

Hysbysiad Hawlfraint

Dyma atgoffa staff a myfyrwyr y Brifysgol hwn fod hawlfraint yn gymwys ar y darn hwn ac ar y gwaith y mae'n dod ohono. Gwnaed y Copi Digidol hwn yn unol â thelerau Trwydded yr Asiantaeth Trwyddedu Hawlfraint, sy'n golygu eich bod yn cael:

- Gweld a lawr lwytho copi
- Argraffu copi

Mae'r Copi Digidol hwn ac unrhyw gopi digidol neu argraffedig a roddir ichi neu a wnaed gennych yn ôl telerau'r Drwydded hon i'w ddefnyddio yng nghyd-destun y modiwl hwn neu'r cwrs astudio hwn. Cewch gadw'r copïau hyn ar ddiwedd y cwrs, ond dim ond at eich defnydd eich hun.

Rhaid i bob copi (gan gynnwys copïau electronig) gynnwys yr Hysbysiad Hawlfraint hwn a rhaid iddynt gael eu dinistrio neu eu dileu os bydd y Brifysgol yn gofyn ichi wneud hynny.

Ac eithrio'r hyn sy'n dderbyniol yn ôl darpariaethau cyfraith hawlfraint, ni cheir copïo, cadw na dosbarthu (gan gynnwys dosbarthu drwy e-bost) heb ganiatâd y sawl sy'n dal yr hawlfraint.

Mae gan yr awdur (ymadrodd sy'n cynnwys arlunydd a'r sawl sy'n creu gweithiau gweledol eraill) hawliau moesol ar y gwaith ac ni chaiff staff na myfyrwyr achosi na chaniatáu i'r gwaith gael ei anffurfio, ei lurgunio na'i addasu fel arall, na'i drin mewn unrhyw fodd difriol arall, a fyddai'n gwneud cam ag anrhydedd neu enw da'r awdur.

Teitl y darn: **The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature**

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gydnabyddiaeth arall (os yw'n berthnasol):

Manylion cyfnodolyn -

teitl/Cyrol/Blwyddyn (os yw'n berthnasol): **Eriu Cyfrol XXXVIII**

Cyhoeddwr: **Royal Irish Academy**

Tudalennau a sganiwyd: **27 - 44**

Cwrs Astudio (Enw a rhif y modiwl): **Hanes y Ferch yn yr Oesoedd Canol: ffynonellau o'r rhanbarthau CYCS7005C**

Enw'r sawl a awdurdododd

y sganio: *E. L. Hams*

Dyddiad y rhoddwyd awdurdod: 06.03.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

THE HONOUR OF WOMEN IN EARLY IRISH LITERATURE

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The world of early Irish literature was dominated by aristocratic warriors in pursuit of martial honour. For these heroes such honour was an external or public quality, an almost tangible possession, ever threatened and demanding constant validation in the eyes of a ceaselessly vigilant critical audience. Predictably, such a society extolled the 'masculine' virtues of aggression and physical prowess. Thus in Ireland the highest development of the honour code, the idea of the fair fight, was expressed as *fir fer*, 'the truth of men', while the adjective *ferda*, 'manly', commonly used to describe heroic persons or honorific behaviour, was virtually synonymous with *lâechda*, 'warrior-like'. Indeed in such a society the coward, *midlach*, was not only literally 'less than a warrior' but, in terms of the strictly defined heroic hierarchy in which he had forfeited his place, less than a man.¹ Yet the high status of one large group of 'non-men' is a frequently noted characteristic of early Irish literature. That group is, of course, women, and this apparent contradiction compels us to examine precisely how women relate to the honour code which gave coherence and inspiration to the lives of the male heroes.

First, a brief statement of purpose is in order. The emphasis throughout

¹ While Irish heroes frequently indulged in and obviously enjoyed acrimonious boasting contests with each warrior vaunting his superiority over others, very rarely does a man go to the extreme of calling his rivals cowards. When the word *midlach* appears in Irish literature in the context of a deliberately insulting speech intended to goad a hero to action, it is virtually always efficacious. See, for example, Láeg's use of the word to enrage Cú Chulainn in one of the combats in *Fled Bricrend* (LU, ed. Best and Bergin, 8878–80); the seven-year-old Cú Chulainn's use of the term to goad Fóill into fighting him in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (ed. from LL by Cecile O'Rahilly, 1095–8); or the herd's sister's use of the word to incite her brother to kill Suibne in *Buile Suibne* (ed. O'Keeffe, MMIS, 2166–8). Fer Diad's willingness to fight Cú Chulainn is largely rooted in his hasty and touchy inference of a charge of *midlachas* in the words of Cú Chulainn fabricated by Medb. See *TBC: Recension I*, ed. Cecile O'Rahilly, 2611–14.

The early Germanic peoples saw cowardice in a similar light. Walther Gehl writes: 'Der Unterschied zwischen tapfer und feige war alles andere als eine Nuance in Mannestum, sondern vielmehr die grundsätzliche Scheidung zwischen Mann und Nicht-Mann'. See his *Ruhm und Ehre bei den Nordgermanen* (Berlin 1937) 116–17. More dramatic insight into the virulence with which Irish heroes refuted charges of *midlachas* can be gained through an examination of the concept of *ergi* and of the inflammatory ritual of *nið* in the aggressively competitive society of the Icelandic chieftains. See Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The unmanly male: concepts of sexual defamation in early northern society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petrie (Odense 1983); Folke Ström, *Nið, ergi and old Norse moral attitudes*, The 1973 Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies at University College, London (London 1974); and Ursula Dronke, *The role of sexual themes in Njál's Saga*, The 1980 Coke Memorial Lecture (London 1981).

this paper will be on the evidence of the early literature itself. It is not my intention to attempt a full-scale analysis of the place of women in early Irish society,² nor to study the legal evidence on women in any depth.³ Furthermore, discussion will be limited to female characters whose actions are not primarily dictated by their former mythological functions. In other words, figures like Medb, Scáthach, Aife, Nes, and the Morrígu of the Ulster Cycle, and Sín from *Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca*, fall outside the main focus of this study, although their actions may occasionally be referred to, with caution, to elucidate the behaviour of other women.⁴ With these limitations in mind, we may now turn to the evidence of the literature.

Women often boast of their men's adherence to the honour code, thus seeming to define their own honour as virtually a reflection of that of their husbands. This practice finds its clearest expression in the section of *Fled Bricrend* titled 'Briatharcath Ban Ulad'. Here Bricriu, having already set the three greatest Ulster heroes at each other's throats, turns his malicious attention to their wives. One by one, he offers Fedelm Noichride, the wife of Loegaire, Lennabair, the wife of Conall Cernach, and Emer, the wife of Cú Chulainn, precedence over all the women of Ulster. In each instance he praises the woman herself, but quickly goes on to define her in relation to the powerful men in her life.⁵ Thus to Fedelm he says: 'Conchobar, king of a province of Ireland, is your father. Loegaire Búadach is your husband'.⁶ Similarly, he flatters Lennabair with the words: 'As much as your husband has surpassed the warriors of the world in bravery and appearance have you

surpassed the women of Ulster'.⁷ In his speech to Emer praise of her outweighs that of her father and husband, although reference to her impressive male relations is by no means omitted. When the time comes for the women to engage in their word battle, each begins with a summary of her own claims to recognition, but then goes on to a more lengthy glorification of the warrior accomplishments of her husband, following the latter boast with her demand for the precedence. Lennabair's praise of Conall may serve as an example: 'My husband is triumphant, big-bodied Conall . . . He battles at their fords; he repels attacks on them. He is a protecting warrior over whom a standing stone will be raised . . . For because of the number of his accomplishments Conall excels every warrior'.⁸

