

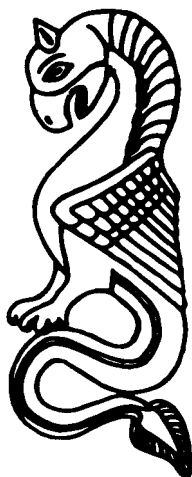
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'Truth' and 'Modesty': A Reading of the Irish *Noínden Ulad*

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The Cattle-Raid of Cooley, or Táin Bó Cúailnge, is the most ambitious narrative in the medieval Irish Ulster Cycle, but its basic plot is quite simple.¹ Ailill and Medb, rulers of Connacht, lead a great plundering raid against the neighbouring province of Ulster, where Conchobar is king. At the hour of crisis Ulster has virtually only one defender, CúChulainn: for some three months, and almost single-handed, CúChulainn harasses and delays the invaders by fighting and negotiating and manipulating the 'rules' of heroic warfare. Then at last the hosts of Ulster arise and come to drive the invaders away. But why must CúChulainn defend his people for so long alone? It is not difficult to answer: because the warriors of Ulster have been stricken with their 'debility' (*noínden*, or *ces(s)*). This has left them as weak as a woman who has just given birth.

This collective debility was one which did not affect females nor ungrown boys nor CúChulainn; and because it incapacitated his fellow-warriors it made CúChulainn's heroic feats in the *Táin* seem all the more brilliant. It is a puzzling debility, and is not very clearly described. In part, at least, it seems to have been a kind of sleep or torpor.² What it did to the fighting men of Ulster may be illustrated by reference to a situation not uncommon in heroic literature — the calling of warriors to arms. We have an example in the Old English *Finnsburh Fragment*, where 'a youthful king' bids his men awake to face conflict. Hearing the king, 'many a thane adorned with gold rose up and girded on his sword' (l. 13). In a similar situation a Danish warrior cries, ' "Away with shameful slumber!" ' and ' "Are you sunk in sleep? Why, I ask, do you dally?" ' And the warriors arise.³ The Ulstermen do the same when they are freed from their debility: to answer their king's summons they rush out naked except for their weapons, scorning to use the proper exits from their tents in their eagerness for the fight (*LL Táin*, ll. 4639–49). But while their debility is upon them, they can do nothing. When the hard-pressed CúChulainn comes himself to say that women are being captured, men slain, and

cattle driven off, Conchobar can only reply, ' "We have been smitten by the cess" '. CúChulainn can expect no help from them even in the direst emergency (*LU Táin*, ll. 1211–20). While the debility lasted it was a 'shame' and a 'disgrace' to the men of Ulster. It left those terrifying fighting men as feeble as a woman at her weakest.⁴

What caused the debility? A number of medieval Irish texts offer explanations. One of these is 'Noínden Ulad' (*NU*).⁵ It is extant in three recensions which do not greatly differ from one another, but its recent editor Vernam Hull comes to the conclusion that an original text was probably composed in the middle of the ninth century (*NU*, p. 23). There are also *dinnsenchas* or etymologizing place-name stories based on *NU* which tell much the same story, though with less literary skill.⁶ Another text, which Hull has named 'Ces Ulad' (*CU*), gives a quite different account of the debility. This text is extant in one manuscript and is obscure at key points in the recital of events. Hull would date its time of composition to the tenth century or a little earlier.⁷ The present paper will mainly be concerned with *NU* and *CU*.

The *NU* account of the cause of the debility of the Ulstermen is too long to give here in full. The following summary is taken from Mac Cana. The story recalls the familiar theme of the supernatural bride who lives happily with her mortal husband until in a moment of indiscretion he violates a promise not to mention her name in the concourse of men:

One day a beautiful young woman walked into the house of Crunnchu, a wealthy husbandman of Ulster and a widower. Without speaking any word, she attended to the household duties, and, when night came, she made the ritual right-hand turn (*for dessel*) to ensure good fortune and entered Crunnchu's bed. She became pregnant by him, and through their union his wealth was increased. In due course Crunnchu went to the great assembly of the Ulstermen. He had been warned by his wife not to speak of her there, but when he saw the king's horses racing and heard the poets and the public sounding their praises, he forgot the warning and boasted that his wife could outrun them. The king took up the challenge; the woman was summoned, and, despite her protestations that her time had almost come, she was compelled to run against the royal horses. She reached the finish before them, but there she cried out in pain and gave birth to twins (Irish *emhain*), whence the name of

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Emhain Mhacha. And before she died from her anguish and exhaustion, she laid a curse on the Ulstermen: until the end of nine generations in times of greatest peril the Ulstermen would experience the same malady as she, so that every grown man would be as weak as a woman in childbed.⁸

Mac Cana has elsewhere written of *NU* as a version of the 'Mélusine' theme, and he finds the text to be composed with an 'almost classic sense of style and craftsmanship'.⁹ One may add that according to *NU*, Crunnchu had many sons and lived in a remote wilderness. *NU* does not name either the woman or the king, but in the related *dinnshenchas* narratives they are identified as Macha and Conchobar respectively. The twins to whom Macha gives birth do not have names in Thurneysen's Recensions II and III, but in Recension I the boy is called Fír and the girl Fial.¹⁰ Grammatically these names are adjectives, but for convenience here I should like to render them as 'Truth' and 'Modesty'.

