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### The Secret Queen: Two Views of the Heroine in Diana Paxson's *The White Raven*

#### Abstract

Contrasts Esseilte, who typifies the Campbellian role of the female in her symbolic relationship to the male, with Branwen—who challenges this pattern “by pursuing her own enlightenment in much the same way that a male hero does.”

#### Additional Keywords

Heroines; Paxson, Diana—Characters—Branwen; Paxson, Diana—Characters—Drustan; Paxson, Diana—Characters—Esseilte; Paxson, Diana—Characters—Marc’h; Paxson, Diana. *The White Raven*

# The Secret Queen

## Two Views of the Heroine in Diana Paxson's *The White Raven*

Bruce Byfield

In the Afterword to *The White Raven*, Diana Paxson notes that she once retold the story for a college literature class, keeping "to the traditional lines of the story" (437). Paxson does not explain this remark, but, since she refers to "the Tristan story" (437), one of the traditional aspects she has in mind seems to be the focus on the male; in most retellings, the focus is on Tristan's conflict between duty and love. Certainly, the fact that she inverts this tradition seems the main reason she dedicates this particular novel to Marion Zimmer Bradley, who did the same thing for the Arthurian legends in *The Mists of Avalon*. Unlike the Arthurian legends, however, the love of Tristan and Isolde is not easily inverted. Guinevere can be given her own conflict between love and duty, and allowed a certain bravery — or, if not, Morgan or some other female character can be developed. Isolde, on the other hand, is defined only through her love, and is the only woman in her legend. Rather than working overtime to provide the missing personality therefore, Paxson concentrates on Branwen, cousin and lady-in-waiting to Esseilte (as she calls Isolde). A servant to the aristocratic Esseilte, forced by circumstances to be practical where Esseilte is a dreamer, Branwen contrasts sharply with her mistress, both in her personality and in her power to mature. When Esseilte's relation with her lover Drustan is paralleled by Branwen's growing love for Esseilte's husband Marc'h, the contrast becomes even greater. It is by repeatedly emphasizing this contrast that *The White Raven* becomes more than simply a historical version of the legend. Instead, Paxson's novel becomes a study of the female role in the heroic tradition.

The traditional view of the heroic is summarized best in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Extrapolating from psychoanalysis — particularly Jung's *Symbols of Transformation* and "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairy Tales" — Campbell classifies the episodes in the heroic quest into three main categories. The first is the Call to Adventure, in which a threat to the community causes the hero to enter the previously unknown world of adventure: another country, the wilderness, or perhaps the spirit realm. In this place, the Hero undergoes trials and is helped and threatened by different encounters. Since these experiences prepare the Hero to fulfill the quest, Campbell calls this stage Initiation. Initiation ends with the quest's success, and is followed by the Return, in which the Hero brings back the power or wisdom found during the quest and saves or renews the community. Like Jung before him, Campbell sees this process as a metaphor for individual-

tion, or the fulfillment of adult potential. The Call to Adventure is analogous to the separation from the Mother, and those encountered during Initiation can be considered projections of what the Hero fears or needs to learn. Similarly, in the Return, there is an allegory of the child entering an adult relation with parents.

Throughout his works, Campbell is careful to define the Hero as either a man or a woman. All the same, the psychology he defines is decidedly masculine. In general, the myths he refers to offer the passive image of the female that has prevailed in most cultures since the agricultural revolution. In *The Power of Myth*, for instance, he mentions the Aztec's hierarchy of heavens, in which "the heaven for warriors killed in battle was the same for mothers who died in childbirth" (125). Women, he goes on to say, become adults simply by physically maturing and by having children, while men have to leave home and find adventures. When women do have adventures, they tend to center around their suitors. By contrast, marriage for men is more an acknowledgement of maturity than maturity itself. "Woman," Campbell writes in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, "... represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know" (116). When a quest ends with the rescue of a captured princess or in marriage, it metaphorically asserts that the hero's development has been completed. The Hero's female companion is the "other" part of the hero himself

... if his stature is that of a monarch, she is the world, if he is a warrior she is fame. She is the image of his destiny which he is to release from the prison of enveloping circumstance" (342).

