

# Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal

---

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 10

---

February 2019

## A Woman Wielding Words: The Role of the Woman-Poet and Woman-Prophet Fedelm in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

Laura Steblay  
*University of Minnesota - Morris*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/horizons>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Steblay, Laura (2019) "A Woman Wielding Words: The Role of the Woman-Poet and Woman-Prophet Fedelm in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*," *Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61366/2576-2176.1075>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/horizons/vol6/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal* by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact [skulann@morris.umn.edu](mailto:skulann@morris.umn.edu).

Laura Steblay

University of Minnesota, Morris

A Woman Wielding Words: The Role of the Woman-Poet and Woman-Prophet Fedelm in the  
*Táin Bó Cúailnge*

In a story recounting the exploits of characters famous from their prominence in a multitude of tales, it is the characters who seem to be unique to a tale that stand out. The *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, or the Great Cattle Raid of Cúailnge, is one such story, starring legendary figures from Irish oral story-cycles such as the warrior-queen Medb and Cúchulainn, the boy-hero who single-handedly defeats her army. While the raid is set in the first century, the story dates to around the seventh century, and the tale was written down by monks in a variety of manuscripts throughout the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. As such, it exists in multiple versions and translations, utilizing famous characters and their backstories in slightly different ways. Yet some characters seem to be unique to just the tale of the *Táin* – including the woman-poet and woman-prophet Fedelm. In a story filled with characters who engage with the narrative through physical interactions with the land and each other, Fedelm's only action in the story is to prophesy of the bloodshed that is to come. However, I will argue that Fedelm's appearance and presence in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, as well as her prediction, establishes a literary, prophetic, and visual narrative structure for the role of the heroic Cúchulainn and the stunning destruction he will bring to Medb's army. Examining Fedelm's role as a poet and prophet contextualizes her words' authority to foretell fate both in the Irish world of the *Táin*, as well as in the narrative of the text itself. Viewing Fedelm as a literary reflection of Cúchulainn's mentor Scathach positions Fedelm as a shaper of Cúchulainn's fate. Finally, the parallels of gender and physical appearance between Fedelm and Cúchulainn provide a visual foretelling of the hero that is to come, placing

Fedelm as an embodied augury of her own prophecy and highlighting the dual effect of her words and presence.

Fedelm enters the story of the *Táin* by blocking the path of Medb quite literally as the latter prepares to set out with her army. Queen Medb of Connacht, in her desire to equal her husband in wealth, plans to capture the Brown Bull of Cúailnge to finally even out their possessions. She gathers a great army, but before they can leave, Fedelm appears. Joseph Dunn, in his 1914 English translation, describes her as “a lone virgin of marriageable age standing on the hindpole of a chariot.” After this maiden establishes her identity as Fedelm, a woman-poet who has the ability of foresight after studying in the foreign land of Alba, the following exchange ensues, as depicted in Kinsella’s 1969 translation:

Medb said, “Fedelm, prophetess; how seest thou the host?”

Fedelm said in reply: “I see it crimson, I see it red” (61).

Medb rejects this prediction of bloodshed three times, retorting that she has the military advantage and that blood is always to be expected in war, before asking for “the truth” (61). Fedelm finally launches into a long prophecy in verse, fortelling of a striking, magnificent figure who will bring death and destruction. This is revealed to be the hero Cúchulainn, and in explaining how Medb’s army will yield to the power of the boy-hero, Fedelm states, “I am Fedelm. I hide nothing” (63). As her prophecy and her words end, she vanishes from the narrative.

When Medb initially asks the name of the figure who appeared before her, after giving her name Fedelm says, “I am a woman poet of Connacht.” Medb then asks, “Where have you come from?” (Kinsella 60). Such a question implies that Medb thinks a person such as Fedelm could not have come directly from Connacht – she must be travelling from elsewhere. Even in

Joseph Dunn's translation, where Fedelm identifies herself as "a bondmaid 'mid thy people" and "of Cruachan" Medb asks, "Whence came thou?" As Medb herself is the queen of Connacht and lives in Cruachan (Kinsella 52) she would presumably know the characteristics of the people of the area. What aspect of what Fedelm has said would lead Medb to ask this? Since all she knows about her at this point is the fact that she is a woman-poet, this is worth investigating further.

