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The Deirdre legend, ancient and modern : a study of modern dramatic treatments and their sources

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The Deirdre Legend, Ancient and Modern
A Study of Modern Dramatic Treatments and Their Sources

by

Sylvia Bailey

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Abstract

The Deirdre legend belongs to a group of ancient Celtic stories which modern scholars call the Heroic or Ulster Cycle. Most of these tales, which describe a prehistoric heroic age in Ireland, probably existed in oral tradition long before the skill of writing was brought to Ireland in the fifth century, although the oldest extant manuscripts of the Deirdre legend survive from the Middle Irish period, and date back only as far as 1160.

These manuscript versions fall into two categories which might be described as classical and romantic. The superficial difference is in plot: in the classical version Deirdre mourns helplessly for a year in the palace of King Conchubar, the man responsible for the death of her lover, Naisi, before she commits suicide by throwing herself from a chariot; in the romantic version Deirdre dies beside Naisi's newly-dug grave. Significant contrasts in style, tone, and especially characterization reveal an underlying difference in theme. In the classical version fate is an ominous force against which men are inevitably powerless. The lack of interest in characterization is evidence of this perspective from which the individual will appears insignificant. The more elaborate characterization of the romantic version, however, reflects a shift in theme from man against fate to man against man.

These two versions, however, have in common a heroic spirit and setting. All the Ulster stories take place at a time when Irish culture was robust and flourishing. It is not surprising, then, that at the turn of the century when the Irish were seeking political and cultural independence from England Irish writers should revive the ancient heroic literature of their race. The belief among Irish intellectuals that popularization of the heroic legends would inspire a cultural rejuvenation and a sense of national pride among the Irish people led to the founding of the Irish Literary Theatre. This organization, begun by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn in 1898, was dedicated to presenting plays on Irish subjects by Irish playwrights to Irish audiences.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, when the Irish Literary Renaissance was at its height, Fiona Macleod (William Sharp), Eva Gore-Booth, AE (George Russell), W. B. Yeats, and John Synge wrote Deirdre plays, three of which were presented by Yeats' company. The plays of Fiona Macleod, Eva Gore-Booth, and AE are minor in execution and theme. Both Yeats and Synge, however, succeed in duplicating the heroic spirit of the original tale, while at the same time creating heroines which reflect a uniquely twentieth-century perspective.

Introduction

The Irish possess one of the oldest vernacular literatures in the Indo-European tradition. Although not well known outside Ireland, a large collection of ancient Celtic tales still survives in Middle Irish manuscripts. The Celtic bards, who perpetuated the legends in oral tradition centuries before the scribes began to record them in the fifth century A.D., categorized their stories and verses according to plot: for example, destructions, cattle-raids, courtships, battles, elopements, and invasions.¹ Modern scholars, however, have arranged the legends more conveniently into five cycles:² the Mythological Cycle, stories which deal with the origin of the Celtic gods and the history of the first race to inhabit Ireland, the Tuatha Dé Dannan; the Finn Cycle, tales of Finn mac Cumail, his son Oisín, and the fiana or warrior bands, which date from the third century A.D.,³ and seem to be based on historic events;⁴ the King Tales, which record the dynastic origins and the deeds of Irish kings from the third century B.C. to the seventh or eighth century A.D.;⁵ a group of stories which describe expeditions to the otherworld; and the Heroic, or Ulster, Cycle, which gives an account of Ireland's heroic age, and records the exploits of the Ulaid, early inhabitants of northeastern Ireland.

In the late nineteenth century scholars rediscovered the literature of the Irish Celts and began to translate the ancient stories into English. After centuries of neglect the legends once again became popular among the Irish, and they came to be associated with the movement for political and cultural independence.

The tales of the Heroic Cycle were of particular interest since they described the Golden Age of Irish history, and provided the British-dominated Irishmen with an example of a powerful native culture. No one knows whether a heroic age actually did exist in the prehistory of Ireland;⁶ since stories of such an age were passed on for an indeterminate time in oral tradition, the distinction between history and myth was lost, if, in fact, such a distinction ever did exist. There can be no doubt, however, that an Irish heroic age was alive in legend, if not in historical fact; and it seems appropriate that in a time when modern Irishmen were seeking political independence from England their scholars and writers should look to the ancient heroic tales to inspire cultural independence, as well.

The Deirdre legend was one of the ancient heroic tales retold most often by modern writers during the Irish Revival, a literary movement which reflected the political temper in Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This thesis seeks to explore

how modern Irish writers at the height of the Revival, 1900-1910, transformed their ancient source for modern audiences. The study focuses on the drama: first, because the leaders of the Revival regarded the drama as their most immediate means of influencing public opinion, a major concern to them as they hoped the Literary Revival would inspire a general renewal of Irish culture; and second, because the best modern treatments of the Deirdre legend are dramatic.

Chapter 1: Sources

The Deirdre legend belongs to the Ulster Cycle--a number of tales linked through plot, characters, and setting, which comprise the heroic literature of ancient Ireland. Characteristically, the tales focus on warfare and great feats of strength and prowess; action, description, and lists of warriors take precedence over characterization and motivation. The major portion of the cycle consists of the epic "Tain Bo Cuailnge" ("The Cattle Spoil of Cooley"), in which the leading protagonists, Conchobar, King of Ulster, and Cuchulainn, chief warrior and superhero, reach the height of their powers. The Deirdre legend is one of the remscéla, or preceeding tales, which elucidate or embellish this general episode. It explains why Fergus and his followers are in exile at the time of the cattle raid, and why they fight against Ulster.

The Deirdre story also belongs to the ancient Celtic category of aitheda, or elopement stories. In theme and plot it is related to the tales of Helen of Troy, Tristan and Isolde, and Diarimud and Grania. In each, a beautiful woman forsakes her role as queen to abscond with a young lover, an act which ultimately brings about the destruction of a kingdom.

The themes of the conflict between desire and duty,

and the potentially destructive force of great beauty are ancient ones, and the Deirdre story appears to be one of the oldest examples of Irish literature to have survived. Most of the Ulster tales are extant in Middle Irish,¹ but the prototypes were probably committed to writing much earlier and existed in oral tradition during the obscure prehistory of Ireland, before the skill of writing was brought by Christian missionaries in the fifth century.² The earliest manuscripts have been lost; however, on the basis of philological and critical evidence in the surviving ones, Alfred Nutt estimates the redaction of the principal Ulster stories to have taken place in the seventh to ninth centuries, "at about the same date as Beowulf, some 100-250 years before the Scandinavian mythology crystallised into the present form, at least 200 years before the oldest Charlemagne romances, and probably 300 years before the earliest draft of the Nibelungenlied."³ Of the Deirdre legend itself, Vernam Hull observes that the prototype appears to have been written in the eighth or ninth century, during the Old Irish period.⁴

The oldest extant version of the Deirdre legend bears the title "Longes Mac N-Uislenn" or "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu." This version is preserved in three manuscripts. The Lebor Laignech, or Book of Leinster (H. 2.18 of Trinity College, Dublin) was begun about A. D. 1160.⁵

The Yellow Book of Lecan, Leabhar Buidhe Leacain (H. 2.16 of Trinity College, Dublin), was compiled at the end of the fourteenth century.⁶ The third manuscript, Egerton 1782 of the British Museum, is dated about A. D. 1517. Of this there are two transcripts, M. S. H. 1.13 of Trinity College, Dublin, and M. S. G. 138 of the Philips Collection in the National Library of Ireland.⁷

Following the Old Irish tradition, the main narrative is in prose, concise and straightforward.⁸ Certain other parts of the story, especially prophetic statements, are told in a special form called retoiric, which is a combination of verse and prose, sometimes rhythmical and sometimes not. Usually obscure,⁹ these passages possibly served as mnemonic aids for the early bards, and the prose sections may have been later additions.¹⁰ Poetry is used to heighten the mood, and is usually spoken by one character. In this early version Deirdre speaks two laments for the Sons of Uisliu.

The precis which follows is taken from two translations of the old version, each based on the three manuscripts described above.¹¹

The men of Ulster were gathered for a banquet in the house of King Conchobar's storyteller, Fedlimid mac Daill. In the midst of the carousing the king and his warriors were alarmed at the sound of a terrifying shriek from the womb of Fedlimid's wife, who was about to give birth.

Called upon to explain, but unable to do so, she sought an explanation from Cathbad the druid. Cathbad revealed that the scream was given by her unborn female child. The child's name would be Derdriu, he said, and she would bring evil.

The child was born and brought to Cathbad, who predicted that she would be an incomparable beauty and that she would bring destruction and sorrow to Ulster:

O Derdriu, you will destroy much
If you are comely-faced and fair of fame.
The Ulstermen will suffer during your lifetime,
O demure daughter of Feidlimid.

Even afterwards jealousy will be
Ablaze on your account, O woman.
In your time it is--hear this
That will be the exile of the three sons of
Uisliu.

In your time it is a violent deed
Will be performed then in Emain.
Even afterwards will be repented the destruction
Done under the protection of the very mighty Mac
Roig.

O woman with destiny, it is on account of you
That will be the exile of Fergus from the
Ulstermen
And a deed for which weepings should lament.
The slaughter of Fiachna mac Conchobuir.

O woman with destiny, it is for your crime
That will be the slaying of Gerrce mac Illadain
And a deed, the penalty of which is not less,
The killing of Eogan mac Durthacht.

You will perform a horrible, fierce deed
For anger against the king of the noble Ulstermen.
Your little grave will be everywhere.
It will be a famous tale, O Derdriu.¹²

Afraid, the warriors' first impulse was to kill the

child, and thus ward off the evil she was prophecied to bring, but Conchobar refused, and ordered Derdriu to be taken away where she would be reared alone until she was of age to become his queen. Only her foster-parents and Leborcham, Conchobar's satirist, were allowed to see the astonishingly beautiful child.

One day, years later, Derdriu's foster-father was skinning a calf on the snow for Derdriu's dinner. As she watched a raven drink the blood, she told Leborcham that she would love a man who had those three colors: hair black as the raven, cheeks like blood, and a body white as snow. Leborcham exclaimed that such a man was close at hand, Noisiu, son of Uisliu; he and his brothers were famous as unbeatable warriors and excellent hunters, but Noisiu in particular was known for his beauty.

Some time later, Noisiu was chanting on the ramparts of Emain. His chanting was so sweet that every cow that heard would give two-thirds more milk, and every person would be filled with peace and music.

Derdriu slipped out and passed Noisiu, pretending not to recognize him.

"Fair," he said, "is the heifer that goes past me."

"Heifers," she said, "are bound to be big where bulls are not wont to be."

"You have the bull of the province," he said, "namely, the king of the Ulstermen."

"I would choose between the two of you," she said, "and I would take a young bullock like you."

"By no means!" he said. "Even because of Cathbad's prophecy."

"Do you say that in order to reject me?"
"It assuredly will be for that reason," he said.
Therewith she made a leap to him and grasped both
ears on his head.
"These are two ears of shame and of derision,"
she said, "unless you take me away with you."
"Go away from he O woman," he said.
"You shall have that," she said.¹³

At his cry Noisui's brothers came to his aid. They would
not see him shamed even if evil came of it.¹⁴ So all
four, the brothers and Derdriu, left Emain that night with
one hundred each of warriors, women, hounds, and menials.

For a long time the party wandered about Ireland,
pursued by Conchobar. Finally, they crossed the sea to
Alba, where they settled in the wastelands. When they
could no longer sustain themselves by hunting they were
forced to steal cattle from the natives. Enraged, the
people of Alba went out to destroy them, and for protec-
tion the brothers were obliged to offer themselves as
hired soldiers to the King of Alba. To prevent any strife
on her account, they were careful to keep the beautiful
Derdriu from view.

Despite their precautions, a steward saw Derdriu and
reported to the king. In secret, the king sent the steward
every day to ask Derdriu to be his queen, but each night
she told Noisiu of the request. Hoping they would be
killed in battle, the king sent the Sons on dangerous
missions, but they always returned. Finally, in desper-
ation, the king ordered the Sons killed so he could make

Derdriu his queen, but Derdriu, aware of the king's plans, warned Noisiu and his brothers and escaped with them to an island in the sea.

When the news reached Ulster, the Ulstermen asked Conchobar to grant amnesty to the wanderers because it would be shameful to let them be killed in a strange land through the fault of a bad woman. Conchobar was persuaded to let them return. News was sent, and the Sons agreed to return if Fergus, Dubthach, and Conchobar's son, Cormac, would be sent as a pledge of safety.

The exiles and their protectors returned to Ulster, but Fergus was stopped by Conchobar's cunning. While Fergus was under geasa never to refuse a feast, the Sons had sworn not to eat in Ireland until they ate Conchobar's food first. Conchobar had arranged that Fergus be invited to feasts upon his return from Alba; thus, he was obliged to stay and banquet while the Sons were obliged to continue to Emain. Fiacha, Fergus' son, accompanied them.

