Pious Woman, Pesky Hag:
Transferring the Pre-Christian Irish Goddess and the Effects of Transferal on Modern Storytelling and Culture

We have all read books and seen movies with what many consider to be images of traditional Irish folklore: fairies flying, leprechauns leaping, and the like. What most people do not realize, however, is that the popular version of Irish folklore is, to a great extent, exactly that: popular. Modern authors and filmmakers have taken traditional images and molded them into more acceptable and appealing subjects for genres such as children's literature. Often, more attention is paid to what will illicit a laugh or impart a modern moral than to maintaining authenticity. Indeed, even were an attempt at authenticity made, it would be difficult to attain, for what modern authors and filmmakers do to Irish folklore is nothing new. In order to understand what is done with traditional Irish stories today, it is perhaps wise to start at the beginning, with the conversion of Ireland from paganism to Christianity. While the focus of this examination will be, for the most part, on the transferal of the female goddess figure from pre-Christian Irish stories and culture to early Christian culture, it will undoubtedly shed light on the habit of "modernizing" traditional stories and character types.

Comparing pre-Christian Irish stories to those of the early Christian era illuminates an interesting transferal practice—one which, I believe, has had a great impact on our own adaptation practices today. Although men dominated pre-Christian society, women had a prominent role in pre-Christian Irish mythology and folklore, and the goddess was a powerful figure. One such figure was Brigit, a triune goddess of healing, smiths, and fertility and poetry. Another was the Mórrígan, also a goddess of multiple areas. Although hers are more difficult to

define, the standard accepted realms over which the Mórrígan reigned were war, sex and fertility, and death. Based on these concise descriptions of the goddesses, it is fairly easy to discern that Brigit was a more harmonic goddess than was the Mórrígan, and this fact played a significant role in the transferal—or lack of such action—of these goddesses from pre-Christian storytelling and culture to that of the early Christian period. Stated rather simply, the Christian writers and transcribers of pagan oral literature found Brigit a rather easy figure to translate into Christian culture, while the Mórrígan, in her more brutal mannerisms, presented quite a challenge.

When goddesses were translated from the pagan version of a story and culture to fit a "new and improved" Christian culture, they were, as Rosalind Clark explains in *The Great Queens*, "euhemerized; that is, they were made into pseudo-historical queens and tribal ancestors. Other goddesses became fairies or saints. Historical queens, fairies, and saints were all accepted as part of the new Christian conception of the world; goddesses were not" (2-3). Again, the Mórrígan was, among other things, a goddess of war, sex, and death. As such, she obviously could not be sainted, but neither could she be historicized; it would not have been appropriate or acceptable for an actual woman to have done the things the Mórrígan was reputed to have done, nor could the Christians simply tweak her character and still hope to maintain anything close to her original function. Clark says the following about the problem of transferring the Mórrígan:

> The Mórrígan must either be changed in kind—that is, her character must become more 'womanly'—or she must be removed from the centre of the action. As it is impossible to give the Mórrígan a 'womanly' personality, she is removed from the main plot in the Ulster cycle and becomes a portent and a vision, rather than a planner and manipulator as she was in the early Irish *Táin* (3-4).

In short, the Mórrígan was problematic and did not meet early Christian standards. Her problematic nature was twofold: first, she was not, because of her wrathful and violent nature and the aspects of life over which she reigned, an admirable person to whom glory and sainthood could be given—the Christians certainly did not want to make the Mórrígan into a spiritual role model of any kind. She also did not fit into the accepted role of a woman in the society of the time—by pagan or Christian standards—and could not, therefore, be changed from a goddess to a historical figure. Such a historical female figure would have been quite outrageous and unbelievable. The Mórrígan simply did not "fit into any of the patterns available to Christian authors", and because the scribes who wrote down the oral literature of pre-Christian Ireland were largely Christian monks, they took a third route and opted simply to gradually minimize the Mórrígan's role until she lost much of what we see in her in the *Táin* and gained a more surreal and somewhat fairy-like quality (Clark 48). This early reluctance to translate the Mórrígan into the modern literature of the day is perhaps one of the reasons that we still have no patterns into which female characters like the Mórrígan can fit, except, perhaps, in fanciful fairytales, in which the modern reader does not place any sort of confidence or belief.

