



Burrows, Erin Kathleen (2021) *Subjective constructions: Medieval and modern perceptions of women and women warriors in Early and Middle Irish legal and literary texts*. MRes thesis.

<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/82032/>

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>
research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk

**Subjective Constructions:
Medieval and modern perceptions of women and women warriors in
Early and Middle Irish legal and literary texts**

Erin K. Burrows

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Research

School of Humanities
College of Arts
University of Glasgow

September 2020

Abstract

There is an apparent need among some modern scholars to read the women of medieval Ireland, specifically the warrior women of the Ulster Cycle, as feminist icons. The drive for such interpretations is a reflection of the lived experiences of contemporary women, but does it have some basis in the institutions that influenced the lives of medieval Irish women? The active debate over social constructions in early medieval Ireland, particularly perceptions of powerful women, rests on the informed assumption that women did not have an equal role in the patriarchal society in which they lived. Legal texts are the main source of evidence supporting this assumption. However, further arguments by scholars such as D.A. Binchy, Amy C. Mulligan, and Jennifer Dukes-Knight have suggested that extant pseudo-historical and saga literature were influenced by legal social constructions, providing valuable clues regarding the place of women in medieval Ireland. The purpose of this thesis will be to take up the current debate and explore whether or not the evidence in legal and literary sources precludes the possibility of finding a version of feminism in medieval Ireland. The initial focus will be on the extant legal texts composed in the seventh through ninth centuries to establish the perceptions and constructions of women, as defined in the law, during that time. This will be followed by an examination of the interdependence of law texts and pseudo-historical and saga literature during the flourishing of medieval Irish writing in the tenth through twelfth centuries, arguing that the two writing forms worked in tandem to redefine the social construction of mothers and martial women. Finally, a specific look at warrior women in the Ulster Cycle argues that the evidence of the androcentric society found in medieval Irish legal and literary texts does not preclude a positive feminist approach to the Ulster sagas, particularly for modern scholars.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Social Constructions in Medieval Irish Law Texts, 7th-9th Century	5
A Brief History of Medieval Irish Law and Law Texts	5
The Construction of Power and Status in Medieval Ireland	8
Modern Interpretations of Women in Legal Texts	13
Chapter 2: Law, Literature, and Social Construction, 10th-12th Century	16
Literature as Case Law	16
Constructing Society: <i>Cáin Adomnáin</i> and Literary Warrior Women	18
<i>Cáin Adomnáin</i> and Its Preface	20
The Evolving Woman Warrior	24
Chapter 3: Modern Feminist Constructions of Warrior Women, 20th-21st Century	32
The Value of Feminist Literary Critique in Celtic Studies	32
Modern Feminist Critique of Medieval Irish Literature	35
Negative Hermeneutic Mode	35
Positive Hermeneutic Mode	39
Amy C. Mulligan's Macha Mongrúad	42
Social Hierarchy: Scáthach and Cú Chulainn	45
Medb, Sovereign of Connacht	46
Conclusion	51
References	52

Acknowledgments:

I would like to offer sincere thanks and gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Geraldine Parsons and Professor Thomas Clancy, for providing much-valued support, guidance, and feedback throughout this project.

This work was funded in part by the Duncan and Morag MacLean Studentship.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Glasgow. It is original and is the result of my own work, except where indicated as referencing. This thesis has not been submitted to any institution for any other degree or qualification.

Introduction

Gilbert Márkus, in his essay ‘Early Irish “Feminism”’, describes what he viewed as a problematic trend in Celtic Studies:

[the] tendency among critics of ‘patriarchal’ culture or religion to point to the high status of women in early Irish or other Celtic societies as a model for change, suggesting that these societies displayed what one might call ‘actually existing feminism’.¹

His argument challenged this suggestion and attempted to dismantle the notion that feminism might have existed in medieval Ireland. While he does not define what he means by early Irish feminism, the implication is that a feminist culture is determined by whether or not women had ‘high status’ or a ‘high place’.² However, we do not define patriarchal cultures in terms of the ‘high status’ of men, but rather by whether or not men have power, legal enfranchisement, autonomy, social mobility, and other constructions that establish gender hierarchy. While Márkus does address some of these guideposts, he ultimately concludes that ‘[t]he claim that women had a high place in traditional Celtic society seems to be unsubstantiated by the evidence.’³ However, this would not necessarily preclude the existence of an early Irish feminism, defined here as a societal concept that provided women a degree of legal rights, autonomy, the opportunity for self-betterment, and intrinsic value and worth as females.

There is an apparent need among some modern scholars to read the women of medieval Ireland, specifically the powerful martial women of the Ulster Cycle, as feminist icons.⁴ Modern feminist literary critiques of warrior women such as Medb and Scáthach, though perhaps not reflecting a medieval reality, explore the idea that male-dominated societies are constructed rather than inexorable, that it is possible for women to be powerful, sexual, and independent in cultures not bounded by patriarchy. The need for such scholarship and such interpretations is a reflection of the lived experiences of modern women, but does it have some basis in the institutions that influenced the lives of medieval Irish women?

¹ Gilbert Márkus, ‘Early Irish “Feminism”’, *New Blackfriars*, 73, 862 (1992), 375-388 (p. 375).

² Márkus, ‘Early’, pp. 375, 387.

³ Márkus, ‘Early’, p. 387.

⁴ See Márkus, ‘Early’, p. 375; Sarah Sheehan, ‘Loving Medb’, in *Gablánach in scélaigeacht: Celtic Studies in honour of Ann Dooley*, ed. by Sarah Sheehan, Joanne Findon, and Westley Follet (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), pp. 171-186; Erica Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb: Approaching Medb with Feminist Criticism’, *Ulidia: proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Belfast and Emain Macha, 8–12 April 1994*, ed. by James P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (1994), pp. 135-138.

In 1993, Judith M. Bennett explored the connection between medievalism and feminism and noted that no consensus had been established at that time as to the realities for women in medieval Ireland.⁵ In 2019, Máire Herbert noted that ‘[g]ender-based scholarship is still under-represented in Celtic Studies’ and that ‘a definitive statement of the position of femininity in early Irish society may not yet be feasible.’⁶ Bennett describes this lack of consensus among medieval feminist scholars noting equally viable evidence that women in early Ireland had opportunities not available to modern women and that not much has changed over the past 1,500 years.⁷ She recognizes contentions that the Church constructed a society of misogyny as well as evidence of the liberties provided to medieval nuns.⁸ She acknowledges that medieval women had agency to assert control over their lives and were also constrained by patriarchy.⁹ Depending on the sources used and one’s own subjectivity, all of these perceptions of women have at least some foundation in what is known of the legal and cultural institutions of medieval Ireland.

The active debate over social constructions in early medieval Ireland, particularly perceptions of powerful women, rests on the informed assumption that women did not have an equal role, socially or politically, in the patriarchal society in which they lived. Legal texts are the main source of evidence supporting this assumption. However, further arguments have suggested that extant pseudo-historical and saga literature were influenced by social constructions codified in legal texts, providing additional and valuable clues regarding the place of women in medieval Ireland.¹⁰ This thesis will explore the possible intentions of the medieval Irish learned class along with the subjective perspectives of modern scholars in addressing constructions of martial women in extant texts and will examine the possibility of finding a form of feminism, as defined above, in medieval Ireland.

Chapter 1 will focus on the extant legal texts composed in the seventh through ninth centuries to establish the perceptions and constructions of women as defined in legal texts, during that time. During these centuries, the majority of both the native law (*fénechas*) and

⁵ Judith M. Bennett, ‘Medievalism and Feminism’, in *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, ed. by Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1993), pp. 7-29 (p. 19).

⁶ Máire Herbert, ‘Review: *Perceptions of Femininity in Early Irish Society* by Helen Oxenham’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 78 (2019), 114-117 (p. 117).

⁷ Bennett, ‘Medievalism’, p. 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ For example, D.A. Binchy, ‘The Background of Early Irish Literature’, *Studia Hibernica*, 1 (1961), 7-18; Amy C. Mulligan, ‘Playing for Power: Macha Mongrúad’s Sovereign Performance’, in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, ed. by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 75-93; Jennifer Dukes-Knight, ‘The Wooden Sword: Age and Masculinity in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 33 (2013), 107-122.

ecclesiastical laws was written down for the first time, marking the major starting point of Ireland's legal textual culture. It should be noted that very few of the available native legal texts have been translated, as to do so requires not only a general mastery of Old Irish, but also of the obscure style of early Irish lawmakers.¹¹ The arguments to follow rely on the work of scholars such as D.A. Binchy, who compiled most if not all of the known extant *fénechas* texts, including the *Senchas Már*, into seven volumes of a diplomatic edition called *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*.¹² Sections of this extensive work have been interpreted and sometimes translated by Binchy and others, such as Fergus Kelly, Liam Breatnach, and Helen Oxenham, as will be referenced later in more detail. The major compendium of canon law, *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, has been edited and translated by Roy Flechner and provides useful insight into the legal priorities of the ecclesiastical class.¹³

Chapter 2 examines the interdependence of legal and literary texts during the flourishing of medieval Irish literature in the tenth through twelfth centuries. During this literary period, traditional works, some which may have existed even prior to the dawn of Ireland's textual culture, were being intentionally revised and refined for contemporary audiences. Due to the obscurity of the legal texts, literature was helpful in transmitting legal formulae and supporting the social constructions of legal innovations. Arguments by scholars such as Tadhg O'Donoghue, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, Neil McLeod, and Thomas C. O'Donnell will be addressed to establish the intertextuality of law and literature. To examine a possible interpretation of warrior women in the Middle Irish period, the chapter will conclude by exploring how the tenth- or eleventh-century preface to *Cáin Adomnáin*, a law originally promulgated in the seventh century, worked in tandem with literary descriptions of warrior women in the tenth through twelfth centuries to redefine the social constructions of mothers and female combatants.

Chapter 3 focuses more specifically on the depictions of warrior women in the Ulster Cycle, investigating if the evidence of the androcentric society found in medieval Irish legal and literary texts truly prohibits any notion of feminism, particularly for modern scholars. It will establish the value of developing feminist perspectives in the critique of literary Irish women, followed by a review of current feminist literary theories regarding women warriors, which tend to offer a negative outlook on the intentions of the medieval authors who described these women in the Ulster Cycle. In contrast, an example of

¹¹ D.A. Binchy, 'Irish History and Irish Law: I', *Studia Hibernica*, 15 (1975), 7-36 (pp. 11, 14).

¹² D.A. Binchy (ed.), *Corpus iuris Hibernici: ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum*, 7 vols (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978).

¹³ Roy Flechner (ed. and trans.), *The Hibernensis*, 2 vols, *Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Canon Law* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2019).

positive feminist critique is Amy C. Mulligan's examination of Macha Mongrúad.¹⁴ Following her lead, it will be argued that martial women featured in the Book of Leinster's version of the 'Pillow Talk' episode of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (hereafter 'Pillow Talk') and a *remscél* to the *Táin*, *Tochmarc Emire*, provide literary heroes for modern feminist scholars, in spite of the patriarchal textual culture in which they originated when appraised through the context of medieval Irish law.

¹⁴ Mulligan, 'Playing', pp. 75-93.

Chapter 1: Social Constructions in Medieval Irish Law Texts, 7th-9th Century

Extant legal texts offer the most probable social constructions of women in medieval Ireland. Moving from an almost exclusively oral culture to a Christian society reliant on the written word, early medieval Ireland had a singular occasion to preserve not just the society that might have existed at the time, but the one they wished to construct.¹⁵ Early Irish law offers evidence of social and legal institutions, as well as economic and religious configurations. Whether or not the laws were accurate reflections of everyday life, they provide insight into the mentalities of those with the authority to shape culture and govern medieval Irish society. While we cannot know for certain, even after close study of the law texts, the reality of women's lives during this time period, it is possible to propose interpretations of how women might have been perceived in medieval Ireland.

A Brief History of Medieval Irish Law and Law Texts

Extant legal texts primarily stem from the late seventh and early eighth centuries and remained essentially unchanged as they were transmitted over time until at least the fourteenth century, with the exception of later glosses and commentaries.¹⁶ With most initially written down between 650 and 750 CE, they were generally structured as either secular native law or ecclesiastical law, with *cáin* law and wisdom texts combining the jurisdictions of the two.¹⁷ These various forms of law are defined as follows.

Native laws were the vernacular laws of the laity, also known as *fénechas*. They formed the legal institutions upon which the foundations of governance in disparate *túatha* – used here to define a political or jurisdictional territory – were built. While these laws had existed as part of Ireland's oral tradition for generations, if not centuries, many were compiled in the *Senchas Már*, or the 'Great Tradition' in the eighth century.¹⁸

Canon law, the official law of the Church, also had its comprehensive legal text in the form of the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, which is dated to between 669 and 748

¹⁵ John O'Donovan and Eugene O'Curry (eds. and trans.), 'Introduction to *Senchas Már*,' in *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. 1 (London: Alexander Thom, 1865), pp. 3-63 (pp. 15, 17); Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 78.

¹⁶ Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series, 3 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), p. 225.

¹⁷ Flechner, *Hibernensis*, Vol. 1, p. 44; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Early Irish Law', in *A New History of Ireland, Vol. 1: Prehistoric and early Ireland*, ed. by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 331–370 (p. 369); T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Law Texts [1] Irish', in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol III, ed by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 1109-1112 (p. 1109).

¹⁸ O'Donovan and O'Curry, 'Introduction', p. 15; D.A. Binchy, 'The Pseudo-historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Studia Celtica*, 10 (1975), 15-28 (p. 15); Charles-Edwards, 'Law Texts', p. 1109.

CE.¹⁹ This was a deliberately constructed Christian law code, written in Latin, which included rules pertaining to ecclesiastical jurisdiction, as well as regulations for a Christianised society still functioning under native law.²⁰

Cánai were promulgated under the authority of saints and with the support of the nobility. Regionally constructed, but having the authority of both the Church and kings, *cánai* provided governance on specific subjects, such as warfare or lawful unions, and was intended to be universally adopted throughout Ireland.²¹ Some of these, such as the eighth-century *Cáin Lánamna*, ‘the law of couples’, are included in the *Senchas Már*.

Finally, wisdom or gnomic texts offered advice and beliefs as to the governance of Irish society. The best known are *Audacht Morainn* (‘Testament of Morann’), *Senbriathra Fíthail* (‘Traditional Judgements of Fíthail’), *Tecosca Cormaic* (‘Instructions of Cormac’), and *Trecheng Breth Féne* (commonly called the *Triads of Ireland*).²² These often appeared together in some combination in extant manuscripts.²³ Wisdom texts date from the eighth and ninth centuries, though, again, probably derive from an earlier time period.

Binchy notes that the basic structure of the earliest *fénechas* was pre-Christian, with the language ‘[embodying] the oral teaching of the law-schools’.²⁴ They reflected the power of tradition, but were laws based on and adaptable to political, geographic, economic, and religious living conditions. Despite its longstanding use, native law could not help but be profoundly influenced by the incorporation of the Church into the functioning of a tribal Irish society.²⁵ A specific example of this influence appears in the legal text *Bretha Crólige*, included in the *Senchas Már*, which attempts to reconcile native laws allowing polygyny with the Church’s new laws of monogamy:

¹⁹ Flechner, *Hibernensis*, Vol. 1, p. 61.

²⁰ Flechner, *Hibernensis*, Vol. 1, p. 49.

²¹ Charles-Edwards, ‘Law Texts’, p. 1110; Charlene M. Eska, ‘Varieties of Early Irish Legal Literature and the *Cáin Lánamna* Fragments’, *Viator*, 40, 1 (2009), 1-16 (p. 4); Colin Smith and James Gallen, ‘*Cáin Adomnáin* and the Laws of War’, *Journal of the History of International Law*, 16 (2014), 63-81 (p. 67).

²² John T. Koch, (trans.), ‘*Audacht Morainn*’, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 4th edn, ed. by John T. Koch (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), pp. 188-193, based on Fergus Kelly (ed.), *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976) and Anders Ahlqvist (ed.), ‘Le testament de Morann’, *Études Celtiques*, 21 (1984), 151-170; Roland M. Smith, (ed. and trans.), ‘The *Senbriathra Fíthail* and Related Texts’, *Revue Celtique*, 45 (1928), 1-92; Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *The Instructions of King Cormac Mac Airt: Tecosca Cormaic*, RIA Todd Lecture Series, 15 (Dublin: Hodges Figgis & Co., 1909);²² Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *The Triads of Ireland*, RIA Todd Lecture Series, 13 (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1906).

²³ Meyer, *Triads*, p. vii.

²⁴ Binchy, ‘IH&IL I’, p. 21-22, 23.

²⁵ D.A. Binchy, ‘IH&IL I’, p. 29; Liam Breatnach, ‘Canon Law and Secular Law in Early Ireland: The Significance of *Bretha Nemed*’, *Peritia*, 3 (1984), 439-459 (p. 459); Eska, ‘Varieties’, p. 5. See analysis of clerical influence on secular administration, particularly with regard to oral versus written contracts, in Andrew Rabin, ‘Preventive Law in Early Ireland. Rereading the *Additamenta* in the *Book of Armagh*’, *North American Journal of Celtic Studies*, 2, 1 (2018), 37-55.

[A]r ata forcosnam la Féne cia de as techtta in nilar comperta fa huathad. [A]r robattar tuiccsi de i (n)nilar lanamnusa, connach airissa a caithiugud oldas a molad.

For there is a dispute in Irish Law as to which is more proper, whether many sexual unions or a single one: for the chosen [people] of God lived in plurality of unions, so that is not easier to condemn it than to praise it.²⁶

The *fénechas* also impacted clerical conceptions of justice, as is evidenced by the inclusion of native legal precepts in ecclesiastical law.²⁷ One of these is the law that a woman cannot act as a witness in most legal proceedings. The *Hibernensis* declares women lack the proper nature to act as witness ‘for a woman always says changeable and fickle things’, citing biblical precedent that her testimony should not be accepted ‘just as the apostles did not accept the women’s testimony concerning the resurrection of Christ.’²⁸ The Bible itself goes on to explain that the apostles were wrong not to accept the women’s testimony, so the omission of the full biblical context by the authors of the *Hibernensis* was perhaps a means of preserving native law through selective use of the gospels.²⁹

As for the wisdom texts, rather than being formal laws, they included didactic statements of ‘fact’ indicating a construction of society the authors wished to promote. These texts were predominately concerned with a king’s personal behaviours and societal obligations. The oldest in origin is *Audacht Morainn*, dating from the seventh century and belonging to the genre of wisdom texts called *speculum principum* or ‘mirrors for princes’. Of the same genre, *Senbríathra Fíthail*, from the ninth century, records the sayings of the pre-Christian judge Fithal, many of which were recycled, adapted, and added to in *Tecosca Cormaic* and the *Triads*, with the latter texts reflecting values of the Christian faith. The *Triads* claim, for example, that:

Trí as mó menma bís .i. scolóc iar légad a salm 7 gilla iar lécud a erraid úad 7 ingen iar ndénam mná dí.

