

**EPIC WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE INDO-EUROPEAN  
TRADITION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO  
INDIA AND IRELAND**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE  
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
JADAVAPUR UNIVERSITY**

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1986**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The inspiration for this study flowed from four different sources or springs. The late Dr James Delargy, formerly Head of the Department of Folklore, University College, Dublin, impressed upon me the richness of our Celtic story heritage. The late Father Robert Antoine sj formerly Reader in Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University introduced me to the world of Sanskrit epic literature and urged me to work on Gaelic epic material. Dr Proinsias MacCana, Professor of Early and Medieval Irish, University College, Dublin, assured me that there was scope for a study of women characters in Celtic mythology and made available to me his own work in this field and other valuable materials. Dr Naresh Guha, formerly Head of the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University and currently Director, Rabindra Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, focussed my attention on Draupadi and has proved a patient and encouraging guide throughout the work involved in this research. To these four gentlemen and acclaimed scholars, I acknowledge an immeasurable debt.



The Embassy of Ireland in Delhi, headed in recent years by His Excellency, the Irish Ambassador to India, Mr Bernard McHugh, has been of inestimable help, obtaining books for me from Ireland and giving me a "long loan" of important reference works.

The libraries at University College, Dublin, Loreto College, Calcutta and Rabindra Bhavan, Santiniketan have assisted me in my quest for source and reference materials with a perseverance and courtesy that deserves special mention. Professor Lal, too, has been generous and helpful with books and suggestions.

At the School of Celtic Studies, Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin, Professor James Carney provided me with excellent research facilities in the Institute Library and discussed several points of my work with me. His assistant, Miss Peggy Walsh, was indefatigable in her efforts to assist me, a hot cup of tea on cold October afternoons proving not the least of her kind attentions.

The British Centre in Calcutta very kindly gave me a cool spot to work in during the summer of 1985 when the first draft of my thesis was written.

Without the constant and unfailing support of my community at Loreto House and the sustaining encouragement of Sister Stella Lahiry, Provincial Superior, this work would never have taken shape let alone have been completed. No words can adequately express my indebtedness and appreciation.

A special word of thanks is due to Miss Carol Dias and Miss Mary Ann Hendrie for preparing the first draft of the typescript, coping cheerfully with the difficulties of unfamiliar names and terms. The final typing is the work of Miss Priti Kana whose close attention to detail and practical experience contributed in no small measure to the presentation of this work.

A small grant from the All India Association for Christian Higher Education helped defray incidental expenses.

To all these and to many others, too numerous to mention individually, whose kindness, patience, co-operation and good-will have smoothed out many a snag along the way, I offer my sincere thanks.

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## CHAPTER I

### IN THE BEGINNINGS

If poets' verses be but stories  
So be food and raiment stories;  
So is all the world a story;  
So is man of dust a story.<sup>1</sup>

"And for this cause it were right for thee to buy the poems of the poets, and to keep the poets in Ireland, and since all the world is but a story, it were well for thee to buy the more enduring story, rather than the story that is less enduring."<sup>2</sup>

"Irish literature, like most other traditional literatures, has no real beginning. The numerous close

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1 Judgement of St Colmcille quoted from Betha Colaim Chille by A & B Rees in Celtic Heritage (1961 rpt London: Thames & Hudson 1978) p 342

2 Ibid p 342

analogies between it and Welsh literature presuppose an earlier Celtic tradition of which both are in large part a continuation, while the more sporadic but hardly less impressive analogies which link Irish and Welsh to certain other Indo-European literatures bear clear testimony to a still older tradition of which Celtic is a direct derivative."<sup>1</sup>

The Celts, we are told, were a restless, tribal and warlike people who occupied Europe about 600 BC, united more by language and culture than by race. They were master craftsmen in bronze and iron from which they produced their weapons, as well as in gold and silver which they used to fashion jewellery of the utmost delicacy.

They rarely used a written language, but from their imagination emerged an epic series of tales which gives a tantalising glimpse of their way of life; they never managed to found an empire or even establish a stable state, but are seen by many today as the founders of the continent of Europe, as the oldest Europeans.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Proinsias MacCana, Literature in Irish (Dept of Foreign Affairs, Dublin 1980) p 11

2 Condensed from a programme description of a four-part series on The Celts broadcast by BBC in June 1985 by Professor Barry Cunliffe

Diodorus Siculus tells us about their poets: "They have also lyric poets whom they call Bards. They sing to the accompaniment of instruments resembling lyres, sometimes a eulogy and sometimes a satire"<sup>1</sup> and in his De Bello Gallico VI Julius Caesar adds that "they commit to memory immense amounts of poetry, and so some of them continue in their studies for twenty years.... They have also much knowledge of the stars and their motion, of the size of the world... of natural philosophy, and of the powers and spheres of action of the immortal gods, which they discuss and hand down to their young students."<sup>2</sup> Professor Dillon finds in the three classes of Celtic society, "druides, equites and plebs, that is to say priests, warriors and common people" a correspondence "to the brahman, kshatriya and vaishya of Hindu society" and a "similarity in status and function between Celtic druid and Hindu brahman pointing clearly to a common Indo-European inheritance."<sup>3</sup>

Linguistic links between Sanskrit and European languages, now known as the Indo-European family of languages, were

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1 Quoted by Myles Dillon in Celts and Aryans, (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla 1975) p 24

2 Ibid p 25

3 Dillon op cit p 25-26

pointed out as early as 1786 by Sir William Jones in an address to the Royal Asiatic Society in Calcutta, but the inclusion of Celtic within the family was the work of Franz Bopp who developed further a comparison of Sanskrit and Celtic languages made by the Frenchman, Adolphe Pictet (1837). Johann Caspar Zeuss then took up the study of the Old Irish glosses<sup>1</sup> and in 1853 his Grammatica Celtica laid the foundation for Celtic research and scholarship. These scholars did for the Irish and Welsh what Max Mueller did for Sanskrit. Ernst Windisch and Heinrich Zimmer, both Sanskrit scholars, delved deeper into the intricacies of the Celtic language forms and found convincing parallels with Sanskrit. Windisch also drew attention to the similarity between the narrative form of the Irish sagas and some stories in the Brahmanas. Rudolf Thurneysen (1857-1940) became the greatest Celtic scholar of his time. Nor must we forget the contribution of Dr Whiteley Stokes (1830-1909) who, though Irish-born, spent most of his life in India and explored comparable motifs in Irish and Sanskrit mythology.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 These were explanations and comments appearing in a different hand in the margins of the oldest manuscripts, indicating the fruit of study at a later date.
  - 2 He edited the tale The Adventure of Nerae, with its opening motif of the thirsty corpse (which he found also in the Sanskrit Vetala-pancavimsat) for the Révue Celtique 10(1889)

These scholars broke their way into the virtually secret recesses of what had become archaic languages and released from a literary sleep of several centuries the beautiful princes and princesses of a bygone age. Since then scores of scholars have been examining with reverential awe, and modern analytical tools, the treasures of the past and revealing them to the gaze of their contemporaries. India's tradition of Sanskrit scholarship has never fallen into decay, but the new research methods introduced by the German Sanskritists in the nineteenth century have led to a much richer appreciation of the invaluable heritage of ancient Indian literature. It is to the indefatigable efforts of these pioneers that we owe the firm establishment of incontrovertible evidence of not only linguistic but cultural links between Ireland and India; not only Ireland but the large stretch of continental Europe where the Celts had made their home until they were disturbed by the Roman armies. Then they buried their bronze and silver artifacts at the bottom of their holy wells or the head springs of their sacred rivers, left their stone carved deities to be identified by Caesar's armies with the Roman Gods and moved on with their legends, their poetry, their spells and curses and incantations to south-west Britain and Ireland. Caesar's troops never set foot on Irish soil,



and so the Celts or Goidels (Gael), as they came to be known, were left undisturbed to preserve their heritage from the taint of Roman and later admixtures but not from the influence of the culture of their predecessors in Eriu, Banba or Fodla by whichever of these feminine names the country was then known. It is this relative isolation from the successive waves of martial and cultural invasions that swept mainland Europe down the centuries, which has preserved with such a degree of intactness the myths, traditions and customs that have such close parallels in India and Ireland. Professor Binchy points out the very close parallelism between Irish and Hindu law, a closeness that extends not only to form and technique but even to diction. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt puts it another way when she writes: "It is chiefly in Ireland that Celtic paganism survived long enough to be committed to writing. And everything tends to suggest that if the oral tradition of Gaul before the (Roman) conquest had been written down and preserved to us, it would have revealed a mythological world not very different and certainly not more 'primitive' than that to which the medieval Irish texts give access."<sup>1</sup>

Professor MacCana also comments on the effect of Ireland's

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1 Gods and Heroes of the Celts, trans of Dieux et Héros des Celtes (London: Methuen 1949)

insulation "against Roman political and cultural domination" and claims that "it was only with the coming of Christianity that she was fully exposed to a new culture and philosophy of life." This besides creating a conflict of ideas and beliefs also presented a problem of "how to accommodate a foreign and universal organisation such as the Church within the native hierarchy of authority without at the same time upsetting the delicate balance evolved over the centuries and secured by a complicated system of social sanction and tradition... one of the changes entailed in its solution was the gradual displacement of the druids. But... the flair for salvaging essential continuity out of inevitable change... was maintained."<sup>1</sup>

India, on the eastern periphery of this cultural empire, has had fewer overlays of external cultural strata than continental Europe. Moreover the vigour and vitality of Hindu traditions and customs have never been seriously threatened by the culture of the invader; on the contrary the tolerant, absorbent nature of Hinduism has been able to channel into its mainstream the currents of foreign culture that invading forces whether Greek, Tartar, Persian,

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1 "Conservation, Innovation in Early Celtic Literature" in Études Celtiques, XIII (Paris 1972) p 66

Portuguese or British have brought with them. In his essay "Bhāratbarser Itihās" (The History of India) Rabindranath Tagore reflects on the hospitable nature of Indian culture which finds a place in the strong flow of its own current for all that it draws from other cultures. By contrast in Europe the struggle to protect national culture from foreign inroads has led to a policy of confrontation. He sums up the Indian achievement, despite obstacles and difficulties, as the realisation of a "oneness in the universe and in one's own soul", as the ability "to establish unity in diversity, to discover it through learning, to accomplish it through effort, cherish it in love, and proclaim it through living."<sup>1</sup> Armies are not serious purveyors of culture: it is mass movements of population that bring major changes or modifications; and the last such considerable wave that hit India was the coming of the Aryans, who absorbed into their predominant mores the existing Dravidian traditions, a blend that gave us what we know as Indian culture. The early date of such a commingling does not denote the absence of change in the intervening millenia, does not spell stagnation. James Talbot Wheeler writes: "The religious revolutions which have stirred up the life of the Hindu to its uttermost depths, have been nearly all

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<sup>1</sup> Rabindra-Rachanabali Vol 4 (1940 Calcutta: Visva-Bharati rpt 1957) p 381; translation mine

of indigenous growth. They have sprung up from within rather than from without; and must be generally regarded as the product of the Hindu mind. For ages the people have been shut in from the outer world by the Himalayas and the sea, and their religious faith has been formed from the consciousness alone."<sup>1</sup> This evolution from within has given Indian culture its distinctive qualities of cohesion and continuity.

Several scholarly studies since the early years of this century have explored the common characteristics of Indo-European laws, linguistics, customs and traditions. Sir J G Frazer in a series of titles: The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion,<sup>2</sup> The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead,<sup>3</sup> and The Worship of Nature<sup>4</sup> has traced the origin of basic Indo-European religious beliefs. Andrew Lang's Custom and Myth<sup>5</sup> has widened the understanding of the links between various local and national practices and traditions. Georges Dumézil has

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1 Ancient and Hindu India, in his History of India from the Earliest Ages Vol 2 Pt V (1869: 2 rpt Calcutta Punthi Pustak 1961) Ch 1

2 London 1911-15, 12 Vols

3 London Vol 1 1913; Vol 2 1922; Vol 3 1924

4 London Vol 1 1926

5 London 1901

examined the very concept of an Indo-European society and the origins of Rome in his Jupiter-Mars-Quirinus<sup>1</sup> and followed it up in two further volumes: Naissance de Rome<sup>2</sup> and Naissance d'Archanges.<sup>3</sup> His Tarpeia<sup>4</sup> is a study in comparative Indo-European philology. With Mithra-Varuna<sup>5</sup> he began to explore the idea of sovereignty among the Europeans, examining its growth in India and Iran in particular.

In Mythe et Épopée I (1968) the concept of the three functions of the gods<sup>6</sup> in the epics was launched. This is followed further with a study of three epic types: hero, magician and king in Indian, Iranian, Celtic and Scandinavian literature particularly, in his Mythe et Épopée II (1971). I am very much attracted by Dumézil's theory of the trivalent gods of the ancient Indo-European world and will endeavour to examine its application to some of the outstanding women characters in Gaelic and

1 Paris: Gallimard. 1941

2 Paris 1944

3 Paris 1945

4 Paris 1955

5 Paris 1948

6    1 the maintenance of cosmic moral order  
      ii protection and defence - the warrior role  
      iii prosperity, fecundity and beauty of the earth,  
          the flocks and man

Sanskrit heroic poetry, in order to understand the position of women in the epic age and see what relevance, if any, these findings have for the women of our times.

For, looking back into the past, however fascinating the exercise may prove, is not to be undertaken mainly for its own sake or merely as an escape from the problems and challenges of the present. Looking back into the past, into the golden age that had gone, but which still lingered in the memory of the race, was the specific exercise continued over a long period of time, that gave us the great classical epics that we treasure and marvel at today. In a Greece where heroic virtues were falling into oblivion, where greed and personal ambition were prevalent and threatening the very fabric of society, the poets looked back to the walls of Troy, to Achilles and Agamemnon, to Patroclus and Menelaus, to Hector and Priam, to Odysseus and Penelope and their reminiscences gave us the songs from which grew the Iliad and the Odyssey. We see the epics actually in the making at the court of King Alcinous where Demodocus sings of the Trojan war and the deeds of the heroes.<sup>1</sup> The situation in Ithaca gives us, all too clearly, indications of a decadent society, purged

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1 The Odyssey, trans Samuel Butler ed L R Loomis  
(Princeton, New Jersey: D Van Nostrand Co 1944)  
see Ch VIII

somewhat, perhaps, after *Odysseus*' return and punishment of the suitors.

When the structures and traditions of Hindu society, particularly at the time of brahmin domination were threatened by more democratic and personal movements like Jainism and Buddhism, it is probable that the teaching of the Hindu sages was incorporated into the body of the Mahābhārata in the form of the Bhagavad-Gītā and the exhortations of the dying Bhīṣma. This would have served to strengthen and perpetuate the caste system and brahmanical power and doctrine. "The Mahābhārata is the content of our collective unconscious," said the late V S Sukthankar.... "And just for that reason it refuses to be discarded. We must therefore grasp this great book with both hands and face it squarely. Then we shall recognise that it is our past which has prolonged itself into the present."<sup>1</sup>

In this study it is the women characters in Indo-European heroic poetry, particularly in India and Ireland, who will be the focus of attention. It is necessary to remark at

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1 Quoted by P Lal in his The Mahābhārata of Vyāsa (Delhi: Vikas 1980) p 3

this stage that while a good deal of work has been done in the field of heroic literature, not much study has been directed towards the specific role of women characters whose presence in the legends is not merely accidental or ornamental. The general studies refer to the women, no doubt, but usually see them in an ancillary role.

T F O'Rahilly in his wide-ranging Early Irish History and Mythology<sup>1</sup> does a great service to Celtic studies by bringing together in one volume (his promised second volume did not appear) a vast store of information, speculation and critical comment on early Irish settlers, their language, the geographical and political history of ancient Ireland and the wealth of legend, literature, customs and beliefs that have come down to the present day. He sees the characters in the Ulidian tales as entirely mythological figures, a view that is vigorously opposed by James Carney in his fine work Studies in Irish Literature and History<sup>2</sup> in which he analyses the composition and structure of several of the old texts, traces themes of a comparable nature in Beowulf and Tristan and plays down the oral tradition in longer works like the Táin Bó Cúailnge (The Cattle-Raid of Cooley), opting like Frank O'Connor, though not quite so absolutely,

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1 Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1946 rpt 1976

2 Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1955 rpt 1979



for a single author creating an original work based on ancient traditions much in the way that Virgil created his Aeneid with an eye on Homer. Carney sees most of the characters in the Táin, for example, as essentially historical. The Chadwicks<sup>1</sup> also view the situation described in the Táin as historical and "see no reason for regarding (the characters) as products of fiction." Some of the pre-tales (rémscéala) of this work they see as fictional. Gerard Murphy, while admitting that the mythologists may have a point, opts for the "general historicity of the background against which the characters are depicted."<sup>2</sup> With O'Rahilly and Kenneth Jackson, Tomás O Máille and Proinsias MacCana side with the myth-makers and the latter, in particular, traces the parallels in other literatures as Dumézil has done. The late Professor Myles Dillon was deeply interested in the cultural links between Ireland and India and refers to some of them in his Early Irish Literature.<sup>3</sup> He came to India in 1967 and worked on his last book Celts and Aryans at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla, where it was published in 1975, three years after his death. This work is predominantly philological and shows close

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- 1 H M Chadwick and N K Chadwick, The Growth of Literature (Cambridge 1932)
  - 2 Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, Early Irish Literature (London 1966) p 126-7
  - 3 The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 1948 4th imp 1969

linguistic ties between Sanskrit and Gaelic. Since language is a vehicle of communication, an instrument for sharing ideas, feelings, stories and much else, the proven fact of linguistic relationships, involving not only a similarity of language patterns but also of thought patterns, points to the inevitable sharing of a wider range of cultural riches.

While the learned works listed so far deal with sources, borrowings, dates, developments, philology, grammar, division of language into Old, Middle and Modern ages, external influences and so on, studies of character portrayal in the tales have largely concentrated on heroic male figures like Cú Chulainn, Conchobar, Fergus, Bran, Diarmait and others. The women characters had not been subjected to close scrutiny until Georges Dumézil set about testing his theory of the goddess of sovereignty, an idea which we find already in Tomás Ó'Máille's "Medb Chruachna".<sup>1</sup> Dumézil dwells at length on Medb and Mādhavī, exploring at considerable depth their common heritage and role in heroic literature (Mythe et Épopée II pp 316-374). In the first volume of the same work, in which he examines several aspects of the Mahābhārata, he

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1 In Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie XVII 1927 (Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen)

gives us a learned explanation of the nature of Draupadī's marriage, defending her against the charge of polyandry. But there is no parallel drawn between her and any other literary figure. Professor MacCana has taken up the study of the goddess of sovereignty in several serious essays<sup>1</sup> and finds a close parallel between the Gaelic and Indian goddesses of fertility, Anu "the mother of the Irish gods", "regarded as the well-spring of the fertility of the province of Munster" with Śrī or Lakṣmī, presumably, for he does not identify the Indian goddess. He posits close links between kingship and the land, the earth and its fecundity. The International Women's Year brought to the fore a great deal of writing by and about women. The Arts Council of Ireland in its journal The Crane Bag devoted an entire number<sup>2</sup> to articles on and by women. The names of only four men figure in the list of twenty four contributors, among them MacCana with the essay just mentioned. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin writes on "Women in Early Irish Myths and Sagas" covering briefly three features in the literature of this period: (i) the goddess of sovereignty, (ii) the extraordinary conceptions and births attributed to the children of these women, and

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1 "The King and Goddess in Irish Literature" in Études Celtiques VII & VIII 1955-56 and "Women in Irish Mythology" in The Crane Bag Vol 4 No 1 (1980)

2 Vol 4 No 1 (1980)

(iii) their association with love and the death of their lovers. Ms Bhrolchain's thesis for her MA dealt with poetry about women in ancient Irish tradition. More recently Máire Bhreathnach, whose father, Richard Breathnach, was a noted Gaelic scholar and critic, is writing on "The Sovereignty Goddess as Goddess of Death".

There is therefore, a growing body of literary study and criticism centred on women figures in Gaelic heroic and folk literature and an emerging interest in their relationship to women figures in other Indo-European traditions. In India, critical work on the great epics tends to focus on establishing a sort of ur-text, an original text pure and undefiled, shorn of all interpolations; there is learned analysis of the various recensions and the validity of their claims to textual integrity. In his last unfinished work, the late Father Robert Antoine had undertaken a metrical analysis of the Rāmāyana that would establish the "age" of various kāndas (literally, "divisions" hence parts, chapters or cantos) on the basis of metres used.<sup>1</sup> He has also a number of essays on the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata eg "Indian and Greek Epics"<sup>2</sup> and "Calliope and Rama's

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1 Part of this work has appeared in the Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature (JJCL) as "The Technique of Oral Composition in the Ramayana" Nos 21 (1983), 22 (1984) and 23 (1985)

2 JJCL 1965 p 70

Initiation".<sup>1</sup> In the latter he discusses the oral techniques in epic literature and draws parallels between the composition of the Iliad and the Rāmāyana. This essay forms part of a book published later as Rama and the Bards<sup>2</sup> where he elaborates on the language of myth and attempts to define the Epic Vision in terms of (i) the world of the immortals, (ii) the power of the word and (iii) the problem of good and evil.

The historical accuracy or otherwise of the events described in the epics has engaged yet other critics like Pramatha Nath Mullick in The Mahabharata As it was, Is and Ever shall be<sup>3</sup> and The Mahabharata as a History and a Drama.<sup>4</sup> Max Mueller had examined the question of polyandry and bigamy in his History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature without devoting much space to other aspects of the great epic. In Evolution of Morals in the Epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana)<sup>5</sup> Dr D P Vora discusses, from the ethical rather than the literary point of view,

1 JJCL 12 1974 p 1

2 Calcutta: Writers Workshop (1975)

3 Calcutta: Thacker Spink (1939)

4 Calcutta: Thacker Spink (1939)

5 Bombay: Popular Book Depot (1959)

subjects which are pertinent to this study: polyandry, fidelity in wedlock, marriage taboos and the status of women. In Religious Hinduism: A Presentation and Appraisal by Jesuit Scholars<sup>1</sup> Father Pierre Fallon's essay on the "Gods of Hinduism" particularly the section on "The Mother Goddess: Sakti" who is "as compassionate as she is powerful" and Father G A Deleury's pages on "The Devis" as mother-goddesses in 'folk' Hinduism have proved helpful for this work. While Fr C Bulke's essay entitled "The Ramayana" deals in a brief but lucid and scholarly manner with the origins and historicity of the epic, it is his remarks on Sītā's fire-ordeal, which he rejects as a later interpolation, that will be referred to later in support of my arguments.

In Heroic Song and Heroic Legend,<sup>2</sup> Jan de Vries, dealing relatively briefly with the Indian epics, which he groups with the Persian heroic works, touches on the question of Draupadī's polyandric marriage, but offers no solution beyond reiterating one of Dumézil's theories of the goddess of fertility wedded to the rightful king. He extends this myth to include Sītā and Rāma and draws a brief parallel with the Gaelic Medb. Dr R C Majumdar, the

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1 Allahabad: St Paul's Publications (1954)

2 London: Oxford University Press (1963) trans by B J Timmer

noted historian, has collected in The History and Culture of the Indian People: the Vedic Age<sup>1</sup> a number of brilliant and reflective essays on the position of women in post-Vedic India, marriage customs, the education of women, polygamy, polyandry and other matters that throw light on the attitudes towards women that prevailed in epic times. Dr V M Apte's essay entitled "Social and Economic Conditions" covers most of the items just listed, supporting the notion of the position of respect accorded a newly-married woman with apt quotations from the Rgvedic hymns and showing convincingly that in Vedic times child marriage was not the norm, girls were often wooed and won rather than merely given away to a man of their father's choice. Dowries were not in evidence and bride-price was demanded if the bridegroom was not a desirable son-in-law. Dr Apte examines the same areas at three points of time - Vedic and two successive post-Vedic periods, but does not make any exhaustive comparison of the three sets of findings.

In the 2nd volume of Cultural Heritage of India<sup>2</sup>

Dr C P Ramaswami Aiyar draws a series of parallels between the cultural and literary climate of the epics and that of

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1 Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (1951 4th imp 1965)

2 Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission (1937 2nd ed 1962)

Vedic literature. His observations on the different types of poets and "singers of tales" find a close similarity in those made by Professor MacCana about the purveyors of Celtic song and saga in his Literature in Irish<sup>1</sup> and The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland<sup>2</sup>.

This tradition is also described by Dr David Greene in his essay "Early Irish Literature" in Dr Myles Dillon's collection of writings entitled Early Irish Society.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Aiyar writes at some length on Sītā quoting at length from the Rāmāyana in support of his claim that the source of all her virtue, her dignity and fidelity is her adherence to dharma. He concludes that "Rama and Sita showed that marriage could be an indissoluble bond resulting in mutual confidence and esteem, and in the rearing up of heroic sons in spite of enforced exiles, apparently inhuman treatment, and all the shocks given by a hostile world." (p 46) In his chapter on the Mahābhārata, however, he concentrates on the philosophical value of this great epic, but has no reflections on the truly outstanding women whose living of that philosophy, perhaps even their enduring of that philosophy, has contributed substantially to its qualities of mahattva, bharavattva and bhāratatva.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Dept of Foreign Affairs, Dublin (1980)

2 Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (1980)

3 Irish Life and Culture Series (1954 Mercier Press, Cork rpt 1969)

4 Substance, gravity and Indianness. See Aiyar op cit p 68



In the same volume Professor T R Venkatarama Sastri writes on the suppression of woman's individuality as reflected in the Smritis but adds "when circumstances have drawn her outside the home to high duties, she has shown capacity, courage and strength." (p 321) Professor V Raghavan, a Sanskrit scholar of Madras University, examines the laws of Manu relating to women and interprets them as underlining the respect due to a woman, rather than as restrictions placed on an inferior and irresponsible person. He quotes similar laws cited by G Tucker in Life in Ancient Athens to show that comparable laws were applied to women in ancient Greece. Later we will examine examples of similar laws in ancient Ireland, so close to those of Manu that they might have been carried in the rote memory of the race over thousands of years and thousands of miles. Could it be one of those phenomenal feats of memory that one reads about in old tales from both countries where enormous quantities of material are transmitted verbatim at a single hearing and passed on in similar fashion from generation to generation? Have we in our era lost what may have been a common capacity for total recall?

This list is far from complete for there has been much valuable comment on Epic India and its institutions by historians, sociologists, antiquarians, indologists,

philosophers, men of letters and men of religion. There have been German scholars among the critics, men like Holtzmann and Jacob; Frenchmen like Louis Renou and A C Bouquet; English critics in the nineteenth century include Monier Williams and H H Wilson while more recently there is Charles Eliot (1948).

Before concluding this catalogue (by no means an "epic" one) mention must be made of Sukhamaya Bhattacharyya's compilation of varied and valuable information on social, religious and political circumstances in epic India: Mahābhārater Samāḥ.<sup>1</sup> His chapters on marriage and women are particularly relevant. While admitting that marriage as an institution was not always widely practised, it gradually came, he claims, to be the accepted norm during the period covered by the events of the Mahābhārata. He quotes texts to show that a man could not fulfill the triple tasks of a householder without the aid and support of a wife, and a devoted one at that. The epithet he uses is "patibrata" - vowed to a husband or lord, and gives some idea of the status of a wife in that society. She was also referred to as "dharmapatni" - righteous wife - and held in high esteem. The picture of a woman he finds emerging from the Mahābhārata society is one of

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1 Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati 1946 2nd imp 1959

maidenly modesty, piety and tender motherliness; the wife was always to be regarded with love and considerateness. His detailed descriptions of the various types of marriage-relationships recognised in ancient India involves accounts of various women characters and his analysis, as far as it goes, is generally sympathetic. The importance of begetting sons and the means to which recourse was had on various occasions stresses male supremacy at the expense of womanly feelings, and social pressures were such that women had little say regarding the methods to which they had to submit to ensure male heirs. His statement that Draupadī's multiple marriage was entirely contrary to current practice in the epic age is not fully convincing. He mentions some earlier examples: Jatilā, Barksī and Madhavī and declares that their polyandric situations belonged to "very ancient times". Now, according to historians, it is very difficult to assign specific dates to particular events in the Mahābhārata, and while the story of Yayāti's daughter clearly precedes that of Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas, there is no way of measuring the time span between "ancient" and "very ancient" times. Apart from this the encyclopaedic nature of Bhattacharyya's compilation of references to figures and situations in the Mahābhārata society makes it a very convenient

reference manual, and his attitude to the women characters and the circumstances of their lives is sensitive and compassionate. In his book on the Brahmanic Period of Indian history already mentioned, James Talbot Wheeler examines with a fresh and critical eye the Four Stages of Life, the Eight Forms of Marriage and the position of Hindu women in the society of the time. In his last chapter, "Historical Resumé" he attempts to establish a chronological order and sequence for the ancient writings and distinguishes (i) a Patriarchal, (ii) an Epic and (iii) a Brahmanical period. He examines the marital status of women in all three and concludes that the more barbarous' (sic) forms of marriage relate to an earlier and the more spiritual and refined modes to a later time. This means that polyandry, in particular, and also polygamy gradually give way to the ideal of a relationship of affection and life-long fidelity between one man and one woman. The marriage situation of Draupadī appears to him the most primitive, that of Pandu and his two wives, Daśaratha and his three wives, representing a less revolting but still undesirable situation, while the lifestyle of Rama and Sītā in the forest and the beautiful story of Nala and Damayanti represents the perfect marital relationship. There is, however, no attempt at an in-depth examination of the role of women in epic literature. They serve as illustrations for his ideas on social and moral issues,

for Wheeler is a historian, not a man of literature. In fact he searches literature in order to reconstruct a lost chronology and to find a missing link in the chain of ~~of~~ political development in the Aryan conquest of northern India.

To sum up then: while much has been written in order to bring the treasures of ancient literatures, written in languages sometimes described as "dead" or "archaic" and often confined until recent times to manuscript collections, to the modern reader limited to one or two "living" languages, while philologists and other specialists have explored their own particular avenues of research with various measures of success, there has not been much concentrated study of the women characters as they are presented in these literatures. Anthropologists and sociologists are discovering rich lodes of ore and have begun their mining operations in sanguine expectation of striking rich veins of precious metal. Women writers, and some men, are becoming aware of the extraordinary power for good or evil that heroic women characters have wielded in epic ages east and west. Undoubtedly a sizeable literature on the subject will be forthcoming in Ireland and India in the coming decade.

The purpose of this study is to examine the roles played

by some of the more outstanding women figures in Sanskrit and Gaelic heroic literature. I hope to show that the concept of woman, the part she plays as the inspirational force behind the king, as the protector of the home, the land and the dharma, and also as mother, in both literatures have much in common. I will examine the goddess-of-sovereignty figures, the warrior-women, the different types of mother-figures that emerge from the pages of the Mahābhārata, the Táin Bó Cúailnge and Gaelic folk-tales. Since the two wings of Indo-European culture (the Indian east, the Irish west) spring from and overshadow the body of that culture, characters from Greek and Latin classics will also be considered in so far as they illustrate the presence or absence of particular traits in the main area of study. For example in exploring the theme of revenge as a reaction on the part of women whose dignity has been offended, it will not be sufficient to examine the quality of Draupadī's and Medb's bloodthirsty avenging anger; it will enrich the study if we include the Germanic-Scandinavian figures of Kriemhild and Brúnhild whose vindictiveness reminds us of the Erinyes themselves, and pause also to reflect on Medea.

The questions to be raised, and if possible answered, but at least explored, will concern the attitudes of the ancient

poets to the women whom they present in their stories. As poets they fulfilled a mission in society, placing before their listeners (a long oral tradition flourished in India and Ireland) figures to inspire admiration, devotion, courage, hope for the future, amazement, awe and wonder as well as delight and enjoyment. Their role too, was prophetic: they sought to warn their hearers of the dread consequences of ill-conceived or malicious plots and plans, of envy, jealousy and treachery.

How did they intend to portray the women characters in their tales? They did not, as a rule, create them. The stories they shaped, in the moulds in which we now possess them, are older than the poets themselves. But the final shaping, before, or when, the oral tradition was committed to writing, or which may have taken place in the early drafts of the oldest manuscripts, had the personal, creative touch of one or more professional poets. How much change the oral traditions have undergone may never be fully ascertained even by Sanskrit and Celtic scholars and philologists, and any serious discussion of the question is beyond the scope of this study.

The text of the Táin Bó Cúailnge which is central to this work does not exist today in any single manuscript. The oldest of these medieval vellum documents is Lebor na hUidre

(The Book of the Dun Cow), compiled in the monastery of Clonmacnoise in the twelfth century. The text is flawed and mutilated as is the fourteenth century Yellow Book of Leccan. Yet the two together give us the greater part of the story. The Book of Leinster, (also twelfth century) contains a harmonized text, but omits the pre-stories (rémscéala) which enliven the main story by giving us an introduction to some of the main actors in the drama or explain why they are taking part in this particular one when we might very well expect to find them elsewhere. There is also a sixteenth century version in a more flowing style, in language of a period later than the Old Irish of the other manuscripts. There are lengthy passages (reitoric) in the earlier texts that, linguistically, date back to the eighth century, salvaged perhaps, from the mutilated remains of earlier manuscripts, or, maybe, handed down orally in the family of some unknown bard, a tradition that is known to have continued into the eighteenth century. So precious were these ancient manuscripts that special blessings were invoked on "Mael Muire son of Celechar... who copied and searched out his book from various books" and on the man who ordered its restoration (ie the re-inking of faded letters) and the one who carried it out. In the fourteenth century it was given as ransom for the son of a learned poet and ollamh (judge or



wise man) of Breifne.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the earliest translation of the Táin was that of Winifred Faraday who drew on the Lebor na hUidre and Yellow Book of Leccan text for her The Cattle Raid of Cualnge published in 1904. Ernst Windisch's German translation is dated 1905. The Strachan and O'Keefe translation of 1913 is drawn from the Yellow Book of Leccan with variant readings from Lebor na hUidre. Eleanor Hull's Cuchulainn, the Hound of Ulster was published the same year and draws on the Book of Leinster as well as Lebor na hUidre. It is not strictly speaking a translation for Ms Hull has valuable comments throughout the story that she tells for its "human interest" value more than for its importance as folklore or history of manners. She compares the Cúchulainn stories with the Arthurian and finds the Gaelic tales "have a sprightliness and buoyancy not possessed" by the others... "and the characters, more especially those of the women, are more firmly and variously drawn" (emphasis mine). Joseph Dunn's The Ancient Irish Epic of the Tain Bo Cualnge was published in 1914 and after that the need for further translation seems to have subsided. There were popular re-tellings of

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1 Introduction to Lebor na hUidre ed R I Best and Osborn Bergin (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin 1929) p*x* quoting O'Curry's Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History p 182 ff

individual stories and of folk-tales independent of the Táin. Mention must be made here of Lady Gregory's delightful rendering of Fenian tales in Gods and Fighting Men published in 1904.

In 1967, Cecile O'Rahilly's Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster, bi-lingual and closely annotated, came off the press and gave to researchers and students of Old Irish a work of exemplary scholarship. This text will be referred to throughout this study except for material from the rémscéala (pre-stories) when Thomas Kinsella's The Táin is used. He describes his work as a "readable translation of the older version of the Táin, (he uses the Book of Leinster for the main story) tidied a little and completed from other sources" (which he does not identify). The fact that his book, first published in 1969,<sup>1</sup> has been reprinted twice (in 1972 and 1974) testifies to its popularity. It is indeed eminently readable and supersedes the romanticised and often bowdlerised popular versions that preceded it. Eoin Neeson's two books of Irish Myths and Legends (1965 and 1966) and Jeffrey Gantz's Early Irish Myths and Sagas (1981)<sup>2</sup> are the other sources of narrative drawn on here.

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1 The Dolmen Press, Dublin published a limited edition in 1969. Oxford University Press published a cloth-bound and a paper back edition simultaneously in 1970

2 Gantz's work is a translation, Neeson's re-telling

The Mahābhārata has also been subjected to a wide range of translations and re-tellings during the present century in a variety of Indian languages as well as in English. The first of two complete English translations belongs to the end of the last century when a certain Mr Pratap Chandra Roy believed that "if a knowledge of the mind of the people is of value to the administration of the country, who will deny the utility of an English translation of the Mahabharata to the British Government of India?"<sup>1</sup> He engaged a gentleman named Kisari Mohan Ganguli to undertake this monumental work which was accomplished between 1883 and 1895. It drew the attention of Lord Dufferin and Lord Ripon both of whom sanctioned funds for the project. Romesh Chunder Dutt's

The Ramayana and Mahabharata (condensed into English Verse), 1910<sup>2</sup> was my first introduction to the Indian epics. Other English "re-creations" of note include Rajagopalachari's series of one hundred stories designed for Tamil children and later rendered in English. As a children's version there has been a good deal of bowdlerization and simplification. What is remarkable is that this great statesman decided "to employ some of the scanty leisure of a busy life" to ensure that the Tamil-

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1 Quoted by P Lal in the Annotated Bibliography at the end of his Mahābhārata of Vyāsa (1980)

2 Latest rpt 1978 (New York: Everyman's Library)

speaking children would have easy access to the epic stories. Kamala Subramaniam (1965) has attempted to relate the Mahābhārata story "as dramatically as possible" in 750 pages. She considers that "old fashioned English... seems to suit the epic perfectly." I would not agree, and prefer the style of P Lal's The Mahābhārata of Vyāsa (1980) not to be confused with the sloka-by-sloka "transcreation" of the Mahābhārata which he began in 1968 and expects to complete by 1990. If the style is as pleasant as in his four-hundred-page translation of the narrative sequence of the epic in his 1980 publication, it should make pleasant reading.

It is not, however, English renderings of the Mahābhārata that this study substantially relies on, but on a Bengali re-telling or condensation of the epic by Rajsekhar Basu, entitled Kṛṣṇadvaipāyana Vyāsa kṛta Mahābhārata: Sārānuvāda published in 1957. His pleasing style and flow of language give the impression that one is reading an original work rather than a "translation of the essence"! Quotations in the course of this work are mainly from Basu's book and are my translation. The ten-volume bi-lingual edition of the Mahābhārata translated into Bengali by Sitaramdas Omkarnath<sup>1</sup> has been used to check reference and details omitted in the various re-tellings or

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1 The Sanskrit text is followed immediately by a Bengali rendering. In Aryasāstra Vol 14 No 1 1975 Calcutta 1975

when details differed from one version to another.

This study will touch only the fringe of the vast field opened up by relatively recent interest in the women characters in epic literature. It is hoped that it may, perhaps, indicate some of the mysteries of the feminine mystique that are calling out for deeper study and understanding. Strident demands for equality with men do not help women to achieve the "liberation" that they are clamouring for today. Self-understanding is a much more immediate need and for that each woman needs to possess her own story from the beginning. And so, "back to the roots", to the childhood of the race, described in our epics, in our great books, to see how things were in the beginning. For the past has a message for the present which can be ignored only at the cost of the future.

Since the epics were not created in a vacuum, nor ex nihilo, some presentation of the socio-cultural milieu in which they came to birth in Ireland and India, and some reflection on the status of women in the cultural context of the epic situations is necessary as a preliminary to a more extensive consideration of the feminine roles presented in ancient literature. Such a study must, of necessity,

be brief and general in tone, but valid enough to help understand the atmosphere of the heroic age and to enter into the lives and feelings of its heroines.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ORAL TRADITION

I and Pangor Bán, my cat,  
'Tis a like task we are at  
Hunting mice is his delight  
Hunting words I sit all night  
'Tis a merry thing to see  
At our works how glad are we  
When at home we sit and find  
Entertainment to our mind  
'Gainst the wall he sets his eye  
Full and fierce and sharp and sly  
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I  
All my little wisdom try  
So in peace our task we ply  
Pangor Bán my cat and I  
In our arts we have our bliss  
I have mine and he has his<sup>1</sup>

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1 The 9th century text of this poem was found in a monastery in Carinthia in South Austria, founded by Irish monks, but the setting would correspond to an Irish monastery of the same period.

The medieval monk in his quiet monastery, busy with his "little wisdom" against "the wall of knowledge" is typical of the many clerics who recovered and reconstructed for posterity the old tales of ancient Ireland. These tales had survived a long oral tradition in a virtually illiterate community, for Ogham, a linear script that was the only form of writing known till about the sixth century of our era, was quite unsuited to extensive texts.<sup>1</sup> With the coming of Christianity in the mid-fifth century, the Latin alphabet came to Ireland and the sounds of the Goidelic or Gaelic language were gradually represented in Roman script. This work of adaptation flourished in the monastic schools which sprang up all over the country succeeding the adoption of Christianity. The druids or priests of pre-Christian Ireland had been the repositories of the oral tradition, literary, legal and religious, though no religious texts, if they were ever committed to writing, have come down to us. They were too sacred to be committed to the frailty of bark or parchment, so the oral tradition flourished as it did in India. The druids, however, fade out of the picture in monastic Ireland; some may have been converted and entered the monasteries as scribes or litterati. Others may have been professional filidh (singular, filí; the nearest

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1 cf Proinsias MacCana, Literature in Irish (Dublin: Dept of Foreign Affairs, Ireland 1980) p 12



translation is "poet") or learned poets as distinct from the literati who were primarily record keepers, though some of them were true poets as well, like our friend with the pet cat. It was in the great monastic schools like Bangor, Monasterboice, Clonmacnoise and Terryglass that the manuscripts we have today, and countless others destroyed in Viking raids or by the passage of time, were meticulously and painstakingly inscribed on vellum with incredibly beautiful illuminations. It is with a sense of awe that one views them behind glass in the libraries of Trinity College, the Royal Irish Academy or the National Museum in Dublin. To handle the original manuscript of the Annals of the Four Masters, a seventeenth century compilation from a Franciscan convent in Donegal, is already an experience that gives one a sense of the immense love of literature and value of scholarship in the Irish tradition. One has only to look at the collection of scrolls in a Buddhist monastery or in a synagogue to see the same reverence for the word and the provision made that the word does not perish, that it may be transmitted from age to age.

