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Tellers, Tales, and Trances: A Postcolonial View of Celtic Bards from Myrddin to McCourt

Before there was the ideal postcolonial reader, there were the Celtic bards. They came to be known for magic and prophecy and sometimes biting satire. But I want to rethink the bards using two interests of postcolonial theory: crossing boundaries and hybridity. This paper proposes two sides of one argument: first, that ancient Celtic bards were early versions of postcolonialists, and second, that we as postcolonial readers can sharpen our readings by studying both ancient and contemporary versions of Celtic bards. If we look closely at two of those bards, the ancient Welsh bard Taliesin and a contemporary Celtic bard, Frank McCourt,¹ the lesson we learn is that they are always crossing boundaries; they are often displaying two or more identities at a time. They are hybrid creatures.

Taliesin

No wonder Taliesin is a hybrid. Just look at the way he was conceived, the way he received the wisdom that would make him powerful. His beginnings are told in the following story, adapted from Patrick Ford's² version of "The Tale of Gwion Bach":

Long, long ago in the time when Arthur was just beginning his reign as king, there was an enchantress named Ceridwen, and she and her nobleman husband had a son who was so ugly in face and form that they called him Afagddu, meaning "Utter darkness" ("Gwion" 162). His

¹ My thanks to Thomas Hahn for helpful conversations regarding this paper, particularly for the suggestion to consider Frank McCourt as contemporary bard.

² Elis Gruffydd's "Chronicle of the World" (mid-sixteenth century) gives the earliest written versions of the following two tales.

mother thought and thought about a way to help him, for she knew that unless he were to possess other winning qualities, he could never be accepted by the ranks of the noble into which he had been born. Resolving to give her son gifts of wisdom and prophecy that would earn the respect and admiration of all men, she turned to the study of her magical arts. Finally, she learned that “by the special properties of the earth’s herbs and by human effort and cunning” (“Gwion” 163) it was possible to bestow such knowledge. She assembled the herbs and placed them in a cauldron of water over a fire, to be maintained for a year and a day, at which time three drops of inspiration would spatter out of the cauldron: “On whatever man those three drops fell, she would see that he would be extraordinarily learned in various arts and full of the spirit of prophecy” (“Gwion” 163). Ceridwen found a blind man to stir the cauldron; she found a boy named Gwion Bach to stoke the fire, and she replenished the herbs and water for a year and a day. Then she brought her son to stand next to the cauldron so that he could receive the three drops when they jumped out of the cauldron, and she went to rest from her long labors. And while she slept, the three drops did indeed jump from the cauldron, but Gwion Bach pushed the ugly son out of the way. The drops landed on Gwion Bach, immediately endowing him with wisdom and knowledge. He ran away before Ceridwen could visit her wrath upon him. She chased him, and during this chase each of them shifted into various shapes, until Gwion Bach turned himself into a grain of wheat and was swallowed by Ceridwen, who had transformed into a black hen. She carried him in her belly for nine months, but when she gave birth, she could not bear to harm the baby, and so she placed him in a basket and he floated away in the sea (162-164).

“The Tale of Gwion Bach” is filled with examples of boundaries that don’t hold, and Taliesin’s hybrid nature continues to reveal itself in a companion story, “The Tale of Taliesin.”

In this story, Gwion Bach in his basket is found by a young man named Elphin, who first glimpses the babe's forehead and so names him "radiant forehead" or Taliesin. Taliesin proves that he is wise in very practical ways, showing his usefulness to Elphin by getting him out of jail for bragging that his wife is as faithful and chaste as any wife in the kingdom; that his bard is more skilled than all of the king's bards put together (Ford, "Taliesin" 168). The story crosses a boundary of genre, one might say, because long sections of poetry are interspersed with the prose narrative. As we look closely at some of those verses, we see that boundaries of identity are breached in several ways.

