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## Celtic Heroes, 'Changelings', and the Mothers

Yoko Hemmi

### I. Infant heroes who are exposed at their births

Celtic heroes, or heroes in general, are distinguished from others by their close relationship with the Other World. This is particularly manifest in the tales of their conceptions and births. The 'triple conception' motif found in the birth tale of Cú Chulainn, the most renowned hero in the Irish heroic tradition, may be a typical example relating the hero's otherworldly connexion.<sup>1</sup> In this tale, the god Lugh came to Dechtine in her sleep and told her that she would bear his son. She, however, induced a miscarriage before marrying an earthly husband. The miscarriage incident may be explained as an attempt to banish the otherworldly child. In fact, one of the prominent incidents recurring in the birth tales of heroes worldwide is the obvious attempt to get rid of the newborn heroes. Taliesin, a legendary poet and prophet in the medieval Welsh tradition, for example, was set adrift in the water like Moses in the Old Testament. It is explained that in both cases the mothers had no intention of committing infanticide. Taliesin's mother Ceridwen set him adrift because 'she could not in her heart do him any physical harm herself, nor could she bear to see anyone else do it'.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Moses' mother, she wanted her son to escape from the cruel

fate awaiting all male Hebrew children: the king of Egypt had ordered that every Hebrew man-child at birth be flung into the river.<sup>3</sup> Frazer explains the incident of 'Moses in the ark of bulrushes' as a narrator's invention in order to imply the interposition of the finger of Fate.<sup>4</sup> We are also reminded of the ancient Celtic (or probably Germanic) custom reported by the Emperor Julian that the child's legitimacy was submitted to the judgement of the river Rhine: if the baby survived, he was accepted by his father as legitimate. Likewise, Frazer argues, the story of the birth of Moses may echo an old custom to expose the life of a baby to danger on purpose to see if the river (goddess) would save him or her.<sup>5</sup>

Alwyn and Brinley Rees, on the other hand, offer a different and more symbolical viewpoint regarding the threat to the hero's life at birth. They put stress on the enigma concerning the origin of the hero; that is, on the fact that 'whether he has an earthly father or not, he is usually begotten by another—a king, a man from another race, or a supernatural being'.<sup>6</sup> They interpret the hostility towards the advent of the hero as follows:

In the interest of law and order, normality and morality, the disturbance from the Other World must be repressed and forgotten. And so, the infant prodigy is expelled to the wilderness beyond the confines of ordered life, or to the waters of non-existence, the otherworld chaos to which he belongs. Alternatively, he is denied a name and thus kept outside the cosmic pale where everything that exists has a name.<sup>7</sup>

The Rees also point out that 'a comparison between the exposure of the

hero, particularly by immersion or by setting him adrift, and the sacrificial ritual of baptism is therefore inescapable'.<sup>8</sup> By the ritual of death and rebirth, or 'by being returned through water to the world beyond and brought back again by the appropriate ritual, the child is separated more completely from its uncanny associations with the unseen world'.<sup>9</sup> It is well attested in folklore that Christian baptism is extremely efficacious in protecting the newborns from supernatural forces. The Rees seem to recognize the same function as Christian baptism in the exposure of the hero by setting him adrift: both serve to separate the hero from his otherworldly self.

## **II. Heroes and the otherworldly waters**

However, at least in the Celtic hero tales that will be discussed below, the episodes of the committal to the waters seem to convey quite a different meaning. By recounting how the baby hero was thrown into the sea (or river/lake) and how he survived the peril, these episodes seem rather to emphasize the hero's affinity with the waters or the Other World. In other words, they function as the revelation of the hero's otherworldly aspect. The waters, be it the sea, the river, or the lake, are the otherworldly regions dominantly governed by the goddesses of fertility and healing. Many rivers are named after the goddesses. As Miranda Green points out, 'water represented liminal space, locations at the interface of the earthly and supernatural worlds. Such places were perilous and unstable but because they were "gateways" between worlds, communication with the spirit-world was easier than elsewhere'.<sup>10</sup> The hero's connexion with these regions may suggest his association with these goddesses.

### III. Heroes and 'changelings'

Fairies, when they steal a human child from the mother, leave a creature of their own race as a substitute. That non-human child left behind in place of a human child is called a 'changeling'. Folk narratives abound in the episodes of the mother's attempt to banish it.

