

Deirdriu and Heroic Biography

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Abstract

This paper addresses two questions. The first is whether the life of Deirdriu, as described in *Longes mac n-Uislenn*, can reasonably be said to correspond to the narrative pattern commonly referred to as the ‘heroic biography’. I argue that Deirdriu’s biography is, indeed, a heroic one, at least at the level of narrative structure, and can be shown to broadly follow the same progression as the biographies of more typical heroic biography subjects, and in particular that of Oedipus, who provides a model for many studies of the biography pattern. Moreover, this narrative kinship can be observed straightforwardly and without appealing to alternate versions of the pattern constructed to suit stories about women (i.e. those of Jezewski 1984 and Covington 1989). The second question is that of what Deirdriu’s biography tells us about the heroic biography itself. I argue that in recognising that Deirdriu not only has a heroic biography, but also that it is a conventional one, we gain insight into the use of the heroic biography as a narrative structuring device in stories about the lives of those who cannot be labeled ‘hero,’ according to any standard definition of the word.

Introduction

The earliest account of Deirdriu’s life is found in *Longes mac n-Uislenn* (LMU) ‘The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu’.¹ In that it narrates the major events of Deirdriu’s life and covers the period extending from before her birth to just after her death, LMU may fairly be said to represent her biography. I argue here that this biography can be viewed as a ‘heroic’ biography on the grounds that it contains most of the key components of the narrative structure known as the ‘heroic biography’. A basic summary of heroic biography-type stories is as follows: A boy is conceived and born under extraordinary circumstances. Because of his nature, or because of a prophecy, he is perceived as a threat and an attempt is made to kill him. He is rescued and raised in exile by foster-parents, often in ignorance of his true identity. His special nature becomes increasingly evident as he ages, and in time he returns to his point of origin to reclaim his identity and overcome his enemies.

A number of different formulations of this pattern have been proposed in the many studies of it, and these show a great deal of variation in the details of how the hero’s life is described. I begin with a survey of the various heroic patterns that have been described in order to identify their core similarities, and I then discuss the

1 Throughout this article, I refer to the 1949 edition of Vernam Hull. Translations are my own.

presence of this essential core in Deirdriu's life as narrated in LMU. I consider also the problem of the hero at the center of the heroic biography, which has been raised in some studies of the pattern. Of particular interest is the issue of whether women have heroic biographies. Several studies have suggested that there is a separate narrative pattern present in the lives of 'heroines', which is closely connected to, but distinct from, the canonical male pattern. However, I argue that Deirdriu's biography more closely resembles the standard male biography than the derived female hero patterns that have been proposed. I must emphasize that I am concerned here not with the character or characterization of Deirdriu, nor with her relationships to various heroes and kings, but I am interested rather in the elements of her biography and the question of whether these elements can be reasonably said to constitute a *heroic* biography.

The Heroic Biography

The heroic biography appears to be a universal way of patterning stories about the lives of heroes, but it has primarily been studied in the context of Indo-European and Near-Eastern narratives about males who conform to a warrior-king type hero. As early as 1871, Edward B. Tylor remarked on the common pattern of stories 'in which exposed infants are saved to become national heroes' (v.1, 254–255), but it was J.G. von Hahn who, in 1876, first formulated a multi-point description of the narrative pattern that he termed the *Arische Aussetzungs- und Rückkehr-Formel* 'Aryan expulsion and return formula', now conventionally referred to as the 'heroic biography'. Von Hahn's work, though largely neglected, inspired Alfred Nutt's 1881 work on the pattern in Celtic sources.² Later work by Otto Rank and Lord Raglan, seemingly independent of both earlier work on the pattern and of each other's work, provided two additional formulations of the pattern, brought it to wider attention, and also recognized its presence in stories from outside the Indo-European cultural sphere.³ Jan de Vries' *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend* (1963) provides yet another examination of what he describes as 'the pattern of an heroic life'. Joseph Campbell's 'hero's journey', as first introduced in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949), overlaps and intersects with the heroic biography in various ways.⁴

2 Nutt refers to stories from Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and Breton tradition, both from medieval sources and from more modern folktales.

3 Otto Rank's work was first published in 1909 in German as *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden*, and then translated into English in 1914 as *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*. In quoting this work, I refer to the 2015 translation of the 2nd edition of Rank's work, originally published in 1922. Lord Raglan's work *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*, was originally published in 1936. I refer to the reprint in Segal 1990.

4 Archer Taylor's 'The Biographical Pattern in Traditional Narrative' (1964) provides an overview of many of these studies. A more recent discussion of the studies of the pattern, though focused primarily on the work of Otto Rank, is Robert Segal's introduction to the 2015 translation of Rank's work.