Stylishly written though it may be, *NU* is a strange story. The modern reader may wonder why the handsome, mysterious, and probably supernatural Macha bestows her favour on a peasant (*aithech*) who is no longer young. One might wonder why Crunnchu in the assembly boasts not of his wife's beauty and domestic talents, but of a fleetness of foot which has not previously been mentioned; and why the king is so harsh in refusing Macha any respite. The forced contest between the pregnant woman and the king's horses seems less barbarous than grotesquely fantastic. The story also ends rather discordantly, for though Macha will engage sympathy, and though she is helped by God in her travail, she leaves a vengeful and multigenerational curse upon the Ulster males.¹¹ Yet *NU* is well written. We may suspect that materials of this kind, carefully composed in this way, suggest a manipulation of cultural symbols for some particular purpose.

If 'Noínden Ulad' is strange, 'Ces Ulad' is stranger still. It is a brief and enigmatic narrative, the text of which is in places so obscure that its editor Vernam Hull found it possible to make only a tentative translation. Apparently, however, it tells how CúChulainn and his charioteer are driving one day near the River Boyne when they encounter Elcmaire, a supernatural being, and his wife Fedelm Foltchain, Fedelm 'of the beautiful hair'. There is some indication that the men run a race against each other in chariots; but in any case the two parties quarrel and CúChulainn, getting the better of it, cuts off Elcmaire's thumbs and big toes. Fedelm promises that she will be a year in his company and will exhibit herself naked to the Ulstermen upon her arrival among them. At the end of the year she

again exhibits herself, and it was this that caused the debility of the Ulstermen. Here it should be mentioned that exhibitions of both male and female beauty occur in a number of medieval Irish texts. Sometimes the self-exhibitors simply wish to be admired, as CúChulainn does in *LU Táin*, lines 2335–70. Sometimes people are invited to display themselves, like Ailenn Ilchrothach in the *Accalamh na Senórach*. On two occasions men are persuaded to display themselves to admiring women and are assassinated by cunning enemies while they are off guard. In the French *lai* of *Graelent*, a king has the custom of exhibiting his wife, in a state of at least partial undress, for the court to admire. I have not found other relevant examples of women exhibiting themselves naked to a crowd of men.¹²

NU and *CU* thus give quite different explanations for one and the same phenomenon, the debility of the Ulstermen; and such variant accounts of the same thing are of course commonplace in legendary fiction. It is true that *CU* is found in a late manuscript of indifferent quality (MS Harley 5280; fifteenth century), but *CU* is still a part of the tradition, and it should be taken seriously. In fact, *NU* and *CU* have some features in common. In both accounts the women are beautiful and are associated somewhat loosely with the supernatural world; their husbands somehow begin quarrels with the Ulster lords. There is apparently a race in *CU*, and certainly Macha runs a race against the king's horses in *NU*. Sexual themes are strongly represented in both stories. CúChulainn in *CU* not only takes Elcmaire's wife and exhibits her to the men of Ulster, he also cuts off Elcmaire's thumbs and big toes: this may suggest symbolic castration, and it is a cruel and unusual action which may have some equivalence with the king's harsh treatment of Macha in *NU*. There is a good deal of violence in both stories. It will be suggested below that the key feature which *NU* and *CU* have in common is the exposure of a woman to the gaze of the Ulster warriors, and that it is this which brings on their debility.

The story of CúChulainn and Fedelm has been little discussed, no doubt because it is brief and somewhat obscure. The story of Macha, on the other hand, has been elucidated along three main lines, which I shall arbitrarily label here the folklorist, the archaist, and the Indo-Europeanist approaches.

As Mac Cana and others have pointed out, the story of Macha resembles folktales of the 'Mélusine' type. In these, an Otherworld spouse brings happiness and prosperity to a mortal under certain specified conditions, especially a condition of secrecy. When the mortal partner fails to observe the conditions, for example by prying too closely or by boasting, disaster follows. Very often in such stories it is the *seeing* of the Otherworld partner by the spouse or by others which brings on the catastrophe; for example, in Apuleius's old story of Cupid and Psyche, or in the

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'Mélusine' story told by Gervase of Tilbury. Mac Cana also links Macha's taking control over Crunchnu's domestic hearth with Irish folk custom; and Killeen points to tales about how supernatural powers, when offended by theft or sacrilege, bring paralysis on those who offend them. This is what Macha does in *NU*; in folklore terms she looks like an 'Offended Fée'. (The 'collective *couvade*' theory seems to find few supporters now.)¹³

Most comment, however, treats the debility of the Ulstermen in the context of 'myth' rather than in that of 'folklore' — if indeed the two are clearly distinguishable. Tomás Ó Broin, for example, would refer the debility to archaic vegetation ritual, and specifically to a 'primitive drama' of winter decay and vernal rebirth. In this drama a year spirit, regularly portrayed as a king or a hero, is annually slain or held captive, or else he undergoes a 'recession' of his powers. The debility of the Ulster warriors and their king, Conchobar, represents such a recession; the Ulster scenario will be of the same general kind as that found in the myths of Adonis, Attis, and Osiris. Ó Broin, drawing on the work of Cornford, Frazer, and Murray, calls it a *kouros* drama.¹⁴

Jean Gricourt, who follows Henri Hubert, works along broadly similar lines. For him, Macha in *NU* is a Mother-goddess, and the Ulster king is an annual king; the underlying myth in which they figure is about 'the regeneration of time' in annual cycles. Gricourt, however, makes a more direct use of specifically Celtic materials than Ó Broin, and he links the Irish Macha with the Welsh Rhiannon, and both of them with the old Celtic goddess, Epona. There is not space here to do justice to either Gricourt's or Ó Broin's views. It may nevertheless be suggested that Ó Broin relies mainly on Mediterranean and Near Eastern data and on the interpretations of them put forward in the first quarter of this century. Gricourt's argument, on the other hand, depends on sets and chains of partial correspondences among extant Celtic texts, and between those texts and archaeological monuments. He recognizes the gaps in the material with which he must work and would bridge some of them by supposing that the medieval scribes who wrote out the stories about Macha and the Ulstermen no longer fully understood what they had in their hands, and by supposing that Celtic divinities like Epona were multiform and multivalent.¹⁵