Methods of banishing the changeling vary, but throwing it into water or on the fire is considered especially efficacious. Hartland, for example, reports a Welsh story of a mother who by flinging the goblin twins into the river, Llyn Ebyr, retrieved her own.<sup>11</sup> W. B. Yeats on the other hand introduces 'one infallible' way to find out in a child a changeling: 'lay it on the fire with this formula, "Burn, burn, burn—if of the devil, burn; but if of God and the saints, be safe from harm" (given by Lady Wilde). Then if it be a changeling it will rush up the chimney with a cry, for, according to Giraldus Cambrensis, "fire is the greatest of enemies to every sort of phantom, in so much that those who have seen apparitions fall into a swoon as soon as they are sensible of the brightness of fire"'.<sup>12</sup>

The most common way to trick the changeling into disclosing its otherworldly identity is to show it the 'brewery of eggshells'. The changeling then reveals its great age by the remark such as 'I'm fifteen hundred years in the world, and I never saw a brewery of eggshells before!'<sup>13</sup> and 'I am as old/As Bohemian gold [forest],/Yet for the first time now I see/Beer in an egg-shell brew'd to be'.<sup>14</sup> These remarks can be interpreted as betraying their agelessness, the otherworldly timelessness that is shared in Taliesin's boast, 'I was with my lord/in the heavens/when Lucifer fell/into the depths of hell'.<sup>15</sup>

The resemblance of the infant hero to the changeling is already

pointed out by the Rees brothers. They interpret the changeling as 'the personification of the otherworldly side of the human child's nature'.<sup>16</sup> They regard, therefore, the folk narrative episodes relating the banishment of the changeling as referring to 'a pre-Christian rite analogous to baptism, whereby the human child itself was ritually "expelled" or "exposed" so as to separate it from the supernatural and save it from being possessed by its mysterious "other" self'.<sup>17</sup> To the Rees, then, baptism, the banishment of the changeling, and the exposure of the newborn hero are all equated as a ritual to expel the otherworldly aspect of the child.

We may add other similarities between the changeling and the infant hero. First, the changeling particularly resembles the nameless hero because the changeling is also nameless, and is almost always referred to as 'it'.<sup>18</sup> Its namelessness denotes the fact that it is kept 'outside the cosmic pale'. Secondly, as we will examine later, the infant hero is comparable to the changeling in his failure to thrive until he is given a name. The changeling is exclusively marked with its failure to thrive. It also displays other peculiar behaviour: 'always crying and never satisfied, greedy with food, uttering piteous cries, and yelling every night, biting and tearing the mother's breasts, and unable to be still in arms or cradle'.<sup>19</sup> It also has unusual features: 'misshapen limbs, an oversize head, slowness in learning to walk'.<sup>20</sup>

These traits, it has been observed, show striking similarities with the symptoms of congenital disorders. Eberly tries to explain such changeling traits as well as other monstrous features seen in the narratives of *Beowulf*, *Melusine*, and etc. as related to congenital syndromes.<sup>21</sup> The changeling has been studied also from a psychological point of view. Munro argues that 'the changelings bear a close resemblance to the

infants and children described in current medical literature as suffering from “failure to thrive.” These infants fail to grow as a consequence of the parent’s failure to form an adequate emotional bond to them, without any apparent physical cause’.<sup>22</sup> In her article, ‘The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as a Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children’, she argues that the changeling ‘embodies the idea of the failure of the parent-infant bond and the physical consequences that flow from that failure’.<sup>23</sup>

It seems possible to compare the hero’s changeling-like traits—that is, his ‘failure to thrive’—with the psychological ‘failure to thrive’ in infants. We may further apply Munro’s argument to the discussion of the relationship between the heroes and their mothers.

Let us now confirm the points made above by examining the tales dealing with the conceptions and births of Lugh, Finn, and Lleu.

### (1) **The birth of Lugh**

The Irish god Lugh *Lámhfahada*, or Lugh ‘of the long arm’, is the most eminent hero god in Irish mythology. Moreover, he seems to have been a pan-Celtic divinity: it is commonly accepted that Lugh and ‘Mercurius’, whom Caesar mentioned in his *De Bello Gallico* as ranking first in the Gaulish pantheon (Book 6, 17), are one. Lugh’s soubriquet (*sam*) *ildánach*, ‘possessing, or skilled in many arts (together)’, as well as the famous episode in the tale of the battle of Magh Tuiredh explaining how he acquired that soubriquet,<sup>24</sup> corresponds neatly with Caesar’s phrase, *omnium inventorem artium*. The pan-Celtic character of Lugh’s cult is also attested by the distribution of placenames derived from *Lugus*, the older form of his name.<sup>25</sup>

