Representing Éire :

The Transmission of the Deirdre Legend from the Middle Ages to 1910



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Lucie Pereira
St John's College
University of Oxford

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Trinity 2006

ABSTRACT

Representing Éire:
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This thesis analyses the transmission of the Deirdre legend in adaptations from the earliest written sources to the versions of the writers of the early twentieth century Irish Literary Revival. Its aim is to trace the way that the refashioning of the story is informed by the cultural and political contexts within which each writer was working, as well as the more personal and aesthetic motivations behind the various adaptations. The texts chosen for close study represent key moments in the transmission process, both for their treatment of the legend and for the specific context to which this treatment responds. After an introduction dealing with the medieval versions, the thesis is divided into six chapters which chart these key moments in chronological order, ending with J. M. Synge's play *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, published in 1910. Part of the conclusion is given over to tracing the legend's fate in adaptations since the advent of Irish independence. The chronological framework adopted allows a new perspective to emerge which reveals that the Deirdre legend provided a means of reflecting on the various cultural and political conflicts in which Irish identity has been implicated. The thesis demonstrates that the ancient Irish material was used to valorise the writers' contemporary Irish or Scottish culture at times when this culture was under threat, and that following independence the connection between Deirdre and Éire largely disappeared. The particular use to which the legend was put therefore depended on two factors: the specific conflicts with which each writer was engaging and the various connections which they perceived between the present and the mythical past.

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Abbreviations

DUM	*The Dublin University Magazine*
LMU	***Longes mac nUislenn 'Exile of the Sons of Uisliu'***
OCU	*Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach 'The Death of the Sons of Uisneach'*
TCD	**Trinity College Dublin**

INTRODUCTION

The Medieval Origins of the Deirdre Story

The origins of the Deirdre legend, one of the most widely adapted Irish narratives into English, are lost in the mists of time, as if that tragic Irish heroine predestined to bring destruction and sorrow to Ulster was also fated to spread confusion through the different versions of her tale. Despite, or perhaps because of, this mysterious ancestry, the legend has proved a continuing source of inspiration for generations of writers eager to reconnect with some putative ancient Irish or Celtic heritage. This reaching out to the heroic past in order to re-affirm a national or ethnic cultural identity in the present tends to be most keenly felt at times when this identity is considered to be in question. Irish history provides numerous such instances, where the native population has been brought to re-assess its identity in light of threat from outsiders. Successive waves of invaders from the earliest times made the island their home, culminating in the arrival of the Gaels, 'who were to set the most conspicuous and enduring imprint on what 'Irishness' was to be like'[1]. The following centuries, bringing Christian missionaries and Norse settlement, constituted a series of readjustments and cultural compromises crowned by the twelfth-century Norman invasion in which the long and uneasy relation between Irish and English identity was forged.

The texts discussed in this study are adaptations of the Deirdre legend dating from the version included in Geoffrey Keating's seventeenth-century history of Ireland, *Foras Feasa*, to J. M. Synge's 1910 play *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (the last adaptation of the literary revival). The ways in which it was adapted over this period are naturally inflected by the shadow of English cultural domination, even while the English language became

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[1] Robert Kee, *Ireland: A History* (London, 1995), p. 24.

the medium in which the legend was retold. The persecution and betrayal of the heroine and her lover Naisi by King Conchobar carries obvious potential for figuring the oppression of Ireland by English rule; Conchobar himself, meanwhile, is a sufficiently flexible character to embody both contemporary and past ideals of authoritative leadership. Yet ultimately it is the heroine herself who seems to have captured the imagination, whose identification with a sense of national identity becomes so pronounced that by the turn of the twentieth century she comes to be thought of as the '*Irish* Helen' [italics mine.] Deirdre's beauty, which is listed by Lady Gregory in the 'Dedication' to her collection of legendary material, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, as one of the very few aspects of the Ulster Cycle still in the collective memory of the Irish people in 1902[2], is thus frequently presented as a source of national pride.

Given this repeated singling-out of Deirdre for adaptation, it is surprising to find that there is only one published study of the legend's transmission, namely Herbert Fackler's *That Tragic Queen*[3]. Whilst this work gives a useful analysis of the major versions, its capacity to trace the evolution of the story is hampered by its almost exclusive consideration of nineteenth and twentieth century texts. This emphasis is of course to some extent inevitable, since the nineteenth century saw a notable revival of interest in the Irish literary tradition, but his brief mention of the versions by Keating and James Macpherson fails to do justice to their role in transmitting – and, of course, reshaping – the legend before it reached the writers of the Revival. This thesis builds on Fackler's work by extending the scope of analysis back in time to include both of these important figures, as well as the reactions which they prompted from their contemporaries and successors. This focus on the legend's transmission will allow me to trace the ways in which the Deirdre tale has been consistently used as a means of reflecting on the various

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[2] Lady Gregory, 'Dedication of the Irish Edition to the People of Kiltartan', *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (London, 1902), p. v.
[3] Herbert V. Fackler, *That Tragic Queen: The Deirdre Legend in Anglo-Irish Literature* (Salzburg, 1978).

cultural and political conflicts in which Irish identity has been implicated. At the same time, I will be able to examine the more personal and aesthetic motivations behind the various adaptations over this period, as each adaptor has sought to flesh out his or her own conception of the beautiful heroine and her tragic story.

The oldest surviving version of the Deirdre legend, *Longes mac nUislenn* ('The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu'; hereafter *LMU*), is dated to the eighth or ninth century. Many scholars believe that this version draws on legendary material that already had a long-standing oral history. Myles Dillon, for example, notes that

> (...) the texts of the earliest sagas are not earlier than the eighth century. But they have evidently a long oral tradition behind them and probably reflect the social and political conditions of the time which they claim to describe, namely, the first century before Christ. [4]

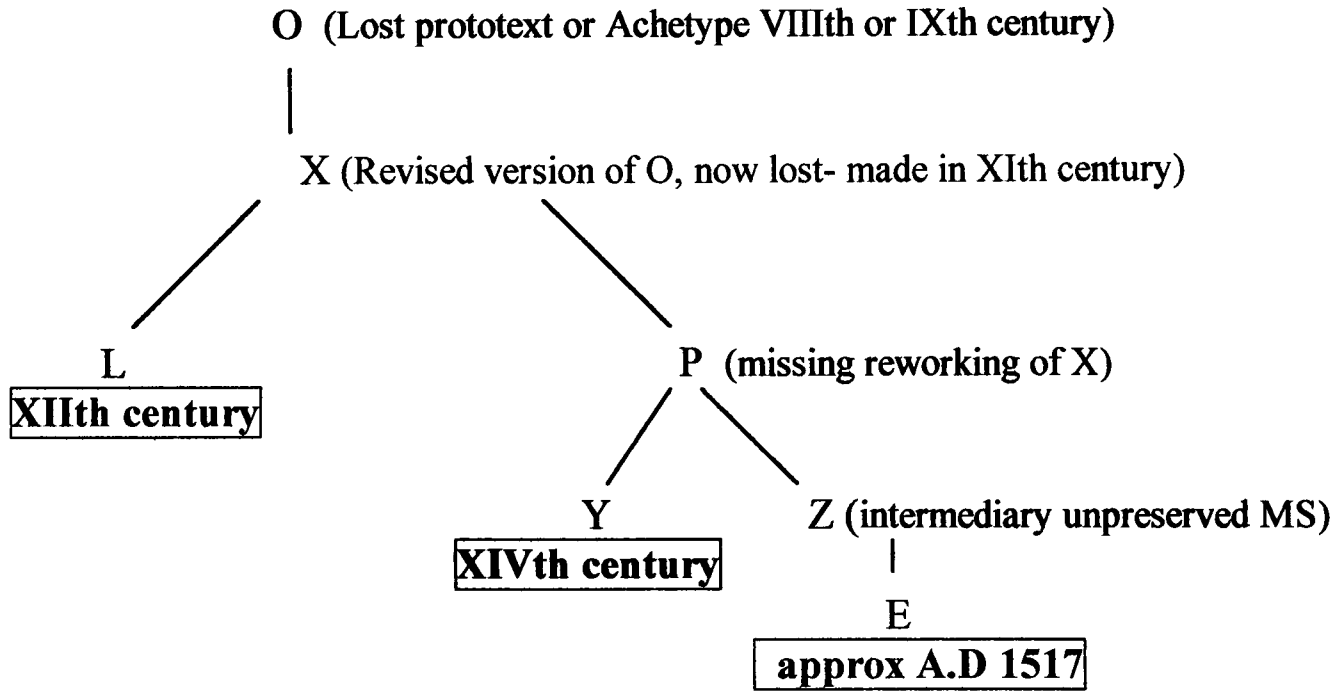
However, James Carney – criticising what he disparagingly calls the 'nativist' view – has drawn attention to the scarcity of references to the Deirdre material datable to before 1000 AD, suggesting that *LMU* is 'a fiction [which] (...) has no ancient roots in Irish tradition'[5]. As Carney and Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith have both emphasised, *LMU* is nowhere found as an independent story, 'but has a definite purpose in the so-called 'Ulster Cycle' of tales'[6]. More specifically, it forms a prelude to this cycle's central narrative, the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. Its function is to explain why the Ulsterman Fergus and his men fight on the Connaught side, against their own King, in the great war opposing the two provinces. Since the *Táin* is dated to the eighth century, it is impossible to determine with any certainty that the Deirdre material existed any earlier.

In the course of the ninth century AD, during the Norse invasions, many of the manuscripts exclusive to Ireland were lost as the invaders burned the monasteries where

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[4] Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago, 1948), p. xii.
[5] James Carney, 'Early Irish Literature: the State of Research', in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies*, ed. Gearóid Mac Eoin (Dublin, 1983), p. 125.
[6] Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, 'From Saga to Folktale: "The Deirdre Story" in Gaelic Tradition', in *Bryght Lanternis: Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, eds. J. Derrick McClure and M. R. G. Spiller (Aberdeen, 1989), p. 407.

they were kept. A few survived thanks to the monks who escaped carrying them. Thus, whether it was composed as a contemporary fiction as Carney maintains, or compiled at this time from pre-existing oral sources, the earliest known version of the Deirdre legend was produced in a context where indigenous cultures must have seemed under threat. From the outset, then, Deirdre appears as an important part of a narrative tradition celebrating Irish legendary history, a kind of cultural resistance to invasion. Sadly, in common with nearly all texts of this time, the earliest manuscript does not survive. However, in the introduction to his critical edition of the text, Vernam Hull's careful analysis of the different *LMU* manuscripts establishes a probable history of textual transmission. He represents his findings in the following stemma[7]:



As the diagram shows, there are three major surviving MSS: the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* [L][8], the fourteenth-century *Yellow Book of Lecan* [Y][9] and the sixteenth-century *Egerton* manuscript [E][10]. Of these, L is probably the closest to the hypothesised lost originals since it is the earliest in date, seems to derive directly from X, and does not rely

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[7] Vernam Hull, 'The Filiation of the Manuscripts', *Longes Mac n-Uislenn* (New York, 1949), p. 9.
[8] Now preserved in Trinity College, Dublin, MS 1339, pp. 259b-261b.
[9] Also kept in Trinity College Dublin as H.2.16, *Leabhar Buidhe Leacain,* 'The Yellow Book of Lecan'. It contains a copy of *LMU* beginning in col. 749, l. 20, and continues to the end of col. 753. It was chiefly transcribed in Connacht by Donogh and Gilla Isa Mac Firbis.
[10] Egerton 1782, composed around 1517, kept at the British Museum, London, Add. 33993, f67r-69v.

on an extinct intermediary copy. Accordingly, Hull bases his edition primarily on L, using the other two versions to supplement gaps in the twelfth-century manuscript.

It is essential to bear in mind the complex historical context within which the *Book of Leinster* was copied. Viking dominance in Ireland had been broken after their defeat at the Battle of Clontarf on 23 April 1014. The 1014 victory briefly encouraged literary production. New churches (like that of St Michan in Dublin, founded in 1095) and the round tower at Clonmacnoise Monastery were built, signalling the reawakening of monastic activities. It was in this particular context of re-appropriation that a medieval literary revival took place, led by monastic scribes anxious to recreate what had once been theirs. *The Book of the Dun Cow*, including *The Táin*, was compiled at Clonmacnoise by Maol Mhuire around 1105. It was soon followed by *The Book of Leinster*, begun around 1160 and completed during the next decade[11], under the patronage of the King of Leinster, Dermot MacMurrough. This paints a complex picture of Dermot, infamous as the man who invited the Anglo-Normans to Ireland and yet apparently keen to patronise the preservation of Irish literature. It also links another important point in the transmission history of Deirdre with a period of political instability and negotiation between native cultures and alien cultural influences.

The story of *LMU* opens at a banquet in the house of King Conchobor's storyteller, Fedlimid, whose wife is 'full with child'[12]. As the pregnant woman is going to bed, the yet unborn child screams 'in her womb'[13], frightening everyone present at the feast. A druid, Cathbad, places his hand on the woman's belly and makes the following prediction: 'there is a girl there. Derdriu shall be her name. She will bring evil.'[14] After

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[11] This is the date given by Vernam Hull. Eleanor Hull believes it was actually completed in 1160 and that it was compiled 'in the reign and for the benefit of Dermot Mac Murrough'. See Eleanor Hull, *A Textbook of Irish Literature* (Dublin, 1908), p. vii.
[12] Thomas Kinsella, trans., 'Exile of the Sons of Uisliu', *The Táin* (Oxford, 1969), p. 8.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

the baby is born, the predictions become more specific: this future woman's beauty will be so destructive that it will cause great torment in Ulster, the exile of the three sons of Uisliu and ultimately the departure of Fergus. Upon hearing that the infant would be responsible for the surfacing of 'little graves everywhere'[15], the men of Ulster wish to kill her at once but, in an attempt to defy the prophecy, the king orders that she be reared in isolation until she is 'ready for Conchobor's bed'[16]. Years later, Derdriu sees her foster-father skinning a calf on the snow and a raven drinking the blood. The colourful sight reveals to her that she 'could desire a man who had (...) hair like the raven, cheeks like blood and his body like snow'[17]. She then meets Noisiu who satisfies her criteria and they elope. Accompanied by Noisiu's two brothers and an army of a hundred and fifty warriors, the lovers are pursued throughout Ireland by the king and have to find refuge in Alba (Scotland) where the brothers become the king's soldiers. But the exiles are forced to escape again after the Scottish king hears of Deirdriu's great beauty and wants her for himself. Their next destination is an 'island in the sea'[18]. The men of Ulster hear about their new abode and try to convince Conchobor to forgive them and welcome them back to Ireland. Fergus is sent as a pledge of safety to bring them back to Ulster. However, he is detained on the way through the king's cunning, being invited to several ale feasts which, because of an old oath, he is obliged to attend. Continuing to the King's residence at Emain Macha, the brothers are killed by Eogan mac Durthacht on Conchobor's instructions, and Derdriu is taken prisoner. Upon hearing of this treachery, Fergus burns Emain Macha and joins forces with the rulers of Connacht against Conchobor. Deirdre spends a year with Conchobor, during which time she composes two laments for the sons of Uisliu. The King then decides to give her to Eogan for a year. Brought to the fair of

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[15] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Macha, she leaps from the chariot and commits suicide by dashing her head against a rock.

As is clear from this summary, there is very little trace of Christianity in the text, and several elements which appear to refer to a pre-Christian order. The recurrent use of animal imagery does not fit with the dominant Christian ideology, which tended to emphasize the importance of the soul over the body and preach the repression of animal-like instincts in favour of more spiritual ideals. Animal metaphors and comparisons abound in the text and usually signify individual prestige, courage or beauty: 'a man who had hair (...) like the raven', 'they were swift as hounds in the chase (...)'[19]. The intimate connection between the human and animal world is conversely emphasised in the attribution of typically human features to certain animals. Cows are hyperbolically described as sensitive to music, and more particularly to the singing of the sons of Uisliu which even has a direct impact on their production of milk:

> The chanting of the sons of Uisliu was very sweet. Every cow or beast that heard it gave two-thirds more milk.[20]

According to Eleanor Hull, in *Folklore of the British Isles*, the milk cow was a sacred animal in Ireland from very early times.[21] Animal imagery[22] is also used to figure human sexual relations. Conchobor's last words to Derdriu represent her as a 'sheep eyeing two rams'[23]. Her first encounter with young Noisiu is similarly related in terms of animal-like physical attraction:

> 'That is a fine heifer going by,' he said.
> 'As well as it might,' she said.
> 'The heifers grow big where there are no bulls.'
> 'You have the bull of this province all to yourself,' he said, 'the king of Ulster.
> 'Of the two,' she said, 'I'd pick a game young bull like you.' [24]

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[19] *Ibid.*, p. 11 and p. 12.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[21] See Eleanor Hull, *Folklore of the British Isles* (London, 1928), p. 149.
[22] For a detailed analysis of references to animals in *LMU*, see Maria Tymoczko, 'Animal Imagery in Loinges Mac nUislenn', *Studia Celtica xx/xxi* (1985/86), 145-166.
[23] Kinsella (1969), p. 20.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Other unorthodoxies include the supernatural powers of the druid Cathbad, who proves capable of predicting the future of an unborn baby. The gory suicide of the heroine, meanwhile, obviously not encouraged by Christian doctrines, speaks for itself: 'A big block of stone was in front of her. She let her head be driven against the stone, and made a mass of fragments of it, and she was dead.'[25] Perhaps the most peculiarly Celtic notion is the custom of *geasa*. This concerns certain taboos or prohibitions whose violation entails death or eternal dishonour and there are three such instances in *LMU*. The first one is performed by Derdriu as she threatens Noisiu with dishonour if he does not follow her:

> 'Are you rejecting me?'
> 'I am,' he said.
> The she rushed at him and caught the two ears of his head.
> 'Two ears of shame and mockery,' she said, 'if you don't take me with you.'
> 'Woman, leave me alone!' he said.
> 'You will do it,' she said, binding him.
> A shrill cry escaped him at that.[26]

Later in the story, the 'old oath' which binds Fergus to accept invitations to ale-feasts combines with another undertaken by the brothers to 'eat no food in Ireland until they ate Conchobor's food first'[27], with the result that he is unable to protect them at Emain Macha. Whether these obligations are self-inflicted or imposed by some exterior will, they are rooted in an essentially pre-Christian Celtic tradition. The fact that *LMU*'s transmitters retained in the text elements such as druidic incantations or *geasa* demonstrates their resolute attempt not to compromise the specifically Celtic flavour of the tale.

This attitude is well exemplified in the final manuscript annotations to the *Táin* in the *Book of Leinster*, one of the scribes being moved to stress the importance of preserving the integrity of the narrative:

> Bendacht ar cech óen mebraigfes go hindraic Táin amlaid seo ná tuillfe cruth aile furri.

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[25] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

> [A blessing on every one who shall faithfully memorise the Táin as it is written here and shall not add any other form to it.][28]

This call for strict adherence to the text is apparently directed to future transcribers of these legendary stories, who might be tempted to christianise them or incorporate the stylistic and thematic elements of their own time. Yet, on the following line, the same scribe expresses strong reservations about the precise significance of the contents of the tales he has been working on, as he vehemently asserts:

> Sed ego, qui scripsi hanc historiam an verius fabulam, quibusdam fidem in hac historia an fabula non accomodo. Quaedam nam ibi sunt perstrigia demonum, quaedam autem figmenta poetica, quaedam similia vero, quaedam non, quaedam ad delectationem stultorum.
>
> [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, other poetic figments; some are probable, others improbable; while still others are intended for the delectation of foolish men.][29]

Clearly, for a twelfth-century monastic scribe, there are limits to the respect that can be shown for pagan material. The complex relation between Christian Ireland and its pre-Christian legends is here laid bare. On the one hand, this heritage is considered important enough to be transmitted with minimal alteration; on the other, the scribe felt the need to condemn the morality of the material, evidently worried that its un-Christian worldview might be mistaken for the truth. He reconciles these conflicting demands by limiting himself to general observations about the 'fable', whilst carefully avoiding giving details about which particular aspects are believable, which unbelievable, and which diabolically inspired. Thus he guarantees the integrity both of his Christian ethics and of the text itself, refusing to single out specific episodes for revision or excision.

The later version of the Deirdre legend, *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach* (*the Death of the Sons of Uisneach*, hereafter referred to as *OCU*), was probably composed in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, at a time of Anglo-Norman dominance, and written in Early Modern Irish. It has frequently been criticised for lacking the harsh realism of

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[28] Cecile O' Rahilly, ed., *Táin Bó Cúalnge from The Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1967), p. 136 and p. 272.
[29] *Ibid.*

LMU. Thomas Kinsella, for example, acknowledges that he decided to make his translation of *LMU* after he had 'found the oldest version of the Deirdre story and been struck by its superiority over the usual one'[30]. However, as Mac Giolla Léith is keen to emphasize, *OCU* is not, as is commonly believed, a rewriting of *LMU* but 'simply a different tale concerning the same characters and events'[31]. Its distinctive origins may also be traced in the multiple references to Argyllshire place names displaying an accurate topographical knowledge of the area.[32] The earliest surviving manuscript copy is known as the 'Glenmasan MS' and dates from around 1500. It is preserved at the National Library of Scotland[33] but was, according to Mac Giolla Léith, probably written in Ireland in the fifteenth century before being brought to Scotland in the mid eighteenth century. Being, however, incomplete, it could not be used by the editor as sole copy text.

Whereas *LMU* covers the entire span of Deirdre's life, *OCU* starts *in medias res* after Deirdre and the sons of Uisneach have been in exile for some years. The opening scene describes a lavish feast at Emain Macha during which the king pretends to be missing the sons of Uisneach. After interviewing the warriors Conall Cearnach, Cú Chulainn and Fearghus mac Róigh, Conchobhar chooses Fearghus to find the exiles and persuade them to return to Ireland by giving them guarantees of safety. Refusing to heed Deirdre's warnings of the King's plotted treachery, the home-sick brothers agree to follow Fearghus back to Ireland, accepting the latter's assertion that 'a native land is better than anything'[34]. Deirdre then sings a long farewell poem to Scotland. Fearghus is stopped on the way by a certain Borrach, sent by the King, who puts him 'under prohibitions' to attend a feast. Unable to refuse, Fergus leaves his charges behind but asks

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[30] Kinsella (1969), 'Translator's Note and Acknowledgements', p. vii.
[31] Mac Giolla Léith (1989), p. 410.
[32] Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, ed. and trans., *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach: The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach* (London, 1993), p. 19. The editor nevertheless notes that despite the linguistic evidence, there are insufficient grounds to ascertain that Argyllshire was indeed the place of composition so that 'the question of the ultimate provenance of the tale must remain open.' (p. 19)
[33] MSS. 56, 53, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland.
[34] Mac Giolla Léith (1993), p. 97.

his two sons, Buinne and Iollan, to take his place as Deirdre's guardians. As they are travelling, Deirdre falls asleep and has a prophetic gory nightmare: 'I saw', she tells Naoise, 'each of you without a head and Iollan the fair headless and Red Buinne the Rude with his own head on him'[35]. The returned exiles are then sent to the House of the Red Branch. Once there, they play *fidcheall* (a Celtic game similar to chess). Leabharcham, for whom in this version Naoise - and not Deirdre - is 'dearer to her than anyone else in the world'[36], is sent by the King to spy on Deirdre and check whether it still is the case that 'there is no woman of Adam's race whose form surpasses hers.'[37] She lies to the king and claims that Deirdre has lost her beauty, but another man, Tréandorn is then sent to double check and contradicts Leabharcham's statement. This infuriates the king and reawakens his jealousy. The Red Branch house is encircled by his men. Deirdre's prediction comes true: being promised land and other riches by the king, Buinne changes sides and betrays the sons of Uisneach. Fearghus's other son, Iollan, is slain in combat by Conall Cearnach and after Cathbhadh the druid intervenes, at Conchobar's request, the sons of Uisneach are ensnared in a magic sea. They are then captured and sentenced to death. The only man willing to act as executioner is Maine Rough-hand, son of the king of Norway, whose brothers had previously been killed by Naoise. They are beheaded simultaneously with Naoise's special sword. The great Irish champion Cúchullain, who was nowhere to be seen in *LMU*, makes here a brief yet heroic appearance to behead the man who killed Naoise. After singing an elegy to the brothers, Deirdre drinks her dead lover's blood 'copiously'[38] and then sings another lament announcing that she herself will not take long to die. Her grief is indeed so great that she simply 'leaped on top of Naoise

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[35] *Ibid.*, p. 105.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 115.
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

in the grave and died immediately'[39]. The story concludes as Cathbhadh the druid curses Eamhain Mhacha and swears that, to punish the king's treachery, none of his descendants will ever rule there again 'until the Day of Judgment'[40].

In contrast with the crude tone of *LMU*, *OCU* is a stylistically more elaborate narrative riddled with hyperbolical images and qualifying adjectives.[41] The characters are also more developed psychologically. Even Leabharcham, who was in *LMU* Deirdre's companion during her reclusive early years, 'tall and crooked, a satirist, who couldn't be kept out'[42], plays a distinctively active part in *OCU* and, for love of Naoise, is even ready to lie to the king in an attempt to save him. Conchobhar is also more manipulative than in *LMU* and becomes, as Mac Giolla Léith puts it, 'one of the most Machiavellian characters in Gaelic literature'[43]. In the same way, Deirdre is endowed with an extrasensory perception that she did not have in *LMU*. This greater character complexity signals a different attitude on the part of its redactors. Taking a more interventionist approach than that advocated in the *Book of Leinster*'s scribal annotations, they do not hesitate to write a romanticised account of the Deirdre story. To enhance the 'Celtic' flavour of the tale, certain typically pre-Christian elements such as *geasa* are retained, while new ones like the *fidcheall* game and allusions to pagan gods like Manannán[44] are added. At the same time, the material is changed in other ways which seem to bring it more in line with contemporary Christian perspectives. The anachronistic references made, for instance, to 'Adam's race'[45] or 'the Day of Judgement'[46] highlight a cultural impregnation by the Old Testament, suggesting that the biblical terminology had already

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[39] *Ibid.*, p. 139.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] See for example, in Mac Giolla Léith (1993), the hyperbole on p. 89: 'those three are (...) *lions* in might and heroism' and the repetition of adjectives on p. 125: '(...) they fought a *fierce*, *warlike*, *bold*, *daring* and very *strenuous* combat.' [Italics mine.]
[42] Kinsella (1969), p. 11.
[43] Mac Giolla Léith (1989), p. 411.
[44] Mac Giolla Léith (1993), p. 111.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 115.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 139.

been applied to popular expressions. While the druidic incantations professed in *LMU* after Deirdre's birth seem to be divinely inspired, the enchantment performed by Cathbhadh in *OCU* is of a more demonic nature, making the sons of Uisneach's limbs fall from their bodies[47] so that the brothers can easily be slain. This revision of the druid's magical powers suggests a certain uneasiness on the part of the writer(s) of *OCU* towards those aspects of the pre-Christian culture which clashed most with the now dominant Christian values. The manner of Deirdre's death reflects this desire to mould the legend to contemporary taste. Thus, she is not made to share Conchobar's bed for a year after her lover's death as in *LMU*; rather than committing suicide, 'she leaped on top of Naoise in the grave and died immediately'[48]. The heroine's romanticised death from extreme grief was no doubt deemed more appropriate as being in keeping with the overt Christian condemnation of suicide.

It is difficult to know whether the later recorders of these pagan traditions intentionally transformed and christianised them in order to eradicate the pagan beliefs that still lingered on among many of their countrymen. What is clear is that, deliberately or not, the passing of time left its imprint on *OCU*. This is well exemplified in the name of the heroes' executioner; where *LMU* attributes the act to 'Eogan mac Durthacht, king of Fernmag'[49] (an Irishman), *OCU* prefers 'Maine Rough-Hand, son of the king of Norway (...)'[50]. It is furthermore added: '(...) it was Naoise who had killed his two brothers'[51]. This detail indicates the impact that the Scandinavian invasions had on the Irish, and the ensuing animosity between the two peoples. Although *OCU* was composed long after Ireland had been freed from the Vikings, the invasions had become part of history and, by extension, literature.

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[47] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 139.
[49] Kinsella (1969), p. 14.
[50] Mac Giolla Léith (1993), p. 129.
[51] *Ibid.*

Similarly, *OCU* bears witness to the developing differentiation of Scottish and Irish identities.[52] Though the narrative begins at the very end of the lovers' stay in Scotland, a significant amount of space is given over to the characters' feelings about their native and adopted lands. Naoise, despite an awareness of the possibilities available to him in Scotland, jumps at the chance to return to his homeland, declaring 'Ireland is dearer to me than Scotland, though I should get more of Scotland's goods.'[53] Deirdre, on the other hand, expresses in her farewell poem to Alba a preference for her land of adoption:

> A dear land is that land on the east,
> Scotland with its wonders;
> I would not have come hither from it
> If I had not come with Naoise.[54]

This discussion of the relative merits of the two places is accompanied by the recognition of fundamental differences between their populations: Naoise, agreeing with Fergus's assessment of the pull of one's native land, notes: 'An Irishman's cry and a Scotsman's cry are not alike.'[55] *LMU*, in contrast, though presenting Alba as the land of Conchobar's 'enemies', gives no sense of these people as ethnically distinct from the Irish; indeed, the Scottish King accepts the brothers 'among his people as hired soldiers'[56], suggesting a relatively unproblematic assimilation. Moreover, the sequence of events in the text, with the King imitating Conchobor by deciding to take Deirdre as his bride, makes the Scottish episode a kind of replay of events in Ireland. Where *OCU* insists upon national differences, *LMU* represents an environment which spans both sides of the sea and in which any figure of authority, Scottish or Irish, becomes a threat to the lovers' safety.

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[52] The failed fourteenth-century Scottish expedition into Ireland probably did much to damage the notion of a common Celtic identity.
[53] Mac Giolla Léith (1993), p. 97.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 99.
[55] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[56] Kinsella (1969), p. 13.

LMU and *OCU* therefore provide us with two strikingly different accounts of the Deirdre story. Each, in its way, reveals something of the attitudes of its medieval Irish redactors to the legend. *LMU* represents a tendency towards maximal respect for tradition, even where this might clash with contemporary sensibilities; *OCU*, which is usually described as a romance, displays more evidence of changes made to the legendary material over the passing centuries. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the less traditional, more romanticised text seems to have been more popular: nearly one hundred MSS of *OCU* survive as opposed to only five of *LMU*. Despite this disparity – which in any case is partly explained by the fact that manuscript production increased greatly between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries – both texts were to have a significant influence on the story's subsequent development. *OCU* continued to be transmitted in manuscript until halfway through the nineteenth century, but its redactors clearly became dissatisfied with the text's *in medias res* opening. Almost all of the MSS from the eighteenth century onwards rectify this situation by prefacing the original *OCU* text with an account of Deirdre's life up to this point drawn from Geoffrey Keating's seventeenth-century *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, which itself was strongly influenced by *LMU*. Thus, despite its meagre MS survival, *LMU* exercised as much direct and indirect influence as *OCU* over the Deirdre legend's transmission.

The version of the story found in *Foras Feasa* – which has been described as 'the most popular prose work in the Modern Irish MS tradition'[57] – will be the subject of this study's first chapter. Keating's text, like *LMU*, was written at a time of great turmoil in Ireland, as the aftermath of the plantations drove a new search for national identity among not just the Gaelic Irish but also the descendants of Norman settlers who now styled themselves 'Old English' to mark themselves out from the new arrivals. As a common

[57] Mac Giolla Léith (1989), p. 414.

saying has it, these Old English had become 'more Irish than the Irish themselves'. It was in response to this complex dynamic of national and ethnic self-definition that Keating wrote his history of Ireland, and his inclusion of the Deirdre story raises important questions about the status of ancient legends in helping to maintain a distinctively Irish cultural identity. Indeed, the story of the various rewritings and recastings of the Deirdre legend is intimately bound up with these issues: in what sense, if any, does the legend belong to Ireland and its people? And what role might it have played, for each era, in defining a connection between Ireland and its mythical past?

CHAPTER I

'The Irish Herodotus':
The Treatment of the Deirdre Legend by Geoffrey Keating and his Translators

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw the development of a new sense of Irish Catholic identity. Though the Reformation had effectively taken hold after the accession of Elizabeth I, Protestantism failed to take root in Ireland, except in and around the seat of government, Dublin. The Gaelic Irish and the Old English settlers remained overwhelmingly Catholic while the newcomers, or 'New English', were Protestant. Reacting strongly against this parallel religion and the arrival of Protestantism, many Catholics became infused with the militant spirit of the movement known as the Counter-Reformation. During this transitional period of religious and political change, a greater need was felt in Ireland and throughout Europe to recall and record the past before such ongoing transformations irrevocably altered the course of history. Many national histories had previously been in circulation such as Hector Boece's Latin history of Scotland, *Scottorum Historiae*, which was published in Paris in 1527 and had portrayed the Scottish people as loyal Christians. As Bernadette Cunningham points out, the past was not considered in isolation but served mainly to shed new light on the complexity of the present situation: 'Like their contemporaries throughout Europe, seventeenth-century Irish writers who undertook to write history usually did so with the intention of illuminating the present as much as the past.'[1] The past thus became an essential catalyst that would offer a point of comparison and could be used, in Cunningham's words, as 'a political tool', 'a vital force in the present'[2].

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[1] Bernadette Cunningham, 'Representations of king, parliament and the Irish people in Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* and John Lynch's *Cambrensis eversus* (1662)', in Jane Ohlmeyer, ed., *Political Thought in Seventeenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 131.

[2] Bernadette Cunningham, 'Seventeenth-century Interpretations of the Past: the Case of Geoffrey Keating', in *Irish Historical Studies* xxv, no. 98, Nov. 1986, p. 116.

It was in this particular social context that, around 1634, a Catholic priest from Tipperary by the name of Geoffrey Keating wrote, in relatively modern Irish, the first narrative history of Ireland from the creation of the world to the coming of the Normans in the twelfth century, divided into two parts and entitled *Foras Feasa Ar Éirinn* (*A Basis of Knowledge of Ireland*). Keating's compilation was, to an extent, designed to preserve a record of the world that was lost at the beginning of the seventeenth century with the onset of the Tudor Conquest, religious reformation and the plantation programme that followed. It was the reflection, as J. M. Synge later wrote in his review of 'The Poems of Geoffrey Keating', of 'a half-mediaeval, half-modern temperament'.[3] Indeed, the bardic order had disintegrated around 1600, the professional bards having lost their patronage, and the subsequent Defeat of Kinsale in 1601 further marked the collapse of the Gaelic aristocracy. The treaty of Mellifont, signed in 1603, concluded the Nine Years' War with the submission of the Gaelic chieftain O'Neill to King James who had succeeded to the throne after the death of Elizabeth in the same year. A greater attempt was made afterwards to suppress the pervading influence of Gaelic and Catholic customs. As a result, the Flight of the Earls occurred in September 1607 and was followed by the plantation of all Ireland, save Connaught and Clare, with English and Scots Protestant settlers around 1610. Penal laws were further introduced against Catholics and the clergy in particular was vigorously persecuted under James I. Considering the impact that such political events may have had on the Catholic people, it is unsurprising that Keating chose to write his history in contemporary Irish. It was a political and linguistic vehicle serving to mourn the passing of the Gaelic order. Even though he himself was of Norman descent and grew up in a bilingual milieu, Keating's work asserted the right of the Old English to be counted as part of the Irish people, a claim to which the New English

[3] J. M. Synge, 'The Poems of Geoffrey Keating', *The Speaker iii*, New Series, Saturday, December 8, 1900, p. 245.

settlers were not in his opinion entitled. *Foras Feasa* was not simply what James Kenney gloomily described as 'a conscious appeal from a doomed civilisation against the oblivion which it saw approaching'[4]. It can also be seen more positively as, in Roy Foster's terms, 'a response to the need to make historical sense of what happened in Ireland'[5].

One may find it rather surprising that a devout Catholic priest should have chosen to weave into this narrative history an account of the Deirdre story and to incorporate other legendary material derived from a pre-Christian past. Keating's previous works had no apparent historical dimension and were religious treatises consisting of a defence of the mass against heretics 'Eochairsciath an Aifrinn' ('The Key-Shield of the Mass') and a series of reflections on death 'Tri Biorghaoithe an Bhais' ('The Three Shafts of Death') written respectively around 1615 and 1625. Accurate biographical information about Keating's life is desperately scarce, regarding even simple facts such as the year of his birth or that of his death. What is fairly certain, however, is that, in accordance with the custom which prevailed in Ireland to have seminarians trained abroad during the period of Protestant persecution of the Catholic clergy, Keating was forced to go to a foreign university in order to complete his philosophical and theological studies.[6] During his period of exile, he composed two nostalgic poetic pieces, 'Farewell to Ireland', and a 'Lament on the Sad State of Ireland' around the time that the news of the Flight of the Earls reached him in 1607. Diverging accounts are given of the circumstances of his death. He is seen in turn as dying in old age or as having been savagely murdered by Cromwellian soldiers in St Nicolas's church, in Clonmel. This second alternative may well be little more than imaginative speculation as it appears to be based on no historical

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[4] James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland Volume One: Ecclesiastical* (New York, 1929), p. 37.
[5] Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London, 1988), p. 43.
[6] There is no certainty, however, as to the place of study; he may have been trained in Spain (Salamanca) or France (Toulouse, Rheims or Bordeaux).

evidence. Despite a certain lack of reliable bibliographical information regarding Keating's life, one anecdote is worth recounting as it is said to have prompted Keating to spend about five years away from his priestly duties gathering the materials necessary for the completion of his *Foras Feasa.* Having absorbed many of the ideas characteristic of European Catholic thinking and obtained the degree of Doctor of Divinity, Keating returned to Ireland about 1610, early in the reign of James I, to find the place very much transformed after the Flight of the Earls. He was appointed curate of Knockraffan near Cahir, and would probably have remained in this peaceful parish had not one of his sermons on sexual morality and conjugal fidelity inadvertently changed the course of his life. As he preached, all eyes in the congregation suddenly turned towards Elinor who was married to a Squire Moclar. She was apparently a very beautiful woman who was often criticized by her neighbours for displaying the very same loose morals which Keating was condemning from the pulpit. Whether the sermon deliberately targeted her is difficult to tell, but she certainly took it personally, and took revenge by invoking the aid of the president of Munster, Sir George Carew - with whom it seems she was having an affair. Orders were given to seize Keating and have him imprisoned, but he was evidently tipped off and fled for refuge to a cave in the glen of Aherlow where he remained hidden for some years. Naturally, he now had to reappraise his life: as a 'wanted' man he could no longer act as a Catholic priest and was compelled to find other activities, the chief one being the writing of a History of Ireland.

He did not remain permanently in his cave and, after a while, began to travel throughout Ireland in search of relevant materials for the completion of *Foras Feasa.* Kindly disposed Protestants provided shelter in Cashel and enabled him to make use of the town's great cultural resources, and he found other material in Cork and elsewhere in Munster. In his *Literary History of Ireland,* Douglas Hyde described him as knocking at

various doors to consult the ancient vellum books owned by important Irish families or preserved in the neighbourhood of the ancient monasteries. These, Hyde noted, 'were gladly showed to him except in the province of Connacht and parts of Ulster, where some of the old families refused to allow him to inspect their manuscripts because he was a Norman by race and not a Gael!'[7] Travelling throughout Ireland, our disguised priest thus had the opportunity to consult a number of valuable ancient sources.

Material relating to the legend of Deirdre represented only a fragmentary portion of the sources he investigated. Yet Keating's active fieldwork was crucial in that he was the first to unearth and gather most of the previous existing accounts of the legend. Whether an oral tradition had survived into the early seventeenth century is difficult to gauge. That the legend continued to circulate, and remained part of collective memory long after the medieval versions, is made clear from the fact that Deirdre is briefly mentioned in an entry to *The Annals of Loch Cé* compiled in 1581 by Brian Mac Dermot. After enumerating a series of deaths and recalling in particular that of an illustrious friend, Mac Dermot compares his own grief to that felt by Deirdre:

> Wretched is my condition, after my comrade and companion, and the person who was the choicest and dearest to me in the world. I am Brian Mac Diarmada; and I am now to be compared to (...) Deirdre, after the sons of Uisnech had been killed in treachery in Emhain Macha, by Conchobhar (...); for I am sad, sorrowful, distressed, dispirited, in grief and anguish. [8]

The compiler evidently expected his sixteenth-century readers to be familiar with the legend and thus to understand the parallel that he was drawing. Thus, though Keating's research did not bring forth any new written text specifically on the Deirdre theme, it seems that he would have had access to an ongoing oral transmission.

Keating's retelling of the Deirdre legend closely follows *LMU*. He even opted for the gory suicide of the earlier text instead of offering the romanticised death in *OCU*. As Bernadette Cunningham emphasizes, Keating had access to compilations which 'were not

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[7] Douglas Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland* (London, 1899), p. 556.
[8] William Hennessy, ed. and trans., *The Annals of Loch Cé* (London, 1871), p. 435.

themselves of great antiquity'[9] even though they were fairly exact copies of the older manuscripts. It is unlikely that he held in his hands the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*; and he seems to have used the Egerton copy, written around AD 1517: as Cunningham observes, 'the close correspondence between *Foras Feasa* and the versions of many of the episodes found in Egerton MS1782 cannot have been purely coincidental.'[10] She also mentions the *Book of Lecan*, 'or a copy made from it'[11], as another valuable manuscript which Keating almost certainly consulted.[12] Though no conclusive evidence can be found as to whether Keating did peruse this MS as well as the Egerton MS1782, it is fairly certain that he spent some time in Dublin where, according to a 1913 biography by 'R. J. C.', 'he had access to many important manuscripts' for 'he gained admittance to Trinity College Library through letters of introduction from his Protestant friends in Cashel.'[13] Trinity College had been founded by Elizabeth 1st in 1592 and the library started to acquire valuable manuscript collections after the suppression of the Munster rebellion in 1601 so that within nine years about four thousand rare volumes had been obtained. Yet it is doubtful whether the *Book of Leinster* and the *Yellow Book of Lecan* - both now preserved in TCD - were among those early acquisitions. As Robert Atkinson points out in his introduction to the *Book of Leinster*, 'there seems to be no definite record of the book down to about the end of the seventeenth century, when it was in possession of the antiquarian Edward Lhuyd'[14]. After Lhuyd's death in 1709, the manuscript was bequeathed to the father of Sir John Seabright who then donated it along with twenty or thirty other MSS. to the Library of Trinity College. The *Yellow Book of Lecan* also

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[9] Bernadette Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating: history, myth and religion in seventeenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), p. 81.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 79.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 76. However, one must be careful not to confuse this *Book of Lecan* with the earlier *Yellow Book of Lecan*, in which a fourteenth-century reworking of the *Book of Leinster* version of the Deirdre tale is included.
[13] R. J. C., *Geoffrey Keating: Priest, Poet and Patriot, His Life, Times, and Literary Work* (Dublin, 1913), p. 16.
[14] Robert Atkinson, *The Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1880), p. 6.

formed part of Lhuyd's collection and was not acquired by Trinity College Library until 1786. Thus it is not easy to determine accurately which copies of *LMU* Keating consulted. He certainly had access to other manuscripts which were, according to James Hardiman, 'extant in his time, but since dispersed or destroyed'[15]. Whatever Keating's exact sources were, it appears that he had studied the *LMU* version carefully and based his own account largely on the early medieval tale.

Having taken many years to gather the necessary material, Keating then undertook the strenuous task of collating the miscellaneous information. He had discovered, among other things, genealogies, lists of kings, topographies as well as legendary tales, and the next step was to build the whole into a coherent chronological framework that would constitute the *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, or 'A Basis of Knowledge of Ireland' in two volumes.[16] *Foras Feasa* was finally completed around 1634 and circulated only in manuscript form as it was very difficult to print in Gaelic at the time, especially in Ireland. The earliest known text dates from around 1640 and is now preserved in the Franciscan Convent Library in Dublin, but it cannot be ascertained whether it was written in Keating's own hand. Professional scribes were in charge of transcribing many other copies so that the work was, from the onset, distributed widely. About thirty seventeenth-century manuscripts contain the text of *Foras Feasa* and one

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[15] James Hardiman, 'Notes to Doctor Keating to his letter', *Irish Minstrelsy or Bardic Remains of Ireland,* vol. ii (London, 1831), footnote p. 377. In his review of David Comyn's 1902 edition of *Foras Feasa Ar Éirinn*, J. M. Synge also alludes to manuscripts 'to which Keating had access, but which have since perished', stressing the great historical value of his work as chief testimony of an obscure distant past. See J. M. Synge, *The Speaker*, 6 September 1902; repr. Alan Price, ed., *J. M. Synge: Collected Works*, vol. ii (London, 1966), p. 361.

[16] The first book traces the history of Ireland from the beginning of time to the coming of Christianity with St Patrick and the second starts with the christianisation of Ireland and progresses down to the coming of the Normans in the XIIth century. Keating's account of the Deirdre legend was obviously included in the first volume. That Keating chose to end the history with the Norman arrival can be interpreted as a rejection of the transformations that followed the Reformation, whilst confirming that Keating's stock are part of - even the culmination of - the national 'story'.

third predate 1650.[17] It is also conceivable that many other copies, now lost, were extant at the time.

Herbert Fackler asserts that 'the single greatest pseudo-historical source [for the Deirdre legend] is undoubtedly Geoffrey Keating's *History of Ireland*, a work so fine it is impossible to relegate it to the status of mere pseudo-history'[18]. His suggestion that Keating's 'Basis of Knowledge about Ireland' deserves to be raised to the rank of history is not a belief that was shared by a majority of earlier scholars. Among the many critics who did not take his work seriously was the eighteenth-century antiquarian and historian Charles O'Conor who declared:

> Keating's Work is a most injudicious Collection; the historical Part is degraded by the fabulous, with which it abounds. Keating was one of those laborious Readers, who in making Extracts, do it without Selection or Discernment; and such Works (...) ought never to be published. [19]

Because he wove Irish mythical lore into a supposedly historical narrative, Keating was accused of lacking a historian's analytical faculties and being unable to distinguish between myth and reality.

In order to understand the place of the Deirdre legend in the book as a whole, it is essential to consider the various reasons that may have led a Catholic priest to incorporate fabulous elements into a supposedly historical work on Ireland. Close examination of *Foras Feasa* in fact reveals that these have their place within a text formally influenced by the Bible. As the first volume of *Foras Feasa* deals essentially with pre-Christian stories and the second starts with the christianisation of Ireland down to the coming of the Normans in the twelfth century, the structure adopted by Keating closely mirrors the division of the Bible into Old and New Testaments. The coming of Christianity to Ireland with St Patrick becomes the significant turning point in the story of the nation just as the coming of Christ started a new chapter in History. It is then easy to see the value that

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[17] See Cunningham (2000), p. 174.
[18] Herbert V. Fackler, 'Nineteenth-Century Sources for the Deirdre Legend', *Éire-Ireland* iv (Winter 1969), p. 59.
[19] Charles O'Conor, 'Preface', *Dissertations on the History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1766), p. x.

Keating attributed to the pagan and mythical episodes included in his History: like the Old Testament, Part One refers to a pre-history of Christianity and needs to be read in light of the second part which describes the emergence of the new monotheist religion with St Patrick. The analogy extends even further: in the same way as the episodes from the Old Testament had allegorical significance for Catholic interpreters, the pagan myths similarly contained some non-literal 'truth' to impart about Ireland and, as such, must have constituted for Keating an important facet of the Irish cultural heritage. They were worth preserving in so far as they had contributed to the development and identity of Catholic Ireland.

On a stylistic level, Keating opted for an eloquent idiom so as to attract a wider readership. The ancient literary and historical records of the country had been preserved away from the public eye in vellum manuscripts and later compiled in annalistic form. They remained written in a deliberately archaic language accessible only to the erudite. The *Annals of the Four Masters* are perhaps the best example of attachment to a traditionalist style that scorned popular comprehensions. Even though its authors were Keating's contemporaries, they carefully reproduced the diction of the old schools, as they were the descendants of hereditary and professed historians. While they had gathered probably the same material as Keating, he refashioned it in the form of a continuous narrative written in the Irish spoken by the educated men of his day.

Just as the form of Keating's history set him at odds with the tradition represented by the Four Masters, his inclusion of fables in the work constituted a deliberate break with a whole line of previous foreign historians of Ireland, whom he accused of having turned a blind eye to the country's many cultural riches, such as its legendary past. The very long preface to his *History of Ireland*, 'Díonbrollach', consists solely of a point-by-point refutation of 'the testimony given by Cambrensis, Spenser, Stanihurst, Hanmer,

Camden, Barckly, Moryson, Davies, Campion, and every other new foreigner who has written on Ireland from that time (...).'[20] Before taking each author in turn and dealing with individual cases, Keating makes the general assertion that 'there is no historian of all those who have written on Ireland from that epoch that has not continuously sought to cast reproach and blame both on the old foreign settlers and on the native Irish.'[21] The implication here is that these historians had deliberately set out to misrepresent the Irish (here made to include the Old English settlers) by writing false histories focusing exclusively on the allegedly barbaric ways of the native Irish. In order to illustrate this point metaphorically, Keating compares their attitude to that of the beetle on a summer day, for he says:

> (...) it is the fashion of the beetle, when it lifts its head in the summertime, to go about fluttering, and not to stoop towards any delicate flower that may be in the field, or any blossom in the garden, though they be all roses or lilies, but it keeps bustling about until it meets with dung of horse or cow, and proceeds to roll itself therein.[22]

In the same way, foreign historians also failed to see the beauties of Ireland, not because they had missed them, but because they had not been looking for them in the first place. According to Keating, far from appreciating the 'virtues or good qualities of the nobles among the old foreigners and the native Irish who then dwelt in Ireland', they delighted instead in the depiction 'of the ways of inferiors and wretched little hags'[23].

Among the many 'delicate flowers' which Keating describes covering Ireland's fertile soil were undoubtedly the long-neglected ancient Irish legends. Historians such as Edmund Campion, Richard Stanihurst or Meredith Hanmer had been generally unkind towards Ireland's mythical tales either by excising them completely from their work as in Edmund Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland* [24], or by regarding them with contempt

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[20] David Comyn, trans, *History of Ireland,* vol. i (London, 1902), pp. 3-5.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[24] See Edmund Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland. Written Dialogue-wise between Euxodus and Ireneus* (1595), in Sir James Ware, ed., *Two Histories of Ireland* (Dublin, 1633). The work did not take into

as mere 'idle fantasies'[25]. In his preface, Keating repeatedly stressed his desire for Ireland to have, in the manner of most other nations, a decent history. His work sought to rectify the unfair treatment given until then to the Irish people and to reinstate a more dignified image by valorising the heroic prowess and martial qualities of the legendary Irish heroes in contrast with an actual history of continuous political subjugation. His method of blending fact and fable was to earn him the title of the 'Irish Herodotus'[26]. Placing himself in defiant opposition to his predecessors, Keating expressed a desire to re-establish an Irish perspective on history:

> I have hope that whatsoever impartial reader shall read every refutation which I make on Cambrensis, and on these new foreigners who follow his track, will trust the refutation I make on their lies (...), for I am old, and a number of these were young; I have seen and I understand the chief historical records, and they did not see them, and if they had seen them, they would not have understood them. [27]

Keating's revisionist project sought to include the legendary material as forming part of the 'chief historical records' which *he*, unlike all the other so-called historians, had inspected. For him, the institution of a firm 'basis for the knowledge of Ireland' needed to encompass legend alongside history in one unbroken narrative.

In choosing to include legends that referred to a pre-Christian era and clashed in many respects with his strong Catholic faith, Keating further signalled an awareness that there was a greater risk, under the new political climate, for the stories which had always formed part of native Irish culture to be gradually undermined by the new English settlers. As Declan Kiberd underlines, Keating 'might properly be seen as one of the first counter-imperial historians, in that his object was not only to reply to Spenser, Stanihurst and the English writers, but more particularly to save the lore of ancient Ireland from

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account any legendary material and was concerned with the real social conditions of the Irish people, arguing in the same way as Gerald Cambrensis that they were 'the most barbarous nation in Christendom'.

[25] See, for example, Edmund Campion, *A Historie of Ireland*, in Sir James Ware (1633).

[26] Herodotus is considered to have been the world's first historian, but his work, like Keating's, blends history, anecdotes, legends and folk tales. For some of the instances in which Keating's name appears linked to that of Herodotus, see Hardiman (1831), p. 377: 'Our Irish Herodotus was both a poet and an historian' or Hyde (1899), p. 556: '(...) he rewrote and redacted in his own language like another Herodotus.'

[27] Comyn (1902), 'Keating's "Díonbrollach"', p. 77.

passing into oblivion.'[28] By taking responsibility for synthesizing the available source material and transmitting the old legends to the next generation, his principal aim was to ensure that they would remain part of a distinctively Irish tradition. Even though he retold the stories using his own elegant speech, he strove not to let the evangelising voice which is characteristic of his religious works predominate in this text. Throughout his narrative, he repeatedly upholds the integrity of the 'seanchas'[29] so as to give more weight to his statements. As Anne Cronin's in-depth analysis of the published and manuscript sources for *Foras Feasa* has demonstrated, Keating showed a strict respect for both his originals and the pre-Christian tradition these represented:

> Keating (...) practically never alters anything, and where the accounts are inconsistent he makes a valiant effort to work them into harmony. He also shows a great desire to include everything known to him and often interpolates from sources outside the *Lebor Gabála* tradition.[30]

Keating's treatment of the Deirdre legend exemplifies well his desire to 'work' the different episodes 'into harmony' and re-establish the original uniformity existing between the separate pieces. As he seeks to account for the unusual placement of the tale immediately after a section on Queen Meadhbh and her lovers, the causal links existing between the various events are reinforced:

> There were war and strife for a long time between the people of Connaught and those of Ulster while Meadhbh held sway over Connaught, and Conchubhar was king of Ulster. And in order that thou mayest know, O reader, the cause of the enmity that existed between them, I shall set down here how the children of Uisneach were slain in violation of the guarantee or protection of Fearghus son of Rogh, of Cormac Conluingeas, and of Dubthach Daol Uladh. The pith of the story is briefly as follows.[31]

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[28] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London, 1995), p. 14.
[29] See Brian Ó Cuiv, 'Literary Creation and Irish Historical Tradition - Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture' in *Proceedings of the British Academy* xlix (London, 1963), p. 237: 'The word *seanchas,* which in medieval times was used in reference to the branch of knowledge in which the professional historians specialized, was also applied to origin legends and other ancient tales (...).'
[30] Anne Cronin, 'Sources of Keating's Foras Feasa ar Éirinn - Manuscript Sources', *Éigse v* (1945-47), p. 123.
[31] Rev. Patrick S. Dinneen, ed. and trans., 'Section XXXI', *The History of Ireland Volume II containing the first book of the history from section XV to the end* (London, 1908), p. 189. This is the most scholarly and authoritative translation of Keating's *Foras Feasa Ar Eirinn.* The first volume had been edited and translated by David Comyn in 1902, but an early death interrupted his work so that Volume II starts with section XV from the first book of Keating's history.

The retelling of the Deirdre story that follows serves to provide, in a retrospective manner, an explanation for the war opposing Ulster and Connaught. This new structural approach betrays the author's desire to make the legend part of a traditional narrative by incorporating it within a wider mythological context and interrelating the different episodes. At times, his account concentrates on Meadhbh rather than on Deirdre. Thus, after narrating the Ulstermen's decision to change sides and join Meadhbh in Connaught following the treacherous killing of the sons of Uisneach, Keating dwells on the amorous liaison of Fearghus and Meadhbh, an episode that is not even mentioned in any preceding version of the legend: 'Within that time Fearghus knew Meadbh, and she conceived of him, and bore him three sons at one birth, namely, Ciar, and Corc, and Conmhac (...).'[32] It is only after quoting some obscure poet extensively on the subject of Meadbh's triplets and digressing further on the topography of various territories in Connaught and Munster named after her sons that the author's attention is turned to Deirdre's last years with Conchubhar. But again, his interest in her individual fate derives simply from the great political changes she had precipitated in Ulster: 'Now as to Deirdre, *who gave rise to the events we have narrated,* she remained with Conchubhair a year (...).'[33] [Italics mine.] After the description of Deirdre's violent death, the concluding paragraph brings the focus back to Queen Meadhbh. By underlining her great longevity and contrasting it implicitly with Deirdre's premature death, Keating reasserts Meadhbh's central place in the tale. The last lines do not mention Deirdre's name once and Keating expands his study of Meadhbh's time with an account of the lives and deaths of some of her contemporaries:

> As it was in the time of Conchubhar (...) that Meadhbh held the sovereignty of Connaught, and as she lived ten years after the death of (...) her first husband, and for eighty years after that was the wife of Oilill Mor, and lived eight years unmarried after the death of Oilill till she was slain by

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[32] *Ibid.*, p. 195.
[33] *Ibid.*

> **Forbhuidhe, son of Conchubhar, we shall briefly set down here the manner of death and some account of the more celebrated of the heroes who lived in the time of Meadhbh.**[34]

Having determined that the Deirdre legend was merely an incident, albeit an important one, for the great Irish epic, Keating's intention was therefore to reconstruct, from the scattered pieces assembled, a continuous narrative that would establish links between the different episodes and give the legends a functional purpose within a pseudo-historical framework.

Intriguingly, *LMU* was chosen as main copy text rather than the christianised *OCU.* Keating follows closely *LMU* in his account of Deirdre's birth, youth, elopement with Naoise and even death. There are no significant differences in plot with the earlier medieval account and even some of its most pagan features such as the druid's prediction or Deirdre's vision after seeing a raven drinking blood on the snow are retained. Eoghan remains Naoise's murderer and Deirdre also dies a year later. Surprisingly for a Catholic priest whose sermons on death (*The Three Shafts of Death*) naturally betrayed a greater preoccupation with the soul than the body, Keating spares none of the gory details as he recounts the death of Deirdre: 'Her head was broken into fragments, and her brain straightway issued forth.'[35] Yet if one is at first inclined to agree with Anne Cronin that Keating faithfully transcribed the old tradition without altering anything, a comparative study of *LMU* with his retelling of the tale demonstrates that this was not quite the case. Indeed, for all Keating's efforts to follow his sources, his narrative has been subtly refashioned in accordance with the religious and moral principles dear to a seventeenth-century cleric.

According to Brendan Bradshaw, Keating applied to *Foras Feasa* a 'confessional rhetoric' and, in order to 'convey contemporary perceptions and values', 'set out to mould

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[34] *Ibid.*, p. 197.
[35] *Ibid.*

the lore relating to the early history of Ireland into an origin legend tailored to the needs of its seventeenth-century Catholic community.'[36] Bradshaw also points out that his works reflect 'the ideological concerns of an Old English Tridentine cleric'[37]. Although traces of an explicitly 'confessional rhetoric' are difficult to detect within the restricted corpus of the Deirdre tale, Keating's priestly voice can nevertheless be heard as many references to pre-Christian customs are, in his hands, either watered down or removed. Perhaps the most striking change he introduces at the very start of the story is the description of Feidhlimid's feast. One of the ways in which Keating moderates the festive atmosphere is by removing all details referring to food or drink, gluttony being one of the seven deadly sins denounced in his sermons and theological writings.[38] We are thus told that 'Conchubhar, king of Ulster, went to partake of a feast to the house of Feidhlimid (...), storyteller to Conchubhar'[39], but no indication is given as to what was actually consumed there. However, there is no such soberness in the depiction of the same scene in *LMU*:

> The men of Ulster were drinking in the house of Conchobor's storyteller, Fedlimid mac Daill. (...) Meat and drink were passed round, and a drunken uproar shook the place. [40]

Keating undoubtedly felt that the legend would lose none of its intended meaning if he refused to represent – and thus encourage – such overindulgence. In the same way, he differs greatly from his medieval source in his account of Deirdre's first appearance. The supernatural manifestation of an unborn baby screaming from a womb in *LMU* represented for Keating a clear mark of pagan idolatry. By simply making Feidlimidh's

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[36] Brendan Bradshaw, 'Geoffrey Keating: Apologist of Irish Ireland' in Bradshaw, Andrew Hadfield & Willy Maley, eds., *Representing Ireland: Literature and the Origins of the Conflict, 1534-166* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 167-8.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 167.
[38] See Cunningham (2000), pp. 161-2: 'Keating's theology of sin was grounded on the medieval teaching on the seven deadly sins (...) The seven deadly sins had such a prominent place in moral teaching (...) that it was unthinkable that the concept would not have surfaced in Keating's writings about death and sin.' Gluttony is mentioned as the fifth stage of a decline into evil, at the root of which is man's pride.
[39] Dinneen (1908), p. 191.
[40] Kinsella (1969), p. 8.

wife deliver the baby on the spot, Keating excises some of the uncanny elements intrinsic to the primary text while at the same time striving not to modify the storyline in any significant manner: 'in the course of that feast the wife of Feidhlimid gave birth to a beautiful daughter.'[41] If the narrative progresses at the same pace as *LMU* and follows the original sequence of events, the weight of the pagan tradition is minimised to such an extent that Keating invests pagan Ireland with a quasi-Christian morality. Even though Cathbhadh, the druid, still makes a prophecy concerning the fate of the baby and gives her, as in the earliest version, the name of Deirdre, his part in the story is minimal. Keating omits, for example, the incantation in verse, uttered by the druid in *LMU*, in which the different phases of the troubles Deirdre's beauty will bring about are described in great detail:

> 'Much damage, Derdriu, 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.
>
> (...)
>
> Harsh, hideous deeds done
> in anger at Ulster's high king,
> and little graves everywhere
> – a famous tale, Derdriu.'[42]

Keating's version deliberately silences Cathbhadh's voice and in place of accurate predictions, it gives only general statements which are condensed to two brief sentences:

> Cathbhadh the druid, who was present at the assembly on that occasion, foreboded and foretold of this daughter that great misfortune and mischief would befall the province on her account. (...) Deirdre was the name that Cathbhadh the druid gave her.[43]

In playing down some specifically pre-Christian attributes and restraining the influence of the druid, Keating sought to mould his narrative into a more familiar framework that

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[41] Dinneen (1908), p. 191.
[42] Kinsella (1969), pp. 10-11.
[43] Dinneen (1908), p. 191.

would be consistent with the moral and religious thinking of his time. This also implied the introduction of small alterations in the respective roles of the characters involved. Keating's Deirdre retains her two attendants, but the designations 'foster-father' and 'foster-mother'[44] are replaced with allusions to 'a tutor and a nurse'[45]. As fosterage was a common practise of early Irish society[46], Keating probably saw that a 'tutor' and 'nurse' would be more appropriate agents of the young girl's training and education, hence the slight shift in the terminology employed. In the same way, Leabharcham is no longer the marginalized witch presented in *LMU* 'tall and crooked, a satirist who couldn't be kept out.'[47] Her social status is improved to that of being the king's spokeswoman or 'Conchubhar's censorious woman'[48]. Furthermore, her role in the story is not, as in *LMU*, limited to unveiling the identity of the man of Deirdre's dreams.[49] She acts as an intermediary who is in charge of informing Naoise of Deirdre's feelings and organises a proper meeting between the two: 'Thereupon Naoise came secretly to visit Deirdre, who revealed to him how greatly she loved him (...).'[50]

Although Deirdre confesses her amorous feelings for him, in Keating it is Naoise, the man, who takes the first step. The respectable young girl is isolated 'in a dwelling apart'[51], hoping to be rescued by her knight in shining armour. Keating thereby gives a conventional form to the whole seduction scene that is no doubt more influenced by medieval romance and chivalric literature than the Celtic tradition on which the legend is based. Deirdre's chaste conduct contrasts radically with that of the indecent girl in *LMU*

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[44] Kinsella (1969), p. 11.
[45] Dinneen (1908), p. 191.
[46] On the subject of fosterage, see, for instance, Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990), p. 203.
[47] Kinsella (1969), p. 11.
[48] Dinneen (1908), p. 191.
[49] In *LMU*, Leborcham plays no part in finding Noisiu, she merely wishes Deirdre 'Good luck and success' in finding him. See Kinsella (1969), p. 11.
[50] Dinneen (1908), p. 191.
[51] *Ibid.*

who seeing that 'Noisiu was out there alone (...) slipped out quickly to him'[52] and exchanged daring words with him before pulling his ears.[53] Keating's removal of the couple's chance encounter enables him to leave out their sexually explicit dialogue. Evidently, he found the animal imagery of the 'heifer' (Deirdre) approaching the 'game young bull' (Naoise) distasteful. In the same way, the omission of the final dialogue between Deirdre and Conchubhar in which the king forces her to live for a year with the man she hates most - her lover's murderer - reveals the extent of Keating's discomfort in expressing attitudes towards sex that fail to conform to the norms of Christian marriage. If he remains faithful to *LMU* in sending Deirdre to live with Eoghan, he does not specify how long this will be for, and attenuates the idea of sexual domination that is clearly expressed in the image of Deirdre caught as a 'sheep between two rams'[54].

This distrust of sexual desire is more clearly evidenced in a poem composed by Keating, 'O lady full of guile', in which the narrator expresses - ironically in sexually explicit terms - his determination not to yield to temptation despite the woman's attempts to seduce him. She appears as an Eve-like figure responsible for enticing a man to sin. If he does not seem to be insensitive to her physical charms, he obstinately resists her provocations:

> O lady full of guile,
> take away your hand.
> Though you sicken for my love,
> I am not an active man.
> (...)
> Take your mouth from mine:
> grave is your condition.
> Touch not skin to skin:
> the heat leads on to lust.

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[52] Kinsella (1969), p. 12. Consider also the striking difference in the expression of Deirdre's fantasies between *LMU*, p. 11: 'I could *desire* a man who had those three colours there' and Section XXXII of Keating's *Foras Feasa*: 'she would *like to have a husband* having the three colours she beheld' [italics mine.] Keating probably considered that the explicit references to sexual desire should not be retained for they referred to immoral behaviours that were unacceptable to the Catholic Church.

[53] Kinsella (1969), p. 12. As we have seen, she performs *geis*, a specifically Celtic form of taboo, in order to commit Noisiu to follow her against his will.

[54] Dinneen (1908), p. 197: ' "Deirdre," said he, "*thy glancing* at me and at Eoghan is *the glancing* of a sheep between two rams" ' [italics mine].

(...)
All deeds but that of the flesh
- and lying in your quilt-
I will do for love of you,
O lady full of guile.[55]

If it cannot be simply asserted that the narrator of the poem is in fact Keating himself, the dichotomy that is established between sexual activity and spiritual love echoes the priest's faith in a moral order precluding sexual immorality. At the heart of it was the conviction that individual depravity could activate God's vengeful wrath and precipitate disasters that would affect the entire community.[56] The story of Deirdre was therefore exploited because it offered the perfect illustration of political chaos and collective destruction being brought about exclusively by the physical beauty of a single woman whom many proud and passionate men could not resist.

The prohibitions characteristic of a pagan culture were treated as equally aberrant, if not sinful, practices which Keating found no interest in preserving. Whereas three instances of taboo operate in *LMU*, Keating skilfully eradicates what must have seemed to him mere eccentricities and does so without occasioning major inconsistencies in the narrative. There is no indication of any restrictions being imposed as to where the sons of Uisneach are entitled to eat. And, by having Fergus stay in Ireland and send one of his sons to fetch Deirdre and the Uisneach brothers in Alba, Keating has no need to mention the ale feast obligation. He solves the problem of inconsistency by stressing simply that 'no tidings whatever of them are related till they reached the green of Eamhain.'[57] In order to divest the narrative of its most disturbing pre-Christian elements, Keating's main technique was simply to excise all traces of primitivism from his text while being cautious not to depart significantly from his sources. Though, on the whole, he followed

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[55] Geoffrey Keating, 'O lady full of guile', ed. Thomas Kinsella, *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford, 1989), p. 169.
[56] This point is developed in Cunningham (2000), pp. 159-61.
[57] Dinneen (1908), p. 193.

closely the progression of the primary narrative, he skilfully impressed small lexical changes on it, making at times notable amendments to the storyline.

One may wonder then why our priest went so far as to dwell on the gory details of the heroine's death and retained the description of a gruesome suicide which most certainly clashed with his strong Christian beliefs. Comparing his account of Deirdre's final jump to that related in *LMU*, it is however possible to suggest the dual nature of Keating's intent:

> When Deirdre heard this, she started at the words, and sprang lightly from the chariot; and her head struck against a ledge of rock that stood before her on the ground. Her head was broken into fragments, and her brain straightway issued forth.[58]

The same event is described in very similar terms in *LMU*:

> A big block of stone was in front of her. She let her head be driven against the stone, and made a mass of fragments of it, and she was dead.[59]

The circumstances of Deirdre's death appear at first sight to be exactly the same in the two versions: she dashes her head against a rock and it is in both cases 'broken into fragments'. Her overwhelming despair is noticeable in *LMU* and the fact that 'she let her head be driven against the stone' proves that she was resolutely jumping off the chariot in order to kill herself. However, Keating's account leaves room for ambiguity and the heroine's death could well have been accidental rather than self-inflicted. Indeed, his Deirdre does not seem to have been aiming for the stone in the first place. Insulted by the king, she 'started at the words, and sprang lightly from the chariot', the result being that 'her head struck against a ledge of rock that stood before her on the ground.' There is no evidence of a conscious suicide attempt here, but rather the suggestion of an impulsive, unprepared escape followed by an unfortunate accident. Suicide was obviously not the way that a Catholic priest would have wanted his heroine to die.

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[58] *Ibid.*, p. 197.
[59] Kinsella (1969), p. 20.

Whether Keating's Deirdre committed suicide or simply fell off her chariot, the incident best exemplifies the ambivalence of his approach. On the one hand, his aim was to preserve the idiosyncrasies of the first medieval tale but, at the same time, his Christian faith led him to excise what he believed were distinctively pagan heresies. Despite a deep respect for the source material consulted, he considered that the *seanchas* were a blend of fact and fiction which should not be taken at face value. According to Douglas Hyde, 'we find Keating (...) distracted between his desire to euhemerise – in other words, to make mere men of the gods and heroes – and his unflinching fidelity to his ancient texts.'[60] Bernadette Cunningham is more assertive in noting that Keating 'carefully reconstructed the story of an ancient kingdom of Ireland, moulding the narrative to suit his own social and religious agenda'[61]. He went even further, she argues, 'by projecting back distinctly Counter-Reformation attributes to pre-Christian figures'[62]. In order to satisfy current political needs and appeal to the readers of his time, he needed to present a vision of the Celtic past that would be in complete conformity with his Catholic moral standards. But conversely, his work betrays a desire for Irish Catholics to record, with pride, a past golden age[63] revealing a unified sense of Irish identity, which included the pagan legends, and to recall a time when national divisions simply did not exist. Because the Old English had eventually adapted to native customs, Keating's aim was to stress that they deserve their place in the *History of Ireland.* Unlike the 'Nua Ghoill' ('New Foreigners'), who had arrived since Tudor times imposing their own language and Protestant faith, the descendants of the 'Sean Ghoill' ('Old Foreigners') had the right to identify with the ancient Celtic heroes. As Joseph Leersen aptly puts it, 'the past becomes the projecting

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[60] Hyde (1899), pp. 51-2.
[61] Bernadette Cunningham, 'Geoffrey Keating's Foras Feasa ar Éirinn', *History Ireland* (Spring 2001), p. 15.
[62] Bernadette Cunningham, 'Seventeenth-Century Interpretations of the Past: the Case of Geoffrey Keating', *Irish Historical Studies,* xxv, no. 98, Nov. 1986, p. 124.
[63] On the idea of a moral code in the ancient Celtic past that accorded with the Christian message, see Nicholas Canny, 'The formation of the Irish mind: religion, politics and Gaelic Irish literature 1580-1650', *Past and Present,* no. 95 (1982), 91-116.

screen for present ideals: what Ireland ought to be is equated with what Ireland used to be.'[64] Yet the projection works both ways: if the past served as a model for the present, the values preached by Keating are also transferred back to the ancient tales.