Georges Dumézil is little concerned with annual kings and would distinguish 'multivalence' from 'trivalence' in accordance with his theory of the 'tripartite ideology' of the Indo-Europeans. Dumézil points to the fact that the Irish *dinnshenchas* tradition preserves stories about three women, all called Macha and all associated with the old centre of Ulster at or near Armagh. Through her husband

Nemed, the first of these Machas has sacral affinities, and she dies after a clairvoyant vision of the future horrors of the Táin. The second Macha leads an energetically bellicose career, takes a husband who can help her lead armies, and dies violently. The third Macha is the Macha of the debility stories; she is plainly associated with sexuality and wealth. Irish tradition, then, has a 'trio of Machas', each representing an aspect of the tripartite ideology of the Indo-Europeans: magico-religious sovereignty, martial force, and the prosperity which is an important element in the rather diffuse third-function complex. Mac Cana (O'Driscoll, p. 147) has called Dumézil's treatment of the three Machas his most convincing demonstration of the tri-functional theory in the Irish context; it is still possible to have some reservations.¹⁶

Dumézil's suggestion of a coherent philosophy informing the strange story of Macha is a most valuable one. Elsewhere he has emphasized how myths, in general, define and magnify ideological concepts; how they embody traditional wisdom; and how they are exemplary fictions which transmit important values from generation to generation. Quite often, as Dumézil shows, these exemplary narratives demonstrate positive values by negative examples, such as 'the sins and losses of Indra' or 'the three sins of Hercules'. If he is right about the trio of Machas, each of them dies in a fashion negatively appropriate to her ideological 'function': one from a clairvoyant vision, one by violence, and the third in giving birth while trying to protect her wealthy husband.¹⁷ The other theories summarily outlined above also contribute valuable insights. The 'folklorist' theory offers analogues to Crunchnu's rash disclosure of what should have remained hidden, and Gricourt's evocation of Epona could explain the collocation of Macha with horses.¹⁸

I should like to raise somewhat different issues here. Is it possible to reconcile the two medieval explanations of the debility of the Ulstermen given in *NU* on the one hand and in *CU* on the other? Then, why is the debility represented as a kind of feminization, a deprivation of the customary virility of the Ulster warriors? Further, did the monastic scribes not fully understand the material they had in their hands, and alter it freely?¹⁹ Perhaps this is so; but it is also possible to think of the scribes as medieval men who perceived a salutary nucleus within the rough cortex of their old stories. It will be suggested here that this nucleus was 'truth' and 'modesty' — Fír and Fial, the names of the twins whom Macha bore. These names suggest a declaration of values, and they may be a guide to interpretation.

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I now turn to the text of *NU* itself, as edited by Hull. I begin at the point where Crunnchu the wealthy peasant (*aithech*) is at the assembly of the whole province of Ulster. He owes much of his wealth to the woman Macha, and she has warned him to reveal nothing about her. Yet he boasts of her swiftness in running in the most provocative way and at the worst possible time. His boast is a breach of social order, and, as we shall see, it opens up an unstable field of reversibilities which systems of order seek to contain.

The king's horses run their race 'in the mid-afternoon' (ll. 26–27 of Hull's text). This is after a varied programme of races, combats, shooting-matches, and other athletic events of a generally military character. What could follow the king's chariot race? It would seem to be a grand finale to the day's proceedings. When the race is over and won, the official eulogists step forward to praise the participants and the distinguished spectators, and especially they praise the horses of the king: they had won 'the victory of the assembly' (*bóaid ind óenaich*, l. 27). They are swifter than any horses in Ireland. One thinks of a seemly closing ceremony before the feasting begins; and it is at this point that Crunnchu the 'peasant' or 'churl' cries out from the crowd that his wife could outrun the horses of the king.

Now there are indications in the *Táin* that only foolish and inferior persons give way to impulsive displays of emotion (Dáire mac Fiachna and Láiríne in *LL Táin*, ll. 98–99 and 1940–42). In Irish, as in other kinds of heroic fiction, 'churls' ought not speak out of turn. The churlish Dubthach the Backbiter, for example, causes irritation and disturbance by what he says (*LU Táin*, ll. 189–213, where he is called *aithech* at l. 211); and on another occasion Fergus deals with Dubthach's verbal misdemeanours in much the same way as Odysseus dealt with Thersites, this Thersites being a man of unmeasured speech 'whose mind was full of great store of disorderly words, wherewith to utter revilings against kings'.²⁰ Crunnchu's boast about Macha not only marred the festive gathering, it directly dishonoured the king: his victorious horses were publicly declared inferior in speed to some unknown female, the wife of an *aithech* from the remote wilderness. When Macha, hearing about it, remarks that her husband had spoken in an 'unseemly' fashion, she did not exaggerate (*níro chomadas in rád hí-sin*, l. 38). There are also passages in the Irish wisdom literature declaring that 'rousing anger' is an act of folly, and warning against being a leader in strife, or contending against a king, or 'racing against a wheel' (i.e., racing against a chariot).²¹

Like Graeent in the French *lai*, Crunnchu is held prisoner until the woman may come to justify the boast. Unlike her counterparts in the *lais*, Macha comes promptly, and though she does not dispute the king's right to see proof of

Crunnchu's boast, she claims the right of *turbaid* for herself. *Turbaid* in Irish law was 'a temporary exemption from the fulfilment of legal obligations or from the infliction of penalties on the grounds of certain external contingencies recognized in law'. One of these grounds was *galar*, 'sickness, disease, or physical pain'. Macha was 'pregnant with the pangs of childbirth' (*álacht co n-idnaib*, l. 39), and this her woman's travail was *galar* (ll. 55 and 58). Her request for *turbaid*, thrice repeated, seems to have been justified in law as well as in common humanity. But the king flatly denies any stay (*Nathó*, *ol in rí*, l. 50).²²

