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‘I will spout a jet of blood in your face’: Women’s words in the *Tain Bo Cualinge*, its pre-tales and the *Fingal Ronan*

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The prominence of women in Early Irish literature has often been mistaken for a sign of their power and autonomy in medieval Irish society,¹ but it is clear from the law codes that they had no legally recognised powers of speech and could not give testimony as witnesses.² This essay will investigate how women’s words are manifested in the *Tain Bo Cualinge*, its pre-tales and the *Fingal Ronan*, an Early Irish king-tale from which the quotation of the title is taken. The *Tain Bo Cualinge* (henceforth *Tain*) is an early Irish epic that forms part of the Ulster cycle of tales, Old Irish stories that would have originally existed in oral form. It tells the story of Medb, the queen of Connacht, and her husband Ailill’s war with Ulster, which is defended only by the young hero CuChulainn, with the intent to steal the Donn Cualinge, a bull of supernatural strength and size. The *Fingal Ronan* is an early Irish king tale which survives in one copy in the Book of Leinster and tells the story of Mael Fothartig, who was murdered by his father because of the accusations of his father’s new young wife, whose sexual advances he had rejected.

¹ Kelly, Fergus. *A guide to early Irish law*. (Dublin institute for advanced studies 1988) 68.

² *ibid* 75.

The power and independence of characters such as Medb in the *Tain* belie the oppression of women in medieval Irish society. However, in the *Tain*, its pre-*tales* and the *Fingal Ronan*, even such powerful women as Queen Medb struggle to make their voices heard in a society that seeks to suppress them. The law that proscribes women's speech also makes any attempt to speak into an act of dissent, because any woman's words that demand to be heard are by nature a challenge to this law. This challenge most often takes the form of violent non-verbal expressions. This is the only recourse these women can seek in a society that excludes their words. Women whose words of frustration, anger, shame and despair are ignored find expression in various physical outpourings, from the outpouring of noise in Deirdre's fatal scream to the outpouring of blood in suicide or menstruation. These non-verbal, bodily expressions form a kind of *écriture féminine*³ that both dissents from and seeks to circumvent the proscription against women's words and find expression that cannot be ignored.

The legal status of women, and particularly their speech, in Early Ireland sheds light on the various ways in which women attempt to make themselves heard in the *Tain*, its pre-*tales* and the *Fingal Ronan*. Contemporary law codes describe a society in which women had no independent legal power, were considered 'senseless' by the law⁴ and, crucially for this essay, in which their words did not count as legal testimony, thus denying them a legally recognised

³ See Cixous, Helene. 'The Laugh of the Medusa.' *Signs* 1.4 (1976).

⁴ Jaski, Bart. 'Marriage laws in Ireland and on the continent in the early Middle Ages.' *The fragility of her sex?: medieval Irishwomen in their European context*. ed. Simms, Katharine. (Four Courts Press 1996) 18.

voice⁵. From a society that ignores the words of women is born a literature that not only shows their frustration at a thwarted desire to be heard, but also functions as a censure of the society that excludes their voice. One of the most poignant examples of men's absolute disregard for women's words is found in the *Death of Aife's One Son*, one of the pre-tales to the *Tain*. Emer calls out to her husband CúChulainn to try to stop him killing his own son: 'hear me! / My restraint is reason'.⁶ Her desperate call to be heard is met with the riposte from her husband, 'It isn't a woman / that I need now' (43); he rejects her words simply on the grounds of her sex. Because she remains unheard, CúChulainn kills his only son, thereby committing *fingal* (kinslaying) and severing his own line. Through Emer's voice, this tale becomes not only a critique of warrior society, as Findon has suggested⁷ but also a critique of a society that actively chooses to be deaf to words of sense and restraint simply on the grounds of the sex of the speaker.⁸

In opposition to the *Death of Aife's One Son*, the *Fingal Ronan* seems to be suggesting that women should not be listened to. In the *Fingal Ronan*, a woman's words precipitate, rather than prevent, *fingal* (kinslaying). In the *Fingal Ronan*, Ronan's wife – who is never named – uses her words to falsely claim that her husband's young son Mael Forthartig has propositioned her for sex by replying to a quatrain that Mael speaks with the implicating lines, 'It is a vain herding, / With

⁵ Findon, Joanna. 'A Woman's Words: Emer versus Cu Chulainn in *Aided Oenfir Aife*' *Ulidia* (Belfast December Publications 2004) 145.

