

The Madness of the Bird Man

As we have seen, lycanthropy was understood in the pre-modern world as a psychological as well as a supernatural condition. The lines between human and animal and between conscious and unconscious were less clear cut in the ancient world. Under certain conditions terrifying transformations were believed to occur in a literal sense. While these alterations of the self were associated, at their root, with profound inner, mental disturbance, lurid physical contortions were not unknown. We have already encountered the horrific ‘warp-spasm’ of Cú Chulainn, as described in the Book of Leinster (quoted in Chapter 1 above (p. 111) – arguably the most vivid description of frenzied metamorphosis documented in medieval sources). In the Werewolf’s Tale, considered in the previous section, this lycanthropic transformation was with associated cuckoldry (and, by association, with the psychology of rage and sexual jealousy). In this section we will consider another related class of animal transformations which appear to be particularly relevant to the content of this section of the Fourth Branch.

We have already referred to the peculiar type of madness known as *gwyllt* in Medieval Wales (Irish *geilt*). We have seen how this dissociative state was experienced by the prophet Myrrdin or Merlin in Medieval Wales, who was believed to have lived as beast-like wild-man, crouching in the trees of the forest of Celidon after the Battle of Aferderydd. A similar account is given of a king of the Ulaid (modern day Ulster) known as ‘Suibne Geilt’, whose frenzy (*buile*) is linked both to a curse bestowed on him by St Ronan, and an irrational panic experienced before a battle:

The vast army reared up like a herd of stags so that they raised on high three mighty shouts. Now, when Suibne heard these great cries together with their sounds and reverberations in the clouds of Heaven and in the vault of the firmament, he looked up, whereupon turbulence and darkness, and fury and giddiness and frenzy and flight, unsteadiness, restlessness and unquiet filled him, likewise disgust with every place in which he used to be and desire for every place which he had not reached. His fingers were palsied, his feet trembled, his heart beat quick, his senses were overcome, his sight was distorted, his weapons fell naked from his hands, so that through Ronan's curse he went, like any bird of the air, in madness and imbecility.

Now, however, when he arrived out of the battle, it was seldom that his feet would touch the ground because of the swiftness of his course, and when he did touch it he would not shake the dew from the top of the grass for the lightness and the nimbleness of his step. He halted not from that headlong course until he left neither plain, nor field, nor bare mountain, nor bog, nor thicket, nor marsh, nor hill, nor hollow, nor dense-sheltering wood in Ireland that he did not travel that day...⁹³³

Hereafter Suibne, like Merlin (see p. 111 above), takes to the woods and crouches in the treetops. Feathers grow on his body, as with the biblical Nebuchadnezzar; he is able to leap from tree to tree and from hilltop to hilltop.

No explanation is given for this curious transformation, though it would have been understood by medieval Celtic audiences that this bird-like aspect (Suibne's hands and feet are even taking on a talon-like aspect) was a direct effect or symptom of his madness. The same would no doubt have also been apprehended of other tree-climbing wild-men from the British Celtic tradition. We find a similar tradition to that of Myrddin/Merlin in the figure of Lailoken (Lailocan), who appears in the Scottish Life of St. Kentigern. There is undoubtedly a common tradition underlying all of these accounts. The basic scenario has summarized thus:

A battle in which a man loses his sanity, either through grief for the slain, a vision in the sky, or a tumult of the battle itself, and who then takes to a life in the woods; the befriending of the mad-man by a saint, and the prophesy of a Threefold Death which is ultimately fulfilled.⁹³⁴

Suibne's avian metamorphosis recalls the 'magical flight' sequences in some of the bardic legends outlined above (p. 98), just as his feats of leaping are reminiscent of as well as the modern British folklore relating to figures such as 'Spring-Heeled Jack',⁹³⁵ or the Owl Man of Maugham.⁹³⁶ In fact, sightings of bird-men and prodigious leapers of various kinds are a feature of numerous folktales and urban myths from a wide-range of contexts. The present author remembers hearing rumours in the early 1980s that a trail of smouldering footprints had been found leading across the winter landscape of southern England for several miles – across rooftops and church-steeple as well as over ground – before they mysteriously stopped in the middle of a field, as if the hot-shod prowler had suddenly taken flight. Often such phenomena were associated with the Devil, and there are numerous folktales about the 'the Devil's leap': across valleys or from one farm to another – made by the Prince of Darkness while he is being seen off by the blacksmith or some other doughty local figure.⁹³⁷

However, it seems there was also a spiritual or visionary aspect to this light-footed ecstasy: which was associated with saints and holy men, as well as madmen, devils and deviant outcasts. Merlin/Myrddin, as we have seen, was credited with the composition of some extraordinary prophecies whilst crouching in the tree-tops of the forest of Celidon. The word *buile* – used to describe Wild Suibne's madness – is also used for other mantic supernatural pronouncements, such as the succession of kings (past and future) declaimed in *Buile in Scail* 'The Frenzy of the Spectre'⁹³⁸. Airborne, avian qualities were also assigned to various Early Irish saints, one of whom was described as having 'a body full of bright white feathers, like a dove'. St Moling was famous for his 'three steps of pilgrimage', which were described in the following terms:

933 *Buile Suibne* (trans. O'Keefe 1913) § 11-12

934 Lea, A.E. "'Lleu Wyllt'" (The Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi and Welsh stories of Myrddin Wyllyt: an Early British prototype of the legend of the wild man?) *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 25 (1997) pp. 35-47.