Studies of the heroic biography in the context of Celtic literatures are not limited to Nutt's 1881 work. Alwyn and Brinley Rees' *Celtic Heritage* (1961) includes chapters on the various stages of the hero's life, and Tomás Ó Cathasaigh's *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (1977) remains the most significant work on the heroic biography in the Celtic context.⁵ The similarities between heroic biography and Welsh and Irish hagiographical materials have been observed by Elissa Henken (1983 and 1991), Dorothy Bray (1988) and others. Bray notes that the pattern proposed by de Vries corresponds quite well to many Irish saints' lives, and the lives of female saints are treated alongside the male saints with no differentiation between them. In the secular world, however, the lives of women in medieval Irish literature have not been considered as reflecting any aspect of the heroic biography.

Each formulation of the pattern has been accompanied by different theories about its origins and interpretation. Taylor provides the following summary of the approaches taken by some of these scholars:

In the pattern Hahn [sic] sees the unity of a biography altered and adapted by a traditional narrative formula; Rank, the unity of human psychology; Lord Raglan, the unity of pseudo-history and ritual; and Campbell, the unity of a formula (mythological or psychological in origin) that develops as culture develops and changes (1964, 119–20).

As a student of Sigmund Freud, Rank takes a psychoanalytic approach to the interpretation of the myths and finds in them the conflict and competition between son and father, and to a lesser extent the conflict between son and mother. As a myth-ritualist, Raglan instead sees the pattern as a reflection of the principal rites of passage, specifically those associated with birth, initiation, and death (1990, 148). This view is also taken by Rees and Rees, who state that 'in human societies generally, the times when a person becomes the central figure in ritual are those of his birth and baptism, initiation and marriage, death and burial. The myth has bearing upon the meaning of these rites' (1961, 213). Rees and Rees, it should be noted, acknowledge that this can also apply to women in a limited way, and they include a very few female characters in their study of birth tales.⁶

There is no real conflict between the interpretive approaches of Rank, Raglan, or the others. The rites of passage mark moments of psychological transition, from childhood into adulthood, at birth and at death. In both approaches, the central

5 Rees and Rees draw extensively on both Irish and Welsh materials, however there is currently no dedicated study of the heroic biography in medieval Welsh sources to match Ó Cathasaigh's work on Irish.

6 They refer in this context only to Mes Buachalla (220-1), the daughter of Raghallach (222), and Étaín (228). See below for further discussion of the daughter of Raghallach.

idea is one of transition and transformation from child and outsider into an adult established in his society. The question of the origins of the pattern are beyond the scope of the current discussion, but a contribution to our understanding of the function of the pattern—or more accurately its multifunctionality—may be made through a study of its presence in LMU.

Given the differences between the formulations of the patterns, some of which might appear to be quite significant, an important preliminary to the discussion of Deirdriu's biography is to determine which features of the pattern should be present in Deirdriu's biography to justify labeling it 'heroic'. In fact, this presents no major difficulty. As Taylor points out:

The ways in which these scholars see and describe the tales vary, but the differences could be reconciled with rather little effort. The discovery of a biographical pattern is no very surprising result of their labors. It is a natural utilization of a pattern easily inferred from life itself, or from biography, history, and human psychology (1964, 128).

Because the pattern follows the obvious divisions of human life, it is best discussed following those same divisions: birth, youth, transition into adulthood, established or settled adulthood, decline, and finally death. In the heroic biography, each phase of life, and especially each moment of transition between the phases, is marked by difficulty. In what follows I compare the formulations of von Hahn (together with Nutt), Rank, Raglan, and de Vries, in order to identify the core elements of the pattern.

Birth

The section of the biography dealing with the birth of the hero is at once the most striking and distinctive, but also the one where the most variation can be found.⁷ The main elements of this section include the nature of the hero's parents and the relationship between them, the means of his conception, the circumstances of his birth, and the many signs and indications that the child about to be born has a special nature.

The various formulations of the pattern largely agree in making the hero's parents distinguished, royal, or otherwise noteworthy, with the additional detail that the mother is likely a princess (von Hahn, Raglan) and a virgin (Raglan, de Vries). His father may be a king (Rank, Raglan), a god (von Hahn, Raglan, de Vries), or a hero from far off (von Hahn). Regardless of these details, the crucial point is that the hero's parents are themselves remarkable, and it is not unlikely that the father will have some supernatural aspect or may be an outsider in some way. There is

7 See Pagé 2014 for discussion of birth-tales in the context of Indo-European mythology, Pagé 2015-16 for birth-tales in the medieval Irish context, and Sasson 2007 for birth-tales in the context of comparative religion.

also general agreement that the conception and birth of the hero may be remarkable or difficult in various ways, whether through barrenness of the mother, incest, rape, or even immaculate conception. This is one area where Campbell diverges strongly from the other studies of the hero's life. Campbell entirely bypasses any discussion of the hero's birth and begins his study only with the adult hero receiving what Campbell terms 'the call to adventure'. Segal summarizes Campbell's view of the birth of the hero as follows: 'Birth itself he dismisses as unheroic because it is not done consciously' (1990, xvii). This is demonstrably false, as I have previously argued in my discussion of a number of birth tales in which the fetus consciously communicates in order to control the circumstances under which it will be born, often under very difficult and challenging conditions (Pagé 2014, 16).⁸

