

8-2009

Goddess, King, and Grail: Aspects of Sovereignty within the Early Medieval Heroic Tradition of the British Isles

Robert Bevill

Clemson University, rsbevill@gmail.com

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GODDESS, KING, AND GRAIL: ASPECTS OF SOVEREIGNTY WITHIN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL
HEROIC TRADITION OF THE BRITISH ISLES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

By
Robert Scott Bevill
July 2009

Accepted by:
Dr. Barton Palmer, Committee Chair
Dr. Susan Hilligoss
Dr. Wayne Chapman

ABSTRACT

When studying the heroic tales and epics of medieval cultures, more questions about their origins and influences remain than answers. The search for sources for a single work, *Beowulf*, for example, can and has been examined within Germanic, Brittanic, Norse, and even Irish traditions. Scores of sources, parallels, and analogues have been found and analyzed, but so many possibilities may only serve to obfuscate the actual origins of the *Beowulf* poet's myriad influences. However, the search for analogous works can build a stronger sense of context for certain motifs and greater themes within a large number of similar texts. Thus, repetitive elements, especially of the mythological sort, can provide scholars with a glimpse of shared mythologies between otherwise very different cultures.

The problem is that so many of these memes are hidden by centuries of redactions and revisions by scribes who had no firsthand knowledge of the original composer's cultural identity. The few shared elements that survive the transition from oral to written literacy are among the strongest arguments for a shared Celtic mythology that existed before the Christians or Anglo-Saxons. The surprising frequency in which these memes appear in Irish, Anglo, Germanic, and Welsh texts would seem to indicate that some motifs more accurately reflect the earlier Celtic mythology than the more whitewashed elements found in later manuscripts. Two particular motifs appear regularly within the context of the great heroic tales of medieval Britain, Ireland, and Wales: the goddess of sovereignty and fertility, and the magical properties of a certain cauldron, sometimes known as the Grail.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Eve, who supported me throughout this experiment with grad school; to my newborn son Finn, who gave me the motivation to work for his future; and to my parents who have stood behind me for 28 years. Thank you all!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Barton Palmer for allowing me to explore so many areas of medieval marginalia in the composing of this thesis and throughout our coursework, Dr. Wayne Chapman for introducing me to Mad King Sweeney and sending me on that particular journey, and Dr. Susan Hilligoss for listening to my own crazy notions about these works and encouraging me to follow up on them. I would also like to thank Dr. Alma Bennett for providing me with all the answers to all the many questions I have asked over the last two years. This could not have been completed without each of you. Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

“What is a god?
A god is an eternal state of mind...
...When does a man become a god?
When he enters one of these states of mind.”
-Ezra Pound, “Religio, or the Child’s Guide to Knowledge”

Perhaps when examining the written record of the early medieval heroic tale, the terms of Pound's latter question should be transposed. When does a god become a man? The answer is: when his culture no longer remembers him for what he was. He has been demoted, usually to a mortal hero, but, often enough, to a monster. This type of cultural shift typically accompanies a civilization's subjugation under the authority of their conquerors, but occasionally it may be tied to a more subtle change. Of course, not all conquerors erase the local gods from the historical records. Classical Rome was famous for adapting local gods and heroes into its Pantheon, and even the Norse pantheon includes the Vanir, echoes of the older, chthonic fertility cults that existed in much of Germanic and Celtic Europe. But Christian Rome, with its God, singular, had no use for these local deities, except, perhaps, as a tool to convince and convert the local populace. Bede records a letter from 601 in which Pope Gregory instructs Abbot Mellitus not to destroy the pagan temples, but to repurpose them so "that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God" (56). He then notes that the people who are accustomed to offering sacrifices on specific feast days should

continue to do so, only that their sacrifices be offered to God instead of idols, "thus they would no longer be the same sacrifices" (56).

This is not a natural form of reverse Euhemerism, but a deliberate attempt to slowly separate the divinity from the tradition of ancient mythology. Myths are not easy things to kill. The archetypal memes of certain traditions can last through any number of cultural layers, even if the actual ceremony becomes completely devoid of its original meaning. Hunting eggs on the holiday named for Eostre is one of the more prominent of these orphaned ceremonies, but certainly not unique. In the study of early medieval texts, however, this type of cultural shift, which has undoubtedly taken place throughout history, is given a striking prominence because the incursion of Christianity into the pan-Britannic world accompanied the beginnings of a written literary tradition. In these early societies, words held power. As Craig Davis argues, the structural elements of oral tradition make its subjects remarkably stable, but upon the conversion to writing it is "turned into scripture and that scripture is closed and canonized by institutions controlling the ideological life of the culture..." (8).

This is evident within the prologue to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* where the great poets of Ireland were gathered together by Senchán and asked if any of them could perform the entirety of the *Táin*. None were able to recite more than brief parts of the tale. Thomas Kinsella's translation points to either Muirgen or Senchán himself as finally receiving a recitation of the full epic by the spirit of Fergus, one of its main characters (1-2). Ciaran Carson, in the introduction to his new translation of the *Táin*, repeats this

story, but also adds to it, equating Senchán with St. Ciaran and painting the dictation of Fergus as "a parable of the superiority of Christian learning over mere Irish pagan lore: as if to say, even your own history is unreliable, recorded in the fickle human memory, whereas our words, inscribed in books and their copies, shall flourish and survive unaltered for all time" (xvii). Regardless of which version of the story is to be believed, the Book of Leinster redaction of the *Táin* ends with these notes, as translated by Kinsella: "A blessing on everyone who will memorise the *Táin* faithfully in this form, and not put any other form on it" (283). This admonition to let the written text stand sacrosanct works within a mostly insular society like Ireland, even after its conversion, but in an early Welsh Arthurian tradition that coexisted and competed with Breton versions of similar legends, it is hard to find the one final, sacred version of events. Should the Welsh *Peredur* take precedence over Chretien's *Percival*, or Wolfram's *Parzival*? Or are they equally valid renditions of an earlier tale, whose echoes remain within *Culhwch and Olwen*, *Preiddeu Annwn*, and branches of the *Mabinogi*? The Welsh versions are certainly more pagan, but Chretien and Wolfram were responsible for the versions of the Grail legend that most closely resemble today's accepted, canonical version.

But *Beowulf* is also the product of competing cultures. The Germanic Anglo-Saxon culture, with its strong ties to Norse myth and legend, existed side by side with the Roman and Celtic-influenced Britons before being overtaken by Christianity within just a few generations. This kind of radical cultural shifting leaves *Beowulf* a mish-mash

of cultural influences. Scholars have found evidence of Irish folklore, especially the Hand and the Child tale, which was also popular in Wales, apparently, because it is replicated almost entirely within the first branch of the *Mabinogi*. But there are also numerous similarities to Norse Saga, especially in the story of Hrólfr, the nephew and successor to Hrothgar who hires a Geatish mercenary, rather like a bear, named Bǫðvarr, to cleanse his hall of "the worst of trolls" (Garmonsway 105). The Saga is from a demonstrably later date than *Beowulf*, but does contain some different mythic elements to it that *Beowulf* lacks, though it has very little in the way of Christian overtones, which *Beowulf* has in abundance. This is another example, it seems, of a tale that crosses cultures but finds multiple scriptural versions. *Hrolfs saga kraka* fulfills a Norse cultural need from the 14th century, while *Beowulf* serves as a unique glimpse into Anglo-Saxon Britain's transition to Christianity.

This connect-the-dots game can become a maddening exercise in attempting to differentiate mere coincidence from actual organic relationships between sources and analogues. But some cross-cultural connections can be worth exploring, not necessarily as an expedition to find the last remaining vestiges of an Indo-European mythic meme, but perhaps to find some explanations for why specific societies evolved in different ways. Campbellian archetypal memes aside, the heroic tales of England, Ireland, and Wales not only embody the marked differences between these three cultures, but also their underlying similarities. Still, an examination of these similarities today must avoid the fallacies of the past. It is convenient to use the word

“Celt” to describe any number of tribes that share a similar geography and mythological outlook, but individual cultural differences should be explored, as well, not simply equated as one large Celtic, or, even worse, Indo-European melting pot. Though the Irish and Welsh fertility goddesses serve a similar purpose for their respective people, they may have very different roles. While both Rhiannon and Medb are recognized for their connections to sovereignty, their other associations are much different. And thus it is with each of the mythic semi-divine characters that this paper will examine.

Keeping the significant differences of the respective cultures in mind, it is, however, useful to still pay attention to similarities when they arise, especially when these possibly coincidental events may be one of the mechanisms for both the Britannic and Continental shift to Christianity. To convert the king is to convert the people. This was a lesson learned as far back as the Emperor Constantine, but is made slightly more difficult when a society values not only the king but also his relationship, and usually marriage, to a goddess of sovereignty. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt describes this cultural meme as a duality, where a "male principle of society to which is opposed a female principle of nature" (93). This relationship does not imply a hierarchical relationship between the masculine and feminine aspects, but a totally dependent one. All the elements of society, war, and rigid order that are present within, for example, the Dagda are for naught without the natural forces of life and death of Badb or the *Morrígan*. And

just as the queens of legend are representative of these mother-goddesses, so too are the kings of legend and myth. According to Sjoestedt,

The union of the god of the tribe with the goddess of the earth, of Sucellos with Nantosuelta, of the Dagda with the Morrígan or with Boann, projects on the plane of mythology what the union of the king with the animal incarnation of the goddess realizes on the plane of ritual, namely the marriage of the human group with the fertile soil, which is the necessary condition for the prosperity of the tribe and the purpose of all religious activity. (94)

For this established mythic and political norm to be broken down, an alternative must be presented.

To that end, heroes, of the legendary and historical variety, provide a break from the reliance on gods and goddesses to determine the fates of men. Though Cú Chulainn is reminiscent of the greatest classical heroes, given his remarkable abilities and semi-divine nature, his defiance of both the *Morrígan* and Medb, the human aspect of the goddess, reflects a subtle shift in thinking that may be attributable to the Christian redactors of the tale. Similarly, Rhiannon's debasement in the tale of Pwyll may also be read as evidence of the same cultural shift. Perhaps even Grendel's mother may be seen as another image of a fertility goddess and queen who has been quite effectively demonized by the subsequent efforts of two new dominant patriarchal religions. After all, Grendel's vendetta against Hrothgar and his war-prize wife did not begin until he pridefully built his great hall so near to the home of these fallen gods.

While this relationship between goddess and king may be the most significant element of Christianization to be found within all three of the aforementioned traditions, it certainly cannot be discussed alone. Though there may have been a

shared underlying cultural and mythical meme between the three cultures, the transition to a predominantly Christian culture was handled differently in each case. Thus, it is also worthwhile to investigate more culturally specific elements of the transition to Christianity as recorded in the heroic literature of the time. For example, how elements of the Patrician legend became so enmeshed with the mythical cycles of Ireland that Patrick's feats and miracles can be virtually indistinguishable from the deeds of either the Tuatha dé Danann or Cú Chulainn. On a similar note, are the miracles that accompany Arthur and his knights symbolic of their righteousness before God or their own semi-divine states in Welsh mythology? Of course, reading *Beowulf* as an allegory of Christ may be no less convincing than reading it as an allegory for Odin or even as political propaganda for a new Mercian king (North 1).

But the means of transition is not a straight line, and attempting to trace the modern popular image of Arthur backwards to his mythic counterpart of oral tradition is likely to be futile attempt. But what can and should be examined is how and why Christian monks found it necessary to write down even the more pagan elements of ancient legend. And why were some pre-Christian traditions more worthwhile for them to record than others? *Beowulf*, in this regard, stands nearly alone. The few pagan heroic tales that do come out of Anglo-Saxon tradition do not approach the length and quality of *Beowulf*. Only the Norse sagas can point to a larger world of northern heroes and monsters. But while *Boewulf* is exceptional for its exclusivity, the *Mabinogi* and the *Táin* are but small pieces of a much larger literary establishment. Even though *Beowulf*

is portrayed as a just, moral king, the poet makes no attempt to judge his state of salvation. And yet Beowulf can still be read as the ultimate literary example of a selfless Christ-like king. But his death, like the deaths of all Norse and Germanic heroes and gods, was final. And Beowulf's funeral, like the funeral of Scyld, which opens the poem, is emblematic of that particularly dark and fatalistic world view. Beowulf, like the god Þorr, must die in his final battle with the serpent, and this is not very compatible with the Christian notion of victory through resurrection. So this may have become a question of literary demand. Do these newly Christianized Anglo-Saxons want to hear about the hero's mortal struggle with fate or would they rather see a holy saint emerge victorious from a confrontation with a similar dragon by praying loudly and flinging the dragon off a cliff? To a modern audience, the Norse heroes are more attractive because they struggle in the face of overwhelming odds and still achieve some manner of success, despite their flaws. But the newer concept of the saint-hero had to have been attractive to its intended audience.

