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DISCOVERING BORDER CROSSINGS IN PAGAN EPIC LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that border crossings were important to the ancient Celts and Norse as evidenced by the vast quantity of occurrences in their literature, and have remained important themes in literature throughout the ages. Border crossings reflect man's fascination with concepts beyond his immediate existence and understanding. His reactions to such inexplicable phenomena have provided inspiration to writers for hundreds of years. The investigation uncovers examples of border crossings in the epic stories captured in the *Ulster* and *Fenian Cycles*, *The Táin*, *The Eddas*, and *The Mabinogion*.

Border crossings remain important for modern literary scholars to consider because they have not vanished. Although they are perceived differently, the concepts remain an integral part of our literary heritage. Analysis which implements border crossing themes explored in this work enables critics to employ a new methodology for engaging with literature, enhancing subtleties and observing moods and tones which might otherwise go unnoticed and unappreciated. Man's natural, instinctive continuing curiosity regarding the supernatural and mystery of the unknown provide a continuing thread of border crossing examples. The epics of Ireland, Iceland, and Wales establish the foundation and environment of Otherworld activity for the romance and gothic genres which follow. The

beautiful fairy-woman who convinces a mortal to follow her into the Otherworld; the “beheading” game; witches and potions; castles hidden in mists – these themes will be employed by later authors to define the mood and tone in works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Macbeth*, and *Dracula*.

Stories of the supernatural have fascinated mankind since storytelling began and scholarly research in the area of border crossings must begin with the early epics. Pagan stories of border crossings have a very different view of the themes than works written in a Christian environment. This work examines border crossings in the environment where the people actually believed an Otherworld existed as part of their own world. The research provides a baseline of border crossing themes and a reflection of how the ancients perceived them. This investigation is summarized with a look at the themes through the centuries, observing how border crossings have changed and evolved. Identifying the significance of border crossings in the early epics provides an insight into understanding where and how they are implicated in later literary works, and offers a view where scholars may continue to search for new literary border crossings. Such occurrences should be taken into account because identifying the continued presence of border crossings in hundreds of years of literature allows us to engage with these works in a new way, implementing a new analysis methodology to seek other worlds while broadening our reading experience.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Stories of the supernatural have fascinated human beings since storytelling began. Although scientific discoveries have explained more than most of us can comprehend, we continue to be intrigued by the all-encompassing mystery of life and death. Ancient man embraced encounters with the spirit world just as modern man may believe there are civilizations on other planets in other galaxies. The supernatural events the ancients experienced as seen in extant literature are known as “border crossings.”

This study will argue that border crossings were important to the ancient Celts and Norse as evidenced by the vast quantity of occurrences in their literature, and have remained important themes in literature throughout the ages. Modern analysis of border crossings has focused on Halloween traditions, but the problem with these Halloween histories is that the vast majority of excerpts cited in these works are from post-medieval authors, neglecting the earlier epics. The investigation cites stories captured in the *Ulster* and *Fenian Cycles*, *The Táin*, *The Eddas*, and *The Mabinogion* to identify border crossing events and outcomes, as these works are considered the national epics of their respective countries. Scholarly research in the area of border crossings must begin with these early epics. Pagan stories of border crossings have a very different view regarding these themes

than works written in a Christian environment. Border crossings should be examined in the environment where the people actually believed an Otherworld existed as part of their own world. I will discuss a baseline of border crossings, and then move forward, tracing these themes through the centuries, observing how they have changed and how the perception of border crossings has evolved, and how different literary genres and literary periods represent societal views of border crossings. Identifying the significance of border crossings in the early epics will give insight into understanding where and how they are implicated in later literary works, expanding appreciation of the literary cultures and evolving traditions.

The sheer volume of current essays and books covering an array of topics in Celtic and Icelandic pagan literature indicates active interest in this field. Many essays reflect an interest in gender study, marriage, and family as reflected in the Scandinavian sagas. Articles also examine diction, speech, and grammar of the Old Irish and Old Norse languages. But a focused study of border crossings in pagan literature has yet to be produced. In the pagan Norse repertoire, we find several works by Amann Jakobsson which discuss the Scandinavian sagas and issues with family and emotional life, as well as the life of Snorri Sturluson, but no analysis of the epic *Eddas* or their border crossing content. Many authors such as David Dwan, Bernadette Leacock, and Ruth Buroine Looper have written on William Butler Yeats but have not incorporated any of his focus on border crossings into their analysis. In studies of both the ancient Celtic and Norse literature, there is a preponderance of information on the role of women and gender studies from David Clark, Carol Parrish Jamison, Ralph O'Connor, L.M.C. Weston, Paula Krebs, and

Susan Stanford Friedman. But these works do not attempt to address border crossing events. P. L. Henry descriptively portrays the significance of the cauldron in his translation of Amirgen's "Cauldron of Poesy" but does not trace the cauldron motif through the ancient literature to solidify its importance to the Celts beyond that of artistic expression. *The New Golden Bough* by Sir James George Frazer is an excellent source for historical information, especially regarding the *Beltaine* and *Samhain* fire festivals, but overall does not discuss border crossing events nor tie them to the ancient epic literature with which we are concerned. T.G.E. Powell in *The Celts* provides an overall history of the ancient Celts and also includes a descriptive section on the idea of "triplism, where three, distinct supernatural women consolidate their potency into a single deity, but it fails to provide a connection to the epic literature where we can find detailed examples. Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick provide another excellent history of the ancients in *The Celtic Realms*, but again, any description of the Otherworld is not tied to the concept of a supernatural, border crossing event from the epic literature. The same can be said of works by Simon James (*The World of the Celts*), P.W. Joyce (*A Social History of Ancient Ireland*), and Eleanor Hull (*A Text Book of Irish Literature*). Other works such as Douglas Hyde's *A Literary History of Ireland* and Frank O'Connor's *The Backward Look* provide excellent summaries of the most popular stories from the ancient Celtic works, as does John Lindow's northern study *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, but none touch on the idea of repeated border crossing events as themes to be traced.

These border crossings remain important for modern literary scholars to consider because they have not vanished. Man's natural, instinctive continuing curiosity regarding the supernatural and mystery of the unknown provide a continuing thread of border crossing examples. Although they are perceived differently, the supernatural concepts remain an integral part of our literary heritage. The epics of Ireland, Iceland, and Wales establish the foundation and environment of Otherworld activity for the romance and gothic genres which follow. The beautiful fairy-woman who convinces a mortal to follow her into the *sídh*; the "beheading" game; witches and potions – these themes will be employed by later authors to define the mood and tone in works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Macbeth*, and *Dracula*. Border crossings offer a unique way of examining a literary work which can expand our appreciation of the ominous, the macabre, and the general unknown.

A border crossing means that two worlds are separated and a passing is occurring from one to the other. During this crossing a threshold area exists, a kind of "no man's land" that belongs simultaneously to neither world and to both worlds. The exact location of the threshold is not important: its significance lies in the "crossing zone." The modern term for this concept is "liminality." Liminality as a sociological field of study explored by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner obviously did not exist in the ancient northern regions. Modern liminality examines the rites of passage of those who exist outside of a society on the verge of making a transition into an existing social group. One example is the rites of passage certain African tribes' adolescents undergo as they cross the border into

manhood. These so-called novices find themselves “betwixt and between” defined social positions (Hansen 5). Liminality primarily refers to the concept of the threshold, that area between the two spaces. That threshold is associated with conditionality, instability, intermediate forms, and what lies between the known and the unknown. The ancients certainly believed border crossings incorporated liminal creatures, those who lived “betwixt and between,” such as talking severed heads, werewolves, and fairies. Border crossings offer a broader area of exploration than just social condition, since the empowered Otherworld in ancient literature has influence on all aspects of the human world.

Chapter Two: Tracing the Tradition

This chapter will trace border crossing themes through various works of more modern literature, demonstrating how relevant these supernatural events were for authors anxious to satisfy audiences thirsty for mystical, eerie, and bizarre activities. As Christianity spread and pagan rituals became less overt and demonstrative, border crossings changed face. With the rise of Christianity, the concepts of Heaven and Hell replaced the Otherworld, fairies were replaced with angels, and magical elements were replaced with personified objects. Keeping in mind characteristics of ancient epics, I will examine a medieval Christian epic to illustrate the evolutionary aspects of border crossings and the Otherworld.

The medieval epic *The Song of Roland* was a religious account of the trials of Charlemagne and his nephew Roland in the battle of Roncevaux Pass in AD 777. In the poem, Roland's horn Oliphant and sword Durendal are personified to the degree that he talks to them as human, treating them as supernatural entities across the border.¹ In line 2287, when Roland is set upon by a Saracen trying to steal his sword, "He holds on to the Oliphant, he does not want to part with it for a single moment." After Roland's death, Charlemagne takes the Oliphant back to France, to the city of Bordeaux, where he places it filled with gold on St. Seurin's altar for pilgrims to see. When Roland knows his defeat is imminent, he cries to his sword:

Oh, Durendal, how beautiful you are, how clear, how bright!
How you shine and flash against the sun!
Charles was in the valleys of Maurienne
when God instructed him from heaven on high by his angel
to give you to a captain count:
So the great, noble king girded me with it. (lines 2316-21)

What follows next is a listing of every battle Roland won with Durendal. Since he does not want the pagans to recover the precious sword, he tries to destroy it on a dark stone, but the sword will neither shatter nor break. He continues to lament the possible loss of Durendal and describes the many relics contained in its hilt and summarizes, “it is not right for the pagans to own you, / You must be served by Christians. / May no coward ever possess you!” (2349-51). Roland treats his sword as an object with almost supernatural powers, with the same reverence the ancients treated their cauldrons.

As Roland feels his death approaching, he sees the angel Gabriel and reaches his gauntlet up to God as a symbol of his final devotion and submission to the heavenly beings, not unlike the respect shown by the ancients for the people of the sídh. The border between heaven and earth is traversed by the angels Gabriel, Michael, and Cherabin, who lift Roland’s body to heaven.

A miracle occurs when God makes the sun stand still, providing the French with enough daylight to chase down the Saracen enemy (2458-9). In ancient Celtic literature, the Druids might have raised a mist to conceal Charlemagne’s approach. Charlemagne is visited by the angel Gabriel who, in a dream-vision, shows him the battle to come and the enemy he must face (Laisse 185-6). As the King heads for Roncevaux Pass to observe the destruction there, “Saint Gabriel, who watches over

him for God, / Raises his hand and makes the sign of the cross over him” (lines 2847-8). The angel makes another appearance before Charlemagne during the king’s battle with the Emir: “But God does not wish [the King] to be killed or vanquished. / Saint Gabriel returned to his side, / and he asked: ‘Great King, what are you doing?’” (3609-11). The king is reinvigorated by the voice of the angel and proceeds to hack through the Emir’s head, cleaving his entire face. In *Ancient Irish Tales* (45), similarly, the war-goddess Morrígan reinvigorates the Tuatha de Danann with her speech in the battle against the Fomor. As the French pass through the Spanish Pass, the scene in the *Song of Roland* (lines 814-5) is in stark contrast to the mounds of the sídh and the forests of the ancient Celtic tales: “The mountains are high and the valleys are shadowy, / The rocks dark, the [narrow gorges] frightening.” Elements of shamanism and sorcery remain, as one scene describes the Archbishop slaying Siglorel, “the sorcerer who was once in Hell, / Jupiter led him there by sorcery” (1391-2).

The Epic gave way to the Romance which thrived on the literary benchmarks established in ancient works. In *Sir Orfeo*, the Greek tale of Orpheus and Eurydice is retold as an Otherworld romance in the form of a Breton Lay. In lines 43-4, we are told Orfeo was a descendent of Roman gods, keeping the poem in a pre-Christian context. The disappearance of Queen Heurodis occurred in May, a prime month for fairy activity. During spring when all the flowers and blossoms were bright and the birds were singing, the queen fell asleep on the green carpet of the forest under a “ympe-tre,” a grafted orchard tree, most likely an apple or cherry (lines 57-72). The queen slept until noon, a perilous time for mortals to encounter

fairies as it was a key liminal moment when crossings between worlds easily occurred. When she awoke from sleep, she told the story of having been approached by a hundred knights and a hundred damsels all on white horses and dressed in white. The king told her she must return to this exact tree the following day and come live with them in the Otherworld forever, else they would tear her apart, limb from limb. The next day, the queen waited at the tree, surrounded by Orfeo and a thousand of his knights, but still she was whisked away right in front of them. Orfeo, in his depression, left his kingdom to wander as a beggar, taking with him only his harp, often charming beasts with his beautiful music. One day he encountered a group of ladies out hawking. He decided to follow them and discovered that one of them was his wife. The ladies rode off, disappearing into a cleft in a rock. Orfeo followed. He came upon a beautiful castle, glittering with gold and jewels, and as he entered he saw many people lying around who had been brought into fairy land because they were thought to be dead, but were not. Some had no heads, others no arms, some strangled as they ate, others drowned in water, and some shriveled in fire. All had been brought to the castle through the power of the Otherworld and fairy enchantment. Orfeo saw his own wife asleep beneath an orchard tree. He made his way to the main hall where he asked to play his harp for the king. The king was so impressed with his beautiful music he told Orfeo he would grant him anything he wanted. Orfeo asks for Heurodis and although the king was reluctant, Orfeo reminded him that a king must keep his word and not be shown as a liar in front of his people. The king let her go and Orfeo and Heurodis returned to their kingdom. This Otherworld romance particularly emphasizes the

liminal periods when fairy activity was heightened, as first seen in the ancient texts.

The “beheading game” contained in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will be discussed in Chapter Six, but the story contains more examples of medieval romance border crossings. The story begins on New Year’s Eve, a liminal period where old and new meet with interesting results. A knight appeared at King Arthur’s court with his beheading challenge. The knight was clearly an Otherworld being, with green hands and face, and green armor, tunic, and stockings. “Everything about him was an elegant green” (SGGK 161). His spurs were made of shining gold. Lines 150-235 mention green and gold so often that one almost feels as if a forest encompassed the hall. These are the traditional colors of the fairy world (Evans-Wentz 313). Gawain traveled one year later in search of the Knight of the Green Chapel to complete his part of the beheading challenge. While on his journey, he entered the “wilderness of Wirral Forest, where few men / lived whom God or a good man could love” (SGGK lines 701-2). In the forest, Gawain was attacked by Otherworld creatures: dragons, wolves, satyrs, forest trolls, and giant ogres. He finally came to a beautiful castle with “stone walls glittering / through tall white oaks, towering around / a steep moat” (770-2), another motif characteristic of the Otherworld. When Gawain made the bargain with Bercilak to exchange whatever they win that day, he had no idea he was making a deal with an Otherworld knight, a risky venture. On New Year’s Day, when Gawain must meet his fate and receive the blow from the Green Knight’s axe, the temporal and seasonal border crossings are emphasized:

Now New Year’s comes, and the night passes,

Daylight replaces darkness, as God
Decrees. But storms crackled through the world,
Clouds tumbled their bitter cold
On the earth, northwinds freezing the poor;
Snow shivered in the air, and animals
Shook; the wind whistled from the hills
And drove snow drifts down in the valleys. (1198-
2005)

This ominous scene matches the fear and trepidation Gawain felt. When Gawain found the chapel of the Green Knight, it was not as expected: “He saw nothing – except / a queer kind of mound, in a glade / close by, a rounded knoll near a stream, / set right on the bank, beside the brook” (2170-3). This was predictably the Otherworld sídh of the Green Knight, with its magical setting. After the Green Knight merely nicked Gawain’s neck rather than lopping off his head, he confessed he was under the power of the witch Morgan Le Fay, who possessed magic she learned from the master wizard Merlin (2445-50). The references to sorcery and shamanism are reminders of the world of the ancient Celtic epics.

Heroic epic and romance poetry paved the way for poetry based on the Literary Gothicism evident in the novels of the late eighteenth century. This Gothic tradition began as an emulation of medievalism and manifested itself in British Romantic literature with references to dungeons, haunted castles, ghosts, vampires, graveyards, screams, and bloody corpses. Thomas Lovell Beddoes is known as the “Death Poet.” Writing primarily from 1821-1849, his poetry included the supernatural, the macabre, the erotic, and the “pleasurably” terrifying. Many of his poems begin with death having already occurred: ghosts are speaking or the speaker is observing an event surrounding an instance of death. Beddoes

does not seem to be concerned with concepts of Heaven and Hell, but rather with what the soul experiences in some “other” realm, or possibly a different part of this world that can only be accessed by an initiated “crossing-over” event. His poems certainly have the feeling of pushing the edges of our construct, trying to access other dominions.