Of the many possible ways of signaling the special destiny of the hero, one of the most commonly occurring devices is that of prophecy. While prophecies may only indicate that a special child is about to be born, they frequently also explicitly identify the child as a threat to someone in a position of power, most often the child's father or grandfather, which then triggers an attempt to kill the child. The most familiar example of this sequence is that of Oedipus, whose biography provides a template for Rank and Raglan's formulations of the heroic biography, and who is also referred to in the work of von Hahn and de Vries.

The sequence of prophecy-threat-exile-return, where the return includes the fulfillment of the prophecy, constitutes a significant part of the heroic biography, and demonstrates that the birth episode of the hero is crucial in creating the impetus for the rest of his biography. That said, it is possible to find stories containing these very elements that, while certainly showing partial overlap with the heroic biography, cannot themselves be considered heroic biographies. The story of the daughter of Raghallach provides a perfect example of this. Her birth is described in Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éireann* (II.XIV) and, though only sparse details are given, provides a close parallel for the life Oedipus. A druid prophesies to Muireann, the wife of Raghallach, that their children, and specifically the child that she is carrying at that moment, will soon bring about their deaths. Raghallach orders his wife to kill the child as soon as it is born. Muireann places her inside a bag and gives her to a swineherd to kill. He instead takes it to the house of a pious woman and hangs the bag from a cross near her house. She finds the child and raises her, and in time the girl's beauty is such that Raghallach hears of her. He demands that the girl be brought to him, and though the woman who had raised her refuses, the girl is brought to him by force. Upon seeing her in person, he makes her his consort, rousing the jealousy of his wife. Soon after this, Raghallach is out hunting deer. Slaves kill and divide the deer that he had been pursuing and he threatens them, but instead they kill him. His

8 The agency of the fetus in a number of traditions is also discussed in many of the papers collected in Sasson and Law (2009).

wife, we are then told, died through jealousy of her own daughter. We are never told the name of Raghallach's daughter, nor do we learn anything of her fate following the deaths of her parents, but we have here many features present also in the life of Oedipus: a prophecy warning against her birth, an attempt to kill her, a rescue, a childhood in exile, and a homecoming that involves an incestuous relationship with one parent and the death of both. This story demonstrates how women can have the same types of extraordinary births as heroes, and that the consequences of their births may follow narratively similar lines, even without fuller development of the biography. It is clear that episodes about supernatural or otherwise remarkable births can often provide a departure point for a heroic biography, but that they can also exist independently, or describe the births of those whose subsequent lives do not reflect the heroic biography in any way.

Youth

The youth of the hero is generally spent in exile and in ignorance of his true identity. Nonetheless, signs of his extraordinary nature are often evident. Von Hahn notes that the hero is raised by a childless couple or by a widow and develops a 'passionate and violent disposition'. Rank says nothing about the hero's childhood, but the hero's eventual return to his parents as an adult establishes that he spends his youth in exile. Raglan specifically states that we know nothing about the hero's childhood, but also that he is raised by foster-parents in a far country. De Vries too describes the hero as not being raised by his own parents, and instead being in the care of lowly people or even a 'mythical figure' (1963, 214). He also notes that the hero begins to display his special nature during his youth. The central features of the youth of the hero are that it is spent in exile—away from his parents and his own country, and that his special nature continues to reveal itself.

Travels

When the hero reaches adulthood, he generally spends a period of time traveling. During this time, he has a variety of adventures, but the movement of the travel is essentially a homeward one, as this period concludes with his eventual homecoming. There is a great deal of variation regarding how this period is described in the differing formulations of the heroic biography. Von Hahn identifies this as a time when the hero seeks service in foreign lands and overcomes various monsters. Rank telescopes the transition from youth in exile to homecoming by simply stating that the hero 'finds his parents in a highly versatile fashion' (2015, 47). Raglan too focuses on this as the time when the hero travels to his homeland or future kingdom. De Vries further describes the hero as gaining supernatural abilities and overcoming monsters, and adds that the hero may win a maiden and travel to the Underworld. Essentially, this is a period of movement toward the hero's point of origin and transition into adulthood

in preparation for his homecoming and full entry into adult life. It is during this period of travels that the hero is given the time, space, and opportunity to display and develop his special nature and to prove himself before achieving his ultimate destiny.