In ancient India, the goddess Vāk is the deification of the same deep-reaching reverence for the word!<sup>1</sup> In the

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1 In Judaeo-Christianity the Bible, especially the Prophets, makes the Word of God audible, intelligible. In Christianity Jesus is the Word of God made man.

Brahmanic as in the Druidic schools, this word was not entrusted to the frailty of clay or bark or hide, but to the living memory of man, specially chosen and carefully trained for a sacred guardianship. Given this concern for learning, for its preservation and propagation, in both India and Ireland, we have already something of a shared attitude, a comparable "atmosphere" in both cultures where epic literature could flourish.

The monastic scribe was no mere "clerical writer" of civil service stature; he was a learned man in that he knew a large number of tales, knew where to get in touch with traditional raconteurs of such tales, and had the ability to put these tales into writing. He was also acquainted with some of the Latin learning that had come to Ireland in the wake of Christianity and so he could add occasional literary embellishments to the old Celtic tales. Indeed Professor James Carney<sup>1</sup> and Frank O'Connor<sup>2</sup> are of the opinion that the monastic cleric was much more enterprising and versatile, that he created his stories, not perhaps ex nihilo, but certainly ab initio. They contend that he knew his Virgil well and that he decided to create from the old Celtic stories an Irish Aeneid in the shape of the Táin Bó Cúailnge. While some "touches",

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1 Studies in Irish Literature and History, (Dublin: Institute of Advanced Studies 1955 rpt 1979) cf p 66

2 The Backward Look, (London: Macmillan 1967) cf p 32

as when the fury Allecto (Aeneid Bk VI, 313) becomes Allechtu or the boyhood feats of Cúchulainn match the recital of Aeneas in Books II and III, show that the scribe had read the Aeneid, they do not prove that he was simply imitating Virgil.

Differences of detail in the several extant, but incomplete manuscripts of the major work among the heroic tales, the Táin Bó Cúailnge, testify to the living quality of the oral tradition which continued even after the stories had been committed to writing. Indeed the tradition is known to have continued down to the eighteenth century. Even today in Connemara, in the West of Ireland, in the evening an eager crowd gathers to listen to the tales of the seanachaidhe, or tellers of old tales, a name that has not changed either in form or connotation down the centuries. This is one area where the Irish tradition differs significantly from the Greek where the commital to writing virtually marked the close of the oral tradition. But we have here a remarkable similarity to the Indian situation where the level of formal literacy requires the continuation of an oral tradition. More recently this is losing something of its authenticity in view of the rising popularity of the transistor radio and the cassette player. Albert B Lord and Milman Parry found

areas in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia about two decades ago where a vigorous oral tradition still flourishes.<sup>1</sup>

The number of so-called interpolations in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana are evidence of the existence of a vital oral tradition over widespread areas long after the texts had been "frozen" in writing. The incidents, reflections and teachings thus introduced into the "original" story are vouched for as to importance and significance in the life of the people of a particular place or time, by their introduction into the body of works of such sacred tradition. Scholars are able to identify the "age" of these "interpolations" on the basis of linguistics and rhetoric, but the ordinary listener or reader is more concerned with the message than with minute details of the medium. The same holds true for the Irish tales as well. Some critics try to evaluate their authenticity on the basis of the presence or absence of Christian ideas or practices, but this is hardly a dependable criterion. The scribes were Christian monks; that they would find an occasional parallel between events in pre-Christian tradition and happenings in Scripture or in the Christian tradition is not unlikely, and that such a discovery would lead to some "embellishment" is no matter for amazement.

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1 Albert B Lord, The Singer of Tales (New York 1965)

The calm, scholarly atmosphere of the monastery "in a quiet watered land, a land of roses" is the scene in which heroic warriors like Cúchulainn, Fergus, Ferdiad, Conn Cétcathach, Niall Noígíallach and other heroes are given a new lease of life, a literary re-birth. A medieval poem speaks of these warriors as being buried "in the red earth" of Clonmacnoise. Perhaps the poet is thinking of the restless spirits of almost forgotten heroes whose restlessness has been put to rest by the assurance that their memory is enshrined not in the countless crosses that dot the plain on Clonmacnoise, but in the precious manuscripts that have been compiled in "St Kieran's city fair".<sup>1</sup> There the "noblest of the clan of Conn", the "seven knights of Tara", the "sons of Cairbre... battle banners of the Gael", to indicate but a few of the mythological warriors, "now their final hosting keep" not necessarily in the "red earth", but surely in the monks' writings.

In one of the rémscéala (pre-stories) of the Táin we are told that the epic had been forgotten. No one then living in Ireland knew the entire tale and it was considered an ill-omen that things had come to such a pass. It is finally "recovered" at the grave of Fergus mac Roich, one

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1 I draw here on the idea that emerges clearly in Dante's "Inferno" where the dead want the traveller to ensure that they will be remembered on earth.

of the chief protagonists, who rose from his grave to relate the story while his listeners were enveloped in a kind of magic mist. This is not wholly unlike the way in which Vālmīki "received" the Rāmāyana, and emphasises once again the sacredness that the "word" is given in both Gaelic and Sanskrit tradition. We do not have anything similar in the world of Homer, though we do find a kind of "picture" of the figure of the poet in society in the person of Demodocus at the court of King Alcinous. His power to move his listeners and to keep them spell-bound deep into the night is highlighted but there is no suggestion that his message has a sacred quality.

Whereas in both Sanskrit and Celtic culture the filí, the bard or the kavi is a person to be reckoned with on many counts. He is not merely a raconteur, an entertainer; he has something of the quality of a seer, and his anger is not to be roused for fear of his curse which cannot fail. This belongs more properly to the seer in Indian tradition, to characters like Durvāsas or Vasiṣṭha whose curse or blessing cannot fail in its fulfilment.

The proto-poet in Gaelic literature is Amharghin<sup>1</sup> who according to Lebor Gabála Erenn (The Book of Invasions) landed in Ireland with the ancestors of the Gaels. That

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1 This is the spelling used by MacCana in the work under reference. Further use of the name will follow the form given by Cecile O'Rahilly in her Táin Bó Cúailnge - Amargin

he is a seer, a being of divine origin, is clear from the song that sprang to his lips as he set foot on Irish soil:

I am an estuary into the sea,  
 I am a wave of the ocean,  
 I am the sound of the sea...  
 I am a dewdrop in the sun  
 I am the strength of art...

Professor MacCana finds in this identification of the poet with cosmic forces a resemblance to Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad Gītā.<sup>1</sup>

The comparison is significant for like Kṛṣṇa, Amargin "the choicest among the royal poets" is no stranger to the battlefield. In the course of the Táin conflict we meet him "a handsome, lively hero in the forefront of that band". He wears the dress of a nobleman, "a fine, fringed garment of blue cloth with plaited, intertwined fine loops of white bronze and strong, splendid buttons of red gold... a mantle with the choicest of colours". He bears a magnificent shield, wears a sword and carries "a straight, ridged spear blazing in his hand".<sup>2</sup> No particular activity is attributed to this dazzling figure in the course of the Táin which would seem to belie

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1 Literature in Irish p 11

2 Cecile O'Rahilly, The Táin Bó Cúalnge translated from the Book of Leinster (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies 1970) p 259

de Vries' claim that "the filí, the poet-reciter, had to follow his lord into battle. He went at the head of the troop, dressed in a white garment, the glittering harp in his hand, and surrounded by musicians. As long as the battle was raging, the poet stood aside. His person was so sacred that his life was not in danger. He followed the whole battle and, in order to celebrate them in his songs, after the victory, noted all the brave deeds his lord performed."<sup>1</sup>

De Vries cites as his source an "old" text, Imtheact na Thromdhaimhe (ed Conellan, Dublin 1860 p XXI) but none of the great battles of the heroic age - the Battles of Mag Tuiread, the Battle of Tailtin, the Battles fought in the Táin Bó Cúailnge, the Battle of Fionntraighe, give any hint of such a practice.<sup>2</sup> Nor do such well established scholars as Lady Gregory, the Rees brothers, O'Rahilly, O'Connor or MacCana refer to such activity in their discussions of the role of the filí, the ollamh or the seanchaíd.

Amargin's role encompasses that of seer and arbiter; he advises the sons of Míl on invasion strategy, appeases the

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1 Jan de Vries, Heroic Song and Heroic Legend (London: OUP 1963) p 168

2 Lady Augusta Gregory, Gods and Fighting Men (1904: Gerrard's Cross, Colin Smythe Ltd rpt paperback 1979)



divine forces hostile to their landing, meets the three divine eponyms of Ireland, Banbha, Fodla and Ériu. The latter foretold that the sons of Míl would rule Ireland forever when the poet-seer assured her that the country would bear her name. This variegated role gives us some inkling of the power and scope that belonged to the ancient filí. The fact that he is listed among the magnificent heroes who rally, somewhat late, to the defence of the Ulaid several centuries later, shows the reverence in which the Gaelic ādikavi was held. This brings closer the parallel with Kṛṣṇa in the Mahābhārata for there too, the functions of Vasudeva include peace missions, campaign plans, personal and family counselling as well as singing the great Song of God. Kṛṣṇa however, has no official role as kavi. In this he resembles Fergus in the Táin. The Ulster warrior-in-exile at the court of Medb and Ailill is primarily a warrior, a leader of fighting men. But it is he who narrates the boyhood deeds of Cúchulainn on the eve of the conflict - a task normally entrusted to the proud professional filí - in order to rouse the spirits of the assembled troops. In the course of the war which lasted from "Samhain to Bealtaine" (Hallowe'en to May day) it is Fergus who, time and again, sings the praise songs of great warriors, again filling the role of the professional filí. Cúchulainn, too,

has some share in this when, after he has defeated and slain his childhood comrade now turned foe, he sings a lament for Ferdiad that has few parallels in poetry, heroic or elegiac.

In the rémisceál, "How the Táin Bó Cúailnge was found again", it is at the grave of Fergus that Muirgen is enveloped in a great mist for three days and nights, while the ancient hero appears "in fierce majesty... in a green cloak and a red-embroidered hooded tunic, with gold-hilted sword and bronze blunt sandals" and "recited to him the whole Táin."<sup>1</sup> Muirgen's feat of memory is hardly less remarkable, for he carried the whole story back to his father, Senachán Torpéist and the assembly of the poets of Ireland, who "rejoiced over it."

So, like the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana, the Táin is alleged to have come from a divine source, for Fergus is undoubtedly a divine being, however expertly later genealogists may detail his human origins. Brahmā and Ganeśa feature prominently in Vyāsa's task of communicating the poem that he has conceived in his head.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Thomas Kinsella, The Táin translated from the Irish epic Táin Bó Cúailnge (London: OUP 1969 rpt 1974) pp 1-2. The description is along the same lines as that of Amargin already quoted.

2 *Yāw Bultenon* "The ~~same~~ *same* mind" *mind*

Brahmā is the one

"whose divine injunction consecrates Vālmīkī  
as the author of Ramakathā:

'In composing this poem no word will ever fail you;  
Put into slokas the holy and charming Story of Rāma',<sup>1</sup>  
The fiction is complete: Vālmīkī, the inspired  
poet... the sudden discovery of poetical speech  
with the implication that poetry did not exist  
before; the promise of divine inspiration...:  
'Although you are ignorant of everything,  
all will be revealed to you.'<sup>2,3</sup>

The mahākāvya is essentially the word of god made known to men. This accounts for the reverence and avidity with which audiences down the ages have listened to the "singers of tales", whether in mighty durbars or village gatherings, as they brought to birth anew the valorous deeds and the valiant doers, the great feastings and the tragic battles of ancient times. These singers of tales might vary from proud court-poet to humble tiller of the soil, from the "brahmin" Amargin to the Connemara fisherman, but the message is the same. In olden times,

- 1 Na te vāg anṛtā kāvye kācid atra bhaviṣyati/kuru rāmakatham puṇyāṃ ślokabaddhāṃ manoramam (1.2.34)
- 2 taccāpyaviditam sarvaṃ viditam te bhaviṣyati (1.2.33 cd)
- 3 R Antoine, Rama and the Bards (Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1975) p 22

in a golden age, lived mighty heroes and lovely queens, who walked and talked with gods, and did heroic and terrible deeds... and we are their children. The pettiness, the poverty and the parochialism of this kaliyuga disappear for a while and we can dream the dreams of Oengus<sup>1</sup> or gaze with Arjuna in trembling awe at Kṛṣṇa's "world form".

So in the east and the west of the far-flung realm of Indo-European civilization we find the epic tale presented as a gift from the gods to chosen mortals who, with divine assistance, pass on this god-given word to especially trained disciples - a twelve-year training period is prescribed for the Gaelic filí as for the Brahmin cele - and gradually this aristocracy of learning is democratized and the singers of tales range from god-men to simple folk.

In an Irish story, the language of which shows it to have been written in the eighth century, the learned poet, Forgall, recites a story to Mongan, an Ulster king, every night throughout an entire winter, from "Samhain to Bealtine" - a phrase still to be heard in connection with story-telling. This gives us an idea of the extent of the story-teller's repertoire. The custom of telling

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1 Oengus, a Gaelic otherworld figure, dreams constantly of a beautiful maiden and falls ill until she is found after a long search and brought to him.

stories at night and during winter is reported also of "people from parts of native America, Europe, Africa and Asia show(ing) them to be almost unanimous in prohibiting the telling of sacred stories in summer or in daylight, except on certain special occasions." The significance of telling stories around the fire is linked "to the central role of the hearth and the fire-altar in Indo-European and other traditions."<sup>1</sup> "Instances are found throughout the world," writes Professor MacCana<sup>2</sup>, "where tales were told in the context of ritual ceremony" and he quotes Basham<sup>3</sup> on the Mahābhārata and the Ramayana:

"Their religious significance lay at first in the royal sacrificial ritual part of which involved telling stories of the heroes of the past."

Indeed a reading of the Mahābhārata with its fascinating chain of interlinked stories one leading out of another to link up with a third, like some intricate spider's web, catching and reflecting gleams of sunlight in its shimmering threads, tells us a great deal about the

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1 Alwyn and Brinley Rees, Celtic Heritage (London: Thames & Hudson 1961 rpt 1978) p 16

2 The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland, (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1980) p 27

3 A L Basham, The Wonder that was India (London 1969) p 409

story-teller and his art. Two examples will suffice as illustrations:

When the Pandavas have gone with Draupadī to settle in their new city, Indraprastha, the sage Nārada visits them, blesses Draupadī and dismisses her from his presence. He then tells the brothers that they must formulate rules to prevent dissension among them. He relates the story of Sunda and Upasunda, asura brothers who were firmly united in all their actions and whose misdeeds were a cause of annoyance to the gods. At Brahma's request Viśvākarma fashioned a beautiful maiden, Tilottama, and sent her to divert the brothers. Each claimed her as his wife and, in the quarrel that ensued, slew each other, much to the relief of the gods.<sup>1</sup>

Again during the course of their long forest exile, Bhīma's patience was nearly exhausted and he urged Yudhiṣṭhira to attack Duryodhana and his brothers immediately without waiting until the full term of their exile had expired. While he was trying to calm Bhīma the Mahārṣi Bṛhadaśva arrived on the scene and was graciously received after which Yudhiṣṭhira poured out the sad story of the game of dice and its consequences. "Do you know any king more unfortunate or griefstricken than I am?" Dharma asked,

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1 Condensed from Rajsekhar Basu's Mahābhārata-Sārānubāda (Calcutta: M C Sarkar 1957) pp 91-92; cited henceforth as Basu

and Brhadaśva proceeded to tell him the heart-rending tale of Nala and Damayantī, a story closely paralleling the Pāṇḍavas' own misfortune.<sup>1</sup> Sañjaya the charioteer or suta, by a special favour from Vyāsa, is to describe the scene on the battlefield of Kuruksetra blow by blow to the blind Dṛtarāṣṭra.<sup>2</sup> As a prelude to this, Sañjaya gives a lengthy discourse on philosophy and geography thus confirming the multifaceted nature of the poet's function.

In the story of Deirdre and the Sons of Uisliu we meet her father, Feidlimid MacDaill (son of the blind one), King Conchobar's story-teller, who is playing host to the king and an uproarious gathering of warriors and other nobles, including the seer, Cathbad. The fact that the hospitality Feidlimid was offering included sleeping quarters for the night, indicates something of the status of the royal story-teller. Here, however, the functions of seanchas (story-telling) and prophecy are separate for it is Cathbad who explains the phenomenon of the babe screaming in her mother's womb, ordains that she will be

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1 Basu p 167 ff

2 In The Age of Imperial Unity, Vol II of The History and Culture of the Indian People (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan 1951) Dr M A Mehendale attributes the origin of the epics to the traditional bards called sutas and says that in popularising them they were further helped by the Kusilavas, the travelling singers. See pp 244-45

called Deirdriu, and foretells her beauty and the tragedy that will follow her.<sup>1</sup>

Although it was not generally considered suitable for a woman to recite the hero tales, ancient Ireland had its banfhilidh (women-poets), its women seers and, as early as the twelfth century, its women story-tellers who usually excelled men "in reciting local and family tales, folk prayers, and tales about ghosts, fairies and other supernatural beings."<sup>2</sup> Brigit, the banfhilí, is represented as a goddess and mother of Brian, Uachair and Uar, na trí dée dána, the three gods of artistic skill, thus ranking poetry as the source of the other arts, or perhaps (for the word dán meaning skill or art, eventually came to mean specifically poetic art) the one who passes on poetic skill to the race. "Side by side with the learned-professional-aristocratic class who recited the tales enumerated in the saga-lists to their high-born patrons, there has from an early time existed among the ordinary people a body of tradition and tradition-bearers and reciters of tales and popular poetry. To assume that interest in literature was confined to a small

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1 Kinsella p 10

2 J H Delargy, The Gaelic Storyteller, The Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture, British Academy 1945 p 9



upper-class literary circle is quite unwarranted."<sup>1</sup>

Our heritage of epic literature, then, has its roots in a divine gift, revelation or inspiration, whether from Brahmā or Amargin-Fergus. It can be lost as in the time of Senchán Torpéist or locked in the mind of Vyāsa. It can be recovered or released in response to the sincere seeking of Muirgen or the earnest prayer of Vyāsa. It is passed on from generation to generation by carefully trained reciters and ultimately by popular story-tellers at every social level. Finally it is captured as a wild, rushing, popular torrent, tamed, directed, arranged behind the sluice-gates of hieroglyphics by a Ganeśa or a monk in his quiet cell. The manuscripts are a work of careful, caring love of art, of tradition and hopefully, of the "poet's truth". The manuscripts are copied and recopied by scribes sometimes careless, sometimes ambitious, anxious to show off some new learning, sometimes suspicious of the validity of ancient ideas or of the morality of ancient deeds, and the censor gets to work. So, we have in our day, a number of versions, differing in detail, in length and sometimes of uneven artistic quality. But somehow the message transcends the medium. The core of truth, the original "divine" gift of poetry and imagination,

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1 Delargy pp 26-27

glows with an unmistakable fire that radiates through the entire work and by its truth gives a value to the many lesser splinters that down the centuries have been drawn into its ambit like iron filings towards a great magnet.

The early Irish tales have been classified into four groups or cycles:

- 1 The Mythological cycle may, in a sense, be called the cycle of fairy-tales for the stories deal mainly with the Síde, the Otherworld beings who live in the fairy mounds of the Boyne Valley. Boand, the tutelary goddess of the river Boyne, figures prominently in these tales, as does the beautiful goddess Étain who becomes bride to a mortal. The god-figures of this cycle are the Dagda, Midir and Oengus.
  
- 2 The Ulster cycle which describes the exploits of the Ulaí (claimed by several critics to be historical); the heroes and events are considered to belong to a period shortly before or after the beginning of the Christian era. Cúchulainn is the hero par excellence of this cycle with Conchobar and Fergus struggling for kingship. Medb is the dominant and dominating female figure.

- 3 The King cycle which centres on the purportedly historical kings and gives us king-lists that have baffled historians trying to establish a reasonable chronology.
- 4 The Fenian or Find cycle tells of the heroic deeds of Find (or Finn) macCumhaill and his warrior band, the fiana. These tales achieved popularity only in the twelfth century and it is not easy to assign even an approximate date to the adventures of Find and his men.

These categories<sup>1</sup>, though useful, are by no means sacrosanct or watertight. We meet characters from the Ulster cycle in stories of the Mythological cycle. Conall Cernach from Ulster is one of the knights defending Conaire Mar in the "Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel", a tale full of Otherworld wonders and fantasy listed in the first cycle. Bé Find, sometimes identified with Étaín, is alleged to be the mother of Froech, who is claimed as an historical figure in The Táin Bó Froech and is invited by Ailill and Medb to help with the Táin of the Bull of Cooley. Some of the kings in the third cycle

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1 This classification is drawn largely from Jeffrey Gantz' Introduction to his translation: Early Irish Myths and Sagas (Penguin Books 1981 rpt 1982)

are of decidedly superhuman lineage, and Find's companion, Oisín, sails off with an Otherworld queen to the Land of Everlasting Youth (Tír na nÓc) to return centuries later during the time of St Patrick. So, there is in the Gaelic storyteller's repertoire a fascinating blend of the divine, the magical, the human, the fiendish, the heroic and the ridiculous that has its extravagance matched in the extraordinary variety of the story content of the Indian epics. Étaín and Savitrī, Gaṅga and Boand, Menakā and Macha, Nés and Kaikeyī, Fergus and Bhīma, Conchobar and Duryodhana are only some of the east-west "pairs" who can be shown to share some common traits, or to perform comparable deeds, or to have somewhat similar destinies.

It is worth giving some attention at this stage to the status of women in ancient India and ancient Ireland, since the social background of the epics is like the canvas on which a rich tapestry is worked. We do not see the canvas but it constitutes the web which holds together the varied and glowing coloured threads that, woven together, produce the finished design.

In India we recognise two stages or periods in this social background, the Vedic age and the post-Vedic age.

In the earlier period the family is described as patriarchal; by the later age the joint-family system has evolved. Professor V M Apte<sup>1</sup> tells us that the Vedic hymns indicate that marriage took place well after the girls had reached puberty and the marriage ritual suggests that consummation was prompt. There is frequent mention of unmarried girls growing up in their parents' home, references to ornaments worn by maidens at festivals in order to attract lovers, to courtship, lover's gifts, mutual love and spells by which the household was lulled to sleep while the lovers met. Because the girls were of mature age there was a certain freedom of choice and a period of formal "wooing" was essential. There are indications that bride-price may have been paid by a not-very-desirable son-in-law. There is no mention of payment of dowry except where the girl had some physical defect. There is very little evidence of widow-burning in the RgVedas and it was the practice for a childless widow to cohabit with her brother-in-law until the birth of a son. The Mahābhārata bears this out in practice.<sup>2</sup> Apte goes on to write:

"Women had to be under the protection of some guardian or

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- 1 "Social and Economic Conditions in Epic Times" in The History and Culture of the Indian People Vol I: The Vedic Age ed R C Majumdar p 392 ff
  - 2 Dṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu were born as the result of their widowed mothers accepting their brother-in-law, Vyāsa

other; in the care of their fathers until marriage, of their husbands after marriage, and of their brothers if not married; still they enjoyed much freedom.<sup>1</sup> They did not always remain indoors, but moved about freely, they publicly attended feasts and dances and there are references to 'fair ladies flocking to festive gatherings'." He further adds: "Female morality maintained a high standard, the same degree of fidelity was not expected from the husbands."

In post-Vedic India conditions had changed to some extent. The joint family envisaged a more extended group than the Vedic patriarchal family. The father arranged his son's marriage and this implies restrictions on the girl's freedom of choice as well. It was considered improper for a younger brother or sister to marry before their elders. (This may have been the root cause of Draupadi's dilemma when Arjuna won her as his bride, while Yudhisthira was still unmarried.) In the absence of the father, the brother and his wife filled the role of guardians of a sister.

The caste system which in Vedic times was based on a

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1 Op cit p 394. This seems more liberal than the laws of Manu prescribed.

common origin, name, tutelary deity, occupation and ceremonial rituals generally distinguished one homogeneous group from another. But in the post-Vedic era the system has become much more rigid, fixed by birth; and exclusive commensality and connubium between the members to the exclusion of all others are its fundamental characteristics. An Aryan, however, could marry a Sudra wife, but the Sudra never an Aryan wife. The male of a lower class could not marry a girl of a higher class or caste. Indeed, the Sudras were hard hit by invidious distinctions; they were not deemed worthy of being addressed by a consecrated person (presumably a brahmin or a king) and they could not take part in the sacrificial rituals. In ancient Ireland there were three social classes: the priests or druids (druf), the warriors (rf) and husbandmen (áire). The king was ruler of his people in times of peace and military leader in war. After the king but within the second group came the nobles (flaithí) who were the warrior-class and patrons of the men of arts (aes dána) - poets, historians, lawyers, leeches and craftsmen. Among these the poet (filí) seems to have inherited much of the prestige of the druids of pagan times. The filí was honoured and feared like the brahmin in India. The third estate consisted of the ordinary free-men who tilled the soil

and paid a tax of food-rent to the king.... There were slaves (muq m, cumal f), perhaps mostly captives of war but they do not appear to have been a large element in the population.<sup>1</sup>

In Irish law we find a statement prescribing legal guardianship for women that is almost identical with the laws of Manu on the same issue. "A woman's guardian is her father when she is a young girl, her c  tmuintir (husband) when she is a lawful chief wife, her sons when she is 'a woman with children' (presumably a widow), her family as represented by its head when she is a woman of the fine, and the Church when she is 'a woman of the Church', ie when she has taken the veil."<sup>2</sup> The parallel could hardly be much closer.

"Even more impressive" writes Dillon, "are the laws concerning marriage in Ireland and India." He then lists the eight forms of Indian marriage: "brahma, daiva, arsa, prajapatya, asura, gandharva, raksasa and paisaca. In the first four the daughter is given by her father without purchase by the bridegroom. The fifth is

1 Myles Dillon "Secular Institutions: Early Irish Society" in The Celtic Realms with Nora Chadwick (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson 1967) pp 96-98

2 D A Binchy, Studies in Early Irish Law, p vi (with Thurneysen and others)



marriage by purchase, the sixth is a voluntary union of maiden and lover, the seventh is forcible abduction (proper for a warrior), the eighth is mere seduction by stealth and is called a base and sinful rite (Manu III 20-34)." In Ireland ten forms "are recognised in the law-tract on marriage, differing in the proportions of wealth brought by each party.... The others are temporary unions and two of these agree exactly with two of the Indian forms: marriage by force (lánamnas écne) and seduction by stealth (lánamnas tothla). Indeed a third, 'union accepted on the man's invitation', may be equated with the gandharva marriage of the Hindus, the voluntary union of maiden and lover."<sup>1</sup> He then reduces the number of marriages to eight on the authority of Binchy<sup>2</sup> who states that two of the Irish 'unions' are a later development.

Polygamy and concubinage was legalised in both Indian and Irish society. "Megasthenes observes that the Indians 'marry many wives; some they marry hoping to find in them willing helpmates; and others for pleasure and to fill their houses with children.' "<sup>3</sup> While in Ireland a man

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1 "Discovering the Celts" in The Celtic Realms pp 11-12

2 Studies in Early Irish Law, vi, cited by Dillon above

3 R C Majumdar, The Age of Imperial Unity p 557

may take a second wife in the life-time of his cétmuintir, 'principal wife'.<sup>1</sup>

The Irish family unit for most legal purposes was the derbfine, a group of four generations descended from a common great-grandfather. The underlying structure corresponds closely enough to that of the Hindu joint family. The derbfine was the unit from which succession to the kingship was selected. It was not necessarily a king's son who followed him on the throne; it could equally well be his nephew or grandson.<sup>2</sup>

Nora Chadwick repeatedly emphasises that "the high prestige of women" is a feature characteristic of early Celtic civilization and especially of Celtic mythology. She cites as evidence the lofty spiritual role assigned to women in the cult of rebirth, for it is the woman, not the man, who conveys the soul to rebirth in a later generation. Then there are the women warriors like Scáthach who trained Cúchulainn in martial arts, and Affe, the warlike queen whom he vanquished in a stormy struggle. Roman historians have recorded the mighty

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1 Dillon op cit p 100

2 Cúchulainn, the Red Branch Knights' hero, is represented as the nephew, sometimes the grandson of King Conchobar. He did not, however, live long enough to be considered successor to the throne of Ulaid.

deeds of the Celtic warrior women encountered by Caesar's legions in Britain:

"A whole troupe of foreigners would not be able to withstand a single Gaul (Celt) if he called his wife to his assistance.... She begins to strike blows mingled with kicks, as if they were so many missiles sent from the string of a catapult (Ammianus Marcellinus, translated by Yonge)."<sup>1</sup>

And indeed the Romans have recorded no meeting with male enemies of the stature of Boadicca or Cartimandua.<sup>2</sup>

Medb, Queen of Crúachan, led her armies into battle and claimed that, singlehanded she herself was "victorious in battles and contests and combats", and we read in the Táin Bó Cúalnge that she "gave battle to Findmór, the wife of Celtchair in front of Dún Sobairche, and she slew Findmór and ravaged Dún Sobairche." (ll 1792-3)

So we see as background to the epic literature of ancient India and Celtic Ireland a society in which women enjoyed

1 Nora Chadwick, "Celtic Religion and Mythology" in The Celtic Realms with Myles Dillon

2 A common characteristic of the battle style of the Celts and Indians is the use of chariots, carrying both charioteer and chieftain, single combat and the carrying off of heads. The Celts preserved the severed heads in cedar oil and displayed them as trophies. Diodorus cited by J J Tierney in "The Celts and the Classical Authors" in The Celts ed Joseph Raftery, The Thomas Davis Lectures 1960

respect and protection, in which they were represented as enjoying certain freedoms and fulfilling many different roles. Their anger was feared, their jealousy was destructive, their courage undaunted and their love and tenderness sought after and cherished. The family was of foremost importance; it was the basic unit of the larger social structure and the legal system was geared towards protecting familial interests, particularly the inheritance and distribution of land and cattle. We find in both societies that the cow was the unit of value for estimating honour price, bride price and the payment of debts. Cows were the occasion of inter-tribal strife for cattle raids were common. Horses were also very significant and were often related to sacrificial rites like the ásvamedha, or were the gift of the gods, like the eight hundred shining white horses with one black ear each that Gālava seeks in the episode of Mādhavī. In Ireland the word "ech" (horse) figures in the names of several kings, most of them mythological, notable among them is Eochaid Aire~~m~~ who won the fairy Étaín as his bride. In the list of kings who assemble for the cattle-raid of Cooley the name Eochaid figures also, while Medb's father is identified as Eochaid Feidlech. On the continent the Celtic horse-goddess Epona is shown seated on a steed. Paul-Marie Duval claims that she was the patroness of

warriors and of travellers.<sup>1</sup> There is a suggestion that some of these figures may originally have been animal gods or the totems of mythological divinities. The two bulls involved in the Táin conflict were originally human beings who at the end of a succession of transmigrations met and fought as Findbennach (the white-headed) of Connachta and the Donn (Brown) of Cualnge. There are bird figures too, as when Midir recovers his erstwhile wife Étaín from Eochaid Airem and they both escape in the shape of swans. Cúchulainn encounters the otherworld goddess, Fand, in the company of several pairs of beautiful swans linked by chains of silver or gold. The goddesses of the battlefield, associated not with valour but with death are the triad-Morrigan, Badb and Macha, and are frequently represented as birds of prey. (On the battlefield of Kurukṣetra it is Kālī who figures as the goddess of death in her most ferocious and terrifying form.) In India in addition to the horse and the cow we find sacred monkeys and peacocks. In ancient Egypt the bull, the crocodile and the ibis were venerated and, even today tribal peoples in Australia, Africa and the Americas have their sacred birds and animals.

Underlying these similarities and differences of a very

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1 Les dieux de la Gaule (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot 1976) p 50

remote past is a more or less common way of life characteristic of the Indo-European peoples. Theirs was a vision of life that found expression, as all visions do, in various forms of art, many of which perished from the earth. But the vision did not disappear with disintegrating clay or shatter with falling masonry or vanish under flood waters however deep. Visions live in men's hearts and are recreated from generation to generation through racial memory. Therefore, whether in the Indus Valley or on the plains of the Tigris and Euphrates, by the shores of the Mediterranean, on the beaches of Brittany or among the hills and woods of Ireland, the vision re-emerged and found expression in stone and silver<sup>1</sup>, in song and saga. Great warriors, noble queens, beings of heavenly origin visiting mortal dwellings, revelations of a life beyond this terrestrial home<sup>2</sup>, journeys of wonder and imagination, trials and threats, betrayal and brutality, war and conquest, death, destruction and final peace, found their way into tales fashioned to perpetuate the good, the true, the beautiful, and to warn against evil, treachery and deceit. The good

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1 cf the artifacts of the La Tène and Hallstatt excavations in Europe which represent the most lasting memorials of Celtic culture on the continent.

2 as in the 8th century Immram Brain (The Voyage of Bran) and the 9th century Immram Máile Duín (The Voyage of Mael Duin)

was portrayed as the mark of a golden age now vanished, the evil as the lot of an age that would one day pass to make way for the return of that golden age in that marvellous cycle of birth-death and rebirth that we find at the heart of the Indo-European interpretation of life, of history, of the meaning of human existence, of the purpose of living and struggling and becoming the divine beings that in essence we believe we are.

## CHAPTER III

### SHAPERS OF DESTINY; INSTRUMENTS OF JUSTICE

In his scholarly analysis of the sixth century text of the Devī Māhātmya Thomas B Coburn<sup>1</sup> arrives at the conclusion that this anonymous Sanskrit text articulates the view that ultimate reality is feminine. He supports this with detailed studies of puranic texts and of the Durga Stava and the Durga Stotra from the Mahābhārata. His arguments are cogent and based on keen insights into the literary texts that he examines. But the purpose of this study is not to deal with religious texts per se, but to consider literary characters presented to us as human, taking part in ordinary human pursuits albeit at times in a somewhat extraordinary manner, and to discover in them greater or less degrees of divine identity or at least evidence of their being special foci of divine predilection. We find in the lives of these epic women

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1 Devī Māhātmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1984)



characters a frequent, sometimes constant intervention of the divine, often at the cost of pain and shame; at other times bringing comfort, reassurance and ultimate glory.

A brief survey of the place in Indo-European epic literature of the more outstanding women figures will lead to a closer study of a selected few in their roles as instruments of justice, goddesses of sovereignty and mothers of warriors. A further question to be considered is whether they have a message of any significance, literary or otherwise, for the world of the twentieth century.

Traditional epic poetry focusses mainly on heroes - the anger of Achilles, the journeyings of Odysseus, the call and mission of Aeneas, the valour and tragic betrayal of Siegfried and Roland, the dilemma of Tristan, the relentless hatred of Duryodhana. There are incomparable warriors capable of feats possible only to god-like beings, perhaps the gods themselves: Bhīma, Arjuna, Beowulf, Cúchulainn come instantly to mind. But behind many of these heroes, goading them into action, inspiring them to heroic deeds or taunting them bitterly till they launch wars or combats of tragic dimensions, are women. The anger of Achilles, his withdrawal from

the fight and the dire consequences for the Greek heroes centred on two captured girls - Chryseis, Agamemnon's prize, whom he had to surrender to save his men from the vengeful wrath of the gods, and Briseis, Achilles' bedmate whom the King demanded as a compensation and substitute. And what was the Trojan war with its devastating slaughter of the "flower of chivalry" all about if legend be believed? The "theft" of Helen, the beautiful, frivolous, almost certainly unfaithful Helen, who left her warrior-husband-King for a handsome, fresh-faced Paris.

In the case of Odysseus, it was the memory and the peril of Penelope that kept his face set towards Ithaca despite the promise of immortal youth held out by Calypso, the devouring song of the Sirens, the magic wand of Circe and the caring charm of the gentle Nausicaa. Penelope is the lodestar of his life, whose memory brings him home, not, however, to an immediately peaceful hearth, but to a battle of wits and a bloody slaughter of the suitors who had been devouring his estate and wooing his wife. Had there been no web-weaving Penelope, no lonely woman worn with love-longing that made her the target of the hungry suitors, there would have been no Homeric Odyssey. We might have had a suitable

Ithacan version of London, 1918, "when Lil's husband got demobbed... think of poor Albert... Goonight. Goonight."

The frivolity of the bored Helen is ultimately responsible for the death of Patroclus and Achilles, of Priam and Hector and countless other warriors of gigantic stature. The sequence of tragic events that follow her elopement eventually compasses the death of Agamemnon at the hands of another treacherous woman, her sister, and the whole complex of the Oresteian tragedy. The golden apple that Aphrodite held out is as deadly in its consequences as the one that Eve plucked in Eden at the instigation of an eloquent serpent. Mankind is the loser. "Vanity of vanities" indeed. Stesichorus would have us believe that Helen never went to Troy, that Paris carried off a mere phantom of this beautiful woman to his ancient city! Several modern Biblical scholars dismiss the story of Eve and the serpent as a fairy tale. Yet these myths remain at the heart of human experience as much as at the heart of story-telling. Perhaps the debunkers begrudge women such an aura of influence, be it for good or for evil, and would put them "in their place" among the cooking pots and the cradles, forgetting that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world - perhaps rocks the world as well.

For Aeneas Dido is a temptress, a pleasant interlude on a perilous journey. But she is more; she is the touchstone - of fire, if you wish - which tests his sense not merely of duty, but of destiny. Aeneas has to choose between Dido and the new Troy; between human desire and the fulfilment of a divine mission. Dido uses no magic wand to turn him into a pig and hold him captive in the city of her design. Instead she offers to share Carthage with the Trojans. What a temptation for Aeneas to see here his second Troy and find a fit mate in the competent, intelligent, widowed Dido! She gives him all that woman can give, then he slinks away in the dark, and in the morning "the father of Rome, looking back with remorseful eyes from his fleeing ship, saw the flames of her pyre reddening the dawn."<sup>1</sup> But Aeneas and his Trojan-Romans never escaped the dire curse of the dying foundress of Carthage.

Siegfried wins the love of Kriemhild that lasts till death and beyond. He also stirs the passion of Brünhild who hates him even unto death. The dragon-slayer, the horny-skinned, fabled warrior lets himself get entangled in a web of deceit, while he waits to win the fair

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1 Mary C Sturgeon, Women of the Classics (London: Harrap 1914)

Kriemhild. Their years in the Netherlands read like a fairy tale come true, but Brünhild's old passion and envy bring them back under false pretences to Worms, to tragedy, to a bitter hatred in the heart of Kriemhild that has few parallels in literature or history. If Brünhild is the Hell-fury of "a woman scorn'd", then Kriemhild, in the length to which she goes, so many years later, to avenge Siegfried's death at the cost of every family tie, bears out Congreve only too well - "Heaven has no rage like a love to hate'd turned." The love that cherished and mourned Siegfried, transmuted to a deadly hatred of Hagen, turns marriage to Etzel, the honour-pledge of Rüdiger, the love of her younger brothers, the very life of her child, into kindling for the brutal holocaust that reminds one of the massacre on the field of Kurukṣetra.

There is the horrendous slaughter of the Mahābhārata war another woman's thirst for vengeance is slaked with the blood of a hundred brothers and countless grandsires and grandsons. Gāndhārī, Kuntī, Draupadī all merit the title of virjya-nāri - warrior women. They would tolerate nothing less than valour and heroism on the part of their husbands and sons. They were women, too, with a great sense of dignity and self-respect, and when their honour was touched they proved implacable in their demand for

justice, nay, insatiable in their thirst for revenge. Life-bearers, life-nurturers, they can and do demand human sacrifice on the field of battle in atonement for the attempt to desecrate womanhood. No wonder is it that Kālī wears a garland of skulls. The Indian woman in her home, as cherisher of the family, as educator of her children and helpmate of her husband is Lakṣmī, but when these are threatened she is Mahādevī too.

The medieval French Chanson de Roland is one of the few epic works that has no woman character of distinction. It is a poem about male friendship, about patriotism, loyalty and treachery. It stands virtually alone in its indifference to women. This fact may be due to the towering figure of Charlemagne and the vigour of the campaigns he waged against all that threatened the Great Lady of his age - the Christian Church. It ensures, at any rate, a date, clearly prior to the emergence of the French romances and the troubadours, for the extant text of the Chanson. It is so much a "man's poem" that one wonders if its final shape is the work of a woman! The other works under review are all the work of men. No one has ever suggested that Homer or Virgil were women or that the gods handed down the Rāmāyana, the Mahābhārata or the Nibelungenlied to a woman. But the

critics have yet to discover the hand that shaped the story of Roland's betrayal by Ganélon. Bédier<sup>1</sup> suggests a "jongleur" while Jan de Vries<sup>2</sup> seems to see a monastic hand holding the quill. There were monasteries of women as well as communities of monks in early medieval Europe and, as already mentioned, women poets and story-tellers were not unknown. These groups were in accordance with the tradition the Irish perægrini brought to the continent. But to return to the vitality and vivid portrayal of women characters in heroic literature. It is virtually a platitude to claim that artists portray characters of the opposite sex more "livingly" than those of their own.<sup>3</sup> That is why there is some justification of the unusual claim that a female eye may have conceived the lineaments of the knights who perished at Roncevaux.