Of course, the magical infallibility of heroes, depending on the tale, is nothing new to the stories in Welsh and Irish tradition. So if Patrick can force all the serpents of Ireland into the sea, conjure up the spirit of Cú Chulainn, or if a different Christian bishop can send Sweeney astray, then these miracles fit right into a culture that already sees magic in every stone, river, and hill. And yet even the monks of these traditions compiled tales of pagan feats and heroes, many of which scarcely mention the Christian faith, although other tales with a decided Christian bias exist which tie the two worlds

together. Part of this acceptance of some pagan traditions may come from the Christian acceptance of various monsters and demons as a part of the medieval world, some of which may have even been believers themselves. Andy Orchard writes of St. Christopher and the tradition of *cynocephali*, dog-headed ones, who could reason like men and some of whom even converted to Christianity. St. Christopher, it seems, was one of them (*Pride* 14-15). And these dog-headed ones are but a small percentage of the monstrous creatures present in a number of Latin and vernacular texts from the time period including the *Liber Monstrorum*, *The Wonders of the East*, and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. Orchard makes a strong argument that *Beowulf* may have specifically been copied down as a part of a larger collection of monster tales. And the presence of the latter two of the above works within the existing *Beowulf* manuscript certainly seem to support that case (2).

However, painting the medieval poets behind these heroic tales as simple monster peddlers may do a slight disservice to their work in preserving a supplanted civilization. In many cases, the original authors or even the monkish redactors of the text may themselves have only been a few generations removed from pagan society, and these texts may have been a powerful way to recall the glories of a bygone era. The remaining texts, inaccurate as they may be, are among the only windows remaining to a world that ceased to exist in any meaningful fashion before the end of the first millennium. And they may even provide a context for other Celtic cultures that could not speak for themselves, and whose only memorials lie in the battle journals of Caesar

or in the histories of Tacitus--the historical truth from the victorious Romans over the barbaric Gauls. This paper will endeavor to examine Celtic society on its own terms, through the voices of its own heroes, and in the context of its ultimate transition into one of the Christian West.

CHAPTER ONE

GYFENES GRUND AND THE GODDESS IN *BEOWULF*

“For myth is alive at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected. It is possible, I think, to be moved by the power of myth and yet to misunderstand the sensation, to ascribe it wholly to something else that is also present: to metrical art, style, or verbal skill. Correct and sober taste may refuse to admit that there can be an interest for us--the proud we that includes all intelligent living people--in ogres and dragons; we then perceive its puzzlement in face of the odd fact that it has derived great pleasure from a poem that is actually about these unfashionable creatures.”

--J. R. R. Tolkien, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*"

MONSTERS AND THE MONSTROUS

Tolkien's most impressive point from "The Monsters and the Critics" is that what is often considered low and unworthy of scholarly attention may in fact be of the utmost importance. The monsters in *Beowulf*, far from being a "radical defect," as Ker proclaimed them, are actually a very key element in understanding *Beowulf's* relationship to the mythology of the past. Even the Christian monks who first compiled *Beowulf* into the *Nowell Codex* recognized its singular nature as a tale of monsters and the heroes who combat them. Why else would it be found in the company of Old English translations of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and *The Wonders of the East*, two significant collections on medieval monsters, similar in nature to the *Liber Monstrorum* (*Prodigies 2*). In *Pride and Prodigies*, Andy Orchard makes a strong argument for the

examination of *Beowulf* in the terms of its monsters, not only as a means of better understanding the poem, but also of understanding the poem's place within the context of a larger mythic tradition. Considering the monsters of *Beowulf* (especially Grendel and his mother) in the context of these larger traditions and giving the monsters the importance that Tolkien argues they deserve, *Beowulf* becomes much more than simply an heroic elegy (as Tolkien describes it) or even an epic. It is now a poem of transitional significance to a world in the midst of religious and cultural revolutions.

Remembering Chambers' description of *Beowulf* as merely a "wild folk-tale," it is ironic that those same folk-tale origins (or at the very least analogues) provide a context for examining *Beowulf* as an important transitional piece of literature. Two 7th century folktales, the Germanic "Bear's Son" tale (also commonly known as "The Three Stolen Princesses") and the Irish "Hand and Child" folk story, predate *Beowulf* and exhibit striking similarities to the 8th or 9th century poem, yet these two early folktales, without the Christian influences present in *Beowulf*, paint an interesting picture of what a pre-Christian *Beowulf* might have been like. In much the same way as *Beowulf* stands as a transitional poem between the folktales and the sagas, Grendel, and his mother, present a transition from the disembodied demon hand of the "Hand and Child" story to the "worst of trolls" and Skuld the witch from the *Hrólf Kraki Saga*. *Beowulf* himself shares a number of similar qualities with his adversaries, marking him an awe and fear-inspiring Other within his own epic. So while these earlier folktales and later sagas

may not be directly related to *Beowulf* and may simply serve as cultural analogues to the poem, the progressions that take place between them is emblematic of the larger transitions of the culture. In matters of religion, storytelling style, and treatment of the heroes and villains, *Beowulf* stands as a bridge between folktale, epic, and saga and Celt, Anglo-Saxon, and Christian.

The *Beowulf* poet was seemingly well-versed in the traditions and cultures of Europe, both continental and Britannic. This is reflected in his hints of other pieces of Germanic and English folklore, his use of a popular Anglo-Saxon tradition involving the kin of Cain, and his clever use of the Old English language, often using the same word to describe both hero and monster thus confusing the line between the two. The poet even avoids using language that directly ties the poem to a single Christian or Pagan tradition, often choosing a word that could equally apply to both. *Beowulf* is often underestimated, but by listening to Professor Tolkien and following the monsters, a thematic, almost allegorical idea behind the work emerges. It is a reading that involves the development of the monstrous in the folklore before *Beowulf* and the sagas after it, the cultural and religious changes of the Germanic and Britannic world, and the poet's ability to creatively weave linguistic elements with multiple, simultaneous meanings. In this reading, the Grendels are not some foreign, terrifying other, but a familiar remnant of a forgotten past—closely related to, and yet exiled from a culture that has no more need of them, and their relationship with *Beowulf* can be evaluated under a new light.

THE OTHERNESS OF BEOWULF AND HIS ADVERSARIES

Grendel is, in many ways, an enigma to the modern reader. The words used to describe him are ambiguous in most cases and conflicting in others. And if Grendel's description is puzzling, the description of *Grendles Modor* is even more so. Yet through a close reading of the Old English terms used by the Beowulf poet, a picture of not only both Grendel and his mother emerges, but also one of Beowulf himself. For Grendel, the poet commonly uses terms like *deofla* (756), *eoten* (761), *Þyrs* (426), or *helle gast* (1274), all variations on demon, devil, or giant—the last being “hell-brute” according to Heaney or “spirit of Hell” according to Klaeber (338;354). Grendel's mother receives similar titles, including *grund-wyrgenne* (1518), *merewif mihtig* (1519), which Heaney poetically translates as “swamp-thing from hell, the tarn hag” (Chadwick 173). These descriptions paint a picture of terrifying, indescribable monsters, yet they may be incongruous with at least two other terms used by the poet—the most common of these being variations on *aglæca*, used no less than nineteen times to describe not only Grendel, his mother, and the dragon, but also Sigemund and Beowulf. The other is *mære*, also used to describe both hero and monster (Kuhn 213). While the meanings of these two words are unclear and often contentious, they provoke a number of questions regarding the shared nature between Grendel, his mother, and even Beowulf.

Perhaps the most contentious term for Grendel is *aglæca* or *aglæcan*. Most of the time, this word has a negative connotation, as it generally refers to the various monsters of the poem, but can also refer to the heroes: Sigemund (893) and Beowulf (1512, 2592). In his 3rd edition, Klaeber deals with this confusion by assigning the word two different meanings: “wretch, monster, demon, fiend” when it refers to Grendel or the Dragon, and “warrior, hero” when it refers to Beowulf or Sigemund (298). The Bosworth-Toller dictionary seemingly ignores the double meaning and defines *aglæca* as “A miserable being, wretch, miscreant, monster, fierce combatant” (29). Heaney's translation does not shy away from using the negative terminology for Grendel, but it does attempt to leave the references to Sigemund and Beowulf vague, not giving a straight-forward translation in 893 or 1512, but uses the term *contenders* in line 2592, referring to both Beowulf and the Dragon. Sherman Kuhn, however, suggests a different strand of thought when translating this term. In noting that the term is used roughly thirty-six times in Old English literature, and recognizing that in each instance, the word is used in the context of combat, Kuhn suggests a more correct definition focusing on the martial attributes shared by *aglæca* should be “a fighter, valiant warrior, dangerous opponent, one who struggles fiercely” (218). Using Kuhn's definition, the term is equally applicable to Grendel and Beowulf. Where Klaeber creates a distinction between the monster and the hero, Kuhn draws the two fighters together. This can imply that while Grendel may be viewed as the ultimate other, separated from the rest of mankind, Beowulf belongs in that category with him.

Kuhn's definition is significant, not only for Grendel, but also for his mother. When the poet describes her as *Grendles Modor, ides, aglæcwif* (1259), the term *aglæcwif* has been defined as “troublemaker, fearsome adversary” by Klaeber (348) or “A wretch of a woman, vile crone” by Bosworth-Toller (30), or “monstrous hell-bride” by Heaney (89). However, Melinda Menzer makes a convincing argument that none of these translations are adequate as they pertain to Grendel's mother. Her argument is that *aglæcwif* is a two-word compound of a type that fairly commonly appears in Old English writings. This compound generally denotes “an entity that is two things at once: a boy and a child, or an elder and a man” (4). She also explores the various occurrences of the *-wif* suffix, which does not simply imply a female, but specifically a female human being. Thus, she argues that an *aglæcwif* is “a woman with the status of an *aglæca*” (4). This implies that a definition of “vile crone” or “monstrous hell-bride” is mistaken, and a more proper definition could be “a woman and fearsome warrior.”

But perhaps Klaeber's note from the 4th edition on the use of *aglæca* at line 892 is most accurate, where he claims that it is “likelier originally to have meant 'one inspiring fear or awe'” (169). This note, by removing the distinction between good and evil characters, yet retaining the martial aspect, adds an essential element to the understanding of both the term *aglæca* and *aglæcan* themselves. Surely to other warriors on the battlefield, Beowulf must have seemed as terrifying and monstrous as Grendel seemed to the Danes. Heaney's translation of Beowulf recounting his slaying of Dayraven the Frank is brutal in its simplicity:

I marched ahead of him, always there
at the front of the line; and I shall fight like that
for as long as I live, as long as this sword
shall last, which has stood me in good stead
late and soon, ever since I killed
Dayraven the Frank in front of the two armies.
He brought back no looted breastplate
to the Frisian king, but fell in battle,
their standard-bearer, high-born and brave.
No sword blade sent him to his death,
my bare hands stilled his heartbeats
and wrecked the bone-house... (2497-2508).

This implies that even in war, Beowulf so stands out over normal men and armies that he doesn't need to draw his weapon to fight. Surely, this sort of martial prowess would have inspired fear in his enemies and awe in his allies. In this scene, Martin Puhvel sees a connection with Cú Chulainn, who on multiple occasions brutally kills his opponents with hand to hand combat (Daghræfn 284). Cú Chulainn seems to embody every aspect of an *aglæca*, given his ability to face down an entire invading army by himself, and the absolute monstrosity he becomes when he experiences his battle rage: "a monstrous thing, hideous and shapeless, unheard of" (Kinsella 150). Beowulf also stands out, even among other mighty warriors, as Hrothgar's herald exclaims when Beowulf first arrives, "Nor have I seen / A mightier man at arms on this earth / than the one standing here" (247-249). Like the monstrous, the hero is also marked as other, an awe and fear-inspiring warrior, an *aglæca*. These *aglæcan* are separate from the rest of humanity by their exceptionality. And while Beowulf and Sigemund are by any definition of the word, heroes, the *Beowulf* poet intentionally classifies them, by their association with Grendel, his mother, and the Dragon, as *other*. This shared nature

invites the reader to imagine these characters as something outside normal human existence, something more god (or demon) than man. The poet readily classifies both Grendel and his mother as demonic, and Beowulf belongs in that same supernatural caste, albeit at the other end of the spectrum. This is not an unreasonable assumption, as an extant reference to Beowulf's king and uncle Hygelac in the *Liber Monstrorum* portrays him as a giant, whose bones are a source of amazement for travelers. Beowulf, it seems, has extraordinary, almost monstrous bloodlines himself. Considering that the poet lists the Grendels along with the race of giants as descendants from Cain, Beowulf may once again have more in common with his adversaries than is usually understood.