Return

Inevitably, the hero must take his place in adult society, and this most frequently involves a return to his point of origin where his identity is recognised, his social position restored, and his enemies defeated. Von Hahn describes the hero returning to his own country, overcoming his enemies, rescuing his mother, and claiming his throne. Rank refers to the hero as finding his parents and taking revenge against his father, while also being acknowledged and receiving his true rank. Raglan and de Vries admit the possibility that the hero may not return to his original country, but may instead gain rank in a new one, but both also acknowledge the pattern of the exiled hero returning to the place of his birth, where he overcomes his enemies, marries, and becomes king. The return of the hero, often described as a triumph over his enemies, ultimately functions to provide him with his entry into adult society. In many cases, as suggested by the frequent references to the hero confronting his father or his original persecutors, the hero's return fulfills the prophecy that led to his original exile.

The Fall of the Hero

Von Hahn's pattern contains additional elements that indicate further problems for the hero, such as being accused of incest, slaying his younger brother, or injuring an inferior. De Vries indicates that the hero may be forced to leave the kingdom that he has gained. Raglan is most detailed about the biography of the hero following his ascension to the throne. His pattern includes the hero ruling peacefully for a time and leading the life that he was meant to lead, before losing the favour of his people or the gods and being forced once again into exile, which eventually leads to his death.

Death

The death of the hero is generally described in far less detail than his birth. Rank does not make any reference at all to the fall or death of the hero, ending his discussion with the hero in his period of settled adulthood. Von Hahn and de Vries both comment on the likelihood of the hero dying young, and von Hahn raises the further possibility that the hero dies while out of favour and under mysterious circumstances. Raglan's pattern gives the most detail about the death of the hero, stating that the death will be mysterious, and often at the top of a hill. Further, if the hero has any children they will not succeed him. This is often a consequence of the hero having lost his status before his death. Raglan also deals with the treatment of the hero's body after death, noting that it will not be buried, but that many sites will be reputed to be the hero's burial place, or 'holy sepulchre' (1990, 138).

This mystery concerning the ultimate fate of the hero resumes the mystery of his origins, dealt with in variable fashion in the narration of his birth.

Deirdriu's Biography

With this outline of the heroic biography in mind, I turn now to the question of the heroic nature of Deirdriu's biography, as present in LMU. No details are given about Deirdriu's conception or the relationship between her parents.⁹ Her father is Feidlimid mac Dall, the storyteller to Conchobar mac Nessa. Her mother is never named and is referred to in the text only as *ben ind Feidlimthe* 'Feidlimid's wife'. Deirdriu's extraordinary nature is first signaled when her pregnant mother crosses the floor of Conchobar's house and a scream is heard from her womb.

When an explanation for this scream is sought, the druid Cathbad prophesies the future of the child in two poems. The first of these is addressed to Feidlimid's wife, and the second to Deirdriu herself. In the first poem, Cathbad describes Deirdriu's physical beauty and the wars that will be fought on her behalf among the men of Ulster. He then places his hand on Feidlimid's wife's belly and says *Fír ... ingen fil and ocus bid Derdriu a hainm ocus biaid olc impe* (ll. 52–3), 'It is true ... there is a girl here and her name will be Deirdriu and there will be evil because of her'. He then proceeds to deliver the second prophetic poem, speaking directly to Deirdriu herself. He says that *Cēsfaitit Ulaid rit ré* (l. 57), 'The Ulstermen will suffer during your lifetime', and then goes on to predict the exile of the sons of Uisliu and their betrayal while under the protection of Fergus mac Róich and Fergus' subsequent exile because of this. Finally, he names some of the Ulster warriors who will die because of Deirdriu.

This prophecy quite explicitly expresses the threat that Deirdriu poses to the Ulstermen collectively, and they respond by demanding that she be killed. Conchobar refuses, however, and declares that *Bērthair lim-sa ind ingen i mbārach ... ocus ailebthair dom réir féin ocus bid sí ben bias im farrad-sa* (ll. 81–83), 'I will take the girl with me tomorrow and she will be reared according to my own wishes and she will be the woman who will be in my company'. In giving this command, Conchobar effectively rescues Deirdriu from the threat of the Ulstermen, but also provides a second view of her destiny, which supplements the prophecy of Cathbad. We now effectively have two visions of Deirdriu's destiny: first that she will bring destruction to the Ulstermen, and second that she will be Conchobar's companion.

In accordance with Conchobar's wishes, Deirdriu is raised in exile and in isolation, permitted only the company of her foster-parents and the satirist Leborcham, who could not be kept away. Unlike her male counterparts, Deirdriu is well aware of both her identity and her expected destiny, at least where her future

9 It should be noted that all studies of the pattern make clear that not every heroic biography will include every element of the common pattern.

relationship with Conchobar is concerned. Like her male counterparts, however, she is taken away from her parents and raised by foster-parents, and like them she shows a special nature and what the von Hahn / Nutt formulation of the pattern describes as 'a passionate and violent disposition'. This reveals itself especially when, again like her male counterparts, Deirdriu attempts to escape her prophesied fate. Once she has seen Noisiu, she decides that she prefers him to Conchobar and forces him to elope with her. Though he recognizes the danger in this situation and initially refuses her, Deirdriu successfully coerces him into following her wishes by physically seizing him and shaming him into cooperation.

