The girl, the hoodie and the comb

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

EVERY time I read one of the "Popular Tales of the West Highlands" – J F Campbell of Islay's classic four-volume collection, first published in 1860–62 – I keep finding exciting new levels of meaning I'd never thought of before.

Take the third story in volume one, *Ursgeul na Feannaig* ("The Tale of the Hoodie"). It's very short, only two-and-a-half pages. It was written down in 1859 by Hector Maclean from the telling of Ann MacGilvray, a native of Cowal who was married to a farmer at Kilmeny in Islay. I'll tell the story first, then I'll say how I would "read" it.

There was a farmer and he had three daughters. One day they were *a' postadh* (washing clothes by trampling) in the river when a *feannag* or hoodie crow came along and asked the oldest girl to marry him. *Cha phòs mis' thu, 'bheathaich ghrànda*, she says. "I certainly will not, you ugly creature."

Next day he reappears, asks the middle daughter to marry him, and gets the same brush-off. The third day he asks the youngest one and she says: *Pòsaidh, s bòidheach am beathach an fheannag*. "Yes, the hoodie's a handsome creature."

They marry next day, and the hoodie says, *Cò 'ca as fheàrr leat mise a bhith 'am fheannag san latha 's 'am dhuine san oidhche, na bhith san oidhche 'am fheannag 's 'am dhuine san latha?* "Do you prefer me to be a hoodie in the day and a man at night, or a hoodie at night and a man in the day?"

She opts for him to be a man in the day and a hoodie at night. And when he's a man, he's handsome. In nine months time (*ann an ceann trì ràithean*) she bears him a son. That night the house is enveloped in the most beautiful music anyone has ever heard. Everyone falls asleep, and the child is taken away.

In the morning the girl's father comes to call. He's appalled that the child has been taken away, for fear he himself may be blamed (*eagal agus gum biodh coir' air a dhèanadh air fhéin air a shon*).

Nine months later another child is born, and although the house is watched, the same thing happens. Another nine months and it happens yet again, and this time they get ready to flee to another house they have – himself, his wife, and her sisters. On the road he says: "Make sure you haven't forgotten anything."

His wife replies: *Dhìochuimhnich mi mo chìr gharbh*. "I've forgotten my coarse comb." The vehicle they're travelling in promptly collapses into a bundle of firewood, or as Campbell has it in his translation, "the coach in which they were fell a withered faggot" (*thuit an carbad anns an robh eud 'na chual chrìonaich*). Off he goes as a hoodie.

Distraught, the young wife pursues her husband. Whenever she spies him on top of a hillock she toils up the slope to try and catch him, and when she reaches the summit he's in a hollow on the other side. When night comes she's exhausted. She sees the light of a house and stands wretchedly at the door. There's a baby boy playing inside and she warms to him hugely (*theòigh i ris gu h-anabarrach*). The woman of the house tells her to come in (*tighinn a-nìos*, "to come up"), and "that she knows what her path and her travelling is" (*gu robh fios a seud 's a siubhail aicese*).

Exactly the same happens the next day and the day after – chasing the hoodie, another house, another little boy, another woman who knows "her path and her travelling". The third time, the woman adds that the girl's husband has just left, that she should be clever, try not to sleep, and catch him. But she falls asleep, and he comes where she is and drops a ring (*lig e tuiteam do dh'fhàinn*) on her right hand. She wakes up and grasps a feather of his wing, but he gets away.

In the morning the woman tells her he has gone over a "hill of poison" (*cnoc neamh*) which she can't cross without horseshoes (*crùidhean*) on her hands and feet. She gives her men's clothes and tells her to learn blacksmithing (*goibhneachd*) so that she can make the shoes herself. This she does, and she crosses the hill of poison.

When she reaches the town on the other side she's told that her husband is due to marry a girl from a prosperous family there, that there's to be a race that day, and that everyone's invited except the stranger who has crossed the hill of poison. She's approached by the cook. He has to prepare the wedding feast, but wants to go to the race, and will she take his place? Of course, she says.

She drops the ring and the feather into her husband's plate of soup. With the first spoonful he gets the ring and with the next one he gets the feather. When the minister arrives to perform the ceremony her husband demands to know who has cooked the dinner. She is brought in and he declares that she is his wife. *Dh'fholbh na geasan dheth*. "The spells went off him."

Back they come over the hill of poison, she stopping every so often and throwing the horseshoes back to him so that he can follow her. One by one they come to the three houses. The women are his sisters. The little boys are his sons, and hers. They bring them home, and all live happily ever after. *Bha iad gu toilichte*.

To sum up: it's a love story. The husband is bewitched – that has two meanings in any language – but the wife is faithful and gets him back. As in many Gaelic stories, the central character is a strong woman.

