

Hidden Portals and Underworld Intimacies: How Doubling, Desire and Illusion Form the
Spiral Staircase of the Hero's Descent and Resurrection

“He dreams he’s hunting with the white hounds. The air makes way,
oaks bow him through, the dogs strike up their partsong,
he stops at the blood-draggled clearing
as the forest gallops on,
and it is no dream” (Francis 7).

The hero enters the scene, living in a dream of the world, one that appears to his gaze in some way other than it is. The masculine hero may be a prince, benign ruler over all he surveys, or a warrior-hero entitled by honor to grab everything he can take. The feminine hero may be aware of the burgeoning grace of her figure in the mirror, the dewy freshness of her face; she may be the queenly daughter whose very sweetness entitles her to the kind attention of her peers. Yet beyond the bounds of image, there is a deficit of understanding or knowledge of the impact of the self upon the world of forms: How feminine fairness may serve to attract the attention of wolves; how masculine prowess may lead to hubris and the overstepping of bounds. Desire plays an equal part in the hero's descent, perhaps in the form of greed for prizes or grasping after beauty, but appearing equally as a fine thirst for wisdom. Heedless or unwary for as little as a single momentary act, the dreaming hero's blindness to the relationship of self and world triggers a slippage into another realm, symbolically rendered as The Underworld or simply “otherworldly.” In headlong collision with these previously obscured aspects of worldly reality, the hero's self-concept undergoes a metamorphic integration encompassing newly recognized

dualities of self and other, concluding with the transformation of blind desire or self-centered goals into prosocial qualities such as acceptance, loyalty and love.

The journey begins for our heroic Welsh protagonist, Pwyll Pendevic Dyfed—Pwyll the Prudent, Prince of the Seven Counties of Dyfed—when he awakens one day and is “seized by the thought and the desire to go hunting” (“Pwyll” I). Kore, the girlchild aspect of the Ancient Greek goddess Persephone, is enjoying herself in the spring fields with the daughters of Oceanus. She is momentarily out of her mother Demeter’s sight and guard, though the fields are her mother’s domain. The text of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* does not say that Kore awoke that morning “seized by the thought and the desire to go flower hunting” but it seems reasonable to suggest that she did.

Pwyll, whose name implies both caution and discretion, is not living up to his moniker as he carelessly loses touch with the rest of his hunting party, never noticing that he can no longer see or hear them. As the hoofbeats of his companions fade away, Pwyll blunders onto the scene of a noble stag just as it is being downed by a pack of strange dogs:

“Then looked he at the color of the dogs, staying not to look at the stag, and of all the hounds that he had seen in the world, he had never seen any that were like unto these. For their hair was of a brilliant shining white and their ears were red, and as the whiteness of their bodies shone so did the redness of their ears glisten” (Guest 27).

The unusual look and color of the dogs, which are also sometimes described as having bright red eyes, should serve as a blaring klaxon to Pwyll that everything here is not as it seems: He has crossed out of his familiar hunting grounds and into Annwyn, the Other World. Pwyll, however, appears to notice nothing amiss as he kicks and cuffs at the rightful hunters to send

them on their way, allowing his own dogs in to feed on the stag instead. The princeling believes himself to be treading his own familiar grounds, the lord of all he surveys. Whether it is his short lifetime of ingrained privilege masking a kind of self-indulgent greed that causes him to chase the hounds of Annwyn away, or their astonishing strangeness that makes him just want them to be gone—even, at the limit, if he is bewitched and acting out within a dream—the note for his rash act comes quickly due.

Through the trees comes a tall grey-clad rider astride a pure grey horse. Arawn, Lord of Annwyn speaks: “I know who you are princeling. I do not greet you” (Francis 4). Pwyll responds that perhaps he is facing a lord of such great rank that the lord should not be bothered to do so. Arawn makes it clear that his discourtesy is due to Pwyll’s own great rudeness in chasing Arawn’s dogs from their rightful kill. Pwyll seems still not to know who Arawn is nor on whose lands he finds himself, but the shame of his unsporting behavior must cause his cheeks to burn. He has crossed a clear social line, not because Arawn outranks him (though he does) but in the absolute sense that as a well-mannered member of a hunting society, he should treat no one in the way he just treated Arawn and his dogs.

