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Anne-Marie O’Connell

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GRÁINNE NÍ MHÁILLE OR « GRANUAILE »,
AN IRISH WOMAN, A CHIEFTAIN
& A NATIONAL SYMBOL

par Anne-Marie O'Connell

Gráinne Ní Mháille (1530- 1603, also known as "Gráinne Mhaol", or "Granuaile", meaning 'Bald Gráinne') stands out as a unique figure in Irish History, since she can be considered as the precursor of national symbolism. Her fame and remarkable popularity come from the exceptional life she led, in exceptional circumstances. She was a chieftain, with a political and military role to play in troubled times for Ireland, under the reign of Elizabeth I of England, who she met on a very public occasion at Greenwich Castle near London, having sailed straight from the west of Ireland. She was also famous for being at the head of a fleet of 'pirates' that attacked forts and garrisons in the West of Ireland and plundered local kingdoms. As a result, she was soon perceived to be "larger than life" and gave rise to numerous myths and symbols. She was the product of a period when nationalism was largely unknown, but turned in time into the legendary torchbearer of Irish resistance against English rule and colonialism. This article will analyse the conjunction of historical facts that gave birth to a national legend, which tapped into a vast reservoir of myths that are part and parcel of the Gaelic heritage. Then the avatars of those myths, largely shaped according to political and military circumstances, will be examined and put into perspective.

I/ A woman's unusual destiny in a male-dominated society.

1 - Historical background

16th century Ireland was undergoing a phase of political transition. Gráinne was born while Henry VIII reigned over England. As early as the 1190's, after the Anglo-Norman invasion the English had established their authority over a sizeable portion of Ireland from their Dublin stronghold and surrounding areas called the Pale. The Normans had brought with

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them the administrative organization they had found in England in 1066¹, and this system of governance was gradually imposed upon the country following the gradual conquest of Ireland. Some areas were under the direct control of the king, some others, called 'liberties' were ruled by lords, who were technically royal agents loyal to the King of England. In those districts, the 'lord's peace' (not the king's) prevailed, and the law of the land applied. Through a system of alliances with local chieftains, more particularly the policy of 'surrender and re-grant'², English authority overshadowed the independence of the still rebellious Irish chieftains.

In that context, the Ó Máille clan was still left to its own devices and retained lordship over the barony of Murrisk in South-West county Mayo, as they had had from time immemorial³. The family is said to derive its descent from King Brian's brother Orbsen, which made the Ó Máille men tributary kings to the provincial kings of Connaught. The clan had lost some of its territories as a result of feuds with the neighbouring Burkes and Butlers but retained some eighty quarters in Burrishoole and some of it as tenants to the Earl of Ormond in Gráinne's time. Their lordship extended to all the ocean islands from Clare to Inishbofin (see map below)⁴.

¹ For a detailed description, cf. A.J. OTWAY-RUTHVEN, *A History of Medieval Ireland*, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1993, p. 144-190.

² Vanquished Irish chieftains could retain their property rights over their lands in exchange for their loyalty to the English monarch.

³ Most of the biographical information used in this article can be found in Anne CHAMBERS, *Granuaile, Ireland's Pirate Queen*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 3rd edition, 2009.

⁴ Western Ireland in the 16th Century. This map is a detail from the 'Map of the great lordships of Ireland', c. 1500. It can be downloaded from www.arttoday.com

she is a [widowed] woman with children, her kin when she is a 'woman of the kin' (i.e. with no other guardian), the Church when she is a woman of the Church (i.e. a nun). She is not capable of sale or purchase or contract without the authorization of one of her superiors"⁶. Along with children, dependent sons of a living father, insane people, slaves and unransomed captives, women are reputed *báeth*, or 'legally incompetent'. However, there were some exceptions to this seemingly iron rule, which all depended on their place in the social hierarchy, a status given by birth, by the position within the family or by marriage⁷. In certain circumstances a woman could give testimony, especially if the matter concerned another woman (generally in relation to food maintenance or sexual matters), or against a cleric if she was a nun⁸. She could also retain some property rights on land, if she could inherit her father's land, or on her personal belongings, often obtained by marriage (*tindscra* or *coibche*, lit. 'brideprice') which she was entitled to keep after divorce through the husband's fault.

B/ Female inheritance

This issue directly concerns Gráinne Ní Mháille. She was the only 'legitimate' child of Eoghan Dubhdara (Owen 'Black Oak') Ó Máille, the elected chieftain of the Umhal Uachtarán area (Murrisk) according to Brehon laws. Her mother Margaret was also a Ní Mháille, which was not unusual in Ireland, since the law authorized the marriage of parallel cousins, while the Church law on incestuous marriage was largely ignored⁹. She had one half-brother, Dónal na Piopa ('Donal of the Pipes'), who was the 'illegitimate' son of her father¹⁰. Being thus an only child, Gráinne could

⁶ *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D.A. BINCHY, Dublin, 1978, quoted by Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin, D.I.A.S., 1988, p. 76.

⁷ The social rank of each individual is called the 'honour-price' (*lóg n-enech*, lit. 'price of one's face). According to Kelly (*opus cit.* p. 8) "this had to be paid for any major offence committed against (this individual), e.g. murder, satire, serious injury, refusal of hospitality, theft, violation of his protection, etc. (...) A person's capacity to perform most legal acts is linked to his honour-price. He cannot make a contract for an amount greater than his honour-price, nor can he go surety beyond this amount. Likewise, his compurgatory oath and his evidence are only given a weight commensurate with his honour-price".

⁸ KELLY, *opus cit.*, p. 207

⁹ Bart JASKI, 'Marriage Law in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages' in C.E. MEEKS & M.K. SIMMS, ed, *'The Fragility of Her Sex'? Medieval Irish women in their European context*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1996, p. 29-30.

¹⁰ This brother did not seem to have any legal claim on his father's property, although sons usually inherit from their fathers. The only explanation could be that

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inherit her father's property and keep a life-long interest in the land, after which it was passed on to the male next-of-kin on her father's side. As a *banchomarba* ('female heir') she "had to take full responsibility for the land and fulfil the duties attached to it"¹¹, either by herself or by marrying a man whose property was less valuable than hers, which restricted him in his contractual capacity, because he had not made an equal or superior contribution to the marriage. Throughout her life, Gráinne was considered to be the legal retainer of the family land and seafaring activities that she administered from her stronghold of Clare Island. She grew to be more powerful after two successive, and different in status, marriages.

C/ The various forms of marriage and the role of married women

There are several forms of civil marriage according to Irish law. The main criteria under consideration are, first, the consent of both families and, secondly, the financial contribution of each spouse to the marriage in terms of land and movable property. From such considerations derive the notion of authority in the couple. Besides, polygyny was permitted, if frowned upon by the Church. In that case, only one woman was considered as the 'chief wife' (*cétmuintir*), while the other one(s) were 'concubine(s)' (*adaltrach* – from the Latin *adultrix*, 'adulteress'). Provided the union was consented to by the woman's kin, all the sons were treated equally in terms of inheritance. Yet the wives had different status, and thus different honour-prices and rights¹². The norm seems to be the 'marriage between equals' (*lánamnas comthinchuir*), meaning not only of equal rank but also of equal wealth¹³. In that case, the property in terms of cattle and other movable

Dónal was the son of a marriage contracted by Dubhdara without the consent of his and the girl's kin. Cf. JASKI, *opus cit.*, pp. 36-37. In that case, Dónal could only inherit his mother's property.

