

A Comparison of the Roles of the Hero and the Seductress
in the Tain Bo Cuailgne and the Iliad

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

This paper attempts to redefine the role of the "hero" in ancient Western epic poetry, focusing specifically on the Iliad of Homer and the Irish epic the Tain Bo Cuailgne, by focusing on the maintenance of a hierarchy of loyalties. Similarly, this paper demonstrates the need to expand the traditional conception of the epic seductress. Ultimately, the paper concludes with a brief cross-cultural comparison of ancient Greece and Ireland based on information extracted by employing the revised definitions suggested in this paper.

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A Comparison of the Roles of the Hero and the Seductress
In the Tain Bo Cuailgne and the Iliad

The term "Heroic Age" encapsulates the theory of H.M. Chadwick which he developed in his book Heroic Age and later in various chapters of The Growth of Literature. This theory holds that the evolution of every society is marked by an early period of domination by an aristocratic warrior class. The Heroic Age of a society is generally credited with the production of long narrative epics that were designed to be delivered in verse form, usually to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument, such as the lyre¹ or the harp². The study of ancient oral epics and the examination of individual heroes or bands of adventuring warriors has fallen under heavy criticism, with much of the harshest criticism being deserved. All ancient epics only reveal a limited amount of factual information about the culture and time period that produced them. The true challenge is to evaluate the information about the epic's parent society to ascertain how much of the extracted material can be validated. Therefore, ancient epic is often a poor substitute for archeological evidence or literature created outside of an oral

¹ H.D. Amos and A.G.P. Lang. These Were the Greeks. p. 27.

² Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees. Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales. p. 141.

tradition when attempting to produce cultural or historical specifics. However, ancient oral epics should not be ignored when studying an ancient civilization, because heroic literature provides a broad view of the general structure and nature of the parent society. This information alone makes the study of ancient oral epic vastly rewarding. However, beyond providing an over-arching view of the parent culture's societal institutions in operation, oral epics also lend a key insight into understanding the abstract notions of the parent society. Among the most basic and important of these abstract notions, or cultural icons, in ancient oral epic are the roles of the hero and the seductress.

The characters of the hero and the seductress are standard elements of nearly all epic sagas, and often they are presented within the context of their individual epics in a strikingly similar manner. This facilitates the cross-cultural comparison of epics and epic characters. Naturally, these cross-cultural comparisons of epics generally rely most heavily on the Iliad of Homer, since it is one of the oldest works of oral epic in the Western Tradition, and it is considered to be the corner stone of Western literature. In contrast to the Iliad, the ancient Irish epic the Tain Bo Cuailgne remains relatively unknown and has often been overlooked.

The Tain Bo Cuailgne has frequently been referred to as simply

the Tain, since it is the most common of several Irish tales with titles beginning with the word "Tain," a Celtic Irish word meaning a "cattle raid"³. The Tain is part of the Ulster Cycle of tales, which deal primarily with the heroes of the Ulaid, a people who lived in Ulster, the northeastern section of Ireland, and maintained a capital at Emain Macha⁴. These warriors have also been referred to collectively as the Heroes of the Red Branch⁵. Although various dates are given for the Tain's authorship, certain parts of the standard text clearly date back to the eighth century A.D., while some verse passages may be older by at least two centuries. However, most Celtic scholars believe that the Tain, along with the rest of the Ulster Cycle, has origins that predate the introduction of Christianity into Ireland in the fifth century A.D. The traditional time frame given for the events described by the Ulster Cycle was roughly the birth of Christ and the reign of Caesar Augustus, but recent scholarship has shown that the culture being described in the Ulster Cycle could have existed up to the introduction of Christianity into Ireland⁶.

The text of the Tain is preserved primarily in three medieval Irish manuscripts, The Book of the Dun Cow, The Yellow Book of Lecan, and The Book of Leinster. Unlike the faultless poetry of the Homeric

³ Patrick Denneen (compiler and editor). An Irish-English Dictionary. p. 1158.

⁴ Miles Dillon. Early Irish Literature. p. 1.

⁵ Eleanor Hull. The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature. p. lv.

⁶ Thomas Kinsella (translator). The Tain. p. 256.

epics, the Tain came into written literature as narrative prose with segments of poetry to accentuate the dramatic speeches of the main characters. These poetic passages are often alliterative in nature with a word order that is archaic or completely artificial. However, if the style of the Tain and that of the Iliad reflect dissimilarities, the structure and the subject matter bear a striking resemblance⁷.