It is not only the sisters of the Erinyes who are presented to us in the songs of the epic poets. We meet

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1 Cited by de Vries in Heroic Song and Heroic Legend p 25

2 *ibid* p 25 ff

3 In a later age Shakespeare's heroines are evidence of, male poet putting his best creative imagination to work in portraying the gaiety of Portia of Belmont, the innocence of Desdemona, the filial loyalty of Cordelia or, on the other hand, the blood-curdling cruelty and tragic shattering of Lady Macbeth. These characters are more dynamic, more convincing than many of his male personae.

gentler women than Medb, Draupadī, Kriemhild and Brünhild, women like Sītā and Andromache, Emer and Mādhavī. They are beautiful yet faithful, gentle yet strong, patient and enduring. They stand out from the epic canvas in warm, glowing colours; they are the sort of women we would like our younger sisters and daughters to be. Sītā is the model Indian wife, faithful to her husband in the most difficult and trying circumstances, sharing the hardships of exile voluntarily, enduring the ignominy of being captive by Rāvaṇa. She is, unwittingly, the cause of war, or rather the Sītāharṇa is the cause of war when Rāma sets out to rescue his wife, but she takes no pleasure in bloodshed, she urges no one to war and slaughter. War follows the insult of her capture and captivity as it does the betrayal of the sons of Uisliu and the bereavement of Deirdre, as it follows the theft of Helen. But there is little resemblance between the wanton Helen and the faithful Sītā. Like Emer Sītā has no mother, both are born in a miraculous manner, though there is more of the divine and mysterious about Sītā's birth. Each is the destined bride of a great hero. Sītā is won by Rāma's skill with bow and arrow at her svayamvara very much in the manner that Draupadī is won by Arjuna. Conchobar sends men throughout the length and breadth of Ireland to find a worthy bride for



Cúchulainn, for the wives and daughters of the Ulster knights were all smitten by the hero's handsome looks! After a year the nine messengers return empty-handed and Cúchulainn sets out to Luglochta Logo (the Gardens of Lug) where he meets Emer. They speak to each other in riddles and she sets him a number of heroic tasks to perform if he would win her as his wife. This reminds us of the tasks Brünhild set Gunther. But Cúchulainn has no need of trickery or substitute. However the lovers are parted for a year during which Cúchulainn trains in martial arts under the woman warrior Scáthach (the Shadowy One), and Emer refuses the marriage proposal of the King of Munster's son. Finally Cúchulainn wins his bride, but Conchobar claims his right to sleep with Emer on her marriage night. Cúchulainn is wild with rage, but a compromise is worked out: "Emer should sleep that night in Conchobar's bed but with Fergus and Cathbad in it as well to protect Cúchulainn's honour. The whole of Ulster would bless the couple if he accepted. He accepted and so it was done. Conchobar paid Emer's dowry the next day, Cúchulainn was given his 'honour-price' and he slept ever after with his wife. They never parted again until they died."<sup>1</sup>

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1 Kinsella, The Táin p 39

This last statement is contradicted by another legend that tells of Cúchulainn's abduction to the "otherworld" and his infatuation for Fand, an Otherworld queen. He remained under her spell in a state of disorientation for a long period after his return to the mortal world. Throughout this time of desertion and distress Emer remained faithful, the constant, devoted, hurt but forgiving wife. She made every effort to find a cure for her husband's "wasting sickness" and finally rallied him out of his stupor. Cúchulainn is generally regarded as being under the special protection of the god Lug, the Celtic god of light, and is sometimes considered to be his son. The meeting of Emer and the hero in the Gardens of Lug, their instant mutual recognition and communication in a secret language would seem to indicate that his divine father had a purpose as well as a significant role in bringing about the meeting of the two young people, just as Rāma and Arjuna were the only suitors capable of handling the bows that won them their brides.

Sītā as a reincarnation of Vedāvatī, a devotee of Viṣṇu, wins as her husband the avatāra Rāma-Viṣṇu and Draupadī finds herself the bride of the five-fold incarnation of

Indra.<sup>1</sup> Sītā demands no heroic feats of Rāma, but the bow contest which King Janaka had devised was certainly a test of the suitor's skill in more than archery. Emer's challenge does not seem wholly in character; she is depicted sitting in the garden, teaching embroidery to her companions when Cúchulainn finds her. If, however, we sense a positive interest, perhaps intervention on the part of the god Lug, we can see in Emer a divinely chosen instrument to turn Cúchulainn into the great warrior and defender of the Ulaid that his subsequent skill in arms made possible. The Fand interlude tests Emer's constancy, her patience and her ability to forgive<sup>2</sup> as Rāma's banishment of Sītā from his court tested her fidelity. While some allowance may possibly be made for Cúchulainn's desertion of Emer on the grounds that he was under a spell, there is no such excuse for Rāma's action. Whether or not Sita was subjected to the agni-pariksha<sup>3</sup> it seems clear that

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1 This idea is examined at length in a later chapter

2 She needed a little magic to help her forget!

3 Dr C Bulcke in Ch 19 of Religious Hinduism (Allahabad: St Paul's Publications 1964) says that Sītā's kidnapping filled Rāma with sorrow, that at the false report of her death he was "overwhelmed with grief, (and) fell to the earth as a tree falls when its roots are severed." But when she was brought back he said "he suspected her fidelity and would not take her back.... This sudden reversal of Rāma's feelings... is sufficient proof that the whole incident is a clumsy interpolation." p 206

at a later date she had to leave the court lest her husband's honour might seem besmirched in the eyes of his subjects. One wonders how Draupadī would have reacted to such a sentence. Surely the daughter of Agni would have blazed with anger where the daughter of mother Earth retreats in dignified but heartbroken silence. This arrogance on Rāma's part reminds one more of Conchobar than of Cúchulainn.

When Sītā makes her last appearance in the Rāmāyana, she comes with her twin sons whom she has brought up in a distant āśrama. No word of criticism, much less condemnation, of their father has crossed her lips. On the contrary the boys have been taught to recite his praise, to recount his deeds of valour. In a sense Sītā is the ādikavi of the Rāmāyana. We see the oral tradition taking shape here. Their mother has recited their father's story of greatness to her sons; they have memorized it, and now she presents them to King Rāma. She has reared his sons without any help or care on his part and now she hands them over to him as they reach the threshold of manhood. She has brought them to him singing his glory, and her task complete, she is received back into the heart of her mother Earth. One wonders if Rāma was able to appreciate the depth of Sītā's fidelity. She will always remain the ideal of Indian

womanhood, faithful wife, brave mother.

From this brief enumeration it should be clear that the epic poets have immortalised a number of outstanding women characters - extraordinary women who urged great warriors to develop to the full their martial potential, women who proved more than equal partners in the governance of kingdoms, women whose wisdom and generosity nurtured, cherished and preserved the virtues of home and hearth. We find that as the poets delineate these women in the course of the epic narrative they show them, at times, in positions of power and eminence, a threat to the dignity of their spouses. At other times, we see them slighted, spurned and ill-treated because, as a seventeenth century sceptic put it, "they are but women".<sup>1</sup>

The ancient story-tellers, whatever specific appellation or social or professional rank they enjoyed, present their heroic women figures as loyal, determined, possessed of strong principles, but singularly unforgiving and vengeful. A more searching gaze focussed on some of these women: Draupadi, Deirdre and Kriemhild particularly, will reveal them as instruments of vengeance.

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1 M E C Chambers, Life of Mary Ward (London: Burns and Oates 1882)

Deirdre and Draupadī - the names fall on the ear with a certain similarity of assonances, sounds that might suggest some remote philological relationship. Deirdre and Draupadī are two beautiful women, born in unusual circumstances; each selects her own husband, to the dismay of other worthy-seeming suitors, and then finds herself in a polyandric situation. Draupadī becomes, literally, a pawn in a game between two royal adversaries and has to spend long years in exile with her husbands. Deirdre is a pawn in a different kind of struggle where a king breaks his word and leaves her widowed after her return from years of exile. The insult offered Draupadī is a major factor in the devastating Mahābhārata war. The betrayal of Deirdre and the sons of Uíslíú<sup>1</sup> makes enemies in his own household for the treacherous Conchobar and is one of the contributory causes of the war that follows the Táin Bó Cúailnge. At such a superficial glance one might suspect that the Deirdre story on the eastern fringe of the Indo-European world was an echo, a descendant perhaps, some thousand years later, of the vigorous stock of the Mahābhārata<sup>2</sup> at the

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1 Kinsella, The Táin p 8

2 The texts used throughout are:

1 Rajsekhar Basu's Kṛṣṇadvaipāyana Vyāsa Kṛta Mahābhārata (my own translation of quotations) (Calcutta 1958)

iii Mahābhārata, trans into Bengali by Sitaramdas Omkarnath. In Aryasāstra, Vol 14 No 1 1975 Calcutta (Delhi: Vikas

eastern heart and source of Indo-European culture and mythology. That Deirdre might prove to be a "throw-back" to Draupadī does not seem impossible on the strength - or weakness - of the parallels just mentioned. That the story may have crossed from India to the Mediterranean and travelled, like the Celts themselves, across Europe to the then western limits of human settlement, is not beyond the realm of the possible. Man was a nomad before he paused to till the soil and build a shelter while he waited for the harvest. Travellers' tales have not lost their hold even on the modern imagination and may well account for the appearance of comparable figures and themes in the folk tales of far distant races and civilizations.

However, the resemblances, so far mentioned, are at best superficial. There are differences that go deeper far. The story of Deirdre is one of the many rém-scéala (prefatory stories) of the Táin Bó Cúailnge, itself the nearest approach in Celtic literature to an epic opus. Each of these "pre-stories" is linked to some event in The Táin, providing in a more or less self-contained story an explanation necessary to understand the event. This prevents long diversions in the course of the main narrative, diversions such as abound in the Mahābhārata,

where the connecting of tales to one another in a kind of chain-link system proves both fascinating and frustrating to the reader, but must have delighted a live audience.

The Deirdre story, or to give it its full title: "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliú", is one such explanatory device, accounting for the presence of Fergus mac Roich, one-time King of Ulster and step-father of the reigning Conchobar, at the court of Medb and Ailill in Cruachan, and so obliged to fight his fellow-Ulidian in the Táin conflict. But this tale is more than an artistic substitute for a footnote. It is a gem of a story, polished and refined to a degree not found in any of the other rémisceála. Nora Chadwick<sup>1</sup> claims that it dates back to the eighth century. Alwyn and Brinley Rees<sup>2</sup> mention a recension a thousand years old. How long it existed in the oral tradition is a question that cannot be answered. The destruction of the earliest Gaelic manuscripts during ninth and tenth century raids from the northern seas has made the task of tracing the origins of this touching tale of love, chivalry and treachery impossible. Professor Proinsias MacCana<sup>3</sup> believes that

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1 The Celts (Penguin 1970) p 272

2 Celtic Heritage p 279

3 My conversation with Professor MacCana at University College, Dublin, October 1983



its composition is of a later date than the Táin and most of its garland of "pre-stories". He also claims that it is the work of a single author of exceptional literary merit.

Draupadī, in striking contrast, is a key figure in the elaborate narrative pattern of the vast Mahābhārata. Once she emerges from the sacrificial fires of the priest Yoja in response to Drupada's long tested prayer for progeny, Kṛsnā eclipses to a considerable extent her twin brother, Dhṛtādyumna and fills the centre of the stage to the last chapters of the epic. At her svayamvara all eyes are focussed on her. When Arjuna brings her home as his bride and calls out to his mother that he has brought a gift, Kuntī, unaware of the nature of the gift, directs her son to share "it" with his brothers; in this she is but the instrument fulfilling a promise made by Mahādeva himself to the beautiful, unmarried, daughter of a ṛṣi that in a later birth she would have five husbands. When Yudhiṣṭhira gambles with Duryodhana's champion gambler, Śakuni, and loses his kingdom, his brothers, himself and his wife, Draupadī, it is this last loss with the insults that follow, which leads irrevocably to the wars and holocaust of the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas. Draupadī will never forget, never forgive

the personal violence that she suffers at the hands of the victors. She will never allow Bhīma to forget his angry oath to break Duryodhana's thigh and drink the blood of Duḥśasana. The long years of exile in the forest with the five brothers, the hardships and deprivations, the year of anonymity with its risks and achievements, do nothing to soften Draupadī's bitter hatred, nothing to mollify the intensity of her desire for revenge. The traditionally purifying spiritual effect of the forest experience is missing in her case. On the contrary, it seems to have fed the flames of her hatred, to have confirmed her in her determination to have vengeance at any cost. In this she resembles Kriemhild, who for a similar period of thirteen years mourned Siegfried unceasingly, nurturing in her heart the while, an unwavering resolution to be avenged on Hagen. It is Rüdiger's sworn oath to avenge all that she had suffered which finally persuades her to accept King Etzel's offer of marriage. Kriemhild's marriage of convenience, made for the sole purpose of becoming powerful enough to destroy Hagen and all who supported him, is perhaps an extreme example of the deadliness of feminine hatred. Yet Draupadī's determination to assert her personal claim to dignity and respect when none of her husbands had acted to defend her, may seem more self-centred than Kriemhild's

vow to slay her husband's murderer. The outcome in both cases is not only the total destruction of the enemy, but the decimation of the flower of knighthood and valour, ancient or medieval. Fathers, husbands, brothers, sons are massacred mercilessly, to appease the anger, to slake the thirst for vengeance of Draupadī and Kriemhild. The gory details of battle, the counting of heads<sup>1</sup> in the Mahābhārata and the Nibelungenlied evince comparable levels of satisfaction, even delight in the macabre rites of death on the battlefield. The Táin Bó Cúailnge has similar scenes, but it is men who revel in bloodshed, warriors and a warrior-queen, Medb, who claims to "thrive on all kinds of trouble".

To return to Draupadī's thirst for revenge and the consequent slaughter, it is necessary to recall the divine prophecy uttered at the time of her birth: "This best of all women, this Kṛṣṇā, will bring about the destruction of the kṣatriyas and become the terror of the Kurus."<sup>2</sup> She was the chosen instrument of the gods then,

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1 The severed head motif also figures in Celtic tradition. In "The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel", Lomnae Druth, one of the raider chiefs, foresees that his own head will be tossed to and fro between the chariot shafts. In "The Hero's Portion" heads are also hurled about and in the Táin battles heads are impaled on wooden shafts and carried in triumph. Celtic iconography also depicts this motif.

2 Basu p 72

and there can be no doubt that she fulfilled her destiny. Perhaps the deepest level of similarity with Deirdre lies in this fated role. For just before the birth of Fedlimid MacDaill's child, his wife was waiting on their guests when the unborn babe screamed in her womb. The seer, Cathbad, foretold the birth of a daughter - "A woman with twisted yellow tresses/Green irised eyes of great beauty..." but he went on

Much damage, Deirdriu will follow  
 Your high fame and fair visage:  
 Ulster in your time tormented,  
 Demure daughter of Fedlimid.  
 And later, too, jealousy  
 Will dog you, woman like a flame,  
 And later still - listen well  
 The three sons of Uisliu exiled  
 Fergus exiled out of Ulster  
 Through your fault, fatal woman,  
 And the much-wept deadly wound  
 Of Fiachna, Conchobor's son...  
 Harsh, hideous deeds done  
 In anger at Ulster's high king,  
 And little graves everywhere  
 - a famous tale, Deirdriu.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Kinsella pp 10-11

The guests present suggest that this child of woe be killed at once, reminding us not only of Oedipus but also of Duryodhana. But King Conchobar intervenes, saving Deirdriu (whose name means "sorrow") to be his own bride in years to come. Like many another character in ancient literature, he seeks to circumvent the dire prophecy, not only by the proposed marriage, but by having the child brought up in a secret, isolated spot by foster-parents with a woman satirist, Leborcham, as her guardian! This was a strange choice of mentor for the beautiful child growing into womanhood in a veritable 'vanavāsa' lasting probably longer than Draupadī's forest exile. It was a lonelier life-style too, with her simple foster-parents and the ageless-ancient, Leborcham, for company. It is Synge<sup>1</sup> who has Conchobar visit her regularly and his artistic sense may be right, but on this point the ancient tale is silent. Perhaps it was resentment of this imposed, lonely childhood that touched some spring of compassion, or mischief, in Leborcham when Deirdre's sight of a raven, drinking the blood of a freshly slain calf on the snow-covered ground, evoked the wistful longing: "I could desire a man who has those three colours there: Hair like the raven, cheeks like blood and his body like snow." The old crone remarks

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1 J M Synge, Deirdre of the Sorrows in The Complete Plays (New York: Vintage Books 1960)

that this dream-lover is close at hand in the person of Naoise<sup>1</sup> and the close-laid schemes of Conchobar begin to come apart.

Deirdre's choice of a husband is simple, direct, almost violent, when compared with the pageantry and splendour of Draupadī's svayamvara. In The Backward Look<sup>2</sup> Frank O'Connor describes it in terms of a Texan cowboy-cowgirl encounter which strikes one as rather offensive until one recalls that the Táin is a story about a war fought to gain possession of a bull! At any rate, Naoise rejects Deirdre's first proposal for he is one of the Red Branch Knights, Conchobar's "commando group", and he knows that she is betrothed to the King. But, grabbing his two ears, Deirdre places him under geis (an ancient form of binding another to a particular action or restraint): "'You will do it,' she said, binding him." Not even his appeal, in warning alarm, to Cathbad's prophecy, carries any weight. And when he summons his brothers, Ardán and Ainle, they agree that go he must though "evil will come of it". They left that night, "with three times fifty warriors and three times fifty women and the same of hounds and menials."<sup>3</sup>

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1 Also spelt Noisiu

2 p 47

3 Kinsella p 12

For Deirdre and the sons of Uisliu, homeless wandering, with Conchobar in pursuit, leads eventually to exile across the seas. A spell of sylvan, romantic happiness is threatened by the demand of the King of Alba for Deirdre's hand, and followed by further flight. Conchobar eventually, on the advice of his knights, pardons them and invites them back to Ulster. His step-father, Fergus, and his son, Cormac, are the guarantors of his pledge. But once back on Irish soil, the three brothers are treacherously slain and Deirdre, her hands bound behind her, is led - dragged by her yellow hair, perhaps? - to Conchobar's side.<sup>1</sup> In this game of dice, it would seem that the king has won, that Deirdre who tricked both Conchobar and Naoise, has now been tricked in turn. But Fergus has yet to be reckoned with. In physical prowess he is not unlike Bhīma, and he is just as easily beguiled. But his anger has something of the same quality as the mace-bearer's and soon Conchobar's palace is in flames and three hundred warriors lie dead - the choicest of the Red Branch Knights. Cathbad's prophecy has indeed proved true. Battle cries, bloodshed, flames leaping in the night-sky, a miniature Troy, a microscopic Kurukṣetra - and all for the sake of a woman, betrayed, degraded, held in

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1 Kinsella p 15

bondage of body, mind and heart. The destruction of the warrior "caste" - Celtic, Greek, Trojan, Indian is accomplished in greater or lesser degree. Etzel's palace in Hungary is another scene of devastation with the knights of Burgundy and Hunland slain to a man because Kriemhild would be avenged.

Deirdre, unlike Draupadī and Kriemhild, neither urges peace-seeking princes to battle, nor contrives conflict. She is handed over to Conchobar and for the year that she spends with him "she never gave one smile, nor took enough food or sleep, nor lifted up her head from her knees". She constantly mourned the death of Naoise and his brothers, recalling her love for her husband and mourning him in touching verses. Small comfort Conchobar could have had of her, and her constant declarations of hatred finally drive him to ask "What do you see that you hate most?" and the answer comes in a flash: "You, of course, and Eogan Mac Durthacht!" (He had actually slain the sons of Uisliú.) Conchobar's response is to devise a penalty even more degrading than that inflicted on Draupadī: "Go and live with Eogan for a year then." This conversation takes place during a chariot drive with Deirdre seated between the two men she hates most. She will endure no more. Swift as thought she springs from



the chariot and dashes her head against a rock.<sup>1</sup> Some versions of the tale have it that this rock marked the burial place of Naoise.

Deirdre's place in literature is that of a tragic heroine, a bone of contention between rival lovers, the cause of conflict, personal and public, and of death. Because of Conchobair's treachery Fergus, with three thousand followers, harries Ulster for sixteen years, first within its boundaries and later in exile in Connachta in the army of Queen Medb. Deirdre is not presented as a mother; she has no son whose death on the battlefield will wring her heart; no son to live for with hope for the future when Naoise dies, no ties at all to hold her to life on earth and so she is one of the few suicides in heroic literature. Dido is the other memorable instance that comes to mind. Women with no bonds of love to give them strength to suffer, or hope for the future. Their husbands dead they have no further duties, no dharma to live by. Draupadī, on the other hand, is a mother and even though she leaves her sons with Subhadra when she sets out with the Pandavas for the forest, her love for her children does not fade. Kriemhild, after Siegfried's death, allows her son,

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1 Kinsella pp 16-20

Gunther, to live with his grandfather, Sigemund<sup>1</sup> (perhaps for safety). The bloodfest that ultimately avenges the death of her first husband involves the slaughter of Kriemhild's second son, Ortlieb, as Kurukṣetra claims the lives of Draupadī's five sons. The destined destruction of the kṣatriyas makes no allowance for the ties of blood. Fate has no pity for a mother's tears. Fate has no pity. And Nemesis is a woman, the divine personification of the righteous indignation of the gods at human presumption.

Although the ancient Irish believed in the possibility of the transmigration of the soul from one human body to another (and also to animal and bird forms), there is no suggestion that Deirdre had a previous existence. Draupadī, on the other hand, certainly lived at least one earlier life-span. Her birth to the King of Pāñcāla is clearly miraculous; in the strict sense she is not his daughter; she is of divine origin emerging from the sacred fire. That Deirdre in some long-lost tradition dating back to pre-Christian Ireland, might have had divine associations is not impossible.<sup>2</sup> Modern scholars

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- 1 The boy fades out of the story as does Brünhild's son, Siegfried, who would have been an adolescent at the time his father set out for Hungary. Brünhild herself committed suicide.
  - 2 It might be possible to work out a connection between Étaín of the Síde (fairyfolk) and Deirdre, but so far scholars do not seem to have done much research on Deirdre.

like O'Máille, Dumézil and MacCana are convinced that many of the characters in Gaelic heroic poetry, presented as historical, are in fact euhemerized divine beings. Older works of lesser literary merit list gods and goddesses of ancient Ireland whose attributes and special functions match or approximate those of the heroes or heroines of the better known sagas. Thus Medb, whether Medb of Cruachan or Medb Lethderg, is certainly the divine symbol of sovereignty, the goddess whom the lawful king must wed before he can ascend the throne. Cúchulainn, the champion of the Táin is probably the son of Ler or Lug, gods of the sea and of light. Yeats possibly has this in mind when he sends him to meet his death fighting the waves maddened by the realisation that he had slain his own son, begotten on the Otherworld warrior woman, Aife.<sup>1</sup>

The monastic scribes while preserving the oral tradition for posterity probably played down the religious significance of characters and events in the legends and sagas. The result is a literature devoid of any philosophical background or theological framework. In this it differs greatly from the Mahābhārata or the Rāmāyana; a reading of these great epics is in itself

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1 W B Yeats, On Baille's Strand

an enriching spiritual experience. Draupadī and Sītā are more than symbols of feminine dignity or marital fidelity. They represent a way of life with an elaborate system of values and beliefs. Deirdre, on the other hand, while she symbolises the strength of love, independence of mind and tragic heroism, is in many respects amoral. There is no religious context, no faith-structure within which her actions take place. Despite her destiny, she is an individual seeking her own freedom and her own happiness, while Draupadī and Sītā are solemnly conscious of their duties as wives, mothers and queens. One reason suggested for this is that while the Indian epics have been transmitted orally and in written form through a succession of persons of the same philosophy and faith, the Gaelic oral tradition was set down in writing for the first time by a society that no longer lived by the norms that moulded the original creation, a society that had in fact rejected them. So we are presented with a very human, often charming Deirdre who chooses a young nobleman in preference to the elderly, reigning king. She will re-emerge as Grainne choosing a young warrior, Diarmait, despite her pledge to the veteran leader of the warrior band, the great Fínd of the Fianna. And later she will undergo a more elaborate transformation as Iseult bringing grief

and death as well as ecstasy to Tristan, the trusted friend of King Mark, the husband they both betray. The virtues of courage, loyalty, open-heartedness, and the force of passion, betrayal and treachery set against them represent a programme of heroic conduct and its contrary, rather than a way of life based on religious convictions.

There is a secular quality about the events of the Táin despite the occasional flash of magic or the warnings of a seer or the fulfilment of a prophecy. The gods are discreetly in the background and God has not yet been introduced. In the Nibelungenlied we have something nearly similar. The Siegfried - Günther - Kriemhild - Brünhild<sup>1</sup> story is patently "pagan". So is the Kriemhild - Etzel<sup>2</sup> story. Yet we find Christian ceremonies framing some of the incidents and an objection to Kriemhild's marriage to the "pagan" Etzel being forestalled by a Rüdiger who has some of the best qualities of a crusader. The Christian framework into which the two separate pre-Christian tales are set is quite inadequate if the late twelfth century poet hoped to give more than a sprinkling of holy water to the old tales. The Irish monks, on the whole, were wiser, though

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1 The Nibelungenlied, Chapters I to XVII (Penguin 1965)

2 Ibid Chapters XX to XXXIX

there are occasional attempts at a Christian turn to some of the incidents in the shorter tales. The stories of the Fenian cycle are "told" to St Patrick, and Oisín returns from the Celtic Otherworld so that Baptism may transfer him to the Christian Heaven - a tribute of appreciation of the nobility of the Fianna rather than a condemnation of an earlier religious system! But, on the whole, the secular tone prevails and we read the ancient legends of the Gaels for entertainment, for a glimpse into pre-history, for pictures of heroic warriors and fascinating women. It would be worse than useless to expect to meet Dharma or to try to find a Gaelic Draupadī following Dharma, rather than Madana, into the forest. Deirdre and Draupadī have different concepts of love, though both are capable of strong, enduring love. They are both unfailingly loyal where they have pledged loyalty but Deirdre refuses to acknowledge a claim made on her before her birth. Perhaps it is because she has lived apart from society that she can flout its norms with such impunity, while Draupadī has known the bonds of family and kindred and accepts those ties as sacred. Deirdre's life is short, tempestuous and tragic. Draupadī lives on into old age, through a long span of varied experience - joys, sorrow, separation and costly victory - following her husbands into the forest, the

palace, the silent battlefield when the war is over, and finally on the last journey to Heaven.

Deirdre has been referred to as the "Irish Helen" or more properly the "Celtic Helen"<sup>1</sup> probably because of her beauty, and because she has been considered as fated to bring disaster on her own people. Before her birth, as before Helen's, there was a prophecy to this effect, and while we do not know what gods or goddesses ordained Deirdre's sorrows, we know that Aphrodite was determined to bring about Helen's undoing. Both Helen and Deirdre are renowned for their beauty; Deirdre seems happily unconscious of her charms, for sequestered as she has been, there is no one to compliment her on her looks, certainly not the aged Leborcham. But it may have been this beauty, just as much as the geis she laid on him, that swept away Naoise's objections: she was pledged to Conchobar, he was the king's knight. That she deliberately used her beauty to ensnare him or tempt him to disloyalty is not even hinted at in the story. Indeed, the metaphorical language of the exchange between the two, is that of the farmyard where Deirdre has grown up. And Knights of the Red Branch though they be, the daily down-to-earth occupation of the sons of

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1 The word "Celtic" embraces the areas on the continent once the homeland of the Celts, as well as Wales, Cornwall and Ireland.

Uisliú is herding cattle.<sup>1</sup> So the references to heifers and bulls provide the "cover" for a marriage proposal, objections and final acceptance. Helen, on the other hand, is Menelaus' wife, queen in a palace with all its wealth and grandeur. That is what Conchobar has in mind for Deirdre, of course, but she has had no experience of anything but the simple life. Helen resists Paris' inducement, even as Naoise tries to reject Deirdre's proposal, but Aphrodite uses her magic so that almost without her willing it, Helen finds herself transported to Troy. Deirdre deliberately turns her back on Conchobar, the old man who chose her without giving her the opportunity to say "yea" or "nay" and she turns her face equally deliberately towards flight, pursuit, exile and capture. The Greek storyteller tries to excuse Helen, to lay the blame on Aphrodite. This is an attitude that is often met with in Greek epic literature and it is one that is singularly absent from the Gaelic stories, where each character is held responsible for his or her actions be they heroic or ignoble. Sometimes reference to an old prophecy or the constraints of geasa may be offered in partial explanation, but they are never made the sole justification for a character's success or failure. This has the effect of making the

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1 Naoise's singing was said to increase his cows' milk yield.



Gaelic sagas in many ways sturdier and more credible than some of the fascinatingly improbable episodes in Homer or Hesiod. The Deirdre tale is so spare in outline that we get no details of the life in Alba that can compare with the situation of Helen in Troy. The protectiveness of Hector, the less than cordial attitude of Andromache, the sadness of Priam when the avenging armies of Agamemnon and Menelaus besiege Troy, fill in a rich background that is totally lacking in the case of Deirdre. Homer tries to show us all sides of the picture, a three dimensional presentation of the Helen event and its devastating consequences. Whether as H J Rose<sup>1</sup> suggests, the Graeco-Trojan conflict was no more than a trade war into the account of which the myth of Helen was woven, it may never be possible to ascertain beyond all shadow of doubt. But without the Helen element, even if it be no more than an illusion, a dream, a nightmare, the ultimate in Maya, there would have been no Iliad, possibly no Odyssey either and the Draupadiharana of the Mahābhārata in its journey westward would have skipped one of its most elaborate and poetic transformations. For the destruction of the warriors seems to have been the fated destiny of all three heroines. Menelaus and all the Greeks are insulted by the "theft"

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1 A Handbook of Greek Mythology (London: Methuen 1928 rpt 1960)

of Helen, the Pāṇḍavas are banished, pursued and persecuted because they will not yield up Draupadī to the envious Duryodhana, Conchobar is enraged because it seems to him that the sons of Uisliú have stolen Deirdre. Helen would discover that Paris had been unfaithful to Enone, Deirdre that Naoise, Ardán and Ainle longed for their native land, and Draupadī would find no ease for her hurt and humiliation in the isolation of the forest. Daughter of Agni, her heart would know no relief from the fires of anger that smouldered there until the embers were fanned into the conflagration of Kurukṣetra. Flames of hatred and revenge would reduce Troy to ashes and burn Conchobar's palace, Emain Macha, to the ground. Most of Priam's fifty sons perished at Troy, his wife Hekabe and Hector's wife, Andromache, were taken into slavery, while on the Greek side Achilles, Patroclus and countless other warriors were slain; the victor Agamemnon, returned home to meet his death at the hands of his unfaithful wife, Klytemnestra, Helen's sister. The hundred sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the sons of Draupadī, Subhadra and the other Pāṇḍava wives perished at Kurukṣetra, while in Ulster Conchobar's son, Maine, his grandson, Fiachna, and Fergus' son Fiacha (who threw himself on Naoise's body in a vain attempt to save him from Eogan mac Durthact's sword) were among the

three hundred warriors slain. More than three thousand Ulstermen went into exile to the court of Medb and Ailill, among them Fergus and Conchobar's son, Cormac. "For sixteen years they made sure that weeping and trembling never died away in Ulster."<sup>1</sup>

There can be little doubt that in some way the destinies of these three women, so different in their geographical and social settings, are closely linked in some far-off deeply held conviction of the race that the gods were determined to destroy martial prowess on the earth. These women are the instruments of this annihilation in their three distinctive cultures: Indian, Graeco-Trojan and Gaelic. The reason for this hostility between the gods and the heroes is outside the scope of this study. That there is here some transcendent order to which the human reality is subordinated there can be no doubt and this pattern which transcends human judgement and values is at the core of the epic vision.<sup>2</sup>

It should be pointed out that while Draupadī like Brünhild and Kriemhild, actively seeks revenge for the insult to her honour and to that of the Pāṇḍavas, neither

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1 Kinsella p 14

2 cf R Antoine in Rama and the Bards p 107

Helen nor Deirdre is seen thirsting for revenge or rallying warriors to her cause. In the Udyogaparva we read of the discussions the five brothers hold with Kṛṣṇa regarding the possibility of a peaceful agreement with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana. All advocate peace with honour so as to avoid a devastating confrontation. Kṛṣṇa is rather doubtful that such an agreement can be reached, but undertakes to open negotiations. Draupadī has been listening to the discussion and when the men have had their say she comes forward and addresses Kṛṣṇa:

Madhusudana, you know that Duryodhana has sworn to deprive the Pāṇḍavas of their kingdom... Yudhiṣṭhira's request for five villages has been turned down. If he (Duryodhana) wants a treaty without yielding the kingdom, do not agree; the Pāṇḍavas and their allies can rout the armies of Duryodhana. Show no mercy; the enemy who will not accept a just solution must be crushed by force. This is the duty of the Pāṇḍavas, it will bring you glory and be beneficial for the kṣatriyas....

Then holding the thick plait of her hair in her left hand she addressed Kṛṣṇa:

When you speak of a treaty to our enemies, keep

in mind this plait by which Duḥśāsana dragged me (to the assembly). If Bhīma and Arjuna cravenly seek peace, then my aged father and his warrior sons will fight against the Kauravas; with Abhimanyu leading them my five sons will fight. If I do not see Duḥśāsana's black arms severed and fallen in the dust, how can my heart know peace? Like a live coal have I kept my anger alight throughout thirteen long years, now the spear of Bhīma's words (he had advocated peace) has pierced my heart. This strong-minded man has turned his mind to Dharma today!<sup>1</sup>

These are strong, angry words that her listeners cannot ignore. Kṛṣṇa assures her that her enemies will be destroyed, that their womenfolk will weep and wail. When his mission to the Kurus at Hastināpura fails, Kṛṣṇa visits Kuntī, the Pāṇdavas' mother, who though she urged Duryodhana in the assembly to heed the advice of Kṛṣṇa and the elders, now sends a rousing message to Yudhiṣṭhira in the form of an anecdote: "When Sañjaya returned defeated and disheartened after a battle against Sindhurāja, Vidulā, his mother, disowned him for his behaviour so unworthy of a warrior. With wise

words she encouraged him to seek alliance with all those who had any grudge against Sindhurāja and to gird himself for fresh efforts."<sup>1</sup> So, we see both Draupadī and Kuntī urging the Pāṇḍavas to the battlefield. Kuntī's words have none of the inflammatory quality of Draupadī's. They are quiet, firm and strong and they carry the same message: War is a warrior's duty. These are ksatriya women.

Deirdre and Helen, by contrast, play a more passive role. It is Conchobar's betrayal of his word, the word of a king, conveyed across the seas to the sons of Uisliú by men of honour, that rouses Fergus to anger, that makes Fiacha rush to the defence of Naoise. Then the sight of Deirdre standing with bound hands by Conchobar's side, sends Fergus and his companions on the rampage through Emain Macha. They may not touch the person of the king<sup>2</sup> but the king's palace goes up in flames, his defenders are slain and three thousand Red Branch Knights renounce their fealty to the king and leave Ulster. In

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1 Basu p 351

2 A point of knightly chivalry that Yeats exploits in his play On Baile's Strand where Cúchulainn, in the madness that overtakes him after slaying his own son, lays hands on Conchobar and the horror of his deed restores him to cold sanity.

the Greek situation, it is the injured husband who seeks redress. With his brother, Agamemnon, leading the Greek armies, Menelaus sets out for Troy, the ten-year siege and the destruction it involved. It is true that at one stage Helen urges Paris to go and fight, but this is because she suspects that he has run away from the battlefield and everything in her upbringing and her association with Priam and his valiant sons, makes her burn with shame for the cowardice of Paris. Has she been taken away from a brave king to be the plaything of a cowardly and unfaithful Trojan? Andromache is also keenly aware, as are Draupadī and Kuntī, of the noblesse oblige that dominates a hero's life. On his way to the battlefield she meets Hector, whom she loves deeply and whose affection for her is clearly tender. She has her infant son with her and for a moment we get a glimpse of a family within sight of the battlefield, within earshot of its din. This is a touch of genius on the part of the poet and reveals more of the meaning, or the meaninglessness of war than long descriptions of the massacre on the field. It gives us too, for a moment, a woman's point of view and reveals the feelings of a wife and mother who knows, with all the keenness of a woman's intuition, that this is her last meeting with her husband. Her heart would have her hold him back

from the conflict, from death, but her long nurturing in the ethos of the warrior-tribe has to win out over the ache in her heart, so after a farewell caress to his child and his wife, Hector goes to the battlefield and to death.<sup>1</sup> Andromache's next glimpse of him will be when Achilles has the body of the dead Hector dragged around the scene of battle at the heels of a horse.<sup>2</sup> The sheer brutality of the episode coming so soon after the poignant farewell scene is in strong contrast and focusses attention on the conflicting values of family and country. War destroys them both as we see so clearly exemplified when the din and dust have settled on the corpse-strewn field of Kurukṣetra. Which is greater, a human life or its honour-price? It would seem that down through history - and even before history began - honour has been valued above life, whether it be Draupadī confronting Kṛṣṇa with her plait in hand, or Deirdre leaping from Conchobar's chariot to her death or Sītā disappearing into the heart of her mother Earth when she has presented her sons to their father who, under pressure of public opinion perhaps, has questioned her virtue. The ancient poets have paid this tribute to their women-heroes and in the Middle

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1 Iliad Bk VI

2 ibid Bk XXII



Ages Dante gave Beatrice to the world, and Petrarch created Laura. Shakespeare's heroines add several outstanding figures to the gallery of distinguished women characters. It is only in post-Renaissance times, from the eighteenth century onwards, that the place of women in literature has changed drastically. The heroines have disappeared with the epic and in the domestic drama and novel woman has been robbed of her glory and reduced to the level of a plaything or a mere household accessory. Is it, perhaps, because men feel threatened by the large-scale emergence of women from the protective seclusion in which they had kept them for so long? Or is it, perhaps, that men, no longer the lords of the earth, must reduce their women-folk to smaller scale, so that they themselves may not feel over-looked or over-shadowed? These are questions for the psychologists and the sociologists. They are questions that do not seem to have troubled the ancient world too seriously. There women had a clearly defined role to play side by side with their lords and masters. Relatively few of them stepped out of those roles into more spectacular parts and these are the heroines of the old legends, sagas and epics. They were able to move beyond the limits placed upon their sex by man-made laws, either because of outstanding beauty like Helen's,

extraordinary courage like Draupadī's, heroic virtue like Sīta's, or a divinely appointed destiny like all three of these and many others too, Medb, Deirdre, Mādhavī, Kassandra.

Another group of women characters, small in number perhaps, but far from insignificant, deserves some mention. These are the seers or prophetesses or messengers from another world. They are invariably divine beings either professedly or euhemerized, though some appear closer than others to the human level. There is Kassandra, daughter of Priam, who foresees and warns of the destruction of Troy, who falls to Agamemnon's share of the spoils and is ignominiously slain by Klytemnestra, if we are to believe Aeschylus. In the Táin Medb has a brief but telling encounter with Feidelm, the prophetess. The Cruachan Queen had already consulted her druid about the outcome of the approaching battle and had received the evasive answer "Whoever comes or comes not back, you yourself will come". On her return journey to the camp she meets a woman in "a green speckled cloak, with a round, heavy-headed brooch in the cloak above her breast. She had a rich-blooded countenance, a bright, laughing eye, thin, red lips.... She had long, fair yellow, golden hair... which touched

the calves of her legs." To Medb's question she answers that she is "Feidelm the prophetess from Síd Chruachna". To Medb's five-times repeated query: "Well, then, Feidelm Prophetess, how do you see our army?" she replies "I see red on them: I see crimson". She then chants a lay foretelling the coming of Cúchulainn and the destruction he will bring.<sup>1</sup> The poet, of course, makes use of this incident to build up a sense of impending doom and the contrast between the bright, laughing girl and the gloomy prophecy she utters is very striking and effective. Also remarkable is the directness of Feidelm's answer compared to the evasiveness of the druid whom Medb went to seek out, while Feidelm came of her own accord to warn Medb and her armies.

In the story entitled The Children of Lir from the mythological cycle when Fionnguala and her three brothers are transformed into swans by their jealous step-mother, Aoife, the girl foretells the woman's doom.<sup>2</sup> But this prophesying is merely incidental and Fionnguala cannot be termed a prophetess, though she and all the others in

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1 Cecile O'Rahilly, The Táin Bó Cúalnge pp 143-5

2 Myles Dillon, Early Irish Literature (Chicago: University Press 1948 rpt 1969)

the story definitely belong to the world of the Síde. Also from this fairy realm comes Li Ban, the sister of Fand, both of whom live with their husband-gods in Mag Mell (the Otherworld "Pleasant Plain"). She comes to where Cúchulainn has fallen asleep against a pillar-stone and horse whips him so that he is ill for a year, at the end of which time she returns. She asks Cúchulainn's help for her husband whose enemies are about to attack him. The reward for this service is a month in the company of Fand, the beautiful wife of Mananan, the sun-god.<sup>1</sup> The month proves much longer by earthly reckoning and Emer, Cúchulainn's wife, has good reason to be jealous. Eventually, Mananan has to use his magic to enable Cúchulainn to forget Fand and return to normal.

There are some instances in Indian literature of women prophesying as when Vedāvatī, living a life of severe penance to win the favour of Visnu, rejects the advances of Rāvaṇa. He then seizes her by the hair but she frees herself and throws herself on the fire. Before expiring, she foretells her future birth as Sītā when she will rise from the furrow.<sup>2</sup> In this re-birth she

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1 He also rules the Otherworld and is known as the son of Ler, god of light, sometimes considered Cúchulainn's father also.

2 Antoine op cit p 59

will realise the desire that has been thwarted by Rāvaṇa's aggression. She will be the bride of Viṣṇu's incarnation, Rāma. Gandhārī's foretelling of the doom of Kṛṣṇa's race is more in the nature of a curse than of a prophecy. She is utterly grief-stricken at the loss of her hundred sons, the desolation of her daughters-in-law and the overwhelming slaughter on the battlefield. She blames Kṛṣṇa for not having prevented the conflict, and calling on the merits she has accumulated in the course of her long and faithful service of her husband she deliberately curses Kṛṣṇa: "Thirty-six years from now, you will slaughter your kinsmen as my sons did theirs. As the Pāṇḍavas did. Having slaughtered them, you will wander in shame and die disgracefully.... And the ladies of your race will weep as the Bhārata ladies are weeping now."<sup>1</sup> The details give this statement the quality of prophecy and emphasise once more the power of the word in ancient and primitive cultures. Once uttered the word cannot be recalled: it operates infallibly. This is a familiar theme in the Mahābhārata, but it is rarely a woman who speaks such words.<sup>2</sup> It is mainly the holy men, hermits, and ascetics in India and, in Ireland, druids, who are formally consulted for signs

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1 Basu, P. 551

2 Kuntī's words to Arjuna, when he wins Draupadī, are an example of power-filled words.

of the future. In Greek literature the oracles are the outstanding sources of divine communication and these oracles are sometimes feminine. It is to seers such as Teiresias, who sums up in his own person the characteristics of both sexes, that the divine will is revealed.