¹¹ JASKI, *opus cit.*, p. 27.

¹² Law-tracts vary in the vocabulary and the number of degrees in marriage, but there are chiefly five categories of wives: 1- *cétmuintir* with sons, 2- *cétmuintir* without sons, 3- the acknowledged woman (meaning the union is official) betrothed by her family (*ben aítiten aranaisc fine*), 4- the acknowledged woman who has not been betrothed, who has not been sanctioned [to enter the relationship] (*ben aítiten nad-aurnascar nad-forngarar*), 5- the woman who has been abducted in defiance of her father or her kindred (*ben bis for foxul dar apud n-athur no fine*). See JASKI, p. 37, and KELLY, p. 70-73.

¹³ In that form of marriage, both spouses had equal authority over property: the woman was called *bé cuitchersna* ('wife of joint authority'). Another two categories of marriage were permissible: the union of a woman on man's property, into which the woman contributed little or nothing, and the union of a man on woman's

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belongings (cattle, other farm animals, jewels, clothes, implements...) that the wife could bring as contribution were of equal value to the man's. The man had to pay the brideprice, the equivalent of a 'dowry' consisting of movables as well as land (but less often) which the woman could retain in case of divorce through the fault of the husband. If consent was a necessity, love had little to do with marriage, as those unions were generally organized by the families on both sides: the more formal the union, the more authority the husband had over his wife. Otherwise, the woman kept closer ties with her own kin. As land was inherited within the paternal lineage and kept in the father's family, the aim of marriage was not to increase the size of one's property, but an opportunity to forge political alliances between clans. In that respect, Gráinne Ní Mháille's early marriage¹⁴ in 1546 to Dónal an-Chogaidh ('Donal of the Battle') Ó Flaherty, *Tánaiste* (heir) to the Ó Flaherty title was a good political match, since he was due to reign over *Iar Connacht* (West Connaught) some day. She bore him three children: Owen, the eldest son, who was murdered in his late twenties by Richard Bingham, Governor of Connaught appointed by Queen Elizabeth I to suppress rebellion in the province, Margaret and Murrough. Eoghan died in battle, fighting the Joyce clan over his seizure of one of their castles. Gráinne took up arms against them and reclaimed the castle, which was henceforth named *Caisleán an Circa* (Hen's Castle) on Lough Corrib (Co. Galway).

Being a chieftain's widow, she was entitled to one-third of her husband's *éaraic* (body-price), *díbad* (inheritable assets) and *cin* (fine for an offence), the remaining two-thirds for her sons, which were rarely paid in those days. Gráinne returned to her family land on Clare Island with her children as well as a large number of O'Flaherty supporters.

She then contracted a second, temporary marriage to *Richard an Iarainn de Burca* (Iron Richard Burke) "for one year certain". Marriage was, as we said, a great opportunity to enhance prestige and forge political alliances between influential families, especially to fight off rival clans. Irish law gave the possibility to officialise those treaties by means of less formal marriage bonds. The Old Irish legal tradition recognized the 'union of a man visiting' (*lánamnas fir thatthigteo*)¹⁵ a woman at her place with her kin's consent, or the acknowledged woman betrothed by her family (*ben aititen aranaisc fine*),

property, which was the opposite. In both cases, the wealthier of the two had full authority over his/her spouse.

¹⁴ She was only sixteen years old.

¹⁵ Fergus KELLY, *opus cit.*, p. 70.

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followed by the woman who has not been betrothed by her family. Lower in dignity according to that ranking system was the woman who allowed herself to be abducted in defiance of her father and kin. Whatever the relevance of those distinctions as such in 16th century Ireland, Gráinne got married according to Brehon law, and the purpose of her marriage was political, to the great abhorrence of the English in general and the Church in particular, who saw that kind of arrangement as nothing short of promiscuity. Under the terms of the agreement, the contract might be terminated after a certain period with or without both spouses' consent. Gráinne had one son with Burke, *Tibóid na Long* (Tibbot of the Ships)¹⁶, while Burke had already four other children. There is a legend that tells about the termination of her marriage: Gráinne had locked herself up in Rockfleet Castle, which had belonged to Richard Burke, and told her husband from a window: "I dismiss you". Those words officialised the divorce as well as, by the same token, her possession of the castle. History does not retain any other official union or marriage. From then on, Gráinne looked after her father's land and financial interests. One of the most striking features of this inheritance is that the Ó Maille clan was a seafaring family, unlike most ruling clans in Ireland. That made Gráinne a very distinctive woman of power.

3- Women's political role

From those legal considerations it is easy to see that women had little say in decision-making. Yet the history of Ireland shows that some exceptional female figures played a crucial part in the shaping of political alliances; some of them indeed contributed to the changes that occurred throughout the 16th century¹⁷. Most women of power used their status as daughters and spouses in order to promote their interests, even in influential Anglo-Irish families, mainly because they wanted to secure their sons' position within the clan and keep the upper hand in local politics. This could go as far as taking up arms against their political enemies, either because they controlled their husbands or because their status as dowagers made it possible. "One widespread practice of the day – that of the political

¹⁶ He was later knighted as Sir Theobald Bourke, and was created first Viscount Mayo in 1626 by Charles I.

¹⁷ This is the subject of Elizabeth MCKENNA's article "Was There a Political Role for Women in Medieval Ireland? Lady Margaret Butler & Lady Eleanor Maccarthy", in: *The Fragility of Her Sex?*, opus cit., p. 163-174.

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marriage - could and did present some women with the opportunity of involvement in state affairs"¹⁸, even if their names are not frequently quoted in official documents. Gráinne Ní Mháille combined the advantages of female inheritance on both her parents' side. After her two marriages were terminated, through widowhood or divorce, she always focused energy on the running of her estate. What makes her remarkable lies in the fact that the Ó Máille clan was deeply involved in seafaring activities, among which international trade and what those allied to the English Crown considered as 'piracy'.

At Her education

Like many women of the nobility, whether Irish or Anglo-Irish, she received some formal education in the form of language teaching. Though this is not confirmed, she was said to have a good command of Latin, as well as some knowledge of English, Spanish and even French. Reports of her historic meeting with Queen Elizabeth I show that the discussions were conducted in Latin, since Elizabeth did not speak Irish and Gráinne's English was far from fluent. From a very early age she had participated in trading expeditions with her father, from which she got the nickname of *Gráinne Mhaol* (or 'Granuaile'). According to one of the many legends that surrounded her, she had insisted on being allowed on board a ship, but was told that her long hair would catch in the ship's ropes. She decided to cut her hair short so that her father would not refuse to take her along, hence Gráinne Mhaol (*maol* means 'bald' or 'cropped hair'), and the name stuck¹⁹. She also had a reputation for physical courage and she often took part in military expeditions too. Her father had commercial connections with Spain (Spanish wine had long been popular among Irish chieftains) and Scotland

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163. The author also quotes a report to Cromwell describing James Butler as the man most capable of serving the king 'by reason he ys so calyd by the maryge of hys systers and by my lady hys wyffe that other by fere ore by love, he ys lyke to do thee servys, and put the Kyng to less charge than any alyve', *ibid.* p. 164.