Though Beowulf may have had his own monstrous tendencies, Grendel and his mother are actual monsters, even though their nature is only vaguely alluded to by the poet. His first images of Grendel in lines 100-104 are indeed terrifying, introducing him as a *fēond on helle*, but the poet continues, using the term *māre* (Heaney: grim demon). The use of *māre* in this passage is not the only time that the poet uses this term to describe Grendel, also using *se māre* (dread of the land) in line 762. *Māre*, however, does not usually carry such a negative connotation, as Bosworth-Toller defines it as "Great, excellent, distinguished, illustrious, sublime..." when used to describe "persons...in a good sense," going on to list numerous examples of *māre* used to describe various kings, queens (including Wealtheow), and other notables from Anglo-Saxon texts. The definition only lists three examples of *māre* being used with a negative connotation, defining it instead as "notorious, distinguished by evil deeds." Those three examples

include one reference for Barrabas and the two above for Grendel (Bosworth-Toller 660). Klaeber's definitions of *mǣre* as used in these two occasions are similar to Bosworth-Toller's, glossing it as "well-known, notorious" (Klaeber 371). However, Bosworth-Toller also includes a listing for *mære*—a word with the same spelling, but a different pronunciation and a very different meaning: "A night-mare, a monster oppressing men during sleep" (660). This may be more in line with what the poet may have intended for Grendel, and Heaney seemingly supports this reading, using "grim demon" or "dread of the land" as translations. Nicolas Kiessling notably supports this reading of *mære*, comparing this "monster oppressing men during sleep" to the figure of an incubus (or in the person of Grendel's mother the *merewif*, a succubus). According to Kiessling, the incubus, like Grendel and his mother, would have been associated with the lines of Adam and Cain from Anglo-Saxon traditions, and he argues that to 10th century English Christians "if Grendel is called *mære*, even a single time, certain associations should arise at once" (195). While it is obvious that *mǣre*, famous, could retain its positive connotation when used to describe Beowulf, Wealtheow, and others, perhaps *mære*, the night terror, is the intended meaning when it is used to describe Grendel and his mother, the *merewif*.

This characterization of Grendel's mother is supported by examining some of *Beowulf's* analogues in the canon of Norse saga. In particular, the *Ormr Stórólfssonar Þáttr* contains an encounter between the hero and feminine monster very similar to Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's mother. Ormr, or perhaps his father Stórólf,

depending on the version, kills a terrible giant named Brúsi and his she-cat (*ketta*) mother (Chadwick 187). Ormr is not able to complete the challenge on his own, however. He finds the pair in a cave hidden behind a waterfall, but is quickly attacked by the she-cat. He is pinned on his back, with the *ketta* trying to kill him with her terrifying claws until he prays “to God and to the holy Apostle Peter to go on pilgrimage to Rome, if he might overcome the she-cat and her son Brúsi” (Garmonsway 319). God grants him the strength and he violently kills both monsters. The similarities of this sequence to the fight between Beowulf and Grendel's mother are immediately noticeable. The two images of the hero, on his back, straddled by a demonic female opponent are strikingly similar, and important when judged in the context of Grendel's mother as *merewif*. When Beowulf is faced with this danger, he does not call out to God, but according to the poet:

The Son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished
and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth
had the strong links and locks of his war-gear
not helped to save him: holy God
decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,
the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance
once Beowulf got back up on his feet. (1550-1556)

In each case, the female demon is defeated by strength granted to the hero by God, and then killed and beheaded. These are two examples of a mortal hero grappling with a feminine demon, who straddles his chest just before killing him. The imagery present within both epic and saga is very reminiscent of how a traditional succubus, or nightmare, would act, as John Grigsby points out, “*Beowulf* seems to describe such a

creature, in the right location, at the right time—even down to the ritual position that the nightmare should take—astride her victim” (120). This characterization of Grendel’s mother as a night mare is an important part of the puzzle behind her nature as a fallen supernatural being, perhaps even a deity.

Understanding the often ambiguous relationship between hero and monster within this tale is key to understanding the likely nature of the players in this epic. Under the umbrella of *aglæcan*, Beowulf and the Grendels are wholly other from the rest of humanity, but that is where their similarities end. Beowulf, the hero and king, represents an ideal to which mankind should aspire. While Grendel and his mother are forgotten and fallen demons, symbolic of a dark and uncivilized past. And though Craig Davis argues that the poem uses these characterizations as a "final expiring expression of pagan heroic tradition as it struggled for life in an increasingly hostile, or perhaps merely preoccupied, intellectual culture" (162), he doesn’t, however, go quite far enough. *Beowulf* can indeed be representative of the dying native Germanic traditions within a newly Christianized Anglo-Saxon society, but Davis omits the idea that the Germanic traditions also supplant an even earlier mythology. A great irony in reading *Beowulf* as an allegory for the Christianization of Anglo-Saxon England is that the very same techniques were used in the Odinization of Germanic and Norse Europe. For either reading, Beowulf remains a symbol of the bright, heroic future, and the Grendels are still emblematic of a brutish past—but which past?

ODINIZING BEOWULF

Beowulf is not alone among stories that deal with a monster besieging a king in his hall, and it is tempting to look at other folkloric and literary examples of this story-type as being of some direct, organic relationship to *Beowulf*. However, establishing such relationships is difficult in the best of cases. Still, similarities in the area of myth and folklore may indicate, if not an organic evolution into epic or saga form, at least an influence from the mythic tradition. One of these recurring themes involves a demon or monster's seige of a king's hall, generally depriving the king of his heir or at least preventing the establishment of a dynasty. The earliest of these tales includes the 7th century Irish folktale of the "Hand and the Child" and the Germanic "Bear's Son Tale." *Beowulf* follows shortly after these folktales, probably being crafted as early as the 8th or 9th century. The tradition continued in the Icelandic and Norse sagas of the early 14th and 15th centuries, including the *Grettis Saga*, the *Ormr Stórolfssonar Þáttr*, and *Hrólfs Saga Kraki*. When examined as one large collection of stories, a striking progression in the portrayal of the attacking monster (and his female companion) becomes evident. Of the folktales, the "Hand and the Child" seems to be most applicable to the recurring theme of king and succession, while *Hrólfs Saga Kraki* may be among the closest of the later analogues to *Beowulf*.

The "Hand and Child" tale begins with a troubled king. Every time a child is born in his hall, a demon, or some other nameless monster, kidnaps the newborn by

reaching its arm through the chimney. The king has no way of stopping this from happening, as no guardian is able to stay awake throughout the night to keep the child safe. Eventually, a hero from another land arrives and offers to stand guard over a newborn prince. After night falls, he alone resists the magical urge to sleep and wrestles with the giant arm when it appears. After a terrible battle, the hero rips the arm out of its socket, while the demon escapes, leaving behind a trail of blood. In versions of the story, the hero follows the trail of blood the next morning to find the demon's lair. He tracks the blood to a hidden cave, either behind, under, or near a body of water. There, he beheads the monster and kills a demonic hag before rescuing the other children that have been previously kidnapped (Scowcroft 23). The original folktale gives no indication of where these monsters came from, or why they were attacking the hall. However, the attacks usually come in midwinter and involve the theft of the king's heir.

Another version of “The Hand and the Child” appears in the first branch of the Welsh *Mabingion*, the story of Pwyll. After the semi-divine king Pwyll and Rhiannon, herself representative of the goddess Epona, have their first child, he is stolen in the middle of the night while Rhiannon and her maidens sleep. When the maidens wake up, they frame Rhiannon for murdering her own son. Her punishment was to spend each morning by the gate to the city, acting as a horse for any approaching visitors. In connection with the strange disappearance of the king's son, a nearby man had been losing a newborn foal from his prize mare every year. That night, he decided to stay

and watch over the birth, and as soon as the colt stood for the first time, a giant hand came in through the window and grabbed the colt. Teyrnon, for that was his name, took out his sword and cut the arm off above the elbow, saving his colt. But as he heard the screaming demon run away, another cry caught his ear. The demon had dropped a baby boy, wrapped in silk cloth, outside his door. This was none other than Pwyll's son, though Teyrnon did not know it yet. He fostered the boy alongside the new colt, and both grew quickly. Eventually, he returned the boy to the king, where he was given the name Pryderi, and Teyrnon was rewarded for his stewardship (Ford 50-56). This telling of the "Hand and the Child" is striking because of its specific adaptation to the main characters. The taking of the horse only reinforces Rhiannon's status as a legendary stand-in for the Horse Goddess. Some of the other political elements of the story seem to hint that Pwyll would be forced to get rid of her if she could not give him an heir, which makes the monster's theft of Pryderi even more distressing, because it could disrupt the succession of Annwyn. Grendel's attacks in *Beowulf* don't seem to deal with the specifics of Hrothgar's succession, but it does interfere with his ability to run a kingdom. Though of course, the line of succession from Hrothgar to his sons is broken, first by his desire to adopt Beowulf, which is prevented by Wealtheow, and secondly by his nephew and regent Hrothulf, who eventually does succeed him to the throne, passing over the king's sons.

Hrothulf eventually rises to his own saga, which tells of the final burning of Heorot hinted at within *Beowulf*. This would seem to imply that the story of Hrothulf,

or Hrolfr in old Norse, was well-known before the composition of *Beowulf*. North even argues that it could have been a direct influence on the composer, who simply changed the names of the main characters and a few of the situations in order to make the epic (52). The Hrólfr saga refers to the hall and kingdom of Hrólfr, one of the greatest heroes of Denmark. This saga contains many elements, both historical and mythical, but among the most contextually relevant to *Beowulf* include the adventures of Bǫðvarr, also a Gautar (Geat) and the son of Björn (Bear). This Geatish Bear's Son travels to the court of Hrólfr in order to seek his fortune. He learns of a beast, “the worst of trolls” (Garmonsway 105) that plagues the hall (Heorot) of Hrólfr during midwinter. Bǫðvarr defeats the troll and is granted entry into the court of the king. The cultural significance of this saga—notably the burning of Heorot and the death of Hrólfr—is not to be missed. While *Beowulf* seems to predict that the upcoming war between Hrothgar and Ingeld will lead to the final defeat of Heorot, this saga actually points to a different tale. Heorowearð, one of Hrothgar’s sons, through his own wedding with a northern witch, attacks his cousin’s kingdom at midwinter, killing both Hrólfr and Bǫðvarr in the burning of Heorot (Grigsby 146). This is an important development, because it is only through his association with the witch that Heorowearð has the strength to even approach an invasion of Hrólfr’s kingdom. This is one of the key differences between the success of Hrothgar and the death of Hrólfr. In the former, *Beowulf* is able to defeat the feminine aspect of death in Grendel’s mother, but in the latter, Bǫðvarr is in turn defeated by the witch during the final battle, and all is lost.

The constant thread through these stories seems to be the indescribable terror that comes with the midwinter attacker of the hall. From the phantom hand of the early folk-legend to the *draugr* of the later sagas, these invading demons are unstoppable for the residents of these great halls and farmhouses. But why do these attacks take place? What do all the victims have in common to cause these unimaginable monsters to murder and haunt them? Whether they are described as demons, trolls, or *draugr*, it can be inferred that these monsters have or at least had an affinity of some sort with the people they attack. The Demonic Hand may have the least backstory motivation in the collection, but the *modus operandi* of its attacks (always taking a newborn of the king) suggests a specific kind of vendetta—one that prevents the king from gaining an heir. The Bear's Son Tale also involves stolen children of royalty, while *Beowulf* and *Hrólf's Saga* deal directly with a king who must abandon his hall and throne to a persecutory monster. The Ormr and Grettis tales have a slightly different set of motivations for the attackers—in those tales, religion is their main cause of distress, but *Beowulf* also describes Grendel as a descendant of Cain, so there is definitely some religious significance in that case, as well. Some missing piece is still needed to tie these tales together, for this motif of a monster attacking the hall (and usually losing an arm in the attempt) is so common that there must be a connection. And that connection is an *aglæcwif*, a *merewif*, lying in wait under the nearest body of water.

A basic study of Norse/Germanic mythology reveals two camps of deities, the Æsir: Odin, Þorr, Loki, and others, and the elder Vanir, who seem to be related to the gods and goddesses of fertility and war from an earlier tradition. John Grigsby argues that the events written about in *Beowulf* took place at a roughly equivalent time to a significant change in the religion of the Danish people. A chthonic goddess cult was the prominent religious group of the Northern Germanic people for over five thousand years until it was finally eclipsed by the worship of Odin and the pantheon of other Norse deities (Grigsby 195). The transition to the worship of Odin did not happen quickly or easily. The worship of Gefion, the Giver, the goddess of sea and earth, was a widespread religion that had been in place since ancient times, with several important rituals and holidays that were not likely to be released by the common people who practiced this religion. The center of this transition occurred at a location central to the worship of Gefion: the Scylding capital of Lejre (or Leire) on the island of Zealand (which she created) home of Heorot (54; 137; 159; 166).

In fact, Norse mythology tells a war between the Æsir led by Odin and the elder Vanir, including Freyr and Freyja, Gerion's equivalent. The war between the gods began when Odin flung his spear into the midst of the Vanir (172). Battles were won and lost on each side until a truce was finally declared, but it was obvious that the warrior gods of Asgard had triumphed over the nature gods of earth. One result of this conflict is the creation of the mead of knowledge, brewed from the blood of one of the Vanir. Odin uses this magical drink to preserve the head of Mimir, a wise Æsir. There are numerous

theories to the nature of this drink, but the most likely is that it grants immortality, and thus power, to the one who possesses it. For Grigsby, Odin's acquisition of this magical drink was a "reinterpretation of the transferral of kingship" (180). It would have been a myth of great significance to the former worshippers of the native agricultural religion, and it would have firmly established both their new gods and new kings.

