

CELTIC UNDERTONES IN *MACBETH*

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In this paper I propose to examine Shakespeare's tragedy "Macbeth" in the light of what we know about Celtic custom and belief. At first sight it may seem strange to seek Celtic symbolism in a play set in 11th century Scotland and written in 17th century England. The question also arises as to why one should do so. The answer is to be in the play itself: it deals with a time when Celtic and Pictish tradition was still very much alive in early mediaeval Scotland, and from what we can see in the sources used, the original imagery of the play seems to have been based in this tradition.¹ I would suggest that an examination of the play in the light of what we know of Celtic lore would be helpful in elucidating some aspects that may appear obscure, and that an understanding of these traditions may throw light on the motives underlying the story, besides clearing up some points which have intrigued critics.

It is obvious that any Celtic touches to be found in the play were in the original sources used by Shakespeare, and not introduced by him. It is true he brings some "local colour" into the play - Scottish mannerisms and dress would have been familiar to Londoners since James I's accession in 1603,- as well as some topical allusions, but in this play, Shakespeare was drawing on Scottish sources, and reference to these show us that the Celtic elements were already present in the original story. *Macbeth* has bona fide Celtic connections: the Kingdom of Dalriada, inhabited by Gaelic tribes from Ireland, had been united by Kenneth MacAlpin with the Kingdom of

¹ It is usually agreed that Shakespeare's sources were Holinshed's "Chronicles of Scotland" and possibly Buchanan's "Rerum Scotticarum Historia".

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the Picts in 844 A.D. -so forming a union from which modern Scotland would emerge. Gaelic was still being spoken there at the time this play is set, as we can see from the fact that Duncan's son Malcolm was surnamed Canmore ("Ceann mór" -great head), the other son Donal's surname being "Bane" (from "Báin" -meaning white). Literary and cultural contact was maintained between the Scots and Irish Gaelic peoples until well into the 14th century,¹ so that the imagery and symbolism we find in the sagas and myths of Ireland where women play such a prominent role, the themes of sacral kingship, including ritual substitution, the ease of contact with the supernatural and the Otherworld, and the effect of good or evil on the cosmic forces, including the disruption of the elements to herald untoward events, would have been familiar to the Scots of the 11th century.

The Celtic world was a world of magic, where the supernatural existed in very close contact with everyday life, and might be found at the turning of any road. Within this world, there were some very strong themes, which occur again and again. One of the most important aspects was the special significance given to woman in the legends and literature of the Celtic peoples. Without romanticising her position, woman still had role in society superior to that found in many classical societies, including the sophisticated world of the Romans.² The female deity especially had an extremely important influence on the thought of the Celts. She was the embodiment of sovereignty and the land, and because of the "triplication" of divinity so beloved by all Celtic races, could be variously or conjointly the maiden, the mother and the hag. The importance of the triple aspect, though common to Indo-European peoples, was of a particular intensity among the Celts, and recurs throughout their literature, together with its multiple of nine. (Several instances are found in *Macbeth*, whenever the weird sisters appear). The Goddess also had fiercer duties to perform; as the Morrigan, or great Queen, she was the bloodthirsty goddess of war, in her three aspects: Badbh the raven that haunts the battle field and announces and often leads the attack on ancient heroes ... Medb the warrior queen and Macha, the horse goddess, are but three examples of this strong female: we read that the Great Goddess "seems to have been a fundamental part of Celtic mythology ... (and) *often assumes a dominating attitude regarding*

¹ JACKSON, K. Hurlstone.(1951) *A Celtic Miscellany*. Rep. Penguin, 1971. Routledge and Kegan; London. p. 17-18.

² Among various classical authors, DIO CASSIUS quotes instances to show the greater freedom and equality enjoyed by upper-class Celtic women.

