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Finder of the Welsh Gods

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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
Finder of the Welsh Gods

A FORGOTTEN FANTASTIc indeed is Kenneth Morris, author of two long prose works and a book of stories. Little can be said of him without referring to his publications—he appears on the scene in England in 1909, when he wrote an introduction to Mrs. Annie Besant and the Moral Code by Joseph H. Russell, a polemical pamphlet sponsored by Katherine Tingley. A few years later he studied at the Theosophical community at Point Loma, California, founded by Mrs. Tingley, where in 1914 his book The Fates of the Princes of Dyfed was issued under the imprint of the Aryan Theosophical Press. (Its emblem, in those dead years, included both a Shield of David and a Swastika.) It was based on the First Branch of the Mabinogi and the name of another Welshman, and would say the invention of his name. The stories in The Secret Mountain (London, 1926) are partly on Welsh themes, and his last published book, Book 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 one would have been surprised if the last we heard 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.

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 bards before the tales were written down: there is nothing sacrosanct about these versions. Scholars agree that their characters were once gods, and Morris has restored godhead to them, so that the tales may work on us as he believes they should. "The deeper in truths of religion and philosophy, but that is the last we heard 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 Tarannis, ancient, medieval, or comparatively modern; one would have been surprised if the last we heard 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.

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So Pwyll arrives at the wedding feast of Gwawl in the guise of a beggar with a basket—a nicely underplayed arrival as three times the enchantment of Taliesin’s story-telling makes the guests oblivious of the noise of his overbearing of giants and piling up of their armor. Gwawl is duly trapped; Pwyll wins his bride. But soon comes his second failure. Setting forth to watch on Gorsedd Arberth, he is distracted by a divine smith he meets on the way; refusing a spear and a shield, he is at last tempted to accept a sword—and so proves himself unworthy; an enemy then comes to the land, and one of the three Birds of Rhiannon, the Singers of Peace, is stolen. A year later, he is sent to watch on Gorsedd Arberth again, where visions of fleeing countrymen and attacking armies tempt him to leave till at last he cannot bear the dishonor of inaction. More sorrow, and now two of the Birds are gone. Lastly, after the birth of his son Pryderi, he is tempted away by a vision of Rhiannon reporting the loss of his son; and thereafter the last bird and the child vanish; Rhiannon (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: “Difficulty it is, this raising up of Immortals”—but Rhiannon will not have her mission come to nothing: “You shall have two Gods from this labor of mine: Pwyll Pen Anwen and Pryderi fab Pwyll.” Though great sorrows await her, she accepts this fate.

As in the Mabinogion, Teyrnion Twrch Filiant, King of Gwent Iscoed, finds an infant boy dropped by his stable as he watches to prevent the magical disappearance of the latest foal of his great steers, but again, also in the original, is the matter: they give the king the Three Drops of Wisdom from the Cauldron of Ceridwen. Three powers are given him: the Art of War in the Midst of Peace, the Art of Peace in the Midst of War, and the Spell of the Wood, the Field and the Mountain: with their aid he overcomes the enchantments set against him and saves the foal. It will be the horse of the young hero, who is given the name of Gwri Gwalt Euryn.

Two chapters now toll of the testing of “The Nameless One with the Misfortunes,” who in thirteen years of wandering has known only sorrow, blame and failure. He meets a bard who names him to a quest for which he seems to be the right man: one with no pride in him. The wanderer pledges not to turn back and not to leave the bard until the other shall leave him. Though he is sorely put upon, he keeps faith and keeps his promise. He comes to the Cauldron of Regeneration, where his fate is made known to him and he who had been Pwyll receives a new name: Manawyddan, son of the Boundless. His companion is revealed as Gwydion, the son of Don, the Prince of Wisdom and Laughter. He embarks now on his quest, at the end of which he may return to Dyfed; but that is the subject of the next volume, Book of the Three Dragons.

