

Two Celtic Deities: Danu and Llew Llaw Gyffes

Danu

Danu, Dana. It's difficult to find Danu mentioned other than as the mother Tuatha De Dannan, the children of Danu, from whom they take their name. Little is mentioned of her in mythology, except in her connect with the Tuatha De. Although it's not mentioned in any of the surviving myths, her husband/consort was probably Bile, the father of Milesius and a god of the Otherworld. (1)

As for the Tuatha De Dannan, they established rule of Ireland by first conquering the Fir Bolgs and then the Formorii. Bringing civilization to the island, the children of Danu represented goodness and light, while the Formorii offered only darkness and evil. The Tuatha were later driven underground into their sidhes by the Milesians, or children of Mil, who were human.

Llew Llaw Gyffes

Probably a solar deity of some sort, the mighty son of Aránrhod and grandson of Don, Llew was nameless until sometime in his youth. Math, the son of Mathonwy, had to sleep with his feet in the lap of a virgin, unless he was caught up in war. When Goewin, his footholder, is abducted and forcibly married to Gilfaethwy, Math's nephew, Gwydion suggests his sister, Aránrhod as the girl's replacement. (Gwydion, by the way, probably helped Gilfaethwy abduct and rape Goewin.)

A summons is sent to Aránrhod and she is asked to step over Math's magic staff to test her virginity, the state of which she's already sworn. Aránrhod may be taken aback at being asked to prove her virginity, when she's already sworn to it, but Math's life is on the line here. His royal footrest must be a virgin. And it was a good thing for Math he had the means to test the applicants, for as Aránrhod jumps over the staff out fall two infant boys. The first baby, Dylan, leaps to the sea, becoming a part of it. He is thereafter known as Dylan Eil Ton, or Dylan, son of the Wave. Gwydion conceals the other boy and raises him as his own son.

Aránrhod, so shamed (2), runs away furious. Year's later she's still pretty upset about the whole thing. So it comes as no surprise that she wants nothing to do with the boy when Gwydion presents him to her. Upon learning that he has yet to be named, she swears he will have no name unless she gives him one herself, and she's not going to do that. Nope. Never. Never say that to your brother. It's too tempting a challenge, especially when the two of you are gods.

Gwydion crafts a couple of disguises for the future Llew and himself and in no time at all Aránrhod has been tricked into naming him Llew Llaw Gyffes, or "Bright One of the Skilful Hand". Needless to say, this only increases her fury. She then swears the "boy" will bear no arms unless she provides them herself. I almost feel sorry for her. Yep, Gwydion produces another pair of disguises, convinces his sister that her castle is under attack, and gets her to hand Llew his arms and armor. Desperate not to be outdone by her brother, or to reward the source of her shame – like it's his fault – she finally swears he'll never have a human wife. Please notice that she didn't add "unless I provide her" at the end of her curse.

Feeling sorry for the youth, Math and Gwydion make him a wife, out of flowers. They name her Blodeuwedd, or "flower aspect". She was fashioned out of oak, broom, and meadowsweet. Llew is delighted with his wife and she, in turn, is delighted with him – for awhile. Soon our created lady tires of her loving husband and, looking elsewhere, falls in love with Gronw Pebyr. Wanting to be together always, they plot to murder our hero. Now this is harder than it seems, for Llew may only be killed under certain conditions. He can not be inside or outside a house, nor can he be on horseback or on foot, and finally, the weapon used must be a spear that has been crafted over the course of an entire year, using only the time available on Sunday when everyone is at Mass. (3)

Our treacherous wife relays this information on to her lover, and the conditions are met, which is pretty impressive. However, Gronw's aim wasn't as true as his love, supposedly, for Llew escapes, wounded, in the shape of an eagle. Gwydion finds and heals him, restoring his human form. Llew then seeks out and kills Gronw Pebyr in combat. And what of our pretty Blodeuwedd? She is outcast, transformed into an owl, which is outcast even among the other birds.

Notes:

1. For more information on Bile see the essay on Bil in the Spring 2000 issue of *The Pellet*.
2. The story is never clear on the source of her shame, although I suspect it's mainly because she'd been caught lying in such an irrefutably dramatic fashion.
3. We'll probably never know what that last restriction was originally. Most of these myths were recorded after the coming of Christianity, when the gods were reduced to various fairy folk.

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