

## MYTHICAL SOURCES OF MATH III: THE BIRDMAN'S TALE

### **The Werewolf's Tale and The Faerie Wife**

'The Werewolf's Tale' is a narrative scenario of international provenance, but one which was evidently especially popular in Western Europe during the Central Middle Ages. Professor G. L. Kittredge described its form and evolution in his analysis of *Gorgollan*, a little-known Arthurian tale in a fourteenth-century manuscript found in Oxford's Bodleian library.<sup>931</sup> The Werewolf's Tale, to which Kittredge ascribes an 'oriental origin', can be reduced to the following basic outline:

A man is a werewolf and has to spend part of his time in wolfish shape. His wife, who has a lover, learns his secret and compels him to remain in beast-shape by removing from his control the means of his disenchantment. The wolf commits great depredations. A hunt is organised, and he makes submissions to the king, who disenchants him. The wife and the lover are punished. The werewolf is freed from his curse forever.<sup>932</sup>

Variants of the Werewolf's Tale are found across a wide range of cultural contexts, medieval and modern, from Ireland to the Far East. Kittredge suggests the story was often told as 'a kind of exemplum, illustrating the fickleness of women', and the cruelty of the punishments meted out to the wife and lover in many versions of the Werewolf's Tale certainly tend to reinforce this impression. But of greater interest to us here is the use of enforced shape-change as a tool of banishment or aggressive magic – a theme of considerable importance within the Fourth Branch itself, and indeed the Mabinogi as a whole. In particular, we might note that the combination of an adulterous wife, a husband with a secret magical weakness, and the motif of involuntary transformation into animal form recollect precisely the circumstances of the final section of the Fourth Branch.

More will be said about the relationship between the Werewolf's Tale and the Fourth Branch in due course. But first we need to consider another narrative set-piece which often combined with The Werewolf's Tale in Celtic areas – a tradition we have already described as the Faerie Wife or Faerie Bride scenario. To recap, this consists of the marriage between a mortal man and a woman from the faery otherworld – a popular folktale in Wales, and one which we have already discussed in connection with the marriage of Pwyll and Rhiannon (see p. 194 ff). In some cases, this plot contains the extra complication of a third party (sometimes hailing from the same Otherworld context from which the bride herself as emerged). This faerie lover attempts to win his mistress back – through force, magic or seduction – and ends up carrying her back to their Otherworld home.

---

931 'Arthur and Gorgollan' *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* VIII (1903)

932 *ibid.* p. 261.

The example given by Kittredge of this scenario is the Irish Tale of *Tochmarc Etaine* ‘The Wooing of Etain’, to which we alluded on p. 99 above. Similar to the Mabinogi at various junctures, this story is characterised by the motif of shape-shifting, and the crossing of boundaries between different worlds.

There is an interesting group of stories (found mainly within the Celtic, or Celtic-inspired narrative traditions of Medieval Europe) where this scenario has incorporated elements of the aforementioned Werewolf’s Tale. According to these variants the husband is magically trapped in his animal form by the faerie wife and her lover, who then escape to their Otherworld home, pursued by the enraged wolf-husband. The wolf lingers in this magical realm, before managing to draw attention to its sentient nature by some benevolent act, after which it is restored to human form by the faerie king (often the actual father of his errant wife). In some versions, the husband then meets and forgives his wife, and the two return to the mortal world. In others she is punished, often by the same shape-changing magic that had been previously used to neutralise her cuckolded husband. It might be noted, in passing, that in a number of these stories the transformation (from beast into human and vice versa) is effected by the victim being struck with a magical wand. This motif (of probable Irish origin) plays a significant role in the Mabinogi, as we have already seen (p. 410, n. 753 etc.).

A further parallel should also be noted at this stage, which points back to the Mabinogi of Pwyll. We have already alluded to the similarities between the marriage of the Pwyll and Rhiannon, and the popular Celtic motif of the Faerie Wife. On closer examination, there are also more particular resemblances between this sequence (the events of Pwyll II) and the tale-type discussed in the previous paragraph. If we can accept the otherworldly affiliations of Gwawl son of Clud (re: p. 204 n. 305), it is possible to discern the same love-triangle involving a faerie-bride caught between two rivals: one a mortal, and the other from her Otherworld home. The only difference is that in the First Branch the roles are somewhat reversed: it is the mortal man with whom the faerie wife conspires, rather than her unloved the faery suitor.

The case for this equation is strengthened when we look at the name of the transformed wolf-man in the Arthurian tale translated by Kittredge, which is evidently based on the Old Welsh form *Gurguallan*, the central element of which *gual* has been compared with the Teutonic *wulf* – the name as a whole meaning ‘wolf-man’ or ‘were-wolf’. This name, of course, is highly reminiscent of Gwawl son of Clud – and in the light of this, we can perhaps understand the latter’s ‘Badger in the Bag’ experience as a variant of the enforced shape-change of the Werewolf’s Tale. The significance of this should be remembered, when we come to explore the parallels between the Branches, and the First and Fourth Branches in particular (see p. 571-572).

As with the Prophesied Death scenario, or any other folktale-type, no two versions are exactly the same. There are at least as many variations as there are consistently represented elements. For instance, the wife is by no means always a faerie being, although there is usually a degree of ‘otherness’ about at least one of the adulterous lovers involved. Sometimes the wife is punished, sometimes she is not. Sometimes a rod or wand is used to transform the cuckolded husband, sometimes it is a ring or some other form of magical device. Sometimes there are multiple transformations: the unfortunate

husband may himself be subjected to more than one enforced shape-change at the hands of his treacherous wife. Alternatively, it might be the adulterous lovers themselves who are transformed, as a punishment, at the end of the tale.

These details, however, are less important than the central theme of this evocative tale, which involves the combination of adultery and the subsequent transformation (or regression) of the cheated party. This enforced (or induced) lycanthropic metamorphosis is reminiscent of the psychosexual tensions alluded to by the scenario of the Otherworld Sorjourn (cf. pp. 233-235). Indeed, as we have seen, both *The Werewolf's Tale* and these stories of Otherworld adventure were often combined with the *Faerie Wife* scenario, creating a suggestive binary opposition – between an otherworldly female (with a recidivist tendency to be drawn back into the unseen realms), and a semi-bestial male husband, whose own struggle is with the problem of lycanthropic regression (cf. pp. 117-118 above).