

Misogyny and Minimization of the Female Psyche in 8th-9th Century Irish Poetry

In *The Finest Music*, an anthology of early Irish lyrics edited by Maurice Riordan, poems #26, #27, #29 and #30 form a cohesive collection that reveals the male perspective on the role of women in Irish society during the 8th and 9th century. Profundity in poems about women in this collection is derived exclusively from sorrow at the loss of male love and affection, whereas poems about men derive meaning through varied individual contemplation outside of interpersonal relationships. This contrast illustrates a biased male perspective towards the role of women in Irish society where women are reliant on their relationships to men for poetic profundity. This reflects both a biased male perspective dominating poetics and significant lack of female influence in poetics in the 8th and 9th century.

The sorrow that unites the selected poems #26, #27, #29 and #30 is indicative of the severity of the emotional minimization of women in Irish society at this time. These poems convey the females' loss of a male companion to be the most profound sorrow a person of the female gender could experience, as it causes them to become suicidal when faced with losing their lover. In poem #27, "Liadan Laments Cuirithir", Liadan says "I will not live without him" (Riordan 52). Despite being a poet herself, who has lived a full life outside of the relationship, the only topic covered in the poem is her sorrow at losing Cuirithir. Further, Liadan is presented as opposing divine morality and chastity, ideals that were highly prized in the religious society of the time. This is exemplified in the second stanza of the poem: "But for fear / of the Lord of Heaven / he would lie with me here." (Riordan 51). This is not the first time that women are used as a sort of scapegoat for religious impurity. Another poem within the collection that exemplifies this is poem #26 "Eve", a retelling of the biblical story of the garden of Eden. MacDonagh's translation reads "I that brought sorrow and sin, / Hell and pain and terror, I" (Riordan 50).

Although this is not a new perspective on the female being the cause of the fall of man, its adaptation into Irish poetry shows that the misogynistic biases of Christianity were aligned with already existing biases in Irish culture. This poem is the most recent of the collection, reportedly from the 11th century, and therefore illustrates the lasting effect of the misogyny and minimization already illustrated by the earlier poems of the 8th and 9th century.

In poem #28 “The Song of Crede”, the second stanza reveals a stark contrast in characterization between genders, even when portrayed through a female perspective: “Great love of a hero from Roiny’s plain / has pierced me through with immortal pain, / Blasted my beauty and left me to blanch / A riven bloom on a restless branch” (Riordan 53). The contrast between a blanched blossom and a “hero” indicates minimization of the female as an accessory to a man, even dependent on his love for her own appearance and beauty. His heroic actions are praised, whereas she is objectified and made out as nothing more than a fragile flower. Further, when her hero and love Dinertach dies, she is driven to the same fate as Liadan- she takes her own life out of sorrow from losing her beloved man. In the final stanza of the poem, Graves’ translation reads “Chaste Christ! that now at my life’s last breath / I should tryst with Sorrow and mate with Death!” (Riordan 54). Her fate lies in suicide, just like Liadan, after the death of the man she loved. Here we begin to see a commonality of a kind of parasitic relationship being displayed through these poems. These women are portrayed as needing a man for emotional survival, yet only reach emotional profundity after losing them. In this way, they are both reliant on men for their life force and significance in day to day society, but also reliant on men for their significance in the arts and in poetry. What becomes apparent is the viewpoints of a misogynistic society shown through female characters. The male-centric societal norms portrayed in the poetry conveys a cohesive point that a woman losing the man in her life is a damning blow that

leads to the woman losing the will to live. This overstates the importance of the man and understates the individual life force of the woman.

A final example of this is in the well known story of Deirdre, represented in this collection through poem #30 “Deirdre’s Lament for the Sons of Usnach.” From the opening lines of the poem, “The lions of the hill are gone / And I am left alone - alone - / Dig the grave both wide and deep / For I am sick, and fain would sleep!” (Riordan 56), we see both the valorization of the male characters and the minimization of the female, despite her being the narrator. The men are described as “lions” whereas Deirdre herself feels diminished to nothing after their deaths, and wants to die with them and cease her own existence- “Dig the grave both wide and deep.” These tragic tales assert that from the male perspective, a woman’s existence is reliant on their connection to males. They have no reason to go on after the men die. This becomes especially clear when compared with poems from the male perspective, that see losing female companionship as insignificant and overall beneficial to intellectual and religious study. For example, in poem #45 “Cu Chuimne”, from the Annals of Ulster in 746 CE, Kelleher’s translation reads “ Cu Chuimne in youth / Read his way through half the Truth. / He let the other half live / While he gave women a try. / Well for him in old age. / he became a holy sage. / He gave women the laugh. / He read the other half.” This poem places women in direct opposition to the pursuit of knowledge and conveys a male perspective of women as a distraction to be minimized. It’s also interesting to note the lack of romantic tone and the missing themes of monogamy in poems about men, especially when compared to poems narrated by and about women.

Further insight into the root of these negative attitudes towards women can be found in poem #38, “Advice to Lovers”, which illustrates the contrast between men and women when

faced with the loss of a lover. The central idea of the advice is to view and treat women as insignificant in order to come out unscathed: “The way to get on with a girl / Is to drift like a man in a mist, / Happy enough to be caught, / Happy to be dismissed. / Glad to be out of her way, / Glad to rejoin her in bed, / Equally grieved or gay / To learn that she’s living or dead.” (Riordan 70). Although the poem begins with a lighthearted tone, the final line reveals a darker nature to the male perspective on relations with women. The advice to detach oneself as a man so completely from a woman to the point of not caring whether she lives or dies is not only in complete contrast with the female perspective demonstrated by the earlier poems, but also illustrates a societal norm for men to disvalue women completely as means to avoid emotional pain and loss.

The gendered disparity in perspectives on romance within these poems reveals a deeper duality in early Irish poetics that is reliant on gender itself, which argues that inspiration and poetic profundity for the woman is solely found through extreme emotion evoked by the loss of a man. She is so insignificant she cannot exist without the love of a man, and this realization of insignificance is the root of the profound sorrow that inspires the ideas behind the poem. This comes back to a deeper perspective perpetuated by a male dominated society that is based on the idea that women are intellectually inferior to men, unable to have profound thoughts outside of relationships with men. As this is obviously untrue, what’s left to believe is that the intellectual and poetic communities in early Ireland lack true female perspective unaltered by male dominated societies of poets, scribes and translators. In conclusion, the misogynistic biases of early Irish society are revealed through the inaccurate and incomplete representation of the female psyche that minimizes the woman as a dependent and parasitic force. Even if women were the original poet behind the works, the ideas still represent a deeper conditioning of women

to believe they are reliant on men for meaning and profundity. The intangible and emotional nature of meaning and profundity are ideas best expressed through and inextricable from poetry. This is why this medium of poetry is so effective at unearthing this specific gender bias regarding meaning and profundity intersected with gender, and illuminates intricacies otherwise missed in historical studies of gender in early Europe.