The birth story of Lugh is not found in the *Second Battle of Magh*

*Tuiredh*, whose language suggests composition in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. No detail is given here, and it is merely told that 'the Tuatha De Danann made a political alliance with the Fomhoire, and Balor grandson of Net gave his daughter Ethne to Cian son of Diancecht, and she brought forth the gifted child, Lug'.<sup>26</sup> Lugh therefore had a Tuatha Dé father and a Fomhoire mother. The *Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh* relates how the young god Lugh led the Tuatha Dé to victory in the battle against the Fomhoire. The climax of the tale is his killing of his maternal grandfather Balar 'of the Evil Eye'. Balar's Evil Eye opened only on a battlefield, and it took four men to lift up the eyelid. 'If an army looked at that eye, though they were thousands in number, they could not resist a few warriors'.<sup>27</sup> As soon as the lid was raised, Lugh cast a sling-stone at that baleful eye, and the stone went through his head.

Balar of the Evil Eye is also described as a monstrous giant in the pseudo-history *Leabhar Gabhála Éireann* (the *Book of Invasions*). Here the Fomhoire are not counted among the six tribes that settled in Ireland. They first appear as the opponent of Partholón and his followers (the second settlers), and are portrayed as having one eye, one arm, and one leg. The Fomhoire whose fortress was on the Tory Island, north of Co. Donegal, are depicted as cruel and demonic sea-raiders demanding heavy tributes. It is noted, however, that the Tuatha Dé in the *Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh* are related to the Fomhoire conjugally, and in such cases they are not portrayed as monstrous. As has already been mentioned, Lugh was born between Cian son of Dian Cécht, a renowned leech of the Tuatha Dé, and Eithne daughter of Balar. Another Tuatha Dé and the Fomhoire couple we find in the tale is a Tuatha Dé woman Eri and a Fomhoire king Elotha. Here, the



appearance of the Fomhoire king is equated with that of any Tuatha Dé kings. From this union, Bres 'the Beautiful' who inherited the leadership of the Tuatha Dé was born. As Mac Cana suggests, the Fomhoire of the *Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh* were themselves gods.<sup>28</sup> Lugh, therefore, had a mother of a divine race who lived on the sea. Lugh's connexion with the sea through his mother's side seems to persist in the later folktale versions of his birth story. The folktale versions, unlike the *Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh*, supply abundant information on his conception and birth.

W. J. Gruffydd introduces four folktale versions of the birth tale of Lugh<sup>29</sup>:

- 1) *B1: Balor on Tory Island*
- 2) *B2: Balor or the Evil Eye and Lui Lavada his Grandson*
- 3) *Version O.*
- 4) *Version L: The Gloss Gavlen*

Let us now examine versions *B1* and *B2*, which seem to offer significant clues to the discussion of 1) the exposure of the hero by setting him adrift, 2) the changeling-like aspect of the hero, especially his failure to thrive, and 3) the relationship between the hero and the mother, from the comparative viewpoint of the psychological 'failure to thrive' in infants.

Version *B1*, *Balor on Tory Island*, orally collected in Co. Donegal, relates that King Balor lived on Tory Island and imprisoned his daughter in a castle with twelve women guarding her, because it was prophesied that he would be killed by the son of his daughter. A hero called Fin (White), with the magical assistance of Gial Duv (Black Jaw),

visited the daughter and mated first with her, then with all the other women. When the daughter and the twelve women had babies, Fin went to Tory to rescue the babies from Balor. Twelve babies were wrapped in a blanket, and Balor's grandson was covered in a separate cloth. While on the sea, the thorn with which the blanket was fastened broke, and the twelve children fell into the water, and became seals. Lugh therefore had twelve half-brothers who became seals. Here his affinity with the sea seems to reveal itself most vividly. Just as a colt was born at the birth of Pryderi, thus explaining his lineage as the son of the horse-goddess Rhiannon, Lugh's twelve seal brothers may suggest his lineage as the son of the water-goddess. In *Version L*, he is reared by the sea-god Mananann mac Lir.

When Balor's grandson was brought to the mainland, he did not thrive with a nurse. Gial Duv advised Fin to take the child to Tory to be nursed by the daughter and the twelve women. Again with the magical assistance of Gial Duv, Fin accomplished this task. The child thrived afterwards. This episode is interesting in three ways. First, it seems to emphasize his close blood-relationship with the seals, the creatures of the sea. The child did not thrive until he was breast-fed not only by his mother, but also by the twelve women, the mothers of his twelve seal brothers, as if these twelve women were also his own mothers. His seal brothers may be equivalent to Llew's twin brother who 'took the sea's nature, and swam as well as the best fish in the sea'.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, the child's failure to thrive until he was breastfed by his mother(s) can be compared to the characteristic of the changeling, which is commonly described as undersized, withered and sickly, no matter how much it eats. Thirdly, the child's 'failure to thrive' episode may be explained from the psychological point of view. It may have

been a result of the maternal deprivation.