What sort of woman, then, did the early Christian writers find suitable to their newly established and slowly developing Irish culture? Unlike the Mórrígan, the goddess Brigit did not have a violent or brutal nature and, while she certainly had a connection to fertility, it was a much more clean association than was the Mórrígan's with sex. Brigit also favored aspects of life which were more harmonious and respectable for a female figure than were war and death: "Brigit was associated with fertility and the spring, and women in childbirth prayed to her. She oversaw the lactation of ewes and cattle and was a great healer" (Husain 37). As such, she lent herself quite well to transference and, with the arrival of Christianity, became the premier

woman saint of Ireland. It is this new role as St. Brigit on which we will now focus, as it shows, I think, a great deal about the early Christian church in Ireland and their understanding of transferal and adaptation in both religion and literature.

Because they were often converted Irish pagans themselves, early Christian monks understood several things about the Irish men and women whom they hoped to convert to Christianity. They knew, first and foremost, about the gods and goddesses who were important in Irish life, as well as the roles those gods and goddesses played. They also knew that they could not hope to convert the Irish by simply wiping away the whole of their religious and storytelling traditions, nor, I think, did they wish to do so, as it was a part of what many of the monks themselves had grown up with. What they knew must be done instead was to incorporate what could be transferred from the pagan Irish traditions into the new Christian ones. An example of this was the building of monasteries around pre-existing holy wells devoted to pagan goddesses. The Christians knew that, by taking such an essential part of the pagan culture and adopting it into theirs, they would make the transition much easier for converts. They did something similar to this with storytelling. In fact, I would like to draw a parallel between the building of monasteries around holy wells and the creation and writing of "saint's lives", most specifically the life of St. Brigit.

The "history" of St. Brigit usually establishes that she was born the daughter of a druid named Dubhtach. Then, although "[l]ittle factual evidence is known about the saint…it is traditionally believed that she founded a monastery at Kildare" (www.kildare.ie). Two aspects of this story are particularly interesting. First, it is amazing—and a little unbelievable— that the daughter of an Irish druid should become a nun and found a convent, unless something dramatic had happened to change the foundation of her religious beliefs, and such an event has not, to my

knowledge, been documented. Furthermore, it is very interesting indeed that her convent was founded at Kildare, which was the site of a pagan sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Brigda. Peter Ellis says, in the *Dictionary of Irish Mythology*, that "[t]here are numerous written accounts of her life soon after her death and her cult became widespread. However, many ceremonies and traditions associated with her predecessor, the goddess, were ascribed to her, not the least her feastday: 1 February is now the feast of St. Brigid" (50). These similarities between St. Brigit and the goddess Brigit may, indeed, be merely coincidental. Some have even suggested that St. Brigit may have been a converted priestess of the goddess Brigit. I, however, find these explanations unsatisfactory and think it much more likely that, like the holy wells, the Irish goddess Brigit was assimilated into the Christian repertoire as a figure much more fitting and applicable to the culture the Christians wished to create in Ireland: a Christian. Saint, completing good works among her people for the good of a single, common God.

In the *Dictionary of Irish Mythology*, Peter Ellis says that, "[a]s an Irish saint [Brigid] takes second place only to St. Patrick" (50), and Pochin Mould suggests that, "if Patrick the British stranger had spread the Faith far and wide over Ireland it remained for Brigit, the Irishwoman, to really take it into the homes of her fellow countrymen and weave it, like the strands of the rush crosses, into the pattern of their lives" (65). This suggestion approaches an explanation of the relationship between St. Brigit and the goddess Brigit that many find most satisfactory. After all, when the task of conversion lies before a man, what better tool than a person or goddess at the heart of the religion and culture from which one wishes to convert people, and who better to fulfill this role than Brigit? Indeed, Brigit had a very clean and motherly role in pagan Irish stories, and her festival was one of the four great feasts of the Celtic world. As such, she was not only an acceptable figure for whom the Christian writers could find

a pattern, but she was also an integral part of pagan Irish society. Like the holy wells in the monasteries, Brigit was adopted into the Christian world as a tool for integration. All the Christian writers needed was to create the proper historical background for her so that she remained true enough to her original character to still have a connection with the Irish people, while at the same time changing enough to act as an example of successful conversion for the non-Christian Irish.