In his book, the Heroic Age, Chadwick lists some general characteristics of Heroic Age literature which certainly apply to both the Iliad and the Tain. Both epics concentrate on the aristocratic caste and their values, which center primarily on courage, prowess in battle, loyalty, and sincere dedication to personal honor. War is the profession of choice among the aristocracy in both epics. The type of war fought almost always follows the deeds of individual heroes in direct combat and is usually devoid of any coherent strategy. Heroes are presented in an idealized human form, but they still must suffer pain, both emotional and physical, and even death. Ultimately, Heroic Age literature presents the lives of the aristocratic warrior class in a setting that readily provides them with the opportunity to be heroic⁸.

The warriors of the Iliad were afforded the chance to gain honor and glory when the Achaians of mainland Greece, Thessaly, and some of the surrounding islands waged war on the city of Troy in Asia Minor

⁷ Ibid. p. 257.

⁸ H.M. Chadwick. Heroic Age.

and all of that city-state's allies. The war began when Paris, a young Trojan prince, while a guest in Sparta of Menelaos, carried off Menelaos' wife Helen. Once Paris returned to Troy, with Helen living with him as his wife, Agamemnon, the older brother of Menelaos, gathered together the princes of the Achaians and sailed to Troy, determined to retake Helen, and to avenge the insult to Menelaos' honor by sacking the citadel of Troy. Once on Trojan soil, the Achaian forces managed to keep the Trojans and their allies on the defensive for nine years. In that time, the Achaians also plundered many of the smaller cities and towns surrounding the walled city of Troy. The narrative of the Iliad begins in the tenth year of the siege of Troy, and focuses on a quarrel between Achilles, the best warrior of the Achaians, and Agamemnon, who acted as the commander-in-chief of the Achaian forces at Troy. As a result of this quarrel, Achilles withdraws himself and his men from the fighting. Achilles then has his mother, the goddess Thetis, persuade Zeus to allow the Trojans to begin pushing the Achaians back to their ships. It is during this time that Hektor, a prince of Troy and the foremost warrior of the Trojans, begins gaining ascendancy over the battlefield. Hektor and the Trojan allies nearly destroy the Achaians when Achilles allows his companion, Patroklos, to defend the Achaian ships. Once Patroklos enters the battle, he over-confidently chases the Trojans back to the walls of

Troy, where he is killed by Hektor. Achilles then reenters the fighting to avenge Patroklos and kills several Trojans, including Hektor. The text of the Iliad ends when Achilles ransoms the body of Hektor to Priam, Hektor's father and the king of Troy. Achilles is killed in battle a short while afterwards, and later in the tenth year Troy falls to the Achaians with most of the heroes of Troy dead, and the civilian population is divided up as slaves between the surviving Achaian heroes, who then sail for home. Most of the Achaian heroes, however, either fail to return home safely, or suffer many set backs in their attempt to re-establish themselves in their kingdoms that they had left years earlier.⁹

The Irish Tain begins under entirely different circumstances than the Greek Iliad. The story recounted in the Tain actually begins in a series of tales called *remscella*, that lead up to the opening of the Tain with the invasion of Ulster by forces gathered by Medb, the queen of Connacht. The true beginning of the tale takes place in the bedroom of Medb and her husband Ailill. As Medb and Ailill list their possessions, Medb realizes that she has no bull to equal the magnificence of a white bull belonging to her husband. Shortly thereafter, Medb hears of a brown bull in the Kingdom of Ulster that is more than the equal to the white bull of her husband. After a failed

⁹ Richmond Lattimore. (translator). The Iliad of Homer. p. 12-13 (Introduction).

attempt to purchase the brown bull from its owner, Medb decides to take it by force. With the aid of her husband, Medb musters troops from every kingdom in Ireland, including a group of exiles from Ulster, who are lead by Fergus, a former king of Ulster, and begins her invasion. Due to a strange curse leveled against the men of Ulster a few generations earlier which causes them to suffer labor pains at times of extreme crises, only the warrior Cuchulainn, whose name means the Hound of Culann, is able to meet the invading forces. However, Cuchulainn is able to single-handedly inflict heavy loses on Medb's forces. After their first few encounters with Cuchulainn, Medb's husband Ailill asks Fergus "What sort of man is this Hound of Ulster we hear tell of?" Fergus responds by telling an account of Cuchulainn's *mac-gnimrada*, which translates as "boyhood deeds."¹⁰ For the next several days Cuchulainn killed at least one man during the day, and at least one hundred each night. Finally, Medb agrees to a condition set by Cuchulainn that limited her troops to advancing only while Cuchulainn was engaged in single combat with one of her hand picked warriors. Once that warrior fell, she was under obligation to stop her advance until another warrior was sent to face Cuchulainn. Medb readily agreed to these terms, realizing that it was better to lose one man each day than to lose a hundred every night.

¹⁰ Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy. Early Irish Literature. p.117.