The first example occurs when Taliesin stands before the king who has imprisoned Elphin. When the king asks him his name, he responds,

Johannes the prophet
 called me Merlin,
 But now all kings
 call me Taliesin (Ford, "Taliesin" 172)

In this paper, you will hear other references to Merlin, a character you will know from Arthurian legend. Merlin has his several identities, too, but at the moment I want to think about the Merlin "known in Welsh as Myrddin" (Ford, Glossary 193). Patrick Ford explains, "the tradition that Taliesin had existed among the Welsh for hundreds of years under different names, and the shapeshifting powers of Gwion Bach are but one manifestation of the polymorphic powers of the archetypal poet" (Introduction 19). "Merlin was believed to have been identical with Taliesin, but existing in another time and place" (Introduction 19n). Here, the boundary of personal identity clearly doesn't hold, for Taliesin is not just Taliesin; he is also Myrddin, also Merlin. But that is not the only boundary crossed in "The Tale of Taliesin."

Boundaries of time, religion, and civilization are crossed as Celtic, classical, and Biblical elements related to Taliesin are combined in this next section of the poem, where Taliesin answers the king's question about where he had been. Here is just a small part of the bard's answer:

I was in the ark
 with Noah and Alpha;
 I witnessed the destruction
 of Sodom and Gomorrah;
 I was in Africa
 before the building of Rome;
 I came here
 to the survivors of Troy....
 And I was nearly nine months
 in the womb of the witch Ceridwen;
 I was formerly Gwion Bach,
 but now I am Taliesin. (Ford, "Taliesin" 173)

Noah? Rome? Africa? What have these allusions to do with a good Welsh boy? Ford explains it this way: "There is not better evidence that the Taliesin material passed through many hands, each embellishing its shape with learning from classical and Biblical sources." (Introduction 20).

And if the previous example is puzzling, consider the next example, which comes from another poem from *The Book of Taliesin*, "Cad Goddeu," or "The Battle of the Trees":

I was rain-drops in the air, I was stars' beam;
 I was a word in letters, I was a book in origin;

I was lanterns of light for a year and a half;
 I was a bridge that stretched over sixty estuaries;
 I was a path, I was an eagle, I was a coracle in seas;
 I was a bubble in beer, I was a drop in a shower;
 I was a sword in hand, I was a shield in battle.
 I was a string in a harp enchanted nine years.... (Ford, "Cad" 184)

A bubble in beer? How can we imagine that such a man can exist? The answer, of course, is that he doesn't exist, for now we look at another aspect of Taliesin's hybrid nature: there are two Taliesins³—one is the figure we've been discussing, the one who is able to take any shape he wishes. Ford explains the significance of the character's shape-shifting persona:

Emerging from these poems...is the figure of the eternal, divine poet and prophet, essentially amorphous yet paradoxically having many shapes. The prose tale itself tells how this archetypal poet first acquired wisdom, and is analogous to tales in Irish that explain how Finn acquired wisdom, and to those in Scandinavian that tell how Odin gained poetry and wisdom. In all three traditions there is a cauldron of poetry or inspired wisdom, and there is a contest for custody of it. (Introduction 20)

The second Taliesin refers to the tradition that there was an actual historical person, a poet of the sixth century; these two Taliesins are connected by Celtic beliefs in the power of the poet to send his spirit roaming through the universe in search of wisdom (Ford, Introduction 17-18).

³ For a comprehensive discussion of the scholarship surrounding Taliesin, see the Introduction to *Ystoria Taliesin*, edited by Patrick K. Ford (Cardiff, 1992). As Joseph Nagy's review notes, "Ford steers a prudent course between the earlier scholarly orthodoxy that would divorce a pre-Christian divine Taliesin...from the seemingly 'real' poet who left praise poems in honor of historical figures of the sixth century, and more recent schools of thought according to which the 'mythical' Taliesin is a later development, cobbled together from 'international' story patterns and motifs, bookish concepts of wisdom and its possessors, or both" (*Speculum* 70.2, p. 369).

Poets were powerful in their ability to praise the prince or king in whose court they served, but they were also feared for their ability to use satire, cutting down to size one who had not been a good ruler. There are three main categories in the Celtic tradition, including the early bards associated with the sixth century such as Aneirin and Taliesin, as well as later bards who served during “the great age of the independent Welsh princes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries....[this] age of the Welsh princes came to an abrupt end in 1282-83 when Edward I’s army conquered Gwynedd...The loss of political independence constituted a crisis for the bardic order, due to the destruction of the patronage structure” (Loomis and Johnston 3). These first two categories of poets were held in highest esteem, but there was a third category known as minstrels and these were considered a much lower class in society. Minstrels traveled the country, competing against one another in the homes of noblemen. They did not have the years of training of the bards; they did not adhere to the strict formal style of the bards; they were much more concerned with entertainment.