Three whose spirits are highest: a young scholar after having read his psalms, a youngster who has doffed his (boy’s) clothes, a maiden who has been made a woman.³⁰

²⁶ D.A. Binchy (ed. and trans.), ‘Bretha Crólige’, *Ériu*, 12 (1938), 1-77 (pp. 44, 45).

²⁷ Flechner, *Hibernensis Vol. 1*, p. 76.

²⁸ Flechner, *Hibernensis, Vol. 2*, pp. 537-538. N.B. Flechner interprets the omission as a condemnation of those native laws that did allow women to act as witnesses. As these are few, it seems more likely it would address the more frequent laws that did not.

²⁹ See Luke 24:1–11.

³⁰ Meyer, *Triads*, pp. 30, 31.

In other words, becoming a cleric, a man, or a woman who could procreate were the greatest sources of happiness, and all three conditions related one's ability to contribute to his or her *túath* either spiritually, economically and politically, or by the provision of children.

Based as it was in oral tradition, there is no consensus as to why there was a sudden production in native law texts in the seventh and eighth centuries.³¹ (Ecclesiastical law, anchored in a religion based on the written word, would naturally have been written down as needed.) There are several arguments that the Irish law schools wanted to preserve native law in written form to mitigate an encroachment of Christian ideologies.³² Others argue that Irish law tracts are a hybrid based on ecclesiastical law, deriving from a single class of learned scholars who were well-versed not only in canon law, but also native legal traditions.³³ While the reality remains unknown, it is fair to say that a straightforward dichotomy of native versus ecclesiastical law did not exist.

The multiple parties and motivations involved in the creation of early Ireland's legal texts were bound to inadvertently create a less-than-clear depiction of social realities. Any analysis of extant legal texts must therefore take into account an often contradictory textual culture stemming from its hierarchal structure and the complexities of social identities based on long-established constructions of power and status.

The Construction of Power and Status in Medieval Ireland

Early medieval Ireland had no central system of government. Instead, individual or aligned *túatha* were responsible for the governance and protection of the people. Nevertheless, the basic social structure, as it was defined in the laws, appears to have been fairly consistent across Ireland.³⁴ Native laws categorised people into two main groups: the *sóer feni*, which included all freepersons, both noble and common, and *dóer* persons, or the unfree. Written laws developed around these broad classifications were not sociological, i.e. meant to define the complex social strata, but were instead concerned

³¹ Robin Chapman Stacey, 'Further Musings on the "Celtic" in "Celtic Law"', *Eolas: The Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies*, 9 (2016), 55-76 (pp. 68-69); Eska, 'Varieties', p. 6; Charles-Edwards, 'Law Texts', p. 1111; Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 231-233.

³² D.A. Binchy, 'The Date and Provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*', *Ériu*, 18 (1958), 44-54 (p. 54); Kevin Murray, 'Some Thoughts on the Operation of Native Law in Medieval Ireland', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 22 (2002), 156-171 (pp. 150-151).

³³ Kelly, *GEIL*, pp. 233-234; Stacey, 'Further Musings', pp. 68-69.

³⁴ N.B. Aitchison, 'Kingship, Society, and Sacrality: Rank, Power, and Ideology in Early Medieval Ireland', *Traditio*, 49 (1994), 45-75 (p. 49).

with the who, what, and why of hierarchal legal entitlements.³⁵ One's role in and contribution to the *túath* determined both one's legal standing and one's honour-price.

Nearly all laws of the *fénechas* are thus related in some way to power or status. The legal rights of women were generally vested in their male kin, with the fully enfranchised person specifically being the arms-bearing freeman.³⁶ It should be noted that there were laws that separated both males and females from legal enfranchisement by their inability to be independent. Children, the mentally fragile, men with living fathers, and married women were all considered to lack full legal competency, as they lived under the headship of another, be it a parent, guardian, or husband.³⁷ By law, a woman had inferior legal status to any man with legal responsibility for her.

In his essay on kingship, N.B. Aitchison classified two forms of power in medieval Ireland: everyday power and ultimate political authority. Everyday power was the most commonly held form, existing in a freeperson's productive capacity, particularly in relation to land and livestock. In contrast, ultimate political power could be more commonly understood as a range of royal powers. Fundamentally, the power of a king or lord manifested in military strength, but kings also exercised economic, legislative, and judicial power.³⁸ It was possible for a woman to manifest everyday power, but lacking full legal enfranchisement, no woman – including queens and abbesses – is documented as having ever held ultimate political power.

Laws of status, while connected to power, were more concerned with the concept of honour. It is here that the social hierarchy is finely parsed, based on one's power, wealth, ability, and principled behaviour.³⁹ The *Senchas Már* outlines the belief that not all persons were equal and that honour, status, and ability played a great part in determining one's place:

Is and ro hairled rig ocus aithech, rigan ocus amrigan, soar ocus daor, sothcedach ocus dothcedach, sona ocus donai. Is and ro airled dire caich fo miad; ar ro bui in bith i cutruma conid tainic Senchas Mar.

In it were established laws for king and vassal, queen and subject, chief and dependent, wealthy and poor, prosperous and unprosperous. In it was established the

³⁵ Timothy E. Powell, 'The Idea of the Three Orders of Society and Social Stratification in Early Medieval Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, 29 (1995), 475-489 (p. 486).

³⁶ Helen Oxenham, *Perceptions of Femininity in Early Irish Society*, Studies in Celtic History, 36 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016), p. 42.

³⁷ Flechner, *Hibernensis*, Vol. 2, p. 551; Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 76; Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 19.

³⁸ Aitchison, 'Kingship', pp. 57-58.

³⁹ Aitchison, 'Kingship', p. 58.

‘dire’-fine of each one according to his dignity; for the world was at an equality until the *Senchus Mor* was established.⁴⁰

Status translated directly to an economic value, tangible in the form of an honour-price, or *díre*, and those of varying status were governed by different rules relating to rights and obligations. While power was an everyday exercise related to action, status was more illusory, relating to assessments of character. Put another way, power related to what one was capable of doing, while status was concerned with the quality of who one was.

Found in texts such as *Uraicecht Becc*, *Bretha Nemed Dédenach*, and *Críth Gablach*, laws of status were fundamental to the jurisprudence of early Ireland.⁴¹ Laws of status, initially concerned with sacred persons, or *nemed* (i.e. *ríg* or *druíd*), probably existed in some form prior to the conversion of Christianity. While the majority of freepersons were members of the common class, once compiled in an ecclesiastical textual culture, the definition of *nemed* expanded beyond sacred persons to include the skilled and the wealthy.⁴²

Still, as a craftsperson was not seen as equal to a noble, the *nemed* were further subdivided into two distinct categories, the *sóer-nemed* and *dóer-nemed*, each having laws specific to their social rank. The *sóer-nemed* included kings, members of the church, and the *filid*. Laws of the *sóer-nemed* worked to secure not only an individual’s own power, but also the power of others of their rank. This ranged from the poet who eulogised a king, to a king who granted land to the church, to a cleric who preserved the laws and stories of the *filid*. The *dóer-nemed* were defined as *dóer* not because they were unfree and lacking privileges under the law, but because they were subject to the patronage of the *sóer-nemed*.⁴³ Julianna Grigg, in her evaluation of the ways in which the laws of *Uraicecht Becc* formed a means of governance across Ireland, notes that *dóer-nemed* might achieve the status of *sóer-nemed* by increasing ‘land or rights by his art or by his husbandry or by

⁴⁰ O’Donovan and O’Curry, ‘Introduction’, p. 40, 41.

⁴¹ Editions of *Uraicecht Becc* are found in Binchy, *CIH*, Vol. 2, pp. 634-655; Binchy, *CIH*, Vol. 5, pp. 1590-1618; Binchy, *CIH*, Vol. 6, pp. 2255-2282, 2318-2335. Editions of *Bretha Nemed Dédenach* are found in Binchy, *CIH*, Vol. 2, pp. 603-604; Binchy, *CIH*, Vol. 3, pp. 1111-1138; Binchy, *CIH*, Vol. 5, pp. 1587-1588; Binchy, *CIH*, Vol. 6, pp. 2342-2343. Editions of *Críth Gablach* are found in Binchy, *CIH*, Vol. 2, pp. 563, 777-783, with a translation in Eoin MacNeill, ‘Ancient Irish Law: The law of status or franchise’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 36 (1921–1924), pp. 265–316.

⁴² Binchy, ‘*Bretha Crólige*’, p. 1; D.A. Binchy, ‘*Bretha Nemed*, *Ériu*, 17 (1955), 4-6 (p. 5-6); Julianna Grigg, ‘The Nemed, *Uraicecht Becc* and Early Irish Governance’, in *The Land beneath the Sea*, ed. by Pamela O’Neill, Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 14 (Sydney: The Celtic Studies Foundation, 2013), pp. 87-100 (p. 87).

⁴³ Grigg, ‘Nemed’, p. 88.

his talent that God gives him'.⁴⁴ In other words, a person could rise above his or her station at birth.

While typically a woman's status, honour-price, and legal enfranchisement were based on that of her husband, the ability for a woman to rise above (or fall below) her station also existed in her acquired skill, her value to the community, and her personal wealth, all of which had an impact on honour-price.⁴⁵ Based on the law texts, while women were generally labourers who tended livestock, brewed beer or mead, manufactured textiles, contributed to planting and harvesting, and so forth, they could also be skilled persons such as physicians and embroiderers.⁴⁶ In addition, if men were not available to fill such roles, women could become poets, landowners, hospitallers, and perhaps even iron workers.⁴⁷ Free women who were skilled or wealthy, as well as those who became nuns, benefitted from laws of status as a means of social mobility. While it was equally difficult for both common men and women to rise into the *nemed* strata, it was possible if a family, including sons and daughters, practiced a notable art or craft over three consecutive generations.⁴⁸ Highly skilled *dóer-nemed* could rise so far as to become *sóer-nemed* artisans of kings or major monasteries, linking their status to the spheres of political and religious authority.

⁴⁴ Grigg, 'Nemed', p. 91 and references therein.

⁴⁵ While Chapters 2 and 3 will address constructions of women warriors, there is frustratingly little evidence regarding the status of warriors in the extant legal texts. Nagy, when describing *fénnidi* (warriors) and *fían* (warbands) notes they were likened more to 'mercenaries in a world where standing armies did not yet exist' (2006: 743). *Tecosca Cormaic* characterises these mercenaries as young and unsettled men: '*fénnid cách co trebad, amos cách co árus*' or 'every one is a roving warrior till he takes up husbandry, every one is a mercenary till he settles in a dwelling' (Meyer 1909:46-47). Warriors of the ruling class did appear to have high status, however. *Aire échta*, or a noble of death feats, was listed in the Grades of Government codified in *Uraicecht Becc* and *Críth Gablach*. Cú Chulainn is a literary example of such a noble, with an honour-price worth 10 *seoit*, or five milk cows. A *rí buiden*, or king of hosts, such as Conchobar, was worth seven *cumala*, or 21 milk cows, in *Uraicecht Becc* and eight *cumala*, or 24 milk cows, in *Críth Gablach*. In contrast, a *mruigfer* (landman) was worth three *seoit* in *Uraicecht Becc* and six *seoit* in *Críth Gablach* (Aitchison 1994: 50-51). There is no ranking for martial women in these texts. Archaeology also provides evidence of a society engaged in warfare, with Irish settlements leaving behind indications of large defensive structures. Furthermore, excavated weapons reveal technological improvements over time, as well as 'the high status and special cultural significance of weapons', as indicated by their advanced workmanship and ritual depositions (Weil and Koch 2006: 1749).

⁴⁶ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Early Medieval Law, c. 700–1200', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 4, ed. by Angela Bourke, et al (New York: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 6-44 (pp. 23-26); Binchy, '*Bretha Crólige*', p. 27; Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, 'Mere Embroiderers? Women and Art in Early Medieval Ireland', in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, Visualising the Middle Ages, 7, ed. by Therese Martin (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 93–128; D.A. Binchy, 'Sick-Maintenance in Irish Law', *Ériu*, 12 (1938), 78-134 (p. 87).

⁴⁷ Seán Mac Airt (ed. and trans.), *The Annals of Inisfallen* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1951), p. 151; Kelly, GEIL, pp. 49, 104; Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: A study based mainly on the law-texts of the 7th and 8th centuries AD*, Early Irish Law Series, 4 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997), p. 417; Tomás Ó Carragáin, 'Is there an archaeology of lay people at early Irish monasteries?', *Bulletin du centre d'études médiévales d'Auxerre*, 8 (2015), §24 <journals.openedition.org/cem/13620> [Accessed 13 July 2020]

⁴⁸ Grigg, 'Nemed', p. 91.

Even with greater legal rights than common women, there were still limitations on the rights of most *nemed* women. For example, a *banchomarbae*, or female heir, was only granted a life-interest in her inheritance, with her father's kingroup maintaining principal ownership, and she could not pass it on to her husband or her children.⁴⁹ However, if she had married one of her father's kin, her children could then inherit the share that would have been returned to the kingroup upon her death.⁵⁰ The *Hibernensis* also reflects the native interest in maintaining the wealth and power of the kingroup by preventing land from passing through women to the children of unrelated men:

God wiped both sexes clean of Adam's sin, and if they receive an equal share in the heavenly inheritance together, why shall they not hold an equal share in the earthly? [...] But the Lord commanded that they marry men from their own tribe, lest the inheritance be transferred from one tribe to another.⁵¹

Much like native law, Irish canon law allowed for women to inherit, but also limited how she might pass her property on to others.

In both native and ecclesiastical law, a laywoman had inferior legal status to the man responsible for her. However, ecclesiastical women, such as nuns and abbesses, had rights unavailable to women in secular society. In Kildare, women were heads of the major religious centre, and its abbesses 'were the only women whose obits were often recorded in the annals, more frequently commemorated even than the queens of Tara.'⁵² Women in the Church could give evidence against clerics, run farms, and negotiate with lords for the release of hostages or relief from heavy tributes.⁵³ They were *sóer-nemed*, whose greater rights were in direct relation to their connection to God.

Medieval Ireland's complex hierarchal social identities as revealed in the law do not demonstrate that all women were lesser than all men at all times.⁵⁴ The *Senchas Már* provides a concise summary of the singular place of women in medieval Irish culture, one in which laws for women were valued as different but equal to laws for men, but for the most part granted higher status to men in relation to women. It reads:

⁴⁹ Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 104.

⁵⁰ Bart Jaski, 'Marriage Laws in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages', in *The Fragility of Her Sex?': Medieval Irishwomen in Their European Context*, ed. by Christine E. Meeks and Katharine Simms (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 16-42 (p. 27).

⁵¹ Flechner, *Hibernensis*, Vol. 2, pp. 640-641.

⁵² T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Early Irish Saints' Cults and their Constituencies', *Ériu*, 54 (2004) pp. 79-102 (p. 90).

⁵³ Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 78, 207; Márkus, 'Early', p. 385.

⁵⁴ Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 43.

Cid cumad senčas fer n-Erenn ad beruid ris, uair naç mo ata aisneis do dliged fer n-Eirend and na do dliged ban? Coir eim a ndebairt som and, airechur do tabairt don rand is uaisli and ar tus, .i. don mascul, uair Cristus caput uiri, uir caput mulieiris, Crist is cend dñir, ocus fer is cend do mnai; ocus uaisli in fer inas in ben, ocus ar oruaislidetaid ro taiselbad he i leit ris in fer.

What is the reason that it is called the *Senchus* of the men of Erin, as it does not treat more of the law of the men of Erin than of the law of the women? It is proper, indeed, that it should be so called, that superiority should be first given to the noble sex, i.e. to the male, ‘for *Christus capat viri, et vir caput mulieris*’ -Christ is the head of the man and the man is the head of the woman; and the man is more noble than the woman, and it was on account of man’s dignity it was ascribed to him.⁵⁵

Whether or not a form a feminism could exist in such a culture is explored below in a more in-depth examination of modern scholarship on the construction of medieval Irish women in the context of the law.

Modern Interpretations of Women in Legal Texts

In *Perceptions of Femininity in Early Irish Society*, Helen Oxenham provides a particularly useful analysis of female gender constructions in extant fifth- to ninth-century law tracts, wisdom texts, hagiography, and some literary works.⁵⁶ Her research does not attempt to uncover the reality of women’s lives, but rather to reveal how women were perceived. Oxenham builds an argument that images of women in the legal texts were contradictory and complex and underscored a purposeful construction of femininity by authors and scribes that, while perhaps being unreliable as historical evidence of ‘real women’, certainly offered a strong view of how it was believed women should behave and how they should be treated. As noted previously, the multiple strata of society in medieval Ireland were governed by different rules. Oxenham argues that a hierarchy based on specifically on gender is therefore not always simple to define.⁵⁷ Viewed through this paradigm, Oxenham saw men and women as existing on parallel levels of status, rather than in fixed, horizontal strata, as would exist in a fundamentally misogynist culture.⁵⁸

In fact, misogynist depictions of women as intrinsically inferior beings were rare in early medieval Ireland, but they were not non-existent. *Tecosca Cormaic* was particularly vitriolic:

⁵⁵ O’Donovan and O’Curry, ‘Introduction’, pp. 34, 35.

⁵⁶ Oxenham, *Perceptions*, pp. 3-5.

