

LADY SPIDER

Play About Deirdre

by

Donagh MacDonagh

Donagh MacDonagh (1912-1968) was a noted poet who grew interested in the utility of verse in the theatre and was successful with *Happy as Larry*, *God's Gentry* and *Step-in-the-Hollow* as well as *Lady Spider* which occupied him from 1956 to 1958. His published poetry includes *Twenty Poems*, published privately with Niall Sheridan, *Veterans* (Cuala Press), *The Hungry Grass* (Faber and Faber) and *A Warning to Conquerors* (Dolmen Press). He took his BA and MA in English Literature at University College Dublin and concurrently read for the bar at King's Inn in Dublin, taking his BA and being called to the bar in a matter of three years. He practised law for ten years and sat as a District Justice for over twenty years. He was a son of the martyred poet and patriot Thomas MacDonagh of the Easter Rising in 1916.

Text annotated by
Gordon M. Wickstrom.

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Dramatis Personae

in order of their appearance¹

- Leabharcham: A woman of about forty five, dignified, handsome and intelligent; Deirdre's nurse. (The name rhymes with "Now are come")¹
- Deirdre: A beautiful girl of about seventeen. (Pronounced "Dair-dreh")¹
- Naoise: A handsome, eloquent, but not brilliant young man of about twenty. (Pronounced, approximately, "Neesha")¹
- Ardán: His elder brother, aged about twenty two, handsome and intelligent, objective and cynical. (Pronounced "Awr-d-on")¹
- Ainnle: A younger brother, fiery and enthusiastic, aged about eighteen. (Pronounced "Awn-lah")¹
- Crier: A figure of dignity.¹
- Conor: The King of Ulster, aged about sixty, wise and portentous.¹
- Fergus: Ex-king of Ulster, aged about sixty-five. Cynical and rather bitter.¹
- Art: A Scottish king, small and apologetic.¹
- Tréndorn: A young warrior of about twenty five. (Pronounced "Train-dorn")¹
- Courtiers, warriors, attendant women.¹

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

1

Scene: A clearing in a forest in Ulster near Armagh (or Eamhain Macha - pronounced "Ow-an Macha)

To the right of the stage is a hut made so that when it is lighted from within, its interior action is visible.

Inside the hut are Leabharcham and Deirdre and Leabharcham is speaking in the manner of a traditional story teller.

It is early morning of a day in Spring some time about the first century of our era.

Leabharcham: And Ossian mounted the noble white stallion
And Niamh mounted the horse before him,
And over the great meadow of ocean
They galloped so swiftly that the sun that was
sinking
Rose high in the sky as their horses overtook it.
And it shone on a land where the young and the comely
Are youthful forever, where laughter is common
As sunlight, and love their whole thought there.
And Ossian dismounted.

Deirdre: And there they were happy.

Leabharcham: And there they were happy.

Deirdre: A year and a day.

Leabharcham: A year and a day, or so it seemed to Ossian,
But years and not minutes are packed in the hours
there.

Deirdre: And seconds are weeks.

Leabharcham: And seconds are weeks. Aren't you the apt pupil.
I'll tell you no more since you know the tale
backward.

Deirdre: But tell me love's knowledge - first signs in a young
men?

Leabharcham: Sighs, blushes and sheep's eyes.

Deirdre: And the maiden replies?

Leabharcham: By modest withdrawal, a halting acceptance, a dubious
promise.

Deirdre: How arrange the first meeting?

Leabharcham: Dropped kerchief, veiled eyes and little lips
pouting.

Deirdre: The first kiss?

Leabharcham: Long expected, long desired, rose leaves fluttering.

Deirdre: The caress?
Leabharcham: No more. There are dishes for washing.
Deirdre: How can I learn love's language and love's moves
If dishes interrupt?
Leabharcham: Too soon you'll know
Far more than I can teach, more than I know myself.
Deirdre: You know why I am here and never see any except
yourself.
You know the secret and the saying.
Leabharcham: Something you know yourself and must remember.
How in the womb you cried till all the house
Was shaken, and they brought the druid Cathbhad,
A comely prince, who said; -

From the womb there cries
A woman with iris eyes,
With foxglove cheeks,
Pearls are her teeth.
For her will there be many slaughtered
Among the chariot fighters of the North.

What does your silver mirror tell you, Deirdre?

Deirdre: That I have never seen a chariot fighter.
Leabharcham: There screams from the womb's cave
One tall, fair, long haired, grave,
For whom champions will contend,
Whom high kings will demand;
Lips like the berry.
And queens will be jealous of her,
Matchless, faultless, to be remembered
forever.

Then came the warning words, promising exile,
Death and destruction for any who loved Deirdre.

Deirdre: And did they say Deirdre would be happy.
Leabharcham: Few who are famous merit happiness.
Deirdre: What's fame to me? I'd be a happy girl
Barefoot and ragged, happy in the straw
With a rapsallion lover and abandon
Fame and its marble face. What do I care
For poets squinting in a smoky hut
Staining the vellum with green juice of ivy
And the dark tale of Deirdre? Let them make
A story out of their own stringy marrow.
No. sweet to me a painted room and pillow
Of swansdown, and silk vests out of the East,

Red stain on finger and lips,
A lover wasting with hopeless love of me

And skimming poems over a garden wall
To where I walk among attendant women.
It's happiness that I would bring to men,
Not death and destruction, exile and the grave.

A PAUSE

What does a man look like, Leabharcham.

Leabharcham: Terrible in battle, vigorous in love, tame by the
hearthstone.

Deirdre: That's a distorted mirror. Tell me the truth.

Leabharcham: Dominant of eye, knotted of muscle, tall as a long
spear -
And add to that your snow and blood and raven.

Deirdre: When I saw the deer's blood widening on the snow,
The raven pecking it, I said, 'Beloved
Would be the man with the colouring of these three:
Hair like the raven, cheeks as red as blood
And body like the snow'.

As she speaks, the three sons of Usna, Naoise,
ardán and Ainnle enter the clearing. The light
outside the hut is now strong enough to show them
clearly.

Deirdre: I see him now,
His cheeks are fairer than a river meadow,
Red are his lips, his eyebrows beetle colour,
Teeth with the nobility of morning snow;
Green purple in his mantle, bordered with gold;
Satin his tunic, fringed with costly diamonds;
Golden the pommel of his sword, two green
Spears and a gold rimmed, bossy shield.

Leabharcham: It's Finn MacCool you see, or his son Oscar.
Or Ossian that went into the land of youth
After a sea king's daughter.¹ The dishes wait
And there's no poetry in dirty dishes.

The light is extinguished in the hut and raises
fully outside.

ardán: This is the place.

Ainnle: No signs of life around.

Naoise: Yet there's a girl here somewhere,
By the lift of my bones I know it.

ardán: Girls, girls, girls; have you no thought but girls?

Naoise: Why not? What thought is better than a thoughtless
joy?
Hunting outwears the hunter, the champion is killed
at last,

But love renews itself eternally
Since every day new girls grow ripe.
The old men say that when the muscles slacken
The girls they might have had dance in their heads,
But I'll have no such dancers.

Ainnle: And this girl here?

Naoise: One of my men lost in these woods
Came on a clearing and saw, he said, a wonder,
A young girl, tall and long haired, dressed like a
queen,
The grace, he said, of an unfrightened fawn,
The tilted breasts of a king's favourite.

Ainnle: She must be the daughter of some nobleman.

ardán: If she is, be careful.

Naoise: They're all the same
Once the first move is made.
The same caress will lay a lady down
As brings the sheep girl gumming for a kiss.
The queen and her slave girl share a single dream.

Ainnle: But a nobleman's daughter! There might be trouble
there.....

ardán: There might even be a wedding!

Naoise: Wedding! When Naoise marries, order him a crutch.
No. While this world is full of generous
Long limbed, high breasted virgins, Naoise is safe
From the cuckoo land of husbands. Listen.

Deirdre sings from the hut.

Deirdre: What fair young man will win my heart,
What eyes admire my face?
What heart will quicken to my heart,
What face live in my face?
The skin that's white as the snow that's drifted,
The cheek that's as red as my blood,
The hair that's as black as the raven's wing -
So shall I know my love.

Naoise: A sentimental schoolgirl, but sentiment
Is love's first ally. Take that redoubt
And all the fort is down.

ardán: Better be off; there's trouble here. I feel it
Like rheumatism in my blood.

Naoise: Be off then.
All I hear is the long trumpet that summons me
To the dark war where there are two winners.
Get back while I prepare the first attack.

Ainnle and ardán retire. Naoise gives a hawking
cry. Leabharcham comes to the door.

Naoise: O gracious lady, O pleasing hill queen,
Your glance like the red sun reflects from....

Leabharcham: From the shields of an army arrayed for battle.
A secondary compliment for a waiting woman
At a shabby court of a needy princeling.

Naoise: Astray all day in the trackless forest....

Leabharcham: Five thousand paces to the chariot road.
Keep Northeast and you can't miss it.

Naoise: A throat as dry as harper's cat gut.

Leabharcham: You will pass the well, a jug beside it.

Naoise: Leg bones that are worn by circular walking,
Eye balls sanded by searching and staring,
A stomach that forgets the mouth that should feed it,
These I would bring to your attention....

Leabharcham: Only the wealthy afford hospitality;
On my turf stained walls the shelves hang empty
Good day and good walking.

Naoise: Will I injure your grass if I sit a moment?

Leabharcham: You had best be going. The grass is damp
And the dew not dry yet.

Naoise: You live alone here
With only the deer and rabbit for company?

Leabharcham: The bird song woven like a net
Beneath oak and beech and holly pine.

Naoise: So that was the bird song I heard that was sweeter
Than a tenor harp in the hands of a master?
But to me it seemed that the throat of the singer
Would be shapely ivory and the lips be crimson.

Leabharcham: Don't sit too long. The damp grass is dangerous.
She turns to go and finds Deirdre behind her. When
Naoise catches sight of Deirdre, he leaps to his
feet.

Leabharcham: I told you to stay in your room and be quiet.

Deirdre: Is that a man, Leabharcham?

Leabharcham: Yes, since you must know, that is a man,
A weasel for scheming, a crow for brawling,
A ram for lusting.
Now go to your room.

Deirdre: Not so my reading.
A fox for wisdom, a cock for courage, a god for
loving.
And what is your name, man?

Naoise: Naoise, son of Usna.

Leabharcham: Now go to your room, miss.
Deirdre draws herself up and speaks imperiously for
the first time -- mistress to servant.

Deirdre: No, Leabharcham.
You will go in and blow the fire to flame,
Set food out on the table, take rough towels
Out of the press and pour the water out
That the man may refresh himself before his meal.

Leabharcham: Deirdre!

Deirdre: Do as I say.

Leabharcham: You will regret...

Deirdre: Call when the meal is ready.

Leabharcham submissively and reluctantly goes.
Deirdre looks with frank interest at Naoise.

So you are a man?

Naoise: So I've been told.

Deirdre: Turn around. Yes, Leabharcham was right.
Dominant of eye, knotted of muscle, Tall as a long
spear.
I've never seen a man before.

Naoise: Never.....?

Deirdre: Never seen anyone but Leabharcham.

Naoise: Is this a joke?

Deirdre: When I was born a prophesy was made,
So strange and puzzling that my father said
It would be better that I should live apart.

Naoise: What was the prophesy?

Deirdre: Oh, nonsense of some sort.
But that is why I have never seen a man.

Naoise: Well. You're the lucky one to see me first;
You might have walked the four great royal roads of
Ireland
Through all the cycles of the year and not come on my
like.

Deirdre: Tell me Naoise, am I beautiful?

Naoise: What does your mirror tell you?

Deirdre: That I am lonely.

Naoise: I'll be your mirror and tell you that when the moon
Is thin as nail parings, it's much like you,
That honey dripping from the comb in Summer sunlight
Is like your hair, That the comely grey-blue iris
Of Spring is your eye's reflection.
You are the dream that leaves dissatisfaction,
The dreamer knowing the wall cannot be scaled
Between his world and yours.

Deirdre: This is how
I knew a man would talk. Is all that true?

Naoise: Love talk is always true.

Deirdre: This can't be love talk;
Sighs, blushes and sheep's eyes, Leabharcham said,
Are the first signs of love.

Naoise: That was before the war.

Deirdre: Oh, there was a war. Who fought? Who won?

Naoise: Ulster vs. Connacht. A matter of a bull.
We won - I think.²

Deirdre: Tell me again what the mirror never whispered.

Naoise: Later when the dusk has clotted to darkness.

Deirdre: I'll be in bed then.

Naoise: Under the sheet of the night
With me on the green bed of the world.

Deirdre: No. No.

Naoise: Yes. Why do you think I travelled
Two days to find you, led by young Aengus,
The joyous God of love?

Deirdre: You came to find me?

Naoise: Led by the god himself. Say that you'll come.

Deirdre: May I bring Leabharcham with me?

Naoise: Are you afraid of me?

