Folklore & Myth

STORIES OF THE GODS?

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Cover Pictures
Mari Lwyd celebrations, Aberystwyth Promenade, Wales
Epona, Trier, Rhineland Germany (Ancient Gaul)
Both photographs: Greg Hill

FOLKLORE & MYTH

A consideration of the argument that Medieval Welsh tales contain elements of Brythonic mythology and a critique of the argument that because they share motifs with folktales they cannot count as

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Do folk tales, legends, and similar narratives contain elements of mythology which allow us access to stories from ancient times about the gods? We know that such stories were told in ancient Greece and Rome when the gods were widely worshipped, and that they were told and re-told over time to illustrate the nature and attributes of the gods. But even here stories told by different narrators at different times are not always consistent with each other. We might note that Plato (5th/4th century bce), although he believed that the gods told us how we should live, and that their festivals should be duly observed, he also dismissed the stories told about them by poets like Homer and Hesiod as scurrilous and disrespectful[1]. So there was contention even then about how they should be represented and whether or not they should be given human identities and characteristics.

But here I want to investigate an even more intractable issue. What of the gods of ancient Britain where stories about them were not written ones, and where any evidence for their identity can only come from archaeology, surviving imagery, and from the limited accounts of Greeks and Romans whose primary interest was to compare them with their own gods. So, to return to the original question, how might oral narratives about these gods have survived in folklore, in accounts of legendary heroes and in medieval literature drawing upon earlier oral narratives both for characters and their stories?

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[1] Plato *Republic II*

And if they have, to what extent are such survivals reliable in indicating the nature and attributes of those gods?

First it is necessary to narrow the focus of the terms 'folklore', 'legend' and 'myth'. Folklore clearly includes material about social customs, local characters (real or imagined), and cultural traits, as well as descriptive narratives about the natural world and imaginative interpretations of natural phenomena. But it may also preserve ancient stories about the gods either as legendary heroes or simply as characters fulfilling a role in a story which may , or may not, itself have a mythical origin. So I want to narrow down the definitions of folklore and folk tales here to stories which do that, while also recognising that they might be mixed up with some of the other elements identified. In fact, it is necessary for such mixing to happen if the tales reflect a local context or appear within a specific cultural tradition, even if their underlying motifs are universal. The same can be said of legends which may emerge from historical characters or events who take on mythical attributes as their stories become embedded in tradition. Lastly there is 'myth' itself, which has a range of understood connotations from fantastic narratives to ideas which are simply untrue. But here I mean by it stories about the gods and the way they appear to us.

So while folklore and legend can be distinguished as distinct from myth, each of them can also be carriers of myth and so themselves function as mythical narratives. It is important to establish this because, as will become clear later, some writers have suggested that some of the medieval Welsh narratives which have been seen as originating in earlier mythology (and are sometimes

popularly referred to as myths) in fact have their origin in folk-tale motifs adapted into literary stories. From this it is suggested that this somehow disqualifies them from also originating in specifically Celtic myths or from stories about Brythonic gods, even when the names of characters in these stories have been shown linguistically to be developments from the names of such gods. My argument, on the contrary, is that the universality of these folk-tale motifs further reinforces the argument that they are stories about gods.

When such tales contain mythic material it is often quite apparent rather than obscure. But because folk tales are likely to contain elements of everyday wisdom and old social customs, the distinction between mythic and non-mythic may be difficult to discern. While some of the tales that have come down to us originate in collected oral lore, many more have undergone a process of literary production and changed through a series of written adaptations. Where these are simply people recording versions of traditional tales it might be that this is no different from the changes or nuances oral tellers might introduce for particular audiences or to suit changing times. Basic story elements and motifs were often linked together to allow open-ended adaptations and tales of varying length. This process is most apparent in *Culhwch and Olwen* where self-contained episodes from folklore — often paired in 'major' and 'minor' doubles — are strung together to form the tale. But the practice of weaving different stories together into a longer literary production was widespread during the Middle Ages and is not entirely absent from later literature. Here, even if the original tales remain intact, their context and the effects of shaping by more sophisticated literary devices integrate and overlap

what had previously been kept distinct and linked only with connectives.