Beddoes is a poet of fragments. He wrote and re-wrote his opus, the drama *Death's Jest-Book* (full of fragments) for over 20 years from 1825-1849. The fragment is defined by its impulse to exceed or transcend its own form; it is known by its desire for an afterlife by suggesting expansion into an unknown space (Bradshaw 85). Often with Beddoes, the question we seem to ponder involves trying to identify the realm, world, or domain implied or identified in the afterlife and what happens to the soul in this next life. A related theme in Beddoes's poetry is the sense of the simultaneous presence of life and death, intertwined together, carrying on the liminal theme of the pagan literature. As body and soul, these are often reflected in opposition to one another. Ghosts, for example, are at once alive and dead, and so inspire the kind of confusion that is expressed equally by horror and yearning. There are instances in which a ghost is clearly intended to be an insubstantial entity, a spirit, or disembodied consciousness. Equally though, there are instances in which a ghost can be seen as nothing else but a fully resurrected person, soul, body, and character all integrated exactly as in life (Bradshaw 119). Graves and skulls, normally symbols of death, become “nests” for new life and birth.

In *The Phantom-Wooer*, Death is portrayed as a state of mystical and transcendental union with the Universe as it entices the soul gently, like a lover (Heath-Stubbs 39). The reader is repeatedly manipulated between twilight worlds of life and death, simultaneously experiencing two worlds across a border. Beddoes's poems constantly push beyond their immediate boundaries in an attempt to transcend into an otherworld.

The Phantom-Wooer

I.

A ghost, that loved a lady fair,
Ever in the starry air
 Of midnight at her pillow stood;
And, with a sweetness skies above
The luring words of human love,
Her soul the phantom wooed.
Sweet and sweet is their poisoned note,
The little snakes' of silver throat,
In mossy skulls that nest and lie,
Ever singing 'die, oh! die'.

II

Young soul, put off your flesh, and come
With me into the quiet tomb,
 Our bed is lovely, dark, and sweet;
The earth will swing us, as she goes,
Beneath our coverlid of snows,
 And the warm leaden sheet.
Dear and dear is their poisoned note,
The little snakes' of silver throat,
In mossy skulls that nest and lie,
Ever singing 'die, oh! die'.

In this poem, Death is erotic, with the phantom hovering by the lady's bed like an incubus. The scene instills a sense of eerie rapture. The ghost obviously doesn't want to be alone and yearns for companionship, a very human trait. It exhibits

other human attributes in that it “stood” at her pillow, it is actively trying to seduce the young woman, and speaks luring words of “human” love. This is an example of Beddoes’s description of a ghost as a full-formed entity, sharing the border between life and death. In the first stanza, an omniscient speaker is describing the scene. In the second, the phantom is speaking directly, trying to seduce the lady. The ghost is asking us to trust that his words are valid and that the other dominion where he wants us to follow is truly wonderful. The tomb where the phantom wants to take the lady is beneath the earth, but rather than being frightening, it is warm and inviting: the “Earth will swing us,” rocking gently as they lie beneath a warm, heavy comforter of snow. The phantom’s description makes us feel like we are crossing over into another realm, into death. But it is an uneasy transport because we cannot trust the phantom. The first stanza sets the stage in this world; the second describes what it will be like in the “other” place where loved will be fulfilled. This is reminiscent of the fairy-woman attempting to seduce the mortal man to follow her into the Otherworld where everything is perfect.

There is a suggestion of a cycle of death moving in opposition to the cycle of life, of ghosts begetting ghosts, since the lady would most certainly become a ghost if she chooses to give in to the phantom’s seduction. The contrast between body and soul is apparent when the lady is encouraged to “put off her flesh,” leave her physical body and follow the phantom to an unknown place in the form of a soul. This begs the question that we typically ask when reading Beddoes’s fragments which is where does this otherworld exist and is it truly better than the world in which we reside?

The phantom is speaking with “poisoned” words. The “snakes’ of silver throat” is possibly a reference to Satan appearing as a snake in the Garden of Eden, trying to charm Eve with his silver tongue. While the snake’s words are poisoned, they are also “sweet” and “dear” and very seductive. The “mossy skulls” may be a reference to Yorick, whose bones are exhumed by the gravedigger in *Hamlet*. Yorick was the king’s court jester and Hamlet talks to his skull, fixated on death’s inevitability and the disintegration of the body. Like Beddoes, Hamlet was fascinated with the physical consequences of death. In the play, Hamlet contrasts the image of Yorick as “a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy” with his now decaying remains (*Hamlet* 5.1.184-5). Historically, the skull was used in alchemy for heating and fusing a combination of contrary elements. In the poem, it may be seen as the receptacle for a syncretic fusing of contrary emotions – desire, fear, and confusion.

Beddoes’s poems all have movement, a feeling of transport into otherworlds. The transport into these otherworlds has the potential to change every time a reader engages with a poem, taking him somewhere new. In this respect, his fragments exceed their own form and transcend to continue “living.” His poems all offer a certain degree of confusion since Beddoes’s words and images do not always coalesce, leading to verbal disorientation. At times we are almost jerked around inside the poem; we feel we know which direction Beddoes is heading, and then, we are suddenly transported from the base of a yew tree to the sea. We are never able to predict where the border crossing will take us.

As poet laureate of the Victorian era, Alfred, Lord Tennyson took on the challenge of writing a classic epic romance based on the legends of King Arthur but added a contemporary dilemma for England to ponder: the cycle of change a nation experiences having emerged from a wasteland into civilization, but which teeters on the precipice of a return to that wasteland (Abrams 1095). The twelve books that comprise *Idylls of the King* were completed in 1888. Many of the themes found in the pagan stories we have analyzed appear again in this poem. The seasonal borders play a significant role in the poem, as we find the first book, *The Coming of Arthur*, introducing a springtime hero who transforms the barren countryside into blossoming fields and instills hope and faith in the hearts of the people. The following books move through summer and fall as Arthur continues to define the borders of his country, assuming his full role as King and establishing his military force of knights to protect the now civilized country. The final chapter culminates in a fierce wintry scene where Arthur's efforts dissolve into bloody civil war and where he must face his own nephew, Modred, in a final death scene. It is in this final chapter, *The Passing of Arthur*, that we want to focus our observations of border crossings, liminality, and fate.

Arthur had been in France with his faithful knight Sir Gawain fighting the forces of Lancelot when word reached him that Modred was raising an army against him in England, so Arthur returned home. Upon his return, he discovers Gawain has been killed by Lancelot's forces and the ghost of Gawain appears to Arthur in a dream and warns him that he is to die on the next day: "Hail, King! Tomorrow thou shalt pass away. / Farewell! There is an isle of rest for thee. / And I

am blown along a wandering wind, / And hollow, hollow, hollow all delight” (34-7). Not only do we have the foreshadowing of King Arthur’s death, but the knowledge that there is an island to which he will be carried in death. The ghost of Gawain appears as the knight himself, simultaneously both alive and dead, a liminal aspect which appears yet again in the tracings through literature. Sir Bedivere, having seen and heard Gawain’s ghost speak, observes, “Light was Gawain in life, and light in death / is Gawain, for the ghost is as the man” (56-7). As the fairies and Druids could raise a mist at will to conceal their presence, a mist pervades the final battle scene between Arthur and Modred:

A deathwhite mist slept over sand and sea:
whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew
down with his blood, till all his heart was cold
with formless fear; and even on Arthur fell
confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.
For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew;
And some had visions out of golden youth,
And some beheld the faces of old ghosts
Look in upon the battle. (95-103)

The confusion and horror across the battlefield was finally cleared by a bitter North wind which revealed all were dead except Arthur, Modred, and Bedivere. Arthur slew Modred with Excalibur, but received a deathblow from his nephew in return. As Arthur lay dying, he instructed Sir Bedivere to take Excalibur and throw it into the clear lake and then report back to Arthur what he had witnessed. But Bedivere could not bear to have the beautiful sword cast away and returned to his king without having completed the task. Three times Arthur sent Bedivere to cast the sword and finally, on the third attempt, Bedivere did indeed cast the sword into

the lake and as he did so, a beautiful arm “clothed in samite, mystic, wonderful, and caught him by the hilt, and brandished him / three times, and drew him under in the mere” (311-13). Similarly to Roland’s sword Durendal, we find Excalibur personified with human attributes, referring to the sword as “him,” a supernatural entity which is given to the supernatural Lady of the Lake who resides across the border in another world.

As Arthur passes away, a barge comes to meet him, occupied by three queens clothed in black with crowns of gold. Here we encounter the three women who control fate, who have come to help Arthur make the border crossing from one world into another. Arthur asks Bedivere to place him in the barge and then he tells Bedivere that he will travel

to the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound. (427-32)

Avalon was the name of the Otherworld in Celtic mythology and medieval romance (Abrams 1206 n2), a place of beauty where there is no suffering and it is always summer. As Bedivere watches the barge slowly sail away, he climbs as high as he can to watch until the boat becomes just a speck on the horizon. At that precise moment, the new sun rose bringing in the new year, another seasonal border that signifies a crossing from the old into the unknown new world.

The twentieth century poet William Butler Yeats wrote a poem called “The Secret Rose” (1896) which reflects how heavily the Irish poet was influenced by

the ancient Celtic stories. He drew upon the pagan myths to create this poem about beauty, a beauty that suffered along with mankind. The mystery and Otherworld feeling that surround the ancient texts provided a perfect tool for Yeats to instill a dreamlike imagery into his modern poetry.

. . . Thy great leaves enfold
The ancient beards, the helms of ruby and gold
Of the crowned Magi; and the king whose eyes
Saw the Pierced Hands and Rood of elder rise
In Druid vapor and make torches dim;
Till vain frenzy awoke and he died; and him
Who met Fand walking among flaming dew
By a gray shore where the wind never blew,
And lost the world and Emer for a kiss;
And him who drove the gods out of their liss,
And till a hundred morns had flowered red
Feasted, and wept the barrows of his dead;
. . . . (7-18)

In early Christian legend, it was said that King Conchobar died on the day of the crucifixion in a fit of rage upon hearing the news (Squire 155). Yeats changed the story so that instead, Conchobar sees the event in a vision raised by the magic of the Druids. He crossed the border from the real world into a dream world before dying in a “vain frenzy.” The hero Cúchulainn was seduced by the fairy Fand into following her into the Otherworld. Yeats depicts the Otherworld with vivid imagery: one can easily imagine a barefoot Fand gently stepping among “flaming dew” along a perfect beach with beautiful sand and no wind. Cúchulainn stayed in the Otherworld with Fand for one month before returning to his wife Emer, who berated him for his infidelity. Emer decreed Cúchulainn should stay with Fand but Fand realized she must stay in the Otherworld, so when her husband Manannán came to claim her, she left with him. All were deeply distraught and saddened by

the course of these events and so the Druids conjured a drink of forgetfulness for Cúchulainn so that he no longer remembered Fand, and gave a drink to Emer so she would forget her jealousy. Manannán then shook his cloak of invisibility between Cúchulainn and Fand so that they might never meet again (*Ancient Irish Tales* 197-8). “And him who drove the gods out of their liss” is a reference to the hero Caoilte who was one of only two Fenian survivors of the battle of Gabhra, the other being the famous poet Oisín, son of Finn, who was not present at the battle. The High Kings of Ireland and the Fenians were said to have fought the battle in A.D. 284. By this time, Finn had died, as had King Cormac (Squire 222). The primary protagonists were Oscar, grandson of Finn, and Cairbré, who in turn slew each other, similar to King Arthur and Modred. This Irish folklore was important to Yeats’s early aesthetic theories, examining the archetypal quality of mythology and the folk imagination.

With the decline of Epic and Romance genres and the rise of the novel, we discover border crossings captured in specific characters. In *Dracula* (1897), we have a being that remains the most prominent liminal icon in popular culture today. It is interesting that this intriguing character was *not* found in ancient Celtic or Norse literature but it is worth discussing here because it reflects the evolution of the border crossing through literary history. There are stories of warriors drinking the blood of their conquered enemy, and stories of fairies that would drink the blood of children to assimilate their purity, but no creature such as a vampire. That would come later and explode with Bram Stoker. The first description of Dracula tells us much of what we need to understand: “The mouth . . . was fixed and rather

cruel-looking, with peculiarly sharp white teeth; these protruded over his lips, whose remarkable ruddiness showed astonishing vitality in a man of his years. . . . The general effect was one of extraordinary pallor” (23). We later find that the Count has no reflection in a mirror, increasing Jonathan Harker’s “vague feeling of uneasiness” (30). The three female vampires in the service of Dracula who seductively attempt to feed on Jonathan are vividly described:

great dark piercing eyes that appeared almost red. . . . All three had brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. . . . There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. (43)

The repeated contrast between blood red lips and white teeth is another reminder of life and death – blood of life and white pallor of death appearing in these demons simultaneously. This contrast causes conflicting emotions in Jonathan: desire and fear manifested together. An excellent description of the border between life and death is the picture of Dracula in his grave:

He was either dead or asleep, I could not say which – for the eyes were open and stony, but without the glassiness of death – and the cheeks had the warmth of life through all their pallor, and the lips were as red as ever. But there was no sign of movement, no pulse, no breath, no beating of the heart. (54)

After becoming a vampire, Mina Harker’s friend Lucy is described in her coffin as more radiantly beautiful than ever and did not appear to be dead. Her lips were

redder than before and on her cheeks was a delicate blossom. As Dr. Van Helsing explains, “here, there is one thing which is different from all recorded: here is some dual life that is not as the common. [Lucy] was bitten by the vampire when she was in a trance and in a trance could he best come to take more blood. In trance she died, and in trance she is UnDead, too” (216). The “dual life” and title of “UnDead” are synonymous with the liminal, hovering in the threshold area “betwixt and between” living and dead. Mina Harker gives an excellent summary description of the power of the UnDead *nosferatu*:

They do not die like the bee when he sting once. He is only stronger; and being stronger, have yet more power to work evil. The vampire which is amongst us is of himself so strong in person as twenty men; he is of cunning more than mortal, for his cunning be growth of ages; he have still the aids of necromancy, which is, as his etymology imply, the divination by the dead, and all the dead he can come nigh to are for him at command; he is a brute, and more than brute: he is devil in callous . . . and he can appear at will when and where, and in any forms that are to him . . . he can direct the storm, the fog, the thunder, and he can at times vanish and come unknown. (253)

The vampire constantly experiences border crossings as it hovers between life and death, shifting between the two from moment to moment.

The themes associated with border crossings that have been discussed can all be found in the *Harry Potter* series, indicating the continued, current interest and fascination with Otherworld concepts. The world of Hogwarts is similar to the Otherworld in that it exists within the real world. Just as in ancient literature, we find wizards performing similar roles of shamans. The tale is full of shapeshifters, from Professor McGonagall who turns herself into a cat in *The Sorcerer's Stone*, to

Peter Pettigrew in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* who has been the Weasley's pet rat for twelve years. Professor Lupin, through no fault of his own, becomes a werewolf. Just as the Norse literature contains numerous stories of giants, we find the giants Hagrid and his half-brother Grawp fighting on the side of the students against the Death Eaters in *The Deathly Hallows*. "Fluffy," the three-headed dog reminiscent of Cerberus, is lulled to sleep by music, reminiscent of Sir Orfeo charming the beasts with his harp. Harry receives a cloak of invisibility for Christmas in *The Sorcerer's Stone*, just as Manawydan possessed in the Welsh epic stories. The *Mirror of Erised* shows an individual whatever his deepest wish or desire may be. In Lloyd Alexander's *Taran Wanderer*, the young hero Taran is on a quest of self-discovery and searches for the *Mirror of Llunet* which will show the person who looks into it whatever he seeks. As Sigurd fought the dragon Fafnir, so dragons play a large role in the Harry Potter series. Hagrid hatches a dragon he names Norbert and tries to keep it a secret, but Norbert ends up being sent to Romania to live in a colony with other dragons. Dragons are the first challenge the students must face in the Triwizard championship in *The Goblet of Fire*. Just as Hagen encourages drinking the blood of the enemy in the *Nibelungenlied* (293), so Voldemort feeds off the blood of the unicorns which can provide endless life. The headless tradition is alive and well in Harry Potter, with not only the ghost "Nearly Headless Nick" appearing as an integral part of Hogwarts, but in the early scenes of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry runs away from the Dursley's home and catches a ride on the magical Knight Bus that will take him to the Leaky Cauldron. A talking Rastafarian head on the bus provides extraneous commentary during the ride.

