden my nails
I do not eat
I do not laugh

There is no peace
There is no joy
There is no life
without Naoise

and his brothers.

Derdriu would not converse but only recite
the beauty of Naoise and his brothers,

giving no joy to the king
and blaming the horse-man
for bringing them back from Scotland,
and selling his honour for ale.

Sorrow is stronger than the sea.
It shall soon carry me to my early grave
like a shell swept into a sea-cave
and none can stand against the tide.

Sorrow is stronger than the land.
It shall soon give way beneath my body
like a stone placed on a bog
and none can stand against the depths.

Sorrow is stronger than the sky.
It shall soon sweep me to my demise
like a cloud dispersed by the air
and none can stand against the wind.

The king asked Derdriu what she hated most,
and she said that next to him,
she hated the one who had slain Naoise.
So the king passed her to that man.

And the next day they went to the assembly at Emain Macha,
an ill-named place they were headed to,
with Derdriu behind them in the chariot.
It was said she had promised herself
she would not see these two she most hated
in the same place, but the king taunted her,
said that she made ewe's eyes between two rams.

Near them was a great boulder.
Derdriu leaped from the chariot,
smashed her head against the stone
until she made a mass of fragments of her head
so she died.

Smash

Smash

Smash

red blooms upon the rock

Smash

Smash

Smash

bone shatters like splintered glass

Smash

Smash

Smash

grey brains sludge the blooms

Smash

smash

smash

Epilogue: Derdriu on Death

Derdriu, how do I write the story of your death,
that gives shape to your life?
Can you live without your man?
Can Derdriu live?
But to live you must be silent.
Let Derdriu not be silent, but shouting and shouting,
the mad woman in the attic until
it's not that she takes her own life
but that the king throws her from the carriage.

She has lain like a log beneath him.
She has ranted like a *bean sídhe*.
Her hair grows lank, her skin sallow,
her eyes shadowed and accusing, always accusing.
There's no joy in bedding a corpse,
so make a corpse of her.
Derdriu does not kill herself, she is killed.
Is this how I would write your death?

They take such pleasure in my death,
devote themselves to it,
it punctuates my story
with the most dramatic
of endings. How many ways
can they kill me?

None of them can face that I was a sex slave
for a year before I dashed my brains out
upon a rock, so leave that one alone, it loses
the romance if I'm actually
a rape victim, better
to fall into the grave.

So the playwrights introduce a knife
because I can't literally die
of a broken heart.
A knife finishes the job neatly,
and then they need only work out
how I sneak the knife past the king.^{lxvi}

Lady Gregory, she has me
wandering forlorn on the shoreline,
time to consider and look
to the wild Atlantic, waves
crashing down as my life
comes crashing
down.^{lxvii}

And then the knife.
And then the grave.
A type of suttee-death,
Orientalism Celtic-flavoured,
a triple death, heart, blade, knife,
harking back to the Indo-European,^{lxviii}
embedding my tale in its cultural context,

taking my death from me
even as Naoise,
and Ardán and Anlann,
were taken from me,
a blade in my heart as surely
as for Our Lady of the Sorrows
and that, too, was predicted
when she presented the Christ-child
at the temple. A sword to your heart,
she was told.

I was told
good fortune for me, death for others,
but my eyes were not yet opened
when the druid proffered his doom.

I knew the prophecy, of course
I did, it had been whispered
into my ears so many times,
it was as familiar
as the wind in the she-oaks.
But they were words outside of me,
while inside sang youth, love, sex,
adventure. Dreams.

I am wakened now.
There will be no more dreams
to cover the bloodied green
in thistledown and birdsong.
I am wakened.

And I will choose
the manner of my death.
Not a blade like the Mother of God,
not my blood and brains,
grotesque blooming on the rock.
Not in the grave like suttee.
How, how shall I die?

Perhaps I will live,
live in a place where no-one knows my name
nor my fame. I will darken my skin,
coarsen my hair, keep my eyes downcast
as a woman should. A lesson learned.
Finally, I have learned the value of silence.

And age will come upon me
 swift enough now,
 Naoise not here to see
 what comes to all of us
 who do not die young.

 I fool myself.
Perhaps I have always been such a fool
 to think I could defeat my fate.
 If I live, it will be as captive
to the king, for no heroes are left
 to lend me their ears.
 And captive is no life.