Deirdre: Why should I be afraid. The long green spear
Is made to let a champion's spirit out,
And I'm a girl. The sword was tempered
To relieve some furious fighter of his life,
But I'm a girl. The arrow from the bow
Seeks for a foe to kill, and I'm a girl,
So spear and sword and arrow pass in safety;
But if I walk in the shadowed woods with you
I'll walk with Leabharcham too, for she knows men.

Naoise: And if I say I love you?

Deirdre: Do you love me?

Naoise: How could I fail?

Deirdre: Is love like that? A draught
That brings a sneeze, that brings a cold; is love
Caught like a cold?

Naoise: Caught just as fast, but love
Is all delight, wine out of Spain, the sun reflected
from the shields of an army in array.....

Leabharcham: (Within) Deirdre!

Naoise: Deirdre. That is your name?

Deirdre: They say it will be long remembered. Yes Leabharcham.
She goes into the hut. Naoise beckons ardán and
Ainnle forward.

ardán: A kindergarten lesson in the art of love.

Naoise: It is like harping, a matter of technique;
And practice of course. The fingers must be supple.

ardán And subtle. A serving wench in the king's palace
Would laugh if she were offered your second hand
And tawdry gauds.

Naoise: They shine like a diadem
In these rough woods. Now, you and Ainnle take
The North North-East, and hurry to the king;
We are already late in greeting him
After our stay in Scotland. Say I'll be there....

Ainnle: How soon?

Naoise: Soon. Soon. Say I'm delayed,
That I explore a certain bushy glen
Where I expect there's gold. I'll come with you
And set you on your road.

ardán: I seem to know
The road we take will finish in a bog.

They go. After a few moments Deirdre comes to the
door and stares about her in bewilderment.

Deirdre: Oh, Leabharcham, has he gone?

Leabharcham comes to the door.

Leabharcham: No further than the falcon from the hunter.

CURTAIN.

END OF SCENE ONE.

ACT ONE

SCENE TWO

Scene An open space near the court of King Conor MacNessa of Ulster³. In the centre of the stage there is a great druid chair of stone. It is late afternoon.

Conor is seated on the throne with Fergus beside him and around them are grouped many young warriors, swords and shields. A crier shakes a chain.

Crier: Fledgling warriors, student warriors, untried champions
Stand forward now to be received.
Into Death's army, the Knights of the Red Branch,⁴
Peerless, inviolable, the terror of the land.
Conor MacNessa, King of the Northern World
Stands Ready to receive your oath of loyalty.

Conor: (Rising) Fledglings of Ulster, green buds of the Spring,
Dear to me your beardless cheeks,
Dear to be your sword-bright, spear-straight bodies,
A fence, a wall between my throne and evil.
On this day when you put boyhood by
And take a warriors arms, I give to you a gift,
Exchanging it for your gift of service,
And my gift shall be wisdom;

Trust not in women, for a woman's faith
Is like a dog-hound's, easily won,
Easily lost, and women have brought the greatest
Down as Fergus here, once king,
Who for my mother's love surrendered
The throne to me.⁵ Trust not in women
And fear love more than a stallion's hoof.
Trust not in wealth, a bronze sword
Can buy more than gold. Trust not in men,
Except those bound to you by blood
And loyalty to my throne. Trust not
In fame except the fame bought by the sword.
Fear laughter, ale and the bright lies of poets,
Fear gaming, feasting and the flattering tongue,
But fear no enemy; for while I rule
And while your muscles writhe under your skin,
You are indomitable.
That is the wisdom I give you.

Crier: Now the oath:

By sun, by oak tree and by stone I swear
That till the sun is drowned and the oak tree
withers,
The stone melts in the sun, my arm and my heart
Are loyal to the king, and my sword will be
His to command, to break if need be.

Do you swear?

Young Warriors: we do.

They salute the king and withdraw to one side.
Conor and Fergus come forward.

Fergus: Conor, I envy you. Year after year
You make the selfsame speech -- fear honey-cake:
The dough sticks to your guts. Fear old men:
Their talk will give you ear ache. Fear the pox:
It's bad for you.

Conor: Those are not my words.

Fergus: Then I have an ear ache.

Conor: All that I say is true.
How could you know who bartered a kingdom for
A woman's kiss.

Fergus: Conor, you think you're wise
And maybe you are, in a dull, statesman's way;
But I'm content, and that is more than wisdom.
You think you're great and many think you so,
But I am happy and great men are not happy.
Perhaps you believe and live by what you say,
But here's a warning - at about your age
A gnat, a flea, a midge, some little pest
Poisons the blood and sets it racing, boiling
Like a glutted river, till the old man thinks
He's seventeen. Then all his thoughts are girls
Glistening naked like a peeled branch of elm.

Conor: And his dreams?

Fergus: His dreams dance like a wanton.

Conor: Ah!

Fergus: Fear love more than a stallion's hoof.
Old men in love are seldom folly-proof.

Conor: This you should know.

Fergus: All this I know and laugh
To hear you preach of virtue to young men
Since you must go to that same school again.
When you were young, your ringleted hair
Won you the love of women. Your sword arm
Won you the warrior's love. Your wisdom won
Love of wise men. Now only wisdom's left,
And you deny the folly and the strength
Of your own youth to the young men of Ulster.

Conor: Women are weakness to the strong.

Fergus: Old men are strong in everything except young blood.

Ardán and Ainnle enter at the back and are
instantly surrounded by young warriors.

1st. Young Warrior: Ardán, you're welcome home.

2nd. Young Warrior: And Ainnle.

3rd. Young Warrior: Add Naoise and the kingdom is complete.

1st. Young Warrior: Where's Naoise?

2nd. Young Warrior: Has he found a Scottish wife?

3rd. Young Warrior: Or has he scattered little Ulstermen Among the Scottish girls?

1st. Young Warrior: How many shoulders has he shorn Of their heady burden.

2nd. Young Warrior: What new stories has he?

Ainnle: He follows after us, his head as full Of stories as his mouth of song; his sword Is glugged with the blood of noblemen.

Crier: Gentlemen, the King has not been greeted.

The young warriors part and Ardán and Ainnle come forward to greet Conor.

Conor: Ardán and Ainnle, sun-risings of the Gael, Your welcome both. Where is the third son of Usna?

Ainnle: He follows us after.

Ardán: He has been delayed.

Conor: What can delay him who should hurry faster Than a rain-cloud on an Autumn day to unloose His greetings at our feet.

Fergus: An unhappy image.

Ardán: He tells your majesty that he explores A certain rushy glen where there is gold.

Conor: The truth, Ardán, that is not the truth.

Ainnle: A deer as white as milk with one brown ear, Tempted his sword hand and he followed it.

Conor: By the light of Baal, I'll have the truth, or three Champions of Ulster will eat bronze for supper.

Ainnle: Your majesty, a girl...

Conor: I should have known Those lies were fanned to bonfire by a skirt.

1st. Young Warrior: A skirt?

2nd. Young Warrior: Has Naoise fallen in love again?

3rd. Young Warrior: It's just as well. We needn't hide our sweethearts, Our mothers or our wives if he is anchored to a sound bottom.

1st. Young
Warrior: Where did he find this girl?

Conor: I am most displeased. No girl should stand between
A warrior and his duty to the state.

Fergus: Though she be faired than an old man's dream?

Ainnle: Taking a shortcut through the woods we came
On a small glade, a cross-grained woman -- and a
girl.

Ardán: A trouble maker and a breeder of dissention.

Ainnle: As slender as a sapling, a deer for grace.

Ardán A wild-cat, rather, that hides under a shining skin
All that's untamed and all that can't be tamed.

2nd. Young
Warrior: Naoise will tame her.

Ainnle: Her hair spilled sunshine.

Ardán: And blood is spilled, I'd say across the pages
Of her horoscope.
The female spider that devours her mate.

Ainnle: Her lips temptation to
The cherry-pecking birds, her breasts unbound
And rounded like the dome that shuts us in.

Conor: Her voice?

Ainnle: The middle notes of a reed pipe,
Melodious as a stream on summer nights.

Fergus: Beauty with crow voice is a broken flute.

Ardán: Beauty with lark voice is a poisoned pipe.

Conor: Her eyes?

Ainnle: We were in a bush under a shadow
And saw only the light that shone as bright
As king's jewels on a festive night.

Ardán: Or the false light that dances on a bog.

Fergus: A girl like that would be, if you paint true,
An ornament in a king's diadem.

Conor: What is her name? Her ancestry? Her station?

Fergus: With beauty like that she's her own ancestor.

Ardán: Her name is Deirdre.⁶ That is all we know.
But I know this: that if she offered me
The red bowl of her lips, I'd swim a currach⁷
Out on the jagged sea and trust the waves
Rather than drink that sweet and poisoned cup.

Conor: Her age?

Ainnle: Sixteen or seventeen.

Ardán: Ripe as an apple
That shapes itself to the hand that plucks it down.

Fergus: I seem to remember the voice of the druid Cathbhad
Who, when the wife of Felim was brought to bed,
Spoke an obscure and puzzling prophesy:

There screams from the womb's cave
One tall, fair-haired, grave,
For whom champions will contend
Whom high kings will demand;
Her teeth are ambushed by
Lips like the berry
And queens will be envious of her,
Matchless, faultless, to be remembered forever.

Conor: And more than that?

Fergus: Death and destruction for any who should love her.

Conor: Was the child as faultless as Cathbhad prophesied?

Fergus: No one knows. No one has seen her since.

Conor: Perhaps she died at birth. It would be well
That such a one be strangled in the cradle.

Fergus: If all the women who caused grief to men
Were strangled in the cradle, only men
Would trouble the Earth. Then who would bake and sew,
Gossip and sweep and warm our beds at night.

Conor: Fergus, your words buzz in my ears like flies.

Ardán: Your majesty, may we retire? we are both very weary
And would like to start early tomorrow
To rescue Naoise.

Conor: You must be weary. Tomorrow you will tell
Of all your deeds in Scotland. Warriors,
In honour of this day when you took arms,
In honour of the great sons of Usna,
I invite you to a hunt. Let the trumpets sound,
Bring highly mettled horses and hounds.

The trumpets sound.

Fergus: The woods are full of game, and yet I know
That we'll explore a certain rushy glen
And chase a milk white doe with one brown ear.

CURTAIN

END OF SCENE 2.

ACT ONE

SCENE THREE

Scene: The same as scene one. It is evening and outside the hut is still light. The dusk, like the bloom of a plum, just blurs the details of the scene.

Deirdre and Leabharcham are in the hut.

Deirdre: For seventeen years the army of my days
Moved forward to this castle. The foot-soldier
Minutes, Sergeant hours, and captain nights
Led forward in battalion by the weeks
Had one objective, and now the march is over.

Leabharcham: You must have learned these metaphors from him.
Who is this man?

Deirdre: Who is this sun? This sky? This evening air?

Leabharcham: Deirdre, you're drunk with dreams.

Deirdre: Yes, rolling, roaring drunk. The evening star
Sings like a linnet to me; I am the trees,
The flowers, the grass; I grow in them and with them,
Love has unveiled its eyes and opened mine.

Leabharcham: And all because a soldier has fluttered his eyes
At you and told his lies to you.

Deirdre: Because love is about me, closer than the air that
surrounds me.

Leabharcham: Who is this man? What are his prospects? Who
Are his parents? Has he a wife already?

Deirdre: Your words drift like leaves in a fountain.

Leabharcham: These are the words and the questions that you should
ask., and not
'What colour are his eyes?' 'What height is he?'

Deirdre: What do I care?

Leabharcham: You are a foolish child
Who never saw a man before and thinks
That the first man is the last. You'll learn in time
That he is one of thousands, a leaf in the forest.

Deirdre: How can you be so foolish? You have taught
That the heart is giddy metal to the lodestone,
That the heart is infallible, that love at sight
Explains why we have eyes, that all we see
I just a hint, a clue, a guide to love.

Leabharcham: That's what the poets say.

Deirdre: And you have taught me
That poets are the eyes of a blind world.

Leabharcham: All that's romance and poetry. This is life!
Who is this man?

Deirdre: Did you not see his hair?
A raven that; the blood drop on his cheek,
The skin of snow. And you ask, who is this?

Leabharcham: That was a girlish fancy.

Deirdre: No, I spoke with the authority of prophecy.

Leabharcham: Young lambs and goats and girls - three giddy creatures.

Deirdre: Three bad masters - why and how and when.
Before today, all that I knew was words
Like 'happiness' and 'love' and 'loneliness'.
Is he a man or a god?

Leabharcham: He is a man, a liar, lustful, vain.

Deirdre: No. All the heroes cut out of the old tales
Would be his runners. he would stop an army
With his eye. Yet he is tender,
And when he smiles, the birds tune a new melody.

Leabharcham: Who teaches love poems to a girl is lost.
Naoise is heard giving a hunting call outside.

Deirdre: Here he is now. Wear welcome like a dress.
Enter Naoise.

Naoise: The woods are full of game, the antlered deer,
His modest wife, the rabbit with the snow flake
On his tail; the glittering pheasant,
But I come empty handed.

Leabharcham: Why is that?