In Emain, the capital of Ulster, Eogan mac Durthact, king of Fernmag, there to make peace with Conchobar, had been chosen to kill the Sons of Uisliu. When the Sons arrived Eogan welcomed them with a thrust of his spear which broke Noisiu's back. In an attempt to save him Fiacha threw himself across Noisiu, but Noisiu was given a fatal thrust through Fiacha's body. Conchobar's hired soldiers slaughtered everyone save Derdriu, who was

brought to Conchobar with her hands bound behind her back.

News reached Fergus, Dubthach, and Cormac. Enraged, they came to Emain and destroyed the city. Then they went to Connacht with three thousand other exiles to join the court of Ailill and Medb, Conchobar's enemies. "For sixteen years they made sure that weeping and trembling never died away in Ulster; there was weeping and trembling at their hands every single night."¹⁵

Derdriu was kept with Conchobar for one year, during which time she never smiled, nor ate sufficient food, nor raised her head from her knees. She talked only to make laments for the Sons of Uisliu.

One day, Conchobar asked her what she hated most. She answered Conchobar himself and Eogan mac Durthacht. In response, Conchobar declared he would send Derdriu to Eogan to be his mistress for one year.¹⁶ The next day Eogan, Conchobar, and Derdriu set out in Eogan's chariot for the fair of Macha. Conchobar taunted her, "Well, O Derdriu it is a sheep's eye between two rams that you make between me and Eogan."¹⁷ At that Derdriu threw herself from the chariot and shattered her skull against a boulder. "That (is) the exile of the Sons of Uisliu and the exile of Fergus and the violent death of the Sons of Uisliu and of Derdriu."¹⁸

The narrative style of the old version is extremely

sparse. Except for Derdriu's two laments and the blood on the snow episode, it is concerned entirely with relating action. Psychological motivation is disregarded. Conchobar orders that the child Derdriu shall not be killed, and that she shall be raised to be his queen; whether he does this because of his pity for the child, because of the prophecy of her great beauty, or because he wished to defy the prophecy and assume the responsibility of governing Derdriu's fate himself is never revealed. Neither does this version explain why Conchobar has the brothers killed against the wishes of his warriors; whether out of jealousy, lust, contempt, or all three. Characterization and description are likewise completely omitted. Perhaps such embellishments were to be added by the storyteller himself as he invented his own interpretation of the tale for his listeners' entertainment.

Another important characteristic of the old version is Derdriu's subordinate role. She is merely a pawn of fate, and since her fate is to bring destruction she is called a "bad woman" by the Ulstermen. Indeed, her name itself means "alarm" or "troubler,"¹⁹ and that is the role to which she is restricted. According to Wickstrom, some early versions omit the character of Derdriu entirely and put all emphasis on the exile of Uisliu's sons.²⁰ In this version, except for her laments, Derdriu appears only when she acts to fulfill Cathbad's prophecy. At Noisiu's death

scene she is silent, and even her suicide is foretold. She is always and only a "woman with destiny" as Cathbad describes her. Fate is the ultimate force; any conflict the characters might feel between their fate and their own desires is not described. This version, then, is sometimes called classical, as opposed to some later versions which show more concern for characterization and motivation, and which thus might be classified as romantic.²¹ Here, in the classical version, psychological conflict is overlooked; the tale is merely the acting out of Cathbad's prophecy.

In one romantic version of the tale, "Oided Mac N-Uisnis" or "Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach" ("The Violent Death of the Sons--or Children--of Uisneach")²² Cathbad's prophecy is omitted entirely, and Deirdre's importance is magnified. According to Hull this variant appears in no manuscript dated before the sixteenth century.²³ It does appear, in part, however, in the Glenmasan manuscript, dated 1238. Basing his opinion on orthographic evidence, Mackinnon asserts that the manuscript could not be older than the end of the fifteenth century, but it may have been transcribed from a 1238 manuscript.²⁴

This manuscript omits the first half of the tale completely, beginning several years after Naisi and Deirdre have fled to Alba. The story opens with a magnificent feast which Conchobar prepared for his nobles. In the midst of all the splendor and feasting Conchobar rose to

declare that there was never a braver household in all Ireland or Scotland than theirs, but there was something they lacked: "The three Torches of Valour of the Gael . . . the three sons of Uisnech, Naisi and Ainle and Ardan" (Glenmasan, p. 15). The Ulstermen agreed unanimously that the sons of Uisnech should be invited to return to Ulster.

Since one of Naisi's geasa was not to return to Ireland in peace except in the company of either Cuchulainn, Conall, or Fergus, Conchobar questioned each of these warriors, asking what they would do if the Sons came to harm upon their return to Emain. Conall answered that no Ulsterman he could lay hold of would escape death. Cuchulainn detected the king's intended treachery and declared that he would rather kill Conchobar than accept a bribe from him. Fergus, however, unaware of the king's motive, answered, "I promise not to take your blood . . . and yet there is not an Ulsterman whom I should lay hold of who would not find death and slaughter from me" (Glenmasan, p. 17).

So Conchobar sent Fergus, instructing him to land, upon his return to Ireland, at the fortress of Borrach; and Fergus gave his word that as soon as they arrived in Ireland the Sons would not rest until they reached Emain. Meanwhile, the king ordered Borach to prepare a banquet for Fergus, knowing that it was one of Fergus' geasa to

refuse a feast.

Fergus set off with his two sons, Illann the Fair and Buinne Rude-red, and they arrived at Naisi's fortress on Loch Etive.

And Fergus uttered a great shout in the bay which was heard throughout the farthest parts of the bounds nearest to them. And thus were Naisi and Deirdre at the time with Conchobar's Cenncaom, that is, the king's draught-board, between them, and playing on it. And Naisi said, "I hear the cry of an Irishman," said he. And Deirdre heard the cry, and knew that it was the cry of Fergus, and she concealed it from them. And Fergus gave a second shout, and Naisi said: "I hear another cry, and it is the cry of an Irishman." "Not so," said Deirdre, "not alike are the cry of an Irishman and that of a Scotsman." And Fergus gave a third shout, and the sons of Uisnech knew that that was the cry of Fergus (Glenmasan, p. 107).

Deirdre revealed to Naisi that she recognised the first cry as Fergus', but that she had concealed her knowledge because of a vision in which she had seen three birds come from Emain Macha with three sips of honey in their bills. They left the honey and took three sips of blood away with them. "'Fergus has come to us with a message of peace from our own native land, for honey is not sweeter than a message of peace; and the three sips of blood that have been taken from us, they are you who will go with him, and you will be betrayed'" (Glenmasan, p. 107).

Deirdre's hesitation angered the brothers, and Fergus easily persuaded them to return with him: "'Better than everything is one's native land . . . for the greatest

prosperity does not bring joy unless one sees his native land'" (Glenmasan, p. 109). Deirdre recited her farewell to Alba, and they departed for Ireland.

When they landed, Fergus was detained at Borrach's fortress, according to Conchobar's plan. Deirdre, suspecting Conchobar's treachery, was distressed: "'You will do (what Borrach desires) [sic], . . . if you prefer to forsake the sons of Uisnech and to enjoy the feast; but verily to forsake them is a great price for a feast'" (Glenmasan, p. 113). Deirdre and Naisi left for Emain in anger, accompanied by Fergus' sons. Deirdre suggested that they seek shelter on an island until Fergus would be free to accompany them, but the men were once again angered by her advice which seemed to them an insult to their courage and honor. She recited another lament bemoaning the fate she foresaw.

As they traveled on, Deirdre fell asleep and was left behind. When Naisi returned to find her, she told him of a dream in which she saw the brothers and Illann without heads and Buinne with his head still on his shoulders. Again, she recited a lament, and then Naisi's wraith appeared to her. She suggested that they seek out Cuchulainn's protection, but again she was refused. This scene of heightened emotion is described in verse:

Said Naisi in wrath
To Deirdre, the handsome, red-cheeked,
'Seeing we are not afraid,
We will not do your counsel.'

'Seldom were we ever before,
Royal descendant of Rugraide!
Without being of one mind,
I and you, O Naisi!' (Glenmasan, p. 119).

Finally, when they saw Emain in the distance, Deirdre gave a sign: if Conchobar allowed them to stay in the house with himself and his nobles, all would be well; but if they should be put apart in the house of Craobhradh, treachery and ruin would await them. They were asked to stay in the house of Craobhradh. Deirdre, reacting to the vision she had seen, wanted to leave immediately, but the men insisted upon staying. Deirdre and Naisi sat down to play Cenncaom, a form of chess.

Meanwhile, Conchobar asked for a volunteer to visit the couple and see if Deirdre retained her beauty. Levarcham went, warned the couple of their danger, and made a lament:

Woeful the dishonour
Which will be wrought this night in Emain;
And from the disgrace ever after
It will be the contentious Emain.

The three best brothers under heaven
Who have walked on the thick earth,
Grievous to me their fate
To be slain on account of one woman.

Naisi and Ardan renowned,
White-palmed Ainnle, their brother;
Treachery on this band to be told,
To me this is great woe.

Woeful (Glenmasan, p. 117).

Levarcham then returned to Conchobar and told him that Deirdre had lost her beauty; but, still unconvinced,

Conchobar sent another spy, Trendorn, whose father had been slain by Naisi.

While Deirdre and Naisi sat over their game, Deirdre saw Trendorn peering through the window and made a sign to Naisi, who knocked out Trendorn's eye with a game piece. Nevertheless, Trendorn reported to Conchobar that "'Yonder is the one woman whose form is best in the world, and Naisi would be king of the world if she were left to him'" (Glenmasan, p. 127).

At this Conchobar ordered his forces to surround the house of Craobhruadh and the fighting began. Buinne left the house and singlehandedly slew one hundred and fifty men, but succumbed to Conchobar's bribe of one cantred of land. (The land, however, miraculously turned to moorland overnight.) Next, Illann terrorized Conchobar's men by slaying three hundred. Conchobar asked Fiacha, his son, to fight against Illann. "They attacked each other and fought a fierce, heroic, bold, daring, and very vigorous combat" (Glenmasan, p. 131). Illann mastered Fiacha and forced him to lie on the edge of Conchobar's magic shield, the Orchain, which roared and caused the three chief waves of Ireland to roar.

Conall, who was in Dunseverick, heard the roar and rushed to Conchobar's aid. When he saw Fiacha lying on his father's shield he drove his sword through Illann from behind, an action which he regretted when he found that

Illann had been defending the sons of Uisnech.

In the Glenmasan manuscript the tale of the Sons of Uisnech ends here, but in other manuscripts of the romantic version the Sons continue to fight valiantly against Conchobar's troops.²⁵ Indeed, they fight with such prowess that they can be overcome only by a supernatural sea which Conchobar convinces Cathbad to conjure up. After they are captured each brother volunteers to be beheaded first. Finally, Naisi lends his sword to the executioner and all three are beheaded at one stroke. Deirdre places herself under the safeguard of Cuchulainn, and under his protection she returns to the Sons' grave where she dishevels her hair, drinks Naisi's blood, kisses him, recites two laments, and throws herself into the grave to die with Naisi.

A major contrast between the classical and the romantic versions rests on the role that fate plays in controlling the action. Whereas in the earlier version fate is the ultimate force and the characters are powerless to influence it--Conchobar tries and fails utterly--in the later version there is an element of personal choice. Characterization is a much more important element, and emphasis is placed on motivation and psychological conflict. Conchobar's treacherous intentions are obvious in his questioning of the three warriors; Cuchulainn recognizes his request as a bribe. Deirdre also intuit

Conchobar's murderous intent and constantly warns Naisi, who refuses to heed her visions and warnings. The conflict that the decision to return causes between Deirdre and Naisi is a new element in the romantic version; no mention is made of it in the classical story. Likewise, in the older version no mention is made of the characters' feelings when they find that Fergus is obliged to remain behind at the ale-banquets. The Glenmasan manuscript, however, describes their reactions:

And Naisi left the place in anger. And Deirdre followed him, with Ainnle and Ardan and the two sons of Fergus. And that plan was not carried out by the consent of Deirdre. And Fergus was left behind sad and very sorrowful.
(Glenmasan, p. 113)

The difference in tone in the two versions is consistent with the difference in attitude toward fate. Both versions begin with a banquet scene, but in the old version the drunken carousing is immediately interrupted by the ominous scream and Cathbad's prophecy of doom. The characters are doomed from the start, and the sparse, tense style reinforces the feeling of foreboding and powerlessness. The Glenmasan version, however, begins on a note of gaiety and resplendence: "A feast of great taste and magnificence was prepared by Conchobar son of Fachtna Fathach, and by the nobles of Ulster besides, in smooth, beautiful Emain Macha" (Glenmasan, p. 13). The only sense of foreboding is the hint of Conchobar's underhanded motives in asking Naisi to return to Ireland. Here,

however, the characters are responsible for carrying out the action; if Fergus and Naisi had had more insight into Conchobar's character, as Cuchulainn and Deirdre did, the disaster might have been avoided. In the Glenmasan version the elements of insight and choice, rather than the insuperable force of fate, rule the action.

