1976

Finder of the Welsh Gods

Dainis Bisenieks

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol3/iss3/11
Finder of the Welsh Gods

Abstract
Discusses the fantasies of Kenneth Morris based on Welsh mythology.

Additional Keywords
Fantasy literature—Welsh influences; Morris, Kenneth. Book of the Three Dragons; Morris, Kenneth. The Fates of the Princes of Dyfed; Morris, Kenneth. The Secret Mountain; Edith Crowe; Annette Harper
A FORGOTTEN FANTASTIST indeed is Kenneth Morris, author of two long prose works and a book of stories. Little can be said of his life, except that he is most remembered for his contributions to the Arthurian legends. Morris was a devout Christian and a member of the Theosophical Society, and his work is characterized by a strong sense of the sacred and the divine.

The language is magniloquent, sometimes flowery; at times supercilious. The imagination remains a natural human faculty; Tolkien in both the "Inward Laws...at the heart of all true religion" and the "inward law...at the heart of all true religion" says that the imagination is the faculty which decides what is truly sacred and what is profane. (The "Inward Law: "Christianity and Art")

God's work on Earth is no longer done by men whose heroic qualities are manifest to the imagination. A Christian will in any event disbelieve Morris's claims to have learned from the theosophists the "inward laws...at the heart of all true religion; which is now human should be more than human, divine." He will be able to heed the divine in each of us...the Dragon Wars and the ages." But the imagination remains a natural human faculty; Tolkien in both the "Inward Laws...at the heart of all true religion" and the "inward law...at the heart of all true religion" says that the imagination is the faculty which decides what is truly sacred and what is profane. (The "Inward Law: "Christianity and Art")

The Fates of the Princes of Dyfed (London, 1914) continues a branch of Welsh themes, and his last published book, The Life and Times of the Three Dragons (New York, 1930), continues a branch of the other long tale. This last had a wider public as a Junior Literary Guild selection and got some good reviews, but that is not enough. The "Morus" book on a bookstore shelf.

It is the work of a believer who is fortunately a good storyteller. One may be shy of theosophy and its vocabulary--I don't like making utterances about the soul of man--but I agree as well as an unbeliever may with his ideas on the uses of myth and story, set forth in an interesting preface. Morris claims the right to rework his sources, did generations of scholars agree that their characters were once gods, and Morris has restored godhead to so, that the tale may work on us as he believes they should. "The deepest truths of religion and philosophy, but that is the last we hear of Mr. Morris. Lin Carter reprinted a part of the last book, Ursula Le Guin spoke well of it, I checked some standard reference works, and so it was my fate to recognize the "Morus" book on a bookstore shelf.

As for the Gods, Morris relies on his intuition to extract their names and natures from the remnants of Welsh lore. He finds nothing numinous in names like Teutates and Hercannis, known from inscriptions in Roman Gaul. But "Plenyydd, Alawm and Grwion--the Light-bringer, the Lord of Harmonies, the Heartener of Heroes--they form so perfect a symbol of powers that lie latent in ourselves and in the universe, that if they were invented by Iolo Morganwg or [others], and would say the invention his name. The stories in The Secret Mountain (London, 1926) are partly on Welsh themes, and his last published book, work of the Three Dragons (New York, 1930), continues a branch of the other long tale. This last had a wider public as a Junior Literary Guild selection and got some good reviews, but that is not enough. The "Morus" book on a bookstore shelf.

The first time he fails is a daughter of Hisford. The second time he fails is a daughter of Hisford. But often, too, there is a sly irony in the words of the heroes as they refuse tempting offers or make light of their difficulties.
As in the Mabinogion, Toymion Tref Filant, King of Gwen Iiscoed, finds an infant boy dropped by his stable as he watches to prevent the magical disappearance of the latest foal of his great bulls. The boy is a god in disguise: Plenydd, the Sight-Giver. Lasty, after the last bird and the child vanish; Rhianon (as in the original) is accused of doing away with her son. Pwyll himself is taken away by Ceridwen, whose deceptions had tested him, and his memories pass from him.

The Immortals take counsel again: "Difficult is it, this raising up of Immortals"—but Rhianon will not have her mission come to nothing: "You shall have two Gods from this labor of mine: Pwyll Pen Annwn and Pryderi fab Pwyll." Though great sorrows await her, she accepts this fate.

As the Mabinogion, Toymion Tref Filant, King of Gwen Iiscoed, finds an infant boy dropped by his stable as he watches to prevent the magical disappearance of the latest foal of his great bulls. The boy is a god in disguise: Plenydd, the Sight-Giver. Lasty, after the last bird and the child vanish; Rhianon (as in the original) is accused of doing away with her son. Pwyll himself is taken away by Ceridwen, whose deceptions had tested him, and his memories pass from him.

The Immortals take counsel again: "Difficult is it, this raising up of Immortals"—but Rhianon will not have her mission come to nothing: "You shall have two Gods from this labor of mine: Pwyll Pen Annwn and Pryderi fab Pwyll." Though great sorrows await her, she accepts this fate.

As the Mabinogion, Toymion Tref Filant, King of Gwen Iiscoed, finds an infant boy dropped by his stable as he watches to prevent the magical disappearance of the latest foal of his great bulls. The boy is a god in disguise: Plenydd, the Sight-Giver. Lasty, after the last bird and the child vanish; Rhianon (as in the original) is accused of doing away with her son. Pwyll himself is taken away by Ceridwen, whose deceptions had tested him, and his memories pass from him.