¹⁹ Another possible explanation is given by Anne CHAMBERS in *Granuaile-Grace O'Malley, Ireland's Pirate Queen, c. 1530-1603*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 3rd ed. 2009, p. 38: "There has always been much speculation on how Grace O'Malley became known, mainly through folklore, as 'Granuaile'... It is likely that the name is a corrupt amalgam of the Gaelic Gráinne Uí Mháille or alternatively Gráinne Umhaill (Grace of the Umhalls - the name of her clan's territory in Irish). Also, a local west-of-Ireland enunciation of the name O'Malley was, and is still, pronounced Mealia (Maleya) which may also have a bearing on the origin of the name 'Granuaile'.

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in time of peace. He also levied tolls and taxes on the ships that sailed along the coasts controlled by the clan. In time of war he acted like a mercenary, offering logistical support with his fleet of ships as well as troops that he ferried to the troubled spots. His daughter carried on his tasks and was true to the family motto "*Terra Marique Potens*" ('Powerful by land and by sea'). She was also rich in cattle and land, a very important feature to determine wealth, since from time immemorial cattle herds had been the measure of a chieftain's wealth and power²⁰. Her passionate interest in the sea is reflected in the various castles she lived in throughout her life: Clare Island and Rockfleet Castle at the tip of western Connaught, overlooking Clew Bay.

B/ The Pirate Queen of Connaught

Gráinne had always been associated with war and plunder but she lived in Ireland where the in-feudings were further complicated by the growing presence of the English and their loyal vassals, who were engaged in a policy of reconquest. She was born with Henry VIII's policy of 'surrender and re-grant' and died – aged 70 – as Hugh O'Neill and Hugh O'Donnell were defeated, thus dashing the hopes of a free and independent Ireland. She had to fight a complex family situation as well as an on-going war with her Irish rivals keen on gnawing at her possessions. To crown it all she also wedged a mortal feud with Richard Bingham, the English Governor of Galway.

A family strife. A woman could only secure her position in marriage through her husband or, should he die, her sons. When *Dónal an Chogaidh* was slain, she had little hope to be paid the share of his inheritance (one-third of his possessions) on behalf of her two sons, due to a strong opposition from her in-laws. As a result she left the O'Flaherty's territory and returned to Clare Island, bringing along a sizeable crowd of O'Flaherty supporters. One of her legendary exploits tells of the way she managed to keep a castle that her late husband had seized from the Joyce family, by defending it herself. Her courage impressed her foes, who gave the name of *Caisleán an Circa* (Hen's Castle) to the place, which has been kept ever since by the Ó Máille family.

²⁰ « Cattle were undoubtedly the most common form of currency in the period of the law-texts. Even after coinage was introduced by the Norsemen in the early 10th century, and re-introduced by the Anglo-Norman in the early 13th century, cattle continued to be the normal currency of the Irish." Fergus KELLY, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, *opus cit.*, p. 113.

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Local feuds and raids. The Irish mythology, which was transcribed from the oral tradition as early as the 7th century, clearly testifies to the constant raiding of one tribe or kingdom by another, the most famous one being told in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* from the Ulster cycle. By the early 1560s Gráinne had returned to her family holdings, recruited Irish fighting men and Scottish mercenaries, known as *gallowglasses*, had launched into attacks against other ships (including English fishermen's) and wrought havoc as far as Waterford and the North West. She had also attacked fortresses near the sea, like Curradh Castle at Renvyle, the O'Loughlin castle in the Burren (County Clare) and the O'Boyle and MacSweeney clans in Donegal. She was thus considered as the scourge of the Irish Sea by many warring factions.

A difficult relationship with England. Before Gráinne's first husband had died, the clan had entered an open war with the Galway Corporation, which had complained to the English that their ships were levying taxes in the area controlled by their fleet, often resorting to violence and murder. Gráinne would negotiate the ships' safe passage to Galway against payment. She was thus seen as a thorn in the side of English political and commercial interests in the region. In 1577 she was engaged in a raid against the Earl of Desmond and was captured by her enemies, then handed over to the Lord Justice Drury of Munster. As he must have considered her as a prisoner of some importance, he sent her to Dublin castle, where she was imprisoned. Unlike most people in similar circumstances, she was not executed but released against her promise to forfeit her old ways, which proved to be wishful thinking. The same year she met with Sir Philip Sydney, Lord Deputy of Ireland, whom she promised two hundred fighting men to serve English interests: no one knows if that was a ploy or a genuine offer. Her military star started fading when Sir Richard Bingham was appointed Governor of Connaught in 1584. He was determined to eliminate all opposition to English rule in Ireland and engaged in a policy of feud and land confiscation. He managed to capture Gráinne herself two years later, confiscated her holdings and dismissed her followers. She narrowly escaped death thanks to her son-in-law, who accepted to act as surety for her, against her pledge that she would end her rebellious enterprises. However, Bingham was a merciless enemy and quite determined to reduce her to poverty by constantly harassing her. She decided to change her attitude and adopted a more political approach.

Meeting with the Queen. In 1593, Bingham had reduced Gráinne's revenues to nothing. He had also a hand in the murder of her eldest son Owen. This prompted her to petition Queen Elizabeth and ask for liberty

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and the dismissal of Bingham against her pledge to attack all the Queen's enemies. Elizabeth responded by sending her a list of 18 questions to answer ("the Articles of Interrogatory"²¹). Bingham managed to hold Gráinne's two other sons, Tibbot Burke and Murrough O'Flaherty, as well as her half-brother Dónal, captive. She felt sufficiently desperate to make a very daring attempt by travelling to England to talk to the Queen, despite the presence of a strong English fleet. The meeting took place at Greenwich Palace. The discussion was carried out in Latin, while Gráinne did not bow to the Queen, which could have well terminated the meeting with immediate arrest. Yet, the two women did talk to each other, and the result was that the Queen ordered Gráinne's sons and brother to be released and removed Bingham from his post. Her other demands concerning her stolen land and cattle were not met. Shortly after Gráinne's return to Ireland, Bingham was reinstated, and she concluded that the meeting had been a useless one. She went back to supporting Irish rebellions, although she was officially fighting enemies of the English during the Nine Years War. She died in 1603, the same year as Queen Elizabeth, probably at Rockfleet Castle.

Gráinne Ní Mháille's destiny was exceptional when compared with the trifling importance of women in politics, but, as was said, she had not been the only woman acting as military commander. Yet she was unique in the fame that followed her throughout the centuries and turned her into the emblem of Ireland fighting English rule. What helped shape her legend was her close association with female mythical figures, and how those myths were reworked by Irish politics in the 18th and 19th centuries.

²¹ The list of questions put to Granuaile can be found in Anne CHAMBERS, *opus cit.*, p. 153-9.



The meeting of Grace O'Malley and Queen Elizabeth I

II/ How myth and history shaped the legend.

Recorded historical events are collected and rearranged, that is, explained, according to existing patterns. Such systems are made up of narratives called myths, which have their own syntactic fabric that help create characters and figurative entities. The life

and deeds of Granuaile are raw materials of great importance that had to be endowed with sense and significance. Such a process relies heavily on existing foundation narratives (like theogonia, the pantheon of gods and goddesses, their functions and their relationship with mankind), which interpret that raw material in the light of those original narratives that form the bulk of 'tradition'. Most of those patterns resist the great changes that occur in every human group or society. To a certain extent they incorporate outside influences, cultural encounters or collisions. But they are often retained as relics of a distant past, and the original meaning may be lost in the mists of time. The form sometimes persists and is adorned with new motives: it is a plausible definition of 'folklore'. The fact that those patterns still exist and are used as paradigms in the process of legend-making is part of the issue of culture and – risky word! - identity. It is now time to examine the motives and figures that are the most relevant in the case of Granuaile.