⁶ *The Tain* ed. Kinsella, Thomas (Oxford 2002) 43. All subsequent references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Findon, *ibid* 148.

⁸ For a full discussion of Emer's words, see Findon, Joanne. *A woman's words: Emer and female speech in the Ulster Cycle* (University of Toronto Press 1997).

no kine, with no lover to meet'⁹ (542). However, the false accusation is motivated by the woman's desire for independence. She has been married to an old man whose own son acknowledges him as 'no mate for a girl' (538), and been denied the affair with the young man she desires. She does not have so much autonomy as to merit even her own first name; she is defined solely in relation to men, as 'the daughter of Eochaid'(539), or as Ronan's wife. Thus the destructive nature of her words, the resulting *fíngal*, is an unintended consequence of her desire to choose her own lover and regain some independence. Since in Irish law women could only testify in sexual matters¹⁰, she is forced by the law to use her voice in the only context in which it will be recognised – to claim Mael propositioned her for sex – in order to desperately assert any kind of control over her own situation.

The *Tain* itself is also set in motion by a woman's desire for a legal voice. In the pillow talk that opens the narrative, Queen Medb is eager to prove that her material possessions are equal to or greater than Ailill's. According to Irish law, it is only in the case of 'marriage on woman contribution' or 'marriage of common contribution' that the woman is as free as her husband to make verbal contracts and dispose of their joint assets.¹¹ Medb asserts that '[her] fortune is greater than [Ailill's]' (52), and it would be, were it not that the bull Finnbennach 'refusing to be led by a woman, had gone over to the king's herd' (55). Even the animals seem to support man's natural supremacy over woman, and thereby present the

⁹ 'How Ronan Slew His Son' T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, eds. *Ancient Irish Tales* (Dublin, Alan Figgis 1969) All subsequent references to this edition.

¹⁰ Findon, *ibid* 145.

¹¹ O'Corrain, Donnchadh O'Dowd, Mary, and Sabine Wichert, eds. *Chattel, servant or citizen: women's status in church, state and society: papers read before the XXIst Irish Conference of Historians*, held at Queen's University of Belfast, 27-30 May 1993. Vol. 19. (Dufour Editions 1995.) 46.

suppression of woman's voice in law as natural. Some have read this as a demonstration that Medb is, because of her sex, no apt leader for the *Tain*.¹² This is patently not the case; not only does the stronger bull, the Donn Cualinge, *not* disdain to be led by Medb, but also Finnbennach meets a gory death because he was foolish enough to disdain Medb as a leader.

Medb's need to prove her greater possession of assets seems arbitrary when it is clear that she is able to make verbal contracts and exercise her political and social power without the permission or help of Ailill, or any other legal authority. The army gathered for the *Tain* is explicitly 'gathered for [Medb]' (60), not Ailill. The raising of the army and the execution of the cattle-raid not only acquire for Medb the bull that will prove her superiority in law, but also enact this superiority before it is legally proven. Medb would not be able to raise an army and take the bull unless she was already powerful and influential enough to make verbal contracts with men to raise an army and control her husband. The *Tain* presents the irony that, though a woman is powerful enough to raise an army, the law will not recognise her as such or give her a legal voice unless she has material possessions equal to or greater than her husband.

The law did, however, recognise the speech of female poets.¹³ Fedelm, the poet-prophetess of the *Tain*, is one whose speech would have been legally recognised. Dooley identifies prophecy as a female space and points out that the

¹² Ni Bhrolchain, Murieann. 'Re Toin Mna: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women' *Ulidia* (Belfast December Publications 1994) 117.

¹³ Kelly, *ibid* 49.

‘divination scene is managed and administered by women alone’.¹⁴ Women were associated with prophecy because of their ability to bring forth new life,¹⁵ but Medb’s speech and presence – as the party receiving, not giving the prophecy – occupies an ambiguous space in terms of what is acceptable for women. Fedelm, speaking as prophetess, occupies the space permitted for women’s speech, while Medb, speaking as military leader, has encroached on male territory. While Medb’s presence confirms her as the real leader of the *Tain* – the prophecy is, after all, not given to Ailill – she often receives critical censure for overstepping the bounds of her gender in her verbal response to the prophecy. O’Rahilly has styled her ‘a strong-willed virago’¹⁶ and her dismissal of the prophecy – ‘It doesn’t matter... Wrath and rage and red wounds are common when armies and large forces gather’ (61) – has been widely interpreted as arrogant, reckless and showing her as an inadequate leader¹⁷. However, similar declarations of intent to fight bravely regardless of consequence appear in the mouths of men without such censure. For example, CúChulainn’s reckless declaration, ‘[i]f I achieve fame I am content, though I had only one day on earth’ (85), demonstrates his masculine fearlessness and bravery. That Medb is unfazed by Fedelm’s prediction of ‘I see it crimson, I see it red’ (61) can likewise be interpreted as a show of strength and bravery on her part; battle entails blood and suffering and Medb is prepared for