Naoise: In friendship they all came to me. I could not shoot.

Deirdre: These are my friends. Who shoots my friends, shoots me.

Leabharcham: Knowing no man they know no fear, since fear
Is man's great contribution to the world.

Naoise: A queenly and vigorous woman like you,
A fine intelligent woman like you,
A woman like you that was born to love,
Should be the friend and ally of love.

Leabharcham: Before you were born I heard such compliments.

Naoise: This is no peddler's coinage.

Leabharcham: When I was young,
My heart was bee and clover, hunter and hunted.
Restless my sleeping, and my dreams were gilded
With love until the grey rain came
And washed them clear and stone grey, and I knew
That love is a fever, love a deceiver, love
Is a drunken night that fathers a sodden day.

Deirdre: The songs you sang were gayer than a blackbird,
Sweeter than a lark and brighter than
The naked Spring when first it breaks
The skin of Winter and shines in the white sun.

Leabharcham: Perhaps if my tongue had withered, not my heart,
I could have cheated love of one poor victim.

Deirdre: What you sang is true.

Leabharcham: I should have been born dumb.

Leabharcham goes into the hut.

Deirdre: Now, Naoise, you may ask me.

Naoise: Ask you what?

Deirdre: The question that, like a mayfly, has been bobbing
A trout-leap from your tongue.

Naoise: I thought I had asked everything you could tell.

Deirdre: This is not something told, but something answered.

Naoise: A riddle then?

Deirdre: If you like. When does two equal one?

Naoise: I was never good at sums.

Deirdre: Then ask your question.

Naoise: Have I a question?

Deirdre: I thought you had. You said you loved me.

Naoise: As astrologers love the kingly stars.

Deirdre: Then don't be shy but ask
My hand in marriage. And here it is already.
Here are my five wits, and they are yours.
Here is my hand-line, life-line, head-line.
All are yours. The bone, the blood, the sinew
And the skin are yours, and if the pulse beats faster
It is for you it beats. It is a goldsmith's hammer
That beats fine my heart that it may gild your life.

There is a silence.

Naoise: And your riddle?

Deirdre: The answer is the same. Two equals one
When they are married.

Naoise: (Very subdued at the word marriage) Yes, I see.

Deirdre: And when will we be married?

Naoise: Some day soon. My heart has grown impatient
As a migrant bird.
Tonight we'll find a shadowy palace
Roofed, walled and carpeted by the forest,
And there I will prove why love rules even kings.

Beethoven's horns from the sextet in E Flat, opus
81b are heard.

Deirdre: What is that?
Naoise: Some huntsmen in the woods.
Deirdre: Then let us hide.
Naoise: No. Let us hide together.

As they turn to go, Conor enters in the background and stands for a long moment staring at Deirdre. Then she catches sight of him and runs off.⁸ Conor comes forward to Naoise, pretending to have seen nothing.

Conor: Naoise, you're very welcome home. Your brothers said
You were delayed, and so my heart outran
My dignity, and I came to meet you.

Naoise: Your majesty, the earth is not more honoured
When the sun sets fire to darkness.

Conor: I have been worried about your long delay.

Naoise: All day a druid mist surrounded me.

Enter Ardán, Ainnle, Fergus and young warriors.

Conor: Here gentlemen is Naoise, the champion
The warrior, the lover, the pride of Ulster,
And he tells me that some incautious druid
Sent a mist to keep him from his dear companions.

1st. Young
Warrior: A shameless druid.

2nd. Young
Warrior: Has the druid suffered?

3rd. Young
Warrior: Has the druid been pierced with that great spear of
yours?

1st. Young
Warrior: We hear the druid wears a most engaging face.

2nd. Young
Warrior: And bears a most peculiar figure.

3rd. Young
Warrior: Most unmasculine.

Conor: May I suggest that as we've found no game....

Fergus: We rode here faster than a courier.

Conor: As we have found no game, you gentlemen
Should search for this strange, engaging druid.

1st. Young
Warrior: Naoise will lead the way.

Conor: No, Naoise and I
Will speak of matters of state. Good hunting
gentlemen.

They go. Conor turns suddenly to Naoise hoping to catch him off his guard.

Conor: Who is this girl?

Conor: This girl?

Conor: Naoise, don't try
That schoolboy's gambit with me. Your brothers told
us
Of the girl. I've seen the girl. Who is the girl?
And most important still, where is the girl?

Naoise: She ran to her burrow when she saw you coming.
She is a country girl, rough and uncouth.

Conor: Perhaps she would do as a serving maid.

Naoise: Clumsy and slovenly.

Conor: A kitchen scullion then?

Naoise: Your majesty, its my opinion
She's not full weight; a little.... you know.....
a little.....
touched.

Conor: Call her and let me judge for myself.

Naoise: Your majesty.....

Conor: Call this girl I said.
But I'll not be the king: some friend of yours,
An uncle or foster father perhaps.

Naoise: (Calls very softly) Deirdre.

Conor: Louder. The Scots have not got your tongue.

Naoise: (Slightly louder) Deirdre.

Conor: Let roar that bellowing voice of your
By which the Ulstermen knew that the bull
Is loose among their gentle heifers.⁹

Naoise: (More loudly) Deirdre!

Conor: That is the bull roar of the Sons of Usna.
After a few moments Deirdre enters, very shyly and
hesitantly.

Deirdre: Yes Naoise. (she sees Conor) Oh!

Naoise: This is my cousin Conor. Don't be afraid of him.

Deirdre: Is he an old man. What strange white hair he has.

Naoise: The snow falls heaviest on the loftiest mountains.

Deirdre: The face so wrinkled, like a winter apple.

Naoise: Your maje..... Conor, you must forgive the girl.

Conor: Clumsy, you said, rough and uncouth, you said, but
not
That she is beautiful as..... as an old man's dream.

Naoise: I must have forgotten.

Conor: Mend your memory.

Deirdre: Leabharcham never said that men grow old as women do.
(to Naoise) Will you be like that?

Conor: The body may wither but the heart and mind
Be seventeen, better than seventeen,
For folly is daunted and wisdom rules the blood.

Deirdre: And can you roar like Naoise, run a stag
Through the plaited forest, or outstare the sun?

Conor: Folly of youth.

Deirdre: Or empty an ale jug at a single swallow.

Conor: Ale is the thief of youth.
Deirdre, you must come to the king's palace
And learn the courtesy which is to beauty
What wisdom is to youth and moderation to the strong.

Deirdre: No, I'll stay here with Naoise.

Conor: Girl, how dare you question.....:

Deirdre: Who are you
To say where I will go or where I'll stay.

Conor: Your king will see that you are educated.

Deirdre: Let the king beware of me; in my blood there flows
A treasonable poison, a king destroyer.
When we are married I'll stay here with Naoise
And Leabharcham, and leave the king in safety.
Good-bye old man.

She runs off.

Conor: 'A treasonable poison'. 'When we are married'.
Explain it Naoise.

Naoise: There is, she says, a prophesy made at her birth
That she will be a dagger in the heart of Ulster
And its prudent king; so she was reared in private,
Far away from the white court and the bright diadems.

Conor: Beauty is dangerous as the wolf-bite. And the
marriage?

Naoise: That's her imagination. She thinks I'll marry her.

Conor: And you won't?

Naoise: What ram is there that ever welcomed a spancel?

Conor: Then you'll give her up?

Naoise: Show me the ram that ever turned aside.

Conor: This girl must be of noble birth, an orphan,
And therefore under the protection of the crown.
She will be brought to court, properly gowned,
Grounded in learning and the ways of nobles.

Naoise: But she won't go.

Conor: She'll go if she is forced.
But I have no wish to use compulsion;
So, Naoise, you'll persuade her.

Naoise: And if I refuse?
Conor: You are a warrior pledged to me by oath.
Naoise: If my persuasion fails?
Conor: It won't fail.
The captain of the guard retires tomorrow.
The captain of the Red Branch Knights will soon retire.
Soon I will choose a captain for the knights.
You are the captain of the guard tomorrow.
There is a pause. Conor is looking pointedly at Naoise.
I'll draw the night about me as a cloak
While you unpack your spangled eloquence.
He goes aside.
Naoise: Girls are as common as the blackberry
Ripening in every ditch, but there is only
One captain of the Royal Guard, one captain
Of the Red Branch Knights.
He calls, bellowing more loudly than ever.
Naoise: Deirdre. Deirdre. Deirdre.
He is still calling as the curtain falls.

CURTAIN

END OF ACT ONE, SCENE THREE

ACT ONE

SCENE FOUR

The same as scene two, some three months later.
Ardán is sitting alone, pondering over a chessboard. Ainnle rushes in.
Ainnle: Where's Naoise?
Ardán: You're back from Connacht? Drilling his men as usual.
"Hayfoot, strawfoot!" He'll drill their feet away.
Why are you excited?
Ainnle: Colm resigns today.
Ardán: The captain of the Red Branch Knights?
Naoise should earn his dowry so. I pity that girl.
Ainnle: You said he was well rid of her.
Ardán: But I still pity her. She thinks he'll marry her.

Ainnle: Surely she knows the king intends her for himself?
Ardán: The silly little thing dreams Naoise, thinks Naoise,
Eats for him, drinks for him, lives only in his eyes.

Ainnle: And Conor?

Ardán: His eyes are tethered to her, he dreams Deirdre,
Thinks Deirdre, and so on.

Ainnle: No wonder, she's the first bud of Spring,
The young moon....

Ardán: Give me a rest from Deirdre;
And give me a rest from all of love's imagery.
Since Naoise found this cursed girl in the forest
Everything in nature has been Deirdre.
The birds can't whistle but it's Deirdre singing,
The flowers are little Deirdres and the moon
Has no business in the sky but to be Deirdre.
What is she after all - a woman.

Ainnle: With grace to shame a dancer.

Ardán: I think you're half in love with her yourself.

Ainnle: I love what's beautiful. If ever I could take a stone
And chip it's grosser parts away, revealing
The face and form of Deirdre underneath,
I would love that; or if I could take cloth
And turn it to a mirror with bright paints
And fix the beauty that I see about me,
I'd love that too; but beauty floats away.

Ardán: These are arts that men may learn some day.
Meanwhile, I wish that Deirdre would float away
And leave us in peace in Ulster. Here is Naoise.

Naoise enters, very efficient and soldierly.

Naoise: Welcome Ainnle. Did you see my men
Turn on the campus like a chariot wheel?

Ainnle: I did. And I have news. Colm resigns today.

Naoise: Good news. I'll order a bright cloak
Of crimson and a shield of the new metal.
Has Conor yet announced my appointment?
The news that will rejoice the men of Ulster?

Ainnle: What is the news of Deirdre, Naoise?

Naoise: She dotes on me as Conor dotes on her.
Commanding officers have too much dignity
And have no time for light conceits of lovers.

Ainnle: (Looking offstage) She's coming now.

Naoise: Then let me escape.

Before he has a chance to go Deirdre enters, very
beautifully dressed and groomed. She speaks with
care and dignity.

Deirdre: Dear Ainnle, you are back from the rough West.
Ardán, you're looking pale. Naoise, my pulse,
Where have you been this fortnight?

Naoise: (Evasively) I've been busy.
out on manoeuvres in the hilly country.

Ardán: The tavern keepers think that Naoise's dead.

Ainnle: Not so his men; they are half dead themselves
With half-sham battles in which they get a spear
Embedded in their rear if they are slow.

Naoise: (Sententiously) Agility and discipline - a soldier's
friends.

Deirdre: But not my friends. For three months I've learned
To walk, to speak, to breath, to balance books,
To curtsy and to dance, to sew, to sing,
To embroider twisted snakes that chew their tails,
To redder lip and finger-nail, to brush
My hair until it crackles lightening. -
All this would be a joy if you were here,
But I am tired and weary of the court,
Weary of silk and gold and honeyed meat,
And, like the poor captive linnet, yearn for trees.

A Pause.

When will you marry me and take me back?

Ainnle: (Embarrassed) Ardán, we're late already.

Ardán: Yes, punctuality's the soldier's friend.

Naoise: Don't hurry, I'll be with you in a moment.

Ardán: It's time, that martinet, that drives us on.

Ardán and Ainnle go.

Deirdre: When you said that I must learn the courtly ways
I thought that you'd instruct me, not the King.

Naoise: I'd be a poor instructor in court grace.

Deirdre: His eyes crawl on me, like snail tracks on a wall.
Naoise, when will we marry?

Naoise: I am bound by oath to the king.
I must have his consent, and you're his ward.

Deirdre: Then let us run away and live together.

Naoise: My dear, a soldier's first and greatest loyalty
Is to his king - the sun by which he lives.

Deirdre: I could have hidden in the woods forever
If you had not enticed me to the court.
Naoise, by this kiss I put you under bonds to marry
me.¹⁰

She catches him by the ears and kisses him on the
mouth.¹¹ A trumpet sounds outside.

Naoise: The king is coming now. He has great news.
Conor enters, followed by the whole court. He takes his place by the throne.