It is no coincidence that *Beowulf* begins with the tale of Scyld Scefing, the founder of the line of Danish kings, for Scyld is known in Danish myth as the husband of the earth and water goddess Gefion (Battaglia 418). Battaglia argues that numerous passages within *Beowulf* make reference to Gefion, which he finds in the use of the word *geafon*. The first example of this word appearing in *Beowulf* takes place in the description of Scyld's funeral:

*Ðā gýt hī him āsetton segend gyldenre
hēah ofer hēafod, lēton holm beran,
gēafon on gār-secg; him wæs geōmor sefa. (47-49)*

Battaglia translates this as:

Then yet they set for him a golden banner
high overhead, let water bear him,
Gefion, on the waves; the heart was sad for them. (417)

He later suggests that because of Scyld's relationship with the goddess, it would have been odd for even the original English audience (who were probably descendants of the Scylding Danes) to have heard this passage of Scyld's funeral and not imagined the goddess carrying him away, in much the same way she brought him to the Danish shore. The legend of Scyld, husband of Gefion, is not just a Danish tale. It is repeated

throughout the Germanic world, but with one slight change: Scyld is not described as the husband of Gefion, his father, Scef (or Sheaf) is (Grigsby 64). This is interesting in that it implies that the use of Scyld instead of Scef was a deliberate alteration to the Scef legend, probably done to both attach *Beowulf* to both a Danish legendary figure, Skjold, and the Gefion/Scef myth. Scyld had no apparent connection to Gefion before the *Beowulf* poet's insertion of him into the beginning of the story, but he was still thought of as the nearly mythical in origin Danish king, so the question is why is he here instead of Scef?

Grigsby's answer to this question follows an astonishing series of connections between the rituals involving the worship of Gefion and the transition to the worship of Odin that took place in Daneland around the time of the events in *Beowulf*. The worship of Gefion centered around a series of winter rituals and traditions involving the relationship between Gefion and her sometimes son and lover Freyr, analogous and equivalent to Scef (Grigsby 120). According to historical accounts, Freyr, the fertility god, was the primary visible deity worshipped by the Germanic people. His representative—usually a wooden idol—was traditionally carted around the villages, blessing the fields until the end of harvest when his wooden representative was thrown into a sacred lake, where his mother goddess would accept him, and ritualistically wash her hands afterwards. This represented his death until the spring when he would be born again. However, according to Tacitus, the specifically Danish tribes had a different take on the final stage of this ritual:

Afterwards the chariot, the cloth, and, if one may believe it, the deity herself are washed in a hidden lake. The slaves who perform this office are immediately afterwards swallowed up in the same lake. Hence arises dread of the mysterious, and piety, which keeps them ignorant of what only those about to perish may see. (58)

Grigsby contends that Tacitus may have misunderstood the nature of the sacrifices—he believes them to be priests, not slaves (56), but it is notable in that these priests were not simply attendants, but actual human stand-ins for the drowning of the fertility god. This bloody ritual seems incongruous with the idea of a beneficent fertility god and earth-mother goddess; however, it is important to note how the Norse classified the Vanir—as *alfar*, or elves (102). To the Norse, as well as Celtic groups, the Elves were duplicitous in nature, at times both natural fairy-kin and *sidhe*, associated with the dead. The *Beowulf* poet is explicit in his description of Grendel and his mother as descendants of Cain, listing other creatures that also are of that lineage: “*eotenas ond ylfe ond orcnēas, swylce gīgantas*,” or as Heaney translates it “ogres and **elves** and evil phantoms and the giants too” (112-113). This description implies that the *Beowulf* poet classifies Grendel and his mother as Vanir, equivalent gods to Freyr and Gefion.

These Vanir were believed to have held dual positions. Gefion, whose name means *giver*, was a feminine harvest goddess similar in nature to Demeter of Greek myth, but she also, like Demeter, was related to the darkness and famine of winter. Grigsby characterizes this darker side of her as “a bloodthirsty cannibalistic monster dragging men to their watery deaths” (116). This role is obviously in line with the rituals seen and described by Tacitus, and it also holds a striking similarity to the

nature of Grendel's mother, with her lair underneath the mere and her kidnapping of Æschere from Hrothgar's hall after Grendel's death. But Grigsby brings up another comparison that ties into some other elements of Grendel and his mother that the *Beowulf* poet may have intended his audience to understand with his use of the word *mære* or nightmare, incubus. Kiessling ties the idea of the incubus in with Grendel, describing the etymology of Grendel's name as equivalent to grinder or destroyer, saying that the comparison of the grinder, Grendel and the crusher incubus is very significant (194). He also implies that in most traditions, the Inucubi commit crimes of a sexual nature, riding and crushing their victims in their sleep (197). This is important as it relates to the hidden ritual of the fertility god, where the representative of the fertility god Freyr (the priest, or occasionally the king) would consummate his relationship with the representative of the mother-goddes, Gefion (Battaglia 419). And as Danish tradition has already been established to include human sacrifice, according to Grigsby, "It could be that one of the roles of the Vanir priestesses, as the embodiment of the carrion-goddess, the nightmare, was to kill the representative of the god while they straddled him, just as Grendel's mother is described in the poem as straddling Beowulf:

Ofsæt þā þone selegyst, ond hyre seax getēah

She then bestrode the hall-guest [Beowulf] and drew her dagger. (Grigsby 119)

Grigsby uses this image, combined with the darker side of the Germanic Earth Goddess, Gefion to argue that Grendel's mother is her literary representative, soon killed by an invasive hero from outside this religious tradition. This also explains the presence of

the witch, Skuld, within the saga of Hrólfr. She is the same darker aspect of the fertility and sovereignty goddess returning with a new champion and attempting to reclaim her role.

Battaglia seemingly supports this reading of Grendel's mother, especially in what he calls the fourth occurrence of Gefion's name, where he claims Beowulf boasts of daring to go into the home of the goddess and fight her if necessary. The passage takes place when Beowulf makes his boast after the attack from Grendel's mother that he will search her out wherever the attacker may run.

*Ic hit þē gehāte: nō hē on helm losað
nē on foldan fæðm, nē on fyrgen-holt,
nē on gyfenes grund, gā þær hē wille. (1392-1394)*

I promise it to you: he will not escape into refuge,
Neither in the embrace of the earth, nor in the mountain wood,
Not (even) in the ground of Gefion, go where he will. (Battaglia 432)

The use of a word derived from *Gefion*, intended as a term for “underwater,” implies that Beowulf knowingly boasts that he will follow and fight the goddess, even in her own home. A bold boast, and one that pleased King Hrothgar greatly. And yet this leaves a question: Why the attack on Hrothgar? From the tradition, it appears that the representative of Freyr gives himself up willingly to the goddess. This may be answered by looking at who, exactly, became the representative of Freyr. Tacitus seems to believe that slaves were the sacrifices, but Grigsby believes that an aristocratic or priest caste took the position. However, he also introduces the possibility that even the king would occasionally be expected to sacrifice himself for the good of the harvest (128). This idea

is backed up by Chaney in his treatise on the transition from paganism to Christianity, where he says “Not only were northern kings sacrificed to get good crops, as the *Ynglingar Domaldi* and *Olaf Tretelgia* of Sweden, but kings were worshipped after their death” (212).

The conclusion of this evidence is that Hrothgar, as well as Hrolf from the sagas, may have been among the first of the Danish kings to establish hereditary rule, under the patriarchal worship of Odin, instead of the matriarchal worship of Gefion. It is implied that Beowulf is brought in as an outside mercenary, not only to defeat the monsters, but also to defend Hrothgar’s right to the throne. Battaglia sees this implication in how Beowulf often describes his Geatish ancestors as being descended from men, a phrase that seems to mean that the Geats had already transitioned to the Odin religion (426). Odin’s own names would seem to back up this assumption, as he is referred to *Gautatyr*, God of the Geats, within Skaldic poetry.

This transition would have had to happen as the small organized tribes eventually grew into larger nations. A culture with a long tradition of regicide would obviously have very serious problems growing as a nation surrounded by other rapidly growing warrior states. Grendel and his mother, along with the monsters present in the folklore and saga traditions were not bogeys created out of the imagination of a storyteller, but part of a larger tradition designed to demonize and shun the neolithic religious traditions of Germanic cultures. In addition, the symbolic victory of the Æsir over the Vanir makes its way into *Beowulf* in regards to the names of two of the chief

heroes in the story. By substituting Scyld for Scef, the *Beowulf* poet not only distanced the line of Scylding kings from the regicidal pattern held by those who worshipped Freyr/Scef, but he also established that line of kings in the lineage of Odin himself, for Skjold (or Scyld) was known as a son of Odin (Garmonsway 120). Yet Grigsby contends that one more reference to Odin is present within the personage of Beowulf, himself. The typical translation of Beowulf is as Bee-Wolf, or Bear. However, in the light of the Scef and Barley worshiping tradition that Odin defeats, he translates Beowulf as Beow-Wolf, or Barley-Wolf, a kenning for Odin (192). Orchard and North seem to agree with, if not the implicit connection between Beowulf and Odin, at least the idea that Beowulf's name is somehow referential to Beow (*Companion* 121; *Origins* 48). Thus, *Beowulf* is much more than it seems: a religious and political metaphor involving Odin killing the fertility god and sovereignty goddess of neolithic tradition.

CHRISTIANIZING BEOWULF

The final question this leaves is how this transition from one pagan tradition to another finds its way into a poem bursting with Christian imagery. The answer lies with the words of Pope Gregory, as he instructed an Abbot in the 7th century:

The temples of the idols should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there. For if these temples are well-built, they must be purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that their temples are not

destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God. (Grigsby 46)

What the Pope may have been unaware of is that this had already been done by the worshipers of Odin, who started the process of ridding the people of a millennia-old belief in gods of nature and earth. For the Christians of the 7th century, their work was already done. The older pagan tradition had already been demonized by a slightly newer pagan tradition, but one with shallower roots and less staying power. Bede gives a familiar-sounding description of the man who converted Pagan Northumbria to Christianity in 627:

So he formally renounced his pagan superstitions and asked the king to give him arms and a stallion – for hitherto it had not been lawful for the Chief Priest to carry arms or to ride anything but a mare – and, thus equipped, he set out to destroy the idols. Girded with a sword and with a spear in his hand, he mounted the king's stallion and rode up to the idols. When the crowd saw him, they thought he had gone mad; but without hesitation, as soon as he reached the shrine, he cast into it the spear he carried and thus profaned it. Then, full of joy at his knowledge of the true God, he told his companions to set fire to the shrine and its enclosures and destroy them. (Grigsby 193)

The similarities to Odin starting the war against the Vanir are important to note, but not quite as important as one other detail: the man Bede is writing about is called Coifi, which means “hooded one,” another common name for Odin (193).

When even the stories detailing the Christian conversion of pagans contain overt symbols of the cult of Odin, it is obvious that the Christian monks and missionaries understood the practice of adopting elements from native religions into the new conquering faith. And if it was done before, as noted by Bede in 627, it could be done again. Everything becomes clear. Heorot is attacked, while under the control of

two different dynastic kings, each requiring a Geatish hero (likely based on Odin himself) to rescue them, the royal children stolen from the beds of the king in the “Hand and Child” tale preventing the king from producing any heirs, and the final changes to the story when the monsters can only be defeated by calling upon the power of a Christian God. Thus, Grendel and his mother are no longer a nameless, demonic giant (with an exceptionally long arm) and his hell-cat mother, they become the kin of Cain, related to other giants, trolls, elves, demons, and old gods (who mostly died in the Biblical Flood, as described by Beowulf’s sword hilt). They fit in with another long tradition from Anglo-Saxon texts that describe the lineage of Cain as terrible monsters perishing in the flood (Orchard 84). And so the story evolves from the chthonic traditions of a fertility and sovereignty goddess who’s union with the king is ultimately responsible for the health of people and nation, into a more militaristic tale from a culture ruled by warrior kings who require a martial hero to save the people from the ravages of this monstrous fallen goddess of plague and death, and finally into a work laced with the symbolism of a newly Christian society, where fallen gods are now demons, hated by God because of their opposition to the new divine right of kingship.

CHAPTER TWO

ANNWN'S SPOILS AND THE MABINOGI

“And before the spoils of Annwn dolefully he chanted
And till the Judgment he will remain in bardic song.
Three shiploads of Prydwen we went into it;
Save seven none returned from the Faery Fortress (Kaer Siddi).”