A crucial process in the transmission of Keating's *Foras Feasa* was its different translations into English since they contributed to its wider access outside strictly Irish-speaking circles. Each rendition involved a certain degree of reinterpretation and was inscribed within a particular political and religious context. In that light, consideration must be given to its first published English translation, as it was, interestingly, produced by a Protestant, Dermod O'Connor, in 1723. There is no reliable evidence as to whether Keating approved of any kind of translation; according to the anonymous author of the 'Dissertation' prefixed to the *Memoirs of the Right Honourable Marquis of Clanricarde*, he came to express doubts regarding the historical validity of his work and for that reason strongly objected to its being translated into English:

> (...) he found it would not stand the test of an History; (...) Since therefore he could not help what was done, (...) he desir's it should never be translated into any other Language, nor otherwise regarded, than as a Miscellany of indigested things, wherein judicious and discerning Natives might find something worth their perusal at leisure Hours.[65]

However, this claim that Keating refused to see his work translated has no historical support, and the fact that it appears in a text partly aimed at discrediting Keating's work casts doubt over its value as a record of his opinions. The first English translation was in fact begun around 1635, while Keating was still alive, by a celebrated scribe of Ballyloskye, Michael Kearney, and circulated in manuscript form.[66] Very little is known about the man or the circumstances that led him to start the work. It seems that his

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[64] Joseph Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Amsterdam, 1986), p. 247.

[65] See 'A Dissertation', in *Memoirs of the Right Honourable Marquis of Clanricarde, Lord Deputy General of Ireland* (London, 1722), pp. cxxx-cxxxi.

[66] Only one transcript of his translation has survived. It is preserved at the Royal Irish Academy, MS 24G 16 and dated 1668. See *Facsimiles of National Manuscripts of Ireland* (London, 1882), ed. Sir John T. Gilbert, Part IV. 2, pl. lxxiv.

primary purpose was simply to produce a translation of *Foras Feasa* for the benefit of those who could not read Irish. Yet his ambiguous attitude to language reflected the complexity of the contemporary political situation: on the one hand, he declared in his preface that English was becoming 'now the more respected language' but he was also, as Cunningham underlines, 'at pains to assert that the Irish language was not inferior to English'[67]. And, although translating the work into English, Kearney held exactly the same views as Keating on the Catholic religion, the Irish language and the status of the Old English. As he engaged with Keating's text on a deeply political level, his translation absorbed and echoed the information contained in the Irish original:

> Kearney's reading of the text of *Foras Feasa* was one which took full account of the nuances of the contemporary political message inherent in Keating's narrative of early Irish history. Kearney read *Foras Feasa* in the way Keating would have hoped it would be read.[68]

Writing also from a Catholic standpoint, Kearney gave a more combative tone to the political message delivered by Keating. For, Cunningham emphasises, *Foras Feasa* was instrumental in the defence of the Old English Catholic cause:

> Kearney valued *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* as an important weapon in a propaganda war, a valuable tool with which to help restore the honour of the Catholic Irish. He noted like Keating that the Old English were now being tarred with the same brush as the native Irish.[69]

As Kearney's translation remained entirely consistent with Keating's work, it must be seen as an important vehicle in the early transmission of his version of the Deirdre story.

However, the first published account of the Deirdre legend in the English language did not appear until the first half of the eighteenth-century. It is included in Hugh MacCurtin's *A Brief Discourse in Vindication of the Antiquity of Ireland* (1717), the first Gaelic history in English to appear in Ireland. The work was published by subscription and most of the 2238 subscribers were from old Irish families. Cunningham notes that MacCurtin's book was largely inspired by *Foras Feasa*, his approach to the

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[67] Cunningham (2000), p. 186.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 187.
[69] *Ibid.*, p. 186.

text 'bordering on the antiquarian'[70]. As is evidenced in the title *A Brief Discourse in Vindication of the Antiquity of Ireland*, the author wrote under exactly the same impulse as Keating and Kearney, similarly seeking to draw attention to the rich cultural heritage that had been overlooked by contemporary historians. He was targeting more particularly Sir Richard Cox's *Hibernia Anglicana* for its biased 'New English' Protestant perspective on Irish history, and its failure to acknowledge the difficulties encountered by the Catholics of Ireland. Although he followed Keating's *Foras Feasa* closely, MacCurtin's summary of the Deirdre legend is incorporated into a more extensive account of Conchobar's reign. Little remains of the original story and Deirdre's name is not even mentioned once. The focus is rather on Feargus:

> But a few years later, a much greater difference happen'd between them about the brave Champions *Clann Uisneach*, i.e., the Sons or Children of *Uisneach* their own Cousins, who were murder'd by *Conor*'s wicked contrivance. An ACTION which puts an end to the Grandure [*sic*] and Happiness of all the Posterity of Ir in the Kingdom; (...)
> After this second Variance happened, *Feargus* fought a very bloody and most destructive Battle against *Conchobhar* or *Conor*, and his Sons, and other Adherents; at *Eamhain* where four Sons of Conor, and five of Feargus's were kill'd, with the most part of the Ultonians. There was one of the Sons of *Conchobhar* who fought against his own Father and Brothers, on Feargus's Side; his Name was Cormac Conloingas, and after the battle, he went along with *Feargus* into Connaught, where Meadhbh one of the Monarch's Daughters was Queen; *Feargus*'s former wife being dead, he made courtship to the queen of Connacht, lay with her, and got on her three Sons, viz. Ciar, Corc, and Conmhac, all courageous, strong and famous warriors.[71]

McCurtin was intentionally elliptical in leaving out the circumstances leading to the murder of the sons of Uisneach, the ensuing civil war in Ulster and Feargus's decision to change sides and join Meadhbh in Connacht. The reader is informed that 'a much greater difference happen'd between them about the brave Champions *Clann Uisneach*' but there is no indication as to what this 'difference' may have been. By contrast, its consequences are dwelt upon, with an enumeration of the different battles fought and casualties numbered on either side followed by a description of Feargus's departure to Connaught. The influence of Keating is noticeable in the last sentence which evokes, in similar terms,

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[70] *Ibid.*, p. 215.
[71] Hugh MacCurtin, *A Brief Discourse in Vindication of the Antiquity of Ireland: Collected out of many Authentick Irish Histories and Chronicles, and out of Foreign Learned Authors* (Dublin, 1717), pp. 80-1.

Feargus's liaison with Meadhbh from which three boys were conceived. Unlike Keating, MacCurtin felt the need to specify that their relationship was not adulterous, 'Feargus's former wife being dead'[72]. But despite its vague resemblance to Keating's account, all events relating to the Deirdre legend, including the main heroine herself, are obliterated from MacCurtin's text. Far from being a satisfactory work for our purposes, MacCurtin's *Brief Discourse* remains of interest because it was written in the same vein as Keating and Kearney, defending a common Catholic cause. The major difference with his predecessors is that, despite its pro-Catholic inflections, his work was nevertheless published in Dublin.[73] In that way, a fraction of the tale was printed for the first time in the English language.

The first complete English version of the Deirdre legend was printed in 1723 and was produced by a certain Dermod O'Connor. His *General History of Ireland* purported to be a faithful translation of Keating's *Foras Feasa*. It was such a commercial success that it was republished in 1726, 1732 and 1738 in London as well as Dublin. It remained the only printed translation until William Haliday issued a dual-language edition (Gaelic text on the left, English text on the right) in 1811.[74] O'Connor must therefore be credited with making Keating's *History* available to an English and Anglo-Irish audience, giving it a new taste for Irish legend and ancient Gaelic civilisation that paved the way for the first Celtic Revival. O'Connor started as a scribe and heraldic painter from Limerick and was employed around 1719 as research assistant by the Church of Ireland vicar and TCD fellow Anthony Raymond, who was preparing his own translation of Keating's text. By 1720 O'Connor had left Raymond's employment and moved to London where he issued printed proposals for the publication of a translation of *Foras Feasa*. He attracted over

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[72] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[73] Dublin had been English-controlled since the end of the fifteenth century.
[74] William Haliday, ed., *Forus Feasa ar Eirinn: A Complete History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1811). This translation was sponsored by Theophilus O'Flanagan and the Gaelic society, but only a quarter of the text was completed.

three hundred subscribers to the London edition of his translation and over four hundred for the Dublin edition. He then obtained a private copy of an Irish manuscript of the text from a wealthy London barrister, Maurice O'Connor, which became the basis for his own translation.[75]

The originality of O'Connor's project is that its subscribers were predominantly Protestant. As Cunningham underlines, 'O'Connor's printed translation consciously tailored the text to non-Catholic audiences'[76]. Keating had written, as we have seen, exclusively for Catholics, denying the 'New English' Protestants any place - even that of invader - in his History. But by the eighteenth century, things had changed greatly and the 'Old English' had ceased to exist as a recognisably distinct group. The militant spirit of the Counter-Reformation had not prevailed. The priest had lost his prestigious status after the second half of the seventeenth century as a result of the penal measures against the Catholic faith. The confederation of Kilkenny (1642-49), which attempted an alliance between 'Old English' and 'Old Irish' families to protect Catholic interests, finally collapsed and was followed by the Cromwellian wars which started in Drogheda in 1649. Meanwhile, the Protestant community grew stronger even though they claimed to have been the victims of Catholics during the 1641 rebellions. In November of that year, a great number of Protestants were thrown from Portadown bridge and those who did not drown were allegedly killed with poles and shot with muskets. But the Catholic menace had been quickly suppressed and the Williamite Revolution of 1690 overthrew the Catholic King James II, secured Protestant dominance, and entitled them to own land in Ireland. These victories confirmed them in the belief that they had been chosen by God as the rightful inhabitants of Ireland. The descendants of the sixteenth-century Protestant settlers who had been denigrated by Keating now took a particular interest in Ireland's

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[75] For details on the circumstances that drove O'Connor to translate Keating's work, see Diarmaid Ó Catháin, 'Dermot O'Connor: translator of Keating', *Eighteenth Century Ireland* ii (1987), pp. 72-4.
[76] Cunningham (2000), p. 225.

past. By the 1720s, they had come to see Ireland as their native soil as it was for many of them the place where they were born. Consequently, as Cunningham points out, they 'appropriated the myth of the ancient kingdom of Ireland as part of their own "Irish" history'[77]. O'Connor was therefore careful to remove any trace of Keating's anti-Protestantism by suppressing the many Catholic overtones we have identified in the priest's work. Most obviously, he continually replaces the word 'Catholic' with the more neutral term 'Christian'.

Yet in adapting his translation to contemporary demands that contrasted sharply with those of the original author, O'Connor inevitably had to depart significantly from Keating's manuscript: he mistranslated many passages, curtailed some parts and interpolated others. Despite its immediate success, the liberties he took with his text gave rise to many accusations from contemporaries who were often motivated by a personal dislike of his character. Indeed O'Connor does not appear to have been highly regarded by the literary men of his time. As his work was being prepared for the press, the anonymous prefacer[78] of the Memoirs of Clanricarde, who already considered Keating's *History* to be merely 'an heap of insipid, ill-digested fables'[79], advised 'every true and understanding Native' against 'another new Translation of the fables above-mentioned' which is 'an Injury done to their Country'[80]. In the preface to his translation, O'Connor replied to this attack by upholding the authority of Keating and signalling the ignorance of his detractor:

> There is an Author who has conceal'd his Name, that has with great Ignorance and Envy attempted to explode and ridicule the labours of the great Dr Keating, and to stigmatise the following History as fictitious and romantick Composition. He has likewise bestowed some Flowers of his Oratory in representing the weakness of my Abilities, and my Incapacity for the

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[77] *Ibid.*

[78] According to Bernadette Cunningham and Diarmaid Ó Catháin, the author of the dissertation prefixed to the *Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde* was a certain Thomas O'Sullevane, but this fact cannot be ascertained. See Cunnigham (2000), pp. 220-2 and Ó Catháin (1987), p. 82.

[79] See 'A Dissertation', *Memoirs of the Right Honourable Marquis of Clanricarde* (London, 1722), p. cxviii.

[80] *Ibid.*, p. cxxxii.

> Work I had undertaken. (...) But the Insolence of this Censure (...) proceeds from a Person, who never had in his possession one of those ancient Records, which if he had, his Ignorance and want of Skill in the Language made him incapable to understand.[81]

But criticism also came from men who had once collaborated with O'Connor and who valued Keating as a great historian. Dr Anthony Raymond believed that O'Connor had stolen his idea while he was his assistant and exported it to London, claimed it as his own and exploited it to his own financial and literary advantage. He expressed his bitterness in the Dublin Gazette of 6 April 1723 and in a letter written to Lord Inchiquin in the same year:

> I delayed Publication till I had made farther Improvements to it in my History. In the meantime one Dermod ô Connor finding I had a considerable offer, for the copy of my History, went for London and got the late Mr Toland to publish a Translation of Dr Keating's fabulous *History of Ireland* (...).[82]

Raymond's own translation of Keating never appeared in print, but he met with great support from various learned men for his denunciation of O'Connor's unscrupulous behaviour. A few years later, on 5 April 1726, Thomas Hearne, keeper of the Bodleian at Oxford, was even more offensive in describing O'Connor's character and his translation as equally 'horrid':

> Mr Conner [*sic*]'s Translation of Dr Keting's *History of Ireland* is a most horrid silly performance, that O'Conner is a most sad Blockhead and wholly ignorant of all Learning, that he knows nothing of the old Irish History or Language and indeed that he is altogether unqualify'd for any such undertaking. (...) his Translation was really done by one Dr Raymond an Irish clergyman, to whom O'Conner was servant, and that this O'Conner stole it from his said master (...). O'Conner, it seems, hath been in prison, and his nose is eat [*sic*] off with the Pox, which he got by having two wives together, both it seems still living. This O'Conner therefore, by what I learn is an Horrid villain.[83]

O'Connor's treachery apparently went even further, as he was accused of stealing not only Raymond's idea but also the subscription money for the 1732 edition. An apologetic letter from the London printer, Benjamin Creake, addressed 'to the subscribers for the

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[81] Dermod O'Connor, trans., 'Preface by the translator', *The General History of Ireland... Collected by the learned Jeoffrey Keating, Faithfully translated from the original Irish language, with many curious amendments taken from the Psalters of Tara and Cashel, and other authentic Record* (Dublin, 1723), p. ii. The last part of the quotation echoes Keating's own strictures (see citation on p. 27).

[82] Anthony Raymond, *A letter from Dr Anthony Raymond to my Lord Inchiquin giving some account of the monarchs and ancient state of Ireland* (Dublin, 1723), p. 4.

[83] Thomas Hearne, *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne*, vol. ix (Oxford, 1889-1921), pp. 110-11.

first Edition of Dr Keating's *History of Ireland*' concluded the second edition of the book, and reveals the full extent of the financial damage caused:

> GENTLEMEN,
>
> The Hardships I have undergone, by the vile Treatment I have receiv'd from the Translator *Dermo'd O Connor*, who without any Thought or Design of paying the Expences [*sic*] of Paper, Print, Engraving; and other accidental Charges, before the History could be published, spent and embezzled about the Sum of *Three Hundred Pounds,* in the space of seventeen Months, great part of it being Subscription Money, which he never brought to Account, nor I never knew of, till Publication of the History; by which Means I am greatly a Sufferer in the Publication, as being oblig'd to pay out of my own Pocket about the Sum aforesaid, more than I have as yet receiv'd for this History. As this is Fact, it is a sufficient Reason for falling the Price of the History, to be sold for *One Pound Ten Shillings* Bound, which is much cheaper than the Subscription Price; but having no other Way to reimburse me the Money that I'm out of Pocket, I hope you will excuse, Gentlemen,
>
> Your Most
> Obedient Servant,
> B. CREAKE[84]

This edition also contained an appendix to Dr Keating's *History of Ireland* explaining in great detail its toponymy and collected from the remarks of 'the Learned Dr Anthony Raymond of Trim', as if the printers involved in this second edition wished to make clear Raymond's legitimate claim on Keating's text.

Despite its many subsequent reprints, O'Connor's translation was criticised for being as unreliable as its author. Nearly forty years after the publication of the 1732 edition, it was reproved by his namesake, Charles O'Conor, whom as we have seen was not particularly well-disposed towards Keating. For O'Conor, if Keating's work had been historically unreliable, the translation made matters far worse by offering to the world a supposedly faithful translation which, in fact, differed greatly from Keating's original: 'The History given in English, under Keating's Name, is the grossest Imposition that has been ever yet obtruded on a learned Age.'[85] Scholarly distrust of O'Connor's work lasted for over a century. James Hardiman described it in 1831 as 'a burlesque on translation

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[84] Dermo'd O'Connor, trans., 'An Appendix to Dr. Keating's *History of Ireland*' (1726) included in *The General History of Ireland, translated with amendments by D. O' Connor. With an appendix, collected from the remarks of Anthony Raymond,* 2nd edition (London, 1732), p. xv.
[85] Charles O'Conor (1766), 'Preface', p. x.

(...) as much a version of Geoffrey of Monmouth, as of Geoffry [*sic*] Keating.'[86] John O'Mahony, whose own translation of Keating was issued in 1857, referred to O'Connor's account as an adaptation rather than a direct translation of *Foras Feasa*: 'Upon comparing some manuscript copies of the *Foras Feasa* with the previously published translation, Dermod O'Connor's English was found so unlike what Dr Keating actually wrote.'[87]

A comparative reading of Dermod O'Connor's version of the Deirdre story with that given by Keating brings to light the exact nature of these alterations. It is immediately striking that O'Connor's version is significantly longer than the scholarly translations by O'Mahony or Dineen, which were published in 1857 and 1908 respectively. A line on the left-hand margin of each section summarises the crucial events which occurred in the narrative, for instance 'Prediction of a Druid Concerning Feidhlim's Daughter', 'Connor put the Infant into a strong Tower to be Educated', 'Deirdre flys to Scotland with Naois', and 'Deirdre continued a Year without Smiling or lifting up her Head after the Death of the Sons of Uischeach'.[88] These commentaries enable the reader to follow, at a glance, the progression of the story. A number of thematic amendments are further introduced by O'Connor to the body of the text. As he dedicates the *General History of Ireland* to the Protestant Earl and Baron of Inchiquin, 'the most Noble and Puissant Lord, William O'BRYEN', O'Connor points at a direct genealogical link between the Earl of Inchiquin and the ancient Irish heroes: 'the most memorable Events and heroic Exploits of the ancient Irish, among whom the Royal Ancestors of your Lordship have filled the throne of Ireland for twenty nine Successions

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[86] Hardiman (1831), vol. ii, 'footnote', p. 377. Geoffrey of Monmouth is one of the significant authors in the development of the Arthurian legends, and was also accused of telling lies by blending fact and fiction. His *Historia Regum Britanniae*, completed around 1138, located Arthur in the line of British Kings and asserted his historicity.

[87] John O'Mahony, trans., 'Preface', *The History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the English Invasion* (New York, 1857), p. 5.

[88] Dermod O'Connor, trans., *The General History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1723), pp. 87-90.

(...) and with signal Bravery have repelled the Invasions of foreign Enemies (...)'[89]. To give more credence to O'Bryen's extraordinary lineage, O'Connor lists 'the Pedigree of the Right Honourable William O'Bryen' and traces his ancestry back to 'King Milesius of Spain'. In identifying Lord O'Bryen with heroic and mythical characters, O'Connor evidently wished to communicate to that 'most Noble and Puissant Lord' a flattering image of himself. Thus in adding lustre to the narrative, the translator is similarly tailoring it to the expectations of a more affluent, mostly aristocratic, English and Anglo-Irish readership. In doing so, he refines, for example, the social position of the characters involved. Thus Feidhlim's 'feast' is turned into 'a splendid Entertainment', while the host, Feidhlim, is no mere storyteller, but holds instead the more prestigious position of 'principal Secretary of State to the king'[90]. Leabharcam's status is also raised considerably. From the 'tall and crooked' satirist[91] of *LMU*, marginalized from Conchobor's Kingdom, and later described in more favourable terms by Keating as 'censorious woman' to the court, she becomes in O'Connor's hands 'the favourite of the King's'[92]. The translator further dwells on her intellectual abilities and literary talent: 'she could deliver extempore Verses upon any Subject, and was much respected by the Nobility of the Country.'[93] As a result, the figures of the tutor and the nurse, which had been preserved in Keating's version, are no longer in charge of Deirdre's upbringing since Leabharcam's promotion enables her to take up their respective roles: she is Deirdre's 'Governess'[94], entrusted with both her care and education. The different social classes do not seem to interact, as each group is assigned a specific function. This is probably best exemplified in the episode of the killing of the calf which is witnessed from

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[89] *Ibid.*, 'The Dedication'. According to the list of subscribers, six books of O'Connor's translation were sent to the Earl of Inchiquin.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 87.
[91] Kinsella (1969), p. 11.
[92] *Ibid.*, p. 88.
[93] *Ibid.*
[94] *Ibid.*

a greater distance: 'as Deirdre and her Governess were looking out of a Window, they spied one of the slaughter Men of the Garrison killing a Calf for the use of her Table upon a snowy Day (...).'[95] Not only are the female protagonists physically removed from the scene, but the tutor is no longer, as in Keating's text[96], in charge of the skinning of the calf. Instead, the act is more appropriately performed by 'one of the slaughter Men of the Garrison'[97]. The word 'Garrison' had specific political connotations, since the idea that Irish Protestants were a garrison class was well known in the eighteenth century. While Keating's retelling of the passage reflects ancient Celtic society, O'Connor introduces a certain distancing between the upper and the lower classes, imposing some of the social structures specific to the eighteenth century on the tale.

The translator was therefore prepared to refine the tale, adjusting it to a more contemporary taste. The list of subscribers to the London edition of the *General History of Ireland* (1723) indicates that the changes introduced in the status of the legendary characters were in fact made to reflect the social background and functions of the eighteenth-century readers. Of the three hundred and nine names mentioned, over two hundred and fifty appear to be aristocrats.[98] Many even have multiple titles, as for example 'His Royal Highness GEORGE AUGUSTUS, Prince of Great Britain, Lord of the Isles, Steward of Scotland, Knight of the most Noble Order of the Garter, Prince of Wales, and Earl of Chester', who was to become, four years later, King George II (1683-1760). An interesting case is 'Charles Butler, Earl of Arran, Lord Butler of Weston in the Kingdom of Ireland, and Chancellor of the University of Oxford', who shared Keating's Old English ancestry. The Butlers, one of the most important Anglo-Norman settler families, had governed Ireland for the English King in the early sixteenth century, though

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[95] *Ibid.*
[96] Dinneen (1908), 'her tutor killed a calf to prepare food for her', p. 191.
[97] O'Connor (1723), p. 88.
[98] See the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography for biographical entries on the individuals mentioned below.

by Charles's day they had fallen on hard times. Noblewomen, such as a certain 'Lady O Carroll' or 'Her Grace the Dutchess of Grafton', as well as numerous politicians, governors and military officers, can also be counted in the list of prosperous subscribers. Among them, one finds eminent figures such as 'Coll. John Armstrong, Surveyor of the Tower of London', a Protestant Irishman and military engineer who had become Fellow of the Royal Society in 1723, and the Protestant Earl William Cadogan (1671/2-1726), of Welsh descent, who had enlisted in William III's army. A number of prominent Protestant churchmen were also interested in acquiring this translation. William King (1650-1729), whose Scottish father had settled in Ireland during the Plantations, was no less than 'the single most important Irish Protestant churchman of his era'[99]. As well as being a Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin from 1703 to 1729 and a staunch defender of the Protestant succession, he was an intransigent defender of Ireland's constitutional rights. The fact that the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, William Wake (1657-1737) was also a distinguished historian probably prompted his interest in the volume. Like William King, he was strongly opposed to the Catholic James II, and committed to the creation of a union between the Protestant denominations. His belief that the Protestant religion needed defending was linked to his great fear of the threat of Catholicism.

Yet there were also a number of Catholics who subscribed to Dermod O'Connor's work, including some who would have been strongly disliked by men like William Wake. A name that stands out is 'Donough Mac Carty, Coll. of a Royal Regiment, Brigadier General of Foot, (...) and Captain of the Second Troop of Guards (...) under his Majesty the late King James II, in France'.[100] Donough Maccarthy (1668-1734), born in Co. Cork, was a Jacobite army officer, although his mother had been a Protestant who tried in vain

[99] According to his entry in the DNB.
[100] O'Connor (1723), 'List of Subscribers'. Spelled 'Maccarthy' in the DNB.

to inculcate her faith to her son. In defiance of his mother, Maccarthy converted to Catholicism and ended up in jail for supporting James II. He was eventually pardoned by William III and released on condition of leaving the kingdom. By the time he subscribed to the book in 1722, Maccarthy had settled in Hamburg and lost all political power. His purchase of this *General History of Ireland* betrays the nostalgic interest of an exile; it may have represented for him a way of reconnecting with the land he had lost. Other lifelong Roman Catholics included the army officer General Arthur Dillon (1670-1733) who was in 1722, along with another subscriber, Charles Boyle (1674-1731), involved in the Jacobite Atterbury plot which planned an armed invasion of Britain on behalf of the Old Pretender. Another Boyle, Richard (1694-1753), earl of Cork and Burlington, was also suspected of leading a double life and conspiring in the same Jacobite plot, but his desire to subscribe to O'Connor's translation may just as easily have stemmed from his being a book collector and patron of the arts. Although he was treasurer of Ireland and governor of Co. Cork, he never set foot on Irish soil; he did, however, subscribe to ninety-seven publications, twenty-six of which were histories. Therefore, we find Protestant supporters of the Hanoverian succession as well as Catholic Jacobites ordering a translation of Keating's *History of Ireland*. The list even mentions a certain Thomas Gage (d. 1754), elected MP in 1721, initially a Catholic who joined the Established Church in 1715. Although the subscribers held different religious and political beliefs, what they have in common is that they were, for the most part, affluent and influent people with varying attachments to the past and present of Ireland.

The translator's awareness of the keen interest expressed by hundreds of army and government officials for his work obviously led him to anticipate the particular issues that would be dear to his largely aristocratic readers. Thus, greater importance is given to legal matters and governmental cohesion, as Keating's abstract notions are replaced with terms

that are politically charged. For example, whereas Keating's druid predicts that the newborn Deirdre would bring 'great misfortune and mischief' in the province, O'Connor's is more specific in foretelling that she 'should occasion great Disturbances in the Province of Conacht [*sic*], and turn the Government into Confusion'[101]. In the same way, the reason given by the King's attendants for the necessary destruction of the child is that her death would be in the interest of 'publick Welfare'[102]. The language of taste, refinement and sensibility is accordingly applied throughout the narrative. Deirdre is repeatedly referred to as 'the young Lady', 'the poor Lady', 'the Damsel' and is even described in one especially flowery passage as 'the most genteel and accomplish'd Person in the whole Kingdom'. As in Keating's story, the king spares the life of the child in order to make her his future wife, but in this version he seems to have some scruples about his somewhat indecent decision to marry a woman while she is still a baby: '(...) and perhaps when she arrived at Maturity of Years, he might think it proper to make her his Wife.'[103] The King is not presented, therefore, as a lustful man who is determined, from the onset, to raise Deirdre for his later enjoyment. At this early stage, his consideration of the possibility of a marriage with Deirdre is the direct consequence of a desire 'to disappoint the Accomplishment of the Prophecy'[104]. In justifying the actions of the different protagonists, O'Connor strives to provide psychological motives which were lacking in Keating's version and which did not form part of the primary medieval tale. The same concern underlies his attempt to account for Deirdre's sudden vision of the man she desires after she sees a raven drinking the blood of the calf spilled on the snow: 'This Sight occasioned a strange Passion in the young Lady; for notwithstanding her

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[101] O'Connor (1723), p. 87.
[102] *Ibid.*
[103] *Ibid.*, p. 88.
[104] *Ibid.*

Confinement she was of a very amorous Disposition.'[105] Deirdre experiences feelings of love for Naois immediately after Leabharcham reveals the existence of a man whose features correspond exactly to the young girl's fantasy: 'Deirdre began immediately to be in love with him.'[106] This infatuation becomes so unendurable for the poor girl that a private rendezvous must be arranged between the two, 'for she was passionately charm'd with his Features and Complexion, and she was in torment till she saw him.'[107] Rather than treating the legend as an ancient Celtic myth, O'Connor was clearly adapting it to an eighteenth-century context and readership.

If Deirdre is a 'Lady', Naois is likewise portrayed as a distinguished and gallant 'young Gentleman'[108] whose mission is, naturally, to rescue the lady from her prison. If, in Keating's text, Deirdre is raised in some 'dwelling apart'[109], O'Connor's version is more specific and she is imprisoned 'within the walls of a castle.'[110] The translator further comments extensively on the structural design of the building, insisting more particularly on its impenetrability: Deirdre is placed 'in a Tower well fortified, (...) almost inaccessible' and 'strictly guarded'[111]. This more elaborate setting renders Naois' venture all the more heroic as 'the enterprise was of the utmost Danger'[112]. The story is thereby given a greater romantic flavour as well as a more explicitly chivalrous dimension with the young girl in her lonely tower awaiting the arrival of her courageous knight. On their first encounter, Naois and Deirdre discuss her deliverance: 'after many Endearments and solemn Protestations of Love, she entreated that he would deliver her from confinement, and remove her out of the Castle.'[113] The enthusiastic young man raises an army and they

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[105] *Ibid.*
[106] *Ibid.*
[107] *Ibid.*
[108] *Ibid.*
[109] Dinneen (1908), p. 191.
[110] O'Connor (1723), p. 88.
[111] *Ibid.*
[112] *Ibid.*
[113] *Ibid.*

set off to rescue the girl: 'with the Assistance of a hundred and fifty resolute Soldiers, they surprised the Garrison, and carried off the Damsel.'[114] O'Connor's translation was therefore as much stylistic, thematic and cultural as it was linguistic. It was chiefly designed to tell an entertaining story that could be fathomed by his wealthy contemporaries rather than to instruct them on Ireland's pre-Christian past.

It seems that O'Connor credits noble characters with only noble intentions. In doing so, he is presenting, as we have seen, a flattering picture of the aristocrats in the story in which his readers might like to recognise themselves. As a result, one finds a few inconsistencies in his description of the motives underlying the actions of the main protagonists. The most striking alteration transpires in Naois' readiness, despite the utmost danger of the enterprise, to deliver Deirdre 'or die in the Attempt'[115] whereas Keating's Naoise, like the hero of *LMU*, had followed Deirdre 'with reluctance, as he feared Conchubhar'[116]. O'Connor's Naois becomes a fearless and enterprising knight, having had, in O'Connor's polished phrasing, 'gallantry enough to venture his Person'[117]. A divergent account is also given as to the circumstances that brought Naois back to Ireland after receiving imminent threats of an attack from Scottish troops: 'he sent to some of his Friends among the Nobility of *Ulster*, for a Supply of Forces; and his Request was (...) favourably received (...).'[118] By contrast, Keating's hero, as that of *LMU*, had taken no initiative in calling for military assistance from home and his return to Ireland had been exclusively organised by his companions who pledged the king's forgiveness.[119] O'Connor deliberately attempts to portray the young and handsome 'Lover' as a naturally bold hero. The description of valour as one of man's greatest qualities is even applied to

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[114] *Ibid.*
[115] *Ibid.*
[116] Dinneen (1908), p. 191.
[117] O'Connor (1723), p. 88.
[118] *Ibid.*, p. 89.
[119] Dinneen (1908), p. 193: '(...) many of the nobles of the province said to Conchubhar that it was a pity that the sons of Uisneach should be in exile on account of a wicked woman, and that they should be sent for and brought back to the country.'

Naois' enemy, 'Eogan who was, it must be confes'd, a Person of singular Bravery (...).'[120] Despite a certain loftiness in tone and manner, O'Connor's characters appear nevertheless to be more reconciled with sexual matters. Perhaps on account of his being of a more libertine nature than Keating, having had, it seems, 'two wives together'[121], O'Connor is far more explicit in the expression of physical desire and remains in that way closer to the *LMU* text. Thus Deirdre longs to be 'in the Arms of a Man'[122] who would have a skin as white as snow, hair like the raven and cheeks as red as the calf's blood. At the end of the story, the translator overtly underlines the king's intention to bring Deirdre to Eogan's, as 'a Present of her to him, to be used at his Pleasure'[123]. King Connor also possesses a private collection of concubines who are similarly treated as sexual objects, 'the Ladies of the Seraglio, whom the King kept for his own Pleasure'[124]. O'Connor's relative ease in discussing such matters and his elimination of Keating's priestly voice contribute to making the story comparatively more titillating for his readers.

O'Connor's ambitious translation technique consisted in supplying the information which he felt was lacking in Keating's text. In attempting to fill in these gaps, he explored, in an unprecedented fashion, the psychological motives of the characters involved and provided more detailed descriptions as well as tighter transitional links between the different episodes than Keating had done. Although he genuinely sought to reconstruct a story that would be more complete and also restored the sexual element which Keating had previously suppressed, his allegedly faithful translation was, on the whole, a very personal refashioning of Keating's *Foras Feasa* adapted to the contemporary taste of his readership.

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[120] *Ibid.*
[121] Hearne (1889-1921), pp. 110-11.
[122] O'Connor (1723), p. 88. Keating's Deirdre had wished instead 'to have a husband' with the same attributes.
[123] *Ibid.*, p. 90.
[124] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Keating wrote at a pivotal time as the ancient aspects of Irish society were disintegrating and sudden changes were taking place. His vision of the past was shaped by the society in which he lived. His *Foras Feasa* was thus invested with a clear political goal. He wished to record Irish culture in the wake of the hostile New English takeover of the country and to denounce the so-called histories of Ireland which had previously been composed from a distinctively anti-Irish point of view. In choosing to write exclusively in Irish, Keating was taking a clear political position, leaving his text inaccessible to the new rulers as well as their descendants. His motivations were also religious: as a priest, he was addressing an exclusively Catholic readership.

However, in translating Keating into English, O'Connor inevitably changed the nature of his message and, partly to gain greater financial benefits by increasing the total subscription amount, welcomed a Protestant readership. As a result Keating's point was lost, as O'Connor, who assumed the role of a storyteller, completely changed the focus of the story, treating it as a romantic tale rather than a political myth.

Thus the legend of Deirdre was transmitted to succeeding generations through the adaptations of Kearney, MacCurtin and O'Connor, each as we have seen providing distinctive English versions of the tale. Although coloured by their own political and religious beliefs, they ensured the story's popularity for later generations in England and Ireland who could not read the original. If Keating's goal of preserving Irish culture was attained through the medium of the Irish language, inevitably his work was remodelled by the changes in the social and political context throughout this turbulent period.

The transmission of 'Deirdre' in this period also bears witness to the different religious currents running through the political struggles: Keating, the Catholic priest, worked hard to turn his pagan source into an acceptable monument to Catholic Irish

culture, little realising that within a hundred years, his name would be associated with a gentrified, non-denominational translation in the language of his Protestant enemies.

The unscrupulous attitude of Dermod O'Connor towards his source material and the original work of Anthony Raymond found an echo in that of another eighteenth-century writer of dubious reputation, James Macpherson. His alleged translations of the legendary bard Ossian contained a version of the Deirdre legend called *Darthula*, and it is to this that we turn next.

CHAPTER II

A Scottish Deirdre?
James Macpherson's 'Dar-thula' (1762) and Irish Antiquarian Responses

After Geoffrey Keating provided his account of the Deirdre story in *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* and Dermod O'Connor's controversial English translation was published in 1723, the next generation of Irish scholars appears to have taken little interest in the story. It is not until the last decades of the eighteenth century that a renewed interest in ancient Irish manuscripts and traditional folk tales becomes evident. As was to be pointed out in 1808 in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Dublin*, Ireland's 'fine poems' and 'literary productions' had for too long been left to 'rot in the dust of libraries neglected and unknown'[1], being 'deranged and dispersed, shattered and mutilated, and nearly consigned to contemptuous neglect and annihilating oblivion'[2]. Yet while these were gathering dust, an eighteenth-century Scotsman, James Macpherson, followed the adventurous steps of Keating and went in search of original manuscripts to collect and translate. Unlike his Irish predecessor, he chose to conduct his expeditions in the Scottish Highlands, where he believed the Ulster and Fenian cycle of legends to have originated.

This Celtic Revival, which began about the year 1750, was not Irish but Welsh, English and Scottish in essence. A few years before Macpherson, the English poet Thomas Gray had shown with *The Bard* that the time had come to look to the past and recover hidden treasures of native poetry. As Edward D. Snyder underlines, the movement for a rediscovery of the scattered manuscript fragments of old Gaelic literature coincided with an 'awakening of the spirit of Romanticism', and signalled a 'desire to find a satisfactory

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[1] See Theophilus O' Flanagan, ed., 'Observations on the Gaelic Language communicated by P. Mc. Elligott of Limerick' in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Dublin* (Dublin, 1808), p. 6.
[2] *Ibid.*, 'Proeme', p. 21.

substitute for the overworked mythology of Greece and Rome'[3]. Sensing this contemporary appetite for a vernacular epic, the young James Macpherson, then working as a teacher in Ruthven, began to collect old Gaelic poetry. His interest in the Highlands had already motivated his early compositions, as in the 1758 poem *The Highlander*, which, as the title suggests, celebrated the heroic deeds of a Highlander saving Scotland from foreign invasion. The then unsuccessful young poet met John Home, an eminent literary figure from Edinburgh equally interested in Scottish folklore, who asked him to translate a piece of poetry for him. Although initially reluctant to undertake this task, Macpherson produced 'The Death of Oscur'. It was shown to the Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh, Hugh Blair, who was so impressed that he persuaded Macpherson to translate additional poems, with a view to publication. *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland*, a small volume consisting of fifteen poetical sections translated anonymously from Gaelic, was published in 1760. The *Fragments* introduced a blind Scottish bard, Ossian, as the last survivor of his age mournfully recalling the race of his ancestors and the heroic deeds of his father Fingal: 'Of former times are my thoughts; my thoughts are of the noble Fingal.'[4] In an age that yearned for the primitive virtues of natural man and wept over Richardson's novels, the figure of the ageing bard, lamenting the death of his heroic ancestors, was destined to become a popular success. The author of the anonymous[5] preface celebrates the cultural and linguistic antiquity of the fragments which were 'originally episodes of a greater work which is related to the wars of Fingal' and 'such poems were handed down from race to race; some in manuscript, but

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[3] Edward D. Snyder, 'Introduction', *The Celtic Revival in English Literature 1760-1800* (1923); repr. (Gloucester Mass., 1965), pp. 4-5.

[4] James Macpherson, 'Fragment VI', *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* (Edinburgh, 1760), p. 26.

[5] Although the preface echoes Macpherson's ideas, it appears to have been written by Hugh Blair 'in consequence of the conversations (...) held with Mr Macpherson'. See 'Appendix IV - Letters to Mr Mackenzie', in Mackenzie, comp., *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1805), p. 56.

more by oral tradition' through the then influential Bards or poets.[6] The preface expresses Macpherson and Blair's common desire to reconstruct a national epic from the different Highland poems attributed to Ossian:

> It is believed, that, by a careful inquiry, many more remains of ancient genius, no less valuable than those now given to the world, might be found in the same country where these have been collected. In particular there is reason to hope that one work of considerable length, and which deserves to be styled an heroic poem, might be recovered and translated, if encouragement were given to such an undertaking.[7]

This implicit call for financial assistance was soon to be heard. An 'Advertisement' included in the second edition of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, published also in 1760, indicates that measures were now being taken 'for making a more full collection of the remaining works of the ancient Scottish Bards; in particular for recovering and translating the heroic poem mentioned in the preface'[8]. After the success that followed this publication, Blair organised subscriptions to fund Macpherson's research trips to the Highlands, and enable him to 'disengage himself from all other employment' and complete his 'poetical mission'[9].

The discovered *Fragments* thus prompted Macpherson's search for oral and manuscript materials which led him to incorporate the Deirdre story into his next volume of collected poetry. Although it is not known whether Macpherson had been familiar with the legend before he set off on his Highland tours, he had read Jerome Stone's translation from the Irish language of an old tale 'Albin and the Daughter of Mey', published for the *Scots Magazine* in January 1756.[10] Stone's translation is loosely based on a fourteenth-century Gaelic ballad 'Laoidh Fhraoich' ('The Death of Fraoch') preserved in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore.* It deals with the death of a young man, Albin, who fights a venomous dragon.

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[6] See Macpherson (1760), 'Preface', pp. v-vi.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. vii.
[8] *Ibid.*, 'Advertisement',
[9] For further details on this fund raising, see *Report* (1805), 'Appendix IV - Letters to Mr Mackenzie', p. 58.
[10] Jerome Stone, 'Albin and the Daughter of Mey', *Scots Magazine xviii* (Jan 1756), 15-7. Macpherson knew this journal well for he had contributed to the preceding issue with an elegiac poem 'To a Friend, mourning the Death of Miss...', *Scots Magazine xvii*, (1755), p. 249.

Although no such mythical creature is involved in the Deirdre story, the circumstances that bring about the hero's death are similarly based on the traditional love triangle. Just as Deirdre is coveted by an old and powerful king, Albin finds himself desired by his lover's mother, Mey. In both cases, the jealous unreturned passion of the older person precipitates the death of the hero. Neither Concobar nor Mey murders with their own hands but they both exert their authority in a Machiavellian way: 'Revengeful *Mey*, her fury to appease, / And him destroy who durst her passion flight, / Feign'd to be stricken with a dire disease, / And called the hap'less ALBIN to her sight.'[11] Whereas king Concobar chose to exterminate Deirdre's lover so as to keep her to himself, Mey has Albin to approach the dragon and face death. Despite the gender reversal, the parallels between the two stories are striking and the young girl's lament for her dead lover could well have been that of Deirdre: 'But now he's gone! And nought remains but woe / For wretched me; with him my joys are fled, / Around his tomb my tears shall ever flow, / The rock my dwelling and the clay my bed!'[12] Stone's translation was preceded by a short letter to the editor dated 15 November 1755 in which he signalled the existence of many similar Irish poems worthy to be retrieved and translated, were it not for a contemporary lack of interest in the language:

> Those who have any tolerable acquaintance with the Irish language, must know, that there are a great number of poetical compositions in it, and some of them of very great antiquity, whose merit entitles them to an exemption from the unfortunate neglect, or rather abhorrence, to which ignorance has subjected that emphatic and venerable language in which they were composed.[13]

Macpherson responded to Stone's call to rescue traditional compositions from their hitherto 'unfortunate neglect' and set off in August 1760 on a journey to the North West Highlands and the Islands of the West which lasted for about two months. The expedition to Mull and the coast of Argyle was conducted in the company of John Home and they then crossed over to the Isle of Skye to gather additional material. According to the contemporary

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[11] Stone (1756), p. 16.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

historian John Macpherson, the Highland Scots possessed 'many ancient manuscripts of detached pieces of his [Ossian's] works' which 'may have been copied from manuscripts still more ancient'[14]. The various oral and written sources that may have influenced Macpherson are enumerated in the 1805 *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland*, one of them being the Glenmasan manuscript of *OCU*:

> The next manuscript (...) was given to the society by Lord Bannatyne. (...) the cover of it has the following date in a modern hand, though black letter: "Gleann Masain an cuige la trichid sa hocht." That is, "GlenMasan, the 15th day of the... of M:: of the year of our Redemption 1238." (...) It appears from a note on the margin of its 15th leaf, that it formerly belonged to the Rev. William Campbell, minister of Kilchrenann and Dlavich, who was a native of Cowal, and to whom it may perhaps have descended from his grand uncle Mr Robert Campbell (...) It consists of some mutilated tales in prose, interspersed with verse. One of them regards the tragical story of Deardir, Dearduil, or Darthula, and the three sons of Usnoth, Naos, Ainle, and Ardan (...).[15]

A facsimile of six lines from the Glenmasan manuscript is appended, suggesting that the original may have served as a tangible basis for Macpherson's translation. However, as Donald Mackinnon remarks in his *Descriptive Catalogue of Gaelic MSS*, the Glenmasan MS 'does not date further back than 1500' although 'it may well be a copy of an older one of date 1238'[16]. The nineteenth century ballad collector J. F. Campbell maintained the belief that 'the date 1238, the locality of Glenmasan, and names of owners are sufficient to prove that the story, of which the scene is partly laid in Argyll, was known in Cowal a long time ago.'[17] It is, then, very likely that an oral tradition developed there and predated the manuscript. The institution of bards was retained in the families of several chieftains until the second half of the eighteenth century and accounted for the preservation of these poems by oral tradition, as also did the manners of the people, whose winter-evening entertainment was the recounting of poems, tales and songs. In a letter dated 27 November 1763, John Macpherson names several local men able to rehearse from memory passages

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[14] John Macpherson, *Critical Dissertations on the origin, antiquities, language, government, manners, and religion of the Antient Caledonians, their posterity the Picts, and the British and Irish Scots* (Dublin, 1768), p. 84.
[15] See *Report* (1805), p. 285.
[16] Donald Mackinnon, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Gaelic MSS. in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh, and elsewhere in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1912), p. 159.
[17] J. F. Campbell, *Leabhar na Feinne: Heroic Ballads Collected in Scotland Chiefly from 1512 to 1871* (1872); repr. in facsimile (Shannon, 1972), p. 19.

from the Deirdre legend, i.e. 'Alexander Macdonald, in the parish of Duirnish, gentleman; Ewen Macpherson, schoolmaster in Glenelg; and John Down, cowherd, in Slate'[18]; he further comments that their recitations strictly agree with Macpherson's version of the Deirdre legend published under the title 'Dar-thula'. In another letter dated 23 December 1763, Mr Angus MacNeill, Minister of Hovemore, similarly bears witness to an ongoing oral tradition relating to the Deirdre legend, and mentions in particular the performance of a certain Neil McMurrich, the descendant of a family of bards - the Clanranalds - who 'repeated (...) the whole of the poem of Darthula or Clan-Usnoch, with few variations from the translation'[19]. According to Macpherson's work assistant at the time, Andrew Gallie, another Clanranald bard, Paul MacMhuirich, had collected fourteenth-century volumes of the poems of Ossian.[20] Macpherson apparently spent a week at Benbecula where the MacMhuirichs resided, working there on the old family manuscripts. In a declaration made on the 9th of August 1800 for the Highland Society, Lachlan MacMhuirich 'remembers well that works of Ossian written in parchment, were in the custody of his father'[21] who reluctantly lent a few to Macpherson. He, however, never returned them to their owner. Although it is not possible to identify precisely which manuscripts Macpherson did acquire, it seems dubious from the evidence gathered in the *Report* that any of them related to the Deirdre legend. Indeed, Lachlan MacMhuirich points out that, as he could not read the manuscripts, he had not realised their intrinsic worth. As a result, that containing the Deirdre story was, like so many others, 'irrevocably lost'[22]. According to Lord Bannatyne, the alleged owner of the Glenmasan manuscript, the manuscripts recovered were only a small proportion of those originally extant in the Highlands. Most perished or were damaged after the 1715 and 1745 Rebellions 'by violence or by neglect', at a time when

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[18] See *Report* (1805), p. 9.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[20] *Ibid.* See 'Gallie to Mackintosh', 12 March 1799, p. 31.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 278.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

'the houses and the property of the first families in the Highlands so often suffered devastation and plunder'[23]. Despite diverging opinions on the state and survival of such manuscripts, it seems that the legend was transmitted essentially through a strong oral tradition.

The storytellers involved in the oral transmission of the story were either very old or long dead by Macpherson's time, as is testified by a certain Niel Macleod, minister of Ross:

> The whole poem of Dar-thula (...) and many more, I heard in the Island of Sky, when I was a little boy, from an old man who used to repeat them to me for some tobacco (...). This man died when I was but very young, and I could never since meet with any person that could repeat so many of the poems of Ossian, or so perfectly. [24]

As the practise of reciting traditional poetry was slowly ceasing to be passed on to the younger generations, Macpherson sought to record the oral versions of the Deirdre legend that were still being narrated in the Highlands. The story seems to have been a favourite theme among local storytellers, as is attested by an illiterate farmer, Archibald Fletcher:

> (...) the song called Eachdraidh air Conachar Righ Erinagus truer mhac Righ Bharrachoil, an edition of which McPherson has published under the name of Darthula (...) he heard recited above fifty years ago by many persons in Glenorchay, particularly by Nicol McNicol in Arivean, (...) and this he thinks was about ten years before McPherson went about collecting the Poems of Ossian.[25]

Such testimonies from natives of the area reveal that upon Macpherson's arrival in the Highlands there existed many oral versions of the legend, themselves based on obscure manuscript sources. The ballad collector J. F. Campbell further suggests that the legend was rarely found in manuscript form in the mid-eighteenth century, but that the same Fletcher 'got a version in Scotland from oral recitation from about 1750'[26]. This transcribed copy may have formed part of the raw materials which inspired Macpherson's own rendering.

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[23] *Ibid.*, p. 284.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 273.
[26] Campbell (1872), p. 19.

Macpherson's initial aim had been to adhere as closely as possible to his written and oral sources and reveal by that means the textual, cultural and linguistic integrity of the originals. It seems that he had initially shown reluctance to follow Home and Blair's instructions on the ground that 'no translation of his could do justice to the spirit and force of the original'[27]. He nevertheless agreed to carry out the enterprise and was under pressure to create a translation that would remain strictly faithful to his sources. Perhaps this pressure was ultimately too great; in any case, much of Macpherson's purported translation work is now known to have been significantly doctored, though it is not always easy to identify precisely which parts were original, which were embellishments and which were pure invention. The difficulty is compounded by his own repeated insistence on the authenticity of his materials and methods. Thus, if a perfect replica of the original is unattainable, he suggests that the translator should nevertheless aspire to convey the linguistic essence of the Gaelic, even if this is sometimes achieved at the expense of stylistic and grammatical coherence: 'The translation is extremely literal. Even the arrangement of the words in the original has been imitated; to which must be imputed some inversions in the style, that otherwise would not have been chosen.'[28] An inept syntax thus served to reproduce the archaic flavour of his sources. Macpherson was nevertheless aware that his own grasp of Gaelic was insufficient for him to reproduce the intrinsic subtleties of the 'original' and to retain the 'purity and simplicity of language' that, according to the Celtic historian John Macpherson, 'prevails over all the works of this poetical hero'[29].

The Deirdre legend, which Macpherson renamed 'Dar-thula: a Poem', forms part of the sixth (and last) book of *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem*, published in 1762. Unlike the concise anonymous *Fragments*, Macpherson's name is here printed in bold, red capitals

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[27] See *Report* (1805), p. 57.
[28] Macpherson (1760), 'Preface', pp. vi-vii.
[29] John Macpherson (1768), p. 198.

and the great epic work is complete with annotations and lengthy dissertations. In an Appendix to his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian,* published in 1763, Hugh Blair describes this poem as 'one of the most highly finished in the whole collection, and most distinguished for poetical and sentimental beauties: insomuch, that whatever genius could produce Dar-thula, must be judged fully equal to any performance contained in Mr Macpherson's publication.'[30] 'Dar-thula: a Poem' is introduced by means of an 'Argument' which summarises the story and specifies its historical context and geographical setting. Taken separately, the poem is barely comprehensible and hardly appears to be a version of the Deirdre legend. Macpherson's introductory 'argument' seeks to compensate for the narrative inconsistencies: 'It may not be improper here to give the story which is the foundation of this poem, as it is handed down by tradition.'[31] Macpherson implies here that the legend has been inevitably changed in the course of its oral transmission. His aim as a translator had at times been paradoxically to depart from the various corrupted retellings of the story in order, he claimed, to draw nearer to the essence of the original. The 'argument' to 'Dar-thula' specifies, for example, that he has not followed the traditional manner of the heroine's death. According to Macpherson, Ossian 'relates the death of Dar-thula differently from the common tradition', the reason being that 'suicide seems to have been unknown in those early times for no traces of it are found in the old poetry.'[32]

The translator further intervenes in the poem to provide explanatory notes on some obscure elements of Celtic civilization that are alien to the eighteenth-century reader. Dar-thula's father, Colla, for instance, expresses his despair at the debilitating consequences of his old age: 'The darkness of age comes like the mist of the desart [*sic*]. My shield is worn

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[30] Hugh Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (London, 1763).
[31] James Macpherson, *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem* (London, 1762), footnote p. 155.
[32] *Ibid.*, 'Dar-thula', pp. 155-6.

with years; my sword is fixed in its place!'[33] One may wonder why the fact that Colla's sword is 'fixed in its place' may have had any effect on his incapacity of going to war. This oddity is explained in a footnote:

> It was the custom of those times, that every warrior at a certain age, or when he became unfit for the field, fixed his arms, in the great hall, where the tribes feasted, upon joyful occasions. He was afterwards never to appear in battle; and this stage of life was called the *time of fixing of the arms.*[34]

In the same way, Macpherson explains that the allusion to 'the spear of Semo' refers to 'a custom then for the father of the lady to give his arms to his son in law'[35]. Again, special emphasis is laid on it being a 'custom of those times', and as such difficult to fathom for the uninformed modern reader. In his notes to the first edition of *Fingal*, the translator repeatedly insists that the poems he is presenting to the public are the original works of Ossian. In the same fashion, in the opening passage of 'Dar-thula: a Poem', a footnote is included to testify that Ossian's address to the moon is based on some ancient Gaelic text: 'The address to the moon is very beautiful in the original. It is in a lyric measure, and appears to have been sung to the harp.'[36] The introductory argument and extensive notes serve to constantly remind the reader that Macpherson is working on original materials. He presents himself as a mere editor and translator of Ossian's poetry, working chiefly to retain its cultural and linguistic features.

The desire to reveal in translation the original perfection of language and manners of the ancient Scots went alongside a proclamation of their racial purity. They are referred to as a genetically and linguistically unmixed race whose stories have remained intact from generation to generation, 'a people so free of intermixture with foreigners, and so strongly attached to the memory of their ancestors'[37]. Textual and racial corruptions are, in Macpherson's view, inextricably linked: if the manuscripts of the ancient bards cannot be

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[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 161-2.
[34] *Ibid.*, footnote p. 162.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 167.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 156.
[37] Macpherson (1762), p. xiii.

fully recovered, it is simply because they have been forcefully removed from their original location, Scotland. The geographical dislocation of manuscripts into Ireland naturally led its people to 'strenuously endeavour to appropriate them to the Irish nation'[38]. This is also the opinion held by Angus Mac Neill, Minister of Hovemore, who accounts for the loss of the manuscript of 'Dar-thula or Clan-Usnoch' by arguing that it has 'been carried over to Ireland some time ago by a worthless person in a clandestine manner'[39].

Although Macpherson claims in his argument 'to give the story (...) as it is handed down by tradition', he does not hesitate to alter the names of the characters involved as well as the geographical setting of the tale. Deirdre's name is barely recognisable as Dar-thula and its etymological meaning is no longer 'alarm' but 'a woman with fine eyes'[40]. Her lover is called Nathos, one of his brothers is rendered as Althos (instead of Ainnle), while the other, Ardan, is the only character who retains his traditional name. They become, in Macpherson's hand, the sons of Usnoth (rather than Uisneach), the ending in 'thos' and 'oth' adding to the names an ancient Greek flavour. The cruel King Conchobar is introduced as Cairbar, the usurper of the throne who is also in love with Dar-thula. Although most names in the story remain close to their Irish counterparts, Macpherson Scotticises that of the Irish hero Finn Mac Cumhail, changing it into Fingal, and invents others. Dar-thula's father, whose traditional name was Fedlimid, becomes known as Colla and has a son named Truthil, killed in combat by Cairbar, who is unheard of in any other version. Such alterations do not only serve a poetical purpose; by distinguishing the Scottish Dar-thula celebrated by Ossian from the Deirdre of the Irish tradition, Macpherson aims to demonstrate the Scottish origins of the legend and to question by the same token its Irish provenance. This is clearly registered in the shift in the original habitat of the main characters from Ireland to Scotland. Nathos thus becomes 'lord of Etha' in Argyleshire

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[38] James Macpherson, 'A Dissertation', *Temora, an Ancient epic Poem in Eight Books* (London, 1763), p. xx.
[39] See *Report* (1805), p. 19.
[40] Macpherson (1762), 'Dar-thula', footnote p. 157.

'near Loch Eta' which is, according to Derick S. Thomson, 'the Loch Etive associated with Deirdre in Scottish tradition'[41]. While Etha (Scotland) is praised all along for the beauty of its rocks, mountains, hills and streams, Ullin (Ulster) - changed to Erin in the 1773 edition - is the rather unwelcoming land of the evil king Cairbar. Even Dar-thula, who resides in Ulster and is referred to as 'the first of Erin's maids'[42], proclaims upon the arrival of the sons of Usnoth from Scotland: 'Blest are the rocks of Etha (...)'[43]. Ireland is described from the opening argument onwards as the land of Darthula's misfortunes. The brothers are 'beheld (...) from the top of her mossy tower'[44] and greeted as the 'lovely strangers' who may rescue the young maid from the claws of the king of Erin and from Ulster's imprisoning walls. The presence of Scottish noblemen on Irish ground is justified by the fortuitous fact that they found themselves 'obliged to return into Ulster, in order to pass over into Scotland'[45]. There Dar-thula 'saw, fell in love, and fled with Nathos'[46]. Ulster, then, should then have been a mere transitory place from which the brothers would sail back to Scotland - along with a cloistered Irish girl only too happy to leave - if the weather had not failed them: 'a storm rising at sea, they were *unfortunately* driven back on that part of the coast of Ulster, where Cairbar was encamped with his army.'[47] The scene of their accidental return to the shores of Ulster is evoked dramatically by Nathos:

> These are not the rocks of Nathos, he replied, nor the roar of his streams. No light comes from Etha's halls, for they are distant far. We are in *the land of strangers, in the land of car-borne Cairbar*. The winds have deceived us, Dar-thula. Ullin lifts here her green hills. [Italics mine.][48]

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[41] Derick S. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'* (Aberdeen, 1953), p. 54.
[42] Macpherson (1762), p. 157.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 158.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 157.
[45] *Ibid.*, footnote, p. 155.
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 158-9.

Etha's welcoming 'rocks' and the 'roar of its streams' are contrasted with the threatening 'green hills' of Erin. Nathos thus expresses his utmost despair at being brought back to the hostile 'land of strangers' and of the cruel king Cairbar where danger and a sure death awaits them. The nostalgic longing for a return to their homeland becomes a pervading theme throughout the poem, as Nathos continually blames the winds for driving them back to this inhospitable territory: 'We are in the land of the foe, and the winds have deceived us, Dar-thula! the strength of our friends is not near, nor the mountains of Etha.'[49] A Manichean distinction is drawn between the 'land of foes' (Ireland) and the land of 'friends' (Scotland), which underpins Macpherson's desire to identify the heroic characters as being of Scottish extraction and the 'evil-doers' as characteristically Irish.

The translator had clear patriotic motives which involved glorifying Scotland at the expense of Ireland. His belief in the moral and physical superiority of the ancient Caledonian race is reflected, for instance, in the martial valour of Nathos, the lord of Etha, whose 'soul brightened before the war'[50]. Even though the three brothers are aware from the onset that they will be outnumbered and defeated by Cairbar's powerful army, they do not hesitate to take arms against the Irish troops:

> (...) the foe is near, said the rustling strength of Althos. I heard their clanging arms on the coast and saw the dark wreaths of Erin's standard. Distinct is the voice of Cairbar (...). His people watch on Lena's plain, and lift ten thousand swords.
>
> And let them lift ten thousand swords, said Nathos with a smile. The sons of car-borne Usnoth will never tremble in danger. [51]

Although the Scottish forces appear far less powerful, they outperform the Irish in individual courage, strength and humility. As part of this revisionism, it is mentioned in the argument that the great Irish hero Cuthullin, who is, in Macpherson's version, the uncle of the sons of Usnoth, dies before their arrival in Ulster. This is a surprising twist, as in

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[49] *Ibid.*, p. 163.
[50] *Ibid.*
[51] *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.

preceding versions of the legend Cuchullin is briefly seen lamenting the death of the sons of Uisneach. By having Cuthullin die prematurely in combat and reducing him to the state of a wandering ghost[52], Macpherson seeks to downplay his mythical stature, whilst at the same time associating him genealogically with Scotland rather than Ireland. The question of national pride is therefore at stake with one country being measured against the other. This rivalry is best illustrated in the verbal confrontation between Nathos, chief of Etha, and Cairbar, chief of Erin:

> Come, said Nathos, come! (...) Let our battle be on the coast for the white-bosomed maid. His people are not with Nathos; they are behind that rolling sea. Why dost thou bring thy thousands against the chief of Etha? Thou didst fly from him, in battle, when his friends were around him.
>
> Youth of the heart of pride, shall Erin's king fight with thee? Thy fathers were *not among the renowned*, nor of the kings of men. Are the arms of foes in their halls? Or the shields of other times? Cairbar is *renowned* in Temora, nor does he fight with *little men.* [Italics mine.][53]

The Irish king's condescending tone highlights his conviction that his realm is inherently superior to that of those Scottish 'little men'. The three Scotsmen are then overpowered by a thousand soldiers obeying the king's commands: 'Then Cairbar ordered his people, and they drew a thousand bows. A thousand arrows flew; the sons of Usnoth fell.'[54]

Macpherson appears to have regarded the superior attitude of the king as typifying the self-proclaimed ascendancy of the Irish over the Scottish people. This, he argues, is seen in their tendency to think of themselves as the 'mother nation' not only of Celtic legendary heroes such as Ossian, Fingal or Dar-thula, but also of the whole Scottish race, Irish being, they claim, the 'mother tongue' from which the Gaelic spoken in the Highlands is derived. Macpherson further assumes that a number of Irish historians have been 'idle fabulists' in defending the Irish origins of the ancient sagas as well as naive in their belief in the existence of a pre-Christian tradition in Ireland. He directly accuses the seventeenth-

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[52] *Ibid.*, p. 159. Cuthullin's ghost stands by the side of Nathos: 'It was the wall of Tura, and the ghost of Cuchullin stalked there.'
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 169.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 170.

century Irish historians Geoffrey Keating and Roderic O'Flaherty[55] of having been 'credulous and puerile to the last degree' and so 'partial' towards the Irish that 'they have disgraced the antiquities they meant to establish'.[56] Such so-called historians, Macpherson laments, prided themselves in 'uncertain legends and ill-fancied fictions' which were merely designed to 'strengthen a favourite system, or to throw lustre on the ancient state of their country'.[57]

Macpherson did not, however, aim to label all Irish historians as deliberate corruptors of historical truth. He expressed hopes that there still existed some 'able Irishman' willing to dismiss the narratives of Keating and O'Flaherty and 'redeem, ere it be too late, the genuine antiquities of Ireland, from the hands of these idle fabulists.'[58] For that purpose, he relies heavily on the views of another seventeenth-century Irish historian, Sir James Ware, in order to support his theory that Irish history had only started with the coming of St Patrick into Ireland in the fifth century:

> Sir James Ware (...) rejects as mere fiction and idle romance all that is related of the ancient Irish, before the time of St Patrick and the reign of Leogaire. (...) he begins his history at the introduction of Christianity, remarking that all that is delivered down, concerning the times of paganism, were tales of late invention, strangely mixed with anachronisms and inconsistencies. Such being the opinion of Ware, who had collected (...) all the real and pretendedly antient manuscripts, concerning the history of his country, we may, on his authority, reject the improbable and self-condemned tales of Keating and O'Flaherty.[59]

Macpherson argues that his translations do not mention any druidic rites since Ossian composed the poems after the fall of the Druids in the second century. Yet at the same time the total absence of religious elements from his work seems to reflect contemporary materialist thinking in which nature appeared as a substitute for God. Macpherson also suggests that historical distortions occurred long before Keating and O'Flaherty's time,

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[55] Roderick O'Flaherty (1629-1728) wrote *Ogygia* in 1685, a chronology in Latin of Irish history. Like Keating's History, his work was a reaction to the many Anglo-Irish chronicles written in English during the Tudor and Stuart periods which, following the lead of Giraldus Cambrensis, had not portrayed the Irish in a positive light.
[56] Macpherson (1763), 'A Dissertation', p. xi.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. i.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. xi.
[59] *Ibid.*, pp. x-xi.

when 'the Irish bards begun [*sic*] to appropriate Ossian and his heroes to their own country'[60]. This cultural expropriation of the Ossianic poems from Scotland into Ireland is seen in the light of a more general act of re-appropriation of the Scottish race as a whole by the Irish. The two countries were initially united by a similarity in language and manners which, Macpherson believes, 'created a free and friendly intercourse between the Scotch and Irish nations'[61] for many ages so that 'they were of old one and the same nation'[62]. Yet, he laments, this equal footing soon ceased to exist; the Irish cunningly seized the opportunity of an advance of the Saxon language and manners into the south of Scotland and by 'flattering the vanity of the Highlanders' came to 'impose their own fictions on the ignorant Highland senachies'.[63] The Irish then 'assumed to themselves the character of being the mother nation of the Scots of Britain', since 'Irish refugees' or 'Highland senachies' had similarly indoctrinated vulnerable Scottish Lowlanders who had lost their 'national traditions' into accepting Ireland's cultural and linguistic heritage as their own.[64]

According to Macpherson, a similar fate awaited Scotland's mythical identity. Ireland's claims over the stories of Fingal (Finn) or Dar-thula (Deirdre) could, he argued, be explained – and rebutted – by the fact that 'the Irish became acquainted with, and carried into their country the compositions of Ossian'[65]. Macpherson's disapproving comments on the superior attitude of the Irish and his provocative assertion that 'the inhabitants of Ireland were originally Britons'[66] found echo in the *Critical Dissertations* of his namesake and friend, the Celtic historian John Macpherson. With titles such as 'the Irish antiquities peculiarly dark and fabulous' or 'Of the original Inhabitants of Ireland - That they went

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[60] *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.
[61] *Ibid.*
[62] Macpherson (1762), 'Preface', last page [unnumbered].
[63] Macpherson (1763), 'A Dissertation', p. xxxiii.
[64] *Ibid.*
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] Macpherson (1762), 'A Dissertation', p. iii.

from Caledonia', his essays clearly attempt to dismiss popular conceptions of Ireland as the 'mother nation' by asserting on the contrary that 'the oldest inhabitants of Ireland were colonies from the Western parts of modern Scotland' and 'the Irish must have derived their language (...) from North Britain'.[67] The hostility that is perceptible in 'Dar-thula' between the Scottish and Irish forces is therefore symptomatic of the translator's desire, as expressed in his preface and dissertations, to restore Ossian's poetry to what he claims to be its true country of origin (Scotland) and, at the same time, to undermine the self-proclaimed hegemony of the Irish over the Scots.

The commemoration of a legendary heroic past was not simply for Macpherson a backward-looking movement detached from the concerns of his own time. The image of Ossian, old and blind, recalling the race of his ancestors and lamenting over the passing of a golden age was no doubt used as an archetypal symbol of the Highlanders of the mid-eighteenth century who also longed to recapture an idyllic lost order. As Fiona Stafford points out, 'traditional Highland society is presented (...) as an ideal against which to judge a degenerate modern civilisation'[68]. In his 'Dissertation on the Antiquity of the poems of Ossian', Macpherson deplores the total neglect of ancient Highland traditions that followed English colonisation:

> The genius of the highlanders has suffered a great change within these few years. The communication with the rest of the island is open, and the introduction of trade and manufactures has destroyed that leisure which was formerly dedicated to hearing and repeating the poems of ancient times. Many have now learned to leave their mountains, and seek their fortunes in a milder climate; and though a certain *amor patriae* may sometimes bring them back, they have during their absence, imbibed enough of foreign manners to despise the customs of their ancestors. (...) Hence it is that the taste for their ancient poetry is at a low ebb among the highlanders.[69]

In the same way as Ossian lived at a key transitional period at the very dawn of Christianity and soon after the extinction of the Druids, the Scottish Highlanders also witnessed – after

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[67] John Macpherson, *Critical Dissertations on the origin, antiquities, language, government, manners, and religion, of the Antient Caledonians, their posterity the Picts, and the British and Irish Scots* (Dublin, 1768), pp. 86-7.
[68] Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 10.
[69] Macpherson (1762), 'A Dissertation', p. xv.

the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Act of Union of 1707 – great religious, linguistic and political changes. The Act of Union, which united Scotland and England, intensified the tension between Highlanders and Lowlanders, who already felt they did not share a common origin. Macpherson was only nine when, in April 1746, an unusual spectacle took place in Ruthven, the village where he was born. His clansmen under their chief, Cluny Macpherson, had joined the Jacobite army of the 'Young Pretender', Charles Edward Stuart[70], but the battle of Culloden had been lost, and one thousand five hundred fugitives rallied at Ruthven before dispersing in all directions, and Cluny Macpherson spent years in hiding across the valley among the cliffs of Craig Dhu. After this major defeat and the final conquest of the Highlands, followed the annihilation of the Highlanders' ancient ways of life; they were prevented, for example, from playing bagpipes or wearing the tartan. Although James Macpherson was only a child at the time, it is certain that this disaster to his race and clan was to have a strong impact on his writings. In this light, it becomes easy to see Ossian as the embodiment of James Macpherson, himself the 'last of his race', regretting a once-heroic past and remembering the defeated, wounded and exiled Highlanders of the many aborted Jacobite rebellions (1715, 1719 and 1745). There is a similar succession of unsuccessful risings against an unwanted monarch in 'Dar-thula'. Indeed, two kings are systematically contrasted. Cairbar is described as 'the usurper' while Cormac is the 'lawful king'[71]. The parallels between Cairbar and the Hanoverian kings or Cormac and the Stuart monarchs are too striking to be coincidental. In almost the same way as the staunch Catholic king James II of England (VII of Scotland) – Charles' grandfather – had been thrust out of power and condemned to exile by the Protestant William of Orange, Cairbar has Cormac murdered in order to take his place. All the good characters are further presented as defending, from one generation to the next – as the Jacobite rebels had done

[70] On the many Jacobite songs praising Prince Charles and encouraging rebellion, see J. L. Campbell, *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five* (Edinburgh, 1933).
[71] Macpherson (1762), 'Darthula', footnote p. 155.

with King James –, 'the interest of the family of Cormac'[72]. Although their 'swords rose to defend the king', his death could not be prevented: 'Cormac had fallen in his youth'[73]. After Cairbar's treacherous accession to the throne, many rebellions attempt, and again fail, to overthrow him. Even Nathos 'made head against Cairbar the usurper, and defeated him in several battles.'[74] Despite these small victories over Cairbar's army, the three brothers are ultimately overpowered by sheer force of numbers. In the same way, after emerging victorious in Edinburgh, Charles Stuart's forces were greatly outnumbered and routed at the battle of Culloden. The identification of the sons of Usnoth with Scottish Highlanders is clearly seen in the popular tendency to refer to them mistakenly as 'Cla**n**-Usnoth'[75] instead of 'Cla**nn**-Usnoth' (meaning the *children* of Usnoth in Gaelic) and Nathos is recurrently described as 'the chief' of Etha. A note to the original edition further indicates that allegiance to the rightful king is also vowed among Dar-thula's family members, who preserved 'their loyalty to Cormac long after the death of Cuchullin'[76]. Their unyielding self-sacrificial commitment to the cause of their king is recalled in Dar-thula's long monologues. Different time frames are thus jumbled together, making it difficult for the reader to follow the sequence of events. Indeed, the story starts in *medias res*: 'Ossian opens the poem, on the night preceding the death of the sons of Usnoth, and brings in, by way of episode, what passed before.'[77] Thus we learn that Dar-thula's young brother, Truthil, and her ageing father Colla[78] also engaged in battle and lost their lives whilst fighting Cairbar. Far from being the traditional wailing Deirdre, Dar-thula accepts the death

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[72] *Ibid.*, p. 163. See note on Oscar, who avenged the death of his friend Cathol, an Irishman of noble extraction, '*in the interest of the family of Cormac*' [italics mine].
[73] *Ibid.*, p. 166.
[74] *Ibid.*, p. 155.
[75] For such instances, see *Report* (1805), 'Letter from Mr Angus Mac Neill to Dr Blair', dated 23rd December 1763, p. 20: 'Neil McMurrich (...) repeated before me the whole of the poem of Dar-thula, or **Clan**-Usnoch (...).'
[76] *Ibid.*, footnote p. 160.
[77] *Ibid.*, footnote p. 155.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 162. See Colla's declaration of war, as he is prepared to die in battle: 'Cairbar or Colla must fall.'

of Nathos 'in silent grief' and 'with no tear (...) in her eye'[79]. She takes the 'spear, (...) brazen shield' and 'burnished helmet (...) of a warrior'[80] to avenge the death of her brother and later to assist Nathos in combat: 'nor could Dar-thula stay behind. She came with the hero, lifting her shining spear.'[81] Yet far from bringing about victory, her bravery and fearlessness in war also result in death, as her armour suddenly seems to disintegrate, revealing her femininity:

> Her shield fell from Dar-thula's arm, her breast of snow appeared. It appeared, but it was stained with blood for an arrow was fixed in her side. She fell on the fallen Nathos, like a wreath of snow. Her dark hair spreads on his face, and their blood is mixing around.[82]

Dar-thula's physical appearance differs greatly from that of the traditional heroine. Her hair is surprisingly dark whereas the original Deirdre was famous for her golden locks. The colour association of dark hair, white skin and red blood bears close resemblance to Deirdre's evocation, as expressed in *LMU*, of an ideal man who should have hair like the raven, skin like snow and red-blooded cheeks. In Macpherson's hand, she becomes the tri-coloured archetypal model of cold beauty and pale death. Dar-thula no longer commits suicide but is killed instead by enemy forces in combat, her 'breast of snow' having suddenly been pierced by an arrow. The use of the bow and arrow by armies in battle, which is found everywhere in *Ossian*, is an anachronism. As the nineteenth-century Celtic historian Henry d'Arbois de Jubainville argues, this type of artillery was never used by the Celts of the heroic age: 'L'arc et la flèche sont inusités chez les Irlandais et chez les Celtes de Grande-Bretagne (...). Les Irlandais de la plus vieille littérature épique ne se servent pas de l'arc, même à la chasse.'[83] However, bows and arrows were the major form of weaponry in Scotland, both for fighting and hunting, up until the end of the seventeenth century. Far

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[79] *Ibid.*, p. 170.
[80] *Ibid.*, p. 161. A note explains that she takes the arms of a very young man, which makes it easier for her to carry the whole armour.
[81] *Ibid.*, p. 169.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 170.
[83] Henry d'Arbois de Jubainville, *La Civilisation des Celtes* (Paris, 1899), p. 348. [Bows and arrows are never used among the Irish and the Celts of Great Britain (...). The Irish of the most ancient epic literature never use bows, not even for hunting.]

from recapturing the primitive atmosphere of the Celtic heroic age, the battle scenes rather convey something of Highland martial traditions. In 'Dar-thula', as in Ossian's other poems, the heroic and morally good characters die in combat, 'they came forth to war, but they always fell.'[84] The paradoxical correlation of martial failure and heroic grandeur leads to a veritable Cult of Defeat: what matters for the heroes is not winning but defending one's cause if it is deemed a just one. The Jacobites, assisted by the Highland chiefs, likewise failed repeatedly and yet proved brave and loyal to the cause of their Stuart king. If the tragic downfall of the ancient Celtic heroes already forms part of the primary Gaelic texts on the Deirdre legend, it reaches a new - even more defeatist - dimension with Macpherson's purported translation. The Ossianic poems therefore reveal more about the sentimental and political impulses of late-eighteenth century Scotland than they tell us about early Celtic literature. By praising martial valour and showing failed rebellions as nonetheless heroic, Macpherson sought to impress a lasting romantic image of Highland traditions on the modern national consciousness that would serve to reinvigorate the Scots' national pride in their Celtic roots. But he did so all the more convincingly as he cleverly effaced his voice behind that of a mythical bard, a voice more liable to be heard than that of a twenty-four year old unsuccessful poet.

