MACBETH AS A PORTRAIT OF "CÂD GODDEU". ENCOUNTERS WITH THE CELTIC WORLD

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This paper was inspired by Jean Markale's suggestion that the portrayal of a battle of trees in Macbeth might have been inspired by the Welsh text of *Câd Goddeu*. Attributed to Taliesin, the bard and belonging to the Welsh *Book of Taliesin*, collected in the 14th century, Câd Goddeu displays a battle fought by two separate sets of mythological forces taking the form of trees. Robert Graves' reconstruction of the text rendered it available for modern readers through a decodification of the alphabet Beth-Louis-Niomh based on the choreography of the trees which provides an aid to understand its significance. This paper purports an attempt to further pursue that discussion by analysing some of the features contained in the Welsh piece, such as the importance of the hidden name, the battle between Good and Evil or the Ceres myth. According to this, we will view those features as a means Shakespeare uses in order to flatter king James, sponsoring *Macbeth* production, both as the legitimate heir to the English throne and as a monarch beneficial to his kingdom. The projection of the mythological battle outcome on Macbeth, will cause us to reach valid conclusions concerning the allegorical interpretation of Shakespeare's play.

It is generally known that editorial research on different fields regarding Shakespearean production, has evinced a tendency on the author's side to draw heavily form earlier material. This involves, not only his chronicle plays, as could be expected, but also, and most interestingly, a wide range of plays including *The Comedy of Errors*,[1] *Julius Caesar*[2] or *Hamlet*,[3] among others. Similarly, diverse amount of evidence has shown that this habit is not merely circumscribed to the scholarly tradition, but it is also performed within the range of folklore.[4]

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[1] Based on Plautus *Menaechmi*.

[2] Based on Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*.

[3] Based on Saxo Grammaticus' *Historia Danicae* through Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*.

[4] The number of ballads on miscellaneous subjects that were recorded in the Stationer's Company Register while Shakespeare's production was still in progress clearly points to the immense amount of popularity they enjoyed.

This paper will henceforth attempt a revision of *Macbeth* following Jean Markale's (1969: 373) comments on its similarity to a battle of trees in the saga manuscripts, as suggested in *Les Celtes et la Civilisation Celtique* which particularly points to the links between Shakespeare's work and the Celtic background in the British Isles. Were those to prove operative, we could find no reason to wonder. A reputed actor and playwright, Shakespeare made a living on his writing plays for the scene. Accordingly, his productions were expected to be both commercial and entertaining. Originality was not a priority. Moreover, the popularity of Celtic stories must have been ample as shown by Spencer's *Faerie Queene* and Marston's *Sophonisba*, a play being represented at Blackfriars in 1606 and dealing with a plot partly borrowed from the Arthurian cycle (Bollough, 1973: 426).[5]

Thus, when *Macbeth* was performed for the first time, probably, in The Globe Theatre around 1606 (Gibert, 1985: 279), the very fact that it dealt with the events occurred during the reign of Duncan I of Scotland proved to be highly indicative of the sort of inspiration that was leading its author's hand. In fact, the composition of this piece originated in the patronage offered by King James I, who had previously reigned over Scotland as James VI. The monarch's love both towards Scotland and his own ancestry being already mythic by the time he reached England, Shakespeare found the means to flatter both by enhancing the fictional Banquo, whom King James believed to be his own ancestor (Gibert, 1985: 280) as referred in Holinshed's *Chronicle* (Nicoll & Calina, 1969: 207). *Macbeth*, however, deals with a subject much more complex that the mere consideration for the king's birth country.

By the year 1000, Scottish tradition, deeply rooted in Celtic customary habit based on non-hereditary kingship, forced to choose the king from among all clan chieftains. This procedure, which apparently protected kingship from the conflicts derived from direct succession,[6] weakened the monarchy as a result of a major incidence of plots, murders and violent deeds, making it swing from one clan into the other.

Macbeth's legend was partly borrowed from Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* in its second edition of 1587, which Shakespeare had already used as an aid to compose some of his chronicle plays, including *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, the three parts of *Henry VI*,

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[5]Some of Shakespeare's best known plays show this influence, namely the first part of *Henry IV* dealing with Welsh matters (3.1.142-158)1, *Romeo and Juliet* referring to Queen Mab (1.4.54-94) lately transformed in the Fairy Queen and even *A Midsummer Night Dream* which reflects fairyland as a complete system within the world boundaries.

[6]The system guaranteed the ruler's strength as derived from the fact of his being the most powerful chieftain (Gibert, 274).