The mediæval writings that record the tales of the earlier Welsh oral tradition are quite spare in their descriptions of the action, using what might appear to us as subtle cues of color to indicate significant shifts of place and of rank. For listeners “in the know,” the brilliant whites and reds of the dogs, the imposing yet shadowy greys of Arawn’s habit, clearly signal the Other Worldly nature of the dogs and their master. Part of the pleasure of the tale as told aloud is that from these few cues, the intended audience knows sooner and more about the pile of trouble Pwyll has just stepped into than Pwyll does himself.

The symbology of color in the tale—along with the concept of a parallel magical plane that makes Arawn into more than just a neighboring lord who happens by—are some of the infrastructure elements that fall under the Silence Principle and potential erasure by the Lethe Effect (Barber and Barber 17-25). The cycle of tales recorded in the Mabinogi contain elements and references to political succession that place them as extant from the 11th Century as a bardic tradition (Parker 140-143). The tales were preserved in written form by the 14th century yet always intended to be told aloud and interpreted interactively with an audience of listeners. Portions of the stories recorded in the Mabinogi are often faulted as chaotic, incomplete, or simple mirrors of tales in other Gallo-Brittonic and Celtic-influenced (Irish) traditions (Parker “First Branch”). According to some modern native Welsh speakers, there exists to this day a trove of additional lore kept exclusively in the realm of oral tradition, never to be shared with outsiders. Long centuries of conquest and cultural suppression at the hands of serial waves of Nordic and Germanic invaders has left the Welsh a rather cautious and secretive people.

Though later reinterpreted through a Christian lens as a Hell realm with corresponding assumptions of evil conditions and punishment, the Welsh Annwyn or Land of the Dead is described as a land of plenty and ease, wisely ruled over by Arawn. The connection with the abandoned Celtic tumuli scattered across the landscape and fabled portals to the magical lands of Faerie believed to be hidden within or under the burial mounds cannot be overlooked. The suite of the tale of Pwyll’s adventures partly conforms to the tale of the male mortal stolen away to Faerie to fulfill some Otherworldly purpose or Faerie lust, which we will examine shortly. Let us turn now to the parallel tale of Kore’s descent to the Underworld.

Homo homini lupus

Kore is raptured suddenly by Hades and against her will. Yet the shift away from markers of the familiar that signals the Kore's descent build more subtly. The Homeric hymn focuses extensively on a clump of narcissus:

“a marvellous, radiant flower. It was a thing of awe whether for deathless gods or mortal men to see: from its root grew a hundred blooms, and it smelled most sweetly, so that all wide heaven above and the whole earth and the sea's salt swell laughed for joy. And the girl was amazed and reached out with both hands to take the lovely toy” (Evelyn-White ll. 4-18).

The focus of the poem's lens on this one collection of burgeoning golden blooms among the many aforementioned “roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, irises also and hyacinths” spotlights the symbolic significance of this particular flower to the narrative, where it stands in for multiple strands of meaning. The first of these, explicit within the text, is as a honeypot to trap the girl; the second, a reference to the blind self-absorption of youth that plays out in the myth of Narcissus mesmerized by his own reflection; the third is the description of the girl as “flower-faced,” indicating she is herself in springtime bloom and ripe to be plucked from the Earth. Finally, the heavenward-pointing flowers stand for Hades' potency as he erupts from the ground in his golden chariot at the exact spot where she has grasped at the golden-tipped stems.