In the First Branch of the *Mabinogi* tales there is an episode where Rhiannon is falsely accused of murdering her own son who has in fact been snatched away in the night. The women who were supposed to be watching him smear Rhiannon with blood from a puppy while she sleeps and leave the bones about her as evidence that she has devoured her own child. Like other episodes in these tales, this one has parallels elsewhere in folk narratives as well as in more obvious mythic material. Mabon, Son of Modron, is said to have been taken from his mother "when he was three nights old" in the tale of *Culhwch and Olwen*. Reading the implications across to the closely related *Mabinogi* tales, this contextualises the relationship between Rhiannon and her son with that between Modron and Mabon, whose names have been shown to be later versions of the names of the Brythonic deities Matrona and Maponos. The mythic context of a divine son of a divine mother is therefore unmistakable. But the broader setting in this tale of a wife who is falsely accused of murdering her child occurs more widely in folk narratives. Not only does the woman lose her child, but she is maligned and has to undergo humiliation or punishment before her child is eventually returned to her.

We can construe this in mythic terms, but underlying the symbolism of the seasonal cycle this is one of the deeply embedded themes of folk narrative across many cultures which take on significance in different ways when told within particular cultures. Then they take on resonance and power, as if their significance is potential and dormant until they are enacted with other elements of universal folk narratives and the potential is realised. Like the gods they

inhabit psychic space but manifest themselves in physical space in particular forms in particular places and take on identity in the stories we tell.

So as well as embodying mythic themes the universal motifs of folk narratives also contain elements of deep soul stuff, shared insights into human nature and perceptions of otherness. Sometimes they are simply agencies for other significant events in the story. So with Rhiannon's 'humiliation' at the horse block which is usually classified with the folklore analogue of the 'Calumniated Wife' (Aarne-Thompson tale types 705-12) . But consider, too, how the same theme is used in the 'The Maiden who seeks her Brothers' (Aarne-Thompson tale type 451) in which a variable number of brothers are turned into birds or animals and their sister has to sew a shirt for each of them over a number of years while remaining silent in order to break the spell and restore them to human form. The tale is found in countries across the world with local variants to the common theme. An Irish Version, given by W.B. Yeats[2] is 'The Twelve Geese', in which the sister has to sew shirts from bog cotton. While engaged in this work she is discovered by a prince who marries her. They have a child but while she is sleeping her son is taken by her husband's stepmother who disapproves of the marriage and thrown to a passing wolf. The stepmother then smears blood onto the wife's lips and tells her husband she has devoured the child. There are obvious parallels here with the snatching away of Rhiannon's child as well as some differences of narrative detail. Like Rhiannon she is blamed for the child's death although in this case she herself is

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[2] W. B. *Yeats Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry (London, 1888)*

sentenced to death, not having the means to defend herself. When she is able to speak again after completing the shirts and bringing her brothers back to human form, the wolf, who in this story is a disguised good fairy, returns her son just as Teyrnon returns Pryderi to Rhiannon.

The same story is contained in Grimm's version of the tale: The *Six Swans*. Here the sister doesn't quite finish the final shirt and the youngest brother is restored to human form with a swan's wing instead of one arm. It touches something deep in its references to transformation across species and the working out of a number of folk tale motifs, including that of the falsely accused wife which is simply the last of a series of adversities which are resolved in the final scene.

These are stories about humans caught up in age-old dilemmas which the motifs embody. Their peripheral involvement with magical elements points to the world of the gods with whom they share an entanglement in these dilemmas. Seen in this way the gods are not spiritualised platonic essences but beings who share the world with us, although they also inhabit a parallel space which we may characterise as the Otherworld. If, for Plato, they have their being entirely elsewhere, and we have no business making stories about them, then they would have no place in folklore as he would wish. But we are not merely shadows cast by their light; as the tales tell it, they come amongst us. What the medieval Welsh stories do is show the interactions between our world and theirs in both its positive and its negative aspects. Although the *Mabinogi* story contains a complex of folklore elements, it also completes a pattern of mythic transformation between World and Otherworld set in an equine context. The horse associations occur in a parallel snatching away of a foal

from Teyrnon's stable and the snatching away of Rhiannon's child, the transference of the child from the foal to Teyrnon's wardship, and the horse block punishment endured (apparently willingly) by Rhiannon. While stories about the gods in mythic narratives might become stories about ordinary people in folk tales, the mythic themes often remain, as might the actual names of the divine characters, as with Matrona and Maponos appearing as Modron and Mabon in a tale in Medieval Welsh. In this sense, the folk tale, and its literary derivative are simply the myth in a developed form. Whether we experience the characters as gods, as humans enacting mythic narratives, or simply characters in a 'wonder tale' will be a matter of individual perception and sensibilty. We may say of the gods 'In nature they are presences; In culture they have form'. So the characters in these tales are 'gods of culture', enacting themes that originate in 'gods of nature', and experienced as such by readers of the tales, whether or not they actually think of them as gods.