Conor: Deirdre, stand here beside me. You warm the air
About me. Now gentlemen, you know the purpose
Of this meeting. Today the Captain Colm
Retires from chieftainship of the Red Branch.
You know there is only one to fill his place,
A warrior renowned, a courteous, gentle
Murderer of men.
Naoise preens himself, but at the next words shows his disquiet.
I refer, as you know, to that great killer
Who at this moment, is widowing and orphaning
The wives and children of the South. Your leader
Will be Cuchullain.¹²
There are cries of enthusiasm from the warriors and courtiers. Naoise starts forward in dismay.

Naoise: But your majesty....

Conor: And I officially confirm that Naoise be
The captain of the Royal Bodyguard.

Naoise: But your majesty, you promised.....

Conor: Am I interrupted?
Naoise, I will not hear you. You are a fighting man,
Excellent with the sword, but generals command
With mind and heart, experience and guile.
You are a woman lover,
An ale devourer, but generals are sober,
Disciplined and diligent and calm.

Naoise: When was Cuchullain any of these things?

Conor: Perhaps in ten years, when you have reaped a crop
Of golden wisdom, you may wear the cloak
And arm ring of a general.

Naoise: I protest.

Fergus: Silence, Naoise, is the greatest wisdom.

Naoise: Cuchullain has scattered his progeny like pollen;
Cuchullain has drunk ten thousand barrels dry;
Cuchullain has quarrelled like a woman when
The moon has emptied her of womanhood.
If this be discipline and calm and diligence,
I am unstoned.

Ainnle: Naoise, be quiet now.

Fergus: Ardán and Ainnle, take your brother out.
Ardán and Ainnle take Naoise by the arms to remove him, but he struggles violently and shouts.

Naoise: Promises are promises, even when royally made.

They succeed in pulling him from the stage. There is a buzz of conversation. Conor raises his hand for silence.

Conor: He has been drinking ale. I shall forgive him,
Since youth and ale are fiercer than a Winter's
blast.
And I would speak of gentler subjects now,
Of Deirdre, my sweet ward, my more than daughter,
This treasure rescued out of the savage forest.
Daily she shines more brightly, like a diamond
That's cut and polished by the jewel maker;
Daily her voice, that shamed the forest birds,
Has grown more lilting still until it shames
The glittering singers of the royal gardens.
She can beat me at chess. The bards agree
That she's a master poet, and the harpers
Swear that her flying fingers trick the sight.

Deirdre: Conor, I blush to hear such flattery.

There is a shocked buzz from the courtiers and warriors.

1st. Young
Warrior: She called him Conor!

2nd. Young
Warrior: Not 'Your Majesty'!

3rd. Young
Warrior: Only those of the royal house may call him that.

Conor raises his hand for silence.

1st. Young
Warrior: (In the silence) Or the betrothed of the king!

Conor: Since Deirdre is my darling..... is my ward,
I have instructed her to speak familiarly;
But she must be addressed as royalty.

Fergus: Only members of the royal family
Are so addressed. Is Deirdre your family?

Conor: She will be addressed as royalty.

Fergus: Women, they say, have brought the greatest down.

Conor: (Angrily) When I want counsel I will ask for it.

Fergus: Somebody said that to the men of Ulster.

Conor: In Deirdre I have found beauty -- of mind
And womanly wisdom.

Fergus: That is obvious to the most modest eye.

A trumpet sounds.

Crier: That is the horn of the commander
Of the Red Branch Knights, the great Cuchullain.

Conor: I'll honour him in person and greet him
As he comes to his command.

All go, except Deirdre who stands for a long moment alone in the centre of the stage. Then she calls.

Deirdre: Naoise!

After a moment Naoise enters, very dispiritedly. Deirdre goes to him.

Deirdre: My heart, put mourning by. What is a cloak
Or arm ring to the man who wears his fame
About him like a flame? What name can Conor
Grant to the son of Usna that is greater
Than that of Naoise? The commander of the Knights
Is Conor's man, but Naoise is his own.
My love, put mourning by. Your oath is cancelled
Since Conor has broken his. And now we'll marry.

Naoise: (Heavily) You are a prophesy, not a woman.

Deirdre places his hand over her heart.

Deirdre: Feel my heart beat - stronger than a blooded horse;
Is that prophetic or a woman's heart?
Look in my eyes. Are they a prophet's glass
Or are they woman's eyes? Circle my waist
And tell me if the flesh is woman's flesh
Or has some poet, sweating twisted words,
Imagined it and put it in your arms?
I am a woman, Naoise. I am your woman,
And whether poet or prophet fashioned me,
My name, my flesh, my heart are linked to you
Until the stars unlink themselves and fall.

Naoise: Since Conor has betrayed me, where can I turn?

Deirdre: Ireland is full of kings.

Naoise: But I'll keep faith.

Deirdre: We must leave Ireland if you marry me.

Naoise: Then let us go to Scotland. (He calls)
Ardán! Ainnle!

Ardán and Ainnle enter.

Ainnle: What is it now?

Ardán: Have you recovered your temper?

Naoise: We are leaving this land and Deirdre goes with us.
Gather our people. When it's dark we'll travel.

Ainnle: But where.

Naoise: To Scotland.

Ardán: Naoise, this is madness.
Deirdre is royal meat, reserved for a royal dish.

Deirdre: What's that?

Ardán: The king intends you for himself.

Deirdre: But I am Naoise's wife.

Ainnle: That's news to us.
Naoise: And news to me, but I'll not break her word.
Ardán: If we go our journey must be swifter
Than hawk or eagle, more secret than the owl.
Naoise: Gather our people. Say we march tonight.
Ainnle: If Conor hears of this or comes on us
Before the sea god¹³ gives us his protection,
Out heads are worth less than a hound dog's supper.
Ardán and Ainnle go, Ardán muttering as he leaves
the stage.
Ardán: I knew that cursed girl would cut our throats.
Deirdre: (Ecstatic) Now the world opens before us like a
palace door.

Naoise looks at her distrustfully, then, side by
side, they walk slowly from the stage, not touching
one another.

CURTAIN

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Scene Among sandhills on the coast of Scotland. In the background there is a stone beehive dwelling. It is an autumn afternoon, some three years later.

A few moments after the rise of the curtain, Ardán and Ainnle enter, carrying Deirdre unconscious. All three are dripping with water.

Ardán: She must have swallowed half the sea god's bath.

Ainnle: Is she unconscious still?

Ardán: Deaf, dumb and blind.

Ainnle: Surely we've pumped her dry?

Ardán: My back is breaking.

Ainnle: Try her again. Although she's pale as milk
She can't be dead. Prophecies are fulfilled
And there's no water in her prophesy.

Ardán: When I saw her swimming strongly to the world's
End, I could have thanked her. But you
Ran to the coracle and called to me.
It would have been well if she has swum until
The sea god fell in love and took her down.

Ainnle: Why did she do it?

Ardán: When I can tell you why a girl does anything,
I'll marry one.

Ainnle: But why did she do it. There's Naoise and her
children.

Ardán: For three years now I've left my head at home
And the word 'Why' along with it. Why exile
Misery and foreign kings? Why build
A secret house? Why crouch in woods? Why fight
In foreign wars? Why mouth the bread of mercenaries?
Why but Deirdre, this little box of flesh,
This bag of sighs. And there it is, mere earth
Without the fire to warm and air to lighten.

Ainnle: Hush! Was that a breath.

Ardán: The blood creeps back like a deserter.
Strip off her clothes and warm her.

Ainnle: I'd be ashamed. You strip her.

Ardán: And have her say I loved her like every fool?
No, bring a stone out of the fire and put it
To her feet.

Ainnle: I'll cover her with fox fur.

Deirdre speaks, her voice barely audible.

Deirdre: Take me in your arms,
Mannanan MacLir, king of the sea.

Ainnle: Her sentries are awake. (To Deirdre) Why did you swim
away?

Deirdre: Am I not dead and happy. I'm so cold.

Ardán: Ainnle will fetch a stone out of the fire.

Deirdre: I was so happy in the waves, the future was present.
Must it recede again, a wave that never reaches up our
Beach of years.

Ainnle returns with a fur rug and a stone which he
places at her feet.

Ainnle: Now cover yourself with these and warm your feet.

Deirdre: Take off these wet clothes. I'm colder than Ardán.

Ainnle: What would Naoise say if you were stripped
Before us? Do not tempt the credulous eye
That sends hot messages to the credulous heart.

Deirdre: You've seen me night and morning for three years,
And Naoise cares nothing whether I strip or dress.
He'd rather have a hot, red headed Scots girl.

Ainnle: Rebels my hands. I'll strip only the girl
Who strips for love of me.

Deirdre: Then Ardán will strip me, who cares nothing for me.
To him I am an evil thing out of a legend.

Ardán begins very reluctantly and very clumsily to
untie her shoulder straps.

Ainnle: Ardán, your fingers are cowards. They tremble.

Ardán: I'm cold. And they're cold. As cold as Deirdre.

Deirdre: No, they burn like ten candles at a royal table.

She disengages herself from him and, under cover of
the fur rug, slips off the dress which she throws to
Ainnle. Gingerly he takes it to the fire. Deirdre
fastens the furs around her.

Deirdre: Oh take me in your arms and warm my blood
With your rich blood. I know you hate me,
And so I need not fear your arms about me.

Ardán puts his arms about her, very coldly. She
clings to him.

Deirdre: Oh that's so good. I'm like a cat that's dazed
On a burning stone. Open your tunic; let me
Kindle my hands at your good open fire.
If you were any other man I'd fear to touch you,
But I know all the spleen that's in your body.

Ardán tries to disengage himself.

Ardán: That is enough. Now we have saved your life.

Deirdre: Oh save more than my life. Save my poor heart.
This hand is frozen too. Oh you are warmer
Than a king's sun house on an Autumn day.

Ardán: Ainnle, bring out a towel and dry her hair.

Deirdre: I know that you'd be glad to see me die.
And yet you warm me, generous as the sun
That loves the beggar as the golden king.

Ainnle begins to dry her hair.

Ainnle: Why did you swim away?

Deirdre: Naoise has split my love in a red-haired bitch's bed.
Oh hold me closer; the sea god freezes still with
His embrace.

Ainnle: You know that Naoise loves you.

Deirdre: And he loves his dinner. I stay his appetite
And no more. His fancy meat he finds in a king's
palace.

Ainnle: Who carried this madman's story?

Deirdre: Such stories dance upon the air like birds,
And sing as shrilly.

Ainnle: You choose a lie instead of life?

Deirdre: No, death instead of truth.
Were I a moony girl, unwed,
Then I could pray for a hasty lover
To climb the wall and take me suddenly
Out where the waves are hoarse with passion.
Were I a pale unwanted love-child,
Then I could pray for a golden carriage,
Abounding presents and a perfumed mother,
Warm like a queen in a nest of fur.
But all that I have is a heart that's pressed
Between rocks as heavy as druid altars
And a sigh that would swell a sail to Ireland.
What's there for me but the sea and its roaring?

Ainnle: And what of your children?

Deirdre: When have I seen them?
They're happy in fosterage¹⁴, warm in a sun house,
And their mouths not sour from wild beasts' flesh.

Ainnle: And so you're weary of this land of Scotland?

Deirdre: No, delightful to me the land of Scotland,
Dún Sweeny and Glen Etive, the woods of Cuan,
Where in the bending branches the cuckoo shouted;
Delightful in this land the flesh of salmon
Not evil the flesh of venison, the strong flesh of
badger,
Delightful are its lakes cupped in its mountains,
Where even the rain is bright and the royal heather
Fit for a high king's coat. Here I was happy
Till love was quenched and all the colours faded.

Ardán: Who tells these scandal tales of Naoise?
Deirdre: The winds carry them. They whistle in the leaves.
Ardán: Who fondles a lie is its own mother.
Ainnle is staring out towards the sea.

Ainnle: Ardán, the coracle is loose on the ebb-tide
That we had tied safe to the sheltered land.
Ardán: Two baths in a day. We'll be fit for a court soon.
They run off. After a moment Art, a Scottish king
disguised as a steward, enters furtively.

Art: I come in fear, my lady, risking the brothers' sword
points
Since I have set their coracle adrift that I might see
you.
Deirdre: No act of friendship that. They'll kill you if they
find you.
Art: I come, you know, your highness with honey words of
kindness.
A servant from my high lord, a humble bee to carry
Gold from the flowering king-cup, sweetness from the
lily.
Deirdre: You bring me bitter aloes and bitter gall to parch me.
Art: I bring you truth, a healing and heady draught to
swallow.
Deirdre: My lord still spills his goodness on a foreign woman's
mattress?
Art: Think rather of me ... of my lord and the love he has
for Deirdre.
Deirdre: But he has never seen me.
Art: He sees you in my pupil.
Deirdre: If he could see me now!
Art: Why? Was your highness bathing?
Deirdre: Not bathing, but drowning. A green grave was my wish.
Art: Why risk the crown of beauty in the unmannered sea
To dazzle fish who never saw moon or sun or starlight?
Deirdre: That's how they talk in palaces. I'm weary of their
hunting,
Their fishing and their fighting. Tell me of your
lord's palace.
Art: A lime-white palace reflected in the sea,
Grave, noble courtiers who walk under trees,
Lofty the halls with brave embroideries,
Stately the women with hair braided to the knee,
Harping the recital of sweet poetry
Are the delight of ladies in their court by the sea.
Deirdre: And the king?