Richard III and *Henry VIII* as well as *King Lear* and *Cymbeline* (Nicoll & Calina, 1969: XIII). According to Bullough, a historical character called MacBeth actually reigned over Scotland between the years 1040 and 1057. Apparently, he doesn't seem to have been the obscure villain Shakespeare depicts on his play. Married to Gruoch, who already had a child from an earlier marriage, the only action MacBeth could be accused of is to have claimed the throne for his wife, whose relatives, belonging to the legitimate branch had been exterminated by Malcom II (Bullough, 1973: 432). On this basis, MacBeth killed Duncan I and after a lapse of time he got himself killed by Malcom III who was crowned on the 25th April 1057 (Nicoll & Calina, 1969: 223). With regard to History, we can add but little to this picture; there's no trace of a battle of trees at this early stage.

Shakespeare works on this basis by exaggerating the characters, by intermingling human passions such as temptation, guilt, and punishment and, specially, by invigorating the plot with borrowings from sources other than Holinshed, namely, the Celtic tradition.

The dramatic plot is otherwise well known. Macbeth murders good king Duncan as suggested by his wife by the sole reason of "vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself, and falls on th'other" (1.7. 26). The appearance of the three weird sisters emphasises the *pathos* of Macbeth's cruel fate: that of committing murder and treachery and being later dethroned by Duncan's legitimate heir. A prophecy seals Macbeth's doom: he is foretold to be a king before he even dreams of it (1.3.50), and later, after Hecate's fatal intervention, Macbeth learns that he must "laugh to scorn the power of man; for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.79-81) and even that "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam wood to high Dursinane hill shall come against him" (4.1.92-93). That soothes the villain who trusts the impossibility of both predictions although they end up by becoming true. Macduff, whose children Macbeth had previously killed "was from his mother's womb untimely ripped" (5.7.26) and, similarly, as the messenger reports: "As I did stand my watch upon the hill, I looked toward Birnam, and anon methought the wood begun to move" (5.5.34-35).

Precisely, it is this feature, caused by Malcom's order to each of his warriors to "hew him down a bough, and bear't before him" (5.4.6) in order to hide their real number, the one which has attracted Markale's attention. No wonder it does, as a forest moving up the hill is such an unusual episode as to become suspicious about its source. With regard to this, we can recall that there is no doubt whatsoever about Shakespeare's proficiency in joining together different traditions and, on the other hand, we know as a matter of fact that the connection of the tree symbol and the battle performance is highly characteristic

of Celtic tradition where the sacred tree, called *bile* was considered to be *axis mundi* of the particular population where it stood. Indeed, Robert Graves has successfully identified the seven sacred trees, in a poem belonging to the 7th century attached to the old Irish law *Crith Gablach*[7] (Graves, 1984: 336). Later, he transplanted its significance in order to interpret the Welsh poem "Câd Goddeu" portraying a battle of trees. Albeit, the subject remains to be fairly obscure.

"Câd Goddeu" is a text belonging to the *Book of Taliesin*, a collection of early manuscripts attributed to this bard, of which only 38 folios are extant. According to one of the pieces recorded in this book, a youth called Gwion Bach disobeyed the witch Keridwen while looking after the Cauldron of Knowledge and became thus invested with wisdom after undergoing a process of metempsychosis through the four elements which ended up in the boy's rebirth as Hanes Taliesin, meaning "illuminated forefront" (Graves, 1983: 565). The story is interesting because it illustrates the only extant process of initiation into the bardic order. Different sources point to the possibility of Taliesin's having been a historical figure living on the 6th century. If that were so, the *Book of Taliesin* would be consistent of a central bulk of poems probably composed by this bard to which it has been added other later pieces conforming a collection which was gathered on the 14th century.

One of those pieces is a text entitled "Câd Goddeu" or "The Battle of Achren." By the time the collection was put together, one must say, the bardic tradition had already lost its prime and whoever the scribe was, he had a clear conscience of his act as a means to preservation. The poem thus conceived proves to be an attempt to keep for posterity the vernacular tradition which the compiler felt to be endangered. The battle presents thus on the one side the forces of Arawn, king of Annwn, the Welsh Other World while, opposite, there stand the forces of Gwydyon (Markale, 1992: 358) whose brother, Amaethon, had stolen from Arawn the secrets of agriculture. Gwydyon transformed the Breton army into trees with the aid of magical powers in an attempt to help his brother and eventually won the fight by guessing his opponent's real name (Markale, 1992: 104). Although the text is still obscure enough, Robert Graves's reconstruction of it has made it available to modern readers and it enables the critic to follow the choreographic pattern unveiling the alphabet of Beth-Louis-Niomh, which assigns a vocalic or consonantal value to every single tree in the forest.

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[7]Those are known to be: birch tree, alder tree, willow tree, oak tree, holly tree, hazel tree and apple tree.