As far as the early Welsh tales are concerned, the interpretation of them by scholars, critics and others up to the middle of the twentieth century saw the tales in this way, identifying philological continuity in the development of the names of the gods and characters in the tales, and also thematic continuity in their stories. Some went so far as to try to re-construct the original myths from the folklore and literary embelishments with which they had been overlain, and to untangle the strands of mythology, folktale and legend which went into the medieval narratives and the even more impenetrable poetry from the period[3].

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[3] Notably W J Gruffydd in his studies of the *Mabinogi* tales : *Rhiannon* (Cardiff, 1953) and *Math fab Mathonwy* (Cardiff,1938*)*

As academic fashion changed there was a reaction against mythological interpretations and a feeling that such reconstructions were misguided. Modern polytheists might continue to re-imagine the tales as stories of their gods, and to speculate about the significance of the stories in this context, but the interests of academics were moving from what were seen as 'diachronic' analyses, seeing the tales in terms of developing over time, to 'synchronic' analyses viewing them in terms of their significance to the medieval audience for whom they were narrated or written, and more recently still how they might be employed by critics to illustrate present-day concerns such as feminism and gender studies. These are not always incompatible with the mythological approach, but the main emphasis tends to be elsewhere.

Initially, such analyses attempted to reconcile inherited mythological approaches with seeing the tales in their medieval contexts. Patrick Ford, for instance, continued to see the *Mabinogi* tales, and the Taliesin story, as containing mythological themes which, he claimed, would have been apparent to the medieval narrators and their audiences, even if they did not actively experience them as fully worked-out myths[4]. This challenged earlier views that the medieval inheritors of the tales were ignorant of their original meanings. Catherine Mckenna, in her studies of the *Mabinogi* tales, continues to accept analyses which, for instance, see Rhiannon as a sovereignty goddess, but asserts that this is presented in a way that is wholly compatible with medieval concepts of appropriate

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[4] Patrick K Ford Introduction to *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (1977)

behaviour and "as a mirror or exhortation for medieval Welsh princes"[5].

Ford developed these themes further in a later article. He argues for a reading that understands that narrative need not only be horizontal but that a mythical reading also needs to look at vertical parallels elsewhere in the text. Such a mythical reading here requires us to regard, for example, the events in the First Branch where Gwawl is the 'badger in the bag' and those in the Third Branch, where Manawydan has a mouse in a glove, as mythically parallel events while also being different events in the narrative scheme. Similarly, Pryderi's disappearance at the same time as Teyrnon's foal in the First Branch, and Rhiannon's displacement to the horse block, and the disappearance of Pryderi and Rhiannon in the enchanted fort in the Third Branch, are to be seen as mythically parallel expressions of the same theme of cyclic fertility of the land worked out in different narrative elements in the text. Pryderi, son of Pwyll and Rhiannon and stepson of Manawydan is, in the mythical dimension, the offspring of Other World parents who are also, in the narrative scheme, characters in a medieval tale. The contemporary narrative is necessary for the multiple expression of the mythic themes. Ford concludes that we need not look for an origin myth, "nor need we assume that the text is corrupt or that the medieval redactor and his audience were ignorant of their traditions"[6].

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[5] Catherine McKenna 'The Theme of Sovereignty in Pwyll' Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies Vol 29 (1980)

[6] Patrick K Ford 'Prolegomena to a Reading of The Mabinogi' *Studia Celtica* Vol.16-17 (1981-82).

More recently, the move to synchronic analyses have led either to a rejection of the mythological view, or an approach which simply ignores it altogether. The challenge to the mythological view is often based on a refusal to accept that there could be any continuity of coherent narrative tradition from the Pagan Iron Age to the Christian Middle Ages. Ronald Hutton, whose study of modern Wicca showed that it was entirely a twentieth century invention, and who went on to locate the origins of contemporary Druidry in the early modern period rather than in ancient religious practice[7], then turned his attention to the medieval Welsh material for which mythological origins have been claimed, and sought to show a similar lack of continuity up to the Middle Ages, and therefore, by implication, deny its significance for modern polytheists drawing upon the medieval texts as part of a process of reconstructing ancient deities. In doing so he challenged the views of philologists who had shown a linguistic development in names from Brythonic into Welsh and those who saw the stories as reflecting mythological themes. In this he was able to draw upon more recent scholars who had sought to provide synchronic analyses or who identified alternative significances in the material.

