

Winning the hand of the fair woman

By John Bonsing. (Originally published on Caer Australis 2002)

One of the great stories of Celtic literature is that of the hero winning the hand of a beautiful maiden from an older king. This is a story drawn from ancient Celtic tradition, for behind the characters in these tales we can find the Celtic story of renewal at the turn of summer. In the hero is the sun, newly ascendant at Beltaine, and in the maiden is the goddess of earth and moon, and in the king is the old year passing. The literature was recorded well into the Christian era, being recorded from older sources and an oral tradition from the ninth century onwards. Here is presented a look at how an ancient motif is embedded within these stories.

The start of summer is the beginning of the vital and active part of the Celtic year and in the same way that the young sun gains its vitality at this time, so does the young hero gain his strength, for in winning the hand of the fair maiden of the flowering earth, the hero must defeat an older hero, the old year, usurping him and taking his place as consort to the exalted goddess.

'BRIGIO' THE EXALTED

The goddess born at springtime is famously known from Ireland as Brigit. The ninth century Cormac's Glossary tells us that 'very great and very noble was her superintendence', and 'Brigit was with all Irishmen called a goddess'. So too was she called a goddess in Gaul, as 'Brigindoni', and in Britain, as 'Brigantia' - her name or epithet brigio meant 'exalted'.

Brigit was the daughter of the ancient earth god the Dagda, whose harp called forth the seasons, and she was the goddess of poetry. She had two sisters, Brigit, goddess of smith-work, and Brigit, goddess of healing. The three Brigits reveal that the exalted Brigio was tripartite; across Europe the image of the tripartite Celtic goddess is often encountered, and Caesar took her to be Minerva.

Brigit was the patroness of three exalted roles in Celtic society - the 'poets', whose words held power; the 'smiths', who transformed minerals of the earth into bronze and iron for use as tools, utensils, jewellery and weapons; and the 'healers', the physicians and herbalists who attended the sick and drew from plants the medicines for people's health and well-being.

As patroness of craftsmanship, the goddess attended to the guidance of Celtic society. It was to the goddess, then, that the sun-god turned for patronage over his year: As Mider sings in Irish myth, 'It is she who will be celebrated everywhere; it is she the king is seeking: Bé Find'.

'BÉ FIND' THE FAIR WOMAN

With the turn of the Celtic year at Beltaine, the new sun takes his place as giver of warmth and light in the days of summer that lay ahead. In order to achieve this, the new sun has to defeat the old sun for the hand of the goddess and gain her patronage and his right to kingship. This is succinctly recorded in an episode in How Culhwch won Olwen, from tenth century Wales:

'Creidyladd was the most majestic woman ever in Britain; for her, Gwthyr and Gwynn fight every May Day'.

In Irish myth, the right to kingship is directly related to the hand of the maiden: Echu Airem wished to hold a feis at Tara one Samhain 'so that their taxes and assessments for the next five years could be reckoned'. However, the 'men of Ériu replied that they would not hold the feis of Temuir for a king with no queen, for indeed Echu had had no queen when he became king'. This prohibition against the king caused him to seek a wife, Étaíne, who 'was his equal in beauty and form and race, in magnificence and youth and high repute'.

In Celtic literature, the story of the ascent of the new sun is told as the encounter between a vital young solar hero, a 'young warrior, golden hair falling onto his shoulders', and his older rival, whose role is in some way the current consort - such as husband or father - to a fair maiden, the goddess of springtime beauty. The young hero defeats his older rival and gains the hand of the maiden.

The old solar year is seen as being defeated and replaced by the new. The sun makes a journey each year rising between extreme points on the horizon and back again. Because of the annual cycle, the new year is seen as a triumphant replacement of the old, and the Celts marked the year from the time when the sun's vitality returned at Beltaine.

The goddess, like her moon, constantly renews herself in her feminine cycles throughout the year, and this is a hallmark of the 'noble superintendence' spoken of with regard to Brigit. Bé Find the 'fair woman' is the title afforded the maiden goddess in the epic Irish myth Tochmarc Étaíne, 'The Wooing of Étaíne', and her beauty is superlative at the threshold of summer, when the golden haired hero Mider comes to win her hand:

'Her hands were as white as the snow of a single night, and her eyes as blue as any blue flower, and her lips as red as the berries of the rowan-tree, and her body as white as the foam of a wave'

The myth tells us of the day he arrived: it was 'one beautiful summer day' and the plain of Tara was 'vibrant with colours of every hue'. The consort of Étaíne who Mider comes to defeat is the king, Echu Airem, who had climbed the ramparts of Tara and saw Mider coming. The way in which Mider defeated Echu was through winning three fidchell games played over three consecutive days: the prize Mider won was 'a month from today ... my arms around Etaine and a kiss from her'. When he took her in his arms and kissed her, Mider transformed Étaíne and himself into 'two swans high up in the air, linked together by a chain of gold': the solar connection of the new sun to the goddess, the chain of gold, was complete and he took her to be his queen.

In 1888, W.B. Yeats wrote of Irish folkloric traditions and he noted that 'on May Eve [the fairies] they fight all round' and 'on Midsummer Eve...the fairies ... steal away beautiful mortals to be their brides'. In the folklore of the nineteenth century remained the echoes of the Beltaine contest between the rivals and the union of hero and maiden in the following month at the solstice of summer.

