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From Domestic Warrior to "Some mild modern housewife": Lady Gregory's Transformation of the Deirdre Story

by JACQUELINE MCCURRY

LADY GREGORY'S explicit desire to idealize Irish mythology results in a widely influential but radically altered version of one of the most famous tales in Irish literature. An examination of Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation, "Exile of the Sons of Uisliu," which was "intended as a living version of the story, leaving as few obstacles as possible between the original and the reader" (vii), reveals the degree to which Lady Gregory's 1902 "Fate of the Sons of Usnach" strays from Irish legend. Indeed, Lady Gregory changes the very nature of the story (from an elopement to a wooing), eliminates the brutal plot details of the original, and, most significantly, transforms a fiercely independent woman of fiery will to a gentle, blushing, decorous creature whose life and death are dependent upon the men around her. In order to be successful in countering turn-of-the-century attacks made on the "barbarous" language and literature of ancient Ireland, Lady Gregory completely de-feminizes the Deirdre story; consequently, male writers influenced by Lady Gregory's translation—Yeats and Synge among them—create poignant but patriarchal love stories which have very little in common with the original Irish tale.

In her autobiography Lady Gregory records the initial impetus for her translation of the Irish epic, *Táin Bó Cuailnge*: "on 19 October 1900, I wrote: 'I have had an idea floating in my mind for some time that I might put together the Irish legends of Cuchulain into a sort of "Morte d'Arthur," choosing only the most beautiful or striking"' (*Seventy Years* 391). Mary Lou Kohfeldt, in her recent biography of Lady Gregory, notes that months earlier—in the summer of 1900—Yeats had told Lady Gregory that an English publisher suggested that he retell the Irish epics but he had refused because he didn't have the time. A few days later she asked if he would object if she tried it herself (139). Both Yeats and Lady Gregory were determined to combat England's perception of Irish literature. Lady Gregory was especially angered by the comments of a Dr. Atkinson (Trinity College Professor of Sanscrit), who stated in 1900 that "there is very little idealism" in ancient Irish literature (*Seventy Years* 391). And two years later, after the publication of *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, Lady Gregory recorded the pride she felt in her achievement: "I had done what I wanted: something for the dignity of Ireland. The reviews showed that the enemy could no longer scoff at our literature and its 'want of idealism'" (400).

Indeed, the reactions to Lady Gregory's book were overwhelmingly positive—especially in regard to the Deirdre story. Mark Twain found the tale

“moving and beautiful”; Professor York Powell wrote that “the Deirdre part [is] one of the most beautiful stories in the world”; and George Russell (AE) found the Deirdre story “extraordinarily lovely” (*Seventy Years* 401). But perhaps the highest, and the most personally rewarding praise of all, came from Yeats, who described Lady Gregory’s book as “the best book that has ever come out of Ireland” (Preface 11), and characterized Deirdre herself as one “who might be some mild modern housewife” (16).

Any reader of Kinsella’s literal translation will be struck by the incongruity between the brutal reality of the original story and descriptions of it as “beautiful”; likewise, the ferociously willful original Deirdre, who screams from the womb even before her birth, has very little in common with “some mild modern housewife.” Recent feminist critics have persuasively argued that the Ulster cycle represents a culture in transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, supporting Kinsella’s assertion that “the greatest achievement of the *Táin* . . . is the series of women on whose strong and diverse personalities the action continually turns: Medb, Derdriu, Macha, Nes, Aife” (xv).

It could be said that Queen Medb—not Cuchulain—is the protagonist of the *Táin*. Lady Gregory’s decision to focus on Cuchulain may be an artistic manifestation of a personal fear: Mary Lou Kohfeldt believes that Lady Gregory herself had a “fear of appearing a powerful woman” (141). Such trepidation may account, in part, for Lady Gregory’s de-feminization of the Deirdre story. Certainly, in her Dedication of *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (to the people of Kiltartan), Lady Gregory makes it ironically clear that she believes she has undertaken man’s work in translating the Irish epic: “And indeed if there was more respect for Irish things among the learned men that live in the college at Dublin, this work wouldn’t have been left to a woman of the house, that has to be minding the place, and listening to complaints, and dividing her share of food” (5). Thus, Lady Gregory’s own sexism may help us understand her desire to change both the nature of Deirdre’s story and the character of Deirdre herself.

According to the eminent Celtic scholars Alwyn and Brinley Rees, wooings and elopements “represent a pair of contraries. In the Wooings man is the suitor while the role of the maiden is largely passive, but in the Elopements it is the woman who chooses the man and compels him to do her will” (291). In Lady Gregory’s story, Naoise falls in love with Deirdre at first sight: “So Naoise turned back and met Deirdre, and Deirdre and Naoise kissed one another three times. . . . and he gave Deirdre, there and then, the love that he never gave to living thing, to vision, or to creature, but to herself alone” (98).

In sharp contrast with Lady Gregory’s romantic scene is the original tale, in which Deirdre is the aggressor—putting Naoise under *geasa* (bond) to do as she asks:

“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. (Kinsella 12)

Clearly, Deirdre is the prime mover in a relationship that has nothing in common with the romantic (patriarchal) love relationship in which the male (deliverer) chooses and courts the female. Just as the political warrior Medb (and not her husband Ailill) gives the orders for battle, so the domestic warrior Deirdre (and not Naoise) gives the orders for sexual union.