Upon reaching adulthood, the hero of the von Hahn/Nutt heroic biography will seek service in foreign lands, while the hero of Rank and Raglan's patterns will return to his point of origin in order to claim his throne, and thus reclaim his original position in society. The return of the hero is generally a trigger for the fulfillment of the initial prophecies about the threat that he poses, and so his homecoming will likely be accompanied by death and destruction. In Deirdriu's biography we find both these stages reflected. Following their initial flight from Conchobar, Deirdriu and Noisiu, along with his brothers, spend several years in exile, taking shelter in various places in Ireland before entering the service of the king of Scotland. After Deirdriu and the sons of Uisliu have been gone from Ulster for some time, Conchobar offers a truce and they are lured back to Emain Macha. They are betrayed and the sons of Uisliu are killed while under the protection of Fergus mac Róich. Deirdriu's return to her point of origin thus precipitates the prophesied conflict among the Ulstermen, which causes the death of many and leads to Fergus' exile, as foretold by Cathbad. As we would expect in a heroic biography, Deirdriu's homecoming is accompanied by the fulfillment of the prophecy that warned against her before her birth.

Deirdriu then takes the place in society that was determined for her by Conchobar and becomes his consort. The standard formulation of the heroic biography describes the hero as returning home in triumph, fulfilling the prophecy, marrying a princess and claiming his throne. Here we have Deirdriu returning home, fulfilling the prophecy, marrying a king, and taking her place at his side. Though there is no triumph here and she is unwilling to take her place with Conchobar, this serves to illustrate the distinction between the formal features of the pattern and the range of functions that they can serve within the narrative. Deirdriu's life is progressing along the same lines as a heroic biography at the level of narrative structure, but the meaning of her story is entirely different to that of traditional heroes.

Rank's pattern ends with the hero 'achieving rank and honours' (2015, 47), but as we have seen von Hahn, Raglan, and de Vries all make reference to further events in the hero's life. De Vries and Raglan both describe a fall from grace or loss of favour that drives the hero into a second exile. This outcome corresponds

closely with the final part of Deirdriu's biography. She remains with Conchobar as his companion for one year but continues to grieve for Noisiu and his brothers and to express her unhappiness. Her sorrow eventually causes Conchobar to become angry with her, and having lost Conchobar's favour, Deirdriu is to be sent to Eogan mac Durthacht, Noisiu's killer. When Eogan attempts to take Deirdriu away from Emain Macha, initiating a second period of exile for her, she leaps from the chariot, strikes her head against a boulder, and dies.

The extraordinary death of the hero is remarked upon by von Hahn, and both von Hahn and de Vries note that the hero dies young. Raglan's description of the hero's death does not apply here, for the most part. Deirdriu's death is not mysterious, and it does not occur on a hilltop. Of interest, however, is Raglan's assertion that 'the hero is not buried, but nevertheless he has one or more holy sepulchres'. LMU makes no reference to Deirdriu's burial, but *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*, a later retelling of Deirdriu's story, describes her death differently. In the latter text Deirdriu throws herself into Noisiu's grave and dies there. As Deirdriu's story continues to be told over time, additional and conflicting details are incorporated, including the motif of her drinking Noisiu's blood and Deirdriu's corpse refusing to remain buried separately from that of Noisiu.¹⁰ LMU makes only one passing reference to Deirdriu's grave. The final quatrain of Cathbad's second prophetic poem, addressed directly to Deirdriu, ends with the lines *Biaid do lechtán i nnach dú; / Bid scél n-airdairc, a Dêrdriu* (ll. 77–8). Hull translates these lines 'Your little grave will be everywhere. It will be a famous tale, O Dêrdriu' (62). Though I would certainly not insist on interpreting these variations as a close correspondence to Raglan's statement that the hero is not buried but has multiple burial places, the uncertainties surrounding the final fate of Deirdriu's body at least recall the mysterious quality of the hero's death.

Deirdriu and Oedipus

In most aspects, Deirdriu's biography as represented by LMU clearly follows the pattern of the heroic biography. This can be illustrated even more explicitly by directly comparing her biography with that of Oedipus, one of the most standard and frequently cited examples of heroic biography. For the major points of Oedipus' biography, I refer to the summary of Oedipus' life in Apollodorus' *Library of Greek Mythology* (ed. Hard 1998, 105–7).

Women and Heroic Biography

There is a great deal of variation regarding the type of hero at the centre of this pattern, and a good part of the variation between the patterns has to do with the specific heroes that each scholar has chosen as his models. Oedipus and the

10 See in particular Mathis (2011) for a discussion of the evolution of Deirdriu's story, including the different traditions about her death and burial.