Perhaps the clearest indication that a woman's honour is seen as a function of that of her husband is the fact that the man's proof of his pre-eminence automatically validates his wife's claim to precedence. Thus when Medb grants Cú Chulainn the *curadmír*, she seems to include Emer in the award as a matter of course: 'And furthermore our judgment is that as you yourself are not to be compared with the warriors of Ulster, so your wife should not be compared with their wives. We think it proper that she always be allowed to precede all the women of Ulster into the drinking-hall'.⁹ Later, Cú Roí grants Emer precedence almost as an afterthought to his acceptance of Cú Chulainn's claim: 'The judgment that Cú Roí then gave them was the *curadmír* and the highest warrior status among all Gaels to Cú Chulainn, and precedence in the drinking-hall before all the women of Ulster to his wife'.¹⁰

A similar identification of a woman's honour with that of her husband is evident in *Serglige Con Culainn*, in which a flock of beautiful birds lands in Ulster, and the wives of the heroes boastfully argue about whose husband will catch them. Ethne Inguba, who appears as Cú Chulainn's wife at the beginning of the tale, explicitly makes this identification after Cú Chulainn has caught the birds and given them away without saving any for her: 'I am not angry for they were distributed to them by me'.¹¹ Emer identifies herself with Cú Chulainn in the same manner in *Fled Bricrend*, basing her right to address the company on the prestige of her husband: 'It is fitting for me, Sencha, for I am the wife of a handsome hero who exhibits both beauty and wisdom . . . There will not be found a man who can equal, for his age, his growth and his splendour . . . his prowess, his battle ardour, his valour'.¹²

Such vicarious participation of women in the honour code finds its most dramatic expression in those instances in which women goad their men to fulfil its dictates. Emer is repeatedly seen inciting men she feels are lax in their pursuit of honour. In *Fled Bricrend* she, like her two rivals, spurs her husband

² For relatively brief attempts at such an analysis see Josef Weisweiler, 'Die Stellung der Frau bei den Kelten und das Problem des keltischen "Mutter-rechts"', *ZCP* xxi (2) (1939) 205-79; and Donncha Ó Corráin, 'Women in early Irish society', in *Women in Irish society: the historical dimension*, ed. Margaret Mac Curtain and Donncha Ó Corráin (Westport 1979) 1-13. For a full-length study see Jean Markale, *La Femme celte* (Paris 1972). Unfortunately Markale's work is of dubious value because of his questionable theorizing and undue dogmatism.

³ The seminal work in this area remains, of course, *Studies in early Irish law*, ed. Dillon and Binchy (Dublin 1936), the entirety of which is devoted to the legal status of women in early Ireland. Weisweiler summarizes evidence on this question in 'Die Stellung der Frau', *ZCP* xxi (2) 222-30, as does Markale in *La Femme celte* 43-58.

⁴ See Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Aspects of the theme of king and goddess in Irish literature', *Études Celt.* vii (1) (1955) 76-114; vii (2) (1956) 356-413; viii (1) (1958) 59-65. The evidence on Medb as a character best interpreted in mythological terms is summarized by Tomás Ó Máille, 'Medb Chrúachna', *ZCP* xvii (1928) 129-46.

⁵ Nancy Power writes of the various classes of women dealt with in *Senchas Már*: 'From the *cétmuintir* to the *bé nindis*, all the women mentioned up to the present stood in a clearly defined relation to some one man, in a relation which, in default of a more exact English term, must be described as a marital relation. Their status and privileges varied, but all of them had certain rights and duties in relation to the man'. See 'The classes of women described in *Senchas Már*', in *Studies in early Irish law* 99.

Discussing patriarchal societies like the one that shaped early Welsh law, Morfydd Owen writes of the legal status of women: 'The juridical inferiority sprang from the fact that, in most legal institutions, she, like the dumb and the mad, was regarded as a non-person, recognized by society only as an appendage to some male with whom she was connected by ties of blood or by bonds of marriage.' See 'Shame and reparation: woman's place in the kin', in *The Welsh law of women: Studies presented to Professor Daniel A. Binchy on his eightieth birthday*, ed. Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff 1980) 40.

⁶ *Fled Bricrend* in LU, ed. Best and Bergin (Dublin 1929) 8227-8. All translations in this paper are my own.

⁷ *Fled Bricrend*, LU 8238-9.

⁸ *Fled Bricrend*, LU 8306-17.

⁹ *Fled Bricrend*, LU 8822-6.

¹⁰ *Fled Bricrend*, LU 9158-61.

¹¹ *Serglige Con Culainn*, LU 3268-9.

¹² *Fled Bricrend*, LU 8440-2.

on in his efforts for the *curadmir*. In *Serglige Con Culainn*, she upbraids the Ulstermen for their failure to aid the languishing Cú Chulainn, sharply impugning their honour while exalting that of her husband: 'It is a miserable thing for the Ulstermen not to be seeking a great healing. If Conchobar were withering or if Fergus were overpowered by sleep, or if Conall Cernach had suffered blows . . . it would be "Cú Chulainn, help!"'¹³ Later in this same tale she turns on Cú Chulainn himself: 'It is a shameful thing for you to be laid low for love of a woman'.¹⁴ Her taunts are similarly directed at Cú Chulainn, this time prior to their marriage, in *Tochmarc Emire*. After listening to his boasts she pointedly questions his masculine status: 'Those are good fights for a mere boy, but you haven't yet reached the strength of a chariot-warrior'.¹⁵ As she no doubt expects it might, this slight provokes the hero to fresh boasts and eventually to the deeds that corroborate them.

Medb often manipulates warriors through a similarly skilful use of mockery. Thus to Lóch mac Mo-Femis she says: 'You well deserve to be laughed at when the man who killed your brother is destroying our army without your going to fight him . . .'.¹⁶ She uses the same approach in *Bruiden Da Chocae* to rekindle Fergus's hostility towards Ulster and thus prevent his aiding his compatriot Cormac Connlongas: 'It would be an easy thing for you to see the son of the man who exiled you from your own land and whom, in addition, Conchobar fathered with Nes in spite of you, made king in your presence'.¹⁷ Her abuse goads the aged Conall to kill Ailill in *Goire Conaill Chernaig i Crúachain ocus Aided Ailella ocus Conaill Chernaig*: 'Conall the Triumphant (Cernach) was your name until today. Conall the Wicked Wretch is your name from now on. When you were the Triumphant, no one would have dared violate your guarantee. Today that outrage is near you'.¹⁸

Other women use such abuse with equal effect. For example, in *Tochmarc Ferbe*, the heroine bloodthirstily urges Domnall Derg to exact vengeance for her slain suitor Maine: 'If it were you, Domnall Derg, whom the Ulstermen had killed on account of Ferb, the revenge for it would have been famous among the tales of Maine of the great deeds . . . The destruction of all the Ulstermen by your furious hand would be peace to my good heart and consolation to my soul, Domnall'.¹⁹ In *Cath Cairn Chonaill*, Sinech Cró, the foster-mother of Diarmaid mac Aeda Sláine, drives him to avenge the plunder of her cattle by sarcastically calling his honour into question: 'You

¹³ *Serglige Con Culainn*, LU 3536-8.

¹⁴ *Serglige Con Culainn*, LU 3590.

¹⁵ *Tochmarc Emire*, LU 10277-8.

¹⁶ *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, ed. Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin 1976) 1971-2.

¹⁷ *Bruiden Da Chocae*, ed. W. Stokes, RC xxi (1900) §39.

