

THE THREE RAVENS EXPLICATED

“THE THREE RAVENS” presents a host of difficulties to anyone who attempts an explication. Among these there are two which should be dealt with at the outset: 1) Is ‘fallow doe’ metaphorical or is it to be understood literally?; 2) Are the lines ‘Downe a downe, hay downe, hay downe,’ ‘With a downe,’ and ‘With a downe derrie, derrie, derrie, downe, downe’ a meaningless refrain or do they have some intelligible import? These problems require attention first because their solutions will indicate what is the specific situation depicted in the ballad.

The first difficulty is solved relatively easily. To render ‘fallow doe’ literally presents three problems incapable of solution: 1) How does the doe get past the knight’s hounds?; 2) How does the doe manage to “lift up his bloody hed”?; 3) How does the doe manage to fill the grave (if we assume it already dug)? Further, upon such a reading ‘kist’ becomes a relatively poor metaphor for “licked.” However, if we take ‘fallow doe’ as a metaphor for a woman two new problems arise: 1) What is the significance of the epithet?; 2) The tasks of getting the knight on her back and carrying him to a grave require a strength which is incongruous with her attributes of tenderness and loving concern. These problems strongly suggest the need of some third alternative, and one is readily available; viz, this “fallow doe” is a centaur-like woman, or to coin a word, a *daineferme* (deerwoman), presumably possessing nymph-like qualities.¹ This rendering explains her being able to lift the knight’s head, her ability to fill and/or dig his grave, does away with the strength-tenderness opposition, and gives significance to the epithet ‘fallow doe.’ The problem relative to the knight’s hounds is also mitigated by the notion of the *daineferme*: first, “it seems worthy of notice, that dogs can see spirits (Sup. I, 1111) and recognize an approaching god while he is yet hidden from the human eye;”² secondly, the hounds can recognize in her a kind of emotional complement; thirdly,

as she is semi-divine she can exert influence over the hounds; and fourthly, as a bifurmed creature (and in particular as part woman) she is distinguishable from other beasts. Further, the "problem" of the love relationship between the knight and the "fallow doe" is resolved while retaining its primitivistic aspects. Thus, this "fallow doe" emerges as semi-divine or supernatural, beautiful, part deer, and part woman; what I have taken the liberty of referring to as a *daineferme*.

The second difficulty is very complex in its nature since the lines which concern us here seem hardly capable of being regarded as meaningless: the recurrence of the word 'downe' gives it great emphasis; one suspects some connection between the 'downe' which they contain and the 'downe' of lines fifteen, twenty-two, and thirty-six. Yet, in spite of the above, one is hard pressed to ascertain the content of these lines. As this writer believes they do harbor meaning, some patchwork will be attempted to effect, hopefully, some coherence.

It should be clear from the outset that any *a priori* generalizations to other works of the meanings here attributed are unwarranted, i.e. that any meanings here attributed do not function in any other work is not evidence for the rejection of those meanings in this work. This is because a) these lines may even here be distorted, b) they may have been "lifted" without regard to meaning, and c) these words may be used in different senses.

Let us proceed one line at a time. We find in the *Oxford Universal Dictionary* (1955) that 'down' can be used as an adverb either attributively or by ellipsis of some participial word in the sense of "dejected."³ Also, we find that 'a' can be used as a preposition as in 'a live' or as an adjective in the sense of "all." Further, we find that 'hay' can be used as an interjection in the sense of "thou hast (it)" and that it occurs in the phrase 'to make hay' this phrase meaning "to make confusion." Thus, the sense of line two is something like the following: 1) Dejected all dejected, thou hast dejection [thou art dejected?], thou hast dejection; or 2) Dejected all dejected, confused and dejected, confused and dejected.

Relative to line four we find in the *Oxford Universal Dictionary* that 'with' can be used to form adverb phrases denoting "to the fullest extent." Thus, the sense of the fourth line is something like the following: Utterly (completely) dejected.