¹⁴ Dooley, Ann. ‘The invention of women in the Táin.’ *Ulidia* (Belfast December Publications 1994) 128.

¹⁵ Dominguez, Diana Veronica. “‘Is dethbir disi’ [It is appropriate (that she behave in this way)]: applying the lens of gender parody to Medb in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle.’ PhD Thesis (2004). 273.

¹⁶ O’Rahilly, Thomas Francis. ‘On the origin of the names Érainn and Ériu.’ *Eriu* 14 (1946) 15.

¹⁷ Dominguez, *ibid* 229.

this.¹⁸ Medb's confidence is not so unfounded; there are heavy losses on both sides, but Medb ends with 'the Brown Bull of Cualinge... got safely away, as she had sworn' (250). Medb's masculine response in this space of female speech highlights the way in which she transgresses the gender expectations of her society, and indeed refuses to be circumscribed by what the laws of society would have her do. Just as the legal restrictions that apply to her because she owns less property than Ailill do not stop her from raising the army and enacting the supremacy with deeds that she cannot do with words, so the legally recognised words of the poet-prophetess do not dissuade her from the raid she is resolute to carry out.

While the law permitted female poets in some roles, such as prophecy, it also differentiated them from female satirists, whose activities it proscribed.¹⁹ But though the law sought to contain the voices of women it could not do so entirely and Medb's is not the only voice that escapes from the space set out for it in law. Another such dissenting voice is that of the satirist of the *Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, another pre-tale to the *Tain*. Although the satirist's words are banned by law, she 'could not be kept out' (11), and as she comes in she brings with her the words that will both encourage Deirdre to break the bounds of her society and give her the means to do so. The satirist points out that the man Deirdre has been dreaming of is 'close at hand' (11), prompting Deirdre to begin her affair with Noisiu. Furthermore it is the threat of satire - presumably learnt from this female satirist since she has been kept away from all other society - that Deirdre uses to

¹⁸ Dominguez, *ibid* 228.

¹⁹ Kelly, *ibid* 49.

attain her desire; she threatens ‘shame and mockery’ (12), that is, satire, if Noisiu will not break the bounds of society with her to take her as lover. The satire of women threatens male society in two ways: the female satirist criticises the laws of society that she is already breaking by speaking. Furthermore, speaking from the margins of society, Deirdre and the satirist’s dissenting words threaten its ability to contain women, but also demonstrate that it is the very proscription of women’s speech that makes it such a threat.

Dissent is also expressed through Deirdre’s scream. At the beginning of the *Exile*, Deirdre screams in the womb of her mother and this is interpreted as a portent of disaster. Deirdre’s *in utero* scream acts as a non-verbal voice in parallel with the satirist’s verbal one, similarly destructive and in equal measure contributing to the tragic outcome of the tale. The ‘fierce shuddering sound / in [her mother’s] troubled womb’ portends ‘great terror’(9). The scream that both portends and causes destruction links Deirdre with the war-goddesses of the *Tain*. These goddesses of Irish literature are associated with the cries and shouting that instigate battle.²⁰ Immediately before the final battle of the *Tain*, ‘Nemain and Badb, called out to the men of Ireland... and a hundred warriors died of fright’ (238-9); not only do their words precipitate violence, but their words are acts of violence in themselves, both causing and effecting slaughter, just as Deirdre’s scream portends and causes her tragedy. This scream, however, is not only an omen, but also a destructive expression of dissent. Once Noisiu agrees to break the laws of his society to give Deirdre what she desires, his chanting that ‘[fills all

²⁰ Borsje, Jacqueline. ‘Omens, ordeals and oracles: on demons and weapons in early Irish texts.’ *Peritia* 13.-1 (1999) 238.

who hear it] with peace' (12) is transmuted into a 'shrill cry' (12) – an echo of her own *in utero* scream – which, like the screaming of the war-goddesses, raises the warriors and starts the war. But this violent non-verbal scream is not inherently female; it is the noise of those whom society has marginalised, whose voices have been banned and ignored, speaking in the only way they can.