The story created as the life of St. Brigit served the purpose not only of making her human and, therefore, a more acceptable subject of Christian stories, but also of giving the Christian authors a foundation of good works upon which to base her sainthood. For however good Brigit was as a pagan goddess, she was not quite acceptable as a saint. She needed the proper pagan background, followed by successful conversion, then a life dedicated to spreading the love of God to his new people and doing his work among his flock. As such, the following story, as summarized by Mould in *Ireland of the Saints*, was given Brigit:

> What do we know certainly about this remarkable Irish woman? That she was one of the earliest Irish saints, born in 452 or 456, dying 1st February 524. That she probably came of the clan Focharta in Uí Falge in Leinster, though tradition, with which is associated a long-continued pilgrimage, would make her birthplace Faughart on the border between Lough and Armagh. Later, Brigit became a nun and was given land at Kildare, where she founded a church. She traveled about Ireland and founded other churches. Working with her was a group of nuns…Brigit and her nuns seem to have been free-lance workers who went about the country helping the missionary clergy in their work (60-61).

Again, several points of this "history" of Brigit are quite remarkable. Not only are the facts unsure—and while I do understand some uncertainty because of the early date, important people tended to have more accurate accounts—but they are also coincidental enough as to make them suspicious. St. Brigit died on February 1st, which just happens to be the feastday of the goddess

Brigit. Furthermore, a clan is speculated but with an alternate birthplace suggested by tradition. This makes it easy enough to spread the story without too much dispute from the residents of either place named as a potential point of origin. There is, again, the fact that Brigit's convent was begun at Kildare, home of a sanctuary devoted to the goddess Brigda, as well as the roaming nature of the end of Brigit's story. The more nomadic a person is, the harder it is to disprove specific aspects of stories about them, for they can always be explained away. I support this conjecture with the words of W.G. Wood-Martin in *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*: "A perusal of the so-called 'Lives' of the early Irish saints brings before the reader, in a striking manner, the survival of the pagan institutions under Christian names and forms" (277).

When one considers the fate of the pre-Christian goddess when introduced to Christian culture, it becomes increasingly apparent that, despite the best efforts of feminists the world over to point out repression in the way that women are and have been portrayed, the early Christian Irish writers did nothing radically different than what modern authors and filmmakers do now—in fact, I am quite certain that much of our literary practice stems directly from such predecessors. Women figures still generally fall into one of three categories: the maiden, the mother, and the hag. Disney movies continually feature figures like the Mórrígan—although perhaps a bit more sanitized than she appears in pre-Christian texts—but she is only ever a one-dimensional "bad" character, rather than the aspect of balance and keeper of natural cycles that the Mórrígan was. As Clark claims in *The Great Queens*, "The mythological cycle, from which we gain most material about goddesses, is very fragmentary. Since the material was written down by Christian authors and the stories concerned the old pre-Christian religion, much has been changed, forgotten, or deliberately omitted" (8). What I claim, however, is not that the early Christian writers were bad, evil men who were out to repress women and confine them to

their "proper" place in society—for indeed, they were more forgiving and lenient than other cultures and religions were to their conquered—but rather that, in an attempt to make stories fit more into a modern concept of what was religiously and socially acceptable, they perhaps caused future generations to lose sight of what was important about literary figures like the Mórrígan.

Much of what we know about the goddess Brigit, we know because of her Christian counterpart, St. Brigit. In this matter, the modern audience is lucky to have the work of the early Christian authors who, in attempting to remain as true to the original goddess as possible, so as not to drive potential converts away, actually retained much useful information about the goddess herself. With the case of the Mórrígan, however, we are not so lucky. What we have comes simply from what was left us after changes, forgotten facts, and omissions. Thankfully, one can still see that the original intent of the Mórrígan, in a society where the natural cycles were so very important, was to explain those cycles and to maintain balance by creating death and the opportunity for new life. What the modern author and storyteller must be careful of, then, is to also maintain the integrity of such tales. While it is inevitable that each person who tells a story will change certain aspects of it, whether for the sake of memory or to achieve some outcome—and indeed storytelling has been done this way for ages and this practice is, therefore, nothing new—the storyteller and audience alike now have the important duties of inference. When we see those flying fairies and leaping leprechauns, ask yourself what the original intent of such beings was. Certainly, they were probably much less whimsical in the beginning, whimsy being something added in situations such as that faced with the Mórrígan, where the only option for making a character or situation fit into a new or different storytelling culture was to make it seem less than it once was, they certainly had a purpose. It is not, then, the figures such as Brigit who, through the merit of being so close to what was needed in the new culture were not

significantly changed, but rather preserved, whom the storyteller and audience should pay particular attention to. Rather, it is to those Mórrígans—the characters from whom voice and all sense of substance was taken—that we must listen closely, for the only path they have to regaining their voices, substance, and purpose is through inference and close attention on our part. Only with our help can they be re-transferred into a storytelling culture.

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