Syntagmatically, time plays a crucial part in the shaping of the 'tonality' of the legend. If mythical references can be made by extracting some characteristic features and adapting them to existing figures (a goddess, for example), which is akin to abstraction, the transformation of that legend and its resilience is largely founded on its relevance to history. The 'convertibility' of the mythical pattern is not rigidly set. What Granuaile represented for 16th century Irish people is neither similar to the historical-imagery she conveyed two centuries later, nor to what she represented for the contemporaries of the Easter Rising. Tonality draws on contemporary events and ideologies; the genealogy of Granuaile's legend rapidly took on a marked political tinge that changed as decades and centuries went by. As

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Granuaile became the staple food of Irish politics, she frequently appeared in the 'propaganda' conveyed by poems and songs, our primary sources of information.

1 - Mythical figures.

Granuaile's association with Irish myths is a rich and complex one. Obviously the link is provided by female imagery, but the woman of the legend combines several mythical figures, sometimes complementary, sometimes antagonistic. On the one hand she is strongly associated with Ireland's geography, i.e. County Mayo (part of the Western province of Connaught) and more specifically coastal areas, a mixture of land and sea, as the family motto suggests. Many myths around the world connect land (in its fertile and political aspects) and female symbolism. Old-Irish myths add an extra dimension to the equation by including Sovereignty in the shape of Queen Medb of Cruachan in Connaught, a political and a military figure from early Irish myths.

Queen Medb

She is the Queen of Connacht (like Granuaile, she comes from the Western province) and one of the protagonists of a whole cycle of narratives called 'the Ulster Cycle'. Those tales focus on the heroic deeds of Cúchulainn, Ulster's champion, whose role was to protect his province against their arch-rivals under the kingship of Conchobar mac Nessa. Medb of Connacht (anglicized as Connaught) always accompanied by her husband Ailill, constantly plotted against the northern king. At some stage, she organized a huge cattle-raid against Ulster (*Táin Bó Cuailnge*) to seize the famous bull of Cooley (*Donn Cuailnge*) so as to match Ailill's own bull *Finnbenach Aí*²². Interestingly enough, one of the tales detailing the causes of the raid (*rémscéil*), known as *Comrad chindchercaille* (the 'Pillow Talk'), describes Medb and Ailill squabbling over who is the richer of the two, a real legal issue, as was seen in part I. This seems quite in keeping with Granuaile's status as heir and ruler. Upon finding that her husband was not

²² This narrative can be found in several manuscripts, such as the 14th century *Lebor na hUidre* (Book of the Dun Cow), published and edited by R.I. BEST & Osborn BERGIN, Dublin, School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (1992, from the 1929 edition published by the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin), p. 142-207 or the *Lebar na Núachongbála* (Book of Leinster) compiled in the 15th century and edited by R.I. BEST & M.A. O'BRIEN, Dublin, D.I.A.S. vol. II (1956) p. 261-400, both from earlier materials.

'on woman's property' because he had a bull, while she had none, she decided to borrow Dáire (an Ulsterman)'s bull for one year against a magnificent reward in gold and cattle. When Dáire finally refused, she launched into a military campaign, while Ulster warriors were lying in their 'pangs'²³ that chronically prevented them from taking up arms. The only exception was the hero Cúchulainn who, still a boy, was not physically incapacitated. Medb took the initial decision²⁴, led the hosts and devised the military strategy, just like a king and chieftain. She travelled with her army but didn't take part in the battle, which no king ever did in similar situations. It is hard to see this epic story as an example of a Celtic matriarchal society pre-existing Christianity in Ireland. What may point to the opposite is the scarcity of such cases. Female warriors are not unusual, but queens that are in command of their army and land are exceptional: in fact, Medb is unique in the whole corpus. One possible interpretation of such oddity (that strangely parallels Granuaile's unusual destiny as chieftain and warrior) may be found in Georges Dumézil's analysis²⁵ of Medb as the allegory of Sovereignty. It was quoted and completed by F. Le Roux and Ch. J. Guyonvarc'h in *La société celtique*²⁶ on the three qualities (*cen ét*, 'without jealousy', *cen omun*, 'without fear', *cen néoit*, 'without niggardliness') a righteous king should possess according to Medb:

"Le premier élément, *cen ét*, correspond à l'exigence que le mari ne soit pas jaloux de l'autre homme qui est éventuellement dans l'ombre. Medb

²³ An equivalent of 'pains of childbirth'. As the legend goes, all Ulstermen of warring age were plagued with pains and weaknesses for five days every year. This was the consequence of a curse, wrought upon them by a woman called Macha. She had come from the Otherworld to marry an ordinary man. One night she confided to him that she was quite capable of winning a race against the king's best horses. Her husband boasted of it in front of the king, who ordered him to bring his wife to him to test her claims. But Macha was pregnant with twins. That did not mollify the king, and she was made to run the race, which she did victoriously. But as she reached the finishing line, she let out a huge scream and gave birth to her babies. She then cursed the king and the assembly of warriors, so that they should, in turn, feel the pains of a woman giving birth when their strength would be needed most. That would prevent them from taking up arms for a limited period of time every year.

²⁴ « Ní hécen féth dar fudbu de a Meic Roth ar rafes sar Medb na tibertha ar áis co tuctha ar écin. 7 doberthar ón": 'difficulties need not be glossed over, Mac Roth, Medb said. It was always known it would be taken by force if not given freely and taken it will be'.

²⁵ Jupiter-Mars-Quirinus, Paris, Gallimard, 1941, p. 115-116.

²⁶ Rennes, éd. Ouest-France Université 1991, p. 156-157.

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entend par là que le roi en titre ne doit pas être jaloux du suivant ou de celui à qui, par dérogation ou anticipation, elle accorde quelque faveur : la souveraineté est éternelle et le roi est éphémère. Le roi prend mais la souveraineté choisit. (...) Le deuxième élément, *cen omun*, est proprement militaire : le roi, membre éminent de la classe guerrière, se doit de ne pas manquer de courage non plus que d'intelligence (...) On ne voit pas non plus comment un roi lâche ou peureux pourrait conserver la souveraineté. Le troisième élément, *cen néoit*, s'inscrit dans la même logique d'égalité. Le roi n'a pas le droit d'être avare, surtout si son épouse ne l'est pas. De toute manière, l'avarice est un défaut qui échoit normalement à la troisième et non à la deuxième fonction. Le roi est fait pour donner beaucoup plus que pour recevoir et le roi avare... finit très mal sa carrière".

Such threefold division, based on Dumézil's theory of the trifunctional structure of Indo-European societies²⁷, does not attribute any specific role to women. Yet the authors consider that the Celtic pantheon has only one goddess, who is associated under different names with male deities divided into three groups or trifunctional roles²⁸. Granuaile also led cattle-raids against neighbouring clans, most of them more successful than Medb's. Such symbolic proximity greatly contributed to the mythical aura given to the real woman in the course of Irish history²⁹. It may also explain the

²⁷ The first function concerns the administration of the Sacred, the second one pertains to war, the third one to agricultural production and the various types of handicraft.