Odysseus has to travel all the way to Hades to discover whether and how he can return to Ithaca. Calypso, who seems to know so much of the future, cannot reveal this to him.

The apsarās who usually appear as beautiful temptresses, often sent by the gods to divert the prayers and penance of holy hermits, have no direct parallel in Irish literature. The fairy women who lure mortals away from home and loved ones, who steal babies from their cradles, replacing them with "changelings", who steal the butter from the milk and the milk from the cows and do all the other naughty things that Shakespeare lists in A Mid-Summer Night's Dream, are far from being identical or even comparable with Urvasī or Menakā. Both groups, however, are unquestionably wilful and irresponsible.

If, then, we are to entertain at all the view that "the ultimate reality is feminine" we must add that before reaching that reality we have to pass through many phases of illusion much of which is, of its nature, also feminine.

## CHAPTER IV

### GODDESSES OF SOVEREIGNTY: MEDB, MADHAVI, DEIRDRE, DRAUPADI

While speculation regarding any philological correspondence between the names "Deirdriu" and "Draupadi" does not seem to have engaged any serious attention on the part of linguists, there is no doubt whatever in the minds and writings of several eminent scholars that the names of Medb and Mādhavī spring from a common source.

Tomás O Máille<sup>1</sup> gives the Old Irish word mid, English mead, Old High German metu, Sanskrit madhu, as the source of the names of the Gaelic Queen Medb, daughter of the King of Ireland, and Mādhavī, daughter of the King of the Universe, which makes them if not "intoxicated" then "intoxicating" women.

In Mythe et Épopée<sup>2</sup> Georges Dumézil cites Heinrich Zimmer,

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1 "Medb Chruachna" in Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie XVII 1927 p 143

2 Vol II (Gallimard 1971) p 330. Cited hereafter as M E II

Rudolf Thurneysen, Josef Weisweiler as well as Alwyn and Brinley Rees in support of this derivation. While the Germans favour the rendering "die Betrunkene" Dumézil agrees with O Máille and the Rees duo that "the Intoxicating One" rather than "the Intoxicated One" more aptly describes these two royal daughters and consorts of many kings.

Dumézil's theory of an Indo-European tradition assigning three functions to three social classes, three functions often united in a single person, particularly in the person of a king; three functions shared among the gods or focussed in a single supreme Being, is indeed a fascinating thesis.<sup>1</sup> He applies it with convincing aptness to the Pāṇḍavas, to Draupadī, to the gods of the Iranians, to the Roman Jupiter-Mars-Quirinus, to the Norse hero-gods, to the sons of Mādhavī and to Medb of Cruachan and her ideal consort. Within its compass fall Herakles, Śiśupāla and Kṛṣṇa. One feels that there is scarcely a significant figure in Indo-European mythology who can be effectively excluded from this classification.

The categories that this theory distinguishes are as follows:

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1 Dumézil acknowledges the contributions of the Scandinavian scholars, M Stig Wikander and M Henrik Nyberg to this theory



Sovereign rulers fall within the scope of the first or highest function, the exercise of which includes judgement, wisdom, dominion; warriors belong to the second function-group and are characterized by courage, heroism, fortitude, loyalty; the third function is exercised by those who attend to the temporal needs of man, the tillers of the soil, the healers of bodies, the producers of food and wealth. When this classification is applied at the level of the gods, we have in the first group sovereign divinities like Odinn, Zeus, Mithra-Varuna, while the second would include Indra and such figures of divine origin as Starkadr, Herakles, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and Cúchulainn. The gods of fecundity and prosperity fall within the third category: the Asvins and their human counterparts, Nakula and Sahadeva; the popular Ganeśa and Lakṣmī would also find a place there as would the nature gods of the Greeks, Romans, Norse and Celts. It is to this division of roles that Dumézil attributes the emergence of the caste-system in India,<sup>1</sup> a system catering to man's basic needs - food, shelter and medicine; security in his possessions, and right ordering of his relations with gods and men.

How does this theory apply to Mādhavī and Medb? It is

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1 Mythe et Épopée Vol I p 48. Cited hereafter as M E I

quite a long story.<sup>1</sup> Gālava, the disciple of Viśvāmitra, the kṣatriya whose penance obtained for him the boon of becoming a brahmin, ie of moving from the second to the first function-category, served his guru for the entire year that Viśvāmitra stood motionless offering food to Dharma-Vasiṣṭha. At the end of this period, his discipleship now complete, Gālava made repeated requests to be allowed to offer an acceptable dakṣiṇa to his preceptor. Finally, Viśvāmitra set him an impossible task: to procure for him eight hundred horses "white as the moon" each with one black ear. In the futile wanderings with the celestial bird Garuḍa that ensued, Gālava came one day to the rich, powerful and generous King Yayāti. The king's response to the request for alms took a strange form. Since he did not own horses of the specified type, Yayāti offered his daughter, Mādhavī, as a kind of "coin of exchange". Gālava could give this beautiful maiden as wife to any king able to provide him with the eight hundred horses he sought.<sup>2</sup> But no monarch could supply his need outright. The first king offered him two hundred horses and Mādhavī would bear the childless ruler a son. This done her virginity was restored and she bore sons to two other kings in

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1 Rajsekhar Basu op cit pp 342-44

2 This gift of horses might possibly be construed as constituting a kind of 'bride-price'.

return for a further two hundred horses from each. And that represented the sum total of such horses in the world. Gālava returned to Viśvāmitra and offered him a son by Mādhavī in default of the remaining two hundred horses. So beautiful was the maiden that Viśvāmitra would have gladly surrendered the total count of horses in exchange for the pleasure of having four sons by her! When her fourth son was born, Mādhavī, virgin once more, returned to her father who arranged her svayamvara at which she chose Vana (the Forest) as her spouse and retired into the depths of the forest to live a life of solitary asceticism.

It is the sons Mādhavī bore in whom Dumézil sees the realisation of the three functions:

- 1 Bhoja's son, Śibi, was virtuous and truthful
- 2 Bhīmasena's son, Pratardana, was an outstanding warrior
- 3 Haryaśva's son, Vasumanās, was rich and generous
- 4 Viśvāmitra's son, Astaka, became a celebrated ritualist and conductor of sacrifices, thus sharing with Vasumanās the third function.<sup>1</sup>

We meet Mādhavī again much later when her father, Yayāti, is expelled from Heaven because of a single proud thought, a glance of disdain towards some of the celestial

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1 M E II pp 321-24

inhabitants who seemed less fit than himself for the joys of paradise. As his chariot descends towards the earth, he sees the smoke of a sacrificial fire rising heavenwards and prays that his chariot may touch the earth near the sacred altar. Mādhavī becomes aware of her father's plight and hurries from her forest retreat to where her four sons are assembled performing a sacrificial ritual. At her request they offer a full share of their merits to their grandfather to prevent his fall from Heaven; she offers half her own merits, and Gālava who also re-emerges from his hermitage makes an offering of one-eighth of his merits. This transfer of merit from the living to the departed restores Yayāti to his celestial glory.<sup>1</sup>

In his farewell song to her, Gālava sums up the good that Mādhavī has accomplished. She has secured for the brahmin six hundred splendid horses; given three childless kings a son and heir each; borne a son to the warrior-brahmin Viśvāmitra; given her father four grandsons, each of whom later becomes an eminent king, and assured Yayāti's restoration to Heaven. Dumézil's emphasis is on the trifunctional character of the joint virtues of

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1 In the Judaeo-Christian tradition transfer of merit from the living to the departed souls in purgatory is an article of faith and a common practice.

Mādhavī's sons; but it is also possible to see these functions brought together in the person of Mādhavī herself.

As child-bearer and mother of four sons, Mādhavī obviously exercises one of the duties of the third function which encompasses all that relates to fecundity at every level. The selflessness implied in the single act of union with each of the fathers and the miraculous restoration of her virginity, place her in close touch with dharma, with what is sacred, thus giving her a claim to the first function. This is further emphasised by the choice she exercises in her svayamvara - her option for a life of asceticism. But what of the second function? How can we relate Mādhavī to the warrior, kṣatriya category? It would be a poor argument to plead that by birth she is a king's daughter and that the ruling class were kṣatriyas, to claim this single function as a birthright while the other two are the fruit of personal action, of choice more or less free.

In an earlier work, Les Dieux des Germains (1959) Dumézil refers to a list of Scandinavian gods "of whom each one represents either one of the three functions, or an important aspect of one of the three functions,

the other aspects being rather overshadowed."<sup>1</sup> While the writer applies this qualification particularly to the figures of the third function, I propose to apply it to the second function in the case of Mādhavī. The most outstanding representative of this second function group is the god, Indra. The Vedic hymns, the Atharva-veda in particular, associate Indra with the soma offering the god being invoked by priests who "press the soma... and rinse it in behalf of Indra, who shall listen to the song of the worshipper," and who is also presented as drinking the soma from the mouth of his consort, Śrī. Dumézil suggests that it is the intoxication, induced by imbibing this drink, which gives Indra the impetus and fury that characterise his valour in combat.<sup>2</sup> This association of an intoxicating drink with martial valour brings us back once again to

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1 ... en Scandinavie comme à Rome, il fut constaté que, théologiquement, cette structure s'exprimait ou plutôt se résumait volontiers dans une brève liste de dieux dont chacun exprimait soit une des trois fonctions, soit un aspect important d'une des trois fonctions, les autres aspects restant dans l'ombre.  
M E I p 49 (emphasis mine)

2 First hand reports of World War I mention a practice common during trench warfare. Soldiers were issued a tablespoonful of raw rum before going "over the top" which sent them charging headlong and yelling: "Wipe your bayonets and charge again!"

the significance of Mādhavī's name: the Inebriating or Intoxicating One, and enables us to link her with Indra, the valiant one among the gods.<sup>1</sup> As mother of the warrior son of King Divodasa (also known as Bhīmasena), Pratardana, Mādhavī can also lay claim to the second function.

In the first volume of Mythe et Épopée Dumézil works out a somewhat similar pattern for Draupadī, associating her with gods of the three functions, her choice of Arjuna in her svayamvara linking her from an early stage with the second category. There are other resemblances, too, between Mādhavī and Draupadī. The multiple, yet sequential marriages of Mādhavī correspond in some degree to the polyandric marriage of Draupadī in which, however, co-habitation was sequential. It is true that Mādhavī was wife on four occasions while Draupadī had five husbands, but if we take into account the former's final choice of Vana in her svayamvara, then the tally is even. It may be possible to see in Draupadī a kind of doublet of Mādhavī, a parallel story at a later stage (and a more developed story) in the overall panorama of events that constitute the great compilation of the Mahābhārata.

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1 M E I p 50 where the author mentions "...l'affinité toute particulière d'Indra pour le soma, pour la liqueur où il puise l'ivresse nécessaire à ses victoires..."

From a different angle, perhaps Mādhavī is a foreshadowing or pre-figuring of the better known, Draupadī. This would be something akin to what happens in Irish literature where the Deirdre story of the Ulster cycle is repeated with certain variations in the Gráinne and Diarmait tale of the Fenian cycle, presumably (for historical sequence is not a prime concern of the seanachaidhe - storytellers) at a later date, and certainly in a different socio-political setting.

In the Deirdre story the king is a powerful monarch with his Red Branch Knights a loyal, spirited, but slightly subservient band of courtiers. The Fianna, in the later tale, are a more independent, foot-free group of warriors, almost mercenaries according to some critics, and Gráinne has a great deal more freedom of action when she appears at the royal festival of Tara (she is the king's daughter) and puts a sleeping potion in the mead that is served to the royal and warrior guests. Deirdre, on the other hand, has been brought up a virtual prisoner and it is only the leniency of her nurse that enables her to exchange a word with Naoise, a word that compels him to accept her as his wife and flee with her from the anger and revenge of Conchobar. In both stories a young maiden is promised in marriage to an elderly man - the



king, Conchobar, the Fianna chieftain, Find. In both cases the girl is determined not to be the bride of an old man and initiates action in which she chooses instead a younger man, who is, in some way, pledged to the service of the older one. There is flight and pursuit, Deirdre with the three sons of Uisliú - Naoise and his brothers, Grainne alone with Diarmait. Ultimately the old man brings about the death of his younger rival. Deirdre becomes an unwilling captive in the palace of Emain Macha where Conchobar becomes technically her fourth husband, and eventually commits suicide when he tries to pass her on to a fifth. Grainne is credited (or discredited?) with having accepted the aged Find as her husband after Diarmait's death<sup>1</sup> - a somewhat cynical ending to the tale which makes us wonder what all the fuss was about from the start!

The Tristan and Iseult story is considered by many critics to have originated from the Deirdre legend, though James Carney would have it that a primitive Tristan tale, possibly borrowed from the Chinese, was

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1 Diarmait was mortally wounded by a wild boar, but could have been healed by water from Find's hands. Twice Find brought water from a spring in his cupped hands but let it trickle to the ground. The third time he actually brought the water Diarmait was dead. So Find was at least partly responsible.

the "source" of the Deirdre story. He points out that Deirdre has no connection with any other incident or person in the Táin Bó Cúailnge and the story serves merely to explain why Fergus of Ulster is found in the army of Medb and Ailill fighting against the Ulidians.<sup>1</sup> This is not the point at which to examine Carney's statements but they do not in any way invalidate the claim that the Grainne adventure is a replica of the earlier tale of Deirdre.

On what grounds, however, can one dare to see in the events of Mādhavī's career a fore-shadowing of Draupadī's role, or in Kṛṣṇā's career a re-enactment of happenings in Mādhavī's life? Apart from the multiple husbands, have they anything more fundamental to link them together? I have already tried to show how the three functions: dharma (truth and justice), defence and prosperity, find fruition not only in Mādhavī's progeny but in her person. Dumézil develops this trivalence in relation to Draupadī in an elaborate and convincing manner.<sup>2</sup> First, he establishes the triple-functional character of the five Pāṇḍavas - Yudhiṣṭhira obviously in the role of dharma, engendered as he was by the divine

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1 Studies in Irish Literature and History p 236

2 M E I Chap II "The Five Brothers" p 53 ff

Dharma, Bhīma and Arjuna in the second or warrior function, tracing the association of Vayu and Indra back to pre-Vedic sources and an Iranian parallel. Nakula and Sahadeva belong to the third category by virtue of their being fathered by the Aśvins long associated with the fruitfulness of the earth in all its richness and beauty. The idea of beauty in relation to fertility is emphasised for Mādri's twins are distinguished for their beauty (rupa). He sees, therefore, in the Pāṇḍavas the transfer of the Vedic gods from the divine or religious level to the epic and human level. They retain or rather incarnate the qualities and functions of the divine persons whom they not merely represent, but bring into the orbit of human activity. Their actions and reactions are fully human and spontaneous, but there is a divine or supernatural quality that shapes their deeds and their destiny, giving an added dimension to their lives.

Draupadī's birth is miraculous, more so, in fact, than the births of the Pāṇḍavas, in that she has neither father nor mother.<sup>1</sup> She is born from the sacrificial fire and, is, therefore the daughter of Agni who is trivalent in his activity as fire of the hearth, fire of defence and sacrificial fire. Draupadī is presented as

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1 In this she resembles her namesake, Kṛṣṇa, with whom she enjoys a special sakhi relationship

the incarnation of Śrī, the goddess of prosperity, who according to the Markandeya Puranas was the destined bride of Indra in his five-fold incarnation in the Pāṇḍavas.<sup>1</sup> The seeming contradictions between the Mahābhārata attribution of Pāṇḍava paternity to Dharma, Vayu and the Aśvins in addition to Indra and the Puranic version just mentioned, is reconciled in the story of Indra's three sins. These resulted in his losing certain attributes - tejas, bala, rupa - which entered into Dharma, Vayu and the Aśvins who now each possessed a "part of Indra". Therefore the five Pāṇḍavas were collectively the incarnation of Indra, and Draupadī as their bride was, in effect, the bride of Indra himself.<sup>2</sup> Arjuna may, in a sense, be considered a fuller sharer in this incarnation than the other brothers and it is noteworthy that it was he who won Draupadī's hand. This "explanation" counteracts, also, the charge of a scandalous marriage in the Aryan community of the Mahābhārata at a stage where polygamy was no longer tolerated. So we can see in both Draupadī and Mādhavī examples of the "trivalent" goddess assuming human form.

And what of the Intoxicating Queen at the then farthest-

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1 M E I p 115

2 ibid p 110 ff

known limits of the western world, on the outermost fringes of the Indo-European reaches of civilization? Medb of Cruachan and Medb Lethderg (half red) are accepted by critics from as far back as the nineteenth century<sup>1</sup> and by contemporary scholars like Tomás O Máille, Thurneysen, the Rees brothers and MacCana as goddesses of sovereignty. James Carney, however, supports earlier scholars, Eoin MacNeill, O'Curry and Zimmer, in regarding Medb of Cruachan as an historical personage and bemoans the invasion of the field of history by mythologizers. He acknowledges (in conversation) that "other Medbs" may be euhemerized goddesses but sees no reason to include the Cruachan queen among them. For him the Táin is not so much a legend handed down as an early historical novel or a work of fiction set against a particular historical and political background, that of a period not later than the fifth century of our era.<sup>2</sup>

But to examine Medb of Cruachan as we find her in the Táin: she is at first the wife of Conchobar, King of Ulster, who will later claim for himself Deirdre, foretold

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1 Alfred Nutt (1888) Sir John Rhŷs (Hibbert Lectures 1886)

2 "Early Irish Literature: the State of Research" in Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies held in University College, Galway 1979 (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1983)

as a harbinger of disaster before her birth. There are conflicting accounts of Medb's marriage to Conchobar. One version has it that her father, Eochaid Feidlech, gave her in marriage to Conchobar as part compensation for having killed Fachtna Fathach (Conchobar's father) at the battle of Lottir Rusd.<sup>1</sup> It would seem that Medb left him after sometime to return to her father at Tara. Despite the separation (caused, we are told, by her proud disposition) Conchobar attended a royal banquet at Tara, delayed sometime there and seized an opportunity to violate Medb as she was bathing in the river Boyne. Whether this Boynside encounter constituted the rape of a maiden or of a deserting wife is not very clear. What is certain is that Medb bore Conchobar an undying grudge that was one of the underlying reasons for the conflict described in the Táin and that her rejection of him, whether as a duly chosen husband or a mate by right of physical conquest, was something he could not forgive. The wounded pride of two royal characters is at the heart of the conflict. Fidech and Tinde, both Connacht princes, contended for Medb's hand and fought each other for that privilege. Tinde slew his rival but was punished by Eochaid for his ignoble deed and Medb was

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1 In Cath Bóinde published and translated by Joseph O'Neill in Eriu 11 1905, we learn that five of Eochaid Feidlech's daughters were given in marriage to Conchobar and that the main reason for the Táin was Medb's desertion of him "against his will".

installed as ruler of Cruachan. Some time later she married Tinde and "with her consent he became king". But Medb had an unusual bride-price: the man who would be her spouse must be free from jealousy, cowardice and avarice. "If my husband should be mean, it would not be fitting for us to be together, for I am generous in largesse and the bestowal of gifts and it would be a reproach for my husband that I should be better than he in generosity, but it would be no reproach if we were equally generous provided that both of us were generous. If my husband were timorous, neither would it be fitting for us to be together, for single-handed I am victorious in battles and contests and combats, and it would be a reproach to my husband that his wife should be more courageous than he, but it is no reproach if they are equally courageous provided that both are courageous. If the man with whom I should be were jealous, neither would it be fitting for I was never without one lover quickly succeeding another (lit. without a man in the shadow of another)."<sup>1</sup> It was because Ailill, son of Rus Ruad (and the third of his sons who wooed Medb) possessed these qualities of magnanimity, courage and freedom from jealousy that Medb chose him for her fourth

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1 Cecile O'Rahilly Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1970) p 138 ll 31-42 (translation) p 1-2 ll 29-37 (text)

husband and constituted him King at Cruachan. He was king at the time of the cattle-raid of Cooley during which Fergus proves to be the man "in the shadow", without doubt Medb's lover.

The qualities which Medb insists on in her husbands and which she claims to possess herself are clearly akin to the three qualities of kingship or the three functions of sovereignty which appear to form the backbone of Indo-European idealism and civilization at the religious and social level during the heroic age. Whether we see Medb of Cruachan as a mythological figure, an euhemerized goddess of sovereignty, or a potentially historical figure, an outstanding woman and queen from a pre-Christian Gaelic kingdom, whether at Tara or Cruachan, the qualities of the three states are clearly realised in her and indicate the geographical extent of Indo-European civilization at an early stage of its western extension. The other Medb, who reigns at Tara, is an even more explicit embodiment of the sovereignty principle and is, beyond doubt, a legendary figure of divine origin. No king can reign in Tara unless he is wedded to Medb Lethderg. Ó Máille interprets the epithet "half-red" to mean that "the sovereignty of Ireland was always half-red or bloody, a peculiarity



which holds to the present day."<sup>1</sup> This theme of the territorial goddess whom the rightful king must wed before assuming royal jurisdiction is a fairly common theme in early Gaelic literature, exemplifying the belief that the king was "so closely identified with his realm that it reached in its substance to his own moral and physical traits; if he showed the traits of a just ruler, epitomized in the term fir flaithemon 'truth of the ruler', (the Irish equivalent of the Indian rājadharmā), the land responded with an increase in its fertility and general prosperity; if he were an unjust or illegitimate ruler, or blemished in his person, it became barren and strife-torn.... In order to acquire the seal of legitimacy he must be ritually sacralised. In pre-Christian times this ceremony, the banfheis rigi or 'marriage of sovereignty' presumably included an enactment of the union of king and goddess."<sup>2</sup> This finds ample endorsement in the tradition that Medb Lethderg had nine husbands and, if the list is to be credited, the total term of their reigns spanned several generations, and as in the case of Medb of Cruachan, it was not unusual for the slayer of one royal consort to replace his victim.

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1 "Medb Chruachna" in ZCP XVII 1927

2 P MacCana "Women in Irish Mythology" in The Crane Bag Vol 4 No 1 1980 p 8

There are several folk-tales, too, that tell of an encounter between a group of young princelings out on a hunting expedition, seeking either water to quench their thirst or shelter from a storm, with an ugly old woman. She offers shelter or water in exchange for either a kiss or closer physical union. This is refused by all but one of the group, out of a feeling of revulsion. The last prince grants her request and the ugly hag is transformed into a beautiful young girl, who identifies herself as the sovereignty of Ireland and promises the throne to the chivalrous prince. It is not without reason that the names given to Ireland in ancient times, and revived in seventeenth and eighteenth century patriotic song, are the names of women - Eriu, Banba and Fodla, three eponymous goddesses presented as queens of one of the early groups who invaded the land.<sup>1</sup>

In another old legend of the mid ninth century: Baile in Scáil (The Phantom's Frenzy) the ritual drink of sovereignty is offered to Conn Cétacathach (Conn of the hundred battles) during a mysterious "translation" to the Otherworld. There the god, Lug, is enthroned in

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1 Lebor Gabála Erenn (The Book of Invasions) cited by H D'Artois de Jubainville in The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis 1903) p 132

a splendid dwelling. Nearby, seated on a crystal chair and wearing a crown of gold, is a young girl. Beside her is a golden vessel of red ale (dergfhlait - a play on the words laith 'drink' and flaith 'sovereignty') and she holds a golden cup. When she asks who are to drink from her golden cup, Lug names all Conn's successors. Though the cup in the hands of the maiden has undoubtedly sexual overtones, the emphasis is on the drink<sup>1</sup>, the mādhavī, the soma, the mead that indicates the transformation of a human king to the divine level of the gods, to an association with Lug, the archetype of the sacral king.

There are then in Mādhavī, Medb and Draupadī clearly discernible similarities centring round the idea of a feminine principle of sovereignty, a focussing within each of them of the distinctive functions of royal rule in terms of truth and justice, protection of the kingdom and the guardianship or promotion of prosperity and fecundity. But these three female figures are not mere clones of one another. Heroic poetry, after all, is not mere history, nor history repeating itself. It is an artistic creation from as far back as human memory, racial memory can reach, a creation that is not confined within

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1 MacCana op cit

a short span of time, like the few months or years required to write a modern novel, but an on-going creation. Each generation of story-tellers, while preserving the basic material, added to its outlines the best of that particular age, embellishing the language, the character delineation, the descriptions of battles and feasts, of ceremonies and sacrifices, of divine intervention and human striving, from the riches of their own genius. Theirs was the task of being faithful to the past while they fashioned in the present of their own age the heritage they would pass on to the future. And so, while we have the fundamental concept of the feminine incarnation of royal power preserved in the characters of the women under review in this chapter, while they have certain experiences of a similar nature - multiple marriages, an association direct or indirect with intoxicating drinks related to religious rituals, there are very distinct differences that distinguish them from one another, differences that testify to the time-gap in the creation of different layers of the same work of art (as in the Mahābhārata) or in the spatial gap between the two wings of the Indo-European world: the eastern cradle and the western resting-place, not in the sense of a grave, but in the sense of the place beyond which the traveller could proceed no further, because,

literally, there was nowhere else to go!

There are powerful religious and moral influences at work in the characters and society of the Mahābhārata in an open and declared manner, and this is something that is not so evident, in fact, in some opinions, is singularly lacking in the Táin Bó Cúailnge and other Celtic tales, particularly those belonging to the Ulster cycle. For instance, the polyandric marriage of Draupadī, polyandric at the simple human level, may have been normal in an early pre-Aryan, Indian society. But in a later Aryan community, established over a period of several hundred years, this marriage could not but be regarded as "scandalous" (to quote Dumézil). There are, therefore, at least three justifications put forward to show that this marriage, despite the external circumstances, was part of a divine plan. There is the simple tale of how, as he neared their forest hut, on his return from the svayamvara, Arjuna called out to his mother:

Her answer from within doors:

yourselves",<sup>1</sup> caused consternation, but the word of a mother must be obeyed for the Upanishads tell us, "let

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your mother be to you as a god."<sup>1</sup> The sage, Vyāsa, confirms this: the Pāṇḍavas must obey their mother; they will incur no guilt. To the simple folk listening to the recitation of the tale this was acceptable in a society that honoured women, where normally a bride was wedded to one husband, and motherhood brought respect and authority. The word of the holy man also carries weight. For the less credulous there is the explanation that, in a previous birth, Draupadī had importuned Śiva five times for a husband and had received as answer that in a later existence she would have five husbands. The invocation of the dread name of Mahādeva would clinch the argument for a society where Śaivism flourished. While the more elaborate explanation of the Pāṇḍavas as a five-fold incarnation of Indra constituting a uniquely "single" husband for Draupadī is based on the frequent references in the Mahābhārata to Kuntī's sons<sup>2</sup> as sakrapratimatejasah (images of the energy of Sakra ie Indra) and would appeal to a more sophisticated audience. But whichever justification one accepted the important point was that the marriage of Draupadī should be shown to be free from any taint of scandal. Mādhavī evidently

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1 Taittiriya Upanishad trans Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal (New York: Mentor 1957) p 54

2 After Mādri's death all five Pāṇḍavas are Kuntī's sons

belongs to an earlier time and the Mahābhārata depicts her as an ancestress of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. Whether, even in that earlier society multiple marriages for a woman would be tolerated is doubtful. That men might contract several unions seems to have been taken for granted at all stages of the heroic age, but the women who indulged in casual encounters were often apsaras, like Śakuntalā's mother, or courtesans. In his Mahābhārater Samāj,<sup>1</sup> Sukhamay Bhattacharya asserts that polyandry was not a characteristic of the society from which the great epics sprang. Examples to the contrary he treats as exceptions to the rule; besides Mādhavī's and Draupadī's he cites the cases of Jatilā who was married simultaneously to seven ṛsis and Barksī who had ten brothers as her husbands. He remarks, however, that among the Kurus polyandry was practised and refers to the Ādi-parvā as his authority. The practice, nevertheless, was generally unacceptable. Mādhavī's marriages do pose something of a problem. When the hermit, Gālava, approaches her father, Yayāti, begging a gift of eight hundred white horses, each with one black ear as dakṣiṇa for his guru, the king appears to hand over his daughter without hesitation, as if it were the most natural thing to do. To a twentieth century mind it seems as if

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1 Viśva-Bhārati, Santiniketan p 51-52

Mādhavī is being treated not as a person, but as a commodity, a "thing" to be bartered. Yet Mādhavī is far from being a supine, mindless character. When King Haryasva tells Gālava that he has only two hundred of the specified horses, it is Mādhavī who proposes that the hermit accept them while she bears one son to the childless ruler, after which they can approach another king. She shows initiative and co-operation; there is no sign of resentment. Perhaps this is because the poet is a man and with typical male smugness expects a woman to be honoured by her role in procreation whether it be willingly accepted or arbitrarily imposed! That Mādhavī has a mind and will of her own is eminently clear from the choice of Vana as her spouse at her svayamvara. This in itself marks her out as an exceptional woman. There is no slightest hint that her choice of an ascetic life is a form of expiation for the "sins" of her four marriages. It would appear that this "calling" to an hermetical life is her real fulfilment. The fact that when she re-emerges from the forest much later to rescue her father as he falls from Heaven, Gālava comes on the scene almost simultaneously might cause an irreverent mind to associate the erstwhile seekers of horses and the current dwellers in the forest in an unbroken, close relationship. On the whole, the pre-dominant tone in the



recital of the episodes of the four marriages is that Mādhavī is bestowing a genuine favour on each of her four partners as well as on the beggar-hermit. The idea of doing good comes across strongly. The noble nature of the sons she bore and the accumulated virtue they were able to transfer to their grandfather bears this out distinctly also. There is certainly no trace of self-seeking in Mādhavī's encounters with her husbands; she neither seeks nor finds a throne, a permanent husband, nor a child she can rear as her own. One thinks of the current uproar over surrogate motherhood and the scandal of renting wombs. Mādhavī did it a few thousand years ago and, from the personal point of view, she did it gratis! It was Gālava who received the gift of horses. At a later stage the quality of mothering, given or not given to their children by women of epic stature in the heroic sagas, will be examined.

The moral tone of the incidents relating to the marriages of Draupadī and Mādhavī has been pointed out and the suggestion made that an equally elevated morality might not be so easily detected in their Gaelic counterparts. Of another Medb-figure, Étaín, T F O'Rahilly writes: "The attempt to humanize Étaín has somewhat complicated her matrimonial affairs, as when we read that she had a

daughter of the same name and appearance whom her father, Eochaid Airem, mistook for his wife. For a similar reason the love-affairs of Medb, ultimately Étaín's double, have become multifarious and indiscriminate, with unfortunate results for the character of the one-time goddess."<sup>1</sup> He attributes this "attempt to humanize" the gods and goddesses to a slovenly effort to fill up the vacuum that exists where early Irish history should be. It is possible to view this humanizing procedure from a different angle. The texts of the ancient tales that we have today date back little further than the eleventh century and this for two reasons. Earlier manuscripts were destroyed in Viking raids which often resulted in the burning down of monasteries, the repositories of these documents. The monastic libraries held these treasures because the compilation was the work of the monks or clerics who were the first to learn and spread the use of Roman script in Ireland. In one sense they replaced the pre-Christian druids as the human repositories of the lore and learning handed down orally over countless centuries. As in India the sacred character of the oral transmission of knowledge, the training of those chosen to perpetuate this treasure and the sense of guardianship of the word are strong features

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1 T F O'Rahilly Early Irish History and Mythology (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1946 rpt 1976)  
p 131 footnote

of Celtic tradition. Despite the fact that the art of writing came late to Ireland, Kuno Meyer calls the written literature of medieval Ireland "the earliest voice from the dawn of Western European civilization".<sup>1</sup> He is obviously referring to the ancient quality of the literature rather than to the date of the manuscripts, and despite the bowdlerization that was to some extent inevitable when "pagan" texts were copied or re-created by Christian clerics, he sensed the vital originality of the tales. That these scribes were largely faithful to the spirit of the material they handled seems certain, but it is almost equally certain that these monastic literati are probably responsible for the euhemerization of many of the gods and goddesses of pre-Christian Ireland. That theological speculation, religious doctrine, moral and ethical inculcations such as we find in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana are totally lacking from such works as the Táin Bó Cúailnge, the Táin Bó Froech and other tales of considerable length, seems to indicate a Christian monk at work to protect audiences from confusing druidic magic and rituals with Christian practice. The stories may be the briefer and the more compact, perhaps even more dramatic as a result of such omissions, but they are the poorer in religious and moral tone, though deep reflection may draw spiritual values

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1 cited by Delargy in The Gaelic Storyteller p 2

from some of them. The fact that the Indian epics have retained these characteristics intact down the ages, may be attributed to the happy circumstances that works created by and for a Hindu society have been handed down by and to Hindus. We must not think too unkindly of the Irish monks whose circumstances were so very different. Indeed the virile character of the prose and verse of the sagas, the lively presentation of deeds of valour or horror, the retention of much magic and numerous supernatural events points to a degree of tolerance and respect for earlier beliefs and practices. We can still trace the outlines of those creeds and rituals, but they are the bare bones from which form and fullness have departed. So, we find no attempt at any explanation, justification or condemnation of Medb's many amours. Perhaps Proinsias MacCana has the answer when he writes "One cannot expect stability in the human relationships allotted to euhemerized goddesses."<sup>1</sup>

That Medb's first marriage was to the Ulster king, Conchobar, is generally accepted. It is remarkable that a king as powerful as he was, for he threatened the overlordship of Tara, should be identified as cetfer Medba (the first husband of Medb) and the fact that she

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1 "Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature" in Etudes Celtiques Vol VII 1955-56 p 96

left him tre uabar menman (through haughtiness of mind) to return to her father's palace, gives some indication of the relative positions of the partners in that marriage. In The Celtic Realms<sup>1</sup> we read that in ancient Ireland divorce was common; that there was possibly such an institution as annual marriage<sup>2</sup> and that common consent was the only requirement for dissolving a marriage. That the "common consent" was lacking in the separation of Conchobar and Medb seems clear from the king's later attempt to recapture his erstwhile queen by physical assault. Marriage by force or capture (lanamnas écne) was, as in India, a recognised form of union. Her second husband, Tinde had killed his rival and after a period of banishment by her father, met and married Medb. When he was slain in battle (perhaps conveniently) Eochaid Dála fought for and carried off Medb to his kingdom, and she "consented to his becoming king of Connacht on condition that he became her husband."<sup>3</sup> It is with regard to her fourth husband that Medb declares her conditions for marriage; she will only accept a husband "without jealousy, fear or avarice". "And Medb

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1 Dillon p 100

2 This recalls the "rotation" in Draupadi's relations with her five husbands

3 M E II p 333

loved Ailill for his qualities and he became her husband in place of Eochaid Dála, because she preferred Ailill to Eochaid."<sup>1</sup> There is no mention here either of mutual consent; it would seem that Medb had the last word in the choice of a husband and in his dismissal "from bed and board". At the beginning of the Táin she lists her rejected suitors: "And they came from Finn, the King of Leinster, Rus Ruad's son, to woo me, and from Coirpre Niafer, the King of Temair, another of Rus Ruad's sons. They came from Conchobar, King of Ulster, son of Fachtna, and they came from Eochaid Bec, and I wouldn't go. For I asked a harder wedding gift than any woman ever asked before from a man in Ireland."<sup>2</sup> Evidently Medb did not consider any of these suitors capable of paying her "bride-price". The mention of Conchobar's name in this list, in view of other traditions that say he was her first husband, is confusing if we do not reflect on the nature of oral tradition and the later conflation or parallelling of variant versions. We have only to read the first two chapters of Genesis to find two differing accounts of the creation of the universe, two independent traditions being accommodated in the

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1 "Et Medb l'aimait pour ses qualités et il lui fut uni et il devint son époux à la place d'Eochaid Dala."  
M E II p 333

2 Kinsella p 53. Also C O'Rahilly p 138

final text.

The critics who claim that Medb is an historical figure, perhaps a little overdrawn and enhanced, claim a certain authenticity for these four husbands and try not to make too much of her marital mores. After all, divorce was freely permitted in pre-Christian Ireland and they would like to date the events of the Táin Bó Cuailnge about the beginning of the present era. In fact, an easy attitude towards the bonds of matrimony continued even after the acceptance of Christianity with its strong commitment to the indissolubility of the marriage vows. The instances that Dillon cites, however, are all cases where men put aside their wives to take others, or the exceptional case of Gormlaith, who was wife to two living kings and the Earl of Orkney. She is, however, a "foreigner" - the notorious Kormlöd of the Njal Saga, a woman "endowed with great beauty... but it is said that... she was utterly wicked."<sup>1</sup> And that is what many people say of Medb, especially in her relationship with Fergus MacRoich, who gave up the throne of Ulster to Conchobar for a year because of a pact he made with Nes, the mother of Conchobar. Like Kaikeyī, Nes was capable of clever intrigue and at the end of the one-year period

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1 Dillon op cit p 100 and footnote

she retained the throne for her son. Fergus is shown as leaving Ulster, not because he lost the throne, but because of Conchobar's broken word and the murder of Deirdre's husband and his brothers, the sons of Uisliú. This portrays Fergus as a hero, a loyal man of his word who would brook no untruth, a protector of women, the trivalent hero of Indo-European tradition. "He is a champion who gives protection against every evil; he lays low the mighty and upholds the weak."<sup>1</sup> In a lecture on "Early Irish Literature: the State of Research" James Carney debunks this myth. He refers to a work entitled Conailla Medb Michura (the Evil Deeds of Medb) which he dates about 600 AD. The poet, Luccreth Moccu Chiara, refers to the content of the poem as sen-eolas "ancient knowledge" which Carney takes as being "at least a century older than his own day". In this work Fergus' valour is described as an inspiration to 'the men of the lands of Ireland of great gods,' but it also states... 'Fergus turned against the Ulstermen because of a woman, that is because of Medb of Cruachain, for he fought against his own people for the body of a woman'.

That Conchobar, Fergus' step-son, had also burned with

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1 A & B Rees Celtic Heritage p 241



desire for the same woman, adds a further reason for Fergus' leaving Ulster. Fergus is a fertility god; of this there can be no serious question. Genealogists have claimed him as the ancestor of a whole range of tribes - the Conmaicne, the Benntrige and many others. Whenever they were at a loss to trace the descent of a particular clan, they somehow managed to show that Fergus had been its source and origin. But efforts to bring him within the orbit of history are set at naught by the pictures of him that emerge from the old literature. His name, Fergus (vir gustus) MacRoich suggests exceptional virility and may be translated: Manly Energy, son of Stallion. "He eats seven times as much as an ordinary man; he has the strength of seven hundred men; his nose, his mouth and his penis are seven fingers in length. He needs no less than seven women when separated from his wife, Flidais, a woodland deity."<sup>1</sup> All the evidence points to his having been Medb's lover, and ultimately Ailill, by becoming jealous of the relationship, so jealous that he brings about Fergus' death (as described in Aided Ferghusa), and so renders himself unworthy of being Medb's husband - "a man without fear, jealousy or avarice." It is only if we recognise Medb as a goddess of sovereignty, without whom the king cannot reign, and of fertility as witness her great concern

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1 Marie-Louise Sjoestedt Gods and Heroes of the Celts (London: Methuen 1949) trans Myles Dillon p 36

for her herds and flocks, and her extra-marital relations with Fergus, the god of fertility, that her multiple marriages can be seen in proper perspective. As a warrior-goddess par excellence she defends the sovereignty conferred on her spouse and protects the fruits of the fields from unlawful trespass.

This is something that seems to have escaped the perception of the monastic scribes or the later filidh, who sought to present Medb shorn of her divinity, reduced to the status of a powerful but wicked woman, a king-maker within the limits of local history. This presentation of Medb as a "woman of ill-counsel" moves Frank O'Connor to claim that the "original author" (a persona whose existence cannot be proved) had no other purpose "than to warn his readers against women, particularly women in positions of authority. 'Look at what happens to people and armies when they are in a woman's power!' he seems to say."<sup>1</sup> The cynicism which O'Connor attributes to "the original author" is perhaps something he shares with that fictitious character, for he finally relegates Medb to a place among John Knox's Monstrous Regiment of Women. And the "readers" to be so carefully warned against women in power would have been mainly the compilers of manuscripts in a monastic cell!

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1 op cit p 32

Victorian prudery which, unfortunately did not die with her Majesty, would undoubtedly view Medb's several exploits as monstrous, and it is probable that the audience the Indian poet-singer had in mind, when he went to such lengths to show that Draupadi's marriage was blameless, would pass harsh judgement on Medb of Cruachan.