*The first leap that he leapt, he seemed no bigger than a crow on the top of the hill. The second leap that he leapt, they saw him not at all, and they knew not whether he had gone into heaven or into the earth. But the third leap he leapt, 'tis then he alighted on the wall of the church enclosure.*⁹³⁹

In a treatise attributed to Gregory the Great, Cynewulf draws attention to the following doctrine, which suggests this same association between spiritual exaltation and this mysterious avian state was also not unknown amongst the Early Christian English:

*Blessed Job figuratively called the Lord a bird on account of this 'lightening' of the flesh ... the Lord has rightly been called a bird, since He launched His fleshly body into the ether*⁹⁴⁰

These Early Christian/Patristic interpretations notwithstanding, there is some evidence that this was a reflex of what was probably an extremely old and widespread magico-religious tradition. S. S. Sailer⁹⁴¹ draws attention to Eliade's observations:

Shamans and medicine men, to say nothing of certain types of mystics, are able to fly like birds and perch on the branches of trees. The Hungarian shaman (táltos) "could jump up in a willow tree and sit on a branch that would have been too weak for a bird." The Iranian saint Qutb ud-dîn Haydar was frequently seen in the tops of trees. St. Joseph of Cupertino flew into a tree and remained half an hour on a branch that "was seen to sway as if a bird had perched on it"⁹⁴²

Eliade also notes that ornithological symbolism is a central part of the shamanic assemblage:

The shamanic costume tends to give the shaman a new, magical body in animal form. The three chief types are that of the bird, the reindeer (stag) and the bear – but especially the bird ... Feathers are mentioned more or less everywhere in the descriptions of shamanic costumes. More significantly, the very structure of the costumes seeks to imitate as faithfully

935 Sightings of 'Spring-Heeled Jack' have been recorded in the Sheffield area for over 200 years, with a recent outbreak in the 1970s, when he was simply known as 'The Prowler'. This alarming, malicious entity is described as running up walls, leaping between roof-tops, and having red shining eyes 'like the devil'. A cursory search on Google under the keyword 'Spring-Heeled Jack' will demonstrate that the tradition is alive and well to this day.

936 This owl-like bird man was sighted a number of times around the Mawnan churchyard area over the Summer of 1976. Witnesses described a man-sized creature, covered in grey feathers with black 'crab-like' claws, with large pointed ears, a gaping mouth, and red, slanted eyes (Shiels, 1990, p.61).

937 Katy Jordan, *The Haunted Landscape – Folklore, ghosts and legends of Wiltshire* (Bradford on Avon: Ex Libris Press, 2000) pp. 33-34.

938 trans. Thurneysen (1935)

939 quoted Rees & Rees (1961) p. 77

as possible the shape of a bird ... Even where the costume presents no visible ornithomorphic structure ... the headgear is made of feathers and imitates a bird ... On the authority of his Tungus informants Shirokogoroff adds that the bird costume is indispensable to flight to the other world.⁹⁴³

Interestingly enough, Eliade notes that the most commonly represented bird-types in shamanic regalia were the owl and the eagle – both of which feature significantly in the Fourth Branch, as we shall see.

Evidence for shamanic practices in the Medieval Celtic world is largely inferential, although some striking parallels can occasionally be identified. The ecstatic trance-visions of the Welsh *awenyddion* have already been noted, as have the shape-changing fantasies of the bardic tradition – both of which might be compared in general terms with the content of the shamanic magico-religious system. But a more specific analogue can be found in *Forbuis Druim Damhaire*, the description of a magical battle between the pagan druids of Ireland recorded in the Battle of Lismore. Here, we have a description of what would appear to be the very same ornithological costume that we have seen to be associated with shamanic flight:

*Mogh Ruith's skin of hornless, dun-coloured bull was brought to him, and his speckled bird-dress, with its wings flying, and his druidic gear besides. He rose up, in company with fire into the air and the heavens*⁹⁴⁴

We have already identified a shamanic element in the figure of Gwydion and his Germanic counterparts Oðinn/Woden/Woutan (see p. 473). At this core of Germanic tradition is the complex of the world-tree, or Yggdrasil ('Ego-Bearer') as it is known in Icelandic mythology. This cosmic pillar, and Oðinn's ecstatic self-immolation thereon, have extensive parallels in the Central Asian shamanic visions documented by Eliade and others, which are often found in close association with various forms of avian imagery. We might note at this stage that both the idea of the shaman shedding his flesh, and the retreat of souls (in bird form) into the branches of the World Tree are all familiar and closely associated motifs in the shamanic initiatory system.

It is almost certainly the case that the incident described in Math III – which sees Lleu crouching in an oak tree, in eagle form, while his flesh is devoured by chthonic pig – belongs to a similar category of psychic experience. However, the influence of the Oak-Mistletoe-Lightning cult is also apparent in this sequence, as is the narrative framework of the 'Werewolf's Tale' outlined in the

940 quoted by S. S. Sailer in 'Leaps, curses and flight: Suibne Beilt and the roots of early Irish culture' *Études celtiques* 33 (1997) pp. p. 198

941 *ibid.* p.199

942 Mircea Eliade *Shamanism: Techniques of Ecstasy* (Arkana: London, New York, 1989) p. 126

943 *ibid.* p.157

previous section. Also influential was the Love Triangle motif, which we will consider shortly, after our examination of the myth of Little Flower. It is unnecessary and perhaps impossible to attempt to separate out these various strands of magico-religious and narrative tradition. It is sufficient to say that the bardic author had on hand a rich vocabulary of ecstatic symbolism by which he could articulate and embellish this all-important moment of crisis and transformation. That this material was drawn from traditional, ultimately pre-Christian sources is a matter beyond doubt. But when we come to consider the work extant, we can hardly fail to be struck (once again) by the medieval author's genius for creative synthesis and his ability to produce a harmonious, internally consistent fusion out of these diverse materials, which can nonetheless address – profoundly and coherently – the social and political concerns of his twelfth-century audience.