Naoise, I lie down beside you
 and let my heart stop beating
 that beat only for you.

And the king moves on to another.
Moves on to another who looks like her,
sounds like her, moves like her,
and is not her. Yet dies like her.
And the story is as never-ending
as our tears.^{lxix}

ENDNOTES

ⁱ In Irish literature and folklore, blindness was often the price paid by poets or bards for the creative gift given by the *sídh*e. Edward Larrissy, “The Celtic Bard in Ireland and Britain: Blindness and Second Sight,” in *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period*, 36-63: Edinburgh University Press, 2007: 39-43.

ⁱⁱ James Stephens writes this demand into his 1923 novel, and while this makes it a more contemporary invention, it nevertheless incorporates the demands of the king in the context of his attitudes to women. It seems appropriate to include that possibility of such as part of this reconstruction. James Stephens, *Deirdre*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1923: 3-5.

It may also be a motif borrowed from the medieval tale of *Talland Étair*, where the same king sends a poet on a circuit of Ireland, and the poet demands to sleep with his host’s wife when she is in labour. Caoimhín Ó Dónaill, ed., “Talland Étair: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation, Textual Notes, Bibliography and Vocabulary,” Maynooth: National University of Ireland, 2005: 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ The *bean sídh*e or *banshee* is a messenger of death. Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2003: 52-4.

^{iv} This poem is derivative of quote: “Because a woman does not know / Whatever is wont to be in [her] womb, / Though it cried out in my womb’s receptacle.” Vernam Hull, ed. and transl., *Longes Mac N-Uislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1949: 61.

^v “Deirdriu, literally, ‘one who resounds/ causes resonance’ [= derdrethar].” Kate Louise Mathis, “The Evolution of Deirdriu in the Ulster Cycle,” University of Edinburgh, 2010: 69.

^{vi} “... concerning her there will be evil ...” Hull, *LMU*, 61.

^{vii} This king won his kingship through the trickery of his mother, Ness, who persuaded the serving king to give up his rule for a year, but then that rule was never returned. Patricia Ní Mhaioleoin, “Patterns and Problems in the Heroic Biography of Fergus Mac Róich,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 32 (2012): 221.

^{viii} “Concerning whom champions will contend ... Against whom high queens will be jealous ...” Hull, *LMU*, 61.

^{ix} Derived from: “In the receptacle of your womb there cried out / A woman of yellow hair with yellow curls, / With comely, grey-blue irised (?) eyes. / Her purplish-pink cheeks [are like] foxglove; / To the color of snow I compare / The spotless treasure of her set of teeth. / Lustrous [are] her scarlet-red (?) lips ... A woman, fair, tall [and] long-haired ...” Hull, *LMU*, 61.

^x In one tale, Cathbad rapes Ness and Conchobar is conceived. Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985: 48.

In another tale, Cathbad is conceived when Cathbad tells Ness that a child conceived on this day will be king. Lisa M. Bitel, “‘Conceived in Sins, Born in Delights’: Stories of Procreation from Early Ireland,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 2 (1992): 196.

^{xi} The name of the mother of the sons of Uisliu is not mentioned in *LMU* and *OCU* but in *The Prose Bansenchas*, she is named as Innlenn, daughter of Cathbad, the druid, wife of Uisliu, and mother of Náise, Áinnle and Ardan. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, “The Prose Bansenchas,” PhD, National University of Ireland, 1980: 139.

^{xii} Innlenn was the daughter of Cathbad the druid. Ní Bhrolcháin, “The Prose Bansenchas,” 336.

^{xiii} Máirín Ní Dhoonchadha, “Travelers and Settled Folk: Women, Honor, and Shame in Medieval Ireland,” in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, edited by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley, 17-38. New York: Springer, 2013: 32.

^{xiv} Ó Dónaill, “Talland Étair,” 55.

^{xv} This description of Leborcham comes from various sources that are extrapolated in Esther Le Mair, “A Trusted Outsider: Leborcham in the Ulster Cycle,” *Ulidia 3: Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, Berlin, Curach Bhán Publications, 2009: 44-47. The main sources are: “Talland Étair - The Siege of Howth”; and “Tochmarc Luaine Ocus Aided Athairne.”