The defining aspect of Fedelm's identity which sets her apart from both other Fedelms in Irish tales and other characters within the *Táin* is her status as a woman-poet. While this term is translated differently among the English versions, the Irish term is *banfili*. *Fili* means poet, but in early Irish society this meant much more than a person who composed poems. As explained in the opening to Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation of the *Táin*, poets were the ones who passed along the tales orally, combining disparate stories into the tale of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (1). In addition, the *fili* enjoyed a high status in Irish society. According to Eleanor Hull in *A Textbook of Irish Literature*, the class of poets was just below that of kings, and they often acted as advisors (181). Fergus Kelly further confirms this in *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, in which he compiles information from legal documents and other written works that record the society and laws of early Ireland. In his section on the *fili*, Kelly points out that poets are the only "lay professional who has full *nemed* status," where *nemed* signifies "sacred" or "privileged" (43). Thus, poets have enough power that their very words must be respected by the likes of kings and queens. Given how integral poets were to early Irish society on both a social and literary level, Fedelm's self-identification as such establishes the authority of her words and explains why Medb knew to ask where she had come from – as Queen of Connacht, Medb would certainly know of the powerful *fili* in her own area, so Fedelm must have gained her skills elsewhere.

Fedelm is most well-known for her prophecy, and her status as a *fili* is directly connected with her ability to deal with fate. Fedelm tells Medb that she has come “from learning verse and vision in Alba” (Kinsella 61). In his notes to the edition, Kinsella explains that Alba refers to a foreign land, which often used to refer to Britain (257). Fedelm travelled to a specific location to gain her skills, reflecting Eleanor Hull’s explanation of the existence of poetic schools where the *fili* honed their craft, some taking over twelve years to complete their training (187). The “verse and vision” Fedelm references as a way to summarize her knowledge is translated from the word *flidecht*, which Kinsella defines in his notes as meaning “simply ‘poetry’ in modern Irish, but the functions of the ancient poet would have included prophecy” (261). This is reflected in the way Medb later addresses Fedelm as “prophetess,” and asks if she has “*imbas forasnai*, the Light of Foresight” which Fedelm confirms (61). Fergus Kelly identifies *imbas forasnai* as one of the three chief skills of the *fili*, defining it as “encompassing knowledge which illuminates’ [...] [giving] the poet the power to describe future events in verse” (44). This ability to illuminate what is to come, coupled with the high respect given to the *fili* gives Fedelm great power. In fact, Eleanor Hull states that the *fili* “probably attracted to his [sic] person a dread and reverence which approached more nearly to that paid to the gods than that ascribed to any human being” (181). She goes on to say that the *fili* even had the power to establish an heir to the king, which one would do by “describ[ing] out of a sleep accompanied with special rites the appointed prince, whose claims may be otherwise unrecognizable to the people” (181). While Fedelm is not establishing a royal succession through her prophecy, she does use *imbas forasnai* to describe the hero Cúchulainn to an unsuspecting Medb. Thus, Fedelm’s power over words as a *banfili* leads directly into her clairvoyance and her abilities to determine the identity of one who is to come.