As mentioned above, Munro perceives a remarkable resemblance between the changeling and the infants suffering from 'failure to thrive'. Medicine began to investigate the connexion between the 'failure to thrive' and emotional deprivation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until the mid 1900s, the focus of medical studies were on the infants living in foundling institutions or hospitalized for extended periods of time, mostly because of the extremely high death rates among them.<sup>31</sup> It came into notice that the failure to thrive in infants in institutions was caused by emotional deprivation, especially maternal deprivation.<sup>32</sup> After 1957 when an important case study of infants who failed to thrive at home appeared, medicine turned its gaze upon children who were failing to thrive in their own homes.<sup>33</sup> Through the research on mothers of nonorganic failure to thrive infants, it was made clear that the mothers had emotional problems hindering them from forming an adequate emotional bond to their children.<sup>34</sup>

Psychosocial dwarfism typifies the connexion between the psychological failure to thrive and maternal deprivation syndrome. It is emotionally induced, causing developmental and intellectual delays. It is reported that parental hostility and maternal rejection can depress the production of human growth hormone.<sup>35</sup> The patients are noted for their bizarre behaviour including eating to the point of vomiting and roaming at night. However, once the environment is improved, they exhibit remarkable changes in behaviour and in growth rates. They even exhibit 'growth rates of three to six times the normal rate',<sup>36</sup> which reminds us of the stories of extraordinary growth rates of the heroes. Leprechaunism, named after the Irish 'leprechaun' (a fairy), is also related to parental rejection and emotional deprivation.<sup>37</sup> This is the

syndrome in which an infant is hirsute, underweight, and has elfin facies. In other words, the patients look exactly like the changelings. In fact, changelings were often referred to as 'prechauns', short for 'leprechaun' in Ireland.<sup>38</sup>

We may infer, then, that the episode of Lugh's changeling-like condition, that is, his failure to thrive until he was breastfed by his mother(s), reflects the trauma caused by exposure to the hostility at his birth and by the failure to form an adequate mother-infant bond.

In *B2*, titled '*Balor of the Evil Eye and Lui Lavada his Grandson*', the hero's naming episode replaces the breastfeeding episode in *B1*. Cian, with the help of a cloak of darkness, given by the druid, visited Balor's daughter who was kept behind seven locked doors. When she gave birth to a boy, he was brought to Ireland, but 'was not thriving for three years, hardly lived, and was puny'.<sup>39</sup> The druid advised Cian to take the child to Balor, 'as the child would not thrive till his grandfather called him by name'.<sup>40</sup> Cian, disguised himself as a gardener, went to Balor with the child, but the child was not thriving because Balor spoke no words to him. One day, however, the child picked up the apples scattered on the floor with such extraordinary nimbleness that Balor cried, "take away with thee, *Lui Lavada* (Little Long Hand)." "Oh, he has the name now," said Cian and he took his son to Ireland; the child grew wonderfully after that, and was soon full of strength'.<sup>41</sup> Here, the hero was given a name by his maternal grandfather's remark made at the moment he recognized the hero's extraordinary deftness that denotes his otherworldly aspect. It seems as if the hero can be named only when his otherworldly aspects are recognized and appreciated by the person who initially denied his existence in this world. As he was freed from the namelessness—the changeling-like state—he started to

thrive wonderfully afterwards.

In this respect, the intriguing fact is that the parents of premature or ill newborns tend to defer the naming of their children. They may delay 'for days or even weeks, and even when home with the baby, will refer to the child as "it" much more than the parents of a normal healthy infant will'.<sup>42</sup> As already mentioned, the changeling is always referred to as 'it'. The parent who refers to the child as 'it' may be incapable of seeing the child as a fellow human being: the child is seen as a mere 'thing' or as an otherworldly creature. Munro argues that 'the very ability to give one's child a name is linked with the ability to form a healthy emotional bond to the child. The namelessness of changelings could be seen as a symptom that the parent has been unable to form this bond'.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, the namelessness of the hero and his changeling-like condition may indicate the mother's inability to form a 'healthy emotional bond to the child'.