Throughout the myths which Campbell analyzes, women mostly exist in this symbolic relation to men. It is this subordinate pattern which Esseilte typifies and which Branwen, by pursuing her own enlightenment in much the same way that a male hero does, implicitly challenges.

Paxson's Esseilte has all the emotionalism traditionally assigned to women. Early in the novel, Branwen describes her as "one of those fortunate women who can weep at will" (15), and, as a young girl, Esseilte enjoys love stories. Above all else, she is a person of emotion, and more than once, the intensity of her emotions frightens Branwen. These emotions are almost totally self-centered: from taking a reserved seat without finding room for Branwen, and preparing to kill Drustan, (regardless of the fact that he is a guest), to being prepared to endanger Marc'h's kingdom through her love affair, all of Esseilte's reactions seem due to emotions indulged in without a thought for consequences.

At the same time, her actions are frequently ineffectual. Her response to the Morholt's death is to waste away from grief, a process that only stops when she transfers her love to Drustan; later, of course, Drustan's death causes a similar decline. Nor is a knowledge of magic — a woman's way to power under patriarchy — open to Esseilte. As her mother admits, the efforts to teach her magic are largely unsuccessful, and Branwen is the one who should have been taught. When Esseilte asks, "'Don't you understand . . . ? This body is the only weapon I have!'" (121), she identifies herself entirely with the traditional female role. For this reason, her gloating delight over Drustan's slavish devotion can almost be excused — it is almost the only taste of power that she experiences.

As a traditional woman, Esseilte cannot conceive of existence except through a man. As a young girl, she anticipates "the jewels she would have someday, when she was somebody's queen" (22), and as a woman, she asks Drustan, "Does the tree fall of the tree make a sound if there is no one to hear it? . . . If I am beautiful, it is because you are here to see" (252). This dependency extends to her definition of the heroic, as her appetite for the stories of Grainne and of Deidre implies. After Branwen remarks that there are no warrior queens left, Esseilte adds that there are no female harpers, either, so that "there is no way but Deidre's for a woman to gain renown." (89). When the practical Branwen points out that she needs a man to die for, if she is to emulate Deidre, Esseilte asserts that "if the hero-power is in me, he will come" (89). Later, in acknowledging her love for Drustan, she announces triumphantly, "As Grainne claimed Diarmuid, I will claim you; as Deidre claimed Naosí . . . together we will find glory; we will make a song that will never die!" (190).

Yet despite her words, Drustan is never as dependent upon their love for his fame as she is. After Marc'h has discovered their relation and forgiven them after exiling them for a season, Esseilte is the one who begins the affair again, arguing that Drustan's loyalty to her comes before his loyalty to his king. "You, at least," she tells him, "have all the release and the glory of making war. What is there for me . . . If I do not have your love, what is there in the world for me?" (322). For Drustan, the times with Esseilte are pleasant interludes between battles, but for her they are the reason for her existence. As she does at the Midwinter ceremony, Esseilte plays for Drustan "the lady who will hearten the Champion when the dragon rose out of the dark, and the maiden who will be devoured by it if he failed" (132). Like women generally in Campbell's schemata, Esseilte is the incentive and the reward for Drustan's heroic labors, not his main goal. She is incapable of direct action or existence.

Branwen's physical resemblance to Esseilte is mentioned throughout *The White Raven*, several times by Branwen herself. The resemblance is strong enough that Branwen can successfully take Esseilte's place on her wedding night, so that Marc'h has a virgin bride. This physical