*her male partner*¹ ... and was renown for her war-like vigour".² It is not far-fetched to see this cruel aspect of the dominating female borne out in the behaviour of Lady Macbeth and it has been found also in the indifference and cruelty typical of the faëry women in Medieval legend, and epitomized by the "belle dame sans merci".³

As symbol of the sovereignty of the land, the Goddess was basic to the renovation of kingship by needing the substitution of the old ruler by a younger, and thereby demanding the ritual shedding of blood of the previous king. This blood was necessary for her rejuvenation and metamorphoses back into a young and fertile woman. This theme of kingship occupies a prominent part in the laws of the Celts as we know them. They saw in kingship a sacred bond uniting the representative of the people with the spirit or tutelary goddess of the land. Personification of the land was particularly strong among all Celtic peoples and was closely identified with the idea of fertility: when the king became old, the land became wasted, desolate and barren and the goddess's rejection of him and was carried out as a sacrifice. With the new king, the land became fertile again. In so far as a good king brought happiness and prosperity to the land, a bad king, young or not, would bring desolation and misery. The conferring of kingship involved certain ceremonies of approbation including the "Bainis rí" -or wedding banquet of the king, and legitimization before the stone of Fál, the stone of Destiny.⁴ Kingship among the Celts was represented by the golden torque or circlet, rather than a crown, and the horse, a sacred animal to the Goddess, played a prominent part in the ceremony. Once elected, the king was warned not to transgress specific "geasa" or magic taboos. The demise of the king was heralded when, induced by fate he began to break these taboos, so bringing about the fulfilment of these prophecies. This was a divine sign that his reign was

¹ My italics.

² MAC CANA, Proinsias.(1968) *Celtic Mythology*. Rep. 1984. Newnes, London. p. 86.

³ For a commentary on the origins of cruelty and indifference in women in Mediaeval romance see Jean Frappier's "Chrétien de Troyes" in LOOMIS, R. (1927) *Arthurian Legend in the Middle Ages*. New York. Rep. 1957 Clarendon, London.

⁴ These two elements -the banquet of the new king and his investiture before the stone of destiny, at Scone, are present in the play. cf. Act 2, sc. 4. l. 31 and Act 3, sc. 4.

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approaching its end, and that he would be sacrificed to make way for a new, vigorous king.

With this introduction we have set the scene for our summary examination of Macbeth in the light of Celtic lore. As we know, Macbeth himself reigned as an actual historical figure from 1040 till 1057, when he was defeated by Malcolm. Duncan and Macbeth were first cousins, sons of the two daughters of Malcolm II.¹ To understand what lies behind Macbeth's, by later standards, "usurpation", we must examine the basic tenets of royal succession prevalent among the Celts. Kingship was not yet hereditary as we know it- the king was chosen from among 4 generations of a family group, including descent through females,² the actual decision being made after a series of rites including ritual dreams.³

As we have seen, Duncan and Macbeth both based their right to the throne on descent through royal princesses. What we are not told in the play, but is stated in the sources, is that Lady Macbeth was also a member of the royal family group in her own right: like the goddess, she has had more than one husband, and according to custom her son by the previous marriage, who does not appear in the play, would have had a claim on the throne. It is interesting to speculate whether historically her ambition might have had as much a maternal as a personal basis.

In Celtic myth and legend, women played an important part in the rites of regal substitution: Blathnad⁴ in Ireland and Blodeuwedd⁵ in Wales both betray an older divine figure for a younger man; and Deirdriu and Grainne with their taunts prevail on young men to break faith with the king or leader to whom they are bound by loyalty -a fearsome responsibility in

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- ¹ Duncan, on two occasions at the beginning of the play uses the word "cousin" when referring to Macbeth. Act 1, sc. 2 l. 24 and sc. 4 l. 14.
- ² BEDE, (1955) *A History of the English Church and People* Bk.1. Rep. 1988. Penguin, London. p. 39.
- ³ These ritual dreams involved apparitions to the chief druid as to who would be the right choice for king.
- ⁴ *Aided Con Roi*. See MAC CANA, Proinsias. (1968) *Celtic Mythology*. Rep. 1984. Newnes, London. p. 98 ff.
- ⁵ See GANTZ, Jeffrey. (1976) *The Mabinogion*. Penguin, London. p. 11-114.

primitive societies.¹ Lady Macbeth precipitates the tragedy by stimulating her husband to break of the bond of fealty to his liege lord.

