

Hidden Portals and Underworld Intimacies: How Doubling, Desire and Illusion Form the
Spiral Staircase of the Hero's Descent and Resurrection

“He dreams he’s hunting with the white hounds. The air makes way,
oaks bow him through, the dogs strike up their partsong,
he stops at the blood-draggled clearing
as the forest gallops on,
and it is no dream” (Francis 7).

The hero enters the scene, living in a dream of the world, one that appears to his gaze in some way other than it is. The masculine hero may be a prince, benign ruler over all he surveys, or a warrior-hero entitled by honor to grab everything he can take. The feminine hero may be aware of the burgeoning grace of her figure in the mirror, the dewy freshness of her face; she may be the queenly daughter whose very sweetness entitles her to the kind attention of her peers. Yet beyond the bounds of image, there is a deficit of understanding or knowledge of the impact of the self upon the world of forms: How feminine fairness may serve to attract the attention of wolves; how masculine prowess may lead to hubris and the overstepping of bounds. Desire plays an equal part in the hero's descent,

dualities of self and other, concluding with the transformation of blind desire or self-centered goals into prosocial qualities such as acceptance, loyalty and love.

The journey begins for our heroic Welsh protagonist, Pwyll Pendevic Dyfed—Pwyll the Prudent, Prince of the Seven Counties of Dyfed—when he awakens one day and is “seized by the thought and the desire to go hunting” (“Pwyll” I). Kore, the girlchild aspect of the Ancient Greek goddess Persephone, is enjoying herself in the spring fields with the daughters of Oceanus. She is momentarily out of her mother Demeter’s sight and guard, though the fields are her mother’s domain. The text of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* does not say that Kore awoke that morning “seized by the thought and the desire to go flower hunting” but it seems reasonable to suggest that she did.

Pwyll, whose name implies both caution and discretion, is not living up to his moniker as he carelessly loses touch with the rest of his hunting party, never noticing that he can no longer see or hear them. As the hoofbeats of his companions fade away, Pwyll blunders onto the scene of a noble stag just as it is being downed by a pack of strange dogs:

“Then looked he at the color of the dogs, staying not to look at the stag, and of all the hounds that he had seen in the world, he had never seen any that were like unto these. For their hair was of a brilliant shining white and their ears were red, and as the whiteness of their bodies shone so did the redness of their ears glisten” (Guest 27).

The unusual look and color of the dogs, which are also sometimes described as having bright red eyes, should serve as a blaring klaxon to Pwyll that everything here is not as it seems: He has crossed out of his familiar hunting grounds and into Annwyn, the Other World. Pwyll, however, appears to notice nothing amiss as he kicks and cuffs at the rightful hunters to send

The symbology of color in the tale—along with the concept of a parallel magical plane that makes Arawn into more than just a neighboring lord who happens by—are some of the infrastructure elements that fall under the Silence Principle and potential erasure by the Lethe Effect (Barber and Barber 17-25). The cycle of tales recorded in the Mabinogi contain elements and references to political succession that place them as extant from the 11th Century as a bardic tradition (Parker 140-143). The tales were preserved in written form by the 14th century yet always intended to be told aloud and interpreted interactively with an audience of listeners. Portions of the stories recorded in the Mabinogi are often faulted as chaotic, incomplete, or simple mirrors of tales in other Gallo-Brittonic and Celtic-influenced (Irish) traditions (Parker “First Branch”). According to some modern native Welsh speakers, there exists to this day a trove of additional lore kept exclusively in the realm of oral tradition, never to be shared with outsiders. Long centuries of conquest and cultural suppression at the hands of serial waves of Nordic and Germanic invaders has left the Welsh a rather cautious and secretive people.

Though later reinterpreted through a Christian lens as a Hell realm with corresponding assumptions of evil conditions and punishment, the Welsh Annwyn or Land of the Dead is described as a land of plenty and ease, wisely ruled over by Arawn.

“For Homer, death is being trapped in a murky dreamland where the rational will loses all ability to make choices or influence events” (Harris and Platzner 272). In the mists of the Ancient Greek place of the Dead, for most inhabitants, memory, reason and volition are forever lost and obscured, as is all color and vibrancy.

In comparing the experience of descent for Pwyll and Kore, a substantial difference in the form and substance of the transition emerges. The two methods of descent can be illustrated as being carried away either a) in a dreamlike trance or b) by a sharp physical and/or emotional trial invoking suffering. These modalities are not strictly gender-determined and appear in differing proportions in each hero’s journey, on a scale teetering between seduction and force. Where the heroic

Hidden Portals and Underworld Intimacies

She is gold, silk, wax.

He feels her burn all night, through
the wall of his back” (Francis 7).

Kore in her parallel but much more austere journey, over the months of her captivity in the Underworld, is replaced by the Dread Queen Persephone, “Bringer of Death.” The cap on her transformation is the symbolic marriage to Hades via pomegranate seed, prior to her temporary release and resurrection in the springtime upper world. Yet by flipping from Kore to Persephone—the twinned opposites of youthful fertility and death—Kore the maiden overcomes. She succeeds in transforming herself from object to subject, seizing a future for herself to go forward into, an eternal version of her blooming spring and summertime girlhood-self cycling back down into a powerful goddess ruling the very processes of birth, death, and rebirth. She is complete, containing within herself both the full cycle of the seasons and the etiological myth to explain the falling leaves of autumn, the winter’s snows, and spring’s orchestra of flowers reborn.

Arawn’s wife: “Shame on me,” she replied, “[but] for the last year, from whenever we were enfolded in bed clothes there has been no affection, no conversation, nor you even turning your face towards me: let alone anything other than which might have happened between us.”

Arawn: Then he began thinking. “Lord God,” he said to himself, “a uniquely strong and unwavering friend is the one with whom I have made [this] friendship” (“Pwyll” I).

that won't hold still in the wind,
and it is no map.

And this is her hand, that voice is hers,
Laughing and hurt. Every night
his back's turned on her,

and every day the forest
gallops around him" (Francis 7).

Works Cited

Barber, Elizabeth Wayland and Paul T. Barber. *When They Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth*. Princeton UP, 2004.

Evelyn-White, Hugh G., trans. "Hymn to Demeter." *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White*. Harvard UP, London, William Heinemann, 1914. www.gutenberg.org/files/348/348-h/348-h.htm#chap37. Accessed 18 May 2024.

Francis, Matthew. *The Mabinogi*. Faber and Faber, 2017.

Guest, Charlotte, translator. "The First Branch of the Mabinogi: Pwyll Prince of Dyfed," *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. Jackson, Jake, Ed. Flame Tree Publishing, 2022.

Harris, Stephen L. and Gloria Platzner. *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*, 6th Edition. McGraw-Hill, 2012.

Nagy, Gregory, translator. *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. By Homer, The Center for Hellenic Studies Primary Sources, 2020. chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/homeric-hymn-to-demeter-sb. Accessed 18 May 2024.

Parker, Will. "The First Branch-the Mabinogi of Pwyll." *The Mabinogion*. www.mabinogion.info/pwyll.htm. Accessed 18 May 2024.

---. *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi: Celtic Myth and Medieval Reality*. Bardic Press, 2007. www.mabinogi.net/fourbranches.html. Accessed 18 May 2024.

"Pwyll Pen Annwfn: First Branch of the Mabinogi." *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. Will Parker, trans. 2005. www.mabinogi.net/pwyll.htm. Accessed 18 May 2024.