Differences in plot also emphasize the increased power of personal choice in the later version. Cathbad's fateful prophecy is omitted entirely from the Glenmasan manuscript, and Deirdre's visions take its place. These visions, rather than forecasting certain doom, provide the characters with a warning and a chance to escape death at Conchobar's hand. Also in this version Naisi has become a powerful lord in Scotland--he could easily choose to remain there in comfort. In the older version, however, Naisi and Deirdre are living in hardship after fleeing from the King of Alba, and Conchobar offers them a life of comfort and nobility in Emain. The Ulstermen request the Sons' return to avoid their disgrace at the hands of their enemies:

"Grievous it is, O Conchobar," the Ulstermen said, "for the Sons of Uisliu to fall in hostile lands through the crime of a bad woman. It were better to be lenient with them and to feed them and not to slay them and for them to come to the land than for them to fall at the hands of their foes."²⁶

In the romantic version, however, the Sons are much more powerful figures. Conchobar suggests to the Ulstermen

that they be invited to return because his court is incomplete without "the three Torches of Valour of the Gael."

The change in plot at the end of the romantic version also stresses the valour of Naisi and his brothers. They defend themselves so courageously against Conchobar that only Cathbad's magic spell can overcome them. Thus, Conchobar's stature is reduced once again, as it is in the scene in which he sends Trendorn to spy on Deirdre, transposed from the episode in the earlier version in which the King of Scotland sends his steward to woo her. Conchobar does not face Naisi personally, but stays protected in the house of Emain. In fact, Conchobar is so inferior to Naisi in valour that he can overcome him finally only by resorting to the magical powers of Cathbad. The motif of the chess game emphasizes Naisi and Deirdre's calm and courage in the midst of danger and imminent death, and their willful fight against Conchobar's deception. In this version also, Deirdre escapes Conchobar's control, and the dramatic final scene stresses her choice of death with Naisi over life with Conchobar.²⁷

The third of the most influential versions of the tale to twentieth century writers is the one told to Alexander Carmichael in 1867 by John Macneill, an eighty-three year old crofter from Barra.²⁸ The most obvious distinction of this telling is its tone: several of the characters have changed from aristocrats to peasants, and the

cantankerousness of Colum Cruiteir, Deirdre's father, is comic. The portrayal of Deirdre, however, is one of the most charming.

When Colum Cruiteir, an Irishman with a wife but no family, consulted a fiosaiche, or soothsayer, he was insulted by the wise man's prophecy:

"It is on account of a daughter of yours that the greatest amount of blood shall be shed that has ever been shed in Erin since time and race began. And the three most famous heroes that ever were found will lose their heads on her account." . . . "Is that the soothsaying you are making for me?" said Colum Cruiteir in wrath, thinking that the fiosaiche was mocking him. "Well, it is," said the fiosaiche. "Well, if that is the soothsaying you are making for me you may keep it to yourself. You are not much worth yourself or your soothsaying, and do you be taking another road" (Carmichael, p. 70).

Cruiteir thought the soothsayer was mocking him because both he and his wife were well past the age of bearing children. Not long afterward, however, his wife became pregnant. Because of the prophecy Cruiteir feared disaster and decided to send his daughter to be reared by a nurse on a distant mountain "where eye might not see sight of her nor ear hear tattle of her" (Carmichael, p. 71). So Deirdre and her nurse lived in a dug-out hillock until Deirdre reached the age of fourteen, by which time she had become an outstandingly beautiful young woman.

One night a hunter who had lost his way fell asleep beside the green knoll in which Deirdre lived. He dreamed

that he was enjoying the warmth of a fairy brooch and called out three times to be let in. Deirdre asked what sort of creature could be crying out, and her nurse told her it was only the birds of the wood. Deirdre insisted upon giving the creature shelter and let the hunter in. In spite of a cold reception from the nurse, the hunter told Deirdre of Naois, Aillean, and Ardan:

"They have the colour of the raven on their hair, their skin like swan on the wave of whiteness, and their cheeks as the blood of the bridled red calf, and their speed and their leap are as those of the salmon of the torrent and the deer of the gray mountain side. And Naois is head and shoulders over the rest of the people of Erin" (Carmichael, p. 74).

Upon his return to civilization the hunter sought King Connachar's favor by telling him of the extraordinarily beautiful Deirdre. When the king saw Deirdre he loved her and carried her back to his court. But Deirdre would not consent to marry Connachar immediately--she knew nothing of the duties of a queen--so she asked for a respite of a year and a day, which Connachar granted her.

One day, accompanied by her companions from the court, Deirdre saw the sons of Uisnech. She loved Naois immediately and left her companions to follow him. Three times she cried out, but Aillean and Ardan, afraid that if Naois should see her he would love her, hurried their brother on. Finally Naois turned to meet Deirdre, and she kissed him three times. He carried her on his shoulder to Scotland

where they lived in a tower.

When the appointed time for Connachar to marry Deirdre came, the king schemed to take her from Naois by force. He sent Ferchar Mac Ro and his sons, Daring Drop, Hardy Holly and Fiallan the Fair, to invite the lovers to a feast at court. When she heard the news Deirdre predicted disaster, but Naois insisted upon returning to Ireland. Deirdre sang two songs of warning, one of which describes the vision of the three white doves with drops of honey in their beaks, but here the description is expanded to include also three fierce hawks, three black ravens, and a yew tree. Deirdre wept and sang her farewell to Alba.

When the party arrived in Emain King Connachar sent the brothers and Deirdre to a house where he kept the Amhusgs, horribly fierce wild men and cannibals, but Naois killed all fifteen score and fifteen of them.

Connachar sent his foster-mother to see if Deirdre was still beautiful. When she reported that Deirdre had lost her fairness, he sent Gelban Grednach. Naois saw Gelban looking through the bicker-hole of the door, threw dice through the hole and knocked Gelban's eye right through the back of his head. Nevertheless, Gelban reported to Connachar, "But of a truth and verity, although he put out even my eye, it were my desire to remain looking at her with the other eye" (Carmichael, p. 134). So,

Connachar sent three hundred warriors to kidnap Deirdre and kill the others. Daring Drop killed one-third of the king's men before he succumbed to Connachar's bribe of a free bridge and changed sides. The king sent three hundred more heroes, but Hardy Holly killed two-thirds of these before he followed his brother's example and accepted a bribe from Connachar. Fiallan the Fair killed three-thirds of three hundred more heroes and refused to be bribed by the king. Rather, he returned to his father with the news that Naois and the others were safe.

The four set out to return to Alba. When Connachar heard this he sent for his best druid, Duanan Gacha, a magician. First, the druid placed before the Sons a magic wood through which no man could go, but the Sons marched through "without halt or hesitation." Next, the druid placed before them a gray sea, but the Sons swam across. Finally, the druid caused the sea to freeze into hard, rocky knobs, "the sharpness of sword being on the one edge and the poison power of adders on the other" (Carmichael, p. 137).

Exhausted, Ardan died on Naois' shoulder, then Ailleán also. At the sight of his dead brothers Naois died of a broken heart. The druid dried the flood, and the three brothers lay dead on a grassy plain with Deirdre crying over them. Connachar ordered a pit to be dug for burial; Deirdre jumped into the grave and died beside

Naois. Connachar ordered her body to be raised from the grave and buried on the other side of the loch. A fir shoot grew from Deirdre's grave, and one from Naois', and the two shoots formed a knot above the loch. "The king ordered the shoots to be cut down, and this was done twice, until, on the third time, the wife whom the king had married caused him to stop his work of evil and his vengeance on the remains of the dead" (Carmichael, p. 138).²⁹

The Carmichael version was a major influence on Lady Augusta Gregory's version published in 1902, perhaps the most important source for the major twentieth century dramatic treatments of the Deirdre legend. Lady Gregory was familiar with all the major versions of the tale, as well as many folk variants, and her treatment is a composite of the most dramatic episodes from each. Thus, without adding any new elements she skillfully produced the most complete telling possible.

In the first half of her story Lady Gregory combined details from the classical version and the Carmichael folk version. For example, Deirdre's father is Fedlimid, harper to King Conchubar, as in the classical version, but he plays the role of Colum Cruiteir, Deirdre's father in the Carmichael version:

Cathbad went out of the house for a while, and when he came back he said: "Had you ever any children?" "I never had," said Fedlimid, "and the wife I have had none, and we have no hope ever to have any; there is no one with

us but only myself and my wife." "That puts wonder on me," said Cathbad, "for I see by Druid signs that 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. And great heroes and bright candles of the Gael will lose their lives because of her." "Is that the foretelling you have made for me?" said Fedlimid, and there was anger on him, for he thought the Druid was mocking him; "if that is all you can say, you can keep it for yourself; it is little I think of your share of knowledge."³⁰

Likewise, the episode with the King of Scotland, absent from Carmichael, Lady Gregory took from the classical version. In general, though, Lady Gregory's story of Deirdre from birth through elopement parallels Carmichael and includes the episode of the hunter who found Deirdre in the forest. In both Carmichael and Gregory Deirdre has begun to assume a new aspect: she has acquired an innocence and gentleness conspicuously absent in the Deirdre of the earliest manuscripts. In Lady Gregory's version especially, this meekness makes Deirdre more victim than a heroine. Naoise, however, assumes once again the heroic character of the Glenmasan manuscript:

But when Naoise went to the court of the king, his clothes were splendid among the great men of the army of Scotland, a cloak of bright purple, rightly shaped, with a fringe of bright gold; a coat of satin with fifty hooks of silver; a brooch on which were a hundred polished gems; a gold-hilted sword in his hand, two blue-green spears of bright points, a dagger with the colour of yellow gold on it, and a hilt of silver (Gregory, p. 99).

Lady Gregory includes several other details not found

in the best-known versions of the tale, probably taken from the many folk versions with which she was familiar. She mentions Deirdre and Naoise's two children, Gaiar and Aebgreine, whom they put into the care of Manannan, Son of the Sea. Another new element is the discourse between the king and the Sons. After Conchubar had attacked the Sons in the House of the Red Branch he speaks to the brothers, and the Sons, here as in many other versions Conchubar's nephews,³¹ remind the king of the many reasons he has for sparing their lives, for they had rescued their uncle from danger many times. The battle at the House of the Red Branch, the fire, and the enchantment are all taken from the romantic version, but one of Deirdre's laments adds a new detail: she mentions the daughter of the lord of Duntreon (the same lord with whom the Sons took shelter in the Dottin folk version) to whom Naoise had shown some attention. When Deirdre heard of it she was so filled with jealousy that she set herself adrift in a boat; Ainnle and Ardan saved her before she was lost. After Naoise's death, however, Deirdre had no more jealousy for her rival: "Och! if she knew to-night, Naoise to be under a covering of clay, it is she would cry her fill, and it is I would cry along with her" (Gregory, p. 112).

From Conchubar's feast to the Sons' burial Gregory's telling generally follows the romantic version with some details from folk versions added, but with much taken from

the Glenmasan variant, including the scene in which Naoise refuses to take Deirdre's advice: "It is seldom until now, Naoise, that yourself and myself were not of the one mind" (Gregory, p. 105). But Deirdre's death scene differs from the romantic version; in it Gregory probably followed a fairly common folk variation.³² After the Sons had been buried Deirdre walked along the strand "like one that had lost her wits." She was given shelter by a fisherman and his wife, but she would neither eat nor sleep. Later she wandered onto the strand again, met a carpenter, and traded her ring for his knife. She stabbed herself and then threw the knife out to sea so no one would be blamed for her death. Conchubar found her body, lamented her death and the deaths of his nephews, then buried her beside the sons of Usnach,

The most specific contribution of Lady Gregory's version of the Deirdre legend was stylistic rather than formal: she was the first major Irish writer to develop a literary Anglo-Irish dialect, that distinctive rhythm which marks much of the Irish Revival. But her general contribution is equally important. She intended her prose tellings of Old Irish tales to be sources for Irish plays to be presented in Irish theatres,³³ and her Deirdre story became just that. It was an important source for both Yeats and Synge, although both changed the characterization of Deirdre significantly.

Chapter 2: Minor Dramatic Versions of the Literary Renaissance

In 1890 Yeats wrote:

The first thing needful if an Irish literature more elaborate and intense than our fine but primitive ballads and novels is to come into being is that readers and writers alike should really know the imaginative periods of Irish history. It is not needful that they should understand them with scholars' accuracy, but they should know them with the heart, so as not to be repelled by what is strange and outré in poems or plays or stories taken therefrom. The most imaginative of all our periods was the heroic age and the few centuries that followed it and preceded the Norman invasion--a time of vast mysterious shadows, like the clouds heaped round a sun rising from the sea.¹

Yeats' idea, that the Irish should look to their heroic literature for inspiration, came to be one of the tenets of the Irish Literary Revival. Supporters of the movement hoped that the Irish people would find a sense of pride and unity in their ancient Gaelic literature, a heritage which the Anglo-Irish class had overlooked until late in the nineteenth century. Later, in 1898, Yeats' belief in this idea led to the founding of the Irish Literary Theatre, an organization dedicated "to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland": "We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism."² The founders of the literary movement, notably Yeats and Lady

Gregory, hoped to revive and popularize the ancient heroic stories and by so doing revive the spirit of the Irish people.