Hutton put together a detailed examination of the evidence for doubting that these medieval Welsh texts represented survivals from ancient mythology in a scholarly journal in 2011[8]. He pointed out that the gap between the alleged

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[7] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford, 1999), *The Druids* (Hambledon, 2007)

[8] 'Medieval Literature and Pre-Christian Deities' *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 61 pp.57-85

sources and the medieval tales "… renders impossible the setting of the different pieces in a secure chronological succession". In doing so he echoes one of his cited sources, Juliette Wood, who refers to a "rather naive cultural evolutionism"[9] which sees the tales as being passed on unblemished into the medieval period. But she also suggests an alternative view which sees a "continuity of structure and symbolic meaning" within the folklore tradition.The emphasis here is on folklore as a carrier of "complex metaphorical structures" which a concern with fixed origins may obscure.

Another way of addressing the apparent problem of continuity of specific forms is to compare transmission within the bardic system of passing on themes, stock phrases and forms of address. This often led to anachronistic expressions as the result of the ongoing process of conservation of verse forms. A number of these are given by Nerys Ann Jones in her discussion of horse references in the Poets of the Princes[10]. She points out several examples of such conservative tendencies, including a reference to use of the term '*eurdorchog*' (golden-torqued) to describe high status long after the Iron Age practice of leaders wearing torques had passed. She wonders if "certain elements in the portrayal of horses by the *Cynfeirdd* and the *Gogynfeirdd* might also be anachronistic". One identified medium of transmission

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[9] Juliette Wood 'The Horse in Welsh Folklore' in *The Horse in Celtic Culture* ed Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones (Cardiff, 1997)

[10] Nerys Ann Jones 'Horses in Medieval Welsh Court Poetry' in *The Horse in Celtic Culture* ed Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones (Cardiff, 1997)

were the Triads which, according to Rachel Bromwich, "refer to traditions which were for a long time not committed to writing, but were preserved entirely by word of mouth, and were handed down by professional poets and storytellers."[11] Even when the earliest Triads were committed to writing in the time of the poets of the Princes, they often contain archaic words or phrases conserving their antiquity. In, for instance, *The Triads of the Horses*, the word for horse is frequently *eddystr*, an otherwise rare word from Brythonic, rather than the usual medieval word *march* or the even later *ceffyl*.

At this point it is worth taking a closer look at the nature of the 'International Tale Types' and the motifs they carry across the folklore of different cultures. The evolving study of folklore internationally led to the categorisation over time of tale types, motifs and typical characters within tales. Initially based on Europe and the Near East, the Index has since been expanded to include tales from across the world and to include written as well as oral sources[12]. What it shows is that the same basic types of tales and motifs occur in different countries and languages but with distinct cultural markers in each case. Many of these tales overlap with the mythologies of countries where the myths have survived by being written down in ancient times. So story types can apply to stories about the gods in mythology as well as stories about typical characters in folktales. In that case myth and folktale can hardly be

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[11] Rachel Bromwich 'The Triads of the Horses' in *The Horse in Celtic Culture p.102* ed Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones (Cardiff, 1997)

[12] https://www.folklorefellows.fi/the-third-revision-of-the-aarne-thompson-tale-type-index-ffc-184/

separated although myth also expands to cosmological dimensions and folktale, especially in its localised expression, also contextualises these in terms of everyday usage and customs. But at the psychological level both categories can encompass ways of experiencing both the natural and the supernatural worlds that are common to peoples everywhere. It can certainly be argued that it is a vain endeavour to locate the source of a tale in a myth at a particular point of time in the past, where no unbroken succession can be established, but identifying the recurring motif and the tale type as it shapeshifts across time as well as across cultural identities is quite another matter.

