

One of the eternally fascinating things about the old myths and legends is the way in which the stories, in varying versions, get caught up and incorporated in each other. Thus one runs continually up against stories-within-stories, and even stories-within-stories-within-stories. Some of the stories, furthermore, are virtually unspoken - so well understood by the mythographers original public that they are only hinted at in the surviving texts, leaving such latter-day public as ourselves somewhat tantalised. Since the stories-that-didn't-have-to-be-written-down are presumably even more basic - and thus important - than the stories in which they are obliquely referred to, we have to grope as best we may for what lies behind the overt record.

Take the Mabinogion ((version as in Everyman Library)), eleven assorted stories, translated from the mediaeval Welsh, in which a very flimsy Christian false-front has only to be stripped away to reveal the pre-Christian vitality beneath. (I do not say this in disparagement of Christianity, I may say: Christianity has its own vitality, but here I am concerned with that of its predecessors.) Beneath the vitality - something else again: another vitality, earlier still, reduced to bare names and a few hints of the deeds and natures connected therewith. Pendaran Dyfed, sitting as it were in the back row of the chorus, but who once, surely, played the lead. Glewlwyd Mighty-grasp, Chief porter (ie, gatekeeper) at Arthur's court, or, according to a curious variant, not really chief porter but nevertheless performing the functions of that office. Only, it would seem, Glewlwyd was originally porter not to Arthur but to some even earlier dignitary. And so on.

Then there is the family that is the main subject of this article

Our quest here starts in the Second Branch, the tale of "Branwen, daughter of Llŷr". Bendigeidfran (or Bran for short), ruler of Britain, gave his sister Branwen in marriage to Matholwch king of Ireland. When the news came that she was not being treated befittingly, Bendy (as I prefer to shorten him) took his armed strength and invaded Ireland. Seven chieftains remained to look after this island, one of whom is given as "Lllashar son of Llaesar Llaesgyngwyd".

Continuing to the Third Branch, the tale of "Manawydan son of Llŷr", we find a certain "Lllasar Llaes Cnygnwyd" referred to in passing as having been renowned for the manner in which he was wont to colour saddles. (This could, presumably refer either to the son or to the father in the preceding entry.) Traces of an elder artisan-god, perhaps? Certainly nothing so simple as a mediaeval court-craftsman, for Manawydan - of heroic status himself, if not deific - is shown as following his example.

Leaving for the moment the Four Branches proper, we come to the incredible tale of "Culhwch and Olwen". Here we meet Glewlwyd Mighty-grasp, and his four assistants who do the actual portering except only on the first of January. One of the four is peculiar indeed, but it is not he with whom we are now engaged but a certain "Llaesgymyn". Some six-and-thirty pages later, three of the four are slain during the hunting of Twrch Trwyth, leaving only Llaesgymyn of whom the somewhat equivocal remark is made that he was "a man for whom none was the better".

In the romance of "Gereint son of Erbin", which was apparently set down a century or three later than the tales we have already glanced at, we meet Glewlwyd Mighty-grasp and his gang again. The gang has grown to seven now - not including Glewlwyd himself, who officiates as porter at the "three high festivals" but not otherwise. Despite three of his men having - according to the earlier account - been killed off, at least one if not two of them are still around - and "Llaesgymyn" is still one of their number, though nothing more of him is said in this particular story.

In order to get the most detailed account of what I presume

to be this same family, though, it is necessary to return to where we started - the Second Branch, the tale of "Branwen, daughter of Llŷr". When Matholwch king of Ireland was over in Britain courting Branwen, brother Bendy gave him a magic cauldron which had the property of restoring life to slain men - save only that they lived thenceforward as mutes. Bendy explained that the cauldron originally came from Ireland (it must be emphasised that this is the Welsh version of the tale, not the Irish, if there was one) and had been brought to Britain by a certain "Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid", who with his wife Cymidei Cymeinfoll had escaped from Ireland. Matholwch then provided details/further/: Llasar was huge and ruffianly in appearance, and carried the cauldron on his back, while the woman who walked behind him was twice as big as he. Told that the woman would give birth to a fully-armed warrior, Matholwch took them into his service. After the first year, however, the scions of the growing clan started making public nuisances of themselves, and the Irish decided to get rid of them. To this end they constructed a great Iron cage, and getting the entire clan drunk, they imprisoned them inside and tried to roast them alive. When the iron was white-hot, Llasar charged it with his shoulder and broke free, his wife following. They lost their children - but at least they saved the cauldron! This they gave to Bendy, who in return received them hospitably, and gave them lands in Britain. Nothing is said of the civil behavior of the clan that arose, but Bendy admitted that he found them around because of their excellent fighting qualities.

There we are then. "Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid", the giant with the cauldron and the troublesome offspring. "Llashar son of Llaesar Llaesgyngwyd", one of the leaders who stayed behind in Britain when Bendy invaded Ireland. "Llasar Llaes Gygnwyd", noted dyer of saddles. And "Llaesgymyn", one of the assistant porters at Arthurs court. Quite a family, it would appear. A family, moreover that was important in myth and legendry before Arthur was ever heard of. AM.

//////////////////////////////////////THE LAST UNICORN//////////////////////////////////////  
 REVIEW ////////////////////////////////// by Peter Beagle

The story concerns - would you believe? - the quest of the last unicorn to find and free her fellows, captured by the Red Bull for the evil King Haggard. All the essential ingredients of a fairy-tale are supplied: the wicked witch, the curse, the fair maiden, the valient (though stupid) hero, and of course the happy ending. Yet the result is far from what one would expect from such a well-worn formula; the parts fit together into a credible whole, and one willingly believes that things will happen as they must because the nature of the story demands it. The Red Bull is vanquished, the unicorns are freed, and yet there is a perpetual sense of expectation rather than boredom.

Above all, this book has what Tolkien's works most seriously lack - humour. The humour of LotR is rare and cold, but here it is ever-present and refreshing, an undercurrent of irony stopping just on the right side of parody. I realise that almost every book of the genre is described as being as good as, or even better than, Tolkien, but in this one respect I think that this book surpasses the master.

This article is being written by myself, and not by someone more competent to do so simply because, as far as I know, no-one else has heard of the book. To the best of my knowledge, the paperback will soon (February?) be back in print. I hope that the book will be dragged from its ill-deserved obscurity.

Alex Holdschmidt.

Short book reviews on any book, or longer reviews on Tolkien-oriented books are very welcome (1 per issue perhaps?) This is of course in general sphere of fantasy-SF, etc.