While Fedelm is the only *banfili* within the narrative of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, there is another woman in early Irish literature who wields *imbis forosnai* to describe Cúchulainn's future: Scathach, the woman who instructs Cúchulainn at her territory in Alba. Included in the pre-*tales* of Kinsella's text, Scathach is described as "the Shadowy One," a powerful warrior-prophet of great renown (Kinsella 28). It is Scathach who teaches the young Cúchulainn the legendary fighting skills that will allow him to defeat Medb's army, thereby forming him into a hero. After his training, as Cúchulainn readies to leave her care, Scathach uses *imbis forosnai* to foretell his future. Speaking of the same violence and "redness" that Fedelm describes, Scathach prophesies to Cúchulainn "One against an army / your own blood a red plague / splashed on many a smashed shield / on weapons and women red eyed" (Kinsella 35). Given that Scathach is a teacher residing in Alba who uses *imbis forosnai* to predict Cúchulainn's bloodshedding, it is not difficult to imagine that she was the one who trained Fedelm in "verse and vision." At the very least, Fedelm acts as a literary reflection of Scathach, and the latter's ability to induce Cúchulainn's fate. Just as Scathach trains Cúchulainn in the skills necessary to fulfill his role as a heroic warrior, Fedelm's prophecy positions Cúchulainn's character as the boy-hero who will single-handedly defeat Medb's army.

Beyond the connection to Cúchulainn's instructor, Fedelm is also a character-parallel to the hero she describes in her prophecy. As Ann Dooley puts it in her essay "The Invention of Women in the *Táin*," Fedelm is "'constructed' visually and rhetorically both as a figure of another woman, Scathach, and as the warrior Cu Chulainn [sic] himself" (128). Both Fedelm and Cúchulainn received the training to fill their narrative roles in Alba and enter the narrative of the *Táin* to shake up the expected course of the story. With close investigation into the parallels

between Fedelm and Cúchulainn, as well as the language used to describe them, it becomes apparent that Fedelm's presence is just as much a part of her prediction as her words.

Interestingly, Fedelm's status as a woman-poet parallels Cúchulainn's social positioning as a youth, since each allows them to occupy a place outside of normal woman- or man-hood. As scholar Jennifer Dukes-Knight states in her essay "The Wooden Sword: Age and Masculinity in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*", "Cúchulainn's gender identity is in a state of flux: [...] he stands somewhere in between the feminized state of boyhood and the fully realized state of masculine maturity," which she goes on to say is purposefully highlighted throughout the tale (118). Even Medb, in downplaying his danger, describes Cúchulainn's age as "but that of a girl to be wed" in Dunn's translation, echoing Dunn's earlier use of "lone virgin of marriageable age" to describe Fedelm. As such, Cúchulainn occupies a unique place in the *Táin*, given that the central conflict in the tale is caused by the binary juxtaposition of the possessions of a husband and wife. His placement outside of the role of a "man" even benefits Cúchulainn. All the other men of Ulster are affected by a curse in which they experience labor pangs, disabling them from battle (Kinsella 8). However, Cúchulainn is the lone warrior who does not suffer under this curse, allowing him to continue the fight.

Similarly, Fedelm's identity as a *banfili* gives her privileges beyond that of a normal woman. While one might assume the word *banfili* should be translated as "poetess" (as it is translated in Joseph Dunn's 1914 version), Thomas Kinsella's use of "woman poet" in his 1969 translation is more accurate. As contemporary Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill explains, "*banfhili* [sic][is] neutral and non-judgmental [...] unlike the term, say, in English 'poetess' which is derogatory and reductive" (31). The status of women-poets is further supported by Fergus Kelly when he states that "the *banfili*'s status as a poet would presumably invest her with