Yet it was not long before the authenticity of the poems was called into question. Less than three months after the publication of *Fingal,* the English-born clergyman and historian, Ferdinando Warner, then preparing his *History of Ireland*, issued the first public attack on Macpherson in a pamphlet published in London in 1762 entitled *Remarks on the History of Fingal.* His opinions immediately found echo in contemporary London reviews. An anonymous article published in the *Annual Register* referred to Warner as 'an Englishman

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[84] See Macpherson (1763), p. 197. Also famously cited in Matthew Arnold's essay 'On the Study of Celtic Literature' (1866).

unbiased to Ireland' as well as 'an impartial (...) and able judge'[85]. Although he genuinely believed the poems to have been the original production of an ancient bard, Warner was the first critic to signal a lack of chronological coherence in the texts. Whereas according to him, 'Cuchullin lived two hundred and fifty years before Fingal,'[86] respectively in the first and third centuries AD, the two legendary heroes suddenly became contemporaries in Macpherson's translated poems. Anachronistic references extend even further in time and Warner finds it equally surprising that in the work of Ossian the 'dominions' of the 'infant king of Ireland' have already been 'invaded by Swaran the king of Scandinavia; the most terrible warrior of his time'[87] since the first wave of Norse invasions did not occur until the VIIIth century. The English historian was not only the first critic to expose such temporal inconsistencies; he also questioned Macpherson's belief in a Scottish provenance of the poems and his bold assertion that the Irish were originally descendants of the Scots. While he did not directly accuse the translator of instigating the anachronisms, Warner suggests that they were the result of a gradual corruptive process for which the Scottish race – and not the Irish – should largely be blamed. Ossian and the other heroes celebrated in the poems were, he argues, 'the production of an Irish bard, because, (...) the heroes are evidently Irish and (...) the Caledonians would have as little scrupled to steal the poem, as they did the heroes'[88]. In the same year, the philosopher David Hume, who had initially shown enthusiasm for Macpherson's project, opined in a letter to James Boswell that the translator had been 'full of Highland Prejudices' and ready to see 'all the Nation divided

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[85] See 'An Account of Books for 1761', *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politicks, and Literature Of the Year 1761* (London, 1762), p. 276.
[86] *Ibid.*
[87] *Ibid.*
[88] *Ibid.*

into Clans, and these Clans to be allways fighting'[89]. The sceptical philosopher proposed that the only way to ascertain once and for all the authenticity of the poems would be by having Blair conduct an investigation based purely on factual evidence and not on national prejudice:

> Macpherson pretends that there is an ancient manuscript of part of Fingal in the family (...) of Clanranald. Get that fact ascertained by more than one person of credit; (...) let them compare the original and the translation; and let them testify the fidelity of the latter.[90]

The suspicions voiced by David Hume, a fellow Scotsman, may have encouraged Warner and the next generation of historians to propound the idea that Scotland, and not Ireland, had 'stolen' traditional Irish works and claimed them as their own cultural heritage. The same theory was later advanced by another ferocious adversary of Macpherson and the Scots in general, Samuel Johnson, for whom these translations were only 'another proof of Scotch conspiracy in national falsehood'[91] since there was not 'in the world an Earse manuscript a hundred years old'[92]. Macpherson's prolonged silence and refusal to divulge his sources only served to fuel the controversy. Although Warner believed the poems to be authentic and had, in the words of the Irish historian Charles O'Conor, 'credulity enough to think the epic poem of Fingal a translation', he was nevertheless the first to question its Scottish provenance.

However, Warner's *History of Ireland*, published in 1763, does not display the careful approach of his *Remarks on the History of Fingal*. Ironically, his *History* replicates the same inconsistencies he denounced in Macpherson, as he does not always respect the chronological sequence of events. The account of king Connor's death comes, for instance, before that of Deirdre, and includes Warner's own subjective interpretations: 'Whatever were the great accomplishments and the merit of Connor King of Ulster, (...) yet he was

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[89] See G. Scott and F. A. Pottle, eds., *Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle*, vol. i (New York, 1928), pp. 127-8.
[90] See J. Y. T. Greig, ed., *The Letters of David Hume* (Oxford, 1932), vol. i, pp. 399-400.
[91] James Boswell, 'Letter from Samuel Johnson to James Boswell, dated 7 February 1775', *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, fifth edition (London, 1807), p. 310.
[92] Dr Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (Dublin, 1775), p. 186.

far from being a happy man either in his family or himself.'[93] A brief summary of the Deirdre legend immediately follows a gruesome account of the king's death[94], but it bears only a vague semblance to the actual story:

> The original of the quarrel was an Ulster gentleman's stealing a young lady, whom Connor, to defeat the prophecy of a Druid at her birth about the disturbances she should occasion, had kept confined and guarded; and although he had given hostages for their safe return as a testimony of his pardon, yet he caused the lover and his two brothers to be assassinated; whose friends, and the hostages themselves resenting this perfidy, took up arms against him, as it has been said; and retreating into Connaught they interested the Queen and people of that province in their cause. [95]

The only name that is explicitly mentioned is that of Connor. Even the well-known figure of Maeve remains anonymous, referred to only as 'Queen' of Connaught. Deirdre is simply described as 'a young lady' who is taken away by an unidentified 'Ulster gentleman' and 'his two brothers'. They are further brought back to Ireland by mysterious 'hostages' of the king. Even the prophecy is delivered at the girl's birth by an unidentified Druid. The elision of the characters' traditional names manifests a conscious desire on the historian's part to avoid any confusion resulting from the significant orthographic variations introduced in Macpherson's translation. Yet it is difficult to account for Warner's factual evasiveness. For example, he fails to specify what the 'disturbances' announced by the prophecy are and does not account for the king's 'perfidy' or the nature of 'the cause' defended by the hostages after their alliance with the people of Connaught. Instead of taking the detached approach of the historian, his book, which is dedicated to the Hanoverian king George III, criticises the period of Connor's reign and seeks, by contrast, to 'teach us to value our own happiness, in *living in a less barbarous and more enlightened age*, and under a constitution of government, though not perfect, yet undoubtedly the best and most eligible upon earth.'[96] [Italics mine.] Despite his claims of total impartiality, it is clear that Warner was

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[93] Ferdinando Warner, *The History of Ireland: From the Earliest Authentic Accounts to the Year 1171* (London, 1763), p. 205.
[94] *Ibid.* '(...) the wound bursting out with some of his brains he died upon the spot.'
[95] *Ibid.*, p. 206.
[96] *Ibid.*, p. 207

implicitly taking an anti-Jacobite line. An article published in the *Critical Review* in 1763 openly denounced his tendency to take 'many (...) matters for granted that required proof', and raised the question: 'Pray, good doctor, upon what grounds would you have us believe all this stuff?'[97]

As a number of editions of *Fingal* were published in Dublin between 1760 and 1790, Macpherson's creation of a Caledonian Ossian had the effect of awakening both the interest and anger of Irish scholars. The first critical Irish response, or as Paul Van Tieghem puts it, 'la première fois que l'Irlande fait entendre sa voix pour réclamer Ossian'[98], took the form of a letter dated 3 May 1763 by an Irish physician living in Brussels, Terence Brady, published in the *Journal des Sçavants* in June 1763. It referred to Geoffrey Keating's *History of Ireland* as the essential document attesting, long before Macpherson's time, the Irish provenance of the poems. The letter undoubtedly inspired a lengthy dissertation written in French by an Irish scholar under the enigmatic initials 'M. de C.' and published in six parts in the May, June (two volumes), August, September and December 1764 issue of the *Journal des Sçavants*. This 'Mémoire sur les poèmes de M. Macpherson' questioned the authenticity of the translations, regarding them as mere imitations of the poems of Homer and Milton.[99] Its author seeks to re-establish the Irish spelling - and origins - of characters like Deirdre or Oisín and to signal by the same token the cultural dispossession and historical confusion that Macpherson's work had generated.[100] The term *Scoti*, he further argues, designated exclusively the Irish people down to the eleventh century and the two countries were not culturally distinct until the

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[97] See *The Critical Review or Annals of Literature xv* (May 1763), p. 363.
[98] Paul Van Tieghem, *Ossian en France* (Paris, 1917), p. 163. ['the first time that Ireland raises her voice to reclaim Ossian']
[99] See 'Mémoire de M. de C. à messieurs les auteurs du Journal des Sçavants au sujet des Poëmes de M. Macpherson', *Journal des Sçavants* (Paris, Mai 1764), p. 277.
[100] *Ibid.*, p. 279 and p. 292: 'il enlève aux Irlandois leurs anciens Héros les plus illustres (...) pour les faire renaître dans les montagnes d'Ecosse (...).' [He takes away from the Irish their greatest ancient heroes so that they can emerge again in the Scottish mountains.]

fifteenth century.[101] The dissertation concluded with the vehement accusation that both Scotland and England had purposefully misrepresented native Irish culture.[102] Warner's *History* was cited as the most recent example of the disdainful anti-Catholic stance the English adopted towards the Irish.

Another particularly vehement attack on Macpherson had been made in the previous year by a certain Miso-Dolos, otherwise known as Sylvester O'Halloran, whose letter 'The Poems of Ossine, the son of Fionne Mac Comhal, Re-claimed: By a Milesian', was published in the 1763 *Dublin Magazine*. It situated the Ossianic controversy in a tradition of earlier Scottish impostures and portrayed Scotland as a jealous and proud neighbour endeavouring to 'arrogate to itself' the riches of Irish culture, the 'lately published poem of FINGAL' being the greatest 'instance of Caledonian plagiary'.[103] The first influential Irish historical work to condemn Macpherson was the second edition of Charles O'Conor's *Dissertations on the History of Ireland*, which was reissued in 1766, and contained appendices designed to ridicule this 'impostor'[104]. In the end, the debate over the ownership of Ossian / Oisín or Darthula / Deirdre became a matter of national honour. Macpherson's pretensions to the Scottish origins of Ossian triggered a violent reaction of national defence in Ireland, awakening the country's sudden awareness of its legitimate right to represent and re-claim its long-forgotten mythical heroes.

The movement known as 'antiquarianism' developed in Ireland in the second half of the eighteenth century as an immediate response to Macpherson's pseudo-Ossianic

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[101] *Ibid.*, Juin 1764, p. 360.

[102] *Ibid.*, Décembre 1764, p. 854 : 'On ne peut s'empêcher de plaindre le sort de la Nation Irlandoise, (...). Les uns [les Ecossais] lui enlèvent ses héros (...), les autres [les Anglais] s'attachent à avilir cette Nation respectable.' [It is hard not to feel sorry for the fate of the Irish nation (...). Some (the Scots) steal its heroes while others (the English) always endeavour to debase this respectable nation.]

[103] Miso-Dolos [Sylvester O'Halloran], 'The Poems of Ossine, the Son of Fionne Mac Comhal, Reclaimed', *Dublin Magazine,* January 1763, pp. 21-22. This article was followed by another letter against Macpherson printed in August of the same year. See Sylvester O'Halloran, 'A letter to Mr Macpherson, occasioned by his Dissertation on the poems of Temora. By a Milesian', *Dublin Magazine*, August 1763.

[104] See O'Conor (1766), p. 60: 'let us confess, that no Gentleman, (...) ever knew less of the Trade of an able impostor, than the most memorable Mr James Macpherson.'

fabrications. It gave rise, as Seamus Deane points out, to a first Celtic revival[105], prompted by a desire to defend Irish literature and antiquity. A process of rediscovery, indeed of re-appropriation of Ireland's Gaelic past, was initiated. Irish intellectuals were thus driven to treat their legendary materials seriously and proceed in a rigorous and scholarly fashion. A number of antiquarian writers such as Sylvester O'Halloran, Charlotte Brooke and later Theophilus O'Flanagan retold, in their own ways, the Deirdre legend in order to expose the full extent of Macpherson's fraud. Unlike their predecessor, they readily published the manuscript documents they claimed to possess alongside their proposed literal translations. The juxtaposition of the Gaelic originals and the English version served as concrete evidence that Macpherson's 'Dar-thula' had largely been the product of his imagination. But although these scholars claimed to be motivated by a rational desire to uncover some essential historical truth and restore to the Irish what was inherently theirs, their work was also far from being ideologically neutral.

Sylvester O'Halloran was the forerunner of a younger generation of antiquarians, indeed the first to give a short summary of the legend entitled 'The Sons of Usnach' which was included in Chapter VIII of the second book of his *General History of Ireland*, published in 1778. The chronological order of events is not respected and the Deirdre story incorrectly follows Maeve's invasion of Ulster. His account, which provides only a general outline of the story, is very much lacking in detail. His lack of familiarity with the mythical materials may be explained by the fact that he was not primarily a historian or literary man but an eye and brain surgeon in Limerick[106]. His interest in Irish antiquities had been essentially aroused after writing, as we have seen, the letter published in the 1763 *Dublin Magazine* on the subject of Macpherson's Ossian. O'Halloran, echoing Keating, believed that the Irish had for too long been ridiculed by English and Scottish writers alike who saw

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[105] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals* (London, 1985), p. 20.
[106] See, for example, his medical publication, *New Treatise on the Glaucoma or Cataract* (Dublin, 1750).

them as 'the most brutal and savage of mankind, destitute of arts, letters, and legislation'[107]. The tone he adopts is often reproachful: 'I publicly complain of the constant abuse, poured out by Caledonian writers, for centuries against my country.'[108] With chapters like 'the Scotch, the real source of all the calamities of these unhappy times'[109], it is clear that his historical pieces on ancient Ireland were written with the intention of humiliating the Scots, in particular Macpherson, who is explicitly condemned for his fabrications[110]. Significantly, his account of the Deirdre story follows a critical passage on Macpherson's refutation of the existence of druidic rituals. In retaliation to Macpherson's depreciative treatment of Ireland in 'Dar-thula', O'Halloran refuses to recognise the importance of the lovers' stay in Scotland. Whereas in *LMU*, Deirdre praises the beauty of Alba (Scotland) and the peace she found there for many years, O'Halloran's version considerably shortens the amount of time she and the sons of Uisneach spend on Caledonian ground: no sooner have they all landed in Alba than, 'finding little protection abroad', they are 'obliged to take their ships' and escape. The miserable exiles even come to implore the king's pardon 'through the mediation of friends'[111], pleading that they may be allowed to return safely to Ireland. The fact that Scotland holds little importance in O'Halloran's story betrays a conscious desire on his part to highlight the Irish origins of the myth.

Against the English and Scottish stereotypes of the uncivilised Irish, O'Halloran makes Deirdre and the sons of Uisneach exceptionally well-behaved, educated and moral characters: 'The beautiful Dierdre (...) was educated in the palace of Emania, and amongst the numbers of illustrious youths (...) who attended the court, were the three sons of

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[107] Sylvester O'Halloran, 'A Preliminary Discourse', *An Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland* (London, 1772), p. i.
[108] *Ibid.*, p. 333.
[109] *Ibid.*, Chapter VI, p. 295.
[110] *Ibid.*, p. 312. O'Halloran reiterates, for instance, Warner's arguments as to the obvious lack of chronological coherence in Macpherson's translations.
[111] Sylvester O'Halloran, *A General History of Ireland, from the earliest accounts to the twelfth century* (London, 1778), p. 182.

Uisneach (...).'[112] The protagonists of the story are dominated by values of national honour and courtly love, 'personal accomplishment'[113] being the driving force of their society. Far from being the product of rigorous antiquarian investigation, the legend, as retold by O'Halloran, is made to reflect his own romanticised vision of ancient Irish history. Indeed, the author formulates his own subjective impressions by means of interrogative or exclamatory phrases, and does not hesitate to intervene throughout the text:

> *We may judge* of the personal accomplishments of the first of them, who *loved and was beloved* of Dierdre, by the strong terms in which she expressed them. Attended by her confident, (...) she beheld a butcher at a distance killing a calf, and (...) a raven came to feed on the blood. The whole woman *absorbed in love*, turns to her governess: "Behold," says she, "the whiteness of that snow, such is the skin of my hero! his cheeks are more blooming than the blood scattered round it!" and his hair is smoother and blacker than the feathers of the raven that feeds upon it!" *Metaphors inexpressively bold and strong!*
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> After such declaration, *we may judge* it did not require much importunity to prevail upon her to elope with her paramour. But to carry off a lady from court, under the protection of the king and queen, was not only in itself dangerous, but even deemed a sacrilege. *But what action is not love capable of inspiring*? [Italics mine.][114]

While in *LMU*, women appear to be little more than reproductive mammals (heifers), they become, in O'Halloran's version, true 'ladies', deserving of the respect that is due to their sex. In that light, the abduction of 'a lady from court' is a sacrilege that can be excused if it is the consequence of a love that is mutual and sincere. Even though he presents his Deirdre story as forming part of a historical work on ancient Ireland 'from the earliest accounts to the twelfth century', his version differs greatly in tone and thematic content from that preserved in *The Book of Leinster*. It is paradoxically eloquent for what it does *not* say and the circumstances of Deirdre or Naois's death are not divulged. One would have expected O'Halloran, a specialist in head injuries[115], to find medical delight in the description of Deirdre's suicide as, in *LMU*, she jumped off a chariot and smashed her head

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[112] *Ibid.*, p. 181.
[113] *Ibid.*
[114] *Ibid.*, pp. 181-2.
[115] Years later, in 1793, O'Halloran was to publish *A New Treatise on the Different Disorders Arising from External Injuries of the Head* (Dublin, 1793) in which he grouped the causes of head injuries into six categories: personal violence (43), falls from horses (15), accidents at work (7), children kicked by horses (6), falls (6), duel (1).

against a stone. Although as J. B. Lyons points out in a biographical article, O'Halloran 'had a clear concept of concussion and of compression of the brain by depressed fractures or effusions of blood and pus'[116], he chose to leave out from his version the gruesome details of *LMU*. The author's Catholic beliefs as well as the refined moral values of the eighteenth century led him to go further than Keating in censoring certain sinful acts openly condemned by the church, such as murder, suicide or sex without love. Political sentiment and interest in the Gaelic native traditions went hand in hand, particularly at a time when Catholics, who had by and large refused to convert to the established church, were beginning their campaign for emancipation and advocating an end to the Penal Laws. By the time O'Halloran's *General History of Ireland* was published, a first Catholic Relief Act had been passed in 1778, restoring the right of Catholics to take long-term leases and inherit land. But the first sign of relaxation of the Penal Laws occurred on a cultural level with the establishment of a 'Select Committee' within the Dublin Society founded by Charles Vallancey in 1772. With the general aim 'to inquire into the antient state of arts and literature; and into the other antiquities of Ireland'[117], it enabled for the first time Catholic scholars like Charles O'Conor and Sylvester O'Halloran to work in close collaboration with Protestant antiquarians. In return, by collaborating with Catholics, the Protestants who had an Anglo-Irish background aspired to identify more closely with Gaelic culture so that the two groups joined together would prove a strong force to overturn Macpherson's claims. This Committee subsequently known as the 'Hibernian Antiquarian Society', existed from 1779 to 1783 and its immediate successor was the Irish Academy, founded in 1785 and renamed Royal Irish Academy in 1786, which was mostly made up of members of Trinity College. The society, dedicated to 'the cultivation of Science, Polite

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[116] J. B. Lyons, 'Sylvester O'Halloran', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* iv (1989), 65-74, p. 67.
[117] See Minutes of the Dublin Society, 17 May 1772, quoted in Leerssen (1986), p. 403.

Literature and Antiquities' became the institutionalised expression of the cultural aspirations of the Protestant Irish nation that had elected Grattan's Parliament in 1782.

The first Protestant antiquarian to produce translations of ancient Irish poetry and investigate the legend of Deirdre was Charlotte Brooke, the daughter of the novelist Henry Brooke. The fact that her father had moved from writing rabid anti-Catholic pamphlets in 1745 to defending the Catholic cause against the Penal laws in 1761[118] may have contributed to Charlotte's early appreciation of Catholic historians such as Charles O'Conor and Sylvester O'Halloran. Although the daughter of Henry Brooke, she was not eligible for membership of the Academy simply on account of being a woman. The closest she got to it was when, finding herself in a dire financial situation after the successive deaths of her father and brother, she applied for a position of housekeeper there in 1788. Her letter to the Academy shows that she was prepared to undertake the job 'if so required, without a salary'[119]. Even though she presented herself as a 'female Orphan' and invoked the spirit of her deceased father in order to arouse the pity of its members, she failed to convince these 'gentlemen' and had to withdraw her application. Her antiquarian friend and founding member of the Royal Irish Academy, Joseph Cooper Walker, offered her, however, a far better position by giving her a chance to express, albeit anonymously, her literary talents. Incredibly gifted in the Irish language, she first contributed translations of Irish poetry to Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*, published in 1786. The work being a success, he encouraged her to engage in a wider and more personal project, *Reliques of Irish Poetry,* a collection of translations from ancient Irish poetry. The great influence of the previous generation of antiquarians both Catholic and Protestant is acknowledged in a preface. Charlotte Brooke constantly refers the reader 'to the names of

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[118] Compare Henry Brooke's *The Farmer's Letters to the Protestants of Ireland* (Dublin, 1745) with *The Tryal of the Roman Catholics of Ireland* (Dublin, 1761).
[119] Quoted in Aaron Crossly Seymour, Esq., 'Memoirs of Miss Brooke', *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (Dublin, 1816), p. liv.

O'Conor, O'Halloran and Vallancey' for further information on the historical background of ancient Irish poetry and modestly effaces her own voice by asserting her inferiority in relation to these 'great men', as if to reassure this exclusively male circle that she is only there to put them on a pedestal: 'My comparatively feeble hand aspires only (like the ladies of ancient Rome) to strew flowers in the path of these laurelled champions of my country.'[120] The preface concludes with words of gratitude directed specifically at these 'laurelled champions' of Irish history: the Gaelic scholar Theophilus O'Flanagan, Reverend Doctor Warner and Sylvester O'Halloran.

Despite Charlotte Brooke's lack of self-confidence and her shy awareness that 'a merely literal version' would be 'an impossible undertaking'[121], her translations are regarded as a significant scholarly work. Although she had studied the Irish language for two years only, she was so gifted that she soon became proficient enough to produce her own translations of early material based on the Red Branch and Fionn cycles. Finding original specimens was, however, no easy task and she was assisted in it by erudite friends and historians such as O'Halloran who sent her copies of Irish poems. She made no claims for the poems' great antiquity, did not present Oisín as their original author and commented realistically that, even though the poems contained evidence about the nature of early Irish society, they 'were written during the middle ages'[122]. Even though the legend of Deirdre was not among the poems she translated, Charlotte Brooke nevertheless included a full account of the story in a three-page long footnote to a poem on Cuchullin's accidental murder of his son entitled 'Conloch'. As Russell Alspach notes, in this poem, Cuchullin relates the painful loss of his son to that felt earlier for the three sons of Usnach.[123] The

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[120] Charlotte Brooke, 'Preface', *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (Dublin, 1789), p. iii.
[121] *Ibid.*, p. v.
[122] *Ibid.*, p. iv.
[123] Russell Alspach, *Irish Poetry from the English Invasion to 1798* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 115. Alspach quotes the following lament from 'Conloch': 'O my lost son! - my precious child, adieu! / No more these eyes that lovely form shall view! / No more his dark-red spear shall Ainle wield! / No more shall Naoise

poem is preceded by an 'Introductory Discourse' by Sylvester O'Halloran praising the values of early Irish courtliness which had, ten years before, inspired his own outline of the Deirdre legend: 'With us chivalry flourished from the remotest antiquity (...) principles of Morality were sedulously inculcated, and a reverence and tender respect for the Fair, completed the education of the young hero.'[124] Charlotte Brooke clearly found inspiration in O'Halloran's romanticised account of the legend. The characters of her story bear close resemblance to his refined and civilized heroes. Naoise, who is described as a 'gallant' young man, is introduced to the well-mannered Deirdre through the intermediary of her preceptor, Leavarcam, who urges him to 'free the fair captive' from her fortress and promises that in return he shall be free to 'make her his wife'. Finding no obstacles in his path, the knight in shining armour delivers the girl from her tower and their first encounter soon develops into feelings of mutual respectful love naturally leading to marriage:

> (...) they met; - mutual astonishment and admiration concluded in vows of the most passionate love! Naoise with the aid of his brothers, Ainle and Ardan, stormed the fortress, and carried off his prize; and escaping thence to Scotland, they were there joined in marriage. [125]

Despite having toned down the directness of *LMU* and given greater social standing to the characters involved, Charlotte Brooke follows the progression of events, including Deirdre's violent suicide which had been carefully omitted by O'Halloran. But although her work shows the influence of historians who had issued outspoken literary attacks on Macpherson, she does not deign to mention his name once or the fact that the subject of her poem 'Conloch' had been previously treated by Macpherson as 'Carthon'. Her long footnote on Deirdre summarizes accurately all the preceding traditions relating to Deirdre but leaves out 'Dar-thula'. That she was at least acquainted with Macpherson's version can be seen in her choice to maintain his orthographical distortion of the name 'Uisneach' into

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thunder o'er the field! / No more shall Ardan sweep the hostile plains! - Lost are they all, and nought but woe remains!'

[124] Sylvester O'Halloran, 'An Introductory Discourse to the Poem of Conloch', in *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (Dublin, 1789), p. 5.

[125] Charlotte Brooke (1789), footnote to 'Conloch', p. 13.

'Usnoth'. Her reluctance to take part in the Macphersonian controversy may have been partly caused by a retiring, unconfident nature, but since she intended her *Reliques* to be unblemished representations of great literary antiquities, she presumably deemed it important that they should avoid present-day disputes and concerns.

However, silent voices can speak loud. If Brooke did not need to point her finger directly at Macpherson, she still repudiated his translations altogether. By providing for the first time Gaelic originals appended to her translations, she aimed to demonstrate visually that the Irish were the true possessors of Oisín's (not Ossian's) poetry. The title page not only emphasises in broad capital letters that the 'originals in the Irish character' are appended towards the end of the volume, but a line in ancient Irish translated as 'Melodious, Oisin, are thy strains to me'[126] further illustrates that, unlike her Scottish predecessor, she could answer Dr Johnson's request by providing an identifiably Irish text that would put the genuineness of the original tales beyond doubt. Despite a deliberate detachment from contemporary political quarrels and literary controversies, her preface is not exempt from patriotic sentiment and makes it clear that her work was produced 'with a view to throw some light on the antiquities of this country, to vindicate, in part, its history, and prove its claim to scientific as well as military fame (...)'[127]. Yet at the same time as Charlotte Brooke praises the 'military fame' of pre-colonial Ireland, she also presents herself as an Anglo-Irish ambassador, promoting 'a cordial union between two countries that seem formed by nature to be joined by every bond of interest, and of amity'[128]. She describes England and Ireland metaphorically as neighbours fully ignorant of each other: 'were we better acquainted, we should be better friends.'[129] This call for a cultural rapprochement shows that Brooke's patriotism was not strictly speaking separatist; she was

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[126] The translation of the line is only given in the 1816 edition, it stands on its own in the first edition.
[127] *Ibid.*, 'preface', p. v.
[128] *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.
[129] *Ibid.*, p. vii.

welcoming a cultural union between the two countries whilst displaying their fundamental differences. At the time when her work was published, in 1789, Brooke's dreams of cultural collaboration and mutual understanding not only between Protestants and Catholics but also between England and Ireland seemed closer to becoming true. The 1770s had been marked by the American War of Independence and the French revolution was now spreading ideals of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité'. Henry Grattan had won a Declaration of Independence from the British government in 1782 granting Ireland its own independent parliament and abolishing the penal laws against Catholics, though the country still remained attached to the British Crown. The French revolution had also substantiated the idea developed by Rousseau in *Du Contrat Social* that sovereignty resides in the 'the will of the people', not the ruler. In that context, an open radical organization promoting non-sectarian Republican separatism and rallying Protestants and Catholics for the same cause was formed, the Society of United Irishmen. Charlotte Brooke must therefore be credited with giving a new impetus to the interest in Irish antiquities and implicitly conveying something of the spirit of the 1780's, a decade marked, on the political as well as cultural level, by a more conciliatory attitude between Catholics and Protestants. The Ossianic controversy therefore had the indirect effect of facilitating the integration of the Ascendancy class in their efforts to gain access to the Gaelic tradition, which had until then been the exclusive property of Catholics.

As far as the Deirdre legend is concerned, the Irish historians and translators considered so far gave it little consideration in itself and contained the story within a wider, often historical, research project. That was until another Gaelic scholar member of the Academy, Theophilus O'Flanagan, who had also been one of Charlotte Brooke's advisers, ventured to provide a complete literal translation of two sharply contrasting versions of the Deirdre

story based on both *LMU* and *OCU*. The way in which this Catholic native Irish speaker from Co. Clare was admitted to the restricted circles of the Royal Irish Academy was suspicious in itself. In 1785 he had been sent by the Irish antiquarian Charles Vallancey on an expedition to Mount Callan to look for the sepulchral stone of some ancient legendary hero, 'Conan', and reported to have found it along with a mysterious inscription in ogham character. Ironically, his discovery generated, just like Macpherson's, a controversy as to the authenticity of his findings. Whether O'Flanagan was indeed a forger of stones or not, the quest for the ogham stone allowed him to enter the Academy where he was employed as translator from 1786.

In 1807 the Highland Society of London published, along with a literal translation into Latin, what was claimed to be the Gaelic originals of the Poems of Ossian[130] but, as Thomson argues in *Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's "Ossian"*, they were probably no more than translations of the English poems into Gaelic. The Gaelic Society of Dublin was established in January 1807, 'for the investigation and revival of Ancient Irish Literature'[131] through the publication and translation of all surviving manuscripts. It had a predominantly Catholic membership. O'Flanagan, who was the Society's secretary at the time, was in charge of editing its first and only volume, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society*, in 1808, and this contained the original Gaelic text as well as English translations of the Deirdre saga. The title page insists that 'Deirdri, or, the Lamentable Fate of the Sons of Usnach' had been 'literally translated into English, from an original Gaelic manuscript'. As with Brooke's publication, the work betrays an anti-Macphersonian drive to achieve textual faithfulness to the Gaelic original which is registered in the juxtaposition of the Gaelic and the English text. Going further than Brooke in his meticulousness, O'Flanagan prints the

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[130] See Robert Macfarlan trans., *The Poems of Ossian, in the Original Gaelic, with a Literal Translation into Latin by the late Robert Macfarlan* (London, 1807).

[131] Theophilus O'Flanagan, ed. and trans., 'Deirdri: or, The Lamentable Fate of the Sons of Usnach', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society i* (Dublin, 1808). See title page in Appendix 1.

Irish text and its English translation on facing pages. Unlike her, he does not hesitate to condemn Macpherson, long dead at the time, with particular reference to his spurious 'Dar-thula'. His 'proëme', or preface to *Deirdri*, begins thus:

> The following story, from the Irish, is the foundation of Mr James Macpherson's *Darthula*. It is properly denominated with us, "The tragical Fate of the Sons of Usnach." Upon a comparison, the reader will be enabled to judge of the vast liberties taken with the original by Mr Mac Pherson, and also to observe his anachronisms and interpolations. [132]

Even though O'Flanagan acknowledges that Macpherson had brilliantly 'compiled and left to posterity a lasting monument of his genius', he could not forgive the fraudulent means by which he had fabricated complete stories out of 'scanty and disfigured original materials'[133]. O'Flanagan displays an obsessive desire to show that he is not like Macpherson because *he* has achieved a perfect, mirror-image translation of the Gaelic original. His long explanatory footnotes further seek to draw the reader's attention to the fact that he has opted for the strictest, word-by-word adherence to the primary text, often at the expense of meaning. The following note to explain an obscure sentence is a good example of his obsessive desire to produce an exact translation:

> "Barach promised him this: thus they bore away that night."
> Meaning that so they passed that night, that is, that all was settled for that night (...).
> Thus I might have translated, but I choose to be even idiomatically literal. [134]

Yet far from being just a scholar merely concerned with the preservation of Gaelic antiques, a closer reading of O'Flanagan's *Transactions*, and in particular of his preface and footnotes, reveals that the main purpose of his work is, in fact, to refute, on every single page, Macpherson's 'Dar-thula' as the product of modern Scottish invention as well as to stress the Irish origins of the story and of the Scottish race as a whole. For that, O'Flanagan draws heavily on the account given by Keating, whose reputation had, as we have seen, been attacked by Macpherson. As is underlined in the 'proeme to Deirdri', the

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[132] *Ibid.*, 'Proëme to Deirdre', p. 1.
[133] *Ibid.*, 'Proëme', p. 25.
[134] *Ibid.*, 'The Death of the Children of Usnach', note p. 33.

story of the heroine's birth and education is extracted from *Foras Feasa ar Ėrinn* by the 'learned Doctor Keating' who, O'Flanagan insists, 'tells every story well'. When referring to Deirdri, in the preface and footnotes, O'Flanagan recurrently adds in parentheses '(not Darthula)'. In so doing, he defines his work against that of Macpherson and seeks to defend a genuine Irish tradition from what he considers to have been pure Scottish invention. For instance, after translating a passage in which Naisi expresses nostalgic feelings for his native land[135], O'Flanagan interprets it in a footnote as the best form of evidence that 'Eiri, not Alba, was the native country of the sons of Usnach', and adds angrily: 'Away then with the conceit, that "Usnach was lord of Etha "'[136]. Some of the footnotes even cover most of a page so that the text becomes a convenient support to sustain irrefutable arguments against Macpherson. His voice is raised again as he addresses 'modern Albanian Highland Scots of noble Irish extraction' in a sardonic outcry against their attempts to claim the history and literature of Ireland as their own:

> Your silly, perverse adherence to falsehood could alone provoke this animated version from us, whom could you deprive of history and literature, you yourselves would have none left, nor the name of a people to boast.[137]

Not only does he question the existence of a Scottish race and culture independent from Ireland but he also invalidates the existence of a written Erse language: 'Ours is a fine original tongue, of which the dialect of Alba is a debased corruption.'[138] An advertisement for 'a new grammar of the Gaelic, or Irish language' included in the first page of the volume boasts that this newly published grammatical work rejects 'all corrupt, unlettered jargon', sustaining the editor's opinion that the idiom spoken in the Highlands is no more than a vulgar patois.

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[135] *Ibid.*, p. 39: 'dearer to me is Eiri than Alba, though more should I obtain in Alba than in Erin.'
[136] *Ibid.*
[137] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[138] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Paradoxically, in trying hard to differentiate himself from Macpherson, O'Flanagan's methods appear to be strangely similar to those of the Scottish translator. He even manipulates his text in order to defend his case against the accusations of archaeological forgery held against him. Thus, he stresses that after Deirdri and Naisi's deaths 'stones were laid on their monumental heap, their ogham name was inscribed'[139] and provides further details in a footnote on ancient modes of burial. Whereas the note is, in all appearance, inserted to explain an obscure custom in the text, its underlying purpose is, in fact, to establish once and for all O'Flanagan's innocence:

> The druidical mode of interment in ancient Ireland is described in this tale. A stone was put over the grave and the name of the person interred was inscribed in the hieroglyphic (...) characters used by the druids; *of which kind of inscriptions numerous instances are daily discovered in Erin* (...) [Italics mine.][140]

A close analysis of his 'Deirdri' reveals that O'Flanagan's translations are motivated by a desire comparable to that of Macpherson to bring to the fore some native heroic tradition following times of great political turmoil. There are noticeable similarities between the political situation in Ireland in the 1790s and that of Scotland in the first half of the eighteenth century. Ireland had gained Grattan's parliament, but all the risings designed to achieve national independence and create an Irish republic failed in a way that brings to mind the repeated defeats of the Jacobite rebellions in Scotland. Having declared war on England in 1793, the French became a possible ally of the Irish. In 1796, a leader of the United Irishmen, Wolfe Tone, went to France to seek aid for a rising and returned with a fleet of fifteen thousand men. They sailed into Bantry Bay in the south-west of Ireland, but due to terrible weather, a landing was impossible, the invasion had to be abandoned and the fleet returned to France. Two years later, in 1798, another major rebellion was organised and put down. The Wexford army was defeated and the Ulster United Irishmen of Antrim

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[139] *Ibid.*, pp. 127-8.
[140] *Ibid.*, pp. 131-2.

and Down were routed in June. Even though the French this time managed to land, at Killala, the invasion failed. The culmination of this run of bad luck was the capture of Wolfe Tone who cut his throat on 12 November after his request to 'die like a soldier' by firing squad was refused. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the Irish Parliament was suspended and the 1800 Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland created a single parliament in London from 1801. Again, as had been the case for Scotland after the Union of 1707, other unsuccessful insurrections followed, this time led by another revolutionary, Robert Emmet, who had been a TCD student member of the United Irishmen. On 23 May 1803 Emmet led an abortive attack on Dublin Castle, and printed and distributed a 'Proclamation of Independence', but was eventually caught, convicted of treason, hanged, and beheaded.

The legend of Deirdre displays a similar pattern of tragic defeat whereby attempted rebellions against the authoritative power end with the exile, retreat or death of its protagonists. Naisi and his brothers are killed upon confronting the king, Deirdre either dies immediately of grief or is held captive for a year[141] and Fergus' revengeful rebellion against kingly power brings about chaos and civil war in Ulster. The fact that the legend is itself particularly dark may account for a general tendency to revive it at times of political trouble, when Ireland could readily identify with the sorrows of Deirdre, both forced to enter a reluctant union with a powerful and dreaded king. The Union of Great Britain and Ireland was hardly the cordial union Charlotte Brooke had in mind in 1789. In the same way as the Jacobite rebellions had fuelled Macpherson's interest in traditional Highland poetry, the turbulent events of 1796-1803 in Ireland helped to shape O'Flanagan's work and indirectly re-awakened a general interest in the Gaelic heritage. Looking to the past for a great body of mythical literature was a means of escaping the political reality of a Union

[141] O'Flanagan is careful to translate the two medieval versions *LMU* and *OCU* with their distinctive endings.

that had been recently imposed; at least Ireland's old literary possessions could not be taken away. By focusing almost exclusively on 'Deirdri', O'Flanagan was acting out of an impulse to preserve Ireland's ancient cultural and historical patrimony. Contrasting with the disintegration of legislative independence, the conception of Ireland as a culturally distinct nation attractive to both Anglo-Irish and Irish had begun to take shape.

Antiquarianism was not therefore a politically neutral movement. In 1790, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* asserted that 'people will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors.'[142] It was, however, impossible to simply look back and preserve these antiquities in their original form. On a literary level, O'Flanagan's fervent desire to achieve the most accurate prose literalness was undermined by a certain uneasiness and difficulty in conforming strictly to the original. His footnotes to *Deirdri* include the transcription of an 'English Versification, from the literal Translation by Mr William LEAHY', poetical renderings of his scholarly translation presumably inserted there as being more likely to please contemporary readers. Similarly, since *LMU* may have seemed too crude for contemporary taste, its English translation is not strictly literal and displays a certain prudishness. After hearing the unborn Deirdre cry from her mother's womb, the druid exclaims that there 'loud speaks a virgin fair' and insistently describes Deirdre as 'a *virgin* from whom shall arise many misfortunes'.[143] [Italics mine.] The tone is thus very different from *LMU* where she is referred to as 'a tall, lovely, long-haired' and highly sexual 'fatal woman'[144]. The changes introduced by O'Flanagan are best exemplified in the exchange that follows Deirdre and Naisi's first encounter:

LMU:

> 'That is a fine *heifer* going by,' he said.
> 'As well it might,' she said. 'The *heifers* grow *big* where there are no *bulls*.'
> 'You have the bull of this province all to yourself,' he said, 'the king of Ulster.'

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[142] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1790), p. 274.
[143] *Ibid.*, p. 149.
[144] See Kinsella (1969), pp. 10-11.

'Of the two,' she said, 'I'd pick a *game young bull* like you.'
'You couldn't,' he said. 'There is Cathbad's prophecy.'
'Are you rejecting me?'
'I am,' he said.
Then she rushed at him and *caught the two ears* of his head.
'Two ears of shame and mockery,' she said, 'if you don't take me with you.'
'Woman, leave me alone!' he said.
'You will do it,' she said, binding him.[145] [Italics mine.]

The passage is translated thus by O'Flanagan:

'Mild is the *dame* who passeth by,' said Naisi.
"It is natural for *damsels* to be mild where there are no *youths*," says she.
"The *man* of the *province* is with you," says he.
"I would make a choice between you both," says she, "and would prefer a young man such as you."
"Not so," says he, "though it is in consequence of apprehension."
"It is for avoidance of me thou sayest that", says she.
"Be it so then," says he.
With this *she flung a ball at him*, which struck his head.
"A stroke of disgrace through life's extent is this," says she, "if you take me not."
"Depart from me, woman," says he.
"Thou wilt be in disgrace," says she. [146] [Italics mine.]

O'Flanagan evidently deemed it necessary to remove all traces of the physicality displayed in the original. By making the characters better spoken and behaved, he ensured that the readership of the time would not be so shocked by their unceremonious attitudes, and to this end substituted the genteel terms 'damsels' and 'youths' for the more direct originals 'heifers' and 'bulls'. As it would have been considered unbecoming for a woman to seize the ears of a man she hardly knew, O'Flanagan has her throw a ball at him instead. The effect may have been the same, yet Deirdri's throwing of a ball avoids the need for any physical contact between the young couple. In his translation of *OCU*, O'Flanagan even feels it necessary to intervene in a footnote in order to banish any sexual ambiguity when Deirdri calls king Conor her 'first husband': 'No more is meant than that Deirdri was, from infancy, betrothed to Conor. It is human nature, that she should prefer a fine youth of her own age to a man old enough to be her father.'[147] Similarly, when Deirdri drinks her lover's blood after his death, O'Flanagan explains: 'This is introduced as a mark of extreme affection, sorrow and distraction; and however disgusting it may appear, still

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[145] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[146] O'Flanagan (1808), p. 157.
[147] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

fidelity to the original obliges us to retain it.'[148] The translator therefore appears torn between a genuine desire to reproduce the cultural oddities of the medieval versions and an uneasy awareness that these might deter a modern readership.

Despite the time and effort invested in his meticulous work, the Gaelic Society's only volume of *Transactions* made next to no impact. The disappointment felt after the collapse of this great project put an end to O'Flanagan's literary endeavours. However, his 'Deirdri' was an important scholarly text for it brought together the three existing Gaelic versions of the myth: *LMU*, *OCU* and that of Geoffrey Keating, and his (more or less) literal English translations became the major document on which future generations of revivalists, with little or no knowledge of Irish, would base their own adaptations. The publication also encouraged William Halliday, vice-president of the Gaelic Society and author of an Irish grammar, to produce in 1811 the first volume of a fresh translation of Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*. However, the immediate literary appeal of O'Flanagan's scholarly 'Deirdri' was to prove negligible compared to Macpherson's fabricated 'Dar-thula'.

Macpherson's *Ossian* brought to light the different ways in which Scottish and Irish antiquaries interpreted a common Gaelic heritage and used the past to come to terms with contemporary political issues. The pastoral image of the backward-looking Celt served to counterbalance the modernization and rationalization of society during the Enlightenment. But before demonising Macpherson by calling him, as is often done, a fraud, a forger, an hoaxer or an impostor, one should acknowledge, as Derick Thomson did for the first time in *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian*, that even though Ossian could not have been the original author of the 'translated' poems, Macpherson's trip to the Highlands did

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[148] *Ibid.*, p. 115.

yield a small number of manuscripts and a considerable amount of oral material. Although no reliable manuscript source can be traced for Macpherson's 'Dar-thula', many witnesses in Mackenzie's 1805 *Report* have testified that the story was part of a strong oral tradition in the Highlands. But more importantly, the poems were instrumental in enhancing the status of Gaelic, hitherto considered a barbaric tongue, and encouraged a new scholarly interest in the language and its ancient literature, both in Scotland and Ireland.

As Scotland and Ireland shared a common identity and culture in those early days, it is not unlikely that both territories developed their respective oral traditions of the same legend. The interaction is reflected in the narrative itself, as the main characters travel from Ireland to Alba (Scotland) where they spend several years. There is even a 'hill of Usnagh' in Scotland.[149] Yet Macpherson, who invented the exotic name 'Dar-thula', drew on material originating in both countries, but manipulated his sources to make Ossian exclusively Scottish. By the same token, he proclaimed the greater antiquity of the Scots over the Irish. These historical and literary distortions had the effect of enraging contemporary Irish scholarship. Anxious to refute Macpherson, Irish intellectuals strove to provide literal translations that would prove faithful to the original texts and thus attacked the alleged Scottish setting of the poems. However, this chapter has shown that even the purportedly literal translations offered by meticulous scholars like Charlotte Brooke or Theophilus O'Flanagan had a strong anti-Macphersonian drive and were themselves influenced by contemporary political and moral values. Despite an effort common to Protestant and Catholic authors to signal - directly or indirectly - the dubious elements of Macpherson's enterprise, the great influence of the Scottish Ossian was impossible to escape.

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[149] See William Graham, *Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach: a Scoto-Irish Romance of the first century AD* (Edinburgh, 1908).

Ironically, the inward-looking nature of Macpherson's work and the insular concerns expressed by the Irish antiquarians did not prevent *Ossian* from exporting very successfully. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, the eighteenth century had seen the emergence of new ways of looking at the past. What had begun as an attempt to bring literary fame upon himself and national prestige to Scotland led Macpherson's *Ossian* to prefigure the Romantic temper. His depiction of natural men living in an ideal primitive society had worldwide appeal. The poems were translated into French, Italian, Spanish, German, Russian, Dutch, Swedish, Polish, Danish and Macpherson's controversial name as a translator ceased to be mentioned. Ossian's mythical appeal survived well into the nineteenth century. Napoleon, for instance, was so enthused by *Ossian* that a number of epic paintings featuring Ossian decorated Josephine's apartments. Two of them by Gerard and Girodet are still exhibited today above the living-room fireplace at Josephine's Castle in Rueil-Malmaison. The political dimension given by Girodet to the mythical bard was thus transposed to a French political context, as Ossian is shown welcoming Napoleonic officers with open arms (Appendix II). But it is perhaps in Germany that the literary influence of Ossian was strongest. With Goethe's famous inclusion of Ossianic lines in *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, it prefigured the era of romantic sentimentalism. In the mid-nineteenth century, Johannes Brahms composed a choir piece based on Macpherson's version of the Deirdre theme entitled 'Darthulas Grabesgesang' (Darthula's song of the grave). In 1815, the Austrian composer Franz Schubert also set Macpherson's poems to music, the song 'Ossians Lied nach dem Falle Nathos' being directly drawn from 'Dar-thula'. Rather than remaining a static text imprisoned in Scoto-Irish quarrels over its origins and authenticity, *Ossian*, and with it 'Dar-thula', gained a new mythical dimension by taking different artistic shapes. That the poems had been, at least to some extent, the product of a forgery mattered little in the end. *The Works of Ossian* could only find new

life by emigrating abroad where Macpherson's name was safely eclipsed by that of his bard.

CHAPTER III

The Victorian Fathers of the Irish Literary Revival: The Deirdre Myth Retold by Samuel Ferguson and Standish James O'Grady.

The antiquarian movement's principal achievement was to make the Irish legendary material readily available to scholars for the first time. The publication of translations by figures such as Brooke and O'Flanagan ensured that the ancient texts would be taken seriously as objects of study, and in the nineteenth century they began to circulate freely among both Gaelic and English-speaking intellectuals. The new prestige accorded to the legends led to the production of new versions of the Deirdre myth, the first Irish attempts since the time of Geoffrey Keating to adapt – rather than merely translate – the story. Of these the most important adaptations were the work of two men, Samuel Ferguson (1810-1886) and Standish James O'Grady (1846-1928), conservative unionist Protestants who each composed two distinct versions of the tale.

Unlike their predecessors, Ferguson and O'Grady were not interested in producing a (more or less) authentic record of traditional storytelling; rather, they used the Deirdre myth as the raw material for original work that shaped the stories according to their political, moral as well as aesthetic tastes. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the roles of Ferguson and O'Grady as 'Fathers of the Irish literary revival' and the ways in which their treatments of the Deirdre myth reflect the convictions of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy as well as the dominant Victorian morals. Yeats considered Ferguson 'the greatest poet Ireland has produced, because the most central and most Celtic'[1] and also sensed in O'Grady 'a most Celtic temperament'[2]. This identification of the Celtic spirit in figures whose backgrounds and sympathies associated them more

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[1] Yeats, *Dublin University Review*, November 1886; repr. as 'The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson: II', *Uncollected Prose*, vol. i (1970), p. 103.
[2] Yeats, 'Irish National literature II', *Bookman*, August 1895; repr. *Uncollected Prose i* (1970), p. 367.

readily with the unionist ruling class raises important questions about the traditional association of cultural patriotism and political nationalism. Their versions of the Deirdre myth provide a useful focus for investigation into how a unionist Irishman might position himself in relation to the legendary past.

The Deirdre legend fascinated Samuel Ferguson throughout his life. His prose version 'The Death of the Children of Usnach' had been composed in his early twenties and formed part of the *Hibernian Nights Entertainments* series, first printed in the *DUM* of December 1834.[3] He later wrote a monodrama based on the legend, which was to be included in his collection of *Poems*[4] published in 1880 and reprinted posthumously in *Lays of the Red Branch*[5] in 1897. The theme of Deirdre is also briefly evoked in Ferguson's 'introductory note' to 'The Tain-Quest', which forms part of *Lays of the Western Gael*[6], where it is described as the essential opening tragedy that precipitated war between the troops of King Conor in Ulster and those of Queen Maev of Connaught. In her biography of her husband, Lady Ferguson recalled his life-long fascination with the legend of Deirdre and commented that it 'dominated Ferguson's imagination from youth to age'.[7] His interest in the tale did not simply cover a long time span but also manifested itself in the diverse literary forms – prose, verse and drama – in which he was to shape the myth. In 1832, together with George Fox, John Maclean and O'Hagan, Ferguson formed an Irish language study group. Although he never fully mastered Old Irish, he investigated the medieval manuscripts of the legend and, as was pointed out by Lady

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[3] Samuel Ferguson, 'The Death of the Children of Usnach', *Hibernian Nights' Entertainments*, *DUM* (December 1834), 670-88; repr. First series (Dublin, 1887).
[4] Ferguson, 'Deirdre', *Poems* (Dublin, 1880).
[5] Ferguson, 'Deirdre', *Lays of the Red Branch* (London, 1897), pp. 36-88.
[6] Ferguson, *Lays of the Western Gael* (London, 1865); repr. (Otley, 2001) ed. John Kelly, pp. 2-3.
[7] Lady Mary Catharine Ferguson, *Sir Samuel Ferguson in the Ireland of his Day,* 2 vols (Edinburgh & London, 1896), vol. i, pp. 49-50.

Ferguson, 'knew enough to glean from Gaelic sources the material (...) he made the groundwork of many of his poems'[8].

One may wonder what drove a Protestant unionist student of law in the modernising city of Belfast to focus for so long on the ancient Irish tragedy of Deirdre. Ferguson apparently developed a special fondness for the legend after coming across the volumes of traditional melodies collected by Edward Bunting after the 1792 harp festival in Belfast.[9] According to Lady Ferguson, he was particularly drawn to the 'Neaill ghubh a Dheirdre' ('The Lamentation of Deirdre for the Sons of Usnach'):

> In noticing the (...) pieces and melodies of Mr Bunting's collection, Ferguson dwells on the "Neaill ghubh a Dheirdre", which he [Bunting] says is "perhaps the *oldest* piece in the collection; for the story (...) refers to a period *considerably anterior* to the Ossianic era. It is hard to say in what particular part of the story the interest lies, which has taken so strong a hold on the imaginations of the people. It would appear, however, to consist mainly in its frequent examples of magnanimity and fortitude, and in the high idea which it gives us of *ancient* honour." [Italics mine.] [10]

By quoting in full Bunting's comments on the piece, she signals that her husband's enduring attraction to this tale was, like Bunting's, caused by its mysterious 'ancient' origins. In his 'Inaugural lecture of the Meath Archaeological Society', Ferguson praised the ancient Irish legends for being rich repositories of Gaelic culture that serve to enliven a dreary modern reality. They are described as 'a happily preserved *deposit* from which some of the exhausted *fields* of imaginative and dramatic thought in our own generation may be *re-fertilised*'.[11] [Italics mine.] Ferguson exposes in figurative terms the importance of its rediscovery and volunteers for the task of cultivation. In a eulogising essay published in the literary weekly *Irish Fireside* on 9 October 1886, just two months

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[8] Lady Ferguson, 'Introduction', *Lays of the Red Branch*, p. xviii.
[9] Edward Bunting (1773-1843) collected three volumes on ancient Irish music. See *A General Collection of the Ancient Irish Music* (London, 1796), *A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland* (London, 1809) and *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin, 1840).
[10] Lady Ferguson (1896), p. 49.
[11] See Ferguson's *Inaugural Lecture Meath Archaeological Society* (Trim, 1879), p. 21, cited in Terence Brown, ed., *Samuel Ferguson: a Centenary Tribute* (Dublin, 1987), pp. 61-2.

after Ferguson's death, W. B. Yeats celebrates his position as the pioneering revivalist of the heroic cycles and also resorts to a gardening metaphor:

> Sir Samuel Ferguson's special claim to our attention is that he went back to the Irish cycle, finding it, (...), a fountain that, in the passage of centuries, was overgrown with weeds and grass, (...); but now that his feet have worn the pathway, many others will follow, and bring thence living waters for the healing of our nation, (...).[12]

It would be an unfeasible task to enumerate the different sorts of 'weeds and grass' that Ferguson encountered while digging into the material that was available to him. But despite Yeats's claims, he was not the only antiquarian concerned with the retrieval of Ireland's Gaelic past, nor was he the first man of the nineteenth century to tread on 'the pathway' of Irish saga. Apart from the Gaelic Society's important volume of *Transactions,* published in 1808, which, we have seen, included a translation of the Deirdre legend by Theophilus O'Flanagan, Thomas Moore was at around the same time writing his *Irish Melodies*, a series of poems that served as lyrics to popular Irish tunes. Inspired by Bunting's work, he took possession in 1811 of the Deirdre theme and wrote the famous 'Avenging and Bright', which he applied to an old Irish air *Crooghan A Venee*. Although the song is based on the betrayal of Deirdre and the sons of Usna by Conchubar, Moore was implicitly associating King George IV with the untrustworthy king of Ulster. He felt that the Regent had acted in a similar fashion to Conchubar towards the exiled sons of Usna, by promising the 'safe return' of Catholics and supporting Catholic emancipation, but then failing to defend their cause after ascending the throne. The last stanza particularly expresses Moore's personal disillusionment with George IV, as he calls for vengeance:

> Yes, monarch! though sweet are our home recollections,
> Though sweet are the tears that from tenderness fall;
> Though sweet are our friendships, our hopes, our affections,
> Revenge on a tyrant is sweetest of all![13]

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[13] Yeats, *Uncollected Prose*, vol. i., p. 82.
[14] Thomas Moore, 'Avenging and Bright', *Irish Melodies* (1811), vol. iv; repr. (London, 1852)

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the saga material had been largely utilised by politically motivated Catholic authors, often songwriters like Moore, who departed from the Gaelic originals and invested their narratives with the ideologies of the time. This deeply affected Ferguson, not only as it clashed with his unionist and Protestant allegiances, but also because it filled the early Irish sources with unwanted 'weeds'.

Before Ferguson, another lawyer, James Hardiman compiled *Irish Minstrelsy* in 1831, a two-volume anthology containing English translations of traditional Irish poetry and songs. The first volume contains a ballad entitled 'Blooming Deirdre'[14], inspired by the celebrated Irish heroine, but, as the author's notes to the poem indicate, rather evokes a fifteenth-century woman named Catherine, who also became the cause of an earl's ruin. The shared legal and antiquarian interests did not, however, draw the two men closer together. The young Ferguson of the 1830's was a radical Protestant Tory who abhorred Popish doctrines. Hardiman was, on the other hand, a Catholic and sympathetic to the Jacobite cause. Although they were placed alongside the Gaelic text, his translations were vehemently criticized by Ferguson in his four-part review article for being 'politically malignant and religiously fanatical'[15] as well as 'spurious, puerile, unclassical – lamentably bad'[16]. If Hardiman's intention to make native poetry available to English-speaking readers was applauded by Ferguson, his translations were nevertheless seen as another instance of Catholic monopoly over Gaelic culture. This realisation acted as an activating trigger on Ferguson's subsequent decision to turn to the old cycles and show that they could also be the strongholds of Protestant culture: 'Let us contribute our aid to the auspicious undertaking, and introduce Saxon and Scottish Protestant to an acquaintance with the poetical genius of a people hitherto unknown to them.'[17]

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[14] James Hardiman, 'Blooming Deirdre', *Irish Minstrelsy*, vol iv, pp. 290-5.
[15] Samuel Ferguson, 'review of Hardiman's Minstrelsy', *DUM* vol iv (Aug. 1834), Part II, 153ff.
[16] *Ibid.*, Part III, Oct. 1834, 453ff.
[17] *Ibid.*, vol iii, April 1834, Part I, p. 457ff.

His prose version of the Deirdre story, 'The Death of the Children of Usnach', appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* as early as 1833 and was published anonymously in the *DUM* in December 1834. It served as the first instalment of the *Hibernian Nights' Entertainments* series. Its inclusion in the *DUM* is not anodyne. The journal had been launched in January 1833 by a group of young unionist conservatives in direct response to the so-called constitutional reforms of the 1830s which threatened to undermine the prestige and power of Irish Protestants.[18] The journal thus sought to instigate a Protestant revival in order to offset what was seen as a Catholic threat. The pre-Christian tale of Deirdre, being neither Protestant nor Catholic in essence, represented for Ferguson a neutral terrain where a common Irish identity could be found and cultural reconciliation achieved. Although the early versions of the tale were elaborated long after the christianisation of the country, they displayed a harmonious coexistence of pagan and Christian values, which Ferguson wished to emphasize. His desire to bring divergent cultures together is more obviously registered in his conflation of *LMU* and *OCU* into a continuous narrative. While the title 'Death of the Children of Usnach' is the direct translation of *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*, the tale starts as in *LMU* with the early developments of Deirdre's life, the druid's predictions before her birth, her forced reclusion, the encounter with Naisi, to which are then attached additional episodes and the tragic ending of the later *OCU*. Ferguson's retelling seeks to combine two separate versions in one single literary and cultural unit.

A similar process of amalgamation of different temporal frames is evidenced in a *mise en abîme* structure, which creates a three-dimensional narrative space. In an unprecedented fashion, Ferguson incorporated the tale of Deirdre within the historical context of Elizabethan Ireland. The action is set in 1592 in the Birmingham Tower of

[18] Catholic emancipation was granted by a Relief Act in 1829 which allowed Catholics to enter Parliament, and to hold civil and military offices. The 1832 Irish Reform Act increased Irish seats in the House of Commons and widened the franchise to include more Catholics.

Dublin Castle where three prisoners are detained. They are the historical figures of Red Hugh O'Donnell, one of the last Gaelic leaders, and the two sons of Shane O'Neill, Henry and Art who were imprisoned by English forces. 'The Death of Children of Usnach' is the first of many stories told by Turlogh O'Hagan, the hereditary bard of O'Neill, to the three captives in order to entertain them. The traditional oral mode of transmission of the legend is thus re-enacted. The embedded tale does not merely offer the prisoners the possibility of a mental form of escapism but also gives rise to a stimulating debate which prepares them for a future escape. The *mise en abîme* structure signifies the author's desire to relate the mythic past of Deirdre, the Elizabethan past of Hugh O'Donnell, and the nineteenth-century present of Ferguson and his contemporaries. The legend is not structurally isolated or cut off from present reality, but forms an integral part of history and fiction. The present further finds echo in the mythical past. Thus, the opening scene between the nostalgic prisoners mirrors that of the three exiled sons of Usnach before the arrival of Fergus:

> "I'd give the best of my life", cried Art, "to hear the war-cry of our house once more upon the hills of Kilultagh- (...)!
> "Lamb dearg aboo!" cried a voice, (...) at their backs.
> The three young men started to their feet, and standing before them, beheld in their attendant the well-known features of their fosterer and clansman Turlogh Buidh O'Hagan, the bard of Tulloghoge.[19]

The effect of this framing device is to create an impression of unity between three essential stages of Irish history. The nineteenth-century Irish man is a product of the interaction and amalgamation of diverse religious and political cultures: that of pre-Christian oral tradition, medieval Christianisation, but also of Elizabethan rule. The changes and divisions imposed by history must not prevent man from searching for common roots or from aspiring, in the poet's own words, 'to link his present with his country's past, / And live anew in knowledge of his sires'[20]. The sons of Usnach,

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[19] Ferguson (1834); repr. (1887), p. 10.
[20] Quoted by Lady Ferguson, 'Introduction' (1897), p. xiii.

O'Donnell and Ferguson all share common Ulster origins, but they lived at different stages in the history of the province: before the Anglo-Norman invasions, during the consolidation of English domination over the Gaelic chieftains in the sixteenth century, and more than two centuries after the 1609 Ulster plantation which took the land away from the Catholic Irish, replacing them with English and Scottish settlers. Ireland's religious and cultural diversity should not, Ferguson insists, make one individual more Irish than the other: 'I am an Irishman and a Protestant, but I was an Irishman before I was a Protestant.'[21] It is, therefore, essential to be acquainted with one's past before laying claims to an Irish identity. This idea is developed in the exchange that follows the narration of the story, as Henry O'Neill expresses his difficulty in understanding why Fergus did not bring the protagonists safely back to Ireland, but joined a feast instead:

> "Had I been Fergus," said Henry O'Neill, when Turlogh concluded, "I would never have deserted my charge for Barach's banquet."

The bard replies that the customs of Fergus's time cannot be easily apprehended by the man of the sixteenth century. It is the role of the storyteller not to alter the cultural peculiarities of his ancestors just to make them fit in with the dominant ideologies of his time:

> "Ah", said Turlogh "thou takest no thought of the strange usages of different times and nations-(...): but what I have told you is according to the ancient account, which has never been varied during many hundred years of constant tradition, (...) and this obligation of hospitality, although it be not now practised, yet hath its old existence never been doubted by any bard or story-teller of ancient or modern day. Truly it was a strange and ungracious observance to detain a man against his will (...): yet such is the tale our ancestors have told us, and it becomes not us to alter or corrupt it." [22]

The 'obligation of hospitality' that forces Fergus to attend a banquet against his will, refers to the old Celtic practice called *geasa* which were, we have seen, personal obligations or taboos laid upon a person or a society. Their violation triggered shame, dishonour or other dire consequences. Ferguson seems to suggest that such oddities,

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[21] See Ferguson's letter to Robert Blackwood dated 9 April 1838, preserved at the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, MS. 4046, f. 158.
[22] Ferguson (1834); repr. (1887), p. 32.

whether actual or mythical, must be regarded as essential elements of early Irish civilization and their elision would lead to an inaccurate perception of native folklore. He is thus implicitly accusing Catholic adapters like Hardiman and Moore of having altered the legendary texts in order to express personal and contemporary concerns.

Ferguson's adaptation also functions as a meditation on Ireland's complex political situation. After listening to a story that ends in civil war in Ulster, the captives interpret the myth as an allegory of their current situation. O'Donnell transposes the political split that followed the murder of the Sons of Usnach to the reality of late sixteenth century Ireland:

> behold what strife and weakness arose for Ulster, from making private wrongs and jealousies the causes of public commotion: behold the nobles disgusted with the king, the king sacrificing the best and bravest of his own subjects; and, in the end, inviting (...) the invasion of another potentate, and the final subjection of his own people to the rule of strangers. Alas, it has been ever thus (...). In God's name, my cousins, let not the old quarrels of our houses, hinder our hearty union now! (...) let us first join in keeping the country, and let us settle its division after. (...) we are strong enough, if united, to hold the three provinces against the world![23]

National divisions are seen as the greatest obstacle to the creation of a strong and united Ireland. Yet the transposition is double and O'Donnell's statement is made to reverberate and evoke nineteenth-century tensions between pro-unionist Protestants and nationalist Catholics. Their cultural union through the translation of Irish material into English and a shared pride in Ireland's past may similarly facilitate political reconciliation. Anyone who is unfamiliar with Ferguson's political and religious allegiances would probably fail to discern that he is committed to the Protestant unionist cause after reading *Hibernian Nights' Entertainments*. The highly depreciative descriptions of the Elizabethan 'Saxon' oppressors who fettered three patriotic young men evoke rather the narrative voice of a fervent nationalist. The tales told to the prisoners in the series are a means to hasten the moment when the prisoners will escape and fight again for an independent Gaelic Ireland.

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[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5

Far from being just a passive storyteller, the bard is the prisoners' accomplice and supports their plans to re-conquer their territories:

> (...) it wants but O'Donnell in Ballyshannon and O'Neill in Castlereagh to raise such a storm about the head of this cruel Queen as shall ere long beat the rifled crown from her withered brows, and blow across the seas those robbers of our lands and snarers of our chieftains' children, never to trample on our blessed soil again! [24]

The story even has the unexpected effect of making chains 'hang lighter' and intensifying the heroes' desire for individual and national freedom:

> He [O'Donnell] rose, unconscious of his captivity (...); but the fetter soon checked him, and he again sat down with a bitter sigh. "I had forgotten," he cried, "while meditating English overthrow, that I am still a captive in the chains of England."[25]

The rebellion they are preparing against an old ruthless queen parallels that of Fergus towards Conor. The monarch is represented as the embodiment of evil and, 'revenge on a tyrant' is, as in Moore's melody, 'sweetest of all'. It is, indeed, complete, as Fergus eventually 'slew Conor'. The king had never been killed in previous versions. Ferguson thus wishes to raise his patronymic hero to a more prominent role and debunk the caricatural representation of a weak and cowardly king who had given his crown away to Conor.[26] The final triumph of Fergus over the crown undoubtedly inspires O'Donnell to persevere and fight for the fall of Queen Elizabeth. This may seem, however, to stand at odds with what we know of Ferguson's defence of political union with England. But the choice of Elizabethan Ireland as contextual framework reflects, in fact, the author's own contradictions, revealing mixed feelings of sympathy and contempt towards his Catholic countrymen through an unusual combination of cultural patriotism and political unionism. Ferguson had allowed a confrontation of his divided voices in his 1833 'Dialogue between the Head and the Heart of an Irish Protestant'. Heart stresses its deep love for the country and its people, although it suffers from rejection:

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[25] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
[27] The theme of the abdication of Fergus was to interest Ferguson in later years. See his poem 'The Abdication of Fergus Mac Roy'; repr. *Lays of the Western Gael* (2001), pp. 27-35.

> HEART: (...) I am tormented and enraged by the condition to which our loyalty has brought us. - Deserted by the Tories, insulted by the Whigs, threatened by the Radicals, hated by the Papists, and envied by the Dissenters, (...) and after all, told that we are neither English nor Irish, fish nor flesh, I love this land better than any other. I cannot believe it a hostile country. I love the people in it, in spite of themselves, and cannot feel towards them as enemies.[27]

This desire to reconcile two religious communities finds echo in the shifting allegiances of Gaelic chieftains at the time of Elizabeth, their most emblematic figure being Hugh O'Neill. Before becoming O'Donnell's ally in his battle against the English forces, O'Neill had been granted the title of earl of Tyrone by Queen Elizabeth and had always proved loyal to her until he, like Fergus, changed sides. The reader is assumed to know that although the three captives' escape was indeed successful, the death of the Sons of Usnach becomes proleptic of O'Donnell and O'Neill's failure to win the final battle for the Gaelic cause at Kinsale on 24 December 1601. They too were proclaimed traitors by the Queen and had to surrender. Like the Usnach brothers, O'Donnell met a tragic fate and was poisoned in Spain by an English agent in September 1602. Both myth and history reveal that rebellion against kingly power may be the fanciful hope of sincere, passionate and brave young men, but it can only result in national chaos.

Ironically, Turlogh the bard, who warns against the tendency to adapt the story to a contemporary taste, fails to follow his own advice. Rather, his tale cherishes the notions of respectability, virtue and domesticity that are more likely to be found in the literature of the Early Victorian period. Although Queen Victoria succeeded to the throne in 1837 and soon came to epitomise the respectable housewife, devoted to her husband and children, that Ideal of Womanhood had already begun by the mid-1820s. The Deirdre saga is thus made to suit contemporary bourgeois respectability, principles with which Ferguson totally agreed: 'with bold men and chaste women (...) you have the elements of a nation.'[28] The episodes that constitute the original story are retained, as well as certain

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[27] Samuel Ferguson, 'A Dialogue Between the Head and Heart of an Irish Protestant', *DUM*, vol. ii (Nov. 1833), p. 591.
[28] Ferguson, 'Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy', part III, *DUM*, vol. iv, Oct. 1834, 447ff.

cultural specificities such as *geasa*, but they are exempt from the coarse elements of *LMU*. As we saw in Chapter 2, the supposedly literal translations of the antiquarians had already felt the need to smoothen off some of these harsh edges, but Ferguson goes even further in this direction. This can best be seen via a comparison with the O'Flanagan passage examined above, Deirdre and Naisi's famous first exchange:

> O'Flanagan's translation:
> 'Mild is the dame who passeth by,' said Naisi.
> "It is natural for damsels to be mild where there are no youths," says *she*.
> "The *man* of the *province* is with you," says he.
> "I would make a choice between you both," says she, "and would prefer a young man such as you."
> "Not so," says he, "though it is in consequence of apprehension."
> "It is for avoidance of me thou sayest that", says she.
> "Be it so then," says he.
> With this *she flung a ball at him*, which struck his head.
> "A stroke of disgrace through life's extent is this," says she, "if you take me not."
> "Depart from me, *woman*," says he.
> "Thou wilt be in disgrace," says she. [29] [Italics mine.]