Art: Rich, wise and kindly he.

Deirdre: And young?

Art: Young. Young enough to please a lady.

Deirdre: His age?

Art: The same age as myself to the same day.

Deirdre: Has he a wife?

Art: Bitter and stringy as dried weed of the sea.

Deirdre: Tell him that Deirdre is married happily.

Art: He can have you any moment that he wishes
He knows how I came on your little house
And saw you shining in your husband's arms
Like the moon on the dark sea. I said to him;
'Let the three men be killed and take the woman'
But he replied, 'No, tell her of my court
The silks, the jewelled cups, enamelled gold;
And tell her I love her. Tell her how
Her husband has forgotten her in bed
With a red beauty. Tell her I wait for her.'

Deirdre: Wherever I have been, this thing has happened;
Whenever men have seen me they have wanted
To kill my men and take me to their bed.
So we have travelled, hidden, built a hut
To hide me from men's eyes. Now I am tired,
And the wind and sea and sun have scored my beauty.

Art: Perfumes and bottles sleep in rich bottles for you;
Carved pots of alabaster guard the scarlet
Stain, and a silver bath attends your wish.
Jewels that men have died for, silk gowns with fur
At neck and hemline languish for your presence.
The bards and harpers wait for a new theme that shall
be Deirdre.

Deirdre: Tell him ... tell him that Deirdre prefers the wild.

Art: As her husband prefers another bed?

Deirdre: Tell him that I left a greater court than his
And chose to live with exile, cold and fear.

Art straightens himself and speaks with dignity.

Art: Now that my court is insulted, I put the steward by.
I give you my ring to kiss. I am the king.

Deirdre: (Unimpressed) All this I have heard before and I am
tired
Of kings who pose of men and men who pose as kings.

Art: I have told you I can take you at any moment.

Deirdre: A poor prize that. A stolen wife and mother.

Art: But I prefer to wait. The bait is sure.

Deirdre: Reel in your line, you'll get no rise today.

Art: When the rain breaks, when the fire smokes
When rabbit and hare and deer stick in your teeth,
When the earth is a hard bed, remember of swan down,
Remember smells of cooking from a royal kitchen --
Goose, golden as an arm-ring, pheasant, plover,
Custard and honeycake ...

Deirdre: Oh be quiet!

Art: Peacocks served with their starry tails,
Oysters and salmon, starlings' tongues.

Deirdre: Be quiet now and go.

Art: Baby pigs and wild boars' udders,
Honey and poppy, strong mead and golden ale.

Deirdre: Go, go quickly.

Art: I will bring a basket,
Of palace food, white bread and celery,
Fruit out of season, little strawberries....

Deirdre, completely exasperated, jumps to her feet
and takes a sword in her hands. She advances on Art.

Deirdre: Go or I'll cut the tongue out of your head.

Art: (Going) Frozen in snow and blanketed in cream.

He goes. Deirdre sinks back, exhausted. She takes a
mirror and stares, critically and disapprovingly, at
herself; tries a new arrangement of her hair,
anxiously examines her face for pimples. She begins
to paint her lips. Ardán and Ainnle enter and stand
for a moment smiling at her.

Ainnle: Vanity comes with the warming of the blood.

Ardán: Next time you want to die, jump from a cliff.
We've lost the coracle. Somebody cut the rope.

Deirdre: I'm sorry for my foolishness, my heart.....

Ardán: This famous heart that drives us all like sheep!
It is a schoolgirl's heart, fed on romance,
Sweetmeats and poetry and fancy stories.

Deirdre: Don't be so harsh with me. You both abandoned
All that you loved at home to come with me.

Ardán: To come with Naoise.

Deirdre: You've saved my life so often.

Ardán: For Naoise.

Enter Naoise, looking very tired and dissipated.

Naoise: Do you play handball with my name?

Deirdre turns fiercely on him.

Deirdre: Where have you been all night?

Naoise: I lost my way.

Deirdre: And all the day?

Naoise: I hunted.

Deirdre: Aye, you hunted
But what game did you hunt? Look at the eyes,
Brilliant with fatigue, and his pale cheeks.
(With false solicitude) You are worn out, my love.

Naoise: Yes, I am tired.

Deirdre: That stain there - is it blood?

Naoise: (Disconcerted looks at his tunic) It must be blood.

Deirdre: It seems to me a lip stain or a rouge.
And that scent - is that the scent of blood?
(Fiercely) Answer! Where did you that lip-dye and that
perfume?

Naoise: Am I a schoolboy to be cross-examined?

Deirdre: What amorous hands have pulled your hands about?
What strumpet's lips have put their seal on you?
What trollop sends you reeking home to me?

Naoise: I'll speak when you have studied better manners.

Deirdre: Ardán, you should have let me die in the sea.

Naoise: What nonsense is this?

Ardán: She plunged into the sea
And swam as though she'd reach the shore of Ireland.

Naoise: Why did you do it?

Deirdre: (Handing him her mirror) The beast in there will tell
you.

Naoise: (To Ardán and Ainnle) Who has been talking?

Ardán: Don't look at us. You must have rambled in your sleep.

Deirdre: Then it's true?

Naoise: What if it is? Is Naoise to be hobbled,
Spanceled, manacled, fettered and chained
Like ... like a husband? The rain falls equally
On valley and upland. Can Naoise be less generous?

Deirdre: They should have let be drown in the clean sea.
Now I will drown in tears.
She weeps. Naoise puts a tentative arm around her.

Take your hand off me!
It reeks of carrot head, of rusty tail.
Naoise winks at Ardán and Ainnle and signs for them
to go. They do so.

Naoise: You know that I have never loved another woman,
And if I tell them so it is a lie.
So pity them and let them envy you.

Deirdre: I envy only those who never saw you.

Naoise: But I love you.

Deirdre: Continue. If you lisp
I'll be your prompter. Honey dripping from
The comb in Summer sunlight is like my hair?
Or have you learned new similes? She's like
The red earth, turned with a spade. The fox-red vixen
Sizzling into the bed of night.

Naoise: I love you.

Deirdre: This will be good. You love me as ... as what?

Naoise: As astrologers love the kingly stars.

Deirdre: That is bankrupt. Try again, you love me...?

Naoise: As drunkards love the bottle, as gluttons love their
gut.

Deirdre: That's nearer home.

Naoise: As sailors after a voyage
Love woman, female or girl, widow or virgin.

Deirdre: And more?

Naoise: As Naoise loves Naoise in his heart.

Deirdre: Now let me hear the touching tale of carrothead.

Naoise: You've suddenly grown so hard.

Deirdre: I'm pickled in brine.
Sun-dried, smoke-cured. A salty Scottish kipper.

Naoise: Where is that girl who was as soft as silk around my
neck?

Deirdre: Tell me of rusty mouth.

Naoise: Where is my forest singer?

Deirdre: If you were a hare, I'd turn you.

Naoise: Oh, my love, was it I
Who froze that warm heart, who beat it anvil hard.

Deirdre: Who whistled me down out of the sky? Who wooed me
In golden courts? I'm caged while he flies free.

A pause.

Since life has dragged me back out of the waves,
perhaps it is you that death is waiting for.

She snatches up the sword. Naoise bares his breast,
while keeping a wary eye on the sword.

Naoise: If Naoise must die, then let him die for Deirdre.
If Naoise deserves to die, then death is welcome.
If Naoise has wronged his love, then death's overdue.

She takes the sword like a bullfighter and prepares
to plunge it into his heart, then collapses weeping
into his arms. After a moment, realising that her
mood has changed, Naoise speaks soothingly to her.

Never doubt me again. I am the constant earth
To your white moon; and if my shadow crosses,
Be sure the eclipse will pass like a cobweb's ghost.

Deirdre: Fool that I am, I love you.

Naoise: (Smoothing back her hair) Now dry your eyes.

Deirdre: Who would believe that I would try to kill you?

Naoise: You wouldn't try to kill me.

Deirdre: You were so close to death, you are half ghost.

Naoise: Never, never again
Shall my eyes be womanisers; never again
Shall these hands lead their master into danger,
Now I am yours, each bone and pore and sinew
For which no names have ever yet been forged
Will wonder why knotted calf and curious finger
Are all called Deirdre.

Deirdre: Then you love me truly?

Naoise: So much that I renounce all living women.
The only names that I will join to yours
Will be those few that live in song for ever.

A distant shout is heard.

Deirdre: What's that?

Naoise: The man cry of a hunter in the woods.
Forget it and creep into my arms.

Deirdre: No, that is as much a sea cry as a gull's.

Naoise: Be my young love and creep into my arms.

A nearer cry. Deirdre draws away from him.

Deirdre: Whose is that call?

Naoise: Some Scottish hunter. Sleep now, your eyes are closing
Like evening Anemones.

A still nearer cry.

Deirdre: Ireland bred that cry.

Naoise: Ireland has no word for me but death.

Enter Ardán and Ainnle.

Ainnle: A boat with purple sails, a golden beak
And rowlocks all of gold.

Naoise: Then let us hide.

Ainnle: It is some royal messenger from Ireland.

Naoise: Then let us find a cave.

Ainnle: The Red Branch Knights have sent a greeting to us.
Their banner whips the wind like a gallop.

Naoise: We'll draw the forest round us.
Ardán: The only cargo they can bring is death.
A cry is heard, much nearer.

Deirdre: I think I know the face behind that voice.
Ainnle: That is no enemy.
Naoise: That is a laughing voice, a drinking voice.
Ardán: A voice as weak as tears.
Such weakness is an enemy. Let us be going.
Naoise: That voice is Fergus's. Burnish your welcome.
They all begin to straighten their shabby clothes.
Deirdre runs to the beehive hut.

Ainnle: How did you pacify her? How did you explain?
Naoise: I explained nothing. Never explain; you forge
A weapon against yourself. I said I loved her.
Ainnle: And that was enough?
Naoise: Plenty, since it is true.
Ainnle: What can Fergus want?
Ardán: A basket of eggs. Four hairy eggs in a basket.
Naoise: Hurry and let us meet him at the shore.
Ardán: You go. I'd rather live.
Ainnle: He is a friend.
Ardán: Whose friend? I smell blood in the air like thunder.
Ainnle: Ah, you're always smelling something.
Enter Fergus, gorgeously dressed, accompanied by
several warriors.

Ainnle: There he comes now, bright as a herring shoal.
Fergus: And this is where I find the sons of Usna, living
Like foxes in the rocks. Naoise, you're thin,
And Ardán too. Ainnle, my son, how are you?
Ainnle: As well as exiles can be.
Fergus: Then you're cured.
Naoise: Fergus, you're welcome. Tell us about your crossing.
Fergus: I am a heaving, nauseated bag of wind.
Ardán: (Truculently) What do you want with us?
Naoise: Ardán, mind your manners.
Ardán: And you mind your good wits. Conor has sworn that you
And I and all who travelled with us will die
If we are caught.
Fergus: That oath's unsworn.

Ardán: What do you want with us.
Ainnle: You're not a fighting cock, bred till the brain
Has only one spiteful message. Fergus comes visiting.
That is enough. Now take your needles off.

Ardán: Fergus, I know you and I know your history,
Your mild and thankless reign, your old man's love
For Conor's mother, how you weighed a throne
Against a bedmate and tumbled into bed.
You're wise and witty, weak and tractable,
Generous and gullible. I don't trust you.

Fergus laughs heartily.

Fergus: I see that sullen Scotland hasn't changed you.
Naoise: Ignore him Fergus, you know we welcome you.
Fergus: And I bring greetings from all Ulster to you
And to the peerless Deirdre. Where is that heart-drop?
Ardán: Gone into hiding if she has any sense.
Now what is your business here? Is Conor dead?
Fergus: Not dead, but flourishing like a garden weed.
I have great news, my heart is big with it
And must give birth this instant.
Ardán: If Conor's alive all other news is bad.
You've misconceived.

Enter Deirdre in a court dress, her hair bound, her
face freshly painted.

Fergus: Now the sun rises that will scorch the clouds
And make a tropic island here in Scotland.
Deirdre: (Graciously) Such hospitality as exiles own
Is spread before you. We're glad to see you, Fergus.
Fergus: You've changed a little - a girl's eyes in a woman's
face.
You're even lovelier than memory.
Deirdre: We're happy here,
Naoise and I, the only lovers left
In this dull world of businessmen.
We are so weary of soft living that
We camp here as you see, and counterfeit
The graceless life of the hunter. Our servants wait
Among the cloth of gold and silver dishes,
Keeping the candles trimmed till our return.
will you sit on the ground and take pot luck,
or shall we travel to our lime white palace?

The brothers are at first bewildered by this
conversation, but gradually understand it and smile
appreciatively.

Fergus: I'm glad that fortune's face has turned towards you.
Deirdre: And what is the news of Ireland?