These voices are also equated with another non-verbal expression, the outpouring of blood. The Morrigan predicts 'blood spurting' (238) in the poem that precipitates the start of the final battle of the *Tain*; these words then produce the spurting of blood in the men who fight. The nameless wife in the *Fingal Ronan* threatens 'a jet of blood' (541) in the face of Congal, who has shamed her for her words of desire for Mael Forthartig. Her words are echoed in Mael's death: 'a spout of blood broke over his lips and he died' (543). This equates her words with his death; like Deirdre's scream transmitted to Noisiu's mouth, her jet of blood bursts from Mael Forthartig. As for Noisiu, it is fatal. But like the scream, the jet of blood is an expression of a voice that has been ignored; as her words are ignored she threatens the jet of blood, and the jet of blood that bursts from Mael's lips is a direct result of his father not giving him a chance to speak and refute the 'falsehood' (542) said against him until it is too late. A jet of blood is all that is left when there are no more words, and becomes itself the articulation of that tragedy at the end: the society did not listen to the woman and Ronan did not listen to his son.

Medb similarly expresses herself through spurting blood. However she harnesses the marginal, taboo powers of femininity through spurting her own,

quintessentially feminine, menstrual blood. A Queen had no more legal recognition for her speech than any other woman,²¹ and thus Medb also has to resort to bloody expression to make herself heard. Dominguez posits that Medb initiated the cattle raid against Conchobor in revenge for the rape he perpetrated against her in a preceding Ulster cycle tale.²² Medb's violently extreme (if biologically natural) expression of blood replaces a protest against Conchobor's treatment of her that society would have ignored. Her 'gush of blood' leaves a permanent, violent scar on Conchobor's land, not just geographically – 'three great channels' (250) – but also in the form of its name: 'Fual Medba, Medb's Foul Place' (250). Bowen has pointed out that this name literally means 'Medb's urine', and it is not explicitly clear that this is supposed to be menstruation rather than a urination of blood.²³ However, he also points out that the bladder is analogous with the womb,²⁴ so this 'gush of blood' is most likely menstrual. Distinctively feminine as well as shameful to Conchobor and taboo, Medb's wordless expression is able to say everything she wishes to verbalise but cannot. Furthermore, if we read Medb as a sovereignty figure, as Sessle does, then this voiding of the fertile blood of her uterus is also an expression of the lack of a suitable king-figure, a gesture of disdain against the candidates of kingship and a visual demonstration of fertility gone to waste because of lack of an adequate

²¹ Kelly *ibid* 78.

²² Dominguez, *ibid* xx.

²³ Bowen, Charles. 'Great-Bladdered Medb: Mythology and Invention in the *Táin Bó Cuilange*' *Eire-Ireland* 10 (1975), 32.

²⁴ *Ibid* 28.

male.²⁵ Conchobor's land thus bears the mark also of her disdain for his kingship.

While Bitel has suggested that women in Irish texts are defined by their reproductive function, Medb subverts this by turning the fertile blood of her womb into a destructive weapon, and not only that but into a non-verbal expression of dissent, protest and distain directed against the man who has wronged her.²⁶

Medb claims that she will 'die if she can't [let out her blood]' (250). If her blood is read as a replacement for the words she cannot speak, we see her assertion come true in Deirdre, Finnabair and the wife in the *Fingal Ronan*, who all die when they cannot 'let it out' with words. O'Leary points out that 'while references to suicide are rare in Irish literary tradition, a significant number of women die of grief for lost husbands or lovers or of shame'.²⁷ Death comes as their voices are stopped, for although we are told Finnabair 'fell dead of shame' (215), just before this episode, the space for women's speech – they were traditionally given the role of mourning the dead – is taken from her by CúChulainn.²⁸ It is he who 'mourned and lamented' (200) Ferdia, filling the only discursive space open to her: 'Finnabair herself is totally silenced and her only answerable response is suicide'.²⁹ This incident, coupled with her inability to speak to recuperate the shame she feels, precipitates her death. Similarly, Deirdre, who has used her voice to obtain her desires throughout the *Exile*, resorts to

²⁵ Sessle, Erica 'Misogyny and Medb: Approaching Medb with Feminist Criticism' *Ulidia* (Belfast December Publications 1994) 138.