resemblance encourages a comparison of the two women, but Paxson's emphasis is on their mental differences. Early in the novel, Branwen describes herself as "Esseilte's shadow" (4), and despite their kinship and friendship, the two women have almost entirely opposite outlooks. As a servant, Branwen cannot indulge in the day-dreams and self-will that Esseilte enjoys. While Esseilte enjoys a sentimental cry over the tragic heroines and dreams of emulating them, Branwen is more skeptical. "And is it so necessary to provide more meat for the poets?" Branwen asks herself (18), and Branwen is the one who, watching Esseilte and Drustan, reflects that "for their story to be remembered, it would have to become known" (258). Unlike Esseilte, who expects greatness as her due, Branwen expects nothing for herself. As they tend the ailing Drustan, Esseilte is furious at the likelihood of his death. She does not love him at the time, but all the same, she is seen "challenging the heavens with the fierce abandon of a child who still believes in fortune's favor" (79-80). Meanwhile, Branwen "saw defeat ahead and accepted it as the way of the world, for I had never had anyone to lose" (80). Similarly, when the possibility of an arranged marriage threatens Esseilte's hopes for a great love, Branwen understands her cousin's distress at having to face realities, but adds that "I found it hard to pity, who had never been free" (88). Even love, Esseilte's reason for living, is beyond Branwen's expectations. Reflecting on how she deceived Marc'h on his wedding night, she reflects ruefully that she had never considered the possibility that "the King of Kernow might be a man I could love" (214), and despite her desire, she hesitates to betray her friends or endanger her adopted land by actively pursuing it. Facing the responsibilities that Esseilte ignores, Branwen reacts differently to her cousin in almost every circumstance. At the end of the novel, when Branwen accuses Esseilte of ingratitude and Esseilte responds by accusing Branwen of self-martyrdom, it becomes clear that, although they have lived all their lives together, the two women have very little in common.

The differences between Esseilte and Branwen can be attributed culturally to the differences between an aristocrat and a servant. On a psychological level, however, the differences suggest two opposing views of the adult woman: Esseilte's, in which the woman lives through a man, and Branwen's, in which a woman moves towards a sense of self which allows a relation with a man, but is not dependent upon him. Of these two concepts, Esseilte's ideal of the magnificent obsession comes off the worse. From the first, Branwen is skeptical of Esseilte's ideals. "I have heard of warriors who wanted to die for glory," she tells Esseilte after her cousin expresses the wish to emulate Deidre, "but I have never known of a woman who deliberately sought to die for love" (89). Later, she is more sympathetic, reflecting that Drustan and Esseilte's love "however hidden and unlawful, was still a sacred thing" (249). Still, the very idea of directing religious feeling towards a person rather than a deity seems dangerous to

Branwen; Drustan's passion may resemble that of the hermit Ogrin towards his Deity (242), but Branwen wonders if it can possibly be sustained or avoid disaster.

In her pursuit of this passion, Esseilte is consistently described as a child, and the implication seems to be that she is refusing to develop into an adult. Esseilte's adolescent vow to marry only a hero who can defeat her uncle the Morholt is described as no different than her childish "pronouncements after the death of a pet-sparrow, or the time her golden arm-ring was lost" (4), and although she keeps her vow, at the end of the novel she admits that when she compares herself to Branwen she feels "like an idiot, or a child" (401). Since Esseilte's mother describes both Esseilte and the Morholt whom she admires as children in their pursuit of the heroic (36), there is a suggestion that the heroic does not lie in their single-minded pursuit of glory. For both the Morholt and Esseilte, obsession leads only to death.

If Esseilte's story is one of obsession, then Branwen's is one of development. As they depart for Kernow, Esseilte is the one who tries to carry out her mother's vow of vengeance on the killer of the Morholt. By contrast, Branwen is made heir to the magic of her aunt, but when she asks if she is to be the queen's "instrument" (176), she receives no reply, which suggests that like a male hero, she is left to find her own destiny. When they arrive in Kernow, Esseilte makes little effort to belong, refusing to observe Beltane, the festival which celebrates the relation between people and the land. Meanwhile, Branwen participates fully in the celebration, taking Esseilte's place with Marc'h to become the secret queen of the land.