¹⁸ *Goire Conaill Chernaig i gCrúachain ocus Aided Ailella ocus Conaill Chernaig*, ed. Kuno Meyer, ZCP i (1) (1897) p. 104. Other instances of Medb's use of incitement which questions the honour of the men involved are found in *TBC: Recension I*, where she goads on Fer Diad with an explicit charge of *midlachas* (lines 2616-19); and in the late *Aided Con Culainn*, where she shames her allies into attacking Cú Chulainn (ed. A. G. Van Hamel in *Compert Con Culainn and other stories*, MMIS 1933; reprinted Dublin 1968 §37).

¹⁹ *Tochmarc Ferbe*, LL, ed. Best and O'Brien (Dublin 1954-) 34051-4, 34059-62.

are slow to help, Diarmaid. Fear of Guaire destroys us. Since you are feeble in feats of battle, come to us out of the slaughter . . . The calves of our cows will be trained oxen before help comes from Diarmaid'.²⁰ Despite the fact that they are allowed little scope for direct, active personal involvement in the warrior honour code, it is obvious that all of these women unquestioningly accept the code and aggressively promote the fulfilment of its dictates.

It is interesting to note here that Icelandic saga literature offers particularly striking cross-cultural parallels with this Irish evidence.²¹ Of Icelandic women Wolfgang Krause writes: 'Sie sind viel rachesdürstiger als die Männer und lassen keine Gelegenheit vorübergehen, um sie durch kränkende austachelnde Worte bis aufs Blut zu reizen'.²² A few examples of such hortatory speeches will show their fundamental similarity to the accusatory diatribes of Irish heroines. In *Eyrbyggja Saga*, Geirriður goads her son to take action in response to the insulting arrogance of Thorbjörn the Stout: 'It is often true, as is said, that you, Thórarinn, have a woman's spirit rather than a man's, since you will endure every outrage from Thorbjörn the Stout, and I do not know why I have such a son'.²³ In *Laxdaela Saga*, the redoubtable Guðrún uses insults to drive both her brothers and her sons to violently honorific action. Inciting her brothers to attack Kjartan, she bitterly impugns their virility: 'You would have the right disposition if you were the daughters of some farmer . . . Men like you have a swine's memory . . .'.²⁴ A similarly aggressive sarcasm is used later in the saga by Thorgerður Egilsdóttir, who says to her sons: 'It is a pity to have cowardly sons, and I'm certain it would have suited you better to have been your father's daughters and to have been given away in marriage'.²⁵ In *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoda*, a female servant rouses Hrafnkel to vengeance with the jibe: 'It is altogether true as was said of old that "Everyone becomes a coward as he ages"'.²⁶ This charge of cowardice was inextricable in Icelandic minds from the accusation of passive homosexuality, and this connection is made explicit in *Brennu-Njáls Saga* in

²⁰ *Cath Cairn Chonaill*, LL 9571-4, 9587-90.

²¹ Similarly, of ancient German women George Jones writes: 'Women were known to restore broken battle lines by urging the warriors to greater effort with the reminder that defeat would mean the enslavement of the women.' See *Honour in German literature* (Chapel Hill 1959) 14.

Pre-Islamic Arab women also behaved in this manner. Bichr Farès writes: 'Les hommes, au lieu d'abandonner leurs femmes dans les campements, les emmenaient avec eux au combat. Ces derniers leur criaient: "Vous n'êtes point nos maris si vous ne nous défendez pas" . . . Les hommes allaient alors de l'avant et ne reculaient point.' See *L'Honneur chez les Arabes avant l'Islam* (Paris 1932) 67.

²² Wolfgang Krause, *Die Frau in der Sprache der altisländischen Familiengeschichten, ergänzungshefte zur Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen*, Nr. 4 (Göttingen 1926) 41. See also Walther Gehl's comment in *Ruhm und Ehre bei den Nordgermanen* that 'Ebenso masslos wie die Männer leiden auch die Frauen unter der Ehrkränkung' (p. 34).

²³ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, ed. Grímur M. Helgason and Vésteinn Ólason in *Íslendinga Sögur ii* (Hafnarfjörður 1969) 26.

²⁴ *Laxdaela Saga*, ed. Helgason and Ólason, *Íslendinga Sögur iii* (1969) 120. For her abuse of her sons see pp 143-4.

²⁵ *Laxdaela Saga*, *Íslendinga Sögur iii* 130. The word *dád-lauss*, here translated 'cowardly', can also mean 'impotent'.

²⁶ *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoda*, ed. Helgason and Ólason, *Íslendinga Sögur vii* (1972) 90.

the speech of Hildigunnar to Flosi urging him to avenge the death of Hoskúldr: 'I appeal to God and to good men that I conjure you by all the power of your Christ and by your manhood and valour that you avenge all the wounds that he suffered in dying or otherwise be called every man's coward'.²⁷ While Icelandic women are unlike their Irish counterparts in making such an explicit equation between cowardice and femininity, both the Norse and the Irish literatures agree in presenting women as thoroughly committed, if on the whole indirect, adherents of the masculine honour code.

A further powerful example of women's acceptance of the honour code, including their own secondary status under it, is seen in the willingness of several female characters to sacrifice themselves for the advancement of son or husband. Thus in *Compert Conchobair* Nes is willing to die in order to delay the birth of Conchobar until a day prophesied as auspicious by Cathbad: 'If he does not come out through my side, he will not come any other way until that time arrives'.²⁸ The mother of Fiacha Muillethan behaves in an identical manner for an identical reason in *Fotha Chatha Mhucrama*, although unlike Nes she dies in the attempt.²⁹ In *Orgain Denna Ríg*, the justifiably suspicious Cobthach refuses to enter Labraid's feasting hall until the latter's mother does so. When Labraid hesitates to burn the hall on being reminded that she is inside, she herself tells him not to forgo his vengeance for her sake: 'Make your honour through me, for I will die anyway'.³⁰ In *Talland Étaí*, the wife of Mes Gegra agrees to sleep with Athirne to prevent his satirizing her husband: 'And the night on which the woman was brought to bed to give birth, that is the night she slept with Athirne for the sake of her husband's honour, so that his honour would not be taken away'.³¹ In all these instances women seem willing to sacrifice themselves to the harshest demands of the honour code.

Indeed women sometimes appear in the literature as mere pawns in male struggles for prestige. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the repeated use of Finnabair as a lure to induce various Connachtmén to face Cú Chulainn is a stark example of such an abuse. According to the Book of Leinster redaction of the tale, her discovery of her role as sexual bribe causes her to die of shame. In *Táin Bó Flidais*, Flidais seems important only as an honorific possession. Her husband Ailill Finn is aware that she loves Fergus, and for this reason

declines to give Fergus the gift he has requested, for 'people will say I gave you what you demanded to protect my wife'.³² Nonetheless she, along with her women, is eventually carried off by the Connachtmén and awarded to Fergus for his help in this battle. In the Deirdre tale, Conchobar ultimately comes to regard Deirdre more as a prerogative denied him than as a loved one, and it is this sense of outraged dignity that explains the virulence of his desire for revenge. There can be little doubt that in examples like these we see survivals of an earlier and cruder ethic at work in a literature that, on the whole, views women with considerable respect.³³