There can be no doubt that periods of transition are marked by turbulence, and the transition between elected and hereditary kingship must have been fraught with setbacks. In the case of this play it can be seen that the actual detonator of the assassination plot is Duncan's decision to flout the customary laws of succession and bestow the title of Prince of Cumberland, that is, heir designate to the throne, on his eldest son.² This stands in the way of what, in traditional circumstances, might have been Macbeth's just claim to the throne at a later date. For, as we have seen, Macbeth's aspirations are not based solely on the prophecies of the witches, as in the play, but on a lawful right to the throne, to be taken up when the old king can no longer fulfil his role.

The traditional signs that Duncan's reign has run its course and that a new king needs to be substituted are missing in the play: although Shakespeare depicts him as older than the historical character actually was and as relying on the help of others to hold his kingdom together, Duncan still retains what were importance attributes of sacral kingship. When he arrives at castle of Glamis, the fact that he is a beneficial king for the land is confirmed by favourable signs of nature,³ in contrast to the desolation which has greeted Macbeth and Banquo on the "blasted heath". After his murder, there is no joyful renewal of nature: indeed, as a metaphor of the anti-natural forces unleashed by this untimely sacrifice, Duncan's horses, sacred animals to the Celts -we must not forget that one of the aspects of the Great Queen was that of Epona or Macha, the horse goddess, -revolt against the unlawful slaying of their master and devour each other.⁴ Duncan's death is also accompanied by a gross disturbance of the elements, a sure sign that the tutelary deities as manifest in the forces of nature have been offended.

As for the man who substitutes Duncan on the throne, when we first hear of him at the beginning of the play he in fact appears to be a suitable

¹ KINSELLA, T. ed. (1970) *The Táin*. OUP, London and Dolmen Press. p. 12.

² Act 1, sc. 4. l. 38-38 and l. 48-49.

³ Act 1, sc. 4 l. 1-9.

⁴ Act 2, sc. 4. l. 1-19.

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candidate for the crown. Macbeth's valour is stressed: we are told of his many exploits, and he is referred to as Bellona's bridegroom, that is, the mate of the goddess of war. It is interesting to note that critics from Douce to Granville-Baker have had difficulty explaining the exact significance of this phrase.¹ For students of myth and legend no such difficulty exists. This is the typical role of the new king and points him out as a future favourite of the goddess: the younger man, defender of the unity of the realm, famous for his bravery, whom the goddess has chosen to be her next mate. Macbeth, therefore is seen to have a future claim on the kingship, whatever the purpose of the witches' prophecies may have been. His taking of Macdonwald's head and placing it on a pole will also be familiar to those who have read Celtic myth: the head was regarded as the seat of the soul and it was a typically Celtic custom to take as trophies the heads of those they had vanquished in battle; similarly Macbeth's head will be struck off in its turn and presented by MacDuff to Malcolm.²

It is less easy to find a satisfactory Celtic framework for the witches, who in the sources present both aspects of the triple goddess and of the Sidhe or faery women. In presenting us with the three hags or witches, Shakespeare seems to have modified the concomitant atmosphere of the original story, possibly out of deference to the new King, James I, whose interest in witchcraft led him to authorship on the subject. However, Shakespeare does retain the number three, and the total of three successive apparitions to Macbeth and even refers to them throughout as "the weird sisters". His source Holinshed also speaks of three "weird" sisters, - meaning supernatural, a word derived from the Anglo-Saxon for "destiny" or "fate"; he goes on to call them "the goddesses of destiny or else some nymphs or faeries".³ This is much more in keeping with Celtic beliefs, but it may be that Shakespeare wished to flatter the royal author of the *Daemonologie* by depicting spirits that conformed to his prejudices. Witches did exist in the legends of the Celts: in Irish folklore they are the children

¹ See MUIR, K. ed. (1964) *The Arden Shakespeare: Macbeth*. Rep. 1973. Methuen, London. Act 1 sc. 2. l. 55, p. 9. note. "Valour's minion", Act 1. sc 2. l. 19, is a similar image.

² c.f. Act 1, sc. 2. l. 22; Act 5, sc. 9, l. 21.