Line seven presents the gravest difficulty; however, it can be surmounted. The problem here centers upon 'derrie.' Checking this

time with *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1956) we find that Londonderry was once named 'Derry.' Derry is an appropriate locale for the scene depicted in "The Three Ravens:" the Scandinavians plundered the city, and it is said to have been burned down at least seven times before 1200; it thus is a site of many battles. Line seven now "means" something like the following: Utterly dejected in Derry, in Derry, dejected, dejected.

The above renderings may at first strike one as maverick; however, their contribution to the total poem (i.e. the coherence which they establish) offers sufficient justification for their acceptance. Given these, we are now in a position to deal with the ballad as an artistic structure.

The frame of this structure is as follows: there are three ravens on a tree; one of them asks another⁴ where should they their "breakfast take;" one of the other ravens answers elliptically 'Not in "yonder greene field," for though there is a body to prey upon it is too carefully and extensively guarded;' at this juncture a pregnant *daineferme* approaches the body of the slain knight; she takes up the knight's head and kisses his wounds; after this she places the knight upon her back and carries him away to bury him; after burying the knight she dies herself before "even-song time." Upon this frame is built a very subtle verbal artifice.

In the first line of the first stanza the speaker sets his stage: "There were three ravens sat upon a tree." Line two informs us of the mood of the ravens and the speaker's attitude toward the ravens; he subduedly mocks them. This at once portends a satisfying or consoling denouement to whatever tale he tells and informs us that the ravens have certain repugnant aspects. The function of the first two lines is reiterated and thereby emphasized by lines three and four. Line five repeats line one and three but the speaker uses this line to first, refocus the point of interest (i.e. the ravens), and second, to lead to additional information about them: "They were as blacke as they might be." Here 'blacke' refers to color, but it connotes "evil" and also "confused" or "disheartened." Thus, this line (six) advances the ballad. Line seven concludes the first stanza, again mocking the ravens, but also revealing the locale of the scene which the ballad unfolds.

The next stanza serves to develop tension; a question is asked. The refrain in this stanza serves primarily to mock the ravens, but in addition it reinforces the implication as to the cause of the question and the attitude of the speaker. From the question asked we learn

of the concern of the ravens. This concern is shown as parasitic: "Where shall we our breakfast take?" We thus are informed that it is their doubt as to where they can obtain sustenance for which the speaker mocks them, and about which they are dejected. Even so, yet, no definite reason or motivation for this doubt or this mocking is evident; thus, this stanza leads naturally to the third.

The next three stanzas (the reply) make clear the grounds of the doubt of the ravens and the attitude of the speaker toward them. The raven's beginning its answer with the word used to mock it results in a subtle bit of irony (for we first suspect a line akin in matter to those of the refrain). In these stanzas, instead of marching the refrain serves primarily to point to the very different form of dejection of the hounds and hawks and to mark the speakers sympathy with them—it connotes three very different forms of dejection. The speaker in these stanzas very artfully and deceptively first leads us down a positive path ("Downe in yonder greene field, . . . There lies a knight slain under his shield") then turns us round the other way ("So well they can their master keepe . . . There's no fowle dare him come nie"). It is not until "There's no fowle dare him come nie" that we realize that the raven's reply is not 'Downe in yonder greene field' but 'not downe in yonder greene field.' This manipulation serves to develop a kind of pseudo-climax. With this answer we see that the ravens are dejected because what is apparently possible prey is inaccessible—a notion which in its content reflects the movement of these stanzas. More than this is conveyed by these lines. We learn that the knight has engaged in a fight ("slain under his shield") and been killed; apparently he fought with an enemy of some allegiance of his ("under his shield"). This was a casual or accidental encounter; the presence of the knight's hounds and hawks suggests that he was out hunting.