Occasionally, though not often, women question the honour code by which their men live. The clearest example of such questioning is found in the Deirdre tales, particularly in *Oided Mac nUisnig*, the later of the two major versions. Indeed it is Deirdre's failure to fully comprehend or accept the dictates of that code that lends this tale much of its poignancy.³⁴ She is unable to understand the predicament of Fergus when he is trapped between two conflicting honour-related duties: the responsibility of accompanying Naísi to Emain and the obligation of fulfilling one of his *geasa*. For this reason she bitterly reproaches him for actions that, by the standards of his society, are perfectly rational if not absolutely mandatory. She charges that 'Fair Fergus has done us an injury by bringing us across the great sea. He has sold his honour for ale. His great exploits have been forfeited'.³⁵ In *Oided Mac nUisnig*, she seeks a compromise in this situation, a compromise which, however logical to the modern reader, is utterly impossible in terms of her own society, violating as it does Fergus's word and impugning the courage of both the sons of Fergus and the sons of Uisnech: 'Let us go tonight to Inis Cuilinn, between Ireland and Scotland, and let us stay there until Fergus finishes his feast. And that allows Fergus to fulfil his word and offers you long continuation in your sovereignty'.³⁶ Both Naísi and Illann mac Fergusa become impatient with her inability to understand what honour demands of them. 'In wrath' Naísi exclaims: 'Since we have no fear, we will not follow your counsel'.³⁷ When she later urges the men to leave Emain, Illann turns on her angrily: 'We will not do so, and we confess, girl, that you attributed

²⁷ *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, ed. Helgason and Ólason, *Íslendinga Sögur* viii (1973) 215. The word *níðingr*, here inadequately translated as 'coward', is one of the most emotionally charged words in the saga literature. Folke Ström writes of the root word *níð*: 'The meaning of *níð* . . . should be considered in relation to another Old Norse conception with which it is often linked, the word *ergi*. *Ergi*, like the adjective *argr* from which it is formed, has a strongly pejorative sense: it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that no other Norse word was able to provoke such violent feelings and reactions. According to the opinion of the time, the application to a man of the term *argr* . . . meant that he was "unmanly" in various ways, and in particular that he was a coward and a homosexual.' See *Níð, ergi and old Norse moral attitudes* 4.

²⁸ *Compert Conchobair*, ed. K. Meyer, *RC* vi (1884) 176. 59–60.

²⁹ *Fotha Chatha Mhucrama*, LL 32273–9.

³⁰ *Orgain Denna Ríg*, LL 35318–19.

³¹ *Talland Étaí*, LL 13322–3.

³² *Táin Bó Flidais*, LU 1564–5.

³³ Such a situation exists in Icelandic saga literature as well. Having discussed the ambivalent attitude towards women in the sagas, Wolfgang Krause writes: 'Dieser Gegensatz erklärt sich wohl so, dass jene allgemeinen, oft sentenzartigen Urteile über die Frau die Anschauungen einer älteren Zeit und Kulturstufe bewahrt haben, in der das Weib noch eine niedrigere Stellung einnahm.' See *Die Frau in der Sprache des altisländischen Familiengeschichten* 60. See also the ideas of Maarten C. van den Toorn, *Ethics and morals in Icelandic saga literature* (Assen 1955) 144.

³⁴ That her ignorance is not total is shown by her ability to manipulate Naísi's sense of honour to compel him to elope with her. The ear-pulling scene is lacking in the more genteel *Oided Mac nUisnig*. It should perhaps be noted that, in her ambiguous approach to the honour code, Deirdre is a far more complex and intriguing character than is Gráinne.

³⁵ *Longes Mac nUislenn*, LL 34564–7.

³⁶ *Oided Mac nUisnig*, ed. W. Stokes, *Irish Texts* ii (3) (Leipzig 1887) 160.

³⁷ *Oided Mac nUisnig*, *IT* ii (3) 163.

great timidity and cowardice to us when you said that ...'.³⁸ Of course Deirdre's rejection of the values of the code is most evident in her hope that Naisi will renounce the honour and prestige to be gained by a return to Emain to live an idyllic but obscure existence with her in Scotland.

Emer shows a similar unwillingness to accept the inexorable demands of the honour code in *Aided Óenfir Aife*. Seeing Cú Chulainn ready to fight the boy she knows to be his son by another woman, she cries out in an attempt to stop him. Cú Chulainn rejects her rational and humane intervention brusquely but entirely logically from the point of view of his society, representatives of which are closely watching his conduct: 'Leave off, woman. I don't ask for a woman to hold me back from great deeds and brilliant triumph'.³⁹ Here Emer not only questions Cú Chulainn's blind adherence to the code, but also—and one should keep in mind her furious jealousy at Cú Chulainn's infidelity with Fann in *Serglige Con Culainn*—seems willing to sacrifice a measure of her own pride to forestall the tragedy brought on by male drives for prestige.⁴⁰

One further instance of a woman acting as what a modern reader may regard as a voice of reason in an honour-crazed world should be cited. In *Tochmarc Ferbe*, after Conchobar has related to his wife Mugain his dream of a bloody victory over the Connachtmen under Maine, she succinctly replies: 'What has already happened between us and Connacht is indeed enough'.⁴¹ Unfortunately for both the men and the women of the two provinces, such sane assessments stood little chance in competition with the more stirring claims of honour and glory.

When we examine the honour of women themselves, as opposed to the honour that their men impart to them, we find several qualities recurring repeatedly in descriptions of respected female characters. The first such quality, especially prominent in the women's own boasts, is beauty.⁴² In *Fled Bricrend*, all three of the contending women vaunt their loveliness, with Emer predictably making the most impressive claims: 'All Ulstermen sigh for me. I am their hearts' bright nut. If I were wanton and welcoming not a woman of you would have a husband by this time tomorrow'.⁴³ Emer reveals this same pride in her beauty in her boasting conversation with Cú Chulainn in *Tochmarc Emire*.⁴⁴ In *Aided Lugdach ocus Derbforgaill*, the maimed and

³⁸ *Oided Mac nUisnig*, IT ii (3) 164. Illann detects a charge of *midlachas* in her suggestion, hence his spontaneous anger.

³⁹ *Aided Óenfir Aife*, ed. A. G. Van Hamel in *Compert Con Culainn* 14 §9.

⁴⁰ It is, of course, probable that the fact that Cú Chulainn's affair with Aife took place long ago and far away, as well as before their marriage, rendered it less of a threat to Emer's honour.

⁴¹ *Tochmarc Ferbe*, LL 33568–9.

⁴² For a lavish description of the Irish concept of feminine beauty see *Togail Buidne Da Derga*, ed. Eleanor Knott, MMIS (1936; reprinted Dublin 1963) 1–2. The same description of Étain is also found in *Tochmarc Étaine*.

⁴³ *Fled Bricrend*, LU 8330–4.

⁴⁴ *Tochmarc Emire*, LU 10311–14.

dying Derbforgaill pathetically recalls 'the triumph of my appearance over that of every other woman'.⁴⁵

Sometimes linked to these boasts of personal beauty is pride in an aristocratic pedigree. Thus Fedelm Noíchride asserts: 'I descend from the bodies of king and queen'.⁴⁶ In like manner, Emer brags: 'I was raised with the status of the Féni ... trained in regal behaviour ...'.⁴⁷ In keeping with her exalted role in the Ulster Cycle, Emer is also richly endowed with, and boasts of, qualities that other Irish heroines aspired to as well, among them wisdom⁴⁸—attested in her riddling conversation with Cú Chulainn in *Tochmarc Emire*—and generosity.⁴⁹

Yet despite the pride with which these various attributes are claimed, none of them, nor their sum total, represents the fundamental element of feminine honour. As Rudolf Thurneysen stated more than a half-century ago, the inescapable conclusion to be derived from a study of the early literature is that the honour of women was conceived of primarily as sexual: 'Was dem Mann die Ehre ist, ist der Frau die Schamhaftigkeit'.⁵⁰ This point is clear in the literature from both the statements of men and from the boasts of women themselves. In *Fled Bricrend* Emer asserts that she has no equal for 'intelligence or generosity or chastity'.⁵¹ She develops this claim in more detail in *Tochmarc Emire*, calling herself 'Tara of women, fairest of maidens, champion of chastity ...'.⁵² A textual gloss in *Lebor na hUidre* here explains: 'As Tara is above every hill, so am I above every woman in chastity'.⁵³ It is this equation of female honour with chastity or fidelity (Irish *féle* or *genas*⁵⁴) that provides the reason for the reluctance of Deichtine to approach her husband while pregnant in *Compert Con Culainn*. She does not suffer from an inner feeling of guilt, but rather from a very real sense of public shame, no doubt considerably augmented by the widespread gossip about her condition: 'It was a source of great curiosity to the people of Ulster that they did not know who her mate had been. It was thought and feared

⁴⁵ *Aided Lugdach ocus Derbforgaill*, LL 14495.