⁵⁷ Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 14

⁵⁸ Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 60.

a n-úaman amail tenid, a n-ecla mar fiadmíla, [...]ferr a túargain a táltugud, ferr a mbúalad a mbuidechas, [...]ferr a ndinge a ngrádugud

[women] should be dreaded like fire, they should be feared like wild beasts, [...] better to beat them than to coddle them, better to smite them than to please them, [...] better to crush them than to cherish them.⁵⁹

Oxenham's conclusion that women were legally different but not always inferior is well-argued, but it should be noted that there are some cases where she makes generalisations that do not bear out. For example, she contends:

Nowhere in any early Irish source is there any indication that the writers and compilers wished to represent femininity as something confined and closely protected through the tasks assigned to it. No text states that women ought to remain within their households because of their femininity.⁶⁰

This is true, as far as extant native law, but citing Saint Augustine, the *Hibernensis* states '[i]t is the woman's role to give birth, to nourish, to be subject to her husband's power, to work in the house.'⁶¹ The pragmatic exigencies of native law shifted perhaps to those concerned with morality in canon law, aligning to perceptions of women found in the Christian Bible or espoused by the Fathers of the Church. This might explain why women who became nuns, perceived then as morally superior, were granted a level of independence and status that was greater than that of their secular counterparts.

Lisa Bitel, in her book *Land of Women*, also evaluates perceptions of women in extant texts, starting from the premise that they were formed by a small group of literate men who had the means of formalising culture.⁶² Ultimately, Bitel concluded that any social constructions of women in the legal texts, regardless of the time period or circumstance, were created by a tension between how a male learned class perceived the nature of women and the practical relationships between everyday men and women needed for a functioning domestic economy.⁶³ Bitel's approach was unabashedly subjective, but she ironically describes the 'history of ideas, attitudes, culture, and social processes' as 'history without facts'.⁶⁴ Yet, history is constantly being reinterpreted, influenced by ideas and attitudes, and there would have been value in Bitel addressing how changes in the

⁵⁹ Meyer, *Tecosca Cormaic*, p. 34, 35.

⁶⁰ Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 80.

⁶¹ Flechner, *Hibernensis Vol. 2*, p. 640.

⁶² Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 12-13.

⁶³ Bitel, *Land*, pp. 18-19, 24-25, 28.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

constructions of women, formed by both the learned class and the wider society, must have been reflected as legal and literary texts as they were adapted to new audiences over time

The textual culture of the legal and literary texts examined by Bitel may not be quite so dichotic, e.g. learned class versus reality, as she portrays, but it was also perhaps not as sexually equal as Oxenham implies. To better understand how perceptions of women might have been expressed over time, perhaps the best means of examining the ways in which stereotypes and social constructions were transmitted from law to society is to evaluate its interdependence on the more malleable medium of literature.

Chapter 2: Law, Literature, and Social Construction, 10th-12th Century

It is almost certainly not a coincidence that while laws were being drafted as written texts in the seventh and eighth century, the earliest extant versions of the Ulster sagas and other important Irish literature were also being transcribed. In early Ireland, the *filid* were responsible for law-making, as well as poetry, literature, and history. As a textual culture began to develop, the oral tradition of the *filid* was reflected textually and inter-textually not only in the law but in many forms of cultural writing.⁶⁵ Literature, if approached as a didactic tool meant to teach law, history, and social norms as part of this inter-textual history, unveils a wider view of medieval Irish social constructions than can be found solely in the legal texts themselves. The following chapter explores the interconnection of the relatively static law texts with literature that adapted alongside society. An overview of the traditional interdependence of law and literature will be followed by a case study of the ways in which a new social construction of mothers and warrior women was first implied in the law and later expressed in literature.

Literature as Case Law

Prior to the establishment of a textual culture, there is not much evidence that the *filid* had formally taught their wisdom of the law to those outside the learned class. As Binchy pondered:

Apart from the professional custodians, did the ordinary tribesman really know the rules and understand the recondite and perhaps deliberately obscure language in which they were formulated? Irish law has many of the marks of a secret science, knowledge of which was confined to a privileged few. [...] But if the ordinary people were ignorant of the law how could they be expected to obey its rules?⁶⁶

As law had previously been the purview of an elite learned class, the written codes were purposefully difficult to interpret (and remain so today).⁶⁷ This is compounded by a lack of case law, documentation of the law in action, or reliable information as to how the system worked in practical terms.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Binchy, D.A., 'Background', p. 78; Neil McLeod, 'Fergus Mac Léti and the Law', *Ériu*, 61 (2011), 1-28 (p. 24); Tomás Ó Cathasaigh 'Early Irish Literature and Law (2006-7)', in *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion to Early Irish Saga*, ed. by Mathieu Boyd (2014), pp. 107-114 (p. 109).

⁶⁶ Binchy, 'IH&IL I', p. 34.

⁶⁷ Binchy, 'Background', p. 13.

⁶⁸ Binchy, 'IH&IL I', p. 27; Smith and Gallen, '*Cáin Adomnáin*', p. 69.

Perhaps as a proxy for case law and formal documentation, there are examples of stories being used as didactic legal tools. One such example is *Airec menman Uaird maic Coisse*, or ‘The stratagem of Urard mac Coise’.⁶⁹ This cleverly crafted story-within-a-story, written around 1000 CE by the *ollam* Urard mac Coise, sets legal precedent for the honour-price of high poets. In the text, Urard’s home is raided, and he seeks restitution from the king. He composes a story describing a fictional poet whose home has also been raided and who is then compensated with the payment of a king’s honour-price. After hearing Urard’s new tale, the king agrees the outcome was just, whereupon the *ollam* reveals it was his home that had been raided and that he should likewise be granted the honour-price given to the poet in his tale. The stratagem thus established the honour-price of all *ollamain* as being equal to that of a king thereafter.

The saga of Fergus Mac Léti, as found in the *Senchas Már* appears to be a tale crafted to explain existing law, rather than create it; Neil McLeod concludes that every twist in the plot is designed to raise and answer a specific legal question.⁷⁰ The story describes the death of Eochu Bélbuide, who after failing in his challenge for Tara, flees to Ulster and places himself in the care of Fergus mac Léti. While under Fergus’s protection, Eochu is killed, and thus Fergus demands he be paid an honour-price of 21 *cumala* (the equivalent of 63 milk cows). One of Eochu’s three assailants is the son of a woman named Dorn, but as the child of a foreign father, he is not part of her kingroup – which would normally contribute to paying the fine – and he does not have seven *cumala* to settle Fergus’s claim. The solution arrived at is as follows:

Foglaid forn[n] mac di Duirnn.. Do fóglaid a c[h]in; do t[h]úathaib tárcuth echtrann dun. A forus fil co breith biru: a bás n-inn, ma rechteid ad-rorastar, nó airnaided a máthair a mífolta.

An assailant against us [is] the son of Dorn. To the assailant [belongs] his guilt; payment [belongs] to kingdoms which are foreign to us. That is the principle I bring to [this] judgement: his death for it, if by a ruler he can be captured; or let his mother assume responsibility for his misdeeds.⁷¹

In this complicated scenario involving concepts of protection, honour-price, rules of kinship, and restitution, it is determined that only Dorn or her son are responsible for his portion of the fine, which, as the son cannot afford the cost, can also be paid through his

⁶⁹ Mary E. Byrne, ‘*Airec menman Uaird maic Coisse*’, in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts, Vol. 2*, ed. by Osborn Bergin, R. I. Best, Kuno Meyer, and J. G. O’Keeffe (Halle: Max Neimeyer, 1908), pp. 42–76.

⁷⁰ D. A. Binchy, D. A. (ed. and trans.), ‘The saga of Fergus mac Léti’, *Ériu*, 16 (1952), 33–48.

⁷¹ McLeod, ‘Fergus’, pp. 4–5.

death. Ultimately, Dorn sells herself into bondage to Fergus to pay Eochu's honour-price and save her son's life.

Just as *Airec menman Uraird maic Coisse* and Fergus mac Léti's saga transmitted legal formulae, legal records and commentaries often refer to literary figures as a means of supporting the rules of law.⁷² Innovations, perhaps created through the resolution of conflicting native and ecclesiastical law, required such sanctions from the traditional past to provide authority in the present.⁷³ References to Medb, Cú Chulainn, and other figures in the Ulster Cycle often appear in legal texts or in codices compiled after the eighth century, which supports the idea that literature functioned as a transmitter of laws over long periods of time and helped support the establishment of legal innovations.

One such innovation was the legal and social construction of mothers as innocent embodiments of the Virgin Mary who were to be protected from all forms of violence. The following is an examination of how *Cáin Adomnáin*, specifically its tenth- or eleventh-century preface, and literary representations of woman warriors, worked together to construct women as non-combatant mothers, first through law and then literature.

Constructing Society: *Cáin Adomnáin* and Literary Warrior Women

While motherhood was by nature the realm of women in early medieval Ireland, unlike the descriptions of good kings, warriors, men, and women found in the wisdom texts, there was no formal construction of the socially ideal mother. In the late seventh century, a new and discrete social construction of mothers as non-combatants began to emerge, which placed the mother within a box of reproductive sacrality – one not accessible to men – and outside the sphere of combat in which, as inferred from legal texts, they had previously had a place.⁷⁴

Both legal texts and early Irish literature include several references to female combatants. However, unlike the limited information provided in legal texts regarding male warriors, there is a complete lack of evidence as to specific grades of female warriors in the laws of status. This does not mean women were excluded from warfare, but the degree to which they took part in battle is unclear.⁷⁵ One clue is that, among the twelve

⁷² Myles Dillon, 'Stories from the Law-Tracts', *Ériu*, 11 (1932), 42-63.

⁷³ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'Early Irish', p. 110.

⁷⁴ Binchy, '*Bretha Crólige*', pp. 27, 29, 65.

⁷⁵ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Travelers and Settled Folk: Women, Honor, and Shame in Medieval Ireland', in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, ed. by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 17-38 (pp. 21-22); Dorothy Dilts Swartz, 'The Legal Status of Women in Early and Medieval Ireland and Wales in Comparison with Western European and Mediterranean Societies: Environmental and Social Correlations', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 13 (1993), 107-118.

women who could not be removed from their homes and were instead paid a nursing fee for injuries, the laws of sick maintenance listed both ‘[r]echtaid geill (a ruler entitled to hostages)’, which is glossed as ‘i. gabus gialla .i. amal robi meadb cruacan (who takes hostages, such as was Medb of Cruachain)’, and ‘[c]onfæl conrecta (a werewolf in wolf’s shape)’, glossed as ‘i. ben conrechta .i. inti risa cartanach dol asa eol a richtaib con amail atait i coinerca’ (a woman in wolf’s shape, she who likes to stray in wolf-shapes, as the Í Chon Erca)’.⁷⁶ Furthermore, nursing fees for the werewolf were paid based on an honour-price equal to rather than half of that of her husband.⁷⁷ As later commentary states, ‘digail deitbir doni 7 noca millinn a heneclainn impi’ or ‘it is justified vengeance that she wreaks, and that does not destroy her honour-price.’⁷⁸ *Fíana*, or warbands, were often described as wolves or as those who went wolfing.⁷⁹ Perhaps this note on honour-price implies that a woman in a wolf’s guise would be one participating in violent conflict.⁸⁰ Though they were the exception per the specific reference in the law, it is possible to theorise that women had a place as both military leaders and combatants who were entitled to special treatment by virtue of their function and an honour-price equal to that of men.

Cáin Adomnáin, or the Law of Innocents, introduced new prohibitions on violence involving women, including as members of an army, with the deaths of women on the battlefield described as atrocities and illegitimate violence punishable by law.⁸¹ Moreover, in medieval literature, depictions of women as warriors gradually showed more emphasis on their motherly natures as fosterers, teachers, or protectors of kin, with any roles outside those boundaries seen as destructive. The biological potential for motherhood was portrayed as explicitly incompatible with war. This incompatibility was strangely constructed both in the ninth-century *Noínden Ulad*, ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen’, whereby male warriors are incapacitated by the equivalent of birth pangs, and in the twelfth-century recension of the *Táin* where Medb’s menstruation, or *fíal fola*, prevents single combat with Cú Chulainn.⁸²

⁷⁶ Binchy, ‘*Bretha Crólige*’, pp. 26, 27.

⁷⁷ Binchy, ‘*Bretha Crólige*’, p. 29.

⁷⁸ Binchy, ‘*Bretha Crólige*’, p. 29.

⁷⁹ Joseph Falaky Nagy, ‘*Fíana*’, in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol II, ed by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 743-744 (p. 743).

⁸⁰ Cf. John Carey, ‘Werewolves in medieval Ireland’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 44 (2002), 37–72.

⁸¹ Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *Cáin Adomnáin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), p. 25, 33; Peggy McCracken, ‘The Amenorrhoea of War’, *Signs*, 28 (2003), 625-643 (p. 625).

⁸² Vernam Hull (ed. and trans.), ‘*Noínden Ulad*: The debility of the Ulidians’, *Celtica*, 8 (1968), 1–42; Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), ‘The prose tales in the Rennes dindshenchas’, *Revue Celtique*, 16 (1895), 31–83, 135–167, 269–312 (pp. 44–46); Cecile O’Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), pp. 6 (ll. 204–224), 133 (ll. 4824–4832), 143–144, 269–270; McCracken, ‘Amenorrhoea’, p. 626. The Bible and canon law also insist that a warrior cannot fight if unclean, specifically after being with a woman, and that a menstruating woman is an unclean

While *Cáin Adomnáin* is generally viewed as a step forward for women in protecting them from violence, it also limited a medieval Irish woman's capacity to contribute to her society as a combatant in times of warfare. The perception of women as 'Mother' did not allow for a separation of her role from her sexual function, nor did it allow for her ambitions or her sense of obligation to her *túath* to exist far beyond the context of child production.⁸³ It is the only law in the extant legal texts that specifically prohibits women from combat, excluding them from being employed in assaults and hosts.⁸⁴ This separation of women from war did not reflect the reality that women are capable of violence, as noted in *Cáin Adomnáin* itself, or the fact that common acts of female violence were addressed in other *fénechas* tracts.⁸⁵

Cáin Adomnáin can, perhaps, therefore be described as the genesis of a new construction of mothers as explicitly non-combatants. It defines women as having a divine connection to the mother of Christ, who becomes the standard of the right and proper mother, arrogating the divinity of Ireland's traditional war goddesses.⁸⁶ It makes no such distinction for fathers, and renders the role of a mother separate from combat by virtue of her femininity. Particularly in its later preface, we begin to see a mutually exclusive divide between mothers and female fighters, which found its way into descriptions of female combatants in literature by at least the tenth century.

Cáin Adomnáin and Its Preface

Cáin Adomnáin was promulgated in 697 at the Synod of Birr, authorised by members of the Church and nobility from both Ireland and Britain. Once made law, it introduced a fundamental shift from the *status quo* by excluding women (and later clergy and male children) from any aspect of combat.⁸⁷ A Latin section of the law, called '*sententia angeli Adomnani*' or 'the speech of the angel to Adamnan' provides the reason for its establishment as being '*propter matrem uniuscuiusque, quod mater unumquemque portauerit 7 propter Mariam matrem Iesu Christi per quam totus est*' or 'for the sake of the mother of each one, because a mother has borne each one, and for the sake of Mary mother

person. See 1 Samuel 21:5 and Flechner, *Hibernensis*, Vol. 2, pp. 747. Cf. See discussions on whether the *Táin* described Medb as menstruating or urinating in Sarah Künzler, '*Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature*' (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), pp. 395-403.

⁸³ Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, 'Introduction', in *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*, ed. by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Dublin: Arlen House, 1985), pp. 1-11 (p. 2).

⁸⁴ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, p. 33; Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 108.

⁸⁵ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, p. 31; Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 107; Binchy, '*Bretha Crólige*', p. 49.

⁸⁶ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, pp. 23, 25; Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 76.

⁸⁷ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, p. 25; Smith and Gallen, *Cáin Adomnáin*, p. 77. NB. Other forms of violence against or by women were addressed, but these were also prohibited in other native law texts.

of Jesus Christ, through whom all are.⁸⁸ Unlike native law, it established a woman as a person who created life but who should not destroy it or risk her own for the sake of potential or realised motherhood.

Violence committed in warfare was thus legally gendered. While accepted by 91 guarantors at its inception, it is unclear how successfully *Cáin Adomnáin* was fully adopted in the following centuries.⁸⁹ One eighth- or ninth-century text includes a lengthy request to the king of Ailech, asking him to exempt the clergy from military service, followed by an edict to avoid pressing women to muster and instead taxing spears.⁹⁰ Spears or poles were the chief weapons of women in medieval Ireland, and it is possible the reference to enforcing taxes refers to fines levied against female combatants in *Cáin Adomnáin*. On the other hand, at least one circa tenth-century commentary, found in the Old Irish text *Lebar Aicil*, or the ‘Book of Aicill’, limits fines for failing to turn out for a hosting to men only.⁹¹

The ambiguous reception of *Cáin Adomnáin* is potentially further emphasised in the tenth-century or eleventh-century addition of a preface to the 697 CE text. Based on the previous discussion of native and ecclesiastical law, as well as the social constructions reflected in legal texts and literature, it appears to be a fictional work that paints an unlikely and dire portrait of the lives of women in Ireland before Adomnán, establishing (and perhaps reinforcing due to lax adherence) the need for his law.

The highly propagandic preface starts with a rather absurd claim that women had been *cumala*, or slaves, from the time of Adam until the law of Adomnán.⁹² The rhetorical propaganda continues by describing the inclusion of women in *slóig*, or military troops, as a form of abuse:

In ben ba dech de mnáiph, ba si opair dogniid, techt ar cenn catha 7 cathrói, dáil 7 dúnaid, fechta 7 slógaid, gonae 7 airligh. A tíagh looin for indara táib dí, al-lenbán for in tóib n-ailiu. A fidcheis fria hais. Trícha traigeth ina hairdi. Corrán iaroinn for indara cinn dí, conidh edh doberedh ar trilis na bandscaíle aili assin cad n-araile. A fer inna díaidh; cuaille airbed inna láim oc a sroigled ar cenn catha. Ar ba cenn mnaa nó dá ciich noberthe i tasilbhath in tan sin.

⁸⁸ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, pp. 22, 23, 24, 25.

⁸⁹ Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘The Guarantor List of *Cáin Adomnáin*, 697’, *Peritia*, 1 (1982), 178-215 (p. 182); Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, p. 17.

⁹⁰ Tadhg O’Donoghue (ed. and trans.), ‘*Cert cech ríog co réil*’, in *Miscellany Presented to Kuno Meyer by Some of His Friends and Pupils on the Occasion of His Appointment to the Chair of Celtic Philology in the University of Berlin*, ed. by Osborn Bergin and Carl Marstrander (Halle: Max Neimeyer, 1912), pp. 258-277 (pp. 259, 271). Cf. F.J. Byrne dates this text to the eleventh century; see ‘Ireland and Her Neighbours, c. 1014 - c. 1072’, in *A New History of Ireland, Vol. 1: Prehistoric and early Ireland*, ed. by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 862-898.

