The Twa Magicians as Conception Story

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The Twa Magicians (Child no. 44)[1] tells the story of a blacksmith who sets out to take a lady's maidenhead and eventually does so. The narrative, as it stands in the ballad, has a levelling moral, the abolition of the social distinction between workman and grand lady: 'The rusty smith her leman was, / For a' her muckle pride.' However, the figure of the blacksmith is not an insignificant one in myth and folklore and clearly the smith of the ballad is not an ordinary man. Both he and the lady display powers of transformation which mark them as supernatural beings.

In her attempt to escape the smith, the lady assumes a variety of different shapes but in each case the smith pursues in a shape that in some way matches that taken by her:

Then she became a turtle dow,
  To fly up in the air,
And he became another dow,
  And they flew pair and pair.

She turnd hersell into an eel,
  To swim into yon burn,
And he became a speckled trout,
  To gie the eel a turn.

Then she became a duck, a duck,
  To puddle in a peel,
And he became a rose-kaimd drake,
  To gie the duck a dreel.

She turnd hersell into a hare,
  To rin upon yon hill,
And he became a gude grey-hound,
  And boldly he did fill.

She then became a mare and he became a saddle; she became a girdle and he became a cake; she became a ship and he became a nail; and finally she became a silken plaid on a bed and 'he became a green covering / And gaind her maidenhead.' The ballad ends here, but, as it is frequently a given in Scottish ballads that intercourse will be followed by pregnancy, *The Twa Magicians* may plausibly be regarded as belonging to the class of conception stories and I attempt here to place it in context when it is considered in this way.

In a conception story the transformations would not occur in isolation as they do in the ballad but would be linked to a birth which could be expected to be as remarkable as the events that led up to it. This is the case in the only conception story among the many parallels to *The Twa Magicians* adduced by Child—the conception of the bard Taliesin (Child 1882–98:1.402, 2.506, 5.216). The tale, known through Welsh manuscripts of the sixteenth century onwards, tells of the pursuit of Gwion Bach by the hag Ceridwen who becomes the mother of the famous bard.

Taliesin is obviously thought to have derived his inspiration as poet from the pre-natal experience that occurred immediately before the pursuit. Gwion Bach accidentally tasted three drops from the cauldron of inspiration which Ceridwen had been brewing for the benefit of her son, Morfran, and so stole its power for himself. From the magical knowledge gained by tasting the drops he realised that he was in danger from the anger of Ceridwen, whose hopes for her son had been disappointed, and tried to make his escape but she caught sight of him and followed (Guest 1849:323–4, 358–9; *cf.* Ford 1977:x. 160–4):

> And she went forth after him, running. And he saw her, and changed himself into a hare and fled. But she changed herself into a greyhound and turned him. And he ran towards a river, and became a fish. And she in the form of an otter-bitch chased him under the water, until he was fain to turn himself into a bird of the air. Then she, as a hawk, followed him and gave him no rest in the sky. And just as she was about to stoop upon him, and he was in fear of death, he espied a heap of winnowed wheat on the floor of a barn, and he dropped amongst the wheat, and turned himself into one of the grains. Then she transformed herself into a high-crested black hen, and went to the wheat and scratched it with her feet, and found him out and swallowed him. And, as the story says, she bore him nine months, and when she was delivered of him, she could not find it in her heart to kill him, by reason of his beauty.

The boy that she conceived by swallowing Gwion Bach as a grain of wheat is in a sense Gwion Bach himself and in a sense a new being who is given the name Taliesin. This gifted child retained, as I have noted, the inspiration received by Gwion Bach when he tasted the drops from the cauldron. I have not seen it suggested, but it seems likely to be the case, that he is exceptional also because he partakes of the nature of the transformations undergone by Gwion Bach and Ceridwen during the pursuit, that is, that he shares in some way the nature of animal (hare/greyhound), of water-creature (fish/otter) and of bird (bird/hawk), or of the three elements to which they belong: earth, water and air. The transformations in *The Twa Magicians* similarly include adaptations during the pursuit to these three elements: the lady and the smith become animals (hare and greyhound) 'to rin upon yon hill', water-creatures (eel and trout or duck and drake) 'to swim into yon burn' or 'to puddle in a peel' and birds (doves) 'to fly up in the air'.