Medb Lethderg, wedded in turn to nine kings of Tara over a time-span of four generations, is obviously a goddess and no mere mortal. The folk-tales of the ugly old woman transformed by a princely kiss into a beautiful maiden who identifies herself as the "sovereignty of Ireland", are invariably related to the throne of Tara. It is not unreasonable to link them to a greater or lesser degree with Medb Lethderg since she is widely acknowledged as the principle of sovereignty. Professor Carney who leans heavily in the direction of Medb of Cruachan's historical existence, admits (in conversation) that "the other Medbs" by which he surely means Medb Lethderg and possibly another Medb of Leinster, may be goddesses of sovereignty thus lending support to the majority view. In his lecture already mentioned, at the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies, he provides a link between Medb of Cruachan and Medb Lethderg. He points out that in an old variant version of the incident in the Táin Bó Cúailnge

where the allied armies gathered under Medb are about to set out against the Ulidians, they set out not from Cruachan in the west, but from Slechta about twelve miles from Tara. It may not have been Carney's intention to relate Medb Cruachan so closely, at least spatially with Tara but in doing so he has strengthened the claim made by Ó'Máille and MacCana that the Queen of Cruachan was originally the "Goddess-Queen of Tara". She is after all, the daughter of Eochaid Feidlech, the "Supreme King of Ireland", therefore of Tara. She claims in her pillow-talk with Ailill, at the beginning of the Táin, that her father gave her the province "ruled from Cruachan". If she has been represented traditionally as the goddess of Tara where no king could rule until he had slept with her, it is probable that when the Táin Bó Cúailnge presents her as Medb of Cruachan her characteristics will not change. Moreover there is a connection between the two epithets: lethderg and cruachan, the one meaning "half-red", the other derived from cró, the word for "blood", so the colour of blood is associated with both Medbs or with the two titles of one Medb. There is the common association with Tara, the basic similarity in meaning of the two epithets and, more importantly, the same crucial role of bestowing or confirming the royal sovereignty on a line of successive husbands. There may

be an objection to this claim because of chronological inconsistencies: the notional dates for the reign of Ailill in Cruachan and the tenure at Tara of Cú Corb, Feidlimid, Art and Cormac may be in conflict. But then sober historians have never claimed historical accuracy or incontestable validity for the king-lists and chronologies relating to the early centuries of the present era in Ireland. This absence of historical data may even support the contention that there were not two Medbs but one, and that the idea of a goddess of sovereignty was so deeply embedded in the early tradition that it was extended from Tara to Cruachan without even a change of name for the goddess. The same belief is found in the south of Ireland where the goddess, Mór Muman, is represented as bestowing the kingship of Munster on Fingen mac Aeda and on Cathal mac Aeda through marriage in the seventh century AD. That the tradition persisted into historical and Christian times may be further seen in the fact that when, in the ninth century, Feidlimid macCrimthainn, king of Caiseal, tried to win the throne of Ireland, he is said to have seized Gormlaith, wife of Niall Caille, the high-king. Reflecting on this incident, Proinsias MacCana asks: "Assuming that Feidlimid did in fact carry out this abduction of the queen from the traditional seat of the

high-kingship (Tara), did he have an eye to tradition in doing so? Was his action intended partly to suggest that just as he had taken possession of Niall's spouse of flesh and blood, so also was he in virtual possession of that other spouse claimed by Niall, namely the kingdom of Ireland?"<sup>1</sup> We might also ask ourselves whether Duryodhana's ill-treatment of Draupadī was not an assertion of his claim to Yudhiṣṭhira's espoused kingdom and his espoused wife. When he had won the kingdom in the game of dice he was not yet satisfied, but egged on Yudhiṣṭhira to stake his brothers, the next claimants to the throne, and finally Draupadī, the embodiment of the royal power in her trifunctional capacity. For it is noteworthy that it was only Draupadī who became a gambling stake, only she who accompanied the Pāṇḍavas into their forest exile. The other wives stayed with Kuntī and looked after the children. The attempts to abduct Draupadī during this exile - Jayadratha's motive is seemingly lust, the Upakicak group were motivated by the desire for immediate revenge - may be seen in a broader perspective as attempts to take away the rightful sovereignty from the Pāṇḍavas. As long as Draupadī is with them their royal rights are safeguarded. If she is abducted the principle of sovereignty is lost. Tomás Ó Máille<sup>2</sup> declares

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1 Études Celtiques Vol VIII 1959 pp 62-63

2 art cit in ZCP XVII 1927

that Medb's period as wife of Conchobar represented a time when the high-kingship of Ireland passed from Tara to Ulster. Medb's desertion of Conchobar and her return to her father at Tara would indicate the defeat of the Ulster King and the restoration of the sovereignty of Ireland to Tara. This eventually led to the conflict between the rival dynasties of Connacht and Ulster described in the Táin Bó Cúailnge. For when Medb went to Cruachan as wife of Tinde the national celebrations were held there instead of at Tara. As wife of Eochaid Dála her sway extended to Meath "so that nobody dared attack them from the Boyne to the Shannon" ('co nar lamad iad o Boind co Sinuind)<sup>1</sup>. Ó Máille sees in Ailill Mac Mata who is referred to in the *Anecdota* v21 as belonging to the *Ernai* of Munster while the common tradition (vide Rawlinson B502) has it that he was the son of *Rus Ruad* of Leinster, an attempt to associate Munster with the Cruachan dynasty in the sovereignty of Ireland. He also sees in the *Rus Ruad* ancestry claim a "political effort to assuage the sympathies of Leinster by connecting the Connacht (Cruachan)<sup>2</sup> dynasty with Leinster".

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1 Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts v20 cited by Ó Máille in ZCP XVII

2 Carney points out that Connachta was divided into three kingdoms one of which was Cruachan

Medb's fifth "man", Fergus, is never officially her husband. Throughout the story of the Táin he is her lover. Ailill seems to have turned a blind eye to this cuckolding for a considerable length of time; and as long as he remained free from jealousy he continued to rule at Cruachan, at least nominally, for it was obviously Medb who was the de facto ruler, who decided when and how to go to war and when to make peace. In the story Aided Ferghusa (The Death of Fergus) Ailill's jealousy breaks out when he sees Medb and Fergus swimming in the lake in a (deliberately?) provocative manner. Ailill refers to them as a "hart" and a "doe" and urges his companion, his blind brother Lugaid, to cast his spear at them. The spear pierces Fergus' breast to Lugaid's great dismay when he learns the true identity of the "hart". Fergus pulls out the spear, hurls it after the fleeing Ailill's chariot,<sup>1</sup> leaves the water and on a mound by the lakeside "his soul left him". Another story tells how Medb overhears Ailill making love to a woman behind a hazel bush on the morning of May Day. Enraged, she prompts Conall Cernach to kill him. This presence of Medb at the death of both her lover and her husband moves Máire Bhreathnach to see in Medb not only the goddess of

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1 By fleeing Ailill loses his claim to being a man "without fear", having already proved himself jealous



sovereignty but also the goddess of death.<sup>1</sup> Ó Máille does not proffer any political explanation of Medb's affair with Fergus, but it would seem evident that the worthiness of Ailill as a husband/ruler was being tested and finally found wanting; that the árd-righeachta<sup>2</sup> of Ireland was about to pass out of the Cruachan derbfine and the goddess had not yet found a worthy successor since Ailill had slain the one who could bring valour, prosperity and honour to the throne - Fergus, the god of fertility, of courage and of fidelity to his word.

The eminently reasonable political explanation of Medb's many marriages outlined here, together with some understanding of the unstable situation where kingship did not pass directly from father to son - the king was chosen from the derbfine, the descendants to the fourth generation of a common ancestor, gives a less "scandalous" image of the daughter of Eochaid Feidlech. She was in reality, or perhaps more correctly, in mythology, the Flaith Erenn, the "Sovranty of Ireland", the solar deity of Baile in Scáil, "a lady wearing a golden crown, seated on a crystal throne" dispensing the mead of kingship to successive rulers. "The goddess is known as Medb, 'she

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1 "The Sovereignty Goddess as Goddess of Death" in Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie XXXIX 1982 p 252

2 High kingship

who intoxicates'."1

And Draupadī, when Jayadratha urged her to leave the deposed, poor and worthless Pāṇḍavas to become his queen, drew herself up to her full height and blazed with anger "like fire in dry grass on a summer's day"2 for Draupadī's fire and beauty relate her also to the solar deities. The physical assaults on both Medb and Draupadī and the regal appearance that each presents, Medb as the Flaith Erenn, Draupadī at her svayamvara, the dazzling fire of the sun goddess, the holy flame of the hom sacrifice provides further evidence, if it were needed, of the affinity between these two epic women from the extreme eastern and western fringes of the Indo-European world. The last we see of Mādhavī in the Mahābhārata is when she stands by an altar of sacrifice offering her merits, with those of her sons, to her father, Yayāti, as his heavenly chariot rises once more skyward, sunward, heavenward.

In the article in The Crane Bag already cited, Professor MacCana, commenting on the "more active and independent role" that women characters play in Irish

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1 MacCana in Études Celtiques VII 1955-57

2 Basu p 247

literature, associates Deirdre with Medb as an "exemplar of the goddess who by her own right selects her partner for his kingly qualities and thereby validates him in office" (p 10). This is a curious claim to make for Deirdre. That she is a goddess in human form can be substantiated on the basis of her extraordinary birth and her destiny as the destroyer of the warrior caste. But how can we see her in the role of goddess of sovereignty? Perhaps if we consider her as the negative aspect of Medb's blatant and aggressive function, it may be possible to distinguish a kind of negative polarity as opposed to, or may be even complementary to, Medb's positive magnetism.

Deirdre's beauty is attested to by the seer Cathbad, by Naoise's capitulation to her charm at the risk of his life, by his brothers' ready consent to accompany the couple in their flight before Conchobar's avenging forces, and by Conchobar's persistent infatuation that moved him to welcome her exultantly after he had slain the sons of Uisliú. She is, undoubtedly, a goddess of beauty, the sister of Helen and Draupadi, the Gaelic *Írí*. Yet, she fulfils none of the other functions of *Írí*. There is no question of fertility of either the land or the family. In fact, because of her the land

will be laid waste, families will be destroyed; sons will die instead of being born. Her beauty is death-bringing. She is a sterile *Śrí*.

In the second function, her role again is a negative one. She does not fight any combats as Medb does; she does not urge warriors to the battlefield as Draupadī does; she bears no warrior son as Mādhavī does. There are three instances of physical "assault" in her story: the first when, in some ancient mythic rite, she grabs Naoise by the ears and places him under geis to take her as his wife. On the second occasion we see her with her hands bound, by Conchobar's side, the sons of Uisliú treacherously slain. And in the third instance, Deirdre jumps from a moving chariot and dashes her head against a rock rather than have Eogan mac Durthact as her husband. Her first action is to escape being a queen; it is directly contrary to everything Medb stands for. Draupadī's choice of the "poor brahmin" at her svayamvara would seem to destine her also to a life far from the royal court. If there had been any chance of one of the sons of Uisliú attaining to kingship, the elopement with Deirdre would have dashed such a hope. Naoise and his brothers are frequently referred to as the sons of Uisne or Uisnech (rather than Uisliú) and

the Hill of Uisnech was said to mark the centre of Ireland where a big natural rock was believed to mark the meeting point of the five provinces. Giraldus Cambrensis claimed that this rock was known as "umbilicus Hiberniae". If Naoise, Aíne and Ardán are indeed the sons of Uisnech, of the fifth "fifth", they might well be future claimants to the high-kingship of Ireland, a claim that their elopement with Deirdre certainly brought to nought. The rock against which she smashed her head could symbolise the rock of Uisnech, its sovereignty destroyed along with the lives of its three warrior princes. So Deirdre would appear then as a negative force in all three functions of the trivalent goddess, a significant foil to Medb and a much simplified version of the complex Draupadī.

Of the story of the Sons of Uisliú Carney writes: "The absence of chance references to Deirdre in other early tales suggests that she, as well as her father Feidlimid, had no existence in tradition prior to the composition of this romance." He claims that it is "a literary addition to a pre-existing saga cycle, replacing the tale Fochonn Loingse Fergusa Meic Roig of which only a fragment is preserved."<sup>1</sup> Both tales explain the departure

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1 Studies in Irish Literature and History p 235

of Fergus, step-father of Conchobar, from Ulster, but the reasons given are very different. MacCana, however, gives the Longes mac nUisnigh a wider context, Celtic rather than merely Gaelic, seeing in it "a mythological motif that is well attested both in literature and iconography, namely the union of a divine heroine with one of a closely bound trio of brothers."<sup>1</sup> At this stage (1970) he does not attribute a divine origin to Deirdre; in fact he argues against it, but by 1980 in The Crane Bag essay his ideas and research on the goddesses of sovereignty have broadened to include Deirdre though he does not develop his statement. I would agree with Anne Ross<sup>2</sup> that the relief from Easton Grey near Malmesbury in Wiltshire, portraying three male figures and one female figure may be interpreted as a representation of a legend similar to that of Deirdre and the Sons of Uisliú.

Perhaps because of the isolation from the intricate web of mythological and hero tales that Professor Carney claims for the Deirdre story, very little research appears to have been done on this fascinating character. Scholars publishing the fruit of their research in Études Celtiques, Eigse, Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie and other

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1 Celtic Mythology (London: Hamlyn) 1970 p 99

2 Pagan Celtic Britain (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul) 1967 pp 211-12

learned journals seem to focus more on linguistic studies, comparative philology or on single tales that have obviously more tenacious links with the complex of older stories or with material in the annals. There are many questions to be raised and probed in relation to "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu" if we do not agree to dismiss it as "a romance with no existence in tradition". Is Deirdre the anti-goddess of sovereignty as briefly suggested here? Is her great beauty - "her twisted yellow tresses, her cheeks flushed like the foxglove, her lips' lustre 'parthian red'" - in any way connected with a solar deity, a sun-goddess? The sun perhaps in eclipse with all the ill omens and devastation thought to attend such a natural phenomenon? This question is prompted by her association with Ainle (one of the three brothers) whose name is obviously associated with Aine the sun-god who had a wife, a sun-goddess of the same name. Fergus Ro-ech, whose pledged word brought the four exiles back to Ulaid, is in T F O'Rahilly's opinion connected with the horses of the sun,<sup>1</sup> and there is no doubt about the association of the sun with fertility. If Deirdre has any mythological relationship with solar deities we may compare the sorrows that were her lot and that, foreseen by Cathbad, determined her name "Deirdriu,

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1 Early Irish History and Mythology pp 287, 291

the sorrowful one" with the life-long anguish hidden in the heart of Kuntī following the encounter with the sun-god, Surya.

There are further examples of the trivalent goddess that could be culled from the literature and traditions of both extremities of the Indo-European world of epic times,<sup>1</sup> but there is no need to multiply instances in support of the theory that came to be developed independently by M Stig Wikander and M Georges Dumézil during the dark days of World War II when the gods and goddesses once again destroyed "the flower of chivalry" not merely from Ireland to Burma but in all five continents - a very feast of mortality where there were "many to whom drinks of death were given at the door".<sup>2</sup>

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1 Sarasvatī, Étaín for example

2 Da Derga's Hostel in Early Irish Myths and Sagas  
pp 60-106



## CHAPTER V

### MOTHER FIGURES IN HEROIC LITERATURE

Hail to the Queen who reigns above,  
Mother of clemency and love:  
Hail thou our hope, life, sweetness; we  
Eve's banished children, cry to thee.

We from this wretched vale of tears  
Send sighs and groans unto thine ears;  
Oh! then, sweet advocate bestow  
A pitying look on us below.

After this exile, let us see  
Our blessed Jesus, born of thee:  
O merciful, O pious maid,  
O gracious Mary, lend thine aid.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Version printed in the first edition of Challoner's  
Garden of the Soul (1740)

The sonorous Latin<sup>1</sup> of the original hymn to Mary is attributed to the great Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) and is still chanted as the last prayer of the day in monasteries, convents and churches throughout the world. It is an indication of the position of Mary not only in Biblical literature, but in Christian life down the centuries. If we consider the Bible as the great epic narrative of Yahweh's intervention in human history there is no reason why we may not include Mary, the mother of Jesus, among the heroic mother figures to be reviewed in this chapter.

The women characters studied so far include two categories of mothers: those for whom motherhood is of foremost importance in their own lives and in the unfolding of the epic drama. To this group belong Kunti and Gāndhārī, Andromache and Penelope. In the second category are women who have children, but for whom motherhood does not seem to be a primary role: women like Medb, Mādhavī, Draupadī, Medea and Helen. They have

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1 Salve regina, mater misericordiae; Vita, dulcedo et spes nostra, salve! Ad te clamamus exules filiae Hevae. Ad te suspiramus gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle. Eja ergo, advocata nostra, illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte. Et Jesum benedictum fructum ventris tui nobis post hoc exilium ostende. O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria!

another "career" that dominates their lives. Quite apart from these stands Deirdre who is childless. We never see her in a family context. We hear her pre-natal screams and the dread prophecy of the seer, Cathbad:

"There howled in your troubled womb  
a tall, lovely, long-haired woman  
Heroes will contend for her...  
Harsh hideous deeds done  
in anger at Ulster's high king  
and little graves everywhere...."<sup>1</sup>

Then we are told of her upbringing where "no one was allowed in the enclosure but her foster-father and her foster-mother, and Leborcham, tall and crooked, a satirist, who couldn't be kept out."<sup>2</sup> After her evasion of this strict seclusion and her elopement with Naoise and his brothers "they travelled about Ireland for a long time.... Then they offered themselves to the King of Alba as his hired soldiers.... They built their houses so that no one could see in at the girl in case there might be killing on her account."<sup>3</sup> But she was discovered and asked in marriage by the king. Her refusal endangered their lives so they fled to an island in the sea. Conchobar's offer of reconciliation came

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1 Kinsella p 11

2 Ibid p 11

3 Ibid p 13

some time later, then return to Ireland, death for the sons of Uisliu, killings and arson in Emain Macha. There was no child of Deirdre's marriage to Naoise and none during her year in Conchobar's house. Any fulfilment she knew was brief like her life. Strange was the heralding of her entry into the world, then a violent end to her own life and violence erupting in Ulster to engulf eventually the greater part of Ireland. Hers was a strange destiny, one on which the epic poet makes no comment. In no other Ulster tale, in no legend from any other cycle is there mention of the yellow-haired, green-eyed Deirdre. A later poet "re-incarnates" her as Grainne in the Find story, but even though the rejection of an elderly suitor in favour of a young hero is common to the two tales, there are significant differences between the two women. Grainne has not led a life of isolation; she has in fact, accepted Find's hand on her father's advice; she administers a sleeping draught to the entire assembly at Tara, excepting Diarmait and a couple of his friends. The splendour of Tara replaces the cottage in the wilderness. Grainne is reported to have had four sons whom she urged to avenge their father's death.<sup>1</sup> The story of Deirdre is unique

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1 Lady Gregory Gods and Fighting Men Bk 7  
 "Diarmuid and Grania" pp 307-8

in Gaelic literature. Carney finds many similarities between Deirdre and Iseult, the most relevant here being that both die childless.

Draupadī, by contrast, is not merely an heroic woman and the wife of heroes, she is also the mother of heroes. In her dialogue with Kṛṣṇa before he goes to Hastināpur on a final peace mission, she declares that if the Pāṇḍavas do not fight to avenge her, her old father and her five sons will take up arms to defend her. This incident, of course, emphasises the virjya nārī quality of Draupadī rather than her motherliness, but it does reveal a pride in the valour of her sons, as well as a confidence that motherhood has given her sons who are sensitive to her honour, should their fathers fail in this respect. Shortly after Subhadrā's arrival in the Pāṇḍava household we hear of the birth of her son, Abhimanyu. Almost in the same breath, a list of Draupadī's five sons follows. It is not stated explicitly in the text whether all of them are older than Abhimanyu, and nowhere do we read of any of Draupadī's pregnancies or of the birth of any of her sons. In the early stages of the forest sojourn when she is restless and grief-stricken, rebelling against all the evil that has befallen her, she refers to herself as "daughter of Drupada, daughter-in-law

of the great Pāṇḍu, Dhṛṣṭadyumna's sister, the pledged wife of warriors".<sup>1</sup> She does not, as Indian women are wont to do, call herself the mother of Pratibindhya, Sutasoma, Śrutakarmā, Satānika and Śrutasena. When she complains to Kṛṣṇa in her grief she claims that she has no husband, no son, no friend, brother or father.<sup>2</sup> She is nāthavatī anāthavat.

It is clear that her children did not accompany her into the forest; they were with Subhadrā and the other Pāṇḍava wives. So for thirteen long years she was separated from them. Perhaps there is hidden heartbreak behind her complaining, beneath her anger and resentment, underlying her attitude to the gods, which Yudhiṣṭhira tells her is atheistic.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps she dare not mention her children lest she falter in her determination to share fully the exile ordained for the Pāṇḍavas. It is possible that she tries to suppress ruthlessly her maternal feelings, in order that a stronger emotion, one from which all tenderness is absent, the thirst for revenge, may not diminish or fail. Is there, in Draupadī in the forest, a touch of Lady Macbeth? Shakespeare lets us witness his

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1 Basu p 151

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3 Basu p 157

heroine struggle to stifle her gentler nature; the epic poet ignores that side of Draupadī's character and focusses on the harsher elements. When Kṛṣṇa's wife, Satyabhāmā visits her during the exile, Draupadī gives a lengthy exhortation on how a faithful wife should serve her husband and describes how she sees to the happiness of the Pāṇḍavas, but there is no corresponding advice on how to bring up one's children. As she is about to take her leave Satyabhāmā mentions that Draupadī's sons are happy; Subhadrā looks after them as if they were her own; Rukmiṇī too, mothers them and the elders ensure that they want for nothing. There is no response from Draupadī.<sup>1</sup>

Towards the end of the epic when slaughter on both sides has decimated the warrior families; all Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons have been slain, Duryodhana is mortally wounded but capable of directing one last attack against the Pāṇḍavas. In the dead of night Aśvathāmā leads a raid on the sleeping quarters of the Pāṇḍavas and their allies. Taken utterly by surprise and relaxing, perhaps for the first time since the battle began, the drowsy men could do little to defend themselves. Dhṛṣṭadyumna, the five sons of Draupadī, Śikhandī and many others are despatched by

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1 Basu p 237

the hard, sharp blows of Aśvathāmā's sword. The guards on duty claim to have seen a blood-smeared Kālī singing as she swept men, horses and elephants away from the camp. When Nakula brings Draupadī to the scene of the slaughter she collapses, is comforted by Bhīma and Yudhiṣṭhira, then turns on the latter and lashes out through her tears: "O King, you have sacrificed your sons to Yama according to kṣatriya laws. Now, enjoy your kingdom."<sup>1</sup> She then vows to fast unto death, here in the camp, until Aśvathāmā is slain or the precious gem from his head brought to her.

In the scene we see Draupadī's grief submerged in a greater anger, an overwhelming demand for revenge. That she should not want the slayer of her children to go unpunished is understandable, but that the poet should focus on this aspect of her sorrow rather than on the anguish of her mother's heart at the sight of her murdered children argues in favour of a temperament that is not predominantly motherly. She sustains a wild, destructive level of grief, resorting to threats, demanding vengeance, instant retribution. It is possible to plead on her behalf that she has had an exceptionally hard life for a woman. There was, first of all, the shock of finding



herself the wife of five husbands. Arjuna had won her, but her formal marriage was first to Yudhiṣṭhira. When Arjuna, whom she loved best, was banished for his transgression, she endured a long separation and when he returned Subhadrā soon came on the scene. This naturally enough roused jealousy in her heart but at Arjuna's request she accepted Subhadrā. The loss of the kingdom, the insult offered her, the banishment to the forest with all its hardships, not least the separation from her children now placed in the care of the other Pāṇḍava women, all this was more than an ordinary woman's lot.

We must not make the mistake of considering Draupadī an "ordinary woman". She retains her dignity, her courage, her determination throughout the vicissitudes of the thirteen years' exile. Then back once more in Indraprastha, she wants that insult to her dignity avenged, wants it even more than she wants the kingdom restored to Yudhiṣṭhira. Or so it would seem. As an intelligent woman she must have realised what warfare would involve in the way of loss of life. She was literally putting all the Pāṇḍavas of three generations and their allies on the firing line. A mother's instinct is to save life, to protect it even at great cost to

herself. She does not put her own concerns, her own claims before the safety, not to mention the life of her husbands or children. Yet, that is precisely what Draupadī does. She has very little, if any, of the milk of human kindness in her fiery nature. It must be remembered that Draupadī is no mere mortal; she is the daughter of Agni, the incarnation of Śrī, and one of the ideas that comes across very clearly in the Indo-European tradition is that divine mothers are notoriously careless of their off-spring. Menaka, the apsarā, having successfully tempted Viśvāmitra for her own ends, leaves the baby Śakuntalā by the riverside and departs heavenwards.<sup>1</sup> She does not, like Moses' mother, watch in the shadows to see what becomes of the hapless infant. Adrikā, the fish-nymph, abandons her twin children as soon as they are delivered.<sup>2</sup>

In Greek literature we have the immortal Thetis, married to the human Peleus, throwing seven of her children, one after another, into the fire or into a boiling cauldron, according to another version, to burn away the mortal part they had inherited from their father. When Peleus finally intervened (he must have been a very submissive husband

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1 Basu p 35

2 Ibid p 25

to have endured such atrocities for so long) and saved Achilles, "Thetis, in high dudgeon, left her husband, exactly after the manner of fairy-brides when crossed."<sup>1</sup> In the case of Hera, legend makes much more of her as a bride or wife than as a mother and we do not see any cruelty towards any of her relatively insignificant children.

Another figure of divine character who shows up poorly as a mother is Medb. That she had a daughter, Findabair, we learn from the Táin Bó Cúailnge where her mother repeatedly dangles her as a bait before valiant warriors to lure them into single and deadly combat with Cúchulainn.<sup>2</sup> There is no indication that Findabair has any say in the matter. To her ambitious and hard-pressed mother she is simply a commodity to be used to seal a bargain. We may recall here how Yayāti disposed of his daughter, Mādhavī. We see Findabair more as a person in her own right briefly in the tale Táin Bó Froech (The Driving of Froech's Cattle). There the handsome young Froech, prince of one of the divisions of Connachta, whose mother was the goddess Bé Find, comes to ask for the girl in marriage. They meet by the

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1 H J Rose A Handbook of Greek Mythology

2 see C O'Rahilly pp 192, 193, 213 for three instances

river where Froech asks her to elope with him, but she refuses although she loves him and gives him a thumb ring as a love-token. He then goes to Medb and Ailill who demand an exorbitant bride-price, but the indignant suitor declares: "I swear by my shield and sword I would not give such a bride-price for Medb herself." Then he strides away from them out of the house.<sup>1</sup> The demand for such a high bride-price was not because of the high regard in which Ailill and Medb held their daughter. It is more likely that her mother was not anxious to lose control of a daughter who was so useful to her politically or, to be a little less unkind, the royal couple's prestige would be enhanced thereby. So we see Findabair once more being treated as a commodity with no consideration shown for her personal feelings. As the story progresses Ailill is afraid that the young couple may elope and he does not hesitate to make an attempt on the life of Froech as he swims in the lake. This, of course, is her husband's doing but Medb sits by his side without any sign of protest, and we know that she could and did dominate him when it suited her purpose. Medb had seven sons by Ailill, but we see or hear relatively little of them. We learn that Órlám was slain

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1 Studies in Irish Literature and History p 7

by Cúchulainn and another son by Cethern Mac Fintain<sup>1</sup> in the course of the Táin battles. But we do not find their mother weeping over their dead bodies, nor yielding to paroxysms of rage. She simply urges more heroes to confront Cúchulainn. Medb is hardly more admirable as a mother than Draupadī is. Indeed, one version of the Táin has it that Findabair died of shame when she discovered that seven Munster kings had come to take part in the conflict because her mother had promised her in marriage to each of them. "They came to take vengeance against Ailill's sons... in Glenn Domain. But Medb rose up against them... and Ailill and Fergus. Seven hundred men died slaughtering each other there in Glenn Domain."<sup>2</sup>

Mādhavī, for all the gentle goodness of her nature, her respect for and obedience to her father, her virtue recognised and rewarded by the gods and her clearly divine mission, is not seen mothering any of her children. She spends a single night with each of the fathers, then presumably waits in appropriate seclusion for the birth of her son, her virginity is restored, she hands over the child to his father and is on her way to

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1 C O'Rahilly p 172

2 Kinsella p 215

the next owner of horses. There is no hint in the text of mother-love tugging at her heart-strings, no display of emotion at all. Child-bearing for her is part of a bargain, a means of earning for Gālava his guru-daksina. This very mercenary exploitation of motherhood is quite extraordinary in the epic where so many of the births that take place are due to divine intervention following long prayer and rigorous penance to obtain the gift of a child. Draupadī and Dhṛṣṭadyumna are born of the sacrificial fire; the Pāṇḍavas are the sons of gods by human mothers; the hundred sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra are born miraculously; Karna is Kuntī's son by the sun-god Surya summoned to her side by virtue of a special gift. In the Rāmāyana, Sītā is born of the earth; she has no human mother, as Draupadī has none. Again, it is the sacred prasād which the god Viṣṇu, emerging from the sacrificial fire, gives to Daśaratha, which enables his three wives to give birth to Rāma, Lakṣmana, Bharata and Śatrughna. The list could go on and on. Since there is such emphasis on the need for progeny, so much importance given to prayer and sacrifice to obtain children as gift from the gods, it is strange that the role of a mother in caring for and bringing up her children gets such scant attention. In later literature we will have stories of the childhood of Kṛṣṇa in a very different tone. The

medieval poets will give us charming pictures of a child's world, of the intimacies of the home, but the epic world is primarily a world of adults, and the women on whom the spotlight plays are mainly virjya nārī. We do not see them nursing babies, but urging warriors to the battlefield, or bargaining for alliances that will strengthen martial forces.

Yet, not all epic women have to sacrifice their mother instincts to political ends. Some of them, at least, are able to take care of their growing children through their formative years before grimmer pursuits take them away from hearth and home. We have glanced at Andromache already and reflected on her last meeting with Hector, where father, mother and child are framed in a fleeting, but deeply touching picture of family life against the background noise of the battlefield just out of sight. His little son, Astyanax, is frightened by his father's shining armour and plumed helmet and refuses his embrace. Hector removes the intimidating headgear, hugs the little boy, lays a caressing hand on Andromache's shoulder and is off to his death.<sup>1</sup> Later Andromache will be taken into captivity, her child will be dashed to death before her eyes and her heart will break. But we remember her,

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1 Iliad Bk VI ll 543-4

not as the woman led away to slavery, widowed and childless, rather as the anxious young wife and mother, sharing a moment of poignant emotion with her husband and son on the eve of disaster. Later literature will show her torn between fidelity to Hector's memory and the life of Hector's son.<sup>1</sup> From what we see of her in the epic, this presentation, though it lacks specific supporting evidence in Homer, rings true and falls well within the bounds of credibility. Those were the two main concerns in her life: her husband and her son. One reason, perhaps, that she resented Helen's arrival in the Trojan household may have been that she realised war would follow sooner or later, threatening all that was most sacred to Andromache and the other Trojan women: their husbands, homes and children.

It may be objected that Andromache is in no way a heroine, that she is little more than an incidental figure, mentioned because she is Hector's wife, not because of any intrinsic merit of her own. This is a superficial argument. Homer is not concerned only with militant women, goddesses or intriguing half-human consorts. In the Odyssey, the woman character on whom he fixes his attention and ours is Penelope. True, he gives Athene

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1 Racine's Andromaque Act III Sc VIII



a distinctive role as a divine go-between, as human-appearing mentor to Telemachus, friend to Odysseus and Penelope; and there are the winning, affectionate Nausicaa, the wily Calypso and Circe with her dread magic. The busy Athene intervenes to solve "impossible" problems and push the action forward where it seems to reach an impasse. The other three female characters figure prominently in but a single chapter of Odysseus' experiences. It is Penelope whose presence, overt or hidden, pervades all twenty-four books of the epic. She is the woman in the home, the wife and mother whose separation is not from her children, in the company of her husband as in the case of Draupadī, or with her children from her husband as happened to Sītā, but whose husband is separated from her and from his home and son. Penelope's struggle to be faithful to her husband - perhaps only her husband's memory - and to her son lasts the greater part of twenty years, and despite doubt and hesitation and well-nigh intolerable pressure, her fidelity triumphs and meets its reward. Here is a faithfulness that is comparable with Sītā's devotion to Rāma and to Rāma's sons. For Telemachus, too, has been brought up to be proud of his father. Homer does not give us a close-up picture of Penelope's rearing of her son. We do know that he shares her resentment of the

behaviour of the suitors, and, despite the fact that he has been brought up to believe in an heroic father, the absence of that father from a share in the task of his upbringing has left him irresolute, hesitant and unable to cope with the worsening situation, until Athene comes on the scene. Assuming the guise of a friend of his father, she instils moral courage into Telemachus and places a plan of action before him. That he responds to this inspiration is indirect evidence of his mother's influence and training despite the bad example and the irritant of the suitors' greed, boisterousness and incessant demands. Telemachus when we first meet him in the poem is somewhat a spoiled child, over-protected, restless, unequal to the man's task that faces him. There appears to be something of Hamlet in his make-up and we may attribute this to his having grown up without a father rather than blame his mother for failing to turn out a more manly son. The specimens of manhood with whom he had closest contact were the suitors with their bullying tactics, their threatening attitude towards his mother which intimidated as well as infuriated the young boy. This is understandable and it is not surprising that Penelope did not urge her only son to offer stiffer resistance to a group of men little better than gangsters.

They would not have hesitated to kill him<sup>1</sup> and that would have left Penelope even more helplessly at their mercy. Given the circumstances, Penelope has done her best in rearing her son, keeping before him the memory of his father and the values of the family. It is because of this motherly concern for her son's safety that Athene tells him to set out in quest of his father without his mother's knowledge. She herself breaks the news to Penelope and comforts her with the promise that Odysseus will return. Telemachus' occasional words of reproof to his mother are not prompted by disrespect. They are the remarks of an adolescent growing into manhood and getting the feel of his burgeoning sense of authority. They also intimate indirectly to the listening suitors that his mother has a protector; there is now a man in the house! Perhaps it has begun to dawn on the young man that the absence of his father is a source of cruel suffering to his mother, not merely because of the persistent attentions of the suitors, but because her existence is incomplete without her husband. She has stronger reason than Draupadī to feel that she is nāthavatī anāthavat.

Telemachus' joy when he eventually meets his father may

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1 The suitors prepare an ambush to waylay and kill Telemachus as he returns from his search for his father. Athene foils the attempt by advising him to change his sea-route.

may owe something to the praises of Odysseus he has heard sung in the course of his quest, but it is even more a tribute to the regard for his father that his mother has nurtured in him over the years. So overjoyed is he in his recovery of his father that he cannot understand his mother's slowness in recognising him, in welcoming him back home. He is too young and too excited to appreciate Penelope's need to be sure that she is not deceived, for if she gave herself to someone who was not Odysseus her whole life would be a lie. She is looking for the truth of Odysseus, that old Indo-European concept of śvadharmā, the integrity that marks a man out from among his fellows. This is something beyond the comprehension of the youthful Telemachus, but it is the touchstone of Penelope's fidelity; it is the inner light that has kept her faithful to Odysseus' memory and to Odysseus' son during twenty years of waiting in the dark.

The more traditional, but still unusual, mothers whom we meet in the Mahābhārata are Gāndhārī and Kuntī, the wives of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇdu respectively. Gāndhārī has, perhaps, the more difficult role to play, though Kuntī's may be more spectacular. Gāndhārī is married to a blind husband whose blindness deprives him of the throne to

which as first-born he should have succeeded. In her imaginative re-telling of the Mahābhārata story Irawati Karve<sup>1</sup> has Gāndhārī fall unconscious to the floor when she learns that the prince she has come to Hastināpura to marry has been blind from birth. But she has a strong sense of duty and her devotion to her husband goes to the length of blind-folding herself so that she can share the darkness into which her husband was born. But she resents keenly the fact that succession to the throne has gone to his brother Pāṇḍu, and ardently longs for it to revert to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son. Because her pregnancy continues beyond the normal term, Kuntī's eldest son is born before Duryodhana and his ninety nine brothers whose birth is extraordinary and fulfils a prophecy which, at one stage, Gāndhārī is tempted to doubt.<sup>2</sup> Though the evil nature of her first-born is foretold neither she nor her husband heed the advice given them to destroy the child. It is the story of Oedipus and Deirdre ever again, and the boy is allowed to live to bring death and destruction to others. We see this problem posed at three intervals or stages in the Indo-European life-pattern - the problem of seemingly

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1 Yuganta: The End of an Epoch (Poona: Deshmukh Prakashan 1969) cf p 55

2 Basu p 48

avoidable evil, but the means of circumventing it are more evil still. In two of the three instances parental love recoils from destroying an innocent child. Laius and Jocasta entrust the task to others. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī simply refuse to consider the advice and, in Ulster, a king defies opinion out of what feeling we do not know. However, it is possible to see these children as instruments of divine wrath, sent into the world as a punishment for the sins of a family as in the case of Oedipus or to hasten the decimation of the warrior caste as in the instance of Deirdre and Duryodhana. While Oedipus and Deirdre are innocent victims of fate and relatively innocent instruments of Nemesis, Duryodhana deliberately maps out a course of evil: injustice, deceit, indecency, hatred, trickery and revenge, from which no power, human or divine, can divert him. Perhaps Gāndhārī's resentment of the fate, that left her husband blind and gave rights of primogeniture to Kuntī's sons, communicated itself to her evil-minded son, but the matter goes deeper than that. So powerful is Duryodhana's influence, so irresistible the impact of his personality that his parents have very little control over him even as a youngster. Time and again he sways his father's judgement away from truth and justice to support his own vicious designs.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra has no genuine grudge against his nephews. In fact since Pāṇḍu's untimely death he has stood in loco parentis to the five brothers; yet against his own better judgement, he agrees to the game of dice and to the banishment of Yudhiṣṭhira, his brothers and Draupadī to the forest. It would seem that Gāndhārī could do nothing to prevent such flagrant injustice and disproportionate revenge. Being a full-time mother did not enable her to exert that influence on her sons that would have enabled them to live in tolerance and brotherhood with their Pāṇḍava cousins. After all, Yudhiṣṭhira had divided the original kingdom, so that the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra were restored at least half of what fate had taken from their father. The care of a hundred sons was a gigantic task particularly for parents who were blind whether by birth or by choice, and there is some excuse for the poor job Gāndhārī made of training Duryodhana and Duṣśāsana in the way of dharma.

After the return of the Pāṇḍavas from exile, when the whole question of the restoration of their share of the kingdom is re-opened, Kṛṣṇa goes to Hastināpura to see if there is any hope of peace with honour. Duryodhana not only rejects all offers of conciliation, he even plans to lay hands on the person of Kṛṣṇa, who then approaches

Gāndhārī to try if she can deflect her son from the path of violence on which he is bent. She turns to her husband and puts the blame for the present situation on him: "Mahārāja, you are the guilty one. Even though you knew the evil inclinations of your son, you let yourself be ruled by your feelings. You gave the kingdom to this stubborn, bad-spirited, avaricious son who keeps evil company, and now you are reaping the reward."<sup>1</sup> These are hard words wrung from the heart of a mother who has been powerless to hold her son back from evil ways, powerless because her efforts met with no support from her husband. When Vidura succeeds in bringing Duryodhana back to the council hall she addresses him in more reasonable tones: "Son, think of the example of your father, of Bhīṣma, Droṇa and all right-minded people. The wealth of a kingdom is something powerful. Men of evil mind desire it, but they cannot hold on to it. Anyone who wishes to harm a kinsman out of greed or anger gets no support from anyone. The Pāṇḍavas are skilled and united warriors; if you join forces with them you could enjoy your share of the realm in happiness. Son, Bhīṣma and Droṇa have spoken the truth: the alliance of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna is invincible. If you please Keśava (Kṛṣṇa) he will do what is best for both sides. No good

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1 Basu p 348



comes of war; it brings neither justice nor wealth; it brings no joy and it doesn't always bring victory either."<sup>1</sup> She reminds him of the harm he has done the Pāṇḍavas over the past thirteen years and implores him to desist from further wrong-doing. She points out that although Bhīṣma, Droṇa and Kṛpa may enlist on his side, because they are under obligation to him, their hearts will not be in the fight; they will not be able to regard Yudhiṣṭhira as an enemy. "Son, give up your greed and live in peace."<sup>2</sup>

It is not merely that her words fall on deaf ears, they rouse her son's anger to a whiter heat; he quits the hall in high dudgeon to set about abducting Kṛṣṇa. Gāndhārī's cup of bitterness is full to the brim. We do not meet her again until the Strīparvāṇa when the Pāṇḍavas go to visit her; all her hundred sons are dead. She is overwhelmed with anguish, but the sight of her victorious nephews rouses her to terrible heights of uncontrollable anger. She is prevented from cursing Yudhiṣṭhira only by the timely arrival of Vyāsa who reminds her of her daily answer to Duryodhana's request for a blessing on his warfare: "Victory will come to the side that has dharma."<sup>3</sup>

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1 Basu pp 348-9

2 Ibid p 349

3 Ibid p 550

And Dharma has won. He reminds her of the Pāṇḍavas' efforts to avoid war and asks her to forgive them, and she answers that she does not blame the Pāṇḍavas; she blames Kṛṣṇa for allowing Bhīma to deal a mean, unworthy blow to Duryodhana. Bhīma and she then trade accusations and justifications but she has no answer to his final charge: "When your sons were ill-treating us you never forbade them. You should not blame us now." Her only response is an impassioned: "Why is there not a single one of our hundred sons left?"<sup>1</sup> Then she turns her rage on a trembling Yudhiṣṭhira who admits to being the murderer of her sons and invites her to curse him. She falls silent but the angry gleam from beneath her bandaged eyes falls on Yudhiṣṭhira's toenail and destroys it. As suddenly as it flared up the storm of her anger is spent and she turns to comfort the Pāṇḍavas, Kuntī and Draupadī.

The grief and anger that sweeps the bereft Gāndhārī is more immediately terrifying than Draupadī's reaction to the death of her sons. The older woman's wrath is more spontaneous, more dangerous while it lasts, like lightning flashes in a thunderstorm. It is less contained and deliberate than Draupadī's and it passes more swiftly.

