

Introduction to Irish Literature Friends of Snow Library LLC

Mary Ann Eaton, Instructor

Fridays 1:30-3:30pm

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10/1/21 – 10/22/21

Syllabus

Week 1- Friday October 1, 2021

- Welcome – Syllabus review – Handouts
- Overview of Mythological Ireland
- Read for class:
 - *The Twins of Macha*
 - *The Dream of Oengus (Aislinge Oengusso)*
 - *The Song of Wandering Aengus* (Poem by W.B. Yeats)

Week 2 – Friday October 8, 2021

- Read for class:
 - *The Midnight Court* by Brian Merriman

Week 3 - Friday October 15, 2021

- Read for class:
 - Orpheus & Eurydice from *The Metamorphoses* by Ovid
 - *The Midnight Verdict* by Seamus Heaney

Week 4 – Friday October 22, 2021

- Read for class:
 - Play: *Riders to the Sea* by J.M. Synge

The Labour Pains of the Ulaid

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The Twins of Macha



Introduction

Although 'The Labour Pains of the Ulaid' purports to be history, it has been erected upon a foundation of myth. Macha, like Rhiannon in the Welsh 'Pwyll Lord of Dyved', is a euhemerized horse goddess, another insular version of the continental deity Epona, whose name means 'great horse'. Like Rhiannon, Macha appears seemingly out of nowhere; like Rhiannon, she selects a mortal husband and brings him great prosperity; like Rhiannon, she is associated with great equine speed. Rhiannon, however, is more thoroughly euhemerized, for she merely rides a horse that is faster (like those of the three Reds in 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel') than any other; Macha actually runs faster than any horse.

On the narrative level, this story answers the question 'How did Emuin Machae get its name?' According to this version, the word *emuin* means 'twins', so that the name means 'The Twins of Macha'; according to another tradition, however, the word means 'brooch' and the name 'The Brooch of Macha', because Macha measures out the confines of Emuin Machae with her brooch.

The story also explains why it was necessary for Cú Chulaind to stand alone against the Connachta during the initial stages of 'The Cattle Raid of Cúailnge'. To the storyteller, of course, the inaction of Conchubur and the Ulaid merely

afforded additional opportunities to elaborate on Cú Chulaind's heroism; but some explanation had to be offered. Perhaps the idea of a general weakness originated in some kind of couvade ceremony.

Although 'The Labour Pains of the Ulaid' is grouped with the tales of the Ulster Cycle, the name Crunniuc does not appear elsewhere; and the king and his people are not named at all. It may be that the story's association with the Ulster Cycle is not early – in any case, it has not been well integrated.



The Labour Pains of the Ulaid
&
The Twins of Macha

Crunniuc son of Agnomán of the Ulaid was a hospitaller with many lands. He lived in the wildernesses and the mountains, and his sons lived with him; his wife was dead. One day, when he was alone in his house, he saw a woman coming towards him, and she seemed beautiful to him. She settled in at once and went to her tasks, just as if she had always been there, and, when evening came, she set the household in order without being asked. That night, she slept with Crunniuc. She was with him a long time after that, and there was no prosperity that she did not bring him, no want of food or clothing or wealth.

Not long afterwards, the Ulaid held a fair, and they all went, men and women, sons and daughters. Crunniuc set out as well, with good clothes on him and a great bloom in his

face. 'Take care to say nothing foolish,' she said to him. 'Not likely that,' he replied. The fair was held, and at the end of the day the king's chariot was brought on to the field, and his chariot and horses were victorious. The hosts said 'Nothing is as fast as those horses are'; Crunniuc said 'My wife is that fast.' He was taken to the king at once, and the news was taken to his wife. 'A great misfortune my having to go and free him now, when I am with child,' she said. 'Misfortune or no,' said the messenger, 'he will die if you do not come.'

She went to the fair, then, and her labour pains seized her. 'Help me,' she said to the hosts, 'for a mother bore every one of you. Wait until my children are born.' She failed to move them, however. 'Well then,' she continued, 'the evil you suffer will be greater, and it will afflict Ulaid for a long time.' 'What is your name?' asked the king. 'My name and that of my children will mark this fairground for ever – I am Macha daughter of Sainrith son of Imbath,' she said. She raced against the chariot, then, and, as the chariot reached the end of the field, she gave birth in front of it, and she bore a son and a daughter. That is why the place is called Emuin Machae. At her delivery, she screamed that any man who heard her would suffer the pains of birth for five days and four nights. All the Ulaid who were there were so afflicted, and their descendants suffered for nine generations afterwards. Five days and four nights, or five nights and four days – that was the extent of the labour pains of the Ulaid; and, for nine generations, the Ulaid were as weak as a woman in labour. Three classes of people, however, did not suffer this affliction: the women and the children of Cú Chulaind. This was the inheritance of Ulaid from the time of Crunniuc son of Agnomán son of Curir Ulad son of Fiatach son of Urmi until the time of Furcc son of Dallán son of Manech son of Lugaid.