The Deirdre legend was one of the most popular of the ancient tales rewritten for modern audiences. Although the first Deirdre play of the period between 1900 and 1910, The House of Usna by Fiona Macleod,³ was not presented by the Irish Literary Theatre, it can be considered a work of the Irish Renaissance since it clearly advocates the ideals expressed by Yeats and Lady Gregory, and also since the founders of the Literary Theatre recognized Macleod's work as sympathetic to their own goals. Lady Gregory mentions him in her diary of 1898: "[Yeats] is very keen about taking or building a little theatre somewhere in the suburbs to produce romantic drama, his own plays, Edward Martyn's, one of Bridges', and he is trying to stir up Standish O'Grady and Fiona Macleod to write some."⁴

Perhaps Macleod's dramatic treatment of the Deirdre legend was a result of Yeats' enthusiasm, but the play was produced in London, not Dublin. One of the reasons Macleod's play was not presented by the Literary Theatre might be that it is not good drama. A critic who saw the performance in London commented: "It had beauty and it had atmosphere, two very rare things on the stage, but I did not feel that 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,"⁵ a criticism which sounds much like the comment on Celtic literature that Matthew Arnold made half a century before. Thus, Macleod's play demonstrates that "easy sentiment" which had come to be associated with Celtic writing, a quality which Yeats and Lady Gregory denounced. The House of Usna is part of the "Celtic Twilight," a nostalgic, sentimental romanticizing of the ancient literature.

However unoriginal in tone, The House of Usna is interesting in its particular treatment of the Deirdre story. As Macleod explains in the prefatory note, the action takes place four years after Deirdre's elopement and one year after Naysha's murder. Cormac Conlingas, Concobar's son, has seceded, and with other champions of the Red Branch has joined the army of Queen Maeve, which at the time of the play is marching against Ulster. Cormac suddenly decides to rejoin Concobar, but on the way is delayed by his love for Eilidn, wife of Cravetheen the Harper. When Cravetheen finds Cormac with his wife, he sets fire to the house and burns them both to death. Concobar is "already, as was presaged, brought to the verge of madness by his thwarted and inconsolable passion for Deirdre, and by his unkingly and treacherous revenge and its outcome" (Poems and Dramas, p. 401). All this action takes place before the play begins, but the king has not yet heard of his

son's death.

Scene 1 is a dialogue between Coel, an old blind harper, and Cravetheen, who is running from the Ultonian warriors. Cravetheen recounts the story of Deirdre and the story of Cormac and Eilidh, and then is captured by Concobar's warriors. Scene 2 is devoted to the ravings of the mad king who repeatedly asks "Where is Deirdre?" and is answered by his page, who pipes melancholy notes on his reed pipe throughout the scene, that "Deirdre is dead? Deirdre the Beautiful is dead, is dead!" The rest of the scene is a dialogue between Duach the Druid and Concobar. They mourn for Deirdre and for Concobar's mother, Nessa, another beautiful queen. Duach's lament, "The beauty of the world is now as an old song that is sung" (Poems and Dramas, p. 417), strikes the major theme of the play. The heroism and beauty of the Golden Age are past, but Concobar and Duach dream of lost times and the beauty that is gone, and their dreams are more real to them than their loss; "The dead, old wisdom, the wind, dreams--these speak. All else are troubled murmurs, confused cries, echoes of echoes" (Poems and Dramas, p. 419).

The entire scene is a long lament for things past: Deirdre, Naysha, the warriors of the Red Branch who left Ulster, Cormac, Nessa, Emain Macha; and inserted into all this longing for the past is the prophecy that Eiré will live again when her people rediscover the spirit of the

Golden Age. This theme of past greatness and future re-birth is evident in Macleod's version of Cathba's prophecy:

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. But before the end she shall be a queenly land again, and the nations shall bow before her as the soul of peoples born anew. For into all the nations of the world, he said, Eiré shall die, but shall live again. She shall be the soul of the nations (Poems and Dramas, p. 423).

Macleod has added a theme here which is entirely absent from earlier versions of the legend, a theme which obviously reflects the political and cultural issues in Ireland at the turn of the century.

In the short last scene, which adds very little to the play, Cravethen is sent out to be executed. In his death cry Concobar hears the vengeance of the House of Usna, and is left utterly defeated. Concobar is finished, but not Eiré, for Duach has prophesied that the fate of the king is not the fate of Ireland: "Through no king can Eiré become one nation and great, but only through the kinghood of her sons and daughters. In the end, when all are royal of soul, Eiré shall be the first of the nations of the world" (Poems and Dramas, p. 427).

Macleod's message, obviously, is that Ireland has lost the noble beauty she had in the past, but that dreams of

that beauty are still alive; when they are recalled and recreated Ireland will regain her "Ancient idealism." Such ideas were the basis for the Celtic Revival, but Macleod's play is far too didactic, expository, and uneventful to make good drama. Concobar's raving in the forest seems to be patterned on Lear's scene on the heath, but there is really no comparison, for, unlike Lear, Concobar learns nothing from his experience; he is the same pathetic figure throughout, longing for the past and unable to recognize his own blunders or take responsibility for them. Deirdre herself is merely a wistful symbol of past beauty destroyed. Macleod's work may echo the ideals of the Literary Movement, but his drama misses the point. Rather than recreating the dynamic, willful characters of the old sagas, he has given us a watered-down, whimpering old king full of sentimental memories. In no way does his play live up to Yeats' goal: to recreate for the audience the vitality of "the imaginative periods of Irish history."

AE's Deirdre, the first Deirdre play staged by the Irish National Theatre Society,⁶ reflects the same belief that revival of the ancient heroic literature would ennoble the modern Irish spirit, but AE's play reflects the author's mystical beliefs as well. However, his is a brand of mysticism which allows these two ideas to unite into one cause:

The leitmotiv of "AE's" poetry, and the

fundamental postulate of his philosophy, is the origin of man, the gradual falling away of the human race from its heroic destinies, and its present enslavement to materialism. It is only when he is aroused by some noble ideal, or some great memory, that man rises to a realization of the divinity that is in him. His constant endeavour is to fan this divine spark into flame. Hence his love and admiration for the heroic figures of Celtic history and legend, when man carried latent within him all the potentialities of nature, and his faculties were not diminished by specialization.⁷

To AE, then, the old legends came trailing clouds of glory, and his mission as a modern Irish writer was to recapture the heroism of the Irish Golden Age. But, like Macleod, AE failed to recreate the heroism of the legends. The characterization, the action, and the language of his play are all less than we might hope for in heroic drama.

The one exception to the general failure of the play is its structure, which is simple and not ineffective. All the action rests on the opening lines in which Deirdre describes the spring as flowing "from the lips of the harp," and Lavarcam responds: "The harp has but three notes; and, after sleep and laughter, the last sound is of weeping."⁸ The three notes of the play correspond to these three notes--sleep, laughter, and weeping; as well as to the three seasons--spring, summer, and autumn; and to the three major stages of Deirdre's life--her isolated childhood in the glen, her life with Naisi in Alba, and her death in Emain Macha. Thus, AE shows some skill by

establishing these correspondences in the structure of the play, and also by integrating references to Irish traditions, such as the harp, into a story which originally made no mention of them.

But AE was not a professional playwright; Deirdre was his first and only dramatic work, and it shows the marks of an amateur. One of its major faults lies in the failure to create intensity in the most dramatic moments, resulting in the impression that AE is merely repeating a well-known story in dramatic form. In fact, the subtitle calls the work a legend in three acts rather than a play. But the most injurious shortcoming is the failure to produce characters with depth, who respond to their experience and grow as a result of it.

Lavarcam, perhaps the most interesting character in the play, is a typical example of AE's failure to produce convincing, forceful characters. Inexplicably, Herbert V. Fackler, in his introduction calls her a "super-realist, seeing always the truth through her keen insight into spiritual and visionary mysteries."⁹ He sees her as a choral figure, "important to the play's development, for the other major characters choose consistently to follow their visions and suppress reality; thus she becomes a Cassandra figure, unheeded prophetess of reality which breaks illusions."¹⁰ This sounds more like a description of the traditional Lavarcam than the one AE has created;

the druidess of AE's play seems to be thriving on a reputation which she can no longer uphold. So many of her prophecies turn out to be mistaken, that the valid ones seem to happen by accident, and we are forced to distrust her prophetic ability as well as her wisdom. Her first prophecy of doom, in the harp speech quoted above, is more a platitudinous folk saying than an inspired vision, especially since it is followed several speeches later by a false prophecy to Concoibar: "King, your mercy will return to you, and if any of the Red Branch fall, you will not fall" (AE, Deirdre, p. 11).--shallow flattery, not a vision of the future. Lavarcam, then, in spite of her reputation in the earliest versions of the legend as Concoibar's powerful satirist, in AE's version, even though she is called Druidess, seems merely a simple old woman who fawns on the king and dotes on Deirdre. In fact, Deirdre has more wisdom than her old protectress, for she recognizes something sinister in the king which Lavarcam, in her simplicity, cannot see:

Deirdre. I fear this stony king with his
implacable eyes.

Lavarcam. He is implacable only in his desire
for justice.

Deirdre. No! No! There is a hunger in his
eyes for I know not what.

Lavarcam. He is the wisest king who ever sat on
the chair of Macha (AE, Deirdre, p. 12).

Like her counterparts in other romantic treatments of the legend, Lavarcam does not warn Deirdre of the prophecy or

try to thwart its fulfilment; rather, she accepts the prophecy as the will of the gods and tells Deirdre that she must go with Naisi: "where he goes you must go, and he must fly afar to live with you" (AE, Deirdre, p. 14). Deirdre, not Lavarcam, is the only realist in the play, for it is Deirdre who warns Naisi to leave her when she finds that he is risking his life by being in her company; Lavarcam, however, convinces them that they must flee to Alba together.

Inconsistently, and in spite of her apparent shortsightedness, the druidess does make two true warnings. The first is addressed to Naisi: "Do not cloud your heart with dreams of a false honour" (AE, Deirdre, p. 15), but he does just that when he returns with Deirdre from Alba in Act 3. The second true prophecy is the curse on Concoibar in Act 3, traditionally the words of Cathba:

Do you think to bind men together when you have broken their hearts? On, fool, who would conquer all Eri! I see the Red Branch scattered and Eri rent assunder, and thy memory a curse after many thousand years. The gods have overthrown thy dominion, proud king, with the last sigh from this dead child; and of the pity for her they will build up an eternal kingdom in the spirit of man (AE, Deirdre, p. 31).

Yet this authoritative speech comes after Lavarcam's confession to Deirdre that she herself is responsible for Deirdre's return to Emain Macha and Concoibar's jurisdiction:

Oh, Deirdre, my child! my darling! I have let love and longing blind my eyes. I left the mountain home of the gods for Emain Macha, and to plot for your return. I--I deceived the king. I told him your loveliness was passed, and the time of prophecy gone by. I thought when you came all would be well. I thought wildly, for love had made a blindness in my heart, and now the king has discovered the deceit; and, Oh! he has gone away in wrath, and soon his terrible hand will fall! (AE, Deirdre, p. 26).

AE has made Deirdre's foster-mother an old dotard indeed, for out of longing to see Deirdre she deceived Concobar by telling him that the prophecy was no longer true.¹¹ So in AE's drama it is Lavarcam who is immediately responsible for the deaths of the lovers; unless we believe, as is hinted, that Lavarcam's blind judgment is really a result of the gods' intervention. Thus, as Deirdre was the agent of fate in the classical version, here Lavarcam is the one who blindly manipulates the action. Still, the old druidess is not a convincing character. She is assumed to be wise, as tradition dictates, but repeatedly she shows poor judgment.

However, if we choose to believe in Lavarcam's fatalism--"My darling, it was fate, and I was not to blame" (AE, Deirdre, p. 30)--then we must believe that all the characters are subject completely to the will of the gods, or fate; therefore fate, and not the individual's free will, is the governing factor in the drama. Here AE's mystical beliefs become important to the meaning of the

play. The action has been fated from the beginning, not as Macha's punishment of Concoibar as in the classical version, but as part of a spiritual plan. Deirdre is a sacrificial figure, and her story will inspire all those who hear it. Indeed, some of Deirdre's speeches support this idea, and Deirdre, in spite of her apparent innocence, has more insight than any of the other characters. Throughout the play runs the idea that Deirdre and Naisi are destined to be sacrifices to the spirit of the Gael. At times they feel premonitions of their fate:

Naisi! You remember when we fled that night; as I lay by thy side--thou wert yet strange to me--I heard voices speaking out of the air. The great ones were invisible, yet their voices sounded solemnly. "Our brother and our sister do not remember," one said; and another spake: "They will serve the purpose all the same," and there was more which I could not understand, but I knew we were to bring some great gift to the Gael. Yesternight, in a dream, I heard the voices again, and I cannot recall what they said; but as I woke from sleep my pillow was wet with tears falling softly, as out of another world, and I saw before me thy face, pale and still, Naisi, and the king, with his implacable eyes. Oh, pulse of my heart, I know the great gift we shall give to the Gael will be a memory to pity and sigh over, and I shall be the priestess of tears.