The divination abilities of the Druids live on in Professor Trelawney's class, where she asks the students to read the future in a cup of tea leaves. While much of Professor Trelawney's conjuring lacks any real magic behind it, much to the disgust of Harry's friend Hermione, there are flashes that show the audience she truly does have the power, such as when she sees the "Grim," a black dog which symbolizes death, in Harry's future. Professor Trelawney was also the one who pronounced the prophecy regarding Voldemort and Harry's strange connection with life and death. "Mad-Eye Moody" is an "auror," one who tracks down and catches dark, evil wizards, somewhat similar to the powers ascribed to the ancient Druids to foresee an enemy approaching. Dumbledore's *pensieve* is similar to the cauldrons of regeneration and inexhaustibility, a vat into which he deposits his memories so that they can be retrieved and viewed again later. The Room of Requirements provides whatever one needs and Harry along with "Dumbledore's Army" uses the room to train as wizards against the Dark Arts. Similarly, in the castle at Gwales in the Otherworld, Bran's head and his seven men live with everything they need – food, wine, entertainment – for eight years until someone opens the castle door and they are returned to reality. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, Snape makes the "Unbreakable Vow," swearing to protect Harry's nemesis Draco and kill Dumbledore. To break this vow means instant death for Snape. This is similar to the hero's *geis* or taboo of the ancient texts which he must not violate on pain of death. Instead of battles fought with spears and swords, wands are used for dueling, with the owners casting and directing spells at their enemies. The

similarities go on and on but the main point is to demonstrate how border crossings are alive and well in this enormously popular series.

The influence of border crossings maintains a permanent place in our culture through our Halloween customs. From the date we celebrate it (*Samhain*), Halloween presents the opportunity to pretend as we give life to various apparitions. Halloween offers the opportunity for children and adults to cross borders and become something they are not by disguising themselves, which is not so different from the ancients. The real difference lies in the fact that the ancients truly believed in border crossings with the Otherworld and treated them as ordinary occurrences. People today accept the supernatural influences in our world at Halloween as strictly make-believe. But the eeriness that exists on All Hallow's Eve, when pumpkins are carved into ghoulish, grinning, lighted beacons and children are turned loose in the dark of night to roam the neighborhoods, adds a feel of the gothic to this long-standing tradition.

Trick-or-Treating, Jack-o-Lanterns, bobbing for apples in a cauldron, and popular costumes portraying werewolves, witches, and monsters all have origins traceable to pagan literature. Trick-or-treating has been with us for hundreds of years. As Tad Tuleja speculates:

Majority opinion on the origins of trick or treat has it as a relic of the Celtic New Year. The ancient Celts believed that at Samhain the spirits of the dead returned to visit the living. To welcome them – and to protect themselves from supernatural mischief – people unbolted their doors, kept hearth fires burning, and set out gifts of food as propitiation. Later, they dressed up as spirits themselves, using mimicry as a

magical defense and demanding contributions from their neighbors for communal feasts. (82)

Bannatyne concurs that the Celts hid themselves in ghoulish disguise so that the spirits wandering about would mistake them for one of their own and pass by without incident, the forerunner of the modern custom of dressing up in Halloween costumes. The ancient Scots observed Samhain in a manner similar to the ancient Irish, owing to the Gaelic heritage of both. Their autumn festival was pre-Christian Celtic in origin, and is known in Scottish Gaelic as *Oidhche Shamhna*, the "*Summer's night*." During the Samhain fire festival, souls of the dead wandered the Earth and were free to return to the mortal world until dawn. Children who ventured out carried a traditional lantern (*samhnag*) with a devil face carved into it to frighten away the evil spirits (Bannatyne, *American Holiday* 15). Such Halloween lanterns were made from a turnip, or "Neep," with a candle lit in the hollow inside (Morton 128). These large turnips were also placed in windows to ward off unwelcome spirits. This was the beginning of the modern custom of carving Jack-O'-Lanterns, since pumpkins were much more plentiful in America and easier to carve. If the spirits got past the protection of the lanterns, the Scottish custom was to offer the spirits parcels of food to leave and spare the house another year, the historical beginning of passing out candy during Trick-or-Treating. Another custom is the Scottish practice of "guising" (dressing in disguise), where children would go door-to-door and offer entertainment of various sorts: a song, a dance, or a skit. If the entertainment was enjoyed, the children were rewarded with

gifts of sweets, fruits, or money, once again showing the origins of Trick-or-Treating.

As centuries passed, the Scots developed their own unique All Hallow's Eve traditions, many of which were based on divination rituals passed down through the ages. These divination rituals encouraged the mingling of Otherworld spirits with the living. The Scottish bard Robert Burns portrayed several of the eerie customs in his 1785 poem "Hallowe'en." In the opening stanza, the fairies danced on their favorite green hills and caverns in celebration of this special night. The locals gathered at the ancient seat of the ancestors of Robert the Bruce, the Earls of Carrick, to perform their ceremonies. Contacting the Otherworld to seek information about future husbands or wives or vocation was popular with the young people in the poem. A couple placed two nuts together in the fire to roast. If they separated under the heat, the couple was destined to split. If they simmered alongside together, it boded better for the relationship to last. Sometimes Otherworld spirits were instrumental in the ceremony. An individual went to the barn alone, leaving the barn doors open, and picked up a winnowing fan and mimicked the action of winnowing the grain to the wind. After repeating this three times, an apparition would pass through the barn outfitted in the garb of the seeker's future career. If one ran around a "bear-stack" three times, on the last lap, the ghost of a future lover would be revealed in the seeker's arms. A girl went to a south running spring where three lords' lands meet and dipped her left shirt sleeve in the water. She went home and hung the wet sleeve before a fire to dry. As she lay awake, sometime near the liminal period of midnight, an apparition resembling

her future groom would appear and turn the sleeve, as if to dry the other side. These examples from Burns's poem show Otherworld spirits making border crossings into the real world on Halloween night when the veil between worlds is at its thinnest.

Border crossing events have remained a constant in literature through the ages. Beginning with the epics and oral tradition, to children's stories with witches and fairies, to modern adult fiction, readers and listeners have been alternately thrilled, fascinated, and sometimes amused when the supernatural is introduced. Loved by both children and adults, the *Harry Potter* series is a prime example of the enduring appeal of border crossings in all their manifestations.

Scholars studying works utilizing border crossings as an analysis methodology broaden their opportunities for engaging with the literature. Border crossings encourage analysis of binaries such as life and death, dark and light, the empowered and the weak, and good and evil, along with the unusual, simultaneous coexistence of these binaries. Realizing that a creature can exist simultaneously as two separate entities begs the additional question of what mood is established by each of the entities. A very different mood is established when Cúchulainn battles as himself than when he battles as a monster in his battle frenzy. Living, talking heads have a lot more interesting things to say than their dead, buried corpses. Border crossings also take us into liminal space, that thin threshold that exists betwixt and between the binaries. Engaging with literary works in this manner enables scholars to uncover more of the mysterious and the ominous, enhancing

powerful, sometimes subtle themes. Haunting occurrences on Samhain are made even more so since they occur when the veil between worlds is permeable.

Discovering the Crossings

The Otherworld is separated from the real world to provide the ancients a satisfactory explanation of what happens to them when they die, as well as explain the mysteries in their world. The Celts immediately cross over to be reborn in the Otherworld. The best dead warriors of the Norse are selected by the Valkyries to cross into Valhalla, joining Odin to fight against the frost giants and other evil creatures at the end of the world. The others descend to the realm of the goddess Hel, the Norse world of the dead.

Border crossings fall into four main genres: seasonal, physical, mystical, and temporal. Just as it is today, the Celtic year was divided into four seasons and each part of their year was preceded by a great religious festival. The first occurred on 1 February, known as *Imbolc*, and was the feast sacred to the goddess Brigit, later taken over by St Brigid, her Christian successor. The second festival, *Beltaine*, took place on 1 May, with its eve known in some regions as Walpurgis Nacht. The third occurred on 1 August, the Feast of *Lughnasa*, in honor of the sun god Lugh. The fourth festival, which was in fact the first in the Celtic year since it marked its beginning, was that of *Samhain* on 1 November, the most important of the four, when the Otherworld became visible to mankind, and all the forces of the supernatural were let loose upon the human world (Dillon, *Celtic Realms* 108). Most things of mythological importance and ritual significance were alleged to

have occurred then. It was the end of one pastoral year and the beginning of the next. At Samhain, the Dagda, the tribal god of Ireland, ritually mated with the Morrígan, the raven war-goddess, whose influence on the battlefield was accomplished by magical interference during the fray rather than by strength of weapons.

The borders or boundaries that separate worlds can be manmade or natural physical barriers such as the ocean. As Kelley cites, many believed that “in the sea was the Otherworld, a green fairy island reposing in sunlight and beauty on ocean’s calm breast” (103). She goes on to note this was the abode of the Druids, and hence of all supernatural beings who were “Something betwixt heaven and hell, / Something that neither stood nor fell” (103). As Rees states, “the boundaries between territories, like boundaries between years and between seasons, are lines along which the supernatural intrudes through the surface of existence.” The fact that un-baptized children in the Christian era used to be buried in boundary fences suggests that these lines, like the un-baptized child, belonged to both worlds (Rees 94). The importance of thresholds and boundaries can be seen in archeological as well as written sources. Prehistoric burial mounds are often surrounded by ditches, post rows, or stonewalls, as are churchyard cemeteries. Such boundaries work both ways, to protect the dead from the living, and vice versa, as noted by Arnold in “Halloween Customs in the Celtic World.” The Celts were an extremely superstitious people, beholden to their gods, the spirits, and their priests. Their lives were regimented by rituals and taboos. Even the landscape was suffused with the supernatural, and dotted with ritual enclosures or shrines (James 87).

Territories had their boundaries ritually redefined every year, just as the seasons did. In many parts of ancient Ireland, May Day was spent mending fences, and “beating the bounds,” a ceremony where boys armed with boughs of willow or birch would beat the boundary markers of the parish to ensure clear lines of division. In medieval times, a castle’s moat was more or less standard equipment for protection, but in ancient northern folklore, running water was a barrier to spirits and ghosts (Liggins 97). One means of preventing the return of a dead person’s spirit was to ensure that the burial route crossed over bridges or stepping stones across streams, since spirits could not cross open, running water. This mysterious character of boundaries which usually followed rivers and streams helps explain why so many combats were fought at fords, a natural battle-line, which was a recurrent feature in ancient epic battles.

In Wales, it was firmly believed in former times that on All Hallows Eve (Samhain), the spirit of a departed person was to be seen on every cross-road and on every stile. In Irish tradition, the power of fairies could be thwarted at cross-roads and people abducted by fairies could be freed there (Puhval 169, 173). Considered boundaries between this world and the next, cross-roads were meeting places where the dead and the living were thought to be able to communicate, according to Arnold’s “Halloween Customs.” Fairies are to be met at cross-roads, where happenings such as funerals may be witnessed weeks before they really occur (Kelley 63). In Old Europe, corpses of suicides were buried at cross-roads so that their spirits would be “bound” there, and for similar reasons, gallows were often erected at cross-roads.

Other physical boundaries included fairy paths, the paths known to be preferred for fairy travel. These typically linked fairy forts (stones arranged in circular earthwork), eerie mountains and hills, thorn bushes, springs, lakes, and strange rock outcrops. In Ireland and Celtic lands, there were fairy paths related to what are now called “leylines” which although invisible, nevertheless had such perceived geographical relevance in the minds of the ancients that building practices were adopted to ensure the paths were not obstructed, as noted by Paul Devereux in “Where the Leylines Led.” The ancients acknowledged the significance of the fairy borders and were careful to avoid crossing them lest they find themselves unwanted occupants of the Otherworld.

Mystical boundaries also existed. The race of gods known as the Tuatha de Danann in Celtic literature lived in *sidhe* (mounds). It was in a mist that the Tuatha de Danann came to Ireland (MacCulloch 367). The idea that the Otherworld was co-existent with this world and hidden in a mist is perhaps connected with the belief in the magical powers of the gods. As the Druids could raise a mist at will, so too might the gods, who then created a temporary Elysium in it. From such a mist upon a hill, supernatural beings often emerged to meet mortals (MacCulloch 372). The mist served as a border between the real world and the mysterious Otherworld. The Norse gods called the *Aesir* lived in Asgard and were separated from the world of men, Midgard, by the mystical rainbow bridge Bifröst.

Temporal borders were very significant to the ancients. Many supernatural events occurred at midnight, a critical boundary in the day. Midnight is neither yesterday, today, nor tomorrow, yet it is all of those things at once. As a moment

of transition, midnight has often attracted supernatural activities and rituals. Since it was both here and there, but neither here nor there, midnight was a time when the possibility existed for the Otherworld and its occupants to enter the world of the ancients (Santino, *Hallowed Eve* 126). Midnight was the “witching hour,” fairies and phantoms became visible, and to visit a churchyard at this hour was a challenge to be reckoned with (Rees 92). Midday and midnight, like sunrise and sunset, were moments when the veil between the real world and the unseen world was very thin. Fairy funerals were to be seen at noon, and it was a principal moment for banishing fairy “changelings.” In Norse mythology, the ancients believed the end of the universe would come at Ragnarök, the “Twilight of the Gods,” according to Snorri’s translation. Twilight was the temporal threshold which signified the ending of day, the onset of darkness; or in this case, the ending of a way of life and the darkness of an unknown new universe awaiting the survivors.

With this overview of the different genres of border crossings, it is important to realize that traversing any of these planes meant departing the real world for the Otherworld, or possibly bringing aspects of the Otherworld back across the threshold into the real world. As a general rule, border crossings were not fortuitous events and mortals took care to guard against unwarranted crossings. But there is an inherent challenge in assessing the significance of the crossings to the ancients, since theirs was an oral culture and relatively few texts exist. Those that do exist were subjected to filtering by the early Christian clerics who transcribed the works.

Looking at these early scribes, much of the literary evidence from which we derive a great deal of information about the Celtic past was written down in Ireland during a post-pagan period, and under the aegis of the Christian Church. These Irish clerics, Christian but proud of their heritage, wrote down many traditional stories, epics, and poems, including *The Táin*. These are precious survivals of Celtic mythology and oral literature of a kind which has been largely lost elsewhere (James 153). The clerics lovingly preserved these traditions of an age long past, humanizing and sophisticating the gods (Dillon, *Celtic Realms* 146). The clerics' efforts to ensure the continued existence of these unique stories in writing is commendable, since the most important source that should have been at their disposal was lacking:

texts written in the Celtic language by the Celts themselves, which would have provided the Celtic viewpoint from *within* the society. These simply do not exist. The Celts did not care to commit their laws, genealogies, history, poetry, or religious prospects to writing. They regarded them in a semi-sacred light. . . . [Under prescription] of the Druids, the Celts were unwilling for their traditional lore and learning to be made available to blasphemous outsiders; the secrets were jealously guarded by those responsible for their preservation. Moreover, the cultivation of these stories to memory for oral recitation is one of the most characteristic features of their culture. This practice still persists today and is held in high honor in the Celtic-speaking areas of the modern world. (Ross 134-5)

The resulting manuscripts of the scribes' hard work were not produced until quite late. In fact, none of the narrative texts survives in a manuscript written before the

end of the eleventh century (Ó Cathasaigh 24). The original manuscripts provide the foundation on which future border crossing themes are emulated.