²⁸ For further discussion on Medb as a goddess of the land and sovereignty, see also Mairín nic EOIN, *B'ait Leo Bean, Gnéithe den Idé-eolaíocht Inscne I dTraidisiún Liteartha ne Gaeilge*, Baile Átha Cliath, An Clóchomhar Tta (1998), p. 53-59, esp. the following passage: "Is é an léamh a dhéanfainn ar shealbhú na ríochta ag Meadhbh ná gur faoi choimirce an bhandé a bhí sí anois arís go dtí gur ghlac comharba dlisteanach an chumhacht pholaitiúil chuige féin.(...) Is é an caidreamh léi siúd a bhronnann dlichteanacht ar an rí nua, cé nach íse a cheapann é", p. 57 (One possible interpretation of Medb's ownership of sovereignty is that it was under the protection of the goddess she was then until she became herself the legal inheritor of the political power... It was the close association with her that granted legitimacy to the new king, although she was not the one who designated him.)

²⁹ Granuaile's name can be found in 18th century poems describing the woes of captive Ireland ; it is synonymous with the land chained by its English captors, and that female character stands at the crossroad of history, literature and folklore (« is í Gráinne Mhaol í, ainm a thug idir stair, litríocht is bhéaloideas chun cuimhne": She, Ireland, is Granuaile, a name that was remembered in History, literature and folklore). Breandán Ó BUACHALLA, *Aisling Ghéar, Na Stíobhartaigh agus an tAos Léinn*, 1603-1788, Baile Átha Cliath, An Clóchomhar Tta (1996), p. 556.

accusations made against Granuaile's supposed promiscuity. It may have been mere slander by her English detractors; it may have been a reference to her connection, in folk tradition, with sovereignty, albeit a distant and obscure one.

The war goddess Mórrígu

Female warriors are not unusual in early Irish myths: Cúchulainn, the most famous of all Irish heroes, was trained in arms by women, Scathach and Aoife, both queens of Alba (Scotland). They taught him his most renowned tricks and gave him his weapons, notably the *Gae Bolga*, his most special spear. Scotland and Ireland had long had trading, cultural and military links, but the reference to Alba merely refers to its northern situation on the map. It parallels the division of Ireland into four provinces, plus a fifth one, Mede, made up of a portion of each of the four others. Each province is associated with one of the four directions, and North is clearly linked to Ulster and battle³⁰. Granuaile did entertain numerous commercial exchanges with Scotland, especially when she transported the Scottish *Gallowglasses* (mercenaries) who were employed by Irish chieftains on a half-year basis. Tales of her physical courage and engagement at sea and on the battlefield testify to her warlike personality. This bears a resemblance with Mórrígu (lit. "Great Queen"), avatar of the war goddess, who had a head-on collision with Cúchulainn while he was fighting Connachtmén during the *Táin*. She appeared to him as a beautiful, richly dressed young woman, who brought him jewels and cattle for the love of him. He told her that the moment was particularly ill-suited for such an encounter, but she offered him help in battle. After she got rebuffed, she threatened to turn into animals (an eel, a grey she-wolf, a hornless red heifer) to hinder Cúchulainn's efforts. The latter retorted that he would hurt her three times (on her ribs, on her legs and in her eye), and she would not heal unless he gave her his blessing, which is what happened. Mórrígu was eventually cured by Cúchulainn's blessings after she had appeared in the shape of a squinting old woman who gave him milk to drink from the three teats of a cow she had brought along. She then regained her original shape³¹. Besides

³⁰ See *Cethri arda in domain*, 'The four directions of the world', in *Lebor na hUidre*, *opus cit.*, p. 305, lines 10063-10087.

³¹ The *Táin Bó Cuailnge* from the *Lebor na hUidre*, *opus cit.*, p. 188-189: 'Imacallaim na Mórigna fri Coin Culaind inso' (dialogue between Mórrígu and Cúchulainn) lines 6081-6102, 'Slánugud na Mórigna inso' (The healing of the Mórrígu), *ibid.* p. 193-194, lines 6245-6257.

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showing the stormy relationship of Cúchulainn and Sovereignty, this episode also enhances the goddess's resort to magic in a very effective and cunning manner. Likewise, Granuaile engaged in battle and was considered a good strategist. What also strengthens her association with Sovereignty is the manner in which she teaches her adversaries how to respect fundamental social rules like hospitality. Legend has it that she wanted to pay a courtesy visit to Howth Castle (north of Dublin), but the gates were shut against her and the ruling Baron would not be disturbed. She managed to abduct his grandson in retaliation and brought him back to her Clare stronghold. Lord Howth, the Baron, was ready to pay any ransom she would have asked for the release of the young man. She eventually set him free against the pledge that Howth Castle's gates would always be open to unexpected visitors, and that an extra plate would always be put on the family table. The promise is still honoured by the Gaisford St. Lawrence family, descendants of Lord Howth.

By combining features of Sovereignty and war, embodied by Medb and Mórrígu, Granuaile has acquired a status similar to a queen's, albeit an uncrowned one, on land and on sea.

The 'bean an tsidaib' and sea crossings

The paradox with Ireland is that, despite being an island, it never had a reputation as a seafaring nation; by Irish standards, the Ó Máille clan were an exception. Early Irish myths seem to consider the sea as a source of life and destruction, as well as the natural passage to the Otherworld:

- The Book of Invasions (*Lebor Gabála hÉirenn*)³² tells of the successive invasions of Ireland by five groups, from the Biblical Deluge down to the end of the Tara high-kingship, all of them arriving by sea. Ireland can be seen as the allegory of the world, and the book is an attempt to link up the newly accepted Bible to far older creeds. It is worth noticing that the first wave of settlers is led by a woman, Cessair, grand-daughter of Noah. She is followed by Partholón, the race of Nemed, the Fir Bolg, the Tuatha Dé Danann (race of the 'Irish deities'), eventually offset by the Sons of Míle, allegedly from Spain. Most of those groups had to fight off the attempted invasions by the Fomór, a huge group of seafarers that incarnate evil forces. What also strikes in this Irish myth is that women are both antediluvian and cosmogonic figures that play the part of the Irish Magna Mater³³ even if

³² The earliest version can be found in the *Book of Leinster* (early 12th century).

³³ Cf. Máirfin NIC EOIN, *B'ait leo Bean*, opus cit., p. 41.

such role was reduced in later texts. It is also clear that those mythical women gave their name to rivers or places where they had found their death, following a transgression, notably in the name of the river Boyne³⁴ (Bóand, from *bó-vinda, 'white cow') or Cliodna's wave³⁵.