Though the Hymn explicitly states the flowers were planted intentionally to lure her, Kore possesses a tiny sliver of agency as, in innocent greed for their beauty, she reaches out and seals her fate: to be raptured away deep within the earth by Hades. It is an agonizingly thin stem of choice, the impossible needle in the haystack, the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, the whisper of “if only”—if only she had made a different choice, roamed a different field, worn a different face or slightly thicker ankles. This icepick-thin sliver of victim-blaming takes on greater heft later in the tale, recurring in the parallel scene of Kore's return to mother-Demeter's side and

the fair fields of her youth—but only after she has been either tempted or forced to consume the seeds of the pomegranate in symbolic marriage to Hades and her once and future Underworld role.

Pwyll, while demonstrably an upright man, explicitly commits an error of manners that provokes his year of living not-so-dangerously, embedded as Arawn’s proxy. Perhaps he does so out of ignorance of the provenance of Arawn’s dogs, but scarcely due to ignorance of the general principles of the sport. The nature of Kore’s fault is of more questionable provenance, perhaps wholly grown within the perspective of wolfish men who wish to do with her as they please. Unfortunately, this is every man in her entire world: her father, her uncle and de-facto suitor, even Helios the sun bearer, the only male god to witness her plight.

“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” Eccl. 1:2

As Kore is stolen away, she cries out for her father Zeus to save her, not knowing that he is first among her betrayers. She is the child-sacrifice of her father in the name of a propitious future, a theme echoed elsewhere in Greek mythologies, such as Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia, and woven through the entire story arc of the Christian Bible from Abraham’s Isaac to Jesus as the Son of God. In the scene of Kore’s descent into the realms of death, as with the golden narcissus echoing Hades’ golden chariot and the glistening red ears of Arawn’s hounds mirroring the spilled entrails of the stag, the use of color and texture is a metaphor for a state change while also carrying multiple implications that extend beyond the atmospheric. The misty gloom of Hades’ Underworld is a reminder of the obscuration of all things with the passage of time. As in the verse that opens Ecclesiastes, “vanity” more than self-regard or self-absorption is a literal reference to mist, vapor, or “mere breath,” a thing that is metaphorically fleeting and elusive, something “in vain.” As Harris and Platzner explain, the Ancient Greek Underworld is an insubstantial realm where souls aimlessly wander a shadowy nightmare-scape like helpless clouds.

“For Homer, death is being trapped in a murky dreamland where the rational will loses all ability to make choices or influence events” (Harris and Platzner 272). In the mists of the Ancient Greek place of the Dead, for most inhabitants, memory, reason and volition are forever lost and obscured, as is all color and vibrancy.

In comparing the experience of descent for Pwyll and Kore, a substantial difference in the form and substance of the transition emerges. The two methods of descent can be illustrated as being carried away either a) in a dreamlike trance or b) by a sharp physical and/or emotional trial invoking suffering. These modalities are not strictly gender-determined and appear in differing proportions in each hero’s journey, on a scale teetering between seduction and force. Where the heroic masculine ideal is one of “always going forward” in what appears to the hero as a straight line but is more exactly a subtle curve echoing the disappearing horizon, spiraling around to rejoin its starting point yet at one revolution’s remove, the heroic feminine ideal is less clear. The divine creative feminine having been largely relegated to the role of passive vessel of procreation, the female protagonist tends to end up being claimed and carried off, imprisoned in a life and household not of her choosing, in the worst cases broken into as a sacrificial libation like an amphora of wine. Not only does her journey frequently begin with an explicitly sexual initiation but also her gaze is instinctively directed inward to the confines of the body and the past. While being carried down beneath the earth, Kore wails and mourns the loss of her entire known world. In the passage below, she is traveling downwards but looking upwards, into the fast-disappearing landscape of her past:

“So long as the earth and the star-filled sky
were still within the goddess’s [Persephone’s] view,
as also the fish-swarming sea [*pontos*], with its strong currents,

as also the rays of the sun, she still had hope that she would yet see her dear mother and that special group, the immortal gods.

For that long a time her great *noos* was soothed by hope, distressed as she was” (Nagy 33-37).