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1 Basu p 550

The shock of having injured Yudhiṣṭhira, even though it is only his toenail, causes her rage to evaporate and she realises that the Pāṇḍavas, too, are grieving for their sons and grandsons, that Draupadī and Kuntī are as bereft as she is, and her motherly heart turns to comfort them. Her vision of the dreadful battlefield with its incredible tale of human destruction brings home to her the plight of her widowed daughters-in-law, searching now among the headless corpses and severed heads for their husbands, and sweeps her into a fresh paroxysm of grief and wrath. The full import of the eighteen days' fighting is brought home to her and every womanly instinct, every maternal feeling revolts against this crime against life. She turns on Kṛṣṇa who, she insists, could have prevented this carnage, and curses him:

"As the women of the Bhārata tribe are mourning the destruction of their menfolk today, forty years hence may your women-folk grieve for the destruction of your race."<sup>1</sup>

Kṛṣṇa knows that her curse is destined to be fulfilled. Like Deirdre and Draupadī, Gāndhārī too, brings about the destruction of a warrior race.

It is at this point that Kuntī chooses to reveal that Arjuna's long-time adversary whom he has slain, Karṇa, is her son and his half-brother. There is profound consternation and distress that could have been avoided if Kuntī had had the courage earlier to own him as her son. How true are Yudhiṣṭhira's words: "If we had been united with him (Karṇa) there is nothing in heaven that we could not have attained and this war, that has utterly destroyed the Kuru dynasty, need never have been fought."<sup>1</sup> This was, indeed, Kuntī's greatest failure as a mother and as a woman. The secret of her youthful adventure, in itself the result of a childish playing with a gift she did not understand, has remained hidden all these years, buried in an oblivion from which she hoped it would never emerge.

We see her as a frightened child-mother sending her little unwanted son floating down the river, not with the casual indifference of a Menaka, but with even more cruel consequences. The rigid caste system, already functioning in epic society, doomed the presumed son of Adiratha and Rādhā to exclusion from a variety of opportunities. At her svayamvara, when Karṇa steps forward to string the

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1 Basu p 553

bow, Draupadī cries out in shrill tones that she will not accept the hand of a Sudra. Earlier still, animosity and rivalry had sprung up between Karna and Arjuna. Men claim that women cannot keep a secret, but Kuntī kept hers too long and too well. When she does meet her son on the eve of the battle and reveals to him the secret of his birth, he spurns her as she had once rejected him. Her mother's heart suffers keenly, but she is merely reaping the bitter fruit of the seed she had sown. Her motive in acknowledging Karna as her son at this point of time is not the desire to make amends for her neglect of him, to restore to him the rights and privileges of which he has been deprived, but to avert the danger that threatens her other sons and the entire Kuru-Pāṇḍava race. Her cup of sorrow is full to the brim when at the end of the struggle the reality of fratricide is brought home to her, a grief as sharp and intense as Eve's when she saw Abel's blood on the hands of Cain.<sup>1</sup>

Despite her fidelity as a wife and the severe penances she underwent to obtain an assurance of progeny for her accursed husband, despite the ideal sons she bore as gifts of the gods, despite her enabling Mādrī to bear

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1 Genesis, Chapter 4

the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, despite her undertaking to bring up all five sons when Mādrī chose to join their husband in death, Kuntī's record as a mother is blotted by her rejection of her first-born son and her concealment of his identity. Had she been an *apsarā* her conduct might have been overlooked, even tolerated, but because she is human her crime is unpardonable. She cannot forgive herself, so no one else can pardon her either. There is more morality, evidently, on earth than in Heaven! Kuntī's failure here as a mother constitutes one of the many "ifs" that plague the reader (as distinct from the original hearer) of the Mahābhārata. As one contemplates the utterly meaningless devastation on the field of Kurukṣetra one cannot refrain from exclaiming: "If only Dhṛtarāṣṭra had not been born blind.... If only he had been firmer in his handling of Duryodhana.... If only he and Gāndhārī had followed the sage's advice and got rid of the child of such evil destiny (dread solution, indeed).... If only Kuntī had not played with the boon granted her of summoning a god to her side..... If only the infant Karṇa had perished instead of being rescued by his good foster-parents.... If only Kuntī had acknowledged her son born out of wedlock, which she could have done when Pāṇḍu, in his enforced celibacy, was so desperate to obtain a son...."

The "ifs" could go on indefinitely, but perhaps the last one indicates the least pardonable omission.

Apart from this fatal flaw in her performance as a mother, Kuntī stands out as remarkably successful in her maternal role. Her care and concern for her sons is consistent; she appreciates their individual needs and treats them accordingly. When widowed she does not shirk the responsibility of her sons' training and education. There is a close bond between mother and sons, never more evident than when Arjuna wins the hand of Draupadī at her svayamvara. She has guided her sons through the early stages of the Kauravas' envy and ill-will. She shares with them the danger at Vārāṇāṣa, their escape and their period of isolation. She welcomes Draupadī warmly as her daughter-in-law and is happy in the happiness of her sons.

Irawati Karve sums up the contrasts in Kuntī's character when she writes: "Throughout (her) life we get alternate glimpses of meanness and nobility. One is repulsed by the Kuntī who blamed Mādrī for her husband's death; but the same Kuntī showered her love on Mādrī's orphaned children all her life. Draupadī could have been the wife of her own three sons, but Kuntī did not exclude

the other two. It does not appear that in doing this the unity of the five was her only motive. Once she called Mādrī's sons her own they did become her own."<sup>1</sup>

When the macro-conflict becomes inevitable she tries to deflect it by going to Karna and revealing the secret of his birth and the painful story of her rejection of him. This called for a degree of moral courage that we could wish had been evident earlier in the story. To quote Mrs Karve again: "Just before the great war both she and Krishna had felt the necessity of getting Karna to join the Pāṇḍavas. For this a public acknowledgement of her relationship with Karna was necessary. Kuntī was prepared to undergo this ordeal."<sup>2</sup> Finally, when it is clear that the clash of arms cannot be averted she reminds her sons of their ksatriya-dharma through the story of Sañjaya and his mother, Vidulā.<sup>3</sup> There is no long discourse on the obligation to defend the family honour; there is a brief story, very much to the point, which she knows will tell her sons all that she wants them to understand. It gives us a clue to Kuntī's method of training her sons. She was evidently not given

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1 Yuganta p 83

2 Ibid p 84

3 Basu p 352



to long exhortations but must have had a fund of short, apt stories that carried her message far more effectively.<sup>1</sup> The philosophy of the battlefield she could safely leave to Kṛṣṇa;<sup>2</sup> the simple parable of Sañjaya and Vidulā is the only message she entrusts to him for her sons. It is remarkable that except Karna, whom she had never treated as a son, Kuntī loses none of her sons in the slaughter of Kurukṣetra. All the other women - Gāndhārī, Draupadī, Subhadra, not to mention the Kaurava wives and Karna's wife, have been left childless. Only the five-fold incarnation of Indra, the Pāṇḍavas, are left to console their mother, whose grief, understandably, is less tempestuous than that of Gāndhārī, Draupadī and the countless bereaved women searching the battlefield for the mutilated remains of their husbands and sons.

Kuntī seems to have enjoyed the favour of the gods from an early age. It was the manner in which she served

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1 In Storytelling: Imagination and Faith (Mystic, Connecticut 1984) William J Bausch writes: "Stories provide a basis for hope and morality. When people are in a hopeless situation, the only way out, so to speak, is to imagine other possibilities and alternatives. It is the imagination, therefore, that gives birth to hope, and it is the story that is imagination's vehicle." p 60-61

2 as expounded in the Bhagavad-Gītā

the guests in her uncle Kuntībhoja's home<sup>1</sup> that won for Pṛthā from Ṛṣi Durvāsā the boon of summoning a god to her side. We have already mentioned how the irresponsible use of this gift led to the birth and abandonment of the extraordinary child, Karna, fathered by the sun-god, Surya. When she was married to Pāṇdu, the younger son who ascended the throne because of his elder brother's blindness, she soon had Mādrī as a co-wife. Despite some signs of resentment, she seems to have accepted the situation with a reasonable degree of tolerance. A forest sojourn resulted in Pāṇdu's being cursed for shooting a mating deer - a muni in disguise. He would die in a similar situation. The consequent enforced celibacy seems to have been accepted philosophically by both wives, though not by Pāṇdu himself, whose penances and prayers to obtain a son were shared by the women. After a ṛṣi promised him sons "like the gods" he suggested that Kuntī have a son by a brahmin or holy man. It is then that she "remembers" the boon of earlier days to the delight of her husband. Her choice of fathers for her sons - Dharma, Vāyu, Indra - is quite remarkable and surely points to a divine destiny shaping her decisions. It is only at Pāṇdu's request, however, that Kuntī agrees to relieve Mādrī's natural distress at her childlessness

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1 She was given by her father to her childless uncle.

by agreeing to allow her to summon a god just once. But this lady is shrewd and calls on the Aśvins who father her twins.

After the death of Pāṇdu and Mādrī, Kuntī returns with the five boys to the court. Her situation is far from enviable. She has to face the growing animosity of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī who would like the throne restored to their sons and are grieved that Yudhiṣṭhira is older than Duryodhana. That her sons grew up such noble young men inspite of this hostility and show so little resentment of the petty, and often not so petty, malice of Duryodhana is certainly a tribute to Kuntī's example of patience, tolerance and good sense, which shaped the character and conduct of her very remarkable children. After their marriage to Draupadī, Kuntī moves quietly into the background. Like a wise mother she follows the fortunes of her sons, but does not interfere. Her distress when the forest exile starts is evident in her expressed wish to share the hardships with them. But she is not to join them; her task now is to look after her deserted daughters-in-law and her grandchildren. "Kuntī, though not in exile, suffered greater agonies because she had to live among enemies and witness their prowess and prosperity. When Krishna went to negotiate

a treaty with the Kauravas he called on her. The moment she saw him she fell upon his neck and burst into tears, recalling all the calamities that had befallen her since childhood."<sup>1</sup> Despite such a momentary outburst, Kuntī applies herself to the task in hand. She has always had this ability to bring all her natural gifts to bear fully upon what she is doing, whether it be the sharing of her husband's penances, the upbringing of her children or the care of her grandchildren. She is a woman of destiny, a destiny she accepts and fulfils.

Before attempting to draw conclusions regarding the vision of womanhood that inspired the epic poets, I would turn briefly to the most bewildering mother in Indo-European literature: Medea. Revenge is the prime reason for her mad murder of her children. She confesses that she has borne them in pain; she laments the sad fate in store for them exiled from their father; she bursts into tears when she reconciles them to Jason. But their last screams from behind closed doors seem to indicate a monster, not a mother:

"Help quickly ere we die."

"She has almost caught me now. She has a sword."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Karve op cit p 79

2 Euripides, Medea trans Gilbert Murray (London: Allen and Unwin 1910 rpt 1956)

Medea would render her faithless husband childless. That would be part of her revenge, after leaving him widowed before his wedding day. But her final "reason" is that she would not have her children apprehended and punished for the crime she had effected through their innocent hands. There is a strange, warped strand of mother-love woven through the dark fabric of her last murder.

The Argo legend belongs to a collection of myths even older than the Iliad and pertains to barbarous tribes who had not yet felt the civilizing influence of Greek culture. Medea is a barbaric figure from the eastern Mediterranean. Although she appears to have made great sacrifices - blood sacrifices of her closest kin - for Jason's sake, it is really to satisfy her own desires, to further her own designs, that she slays father, brother and Jason's usurping uncle. And it is to slake her thirst for revenge that she first plans to murder her sons. The later plea that she would thus save them from harsher punishment for her deed is an after-thought - some primitive maternal instinct, perverse and cruel, but not without a twisted sense of pity, that they might die less painfully at her hands than at the hands of an avenging enemy, even at their father's hands. We have already adverted to Thetis' destruction of her children

and considered the probability that the less mortal and more divine epic mothers prove to be, the poorer is the quality of their mothering. Hera, when she wanted to punish Ino, made her mad and the Theban queen clasping her infant in her arms, leaped into the sea.<sup>1</sup> But we can hardly excuse Medea on the plea of insanity, though some critics do.<sup>2</sup> Uncontrolled anger and the driving force of her desire for barbarous revenge have taken over from reason to a considerable extent, but Medea can plan and plot with cold logic and ruthless determination, for she is no mere human and the gods do not go mad. She is the sun-goddess, grandchild to the Sun and partakes of the dual nature of that heritage. She can, in Euripides, speak of the "still green sepulchre"<sup>3</sup> where she will lay the corpses of her children, for as sun-goddess she nurtures the earth and brings forth the flowers and grass that adorn its life. But she is also the scorching destroyer that burns the desert sands and dries up the very springs of life, so that the sad earth pants for

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- 1 Ovid, Metamorphoses trans Mary M Innes (Penguin 1967) pp 105-108
  - 2 Gilbert Murray in Euripides and His Age (Oxford Paperbacks 1965) writes "Medea... is at heart a maniac. It is the madness produced by love rejected and justice denied...." (p 40)  
Kitto repeatedly stresses her "irrationality".
  - 3 Euripides, Medea trans Gilbert Murray p 77

moisture and the very foliage she nourished withers and dies. She burns to death her rival, Creon's daughter, and the king himself, with the pitiless fire of her revenge. The princess was probably young enough to be the daughter of this aging, greying fury so her fiery destruction

"The carcanet of gold  
That gripped her brow was molten in a dire  
And wondrous river of devouring fire  
And those fine robes... everywhere did lap and lave  
The delicate flesh; till up she sprang and fled  
A fiery pillar..."<sup>1</sup>

bears something of the quality of child murder. Aoife, the step-mother of the children of Lir, jealous of her husband's love for them, plans to kill them. But "her womanly nature prevented her" doing the deed. Instead she had recourse to magic and turned them into four swans.<sup>2</sup>

Medea seems to have shed "her womanly nature" and is seen as a monstrous mother, but is she so greatly different from Medb urging her sons into deadly conflict or bartering

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1 Euripides Medea trans Gilbert Murray p 66

2 Myles Dillon Early Irish Literature (Chicago University Press 1948; 4th ed 1964) p 64

her daughter for a better chance of victory in her own war of revenge? Is there an unbridgeable gap between her and Draupadī who insists on bloody war where the lives of her sons, her brother, her father and her husbands are at risk? There is one significant difference, even where there is the common, powerful quest for revenge and it is that in the wars of the Táin Bó Cúailnge and the Mahābhārata, the sons, husbands and lovers are old enough to do battle; they have been trained to arms and are warriors by birth and profession, so they have as good a chance of survival as their enemies have. They are also fighting for their own glory, prestige and gain as well as for the honour of their womenfolk. In the case of Medea's children, however, the odds are all against them. Their mother has used them to commit a heinous crime, and, in the name of saving them from justice, slays them with her own hand behind closed doors. Shakespeare is possibly indebted to this scene for the murder of Macduff's children in Macbeth.

Helen was listed at the beginning of this chapter as one of the less dedicated mothers in epic literature. By comparison with the barbaric cruelty of Medea and her betrayal of all motherly instincts, Helen appears merely as a vain, thoughtless, self-seeking woman, whose



motherhood is no more than incidental. She left not only her husband but her child to go with Paris to Troy and the consequence of this maternal negligence, indifference or cruelty, call it what you will, was the death of the sons of other women. Helen is morally responsible for the death of Iphigeneia, of the sons of Hector, of Astyanax, if we accept that the Trojan War was fought to recover Helen and was not simply a trade war. The Greeks were a people with an ethical code and a philosophy of life, perhaps not fully articulated in the epic age, but certainly emerging in clear terms were the duties and responsibilities of family life<sup>1</sup> and the rearing of children. Penelope testifies to this beyond any possible doubt and so does Andromache, for Trojan though she may be, her character is the creation of a Greek poet who shows us admirable womanhood and motherhood even in the enemy camp.

That womanly loyalty and tenderness transcend such categories as friend and foe, race or class, east or west, seems to be one of the statements that the epic poet makes on behalf of the epic society, the heroic age. How does this figure, who stands for all the members of the race of singers of tales, view the role of mother in that society? It would seem that certain

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1 The Greek dramatists explore these duties extensively

distinctions are made or at least appear to be made. There are warrior-mothers, generally of divine origin, who have a symbolic role, and the human or nearer human mothers whose role is primarily but not solely domestic. The superhuman mothers: Draupadī, Medb, Mādhavī, are mothers only to serve some wider, vaster purpose than the fulfilment of an ordinary, natural destiny. They are symbols of sovereign power; their marriage(s) in each case is to a king and his kingdom rather than to a particular man. The role of their children, sons and daughters, is to further and protect the stability and glory of the kingship. Their motherhood is not intended for their own personal fulfilment as women, but serves their function as symbols and purveyors of royal power. Mādhavī bears four sons destined to be kings whose virtue will enhance the very idea of kingship.<sup>1</sup> Her role is to ennoble the concept and exercise of sovereignty. Just as Viśvāmitra by his asceticism had raised the warrior code, the idea of chivalry, to what was considered a higher degree, that of the brāhmaṇa, so the sons of Mādhavī appear destined to raise the level of the dignity of kingship to new heights.

Draupadī, too, brings a fresh ideal into the exercise of

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1 See Mythe et Épopée II p 326

royal power. She is Śrī, the goddess of beauty and fecundity, and she has, too, the divine spark of her progenitor, Agni. Yudhiṣṭhira, as king, cannot rule without Draupadī, and when he gambles and loses his kingdom it follows that he has to lose Draupadī as well. If she goes to the Kauravas the Pāṇḍavas will never regain their kingdom. Duryodhana and Duṣṣāsana direct their insults not merely to the woman, Draupadī, but to the embodied symbol of the Pāṇḍava kingship. That they may not be conscious of the full significance of their actions is immaterial. In a work of art it is the poet's intention that is relevant. When Kṛṣṇā protests so vehemently against her ill-treatment she is, of course, protesting on behalf of all oppressed womanhood, but she is also asserting herself against the desecration of a sovereignty that is divinely willed, divinely given.<sup>1</sup> That is why she does not hesitate to send her sons into battle so that the crime against sovereignty, and ultimately against the gods, may be avenged, so that the concept and exercise of kingship may be defended against its attackers and restored to its rightful exercitant,

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1 The "divine right of kings" claimed by the Stuart kings in Britain may be traced back to this old Indo-European tradition. In the Bible, too, the king is God's representative, his annointed one.

Dharma-Yudhiṣṭhira. It is for this purpose that she is married to him and not to the warrior, Arjuna.

Draupadī is like the many mothers, human mothers, throughout history who have sent their sons to do battle for their country in the name of freedom. They have inspired their young men with a glowing sense of patriotism that has made them fearless in the face of danger, that has transformed simple sons of the soil into never-to-be-forgotten heroes. Draupadī is the model of such mothers. The long years of exile deprived her of the joy of seeing her sons grow from childhood to manhood. When she returned with her husbands she had little time to relish the joy of being with her children again before the great encounter at Kurukṣetra robbed her of them all. She is rather like the mother of the Maccabees in the Bible, who stood by while her sons, one after the other beginning with the eldest, were tortured and executed because they refused to deny their faith. When the king, Antiochus Epiphanes (175-165 BC) asked her to try to persuade her seventh and youngest son to abandon the traditions of his ancestors, she drew close to the young boy and in their native Aramaic, which the king did not understand, she encouraged her son:

Do not fear this executioner, but prove yourself worthy of your brothers, and make death welcome,

so that in the day of mercy I may receive you  
back in your brothers' company.

So the youngest brother met his death and the mother was  
the last to die, after her sons.<sup>1</sup>

The circumstances are different to those in which Drappadi finds herself, but the spirit of sacrifice of one's flesh and blood in defence of a cause that transcends, in its idealism and nobility, the limits of the human life span, animates both women, although strictly speaking, the Biblical mother is outside the framework of the Indo-European tradition. Whether or not we agree with the specific vision that motivates these mothers we have to admire a courage that looks beyond the tender claims of kinship. Yet, the fortitude, the ability to make this sacrifice, to motivate their sons to sacrifice their lives, does not lessen the human grief that threatens to overwhelm the bereft mothers, an anguish that seems to drain the human psyche not only of all the joy of life, but of the very purpose of living. "What a kingdom, I who have children?"<sup>2</sup> We can envy the mother of the Maccabees dying immediately after her last son. There is no focus on Medb's loss of her sons; she

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1 2 Maccabees 7 : 29

is too busy getting her armies back to Cruachan. Gāndhārī spends fifteen empty years with her husband at her nephew's court, bearing the occasional rough word from Bhīma in silence. Perhaps she can appreciate now the position of Kuntī for so long at Duryodhana's court. At last the forest beckons and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Gāndhārī and Kuntī leave the palace for the last time. For Draupadī the rest is silence. The last pārvanas of the Mahābhārata, probably a later addition, tell us nothing of Yudhiṣṭhira's queen. After she hands over Aśvathāmā's precious gem to her husband we do not hear her voice again. We see her, dressed in bark-cloth, following her husbands on the last journey to heaven. For her "the road winds uphill all the way/Yes, to the very end."

The more human mothers of epic tradition are not created to any one pattern or formula. It would seem that the epic poets sought to present the mystery and miracle of motherhood in a variety of moods, from several different vantage points. Love for their children predominates in the lives of Gāndhārī, Kuntī, Andromache, Penelope, Sītā and Śakuntalā. But the poets see other claims on their affections and sense of duty shaping and directing their maternal feelings and actions. Gāndhārī's devotion to her blind husband, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, has not only deprived her

of the sight of her children, but has left her powerless to stand against his persistent defence of Duryodhana's wrong-headedness. The poet shows her love for her children flowering into an ambition that makes her swerve from the path of justice towards Kuntī's sons. He shows us, too, the outcome of it all - a mother bereft of her hundred sons and all her grandsons, racked with passionate anger on the corpse-strewn battlefield, still unwilling to blame her son or her husband for the massacre, seeking instead to settle the blame on Bhīma, on Yudhiṣṭhira and finally on Kṛṣṇa whom she curses. A great woman is Gāndhārī, but like all mortals, flawed. Her very qualities beget her weaknesses. Her heart abounds in love but her mind lacks logic. There is no attempt to turn her into a goddess; she is portrayed in totally human dress in all its flawed glory, its generosity and nobility, its meanness and pettiness. It is as if the poet stands back in awe of his own creation, amazed at the mystery of womanhood and motherhood. In Kuntī's character, too, he expresses the same sense of bafflement. She is depicted as the near-perfect mother, but there is the devastating secret of her childhood playfulness, wilfulness, sinfulness - her testing of the mantra and her rejection of the consequences, the abandonment of her son. Her encounters with the gods

thereafter, are more reverent, more deliberate and richly blessed. Of all the woman figures in the Mahābhārata she is the one who was least in favour of war. Her approach to her abandoned son, Karna, and the painful revelation of her secret shame, is in the interests of peace. If Karna joins forces with the Pāṇḍavas there will be no need for war. When this gesture, made for the sake of her acknowledged sons, fails, she supports Kṛṣṇa's peace efforts, but when these too fail she is the warrior-mother who reminds her sons of their ksatriya duty. And finally, although Kuntī loses her first-born son, for a second time, on the battlefield, she has the joy of seeing her five Pāṇḍavas spared and their rights restored. The victory at Kurukṣetra is a Pyrrhic victory, no doubt, and there is little happiness for anyone in the outcome. Kuntī, however, is the one whose losses are least. This, from the poet's point of view, may indicate that she still enjoys the favour of the gods and in the socio-religious context of the epic world this is much indeed.

Andromache stands out as a tragic figure, a valiant woman in the Biblical sense,<sup>1</sup> a noble woman widowed, enslaved,

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1 Proverbs 31, v 10-31 "A perfect wife - who can find her? She is far beyond the price of pearls. Her husband's heart has confidence in her... Advantage and not hurt she brings him all the days of her life" (vv 10-12)



rendered childless for no fault of hers that we can discern. Perhaps in the eyes of the envious Greek gods she was too fortunate - loved by her husband and son, honoured by her family. Her misfortune is that she belongs to the defeated party, the Trojans. Homer presents her as tender-hearted, wronged, innocent and dignified. He does not try to "explain" Andromache, he reverences her in her role as wife and mother.

Penelope and Sītā have the onerous task of bringing up sons without a father's support. Their success is a matter of no small wonder to their respective poets. Penelope is shown mourning her husband's absence and his feared death and also worried beyond endurance by Telemachus' adventure in quest of Odysseus. The harassment of the suitors stirred her ingenuity to devise the weaving scheme, but alone she could find no solution to her dilemma. An adolescent son, for whose safety she feared, was at once her consolation and a source of anxiety. Sorely tried and humanly at her wits' end is the Penelope Homer portrays, but like Kuntī and Sītā, her goodness wins her the favour, help and protection of a divine advocate. Athene sustains Penelope with just the meed of courage or hope she needs in each moment of crisis till her son and her husband restore normalcy and

tranquillity to their home in Ithaca. It has been a long testing time of her fidelity as a wife and her duty as a mother and the poet focusses on the last phase of the weary struggle. There is no serious flaw in Penelope's character, just normal human limitations which show up under prolonged strain. Her fidelity and her parenting show up more heroically, more quietly heroically, on the whole than Odysseus' do. Perhaps that is Homer's tribute to womanhood. Sītā as a mother leaves all other epic women in the shade, but at the expense of Rāma's reputation, for his banishment of her and the implied questioning of her virtue shows him in a light that reflects no glory on his own position - certainly not in the eyes of a twentieth century critic, and Vālmiki's opinion is only thinly veiled as well. Her twin sons' recitation of their father's praises is an even louder and clearer proclamation of their mother's virtue, of her fidelity and her dignity. And the poet underlines that dignity further when he has her mother Earth receive Sītā back into her embrace leaving Rāma confused in the presence of his sons.

Śakuntalā, like Sītā, is rejected by her royal husband, but this is the consequence of a ṛṣi's curse, when pre-occupied with thoughts of her absent lover, she failed

to extend due hospitality to the visiting holy man. It is Śakuntalā's courage in the face of daunting obstacles, her tenacity in claiming recognition for her son rather than for herself that the poet emphasises. And once again it is the mother who emerges as the nobler figure, the worthier human being, despite the lengths to which the male poet goes to palliate or even justify the attitudes and actions of both Rāma and Duṣmanta.

The less responsible or irresponsible mothers like Helen and Medea are, like Sītā and Śakuntalā, of more than human origin, but in presenting them Homer and an earlier bard portray the less than human quality of their mothering. Helen is frivolous as a wife and indifferent as a parent. Medea is a near monster in both roles. It is as if the poet in depicting such characters is inviting his audience, his readers, to reflect on the difference between these semi-divine mothers and their human, frailer counterparts and to be glad that they themselves are human! Motherhood is more natural to the human condition and, therefore, more sacred, more awesome, more mysterious. To the *apsarās* it is something of a curse or punishment and involves a period of exile from the joys of heaven. Sītā and Śakuntalā are remarkable exceptions perhaps because of their upbringing in human

society, perhaps because of their destiny.

The most outstanding mother, the most outstanding woman in all literature, in all history for the Christian world, and for many sincere admirers besides, is Mary, the mother of Jesus. "Fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army in battle array" so sings the Church in praise of her, borrowing the language of the Cantic of Canticles.<sup>1</sup> She is the second Eve, the sinless Eve, promised in Genesis as the one who will crush the serpent's head ie Satan's. The great mystical prophet Isaiah in the eighth century BC foretold how this promise would be fulfilled: "The virgin will conceive and bear a son and will call him Emmanuel which means God-with-us."<sup>2</sup>

It is Luke, the gentle physician, possibly of Greek origin, who tells us in the first century of this era, how Yahweh asked the consent of Mary of Nazareth in Galilee to give a human presence on earth to his Son, the Eternal Word of God.<sup>3</sup> This divine respect for a woman's freedom is the most beautiful and the most absolute declaration possible on the dignity of womanhood. Mary's

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1 The Cantic of Canticles Ch 6:9-10

2 Isaiah 7:14

3 See Gospel of Luke Ch 1-2

response in the simplicity and humility of faith takes her into the depths of a mystery that will slowly unfold God's plan in her life and in the life of her son, but the mystery will always remain. The enfleshment of the Word within her virgin-womb brings misunderstanding, then a weary journey to Bethlehem, poor shelter for the birth of her child, threats to his safety, exile in Egypt, and after their return, years of quiet anonymity with Joseph in their carpenter's home in Nazareth.

Words of joy greet Mary and her child in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, but there in the temple of Yahweh, his Father, comes the prophecy of the ancient Simeon: her child would be "a sign of contradiction" and a sword of sorrow would pierce her own heart. During his life as an itinerant religious teacher, Mary watches from afar and ponders in her heart the praise and the denunciation that reach her ears. When the opposition to his Word of Truth reaches its climax, she meets him on the road to Calvary and follows him to stand beneath the cross on which he hangs until he returns his spirit to the Father. With her there stands the youngest of his chosen friends, John son of Zebedee, and two women who have braved the jealous hatred of the religious leaders who have brought about his death: three women and a man.<sup>1</sup>

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1 See Gospel of John 19:25-30

The Word that came to Mary some thirty odd years earlier in Nazareth was a word of hope: salvation for all the nations. Beneath the cross of shame and failure with her dead son in her arms, Mary still hoped because she believed God's word. Her heart still echoed her responsive word of long ago: "Let what you have said be done to me." Faith is Mary's great virtue, a faith that never falters no matter how adverse the circumstances may be. And that faith is rewarded on Easter morning when Jesus triumphs over sin and death in the greatest mystery of all - the Resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

A virgin-mother through the power of God's spirit, to her neighbours the wife of Joseph the carpenter, a cheerful, kindly woman, sensitive to the needs of others as at the wedding feast at Cana, where the wine ran short and at her whispered word, her son changed water into wine, Mary is heroic in her sharing of her son's suffering for the redemption of the world. In a litany of praise and petition the Church honours and invokes her as Refuge of Sinners, Comforter of the Afflicted and Queen of Martyrs, and celebrates her victory with the title Queen of Heaven - the end of the journey for the humble "handmaid of the Lord". Over his cross the Roman Governor

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1 See Gospel of John 20

of Judea, Pontius Pilate, affixed the legend: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, for he had been baffled by his prisoner's words: "My kingdom does not belong to this world". But the kingdom in the hearts of men was a reality, and her share in helping the weak, the sorrowful and the sinner towards its growth within them entitles Mary to be called a queen. She sums up in her person and in her life all our hopes and all our striving; she still turns to her son, when we turn to her, to say: "They have no wine" and to her clients her message is "Do whatever he tells you".

Andromache, Draupadī, Penelope, Medb, Mādhavī, Mary - wives, mothers, women. Women whom poets have celebrated, have exalted and adorned with the most beautiful imagery, language and symbolism of which their genius was capable. They continue to fascinate the poets, the painters and the public of to-day's world because their creators rendered them timeless, eternal.

## CHAPTER VI

### REMEMBERING AND REBIRTH

"To remember is not simply to look back at past events; more importantly, it is to bring these events into the present and celebrate them here and now." This idea is "central to biblical tradition. For Israel, remembrance means participation."<sup>1</sup> Celebration and participation are activities of the here and now that can draw on the past to bring its inspiration, its essence into the present and seek direction towards the future. In his Anti-Memoirs André Malraux writes, "One day it will be realised that men are distinguishable from one another as much by the forms their memories take as by their characters."<sup>2</sup> And Elie Wiesel in his novel, Legends of Our Time describes his feelings when he returned to the town of Sighet, where in 1944 all Jews were rounded up

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1 Henri J Nouwen The Living Reminder (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1982; Seabury Press 1977) p 38

2 New York: Bantam Books 1970 p 125 quoted by Nouwen p 17



and deported to concentration camps. Twenty years later he was pained to find that the people of his home town had erased the Jews from their memory. He writes: "I was not angry with the people of Sighet... for having driven out their neighbours of yesterday, nor for having denied them. If I was angry at all it was for having forgotten them. So quickly, so completely... Jews have been driven not only out of town but out of time as well."<sup>1</sup> The consequences of such forgetting of the past, warns George Santayana, is to be doomed to repeat it, whereas, according to the Ulster poet, John Montague (born 1929), "One explores an inheritance to free oneself and others."<sup>2</sup>

The roots of racial memory go very deep and the cyclic concept of time which in most civilizations precedes the linear, and which tends to prevail in the human psyche quite independently of any super-imposed time-line, bears testimony to these depths. Time and again the root memories as enshrined in the myths, legends, chronicles - the stories of the race, emerge in periods of crisis or transition, emerge in startling new forms to express once more what is fundamental in human experience. Like the natural cycle itself the beliefs and traditions

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1 Quoted by Nouwen in op cit p 17

2 Preface to The Rough Field (The Dolmen Press 1972)

of a people can undergo a winter darkness in an underworld of forgetting, decay or even rejection. But spring returns with the tentative emergence of tender shoots from the dead seeds of a late harvest and a new verdure, a fresh flowering begins.

The Renaissance in Europe flowed in large measure from the re-discovery of the literature and learning of ancient Greece. Into the limiting framework of scholasticism, already beginning to show cracks in its structure, into the fantasy world of the romance, into the dream-heaven of the troubadours, burst a torrent of startlingly unfamiliar but excitingly welcome ideas, ideals and stories - above all an avalanche of stories. The whole wealth of the Homeric world that had already in the fifth century BC overflowed into the works of the dramatists,<sup>1</sup> now provided heady new wine for a Europe where medieval styles were ripe for change, for transformation.

In the centuries that followed painters, sculptors,

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1 The tragedians focussed their attention on several women figures from the epic world: Aeschylus in the Oresteia depicts Klytemnestra, Electra and the Eumenides.

Sophocles gives us Antigone and Electra as well as several lost plays eg Colchian Women, The Marriage of Helen etc. Euripides outnumbers his elders with Andromache, Electra, Hecuba, Iphigenia (at Taurus and Aulis), Medea as well as many lost plays.

architects, poets, dramatists looked for inspiration to a pre-Christian past where man was seen emerging as the centre of the universe and the gods were retiring in something akin to disarray to the oblivion of remote heavens. Christian theologians taking a fresh look at their sources would also re-discover God's view of man as the crowning point of the creation.

# I

English and European literature recreated both major and minor Homeric figures as well as characters from peripheral stories not included in the epic mainstream eg Jason, Orpheus. Chaucer transformed Chryseis from Boccaccio's Il filostrato to his own Criseyde and Shakespeare called her Cressida when he presented her in the company of Troilus. More than a century later Agamemnon's prize, the Trojan priest's daughter, would inspire Dryden's "Troilus and Cressida or Truth found Too Late". His translations from Greek and Latin include "The Last Parting of Hector and Andromache" and Ovid's Epistles: "Helen to Paris" and "Dido to Aeneas". The

epic women were making so strong an impression that Samuel Butler could seriously attribute the authorship of the Odyssey to Nausicaa! In seventeenth century France Racine immortalized a new Andromaque, Iphigénie, Phèdre and Bérénice, interpreting the myths in terms of absolute choice between two values: fidelity to Hector's memory or Hector's son in Andromaque, the public will versus personal love in Bérénice, paternal affection and royal duty in Iphigénie. The dramatist's Jansenistic cast of mind gives an added sharpness to the harsh choice whose outcome is already fatalistically predetermined.

Corneille's Médée follows Seneca more closely than Euripides, and the dramatist is intrigued by the magical aspects of his heroine's exploits. His Andromède drawn from Ovid and presented as a musical extravaganza delighted the court of Louis XIV with the magical devices that brought Juno on stage in a "flying chariot" adorned with the star of Venus.<sup>1</sup> In La Toison d'Or he recreated the story of Jason's search for the Golden Fleece and related it symbolically to the France of his day where Victory "repents not having followed incomparable France with such unflinching constancy." These examples give us an idea of how the ancient themes, heroes and heroines

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1 Euripides seems to treat the Andromeda and Perseus story as a primal star myth

came alive for the audiences of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England and France, for Shakespeare's Cressida and Troilus and Racine's Greek maidens have been reborn as characters of the Renaissance, not as mere reprints of the Homeric heroines.

The eighteenth century focussed more on the philosophers than on the poets for enlightenment and on stylistics for form until, in some cases, the spirit of poetry was in danger of being imprisoned in brittle, if brilliant, so-called classical techniques. It was against such formality that the Romantics revolted. When they got "back to Nature" they found Homer there already and if they had had access to the earliest Gaelic lyric poetry (7th/8th century) they would have discovered a fresh and wholesome, even tender regard for the beauty of creation. The Romantics knew their classics and drew on them for inspiration and illustration, and so did the Victorians. But the rather astonishing feature of the English and French poets of the post-Renaissance period is that, while they reached back into the treasure trove of Greek and Latin authors they all too rarely turned to the early culture and literature of their own national tradition. In this respect the Germans differ; the influence of Volkslied is evident throughout the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries in Goethe's Faust, in Herder's lyrics, in Schiller and in Lessing. We find more folklore in Malory, Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare than we do in Keats or Shelley, Tennyson or Mathew Arnold, while Corneille in recreating the Spanish folk-hero, the Cid, and giving a new dimension to the fidelity and tragedy of a woman's love in Chimène, is closer to Cervantes than to Racine.

The twentieth century sees Electra crossing the Atlantic to be reborn in Eugene O'Neill's trilogy Mourning Becomes Electra not in the House of Atreus, but in that of Mannon. The Trojan War becomes the Civil War where Ezra Mannon/Agamemnon wins glory and returns to an unfaithful wife who brings about his death. O'Neill adds an American complication to the plot by having mother and daughter fall in love with the same man, Brant. Orin-Orestes murders Brant at his sister's instigation and shares with her, Lavinia-Electra, the responsibility for their mother's suicide. The consequent madness, the suggestion of incest and Orin's suicide are O'Neill's ventures beyond the plot of his Greek model, but they are at once a credible extension of the Greek scene and an apt reflection on the crises threatening family life in America in the wake of the mid-century

wars that took American service men away from their wives to Europe or the Pacific, to Korea and Vietnam. O'Neill's handling of the myth bears out Gilbert Highet's claim that "every great myth carries a deep significance for men of every age, including our own.... For myths are permanent. They deal with the greatest of all problems, the problems which do not change, because men and women do not change."<sup>1</sup>

The French rarely return to Roland or even to Charlemagne; they turn again and again to Ovid and Sophocles. Anouilh entitles his play Eurydice while Cocteau's is Orphée. Anouilh presents his characters in very ordinary everyday dress: a wandering violinist and the somewhat less than virginal daughter of a travelling actress. She dies in a motor accident and when Providence sends her back to the idealistic lover Orphée, they meet in a railway station. The test of his love is that he must not look at her till dawn. He fails because he rebels against the ugliness of life. He finally chooses to go to his death so that he may meet Eurydice beyond its portals in a dazzling light that can neither deceive nor fail. This is but a partial interpretation of the myth, narrowing its

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1 The Classical Tradition Ch 23 "The Reinterpretation of the Myths" (New York and London: Oxford University Press 1949; 4th printing 1959) pp 532 and 540

scope to objectifying the two characters as symbols of love, thwarted always in this life, fulfilled only in eternity. Cocteau concentrates on Orpheus as symbol of the poet and of death. Here, too, the myth loses its universality; the treatment is surrealistic and the interpretation pales beside the inherent richness of the simple myth.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, an idiom that is intelligible to the modern day audience who find pleasure in "discovering the parallels that the author establishes with his sources."<sup>2</sup> Highest claims, in the essay already cited, that French intellectuals "find a certain relief in humanizing, debunking and even vulgarizing some of the formidable old traditions. By bringing the myths nearer to humanity they make them more real."

Antigone is the Sophoclean maiden who appears on the modern French stage costumed again by Anouilh and Cocteau in garments that differ from those she donned in the Greek theatre and that differ from each other in the two twentieth century plays. Among Anouilh's card-playing men in evening dress is a one-man chorus, a play which, according to Raymond Williams "restores to the dramatist

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1 cf Leonard Cabell Pronko The World of Jean Anouilh (University of California Press 1968) pp 197-200

2 Ibid p 199



major control of the form of the play".<sup>1</sup> And certainly Anouilh moulds the drama to "an intense realisation of the experience of choice" with Antigone declaring: "Moi, je n'ai pas dit 'oui'.... Moi, je peux dire 'non' encore a 'tout ce que je n'aime pas, et je suis seul juge."<sup>2</sup> The setting is a neutral, timeless ground. It is no-time or all-time where the ancient and modern touch without embarrassment. Anouilh preserves the Sophoclean outline, adding a love scene between Haemon and Antigone, projecting a more human Creon ready for compromise, and therefore a more strong-willed heroine who has the courage to be true to her truest self. The story and characters are treated with dignity and the tight plot is marked by a classic simplicity and austerity bringing this Antigone closer to the Greek level of universality than most other modern representations of myths. We sense that beneath the surface of the ancient legend Anouilh has found a message for his own time, a message for the harried but often heroic Résistance during the dark days of the Occupation of France.

Cocteau's Antigone is a shortened version of Sophocles' play and relies on stage effects that suggest in the

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1 Drama from Ibsen to Eliot (London: Chatto and Windus 1954) p 198

2 "I have not said 'yes', not I... I can say 'no' again to all I do not love and I am the sole judge."  
(my translation)

author's words "a sordid carnival of kings, a family of insects". The play is very brief, very hurried and in content does not diverge substantially from the Greek model. Teiresias, absent from Anouilh's play is present here and Creon's accusation of bribery comes across in crude accents. In fact the entire tone of the play is blunt and crude in keeping with the character of Creon as Cocteau limns him - a rather insensitive, strutting figure, insisting on the power and authority of his position and anxious to get through the unpleasant business as quickly as possible. The stage directions require a minimum of movement; the single voice of the Chorus and its leader issue through a hole in the centre of the scenery giving a kind of Orwellian touch to the whole, suggesting that the dramatist sees the entire episode as absurd, a situation that is static with the masks and the costumes emphasising the air of unreality. Does Cocteau perhaps wish to imply that modern man cannot, or need not, give to such moral issues the lengthy debate and reflection that was thought necessary in ancient Athens? Or does the fervid pace of modern life decree that man can pay but scant attention, little more than lip service in fact, to such ethical niceties when they do manage to surface? The author may be underlining the difference "twixt now and then" in his treatment of

the problem. What is clear is that Antigone retains much of her Sophoclean stature; it is Creon who is diminished in the shortened play.