The authors of the tales were not named, and the manuscript transmission was a creative process comprising the expansion and contraction, reshaping and redaction of content, much of which must have been received into the literature from indigenous oral tradition, but some of which was learned ecclesiastical provenance (Ó Cathasaigh 24). As transference of material from oral to written form occurred, the transmission was necessarily made in the first place by people whose minds had been opened to the great world of Classical and Christian literature. This experience included direct knowledge of a certain range of Latin literature, knowledge of Greek epic, and knowledge of the scriptures. The transference makes it difficult to measure the degree to which any given story related of these characteristics existed in pre-Christian oral tradition (Carney 321-2). When the clerics authored these writings with a traditional Irish background, they were naturally concerned with seeing that the material was presented as literature, and that the presentation was worthy of the new degree of sophistication which their society had attained by the very fact of becoming literate (Carney 277-8). The author of *The Táin*, in creating his epic, had to visualize the scene in the pagan Ireland of six centuries earlier. In presenting the pre-Christian past, the clerics drew not only on native material but upon their total literary experience. The scribe's direct involvement with his material was not confined to the level of critical commentary. The clerics also revised and reinvented that which had come down to them: lists of kings and heroes were brought down to the scribe's own

time. Thus many scribes “updated” their exemplars (Mhaonaigh 36-7). Research in the area of border crossings must begin with the transcripts of these early epics. Pagan stories of border crossings have a very different view of the themes than works written in the medieval Christian environment. The clerics took care to transcribe border crossings in the environment where the people actually believed an Otherworld existed as part of their own world.

We can assume there was a considerable degree of overlap between the early Christian Irish clerics and the patron-appointed *filid*, the elite class of Irish pagan poet society. The patrons of the *filid* were either the kings and nobles or the church. There is a good deal of evidence that the clerics, the *filid*, and the jurists exercised their respective roles within a single literary and scholarly establishment, possibly working as a trio to produce the manuscripts we have today. The work of bilingual (Latin and Irish) Irish scholars, which had its beginnings in the invention of the ogham alphabet, continued with the adaptation of the Latin alphabet for the purpose of writing Irish (Ó Cathasaigh 20).

Eddic and skaldic poetry, Snorri’s *Edda* and *Ynglinga Saga* are the most important direct sources of Scandinavian mythology and each has its history and is anchored, either by recording or composition, in thirteenth-century Christian Iceland (Lindow 35). The conversion to Christianity in Iceland followed a fascinating course. Missionaries were active in the latter decades of the tenth century, but so were their pagan opponents. As the two sides approached the *Althing* in the year 1000, it appeared war might break out. It was agreed that a single arbiter should choose one religion for the entire land, and the pagan

Lawspeaker Thorgeir was chosen. After spending a night under his cloak, he emerged and decreed that Iceland should be Christian (Lindow 9). This paved the way for a Christian chieftain and Althing Lawspeaker named Snorri Sturluson to document stories of the Norse gods and heroes (Snorri xiii).

Understanding that the works which are referenced in this paper have been submitted to radical editing does nothing to detract from the study of the literature as we possess it today. The editing is given due credit for capturing to the largest degree the aspects that are most important in this investigation – that of the border crossing event. Not to go forward with this examination would indeed be a loss, since *The Táin*, *The Eddas*, and *The Mabinogion* are seldom included in scholarly analysis of epics and the epic genre, where critics largely focus on classical epics and the heroic attributes of Achilles, Hector, Aeneas, and Beowulf. Critics tend only to examine *The Eddas* for the heroic stories of Sigurd and Brynhild, skipping the foundation stories of the gods and goddesses. One reason the northern epics tend to be overlooked may be the lack of original texts, compared to the large extant volume of Greek and Roman epics. These northern epics provide the original border crossing themes where we want to begin our focused study.

It is not in any examination by epic critics that we find analysis of border crossings, but rather in Halloween history readers and encyclopedias, where the origins of modern Halloween traditions and stories are traced. The problem with these Halloween histories is that the vast majority of excerpts cited in these works are from post-medieval authors, neglecting the earlier epics and the foundation stories with which border crossings began. On the rare occasion when a story from

a pagan work is included as a border crossing occurrence, only one instance is usually cited, most often in support of an historical and anthropological analysis of pagan beliefs. For example, when discussing border crossings at Samhain, “The Adventures of Nera” is frequently mentioned but no other examples, leaving an inadequate sampling to make an assessment of how important border crossings were to the ancients.

The following chapters will highlight stories primarily from the northern epics to demonstrate the preponderance of different types of border crossings. The third chapter identifies the ancient peoples referenced in the study, and establishes the historical and mythological setting in which the border crossings took place. The fourth chapter highlights examples of border crossings at Samhain to show how Samhain is the time when the opportunity for border crossings is at its peak. Chapter five looks at life-altering cauldrons and potions to show how they have the power to affect life through magical world attributes. Chapter six identifies examples of talking heads and warriors who experience border crossings. Talking heads are specific examples of liminal entities straddling the border between life and death, and battle can spur warriors to take on attributes of Otherworld creatures/monsters. Chapter seven investigates the tradition of three women who have the ability to control fate, an Otherworld attribute. *Sir Orfeo*, *SGGK*, *Macbeth*, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, *Dracula*, and Lloyd Alexander’s *Chronicles of Prydain* series are some of the works that will be referenced throughout. As we elaborate on the supernatural tradition within the epics of Ireland, Iceland, and Wales, tracing the different thematic manifestations of border

crossings in the extant literature, the argument is summarized with a final statement of how these themes continue to play a significant role in modern culture.

Chapter Three: Shamans, Gods, and Goddesses: “Super” Humans Across the Border

This chapter establishes the historical setting necessary to understand the significance of border crossings to the ancients. Otherworld beings, as well as humans who are imbued with Otherworld powers, create the foundation around which supernatural aspects of the ancient literature is grounded. Scholars may observe how important the historical beliefs of the ancients were relative to myths and legends that were native to their culture, since historical setting and environment of an era continues to shape belief systems written in modern literature as well.

The inhabitants of the Otherworld included fairies, gods, and goddesses. Certain humans had such awesome power that they were thought to have one foot in the Otherworld as well. Druids and Seers were among this class. Druid shamans, the gods, and other wise figures were revered in ancient literature because they possessed knowledge hidden from everyone else, knowledge obtained from the Otherworld. For the purposes of this study, we will include Asgard, the home of the Norse gods, as well as Niflheim, the Underworld of the Norse gods ruled by Hel, in the category of the Otherworld, even though the Otherworld was predominately a Celtic concept. To understand how these powerful shamans and

deities became an integral part of Celtic and Norse mythology and pseudo-history, an historical overview is necessary to grasp fully their impacts on border crossings.

The Celts were an ancient people who lived in Central Europe 1200 BC – AD 400. The Proto-Celtic people of the Early Iron Age lived in what was known as the Hallstatt area of Central Europe. Later came the Iron Age and evidence of Celtic occupation was found in the La Tène area of Switzerland. By 450 BC, the Celts had migrated into what is now Great Britain (Davies 14-24). We are mostly concerned with the Celts who settled in Ireland and Wales, as those are the countries whose epics we are examining. Evidence of these insular Celts can only be confirmed from about AD 400 with the ogham inscriptions which were discovered in these areas. During this early period, Ireland was divided into the regions of Connacht, Munster, Ulster, Leinster, and Meath.

The oldest Celtic story we possess is *The Book of Dun Cow* and the story of “The Cattle Raid of Cooley.” Assigned to the first century, this “Ulster cycle” story is so-named because its hero belongs to the Ulaid, a people of northeastern Ireland. Their king was Conchobar, and his palace was at Emain Macha, now marked by the remains of Navan Fort. His warriors were collectively known as the “Red Branch.” The central figure of the cycle is Cúchulainn, often called the Irish Achilles, who was the son of the god Lugh. His enemies were Ailill and Medb, king and queen of Connacht, and their daughter was Finnabair, known in Welsh as Guinevere (Dillon, *Early Irish* 1). Cúchulainn fought in single combat against all of Medb’s warriors because his Red Branch companions were suffering “the pangs of Ulster,” a magical weakness conjured from the Otherworld that fell on the men

of Ulster every year for five days. This curse was laid upon Conchobar's lineage by the goddess Macha, who had been mistreated by one of his ancestors.

Another legendary tribe significant to the study of Otherworld adventures in the extant literature involves the *fian*, meaning "a band of warriors," and the Fianna were led by Finn mac Cumhaill, the other great Irish hero. Finn's son was the great poet Oisín (known from the Scottish MacPherson's *Ossian*) and Oscar was his grandson. The stories of Finn took place mainly in Leinster and Munster (Dillon, *Early Irish* 32-4). Finn's heroics are found in "The Boyhood Deeds of Finn mac Cumhaill," and in "The Colloquy with the Ancients." The Fenian cycle is traditionally assigned to the third century AD, three hundred years later than the Ulster cycle (Hull 2).

As we observe border crossing events that these warrior tribes experienced as discussed in forthcoming chapters, it will be apparent that in the actual conduct of battle, the Celts took the heads of their vanquished enemies as trophies. This practice also played a profound religious and superstitious role in Celtic everyday life. The heads were often placed in the sanctuaries of the Celts and offered to the gods. The great stone shrine at Roquepertuse, the religious center of the ancient Celts located in southern France, had skull-niches in the walls for display of human heads (Ross 72).

Our border crossing study will examine how taboo played an all-important role in the warriors' conduct. Just as truth was considered to be a vital, magical force, so was the concept of *geis* (taboo) held in high esteem in early Celtic society. *Geis* could either consist of the necessity of doing something specific, or it could be

the complete prohibition from doing a particular thing. Violation of one's *geis* could lead to serious consequences and even to death (Ross 115). For example, it was *geis* for Cúchulainn to eat dog's flesh, and for Conaire, whose father was a bird, to hunt birds. The king of Connaught could not make a circuit of Cruachan on the feast of Samhain (Dillon, *Celtic Realms* 106).

Not only was *geis* an all-consuming rule around which the Celts organized their lives, but their religion was also an absolute, integral part of their day-to-day existence. While pagan Celts did not appear to have a formally defined system of religion, as the Greeks and Norse did with beliefs centered on their supreme gods Zeus and Odin, their religion still governed every aspect of their universe (Joyce 219). According to Ross:

Perhaps even more than other ancient peoples, the Celts were so completely engrossed with, and preoccupied by, their religion and its expression that it was constantly and positively [at] the forefront of their lives. The deities and the Otherworld in which they were believed to reside . . . were not mere academic concepts to be remembered at convenient intervals. . . . They were ever-present, sometimes menacing, always dangerous. When placated, helpful and generous; when offended, vengeful and without mercy. The everyday life of the Celts included the supernatural equally with the natural, the divine with the mundane; for them, the Otherworld was as real as the tangible physical world and as ever-present. (133)

The Druids were the ministers of religion among the ancient Celtic nations. They used no images or objects in their worship, nor did they meet in temples for performance of their sacred rites. An encircled area of stones constituted a sacred place. These sacred circles were normally situated near some stream, or under the

shadow of a grove (Bulfinch 358). The Roman Tacitus tells us how shortly after Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC, the Isle of Man (Angelsey), the great stronghold of Druidism, was attacked and its sacred groves cut down, its alters laid level, and its priests put to sword (*Celtic Mythology* 315).

As the religious leaders in pagan Ireland, the Druids occupied an exalted place: no one, including the king, could speak before the Druid had spoken. Conchobar mac Nessa, King of Ulster, had the powerful Cathbad as his Chief Druid, making a powerful ruling combination of both religious and military leadership within Ulster. He was also the King's father (Ross 39). The accounts of Roman writers give us an idea of the nature of the Druids and especially of the high estimation in which they were held. These shamans were at once the priests, physicians, wizards, diviners, theologians, scientists, and historians of their tribes. All spiritual power and all human knowledge were vested in them, and they ranked second only to the kings and chiefs. They were freed from all contributions to the state, whether by taxes or service in war, so that they might better apply themselves to their divine offices. Their decisions were absolutely final and those who disobeyed them risked excommunication (*Celtic Mythology* 33).

In practicing religion, the powerful Druids were closely affiliated with the natural world and they used natural elements to facilitate their worship. The word Druid is connected with the Celtic term for oak, and trees and sacred groves loomed large in Celtic religious life. The Irish Druids worshipped the yew, the hazel, and the rowan-tree and employed them in many of their religious ceremonies. During battle, Druids on both sides made immense fires of rowan-tree

boughs. The fires were lit with great incantations and each fire was intended to exercise a sinister influence on the opposing army. From the movements of the smoke and flames, the Druids forecasted the outcome of the war (Joyce 236).

The Celts idolized their Druids to such a high degree that not only did they honor them as divine religious leaders, but they also granted to the Druids status as great magicians. According to legends, Druids could raise clouds and mists, and bring down showers of fire and blood; they could cast a spell on an individual or an entire army, producing a withering effect on the men. The Druids could give a drink of forgetfulness to erase the memory of any particular event (Joyce 223-8). These shamans could produce a *féth-fíada* (magic fog) which rendered people invisible. Every *sídh* had a *féth-fíada* around it, concealing it from human sight (Joyce 246). An important function of the Druids was divination, practiced by the ancient Celts during most significant affairs. Queen Medb, before setting out on the *Táin* expedition, conferred with her Druid to gain an accurate battle forecast from his divination rituals. Since the Druids passed their wisdom from one generation to the next in the form of memorized verse, their secrets ultimately died with them.

Lastly, in addition to their religious and wizard roles, an important function of the Druids was teaching: they were employed to educate the children of kings and chiefs (Joyce 237). Novices were expected to memorize a great number of verses, laws, histories, magic formulas, and other traditions. It could sometimes take as long as twenty years for a Druid to complete his studies so training often began in boyhood (James 91). We know little detail of the famous teaching of the

Druids, since their doctrines were never put into writing. As we shall see in the forthcoming chapters, the Druids experience border crossing events that place them in the category of liminal beings, using their powers to filter the supernatural to and from the Otherworld. Unlike the Druids of Britain, the Druids of Ireland avoided slaughter at the hands of the Romans, and Ireland remained a purely Celtic area because the Romans never invaded west of Britain across the Irish Sea.

For the non-religious highest class of the ancient Celts, hunting and cattle-raiding were the chief employment of the nobles (Ross 25). Board-games were a common past-time. The game most frequently mentioned is *fidchell* (Welsh *gwyddbwyll*), a board game somewhat resembling chess. At home, the Celts listened to the poems of the *filid* (poets) and the bards. Their Otherworld beliefs could have been reinforced with stories of the fairy people who appeared as noble beings and occasionally mixed with men and women, and even intermarried with them. But the enchanted people of the *sídh* retained a special stateliness of form and expertise in magical arts which marked them as being above the imperfections of mortal life (Hull 23). They became the liminal beings who occupied an intermediate position between the spiritual and the corporeal in the Otherworld. These poets' stories portrayed the Celtic Otherworld as an idealized version of the real world: everyone was beautiful, there was an abundance of beautiful things, and the joys of life were endless. Sickness, age, and decay were banished. Mortal visitors often found the Otherworld a source of wisdom and were impressed by the order and harmony there. The rulers of the Otherworld, not always named, appeared wise, generous, and peace-loving.

The Otherworld residents, as well as the Norse gods, were most often depicted as having human attributes, although those of greatly enhanced humans. Paradoxically, the people of the sídh had no physical strength for fighting: Pwyll was asked to fight on behalf of the Otherworld ruler Arawn, and Cúchulainn was asked to fight on behalf of the fairy lord Labraid Luathlam. The people of the sídh were distinguished primarily by their power of transformation: they moved invisibly, or they turned themselves (and others) into birds and animals. However, they exerted no moral authority and while they could injure and heal, they did not have that power over life and death characteristic of the Greek Olympians. Often they seemed just like ordinary humans (*Early* 15).

To fully comprehend the border crossing discussions in the following chapters, it is necessary to summarize how the Tuatha de Danann became the people of the sídh, the Otherworld inhabitants. The battles between immortals, followed by battles with humans, are frequently cited in the ancient texts, so it is useful to recognize the history of the tribes being referenced. Just as the Greek Olympians struggled with the giants, and the Norse Aesir fought the Vanir, the Celts experienced warfare between two superhuman hosts. On one side stood the gods of day, light, life, fertility, wisdom, and good called the Tuatha de Danann; on the other, the demons of night, darkness, death, barrenness, and evil called the Fomor (*Celtic Mythology* 45). Prior to leaving their enchanted northern islands, the Tuatha de Danann made an alliance with the Fomorian. The Fomor were represented as half human, half monster, with one hand, one leg and three rows of teeth. Their leader Balor had one eye in the middle of his forehead. To seal the

peace agreement, the daughter of Balor the Fomorian was given to Cian of the Tuatha. They had a child named Lugh of the Long Arm. The Tuatha king was Nuada and he brought his gods from four mythical cities where they had learned poetry and magic. They brought to Ireland their four chief treasures: from Finias came Nuada's sword, from whose stroke no one ever escaped or recovered; from Glorias, Lugh's terrible lance; from Murias, the Dagda's cauldron; and from Falias, the Stone of Fáil, better known as the Stone of Destiny, which afterwards fell into the hands of the early kings of Ireland (MacKillop, "Tuatha Dé Danann").