--Roger Sherman Loomis, *Preiddeu Annwn*

THE TREASURES OF BRITAIN

Preiddeu Annwn a poem once called “elaborately incomprehensible” by its first translator Sharon Turner (Loomis 1941, 887), deals with a tragic raid on the Welsh otherworld, Annwn, by Arthur and three shiploads of his men. Arthur’s assault on the island was ostensibly for a magical cauldron that would not boil food for a coward. Though the text is unclear about the ultimate success of that venture, it is clear that only seven men, including the king, returned. The poem offers other tantalizing glimpses of the otherworld, listing the prisoner Gweir dolefully chanting while bound with iron chains, a feast with drinks of sparkling wine, a strong wall and a Glass Fort where six thousand men stood to protect it, and the cauldron itself, lit by the breath of nine maidens. The first six stanzas closing lines—“Apart from seven, none came back up from Caer Siddi” (Haycock 62)—reinforce the tragic end to this raid, but also provide the reader with no clue to its ultimate end. Did it succeed or fail? Did Arthur, Taliesin

(for he must have been one of the seven), and the others manage to secure the magical cauldron? These questions only hint at the cryptic nature of this poem, which so tantalizingly establishes a scenario only to leave the reader with more questions than answers.

If *Preiddeu Annwn* is a puzzle to solve, then the answers must be found elsewhere in not only early Welsh tradition, but also in some of Arthur's early Continental romances. In the Welsh Triads, for example, there is a reference to another magical cauldron that only boils food for the courageous, attributed to Dyrnwch the Giant (Bromwich). While this is likely the same cauldron from *Annwn*, Loomis also makes the argument that this is the same vessel listed in *Culhwch and Olwen* as belonging to Diwrnach, the steward to the king of Ireland (1941, 911). Within *Culhwch*, no mention is made of the cauldron's magical properties, save that it should be used "to boil food for your (Culhwch's) wedding guests" (Davies 197), but there is a vivid description of the cauldron's theft from Diwrnach that echoes the events surrounding the violence in *Preiddeu Annwn*. Haycock translates the corresponding lines in *Annwn* as "The flashing sword of Lleog was thrust into it / And it was left behind in Lleinog's hand" (62), while Ford's rendition of the similar events in *Culhwch* reads "Llenlleawg the Irishman seized Caledfwlch and let it go out in a circle: it killed Diwrnach and his entire retinue" (152). Here the names differ not only between works, but between translations. In *Annwn*, Loomis calls the sword wielder Lluch and Lleinawc while Highley correspondingly names him Lleawch and Lleinawc. All three of these translators

regard the two names as belonging to the same figure, but Loomis takes the additional step of equivocating the Llŵch of *Annwn* and the Llenlleawg of *Culhwch* as reflections of the old Irish god Lugh and the Arthurian hero Lancelot (914-15). Lugh's mythology does bear a number of striking resemblances to Arthur's greatest champion, though he is more often thought of in relation to the Irish hero Cú Chulainn, and the linguistic evidence provided by Loomis does seem to back up his argument. These texts seem to be sharing different parts of the same story, with only slight variations in the names of the characters involved.

Also of note are other significant similarities between these three texts, line 30 of *Annwn* mentions "Kaer Wydyr" the fortress of glass. Loomis asserts that this is in line with a number of older Welsh and Irish traditions, including the account of Ireland's colonization by Nennius (925). In that situation, thirty ships of men are sunk attempting to attack an unresponsive glass castle. The few survivors were the first mortal inhabitants of Ireland. But the glass house is also mentioned in Edward Jones's catalogue of the Thirteen Treasures:

Here are the Thirteen Treasures of the Royal Treasures of the Isle of Britain. They were kept in Caerleon on Usk, and went with Myrddin ab Morfran to the Glass House in Enlli [Bardsey Island]. But some authors write that Taliesin, chief of bards, obtained them. (qtd. in Loomis, "Annwn" 913)

Whichever legendary figure ended up with the treasures, their association with the Glass House is appropriate, as both sages are repeatedly linked with *Annwn* throughout Welsh tradition. Taliesin's presence in *Preiddeu Annwn* is implied by his assumed status as speaker of the poem, but another tale involving another raid for a cauldron within

Bronwen Daughter of Llŷr, the second branch. Arthur doesn't play a part in that text, but a number of Welsh heroes bearing significant similarities to figures from Arthurian legend do, and Taliesin is listed among the seven survivors. The weight of coincidence between all of these tales argues for their shared origins, and when looked at in combination, a few conclusions can be reached. The desired cauldron is indeed one of the Thirteen Royal Treasures. Taliesin, a figure resembling Lancelot, and Pryderi (also mentioned in *Bronwen*) were among the seven survivors that accompanied Arthur. And the raid on Annwn, though tragic, was ultimately successful for Arthur.

Taliesin's presence within all three of these texts should not go unmentioned. Because of *Preiddeu Annwn's* place within the *Book of Taliesin*, it is assumed that the chief of bards is, in fact, the narrator and thus an eyewitness to this unfortunate raid. While the sixth century bard Taliesin is scarcely a candidate as author for the thirteenth century book that bears his name, it does fit within a tradition that consistently places Taliesin at the side of Arthur. While his more mystical aspects seem to place him within the same magical category as figures like Merlin, Taliesin enjoys a much more specific role as chief bard in Prydain. In this context, Taliesin is associated with great kings and heroes like Pwyll, Bran, Pryderi, Manawydan, and, of course, Arthur.

His gift of foresight and poetry, gained when three drops of concentrated knowledge from another magical cauldron accidentally land on his finger, is similar to that of Finn within Irish legend, who burns his thumb while attempting to cook the Salmon of Knowledge, thus gaining wisdom whenever he sucks his thumb. Both figures

also share an affinity with animals and the ability to shape shift, but Taliesin's role within Welsh myth and legend is significantly different. While Finn plays the role of the hero and leader of men, Taliesin is the observer in the background, whose very words can either make or break a reputation. In a landscape where the threat of being satirized by a bard is considered to be one of the gravest insults a king can bear, Taliesin's status as chief of bards, holding a seat in Annwn, gives him remarkable power. On a more practical note for the later redactors of early Welsh tradition, Taliesin's presence in a text immediately gives it a high level of significance and his associations with kings, from the mythical to the historical, legitimizes their reigns. From a critical perspective, his presence with a legendary hero is a symbol of that hero's importance, much like the Thirteen Treasures of Britain. While each of these treasures may be connected with specific mythic figures, they are attributed or euhemerized to famous historical kings and their kingdoms (Loomis, "Annwn" 912).

The reasoning behind Arthur's disastrous raid into Annwn and the multitude of quests he and his champions undertake for Culhwch becomes clear. A king's association with these magical royal treasures enhances that king's standing within the realm of legend. If there was an actual Arthur that existed within the sixth century power vacuum left by the Romans, and there are certainly numerous arguments on either side, then his transformation from historical footnote to legendary king would have been made clear by his associations with the magical treasures of royalty and, of course, the chief bard in Britain to memorialize him in song.

PEN ANNWN

Actually identifying the Head of Annwn, king of the otherworld, is not a straightforward task. Loomis wryly notes that the traditions concerning Taliesin and Annwn are not completely consistent, but “what Welsh traditions are?” (Annwn 913). And it is true that even a limited study of works from *The Red Book of Hergest* and the *Book of Taliesin* exhibits enough labyrinthine substitutions, name-changes, and mythic remnants to utterly confuse a casual reader. Within these selected tales alone, the head of Annwn is represented by Arawn, Pwyll, Manawydan, Pryderi, Bran Bendigeidfran, Math, and even Arthur. Yet with the blending and clashing of so many different traditions, it is inevitable that some overlap exists. Arawn and Pwyll are very quickly established as equals in the first branch, and their exchange of responsibilities led to a time of plenty in each of their kingdoms. The Arthur of *Culhwch* is so intrinsically magical that some have argued that he is a post-Camlan Arthur, in a similar position to Arawn, a faerie king of the otherworld who needs the aid a mortal hero just as much as the mortal needs him (Brown 64). In fact, a number of Arthur’s retainers are mentioned specifically because of their survival in the battle of Camlan, three of which are listed when Culhwch makes his plea to Arthur by invoking the names of his warriors:

Morfran son of Tegid—no one wounded him at the battle of Camlan because of his ugliness. Everyone thought he was an attendant demon; he had hair on him like a stag. Sanddef Pryd Angel angel-face—no one wounded him at the battle of Camlan because of his beauty. Everyone supposed he was an attendant angel.

Cynwyl Sant the said—one of the three men who escaped from the battle of Camlan; he left Arthur last, on Hengroen his horse. (Ford 127-8)

All this implies that the Arthur of *Culhwch*, who undertakes a raid for a magical cauldron, likely even the one from *Preiddeu Annwn*, was already a mythic, post-mortal king. This reading puts Arthur on equal footing with the other lords of Annwn listed above, as all of them now exhibit an element of crossing over between the mundane and other world.

None of this, however, seems to narrow down who exactly was the “*pen Annwn*”, or head of Annwn, as described within the poem. Perhaps a more literal translation would be more appropriate here. Just as in the myths of Odin and the Æsir where the head of Mimir is preserved and offers wisdom and legitimacy to Odin’s claim of lordship, the tale *Bronwen, Daughter of Llŷr* exhibits the same motif with the head of Bendigeidfran, or Bran the Blessed. Within this tale, a group of Welsh soldiers, accompanied by the giant Bran, ventures to Ireland to avenge the treatment of Bronwen, daughter of the king and Bran’s sister, by her new husband. Retrieving the wedding gift of a magical cauldron of rejuvenation from the King of Ireland is a secondary goal of the raiders. Ultimately, two significant events happen to Bran. First, he is wounded in the heel by a poisoned spear (Ford 70), and, second, he is beheaded before he dies, becoming quite literally the head of Annwyn, and taken back to Wales by the seven sole survivors of the battle (70). From there, the seven survivors, including Taliesin, Pryderi, Manawydan, and other notables, journey to Harlech, where they feast for seven years before traveling again to Pembroke where “there was a fine Royal palace

for them there, high above the sea, with a great hall” (71). They stayed there entertained and comforted by Bran’s severed head for eighty years before they returned home and remembered the sorrow of their losses. Bran’s head was buried in London where, according to other legends, it became a sort of talisman against plague and conquest (58).

Loomis, in his essay “The Head in the Grail,” connects this extravagant feasting with existing Celtic myths of the banquets thrown by the sea god Manannán, who takes on the personage of Manawydan in both this and the third branches of the *Mabinogi* (53). Also, the protective properties of the head of Bran bring to mind events within the Welsh *Peredur*, generally thought to be a variation on Chretien’s *Perceval, le Conte du Graal*. One of the major differences between these two texts involves a remarkable procession in the hall of the wounded Fisher King. In the continental tradition, as portrayed by Chretien and Wolfram, Perceval sees a number of marvelous objects, including a bloody lance and finally the Grail itself, from which the Fisher King receives a wafer that keeps him alive, but not fully healed. Perceval does not ask about any of these strange objects or rites, thus prolonging the suffering of the king and symbiotically the land. A similar scene takes place within *Peredur* with the significant substitution of a severed head instead of the Grail. While an argument could be made that *Peredur* simply substitutes the Biblical symbol of John the Baptist’s head for the Eucharistic Grail, Loomis disregards that argument, focusing instead on the apparent connections to the tradition of Bran (38). To make this connection, he especially looks

at the Pseudo-Wauchier continuation of *Perceval* which seems to draw upon elements of the same tradition.

What seems constant between the Welsh and continental version of the Grail stories are its magical properties. To put it simply, the Grail gives life, not only to a wounded king, but also to wounded kingdom. It is representative of the health and prosperity of a sovereign's rule. In the earlier, pre-Christian style, it would be similar in nature to the Thirteen Treasures of Britain, a talisman held in protection by a euhemerized king, establishing his ability to protect and provide for his kingdom. Similarly, in later Christian tradition, as is becoming evident in Chretien's *Perceval* and its later additions before being fully realized in Robert de Boron, the Grail is a visible symbol of the divine right of kings or in Mallory's version, the sigil of a perfect knight. In each iteration, severed head, cauldron, platter, or golden chalice, the Grail is tied to the health of a kingdom. Bran's head protects London in the same way that the head or chalice in the Grail castle would protect that kingdom, if only its purpose could become known. This, it appears, is the singular qualification of the Grail legend. In *Bronwen*, the seven survivors live with the head of Bran for eighty-seven years, conversing with it and learning from it before they fully utilize its powers to protect the land. In both *Peredur* and *Perceval*, the wasteland and wounded king face extended suffering after the eponymous hero neglects to inquire about the Grail. Thus the true head of Annwyn would possess both the Grail, or its substitute, and the kingship, literally holding the health of his royal personage and his kingdom in his hands.