It might well be, then, as Juliette Wood suggests, that 'the Calumniated Wife' tale type, that is one element in the *Mabinogi* story of Rhiannon, "sets out structural and thematic patterns found in a number of tales and opens the way to answering questions of meaning and motivation which identifying myth as sources leaves unanswered". But only if we limit the identification of myth to a single source rather than as another example of the fluidity of the tale type in its various manifestations. The *Mabinogi* tale contains other elements in a more sophisticated literary combination, and features characters who move to and from the Otherworld, which might be sufficient to regard them as gods even if this version of their mythology does not have a specifically religious context. We cannot, that is, link the tale to specific stories from ancient mythology in the way that Greek folktales can be linked to stories about the gods of Ancient Greece, but we can identify recurring patterns of significance that are common both to tales from mythology and to what are termed 'folk tales', so that, however we may want to distinguish between the terms, in this sense they fulfil the same purpose.

Responding to an earlier piece by Juliette Wood, and also to a discussion by Kenneth Jackson, Patrick Ford countered the suggestion that identifying motifs from International Tale Types could tell us anything significant about the tales because it stripped them of their immediate cultural contexts which are an essential element in their presentation[13]. That is, it is not just that the tales carry motifs that are common to tales across the world, and so have universal significance, but to express that significance they need to be located in a particular time and place. Like the gods, they need to be experienced in *this* place even though they have their being everywhere. So we can also conclude that the universal mythological significance of the tales and the characters who inhabit them is itself contained in the tale types and motifs of folklore, but for it to be realised we need to experience it in a particuar setting so that it can speak to us through story as well as through experience of the numinous. Seen in this way the fact that the tales we are discussing can be assigned to International folklore motifs reinforces, rather than undermines, their mythological status. It is not necessary to prove or disprove a continuous mythological transmission to recognise them as expressing universal perceptions that would have been available to the myth makers of the Iron Age, the medieval redactors, and to ourselves. That there is some linguistic evidence to show continuities of naming or of themes within the tales reinforces any sense we have finding the gods in them, but it is by no means the primary factor in appreciating their mythological significance.

Returning, then, to Hutton's denials about a continuous development from Iron Age or Romano-British deities to

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[13] Patrick K Ford Introduction to *Ystoria Taliesin* (Cardiff, 1992)

the medieval Welsh tales, this seems to be a narrow and 'glass half empty' way of looking at things. Rather, the 'glass half full' approach which I take above does allow us to experience Brythonic gods in the medieval tales with some degree of support from the linguistic evidence and a considerable reinforcement from the view of international folklore motifs as carriers of universal perceptions of the gods. Here 'gods of culture' are not only expressions of 'gods of nature', but also realisations of gods embedded in human psychology and finding various forms in different cultures and natural environments. Hutton's assertions that, for instance, Maponos and Matrona "have no connection with each other at all" and cannot be related to Mabon and Modron, is not only based on a narrow conception of the idea of continuity, but also ignores other ways of making the connection between the literary tropes of Mabon being snatched from Modron as a baby in *Culhwch and Olwen* and the snatching of Pryderi from Rhiannon in the *Mabinogi*. It also leads him to the conundrum that "The undoubted linguistic relationship between the names is a puzzle"!

Some use of literary tropes is, however, used to show that similar motifs occur elsewhere in medieval literature, for instance the citations taken from Jessica Hemmings that magical horses like that ridden by Rhiannon and that the punishment of being ridden like a horse feature elsewhere both in folklore and in historical fact. He concedes that Hemmings nevertheless says that Rhiannon is "probably derived from ancient paganism", but uses her arguments about folklore analogues to deny any mythological significance, preferring to see such stories as "wonder tales, in which apparently human characters frequently possess magical abilities …. and the line between the

natural and supernatural is constantly blurred." This, as I suggest above, might be precisely how gods can continue to be presented in narratives as expressions of common human perceptions of them even if they are objects rather than subjects of religious practice. That is to experience them as dynamic presences rather than static figures frozen in a lost history.

Sometimes folklore tale-types and motifs are overlain or the same motif will appear in a different guise within the same literary narrative. As well as those already noted in the *Mabinogi* stories about Rhiannon, the 'Calumniated Wife' motif is often identified as a source. While this is clearly an element of the plot, it is not necessarily a defining characteristic, particularly as she bears her 'calumniation' with considerable dignity, the text stating that she considers it not worth contesting the story of those who should have been watching her child while she slept[14]. A better focus on her nature would be her arrival on horseback in the first of the *Mabinogi* tales. This seems to Pwyll, whose men are unable to catch up with her, to be infused with "some magical meaning". One of his men attempts to catch up with her, but to no avail: "The more he spurred his horse forward, the further she was from him, though her pace remained the same" and Pwyll himself fares no better until he calls to her and she waits for him.