a legal capacity generally denied to women” (49), giving her more of a “voice.” He also states that a woman in such a position “must have been regarded as unusual,” given the few examples of *banfili* in early Irish records (49). While Claire Harrill in her essay “‘I will spout a jet of blood in your face’: Women’s Words in the *Táin Bó Cúalinge*, Its Pre-Tales and the *Fingal Ronan*” claims that Fedelm’s prophecy is allowed because it “occupies the space permitted for women’s speech” (7), I argue that this is instead due to the fact that being a *banfili* places Fedelm outside the bounds of womanhood. Discrediting the words of women about matters relating to death due to their status as women is a pattern throughout the *Táin* and its opening stories. In Kinsella’s translation of one of the extra tales, Cúchulainn’s wife Emer warns him not to kill his own son, but he says, “It isn’t a woman / that I need now / to hold me back,” and proceeds to murder the boy anyway (43). During the *Táin* itself, Medb wants to kill the troops of the Galeoin, which Ailill rejects as “a woman’s thinking [...] a wicked thing to say” and takes a different course of action after listening to a man. (Kinsella 66). Yet when Fedelm speaks of death, the text goes on to affirm her words, and nowhere does either the text or Medb discredit Fedelm due to her gender. (Although Medb initially doesn’t accept the prophecy, her reasoning is derived from her belief in her martial strength and advantage). This ability to escape the confines of womanhood allows Fedelm to fulfill her narrative role as a foretelling of Cúchulainn. Existing somewhere outside the gender binary gives power to both Cúchulainn and Fedelm, he in his ability to circumvent the curse of the pangs of Ulster, and she in her right to speak and prophecy.

The physical descriptions of Fedelm’s and Cúchulainn’s beauties have ominous implications, and their remarkable beauty warns of the destruction that will follow the two characters. This concept of terrible beauty can be best understood when viewing Fedelm’s appearance in the context of another Irish literary figure. Derdriu, the woman who appears in the



“Exile of the Sons of Uisliu” appears in Thomas Kinsella’s pre-*tales* to the *Táin*. Cathbad the prophet foretells of the beauty of the unborn Derdriu, stating “I say that whiter than the snow / Is the white treasure of her teeth; / Parthian-red, her lip’s lustre” (9). This description would be in the mind of anyone who then read about Fedelm, “her lips were inset with Parthian scarlet. Her teeth were like an array of jewels between the lips” (Kinsella 60). As Dorothy Dilts Swartz explains in her essay “The Beautiful Women and the Warriors in the *LL TBC* and in Twelfth Century Neo-Classical Rhetoric,” these descriptions of both characters set them apart as “beautiful women” by utilizing the literary style of classical beauty which medieval Irish writers strove to emulate (129). In addition, Swartz explains that the poetry style of Derdriu’s description matches what would have been used in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, neatly positioning that tale in the same period as the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* text which describes Fedelm in that style (130). Thus, the two women are connected through the words used to illustrate their appearances. However, associations with Derdriu do not end with beauty. Cathbad’s states that Derdriu “will bring evil” and “much damage [...] will follow [her] high fame and fair visage,” establishing her as a “fatal woman” whose beauty acts as a harbinger of death (Kinsella 10). When considering the implications of Fedelm’s beauty, Swartz points out that “the description [of Fedelm] is not typical of the appearance of women seers in other Irish saga literature” (130). Other female figures depicted in Kinsella’s *Táin* such as Medb or Emer do not receive the same “beautiful woman” treatment with regards to their appearances. Such a flowery description of beauty inevitably associates Fedelm with a woman whose life is filled with destruction, fitting for one who prophesies great amounts of bloodshed.

This beauty-implying-destruction is paralleled in Fedelm’s descriptions of Cúchulainn during her prophecy, and she alludes to his striking appearance while also reflecting her own

looks. Fedelm describes Cúchulainn as blond, while her hair is said to be yellow (Kinsella 60-61), reflecting Derdriu's "twisted yellow tresses" (Kinsella 9). While Derdriu's eyes are mentioned to be green, Fedelm and Cúchulainn bear an even stronger and more arresting similarity: they both have multiple irises. Fedelm's eyes have "triple irises," while "Seven hard heroic jewels / are set in the iris of [Cúchulainn's] eye" (Kinsella 60 & 62). In Jacqueline Borsje's article "Early Irish Examples of the Evil Eye" she draws a connection between these two examples, stating that Cúchulainn's "seven pupils [...are] qualified as a sign of beauty" (15). While she says that Fedelm's three pupils could either be part of her beauty or a mark of her prophetic foresight, "the latter is more probable" (Borsje 15). Nevertheless, the correlation is clear, establishing Fedelm as a kind of visual foreshadowing in addition to her verbal prophecy.