Now I want to come back to our thinking about postcolonial ideas, because just as we viewed the shape shifting in previous examples as crossing boundaries, we can see boundaries being crossed in the bardic tradition over time. As the English colonized the Welsh and the Irish, they saw the bards as a great threat. Eventually, as noted above, the English defeated the princes and the bardic tradition morphed into a minstrel tradition. With no powerful princes left to serve, the bards were reduced to competing with the minstrels for their livelihood. As Loomis and Johnston point out, “By the later Middle Ages the minstrels of England and Wales were basically musicians performing popular songs. A clear distinction must be made between them and the poets of Wales who composed original works in a strict and complex style, the mastery of which demanded lengthy training” (4). And yet, as the bards competed with the minstrels, traveling

from house to house just as the minstrels did, “The stately, ceremonial style of the traditional court odes was gradually replaced by a lighter, livelier style which made the poetry much more accessible to audiences as it was performed in halls” (4). In other words, hybridity was as evident in the poetry as it was in the lives of the poets.

Furthermore, I want to suggest that even though the poets were forced to move from positions of stable power to unstable positions on the margins of colonial society, they continued in some measure to maintain a kind of Celtic identity against the English. Although the bards had shifted their shapes, so to speak, into that of minstrels, they resisted the imposed culture. In that way also, I see them as early postcolonialists.

Frank McCourt

Frank McCourt crosses boundaries as an Irish-American remembering his life in Ireland in his Pulitzer Prize winning memoir, *Angela's Ashes*. Like the ancient bards and minstrels who molded their material to suit occasions, McCourt adapts his material for different audiences and uses a variety of voices to do so. Shannon Forbes analyzes the book in terms of the “complicated linguistic structures and narrative techniques McCourt uses to fashion his memoir,” seeking “possible answers to frustrating questions offered by *Angela's Ashes* and outwardly asked by critics regarding the ‘truth’ of the text.” Her analysis is useful as we consider the ways McCourt figuratively shifts shape: “It would,” she acknowledges,

be an infinite, unending task to aim to identify all the identities McCourt-as Author performs as Other, and readers and critics instead tend to hone in on one of these numerous identities and equate this identity with who McCourt ‘is’—the innocent child, the judgmental adult, the merciless fabricator, the talented

storyteller, the brilliant survivor, the thankless child, the passive observer, the unbiased chronicler, the cruel critic, the cynical autobiographer, the successful Irish-American, etc. (Abstract)

McCourt's central hybrid condition is that he writes out of the Irish diaspora tradition, although, uncharacteristically, he is born in the U.S. to Irish parents who then move back to Ireland to raise him and his siblings in proverbial poverty and misery. As James Mitchell points out, "For the Americans who form the bulk of McCourt's readers, this is an unusual, even unthinkable twist—an emigration from America to Europe—that appeals to American readers' sensibilities because of the initial implication that leaving America is disastrous for the family" (613). McCourt returns to the U.S. as a young man, becomes a high school teacher in New York City, and after many years eventually publishes his memoir of his childhood and adolescence in Limerick. It would seem that he is firmly planted in the land of his birth, but as Mitchell points out, "McCourt's identity often seems to find itself occupying a provocative and sometimes discomfiting hybrid space between both cultures" (619).

It's this condition of living and writing between two worlds that interests postcolonialists. Here I draw upon a text that is still valid, though much argued with, *The Empire Writes Back*, whose authors comment: "If, as Stuart Hall suggests, the crucial concern of diasporic identity is not subjectivity but subject *position*, then the diasporic writer provides the prospect of a fluidity of identity, a constantly changing subject position, both geographically and ontologically" (Ashcroft et al 218). McCourt shares this fluidity of identity with the ancient bards in his identity as both American and Irish and in the various voices he assumes in conveying his memories, but can the term "bard" be applied to McCourt, even loosely? I would argue that he is much more minstrel than bard. "Since *Angela's Ashes* was published in 1996...McCourt has been on the road

almost nonstop, making more than 200 personal appearances” (Ann Marsh qtd. in Mitchell 619). Marsh goes on to observe that these appearances include readings that transform depressing material into funny impersonations of McCourt’s alcoholic father and other characters and speaks of McCourt “singing a couple of trilling Irish ditties,” (619) and signing books. McCourt’s transformation of the characters and situations in his written text for the purpose of entertaining audiences on the road strikes me as both minstrel-like and shape shifting.