^{xvi} Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, “The Bansenchas – Genealogy and Women of the Ulster Cycle,” *Ulidia 3: Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*. (2009): 78-79.

- xvii Thomas Kinsella, ed. and transl., *The Tain: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cúailgne*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 1970: 92.
- xviii Kuno Meyer, ed. and transl., *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1906: 23.
- xix John O'Donovan, ed. and transl., *The Banquet of Dun Na N-Gedh and the Battle of Magh Rath*, Dublin: Trinity College, 1842: 213.
- xx Joseph O'Neill, "Cath Boinde: The Battle of the Boyne Here," *Ériu* 2 (1905): 177.
- xxi Vernam Hull, "Aided Meidbe: The Violent Death of Medb," *Speculum* 13, no. 1 (1938): 60.
- xxii Whitley Stokes, ed. and transl., "Tidings of Conchobar Mac Nessa," *Ériu* 4 (1910): 25.
- xxiii Ní Bhrolcháin, "The Prose Bansenchas," 153.
- xxiv Ó Dónaill, "Talland Étair," 55.
- xxv Derived from: "Beloved would be the one man on whom might be yonder three colors — that is, hair like the raven, and a cheek like blood, and a body like snow." Hull, *LMU*, 62-63.
- xxvi Derdriu says she shall not be well until she sees him. Hull, *LMU*, 62-63.
- An anorexic sickness associated with love is a common motif in Irish medieval tales, including *Aislinge Óengusso* and *Tochmarc Étaíne*. I have called it *grá-tinn*, which translates in Irish to 'love-sick'. Jeffrey Gantz, ed. and transl., "The Dream of Oengus," in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. London: Penguin, 1981: 109; Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best, "Tochmarc Étaíne," *Ériu* 12 (1938): 167.
- xxvii Kuno Meyer, "The Death of Conla," *Ériu* 1 (1904): 115.
- xxviii Derived from Derdriu's lament: "fostered by Aoife ... three pupils who Sgáthach had ... three pupils whom Uathach had." Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, ed. and transl., *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach: The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach*, London: Irish Texts Society, 1994: 135-37.
- xxix Derived from description of the brothers in *LMU* and quoting: "swift as hounds." Hull, *LMU*, 63.
- xxx Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 121, 137.
- xxxi A poet when satirizing could "coerce a person who denied them any request" by rubbing or pulling the lobe of the ear between their fingers. It seems clear that Derdriu was acting as a poet when she grasped Naoise by the ears and threatened shame on him. Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*. Dundalk, Ireland: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2008: 16-17.
- xxxii Naoise is described as singing in a tenor voice. Hull, *LMU*, 63.
- xxxiii Ní Bhrolcháin, "The Prose Bansenchas," 336.
- xxxiv Ní Bhrolcháin, "The Prose Bansenchas," 35.
- xxxv Fosterage was a common practice in Irish society. Bronagh Ní Chonaill, "Fosterage: Child-Rearing in Medieval Ireland," *History Ireland* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 1997): 28-31.
- xxxvi *Fèidh* is Scots Gaelic for 'deer'.
- xxxvii Earl of Dún Treóin: *dún* 'fort' dil.ie/19227 No headword for *treoin* but associated with strength and heroism.
- xxxviii This is the epithet I have given to Fergus mac Roich, whose name may mean son of a horse. He was considered to be particularly well endowed in the masculine sense. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, New York: Dover Publications, 2000: 36.
- xxxix Emain Macha was the centre of kingship in Ulster. Charles Doherty, "Kingship in Early Ireland," in *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara*, edited by Edel Bhreathnach, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005: 3.
- xl *Droighean* 'blackthorn, sloe' dil.ie/18563
- xli Cúchulainn was known as the hound of Ulster, earning his name from the time he killed the hound which guarded the home of Culann the Smith, and took on the protective role in restitution. Kinsella, *The Tain*, 81-84.
- xlvi Medb's name has been translated as 'she who intoxicates.' Ní Bhrolcháin, "Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas," 15.
- xlvi The lips of the unborn Derdriu are described as *partuing-deirg*, indicating a particular shade of red which Hull indicates could be a loan from *parthica* or *pellis* which is Latin for skin. However, he also concedes that the term could be a corruption of *partlaing* which, according to eDIL relates to Parthian leather dyed red or scarlet. *LMU*, 80; dil.ie/34207
- xlii "Changed, changed utterly" is derived from Yeats' poem *Easter 1916*. Peter Allt and Russell K Alspach, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1957, first ed., 1903: 391-4.
- xliii Lia Mills, "'I Won't Go Back to It': Irish Women Poets and the Iconic Feminine," *Feminist Review*, no. 50 (1995): 73.
- xliii Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 120-121