Jean-Paul Sartre portrays the Furies in his play Les Mouches (The Flies) and the plague of fat, black insects, germ-carrying, polluting, annoying and terrifying surely symbolise once again the German forces occupying France at the time of its production. Sartre's solution: kill some, drive some away, ignore the rest and survive - is more optimistic in tone than is usual with him. The sceptical bent of the French playwrights does not favour the introduction of the supernatural on the stage, even when such beings figure in the original legend. Hence Sartre's reduction of the Erinyes to the status of flies, a clever and highly effective metamorphosis. Cocteau's figure of Death is a beautiful, almost robot-like young woman in a doctor's white coat and surgical mask, while the Sphinx in his La Machine Infernale (The Infernal Machine) graduates from young girl to winged monster, half-woman, half-lioness, before whom Oedipus, the clever, proud Oedipus, must fall bewitched and terrified. The Furies take another form in Giraudoux's Electra. They first appear as little girls when Orestes' plans for revenge are not yet mature. They grow into young maidens and later into the full

stature of womanhood as thoughts of hatred and plots of revenge turn into bloody murder. The symbolism is striking for in Aeschylus Orestes himself grows from innocent frightened child to a young man who has achieved his purpose at a price that robs him of youth and turns him, for a space at least, into a haunted, terrified man with little hope for the future.

The British stage was given over to domestic drama throughout the first half of the present century and any taste for the classical was confined to private theatricals organised by rather highbrow groups. Eventually the cinema revived a taste for epic drama with screen productions of Shakespeare, the English classic and all-time masterpieces like War and Peace, Lawrence of Arabia and Lord Jim. It was in the nineteen sixties that Greek tragedy began to make a serious comeback either in repertory as at the Theatre Royal at Stratford in 1964 when three Euripides plays drew large audiences over an eight-week period, or as opera. Most of these productions were fairly straight translations from the Greek with, understandably, certain liberties taken with the Chorus, and the addition of what Lawrence Kitchin calls "dynamic visual effects."<sup>1</sup> So with the help of cinema, opera and

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1 Drama in the Sixties: Form and Interpretation (London: Faber and Faber 1966) Chs 3 and 8

stature of womanhood as thoughts of hatred and plots of revenge turn into bloody murder. The symbolism is striking for in Aeschylus Orestes himself grows from innocent frightened child to a young man who has achieved his purpose at a price that robs him of youth and turns him, for a space at least, into a haunted, terrified man with little hope for the future.

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ballet the British public has been treated to Oedipus Rex, The Bacchae, Elektra, and Medea. This revival indicates a felt need for the basically hard fare that the Greek dramatists presented to the people of fifth century Athens, a need to be challenged once more to face the fundamental issues of life and death. Neither the theatre of violence nor the theatre of the absurd could drive away or wish away these primal realities, these daily confrontations. Leo Aylen in his Greek Tragedy in the Modern World holds that man today needs the enlightenment or the catharsis of Greek tragedy more than ever before. He writes:

"We are all aware of the insecurity of human life.... We can hardly fail to be aware of death; we can hardly fail to see the need to reach a clear idea of right and wrong within the conditions of our society; we can hardly fail to be aware of the limits of our understanding. Awareness in these three ways is the mark of Greek tragedy. So we may dare to hope that out of the realisation of our need may grow the answer to our need."<sup>1</sup>

Aylen makes a striking claim for the efficacy of Greek tragedy in the context of the problems of modern life,

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1 Greek Tragedy and the Modern World (London: Muthuen 1964) p 338

not because he discounts Christianity, but because he believes that true Christian tragic drama has yet to be written. That such an achievement is possible he has no doubts and points to T S Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral as "the one great play in English of this century", a play that uses myth, is based on ritual with the action carried principally by the chorus, a play first performed at a festival, not before a theatre-going public.<sup>1</sup> Aylen, is of course, interested in the relationship that he seeks to establish between Eliot's techniques and those of the Greek dramatists. He remarks on the use of myth and of the storehouse of myths that the Christian tragic poet can draw upon. He claims that "there is a body of historical material which would serve a Christian writer in almost exactly the same way as the Greek myths served the tragedians."<sup>2</sup>

I would like to substitute the word British or English for 'Christian' in Aylen's statement and draw attention once again to the failure of twentieth century writing to take into account a mythological past that one fears may be, to all intents and purposes, dead. Not since Scott's novels have the glories of the past provided the

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1 Aylen op cit p 325

2 Ibid p 194

myths around which memorable literature grows and flourishes. Britain faces a peculiar dilemma with regard to its mythological resources. Its oldest myths are Celtic and have not the same relevance for the Anglo-Saxons that they have for the Welsh and the Scots who, like the Irish, foster a pride in their ancient heritage. The British have long tended towards a reverent care for ancient relics rather than sought to give them a central place in their modern culture. Anglo-Saxon history gives scope for the creation of a goodly share of myths but we find too little trace of such myths in the mainstream of English literature of the past century and a half. It is Eliot, once again, who has revived the Grail legend and related it to man's eternal questing.

In India and in Ireland the nineteenth century presents a totally different picture. In both countries, though not for the same reasons the English language had been imposed as the medium of education. The British wanted an Indian Civil Service with "native clerks" proficient in the language of administration. In Ireland they wanted to consolidate the Act of Union of 1800 by wiping out the "native" language with all its connotations of revolt and rebellion. When the Irish leaders, defeated and



demoralised, fled their homeland in the seventeenth century to serve in the various armies of Europe, it was the poets who kept hope alive in the hearts of the people, poets who were little more, apparently, than strolling singers. All political activity was denied the Irishman; he was no longer a citizen in his own country. So at this time, Aodhgan O'Rahilly (1670-1726) presents his vision (aisling) of a beautiful woman, "the perennial goddess of Irish tradition"<sup>1</sup> now forlorn in the absence of her rightful spouse and oppressed by the foreigner. He addresses her in the most exquisite language, in what Frank O'Connor calls "pure music" as

"Brightness of brightness lovely met me  
 where I wandered  
 Crystal of crystal only by her eyes were  
 splendid  
 Sweetness of sweetness lightly in her speech  
 she squandered  
 Rose-red and lily-glow brightly in her cheeks  
 contended."<sup>2</sup>

Eoghan Rua O Suilleabhain was another of the many poets in the same tradition, the poets who sang on the fair-greens of Roisin Dubh (My Dark Rosaleen) and the Sean-Bhean Bhocht

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1 Proinsias MacCana Literature in Irish p 50

2 Quoted by MacCana in Literature in Irish p 50

(The poor old woman). Their British masters thought they were singing love songs. Their Irish listeners knew that the maiden and the old woman both represented their "most distressful country" (as a later balladeer would call Éire). At the same time in what seems another world entirely Anglo-Irish literature was being created by Swift and Goldsmith; it had no links with the Irish-speaking world nor with the Irish past.

However as the nineteenth century progressed some of the harshest laws against the Irish were repealed; Parliamentarians like Parnell and Daniel O'Connell came on the scene and hope began to kindle anew. But by then, for all practical purposes, the Gaelic language was dead. It lingered in the poorest, most barren and inaccessible areas of Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Kerry and among the old, illiterate peasants in other out-of-the-way places. The Fenian movement began in the middle of the century with its leaders looking back to the mytho-historical figure of Find MacCumail and his band of Fianna warriors. They had to go back that far to find a figure of inspiration, a larger than life hero who shared the life of his men, not a monarch on a throne. It was in the following decades that Samuel Ferguson and Standish O'Grady retold in English some of

the stories of ancient Ireland and translated from Irish some of the patriotic songs and ballads of the previous centuries. Their example would later inspire Lady Gregory and Yeats to delve deeper into the tales of a time of Gaelic glory, freedom and leadership.

But without a mother-tongue there can be no motherland, and so in 1893 Douglas Hyde founded the Gaelic League to promote the study of the Irish language and in this "back to school" movement "a large part of the Irish people began to rediscover with pride and exhilaration a language and tradition which their recent forefathers had discarded as a mark of poverty and deprivation."<sup>1</sup> Music, dancing, games and crafts figured in the Gaelic League classes and gradually a new literature in Irish began to emerge. With this renewal of the language came a growing sense of national identity, a political as well as a cultural evolution that grew into the Revolution that burst upon the country in 1916, and after five years of bloodshed saw the birth of the new Ireland, the rebirth of the pre-historic goddess figure who talked with Amargin in an ancient dawn when she promised her that the land would bear her name, Éire. It was the men of our century, Pádraig Pearse, poet, patriot and martyr

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1 MacCana Literature in Irish p 50

and Eamon de Valera, teacher, soldier and statesman who fulfilled in the present the poet-seer's promise of the mythic past.

Writing in Irish since the revival of the language tends to be autobiographical or oriented towards social issues like Tomas Criomthain's An t-Oileánach (1929, translated as *The Islandman*), an account of his life in the Blasket Islands off the Kerry coast, Muiris O Suilleabháin's Fiche Blían ag Fás (Twenty Years a-Growing - 1933) and the woman writer Peig Sayers' autobiography Peig. The short story, rather than the novel, is the favourite medium of literary activity in both Irish and English in Ireland today.

It is not, however, to the writer in Irish that we turn to find the literary reincarnation of heroic characters, but to what are termed the Anglo-Irish writers - to Yeats and Synge chiefly. Yeats, all his life, was fascinated by the figure of Cúchulain and he returns to him again and again in The Green Helmet, At the Hawk's Well, The Death of Cúchulain and The Only Jealousy of Emer. Cúchulain's was the hero-figure that inspired the leaders of the national movement, and since Independence Oliver Sheppard's magnificent bronze of the Dying Cúchulain

adorns the entrance of the General Post Office where the 1916 Rising began. It is a symbolic creation in many ways, for it was the death, at the hands of the British, of the leaders of the Easter Rising that brought that massive popular support to the rebellion that led to its success.

Yeats' preoccupation with Cúchulain has, therefore, some political colouring. He was an artist primarily who tried to be a patriot, more because of his feelings for the utterly dedicated-to-freedom Maude Gonne, than from any personal deeply-rooted conviction. He was more concerned by the loss of Pearse to the literary world than to the freedom struggle:

"He might have won fame in the end  
So sensitive his nature seemed  
So daring and sweet his thought."

MacBride, Maude Gonne's husband who shared her dreams and died for them, was no more to Yeats than "a drunken, vainglorious lout". These words are written in 1921, five years after MacBride's execution when the poet has to admit:

"He too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born."

Yeats' contribution to the birth of the new Ireland was to be literary and cultural - an essential contribution. He would give his words, but not his blood. His concentration on Cúchulain has another dimension yet; it flows from the fascinating hold that magic and the otherworld held for the poet. And Cúchulain is pure magic - the history of how he got his hound name, his sword, his strange weapon the gae bolga, the extraordinary riastradh or change of appearance that came over him in battle, his involvement with the fairy-woman, Fand, and his time in the Otherworld with her. The wild swans at Coole Park are not just summer visitors for Yeats, they recall the magic swans linked by chains of gold that led Cúchulain to his encounter with the Queen of the Tir fó Thuinn (the Land-beneath-the Wave). This was a rich mine for Yeats' imagination and the ore he prized from it precious indeed. It was more accessible and in ways more authentic than anything Mohini Chatterjee could offer him. The plays listed above, though not perhaps literally faithful to the old tales, captured much of their spirit, and his poetic imagination transformed the past, recreating perhaps, some of the original spirit that the monks had sacrificed.

The "Woman of the Sidhe" in The Only Jealousy of Emer is

identical with the half-bird woman in At the Hawk's Well and both are variations of the Fand of the ancient tale, though their association with death in both plays also associates them with the Morrigan, one of the triad of bird goddesses of the battlefield. The bird symbolism probably finds its climax in The Herne's Egg, a highly complex play outside the scope of this study.

It is in his long poem "The Wanderings of Oisín"<sup>1</sup> that Yeats gives his fullest description of a Woman of the Sidhe - the beautiful Niamh Cinn Óir (of the golden hair) who lures the grave Fenian warrior, Oisín, over "the glossy sea" to the hall where

"Angus dreams from sun to sun,

A Druid dream of the end of days

When the stars are to wane and the world be done."

Yeats seems to have had Dante in mind as he bids to outdo him in his descriptions of both beauty and sadness, splendour and distress in the various "ages" that Oisín has to live through in the Land-under-Wave. Niamh is a much less spiritual Beatrice, even though she belongs to the fairy world. Her role is a more kindly one than Yeats usually designs for his women characters. When Oisín one day comes upon a reminder of his terrestrial

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1 Collected Poems of W B Yeats (London: Macmillan 1958)  
p 409

existence - "a staff of wood/From some dead warrior's  
broken lance" he weeps

"Thereon young Niamh softly came  
And caught my hands, but spake no word  
Save only many times my name  
In murmurs like a frightened bird."<sup>1</sup>

She protects him from phantoms in the Isle of Many Fears  
and counsels him to flee the demons; the barking demon,  
however joins in a mighty contest with Oisín who finally  
having slain him, "cast him in the wave lest Niamh  
shudder". But after a three-day celebratory feast he finds...

... "dropping sea foam on the wide stair  
And hung with slime, and whispering in his hair  
That demon dull and unsubduable."<sup>2</sup>

One can almost hear Yeats' ironic chuckle at the return  
of the indestructible demon he has created! At the end  
of that century-span Niamh leads Oisín to the Island of  
Forgetfulness when he would have preferred the Island of  
Content. A kind of Celtic Land of the Lotus-Eaters is  
the next venue and then the old warrior (still young, of  
course) wakes from dreams of the Fenians and Grania and  
knows that he must "leave the Immortals",

"O Niamh! O white one! if only a twelve-houred day,

1 Collected Poems p 409

2 Ibid p 430



I must gaze on the beard of Finn, and move  
 ... in the Fenians' dwellings of wattle..."<sup>1</sup>

Niamh understands and sends him on his way with touching,  
 romantic kindness:

"'But weep for your Niamh, O Oisín; for  
 if only your shoe  
 Brush lightly as haymouse earth's pebbles,  
 you will come no more to my side  
 O flaming lion of the world, O when will you  
 turn to your rest?'"<sup>2</sup>

So Oisín "rode away on the surges" till "coming out of  
 the sea as the dawn comes" and with a song of love on  
 his lips he beholds

Your bell-mounted churches, and guardless  
 the sacred cairn and the rath,  
 And a small and feeble populace stooping with  
 matlock and spade,

And I rode and I rode and I cried out, 'The  
 Fenians hunt wolves in the night,  
 So sleep they by daytime,' A voice cried,  
 'The Fenians a long time are dead.'<sup>3</sup>

1 Collected Poems p 439

2 Ibid p 440

3 Ibid p 444

A little later he hears 'the gods a long time are dead'. When he stoops to help two of these puny people lift a sack full of sand, his horse's girth breaks and he falls to the ground, his steed speeds away and the three hundred years of his absence fall on him to turn him into a "creeping old man full of sleep" and his dreams of returning to Niamh are empty dreams.

Yeats' use of language - he "writes for the ear" - variations of rhythm, his sensuous images, the music of his verse all combine to create a romantic dream world where a brave man is led to his undoing by a beautiful woman, ageless and perfect in the fullness of her womanhood, consistently gentle, protective with eyes only for this human she has lured to her fairy world. Yeats is drawing on old tales of Otherworld journeys, the immrama, as well as on Dante, the stories of the Find cycle and his own vivid imagination. There is nothing harsh about Niamh as there is in his depiction of Deirdre, no hesitation on her part when she tearfully sends him on his visit to the Fenians, no hesitation such as we see in Emer when the ghost of Bricriu bids her renounce her love for Cúchulain so that she can break the Fairy-Woman's hold on him.

Is Niamh Yeats' ideal woman? Is she a re-creation of Maude Gonne in a beautiful fantasy with the poet as Oisín? It is noteworthy that "The Wanderings of Oisín" was written in 1889 in which year, Norman Jeffares tells us, Yeats met and fell in love with Maude. If so, we can see in the poem a very personal rendering of "love's own sweet dream", but it is more than that; it is a declaration of the poet's faith in the beauty of love surely, but also in the pain of the human limitations of loving and being loved. And this pain that testifies to life spans the centuries from the dateless days of Find to the twilight of the nineteenth century and girdles the earth between Tír na nÓg and Sligo Bay. However romantic Yeats' use of the ancient myth may be there is a quality of credibility about his poem that is not always present in modern versions of the Greek Myths.

In The Only Jealousy of Emer Yeats draws on the story "The Wasting Sickness of Cúchulain". The tale as it is found in Lebor na hUidre (The Book of the Dun Cow) is a conflation of two older versions. In the early part of the story where the Ulaid are celebrating the feast of Samhain (Hallowe'en), the women see beautiful birds on the lake and Eithne Ingubai, his wife, asks Cúchulain to bring some of them to her companions. When he has

done so rather reluctantly all the women except Eithne have their birds. "Do not be angry," said Cúchulain. "When birds come to Mag Muirthemne or the Boand, you will have the most beautiful pair."<sup>1</sup> Soon afterwards a pair of birds linked by a red-gold chain fly over the lake but Eithne forbids Cúchulain to pursue them because their singing has lulled the company to sleep. But Cúchulain is not to be persuaded and his pursuit of the birds leads to his being horsewhipped by two fairy women, and a year's silent sickness results. Conall Cernach and other knights are by his bedside a year later when a man from the Otherworld comes with an invitation from Fand, his Queen. At the scene of his unhappy experience the previous year Cúchulain meets Li Ban who repeats the invitation adding that her own husband needs the warrior's help in battle. First he sends his charioteer to the land of Fand and when he returns Cúchulain rallies a little and sends a message not to Eithne but to Emer that the women of the Síde have come and destroyed him. When Emer reaches Emain Macha she rouses her husband: "Rise, warrior of Ulaid! Awake healthy and happy from sleep!"<sup>2</sup> He is restored to health, goes to the Otherworld, defeats Labraid's enemies, spends a month with Fand,

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1 Early Irish Myths and Sagas trans Jeffrey Gantz  
(Penguin 1981 rpt 1982) p 156

2 Ibid p 164

returns bemused to Ireland, meets Fand again after a year, when Emer and her fifty women armed with knives come to kill the fairy woman. She returns to her husband, Manannán MacLer and Cúchulain is eventually restored to Emer.

This is the only story in the Ulster cycle where Eithne Ingubai is mentioned as the wife of the Red Branch hero. Elsewhere it is Emer who fills this role. Yeats exploits this ambiguity with ingenuity and instead of presenting Eithne as wife and Emer as an interloper, he reverses the situation, following the more widely held tradition of Emer's status. In the play all three women are at the bedside of an apparently dead Cúchulain, but Emer is convinced that he still lives. She is aware that Eithne, and possibly, Fand, have replaced her in Cúchulain's heart and so she asks Eithne to call him back from the brink of the strange world he seems to have reached. There is no sign of jealousy or resentment of Eithne, just a desire to save her husband from death and also from Fand. The distinction between the "Figure" of Cúchulain and the "Ghost" of Cúchulain is not clear. Though we learn that the "Figure" is that of Bricriu he would seem to represent some aspect of the warrior's unconscious or subconscious Self, perhaps the very

"changeling" that Emer believes has replaced her husband. When the Figure shows his distorted face, Eithne leaves the stage and he remarks:

"I show my face and everything he loves  
Must fly away"<sup>1</sup>

He is therefore, a figure of Anti-Love. And yet Emer, who truly loves, is able to confront him, but only so that he can prevail upon her to save Cúchulain from the Síde by renouncing her claim to his love:

"You spoke but now of the mere chance that some day  
You'd be the apple of his eye again  
When old and ailing, but renounce that chance  
And he shall live again."<sup>2</sup>

We are reminded of Savitrī's efforts to regain from Yama the life of her husband, Satyavāna, except that there was no bargain with Yama. It was all gain for Savitrī; boon upon boon was granted her but she would not desist from her prayer for her husband's life. When Pand has all but taken Cúchulain (the Ghost) with her, Emer's anguished cry rings out: "I renounce Cúchulain's love forever" and when he awakes it is not Emer he calls out to now, but

"Your arms, your arms, O Eithne Inguba

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1 The Only Jealousy of Emer in Eleven Plays of W B Yeats  
ed A N Jeffares (New York: Collier 4th rpt 1976)  
p 118

2 Ibid 119

I have been in some strange place and I am  
afraid."<sup>1</sup>

The mistress of Yeats' play has replaced the wife. Bricriu is a man of the Síde even as Fand is one of their women, in fact their queen. The struggle then seems to be between humans and supernatural beings not merely for the love, but for the very life of a man. The Otherworld beings seem to underestimate the quality of human love. Emer is jealous, not of Eithne, but of the fairy woman and in her anxiety to save Cúchulain from Fand she loses him to his "mistress". "O bitter reward/Of many a tragic tomb!" Emer, as we see her in Yeats' play, is resigned to being set aside at least temporarily, in her husband's life. She is not seen brandishing a knife to threaten Fand: nor does she like Emer of the legend, succeed in rousing him from his "wasting sickness". She seems to have lost faith in the power of her love for the moment, though not in love itself, and then she is tricked into renouncing that love forever.

Fand and Bricriu are figures of Death. Perhaps echoing at the back of the poet's mind are the words of St Paul: "Love does not come to an end" and the Song of Songs:

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1 Eleven Plays p 124

"Love is stronger than death."<sup>1</sup> Love then, once renounced, Death can have his way. But Eithne loves too and the very love that Emer renounces seems to well up from her and so restore Cúchulain. Here, as in the legend it is love that heals. Just as there are two Cúchulains on the stage, perhaps there are two Emers also. Perhaps Eithne represents another dimension or another phase of Emer's love: the "newness" that a man seeks in love, while Emer represents the fidelity of a "well-worn" love, a love that has been tried and tested and found true. Then Eithne's triumph would signify a renewal of love, a burgeoning forth again of the youthful freshness of young love, the kind of "first" love that Cúchulain needs in his rebirth. Yeats would only experience such love in dreams, in "broken dreams", but he can transform his dreams into the magic reality of poetry and give them there an Otherworld substance denied them in this life. No wonder that the poet was so fascinated by the idea of ~~the~~ rebirth! If dreams could shape his next incarnation he would fashion a dream to realise all dreams! Perhaps Eithne Inguba is the woman who disappears out of Yeats' life, out of every man's life ideally if not physically, and can be restored to him only in death.

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1 Corinthians 13:4



"Of all the many changing things  
 In dreary dancing past us whirled  
 To the cracked tune that Chronos sings  
 Words alone are certain good."<sup>1</sup>

Words are Yeats' colours, his clay, his marble and with their magic he creates a shrine for love that time can neither dim nor wear away.

Twelve years earlier Yeats presented another immortal woman in his Deirdre (1907) and here too he moves a considerable distance from the legend setting. The action takes place in a guest house in the woods to which Naoise and Deirdre are assigned on their return from exile. This location is entirely Yeats' invention and creates a measure of distancing from the familiar data of the saga. It is what Peter Ure calls "'staginess' in the good sense and the bad".<sup>2</sup> It also suggests the influence of the Noh drama on Yeats. In "The Cutting of an Agate" he writes that in the Japanese form the adventures (action) happen to "a traveller, commonly from some distant place... the meeting with ghost, god or goddesses at some holy place or some legended tomb."<sup>3</sup> The

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1 "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" in Crossways (1889)

2 Yeats the Playwright (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1963) p 43

3 "The Cutting of an Agate: Certain Noble Plays of Japan" in Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan 1961) p 232

application to Deirdre is not difficult if we see the Women Musicians in a supernatural role and the guest house as the ultimate tomb of the travellers from Alba. The "distancing" is further emphasised in the chorus-style recounting of the story of Deirdre by the First Musician to her second. Deirdre's origins are even more shrouded in mystery than in the legend where we know her father's name and the circumstances of her birth, but Yeats would have it that

Some dozen years ago, King Conchubar, found  
 A house upon a hillside in this wood  
 And there a child with an old witch to nurse her  
 And nobody to say if she were human,  
 Or of the gods, or anything at all  
 Of who she was or why she was hidden there  
 But that she'd too much beauty for good luck.<sup>1</sup>

Repeated visits as she grows to womanhood disturb the King's peace of mind, and a "month or so before the marriage day" Naoise "carried her off". The Second Musician wants to know the end of the story and hears that there are whispers of a bridal chamber being prepared at this moment in Conchubar's palace.

When Fergus arrives expecting a message from the King

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1 Eleven Plays p 48

there is none. Instead, strange, dark figures come and go beyond the doors and windows and the atmosphere grows tense with doubt and misgiving. Fergus' restless pacing deepens the feeling of unease, and when Deirdre and Naoise enter his efforts to convince them of Conchubar's sincerity fail. Meanwhile the Musicians sing of Queen Edain,<sup>1</sup> the fairy wife of Midir, who is maliciously separated from her husband given to a second and finally restored to Midir. Yeats' use of this parallel theme in a minor key is highly dramatic and effectively underlines Deirdre's dilemma and points to her future. Naoise, like Fergus, believes the King will keep his word but Deirdre's anxiety is palpable. The theme is a richly romantic one, a tale of treachery, a broken promise, a journey's end, yet the presentation is something of a theatrical novelty. Fergus appears as a kind of stage-manager, directing musicians and naively welcoming in turn Naoise and Deirdre and the King. The Musicians' chorus-role is further extended in a series of "riddles" through which they reveal to Deirdre what Conchubar's plans are, and she with her womanly intuition further sharpened by apprehension, translates them into plain and terrifying statements:

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1 Yeats' "Edain" is the "Étaín" of the old tale "Tochmarc Étaíne" (The Wooing of Étaín)

Deirdre: There was a man that loved me. He was old;  
I could not love him. Now I can but fear....

First Musician: I have heard he loved you  
As some old miser loves the dragon-stone  
He hides among the cobwebs near the roof.

Deirdre: You mean that when a man who has loved like that  
Is after crossed, love drowns in its own flood,  
And that love drowned and floating is but hate;  
And that a king who hates sleeps ill at night  
Till he has killed; and that, though the day laughs  
We shall be dead at cock-crow.

A further riddle corrects this solution to:

Ah, now, I catch your meaning, that this king  
Will murder Naoise and keep me alive.<sup>1</sup>

Deirdre's plain speaking here reminds us of the frankness of her speech when she puts Naoise under geis to marry her in the original legend. On the Yeats stage Naoise and Fergus make light of her fears but the conviction of the imminence of death builds up within her and she pleads with Naoise "to get away to the windy summits, and there mock the night-jar and valley-keeping bird!"<sup>2</sup> Fergus reminds her a trifle sharply that her first flight had brought death to many and warns, ironically, that a

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1 Eleven Plays p 56

2 Ibid p 59

second flight might set the house ablaze again. Deirdre's fears are confirmed when the King's messenger comes to fetch her and Fergus but not Naoise who now senses the treachery afoot, but Fergus still declares "I'll not believe it". There is every reason for Deirdre's outburst: "We listened to the counsel of the wise, and so turned fools,"<sup>1</sup> and Naoise, in a remarkable state of calm confirms

"The crib has fallen and the birds are in it;  
There is not one of the great oaks about us  
But shades a hundred men."<sup>2</sup>

There follows a strange suspension of time while they await the inevitable. They attempt a game of chess as Lugaid Redstripe and his wife had done long before in similar circumstances. But Deirdre cannot fit this role and switches to the "Do you remember?" game ending with a kiss as Conchubar peers in at the doorway. In a lightning change of role the suppliant Deirdre is pleading for Naoise's life - and her own - and renouncing a crown. Like Emer surrendering her claim to Cúchulain's love that he might live, Deirdre's next move is to offer to go with Conchubar if he spares Naoise's life. She begs "Speak, speak, Naoise, speak/And say that it is better

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1 Eleven Plays p 61

2 Ibid p 61

that I go," then swiftly changes to

"Do not speak a word

For I will take it all upon myself.

Conchubar, I will go."<sup>1</sup>

But Naoise cannot accept his life at such a price

"O my eagle!

Why do you beat vain wings upon the rock

When hollow night's above?"<sup>2</sup>

Then Deirdre is on her knees before the King, retracting

her concurrence, asking pardon, calling punishment on

her own head, for she, not Naoise, is at fault. During

this passionate pleading Naoise is taken out and slain.

As she becomes aware of his absence the executioner

enters with a bloodied sword and Conchubar is triumphant:

"The traitor who carried off my wife

No longer lives."<sup>3</sup>

So might Menelaus have exulted had Paris died.

With startling speed Yeats' Deirdre now assumes yet

another role and to the King's total surprise agrees to

go with him, "assumes the role of half-reluctant mistress,

attracted by Conchubar and yet angry because he will not

allow her a moment to adjust to her new dignity by brief

1 Eleven Plays p 67

2 Ibid p 67

3 Ibid p 69

mourning over her lover's corpse."<sup>1</sup>

"I cannot be your queen

Till the past's finished and its debts are paid."<sup>2</sup>

This strategem, shocking though it must still appear to a new audience, gets her to Naoise's grave where, on a note of triumph, she ends her life:

Now strike the wire (she directs the Musicians)  
and sing to it awile

Knowing that all is happy, and that you know  
Within what bride-bed I shall lie this night  
And by what man, and lie close up to him,  
For the bed's narrow, and there outsleep the  
cock-crow.<sup>3</sup>

Conchubar, the trickster, has been outsmarted, all his scheming has come to naught. This is an incredible blow to his self-esteem, though he manages to preserve some remnants of tragic dignity:

No, no; I'll not believe it. She is not dead -  
She cannot have escaped a second time!

. . .

... she has deceived me for a second time;  
And every common man can keep his wife,  
But not the King.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Peter Ure Yeats (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd 1963) p 45

2 Eleven Plays p 70

3 Ibid p 71

4 Ibid p 72

The Deirdre of the play is a confoundingly versatile woman. Her changes of mood, of role, of mind even, are breath-taking, are brilliant, but there is something brittle in the brilliance, an intellectual tour de force that makes one focus on the actress and her performance rather than on the character she portrays, for the Deirdre of this play is a consummate actress even where she is most sincere. Yeats shows us a passionate woman, sensitive, and intuitive, but essentially a clever woman, quick to sense every nuance of change in the situation and make a swift, intelligent adaptation. She has moved a long way from the young woman with bound hands standing by the King's side with Naoise, Aine and Ardán dead beside her, condemned to live in Conchobor's household, the woman of the Táin rémscéal. Once again she is a personal symbol for Yeats, as Ure points out, rather than a figure to inspire the populace, though the sheer poetry and the imaginative intensity lent it by his personal experience, could not fail to appeal to the select audience which the poet prefers. Yeats gives the impression in Deirdre that form is more his concern than character, even though he chooses to let Deirdre stand out strikingly in the midst of the group of somewhat subordinated characters in the play. One feels too that he has a certain sympathy for Conchubar, a rather detached



attitude towards Naoise and that Deirdre for him is a mystery, a "riddle" that no musician helps him solve. Perhaps she symbolises or rather personifies his definition of Tragedy as "passion alone (which) rejecting character, gets form from motives, from the wandering of passion... the intense moment when character is shed and the hero(ine) transcends the limits of the merely individual mind and becomes the vehicle of the anima mundi."<sup>1</sup> It is only in death that Deirdre, freed from the frantic, kaleidoscopic changes of mood and role, rises to become the symbol of a love that transcends death, an eternal anima hominis, perhaps.

Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows<sup>2</sup> brings on the stage a more romantic, a more credible tragic heroine. Unlike Yeats, he is substantially faithful to the old storytellers' version, though for dramatic purposes the timespan is shortened by omitting the early childhood of Deirdre and changing the time and manner of her death. The setting is a house on Slieve Fuadh, "a place set apart" where Lavarcham and the old serving woman are awaiting Deirdre's return from a walk in the woods. "She hasn't come yet, is it, and it falling night?"

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1 Autobiographies (London: Macmillan 1961) p 471

2 The Complete Plays of John M Synge (New York: Vintage 1960)

"She has not.... It's dark with the clouds are coming from the west and the south, but it isn't later than common."<sup>1</sup> Synge builds an atmosphere of tension and tragic intensity as the action unfolds. The brooding clouds, the mention of the full moon, of the sons of Usna (Uisliu) hunting hares in the forest are pregnant with meaning, even with irony, for Synge's audience knew the old tales as the Greek theatre-goers knew the tragic outcome of Oedipus and Antigone. When the King and Fergus come to visit before Deirdre's return, we agree that "a night with thunder coming is no night to be abroad."<sup>2</sup> Lavarcham's ready defence of Deirdre gives us a picture of wild beauty.

"She's used to every track and pathway, and the lightning itself wouldn't let down its flame to singe the beauty of the like of her."<sup>3</sup>

We are not surprised that on her return with "a bag of nuts and twigs for our fires", Deirdre tells Conchobor "I have no wish to be a queen"<sup>4</sup> and that he decides their marriage will take place two days later.

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1 Deirdre of the Sorrows p 213

2 Ibid p 215

3 Ibid p 215

4 Ibid p 218

Her pleas fall on deaf ears and with the visitors' departure it seems her fate is sealed. Will this wilful, winsome child of the woods be wedded to a domineering old man while her heart is hunting in the forest where she has already met Destiny in the shape of the sons of Usna? Synge poses the tragic question, exposes the tragic potential of the situation with delicacy, with economy of word and action, to the haunting music of the lilting cadences of Irish voices.

Then in a moment, the stricken, broken Deirdre becomes a woman, a queen. The heroine of the Celtic Rémscéal stands on the modern stage:

I will not be a child or plaything;  
I'll put on my robes that are the richest, for  
I'll not be brought down to Emain... and  
maybe from this day I will turn the men  
of Ireland like a wind blowing on the heath.<sup>1</sup>

Deirdre is regal here; she places herself in line with Maeve<sup>2</sup> and Emer, reigning queens of the legend, a contrast to the fairy Étaín analogue in Yeats' play. In 1909, Deirdre is more than Maeve or Emer, she is Eriu, Banba and Fodla, the spirit of the new Ireland that is in the

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1 op cit p 224

2 The Medb of the Táin

process of being born and, in another decade, will have broken the shackles of centuries of oppression. The dreamers of the Freedom movement can find inspiration here and even their less imaginative followers can catch fire from Synge's girl of destiny in a way that perhaps only a few might find possible in the presence of Yeats' Deirdre, as she "pernes in a gyre"<sup>1</sup> beating frantic wings against the toils of tyranny. At this point in the drama, Deirdre of the Sorrows is larger than life, yet intensely human. Revealing her knowledge of the seer's prophecy, she yet reaches out to grasp at happiness, at love, while she may. Perhaps she may win this round with Destiny.... Later she will know that she has lost, but for the moment the world is at her feet, it is her plaything. Synge has raised her to the full measure of heroic stature, of regal dignity, and that is how Naisi, Ainle and Ardán find her when, seeking shelter from the storm on Slieve Fuadh, they enter and recognise her as their playmate of the woods and the destined bride of Conchobor. The storm, their initial encounter with a forbidding old woman and the sudden emergence of a princess-like Deirdre, raises an echo of the old tale of the Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid - Echtra na nEchach - where the hideous old hag

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1 Yeats Michael Robartes and the Dancer, "Demon and Beast", in Collected Poems p 210

encountered in similar circumstances, is transformed into a beautiful young girl by a princely kiss. "Royal Rule am I" she announced and promised him a throne.<sup>1</sup> It is a moment of heightened dramatic excitement, when time stands still in tragic expectation - almost in ecstasy. "It's a sweet life you and I could have, Naisi.... It would be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only." The decision comes in Naisi's distressed reply: "And we've a short time only to be triumphant and brave."<sup>2</sup> The sorrow and death that lie in the future do not deter their choice in favour of the love that comes between. Synge has taken the honour-binding of the legend and lifted it on to the plane of personal responsibility and inner conflict fairly faced and accepted.

Act Two shows us the living out of what is "best and richest" in exile in Scotland. Deepening love and an increasing anguish at the inevitability of the fulfilment of the prophecy mark the relationship between Deirdre and Naisi. Lavarcham arrives to warn that Conchubor's imminent invitation is a treacherous trap; but Deirdre will choose what Naisi chooses, for her sensitive

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1 cf Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, "Women in Early Myths and Sagas" in The Crane Bag Vol 4 No 1 1980 p 12

2 ~~ibid~~ p 230

intuition tells her that the "short space" is nearly over and she will not kill Naisi's optimism. Back in Ulster, separated not only from their pledged protector, Fergus, but also from Ainle and Ardan, she and Naisi discover the freshly dug grave, their "home in Emain" and humanly, she panics for a moment, but recovers her poise to declare, "I'll die when you do, Naisi."<sup>1</sup> When an attempt to restore friendship with Conchubor fails and his mask of good-will slips to reveal his murderous intent, there is a short desperate scene. Ainle and Ardán, offstage, call out to Naisi for help; Deirdre, sensing treachery again, clings to him to hold him back, and hard words, their last, pass between them, words that are cold and cruel: "Go to your brothers... the hardness of death has come between us." "It's women that have loved are cruel only; and if I went on living... I'd be putting a curse on the lot of them."<sup>2</sup>

This is Synge's most significant diversion from the legend. Does he, perhaps, want his audience to see Naisi and Deirdre suffer the agony of separation before death brings it about? Is tragedy not complete unless love dies?

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1 Deirdre of the Sorrows p 256

2 Ibid p 259 cf Yudhiṣṭhira's curse on women when he hears that Karna was the Pāṇḍavas' half-brother. Kunti had kept this secret till he died.

Or is Deirdre a temptress here, like Dido, urging him to what one weak, human cogner of his heart secretly wants, a temptation that he has to thrust aside roughly lest it undermine his honour? Certainly this last cruel clash of loyalties, the love-honour dilemma that Racine (whom Synge greatly admired) portrays so often, intensifies the sense of tragedy and desolation, giving it an utterly irresistible quality. Synge leaves Deirdre stricken, bewildered, crouching down on Naisi's cloak while Conchubor's "That's Naisi, strike him!" is heard off-stage. The King's brutal triumph as he strides in to claim her, "They've met their death - the three that stole you, Deirdre, and from this out you'll be my queen in Emain."<sup>1</sup> is a piling up of tragedy, blow upon harsh blow. Her sorrow and bewilderment grow in intensity as Conchubor pleads with her - no coquetry here, no playing for time. When the news that Emain is in flames sends him rushing out, she moves to the graveside and weeps out her heart's bitterness, rejecting the comfort offered by Lavarcham, the demands of the King when he returns, and the protection proffered too late by Fergus. Here grief spent, Deirdre, like Maurya in Riders to the Sea, moves on to a higher plane of experience. Standing erect, gazing at the flames engulfing Emain, she looks

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1 op cit p 259

beyond the "squabbling fools" beside her, into the future that compasses "a ruined city, a raving king and a woman will be young forever.... I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out.... I have had a life that will be envied by great companies.... It was sorrows that were foretold, but great joys were my share always.... It's a pitiful thing, Conchubor, you have done this night; yet a thing will be a joy and a triumph to the end of time."<sup>1</sup> And with this vision shining in her eyes, in this state of near ecstasy, Deirdre presses a knife into her heart and sinks into Naisi's grave. Synge has transformed the wood nymph of Slieve Fuadh into a queenly woman of tragic stature, indeed the full stature of the heroic saga.

It is Synge, as Harold Bloom suggests, who is in love with his Deirdre, not Yeats, who had claimed for his play "red heat up to Naoise's death, white heat after he is dead".<sup>2</sup> Despite the glow of intellectual beauty in his Deirdre there is a sense of contrived effect, as if the technique has grown too important in the play and taken something from the white heat of passion purified in the crucible of pain. Yeats' personal disappointment wraps Deirdre round and makes of her a private symbol, and his own sorrow has been "a bitter black wind that blows from

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1 op cit pp 266-7

2 Lennox Robinson quoting Yeats in Scattering Branches p 96



the left hand" to dim all too quickly "the flame out of the eyes/of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan."<sup>1</sup>

"The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu" has but a small place among the tales of the Ulster cycle, yet Deirdre has fired the imagination of twentieth century writers of the stature of Yeats and Synge. Medb, the warrior queen of Cruachan, earns many a passing reference in poetry and drama but is quite eclipsed by Deirdre. It must be remembered that Deirdre of the Sorrows was Synge's last play and his first venture into the treasure house of the literature of his country's heroic age. Perhaps if the thirty-eight year old poet-dramatist had lived to see the success of his Deirdre, he might have chosen Medb as his next heroine. When Yeats chose to write about her it was her old age that he described,<sup>2</sup> but a restless, sleepless old age where her sleeping husband, Ailill, becomes the vehicle for a message from the Otherworld god, Aengus, god of love. It is a message that sends Maeve's grandchildren digging into a magic hillside, releasing mythic creatures, "great cats with silver claws" and "red-eared hounds with long white

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1 "Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland" in Yeats' Collected Poems p 90

2 "The Old Age of Queen Maeve" in Collected Poems pp 451-6

bodies", creatures housing the souls of "common men", and Aengus finds under Bual's Hill, "Caer, his blue-eyed daughter that I love". And as Yeats admires Maeve's glad "high heart" and "light footfall" a nearer woman-image comes to mind, "friend of these many years". When Aengus has said his thanks and vanished "out of the dark air" Yeats hears "a murmur of soft words and meeting lips". The young Niamh and Eithne Inguba, the baffling re-born Etain, the deceived Deirdre, the faithful Emer, the old Maeve, Yeats conjures them up out of the past to give body and substance to his own heartache.