(AE, Deirdre, pp. 18-19)

After the king's dire intentions are obvious, and Lavarcam has confessed her folly, Deirdre recognizes the signs of her fate working itself out to its preordained end: "It was not love made you all blind, but the high gods have deserted us, and the demons draw us into a trap. They

have lured us from Alba, and they hover here above us in red clouds--cloud upon cloud--and await the sacrifice" (AE, Deirdre, p. 26). She sees that "no skill my avail" in a game set with fate, for "the victory is already fixed" (AE, Deirdre, p. 27).

Thus, all AE's characters are controlled by fate, as are the characters of the classical version, but AE has added a new sense of purpose to their destiny, reflecting his belief in the redemptive powers of the ancient legends, by making Deirdre and Naisi sacrifices to the spiritual future of the Irish race. In a sense, his explicit statement of this purpose, and his characters' recognition of it, detracts from their tragedy, and he fails to create characters worthy of their sacrificial role. Lavarcam is an old fool; Concoabar is treated superficially; Naisi is ignorant, thickheaded and dull, and Deirdre is pitifully powerless. AE, then, like Macleod, has used the play as a demonstration of his own beliefs, in AE's case mysticism as well as nationalism. But, again like Macleod, he fails to develop the drama through either action or character.

Eva Gore-Booth fails in a similar way. The Buried Life of Deirdre, written about 1908, is an extreme example of the mysticism which some writers of the Revival cultivated; indeed, Miss Gore-Booth almost completely separated the Deirdre story from its original context and saturated it with her own mystical ideas. Like AE, who influenced

her work,¹² she uses these ideas to explain and motivate the action.

The play is based on the theories of reincarnation and karma--that one soul inhabits many bodies throughout the ages and that the actions of one lifetime determine the soul's fate in its next existence. These mystical beliefs, more Eastern than Celtic,¹³ are superimposed on the Deirdre legend to produce something quite removed from the original versions. None of the oldest manuscripts give any hint that Deirdre's suffering is the penalty for wickedness in a former existence,¹⁴ but this assumption is the basis of Miss Gore-Booth's drama. Her theme is the conflict of the force of freedom in spiritual love, represented by the Celtic god Mannanan, and the force of exclusive, jealous passion, represented by the god Angus. In Celtic cosmogony Mannanan is the divine imagination from which all conscious life springs. Angus is a lower deity who is the root of every energy--love, desire, and chemical affinity.¹⁵ Material creation originates in spiritual energy, but as this energy takes on material form it becomes less spiritual, more diversified and unharmonious. In The Buried Life of Deirdre Mannanan represents the unity of the spiritual source of creation--"freedom and universality of loving" (Gore-Booth, p. x.); he is identified with Deirdre. Angus, a deity farther removed from the spiritual source, identified with

earthly passion and division from the one, is the god Concoobar worships. When exclusive passion, or Angus, is united with the spirituality of Mannanan, a higher spiritual state is attained; this is the aim of what Miss Gore-Booth calls "the law of Evolution" (Gore-Booth, p. x), and one might experience many incarnations before reaching this spiritual unity. The Buried Life of Deirdre dramatizes Deirdre's final stage on this spiritual journey.

As in other versions of the legend sorrow has been predicted for Deirdre, but in this play the suffering has a definite purpose, which is revealed to Deirdre in a vision. She sees herself in a former life as an old, jealous king standing with a bloody sword beside a wounded and pleading woman. Deirdre, in her former incarnation as the king, killed this woman out of jealous passion, and this deed is the reason for the action of the play. As the author puts it:

Her death and Naisi's are claimed as a sacrifice by that strange law, whose victims are its only conquerors--that law under which pain is a condition of survival--the law of Evolution. It is by virtue of this sacrifice that the passionate pilgrim of Angus becomes one with the mysterious light and untroubled waters of Mannanan--the Spirit of the One (Gore-Booth, p. x).

The plot and structure of the play are similar to AE's Deirdre: act 1 takes place outside Deirdre's dun where she meets Naisi; act 2 takes place in Alba, where

Fergus comes with a false message of peace, and act 3 is in the dun at Emain where the lovers are killed. The mysticism which saturates the play produces a subdued tone, in spite of the passion, danger, and violence, and it affects the characterization of Deirdre, as well. She understands and accepts her fate completely: "Pain and death are not punishment. They open the eyes of the blind" (Gore-Booth, p. 57). She is not a weak or subdued character, as in AE's play, nor is she passionately rebellious: she aptly describes herself in her reply to Concoibar's demands, "I do not defy you. I am of those who do not defy, yet cannot obey" (Gore-Booth, p. 10). This Deirdre is more substantial than AE's, but the revelation of her character is more an exposition of the author's religious beliefs than a conflict which the character feels. The legend is entirely transformed in theme and tone, and it loses in the translation. A dying Deirdre ends the play with a prayer to Mannanan: "To those who have fought many wars, give thou peace in the end. To those who have lived many lives, give thou Life, Mannanan" (Gore-Booth, p. 59). This curtain speech gives some indication of how far Miss Gore-Booth has taken the legend from its original context; in the old versions the story ends with Cathba's curse on Concoibar and Fergus's bloody revenge. Miss Gore-Booth produced an interpretation of the legend interesting in its uniqueness, but dramatically unsuccessful..

Like the other minor versions its theme is too glib and its characters too shallow.

In fact, all three minor versions have in common an almost crusading quality. Rather than vitalize the myth and fulfil its potential as drama these authors have enervated it by using it as a structure on which to hang their own beliefs; all three fail to fuse successfully their own individual visions with the essence of the myth itself, to find that affinity of theme, structure, and language which produces excellence in literature. However, these plays, which miss the mark of good drama, provide an enlightening comparison with the plays of Yeats and Synge.

Chapter 3: Major Dramatic Versions of the Literary Renaissance

Deirdre matures as a tragic heroine in the plays of Yeats and Synge; the character who was a mere shadow in Sharp's The House of Usna, a pitiful victim in AE's Deirdre, and a projection of Eva Gore-Booth's mysticism in The Buried Life of Deirdre realizes her potential as a tragic figure in Yeats' one-act play Deirdre and in Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows. These playwrights, two of the greatest writers of the Revival, see the legend from very different perspectives, and dramatize it by very different methods, but both create a character worthy of the title heroic.

Yeats, in fact, developed a detailed theory of tragic drama and the tragic hero. He believed that drama should be stripped down to the bare essentials of plot and character, that the methods of realism should be subordinated to the subtleties of rhythm, allusion, and symbol, for these are the best means of heightening the mood and describing the emotional conflict which to Yeats was the proper subject of tragedy. The evolution of this theory can be traced in the plays, the first of which differ greatly from the last. Deirdre is a transitional work which stands between the more conventional early plays and the ritualistic, highly stylized later ones. It was produced at the Abbey Theatre on November 26, 1906.

Critical comment on the play ranges from one extreme to the other. Yeats is attacked on the one hand for following his dramatic theories too well--Harold Bloom complains that Deirdre "fatally lacks individuality"¹--and on the other hand for not following his theories well enough--Peter Ure finds that Deirdre shows too much "individuality" and "personal energy" to conform to Yeats' definition of a tragic hero.² However, if Yeats' theories of theatre, character, and the tragic hero are examined, and if Deirdre is accepted as the transitional work it is, Deirdre may rightfully take her place with Seanchan and Cuchulain as a Yeatsian tragic figure of the first order.

In his plays Yeats was concerned mainly with exploring the heroic vision. He did not necessarily follow the traditional technique of demonstrating the beginning, middle, and end of a plot because he was not interested in the conflict of personalities or with "action" in the traditional sense. Rather, Yeats wished to dramatize the tragic vision and the passion which enable the hero to adhere to his vision. Yeats' plays are, in a way, an exploration of a heroic otherworld, a world of heroic vision which is always in conflict with the natural world. The real conflict and action of Yeats' plays occurs within the mind of the hero; it is the conflict of the real and the ideal: "it takes place in the depths of the soul and one of the antagonists does not wear a shape

known to the world or speak a mortal tongue. It is the struggle of the dream with the world--it is only possible when we transcend circumstances and ourself, and the greater the contest, the greater the art."³ Such internal longing for an ideal is usually expressed in the lyric mode, but for Yeats the vision of an ideal was heroic vision, and a passionate insistence on upholding such an ideal in spite of its impossibility in the world was the essence of tragic conflict. Yeats wanted to dramatize this quest which was for him at the center of heroic tragedy. His idea of heroic vision is closely related to the theory of the mask, and it represents a conflict that Yeats believed was central to human personality; he chose to represent it in the drama, the most intense and immediate of art forms.

What attracts me to drama is that it is, in the most obvious way, what all the arts are upon a last analysis. A farce and a tragedy are alike in this, that they are a moment of intense life. An action is taken out of all other actions; it is reduced to its simplest form, or at any rate to as simple a form as it can be brought to without our losing the sense of its place in the world. The characters that are involved in it are freed from everything that is not a part of that action; and whether it is, as in the less important kinds of drama, a mere bodily activity, a hair-breadth escape or the like, or as it is in the more important kinds, an activity of the souls of the characters, it is an energy, an eddy of life purified from everything but itself. The dramatist must picture life in action, with an unpreoccupied mind, as the musician pictures her in sound and the sculptor in form.⁴

Such an idea of drama called for abstraction and suggestion rather than an imitation of "the passing mode of society." "After all, is not the greatest play not the play that gives the sensation of an external reality but the play in which there is the greatest abundance of life itself, of the reality that is in our minds?"⁵ Such reality can be expressed only indirectly through symbol, allusion, rhythm and movement. Yeats' plays are a series of experiments to discover just how far the playwright can go in reducing dramatic action to its simplest form.

In "An Introduction for My Plays" Yeats lists his two dominant desires: he wanted "vivid words," and "to get rid of irrelevant movement--the stage must become still that words might keep all their vividness."⁶ He wanted a drama more ritualistic than realistic, a drama which appealed to emotion and imagination rather than intellect. He rejected realistic action because it "does not permit that stilling and slowing which turns the imagination in upon itself."⁷ The images and rhythm of the poetry were to be the most important aspect of the plays; the movement of the actors was to be simple and symbolic, the set simple and suggestive, to allow the imagination free reign.

As well as elaborate sets and grandiose gesture, Yeats rejected "the clear and logical construction which seems necessary if one is to succeed on the modern stage."⁸ Instead, he sought what he called "emotion of multitude,"

a strengthening and expansion of theme through allusion and variation. "The Greek drama has got the emotion of multitude from its chorus, which called up famous sorrows, even all the gods and all heroes, to witness, as it were, some well-ordered fable, some action separated but for this from all but itself."⁹ Like the poetry and symbolic movement, allusion and subplot should be designed to overleap the intellect and stir the imagination without letting it wander, to enrich the theme without complicating it. To call upon the emotion of multitude is another method of abstraction; it removes the action from the particular and strengthens its universal aspects.

Like plot and movement, character or personality must be reduced to the barest essentials in tragedy. Yeats disagreed with the dogma that dramatic action is always a conflict between character and character, because to Yeats real tragic action takes place within the hero himself. Character, and here Yeats means personality traits peculiar to the individual, belongs to comedy; in tragedy it is replaced by lyric feeling or passion.¹⁰ Comedy focuses on the particular, tragedy on the universal or archetypal. "Tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man, and it is upon these dykes comedy keeps house."¹¹ Tragedy must awaken emotion of multitude, reverie, passion, dreaming; it must be removed from the daily world: "In mainly

tragic art one distinguishes devices to exclude or lessen character, to diminish the power of that daily mood, to cheat or blind its too clear perception. If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and into the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind us of vast passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edge of trance."¹² The persons on the stage become universal figures, for their function as tragic figures is to shed the particular.

