THE ADOLESCENT HERO IN CELTIC MYTH

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My motives in writing this paper are complex and multilayered, personal and professional, overdetermined in Freudian terms. These impulses relate to separate identities which is also the subject of the paper. As a dynamic psychotherapist I am of course concerned with human development and identity formation, and the dilemmas faced by the heroes and heroines of these ancient stories are often the same dilemmas I hear about in my consulting room, though the language and cultural context may be different. For me psychotherapy is about stories. In constructing, perhaps reconstructing, their own stories for the therapist to hear, people get better. Nor do I believe that narratives could be shared and transmitted for centuries, as they were in Ireland, if they were not true to our nature, including our capacity to relate to one another, and the deep structures which shape that capacity. In this way personal and public narratives merge. This is not to deny that ancient stories may have other dimensions, to do, for instance, with history and spirituality – stories themselves are over-determined.

These stories relate also to my own identity since I first heard fragments of them in Ireland when I was a boy. We all have separate identities, but the tension between them can be a creative one.

Hero myths are universal and go back to the beginnings of recorded history, at least. The epic of Gilgamesh, the world's oldest known narrative, deals with the exploits of the eponymous king of ancient Uruk, and Sargon was the

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The poems and the papers both attempt to explore the relationship between the individual and history, on many levels

heroic founder of the Babylonian empire. The ancient Greeks had Perseus and Heracles, the Romans Romulus, who was also a founder, as was Moses. Roma, an incarnation of Vishnu, is the hero of the Hindu Roma-yana, Norse myth has its Thor and Baldr, British its Arthur, Merlin and Beowulf. That some of these characters may have enjoyed a quasi-historical existence in some sense or other in no way vitiates their essentially myth is essence.

Wherever and whenever it is found, the heroic life has roughly the same structure. It is characterised by obscure, often supernatural origins, early struggles, initiation and travel, contest, persecution, a violent or ambivalent death, followed by resurrection ascension. [Raglan, 1936]. Thus, the hero's story encompasses the whole human life-cycle, though the emphasis is generally upon his boyhood deeds and martial exploits. The contest frequently involves the defeat of a supernatural foe followed by the acquisition of a sexual partner.

The hero does things. He is both virile and violent, and his story has a tripartite shape, involving a hero/monster/woman triangle [Cask, 1903]. In Jungian thought, the hero embodies those dynamic processes within the psyche that seek to escape the archetypal mother, and replace her with the anima, the inevitable princess of the story [Jung, 1952]. Employing a Jungian perspective, Campbell discerns a 'mono-myth', a vision which transcends time and space, which he uses to critique contemporary western culture

[Campbell, 1949].

Irish mythology had a specific category of stories devoted to youthful exploits: of which the most famous concerns Cuchullain, the great hero of the Ulster cycle of tales, whose birth is shrouded in mystery. He seems to have had both human and divine parents. His mother Deichtine is grieving for the loss of a foster son when she drinks water containing a small creature, supposed to be the God Lugh, who is then reborn as the boy who later becomes Cuchullain. Other sources suggest that her father or brother the King Conchobar slept with her and fathered the child. Deichtine is given in marriage to Sualtam Mac Roich, but is ashamed to enter his bed while pregnant. She spontaneously aborts the foetus, and her virginity is miraculously restored. The foetus lives however and is called Setanta, who later acquires the name Cuchullain in the following way:

One day, Conchobar, Setanta's foster-father, goes with his men to a feast at the house of Culann the smith. Setanta is to follow them later. When the king arrives at the smith's house, Culann invites the company in and releases his savage guard dog to defend the stock. When

Setanta arrives the fierce hound attacks him, but the boy kills it with his bare hands. While the others rejoice, Culann says,

'You are welcome boy, for your mother's heart's sake. But for my own part I did badly to give this feast. My life is a waste, and my household like a desert, with the loss of my hound. He guarded my life and my honour,' he said. 'A valued servant, my hound taken from me. He was shield and shelter for our goods and herds. He guarded all our beasts, at home or out in the field.'

'That doesn't matter,' the boy said. 'I'll rear you a pup from the same pack. Until that hound grows up to do his work, I will be your hound, and guard yourself and your beasts.'

'Cuhullain shall be your name, the Hound of Culann,' Cathbad said.

