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# The Role of Women in Medieval Ireland

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If you type ‘woman’ into the Search field of the Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language ([www.dil.ie](http://www.dil.ie)), you receive a huge number of different results: from *ben*, the medieval Irish word for ‘woman’, to *ingen* ‘girl’, *caillech* ‘old woman’, *cumal* ‘female slave’ and *óinsech* ‘foolish woman’. Female occupations seem to include *banbúachaill* ‘herdswoman’, *banliaig* ‘female physician’, *banabb* ‘abbess’, and even *banimpir* ‘empress’.



But can we immediately take these words as evidence for the role and position of women in medieval Irish society? In fact, the words in the online dictionary have been taken from a wide range of different documentary sources, all produced in medieval Ireland. Each one will have its own agenda, its own stylistic conventions, its own limitations, and so needs to be considered on its own terms.

This resource is intended as a starting-point for considering how women are portrayed in some of these medieval Irish sources.

We will cover:

- ◆ Women in Irish literature
- ◆ Women in other Irish sources
- ◆ Conclusions

## Women in Irish literature

In medieval Ireland, literary tales began to be written down from around the seventh century, although most of the tales that survive today belong to the ninth and later centuries. In these tales we meet kings and heroes, monsters and Otherworldly beings, lovers, poets and, of course, women. Indeed, medieval Irish literature is renowned for its colourful and varied female characters.

## CASE STUDIES

### MEDB: RÍGAIN

**Medb** is the strong-willed queen (*rígain*) of the province of Connacht, married to King Ailill. She features in many stories concerning the (often hostile) interactions between the medieval provinces of Connacht and Ulster. The most famous tale is *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cooley’, in which Medb leads an army into Ulster to capture the Brown Bull of Cooley. In spite of the best efforts of the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn, Medb manages to take the bull, but her army is later defeated by the men of Ulster, while the Brown Bull himself dies in a climactic fight against a rival, the White Bull.

Medb clearly takes the role of the leader of the Connacht army, while her husband Ailill is portrayed as a weak king, ruled by his dominant wife. At the start of the tale, she summons her troops with the words: ‘Everyone leaving a lover or a friend today will curse me. This army is gathered for me’. Her raid ultimately fails, ending in disaster and defeat for Connacht and death for the Brown Bull. As her army is routed, one of her leading warriors, Fergus, says: ‘We followed the rump of a misguiding woman. It is the usual thing for a herd led by a mare to be strayed and destroyed’.



Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons

- What is your response to Fergus’ comment on Medb’s role in the cattle-raid? What message might this author be trying to convey about women taking on positions of authority?
- Ailill is a weak king, while Fergus is actually Medb’s lover: how does this affect your assessment of the balance of power between the genders in this tale? Is it possible to discuss the role of women without also considering the role of men?

You can read the full story of ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cooley’ online via the Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT) website (<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T301035/>). There are also translations by Thomas Kinsella (used here) and Ciaran Carson.

### EMER: BANCHÉILLE

**Emer** is the wife (*banchéile*) of the greatest warrior in Ulster, Cú Chulainn. She is characterised by her wisdom and ability with words. In one tale, *Aided Óenfhir Aífe* ‘The Death of Aífe’s Only Son’, Cú Chulainn is forced into a situation where he must fight against his own son, in order to uphold his role as defender of Ulster. Although this is Cú Chulainn’s son by another woman, Emer still pleads for the boy’s life, saying: ‘Do not go down there! Neither fair nor right is it to rise against your son’.

Here we see Emer offering a critique of the warrior code which demands that heroes must uphold their honour, whatever the cost. Emer is the voice of reason in the tale: unfortunately, Cú Chulainn ignores her and proceeds to kill his son.

- How would you characterise the behaviour of male and female characters in this tale? How does this compare with their behaviour in the other medieval Irish tales discussed here?
- Would you consider Emer to be an active or a passive character in this tale? What is the author’s opinion of her? What purpose does her character serve in this tale’s message?

You can read the full story of ‘The Death of Aífe’s Only Son’ in Jeffrey Gantz’s *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (used here) and in Thomas Kinsella’s *The Táin* (or online: <https://bit.ly/2OIzJsw>).

## DERDRIU: LENNAT

The tragic story of **Derdriu**, lover (*lennat*) of Noísiu, is one of the most well-known in Ireland. In the medieval version of the story, called *Loinges mac nUislenn* ‘The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu’, Conchobar, king of Ulster, wants to keep the beautiful Derdriu all for himself and locks her away. But she falls in love with Noísiu, one of the sons of Uisliu, and chooses to elope with him. They flee to Scotland, but Conchobar tricks them into returning to Ireland and has Noísiu killed.