What, then, is left to this Yeatsian tragic hero who lacks character? Mainly energy and a passionate adherence to his ideal. The conflict of the ideal vision with experience in the world reveals the passionate intensity and self assertion of the hero, and it is in the process of this conflict that the hero sheds his character; he sacrifices the particular for the ideal. Tragic heroes are "those men and women . . . who made their death a ritual of passion; for what is passion but the straining of man's being against some obstacle that abstracts its unity?"¹³

Yeats makes Deirdre's story a dramatization of this straining against an obstacle. It is a record of the conflict with herself which leads her to assume a heroic role. The suspense in the play is not a result of external action; it is evident from the first that Deirdre and Naoise have stepped into a fatal trap, and the outcome is

no surprise. The suspense is created by the conflict in Deirdre's mind; the major question is whether she will be a tragic or merely a romantic heroine. As John Rees Moore puts it, "Deirdre's struggle to be a heroine is the essential action of the play."¹⁴

The structure of the play is ingenious. Yeats eliminates all unessential details in order to place all the emphasis on Deirdre's personal conflict. The play is based on Lady Gregory's composite translation of the legend in Cuchulain of Muirthemne,¹⁵ but the structure and emphasis in the play are quite different. Yeats reduces the long action of the tale to the last few hours before the lovers' death. The one-act play opens in Conchubar's guest-house before the arrival of Deirdre and Naoise; three musicians sit before the fire, discussing the story of Deirdre's birth and elopement. This technique of summarizing the beginning and middle of the story for the audience also serves, in the first lines of the play, to summon up the emotion of multitude which sets the play at a distance from everyday life, in the "rich, far-wandering, many-imaged life of the half-seen world."¹⁶

I have a story right, my wanderers,
That has so mixed with fable in our songs
That all seemed fabulous.¹⁷

As the musicians tell the tale the audience is drawn into the fable and at the same time becomes aware of a feeling of foreboding. When Fergus enters excitedly and

speaks to the musicians his words are, unwittingly, a prediction of the lovers' fate:

You can praise love, you'll have the best of luck,
For there'll be two, before the night is in,
That bargained for their love, and paid for it
All that men value. You have but the time
To weigh a happy music with a sad,
To find what is most pleasing to a lover,
Before the son of Usna and his queen
Have passed this threshold (ll. 38-45).

The threshold the lovers will pass is death; they will bargain for their love, but will shed "all that men value" rather than compromise with Conchubar.

The conversation that follows, between Fergus and the musicians, is full of foreboding. The allusions to Lugaidh Redstripe and his lady, who "perished wretchedly," and the musicians' melancholy song thicken the already ominous atmosphere, as does the appearance at the window of the dark-faced men in barbaric dress. The musicians recognize these strangers as assassins, but Fergus, in his innocence, takes them to be merchants. Thus, a contrast is set up between the musicians' intuitive, expansive wisdom--they know "the stories of the world" (l. 293)--and Fergus's limited insight and simple-minded trust in Conchubar's good nature. When Deirdre and Naoise arrive it is apparent that Deirdre shares the wisdom of the musicians and foresees her fate, while Naoise, like Fergus, trusts in Conchubar's honor, although not with Fergus's simple confidence. Deirdre is already aware of the con-

Here is worse treachery than the seamew suffered,
For she but died and mixed into the dust
Of her dear comrade, but I am to live
And lie in the one bed with him I hate.
(ll. 280-83)

And again, when they are hopelessly surrounded Naisi suggests that, like the legendary figures, they sit quietly and play chess while they wait for Conchubar's henchmen. Deirdre follows his lead and replies,

He's in the right, though I have not been born
Of the cold, haughty waves, my veins being hot,
And though I have loved better than that queen,
I'll have as quiet fingers on the board.
(ll. 457-60)

. . .

for naught's lacking
But a good end to the long, cloudy day.
(ll. 466-67)

But after the musicians' mournful song she cannot continue playing so heroic a part:

I cannot go on playing like that woman
That had but the cold blood of the sea in her veins.
(ll. 486-87)

Deirdre's story is more dramatic, in the Yeatsian sense, than the story of the seamew, because Deirdre feels more internal conflict. The seamew was not entirely human, and therefore influenced by some supernatural or other-worldly influence; Deirdre's decision is entirely her own, not the result of possession by some magical power.

From the beginning she has sensed her fate, and she tries throughout the play to find a way to escape it or to confront it. She wants to follow Naoise's heroic example,

but she realizes that even he is not entirely sure of himself. When Naisi says he is willing to face death to preserve his honor she replies, "You speak from the lips out,/And I am pleading for your life and mine" (ll. 315-15). Unlike Naisi, she acknowledges the conflict she feels; she wants to behave heroically, but she cannot give up so easily the only life she knows:

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.
(ll. 494-99)

When Conchubar appears, however, it is Naoise, not Deirdre, who fails to maintain the heroic calm they sought. For a moment Deirdre appears to have accepted their fate:

Musician. And though you have suffered all for
 mere love's sake
 You's live your lives again.
Deirdre. Even this last hour.
 (ll. 538-39)

But at the sight of Naoise captured and threatened she falters once more. She tries desperately to convince Naoise to compromise and so escape a tragic death, "For what am I, to be remembered always?" (l. 610). The reality of seeing Naoise killed is more fearful than the loss of the lovers' ideal. Now it is Naoise who adheres to the heroic vision, while Deirdre continues to plead for his life. Not until after Naoise's death does Deirdre accept her role as tragic heroine. Her mood changes

suddenly; at the moment of acceptance she becomes calm. She deceives Conchubar and escapes him a second time, this time through death.

The suspense in the last lines is external, only a question of whether Deirdre can succeed in deceiving Conchubar. The conflict within herself has ceased because she has accepted tragedy. Perhaps this is what Yeats meant when he said that tragedy was related to changes of state: "The soul knows its changes of state alone, and I think the motives of tragedy are not related to action but to changes of state."¹⁸ This change in Deirdre at Naoise's death must have been significant to Yeats because, according to Lennox Robinson, "Yeats used to say about Deirdre's performance--'Red-heat up to Naoise's death, white-heat after he is dead'."¹⁹

Deirdre's tragedy is her shedding of character, the conflict leading to acceptance of her tragic fate. Her gesture would be more poignant if she could acknowledge her tragic role in a final speech, but because it is necessary to deceive Conchubar in order for her to die with Naoise she can speak only indirectly in an equivocal speech to the musicians. Throughout the play there is much emphasis on her desperate changes of attitude; she tries every way she knows to evade her fate. She tries to influence Naoise by arousing his jealousy; she threatens to destroy her beauty; she sends Fergus for help; she

pleads with Conchubar. In contrast, her acceptance of her tragic fate has little emphasis in the action.

The imagery, however, indicates a steady progression from a feeling of hunted helplessness to one of transcendence and victory.²⁰ In the major series of images Deirdre is compared to a bird. At first she is fearful and hunted; "She has the heart of the wild birds that fear/The net of the fowler or the wicker cage" (ll. 302-03). Later, however, the mood begins to change as Deirdre tries to take control of her fate: "Away to windy summits, and there mock/The night-jar and the valley-keeping bird!" (ll. 347-48). When Naoise realizes Conchubar's treachery he refers to himself and Deirdre as birds caught in a trap (l. 485), but after his capture the imagery reaches its final stage. The lovers will triumph by refusing to compromise their love. When Deirdre falters and pleads with Conchubar, Naoise calls her an eagle: "O my eagle!/Why do you beat vain wings upon the rock/When hollow night's above?" (ll. 606-08). And finally, after Deirdre's death the musicians complete the imagery: "Eagles have gone into their cloudy bed" (l. 738).

Conchubar has the last speech, and it gives him a certain degree of nobility which he lacked previously.

I have no need of weapons,
There's not a traitor that dare stop my way.
Howl, if you will; but I, being King, did right
In choosing her most fitting to be Queen,
And letting no boy lover take the sway.
(ll. 755-59)

The real world has not changed, but neither has Naoise nor Deirdre compromised with it. The imagery emphasizes their transcendence of the world in which their ideal could not be protected; their passion finally transcends the circumstances which threatened it.

Yeats' dramatization of the Deirdre legend shifts the emphasis completely from the outward action to Deirdre's personal conflict with fate. In so doing Yeats created the first Deirdre worthy of playing a heroic part; the previous heroines may have been wise, but they were too passive, ineffectual, and underdeveloped to be interesting characters. Yeats emphasized Deirdre's struggle to control her fate, a fight carried on both internally and externally. Externally she fails; she cannot change the circumstances which threaten her and her lover, but internally she succeeds when she finally accepts her role as a tragic figure.

Synge's Deirdre shows a spirit similar to Yeats', but Synge approaches the legend from a very different point of view. Critics have often discussed the differences between Yeats' Deirdre and Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows²¹: that Synge wrote in reaction to the aloofness and mysticism of Yeats and AE, and that in contrast to Yeats' elevated poetic diction Synge wrote in a language derived from peasant speech, full of earthy imagery. Yet, at the core of both plays lies the same basic theme, a common one to

Irish literature, the conflict of the real and the ideal. The major difference in the two playwrights' treatments of this theme is emphasis: Yeats emphasized the ideal, Synge the real.

This stress on reality is evident in the language and imagery of Synge's play. Whereas Yeats called up the images of mythological queens in his poetic drama, Synge wrote in a language based on peasant rhythms and idioms, with imagery which constantly calls to mind earthiness and physicality: "There are nights when a king like Conchubor would spit upon his arm ring, and queens will stick their tongues out at the rising moon."²² We are constantly reminded of the inescapable effects of time--old age, loneliness, and death: "How would I be happy seeing age coming on me each year, when the dry leaves are blowing back and forward at the gate of Emain" (p. 160); "Queens get old, Deirdre, with their white and long arms going from them, and their backs hooping. I tell you it's a poor thing to see a queen's nose reaching down to scrape her chin" (p. 173); "There's one sorrow has no end surely--that's being old and lonesome" (p. 189).

Conchubor seeks to stave off old age and loneliness through possession of the young and spirited Deirdre. Likewise, Synge sees Deirdre's tragedy in her passionate attempt to avoid the unavoidable. In Act 1 she is a willful young woman who has no intention of obeying

Conchubor: "I will not be your queen in Emain when its my pleasure to be having freedom on the edges of the Hills" (p. 161). She scorns the king's offer of a "place is safe and splendid" (p. 160), for she prefers her freedom in the forest to the confined splendor of Conchubor's palace. Not frightened by death or danger, she wants intensity and adventure, and she convinces Naisi that even though they risk being caught by Conchubor's henchmen, "It should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only" (p. 167). The life they could have in the meantime would be worth any price they might be forced to pay later: "Isn't it a small thing is foretold about the ruin of ourselves, Naisi, when all men have age coming and great ruin in the end" (p. 168). Deirdre's passion for life in Act 1 is natural and inevitable, as Lavarcham observes, "Isn't it a hard thing you're doing, but who can help it? Birds go mating in the spring of the year, and ewes at the leaves falling, but a young girl must have her lover in all the course of the sun and moon" (p. 169). Thus, in Act 1 Synge establishes dramatic tension between Conchubor's search for quiet comfort and Deirdre's romantic passion for a life of intensity no matter what the price.

Act 2 opens just before Fergus's arrival in Alba. In the time that passed since the action of Act 1 Deirdre and Naisi have spent seven years of unparalleled happi-

ness, but Deirdre has grown uneasy in the fear that their passion will spend itself:

I've dread going or staying, Lavarcham.
It's lonesome this place, having happiness
like ours, till I'm asking each day will
this day match yesterday, and will tomorrow
take a good place beside the same day in the
year that's gone, and wondering all times
is it a game worth playing, living on until
you're dried and old, and our joy is gone
for ever (p. 171).

There are as many ways to wither love as
there are stars in a night of Samhain; but
there is no way to keep life, or love with
it, a short space only . . . It's for that
there's nothing lonesome like a love is
watching out the time most lovers do be
sleeping (p. 177).

More than Conchubor's wrath or death itself, Deirdre fears the dissolution of passion, and, like Axel and Anouilh's Antigone, she chooses death rather than a life enervated by time: "Isn't it a better thing to be following on to a near death, than to be bending the head down, and dragging with the feet, and seeing one day a blight showing upon love where it is sweet and tender" (p. 177).

Thus, she convinces Naisi to return to Emain even though he and his brothers prefer to continue their idyllic life in Alba.

Synge's is the first treatment of the legend in which Deirdre chooses to return to Emain, and this is a significant change in her characterization. She has the option of staying in Alba, an option which her predecessors begged for, but she chooses to return to Emain and

certain death. Her choice of death, an attempt to escape the ravages of decaying beauty and dying love--"I will not have Naisi growing an old man in Alban with an old woman at his side, and young girls pointing out and saying: 'That is Deirdre and Naisi had great beauty in their youth'" (p. 179)--is directly related to Synge's theme. Deirdre makes her decision more out of fear than defiance. Even Deirdre, whom we have seen to have so much spirit in Act 1, who "has no match for keeping spirits in a little company is far away by itself" (p. 178), succumbs to the terror of time. And she is not alone, for Naisi, too, has had fears: "There have been days a while past when I've been throwing a line for salmon or watching for the run of hares, that I've a dread upon me a day'd come I'd weary of her voice, and Deirdre'd see I'd wearied" (p. 175). Perhaps because of these feelings Deirdre has so little trouble convincing Naisi to return to Emain, even though they are both aware that Conchubor will have them murdered. Synge completely reverses the traditional plot in which the lovers quarrel because Naisi is determined to return to Ireland and Deirdre begs to stay in Alba.