At first blush, it might appear that in some sense the ballad has been resolved at the close of stanza five; however, noticing that the hounds and hawks cannot guard the knight's body forever leaves open the possibility that at some time the body would be accessible to the "fowle." Such a possibility seems contrary to the speaker's interests; he justifiably continues. 'Downe there comes a fallow doe' introduces a new element. While the line is descriptive of the action of the *daineferme*, 'downe' connotes "dejected" and thus the speaker effects a contrast between the interests of the doe and the interests of the ravens. As *daineferme* the doe depicts both a similarity and a difference of her emotion and that of the hounds and hawks.

Consistent with this is the function of the refrain in the next three stanzas: to show the mood of the *daineferme* and to effect a contrast by reminding us of the now unmentioned ravens. The pregnancy of the *daineferme* suggests an intimate connection between her and the knight, which suggestion is confirmed by the ensuing lines. The love and concern of the "fallow doe" for the knight, as well as her awareness of the threat to which his body is subject, are exemplified by her actions:

She lift up his bloody hed,
And kist his wounds that were so red.
She got him up upon her backe,
And carried him to earthen lake.
She buried him before the prime,

The fact of her pregnancy does not, as some have claimed, establish her as "a female symbol of fertility,"⁵ for she dies and, presumably, does so without giving birth to her young. Rather, the fact of her pregnancy serves to reinforce her emotion *via* the relationship it implies and to promote her as bearer and caretaker. These aspects of her are imaged and fulfilled by her actions. She carries and buries the knight "before the prime" (i.e. before the end of the first three hours of day), before his body becomes subject of decay. Her death before "even-song time" shows the intensity of her emotion. However, her death does not revive the original problem (as it would if she were a woman); after all she is a beast ("fallow doe") and a supernatural being. Mention should be made of the dramatic tension present in the portraits the ballad presents: first, we have the three ravens *vs* hounds, hawks, and leman, a kind of balance of forces; second, and more subtly, we have the ravens on the oak⁶ *vs* the dead knight or the *daineferme*. The oak tree was considered sacred;⁷ thus we have the symbols of death on the sacred versus the dead on the manifestation of (or vehicle for) the sacred—two strikingly similar images with strikingly different import.

The concluding couplet clearly indicates the consoling nature of the denouement: "God send every gentleman,/Such hauks, such hounds, and such a leman." I say 'couplet' because such a reading seems dictated, first, by the above explication of the refrain in that here it would have no relevance, and second, by the distinct difference in function of these lines and the others of the ballad. This ballad thus appears as a commemoration of the burial of the dead, the protection of the body (a primitive, howbeit enduring concern). It

exhibits a theme of ancient derivation; a notable employment of this theme is *Antigone*.

Before proceeding with discussion of the ballad directly I would like to deal further with the notion of the *daineferme*. What I offer here are presented merely as suggestions or directions for further study as to the 'mythological existence' of the *daineferme*. However, it should be stated that the view of this writer is that since this notion functions in the ballad and the only other alternatives either fail or do not offer as much, we have sufficient grounds for its use. There are several possible sources for the notion of the *daineferme*. I shall deal with each of them separately.

The rendering of 'derrie' given earlier implies that "The Three Ravens" is an Irish ballad or rather a ballad of Irish derivation. In this connection the occurrence of the Danish motif of the *dainehomme* is of paramount interest, for the Danes frequently had possession of Derry from the ninth to the eleventh century (and were not driven out until the beginning of the twelfth century).⁸ *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, in which use is made of the *dainehomme* motif,⁹ is a fourteenth century document, but it "is interesting for the many old traditions which have been utilized in it."¹⁰ This much, conjoined with the fact that "the elk may have been worshipped in Ireland,"¹¹ makes it clear that a notion akin to that of the *daineferme* would not have been an unlikely product of the long period of contact—upwards of two centuries—between the Celts and the Danes.