In Ferguson's hand this dialogue becomes:

> 'Gentle is the damsel who passeth by,' said Naisi.
> Then the *maiden* (...) replied, 'Damsels may well be gentle where there are no youths.' (...)
> 'The *king* of the province is *betrothed* to thee, oh *damsel*,' he said.
> 'I *love him not*,' she replied, 'he is an aged man; I would rather love a youth like thee.'
> 'Say not so, *oh*, *damsel*,' said Naisi; 'the *king* is a *better spouse* than the *king's servant*.'
> 'Thou sayest so,' replied Deirdre, 'that thou mayest avoid me.'
> Then plucking *a rose* from a briar, she flung the *flower* to him and said, 'Now art thou ever disgraced if thou rejectest me.'
> 'Depart from me, I pray thee, *damsel*,' said Naisi.
> 'Nay,' replied Deirdre, 'if thou dost not take me to be *thy wife*, thou art dishonoured before all the men of thy country (...).'[30] [My emphasis]

The extra changes introduced by Ferguson reflect distinctly nineteenth-century values. Naisi is uncomfortably aware of his class status as the 'king's servant'; meanwhile, any ambiguity about the nature of Deirdre's proposal is removed as the characters all seem agreed that marriage constitutes the only conceivable framework for the consummation of their desires. Although O'Flanagan had already substituted the more refined words 'damsels' and 'youths' for the 'heifers' and 'bulls' in *LMU*, in Ferguson's text the process becomes systematic – Naisi seems unable to address Deirdre without reminding her that

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[29] O'Flanagan (1808), p. 157.
[30] Ferguson (1834); repr. (1887), p. 16.

she is a 'damsel', and Ferguson himself labels her a 'maiden'. This repeated insistence on her virginal status goes hand in hand with a further romanticising of the *geasa* she imposes on Naisi. What began in *LMU* as a grabbing of his ears had already become a more reserved throwing of a ball in O'Flanagan; now Ferguson changes the ball to a symbolic rose. The implicit recommendation is that the 'damsel' must first become a 'wife', a 'spouse', before she can elope with a man and allow him to take her flower for real.

In the same way, the poems included in the narration such as 'Deirdre's Lament for the Sons of Usnach' are pale shadows of the originals and more akin in their lofty tone and style to the poetry of the Romantic period: 'Dig the grave, and make it ready - / Lay me on my true love's body!'[31] The changes in the terminology have clear political undertones and reveal a tension between the author's contradictory desire 'not to alter or corrupt', in his bard's words, the tale 'our ancestors have told us' but also to remain true to his own moral and political conservatism. The respectable Celtic heroes are therefore treated as well-behaved Protestants who are, for Ferguson, the true keepers of good taste in Victorian Ireland.

The tendency to turn Celtic heroes into respectable and sentimental Victorians is more greatly felt after Ferguson is knighted in 1878. Despite a brief volte-face in 1848 when he spoke at the Protestant Repeal Association in favour of the restoration of a national legislature, Ferguson was quickly brought back to the unionist sphere after marrying a Guinness heiress. He became, perhaps more than ever, a great defender of the rights of his class. In 1880, his *Poems* were published and included a dramatised version in blank verse of the Deirdre legend. It starts in *medias res* just before Fergus's arrival in Scotland. It is dubbed a monodrama, 'because though the actors are more than one, the

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[31] Ferguson (1834), 'Deirdre's Lament for the Sons of Usnach', in 'The Death of the Children of Usnach', pp. 30-31.

action is unbroken, and the principal figures remain in sight throughout'[32]. It is a first attempt to dramatize the story, albeit setting it in an even more Victorian context. In her summary of the play, Lady Ferguson also turns poor Deirdre into a decent maid and wife:

> Nearly half a century later, in his 'Poems', Deirdré, its heroine, forms the central figure in a drama called by her name. Her story is a sad one. A *lovely girl*, brought up in seclusion by the orders of King Conor Mac Nessa, who designs her for future wife, Deirdré meets a lover Naisi, (...). *They wed*; and accompanied by his brothers, fly to Alba. (...) Notwithstanding the apprehensions of Deirdré, *her husband* decides to return to Ulster. [Italics mine.][33]

In *Sir Samuel Ferguson, Poet and Antiquarian*, Arthur Deering expresses his exasperation with what he terms the play's 'vitiated Victorian vagaries' and further comments on Deirdre's famous 'Farewell to Alba', which Ferguson very loosely translated from the Irish: 'In 1880 Ferguson revised the idea he had of Deirdre and he put this song into her mouth in a measure which connotes the melancholy of a sentimental Victorian maid.'[34] Indeed, she is presented in the *dramatis personae* as the 'wife of Naisi', a respectable and well-mannered girl. As in Ferguson's earlier account, the socialising institution of marriage erases any trace of the seductive and sexually forward Celtic 'heifer'. The women portrayed in Ferguson's adaptation appear to be fulfilled with love and domestic matters only. Deirdre's 'Nurse', Levarcam, stands as the most obvious example of household perfection, having been responsible for Deirdre's good education. On Naisi's request, Deirdre plays the harp to her husband in a way that is reminiscent of the Victorian ladies to whom the piano similarly offered a most refined form of recreation: "'Upon a silken couch: she flung her arms, / No ivory fairer, o'er her golden harp, / And played a merry and delightful air.'"[35] Conversely, men feel the need to leave the home and indulge in exterior activities:

> Naisi (...) Love makes the woman's life
> Within-doors and without; but, out of doors,

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[32] Ferguson, 'Introductory Note', *Lays of the Red Branch* (London, 1897), p. 35.
[33] Lady Ferguson (1896), vol i, p. 50.
[34] Arthur Deering, *Sir Samuel Ferguson, Poet and Antiquarian* (Philadelphia, 1931), p. 39.
[35] Ferguson (1880), p. 134.

Action and glory make the life of man.[36]

Deirdre later enters into lengthy philosophical debates with Fergus's sons, Illan and Buino, on the existence of God and the corruption of urban life and asserts that '(...) the simple country people deck / Each natural scene with graceful tales of love, / While the strong castles and the towns of men / Are by the poets and historians / Stuck full of tragedies and woes of war.'[37] Illan agrees with her and would also 'rather, if I might, / Frequent the open country, and converse with shepherds, hunters, and such innocents'[38]. These metaphysical questionings stand as far as can be from the medieval text and rather reflect contemporary religious doubts as well as environmental issues arising after the industrial revolution.

As well as censoring the more overt signs of female sexuality, Ferguson eradicates all traces of the story's original goriness by reducing, for example, the amount of blood spilt during the injuries and deaths of certain characters. Two examples in particular stand out. In *OCU*, the king sends one of his men to check whether Deirdre is still beautiful. As the couple are playing fidcheall, Naisi senses that they are being spied upon and taking one of the pieces, makes 'a terrible, well-aimed shot with it so that it chanced to go in the warrior's eye'.[39] Ferguson's spy is only hit on the cheek, which is 'besmeared with blood'[40]. In the same way, Deirdre no longer commits suicide by 'letting her head be driven against a stone' and making 'a mass of fragments of it'[41], but cleanly poisons herself instead: 'That cup of wine/ Is still untasted. Pray thee hand it me. / I would but kiss my nurse and say farewell.'[42] The practical reason for such alterations is that they are

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[36] *Ibid.*, p. 100.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 120.
[38] *Ibid.*
[39] Mac Giolla Léith (1993), p. 119.
[40] Ferguson (1880), p. 134.
[41] Kinsella (1969); repr. (1970), p. 20.
[42] Ferguson (1880), p. 145.

obviously easier to stage. Yet the manner of them betrays a desire not to shock a Victorian audience.

The 1880 version also makes anachronistic political allusions to the necessary integration of Ireland within the British Empire more explicit, as the fight for Home Rule was becoming an increasingly important issue:

> **NAISI**
> Man lives by mutual trust. The commonwealth
> Falls into chaos if man trust not man.
> For then all joint endeavours come to nought,
> And each pursues his separate intent.[43]

Naisi's words may also be interpreted in light of Ferguson's call for a necessary understanding between the different men living in one same country which echoes the statement made in 1834: 'let it first be our task to make the people of Ireland better acquainted with one another.'[44] The 'mutual trust' that Naisi is referring to can be seen more specifically as the indispensable instrument for a future cultural union between Protestants and Catholics. If reconciliation cannot be achieved on a religious or political level, it is by stimulating the interest of the Protestant Ascendancy in the native literary heritage which had until then been explored essentially by the Catholic tradition that Ferguson hopes to see the possibility of a new 'joint endeavour'.

The tensions between his antiquarian interests, cultural nationalism, and a simultaneous engagement in unionist and conservative politics probably explain the divergent opinions that Ferguson's works received both during and after his lifetime. His *Poems* received poor reviews in England, as in the short anonymous article published in *The Academy* of 24 July 1880, which advised Ferguson not to write poetry if he did not have the 'necessary gifts', and suggested that he should 'issue copies of his poems as

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[43] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
[44] Ferguson, 'review of Hardiman's Minstrelsy', 457ff.

presents to a few intimate friends' only.[45] In the two long essays on Ferguson written by Yeats immediately after his death, the first one praised his work and contested previous refutations of his literary talents as symptomatic of 'anti-Irish feeling'[46]. In the second, Yeats went further and insisted that Ferguson's works had been dismissed by English critics simply because he had boldly chosen to deal with the Irish heroes:

> If Sir Samuel Ferguson had written to the glory of (...) British civilization, the critics (...) would have taken care of his reputation. (...) If Sir Samuel Ferguson had written of Arthur and Guinevere, they would have received him gladly; that he chose rather to tell of Congal and of desolate and queenly Deirdre, we give him full-hearted thanks; he has restored to our hills and rivers their epic interest.[47]

He further devotes three entire pages to the 1880 *Deirdre*, which he classifies as 'the greatest of Sir Samuel Ferguson's poems'[48]. He even feels tempted to give more details in his summary of the legend, but is limited by space restrictions:

> I *have not space to tell you* how, point by point, she sees fate drawing near them (...). I *have not space to tell you* how the sons of Usna are slain, but *I cannot resist* quoting in full the beautiful lament of Deirdre (...)[49] [Italics mine.]

Yeats, who does not seem to have noticed the recurring Victorianisms of *Deirdre*, asserts that Ferguson 'was like the ancients' and that the monodrama 'restored to us a fragment of the buried Odyssey of Ireland'[50]. The articles also betray a refusal to acknowledge Ferguson's unionist allegiances. According to Yeats, Ferguson's political nationalism simply 'became less ardent'[51], but he always remained a fervent patriot. He goes so far as to condemn Margaret Stokes for having dismissed Ferguson's nationalistic leanings in her obituary notice in *The Academy*[52]:

> Miss Stokes severely errs in asserting that after Davis's death he 'severed himself wholly' from the national movement. (...) Two years after Davis's death, Ferguson was a chairman of the

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[45] Anon, in *The Academy* xviii (London, 1880), p. 60.
[46] Yeats, *Uncollected Prose* i, p. 85.
[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 93.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 100.
[52] Margaret Stokes, 'Obituary', *The Academy* xxx (21 Aug. 1886), pp. 120-121.

> Protestant Repeal Association, and delivered (...) a speech so national in tone that Emmet might have owned it.[53]

If most reviewers diverge when trying to measure the degree and extent of Ferguson's involvement in separatist politics, they nevertheless tend to agree on his patriotic love for Ireland: 'a man who loved his country from pure affection and as a moral duty.'[54]

However, as is suggested in an anonymous article published in *The Reflector* entitled 'Has Ireland a National Poet?', a national patriot is not necessarily a nationalist: 'We do not use the term national in the sense of belonging to the Nationalist party in Ireland.'[55] Ten years later in a *Bookman* review of Lady Ferguson's biography, Yeats mentions the simplistic tendency to see unionism and nationalism as irreconcilable: 'I was so accustomed to find Unionist hating Nationalist, and Nationalist hating Unionist, with the hatreds of Montagu and Capulet (...)'[56] He recalls the words of the former Fenian John O'Leary: 'Sir Samuel Ferguson (...) is, I understand, a Unionist, but he is a better patriot than I am; he has done more for Ireland than I have done or can ever hope to do.'[57]

Born thirty-six years after Ferguson in 1846, Standish James O'Grady was also drawn to Irish history and the old heroic cycles in his early twenties. He knew virtually no Gaelic and deplored the fact that his interest in Ireland's legendary past had not sprung from academic schooling or, in his own words, 'the stupid educational system of the country'[58]. Bad weather was to prove more helpful. In an article appropriately entitled 'A Wet Day' published in *The Irish Homestead* in 1899, O'Grady recounts how in his twenty-fourth year, while staying in a country house in the West of Ireland, he had to stay

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[53] Yeats, *Uncollected Prose* i, p. 100.
[54] J. P. Mahaffy, 'Obituary for Sir Samuel Ferguson', *The Athenaeum* (London, 14. Aug 1886), p. 205.
[55] See 'Has Ireland a National Poet?', *The Reflector* xvi (14 April 1888), pp. 380-383.
[56] 'An Irish Patriot', *The Bookman* (May, 1896), in *Uncollected Prose*, p. 403.
[57] *Ibid.*
[58] Standish James O'Grady, 'A Wet Day', *The Irish Homestead*, 1899, cited in 'Introduction' by Ernest A. Boyd, *Selected Essays and Passages* (Dublin, 1918), p. 3.

indoors and 'spent the time (...) looking over the books in the library'[59]. There he read O'Halloran's *History of Ireland*, which he erroneously supposed to have been written 'in the second decade of this century and before the rise of the Vallency School'[60]. This accidental discovery led to his acquaintance with early Irish history and awakened in him a desire to learn more about the period. Intellectual curiosity soon turned into antiquarian fascination and he pursued his investigation at the Royal Irish Academy, where he was directed to the lectures of Eugene O'Curry on ancient Irish history and mythology.[61] This important second step introduced him for the first time to Irish heroic literature, and to the legend of Deirdre.

The literature O'Grady consulted before writing his first Deirdre story consisted essentially of traditional documents. It is very unlikely that he looked at the more fictionalised adaptation of Ferguson, the 1834 'Death of the Children of Usnach', since it was not printed in book form until 1887. The two men had, nevertheless, met on several occasions, but in conditions that satisfied more their gustatory than their literary appetites: 'I knew Sir Samuel Ferguson and was often his guest, but knew him only as a kind, courteous and hospitable gentleman; no one ever told me that he was a great Irish poet.'[62] Like Ferguson, O'Grady suffered at some stage from a lack of literary recognition. His *History of Ireland* did not appeal to publishers, who found the names of characters such as 'Cuculain', 'Concobar', 'Cathvah' or 'Lowrcam' unpronounceable, and thus off-putting to a modern audience, and he published and printed the book at his own expense in 1878 – his perseverance being initially 'a good deal laughed at' by 'the professors and educated classes'.[63] As his son Hugh Art comments in his biography, the book was

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[59] *Ibid.*
[60] *Ibid.* Sylvester O'Halloran had in fact long been dead at the date suggested by O'Grady.
[61] Eugene O'Curry, *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish* (London, 1873), *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History* (Dublin, 1878).
[62] O'Grady (1899), quoted in Boyd, introd. (1918), p. 3.
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

acquired (but not necessarily read) by a few intimate friends who 'rallied round him, and bought what they were pleased to call "poor Standish's latest."'[64] Although press reviews generally praised his work, it failed to appeal to a wider audience, more inclined to read fiction and romance than supposedly dreary Histories of Ireland. O'Grady later decided to rewrite the legends in the form of three novels with more alluring titles and another version of Deirdre was included in *The Coming of Cuculain*, published in 1894.

The tale is condensed to the extent that it omits essential details, as if it were deliberately censored, and the encounter between Deirdre and Naysi is abridged to one single sentence: 'But he presented himself to her as she walked among the trees, and the end of that meeting was, that they gave each other their love, and plighted a faithful troth.'[65] As in Ferguson's versions, sexual union derives from mutual love and can only occur within the bounds of marriage. The only expression of unconventional erotic desire is hidden away in the obscure epigraph extracted from Swinburne's poem 'Laus Veneris': 'Yea, for her sake, on them the fire gat hold.'[66] Unless the reader is aware that the poem as a whole praises illicit sexuality, the line is not by itself very explicit and rather tends to inscribe the legend even more within a Victorian context.

The 1894 version 'Deirdré' which forms the tenth chapter of the novel *The Coming of Cuculain,* goes so far as to make the heroine unaware of her impure thoughts so that her innocence sounds exaggerated, if not affected:

> I would wish to have him for a playfellow and pleasant acquaintance. Of maidens, too, such as myself I have dreamed, yet they do not appear to me to be so alluring or so amiable as that youth.[67]

The realisation of the true nature of her feelings soon distracts her from her embroidery and disturbs her to such a great extent that:

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[64] Hugh Art O'Grady, *Standish James O'Grady, the Man & the Writer* (Dublin, 1929), p. 36.
[65] Standish James O'Grady, *History of Ireland: the Heroic Period* (London, 1878), pp. 116-7.
[66] See Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Laus Veneris', *Poems and Ballads* (London, 1866), p. 21. The poem actually reads: '*Yet* for her sake on them the fire gat hold.'
[67] Standish James O'Grady, *The Coming of Cuculain* (London, 1894), p. 78.

> As she spoke, Deirdré blushed, and first she stooped down over her work and then put before her face and eyes her two beautiful hands, rose-white (...) and tears, clearer than dewdrops (...) fell in bright showers upon the embroidery. [68]

The man of her dreams does not appear to be the archetype of the virile Celtic man but is rather a pubescent adolescent whose 'manly face had not yet known the razor, only the first soft dawn of budding manhood was seen there'[69]. O'Grady even felt the need to add: 'He had never known woman save in the way of courtesy.'[70] The following encounter between the lovers closely parallels that in Ferguson's 1834 version, as O'Grady also resorts to images of culled flowers that suggest the loss of sexual innocence. Yet the *double entendre* is here more explicit, as Deirdré and Naysi, for all their innocence, know how to interpret the secret language of flowers:

> Jocund and happy, breathing innocence and love, she came up to the dell. (...) Naysi came trembling and blushing. (...) As they went she gathered a rose and gave it to Naysi.
> "There is a great meaning in this token amongst the youths and maidens of the Gael," said he.
> "I know that," answered Deirdré.[71]

Through his repeated correlation of physical beauty and chastity, O'Grady seems to be going further than Ferguson and implicitly reproves the indecent behaviour of the young heroes. Like the plucked flower, the maiden who is insistently described as 'unwitting, jocund, (...) innocent, fresh and pure as the morning'[72] runs the risk of seeing her charms wither away once deflowered. The story ends as the lovers settle in Scotland and little is known about their subsequent adventures, their return to Ireland and the tragic fate they meet there. Their individual lives and deaths seem to be of little importance beyond the effect that their actions have on the nation's stability. They are, in short, responsible for having been irresponsible, as the violation of the 'solemn law enjoining perpetual virginity on the child of ill omen'[73] has caused disorder and civil war in Ulster; indeed, we see O'Grady's preoccupation with this consequence in the title of the very next

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[68] *Ibid.*, p. 79.
[69] *Ibid.*, p. 81. The allusion to the razor is not an anachronism. Celts used them during the Bronze Age.
[70] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
[71] *Ibid.*, pp. 90-2.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
[73] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

chapter, 'There was war in Ulster'. In this chapter, the king insists on virtue being a necessary condition for heroism, as true heroes prefer collective well-being to personal gratification: 'without chastity valour faileth in a nation, and lawlessness in this respect begetteth sure and rapid decay (...).'[74] The image of the king is therefore significantly altered. He is no longer described as the perverted old man who has designs on baby Deirdre, but becomes instead a preacher of good morals and the embodiment of heroic virtue. The fact that the author's father was a Church of Ireland rector[75] probably had an effect on the pervading evangelical tone of even his mythological works. When transposed to the reality of late nineteenth-century Ireland, the sermons on heroic chastity reflect the author's desire to see the aristocratic elite of his time distinguish itself from what he saw as the materialistic and uncultured middle classes by leading a virtuous life. Like Ferguson, O'Grady sought to summon ancient heroic culture to the standard of the Protestant Ascendancy.

However, the degenerate attitude of a few who, like the son of Usnach, prefer to follow a girl into exile rather than defend the rights of their country and class, represents a major threat that can lead to political and social anarchy. This had happened to the major political figure in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Charles Stewart Parnell, whose liaison with a married woman, Katharine O'Shea, could not be shown to the public eye. The husband, who had long known about the affair, eventually sued for divorce. In a country where the influence of the Catholic Church was so powerful, the effect of the scandal was disastrous for Parnell's political career. He was deposed from his position of leader of the Irish Party because it could not be held by an adulterer[76] and died less than a

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[75] *Ibid.*, 'There was war in Ulster', p. 95.

[76] O'Grady was in his early twenties when the Church of Ireland was disestablished. The Act of Disestablishment introduced by Gladstone was passed in 1869.

[76] In fact, Parnell was re-elected by the Irish Party after the divorce, until it was apparent that Gladstone would end the Liberal alliance if he stayed, whereupon the Irish party split into two.

year later, on 6 October 1891. On a larger political scale, any hopes for Home Rule were buried with him. O'Grady could not have been blind to the fact that the Deirdre myth would be read in a different light after the former leader's death and exploited the literary potential of the Parnell story. Even though, as a unionist, he was opposed to Parnell's call for Home Rule, O'Grady admired the man's charismatic personality and blamed the O'Shea divorce case for having precipitated his political downfall. Just as Naysi's encounter with Deirdre radically transformed his character and compromised his involvement in the military affairs of his king, Parnell was no longer the same man after his illegitimate liaison was brought out to the public eye. His metamorphosis is described in *The Story of Ireland* where O'Grady comments on the incredible change he had witnessed in Parnell's physical appearance after the scandal:

> When first I saw him, he was in the chair at one of Butt's meetings in the Rotunda. He was then a fashionable and elegant, but very shy and diffident young man.
>
> I next saw him in the height of the Land League agitation. He was walking down one of the Dublin Streets on his way to some public meeting. He was very smart and spruce in his attire, he smoked a cigar, (...) and looked gay and triumphant, and as if he were kicking landlords into the pit. Which, indeed, to some extent he was.
>
> Save a casual glimpse of Parnell in a Law Court, and afterwards when speaking in the House of Commons, I did not see him again till after the divorce case, and the revolt of his followers. He was ill-dressed, his hair was long and untrimmed, he was nearly bald, (...), he was bowed in the shoulders, his face was emaciated, he looked like a man who would not live long. The place was still the Round Room in the Rotunda, where I had first seen him.[77]

He then mentions how in the last year of Parnell's life, he 'came full tilt on him'[78] as he was driving in the County of Wicklow. After chatting with him for a while, he noticed a 'singular withdrawnness' in him: 'there was the pallor of death in his worn and hollow face'[79]. Thus to the reader of the 1890s, Deirdré and Katharine became archetypes of the *femmes fatales* who had distracted men from their national cause, brought about their political dishonour and precipitated their tragic fates. The civil war in Ulster which followed the tragic romance of Naysi and Deirdre further parallels the political turmoil that arose after that of Kitty O'Shea and Parnell. Just as Ulster was divided between those

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[77] Standish James O'Grady, *The Story of Ireland* (London, 1894), p. 203.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 204.
[79] *Ibid.*, p. 205.

who remained faithful to the king's army and those who, like Fergus, changed sides and fought for Queen Maeve of Connaught, Ireland was split into Parnellites and anti-Parnellites in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Not just Parnell's politics, but now also his private life, threatened to bring about the kind of anarchy and national disorder that O'Grady feared. By stressing the chaotic situation that concludes the Deirdre story, he is expressing fears that the same internal divisions – whether driven by nationalist and tenant demands, or by the scandal of moral laxity – might permanently weaken the nation as a whole.

O'Grady produced bowdlerized versions of the original Deirdre tale. A lot is left unsaid, entire passages are cut out, and the lovers' carefree years of bliss in Alba (Scotland) are hardly mentioned since they clashed with O'Grady's ideals of heroic grandeur, patriotism and virtue. He often applies the seal of history inappropriately, even on his imaginary considerations of the virtuous conduct of Irish mythical heroes. In the supposedly scholarly work *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical*, he wrongly insists that 'the heroic literature of Ireland (...) breathes more the antique German spirit of heroic chastity'[80]. He then cites extravagant examples to support his claim, going so far as to see Deirdre's suicide in *LMU* as directly caused by the ribald jest Conchubor addresses to her, as she is in a chariot with two men: 'Between me and Eogan you are a sheep eyeing two rams.'[81] For O'Grady, the crude joke has the radical effect of making the heroine 'perish from shame and grief'[82]. However, he does not specify that she dies by dashing her head against a stone. His so-called *Histories of Ireland* present a tendency to record only the details that conform to his views and to adapt historical and mythical stories to the political and moral tastes of his class. They are not, therefore, histories as

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[80] Standish James O'Grady, *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical* (Dublin, 1881), p. 31.
[81] Kinsella (1969); repr. (1970), p. 20.
[82] O'Grady (1881), p. 31.

such but evidence a 'desire to make the heroic period once again a portion of the imagination of the country'[83].

The need to appeal primarily to the collective imagination is further reflected in O'Grady's fictional treatments of Elizabethan Ireland. He shared with Ferguson a certain fascination with the period and also recounted the adventures of the Gaelic chieftains, notably those of Red Hugh O'Donnell. Unlike his predecessor, he did not incorporate the Deirdre legend within an Elizabethan context, but similarly chose to relate the episodes of the chieftain's detention and flight from Dublin Castle in his novel *Red Hugh's Captivity.* Largely eschewing Ferguson's ambivalence, his work emphasises the inevitability and necessity of the Elizabethan Conquest, which was, in his opinion, 'to Ireland's gain and not loss'[84]. In his 1897 review of O'Grady's *Flight of the Eagle,* Yeats described him as 'the first historian who has written Irish history in a philosophic spirit and as an imaginative art'[85], for his books on Elizabethan Ireland were 'more than dates and dialectics'[86]. However, this unscientific approach also exasperated Yeats, who criticised his 'breathless generalisations, his slipshod style, his ungovernable likings and dislikings' and 'disagreed with his conclusions too constantly'[87]. The conception of history as imaginative art had already prevailed in Carlyle's writings which were a great source of inspiration for O'Grady. He praised the Victorian sage for being 'the first man of letters of the day, his the highest name as a critic upon, and historian of, the past life of Europe'[88].

Legends thus became the ideal terrain upon which the author could freely exercise his imagination. The legendary tales of the Ulster Cycle presented a world that is fanciful,

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[83] O'Grady, *Early Bardic Literature, Ireland* (London, 1879), p. 17.
[84] O'Grady, 'Introduction', *Red Hugh's Captivity* (London, 1889), p. 4.
[85] Yeats, *The Bookman*, August 1897; repr. *Uncollected Prose* ii, p. 47.
[86] Yeats, *The Bookman*, August 1895; repr. *Uncollected Prose* i, p. 368.
[87] *Ibid.*, p. 369.
[88] O'Grady (1879), p. 38.

but also rooted in pre-Christian history, in which O'Grady could reconcile historical and imaginative processes. He thus described legends as the ideal form of History:

> The legends represent the imagination of the country; they are that kind of history which a nation desires to possess. They betray the ambition and ideals of the people, and, in this respect, have a value far beyond the tale of actual events and duly recorded deeds, which are no more history than a skeleton is a man.[89]

Imagination needs to project such myths and fancies and aspire to achieve that supreme form of civilization, 'the ideal of the race'. 'Imaginative conceptions', O'Grady believed, 'though invariably wrought upon the past, are painted with hues fetched from the future.'[90] He borrowed the prophetic tone of Carlyle, expressing his hopes for a future that would mirror that ideal legendary past. His idyllic vision of Celtic realms led him to fill his retellings of Irish legends with references to obscure Irish place names which do not form part of the original tales. Thus, the 1878 *Deirdre*, which is very abridged in its thematic content, abounds with odd names, such as 'the knights of the Crave Rue', the 'kings of the Clanna Rury', the 'Tayta Brac' or the 'Grianan of the women'[91], unnecessary for the understanding of the story and which only serve to embellish its Celtic setting. O'Grady further insisted on the mythological nature of the tale by introducing the Children of Lir into the narrative: 'For, as they rowed across the cold expanse of the Moyle, they heard the children singing, and it was night.'[92] Although the two legends had often been regrouped together with *The Death of the Children of Tuireann* under the heading *The Three Sorrowful Tales of Erin*, they had not previously been combined in one story.[93] The interpolation enables the author to insist on the mythological background of the story; imagination refashions it in new forms, familiarising, for instance, Deirdre with the children of Lir.

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[89] O'Grady (1881), p. 41.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 146.
[91] O'Grady (1878), pp. 114-5.
[92] *Ibid.*, p. 118.
[93] Although the story of Deirdre belongs to the Ulster cycle and the other two tales are related to the mythological cycle, these tales have been found together since the 15th or 16th century.

The Carlylean appeal to imagination reflects O'Grady's political and ideological goals. Like Carlyle, he imagines a world ideally governed by worthy leaders whom inferior people should naturally serve. This preference for a powerful ruling aristocracy is evidenced in his descriptions of king Concobar's court at Emain Macha. The harmony and strength of the kingdom rely on the good functioning of this hierarchical system, at the head of which reigns the king. In this light, Concobar could not continue to embody the perverted and wrathful tyrant who does not keep his promises and brings about the death of two passionate lovers. As we have seen, in his two versions of the tale, O'Grady reverses the traditional patterns of heroism by turning the king into the true hero whose actions are wholly disinterested, and Naysi and Deirdré into selfish and irresponsible youths. As a good monarch, Concobar seeks only to guarantee the political unity of the nation while Deirdré is no more than a creature of ill omen who must be kept away. Thus, in his *History of Ireland*, O'Grady insists that after the druid's terrible predictions, the king 'finally determined that a tower should be built in a remote and inaccessible spot, and that she should be immured there until she died'[94]. Later, when the lovers take refuge in Alba, the king passes 'a sentence of perpetual banishment and exile against the clan'. All he wants is for them to stay there, 'for he feared the words of the prophet prophesying the Red Branch divided against itself'.[95] This sets his character at odds with the king of Ferguson's version who is the anti-hero par excellence. Unlike Ferguson, O'Grady further finds the attitude of Fergus – who abdicated from kingship and joined a feast instead of offering protection to Deirdre – unworthy of a natural-born leader. It is shameful for a king, he believes, to relinquish the Crown in order to please a woman and even more reprehensible for him later to desert the new king. Fergus and Naysi are therefore both held responsible for having turned the best of kingdoms into a most desolate place,

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[94] O'Grady (1878), p. 115.
[95] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

governed only by social and political anarchy. The sovereign is needed to ensure a nation's military prestige. This also echoes Carlyle's depiction of 'The Hero as King', whom he described in a lecture given on 22 May 1840 as 'the most important of Great Men', 'the Commander' to whose will men 'loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so (...).'[96]

O'Grady's intention was to relate these 'hero-worships' to late nineteenth-century Ireland. He establishes a direct lineage between the noble heroes at Emain Macha and the natural aristocracy of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, as is evidenced in the introduction to his *History of Ireland: the Heroic Period*:

> It is the same sky that bent over them, which shines or darkens over us. The same human heart beat in their breasts as beats amongst us to-day. All the great permanent relations of life are the same. (...) I do not like to contemplate that heroic age as vague, shadowy, and remote, and have not so contemplated it.[97]

During that 'heroic period', individual prestige was determined by territorial possessions. The greatest reward that the king could assign was a parcel of land, as it signified an improved social status. In the later medieval version, Fergus's sons, Buinne and Illan, were both offered a 'cantred of land' if they agreed to change sides and serve the king. Illan refused to surrender, but his brother 'accepted those terms and that cantred was turned into moorland that night, whence Sliabh Dalm Buinne'[98]. However, O'Grady saw the landowning classes as the 'noblest and best on Irish soil (...) the highest moral element'[99] and evidently felt uncomfortable with the idea of describing a landlord as disloyal and merely interested in material profit. Even Parnell, who defended the tenants, was originally an Irish Protestant landlord, and as such, O'Grady believed, was born to be a leader: 'The Muse of history loves best her imperfect heroes. (...) Posterity will easily

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[96] Thomas Carlyle, 'The Hero as King', *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (1840) - a series of lectures given from 5 to 22 May 1840; repr. (London, 1885), p. 161.
[97] O'Grady (1878), 'Introduction', p. xii.
[98] See Mac Giolla Léith (1993), p. 123.
[99] O'Grady, *The Crisis in Ireland* (Dublin, 1882), p. 49.

forgive Parnell and like him probably all the better for his weakness.'[100] This desire not to convey a negative image of property owners may explain the author's excision of the offer of land to Fergus's son in the 1878 'Deirdre'. Although the treachery of Bewney the Ruthless Red, predicted by Deirdre, is evoked in the end as he changed sides and 'betrayed the children of Usna'[101], the circumstances leading to it are carefully suppressed.

O'Grady inscribes both his mythological and political texts within a Protestant Gothic tradition. They abound with the imagery of spells, enchantments, ghosts, spectres and storms, also present in Carlyle, which create a mysterious atmosphere where dark threatening forces pervade. In the 1894 version, the hero is surrounded by menacing phantoms against which he needs to fight. As Naisi is walking in the forest, he is suddenly attacked by shapeless forces of evil, against which he tries to defend himself:

> Then suddenly and unawares an ice-cold air struck chill into his inmost being, the bright earth was obscured and the sun grew dark in the heavens and menacing voices were heard and horrid forms of evil, monstrous, not to be described, came against him, and they bade him return as he had come or they would tear him limb to limb in that forest. Yet the Son of Usna was by no means dismayed (...) and he drew his sword and went on against the phantoms.[102]

In his political works, similar images of phantoms and storms menace to sweep away aristocracy, and, more particularly, O'Grady's modern hero, the landlord. *The Crisis in Ireland* is an alarmist call directed to the landowning classes. The term 'alarmist' would not have offended O'Grady, who insisted: 'if anyone should call me an alarmist, I shall be pleased for I wish to alarm!'[103] The book is little more than the expression of his fears. It is steeped with apocalyptic rhetorical images of shipwrecks and tempests, but no real solution is offered to the problem: 'A storm (...) blows over the land to-day. All things conspiring to that end, Democracy has arisen in this country (...).'[104] He further identifies

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[100] O'Grady (1894), *The Story of Ireland*, p. 211.
[101] O'Grady (1878), p. 119.
[102] O'Grady (1894), p. 82.
[103] O'Grady (1882), p. 55.
[104] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

the 'two deadly enemies' as the Land League and the Land Act.[105] The Land League had been founded in October 1879 by Michael Davitt to carry on his campaign against the landlords, and Parnell became its president. The even 'deadlier foe' for O'Grady was the English government under Gladstone, which had failed to support the landlords (who had always stood by the side of the English) and introduced, under the influence of the Land League, a bill to reform the Irish land system in favour of the tenant farmer. This would, O'Grady feared, echoing Carlyle's discourse on the Negro question, gradually suppress boundaries between classes and result in the creation of plutocracies, wealth being no longer the sole property of 'noblemen and gentlemen'[106], landlords having 'no longer serfs, but free men, having votes'[107]. What they had long needed was a great leader who would stand by them in the same way as Parnell had supported the tenants:

> Many of us fully expected that the landlords on their side, in that crisis of their fortunes, would have exhibited a spirit resembling that in which they were assailed, and on their side would have brought out a man to match Parnell.[108]

O'Grady senses a lack of solidarity between the landowners. The real danger resides less in exterior forces than within the internal divisions of his class. As he remarks in apocalyptic terms, if the landlords fail to devise quickly a strategy and do not remain strongly united together, they will 'neither row, steer, nor set sail' but 'drift'.[109]

The Deirdre myth is therefore rediscovered in the light of the recent events that affected O'Grady. The landlords must realise that they need to recognise their status of natural leaders and guardians of good taste. They are encouraged to behave like the king, who strove to maintain virtue and unity in Ulster and fight against the menacing spectres that threaten their existence. Concobar, upon whom O'Grady bestows the grand title of

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[105] *Ibid.*, pp. 32-3.
[106] *Ibid.*, p. 52.
[107] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[108] O'Grady (1894), *The Story of Ireland*, p. 210.
[109] O'Grady (1882), p. 54.

'founder of the Ultonian nation'[110], plays a crucial role in the transmission of this message. O'Grady believed that 'the Irish never achieved a vital and stable political unity'[111]. But he was convinced that 'the whole tenor of the bardic literature' called for this unity; he even called it 'the ideal of the race'[112]. He reads the Deirdre myth as a warning of what happens to a nation when this unity is lacking. In this light, Concobar becomes a spokesperson for the ideals that O'Grady attributes to the ancient bards; but these ideals are also those which he feels the landlords should be defending. Their class interest in holding back the tide of democracy is revealed as the same concern for stability that drove the production of Ireland's national myths. Here it is Concobar, not Deirdre, who represents Éire and who understands the nation's needs; and in doing so he forms a bridge connecting the landlords with their ancient Irish forebears. O'Grady's versions of the Deirdre story act as a warning to his peers of the consequences of disunity, whilst at the same time asserting their right to fight the gathering storm of democracy on behalf of the national interest.

Samuel Ferguson and Standish James O'Grady could be seen as the fathers of the Irish Literary Revival, as they brought ancient Gaelic mythology to a generation of young writers, including Yeats, Lady Gregory, AE (George Russell) and Synge. They were not the first translators or adapters of the Deirdre legend, but they distinguished themselves from their predecessors in that they first strove to define cultural nationalism as not being intrinsically linked to nationalist and Catholic convictions. They explored new, more specifically literary forms of transmission of the myth, thus marking the 'dawn' of the Revival.

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[110] O'Grady (1881), p. 217.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 146.
[112] *Ibid.*

Ferguson was for Yeats an 'Irish patriot' while Lady Gregory considered O'Grady a Fenian unionist. While they were Protestant unionists who saw the Elizabethan invasion as necessary and beneficial for Ireland, they were also great exponents of cultural nationalism who 'gave their hearts to the Motherland'[113]. Ferguson did not simply place the Deirdre story within a new fictional, historical and dramatic framework, but also demonstrated that a weakened unionist Protestant class also held the legitimate right to adapt the ancient Irish legends. As Brendán Ó Buachalla points out, in romanticising the legend of Deirdre and elevating it 'to a more dignified level', he displayed 'the intrinsic tension within himself between the cultural Nationalist and the political Unionist'[114]. Although to some extent he sought to bridge the gap between the Catholic and Protestant cultures, the complex nature of Ferguson's political allegiances, and in particular his ambivalent relationship with the Catholic people, left him open to being widely misunderstood by Protestants, Catholics and English alike.

Standish O'Grady also departed from the medieval versions in an effort to associate the Irish landlords with the ancient Celtic warriors. In doing so, he attempted, as Roy Foster nicely puts it, 'to restore to the Irish their mythological pedigree'[115] and therefore to encourage the once prestigious and heroic landowning classes to fight for their survival. Both writers revealed, despite themselves, the full propagandist potential of the Deirdre legend: the mythical past could be used as an active force in the present which would ultimately change the future. Yeats recalled as one of his 'Beautiful Lofty Things' O'Grady 'supporting himself between the tables / Speaking to a drunken audience high nonsensical words'[116], and prophesying in his drunken speech: 'We have

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[113] 'I give my heart to thee, o mother-land' is the title of a poem by Standish J. O'Grady. See also the poem 'Inaugural Ode' by Ferguson, *Dublin University Magazine*, January 1834.
[114] Breandán Ó Buachalla, 'The Gaelic Background', in Terence Brown and Barbara Hayley, eds. (1987), p. 39.
[115] Roy Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (London, 2001), p. 12.
[116] Yeats, 'Beautiful Lofty Things', *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 577-8.

now a literary movement, it is not very important; it will be followed by a political movement, that will not be very important; then must come a military movement, that will be important indeed.'[117]

[117] Cited in Yeats, 'Dramatis Personae', *Autobiographies* (1926); repr. (London, 1956), p. 424.

CHAPTER IV

Psychic Deirdres:
William Sharp / Fiona Macleod and the 'Geography of the Mind'

Besides their inaugural role in the Irish Literary Revival, Standish James O'Grady and Samuel Ferguson had revealed the potential malleability of the mythical past. The Deirdre legend had been exploited to convey, in a subtle manner, the political and moral views of its adapters. Just a few years after the publication of Standish O'Grady's *The Coming of Cuculain*, the story was retold by a mysterious young woman from the Scottish Highlands, a certain Fiona Macleod, whose outlook on Scotland and Ireland's legendary past explored the hidden mystical and symbolical meanings of the myth, reacting thereby against the Victorian seriousness of her predecessors. As is now well known, this allegedly beautiful lady was none other than the poet and literary journalist, William Sharp. If the author's double identity was revealed to the world immediately after his death in 1905, the true aesthetic and psychological motives underlying his double literary life were a mystery, even to Sharp himself.[1]

The name of Fiona Macleod appears only after 1894, and it is interesting to note that the works ascribed to 'her' display a specifically Celtic interest. In particular, the figure of Deirdre stimulated William Sharp's imagination from an early stage. Like Ferguson and O'Grady before him, he produced - under the name of Fiona Macleod - two distinct adaptations of the tale. Published in 1897, a prose version entitled 'Darthool and the Sons of Usna' was the last of the 'Three Sorrows of Story-Telling' to be included in

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[1] Sharp left the following confidential note, to be disclosed only after his death: 'This will reach you after my death. You will think that I have wholly deceived you about Fiona Macleod. But, in an intimate sense this is not so: though and inevitably in certain details I have misled you. Only it is a mystery. I cannot explain. Perhaps you will intuitively understand or may come to understand. "The rest is silence". William Sharp.' Cited in Elizabeth Sutherland, ed., 'Introduction', *The Gold Key and the Green Life: Some Fantasies and Celtic Tales by George Macdonald, Fiona Macleod* (London, 1987), p. 137. Yeats knew of the double identity by at least 1897.

The Laughter of Peterkin.[2] Three years later, Macleod composed the first fully-fledged play to be based on the story of Deirdre, *The House of Usna*. It was produced by the Stage Society at the Globe Theatre on 29 April 1900 and printed in *The National Review* three months later.[3] The author's interest in the story was nevertheless manifest long before the two versions were completed under Fiona Macleod's name. In a diary entry dated December 1893 and quoted in his wife's biography, he mentioned a version of 'Darthûla' that he intended to write, 'thought out nearly fully, which I would like to make my *chef d'oeuvre*'[4]. No further record is found of this unfinished project. Yet it is clear that he was influenced at this stage by Macpherson's version, as is indicated by his preference for the name 'Darthûla' over the more conventional 'Deirdre'.

Sharp discusses Macpherson in his introduction to *Lyra Celtica: An Anthology of Representative Celtic Poetry* edited by his wife, Elizabeth Sharp in 1896. As he enthusiastically points out, the volume's date of publication coincides with the centenary of Macpherson's death:

> It is pleasant to think that a book like 'Lyra Celtica' appears just at the centenary of James Macpherson. Macpherson died in 1796, but long before his death his reputed 'Ossian' had become one of the most vital influences in literature.[5]

Although he insists that 'this is not the occasion to go into the 'Ossian' dispute'[6], Sharp reaches a five-point conclusion on the controversy which is also included in the 'Introductory Note' to the edition of *The Poems of Ossian* issued in the same year by the same publisher, Patrick Geddes.[7] While maintaining that Macpherson's 'Ossian' cannot be proclaimed an authentic translation and that the writer was 'at most no more than a

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[2] Fiona Macleod, *The Laughter of Peterkin* (London, 1897), 177-277.
[3] Fiona Macleod, 'The House of Usna: A Drama in a Wood', *The National Review xxxv* (July 1900), 773-788. However, *The House of Usna* was not issued in book form until T. B. Mosher's 1903 American edition.
[4] Elizabeth A. Sharp, *William Sharp (Fiona Macleod), A Memoir* (London, 1910), p. 217.
[5] Elizabeth Sharp, ed., *Lyra Celtica: An Anthology of Representative Celtic Poetry, With an Introduction and Notes by William Sharp* (Edinburgh, 1896), p.xxviii.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] See James Macpherson, trans., *The Poems of Ossian, with Notes and with an Introduction by William Sharp* (Edinburgh, 1896), p. xxii.

skilful artificer', he insists that genuine fragments had nonetheless been recovered so that neither Macpherson nor Ossian could claim 'sole authorship' of the poems. But he ended with the positive judgements that '(4) if he were the sole author, he would be one of the few poetic creators of the first rank, and worthy of all possible honour' and '(5) that no single work in our literature has had so wide-reaching, so potent, and so enduring an influence.'[8] In his introduction to *The Poems of Ossian*, Sharp further responds to Macpherson's bold assertion that the ancient tales originated in Scotland rather than Ireland:

> Both Scotland and Ireland have an equal claim to the saga in this sense – that both countries were inhabited by the Gaels. But Ireland's claim is so far superior, in that these tales were told in Ireland earlier than Scotland; that whatever admixture of fact in them is Irish fact, and that the chief shapers of the cycle have been Irish, not Scotch Gaels.[9]

By suggesting that Macpherson was wrong and proclaiming the legitimate right of the Irish to the ownership of the ancient sagas, Sharp betrays a desire to re-establish a cultural link between Ireland and Scotland that had been severed following Macpherson's provocative assertion of Scotland's cultural hegemony.

Lyra Celtica is divided into thirteen sections which gather poems by ancient and modern authors representing the Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Cornish, Breton and Anglo-Celtic tradition. Fiona Macleod is given an important place in the volume. Seven of 'her' poems are introduced as being representative of 'modern and contemporary Scoto-Celtic' literature. Curiously, James Macpherson is nowhere to be seen in the anthology and no reference is made to his 'Darthula'. A number of Ossianic poems are nevertheless included such as 'Ossian sang', 'The Death-song of Ossian', 'Ossian's Midsummer Day-Dream' or 'Fingal's Weeping', but the versions chosen are by Domhnull Mac Fhionnaiadh, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and Neil Munro. It seems that the concurrent publication of *The Poems of Ossian* meant that the works of Macpherson would be

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[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*, pp. xii-iii.

printed separately from the remaining body of Celtic poetry. The fact that Macpherson's poems are not placed alongside those of Irish authors, being altogether excluded from the Sharps' anthology, may be seen as an indirect attempt on the part of the editors to avoid controversy.

As it happens, a number of the poets figuring in *Lyra Celtica* tackled the Deirdre theme at some point in their lives including AE[10], Aubrey De Vere[11], Sir Samuel Ferguson, Douglas Hyde, John Todhunter, Dora Sigerson[12], T.W. Rolleston, W.B. Yeats and Eleanor Hull[13]. However, only one poem in the anthology relates to the story of Deirdre. It is entitled 'Deirdrê's Lament for the Sons of Usnach' and is included under the general heading 'Ancient Irish and Scottish Ancient Erse'. Its author is identified in Sharp's introduction as being Samuel Ferguson whom Sharp described as 'the foremost Irish poet of the Middle Victorian period'[14]: 'Possibly too, even Celtic scholars may not be displeased to read here English metrical paraphrases, such as Sir Samuel Ferguson's "Lament of Deirdré for the Sons of Usnach (...)"'[15]. In a note, he voices his preference for Ferguson's poem despite the professed existence of an original Erse document 'of unknown antiquity': 'Of the many Irish-Gaelic and Scottish-Gaelic and English translations and paraphrases, I have selected the rendering of Sir Samuel Ferguson.'[16] No further explanation is given for this choice, which could be judged anachronistic; a well-informed reader would have expected passages drawn from the medieval versions to

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[10] Sharp's admiration for AE's character and for his artistic works is noticeable in his note on the Irish poet. See *Lyra Celtica*, p. 383: 'it is no longer secret that Mr G. W. Russell is the name of this poet-dreamer, who, like Blake, (...) has also a faculty of pictorial expression of a rare and distinctive kind.'

[11] Aubrey De Vere, 'The Sons of Usnach', *The Foray of Queen Maeve and Other Legends of Ireland's Heroic Age* (London, 1882), 1-69. This poetical piece, divided into three cantos, is of little literary value, consisting essentially in metrical paraphrases recapturing the sentiments and tone of the late Victorian era.

[12] Dora Sigerson (Mrs Clement Shorter), 'The Fate of the Three Sons of Uisneach and Deirdré, Daughter of Felim', *Ballads and Poems* (London, 1899), 35-40.

[13] Eleanor Hull, 'The Tragical Death of the Sons of Usnach', *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), 23-53.

[14] Sharp, 'Notes', *Lyra Celtica*, p. 388.

[15] *Ibid.*, 'Introduction', p. xl.

[16] *Ibid.*, 'Note', p. 376.

serve as more suitable representatives of 'Ancient Irish and Scottish Ancient Erse'. In anticipation of possible disapproval of Ferguson's 'English metrical paraphrase', a footnote redirects the reader to Douglas Hyde's 'Three Sorrows of Story-Telling', published just a year earlier, 'wherein the beautiful old tale of Deirdré is retold by one who is at once a poet and a scholar'[17]. As we shall see, Hyde's version was to become the greatest source of inspiration for the Macleod retellings of the legend. Sharp's great admiration for this writer can be seen clearly in the prominent place he occupies in the anthology[18] and also in the many words of praise addressed to him. His 'lucid and excellent exposition of early Gaelic literature'[19] is celebrated and, no doubt thinking of the Gaelic League, which Hyde had founded in 1893 to encourage the dissemination of ancient Gaelic literature and language, Sharp asserts that 'no man has worked more whole-heartedly (...) for the cause of the Irish Gaelic language, folklore and literature and (...) the best interest of the Irish of the soil'[20].

While, according to William Sharp, 'Modern Irish-Celtic literature' dates from O'Donovan's 'Annals of the Four Masters' and Keating's 'History of Ireland', it is the ongoing global effort invested in the preservation of Celtic folklore and literature that he applauds. The Irish may indeed pride themselves in holding 'an army of workers in every branch of Celtic science and literature' and the Scots 'one less numerous perhaps, but no less ardent and (...) enthusiastic'[21], yet equally important are also, for instance, the contributions of the Welsh and the Bretons. Furthermore, the works of German and French 'Celticists' such as De Jubainville, Windish or Kuno Meyer should not be ignored:

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[17] *Ibid.*, 'Introduction', p. xl. See Douglas Hyde, 'Déirdre', *The Three Sorrows of Story-telling and Ballads of St. Columkille* (London, 1895), 1-39.
[18] Five poems by Douglas Hyde are included in *Lyra Celtica*, pp. 126-32.
[19] Sharp (1896), 'Introduction', *Lyra Celtica*, p. xxii.
[20] *Ibid.*, 'Notes', p. 390. See in particular Hyde's essay on 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' (1894) where his growing fears of cultural Anglicisation are expressed.
[21] Sharp (1896), 'Introduction', *Lyra Celtica*, p. xxi.

> In a score of ways, pioneers have been clearing the ground for us: philologists like Windisch, Loth, Kuno Meyer, Whitley Stokes; literary scholars like S. Hayes O'Grady, Campbell of Islay, Cameron of Brodick, Dr Douglas Hyde; folklorists innumerable, in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland; romancists like Standish O'Grady, who write across the angle of the historic imagination, and romancists like W. B. Yeats, who write across the angle of the poetic imagination; and poets, an ever-growing band of sweet singers, who catch for us the fugitive airs, the exquisite fleeting cadences, the haunting, indefinable music of an earlier day.[22]

Whatever their country of origin and whether their approach is scholarly or not, they all play an equally important part in the transmission of 'Anglo-Celtic' literature. Sharp urges all writers dealing with Celtic themes to be oblivious of national boundaries and divisions. While the 'Celtic Renascence' is, as he understands it, 'fundamentally, the outcome of "Ossian"', it can only be effectively accomplished if 'a brotherhood of dreamers'[23] resuscitates that Celtic spirit which is slowly disintegrating.

As set out in his introduction to *Lyra Celtica*, Sharp's philosophy of Celticism, which is in line with the Pan-Celtic beliefs of Patrick Geddes[24], already gives the reader an indication as to the nature of his project and foreshadows the approach he was to take in tackling the Deirdre story. As the different Celtic nations, ancient and modern, are felt to deserve an equal place in the anthology, a sense of unity between the various Celtic languages and cultures and of continuity between past and present is intentionally created. For this reason, poems such as 'The song of Fionn', 'Cuchullin in his chariot' or 'Deirdrê's Lament for the Sons of Usnach' are included under the general heading 'Ancient Irish *and* Scottish ancient Erse' [Italics mine]. In a clear attempt to solve past quarrels over the ownership of the ancient legendary tales relating to Finn, Deirdre or Cuchullin (instigated, as we have seen, by James Macpherson), Sharp points to a shared

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. xxxi.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.
[24] Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) was a biologist influenced by Charles Darwin and author of a book that shocked the Victorian spirit of the time, *The Evolution of Sex* (London, 1889). Sharp had met him in 1894. Believing in the interdependence of science and the arts, Geddes was a leading figure of the Celtic movement in Scotland and established a firm which published books dealing with Celtic themes, including some by Sharp/Fiona Macleod. His aim was to bring the different Celtic peoples together through the creation of a Pan-Celtic movement that would be detached from purely nationalistic concerns. His short-lived review, *The Evergreen*, greeted the Celtic Renascence whilst being internationalist in spirit. It included various contributions signed Fiona Macleod and William Sharp as well as pieces by Elizabeth A. Sharp, Standish O'Grady and Douglas Hyde.

cultural heritage that is as much Scottish as it is Irish in origin. In his view, rather than focusing on recent points of dissent, the two nations should look at what binds them together. Thus the 'Lament of Deirdrê' belongs to no particular country and breathes, in his own words, '"the inner self" of many a familiar ballad or legend'[25]. Even though the story forms part of a joint Irish and Scottish tradition, for Sharp it speaks a more universal truth that bears no specific national allegiance.

The obvious impact of Matthew Arnold's famous essay *On the Study of Celtic Literature* and of Ernest Renan's 'La Poésie de la Race Celtique'[26] on William Sharp's characterization of 'the Celtic spirit' is acknowledged throughout the introduction by the author himself. Melancholy appears to be the essential defining trait of the Celt and suffuses a legend's 'inner self':

> (...) there is a touch of melancholy, a 'cry of the weary,' pervading the spirit of the Celt. Ossian gives expression to this sentiment in the touching line which Matthew Arnold (...) with the true instinct of genius, prefixes to his charming volume, 'On the Study of Celtic Literature':
> "They went forth to the war, but they always fell.." (...)
> Renan fully recognises this, and how, even in the heroic age, the melancholy of inappeasable regret, of insatiable longing, is as obvious as in our own day, (...).[27]

Following the lead of Arnold and Renan, Sharp comments on the 'Celtic Gloom' characteristic, for instance, of 'Deirdrê's lament', as being inextricably linked to a pervasive 'Celtic doom'. Writing - as Fiona Macleod - the prologue to *The Sin-Eater*, 'From Iona', in 1895, he exclaims 'Who but the Celt in his sorrow?'[28] and defines 'the Gloom' as an affliction commonly found in the Scottish Isles which typifies 'the unconscious knowledge of the lamentation of a race, the unknowing surety of an inheritance of woe'[29]. He repeatedly refers to the Celt as 'a doomed and passing race'[30],

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[25] Sharp (1896), 'Introduction', *Lyra Celtica*, p. xl.
[26] See Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London, 1867) and Ernest Renan, 'La poésie des races celtiques' (1859); repr. *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. ii (Paris, 1948), 252-301.
In 1896, William Sharp wrote an introduction to the poems of Arnold.
[27] Sharp (1896), 'Introduction', *Lyra Celtica*, pp. xlii-xliii and p.xlix.
[28] Fiona Macleod, 'From Iona', *The Sin-Eater* (Edinburgh, 1895), p. 11.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

holding 'Calvinistic theology' as well as a 'bastard utilitarianism'[31] directly responsible for the disintegration of Celtic Scotland and for a general lack of interest in its legendary tales. A counter-movement against this dangerous form of cultural apathy is therefore necessary. The same observations are made in the introduction to *Lyra Celtica*, which Sharp concludes by quoting 'the words of the most recent of those many eager young Celtic writers'[32] who is in fact none other than his alter ego, Fiona Macleod. An entire section from Macleod's prologue to *The Sin-Eater* is quoted in full, revealing Sharp's passionate commitment to the Celtic cause:

> "A doomed and passing race. Yes, but not wholly so. The Celt has at last reached his horizon. There is no shore beyond. He knows it. (...) But this apparition of a passing race is no more than the fulfilment of a glorious resurrection before our very eyes. For the genius of the Celtic race stands out now with averted torch, and the light of it is a glory before the eyes, and the flame of it is blown into the hearts of the mightier conquering people. The Celt falls, but his spirit rises in the heart and the brain of the Anglo-Celtic peoples, with whom are the destinies of the generations to come."[33]

The passage is an enthused call for solidarity among the 'Anglo-Celtic peoples' in order to bring about a new spiritual awakening. As Macpherson's Ossian put it, the Celts fall but they nevertheless experience nobility in defeat. Yet all hope is not gone, as their spirits may be lifted up again to emerge eventually stronger: 'No, it is no "disastrous end": whether the Celtic peoples be slowly perishing or are spreading innumerable fibres of life towards a richer and fuller, if a less national and distinctive existence.'[34] By placing Celtic writers of different countries and times together in one book, *Lyra Celtica* is an attempt at materialising their cultural union. More specifically, Sharp's lengthy considerations on the nature of the Celtic temper undoubtedly inspired the Macleod versions of the Deirdre story by giving the author a sense of what would constitute for

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[31] *Ibid.*, p. 13. Calvinism is condemned more fiercely in the essay 'The Gael and his Heritage' for having affected Highland life. First published in *The Nineteenth Century* (November 1900), it was later reprinted in *The Winged Destiny: Studies in the Spiritual History of the Gael* (1904); repr. (London, 1927), p. 235: 'the blight of Calvinism has fallen upon the people, clouding the spirit, stultifying the mind, taking away all joyousness and light-hearted gaiety, laying a ban upon music even, upon songs, (...) causing a sad gloom as common as a ruined croft.'

[32] Sharp (1896), 'Introduction', *Lyra Celtica*, p. li.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] *Ibid.*

him a legend's 'inner self'. Yeats is seen as a model to follow for having found the right method of treating legendary themes and accessing this 'inner' truth. Five of his poems are quoted extensively in the introduction to *Lyra Celtica*. One of them, 'The Rose of the World', alludes to the legendary figures of Helen and Deirdre:

> "Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?
> For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,
> Mournful that no new wonder may betide,
> Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,
> And Usna's children died."[35]

In this poem, a parallel is drawn between Deirdre and Helen of Troy. Despite different countries of origin, their immense beauty has had similarly destructive effects and proved equally fatal. The same 'red lips' and 'mournful pride' led to war and bloodshed in Troy as well as Ulster. For Sharp, it is this supreme and universal beauty that needs to be recaptured by the modern adaptor and he believes Yeats to have achieved this aim: 'For him always there is the Beauty of Beauty, the Passion of Passion: the "Rose of the World"'[36]. *Lyra Celtica* is not, therefore, simply an anthology of Celtic poetry which includes Ferguson's Victorian 'Lament' of Deirdre. Besides serving to give credence to the separate identities of William Sharp and Fiona Macleod, the volume foreshadows a wider Celtic project that is motivated by Pan-Celtic ideals as well as spiritual concerns.

Less than a year after the publication of *Lyra Celtica*, William Sharp wrote - under the pseudonym of Fiona Macleod - a small volume of stories which included three major legendary tragic tales: 'The Tale of the Four White Swans' [the story of the Children of Lir], 'The Fate of the Sons of Turenn', and a version of the Deirdre legend entitled 'Darthool and the Sons of Usna'. Although these had been previously assembled and were collectively known as 'The Three Sorrows of Storytelling', Macleod brings the three

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[35] Quoted from W. B. Yeats, 'The Rose of the World' (*The Rose*, 1893) in 'Introduction', *Lyra Celtica*, p. xlvii.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. xlvi.

sad stories together under the curious heading *The Laughter of Peterkin*. They are linked in the text through a distinctive fictional narrative relating to a mysterious child, Peterkin, to whom the three legendary tales are told. Thus, though the book is presented as 'a retelling of old tales of the Celtic underworld', the central story does not take place in the Celtic past. The choice of the term 'underworld' (rather than simply 'world') in the title page is already suggestive of the author's mystical approach.

The story starts somewhat abruptly: 'At the rising of the moon, Peterkin awoke, and laughed.'[37] His sudden burst of laughter is then explained. Lying, sleepy, in his bed and looking through the window, the boy witnessed 'a dance of moonshine' and distinguished 'a great fantastic shape' which was in fact only a poplar. Staring more intently in its direction, he glimpsed strange creatures of the night:

> tiny yellow and green lives slipping and sliding along and in and out of the branches of the poplar. (...) each delicate shape was like a human being: little men and women, but smaller than the smallest children, smaller even than dolls. They were all laughing and chasing each other to and fro. (...) Ever and again a delicate sweet singing came from the moonshine-folk.[38]

After a while, the small people disappear. Even though the adult world tells Peterkin that 'there were no little people in the poplar', he remains convinced that 'they came into the tree on the flood of the moonshine'[39]. On the following night, having heard 'a strange exquisite whispering'[40], Peterkin crept out of bed and went outside into the garden, in the dark. Expecting the noise to emanate from 'one of the Shee – one of the little people'[41], he comes face to face instead with a toad (Appendix III). As it sticks its tongue out, the child starts laughing heartily. Finally, Peterkin is brought back home and, on that night, 'he did hear the horns of elf-land (...), and did see the gathering of the Shee in the

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[37] Macleod (1897), p. 9.
[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 11-2.
[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 13-4.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 22. The Shee were the immortal fairies or elves traditionally associated with the race of the Dedannans to whom the great majority of the fairy gods belonged. See Macleod's own definition in the glossary of The *Laugther of Peterkin.*

moonshine'[42]. Macleod's insistence on the child's night encounters with the 'green life' in a work purporting to be a 'retelling of old tales' is justified by the impact these early experiences will have on the grown-up Peterkin. Having been in contact with strange beings from another world, the boy developed over time a special fondness for the mythical stories heard in his childhood:

> As year after year went by, his mind became a storehouse of all that was most beautiful and marvellous in the Celtic *wonder*-world. It is no wonder this, since he had for story-teller Ian Mor, and Eilidh whom Ian loved; and knew every shepherd on the hillsides of Strachurmore, and every fisherman on the shores of Loch Fyne. The old ballads, the old romances, the strange fragments of the Ossianic tales, the lore of *fairydom*, *fantastic folklore*, craft of the woodlands, all of the outer and inner life grew into and became interwrought with the fibre of his most intimate being.[43] [Italics mine.]

The lives of Peterkin and his contemporaries, of the moonshine folk in the poplar and of the ancient legendary heroes are therefore connected. The structure of 'mise-en-abîme' adopted here, with mythical episodes incorporated within one central story, serves to link the legendary past to Peterkin's own fabulous present. Local fishermen, shepherds and storytellers are in charge of transmitting the tales to the child. In particular, the unspoiled island of Iona, dear to William Sharp himself[44], provides the ideal setting for the child's initiation into the old Celtic legends:

> It was to that island he was taken when he was still a child, at a time when the shadow of death darkened his young life. But there, staying with Ian Mor and with Eilidh, his wife, he lived the happiest months of his early years, and came closer to the beauty of the past and to the beauty of the present than ever before or after. It was on Iona that he first heard the "Three Sorrows of Story-Telling" (...). Peterkin was told something daily by Ian Mor, so that, child as he was, he became familiar with strange names and peoples of the past, as well as with the wonders of the living world. True, there was thus in his mind a jumble of the past and the present, and Columba was more real to him than McCailin Mor himself, and Finn and Cuchulain, Oscar and Ossian and Dermid, as vivid and actual as any fisherman of Iona.[45]

The island of Iona appears as a mythical place where past and present, the real and the imaginary, coexist harmoniously. The introductory section to the *Laughter of Peterkin* ends with the following transitional words: 'When he was old enough to follow aright,

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[42] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.
[44] See Macleod (1895), 'From Iona'. Incidentally, the last four letters of the name 'Fiona' are 'iona' which may well have been another determining factor in the choice of the pseudonym.
[45] Macleod (1897), pp. 29-30.

Ian Mor told him, anew and in his own way, the three famous tales which follow.'[46] The tales known as the 'Three Sorrows of Storytelling' are therefore inscribed within a distinctively Scottish oral tradition which is then passed on to Peterkin.

The adventures of Peterkin, totally immersed in an idyllic environment, alert to the apparitions of invisible beings, playing with frogs and listening to the old Celtic legends, are an obvious representation of William Sharp's own childhood experiences. The similarities between the two are indeed quite striking. As is revealed in the memoir of his wife, Sharp himself encountered, at the age of six, what he called 'the Green Life': supernatural beings alike in size and appearance to the 'moonshine-folk' seen by Peterkin. Curiously, little William's apparitions also tended to spring from trees:

> During the child's sixth year, (...) there lay an undefined attraction in a little wood, a little pine belt nestling on the hillside above the house. It was an enchanted land to him, away from the everyday world, where human beings never came, but where he met his invisible playmates (...)- *tree spirits* and nature spirits, great and small - (...). He believed in them for the best of possible reasons, because he saw them day and night. (...) he needed from time to time to get away alone, from other people, so as again and again to get into touch with 'The Green Life', as he called it, for spiritual refreshment (...).[47] [Italics mine.]

The story of Peterkin is clearly a disguised confession of Sharp's own early memories. The same mystical fascination for 'Mother nature' is displayed by the two boys and very similar circumstances also introduced them to the old Celtic tales. Peterkin's departure to Iona after 'the shadow of death darkened his young life' is clearly an allusion to the nearly fatal illness which struck Sharp in his teenage years, making him spend the summer away from the city in the Inner Hebrides.[48] There, like Peterkin, he would converse with shepherds and fishermen and listen to their tales. An old highlander, Seumas Macleod, who was to inspire Fiona's surname, particularly captivated his attention:

> It was to that summer during the long months of convalescence in the West that many of his memories of Seumas Macleod belong. In this way he made many friends, especially among the

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[46] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[47] E. Sharp (1910), pp. 6-9.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 12. Sharp's parents had moved to Glasgow when he was twelve.

> fishermen and shepherds, stayed with them in their houses, and, "having the Gaelic," talked with them, gained their confidence, and listened to tales told by old men, and old mothers by the fireside during the long twilight evenings, or in the herring-boats at night.[49]

Sharp's youth in Scotland brought him into contact with a distinctive oral tradition, through which he was made aware of the legend of Deirdre. It is likely that he heard several accounts of the story from different storytellers. One name nevertheless stands out and is honoured in the story of 'Darthool and the Sons of Usna': that of Sharp's Highland nurse, Barabal, who had aroused little William's interest in mythical and mystical questions.[50] Acting as William Sharp's spokesman in *The Laughter of Peterkin*, Ian Mor, declares: 'I will tell the story as it is told in the old chronicles, (...) and if I add aught to it, that shall only be what I myself heard when I was young, and had from the lips of an old woman, Barabal Mac-Aodh, who was my nurse.'[51] Yet the many explicit references to Sharp's own past cannot simply be interpreted as arbitrary projections. Rather, it seems that Macleod sought to depart from the field of individual experience by divesting 'her' fictional characters of clearly separate identities. Thus there is not simply one Ian Mor, Peterkin or Barabal. Instead of individuals endowed with certain physical and moral attributes, we find essentially spiritual beings, local people sharing with the ancient Celtic heroes a magical 'wonder world' as yet unspoiled by the urban way of life which Sharp deeply abhorred.[52]

In praising the exemplary conduct of the characters involved, the author is directly engaging with his young readers in the hope that they will acquire, in their own turn, a taste for the mythical stories. Such educational concerns justify the necessary creation of a child-model whose lifetime mission will be to reveal to future generations the beauty of

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[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
[50] The memory of the old woman is celebrated alongside that of Seumas Macleod in *By Sundown Shores: Studies in Spiritual History* (Portland Maine, 1902), pp. 55-6: 'I can hear her telling me old tales before the fire (...) in her little island-cottage, speaking of men and women, and strange legends, and stranger dreams and visions.'
[51] Macleod (1897), p. 179.
[52] See Macleod (1902), p. 56: 'Perhaps it is from her [Barabal] that in part I have my great dislike of towns.'

his 'early favourites [the three Sorrows of Storytelling] (...) that he loved to re-read, to hear again, to re-tell'[53]. Peterkin thus represents a universal ideal of childhood to which other little boys and girls should also aspire:

> He stands, indeed, for many children rather than one, for many lives and not an individual merely. (...) Peterkin is not merely a little child, a boy, a youth, (...) but a type of the *Wonder-Child*, and so a brother to *all children*, to poets, and dreamers.[54]

The *Laughter of Peterkin* is therefore not simply intended as a book for children. It seeks, however, to captivate their attention by speaking to them directly with clear messages of recommendation: 'Ah, children, children to one and all I wish the golden fortune of Peterkin.'[55] Thomas B. Mosher's 1903 American reprint of 'Darthool and the sons of Usna' – which was renamed, probably to remove all traces of Macphersonian spelling[56], 'Deirdrê and the Sons of Usna' – includes a dedicatory preface which is addressed to a small girl called Esther Mona[57]. Some remarks relating to the beauty of the legends in the story are incorporated in condensed form into the dedication. They are addressed this time to a living girl who is invited to follow in Peterkin's footsteps. Again, the educational purpose of the work is emphasised, as the child is repeatedly urged to cherish and transmit the inherent beauty of the ancient stories:

> Little girl, when you come to maidhood and womanhood, it is a hope of mine that you will love these legendary tales (...). You must come to these old tales to seek and to find the surviving beauty of gathered dreams and a silent world, the immortality of ideals treasured once, forgotten now. (...) I know you will find a compelling beauty in these old tales of the Gael (...). They are more than tales of beauty, than tales of wonder. They are the dreams of the enchanted spirit of man, achieved in beauty. (...) Shall the day come when the tale of Deirdrê shall be no more told (...)? If so, it is not merely beautiful children of legend we shall lose, (...) but the very beauty and love themselves, the love of beauty, the love of love (...). So, little one, come in time to love these things of beauty.[58]

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[53] Macleod (1897), p. 27.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
[55] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[56] The name 'Darthool' inevitably brings to mind Macpherson's 'Darthula'.
[57] Probably the daughter of William Sharp's friend, Mona Caird. I am indebted to Warwick Gould for this suggestion.
[58] The story of Deirdre was published separately from the other two 'Sorrowful Tales' and the character of Peterkin also disappears from this small volume (925 copies of this edition were issued). See Macleod, *Deirdrê and the Sons of Usna* (Portland Maine, 1903), pp. v-xii.

In his concern for the literary fates of Deirdre or the children of Lir, Macleod is, above all, expressing great fears that the ideals captured in the ancient stories will eventually disappear with them. A constant focus in the works of Sharp/Macleod, beauty is defined as the most divine force in the world, or in the author's own words 'the profoundest and most exquisite mystery in life'[59]. Adopting a prophetic tone, Ian Mor thus warns Peterkin: '(...) he who adds to the beauty of the world is of the sons of God. He who destroys or debases beauty is of the darkness, and shall have darkness for his reward.'[60] It is this spiritual, indeed disincarnated beauty that Macleod seeks to convey in 'her' retelling of the Deirdre legend. The *Laughter of Peterkin* can therefore be understood as an edifying text promoting values which children could grasp more easily if pictured in allegorical stories.

If Macleod aims to promote 'the love of beauty' and the 'love of love', we may then wonder why 'she' selected three 'sorrowful' stories in which the main protagonists die after being confronted by jealous and treacherous characters for the attention of susceptible children. The narrator justifies this choice by stressing the natural fondness that children feel for such tragic stories. In them, Peterkin discovers 'the haunting charm and sad exquisite beauty which are the colour and fragrance of the Celtic genius'[61]. However, most adults believe that their content may not be suitable for small children since they tackle themes such as sexual desire or death, which are thought to be unintelligible to innocent minds. Peterkin is presented as a privileged child for he was never refused access to the old tales:

> When Peterkin was still a child he was familiar with the tales of the old world which now-a-days we keep from children, because they are not old enough to understand. That, I fear, is because we ourselves do not understand, or are out of sympathy. Is a child more likely to be hurt, (...) by

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[59] Macleod (1897), p. 29.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 178.
[61] Macleod (1897), p. 27. The terminology employed here highlights again the influence of Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold.