This shape shifting, whether figurative or literal, whether displayed by physical forms or in political and cultural identities, whether applied to Celtic poets or minstrels or to their material--and here I cross a boundary myself--might well make us think of Proteus—that mythological old man of the sea and prophet who would tell you the truth but only after you had held on to him for dear life as he changed shape: now lion, now serpent, now panther, now wild boar, now torrent of water (Homer 4.12-14). In the *Ion*, Socrates uses the image of Proteus pejoratively, accusing Ion, “you are only a deceiver, and so far from exhibiting the art of which you are a master, will not, even after my repeated entreaties, explain to me the nature of it. You have literally as many forms as Proteus; and now you go all manner of ways, twisting and turning, and, like Proteus, become all manner of people at once” (Plato).

While Socrates sees such shape shifting as a negative quality, I think the ancient Celtic bards as well as modern ones, can help us rethink how we read today. Plato’s cautions about thinking for ourselves rather than allowing ourselves to be linked into the chain of inspiration effected by a gifted storyteller, can be our cautions as well. But we need not throw out the charismatic baby with the cauldron water. Instead, we can enter into the magical circle of the storyteller yet keep our wits about us. We can be painstakingly alert to the positions we occupy at any given moment, listening for voices, subaltern and otherwise, and strive to stand as close to

other positions, or to the positions of the Other as is humanly possible. Failing to do this may cause us to make mistakes like the one Vortigern makes in the following anecdote about Merlin from Geoffrey Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*:

The king Vortigern plans to kill the child Merlin because, he says, "My wizards have advised me that I need a man without a father whose blood I may sprinkle on my edifice so that it will stand firm" (Geoffrey 129). Merlin addresses the king's magicians, "You do not know what is interfering with the foundation of the tower which these men have begun, yet you have recommended that my blood be mixed with the mortar, hoping in that way to stabilize the building. But tell me now what lies underneath that foundation. For the thing that lies beneath it is what prevents it from standing" (129). Sure enough, when the area is excavated, a pool containing two hollow stones wherein lie two sleeping dragons is found under the tower" (129). This behavior of Vortigern and his magicians brings to mind the ideas of Edward Said, and although his work is considered passé, I think it's useful here, explained simply by Bressler:

nineteenth-century Europeans tried to justify their territorial conquests by propagating a manufactured belief called Orientalism: the creation of non-European stereotypes that suggested so-called Orientals were indolent, thoughtless, sexually immoral, unreliable, and demented. The European conquerors, Said notes, believed that they were accurately describing the inhabitants of their newly-acquired lands in 'the East.' What they failed to realize...is that all human knowledge can be viewed only through one's political, cultural, and ideological framework. No theory, either political or literary, can be totally objective. In effect what the colonizers were revealing was their unconscious desires for power, wealth, and domination, not the nature of the

colonized subjects. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said captures the basic thought behind colonization and imperialism: “They’re not like us,’ and for that reason deserve to be ruled” (qtd. in Bressler 203)

Vortigern identifies a danger in his kingdom that he believes can only be prevented by taking Merlin’s life . And yet, when care is taken to look thoroughly, it turns out that there is another reason for the danger entirely. (Why does this passage make me think about reported weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?)

Like the various shapes taken on by Ceridwen and Gwion Bach, we must shift from one position to another constantly in our reading and interpreting of texts. It is only this shifting view that can help us to approach understanding of the Other . Whenever we rest from these labors, we risk the possibility that the drops of inspiration will jump out and fall upon someone else, leaving us with only the ugly side of our intellects.

We are standing by the cauldron and the three magic drops may land on us at any moment. Will we push the ugly child out of the way? Bardic lore can inform our attitudes toward contemporary reading, whether we are reading a medieval poem or a mideastern culture. We can exercise rational thought while enjoying the spell of a gifted storyteller. We may not be able to see the future, but we can see the past—and this long view enables us to read in a hybrid way.

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