There is a limit to the accuracy of legal detail that one can expect from fiction, but it would appear that Macha had a genuine claim to *turbaid* and that the king's denial of it was unjust. (The assembled Ulster notables did not dissent.) Yet the Irish wisdom literature insists that to give rightful judgments was a prime duty of a king: the king should at all times act in accordance with the principles of *fír flaitheon* — the 'truth' or 'justice' of a ruler. Certainly a king should be 'masterful to check everyone that may be undutiful' (including, no doubt, a boastful *aithech* like Crunnchu), but Cormac's *Instructions* say three times that a king should give 'true judgments'; 'rash judgments' were a mark of folly (*Instructions*, chs 1. 14; 1. 38; 3. 28; 6. 42; and 14. 5). Another wisdom text, the *Audacht Moraind* goes further.²³ It states that it was 'by the truth (or "justice") of a ruler' (*tre fír flaitheon*) that great communities were governed, mortalities avoided, invasions repulsed, trade encouraged, and the land kept prosperous; even the seasons of the year brought abundance *tre fír flaitheon*. Perhaps unjust judgments brought the reverse of these happy effects; and though *NU* says nothing about plague or murrain, the Ulster king and his accomplice warriors, when stricken with that debility which stems in part from the unjust refusal of *turbaid* to Macha, are unable to guarantee their frontiers or hold off the disasters of war. For a long time CúChulainn must fight alone as best he can. (See Cormac's *Instructions*, ch. 1. 29 and ch. 3. 51; and also Thurneysen's 'Morand', p. 99 and note 4.)

NU, then, seems to offer an example of a king's 'injustice' and its consequences; but Macha's complaint in the text is that she is treated in an 'unseemly' fashion, especially because she must be exposed to the gaze of the assembly of Ulster. ' "It is not meet," she said, "to gaze upon my shape" ' (*Nochon fíu taidbred ón*, *ol sí*, 'mo chrotha-sa', *NU*, l. 44). It is a matter of more than ordinary embarrassment; for in order to race against the king's horses Macha would need to lift up her skirts and expose herself. This is what the wives of the Ulster chieftains do (in very different circumstances) when they run to be first to enter Bricriu's hall: 'they raised their robes to the rounds of their buttocks'.²⁴

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Macha must do the same under the eyes of all Ulster, and it is this that she is calling 'unseemly'. A *dinnsenchas* poem states quite plainly that she 'bared herself' (*rosnocht in mer mend*, Gwynn, p. 128, l. 61). Exposure of the female person also appears to be the key feature which links *NU* and *CU* in their explanations of the origin of the debility of the Ulstermen: Macha had to run with lifted skirts, and Fedelm 'exhibited herself naked' to the Ulstermen, and it was that action which caused 'an affliction to be upon the Ulstermen, *et cetera*' (Hull's *CU*, pp. 311 and 314).

Now exposure of the human figure may have two different kinds of effect: on the person exposed and on the beholders. There may also be a difference between men's nakedness and women's nakedness. It is best to take these aspects separately.

Male nakedness in medieval Irish fiction produces no particular effects on either the spectators or the person beheld. As mentioned above, Níall of the Nine Hostages displays himself unclothed to an audience of admiring women (n. 12). In the *Táin CúChulainn* strips to delouse himself after long weeks in the field, and Fráech takes off his clothes in order to wrestle in a river (*LU Táin*, ll. 841 and 1235–36). In another episode, an old man called Iliach fights naked from his chariot in the antique Celtic style. It is true that this episode is 'Iliach's Humorous Fight', and that is because the ignorant rabble come to stare; but the aristocratic Dóchae mac Mágach recognizes Iliach's suicidal heroism, rebukes the rabble, and treats Iliach with honour (*LU Táin*, ll. 3366–86; cf. Diodorus Siculus, v. 29). And, as mentioned earlier, the restored Ulster warriors rush to answer a call to arms with weapons in their hands but otherwise naked. All this seems to be within the normal limits set for men in the Irish sagas.

The exposure of women to the gaze of spectators was evidently felt to be an entirely different matter in the world of the Irish sagas; for, as often in traditional societies, the roles of men and women were strongly polarized. As Thurneysen remarks, 'modesty' was the women's moral equivalent of the men's heroic honour, and failure to maintain it caused overwhelming feelings of 'shame'.²⁵ The whole complex of feelings and social expectations is too subtle to explore here in any detail, but a number of somewhat theatrical examples may be cited from medieval materials. Aillenn, daughter of Lugaid, for example, Luaine, daughter of Domanchenn, Frithir, daughter of Túathal, Findabair, daughter of Ailill and Medb — all these die of feelings of shame because they believe their 'modesty' is compromised in some way.²⁶ The recurrent terms for their feelings are *féle* and *náire*; and one also remembers the suicide of Deirdre when taunted by Conchobar.

More specifically, Gile, in a *dinnshenchas* story, dies of shame when she is seen unclothed by an unwelcome suitor; and Fial, wife of Lugaid mac Itha, dies of shame (*do náire*) when her own husband chances to come upon her while she is bathing. This last woman, Fial, appears to have the same name as the girl twin whom Macha bore, and, conformably with the story of her death, the name appears to mean 'Modest', or 'Modesty'.²⁷ Fial also belongs to what the medieval Irish thought were the oldest strata of their exemplary traditions, the traditions of 'the settlement of Ireland'. Given all this, having to race against the king's horses in an 'immodest' and 'unseemly' fashion might well have been the death of Macha even without her birth-pangs.