The supernatural clearly has a role, but it's not good enough to say that that means anything can happen. Otherworlds are a way of making sense of the real world. The story can't be enjoyed unless we understand that some things are symbols. Who is the hoodie? What does it mean to be a man in the day and a hoodie at night? What is the music that envelops the house? Why are the children kidnapped? Why should the girl's father be afraid of being blamed? Why does the vehicle fall apart when the girl says she's forgotten her comb? What is the feather that the girl pulls out of her husband's wing? What are the hill of poison and the horseshoes?

Here's my reading of it.

The story is set in the time before the '45. The hoodie is a criminal, presumably a cattle-thief. As J F Campbell points out, *feannag* means literally "flayer". This is appropriate to a person who deals in hides. Being a man in the day and a hoodie at night means living in a normal kin-based community rather than among "broken men" like Rob Roy in out-of-the-way places like Rannoch or Knoydart or Balquhidder.

The music that envelops the house is drunkenness. The children are kidnapped by broken men in out-of-the-way places because they need children to herd stolen cattle. The girl's father is afraid of being blamed because it's known that he pays blackmail to be left alone. Blackmail was usually paid in kind, and children would have been as acceptable a form of payment as grain, fodder, a stirk, some sheep, or a few Spanish dollars.

The comb I'll come back to later. The feather that the girl pulls out of her husband's wing must be some personalised article of clothing like an embroidered handkerchief. The hill of poison and the horseshoes have dramatic rather than symbolic value, I think. It sounds like a motif that has its origin in Stromboli, the Sicilian volcano, and has found its way into our story through tales that have wandered the globe. This, I am sure, is the sort of thing that J F Campbell has in mind when he tells us that *Ursgeul na Feannaig* "has some resemblance to an infinity of other stories", listing as examples "Orpheus, Cupid and Psyche, Cinderella's Coach, The Lassie and her Godmother (Norse tales), East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon (ditto), The Master Maid (ditto), Katie Wooden Cloak (ditto), The Iron Stove (Grimm), The Woodcutter's Child (ditto), and a tale by the Countess d'Aulnoy, Prince Cherie".

I don't know these tales as well as Campbell did, but if there isn't a hill of poison somewhere in one of them, I'll eat my hat.

Now why does the vehicle fall apart when the girl says she's forgotten her comb? That's the million-dollar question. Of course it's why Campbell mentions Cinderella's coach, but that doesn't explain the comb.

Combs are surprisingly prominent as magical objects in Gaelic tradition. For instance, John Gregorson Campbell tells us that a girl shouldn't comb her hair at night when her brother is at sea, or it will raise a storm that may drown him.

In his introduction to volume one, J F Campbell discusses the widespread symbolic importance of combs: "There is evidence throughout all popular tales that combs were needed. Translations are vague, because translators are bashful; but those who have travelled amongst half civilized people, understand what is meant when the knight lays his head on the lady's knee, and she 'dresses his hair'. In German, Norse, Breton, and Gaelic, it is the same."

I see what he's getting at. One of the best known of all Gaelic tales tells how a water-horse comes out of a loch in the form of a handsome young man and encounters a beautiful girl. He lays his head in her lap while she combs his hair. She discovers shells in it and realises what he is. By now he's asleep, so she cuts away the part of her apron or dress where his head is lying and runs away. What J F Campbell means is that combing the hair is a metaphor for making love, and that the comb symbolises sex. But it isn't quite as simple as that, I think.

For one thing, traditional tales refer frequently to two types of comb, the *cìr mhìn* ("fine comb") and *cìr gharbh* ("coarse comb"). It seems to me that the *cìr mhìn* was for removing lice, and the *cìr gharbh* for dressing the hair. The *cìr gharbh* sounds like the sexy one to me, and it's the one referred to in *Ursgeul na Feannaig*.

For another thing, J G Campbell refers to *galar na té a chuir a' chiad chìr Chiadna 'na ceann*, "the disease of the woman who put the first Wednesday comb in her head". Wednesday is the unluckiest day of the week, and he explains that the disease in question is sterility. So perhaps *cìr* symbolises not sex exactly, but fertility.

Now let's consider the word *cìr* itself. It has the same three meanings as "comb" in English: a hairdressing tool, a cock's crest and a network of cells where bees store honey. These all seem to have to do with its shape. But we have a fourth, *cìr* as in *a' cnàmh na cìre*, "chewing the cud". Now "cud" is defined by my dictionary as "food brought back from first stomach of a ruminating animal to be chewed again", from Old English *cwidu*. Surely the only way it has anything to do with combs is if *cìr* is here being used in its symbolic sense – "chewing the fertility".

So when the girl in her Cinderella's coach cries out *Dhìochuimhnich mi mo chìr gharbh!* we can enjoy the joke as the ceilidh-house audience did. "I've forgotten my fat fertility!" Or: "I've forgotten my coarse cud!" The result is inevitable. It's a fairy coach, and, as J G Campbell says when telling another story, "she made use of a coarse, unseemly word", and "no such language is tolerated among the Fairies". In any case it's her assumed "fat fertility" that gives the coach its substance.

Collapse of coach. Collapse of audience. Long live pantomime.

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