Pwyll is also escorted into the Other World by its Lord, who makes him an offer that he can't refuse without accepting the taint of dishonor. Still, he is given the implicit option to renounce this journey and he willingly chooses to enter a compact with Arawn. After receiving assurances that Arawn will administer his lands in his place, Pwyll never looks back nor reflects more than briefly upon what has transpired to bring him to where he stands. Not only is the past a vain vanity for Pwyll, the only way back is through, via completion of the cycle.

The sojourn in the otherworldly realms is framed for both our heroes by dualities or doublings—what could be considered a form of twinning. Pwyll accepts Arawn's challenge to replace him and meet his rival death-lord in battle a year hence, and through Arawn's magic they each assume the physical appearance of the other and begin a yearlong charade of ruling in each other's place. Though Pwyll's occupation of Arawn's holdings includes the company of Arawn's wife and their shared bed, Pwyll resists all temptation. Each night following a pleasant evening of raised cups and song and gentle conversation with the queen, they climb together to their bedchamber:

“The red fire
utters yellow, and magics
a bed out of the dark,
a cave hewn from curtain where they lie
in the candle's buttered light.

She is gold, silk, wax.

He feels her burn all night, through
the wall of his back” (Francis 7).

Kore in her parallel but much more austere journey, over the months of her captivity in the Underworld, is replaced by the Dread Queen Persephone, “Bringer of Death.” The cap on her transformation is the symbolic marriage to Hades via pomegranate seed, prior to her temporary release and resurrection in the springtime upper world. Yet by flipping from Kore to Persephone—the twinned opposites of youthful fertility and death—Kore the maiden overcomes. She succeeds in transforming herself from object to subject, seizing a future for herself to go forward into, an eternal version of her blooming spring and summertime girlhood-self cycling back down into a powerful goddess ruling the very processes of birth, death, and rebirth. She is complete, containing within herself both the full cycle of the seasons and the etiological myth to explain the falling leaves of autumn, the winter’s snows, and spring’s orchestra of flowers reborn.

Arawn’s wife: “Shame on me,” she replied, “[but] for the last year, from whenever we were enfolded in bed clothes there has been no affection, no conversation, nor you even turning your face towards me: let alone anything other than which might have happened between us.”

Arawn: Then he began thinking. “Lord God,” he said to himself, “a uniquely strong and unwavering friend is the one with whom I have made [this] friendship” (“Pwyll” I).

Through chivalric restraint and prudence and the efficient toppling of Arawn's rival Hafgan, Pwyll earns the eternal trust and friendship of the Lord of the Other World for himself and his future heirs. Pwyll is safely returned from the Other World to his own domains, which Arawn has ruled even more wisely than himself and caused to prosper in his stead. A future gift of (magical) piglets from Arawn to Pwyll's son Pryderi will set the stage for Pryderi's untimely death, completing the cycle.

The end of every hero's story is some form of reintegration with the inclusion of new self-knowledge. The pathway to that integration is acceptance of things as they are. In both cases, the heroes come to a form of realization, beginning with seeing things clearly. Thinking himself alone in the forest, Pwyll performs a face-threatening act toward an unseen party. His rudeness offends the powerful god of a shadowy realm and yet the way to resolve his situation is the same as for anyone who ever lived in the world: Taking responsibility for his actions and offering recompense. "How may I obtain your friendship?" the princeling queries Arawn.

Minding her own business, Kore is snatched from her idyllic life and dragged down into the shadow realms. Naturally, she mourns her losses, but she cannot move forward in any direction until she accepts her current position on the chessboard. Looking back into the past for anything more than simple lessons to be learned will freeze her in place for all eternity. Kore's eating of the pomegranate seeds after her long fast of mourning and resistance, all other symbolism aside, can be seen as Persephone embracing life itself, the snake twined about the apple, the apple wrapped around its seeds.

"He stands on the tower studying the map,
the green and yellow squares of his fields

that won't hold still in the wind,
and it is no map.

And this is her hand, that voice is hers,
Laughing and hurt. Every night
his back's turned on her,

and every day the forest
gallops around him" (Francis 7).

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