A triple transformation like this into creatures of land, water and air seems to be present in one of the conception stories told of Helen of Troy who was held to have

been born (or rather hatched) from an egg. In the particular account of her conception with which I am concerned here she was said to be the daughter of Zeus and Nemesis. It was given in the *Cypria*, a poem belonging to the post-Homeric Epic Cycle composed in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. (M. L. West in Hammond and Scullard 1972:388–9). The poem itself is lost but an extract quoted from it by Athenaeus in *The Deipnosophists* in the course of a discussion on fish tells part of the conception story (Gulick 1930:16–19—334 c-d; *cf.* Allen 1912:120):

> And after them, thirdly she bore Helen, a wonder unto mortals. Her once upon a time did beautiful-haired Nemesis, united in love, bear to Zeus king of the gods, under strong necessity; for she fled from him, nor was she willing to be united in love with Zeus the father, Cronos' son; for her heart was oppressed by modesty and indignation; and she fled throughout the earth and the unharvested dark sea, and Zeus pursued her; and in his heart he longed to catch her; and at one moment, in the waves of the resounding sea, like unto a fish, she caused a commotion in the vast deep, and at another time in the river of Ocean and at the earth's farthest bounds, and at another time on the fertile land; and ever did she become all the terrible beasts that the land nurtures, that she might escape him.[2]

Apollodorus also mentions this account of Helen's parentage in *The Library* (Frazer 1921:23–4—3.10.7):

> But some say that Helen was a daughter of Nemesis and Zeus; for that she, flying from the arms of Zeus, changed herself into a goose, but Zeus in his turn took the likeness of a swan and so enjoyed her; and as the fruit of their loves she laid an egg . . .

If these quotations tell different parts of the same story, as seems probable, then Nemesis in her flight from Zeus took successively the shapes of fish, beasts of the land, and bird (goose).

These Scottish, Welsh and Greek instances taken together provide fair, if not fully conclusive, evidence of the currency of a story of a remarkable birth preceded by a series of transformations representative of the three elements of earth, water and air. It is a reasonable inference that such a story gives expression in narrative form to the idea that the divine or quasi-divine child incorporated the qualities of these elements in his or her own being.

A. L. Lloyd has pointed out that there is a resemblance between *The Twa Magicians* and the shape-shifting sexual pursuit which occurs as part of a creation myth in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* dated *c.* 700 B.C. (Lloyd 1967:154; O'Flaherty 1975:17, 34–5—1.4.1–4). This is particularly interesting in showing that the story of a flight and pursuit with transformations was linked to an early stage in the creation story for it occurs 'in the beginning' immediately after a splitting apart of primal being into man and woman. Male and female mate as a series of different animals and are the progenitors of each species, but there is no suggestion of the presence of the various elements. On the other hand, the creation myth in a later Indian record—the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* dated *c.* 450 A.D.—does have an account of the union of the elements although there is no story of a pursuit. After the creation of the five elements of ether,

air, fire, water and earth, it is said of them that 'possessing various energies, and being unconnected, they could not, without combination, create living beings, not having blended with each other.' In combination, however, they form an egg containing Brahmā (Wilson 1840: 16–18).

If such a concept was present when the narrative for which *The Twa Magicians* is part of our evidence came into being, the pursuit can be seen as a stage in the creation story. After the separation or identification of the various elements comes the fusion of these elements, each caught up in turn in the course of the flight and combining in the person of the marvellous child.

NOTES

1 Quotations from *The Twa Magicians* are from Child whose only text is that printed by Peter Buchan in 1828 (Child 1882–98: 1.402–3). Bronson compares the ballad as collected by Cecil Sharp at Minehead in 1904 with Buchan's text (Bronson 1959: 348–50). Fragments have been collected in Scotland in the present century by Gavin Greig (Keith 1925: 32–3) and James M. Carpenter (The Archive of Folk Song in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

2 I am very grateful to Dr R. C. McCail for making this translation. He adds the clarifying comment that the ending 'and ever . . . escape him' relates to the words 'and at another time on the fertile land'.

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