⁴⁶ *Fled Bricrend*, LU 8282.

⁴⁷ *Tochmarc Emire*, LU 10311–13.

⁴⁸ See, for example, *Fled Bricrend*, LU 8323, 8327; and *Tochmarc Emire*, LU 10186.

⁴⁹ See *Fled Bricrend*, LU 8327.

⁵⁰ Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle 1921) 81. Of the Icelanders, Folke Ström writes: 'The noun *ergi* when used about a woman is virtually synonymous with nymphomania, which was a characteristic as much despised in a woman as unmanliness was in a man.' See *Níð, ergi and old Norse moral attitudes* 4.

⁵¹ *Fled Bricrend*, LU 8327.

⁵² *Tochmarc Emire*, LU 10254.

⁵³ See LU, ed. Best and Bergin, p. 311, gloss b on line 10254.

⁵⁴ Another important word relating to female honour and at times linked with *féle* is *náire*, which is a generally favourable term meaning 'modesty, sense of shame' when used of women, and a term of reproach meaning 'diffidence, backwardness or reluctance ... feeling of shame or humiliation' when used of men (*DIL* N col. 10). It is also interesting to note that the key word *enech* in the sense of 'honour' is very rarely used of women in the early literature, other terms, particularly *míad*, being favoured.

that the child had been fathered by Conchobar when he was drunk . . .⁵⁵ The force of such a sense of humiliation is seen in *Acallamh na Senórach*, in which a young woman abducted by Oisín is overwhelmed by shame when she sees her father approach her: 'Fortunate is the one who had died or had been killed before her father and her three brothers and the nobles of Munster saw her thus'. With these words, 'she put her face to the ground and died'.⁵⁶

Further instances of the definition of female honour as sexual are copious. In *Tochmarc Emire*, the Ulstermen, fearing his attractiveness to their own women, send Cú Chulainn off to court Emer, 'for they were certain that he would be less likely to try to seduce their maidens or to accept the love of their women if he had a suitable wife'.⁵⁷ On this quest Cú Chulainn himself demands virginity in his future spouse. Offered Emer's sister Fial, he flatly rejects her: 'She is not the one whom I have loved, and I have never accepted a woman who might have slept with a man before me. And I have heard that that girl at one time slept with Cairbre Niafer'.⁵⁸ In *Fingal Rónán*, the pursuit of Mael Fothartaig by the wife of Rónán is seen as especially shameful, and Congal, the foster-brother of Mael Fothartaig, reproaches her contemptuously: 'Where are you going, harlot? There's no point in your going around alone unless you're going to meet with a man. Go to your house and take a curse'.⁵⁹ In *Echtra Cormaic i Tír Tairngiri ocus Ceart Claidib Cormaic*, the sexual integrity of his wife and daughter—and also rather unexpectedly of his son—is foremost in Cormac's mind, for when asked to pronounce three truths over a magical cup, he uses the opportunity to discover whether they have abstained from sex during their absence from him.⁶⁰ In *Orgain Denna Ríg*, the strong guard around Moriath, a guard outwitted by Labraid, is obviously intended to preserve her virginity, for her father has not yet chosen a husband for her and he is outraged when he learns that she now has 'the breath of a woman'.⁶¹ In *Echtra Airt meic Cuinn*, Bécuma is banished from the Otherworld for her adultery with Manannán's son Gaidiar, who, in an extreme instance of a double standard at work, sits on the panel that judges her. Mercifully he votes for banishment rather than

⁵⁵ *Compert Con Culainn*, LU 10605–7.

⁵⁶ *Acallamh na Senórach*, ed. S. H. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London 1892) i 160.

⁵⁷ *Tochmarc Emire*, LU 10162–4.

⁵⁸ *Tochmarc Emire*, ed. A. G. Van Hamel in *Compert Con Culainn*, MMIS, p. 31 §26. The text here is that of RIA D.4.2. One thinks of Math's testing the virginity of Aranrod in *Math vab Mathonwy*. See *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch: Y Chwedlau a'r Rhamantau*, ed. J. Gwenogvryn Evans (1907; reprinted Cardiff 1973) 47 col. 93. For further references to Celtic chastity tests see Weisweiler, 'Die Stellung der Frau', *ZCP* xxi (2) 216.

⁵⁹ *Fingal Rónán*, LL 35504–6. A similar contempt for a woman is voiced by Cú Chulainn's dying son Conlai if E. J. Gwynn is correct in his reading of a line in the *dinnshenchas* of Lecht Óenfir Aife. According to Gwynn, Conlai says: 'Dearer to the womb is that which quickens than that which it bears.' Thus the boy's comment on his mother is a double indictment, charging her with both sexual voraciousness and indifference to her child. See 'Varia III', *Ériu* xi (2) (1932) 150–1. *DIL* seems to accept Gwynn's emendation.

⁶⁰ *Echtra Cormaic i Tír Tairngiri ocus Ceart Claidib Cormaic*, ed. W. Stokes, *Irische Texte* iii (1) (Leipzig 1891) 215–16.

⁶¹ *Orgain Denna Ríg*, LL 35264.

burning.⁶² Such a harsh penalty is recommended for a woman's adultery in *Aided Fergusa mic Léide*. Overhearing a man boasting of one of his wife's fine garments, the pygmy king Iubdán laughs and says that instead of boasting the man should kill his wife, for she has made love to another man on that very cloak.⁶³ The death penalty is again urged for adultery in *Longes Chonaill Cuirc*, in which Feradach Find Fechnach plans to burn his daughter for having slept with Conall: 'It was a custom at first that every maiden who practised wantonness in violation of betrothal would be burned'.⁶⁴ Midir makes explicit the connection between female honour and sexual fidelity in *Tochmarc Étaíne*. Appearing to his erstwhile wife, he tells her that it was he who had prevented her brother-in-law Ailill from coming to a tryst with her, 'so that you would not suffer the ruin of your honour'.⁶⁵ Ailill himself, cured of his passion for her, says: 'Your honour has not suffered great destruction'.⁶⁶

In Irish prophecies of doom, female promiscuity, like male cowardice, is one of the key-notes of a world gone mad. Thus the Morrígu predicts: 'I see a world to which I will feel no attachment . . . Women without modesty, men without valour . . .'.⁶⁷ Ferchertne paints a similarly gloomy picture of future anarchy in *Immacallam in Dá Thuarad*: 'Every lawful marriage will turn into adultery . . . Modesty will be cast off'.⁶⁸

If sexual rectitude was the fundamental component of the Irish concept of female honour, we may now ask why this was so. The sexual morality of early Irish saga literature was based on a definite double standard for men and women.⁶⁹ One example of this double standard, Gaidiar's sitting in judgment on Bécuma, his partner in adultery, has already been cited. In the Ulster Cycle, the clearest example is found in *Tochmarc Emire*. After Cú Chulainn and Emer have met and conversed, 'each of them promised the other to preserve chastity until they met again unless either of them died in

⁶² *Echtra Airt meic Cuinn*, ed. R. Best, *Ériu* iii (1907) 152.