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- xlvi The three waves warned of “the approaching death of kings and chieftains.” Patrick Weston Joyce, *The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places*, Vol. 2, Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1883: 257-8.
- xlvi Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 125.
- xlx Every ninth wave, considered the largest, is regarded as Cliodna’s wave, which carried her away from her mortal lover. Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, New York: Infobase Publishing, 2014: 90-91.
- ¹ Joyce says *tuadh* means ‘axe’ but also when talking about three waves calls it *túaithe* which eDIL ascribes to witchcraft or sorcery. dil.ie/42191
- li Geoffrey Keating and Seathrún Keating, *General History of Ireland*, James Duffy, 1865: 82.
- lii Poem derivative of quote: “until the sand of the sea and the leaves of a wood and the dew of the grass and the stars of the heavens are counted the number who fell and the number of bare red necks by Naoise’s hands at that place cannot be counted or told.” Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 127.
- liii Derivative of quatrain in Derdriu’s lament: “A potential king of all Ireland / was gentle, yellow-haired Ardán / Ireland and Scotland without reproach / had Ainnle awaiting him.” Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 131.
- liv It was considered that the lament should be a public occasion to honour the deceased. Lysaght, Patricia. “Caoineadh Os Cionn Coirp: The Lament for the Dead in Ireland.” *Folklore* 108, no. 1-2 (1997): 66.
- lv Derived from quatrains in Derdriu’s lament: “Uch! if she were to hear tonight / that Naoise had gone in a shroud into the clay / she would weep right properly / and I would weep seven times over with her.” Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 133.
- lvi Derived from quatrains in Derdriu’s lament: “What wonder that I have an affection / for the land of Scotland whose ways are smooth; / my partner was safe among them, / I owned its horses and gold.” Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 133.
- lvii Derived from quote: “After them I will not be alive ...” Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 137.
- lviii Ní Bhrolcháin, “The Prose Banshenchas,” 166.
- lix Derived from quote: “Their three hounds and their three hawks / will be without huntsmen from now on ... it was I who minded them / to see them is cause for lamenting.” Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 137-39.
- lx Derived from quote: “I was never alone / save the day your grave was made, / though I and you / were often lonely.” Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 139.
- lxi Derived from quote: “Their three shields and their spears / were often a bed for me; / place their three hard swords / over the grave, boy.” Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 137.
- lxii Derived from quote: “I am Deirdre without darkness”. Mac Giolla, *OCU*, 139.
- lxiii Derived from quote: “A year, now, she was with Conchobor, and during that time she did not smile a laughing smile, and she did not partake of her sufficiency of food or of sleep, and she did not raise her head from her knee.” Hull, *LMU*, 66.
- lxiv Derived from quote: “Noisiu with good hazel-mead – Him I washed at the fire – Arddan with a stag or a fine pig, A load [was] over Aindle’s tall back.” Hull, *LMU*, 66.
- lxv In this lament, Naoise is described as having yellow hair when it was black earlier in the tale: “Beloved [is] the [little] crop of hair (?) with yellow (?) beauty ... Beloved [is] the gray eye that women used to love; Fierce it used to be against foes.” Hull, *LMU*, 67.
- lxvi W.B. Yeats, “Deirdre,” in *The Collected Plays of W. B.*, 169-204, London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1952: 199-200.
- lxvii I. A. Gregory, “Fate of the Children of Usnach,” in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster*, London: John Murray, 1902: 139-140.
- lxviii On the Indo-European associations with the motif of the threefold death, see Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *Coire Sois: The Cauldron of Knowledge*, edited by Matthieu Boyd, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014: 103-104.
- lxix Kate Louise Mathis, “Parallel Wives: Deirdriu and Lúaine in Longes Mac N-Uislenn and Tochmarc Lúaine Ocus Aided Athairne,” *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (2013): 17-24.

