

## The Birth of Llew

The punishment of the sons of Dôn, along with the rape of Goewin itself, the stealing of the pigs, and the death of the southern hero Pryderi might collectively be seen as the initiating circumstances for the conception of Llew Llaw Gyfess, the central hero of the Fourth Branch. To understand why this should be the case, it is necessary to re-examine the Celtic tradition relating to the ‘unusual’ birth of heroes, which we have already considered above (pp. 491-494).

We will recall, in the story of Cú Chulainn there would appear to have been a number of attendant circumstances, rather than a single cause, surrounding the birth and conception of the hero. The mother of Cú Chulainn seems to have recently lost a much loved (otherworldly) foster-son, imbibed a strange drink and had a prophetic dream in which she met the god Lugh, who informed her that she was pregnant with his child. And pregnant she proved to be. The mysterious circumstances of her pregnancy led to rumours of incestuous relations with her father and considerable private shame. On her wedding night, we are told, she lay on her front and crushed the unborn child within her, yet she soon became pregnant again in the normal way with her new husband. Precisely which of these circumstances led to the birth of the hero is far from clear, but what is implied was that each of them was significant in some way to his coming.

The circumstances surrounding the birth of Llew would seem to be no less murky. Perhaps the most significant preceding event was the rape of Goewin, which occurred shortly before the death of Pryderi in the previous section. Following this is the magical punishment of the sons of Dôn, which combined the themes of incest and congenital animals (both features of the traditional hero-birth tale).<sup>998</sup> These events are associated with the arrival of the pigs of Annwn, symbolising the emergence of the elemental energies of the Indigenous Underworld into the landscape of Gwynedd.

With these circumstances already in place in the background, Math requests the help of Gwydion in locating a new virgin foot-holder, to cater for his debilitating ‘peculiarity’. Gwydion immediately suggests his own sister, Math’s niece, for this role. However, the latter seems less than enthusiastic at the prospect of this position, literally under the feet of her uncle. When asked if she is a virgin, she simply offers the following reply: *I know not but that I am not*. Given the somewhat intrusive nature of the question, Aranrhod’s reluctance to venture a specific answer is perhaps understandable enough. However, there is quite possibly more to this reply than sullen evasiveness. One is reminded of the curious situation of the Irish heroine Deichtine, mother of Cú Chulainn, before she gave birth to the hero. Given the high magic which seems to surround the conception of Celtic heroes, and the inexplicable nature of their mother’s experiences, it was perhaps the case that Aranrhod would have been unable, as well as unwilling, to provide as simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to this highly personal question.

996 Welsh (1990) pp. 359-360

997 It may also be related, ultimately, to a foundation myth about three different totem groups, as folklorists W. M. S. Russell and C. Russell suggest about this account of human-animal offspring of these monstrous unions ‘here we are on the border between totemic ancestors and werewolves’ (‘The Social Biology of Werewolves.’ in *Animals in Folklore* ed. J. R. Porter and W. M. S. Russell, Ipswich: Brewer, 1978)

As a result, Aranrhod is subjected to a virginity test, the symbolism of which is obvious enough. Math bends his magic wand, and lays it on the floor. Aranrhod is then asked to step over this object. As she does so, to everyone's surprise, a large curly-haired baby falls out from between her legs. She runs to the door in horror, and as she does so a second 'small something' falls from her person. This 'small something', is picked up and secreted by Gwydion, and eventually grows into the hero Lleu.

Gwydion's wraps this placenta-like object in a sheet of silk and places it in a small chest at the foot of his bed. Sometime later he is awoken one morning by the sound of crying and discovers a fully-formed baby in this box, which he takes into the township to be reared by a wet-nurse. In later life, he becomes a kind of surrogate father to boy, as we shall see. But in these earliest stages of the boy's life, Gwydion's care of the infant Lleu brings him into an almost maternal role, if only by proxy. It is not hard to see a womb-substitution in the box at the end of his bed: and when the baby first emerges from this container, it is described as thrusting its arms through the fold (*o blyc*) of the silk, using a word which recalls the 'fold' (*plyc*) of the virgin's lap in which Math must rest his feet. As Valente has pointed out, there is a sense in which this curiously feminine, nurturing role might be part of a larger theme of gender crossing and role-transgression, which seems to dominate the Fourth Branch as a whole.

Incest is another theme that has been identified as significant within in the Fourth Branch (as elsewhere in the Mabinogi, cf. p. 415 above), and which may indeed be plausibly related to these concepts of doubling and gender transition alluded to above, as suggested by Andrew Welsh. There is a latent suggestion that Lleu (and his twin brother Dylan, of whom more will be said below) may have been the offspring of an incestuous relationship between Gwydion and his sister Aranrhod. This is borne out by the shame and hostility exhibited by Aranrhod towards both Lleu and Gwydion, which we shall explore in the following section; but most particularly by the word-play on *mab*: meaning both 'son' and 'boy' in a more general sense (see p.510, n. 918). As Welsh points out, 'Gwydion never denies his paternity and, in a legal sense, may even admit it by maintaining and raising Lleu for a year and a day'.<sup>999</sup>