<i>The Pattern</i>	<i>Oedipus</i>	<i>Deirdriu</i>
1. Birth	Warned against	(—)
2. Prophecy	Kill father / marry mother	War and destruction among Ulstermen
3. Threat	Father orders him exposed	Ulstermen want her killed
4. Rescue	Rescued and taken to the queen of Corinth, who passes him off as her own child	Conchobar orders her raised to be his consort.
5. Exile	Raised in exile by foster-parents	Raised in isolation by foster-parents
6. Attempt to avoid fate	Leaves foster-parents to avoid prophecy	Elopes with Noisiu to avoid Conchobar
7. Travels	Having learned about the prophecy, he refuses to return to Corinth and travels instead	Travels with Noisiu in Ireland and Scotland
8. Return	Oedipus returns to Thebes	Deirdriu returns to Emain Macha
9. Fulfillment of Prophecy	Oedipus kills father and marries mother	Deirdriu's return sparks war among the Ulstermen and after Noisiu's death she is taken by Conchobar
10. Fall from grace	Oedipus learns his true identity, blinds himself, and loses kingship	Conchobar grows tired of Deirdriu's grief for Noisiu
11. Second exile	Oedipus leaves Thebes and goes into exile	Conchobar gives Deirdriu to Eogan mac Durthacht
12. Death	Oedipus dies as a suppliant in Colonus	Deirdriu dies leaping from chariot

Oedipal complex are central to Rank's understanding of the heroic biography and Raglan takes Oedipus as the proto-typical example of the hero around whom a heroic biography is built.¹¹ Independently of one another and with entirely different approaches to the interpretation of the pattern, Rank and Raglan both established Oedipus' biography as the most typical of the heroic biography. Von Hahn also includes Oedipus as one of the heroes on whom he bases his pattern, and though de Vries makes scant reference to Oedipus in establishing his own pattern, most of it does nonetheless apply to Oedipus' life. While in many studies the emphasis remains on warrior-type heroes, other types of heroes are also known. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has commented that while the warrior hero is generally preferred in studies of the pattern, it must be emphasized 'that in the Irish tradition, as elsewhere, the heroic biography is not limited to martial figures, and that it does not always relate to a setting dominated by military aristocracy and celebrating martial virtues' (1977, 11). Alan Dundes' study *The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus* (1977) further illustrates the extent to which the biography pattern can be present in the lives of non-traditional, non-martial 'heroes'. As previously noted, there have also been studies showing that Irish saints' lives correspond to the heroic biography, in

11 Raglan's system of evaluating heroic biographies is based on a 22-point system, with Oedipus receiving the highest score with 21 points.

particular Bray (1988), and while some of these saints are women, they are treated primarily as saints and only secondarily as women.

In standard formulations of the heroic biography, there are of course some roles for women, but these are secondary and dependent on the women's relationships with the hero at the centre of the pattern. We find that in stories about heroes, women occupy two main roles: the hero's mother, who may suffer on his account and may need to be rescued by him, and the hero's bride, who is usually a prize that he must win as a part of his entry into adult society. Joseph Mbele, writing about the roles of women in African epic, has offered a different reading of the hero's relationship with his mother, noting that:

No matter what the women do, we just do not see them as heroic. The mother may carry the unborn hero for seven years, as is the case with Sundiata, or one hundred and fifty years, as is the case with the Akoma Mba epic, suffering incredibly in the process, but we just ignore this immense burden and feat. Sundiata's mother not only endures the long pregnancy and the insults of other women, but she travels with Sundiata into exile, guiding and protecting him, and offering him crucial advice. We do not see or acknowledge this as heroic [...] (2006, 63).

Rachel Havrelock (2008) has also written about the mother of the hero as having her own heroism, specifically in the context of barren women who must undergo a journey in order to conceive.

Additional women may appear at various points in the hero's life in the role of opponent or ally. A typical episode in the life of the hero is conflict with a monster or other supernatural creature, and some of these are female. We can think here of Perseus' encounter with Medusa and the Gorgons, Hera's persecution of Herakles, or Ishtar's antagonism towards Gilgamesh. Other heroes have female figures who offer them support in various ways, such as Cú Chulainn's training with Scáthach, though this is less common and often the woman in the helper role later becomes the hero's bride.

The idea that a woman may herself be the subject of her own full heroic biography, rather than being merely present as accessory to a male hero, is rarely addressed. None of the studies of the pattern discussed thus far raises the possibility even as an anomaly. In fact, the idea is so absent from these studies that they never explicitly state that the hero is always male, or that a woman cannot have a heroic biography. Maureen Murdock, in preparing her book *The Heroine's Journey* (1990), spoke with Joseph Campbell about how the journey of women might relate to his understanding of the 'hero's journey'. She quotes him as responding that women do not need to make the journey, because 'In the whole mythological tradition the woman is *there*. All she has to do is to realize that she's the place that people are trying to get to. When a woman realizes what her wonderful character is, she's not going to get messed up

with the notion of being pseudo-male' (1990, 2). Thus, for Campbell, and likely for many other scholars who do not state it so explicitly, women have no stories of their own. They are static and function to mark milestones for the hero. They make no journey of their own and have no agency. They are the hero's goal.

