

MYTHICAL SOURCES OF BRANWEN I: THE TRAGIC PEACEWEAVER TALE

The Völsunga Saga and other Germanic Analogues

The narrative framework of the Second Branch is based on what Andrew Welsh has described as the ‘Tragic Peaceweaver Tale’: the doomed attempt to forge an alliance between two peoples on the basis of a marriage. The alliance fails, and the bride is persecuted by her marital kin. Eventually, the bride’s people return to reclaim their kinswoman and avenge her injury. The action typically culminates with a violent confrontation between the kindreds (which usually takes place in a great hall) after final attempts at reconciliation have failed. The unfortunate wife looks on helplessly as both her husband and her brother’s people are butchered in an orgy of mutual destruction. Even if one side emerges victorious out of this conflict, this victory is always pyrrhic: the scale of the loss, even for the winning side, outweighs anything that might have been gained. The Tragic Peaceweaver Tale, as much as anything else, is testimony of the inexorable, relentless nature of destiny and its terrible fulfilment in the ravages of war.

As has been noted by number of scholars,⁴⁸² this basic theme and plot structure is also common to a number of Germanic narratives, particularly those of the *Hild* group of tales (including *Hildeburgh* in *Beowulf*, and the *Hildir* story of the Prose Edda tradition⁴⁸³). Parallels with the Second Branch have also been noted in the Icelandic *Völsunga* Saga and other related traditions. Nineteenth-century scholar Alfred Nutt summed up the common elements thus: ‘all [of these stories] deal with the fortunes of a woman who, having gone over the sea to a strange king is, for one reason or another, visited by her kinsmen and the result of this visit is woe and slaughter, and the final death of the heroine. Looking more closely at the stories, there is hardly a prominent feature in the Mabinogi [of Branwen] but finds its parallel in some one or other of these Teutonic tales’⁴⁸⁴. The nature of this connection, and the origin and significance of this group of tales is what we shall attempt to establish in the remainder of this chapter’s introduction.

These similarities extend not only to basic structural and thematic characteristics but also include specific points of detail. Parallels have been drawn between Efnisien son of Euroswydd, the war-mongering villain of the Second Branch, and *Grimme Hagen* – the malevolent advisor of the King Gunther, who plays a similarly divisive role in the medieval German tale known as the *Nibelungenlied*. A Germanic parallel for the curious horse-mutilation incident of the Second Branch (see p. 296, n. 517 below) has also been noted in the Norse *Hrolfssaga Kraka*, a narrative which also

482 Alfred Nutt was the first to elaborate on these parallels as long ago as 1882. Since then Andrew Welsh (1991) and Alaric Hall (2001) have both contributed, in different ways, to our understanding of the relationship between *Branwen* and the Germanic saga tradition.

483 *Beowulf*, l. 1068 ff., *Prose Edda* pp 122-123

484 Nutt, Alfred. ‘Mabinogion Studies. I – Branwen Daughter of Llŷr’ *The Folk-Lore Record* 5 (1882) pp.1-33

exhibits some more general thematic and structural similarities to this group of tales⁴⁸⁵. This tale includes the Fight In the Great Hall episode (see pp. 350-352), and even features the motif of concealed warriors. Likewise, the ‘starling-bird’ trained by Branwen to carry news of her oppression to Bendigeidfran has discernable parallels with the angel-in-bird-form which appears to Kudrun in the Germanic tale (p. 342).

Given these connections, it is hard to dismiss the impression that what we are dealing with a *common tradition*, rather than simply a common narrative response to the general conditions of heroic society (although it is clearly that as well, as we will be considering below). While many of the elements found in the Second Branch and these Germanic hero tales are widespread narrative motifs of international provenance, their particular combination in a group of stories with such distinct and similar thematic and structural characteristics is hard to explain in terms of coincidence or spontaneous polygenesis. The conclusion must surely be that at some stage the story must have passed from one milieu (e.g. the Germanic world) into the other (e.g. Medieval Wales) – or perhaps that both shared some common origin in a more remote, heroic age past.

Alaric Hall has been the only scholar to my knowledge to suggest a direct Germanic influence on this Medieval Welsh tale. Pointing out that Anglesey was under Norse occupation in the late ninth century, Hall suggests that it might have been here that these distinctively Germanic traditions first entered the Welsh story-telling culture.⁴⁸⁶ Other observers have been rather more circumspect, pointing out that many of these motifs and tale-structures can be found elsewhere – notably in Ireland.⁴⁸⁷ Many of these elements are common and widespread enough to constitute part of the ‘International Popular Tale’ tradition – the common imaginative inheritance of all humanity – as we have already noted. However, even Andrew Welsh – who at least partly subscribes to this latter view – considers the particular story-pattern of the Peaceweaver Tale ‘more Germanic than Celtic in origin’ even if ‘in the process of tradition that question soon becomes irrelevant’.⁴⁸⁸

However, what would appear to be the earliest exemplar of this narrative complex is neither Germanic nor Celtic. Homer’s *Iliad*, thought to have been composed in c.1000 BC, shares many of the basic elements of *Branwen* and the Germanic Peaceweaver tales, and not a few of their incidental details. Admittedly, the heroine here is carried off by force, rather than married as part of an alliance-building exercise but this is also the case in a number of the *Hild* traditions and may simply reflect an archaic prototype of the same tradition. The root cause of the Trojan war is traced back to the capricious vanity of the gods – a bleakly cynical aetiology altogether typical of this group of stories. Specific details, including the famous Trojan Horse incident, might be compared to other ‘hidden warrior’ motifs – found in a number of the variants of the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale, including the Second Branch (cf. ‘the Men in Bags’ p. 307 below). Even the distinctive ‘watchman device’, by which

485 Hall (2001) pp.30-34

486 Andrew Hall ‘*Gwyr y Gogledd?* Some Icelandic Analogues to *Branwen Ferch Lyr*’ *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 42 (2001) p. 27-50

487 Pronsias Mac Cana *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr: A study of the Irish Affinities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958)

488 A. Welsh (1991) p. 9

Helen identifies the oncoming Greek army, finds an almost precise parallel in the Mabinogi of Branwen.⁴⁸⁹ Perhaps, then, we should be looking for a more remote origin of this heroic age tale *par excellence*.

In general terms, it finds echoes in the Irish Tain and numerous other martial epics from other European Iron Age warrior societies. In its basic form, we might assume this tale was a popular narrative scenario, told and retold throughout Barbarian Europe from the Late Bronze Age onwards. However, a particular variant of this basic theme – including as it did a distinctive ‘package’ of specific motifs – seems to be discernable, even amidst the ambiguities of comparative folklore. There may well be some truth in Alaric Hall’s suggestion that this particular narrative tradition in Wales may have received a more recent stimulus from contacts with the Viking world, where it was most fully represented. But I would venture the possibility of an older common substrate, which would also account for the similarities we have noted with the Homeric Iliad. In the next section, we will consider the case for a Belgic connection – a variant of the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale which may have formed a part of the origin myth alluded to above (pp. 280-282). It was from this Belgic source that it may have first entered the Germanic tradition, as represented by the Völsunga Saga and other related material.

489 The remnants of similar sequence can be also be discerned in verses 38-39 of *The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding’s Bane* – part of the oldest stratum of the V_lsung tradition extant, found in the pagan Icelandic *Verse Edda* (pp.131-132)

490 Stabo, I, 14 (Tierney p. 262)