⁶³ *Aided Fergusa mic Léide*, ed. S. H. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* i 247.

⁶⁴ *Longes Chonaill Cuirc*, LL 37042–3. The entire question of the execution of adulterous women is discussed by John R. Reinhard, 'Burning at the stake in medieval law and literature', *Speculum* xvi (2) (1941) 186–209. Reinhard concludes that such a practice was never institutionalized in ancient Ireland.

⁶⁵ *Tochmarc Étaíne*, LU 10781.

⁶⁶ *Tochmarc Étaíne*, LU 10785.

⁶⁷ *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. Elizabeth A. Gray, *Irish Texts Society* lii (Dublin 1982) 72. 831–2. Incest is also forecast (lines 838–40).

⁶⁸ *Immacallam in Dá Thuarad*, LL 24787–823.

⁶⁹ Jean Markale's assertion that 'il y avait chez les Celtes une grande sérénité en même temps qu'une sorte d'amoralité tranquille et souriante' (*La Femme celte* 377) is a serious misreading of the Irish evidence, due, most likely, to an acceptance of Medb's conduct as indicative of Celtic attitudes to female sexuality. Markale himself is nearer the mark in his earlier *L'Épopée celtique d'Irlande* (Paris 1971), where he describes a Celtic double standard and says of Celtic chastity: 'Pour la femme, il s'agit de l'exclusivité donnée à un homme' (p. 126). Medb's promiscuity is, of course, explicable in terms of her role as goddess of sovereignty. In like manner, it should be remembered that Iubdán's wife, who blithely has relations with the far larger Fergus mac Léide, is also a supernatural being. Iubdán's attitude towards her infidelity is as casual as that of Ailill towards Medb's. See *Aided Fergusa mic Léide*, *Silva Gadelica* i 244.

the meantime'.⁷⁰ While Emer fulfils her commitment, Cú Chulainn, with no hesitation, sleeps with Scáthach, Úathach and Aife, and arranges a future tryst in Ireland with Derbforgaill, although this relationship is never consummated. Indeed in *Serglige Con Culainn*, the hero is angered when Emer's jealousy erupts over his planned meeting with Fann: 'I avoid [striking] you, woman, as everyone avoids [striking] his friend. I do not strike at . . . your weak, limited anger'.⁷¹ Cú Chulainn eventually does forgo his tryst with Fann, but more under the influence of Emer's personality than from any sense that he has acted wrongly.

The strength of Emer's jealousy here may seem to raise some question about the existence of a double standard; a closer examination will, however, show that her rage is precipitated by the manner in which Cú Chulainn has acted rather than by his actions themselves. After hearing the contemptuous words of Cú Chulainn quoted above, Emer, who is, of course, accompanied by fifty women, makes clear the cause of her fury: 'A question now. What has caused you, Cú Chulainn, to dishonour me before all the women of the province and before all the women of Ireland, and before people of honour in general?'⁷² In other words, what she finds so demeaning is the publicity with which he has favoured Fann over her; when his infidelity is long past or has occurred far away and thus out of the public eye, as in *Aided Óenfir Aife*, she behaves with the equanimity that her culture apparently would have expected in such situations.

The maintenance of such a double standard with its demand for either chastity or marital fidelity on the part of women is, of course, a fundamental characteristic of patriarchal societies like that of early Ireland. As Jean Poirier has pointed out, 'le schéma originaire' of all patriarchal societies, including some seemingly aberrant Eskimo and Polynesian groups exhibiting an apparent 'facilité sexuelle', is 'une stricte régulation socio-juridique des relations affirmant la double exigence de virginité des filles et de fidélité des femmes'.⁷³ Women had to be chaste at marriage and faithful thereafter to insure the purity and legitimacy of descent in the male line.⁷⁴ Expressed differently, female sexual restraint was a vital component of male honour. A wife's fidelity, or lack of it, crucially affected the status of her husband and

⁷⁰ *Tochmarc Emire*, ed. Van Hamel in *Compert Con Culainn* 45 §59.

⁷¹ *Serglige Con Culainn*, LU 3897-9.

⁷² *Serglige Con Culainn*, LU 3901-3. Emer's rival Fann seems to share her awareness of a watchful audience. Realizing that Cú Chulainn will pick Emer over herself, 'she began lamenting and grieving, for she thought it shameful, having been abandoned, to go home immediately'. See LU 3922-3.

⁷³ Jean Poirier, 'Le Statut de la femme dans les sociétés archaïques', in *La Femme*, Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin XI (Brussels 1959) 18-19.

⁷⁴ Of medieval Welsh society Nerys Patterson writes: '... there must have been anxiety as to whether the groom was getting what he was paying for. In particular there would be fear that a non-virgin bride might be carrying another man's child. A strong ideology of physical descent governed affiliation, and the laws convey a distinct impression that membership in a land-owning agnatic group was a privilege that was jealously guarded against intrusive claimants.' See 'Honour and shame in medieval Welsh society: a study of the role of burlesque in the Welsh laws', *Studia Celtica* xvi-xvii (1981-2) 78.

descendants. This belief is a powerful force in the literature. Thus in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Cú Chulainn is keenly aware of the importance of women as mothers of future generations. When Mac Roth attempts to arrange a truce by offering to let Cú Chulainn keep all the bondwomen taken by the Connachtmen on their raid on the condition that he allow the noblewomen to be carried off, the guardian of Ulster immediately rejects the proposal, 'for the Ulstermen will take their lowborn women to their beds and then lowborn sons will be born to them'.⁷⁵ Here, women are viewed as little more than instruments for the propagation of a race of heroes. A similar mentality is seen in *Genemain Aeda Sláine*, when one of the two wives of Diarmaid mac Fergusa curses the other: 'I invoke God that you may be shamed for this in the presence of the men of Ireland'. The tale relates that this curse is efficacious, with the public disgrace taking the form of barrenness.⁷⁶ Furthermore, in *Aided Lugdach ocus Derbforgaill*, the bizarre urination contest of the Ulsterwomen is clearly designed to test their sexual and reproductive capabilities. Having built tall snow pillars, they mount them and compete to see whose urine will penetrate farthest into the snow. Although a reluctant participant, Derbforgaill wins the contest, to the rage of the other women: 'If the men find out about this, no woman will be loved in comparison with this woman. Let her eyes be pulled out of her head as well as her nose and her two ears and her hair. She won't be so desirable then'.⁷⁷ Plainly the vicious envy of these women has its source in their awareness that they have been excelled in what they regard as their primary function, pleasing men and providing them with offspring. In like manner, in the *Bóramha* tale it seems possible that a factor in the death by shame of Fithir, the daughter of Tuathal Techtmar, on seeing her husband return home with her own sister Dáirine as a second wife, is her feeling that she has now been publicly pronounced sexually inadequate.⁷⁸

In *Fingal Rónáin*, a woman's sexual behaviour is again interpreted primarily with regard to its effect on her husband's honour. Congal denounces the wife of Rónán for her attempts to seduce Mael Fothartaig, but his emphasis is on the threat to the king and not on that to his son: 'So you want to put the king of Leinster to shame, evil woman! . . . An evil woman to put him to shame alone with a man in ditches and bushes'.⁷⁹ Indeed the woman herself later maliciously accuses Mael Fothartaig before the king of being the aggressor with the significant words: 'Indeed he does not get from me the pleasure he desires, that is to meet with me in spite of you'.⁸⁰ In *Buile Suibne*,

⁷⁵ *TBC: Recension I*, 1274-5.