QUEEN OF ANNWN

In continuing the search for mythic elements within the Welsh literary traditions, Rhiannon is a figure too prominent to overlook. Even in Jessica Hemming's generally skeptical take on the mythological aspects to the names of characters within the *Mabinogion*, Rhiannon's status as a goddess figure is still "quite plausible" ("Ancient" 88). Rhiannon is usually associated with the equine goddess Epona, who may have also held a number of fertility and sovereignty associations. Anwyl writes that "there may at one time have been an attempt to explain the growth of summer by the rebirth, from a divine mare, of the spirit of vegetation in the form of a foal" (155). The "Hand and the Child" episode from the first branch that equates the theft of Rhiannon's firstborn with Teyrnnon's mayday foal fits the general pattern of this myth. And so the foal of Teyrnnon, or Great Sovereign, and the son of Rhiannon, Great or Divine Queen, were raised together and never separated. Rhiannon's characterization is, as Hemming described it, "a complex blend of euhemerized Celtic goddess, fairy mistress, folktale heroine, and elegantly imagined literary heroine" ("Reflections" 19). And it is these qualities that give her such importance within the context of the Welsh literary, mythological, and cultural tradition.

Rhiannon's first appearance in the *Mabinogi* is as a magical wonder seen by Pwyll while he sits upon the Mound of Arbeth. Ford's translation provides a tantalizing description of her appearance:

As they were sitting, they saw a woman mounted on a great, majestic pale-white horse, dressed in brilliant gold silk brocade, coming along the main road that ran past the mound. To anyone who saw it, the horse appeared to have a slow, steady gait as it came even with the mound. (42)

But this vision, as it appeared to Pwyll pen Annwyn, proved impossible to contact. Ford again: “One of them rose, but when he got to the road to meet her, she had gone by him. He pursued her as quickly as he could on foot. The more he hastened, the farther she got from him” (43). Pwyll tries a number of methods to reach her, including riding his fastest horse at full gallop, but she continues to outpace him. Finally, after failing to catch her again, Pwyll calls out to her and she stops to speak with him. When she removes her veil, Pwyll’s reaction to her beauty is remarkable in its understated simplicity: “And he thought that the faces of all the maidens he had ever seen were unpleasant compared with her face” (45). In their conversation, Rhiannon clearly displays her own headstrong manner by openly declaring her love for Pwyll and plainly telling him that if he will not marry her before she is to be given to another man against her will, she will never be with any man. Faced with an ultimatum from an otherworldly beautiful woman to either marry her or she will kill herself, Pwyll readily agrees to her request and allows her to set the date for a year from that night.

The first branch, named for Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, from that point on is dominated by the figure of Rhiannon. While Pwyll is portrayed as capable, loyal, and noble in the episode with Arawn, Rhiannon’s own incredible character later makes Pwyll seem weak, foolish, and nearly incompetent. At what was to be their wedding feast, Pwyll recklessly agrees to give anything in his power to an unknown suppliant.

Of course, the stranger is the man to whom Rhiannon was originally promised, and he asks for her. The importance of this moment cannot be understated, because it seems that just as Pwyll, a prince and lord over seven cantrefs, is about to be married to a human incarnation of a sovereignty goddess, he agrees to give her away. One of the criticisms of this particular branch is that the Arawn episode seems to be a wholly different tale from the later courtship of Rhiannon, but the connection between the two seemingly separate stories should have happened at this wedding. Pwyll, in the earlier tale, does a favor for the lord of the otherworld, allowing him to keep his kingdom. After Pwyll's year of trading places with Arawn, he asks what his rule had been like for the last year. The answer is unsurprising: "your discernment has never been so good: never have you been so amiable a fellow; never have you been so ready to spend your gain; your rule has never been better than this year" (42). So under the rule of a true king, likely one who already possessed the symbolic treasures of kingship, Pwyll's cantrefs had never been more prosperous. His marriage to the otherworldly Rhiannon would seemingly have been a deserved reward for his heroism in the Arawn episode. This union would have solidified his authority as a king, no longer a prince or minor, mortal lord, and given his kingdom the same benefits it had under Arawn when he took Pwyll's shape. Rhiannon, however, is not merely a gift. Like Medb, she has her own strong personality and powerful temper, and she will not allow herself to be given to an undeserving husband. She comes up with a plan for vengeance against the suppliant and finally, a year after originally planned, she is able to finalize her intended

marriage to Pwyll. At that feast, it is important to note that it was Rhiannon, not Pwyll, who gave away rich gifts. “Neither man nor woman of them went away from Rhiannon without being given some special gift, either a brooch or a ring or some precious stone” (50). This immediately recalls the famous kennings from *Beowulf* and numerous other works that describe kings and rulers as “ring-giver.” Through that simple act, Rhiannon’s own sovereignty is evident.

This, however, is not the only example of Rhiannon’s sovereignty aspect. After the death of Pwyll, their son Pryderi takes over the rule of the kingdom. During his reign, under the watchful eye of his mother, he is even able to expand the kingdom: “And then Pryderi ruled the seven cantrefs of Dyfed successfully, beloved by the realm and the people around him. Later, he gained the three cantrefs of Ystrad Tywi and the four cantrefs of Ceredigion; these are called the seven cantrefs of Seisyllwch” (56). At some point in time after Pryderi’s own marriage and his ill-advised raid into Annwn, Pryderi arranges a marriage between his mother and Manawydan: “‘The seven Cantrefs of Dyfed were left to me,’ said Pryderi, ‘and my mother Rhiannon is there. I will bestow her upon you, as well as possession of the seven cantrefs’” (76). In this passage, Rhiannon is tied to the possession and kingship of that land, and her upcoming marriage to Manawydan, another mythological figure, often associated with the sea god Manannan. Once again, a disaster befalls Rhiannon’s wedding feast when a mist falls upon the land and everyone has disappeared except for Rhiannon, Manawydan, Pryderi, and his wife Cigfa. Further complications arise when Pryderi and Rhiannon

wander into a magical castle where they are both captured. Ford is not alone in seeing the connection between Pryderi's imprisonment and other folk or mythological figures, "namely Mabon son of Modron in the tale of 'Culhwch and Olwen' and Gweir, the prisoner of Caer Siddi in 'The Spoils of Annwfn'" (74). Hemming comments on this identification of Pryderi with these mythological figures in her study on the etymology of character names within the *Mabinogi*. She first lists a number of scholarly arguments for this connection, though she is more skeptical:

Presumably Mongán is therefore also Maonos, along with Gwri (Pryderi), Gweir, and Mabon. If we also accept the equation of Rhiannon with both Epona and Matrona/Modron, we are left with no more than a handful of characters in all of Insular Celtic mythology! ("Ancient" 90)

This is one of the pitfalls always present in looking for mythological analogues to medieval texts. One of the most interesting arguments for the *Mabinogi* itself is that it is a collection of four stories about the life of the god Maonos, in the guise of Pryderi. The first branch tells of his birth, the second of his part in the raid on the otherworld, the third of his famous imprisonment, and the fourth of his death. As Hemming notes in her essay, Eric Hamp was among the first to put forth this theory, and it does work to nicely tie together the multiple strands of myth, legend, and folklore throughout the Four Branches. However, as Hemming argues, the etymology of the names does not match very well. Some are close, but a true organic connection cannot be completely proven. Even in a case that would seemingly be as obvious as Rhiannon's, there are still questions: "It just goes to show that even names with simple etymology are fraught with difficulties when one tries to prove mythological roots"

(88). So while the etymology is complicated, the contextual similarities to mythological memes still offer an intriguing glimpse into the pre-Christian world. But the question still remains about how these mythic elements came to be placed in the early and even later written literature. Are these cases of organic evolution from oral tradition to the written word, or is there some level of invention in the case of the scribes and redactors of older texts? The inconsistency of the etymology, in spite of the consistency (even across cultures) of the mythological context within a variety of medieval texts, implies a little bit of both options.

Certain figures and motifs recur with surprising frequency. The magical cauldron or cup with the drink that induces knowledge, health, or immortality and the imposing figure of a queen, sometimes a mother, but often a warrior, that drifts between the mortal and immortal world are both examples of these cross-cultural memes. Rhiannon is not Medb and certainly not Grendel's mother, but all three share an inherent connection to the kingship and the health of the kingdom. Rhiannon may be the most pure and untouched example of the sovereignty goddess motif because her actions are centered around keeping her self-contained kingdom whole. It is not until after she is freed from her imprisonment in the Third Branch that the Seven Cantrefs are restored to their full health. And unlike Medb, she seemingly has no ambitious interest in conquering other kingdoms or even advancing her own station in life by marrying greater and greater kings. Yet for her kingdom, she is definitely greater than mortal, as evidenced by her outliving Pwyll, surviving through Pryderi's eighty-seven

year exile with the head of Bran in which she likely was the sole ruler, and still was beautiful enough to be desired by and married to Manawydan before her captivity. Her actions as a queen tie her to Rigantona, but the punishments that she suffers—acting as a horse at the foot of the castle after the supposed death of her son and wearing collar and bridle during her extended imprisonment—reinforce her long association with Epona. These are the type of connections between literature and mythology that continue to inspire the study of old texts, but the etymological distance between the names continues to obfuscate the answers to the multitude of questions.

What is left is the picture of the tale's redactor—the person or persons that recorded these stories to paper. What these tales were before can only be guessed at, but it is increasingly obvious that even the writing down of these epics and heroic tales was a great, creative effort. Much like the modernists, the medieval redactors exhibited revolutionary levels of textual creativity. They were able to take bits and pieces of Celtic, Germanic, or possibly even Indo-European mythology and weave them into tales that reflected the later developments of oral tradition and folklore of very specific cultures. Yet because of the mythological roots, no matter how deeply buried, certain similarities remained and beautiful works of post-Christian literature mirrored the labyrinthine complexities inherent in the pre-Christian world.

CHAPTER THREE

IRISH DUALITIES IN THE TÁIN

“ravens gnaw men’s necks blood gushes
fierce fray hacked flesh battle-drunk
men’s sides blade-struck war-torn
raking fingers battle-brave men of Crúachan
ruination bodies crushed underfoot
Long live Ulster woe to Ireland
woe to Ulster long live Ireland”

--Ciaran Carson, *The Táin*

AN IRISH OLD TESTAMENT

In trying to identify what could be called true Celtic culture, most scholars look to the literature and mythology of Ireland. Ireland’s independence from Roman authority and influence makes it singular among the other Celtic traditions that had been assimilated into Roman culture. Often, the gods and goddesses of the continental Celts would have been simply renamed and reclassified according to the Roman pantheon, as Julius Caesar did when he wrote about his encounters with the Gauls, listing their principle god as Mercury along with a cohort of Apollo, Minerva, and others (Sjoestedt xiii). While this reclassification may have worked for Caesar, it was likely not an accurate reflection of the roles of the Celtic deities. Caesar’s version of the Gallic pantheon does have one significant purpose, though. It establishes that the Gauls and other Celtic tribes primarily worshipped the lesser gods of Roman tradition, which

only serves to further illustrate Roman superiority. Luckily, Irish tradition was spared this sort of Roman interference, and, alone in the Celtic world, its oral tradition should have existed intact until the development of writing. This insular nature would naturally preserve the mythology in a purer state, as Sjoestedt argues:

It is chiefly in Ireland that Celtic paganism survived long enough to be committed to writing. And everything tends to suggest that if the oral tradition of Gaul before the conquest had been written down and had been preserved for us, it would have revealed a mythological world not very different, and certainly not more 'primitive' than that to which the mediaeval Irish texts give access.
(xix)

It is for this reason that Sjoestedt argues for examining the surviving pieces of early Irish literature as mythological remnants of a larger Celtic and eventually Indo-European culture.

But there are problems with this approach. Early Irish literature, though generally free from Roman corruption, cannot be said to be completely pure when it was first written down and preserved by Christian clergy. Sjoestedt addresses this concern about the earliest manuscript writers by noting that "only a few generations separated them from paganism" (xiv). However, this would still imply that these mostly Christian scribes would preserve the pagan past of Ireland as simply a matter of historical record. This notion seems to be at odds with what Vernant and Levi-Strauss concluded about myth: that it is inherently analogous to the culture of the mythmakers (McCone 62). If myth is reflective of the current culture, then the myths recorded by the eighth and ninth century scribes would have been a mirror not of pre-Christian

Ireland, but of their contemporary Christianized society. This is the basis of McCone's argument against nativist readings of the Irish manuscript tradition.

To set up the opposing sides, Sjoestedt and others, like Mac Cana, see in the earliest Irish texts a description of the mythological past of the island. The battles between the *Túatha dé Danann* and the Fomorions and Fir Bolg are representative of the gods and goddesses driving out the giants and monsters of past traditions. The later heroic cycles show how the early mortal heroes carved out Irish society while existing side by side with the deities of the island. They argue that the number of similarities between Irish and Welsh texts or Irish and continental traditions is evidence of an earlier Celtic mythological source. McCone also looks for sources to the heroic and mythic traditions of early Ireland, but he disregards the notion of a pure Celtic source and favors one that is more in line with the religious sensibilities of the Christian manuscript writers—the Bible. For McCone, the ongoing conflict between the *Túatha dé* (or God's People) and the *Fir Bolg* and the later *Fomorians* is analogous to the conflicts of the Israelites as they take the promised land from the Canaanites before spending much of their history battling the Philistines. For McCone, the Irish mythological and heroic cycles are emblematic of an Irish Old Testament, while the literature that takes place after Patrick's arrival can be seen as the New Testament (71). Even the inter-Irish conflicts represented within the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* have their Biblical counterparts in the rivalry that develops between the nations of Israel and Judah.