Appendix One: Examples of the Woman's Choice in Wooing

*Ectra Condla (The Adventure of Connla the Fair)*¹

An otherworldly woman appears and invites Conla, the son of the king, to join her in *Mag Mell (The Plain of Delight)*. When the king's druid silences the woman, she leaves Connla with otherworldly food so that when she appears again, he goes with her.

*The Voyage of Bran, Son of Ferbal (Imram Brain maic Febail)*²

Bran is invited to take a voyage by an Otherworldly woman. When he and his sailors arrive at the Isle of Women, Bran is reluctant to go ashore but the women toss a ball of thread to him and ensnare him and his crew and they are drawn ashore where each is paired with a woman. They spend many decades there until Bran returns to Ireland.

*Longes Mac N-Uislenn (The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu)*³

Derdriu has been raised apart to become the wife of the king but she decides upon Naoise and threatens shame on him unless he elopes with her, which he does. They have many years together until the king entices Naoise to return and has him killed. Derdriu dies also.

*Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin (The Story of Cano mac Gartnáin)*⁴

Créd is the wife of Marcan but loves Cano, a king in exile from Scotland, before she has met him. She tells him that she wants to be with him, but he says they must wait until he has reclaimed his rule and has something to offer her. He gives her his soul-stone and keeps an annual tryst with her, until it goes wrong and they both die.

¹ Rev. J. P. MacSwiney, S.J. "Translation of 'Ectra Condla'." *The Gaelic Journal* II, no. 13 (1884): 307-09.

² Meyer, Kuno ed. *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Ferbal, to the Land of the Living* Vol. II. London: David Nutt, 1897.

³ Hull, Vernam, ed. and transl. *Longes Mac N-Uislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1949.

⁴ Cathasaigh, Tomás Ó. "The Theme of Ainmne in Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin (1983)." In CS: 342-51.

Tochmarc Becfhola (The Wooing of Becfhola)⁵

Becfhola is an otherworldly woman in search of a mate. Firstly, she approaches the king and accepts his offer of a brooch, a small bride-price, hence her name of *Becfhola*, meaning ‘little worth’. Next, she tries to woo the foster-son of the king but he fails to meet her at the arranged tryst. Then she follows an otherworldly warrior and asks him why they should not be together. He says they must wait until he has something of worth to offer her, and when he has won his land, he comes to take her away with him.

Fingal Rónáin (The Kinslaying of Rónán)⁶

The daughter of Echaid is married to Rónáin but loves his son, Mael Fhothartaig, who goes into exile rather than succumb to her. When he returns, she attempts to arrange a tryst with him but he deceives her, and it ends in his death when she convinces Rónáin that they have been together.

Oenét Emire (The Only Jealousy of Emer)⁷

Two otherworldly women, Lí Ban and Fand, come to Cuchulain in his sleep and whip him so that he is greatly weakened when he wakes. Fand sends him a message that she loves him and wants him to come to her. He joins her in the otherworldly Mag Mell and his wife Emer comes to reclaim him.

Aislinge Óengusso (The Vision-Dream of Óengus)⁸

A woman visits Óengus in his dreams and he falls in love, so a search is instigated until he finds her and learns she is sometimes a swan, sometimes a woman. She tells him that if he wants to be with her, she must be able to return to the water, so he transforms into a swan and they are united.

Macha Mongruad (Macha of the Red Mane)⁹

There is an arrangement between three kings to rotate sovereignty but one king dies, and his only child is a daughter, Macha. They refuse her turn as king, but she defeats

⁵ Bhreathnach, Máire. “A New Edition of Tochmarc Becfhola.” *Ériu*, 1984, 59-91.

⁶ Cathasaigh, Tomás Ó. “The Rhetoric of Fingal Rónáin (1985).” In *CS*: 376-98.

⁷ Gantz, Jeffrey, ed. and transl. “The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulaind and the Only Jealousy of Emer.” In *EIMS*: 153-78.

⁸ Gantz, Jeffrey, ed. and transl. “The Dream of Oengus.” In *EIMS*: 108-12.