As the ancient historical text "The Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh" tells us, the Tuatha landed in a mist on the coast of Ireland on the mystical first of May (Beltaine) with a great fleet, planning to seize the region from the Fir Bolgs, the current inhabitants of southern Ireland (*Celtic Mythology* 60-1). They fought the Fir Bolgs at Magh Tuireadh (Moytura) and the battle went on for four days with terrible slaughter on both sides until the Tuatha were finally victorious. The Fir Bolg retired to the islands of Aran and Man. But King Nuada of the Tuatha had lost his arm in the battle and was therefore no longer fit to rule. Leadership was given to Bres whom the Tuatha had adopted, but whose father was a Fomorian. Bres oppressed the people and allowed the Fomorians to exact tribute from them. The alliance was broken and a second battle was fought between the Tuatha and the Fomorians (Dillon, *Early Irish* 58). The blinding of the terrible Balor turned the fortunes of the fight, for the Fomorii wavered and the war-goddess Morrígan came and encouraged the Tuatha with a song, so that they took fresh heart and drove the Fomorii headlong back to their country beneath the sea. This was the Second

Battle of Moytura the Northern, to distinguish it from the other battle fought against the Fir Bolgs farther to the south (*Celtic Mythology* 91).

Two additional battles were then fought between the Tuatha and the humans, and in both, the gods were beaten by the mortal Milesians (*Celtic Mythology* 102). Defeated and disheartened, dispossessed of upper earth, the gods had to seek new homes. A council was convened and some decided to seek refuge in a paradise overseas. Of these divine immigrants, the principal was Manannán mac Lir and his home became the Isle of Man. He had three legs on which he rolled along on land, wheel-like, surrounded by a magical mist. Manannán also kept the Isle of Man itself always under mists raised by his wizard arts (Hull 20). Residences still had to be found for the gods who refused to leave, and the Dagda, their new king, proceeded to assign to each of those who stayed in Ireland a sídh. These sídhe were barrows, each being the door to an underground realm of inexhaustible splendor and delight (*Celtic Mythology* 106).

Dealing with deities, and perhaps a host of other spirits and supernatural forces, was a serious business for the Celts, since these divine entities were believed to be a common part of Celtic everyday life and must be taken into account at all times. Lugh, whose name means “shining light,” was worshipped across the Celtic world as the sun god (James 88). The goddess of war in Ireland was the Morrígan (great queen). The Morrígan was one of the early pan-Celtic divinities, and is also considered the forerunner of Morgan le Fay of the Arthurian cycle (James 144). Another Celtic goddess was Brigit, goddess of poetry and crafts, and daughter of the Dagda. The Dagda was the most prominent of the older

gods. His name literally means “the good god.” The Dagda was a figure of immense power, armed with a magic, eight-pronged war club and owner of the Undry cauldron. The club was supposed to be able to kill nine men with one blow, but with the handle he could return the slain to life. The cauldron was said to be bottomless, from which no man left unsatisfied. He also possessed Uaithne, a richly ornamented living harp made of oak which, when the Dagda played it, put the seasons in correct order (*Celtic Mythology* 49).

The Norse also possessed a cadre of gods and goddesses to which they paid homage. Iceland has been inhabited since AD 800. The people worshipped many different gods, but the primary Norse deities were worshipped from about AD 800 – 1000 when Scandinavian seafarers explored, raided, and settled distant lands to include previously uninhabited Iceland. Old Norse was the language spoken throughout Scandinavia during the Viking period and the two *Eddas* were written in Old Icelandic, a form of Old Norse that had changed little from the time Iceland was settled. The content of the *Edda* did not go through the intermediate stage of being written in Latin, the language of the church, as did most other non-Icelandic writings that gave information about Norse myth and legend. Snorri authored the *Prose Edda* between 1222 and 1241, and the *Poetic Edda* was written earlier in the same century.

In the Norse realm of Asgard, Odin was the chief of the gods, leader of the Aesir. He was the god of war, poetry, trickery, and wisdom. He often appeared as a patron of human heroes. Odin’s son Thor was the patron of farmers and sailors. Armed with his mighty hammer and his huge size, Thor often fought the giants.

Loki was a trickster and a troublemaker. He was Odin's foster brother, but he easily switched loyalties between the gods and the giants. Loki fought on the side of the giants at Ragnarök and was father to the monsters Fenrir wolf, the Midgard serpent, and Hel, the goddess of death. Hel herself was a liminal creature, half corpse-blue and half human-pink. Frigg was the wife of Odin and the leading goddess of the Aesir. She was primarily known as the suffering mother of Baldr, who was accidentally killed by his blind brother Hod with a mistletoe dart in a trick orchestrated by Loki (*Poetic Edda* xv).

One of the most important of the Aesir was Heimdall, a boundary figure who was the guardian of the gods and sat at the edge of Asgard to guard the bridge Bifröst from mountain giants. His other main action involved a temporal boundary, namely his sounding of the Gjallarhorn to signal the changing of the world at the beginning of Ragnarök. He needed less sleep than a bird. Heimdall and Loki squared off in the final battle and killed one another.

Ragnarök was comprised of two parts and each represented a border crossing. The battle between the gods and the giants/monsters demonstrated the collapse of the divisions between realms, allowing evil creatures to access the Otherworld of Asgard. The second border crossing involved rebirth, as the earth arose from the sea, and a new generation of gods inhabited it. New borders had to be defined to surround and protect this new land.

The destruction of life did not necessarily identify its final end. The Celts apparently had no conception of Heaven or Hell as a reward or punishment for their conduct during life: rebirth into the afterlife was thought to be automatic. Caesar

records this scope in *De Bello Gallico* Book VI, Chapter XIV: “As one of their leading dogmas,” he says, “they inculcate this: that souls are not annihilated but pass after death from one body to another, and they hold that by this teaching, men are much more encouraged to valor, through disregarding the fear of death.” Death did not mean the absolute end for the Nordic people either, but rather the transition into a different kind of existence. Their burial customs provided no information regarding the exact kind of life after death the Norse believed in, nor whether they believed the existence took the form of a soul or a physical entity. Christian documentation on the subject depicts the following picture of the corpse: the dead person is alive and lives in the grave with full physical qualities. He is directly in touch with the world of the living. He prophesies what will happen in the future, defends his burial mound against grave robbers, and terrorizes his surroundings as a *draugr* (ghost). The living dead looks exactly like his corpse, so that a drowned man appears to be totally wet, and those who have been slain appear bloody, complete with wounds (Simek 57-8). In the old Norse poem *The Waking of Angantyr*, the shield woman, Hervor, arrives on an eerie island to find fires around the berserkers’ graves with the graves standing open and the dead standing beside their graves. As liminal places, on the threshold between the living and the dead, burial-mounds are places where supernatural incursions and border crossings often occur (*Poetic Edda* n280).

All Nordic people recognized a range of spirits dwelling in particular objects or places, such as stones, trees, groves, waterfalls, houses, and small idols. Forms of familiar ancestor worship occurred among all the Nordic groups to

varying degrees and often took place on or near the grave. Dead relatives remained valued members of the clan and were venerated at sacred sites, often burial grounds or shrines near the home. The dead were seen as essential guardians, ensuring that family members upheld the rights and responsibilities incumbent upon the clan. Dead and living were united in adherence to a single code of honor against which neither the living nor the dead dared transgress (Dubois 75). At burial mounds, the separation of borders was weak and interactions between the living and their dead ancestors were frequent.

The Einherjar, “those who fight alone,” were the warriors slain in battle who were brought to Valhalla by the Valkyries after their deaths. In this warriors’ paradise, they spent their days in battle, but in the evenings they drank mead served by the Valkyries. Each day, the Einherjar ate meat from a constantly renewed boar (Simek 71). At Ragnarök, the Einherjar went to battle on the side of the gods against enemies like Fenrir wolf and the Midgard serpent. The Einherjar were liminal beings, neither alive nor dead, and this half-life provided an advantage over others who died and went to permanency in the Underworld, Hel. There was a fence around Hel called Helgrind, creating a border which no one who passed through the gate of Hel could ever cross again (Simek 138). Ragnarök literally means “Final Destiny of the Gods” but most follow Snorri’s later translation, “Twilight of the Gods,” which is also the name Wagner gave to the fourth opera *Götterdämmerung* in his German *Ring of the Nibelungs*. Ragnarök describes the Nordic concept of the downfall of the world (Simek 259)

In Wales, the gods of the Tuatha de Danann were transformed into the heroes of the *Mabinogion* (Dillon, *Celtic Realms* 147). Arawn was the ruler of the Otherworld known as Annwfn. In one story, Arawn trades places with Pwyll, Lord of Dyved, for one year so that Pwyll may defeat his enemy for him. Eventually, Pwyll becomes the ruler of the Otherworld. Rhiannon was Pwyll's wife and the Welsh equivalent to the Irish goddess Macha. They had a son named Pryderi who also ruled the Otherworld when he reached manhood. Math son of Mathonwy was the Lord of Gwynedd and could not live unless his feet were in the folds of a dress of a virgin's lap, ensuring her virginity remained intact. Math could hear everything anyone spoke. In one story, he punished his nephews Gwydion and Gilvaethwy for committing rape by shapeshifting them into various animals. Math handed down his magic lore to his nephew and pupil Gwydion, who became the Druid of the gods, a master magician and teacher of all that was useful and good (*Celtic Mythology* 223-4).

Manawydan was the counterpart to the Irish Manannán mac Lir, god of the sea. Manawydan was brother to Bran, the king of England known for his gigantic size, and brother to Branwen. Gwyn ap Nudd was the god of battle and the dead. A famous hunter, he was the son of the god "Lludd (or Nudd) of the Silver Hand." Gwyn later became king of the *Tylwyth Teg*, the Welsh elves known as the "fair folk." He was the specter known as "the wild huntsman of Wales" and it was his supernatural hounds that were heard hunting in lonely places at night. He knew when and where all the great warriors fell, for he gathered their souls upon the field of battle and ruled over them in the Otherworld (*Celtic Mythology* 219).

All three cultures, Welsh, Celtic, and Norse valued wisdom as evidenced in their literature. The continual quest for wisdom implied a belief that Fate could be altered through the acquisition of knowledge. From the lays and sagas, we can observe that wisdom was extremely important to the Scandinavian people. The earliest people of Iceland established a form of government called the *Althing* where the ruling chiefs met to amend laws, settle disputes, and appoint judges to lawsuits. None of the laws were written down but were memorized by an elected Lawspeaker. The position of this official was dependent on his knowledge and wisdom and his ability to convey it and guide the lives of the villagers.

In *The Poetic Edda*, Odin was frequently called “wise” and continually searched for the means to acquire knowledge, trying to uncover what lies ahead, hidden “on the Other side.” His quest for wisdom had as its end goal discovering a way to circumvent the destruction of the gods at Ragnarök. Odin hoped to discover how to keep his enemies at bay until he had a large enough band of heroes to fight against the frost-giants. Few gods survived this final battle. Even though their destiny was predetermined, this did not discourage Odin and other gods from seeking additional knowledge which could alter their prescribed fate.

Some Irish mortals ventured across the border, possibly seeking wisdom from the Otherworld, where they witnessed strange and sometimes frightening events. Often humans were welcomed to the land of fairies to live there permanently, possibly to rule jointly with the leader of the sídh, or to become the escort of a fairy lady. The humans might be given special permission to visit their homeland, if they adhered to certain conditions.

One example is Loegaire, son of the king of Connaught, who went with fifty followers to the sídh Moy Mell to aid the fairy king Fiachna mac Retach against a rival fairy king. After defeating the enemy, Loegaire and his fifty men were permitted to visit their homes on horseback, but with a warning from Fiachna not to dismount. When they arrived, their friends were overjoyed and begged them to stay. But Loegaire called out to everyone to stay back and he and his companions returned safely to the sídh where Loegaire ruled jointly with Fiachna (Joyce 298).

Another example is Finn's son Oisín, who on the invitation of a goddess, traveled to the Otherworld. Niamh of the Golden Hair, Manannán's daughter, chose Oisín to be her lover and he mounted behind her on her fairy horse and they rode across land to the seashore and then over the tops of the waves. After seeing the sights of the fairy land, Oisín wanted to see his own country again and Niamh gave him leave to go and mounted him upon a fairy steed but made him swear one thing: not to let his feet touch the earthly soil. Oisín promised and reached Ireland on the wings of the wind. But he found all had changed. Seeing three hundred men trying to raise a marble slab, he rode up to them and lifted it with one hand, but as he did so the golden saddle girth broke with the strain, and he touched earth with his feet. The fairy horse vanished and Oisín rose from the ground no longer divinely young, fair, and strong but a blind, gray-haired, withered old man (*Celtic Mythology* 182-3).

Strange journeys into the forest which led to encounters with the Otherworld are frequently found in the sagas and classical myths. The forest was

the dwelling place of fairies, of enchanted mortals, and of departed spirits. From ancient times, the oak had been held as sacred, with special sanctity attached to this mistletoe-bearing tree (Liggins 94). Green was the color that nearly all the Celtic fairy folk wore. It symbolized eternal youth and re-birth, as in nature during the springtime, when all vegetation after winter springs into new life (Evans-Wentz 313). Lush, green forests of oak trees and mysterious “people” wearing green were typical scenes of fairy encounters, especially in the later medieval romance stories.

These Otherworld stories of forests and fairies were made famous by the great poets, the *filid* and the *ollamh*. It is interesting that many were said to be blind or blemished in some way. There are a number of tales about poets who were hideous in form but perfect in poetic knowledge, as if they were able to cross a border from a lowly physical existence to a higher artistic life. This lack of a requirement for perfection opens up the basics of poetic craft to nearly everyone, regardless of their physical condition. Amirgen, the poet-initiate, was dumb until the age of fourteen. He was likened to a specter or demon. He was ugly, even grotesque in appearance, and he was the son of Salach, the “dirty” or “impure.” When he first spoke, it was in a riddling language (Ford 30). In some stories, there was something contrary or paradoxical about the poet-to-be: he who was to become “radiant” and “beautiful” started out as repugnantly ugly; he whose words were to be esteemed above all others’ began by being mute (Ford 36).

Their deformities may be evidence of a link to powers across the border in the Otherworld, for many Otherworldly beings of great power were described as having a single arm, eye, or leg. Cúchulainn in his *riastrad* (warp spasm, battle

frenzy) displayed similar deformities. Boann, in bringing the power of the Well of Wisdom into this world, created the River Boyne but in the catastrophe, she was swept along in the rushing waters, and lost an arm, a leg, an eye and ultimately, her life, according to Erynn Rowan Laurie in the “Cauldron of Poesy.” Heimdall gave up an ear for wisdom. Tyr, the Norse god of war, lost a hand to Fenrir wolf. Volund, the blacksmith of the gods, was hamstrung. Odin’s son Hod was blind. Odin himself sacrificed an eye in exchange for wisdom. “It could be said that those with ‘second sight’ have one eye in this world and one in the Other,” says Laurie.

The background information presented in this chapter paints a picture of the lives of the ancient Celts and Norse relative to their views on religion and the Otherworldly beings who shared their universe. We now understand that the people of the sídh were a tribe called the Tuatha de Danann that came from northern islands, conquered the current inhabitants of Ireland, but were in turn conquered themselves and driven into mounds with all their supernatural powers intact. The ancient Celtic people believed in treading carefully when it came to crossing paths with these divine beings. It was not only gods and goddesses with whom they interacted on a daily basis, but other unusual, powerful beings such as Druids, kings, and supreme poets. Having no wish to experience a supernatural encounter with any of these beings, the ancient Celts patterned aspects of their lives to ensure they did not offend, but rather honored those who possessed great powers. The following chapters offer specific examples of border crossing events which took place in the locations discussed and involved various characters and themes referenced. The more one delves into this study, the more apparent it becomes how

the real world and the Otherworld were in no way mutually exclusive but instead interacted with one another as inseparable and intertwined entities.