²⁶ Bitel, Lisa M. "'Conceived in Sins, Born in Delights": Stories of Procreation from Early Ireland' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (1992) 198.

²⁷ O'Leary, Philip. 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature' *Eriu* 38 (1987) 41.

²⁸ Dooley, *ibid* 127.

²⁹ Dooley, *ibid* 127.

suicide when her words of sorrow – she is ‘comfortless, no peace nor joy’ (18) – are ignored by Conchobor. He ignores her long poem of mourning that dominates the end of the tale, and thus when he speaks to publicly humiliate her – ‘Between me and Eogan you are a sheep eyeing two rams’ (19) – in a public sphere that will not hear her voice, she cannot speak back to recuperate her shame, and she turns to suicide. Her suicide is vivid and haunting: ‘She let her head be driven against the stone, and made a mass of fragments of it, and she was dead’ (20). This is more than ‘a graphic realization of disintegration’ in warrior society, as Herbert argues; her physical self-destruction becomes the only language that the men cannot ignore.³⁰ The extremity of its violence bespeaks her desperation to be heard. Similarly, the unnamed woman in the *Fingal Ronan*, whose expression of desire for the young lover was not only denied but ultimately resulted in his death, ‘threw herself on to her knife, so that it came out through her back’ (543). The graphic nature of these suicides articulates the violent desperation of these women who have been prevented from speaking. Suicide seems to be especially associated with women in Irish literature, and these tales suggest that suicide is a response to being silenced.³¹ Finnbair’s spontaneous death, arising from the shame she can’t articulate, suggests that this frustrated speech is powerful enough to choke in the throats of these women and kill them if they cannot ‘let it out’.

In these tales it is only Medb who manages to make her words heard effectively in a culture that excludes them by law. It is by manipulation of the gender expectations of her society that Medb manages to ‘speak’, both verbally

³⁰ Herbert, Máire. ‘Celtic heroine? The archaeology of the Deirdre story.’ *Gender in Irish writing* (Open University 1991) 19.

³¹ O’Leary *ibid* 41.

and non-verbally, and attain what she desires. Dooley uses gender performance to find a voice in Medb ‘talking back’ against the male society that wants her silent,³² but Medb does more than talk back: she manipulates the men around her into helping her achieve her goals. At the end of the *Tain* Medb asks CúChulainn to ‘spare [her]’ (250), seemingly defeated, begging for mercy. This has often been read as a sign of her weakness, and the declaration that he will not kill her, ‘not being a killer of women’ (250), has been read by Mallory as his contempt for her cowardice, denying Medb the warrior status she so clearly deserves because of her sex.³³ However, we know from CúChulainn’s killing of Medb’s maid (100) that he is indeed willing to kill women, and also from his repeated promise that he would kill Medb ‘whenever he laid eyes on [her]’ (96). It is not her gender but her bodily articulation, specifically her menstrual blood, which stops CúChulainn from killing her. Dooley suggests that Medb’s menstruation acts like an animal ‘body decoy’, and ‘has turned both sexual and gender difference back on men to good effect’.³⁴ The menstrual blood makes her feminine physicality undeniable.

Dominguez has pointed out that CúChulainn is disarmed by the sight of Medb’s menstruating body – and potentially her nudity from the waist down – in the same way that he is disarmed in his ‘boyhood deeds’ section by the bare breasts of the Ulsterwomen. Indeed the women here describe their breasts as ‘the warriors [he] must struggle with today’, and they are a match to which he is unequal, just like Medb’s menstruating body which is enough to embarrass him not only into sparing her but also into giving her armies the safe passage that

³² Dooley, *ibid* 123.

³³ Mallory, James P. *Aspects of the Tain*. (David Brown Book Company 1992) 82.

³⁴ Dooley, *ibid* 133.

enables them to take the Donn Cualinge out of Ulster. No male violence was ever capable of subduing CúChulainn, only the non-verbal expressions of the female body. While the words of Emer to CúChulainn were unable to stop him killing his own son, the bodily expression of women can speak enough to subdue Ulster's greatest warrior. As the words of the Morrigan spur men to action in battle, the wordless naked bodies of women are able to stop battle.