³ Holinshed's *Chronicles of Scotland*. p. 170. Quoted in *The Arden Shakespeare Macbeth*, op. cit. p. 171.

of Cailidín, who plot Cú Chulainn's death¹ and in Welsh legend, we find the hags of Gloucester, warrior women whom the young Peredur slays.² It should therefore come as no surprise when we hear that the titles given by these beings to Macbeth are three: Glamis, Cawdor and King, and that the witches throughout speak in threes, this being, as we have said a sacred number for the Celts.³

Nevertheless the witches in *Macbeth* still seem to owe more to their Elizabethan stereotype than to the idea of the three supernatural goddesses of destiny. We should note, however, the wildness of the elements that attend their appearances, and the fact that among the witches' appurtenances is a cauldron, one of the sacred objects of Celtic mythology, which can return the dead to life. The atmosphere in which Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches -separated from their retinue, in a swirling mist, at a moment when nothing is as it seems, is typical of encounters between the heroes of legend and the Otherworld folk. However, it is interesting to note here that the Celtic Otherworld did not have unpleasant associations, - often the case was quite the contrary; what one could never do, however, was place one's trust in the *Sídhe*. Also basic to the Celtic idea of the world, was a belief in the closeness of the Otherworld to everyday life, especially at key seasons of the year, so that the signs that accompany the three weird sisters signify something much deeper than mere stage business around the typical figure of the witch. They represent a disturbance of the cosmic and psychic forces that govern the earth. That this is a disruption of the normal state of affairs is pointed out by Macbeth's words:

So foul and fair a day I have not seen⁴

echoing the weird sisters' chant of "Fair is foul and foul is fair".⁵ Something is not right with the order of things -and as we know, the supernatural in Celtic tales occurs wherever opposites meet.

¹ JACKSON, K. Hurlstone. (1971) *A Celtic Miscellany*. Penguin, London. p. 42-48.

² GANTZ, J. ed.(1976). *The Mabinogion*. Penguin, London. p. 232.

³ c.f. Act 1, sc. 3, l. 48-50; Act 4, sc. 1, l. 61 and l. 107-9.

⁴ Act 1. sc. 3. l. 38.

⁵ Act 1. sc. 1. l. 10.

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Apart from Macbeth, the other central figure in this tragedy conforms also to the symbolism of the Celtic legends. Lady Macbeth, when we meet her, epitomises the strength of character one might expect from one of these primitive women. Not for her the doubts of her husband, bound by ties of faith and loyalty to the king: like Blathnad and Blodeuwedd she has decided actively to engineer the succession of her more vigorous mate, whom she suspects of being too squeamish to “help” fate along. Her reference to the raven at the beginning of Act 1, sc. 5, announcing the death of the King seems to have puzzled some critics,¹ yet no such difficulty should exist in its interpretation: as we have mentioned, the crow is not just a bird of ill-omen, a haunter of the battle-field -it is the embodiment of the Great Queen, the Morrigan, the triple and terrible aspect of the blood-thirsty goddess of war, hungry for victims, and who initiates in the legends the persecution of the male hero who defies her. In the story of Cú Chulainn the Goddess of War, in the shape of a raven, alights on the dying hero’s shoulder and only then does the enemy dare to rush forward and cut off his head.² The fact that the play appears to be the amalgamation of the story of Macbeth and that of Donwald who murdered his king, “set on by his wife”,³ only serves to reinforce the aspect of fierceness and ambition of such single-minded females. The goddess was famed for her cruelty -even to her devotees: Lady Macbeth’s invocation to the spirits to unsex her, and her unnatural recourse to the image of infanticide more than hints at the dark forces that underlie the seemingly too human aspirations to the crown and the sublimation of herself to her husband’s advancement.⁴ The strength of character of Lady Macbeth, which strikes everyone who reads or sees the play, is totally in keeping with the image of Celtic womanhood that we find in the legends and sagas. As we have seen above, the woman is often the person who unleashes the forces that result in tragedy: in the stories of Grainne and Diarmuid, Naoise and Deirdriu, it is the woman in each case who taunts the hero into betraying his king or chieftain in her desire to substitute a younger man for the old ruler.

¹ Notably Hunter and Manly, as quoted in The Arden Shakespeare *Macbeth*, op. cit. p. 28. note to Act 1 sc. 5. l. 38-39.

² KINSELLA, T. ed. op. cit.

³ Holinshed’s *Chronicles of Scotland*, p. 149.