Fergus: You are forgiven
And Ireland is swept and perfumed for your coming.

Ainnle: (Eagerly) Is this true.

Ardán: (Sceptically) Show me the high king's ring, the seal
of safety.

Fergus: He sends me as his regent. Here's my ring.

Deirdre: What has changed his mind?

Fergus: He built a hunting lodge
Close to Dundalk¹⁶, a palace in miniature.,
And, when the hunting season opened, asked
The lords and warriors - and all his creditors -
To a great ale feast that will be long remembered.
Nothing was lacking, abundance of bright ale,
Food by the cartload and candles light as daybreak -
The creditors nearly blew them out with sighing.
After the harping, dicing, dancing, singing,
He rose and asked "What is there that's lacking?"
And every guest said "Nothing but more time!"
And so he broke the hour glass, but repeated,
"What is it that is lacking?" and all stood
mouthless;
And then he said, "We lack the sons of Usna,
Those three sun risings of the Gael, those heroes."
But I'd embarrass you to repeat it all.

Deirdre: No, let us hear the catalogue.

Ardán: Who wants to hear a spurious speech at second hand?

Fergus: The warriors then all begged for your reprieve,
And he agreed.

Ardán: And so he sent his ring?

Fergus: No, he sent me as his plenipotentiary.

Ardán: I'd rather see the ring.

Naoise: Ardán, to heel.

Fergus: He asked Cuchullain first, but he was busy.¹⁶

Naoise: Chasing some fairy woman!

Fergus: Then he asked me,
But knowing Conor, I asked for guarantees.

Ainnle: What did he give?

Fergus: As long as you're with me
Your head is safe; and I'll not stir from you.

Warrior: We have guaranteed your safety too.

Another: This sword was forged to flourish in your service.

Naoise: Thank you. Thank you all.

Deirdre: And Deirdre. What did he say of Deirdre?

Fergus: Not a word.

Ainnle: What do you think, Fergus?

Fergus: I think he's old and that his sting is drawn.

Ainnle: Do you think that he's forgotten Deirdre?

Fergus: I'm sure of it.
An old man with the vigour in his thought
And none where its of use will talk of girls
Like a young fellow going to love's school.
But Conor talks of statecraft and of war.

Naoise: What do you think, Deirdre?

Deirdre: What can he offer us? Soft beds and bread
As soft as a court lady's secret flesh,
Oyster and salmon, starlings' tongues,
Peacocks served with their starry tails,
Little strawberries frozen in snow,
Music that dances in it's own delight,
And fountains that climb rainbows to the sun.
What's that to us. Here we have safety.

Ardán: Yes. We have safety here.

Deirdre: And I can well defend myself when men come offering
kingdoms.

Naoise: What's that? Who has been here?

Deirdre: Only a king.

Naoise: What kind of king? A Scot?

Deirdre: A king who wants to kill his wife and marry me.
Don't worry. I can keep him as a pet.

Naoise: (Outraged) "Don't worry," she says when men come
chasing her.
And married men! Oh, this is a race of lechers.

Deirdre: What is a word of courtship to your safety?

Naoise: My safety! What is it to my peace? And when
Has safety frightened us with it's coward's face?
We've never known a day of safety since
You caught me by the ears and drank my soul.
I'd rather walk on sword blades and redden the fields
Of Ireland than have you festooned with lechers.

Deirdre: You know that you can trust me as I trust you.

Fergus: Better come home. In Ireland the druids preach
Against the songs of love, the lidded eye,
The reddened smile and all love's light conceits.

Ainnle: What do the boys and girls do?

Ardán: What they have always done.

Naoise: Let them dig in the ditches, but keep their eyes from
Deirdre.

Fergus: Say that you'll come.

Deirdre: But not on my account,
Even though I'm afraid to sleep at night.
A sword can be too shrewd a soporific.

Art enters at the back of the stage carrying a basket covered with a white cloth.

Quiet a moment. There in the shadows. Look.

Ainnle: (Whispers) What is it? A fox or a wandering wolf?

Deirdre: Snare him and bring him here.

Ardán and Ainnle run to Art and capture him.

Fergus: What is it?

Deirdre: A ravening raider of the neighbour's hen runs.

They bring Art forward.

Naoise: Who is this little man?

Art: Only a steward.

Naoise: What is in the basket?

Art: Rations.

Ainnle: Why are you spying?

Art: Not spying, but walking out to take the air.

Naoise: Air enters painfully through a split gullet.

Ainnle: Now spit out the truth before it's hardened with
A mouthful of teeth. What are you doing here?

Art: My lord owns all you see. I'm on his business.

Ardán: Oh let him go. He has nothing to report.

Art: I thank you humbly and present this basket;
It's stuffed like a roast goose with palace food.

He begins to run. Deirdre waits until he is nearly
off the stage. Then she shouts.

Deirdre: Stop him. That is the king I told you of.

He is brought back and all the men surround him.

Naoise: You dared to lift your eyes to Deirdre.

Ainnle: You dared to offer her a throne.

Fergus: You dared to wrong the sons of Usna,
Guests in your rotten land.

Naoise: You thought you would buy her for a cupboard of food.

Art: (With dignity) I saw her lonely, despised, forgotten
And offered her a throne and honourable marriage.
I have demeaned myself in trucking
With the hireling girl of foreign bully boys.

The men all growl at him.

Ardán: If you were honourable, why skulk like a scullion?

Art: Because I am in love. Because I am foolish.

Ainnle: But you are too old and ugly.

Naoise: And too presumptuous.

Art: Foolish young man, do you imagine love
Is an old man's ailment? That old men's flesh is grey
And lifeless as their hair? That ugly little men
Are not as lustful as a cock?
All my love lacks is height and youth and beauty
To make itself immortal as a poem.
Deirdre some day will wonder if she chose right.
And little would have persuaded her to choose
A well cooked meal and my soft royal bed.

Deirdre: This man was ever-present as the sky,
But, knowing your hero rage I kept it secret.
His death might anger other kings in Scotland.

Art: You were glad enough to hear news of your husband.

Deirdre: Enough of this talk. Kill him and let us go.

Art: This is not unexpected. Reconciliation needs
Blood in its cement.

Ardán: He has done little harm.
Art begins to run.

Naoise: He has lifted his eyes too high.
He shoots an arrow after Art.

Ardán: That was unwise.
You've banged the door of Scotland in our face.

Fergus: The door of Ireland opens, and there's welcome
Spread before you like enamelled flowers.

Warrior: The breeze is from the land.

Fergus: All winds blow towards Ulster now,
And sing like royal trumpets.

Ardán: I'll say no more about the foreboding wave
That's lifted green over our little boat.

Fergus: The boat is great and splendid - the king's own
galley.

Naoise: Then let us go before the light grows tired.
They all begin to leave the stage. Just before they
go, Deirdre stops and turns around. They all turn
with her. Naoise strikes a romantic attitude and
declares:

Naoise: Good-bye to Scotland. Here we were young and happy.
I'll write these words on the beach before we go:
"This is where Naoise and Deirdre loved together!"

Deirdre: (Very businesslike) That basket. Don't forget it. It's
full of Palace food.
Naoise returns and picks it up. They all go, leaving
the body of Art in the middle of the stage.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

Scene: Conor MacNessa's hunting lodge near Dundalk, some days later. The curtain rises on a spacious room. To the left there is a dais and on it a wide, low, divan bed. Shallow steps lead up to the dais and the bed. Centre stage there is a noble, throne-like chair. Right back, at an angle, there are great bronze doors from which three steps lead down to the stage. There is a curtained opening to the right through which exits may be made. Behind the bed there is a window, which, through most of the act, is concealed by draperies.

On the rise of the curtain there is a busy and colourful scene as women run about, arrange coverlets on the bed, dress the throne, fix drapes over the end of the bed.

Conor stands in the midst of them all, directing operations. He looks older and more benign than in act one.

Conor: Gold plate and silver dish and jewelled cup
Are polished brighter than the eye of youth;
The sunbeam has no mote, the spider is banished
And on the walls, the lifework of ten million
Silkworms glows as though the Autumn moon
Made herring shoals of the green sea, and nothing
Is lacking now but our four exiled guests,
The sons of Usna and Deirdre, that Northern Light.
Plump out the pillows, spread fur rugs everywhere,
See that the colours sweetly chime together;
(He gestures) A purple coverlet here, by the green.
Take off that red, bundle away the blue.
The eyes long dulled by nature's forest green
And rained on grey must be rejoiced with royal
Gold and purple, silver and amethyst.

He has been walking backwards across the stage and now stumbles over the low step on the dais. He turns angrily and glares.

Conor: What fool has set this foot-trap?

A woman: The carpenter can set it right in a moment. Let me get him.

Conor stands staring thoughtfully at the step for a moment.

Conor: No, let it be. This is no time for carpentry.

His urbanity returns.

Within the hour my guests arrive and everything
Must be prepared. This bed - a thousand swans
From my own lakes go naked for its filling;

How they will love it, these sweet children
Who have lain three years on land where the stone
breaks
The skin of the earth and shows the naked bone.
These rugs for tender feet that have grown hard,
The sweetly perfumed air,
The kitchen's rich, prophetic smell, the clean
Scent of new paint will all delight their nostrils.
Yes. This is a joyful day the bards will sing of.

A woman: They'll sing your royal magnanimity,
Your generosity to unworthy subjects.

Conor: I have forgiven them. You must forgive.

The doors are flung open and Fergus and a number of
the young warriors from Act I enter.¹⁸

Conor: Well, Fergus, what is the news of our dear guests?

Fergus: They're close behind me, waiting a royal command,
And also, be it said, royal assurance.

1st. Young
Warrior: They asked a royal ring.

Conor: Fergus, you know
They're safe, that I have forgotten all their crimes.

Fergus: I've told them so and they've accepted it.

Conor now speaks, ostensibly to Fergus on whom his
eyes are fixed, but, in reality, to the young
warriors who respond.

Conor: I have forgiven Naoise's treachery,
His breaking of his oath of fealty.

2nd. Young
Warrior: That should not be forgiven.

Conor: But I forgive.
And I forgive his sudden flight to Scotland,
His alliance with Scottish kings who are my enemies.

3rd. Young
Warrior: A crime worthy of death and not forgiveness.

Conor: Yet I forgive. And I forgive his insults,
His lies and slanders over the ale cups in
The camps of foreign kings.

1st. Young
Warrior: A sword in the throat would silence talk like that.
I'd not forgive.

Conor: Yet I forgive. And I forgive his treason against
Ulster
When he deprived her of his brothers' arms
And all the followers he took with him.

2nd. Young
Warrior: That is a crime that cannot be forgiven.

Conor: Yet I forgive; and I forgive one greater, major crime,
The stealing of my ward out of my house,
The gentle Deirdre, a child too innocent
And tender to resist his shameless ways.

1st. Young
Warrior:

Your majesty has too kind a heart.

Conor:

Not kind,
But strong, since king's hearts must be strong. In
youth
I loved the chase, kisses of women, drink,
Dicing and song and poets' coloured lies,
But when I took the throne I put these up
And took strength as a sceptre in my hand.
A king's heart must be strong, and if he'd rule
More than a morning it must be cunning too.
I youth I trusted much and thought all coin
Was sovereign gold, but even thrones are gilded.
And so I learned not guile, but how to know
Guile from the truth, the king-coin from the forged.
I am not so simple now as in my youth.
But young or old, a king must be forgiving
And so I welcome Naoise as my brother
And welcome his two bothers as my own.

A pause.

If they are loyal, if they've learned loyalty,
I'll honour them above all Ulstermen.
If not ... (he dismisses the thought) This room's for
Naoise and his wife,
Two other princely rooms await his brothers.
Welcome them kindly as I will welcome them.

1st. Young
Warrior:

For the first time I will unwillingly obey
Your majesty's command. But I will obey.

Conor:

You shall obey. This is a royal command.
Naoise and his brothers must be guarded
Against the feeblest breath of jealousy.
He is the honoured guest of royalty,
And you must whistle all your falcons in.

The door opens and the crier enters.

Crier:

Your majesty, the woman Leabharcham is here.

Conor:

Tell her to come in. Fergus go out
And tell the sons of Usna that I wait
Impatiently to greet them.

Fergus has been silent all this time. As the young
warriors go, he turns in surprise to Conor.

Fergus:

How you have changed
Since I set out for Scotland. It almost seems
As though not one, but two kings have ruled Ulster.

Conor:

(Smiling) That is a thought that might have saved your
throne.

He calls after the young warriors.

Gentlemen, Go with Fergus and greet the brothers.

He sees Leabharcham at the door. As Fergus goes
Conor calls:

Conor: Come in Leabharcham and tell me about the new Deirdre.

Leabharcham: She has changed - a little.

Conor: Lovelier or less lovely?

Leabharcham: She is the same girl but different. Three years'
Dust lies on her hair, and three years' thought
Has hardened her eyes; her mouth is twisted
From three years of complaint; her waist has broadened
And her breast has dropped; her movements
Are slow and tired, so you're a lucky man,
Well rid of her. You said, if she had lost her beauty
You wouldn't see her - she's like the farmer's
wife....