Other scholars, however, have recognised that female characters play a much more dynamic and active role in most narratives. Accordingly, they have sought to determine whether women have their own heroic biographies and to identify the form that these biographies may take. While discussions of heroic biography overwhelmingly focus on male subjects, there have also been a few studies of women's heroic biographies, or heroine's biographies. These involve taking the male pattern as primary and the female pattern as secondary and treating the female pattern as a separate but derived entity, an altered form of the male pattern consisting of gender based deviations. We have seen that Deirdriu's biography follows the same standard pattern found in the biographies of male heroes, but it is also worth examining how a 'heroine's biography' may also be read in Deirdriu's life.

By taking the approach that the female biography is a derivative of the male, scholars are forced to also treat the women at the center of these biographies as imitations of male heroes, or as deviating from normal female roles. Coline Covington, for example, writes that 'The female hero is essentially a woman warrior whose battles take place within the male world. Although she is unusual in this one respect, her sex is nevertheless incidental' (1989, 243). Covington, like Rank, takes a Freudian approach to understanding the function of the heroic biography, and though she dismisses the difference between male and female heroes as 'incidental', she nonetheless sees them as representing different aspects of psychological development. The hero represents separation from the parents, and especially the mother, and his travels represent the conflict between wishing to be recognized by and connected with his mother, and his desire to be independent. The heroine, on the other hand, represents a second stage of development in which new attachments and dependencies can be formed, and in this context Covington notes the role of the heroine as the hero's partner. By this view, the female heroine is essentially the same as the male hero but represents a later stage of life through her role in creating family for the hero. This reduces the heroine's biography to an appendage to the male hero's and positions her relationship with him as the ultimate goal of her journey. It is difficult to recognize Deirdriu in Covington's heroine. She is unable to form the attachments and dependencies that Covington views as central to the function of the heroine. Her first partner, Noisiu, is taken from her before they can truly establish themselves, and she refuses to play this role for Conchobar. It would be very difficult to argue that Deirdriu's sex is incidental to her story, and yet her challenges are the same as those of the male hero: surviving threats in infancy, navigating exile and homecoming, and attempting (and failing) to establish a permanent place in adult society on her own terms.

Mary Ann Jezewski (1984) provides a separate study of the heroine’s biography in ‘Traits of the Female Hero: The Application of Raglan’s Concept of Hero Trait Patterning’, in which she attempts to adapt Raglan’s pattern for a female hero. She makes the claim that although there is a clear pattern in the biographies of female heroes, it is one ‘markedly different from Raglan’s hero pattern’, and she further states that ‘Raglan’s male hero traits do not “fit” the female hero’ (70). Jezewski imitates Raglan’s approach in listing key commonalities between stories about female heroes, but unlike him she does not treat these as reflective of any sort of ritual cycle. As a result, her pattern combines elements of narrative structure with items that describe the character of the heroine. In fact, her pattern, developed primarily based on Greek sources but with reference to other cultures as well, contains many elements identical to Raglan’s, despite her claims that these traits are not suitable to the female hero. I here reproduce her pattern in full, separating the elements that differ from Raglan’s pattern from those that do not.

<i>Similarities to Raglan’s Features</i>	<i>Differences from Raglan’s Features</i>
1. Her parents are royal or godlike and 2. They are often related.	
3. There is a mystery surrounding her conception and/or birth.	
4. Little is known of her childhood.	
5. She is herself a ruler or goddess. 6. She is charming and beautiful	
	7. She uses men for political purpose. 8 She also controls men in matters of love and sex.
9. She is married and 10. She has a child or children.	
	11. She has lovers.
	12. Her child succeeds her.
13. She does a man’s job or deeds.	
14. She prescribes law.	
	15. There are conflicting views of her goodness.
	16. Her legend continues the Andromeda theme ¹²
	17. and the subsequent resolution of this by treacherous means resulting in untimely death or exile or incarceration, etc
	18. Her death is uneventful and may not be mentioned in her legend.

12 The ‘Andromeda Theme’ refers to the rescue of the heroine from a monster or some other undesirable situation by the hero, whom she then marries. After some time, her relationship with the hero deteriorates, but he is then permanently removed in some way. On this theme see further Jezewski 1984, 58-9.

Some of the features of this pattern are worded in such a way as to relate specifically to a female hero, but in fact perfectly mirror what we find in Raglan's pattern, such as 'She is herself a ruler or goddess', which corresponds to the royal and/or semi-divine status of the male hero. Similarly, in stating that the heroine is 'charming and beautiful', Jezewski is merely identifying the gender-appropriate description of the special or extraordinary nature of the hero. These can therefore be excluded from a discussion of how this female-specific pattern might appear in Deirdriu's life, since they echo the canonical formulation of the pattern which we have already established as present in her biography.