Chapter Four: Border Crossings at Samhain

Samhain was the most active time of year for border crossings, when the curtain separating worlds was most fragile. Permeations by Otherworld beings into the real world were prolific, and sometimes, humans made crossings into the mystical Otherworld. The stories contained in this chapter provide various examples of the power that was present on Samhain, the start of the Celtic New Year.

Ancient Celts were mainly a pastoral people, dependent upon herds and crops for their livelihood. One of the most important times of the year for them was Samhain, which marked the seasonal change from harvest to winter. On this day, Druid priests performed divination rituals to foresee events of the coming year. Their year was divided into two halves, one beginning May 1st (Beltaine), the other November 1st (Samhain). The season's epochs of the year represented the days when cattle left the homestead for the fields in early summer, and returned home in early winter as the crops were harvested (Frazer 619). In the ancient calendar, winter came early and lasted nearly six months. The Fianna spent the summer season from Beltaine to Samhain hunting and fighting in the forests, but from Samhain to Beltaine, they lodged themselves among the settled population (Rees 84). November was seen as a "dead" month, since it introduced a period of

bleak desolation. It was a frightening time for the Celts, with fear of the unknown lurking in the fast approaching winter cold. As Emer tells Cúchulainn in *The Táin*, “Samhain is the time when summer goes to rest” (Kinsella 27). The warm and benevolent sun fell victim to a cold, brutal winter darkness. It is “in summers and winters that the world is spent” (Rees 89). In *Ancient Irish Poetry*, Kuno Meyer includes the poem “A Song of Winter” which dramatically describes the situation the ancient Celts faced as winter approached (57):

Cold, cold!
Cold to-night is broad Moylurg,
Higher the snow than the mountain-range,
The deer cannot get at their food.
Cold till Doom!
The storm has spread over all:
A river is each furrow upon the slope,
Each ford a full pool.

...

Samhain marked a seasonal boundary and a temporal boundary, both centering on life and death. The dividing lines between the contrasting seasons were haunted by a mysterious power which had a propensity for both good and evil. This supernatural power broke through in an ominous way on November Eve and May Eve, the borders between the two great seasons of the year. These two Eves were known as the “spirit nights.”

As reflected throughout the remnants of their literature, the ancient Celts believed that the veil which separated the world of the living from the world of the dead, known as the “Otherworld,” was permeable on Samhain. Spirits could easily cross into the real world and move among the community. The burial mounds of the dead known as the *sídh* were thought to be open on Samhain, allowing the dead

to roam freely. These spirits were liminal creatures, neither dead nor living. They would appear as human to the mortals who encountered them, but they possessed magical abilities. While often described as “betwixt and between,” a border crossing does not imply that the beings were in a limbo position between two worlds; rather they were and forever shall be beings of the Otherworld. The Otherworld was a permanent condition, not a Purgatory, and there was no indication that these spirits would be moving along to another existence. The Otherworld and its inhabitants were not simply academic concepts to be remembered at convenient intervals or special occasions: they were a constant presence to the Celts. When placated, the spirits could be helpful and generous; when offended, they could act vengefully and without mercy. The everyday life of the Celts included both the supernatural and the natural equally. For them, the Otherworld was as real as the physical world and as ever-present (Ross 133).

The contrast between day and night, between light and darkness, had a profound meaning for the Celts. This division manifested a fundamental duality with a border separating the two elements. Even now, many believe the dead of night is felt to be nearer to the Otherworld than it is to the light of day. Some still believe a person born during the night can see ghosts and phantoms which are invisible to those born during the day. The Celts thought fairies and other spirits became especially active after sunset; the night belonged to them and it was fitting that mortals withdrew to the security of their own homes. Their activities were especially prominent at the temporal boundary of midnight and even more so on Samhain, the midnight of the year. As Cúchulainn orders his charioteer in “The

Intoxication of the Ulaid,” “Go outside, good Laeg, and examine the stars, and determine if midnight has arrived, for you have often waited and watched for me at the boundaries of distant lands” (*Early* 195).

As Squire describes in *Celtic Myth and Legend*, there were two classes of supernatural spirits that ruled the world: the Tuatha de Danann, or “the people of the goddess Danu,” who were the gods of light and life, and the sea-demons, the spirits of darkness and evil called the Fomor (65-67). The Fomor destroyed nearly all their enemies by plagues, and then exacted from the remaining Nemedians (a human tribe), “a third part of their corn, a third part of their milk, and a third part of their children” (Gregory, *Gods* 18). The tribal people paid this tax to their conquerors on Samhain.

Marie-Louise Sjoestedt-Jonvals emphasizes in *Dieux et Heros des Celts* that the Tuatha de Danann were not thought to be of the race of man, neither living nor dead, and that their world was likewise of a totally different character. A fairy could be injured or die and mortals were sometimes immune to the passage of time while in the sídh. When an immortal or a mortal left his natural environment, he was temporarily subject to the rules of the world in which he found himself. This made the festival of Samhain one of vital importance to the Celts, since the separation between the worlds was so easily breached on this night (Sewell-Johnson 135).

As Caitlin and John Matthews explain in the *Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom*:

The continuing propitiation of the fairies in Celtic countries is due, in good part, to the fact that the ancestors and the fairies are considered to be one and the same tribe. This notion is . . . derived from the idea that those who are interred in the ground become of one nature with fairy people of the hollow hills: both inhabit a dimension that is timeless and ubiquitous, accessible to mortals only on special occasions. It is not insignificant that the time when the dead and the fairy are most active is at Samhain. (117)

The ancients seemed to have looked upon these spirits as a combination of both good and evil: some they would welcome; others they wished to repel. In *Faiths and Folklore*, William Hazlitt incorporates most of Brand and Ellis' *Popular Antiquities of Great Britain* and cites the continuation of this tradition into the Middle Ages where *apple-howling* (also called *apple wassailing*) was carried out to either honor sylvan spirits or to frighten away evil ones in hope of producing a good crop. One of the traditional wassail rhymes found in "Apple Howling" from Brand & Ellis is:

Apple-tree, apple-tree,
Bear good fruit.
Or down with your top
And up with your root.

The Celts believed that at Samhain, the spirits of the dead returned to visit the living. To welcome spirits of loved ones, people unbolted their doors and kept hearth fires burning. Food and wine were set out for the spirits of ancestors, sure to be weary from their travels in the Otherworld.

To protect themselves from supernatural mischief of evil spirits, the Celts dressed up as spirits themselves, using mimicry as a magical defense so that the

wandering souls would mistake them for one of their own and pass by without incident (Tuleja 82). Masked villagers representing souls of the dead also attempted to trick the sprits by forming a parade and leading them to the town limits, a physical border the villagers felt would keep them safe (Bannatyne, *Halloween: An American* 4).

In Wales, it was said that on Samhain there was a phantom on every stile (Rees 89). Some believe this was inspired by folklore that told how when a criminal was sentenced to death, he was hanged from the top rung of a ladder and his spirit remained to haunt it. Stiles were often found along field footpaths to allow access between adjacent properties, making the “border crossing” easier. A fairy path (or spirit path) was a trail or road that spirits are thought to travel, usually a straight line between two points of significance, such as *sídhe*. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Puck says:

Now it is the time of night
That the graves, all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite,
In the church-way paths to glide. (5.1.379-82)

The “church-way path” was also known as a “corpse road.” These roads were created with a practical purpose, providing villagers a clear path to transport corpses to the cemetery. Spirits were also said to pass along this direct line, so the path between two significant endpoints was kept clear of fences, walls, and buildings to avoid perturbing them. As Devereux cites in “Where the Leylines Led:

Other minor ritualistic means of preventing the return
of the dead person’s shade included ensuring that the

route the corpse took to burial would take it over bridges or stepping stones across streams (for spirits could not cross open, running water), stiles, and various other liminal (“betwixt and between”) locations, all of which had reputations for preventing or hindering the free passage of spirits.

These burial rituals were strictly followed to ensure no border crossings were encountered.

This history of the Celtic belief in gods, spirits, and humans is very confusing because as Douglas notes, “gods, heroes, and men have been so far brought to a common level, that it is next to impossible at first sight to disentangle them or say which is which. . . . Historians saw in the Irish pantheon nothing but a collection of human beings” (50-1). As a result, mythological and historical characters are all treated in the same manner in the epic literature. The gods are euhemerized [treated as human] and the fairies of the Otherworld appear as human. The Celts had been taught by their priests that the soul is immortal and that when the body dies, the spirit passes instantly into another existence in a country close at hand (Kelley 107). Caesar also cited this belief, describing metempsychosis as the reason why the Celts were so aroused to valor in battle, with all fear of death being despised (Hyde 94). With no clear lines of distinction drawn between mortals and spirits, Samhain represented a frightening opportunity for the two worlds to impinge on one another. Hyde quotes from an article in Jacob Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie*: “a fundamental feature in the faith of the heathen is that they allowed to their gods not an unlimited and unconditional duration, but only a term of life far exceeding

that of man. As their shape is like the shape of man only vaster, so are their lives like that of men only indefinitely longer” (Hyde 80). It is important to note that while most of the gods of the Tuatha die in battle, they are able to reappear in later stories as inhabitants of the sídh.

Liggins makes an observation about folklore in general: “In folklore there are no sharp distinctions between witches and fairies, between fairies and devils, and between fairies and the dead. Their activities are similar. Both fairies and ghosts can carry mortals back to their realms, for a period of time or forever” (92). With the boundary dissolved, not only could the dead enter the physical world but the living could enter the Otherworld as well, either of their own accord or by trickery. This is best illustrated in the story of *Tam Lin*. As told by Francis James Child, Janet went to Carterhaugh and plucked a double rose, whereby Tam Lin appeared and asked why she had come to the town without his permission and taken what was his. Janet returned home to discover she was pregnant by the “elf.” She returned to Carterhaugh to demand answers of Tam Lin. He tells her that one day, when he was still human, he was out riding with his grandfather when he fell from his horse and was taken captive by the Fairy Queen. Every seven years, the fairies paid a tithe to Hell of one of their people and Tam Lin is scared that he is to be this year’s sacrifice, which of course occurs on Samhain. To save him, Janet must come to the crossroads to meet the fairy procession and retrieve the soul of her beloved. Tam Lin would be riding with other knights and she would recognize him as the one riding a white steed. His right hand would be gloved and his left one bare. She was to pull him from his horse and hold him in her arms, even as he

undergoes a series of terrifying shapeshiftings. When he turned into a burning coal, she should throw him into a well and he will reappear naked, but as a true human again. She was to hide him from the fairies under her green mantle. This happened according to plan and when the Fairy Queen learned of it, she was very angry but allowed him to leave the fairy world, marking one of the rare instances when a human was able to depart the fairy lands once captured.

Heroic texts are filled with examples of mortals and fairies crossing the border between worlds on Samhain. *The Coming of Finn* tells how when the Irish hero Finn was still a boy, he went to the gathering of the High King at Teamhair (Tara) during Samhain. He announced that he was Finn, son of Cumhaill, and pledged his service to the High King. Every year for nine years, the fairy Aillen had come to Teamhair on Samhain, lulled the people to sleep with the music of the sídh, and once they were asleep, burned Teamhair to the ground. Aillen must undertake this malice when the border between his world and the physical world could be breached, which meant he could only perform his evil deed on Samhain. The High King promised to anyone who can keep Teamhair safe through the night, “Whatever inheritance is right for him to have, whether it be much or little.” Finn is the only one to accept the challenge. Fiacha, an old warrior and friend to Finn’s father, offered to make Finn a deadly spear that would resist the sleep power of Aillen’s music. That Samhain night when the music began, Finn stripped the cover from the head of the spear and held the spear to his forehead, making him immune to the music’s spell. When Aillen let a flame of fire from his mouth, Finn held up his crimson cloak against the flame, causing the flame to wither in the air. Aillen

left Teamhair in defeat but Finn followed and as Aillen was about to disappear into the sídh, Finn cast his spear through Aillen's heart. Finn then cut off Aillen's head, brought it back to Teamhair, and fixed it on a pole. When the High King saw the head the next morning, he bestowed the leadership of the Fianna on Finn as promised (Gregory, *Gods* 151-3). This was the "right inheritance" for Finn to receive, since this was the position his father Cumhaill had held. This story is made possible because it occurs on Samhain, the only time Aillen was able to breach the border between the Otherworld and the real world.

In one of the most popular stories of magical events that happen on Samhain, when the boundary between worlds is at its thinnest, concerns the Irish hero Cúchulainn. It is entitled "The Wasting Sickness of Cúchulainn." Its popularity may be attributable to the significant and numerous roles that women play in manipulating the great warrior. It is also a story of a human crossing into the Otherworld for a time and being allowed to return to the real world, which is uncommon. The Ulaid gathered for the feast of Samhain. The games, food, and meetings lasted from three days before Samhain to three days after, giving all the warriors an opportunity to flaunt their heroic skills and boast of their achievements over the past year. While the men were enjoying their activities, a flock of birds appeared and all the women began to argue over how beautiful the birds were and who should possess them. Cúchulainn was annoyed with their antics and threw a spear into the wing of one of a pair of birds, which proved to be fairy women. The women appeared to Cúchulainn in a vision, one wearing a green cloak and the other a five-folded red cloak, and beat him with a horsewhip. Cúchulainn remained in

his sickbed for a year after this event, caught in a trance, unable to speak to anyone. A year later on Samhain, Oengus came to Cúchulainn to tell him that Fand, wife of Manannán, wished to lie with him. He must return to the rock where the events of the previous year occurred. When he did so, Cúchulainn was approached by the fairy woman Li Ban who carried a message from her husband Labraid Luathlam: he would send Fand to Cúchulainn in exchange for one day of fighting against his enemies in the sídh. It is interesting that although Labraid was a fairy with magical powers, he required the services of a human to battle in the Otherworld on his behalf. Cúchulainn was wary and instead sent his charioteer Laeg into the sídh to observe and report back to Cúchulainn all he surveyed. After meeting with Fand, Laeg returned to Cúchulainn with wonderful stories of sights of the sídh. Cúchulainn then visited Labraid on Samhain and disposed of Labraids' enemies. As promised, Cúchulainn coupled with Fand and stayed with her in the sídh for a month before returning home to the real world (*Early 155-173*). Once again, Laeg and Cúchulainn's forays into the sídh must occur at Samhain, the time when the border could be breached.

The next story is one of the most frequently cited in Celtic works. It contains many aspects of a true adventure story, beginning with a challenge which the hero must overcome and incorporating mysterious visions, evil trickery, and a large battle where the hero is torn between the two sides. "The Adventures of Nera" begins on Samhain-Eve, with Ailill and Medb in the Cave of Cruachan. Ailill extends a challenge to his guests that whoever can put a willow branch around the foot of either of the prisoners in the torture house will have his choice of

reward. But, “great was the darkness of that night and its horror, and demons would appear on that night always” (*Ancient Irish Tales* 248) and so no one succeeded at the task. Nera took up the challenge but first donned a suit of armor which protected him and allowed him to complete the task. Then the hanged man asks Nera for a drink stating, “I was very thirsty when I was hanged.” The use of the past tense in the prisoner’s explanation indicates he might already be dead and is speaking from across the border, but the story never makes it clear whether the prisoner is still in the process of dying a slow death, or is already dead. Nera takes the captive on his back and carries him to the nearest house, but they are unable to approach because it is surrounded by fire. They proceed to the next house, but it is surrounded by a lake of water, used for household chores and bathing but not for drinking. At the third house, the prisoner is finally able to drink, but then “scatters the last sip from his lips at the faces of the people that were in the house, so that they all died.” Nera carries the captive back to the torture house in Cruachan, but everything has changed. Nera has crossed into a sídh, where he sees the heads of his dead warriors displayed and the Cave destroyed. The king of the sídh instructs Nera to visit a certain woman where he will be made welcome, providing he brings firewood to the king each day. When Nera visits the woman, she tells him that the severed heads and destruction of Cruachan he witnessed are merely illusions, a prophecy of what will happen if he does not warn his people that they should attack the sídh first. This trickery occurs on Samhain, when the border between worlds can be accessed. Nera fathers a child with the woman, essentially giving him two families he must look after in two different worlds. In another rare occurrence,

Nera is able to depart the sídh and returns to Medb and Ailill, finding them in the exact position as if he had just left them, time having stopped while he was in the Otherworld. They prepare to invade the sídh on the following Samhain when the fairy mounds are open. Nera returns to the sídh three days before Samhain to be with his Otherworld family. The invading Connaught force destroys the sídh and removes its treasures. According to the story, Nera obviously survives: “Nera was left with his people in the sídh, and has not come out until now, nor will he come till Doom.” As explained in *Celtic Heritage*, “The strange challenge with which this tale begins and the weird affair with the hanged man – a man who is both dead and alive – suggest a Halloween ritual, comparable to visiting a graveyard on this night when time and eternity intermingle, a ritual by which men made contact with Otherworld forces” (Rees 300). Nera remains in the sídh, becoming a liminal being himself.