This parallel is further strengthened in Fedelm's use of color to stress the bloodshed Cúchulainn will bring. Ann Dooley explains that "Fedelm creates the heroic icon of Cu Chulainn [sic] out of the fundamental element 'red', out of spilled blood, wounds and clothing, interweaving it with the dual beauty/terror effect of heroic sexual and destructive energies" (129). "Red" is the initial answer Fedelm provides when Medb asks her to see the future of the army, and the color is intertwined with her description of Cúchulainn's appearance. He has "much blood about his belt" (Kinsella 61) and "wears a looped, red tunic" in Kinsella (62) or "he hooks a red cloak round" in Dunn. This image of a red-covered man causing red "blood [to start] from warrior's wounds / – total ruin – / at his touch" (63) is visually linked to Fedelm's "red-embroidered hooded tunic" (60) as she brings forth a description of bloodshed. While Medb's army will be "coloured crimson by his hand" (Kinsella 62), Fedelm's lips of "Parthian scarlet" summon forth a prediction of that crimson. While she paints the future with her words, she also visually embodies the effect it will have.

Fedelm's appearance on her chariot is another aspect of her physicality which even more clearly embodies the dread the sight of Cúchulainn will bring. Her prophecy states, "Across the sinister chariot-wheel / the Warped Man deals death" (Kinsella 62). When this event occurs later in the story, four pages of Kinsella (147, 148, 150, 153) are spent describing how fearsome Cúchulainn looks when "every inch of the chariot bristled" (147). While at first Fedelm's connection to this impressive sight might seem tenuous given that Kinsella only takes the time to mention that she has no charioteer, other versions detail how exactly she is riding the chariot. Her unique position is examined by William Sayers in his essay "Old Irish *fert* 'tie-pole,' *fertas* 'swingletree,' and the seeress Fedelm" in which he translates and researches the old Irish words used to describe chariots. Sayers points out that Fedelm is said to be standing on the swingletree of her chariot (179), which is not inside the chariot itself, but is a bar "mounted flexibly on the pole" which is attached to the horses (176). A young woman without a charioteer balancing on a beam at the front part of her chariot would be a striking sight. Sayers mentions "another example of non-standard charioteering with its ominous implications" in another early Irish tale, the *Táin Bo Regamna*, where a war-goddess rides alone in a chariot pulled by a one-legged horse when she tells her poem to Cúchulainn, bringing destruction in her wake (178). In the unsettling image she creates balancing on her chariot, Fedelm reflects another woman who gives a poem from her chariot to disturbing effect. Yet the way she blocks Medb just as the queen is preparing to advance also foreshadows the way Cúchulainn will halt Medb's army, and Sayers calls this unlucky arrival "an augury of her fateful prophecy of Cu Chulainn's [sic] slaughter of the Connaught [sic] host" (177). Fedelm, as a maiden balancing alone on her chariot, manifests the fear that Cúchulainn will bring when he advances in his chariot as the lone warrior causing terrible destruction, and as such embodies her verbal prophecy.