The result is to simultaneously channel male aggression and confer identity. 'Cuchullain' is not only a name but also a rôle, and potentially destructive energies can now be utilised to protect the community against external threat. Traditional Irish narrative returns to this theme very frequently, and it was no doubt a pressing problem in a warrior society. Employing Jungian concepts, Peter Tatham argues that the heroic archetype has been overvalued, but it seems to have had practical utility in Celtic warband culture [Tatham, 1992]. In the case of this particular narrative neither Freudian nor Jungian interpretations are very satisfactory. If there is a desire to kill the father, then it is sublimated rather than repressed, and the hero acquires a new symbolic father in Culann the smith. One might consider C•chullain's offer to be the result of Oedipal guilt or castration anxiety, though there is nothing in the text to support such a view, unless one is determined to impose it at any cost, as is so often the case. For Jungians the fearsome hound would presumably represent the dragon/mother archetype which the young man must slay in order to achieve autonomy, but again the text cannot substantiate such an interpretation. Rather it seems to me, we are given a glimpse of a world in which our distinctions between internal, interpersonal and communal worlds have no meaning, in which the developmental tasks of the individual coincide precisely with the needs of the community. In other tales, it is true, value conflicts do arise, often with tragic consequences [McMahon, 1998].

The ancient Irish, it would seem, had a strong interest in the socialisation of young men and in the consequences of its failure. Joseph Nagy has emphasised the liminality of life in the fianna, the warband whose members inhabited the boundaries between the wilderness and the settled human

world and, I would add, between childhood and maturity [Nagy, 1985]. A particular kind of roving band, the Diberg, was associated with robbery, murder, and rape, and condemned also for pagan practices by the Church [Sharpe, 1979]. It is clear from both contemporary chronicles and the literary context that the wandering militias consisted of mainly young men, many of whom eventually resumed their place in society, and that this pattern was influenced by laws of inheritance [McKong, 1986]. This could be seen from a developmental point of view as a way of institutionalising and containing what Winnicott describes as the 'transient psychosis' of adolescence. From a Freudian perspective it might be said that membership of a fianna allowed Oedipal impulses to be displaced and discharged (but surely not repressed and eventually resolved?), enabling the young men concerned to eventually return to the community and become husbands and fathers. The diberga, however, as distinct the Fianna, could not be accommodated: they were killed when found. They were said to be able to transform themselves into wolves and clearly occupied a radically liminal space of their own, somewhere between sanity and psychosis, if that. But warriors in the mainstream of the tradition were sometimes identified with animals too, Cuchullain being an obvious example. While some members of the Irish männerbund, and possibly whole troops, were violently psychopathic, driven to the edges of society by their own psychological marginality. For many young men the Fianna provided a valuable transition from childhood to adulthood, and there is something about these ambiguous groupings which captures the ambivalence of adolescence itself, especially the emphasis on peer group loyalty and values.

Courtship is of course a crucial event in the life of the hero, and, while in Celtic stories the 'place d'enunciation', to use Julia Kristovq's phrase, is invariably male, women are rarely mere passive objects of desire. The medieval Welsh collection of stories traditionally entitled 'The Mabinogion' contains the story of Culhwch and Olwen.

Cilydd, son of Prince Celyddon, took to wife Goleuddydd, the daughter of Anlowdd. She became pregnant and went mad, subsequently giving birth to her son in a pig-run, whence he was named Culhwch. She then died, and Cilydd went on to kill a neighbouring king and marry his widow. As Culhwch approached manhood, his stepmother prophesied that he would never lie with a woman until he won Olwen, the daughter of Yspaddaden, the giant. Culhwch was advised by his father to seek the advice of his cousin Arthur.

Having done so, Culhwch and his companions seek out Yspaddaden Ben Cawr's castle and contrive to meet with Olwen, who accepts Culhwch's love.

'And she came, with a robe of flame – red silk about her, and around the maiden's neck a torque of red gold and precious pearls thereon and rubies. Yellower was her head than the flowers of the broom, whiter was her flesh than the foam of the wave, whiter were her palms and her fingers than the shoots of the marsh trefoil, from amidst the fine gravel of a welling spring. Neither the eye of the mewed hawk nor the eye of the thrice-mewed falcon, not an eye was there, fairer than hers. Whiter were her breasts than the breast of the white swan, redder were her cheeks than the reddest foxglove. Whoso beheld her would be filled with love of her. Four white trefoils sprang up behind her wherever she went, and for that reason was she called Olwen ('white Track') [Jones and Jones, 1949, p 110].