This difference between the two women is suggested by the changes in the images of light and darkness throughout the novel. At the start of *The White Raven*, Branwen is described as a "shadow" (4), Esseilte as "shining" (5) and "crowned with gold" in the sunlight (196). As the story progresses, however, these images are reversed. Substituting for Esseilte on her marriage night, Branwen notices that "the stones are shining" within the circle of standing stones (206), and after this point, she — rather than Esseilte — comes to be associated with light. Seeing the supernatural inhabitants of the Other World surrounded by light, she starts to notice their presence about her as she goes about her normal affairs. Esseilte, on the other hand, seems to fade. "If moonlight were to take the shape of a woman, it would be she," Drustan says of Esseilte (242), and although the image is romantic, it reinforces the impression of her as a secondary creature, shining only with reflected light. Towards the end of the novel, Esseilte is described as "thin and pale," and Branwen is the one who appears "like the sun" (369). Esseilte's story ends at Drustan's death-bed, in a room in which "the only brightness came from the window" (414), and only after the lovers have died does Branwen see them as "two forms of light" (422) moving over the sea. Left to comfort Marc'h

in the night, her value and love revealed at last, Branwen is the one who lives to see the returning dawn.

From the Beltane rites and from conversations with Ogrin the hermit, Branwen learns one of the major lessons in the maturation which is behind the myth of the hero: her relation with that which is outside herself. At the height of the sexual rite with Marc'h, Branwen feels a mystical identification with the land, feeling herself the female incarnation of Deity:

for that moment, my flesh was the soil, my blood the rivers that nourished it, my breath the wind, and the life within me one with the life of everything that moved or grew . . .

I had touched the Goddess . . . Now I knew Her as the land itself. I was Logres; I was Brigantia. She filled and fulfilled me until even the world could not contain my spirit, and I knew union, not with the man, but with a white radiance that was more than king or queen or goddess or god. (211-12, second ellipsis added)

Her lesson is marked by a refusal to simplify perception with misleading dichotomies; Ogrin, notably, is reluctant to make a distinction between the Christian God and the nature spirits of the Other World.

Branwen's efforts to acknowledge this complexity is deliberately contrasted with the simplification that Esseilte and Drustan make in the exclusiveness of their love. Shortly after they arrive in Kernow, Branwen notes that "Drustan had become the priest of a cult whose goddess was Esseilte, and whose religion was earthly love" (200). Talking about Esseilte, Drustan, Branwen notes, has "a pure fever that reminded me oddly of the hermit Ogrin as he said mass. But Ogrin's deity was eternal. Could any mortal spirit sustain such a passion life-long?" (242). Asked how his love will end, Drustan asks simply, "Does it matter?" (242). In Esseilte, he has found purpose, and the consequences do not matter. Yet the perception that the lovers have in their exclusive religion is misleading. Watching Esseilte listening to Drustan's harping and looking "as if she saw the doorway opening to the Otherworld," Branwen rejects the spurious mysticism of obsessive love, adding that "the road to that place is not traveled by dreaming, but by opening oneself to a greater reality" (241).

At the same time that Branwen learns about the world outside her, she also learns to value herself. Because she is half-neglected as a girl, she has a poor self-image. Her circumstances seem to rule out marriage, and she is slow to realize that a man might be interested in her (93). Although she admits that she resembles Esseilte, and admits that Esseilte is attractive, Branwen cannot believe that she might be attractive as well. "It was true that we shared a family likeness," Branwen thinks when debating whether she should substitute for her cousin with Marc'h, "but Esseilte was beautiful!" (196). Although she learns to value sex as part of the Beltane ritual, for most of the year she remains celibate, content with her visions of the Other World and with serving those around her.

Only when she is violently abused by Drustan's brother-in-law Keihirdyn is Branwen forced into an awareness of herself as a sexual being. At first, what is fulfillment for Esseilte is torment for her: Branwen feels herself reduced to "a thing of flesh made to serve the flesh of a man" (375) and in her anger she wishes to avenge herself not only on Keihirdyn, but on Drustan and Esseilte, who short-sightedly assume that all physical love has the sacred quality of their own. It is only after an angry exchange of words with Esseilte which makes her realize that in taking responsibility for all around her, she has kept Esseilte from maturing, that Branwen is able to realize her own lack of self-worth. Taking counsel with Ogrin, Branwen realizes that her "spirit remained stubbornly imprisoned by this form of flesh, which was not loved . . . because I myself did not value it" (407). She has been trapped, after all, into a simplifying dichotomy: that between spirit and body. On the moors near Ogrin's hermitage, she has a vision of the Mother Goddess, who tells her to look within herself, adding that if she is to play mother to others, she "must give birth to yourself" first (408). Taking mass from Ogrin, she rejects the division of spirit and body she has fallen into, understanding that "the unity of flesh and spirit I had known in the sacred marriage, and the Mother and Child who had blessed me on the moor, were all part of the same mystery" (409). With this insight, Branwen's maturation is complete. She uses the sexual techniques that were so degrading with Keihirdyn to revitalize the dejected Marc'h, and, as dawn comes, she is lying in bed with Marc'h, "watching as the world was reborn" (433).