> acquaintance with stories of vivid and beautiful human love such as that of Nathos and Darthool (...)? Surely what is beautiful is not a thing to be feared.[62]

Grown-ups are therefore to be blamed for having deliberately hidden from their progeny what Macleod considers to be three most precious gems of storytelling. In so doing, they have dangerously limited the diffusion of the tales. The general assumption that such stories may greatly upset children simply for not having a happy ending should not, the narrator insists, be taken seriously. While Peterkin's recurring laughter may seem out of place - as does indeed the title of the book - it signals a joy springing paradoxically from the 'beautiful sadness' pervading in the old legends: 'to me not one of them is sad, save with beauty. For through all I hear the sound of Peterkin's laughter.'[63] Children are encouraged to show defiance towards those who are determined to keep this 'sad beauty' out of reach. It seems that this censorship was particularly applied to the legend of Deirdre, which remains confined to the adult world. Even Peterkin is kept away from it in his early years until he eavesdrops on Ian Mor narrating it to his wife:

> It was on Iona that he first heard the "Three Sorrows of Story-Telling," though that of Nathos and Darthool – or of "The Sons of Usna", as it was generally called – was rather overheard by him as Ian related it to Eilidh, than told to him direct.[64]

As children are urged to go actively in search of the stories which had until then been safeguarded by grown-ups, the 'Three Sorrows of Storytelling' are presented, for the first time, as tales to be enjoyed by all. The catastrophic message delivered in *The Laughter of Peterkin* is then clear: if children are not made familiar with the old legends, these will soon cease to be passed on from one generation to the next and thus the meaning of beauty itself will be lost.

'Darthool and the Sons of Usna' is the third story that Ian Mor told Peterkin 'when he was old enough to follow aright'[65]. His narration starts with introductory

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[62] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[64] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[65] *Ibid.*

remarks: 'Many poets and shennachies have related this tale. I have heard it given now this way, and now that; sometimes with new names and scenes, sometimes with other beginnings and endings; but at heart it is ever the same.'[66] In the same way as Peterkin is described as a 'Wonder Child', 'standing for many children rather than one', the narrator suggests it is necessary to look at the different versions in order to uncover the quintessential beauty of a legend that is as popular in Ireland as it is in Scotland:

> In all the regions of the Gael throughout Scotland, and in every isle, from Arran and Islay in the south, to Iona in the west, and Tiree in mid-sea, and the Outer Hebrides there is no story of the old far-off days so well known as that of Darthool.
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> She it is who in Ireland is called Deirthré or Deirdré; and in Ireland to this day there is not a cowherd who has not heard of Deirdré. Her beauty filled the old world of the Gael with a sweet, wonderful, and abiding rumour. The name of Deirdré has been a lamp to a thousand poets.[67]

The storyteller is therefore pointing to a mutable oral and literary tradition which has travelled through many regions of Ireland and Scotland. He insists that it does not at all matter 'whether the father of Deirdré be Felim, the warrior bard of the Ultonians, or Malcolm the Harper, or any other; or whether the fair and sweet beauty of the world be called Deirdré or Darthool'[68]. In other words, disputes as to whether Irish or Scottish names should be adopted are seen as groundless and an unbiased reading of both countries' accounts of the legend is thus desirable in order to grasp its universal spirit. The extensive notes at the end of the volume list the various sources consulted by Macleod:

> In my renderings of the three famous ancient Gaelic tales (....), I have followed Professor Eugene O'Curry (In *Atlantis*, *Manners and Customs* and *MS. Materials*); Dr. Douglas Hyde (*The Three Sorrows of Story-Telling*, translated into English verse); Dr. Joyce (*Old Celtic Romances*); Dr. Cameron (*Reliquiae Celticae*); Alexander Carmichael (*Trs. Gael. Socy. of Inverness*), Dr. Angus Smith (*Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach*). (...) particular mention should be made of the metrical versions of Dr. Douglas Hyde, Dr Robert Joyce (*Deirdre*), and I believe of Dr. John Todhunter. (...) The reader who wishes further information should consult in particular Professor Eugene O'Curry; Dr Cameron, in *Reliquiae Celticae*, Dr. Joyce, in *Old Celtic Romances*; and Dr. Douglas Hyde, in his delightful and deservedly popular little volume. (...) Readers familiar only with the Irish versions of this beautiful old tale ["Darthool and the Sons of Usna"] should also consult the important variants given by Dr. Cameron and Mr. Alexander Carmichael. Dr. Angus

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[66] *Ibid.*, pp. 178-9.
[67] *Ibid.*, p. 177.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 179.

> Smith also gives a good digest, and readers interested in the Scottish wayfarings of Darthool and Nathos will find the details given there more or less specifically.[69]

Interestingly, most of the versions mentioned are the obscure works of both Irish and Scottish scholars who see the legend as appealing for its historical, literary or philological characteristics rather than as a vehicle for the diffusion of contemporary political or moral values. By conjuring up this ideal of the unpartisan scholar, Macleod gives by the same token more authenticity to 'her' own work. Thus, James Macpherson, Samuel Ferguson and Standish James O'Grady, whose works Macleod had most certainly read, are absent from the bibliography. Since the legend belongs to a *joint* tradition, readers are invited to become more aware of the latest Scottish works on the subject and not to confine themselves to the exclusive consideration of Irish texts. Equal weight is thus given to research being carried out in Ireland and Scotland, as three names stand out for each country: Prof. O'Curry, Dr. Hyde and Dr. P. W. Joyce represent the Irish scholarship, while Dr. Cameron, Mr. Carmichael and Dr. Angus Smith offer a distinctively Scottish insight into the tale.

It would fall beyond the scope of this study to examine all the versions cited in detail or to measure the full extent of their influence on the Macleod retellings. Yet a few remarks on each of the major sources will help form a clearer idea of Fiona Macleod's approach. Undoubtedly, the Irish authors were selected for having similarly treated the Deirdre legend alongside 'The Children of Lir' and 'The Sons of Turenn' as one of the 'Three Sorrows of Story-telling'. Of the three, Eugene O'Curry had been the first to incorporate his scholarly edition of 'The Exile of the Children of Uisnech' (from the fourteenth-century Yellow Book of Lecan MS) within 'the "Tri Thruaighe na Scéalaigheachta", i.e., the "Three Most Sorrowful Tales" of Erinn' published in the third

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[69] Macleod (1897), 'Notes', pp. 281- 283.

volume of *The Atlantis* in 1862.[70] In an introduction, O'Curry explains that he decided to produce a new scholarly translation of the Deirdre tale because he was not at all satisfied with that attempted by Theophilus O'Flanagan in 1808 and condemned the Gaelic Society's failure to designate the primary sources investigated by the translator. O'Flanagan's footnotes which inappropriately serve to denounce Macpherson's *Darthula* are thus 'indicative (...) rather of the patriotic spirit than of the historical or philological learning of the writer'[71]. The translator is further criticised for taking 'very great liberties with his text, in rejecting redundancies, supplying omissions, and changing the character of the orthography'[72]. Eugene O'Curry's avowed desire to overlook the Macpherson controversy and to focus authoritatively on the old texts and times undoubtedly appealed to Macleod who in the notes acknowledges having consulted Eugene O'Curry's monumental *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*[73]. In 'Darthool and the Sons of Usna', 'she' closely follows the terminology employed in O'Curry's *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, drawing, for instance, the same distinction between a Dún (that is a fortress, often a king's residence), a Rath (a homestead) and a Lios (a smaller fort).[74] A number of characters in Macleod's narrative perform some of the social functions listed by O'Curry. Perhaps the best example can be found in the description of Darthool's chance encounter with a swineherd, whom she at first mistakes for one of the sons of Usna. Although unheard of in previous versions, he is given a significant part in the story. His inclusion in the tale may well have been inspired

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[70] Eugene O'Curry, 'The Exile of the Children of Uisnech', *The Atlantis: or Register of Literature and Science of the Catholic University of Ireland iii,* No. 6 (1862), 377-422. O'Curry had been appointed Professor of Irish History and Archaeology at the Catholic University in 1854.
[71] O'Curry (1862), p. 378.
[72] *Ibid.*
[73] The lectures were delivered at the Catholic University in 1855-6. See Eugene O'Curry's *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History* (Dublin, 1861).
[74] Macleod (1897), p. 193. Darthool is brought up in a 'lios': 'Concobar sent Darthool (...) to a small lios, or fort, (...).'

by O'Curry's depiction of the position held by swineherds in ancient Irish society.[75] Macleod thus aims to recreate the 'manners and customs of the ancient Irish' and to curb as far as possible the distorting presence of contemporary expressions and ideas.

Macleod's admiration for Douglas Hyde is reflected in 'her' choice of a few lines extracted from his 'Déirdre' poem as the incipit to the story of 'Darthool and the Sons of Usna'. The passage selected again describes Deirdre as an Irish Helen of Troy:

> "the story this
> Of her, the morning star of loveliness,
> Unhappy Helen of a western land."
> "Deidrê." Trs. by Dr. Douglas Hyde.[76]

As we have seen, in the final notes to *The Laughter of Peterkin*, the reader is encouraged to procure, among other works, Hyde's 'delightful and deservedly popular little volume', *The Three Sorrows of Story-telling*.[77] Academic merit had also distinguished Hyde's metrical version of the Deirdre legend which had won the prestigious Dublin University Vice-Chancellor's prize in 1887. Having by then become 'enamoured of the subject', the award drove him, in his own words, 'to turn the other two "Sorrows of Story-telling" into orthodox English Iambic'[78]. Among the sources consulted by Douglas Hyde appear not only O'Curry and O'Flanagan, but also the Scottish scholar Dr Cameron whom he quotes to underline the fact that the tale was known 'over all the lands of the Gael, both in Ireland and Scotland'[79]. While Hyde's academic achievements and his recognition of a

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[75] See Eugene O'Curry's 'Introduction', in *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish* (Dublin, 1873).

[76] Macleod (1897), p. 176. The passage quoted is based on Douglas Hyde (1895), 'Déirdre', p. 2. Macleod has slightly altered the original text, adding the introductory fragment 'the story this of her' while Hyde's version reads: 'And none dared cross him, till the fatal day / When she, the morning star of loveliness / Unhappy Helen of a Western land / First flung the apple of discordance down.' Fiona Macleod's first novel, *Pharais: A Romance of the Isles* (Derby, 1894), is dedicated to E. W. R. - Edith Wingate Rinder - a beautiful young woman with whom William Sharp was very much in love. The author draws a clear parallel between E. W. R. and Deirdre, stressing their mutual love for Scotland. Once again, the beauty of the Celtic heroine is compared to that of Helen of Troy: 'You, too, like Deirdre of old, have looked back on "Alba" and, finding it passing fair and dear, have with the Celtic Helen, said in your heart --- (...)'.

[77] *Ibid.*, 'Notes', p. 282.

[78] Hyde (1895), 'Preface'.

[79] *Ibid.*, 'Notes', p. 149, quoted from Dr. Alexander Cameron, 'Deirdre and the Sons of Uineach', *Reliquiae Celticae: Texts, Papers and Studies in Gaelic Literature and Philology*, vol. ii (Inverness, 1894), p. 421.

shared literary tradition undoubtedly appealed to Macleod, the more obscure metrical versions of 'Dr. Robert Joyce[80] (...) and Dr. John Todhunter'[81] do not appear to have been as highly regarded and are only very briefly alluded to. Besides O'Curry and Hyde, the third most significant translator of 'the three sorrowful tales' was the linguist Patrick Weston Joyce[82] (the brother of Robert Joyce) who presented himself as the first man to rewrite the stories in accessible English. His work was a self-proclaimed reaction to the inelegant, indeed 'almost unreadable'[83], literal translation produced by O'Flanagan in 1808.

In order to balance out the impressive historical, literary and linguistic research carried out by these three major Irish scholars, Macleod has an interesting assortment of knowledgeable Scotsmen, namely Dr Angus Smith, Alexander Carmichael and Dr. Alexander Cameron, whose important contributions are equally acknowledged in the 'notes'. Unlike the other works cited, Smith's *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisneach*, does not offer another version of the legend, but is rather a detailed toponymic study of the

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[80] Robert Dwyer Joyce (1830-1883) was an Irish poet who had emigrated to America in 1866. His long poem, *Deirdrè*, was divided into eight parts and contained many fantastic episodes which were of the author's invention. It was published anonymously in Boston. See *Deirdrè* (Boston, 1877).

[81] John Todhunter, 'The Fate of the Sons of Usna', *Three Irish Bardic Tales* (London, 1896), 47-139. Todhunter (1839-1916) was a Dublin-born poet and playwright whose work was inspired by Standish James O'Grady. Published just a year before *The Laughter of Peterkin*, his *Three Irish Bardic Tales* purported to be 'metrical versions of the three tales known as The Three Sorrows of Storytelling', but they display a disproportional interest in the Deirdre legend which is treated in nearly a hundred pages and divided into seven 'duanta' (or poems). As is admitted by the author in the preface, his was a free re-handling of the legend. Deirdre is, for instance, given a son, named Gaier. Macleod may have deliberately avoided commenting further on Todhunter's version on account of its lack of adherence to the primary texts. 'She' also probably disliked the excessively sentimentalised patriotic tone adopted by Naisi as he is called back to his homeland, p. 102: 'Were it my death, I long to see an *Irish* face. / This [Scotland] is a goodly land, but not my land. (...) / Though great our having here, '*tis Ireland has my love* (...) O the first brave hounds I followed / Through the *sweet Irish dew*! I left my life behind / When I left Ireland. O, the comrades that I had / In Ireland! O (...) the friendly faces in the hall, *Irish and true*! My heart, a bird above the waves, / Flies to the *glad green fields of Ireland*, that I love (...).' The same clichés are applied as Naisi dies, happy, for his country, p. 129: '*There is no better land, for valour and kindly mirth*; (...) Ireland has my love; / Would that we died for her!' After the three brothers are slain together, Ireland's soil absorbs their bodies: '*the sod of Ireland* drank their blood.' [All italics mine] Macleod undeniably frowned upon this glorification of Ireland at the expense of Scotland.

[82] Patrick Weston Joyce (1827-1914) was a linguist and geographer who had joined the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. His *Old Celtic Romances* included, besides the three traditional 'Sorrows', a retelling of 'The Pursuit of Dermat and Grania'. His account of 'The Fate of the Sons of Usna' was divided into six chapters, each bearing a subtitle.

[83] P. W. Joyce, 'Preface', *Old Celtic Romances* (1879); repr. (Dublin, 1961), p. vi.

different places where Deirdre and the sons of Uisneach stopped during their stay in Scotland. Chapter thirteen focuses exclusively on 'the fort of the sons of Usnach' with particular emphasis being laid on Dun Mac-Uisneachan, Loch Etive and Glen Etive. They are places of particular romantic significance for Deirdre and her lover: 'Glen Etive must live in our feelings, and Deirdre is the first person who is said to have discovered its beauty, and to have recorded it in song'[84]. Smith's account further mentions a stone named 'Clach Manessa'[85] after Conor MacNessa, a 'great projecting rock half way up Glen Etive, called Deirdre's drawing room', a 'field not far below it called after Deirdre', a 'wood near Taynuilt still called the wood of Naisi'[86], and a 'vitrified fort on the Ness'[87] also bearing Deirdre's name. In 'Darthool and the Sons of Usna', Macleod also enumerates the many Lochs, hills and glens traversed by the protagonists, basing 'her' description largely on Smith's geographical study. Thus, in a footnote, 'she' likewise comments on the 'Fort of the Sons of Usna'[88] where the lovers spend the first three years before moving to a 'stronghold by the shores of Loch Etive' named 'Dunuisneachan' and find a summer residence in 'the high fort of Darthool (...) on the heights above the Black Loch, or Loch Ness as we now call it'[89], all places which had been described in very similar terms by Dr. Smith. Therefore, in retracing the itinerary followed by Deirdre and the Sons of Usna, Macleod stresses the fact that the second part of the story takes place in Scotland and represents a key stage in the development of the tale which had been neglected in many previous retellings.

Macleod also relies on Alexander Carmichael's exploration of oral sources from the Western Isles to give to the Scottish tradition the credit 'she' believes it to deserve. He

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[84] Dr Robert Angus Smith, *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (London, 1879), p. 325.
[85] *Ibid.*, p. 76.
[86] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[87] *Ibid.*, p. 99.
[88] Macleod (1897), p. 239.
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 240. The names of the different places in Scotland visited by Deirdre and the Usna brothers are listed in a long paragraph (pp. 240-1).

prepared an English translation of the Deirdre legend from a Gaelic version which he heard from an eighty-three year old farmer, John Macneill, in the Island of Barra on 16 March 1867. It was first published in *The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* twenty years after being collected[90] and was, at around the same time, issued in two parts by *The Celtic Magazine*.[91] A French translation by a certain Louis Ponsinet appeared just a few months later in the *Revue des Traditions Populaires.*[92] Although not available in book form until 1905,[93] Carmichael's translation had already met with a certain amount of success by the late nineteenth-century. It revealed the textual possibilities of the existing oral tradition, which was then fictionalised in *The Laughter of Peterkin* through a story-within-story framework: Ian Mor had heard the tale from his Highland nurse, then retold it to Peterkin and it was finally printed by an exterior agent. As regards the Scottish manuscript tradition pertaining to the Deirdre legend, Macleod commends the scholarly approach of Dr. Cameron's *Reliquiae Celticae*, the second volume of which reproduces two versions of 'the tale of Deirdre', both very similar in content. The first (MS. 56) dating from the seventeenth or eighteenth-century, 'belongs to Turner's collection in the Advocates' Library' and is, according to Cameron, 'of Irish origin' while the other (MS. 53) famously known as 'the Glenmasain MS', 'belongs to the fifteenth-century' and is 'doubtless of Scotch origin'[94]. Although a complete text from these two manuscripts had

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[90] See 'Deirdire', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness xiii* (1886-7), 241-57 and 'Children of Uisne', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness xv* (1888-9), 206-15.

[91] See Alexander Macbain, ed., 'The Hero Tales of the Gael: II - The Story of Deirdre' in *The Celtic Magazine xiii,* No. CXLVI (December, 1887), 69-77 and No. CXLVII (January, 1888), 129-38.

[92] Louis Ponsinet, trans., 'Exil des Fils d'Usnech, puis de Fergus, Mort des Fils d'Usnech et de Derdriu : Légende Irlandaise', *Revue des Traditions Populaires iii* (Paris,1888), 199-207. It was introduced by Henri D'Arbois de Jubainville's interesting 'Observations sur la Légende des Fils d'Usnech', 199-200.

[93] Alexander Carmichael, *Deirdrire and the Lay of the Children of Uisne, Orally Collected in the Island of Barra* (Edinburgh, 1905) with the Gaelic text on the left page and the English translation on the right.

[94] Cameron (1894), p. 421. The text printed here (pp. 423-463) is a version of *OCU* which includes no less than seven lays. The Gaelic original and the English translation are printed on facing pages. The first volume of *Reliquiae Celticae* (1892) includes a few poems in Gaelic on the Deirdre theme: 'Duan Chlann Uisneachain' from 'The Macfarlane Collection' (pp. 266-9) and 'Dara Oran Chlainn-Uisleachain ag innseadh mar chuaidh iad gu bas' (pp. 320-323) from 'The Maclagan MSS.' Interestingly, Mr Maclagan allegedly 'gave several of his collected ballads to Macpherson when he was on his tour (...) for his "Ossian".' (see 'Preface', vol. i, p. xiv.) Cameron's papers gathered other collections of Ossianic ballads,

been produced a few years before by the eminent Celtic philologist Whitley Stokes, the German edition in which it was published was not easily accessible.[95] In comparison, Cameron's appeared far more readable. The authoritativeness of his edition is also acknowledged in a footnote on the sources which inspired Macleod's rendering of Darthool's 'Lament for Scotland': 'This is a free paraphrase of the original as given by Dr. Cameron in the *Reliquiae Celticae*.'[96] Therefore, it is possible that Macleod saw Cameron as a sort of Scottish counterweight to Eugene O'Curry. In *The Laughter of Peterkin*, Fiona Macleod has deliberately woven different versions together so as to create a literary patchwork that would reflect 'her' own Pan-Celtic aspirations and embrace the Irish and Scottish literary traditions relating to the Deirdre legend. 'She' thus sees herself as an agent of reconciliation striving to restore the fundamental cultural bond existing between the Irish and Scottish literary heritage, a link which had no doubt been compromised by Macpherson. In merging the two, the other aim is to absorb from the plurality of versions considered the legend's intrinsic beauty, which for Macleod is independent from any given time or place.

These concerns can also be detected in the narration of 'Darthool and the Sons of Usna'. Yet despite Macleod's efforts to show that the story breathes some universal truth and does not belong to one particular country, 'her' retelling nevertheless bears a distinctively Scottish flavour. For example, as the lovers leave the 'rath' and pass through dark woods, they encounter supernatural beasts and spine-chilling sounds are heard:

> for the mountain solitudes were full of dreadful noises, (...) they could hear the moaning of the *kelpie*, or on the shores of the *hill-lochs* the shrill neighing of the *waterhorses* [*sic*], terrible creatures of the darkness. (...) A wolf tracking a wounded doe howled, and the howling wailed from *corrie to corrie*.[97]

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among which those of Jerome Stone, Alexander Campbell and also contained Ossianic poems drawn from 'The Book of Clanranald'.

[95] Whitley Stokes, 'The Death of the Sons of Uisneach', *Irische Texte 2* (Leipzig, 1887), 109-84.

[96] Macleod (1897), p. 252.

[97] *Ibid.*, pp. 223-4.

The terminology employed significantly refers to Scottish folklore: the kelpie, or water-horse, is there known as a malignant water sprite haunting fords in the form of a horse. A corrie is also a Scottish word used to describe a semicircular hollow on a hillside. Only the Loch Ness monster seems to be missing from this picture. Yet Macleod seems to have forgotten that the scene described takes place while the heroes are still in Ireland and it may seem odd therefore that they should have met kelpies on the way. The author also willingly admits having given preference to the Scottish spelling of the characters' names, a choice 'she' acknowledges as having been guided to some extent by Macpherson:

> In old Irish Gaelic, *Derdriu*, then *Deirdré* sometimes *Darethra*. In Scotland, *Dearduil* (...) or "Darthool" whence Macpherson's "Darthula" (...). I have adopted here, as more euphonious, the name given to the eldest of the sons of Usna (Uisneach) by Macpherson in "Darthula" [Nathos]. The old spelling is Naoise.[98]

Interestingly, Darthool's mother, who had remained unidentified in previous versions of the story, is given the typically Macphersonian name of 'Elva'.[99] Although Macpherson's 'Dar-thula' is not even mentioned in the bibliographical notes concluding the volume, there is textual evidence that his adaptation left an imprint on Macleod's retelling that is at least as deep as that of the other works cited. In particular, the characterization of 'Darthool' and Nathos' is similar to Macpherson's whose etymological meaning of the name 'Darthool', 'a woman of beautiful eyes' (while Deirdre signifies 'alarm') has been exploited in Macleod's text. Thus, Darthool's mysterious eyes become her most striking feature and are constantly referred to in the text. She is described from the day of her birth as a 'starry-eyed'[100] baby who grows to be a woman with 'great sad eyes, (...) blue as are the hill-tarns at noon, and often dusky as they when passing clouds put purple into their depths'[101]. Macleod similarly focuses on Darthool's 'snow-white breast', which had

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[98] *Ibid.*, 'footnote 1' p. 192 and 'footnote 1' p. 199.
[99] Cf. Macpherson's Colla (the heroine's father), Etha, Dar-thula, Cath-loda...
[100] *Ibid.*, p. 193.
[101] *Ibid.*, p. 195.

been the object of Macpherson's attention.[102] Imitating 'her' predecessor, Macleod also makes her go forth to battle and fall. Like Dar-thula, Darthool does not conform to the Irish stereotype of a passive Deirdre and eventually tries – and fails miserably – to kill Maine as he is about to strike the sons of Usna with his sword: 'Darthool sprang from the shoulder of Nathos, and strove to kill Maine of the Red Hand. With a blow he reeled her aside, and then whirled the great sword of Manannan on high.'[103] Macleod's Nathos also resembles Macpherson's in more than name. He is similarly of noble Scottish descent, being 'the son of Usna, who is a great lord in Alba' and yet living 'in Emania, among the company of the king'[104]. As the lovers discuss a possible departure to Scotland because Concobar would not be a threat to them there, Nathos praises his country's beautiful landscapes and delicious food:

> Come, Darthool; across the Moyle are the pine-green shores of Alba. It is a fair, beautiful land. The sealochs reach far among pine-clad hills, (...). The forests are full of deer and wild birds, the rivers and lochs of fish, the pastures of cattle and sheep and swift brown mares. Thou shalt have milk to drink, and the red flesh of the salmon, and the brown flesh of the deer, and the white flesh of the badger. [105]

Like Dar-thula, Macleod's heroine does not appear to be very upset about leaving her homeland, and answers 'I will come' with 'glad eyes'[106]. Upon reaching Alba, 'Darthool (...) was glad indeed that the land of Nathos was so beautiful'[107]. Therefore, Macleod's particular affection for Scotland led 'her' to find inspiration in Macpherson's text and embellish the Scottish part of the tale.

Even though Scotland appears particularly dear to 'her' heart, Macleod's primary concern remains that the Irish and the Scots should be represented as cultural allies and 'she' therefore suppresses the antagonistic rapport that so much characterised

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[102] *Ibid.*, p. 197: 'every glade was smooth and *white as was the breast* of Darthool herself'. Compare with James Macpherson (1762), 'Darthula: a Poem', p. 170: 'Her shield fell from Dar-thula's arm, her *breast of snow* appeared' [Italics mine.]
[103] *Ibid.*, p. 275.
[104] *Ibid.*, p. 199.
[105] *Ibid.*, p. 219.
[106] *Ibid.*
[107] *Ibid.*, p. 230.

Macpherson's adaptation. Thus, there is no longer a kind Alban king fighting against an evil Irish one. If the primary medieval texts already mentioned the existence of a Scottish monarch who has his eye on Deirdre, Macleod goes further in making him an exact replica of Concobar. King Angus Mudartach of Alba similarly intends to chase the couple, destroy their abode, 'slay Nathos, and to take Darthool to be his wife'[108]. He even has his own Fergus, inappropriately nicknamed 'Fergus of the Three Duns'[109], who assists him in his quest. Darthool and Nathos are, once again, forced to flee to the remote mountain lands, and after the King of Alba dies they enjoy peace at last. The sexual and romantic union of Darthool, the Irish girl, and Nathos, the Scottish knight, becomes an implicit expression of the author's hopes that, despite the negative repercussions of Macpherson's vehemently anti-Irish position, one day Ireland and Scotland should be culturally bound together and enjoy a harmonious relationship. Nathos himself declares that he feels as much Irish as Scottish and swears allegiance to both countries, considering Ireland his land of adoption. In fact, even though they come from Scotland originally, the three brothers have settled in Ireland and even own property there, 'the dun of the sons of Usna'[110]. They become more aware of their double nationality when Fergus calls them back to Ireland since they have to make a difficult decision as to which country to choose: 'We have two lands, interrupted Ardan, we who are of both Alba and Erin.'[111] The only reason they finally agree to leave is that they miss being courageous Red Branch knights. Macleod tactfully avoided making 'her' characters express national preferences for one country over another and strove not to let nationalist agendas find any support in the narrative. Instead, 'her' version treads a tightrope between the Irish and Scottish schools of transmission.

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[108] *Ibid.*, p. 238.
[109] *Ibid.*, p. 235: 'As for Fergus of the Three Duns, he was no longer a great lord, but had been despoiled (...)'
[110] *Ibid.*, p. 225.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 238.

The Laughter of Peterkin is not only concerned with the material questions confronting the Celtic nations. The mythical world of Darthool is essentially a mystical one in which natural and occult forces play a major part. In her *Memoir*, William Sharp's wife mentions that her husband had been from a very early stage a nature worshipper and a pantheist who, while at Glasgow University, had 'read omnivorously; (...) literature, philosophy, poetry, mysticism, occultism, magic, mythology, folk-lore' which 'gave him a sense of brotherhood with the acknowledged psychics and seers of other lands and other days'[112]. While he was courting her, he explained that his 'true ambition (...) was to write about Mother Nature and her inner mysteries' because he believed that 'we are never alone, though we are rarely conscious of other presences'.[113] He complemented Spinoza's 'Deus sive Natura' (God or Nature) with a third notion, Beauty: 'Nature, or Beauty, or God'[114]. In 1892, he edited and wrote under seven different pseudonyms all the articles of the short-lived *Pagan Review*. The editorial was addressed to a young generation advocating a 'new paganism' that 'would fain see that sexual union become the flower of human life' and which professed to be 'frankly pagan; pagan in sentiment, pagan in convictions, pagan in outlook'.[115] This self-proclaimed paganism may account for the importance given to druidic rituals in 'Darthool and the Sons of Usna'. While previous versions tended to minimise the part played by Cathba the druid, in Macleod's version, Cathba is not simply a mediator in charge of delivering a prophecy that is central to the plot but he is described as a spiritual leader 'staring into the other world that is about us'[116]. The reader is informed that the druid was driven to Felim's party by a strong intuition that something important would be foretold there. Cathba is also given a more prominent social role, as his predictions are believed and respected by everyone. At the

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[112] E. Sharp (1910), p. 15.
[113] *Ibid.*, pp. 17-8.
[114] *Ibid.*, p. 19.
[115] See William Sharp, 'Editorial', *The Pagan Review i,* 15 August 1892.
[116] Macleod (1897), p. 183.

start of the story, he is seen interacting with his audience and formulates his prophecy through a series of metaphorical revelations:

> To thee, O Felim, shall be born this night a sting, a sword, a battering ram, and a flame. The sting will sting to madness him who is king of the Ultonians; the sword will sever from Uladh (...) the proud Red Branch (...); the ram shall batter down the proud splendour of Emain Macha; the flame shall pass from dun to dun, from forest to forest, from hill to hill (...).[117]

In a second vision, more clichés are used to describe Darthool's appearance: eyes like 'shining stars', a neck like 'a tower of ivory', teeth as white as pearls and a smiling mouth that is 'a strange crimson fruit'[118]. Finally, the druid perceives a sea of blood presaging collective ruin and destruction.[119] Cathba's prophetic messages run for about ten pages, rather than the single paragraph found in most other versions. Macleod goes even further by analysing the hypnotic effects of his incantations on the people assembled: 'None spake, but all stared at the Druid. For dream was upon them at these words, and each man (...) was rapt in strange longing.'[120] The unprecedented focus on their sudden drowsiness is a reflection of the author's own fascination with psychic experiments, hence they are given greater importance in 'her' version of the legend. Macleod also plays up specifically pagan customs by alluding, for example, to 'the Festival of the Sun in the time of the greening' and 'the Festival of end Summer at the fall of the leaf'[121] rather than simply mentioning spring and autumn. In the same way, 'she' invents new Celtic *geasa*, adding them to the ones which had already formed part of the medieval texts. Among the new injunctions was the obligation for each of the sons of Usna to 'abide by each until death'[122], and the *geis* that was set upon Nathos after being exiled from Ireland 'not to return to Erin unless it be in the company of Fergus (...) or Conall (...) or Cuchulain'[123]. In drawing attention to the pagan elements and creating additional ones, Macleod seeks to

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[117] *Ibid.*, p. 185.
[118] *Ibid.*, p. 186.
[119] *Ibid.*, p. 187.
[120] *Ibid.*, p. 186.
[121] *Ibid.*, p. 194.
[122] *Ibid.*, p. 228.
[123] *Ibid.*, p. 243.

enhance the more mystical facet of the mythical 'Celtic underworld', which includes, among others, nature-worships and incomprehensible taboos.

However, more impalpable forces drive the action, invisible forces from another world which Macleod/Sharp believed to be moving about us. Even though these are abstract entities, they interfere directly in our material lives and nothing can be done to counter them. Perhaps the most important one is Fate, which is personified on more than one occasion, being represented synecdochically as 'the feet of Fate'. In a way that is comparable to the story of Oedipus, the alarmed audience attempts to modify the course of events after hearing Cathba's prediction, suggesting that the child should be killed in order to save the nation. Yet the king decides to spare Darthool's life and his choice is supported by the druid who asserts: 'that which has to come, cometh'[124] The narrator also intervenes to express great disapproval at the people's attempt to act against Fate: 'For they did not know that there is no thought, no power, no spell, no craft, wherewith to turn aside the feet of Destiny.'[125] The footprint of Fate gains in definition as the story develops. First, they are only the faint 'shadows of the feet of Fate' looming over Darthool's 'lios', in the forest, as she is blooming. Then as 'Destiny waits on no man'[126], it 'moves' Lavarcam to reveal to Darthool that Nathos is the man of her dreams, as if 'the power of Destiny' were speaking through her.[127] Later, as the couple find refuge in Scotland and hear Fergus cry out, the narrator comments: 'even now were the footsteps of fate drawing close. For none can prevail against destiny'[128] and by the time Fergus delivers his message of peace, 'the shadowy feet of Fate were all about them'[129]. Ilann the Fair, the son of Fergus who had been sent to protect them on their way back, feels its

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[124] *Ibid.*, p. 191.
[125] *Ibid.*, p. 188.
[126] *Ibid.*, p. 197.
[127] *Ibid.*, p. 198.
[128] *Ibid.*, p. 247.
[129] *Ibid.*, p. 251.

threatening presence before he goes out to fight the king's son: 'I feel the heavy hand of fate is against me, and who can withstand fate?'[130]. For Macleod, Fate is the true ruthless hero of the story whose decisions should never be disputed, as it always has the last word.

The other driving force in the story is Beauty, the object of Macleod/Sharp's constant fascination, which is embodied in the person of Darthool. However, this ideal of Beauty is not that of a physical beauty driving men mad with sexual desire, but rather an awe-inspiring, quasi-divine form of Beauty that can prove fatal to whoever becomes drawn to it. If Darthool asserts that she is simply 'a woman as other women are'[131], she nevertheless does not stand far from being a Goddess, albeit paradoxically a mortal one:

> So exceeding great was her beauty that Nathos did not think of her as Darthool or as any mortal woman, but rather as a daughter of the elder gods (...) whose beauty surpassed that of human beings. He looked upon her amazed, and in silent worship.[132]

Darthool's beauty thus inspires distance, respect and veneration and has this effect not only on her future lover, but also on other males who may cross her path. The first men she sees, before meeting the sons of Usna, are a swineherd and two 'dishevelled hillmen'[133]. As they first set eyes on her, 'they stood amazed at her exceeding beauty'[134] and the narrator, echoing Macleod's voice, specifies: 'beauty is strange and terrible to most men, and they are prone to stand in dread of it.'[135] Its effect is hypnotic, affecting the eyes and mind of the gazer rather than any other part of the body. The men are even unflatteringly compared to the 'dull cattle in the fields' staring 'unwaveringly upon her'[136]. In particular, the swineherd is mesmerized by Darthool's dazzling beauty. Sensing that he is vulnerable to its power, she asks him whether he could do her a favour and find Nathos for her. Then, 'Darthool smiled into the man's eyes, and what was only

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[130] *Ibid.*, p. 268.
[131] *Ibid.*, p. 212.
[132] *Ibid.*, p. 211.
[133] *Ibid.*, p. 200.
[134] *Ibid.*, p. 202.
[135] *Ibid.*
[136] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

the swineherd died, and a strong heroic soul arose in him'[137]. Metamorphosed by his first contact with such extraordinary beauty, the swineherd answers her request:

> rather would I die by torture, and please thee, than live out my life and refuse thee of what thou art fain. For thy beauty is upon me like the light of the moon at the full on the dark moorland. I am thine.[138]

Darthool gratefully kisses him on the brow, which far exceeds the swineherd's expectations and makes her all the more worth dying for. Beauty thus operates differently from Fate, as one has to reach for it before being fatally struck. Its victims die happily even if their deaths occur in the most horrible circumstances. Although the swineherd's body is discovered 'with the gaping wounds of blunt spear-shafts'[139], his spirit appears to have been freed and lifted to another dimension. He dies, happy, with 'a smile upon his face' simply because 'Darthool had looked into his eyes'[140].

The *Laughter of Peterkin* can therefore be understood as an invitation, addressed particularly to the young reader, to look beyond merely local or material desires in order to reach for the real life that is in an infinite spiritual 'other-world'. What Macleod calls 'the Celtic underworld' is a goldmine of stories which reveal the interaction between the human world, the supernatural 'green life' and the mysterious intangible forces controlling human destiny. This is why the legend of Deirdre has universal appeal; in particular, it belongs to both the Irish and the Scots and is not the exclusive possession of any one country. Quarrels over the names of the characters or the countries they represent are to be seen as the pointless concerns of people living as if only the earthly world existed. Through the attentive reading and understanding of the tales, little Peterkin is learning to disengage himself from a material world into which he has only recently landed. By contemplating the Celtic wonder world, the child will eventually recover some

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[137] *Ibid.*
[138] *Ibid.*, p. 204.
[139] *Ibid.*, p. 207.
[140] *Ibid.*, p. 209.

'lost world and imperishable beauty'[141]. His storyteller even warns him that he may become so captivated by it, as were the swineherd and the sons of Usna, that he would eventually 'love Deirdré as did the sons of Usna, and would die for her, or live to see her starry eyes'[142]. Rather than focusing on secular matters, one should, Macleod believes, 'seek for the beauty that can stand apart from time and place'[143].

Meanwhile, in Ireland, W. B. Yeats was echoing Macleod's Pan-Celtic beliefs. In an article written in 1898 for the French journal *L'Irlande Libre*, he reciprocated the compliments that Macleod had on several occasions paid to his poetry. He applauded especially the clear effort that was made in *The Laughter of Peterkin* to bring the Irish and the Scots together and even saw in 'her' the foremost figure of a new 'Celtic renaissance':

> Miss Fiona Macleod est le nom le plus intimement lié à ce mouvement, à cette renaissance celtique, comme disent les journaux. (...) Ce livre [*The Laughter of Peterkin*] ne peut manquer d'aider à l'union des sentiments que nous souhaitons créer entre les Celtes irlandais et écossais, en leur rappelant tout à la fois leurs origines semblables et ces trésors d'héroïques légendes. Une communauté de sentiments (...) sera peut-être l'un des résultats décisifs du 'Mouvement Celtique', et bien des événements sociaux, politiques, aussi bien que littéraires, en peuvent dériver.[144]
>
> [Miss Fiona Macleod's name is that which is most closely linked to this movement, to this Celtic renaissance, as the newspapers call it. (...) This book will not fail to help the union of feelings which we wish to create between the Irish and Scottish Celts by reminding them of their common origins as well as their treasure of heroic legends. A community of feelings (...) may well be one of the most significant outcomes of the 'Celtic Movement' and many social, political as well as literary events will derive from it.]

As Yeats saw it, this new so-called 'Celtic movement' was not to be run exclusively by the Irish. As Fiona Macleod had been from 1894 the most important Scottish writer working on Celtic themes, Yeats believed that literary collaboration with 'her' would be

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[141] *Ibid.*, p. 178.
[142] *Ibid.*
[143] This statement is extracted from a 1904 article in which Macleod criticizes *The Treasury of Irish Poetry* compiled in 1900 by Stopford A. Brooke and T. W. Rolleston for bearing too much 'the impress of the time and the accent' of its country. See 'The Irish Muse I', *North American Review* clxxix, no. 5 (1904), 685-697.
[144] W. B. Yeats, 'Le mouvement celtique: Fiona Macleod', *L'Irlande Libre, Organe de la colonie irlandaise à Paris*, avril 1898, 2e année, n°4, p. 1. *L'Irlande Libre* was the principal means of propaganda for Maud Gonne's 'Association irlandaise'. She had most probably translated Yeats's article into French.

necessary to prove the inclusive nature of his revivalist project. The word 'Celtic' had therefore been loosely applied to welcome countries like Scotland and Wales which were culturally similar and which had a similar legendary tradition. The 1897 Manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre spoke of the intention to perform 'certain Celtic and Irish plays' in order to build up 'a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature' and, according to Lady Gregory, the word 'Celtic' was unsuitably 'put in for the sake of Fiona Macleod whose plays however we never acted'[145]. As William F. Halloran points out[146], 1897 was a very important year for Sharp in that it cemented his connections with the Irish circles: he was invited to be part of a 'Celtic' movement and also, as Lady Gregory recalls somewhat sarcastically, to attend a 'Celtic' party[147] in early October 1897 at Edward Martyn's house in Tillyra where he was introduced to Douglas Hyde. Clearly, Yeats wanted to make him feel like 'one of them' and to concretise the ideal of a 'brotherhood of the Celts' by organising a proper gathering in Ireland. William Halloran also gives the more practical explanation that Yeats 'probably hoped (...) to bring together the people he had asked to write plays' so as to 'discuss the kind of drama he wanted'[148]. He further suggests that Sharp may well have confessed to Yeats that he was Fiona Macleod as early as the 'last weeks of April or first week of May 1897'[149] - that is, a few months before the party. Probably before knowing Macleod's true identity, Yeats had sent 'her' a letter dated 12 January 1897 asking whether 'she' could write a few plays for his 'Celtic movement'. While admitting that he was not yet ready to 'try his own hand' at the theatre, Yeats already had a clear idea of the sort of drama that he wished to create:

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[145] Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre, A Chapter of Autobiography* (1913); repr. (Gerrards Cross, 1972), p. 20. See also p. 21: 'I myself never quite understood the meaning of the "Celtic Movement," which we were said to belong to.'
[146] See William F. Halloran, 'W. B. Yeats, William Sharp, and Fiona Macleod A Celtic Drama, 1897', *Yeats Annual 14*, ed. Warwick Gould (Basingstoke, 2001), 159-208.
[147] James Pethica, ed., *Lady Gregory's Diaries* (Gerrards Cross, 1996), pp. 153-4. Note Lady Gregory's ambivalent first impressions of Sharp which make him seem out of place amidst the Irish crowd: 'William Sharp, an absurd object, in velvet coat, curled hair, wonderful ties'.
[148] Halloran (2001), p. 187.
[149] *Ibid.*, p. 175.

> I have just now (...) a plan I want to ask you about. Have you ever thought of writing a short play? (...) My own theory of poetical, or legendary drama, is that it should have no realistic or elaborate, but only a symbolic & decorative setting. (...) This method would give one's work the remoteness of a legend. [150]

In choosing to give dramatic form to the legend of Deirdre with *The House of Usna*, Fiona Macleod was following Yeats's suggestion and it is unlikely that 'she' would have written the play at all had the Irish poet not expressly called for 'two or three short & direct prose plays of (...) a mythological & folklore kind'[151]. Two dramatic pieces, published by Macleod in 1900, *The Immortal Hour*[152] and *The House of Usna*[153] came as somewhat late attempts to answer Yeats's request since by the time they reached him, the Celtic Theatre had become a more specifically Irish Literary Theatre in which Macleod/Sharp's works were no longer welcome.[154]

Both plays were nevertheless completed. The *House of Usna* was the first attempt to dramatise the Deirdre legend[155] and was performed at the Globe Theatre in London by the Stage Society on 29 April 1900. It is divided into three long scenes rather than acts and the action takes place 'the year following the triumph of Concobar's (...) treacherous

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[150] John Kelly, ed., *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats ii 1896-1900* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 73-4. Exactly a year and a half later, on 12 July 1898, Yeats was still interested in the project and asked Fiona Macleod which plays she would 'have ready for the autumn' (p. 255). On 1 November 1898, after the Celtic theatre was renamed the Irish Literary Theatre, he again urged Sharp to send the Fiona Macleod plays (p. 284). They were nevertheless rejected by the Irish Literary Theatre.

[151] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

[152] Fiona Macleod, 'The Immortal Hour', *The Fortnightly Review lxxiv*, No. ccccvii New Series (London, November 1900), 867-896. The story was based in part on the ancient Celtic legend of Midir and Etain.

[153] Fiona Macleod, 'The House of Usna: A Drama in a Wood', *The National Review xxxv* (July 1900), pp. 773-88. It is interesting to note that *The National Review* was a political rather than literary journal. Quite surprisingly, the drama was first printed in a special supplement on 'The Story of the Boer War'. This South African War lasted from 1899 to 1902.

[154] See Kelly (1997), p. 277. Yeats's letter to Lady Gregory dated 24 October 1898 informs her that the 'Celtic Theatre' 'we now think should be called "The Irish Literary Theatre" as less dangerous than Celtic'. Lady Gregory agreed with this decision and replied on 23 November that it was 'a much better name than poor Sharp-ridden "Celtic"'.

[155] The suggestion that the story was full of dramatic potential had, however, been made a few years earlier by the physician and translator Dr George Sigerson, whose anthology of Irish poetry included three translated poems, 'Deirdré's Farewell to Alba', 'The Cloud Over Emain' and 'Lament for the Sons of Usnach'. See George Sigerson, *Bards of the Gael and Gall* (London, 1897). In an 'Appendix', Sigerson expresses great surprise that the characters of this tragic tale had never before been 'impersonated by male and female actors' and suggested that a future 'Deirdre' play should be divided into five acts, each with four or five scenes (p. 390).

murder of Naysha (Naois) and his brothers Ailne (Ainnle) and Ardan'[156], and so the main action of the *Táin* is underway and Emain has been destroyed. The only character remaining from the original story is king Concobar, since gone mad, who experiences hallucinations and refuses to believe that Deirdrê has died. Macleod initially found the material for 'her' imagined sequel in Eugene O'Curry's account of the events that followed Deirdre's death:

> After the tragical death of the sons of Uisneach (...) and the death for grief of them of the lady Deirdri a year after, king Conchobar, we are told, fell into a state of grief and melancholy from which no effort of his courtiers could raise him.[157]

> Fergus was accompanied in his exile by Cormac Conloinges, son of king Conchobar. On the death of the latter, his son Cormac was invited back to Ulster. (...) he set out from Rath Cruachain in Roscommon (...) and sought rest for the night at the mansion of the two smiths. (...) The house was beset in the night by the men of Leinster, and Cormac with the most of his people killed. The tale of this slaughter relates that Cormac had been the former lover of a Connacht lady named Sceanb, who afterwards became the wife of a famous harper named Craiftine; and it is stated that on the night of the attack on Cormac, Craiftine, in a fit of jealousy, attended outside with his harp, and played (...) a debilitating Ceis, or tune which left him an easy prey to his enemies.[158]

Macleod had already dealt with the story of Cormac and Cravetheen the harper in a version included in *The Sin-Eater* in 1895 entitled 'The Harping of Cravetheen'. However, in *The House of Usna*, 'she' slightly departs from O'Curry's summary. Some of the names have been altered: Craiftine is spelled 'Cravetheen' and Cormac's beloved is called Eilidh, not 'Sceanb'. If Cormac is also expected to come back to Ulster, Macleod's Concobar is not, however, dead at the time. The description of Cormac's death bears resemblance to that of Naysha. Moreover, as in the story of Naysha and Deirdrê, the lovers are threatened by a jealous older man, who enacts a more direct revenge on them than in O'Curry's version: Cravetheen, like Concobar before him, is personally involved in bringing about the young rival's death, whereas O'Curry presents him as an accessory to the deed, only indirectly involved. Macleod's intention is therefore to make the couple Cormac-Eilidh the mirror image of Naysha and Deirdrê. Cravetheen, who tells the story

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[156] Fiona Macleod, 'Note', *The House of Usna* (Portland Maine, 1903), pp. 4-5.
[157] O'Curry (1873), p. 373.
[158] *Ibid.*, p. 254.

of Deirdrê at the start of the play, draws attention to the parallels between his situation and that of Concobar:

> there was a woman of my people as beautiful as Deirdrê. She loved an Ultonian, that had for name Cormac... (...) Cònairey Mòr was fierce with anger at that, and sent him away, but against her will, and gave her to *me*, who loved her, though she hated me. So I took her to my Dûn. But this Cormac came there and found her... (...) I set fire to the great Dûn (...) and I laughed when the red flames swept up to where the sleepers lay - and they died, Cormac and Eilidh, to the glad death-song of me, Cravetheen the Harper! Two charred logs these mourners carry now -[159]

Macleod sets up a triangular rapport between Cormac, Eilidh and Cravetheen which reproduces that of Deirdrê, Naysha and Concobar. Introducing Cormac, the son of Concobar, in the play, allows 'her' to deal with a favourite theme, the idea of an inherited doom affecting a particular family.[160] Ironically, Cormac meets exactly the same death as Naysha whom his jealous father had killed. Starting the play in the aftermath of Concobar's treachery with a copycat crime enables Macleod to introduce the idea of a recurring cycle of love and loss transmitted from one generation to the next. In addition to this, the past haunts Concobar's present to such an extent that he suffers from hallucinations and sees Deirdrê, for example, laughing in the woods[161]. The drama is centred around the king's disbelief that she is no longer alive, as he asks recurrently 'Where is Deirdrê?', 'When shall she wake?'. A young boy, Mainé, answers his questions, playing upon a reed and singing incessantly in the background: 'Deirdrê is dead! Deirdrê the Beautiful is dead, is dead!'. The drama ends with the king's decision to execute Cravetheen, reproducing (and yet, by analogy, condemning) the vengeful act carried out earlier upon the sons of Usna.

The title, *The House of Usna*, is already suggestive of a lineal transmission, as the word 'House' refers synecdochically to the family pedigree rather than a specific abode. Phonetically, it brings to mind Edgar Allan Poe's famous tale 'The Fall of the House of

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[159] Macleod (1903), *The House of Usna*, pp. 18-19.
[160] In *Pharais* (1894), for example, the hero suffers from a hereditary form of mental disease which makes him grow progressively mad.
[161] Macleod (1903), *The House of Usna*, p. 31.

Usher'[162] and the similarity in title is not coincidental. There is biographical evidence that Sharp/Macleod had been reading Poe on his 1890 autumn trip to Italy[163], and it appears that Macleod drew on Poe's text for 'her' sequel to the Deirdre story. The link between the 'House of Usher' and the 'House of Usna' is briefly acknowledged in the foreword to the play, which 'she' uses to re-affirm the principle of the universal nature of literary beauty:

> The tradition of accursed families is not the fantasy of one dramatist or of one country or of one time. (...) The doom of the clan of Usna is not less veiled in terror and perpetuated in fatality than the doom of the Atredai: and even 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is but a single note of the same ancient mystery (...).[164]

'The House of Usher' refers both to the time-honoured Usher race and to their mansion, the two being mutually dependent. At the end of the tale, the house disintegrates at the same time as the remaining descendants of the family which has lived there for many generations. The proprietor, Roderick Usher, suffers from a serious mental disorder characterized by 'a morbid acuteness of the senses'[165] akin to the distorted perception experienced by Concobar. His peculiar condition is further described as 'a family evil'[166]. The only other resident in the house, his twin sister Madeline, has also contracted a rare form of hereditary disease affecting the body rather than the mind, its symptoms including 'a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person'[167]. Believing that she has succumbed to a strange illness, Roderick places her inanimate body in a vault without realising that she is still alive. She later manages to escape and, standing outside her brother's door with 'blood upon her white robes'[168], expires in his arms.

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[162] 'The Fall of the House of Usher' first appeared in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in September 1839.
[163] See Flavia Alaya, *William Sharp: "Fiona Macleod", 1855–1905* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 96. He was also at the same time reading Maeterlinck.
[164] Macleod (1903), 'Foreword', *The House of Usna*, pp. xi-xii.
[165] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839); repr. *Complete Tales and Poems* (New Jersey, 2002), p. 174.
[166] *Ibid.*
[167] *Ibid.*, p. 175.
[168] *Ibid.*, p. 182.

Unlike that of Usher, the fall of the House of Usna has repercussions extending beyond the closed 'Usna' circle. The malediction pronounced by Cathba at the time of Deirdrê's birth also extends to the Irish people across the centuries:

> CONCOBAR
> What were the last words of Cathba the Wise?
>
> DUACH
> That Eiré, the most beautiful of all lands under the sun, should be the saddest of all lands under the sun. Blood shall run in that land till Famine shall make her home there, he said: and tears shall be shed for it in every age: and all wisdom and beauty and hope shall grow there: and she shall be a lamp, and then know the darkness of darkness.[169]

Cathba's prediction is thus given a contemporary resonance. Considering Macleod's belief in a necessary non-politicisation of the Celtic legends, it may seem surprising that 'she' should have gone so far as to make the druid foresee nineteenth-century historical events. Indeed, the 1845-1849 Irish Famine in which more than a million people - one eighth of the population - are estimated to have died, appears as a long-term and large-scale consequence of the Deirdre curse. The Nostradamus-like foresight of Cathba the druid even reaches far beyond Macleod's lifetime. According to the seer, the recurring doom will be eventually defeated after the country resurrects spiritually. Only then will Ireland see light at the end of the tunnel: 'she shall be a queenly land again, and the nations shall bow before her as the soul of peoples born anew. (...) Eiré shall die, but shall live again. She shall be the soul of the nations.'[170] Clearly, there is a hidden political agenda in the prophecy. Significantly, in the 1900 *National Review*, the expression used is 'sovereign land'[171] which was replaced in the 1903 American edition with the more neutral 'queenly land'. The statement 'Eiré (...) shall be a sovereign land again' would undoubtedly have been understood as the hopeful declaration that Ireland will, in the end, prevail and regain national independence. It seems that Macleod, usually so careful not to

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[169] **Macleod** (1903), *The House of Usna*, pp. 40-1.
[170] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[171] **Macleod** (July 1900), 'The House of Usna: A Drama in a Wood', p. 780. In this text, the Irish Famine appears as an even more threatening catastrophe: 'Famine shall stalk through it [that land].'

let contemporary political ideas intrude into 'her' writings, was, at the time of composition, consciously adapting the 'legendary drama' that Yeats had requested to the likely expectations of a largely nationalist Irish audience.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the play is that nothing apart from those cycles of doom really seems to happen and the different characters do not even seem to be living in a concrete present. They are instead haunted by memories of the past. The dialogues serve mainly to display the king's hallucinations, as he obsessively recalls the past through a series of metaphysical questionings addressed to his druid, Duach:

CONCOBAR
Is Emain Macha as a dream that is no more?

DUACH
Emain Macha, the beautiful city, is as a dream that is no more.

CONCOBAR
Wind, wind, nothing but wind! (....)

DUACH
(...) To-night, dreams: the morrow waits, when dreams will be realities.

CONCOBAR.
Dreams, dreams, nothing but dreams![172]

Indeed, all the conversations in the play ultimately amount to little more than 'wind' and 'dreams'. The characters seem to have lost touch with reality and to seek interaction instead with some hidden world. Trees occupy an important part of the setting and serve to connect the material world with outside mystical forces. The drama takes place in a wood, 'a forest of pines and oaks'[173], an instance of the 'symbolic & decorative setting' that Yeats had called for. The spiritual beings are physically in contact with wood: the harper Coel has 'an oak-fillet round his head'[174] and Duach the druid wears 'a wreath of oak leaves'[175]. The characters are often found leaning against an oak (Concobar)[176] or, as

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[172] Macleod (1903), *The House of Usna*, p. 59.
[173] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[174] *Ibid.*
[175] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[176] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

in the case of Mainé, lying under a tree playing a reed-flute[177] and Cravetheen is even sentenced to what Concobar calls 'the death of the oaks'[178], tied to the 'saplings'. Sharp's active involvement in Yeats's Celtic Mystical Order, which carried out rituals using talismans, symbols and telesmatic images drawn exclusively from Celtic myths and gods, undoubtedly had a strong impact on his approach to the legend.[179] In his correspondence with Sharp, Yeats often gives detailed accounts of his occult experiments and confesses in a letter dated 16 May 1897 of having appealed to trees to summon up visionary power: 'I am working at the occult symbols in celtic mythology & have made out a sacred hazel tree, which will help in vision – a tree with symbolic fruit.'[180] A few months later, Lady Gregory recalls one notable event at Tillyra when, in trance during one of his visions, Sharp made himself look 'ridiculous' as 'one apparition clasped him to an elm tree from which he had to be released'[181]. The bizarre explanation given to Yeats, who found him with his arms wrapped around the tree, was that 'his soul had flowed in the sap through the elm'[182]. Yeats was not so much looking for literary genius in William Sharp, but rather admired his scholarly knowledge of Celtic myth combined with what he considered to be great psychic abilities: through Sharp 'the fluidic world seemed to flow, disturbing all'[183]. As Halloran suggests, Sharp was at that point a perfect associate for Yeats who 'needed help from people who knew Irish myth, who were committed to a revival of Celtic culture, and who could see through or beyond the material world'[184]. Both wished

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[177] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[178] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
[179] Kelly (1997), notes p. 166 and p. 666. Apparently, the meeting of the Celtic Mystical Order on 1 January 1898 at the Hunters' House resulted in the group vision of many figures from the Irish heroic cycles which included 'Cathbad the Druid, Deirdre, Cuchulain, Conal Cernach, Conchubar and Fergus'. Sharp only started participating actively in such visionary activities in the summer of 1898.
[180] *Ibid.*, p. 99.
[181] Pethica (1996), p. 154.
[182] W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London, 1972), p. 129.
[183] *Ibid.*, 128.
[184] William F. Halloran, 'W. B. Yeats, William Sharp, and Fiona Macleod A Celtic Drama: 1887 to 1897', *Yeats Annual 13*, ed. Warwick Gould (London, 1998), p. 99.

for a dramatic interpretation of the ancient myths that would reflect what Halloran calls 'the mystical vein of Celticism'[185].

Yeats and Sharp/Macleod agreed that their prospective plays would have to depart significantly from the realistic drama of Ibsen. Macleod went even further, as he wished to see the establishment of a 'Psychic Drama' in which the different characters would incarnate abstract ideas while their respective names, physical appearance or social role would not hold any real significance. The idea had already come to Sharp in 1894, years before Yeats asked him to write the plays, with the publication of his *Vistas*, 'dramatic interludes' which sought to imitate the symbolist writings of the Belgian poet and playwright Maurice Maeterlinck whom Sharp greatly admired. *Vistas* announced the advent of a 'great creative period', rich in 'imaginative rendering', that would also be a 'great dramatic epoch': 'All are vistas [meaning views] into the inner life of the human soul, Psychic episodes (...) renderings of dramatically conceived impressions of spiritual emotion.'[186] In the 'foreword' to *The House of Usna*, Macleod goes so far as to suggest that, ideally, all physical forms of representation, including human speech, should be eradicated from this new 'drama of the mind' and emotions should almost appear to be floating on the stage, communicated to the audience without need for words:

> We are, I believe, turning towards a new theatre. The theatre of Ibsen, and all it stands for, is become outworn as a compelling influence. (...) The Psychic drama shall not be less nervous: but the emotional energy shall be along the nerves of the spirit, which sees beneath and above and beyond, rather than merely along the nerves of material life, which sees only that which is in the line of sight.[187]

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[185] *Ibid.*, p. 101.
[186] William Sharp, 'Foreword', *Vistas: Dramatic Interludes* (Derby, 1894). Maurice Maeterlinck's style and genius are praised at great length in the foreword, in particular the imaginative qualities of his dramas.
[187] Macleod (1903), 'Foreword', *The House of Usna*, pp. xxvi-xxviii.

Since an actual 'Theatre of the Soul'[188] was, for practical reasons, impossible to achieve, Macleod's only remaining option consisted in taking away unnecessary realistic elements so as to focus instead on the dramatization of psychological experience.

The first theatrical performance of *The House of Usna* took place at the London Globe theatre on 29 April 1900 on the occasion of the Fifth Meeting of The Stage Society over which William Sharp presided. It was staged together with two short 'puppet' dramas by Maeterlinck, *The Interior* and *The Death of Tintagiles*[189], both written in 1894. All three works were similar in tone as well as content and each play announced from the start the forthcoming death of one of its characters. According to Elizabeth Sharp, *The House of Usna* was directed by George Bernard Shaw's collaborator and friend, Granville Barker, a young English actor and director who, having grown discontented with the commercial theatre, had joined the experimental Stage Society in 1900. Mrs Sharp also recalls amusingly the 'double play that was going on', as her husband who attended both the rehearsals and the performance 'chatted to his friends during the intervals, with little heed of the risks he ran of detection of authorship'[190]. Yeats was among the friends who went to see the play.[191] Predictably, it did not meet with great success. Little is known of the production since, according to Dennis Kennedy, 'the Stage Society disallowed reviews in the press'[192]. The only surviving comment on the performance was made by one unidentified critic quoted in Mrs Sharp's *Memoir*:

> It had beauty and it had atmosphere, two very rare things on the stage, but I did not feel it quite made a drama, or convince, as a drama should, by the continuous action of inner or outer forces. It was, rather, passion turning upon itself, and with no language, but a cry.[193]

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[188] Elizabeth Sharp indicates that her husband saw *The House of Usna* as the first of a series of plays to be published collectively as 'The Theatre of the Soul' or 'The Psychic Drama'. See her 'Biographical Note' in Macleod, *The Collected Works of Fiona Macleod vii: Poems and Dramas* (London, 1919).
[189] See Maurice Maeterlinck, *Alladine et Palomides, Intérieur et la mort de Tintagiles : trois petits drames pour marionettes* (Bruxelles, 1894).
[190] E. Sharp (1910), p. 318.
[191] See John S. Kelly, *A W. B. Yeats Chronology* (Basingstoke, 2003), entry for 29 April 1900, p. 67.
[192] Dennis Kennedy, *Granville Barker and the Dream of the Theatre* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 9.
[193] E. Sharp (1910), p. 317.

It seems therefore that Macleod's conceptual 'theatre of the soul' did not appear to the general audience to be theatrical at all. The performance nevertheless inspired the symbolist Scottish painter, John Duncan, to produce around 1901 a chalk on paper portrait of *Deirdre of the Sorrows.*[194] The play was also greatly appreciated by Sharp's friend, the Celticist Ernest Rhys and his wife. Having been given a copy of Mosher's edition of *The House of Usna* as a present for the New Year of 1904, they wrote to thank Fiona Macleod

> (...) for sending us your most characteristic heroic-lyric tragedy, *The House of Usna.* We were fortunate in being allowed to see it performed (...). The "Psychic Drama", as you conceive it, opens the door to a lost world of Nature and the emotions of Nature in the imagination. No doubt it is a frightfully difficult thing to attire these emotions in fair and credible human dress (...), but the "House of Usna" may serve as a test of how far those who have the key to these emotions can hope to fit it to old or new-old dramatic forms. (...)[195]

The legend of Deirdre has, from its earliest incarnation, been used to convey allegorically the intangible forces governing the human world. By retelling the legend in different literary forms, Macleod's intention is to play, in 'her' turn, a didactic role in the transmission of those immortal values. In a preface to *From the Hills of Dream: Threnodies, Songs and Later Poems*[196], a volume of poetry dedicated to W. B. Yeats and published posthumously in 1907, Macleod declares: 'Like Deirdre [who nostalgically remembers Scotland], we too, look often yearningly to a land from which we are exiled in time, but inhabit in dream and longing.'[197] The work of Fiona Macleod was therefore created to unveil a spiritual world that was at odds with that in which the real William Sharp, a man 'in velvet coat, curled hair, wonderful ties'[198], lived. According to Yeats, 'he had created an imaginary beloved' and 'attributed to her the authorship of all his

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[194] John Duncan (1866-1945) was greatly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites and painted many scenes drawn from Celtic myth and legend. His artistic works are not, however, very well known. See *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, chalk on paper, 36X30, Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, (c. 1901) [Appendix IV]
[195] Quoted in Elizabeth A. Sharp (1910), pp. 377-8.
[196] Three poems, 'The Lament of Darthool', 'Deirdrê is Dead...' and 'The Desire and the Lamentation of Coel' are included in the volume, the first based on 'Darthool and the sons of Usna' (from *The Laughter of Peterkin*) and the other two being poetical renderings drawn from *The House of Usna.* See *From the Hills of Dream: Threnodies, Songs and Later Poems* (London, 1907), pp. 61-2 and pp. 40-8.
[197] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[198] Pethica (1996), p. 154.

books that had any talent'[199]. The 'theatre of the soul' thus had to be written by the more delicate and ethereal figure of Fiona Macleod; the guide to the land of 'dream and longing' needed to be unreal herself. It was through this intangible alter ego that Sharp hoped to connect with the mythical past.

But this self-imposed detachment from reality made Macleod/Sharp look at best an eccentric, at worst some sort of mystical mystifier, a new James Macpherson with something to hide. The analogy between the two is made in an article published in *The Highland News* headed 'Mystery! Mystery! All in a Celtic Haze':

> Highland Celts in Glasgow are, I hear, hot on the scent of what they believe to be a female James Macpherson. This, of course, is Miss Fiona Macleod. The way which Miss Macleod has led our Glasgow countrymen is strange indeed, and the literary detective has been busy. In the first place, it is asserted that Miss Fiona Macleod does not exist. No one seems to have seen her.[200]

If Yeats was, on the whole, positively intrigued by Sharp's complex character and had genuinely desired that he write some Fiona plays for him, the literary collaboration never materialised and Sharp was kept at a distance from the chief activities of the Irish movement. Lady Gregory was particularly suspicious of him and objected to his involvement in the Irish Literary Theatre. Yet Sharp had also voluntarily marginalized himself by refusing to be identified with the so-called Celtic movement, Celtic Renascence, or Celtic theatre which were for him no more than meaningless labels: 'The "Celtic Renascence," the "Gaelic glamour," these for the most part are shibboleths of the journalist.'[201] The word 'Renascence' was deemed particularly inappropriate: 'why re-birth of what has never died, but has ever had a beautiful Protean life?'[202] Such so-called 'Celtic movements' would, he believed, give rise to dangerously nationalist attitudes and spawn adaptations of the old legendary tales that would be tinted with political and local flavours. In 'her' controversial essay 'Celtic', Macleod describes the consequences of the

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[199] See W. B. Yeats, 'The Trembling of the Veil: The Tragic Generation' (1922); repr. *Autobiographies* (New York, 1999), p. 261.
[200] Quoted in Elizabeth A. Sharp (1910), p. 258.
[201] Fiona Macleod, 'A Group of Celtic Writers', *The Fortnightly Review*, January 1899, p. 35.
[202] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

misuse of the word 'Celtic' which often excludes the English. 'She' provocatively remarks that 'there is, for us all, only English literature', the rest 'being provincial or dialectic'[203] and insists that 'above all else (...) a prevalent pseudo-nationalism should be dissuaded'[204]. The essay can be interpreted as an avowed refusal, on Macleod's part, to join the more politically involved group of Irish writers. Flavia Alaya has highlighted Sharp's apparently contradictory role within the Celtic movement: 'spokesman of a national movement while remaining at the same time fiercely critical of nationalism in its strict political sense.'[205] Macleod's non-partisan approach to the legendary tale is quite in keeping with 'her' insistence that 'there is no racial road to beauty'[206].

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[203] Fiona Macleod's essay 'Celtic' first appeared in *The Contemporary Review lxxvii*, n. 413 (May 1900); repr. *The Winged Destiny: Studies in the Spiritual History of the Gael* (London, 1904), p. 182.
[204] *Ibid.*, p. 181.
[205] Alaya (1970), p. 149.
[206] Macleod, 'Celtic', in *The Winged Destiny* (1904), p. 177.

CHAPTER V

For Their Own People:
Reinventions of the Deirdre Myth by AE, Lady Gregory and Yeats

'I believe that the tales which have been preserved for a hundred generations in the heart of the people (...) had in them a core of eternal truth. (...) Deirdre is, like Helen, a symbol of eternal beauty.'[1] These were not the words of Fiona Macleod but of an Irish poet and mystic, George Russell, who composed the first dramatic version of the Deirdre legend to be produced in Ireland.[2] Macleod and Russell were in many ways comparable characters. Both were driven by a desire to make the old stories 'ready for the use of the spirit'[3]. The tone and imagery through which Russell expresses this idea would have been quite at home in Macleod's works:

> those antique names (...), Angus, Lu, Deirdre, Finn, Ossian, and the rest, will be found to be each one the symbol of enduring qualities, and their story a trumpet through which will be blown the music of an eternal joy, the sentiment of an inexorable justice, the melting power of beauty in sorrow, the wisdom of age and the longings of the spirit.[4]

The mythical tales were therefore valued more for their power of suggestion than for the legendary events they celebrated. 'The question is', writes Russell, 'do they express lofty things to the soul? If they do they have justified themselves.'[5]

Like William Sharp, Russell wrote under an unconventional pen name with mystical resonance[6], AE, which enabled him to reveal a genderless inner self: 'Perhaps it may be that I am half a woman inside. My reviewers could never make out whether "AE"

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[1] AE, 'Nationality and Cosmopolitanism in Art' (1899); repr. *Some Irish Essays* (Dublin, 1906), pp. 17-18.
[2] AE's version was first printed serially from 6 July 1901 to 2 November 1901 in Standish O'Grady's *All Ireland Review*. The first act was reprinted in the 'Celtic Christmas' issue of the Irish Homestead in December 1902. In 1903, 'Deirdre: A Drama in Three Acts' was published as a whole and included in *The Green Sheaf - Supplement to No. 7* (London, 1903), 1-11. The full play was only issued in book form in 1907. See *Deirdre: A Drama in Three Acts* (Dublin, 1907), later reprinted as 'Deirdre: A Legend in Three Acts' in *Imaginations and Reveries* (Dublin, 1915), 202-255.
[3] AE (1899); repr. (1906), p. 18.
[4] AE, 'Nationality and Imperialism', in Lady Gregory, ed., *Ideals in Ireland* (London, 1901), p. 16.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[6] AE had originally chosen 'Aeon' for pseudonym, but it had once been accidentally misread and printed 'AE?', a name Russell subsequently decided to keep. It is found spelled either 'AE' or 'A.E.'. 'Aeon' referred to a power emanating from a supreme deity and involved in the creation and government of the universe.

was he or she.'[7] The obvious affinities between Sharp and Russell are not simply coincidental. In an undated letter to Fiona Macleod, AE addressed 'her' as a fellow mystic: 'I talk to you as a comrade on the same quest. (...) Sometime perhaps, (...) we may meet and speak of these things.'[8]

However, AE's initial respect for William Sharp was radically altered after reading Fiona Macleod's controversial article 'Celtic' published in the *Contemporary Review* in May 1900 which, as we have seen, celebrated the Britishness common to many of the so-called Celtic peoples, 'for there at last we have a bond to unite us all (...).'[9] Such declarations infuriated AE who could not agree with the Pan-Celtic and pro-British ideals expressed in the article, which he felt denigrated Irish identity. For AE, there is a 'racial road to beauty' filled with different peoples possessing distinctive national characters and emotions. This opinion is clearly expressed in the vigorous personal attack on Macleod's essay published in the *All Ireland Review* on 21 July 1900:

> She considers that we, as an Irish people, should abandon "our pseudo-nationalism", and have an honest pride in being British (...) but in Ireland the majority of thinking people are determined that they shall not be anglicised; and this determination is, I think, (...) just and divinely implanted in our breasts. (...) Have races no peculiar message to deliver as individuals have? It is to be hoped in the future if Miss Macleod wishes to write semi-political essays she will speak only for the Scottish Celt. We are a strange people over here and dislike being preached to by foreigners.
>
> A.E.[10]

Macleod attempted to clarify what 'her' true intentions had been in a reply addressed to the editor of the *All Ireland Review* (Standish J. O'Grady). In it, 'she' claimed not to have been 'speaking against nationalism' and concluded somewhat boldly: 'I stand for other Gaels as truly patriotic, eager, and passionately national as Mr Russell himself.'[11] Far from reassuring AE, these justifications had the unwanted effect of exasperating him even

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[7] See AE's letter to W.B Yeats dated 3rd April 1897 in *Some Passages from the Letters of AE to W. B. Yeats* (Dublin, 1936), p. 10.
[8] Letter reproduced in Elizabeth A. Sharp (1910), p. 277. The two men did meet in Dublin in the summer of 1897. (p. 287)
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 181.
[10] AE, article in *All Ireland Review*, vol. i, 21 July 1900, p. 2.
[11] Fiona Macleod, 'The Divine Adventure: To the editor of the All Ireland Review, 22 July 1900', *All Ireland Review i*, 3 August 1900, pp. 4-5.

more. He hit back on 18 August 1900 with a more overtly political diatribe, 'Irish Ideals and Fiona Macleod' accusing England of having been responsible for all Irish miseries and seeing Macleod as just another instance of this despicable Britishness:

> (...) the life they [the English] have chosen to live (...) is further off from beauty, more remote from the spirit, more alien from deity than that of any people hitherto in the memory of the world. In her letter, she [Fiona Macleod] humbly speaks of herself as a representative of the Gael. That is a claim which the Gael in Ireland will repudiate; for the Gael in Ireland (...) has the aspiration to a distinct and self-governed nationality, and no one can claim to represent him who does not share this national aspiration.[12]

As he admitted in a letter to W. B. Yeats, AE had 'declared war on Fiona Macleod' and believed that his offensive words would 'sever Fiona from Ireland for evermore'[13]. The quarrel reveals the important place of racial identity in AE's conception of the ancient legends, which had become part of the 'spiritual life' of the Irish people. Legendary figures like Cuchulain or Deirdre had, he felt, 'descended from the heaven-world of the imagination into the national being'[14].