Turning to the genuinely different items in this pattern, we find that few of them actually apply to Deirdriu. Certainly she 'controls men in matters of love and sex', as is evident in her elopement with (or even abduction of) Noisiu, but this is not for political purposes, at least not overtly. Máire Herbert (1992) has argued that in Deirdriu we find a reflex of the Sovereignty Goddess, but one who refuses to act as such and denies sovereignty to the king. This could constitute a political agenda furthered by her relationship with Noisiu, but this is not as straightforward a reading of these relationships as what Jezewski intends, since Deirdriu makes no political gains through her relationships. She does have 'lovers', in that she is involved with Noisiu and then Conchobar, but her relationship with Conchobar can hardly be described as consensual nor can she be said to control him, and further she does not have children to succeed her. It seems likely that there are 'conflicting views of her goodness', but this can be said of many male heroes as well, the observation has just never been included in any description of the hero's life due to the overly simplistic view of the hero of the heroic biography as 'good'. It is worth noting that just as women have been neglected as the potential subjects of heroic biographies, villains and monsters will also frequently have 'heroic' biographies, but they are rarely considered in discussions of this narrative pattern. There is no clear Andromeda theme in Deirdriu's story, unless one wishes to treat Conchobar's isolation of her as something that she needs to be rescued from, but in fact she rescues herself. I certainly could not accept a reading of the text in which Conchobar 'rescues' Deirdriu from Noisiu and his brothers. Finally, her death is not only eventful, it is a key element in her legend. We find, in the end, that the canonical 'male' heroic biography offers a better fit for Deirdriu's life than this derived 'female' pattern does.

Conclusion

In responding to Campbell's claims about the universality of the hero's journey, Barre Toelken wrote that:

The same plot, clearly, does not always mean the same thing; without the implied meanings and shared connotations supplied by cultural context, we may very well have a coherent text whose meanings are totally misapprehended. This is one of several points missed by those who believe “archetypes” are universal in their meaning: it led Joseph Campbell to argue in an otherwise brilliant book that there is a universal hero myth—an assertion that can be maintained only by suppressing thousands of stories [...] in which culture is threatened and destroyed, not stabilized and renewed, by the egotistical actions of a powerful male seeker (1996, 257).

While the ‘archetype’ that is the heroic biography may be universal as a narrative structure, its function within stories about various individuals may vary considerably.

Deirdriu’s biography closely follows the standard heroic biography outlined in the work of Rank, Raglan, and others, and yet her story is not that of a typical hero. This observation provides a starting point for interrogating the relationship between the ‘hero’ and the ‘heroic’ biography. Do we redefine ‘hero’ simply as anyone whose biography follows the standard pattern, or do we instead re-evaluate the extent to which this pattern is proper to stories about heroes? The problem of defining ‘hero’ is a long-standing one and not something that can be addressed in the present discussion. However, simply having a ‘heroic biography’ cannot be a sufficient criterion for defining someone as a hero. Jezewski attempts to resolve this problem by defining a hero in terms of both the pattern of their life and the nature of their deeds and character, stating that a hero is:

A person whose life story is passed on by oral tradition and/or written accounts and is remembered for exceptional deeds that have as their basis qualities exemplified in courage, power or magic. The hero may be a character of folktale, legend, myth, or history (1984, 55).

As previously alluded to however, we find this pattern in descriptions of the lives of many types of people who do not remotely conform to any standard definition of the word hero, including those who explicitly function as villains, or those whose presence barely registers in the narrative, such as the daughter of Raghallach, who is never even named. Further, many of the most familiar and recognizable heroes of myth, legend, folktale, and history do not have heroic biographies.

Rather than attempting to redefine the hero, we must instead reconsider the extent to which the biography pattern as we know it is specifically heroic. I have argued that Deirdriu’s biography is ‘heroic’ only in that we label this narrative pattern as ‘heroic biography’, but I would not argue that having a heroic biography makes Deirdriu a hero. I propose instead that in treating this narrative pattern as belonging exclusively or even primarily to stories about heroes, we fail to recognize the multitude of meanings that this pattern can carry in structuring stories about

the lives of many different kinds of people. It is not that Deirdriu's biography is 'heroic', it is instead that the biography pattern itself is not inherently about heroes. The biography pattern is used to pattern the lives not only of heroes, but also of others whose lives are considered to be worth telling stories about. By taking a more inclusive approach to the study of this pattern and recognizing its presence in the lives of a broader range of people, we will, to paraphrase Toelken, no longer misapprehend the full range of potential meanings that can be expressed by stories that integrate the various aspects of this narrative structure.

Abbreviations

LMU = *Longes mac n-Uislenn*

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