⁹¹ Katharine Simms, ‘The Contents of Later Commentaries on the Brehon Law Tracts’, *Ériu*, 49 (1998), 23-40 (pp. 26-30).

⁹² Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, p. 3.

The work which the best of women had to do, was to go to battle and battlefield, encounter and camping, fighting and hosting, wounding and slaying. On one side of her she would carry her bag of provisions on the other her babe. Her wooden pole upon her back. Thirty feet long it was, and had at one end an iron hook, which she would thrust into the tress of some woman in the opposite battalion. Her husband behind her, carrying a fence-stake in his hand, and flogging her on to battle. For at that time it was the head of a woman, or her two breasts, which were taken as trophies.⁹³

However, a man in battle without proper weapons risked the loss of his honour and status, regardless of the trophies he might claim if his wife killed another woman. Arriving on the field with a fence-stake, rather than a sword or other proper weapon, would be so emasculating that Heptad III in the law tract *Sechtae* equates the *fer díairm*, or ‘unarmed man’, with one who is impotent.⁹⁴ Additionally, patrilineage and kin were essential to the maintenance of status and wealth in medieval Ireland; thus, a man driving both his wife and child into battle would have been anathema to the entire social structure of Irish society. The text can be interpreted as depicting those who allowed or forced women into combat as lacking manhood and as hazards to the perpetuation of the kingroup by allowing the deaths of mothers.

Further stressing the veneration of mothers, the preface continues with a story of Adomnán carrying his mother Ronnat on his back while touring the site of what is now Drogheda. At one point, she refuses to be carried, as he has not been a dutiful son. He protests, “*Ní fetur goiri dogneith mac dune dia máthair ná dénuim-si duit-si* (I know of no duty which a son of man could do to his mother that I do not do for you)”.⁹⁵ Ronnat declares that a dutiful son “*mnáu do hsóerad dam ar dál, ar dúnuth, ar fecht, ar slógath, ar guin, ar erlech* (should free women for me from encounter, from camping, from fighting, from hosting, from wounding, from slaying)”, mirroring the language used earlier in the preface.⁹⁶ She eventually allows Adomnán to carry her again, and they arrive at a battlefield, described using a literary motif also found in the *Táin*:⁹⁷

*Ba sé tiget in áir innosrala, co comrictis dá bond na mná fri médhiu cinn a sétchi.
Ci atconcatar in árbach, ní acatar ní bad báidiu ná bad tróighiu léo indá cend na*

⁹³ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, pp. 2, 3.

⁹⁴ Robert Atkinson (ed. and trans.), ‘Heptads,’ in *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. 5 (London: Alexander Thom, 1901), pp. 117-374 (p. 133).

⁹⁵ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, pp. 4-5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ ‘And he made the attack of a foe upon foes among them so that they fell, sole of foot to sole of foot, and headless neck to headless neck’. See Cecile O’Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), pp. 70 (ll. 2304-2308), 188; Cecile O’Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 63 (ll. 2311-2315), 203.

*mná for indara burt 7 colann for in burt n-ailiu 7 a lenbán for a ciich inna collai.
Sruth lomma for in dara n-óil dó 7 sruth folæ forsinn óil ailiu.*

Such was the thickness of the slaughter into which they came that the soles of one woman would touch the neck of another. Though they beheld the battlefield, they saw nothing more touching or more pitiful than the head of a woman in one place and the body in another, and her little babe upon the breasts of the corpse, a stream of milk upon one of its cheeks, and a stream of blood upon the other.⁹⁸

While the literary rhetoric is fairly heavy-handed and despite the fact that earlier passages note trophies as a motivation to drive a woman to battle, it appears that no trophies, including neither head nor breasts, a clear symbol of motherhood in this case, were removed from at least one woman. That fact that, as the story continues, the slain mother turns out to be the wife and daughter of a king makes it especially difficult to believe that nothing of her would have been removed from the killing field as a valued trophy. In light of the contradictory and unrealistic nature of the text, the intention of the preface seems to be more of an appeal to emotion (especially as felt towards mothers) than reason. Its composer(s) is willing to contradict earlier passages of the text to sway medieval Ireland to a specific belief. It is unclear whether any of the rhetoric accurately describes the reality of combat in contemporary Ireland, but it can be inferred that women were at some point participants.

We learn the identity of the slain mother after Ronnat instructs Adomnán to raise her from the dead to restore her ability to breastfeed her child. Adomnán obediently does so, and the woman identifies herself as ‘*Smirgat ingen Áedha Finn, ingen rig Bréfné Connacht, ben rígh Lúaigne Temrach*’ (Smirgat, daughter of Áed Finn, king of the Breifni of Connought, and wife of the king of the Luaigni of Tara).⁹⁹ No men are described as fighting in the battle, but readers of the preface are meant to believe that a queen, as a mother, risked the life of a high-status child without the king being present or indeed flogging her to battle for the sake of claiming trophies. Her name could have been included as a political slight against the rulers of Tara, but it strains credulity that this particular mother would have been forced onto a battlefield, especially with her baby. The author(s) seems unconcerned with providing a realistic portrayal of the plight of women for whom *Cáin Adomnáin* was promulgated and focuses instead on painting a picture of the deaths of women, specifically mothers, as abhorrent.

After this scene, Ronnat essentially tortures her son for several years until his sacrifice and punishment convince the angels to free women from warfare and bondage.

⁹⁸ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, pp. 4-5.

⁹⁹ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, p. 7.

The kings of Ireland, though, are not pleased, implying that no man should die for the sake or instead of a woman. Once the kings relent, Adomnán acknowledges he ‘*sech rofásaig lesu* (has made desolate [i.e. empty] strongholds)’ by his ‘*cosnam ban* (defence of women)’.¹⁰⁰ He recognises that the result of the new law was that kings were left with fewer combatants to muster into battle and fewer hostages and captives to seize from the battlefield, presumably due to the loss of female combatants.

The Evolving Woman Warrior

In medieval Irish literature, figures that depict the normative construction of women, such as Finnchóem, Cú Chulainn’s first foster-mother, as well as those considered ‘otherworldly’ such as Scáthach, his second foster-mother, could be argued as normative or otherworldly per their conformity to the social constructions of women rendered in the law. The roles of these women were not accidental and, as in any fictional tale – including the preface to *Cáin Adomnáin* – were formed and reformed to convey a specific meaning.¹⁰¹ Those literary figures demonstrating the changing social construction of mothers include military leaders, wolfing women seeking social justice, and nurturing foster-mothers.

Medb is perhaps the most well-known and notorious woman warrior in early Irish literature. She is accomplished ‘*im chath & comrac & comlund díb*’ (in battle and fight and combat), capable of ravaging provinces and carrying off hostages.¹⁰² In the Book of Leinster recension of the *Táin*, the one time she appears unable to participate in conflict is during her menstrual flow, which created three massive trenches, thereafter called *Fúal Medba*.¹⁰³ Not only does Cú Chulainn refuse to engage her in battle during this time, but after the graphic exhibition of her reproductive biology, he becomes the protector of the fierce queen’s armies and ensures their safety as they leave Ulster.¹⁰⁴ Medb is thus diminished as an extraordinary warrior by the reminder that she is a mother and reproductive woman in need of protection. Her role as a military leader is then portrayed as unnatural, with Fergus mac Róich despairing that the change in the army’s circumstances ‘*in lá sa indiu ám i ndíaid mná* (was indeed a fitting one for those who were led by a woman).’¹⁰⁵ Her biological functions made her both unable to perform in a time of war and unfit for leadership.

¹⁰⁰ Meyer, *Cáin Adomnáin*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰¹ Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 13.

¹⁰² O’Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 1 (l. 15), 137.

¹⁰³ Cf. Künzler, *Flesh and Word*, pp. 395-403; Charles Bowen, ‘Great-bladdered Medb: Mythology and Invention in the *Táin bó Cuailnge*’, *Éire-Ireland*, 10, 4 (1975), 14–34.

¹⁰⁴ O’Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 133-134 (ll. 4824-4835), 269-270.

¹⁰⁵ O’Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 134 (l. 4845), 270.

This conclusion of the cattle raid is an ironic recapitulation of Medb's arrival in Ulster with her armies. At that time, she is in the role of warrior, but she refuses to attack Conchobar's army while they are in their simulated birth pangs. The source of these pangs was detailed in the *remscél* to the *Táin, Noínden Ulad*, when the woman Macha was forced into a foot race with horses while heavily pregnant. She won the race and went into labour, afterwards cursing the Ulstermen: '*atbert co mbedis Ulaid fo ceis óited in cach uair dus-ficfad eicin* (she said that the Ulaid would abide under feebleness of childbed whensoever need should befall them)'.¹⁰⁶ By forcing these pangs onto the men during their greatest difficulty, including armed conflict, Macha has inflicted the role of a mother in childbirth on them during a time of war, making them unfit to fight.

Motherhood, though, does not always render a woman unfit for battle. As noted in the legal texts, a wolfing woman seeking vengeance in the preservation of social order holds a place of high honour. Two examples of such women, Créidne and Ness, share various similarities in literary texts. Créidne appears in a short Old Irish tale as a mother seeking vengeance on behalf of her children.¹⁰⁷ She has born three sons to her father, and the story names her as both a *banfénnid*, or a woman warrior, and their mother ('*Créidne banfénnid a mmathair*').¹⁰⁸ After Créidne's father expels their sons from the kindred, which would significantly constrain their legal enfranchisement, the wronged mother goes on the warpath as leader of a *fían*, or warband. She remains in exile warring until her children are restored to their birthright, as well as an impressive inheritance.¹⁰⁹ While the story does not continue beyond that, the implication is that once she has resumed her role as a legitimate mother, she ceases to be a warrior.

Similarly, in one version of *Compert Conchobuir*, 'The Birth of Conchobar', Ness seeks vengeance for the slaying of her fosterers.¹¹⁰ Cathbad, normally portrayed as a wise, nurturing, and martially skilled druid in the Ulster Cycle, has killed the twelve men fostering the girl *Assa*, meaning 'easy'. Once on the warpath with her *fían*, she becomes *Ní hAssa*, or 'not easy'. The transfigured Nessa, or Ness, roams about Ireland laying tribes to waste, looking for those responsible for the deaths of her foster kin. Cathbad comes upon Ness in a vulnerable state while she is bathing nude and unarmed in a river in Ulster

¹⁰⁶ Stokes, 'Prose tales', pp. 45-46.

¹⁰⁷ Meyer, Kuno (ed. and trans.), *Fianaigeacht*, RIA Todd Lecture Series, 16 (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1910), pp. xi-xii; Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Travelers', p. 20.

¹⁰⁸ Meyer, *Fianaigeacht*, pp. xi-xii.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), 'Irish Miscellanies: Anecdota from the Stowe MS. No 992', *Revue Celtique*, 6 (1883-1885), 173-186 (p. 179). The edition and translation of *Compert Conchobuir* are found on pp. 173-178.

and gives her the choice of marriage to him or death. As with Medb and Cú Chulainn, in her weakened position, he also grants her security and peace. She replies “‘[f]earr lium ‘na mo marbad i n-eccmuis mh’ arm duit ([i]t is better for me than to be killed by thee, and my weapons gone)’”.¹¹¹ Deprived of her weapons and coerced into marriage, she has lost her status as a warrior.¹¹²

Ness becomes pregnant, and now as a mother, much like Dorn in the saga of Fergus mac Léti, she seeks to provide the best life for her child, even at the risk of her own health. Cathbad promises her son an illustrious birth if she will hold off delivering the baby until what will be the anniversary of the birth of Christ. She promises to do so, even if it potentially costs her life. Ness secures her son additional status and reserves some of her own autonomy, however, when she conceives Conchobar not with Cathbad, but with a king, Fachtna Fáthach, denying paternity to the man who slayed her foster-fathers.¹¹³

Both Créidne and Ness are depicted as heroic, if female, inciters of vengeance because they seek justice. This distinction between vengeance and general female warfare is a preservation of the values of a warrior society of or concerned with men. With vengeance generally related to male virility, strength, and ability to protect, these two women could only justly go to war as retribution for a wrong done to their respective children or fathers.¹¹⁴ They had to return to or take up the role of mother once their vengeance had been realised or rendered impossible.

Women warriors who teach and foster boys and young men are also an essential piece of the shift in the social construction of mothers in literature. Both the Ulster Cycle and later the Fenian Cycle include depictions of women teaching boys skills gendered as masculine, viz those of a warrior. This transformation is described briefly but explicitly in the twelfth-century *Macgnímartha Find*, whereby Finn mac Cumail is reared by two *banféinnidi*: The Grey-one of Luachair, who teaches him martial skills, and Bodmall, a *bandruí*.¹¹⁵ This continues a literary motif developed in the *Táin* and in the Middle Irish recension of *Tochmarc Emire*, as found in Stowe MS 992, whereby Cú Chulainn is

¹¹¹ Meyer, ‘Irish Miscellanies’, pp. 175, 179.

¹¹² NB: Loss of a weapon also results in the loss of warrior status for men. In Recension I, Láeg warns Cú Chulainn: “‘*Do chlaideb fót choim,*’ *ol in t-ara,* “*arnachath fagthar i mbáegul, ár ní dlig láech a enecland dia mbé i n-écmais a arm. Conid cáin midlaig no ndlig fón samail sin.* (For if a warrior is without his weapons, he has no right to his honour-price, but in that case he is entitled only to the legal due of one who does not bear arms.)” See O’Rahilly, *TBC Recension I*, pp. 59, (ll. 1932-1934), 179.

¹¹³ Meyer, ‘Irish Miscellanies’, p. 180.

¹¹⁴ Binchy, ‘*Bretha Crólige*’, pp. 27; William Sayers, ‘Women’s Work and Words: Setting the State for Strife in Medieval Irish and Icelandic Narrative’, *The Mankind Quarterly*, 31 (1990), 59-86 (p. 68).

¹¹⁵ Joseph Falaky Nagy, ‘Heroic Destinies in the *Macgnímrada* of Finn and Cú Chulainn’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 40, 1 (1984), 23-39 (p. 29); John Carey (trans), ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Finn’, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 4th edn, ed. by John T. Koch (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), pp. 194-201 (p. 195).

fostered in Alba by the warrior woman Scáthach, who gives him the skills to become a peerless warrior in Ireland.

In both Recension I and the Book of Leinster recension of the *Táin*, Scáthach is explicitly named the foster-mother of Cú Chulainn and all those who trained with him in Alba.¹¹⁶ While she is clearly a teacher of martial arts, she is emotionally characterized as a mother figure whose training bound her students as brothers.¹¹⁷ However, the earliest mentions of Scáthach, meaning ‘of shadow’ or ‘shadowy one’, do not describe her as a mother figure to Cú Chulainn. In the seventh-century poem *Verba Scáthaige*, she serves only as the prophesier of the events of the *Táin*.¹¹⁸ In the earliest version of *Tochmarc Emire*, Scáthach is a warrior, teacher of martial arts, prophetess, and mother of grown children. However, much like Domnall the Warlike, who first teaches Cú Chulainn in Alba, she is not described as a foster-parent to those who come to her for instruction.¹¹⁹

By the Middle Irish Stowe recension of *Tochmarc Emire*, Cú Chulainn joins several other pupils who are trained and fostered by Scáthach.¹²⁰ In all versions of Cú Chulainn’s training in arms, it is clear Scáthach is revered as the only teacher who can give him the skills to be a master warrior. It is often noted, however, that Scáthach represents an otherworldly figure, one existing apart from Ireland and fulfilling an unnatural role. Literary analyses remove her from the realm of the everyday woman, classifying her as socially unrealistic, a usurper of male roles, the representation of a divine war goddess, and the inhabitant of a mystical realm.¹²¹

Medieval Irish canon law also renders Scáthach an unusual if not improbable character both as a warrior and a teacher of warriors. Jerome is cited in the *Hibernensis* as proclaiming ‘[s]ome—how shameful!—learn from women that they should teach men.’¹²² It demands that ‘wives and women do not receive any male [...] office’, nor are they permitted to ‘claim for themselves a portion of any male function’.¹²³ Transforming her

¹¹⁶ O’Rahilly, *TBC Recension I*, pp. 54 (ll. 1770-1771), 174; O’Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 71 (ll. 2609-2610), 211.

¹¹⁷ Thomas C. O’Donnell, *Fosterage in Medieval Ireland: An Emotional History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 70, 72.

¹¹⁸ P.L. Henry (ed. and trans.), ‘*Verba Scáthaige*’, *Celtica*, 21 (1990), 191-207 (pp. 200-201); Garrett Olmsted, ‘The Earliest Narrative Version of the *Táin*: Seventh-century Poetic References to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*’, *Emania*, 10 (1992), 5-17 (pp. 7-8).

¹¹⁹ Thomas Kinsella (ed. and trans.), *The Táin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 29-37; Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), ‘The Oldest Version of *Tochmarc Emire*’, *Revue Celtique*, 11 (1890), 433-457. See Meyer, ‘Oldest’, p. 445, for passages on Domnall.

¹²⁰ Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), ‘The Wooing of Emer (concluded)’, *The Archaeological Review*, 1, 4 (1888), 298-307 (p. 299).

¹²¹ Jimmy P. Miller, ‘The feminization of the early Irish hero’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 67 (2014), 1-31 (pp. 1, 10); Sayers, ‘Women’s Work’, p. 61; O’Donnell, *Fosterage*, p. 78.

¹²² Flechner, *Hibernensis*, Vol. 2, p. 741.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

role to that of nurturer and foster-mother rather than active warrior teaching male warriors brings her back into line with the social construction of women established in *Cáin Adomnáin* and the *Hibernensis*, which mandates the role of warrior and mother as mutually exclusive, one being for men and the other for women.