This final scene brings out one of the most interesting aspects of *The White Raven*. In the hero myth as outlined by Campbell, insights into the development of male heroes is given by the female characters they encounter. In *The White Raven*, Paxson reverses this tendency, giving insights into the female characters through the males whom they love. Like the women, Drustan and Marc'h physically resemble each other. Watching them fight in the rain, Branwen notes that "They were much of a height, and similar in build, and with their hair sodden to an equal darkness, even the shape of the skull was the same" (395). Later, of course, Drustan is revealed to be not only Marc'h's most valued and trusted follower, but also his unacknowledged son (423). Yet, psychologically, the son falls short of the father. Drustan tends to be careless, with a taste for the dramatic, as his disguise as a harper, seems to suggest. Attractive to women and respected by other men for his skill in battle, Drustan is in many ways the conventional hero. For him, as for the heroes described by Campbell, a woman is primarily an inspiration and a reward. "I never had a family or a love," he tells Branwen, talking about his relation with Esseilte. "I have been like a storm-tossed mariner, and now at last I have a guiding star" (242). Marc'h, on the other hand, is more far-seeing. Hearing Marc'h speak about his wish to see his kingdom prosper, Branwen realizes that "there was the passion that drove

him as Drustan was driven by the love he had spoken of" (206). Even Marc'h's marriage is shaped by his sense of responsibility, being not only an alliance and a means to heirs but also a Beltane rite to renew the land. Although attracted to him from the start, Branwen must become worthy of his love by maturing. When he offers to marry her at the end of the novel, they are entering a reciprocal relation, based on the mutual assumption of responsibility, and Branwen rouses him from his depression, "invoking the God in him as he had once invoked the Goddess into me" (432). Where Drustan and Esseilte often quarreled, their mutual attraction at times seeming a torment to them, Marc'h and Branwen's love is based on full knowledge of each other; "I knew Marc'h completely in that moment," Branwen states at climax, "his entire identity imprinted on my spirit, as mine was in his" (432). In fact, when the two men are compared, more than the accident of Drustan's birth and his lack of popularity seem to keep him from becoming Marc'h's heir. Like Esseilte, Drustan seems unable to face the responsibility that being king requires.

The women's attitudes towards the men is also used as an indication of female personality and development. Branwen admits an attraction to Drustan, even fantasizing briefly about marrying him when she believes him to be a harper (95), yet she also wonders how trustworthy he is (96). Although Branwen's mistrust seems to soften, her attitude towards Drustan is very much her attitude towards Esseilte presented more clearly. In worrying about the limitations and possible consequence of the love affair, Branwen seems to observe its effects on Drustan more than on Esseilte, pitying him as "My poor friend" (242). Branwen can see his attraction, and pity him for his obsession, even though she rejects the kind of love he finds. Significantly, Esseilte cannot view Marc'h with equal sympathy. Culturally, this inability could be due to her distaste for an arranged marriage, yet the distaste is also due to personality — the childish Esseilte cannot easily understand the adult concerns of her husband. Learning of Branwen's love, Esseilte doubts that "that old man could teach anyone passion" (215), and concludes that Branwen must be planning to betray her for political power. Branwen, who would never allow her love for Marc'h to affect her loyalty towards Esseilte, is baffled by the accusation. When Esseilte insists that, if Branwen is pregnant, she must abort in order to ensure that Drustan has no rival as Marc'h's heir, Branwen flees from the look of vengeance on her cousin's face (216). Loving Drustan has estranged Esseilte from Branwen — at least to some extent — but loving Marc'h has not affected Branwen's friendship for Esseilte. It is only when Esseilte and Drustan, smug in the private world of their own love, refuse to notice that Keihirdyn is sexually abusing Branwen that she overcomes her oldest loyalty and betrays the lovers to Marc'h. Moving steadily towards maturity, Branwen must