On the one hand, the idea of a battle between Good and Evil seems to have been a characteristic well attested among the Indo-European peoples as shown by the Hindu Mitra-Varuna opposition and, also, by the Irish second battle of Mag Tured, confronting the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Formorians (Sainero, 1988: 129). We must assume that, concerning the battle figure, there must be the right side and the wrong one, as very rarely does the narrator stand neutral. However, the *motif* of the gods of light (the Tuatha Dé) and the gods of darkness (the Formorians) is, undoubtedly an Indo-European feature, deeply rooted in the belief of the transfiguration of souls leading towards the Other World. The physical world is thus portrayed as the world of light, whereas outside its limits there lies the kingdom of shadows. This idea is further enforced in Celtic Mythology, in "The Battle of Achren," where it becomes obvious through the etymology of Gwydyon's name, containing the Cymric particle "gwynn," equivalent to the Irish "finn" which means "white," "divine" or "beautiful" (Markale, 1969: 121), as a matter of fact in Cymric "gwydd" and "gwyddon" mean "trees" and "wiseman" (Matthews, 1992: 61). We must conclude on this evidence, that Gwydyon's side is that of the gods of light, and consequently, that of reason. This conclusion is firmly supported by the previous information we hold regarding this figure. Actually, on the 4th branch of the *Mabinogion*, Gwydyon is portrayed as a rebellious youth who aids his brother Gilvaethwy to win Goewin against Math's will and later Gwydyon himself grows to be the protective uncle of Llew Llaw Gyfes, helping the youth against his mother Arianrhod. In both cases, Gwydyon gets his aims when he "drew upon his arts and began to display his magic" (Gantz, 1976: 101). Just as often, Gwydyon is alluded to as a bard: "Gwydyon was the best storyteller ever" (Gantz, 1976: 100).

Bards, we must specify, were not only poets and storytellers. The bards were heavily trained for a number of years to learn by heart a wide range of technical devices which enabled them for the composition of highly complex literary pieces, both in poetry and in prose. However, most of all, the bard was a religious figure, a member of the lowest order of priesthood who had a command on the magic of words.

As a matter of fact, the Celts dreaded awfully the magical effect of an invocation. As a consequence of it, it became a habit to hide one's real name from public exposure. Due to this customary tradition, all Celtic characters, be them mythological, like Dagda, or historical, like Vercingetorix the Gaul, are exclusively known by their nicknames. We know this only because only two instances of nicknames specifying their previous correspondent have reached us: Setanta was Cuchulainn's real name and Demne is Finn macCumhaill's, whose nickname means, once more, "white" (Graves, 1984: 96).

About "Câd Goddeu," we are told that there's a man who could not be welcome into the fight unless his real name was guessed (Markale, 1969: 111).[8] This is a common feature in Myth and Folklore, where it stands in a number of Celtic fairytales. I can name here, for instance, "Whipety Stoury" where an unnamed fairy, coming from the Other World, meets a widow and helps her to recover her poisoned pig after which she throws a spell on her which won't be raised unless the fairy's real name is guessed. Another example is "Perifool," where a princess is helped by a similar unnamed elf with a task imposed by a giant; in exchange for those services the elf requires half the goods he helped to process unless his real name be guessed. In both cases, the difficult task is eventually accomplished when the item is overheard in a private conversation among the fairies. Similarly, in "Câd Goddeu," Gwydyon wins the battle only when he succeeds in guessing Bran's real name.

Finally, there's a third interesting feature based on the Demeter Myth. Amaethon, Gwydyon's brother is, like him, the son of Don. Don here represents a Welsh goddess equivalent to the Irish Dana who is not a Celtic divinity but a preceltic one. The *Book of Invasions*, in Irish *Leabhar Ghabhála*, reports how the peoples of the goddess Dana, the Tuatha Dé Danann were defeated in the Battle of Sliabh Mis, first and later in the battle of Tailltiu, by the sons of Mil, originally coming from Brigantium, in the Spanish Northwest (Sainero, 1988: 190).

Those newcomers are considered to be the first Celtic race ever to inhabit the isle of Ireland, although we could discuss much about this point on the light of historical evidence. The importance of this legendary episode lies, nevertheless, in the fact that it points to the substitution of a previous culture by that of the Celts. Archaeological evidence adds to this point as inferred from the existence of a civilisation in Ireland prior to the coming of the Celts who built up megalithic monuments and worshipped a mother goddess of agriculture (MacCana, 1970: 86). When the Gaels conquered Ireland, they didn't exterminate its previous occupants but colonised them and kept various aspects of their cult and social customs. Adopted thus by a patriarchal society living on cattle, Dana was trespassed into several divinities like Brigit, Boann or even Etaine the fairy, who still kept their influence on fertilising rites as expected from their ascendancy in the Neolithic mother goddess.