The Immortals take counsel again: "Difficult is it, this raising up of Immortals"—but Rhianon will not have her mission come to nothing: "You shall have two Gods from this labor of mine: Pwyll Pen Annwn and Pryderi fab Pwyll." Though great sorrows await her, she accepts this fate.
is tempted with companionship among the Immortals and forgetting of the cares of the world, but perceives that there is a task for him and refuses. He wakes from his vision and soon the first task is made known to him. He follows Aden Lanach to the seashore, where a magical boat takes him to the Isle of Ewinwen Sea-Queen, who is ready to turn him to stone as other heroes have been transformed there. But he encounters her enchantments with the magic of story-telling and song. Seeming treasures he refuses and claims only a leaden disk—which is of course the object he seeks.

Quickly he defeats Ewinwen and Tathal; and Plenydd comes to him in dragon-form. The breastplate shall be his while he needs it on his quest.

On another magical boat Manawyddan comes face to face with Gwiawn, but their battle of enchantments is a standoff. The gloves of Gwron are needed to catch and hold the thief, but they must be earned through arduous service to the God. So Manawyddan goes forth to learn three crafts—Subtle Shoemaking, Subtle Shieldmaking, and Subtle Swordmaking—seeking out the right masters and patiently doing them service. Lastly, on the way to present the sword to Gwron, he meets with a chieftain who tells him of a dragon that bars the way ahead. He cannot refuse the encounter, but is he strong enough? Only the sword he is bearing proves good enough; and the chieftain gives him shoes and shield of the Subtle Making; these prove in the end to be his own work. Forward he goes and endures seven days of fighting with the dragon, who is indeed Gwron Gwyr, Heartener of Heroes.

At last Manawyddan has earned the Gloves. He is conveyed in another magic craft to the door of Uffern, the very underworld, which he forces, finding there enchanted armies, giants that were kings of old, and bards—all turned to stone. Gwiawn comes to oppose him, magic spell against spell. In his final pursuit of Gwiawn, Manawyddan throws out his treasures, one by one, to slow him down and, with but one shoe and one glove, catches him at the last. He compels him to divest himself of his thievishness and then to play on the harp a spell of awakening to the warriors. Then he takes the harp himself to oppose the sorceries of the underworld, and at the end Alawm himself comes to wield it and do away with all the terrors of hell. So the story of Manawyddan's wandering ends.

Nothing like these stories has been written in this century. E.R. Eddison's work might stand comparison, though the sources of his style are different: he too dealt in heroic action and divine purpose. But the exploits of his Demons are by comparison on a human scale, and his gods in Zimiamvia do not need men as allies in fulfilling their purpose. We do not find the systematic testing of the Hero, nor the hyperbole, characteristic of folk tale. To enjoy Morris we must accept that and the convention that a Hero can never be anything but heroic. Action, not character, is the center of interest.

Some part of the First Branch has been told by Evangeline Walton in The Song of Rhiannon. Prince of Annwn now adds Pwyll's struggle in Annwn and the wedding feast, his deception and counter-deception. Point-for-point comparison is impossible, so differently have they the two built on their common foundation. In Miss Walton's blending of passion, will and fate, the first two seem to be paramount. Here it is difficult to see Pwyll/Manawyddan and Gwyr/Fywyder as characters individualized by their passion and will, Kingly pride rules Pwyll, but when he succeeds at Celyddon and fails at Gorsedd Arberth, the temptations are simply given as resistible or irresistible, as the pattern of the story requires. The work of Morris, with its divine 'machinery,' is nearer to epic and farther from tragedy. It has a soaring optimism, while Miss Walton's is brooding and full of portents, most of all in Prince of Annwn, where some passages match the worst of Lovecraft.

I would not be hard to tell that the stories of The Secret Mountain are from the same hand—especially when the same myth appears in several. Men in their successive ensoulements are travelers on the road toward victory, with the Gods, against the forces of Chaos on the borders of Space. "The Last Adventures of Don Quijote" shows the transfiguration of one great soul in such a battle. Varlon Flamlas in the title story finds his quest taking him back to Babylon where he was a slave and so to captivity and death—giving the Godhead a new paean. "He Comedia of Evan Leyshon" is the soul-journey of a dying man, "Daffodil," a princess of Heaven, sacrifices herself for the sake of the corrupt Spirit of the Earth.

In the last two there is a bit too much inveighing. But I greatly liked "The Breasting, in which the three are not sure if Atidhanvan Sanaka, bearing the two and thirty marks of perfect birth and the birthmarks of the Chakhartvartin, truly knows That Brahman. "The Saint and the Forest Gods" tells of a gentle conversion. "Sion ap Siencyn": a husbandman hears the Birds of Rhianon and centuries pass.

The fisherman Wang Tao-Chen converses with the Sages in "Red-Peach-Blossom Inlet" and becomes the wisest of ministers. In "The Rose and the Cup" a widowed Central Asian queen finds a miraculous ransom to offer a conqueror. "The Apples of Knowledge" give wisdom—and sorrow—to two contending kings of ancient times.

The style carries all these stories—as is true of Dunsany—and it is more vigorous style, free of irony. Morris did not trifble with his fancies; he did not invent gods for a joke; the Dunsanian letdown is absent here. An inspiring writer, as our analytical fictionists are not. I do not believe with them that ours is a petty age, with Prufrock as its symbol. Interesting how fantasy can assert the contrary without ever saying anything about the shape of this or any other historical time. The Age of Heroes has never died.

An earlier version of this paper was read at Mythcon V.