The Ulster Cycle makes use of a construction of foster-mothers that mark them as the tie that binds their *daltai*, or ‘fosterlings’, together.¹²⁴ Cú Chulainn’s first foster-mother, Finnchóem, whose name means ‘bright and beautiful’, is one such ideal figure, and the bond between her biological son Conall Cernach and her foster-son Cú Chulainn is described in multiple tales in the Ulster Cycle, including the Stowe version of *Tochmarc Emire*.¹²⁵ In the *Táin*, while Cú Chulainn is portrayed as having many foster-fathers, it is predominantly through their training with Scáthach, whose shadowy name is the opposite of that of Finnchóem, that he and his foster-brothers are connected, evidenced in the many descriptions of single combat.¹²⁶

The warrior code of *fir fer*, literally ‘the truth of men’, required that all combat between individuals be fair, with each possessing equal skill and ability. The foster-brothers taught by Scáthach were considered to be among those who could fairly fight Cú Chulainn.¹²⁷ After several of these honourable but deadly conflicts, Cú Chulainn finally faces his most equally matched foster-brother, Fer Diad. It can be argued that the many references to their brotherly connection through Scáthach as a mother figure make this the most tragic of these duals. Recension I does not play upon this bond quite as strongly as in the later Book of Leinster recension. The earlier version refers briefly to Scáthach as a foster-mother who bound her students by a covenant.¹²⁸ The only mention of a more familial tie in Recension I comes during the tragic battle with Fer Diad, when he reminds him of their common bond:

*Dá m-bámar ic Scáthaich
a llos gaiscidh gnáthaig
is amaráen imríaghmais
imtagmais cach fích.
Tú mo choicli cridi
tú m’acme tú m’fine*

¹²⁴ O’Donnell, *Fosterage*, pp. 70, 72.

¹²⁵ Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), ‘The Wooing of Emer’, *The Archaeological Review*, 1, 1 (1888), 68-75 (p. 74).

¹²⁶ NB. This could be because no other warriors from Emain Macha trained with Scáthach, i.e. the foster-siblings Cú Chulainn battles in the *Táin* are fighting for other provinces. Cú Chulainn is connected to Fergus as a foster-son, but unlike his connections through Scáthach, this prohibits their engagement in single combat.

¹²⁷ Philip O’Leary, ‘The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature’, *Ériu*, 38 (1987), 27-44 (p. 27).

¹²⁸ O’Rahilly, *TBC Recension I*, pp. 54 (ll. 1755-1756), 174.

*ní fúar ríam ba dile
ba dirsan do díth.*

When we were with Scáthach / by dint of our wanted valour / we would fare forth together / and traverse every land. You were my loved comrade, / my kith and kin. / Never found I one dearer to me. / Sad will be your death.¹²⁹

Scáthach is invoked much more often as a common maternal bond in the Book of Leinster *Táin*. Cú Chulainn speaks the same speech to Fer Diad as in Recension I, but continues to reference their fostering together, evoking a more emotional response from the reader:

*Ropar cocle cridi,
ropar cáemthe caille,
ropar fir chomdéirgide,
contulmis tromchotlud
ar trommnúthaib
i críchaib ilib echtrannaib;
aróen imréidmís,
imthéigmís cach fíd,
forcetul fri Scáthaig.*

We were loving friends. / We were comrades in the wood. / We were men who shared a bed. / We would sleep a deep sleep / after our weary fights / in many strange lands. / Together we would ride / and range through every wood / (when we were) taught by Scáthach.¹³⁰

After killing Fer Diad with the *gae bulga* given to him by Scáthach, Cú Chulainn laments:

*Mad dá mmámar alla anall
ac Scáthaig búadaig búanand,
[in]dar lind go bruthe bras
nocho bíad ar n-athchardes.*

When we were yonder / with Scáthach the victorious, / we thought that till great doomsday / our friendship would not end.¹³¹

Cú Chulainn goes on to mourn the deaths of all the foster-brothers he has been forced to slay:

*Is trúag aní nar tá de,
'nar ndaltánaib Scáth[ai]che,
missi créchtach ba chrú rúad,*

¹²⁹ O'Rahilly, *TBC Recension I*, p. 93 (ll. 3055-3063), 206.

¹³⁰ O'Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 85 (ll. 3069-3077), 221.

¹³¹ O'Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 95 (ll. 3444-3447), 231.

tussu gan charptiu d'imlúad.

*Is trúag aní nar tá de,
'nar ndaltánaib Scáthaiche,
missi créchtach ba chrú garb,
7 tussu ulimarb.*

*Is trúag aní nar tá de,
'nar ndaltánaib Scáthaige,
tussu d'éc, missi beó brass,
is gleó ferge in ferachas.*

Sad what befalls us, / the fosterlings of Scáthach. / I am wounded and covered with red gore / while you no longer drive chariots.

Sad what befalls us, / the fosterlings of Scáthach. / I am wounded and covered with red gore / while you lie dead.

Sad what befalls us, / the fosterlings of Scáthach, / you dead. I alive and strong. / Valour is an angry combat.¹³²

The repeated reference to gore and blood may be an indictment of Scáthach's martial role. Regardless, Cú Chulainn mourns the deaths of his foster-brothers much as one would mourn the deaths of blood kin, and it is clear that their familial bond was forged through their foster-mother Scáthach.

While the maternal source of his bond with his foster-brothers is revealing, it is important to look also at the way Scáthach herself is described. At the death of Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn describes her as

*'inund mummi máeth
ras slainni sech cách.*

[t]he same tender foster-mother we had / whose name is beyond all others.¹³³

In the story of Cú Chulainn's birth, similar tenderness was implied of Finnchoem, who bonded the young foster-siblings Cú Chulainn and Conall by the shared nurturing at her breast.¹³⁴ In contrast, however, the reference to breasts during Cú Chulainn's training with the warrior Scáthach is somewhat more threatening.

Female warriors are not portrayed as manly women in the Ulster Cycle, but maintain their femininity: women such as Medb, Scáthach, and Aífe are leaders, warriors, sexual

¹³² O'Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 98 (ll. 3537-3548), 233.

¹³³ O'Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 99 (ll. 3558-3559), 234.

¹³⁴ A.G. Van Hamel (ed.), *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, 3, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1933), p. 8; Kinsella, *The Táin*, p. 25; O'Donnell, *Fosterage*, p. 71.

beings, and biological mothers. While as a young child he fostered at the breast of Finnchóem, the older Cú Chulainn is only able to secure his 'fostering' with Scáthach by hostilely placing his sword between her breasts while she is training her own sons.¹³⁵ He is the only one of her pupils depicted as demanding training in such a fashion, and he is likewise the only one of her pupils to whom she teaches the *gae bulga*.¹³⁶ The reference to the breasts of a warrior woman who is transformed to a mother figure is also applied to Aífe after he has defeated her through trickery, grabs her at her breasts, and demands she bear his son.¹³⁷

From *Cáin Adomnáin*, which established women as non-combatants and sacralised motherhood, to later literature which gradually transforms the warrior violence of women into a vehicle for motherhood, there is a clear indication that the social construction of women as mothers was firmly established as incompatible with women as warriors by the twelfth century. When medieval Ireland's learned class saw a need to prohibit mothers from acting as warriors, they employed legal and literary texts to create and support these emerging social constructions. Today's 'learned class' interprets such social constructions of women in generally negative ways. The mothers, for example, are sometimes seen as subjugated, while martial women depict destructive enemies of the social norm. These interpretations potentially reflect the intentions of medieval authors, but such arguments also reflect the perspectives and environments of the scholars who make them. As such, modern scholars are capable of creating feminist interpretations of the constructions of women in medieval texts to support the constructions of today's society. As modern perceptions and intellectual horizons evolve, so too can our explanations of warrior women in medieval Irish literature.

¹³⁵ Meyer, 'Wooing (concluded)', p. 300; O'Donnell, *Fosterage*, p. 79-80.

¹³⁶ O'Donnell, *Fosterage*, p. 79.

¹³⁷ Meyer, 'Wooing (concluded)', p. 301; Meyer, 'Oldest Version', p. 451.

Chapter 3: Modern Feminist Constructions of Warrior Women, 20th-21st Century

Laws and literature that depict a patriarchal and sexist culture cannot wholly describe the day-to-day entitlements and authority of the women inhabiting that culture. Examining medieval Irish literature and its connection to the law through the lens of modern feminist criticism can provide novel interpretations by which to broaden academic research and understanding in Celtic Studies. This chapter will demonstrate the value of such scholarship, explore current feminist literary critique of women in the Ulster Cycle, and offer interpretations of *Tochmarc Emire* and ‘Pillow Talk’ as feminist literature.

The Value of Feminist Literary Critique in Celtic Studies

With clear consensus as to the limited enfranchisement for women in medieval Ireland, the fact that women of power, particularly martial women, were featured so prominently in the sagas runs counter to social constructions commonly understood by modern scholars. The arguments here will not attempt to redefine the fundamental intentions of early Irish literature. At best, modern scholars can only guess at what motivated scribes and authors. Instead, Maria Tymoczko, in her study of the nature of tradition and cultural memory in Irish culture, argues that ‘it is not at all the case that written texts are immutable in meaning, that interpretations of texts are fixed, or that texts are “situation-transcendent” and “the same” across audiences and time’ despite the fact that the text itself remains unaltered.¹³⁸ Therefore, this chapter proceeds with the understanding that literature is not static, and it evolves as audiences evolve.¹³⁹

It is obvious the meanings of extant literature changed even in medieval Ireland; Irish texts were revised and adapted, sometimes to the point of conflicting with earlier works to suit new audiences.¹⁴⁰ It is a common assumption that those who shaped extant texts were men, and men in power had a vested interest in preserving their status above women. They recorded the histories of men as fierce warriors or important leaders, drivers of culture and tradition, while women were relegated to a place in Irish culture that is more nebulous or

¹³⁸ Maria Tymoczko, ‘The nature of tradition and cultural memory: Evidence from two millennia of Irish culture’, in *Medieval Irish Perspectives on Cultural Memory*, ed. by Jan Erik Rekdal and Erich Poppe (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2014), pp. 15-60 (p. 24).

¹³⁹ Dagmar Schlüter, ‘Medieval manuscripts and cultural memory: The case of the *Book of Leinster*’, in *Medieval Irish Perspectives on Cultural Memory*, ed. by Jan Erik Rekdal and Erich Poppe (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2014), pp. 61-79

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Falaky Nagy, ‘The Pride of Heroes and the Problems of Readers of Medieval Celtic Literature’, *Studia Celtica Fennica*, 14 (2017), 139-153 (p. 140); Schlüter, ‘Medieval’, pp. 61-62; Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 5.

unknowable as creatures of nature.¹⁴¹ The ‘truth’ of the past has been coloured by what men preserved in medieval Ireland, as well as at the nascence of Celtic Studies. A feminist outlook can challenge any myth of objectivity or truth, not only of the texts but also of modern scholars.¹⁴²

Celticists such as Sarah Sheehan, Ann Dooley, and Maria Tymoczko have argued for the need of new critical approaches to medieval and Celtic studies, as both a means of expanding scholarship and ensuring these studies sustain vitality.¹⁴³ Such an approach also allows for individual reader reception, generating meaning that is relevant to modern and future scholars.¹⁴⁴ The appreciation of literature is a subjective experience and has as much to teach as the supposedly objective experience of historical interpretation.¹⁴⁵ Expansive approaches that go beyond the long history of patriarchal framing provide space for the intellectualism of modern feminist scholars and give form to the medieval women of Ireland whose histories have been subsumed by a male-focused preservation of the past.

With regard to extant early Irish texts, a feminist critique requires analysis of the authenticity of author/scribal perceptions, depictions of women in literature, and the events in which they participate.¹⁴⁶ Such assessments have permeated the previous chapters, but arguments have not thus far attempted a fully feminist evaluation or addressed the possibility of feminist ideals in medieval Ireland. A review of recent scholarship, including potential motivations imbedded in its conclusions, will be addressed more fully once the guideposts for a feminist appraisal are established.

In terms of authenticity, the author’s background and viewpoint must be examined when possible.¹⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the identity of an author or scribe of medieval Irish texts is often unknown. It is conceivable, though, that at least some women were members of the learned class, even if there is yet no incontrovertible proof of medieval women authors

¹⁴¹ Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1989, p. xviii; Sessle, ‘Misogyny’, pp. 135-138 (p. 135).

¹⁴² Bennett, ‘Medievalism’, pp. 17-18.

¹⁴³ Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley, ‘Introduction’, in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, ed. by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 1-15 (p. 1); Maria Tymoczko, ‘What Questions Should We Ask in Celtic Studies in the New Millennium?’, *CSANA Yearbook 2*, ed. by Joseph Falaky Nagy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), pp. 10-29 (p. 18).

¹⁴⁴ Tymoczko, ‘What Questions’, p. 22.

¹⁴⁵ Josephine Donovan, ‘Afterword: Critical Re-Vision’, *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, 2nd edn, ed. by Josephine Donovan (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 74-81 (p. 79).

¹⁴⁶ Donovan, ‘Afterword’, p. 77.

¹⁴⁷ Marcia Holly, ‘Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic’, *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, 2nd edn, ed. by Josephine Donovan (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 38-47 (p. 40).

in the extant texts.¹⁴⁸ Regardless, female authorship does not guarantee a reliable view of 'real life' women, especially if the writing was intended to support social and religious constructions of women espoused by men in power.

Of more value with regard to medieval Irish literature, then, is the determination of whether or not the text offers an authentic presentation of women and the ways in which they navigate their lives. For example, a literary portrayal of women via such common patriarchal tropes as the shrew, passive wife, pious saint, or wanton seductress might offer insight as to contemporary audience perceptions of women, but the limited dimensions of such depictions do little to illustrate how women generally behave.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, descriptions of interactions between men and women must go beyond the cliché of patriarchy and reveal an understanding of the power dynamics of law and constructed social norms.¹⁵⁰

At first glance, a woman warrior may be dismissed as inauthentic in terms of the legal and religious structures of medieval Ireland. However, the fact that references to fighting women, e.g. the woman in wolf's guise seeking vengeance or martial masters such as Scáthach, appear in both legal and literary texts implies that they existed at some point. Thomas Clancy, arguing his case for the potential existence of medieval female poets, refers to the seventh-century poem *Aithbe damsca*, or 'The lament of the old woman of Beare', which 'calls one of the characters *banéces*, a female poet or scholar, [and thereby] had no difficulty in conceiving of a female professional poet.'¹⁵¹ He goes on to note that 'a conceit demands a reality with which to play'.¹⁵² If one extrapolates that logic, then the frequency and ease with which authors of the Ulster Cycle reference female warriors could likewise corroborate their real and not just literary existence.

However, it is more often determined that there is little evidence of martial women in the extant non-literary texts. Analyses have generally established a dichotomy, with warrior women as depicted in the sagas on one hand and their representation in the law on the other; though, there are counterarguments that the law and literature both offer corroborative descriptions.¹⁵³ Such counterarguments are, however, dismissed as being

¹⁴⁸ Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland: Stating the Case', in *The Fragility of Her Sex? Medieval Irishwomen in Their European Context*, ed. by Christine E. Meeks and Katharine Simms (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 43-72.

¹⁴⁹ Cheri Register, 'American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographic Introduction', *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, 2nd edn, ed. by Josephine Donovan (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 1-28 (p. 3).

¹⁵⁰ Holly, 'Consciousness', pp. 43, 45.

¹⁵¹ Clancy, 'Women Poets', p. 47.

¹⁵² Clancy, 'Women Poets', p. 49.

¹⁵³ Oxenham, *Perceptions*, p. 83; Kelly, *GEIL*, pp. 68-69.

wishful thinking on the part of scholars capitalising on modern feminist movements.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps, though, the reason for such an easy dismissal is the overreliance on male activities and concerns, which are central in the Ulster Cycle, as a starting point in the examination of female constructs.¹⁵⁵ The following examination of modern scholarship of early Irish literature will explore cases made against and for an early Irish feminism through the evaluation of literary warrior women.

Modern Feminist Critique of Medieval Irish Literature

To date, it can be argued that modern feminist scholarship of medieval Irish texts has been limited in its perspective. As early Irish culture was, and modern Western culture remains, patriarchal, both male and female scholars tend to approach their arguments from an assumption of male authority and limited agency for women. Feminist literary theorist Josephine Donovan describes this as a negative hermeneutic mode of critique, which ‘observes the text’s absences, gaps, and omissions, as well as the reified, destructive forms that are inscribed therein.’ Conversely, a positive hermeneutic mode ‘identifies the text’s liberatory dimension and delineates its utopian horizon.’¹⁵⁶ For the most part, scholars have viewed martial women in the Ulster Cycle through the negative hermeneutic mode; though, there are some who take innovative approaches employing the positive mode. However, even using a positive approach, the literary martial women are frequently only attributed agency within the context of male authority. A review of the use of both modes of critique follows, concluding with a look at how the positive hermeneutic mode can be used to recognise female agency and power without the need of patriarchal consent in the character of Macha Mongrúad.

Negative Hermeneutic Mode

Robbie MacLeod recently analysed women warriors in early Irish literature as part of his dissertation on female alterity.¹⁵⁷ In it, he evaluated the ways in which such women were depicted as being outside the norm of both their literary setting and the textual culture in which they were created. He concluded that intergender violence, as engaged in by characters such as Ness, Créidne, Medb, Scáthach, and Aífe, is ‘a domain of female

¹⁵⁴ Bennett, ‘Medievalism’, p. 21.

¹⁵⁵ Dukes-Knight, ‘Wooden’, p. 107.

¹⁵⁶ Josephine Donovan, ‘Introduction to the Second Edition: Radical Feminist Criticism’, *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, 2nd edn, ed. by Josephine Donovan (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. ix-xxii (p. xvii).

¹⁵⁷ Robbie Andrew MacLeod, ‘Female Alterity in Medieval Gaelic Literature’ (unpublished Master’s thesis, University of Glasgow, 2018), p. 4.

alterity, where the rules are different for men and women, with the latter underpowered, unable to express agency through violence.¹⁵⁸ He goes on to explain that female warriors repeatedly fail in battles against men, and that ‘[f]emale-on-male violence is largely unsuccessful and ruinous for the perpetrator, being answered with further (male) violence.’¹⁵⁹ However, MacLeod’s argument overlooks the successes of Créidne and Medb, the fact that characters such as Finn’s foster-mother Liath are not defined by battles with men, and that victorious warriors such as Ness, Scáthach, and Aífe only lost battles against men who violated the fair rules of *fír fer*.