Quite apart from the women's own feelings of 'shame' at being beheld, their nakedness could produce markedly negative effects on male beholders in medieval Irish saga; and this was so well known that it could be used as a stratagem against enemies. The most familiar example is the climax to the recital of CúChulainn's 'Boyhood Deeds' in the *Táin*. In performing various exploits, CúChulainn works up a terrible warrior's *furor*; and drawn by maddened horses and accompanied by wild stags and flights of birds, he hurtles towards Emain Macha threatening blind massacre to his own people. Seeing CúChulainn come, Conchobar issues the command, ' "Send forth naked women to meet him!" '. The women of Ulster then bare their breasts, and with the queen in the lead they step forward. ' "These are the warriors who will encounter you today," ' says the queen — that is, not naked warriors in the antique Celtic style, but naked women (*LU Táin*, ll. 802–21). The *LL Táin* is more explicit: 'All the young women came forth and discovered all their nakedness and shame to him' (*a nnochta ocus a nnáire dó*; the phrase is repeated, *LL Táin*, ll. 1189–90). The women's action freezes CúChulainn in his tracks. He averts his eyes and is captured and made docile.

This action of the women of Ulster performed at the men's direction seems not to be the same as that of a Iuchna Ardmhór baring her breasts to admonish her son, nor the same as those actions of women reported by Caesar and Tacitus. It does, however, recall the Lycian women who lifted their skirts at Bellerophon and so repelled him. Subduing CúChulainn by these means occurs elsewhere in Irish literature, too; but if it were said that it was a stock joke repeated from text to text, then it could be answered that the stock jokes are the significant ones.²⁸

In another Irish saga, *Mesca Ulad (MU)*, the situation is somewhat different. Richis, a female satirist, wants to kill CúChulainn and engages one Crumthand Níath Náir to help her: she will immobilize CúChulainn, and then Crumthand can slay him. Richis strips naked in CúChulainn's presence (*ernochta, MU*, l. 1042),

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and Crumthand advances. CúChulainn is warned by his ever-vigilant charioteer. "As long as the woman is in that state," answers CúChulainn, "I shall not rise up." The hero is as if paralyzed. His charioteer then flings a stone at Richis, striking her *tara luthain*, (l. 1049). This kills her; and CúChulainn is freed from immobility, rises up, and slays Crumthand.

Now *tara luthain* appears to be a euphemism (see *RIA Dictionary*, s.v. *lutu*). Watson discreetly proposes either *podex* or *muliebria* as the meaning; he prefers the former on lexicographical grounds. Thurneysen on the other hand renders the phrase as 'ins Glied' (*IHK*, p. 484). There is perhaps some further support for *muliebria* in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*, chapters 26–27. In this story, the Norse god Þórr encounters a hostile giant's daughter named Gjálp while he is crossing the river Vimur. Gjálp straddles the river upstream from Þórr and turns it into a torrent, so that Þórr is in danger. He flings a stone at Gjálp with the remark, 'At ósi skal á stemma!', 'A river must be stopped at its source'. Þórr's cast finds its mark, like the stone which strikes Richis 'tara luthain', and it kills Gjálp.²⁹

A common factor present in these stories of CúChulainn and the men of Ulster may be formulated as follows: warriors see unclothed women and then find themselves incapable of action or as enfeebled as women after parturition; there is a 'feminization' of men usually celebrated for their vigour. It is a state of affairs which can be illuminated by Freud's theory of the 'Medusa effect', a reaction of paralyzing horror induced in men by the sight of *muliebria* and the fear of being unmanned. Freud based his theory on the evidence of 'numerous analyses'. What arouses fear in oneself, he goes on, will produce the same effect upon an enemy against whom one wishes to defend oneself; and so female nakedness acquires an apotropaic power which can be put to use. Hence Medusa's severed head upon the dress of the virgin war-goddess Athene; and hence too, perhaps, the stratagem of sending naked women against CúChulainn. Prohibiting the mortal husband from seeing his uncanny partner naked is also a key motif in the 'Mélusine' stories; and when the husband violates the prohibition he is filled with horror, and catastrophe follows.³⁰

Not everyone cares for psychoanalytical theories, but if we assume an heroic society in which masculine and feminine roles were polarized and anxiously maintained, Freud's theory of the 'Medusa effect' can do a number of things. It can provide a means of reconciling *NU* and *CU* as narrative explanations of the origin of the debility of the Ulstermen. They will be variant expressions of one and the same set of ideas and feelings, which could be neither completely repressed nor openly acknowledged, and which must needs appear in disguised and differentiated

forms. CúChulainn's amputation of the toes and thumbs of Fedelm's husband will then look all the more like symbolic castration, displaced to the extremities and multiplied for intensity. Macha's shame-bringing curse on the Ulster males who made her expose her own 'shame' can be taken as a rationalizing shift away from the sexual towards the more acceptable ideas of talion law and the folklore of supernatural beings. One can also say that CúChulainn prudently averted his eyes from Richis and the Ulster women, just as Perseus averted his eyes from the Gorgon.³¹ Finally a 'Medusa' theory can link *NU* and *CU* to other material in the Ulster Cycle, and perhaps also to those Sheela-na-gigs which are set into the walls of certain Irish castles as if to frighten enemies away.³²

All this apart, whoever wrote *NU* asserts that 'God cleared it away' for Macha at the end of her race (l. 55), so that in spite of her torment she gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. The assertion of God's grace may indicate monastic revision of older material, but it also suggests that the story of the birth of Macha's twins lay within the bounds of contemporary moral comprehensibility.