In “The Boyhood Deeds of Finn mac Cumhaill,” the story is told of the wooing of a maiden every Samhain at Bri Ele, and each year one of the suitors is killed. Finn is advised by his uncle Fiagal, to go sit between the *Paps of Anu*, that is, between two mounds inhabited by fairies. As it is the night of Samhain, the mounds are open, the *féth-fiada* (magic fog) which renders the Otherworld invisible having been removed, great fires burn in each stronghold, and Finn is witness to the dialogue and exchange of food between fairies from the two sídhe (Joyce, Vol I 264). Finn throws a spear that Fiagal has given him, and it lands on the hill of Marghe where the Ele sídh is found. He hears great lamentations from the sídh because his spear has killed Aed, the one responsible for the murders, the one who

was in love with the girl and killed a suitor each year out of jealousy (Markale, *Epics* 134-5).

The ancient heroic literature contains many examples of significant events which occurred on Samhain, although an actual “crossing” between worlds does not take place. In “The Second Battle of Moytura,” the Dagda and the Morrígan ritually mate a week before Samhain to gain strength to defeat the Fomor. The battle itself occurs on Samhain, with the Tuatha de Danann defeating the wicked Fomor (“Second” 86). In “The Wooing of Étaín,” the Dagda sleeps with Elcmar’s wife Bóand and they have a son, Oengus. When Oengus reaches maturity, he visits Elcmar and demands that as the son of the Dagda, he is the rightful heir to Elcmar’s lands. This occurs on Samhain (*Early* 41). In “The Dream of Oengus,” he finds his beloved Cáer on Samhain (*Early* 112).

“The Intoxication of the Ulaid” occurs at Samhain, the traditional end of one year and beginning of the next, an appropriate time for a new king to assume command. Cúchulainn and Findtan compete over the right to host the Samhain feast for King Conchobar (*Early* 188, 194). Another Samhain event occurs later in the story when the Ulaid invade Teamhair. Acting on a prophecy interpreted by one of their Druids, Medb, Ailill, and Cu Roi pretend to welcome Cúchulainn and the rest of the Ulaid, offering hospitality and lodging - in an iron house. The servants build a bonfire inside the house for the Samhain feast and then depart, locking the Ulaid inside. Chains of iron are wrapped around the house and additional fires built up encircling the house, fanned by the smiths’ bellows (*Early*

213). The Ulaid escape, although we never know by what method since the manuscript is incomplete.

Samhain is also the night when special knowledge from the “other side” may be obtained. In the *Book of Lismore*, Fingean is visited every Samhain by the *ban-shee* Rothniam, a fairy-woman who tells him “all the marvels and precious things that are in the royal strongholds of Ireland” (“Lives” xxx). Even St Patrick receives a visitor from the *sídh* on Samhain-Eve. The visitor is an *ollamh*, the highest grade of minstrel, from the *sídh* of the great Dagda’s son. He comes to Patrick in order to learn the tales from the great Finn Cycle which the hero Caoilte is recounting to Patrick. The fairy is wearing “a green mantle having in it a fibula of silver; a shirt of yellow silk next to his skin, over and outside that again a tunic of soft satin, and with a *timpan* of the best [kind] slung on his back.” Patrick listens to the youth’s music and says, “But for a twang of the fairy spell that infests it . . . nothing more nearly than it resembles Heaven’s harmony.” When asked what night it is, Patrick answers that it is the Eve of Samhain (“Colloquy” 95-6).

According to Bannatyne, “The Celts feared the sun would leave them forever in the cold night of winter. Since the ancients believed that like begets like, bonfires were lit high on the hills in an attempt to fuel the waning sun” (*Halloween: An American* 4). On Samhain, Druids burned sacrifices to the gods. The old fire on the priest’s altar was quenched on the night of October 31st and a new one made. All the people were required to quench their home fires and rekindle them from the great new fire (Frazer 618). This relighting of individual fires in the homes from the main bonfire served as a source of life renewal for the New Year. Bonfires

were also lit on Samhain to light the way for welcomed spirits and to ward off evil spirits (Santino, *Halloween xv*).

Fire is a “betwixt and between” element, possessing characteristics of both evil and good: it represents not only death, destruction, and fear, but life and regeneration as well, such as when the farmer burns his field to stimulate future harvests. Bonfires have always been closely related to spirits, with the sudden flaring of fire believed to indicate a ghostly presence (Liggins 98). Nowhere is the image of the bonfire in its association with the dead more pronounced than in the old Norse poem *The Waking of Angantyr*. The ominous atmosphere is introduced before the shield-maiden Hervor even approaches the island. A herdsman who guides her refuses to visit the haunted island of Samsey with her, claiming it is unsafe to be out of doors after dark on the island. The very first paragraph sets the contrast between day and night as Hervor encounters the shepherd at sunset, a liminal period. The visual imagery unfolds as if watching a scary movie. The shepherd she encounters reinforces this fear by telling her to seek shelter quickly, as the day is done and light is fading. The flames are mounting high, earth and fen are both blazing, and graves are opening. Hervor sees fires from the graves, the graves standing open, and the dead standing outside, but she passes the fires as if they had been merely smoke until she comes to the mound of the berserkers. This is ominous, eerie, and surreal in appearance. But Hervor is a shield-maiden and is not afraid, entirely motivated by her desire to retrieve the sword Tyrting from her dead father. She first summons her father Angantyr to awaken and give her the sword, and then demands that the other berserkers, her eleven uncles, awaken as

well. Angantyr finally responds, asking her why she disturbs the dead. When she demands to know if he has Tyrfing, “it was as if one flame lit up around all the graves which stood open.” We can picture Hervor dressed in full mail armor demanding the sword while a ring of fire surrounds her and the ghosts stare unspeaking at her. Angantyr points out Hervor’s current situation, warning her “the graves are opening and the gates to Hel stand open wide, the surface of the island is on fire, and evil is all around you; make haste to your ships.” Angantyr tells Hervor that Tyrfing lies beneath him, encircled in flame. After receiving the sword, Hervor expresses an anxious desire to be gone, finally revealing some of the fear which she has kept masked until this point. “Farewell to you all; be safe in your graves. I am in haste to depart. I seemed between the worlds of life and death as the fires around me burned.” Clearly the idea of being caught in that liminal space is unsettling to Hervor.

This image of the dead spirits rising and hovering around the graves is captured in the Bible. As Jesus “yielded up the ghost” on the cross, “the veil of the temple was rent in twain, from the top to the bottom: and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent: and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose. And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many” (Matt. 27.50-53).

Opposite on the calendar from Samhain is Beltaine Eve, occurring on April 30th. Bonfires were also lit in celebration on this occasion. It is probable that at the original Beltaine festival there were two fires kindled near one another. When any person is in a critical dilemma, the Highlanders have a proverb, “he is between the

two Beltaine fires” (Frazer 619). According to the *Book of Invasions*, the Milesians, the human tribe that defeated the Tuatha and drove them into the sídh, invaded Ireland on Beltaine (MacKillop, “Beltaine”). The night is known to the northern people as “Walpurgis Night.” St. Walpurga was an English missionary who traveled to Francia to assist her uncle St. Boniface in ministering among the still-pagan Germans. She became a nun and lived in the double monastery of Heidenheim am Hahnenkamm where she became abbess after the death of her brother. St. Walpurga died on 25 February 779. Here is an example of “Christianizing” existing pagan beliefs, as St. Walpurga’s feast is celebrated on May 1st in an attempt to downplay Beltaine pagan celebrations. Under a cloak of Christianity, May Day and its Eve (Walpurgis Night), along with the Feast of All Souls on November 1st, concealed ancient pagan festivals of the dead (Frazer 630).

The mythology of the Welsh contains the same root idea as that of Ireland. If anything strange took place, it was sure to be on May Day. It was on “the night of the first of May” that Rhiannon lost and Ternyon Twryf Vliant found the infant Pryderi. It was “on every May eve” that the two dragons fought and shrieked in the reign of King Lludd. It is on “every first of May” until the day of doom that Gwyn ap Nudd fought with Gwythyr ap Gwreidawl for the fair Creiddylad. And, according to the *Morte D’Arthur*, it was when she was “a-maying” in the woods and fields that Sir Meliagraunce captured Guinevere (*Celtic Mythology* 319-20).

In Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*, the evil Slavic deity *Chernabog* performs his demonic activities on Walpurgis Night. He conjures writhing harpies and fiends,

and calls the spirits of the restless dead to perform at his beckoning. As Disney describes on its website:

From his perch high upon Bald Mountain, Chernabog unfolds his wings and casts his dark shadow over the sleeping village. Born of nightmare and myth, his evil power stands against anything -- except the clean light of the sacred dawn. When the sweet notes of morning break over the mountain, the monster must crawl back into hiding, for against the purity of the day, his evil is helpless. But Chernabog is never gone; he merely waits for the coming of another night, and the chance to continue the eternal battle between light and dark.

As the liminal period of dawn arrives, the wicked creatures and spirits are sent back to their graves, prohibited from permanently crossing the border and remaining in the real world.

In the Norse legends, we find a story of Odin who in his most drastic attempt to acquire wisdom, hangs himself from a branch of the world ash tree Yggdrasill while suffering from a wound caused by his own spear. He remains there nine days and nights (nine is a magical number to the ancient Norse). It was believed one could only learn magic spells from the runes if one were dead (*Poetic Edda* 34). The ninth night coincided with Walpurgis Night. To obtain this wisdom, Odin had to straddle the border between life and death at a time when both worlds can be accessed. During this final night, all light was extinguished with his death. Odin's death lasted until midnight, and then the light returned to the world. The night was celebrated with large bonfires lighted around the countryside, as noted in "Sacrifice: Hanging and Runes," an article found at the "timelessmyths" website.

Bram Stoker wrote a short story entitled *Dracula's Guest* published in 1914, two years after his death. In the story, a man, presumably Jonathan Harker, is visiting Munich prior to traveling to Transylvania to meet with Count Dracula. While out for a drive, the protagonist sees a desolate country road he wishes to explore. His driver refuses, saying only that it is "Walpurgis Nacht." Eventually he convinces the driver and they follow the road to a cemetery. The driver recounts a story that the people had fled the village to other places "where the living lived and the dead were dead and not – not something." The driver leaves him to take the terrified horses back to Munich. A snow storm arises as the tourist approaches the grave of Countess Dolingen of Gratz, which has an iron stake driven through its solid marble. The tomb is inscribed with "the dead travel fast." Stoker mentions frequently that it is Walpurgis Nacht, the mere title adding an ominous and suspenseful mood. "Walpurgis Nacht was when, according to the belief of millions of people, the devil was abroad – when the graves were opened and the dead came forth and walked. When all evil things of earth and air and water held revel" (5). Lightning flashes and the tomb is opened. Before him appears a beautiful woman with red lips sleeping on a bier. Another lightning flash strikes the iron stake and the woman arises. The last thing the tourist remembers is being dragged away by a large creature. It was as "if all the graves around me had sent out the phantoms of these sheeted dead, and that they were closing in on one through the white cloudiness of the driving hail." As he regains consciousness, the man discovers a great animal lying on him licking his throat. The wolf has been protecting him from the vampire, keeping him warm, the image serving as a forerunner of the

vampire versus werewolf animosity that will become so emphasized in popular culture. He is rescued by a search party who follow the wolf's yelping.

The arrival of Christianity in the Celtic realm was supposed to have a dramatic affect on Samhain celebrations. The emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in AD 312, paving the way for Christianity to displace pagan beliefs. As the Christianization of Ireland evolved, the process was to assimilate beliefs of the pagan religions into Christianity. Cultural traditions in Ireland were rooted so deeply, it proved easier to "turn" these beliefs, alter them and sanctify them, than to try and wipe them out. Pope Gregory I (AD 600) had planned to bring in Christianity in steps and phases, making it more attractive to the Celts. To this end, when pagans worshipped a tree, they were told they are actually worshipping He who made the tree. Pope Gregory II turned November 1st into All Saints Day and the night before into All Hallows Eve, attempting to absorb pagan holidays into Christian celebrations. In such a manner, the overt pageantry associated with Samhain was merged with All Saints Day and All Souls Day where the belief in roaming spirits evolved into a reverence for the saints and souls that had departed that year. Sewell-Johnson comments that "the ninth-century establishment of All Soul's Day . . . had as little influence on the monks and scholars as it did on the folk, for no mention is made of it in the old books and the pagans continued to provide tributes as they always had" (139). The early Christians believed that any spirits other than God and the angels must be evil, so in 1486, Pope Innocent VIII outlawed pagan Celtic religion altogether. While this approach may not have been a total success, since the pagans continued to worship their own gods below the

Christian radar, it did promote Christianity and the proliferation of monasteries across Ireland. The celebration of these days was greatly curbed when Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation in 1517, rejecting all symbols that stood between individuals and God, including the Pope, priests, and saints. The role of saints was downplayed in favor of a more direct communication with God, leading to a backlash against Catholicism which proliferated throughout the British Isles.

On 5 November 1605, Guy Fawkes was accused of attempting to blow up the Houses of Parliament. A year later, Parliament declared November 5th a day of thanksgiving. His act was seen as a Catholic plot against the Protestant government. Because All Hallows Eve was associated with the Catholic calendar, its importance diminished, but many of its traditions shifted to an annual commemoration of the death of Guy Fawkes. Children beg “a penny for the Guy” for their effigies, which are later burned in bonfires (Santino, *Halloween* xvii). So the tradition of the bonfire continued to be celebrated in the first week of November.

In *The Return of the Native*, Thomas Hardy describes a scene where the people of the heath build a bonfire on a well-known barrow to celebrate Guy Fawkes’ Day and to reenact the ritual of death and rebirth. The scene is summarized as follows:

While the men and lads were building the pile a change took place in the mass of shade which denoted the distant landscape. Red suns and tufts of fire one by one began to arise, flecking the whole country round. They were the bonfires of other

parishes and hamlets that were engaged in the same sort of commemoration. . . . Some were Maenads, with winy faces and blown hair. These tintured the silent bosom of the clouds above them and lit up their ephemeral caves, which seemed thenceforth to become scalding cauldrons. . . . Indeed, it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were now enjoying are rather the lineal descendents from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot (19-21).

As these examples demonstrate, Samhain, and to some extent Beltaine, represented not only a very important seasonal event for the ancients, but was also a time when passage into the Otherworld was possible. The traditions continue today throughout the world, celebrated in America as Halloween, in England as Mischief Night, and in Mexico as Day of the Dead. Keeping vigil for the dead is still observed in folk customs throughout Ireland on Samhain, with candles being set in windows inside hollowed turnips to light the way for departed spirits, or to ward off malignant ones (Matthews 119). As a seasonal border crossing, Samhain represents the change from summer to winter. All fears of cold and isolation are coupled with all hopes for a good crop in the summer, and these contrasting feelings on either side of the border are all merged on this day. Many events captured in heroic literature of the Celts occur on this pivotal day, demonstrating how significant Samhain was to these ancient people.

Chapter Five: Life-Altering Cauldrons and Potions

With their ability to alter components of life, cauldrons and potions were powerful border crossing instruments, tapping on Otherworld resources to produce potent results in beings living in the real world. The content in this chapter contains stories of magical cauldrons and potions whose supernatural influences redirect the course of a life in one way or another. Cauldrons and potions have remained a favorite topic of authors through the ages, especially in fairy tales and Halloween literature.