Though this is clearly the language of male desire, in somewhat exalted form, the story is carried on from this point by Olwen's desire and ingenuity. Culhwch asks her to go away with him, but she has given her word never to leave without her father's permission, since he is doomed to die when she takes a husband. She advises Culhwch to ask the giant's permission to marry her, and to perform whatever tasks her father demands of him. Yspaddaden sets the young hero a number of apparently impossible tasks, which, of course, he successfully accomplishes with the help of his friends.

'And then Culhwch set forth and Goreu son of Custennin with him, and everyone that wished ill to Yspaddaden Chief Giant, and those marvels with him to his court. And Cadw of Prydein came to share his beard, flesh and skin to the bone, and his two ears outright, and Culhwch said, 'Hast thou thy shave, man?' 'I have,' said he, 'and thou needst not thank me for that, but thank Arthur who has secured her for thee of my own free will thou shouldst never have had her. And it is high time to take away my life.' And then Goreu son of Custennin caught him by the hair of his head and dragged him behind him to the mound and cut off his head, and set it on the bailey stake. And he took possession of his fort and his dominions and that night Culhwch slept with Olwen, and she was his only wife as long as he lived.' [Jones and Jones, 1949, P 136].

Though the story is told from the hero's point of view, from a developmental perspective the stakes are just as high for Olwen. Until her father is killed she cannot marry Culhwch or anyone else, and she takes an active role in bringing this about. Though composed by professional male storytellers for what was almost

certainly a predominantly male audience, such stories do have female adolescent dilemmas as a recurrent theme, especially in the area of object choice. If the radiant Olwen enables Culhwch to resolve his conflict around his lost, mad mother, then he is the good father/lover who assuages her guilt (if any) about the murder of her father, which she brings about. But the story cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of either classical or object relations theory, and the possessiveness of the father seems just as significant as the Oedipal desires of the protagonists. Moreover, is not his own father whom Culhwch kills but his bride's. Indeed it is his own father and Arthur as surrogate who enable him to compete his developmental task and, as the last sentence makes clear, this resolution has important consequences for the community.

Young women, therefore, are not mere objects of heroic desire in these tales. Often, indeed, it is they who choose, as in the case of Derdriu and the sons of Uisliu for instance.

'When Naoise was out there alone, therefore, she slipped out quickly to him and made as though to pass him and not recognise him. 'That is a fine heifer going by,' he said. 'As well it might,' she said. 'The heifers grow big where there are no bulls.' 'You have the bull of this province all to yourself,' he said, 'the king of Ulster,'

'Of the two,' she said. 'I'd pick a game young bull like you.'

'You couldn't,' he said. 'There is Cathbad's prophecy.'

'Are you rejecting me?'

'I am,' he said. Then she rushed at him and caught the two ears of his head. 'Two ears of shame and mockery,' she said, 'if you don't take me with you.'

'Woman, leave me alone,' he said.

'You will do it,' she said, binding him [Kinsella, 1969].

So Derdriu asserts her right to choose, just as, at the end of the story, she chooses to die rather than be 'a sheep eyeing two rams' between Conchobar and Eogan, her lover's killers.

Whereas, so far as the hero is concerned, the obstacle to full adult genitality may take a number of forms, for young women the threat generally takes the shape of more power, either that of the father, as in Olwen's story, or of the usually much older man for whom she is pre-ordained, without of course, any prior consultation. Though the wilful heroine is sometimes seen as a threat to the established noble order, some, particularly Derdriu, are accorded tragic stature. Though there are undoubtedly misogynistic elements, (and it is impossible to say

whether such elements are aboriginal or the result of the bias of generations of monkish transcribers) it may be that, taken as a whole, the stories express male ambivalence towards woman, who is seen as simultaneously desirable and dangerous. On a deeper level they perhaps express what Julia Kristeva calls,

'the tremendous psychic, intellectual and effective effort a woman must make in order to find the other sex as erotic object. In his philogenetic musings, Freud often admires the intellectual accomplishment of the man who has been (or when he is) deprived of women (through glaciation or tyranny on the part of the father of the Primal Horde, etc). If the discovery of her invisible vagina already imposes upon woman a tremendous, sensory, speculative and intellectual effort, shifting to the symbolic order at the same time as to a sexual object of a sex other than that of the primary maternal object, represents a gigantic elaboration in which a woman cathexes a psychic potential, greater than what is demanded of the male sex.' [Kristeva, 1989]

This gigantic elaboration I suggest operates as a subversive subtext in Celtic traditional narrative.

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