Derdriu’s response is to spend a year grieving and reciting laments for Noísiu. She says: ‘You have taken from me the one I loved most. ... Break no more my heart today – I will reach my early grave soon enough. Sorrow is stronger than the sea’. Then when Conchobar tries to force her to marry Noísiu’s murderer, she throws herself from his chariot and her head smashes against a stone.



Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons

- How would you interpret Derdriu’s death – an act of defiance, an accident as she tries to escape, a moment of despair? How does that affect your view of her character?
- Who do you think is to blame for the outcome of the story? Is Derdriu an active or a passive character in the plot?

You can read the full story of ‘The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu’ online via the CELT website (<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T301020B>). There are also translations in Jeffrey Gantz’s *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (used here) and Thomas Kinsella’s *The Táin*.

## SCÁTHACH: BANFHÉINNID

**Scáthach** is the female warrior (*banfhéinnid*) who trains the young hero Cú Chulainn in combat. According to the story *Tochmarc Emire* ‘The Wooing of Emer’, before Cú Chulainn is able to marry Emer, he is sent to an Otherworldly land across the sea to learn from the mysterious Scáthach, whose name means ‘the Shadowy One’. Cú Chulainn is told that, ‘if he visited Scáthach, and studied the warrior’s art with her, he could beat any hero in Europe’.

Scáthach teaches military feats to Cú Chulainn that no other warriors know, including the *gae bolga*, which he uses in his defence of Ulster in ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cooley’. In this Otherworldly land, all the rulers are women, and Scáthach is currently at war with another female leader, Aífe, whom ‘she dreaded as the hardest woman warrior in the world’. Cú Chulainn helps Scáthach defeat Aífe, and later has a child with her, the son whom he kills in ‘The Death of Aífe’s Only Son’.

- How realistic do you think this depiction of female warriors is?
- Why might this author have chosen to locate these women outside of Ireland, and to give them Otherworldly associations?

You can read the full story of ‘The Wooing of Emer’ online via the CELT website (<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T301021>), or in Thomas Kinsella’s *The Táin* (used here).

In these case studies, we have a whole range of different female characters and roles. All of these women challenge the expectations of female behaviour, but there are vast differences in their methods, the success of their activities, and how positively or negatively each author views them. Some of these women are more active than others – some might even be considered as passive in some respects. Why do you think there is such variation between these tales’ portrayal of women?

And then we have to ask ourselves, how realistic is the portrayal of women in these literary tales? How accurately do they depict the everyday life of women in medieval Ireland?

## Women in other Irish sources

In order to decide how realistic the portrayal of women is in medieval Irish literature, we could compare these literary sources with other types of sources, such as annals, law-texts and wisdom texts.

### Annals: *Banfhile*

Annals, or chronicles, are year-by-year records of significant events, such as battles, deaths and political changes. Since they tend to be roughly contemporary with the events they describe, they should be fairly reliable witnesses to the reality of life in medieval Ireland. However, they do have some limitations: for example, the entry for each year tends to be very brief, and only focused on matters the scribe thought worth recording, which gives little insight into everyday experience.

It may be significant that women very rarely feature in the annals. Although we saw that the fictional Queen Medb exercised huge political power, the annals contain no record of any female political or military leader.

However, some noteworthy women do appear in the annals. For example, the entry in the Annals of Inisfallen for the year 934 AD records the death of Uallach daughter of Muinechán, who is described as ‘the woman poet (*banfhile*) of Ireland’. Clearly there were some professions which, although predominantly male, could also be practised by women.

### Law-texts: *Báeth*

Professional women such as the *banfhile* may have gained their status by inheriting their father’s position if he had no sons. If we turn to law-texts, which set out the complicated legal practices of medieval Ireland, we find mention of a ‘female heir’ (*banchomarbae*) who can inherit her father’s land if she has no brothers.

However, as a general rule, the law-texts suggest that a woman had no legal capacity independent of her husband or father. Indeed, women are placed in a category of people defined as ‘legally incompetent’ (*báeth*), alongside children, slaves, the insane, and an adult son dependent on a living father. One writer even describes female evidence as ‘biased and dishonest’!