It is by acting as a woman that Medb masters her own marginalisation, and her life is saved because warrior society excludes women to such an extent that it does not even deign to kill them. Medb's menstruation compels CúChulainn to see her not as the great military leader she is, but as a woman. The words 'spare me' combine with the menstruation – a sign of her feminine physical weakness – to give the illusion that she is vulnerable and thereby not only save her life but allow her to escape with the bull. Thus in the figure of Medb we are offered a strategy, a language expressed through the body and supported with deceptive words of gender performance. In Medb's menstrual blood we see a hint that women have powers that men cannot understand, that Medb has learned to harness her gender to give her a means both of expression and of control over men. While the other women kill themselves to spill their blood and create a lasting articulation of their suffering, Medb utilises the uniquely female attribute of menstruation: to bleed, but not die of it. Its very nature as menstrual blood suggests that female expression is inherently different to male. Medb is subject to gender difference, yet manages to manipulate it.

The menstrual blood which is an apparent symbol of female physical weakness and inferiority and a taboo that is considered dangerous to men functions also as a displacement of Medb's frustrated speech.³⁵ It becomes the force that allows Medb her success in the *Tain* and also functions as a demonstration of her powerful fertility – fertility powerful enough to destroy the land as well as nourish it. It also forms a feminine parallel to the grotesque physical over-determinism of CúChulainn's 'warp-spasm', in which 'his lungs and liver flapped in his mouth and throat, his lower jaw struck the upper a lion-killing blow' (150), which is as much a terrifying surpassing of male physical strength as Medb's prodigious menstruation that 'dug three great channels, each big enough to take a household' (250). Both have bodies that are capable of surpassing any normal human abilities in a way that is both heroic and grotesque. This huge menstrual flow is the female heroic foil to the warp-spasm. However, the female body is also – as with the Ulsterwomen – the only thing that can stop the warp-spasm. Medb's menstrual blood is shown to be more powerful because it is not only equal in power to CúChulainn's feat, but also prevents him from performing it. The blood of Medb's womb becomes the words that permanently inscribe her on to the land of the Ulstermen and defeat their greatest hero. Unlike the words of women, their blood cannot be ignored.

Medb's blood must be let out, the satirist must be let in. Even though the law excludes their speech, the dissenting voices of women find expression. Even if the suicides of Finnabair, Deirdre and the wife of the *Fingal Ronan* seem to

³⁵ Bowen, *ibid* 26.

paint a bleak picture of the fate of women silenced by law and ignored in society, it is still these women whom we remember; Finnabair's sudden enigmatic death, the wife with the knife sticking out from her back, and most of all Deirdre's shattered skull. Their deaths become powerful and enduring articulations of their suffering at the hands of patriarchal society, and while the law allows them no speech, the literature gives them a means of expression.

However, there is no suggestion that society can change. Instead, the *Tain*, the *Exile* and the *Fingal Ronan* present the oppression of women, their frustration, their desire to have their words heard, and show male society that could benefit from listening, but they offer no hope of change – the suggestion is instead to follow the example of Medb and find another means of expression. A 'jet of blood', a 'gush of blood' that a society with deaf ears will not be able to ignore. Thus we can approach a more nuanced understanding of women's words in Early Irish literature that is neither a simple reflection of their disenfranchisement in society nor a refutation of it. It is one wherein their suppression neither reflects their power in practice – as with Medb's raising of the army – nor condemns them to silence, while simultaneously forcing them into strategies of expression that are often self-destructive. Medb's menstrual blood becomes both a manipulation of her sex and the ultimate circumvention of the rules of society that would silence her: only a woman could create such a copious outpouring of blood and survive it. Ultimately, this female expression of blood that stands in for words is the most powerful element of the *Tain*, subduing CúChulainn and ensuring her victory both in gaining the bull and shaming Conchobor. The menstrual blood becomes a kind

of *écriture féminine* to which men have no access, which is taboo and frightening to them, a symbol of the terrible destructive yet revered procreative powers of the woman who – even while silent – is powerful enough to subdue and defeat even the greatest of male heroes.

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First Response

This study of non-verbal forms of female communication in a range of early Irish works is a fascinating contribution to the discussion of women's agency in pre-modern texts. It also draws attention to the legal suppression of women's voices in early Irish culture, and raises the very interesting issue of the role of women as satirists. Other recent studies have explored the role of traditional skills, such as weaving, song, and embroidery, in giving women 'voices'. Here the author investigates what women's own bodies make possible, and describes a form of *écriture féminine*. The connotations of that word *écriture* suggest one possible direction in which the arguments advanced here might be developed. Another way of extending the article's reach would be to situate its arguments alongside discussions of women's agency and women's voices in other early cultures.