(Continued on page 48)

human subjects themselves. This autonomous, self-determining artefact of a world then rapidly takes on all the appearances of a second nature, erasing its own source in human practice so as to seem self-evidently given and immobilized as those rocks, trees and mountains which are the stuff of mythology. (Eagleton: 316-317)

Whether or not we agree with Eagleton's analysis, our appreciation of Tolkien and Campbell's differences must include an understanding of this larger cultural milieu which they shared, and how it provided a context within which their vision of myth would become meaningful. This broader appreciation of key elements of their own writings on myth is valuable not only for the sake of comparison, but because it can suggest new ways in which Campbell's theory of the hero, for example, might be used to illuminate the archetypal patterns in Tolkien's own fiction, and how those patterns cohere within his overall artistic vision. Similarly Tolkien's affirmation of Catholicism provides an interesting angle from which to explore the subtle ways in which Campbell's thought sometimes preserves the structure of the theological heritage which he rejected. Finally, comparison is always mutually illuminating and points to the common intellectual and aesthetic traditions from which more notable students of myth such as Tolkien and Campbell drew upon for their inspiration, for it is within those traditions that we come to a fuller appreciation of their work.

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**The White Raven** (continued from page 33)  
be betrayed before she betrays; refusing growth, Esseilte's betrayal is simply the sign of careless self-absorption in her own love affair.

In the Prologue, Branwen prepares the audience for the contrast which structures *The White Raven*, asking:

But what is the Queen?

If I am ever to know how Esseilte's fate and my own have been twined with those of Drustan and Marc'h the King, that is what I must understand. (1)

More succinctly, in the Afterword, Paxson stresses that the novel is not "merely a story about a pair of lovers, but about the meaning of sovereignty" (438). Such statements can be taken literally, since Branwen becomes more fit to use authority than Esseilte. At the same time, they can also be taken symbolically: a Queen, as anyone who considers the meaning of the Empress in the Tarot deck can understand, is a common symbol for a mature or successful woman. For this reason, it is in Esseilte's and Branwen's attitudes towards Queenship that the novel's two views of the Heroine are most succinctly revealed. By sending Branwen as her substitute in the marriage bed, Esseilte is metaphorically refusing adulthood. By contrast, in accepting responsibility and by facing the hard truths about herself, Branwen transforms herself into an adult — and, by extension, into a woman worthy of being queen. In this sense, Esseilte is perhaps right to say that Branwen has stolen her life (401) — yet, because Esseilte has refused responsibilities and taken advantage of Branwen's willingness to face them, the accusation is hardly a fair one. For Esseilte, as for the traditional Heroine, love for a man becomes an end in itself, a childish attitude that ends in tragedy. Literally unable to live without Drustan, she dies shortly after him. For Branwen, winning a man's love is only the outward sign of her inward development. Having gained the insight that is the goal of the true Hero, she wins a chance for permanent content — an end that is quite beyond the short-sightedness of her cousin Esseilte.

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## Editorial Note

Periodically someone will ask "Is that *really* your name?" In an age of media hyperbole and outright fiction, it is not unreasonable to question such an unusual and rarely encountered name, especially in this Society. But it is my real name — the one on my birth certificate. According to family history the first GoodKnight immigrated to the Carolinas in 1758, when the name was Anglicized from the German "Gut Knight." The family followed the frontier of an expanding nation, and the trails leads from North Carolina to Kentucky, to Missouri, to Texas, to California. The family began in France with Pierre du Terrail Bayard called "*le bon chevalier sans puer et sans reproche*." Later becoming Huguenots, the family later prudently migrated from France to Germany following the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. The maiden names of those who married into the family here in America over the generations reveal English and Scottish blood. While my name and many of the things I treasure are derived from Europe, I am unmistakably and proudly an American hybrid.

— Glen GoodKnight