After the arrangement has been made, a long series of single combats between various warriors and Cuchulainn follows, with Cuchulainn always winning. Meanwhile, Medb is able to lead her forces into the heart of Ulster, plundering the countryside and eventually stealing the great brown bull of Ulster. When the series of single combats proves to be too physically taxing for the wounded and extremely exhausted Cuchulainn, the god Lug, who was generally considered his father, comes to Cuchulainn and uses herbs to heal his mortal son over the course of three days and nights. When Cuchulainn awakes, he discovers that the young boys of Ulster had come and fought three battles against the invaders. Although the young boys killed three times their own number, they were all slain as a result. This drives Cuchulainn into a battle madness and he kills a great number of Medb's warriors.

The climax of the series of single combats soon follows when Medb manages to seduce Ferdia, Cuchulainn's own foster-brother, into facing Cuchulainn in single combat. The battle between these two great warriors takes three days of bloody fighting to complete and is one of the most powerful scenes in epic literature. Ultimately, Cuchulainn is able to kill Ferdia by using his magical spear, the *gae bolga*¹¹. After this battle, Cuchulainn suffered such massive wounds

¹¹ Thomas O'Rahilly. Early Irish History and Mythology. p. 58-75.

that he was unable to continue to fight until the last battle of the Tain. In the meantime, some single champions of Ulster came out to face the hordes of invaders and while killing an honorable share of opponents, they all were quickly brought down by Medb's forces.

Eventually, all the men of Ulster recover from their magically induced illness and come out to repel the invaders. The battle that ensues is basically the kingdom of Ulster engaged in a battle with the rest of Ireland. At first, the battle seems to be going badly for the men of Ulster since the invaders almost break their lines three times. The tide of the battle quickly turns, however, once Cuchulainn is able to overcome his wounds and retake the field. Due to a prior agreement, Fergus is obligated to retreat before Cuchulainn. Once Fergus has resigned from the battle, troops from the kingdoms of Leinster and Munster also withdraw from the fighting. The only forces remaining on the field to oppose the Ulstermen were the nine battalions of warriors from Medb's home kingdom of Connacht. Cuchulainn and the men of Ulster defeated these battalions by night fall, and Medb was forced to beg Cuchulainn to spare her life and the lives of her remaining warriors. Medb, however, was able to send the great brown bull home to Connacht. Once the bull arrived there, it and the great white bull belonging to Ailill began fighting, because they both were actually rival magic entities. The two bulls raged

throughout Ireland, ripping at each other, all night. By the next morning the brown bull of Ulster had killed the white bull of Connacht, and began making its way back to its homeland in Ulster. Upon arriving at the boarder of its home pasture, the great bull fell dead. The Tain then closes by saying that peace was made between Connacht and Ulster, with the Connachtmen returning to their own kingdom and the Ulstermen joining together in triumph at Emain Macha¹².

Clearly, there are textual similarities between the Iliad and the Tain. In particular, both epics are primarily concerned with the actions of a specific hero in an unusual and extremely stressful situation, and, to a lesser extent, with the warriors and warfare in general. In an attempt to increase the understanding of such heroic epics, many definitions of the term "hero" have been presented. Several scholars have attempted to define the epic hero by citing a list of characteristics which tends to be designed for, and more applicable to, standard mythological heroes. These definitions of "hero" have worked their way into standard usage, and are even found in dictionaries with definitions such as "a mythological or legendary figure endowed with great strength, courage, or ability, favored by the gods, and often believed to be of divine or partly

¹²Thomas Kinsella (translator). The Tain. p. 52-253.

divine descent.”¹³ While this definition certainly applies to both Achilles of the Achaians and Cuchulainn of the Ulaid, it nevertheless remains merely a list of physical characteristics and potential genealogies. A better definition of an epic hero must avoid the temptation to define a hero in terms of a list of attributes and origins, and seek to reveal the true essence of what it means to be “heroic.”

A definition that adequately suits this criterion is that an epic hero consistently maintains his or her principle and defining loyalties. Accordingly, epic heroes are often depicted as ultimately suffering because of their inflexibility or because two or more of their loyalties come into conflict. This also provides an explanation for why so many epic heroes eventually fall from ascendancy, being similar in nature to the heroes of the tragic plays of Sophocles, who were often formerly great men or women who have suffered an inescapable fall¹⁴. However, this definition would still allow for the occasional triumphant hero to succeed. For instance, if the principle and defining loyalty of Odysseus in the Odyssey of Homer is perceived to be the procurement of a safe arrival home, then Odysseus is free to warp or ignore any of his society’s notions of what it is to be “heroic” and still be a legitimate epic hero, regardless of the fact that neither of his

¹³ Philip Babcock Gove (editor-in-chief). Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged. p. 1060.