However, the question of Lleu's paternity, and the circumstances surrounding his conception, would appear to be yet more complex than this. Gwydion was, it should be remembered, in animal form during the three years immediately prior to Aranrhod's virginity test and the rather sudden magical 'birth' of Lleu and his twin brother Dylan. And one has to wonder why Gwydion himself would have volunteered his sister for the role of virginal footholder if he had knowingly been involved in a sexual relationship with her. Although, as with the conception of Cú Chulainn, the rumour and implication of incest would seem to present among the attendant circumstances of the hero's birth, to reduce it to this single cause would be to miss the essentially ambiguous, polygenetic

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998 A better example of the congenital birth motif is found in the association between Pryderi and the foal which was born on the same night (pp. 224-225). Strictly speaking, Hyddwn, Hwchwn and Bleidwn were neither congenital nor animals in the strictest sense, but their association with the birth of Lleu brings them into this category.

nature of this mysterious and highly magical event. We might regard the conception of Llew, and the Celtic tradition of heroic births in general, as a prime example of the type of narrative discourse discussed on pp 81-83 and 112-114 ff. above. Wonder and ambiguity are themselves employed as explicatory modes, as successive investigations reveal contradictory interpretations – oscillating between the natural and the magical, the causal and symbolic perspective of events. In the end, we are left with that most characteristically medieval prose narrative effect. Cohered and propelled forward by the threading current of the narrative voice, the tale is surrounded at every turn by the unspoken implication of wider, deeper (and sometimes darker) patterns of connectivity.

Before we move on to discuss the childhood and early youth of Llew Llaw Gyffes, there is one further sub-narrative within this episode that requires some consideration. That is the problem of Dylan Eil Ton, Llew's twin brother – the fully formed infant that is born at the same time that the 'small something' drops from the body of Aranrhod daughter of Dôn. Of this infant, the following is all we are told:

*The boy was baptized, and as soon as he was baptized he made for the sea. And there, as soon as he came to the sea, he took the nature of the sea: and he could swim as well as the best fish in the sea, and for that reason he was called 'Dylan Prince of the Wave'. No wave ever broke beneath him. The blow by which his death came to him was cast by Gofannon, his uncle. And that was one of the Three Ill-fated Blows.*

Sarah Keefer is probably correct in suggesting there may have been a whole body of lore (now lost) pertaining to this figure. She points to a fascinating body of totemistic seal mythology from Scandinavia and the British Isles to which this story may plausibly be related.<sup>1000</sup> As Gruffydd points out, the involvement of Gofannon (cf. the Irish *Goibinniu*) would also seem to be a traditional part of the proto-Celtic Prophesied Death scenario, as discussed on pp. 467-468. Finally, we have the poetry from the Book of Taliesin, in which Dylan Eil Ton is mentioned on more than one occasion. There is even a whole poem dedicated to this figure, Marwnad Dylan Eil Ton 'The Death Song of Dylan Eil Ton'. All of this would suggest that Dylan was once a more significant figure than this incidental reference in the Fourth Branch might otherwise suggest.

But what of the Llew-Dylan duality? What of its symbolic and structural significance? In symbolic terms, we can see once again the motif of the Double emerging in this pairing, though in this case the relationship seems to be one of binary opposition (rather like the Nisien vs. Efnisien dyad in the Second Branch). At the moment of birth Dylan is robust and fully-formed; Llew, on the other hand, is amorphous, and not even recognisably human. Llew then is the 'weak twin', the placental afterbirth; while Dylan's sturdy appearance (stocky build, curling blond hair) is vividly emphasised. All this changes, however, as soon as the latter is baptised. As we have seen elsewhere within the Mabinogi, baptism signifies assumption into the human world. Dylan's immediate flight

to the ocean might therefore be understood in terms of a rejection of this humanising process – a regression into undifferentiated unconsciousness. Not only does he immerse himself in the ocean, he also undertakes its nature (*anyan*). His soubriquet Eil Ton itself means ‘Prince (or heir) of the Wave’: implying an identity with the watery element. The suggestion is of a mystical dissolution of self, the immersion of the ego into nature, the total breakdown of the subject-object boundary.

We are forced to wonder, then, whether Lleu was understood to stand at the other pole of existence – at the lonely extremity of ego-differentiation? If Dylan stands for passivity and formlessness, it follows that his twin brother would have represented the formative principle of the active will. Lleu’s traditional representation as the ‘many-skilled’ one: master craftsman and poet, magician and warrior; represents an interesting opposition to Dylan’s regressive embrace of undifferentiated formlessness.<sup>1001</sup> We might think too of Lleu’s many and subsequent difficulties: in birth, in love, in war, and on the magical plane. Were these problems being represented as an inevitable consequence of this striving towards differentiation, as the juxtaposition to his watery twin would seem to suggest? Perhaps it was Lleu’s destiny, in the words of Shakespeare’s troubled Prince Hamlet, ‘to take arms against a sea of troubles’. His passive twin brother, on the other hand, is content to cease to resist altogether, to become one with the oceanic mass of external stimuli.

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1000 Sarah Larratt Keefer, *The Lost Tale of Dylan in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi* Studia Celtica 24-25 (1989-1990) pp. 26-37. (Republished in Sullivan (1996) op. cit. pp.79-98)

1001 It might be noted that Dylan’s death at the hands of the blacksmith-god may or may not have additional significance (now lost), but in general terms it too would appear to have the characteristics of a binary opposition with similar implications: juxtaposing the master of metal and fire with a figure whose primary association was with all that is aqueous and without form.