Synge does make use of the quarrel motif, but he moves it from its traditional place before the departure from Alba to Act 3 where the lover's squabble beside their newly-dug grave. Thus, Synge replaces the traditional chess game scene with a bitter quarrel. To sit calmly

over a game of chess would be out of character for Synge's passionate heroine, and the substituted quarrel scene emphasizes Synge's theme--even the legendary lovers are subject to the effects of time: "We've had a dream, but this night has waked us surely. In a little while we've lived too long, Naisi, and isn't it a poor thing we should miss the safety of the grave, and we trampling its edge" (p. 187).

According to Synge's notes, Act 1 was to emphasize "determination for love and life in spite of fate," Act 2 the "inevitable sweeping into the current of life," and Act 3 the "final summing up in death of Deirdre."²³ The inevitable realization of Act 2 is Deirdre's recognition that "joy and sorrow do burn out like straw blazing in an east wind" (p. 188). Her decision to return to Emain is an attempt to avoid that fate which even one as passionate as she shares with the rest of mankind. The summing up in Act 3 is partly the realization that she and Naisi cannot escape time, and partly her reaction to that realization.

Synge's heroine has been attacked as vain and selfish, a ruthless, self-centered "prisoner of her own ego":²⁴ "Synge's Deirdre is an egotistical young woman full of her own destiny and given to luxuriating in self-adoration, and self-pity. She is resigned to her fate from the start and, also, less forgivably, resigned to the fate of

others."²⁵ Synge's drama is not perfect, and it must be kept in mind that the play was unfinished at his death.²⁶ It is hardly feasible, however, to say that Deirdre is resigned to her fate from the start. True, she is resigned to the prophecy, but she is by no means resigned to Conchubor's plan to make her his queen--quite the opposite, in fact. But Synge subordinates the importance of the prophecy to a more universal theme--that of the passing of all things, including love and life. In Act 1 Deirdre has accepted the inevitability of death, and is determined to have what is "best and richest" even if death is the price; death, after all, will come in any case. Deirdre has no idea in Act 1 that the worst fate is not death, but the inevitable passing of beauty and passion. In Act 2 she realizes this, but she does not accept it. She chooses death rather than continue to live in time. She never resigns herself to the fate of time, and her last speeches are evidence that she has overcome it:

I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy, for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies. It was not by a low birth I made kings uneasy, and they sitting in the halls of Emain. It was not a low thing to be chosen by Conchubor, who was wise, and Naisi had no match for bravery. It is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs, and the loosening of the teeth. It was the choice of lives we had in the clear woods, and in the grave we're safe, surely (p. 192).

Yet, there is a pompous and overly romantic quality

in Synge's *Deirdre* which makes her seem almost decadent. She is less admirable than Yeats' queen who has more control of herself and less of her circumstances, and an attitude of hopelessness and defeat pervades Synge's play, in spite of *Deirdre's* attempt to be triumphant. Men are doomed to death and decay, and not even heroic action can change that fate. The tonal difference between Yeats' play and Synge's is reflected in Conchubor's last speech. Deirdre ends on a note of strength:

I have no need of weapons,
There's not a traitor that dare stop my way.
Howl, if you will; but, I being king, did right
In choosing her most fitting to be queen,
And letting no boy lover take the sway.
(ll. 755-59)

In contrast, Deirdre of the Sorrows ends on a note of humiliation and defeat: "Take me with you. I'm hard set to see the way before me" (p. 193).

In Yeats' philosophy, and specifically in his *Deirdre* play, the extraordinary individual is capable, through heroic action, of transcending mundane reality; through the exertion of his own vision the hero is victorious over the compromising forces of life which seek to bind him. This controlled exertion of the will is the essence of Yeats' Deirdre, and his heroine is triumphant in spite of her death and Naoise's. Although Synge's drama is based on the same plot as Yeats', and his heroine commits suicide in defiance of her fate just as Yeats' does,

there is no real victory in Synge's play. Heroic action is fated to failure; all humans are doomed by the inescapable reality of time, decay, old age, and death. In Yeats' vision the hero can transcend reality--that is the essence of heroic action, but in Synge's philosophy no such possibility exists--reality is as inescapable to the hero as it is to the clown. Everyone who lives must undergo the effects of time, and no amount of heroic spirit can make death more than a Pyrrhic victory.

Conclusion

The major distinction between the oldest manuscript sources and the modern treatments of the Deirdre legend centers on the function of the prophecy. In the classical version, "Longes Mac N-Uislen," the plot depends upon the prophecy. The story opens with Deirdre's unnatural scream from her mother's womb and Cathba's prophecy of destruction, and we know that Deirdre is doomed from the start; her destiny was determined before she left her mother's womb.

The characterization of Deirdre, scant as it is, reflects the fatalism which pervades the story. Although she is not submissive or weak--we see the force of her personality when she grabs Naisi by the ears and demands that he take her to Alba--she seems to be controlled by outside forces, as though she were sent by the gods specifically to fulfill the prophecy and cause the preordained fall of Ulster. Her fits of forceful action are balanced by the scene in which she watches Naisi's execution with her hands tied behind her and by the long year of lamentation which she spends with her head on her knees in Conchobar's house. The vividness of these scenes provides a great part of the force of "Longes Mac N-Uislen," but as a character Deirdre is little more than a puppet controlled by destiny.

The most important conflict of the classical version is Conchobar's choice to challenge fate and allow the child Deirdre to live. That action provides the major theme: man's helplessness against the absolute power of destiny. The rest of the action demonstrates this fatalistic attitude, for even the king is not able to avoid the sorrow predicted in the prophecy.

The romantic version reflects a changing literary convention in which characterization has become a more important element. The prophecy is no longer so ominous as in the classical version since Conchobar himself assumes the role of villain. The destruction of the lovers and of Ulster is more a matter of Conchobar's lust and Fergus's poor judgment than of the cruel power of destiny. In visions Deirdre is warned not to return to Ulster, and these visions introduce the possibility of individual choice and of escape. The theme has changed from man against fate to man against man, and the individual is no longer quite so powerless as in the classical version.

This interest in the individual is reflected in the differences in plot between the classical and romantic versions. In the romantic stories we see Deirdre growing up, Conchobar scheming for Deirdre's return, Naisi as a prince in Alba, Deirdre pleading not to return to Ulster, and Naisi and his brothers making a valiant attempt to escape Conchobar. All of these additions to the original

plot focus on an individual who is trying to exercise his own will. The almost paralyzing power of destiny which haunted the classical version is now far in the background, and less important than the conflict between the characters themselves.

The modern treatments by William Sharp, AE, and Eva Gore-Booth fail to be more than interesting variations of the legend because these authors did not capture the thematic power of their sources, but Yeats and Synge did. Whereas the minor dramatic versions are limited by the authors' interest in the rebirth of Ireland, mysticism, or both, Yeats and Synge emphasize the universal in their treatments of the legend. Both return to the theme of man against fate, but fate in the works of Yeats and Synge is a very different force than the destiny of "Longes Mac N-Uislen." To Yeats it is the inevitable dichotomy between the ideal and the real, and to Synge it is the doom of old age and death. Neither Yeats nor Synge emphasizes the prophecy, for Deirdre's real fate, to them, is not the role she plays in the destruction of Ulster, but a plight she shares with all mankind: the imperfection of human life.

Both authors reveal an existential attitude toward fate. Whereas in the ancient version all the characters were hopelessly impotent against destiny, in these modern versions Deirdre defies her fate, and in both the act of defiance signifies, if not a complete victory, at least

an affirmative assertion of human will in the face of destiny. Yeats and Synge both have created a Deirdre who, like Camus's Sisyphus, reflects the modern attitude that living with dignity entails an act of the individual will in defiance of fate. In the words of Synge's Deirdre:

I will dress like Emer in Dundéalgan,
or Maeve in her house in Connaught.
If Conchubor'll make me a queen, I'll
have the right of a queen who is a
master, taking her own choice and
making a stir to the edges of the
seas . . . (Deirdre of the Sorrows,
p. 163).

Notes

Introduction

¹Miles Dillon, Early Irish Literature (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 1.

²Dillon, p. 1.

³Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, Early Irish Literature (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), p. 13.

⁴H. D'Arbois de Jubainville, The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1903), p. 3.

⁵de Jubainville, p. 3, and Thomas Kinsella, The Tain (1969; rpt., New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. ix.

⁶For a synopsis of the debate over the existence of a historical Irish heroic age see Thomas F. O'Rahilly, Early Irish History and Mythology (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), pp. 269-71. For more recent opinions see Knott and Murphy, p. 116, and H. Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick, The Growth of Literature, I (1932; rpt., Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1968), p. 15.

Chapter 1

¹George Brandon Saul, Traditional Irish Literature and Its Backgrounds: A Brief Introduction (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1970), p. 46. Saul delineates the periods as follows: Old Irish c. 600-c. 1000; Middle Irish c. 1000-c. 1400; Modern Irish c. 1400-the present. Another common division is: Old Irish c. 600-900; Middle Irish c. 900-c. 1200; Early Modern Irish c. 1200-c. 1650.

²Miles Dillon, Early Irish Literature (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948), p. xvi.

³Quoted from Cuchulain, The Irish Achilles, in Lady Augusta Gregory, Cuchulain of Mirthemne, 4th ed. (1902; rpt., New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 269.

⁴Longus Mac N-Uislenn, ed., Vernam Hull, MLA Monograph Series, XVI (New York: MLA, 1949), p. 32.

⁵V. Hull, p. 3.

⁶V. Hull, p. 3.

⁷V. Hull, p. 4.

⁸Dillon, p. 2.

⁹V. Hull, p. 28.

¹⁰Don MacKinnon, Review of Die Altirische Heldensage, Celtic Review, 4 (1907-08), p. 90.

¹¹The Tain, trans., Thomas Kinsella (1969; rpt., New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 8-20. V. Hull, pp. 60-69.

¹²V. Hull, pp. 61-62.

¹³V. Hull, p. 63.

¹⁴Apparently Derdriu has put Naisiu under geasa to carry her away with him. Geasa is a Gaelic word (the plural, and more commonly used form of geis) meaning a strong taboo to do or not to do a certain thing. The etomological root probably meant "prayer demand." Geasa

usually play an essential part in Celtic tales (Marcia Schuyler Kelly Miller, "The Deirdre Legend in English Literature," Unpublished Dissertation, Univ. of Pa., 1950, p. 30). For example, Fergus must never refuse an invitation to a feast, and Noisiu and his brothers must accept Conohar's food before eating at anyone else's table upon their return to Ireland. Here, Derdriu places Noisiu under geasa to take her away with him. "Geasa could be placed on a person by another often for what seem to be arbitrary reasons. But on close examination these taboos usually point to some archetypal transaction" (Gordon Minton Wickstrom, "The Deirdre Plays of AE, Yeats, and Synge: Patterns of Irish Exile," Unpublished Dissertation, Stanford Univ., 1968, p. 12). Refusal to abide by these demands would result in "moral degradation and swift retribution" [Gertrude Schoepperle, Tristan and Isolt: A Study of the Sources of the Romance, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (1913; rpt., New York: Burt Franklin, 1960), p. 402], thus, the brothers' concern that Noisiu be shamed if he should refuse Derdriu's demand.

This episode forms one of several motifs which the Deirdre legend has in common with other elopement stories. Here the trusted warrior is compelled by some strange fatality to take away the wife of his king. In the Diarmaid story Grainne puts a geis on Diarmaid; Tristan and Isolde are caught by the love potion. Other common motifs are the king's pursuit of the lovers, the escape into the wilderness, the spy at the window, and the return from the forest [Schoepperle, pp. 401 ff].

¹⁵Kinsella, p. 15.

¹⁶The ancient Celts practiced annual marriages. After one year the husband might give or sell his wife to another man. The practice was largely limited to the lower classes, however, and it would have been a deep insult to a woman of Derdriu's birth (Miller, p. 30).

¹⁷V. Hull, p. 69.

¹⁸V. Hull, p. 69.

¹⁹Saul, p. 81.

²⁰Wickstrom, p. 17.

²¹Roger McHugh, "Literary Treatment of the Deirdre Legend," Threshold 1 (1957), p. 37.

²²V. Hull, p. 1.

23v. Hull, p. 1.

24 MacKinnon, "The Glenmasan Manuscript," Celtic Review 1 (1904-05), p. 4. Subsequent references are noted in the text.

25v. Hull, pp. 2-3.

26v. Hull, p. 65.

27 Unfortunately, later romantic variants, like that of the Belfast manuscript, translated in part by Douglas Hyde in the 1899 volume of Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie, reduce Deirdre and Naisi from the forceful, heroic characters of the Glenmasan manuscript to plotting children [Douglas Hyde, "Deirdre," Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie 2 (1899), pp. 139-141]. The text, according to Hyde's estimate, not older than mid seventeenth century, is from one of six unnumbered manuscripts in the Belfast museum].