- Sea voyages (*immrama*) describe how a small crew of holy men crossed the ocean in search of the lost Garden of Eden³⁶, or the extraordinary travels and marvels witnessed by the adventurer Bran and his companions (*Immram Bran*). Although the stories can be found scattered across Europe, the original pattern is Irish. Most of those texts that insist on the peregrination proper were heavily influenced by Christianity, but there are scores of stories that describe how a beautiful woman from the Otherworld, called *Síd* in Irish³⁷, comes in her crystal boat, or crosses the sea in the shape of a bird and invites the man she has chosen to come along with her to the Otherworld, which usually raises a lot of opposition from the man's kin. In a story called *Echtra Condla*³⁸ after one of the sons of Conn of the Hundred Battles, such a woman manages to attract Condle. The latter is consumed by a wasting sickness, despite the incantations of the druids against the supernatural woman and the king's laments. When the woman returns he jumps on her 'currach' and disappears forever. The reason why his departure should be taken so tragically by the family is that such voyage means death for the young man. Indeed, gods and dead heroes share the same world. Besides, the promise of a better life comes with the necessary separation from land and kin. The story thus explains why Art, Condle's brother, was to be known as 'the only son'. This close association between tide and death is illustrated by a 9th century poem called *Sentainne Berri*, 'The Old Woman of Beara' whose first and final stanzas go as follows:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36 : « Tháinig Bóinn bhán ann lá/ -a díomas mór á gríosadh- / go dtí an tobar gan trá/ chun chumhacht a thriail" : 'one day came fair Bóand / excited by her own arrogance/ to the fountain without decline/ to check her appearance'.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38 : « Mo ghean do Chliodhna cháidh,/ ó rinne sí dáil leis an mbás, / san ionad inar athraigh sí dath,/ le go mbeadh a hainm in airde ar fud Éireann": 'My affection for venerable Cliodna/ since she had met her death/ by which she changed colours/ so that her name be renowned all over Ireland'.

³⁶ Like the *Voyage of Saint Brandan*.

³⁷ The word literally means 'peace'. It is a land, or an island where there is no war, no sin and no decay, where food is always abundant, where death does not exist, and where women and men live in harmony, without any hierarchy. The most usual names are 'Tír na nÓg' (the land of Youth) or 'Tír na mBán' (land of Women).

³⁸ The text can be found in the *Lebor na hUidre*, *opus cit.*, p. 302-305.

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I, the old woman of Beare	Floodtide!	
Once a shining shift would wear;	Not a man answers	
my call	Now and since my beauty's fall	Nor
in darkness seeks my side;	I have scarce a shift at all.	
A cold hand lies on them all.		

Plump no more I sigh for these	Happy island of the
main	
Bones bare beyond belief;	To you the tide will
come again,	
Ebbtide is all my grief;	Though to me it
comes no more	
I am ebbing like the seas. (...)	Over the blank
deserted shore.	

Floodtide!	Seeing it, I can
scarcely say	
Flood or ebb upon the strand?	"Here is such a
place", today	
What the floodtide brings to you,	What was water far
and wide	
Ebbtide carries from your hand.	Changes with the
ebbing tide. ³⁹	

Floodtide
Ebbtide with the hurrying fall,
All have reached me, ebb and flow,
Until now I know them all

The old woman lost on the Beara Peninsula (in Co. Kerry) is Ireland, pining for her dead kings and past splendour, a theme which was to become extremely popular in the political tradition following the Irish's defeat and subjection by England. Granuaile, on the other hand, offered an alternative vision, that of resistance, the belief that salvation would come from across the sea, and from armed struggle. She comes from the sea on board her ship and wreaks havoc on the coast line. She thus represents violent death coming from a place that remains unknown to most, since

³⁹ The poem was edited by Gerard MURPHY in: *Early Irish Lyrics*, Oxford (1956), p. 74-82. This translation is by Frank O'CONNOR, in: Frank O'CONNOR, *A book Of Ireland*, Glasgow, William Collins (1959), p. 300-305.

mastering sea routes was by no means commonplace in 16th century Ireland. That, added to her womanhood, did set her apart from the rest of the community, at least in folk beliefs. Her image, while retaining some constant features, evolved with time, acquiring different tonalities in the process. This will be the next point, by examining her changing image as illustrated in some learned poems and folk songs.

2 - A patriotic legend

Few poems were penned in Granuaile's lifetime, but she had already acquired a reputation for her military prowess and her indomitable spirit. Yet scores of legends had already been spread about her and her war-like deeds. Those narratives had a strong biographical ring to them, and most were based on real events in which she had a key role. One very telling instance is the manner in which Gráinne Ní Mháille came to be known as 'Gráinne Mhaol' (anglicized as 'Granuaile')⁴⁰. The best known version tells us how Gráinne's father refused to let her on board his galley because her long hair would get entangled in the ship's ropes. She then took a sword and cut her own hair, thereby getting the nickname of Gráinne Mhaol, 'Cropped-haired Gráinne' (lit. 'Bald Gráinne'). The parents were very amused, and finally her father allowed her on board and started educating her like a mariner. The second story changes some details: she got very impatient one day upon noticing that her long hair would hinder her movements on the ship; she then cut it very short, hence the nickname. Such interpretations underline blatant inconsistencies, notably the parents' reaction to a young girl's tantrums, considering the status and the role of women in those days. What is more telling is the association of Gráinne's prowess at sea and at war and the denial of her womanhood, as embodied by her long hair. In short, Gráinne was unique in the sense that she was an oddity by Irish standards. The underlying statement was that she was a man's mind in a woman's body, which would have suited the vision her contemporaries had of her⁴¹. In any case, as mentioned earlier on, such tales have no etymological basis, since the nickname is more likely to be the contraction, made in spoken Irish, of her name and surname.

⁴⁰ There's a great diversity of spellings, but all of them are based on the phonetic transcription from the Irish. See Anne CHAMBERS, *Granuaile*, opus cit., p. 38.

⁴¹ It should be reminded that Queen Elizabeth also saw herself as a man's mind in a woman's 'weak body'.

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But she became the subject of numerous poems and folksongs at a crucial moment in Irish history, some fifty years after the Treaty of Limerick (1691) that finalized Ireland's complete subjection to the English Crown. Granuaile's literary fame was gradually shaped in the first half of the 18th century, first in learned poems from the Bardic tradition⁴² then in epic poems penned about the 1798 rebellion (the 'Year of the French'). It was later handed down by street revolutionary ballads and poems of the 19th and early 20th century culminating in the Easter Rising 1916.

The Jacobite wars

Granuaile started her career as a political figure during the English Jacobite Wars. These were wars of succession opposing the Stuarts, first the deposed James II, then his son heir to the throne⁴³ and the Whig party who sought a Protestant monarch following the deaths – without descendants – of Queen Mary, wife to William III of Orange, and of her sister Anne⁴⁴. Irish aristocrats had fought alongside James II before his defeat at the Battle of the Boyne at the hand of his son-in-law William III, known as 'King Billy'. Those who survived the disaster gave loyal and unconditional allegiance to the Stuarts. The reason for such attitude comes from the fact that the reigning Stuarts had strong Catholic leanings⁴⁵ and had family ties with the French royal family. They had hoped that Ireland would regain its autonomy and the aristocrats their lands and powers if the Stuarts were reinstated on the throne of England. Thus the destiny of a country was soon linked to the fortunes of a family, embodied by one man, the Stuart king.

⁴² This refers to the complex and learned poetry composed by famous poets who were in the service of great Irish aristocratic families, primarily to extol their lineage, fame and deeds in intricate rhyme-patterns. Most of them found themselves penniless and unemployed after Limerick, and started a new career as court poets of the new anglicized gentry or wandering the roads as hedge-school masters, teaching their talents and knowledge to Irish children in improvised 'schools'. The most celebrated poets of that period were found mainly in the province of Munster, esp. in Kerry (ex: Aogáin Ó Rathaille who wrote most of his poems between 1690 and 1726).

⁴³ Known as 'the Old Pretender' (1688-1766). He was followed in that attempt by his son Charles Edward nicknamed 'The Young Pretender' or 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' (1720-1788).