Having grown to manhood and learned from his foster father the Three Unusual Arts, Gwri undertakes a quest to learn his origins. He comes to the well at Llandybie and there is told what rhymes he may undertake. First of them is Rhiannon, the Singers of Beauty and Peace. At a castle of sleeping giants he uses the Art of War in the Midst of Peace and frees one of the birds, Aden Lanach. The opposite art, used at a castle of quarreling giants, frees Aden Lonach. The quest of Aden Pwychaw proves a singular—and son of this quest is the famous trial with the Guardian Clan of the King of Bargod, who are there for the testing of men—“Till that which was man is more than man.” Deception must be overcome. At Caer Hedd, the Spell of the Three Places frees Aden Pwychaw, and the men of the castle, like those of the other two, accept their part in the plan which the Immortals have ordained for them. A last quest awaits Gwri: to go to the aid of Rhiannon. And before he departs he learns the “peculiarities” of the fillet and the golden ring that were on him at his finding and which he did not catch. To wear the fillet takes the burden of old age from an old man met on the road, who then reveals himself as Gwrion, the Heartener of Heroes, and soars away in dragon-form. The ring restores the sight of another, again a god in disguise: Plenydd the Sight-Giver. Lastly, within sight of the court, he comes upon a harper who names him to him as Pryderi, and who is recognized as Alawn, the Lord of Harmonies. (These are the Three Dragons of the other book’s title: the dragon was to Morris “the symbol of spiritual wisdom, spiritual courage, of mastery of the forces of the lower world.”) With his counsel Pwyll goes on his quest. Where he meets him are still confronting its usurpers. He restores youth and sight to his mother Rhiannon, who had sat at the palace gate for twenty years. To the last of Pwyll’s men at the palace he gives youth and strength; as a “craftsmen bearing his craft” he gains grudging admission to the palace. He restores the dragon to its rightful owners. None can prevail against him; the sovereignty of Rhiannon is restored, and with the singing of the Birds of Rhiannon the story comes to an end.

BOOK OF THE THREE DRAGONS takes up the story of Manawyddan, who is not, as in the Third Branch of the Mabinogi, a separate personage who marries a widowed Rhiannon, but Pwyll himself reborn. His testing by Gwydion and his rebirth in the Cauldron of Ceridwen are briefly told—there are some differences from the other version. The quest for which he is needed is the bringing of Bran the Blessed from the Isles of the Blessed to be the Crowned King at London. As a bodiless head he goes with the companions, who are those named in the Second Branch, adapted to Morris’s purpose. No Branwen, no war in Ireland: only that final voyage on which, at Gwalas in Penfro, Heilyn opens the forbidden door. Unknown to the companions, the Gods had set in the castle talismans to guard them: the breastplate of Plenydd, which is then stolen by Tathal Cheat-the-Light, and the harp of Alaw—stolen by Gwiaint Cat’s-Eye the Sea-Thief. The two gods can now serve neither gods nor men until the treasures shall be recovered.

Sadly the Companions bury the head of Bran and separate—and from this point the story is again the author’s invention, worked up from names, hints in old books, and his re-creation of druidic philosophy. For names, the story of Culhwch and Olwen is the richest source, with its tremendous list: Tathal is but one of them.

Manawyddan desires to return to Dyfed, but is guided to the Cave of the Trials, where the losses are made known to him. He
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 counts 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 Gwiaun, 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 ready to be armed? 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 Gawr, 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. Gwiaun comes to oppose him, magic spell against spell. In his final pursuit of Gwiaun, 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 forces 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 Alaw 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 Bhlannon. 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 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 Gwir/Frydery as characters individualized by their passion and will, as 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 Quixote" shows the transfiguration of one great soul in such a battle. Varlon Flflamas 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 Opportunity to write "A Commedia of Evan Lelyshon" 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 Holy Prize" in which the three are not sure if Atidhanan Sanaka, bearing the two and thirty marks of perfect birth and the birthmarks of the Charkavartin, truly knows That Brahman. "The Saint and the Forest Gods" tells of a gentle conversion. "Silian 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 trifle 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.