To protect Celtic Ireland from the threat of English materialism, AE sought to introduce his countrymen to the ancient Irish gods and heroes, insisting that they formed part of the national consciousness and should therefore remain a constant source of inspiration: 'What does it matter whether Cuchulain, Deirdre or Maeve ever lived or acted on earth, as legend relates them? They are immortals and find bodies from generation to generation.'[15] If AE briefly considered producing a series of dramatic versions based on the stories of Cuchulain and the children of Lir and Turren[16], he made the Deirdre legend the subject of his only completed play. According to Darrell Figgis, AE got home one

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[12] AE, 'Irish Ideals and Fiona Macleod', *All Ireland Review i*, 18 August 1900, p. 1.
[13] See AE's letter to Yeats (July 1900) in *Some Passages* (1936), p. 23.
[14] AE, 'The Antecedents of History' in Monk Gibbon, ed., *The Living Torch: A.E.* (London, 1937), p. 135.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 134.
[16] See John Kelly, ed., *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats iii 1901-1904* (Oxford, 1994), p. 167 and note p. 168. Yeats's letter to Lady Gregory dated 5 April 1902 wrongly anticipates: 'Russell is planning a play on the Children of Turren & will I imagine do quite a number of plays.'

night after seeing Yeats and George Moore's collaborative work *Diarmuid and Grania*[17] and 'straightway wrote the first act of a play dealing with Deidre [*sic*]'[18]. He then 'put the thing away in a drawer, went to bed, and thought no more of the matter'[19]. In light of what he saw as Yeats's and Moore's vulgarisation of the Gaelic legendary figures, one of AE's aims in choosing a parallel theme for his dramatic experiment was to show how such subjects should be treated. This difference of approach is exemplified in Moore's dismissive reaction to a performance of AE's play: 'Who are his people? Ours were cattle merchants.'[20]

In order to be seen as national ideals, the protagonists of AE's *Deirdre* appear to have lost all traces of physicality. For instance, there is almost no reference made to food and drink in the text. Details such as the hunting and eating of venison while the lovers are in Scotland, which feature in earlier versions from *LMU* onwards[21], are occluded in AE's treatment of the exile. The food that was to adorn the climactic arrival of the exiles in Emain Macha in Yeats's and Synge's plays, and which first appears in *OCU*, is replaced here by a sustained foregrounding of the cerebral game of chess, operating as an extended metaphor for the realisation of Cathvah's prophecy.[22] Downplaying the physical aspect of his characters, AE elevates them to a quasi-divine status. At the start of the play, Lavarcam tells Concobar: 'Deirdre is also one of the immortals. What the gods desire will utter itself through her heart.'[23] If the gods can make themselves heard through mortals, it

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[17] *Diarmuid and Grania* was produced by Frank Benson at the Gaiety Theatre (Dublin) on 21 October 1901 and marked the third and last season of the Irish Literary Theatre. It tells the story of a beautiful girl who, like Deirdre, elopes with a young man so she can avoid getting married to the old king.
[18] Darrell Figgis, *AE (George W. Russell): A Study of a Man and a Nation* (1916); repr. (New York, 1970), p. 135.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] Quoted in W. B. Yeats, 'Dramatis Personae 1896-1902' (1935); repr. *Autobiographies* (New York, 1999), p. 322.
[21] *LMU* and *OCU* both make substantial reference to eating and drinking at this point in the narrative. See for example, Deirdre's lament in *LMU*, in Kinsella (1969), p. 16: 'Modest Noisiu would prepare / a cooking-pit in the forest floor / Sweeter than any meat / the son of Uisliu's, honey-sweet.'
[22] AE (1903), p. 8. 'SCENE. The House of the Red Branch at Emain Macha... CONCOBAR sits at a table on which is a chessboard, with figures arranged.'
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

is also possible for lesser beings to communicate with them. As well as being Deirdre's 'foster-mother', Lavarcam is a druidess with great powers of divination, who obeys the otherworldly forces above her king: 'Concobar, I will not fight against the will of the immortals. I am not thy servant but theirs. Let the Red Branch fall! If the gods scatter it, they have chosen to guide the people of Ulla in another path.'[24] Concobar himself appears able to communicate with the supernatural, according to Naisi in Act III: 'here is the chessboard of Concobar, with which he is wont to divine, playing a lonely game with fate.'[25] The chessboard acts as a link between Concobar and the supernatural forces of fate. As Deirdre notes, in a comment that could apply to either the chess game or the events of the drama, 'if he who set the game played with fate, the victory is already fixed'[26]. This game of chess is an updating and considerable elaboration of the *fidcheall* game played by the lovers in *OCU*.[27] In that version, the game provided the backdrop for the discovery of Lavarcam's deceit by Concobar's spy. AE's play places this discovery (here made directly by Concobar) before the lovers arrive onstage, with the effect that the events of the Act focus around the game itself. Arriving at the house of the Red Branch, they find the king's chessboard and continue his interrupted game: 'The pieces are set. We will finish the game'[28]. Naisi chooses to play with Concobar's silver pieces[29] and a clear correspondence is established between the king and queen of the game and the figures of Concobar and Deirdre. There is dramatic irony as Ainle warns Naisi: 'you play

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] The replacement of fidcheall by chess might seem surprising in light of AE's attachment to Irish national traditions, but can be explained as a concern that the strategic overtones of the game be understood by his audience, for whom the rules of fidcheall would have been obscure (as they are today). In addition, fidcheall does not seem to have involved a queen, making it less suitable as a metaphor for the events of the play.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] AE cleverly introduced a new form of geasa in order to explain why Naisi could guess which pieces the king had played with: 'It is geasa for him always to play with silver pieces.' (p. 10)

wildly. See your queen will be taken.'[30] When Deirdre suddenly 'flings her arms across the table, scattering the pieces over the board'[31], it is clear that in the end the main characters will be similarly knocked down. It also appears as a gesture of impotent rebellion in the face of the destiny that awaits: the workings of fate cannot be undone as easily as the moves of the chess game. Though the audience perceives the connection between the events on the chessboard and those on the stage, the characters have varying degrees of insight into the fates that await them. Deirdre's sense of dread in the final Act is in stark contrast to the insouciance of Naisi, who seems unaware of the scene's inevitable outcome. The gods' designs are inscrutable even to the druidic talents of Cathvah and Lavarcam, as Concobar makes clear at the start of the final Act: 'The air is dense with omens, but all is uncertain. Cathvah, for all his Druid art, is uncertain, and cannot foresee the future.'[32]

Among these mysterious forces of fate, a number of specific figures, drawn from the Irish Mythological Cycle, are mentioned by name. The best example is the sudden apparition of the 'Birds of Angus' flying around Deirdre and Naisi as the couple are leaving Ireland at the end of the first act: 'Their singing', says Lavarcam, 'brings love - and death.'[33] When they reappear to Deirdre in the second act, they provide a more graphic illustration of this promise: their plumage is 'all dabbled with crimson', and they 'shake a ruddy dew from their wings' onto the lovers.[34] The text also contains a great number of allusions to the Sidhe[35] who communicate with Deirdre in her dreams.

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[30] AE (1903), p. 10.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 5. In Irish mythology, Angus was a god of love and beauty. He was said to have four birds symbolising kisses flying about his head (see illustration from AE's play in Appendix V).
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[35] The Sidhe were fairy folk who are associated to the Tuatha de Danann, pseudo-historical invaders of Ireland who possessed magical powers. They often intervened in the affairs of mortals. See Tom P. Cross and Clark H. Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York, 1936), p. 129.

Mythical locations such as 'Hy Brazil'[36] are also mentioned and Celtic deities like the sun god Lu and the great Mananaun[37] are evoked. Naisi meets his death after hearing Cathvah's incantation which provokes mythological hallucinations. He sees 'the swans of Lir' and Mananaun welcoming him with a smile in Ildathach.[38] At the end of Act I, the king also appeals to 'Balor, Tethra, and all the brood of demons'[39] to assist him in his vengeance. That his appeal is answered seems to be borne out by Deirdre's observation in the third act: 'the high gods have deserted us, and the demons draw us into a trap.'[40]

The presence of the supernatural does not only manifest itself externally, but also internally in the form of psychic dreams and visions. Deirdre, in particular, is susceptible to them and the play opens with a description of a dream to Lavarcam: 'Last night in a dream I saw the blessed Sidhe upon the mountains, and they looked on me with eyes of love.'[41] Yet she does not only see celestial beings in her sleep but also encounters Naisi for the first time. She initially mistakes him for an immortal hunter 'from some heavenly field'[42] and describes her movements to Lavarcam: 'Then in my dream I came nigh him, and whispered in his ear, and pointed the way through the valley to our dun.'[43] Naisi gets the message and is guided telepathically to Deirdre's door: 'Goddess, or enchantress (...) Thy lips called hither, and I have come.'[44] It is therefore an exclusively spiritual connection that has brought Naisi to Deirdre, a call of the soul and not of the body, as AE wishes to make clear. Deirdre's capacity for extrasensory perception is also effective

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[36] An imaginary paradisiacal island off the western coast of Ireland.
[37] Mananaun Mac Lir (more commonly spelled Manannan) is the Irish god of the sea. At the end of the play, Cathvah invokes Mananaun who is thus directly involved in Naisi's death.
[38] Also called 'The Many-Coloured Land', it is another earthly paradise of Celtic mythology.
[39] AE (1903), p. 6. Balor and Tethra were supposedly kings of the Fomorians, one of the pre-Christian invaders of Ireland. Balor had one eye whose glance would kill and Tethra possessed a sword which sang of its deeds when it was unsheathed.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[43] *Ibid.* (Illustration in Appendix V)
[44] *Ibid.*

where Concobar is concerned, as she discerns the king's evil intentions long before he has done any harm: 'There is a hunger in his eyes for I know not what.'[45]

The strong mystical current running through the play needs to be understood in light of the author's own visionary experiences. George Moore relates in *'Hail and Farewell'* that Deirdre and Naisi once appeared to AE who instantly visualised some important scenes from their story which were then incorporated in his version of the tale:

> he confided to me that one morning (...) as he rose from his bed, he had seen her [Deirdre] in the woods, "where she lived,' he added "with Levarcam, a Druidess, that King Concubar had set to guard her maidenhood. (...)." It was while returning home over Portobello Bridge that he saw Naisi in his Scottish dun mending a spear (...).[46]

AE apparently took this phenomenon as a source of poetic inspiration: the first act of *Deirdre*, written 'at a single sitting', had been 'transmitted' to him in this initial vision.[47] He then 'had to wait a few weeks for his next inspiration'[48] before the play was finished. This formulation portrays AE in a passive role, enjoying some kind of transcendental revelation. These visions, through which AE 'received' the substance of the play, find an echo in those which allow Deirdre herself to glimpse the fate that the gods have in store for her.

As early as 1895, AE and his friend James Pryse experimented with a form of divination known as 'psychometry' which aimed at reconstructing in vision events drawn from the Irish legends. Their findings were reproduced in a series of narrated episodes entitled 'The Enchantment of Cuchulain' and published in the fourth volume of the *Irish Theosophist.*[49] This was a journal for which AE wrote a number of articles connecting the

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[45] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[46] George Moore, *'Hail and Farewell' ii. Salve* (1912); repr. (London, 1947), pp. 128-9.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 130.
[49] See Peter Kuch, *Yeats and AE* (Gerrards Cross, 1986), pp. 107-8. According to Kuch, the articles were not the product of AE and Pryse's psychic aptitudes but betrayed instead a detailed knowledge of O'Curry's *On The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish.*

myths of ancient Ireland with his spiritual commitment to the theosophical movement[50], and it is important to understand the significance which this esoteric creed had on his conception of the legendary material. In 'The Legends of Ancient Eire', AE shows how theosophy – meaning etymologically God-wisdom (theos/sophos) – forms an integral part of Celtic mythology:

> In these legends, (...) where Gods, heroes and bright supernatural beings mingle, (...) I have found not misty but clear traces of that old wisdom-religion once universal. (...) It was the belief that life is one; that nature is not dead but living; (...). Every real scripture and every ancient myth, to be understood truly, must be understood in this light.[51]

Far from being primitive, the ancient world, as AE sees it, should serve as an example to make modern men aware of their own spiritual nature and 'divinity'[52]. As is well exemplified in *Deirdre*, the pre-Christian gods and heroes naturally commune with the supreme force that is behind all life, what the theosophists describe as a Universal Being or Over Soul with which all individual souls should eventually be reunited. Going beyond mere theosophical abstractions, AE calls for the people of Ireland to awaken to their divine destiny, contrasting the idyllic mythical past with the sombre reality of his time: 'we who, as a race, are the forlorn hope of idealism in Europe, sink day by day into apathy and forget what a past was ours and what a destiny awaits us if we will but rise responsive to it.'[53] If, like O'Grady, AE saw in the legendary past a model of heroism that could save Ireland from 'apathy', he went further than his predecessor and was convinced that the great names and divinities of Irish legend would come back in the form of guiding spirits or avatars who would eradicate materialism and restore spiritual growth in Ireland: 'The Gods have not deserted us. Hearing our call they will return.'[54]

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[50] The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky. The term 'Theosophy' denotes 'those forms of philosophic and religious thought which claim special insight into the Divine nature and its creative processes'. Its doctrines include belief in karma and reincarnation. See Kuch (1986), p. 8.
[51] AE, 'The Legends of Ancient Eire', *The Irish Theosophist iii*, 15 March 1895, p. 101.
[52] *Ibid.*, 15 April 1895, p. 122.
[53] AE, 'The Awakening of the Fires', *The Irish Theosophist v*, 15 January 1897, p. 66.
[54] AE, 'The Legends of Ancient Eire', *The Irish Theosophist iii*, 15 March 1895, p. 103.

The same hope is expressed two years later in another essay published in *The Irish Theosophist*, 'Ideals in Ireland: Priest or Hero':

> There waits brooding in this isle a great destiny, and to accomplish it we must have freedom of thought. What is the ideal of Ireland as a nation? It drifts from mind to mind, a phantom thought lacking a spirit, but a spirit which will surely incarnate. Perhaps some of our old heroes may return.[55]

AE's faith in an avatar who would be drawn from the heroic past was no doubt supported by his strong belief in reincarnation. Towards the end of his life, he was still patiently waiting for its re-emergence: 'I cannot help feeling that there is some precious thing in Irish destiny to be revealed (...).'[56] AE's national expectations undeniably shaped the way in which his legendary characters were portrayed and staged. He was concerned that the moral and spiritual qualities represented by the Celtic heroes should not be debased or vulgarised as had been done in *Diarmuid and Grania*. Rather, the dramatic form could be exploited so that the actors brought to physical life for a modern audience the 'peculiar cultural and spiritual ancestry'[57] that AE felt was permanently written into the Irish 'national being'. The final moments of the play stage the perpetuation of the Deirdre myth through this national collective memory in the form of a prophecy by Lavarcam: 'of the pity for her they [the gods] will build up an eternal kingdom in the spirit of man.'[58]

AE may represent the process of transmission as fated by divine intervention, but individuals are needed in every generation who will keep the stories alive for their contemporaries. According to AE, it was not until he had read Standish O'Grady's epic narratives that he became conscious of the enduring power and nobility of the Irish legends:

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[55] AE, 'Ideals in Ireland. Priest or Hero?', *The Irish Theosophist v* (15 April and 15 May 1897), privately reprinted as a pamphlet in May 1897 by AE, p. 6.
[56] Letter to W. B. Yeats dated 6 March 1932 in *Some Passages* (1936), p. 62.
[57] AE, *The Inner and the Outer Ireland* (Dublin, 1921), p. 6.
[58] AE (1903), p. 11.

> I was as a man who (...) had lost memory of his past (...). When I read O'Grady I was as such a man who suddenly feels ancient memories rushing at him, and knows he was born in a royal house (...). It was the memory of race which rose up within me as I read (...).[59]

O'Grady's great influence can be felt in AE's characterization of Concobar as a law-giver whose 'chivalry' and moral nature, rather than any selfish desire, lead him to spare the new-born Deirdre:

> The Druids would have slain her, but I set myself against the wise ones, thinking in my heart that the chivalry of the Red Branch would be already gone if this child were slain. If we are to perish it shall be nobly, and without any departure from the laws of our order. So I have hidden her away from men, hoping to stay the coming of fate.[60]

As Deirdre grows into a young woman, the king realises her beauty could have devastating consequences on the men of his kingdom and 'turn them from remembrance of their duty'[61], as he warns Lavarcam: 'Wise woman, guard well this beauty which fills my heart with terror.'[62] As in O'Grady's version, AE's Concobar aspires to the construction of an undivided nation: 'it is my purpose to bring the five provinces under the sway of the Red Branch, and there shall be but one kingdom in Eri between the seas.'[63] He also expresses his belief in a specifically Irish heroic grandeur that is inherited from the gods and transmitted from one generation to the next, an ideal of racial purity which, we have seen, is dear to O'Grady: 'through the memory of our days and deeds, the gods will build themselves an eternal empire in the mind of the Gael.'[64] Yet in AE's version, the king, who cannot resist Deirdre, is ultimately overpowered by her beauty. In the end, it is his jealousy that has turned him against Naisi and his brothers, but he pretends to be punishing them to 'see the broken law set straight'[65]. A messenger welcomes Naisi with words that could well have been extracted from O'Grady's *The*

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[59] AE, 'Standish O'Grady: A Tribute by A.E.', in Standish O'Grady, *The Coming of Cuculain* (Dublin, 1919), p. x.
[60] AE (1903), p. 3.
[61] *Ibid.*
[62] *Ibid.*
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[64] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[65] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Coming of Cuculain[66]: 'You have broken the law of Ulla when you stole away the daughter of Felim. You have broken the law of the Red Branch when you sent lying messages through Lavarcam plotting to return.'[67] Naisi's aggressive reply: 'Return to Concobar and tell him that tomorrow the Red Branch will choose another chief'[68] challenges the sovereign's authority and gives to the retaliation that follows an air of self-defence. On this account, the death of Naisi is necessary in order to ensure collective well-being, as Concobar explains in an O'Gradyesque manner: 'Ulla could not hold together if its ancient laws were set aside'[69]. In the end, however, nothing seems to 'hold together'. AE's king finally admits that he has broken both his crown and his heart in the aftermath of the vengeance: 'I have two divided kingdoms and one is in my own heart.'[70] AE seems to have been divided between a desire to represent Concobar as a replica of O'Grady's strong and just king and also to make him, despite himself, vulnerable to Deirdre's charms.

Far from betraying only O'Grady's influence, the sentimental tone of AE's play bears witness to the author's awareness of several of the nineteenth-century Deirdre materials that had previously been consulted by Fiona Macleod. In a larger sense, AE's version still breathes the 'scent of roses' of late nineteenth-century sentimentality, the same 'literary perfume'[71] we find instilled in Ferguson and O'Grady's versions. Indeed, AE removes all allusions to sexuality and minimises physical contact between the lovers. Unlike the seductress of *LMU* who forces a reluctant Naisi to follow her, AE's Deirdre asks him to leave in order to save his life. Her love is therefore selfless and unconditional:

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[66] See, in particular, Standish J. O'Grady, 'Chapter XI There was war in Ulster' in *The Coming of Cuculain.*
[67] AE (1903), p. 10.
[68] *Ibid.*
[69] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[70] *Ibid.*
[71] See the review of the first performance of *Deirdre* in *The Leader* (April 1902); repr. Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Modern Irish Drama: A Documentary History – Laying the Foundations 1902-1904* (Dublin, 1976), vol. ii, pp. 13-14: 'But, alas! "The scent of roses!" (...) Every phrase spoken by Deirdre, every word uttered by Naisi was redolent of literary perfume.'

> DEIRDRE. Is it death to thee to love me, Naisi? Oh, fly quickly and forget me. But first before thou goest, bend down thy head - low - rest it on my bosom. Listen to the beating of my heart. That passionate tumult is for thee! There - I have kissed thee. I have sweet memories for everlasting. Go now, my beloved, quickly (...) I fear for thee this stony king.[72]

The chivalrous Naisi remains undeterred and asks his beloved to accompany him to Alba. Act III follows the tragic ending of *OCU*, as Deirdre dies from grief. Here again, however, we are far from the physicality of the medieval text, where she 'leaped on top of Naoise in the grave'[73]. Instead, AE has her meekly lay her head on his body. He also grants his heroine a valedictory speech which places emphasis on her spirit 'sinking away from the world'[74], suggesting a mystical journey of the soul after death. But as her soul and body fade away, both Lavarcam and Concobar show awareness that a part of her will survive in the 'eternal kingdom' of the Irish imagination, of which she will be the 'Queen'.[75] The end of the drama thus stages the inauguration of the mythological tradition within which AE situates his play.

However, if AE's *Deirdre* has now found a place alongside the other adaptations of the myth, his drama would never have been completed and performed had he not one day received the unexpected visit of the actors Frank and William Fay. Before their meeting with AE, the Fay brothers had been searching for Irish plays to perform that would show their countrymen in a positive light and praise 'the glory of Ireland'[76]. AE, for his part, had no dramatic ambitions when he set off to write the play and admitted knowing 'nothing about stage craft'[77]. The playwright James Cousins, who was to play the small parts of Ainnle and Buinne, mentioned to the Fays that he knew a dramatic text that had a distinctively Irish flavour and showed them the first episodes of AE's *Deirdre* which had been published serially in Standish O'Grady's *All Ireland Review* and

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[72] AE (1903), p. 5.
[73] Mac Giolla Léith (1993), p. 139.
[74] AE (1903), p. 11.
[75] *Ibid.*
[76] James H. Cousins and Margaret E. Cousins, *We Two Together* (Madras, 1950), p. 67.
[77] See AE's letter to Miss L. R. Bernstein dated 11.6.1929 in Alan Denson, ed., *Letters from AE* (London, 1961), p. 182.

reprinted partly in the 'Celtic Christmas' issue of the *Irish Homestead* in December 1901. Cousins next introduced the enthusiastic Fays to AE and they asked him to finish the play, promising in return to 'put the first act in rehearsal immediately' and later to 'undertake its full performance'[78].

James Cousins undoubtedly took pride in being an agent in the collaboration between AE and the Fays and saw this moment as decisive for the creation of a new dramatic movement that would focus exclusively on Irish concerns: 'it was in that meeting that the Irish dramatic movement proper began in the full sense of plays on *Irish* themes by *Irish* writers, performed by *Irish* actors.'[79] [Italics mine] William Fay's troupe was formed in 1902 specifically to produce George Russell's *Deirdre* and was called the 'Irish National Dramatic Society'[80]. The production thus had a distinctively nationalist feel to it. AE particularly welcomed the choice of an Irish cast for his *Deirdre*: 'I prefer them to English actors as they are in love with their story.'[81] Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, who was assigned the part of Lavarcam[82], relates in her memoirs that most of the performers 'came out of Nationalist clubs in Dublin, or were connected in some fashion with the Nationalist movement'[83]. The actresses had been enlisted from Maud Gonne's *Inginidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Erin),* an actively republican women's group with a small drama section which offered to subsidise Fay's production of the play.

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[78] Cousins (1950), p. 66.
[79] See letter of James Cousins, dated 9 September 1938. MS. No. 11,000, National Library of Ireland; repr. Hogan and Kilroy (1976), p. 9.
[80] The name was then slightly changed to 'The Irish National Dramatic Company' when Yeats and Lady Gregory's farce *The Pot of Broth* was produced on 30 October 1902. By March 1903, the company re-formed into the 'Irish National Theatre Society', with Yeats as President and Maud Gonne, George Russell (AE) and Douglas Hyde as Vice-Presidents.
[81] From a letter that AE apparently wrote to Lady Gregory early in 1902, quoted in Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (1913); repr. (1972), p. 30.
[82] Significantly, the tendency for the actors of AE's *Deirdre* to be linked with nationalist movements was still noticeable in December 1907 when the revolutionary Countess Constance Markievicz replaced Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh in the part of Lavarcam.
[83] Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years* (Dublin, 1955), p. 1.

Rehearsals began in December 1901 while AE was still writing the final act. On 3 January 1902, a private full-dress performance of part of the play was held in Dublin, in the garden of the archaeologist George Coffey to celebrate his son Dermot's twelfth birthday (Appendix VI). The programme of this first performance (Appendix VI) indicates that the scenes played were 'The Wooing of Deirdre' (Act I) and 'The Recall of the Sons of Usna' (Act II). As is somewhat exaggerated by James Cousins who played Buinne, the son of Fergus, 'all the literary world was present at the birthday recital' and AE was apparently so absorbed in the part of Naisi that he 'shivered the timbers of the squashed audience (...) when he flung his spear on the floor'[84]. More than a simple birthday celebration, this informal performance gave a foretaste of the full-scale dramatization of the play.

The three acts of *Deirdre* were presented to the public on 2, 3 and 4 April 1902 (Appendix VII). It was decided that the play was too short to stand on its own and Maud Gonne persuaded Yeats to 'contribute a little play he had just then completed, *Kathleen ni Houlihan*[85]. The performance of the two plays took place in Dublin at the hall of St Teresa's Total Abstinence Association in Clarendon Street. The audience was a 'mixed crowd (...) made up of members of the Cumann na Gaedhal, the Gaelic League, the National Literary Society, and the usual attendants at the weekly temperance entertainments'[86]. The room, which was apparently 'packed to overflowing'[87], was therefore filled with people who were broadly Catholics and/or nationalists. In Yeats's play, an old woman who personifies Ireland inspires a young man to fight for Ireland's freedom and to prepare himself to die for her. He leaves his fiancée behind and falls in love with this more appealing 'woman', his country. It is, then, very likely that after

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[84] See letter of James Cousins, dated 9 September 1938; repr. Hogan and Kilroy (1976), p. 10.
[85] See letter of George Roberts, 'A Meeting with AE', *The Irish Times* (13 July 1955); repr. Hogan and Kilroy (1976), p. 12.
[86] *Ibid.*
[87] See *The Freeman's Journal*, 5 April 1902; repr. in Nic Shiubhlaigh (1955), p. 190.

seeing *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* (which was the second play performed) a largely separatist audience would have revisited *Deirdre* in light of the explicit patriotic themes of the latter play. The figure of the king who, in the end, wants to keep Deirdre for himself could easily be understood as an allegorical representation of the English Crown's desire to hold on to Ireland. Echoing the personification of Ireland as *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, the character of Deirdre could have been assimilated (even phonetically) with Éire. The conditions of the production were thus ideally suited to bringing out the latent nationalist resonances of AE's play.

Nevertheless, it was the mystical tone of *Deirdre* that dominated the performance. As was observed in *The Tatler*, 'the whole play was singularly weird and listened to with breathless attention'[88]. AE, who played the part of Cathvah the druid, succeeded once more in frightening the spectators. As he informs Yeats in a letter dated 19 April 1902, a 'hysterical lady' who attended a performance accused him of practising black magic while reciting Cathvah's incantation: 'she saw three black waves of darkness rolling down over the stage and audience and it made her ill.'[89] The eerie atmosphere prevailing on stage was also enhanced by a 'gauze veil' and by the statue-like poses of the actors, as Yeats pointed out: 'And strange to say I like Deirdre. It is thin and faint but it has its effect of wall decoration.[90]

While Yeats offered qualified praise, O'Grady – who attended the first showing – condemned in the *All Ireland Review* the very principle of performing *Deirdre*, declaring that 'the Red Branch ought not to be staged'[91]. He feared that making the heroic cycles available to 'the crowd', and not just to the discerning few, would have the effect of

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[88] See 'The Irish National Drama in Dublin', *The Tatler*, No. 42, 16 April 1902, p. 110. (Appendix VII)
[89] Denson (1961), p. 41.
[90] See letter from Yeats to Lady Gregory in Kelly (1994), pp. 167-8, written on 5 April 1902. Just two days earlier, Yeats held a very different opinion and wrote to Lady Gregory (p. 166): 'I hated *Dierdre* [*sic*] in fact I did not remain in the theatre because I was so nervous about it. (...) When I saw it in rehearsal I thought it superficial & sentimental, as I thought it when it came out in the All Ireland Review.'
[91] As quoted by AE in 'The Dramatic Treatment of Heroic Literature', *The United Irishman* (1902); repr. (1906), p. 21.

'degrading Irish ideals and banishing the soul of the land '.[92] O'Grady seems to have been disturbed by the implications of staging *Deirdre* in particular, as AE indicated in a letter to Yeats: 'I have [according to O'Grady] degraded Conchobar (...) by emphasising the *only* tale in which he appears in an evil light. Shade of Macha, what a fib!'[93] The violent tenor of this letter was toned down in AE's printed rebuttal, but he remained firm in his dismissal of O'Grady's criticisms. Rejecting the idea that the tales should be 'the poetic luxury of the few', he declared that they 'have no special message to the aristocrat more than to the man of the people'.[94] An earlier essay makes explicit the power of the heroic legends to inspire, not just the landowning class as O'Grady believed, but a truly democratic national consciousness:

> An aristocracy of lordly and chivalrous heroes is bound in time to create a great democracy by the reflection of their character in the mass, and the idea of the divine right of kings is succeeded by the idea of the divine right of the people (...). The seeds which are sown at the beginning of a race bear their flowers and fruits towards its close.[95]

AE's wry comment that 'I think the crowd would not follow O'Grady in thinking the legendary literature should not be given to them'[96] was borne out by the success which the play enjoyed. People were turned away on the first evening, and it was re-staged a number of times in the following months, including an open-air production at Dundrum on 22 August 1903. The play also ran from 28 October to 2 November 1902 at the culturally important harvest festival of Samhain as the inaugural performance for the newly re-named Irish National Dramatic Company.

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[92] *Ibid.*

[93] Denson (1961), p. 40. O'Grady apparently saw more differences than similarities between AE's Concobar and his own.

[94] AE, 'The Dramatic Treatment of Heroic Literature' (1902); repr. (1906), p. 22.

[95] AE, 'Nationality and Imperialism', in *Ideals in Ireland* (1901), pp. 15-6.

[96] However, by 1906, AE had reversed his position. In the preface to *Some Irish Essays*, he admitted (p. 7): 'I cannot let *The Dramatic Treatment of Heroic Literature* be reprinted without saying that I feel now O'Grady was right (...).' Perhaps this surprising avowal reflected AE's growing disillusionment with the National Theatre Society. In April 1904, he had resigned his Vice-Presidency following a dispute with Yeats over the latter's opposition to a staging of *Deirdre* in America.

Despite this success, *Deirdre* was to be the only outcome of what AE called 'my brief folly of play-writing'[97]. But it represents a significant reconciliation of two impulses which he sometimes experienced as contradictory, towards nationalism on the one hand and spirituality on the other: 'Birth in Ireland gave me a bias towards Irish nationalism, while the spirit which inhabits my body told me the politics of eternity ought to be my only concern.'[98] By infusing *Deirdre* with what might be called a mystical nationalism, AE came close to doing justice to his conviction that 'all our political ideals are symbols of spiritual destinies'[99].

Lady Gregory started working on her own version of the Deirdre legend at around the same time as AE, who had read the first act of his *Deirdre* to her on 25 November 1900. Although she saw in it 'some beauty', she expressed strong reservations as to the theatrical potential of his play.[100] Barely a month after hearing an extract from AE's *Deirdre*, she considered 'harmonising Cuchulain'[101] by recreating from diverse sources a continuous narrative on the exploits of the great legendary hero, from his birth to his death. The first step towards this project was, according to a diary entry for 26 January 1901, a translation of the Deirdre tale entitled 'Children of Usnach'[102], undertaken 'as an experiment towards my Cuchulain'[103]. Her translation was then shown to Yeats who

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[97] Kelly (1994), note p. 168.
[98] AE (1915), 'Preface', p. ix.
[99] *Ibid.*, 'The Spiritual Conflict', p. 92.
[100] Pethica (1996), p. 292.
[101] *Ibid.* Diary entry for 29 December 1900, p. 293.
[102] *Ibid.*, p. 299.
[103] *Ibid.*, p. 298. She does not specify, however, which Irish text was the basis of her translation. Since she had only started learning Irish in 1894 and could not read old Irish, she would probably have used – as Synge was to do later – the small volume published by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, *Oide Cloinne Uisnig, Fate of the Children of Uisneach* (Dublin, 1898), a simplified book primarily intended for students learning the Irish language.

encouraged her to 'go on' with the rest of her work, convinced that it would be 'a great book'[104].

Yet Lady Gregory was not initially driven to investigate the ancient Irish cycles by a creative impulse to add her name to the long list of adapters of the mythical tales. Her literary enterprise was, in fact, intended as a direct response to the Trinity College scholars - among them Dr Robert Atkinson - who had claimed in a report published in February 1900 for the Commission of Intermediate Education that 'the Irish books' displayed 'very little idealism' and 'very little imagination'.[105] Lady Gregory, whose 1897 manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre vowed to 'show that Ireland is (...) the home of an ancient idealism'[106], was no doubt outraged by the report. Her work on Cuchulain enabled her to respond to such allegations by revealing the important part Gaelic myths could play in raising, to use a favourite expression of hers, 'the dignity of Ireland'[107].

Cuchulain of Muirthemne is not, however, to be thought of as a scholarly attempt; in fact its author clearly expresses her fear of being mistaken for a scholar. This anxiety not only reveals an acute awareness of her limitations in the field but also reflects a personal refusal to be associated with the exclusive intellectual world of TCD academics. She presents herself in her 'Dedication' as a simple 'woman of the house, that has to be minding the place, and listening to complaints, and dividing her share of food'; the task of 'harmonising Cuchulain' should have been undertaken instead by 'the learned men that live in the college at Dublin, where so many of these old writings are stored' who yet

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[104] Pethica (1996), p. 301.
[105] Quoted by Lady Gregory in *Seventy Years: Being the Autobiography of Lady Gregory* (Gerrards Cross, 1974), p. 391.
[106] Lady Gregory (1913); repr. (1972), p. 20.
[107] See Lady Gregory (1974), p. 400: 'I have done what I wanted, something for the dignity of Ireland. (...) the enemy could no longer scoff at our literature and its "want of idealism"'.

show no 'respect for Irish things'[108]. Because they have negligently left the books to gather dust, the task has ironically fallen to 'the woman of the house' to brush away the cobwebs. In explaining the ways in which she has tackled the various textual sources, she is also keen to differentiate her method from that of the professional, admitting, for example, that she 'was not scholar enough to read ancient manuscripts'[109]. The pruning of some passages is further justified by the fact that 'it was not the work of scholars to do this, but it was mine'[110].

Yet whilst positioning herself as the unpretentious housewife in charge of tidying up the Irish sagas, she clearly wishes her work to be taken seriously. By recording in a diary entry for 29 December 1900 that Douglas Hyde initially snubbed her project because 'his feeling is a scholar should do it'[111], she intends to show that she too can rise to the challenge and apply professional rigour to her research. Hyde himself came to appreciate her determination and sent some important documents to assist her.[112] In the same way, she made contact with Eleanor Hull who had a couple of years earlier assembled a collection of stories relating to the hero Cuchulain, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature*, which included an extensive account of the Deirdre legend.[113] Hull, who visited Lady Gregory in November 1900, encouraged her to look at the many scholarly texts she had used for her own *Cuchullin Saga* and advised her to read, among others, O'Flanagan, De Jubainville, Hyde, Windisch and Stokes.[114] Her influence was acknowledged by Lady Gregory in *Seventy Years*: 'Miss Hull's *Cuchullin Saga* was of great use when it came; awakening interest by making known some of the tales translated

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[108] Lady Gregory, 'Dedication of the Irish edition to the people of Kiltartan', *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster* (London, 1902), p. vi.
[109] Lady Gregory (1974), p. 392.
[110] *Ibid.*
[111] Pethica (1996), p. 293.
[112] *Ibid.* See her diary entry for 18 May 1901, p. 398: 'Hyde has sent me a bundle of "Irische Texte" and other books – and a MS that I'm afraid I can't read.'
[113] Hull (1898), 'The Tragical Death of the Sons of Usnach', pp. 23-53.
[114] See Pethica (1996), diary entry for 22 November 1900, p. 291: 'A visit from Miss Hull, and picked up a little information about the Cuchullin stories.'

by various scholars old and new (...).'[115] In order to follow up Hull's references, she applied for a reader's ticket at the British Museum and explained the nature of her research to the keeper of prints and drawings, Sidney Colvin. Although he gave her admission to the British Museum immediately, he did not, she recalls, support her proposal: '[he] says "the difficulty about harmonising is that there are so many stories" – I say "yes, that is just why it is necessary"'[116]. To add to the insult, Colvin praised an unconventional version of the Deirdre legend written shortly before by Herbert Trench: 'he breaks off to say H. Trench has got more of the Celtic spirit into "Deirdre Wed" than any of our other poets, "though he is not in that set!"'[117] The librarian's scepticism did not, however, discourage her from making several studious trips to the British Museum where she was soon 'getting on nicely with Carmichael's "Deirdre"', a version that she believed would 'fit on very well to the others'[118]. Her knowledge of French and German also proved useful for, she remarked bitterly, in translating the old Irish texts, 'German scholars had taken up the task despised by our own Trinity Professors.'[119] As is signalled in the list of sources closing the volume, she worked diligently on Carmichael's Gaelic text alongside its French translation by Georges Dottin.[120]

Despite the wide range of sources mentioned, Lady Gregory's bibliography[121] is in other ways defiantly unprofessional. It is imprecise, even erroneous in places and she justifies these inaccuracies by arguing that if she has not double-checked her references it is specifically because she has chosen to proceed in an unscholarly fashion: 'But I cannot

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[115] Lady Gregory (1974), p. 391.
[116] *Ibid.*, p. 301.
[117] *Ibid.* The title of Herbert Trench's book is, more precisely, *Deirdre Wedded* (London, 1901). This odd narrative poem in five parts focuses only on the meeting of the lovers and their escape. Despite the author's attempts to give a new structure to the tale, it has had very little impact on subsequent treatments of the Deirdre myth.
[118] *Ibid.*
[119] Lady Gregory (1974), p. 393.
[120] Georges Dottin, trans., 'Exil des Fils d'Usnech autrement dit meurtre des fils d'Usnech et de Derdriu', d'après le texte gaélique tout récemment recueilli dans la tradition orale des Highlands par M. Carmichael, in Henri D'Arbois De Jubainville, *L'Epopée celtique en Irlande* (Paris, 1892), pp. 236-52.
[121] Lady Gregory (1902), pp. 359-60.

make it [the list of authorities] quite accurate, for I have sometimes transferred a mere phrase, sometimes a whole passage from one story to another, where it seemed to fit better.'[122] If she indicates that her 'Fate of the Children of Usnach' draws on the 'text and translations published by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language', she does not specify what the actual titles of the 'text' and 'translations' are. In the same way, for each scholarly text, she gives only the name of the periodical in which it is included without mentioning the relevant 'Deirdre' sections. Her entries for 'Whitley Stokes, *Irische Texte*' and 'Windisch, *Irische Texte*' are thus indistinguishable whereas their respective Deirdre versions appear in two separate volumes.[123] The name 'O'Curry', she points out, 'stands for his two books, "The Manners and Customs of Ancient Ireland," and "MS. Materials for Ancient Irish History," and his contributions to *Atlantis*', but the reader is left with no clue as to where among O'Curry's countless 'contributions' the relevant Deirdre material may be found.[124] Of the two *Reliquae Celticae* mentioned, Cameron's entry is correct, but there appears to be no record of a work by O'Flanagan bearing the same title. To make this all the more confusing, two versions are said to be extracted from *Transactions of the Gaelic Society* (by O'Flanagan and Carmichael), but the latter was, as we have seen, published in a different journal entitled *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness.* The obscure title '*Ultonian Ballads*' refers in fact to Hector Maclean's 'Lament of Deírdrí' included in his *Ultonian Hero-Ballads*: *Collected in the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland.* Thus Lady Gregory does not make it easy for her reader to trace back her sources.

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[122] *Ibid.*, 'Notes', p. 359.
[123] Ernst Windisch, 'Die Verbannung der Söhne Usnechs', *Irische Texte* 1 (Leipzig, 1880), 67-82, and Whitley Stokes, 'The Death of the Sons of Usnech', *Irische Texte* 2 (Leipzig, 1884), pp. 153-178.
[124] As we have seen, it is, in fact, in Eugene O'Curry, 'The Exile of the Children of Uisnech', *The Atlantis iii* (1862), 377-422.

In omitting some important details from her titles such as 'of Inverness' or 'Collected in the Highlands', Lady Gregory seems to have deliberately played down the influence of the Scottish tradition on her version. If she confesses to having 'occasionally used Scottish Gaelic versions, as in the account of Deirdre's birth, and the manner of her death'[125], a comparative reading of her 'Fate of the Children of Usnach' alongside the sources mentioned reveals that the departures from the standard Irish texts in favour of less common Scottish variants are more extensive than she is prepared to admit. Indeed, the first ten pages of her version follow Carmichael's account almost literally from Deirdre's birth to her encounter with Naoise and their subsequent flight to Scotland. Despite a few interpolations from other texts, this first part appears to have been closely modelled on Dottin's translation of a Scottish Gaelic version by Carmichael. That she chose this obscure retelling for copy text rather than the more widely disseminated *LMU* or *OCU* versions is in itself significant. Her text, like Carmichael's, begins with the story of a harpist at the court of King Conchubar who one day asks a fortune-teller what the future holds in store for him. The same prophecy is delivered as in *LMU*: 'it is on account of a daughter belonging to you, that more blood will be shed than ever was shed in Ireland since time and race began.'[126] But whereas in *LMU* the future catastrophe is foreseen since this wife is already heavily pregnant, in Carmichael's version the harpist is told some time before the child is conceived that his spouse will, against all odds, give birth to a beautiful daughter who will subsequently cause a great number of deaths in Ireland. Lady Gregory then departs from her Scottish source by bringing the diviner back after the child's birth and weaving in the druidic incantation drawn from the opening scene of *LMU* in which the baby's name is linked to her sombre destiny: 'Let Deirdre be

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[125] Lady Gregory (1902), 'Notes', p. 359.
[126] *Ibid.*, 'Fate of the Children of Usnach', p. 104.

her name; harm will come through her.'[127] If - apart from minor spelling differences - Deirdre's name remains unaltered in both the Scottish and the Irish versions, that of her father varies considerably for he is called Colum in Carmichael's tale and Fedlimid in the Irish texts. Yet while Lady Gregory reproduces Carmichael's syntactic structures, integrating the various thematic changes that he introduced, she replaces the name 'Colum' with 'Fedlimid' and similarly follows the Irish sources by calling Carmichael's unidentified fortune-teller 'Cathbad, the Druid'. This substitution enables her to recognize the characters - and by extension the tale - as being Irish first and foremost and to minimize at the same time the degree to which she has used the Scottish versions herself.

One may then wonder why Lady Gregory nevertheless gave such an important place to relatively obscure Scottish versions, which she does not fully acknowledge, and did not limit her research to the already abundant Irish material. It is, indeed, noticeable that in choosing her Scottish sources she completely dismisses Macpherson's voluminous work, preferring instead atypical retellings drawn from the Scottish oral tradition. For example, she follows Carmichael's Scottish variant in having Deirdre's father - and not the king - decide to have the child raised in isolation with Levarcham 'that no eye might see, and no ear hear of Deirdre'[128]. It is only years later that the king learns of the young girl's existence. After a hunter gets lost and falls asleep outside their house crying for help in his troubled dreams, Deirdre lets him in. She is the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. When he leaves the place, the hunter decides to inform the king, who 'was used to lie down at night and to rise up in the morning by himself'[129], of his great discovery in the hope that he will receive a good reward in return. As no lost hunter figures in any version of the legend prior to Carmichael's, Lady Gregory must have had a

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[127] *Ibid.*, p. 105.
[128] *Ibid.*, p. 106.
[129] *Ibid.*, p. 109.

strong reason for choosing an episode drawn from a marginal oral source[130] rather than follow the more traditional accounts of Deirdre's upbringing. It was evidently a matter of personal taste, and her own experience as collector of folklore underscores this preference for stories told by the country people over scholarly printed texts. According to Elizabeth Coxhead, 'she spent most of her time in the cottages talking to the old people'[131] who could, for example, 'describe the actual physical appearance of Deirdre'[132]. When it came to studying the available material for the compilation of her *Cuchulain*, she thus found in the transcriptions of an orally transmitted Scottish tradition a popular flavour that was missing from purely textual sources. Accordingly, her version gives greater importance to manual workers who are in contact with the natural world. Aside from the hunter we have seen, a fisherman and a carpenter are introduced as key benevolent figures crossing Deirdre's path. The fisherman rescues Deirdre immediately after her lover's death: 'And a fisherman was there and his wife, and they brought her into their cabin and sheltered her (...).'[133] In a similar fashion, a carpenter whom Deirdre finds on the strand 'making an oar for a boat' unwittingly assists her suicide by exchanging his knife for Naoise's ring: 'and he gave her the knife for the ring, and for her asking and her tears'.[134] The figure of the carpenter is extracted from another Scottish oral source – the 'Lament of Deírdrí' – which was translated in 1892 by Hector Maclean and included in his *Ultonian Hero-Ballads: Collected in the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland.* Maclean notes that the poem 'was taken down in 1750 from the dictation of a man who could neither read nor

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[130] The version of 'Deirdire' which Carmichael recorded had been recited by a certain Alexander MacNeill in the island of Barra.
[131] Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait* (London, 1961); repr. (1966), p. 52.
[132] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
[133] Lady Gregory (1902), p. 137.
[134] *Ibid.*, p. 139.

write'[135]. Lady Gregory has reproduced the circumstances of Deirdre's death as given in this singular version:

> And she found a wright making oars –
> His knife in the one hand,
> And his axe in the other.
> (...)
> The wright desired the ring, (...)
> The knife was given to Deirdri,
> And she reached the place of her wish.
> (...)
> She then stretched her side to his [Naoise's] side,
> And put her lips to his lips,
> And she put the black knife through her heart,
> And she died without regret; -
> But she threw the black knife in the sea,
> Lest the wright should be blamed. [136]

Since in Lady Gregory's story Deirdre has outlived Naoise and been sheltered by the fisherman, she cannot stab herself over her lover's body. Instead, standing close to the waves, 'she drove the black knife into her side, but she drew it out again and threw it in the sea to her right hand, the way no one would be blamed for her death'[137]. Conchubar finds only 'her white body on the ground'[138] and not, as in Maclean's translation, the 'four bodies stretched down at their length'[139]. It is possible that the fisherman is Lady Gregory's own invention, as I have found no reference to him among the various sources she consulted. Arguably, this additional character serves the narrative purpose of prolonging Deirdre's life for just a little longer.[140] Yet it is significant that Lady Gregory should have chosen a fisherman to act as the young girl's guardian through her final year, rather than the king as in all versions derived from *LMU*. Throughout her story, the peasants, hunters and carpenters who work in harmony with nature display a certain human authenticity which is far removed from the corrupted life of Conchubar and his

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[135] Hector Maclean, trans., *Ultonian Hero-Ballads: Collected in the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1892), p. 34.
[136] *Ibid.*, pp. 126-9.
[137] Lady Gregory (1902), p. 140.
[138] *Ibid.*
[139] Maclean (1892), p. 129.
[140] By dragging out Deirdre's death in this way, Lady Gregory is able to insert an extra lament from *LMU* alongside those in the *OCU* version which is her principal model for the events surrounding Naoise's death.

court. When Levarcham finds her foster child in the fisherman's cabin, she incites her to return to Emain Maeha 'where she would have protection and riches and all that she would ask', but Deirdre declines the offer insisting that 'it is not land or earth or food I am wanting, or gold or silver or horses'[141]. If Lady Gregory follows a number of Scottish variants, it is precisely because these hold a certain popular authenticity which she wanted to see reflected in the Irish tales.

Lady Gregory's distinctive style seeks to imitate the living speech of the people of Kiltartan which is, she suggests, reminiscent of 'the English spoken by the Irish people'[142]. Like William Sharp, it was her old nurse at Roxborough, Mary Sheridan, who had first introduced her to the folk tales. The considerable influence this modest woman later had on her chosen style is acknowledged in her dedication, as if to signal to the people of Kiltartan that despite her comfortable background she is one of them: 'I have told the whole story in plain and simple words, in the same way my old nurse Mary Sheridan used to be telling stories from the Irish long ago, and I a child at Roxborough.'[143] She warmly thanks the Irish country people for having always been 'very kind'[144] to her but, apart from mentioning Douglas Hyde, she does not address a single word of gratitude to the various scholars whose dreary texts[145] she has nevertheless made generous use of for her *Cuchulain*. She believed that she had developed a more accessible style and categorically refused to follow her publisher's suggestion to 'write it more in the manner and to the level of Jacob's fairy tales'[146]. The publisher may have initially objected, amongst other things, to the repetition of the conjunction 'and' which

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[141] Lady Gregory (1902), p. 137.
[142] Lady Gregory (1974), p. 391.
[143] Lady Gregory (1902), 'Dedication', p. vi. The use of the gerund 'to be telling' in this sentence is a good example of what Ann Saddlemyer calls 'the Kiltartan infinitive'. See Ann Saddlemyer, *In Defense of Lady Gregory, Playwright* (Dublin, 1966), p. 18.
[144] *Ibid.*
[145] *Ibid.*, p. v.: 'there is not much pleasure in reading them.'
[146] Lady Gregory (1974), p. 399. In 1892, Joseph Jacobs had included an account entitled 'The Story of Deirdre' in his *Celtic Fairy Tales* which was, like Lady Gregory's, closely modelled on Carmichael's version. His style is, however, very different since the book was primarily aimed at children.

John Wilson Foster identifies as a deliberate attempt on her part to recapture 'the metrical cadences of western Hiberno-English'[147]. To illustrate this particular recurrence, Foster quotes the following passage from her 'Fate of the Children of Usnach':

> *And* Deirdre grew straight *and* clean like a rush on the bog, *and* she was comely beyond comparison of all the women of the world, *and* her movements were like the swan on the wave, or the deer on the hill.[148] [Italics mine.]

As Foster argues, such repetitions are, in fact, a literary device that serves to produce a textual effect of orality. If Lady Gregory's so-called 'Kiltartanese' hardly seems exotic to the average reader of English, her style that is characterized by a 'studied simplicity and carefully placed idioms' is a clear reaction to what John Kelly describes as the 'unwieldy latinisms and extended similes'[149] of Standish James O'Grady. Whereas O'Grady's elaborate literary devices enabled him to keep the masses away from his work, she conversely wishes to write in a simpler language that would be understood and appreciated by the peasantry.

In her desire to make her work more recognisable to the Irish people, Lady Gregory also removes many details of noble life featuring prominently in the major versions. After the lovers' flight, she abandons Carmichael's text and follows instead the *OCU* versions by O'Flanagan, Stokes, Cameron and O'Duffy listed in her bibliography. A comparative analysis of the feast scene at the start of *OCU* provides a good illustration of the ways in which she has dealt with her sources:

> **O'Flanagan, *Transactions* (1808):**
> A feast of convivial exhilaration, grandly magnificent, was given by Conor, in the delightful splendid Eman of Macha (...). Then arose their professors of music, and harmony, and poetry, to sound their melodious harps of sweet strings, and their bright, splendid tympans; and to sing their poetic strains, their branches of consanguinity, and boughs of genealogy.[150]
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> **Stokes, *Irische Texte* (1884) :**
> An exceeding beautiful and mighty feast was prepared by Conchobar. And the men of music and playing and knowledge rose up to recite before them their lays and their songs and chants, their

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[147] John Wilson Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art* (Syracuse, 1987), p. 25.
[148] *Ibid.*
[149] John Kelly, '"Friendship is the only House I Have": Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats' in *Lady Gregory, Fifty Years After*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer and Colin Smythe (Gerrards Cross, 1987), p. 207.
[150] O'Flanagan (1808), 'The Death of the Children of Usnach', p. 17.

genealogies and their branches of relationship.[151]

Cameron, 'The Tale of Deirdre', *Reliquiae Celticae* (1894):
On a certain day thereafter, a feast of great magnificence was prepared by Conchobar in the softly beautiful Emain Macha, (....). The musicians, singers, and poets arose to sing their songs and strains and famed incantations, and (to repeat) their trees of affinity and branches of genealogy in presence of the king and the nobles of the Province.[152]

Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language (O'Duffy), 'Oidhe Chloinne Uisnigh' (1898):
A feast of convivial exhilaration, grandly magnificent, was made by Conor (...) in the delightful splendid Eamhain Macha (...). The professors of music, of melody, and of science, rose to play their harmonious sweet-stringed harps and their pleasant tympans, and to sing their poetic strains, their branches of relationship and their boughs of genealogy.[153]

Lady Gregory, 'Fate of the Children of Usnach', *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902):
Now it happened after a time that a very great feast was made by Conchubar, in Emain Macha, for all the great among his nobles (...). The musicians stood up to play their songs and to give poems, and they gave out the branches of relationship and of kindred.[154]

Although herself an aristocrat, Lady Gregory has noticeably simplified the terminology denoting opulence by dispatching the king's 'grandly magnificent', 'exceeding beautiful and mighty' feast in two unpretentious words: 'very great'. In the same way, she mentions only that the scene takes place in 'Emain Macha' without specifying, like O'Flanagan, Cameron and O'Duffy, that the king's domain is 'delightful splendid' or 'softly beautiful'. The 'professors of music, and harmony and poetry' (or in O'Duffy's variation 'of melody and science') are simply 'musicians' who 'play their songs' but they are not seen, as in the O'Flanagan and O'Duffy examples given above, sounding 'their melodious harps of sweet strings, and their bright, splendid tympans'. As a counterpoint to the enhanced part given to the working people in her version, then, Lady Gregory tones down the details pertaining to the life and customs of the court which traditionally predominate in the tale. Her aim is to popularize the Cuchulain stories and thus to develop a tradition that would distinguish itself from the scholarly one. For that, she had to create a form which would reproduce, as Yeats points out, 'the idioms of the country people she knows so well', departing from what he disparagingly calls 'the pedantic "hedge school master" style of

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[151] Stokes (1884), 'The Death of the Sons of Usnech', p. 153.
[152] Cameron (1894), p. 425.
[153] *Oide Cloinne Uisnig, Fate of the Children of Uisneach*, published by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish language (1898), p. 53.
[154] Lady Gregory (1902), p. 115.

her predecessors'[155].

The feast scene mentioned above well exemplifies Lady Gregory's method, for it shows how she condenses, picks and chooses from her different sources, adding, she claims, 'nothing of my own that could be helped'[156]. Her plan is to create a compilation of Irish legends related to the figure of Cuchulain which would be in the vein of a favourite book of hers, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Around 1470, Malory had rewritten the different and often contradictory accounts of the legendary figure of Arthur into a coherent narrative. Lady Gregory was undoubtedly inspired by his general approach: he had also moved from one source to another, looking at French as well as English materials, and adopted a more direct style. Another possible influence was a retelling of the Welsh epics, the Mabinogion, by Lady Charlotte Guest, the mother of her great friend Enid Layard. As Yeats comments somewhat hyperbolically in his preface, 'she will have given Ireland its Mabinogion, its Morte D'Arthur, its Nibelungenlied.'[157] Referring more specifically to the Deirdre legend, he describes her technique 'of compression and selection'[158] in metaphorical terms: 'Sometimes, as in Lady Gregory's version of Deirdre, a dozen manuscripts have to give their best before the beads are ready for the necklace.'[159] In other words, she has extracted from each version their often forgotten literary gems and mixed all the best bits together, creating, Yeats claims, a perfect retelling of the Deirdre legend and overall 'the best book that has ever come out of Ireland'[160].

Although she has indeed inserted little of her own and stitched passages drawn from a variety of sources together, the end product reads like a completely new story. Lady Gregory concedes that it is difficult to do justice to all preceding versions since 'in

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[155] See Kelly (1994), Yeats's letter to Robert Bridges dated 20 July 1901, p. 91.
[156] Lady Gregory (1902), 'Dedication', p. vi.
[157] W. B. Yeats, 'Preface', in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), p. viii.
[158] *Ibid.*
[159] *Ibid.*, p. vii.
[160] *Ibid.*

the many legends of the fate of the Sons of Usnach' she could 'but choose one story of Deirdre's courtship and but one of her death'.[161] The frustration caused by the impossibility of giving adequate representation to all the passages she had read finds echo in her tendency to make room for more obscure episodes which are not present in all versions of the story. For example, in her version, Deirdre is uncharacteristically a mother of two. Yet Lady Gregory's passing reference[162] to her children is not her own invention: it is taken from Eugene O'Curry's 1862 version 'The Exile of the Children of Uisnech'. Yeats, who had got the reference from Fiona Macleod, passed it on to her and insisted that the children be included in her *Cuchulain*:

> I have looked up the Children of Deirdre & feal [*sic*] certain they should be incorporated in your book. I send extract from Atlantis Vol. 3, page 421 and neighbouring pages. The children will improve the tale of Deirdre by giving one a better & fuller fealing [*sic*] of her married life in Scotland (...). Deirdre is the normal, compassionate, wise house wife lifted into imortality [*sic*] by beauty & tragedy. Her fealing [*sic*] for her lover is the fealing [*sic*] of the house wife for the man of the house. She would have been less beautiful, considering her type if she had not been fruitful.[163]

However, even in O'Curry's tale, this brief mention is not integrated into the main narrative but is made in a postscript: 'it was he [Manannan] that reared the children of *Naisi* and *Derdré,* namely *Gaiar*, the son, and *Aibgréni*, the daughter.'[164] In referring to them, Lady Gregory did not only wish to please Yeats – she also wanted to do justice to her different source materials.

If she claims that she has not added much of her own, she does not hesitate to remove what she deems inappropriate. Since her aim is to prove the TCD scholars wrong by foregrounding Ireland's dignity, she does not keep the grotesque details or explicit sexual allusions that are part of *LMU.* As John Wilson Foster bluntly puts it, 'Lady Gregory "sanitizes" the old romances for nationalist consumption'[165]. In doing so, she

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[161] Lady Gregory (1974), p. 393.
[162] Lady Gregory (1902), p. 115: 'But the two children they had, Gaiar and Aebgreine, they gave into the care of Manannan, son of the sea.'
[163] Kelly (1994), letter dated 6 January 1902, p. 144.
[164] O'Curry (1862), p. 419.
[165] John Wilson Foster (1987), p. 29.

intends to show that the world of the peasants could, as Kelly points out, be 'cleansed and sweetened'[166] and its people made 'spiritual and idealistic'[167]. To illustrate this point, Foster gives the example of Deirdre's clean death as she stabs herself with a knife. He also mentions the notable detail of her mouth touching Naoise's blood[168] as evidence that Lady Gregory has deliberately toned down the original scene of *OCU,* reproduced faithfully in Cameron, O'Flanagan and Hyde's accounts, in which she actually drinks Naoise's blood abundantly. If Foster's assertion is undeniably valid, this does not explain why, if Lady Gregory is indeed fazed by the blood drinking scene, she does not leave it out altogether as had been done in another of her main sources, the 1898 version published by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. This example shows that she is, as we have seen, keen to preserve as many significant details from her sources as possible, but it highlights at the same time that she cannot quite bring herself to represent the graphic detail that she thinks would be degrading to Irish literature. It is not therefore merely a case of being afraid, as she admits, that her work might be read by children at school[169] but rather that she eradicates, as she subtly points out in her Dedication, what she believes would be unsuitable for the common people to hear: 'I left out a good deal I thought you would not care about for one reason or another (...).'[170]

What she leaves out from her Deirdre narrative are the explicit sexual references as well as the grotesque elements she disliked in the sources exploited. As Thomas Kinsella regretfully remarks, she is continuously 'refining away the coarse elements'[171]. A few examples suffice to illustrate how the original primitiveness of the legends with 'their directness in bodily matters' was, as Kinsella insists, fundamentally the 'source of

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[166] Kelly (1987), p. 187.
[167] *Ibid.*, p. 206.
[168] Lady Gregory (1902), p. 137: 'her mouth touched his blood.'
[169] Kelly (1987), p. 208.
[170] Lady Gregory (1902), 'Dedication', p. vi.
[171] Kinsella (1969); repr. (1970), 'Translator's Note and Acknowledgements', p. vii.

some uneasiness to Lady Gregory'.[172] At the start of the story, after Fedlimid is asked by Cathbad whether he has ever had any children, he replies: '"I never had (...) and the wife I have had none, and we have no hope ever to have any (...)."'[173] As no other explanation is given for the couple's infertility, the reader is left to assume that the wife cannot get pregnant. Carmichael is, however, more specific in explaining that she is, in fact, too old to conceive, and this is also apparent in the French translation of his Gaelic text used by Lady Gregory: 'L'homme et la femme étaient parvenus à un grand âge, en sorte qu'ils n'espéraient plus de postérité.'[174] It seems that Lady Gregory found it incongruous to describe an old woman giving birth and did not, as a result, make the reasons for her sterility explicit. After the wife finds herself heavy with child, Lady Gregory similarly replaces the physicality of Dottin's 'Plus la taille de la femme grossissait'[175] with the more abstract and euphemistic expression 'As her time went on, (...)'[176]. Finally, in Carmichael's version, the baby is delivered by a midwife who is also in charge of bringing the child up. Her absence from Lady Gregory's version may well be connected to this character's professional involvement in what Kinsella calls 'bodily matters'.

Lady Gregory therefore attempted to produce a collection of stories relating to Cuchulain that would distinguish itself from Standish O'Grady's *The Coming of Cuculain* by appealing to the people rather than being reserved to an aristocratic elite. Her style, which she wished to be known as Kiltartanese, was meant to reflect their authenticity of character. This was effected, however, at the expense of textual authenticity for she manipulated her sources according to her personal taste, erasing certain details she found improper. Her tendency to bowdlerize affected the reception of her book. Fiona Macleod,

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[172] *Ibid.*, 'Introduction', p. xiv.
[173] Lady Gregory (1902), p. 104.
[174] Dottin, trans. (1892), p. 236. ['The man and the woman had reached a great age so that they were no longer expecting to have a progeny.']
[175] *Ibid.* ['The bigger the woman's waist was getting, (...)']
[176] Lady Gregory (1902), p. 105.

for example, was not overly impressed and believed that her repeated omissions and 'adumbrating'[177] had weakened her version of the legend in the eyes of connoisseurs - like Macleod 'herself'- of the different renderings. Synge, who was also to adapt the Deirdre legend, expressed similar reservations in his review of *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. After quoting a passage from the lamentation of Deirdre and praising it as one of the finest passages in the book, he warns the reader that 'Lady Gregory has omitted certain barbarous features' so that 'some of her versions have a much less archaic aspect than the original texts'.[178] Anticipating this sort of reaction, Yeats addressed Lady Gregory a letter just before the publication of her book urging her not to censor her text for fear that her work might not be taken seriously:

> I have just noticed with some alarm the bit of boudlerizing [*sic*] (...) on page 20. (...) people will notice (...) & suspect your text everywhere else. They will not understand your reasons & will resent your having done, what both you & I say you have not done – add something of your own. I am sure I am right.[179]

Despite Yeats's pressure for her to follow the originals more closely, she made the following reply: 'I doubt that anyone who takes the trouble of looking will regret any of my slight Bowdlerizing.'[180] Her bold statement expresses her strong belief in the necessity of this Bowdlerizing to reinstate the 'dignity' of Ireland and transmit only good values to its people.

It was not long before Yeats decided, in his turn, to create a version of the Deirdre story. Two years after the publication of Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain*, he started working on a play which would only be completed and performed in 1906 after a long period of redrafting. Yeats's initial project, which he confided to Fiona Macleod in January 1897, had been to write a heroic cycle which would be 'a poetical version of the great celtic

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[177] Macleod, 'The Four Winds of Eirinn', in *The Winged Destiny* (London, 1904), p. 289.
[178] J. M. Synge, 'An Epic of Ulster', *The Speaker*, 7 June 1902, p. 370.
[179] Kelly (1994), letter written on 24 March 1902, pp. 163-4.
[180] *Ibid.*

epic tales Deirdre, Cuchullin at the ford & Cuchullins death & Dermot & Grania'[181]. Wishing to show AE that he too could turn the same legend into a good play, Yeats abandoned his idea to write sequential epic poems on famous Celtic tales. Judging from the contradictory feelings he long held towards the success of AE's drama, which he recognised as having betrayed on his part 'mere jealousy, or some sort of party dislike'[182], it is clear, as Fackler puts it, that he wrote his *Deirdre* 'in a spirit of competition'[183]. The story was not, however, new to Yeats. Although he could not read the Irish manuscripts or the German and French scholarly texts, he had nevertheless contributed in his early twenties various essays praising the nineteenth-century retellings of the legend by Samuel Ferguson and R. D. Joyce[184] and was also familiar with the versions of Douglas Hyde, Fiona Macleod and John Todhunter. However, despite his knowledge and use of earlier textual sources, Yeats asserts that 'the best version is that in Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*'[185] and specifies that the 'foundations of *Deirdre* and of *On Baile's Strand* are stories called respectively the "Fate of the Sons of Usnach" and "The Son of Aoife" in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*'[186].

Not only did her work serve as a model for Yeats, but he also stayed regularly at her Coole residence where he could find inspiration for his projected play. Yeats already had a clear idea as to the kind of drama he believed would best represent his Deirdre, as he informed John Quinn in a letter dated 6 July 1904: 'I go to Lady Gregory's on Monday, and am going to start a play on Dierdre [*sic*]. It will be a long one-act play with choruses, rather like a Greek play.'[187] However, Lady Gregory was not simply for Yeats

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[181] Kelly (1997), letter to Fiona Macleod dated 12 January 1897, p. 75.
[182] W. B. Yeats, 'Dramatis Personae 1896-1902'; repr. *Autobiographies* (1999), p. 332.
[183] Fackler (1978), p. 104.
[184] These are reprinted in John Frayne ed., *Uncollected Prose by W.B Yeats* vol. i (London, 1970-5).
[185] W. B. Yeats, 'Deirdre', *The Arrow: 24 November 1906*; repr. Mary FitzGerald and Richard J. Finneran eds., *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats viii: The Irish Dramatic Movement* (Hampshire, 2003).
[186] Yeats, 'The Legendary and Mythological Foundation of the Plays', *Plays in Prose and Verse* (London, 1922), p. 417.
[187] Kelly (1994), letter to John Quinn, 6 July 1904, p. 616.

an important literary precedent and a generous hostess; she also appears to have taken to heart the responsibility of supervising his work. Yeats spent all summer and much of the autumn of 1904 at Coole working on the drafts of a play he initially called 'The House of Usnach', a title drawn from Fiona Macleod's drama which he had seen performed on 29 April 1900. In her detailed study of the thousand pages of manuscript materials related to Yeats's *Deirdre,* Virginia Bartholome Rohan identifies the presence of Lady Gregory's handwritten comments in a number of folios.[188] The writing of *Deirdre* therefore brings to light a professional relationship between Yeats and Lady Gregory which resembles that of an obedient pupil and a vigilant teacher. On 29 March 1905, Lady Gregory writes to John Quinn in a somewhat exasperated tone: 'He hasn't got back to *Deirdre* yet, and won't I expect until I have got him back to Coole.'[189] Once there, Yeats informs Quinn that he has been given directives to resume work on his play: 'Lady Gregory has announced that I am to return to Deirdre next Monday. I have not touched it since I left here in October.'[190] Quinn then replies to Lady Gregory, telling her to continue the surveillance of her guest:

> Now that Yeats is started at "Deirdre" again you can do nothing better than keep him at it until he has finished. I know that he is likely to be distracted by other things but he has the opportunity here to write the greatest play – the greatest poem – that he has ever written.[191]

By the next spring, Yeats is once again called back to Coole following the same imperative: 'Don't put off Deirdre for too long.'[192] In a further letter, she insists: 'You can come here at any time (...) you ought to get to Deirdre as soon as you can, and do a prose scenario that could be read on the stage.'[193] Her participation in the writing of Yeats's play cannot therefore be overstated and it is unlikely that the final text would have been the same without her assiduous assistance. Lady Gregory herself was keen to assert her

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[188] Virginia Bartholome Rohan, ed., *W. B. Yeats: Deirdre Manuscript Materials* (Ithaca and London, 2004).
[189] John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard, eds., *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats iv* (Oxford, 2005), letter to John Quinn, quoted in footnote 1, p. 52.
[190] *Ibid.*, letter dated 15 April 1905, p. 76.
[191] *Ibid.*, letter dated 29 April 1905, footnote 8, p. 77.
[192] *Ibid.*, letter from Lady Gregory dated 25 March 1906, footnote 2, p. 360.
[193] *Ibid.*, Lady Gregory's reply written on 28 March 1906.

direct input in shaping 'the plot and the construction' of Yeats's 'poetic plays'[194] which was, she remarks, particularly significant in *Deirdre*. Her involvement in the actual play-writing was not denied by the author who comments enthusiastically on 1 May 1906: 'Thanks to Lady Gregory my Deirdre play has at last come right.'[195] In the last years of his life, Yeats became more specific as to the extent of her contributions and confided to his friend Dorothy Wellesley: 'Lady Gregory wrote the end of my "Deirdre" on my fundamental mass.'[196]

Indeed, the manner of Deirdre's death was closely modelled on *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* which, apart from the obscure Scottish oral source that inspired Lady Gregory, is the only text in which the heroine stabs herself. In early versions of the play, the knife scene is an almost exact reproduction of the ending in 'Fate of the Sons of Usnach'. While Lady Gregory's Deirdre gets her knife from a carpenter who exchanges it for a golden ring, in Yeats's earliest draft she snatches it from a wandering musician, to whom she offers her bracelet in return: 'DEIRDRE (putting knife in her girdle) Yes, you will take a price, I will not be remembered as a niggard. (taking off bracelet) It is a great price I am giving you.'[197] If, in his final version, Yeats removes all allusions to this bartering of the knife[198], his heroine's suicide remains analogous to that presented in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. The role Augusta Gregory played in the writing of Yeats's *Deirdre* was therefore, as Virginia Rohan points out, 'multifaceted'[199] - perceptible also in the traces of Kiltartanese dialect that can be detected in certain sections of the dialogue.[200]

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[194] Lady Gregory (1913); repr. (1972), p. 54.
[195] Kelly (2005), letter from Yeats to John Quinn, p. 393. In a letter to Synge written on 3 October 1906, Yeats further justifies the necessity for Lady Gregory's presence at the play's production for she 'has helped me very much with the scenario (...).' (p. 508) [Extract from Yeats's typescripts in Appendix VIII]
[196] See *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (London, 1940), p. 51.
[197] Rohan (2004), 'A: Earliest Draft', p. 11.
[198] In the published text, Deirdre's gift to the musician is completely dissociated from her having taken the knife. See Yeats, *Deirdre: Being Volume Five of Plays for an Irish Theatre* (London, 1907), p. 34.
[199] Rohan (2004), 'Introduction', p. xxxiv.
[200] *Ibid.* These are, according to Rohan, particularly apparent in Yeats's first draft, 'Version A - The House of Usnach', for example: 'it is a great many times you went out fighting for my sake (...).'

Another likely instance of textual intervention may be found in the reference to funeral rites being performed on Naisi's body shortly after his death:

> DEIRDRE
> When I have done whatever's customary.
> We lay the dead out, folding up the hands,
> Closing the eyes, and stretching out the feet,
> And push a pillow underneath the head, (...)[201]

Being close to the Kiltartanese people and acquainted with such peasant rituals, Lady Gregory would surely have played a part in inserting some of their traditional customs into the play.