A second possible account of the *daineferme* arises from the following considerations. As J. A. MacCulloch points out in his discussion of animal worship, "Irish clans bore animal names: some groups were called . . . 'red deer.'"¹² In this connection the following from the discussion of teutonic peoples in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1956) is of interest:

There were yet other classes of supernatural beings. The *fylgiur* and *hamingiur* of Northern belief, are of two kinds, though the names seem not always to be clearly distinguished. Sometimes the *fylgia* is represented as a kind of attendant spirit, belonging to each individual person. It may be seen, generally in animal form, in visions or by persons of second sight, but to see one's own *fylgia* is a sign of impending death. In other cases the *fylgiur* (or perhaps more correctly the *hamingiur*) apparently belong to the whole family. These appear as maidens.

On the basis of these ideas the "fallow doe" of "The Three Ravens" can be seen as a poetic union of the *fylgia* and the *hamingiur* of, for example, a red deer clan.¹³ The explication of such a usage would

be as follows: as doe she is the attendant spirit of the knight and suggests the clan of which he is a member; as maiden she is the attendant spirit of the clan and suggests (as her pregnancy would support) the woman of the clan. Thus, the *daineferme* is a very complex expressional device, both intellectually and emotionally.

Thirdly, the notion of the *daineferme* is accountable on the basis of the following considerations. The Abbots Bromby Dance¹⁴ suggests that the "male as stag" is a notion to which early peoples were susceptible. It would not be difficult for there to occur to such people, e.g. a red deer clan, the notion of the "female as doe." A synthesis of the "female as doe" notion with that of the wood-wife has as a reasonable culmination the notion of the *daineferme*. We find in Grimm's discussion of wood-wives in his *Teutonic Mythology* the following:

We have seen that the wish-wives appear on pools and lakes in the *depth of the forest*: it is because they are likewise *wood-wives* . . . The old sacred forest seems their favorite abode . . . Folksongs make the huntsman in the wood start a dark-brown maid, and hail her: 'wither away, wild beast?' (Wunderhorn 2, 154), but his mother did not take to the bride . . . We find a more pleasing description in the Spanish ballad *De la infantina* (Silva p. 259): a huntsman stands under a lofty oak:

En una rama mas alta viera estar una *infantina* / cabellos de su cabeza todo aquel roble cabrian: / 'siete fadas (7 fays) me fadaron en brazos de una ana mia, / que andasse los siete años sola en esta montina.'

But the knight wants first to take his mother's opinion, and she refuses her consent. When Wolfdieterich sits by a fire in the forest at night, rauhe Els comes up, the *shaggy woman* . . .¹⁵

The Spanish quotation is important here in that it associates the wood-wife with the oak tree; 'Derry' means "oak wood."¹⁶ Also, it is appropriate that the *daineferme* be a leman, for the quoted remarks clearly demonstrate the desirability of the wood-wife. Thus, it appears not unreasonable to, at least, suspect the existence of some notion akin to that of the *daineferme* as a wood-wife.

Fourthly, we can see that the notion of some Corrigauns as *dainefermes* is a possible source of our epithet. This is seen from a consideration of an incident in "The Lord Nann and the Fairy."

The Lord of Nann when this he heard
Hath gripp'd his oak spear with never a word,
His bonny black horse he hath leap'd upon;
And forth to the greenwood he hath gone.
By the skirts of the wood as he did go,
He was 'ware of a hind as white as snow;
Oh fast she ran and fast he rode,

That the earth it shook where his horse-hoofs trode.
 Oh fast he rode, and fast she ran,
 That the sweat to drop from his brow began,
 That the sweat on his horse's flanks stood white,
 So he rode and rode till the fall o' the night.
 When he came to a stream that fed a lawn
 Hard by the grot of a Corrigaun.
 The grass grew thick by the streamlet brink,
 And he lighted down off his horse to drink.
 The Corrigaun sat by the fountain fair,
 A-combing her long and yellow hair;
 A-combing her hair with a comb of gold—
 (Not poor, I trow, are those maidens cold)—
 Now who's the bold wight that dares come here
 To trouble my fairy fountain clear?
 Either thou straight shalt wed with me
 Or pine for four long years and three,
 Or dead in three days' space shalt be.