⁴ GRAVES, R. (1961) *The White Goddess*. Faber and Faber, 1961) p. 426. He states that it is the spirit of the White Goddess (the Great Mother) who takes possession of Lady Macbeth, and inspires her to murder Duncan.

The murder of the King, which is the enactment of the substitution of the new king for the old in the regeneration Myth, is performed as a ritual sacrifice. However, certain basic elements in this rite are missing: that Duncan is a good king for Scotland has been confirmed by the signs attending his arrival at the castle. We may deduce therefore, that in sacrificing Duncan before his time, the Macbeths are going against the rules that govern the substitution. Their action will not bring good to the country for they transgress the basic tenets of primitive society: they murder a king who is still beneficial to the land, a king to whom they owe loyalty, and one moreover who is a kinsman and a guest.

The sacrifice of the druids was preceded by a libation, followed by the shedding of the victim's blood and ritual cleansing. All these elements are present in the play. The drink Lady Macbeth takes to make her strong¹ fulfils the function of the libation. She herself does not perform the sacrifice -the substitute of the goddess, the priest, is Macbeth. The main characters' obsession with blood from the moment of the murder on is perhaps the most pervasive image of the play -the word blood and the cognate words such as bleeding, bloody or gory, is mentioned more than a hundred times throughout the play, as the critics have pointed out: what they have not pointed out is the significance of this word. This emphasis on blood reflects the importance given to its power among primitive people, as representing life itself, and with a force of its own:

Blood will have blood, they say ...²

It was even customary among the Celts to drink some of the blood of someone dear who had been slain in battle: so Emer drinks Cú Chulainn's blood,³ and as late as the 18th century Eileen O'Connell, aunt of Daniel O'Connell the Liberator, in a famous elegy, drinks the blood of her husband Art O'Leary, murdered by the men of the English High-Sheriff of Cork.⁴ From the murder of Duncan on, Lady Macbeth's preoccupation will be with

¹ Act 2, sc. 2. l. 1-2.

² Act 3, sc. 4 l. 121.

³ JACKSON, K. Hurlestone. op. cit. p. 253.

⁴ O'TUAMA, S. and KINSELLA, T. eds.(1981) *An Duanaire*. Dolmen Press, Portlaoise. p. 205, l. 69. The reason was a quarrel over that symbolic animal, a horse.

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cleansing her husband and herself of the victim's blood. Even Macbeth himself is haunted by the seas of blood that seem to cling to him.¹

As to the instrument of sacrifice, the importance of the knife that appears to Macbeth cannot be overlooked in this interpretation: it is the sacred sacrificial knife, present -first in Macbeth's heat oppressed brain, but then very really in his and Lady Macbeth's hand. This image of the knife streaming with blood reminds us to the magic lance of the god-hero Lugh which streams blood, and which has also reached us in the stories of the Holy Grail in the procession of the Fisher King, and to the sword of Nuadhu.²

Macbeth attains the crown, and his installation retains some of the trappings of sacral kingship. The ceremony takes place at Scone, where the famous Stone of Destiny had been kept since its capture from Tara.³ Moreover, Macbeth celebrates the event with a banquet -the wedding feast of the king -an ill-fated banquet, which will turn to ashes in his mouth.

Yet the error that underlies the new kingship will become soon evident: the land resents this imposed change, and demonstrates its unease with the freak weather that scourges Scotland. Eventually, even Macbeth will call the land "sick", and beg the doctor who attends his wife, to cure it. Here again, the woman is in sympathy with the state of the land: Lady Macbeth's sickness is a mirror-image of what has been happening to Scotland on a cosmic scale. The only cure will be the substitution of a new and lawful king for the old. Hereditary kingship from now on will be the norm, and Celtic Scotland and the old ways will disappear.

Finally, another area of Celtic imagery that we can find in the play are the apparitions that the three sisters conjure up for Macbeth out of their

¹ Act 2, sc. 2 l. 45, l. 66. and Act 5, sc. 1. l. 28, l. 41, l. 48, l. 58.

² Traditionally, Lugh's lance was so thirsty for blood that it had to be restrained. With this dual significance of the dagger, the play now contains the four talismans or sacred objects of the Tuatha dé Danaan: the stone of destiny, the cauldron of the Dagda, the bleeding lance and the victorious sword of Nuadhu.