⁹ Toner, Gregory. “Macha and the Invention of Myth.” *Ériu* 60 (2010): 98-104.

them in battle, retains kingship, and marries one among them. When the three sons of one of the other kings, deprived of their chance at rule, turn to trouble-making, she disguises herself as an old hag and invites each one into the forest to sleep with her, where she binds them. Once the three are captured in this manner, rather than kill them, she forces them to carve out the place of Emain Macha which is to become the centre of Ulster kingship.

Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca (Death of Muirchertaig Meic Erca)¹⁰

Muirchertaig is approached by a beautiful woman and falls in love. She tells him she has come to find him but if he wants to be with her, he cannot utter her name. Her names are many but ‘Sín’ is the one she is known by in the story. He is completely enthralled, sends away his wife and the clerics and his life is gradually ruined until he is killed. Sín then confesses that this was her intent; revenge for the death of her family caused by Muirchertaig.

Accallam na Senórach (Colloquy with the Ancients)¹¹

In a story within the *Accallam*, Créde requires suitors to win her with a poem. Cáel does so with a poem written by his mother, and Créde falls in love with him, and mourns him when he is killed in battle.

Noínden Ulad ocus Emuin Macha (The Debility of the Ulstermen)¹²

A woman appears to Crunnchu and moves into his household as his wife, becoming pregnant by him. When Crunnchu boasts of her to the king, she is forced to race against his horses, delivers twins at the end of the race, and curses the men of Ulster before she dies.

Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada Agus Ghráinne (The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne)¹³

Gráinne is to marry Finn but falls in love with Diarmaid and places a geis on him that

¹⁰ Cathasaigh, Tomás Ó. “The Threefold Death in Early Irish Sources (1994).” In *CS*: 106-8.

¹¹ Dooley, Ann, and Harry Roe, ed. and transl. *Tales of the Elders of Ireland: A New Translation of Accallam na Senórach*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008: 25-28.

¹² Toner, Gregory. “Macha.” 83-98.

¹³ Ní Shéaghdha, Nessa, ed. and transl. *TDAG*.

he must elope with her. They are pursued by Finn until a peace is negotiated. Finn then effects Diarmaid's death and Gráinne calls on her children to take revenge on him.

Láoi Oisín Ar Tír Na Nóg (The Lay of Oisín in the Land of Youth)¹⁴

A beautiful otherworldly woman appears on the shores of the lake and invites Oisín to join her in the Tír na nÓg, the Land of Youth. Oisín goes with her but when he returns to Ireland, finds that centuries have passed and he is an old man, and all his old companions gone.

Sruth Dá Econd (The River of the Two Fools)¹⁵

Partholón goes fishing and leaves his wife, Elgnat, and his servant to guard the island where they are dwelling. Elgnat tells the servant he should sleep with her, and goads him when he refuses so that he does. Partholón kills her lap-dog in anger and it is known as the first jealousy in Ireland.

from: Táin Bó Cúailgne (The Cattle Raid of Cooley)

There are many stories associated with Medb and her various lovers, but a central one concerns the Pillow Talk that begins the Cattle Raid of Cúailgne where she and her husband Ailill are comparing wealth to see who has the greater bargain in their marriage. Medb states that she cannot have a jealous husband because she "was never without one lover in the shadow of another."¹⁶

Tochmarc Ailbe (The Wooing of Ailbe)¹⁷

When Finn complains of having been deserted by Gráinne, the king (Gráinne's father) tells Finn that if he can persuade one of his other daughters to go with him, then he gives his consent. Ailbe takes a liking to Finn and they engage in wordplay. Cormac disapproves of her choice but she insists upon it. The term, '*tochmarc togai*' is used, which Carey says "closely resembles *toga tochmairc* 'choice of wooing'; the latter apparently refers to a man's pick of potential wives."¹⁸

¹⁴ Coimín, Micheál. "Láoi Oisín ar Tír na nÓg: The Lay of Oisín in the Land of Youth." Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son Ltd, 1750.

¹⁵ Clancy, Thomas Owen. "Fools and Adultery in Some Early Irish Texts." *Ériu* 44 (1993): 108.

¹⁶ O'Rahilly, Cecile, ed. and transl. "The Pillow-Talk." In *FDA* IV: 39.

¹⁷ Carey, John, ed. and transl. "Tochmarc Ailbe: The Wooing of Ailbe." 1-14, unpublished.

¹⁸ Carey, "Tochmarc Ailbe," 9.

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