The losses of Scáthach and Aífe due to trickery are addressed by Jimmy P. Miller in his article on the feminisation of Cú Chulainn by virtue of his training with warrior women.¹⁶⁰ He argues that Scáthach and Aífe are intended to affirm patriarchal structures and must teach Cú Chulainn ‘feminine wiles’ to round out his martial prowess.¹⁶¹ Despite the fact that *Tochmarc Emire* lists over two dozen martial feats taught by Scáthach, Miller argues that Cú Chulainn ‘must take on “womanly” skills and qualities’ to survive and that ‘those skills are verbal not martial’.¹⁶² The central argument appears to be that Cú Chulainn overcame the superior warriors Scáthach and Aífe through subterfuge, and that, though neither woman had taught such dishonourable behaviour to Cú Chulainn, this was the important skill he learned from them. There are, however, multiple occurrences of men using similar ploys to undo opponents in extant texts, and it is clear it was not a trait exclusive to women.¹⁶³

Miller views Scáthach as usurping a male role, one she is excluded from not by her ability, but by her gender.¹⁶⁴ He contends that Scáthach and Aífe ‘represent the opposite of heroic virtue and ethos’, though it is they, in fact, who have abided by the tenets of a fair fight at all times. Because Scáthach had a sword placed between her breasts and Aífe is restrained at or under her breasts during conflict with Cú Chulainn, Miller ascertains that:

¹⁵⁸ MacLeod, ‘Female’, p. 53.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Miller, ‘The feminization’, pp. 14, 16, 25.

¹⁶¹ Miller, ‘The feminization’, pp. 31, 22.

¹⁶² Meyer, ‘Wooing (concluded)’, pp. 302-303; Miller, ‘The feminization’, pp. 10, 14.

¹⁶³ See Byrne, ‘*Airec menman Uraird maic Coisse*’, pp. 42–76; Seán Connolly and Jean-Michel Picard (ed. and trans.), ‘Cogitosus’s *Life of St Brigit* Content and Value’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117 (1987), 5–27 (pp. 15, 21-22); Meyer, ‘Irish Miscellanies’, p. 179; George Henderson (ed. and trans.), *Fled Bricrenn*, Irish Texts Society, 2 (Strand: David Nutt, 1899), pp. 8-13; O’Rahilly, *TBC Recension I*, pp. 20 (ll. 633-634), 143; O’Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 26 (ll. 954-955), 164; Mary E. Byrne and Myles Dillon (ed. and trans.), ‘*Táin Bó Fraích*’, *Études Celtiques*, 2, 3 (1937), 1-27 (pp. 6-8); Eugene O’Curry (ed. and trans.), ‘The *Tri Thruaighe na Scéalaigheacta* (i.e. the “Three Most Sorrowful Tales”) of Erin’, *Atlantis*, 3 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1862), 377-422 (pp. 405, 407) for just a few examples.

¹⁶⁴ Miller, ‘The feminization’, p. 10.

their primary characteristic is still their gender, and they cannot escape its limitations. Cú Chulainn, meanwhile, is superior because he belongs to the dominant gender and successfully appropriates the skills of the other gender. [D]espite their power, these women cannot overcome the sexual hierarchy that the shapers of the texts assume to be natural.¹⁶⁵

Arguably, sexual hierarchy had little to do with Cú Chulainn overcoming the two warriors, but rather it was his deceitful nature that ensured his victory. Miller has imposed this deceit, instead, on the women, determining it was the accepted reality of the textual culture in that the ‘medieval Irish only had to look to the Bible for explicit affirmation of the deceitful nature of women from Eve onward’.¹⁶⁶ While there is explicit affirmation of such misogyny in the Bible, as well as the *Hibernensis*, both texts also abound in descriptions of honest and virtuous women. One cannot thus surmise that all women were believed to be by nature deceitful in medieval Ireland.

Lisa Bitel also concludes that female warriors are perversions of everyday women constrained in a patriarchal culture. She asserts that warrior women were included in the sagas as a form of pornography, an outlet for violent and sexual fantasies.¹⁶⁷ She argues:

The early Irish were obsessed with arms-bearing women warriors in contest with men, otherworldly *dominatrices* demanding sex from handsome heroes, insolent queens ordering soldiers around or – best of all – any of the ill-humored females being beaten in combat or sexually subdued by other warriors.¹⁶⁸

This is a grotesque and unsupported interpretation, seeming to serve only the purpose of being provocative. It is unclear what warrior characters or creative timeframe she refers to here.¹⁶⁹ However, if the Irish were actually so obsessed, one would expect these kinds of women to have a place in every story, as both sexual dominators and the dominated.

Further, Bitel claims that authors branded women warriors as devouring creatures seeking political domination.¹⁷⁰ In fact, the Ulster sagas give a much more nuanced portrait of warrior women, with figures such as Medb expressing a multitude of positive and negative traits – from the noble strategist in *Táin Bó Fraích* to the cynical mother in

¹⁶⁵ Miller, ‘The feminization’, p. 22.

¹⁶⁶ Miller, ‘The feminization’, p. 25.

¹⁶⁷ Bitel, *Land*, p. 204.

¹⁶⁸ Bitel, *Land*, p. 204.

¹⁶⁹ Bitel, *Land*, p. 204, cites sources related to medieval pornography. She refers briefly to Medb, a prayer attributed to St. Patrick, generally to female warriors, hags, and sorceresses, but not to specific texts, dates, or additional literary figures.

¹⁷⁰ Bitel, *Land*, p. 206.

*Táin Bo Cúailnge*¹⁷¹ – images that sometimes changed dramatically from the seventh to twelfth centuries. Bitel never adequately addresses the reasons for these multi-dimensional and changing characters in her analysis.

Like Bitel, Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, in ‘*Re tóin mná: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women*’, assumes that misogyny is intrinsic to early Irish literature.¹⁷² Much like MacLeod argues that literary warrior women frequently failed in combat, Ní Bhrolcháin suggests more broadly that all women exhibiting independence fail ‘since independence suggests freedom and these women exercise such perilous powers disastrously.’¹⁷³ Derdriu, she argues, leaves Conchobar no choice but to renege on his legal oaths of security and protection to the sons Uisliu, with ‘the otherwise prudent king behaving uncharacteristically because of a rebellious independent woman.’¹⁷⁴ While both Derdriu’s independence and Conchobar’s prudence are debatable, even in medieval Ireland, it would be difficult to argue that the manliest of kings would have so little control over himself. Such a lack of will and honour would have eventually denied him the right to kingship.¹⁷⁵

Ní Bhrolcháin goes on to argue that ‘troublesome’ women appear in the Ulster Cycle due to ‘the Christian wish to present the duality of good Mary/evil Eve’, and because ‘the status of the *banchomarba* [...] increased power within marriage and the legal system resulting in greater wealth which produced greater power and a possible challenge to male authority.’¹⁷⁶ While the Church’s dichotomy of women cannot be denied, as it still exists to some degree today, the changes in social position were in some part due to laws such as *Cáin Lanamna*, which from at least the eighth century was promulgated by both the Church and secular sources of power. Nevertheless, her argument does attest to the fact that some women in everyday medieval Ireland were powerful. Whether that power was increased or merely reflected in *Cáin Lanamna* is unknown, but literary characters such as Medb certainly demonstrated the legal reality.

Yet, most negative hermeneutic interpretations of Medb do not allow for her as a representation of women and instead dismiss her as a deity. As one example, Márkus argues Medb ‘is not a woman at all, but a goddess of sovereignty.’¹⁷⁷ He describes the sovereignty goddess as merely the ‘goddess who slept with many kings’, with female – but

¹⁷¹ Byrne and Dillon, ‘*Táin Bó Fraích*’, pp. 2, 4, 6-7, 8; O’Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, p. 52 (ll. 1931-1942).

¹⁷² Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘*Re tóin mná: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women*’, *Ulidia: proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Belfast and Emain Macha, 8–12 April 1994*, ed. by James P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (1994), pp. 115-121.

¹⁷³ Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘*Re tóin mná*’, p. 115.

¹⁷⁴ Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘*Re tóin mná*’, p. 120.

¹⁷⁵ Aitchison, ‘Kingship’, p. 65.

¹⁷⁶ Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘*Re tóin mná*’, p. 121.

¹⁷⁷ Márkus, ‘Early Irish’, p. 376.

not male – sexuality that includes many partners derided as ‘promiscuous’.¹⁷⁸ Having sex with multiple kings was not the function of the sovereignty goddess. The deity joined with a worthy king to transfer power to him, to symbolise his marriage to the land, and to ensure his protection of it and the life that thrived upon it. Medb, arguably, did none of those things, and she instead slept with men for her own pleasure or as a means of securing material and martial contracts on her own behalf.

Ann Dooley describes sexual interaction between martial women and men in the *Táin* as expressing ‘male terror at the devouring female [as] a fundamental aspect of the language of heroic misogyny [...] associated with deep anxiety about the instability of male gendering and identity.’¹⁷⁹ Such male terror implies recognition of the fragility and perhaps even capriciousness of gender constructions. However, her argument about the blurred lines of gendered roles describes such fluidity only as destructive to men, while not at the same time empowering to women. Essentially, she argues that warrior women are depicted negatively because men fear being made weak, or in other words, made to be like women.

Marian Davis uses an innovative approach to feminist critique in her evaluation of martial women such as Medb by employing Jungian principles to the warrior queen’s relationship with Cú Chulainn. She describes Medb as projecting Cú Chulainn’s ‘shadow’ qualities, ‘such as the urge to wanton violence and an inflexible will to dominate’.¹⁸⁰ In Davis’s argument, Medb can only be seen to be powerful by expressing negative male qualities, rather than exhibiting a power that manifests in her femininity. This precludes any critique of Medb as a feminist figure, rendering her only a woman who has failed to achieve a male ideal.

Positive Hermeneutic Mode

While less extensive in their treatments, there have been scholarly arguments that attempt to define the women warriors of the Ulster Cycle as positive expressions of femininity, exhibiting some dimension of liberation albeit within the constructs of a male-dominated culture. Perhaps the difference is these scholars see medieval Irish patriarchy not so much as misogynist as sexist, without a cultural hatred or mistrust of women assumed by scholars taking the negative approach.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Ann Dooley, ‘The Invention of Women in the *Táin*’, *Ulidia: proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Belfast and Emain Macha, 8–12 April 1994*, ed. by James P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (1994), pp. 123–133.

¹⁸⁰ Marian Davis, ‘Cuchulainn and Women: A Jungian Perspective’, *Mythlore*, 76 (1994), 23–26 (p. 25).

Sarah Sheehan, in 'Loving Medb', reasons that even when employing new approaches to understanding the power of Medb, such as Davis used, scholars often do not see beyond the over-emphasised sovereignty goddess model and 'that practitioners of new modes still attempt to accommodate it.'¹⁸¹ While offering a positive hypothesis of the characterisation of Medb, Erica Sessle exemplifies Sheehan's claim in her article, 'Misogyny and Medb: Approaching Medb with Feminist Criticism'. Sessle maintains that while Medb represents a sovereignty goddess, her unnatural behaviour as a military leader is due to the fact that she has chosen unworthy kings as her consorts.¹⁸² It is this, and not her transgression against male authority, that allows for what Sessle views as a misogynist rendering of the character.¹⁸³ This is a somewhat unusual feminist interpretation of the warrior queen. Medb is not dishonourable because she is playing the role of a man badly, but because she has badly fulfilled her role as a goddess. Though still justifying misogyny, Sessle seems to do so by describing Medb as a truly strong female figure and then defining how she falls short in her liberated role.

Sheehan broadens the scope of her own argument by investigating the ways in which interpretations of Medb are influenced by readers and the time in which they exist.¹⁸⁴ Most are produced by men, and most are concerned either with her sexuality or her supposed divinity. Sheehan notes that the earliest evaluation of the literary figure, conducted by Heinrich Zimmer in 1911, concluded that Medb's sexuality was an expression of the emasculation of genetically inferior men, reflecting a belief in Aryan superiority.¹⁸⁵ Sheehan argues that subsequent interpretations of Medb as a sovereignty goddess were androcentric attempts to define her sexuality as permissible. '[T]he substitution of a figurative, divine Medb for Medb the human, sexual, literary character facilitated the production of an interpretive framework within which all female sexuality could be safely read as either sacred or allegorical.'¹⁸⁶ The same theme permeated studies of Medb well into the 1990s. It follows, then, that it is difficult to undo the presumption of Medb as a goddess, which to some degree requires the acceptance of the biases of the early Celticists who first suggested such a construction.

Doris Edel, however, took a completely different tack in her comparison of Medb to the Empress Matilda. Focusing on the 'Pillow Talk' episode in the Book of Leinster

¹⁸¹ Sheehan, 'Loving', pp. 171-186 (p. 173).

¹⁸² Sessle, 'Misogyny', p. 138.

¹⁸³ Sessle, 'Misogyny', p. 137.

¹⁸⁴ Sheehan, 'Loving', p. 171.

¹⁸⁵ Sheehan, 'Loving', p. 174.

¹⁸⁶ Sheehan, 'Loving', p. 173.

recension of the *Táin*, she argues that, rather than representing a sovereignty goddess, Medb represented an actual sovereign, alluding to the conflict of English succession between Matilda and Stephen of Blois.¹⁸⁷ An innovative approach, her argument rests on the political ambitions of Díarmait mac Murchada, the King of Leinster, who needed to vest political authority in his daughter Aife to secure an Ireland under Leinster dominance.¹⁸⁸ If the depiction of Medb was meant to support both Matilda's and Aife's claims to sovereignty, this would go far in proving a move toward female equality in medieval Ireland, at least among the nobility. However, Edel acknowledges that it is not possible to know precisely when or by whom the 'Pillow Talk' episode was first authored nor the intention behind its inclusion in the Book of Leinster.

Edyta Lehmann likewise offers an inventive literary analysis of Medb through the Nietzschean concept of the will to power. Much as Davis had applied Jungian psychology, Lehmann uses modern philosophy to remove Medb from patriarchal confines by representing her as a self-fashioned and self-fulfilled character.¹⁸⁹ The will to power 'instigates the self to establish itself in opposition to the community and its values and, thus, become a self, as opposed to a mere element of society'.¹⁹⁰ While this may reflect modern mores, based on what is known about medieval Ireland and its focus on a broader society rather than the individual, such behaviour would have been distasteful of any person, regardless of gender.

Unlike Sessle, Lehmann argues that Medb took on a male role and that she then put aside her expected duties and obligations in fulfilling that role.¹⁹¹ Social mores and taboos were seen as essential to the functioning of medieval society, and Lehmann notes that Medb is 'condemned by the tradition sanctified by the prevalent discourse of the Irish heroic age'.¹⁹² Again, this is not about Medb's gender but the fact that, as Lehmann interprets her behaviour, she is not acting honourably in her role. Even though she has the status and skill to be an effective military leader and queen, she chooses to behave otherwise in pursuit of personal gain. While presenting her in a negative light, Lehmann still applauds Medb as 'a [female] character embracing and experiencing the power enjoyed by males of her society.'¹⁹³ The queen ignores social norms, crosses gender

¹⁸⁷187 Doris Edel, 'Medb of Crúachain and the Empress Matilda: literature and politics in 12th-century Leinster', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 64, 1 (2017), 19-58.

¹⁸⁸ Edel, 'Medb', p. 49.

¹⁸⁹ Edyta Lehmann, "'And thus I will it': Queen Medb and the Will to Power', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 28 (2008), 142-151.

¹⁹⁰ Lehmann, 'And thus', p. 143.

¹⁹¹ Lehmann, 'And thus', p. 146.

¹⁹² Lehmann, 'And thus', p. 146.

¹⁹³ Lehmann, 'And thus', p. 150.

boundaries, and maintains her power, despite the viricentric world she inhabits in both the Ulster Cycle tales and in its textual culture.

Medb, though certainly the most examined female figure in the Ulster Cycle, is not the only warrior queen to have been analysed by feminist theorists. By moving away from a focus on Medb, Amy C. Mulligan provides a positive feminist critique of Macha Mongrúad that argues for both her liberated status and her existence at a feminist utopian horizon, i.e. that ideal which acts as a beacon even if it cannot be realized, both of which are central to the positive hermeneutic mode of feminist critique. It transforms a short interlude in *Tochmarc Emire* into a fascinating microcosm of an early Irish feminism.

Amy C. Mulligan's Macha Mongrúad

The story of Macha Mongrúad appears or is referred to in several early Irish texts, including king lists, genealogies, annals, *Dindshenchas*, *Banshenchas*, and literature such as *Tochmarc Emire*.¹⁹⁴ She is said to have established and ruled at Emain Macha sometime between the seventh and the third centuries BCE.

In *Tochmarc Emire*, Cú Chulainn explains the place-name Emain Macha with reference to both the woman Macha who raced against horses and Macha Mongrúad ('the red-haired'). In Macha Mongrúad's tale, three kings from Ulster, called Áed, Dithorba, and Cimbaeth, reign over Ireland and have agreed to each rule for seven years before handing over the kingship to another of the three. Each rules three times over sixty-six years until Áed is the first to die, leaving only one heir, his daughter Macha, to claim his throne. However, Dithorba and Cimbaeth do not wish to share kingship with a woman and are unwilling to acknowledge her inheritance. To claim her right, Macha defeats both in battle and takes her place as sovereign for seven years. During that time, Dithorba dies, and his five sons demand their turn as king. Macha, though, did not gain sovereignty through the original agreement, having earned it in battle, and does acknowledge the claim of Dithorba's sons. To retain her sovereignty, she battles and defeats the five claimants and then marries Cimbaeth, thereby securing the throne without opposition until her death.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Mulligan, 'Playing', pp. 75-93 (p. 77); A.G. Van Hamel (ed.), '*Tochmarc Emire*', in *Compert Con Culainn and other stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 3 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1933), pp. 16-68 (pp. 33-35, §30), E.J. Gwynn (ed. and trans.), *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, 5 vols, Todd Lecture Series 8-12 (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1903-1935), pp. 3:366-369, 4:308-309, 4:124-125, and M.C. Dobbs, 'The Ban-shenchus', *Revue Celtique*, 47 (1903), 282-339 (p. 320); Gregory Toner, 'Macha and the Invention of Myth', *Ériu*, 60 (2010), 81-109 (p. 98).

¹⁹⁵ Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), 'The Wooing of Emer (continued)', *The Archaeological Review*, 1, 2 (1888), pp. 150-155 (pp. 151-152).

Mulligan argues that this tale's composer(s) understood that ability and skill were not biologically predetermined and that laws functionally established artificial, rather than merit-based, limitations on the positions men and women held in medieval Irish society.¹⁹⁶ Native Irish law, while recognizing Macha's right to inheritance, would have prevented her from entering into the sovereignty contract depicted between the three kings. Macha instead legitimised her claim to Áed's kingship through military superiority in battle.¹⁹⁷ She performed the role of warrior better than men and was not hindered by her biology.