¹⁴ E.F. Watling. Sophocles: Electra and Other Plays. (introduction). p. 8.

parents were divine or that he was in as much disfavor with Poseidon as he was in the favor of Athena. In more recent and perhaps more radical example, Satan, in John Milton's Paradise Lost, can readily be defined as an epic hero if one considers that Satan maintains his loyalty to perpetually rage against God and spread evil among God's creations.

It is important to note that in order to make this definition of epic hero function, the exact principle and defining loyalties of the hero must be made clear. For several heroes in the Iliad and the Tain, the primary loyalty is to the maintenance of personal honor. Achilles' famous withdrawal from the war in Book I of the Iliad demonstrates that he places a higher value on his honor than on the lives of his fellow Achaians. This point is stated expressly by Achilles before the council of the Achaians in these lines from Book I of the Iliad:

And this shall be a great oath before you:/
 some day longing for Achilles will come the sons
 of the Achaians,
 all of them. Then stricken at heart though you be,
 you will be able/
 to do nothing, when in their numbers before
 man-slaughtering Hektor/

they drop and die. And then you will eat out the
heart within you/
in sorrow, that you did not honour to the best of
of the Achaians. (lines 239-244)¹⁵

Achilles does not exempt any of his comrades from his curse; in fact, Homer uses the Greek word “sympantas”, which translates as “all together, or all in a body”¹⁶ in line 241 to emphasize this fact. When Patroklos is killed by Hektor after trying to save the other Achaians from certain death by begging Achilles to lend him his armor and to allow him to drive the Trojans back from the Achaian ships, Achilles is partially responsible because it is his curse that is being fulfilled.

In a later episode in the Iliad, Hektor demonstrates that he values personal honor over the lives of his family and friends as well. As Hektor stands before the walls of Troy about to face the enraged Achilles, both his mother and father beg him to come inside the walls of the city and ward off Achilles in relative safety. Hektor, however, is resolved to face Achilles, knowing that it may mean his death and the destruction of his family and city, rather than suffer dishonor. Hektor, thinking to himself in lines 108 through 110 in Book XXII,

¹⁵ Richmond Lattimore (translator). The Iliad of Homer. p. 65.

¹⁶ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (compilers). A English-Greek Lexicon. p. 1462.

states:

...and as for me, it would be much better/
 at that time, to go against Achilles, and slay him,
 and come back,
 or else be killed by him in glory in front of the city.

Hektor can not divorce himself from the heroic code of honor that demands that he meet Achilles on the battlefield in single combat to the death, regardless of the devastating consequences. Hektor decides that an honorable death would be more acceptable than to commit the shameful act of protecting his city safely behind its walls.¹⁷ Obviously, among many of the heroes in the Iliad, the obligation to the maintenance of personal honor is held before all other loyalties.

Most of the heroes of the Tain also hold personal honor and glory to be the defining essence of a hero. The need to protect personal honor for the heroes of the Ulaid is so fundamental that they are willing to abandon practically all other social institutions for it. In one instance, the hero Cuchulainn was about to be married to the beautiful Emer when someone mentioned that "this woman he has brought here will have to sleep tonight with Conchobor -the first

¹⁷ James Hogan. A Guide to the Iliad. p. 273-274.

forcing of girls in Ulster is always his.”¹⁸ The fact that his bride must first sleep in the king’s bed before coming to his own drove young Cuchulainn into such a fury that the cushion beneath him burst up and feathers flew about wildly. The other Ulster warriors quickly realized that the king could not accept the dishonor of not enforcing his own edicts and that Cuchulainn would destroy any man who dishonored him by having sex with his wife. A compromise is reached when the men of Ulster decide that Emer should sleep in Conchobor’s bed that night but with two men in between the two of them to “protect Cuchulainn’s honour.”¹⁹ This story reflects the ability of the heroes to make compromises when faced with conflicting loyalties; in this instance the conflict is between loyalty to Ulster in the form of its king and its laws and loyalty to protecting one’s personal honor. The story also shows that while a compromise was agreed upon, both Cuchulainn and Conchobor were willing to risk their lives and their friendships among the men of Ulster to preserve their honor.

The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu, one of the *remscella*, or foretales, of the Tain, however, presents a situation where a compromise between loyalties could not be made. The tragic story concludes with Conchobor betraying a trust and having a band of warriors led by the sons of Uisliu treacherously killed while under the direct protection of

¹⁸ Thomas Kinsella (translator). The Tain. p. 38.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 39.