As she speaks, Tréndorn enters.

Grown plump and ashy; you will not want to see her,
She smells of turf smoke and....

Conor: (Raising his hand) You will forgive me
If I stop you for a moment. Tréndorn went
On the same errand as yourself. Well, Tréndorn?

Tréndorn: (Entranced) My heart is driven mad by the sight of so
much beauty.

Conor: (Smiling gently at Leabharcham) He's driven mad!

Tréndorn: If one inch more were added or one half inch
subtracted
She would be less than perfect.

Conor: But nothing has been added.

Tréndorn : One more grain of powder and she would lose that moon
bloom,
One extra touch of rouge would daub that perfect rose
cheek,

Conor: (Musingly) One grain. One touch.

Tréndorn: Kingfishers are her eyebrows; her teeth are little
shells;
Her nails the wings of grasshoppers, her waist a roll
of silk.

Conor: (To Leabharcham) A roll of silk, not broadened.

Tréndorn: Her breasts are huntresses.

Conor: Not drooping or sagging?

Tréndorn: Her legs are straight, like saplings, silver in the
bark
And curling in the foliage.

Conor: Your eyes are liars, Leabharcham.

Leabharcham: (Terrified) I never lied, your majesty.

Conor: Not you. Your eyes are liars
Since women's eyes see differently from men's.

There is a fanfare of trumpets without. After a moment Ardán, Ainnle, Naoise and Deirdre enter, followed by Fergus, young warriors and courtiers. The sons of Usna are dressed in a form of lederhosen with

leather jerkins and Deirdre wears a short leather skirt with a leather jerkin. They are very tanned and make a strong contrast to the courtiers. Conor comes forward to greet them.

Conor: Ulster awakens now from its long sleep.
The trees and plants begin to grow again.

He puts a fatherly arm around Naoise and leads him towards the throne.

Naoise, my boy, come and sit in this great chair..
Ardán and Ainnle, give me your hands.

He appears to notice Deirdre for the first time.

And Deirdre.
As lovely as the first star ever seen.

Deirdre: We never thought we'd see your face again.

Conor: When all is said, old friends are loved the best,
And we're all friends, together, our quarrels over.

Naoise: (Still standing and overcome by the reception) This is magnificent!

Conor: (Pretending to misunderstand him) This hunting lodge?
It was built for your reception and it's yours
And Deirdre's now. Being new its hungry
For loving voices that will give it heart.

Naoise: This is magnificent too but I had meant
Your generosity, your kingly welcome.

Conor: Sit down, sit down.

Naoise: No, not before the king.

Conor: This is your house and here I am your guest.

Naoise sits in the throne. Conor turns to Deirdre and speaks in a light, conversational tone.

They tell me, Deirdre, that you have children.

Deirdre: Yes, two. Happy in Scottish fosterage.

Conor: They must be sent for. It is not well
That they should be reared among our enemies.

Ardán is standing, staring glumly. Ainnle is making gay conversation with some of the young warriors.

Ardán, no smile from you.

Ardán: Your majesty,
My lips have never learned how to dissemble.

Conor: Then we must give you pleasure. Name the office
That your heart most desires and you shall have it.

Ardán: I am not greedy of office, but of life.

Conor: Then you must learn ambition - like your brother.
Three years ago¹⁹ he was already anxious
To wear the great cloak and arm-ring of a general,
But I felt that Naoise was too young
To sacrifice his gay and generous days
To guard the public good. Now he is older
And may have what he likes.

Naoise: Your majesty.....

Conor: I do not envy him. I made that choice,
Exchanging youth for dignity and duty.

Naoise: But, your majesty....

Conor: Do not choose now,
Weigh what I have said, consider carefully.

Naoise: My eyes are weaklings; they have filled with tears.

Conor: You're weak and hungry after your journey; food
Is being cook and wine from foreign lands
Is being warmed. We'll leave you now to rest.
They'll bring the food and wine and I myself
Will serve it to you as a pledge of friendship.
Come with me Ardán and Ainnle, your rooms are ready.

Ardán: I'll stay. I have matters to discuss with Naoise.

Conor: They can wait. No doubt Naoise and Deirdre
Have more intimate matters to discuss.

He takes Ardán firmly by the arm and forces him to go with him. All go and leave Naoise and Deirdre alone. Naoise stamps round the room, examining the furniture, throws himself backwards onto the bed and bounces off it. He whirls gaily in the middle of the stage.

Naoise: What fools we were when young, letting impatience
Whip our bare legs and ship us overseas!
If only we had trusted Conor then,
Today we'd be the envied ones. How wise
He is, and kin and thoughtful of my future!

Deirdre: (Sarcastically) And of mine.

Naoise: (Indulgently) And of yours, my love.

He lies back on the bed and tries to draw her to him but she repulses him.

Deirdre: Forget your body and use your head for once.

Naoise: Why should I use that dull and lazy member?

Deirdre: Do you think Conor is a fool?

Naoise: No. But he needs me.

Deirdre: Do you think he has lost his memory?
That he's forgotten who went away with you?

Naoise: Oh that is old news! He has wars to fight.
Kiss me, forget the past. I'll buy you dresses,
Jewels, perfumes, little shoes of leather,
Softer than poppy petals and as red.

Deirdre: Conor is cunning as a kitchen cat.
Naoise laughs, enjoying the luxury of the feather
bed.

Naoise: And that's where he has gone to forage food.

Deirdre: Ardán and Ainnle are in separate rooms.

Naoise: Kiss me and let's enjoy our privacy.

Deirdre: If we should be attacked, where are your brothers?

Naoise: Always suspicious. Who would attack us here?

Deirdre: Many a one has cause to murder Naoise.

Naoise: If that could worry me, I'd never sleep.
Kiss me and lock the door. We'll go to bed.
Deirdre goes to the door.

Deirdre: Show me the lock.
Naoise bounds from the bed and goes to the door.

Naoise: That's true. Where is the lock?
He tries the door and finds that it is locked from
without.
This is a rat trap where rats capture men.

Deirdre: Now you'll believe me.

Naoise: (Shouts) Ardán! Ainnle! Help!

Deirdre: The walls are three feet thick, the doors are bronze.

Naoise: If Conor kills us, honour will avenge us.

Deirdre: When Conor kills us, he'll see that honour perches
On his right shoulder as he strikes the blow.
The door slowly opens. Naoise stands on guard, his
sword in his hand with Deirdre beside him. Tréorn
enters furtively.

Naoise: (Shouts) Why are we kennelled like some furious beast?

Tréorn: (Whispers) Quietly, I come in danger of my head
To warn you.....

Naoise: To warn us of Conor's treachery?

Tréorn: To warn you against wine.

Naoise: (With a fierce snort of laughter) Against wine! I love
it!
Warn me against sword or dagger, spear or knife.

Deirdre: Naoise, be quiet. (to Tréorn) What is this warning?

Tréndorn: Drink no wine in this house, even from the king's own hand.
The wine is poisoned.

Naoise: (Almost incoherent with rage) This is new treachery
In Ireland. Before this day even a lowest,
Basest, skulking murdered used a blade,
And only women, distilling their rank hearts,
Poisoned their enemies. I'll ease him of his head.

Deirdre: Guile must be mated to guile. Young man, we thank you.
What is your name?

Tréndorn: Tréndorn. I hope that I have saved you.

Naoise: I'll hew them in their hearts and raise my own height
Of corpses round me before they find my heart.

Deirdre ignores his ranting and speaks to Tréndorn.

Deirdre: Thank you. No go before you are discovered.

Naoise: I'll blunt my sword on throat nobbs, I'll leave
featureless
Any and every man that enters here.

Deirdre: Forget your sword and use your head for once.

Naoise: What use are heads to us - a champion trapped
And a woman!

Deirdre: Since when have you been frightened?
Death has sat down with us at every meal,
Intimate as our own breath.

Naoise: I'm not afraid of death
When it means fighting. But poison is nature gone mad.

Deirdre: Now think. At any moment Conor will come
Offering wine and we must say we've vowed²⁰
To drink no wine in Ireland till... till what?

There is a silence as they think.

Oh think! There must be some reason for refusing.

Naoise: Until I've won a victory for him.

Deirdre: No, something more colourable. (A pause) I know! Until
Our children join us. He said they must come home.

(A pause)

And no matter what he says, take no offence.
Even if he calls you coward and calls me whore;
Smile and agree. He knows he daren't kill us
After his promises unless we give him cause.

She ceases and forces herself to breath evenly and
calmly.

Now, breath evenly, be calm. We still have friends.
Cuchullain comes tomorrow from the South.

Naoise laughs harshly and bitterly.

Naoise: Naoise seeking protection. This is new.

Deirdre: Do as I say. If we live through tonight
We're safe from all prophecies.

The door swings open. Conor enters followed by Fergus, courtiers and young warriors. Ardán and Ainnle are absent. Conor carries a wine cup. Others bear trays of food etc.

Crier: The suckling pig, the new dropped lamb,
The freshest cress, the reddest ham,
The whitest bread, the best hung meat,
The sweetest honey, come and eat.

A woman: The bowl that's kissing to the brink
With oldest, reddest wine - come drink.

Conor: My mother's father took a hundred men,
How many years ago? Maybe a century,
And journeyed overseas to Spain and brought
Great booty back - girls that were honey colour
With eyes like heather-honey, jewels and gold;
But chief among his treasures was this wine
Which sleeps for generations till a night
When laughter must light up the dome of Ulster.
Then we unchain it and let its laughter free
Until the mountains dance and lakes spill over
And the blue eyed moon is torn out of the sky.
Drink, Naoise, to the company and let us hear
The laughter that is heard once in a life.

Naoise: (Coldly) I thank your majesty. I mustn't drink.

There is consternation among the company, but Conor refuses to take offence.

Conor: This is a royal wine which cannot be refused.

Naoise: Where are my brothers.

Conor: They have gone to rest.
Drink, Naoise, I mixed this wine myself.

Naoise: I will not drink.

Deirdre: (Soothingly) He means he cannot drink.
Both he and I have vowed that till our children
Are safe on Irish soil to serve your majesty
We'll drink no wine. And he can't break that vow.

Conor: Being the king I can absolve you from it.

Naoise: I will not drink the wine.

Fergus: Naoise, be sensible.
This is to other wines what royal jelly
Is to bees. It rejoices and ennobles.

Naoise: (Hotly) It is a traitor's wine!

Conor: (Calmly) It is my wine.
I don't think you should talk of treachery.

Naoise: (Enraged) It is a murderer's wine. The wine is poisoned.

Conor: Am I to be insulted in my own house?

Deirdre: Scotland has driven him mad. Ignore him Conor.
The young warriors move forward to Conor.

1st. Young Warrior: Let us kill him where he stands, the traitor.

2nd. Young Warrior: The singer of bawdy satires, let me kill him.

3rd. Young Warrior: No, let me kill the raper of innocence.

1st. Young Warrior: The hireling of foreign kings, I'll have his head.

2nd. Young Warrior: The lying, drunken lecher, here's my sword.

3rd. Young Warrior: Let me pollute my sword with his wolf's blood.

Conor: Gentlemen, I thank you, but I am dishonoured
And I must avenge my honour.

Naoise: I'll not kill an old man.
Let all your bullies come,
I'll fight them one by one, or all together.

Conor: You've done me too much evil. I must kill you.

Naoise: I've killed my quota of kings this week. To bed
With you and I'll take on your army, murderer.

Conor: Now I will kill you surely. Be on guard.
He draws a short dagger and Naoise immediately
throws away his sword and takes a dagger from his
belt. Both he and Conor are handed small bucklers.
They fight across the stage towards the dais,
speaking at intervals.

Conor: Though I am old, my fury strengthens me.

Naoise: It is no glory to me to kill the old,
But this is a duty to myself and to Ulster.
Conor has backed him against the step of the dais.
He almost trips. Deirdre cries out in alarm.

Deirdre: Be careful Naoise, that step might kill a man.
Naoise leaps lightly across the bed and down on the
other side. Conor comes after him.

1st. Young Warrior: Treason is light afoot.

Deirdre: Conor is light.

2nd. Young Warrior: The perjured guest is agile.

Deirdre: The perjured host
Raves after the betrayed and innocent.

3rd. Young
Warrior: Oh keep your scabbard, sword; hand be obedient
Or I will draw and run the traitor through.

Deirdre: You are not great enough; the hand that kills
The Son of Usna will be red forever,
And blazoned on the silver shield of time.

Conor: Be quiet now. A man's soul has grown tired
Of this sick world and is about to die.

Naoise: My only regret is that you go to join
The thousand noble champions I have killed.

Conor: Take your last treacherous look at Ireland, Naoise.
Conor once more has manoeuvred Naoise to the step
of the dais.

Deirdre: (In alarm) No, look to the step.
Naoise turns to look and Conor is on him. He stabs
him once. Naoise struggles up and then falls dead
across the bed. Deirdre runs to him.