## (2) The birth of Finn mac Cumhail

The hero's affinity with the waters is made even more evident in a folktale version of the story of Finn's birth. Finn, a hero-warrior in the Fiana Cycle, was probably himself divine, as numerous episodes concerning his supernatural abilities imply. The sacred connotation of the word *Finn* (white/fair) may be inferred from the Welsh cognate *Gwynn*, which is found in the name of Gwynn ap Nudd, the King of Fairies who leads the Wild Hunt. The Celtic form *vindos*, 'white', is attested in continental Europe in the deity-name *Vindonnus*.<sup>44</sup> It is further suggested that Finn, 'The Fair One', may originally have been another name for the god Lugh, 'The Bright One'.<sup>45</sup>

The tale of *The Boyhood Deeds of Finn*, whose language is supposed-

ly of the 12<sup>th</sup> century or earlier, does not include the motif of the hero's committal to the water at birth. When Cumall was killed in the battle of Cnucha, he left his wife Muirne Fair-Neck pregnant. When a boy, named Demne, was born, he was taken away to the forest to be raised there in secret by two female warriors: his mother did not dare to keep her son herself because she feared for him on account of the enemy, the sons of Morna.

It is again in the later oral traditions that we find details of Finn's birth. Gruffydd introduces nine tales including medieval manuscript versions,<sup>46</sup> among which the version *F9, Birth of Finn*, orally collected by Curtin, offers the most interesting clues for the purpose of the present paper. In this version,<sup>47</sup> Cumhal Macart married a king's daughter in secret. She was guarded closely so that no man could come near her, because the Druid prophesied that her daughter's son would take the kingdom from the king. It was also prophesied of Cumhal himself that he would be killed in the next battle after his marriage. The prophecy came true, but before going to the battle, he had asked his mother to hide and rear his son if the king's daughter had one. The king's daughter gave birth to a son within the year in which Cumhal was killed in the battle.

By command of his grandfather, the boy was thrown out of the castle window into a loch, to be drowned, on the day of his birth.

The boy sank from the sight; but after remaining a while under the water, he rose again to the surface, and came to land holding a live salmon in his hand.

The grandmother of the boy, Cumhal's mother, stood watching on the shore, and said to herself as she saw this: "He is my

grandson, the true son of my own child,” and seizing the boy, she rushed away with him, and vanished, before the king’s people could stop her.<sup>48</sup>

This incident, in which the newborn hero was thrown into the water to be drowned but emerged holding a live salmon in his hand, seems to convey not only the hero’s supernatural qualities but also his control over the water-world. It is without saying that the storyteller was here conscious of the famous episode of Finn’s acquisition of the otherworldly knowledge through the Salmon of Wisdom. The salmon, repository of otherworldly knowledge and wisdom, is associated with sacred wells in Ireland. It was also revered in Wales: in *Culhwch and Olwen*, Salmon of Llyn Llyw, the oldest of living creatures, is consulted as regards the whereabouts of Mabon son of Modron [Son, son of Mother].<sup>49</sup> MacKillop explains the mythic power of the salmon as follows: ‘Its swimming between salt and fresh water may have suggested the capacity to pass between worlds. The ability to swim against the stream over waterfalls easily excites human admiration’.<sup>50</sup> The salmon in other words represents the limial nature of the water, and the hero Finn is described as having a hold on it.

It is only *F9* that mentions the means by which the grandfather tried to destroy the newborn hero. In the other folktale versions, the grandfather ordered to kill the baby if it was a boy, but he did not specify the means. It is interesting, however, that in all these versions, twin babies, first a girl then a boy were born (in versions *F1*, *F2*, and *F7*; in *F6* the first-born was a boy, but Cumhal’s sister put a lump of fat in his mouth to keep him quiet; in *F8* it is merely stated that ‘twins’ were born). When a girl was born, those who kept watch left the mother to bring

the good news to the grandfather. However, later on that same day, a boy was born without being noticed by anyone but Luas Lurgan, or 'Speedy Foot'. She took the boy away and hid him in a bed made by her carpenter brother in the trunk of a tree. This episode reminds us of the birth story of Lleu. Lleu, as we will examine below, was also born in the manner of 'afterbirth'. Her brother Gwydion picked him up without being noticed by anybody and hid him in a box under his bed.