This is where Don, and subsequently, Amaethon and Gwydyon find their origin. Amaethon inherited from his mother, the goddess of natural fertility, his powers on agriculture, which seem to be fairly unusual in a masculine god. This is probable due to the fact that, by the time the myth was written, all previous

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[8]Based on the Myvirian Archaeology of Wales.

ties to pagan religion were already loose. However, according to "Câd Goddeu," Amaethon gets his powers on agriculture not by natural genetics, but by stealing them from the Lord of the Other World, Arawn. The coincidence of these various elements: agriculture, the god of the Other World and the *motif* of rape points to the possible connections to the Greek myth of Demeter whose daughter, Persephone, was abducted by Hades, the Greek equivalent to the Welsh Arawn, and later claimed back by her mother in order to re-establish the renewal of crops (Kerényi, 1958: 210). In a similar way, Amaethon steals from the Other World the secrets concerning the fertilisation of the earth, a feminine divinity in Celtic tradition. His marriage to the earth in a ritual similar to that of "sacral kingship" will necessarily cause the harvest to be abundant. This significance is further enhanced within the poem by Gwydyon's transforming the army into trees which points to the side, natural forces stand upon in order to cause the renewal of the living cycle, as enforced in Greek Myth.

As a matter of fact, the more we insist on the analysis of "Câd Goddeu," the more we realize that Shakespeare's portrayal of a battle of trees was not taken at random. What this author presents us with in *Macbeth* final act is with the battle between the legitimate heir and the usurper, true and false, light and shadows... Malcom's troops and Macbeth's.

So when the former defeats the latter, his victory not only signifies a predictable outcome but it points to the triumph of Good over Evil. Thus, Malcom, like Gwydyon had done before, transforms his army into trees by giving the following command: "Let every soldier hew him down a bough, and bear't before him: thereby shall we shadow the numbers of our host, and make discovery err in report of us" (5.4.5-8). By doing so, he is fictionally transformed into an impersonation of God, leading into his aid the powers of nature, as it happens in "Câd Goddeu." Similarly, Macbeth's death will bring him back to the darkness that his sinister figure belongs to as in Welsh myth it happened to Arawn, whereas his unruled country will be passed on those who, like Amaethon, own the secrets of agriculture and will be thus able to make the land prosperous.

The parallels with "Câd Goddeu" are further enforced in the way the final victory is achieved. The relevance of the name, which in the Welsh piece had to be guessed, draws here the opposition between an intruder of unknown origin and the legitimate heir claiming the throne.[9] Thus, the legitimacy proved by the

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[9]We are obviously talking about Shakespearean fiction. The Macbeth family was otherwise historically proved to be a ruling clan in Moray. Macbeth's father, Findlaech, was defeated during the reign of Kenneth II by Sigurd of Orkney after having failed in his attempt to challenge the Viking power extending to the North of Inverness (Bullogh 1973: 431).

right ascendancy guarantees the kingdom to be gained both by the force of blood and by the fulfilment of the prophecy.

One must add to this picture the fact that Skene's analysis on the poem sets the action in Scotland, through the identification of Scottish toponyms belonging to the area of Ayrshire (namely, Troon and Beith), Dumfriesshire and the Clyde (Skene, 1868: 402), all of them situated in the Scottish West. This information supports Skene's theory on the combat at the root of the tongue: "Dan von y tauaút" (line 33) (Skene, 1868: 138) being an allusion to "the most striking difference between the Cymric and Gaelic —viz. the interchange of gutturals and labials, which might be called a combat at the root of the tongue" (Skene, 1868: 399). Most importantly, however, is the fact, that Shakespeare's play evinces the existence of an oral tradition linking "Câd Goddeu" to the Scottish land which he considered when writing *Macbeth*, placing thus its action in the right setting.

As earlier mentioned, Macbeth's name can't be guessed because he, like Arawn, has a sinister origin. However, Malcom's own will promote him to the appropriate position as a ruler, setting a lineage of which king James happens to be the last descendant in Shakespeare's generation. The king was nevertheless not considered to be a mere landowner but also the promoter of its common good, which can only be achieved if he proves to be the legitimate heir to the throne in the direct line, being consequently endowed with divine gifts. Like Amaethon kept the secrets of agriculture for the progress of mankind, thus will the right king enforce the richness of the land where he rules. Let me just end by quoting Jean Markale when he states: "Ensuite, il s'agit, non pas d'une bataille réelle, mais d'une bataille mythologique: ce sont les idées qui combattent; c'est une méditation de l'être sur ses origines et sur sa destinée" (1969: 382).

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