She proves her ability and right to rule further once the sons of Dithorba are driven to the forest as exiles.¹⁹⁸ Some recent readings of Medb's role aside, the trope of the sovereignty goddess has been understood to allow only for the transfer of power to a worthy man, and not the retention of power for the goddess's own goals and ambitions.¹⁹⁹ In some tales, she first appears as a deformed and unappealing woman, transforming into beauty and perfection as her king proves that he is fit to rule.²⁰⁰ In *Tochmarc Emire*, though, Macha Mongrúad assumes a parody of the sovereignty goddess as hag for Dithorba's unworthy sons. After having disguised herself as a leper, Macha finds the five men in the forest cooking a boar over a campfire. Despite her appearance, each decides they are going to sleep with the unknown woman, but once alone with her, she physically overpowers and takes each man captive.²⁰¹ Macha turns the sovereignty motif into a comedic display of itself, showing 'the artificiality of such a construction' and how it can be used 'to challenge, complicate, and enrich our understanding of Irish constructions of gender.'²⁰² Rather than transferring power to the sons of a king, she retains her sovereignty and sexual autonomy as the more worthy figure.

As final proof of her superior status, Macha refuses calls by her people to vengefully execute her captives, invoking the concept of *fir flathemon*, 'the king's justice', and seeking instead to be a truly just and proper sovereign.²⁰³ Rather than kill Dithorba's sons, she denotes each man a *ráthmug*, a slave or servant specifically held by a lord for the

¹⁹⁶ Mulligan, 'Playing', p. 79.

¹⁹⁷ Meyer, 'Wooing (continued)', *AR*, 1, 2, p. 151; Mulligan, 'Playing', p. 83; Toner, 'Macha', p. 100.

¹⁹⁸ Meyer, 'Wooing (continued)', *AR*, 1, 2, p. 152; Mulligan, 'Playing', p. 84.

¹⁹⁹ Mulligan, 'Playing', p. 87.

²⁰⁰ Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan, 'The Anatomy of Power and the Miracle of Kingship: The Female Body of Sovereignty in a Medieval Irish Kingship Tale', *Speculum*, 81, 4 (2006), 1014-1054 (p. 1016). For an example of such a tale, see Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The death of Crimthann son of Fidach, and the adventures of the sons of Eochaid Muigmedón', *Revue Celtique*, 24 (1903), 172-207, 446 (pp. 196-201).

²⁰¹ Meyer, 'Wooing (continued)', *AR*, 1, 2, p. 152.

²⁰² Mulligan, 'Playing', p. 90.

²⁰³ Meyer, 'Wooing (continued)', *AR*, 1, 2, p. 152; Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 18; Mulligan, 'Playing', p. 89; Toner, 'Macha', p. 100.

purpose of building a *ráth*.²⁰⁴ In this way, secular law supports Macha's claim that the five sons are unfit to be kings. *Críth Gablach* describes four ways to lower the honour-price of a king to that of a commoner, the first being:

[a] thoracic for teora lorrgeib atchich: lorgg forcca, lorgg samtaighi, lorgg rammai
– ar cen mbis foraib is aithech

[f]inding him at the three handles of a commoner: the handle of a mallet, the handle of an axe, the handle of a spade.²⁰⁵

Forcing the would-be kings to dig as commoners, she marks out the *dún* using her brooch (*eo imma muin Macha*); hence the place-name Emain Macha.²⁰⁶ While once again emphasizing her own superiority as a ruler, she at the same time legally diminishes these five men who hoped to be kings to common slaves.

Within the context of *Tochmarc Emire*, this interlude could be interpreted as a mockery of Cú Chulainn's supposed domination of women. He has just been gently ridiculed by Emer, whose self-confidence allowed her to demand proof that he is worthy to wed her.²⁰⁷ Moreover, later in the narrative, he demonstrates a lack of valour in his dealings with Scáthach and Aife, already discussed, recalling the dominating behaviour of the sons of Dithorba. Toner theorised that Macha's warrior abilities could have been included in *Tochmarc Emire* to 'account for the renowned warlike qualities of the Ulstermen of the Ulster Cycle'.²⁰⁸ It seems just as likely that her abilities provided a literary heritage for martial women such as Scáthach, who trained warriors of Ireland, including the hero of Ulster.

In what follows, the female warriors already considered in this chapter will be re-assessed in accordance with Mulligan's reading of Macha. A sideways approach will be taken with Scáthach, using law texts to illustrate Cú Chulainn's low legal status in *Tochmarc Emire*, followed by a straightforward look at the legal enfranchisement enjoyed by Medb, not as a goddess but as a sovereign, in 'Pillow Talk'.

²⁰⁴ Meyer, 'Wooing (continued)', *AR*, 1, 2, p. 152; Charlene M. Eska, 'Women and Slavery in the Early Irish Laws', *Studia Celtica Fennica*, 8 (2011), 29-39 (p. 34).

²⁰⁵ Kelly, *GEIL*, pp. 360, 361.

²⁰⁶ Meyer, 'Wooing (continued)', *AR*, 1, 2, p. 152.

²⁰⁷ Meyer, 'Wooing', pp. 73-75; Meyer, 'Wooing (continued)', *AR*, 1, 2, p. 150.

²⁰⁸ Toner, 'Macha', p. 101.

Social Hierarchy: Scáthach and Cú Chulainn

Cú Chulainn's time in Alba does not provide a flattering picture of the 'hero' from Ulster. From the beginning he behaves badly: he breaks the finger of Scáthach's daughter, Úathach, and then slaughters the champion who sought justice on her behalf.²⁰⁹ This type of behaviour is repudiated in *Tecosca Cormaic*: 'dreman cech drochláech (every bad warrior is violent)'.²¹⁰ Following the law in *Bretha Crólige* that an assailant must pledge to take on work done by one she or he has wounded or killed, Cú Chulainn pledges to fill the place of the champion he has unjustly killed, just as he'd filled the role of Culand's hound in the *Táin*.²¹¹ Although set in Alba, the events of Cú Chulainn's training at arms reflect the precepts of medieval Irish law and the laws adhered to in Emain Macha. We can therefore assume that other Irish laws would have been applicable in Scáthach's land. When Cú Chulainn travelled to Alba, it is possible he had some protections as a *nemed* crossing the boundaries of *túath*, as well as those afforded to pupils.²¹² However, when he attacked the unarmed Úathach, he failed to act according to the honour of his role, reducing his status as a warrior.²¹³

Once Cú Chulainn marries Úathach, another of the demands made when he put his sword to Scáthach's heart, he takes on the further debased status of a *cú glas*, meaning 'grey dog', denoting an outsider from overseas.²¹⁴ Laws regarding *cú glas*, a name given only to men, relate to the legal consequences of foreign men with no local kingroup or property who marry women from a local *túath*.²¹⁵ According to *Cáin Lánamna*, Cú Chulainn's marriage to Úathach would have been *lanamnas fir for bantinchur*, a 'union of a man on a woman's contribution', and his honour-price as *cú glas* would be reduced to only half that of Úathach's.²¹⁶ Therefore, he could not enter into contracts without his wife's permission and had the limited level of legal enfranchisement usually afforded to women. Though Úathach was willing, his marriage to her did not elevate her status or increase her honour-price, and he added to the insult by refusing to pay a *coibche*, or bride price.²¹⁷ However, as the negotiation of a bride-price was usually only conducted by

²⁰⁹ Meyer, 'Wooing (concluded)', p. 299.

²¹⁰ Meyer, *Tecosca Cormaic*, pp. 26-27.

²¹¹ Meyer, 'Wooing (concluded)', p. 300; Binchy, 'Bretha Crólige', pp. 46-49; O'Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 25 (ll. 901-907) 162; Meyer, 'Wooing (concluded)', p. 300.

²¹² Kelly, *GEIL*, pp. 4-6.

²¹³ Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 11.

²¹⁴ Meyer, 'Wooing (concluded)', p. 300; Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 6.

²¹⁵ Any property a *cú glas* cannot carry remains with his kingroup in his native *túath*. No property acquired when with his wife could be passed down to members of his former kingroup, including his own children. See Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 6.

²¹⁶ Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 70; Ó Corráin, 'Early Medieval Law', p. 25.

²¹⁷ Meyer, 'Wooing (concluded)', p. 300.

fathers or male leaders of a kingroup under the laws of contract, the marriage contract negotiated by Scáthach, unfavourable as it was, perhaps underscores an independence from men enjoyed by the women in Alba.²¹⁸

Multiple scholars have analysed women warriors in the Ulster Cycle as representations of the calamity that befalls women who take on the socially constructed roles of men. As argued here, warriors such as Scáthach can be seen as cautioning women to guard their lawful rights. Though they may have greater skill and higher status, a man might still usurp what is not rightfully his through trickery and a failure to abide by the law, as evidenced by Úathach's unfavourable marriage contract. Medb experienced the same issues with the law in the 'Pillow Talk' episode, but unlike Scáthach, infringement of her rights was not initiated by a choice between life and death but a choice between pre-eminence and subordination.

Medb, Sovereign of Connacht

The twelfth-century Book of Leinster recension of the *Táin* opens with the 'Pillow Talk' episode, an addition not found in the earlier Recension I.²¹⁹ It is meant to provide Medb's justification for engaging in the cattle raid by explaining the impetus. The tale begins with Medb and Ailill in bed, with Ailill congratulating his wife on her improved status through their union. Knowing her high status has not been increased by her marriage, Medb reminds Ailill that he gave no bride price, while she had provided him with a significant *coibche*. Furthermore, she entered into the marriage with a greater status and pedigree than he, she being the sovereign of Connacht and daughter of the high king Eochu, while Ailill had been only a brother of kings. Though Medb is correct in her assessment of her status, to settle the debate, they take stock of their individual property. They are equal in all but the bull Findbennach, which had formerly belonged to Medb but had joined Ailill's herd, preferring to be owned by a man rather than a woman. To maintain and secure her status by virtue of greater property, Medb then seeks the bull's equal, Donn Cúailnge. When his owner reneges on an initial verbal contract, she embarks on the famous cattle raid to secure the bull.²²⁰

Tomás Ó Cathasaigh and, to a lesser degree, Donnchadh Ó Corráin have each evaluated the 'Pillow Talk' episode in legal terms. Ó Cathasaigh concludes the marriage of Medb and Ailill was one of equals, giving each party equal rights and property in the

²¹⁸ Meyer, 'Wooing (concluded)', p. 300; Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 70; Jaski, 'Marriage', p. 24.

²¹⁹ O'Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 1-4 (ll. 1-146), 137-141.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

union.²²¹ Ó Corráin argues that the high degree of legal knowledge, particularly in regards to women, is used for both comedic effect and to deepen the understanding ‘that upset of the patriarchal order of society leads to conflict, even calamity.’²²² In the following arguments, however, Medb is understood as dominant, rather than equal, in her marriage to Ailill; calamity befalls when he usurps her legal rights in an attempt to assume primacy.

While the most common form of marriage, listed first in *Cáin Lánamna*, is *lánamnas comthinchuir*, with both parties entering the union with an equal contribution, ‘Pillow Talk’ does not make the case that this was the form of union enjoined by Medb and Ailill. If it had been, both would have had the same legal capacity to make contracts, and neither would have been able complete major legal transactions without the consent of the other. One of the earliest narratives underpinning the story of the *Táin* is the seventh-century *Conailla Medb mícuru* (‘Medb enjoined bad contracts’), and whether good or bad, her husband had no legal recourse in overturning them.²²³ Furthermore, Ailill could not prevent Medb from making legal transactions with Dáire, who lived in a separate *túath* and kingdom. In all known versions of the *Táin*, it is Medb who drives all contracts, with Ailill offering no resistance. It is clear that with regard to contracting, Medb held the greater legal capacity in her marriage.

Additionally, she had a higher status than Ailill, despite him being called the king. Had theirs been a marriage of equals, Medb’s honour-price would have been half that of Ailill’s.²²⁴ However, she reminds Ailill,

‘Cipé imress méla & mertain & meraigeacht fort, ní fuil díri nó eneclann duit-siu ind acht na fil dam-sa [...] dáig fer ar tincur mná atatchomnaic.’

‘Whoever brings shame and annoyance and confusion on you, you have no claim for compensation of honour-price for it except what claim I have [...] for you are a man dependent on a woman's marriage-portion.’²²⁵

Medb is using the legal precepts of *Cáin Lánamna*, whereby:

Acht is fer do-r[e]anar a hinchuib na mna, mad le in tothchus uile, inge mad sofoltachu in fer oldas in ben, no mad caidiu, no mad saire, no mad airmidnechu.

²²¹ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Ailill and Medb: A Marriage of Equals (2009)’, in *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion to Early Irish Saga*, ed. by Mathieu Boyd (2014), pp. 200-207 (p. 202).

²²² Ó Corráin, ‘Early Medieval Law’, p. 38.

²²³ Olmsted, ‘Earliest’, pp. 5-6.

²²⁴ Ó Corráin, ‘Early Medieval Law’, p. 23; Jaski, ‘Marriage’, pp. 22-23.

²²⁵ O’Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 2 (ll. 42-44), 138.

But he is a husband who is paid honour-price in accordance with his wife's status if she holds all the property, unless he has higher property-qualifications [in his own right] than his wife or is more godly, more high-born or more estimable than she.²²⁶

Ailill does not offer much argument to this, except to say that he was entitled the kingship of Connacht through his mother.²²⁷ Yet, it is clear he had no such claim, per the laws of inheritance, and was only granted the title of king by virtue of being the queen's husband.²²⁸

Furthermore, Medb had been courted by several kings who were her equal in status, but she chose Ailill, despite having to pay a *coibche*, because he was her equal in generosity, confidence, and battle valour.²²⁹ He was not, however, her equal in wealth and status, and his *coibche* reinforces that fact that Ailill was not as estimable as she. As to wealth, Medb's property did not transfer to Ailill when they married. As a *banchomarba* who married outside her kingroup, the only way Medb could have retained full control of her wealth and property after marriage was to marry a man of lower status and less wealth, as she did.²³⁰ Likewise, the bull Finnbennach was never legally transferred to Ailill. Much as Ailill is making an unsubstantiated claim to Medb's sovereignty, Finnbennach has taken what was the queen's, namely himself, and given it to Ailill without the legal authority to do so.

For the loss of her bull, Medb had the right to seek redress under the laws of distraint for his return or payment of his value.²³¹ Perhaps she did not do so because, as the sovereign and primary law enforcer, she could appeal to no one but herself.²³² Additionally, had she pursued the laws of distraint, she would have been responsible for paying Ailill's fines as the spouse of higher status, diminishing her wealth and honour in the process.²³³ Her purpose in securing the brown bull of Cúailnge was not to remain equal to her husband, as argued by Ó Cathasaigh, as she had always been of higher status and wealth. Her quest for the bull was to ensure that her property, and thus her status, did not drop below that of her husband, thereby decreasing her honour-price and her legal capacity.

²²⁶ Ó Cathasaigh, 'Ailill and Medb', p. 201, and references therein.

²²⁷ O'Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, p. 2 (ll. 49-52), p. 138.

²²⁸ Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 104.

²²⁹ O'Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 1-2 (ll. 24-39), 138

²³⁰ Jaski, 'Marriage', p. 27.

²³¹ Ó Corráin, 'Early Medieval Law', p. 23.

²³² Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 22.

²³³ Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 78.

To secure her position, Medb sends her messengers to make arrangements to borrow Donn Cúailnge for a year. Initially, his owner, Dáire, agrees to her proposal. Then he hears by word-of-mouth that one of the lower ranking messengers has boasted while drunk that they would have taken the bull by force if Dáire had not agreed to Medb's terms. Dáire's butler, overhearing the drunk talk and selectively ignoring all the fine things that have been said about his leader, withdraws the hospitality of Dáire's house by not inviting the messengers to consume food or drink and then rushes to his master to tell the tale. Medb's chief messenger Mac Roth denies there has been any such plan to take the bull by force, but Dáire remains intransigent and refuses to lend the bull to Medb.²³⁴

One of the laws promulgated in the *Senchas Már* was 'the binding of all by verbal contract, for the world would be in a state of confusion if verbal contracts were not binding.'²³⁵ Rather than abide by the law and the agreement he had made, Dáire gave greater precedence to the words spoken by an inebriated subordinate than to those of either Medb or Mac Roth. Thus insulting a sovereign by disparaging her honour and failing to abide by his verbal contract, Dáire left Medb no choice but to seek recourse by way of a cattle raid.²³⁶

As in earlier recensions, Medb further demonstrates her status as sovereign by mustering armies for the raid not just from Connacht, but all the provinces of Ireland, including exiles from Ulster. Her ability to command hosts from other *tíath* indicates, at the least, her equal status among the sovereigns of Ireland.²³⁷ 'Pillow Talk' not only supports Medb's claim to sovereignty, but demonstrates her right to retain her role as high ruler in Connacht. Based on the native law of Ireland, 'Pillow Talk' is an expression of injustice against the honour, status, and sovereignty of Medb. This injustice comes at the hands of men of lower rank and wealth, and reveals the harm that comes when laws are ignored or twisted to suit a paradigm of male dominance. The events that followed were a result of Medb fighting to ensure her honour and status were not illegally diminished by men with little respect for the law.

While most previous feminist critiques of women in the Ulster Saga offer negative hermeneutics to reify a patriarchal and even misogynist paradigm in their examination of strong women, the new perspectives offered by those offering positive interpretations of female literary figures allow Celticists and medievalists to challenge foregone assumptions. As demonstrated here, feminist critique of Scáthach and Medb does not need

²³⁴ O'Rahilly, *TBC from LL*, pp. 3-4 (ll. 75-146), 140-141.

²³⁵ O'Donovan and O'Curry, 'Introduction', p. 41.

²³⁶ Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 49.

²³⁷ Kelly, *GEIL*, p. 17.

to rely upon patriarchal norms, nor must it presuppose the misogyny of mediaeval authors or scribes. As Mulligan demonstrated in her examination of Macha Mongrúad, when evaluated as extensions of legal formulae and by considering satirical uses of common tropes, *Tochmarc Emire* and 'Pillow Talk' become lively and empowering tales of female authority and even legal superiority. Broadening the horizon of feminist critique beyond strictly literary texts to strengthen novel arguments allows for those scholars who seek an Early Irish feminism in literature to find it and opens doores of study for Celticists, medievalists, and modern feminist literary theorists.