³ It was removed by Edward I in 1296, and now resides in Westminster Abbey, where it has been used in the coronation ceremonies of the English kings ever since. It was only after its removal that the Scottish kings adopted the ceremony of coronation.

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cauldron. Although the ingredients smack of Elizabethan folk-lore, and James I's *Daemonologie*, the cauldron itself is a potent cult-object, as has been mentioned.¹ Apparitions, if we believe the legends and sagas, were such frequent occurrences in Celtic life as to be considered normal. The apparitions that issue from the cauldron are the armèd head, the bloody babe and the child with the crown and tree. The armèd head has been given different interpretations: some see it as a representation of Macbeth, some of Macduff and others even of Macdonwald. We have mentioned the importance of the head in Celtic lore as the seat of the soul, and also as a favourite trophy. The head represented the life force of a person, and its removal circumscribed his hope of immortality and prevented his regeneration, and possible revenge. (In this sense it is relevant that Banquo is not decapitated, and so is able to return to haunt his murderer. Macbeth cannot perform this traditional act, because it would reveal that no ordinary murder has taken place). Macbeth even states his belief in the importance of decapitation when he says

... time has been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end ...

Act 3, sc. 4, l. 77-78.

admittedly an observation as much attributable to common-sense as to primitive superstition. But in this connection, we must remember that wonder-working and talking heads also feature in the legends, as in the tale of Sualdam, Cú Chulainn's father, or of Bran in the Mabinogion, though their ritual significance is not clear. In the case of the apparition, it may be taken to represent some life force, possibly that of Macbeth himself, especially as it is the only one to give him a true warning- to "beware Macduff" ... , and heralds his future death and beheading. The bloody babe does not seem to have specific Celtic connotations as such that I can find and is generally taken to represent Macduff. It may also hint at the infanticide about to take place in Macduff's castle -and it recalls to us the horrifying image evoked by Lady Macbeth when she seeks to instill courage into her husband. This apparition in turn also instills courage into

¹ RUTHERFORD, Ward. (1987). *Celtic Mythology*. Aquarian Press, Wellingborough. p. 84-84.

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him, directly contradicting the words of the armèd head, but it is a false courage based on a flawed prophecy and will lead to his doom. The third apparition, that of the child wearing the crown and holding the tree may for Shakespeare represent Malcolm, but it is also full of primitive symbolism for us. The circular crown now replaces the torque, worn at the point of union where the head meets the body- and which was the symbol of sacred kingship to the Celts. The uprooted tree refers obviously to Birnam Wood - but the imagery goes much more deeply than this. It is the “crann bethadh” -the tree of life -a powerful force in the mythology of these peoples, where each tribe held a particular tree as sacred, and the victorious tribe in war would automatically cut down or uproot the tree of the vanquished. So closely was the life of the tree identified with the tribe, that the word *crann*-tree - came to mean fate, or destiny. Moreover, in Welsh lore at least, the Druids were credited with the power of turning trees into men and sending them into battle.¹ Hence the symbol of the uprooted tree signifies the eventual defeat of Macbeth, even though the sisters mislead him as to its real meaning. It is typical in this world where the supernatural and the real mix, that nothing is as it seems. Macbeth, now launched on the inevitable path to self-destruction, chooses to believe only what is meant to deceive him, and like the kings of the sagas, cannot prevent the doom that awaits him. The witches’ words, uttered at the beginning of the play are fulfilled: “fair is foul and foul is fair ... ” That which Macbeth desired, the kingship, has led to his death, and those he despised as too weak to withstand him, the young Malcolm and Macduff, have triumphed over him. As in Celtic lore, things are not what they seem, and opposites are but close aspects of one another.

CONCLUSION

These are some of the points of symbolism and imagery from Celtic mythology which I feel would benefit a discussion on the interpretation of this play, and which, without straining the comparisons unnecessarily, I hope will help to throw some light on the complexities that underlie the actions of these fascinating and polemical characters.

¹ See GRAVES, Robert. op. cit. p. 27-48, and especially p. 38. The Battle of the Trees, *Càd Goddeu*, was a fundamental part of Celtic tradition.

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