An interesting perspective on this is developed in Jessica Hemmings' discussion referenced above. She cites the common motif of 'Supernatural Lapse of Time in Fairyland (

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[14] "She thought it better to accept her punishment than to argue with the women" Pwyll Pendefig Dyfed) Sioned Davies *The Mabinogion* (Oxford, 2007) p.17

No. F377 in the Motif Index) and suggests that the deceptive speed of Rhiannon's horse is "part of the general phenomenon of temporal (and spatial) distortion which typically accompanies mortal intrusions into the Otherworld, especially in Celtic tradition."[15] She refers to the many stories of people visiting the Otherworld or entering a fairy mound, and returning after what seems like just a few days to find that centuries have passed. She detects "an underlying kinship between the peculiar speed of Rhiannon's horse and this distortion of elapsed time". Also cited is the episode in the *Mabinogi* tale of Branwen where 'The Birds of Rhiannon' appear simultaneously near and far, and the subsequent stilling of time on the island of Gwales.

The 'supernatural lapse of time' motif is widespread in folk and fairy tales, with a striking example in a tale related by Walter Map in the 11th century where riders returning from a wedding in the underground dwarf kingdom find that when they return people are speaking the Saxon language rather than the Brythonic spoken before they left seemingly just a few days before. This motif then morphs into the 'Wild Hunt' as they ride on, unable to dismount as to do so would mean they would crumble to dust.[16] 'The Wild Hunt' is a completely independent tale type, often involving a pack of dogs and often led by Gwyn ap Nudd, whose dog Dormach, in the 'conversation' poem between Gwyn ap Nudd and Gwyddno Garanhir, is said to "wander

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[15] Jessica Hemmings 'Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in "Pwyll"'. *Western Folklore*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Winter, 1998), pp. 19-40

[16] Walter Map *De nugis curialum 'Herla'*

the firmament", and who, as Idris Foster notes, appears in later folklore as a "magical huntsman"[17] and, in the *Black Book of Carmarthen* poem as a gatherer of souls[18].

I suggest that it is through such folklore motifs , often woven together rather than contained in the isolation of the Motif Index, that stories of the gods were carried through the generations to be made into written tales in the Middle Ages. Rhiannon rides through ancient, medieval and modern time, elusive but not entirely unattainable as Pwyll finds when he calls to her and she allows him to approach. An Otherworld woman taking shape in our world is surely the mark of goddess whatever other narrative purpose it may fulfil within the tale.

Another tale that has a high density of folklore motifs, very much on the surface rather than embedded in the narrative, is *Culhwch and Olwen*. The frame for the tale is the 'Jealous Stepmother' motif, though this is simply employed as a device to generate the action rather than having any thematic importance. The action it generates is the 'Giant's Daughter' motif which gives the tale its thematic impetus. In this tale type a young man wishes to

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[17] Idris Foster in *Duanaire Finn* quoted by Brinley Roberts in Gwyn ap Nudd *Llên Cymru*XIII pp 283-289.

[18] 'Ymddiddan Rhwng Gwyddneu Garanhir a Gwyn ap Nudd' *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* gol. A. O. H. Jarman (Caerdydd, 1982) 34
My translation and discussion of this poem can be found at https://greghill.cymru/sheaves-of-awen/the-conversation-between-gwyn-ap-nudd-and-gwyddno-garanhir/

marry the daughter of either a giant or a powerful magician who subjects the suitor to a series of seemingly impossible tasks or tries to thwart him in other ways. The young man sometimes gains help in completing the tasks, thereby introducing other motifs such as 'Six Go Through The World' where the helpers go together on a quest. Sometimes the helpers are animals which is the case with completing two of the giant's tasks in *Culhwch and Olwen*. Central to the tale is the great boar hunt which occurs in earlier texts as a tale in its own right[19]. It is here that Mabon, Son of Modron is required as a helper in the hunt, and so must be sought with the help of the Oldest Animals who eventually locate him in a dungeon where he has been through many ages of the world. So it is not simply an accident, or a 'puzzle' that his name means 'Divine Son of Divine Mother' (Maponos Son of Matrona) in its earlier Brythonic form but an indicator of a typological device of the return of the lost child back into the world, as with his analogue Pryderi Son of Rhiannon. The folk tale narratives make this into a story about people in the world, and the literary shaping of the folk tale elements even more so. It is not necessary for the mythological theme to be passed on unblemished because the folk tale keeps it alive, constantly re-shaping it, making the stories of the gods available to later generations who can recreate the myth consciously or unconsciously depending on their religious affiliations. It is also important to consider the extent to which ancient religious practice was homogenous and consistent across the geographic range of a deity's provenance. Presentation of the gods of Ancient Greece, as noted above, could be contentious. If the later Greek and Roman empires standardized the identities of the central