⁷⁶ *Genemain Aeda Sláine*, LU 4232-5.

⁷⁷ *Aided Lugdach ocus Derbforgaill*, LL 14455-8.

⁷⁸ *Bóramha*, LL 37665-8.

⁷⁹ *Fingal Rónáin*, LL 35507-10. It is interesting to note that the Welsh laws make specific reference to 'gwraig llwyn a pherth' ('a woman of bush and brake'). See T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Nau Kynywed Teithiauc', in *The Welsh law of women* 32, and the glossary in the same volume, p. 206. See also Patterson, 'Honour and shame', *Studia Celtica* xvi-xvii 79.

⁸⁰ *Fingal Rónáin*, LL 35522-3.

a woman falsely charges another woman of committing infidelity with the wretched Suibne. In her charge she emphasizes to the husband the threat her behaviour poses to his honour: 'Your wife is in that hedge over there with another man, you cowardly weakling'.⁸¹

In the light of all this evidence it is tempting to state that in her boasts of chastity the Irishwoman of the sagas is once again merely consenting to subordinate herself to the honour of her mate. Yet such a conclusion does not do justice to the full picture presented in the literature. Having cited two instances from Plutarch's *Moralia* describing how violently the Galatian Celtic women Cumma and Chiomara defended their chastity, Josef Weisweiler states: 'Diese beiden Beispiele scheinen mir nun weniger die Galtentreue keltischer Frauen zu bezeugen als ihr stark entwickeltes weibliches Ehrgefühl'.⁸² In other words, the pride in her chastity was rooted in a woman's sense of her personal integrity and independence, and not merely in her acceptance of her duty to satisfy her husband's demand for legitimate progeny. It is undoubtedly due to the presence of this belief in early Irish literature that the women of the tales seem so forceful and vividly complex to modern readers. Emer's pride in her virginity and her boast that she is 'Tara of women . . . champion of chastity' are not merely ploys to impress her future husband, but rather expressions of a profound satisfaction in her own physical and spiritual integrity. Furthermore, it is largely this same proud sense of personal dignity and honour that causes Deirdre to commit suicide rather than live with the detested Eogan mac Durthacht.⁸³

The existence of a double standard did not, then, mean that the honour of women was entirely passive or subordinate to that of men. Both Deirdre and Gráinne choose the men they wish to marry, as does Emer, who even goes to the extent of driving off another man who comes to woo her: 'She seized his two cheeks and invoked the truth of his honour and of his soul and confessed to him that it was Cú Chulainn she loved and that she was under his protection . . .'.⁸⁴ Finnabair, hardly the pathetic character of the *Táin*, similarly defends her right to choose her own mate in *Táin Bó Fraich*. In fact she insists that her choice be expressed publicly, refusing to elope with Fráech, apparently in the belief that secret flight is beneath her: 'Indeed I will not elope, for I am the daughter of a king and a queen . . . And it will, moreover, be my choice to go to you. It is you I have loved'.⁸⁵ Thus for the Irishwoman chastity, in its most strictly limited sense, meant fidelity to the man to whom she was presently united, a man whom she herself may have chosen for a union which she had some power to terminate if it came to

⁸¹ *Buile Suibne*, ed. J. G. O'Keeffe, MMIS (1931; reprinted Dublin 1952) §78, lines 2166–8.

⁸² Weisweiler, 'Die Stellung der Frau', *ZCP* xxi (2) 215. See Plutarch, *Moralia*, ed. Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library (London 1931) iii 551–9.

⁸³ Professor John V. Kelleher has pointed out to me that Eogan mac Durthacht, as king of Fernmag, was *aithech* (a tributary subordinate) to Conchobar. For Deirdre a relationship with Eogan would thus involve a social debasement as well as a personal outrage.

⁸⁴ *Tochmarc Emire*, ed. Van Hamel in *Compert Con Culainn* 53 §73.

⁸⁵ *Táin Bó Fraich*, LL 33226–8.

displease her.⁸⁶ That it often meant more to her on a deeper level of personal honour is dramatically evident in the literature.

The loss of such personal honour is, of course, the greatest tragedy in this literature, and faced with shame male heroes routinely embrace death in combat. Women, denied the relatively easy escape of a glorious battlefield death, nonetheless shared their men's unwillingness to live on in disgrace. Thus while references to suicide are rare in Irish literary tradition, a significant number of women die of grief for lost husbands or lovers or of shame. Deaths of grief may suggest an Irish survival of the ancient Indo-European custom of burying the wife with her dead husband, but such a hypothesis is, of course, totally beyond proof at this time.⁸⁷ Deaths of shame are of considerably greater significance for our purposes, and here a pattern readily emerges. In virtually all instances in which women die of shame—men hardly ever do so—the primary source of this shame is sexual. When Finnabair becomes aware of having been used as a sexual bribe in the *Táin*, 'her heart burst like a nut in her breast because of her modesty and her sense of shame'.⁸⁸ In *Tochmarc Luaine ocus Aided Aithairne*, Luaine dies as a result of satires directed against her by Athirne and his sons; the motive of their satires is to punish her for her rejection of their sexual demands, and it seems safe to assume that these satires would impugn her chastity: 'The maiden refused to sleep with them. They then made three satires on her . . . The maiden died after that of modesty and a sense of shame'.⁸⁹

Abduction is the major source of shame-induced deaths. One instance of such a death after abduction, that of the daughter of the king of Munster in *Acallamh na Senórach*, has already been noted. The *dinnshenchas* tales offer further examples. Thus the *dinnshenchas* of Ailenn tells how 'Crem Marda carried off a daughter of Lugaid, the king of Leinster. Ailenn was her name . . . and Ailenn died because of her sense of shame with him . . .'.⁹⁰ In one of the stories relating to Carmun, we learn of the death of Mesca, daughter of Bodb, after her abduction by Sengarman.⁹¹ In the Ulster Cycle tale *Toch-*

⁸⁶ The laws corroborate the literary picture of independent behaviour on the part of aristocratic women. Women had some say over whom they married, kept ownership and control of their own property, retained legal membership in their own families, and could obtain divorces rather easily. Nevertheless, even in the law tracts the double standard is at work, for while the laws allow for concubinage and describe several classes of legal unions often involving multiple wives, they never allow for any form of polyandry. See the various essays in *Studies in early Irish law* for discussion of the legal rights and capacities of women in early Irish society.

⁸⁷ For Indian evidence on this practice see Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya, *Social life in ancient India* (Calcutta 1965) 114–16. A series of rather lurid accounts of such funerals is found in William Johns, *A collection of facts and opinions relative to the burning of widows with the dead bodies of their husbands* (Birmingham 1816) 1–70. The practice was also known in ancient Scandinavia. See Johannes Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, trans. Kalle Skov (Harmondsworth 1965) 301–5.

⁸⁸ *TBC* from LL, 3888–9. It is interesting to note that shame overwhelms both Finnabair and the king's daughter despite the fact that both are personally innocent of any wrongdoing. This pattern repeats itself in other tales of abduction, offering powerful confirmation that in ancient Ireland public shame, not inner guilt, determined ethical choices.

⁸⁹ *Tochmarc Luaine ocus Aided Aithairne*, ed. W. Stokes, *RC* xxiv (1903) 278 §15.

⁹⁰ 'The Rennes Dindsenchas', ed. W. Stokes, *RC* xv (1894) 310.