In *F9*, Finn's grandmother hired a man to cut out a chamber in a great oak tree in a thick forest. There, in the chamber in the oak tree, the grandmother, the boy and 'a whelp of the same age as the boy, which she had brought with her from the castle'<sup>51</sup> lived together for five years. The whelp Bran, presumably born at the same time as the boy, served him as a supernatural helper. As the grandmother kept the boy in the chamber in the oak tree until he became five years old, 'he couldn't walk, he had been sitting so long inside',<sup>52</sup> that is to say, he was like a changeling. He was also nameless at this point, again like a changeling. The grandmother ('Speedy Foot' in *F1*) taught the boy to walk and trained him to be a great runner. When the boy became fifteen years old, she took him to a hurling match between the forces of his grandfather and those of a neighbouring king. The boy opposed his grandfather's people and defeated them completely, exhibiting extraordinary feats. The grandfather was enraged and exclaimed, looking at the boy who was very fair and had white hair: 'Who is that *fin cumhal* [white cap]?'<sup>53</sup> In this version, as well as in all the other versions, the boy was named by his grandfather who witnessed the boy's otherworldly feats.

In *F9*, the grandfather ordered his people to seize and kill the youth on the spot. The grandmother, however, took him out of that place and went 'a hill at a leap, a glen at a step, and thirty-two miles at a



running-leap'.<sup>54</sup> When Finn grew tired after running a long distance, the old grandmother took him on her back and 'ran on with the same swiftness as before, a hill at a leap, a glen at a step, and thirty-two miles at a running-leap'.<sup>55</sup> The extraordinary leap is the ability commonly found in the Irish heroes of divine origin such as Cú Chulainn and Diarmid Donn. The grandmother who reared and trained Finn apparently had superhuman vigour. In the medieval manuscript versions, Finn was reared by two female warriors, who also taught him hunting and fighting. It is noteworthy that the renowned Celtic heroes like Cú Chulainn, who was trained by Scáthach, and Finn seem to have a closer connexion with female instructors in martial arts than with their natural mothers. Finn's mother, in the medieval literature as well as in the folktale versions, abandoned rearing the son herself as soon as he was born.

### (3) The birth of Llew Llaw Gyffes

The story of Llew's birth is narrated in the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi*, *Math son of Mathonwy*. Llew's mother Arianrhod, a daughter of Dôn (the Mother Goddess), was ordered to step over the magical rod of her uncle Math to see if she was qualified as his 'foot holder': his 'foot holder' had to be a virgin.<sup>56</sup> When she was asked whether she was a virgin, she answered, 'I do not know other than I am'.<sup>57</sup> In spite of her declaration, as she stepped over the rod, she dropped first a big, fine, yellow-haired boy, then a 'little something' (the placenta?) on her way out. Gwydion took it before anyone could have a second glance at it, and wrapped it in a brocaded silk coverlet. He hid it in a small chest at the foot of his bed. As for the yellow-haired boy, Math named him Dylan, and as soon as he was baptized, 'he made for the sea. No sooner

had he come to the sea than he took the sea's nature, and swam as well as the best fish in the sea; because of that he was called Dylan Eil Ton [Sea Son of Waves]. No wave ever broke under him'.<sup>58</sup>

If Arianrhod had an aquatic son who 'took the sea's nature', she must have some connexion with the water herself. Her water connexion may be implied, though vaguely, by the location of her fortress. It is told in the fourth branch that her fortress, *Caer Arianrhod* stood by the sea, looking over the port. She is also described as having a court surrounded by the water in an independent tradition: in a verse in the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Book of Taliesin*, she is recorded as a famous beauty who had a water-girt castle.<sup>59</sup> *Caer Arianrhod*, according to the modern local tradition recorded by Rhŷs, was connected with an Inundation legend.<sup>60</sup>

Arianrhod's son Dylan was no doubt a sea-creature, swimming as well as the best fish in the sea. Keefer suggests that he was probably transformed into a seal or a *selchie* [seal-fairy]: the text 'no wave ever broke under him' may suggest that 'he swam by diving under the breaking waters, as a seal does'.<sup>61</sup> If Lleu had a twin brother who became a seal, he was equated with Lugh who had twelve half-brothers who also became seals. Though it is generally held that Lleu is the Welsh counterpart of Irish Lugh,<sup>62</sup> the similarity here is nonetheless remarkable. Both Lugh and Lleu exhibit their affinity with the sea through the existence of the seal brothers.

Lleu's birth story, besides bearing a close resemblance to Lugh's, shares significant details with that of Finn's: both Lleu and Finn were born in the manner of 'afterbirth' and were hidden and reared in a chamber in a tree or in a box. The birth tales of Lugh, Finn, and Lleu seem to form three concentric circles.