Fergus and Conchobor's own son, Cormac. As a result of Conchobor's deceit, Fergus and Cormac, along with some other heroes of Ulster, had to avenge the wrongful deaths of the sons of Uisliu in order to protect their own honor. Fergus and Cormac were driven to kill many men and to burn the capital at Emain Macha, as a result of Conchobor's deceit. Once they had turned against Conchobor and the rest of Ulster, Fergus and Cormac, along with three thousand other men from Ulster, were forced to seek refuge in the land of Connacht and later fought against Cuchulainn and Ulster during the course of the Tain²⁰. This story leaves no doubt as to what is most important to them and where their deepest loyalties lie. Fergus leaves behind the land he loves and Cormac turns against his own father, destroying his chances for royal succession, because they feel that their honor has been insulted by Conchobor.

Although maintenance and expansion of their own honor is the primary loyalty for most of the heroes in both the Iliad and the Tain, there are secondary loyalties for different heroes in each epic. The most common secondary loyalty for the heroes in the Iliad tends to be to family and close friends. Loyalty to the memory of Patroklos and the guilt he feels for Patroklos' death is responsible for the incredible

²⁰ Ibid. p. 14-15.

change that comes over Achilles in the later books of the Iliad. Achilles, who has begun to realize the flaws and futility of the heroic code, no longer cares for his curse, Agamemnon, or his own honor. More than ever before, he has become alienated from the other Achaians. The fact that he makes it a point to senselessly sacrifice twelve Trojan nobles on the funeral pyre with the body of Patroklos²¹ shows that Achilles is only concerned with revenge and death.

Achilles' abandonment of honor as his primary loyalty is reflected in several different passages, but one of the most powerful in the Iliad occurs once Achilles reenters the fighting to take revenge for the death of Patroklos in Book XXI. Achilles comes upon a young Trojan prince whom he had captured twelve days earlier and sold into slavery. The young prince had managed to return to Troy through a series of fortunate circumstances but had the misfortune of meeting Achilles for the second time. The young prince takes Achilles by the knees and pitifully begs for his life again, but this time, however, Achilles is not persuaded to grant mercy. Achilles levies his verdict with these cold words:

Poor fool, no longer speak to me of ransom,
nor argue it./

²¹ Richmond Lattimore (translator). The Iliad of Homer. p. 455.

In the time before Patroklos came to the day
of his destiny/
then it was the way of my heart's choice to
be sparing/
of the Trojans, and many I took alive and
disposed of them.
Now there is one who can escape death, if the
gods send/
him against my hands in front of Ilion, not one/
of all the Trojans and beyond others the children
of Priam. (lines 99-104)²²

Another scene in the Iliad which demonstrates a hero's loyalty to his family occurs in Book VI in an exchange between Hektor, his wife Andromache, and their infant son. Hektor has come inside the walls of Troy during a decisive battle to ask the Trojan women to pray and honor the goddess Athena so that she might grant the Trojans victory over the Achaians. Once inside the city he goes to his house to see Andromache before returning to the fighting. Hektor finds her on the walls of Troy searching the battlefield for a sign that he is still alive and well. After she and Hektor speak in one of the most

²² Ibid. p. 420-421.

endearing scenes in all of Western literature, Hektor reaches for his baby son, who screams and shrinks back against his mother's breast fearing his father's bloody bronze armor and the shining helmet with its long horse-hair crest. Both Hektor and Andromache laugh as he takes off the helmet, and then takes his son in his arms. Hektor then cuddles and kisses him before praying to the gods with these words:

Zeus, and you other immortals grant that this boy,
 who is my son,
 may be as I am, pre-eminent among the Trojans,
 great in strength, as am I, and rule strongly over
 Ilion;
 and some day let them say of him: "He is far better
 than his father,"
 as he comes in from the fighting; and let him kill
 his enemy
 and bring home the blooded spoils, and delight the
 heart of his mother. (lines 476-481)²³

With this prayer, Hektor reveals that he honestly hopes his son will

²³ Ibid. p. 165-166.

surpass him in deeds and in honor, and while this sentiment may not have been such an incredible admission for the heroes of the Iliad, it would be almost unheard of in the Tain.

In the story of the sons of Uisliu from the Tain, Cormac took up arms against his own people to avenge his father's insult to Cormac's personal honor, but in the story entitled "The Death of Aife's One Son," the struggle between father and son over a matter of honor is brought to a tragic crescendo. Cuchulainn had fathered a son named Connla by the warrior-queen Aife and left the instructions that she was to send Connla to him when the child reached seven years of age. He also told her to tell Connla that he must not reveal his name to anyone, and that he should not make way for any man, nor refuse any man in combat. Seven years afterwards, Connla came to Ulster looking for his father. As his boat landed on Ulster soil, the Ulster warriors sent one of their number down to meet him to ask him his name and what business he had in Ulster. True to the instructions given to him, the boy refused to give any information about himself and proceeded to march up the beach saying that he would not give way to a hundred Ulster warriors. A second hero of Ulster was sent to stop the boy and make him pay for the insult to Ulster. The young boy, however, had much of his father's skill in battle and so he quickly defeated the second warrior and tied him up with his own

shield-strap. Finally, Cuchulainn, himself, came down and fought with his own son because Connla had insulted Ulster, even though he was merely following the instructions given to him by Cuchulainn. However, rationality is no match for the incredible fury of Cuchulainn, who advances on his son saying:

...the blood of Connla's/
 body will flush/
 my skin with power/
 little spear so fine/
 to be finely sucked
 by my own spears!²⁴

Obviously, Cuchulainn, and the heroes of the Tain in general, do not appear to have the close sentimental attachments to their family as Hektor and some of the other heroes in the Iliad. Hektor cuddles and kisses his baby son, while Cuchulainn stabs his seven year old son with a magic spear so that it "brought his bowels down around his feet."²⁵ The primary reason that Cuchulainn seems so heartless towards his son is that Cuchulainn's loyalty to Ulster takes precedence over any loyalty he feels towards his son. Cuchulainn was

²⁴ Thomas Kinsella (translator). The Tain. p. 43-44.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 44.

ready to destroy Conchobor, the king and therefore the embodiment of Ulster, rather than allow Conchobor to dishonor him by sleeping with his wife; and, in turn, Cuchulainn is more than willing to destroy his only son in an attempt to avenge an insult to Ulster.

One reason why Cuchulainn places such an emphasis on the honor of Ulster is because he can not divorce himself from Ulster. Although Cuchulainn's commitment to personal honor still overrides his dedication to Ulster, he never completely isolates his own identity from the abstract entity that is Ulster, which includes the warriors, the soil, the culture, and the almost spiritual aspect of Ulster. This helps to explain why Cuchulainn does not feel alienated while he is camped all alone in the middle of a wilderness, single-handedly holding back the huge force of invaders lead by Medb. On the other hand, Achilles feels completely isolated and alone at Troy after his quarrel with Agamemnon, even though his ship and tent are part of one of the largest collective forces of the Achaian people ever. This sense of alienation further increases after the death of Patroklos until funeral games held in the fallen warrior's honor²⁶.

If the definition of epic hero is taken as meaning a character in an epic who maintains his principle and defining loyalties, as opposed to the current popular definition, which is based on a collection of

²⁶ James Hogan. A Guide to the Iliad. p. 243.

attributes, additional analysis of the primary and secondary loyalties each of the major heroes in both the Iliad and the Tain could be compiled in order to provide a deeper understanding of each character, as well as each epic as a whole. Once a particular hero's loyalties have been charted, his or her motivation and internal workings in each scene should be rendered more apparent. However, certain characters in both the Iliad and the Tain can not be defined as epic heroes since they do not maintain their primary loyalties. In the Iliad, for instance, Agamemnon never formulates a defining loyalty since he takes Achilles' war prize in Book I to maintain his personal honor²⁷, but later, in Book IX, he offers to give the prize back along with several other prizes from his own collection in an attempt to bribe Achilles to rejoin the fighting²⁸. Clearly, Agamemnon does not maintain a primary loyalty, and therefore could not be considered a true hero of the epic, but instead he is merely a major character within the narrative of the poem. Similarly, in the Tain, Ferdia, the foster-brother of Cuchulainn, can not be considered an epic hero. When Medb first summons Ferdia to her tent, he knows that it would not be honorable to fight Cuchulainn since they were sworn foster-brothers. However, he allows himself to be seduced by Medb and agrees to fight Cuchulainn. Ferdia, whose primary loyalty should be

²⁷ Richmond Lattimore (translator). The Iliad of Homer. p. 67-68.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 201-206.

to personal honor, finds himself in a hopeless situation once he has said he would meet Cuchulainn in battle, since it would be just as dishonorable to attack his foster-brother and break his warrior's bond and oath of brotherhood as it would be to break his oath to Medb to fight Cuchulainn²⁹. Thus, while Ferdia is certainly a tragic figure in the Tain, he dies not as a true hero but as one who has fallen from the path of the true epic hero.

Ferdia's tragic loss of his status as a hero comes as a result of Medb's words and actions as a classic epic seductress, a woman who persuades "into disobedience, disloyalty, or desertion."³⁰ An epic seductress then is a woman who draws epic warriors away from their primary loyalties. Most would agree that, in the story of the Trojan War, Helen acts as a seductress when her beauty entices Paris to defy the rules of the guest-host relationship and causes him to dishonorably steal her off to Troy. Likewise, in the Tain, Medb acts as the epitome of the seductress when trying to get Ferdia to fight against Cuchulainn by saying she would give Ferdia the following things:

...a chariot worth three times seven bondmaids,

²⁹ Thomas Kinsella (translator). The Tain. p. 168-170.