⁹¹ 'The Rennes Dindsenchas', *RC* xv 314.

marc Ferbe, the deaths of Ferb, her mother, and 150 other female captives are attributed to grief for their fallen men; in light of their predicament as prisoners, shame seems a more plausible cause for their demise.⁹²

With this evidence in mind we may analyse the death of Deirdre more closely. Her death in the two major early versions of the tale is a suicide, and modern re-workers, perhaps beginning with the redactor of the modern Irish *Imthiacht Dheirdre le Naoise agus Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach* who has her die while flinging herself into the grave of her lover,⁹³ have focussed on grief as her major motive for taking her own life. Yet while her grief is undeniable, it cannot be forgotten that she does survive the death of Náisi by a year, albeit a year of misery. Indeed she does not kill herself even after hearing of Conchobar's plan to send her to Eogan. Rather, she waits yet another day. Here *Longes Mac nUislen* reads: 'They went on the morrow to the Assembly of Macha. She was behind Eogan in the chariot. She had vowed that she would not see her two mates on earth at one time. "Well, Deirdre," said Conchobar, "You are looking at me and Eogan like a ewe looks at two rams." There was a large stone in front of her. She threw herself against the stone and smashed her head into fragments and died'.⁹⁴ In other words, she does not kill herself until she is out of the privacy of the house and on her way to the great Assembly of Macha, where her degradation will be presented as a public spectacle. Furthermore, it should be noted that Conchobar's crude sexual joke underlines the exact nature of the shame she faces. Confronted by the thought of ridicule and disgrace, she reacts as would a male in such a dilemma, and opts for death.

In the later of the two early versions of the tale, *Oided Mac nUisnig*, the same value system motivates the action although, in keeping with the more courtly nature of this narrative, her crisis is not so starkly presented. Thus there is no mention of the Assembly of Macha, and the depth of her hatred for these two men is heavily emphasized. Nevertheless, she still does not kill herself until a year after Náisi's death, and does so then only after Conchobar's vicious joke, a public utterance even if heard by just the three of them. Despite its elevation of Deirdre as tragic heroine and its attention to more subjective emotions and motivations, this version of the tale still retains remarkable traces of the older honour ethic. It is, of course, her ambivalent attitude towards that ethic, her simultaneous participation in and questioning of the code, that makes Deirdre such an intriguing figure. Yet while women like Deirdre may at times have rebelled against the dictates of the honour code, what is ultimately suggested by this literary evidence of female

suicide is that most women very rarely questioned its essentially public nature. For the women, as for the men, honour was validated or negated by the consensus of their society, from which there was no appeal.

Two further significant and no doubt interrelated points concerning the prestige of women in early Irish literature may be noted briefly here. First of all, women are present as powerful, if at times somewhat shadowy, figures in all branches of Irish society as depicted in the early tales. Secondly, the recorders of that literature occasionally reveal an unmistakable note of misogyny. The first point is clear from the most superficial glance at the Irish evidence. Even leaving aside such patently supernatural beings as Scáthach and Medb, one encounters a fair number of female warriors, among whom are Buidech and Cainnech, the latter the foster-mother of Cormac Connlongas, in *Bruiden Da Chocae*; Cathach Catutchenn, said to be from Spain, in *Tochmarc Ferbe*; Etsine from the *dinnshenchas*;⁹⁵ and of course Aife and Nes who, although clearly Otherworldly, possess some very human traits, as does, for that matter, even Coinchenn, the mother of the Otherworld woman Delbchaim in *Echtra Airt meic Cuinn ocus Tochmarc Delbchaime Ingine Morgain*. In a more intellectual sphere, one finds a significant number of female seers or poets, most of whom are dangerous and dreaded figures. Fedelm, the Connacht prophetess in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, is an especially memorable character, although malicious poetesses like Dub,⁹⁶ Gris,⁹⁷ Dreco⁹⁸ and Sanpait⁹⁹ are perhaps more typical.

Side by side with this respect for, and in some cases awe of, powerful women is an equally pronounced distrust and at times hatred. Women frequently appear as treacherous, often unmotivatedly so, in the early literature. One thinks immediately of Bláthnat, the wife of Cú Roí;¹⁰⁰ Brig Brethach, who causes the death of Blai Briuga and ultimately that of her husband Celtchar;¹⁰¹ the wife of Rónán, whose deceit results in the destruction of all around her; and Mongfind, the jealous wife of Eochaid Muigmedón, who attempts to encompass the death of the young Niall Noígiallach and his mother Cairenn.¹⁰² This brief list does not, of course, include other, more clearly supernatural figures like Sín, the Morrígu, or even Medb, whose conduct prompts a wide range of hostile comment throughout the Ulster

⁹⁵ 'The Rennes Dindsenchas', *RC* xvi (1895) 56.

⁹⁶ 'The Rennes Dindsenchas', *RC* xv 326.

⁹⁷ 'The Rennes Dindsenchas', *RC* xv 335.

⁹⁸ 'The Rennes Dindsenchas', *RC* xvi 34.

⁹⁹ 'The Rennes Dindsenchas', *RC* xvi 36. Weisweiler cites classical references to powerful female figures among the Celts of the Continent and Britain, as well as evidence from later Irish literary and historical tradition about such forceful women as An Inghean Dubh, the mother of Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill, and Gráinne Ní Mháille, to prove that such women did in fact exist. See 'Die Stellung der Frau', *ZCP* xxi (2) 252ff. Indeed *Cáin Adomnáin* (A.D. 697) specifically forbade the participation of women in battle, thereby indicating that such involvement was not unknown. See John Ryan, 'Cáin Adomnáin', in *Studies in early Irish law* 269-76.

¹⁰⁰ *Aided Con Roí maic Dáire*, ed. R. Best, *Ériu* ii (1905) 22-30.

¹⁰¹ *Aided Cheltchair maic Uithechair*, ed. K. Meyer, *RIA Todd Lecture Series* xiv (1906) 24-30.

¹⁰² *Echtra Mac Echach Muigmedón*, ed. W. Stokes, *RC* xxiv (1903) 190-6.

⁹² *Tochmarc Ferbe*, LL 34137-41. Indeed, since loss of a husband could seriously affect the prestige of his wife, it is possible that concern about future shame further exacerbated the grief that put an end to the lives of many Irish women.

⁹³ The three major versions of the Deirdre story are summarized and discussed in detail by Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, 'Scéal Dheirdre', in *Ar Scéalaíocht: Léachtaí Cholm Cille* xiv (1983) 38-89.

⁹⁴ *Longes Mac nUislen*, LL 34582-7.

Cycle.¹⁰³ Indeed, in *Tecosca Cormaic* the legendarily wise king devotes a considerable amount of time to a warning about women, commencing 'I examine them and I make no distinction among them',¹⁰⁴ and continuing with a diatribe on what he sees as their seemingly infinite shortcomings. It is undoubtedly just this ambiguous attitude towards women, paralleled by the corresponding ambivalence of women towards men and their honour code, that gives such vitality and fascinating complexity to dealings between the sexes in early Irish literature.

¹⁰³ The misogyny often evident in the *Táin* prompted Frank O'Connor to write: 'What is certain is that the purpose of the original author would seem to have been to warn his readers against women, particularly women in positions of authority.' See *A Short history of Irish literature: a backward look* (New York 1967) 29–40. While this hypothesis is clearly extreme, and while Áine de Paor has demonstrated that much of the misogyny of the LL version of the tale originated in the personal prejudice of its redactor, there can be no doubt that distrust of women is by no means an insignificant theme in *TBC*. That this theme is an early one in the literature is evident from *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, in which Mac Dathó quotes the low opinion of Crimthann nia Náir concerning a woman's ability to keep a secret (LL 13049–52). For de Paor's views on the misogyny of the redactor of the LL *Táin*, see 'The common authorship of some Book of Leinster texts', *Ériu* ix (2) (1923) 118–46.

¹⁰⁴ *Tecosca Cormaic*, LL 46048.