Lleu's name was given to him in a similar situation to the other two

heroes. However, Llew's naming episode is of particular interest because the name-giver was his own mother. His mother Arianrhod abandoned him as if she did not even notice the fact that she had dropped him. As she had declared herself a virgin, she could not admit his existence itself. She was therefore an 'enemy' to him in the same way as the grandfathers were to Lugh and Finn. Llew, however, did not show any changeling-like trait: there is no reference to his failing to thrive. On the contrary, Llew, who was given abundant affection by his uncle Gwydion, grew at double the speed as a normal child. We are here reminded of Pryderi in the first branch of the *Mabinogi*, who was carried away from his mother by some otherworldly force, visualized as a great claw, on the night of his birth. The infant was found by the neighbouring lord Teyrnnon Twrf Liant. Having been childless, Teyrnnon and his wife decided to pretend that the boy was their own. Pryderi grew at the remarkable growth rate of three times the normal.

Gwydion took the boy, nameless at this point, to *Caer Arianrhod*. When Gwydion told Arianrhod that the boy was her son, she put a curse on him that he should never have a name until he got it from her. Gwydion tricked her with his powerful magic into giving a name to her son. When she witnessed the boy's remarkable deftness at hitting a wren, she said, 'it's with a skilful hand (*llaw gyffes*) that the fair-haired one (*lleu*) has hit him!'<sup>63</sup> He thus acquired a name, Llew Llaw Gyffes. Though Llew showed no changeling-like traits before he was named, he was cursed again by his mother so that he should never take arms until the mother armed him with her own hands. As long as the warrior is denied a chance to take arms, he must stay 'outside' the society; that is to say, he is forced to remain in the changeling-like state. The second curse was again broken by Gwydion's magic, and his mother was

tricked into arming him with her own hands. Lleu was finally freed from the changeling-like state when he was given a name and arms by his mother who rejected his very existence at his birth.

It is tempting to make a further comparison between Pryderi and the three heroes discussed so far. Pryderi was deprived of his mother on the night he was born. However, he thrived with the affectionate foster-parents. His name Pryderi was given by his mother Rhriannon, when she heard the extraordinary story of his adventure. Though there is no reference to the mother's hostility towards the son, it is interesting to note that in the text, Rhriannon was accused, however falsely, of destroying her own child. Rhriannon, whose name is the derivative of the British \**Rīgantonā*, the 'Great Queen', is equivalent to the Gaulish horse-goddess Epona, 'The Divine Horse'.<sup>64</sup> Just as Epona was associated with the hippomorphic sea god Poseidon,<sup>65</sup> Rhriannon was related to the sea through her ersatz husband, Teyrnnon, who pretended to be the father of her son, Pryderi.<sup>66</sup> As his epithet 'Twrf Liant' may signify 'tempestuous flood', so that he may be 'Lord of the Raging Sea'.<sup>67</sup> Teyrnnon was possibly a sea-deity.<sup>68</sup> Rhriannon was also married to Manawydan son of Llŷr ('son of the Sea') in the third branch.

#### IV. Heroes and the Mother Goddesses associated with water

As examined above, the birth tales of Lugh, Finn, and Lleu relate their close connexion with the water. Their aquatic, otherworldly aspects become manifest at the moment the heroes, or their brothers—their 'other' or alternative selves—, were immersed in the water. Lugh's twelve half-brothers became seals when they fell into the sea, just like Lleu's twin brother who 'took the sea's nature' and began to swim like a seal as soon as he came to the sea. When Finn was thrown into the

lake, he came out of the water holding a live salmon in his hand. These incidents of the heroes' committal to the water at their births seem to emphasize their affinity with the waters, the otherworldly regions governed by the goddesses.

In spite of the suggested connexion with the water-goddesses, the Celtic heroes examined in this paper are distinctively lacking in the emotional bond to their mothers. The episodes of the heroes' changeling-like traits can be compared to what in current medical literature is described as psychological 'failure to thrive' syndrome, caused by maternal deprivation or rejection by the parents. Lugh, Finn, and Lleu were deprived of their mothers soon after their births. While the mothers of Lugh and Finn were simply passive and powerless before the hostility of their fathers towards their sons, Lleu's mother was openly hostile and put a curse on him so that he should remain in the changeling-like state. In all cases, the mothers fail to form an emotional bond with their sons. Their changeling-like traits may symbolize the trauma caused by this.

Incidentally, it is told in *Culhwch and Olwen* that Mabon 'the Divine Youth (Son)' was stolen from his mother Modron 'the Divine Mother' when only three nights old.<sup>69</sup> Mabon is derived from the British god *Maponus*, a god identified with Apollo in inscriptions as *Apollō Maponus*, whereas his mother Modron is derived from Gaulish and British *Matrona*, from which the river Marne was named.<sup>70</sup> It is significant for our discussion to note that 'the Great Son' was stolen soon after his birth from 'the Great Mother' who gave her name to the river. Gruffydd argues that Mabon the Great Son and Modron the Mother Goddess parallel Pryderi and Rhiannon, the Great Queen.<sup>71</sup> The birth stories of Lugh, Finn, Lleu, and Pryderi may belong to the constellation

of Celtic myths of a newborn god deprived from the Mother Goddess associated with waters.