That Yeats accepted and even welcomed her continuous interference in his ongoing work signals a certain nervousness about his *Deirdre* symptomatic of his almost obsessive desire to write a dramatic version superior to that produced a few years earlier by AE. But whereas it had only taken AE a few days to bring out a successful *Deirdre*, Yeats started his in 1904 and kept revising until 1922. The discrepancy between the thousand pages of holograph and typescript material produced and the mere seven hundred and fifty nine lines eventually published also testifies to the great number of difficulties Yeats encountered whilst working on the play. Yet even though the incessant revisions prove that he cannot have been fully satisfied with his *Deirdre*, he made repeated efforts to convince himself as well as others that he was writing his masterpiece. Keeping his friends informed of the progress of his play, he even sent them some lyrical extracts[202] that he particularly liked. As early as 28 September 1904, he told John Quinn: 'It goes very slowly and gives me a great deal of trouble, but it is going to be the best of all my plays.'[203] The same bold assertion was made four days later to a different correspondent: 'It will be my best play – my Dierdre [*sic*] is a very confident serene

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[201] Yeats (1907), p. 42.
[202] They were to become the Musicians' songs in the finished play, first published separately as 'Queen Edaine' in *McClure's Magazine* in September 1905 and as 'The Praise of Deirdre' in *The Shanachie i* (1906), 37-8.
[203] Kelly (1994), p. 651.

person.'[204] Despite the optimistic tone of his letters, Yeats was not himself, as far as his *Deirdre* was concerned, a 'very confident serene person'. Moved by an anxious desire to weigh his Deirdre against AE's Deirdre, he was, to some extent, seeking to advertise his work in progress. In the same letter to John Quinn, he draws attention to Frank Fay's positive reaction to the play: 'F. Fay has been here, and is in great enthusiasm over my Deirdre, so I think Russells [*sic*] Deirdre will fade away. My Deirdre at any rate is not melancholy but full of a sort of tragic exultation.'[205] As we have seen, the Fays had been responsible for persuading AE to finish his play; the comparison suggests a determination to dislodge AE's version in the affections and memories of their contemporaries.

In order to communicate the 'tragic ecstasy'[206] which he believed was lacking in AE's *Deirdre*, Yeats chose to depart from the tripartite dramatic structure of his predecessor. While AE's drama follows the trajectory of the lovers from Ireland to Scotland and back, with each of the three acts involving a change of location, Yeats's *Deirdre* focuses exclusively on the final scene of the legend. The one-act play is thus set in the guesthouse where the lovers are left to await their deaths. As there is unity of time and place with, consequently, an inevitable compression of the action, the succession of events characteristic of AE's version is replaced with the intensity of feeling that is expressed by the protagonists in their last hour. Yeats's retelling of the Deirdre legend thus focuses on the passion awakened in the characters involved rather than on the details of the story itself.

'Tragic exultation', as Yeats sees it, does not preclude sexual passion. His representation of the legendary heroine contradicts what he saw as the dull 'melancholy' girl of AE's play who meets Naisi in a dream and shows no sign of physical desire for her

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[204] *Ibid.*, letter to James Sullivan Starkey dated 1 October 1904, p. 657.
[205] *Ibid.*, letter to John Quinn 28 September 1904, pp. 651-2.
[206] See Yeats, 'On the Boiler' (1939); repr. *Explorations* (London, 1962), p. 415: 'I have aimed at tragic ecstasy (...).'

lover. Going also against Lady Gregory's tendency to expunge all references to bodily matters from her sources, Yeats not only restores the sexual element found in the medieval texts but makes it a human sensation complementary to love. In so doing, he knowingly defies the morals of his contemporaries who would have found a sensual Deirdre distasteful. As Virginia Rohan points out, Yeats's play is made to reflect 'the instinctual love relationship of man and woman - on the one hand, and the forces of society on the other'[207]. Thus, at the end, his passionate Deirdre feels no shame in making overt allusions to the lovers' physical warmth:

> DEIRDRE. Do you remember that first night in the woods
> We lay all night on leaves, and looking up,
> When the first grey of the dawn awoke the birds,
> Saw leaves above us? You thought that I still slept,
> And bending down to kiss me on the eyes,
> Found they were open. Bend and kiss me now,
> For it may be the last before our death.
> And when that's over, we'll be different;
> Imperishable things, a cloud or a fire.
> And I know nothing but this body, nothing
> But that old vehement, bewildering kiss.[208]

This declaration highlights Deirdre's reluctance to envisage the couple's physical separation. The possibility that their disincarnated love might live on when they are transmuted into a 'cloud or a fire' is not wholly appealing to her for whatever happens after death, she will not be able to bring back 'this body' or that 'old vehement, bewildering kiss'. In the drafted 'Version C' of the play, Deirdre expresses in even more physical terms the extent of the lovers' unquenchable desire: 'we are still so full of love, so thirsty for one another.'[209] Far from being the innocent Victorian maiden of previous versions, she is ready to use her charms to get what she wants: the right to die on her own terms and at her chosen time. As she sheds no tears for the lifeless Naisi and affects a sudden change of heart, the king becomes immediately suspicious: 'But why are you so calm? / I thought that you would curse me and cry out, / And fall upon the ground and

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[207] Virginia Rohan, 'Yeats and *Deirdre*: from Story to Fable', *Yeats Annual 6* (1988), p. 43.
[208] Yeats (1907), p. 31.
[209] Rohan (2004), 'C: Transitional Drafts' from NLI8760 (9C), p. 255.

tear your hair.'[210] Later, he asks: 'How do I know that you have not some knife, / And go to die upon his body?'[211] By resorting to seduction, Deirdre gradually defeats Conchubar's incredulity. The manipulative nature of her body language is clearly suggested in the stage directions as she tries, 'almost with a caress'[212], to convince the king to let her pay her last respects to Naisi's corpse. He only yields to her request after she offers that his men undress her and check for the hidden knife: 'Have me searched, / (...) It may be that I have a knife hid here / Under my dress. Bid one of these dark slaves/ To search me for it.'[213] Conchubar's jealousy, awakened as she is about to expose her nudity to his 'dark slaves', leads him to surrender: 'Go to your farewells, queen.'[214] Deirdre's sexual provocations have thus left her victorious and free to stab herself with no further delay. Yeats' new characterization of the legendary heroine as a powerful seductress is evidently meant to contrast with AE's conventionally passive and virtuous figure.

While Yeats repeatedly praises Lady Gregory's version as his greatest influence and strives at the same time to distinguish his play from AE's, it is undeniable that he draws far more on the latter than the former. As Malcolm Richardson underlines, AE's *Deirdre* cannot have failed to strike Yeats in several respects as 'the type of non-naturalistic, meditative, heroic drama he had been discussing in the abstract for several years'[215]. Indeed he had declared as early as 1899 that the principal aim of the newly-formed Irish Literary Theatre was to produce plays that would be 'for the most part remote, spiritual, and ideal'[216] and AE's drama undoubtedly met his criteria. Although he

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[210] Yeats (1907), p. 41.
[211] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[212] *Ibid.*
[213] *Ibid.*
[214] *Ibid.*, p. 45.
[215] Malcolm Richardson, 'AE's *Deirdre* and Yeats's Dramatic Development', *Eire-Ireland* xx: 4 (Winter, 1985), p. 99.
[216] Yeats, 'Beltaine: May 1899 – The Theatre'; repr. Mary FitzGerald and Richard J. Finneran, ed. (2003), p. 148.

never quite grew to like AE's play, he did appreciate the general 'effect of wall decoration' of the staging, in particular the dreaminess conveyed by actors who were 'often merely posing and speaking'[217]. This description is strikingly reminiscent of Yeats's own recommendations for the performance of tragic drama: 'the actors must move (...) slowly and quietly, and not very much, and there should be something in their movements decorative and rhythmical *as if they were paintings on a frieze*.'[218] [Italics mine.] In a subsequent reference to AE's play, he explicitly acknowledges that his own dramatic theories had been materialised in his predecessor's production: 'it was the first performance I had seen (...) in which the actors kept still enough to give poetical writing its full effect upon the stage. I had imagined such acting, though I had not seen it (...).'[219]

AE's preponderant influence can be felt more concretely in Yeats's borrowing of certain themes from the earlier play. Besides the expected plot similarities between the two versions, Richardson has identified bird imagery as being a distinguishing feature in both plays.[220] But while AE gives a mystical Celtic quality to the supernatural 'birds of Angus' whose singing portends love and death, Yeats uses the symbolism of birds systematically to comment on the lovers' captivity. In developing the character of Deirdre, his main intention had been for her to seem, in his own words, 'a wild bird in a cage'[221]. The association is sustained through to Deirdre's death at the end of the play: as Fergus points out, 'the bird's gone' and what is left is 'but empty cage and tangled wire'[222]. In the same way, Naisi, who has been 'entangled in a net'[223] and dragged away by Conchubar's dark-faced Men, cries out: 'I have been taken like a bird or a fish.'[224] Having been hunted and trapped by the king, the lovers only recover their liberty after

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[217] Kelly (1994), Yeats's letter to Lady Gregory, 5 April 1902, pp. 167-8.
[218] Yeats, 'The Play, the Player, and the Scene', *Samhain* (December 1904), p. 31.
[219] Yeats, 'Samhain: 1902'; repr. *Explorations* (1962), p. 86.
[220] Richardson (1985), p. 101.
[221] Yeats, 'The Tragic Theatre' (1910); repr. in Frayne ed., *Uncollected Prose* i,, p. 389.
[222] Yeats (1907), p. 46.
[223] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[224] *Ibid.*

their deaths as they soar away like triumphant eagles, leaving cage and net behind.[225] If Yeats followed AE by filling his version with bird references, his aim was to endow them with greater allegorical meaning. They are not, as AE's 'birds of Angus', identifiable mythical and mystical creatures, but rather represent metaphorically contrastive feelings of imprisonment and freedom.

The tendency to build on elements from AE's play is more perceptibly exemplified in Yeats's dramatic development of the chess scene. If, as is suggested by Balachandra Rajan, Yeats probably 'took his cue' from AE in his treatment of the chess game, he 'uses the symbol more evocatively'[226] by making the chessboard the central object of the backdrop and establishing tighter correspondences between the game played and the action performed. The 1907 printing thus describes the setting: 'There is, at one side, a small table with a chessboard and chessmen upon it and a wine flagon and loaf of bread.'[227] However, the wine flagon and the loaf of bread which are, as Jacqueline Genet remarks, traditionally associated with Christ's Last Supper, are left out from subsequent editions, allowing the author 'to concentrate on the chess-board'[228] and to emphasize its ominous significance in his play. According to David Clark, 'the chessboard thus becomes an objective correlative for their complete tragedy.'[229] The status of the characters involved mirrors that of the different chess figures and the slow progression of the action further echoes the measured movement of the pawns on the board. The black and white pattern characteristic of the game of chess is also reflected in the characterization. Yeats establishes a Manichean separation between the black forces ruled

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[225] *Ibid.*, p. 46: 'Eagles have gone into their cloudy bed.'
[226] Balachandra Rajan, 'Yeats, Synge and the Tragic Understanding', *Yeats Studies* 2 (1972), p. 71.
[227] Yeats (1907), p. 1.
[228] Jacqueline Genet, 'Yeats's *Deirdre* as a Chess-game and a Poet's Game', *Multiple Worlds, Multiple Words: Essays in Honour of Irène Simon*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Pierre Michel, Paulette Michel-Michot (Liège, 1988), p. 125.
[229] David R. Clark, ' "Deirdre," The Rigour of Logic', *W. B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality* (Dublin, 1965), p. 36.

by Conchubar 'the old King of Uladh' on the one hand and, on the other, the white forces presided over by Naisi who is, to accentuate the chess parallelism, described as 'a young king'[230]. The two kings who are opposed on the stage – the metaphorical equivalent of the chessboard – are each assisted by their respective black and white pawns. Conchubar is protected by a '*dark-faced* messenger', a '*dark-faced* executioner' and many other '*dark-faced* Men' [Italics mine]. On the white side, the young king also has his own pawns, the trustful Fergus and the mysterious Musicians, but these cannot prevent the stronger black pawns from capturing Naisi and removing him from the game. However, there is only one Queen, Deirdre, who is eventually encircled by the black opponents trying to make her theirs. As Andrew Parkin wittily puts it, in the end 'the King is mated by a Queen's sacrifice'[231]. If Yeats does not strictly transpose the rules of the game into the final scene, he establishes more exact analogies between the chess figurines and the actual characters than AE had done previously. In doing so, he is able to suggest the greater, impersonal forces that lie behind the events of legend[232], as the characters themselves are symbolically reduced to the status of pieces in a game. The feeling that the action of myth is guided by a pre-existent design is reinforced by the innovation of having the lovers use the chessboard on which Lugaidh Redstripe and his wife played out their last moves on the night they died. Though these legendary characters are mentioned in Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain*[233], it is apparently Yeats himself who introduces the chess theme into Lugaidh's story in order to present his own characters' actions as a repetition of earlier mythical events. This effect is doubled, for those who know their Irish legend, in the Musicians' mention of Queen Edain: the reference is to a myth in which two kings play

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[230] Yeats (1907), 'Persons and Players at the first performance on Saturday 24 November 1906'.
[231] Andrew Parkin, *The Dramatic Imagination of W. B. Yeats* (Dublin, 1978), p. 111.
[232] The First Musician's comment to Deirdre that she and Naisi have 'been paid servants in love's house / To sweep the ashes out and keep the doors' suggests that love is at least one of these impersonal forces. See Yeats (1907), p. 34.
[233] See Lady Gregory (1902), 'The Courting of Emer'; repr. (Gerrards Cross, 1993), pp. 45-48. In her account, Lugaid's beloved, Devorgill, died first and he 'died of the grief that was on him after her'. (p. 48)

chess with the hand of a queen at stake. The immediate material presence of the chess game therefore channels otherwise unrelated events into a collective legendary past made available to the present of the theatrical performance. As early as 1897, Yeats predicted that the 'great fountain of Gaelic legends'[234] which the Celtic movement had uncovered 'may well give the opening century its most memorable symbols'[235]. His reworking of the Deirdre story accordingly places less importance on thematic development, and more on the possibility of evoking tragic moods and abstract ideas by means of tangible imagery.

Yeats's desire to focus on the tragic intensity of the final scene necessitated a significant reduction in the number of characters involved. Early drafts include several figures left out of the final version, indicating an initial *dramatis personae* based on that of AE's play.[236] But by 1906 he had decided that the form he had chosen, condensing the legend into a single scene, would be more dramatic with fewer characters clogging the stage. Announcing the production of his play on 24 November in the first issue of *The Arrow*, he comments: 'in arranging the story for the bounds of a one-act play, I have had to leave out many details, even some important persons that are in all the old versions. I have selected certain things which seem to be characteristic of the tale as well as in themselves dramatic (...).'[237] Not only has Yeats suppressed many fundamental episodes and characters that are, he admits, in 'the old versions' but he also does not hesitate to modify certain thematic aspects of the legend because they may contravene his desire to achieve intensity of feeling. After all, he remarks, 'he [the dramatic writer] (...) will be far more likely to alter incidents and characters, wilfully even as it may seem, than to

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[234] Yeats (1897), 'The Celtic Element in Literature'; repr. *Ideals of Good and Evil* (New York, 1903), pp. 292-3.
[235] *Ibid.*, p. 295.
[236] Rohan (2004), 'Version B: "The House of Usnach" – the Lavarcam texts' (1904), pp. xxxviii-xl. This version follows AE in giving Lavarcam an important role as a nurse and seer. It also includes the two pairs of brothers: Ainnle and Ardan, and Iollan and Buinne. Yeats also brings in another persona of his own invention, the Black Jester, who plays only a marginal part. None of these characters were kept in the final text.
[237] Yeats, 'Deirdre', *The Arrow: 24 November 1906*; repr. Mary FitzGerald and Richard J. Finneran, eds. (2003), p. 184.

become a literal historian.'[238] For that reason, Yeats changes the role of Fergus, having him bring the lovers back to Emain Macha instead of being detained on the way as in traditional retellings of the tale. As a witness to the impending tragedy, the advantage to using Fergus is that he has followed the lovers' trajectory to Scotland and back; at a stroke, Yeats is able both to dispense with the need for other supporting characters cluttering the stage, and to link the action back to the earlier events which he has chosen not to represent in his play.

Yeats's other significant addition to the list of characters, the introduction of three wandering musicians, also makes it possible to fill in some of the gaps left by his decision to focus exclusively on the final scene. The first characters we see onstage, their conversation summarises for the audience the events leading up to the action of the play. However, their account of Deirdre's past is quite different from that given in other versions of the legend:

> *First Mus.* (...) Some dozen
> years ago, King Conchubar found
> A house upon a hillside in this wood,
> And there a comely child with an old witch
> To nurse her, and there's nobody can say
> If she were human, or of those begot
> By an invisible king of the air in a storm (...)
> Of who she was or why she was hidden there
> But that she'd too much beauty for good luck.[239]

Both the King's accidental discovery of Deirdre in a wood and the divergent hypotheses given for her mysterious birth are significant deviations from traditionally unambiguous accounts of the heroine's childhood. The vague references made to Deirdre's origins allow Yeats to minimise the importance of anterior events and thus to heighten the emphasis on the lovers' tragic end.

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[238] Yeats, 'First Principles', *Samhain 1904*; repr. *Explorations* (1962), p. 145.
[239] Yeats (1907), p. 2.

In December 1904, Yeats announced that his projected *Deirdre* would be a play 'with choruses, somewhat in the Greek manner'[240] and the part of the musicians was no doubt conceived with the Greek model in mind. As in the Sophoclean Greek chorus, there is a designated leader, the 'First Musician', who provides background information to the others and (indirectly) to the audience, interacts with the main characters, and makes general observations on life, old age, love or death.[241] The chorus here plays a dual role, they are part of the action by talking to Deirdre and letting her take their knife, but also detached spectators commenting not only on the heroine's past but also on the present as it unfolds before their eyes. The lovers' deaths are another aspect of the play handled 'somewhat in the Greek manner'. As Fiona Macintosh points out, 'the normal sequence of a Greek tragic death is reproduced almost step by step'[242], with both lovers dying offstage. The circumstances of Deirdre's death are also coloured by the dramatic irony so frequently found in Greek tragedy. The audience knows, but the King does not, that Deirdre has left the stage with the intention of killing herself, and a strong irony pervades her bluffing offer to be searched for concealed weapons and his decision not to do so.

These Greek elements must be understood in the context of contemporary debates over the value of Irish culture. The most determined opponents of attempts to develop a national literature, those same Trinity College scholars whose disparaging report on Irish literature had led Lady Gregory to write her *Cuchulain*, frequently made use of Greek models in order to belittle the claims of nationalists to both cultural and political autonomy. As Macintosh emphasises, the work of scholars such as Edward Dowden and John Pentland Mahaffy served to equate Hellenism with Unionism; equally, 'the fact that the classical tradition had been posited as a superior rival meant that it was a serious

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[240] Yeats, 'The Dramatic Movement', *Samhain* (December 1904), p. 11.
[241] See for example the following declarations of the 'First Musician' in Yeats (1907): 'And yet old men are jealous' (p. 6.), 'We have little that is certain' (p. 17.), 'Eagles have gone into their cloudy bed' (p. 46.)
[242] Fiona Macintosh, *Dying Acts: Death in Ancient Greek and Modern Irish Tragic Drama* (Cork, 1994), p. 143.

threat to the Celtic Revival as well'[243]. In reaction to this threat, the writers of the Revival came themselves to adopt comparisons between Ancient Greece and Ireland, but comparisons based on equivalence rather than hierarchy. Discussing his play in *The Arrow*, Yeats writes: 'Deirdre was the Irish Helen, and Naoise her Paris, and Concobar her Menelaus'[244], echoing an idea also expressed by AE and Fiona Macleod. The Ancient Greeks and their culture had been 'transmuted from rivals to exemplars'[245], ennobling rather than embarrassing their Irish counterparts. The use of Greek elements in *Deirdre* should therefore be seen as a direct application of this attitude, Greek dramatic conventions being used to enhance the representation of the Irish myth. In particular, Yeats conceived of Greek theatre as embodying some of his most cherished dramatic theories, particularly in giving primacy to speech onstage. The year before he began *Deirdre*, he comments: 'Greek acting was great because it did all but everything with the voice (...)'[246]. In a later article he restates this priority: 'Tragic drama must be carved out of speech as a statue is out of stone.'[247]

Greek and foreign models, Yeats argues, may paradoxically serve to enhance the beauty of Irish legends: 'A writer is no less National because he shows the influence of other countries and of the great writers of the world.'[248] He is therefore keen to emphasise that, for all the influence of Greek drama, the Deirdre legend remains part of a specifically Celtic literary tradition, one which the writers of the Revival saw as a central plank in re-establishing the nation's dignity and autonomy from English domination. However, unlike AE, Yeats's interest in the transmission of the legends stemmed less from a concern with the spiritual well-being of the Irish people than from the artistic

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[243] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[244] Yeats, 'The Arrow: 24 November 1906 – Deirdre'; repr. FitzGerald and Finneran, eds. (2003), p. 184.
[245] Macintosh (1994), p. 15.
[246] Yeats, 'Samhain 1903: The Reform of the Theatre'; repr. FitzGerald and Finneran, eds. (2003), p. 28.
[247] Yeats, 'The Tragic Theatre', in Frayne ed., *Uncollected Prose* i, p. 390.
[248] Yeats, 'Samhain 1904: First Principles'; repr. FitzGerald and Finneran, ed. (2003), p. 63.

potential he perceived in the ancient tales for the literature of his day. He describes the tragic characters of legend as 'the images of the primitive imagination mirrored in the little looking-glass of the modern and classic imagination'[249]. Later in the same article, defining the Revival as the rediscovery of 'the great fountain of Gaelic legends', he states: 'every new fountain of legends is a new intoxication for the imagination of the world.'[250]

Significantly, then, Yeats chooses to represent transmission of the myth through the exchanges between his heroine and the Musicians who will be charged with turning her song into art. The characters themselves are conscious that Deirdre's death is required in order for her sorry story to become a tragic legend worth retelling. The Musicians are aware of this from the start: having heard the First Musician's exposition of the story so far, the Second Musician comments: 'The tale were well enough / Had it a finish.'[251] Deirdre's own reaction to the prospect of death is to seek assurance from them that they will remember and retell the tale: 'Women, if I die, / If Naisi die this night, how will you praise?'[252] Indeed, the process of transmission functions throughout as a central device for the furtherance of the plot. The Musicians are repeatedly described as 'wanderers'[253], and their travels are represented as the means by which they acquire and impart knowledge about the events of the narrative. Deirdre consults them in order to confirm her suspicions about Conchubar's intentions, incidentally establishing her credentials as a patron of poets: 'I never have met any of your kind, / But that I gave them money, food and fire.'[254] Fergus, in contrast, refuses to hear the proof they can offer of his King's

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[249] Yeats (1897), 'The Celtic Element in Literature'; repr. *Ideals of Good and Evil* (1903), p. 286.
[250] *Ibid.*, p. 293.
[251] Yeats (1907), p. 3.
[252] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[253] *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 5, 17, 22.
[254] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

treachery, dismissing it as 'gossip of the roads'[255], vain lies made up by poets 'because their brains are ever upon fire'[256]. His shortsightedness is shown to be symptomatic of a general devalorisation of the past, as he requests the Musicians to sing 'of some old time not worth remembering'[257]. As a consequence of this reluctance to treat the past seriously, he is unable to react at the critical moment when Conchubar's treachery is revealed. Deirdre, however, understands the importance of transmission, and embraces the death by which the king acknowledges she has 'escaped'[258] his clutches and passed into legend. Declan Kiberd sums the effect up nicely: 'It is almost as if she decides to die, less a martyr to the king than to the literary tradition, which will derive sustenance from the tale of her death and inspire future lovers (...).'[259] The role of the Musicians as witnesses to the action is again crucial: she asks them what words they will 'seek out' to tell her story properly, and gives them a bracelet as evidence 'to show that you have Deirdre's story right'[260]. This mark of authenticity, she predicts, will allow them greater access to the homes of both rich and poor; in other words, the quality of their account will ensure that it is properly transmitted.

There is a whiff of paradox in Yeats's use of the bracelet as a physical token of his story's authenticity – a token handed over by Deirdre herself – since we have seen that his version introduces more changes to the narrative than those of his contemporaries. Whereas AE seems to have been keen literally to make the legends live again, Yeats suggests that this is impossible, that the modern age is cut off from the ancient past which can only be accessed in terms of the present. He puts this alienation of modern writer from ancient material in obliquely Biblical terms: 'I have been cast up out of the whale's

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[255] *Ibid.*, p. 7. Naisi also uses this formula to dismiss the Musicians' evidence (p. 20).
[256] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[257] *Ibid.*, p. 9. He also refuses to discuss the tale of Ludaigh Redstripe, stating 'it were best forgot.' (p. 12)
[258] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
[259] Declan Kiberd, 'The war against the past' (1988); repr. *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 161.
[260] Yeats (1907), p. 34.

belly (...) I still smell the fish of the sea – for Deirdre and Cuchullain and all the other figures of Irish legend are still in the whale's belly.'[261] It is the writer's imagination which can recreate the legends as it were outside of the whale's belly, and in this Yeats did share AE's feeling that they were ripe for harnessing to the nationalist cause: 'the Irish people are at that precise stage of their history when imagination, shaped by many stirring events, desires dramatic expression'[262].

Though Yeats understood the nationalist potential of a Deirdre play, he was careful to stress that the value of art depended at least as much upon personal as political motives. Without listening to 'the casual impulses of dreams and daily thoughts', he writes, 'I could have aroused opinion; but I could not have touched the heart.'[263] In his conception of the character of Deirdre, Yeats proved faithful to his insistence that 'men must put into their writings the emotions and experiences that have been most important to themselves.'[264] A number of real women spurred his imagination at different times through the writing of the play. His tormented love for Maud Gonne, who had rejected his marriage proposal claiming not to be of the marrying type shortly before tying the knot with John MacBride in 1903, finds echo in his approach to the love triangle in the Deirdre story. Yeats's unreciprocated feelings are perceptible in Conchubar's assertion: 'One woman and two men; that is a quarrel/ That knows no mending.'[265] Yeats thus saw his own frustration reflected in that of the king. He understood from experience the emotional turmoil in which jealousy could leave man and gave expression to it in the play: '*Fergus.* And hatred turns to love and love to hate (...). *First Musician* (...) His jealousy is like his

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[261] Yeats, 'A General Introduction for my Work' (1937); repr. *Essays and Introductions* (London, 1961), pp. 524-5.
[262] Yeats, 'Samhain 1901'; repr. FitzGerald and Finneran, ed. (2003), p. 4.
[263] *Ibid.*, 'Samhain 1903: An Irish National Theatre', p. 33.
[264] *Ibid.*, 'Samhain 1904: First Principles', p. 63.
[265] Yeats (1907), p. 34. Gonne brought divorce proceedings against MacBride in 1905, and Yeats was at hand to support her through it; thus, at an important point in the composition of *Deirdre*, he had the opportunity of re-examining his complex relationship with her.

love.'[266] The poems Yeats wrote with Maud Gonne in mind compare her to both Deirdre and that other femme fatale, Helen of Troy.[267] They are, in his eyes, three exceedingly beautiful women, each caught up in her own love triangle. Later in his life, Yeats came to describe Maud Gonne's physical appearance as matching that of the greatest mythical heroines: 'There was an element in her beauty that moved minds full of old Gaelic stories and poems, for she looked as though she lived in an ancient civilization (...). She hated her own beauty, not its effect upon others, but its image in the mirror.'[268] Although Maud Gonne's beauty could be inspirational, Yeats's description of her wariness of its explosive effect makes her a modern Deirdre, similarly frightened by her own beauty.[269] In the play, Deirdre is likewise described as having 'too much beauty for good luck'[270]. Perhaps mindful of the play's significance for their relationship, Yeats was always careful to keep Maud Gonne informed of its progress, and she in turn wrote several times of her interest in and admiration for the shape it was taking.[271]

Maud Gonne's was not the only influence to find its way into *Deirdre*. It seems that around 1904, shortly after Maud Gonne's marriage, Yeats had a brief affair with the actress Florence Farr.[272] She too was given regular updates on the play's development. The part of the Musicians, who are presented as 'comely women of about forty'[273], was clearly formed by Yeats's visual representation of Florence Farr, herself then in her mid-forties. On 28 September 1904, he sent her a passage from his first draft[274] and two years

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[266] *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
[267] See for example his poems 'The Rose of the World' or 'No Second Troy'.
[268] Yeats, *Autobiographies* (1999), pp. 274-5.
[269] See Deirdre's readiness to destroy her beauty in Yeats (1907), p. 21: 'I will be blamed no more. There's but one way: / I'll spoil this beauty that brought misery /'
[270] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[271] Kelly (2005), mention of a letter to Maud Gonne c. 21 July 1906 'discussing his revision of Deirdre', p. 455, and another one in late August 1907 'sending her *Deirdre*', p. 714. For Maud Gonne's response, see 'Footnote 1', p. 714.
[272] See A. Norman Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats: A New Biography* (1988); repr. (London, 2001), p. 117. Apparently, it did not last because 'as she said later, "she got bored"'.
[273] Yeats (1907), p. 1.
[274] Kelly (1994), pp. 652-3.

later confessed to her: 'The first musician was written for you – I always saw your face as I wrote very curiously your face even more than your voice and built the character out of that.'[275] On 30 September 1906, Yeats sent her the following drafted lines (not finally included in the play) which celebrate, in rather explicit terms, the ephemeral bliss felt by lovers during moments of physical intimacy:

> [Enclosure from letter dated 30 September 1906]
>
> DEIRDRE
> There's nothing here for tears - a king and queen
> Who've been true lovers are about to die.
> And what is that? What is't but putting off
> What all true lovers have cried upon-
> The too soon wearying body, barriers
> That are not broken when lip touches lip, (...)
> I am no more afraid of losing love
> Through growing old, for temporal change is finished
> And what I have I keep from this day out.[276]

In the printed version of the play, it is significantly the 'First Musician' and not Deirdre who becomes the spokeswoman for sensual contentment: 'If you would speak of love, / Speak freely. There is nothing in the world / That has been friendly to us but the kisses / That were upon our lips, and when we are old / Their memory will be all the life we have.'[277] Although the affair with Florence Farr predated this particular passage by a couple of years, it is not a coincidence that Yeats chose to send it to her and not to another of his friends. He probably believed that she who had once shared such pleasurable moments with him - though disappointing ones from her point of view - would be able to appreciate its significance.

When it came to thinking about an actress who could incarnate his Deirdre on stage, Yeats had to find her outside Ireland. The Abbey Theatre had opened its door thanks to the generous sponsorship of Annie Horniman in 1904, but his feeling was that

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[275] Kelly (2005), letter to Florence Farr, 11 November 1906, p. 519.
[276] Kelly (2005), letter to Florence Farr, 30 September 1906, p. 504.
[277] Yeats (1907), p. 15.

the actresses at hand within the company, trained essentially for peasant drama and not for tragedy in verse, were neither experienced nor sophisticated enough to take the part of the great tragic heroine.[278] Although the very renowned English actress Mrs Campbell was already 'anxious for the play'[279] in 1906, Yeats had decided to keep it first for his company rather than export it to England. He had also cast his eye over another actress, Miss Darragh (Letitia Marion Dallas), who seemed able to satisfy his contradictory impulses for a Deirdre that would, ideally, be both Irish and yet, in some ways, an outsider. Of Irish descent but living in England, Darragh was, he insisted in his correspondence, 'an *Irish* star on the English stage'[280] [Italics mine.] But there were more palpable reasons for Yeats's choice of Darragh for the part of Deirdre. After seeing her in London playing the title role of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* in July 1905, he re-examined his play in light of the actress's performance. Her interpretation of this inherently sensual biblical figure changed Yeats's perception of Deirdre: 'The moment I thought of her for Deirdre I began to write better (...) and ventured and discovered subtleties of emotion I have never attempted before.'[281] Most significantly, his Deirdre imitates Salomé in the final scene. Each uses her physical charms in order to seduce the king into granting her wish, involving in both cases sight of a man's 'blood-bedabbled'[282] body.

Deirdre was produced on 24 November 1906 at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, the scenery being designed by Lady Gregory's son, Robert. Ironically, what Yeats prized most in Miss Darragh irritated the rest of the troupe and some members of the audience. For a start, her stylish manner contrasted with the simplicity that characterised the Abbey players, as W. G. Fay described in amused metaphorical terms: 'It was like putting a

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[278] Kelly (2005), pp. 469-70. The complexity he had developed for the character, he wrote to J. M. Synge on 13 August 1906, required 'an emotional actress of great experience'. (p. 469)
[279] *Ibid.*, p. 469.
[280] *Ibid.*, p. 526, letter to Katharine Tynan Hinkson, 1 December 1906.
[281] *Ibid.*, letter to W. G. Fay, 13 August 1906, p. 472.
[282] Yeats (1907), p. 43.

Rolls Royce to run a race with a lot of hill ponies (...). The ponies, knowing each inch of the way, could outpace the Rolls every time.'[283] But the main problem was that the 'Rolls Royce' seemed too showy for contemporary Irish taste. Darragh was accused of revealing too much and covering too little, thereby creating a Deirdre that broke shockingly with the demure character of AE's play. It was that chaste Irish heroine that Yeats's father regretted after seeing Miss Darragh on stage: 'she should cover up her neck more. Deirdre was not a Cleopatra. Altogether, she should be gentler, more cloistral (...), that at any rate is the Irish idea of heroic womanhood.'[284] Agreeing with J. B. Yeats, the inveterate theatregoer Joseph Holloway commented that the actress had 'too much of the flesh and too little of the *spirituelle*'[285] and further complained that hearing women speak so explicitly about sexual matters inevitably 'grates on the ear'[286]. Also feeling very strongly against Miss Darragh's 'impersonation'[287], Lady Gregory even seriously considered leaving Dublin since this Deirdre had in her 'something mean, ignoble and sensual'[288] which could 'lead to the deterioration of all our work and our ideas'[289]. The shock was indeed so great that she told Yeats: 'I would rather have Deirdre be forgotten for a while, and then come with a new atmosphere.'[290] To an extent, the unease with Darragh's sexualised interpretation may be seen as a disingenuous criticism of Yeats's portrayal of Deirdre – it was he, after all, who had both written the part and chosen her for it. Yet some of the suspicion must also have stemmed from her ties with the London scene, when the Abbey Theatre was engaged in promoting a specifically Irish dramatic establishment. Roy Foster records Lady Gregory's suspicions that 'Darragh had designs on the Abbey

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[283] W. G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre: An Autobiographical Record* (London, 1935), p. 208.
[284] Kelly (2005), footnote p. 525.
[285] Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill, eds., *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1967), diary entry for Saturday 24 November 1906, p. 75.
[286] Kelly (2005), footnote 4, p. 539.
[287] *Ibid.*, letter from Lady Gregory dated 19 January 1907 mentioned in footnote 8, p. 604.
[288] *Ibid.*, letter from Lady Gregory (18 January 1907) mentioned in footnote 10, p. 600.
[289] *Ibid.*, footnote 8, p. 604.
[290] *Ibid.*, footnote 10, p. 600.

and wanted to infiltrate it with her friends from the English theatrical world'[291]. Clearly, the general feeling was that Miss Darragh, branded an outsider for her English associations and superior attitude – accusations neatly captured in Fay's Rolls Royce metaphor – was not the right person to incarnate this symbol of 'Irish heroic womanhood'.

A few months after Miss Darragh's controversial performance, another actress had to be found to play a Deirdre that would be more acceptable to public opinion. A new managing director, Ben Iden Payne, was hired in January 1907 but he stayed with the Abbey Theatre only long enough to direct a revival of Yeats's *Deirdre* in April. The person chosen for the title role was none other than Mrs Payne who used the stage name of Miss Mona Limerick. Unfortunately, she had to miss a number of rehearsals due to illness and, according to Joseph Holloway, her general performance 'lacked sincerity' and was 'wearying and tiresome'[292]; in fact, he sneeringly remarks, she 'was a very uncomfortable personage for poor "Naisi" to have been exiled with for seven long years. "Concobar" was lucky to have escaped her.'[293] This new *Deirdre* marked the Abbey Theatre's second important failure in representing the tragic Irish heroine adequately.

As Yeats stopped looking for the right Deirdre for his theatre, she unexpectedly came along in the person of another English actress, Mrs Campbell. Ironically, Yeats had, as we have seen, initially opted for Miss Darragh over Campbell partly because he felt that if he handed the play over to the latter[294] he would then have to take it away from his 'own people' and his 'own theatre'[295]. By the autumn of 1907, the tables had turned and after Mrs Campbell volunteered to come to the Abbey in the following year to play, at no

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[291] Roy Foster, *W. B. Yeats : A Life - I The Apprentice Mage 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1997), p. 352.
[292] Hogan and O'Neill, eds. (1967), p. 91.
[293] *Ibid.*
[294] Kelly (2005), p. 450, Yeats's letter to J. B. Yeats, 21 July 1906. After seeing an early prose version of the play, Mrs Campbell asked Yeats for permission to 'produce it in the autumn [1906] and to take it on tour in America'.
[295] *Ibid.*, pp. 452 and 450.

cost, the part of Deirdre, the overjoyed Yeats sent a telegram to John Quinn in America urging him: 'don't give Darragh Deirdre.'[296] His fear this time was that if Miss Darragh were to play Deirdre in America, Mrs Campbell might find out and be 'put off it'[297]. The presence of the great English actress was a sign of a more internationalist outlook on Yeats's part, which Annie Horniman had warmly encouraged. This did not mean, however, that national politics were no longer at stake in this theatrical representation. The new aspiration was to attract as wide an audience as possible in order to improve the theatre's finances and to achieve for the first time through Mrs Campbell's performance national unity between people of radically different political sides. This idea enthused Yeats who predicted in his letter to John Quinn:

> Mrs Campbell's promise, and her fulfilment of it still more is bound to do more than anything else to break down the feeling on the Unionist side here that our plays cannot be good because they are "Irish", and the feeling among a considerable number of Nationalists that they cannot be good because they are cultivated and intellectual.[298]

Thus, what Mrs Campbell herself represented would bring about a reappraisal of the legendary heroine. By making *Deirdre* more accessible to different sorts of people, Yeats hoped that his theatre could speak to unionist and nationalist alike. Soon after her very successful performances at the Abbey Theatre in the week of 9 November 1908 (Appendix IX), Mrs Campbell bought the English and American rights of the play for five years.[299] The gratitude Yeats felt was immense. He owed it to her 'magnificent' acting that he was eventually 'accepted as a dramatist in Dublin'[300] and indeed felt that she had rescued his *Deirdre*. Mrs Campbell had made him forget the earlier unfortunate actresses who had tried the part, as he observed on 18 October 1921: '*Deirdre* was once

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[296] *Ibid.*, 26 October 1907, p. 756.
[297] *Ibid.*, letter to John Quinn, 29 October 1907, p. 758.
[298] *Ibid.*, p. 759.
[299] See Allan Wade, ed., *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1954), letter to John Quinn, 15 November 1908, p. 512. The next production was at the New Theatre in London on 27 November.
[300] *Ibid.*

only played and that was by Mrs Pat Campbell.'[301] She was the only one who had succeeded, in the end, in bringing out this 'intensity of passion' that characterised his *Deirdre* and the vivid memory of Mrs Campbell's performance, 'passionate and solitary', was numbered among the things that 'will, it may be, haunt me on my death-bed '[302].

As the uneasy reaction to Miss Darragh's performance shows, the representation of Deirdre in Ireland in the early days of the twentieth century was closely bound up with ideas about national identity. Though Yeats, AE and Lady Gregory had different views on what kind of figure Deirdre was, two related tendencies are discernable in all three versions. Lavarcham, in AE's play, and the heroine herself in Yeats's, display some awareness of both authors' fervent belief that the story formed part of an Irish cultural tradition linking the Celts of the heroic past with the modern-day Irish people; Lady Gregory's careful patchwork of scholarly and oral sources was similarly intended to popularise an ancient heritage in order to foster pride in Irish identity. However, recreating the legend for their compatriots involved a more or less explicit commitment to contemporary aesthetic or sexual values, and none of the versions – not even Yeats's more sexualised play – is untouched by the romanticising legacy of their Victorian predecessors. The next writer to try his hand at putting the story onstage, J. M. Synge, was to make a more conscious effort to rid himself of this inheritance in order to reconnect more directly with the medieval sources.

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[301] *Ibid.*, letter to Allan Wade, 18 October 1921, p. 674.
[302] Yeats, from 'On the Boiler' (1939); repr. *Explorations* (1962), p. 416.

CHAPTER VI

The Death of an Author: Collaborative Voices in J. M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*

George Moore wrote that J. M. Synge used to speak of *Deirdre* as his 'last disappointment'[1]. The writing of Synge's last, uncompleted play cannot indeed have been a pleasant experience as it went alongside a gradual deterioration of his health. Synge produced a considerable number of notebooks and typescripts which he ordered chronologically and alphabetically. The earliest existing draft of the play is lettered B and dated 5 September 1907, suggesting that there would have been an earlier version 'A', now missing. The latest MS was dated 14 January 1909. Some of the drafts have survived only in fragmentary form and run to over twenty versions, from which fifteen complete versions have been assembled. The anxious rewriting of the play marked the last years of Synge's life, mirroring the frustrations caused by a progressive weakening of his physical forces. On 2 February 1909, he entered Elpis Private Hospital in Dublin for the third time, taking with him the unfinished manuscript of *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, but he died without having a chance to work any more on it.

If the interest Synge took in the story of Deirdre was already apparent in 1901, he was, by his own admission, very suspicious of the creation of 'a purely (...) unmodern, ideal (...) Cuchulainoid National Theatre', believing that 'no drama (...) can grow out of anything but the fundamental realities of life which are neither modern or un-modern, and (...) are rarely fantastic or spring-dayish'[2]. One may therefore wonder how this statement could be reconciled with Synge's later decision to adapt the legend of Deirdre for the

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[1] George Moore, *Hail and Farewell, III Vale* (1914); repr. (London, 1947), p. 142.
[2] Ann Saddlemyer, ed., *The Collected Letters of J. M. Synge*, vol. i (Oxford, 1983), letter to his friend Stephen MacKenna, p. 74.

stage and contribute to the growth of a National Theatre that would be very much centred on the Cuchulain cycle.

In order to understand the change of heart that led Synge to start his own Deirdre play, it is important to consider the influence that preceding versions of the legend, both ancient and modern, had on him. AE's *Deirdre* was revived on the same evening that J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* was staged by the Irish National Theatre Society (25 February 1904) and Synge would have been present at both performances. Yeats's *Deirdre* also ran at the Abbey Theatre for two weeks from 24 November 1906 and Synge attended many showings. Even though he was initially satisfied with Miss Darragh's performance, he changed his mind within a week and became one of her many detractors: 'Looking back from here with the sort of perspective that distance gives I greatly dislike the impression that "Deirdre" or rather Miss Darragh has left on me.'[3] Synge's desire to turn to folk material was thus partly prompted by an imitative drive to add his name to the long list of modern adapters of the Deirdre myth, but he also wanted to distinguish himself from them. He followed AE's tripartite division of the play[4] rather than Yeats's one-act version. Yet despite the structural similarities, Synge criticised Russell's dreamy *Deirdre* for being of 'the fancy land only'[5]. In reaction to this tendency, Synge admitted to being 'a little afraid that the "saga" people might loosen my grip on reality'[6]. Adapting ancient Irish folk material to a modern audience was an exercise that was new to Synge, whose previous plays had been rooted in contemporary peasant reality. His naturalistic drama contrasted radically with the mythological idealism supposedly inherent in Celtic legends. As he explained on 29 November 1908 in a letter to Louis Untermeyer, Synge

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[3] *Ibid.*, p. 262. Letter dated 13 December 1906

[4] Synge initially considered a four-act version of the play and even drafted a fourth act beginning after the death of the sons of Uisneach but he was dissatisfied with it and eventually adopted the same structural division as AE.

[5] J. M. Synge, 'About Literature, Various Notes', in Alan Price, ed., *The Collected Works of J. M. Synge, vol. ii - Prose* (London, 1966), p. 348.

[6] Ann Saddlemyer, ed., *The Collected Letters of J. M. Synge*, vol. ii (Oxford, 1984), p. 56.

thought of his future Deirdre in relation to those of his predecessors: 'I am at work on a Saga play - after the Play boy I wanted a change from Peasant Comedy - or thought I did - on the Deirdre story that Yeats and so many others have treated (...) in one way or other.'[7] But his exercise was not, he told Edward Stephens, a pure act of imitation, and he rejected the notion that he might be accused of copying AE and Yeats: 'Oh, no - there isn't any danger of that. People are entitled to use these old stories in any way they wish. My treatment of the story of Deirdre wouldn't be like either of theirs!'[8]

As he was thinking of adapting the Irish legend, Synge was deeply affected by the riots and controversies that had followed the staging of his previous play *The Playboy of the Western World.* As a direct consequence of this disappointment, he may have felt a temporary need to efface his own creative voice by working within some pre-existing mythical framework. He was to produce, as Yeats remarks, 'a beautiful serene *Deirdre*, with, for the first time since *Riders to the Sea*, no touch of sarcasm or defiance'[9]. The public had by then grown familiar with those legendary figures whose temporal remoteness could not upset the audience as the *Playboy* characters Christy Mahon or Pegeen Mike had done previously. As he confessed to his fiancée Molly in December 1906, he was now aiming for 'something quiet and stately and restrained' and wanted her 'to act in it'[10]. But the change was not easy to make, for the legendary characters seemed to belong to some inaccessible pre-Christian era; Synge had remarked in a notebook that 'a healthy mind' should not concern itself with 'the other more or less artificial retellings of classical or saga stories'[11]. Similar doubts as to the validity of his work were still being expressed four months after he had started his new play, as he confessed in a letter written to John Quinn in January 1908:

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 227.
[8] Quoted in David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge 1871-1909* (New York, 1959), p. 277.
[9] W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London, 1961), p. 310.
[10] Saddlemyer (1983), p. 250.
[11] See Price (1966), 'Various Notes About Literature', p. 350.

> I don't know whether I told you that I am trying a three-Act prose Deirdre - to change my hand. I am not sure yet whether I shall be able to make a satisfactory play out of it - these saga people when one comes to deal with them seem very remote; - one does not know what they thought or what they ate or where they went to sleep, so one is apt to fall into rhetoric - In any case I find it 'an interesting experiment,' full of new difficulties, and I shall be the better, I think, for the change. [12]

The experiment therefore represented a challenge to Synge, whose creative imagination always worked from what he knew, from observation and subjective impressions anchored in reality. Characters like Deirdre were part of a mythical past that seemed beyond his reach. Yet it was precisely the difficulties generated by their remoteness which spurred him on to write his own version of the Deirdre legend.

Although he saw this new work as an attempt to 'change his hand', Synge's interest in the story of Deirdre had been developing for a number of years. A primary source of inspiration was Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, which had been delivered to his Parisian address. There are a handful of thematic similarities; for instance, both authors have Deirdre kill herself with a knife. More importantly, he felt that her experiments in Kiltartanese breathed a fresh literary spirit which, he confessed to her, remained true to the original sources: 'Many of the stories, of course, I have known for a long time, but they seem to gain a new life in the beautiful language you have told them in.'[13] Reviewing her book shortly after its publication, he recommended in a 'word of warning' that serious students of mythology should take a more rigorous approach to the texts by consulting the works of eminent German Celtic scholars, for example, the accurate philological volumes compiled by Ernst Windisch[14]; yet he nevertheless believed those to be too dry and 'addressed to scholars only (...) too learned, and too expensive for general use'[15]. He recognised that 'a step in advance' had been made to broaden the availability of the existing legendary material with the publication in 1898 of Eleanor

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[12] Saddlemyer (1984), pp. 121-122.
[13] Saddlemyer (1983), letter dated [? 30 April 1902], p. 55.
[14] Synge, who read and spoke German very well, had undoubtedly studied the volumes in depth.
[15] Synge, 'An Epic of Ulster' (7 June 1902); repr. Price (1966), p. 367.

Hull's *Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature*, but he argued that 'the arrangement of her book was not adequately carried out and the translations themselves had no uniformity of style'.[16] In contrast, Lady Gregory's Kiltartanese speech, which undoubtedly influenced Synge's own Hiberno-English dialect, was praised for its authenticity.[17] Although the article is rather short, it betrays Synge's special fondness for her version of this particular legend and includes extensive quotations from Deirdre's Lament, of which, he insists, 'a few stanzas *must* be given'[18] [Italics mine]. He later recommended the book to Molly, drawing her attention especially to the Deirdre legend: 'Remember to get Cuchulain of Muirthemne from the library and read 'The Sons of Usnach' in it. It is charming.'[19] Two years after reviewing Lady Gregory's book, he declared that *Cuchulain* was 'still part of my daily bread'[20].

If the great impact that Lady Gregory's version had on Synge is undeniable, it is often forgotten that Douglas Hyde had preceded her by ten years in the use of the Anglo-Irish idiom and therefore inaugurated its rehabilitation with his *Love Songs of Connacht*. There was a clear political intent in Hyde's choice of a dialect that would fuse English and Irish modes of expression. It was not simply a case of adding an Irish flavour to the English language. His linguistic approach reflected a broader 'Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', a plea he had addressed in a lecture delivered to the Irish National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892. Synge's work bears the clear influence of Hyde's prose and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* is reminiscent in tone of *Love Songs of Connacht*. Hyde, who had won the Vice-Chancellor's Prize in English verse in 1888 for his metrical version of the legend, mockingly recalls that Trinity students had at the time no idea as to

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[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.* He describes it as 'a wonderfully simple and powerful language that resembles a good deal the peasant dialect of the west of Ireland'.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 369.
[19] Saddlemyer (1983), letter dated 5 November 1906, p. 228.
[20] Quoted in Lady Gregory's *Seventy Years*, p. 403.

'what Déirdre was, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral'[21]. The lack of public awareness of Ireland's mythical figures may have prompted his decision to publish the story in different literary forms. Four years after his verse rendering of the legend was published in *The Three Sorrows of Storytelling*[22], Hyde produced a prose version of the story which was included in his *Literary History of Ireland*[23]. Undoubtedly, Synge was aware of the ways in which Hyde had inscribed his variants of the Deirdre legend within a specific political agenda that promulgated, above all, 'de-Anglicisation'.

Before Synge took a serious interest in literature, he had been initially aiming for a career as a violinist. A few musical pieces are of particular relevance to his later study of the legend of Deirdre. An obvious source of inspiration was Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, composed between 1857 and 1859, which is thematically comparable to the story of Deirdre and Naisi. The influence of the Italian pianist, composer and teacher, Michele Esposito, who had been conductor of the Dublin Orchestral Society since its establishment in 1899, is even more important as Synge knew the man personally and was a great admirer his works. His cantata for solo voices, chorus and orchestra, *Deirdre*, was awarded the Feis Ceoil (Irish Musical Festival) Prize[24] in 1897 and the lyrics were by the Celtic scholar T. W. Rolleston.[25] It features only three characters (Deirdre: soprano, Naisi: tenor and Fergus: baritone). The piece is construed around three distinct parts, starting with a chorus recapitulating the initial situation: Deirdre's forced seclusion, her longing for a mysterious young man, Naisi's unexpected arrival in her dim abode and the

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[21] Douglas Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland* (New York, 1899), footnote, p. 303.
[22] Hyde (1895), 'Deirdre', 1-39.
[23] This was probably an unnumbered manuscript found in the Belfast Museum which dates from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. According to Hyde, this MS is a copy 'of a copy which must have been fairly old to judge from the language and from the glosses in the margin' dating probably back to the late Middle Ages.
[24] The original prospectus of 1894 urged that a festival be started to give encouragement to the rise of a 'New Irish School of Composers' who should be national in their art and who would produce cantatas preferably on an Irish theme and with Irish words.
[25] The poet and scholar, T. W. Rolleston (1857-1910) helped Yeats set up the Irish Literary Society in late 1891. His 'Deirdre and the Sons of Usna' was later published in *Myths of the Celtic Race* (1911; repr. London, 1986), 196-201.

couple's subsequent elopement. Part II takes place by Loch Etive in Scotland and brings the three characters Naisi, Deirdre and Fergus together whereas Part III is set 'before the Hostel of the Red Branch in Emain Macha' with only Deirdre left to lament the death of the sons of Usna. It appears therefore that Synge's competent knowledge of musical adaptations based on tragic love stories was to help him add a melodious note to his *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

Unlike Yeats and AE before him, Synge had no need to rely on inaccurate or romanticised English translations published at the time since he was able to read the medieval texts in the original Gaelic. Back in 1898, Synge had attended Henry D'Arbois de Jubainville's courses in Old and Middle Irish literature at the Sorbonne, which included a series of lectures comparing the ancient Irish and ancient Greek civilizations. In an article entitled 'La Vieille Littérature Irlandaise' written in almost impeccable French on 15 March 1902, Synge mentions the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* as being among the most important ancient Irish manuscripts, singling out in it 'The Fate of the Sons of Usnach'. He insists on his personal debt to his mentor's excellent scholarly work on Irish mythology: 'C'est à M. d'Arbois de Jubainville que revient l'honneur d'avoir éclairé par de longs travaux toute cette mythologie irlandaise (...).'[26] Chapter II - volume VII ('Le serment par les forces de la nature') of de Jubainville's 'Cours de littérature celtique', published in 1895, bears particular relevance to Synge's adaptation of the Deirdre legend. Undoubtedly, the pagan marriage of Deirdre and Naisi is modelled on the information supplied by the French Professor on the theme of Celtic oaths:

> A l'époque primitive (...) il y a trois puissances que l'homme redoute surtout ; ce sont: le ciel, la terre et l'eau. (...) Loégaré, le roi suprême et payen [*sic*] d'Irlande, (...) donna comme garants de sa parole tous les éléments : le soleil et la lune, l'eau et l'air, le jour et la nuit, la mer et la terre.[27]

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[26] Synge, 'La vieille littérature irlandaise', *L'Européen,* Paris, 15 March 1902, p. 11. [To M. d'Arbois de Jubainville falls the honour of having illuminated by extensive works all this Irish mythology (...).] On the influence of French Gaelic scholars on Synge, see Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, *Primitivism, Science and the Irish Revival* (Oxford, 2004).

[27] Henry d'Arbois de Jubainville, *Cours de littérature celtique - Tome vii* (Paris, 1895), pp. 16-24.

> [In primitive times, there were three powers that man dreaded above all; these were: the sky, the earth and the water. Loégaré, the supreme pagan king of Ireland, (...) called to witness to his word all the elements: the sun and the moon, water and the air, the day and the night, the sea and the earth.]

As Ainnle weds Deirdre to Naisi, he evokes most of the forces of nature enumerated by de Jubainville: 'By the *sun* and *moon* and the *whole earth*, I wed Deirdre to Naisi. May *the air* bless you, and *water* and the *wind*, the *sea*, and all the hours of the *sun* and *moon*.'[28] [Italics mine] It is common knowledge that nature governed the lives of men in pre-Christian times. If Synge was careful to transpose some of the cultural elements specific to Celtic civilization onto his version of the Deirdre legend, Henry d'Arbois de Jubainville had been an essential mediator and he was aware of the complex origins of the tale he had ventured to adapt. During his prolonged stay in Paris, he had acquired an in-depth knowledge not only of ancient Irish literature, but also of the traditional French legends from Britanny. There he read books by Pierre Loti and Ernest Renan, paying particular attention to the stories collected by the Breton folklorist Anatole Le Braz[29] whom he met in Dublin in April 1905. In a short article written for *The Daily Express* on 28 January 1899, Synge refers to Le Braz as a man who had 'passed his childhood in close contact to the Breton peasantry, speaking chiefly in their language, (...) undisturbed by any political or social creed' and came to witness 'with a vague and unpractical disquiet the waning of much that he intimately loves'[30]. As Synge began work on the Deirdre tale, he bore in mind Le Braz's own method for gathering folk material and his obsession with death. De Jubainville had provided a French translation of the legend in *L'épopée celtique en Irlande* with which Anatole Le Braz was familiar.[31]

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[28] Synge, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (Churchtown, 1910); repr. (Dublin,1911), p. 37.
[29] See, for example, Anatole Le Braz, *La légende de la mort en Basse-Bretagne: croyances, traditions et usages des Bretons armoricains* (Paris, 1893).
[30] Synge, 'Anatole Le Braz', *The Daily Express*, Dublin, 28 January 1899; repr. Price (1966), p. 394.
[31] Indeed, it was quoted at some length in Anatole Le Braz, 'Le Drame dans l'Epopée Celtique', *Le théâtre celtique* (Paris, 1905), pp. 7-8.

Synge not only sought inspiration for his *Deirdre* from such eminent Celtic scholars but also from the direct study of some medieval French texts[32], the most significant for our purposes being the thirteenth-century tale *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Even though it is a light comedy with a happy ending, as opposed to the tragic, even ominous tone of the Deirdre legend, a comparative study reveals an interesting series of parallels and reversals between the two texts. That they both tell the story of runaway lovers is not, in itself, surprising. The traditional dynamic of the triangular love pattern is followed: two young lovers escape a noble figure of authority, run away and live in exile before being brought back to the point of origin where they find their death. This structure is found in the story of Aucassin and Nicolette, except that the couple do not die in the end. The old count Garin de Beaucaire, who is firmly opposed to the union of his son, Aucassin, with Nicolette, orders the young girl to be locked up in a room on the top floor of a sumptuous palace, with an old woman for only companion:

> Le vicomte avait un riche palais, clos de hautes murailles et bordé de jardins ombreux. Il fit mettre Nicolette au plus inaccessible étage, avec une vieille pour toute compagnie, (...). Puis il en fit sceller la porte de telle sorte que nul ne pût entrer ou sortir, ne laissant d'autre ouverture qu'une fenêtre (...).[33]
>
> [The viscount had a rich palace, enclosed by high walls and bordered by shady gardens. He had Nicolette held in the least accessible part of the palace, with only an old woman for company (...). Then he had the door sealed up so that no one could enter or go out, leaving no opening other than a window.]

The situation is comparable to that of Deirdre who is also taken away from the court and raised by an old housekeeper, Lavarcham. But while Deirdre is the object of the king's passion, Nicolette is hated by the count. Like her Irish counterpart, she manages to escape from her prison and hides in the woods where Aucassin eventually finds her. Living among dangerous animals, she paradoxically finds there the freedom, safety and protection that were refused to her within the shielding walls of the city:

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[32] Synge had been introduced to medieval French literature by Louis Petit de Julleville (1841-1900) who had become professor of French medieval literature in 1886. Synge attended his lectures at the Sorbonne in 1895.

[33] Delvau, trad., *Aucassin et Nicolette* (Paris, 1866), pp. 9-10.

J'aimerais encore mieux par les loups être mangée,
Que par les hommes brûlée
En allant dans la cité ![34]

[I would still rather be eaten by wolves,
Than be burnt by men
By going back to the city!]

After many adventures, the couple takes refuge in the kingdom of Torelore, but, unlike conventional tragic lovers, they do not meet their death and remain together, triumphant over all obstacles. The many thematic correspondences existing between the *Book of Leinster* version of the Deirdre tale and this anonymous thirteenth-century *chantefable*[35] from Northern France could feasibly be explained by the latter text's extensive play on the legend of Tristan and Isolde. Yet it is striking that the peculiar way in which Aucassin envisages killing himself - by dashing his head against a rock - closely echoes Deirdre's violent death in *LMU*:

> Et sitôt que vous seriez couchée dans un autre lit que dans le mien, ne croyez pas que j'attendisse jusqu'à ce que je trouvasse couteau pour m'ouvrir le cœur? Non certes! Je me précipiterais du plus loin que je l'apercevrais contre une muraille ou une pierre bise et je m'y heurterais si rudement que je m'en ferais voler les yeux de la tête et que je m'écervellerais tout. [36]
>
> [And once you have lain in another man's bed, do not think that I will wait to find a knife to stab into my heart. Certainly not! As soon as I see one, I will dash myself against a wall or a grey-brown rock, and I will strike it so hard that my eyes will be forced out of my head, and my brains will spill out.]

One wonders whether this messy form of suicide was common practice at the time or if the author of *Aucassin et Nicolette* could have found inspiration in the original ending of the Deirdre tale. What is certain is that Synge had the French story in mind as he ventured, in his turn, to adapt the legend of Deirdre; he strongly recommended it to Molly in November 1906, at a time when he was considering the subject of his next play: 'I am very glad that you liked "Auccassin and Nicolete" [*sic*], it is a very beautiful thing, I think, filled with the very essence of literature and romance.'[37] Certain expressions found

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[34] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
[35] As the name suggests, the *chantefable* is a story told in alternating sections of verse and prose, the former sung, the latter recited.
[36] Delvau (1866), p. 38.
[37] Saddlemyer (1983), letter to Molly Allgood dated 3 November 1906, p. 226.

in the French tale are replicated almost exactly in Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, the most striking example being the form of greeting employed whenever two characters meet. For example, as Aucassin encounters children in the forest who inform him of Nicolette's whereabouts, he salutes them in the following manner: 'Beaux enfants, Dieu vous aide!' and one of them replies 'Dieu vous bénisse!'[38] In the same way, when Conchubor enters Lavarcham's House in Act 1, he exclaims 'The gods save you' to which Lavarcham replies 'The gods save and keep you kindly (...)'[39]. Other variants include 'The gods shield you'[40] or 'The gods help the lot of us'[41], the plural 'gods' indicating an attempt to adapt these forms of blessing to a pagan context. Among all the adapters of the legend, Synge is the only one to employ this device and it is indeed absent from the primary medieval texts. It seems therefore that the 'essence of literature and romance' which he wished to recapture was to be found as much in *Aucassin and Nicolette* as in the medieval texts relating directly to the legend of Deirdre.

Synge had also read Geoffrey Keating's *History of Ireland* and was undoubtedly familiar with his account of the Deirdre legend. Keating's name was mentioned in his article 'La vieille littérature irlandaise' published in *L'Européen* on 15 March 1902 and his history deemed a crucial document for the transmission of major ancient Irish records, otherwise long lost. Declan Kiberd concludes that it was essentially Keating's 'fusion of scholarship with the creative imagination' that appealed to Synge who similarly wished 'to infuse the sophisticated forms of modern poetry and drama with the imagination of medieval folklore'[42]. Synge's admiration for the seventeenth-century historian was such that he wrote two reviews on his works: 'The Poems of Geoffrey Keating' (*The Speaker*, 8 December 1900) and 'An Irish Historian' (*The Speaker*, 6 September 1902):

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[38] Delvau (1866), p. 56.
[39] Synge (1910), p. 4.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[42] Declan Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language* (London and Basingstoke, 1979), p. 57.

> Apart from his natural talent he owes a good deal to his foreign studies (...) A comparison of the general expression of Keating's work with that of the annalists of his time recalls, in a curiously remote way, the difference that can be felt between the work of Irish writers of the present day who have spent part of their life in London or Paris, and the work of men who have not left Ireland.[43]

Using Keating as an example, Synge subtly draws attention to a more general need for the Irish to broaden their horizons, as he had done himself.

If Synge displayed an accurate knowledge of the twelfth, fifteenth and seventeenth-century Irish sources, he shunned the romanticised translations such as A H. Leahy's *Heroic Romances of Ireland*, published in 1905. He started his review of this work with an introductory reference to the 'chant fable' *Aucassin and Nicolette*:

> Most of the early Irish romances are written in alternating fragments of prose and verse, like the old French tale of *Aucassin and Nicolette,* and for this and other reasons the translator of them has a task that is far from easy. [44]

He dismisses Leahy's claim to have produced a meticulous translation based on the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*, arguing that 'it is hard to imagine a more deplorable misrepresentation of the spirit of these old verses'[45]. In his preface Leahy maintains that he has used Windisch's scholarly texts, and further specifies that his Book of Leinster version of 'Deirdre' was 'taken from the Irish text printed without translation in *Irische Texte*, vol. I.'[46] But according to Synge, Leahy's sentimentalised rendering of the legend provides a dire example of, in his own words, 'transfiguration' of the source material: 'In order to form an opinion of Mr. Leahy's verses one need not go far. In (...) the very well known story of Deirdre and the sons of Usnach, a child cries out before it is born (...) and terrifies the men of Ulster.'[47] He then quotes the passage of Cathbad the Druid's prophecy regarding the as yet unborn Deirdre, which becomes in Leahy's hand: ''Tis a maid who screamed wildly so lately, / Fair and curly shall locks round her flow, / And her eyes be

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[43] Synge, 'An Irish Historian', *The Speaker* (London, 6 September 1902); repr. Price (1966), p. 361.
[44] Synge, 'A review of A. H Leahy's Heroic Romances of Ireland', *The Manchester Guardian*, 28 December 1905; repr. Price (1966), p. 371.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 372.
[46] A. H. Leahy, 'Preface', *Heroic Romances of Ireland,* vol. i (London, 1905), p. xv.
[47] Synge (1905); repr. Price (1966), p. 371.

blue-centred and stately / And her cheeks like the foxglove shall glow.'[48] Synge deplores the general tendency among modern translators of Gaelic poetry to write this kind of 'facile parody'[49] and thereby to alter the original spirit of the tales. In his French article 'Le mouvement intellectuel irlandais', he refers to the first three quarters of the nineteenth century - and, in particular the time of the Young Irelanders - as having produced few works of literary worth:

> le sentiment national a été trop ardent, trop conscient (...) de sorte que la prose dégénérait facilement chez eux en une rhétorique surchargée, tandis qu'en poésie on croyait avoir tout fait en chantant les anciennes gloires de l'Irlande.[50]
>
> [The nationalist sentiment was too ardent, too deliberate (...) so that their prose tended to degenerate into overblown rhetoric whilst their conception of poetry limited itself to the celebration of Ireland's past glories.]

His own idea of art was that it should look beyond purely nationalistic concerns: one could not create poetry by merely personifying Ireland. He therefore denounced political propaganda written in bad verse and the inevitable distortion of Ireland's heroic past that went along with it. Considering the great range of accounts relating to the Deirdre tale that were available to Synge, it is difficult, as Toni O'Brien Johnson points out, 'to single out precisely which individual features he took from which version'[51]. Yet it is clear that his awareness of preceding treatments of the legend, including the ones he deeply disliked, paradoxically helped him set a new tone for his adaptation.

The first written trace of Synge's interest in the Deirdre myth can be found in a translation attempted during his first sojourn on Aran from 21 September to 19 October 1901 of a manuscript, *Oidhe Cloinne Uisnig*, written about 1740 by Andrew MacCurtin from County Clare[52], based on *OCU*, and published by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language in Dublin in 1898. The handwritten school exercise book containing

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[48] *Ibid.* See also Leahy (1905), p. 92. Synge made a few errors when quoting from Leahy's text, accidentally replacing, for example, 'curling' by 'curly' and omitting a few commas.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 372.
[50] Synge, 'Le mouvement intellectuel irlandais', *L'Européen*, Paris, 31 Mai 1902, p. 12.
[51] Toni O'Brien Johnson, *Synge: The Medieval and the Grotesque* (Gerrards Cross, 1982), p. 70.
[52] Andrew MacCurtin (1690-1749) Irish poet and scholar brought up to the strict traditions of the Bardic school. His work had remained unpublished until 1898.

fifty-seven leaves of Synge's own translation is preserved at Trinity College Dublin (MS 4341).[53] As Synge was learning to speak Irish at the time, this edition served as a convenient textbook which also included an English translation with glossary and notes as well as a 'foclóir' or Irish-English dictionary. Synge's attempt at a translation based on the MacCurtin text was, then, essentially a linguistic exercise and, as Ann Saddlemyer points out, offers no 'further evidence that he used this as the basis for his dramatization of the story six years later'[54]. Yet it already signals a desire to adhere to a Gaelic model, as Declan Kiberd emphasises:

> Where dramatists like Yeats and Russell had to rely on collated English versions of the legend, Synge drew his inspiration directly from a Gaelic source, *Oidhe Chloinne Uisnig*, and indirectly from his study of the evolution of the legend. This directness of approach is one reason why his play is more faithful to the legend itself and, finally, more exciting as drama.[55]

But to achieve faithfulness 'to the legend itself', the author would have to distance himself from his own subjective impressions and contemporary reality. As in Yeats's version, the physical death of the characters becomes a pre-requisite for them to achieve an immortal status through the retelling of their story. There is definitely a Greek flavour in Synge's treatment of the legend which may well have been inspired by the comparative analyses of Irish and Homeric civilizations pervading the works and lectures of Henry d'Arbois de Jubainville. Fiona Macleod's *The Winged Destiny*, which Synge had reviewed on 12 November 1904, had also showed how the Gaelic tradition had been assimilated to the Greek.[56] Michel Foucault underlines that in Greek epics 'the hero accepted an early death because his life, consecrated and magnified by death, passed into immortality; and the narrative redeemed his acceptance of death.'[57] In the same way, in

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[53] 'The Fate of the Children of Uisneach', Dublin, Library of Trinity College, MS 4,341.
[54] Ann Saddlemyer, ed., *J. M. Synge*: *Collected Works*, vol. iv (London, 1968), p. 393.
[55] Kiberd (1979), p. 195.
[56] See, for example, Fiona Macleod, 'Orpheus and Oisin', *The Winged Destiny* (1904); repr. (London, 1913): 'But I have wondered often if the ancient Gaelic tale of Oisin and Niamh has not in it the heart of the old Greek story.'
[57] Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, 1977), p. 117.

Synge's play, the death of the protagonists is described as a necessary pre-condition for the legend to transcend time and for the story to be 'remembered for ever'[58], a mythical fate which Deirdre had already sensed while still safe in Lavarcham's house: 'Do many know what is foretold, that Deirdre will be the ruin of the Sons of Usna, and have a little grave by herself, and a story will be told for ever.'[59] The feeling of the inevitability of her fate turns Deirdre into an Electra-like character and her hubristic pride also recaptures the mood of classical Greek tragedy, as she prophesies before killing herself: 'there will be a story told of a ruined city and a raving king and a woman will be young forever.'[60] Like Oedipus the King, Conchubor leaves the stage supported by Lavarcham, his sight blurred, as if having lost all sense of direction:

> Lavarcham.
> I have a little hut where you can rest, Conchubor; (...)
>
> Conchubor, *with the voice of an old man.*
> Take me with you. I'm hard set to see the way before me.
>
> Lavarcham.
> This way, Conchubor. (*They go out.*)[61]

As in Yeats's play, Deirdre defies time by making events into legend and by asserting the need for the story to be carried through time, triumphantly unaltered. The underlying message is that the ideal story should *be told*, its legendary status prevailing over the agents of its transmission. This is symbolised in Deirdre's 'half-finished piece of tapestry'[62] representing the figures of Naoise and his brothers, which conjures up the image of the Fates, the Greek goddesses who presided over the births and lives of men. The Greek dimension of the play is also manifest in the 1907 manuscript scenario of

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[58] On the theme of eternal remembrance being achieved through an early death, see Yeats's 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan' (1902); repr. *Variorum Plays* (London, 1966), p. 229: 'They shall be remembered for ever, / They shall be alive for ever, / They shall be speaking for ever, / The people shall hear them for ever.'
[59] Synge (1910), p. 30.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[61] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
[62] *Ibid.*, p. 1. The 'half-finished piece of tapestry' appears as a central element in the opening stage directions.

Deirdre of the Sorrows: Synge's intention had been to conjure up the Greek flavour of *Riders to the Sea* and give his Deirdre a 'Rider-like' death, suggesting the heroine's eventual resignation to her tragic fate. By doing so, he reaffirmed his dissatisfaction with romanticised nineteenth-century versions of the legend and manifested a desire to return to the source.

Even though adapting a legend required emotional detachment and a thorough investigation of its different sources, the writing of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was nevertheless the unique personal investment of a dying man which betrayed, as Yeats underlined in his 'Preface', 'so poignant (...) an emotion and wisdom that were his own preparation for death'[63]. Despite its being based on a pre-established text, it is paradoxically considered to be the most autobiographical of Synge's plays. Although parallels between his life and that of his characters have been greatly exaggerated - notably by his nephew Edward Stephens[64] - the gradual awareness of his impending death and his increasing physical suffering were no doubt transposed in the characterisation of his legendary protagonists. Synge's letters to Molly constantly referred to the various ailments that afflicted him but he also kept her informed of the tiredness and frustrations caused by his work on *Deirdre*. As early as November 1907, he wished to show her the drafts he had written and identified her with the tragic heroine.[65] In December 1906, he expressed a desire to see his fiancée play the part of Deirdre. As is revealed in the correspondence, the fictional characters of his plays seem to have so much occupied his

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[63] Yeats, 'Preface', in Synge (1910).

[64] Edward Stephens, *My Uncle John* (London, 1974), p. 195. Stephens went so far as to describe Lavarcham as the embodiment of Synge's mother, the housekeeper of the family, and to see 'his two loyal brothers' as having suggested Ainnle and Ardan. Even Owen was meant to represent 'the detached spirit' of Synge's mind.