Most legal references to women relate to marriage. Irish law recognised three types of marriage: one where the man brings the most property, one where the woman brings the most property, and ‘a union of joint property’ where both parties bring equal amounts. According to one version of ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cooley’, Medb launched the raid because she’d thought she was the one with the most property, but finding that Ailill has one more bull than her, she sets out to capture the Brown Bull to even things out.

### Wisdom texts: *Dagbanais*

A further source of evidence may be found in the group of sources known as ‘wisdom texts’, collections of sayings and proverbial wisdom relating to all sorts of aspects of society. This includes the role of women, and so these texts may give us a closer picture of the lives of everyday women.

One extreme depiction is found in the ninth-century text *Tecosca Cormaic* ‘The Instructions of Cormac’, which dedicates 120 lines to listing the vices of women – to name just a few, they are ‘silly counsellors’, ‘steadfast in hate, forgetful of love’, ‘not to be trusted with a secret’, ‘viragos in strife’, ‘persevering in lust’, ‘happy he who does not yield to them’, ‘they should be dreaded like fire, they should be feared like wild beasts’, ‘better to beware of them than to trust them’, ‘better to crush them than to cherish them’!

However, this is only one author’s point of view: other texts are more measured. Another wisdom text is ‘The Triads of Ireland’, a compendium of material grouped in threes. Triad 180 gives the three steadinesses of good womanhood (*dagbanais*) as ‘a steady tongue, a steady virtue, a steady housewifery’. The Triads criticise women for sexual promiscuity, but many of the vices attributed to women in ‘The Instructions of Cormac’ are here assigned to humankind in general.

- Why do you think women were defined as *báeth*? What do they have in common with the other groups included in that category?
- How far do you think a medieval Irish woman might wield influence through her marriage? Are there types of power or influence that might not be represented in the law-texts, which are concerned only with the public sphere?

- How far do these descriptions of female vices and virtues correspond to the characters of women in the literary texts?

You can read the full texts of ‘The Instructions of Cormac’ and ‘The Triads of Ireland’ online via the CELT website (<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T503001> and <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T103006>).

In these non-literary texts, we see a rather different picture of the role of women in medieval Ireland. In general, women's activity appears to have been more restricted than the literary texts would suggest. On the other hand, there were some cases where a woman might gain some independence – for example, by inheriting her father's profession, or by bringing property to a marriage. In some regards, medieval Irish women had more freedoms than women in other medieval societies.

Although these sources may seem closer to reality than the literary sources, they also have their limitations. Here are some points to think about ...

- The law-texts are concerned with presenting an ideal of how society ought to be run, but how can we tell whether these complex laws were actually obeyed?
- What might the purpose of wisdom texts have been and how would this affect their portrayal of women (and other members of society)?
- How do the intentions and uses of these non-literary sources compare with the moral messages and agendas underlying literary sources?

## Conclusions

We've seen that our documentary evidence from medieval Ireland includes many different types of sources, each giving their own perspective on the role of women. Through all of these different representations of women, what can we discern about what life was like for women in medieval Ireland?

Well, perhaps the true reality may never be known, since each source gives its own personal slant on the truth. But what these different sources do offer us is a vivid spectrum of different *attitudes* towards women in medieval Ireland. We've seen that some were negative and some were positive, some suggest women could wield great influence and some claim they should have no independence at all. Can you identify any themes or patterns that particularly seem to characterise the portrayal of women?

But remember, just like today, not everyone in medieval Ireland had the same point of view. The lives, personalities and experiences of women in medieval Ireland may have been just as varied as the texts that record them.

### To explore this topic further ...

- What other literary roles could female characters perform? Read some of the other tales in Gantz's *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, or the Corpus of Electronic Texts, and compare their depiction of women with the stories you have already encountered.
- What was the role of women in relation to Christianity? Do you think the Church had a positive or negative impact on attitudes towards women? How do depictions of St Brigit compare with those of male saints? You can read *Bethu Brigte* 'The Life of St Brigit' online via the CELT website (<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T201002>).
- Many medieval Irish poems are presented as being narrated by women. What is the significance of this expression of a female viewpoint, in the voice of a female persona? Such poems include 'Eve's Lament', 'Liadain and Cuirithir' and 'The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare', which are collected in Gerard Murphy's *Early Irish Lyrics* (or online: <https://bit.ly/2MHUQsl>).

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You can look up all of the Irish words from this resource, and their English translations, in eDIL (Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language): [www.dil.ie](http://www.dil.ie)

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