If, as Wimberly in his *Folklore in English and Scottish Ballads* seems to imply, "a fairy or korrigan, in the shape of a white hind, insists that a young man marry her," then it seems necessary that we regard this Corrigaun as a *dainefemme*, for then it is the hind which is "A-combing her long and yellow hair." (Lastly, though perhaps not finally, it is easily seen that the notion of the *dainefemme* would not be an unreasonable effect of the notions of the "male as stag" and the "female as doe.")

Returning now to the ballad, making further use of its Irish character, we can ascertain another level of significance of this work. The raven is a symbol of death.¹⁶ The three ravens of the ballad are the Morrigan—a Death goddess who took the form of a raven.¹⁷ The Morrigan is both a Death and a Fate trinity: Neman, Badb, and Macha; Ana, Badb, and Macha.¹⁸ In the old battles the heads of the slain were dedicated, by the victors, to either Macha, Badb, or Neman;¹⁹ each of these goddesses appeared on the battlefield in the form of a raven and they singly or together ate the bodies of the slain.²⁰ The heads of the defeated warriors were referred to as Macha's (Badb's or Neman's?) *acorn* crop.²¹

Badb is also benevolent;²² thus we can account for the silence of the third raven. It is the malevolent aspect of the Morrigan which is emphasized in the ballad. The presence but suppression of the third raven most effectively achieves this emphasis; the ambivalence of the "third member" of the Morrigan keeps the malevolent from dominion—thereby allowing for the entrance of the *dainefemme*. A complement to this is the time at which the action occurs; *viz.*,

during or slightly before the first three hours of day ("before the prime"). If one is aware of the ravens as the Morrigan (as one aware of the mythology would be, *v.* above explication of first two stanzas) there results a tension as to what raven will answer and the tactic of the answer mentioned earlier is an exploitation of this tension; the true interests of the answering raven are not known until the last line of its answer illustrates his frustration. In regard to the functioning of this third raven the contrast with "The Twa Corbies" is interesting.

"The Three Ravens" presents itself as the product of a hybrid sensibility: one affected by Christianity ("God send"), but still predominantly primitivistic ("fallow doe"), superstitious (ravens symbols of death; Death-Fate trinity), and ritualistic (theme: the burial of the dead). On the basis of the coherence which the ideas used in this paper establish in the ballad one is led to suspect that this ballad originated long before 1611, and is probably the invention of warriors or was composed for them. It impresses one as the kind of song warriors might sing the night before going into battle (Badb is the Lady of the Battle Cry; Macha and Neman are Irish war goddesses).²³ The hounds and hawks are clearly established in the ballad as symbols of a kind of blind protectiveness while the *dainefemme* is established as caretaker and mourner (this fits well with viewing her as *fylgia* and *hamingiur*). Thus, the ballad expresses a sense of possible victory over fate and death, and expresses the wish that "every gentleman" be able to participate in the same victory.

In conclusion, we have seen that the most effective understanding of 'fallow doe' is the notion of the *dainefemme*, the refrain is a meaningful and functioning element of the ballad, the song is probably Irish in its origins, (the notion of the *dainefemme* is probably the result of Scandinavian contact), the ballad makes use of ideas which strongly suggest it originated long before 1611, the ballad is probably a "war-song," and "The Three Ravens" expresses a sense of possible victory over fate and death. All the elements of this ballad coalesce to produce a tense, subtle, terse, and complex verbal icon.

NOTES

¹ We can note here that there occurs in *Hrólfs saga Kraka* evidence for the existence of a tradition of *dainepersonae*; namely, a Man-Elk. Additional support of the reading presented here is the fact that there are females of other species of bifomed creatures, e.g. centaureesses. See *Fairbairn's Book of Crests of the Families of Great Britain and Ireland* (4th ed. 1912) Vol. II, Plate 53.8; *Herculaneum et Pompéi* Vol. IV, Plates 78 and 80; list of illustrations, Lum, *Fabulous Beasts*.