This romantic variant includes the beginning of the legend, the story of Deirdre from birth to elopement, which the Glenmasan manuscript omits. As in the classical version the story opens at Feidhlim's feast. No mention is made of the terrifying scream from the womb, but at Deirdre's birth Cathfaidh predicts "hurts and losses" for Ulster on the child's account. Conor stops the nobles from killing the infant, declaring that it is "not laudable to fight against fate I still submit to the omens of the prophecies and foretellings of the seers, but yet I do not submit to, nor do I praise, the committing of a base deed or a deed of treachery, in the hope of quenching the anger of the power of the elements" (p. 143). Ironically, Conor later stoops to a base deed of treachery to quench his own anger.

The emphasis suddenly shifts, however, from the power of fate to the characterization of Deirdre. In the Belfast manuscript she has become a sentimentalized adolescent, sheltered, controlled, melancholy and scheming. Rather than sending her away to grow up far from civilization, in this text Conor confines the child to a fortress. She pines for Naisi, weeping on Lavarcam's bosom, refusing to eat, and fainting. When she does meet Naisi she does not challenge him to take her with him as in the classical version; here she beseeches and persuades him. As Eleanor Hull puts it, "It is curious to find the wild woman of the 12th century Book of Leinster version transformed into the Lydia Languish of a later age" [Eleanor Hull, "The Story of Deirdre, in Its Bearing on the Social Development of the Folk-Tale," Folk-Lore 15 (1904), p. 25]. Moreover, her scheming deceptiveness makes Deirdre's character even less attractive--

secretly she watches Naiose through a hole she drilled in the wall of the fortress to which Conor had confined her, then persuades Lavarcam to arrange a rendezvous. She plays on Lavarcam's sympathy by refusing to eat, while at the same time she gives her food to the hounds which guard her tower so they will accept poison from her when the time is right to escape with Naiose. Until she is able to meet Naiose she pines and schemes, and then she woos the reluctant youth into eloping. Like Deirdre's, Naiose's character has deteriorated; his reluctance arises not from a sense of duty to the king, or even from fear, but from lethargy--he thinks her plan would be too difficult to carry out. What a poor contrast these characters set to the passionate Deirdre and the bold Naiose of the earlier manuscripts.

This variant, although it provides the details of the first half of the romantic version, from Deirdre's birth to her elopement, is not important as a source for twentieth century treatments of the legend; and understandably so, since in it Deirdre's character has lost much of the attraction it might hold for twentieth century readers.

Another seventeenth century version of the Deirdre legend, published by Geoffrey Keating in his History of Ireland (Forus Feasa), completed in 1635, combines elements of the classical and romantic versions. (Keating's History was written in Modern Irish. A translation appears in Irish Texts Society, vols. 4, 8, 9, 15; the Deirdre legend is translated in vol. 8, pp. 190-96.) Keating's story agrees for the most part with the classical Book of Leinster version, but elements of the romantic version are included. For instance, Deirdre sends Leabharcham to inform Naiose of her desire for him, and he comes to visit Deirdre secretly. He consents to elope with reluctance. All these details are similar to the Belfast variant described above; however, the end closely parallels the Book of Leinster version in which Deirdre is kept for a year with Conchubar. Thus, Keating mixes elements from the two major manuscript versions of the legend. His telling, the first in Modern Irish, did much to stimulate the popularity of the legend, and it marks the beginning of an abundance of translations, retellings, and imaginative variations of the legend.

²⁸Alexander Carmichael, "The Hero Tales of the Gael," Alexander Macbain, trans., The Celtic Magazine 13 (Dec. 1887), p. 70.

²⁹Another folk variation is recorded in Revue Celtique, 1895, as dictated to G. Dottin in 1891 by Thomas Ford, an inhabitant of Galway. [G. Dottin, "Contes Irlandais," Revue Celtique 14 (1893), p. 97]. The striking contrast between this and the Carmichael telling demonstrates how varied the legend became in the oral tradition.

A sorcerer sent to the king, in this variant King Manannan, a prophecy that destruction for Ireland would result if the child Derdriu be allowed to reach the age of a woman. Manannan decided to keep the child, in this story his own daughter, but he sent her to live in a tower of stone where no one would see her.

Derdriu dreamed of a man with cheeks red as the rose, hair black as the crow, and skin white as snow. Her nurse told her of a young man in her father's army who fit her description, Aillé. He and his brothers Naois and Ardan were famous warriors at Manannan's court. Derdriu declared that if she could not have Aillé as her husband she would die of heartbreak. The nurse promised to arrange everything.

One day Derdriu and her nurse watched a butcher kill a kid on the snow. A vivid description of the scene follows, and the nurse makes the comparison of the three colors to Aillé.

At last, Aillé and his friends come to the tower to see Derdriu. He was finally persuaded to elope with her, but only after his friends had called him a coward for not doing so. When Manannan was away visiting the king of Ulster, Derdriu and Aillé left for Scotland. The king of Scotland sent them to the count of Dun an Treóin. When Manannan heard of the elopement he followed the couple to Scotland, first to the king, then to the count, who revealed their whereabouts. Manannan found them, and they prepared for combat. After two days of fighting Aillé's men had done so much damage to Manannan's troops that he was forced to retreat to Ireland.

Back at court, angry and broken-hearted, Manannan asked his counselor for a plan. The advisor suggested that the king announce publically that Aillé and Derdriu had been pardoned, and invite them to return. Surely they would accept, and Manannan could place soldiers in ambush in the forest. The plan was carried out, and it happened as the counselor had said. When the exiled party arrived at the forest Naois began to suspect the king's plot. At his warning the brothers prepared for combat, but in the heat of the battle the brothers accidentally killed each other.

Derdriu watched and mourned:

Ils sont morts, les trois guerriers les
meilleurs d'Irlande, comme Naois, Aillé et
Ardan, les trois fils d'Usnech. Vous,
fossoyeurs, ne faites pas la fosse étroite
ni courte, faites-la grande et large, pour
qu'on enterre les trois guerriers les
meilleurs qui soient en Irlande, et moi-
même avec eux. Ils ont été les hommes

les meilleurs qui furent en Irlande de leur temps [G. Dottin, "Contes Irlandais," Revue Celtique, 16 (1895), pp. 447-49].

³⁰Lady Augusta Gregory, "Fate of the Sons of Usnach," in Cuchulain of Muirthemne, 4th ed. (1902; rpt., New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 92.

³¹The uncle/nephew relationship was a particularly strong one in early medieval tradition; many examples come to mind--Arthur and Modred, Charlemagne and Roland, Mark and Tristan, as well as Conchubar and Naoise, and Fergus and Conchubar. Wickstrom suggests the importance placed upon this relationship is a result of the folk memory of a matriarchal system in which a son was closer to his mother's brother than to his own father (Wickstrom, p. 79). There is evidence of such a system in the Ulster stories since Conchobar is often given the name of his mother, Ness--Conchubar mac Nessa (Miller, p. 58). The double breaking of such a close bond, between Conchubar and Naoise and between Conchubar and Fergus, in addition to the betrothal between Deirdre and Conchubar, would heighten the sense of tragedy in the legend.

³²Miller, p. 181.

³³Gregory, Gods and Fighting Men, 2nd ed. (1904; rpt., New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 7.

Chapter 2

¹S. B. Bushrui, Yeats's Verse-Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), pp. 120-21, quoted from "Ireland's Heroic Age" in Letters to the New Island.

²Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory, Our Irish Theatre (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 20, from the statement of purpose signed by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn.

³Fiona Macleod is the pseudonym of William Sharp, a Scotsman born in Paisley in 1855 [Paul Elmer More, The Drift of Romanticism (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), p. 120]. His Deirdre play appeared in the Fortnightly Review in 1900, and was presented at the Globe Theatre, London, on April twenty-ninth of the same year [Fiona Macleod, Poems and Dramas (New York: Duffield, 1910), p. 454].

⁴Our Irish Theatre, p. 17.

⁵Elizabeth A. Sharp, William Sharp (Fiona Macleod): A Memoir (New York: Duffield, 1910), p. 317.

⁶AE's Deirdre was presented in Dublin on April 2, 1902 with Yeats' Kathleen ni Houlihan to inaugurate the opening of the Irish National Theatre Society (Miller, p. 191).

⁷Ernest A. Boyd, Appreciations and Depreciations (1918; rpt., Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), p. 34.

⁸AE, Deirdre: A Legend in Three Acts, Irish Dramatic Series, vol. 4 (Chicago: DePaul Univ. Press, 1970), p. 10.

⁹Herbert V. Fackler, introduction to Deirdre: A Legend in Three Acts, p. 3.

¹⁰Fackler, p. 3.

¹¹In his characterization of Lavarcam AE may have been influenced by the prose "Deirdre" of Standish O'Grady, a man whose work AE greatly admired. In O'Grady's story Lavarcam urges her charge to elope with her lover, saying, "It is the end of the world and the beginning of the world; and the end of life and the beginning of life; and death and life in one, and death and life will soon be the same to thee, O Deirdré!" (The Coming of Cuculain, p. 84). In

O'Grady's version, however, it is Fergus who foolishly convinces Naisi to return, even though Concobar has sworn to execute the young warrior as a traitor.

¹²Boyd, p. 199.

¹³Miss Gore-Booth cites Douglas Hyde in his Literary History of Ireland as saying that reincarnation seems to have been part of Druidic teaching [Eva Gore-Booth, The Buried Life of Deirdre (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1930), pp. ix,x]. An illustration of this belief in the transmigration of souls may be found in the Red Branch, or Ulster, Cycle itself in one of the remscéla to the Táin, "The Dispute of the Swineherds." The two famous bulls involved in the Táin were originally swineherds to the gods. The swineherds quarrelled ferociously and continued their enmity through many centuries in many different transformations, as ravens, sea monsters, champions, worms, and finally as the two bulls of the Táin. George Brandon Saul, in Traditional Irish Literature quotes Ella Young ["An Ancient Doctrine," Irish Review 18 (Aug. 1912), p. 314] on this Celtic belief: "The Celts believed that the soul came out of a beautiful and undying world to manifest itself here through the medium of a body and returned again to that world from whence it might emerge many times and take each time a new earth-body . . . the soul might go back to the divine world and converse with its comrades; this happened in vision or ecstasy, or when the body was in a deep trance . . ." (Saul, note, p. 79). There seems to be little evidence, however, that the Celts believed in a general theory of inevitable consequence, such as the Buddhist doctrine of karma, upon which Miss Gore-Booth relies so heavily in her treatment of the Deirdre legend.

¹⁴It is suggested, however, that the whole Deirdre episode is Macha's revenge on Concobar, but the intervention of a deity in a mortal's fate is an entirely different concept from the idea of karma.

¹⁵AE, The Candle of Vision (London: Macmillan, 1920), p. 158.

Chapter 3

¹Harold Bloom, Yeats (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 158.

²Peter Ure, Yeats the Playwright (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), pp. 57-58.

³Yeats, from an unpublished dialogue written in 1915, quoted by Richard Ellman in The Identity of Yeats, 2nd ed. (1964; rpt., New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 105.

⁴Yeats, Plays and Controversies, "Irish Dramatic Movement" (1907; rpt., New York: Macmillan, 1924), pp. 102-03.

⁵Plays and Controversies, p. 120.

⁶Yeats, Essays and Introductions (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 527. Hereafter referred to as Essays.

⁷Essays, p. 529.

⁸Essays, p. 215.

⁹Essays, p. 215.

¹⁰Essays, p. 240.

¹¹Essays, p. 241.

¹²Essays, p. 243.

¹³Plays and Controversies, p. 209.

¹⁴John Rees Moore, Masks of Love and Death (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), p. 142.

¹⁵The Variorum Edition of the Plays, eds. Russell K. Alspach and Catharine C. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 389.

¹⁶Essays, p. 216.

¹⁷"Deirdre," Variorum Edition, p. 345, ll. 1-3.

¹⁸Quoted in Ure, Yeats the Playwright, p. 57.

¹⁹Quoted in Ure, p. 55.

²⁰Moore, p. 143.

²¹See, for example, John Rees Moore, Masks of Love and Death, pp. 144-46.

²²"Deirdre of the Sorrows," The Genius of the Irish Theatre, eds., Sylvan Barnet, et al. (New York: New American Library Press, 1960), p. 165.

²³David H. Greene, "Synge's Unfinished Deirdre" PMLA, 63 (1948), p. 1320.

²⁴Robin Skelton, The Writings of J. M. Synge (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 150.

²⁵Skelton, p. 148.

²⁶Deirdre of the Sorrows was produced posthumously at the Abbey Theatre on January 13, 1910. The text was made up of the latest drafts Synge left at the time of his death, compiled by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Molly Allgood, Synge's fiancée.

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Appendix

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with a second text. The older of these two agrees closely with Egerton 1782, but neither of the mss. O'Flanagan used is now known to exist.

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