### Notes

- 1 Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961) 217-18.
- 2 Patrick K. Ford trans., *The Mabinogi and other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977) 164.
- 3 James George Frazer, *Folk-lore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend, and Law* (London: Macmillan, 1923) 264.
- 4 Frazer, 265.
- 5 Frazer, 268-69.
- 6 Rees, 223.
- 7 Rees, 239.
- 8 Rees, 242.
- 9 Rees, 242.
- 10 Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers* (London: British Museum Press, 1995) 90.
- 11 E. S. Hartland, *The Science of Fairy Tales: An Inquiry into Fairy Mythology* (London: Walter Scott, 1891) 123.
- 12 W. B. Yeats ed., *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* (1918; New York: The Modern Library, 1994) 53.
- 13 T. Croton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (London: John Murray, 1834) 31.
- 14 Hartland, 113-115. Hartland comments that 'the measure of age given in his [i.e. the changeling's] exclamation is usually that of the trees in the forest, or indeed the forest itself'. He asserts that the 'Bohemian gold' (*Böhmer Gold*) is undoubtedly a corruption, and that the true form is Bohemian Forest (*Behmer Woelt*).

- 15 Ford, 172.
- 16 Rees, 243.
- 17 Rees, 243.
- 18 Joyce Underwood Munro, 'The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children' in Peter Narváez ed., *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997) 256
- 19 Munro, 264.
- 20 Susan Schoon Eberly, 'Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids, and the Solitary Fairy' in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, 234.
- 21 Eberly, 234-247.
- 22 Munro, 252.
- 23 Munro, 252.
- 24 T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover eds., *Ancient Irish Tales* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1935) 35-37.
- 25 Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (1968; rev. ed. Twickenham: Newness Books, 1983) 25.
- 26 Cross and Slover, 28.
- 27 Cross and Slover, 44.
- 28 Mac Cana, 61.
- 29 W. J. Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy: An Inquiry into the Origins and Development of the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi with the Text and Translation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1928) 65-76.
- 30 Ford, 98-99.
- 31 Munro, 265.
- 32 Munro, 267.
- 33 Munro, 268.
- 34 Munro, 269.
- 35 Munro, 273.
- 36 Munro, 278.

- 37 Munro, 274-75.
- 38 Munro, 272.
- 39 *Math vab Mathonwy*, 71.
- 40 *Math vab Mathonwy*, 71.
- 41 *Math vab Mathonwy*, 71.
- 42 Munro, 275.
- 43 Munro, 276.
- 44 Mac Cana, 108-09.
- 45 Mac Cana, 109.
- 46 *Math vab Mathonwy*, 119-27.
- 47 Jeremiah Curtin, *Myth and Folk-Lore of Ireland* (1890; New York: Weathervane Books, 1975) 204-20.
- 48 Curtin, 205.
- 49 Ford, 148.
- 50 James MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 332-33.
- 51 Curtin, 206.
- 52 Curtin, 206.
- 53 Curtin, 207.
- 54 Curtin, 208.
- 55 Curtin, 208.
- 56 'Math son of Mathonwy could only live while his feet were in the lap of a maiden—unless the turmoil of war prevented him' (Ford, 91). Math was looking for a new foot-holder after Goewin was raped by his nephew Gilfaethwy.
- 57 Ford, 98.
- 58 Ford, 98-99.
- 59 *Math vab Mathonwy*, 188.
- 60 *Math vab Mathonwy*, 188; John Rhŷs, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx* (1901; New York: Arno Press, 1980) 208-09.
- 61 Sarah Larratt Keefer, 'The Lost Tale of Dylan in the Fourth Branch of



*The Mabinogi*', ed. C. W. Sullivan III, *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays* (New York and London: Garland, 1996) 84.

62 Mac Cana, 25.

63 Ford, 101.

64 W. J. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon: An Inquiry into the Origins of the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1953) 98; Ford, 5; Mac Cana, 51.

65 Ford, 5.

66 Ford, 12.

67 Ford, 12.

68 Ford, 12.

69 Ford, 141.

70 *Rhiannon*, 92, 98.

71 *Rhiannon*, 90-108.

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