³⁰ Philip Babcock Gove (editor-in-chief). Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged. p. 2054.

with warharness enough for a dozen men, and a portion of the fine Plain of Ai equal to the Plain of Murtheimne. Also the right to stay in Cruachan, with your wine supplied, and your kith and kin free forever from tax and tribute. And this leaf-shaped brooch of mine that was made out of ten score ounces and ten score quarters of gold. And Finnabair, my daughter and Ailill's, for your wife. And my own friendly thighs on top of that if needs be.³¹

Medb does not stop at bribery, but also lies to Ferdia telling him that Cuchulainn has previously insulted him, and Ferdia eventually succumbs to Medb's will. In this instance, Medb demonstrates that the role of the seductress is not limited to sexual enticement, although she maintains that as part of her role, but the true seductress is free to use any tactic or means necessary, including bribery and lying, to get her victim to fall into disloyalty³².

Although there are several instances of the classic and often stereotypical seductress in epic literature, there is another category of seductresses in epic that differs primarily from their more

³¹ Thomas Kinsella (translator). The Tain. p. 169.

³² Moyra Caldecott. Women in Celtic Mythology. p. 167-168.

traditional counterparts in that they often fail in their attempt to seduce. This category contains the idea of the seductress as the good-wife. Often in epic the wife of a hero tries to seduce her husband from what he considers his primary loyalty. The good-wife's reason for the seduction tends to be noble, caring, and rational. For instance, in the Iliad, when Hektor meets his wife Andromache on the walls of Troy in Book VI, she begs him to fight off the Achaians from inside the walls where it would be much safer. Through her tears, she pleads with Hektor to do her bidding and not to leave their son an orphan and herself a widow. Hektor is deeply moved and tells her that he worries more about her future after his death than he does for the safety of his own parents or the preservation of the city, but he maintains his primary loyalty to personal honor. He tells her that he would be shamed before his people and that his spirit drives him to fight as a hero on the battlefield³³. While Andromache does attempt to seduce Hektor from his duty, she certainly holds no malice or deceit in her heart for him, but rather is deeply concerned about the welfare and well-being of her young husband. Andromache, then, succeeds in being a good-wife to Hektor, in part because she attempts, but fails, to persuade Hektor to give up his loyalty to his honor.

In the Tain, Emer, Cuchulainn's wife, also proves herself to be a

³³ Richmond Lattimore (translator). The Iliad of Homer. p. 163-165.

good-wife through a well-intended but failed attempt at seduction. In the story of "The Death of Aife's One Son," when Cuchulainn was storming down the beach to destroy his son Connla for insulting Ulster, Emer tries to stop him. She quickly recognizes Cuchulainn's own son, even though he had been born to another woman, and places her arm around her husband's neck and tries to restrain him with these words:

Don't go down!
 It is your own son there/
 don't murder your son/
 the wild and well born/
 son let him be/
 is it good or wise/
 for you to fall/
 on your marvellous son/
 of the mighty acts/...
 if Connla has dared us/
 he has justified it./
 Turn back, hear me!
 My restraint is reason/

Cuchulainn hear it/...³⁴

Cuchulainn, however, is not persuaded. Unlike Hektor who was gentle and sympathetic with Andromache, Cuchulainn responds to his wife's plea for restraint and mercy by answering her harshly with these words:

Be quiet, wife./
 It isn't a woman/
 that I need now/
 to hold me back/
 in the face of these feats
 and shining triumph/
 I want no woman's /
 help with my work/
 victorious deeds/
 are what we need/
 to fill the eyes/...³⁵

Cuchulainn ends his response to Emer by clearly stating, "No matter

³⁴ Thomas Kinsella (translator). The Tain. p. 42-43.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 43.

who he is, wife, I must kill him for the honour of Ulster.”³⁶ Emer realizes that her husband is resolved to meet his own son in combat because he must not allow Ulster to be insulted, and so she remains silent while Cuchulainn first tries to drown his son and then finally eviscerates him.

Although Emer may initially seem too passive, it is important to emphasize her noble qualities, which make her a good wife by the standards of epic literature. Cuchulainn first came to court Emer as she sat on the lawn in front of her father's fort with several other young women working at embroidery. He began speaking to her in riddles to test her wit, but Emer had no trouble discovering Cuchulainn's hidden meaning and answering with a few riddles of her own³⁷. Cuchulainn, while staring at Emer's breasts over the top of her dress, said “I see a sweet country, I could rest my weapon there.”³⁸ Emer replied by saying no man would travel in that country until he had managed to complete several nearly impossible feats of strength and warrior's skill. Ultimately, Cuchulainn has to go off to a magic island to get additional training before he can complete the tasks that Emer has set before him. Before Cuchulainn leaves, however, he and Emer took a vow of faithfulness to each other until he returned or

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 44.