Conclusion

Though legal texts and most literary analyses of warrior women do not provide a window on to a medieval feminist paradise, they do offer valuable insights regarding general social constructions and mores. While medieval Ireland was undeniably patriarchal, perceptions of women were not static and evolved in texts depending on both the intent of the authors/scribes and the reception of their audiences.

While extant legal texts provide a fairly consistent view of gender construction in medieval Ireland, we must remember existing texts were carefully and intentionally culled and compiled for specific purposes. As we await further elucidation of the many and complex legal sources, accessibility to the curated extant laws available to us will be extremely limited, as will our understanding of medieval Irish culture at specific points in time. Without more comprehensive scholarship with regard to the law, perceptions of women found in the texts will overemphasise the assumptions and subjectivity of those few Celticists who have so far had the ability to interpret them.

Because of the difficulty in determining the intent of medieval authors, analyses of literature are even more so influenced by scholarly reception. With regard to women warriors, we come away with differing perceptions if we assume a misogynist or patriarchal intent as opposed to a misandrist or feminist one. However, because the *fénechas* include laws specific to women and in light of the intertextuality of law and literature, exploring literature as an extension of legal formulae provides an opportunity to expand the current corpus of feminist literary critique.

Scholars are not confined, therefore, to precluding early Irish feminism in modern study. Texts were never meant to be immutable. If glosses and commentaries, or even the second colophon to the *Táin* in the Book of Leinster are any example, they were written with the understanding that an author's intent may at some point become irrelevant, with successive interpretations and reader reception the new loci of understanding. Moving beyond a view that extant texts are a reification of patriarchal paradigms will shift the study of medieval Irish women in new and potentially illuminating directions.

References

- Ahlqvist, Anders, 'Le testament de Morann', *Études Celtiques*, 21 (1984), 151-170
- Aitchison, N.B., 'Kingship, Society, and Sacrality: Rank, Power, and Ideology in Early Medieval Ireland', *Traditio*, 49 (1994), 45-75
- Atkinson, Robert (ed. and trans.), 'Heptads,' in *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. 5 (London: Alexander Thom, 1901), pp. 117-374
- Bennett, Judith M., 'Medievalism and Feminism', in *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, ed. by Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1993), pp. 7-29
- Binchy, D.A., 'The Background of Early Irish Literature', *Studia Hibernica*, 1 (1961), 7-18
- (ed. and trans.), 'Bretha Crólige', *Ériu*, 12 (1938), 1-77
- 'Bretha Nemed', *Ériu*, 17 (1955), 4-6
- (ed.), *Corpus iuris Hibernici: ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum*, 7 vols (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978)
- 'The Date and Provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*', *Ériu*, 18 (1958), 44-54
- 'Irish History and Irish Law: I', *Studia Hibernica*, 15 (1975), 7-36
- 'The Pseudo-historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*', *Studia Celtica*, 10 (1975), 15-28
- (ed. and trans.), 'The saga of Fergus mac Léti', *Ériu*, 16 (1952), 33-48
- 'Sick-Maintenance in Irish Law', *Ériu*, 12 (1938), 78-134
- Bitel, Lisa M., *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996)
- Bowen, Charles, 'Great-bladdered Medb: Mythology and Invention in the *Táin bó Cuailnge*', *Éire-Ireland*, 10, 4 (1975), 14-34.
- Breatnach, Liam, 'Canon Law and Secular Law in Early Ireland: The Significance of *Bretha Nemed*', *Peritia*, 3 (1984), 439-459
- Byrne, F.J., 'Ireland and Her Neighbours, c. 1014 - c. 1072', in *A New History of Ireland, Vol. 1: Prehistoric and early Ireland*, ed. by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 862-898.
- Byrne, Mary E., '*Airec menman Uaird maic Coisse*', in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts, Vol. 2*, ed. by Osborn Bergin, R. I. Best, Kuno Meyer, and J. G. O'Keefe (Halle: Max Neimeyer, 1908; repr. Lenox, MA: HardPress Publishing, 2013), pp. 42-76
- Byrne, Mary E., and Myles Dillon (ed. and trans.), '*Táin Bó Fraích*', *Études Celtiques*, 2, 3 (1937), 1-27
- Carey, John (trans.), 'The Boyhood Deeds of Finn', in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 4th edn, ed. by John T. Koch (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), pp. 194-201

- ‘Werewolves in medieval Ireland’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 44 (2002), 37–72
- Charles-Edwards, T.M. ‘Early Irish Law’, in *A New History of Ireland, Vol. 1: Prehistoric and early Ireland*, ed. by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 331–370
- ‘Early Irish Saints’ Cults and their Constituencies’, *Ériu*, 54 (2004) pp. 79–102
- ‘Law Texts [1] Irish’, in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol III, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 1109-1112
- Clancy, Thomas Owen, ‘Women Poets in Early Medieval Ireland: Stating the Case’, in *‘The Fragility of Her Sex’?: Medieval Irishwomen in Their European Context*, ed. by Christine E. Meeks and Katharine Simms (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 43-72
- Condren, Mary, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1989)
- Connolly, Seán, and Jean-Michel Picard (ed. and trans.), ‘Cogitosus’s *Life of St Brigit* Content and Value’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117 (1987), 5–27
- Davis, Marian, ‘Cuchulainn and Women: A Jungian Perspective’, *Mythlore*, 76 (1994), 23-26
- Dillon, Myles, ‘Stories from the Law-Tracts’, *Ériu*, 11 (1932), 42-63
- Dobbs, M.C., ‘The Ban-shenchus’, *Revue Celtique*, 47 (1903), 282-339
- Donovan, Josephine, ‘Afterword: Critical Re-Vision’, *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, 2nd edn, ed. by Josephine Donovan (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 74-81
- ‘Introduction to the Second Edition: Radical Feminist Criticism’, *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, 2nd edn, ed. by Josephine Donovan (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. ix-xxii
- Dooley, Ann, ‘The Invention of Women in the *Táin*’, in *Ulidia: proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Belfast and Emain Macha, 8–12 April 1994*, ed. by James P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (1994), pp. 123–133
- Dukes-Knight, Jennifer, ‘The Wooden Sword: Age and Masculinity in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 33 (2013), 107-122
- Edel, Doris, ‘Medb of Crúachain and the Empress Matilda: literature and politics in 12th-century Leinster’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 64, 1 (2017), 19-58
- Eichhorn-Mulligan, Amy C., ‘The Anatomy of Power and the Miracle of Kingship: The Female Body of Sovereignty in a Medieval Irish Kingship Tale’, *Speculum*, 81, 4 (2006), 1014-1054
- Eska, Charlene M., ‘Varieties of Early Irish Legal Literature and the *Cáin Lánamna* Fragments’, *Viator*, 40, 1 (2009), pp. 1-16 <doi.org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.1.100342> [accessed 3 March 2020]

- ‘Women and Slavery in the Early Irish Laws’, *Studia Celtica Fennica*, 8 (2011), 29-39
- Flechner, Roy (ed. and trans.), *The Hibernensis, Vol. 1: A Study and Edition*, Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Canon Law (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2019)
- (ed. and trans.), *The Hibernensis, Vol. 2: Translation, Commentary, and Indexes*, Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Canon Law (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2019)
- Grigg, Julianna, ‘The Nemed, *Uraicecht Becc* and Early Irish Governance’, in ‘*The Land beneath the Sea*, ed. by Pamela O’Neill, Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 14 (Sydney: The Celtic Studies Foundation, 2013), pp. 87-100
- Gwynn, E.J. (ed. and trans.), *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, 5 vols, Todd Lecture Series 8-12 (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1903–1935)
- Herbert, Máire, ‘Review: *Perceptions of Femininity in Early Irish Society* by Helen Oxenham’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 78 (2019), 114-117
- Henderson, George (ed. and trans.), *Fled Bricrenn*, Irish Texts Society, 2 (Strand: David Nutt, 1899)
- Henry, P.L. (ed. and trans.), ‘*Verba Scáthaige*’, *Celtica*, 21 (1990), 191-207
- Holly, Marcia, ‘Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic’, *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, 2nd edn, ed. by Josephine Donovan (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 38-47
- Hull, Vernam (ed. and trans.), ‘*Noínden Ulad*: The debility of the Ulidians’, *Celtica*, 8 (1968), 1-42
- Jaski, Bart, ‘Marriage Laws in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages’, in ‘*The Fragility of Her Sex*?’: *Medieval Irishwomen in Their European Context*, ed. by Christine E. Meeks and Katharine Simms (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 16-42
- Kelly, Fergus (ed. and trans.), *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976)
- *Early Irish Farming: A study based mainly on the law-texts of the 7th and 8th centuries AD*, Early Irish Law Series, 4 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997)
- *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series, 3 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988)
- Kinsella, Thomas (ed. and trans.), *The Táin*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)
- Koch, John T. (trans), ‘*Audacht Morainn*’, in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 4th edn, ed. by John T. Koch (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), pp. 188-193
- Künzler, Sarah, ‘*Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016)
- Lehmann, Edyta, ‘“And thus I will it”: Queen Medb and the Will to Power’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 28 (2008), 142-151

- Mac Airt, Seán (ed. and trans.), *The Annals of Inisfallen* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1951)
- MacLeod, Robbie Andrew, 'Female Alterity in Medieval Gaelic Literature' (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Glasgow, 2018)
- MacNeill, Eoin, 'Ancient Irish Law: The law of status or franchise', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 36 (1921–1924), pp. 265–316
- Márkus, Gilbert, 'Early Irish "Feminism"', *New Blackfriars*, 73, 862 (1992), 375-388
- McCracken, Peggy, 'The Amenorrhoea of War', *Signs*, 28 (2003), 25-643
- McLeod, Neil, 'Fergus Mac Léti and the Law', *Ériu*, 61 (2011), 1-28
- Meyer, Kuno (ed. and trans.), *Cáin Adamnáin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905)
- (ed. and trans.), *Fianaigecht*, RIA Todd Lecture Series, 16 (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1910)
- (ed. and trans.), *The Instructions of King Cormac Mac Airt: Tecosca Cormaic*, RIA Todd Lecture Series, 15 (Dublin: Hodges Figgis & Co., 1909)
- (ed. and trans.), 'Irish Miscellanies: Anecdota from the Stowe MS. No 992', *Revue Celtique*, 6 (1883-1885), 173-186
- (ed. and trans.), 'The Oldest Version of *Tochmarc Emire*', *Revue Celtique*, 11 (1890), 433-457
- (ed. and trans.), *The Triads of Ireland*, RIA Todd Lecture Series, 13 (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1906)
- (ed. and trans.), 'The Wooing of Emer (concluded)', *The Archaeological Review*, 1, 4 (1888), 298-307
- (ed. and trans.), 'The Wooing of Emer (continued)', *The Archaeological Review*, 1, 2 (1888), 150-155
- (ed. and trans.), 'The Wooing of Emer', *The Archaeological Review*, 1, 1 (1888), 68-75
- Miller, Jimmy P., 'The feminization of the early Irish hero', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 67 (2014), 1-31
- Mulligan, Amy C., 'Playing for Power: Macha Mongrúad's Sovereign Performance', in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, ed. by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 75-93
- Murray, Kevin, 'Some Thoughts on the Operation of Native Law in Medieval Ireland', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 22 (2002), 156-171
- Nagy, Joseph Falaky, 'Fíán', in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol II, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 743-744
- 'Heroic Destinies in the *Macgnímrada* of Finn and Cú Chulainn', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 40, 1 (1984), 23-39

- ‘The Pride of Heroes and the Problems of Readers of Medieval Celtic Literature’, *Studia Celtica Fennica*, 14 (2017), pp. 139-153
- Ní Bhrolcháin, Muireann, ‘Re tóin mná: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women’, *Ulidia: proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Belfast and Emain Macha, 8–12 April 1994*, ed. by James P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (1994), pp. 115-121
- Ní Chuilleanáin, Eiléan, ‘Introduction’, in *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*, ed. by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Dublin: Arlen House, 1985), pp. 1-11
- Ní Dhonnchadha, Máirín, ‘The Guarantor List of *Cáin Adomnáin*, 697’, *Peritia*, 1 (1982), 178-215
- ‘Travelers and Settled Folk: Women, Honor, and Shame in Medieval Ireland’, in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, ed. by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 17-38
- Ní Ghrádaigh, Jenifer, ‘Mere Embroiderers? Women and Art in Early Medieval Ireland’, in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as ‘Makers’ of Medieval Art and Architecture, Visualising the Middle Ages*, 7, ed. by Therese Martin (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 93–12
- Ó Carragáin, Tomás, ‘Is there an archaeology of lay people at early Irish monasteries?’, *Bulletin du centre d’études médiévales d’Auxerre*, 8 (2015) <journals.openedition.org/cem/13620> [Accessed 13 July 2020]
- Ó Cathasaigh, Tomás, ‘Ailill and Medb: A Marriage of Equals (2009)’, in *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion to Early Irish Saga*, ed. by Mathieu Boyd (2014), pp. 200-207 <ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=3441156> [Accessed 13 May 2020]
- ‘Early Irish Literature and Law (2006-7)’, in *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion to Early Irish Saga*, ed. by Mathieu Boyd (2014), pp. 107-114 <ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=3441156> [Accessed 13 May 2020]
- Ó Corráin, Donnchadh, ‘Early Medieval Law, c. 700–1200’, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 4, ed. by Angela Bourke, et al (New York: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 6-44
- O’Curry, Eugene (ed. and trans.), ‘The *Tri Thruaighe na Scéalaigheacta* (i.e. the “Three Most Sorrowful Tales”) of Erin’, *Atlantis*, 3 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1862), 377-422
- O’Donnell, Thomas C., *Fosterage in Medieval Ireland: An Emotional History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020)
- O’Donoghue, Tadhg (ed. and trans.), ‘*Cert cech ríog co réil*’, in *Miscellany Presented to Kuno Meyer by Some of His Friends and Pupils on the Occasion of His Appointment to the Chair of Celtic Philology in the University of Berlin*, ed. by Osborn Bergin and Carl Marstrander (Halle: Max Neimeyer, 1912), pp. 258-277
- O’Donovan, John, and Eugene O’Curry (eds. and trans.), ‘Introduction to *Senchas Már*,’ in *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. 1 (London: Alexander Thom, 1865), pp. 3-63

- O’Leary, Philip, ‘The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature’, *Ériu*, 38 (1987), 27-44
- Olmsted, Garrett, ‘The Earliest Narrative Version of the *Táin*: Seventh-century Poetic References to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*’, *Emania*, 10 (1992), 5-17
- O’Rahilly, Cecile (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967)
- (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976)
- Oxenham, Helen, *Perceptions of Femininity in Early Irish Society*, Studies in Celtic History, 36 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016)
- Powell, Timothy E., ‘The Idea of the Three Orders of Society and Social Stratification in Early Medieval Ireland’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 29 (1995), 475-489
- Rabin, Andrew, ‘Preventive Law in Early Ireland. Rereading the *Additamenta* in the *Book of Armagh*’, *North American Journal of Celtic Studies*, 2, 1 (2018), 37-55
- Register, Cheri, ‘American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographic Introduction’, *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, 2nd edn, ed. by Josephine Donovan (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 1-28
- Sayers, William, ‘Women’s Work and Words: Setting the State for Strife in Medieval Irish and Icelandic Narrative’, *The Mankind Quarterly*, 31 (1990), 59-86
- Schlüter, Dagmar, ‘Medieval manuscripts and cultural memory: The case of the *Book of Leinster*’, in *Medieval Irish Perspectives on Cultural Memory*, ed. by Jan Erik Rekdal and Erich Poppe (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2014), pp. 61-79
- Sessle, Erica, ‘Misogyny and Medb: Approaching Medb with Feminist Criticism’, *Ulidia: proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Belfast and Emain Macha, 8–12 April 1994*, ed. by James P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (1994), pp. 135-138
- Sheehan, Sarah, ‘Loving Medb’, in *Gablánach in scélaigeacht: Celtic Studies in honour of Ann Dooley*, ed. by Sarah Sheehan, Joanne Findon, and Westley Follet (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), pp. 171-186
- Sheehan, Sarah, and Ann Dooley, ‘Introduction’, in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, ed. by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 1-15
- Simms, Katharine, ‘The Contents of Later Commentaries on the Brehon Law Tracts’, *Ériu*, 49 (1998), 23-40
- Smith, Colin, and James Gallen, ‘*Cáin Adomnáin* and the Laws of War’, *Journal of the History of International Law*, 16 (2014), 63-81
- Smith, Roland M. (ed. and trans), ‘The *Senbriathra Fithail* and Related Texts’, *Revue Celtique*, 45 (1928), 1-92
- Stacey, Robin Chapman, *Dark Speech* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007)

- ‘Further Musings on the “Celtic” in “Celtic Law”’, *Eolas: The Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies*, 9 (2016), 55-76
- Stokes, Whitley (ed. and trans.), ‘The death of Crimthann son of Fidach, and the adventures of the sons of Eochaid Muigmedón’, *Revue Celtique*, 24 (1903), 172-207, 446
- (ed. and trans.), ‘The prose tales in the Rennes dindshenchas’, *Revue Celtique*, 16 (1895), 31–83, 135–167, 269–312
- Swartz, Dorothy Dilts, ‘The Legal Status of Women in Early and Medieval Ireland and Wales in Comparison with Western European and Mediterranean Societies: Environmental and Social Correlations’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 13 (1993), 107-118
- Toner, Gregory, ‘Macha and the Invention of Myth’, *Ériu*, 60 (2010), 81-109
- Tymoczko, Maria, ‘The nature of tradition and cultural memory: Evidence from two millennia of Irish culture’, in *Medieval Irish Perspectives on Cultural Memory*, ed. by Jan Erik Rekdal and Erich Poppe (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2014), pp. 15-60
- ‘What Questions Should We Ask in Celtic Studies in the New Millennium?’, *CSANA Yearbook 2*, ed. by Joseph Falaky Nagy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), pp. 10-29
- Van Hamel, A.G. (ed.), *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, 3 (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1933)
- Weil, Caroline aan de, and John T. Koch, ‘Warfare, Proto-Celtic Vocabulary,’ in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol V, ed. by John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 1749-1750 (p. 1749)