⁴⁴ Both women were daughters of James II Stuart of a first marriage; they had been educated as Protestants, unlike their half-brother Charles, born of James II's second marriage to Mary of Modena, a Catholic.

⁴⁵ James II died a Catholic in France.

In those poems, known as *aislingí* (lit. 'visions'), the poet tells how he fell asleep in a deserted place, and how a woman⁴⁶ appeared to him as a captive, and prophesized the coming of her saviour from across the Ocean, while exhorting him to keep up hope and be ready to follow the liberator⁴⁷. Those poems referred to a woman that symbolized Sovereignty or personified Ireland. Sometimes the name was not mentioned but the references were clear enough to understand the allusions to James, then to Charles Stuart. However, court poetry was not easily available to common folk, and some of those refined poets started using a more popular language and turns of phrases⁴⁸. Besides, the names of those personifications drew heavily on mythology (Fodla, Banba, Éire⁴⁹) or names from the people (Cáit Ní Dhuibhir, Rósín Dubh, Síle Ní Ghadhra...). Granuaile is one of them, mostly in the role of the doleful personification of the land waiting for the heroic Stuart (" 's beidh sealbh ag Carolus, geallaimse, Ghráinne Mhaol', or "Tá Laoiseach go buíonmhar tar sáile ag teacht,/ Le díograis chum díoltais le garda is faobhar,/ beidh saoithe ár gcríche go brách 'na réim,/ ag díbirt a naimhde ó Ghráinne Mhaol...")⁵⁰.

She is also alluded to as the companion in war of the king, with her legendary fleet on its way to free Ireland⁵¹, with the help of the Pope and of the king of Spain.

Those two trends in Irish poetry aim at giving more legitimacy to the Stuarts' claim over the land of Ireland. They are the heirs to Sovereignty, for Ireland is awaiting her liberation at their hands. Their prowess is further emphasized in their association with a warlike character from the past, for

⁴⁶ Sometimes she is young and beautiful, sometimes old, most of the time weeping.

⁴⁷ That device, common in political poems, was not confined to the Irish literary tradition, but it was in Ireland that such poetry was the most widespread and perennial. Cf Máirín NIC EOIN, *opus cit.*, p. 218-219.

⁴⁸ Máirín NIC EOIN, p. 221, and Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Aisling Ghéar*, *opus cit.*, p. 397.

⁴⁹ See also Ó BUACHALLA, p. 556.

⁵⁰ Ó BUACHALLA, p. 396 & 397. they translate as follows: 'And Charles, I promise, shall possess Granuaile' and 'Our Liege is coming with a multitude from across the sea/ with fervent zeal from his dear guards vengeance to seek/ Lives will be spent forever on our land/ Expelling his foes from Granuaile'

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 398: « Beidh an tImpir is Laoiseach is papa Dé,/ ag tíocht chughainn go buíonmhar 's Spáinneach séimh/ beidh síoch feasta muinteartha páirteach réidh,/ leis an Stíobhart ar sí chughainn 's le Gráinne Mhaol''(The Emperor, our Liege and God's Pope/ Will come to us with a large following of slender Spaniards/ Our people ready to take part henceforth in the surge/ With Stuart and Granuaile on their way to us).

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Granuaile's exploits and meeting with Queen Elizabeth were still in people's memory⁵². The Stuarts are natural heirs to that powerful figure, which explains why they are included in that mythical genealogy. Thus Granuaile serves as the justification of the whole enterprise, of the legitimate action by rightful kings of a famed dynasty. It is only fair to see that figure as one of the most potent symbols of Irish nationalism, a process that developed over two centuries⁵³ and became the staple of political ballads until the Easter Rising and the War of Independence.

The Year of the French

The symbolism was indeed strong enough to survive in popular ballads composed around the 1798 rebellion, an event that was generated by the advent of the French Revolution. According to Breandán Ó Buachalla, her image was superimposed on her French counterpart Marianne, a character of similar origins. Thus she came to represent the Irish people's aspiration to freedom⁵⁴: Gráinne's struggle against English forces is paralleled by the battles fought by the joint Franco-Irish troops in Ballynamuck in Co. Mayo, as shown in the following extracts from the long ballad *Granuaile*:

'Twas a proud and stately castle

In the years of long ago

⁵² See, for example, the poem called *Granuaile*, quoted in Anne Chambers, p. 173-4, and the poem *Grana Weal*, quoted by James Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy, vol. II*, p. 65, a translation from the Irish of Seán Clarach O' Domhnaill (Ó BUACHALLA, p. 396 and Anne CHAMBERS, p. 175-6.)

⁵³ Máirín NIC EOIN, p. 222: "Is mar fhlaithneas Éireann a thagann Gráinne Ní Mháille (mar Gráinne Mhaol) isteach i bhfilíocht pholaitiúil an ochtár haois déag, mar shampla, agus baintear an-fheidhm as an ainm i mbailéid pholaitiúla i mBéarla sa naoú haois déag" (Grace O'Malley made her appearance as the Sovereignty of Ireland in 18th century poetry under the name of Granuaile, and her name continued to serve similar purposes in political ballads in English in the 19th century).

⁵⁴ *Aisling Ghéar, opus cit.*, p. 557: "Is mó slí ar nochtadh is ar léiríodh Marianne do phobal mór na Fraince... agus is mó cruth a tharraing sí chuici féin is a thugadh di (mathair, bandia, maighdean, meirdreach, ainnir, cailleach (...)) An véarsaíocht amháin an t-aon mhód ealaíne a bhí ag aos léinn na Gaeilge chun léiriú is nochtadh a dhéanamh ar a mbandia súd ach níor lúide, dá bharrsan, ilghnéitheacht a caractair sise ná níor lúide éifeacht a léirithe" (Marianne is exposed and represented in many different manners to the French people at large...and she herself appears, and is given, many shapes and roles (mother, goddess, maiden, harlot, sweetheart, hag). By contrast the artists in the Irish language had only verse as well as a single artistic medium to reveal and represent her as a goddess, but her character is no less varied and effective in representation).

Anne-Marie O'Connell

When the dauntless Grace O'Malley
Ruled a queen in fair Mayo.
And from Bernham's lofty summit
To the waves of Galway Bay
And from Castlebar to Ballintra
Her unconquered flag held sway.

She had strongholds on her headlands
And brave galleys on the sea
And no warlike chief or Viking
E'er had bolder heart than she.
She unfurled her country's banner
High o'er battlement and mast
And 'gainst all the might of England
Kept it flying 'til the last.

The armies of Elizabeth
Invaded her on land
Her warships followed on her track
And watched by many a stand
But she swept her foes before her
On the land and on the sea
And the flag of Grace O'Malley
Waved defiant, proud and free. (...)

Hurrah! Their spears are backward borne
Their blood-red flag is down
And Sydney vanquished and pursued
Spurs hard to Newport Town.
This lesson taught the Saxon churl
To dread a Free-man's blow
When the dauntless Grace O'Malley
Ruled a Queen in fair Mayo. (...)