³⁷ Moyra Caldecott. *Women in Celtic Mythology*. p. 95-98.

³⁸ Thomas Kinsella (translator). *The Tain*. p. 27.

until one of them died. It is interesting to note that Emer protected her own interests by adding that the vow would be invalidated upon either one of their deaths, since Cuchulainn was setting out on a dangerous journey while she remained in relative safety. Emer is presented as being an excellent wife for an epic hero in Cuchulainn's courtship of her, because she encourages and expects him to act heroically. Although Emer occasionally attempts to get Cuchulainn to act in a manner that he considers contrary to his primary and secondary loyalties, she always speaks with concern, often acting as the voice of moderation in the mist of over-inflated male egos. Emer also aids Cuchulainn in his quest to preserve and increase his status among the men of Ulster. She would not take Cuchulainn as her husband until he had received all the training he would need to become the greatest hero in Ireland. It could easily be said that Cuchulainn could not have reached the pinnacle of fame and skill without Emer's wit, reason, and encouragement.

Oral epic literature, including the Iliad and the Tain, is able to provide a key insight into each work's parent culture through the creation of the roles of the hero, seductress, and good wife.

Although there are several examples in the Iliad and the Tain of females who definitely act heroically, as well as males who seduce, it is necessary to maintain a general focus on the male hero and the

female seductress in order to clearly establish the relationship and the fundamental differences between the traditional and the revised definitions of the terms "hero" and "seductress." In the revised definitions, these roles can be understood in terms of their interactions with each other. The true epic hero will consistently maintain his primary loyalty regardless of the words and actions of other heroes, seductresses, or even his own spouse. The true seductress in epic succeeds at seducing a hero from his loyalties and bending that person to his or her will, thereby destroying the hero's status as a hero. A good wife often attempts to seduce her spouse, but never maliciously and always with his best interest at heart. The seductress acting as a good wife also tends to fail to dissuade her husband from his chosen course.

These revised definitions not only enrich the understanding of the epic characters themselves and the epic as a whole, but they also have the ability to effect a deeper understanding of the value system of the parent culture. By examining the evidence as it was presented throughout the various quotations, some logical inferences can be made about the worldview of the people who originally constructed and circulated the epics.

While personal honor is the primary loyalty for many of the heroes of both the Iliad and the Tain, there seems to be a difference

between the two groups of heroes concerning their secondary loyalties. The heroes of the Iliad tend to maintain a secondary loyalty to their families and close friends, while the Ulaid uphold the kingdom of Ulster as their secondary loyalty. These differences in secondary loyalty reflect the fact that the Greek heroes of the Iliad are presented as being only loosely allied with each other under the unsteady leadership of Agamemnon, with each aristocratic warrior maintaining his strongest political ties to his own predominantly autonomous kingdom. In the Irish tradition, however, all the members of the Ulaid conceptualize themselves as being part of the same single kingdom throughout the course of the Tain. The way each society is politically and socially organized within each epic aids in granting a deeper insight into the methods of social organization practiced by each of the epics' parent cultures.

The role of the seductress also exhibits a dimorphism between the Iliad and the Tain. Helen, the Greek seductress, relies exclusively on her sexuality to seduce the warriors from their individual loyalties, and is thereby limited in the type of interaction and control that she may have with the other characters in the epic. In the Tain, however, Medb is not only a seductress without limitations on her means to seduce, she also dresses in armor, leads men into battle, and openly engages male warriors in battle. Similarly, in the Iliad, Andromache's

character is largely centered on her dependence on Hektor, while Emer's character in the Tain is far more complex. Even though she is only depicted in regards to her relationship with Cuchulainn, she is never depicted as being solely dependent upon him for support and is far more quick to challenge his position within their relationship than Andromache, who seems complacent by comparison. By examining the roles of these four women within the context of their respective epics, it would seem clear that aristocratic women generally held a higher status in ancient Irish society and claimed more social and political freedoms than their Greek counterparts.

The study and analysis of ancient epic is nearly as old as the art of epic poetry itself. This long tradition of scholarship has been, and still needs to be, perpetually examined and revised. In the modern world the terms "hero," "heroine," "seducer," and "seductress" have a hallow, archaic sound, and the abstract notions incorporated into each of these roles are largely viewed as being irrelevant. These roles, however, are part of the Western World's intellectual birth and remain at the primal heart of everyone.

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