[65] Saddlemyer (1984), p. 77: 'P.S. I want to show you my Deirdre some day soon perhaps I can on Sunday.'

mind that the strenuous work seriously affected his physical and mental health. He even had to apologise to Molly for spending more time with Deirdre than with her:

> I haven't had dinner today yet; but I've been working at Deirdre till my head is going round. I was too taken up with her yesterday to write to you. I got her into such a mess I think I'd have put her into the fire only that I want to write a part for YOU, so you mustn't be jealous of her. (...) I am very tired, worn-out, with anxiety about Deirdre.[66]

He further justified his apparent aloofness by insisting that Molly was constantly in his mind during the writing process, providing direct inspiration for the construction of Deirdre as a character. There was no need for her to feel envious of the beautiful Celtic heroine, as the long days and many sleepless nights he was spending with Deirdre allowed him to connect with his fiancée on a deeper level: 'You mustn't mind my letters being a little dry these times, because I am pouring out my heart to you in Deirdre the whole day long.'[67] Synge's late correspondence from 1907 to 1909, particularly his letters to Molly, refers constantly to the difficulties he encountered whilst writing because of a gradual weakening of his physical strength. But whenever he felt like abandoning his project to complete *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Molly would read and act out the scenes in the dining room of Glendalough House to give him the courage to continue. It was precisely this physical suffering, the lumps growing on his side, the repeated stays in Elpis hospital and, by analogy, the growing sense of a fatal outcome that contributed to making the tragedy very much reflective of his own tragic condition. An open grave was thus the central element of the closing act, the allegorical representation of Synge's own slow progression towards death. The correspondence between Synge's and Deirdre's world is pointed out by Padraic Colum: 'he said that he had been close to death and that the grave was a reality to him, and it was the reality in the tragedy he was writing.'[68] The text thus becomes endowed with rich autobiographical meaning whereby legendary events are made to mirror the author's interior conflicts. Thus, one no longer finds a

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[66] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
[67] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[68] Padraic Colum, *The Road Round Ireland* (New York, 1926), pp. 369-70.

Machiavellian representation of the evil monarch, as in most of the previous texts. Instead, the figure of the king is humanized to the extent that the reader cannot help pitying him. He does not appear totally guilty of the death of the sons of Usnach, the greatest tragedy being his loneliness in old age: 'it would be a good bargain if it was I was in the grave, and Deirdre crying over me, and it was Naisi who was old and desolate.'[69] The sixteen-year age difference between Molly and the author clearly preoccupied Synge. This is best evidenced in his letters to her, which are often headed 'dearest child' and signed 'Your Old Tramp', or in his possessive and paternalistic attitude towards her. At 37, Synge was not old, but he was in the last year of his life. The identification was thus two-fold: his possessiveness towards her was, like Conchubar's, due to a fear that his young love would reject him on account of their age difference and his deteriorating health, but he probably found consolation in the thought that he would never become 'old and desolate' and was to be, like Naisi, eternally young. The recurring allusions to the fear of old age, to its being worse than death itself, signal the author's desire to find some justification and even comfort in his premature death. As Maurice Bourgeois argues,

> It is this coming sense of love, this early expectation of death that gives the play its supreme beauty; the author having obtained full mastery over his medium, is able to comprehend and express the deepest of all truths – the truth of the nature of existence; it is because he bids farewell to life that he grasps it to the full.[70]

Synge's Deirdre is thus made to live passionately and fully until she feels it is time to die. In that, she differs from classical Greek heroes like Oedipus, as she is not trying to escape from her fate but freely chooses to follow it. She is conscious that she will only achieve a mythical status by accepting, even welcoming, an early death. One can sense here the influence of the fifteenth-century French author, François Villon, whose 'Regretz de la belle Heaulmiere ja parvenue a veillesse' (in *Le Testament*) Synge had translated into

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[69] Synge (1910), p. 85.
[70] Maurice Bourgeois, *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre* (London, 1913), p. 217.

English. This once beautiful woman, now grown old and ugly, laments the passing of time and her having outlived her lover by thirty years:

> Or est il mort, passé trente ans,
> Et je remains vielle, chenue,
> Quant je pense, lasse! au bon temps,
> Quelle fus, quelle devenue ;
> Quant me regarde toute nue,
> Et je me voy si très changiée,
> Povre, seiche, megre, menue,
> Je suis presque toute enragiée.[71]

Synge's free translation:

> [The man I had a love for (...) is dead thirty years and over it, and it is I am left behind, grey and aged. When I do be minding the good days I had, minding what I was one time, and what it is I'm come to, and when I do look on my own self, poor and dry, and pinched together, it wouldn't be much would set me raging in the streets.] [72]

This finds echo in the King's statement: 'There's one sorrow has no end surely, that's being old and lonesome.'[73] Synge's Deirdre refuses to turn into Villon's 'old hag' with furrows on her face, grey and whitish hair, a nose with a hook on it, 'ears hanging down', sharp and skinny lips, in short 'a bag of bones, and legs the like of two shrivelled sausages going beneath it'.[74] The only two other female characters in the play are almost exclusively characterised in terms of their advanced age. Throughout the play, Lavarcham's servant bears no other name than 'Old Woman'. Lavarcham herself best typifies Villon's 'Belle Heaulmière parvenue a vieillesse' and the great contrast between her past attractiveness and her ugliness in old age is fully exposed by Owen: 'Would you credit it, my father used to be in the broom and heather kissing Lavarcham, with a little bird chirping out above their heads, and now she'd scare a raven from a carcass on a hill.'[75] Throughout the text, Deirdre shows pride in her beauty and mythical status. She refers to herself in the third person 'who'll pity Deirdre has lost the lips of Naisi from her

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[71] François Villon, 'Les regrets de la belle heaulmière ja parvenue a vieillesse', *Le Testament* (Paris, 1918), p. 30.
[72] Synge, trans., 'Villon: An Old Woman's Lamentations', *Poems and Translations* (Dublin, 1911), p. 44.
[73] J. M. Synge (1910), p. 86.
[74] Synge (1911), 'Villon: An Old Woman's Lamentations', p. 45.
[75] Synge (1910), pp. 46-7.

neck' or by stressing the fatal undertones of her name 'I, Deirdre that will not live till I am old'[76]. It is precisely this wilfulness to act out her destiny that makes her, as Jon R. Farris points out, a tragic figure.[77] It seems that Synge, who translated Petrarch's love lyrics into English, created a Deirdre partly modelled on Laura whom Petrarch imagined praising, from beyond the grave, the eternal life that follows death: 'in dying I won days that have no ending, and when you saw me shutting up my eyes I was opening them on the light that is eternal.'[78] These few examples suffice to illustrate the extent of J. M. Synge's emotional involvement in the writing of what became a very personal version of the tale. His letters frequently refer to the need to be alone to write and he even went so far as to postpone his wedding to Molly and the prospect of finding a flat to move in together because of his need to remain focused on Deirdre:

> My dear child (...) I am squirming and thrilling and quivering with the excitement of writing Deirdre and I daren't break the thread of composition by going out to look for digs and moving into them at this moment (...) Let me get Deirdre out of danger – she may be safe in a week – then Marriage in God's Name.[79]

However, Deirdre was finished neither within a week nor within a year and the marriage never took place. Synge's physical condition worsened, and his intense suffering increased his isolation from the exterior world. The difficulty for him was to channel the intensity of those feelings (his love for Molly as well as the growing sense of his own approaching death) into an adequate structural framework, hence the constant dissatisfaction he felt while re-writing the different acts and scenes many times over. He confessed, for example, in another letter to Molly that he was often working until the early hours of the morning revising Act III and had already produced seven drafts of it by 1 December 1907. He also believed that typescript G of Act III still needed 'a good deal

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[76] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
[77] Jon R. Farris, 'The Nature of the Tragic Experience in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*', *Modern Drama*, 14, September 1971, 243-51.
[78] Synge (1911), 'Translations from Petrarch - Laura is ever present to him', p. 32.
[79] Saddlemyer (1984), vol. ii, p. 92 (dated 29th November 1907).

of strengthening, of *"making personal"*[80] before it could satisfy him. The continuous, almost frenzied, redrafting of each act reveals an intricate attempt to invest the narrative with a deeply personal touch whilst remaining faithful to a pre-established corpus:

> I am working at Deirdre again. I can't keep away from her, till I get her right. I have changed the first half of the first Act a good deal, by making Fergus go into the inner room instead of Conchubor, and giving C. an important scene with Lav. Then D. comes in and Lav goes out and D. and C. have an important scene together. That- when it is done- will make the whole thing drama instead of narrative, and there will be a good contrast between the scenes of Deirdre and Conchubor, and Deirdre and Naisi. It is quite useless trying to rush it, I must take my time and let them all grow by degrees.[81]

The decision to work very slowly on *Deirdre* appears therefore to have been a conscious one, which enabled characters to evolve on the page before being brought out onto the stage. Deirdre's despair and her assertion of the meaninglessness of her own life following the death of her lover can be seen as an interesting echo of Molly's own reaction when asked by Synge whether she would attend his funeral. In the concluding ballad of *Le Testament,* François Villon imagined his own funeral using the third person: 'Icy se clost le testament / Et finist du povre Villon. Venez à son enterrement, / Quant vous orrez le carillon (...)'[82] Revisiting the theme in his prophetic poem, 'A Question', written in 1908, Synge gives the impression that he is speaking from the grave:

> No, you said, for if you saw a crew
> Of living idiots, pressing round that new
> Oak coffin - they alive - I dead beneath
> That board, - you'd rave and rend them with your teeth.[83]

If one needs to remain cautious about drawing straightforward correspondences between Synge's life and that of his legendary characters, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* nevertheless clearly emerges as his testament play, being a deeply personal reflection on one of the great dilemmas of life: man's confrontation with either old age (bringing about loneliness and physical decay) or a premature - yet distinguished - death.

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[80] *Ibid.*, p. 93.
[81] *Ibid.*, p. 125.
[82] François Villon, 'Ballade pour servir de conclusion', in *Le Testament* (1918), p. 130: 'Here ends the testament / And all is over with Poor Villon. Come to his funeral / When you hear the bells.'
[83] Synge (1911), 'A Question', p. 16.

Yeats described Synge as a man 'folded up in brooding intellect'[84] and further remarked that his friend displayed no interest in politics: 'Synge seemed by nature unfitted to think a political thought (...) I cannot remember that he spoke of politics or showed any interest in men in the mass (...).'[85] He noted also that Synge never commented on any other authors, including Yeats himself, 'knowing nothing of new books and newspapers'[86]: 'For him nothing existed but his thought. (...) I do not think he disliked other writers – they did not exist.'[87] Yeats seems to have exaggerated this lack of interest on Synge's part for collective modes of expression other than his own. As we have seen, he wrote many reviews of newly published works, read a wide range of literary and historical works which were not exclusively Irish and could read and write in many different languages. In any case, he was certainly no idealistic dreamer. He gave a naturalistic grounding to his works, including *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, where he rooted the myth in contemporary reality, creating what Nicholas Grene calls 'a saga play in peasant dress'[88]. A Rabelaisian note was provided through the introduction of the grotesque character of Owen, not present in the original and serving as the raving fool of the tragedy. According to Maurice Bourgeois, 'Synge adapted a more or less supernatural theme to the requirements of his realistic art (...).'[89] Deirdre thus loses all the premonitions and supernatural knowledge which form an essential part of *OCU*. If Synge closely follows *LMU* in the description of Deirdre's ideal lover as 'a man with his hair like the raven (...), and his skin like the snow and his lips like blood spilt on it'[90], the revelation is no longer a vision or a dream, but the product of Deirdre's personal taste.

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[84] Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 310.
[85] Yeats, *Synge and the Ireland of his Time* (Dundrum, 1911), p. 11.
[86] Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 309.
[87] Yeats, *The Death of Synge and Other Passages from an Old Diary* (Dundrum, 1928), p. 17.
[88] Nicholas Grene, *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays* (London, 1975), p. 175.
[89] Bourgeois (1913) p. 214.
[90] Synge (1910), p. 10.

But if Synge strove 'not to loosen his grip on reality'[91] by euhemerising the legendary characters and almost turning Deirdre into a peasant girl, then the adaptation also had to operate on a linguistic level, hence the odd juxtaposition of a colloquial and a more elevated style. Making kings speak like peasants may indeed seem unusual, but as is stressed by Declan Kiberd and Maurice Bourgeois, such linguistic primitivisms best recapture the tone of *LMU* and are thus truer to the real spirit of the legend. On the other hand, the original texts did not have mad burlesque characters like Owen declaring: 'It's a poor thing to be so lonesome you'd squeeze kisses on a cur dog's nose.'[92] The character of Owen appears to have been remotely based on the spy (referred to as Treándorn in *OCU* or Strongfist in its 1898 edition) of *OCU* whose father had, like Owen's, also been killed by Naisi. But despite such resemblances, Owen was essentially an additional character created by Synge. In his preface to *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Yeats informs the reader that Owen was invented in order to fill the need for 'a grotesque element mixed into its lyrical melancholy to give contrast and create an impression of solidity'[93]. He acts as a kind of Shakespearian fool whose incoherent ravings are paradoxically endowed with some penetrating universal truth.[94] Synge's play differs from the earlier versions in that it makes no use of dream themes and imagery in a conscious desire not to imitate AE but remain faithful to *LMU*. After looking at one of AE's pictures, Synge wrote the poem 'The Passing of the Shee', expressing a clear preference for 'Red Dan Sally's ditch' over the 'plumed yet skinny Shee': 'Adieu, sweet Angus, Maeve, and Fand, Ye plumed yet skinny Shee, (...)'[95]. Druids and supernatural elements are therefore absent from his text.

It is very likely that Synge's intermittent visits to the Aran Islands between 1898 and 1902 and his experiences with the local people further contributed to a rewriting that

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[91] Saddlwmyer (1984), vol. ii, letter to Frederick J. Gregg, p. 56.
[92] Synge (1910), p. 46.
[93] Yeats (1910), 'Preface' to Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.
[94] This is apparent in an early draft, as Owen says to Deirdre: 'Though I play the fool I'm no fool, Deirdre.'
[95] Synge (1911), 'The Passing of the Shee', p. 13.

would be more grounded on reality and less 'Cuchulanoid'. Incidentally, it was also there, in September 1901, that he wrote his translation of 'Oidhe Chloinne Usnig' based on MacCurtin's text. In the first act, Deirdre asks: 'Lay out the skins of the rams of Connaught and of the goats of the west'[96]. The colloquialisms and farcical aspects of the play further betray a more pragmatic desire to anchor the text in a more contemporary social reality, as opposed to the polished style and dreamy idealism of AE's and Yeats's versions. 'Queens' like 'Etain, Helen, Maeve, and Fand, / Golden Deirdre's tender hand'[97] may well have been the most beautiful mythical creatures, yet, Synge argues, for all their splendour, 'these are rotten', being, unlike true living 'Queens' who 'get old'[98], they are no more than mere abstractions or disembodied figures. The term 'queen' is further redefined in the light of his socialist sympathies, as in the first typescript draft of Act I, Deirdre will not be a passive haughty aristocrat but a master in 'raising the low and bringing trouble to those that are high up'[99]. Significantly, this statement was removed from the final version of the play, perhaps on account of its overt politicised tone.

During the last stages of Synge's life, the growing awareness that he would not have sufficient time to complete his Deirdre led him to express his last wishes regarding his unpublished material. He felt uncomfortable with the idea that soon he would no longer be present to monitor what was to be done with his works. Although Synge admitted he knew nothing about printing himself, he had decided that W. B. Yeats's sister, Elizabeth, who directed the Cuala Press, should publish his *Poems and Translations*, to be then followed by *Deirdre of the Sorrows.* He had sent drafts of his poems to her and they had

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[96] Synge (1910), p. 20. Typescript B (November 1907) read: 'Lay out the skins of the rams of Connaught and the hair of the goats of Kerry.'
[97] Synge (1911), 'Queens', pp. 1-2.
[98] Owen is instrumental in debunking the myth of the ethereal, eternal queen. See Synge (1910), p. 47: 'Queens get old, Deirdre, with their white and long arms going from them, and their backs hooping. (...) It's a poor thing to see a queen's nose reaching down to scrape her chin.'
[99] TS 'B', MS 4342, November 1907, TCD, p. 62.

both discussed the contents of the future book. The same could not be done with *Deirdre*. While preliminary discussions had taken place between Synge and Elizabeth Yeats, he insisted that the work was still in its embryonic stage. In anticipation of the publication of his unfinished play, Synge sent her a few guidelines as to its final title, length and structure.

> I feel in a difficulty about this Deirdre book as it is not finished and at present I have hardly any time to work at it... I do not know how long the play will run with your pages, it will have three acts - each about 23 pages of typewritten ms. I propose to call it 'Deirdre of the Sorrows' a Play in three Acts. That is all there is to say about it I think...[100]

But soon after he told W. B. Yeats: 'I will not be able to have Deirdri [*sic*] for your sister – I have written to tell her.'[101] On 4 May 1908, the day before his second operation, he wrote a testament-like letter stating his desire to have Yeats as editor of his works:

> This is only to go to you if anything should go wrong with me under the operation or after it. I am a little bothered about my 'papers'. I have a certain amount of verse that I think would be worth preserving, possibly also the *1st and 3rd acts* [Italics mine] of 'Deirdre' (...). It is rather a hard thing to ask you but I do not want my good things destroyed or my bad things printed rashly (...). Do what you can – Good luck. J. M. Synge[102]

Synge survived the second operation but his condition deteriorated after that. When writing his final drafts of the play, he may have been more aware of imminent death than ever before. In February 1909, he had to go to hospital for the last time. As Edward Stephens recounts, he wished for his writings to be handled by familiar hands: 'He opened the old painted wardrobe and showed me where he kept his manuscripts and letters.'[103] Hoping he would feel well enough to resume work, he brought the typed script of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* to Elpis. According to his nephew, he handed it to his brother, Robert, around the 15 March, feeling incapable of working any more on it, and died on 24 March 1909. The different drafts were later transmitted to Yeats:

> In the summer of 1909, the Executors sent me a large bundle of papers, (...) manuscripts and typewritten prose and verse, put together and annotated by Synge himself before his last illness. I

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[100] Saddlemyer (1984), letter dated 2 April 1908, pp. 146-7.
[101] *Ibid.*, p. 151. Letter dated 29 April 1908.
[102] As quoted in Yeats (1911), 'Preface' to *Synge and the Ireland of his Time*.
[103] Stephens (1974), p. 208.

> spent a portion of each day for weeks reading and re-reading early dramatic writing, poems, essays, and so forth (...).[104]

By publishing Synge's confidential letter and alluding to the Executors, Yeats became his official editor following the wishes of the dying author.

Faithful to the last wishes of his friend, Yeats worked with the aim of constructing an ideal text out of the chronologically and alphabetically ordered drafts. For that, he sought Molly's advice, as she was probably most aware of what Synge's final version of his play should look like. Lady Gregory also assisted them, and she later recalled the difficulties of posthumous collaboration: 'After he had gone, we took infinite trouble to bring the versions together (...) but it needed the writer's hand.'[105] Synge had composed his drafts directly on his small portable typewriter and used to rewrite many different versions of a scene, distinguishing them with letters. In his preface to the first edition of *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Yeats points out that Synge 'would have made several more [versions] always altering and enriching'[106]. The number of question marks added in blue pencil in the margin of the text, even on the final drafts, confirms the author's belief that many revisions remained necessary. As a consequence, the text finally produced by Yeats and Lady Gregory draws substantially on final drafts that were far from being satisfactory to their author. The other dilemma for Yeats was to decide whether he should follow Synge's wish and alter certain scenes himself or leave the text as it was. He opted for the second alternative, refusing to corrupt the text by rewriting certain passages, but nevertheless mentioned in detail the different changes Synge would have made had he lived longer. The 'past conditional' is therefore used throughout the preface:

> (...) the character of Owen, (...) *would have had* some part in the first act also, where he was to have entered Lavarcham's cottage with Conchubor. Conchubor *would have taken* a knife from his belt to cut himself free from threads of silk that caught in brooch or pin as he leant over Deirdre's embroidery frame and forgotten this knife behind him. Owen *was to have found* it and stolen it. Synge asked that either I or Lady Gregory should write some few words to make this possible, but

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[104] Yeats (1911), 'Preface to Synge and the Ireland of his Time'.
[105] Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (1913); repr. (1972), p. 82.
[106] Yeats (1910), 'Preface'. See extract from Synge's typescripts in Appendix X.

> after writing in a passage we were little satisfied and thought it better to have the play performed, as it is printed here, with no word of ours. When Owen killed himself in the second act, he *was to have done it* with Conchubor's knife. He did not speak to me of any other alteration, but it is probable that *he would have altered* till the structure had become as strong and varied as in his other plays; and had he lived to do that, 'Deirdre of the Sorrows' *would have been* his masterwork (...).[107] [Italics mine.]

But preserving the structure of the text as it was went paradoxically against authorial intention. In his letter to Yeats, Synge implied that the second act of his Deirdre, with which he was deeply dissatisfied, should not get into print. He had intended to 'cut it down to two longish Acts', considering 'the middle Act in Scotland (...) impossible'[108] and adding jokingly in another letter to Molly that 'Jesus Christ says if thy second act offend thee pluck it out'[109]. This posed structural problems for the editor, who could not publish the play with the middle act missing. Thus, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* challenged its editor to produce an authoritative text, but also confronted him with the realization that this was not possible.

Editions of J. M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* reveal an intricate entangling of many voices and forces at work before, during and after the author's lifetime. Synge aimed to recapture these 'remote' voices drawn from a mythical Gaelic past and based his own adaptation on the primary medieval sources *LMU* and *OCU* as well as on the MacCurtin version. The originality of his work lies in his having succeeded in combining a rigorous scholarly knowledge of the original texts with an essentially literary approach that would look beyond local nationalist concerns and found inspiration, for example, as much in medieval French literature as in the Irish saga material. In that, he distinguished his play from the works of Lady Gregory or Douglas Hyde. While remaining close to the original

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[107] Yeats (1910), 'Preface'. Synge had apparently asked Yeats to include Owen in the first act, and have him steal a knife left by king Conchubor in Lavarcham's cottage.
[108] Saddlemyer (1984), letter dated 28 August 1908, p. 191.
[109] *Ibid.* Letter dated 24 August 1908, p. 189. In November 1908, Synge started reconstructing Act II by starting with a scene between Lavarcham and Deirdre and reaching a 'nearly full version (...) of the second Act' by 24 November 1908.

spirit of the tale, Synge transposed his own thoughts on death and old age onto the narrative. The story was thus granted subjective and ideological meaning, rooted both in personal and collective reality and Synge envisioned Deirdre as a sort of 'noble savage', a defender of the rights of contemporary Irish peasants.

The theatre production of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was designed by Lady Gregory's son Robert Gregory and staged at the Abbey Theatre on 13 January 1910 with Molly playing the part of Deirdre, in accordance with Synge's wish (Appendix XI). As Yeats recalled in his *Autobiographies*, the play did not receive unanimous applause, since the Friday audience appeared, in his words, 'heavy' and 'bored'. Yeats suggested that their boredom was prompted by Fred O'Donovan and Molly Allgood's unconvincing acting as Naisi and Deirdre. Apparently the spectators also dismissed the inclusion of so many peasant elements in the play, which they found inappropriate within a mythical framework:

> Last night the audience was small - under ten pounds - and less alive than the first night. No one spoke of the great passages. Someone thought the quarrel in the last act too harsh. Others picked out those rough peasant words that give salt to his speech, as 'of course adding nothing to the dialogue, and very ugly'. Others objected to the little things in the costuming of the play which were intended to echo these words, to vary the heroic convention with something homely or of the fields.[110]

It appears then that the death of the author less than a year before had not prevented the criticism that had characterised the reception of his plays during his lifetime, particularly *The Playboy of the Western World.* It seems from Yeats's testimony that the often 'too harsh' scenes and 'rough peasant words' were not to contemporary taste and failed to achieve immediate recognition.

If the initial theatrical productions of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* failed to ensure that Synge's *Deirdre* would achieve a legendary status and be 'remembered forever', the text then had to take on a more tangible shape and be distributed more widely. Facsimile editions of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* were set up and printed in New York so that John

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[110] Yeats, 'The Death of Synge', *Autobiographies* (1926); repr. (1999), pp. 523-4.

Quinn could secure American copyright in Synge's works. Synge had intended to send him the complete MS of *Deirdre*. Since he died before fulfilling his promise, Yeats, Lady Gregory and Molly assembled an acting text of the unfinished play which was sent to him by the executors. The Quinn edition of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was printed in 1910 and based on the proof sheets of the Cuala edition.[111] It contained so many errors that Quinn had all but the five vellum copies and five of the paper copies destroyed. Maunsel and Co in Dublin published the first trade edition in 1911. Long after these inaugural publications, editors persevered in their attempts to produce a text that would remain as close as possible to the one originally intended. The most recent and best example is Ann Saddlemyer's genetic editing of Synge's works, which provides a detailed account of the different draft variants of the text on the left page.

The originality of Synge was that he came closer than any of his contemporaries to achieving a harmonious assimilation of an otherworldly Gaelic past with the more pragmatic social realities of early twentieth-century Ireland, and that while subtly transposing particular elements of his own life – such as his love for Molly, his great physical suffering and the fear of his approaching death – onto the adapted text. Evidently, a legend cannot survive unaltered, but needs to be reshaped in different forms and by various agents to survive the passing of time. Synge's *Deirdre* well typifies the legend's mutability, as the play itself is no more definitive than any version of the legend can be. Thus any attempt to 'fix' a definitive text of Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* would contravene the need for the legend to absorb, create and negotiate the different voices involved in the process of its transmission.

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[111] J. M. Synge, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (New York, 1910).

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the Deirdre legend was repeatedly pressed into service through the centuries by Irish and Scottish authors anxious to establish a direct relation between their present and the mythical past, especially at times when this present seemed disappointing. The legendary material of which Deirdre formed part was treated as literary evidence of a distinctively Celtic ethnic ancestry, a reminder of the past vibrancy of a culture whose existence was continually threatened by the shadow of English colonisation. The tale of the sons of Usna seems to have appealed most at times when Irish cultural identity appeared to be compromised, the sorrows of Deirdre being made to represent those of Éire. This thesis has offered a new perspective on the Deirdre legend by tracing its transmission through the works of authors of varying agendas. The narrative which emerges can be likened to a conversation, of which the participants are not always aware; at stake is the significance of the legend and the value which it both gives to and is given by the society into which it has been transmitted.

We saw in Chapter 1 that Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa*, whose account of the Deirdre story was drawn largely from *LMU* and influenced the subsequent manuscript tradition of *OCU*, was written explicitly in order to prevent the native literary tradition from dying out in the wake of the 17th century English Plantation of Ireland. His version, which locates the Deirdre legend within a pseudo-historical pre-Christian Irish past, was written for an audience made up of the overwhelmingly Catholic Old English and native Irish, and excluded the New English settlers from a share in this cultural inheritance. Dermod O'Connor's loose translation of Keating's text into the vocabulary of the eighteenth-century Protestant aristocracy bears witness to a lasting shift in power, as the country's new ruling class sought to appropriate its culture for themselves. The list of subscribers to his text shows how the Irish legends had begun to interest the descendants

of settlers in search of a sense of Irishness, whilst continuing to matter to the Old English whose ancestors had long seen the value of associating themselves with the construction of a national identity.

Dismissing Keating's text as fabrication, James Macpherson (Chapter 2) proposed an alternative descent for the ancient legends. They were now to be seen as originating in Scotland, promoted to cradle of the Gaelic language and culture, before being stolen and perverted by the Irish. Deirdre is renamed Darthula in order to mark the difference between the better-known Irish version and the Scottish 'original', the orthographic variation taken as proof of the Irish text's corruption of its model. This invented account of the legend's transmission was part of a revisionist project to recast cultural relations between the two countries, establishing Scottish ownership of the ancient material. The heroic yet doomed resistance of the sons of Usnoth (now changed into Scottish lords) then functions to evoke the repression of Highland culture at the hands of the English following the failed Jacobite rebellions, and Macpherson's literary efforts can be seen as a rearguard action to romanticise the Scots' defeats and salvage a national pride based on ownership of early Celtic literature. Ironically, the lasting effect of these efforts was to stimulate the Antiquarian movement in Ireland to refute Macpherson's argument for the precedence of Scottish over Irish literature. By publishing original manuscripts along with their own translations – something that Macpherson had been unable to do – scholars such as Charlotte Brooke and Theophilus O'Flanagan established in graphic fashion the authenticity of their Irish sources. These translations, whose authors did not hesitate to alter material which they found unpalatable, were to make the Deirdre legend available to Anglophone writers in a form that owed more to the sexual values of genteel eighteenth-century society than to the spirit of the original versions. Pride in this Irish

literary inheritance was thus tempered by the perceived need to make it fit for contemporary consumption.

Chapter 3 showed how Samuel Ferguson and Standish James O'Grady made use of the somewhat adulterated Deirdre material handed down to them by the Antiquarian movement. With its status as an object of study now more or less secure, the works of Ferguson and O'Grady took a new approach to the legend. The literature of the past was not simply to be seen as a monument for the present to admire, but could also provide source material for the literary world of Victorian Ireland to feed on. In particular, they sought to show how modern adaptations of the ancient legends might speak to a Protestant ruling class which now considered itself fully entitled to Irish identity. Behind Ferguson's reworkings of the Deirdre story we have seen a desire for national reconciliation which would be achieved through the recognition of a cultural heritage shared by unionists and nationalists alike. O'Grady, meanwhile, saw the heroic example of Concobar as a potential inspiration to the landlords, whose inertia in the face of increasing demands for democracy threatened the stability of the Irish nation. In both cases, cultural nationalism was used to promote political unionism in an attempt to head off the growing calls for Home Rule in Ireland. The Deirdre legend, with its tragic narrative of rebellion and betrayal, served both as a warning of the consequences of disunity and political instability and as a reminder of the cultural identity common to all the Irish.

If O'Grady and Ferguson emphasised what nationalists and unionists had in common culturally, Chapter 4 saw Fiona Macleod (William Sharp) arguing for a similar recognition of a spiritual bond across national boundaries. Macleod's two versions of the Deirdre material identified modernity as the primary threat to a Celtic culture which belonged to the Irish and the Scottish equally. 'Her' *Laughter of Peterkin* presented the

tale in a manner designed to encourage a sense of wonder in children whose appreciation of the spiritual 'she' feared would become lost if it were not stimulated. Aiming to show that the beauty of these legends transcended national agendas, Macleod attempted to reconcile Scottish and Irish claims to the past by drawing on scholarly work from both sides. 'She' was initially successful in promoting this view to Irish contemporaries such as Yeats. However, 'her' views proved unintentionally inflammatory in Ireland, where nationalist intellectuals fighting for recognition of the value of their national literature were not favourably disposed to the suggestion that the English might have as much of a claim to 'Celtic' identity as the Irish.

The writers discussed in Chapter 5 – AE (George Russell), Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats – were at the forefront of this Irish revivalist movement, which sought to show through modern adaptations that the nation's legends were equal to those of any other culture. By popularising the legends, they hoped to reconnect modern-day Irish people with the ancient heritage which for them was at the heart of Irish identity. Thus AE, whilst sharing Macleod's concerns about the failure of modern materialism to appreciate the spiritual, conceived of this threat in explicitly nationalist terms. Materialism was associated with English oppression, mysticism with the Irish traditions under threat. His play *Deirdre* is accordingly imbued with both nationalist and spiritual messages, representing the legendary past as a heroic model which might be brought to life again. By staging the tale, he deliberately made this model available to all, rather than restricting it to the landowners as O'Grady had advocated.

Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, which (like Keating's *Foras Feasa*) includes a version of the Deirdre tale compiled from various oral and scholarly sources, similarly sought to popularise the legend for a non-aristocratic Irish audience. Aware, as her 'Dedication' shows, of Deirdre's prominence in the cultural memory of 'the people',

she developed the literary idiom known as 'Kiltartanese' and gave pride of place in her narrative to oral sources, though without acknowledging the extent to which she made use of Scottish material. In all this there was a clear intent to refute the scholars of Trinity College Dublin, whose close ties with the Protestant unionist elite had led them to neglect legends perceived as popular and unliterary. It was therefore necessary to play down what her work owed to Scotland and emphasise the important place of the ancient tales in the Irish psyche. Yet, as with her predecessors, her desire to popularise authentic material did not prevent her from removing or altering details which she deemed incompatible with the dignity that she wanted the legends to transmit to the Irish character.

Yeats followed AE and Lady Gregory in treating the Deirdre story as evidence for the richness of Ireland's ancient literature. The mythical past represented a fountain of inspiration on which the vitality of the modern imagination depended. AE's play in particular showed him how the ancient tale might allow him to test out his own dramatic theories, and by focusing on the story's climactic moments he privileged emotional intensity over adherence to thematic development. He was also keen to de-romanticise the legend and restore its long-repressed sexuality. In the process, the figure of Deirdre took on aspects of specific women in his own life – the love interests Maud Gonne and Florence Farr, and the actresses Miss Darragh and Mrs Patrick Campbell, whose performances left a lasting mark through multiple revisions of his play.

Chapter 6 demonstrated that J. M. Synge was also able to see how the Deirdre legend might be made to figure personal concerns. His *Deirdre of the Sorrows* could not fail to evoke nationalist ideals through the figure of the heroine ready to die in Ireland rather than live in exile; yet it is the first adaptation in which these ideals are distinctly secondary to a more individual, less political engagement with the tale. Synge used the theme of the heroine's early death to discuss his preoccupations with age and mortality.

As his physical condition worsened, he revisited the play over and over, but was unable to give it a satisfactory form before he died. The posthumous edition prepared by Yeats and Lady Gregory could not settle the unresolved state of the text's many drafts; similarly, no single version of the legend could establish a monopoly over its significance. If Synge's adaptation made less than those of his Irish contemporaries of the material's political resonance, his unfinished text in some ways best exemplifies the legend's inexhaustible malleability.

After Synge, Eva Gore-Booth and James Stephens – contemporary writers in the circle of AE, Yeats and Lady Gregory – produced their own versions of the legend. Because of the scope of this study, it is not possible to give a detailed analysis of their different accounts, but certain general characteristics are worth noting. Eva Gore-Booth's play, *The Buried Life of Deirdre*, was begun in 1908 and completed with twelve illustrations in 1916-7.[1] Inspired by AE's treatment of the tale and his theosophical ideas, Gore-Booth's retelling is dominated by the conflicting divine forces of Angus and Mannanan. The characters fall victim to 'the law of Evolution'[2] governed by re-incarnation. Deirdre is aware that she was, in a past life, an old and jealous king and now has a 'debt to pay'[3] for her previous acts. But what makes Gore-Booth's work distinct from that of her revivalist predecessors is her feminist perspective on the conventionally frail figure of Deirdre which leads her to question the very boundaries of gender.

The liberties taken by Gore-Booth with the legend's central character are echoed by the treatment of the legend in James Stephens's novel *Deirdre*, published in 1923. Stephens's Concobar initially marries his eventual enemy Maeve, raising the possibility

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[1] It was, however, only published in 1930. See Eva Gore-Booth, *The Buried Life of Deirdre with Twelve Illustrations* (London, 1930).
[2] *Ibid.* 'Introduction'
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

that the great war in Ulster might have sprung from the bickering between former spouses, and the whole text is marked by a light, humorous tone hitherto alien to adaptations of the legend. It is difficult to imagine AE, for instance, portraying Ardan as the greedy brother, of whom Ainnle warns: 'Do not go between that man and his meat... he will bite you.'[4] Though Stephens both knew and used the medieval accounts, his novel takes a distinctively modern interest in establishing psychological motivations for the characters' actions, and he is not afraid to enlarge or add episodes along the way. It is as if Gore-Booth and Stephens took as a given the place of the Deirdre legend at the heart of the Irish literary tradition. With this position secure, it was now possible for authors to experiment with the possibilities of more explicitly modern recasting of the material. Not coincidentally, by the time of Stephens's novel, Home Rule had gone from being a cause to fight for to a fully-fledged reality. The tradition of romanticising Deirdre's heroic defeat, so cherished by Irish and Scottish writers responding to the threat of cultural annihilation, must have seemed less interesting as the initial victory of independence in Ireland gave way to dissatisfaction over Partition and civil war in 1922. The ancient legends were no longer needed to give a more positive value to a present threatened by exterior forces, nor did they seem to have much of a role in shaping the future of the Irish Free State. If writers were to look back to them for inspiration, it would be with a critical and experimental eye.

In many ways this process of demystification had begun with the plays of Yeats and Synge, which had in their different ways appropriated the legendary material for the authors' aesthetic ends. Yet it is striking that within twenty years of Lady Gregory lamenting the fact that the tales were in danger of being forgotten, there seems to have been a feeling that the Deirdre story was on its way to becoming stale. Thus the Foreword

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[4] James Stephens, *Deirdre* (1923); repr. (London, 1927), p. 191.

to W. M. Crofton's 1925 opera *Deirdre of the Sorrows* felt the need to apologise for retelling the tale: 'I have been told that it is time poor Deirdre was allowed to rest in peace by story-tellers and dramatists.'[5] Now that the nationalist agenda had been fulfilled in Ireland, the close association established between Deirdre and Éire threatened to make the legend redundant.

As a consequence, more recent adaptations have been marked by a desire to transform the material and find new ways to present the tale. Crofton's version was the first Deirdre opera, followed by that of John Coulter in 1944. That this latter version should have been produced in Canada testifies to a loosening of the ties between Deirdre and contemporary Ireland, as does Coulter's telling comment that his subject was chosen to avoid any 'hampering reference to any kind of feud or schism, political, religious, contemporary or of the past.'[6] Deirdre now forms part of an 'old world heritage of myth and legend'[7], comparable in status to the subjects of Wagnerian opera. Moirin A. Cheavasa's narrative poem *The One Unfaithfulness of Naoise*, published in 1930, justifies its existence by focusing on a marginal reference in *OCU* to Naoise's dalliance with the daughter of a Scottish nobleman while the lovers are in exile.[8] This had been neglected by previous adaptations, no doubt because of its perceived incompatibility with the portrayal of Naisi as a virtuous hero, and Cheavasa's return to a detail from the medieval source marks the difference between her text and those of her predecessors.

The most recent attempts to tackle the Deirdre legend reveal a continuing desire to refashion tradition to modern taste. Donagh MacDonagh's play, *Lady Spider*, written in

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[5] W. M. Crofton, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*: *An Opera in a Prologue and Three Acts* (Dublin & Cork, 1930) p. 7.
[6] John Coulter, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (Toronto, 1944), p. viii.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Deirdre's lament for Scotland after the brothers' death in *OCU* mentions that: 'to the daughter of the Earl of Dún Treóin / Naoise gave a kiss secretly.' See Mac Giolla Léith (1993), p. 131. In Cheavasa's text, the daughter is named as Nuala. See Moirin A. Cheavasa, *The One Unfaithfulness of Naoise* (Dublin, 1930), p. 9.

the sixties, draws an altogether different picture of the legendary heroine.[9] His Deirdre pursues all forms of material fulfilment and refuses to become the literary archetype of sorrow and submission. Unlike Yeats's heroine, she is not ready to sacrifice her life in order to be transmuted into a work of art[10] but is instead keen to satisfy her sexual desires and indulge in good food and expensive clothes. Tempted by the prospect of a wealthy life in the king's court, she refuses to kill herself for Naoise's sake and happily agrees instead to share the king's royal bed. Sex is also the dominant theme in the latest dramatisation of the legend, *A Cry from Heaven*, written by the Irish playwright Vincent Woods and premiered at the Abbey Theatre in June 2005. The explicit enactment of legendary couples (Fergus and Ness, Deirdre and Naoise) kissing passionately and making love openly is accompanied by the staging of the protagonists' nudity. Needless to say, O'Grady would have promptly left the room if he had seen this performance. That the play was produced by the celebrated French director Olivier Py shows that the sexual and geographic boundaries attached to the legend have now been definitively loosened. By taking a more modern and internationalist approach to the story, Wood has given the Abbey Theatre a Deirdre that is not simply Éire's.

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[9] The play is only available online at http://www.turlach.net/macdonagh/dmacd/Ladyspid.pdf

[10] What MacDonagh's Deirdre seeks, above all, is liberation from her tragic condition and legendary status: 'What do I care / for poets squinting in a smoky hut / (...) And the dark tale of Deirdre? Let them make / A Story out of their own stringy marrow.'

Theophilus O'Flanagan, Title pages of *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Dublin* and 'Deirdri or the Lamentable Fate of the Sons of Usnach' (1808)

TRANSACTIONS

OF THE

GAELIC SOCIETY

OF

DUBLIN,

ESTABLISHED

FOR THE INVESTIGATION AND REVIVAL

OF

ANCIENT IRISH LITERATURE,

CONTAINING AN ADVERTISEMENT, EXHIBITING THE VIEWS OF THE ASSOCIATION; THE LAWS FOR THE REGULATION OF THE SOCIETY; INTERESTING OBSERVATIONS ON THE GAELIC LANGUAGE; WITH SEVERAL IMPORTANT TRACTS IN THE ORIGINAL GAELIC OR IRISH, LITERALLY TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH; ACCOMPANIED WITH NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS; SOME OF THE POETRY ASCRIBED TO OISIN; &c. &c. &c.

VOL. I.

ST. IGNATIUS' COLLEGE S.J. DUBLIN.

Dublin:

PRINTED BY JOHN BARLOW, 29, BOLTON-STREET,

PRINTER TO THE SOCIETY.

1808.

DEIRDRI,

OR,

THE LAMENTABLE FATE

OF THE

SONS OF USNACH,

AN ANCIENT DRAMATIC IRISH TALE,

ONE OF THE THREE TRAGIC STORIES

OF EIRIN;

LITERALLY TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH,

FROM AN

ORIGINAL GAELIC MANUSCRIPT,

WITH NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS:

TO WHICH IS ANNEXED,

THE OLD HISTORIC ACCOUNT

OF THE FACTS

ON WHICH THE STORY IS FOUNDED.

By THEOPHILUS O'FLANAGAN, A. B.

FORMERLY SCHOLAR OF T. C. D.

AND NOW SECRETARY TO THE GAELIC SOCIETY.

DUBLIN:

PRINTED BY JOHN BARLOW, 29, BOLTON-STREET,

PRINTER TO THE SOCIETY.

1808.



Appendix II

Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson
L'Apothéose des héros français, 1801
192 x 182 cm
Rueil-Malmaison, musée national des châteaux de Malmaison et de Bois-Préaux

THE LAUGHTER OF PETERKIN.

"A RETELLING OF OLD TALES OF THE CELTIC WONDERWORLD." by

· FIONA MACLEOD ·



·DRAWINGS··· BY···SUNDERLAND···ROLLINSON·S·

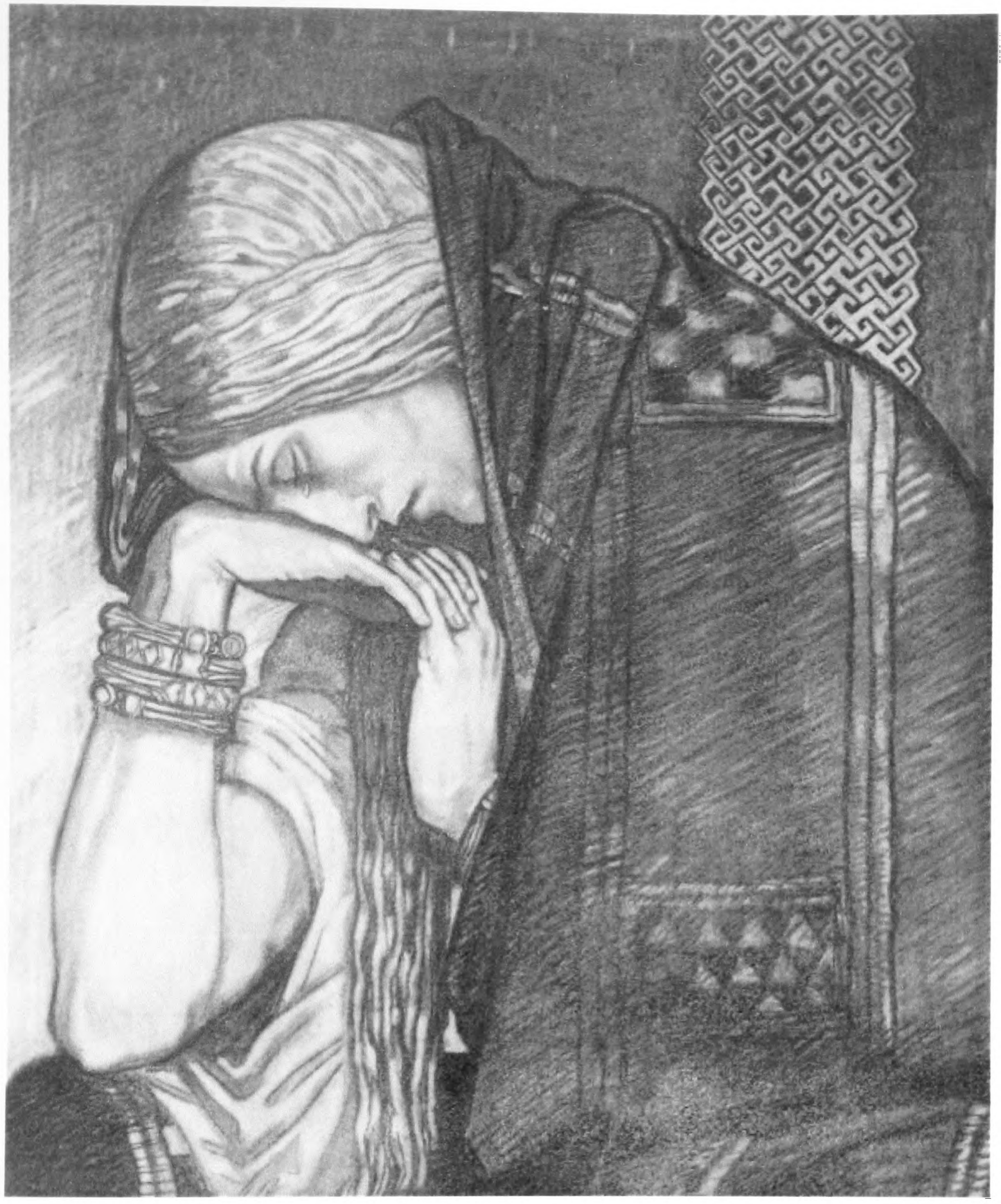
· LONDON ·

· ARCHIBALD · CONSTABLE · & · CO ·

· 1897 ·

Appendix III

Fiona Macleod, *The Laughter of Peterkin,* Title Page of 1897 edition.



Appendix IV

John Duncan, *Deirdre of the Sorrows,* Chalk on paper, 36 x 30 National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, ~ 1901.



"Then in my dream I came nigh him."
Deirdre, Act I.

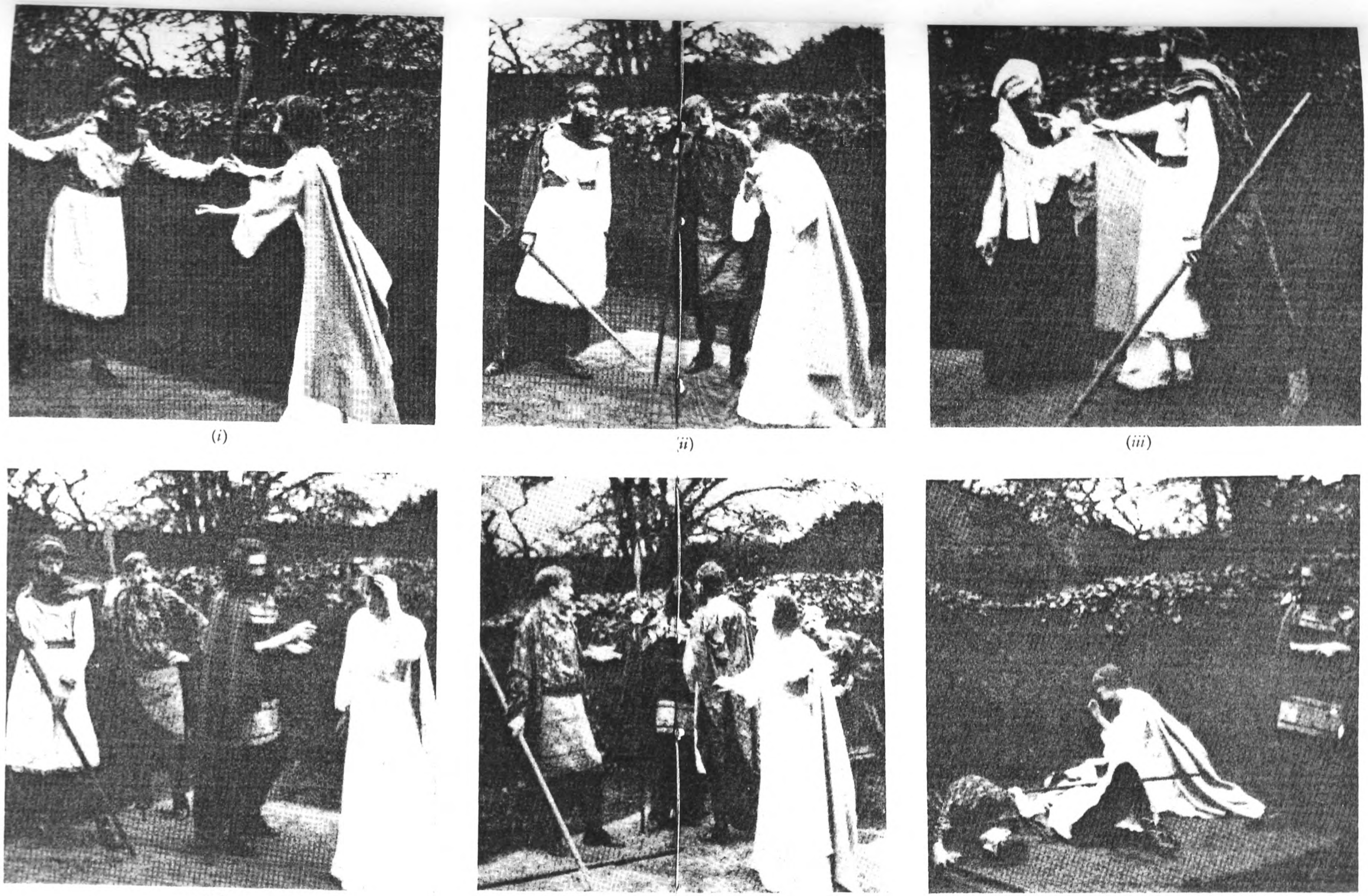


"Do you not see them? the bright birds which sang at our flight! Look how they wheel about us as they sing!"
Deirdre, Act II.

Appendix V

Appendix VI

Private Performance of scenes from AE's *Deirdre*
in George Coffey's garden (Dublin), 3 January 1902.



(*i*) (*ii*) (*iii*)

(*iv*) (*v*) (*vi*)

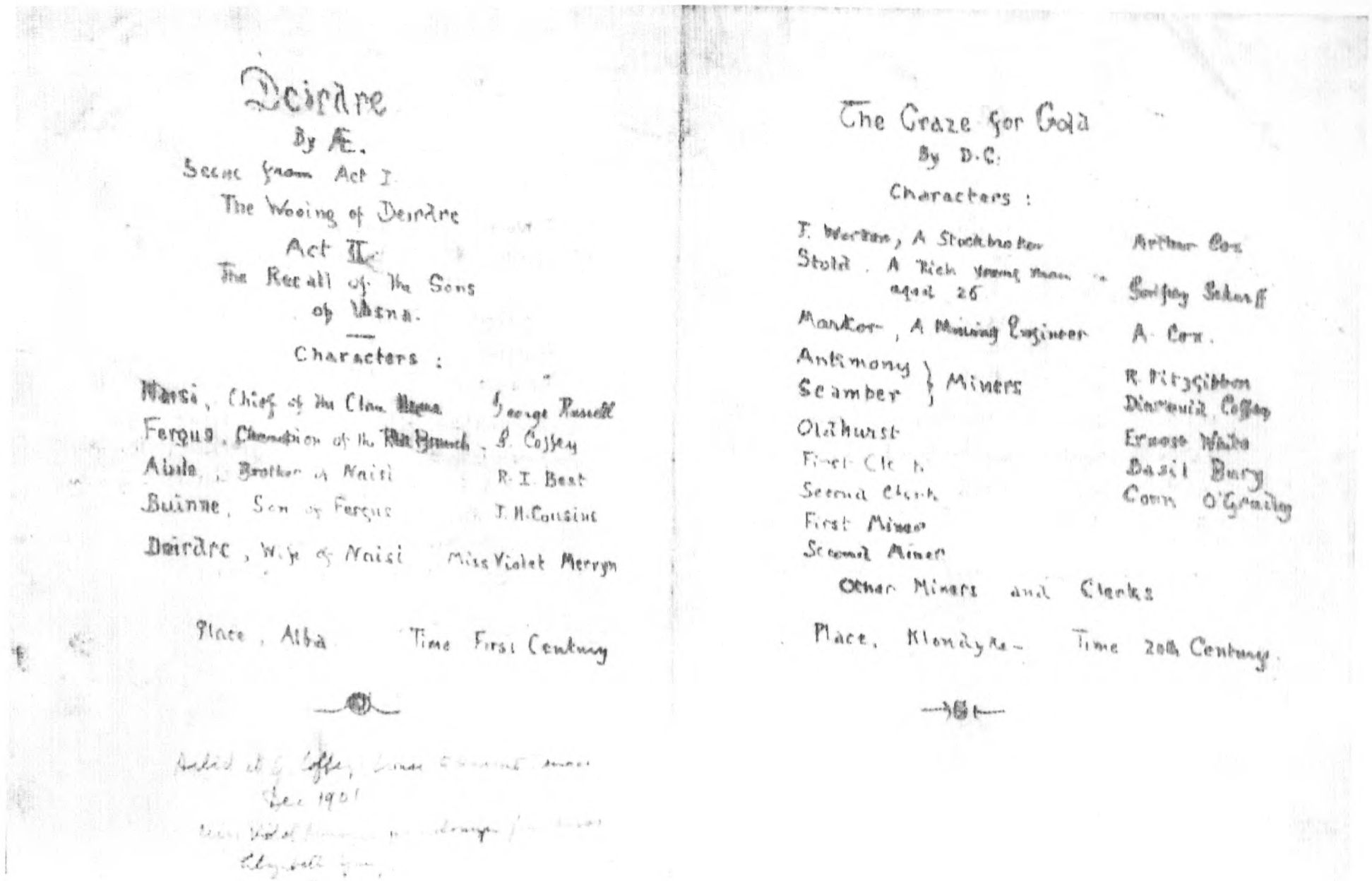
Scenes from *Deirdre* by AE

Performed privately in George Coffey's house (rehearsal) January 2, 1902: the first performance in the garden of G. Coffey's house at 5 Harcourt Terrace, Dublin, January 3, 1902, to celebrate his son Diarmuid Coffey's 12th birthday. (See We Two Together *by J. H. Cousins and M. E. Cousins (1950) pp. 69-70.) The programme was printed on a duplicator, and shows these scenes to have been followed by* The Craze for Gold *"By D.C." ("The wooing of Deidre" from Act 1. (i) Naisi and Deirdre. (ii) Naisi, Ainle and Deirdre. (iii) Lavarcam, Deirdre and Naisi. (Followed by "The return of the Sons of Usna", from Act 2). (iv) Naisi, Ainle, Fergus and Deirdre. (v) Ainle, Fergus, Naisi, Deirdre and Buinne. (vi) Ainle, Naisi, Deirdre, and Fergus. The cast:* Ainle *played by AE;* Deirdre *by Miss Violet Mervyn* [i.e. *Miss Elizabeth Young, Ella Young's sister*]; Ainle *by R. I. Best;* Lavarcam, *Ella Young;* Fergus *by George Coffey;* Buinne *by James H. Cousins*



Elizabeth Young as 'Deirdre' by Ben Bay
National Library of Ireland, ~ 1916, Joseph Holloway Collection
Gouache, 50.4 x 34.4 cm

Duplicated programme
for the first performance of AE's play *Deirdre* (Acts 1 and 2)
at George Coffey's house at 5 Harcourt Terrace, Dublin, 2-3 January 1902.



Deirdre
By Æ.
Scene from Act I.
The Wooing of Deirdre
Act II.
The Recall of the Sons
of Usna.

Characters :

Naisi, Chief of the Clan Usna — George Russell
Fergus, Champion of the Red Branch — R. Cosgrave
Alula, Brother of Naisi — R. I. Best
Buinne, Son of Fergus — T. H. Cousins
Deirdre, Wife of Naisi — Miss Violet Merryn

Place, Alba — Time First Century

Acted at 5 Coffey, Harcourt Terrace
Dec 1901

The Craze for Gold
By D.C.

Characters :

T. Worthington, A Stockbroker — Arthur Cox
Stold, A Rich young man aged 26 — Geoffrey Sedgwick
Mankor, A Mining Engineer — A. Cox.
Antimony, Seamber } Miners — R. Fitzgibbon, Diarmuid Coffey
Oldhurst — Ernest Waite
First Clerk — Basil Burg
Second Clerk — Conn O'Grady
First Miner
Second Miner
Other Miners and Clerks

Place, Klondyke — Time 20th Century.

AE's *Deirdre*, FIRST PERFORMANCE, PROGRAM (1902)

THE IRISH NATIONAL DRAMA IN DUBLIN.

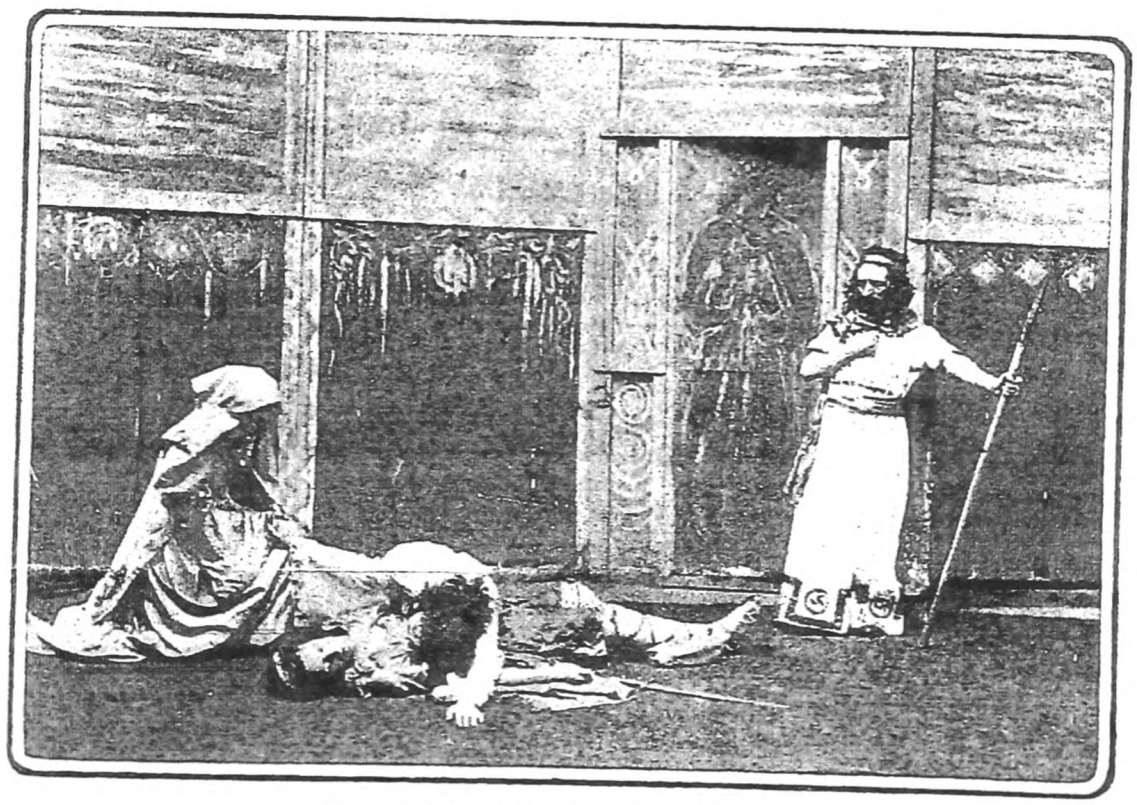
Specially photographed for THE TATLER *by Chancellor, Dublin*

"DEIRDRE"
By "A. E."
(George Russell)

Two beautiful little plays were produced in Dublin a day or two ago before an interesting audience which included Mr. John Burns and Mr. George Moore. One of these plays, *Deirdre*, was by a well-known Irish poet, "A. E.," whose real name is George Russell. Although all the actors who performed the little play were amateurs it is impossible to speak too enthusiastically of their admirable presentation, notably Miss Maire Quinn in the title-part of Deirdre, and Mr. J. Dudley Digges as Naisi. The story, well known to all lovers of Irish legend, first presents Deirdre confined by the Druidess in order that she may not be seen of men, a prophecy having gone forth that her appearance would mean the destruction of the famous Knights of the Red Branch, the principal warriors of Ireland of the dim past. Deirdre is, however, seen by Naisi and flees with him to Scotland, where they are married. The second act sees Deirdre and her husband in Naisi's palace on the banks of Loch Ettive. Here a deputation from the Knights of the Red Branch begs Naisi to return. In the third act we have the treachery and slaughter that follow his return. The whole play was singularly weird and was listened to with breathless attention.



NAISI AND DEIRDRE IN EXILE IN ALBA (SCOTLAND)
Are visited by comrades with an entreaty from King Concobar that they will return home



THE DEATH OF DEIRDRE AND NAISI

"KATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN"
By W. B. Yeats

Kathleen Ni Houlihan, by W. B. Yeats, the play that followed, "A. E.'s" *Deirdre*, was not less interesting. Perhaps it received an additional touch of attraction from the fact that the principal part was taken by Miss Maud Gonne, one of the most fiery of the extreme Irish Nationalists and some of whose friends call her "the Joan of Arc of modern Ireland." Miss Maud Gonne is certainly a very beautiful woman, and in *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* she presents a part which is figurative of Ireland. The scene of Mr. Yeats's play is laid at Killala in 1798. We have a peasant's cottage where father, mother, and son are discussing the boy's speedy marriage. Enter then a mysterious beggar maid, who inspires the young man with the feeling that she, typifying Ireland, wants his services, and that he must leave all thoughts of love and marriage in the interests of a higher love, that of country. A little later the youth's betrothed appears, but as the curtain falls the boy follows Kathleen Ni Houlihan from the place, intent on devoting himself to the struggle for freedom rather than to domestic quietude. In this play as in the other the acting was admirable, and Miss Maire Quinn and Mr. Dudley Digges should assuredly make a considerable reputation.

First Public Performance of AE's *Deirdre*, 2-4 April 1902
In 'The Irish National Drama in Dublin', *The Tatler*, No. 42, 16 April 1902, 110.

FIRST MUSICIAN: Are Deirdre and her lover tired of life?

FERGUS You are not of this country, or you'd know
That they are in my charge and all forgiven

FIRST MUSICIAN: We have no country but the roads of the world.

FERGUS Then you should know that all things change
in the world,
And hatred turns to love and love to hate,
And even kings forgive.

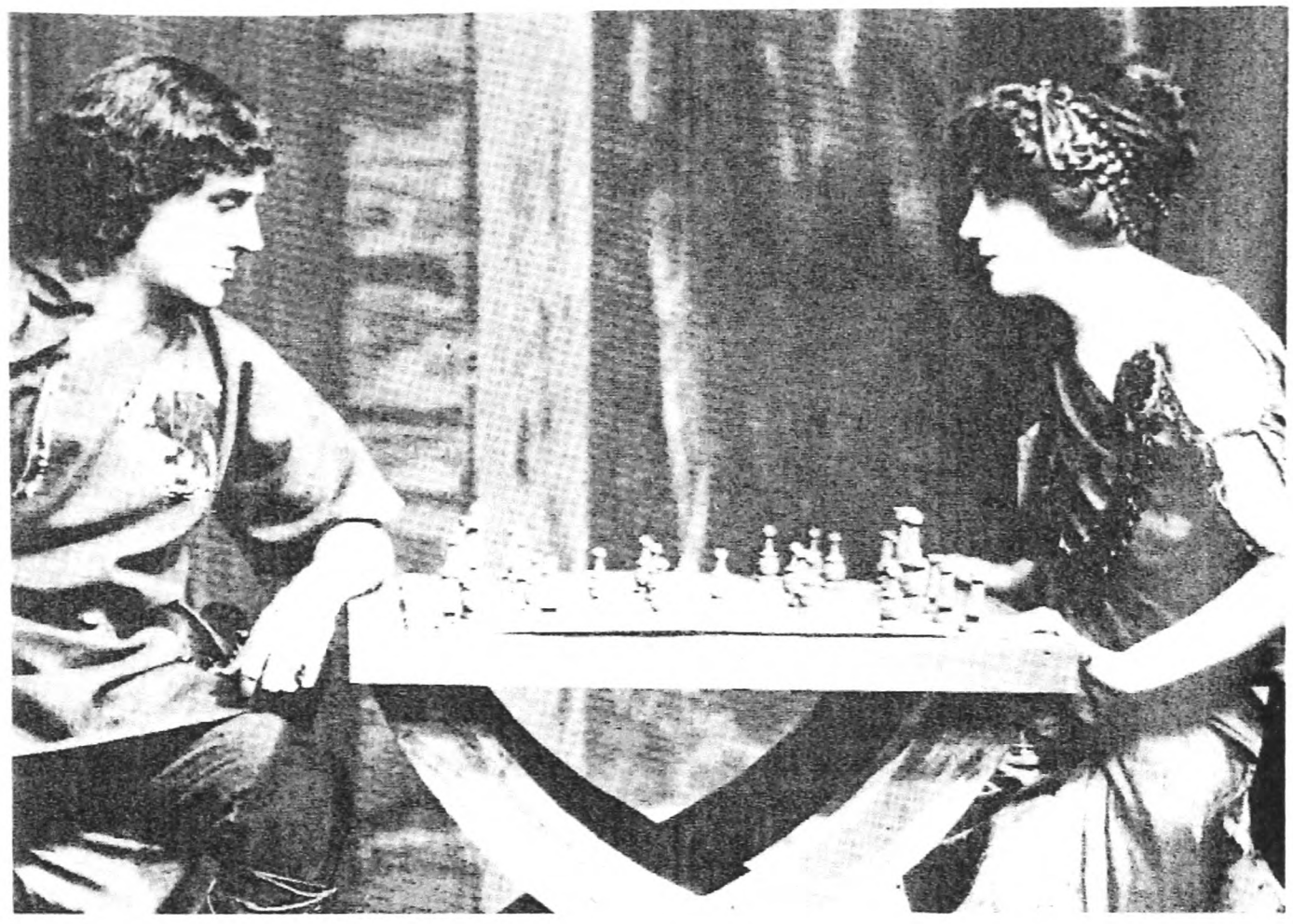
FIRST MUSICIAN An old man's love
Who casts no second line is hard to cure;
His jealousy is like his love.

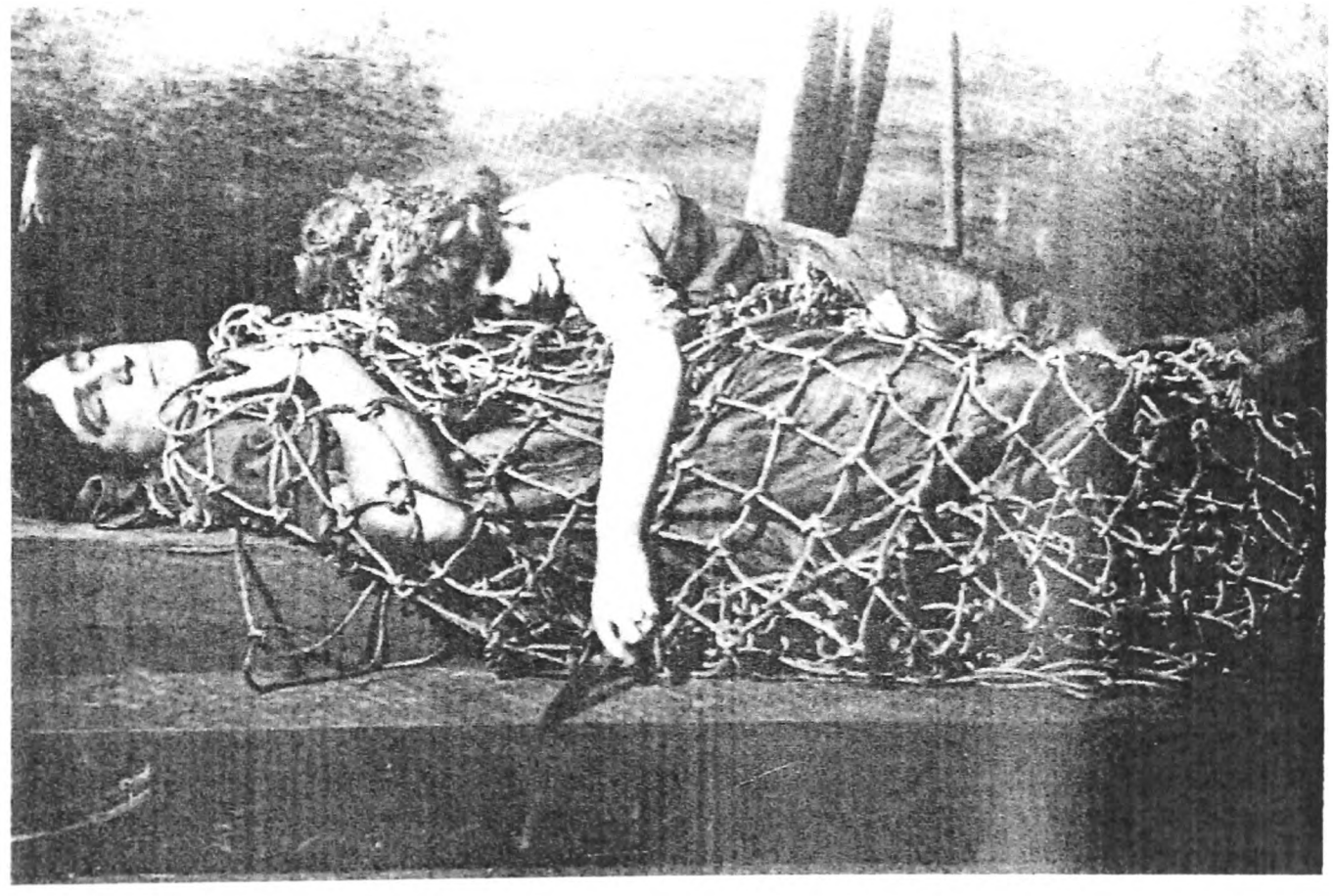
FERGUS And that's but true
You have learned something in your wanderings.
He was so hard to cure that the whole court,
But I alone, thought it impossible;
Yet after I had urged it at all seasons,
I had my way, and all's forgiven now;
And you shall speak the welcome and the joy
That I lack tongue for.

FIRST MUSICIAN Yet old men are jealous.

FERGUS (GOING TO DOOR) I am Conchubar's near friend,
and that weighed somewhat,
And it was policy to pardon them.
The need of some young, famous, popular man
To lead the troops, the murmur of the crowd,

Typescript from Yeats's *Deirdre*, undated
National Library of Ireland, MS 29, 546 (6)





Appendix IX 288

Photos from performance of Yeats's *Deirdre* at the Abbey Theatre, 1908
Enthoven Collection, Museum of London.

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS

FERGUS'S PART

ACT 2.

. . . . . I'm doing in Alban or in Ulster either.

(He goes out, and in a moment Naisi and Fergus come in on the other side).

. . . . . hot and thirsty after mounting the rocks.

It's a sunny nook you've found in Alban; yet any man would be well pleased mounting higher rocks to fetch yourself and Naisi back to Emain.

. . . . . They've answered? They would go?

(Benignly): They have not, but when I was a young man we'd have given a lifetime to be in Ireland a score of weeks; and to this day the old men have nothing so heavy as knowing it's in a short while they'll lose the high skies are over Ireland, and the lonesome mornings with birds crying on the bogs. Let you come this day, for there's no place but Ireland where the Gael can have peace always.

. . . . . while Conchubor's in Emain Macha.

(Giving him parchments): There are your sureties and Conchubor's

Appendix X

Typescript from Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Fergus's part, Act II, National Library of Ireland, MS, 29, 519 (2). 289



'Marie [*sic*] O'Neill as Deirdre' by Ben Bay
National Library of Ireland, The Joseph Holloway Collection, ~ 1910.

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