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[19] e.g the Ninth Century *Historia Brittonum*.

pantheon, there was considerable fluidity in the identities of the many deities gathered around the Olympian core, let alone the many adopted and syncretized gods of the expanding Roman Empire. As for the many other deities within and beyond the empires, and the practices of their worshippers, these were even less likely to be the same — or even similar — at different times or even in different places at the same time.

Viewing 'World religions' in modern terms may lead us to think of standardised theologies and absolute deities, and so to regard specific identities of the ancient gods as being 'there' as if the past is a particular point in space and time. But even in the modern era, the diversity within Christianity, Judaism and Islam belies the aspirations of these religions to orthodoxy of belief and practice. Once the ancient gods had gone 'underground' with the imposition of such orthodoxies, it was hardly necessary for a continuous practice to be maintained, as this had always been fluid, as had the ways the gods themselves had been viewed. They could, then, shape-shift into any number of Otherworld identities, and be perceived in fear, loathing, fascination, admiration, delight and awe as befitted the predilections of individuals, depending on the context or mode of presentation. Their identities may have shifted but they did not go away. It is unnecessary to assume continuity to argue that they have a presence in tales written down in the 11th or 12th centuries based on folklore themes from preceding centuries, or that their names , their identities as Otherworld beings, legendary heroes or folklore 'types' could not continue to resonate in those personas.

Hutton concludes his argument with three possible interpretations of the evidence he has presented: a

'gracious' one in which the possibility that ancient deities might have survived into medieval literature is conceded, but with no certainty that this is the case; a more severe one in which only linguistic connections between names is conceded but no other evidence of continuity; an 'extreme' one which asserts that there is no proof of any connections between ancient deities and the characters in the medieval tales and that any suggestions that there are should be abandoned. He adds that he is not personally adopting any one of these positions but that others may do so on the basis of his arguments[20]. He has, since the article was published, re-stated these views in a book which surveys all periods of prehistory up to the pagan heritage of the Middle Ages[21]. In that work, he remarks on "the number of times in this book at which a plurality of explanations for the same evidence has been suggested as possible". This applies to each of the periods surveyed where the formula is repeated, but with varying degrees of emphasis on the skeptical. No doubt his scholarly caution is to be commended. But he does allow himself to notice that past ages seem themselves to have been haunted by what has gone before. He notes that examples such as the fact that stone circles were erected on the Isle of Arran in the Neolithic period on sites that had centuries before contain wooden circles, and that "somehow stories, songs or rites had preserved the tradition that the place had been special, and perhaps even the recollection of what had stood there"[22]. Or, at the end of the Roman occupation,

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[20] Ronald Hutton 'Medieval Welsh Literature and Pagan Deities' *CMCS* 61 p.85

[21] Ronald Hutton *Pagan Britain* (Yale, 2013)

[22] *op cit* p.106

that a revival of interest in native religion may be ascribed to a desire to "re-connect with their roots … [and] embrace the totality of their own heritage, and with a mythical past which embodied and mediated a relationship with the land."[23] There are other places where he seems more tolerant of the recreation of a past mythos by present-day groups, and their right to "enact them as personal religious practice"[24]. At the end of the section in that book discussing medieval Welsh literature he does shift to what appears to be a more indulgent emphasis than the article cited earlier. He says that "It could represent one of the most important survivals from the old religions to the world of the new…"[25]. But, of course, adds that this is unproven. One could say the same for arguments for the existence of the gods themselves, but for those that experience their presence, in nature or in culture, the tales will contain deeper themes than those of arbitrary fantasy, and the analogues from folklore will be a confirmation rather than a refutation of mythological transmission. If they are also prepared to take the implications of the linguistic evidence as a positive reinforcement, if not a definitive confirmation, of continuity, then even his 'gracious' concession will seem inadequate.

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[23] *op cit* p.273

[24] *op cit* p 143

[25] *op cit* P.370