Fedelm's dual status as both a shaper of fate and a reflection of Cúchulainn culminates in an ambiguous object that she wields. Fedelm is described as being armed, as well as holding a tool, translated in Kinsella as "a light gold-weaving rod in her hand, with gold inlay" (60). This particular object is identified and interpreted differently by many translators, including as a "bordering rod" used for weaving lace in Dunn's version. Because it is most often described as some kind of tool related to weaving, this points to the connection throughout both Irish and classical mythology of women who prophesy while creating textiles. In this interpretation, Fedelm "weaves" the narrative into being by weaving together words. However, William Sayers takes issue with the phrase being translated as an example "of weaving techniques metaphorically associated with the idea of destiny," pointing out that the word translated as a weaving tool here normally refers to a sword (178). Since there are mentions of cords or threads hanging off the edge of the object, Sayers explains that "what the editor would see as seven strips, i.e., threads woven together, then interpreted to read the future, is a stock descriptive phrase used of weapons" (178). Thus, Fedelm's status as a woman-prophet created the assumption that she must be engaging with the imagery of textile-production, rather than creating a martial appearance. Given the sword's descriptive language, Sayers points out it would still be a tool of divination, and "the sword and weighted cords would then resemble a flagellator or whip, not inappropriate for the seeress arriving alone" (179). Considering that Fedelm's appearance already alludes to Cúchulainn, such a unique weapon, characterized by multiple thinner parts branching off the main section, brings to mind Cúchulainn's iconic weapon, the *gae bolga*. This spear, which Cúchulainn learned to use while training with Scathach (Kinsella 34), branches out into barbs that spread through the body of his victim. Even if Fedelm's tool is one associated with textile-making, this visual parallel still stands. Fedelm's tool, involved in her

prediction of bloodshed, mirrors the weapon wielded by Cúchulainn to bring about that bloodshed. While the disagreement over how to translate Fedelm's tool might seem to obscure her role, I posit that this dual meaning captures Fedelm's complexity. As a poet and prophet, she creates a prophecy of destruction, and as a physical embodiment of her prophecy, she reflects the image of a fearsome Cúchulainn, shaping the story both visually and through words. Sayers even acknowledges the extent of this double nuance when he points out that the 'swingletree' on which Fedelm is balanced is related to the word 'spindle,' which is again associated with textiles (179). Fedelm's roles in the *Táin* as both "weaving" the story and bloodshed that is to come and "wielding" the image of Cúchulainn approaching are intertwined, thereby strengthening the effect of her prophecy.

Although Fedelm appears in the narrative of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* for only a short time, disappearing from the story as soon as she has given her prophecy, her words and presence set up the bloodshed and destruction that will color the whole tale through Cúchulainn's deeds. While it seems as though her purpose in the *Táin* is to position a legendary hero of the oral tales within the structure of a specific written piece of literature, it is notable that she is the one chosen to achieve this. In weaving the fate of the famed hero of Ireland while wielding a warning of the bloodshed he will bring, Fedelm becomes the literary originator of the outcome of the *Táin*. Thus, one of the greatest and most famous ancient Irish epics, which still influences and inspires writers today, commences with the powerful image of a woman-poet wielding words.

#### Works Cited

Dooley, Ann. "The Invention of Women in the *Táin*." *Ulidia*, edited by J.P. Mallory and Gerard

Stockman, December Publications, 1994.

Dukes-Knight, Jennifer. "The Wooden Sword: Age and Masculinity in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*." *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 33, 2013, pp. 107–122. JSTOR.

Dunn, Joseph, translator. *The Ancient Irish Epic Tale Táin Bó Cúailnge*. London: David Nutt, 1914.

Harrill, Claire. "'I will spout a jet of blood in your face': Women's Words in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Its Pre-Tales and the *Fingal Ronan*." *Postgraduate English*, issue 27, 2013, pp. 1-20.

Hull, Eleanor. "The Official Poets." *A Text Book of Irish Literature*, Part I, M.H. Gill & Son, Ltd, 1906.

Kelly, Fergus. *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988.

Kinsella, Thomas, translator. *The Táin: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Oxford UP, 1969.

Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala. "An T-Anam Mothala / The Feeling Soul: The Woman Poet in the Irish Tradition." *Irlande-Images*, special issue of *Études irlandaises*, 1994, pp. 27-52.

Sayers, William. "Old Irish *fert* 'tie-pole,' *fertas* 'swingletree,' and the seeress Fedelm." *Études celtiques*, vol. 21, 1984, pp. 171-183. *WorldCat*.

Swartz, Dorothy Dilts. "The Beautiful Women and the Warriors in the *LL TBC* and in Twelfth Century Neo-Classical Rhetoric." *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 5, 1985, pp. 128-146. *JSTOR*.