² J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology* (trans. J. S. Stallybrass), Vol. II, p. 667.

³ V. OED (1933): 'down:' (a. 3), *adv.* (17), 18, 'a:' *prep.*¹ 11, *adj.*;³ 'hay:' *sb.*¹ 3, *int.* and *sb.*;⁵ 'with:' *prep.* 15b.

⁴ Reading 'his' as 'its'; see *Oxford Universal Dictionary*, "his."

⁵ S. Lainoff, "The Three Ravens," *The Explicator*, XVII, 8 (1959), #55.

⁶ "County named from the city. The most ancient name of Londonderry was Derry Calgagh, i.e., the derry or oak-wood of Calgagh." P. W. Joyce, *Atlas and Cyclopaedia of Ireland*, "Londonderry" (New York, 1905), Part I.

⁷ J. A. MacCulloch, *Religion of the Ancient Celts*, v. index (Edinburgh, 1911), p. 199 "oak."

⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911), "Londonderry."

⁹ *Hrólfs saga Kraka* (ed. Finnur Jónsson), ch. 20; Elgfrothi, son of Bera and Bjorn, is a *dainehomme*: "A little later she was taken ill and gave birth to a son, though of a rather strange kind. He was a man above, but an elk from the navel down, and was given the name Elgfrothi." *Erik the Red and other Icelandic Sagas*, (New York, 1961), selected & transl. by Gwyn Jones, p. 268. Miss Agnete Loth, M. A., of The Arnamagnean Institute, Denmark, informs me, *via* personal correspondence, that 'Elgfrödur' (i.e. 'Elgfrothi') "is used to translate the Latin word centaurus into Old-Icelandic in Páls saga eremita. . . . In the desert Anthony meets a (friendly) centaur: . . . i.e.: he sees a man created in a curious way, he is at some part a horse; this sort of monster the poets called a centaur, some men call it an elgfrothi." She also informs me that "the wording of the translation [i.e. *Páls saga eremita*] indicates that it must belong to the older group of Icelandic hagiographic literature, probably not much later than c. 1200."

¹⁰ W. A. Craigie, *The Icelandic Sagas* (Cambridge, 1913), p. 95.

¹¹ MacCulloch, p. 213.

¹² MacCulloch, p. 216.

¹³ Of course, this is the case only if one admits some Celtic-Teutonic exchange.

¹⁴ "Finally in one of the farmyards . . . they 'dear'—circle. . . . The symbolic coloring, deer horns, and ritual characters (man, woman, and clown) point to an ancient ritual significance, marking this as one of the few surviving animal dances in Europe." *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*.

¹⁵ The Spanish, as translated by a friend of mine, Mr. C. James Wood, reads as follows: On a higher branch he saw a little girl, the hairs of her head winning the affection of all that oak-tree: seven witches (7 days) divined to me in the arms of a mistress of mine, who has walked alone on this small mountain for seven years.

¹⁶ G. Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*, (New York, 1961) "Raven."

¹⁷ R. Graves, *The White Goddess*, Vintage Books (New York: 1959), p. 143.

¹⁸ *Funk & Wagnalls* . . . , "Morrigan;" G. Jobes, "Badb."

¹⁹ *Funk & Wagnalls* . . . , "Morrigan."

²⁰ *Funk & Wagnalls* . . . , "Morrigan."

²¹ G. Jobes, "Macha."

²² Badb is emblematic of childbirth and had sexual significance, v. *The Folklore of Birds* by E. A. Armstrong; 'Badb' means "boiling" and refers to the Cauldron of Cairdwen (of life), v. R. Graves, *The White Goddess*, and G. Jobes, "Badb."

²³ G. Jobes, "Badb," "Macha," and "Neman." The story concerning Hylonomé and Cyllarus (see Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Bk. XII, approx. lines 390-470) is of mild interest both in this connection and with regard to some of the habits of the Corrigaun mentioned in the episode quoted from "The Lord Nann and the Fairy."