Yeats may not have contributed remarkably to political developments in the Ireland of the twentieth century, but he has contributed more than he possibly ever realised to another freedom movement: the self-awareness and growing responsibility of Irish women. During 1916 and the years that followed, Maude Gonne MacBride and Constance Markovitch were an inspiration to thousands of young women who fed, sheltered, nursed and carried despatches for the "Fenians" of the Irish Republican Army, always at the risk of their lives. Who can say that the passionate praise that Yeats poured out in his songs of love, desire and despair did not stir an echo, raise a pulse as they identified with Cathleen, the

daughter of Houlihan or hummed "Down by the Sally Gardens" or reflected on "Ireland in the Coming Times"? It may never be possible to test the measure of such influence or computerize the effect of his poetry on the idealism and dedication of the women freedom fighters of the post 1916 years or the fighters for women's freedom down the decades since then.

## II

There can be no doubt about the thrust to the National Movement in India from some of the poets and dramatists of the Bengal Renaissance in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly by those who recreated in both the vernacular and English the heroes and heroines of the epic age. In his Meghanādbadh Kāvya<sup>1</sup> Madhusudan Datta, under the compelling impact of his reading of western epic poetry, takes a new and challenging attitude to the sacrosanct story of the Rāmāyana. It is not Rāma who is the hero of Madhusudan's poem, but Meghanād, the son of Rāvaṇa, Sītā's abductor.

But perhaps the most unusual, in a sense the most revolutionary character in the epic is Pramilā, wife of Meghanād. She is presented as an unparalleled combination of feminine softness and warrior-like courage. When she learns that her husband is in danger, she organises a woman's "battalion", dresses for the battlefield and sets out to join him in the besieged Lankan capital. So amazed is Hanumān, leader of the siege, that he welcomes Pramilā with words of admiration, acknowledging Meghanād's good fortune in having such a worthy wife. The ingenuity and initiative with which the poet endows his heroine is something new in Bengali literature and heralds the role of women characters not only in poetry, drama and novel in the decades to follow, but also in the national movement during the next hundred years.

Perhaps it is to pioneer a break-through into a new age that Madhusudan chooses to create a totally new character in his re-telling, from an unusual angle, of events in the war between Rāma and Rāvaṇa. There is no woman named Pramilā in the Rāmāyana, nor does the wife of Meghanād play any significant part in the events in Lanka. So, the poet is free from the restraints imposed by a traditional model and can let his lively imagination travel freely over a wide field of epic

literature to draw inspiration from the variety of women characters in both western and Indian heroic poetry. The resultant Pramilā is a unique blend of gentleness and valour, a woman ready to face any emergency and take it in her stride. She does not remain fixed in her warrior role which she has assumed with such alacrity and success, but once she reaches her husband's side she lays aside her battle-dress and is all feminine charm once again. The poet seems to suggest a new flexible, fearless yet feminine role for the nineteenth century Bengali woman, knowing that it was true in his day that "what Bengal thinks to-day the rest of India will think tomorrow."

Madhusudan's series of delightful imaginary letters from the wives of outstanding heroes to their warrior husbands in Birāṅgana Kāvya,<sup>1</sup> was first published in 1861.

Draupadī to Arjuna, Śakuntalā to Duṣmanta, Bhānumatī to Duryodhana, Kekayī to Daśaratha are just a few of these epistles which give us the poet's personal insight into the minds, hearts and lives of the women who either inspired or instigated their husbands' recorded achievements. Here again, while working within a traditional range of literary figures, he is able to

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1 Calcutta: Modern Book House 1961

give free rein to his inventive genius and present the problems of nineteenth century Indian women through the "letters" from women of the heroic age. Since Draupadī has been the subject of study in earlier chapters, it is worth looking at her missive to Arjuna who has gone to obtain heavenly weapons from Indra. In the Mahābhārata Draupadī sends her husband off with a brave face and a blessing, which is just what we expect of the strong woman that the epic depicts. Madhusudan pictures another side of her character: the woman who loves Arjuna more than her other husbands, who knows how easily he is attracted to other women and in listening to him the heavenly delights which may turn his thoughts wholly away from the forest (and Draupadī) she describes the special charms of Urvaśī, Tilottamā and other apsaras. She is possibly hoping to draw Arjuna's mind towards her own beauty and attractiveness. The pain of separation which renders her life so meaningless, the memories of her childhood when she already worshipped Śiva's bow so that in due course she might recognise her destined husband, the plays of youthful love that she has had recourse to, her feelings on hearing rumours of the death of the Pāṇdavas, her svayamvara and a voice that spoke within her as Arjuna's arrow hit its mark - all these deepest feelings are poured out unhindered in Draupadī's nineteenth

century letter to her Arjuna. All the sensitivity of a romantic poet finds expression in the two hundred and twenty-three lines of the letter-poem. She describes their forest existence in his absence and how she wanders alone, thinking of him and of days gone by. If he will not return for her sake he should return because his brothers miss him. She hopes for a reply by the messenger she sends, or better still that he reply in person! Michael's Draupadi is as different from her epic self as Synge's Deirdre is from the forest child chosen to be queen. And yet both poets have but dwelt on and developed another side of these characters of heroic fiction, an aspect that lay hidden or was ignored by the ancient poets.

Draupadi lives again in this nineteenth century poem to show the women of nascent Bengal that their own feelings and emotions have been experienced by someone of Draupadi's stature. Their fears, their love, their longings are not something shameful to be hidden away, but part of the riches of their feminine psyche. Perhaps, too, the poet has in mind the many Arjuna's of his day and has a message for them, a message about taking their wives for granted and paying little heed to their feelings. And for the women there is also the cold

comfort that if these husbands are often neglectful and indifferent, the great hero, Arjuna, was no better and Draupadī, too, had suffered like themselves. If they can identify with her at that intimate, personal level, perhaps they may come to imitate her in her struggle against indignity and injustice towards their sex.

There is no hint of the didactic in Madhusudan; there is no need for him to append "morals" to his letter-stories. Like all good stories they provoke reflection, constitute a bridge to one's culture, to one's roots, bind the reader or listener to all humankind while providing at least a temporary escape from present affliction; they evoke imagination and tenderness and therefore healing and wholeness, for every story is our story and its expression by another provides a basis for hope and for sharing.<sup>1</sup>

When Madhusudan began his epistolary series he had planned a total of twenty-one, but after publishing eleven, it seems some new interest must have gripped his attention for all we get are five "beginnings" each shorter than its predecessor! Since Gāndhārī figures in this study and since her "letter" to Dhṛtarāṣṭra is the longest of these fragments we will examine it briefly.

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1 cf William J Bausch Story-telling: Imagination and Faith (Connecticut: 23rd Publications 1984) Chs II & III



The writer is the newly married Kaurava bride sending a verbal message to her blind husband and the news is that "from to-day Gāndhārī is blind too". For how can she enjoy the pleasures of the eye which have been denied her husband from his birth? A serving woman is bringing folds of cloth to ensure a seven-fold barrier between her eyes and the light of day. This is how Gāndhārī will share the lot of the husband the gods have inspired her to choose. She then bids farewell to the sights around her, the faces of her companions, and assures them that she will not forget them. The second part of the poem is addressed to her companions and also lists the sights that she will see no more - the sunlight, the stars, the river; she bids them all farewell. Is this to impress upon her husband the sacrifice she makes for his sake, or is she reassuring him that she knows what she is about and will not regret or revoke her decision later? Or is she speaking to herself, reminding her deepest self of the consequences of her decision, so that "having listened to her own voice pronounce sentence on herself, she may hear the echo of her own words again and again in the dark world she enters? The poem is too short and incomplete to suggest any answers to these questions. Perhaps the poet left it unfinished because he did not find in Gāndhārī a suitable model for the emerging modern woman he envisaged.

Rabindranath Tagore does not celebrate Draupadī in any of his well-known plays or poems, but he does give us "Gāndhārī's Abedan" (Gandhari's Plea) in Kāhinī.<sup>1</sup> It is a verse play of some twenty pages, opening with a dialogue between Duryodhana and his father. The son's stubborn adherence to his creed, "āj āmi sukhī nahi, āj āmi jayī"<sup>2</sup> is the refrain in every answer to his father's efforts to dissuade him from his career of hatred and injustice in his dealings with the Pāṇḍavas. When Gāndhārī enters her son takes off. She is visibly perturbed and is at once insistent and incoherent in her plea to Dhṛtarāṣṭra: "Cast him off at once... this sinful betrayer of righteousness... our son, Duryodhana." (p 374) It is not the first time she has pleaded thus passionately with her husband and his response now does not change; he pleads a father's love, she counters with a mother's and recalls Duryodhana's infancy, but still she cries "tyāg karo aj" (Cast him off to-day). Her reasons are based on dharma, justice, truth and very practical common-sense, and her husband admits the truth of her words and also their sharpness. Their son is dancing with delight at the poisonous fruit of his evil deeds:

"Misled by affection, you must not let him enjoy that fruit, Snatch it away, throw it afar, let your son now weep."<sup>3</sup>

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1 Sanchayitā (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati 1966) pp 366-86

2 To-day I am not happy, I am victorious (l 34)

3 Sanchayitā p 377

These are hard words wrung from a mother who sees all too clearly where her wilful son is heading, but lacks the authority, the power to make him change his ways.

There follows an encounter with Duryodhana's wife, Bhānumatī, decked out in Draupadī's jewels and rejoicing in her good fortune. To her mother-in-law's kindly remonstrances she replies that she can accept joys and sorrows, success and failure, victory and defeat with equal calm of mind. Rejoicing in another's misfortune, Gāndhārī insists, is nothing to be proud of. The last stanza of the poem is addressed to the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī who come to bid farewell and ask Gāndhārī's blessing, which she gives in a moving prayer that all their present misfortune may be transformed to "indestructible treasure" (aksaya sampada). She confesses that her son has done them grievous wrong; they are "more than sons" to her. She embraces Draupadī and sends her off with the wish that she may transform their forest exile into a veritable heaven, every sorrow into joy and she herself become "a white lotus of purity, blossoming in glory, in its fullness of beauty."<sup>1</sup>

Tagore's treatment of Gāndhārī is sympathetic. He depicts

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1 Sanchayita p 386 concluding lines

her as a good woman with a nobility of soul that is cramped and thwarted by a weak-willed husband and an evil son. He has her echo again and again, with passion and vehemence, the words of the sages at the birth of Duryodhana: "Cast him off!" She is not here, as in the Mahābhārata the victim of a pre-ordained fate, but of a stubborn husband who will not take action to curb his son's headstrong tendencies. She acknowledges that her own heart has loved Duryodhana from his infancy, but she does not close her mind to the evil in him that now calls too late for drastic steps: "Cast him off to-day!" Rabindranath may very well be addressing himself to the countless Indian mothers of the twentieth century who let their sons grow unchecked to become household tyrants if not worse. He shows the predicament in which a husband will not support his wife in the training of their children. Duryodhana will not even wait to hear his mother's verdict on his latest "achievement" - the banishment of the Pāṇḍavas, but flees the stage at her approach. Gāndhārī is helpless; she has no weapons but words and these she pours out in a full flowing torrent: words of persuasion, of reminiscence, of warning; to Bhānumatī words of wisdom and exhortation that go unheeded. For Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas she has words of blessing, of sympathy, of comfort, of prophecy, but

the poet gives no clear indication of their efficacy. He puts no words of response on the lips of Yudhiṣṭhira or Draupadī. The rest is silence, a long silence, empty or pregnant as you will, with Gāndhārī's last lovely metaphor trembling on the air. Tagore's Draupadī is silent. The eloquent, indignant Draupadī who asked the unforgiveable, unanswerable question in the assembly, the strong-headed Draupadī who argued with Yudhiṣṭhira in the forest, the romantic Draupadī of Michael Madhusudan's Birāṅgana Kāvya is a totally silent figure on Tagore's stage. That wordless, soundless figure is in striking contrast to Gāndhārī's volubility, to Bhānumatī's vulgarity, to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's weak excuses, to Duryodhana's exultant evil. She stands for the countless, nameless victims of oppression, the anonymous women even in our own day who have no voice to raise in protest against the injustice that masquerades as progress or victory or upward social nobility. Draupadī on Tagore's stage is one "among the downtrodden, the lowly and the lost."<sup>1</sup>

It is the mystery of Draupadī that intrigues the poet, Buddhadeva Bose.<sup>2</sup> In a reflective mood in tune with the cloudy, darkening sky the poet dreams - a bad dream -

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1 Gitanjali

2 "Draupadīr Sāri" in Damayanti, Draupadīr Sāri O Anyānya Kabitā (Calcutta: M C Sarkar 1963)

of Draupadī's sari. This is a nature poem with the "laughing sun", as it escapes the clouds for a moment, reiterating Duṣśāsana's wager: Draupadī's sari. When he awakes it is to a storm-laden sky where "tiger-lightning-flashes" chase a shadow deer, to fasten sharp teeth in Draupadī's sari and so he continues in a waking dream to see stretched across the tumultuous heavens Draupadī's impossible, never-ending sari. Bose seems to stress in a wondering, reverent manner, the eternal mystery of woman, arrayed in beauty, close to nature, to heaven even, but eternally threatened and triumphant - how he cannot say, he simply points to Draupadī's magic-sari - the perfect symbol of the feminine mystique.

Rabindranath in another verse play<sup>1</sup> gives us his twentieth century version of Kuntī, choosing to focus on her meeting with the son of her early youth, the warrior, Karna. It is the story of the rejected son now rejecting his mother, in which the pain of both hearts is delicately but convincingly revealed. The meeting at the mother's request takes place after sunset, suggesting that Kuntī wants to speak to Karna in total privacy after his father, Surya, has disappeared over the rim of the

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1 "Karna-Kuntī Sambād" in Sanchayita pp 395-403

world. In the twilight she recalls the encounter between Arjuna and Karna when the latter was rejected as an unworthy opponent because he was not a kṣatriya and how Duryodhana had saved the situation, by, there and then, creating him King of Anga. Kuntī's revelation of her anguish on that occasion fails to impress Karna now. He asks politely: "Madam, why are you here alone? You the Queen Mother, I a Kaurava soldier - and this is the battlefield?" To her reply: "I have come to take you," he questions "Where?" and the revelation comes: "Into my aching breast, into my mother's heart<sup>1</sup> - I will place you before all my sons; you are my first-born."

The setting, the darkness, the proposal all conjure up a kind of fairy-tale magic for Karna. He imagines some faint recollection of his infancy. He longs for the touch of her hand on his head. He has heard that he was abandoned as a baby; he has dreamed of his mother coming to him but always wrapped in a cloak, her face hidden. Is the dream recurring now with the Pāṇḍava Queen in the role of his unknown mother? Here in the twilight, on the battlefield, on the banks of the Bhagirathi are there faint memories of his first river journey and a frightened child-mother watching him float downstream? Why does he

on the eve of battle hear his mother's voice in the voice of Arjuna's mother? Why does his heart race towards his Pāṇḍava brothers? This is the climactic moment when Kuntī cries "then come, child, come!"<sup>1</sup> His response is from the depths of his personality, voicing all the pain and longing he has known since childhood: "I will go, mother, I will go. I will ask nothing - fear nothing - doubt nothing... for me now the rage of battle, the warrior's glory, victory and defeat are all hollow, empty. Where will we go, mother? Lead the way!" Then he asks her to repeat that he is her son and other emotions are stirred to life; the bitterness of the abandoned child surfaces and the questions with it: "Why did you desert me? Condemn me to an orphan's life? Why did you deny me the companionship of my brothers?" He understands now his jealousy of Arjuna. "Why did you deprive me of a mother's love?" He expects no answer and Kuntī can give none. Then comes the crucial question: "But tell me, why do you want me back now?" Karna is shrewd.

Completely overwhelmed, Kuntī takes refuge in hurt feelings: "Son, why must you wound me in a hundred places?" The hunger in her heart has led her in search



of him. She asks forgiveness for the past, promises to make up for all his suffering as the presumed son of low-born parents. But her words hurt her son to the quick, for he truly loves his foster parents. It is his greatest pride to be known as the son of Rādhā and Adiratha. Kuntī next tempts him with a kingdom, but not even a crown can compensate for the injury of her past rejection of him. "May I be cursed if I cut the bonds that bind me to my Suta mother and to the Kurus!"

Kuntī feels these words as a curse upon herself. In the dark, Karṇa foretells the Pāṇḍava victory; he foresees a peaceful but empty world, yet "Do not ask me to desert the side that will lose.... Let the Pāṇḍavas win and take the throne; I will remain with the defeated." He asks just one blessing: that the thirst for victory, for glory, for a kingdom may never cause him to betray his warrior's honour-pledge.

Rabindranath's sympathy is evidently with the rejected son, but his portrayal of the mother is both compassionate and thought-provoking. He depicts her at the crucial moment when the secret of a life-time is voluntarily laid bare. Her motives may be mixed, but her feelings are genuine. She is not just a scheming woman determined on victory for her Pāṇḍava sons even at the cost of

shame. Karna, with his deep heart-scars, could not have responded to anything hypocritical no matter how skilled the performance. Tagore portrays an agonising human situation, as valid in our day as in the epic nightfall, and shows how nothing can justify, just as nothing can heal the hurt of love denied. The poignant moment of mother-son love when Karna whispers "I will go, mother, I will go" with all it means to both of them, is the poet's way of showing what might have been, what has been lost. Kuntī's excuses are weak as are Gāndhārī's in her "Abedan" and they are meant to be so, for they seek, but fail, to cover a lapse from truth, the truth of a woman's nature, the truth of motherhood.

There is no rancour on Karna's part towards his father, Surya, the sun-god. It is his human mother, the sun-god's victim who must suffer, first as a terrified child-mother and then throughout her life as a mother robbed of her first-born and condemned to nigh life-long silence. "The cruellest lies," wrote Thoreau, "are often told in silence." So has it been all down the years that Kuntī has called Yudhiṣṭhira her first-born, when she sees Karna rejected by his own brothers as "low-born", rejected too, as a suitor by Draupadī because he was a Sudra. And Kuntī has been silent till now. No wonder

that she needs the dark to cover her shame, not at having given birth to an illegitimate son, but at having denied him a mother's love so long. Rabindranath shows her how it is women who have to pay the price, the heaviest price, in all life's tragedies. Karna has suffered a nameless longing all his years and he has had to endure several slights but he has also experienced love and care from Rādhā and Adiratha; he has lacked for nothing that they could provide. He has been fortunate in having his warrior status officially recognised when Duryodhana makes him a king, but Kuntī has lived with a dread secret since before his birth and has been able to put a face and a name on her life's sorrow. Then, when in the longed-for moment of reconciliation, she hears for the first time the word "mother" on her lost son's lips, that fleeting joy is snatched away and set at naught beside the weight of a man's honour-price, his warrior-word. The epic values come shining through the twentieth century dress in which Rabindranath clothes these heroic figures. They are as old and as new as truth itself.

Although Madhusudan and Rabindranath present their women characters from the epics as fully human persons they do not lower their heroic stature or lessen their ancient dignity. Buddhadeva Bose leaves Draupadī her association

with the elements without questioning her divinity or lack of it. She is a dream figure, a flash of lightning across a dark sky, an ephemeral rainbow bridging heaven and earth. The music of Rabindranath's poetry does not hide the underlying current of realism in his depiction of Gāndhārī, Kuntī and the mute Draupadī; neither does the stark reality of truth diminish the time-transcending quality of these women figures. That, unfortunately, cannot be said of more recent presentations of the Mahābhārata women. In Yuganta: The End of an Epoch, Dr Iravati Karve gives us many penetrating insights into the characters of both Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas. She gives them a nearness to our times that is quite new. She analyses the individual roles and presents events from the viewpoint of Draupadī or Gāndhārī, Kuntī or Kṛṣṇa. Unfortunately, in doing so, she has reduced the great epic to the level of a modern novel. There is no longer any trace of divine descent or intervention in the lives of the characters she explores. She does not deny a divine dimension so essential in the ancient epic tradition; she simply ignores it so persistently that it goes away! However, what is even more unforgivable is her re-writing of the end of the epic - the last journey of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī.

When Bhīma asks Yudhiṣṭhira why Kṛṣṇā has collapsed by the wayside, he replies that she is punished because she loved Arjuna more than the others. Draupadī hears the remark where she lies and its bitter tone is a revelation regarding Yudhiṣṭhira's feelings for her and the strict control under which he had kept them all these years. She ponders now Arjuna's restless quest for a woman's love and concludes that the only love capable of filling his heart was that of Kṛṣṇa himself. When her thoughts move on to Bhīma she realises that his love for her has been proved by deeds all down the years. He has challenged, defied, threatened and killed for her sake. So far, so good. But are we to believe that Draupadī was aware of none of this until her last moments? While such thoughts are running through her mind, now clouded by the darkness of approaching death, she becomes aware of something or someone drawing near and fears it may be a prowling animal. But it is Bhīma's whisper that reaches her, Bhīma who, fallen too, has dragged himself back to her side to repeat an old question with his last breath, "Kṛṣṇā, what can I do for you?" and with her dying words she repays him for a life-time of love: "In our next life be the eldest, Bhīma; under your protection we can all live in safety and joy."<sup>1</sup>

This, alas, is the stuff of the modern Hindi film. In the great epic such realisation or revelation would have come, if not during their lifetime in the silence of personal reflection, in the secret depths of the heart, then at last in the new life after death to which, having been tried and tested, they are finally admitted.

The eternal dimension has been swept aside in Mrs Karve's approach to the epic situation and its characters. There is useful anthropological, social and political information that helps to an understanding of certain aspects of Vyāsa's great song, but it loses incredibly in the re-telling.

In a very recent presentation of Draupadī to reach the Bengali stage, Saoli Mitra's Nāthavatī Anāthavat, the author-actress-danseuse relies all too heavily on Iravati Karve's interpretation, a reliance which she acknowledges gracefully but repeatedly during the performance. The rare blend of story-teller to an intimate circle, choosing her tale for the evening, and pausing now and then in the presentation to make an informal comment to her listeners, and formal "singer of tales" whose significant speech illustrated in the superb body language of her dance movements is something unique

in to-day's theatre. Her easy transition from local story-teller to court poet argues exceptional talent and versatility, and there is no doubt that Ms Mitra's two-hour programme brings Draupadī to life for to-day's audience with a conviction and a grace that is enthralling. Her comments, as part of the text, on the characters whose deeds or misdeeds she relates are lively and often apposite. When Vidura intervenes to prevent Duḥśāṣana disrobing Draupadī we hear: "Vidura rose and shouted 'Dharma!' He, the son of a slave girl, no kṣatriya he - and therefore granted scant respect in that assembly - that Vidura could stand no more of this and rose to protest." There is a tender little poem on the loneliness of Draupadī in the forest with a sung refrain that is wide open to a range of interpretation: "Great hopes were in her heart, great desire and great hope." In the context of the Kurukṣetra war Draupadī's hopes are mentioned again and there is reference to a just war, a "dharma-yuddha" which the story-teller rejects outright. There was no just war, there was injustice on both sides and all were guilty - even a war against injustice is unjust, she declares, thus bringing her audience right up to date. The massacre, the deaths, the destruction: this is not what Draupadī hoped for, what she wanted. But what did Draupadī want? This is a

key question in any presentation of Draupadī's character. Saoli Mitra shows how so many of the hopes her heroine relied on have proven false, have turned to dust, like her faith in Arjuna's warrior code of honour - Arjuna who used trickery to encompass the death of Bhīṣma, of Droṇa and of Karṇa; she depended on her five warrior sons and that prop too has gone. This is a tragic Draupadī indeed for whom all seems empty and meaningless. We are reminded of the long silence to which Vyāsa consigns her after the war is over, a silence that Rabindranath had the wisdom to respect. In Nāthavati Anāthavat she dries up and shrivels so that she can no longer find relief in tears, but bears the weight of unwept sorrow in her heart, the sorrow of a whole age. Finally she seems to have passed not only beyond hope and happiness, but beyond sorrow too, as she follows her husbands on the last, long journey, follows them woodenly because there is nothing else to do, no hope, no meaning, no alternative. So they traverse hill and dale till they reach the desert - a fitting symbol of Draupadī's state of mind. There is a song at this juncture that sighs for the past when she was loved by all. Ms Mitra now turns to Iravati Karve's modern, sentimental version of Draupadī's last moments which she renders as "In our next life, be mine, Bhīma, only



mine. Let me rest my head in your lap and I can sleep in peace, but be mine, Bhīma, only mine!"

Perhaps this style brings Draupadī within the range of comprehension of people of the present day, just as the French get to know a Medea, Iphigenia or Antigone considerably transformed from the Greek original. The popular Deirdre or Maeve, as we have already seen, is little more than cousin to the women of the Táin Bó Cúailnge. Perhaps it is better that they meet a rather romanticized Draupadī than not to make her acquaintance at all, for in urban areas particularly it is doubtful whether young people have much knowledge of the Mahābhārata or much desire for such knowledge. In the west, on the contrary, Indian culture, in its manifold aspects, is arousing the interest not merely of scholars but of the general public.

The focus on the status of women over the past decade has produced a spate of stories, many of them frightening and tragic, others blatantly exploiting woman as a sex symbol. It has also brought on the market countless stories by and about women. It is noteworthy that some writers are turning back to the heroic women of the past and are re-interpreting the great stories from the point

of view of the women characters. Jahnabikumar Chakravarty in his Pitrkanyā<sup>1</sup> interprets the main events of the Mahābhārata as reviewed by Satyavati, great-grandmother of the Pāṇḍavas, tracing the divine intervention in her own life and in the lives of her sons, grandsons and great grandsons. It has something of the sentimental appeal of Saoli Mitra's play, but it is a sensitive portrayal of a woman's mission in a man's world. Sudhangsuranjan Ghosh in Rāmāyaṇi Premkatha<sup>2</sup> takes several pairs from the epic cast: Viśvāmitra and Menaka, Indra and Ahalyā, Rāvaṇa and Rambha, and describes events in the epic from their points of view. Since these are all pairs of lovers, this book may be considered to some extent, as a kind of follow-up of the "project" begun by Madhusudan in his Birāṅgana Kāvya some hundred and twenty years ago. In his Pañcasati<sup>3</sup> Siddhartha Raychaudhuri selects Kuntī, Draupadī, Ahalyā, Tāra and Mandodari for a re-telling of old tales. Much attention is being given to these epic women characters, and it is hoped this literary interest augurs well for a revival of the old stories and for a restoration of woman to her rightful place in society, by the side of man as his divinely ordained helpmate, equal but different, happy,

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1 Calcutta: D M Library 1981. Also his Bhārater Savitrī 1982

2 Calcutta: Model Book House 1983

3 Calcutta: Universal Book Depot 1984

respected and respectful.

At the other side of the Indo-European cultural world there is a growing interest in the old tales among scholars, several of them from the Scandinavian countries. Tales from the Fenian cycle and poems, too, in Middle and Modern Irish find a place in school syllabi. What perhaps draws attention to many of the tales is the campaign by the Irish Tourist Board (Bórd Fáilte Éireann) to attract visitors to places like Newgrange on the banks of the River Boyne. It is the legendary home of Aengus, the lord of the Síde, and is in fact a passage grave over three thousand years old, possibly belonging to a pre-Celtic period and certainly connected in some way with a solar deity. It is from here that Étaín emerges into the world of men and here, too, that Grainne's Diarmait was fostered by the same Aengus. Another tourist spot is Knocknarea where Queen Medb's grave is located. "The view (from the mountain top) is stupendous: over the great bays of Sligo, out along the cliffs of Mayo to Slieve League and the sun setting on the ocean. It is unreasonable to suppose that the person who selected such a site and built the great monument was not a ruler of quite exceptional power. There is not a shred of evidence that

it was not a woman and that her name was not Maev(sic)."<sup>1</sup>  
This relating of old stories to the localities connected  
with the legendary heroes and heroines(of Chhatisgarh  
with the Pāṇḍavas) is a way of ensuring that the  
legends will not die, that we will not lose our  
stories.

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1 Christopher Moriarty, "Knocknarea, Co. Sligo"  
The Irish Times, 20 May 1982

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSIONS

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, to paraphrase Eliot - "in our beginning is our end". This study began with a statement on the value of poetry and the importance of the role of the poet, the ancient storyteller-poet. It went on to examine the oral tradition which the storyteller nurtured and passed on from generation to generation in Ireland and India. The Irish fili or seanachaid and the Indian kavi enjoyed the same kind of prestige in their respective communities as guardians and purveyors of the word. "The spoken word very often had magic power, magic influence... and the spoken word was regarded as being more sacred, more dynamic

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1 T S Eliot Four Quartets "Little Gidding" ll 239-243

than the written word. The written word was permanent but inert. But the spoken word was shifting, moving, dynamic, growing, creative."<sup>1</sup> We caught a glimpse of the Greek court poet in Homer's Demodocus but noted that his status lacked the aura of the sacred that characterized his Irish and Indian counterpart.

Both the Mahābhārata and the Táin Bó Cúailnge end with similar blessings invoked on those who listen to the message: "As the darkness is dispelled by the rising sun, so every sin of thought, word or deed is banished from him who listens to the Mahābhārata,"<sup>2</sup> and "A blessing on everyone who shall faithfully memorise the Táin as it is written here and shall not add any other form to it."<sup>3</sup> The Irish scribe belongs to a later age than the Indian kavi and is concerned about the integrity of his manuscript, but the sacredness of the word is the concern of both. Not so, however, with a later Irish copyist who appends his own sceptical comment, and in Latin for good measure! "But I who have written this story, or rather this fable, give no credence to the various incidents related in it. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, others poetic figments;

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1 The Celts: First Europeans, Broadcast on BBC World Service on 9 June 1985. Presenter: Barry Cunliffe, Producer: Margaret McKee, Speaker: Proinsias MacCana

2 Basu Mahābhārata: Śāranuvāda p 687

3 Cecile O'Rahilly Táin Bó Cúailnge p 272

some are probable, others improbable; while still others are intended for the delectation of foolish men."<sup>1</sup> Evidently the opinions of this scribe were not widely shared or the Táin would not have survived the passage of time, the recopying and the restoration down the centuries. For while the early composition was pagan, the copyists were Christian monks.

The art of printing which spread the wisdom of the past as well as new discoveries to a wide readership tended to diminish the role of the story-teller and to transform the poet into a mere name at the end of a printed page. The television screen is gradually bringing about a change in this situation; once more there are listeners to the spoken word, and the illusion of the speaker's presence. Virtually the same qualities of clear and dramatic speech and a personality that can hold the attention of the audience characterize the television performer to-day and the story-teller of yesteryear. The live stage, too, has been considerably influenced, sometimes enhanced, by the screen, whether it be the sophisticated urban auditorium with its increasing range of audio-visual facilities or the jātra-style theatre with its parallel folk stage in other

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1 Cecile O'Rahilly Táin Bó Cúalnge p 272

parts of the world.

In July 1985, the Mahābhārata was performed in the open-air at Avignon with "an enormous white, rugged stone wall as the backdrop, at its base a ribbon of water, a pool up front and a semi-circular seating plan."<sup>1</sup> The performance began at dusk and continued through the night, ending only as dawn broke the following morning. This is no mere revival of the Greek theatre; indeed the massive scale of the production is totally at variance with the spare lines of Attic tragedy. It is rather a western quest for its roots finding its way back to the cradle of the great Indo-European civilization that is the common heritage of Europe and India. The popularity of the cultural fairs that India has been organising abroad in recent years, in New York and Paris in 1985, shows that people all over the world are captivated by Indian music, dance, art, crafts, customs, dress, cuisine and literature. It is something stronger and deeper than curiosity that draws visitors to these exhibitions. It is the recognition, in some inner recess of their being that there is something here that responds

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1 Malavika Singh, "The Festival of Avignon", the India Magazine 5 No 10 Sept 1985 p 61.  
The script of the epic was by Jean Claude Carrière, the producer, Peter Brooks.



to a basic heart-need, something that satisfies a primal heart-hunger, something that goes back to the roots of our tradition, to the first stirrings of man's search for something beyond food, clothing and shelter:

And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

The filming in the last decade or two of epic works like War and Peace, The Ten Commandments or Roots, further underlines the thirst to-day for stable values, for "the more enduring story" after the fascination of the absurd has faded out.

In India, too, the great epics continue to provide material not only for entertainment, but, hopefully for deeper sustenance, in the annual festivals like the Rāmālīla, and for folk-programmes mainly outside the large urban centres. In Chhātīsgarh in Madhya Pradesh, a region the Pāṇḍavas are said to have traversed during their vanavasā, there is the Pandavani style of reciting and singing the Mahābhārata as a ballad. It has two forms. The Kapalik Pandavani singer centres more on local folklore, making a mythical use of the epic characters even when the folk tale is not directly linked to the Mahābhārata. The Vedamati Pandavani poet,

on the other hand, remains faithful to Vyāsa's canon and revolts against the incorporation of folklore into its tradition. Instrumental music and expressive gestures accompany the recitation and singing.<sup>1</sup> The dichotomy between urban and rural culture - if we may apply the word "culture" to the urban "jeans generation" - is a problem that needs to be tackled while there is still a possibility of bridging the gulf. Here again the media can be a powerful influence by engaging the best creative artistes to provide just enough truly Indian, truly appealing cultural programmes to whet an appetite for the live show. In ancient and medieval India and Europe artists had royal and noble families as their patrons. India does not lack potential patrons to-day. The commercial houses which sponsor sports programmes could just as easily encourage folk theatre. There can be little doubt that the values both moral and artistic that the Indian epics enshrine have a meaning and a message for the world to-day. This may not be so apparently true of Gaelic heroic literature; it is perhaps the degree of freedom and independence enjoyed by women in ancient Ireland that holds the strongest

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1 Condensed from "Pandavani" translated and adapted from a monograph published by the Madhya Pradesh Adivasi Lokala Parishad, published in the India Magazine 5 No 11 Oct 1985

appeal, and that for only the female half of the population of the island!

In Chapters III to V some outstanding women characters from the epic world of India, European classics and Ireland are considered in different roles in order to see how the poets sought to present them. We know that in general the Greeks did not greatly honour women; they gave them as gifts or prizes to victors in the games as we read in the Iliad:<sup>1</sup> "Briseis was a trifle; but Briseis seized from Achilles was worth 'seven tripods... and ten talents of gold and twenty glittering cauldrons....'"<sup>2</sup> Here a woman's value depends on her relationship to a particular male; she is not seen as possessing any intrinsic value. Homer believes that women are inferior even when he portrays women sympathetically as he does Penelope, Andromache and Nausicaa. That his female characters were not helpless is very clear from such instances as the determination of Hera and Athena to destroy Troy so that they might be avenged on Paris who slighted them when he declared

1 Chapter XXIII

2 M I Finley The World of Odysseus (London: Chatto and Windus 1964) quoting Iliad IX 1 121 ff

Aphrodite more beautiful than either of them. These, of course, were no mere human women.

"All Mediterranean peoples," writes Jean Markale,<sup>1</sup> "kept their women in a permanent state of inferiority. In contrast the Celts conferred on them rights of which women in western Europe were still deprived during the puritanically-minded periods of the 19th and 20th centuries." He goes on to list personal ownership of goods even in marriage, freedom of choice in marriage, the transmission of property and even sovereignty through the mother, or through the maternal uncle as witness Tristan who was the heir of his mother's brother, King Mark. "Basically," he continues "the exceptional status of women in Celtic societies comes from the Celtic view of woman as a mysterious creature, attractive and redoubtable at the same time, and possessor of the power of giving life. The entire Celtic tradition... emphasizes the sovereign quality of women." This tradition we see clearly exemplified in Medb and in the independent spirit of Deirdre and Grainne, but it is much less evident in a character like Findabair though she is not totally dominated by her powerful mother if we accept her role in the Táin Bó Froech. The outstanding

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1 La Femme Celte published in English as Women of the Celts, "The Three Faces of Celtic Woman" (London: Gordon Cramonesi 1974)

women in the Mahābhārata have a considerable measure of freedom, too, though this may be due more to their independence of spirit and their striking personality than to any legally established rights. Draupadī and Medb would have recourse to warfare to right the wrongs inflicted on them, but Sītā would submit to the banishment imposed by her husband. That the epic poets, east and west, saw women as keenly sensitive to injustice and to their own worth and honour comes across strongly in Indo-European heroic poetry. They see in them, too, the feminine principle of sovereignty, the consorts without whom kings cannot exercise the royal prerogative. Perhaps the more prominent role in public life that women are claiming and assuming to-day has its roots in the vision of woman that inspired the creators of the great epics - the Celtic concept of the sun as feminine, a female source of power and growth, of fertility and nourishment, and the not dissimilar Indian ideal of Śakti, the mother goddess. This is not so clearly evident in Greek mythology, although Athene seems to have a fair share of executive power; she nudges Zeus to right action and is his enthusiastic messenger and bearer of good tidings. There is no hint whatever that he could not have ruled without her or Hera.

The second half of the present century has seen a world-wide cry for the recognition of women's rights, of woman's equality with man. All too often this demand for more freedom has focussed on the wrong things and been frittered away by trivialities. This is because women have not reflected sufficiently on their femininity, on the qualities that make them different from men. Their claim to equality has become a question of mathematics - of identical triangles rather than complementary angles! The great women of the epic age were wiser than their modern counterparts; they proved themselves worthy and so won for themselves the respect, position and power that they wished for and were capable of sustaining. That women in different parts of the world, at different times and for different reasons lost some or much of the dignity and freedom accorded them in ancient societies is a matter of history and cannot be analysed here. But a few reflections on one example may provide a clue to one possible reason for this lowering of the status of woman.

The loudest and bitterest campaigns for women's liberty have been and are still being heard in the United States of America, a country which for countless millions of people is a bastion of freedom, the refuge of those who

can escape from national tyranny in other parts of the world. And yet it is true that American women consider themselves victims of discrimination simply because they are women. It is only too evident that the vigour and energy of women in the pioneering, "covered wagon" era has been curbed in a society where men dominate the scene. I would suggest that one reason contributory to this situation is that the women who strove side by side with their men-folk, sometimes leading, always urging and supporting, in the struggle to "win the west" were women still imbued with and inspired by the culture from which they sprung - Polish or Irish or Dutch or English. They were women who knew where their roots were earthed, who the God or gods were whom they worshipped, and so were secure in their relationships with the men of their families. Their very struggle had them concerned with issues larger than their individual selves, with the survival and settlement of the family, of the community, in a new environment. The goal of their striving once achieved a kind of relaxation seems to have followed, during which household chores and responsibilities devolved more and more on the women while the menfolk pursued careers in a wider world. Comfort, an organised way of life, social recognition became the goals, lesser goals compared with those of

the pioneers, of the new American woman. She "settled down" and left the larger challenges to her husband, brother or son. Gradually in the great melting pot of cultures that America is, individual cultures lost their vitality and the alloy that emerged was more concerned with style and ambition than with the more permanent values of an older society. It was in accepting this popular blend that the American woman lost her moral leadership and her real independence; her roots had no longer that thrust towards the stream that ensures growth and fruitfulness. Without realising it she was culturally and spiritually "in the parched places of the wilderness, in a salt land."<sup>1</sup> It is from this wasteland that Betty Friedan and her associates raise strident slogans for women's liberty. It was into an even more arid wasteland that Draupadi's and Kriemhild's calls for vengeance led their people three thousand or a thousand years ago. It was possibly because she saw that she was leading her supporters in a similar direction that Medb of Cruachan cried "Halt" to the war of the Cattle Raid and turned her troops homewards.

From all this it would appear that it is in times of crisis that women rise to the full potential of their

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1 Jeremiah 17:6



ability as leaders, whether for good or evil. This may be the lesson that the epic poets have for our world to-day. It is not in lengthy dialogue or in trading accusations, as in Anouilh's Médée where the great harrikan never leaves the stage but talks and argues incessantly until she sets fire to herself and her children in the last minutes of the play, that women will establish their claims to liberty and to equality with men. Freedom is essentially a state of mind and soul; true it requires certain conditions for its rightful expression. Equality is god-given and it is there in the world religions, enshrined in their basic tenets, but honoured more often in the breach than in the observance. Women as the bearers and transmitters of life have to be the nurturers and the channels of all that supports life at its deepest and most spiritual level. To do this every woman needs to tend the tree of life that is within her; she has to ensure that its roots reach out to life-giving streams, to streams that have not suddenly sprung out of the desert to-day or yesterday, but to waters that are as old as the land itself. To be able to accomplish this every woman needs to know who she is, to possess her own story for,

"Without my story I have no identity. I do not know who I am or what I am about. If you have no story, how do

you know where you are going; and if you are going somewhere, how will you know when you get there?"<sup>1</sup>

At least the threat of a nuclear holocaust should make us pause and reflect on these vital questions regarding the right use of power, its responsibilities, its snares and its dangers.

The Mahābhārata shows us the deep felt desire and need for a dharmayuga (an age of righteousness) and tells us that the slaughter of one's kin is too great, a price to pay for a yuga in which there is little dharma, in fact that killing is no solution and can bring neither justice nor peace. It shows us women who might have done much if their husbands had been more appreciative of their ability and their courage; and it shows us women whom men could not deter from their pursuit of pleasure or revenge. The same answers come through from Gaelic heroic literature and are echoed in the Greek and German epics. We have statements translated into action on the quality of mothering and the fruits good or bad of a child's early upbringing. We need to listen closely to catch, in the bustle of to-day's world, the whisper of what the ancient poets are saying. We need to take a look beyond the all too visibly flawed world of our elders, to a more stable society where heroes and heroines stand out above the throng, clear, strong, sometimes gentle

people who are distant enough not to threaten, human enough to emulate and sufficiently divine to inspire. We need to be in touch with our origins, with the wellsprings of our being, to restore to us the myths of the race, not racial myths, but the myths of the human race wherever they find expression. It is only when a community or a generation has a sense of identity that its members will want to "preserve and prolong the traditions that give them their identity. When a nation is in trouble, it often returns to its traditional stories to look for direction and healing, to regain a sense of what made it great in the past and what will nurture it into the future.... A region or a nation has its story concretized in shrine, statue, museum.... A person without a story is a person with amnesia. A country without its story has ceased to exist. A humanity without its story has lost its soul."<sup>1</sup>

It is to save our soul to-day that we need to explore our stories, the great epics that have been preserved and handed down in good times and bad, until they belong to us to-day, until we "arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time."

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1 Bausch op cit p 33

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