Étaíne is superlative as a representation of the renewing goddess, for in the myth Tochmarc Étaíne, her hand is won on multiple occasions by different youthful heroes from different older consorts, and each involved in some way a three day challenge: Her hand is won by Oengus the Macc Óc , 'Divine Son', from her father Ailill king at Emain Macha: he had to perform three impossible tasks; by Mider from Ailill: Mider had to climb upon a hill for three consecutive days, and by Mider from Echu Airem king of Tara, where the three fidchell games were played.

THE WOING OF THE GODDESS

The winning of the hand of the fair maiden by the hero from his rival appears many times throughout the Celtic myths of both Ireland and Wales. In the tenth century Welsh myth 'How Culhwch won Olwen', we find a fine rendition. The hero in this telling is Culhwch. He is described as 'a well-born lad'. Olwen is the fair maiden, 'her hair was yellower than broom, her skin whiter than sea-foam, her palms and fingers were whiter than shoots of marsh trefoil against the sand of a welling spring', and 'everywhere she went four white trefoils appeared behind her, and for that reason she was called "white track", Olwen'. In this myth, Culhwch must defeat Olwen's father, Chief Giant Ysbaddaden to win the hand of the maiden. Culhwch defeated his rival through spearing: Culhwch endured three spearings on three consecutive days and on the third day 'Culhwch caught the poisoned spear and threw it back at Chief Giant Ysbaddaden, aiming at his eyeball so that the spear came out through the base of his neck. "You cursed barbarian of a son-in-law!" cried the Chief Giant', for as Olwen relates "he shall live only until I go with a husband".

Other renditions in the literature include the 'Tochmarc Emer', where the 'smooth-faced', 'daring', and 'beautiful' hero Cú Chulaind wins the hand of the fair maiden Emer, who 'had the six gifts' of beauty, voice, sweet-speech, needlecraft, wisdom and chastity. Cú Chulaind won the hand of Emer from her father Forgall who journeyed in disguise to Emain Macha to challenge, but on the third day of this visit, Cú Chulaind was praised above all before him. In 'Pwyll Lord of Dyfed', during the three consecutive days of feasting Pwyll sat on the Gorsedd Arberth, 'the hill which rose above the court', and on the third evening he met with Rhiannon, 'a wonder', and won her hand, remarkably similar to Mider in an episode in Tochmarc Étaíne, where he won the hand of Étaíne from Ailill after meeting her on three consecutive days 'on the hill above the house'.

The winning of the hand of Rhiannon by Pwyll holds clear allusions to the succession of solar years, for Rhiannon's father is named Heveydd the Old, which means 'the old summery one', and Pwyll endures on successive years the rivalry of Gwall. This myth also tells of the eventual replacement of Pwyll, in the form of his own successor, the golden haired Gwri, who as the young king Pryderi wins the hand of Kigfa. This myth also affirms that the winning of the hand of the goddess occurs at Beltaine - it was during the three day feast that Pwyll first met Rhiannon, and it was on May Eve five years later that the young Gwri was born.

THE HERO AS MAPONOS, THE DIVINE SON

In the 'Tochmarc Étaíne', the hand of Étaíne is sought by Oengus, the Macc Óc. Oengus was the son of Bóand, goddess of the river Boyne by the Dagda, and he was renowned for 'his handsomeness'. The epithet 'Macc Óc' means 'Divine Son', and this term is found across the Celtic world - in 'How Culhwch won Olwen' we are introduced to Mabon ap Modron, whose name means '[Divine Son, son of the Divine Mother](#)' explored in the accompanying article; and in Gaul we find 'Maponos' the son and 'Matrona' the mother - she is the goddess of the river Marne.

In Oengus we have a direct reference showing us that the hero who wins the hand of the fair maiden was himself the divine son of the goddess. In Pwyll Lord of Dyfed we find that the divine son was born on May eve, for the son of Rhiannon and Pwyll was born on this day, and he was called Gwri Golden Hair, befitting his infant solar form. His birth was accompanied by the birth of a colt, as was that of Cú Chulaind in Ireland, and strong associations with horses are found with the similarly divine son Culhwch, son of Goleuddydd 'Bright day', and Mabon ap

Modron who helped Culhwch in winning the hand of Olwen; Gwri's mother's name, Rhiannon, originally Riannon in the White Book, meaning 'Great Queen' (*Rigantonia) reflects the term Modron 'Divine Mother'.

In the hero Oengus son of Bóand, we see the Divine Son as the hero who wins the hand of the goddess, and in Gwri son of Rhiannon, we see the Divine Son as the son of the hero who won the hand of the goddess. In these two divine sons, we can see the manner in which the progression of the years is achieved and the reason why the hero seeks the hand of the goddess - for it is through the union of the new sun with the goddess that the future is assured through the birth of their son, the Maponos, who in time will claim the right to kingship himself.

Seeing the succession of the son from the union of the hero with the fair maiden allows us to understand that each hero of these myths was once the Maponos himself, born with the new year: this is the reason for their handsomeness and golden hair. It is also possible to understand that the older consort of the goddess who the hero comes annually to defeat was once the hero himself, an ancient Maponos, as we can comprehend in names such as Heveydd the Old 'the old summery one', Echu 'horse', or even the Dagda 'the good god'.

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The origins of this Celtic story of renewal long predate the late first millennium versions we have from the Celtic literature, but preserved within these works through the meanings of names, descriptions of summer or references to May, and the actions and roles that are portrayed, we still can find traces of a myth that tell us of the eternal progression of old king, new king and future king, brought about at the beginning of the summer through the winning of the hand of the goddess.

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