There's many a fearless rebel
In Westport and Clew Bay
Who watch with longing eagerness
For Freedom's dawning day.
There's many a brawny mountaineer

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Prepared to strike a blow
For the old Green Flag and Freedom
On the soil of brave Mayo.⁵⁵

The figure of Granuaile federates Irish patriots by setting the example to follow, for history is the source of patriotism. The references to freedom and to the flag (the 'Green Flag') represented Irish rebellion and the cause that was worth dying for, a feeling that was unknown in Granuaile's days. But her symbol was still very aptly chosen, for the Irish patriots had once again sought military help from foreign powers, and France had been historically considered as Ireland's closest ally since the Jacobite wars, if only to thwart England's hegemony. That the French, led by General Humbert, had landed in Killala (Co. Mayo) in 1798 played no small part in the revival of her warlike exploits, as Grace O'Malley's territories were all situated in Mayo.

The Easter Rising

Her name never disappeared from political folk culture, and she is mentioned in times of trouble when plots and rebellions were fomented by successive patriotic movements: the Young Irelanders in 1848, the Fenians (1850-1891), and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, whose prominent members included Padraig Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising⁵⁶. Pearse, 'the son of an English man' as his proud mother proclaimed on the first day of the Rising, was a school teacher and a poet. It is he who composed one of the best known political poems in Irish, which became an anthem for the Irish nationalists, *Óró, Sé do Bheatha 'bhaile* (as it is now sung):

⁵⁵ See Anne CHAMBERS, *opus cit.*, p. 181-5, and Máirín NIC EOIN, p. 225.

⁵⁶ Máirín NIC EOIN, *opus cit.*, p. 226: "Ar thaobh eile den scéal, tagann spéirbhean óg álainn í láthair le teachtaireacht láidir réabhlóideach, le teachtaireacht na saoirse. Is mar íomhá ghríosaitheach a fheidhmíonn sí siúd, mar fhoinsé inspioráide a bhfuil diminsean gnéasúil ag baint léi freisin sa mhéid go saighdeann sí fir óga chun aicsin. Ba chuid lárnach de reitric an náisiúnachais réabhlóidigh í ó aimsir na gluaiseachta Éire Óg go dtí Éirí Amach na Cásca í 1916 ach ba íomhá í a bhí mí-oiriúnach do mhná a bhí ag iarraidh páirt ghníomhach a ghlacadh í ngluaiseacht na saoise" (On the other hand of the tale, a fair young maiden appears, bringing a strong revolutionary message, a message of liberation. She thus acts as a source of stimulation, as an image of inspiration with a dimension of sexual reward in the way she stirs young men into military action. She was central in the rhetoric of revolutionary nationalism from the Young Ireland movement to the Easter Rising in 1916, but she was an ill-suited image for the women who were trying to take part in the movement for freedom.)

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Sé do bheatha! A bhean ba léanmhar! B'é ár gceach tú bheith I ngéimhinn, Do dhúthaigh bhrea í seilbh méirleach 'S tú díolta leis na Gallaibh.	Welcome home, O woman that was sorrowful What grieved us was thy being in chains, Thy beautiful land in the hands of rogues And thou sold to the English
Óró! Sé do bheatha 'bhaile! (x3) Anois ar theacht an tSamhraidh.	Óró, and welcome home (x3) Now at summer's coming!
Tá Gráinne Mhaol ag teacht that sáile, Óglaigh armtha léi mar gharda; about her, Gaeil féin 's ní Francaigh ná Spáinnigh 'S ruaigairt ar na Gallaibh!	Gráinne Mhaol is coming from over the sea, With armed volunteers as a guard Gael they, and neither French nor Spaniards, And a rout upon the English!
Óró! Sé do bheatha 'bhaile, etc (x3)	...
A bhui le Dian a bhfeart go bhfeiceann, Múna mbímid beo ina dhiadh ach seachtain, Gráinne Mhaol is míle gaiscíoch Ag fógairt fáin ar Ghallaibh.	Thanks to the God of miracles that we see, Though we live not a week thereafter, Gráinne Mhaol and a thousand heroes Proclaiming the scattering of the English! ⁵⁷

The poem draws on the now familiar theme of the warlike figure inspiring patriotic love and vengeance against English rule, but there is a much older version of that poem, dating back to the 18th century called *Séarlas Óg* (Young Charles), as can be seen in this verse and chorus:

Tá Séarlas Óg ag triall that sáile, Beidh siad leis-sean cúpla garda, Beidh said leis-sean Francaigh is Spáinnigh, Agus bainfidh siad rince as éircibh.	Young Charles is coming from over the sea, With him there'll be a few guards With him there'll be French and Spaniards And just reparation they will exact.
Óró, sé do bheatha abhaile (x3) Anois ag teacht an tSamhraidh. ⁵⁸	

Bonnie Prince Charlie was no longer at the centre of Irish political preoccupations, and Granuaile, being a true born and bred Irishwoman of old Irish stock, became the most suitable torchbearer of patriotic movements. She could inspire sacrifice because of what she achieved in her lifetime, like keeping the English force at arm's length. But she also

⁵⁷ Pádraig PEARSE, *Rogha Dánta/ Selected Poems*, introduced by Eugene MCCABE, Iar-fhocal le Michael Davitt, Dublin, New Island Books, 1993, p. 50-51. The original title is *An Dord Féinne* (The Chant of the Fianna).

⁵⁸ Ó Buachalla, p. 400.

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combined the essential features of Sovereignty and War. Even if the sacred aspects of these functions were no longer understood, those empty shells were ready to be filled with whatever propaganda was needed according to the historical circumstances, because her life story took place in already troubled times. History seemed to have repeated itself in Ireland's case, at more or less regular intervals. The only difference between the Jacobite War and the Easter Rising poems lies in the recognition, in the latter's case, that help couldn't come from abroad, but from the lifeblood of the nation itself. This was encapsulated in the name of the party seeking Irish independence from England, *Sinn Féin* ('Ourselves Alone').

Today, Granuaile has become a manna for tourism marketing, and her name is now associated with a variety of initiatives and mock re-enactments of past events for the benefit of generations of people that had never heard of her. She is now as renowned as a monarch or a character that has changed the course of history. Yet she had been strangely absent from the learned annals that decided who to bestow fame on. To quote Anne Chambers,

"Granuaile's memory remained alive in the folklore of the people of the area where she once lived. The English also had good reason to remember her long after her death. Writing in 1623, an English lord deputy, seeking to justify the seizure of fishing rights on the borders of Mayo and Galway, reminded the Privy Council that the inhabitants of Mayo 'had been always more apt to rebellion in so much that the very women have borne arms there, whereof *Grany ne Maly* was famous and is yet renowned by them...'. In the west of Ireland many of the stone fortresses associated with her name stand solidly still in remembrance of their audacious chatelaine... Across the bay on Clare Island the ruins of 'Grania's castle' evoke images of the Pirate Queen. More recently her story has fired the imagination in a wide range of creative disciplines, and her life has been depicted in fiction, music, dance, drama, documentary and film. She has become the inspiration for women's self-awareness groups, for yacht races and diving clubs named in her honour... Her life and contribution to the eventful era in which she lived is now part of school curricula both in Ireland and abroad."⁵⁹

In conclusion, Gráinne Ní Mháille exemplifies the destiny of women who would not be confined to what role society had in store for them. In a way, history always gives such odd characters an opportunity to shine out.

⁵⁹ Anne CHAMBERS, *opus cit.*, p. 135-6.

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Paradoxically, the social and religious norms imposed upon women call for an alternative model to come forth, that of the woman who would not be a woman, and yet represents the archetypal female figure of land, of sovereignty and war to form the complex concept of 'nation'.

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