Both approaches have their merits, so it would be difficult to delve into an attempt at literary anthropology within a specific heroic text without considering both arguments. Without attempting to solve the larger disagreement between these two schools of thought, it may be possible to find a kind of compromise between a wholly mythic and purely Christian reading by acknowledging that Christian writers, though only separated from pagan society by a few generations, would have been influenced by both their pagan past and Christian present. In this way, the euhemerization process is recognized, but so are the remaining echoes of pre-Christian myth.

Among the most predominant of these are the memes related to sovereignty. While the Welsh tradition held Annwn as the predominant site reflecting mythic kingship, the Irish seat of kings was the Hill of Tara. In myth, this was the capital of the *Túatha dé Danann* and the later High Kings of Irish tradition, including Medb's father Eochaid Feidlech and Lóegaire, the last pagan king of Ireland. It would seem that for mythic purposes the king in Tara would have similar stature to the Head of Annwn. Loomis makes this connection, as well, by naming Curoi's fortress at Tara the equivalent of the Grail King's castle (*Celtic* 158). The story of *Bricriu's Feast* then becomes an analogue for continental Grail tradition and the comparison may even be carried further with the story of the Dagda's cauldron within the Mythological Cycle. Thus, it is through a relationship with Tara that the pre-Christian Irish kings were able to claim a right to kingship. While the historicity of a true High King of Ireland may be justifiably called into question, the mythological and literary Tara is central to the mythological

and literary map of Ireland. By the time of Patrick, Tara becomes a symbol of all that remains of pagan Ireland. And it is here that Patrick has his most memorable confrontations with Léogaire in an attempt to convert him, and thus the island, to Christianity. In this sense, Tara, and those associated with it are relics of the pre-Christian past, and even in the “New Testament” texts related to Patrick, it is the city of sovereignty.

THE PRICE OF SOVEREIGNTY

Sjoestedt, in describing the rituals related to kingship, quotes Giraldus Cambrensis' description of an Ulster clan's violent rite of kingship where the king is united with a mare, representing the fertility of the land. The symbolic act ends with the king eating of the mare's boiled flesh and bathing in the broth (xviii). This is reminiscent of the description from Tacitus of the ceremony involving the goddess and her priests. In fact the only thing missing from the description is water. Grigsby finds this counterpart in the story of Fergus and Medb. He argues that their act of consummation within a lake, which drives Aillil to have Fergus killed, is emblematic of the same ritual of *heiros gamos* Cambrensis mentions (*Warriors* 40). Aillil had tolerated Medb's infidelity with Fergus throughout the *Táin* because he believed that their union would lead towards victory. But it seems that after the battles were over, Fergus

became a significant threat for Aillil's kingship, so he interrupted the rite between a presumptive king and the personage of the sovereignty goddess.

The interpretation of Medb as sovereignty goddess became commonplace in 1928 when Tomás Ó Máille first proposed her status as a personification of the goddess and later when Thurneysen and Mac Cana published their own arguments agreeing with Ó Maille (Edel "Caught" 149). Her role in the *Táin* as the primary instigator of the entire war certainly seems to grant her a level of authority even over her husband, King Aillil. Medb reminds Aillil of her power over him constantly, and, according to the "Pillow Talk" chapter from the Book of Leinster version of the text, Medb's desire for a bull to match Aillil's White Bull of Finnbennach with one of her own is ostensibly reason for war between Connacht and Ulster. Also, within the "Pillow Talk," Medb taunts Aillil with a list of her other potential husbands, all of whom are kings over smaller parts of Ireland. One of whom, not coincidentally, is Conchobar, king of Ulster. In fact, other traditions actually point to Conchobar as Medb's previous husband, not simply one of her suitors (Edel 173). If that is the case, then there is now a literary pattern of Medb as the wife of an Irish king. Thus, the Leinster redaction of the *Táin*, which does promote Medb's dominance over Aillil more prominently than other versions, is considered, by a number of scholars from Cecille O'Rahilly to Nora Chadwick, the definitive version (Gribben 3).

Medb, it seems, has a number of similarities to the figure of Rhiannon from the *Mabinogion*. Each has been thought of as a representative of the sovereignty goddess,

and their multiple marriages to kings would seem to be enough to back up that assumption. Rhiannon's associations with the horse goddess and her own associations with horses also tie her into the scaral rite of kingship as described by Sjoestedt above. Of interest here is Doris Edel's assertion that Medb's physical abilities are connected to horses in the *dindshenchas* tradition (158). This also serves to place Medb within that same tradition of equine-sovereignty goddesses. Yet Medb's divine traits continue within another Irish tradition of sovereignty. Mac Cana, in his landmark essay on this theme, describes a scene from *Baile in Scáil* where the goddess Éire is "depicted as a lady wearing a golden crown and seated on a crystal throne, having before her a vat of red liquor, from which she pours a draught into a golden cup which she hands to each successive king of Ireland" (77). Medb, or "the drunken (or drunk-making) one" could easily be seen as the personification of this red liquor, as Edel describes, "a divine being with whom the kings of certain tribes were supposed to unite through drunkenness" (161).

Within the *Táin*, Medb seemingly makes a promise to Fer Diad that exemplifies her possible authority as a goddess of sovereignty. To entice this great warrior to fight his foster brother, she promises him land, a chariot, quite a lot of money, freedom from taxes, her own daughter, and as Carson translates it, "the friendship of my own thighs" (124). Implicit in this arrangement is the notion that Fer Diad will be a king, though not necessarily in title. What is clear from this passage is that Medb adamantly believes that she not only has the ability to grant these things, but that it is her right to do so.

She does not consult Aillil before making this offer, but does so under her own authority, which at this point is greater than the king's. Her authority here is established very early in the epic where she claims responsibility for the coming war: "There are those today who leave behind lovers, friends and relations. And if they do not come back safe and sound, they all will curse me, because I made the call to arms." With that statement of her own authority and culpability in this war, Medb firmly establishes her authority over her own husband and in turn, their kingdom.

Once again like Rhiannon, Medb seems to take the lead away from her husband, the king. Aillil, while not quite as helpless as Pwyll, generally assents to Medb's plans, with very few exceptions. One of those comes early on when Medb notices one of the eighteen companies is much more organized and skillful than the others. She immediately worries that her victory will be claimed by these skillful Galeóin, so she offers a solution to Fergus and Aillil:

"Kill them," Medb said.

"That is a woman's thinking and no mistake!" Aillil said. "A wicked thing to say."

"These men are our friends," Fergus said, for the Ulster exiles. "You will take this evil advice over our dead bodies."

"We might do that," Medb said. (Kinsella 66)

Later in the exchange, she agrees to a suggestion from Fergus to split the company of Galeóin among the rest of the army, so that they will no longer stand out. Noticeable in this exchange is not just Aillil's disagreement with Medb, but also his failure to come up with a workable solution. Fergus, himself a mythological figure in nature, has to come up with a solution to avoid a schism between his own loyal soldiers and Medb's. This

confrontation prefigures the seemingly destined affair between these two mythic characters.

Ireland's sovereignty, however, is not just present within the personage of Medb, but also within the magical liquor poured distilled and distributed by the goddess Éire. Could this drink be the same as that from the Dagda's cauldron, or the Head of Annwn's cauldron, or even the draught of wisdom consumed by Taliesin and tasted by Finn? It certainly seems to share a number of the same magical properties, but the most significant is how the drink is only found in the magical realm of Tara, or as in the other traditions Annwn and the Grail Castle. In the Irish tradition, this drink, representative of the land, and the sovereignty goddess concomitantly exist within the personage of Medb.

McCone, however, sees something else within the tradition of sacral kingship (154). To quote from the King James Version:

And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fortification. (Rev. 17:1-2)

This is quite a different picture of Medb than the previous reading of her as a semi-divine Boudicca. And yet we have here in *Revelation* the symbols of both the wife of kings and the drink she intoxicates them with. However, reading Medb as the Whore of Babylon places her firmly within McCone's pre-Christian Ireland as an Old Testament. She is emblematic of the way things were before a king could know of Christ. Is it any

wonder then that her ex-husband, Conchobar through later legends becomes the first Irish king to receive salvation? As the story goes, Conchobar had a grievous wound in his head that threatened to kill him if he ever exerted himself. He lived in a state of calm for seven years until he felt the tremors of the earthquake from the time of Christ's death. After his druid tells him the cause of the quake, Conchobar's head literally explodes with grief upon hearing the news. The blood from his head serves as his baptism and he is thus the first pagan to receive salvation (McCone 74).

McCone's argument, however, doesn't negate the possibility that Medb and other mythical and legendary female figures could be remnants of a sovereignty goddess, but it does provide an example of how the more Christian texts would rework older mythic themes into the new Christian paradigm. The true female figure of sovereignty in the newer culture would not be represented by what Sjoestedt called "A deity who is at the same time a mother and a warrior" (37), but as the heavenly city, the holy bride of Christ: "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2).

If in the older tradition, the sovereignty goddess (or grail) represented the health of the land and the king's right to rule it, the newer tradition supplanted both of those roles with the church. After Patrick, authority no longer came from Tara, but from the church. As McCone states, "...a hierogamous pagan Irish sacral kingship and associated mythology had by about the seventh century A.D. been subtly but nonetheless comprehensively converted by churchmen into a Christian ideology of

monarchy by God's grace with a marked Old Testament stamp" (158). This kind of transition, once again, does not mean that an Irish and therefore Celtic tradition of sovereignty goddesses did not exist, just that it underwent a much more subtle euhemerization process than the typical conversion of ancient gods and heroes into saints.

The question still remains, however, whether these changes were intentional efforts to marginalize the pagan past of Ireland or simply subconscious alterations of the historical record by Christian monks truly interested in the past. Perhaps looking at only these two symbols narrows the focus too much. If old heroes generally become saints, then there must be some other level of distinction to the "Old Testament" heroes of Irish tradition.

SAINT AND HERO

The main point of Sjoestedt's work on Celtic mythology is that it is based on a pair of juxtapositions: the goddess, the natural world's representative of fertility and war, with the king who embodies the same traits from the mortal aspect of society, and the hero of the tribe and society with the hero outside the tribe's authority. The former is embodied in Medb and her numerous partners of Conchobar, Aillil, and Fergus, but the latter is epitomized by Cú Chulainn and Finn. In the light of the previous section, a third element should be added to the duo of goddess and king: the

church. Likewise, another element should be added to the list of heroes: the saint, personified by Patrick. Each of these characters plays a specific role within myth and literature. The hero, either Finn or Cú Chulainn, straddles the line between the gods and men, guarding against threats both natural and supernatural, but always serving the people (Sjoestedt 94). The saint, in contrast, serves as God's representative to the people, and anything he does, even his battles against supernatural foes, is designed to bring his flock closer to God.

Within the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn is the solitary protector of Ulster because of the incapacitating illness all Ulstermen, save him, experience. He stands alone against an invading army of nearly 40,000 men, led by the personage of the goddess of sovereignty herself, using guerilla warfare and his own supernatural strength and abilities. Throughout the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn not only faces and defeats countless mortal enemies, but he also engages in combat various forms of the Morrígan. She first approaches him as a seductress, but after he refuses her offer, she promises to disrupt him during the battle:

“When you are busiest in the fight I’ll come against you. I’ll get under your feet in the shape of an eel and trip you in the ford.”

“That is easier to believe. You are no king’s daughter. But I’ll catch and crack your eel’s ribs with my toes and you’ll carry that mark forever unless I lift it from you with a blessing.”

“I’ll come in the shape of a grey she-wolf, to stampede the beasts into the ford against you.”

“Then I’ll hurl a sling-stone at you and burst the eye in your head, and you’ll carry that mark forever unless I lift it from you with a blessing.”

“I’ll come before you in the shape of a hornless red heifer and lead the cattle-herd to trample you in the waters, by ford and pool, and you won’t know me.”

“Then I’ll hurl a stone at you,” he said, “and shatter your leg, and you’ll carry that mark forever unless I lift it from you with a blessing.”
Then she left him. (Kinsella 133)

Cú Chulainn was true to his word, for in the next battle, everything happened as was promised. The Morrígan even was able to trick Cú Chulainn to bless her and heal her wounds later. But the story remains that he went into battle against a goddess and won.

But Cú Chulainn’s other supernatural traits manifest themselves within the epic, especially when he begins his heroic warp spasms. He becomes a monstrous thing, a giant on the battlefield with the light of the sun shining from his head. This kind of description leads McHugh and others to name Cú Chulainn as the reincarnation of Lug, the Celtic Sun-god, and not just his son (28). Cú Chulainn, along with Perceval and Lancelot, certainly shares a number of traits with Lug, but his status as the semi-divine son of this god puts him on another level from other Irish heroes. To detail all of his legendary exploits would take a library, but as evidenced from his role in the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn generally works with the tribe against outside threats, often putting himself up against insurmountable odds in order to protect his society.