Deirdre: He's wounded, bleeding. I should have held my tongue.
Naoise! Rise up and kill. Kill every enemy.
Naoise! His eyes are closed. A wound
So small, a needle prick can't make you faint.
Ten men or twenty men wait here for death.
Release them quickly before they die of shame.
Why have you turned so pale? Are you afraid
That were the king of fear to multitudes?
She feels his heart.

Oh, the heart's still that every night
Lay in my hand. The world's great heart has stopped.
The weeps for a moment and then speaks to Conor.

Now the last hero's dead and only men
And murderers wither in this grey wood.
Now you have killed him. This was the hope that
rallied
Your ailing blood and kept your eyes alive.
But do not think that you have trapped us now,
Death hurries to us, that great rescuer.
Give me the wine that had a nobler errand.
It will be sweeter than the mother's milk
That brought me only life.
She rises heavily and goes towards Conor. He takes
the wine cup and holds it towards her, as though
offering it, then withdraws it.

Conor: You are exalted now and tragedy
Makes you a woman. I've too much love for you
To see you grasp at death and find that life
Is all that's in your arms. This is no death cup
This is the gracious wine. The wine is innocent.

He slowly drains the cup, looking all the time at Deirdre. The company stands appalled. As soon as he has finished, Conor turns abruptly and goes. There is a long silence. Then Deirdre turns to the company.

Deirdre: Now go and leave me with the only one
Who knows me, child and woman, queen and widow.
Leabharcham, send them out and comfort me.

The crowd slowly disperses leaving Deirdre and Leabharcham alone. Just as Leabharcham goes to the door to close it, Fergus re-enters.

Fergus: Tell me to kill myself. Here is my sword.

Deirdre: If death is what you want, you are its master.
What's death to me, now that my husband's dead?
Ten thousand men will not bring him back.

Fergus: I brought you here from Scotland.

Deirdre: Scotland holds me and every moment of my happiness.
Naoise and I are happy there forever.
So go and live or die - what is it to me?

Fergus: I have betrayed myself betraying you.

He goes.

Leabharcham: And so, in the end of all, we're alone again.

Deirdre: I'm not alone. Naoise is always with me;
Not that sprawled thing on the bed, but all the
kisses,
The whispered words of night, the flesh in darkness.
Sometimes he bored me, Leabharcham, often he bored me,
But never again, now he is always young.

Leabharcham: You must run quickly if you hope to live.

Deirdre: These are strange words to me - "hope" and "live".

Leabharcham: Wake up. If you can get away there's still a hope
That Maeve of Connacht or some king of the South
Will give you refuge.

She pulls aside a drape and reveals a window which had been concealed.

Can you fit through that window?

Deirdre: I'll try. Better be killed in the open. How strange
That Naoise, killer of a thousand champions
Should die like that - one blow from an old man.

Leabharcham: He made his trip over that step there.

Deirdre: One blow from a grandfather to put out so much light.

Leabharcham: I'll come with you, though I'm not good at walking.

Deirdre: I knew when we left Scotland what would happen
But I was tired of living in the rocks.
Now, if I could, I'd lie in the stone with Naoise
And think it softer than a downy bed.

Leabharcham: You will have time to remember. Now we must go.

The doors open and Tréndorn enters, very downcast.

Deirdre: Here is the helpful Tréndorn, the teller of poisoned
stories.
Well, are you satisfied? You've killed a champion.

Tréndorn: No. I could kill myself. I never knew
Why Conor said to say the wine was poisoned.

Deirdre: Conor sent you to tell us that?

Tréndorn: He did, but it was a lie. The wine was unpoisoned.

Deirdre: A trap for Naoise. Ah, he was innocent.

Tréndorn: But what I heard since then makes all other lies
True as the sun. The wine was innocent,
But not the dagger. The king's dagger was poisoned.

Deirdre is filled with genuine admiration for such
guile.

Deirdre: Now, Conor, I know you; you are so sly
And cunning that I think you're really great.
All of us, Fergus, Naoise, Ainnle and myself,
And even Ardán failed to plumb those depths.

Tréndorn: Ardán and Ainnle are dead.

Deirdre: This is no news. My heart was stabbed three times.
Three noble youths have entered poetry forever.

Tréndorn: I'll be remembered.
I'll kill the king myself with his own dagger.

Deirdre: Your part is played. You were a messenger,
A necessary device of treachery.
Go now and be forgotten.

Tréndorn goes away sadly.

Leabharcham: Now we must go.

Deirdre: No, now the pursued becomes the hunter.
For three years, fear of Conor's vengeance
Kept us in exile. Now he has killed my men,
But he'll not kill me or send me back to exile.
Conor is wise and cunning; he can plan
A chess game or a murder, but no man
However fine and subtle in his brain
Equals the guile of a woman. I will play him
As a salmon, be cat to his grey mouse.
He's still in love with me, or thinks he is;
I'll be all woman to him, the virgin he lost,
The woman who will drain him of his vigour.

I'll let him love me, suffer his scaly skin,
His brittle bones, his dry and heartless hands;
But every time that Conor touches me
It will be Naoise's hand; each time that Conor
Takes me to bed, I'll go there with my husband
When I eat Conor's food, the finely seasoned food
That simmered in my head in arid Scotland,
Naoise will be my host - not serpent eyes.
I'll wake him in the night and leave him weak.
I'll call him from the banquet and break in
On his solemn, foolish state affairs
And urge him to my bed, and when he fails
I'll laugh, reminding him of Naoise's deeds,
Or tell him that the lowest palace guard
That stamps the ramparts is greater than a king.
I'll be a queen and when I've sucked the strength
The life and manhood out of his marrowbones,
My son and Noise's son will have this throne.
No, I'll not tramp the hills again; I'll not
Mumble the bitter flesh of deer and badger.
I will be a queen and Conor will be afraid.

Leabharcham: And this is the girl that lived for poetry.

Deirdre: I'll have no more romance, nor live to be
A ruin that tourists stare at. I'll not be
A haggard, painted travesty of love.

Leabharcham: And what of the prophesy which said you'd die
On Naoise's grave?

Deirdre: You never told me that,
But that must be the poet's ending. Let them
Finish the tale themselves, tell how I died
In the red grave that held so much of me;
Or better, that I leaped from a racing chariot
And smashed the beauty that broke hearts and kingdoms.
I'll help them with the metre if they limp.²¹

The doors open and Conor enters, followed by the
warriors and courtiers. Conor speaks in a mock-
contrite manner.

Conor: For the first time in over fifty years
Anger betrayed me, judgement deserted me,
I weep to see that slaughtered boy, dear Naoise,
A hero certainly, but lacking judgement.
He was unwise to say the wine was poisoned.

Deirdre: He was young and generous, but lacked discretion.

Conor: That is the word - discretion. Can you forgive me
The hot spring of youth that for an instant
Bubbled in my cool brain?

Deirdre: Even the coolest
Might be outraged at being called a poisoner,
And we all know the wine was innocent.

Conor: Even provoked I should have had ... discretion.
Can you forgive me now?

Deirdre: You had forgiven.
And can I be less generous than you?

Conor: I'll see that Naoise's buried like a prince.
Deirdre: And his brothers?
Conor: Like princes too. Unwisely
They attacked some of my men and the wolf anger
Being loose in the palace clawed them to death.
Deirdre: Three deaths mean two-thirds less sorrow for each one.
Conor: Soon, not tomorrow or next week, but soon,
That sorrow will be sealed from memory.
As the bees seal the damage to their hives
With propolis. Then we'll have things to talk of.
Deirdre: Why should we wait? I know what you will say.
Conor: In private we can talk some other time.
Deirdre: No, this is a matter of state, let them all hear.
You'll say you wish to say, you will say now
That I was born to be Queen of Ulster -
Prompt me if I'm wrong.
Conor: (Completely dominated) No, you are right.
Deirdre: That you have always loved me and would now marry me.
Conor: Those are my very words.
Deirdre: And I will say that I have always loved
Your strength and wisdom and that I now love
Your truly regal generosity.
I will remember Naoise, but as a poem
Or some sweet music that I heard when young.
Conor: This is the end, the climax of a story
That will be remembered as long as there are poets.
Courtiers, warriors, salute my wife and queen.
They come forward and surround Deirdre. There is an
abortive flourish of trumpets. She raises and
imperious hand.
Deirdre: Make no great music yet!
Remove that body. Tonight
My husband and I must share that royal bed.

Conor is looking at her doubtfully as the curtain
falls.

Notes to Lady Spider

by
Gordon M. Wickstrom

1. Finn MacCool was king and principal figure in the third cycle of Irish myths. The first, the mythological cycle deals with the earliest gods, second is the Ulster Cycle from which the Deirdre tale comes, and finally, the Finn Cycle about the warrior king and his son, Ossian who is reported to have had conversations with St. Patrick on paganism and Christianity. The Finn Cycle alone reaches into recorded history. The tale of Finn, Diarmuid and the beautiful Gráinne echoes the Deirdre story in interesting ways.

2. The playwright takes liberties with chronology. Actually the war, fought over a bull, Táin Bó Cúalaighe, (The cattle raid of Cooley), occurred after and as an upshot of the deaths of Deirdre and Naoise. Fergus deserted Ulster to help Maeve of Connacht try to rustle the Northerners' prize bull.

3. Conor is the modern rendering of Conchubar MacNessa who kept his capital at Eamhain Macha close to modern Armagh.

4. The Red Branch Knights were an elite force of men close to or related to the king who took their name from the red branch House where were lodged the heads and arms of vanquished foes. They were also called the Red Branch and Speckled Branch.

5. Fergus MacRoy, rightful king of Ulster, pursuing other delights, willingly let the kingship pass to Conor, a man of more intense political bent. He and his cousin, Conall Cearnach, were ancestors of many of the Irish royal clans.

6. The name Deirdre means alarm or troubler.

7. A currach is a frail long boat of wooden skeleton and tarred canvas skin. The oarsmen found treacherous work getting it out beyond the wild Irish surf and onto the sea. Later in the play, MacDonagh uses the Welsh word coracle for the boat.

8. According to the sources of the legend, Conor was present at the birth of Deirdre, heard her named an agent of future trouble, and arranged to have Leabharcham raise the baby in mountain isolation. One day he saw her there in her innocent and adolescent beauty...

9. The Leinster manuscript of the 12th century, the legend's earliest form, notes that at the sound of Naoise's musical war cry, cows increased their yield of milk by two-thirds and everyone took pleasure.

10. The bonds and vows spoken of in the play were Geasa (plural), strange taboos or absolute obligations that one might fix on another, apparently for quite arbitrary reasons, but on closer examination they often seem to point to archtypical transactions.

11. This bizarre detail comes from the early Leinster ms. account of Deirdre's placing Naoise under Geasa to elope with her:

One day Noisiu, alone on the rampart of Eamhain, uttered his musical war-cry - a cry which gave pleasure to all who heard it and induced cows to increase the yield of their milk by two-thirds. Derdiu escaped from her confinement and ran past him. "Fair is the heifer that goes past me." he cried. "Well may the heifers be great", she said, "in a place where there are no bulls." "You have the bull of the whole province, the king of the Ulstermen." said he. She replied that she preferred a young bull like him, and when he demurred, she

12. Cuchullain was the greatest of the heroes of Ulster who single handedly defended Ulster from Maeve and the forces of the South in the cattle-raid episode. Cuchullain, the small, dark man of incredible power, is the paradigm of the Irish hero, compromised and tragic, and the one who dominated the imagination of W. B. Yeats.

13. The sea-god is Mannanan MacLir of the Mythological Cycle.

14. It was customary for children of the nobility to be raised in the home of foster parents and trained there for further duties. Maternal relationships were, in this society, more important than the paternal: Conor MacNessa, for instance, being the son of the woman Nessa.

15. Dundalk in the County Louth was the site of Cuchullain's fortress (dún) and the centre of his life. In the originals Conor prepared the Red Branch House at Eamhain for the lovers returning from exile.

16. Conor also asked Conall Cearnach who, like Cuchullain, could not give the king the right guarantees.

17. Art is comparable to Owen, that controversial character who appears in the second act of J. M. Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows.

18. The originals tell how Conor conspired with Barach of the Northern coast to separate Fergus from the lovers and delay his return by offering him a feast that that under his Geasa he could not refuse. This plan meant that, after landing in Ireland, Deirdre and Naoise would have to press on to Eamhain

Macha alone without Fergus's protection. W. B. Yeats, in his Deirdre, like MacDonagh, has Fergus in the lovers' constant company, and in Synge's play Fergus arrives, but too late to save them.

19. Deirdre and Naoise are said to have lived in Alban (Scotland) for seven years.

20. This vow, too, has the strength of Geasa.

21. This brilliant and audacious dramatic device gives Deirdre the prescience to sketch the variant accounts of her death as the different redactions will record it. Her ironic sense of her own mythic role and Naoise's anti-romantic behaviour are, perhaps, MacDonagh's most interesting contributions to Deirdre-lore. This play stays closer to the original legend than any of the three preceding Deirdre plays by Æ, Yeats and Synge.