As mentioned earlier, Deirdre's ferocious will—in the original story—is evident even before she is born: "the child screamed in her [mother's] womb and was heard all over the enclosure" (Kinsella 8). Deirdre is reared in isolation by Conchobor and grows "into the loveliest woman in all Ireland" (Kinsella 11). In Lady Gregory's version, however, Deirdre is "the young *girl* of the greatest beauty *and of the gentlest nature* of all the women of Ireland" (94; italics mine). Furthermore, Lady Gregory's Deirdre—far from being aggressive—is so demure that she blushes when looked upon: "and if any one at all looked at her face, whatever colour she was before that, she would blush crimson red" (96). Lady Gregory thus transforms the character of Deirdre so completely that the latter becomes "the gentlest . . . girl" rather than a fiercely-willed woman whose beauty is not a blessing but a curse.

Deirdre's ferocious independence likewise characterizes her suicide in the original tale. After Eogan (under orders from King Conchobor) kills her beloved Naoise, Deirdre is taken by Conchobor, who, after one year, orders her to go and live with Eogan. As she rides between the two men in a chariot, Conchobor taunts her:

"This is good. Derdriu," Conchobor said. "Between me and Eogan you are a sheep eyeing two rams."

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. (Kinsella 20)

Thus the story closes with a brutal thud of finality; Deirdre simultaneously ends her life and destroys her accursed beauty.

As might be expected, Lady Gregory radically alters Deirdre's suicide. In her version of the story a warrior named Maine beheads the three sons of Uisliu at one stroke of his sword. Left alone, Deirdre walks out on the strand and chances upon a carpenter who is making an oar for a boat. She convinces him to exchange his "sharp black knife" for Naoise's gold ring—but note the reasons for the trade: "and he gave her the knife for the ring, and for her asking and her tears" (116). Even at her death, Lady Gregory's Deirdre depends on the men around her and exhibits not a fierceness of will but a tearful selflessness: "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" (116). Thus, Deirdre dies with her beauty intact and with a fairy tale decorum which is alien to the original version of the story. Lady Gregory's Deirdre, in fact, bears a striking resemblance to the sentimental nineteenth-century Irish colleen, the gentle, modest creature with a shawl over her head.

As a consequence of Lady Gregory's work, the Deirdre tale became, as

Richard Fallis states in *The Irish Renaissance*, “the greatest of Irish love stories” (97). Both Yeats and Synge were tremendously influenced by Lady Gregory’s version in their dramatic treatments of the tale; Yeats’s *Deirdre* (1907) and Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910) provided Abbey Theatre audiences with heroic, patriarchal love stories that bear very little resemblance to the starkly brutal elopement tale.

Yeats’s poetic drama, elevated in tone and utilizing a classical Greek chorus, relies on visual imagery and stage properties rather than on flesh and blood realism. His *Deirdre* is heroic, decorous, and concerned that her story be told accurately to succeeding generations: “set it down in a book, / That love is all we need. . . / show that you have Deirdre’s story right” (62, 65). Naoise is a young king; Deirdre is his queen. She is accurately described by one critic as “feminine . . . dependent upon Naoise for strength” (Knowland 106).

In contrast to Yeats’s resounding, lofty blank verse, Synge uses a colloquial idiom more akin to Lady Gregory’s “peasant” language. Yet Synge’s *Deirdre* is even less realistic than Yeats’s, as she is resigned to her fate from the start of the drama and sees herself as a mythical character throughout the play. Her first words to Naoise make her self-consciousness patently obvious: “Do not leave me . . . I am Deirdre of the Sorrows” (228); her last words, after Naoise’s death and just before she stabs herself with his knife, reveal her to be full of her own destiny: “It’s a pitiful thing, Conchubor, you have done this night in Emain; yet a thing will be a joy and triumph to the ends of life and time” (267). As Robin Skelton asserts, *Deirdre*’s “values are the pure values of romance” (*Writings* 150). Believing the truth of the prophecy about herself from the very beginning, *Deirdre*’s character is trapped in her perception of herself as the heroine of a great tragic love story. Synge’s last play aimed for “stateliness, but he had achieved it at the expense of vitality” (Skelton *Synge* 78).

The *Deirdre* story offers us a unique opportunity to see the de-feminization of a woman’s character at the hands of a female translator; in this case what is demanded is not a rewriting of literary history but the “righting” of it—that is, we must return to the original story in order to restore *Deirdre*’s feminism. Critic Lorna Reynolds concludes her 1983 essay, “Irish Women in Legend, Literature and Life,” with the conviction that “the women of Ireland, whether we look for them in legend, literature, or life, do not correspond to the stereotypes that have, so mysteriously, developed in the fertile imaginations of men” (25). In the case of *Deirdre*, however, stereotypical traits of the gentle, heroic Irish colleen emerge in Yeats and Synge not “mysteriously,” but by way of a female translator who was herself perhaps too close for comfort to the strong, independent character of the original *Deirdre*.

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