The name of the boy-child was *Fír*, 'Truth', and the girl's name was *Fial*, 'Modesty'. Such allegorical names have a long literary history: Hesiod, for example, tells how Eunomia ('Order'), Diké ('Justice'), and Eirene ('Peace') were three sisters whom Themis ('Right') bore to Zeus (*Theogony*, 901–23). The Irish *Triads* use similar metaphors of kinship.³³ Meyer dated the *Triads* to the ninth century (which would make them contemporary with *NU*), and they are associated in the manuscripts with Cormac's *Instructions* and other gnomic texts (Meyer's *Triads*, pp. vii and xi; Hull's *NU*, p. 23). Prosperity and Husbandry are 'brothers' in *Triad* No. 134; and in No. 211, Diligence, Prudence, and Bountifulness are 'three sisters of good repute' (cf. also Nos 142–44). I do not find any 'twins' in the *Triads*, but their metaphors point to 'Truth' and 'Modesty' as ethical principles which were closely related in medieval Irish thought.

Something has already been said about 'Modesty' and its opposite, 'Shame'. The boy's name *Fír* or 'Truth' could have a variety of meanings. *Fír* is for example the equivalent of Latin *verus* and *veritas* in such texts as Milan Glosses, 24. d. 16, and Würzburg Glosses 14. c. 22. When defined by an appropriate noun in the genitive case, *fír* could also mean something like 'the true justice of a king', as mentioned above. *Triad* No. 242 says that *fír*, 'justice', is one of the 'three things which are best for a chieftain'; the others are 'peace' and 'an army'. *NU*'s Conchobar, being deficient in the first, soon came to lack the others as well. On the other hand, *fír fer*, 'men's truth', is usually understood as 'fair play in combat'. *Fír catha*, 'battle truth', has a similar meaning; and at one point in the

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Táin Medb adjures the warrior CúRoí, '*ar fír do gascid fritt*', that is, 'by the truth of your weapons' or 'the truth of your valour' (see *LL Táin*, ll. 2325, 4002, 4025, 4222, and 3962).

What particular kind of 'truth' is meant in such locutions as these? Evidently something close to *fortitudo* — the kind of 'truth' which was made manifest when warriors encountered each other on equal terms, so that their 'true' masculinity appeared plain to all: vigour, courage, skill, and the noble desire for fame. It would then seem that the name of Macha's boy alludes to a supremely important general masculine virtue as well as to the special virtue of a wise and just ruler. In the same way, the girl's name signifies a supremely important feminine quality. The 'truth' of men and kings and the 'modesty' of women, the names imply, were the 'twin' principles which figuratively emerge from the *NU* explanation of the debility of the Ulstermen.

The nuances of Irish ethical thought and expression will no doubt remain elusive, but let us imagine a philosopher who could expound the polity he knew in modern terms. He might have said something like this: 'Kinship is a matter of great importance. Apart from that, our community is segmented vertically and horizontally: there is a hierarchy of kings, lords, and commons, and men and women have separate spheres of activity. Though power is distributed unequally, everyone has rights and duties. Peasants may become rich, but they should keep their subordinate place; kings rule, but they must give true judgments. Warrior aristocrats enjoy privileges, but they must guard the frontiers with vigour and vigilance. Women bear children and govern the hearth; they should be chaste and modest. There is harmony when each person behaves as he or she ought; this harmony is celebrated at our festive assemblies. Yet since there are external enemies and uncanny powers in the world, and since men and women are what they are, things do not always continue as they should. There are tensions in the social system, and its balance may be upset. The shift of a single stone may begin a general slide into confusion; the world may turn upside down; warriors may become as weak as women. All this is plainly visible in the mirror of history. Consider how Crunnchu the peasant was a remote cause of disaster when Ailill and Medb led the *Táin* into Ulster.'

The story of the debility of the men of Ulster may be considered as a complex exemplum of such a social philosophy. Unjustly deprive women of modesty, it would suggest, and you risk depriving men of true manliness, for the 'truth' of men and kings and the 'modesty' of women were indispensable complements to one another. Untune one of those double strings and you untune the other; then hark

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what discord must follow. Yet modesty, justice, and heroism have never been easy to maintain as ideals. In societies where they are valued, the expressive culture must persistently reinforce them. The appropriate traditional tales must be told and re-told — both the positive ones, like the triumphs of CúChulainn, and also the negative tales, like that of the debility of the Ulstermen, which mark the opposite of what was held to be just and right. It would be surprising if medieval Irish fiction did not have as one of its central concerns the continual restatement of such essential commonplaces as order, equity, self-defence, and social complementarity. Such a socio-political perspective is not incompatible with the masculine/feminine tensions of Freud's 'Medusa' theory; and it suggests that old story-material was perceived as having contemporary relevance rather than as being the fragmented debris of the past.³⁴

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NOTES

¹ The *Táin* is quoted here from either *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster* or from *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, both edited by Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin, 1970 and 1976). The titles of these two texts are abbreviated as *LL Táin* and *LU Táin*, respectively. The present article is not directly concerned with relationships between the various recensions and manuscripts of the *Táin*. There is a convenient English translation of the *Táin* by Thomas Kinsella (London and New York, 1970); it includes 'The Pangs of Ulster' (pp. 6–8) and other texts.

² In *LU Táin*, l. 1114, it is said that 'the hosts sleep on' (*contolat*); in l. 1629 the Ulstermen 'awoke from their torpor' (*dofíuchtraíís*); and in ll. 3510–11, Conchobar, desiring no more delays, wants the men of Ireland to know about his 'awakening' (*mo díuchtrad-sa*). Compare also *LL Táin*, l. 4115, where the word *lén* may bear the sense of 'sloth, inertia'.