Finn, in contrast, exists outside the system of tribe and kingdom. As Sjoestedt describes the *fiana*, a member “lives on the margin of society, in forest and wilderness where the tribal hero adventures only on brief expeditions, the domain of the *Tuatha*, of the people of the *Síde*, the Celtic spirits of the wilderness” (85). Where Cú Chulainn occasionally battles the gods for his people, Finn exists out among them, only

occasionally venturing back into the world of men. Finn, like Cú Chulainn has his own supernatural side. He shapeshifts, usually as either a dog or deer, and may even be the son of the water god Manannán (86). Finn's heroic nature is not in opposition to Cú Chulainn, but complements it. Perhaps the difference between the two heroes is the same as that between myth and folklore. Cú Chulainn's works are those of the epic, while Finn's numerous adventures more closely resembles that of oral tradition (91).

In many ways, Finn may more closely resemble the Beowulf of the first half of his epic than his Irish contemporary, Cú Chulainn. Beowulf leaves his own tribe in search of an adventure to bring himself glory. He hears of a terrible monster across the sea and travels to destroy it. He has no attachment to Hrothgar's kingdom and seems to work wholly as a mercenary, only taking home treasures and gifts, while refusing the chance to be an heir for Denmark. Finn, likewise, travels outside of his homeland to defeat giants and build his own legend. Where Finn differs is how he continues to resist the temptation to join in with the community. While Beowulf becomes king of his people, one of Finn's last battles comes in a war against the High King of Ireland. He becomes emblematic of the outlaw hero, and like any great hero from folklore, his end is uncertain. As Lady Gregory's translation of *Gods and Fighting Men* says,

And as to Finn, there are some say he died by the hand of a fisherman; but it is likely that is not true, for that would be no death for so great a man as Finn, son of Cumhal. And there are some say he never died, but is alive in some place yet- But some say the day will come with the Dord Fiann will be sounded three times, and that at the sound of it the Fianna will rise up as strong and as well as they ever were. (384-385)

With an ending like that, Finn sounds a lot like another messianic hero of legend and folklore. Arthur and Finn are a lot alike—both leaders of men and folk heroes, but both are eclipsed by the overtly Christian theme surrounding their death. Finn in particular has his own legend meshed with another type of hero, one that disregards the earlier tradition altogether in St. Patrick.

Patrick Ford, in writing about the Patrician legend quotes Ludwig Bieler's statement that "the Lives of the Irish saints not only continue the tradition of heroic literature, but have in some degree borrowed from the sagas even their motifs" (30). The legends of St. Patrick are no exception to this statement. McCone's argument that the literature and mythography of Ireland shifts from an Old to New Testament style after Patrick's arrival in 432 would seem to imply that his literary character existed outside the normal confines of hero. But there are numerous aspects to his character that reflect an almost mythic quality. In a scene very reminiscent to the confrontation between the biblical prophet Elijah and the priests of Ba'al, Patrick challenges the druids of Tara's king Loíguire (Lóegaire) to an "ordeal by fire" (Ford 32). In the end, "Patrick's opponents are consumed by their own fires and Lucet Mael (the chief druid) is snuffed" (32). Patrick's mastery over fire, exhibited by this and other tales, is accompanied by another traditional heroic feat—the removal of serpents (or dragons).

As Ford summarizes a tale from Hyde's *Saints and Sinners*,

When the serpent sees the saint swimming naked across the water to the island, it swims out to meet him and swallows him. Using his crozier, Patrick strikes out on all sides from within the serpent, so that blood flows out of the serpent's mouth, turning the water red. (34)

In defeating the Serpent by force, Patrick goes against the traditional saintly battle against a dragon, which typically involves the Saint invoking the name of Christ and ordering the dragon to die (Rauer). Instead, Patrick acts more like a legendary hero, killing the beast by his own means.

But these are mere heroic feats, things that Finn or Cú Chulainn could easily do to protect their *fianna* or tribe. Where Patrick transcends the status of hero is in his mastery over these two iconic figures in their deaths. Finn's son, Oisín, returns to Ireland after nearly 400 years in the land of Faerie, only to meet Patrick, who listens to Oisín's tales of the *fianna*, but explains that the heroic Finn and his men are not only dead, but also "lying now very sorrowful on the flag-stone of pain" (Gregory 402). The confrontation between Oisín and Patrick ends with Oisín begging Patrick to "not forsake the great men; bring in the *Fianna* unknown to the King of Heaven" (404). Patrick's response to that request is left unsaid, but it is especially telling that in describing so many great heroics, Oisín cannot ultimately declare Finn and his band greater for Ireland than God. And he laments that fact, and is full of sorrow for the loss of Ireland's heroic past. As for Cú Chulainn, Patrick's resurrection of his spirit as a means to convert Lóegaire is well-documented as is Cú Chulainn's begging of Patrick to "bear me with your faithful into the lands of the living" (McCone 200).

In two separate accounts, Patrick is shown to have power over Ireland's two greatest heroes as they suffer in the afterlife. He wears the trappings of a hero, with his supernatural abilities, but he plays the role of antagonist to the entrenched pagan

traditions. So through the hero-saint of Patrick, the Christian tradition is shown to be superior to the mythical accomplishments of Ireland's heroic past. It is in these tales, then, that the most visible evidence of Christianization is present. If the monkish redactors of earlier Irish texts set out to minimize the pagan past, it would be logical to assume that those heroic tales would be similar in nature to the Patrician tradition. A complicated, extended metaphor for Biblical heroes would be unlikely in the Irish scholarly tradition, though perhaps the redactors were unconsciously influenced by their own Christian biases. One has to look only as far as *Beowulf* to find an example of a pagan heroic text modified by a Christian redactor intent on using it for religious purposes. The *Táin*, and to an extent the Mythological and Fenian Cycles, avoids the overt Christian elements present within *Beowulf* or similar texts from contemporary traditions. These texts are so unabashedly and almost joyfully pagan in nature, that it is difficult to reconcile their character with that of a Christian scribe. McCone is correct, at least, in asserting that the scribes could not have helped but be influenced by their contemporary cultures. And those cultural shifts are evident in the differences between the earlier and later manuscripts of the *Táin*, but there is still very little to suggest an overt attempt to Christianize the old texts themselves. Patrick, it seems, fills that role nicely. With his heroics, there is no need to try to completely reconcile the pagan past with the Christian present. Because Patrick changed things. His arrival and subsequent myth merged beautifully with the pre-existing Irish mythology. As Sjoestedt says, "Some peoples, such as the Romans, think of their myths historically;

the Irish think of their history mythologically” (1). And that outlook on history and myth allows the paradox of a pagan literary tradition compiled and saved by a Christian scholar class.

CONCLUSION

(in Irish) “A blessing on everyone who will memorise the Táin faithfully in this form, and not put any other form on it”

(in Latin) “I who have copied down this story, or more accurately fantasy, do not credit the details of the story, or fantasy. Some things in it are devilish lies, and some poetical figments; some seem possible and others not; some are for the enjoyment of idiots.”

--Thomas Kinsella, footnote to *The Táin*

‘The Celtic movement,’ as I understand it, is principally the opening of this fountain, and none can measure of how great importance it may be to coming times, for every new fountain of legends is a new intoxication for the imagination of the world. It comes at a time when the imagination of the world is as ready, as it was at the coming of the tales of Arthur and of the Grail, for a new intoxication.

--W. B. Yeats, “The Celtic Element in Literature”

The survival of certain mythic elements from the heroic traditions of the British Isles into the later Christian copies and redactions lies behind one of the most significant questions in early medieval scholarship. Namely, how trustworthy are the Christian scribes regarding the now obsolete pagan societies? This debate has primarily taken place within the confines of Irish literature, under the respective umbrellas of nativist and non-nativist research, though these exclusionary groupings may represent an oversimplification of the arguments presented by either side. This simplified dichotomy conjures up the ghostly images of two very different monkish scribes. One is a studious historian, carefully gathering as much information on the old ways as he can before putting pen to paper. Though he may not always have an

accurate grasp of the mythology behind what he is writing, some kernels of the true pagan past are still present in the tales he records. The other is a cunning and creative writer. He understands that his writing will eventually supersede whatever oral tradition currently exists, and he should frame his narrative not as an accurate representation of the previous heathen culture, but as an allegory preparing the way for the coming of the true faith. Neither portrait is truly satisfying.

Instead, there is room for a scribe that combines the creativity of the latter view with the former's respect for or even interest in historical and mythical tradition. McCone allows for this possibility by asserting that the *filid*, or scholar-poets of Irish tradition, would have been likely candidates for education within a monastic setting (28). With this noted, it would be possible that a number of these *filid* would then not only write and copy the texts and documents representing their new faith, but also the tales and myths that had been the focus of their prior learning. This seems to be a reasonable assumption, but certainly cannot alone account for the wealth of mythological material present within Irish tradition or the extant literature from the Welsh and Anglo-Saxon cultures. While it would be convenient to argue for a single Indo-European mythic tradition uniting similar tales from Ireland and India or Germany and Wales, these similarities may have no more of a relationship than that of Beowulf the Geat and Watanabe the Japanese champion (Fjalldal viii). Therein lies the problem of searching for analogues, even among the later Christian traditions. While Old Testament parallels can certainly be read into the mythological cycles of Irish

literature, the human ability to underestimate the patterns created by coincidence should also be accounted for. Ockham's Razor, so adroitly used by McCone to argue against nativist theories may in turn be used against his own. The simplest explanation is often the most correct. A vast number of monks working across the entirety of Ireland independently or cooperatively reworking the ancient myths of the island into Christian allegories is not as simple an explanation as coincidence. Now, does this mean that an allegorical reading of *Cath Maige Tuireadh* should be discarded? 'Not difficult.' No. What should be discarded is the notion that either an allegorical or mythological reading is correct, for they both are.

In the case of tales of which multiple versions and manuscripts exist, which should be considered most accurate? 'Not difficult.' All of them. The *Táin*, for example, has at least two major redactions, the later one with some significant changes from the first. Yet when looked at together, the two versions paint a much fuller picture of the epic, while also showing how cultural ideas may have shifted in the intervening years. The redactor of the later book of Leinster version is more cautious in his descriptions of the powerful Medb, perhaps exhibiting a recent shift in the thinking towards women. This scribe is also the one who penned the epigraph above, writing a brief editorial commentary on the contents of the work he just completed. This certainly calls into question the infallibility of how the *Táin* was found again, but it may actually strengthen the argument for the *Táin* as an accurate representation of pagan culture in pre-Christian Ireland. The implications of this brief coda are many, but none seem to

provide an answer that resolves the debate on the native aspects of Irish myth and literature.

Beowulf, despite not existing in multiple copies, still bears the mark of two separate scribes, leaving open the possibility of two different editorial minds working, copying, and adjusting an older text. What were their influences? More significantly, what were the influences of the original composer of the written epic? Richard North has some ideas to answer the latter question. He argues that *Beowulf* was the work of Abbot Eanmund of Breedon on the Hill in Mercia, and that the epic was composed by reworking the legend of Hrólfr as received by Frisian traders, was influenced by the epics of Virgil, and was written in honor of the new Mercian king Wiglaf, successor to Beornwulf in the winter of 826-7 (331). If this were the case, any resemblance to myth would therefore be incidental, but would they be of any less import? Certainly the accuracy of any speculation into the relationship between epic and myth is called into question, but even North himself admits that his argument is based on possibility and coincidence and is not something that can be readily proven by any historical evidence (ix). *Beowulf* is a landmark text within British literature, yet its origins are no more clear today than a century ago.

Without textual examples from before the transition to Christianity, we are still left to wonder exactly how accurate the existing manuscripts reflect pre-Christian culture in Ireland and Britain. As Sjoestedt wrote, “it is proper to believe the evidence they have left us, unless there is proof to the contrary” (xiv). This seems right, as far as

literary and even anthropological analysis goes. To borrow a metaphor from Mark Scowcroft, spending too much time trying to examine the pagan stones may bring the ancient and still beautiful Christian church building tumbling down (McCone 80). Or in other terms, this kind of analysis would be akin to trying to see the marble-clad Rome of Augustus in the halls of the Vatican instead of the ruins of the Forum. There is value in appreciating beauty in where it lies, not in only what it might have been. The cultural memes of Goddess and Grail may still echo within the later Christianized heroic tales of the British Isles, or they may have even survived intact, but they are only alive in their existing forms, regardless of their past shape. Maybe Medb was simply lucky in her choice of husband, Grendel's mother was just a troll, or the Grail really was brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimethea. Then again, it may be more rewarding to see the personification of Eíre or even the Church in Medb, a fallen sovereignty and fertility goddess in *Grendles Modor*, or one of the Thirteen Royal Treasures of Britain in the *Sangreal*.

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