³ See *Finnsburh: Fragment and Episode*, edited by Donald K. Fry (London, 1974). For the Danish example, see *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, edited by J. Olrik and H. Raeder (Copenhagen, 1931), II. vii. 4 and II. vii. 11. Similarly, Thorbjörn Hornklofi composed eulogistic verses about how King Harald Finehair spent a whole winter at sea on Viking raids and was impatient with 'sitting indoors, and the snug women's bower, and mittens filled with down': see E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 13–14. Saxo also more than once contrasts the vigorous warrior's life with enervating womanish pursuits, for example in *Gesta Danorum*, II. vii. 4; similarly in the fragments of the *Bjarkamál*, in E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse*, second edition, revised by A. R. Taylor (Oxford, 1957), pp. 124–25.

⁴ 'Shame' and 'disgrace' (*mebal* and *aithis*) are terms occurring in 'Noínden Ulad', edited by Hull (see note 5, below), ll. 52 and 59. CúChulainn's exemption from the debility is mentioned in the same text, ll. 65–66.

⁵ Vernam Hull, 'Noínden Ulad: The Debility of the Ulidians', *Celtica*, 8 (1968), 1–42. See also Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle, 1921), pp. 360–63. This work will subsequently be referred to as *IHK*.

⁶ See Thurneysen, *IHK*, p. 363; also Edward Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas, Part IV*, Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series, 11 (1924), 125–31.

⁷ Vernam Hull, 'Ces Ulad: The Affliction of the Ulstermen', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie (ZCP)*, 29 (1962–64), 305–14. See also Thurneysen, *IHK*, pp. 359–60.

- 8 Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London, 1970), pp. 90–91. See also Kinsella, pp. 6–8.
- 9 Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Mythology in Early Irish Literature', in *The Celtic Consciousness*, edited by Robert O'Driscoll (Portlaoise, 1982), pp. 143–54, especially pp. 145–48.
- 10 Thurneysen, *IHK*, p. 362, note 6. The same names are given in the editions by Stokes and Gwynn: Whitley Stokes, 'The Edinburgh Dinnshenchas', *Folk-Lore*, 4 (1893), 480–81, and Gwynn's *Metrical Dindshenchas*, IV, 128–29.
- 11 There is a multi-generational prohibition in Deuteronomy 23. 2. It occurs in a context of sexual offences and misdemeanours.
- 12 In general, see Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1952), Motif T55. 6. For Aillenn Ilchrothach, see *Irische Texte*, edited by Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes, 4. Serie, 1. Heft (Leipzig, 1884–1909), pp. 246–47. For assassinations, see Whitley Stokes, 'The Rennes Dindshenchas', *Revue Celtique*, 15 (1894), 295–96, and also Kuno Meyer, *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*, Todd Lecture Series, 14 (1906), 6–7. (The word *cruth* '(beautiful) form, shape', occurs in a number of these stories.) For *Graelent*, see T. P. Cross, 'Celtic Elements in the Lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent*', *Modern Philology*, 12 (1915), 585–644, and especially 638–41.
- 13 See Mac Cana, in 'Mythology in Early Irish Literature', p. 146; Apuleius of Madaura, *Metamorphoses*, IV. 28–VI. 24; Fritz Erik Hoevens, *Märchen und Magie in den Metamorphosen des Apuleius von Madaura* (Amsterdam, 1979), especially pp. 96–99 and 262–70; Otto Rank, 'Die Nacktheit in Sage und Dichtung: eine psychoanalytische Studie', *Imago*, 2 (1912), 267–301 and 409–46, especially 413–19. For more immediately Celtic material see, J. F. Killeen, 'The Debility of the Ulstermen — A Suggestion', *ZCP*, 33 (1974), 81–86; Tomás Ó Broin, 'What is the "Debility" of the Ulstermen?', *Éigse*, 10 (1963), 286–99; and Cross, 'Celtic Elements'. Cross's article, though old, is still taken seriously by French scholars: see Philippe Ménard, *Les Lais de Marie de France* (Paris, 1979), p. 254. Many current French interpretations of the *lais*, including the *lais* of *Lanval* and *Graelent*, are psychologically orientated: see, for example, Jean-Claude Aubailly, *La Fée et le chevalier* (Paris, 1986), especially pp. 71–100.
- 14 Ó Broin, 'What is the "Debility" of the Ulstermen?'. For myth and folktale, see G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, Sather Classical Lectures, 40 (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 31–41.

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- 15 Jean Gricourt, 'Epona-Rhiannon-Macha', *Ogam*, 6 (1954), 25–40, 75–86, 137–38, 165–88, and 269–72.
- 16 Georges Dumézil, 'Le trio des Macha', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 146 (1954), 5–17; abridged in his *Mythe et épopée*, I (Paris, 1968), 602–12. I think that Dumézil's claim, namely to have established that 'the druidical doctrine relative to the political and religious centre of pagan Ulster was governed by the ideology of the three functions', is not fully borne out; we have little firm evidence about 'le savoir druidique' in Ireland (p. 612; my translation).
- 17 Georges Dumézil, *Heur et malheur du guerrier* (Paris, 1969).
- 18 I prefer not to enter into discussion here of that ritual inauguration of a king mentioned in *Topographia Hiberniae*, III, xxv — see Giraldi Cambrensis, *Opera*, edited by J. F. Dimock, Rolls Series, V (London, 1867).
- 19 See Jean Gricourt, 'Epona — Rhiannon — Macha', pp. 27, 79, 80.
- 20 *LL Táin*, ll. 2376–405. Compare Homer, *Iliad*, II, 211–77, as edited and translated by A. T. Murray (London, 1924), especially ll. 211–29 and 264–68. By contrast, no-one rebukes Dunnere the *unorne ceorl* in the OE *Battle of Maldon*, ll. 255–59, because Dunnere is confirming the sentiments of his social superiors. For the passions aroused in heroic societies by chariot races, see *Iliad*, XXIII, 262–650. See also Marcello Durante, 'Ricerche sulla preistoria della lingua poetica greca. L'epiteto', *Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, Serie ottava, Rendiconti. Classe di Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche, 17 (1962), 25–43, especially 30–31.
- 21 See *The Instructions of King Cormac Mac Airt*, edited by Kuno Meyer, Todd Lecture Series, 15 (1909), chs 14. 5, 19. 1, and 19. 9.
- 22 For *turbaid* and *galar*, see the RIA *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, s. vv.
- 23 R. Thurneysen, 'Morands Fürstenspiegel', *ZCP*, 11 (1917), 56–106.
- 24 *Fled Bricrend*, edited by George Henderson, Irish Texts Society, 2 (London, 1899), pp. 20–21. The abbreviation *ITS* will be used below. Contrast, however, the sophisticated Ovid's attitude towards women athletes in *Amores*, III, ii, 29–32, and *Ars amatoria*, III, 775, with the learned notes by Paul Brandt in his editions (both reprinted, Hildesheim, 1963).

- 25 The usual medieval Irish words for 'shame' in this context are *féle* or *náire*, which Thurneysen translates as German 'Schamhaftigkeit', *IHK*, p. 81.
- 26 See Whitley Stokes, 'The Rennes Dindshenchas', *Revue Celtique*, 15 (1894), 309–10; Stokes, 'The Wooing of Luaine and the Death of Athirne', *Revue Celtique*, 24 (1903), 278–79; Stokes, 'The Boroma', *Revue Celtique*, 13 (1892), 39; and *LU Táin*, l. 3365. *Tochmarc Luaine* has recently been re-edited by Liam Breatnach in *Celtica*, 13 (1980), 1–31.
- 27 For Gile, see Whitley Stokes, 'The Rennes Dindshenchas, First Supplement', *Revue Celtique*, 16 (1895), 145–46, and Gwynn, Todd Lecture Series, 11 (1924), 12–15. For Fial, see *Lebor Gabála Erenn*, V, *ITS*, 44 (1956), 74–75. The insistence on maintaining ideal 'modesty' in these exemplary stories may be contrasted with Cormac's observations in his *Instructions*, ch. 16.
- 28 For Iuchna, see Kuno Meyer, *The Chase of Síd na mBan finn and the Death of Finn*, Todd Lecture Series, 16 (1910), 72–73. For the classical references, see Caesar, *Gallic War*, VII, 47; Tacitus, *Germania*, 8, and the notes in the edition by Wolfgang Lange (Heidelberg, 1967); Plutarch's *Mulierum virtutes*, in *Moralia*, III, 248. B. The Bellerophon story is discussed by Raymond J. Cormier, 'Pagan Shame or Christian Modesty?', *Celtica*, 14 (1981), 43–46. Cormier's point of view is different from the one adopted in the present paper. For other confrontations of CúChulainn by naked women, see *Fled Bricrend*, chs 51–53; W. Stokes, 'The Violent Deaths of Goll and Garb', *Revue Celtique*, 14 (1893), 418–19; *Toruiogheacht Gruaidhe Griansholus*, edited by Cecile O'Rahilly, *ITS*, 24 (1924), 15; Dumézil, *Heur et malheur*, pp. 121–24.
- 29 See *Mesca Ulad*, edited by J. Carmichael Watson (Dublin, 1941). For Snorri, see *Edda: Gylfaginning og Prosafortellingene av Skáldskaparmál*, edited by Anne Holtmark and Jón Helgason (Copenhagen, 1950), pp. 88–89; and *Edda*, translated by Anthony Faulkes (London, 1987), pp. 81–83.
- 30 See Freud's papers in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey (London, 1953–74), 'Medusa's Head', 18 (1955), 273–74; 'The Infantile Genital Organization', 19 (1961), 140–45; and 'Fetishism', 21 (1961), 149–57. Also Rank, 'Die Nacktheit', and Hoevens, pp. 267–68. For psychoanalytical discussion of a relationship between child-bearing and castration, see Marcia Pointon, 'Artemisia Gentileschi's *The Murder of Holofernes*', *American Imago*, 38 (1981), 343–67, and Graeme J. Taylor, 'Judith and the Infant Hercules: Its Iconography', *American Imago*, 41 (1984), 101–15.

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- 31 See Apollodorus, *The Library*, edited and translated by J. G. Frazer, 2 vols (London, 1921–39), II. iv. 2.
- 32 See Jørgen Andersen, *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles* (London, 1977), especially pp. 96–103. For the aggressive masculine ethic in Norse literature, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, translated by Joan Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983), especially ch. 2. I am indebted to Margaret Clunies Ross for this and other Norse references. Belief in the apotropaic powers of the human body may not be confined to the past. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported (28 December 1987) that Ms Barbara Meyers, a 49-year-old grandmother, stripped down to a beige bra and black panties on the quarterdeck of USS *Missouri*, then lying in Sydney Harbour. The words 'No Nuke Ships' were written on Ms Meyers's thighs, and she wished to protest against the dangers of 'floating Chernobyls' near centres of population. Ms Meyers was forcibly removed from the ship but not charged because, she said, the Australian authorities did not want to 'embarrass' the American navy. No doubt similar incidents have been reported elsewhere in recent times.
- 33 Kuno Meyer, *The Triads of Ireland*, Todd Lecture Series, 13 (1906).
- 34 A version of this paper was read at the fourteenth Australia and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Conference, Sydney, 1988. I should like to acknowledge the support which Professor Rogers has given to Celtic studies in Sydney, especially in the acquisition of materials.