During the seventh century, a powerful Irish *fili* (most learned poet) named Amirgen composed a poem called "The Cauldron of Poesy" which discusses one of the facets of Irish wisdom tradition: the internal inspiration of poetry. In this poem, Amirgen describes three cauldrons which are said to be born in every person, taken by divine forces from out of a great mystery, most likely in the Otherworld. As translated by P. L. Henry:

What then is the origin of poetry and every other knowledge? Not difficult: three cauldrons are born in everyone, a cauldron of Maintenance, a cauldron of Motion, and a cauldron of Knowledge. The cauldron of Maintenance is the one that is born face up in a person at first (and) from it learning is imparted in early youth. The cauldron of Motion . . . magnifies. It is what is born on the side in a person.

The cauldron of Knowledge is what is born in the prone position and from it is imparted the Learning of every poem. (125)

The qualities of these cauldrons can be thought of as similar to the chakras, the seven yoga energy centers in the body. The cauldrons move about in the body, occupying different positions and enabling the production of knowledge and poetry of varying quality (Mulligan 483). The text is basically an extended answer to the question it poses: where is the source of poetic art in a person? The short answer is the source of poetic art resides in every person in these three cauldrons which are either born or generated in the body, and which in turn produce and release knowledge (Mulligan 493). The motion of the cauldrons represents the artistic journey. The idea of the cauldron in the body is also described in an ancient Irish law text, *The Bretha Nemed*, where the cauldron of judgment is noted by P. L.

Henry:

Did you hear the judgment of the cauldron?
The womb that boils up knowledge;
The womb-cauldron of judges
Boils judgments. (115)

In these examples, the cauldron is a container, not for holding food or drink but for holding artistic aptitude and knowledge. We can see the cauldron not only provided warmth and sustenance but inspiration and wisdom as well.

Mention the word “cauldron” and Shakespeare’s *Three Weird Women* immediately come to mind, with their supernatural, border-crossing machinations. But long before the bard penned his famous imagery of witches stirring a potion to summon spirits, cauldrons were an integral part of storytelling. Archaeological

evidence testifies that cauldrons, both domestic and sacred vessels, were widely used in Celtic and Northern regions during ancient times. Many burial sites contained cauldrons along with other valuable items. A grave site was sacrosanct and the reason treasured objects were buried with the dead (Davies 90). Cauldrons were immensely valuable properties. The ancient literature reflects the belief that special cauldrons were owned by Otherworld beings. To explain their presence on earth, stories arose detailing how heroes stole these vessels from the divine world. These heroes would not risk stealing an object unless it was truly precious, especially when stealing from gods.

Interestingly, it was an unearthed cauldron that allowed experts to decipher Celtic mythology and literature. The Gundestrup Cauldron found in Denmark dates from the first half of the first century BCE. The cauldron is beautifully designed with silver embossed in high relief and partially gilded, a design which was the specialty of regions to the east of the Celtic world. However, Celtic motifs dominate the cauldron's design. It is widely accepted that it was made by Celts, possibly in what is now the Luxembourg area, and it is believed to be part of a treasure looted by Teutonic raiders. This magnificent cauldron holds more than twenty-eight gallons (Davies 90-1). The cauldron itself depicts a procession of warriors waiting to be deposited into a deep cauldron (Matthews 218). It is now housed at the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. Another famous relic is the bronze cult wagon found in a warrior's grave in Strettweg, Austria, dating from the seventh century BC. The cart depicts a goddess holding a sacred cauldron

above her head (Davies 82). It is on display in the Archaeology Museum of Styrian Universalmuseum Joanneum at Schloss Eggenberg in Graz.

According to the *OED*, the word “cauldron” derived from the Latin *caldrium* meaning “warm-bath;” the word “kettle” derived from the Latin *catillus* meaning “food-vessel.” In these two words for “pot” we have images of warmth, fire, water, and cooking. Through an observation of these qualities and the numerous references, we can discover how important the cauldron was to the ancients, and show how the cauldron became endowed with special magical attributes linked to the Otherworld as reflected in epic literature.

Warmth from the cauldron brings to mind comfort, family, and community. As the center of a feast, the cauldron provided warmth to the entire room. In cold northern winters, families were confined to their homes, often congregating in the chief’s hall where the most abundance of food and warmth was available. It was during this sequestered period that planning for the next year would take place, with villagers gathered around the cauldron and its warm fire (Rees 84).

The cauldron as representative of fire can be found in Greek history of the Olympic torch. The tradition originated with the story of Prometheus who dared to steal fire from the gods and give it to Man. This tribute to the human spirit was captured during the Olympic Games in a huge cauldron of fire. In Elis, where the ancient Olympic Games took place, the cauldron’s flame burned permanently on the altar of Hestia, the goddess of the hearth. Hestia’s altar was situated in the *Prytaneum*, the building used for large banquets to honor the athletes at the end of the Games. The cauldron flame in Hestia’s shrines was religiously cherished: the

other gods all obtained their fires from her altar, similar to the villagers lighting their home fires from the Druid's sacred fire on *Samhain* (Gayley 35). The fire of the Olympic cauldron originated with the goddess across the border, and was infused with her divine qualities as it burned throughout the Games for all to witness.

The ancient Celts not only worshipped fire but also water, as evidenced by the large quantity of valuable artifacts that have been retrieved from rivers, lakes, springs, and wells. These water locations were associated with gods and spirits. Water was thought to have healing properties, and it is possible deep wells might have formed a connection between the human world and the Otherworld through their deep caverns. Because the cauldron was such a valuable household item, it was given in tribute to the water gods as religious and votive lake offerings (Matthews 218). In both Celtic and Icelandic literature we find the god of the sea in possession of a special cauldron. In *The Poetic Edda*, Aegir, the Norse god of oceans, dwelled in a hall at the bottom of the sea and would often hold feasts for the gods. To ensure all his guests had enough ale, he sent Thor to fetch a mile-wide cauldron from the giant Hymir. Only Thor was strong enough to lift this massive cauldron (78).

The cauldron was especially regarded as having the ability to give life through its ability to provide sustenance. The bigger the cauldron the more special it was because of its increased capacity to hold more food and serve more people. In the house of every chief and every brewery there was at least one cauldron for cooking meat. The *Brehon Law IV.327* tells us that the chief's cauldron must be

large enough to hold both a cow and a hog (Joyce, Vol II 124-5). Since cauldrons in the large homes had to serve so many, they had to remain well-filled. From this grew the notion of a magical cauldron of plenty that was never empty.

The cauldron was a prestige possession and restricted for the most part to the homes of the wealthy. It was highly valued as a very important household article, looked upon as the special property of the chief in the same way as his sword or shield. These cauldrons were most often made of brass or bronze, which were costly. As a boy in slavery in Ireland, St. Patrick was sold to mariners for two cauldrons of bronze (Joyce, Vol II 124). The five *bruidne* (feasting-halls or hostels) of Ireland were equipped with inexhaustible cauldrons (MacKillop, “Cauldron”). The ruler of the Otherworld characteristically possessed a cauldron in his role as dispenser of feasts.

We find three properties of cauldrons in pagan literature that signify border crossings. These properties all relate to life: either sustaining life through food and mead, regenerating life, or receiving knowledge to enhance life. Literary stories provide examples of each of these instances, emphasizing the supernatural attributes of the cauldron. We can follow these vessels as they migrate through fairies, kings, and warriors, most frequently being stolen but sometimes being given as reward or thanks for a deed.

The magical cauldrons which provide an endless supply of food and mead suggest that the supply is coming from another place across a border, from a different, magical world where there is no want. The Cauldron of the Dagda was brought from the island city of Murias and was very special since it was always

full. It was one of the four wonderful treasures of the Tuatha de Danann. In extant texts, the literary history of the Cauldron of Plenty begins with Diwrnach Wyddel in the story “How Culhwch Won Olwen” (*Mabinogion* 156, 169-70). Diwrnach was steward to Odgar, son of the King of Ireland. The giant chief Ysbadden Bencawr demanded that Diwrnach's cauldron be brought to Wales to provide meat for his daughter Olwen's wedding feast. King Arthur asked Odgar to persuade Diwrnach to give it up willingly, but the steward refused. After several failed attempts to wheedle Diwrnach, Arthur seized the cauldron and took it to Wales filled with Irish treasure. In “The Spoils of Annwn,” Arthur crossed the border to steal this cauldron of plenty from the ruler of the Otherworld, Arawn (or possibly Pryderi). It was rimmed with pearls, voices issued from it, it was warmed by the breath of nine maidens, and it would not boil a coward's food. Only seven survived this expedition, according to “The Raid on the Otherworld”.

We can find more stories of the inexhaustible cauldron in ancient literature. Manannán, the Tuatha god of the sea, possessed two magic cows which supplied an endless flow of milk. At his Feast of Age banquet, every guest was satisfied from the “Cauldron of Restitution” which never failed until each had had his fill. The cauldron was also the Cauldron of Truth because if anyone spoke a falsehood, the pig in the cauldron would not be cooked. Each guest must tell a true story before the cooking would continue (Hull 20-1). The powers across the border actively completed their supernatural tasks within the waiting cauldron.

In a story of the Irish hero Finn mac Cumhaill, a young man wearing skins came to Finn's house seeking employment and Finn took the lad in. The next day,

they went hunting and the lad killed more game than Finn and all the Fianna combined. Finn was warned by one of his men that the Lad of the Skins would destroy all the Fianna of Ireland if he did not do something to stop it. Finn decided to send the Lad of the Skins to the King of the Floods (Manannán) to steal his great cauldron “that is never without meat, but that has always enough in it to feed the whole world” (Gregory, *Gods* 169). The Lad of the Skins successfully stole the cauldron and carried it on his back to Finn. Again, a border crossing episode has prominently been identified through this ancient story of the “bottomless cauldron” that draws on its magic from the Otherworld.

In early Scotland, the historical King of the Picts, Eochaid Buide, was said to possess a wonderful cauldron “from which no one ever departed unsatisfied” (MacKillop, “Eochaid Buide”). In “The Wasting Sickness of Cúchulainn,” Cúchulainn’s charioteer, Laeg, travels to the Otherworld while Cúchulainn lies ill and in one scene Laeg describes “a vat of intoxicating mead being distributed to the household. It is there yet, its state unchanging – it is always full” (*Early* 169). In the story of “Bricriu’s Feast,” Bricriu incites the three heroes Loegaire, Conall, and Cúchulainn to compete against one another for the Champion’s Portion, which includes a cauldron filled with wine to the equivalent of the size of three men (*Early* 223). These stories reflect how important a cauldron full of food was to the ancients, so much so that they invented stories of Otherworld magic to account for a continually full pot to satisfy very hungry bellies in harsh northern regions.

The Cauldron of Plenty may also contain something other than an endless supply of food. In “The Tragic Death of Cu Roi,” Cu Roi steals a magical cauldron

from the fortress of Fir Falgae, most likely the Isle of Man. The cauldron produced the equivalent of thirty cows' milking, no one came away from it unsatisfied, and it also held much gold and silver (*Ancient Irish Tales* 328). Cu Roi's cauldron filled with gold is reminiscent of the myth of *leprechauns* and their hoards of treasure. The leprechaun is a little man whose occupation is making shoes for fairies. If you can catch him and keep your eyes locked on him, he will tell you where to find his hidden cauldron of gold. But if you take your eyes off him for an instance, he will be gone (Joyce, Vol I 271). In *The Death of Fergus mac Leide*, Fergus kidnaps the King of the Leprechauns and the king ransoms himself by giving Fergus the choice of one of his many treasures. Fergus chooses the king's magic shoes, "brogues of the white bronze, of virtue marvelous! Alike they travel land and sea" (*Ancient Irish Tales* 484). Fergus could have chosen the king's cauldron, which granted anyone who bathed in it three times their life's length, but he wanted the ability to travel quickly across any surface to engage in battle.

The second property of the cauldron that signifies a border crossing event related to life is regeneration. The lineage of the Cauldron of Regeneration began with the giant Llassar Llaes Gyngwyd and his wife Cymidei Cymeinfol, a giantess twice his size. Matholwch, the King of Ireland, met them at the Lake of the Cauldron, where Llassar emerged from the water with the cauldron on his back. When Matholwch asked how they are faring, Llassar replied, "In a month and a fortnight, this woman will conceive, and the boy that she bears at that time will be a full-armed warrior" (*Mabinogion* 72). Matholwch provided them hospitality for a year but when they "committed outrages and harassed and importuned gentlemen

and ladies,” he decided to burn them in an iron house. This is similar to the attempt by Medb and Ailill to destroy the Ulaid in an iron house in “The Intoxication of the Ulaid.” Using Llassar’s great strength, they were able to escape to Britain, where they gave the cauldron to Bran, King of England, in thanks for his hospitality. Coming full circle, Bran later presented it to Matholwch as compensation for the slaughtering of his horses by the trouble-maker Evnissyen. If a corpse were to be thrown into the cauldron, the dead would be reborn as human but unable to speak (*Mabinogion* 71). It is interesting that while the cauldron gave a dead warrior back his life, it was a different life, because he was now mute. The person would be the same, yet different, straddling his former life and the new one which was lacking. He was neither alive nor dead but rather betwixt and between, just as those who inhabited the Otherworld appeared as human but were not.

The story of the cauldron continued as Branwen, sister of Bran and wife of Matholwch, was mistreated by her husband. She trained a starling to carry a message to Bran of her circumstances, and he traveled to Ireland to battle Matholwch. During the fight, the Irish lit a fire under the cauldron and began throwing corpses into it, regenerating their warriors. To end this, Bran’s brother Evnissyen hid among the Irish dead and was thrown into the cauldron where once inside, he used his strength to break the cauldron into four pieces (*Mabinogion* 79).

In Lloyd Alexander’s *The Black Cauldron*, the evil Arawn, ruler of Annvin, created the Cauldron-Born in the Black Crochan (*crochan* is Welsh for cauldron). The only way to destroy this evil cauldron was for a living person to climb into it, giving up his own life, and he must do so willingly and with full

knowledge of what he does (165). When the companions tried to steal the cauldron, they found themselves stuck to the pot and unable to move (150). This is similar to the story *Manawydan Son of Llŷr* where Pryderi and Rhiannon find themselves stuck to a golden bowl:

What [Pryderi] did see, as if in the middle of the fortress, was a fountain with a marble stone round it, and a golden bowl fastened to four chains, the bowl set over a marble slab and the chains extending upwards so that he could see no end to them. Ecstatic over the beauty of the gold and fine craftsmanship of the bowl he walked over to the vessel and grasped it, but as soon as he did so his hands stuck to the bowl and his feet to the slab he was standing on, and his speech was taken so that he could not say a single word. There he stood. (89)

When Rhiannon's search led her to where Pryderi was trapped, she too tried to grasp the bowl and became stuck as well. When night descended, a mist rolled in and the fortress vanished and they along with it.

We can only imagine the importance ancients placed on a cauldron they believed could restore life. With the numerous references to these cauldrons in their literature, we can speculate that this object was so important to their livelihood that they created entire stories around its reanimation attribute to regale avid listeners. It is not hard to see how they would adopt this belief, since they believed that upon death, the soul immediately passed into another existence in the Otherworld. The cauldron remained a conduit to the Otherworld in later literature as well, as the Three Weird Sisters from *Macbeth* used it to summon dead spirits to foretell Macbeth's future. It is easy to see why Shakespeare would have the witches appear in a cave, huddled around a big, ugly, evil-looking pot,

characteristic of the witches' personae (*Macbeth* 4.1). In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the magical Goblet selects the names of the most worthy teenagers qualified to compete for the honor of winning the Triwizard Tournament after passing three challenges. Qualified applicants write their names on a slip of paper and place it in the vessel and at the appropriate time, the Goblet spouts forth the chosen names in a cascade of fire (255-271).

In *The Gaelic Otherworld* (31), James Gregorson Campbell includes the story of a fairy family who borrowed a kettle from the local smith each evening. When giving the pot to the fairies, the smith always recited this rhyme:

A smith's due is coals
And to send cold iron out,
A cauldron's due is a bone
And to come safe back.

With the power of this spell, the cauldron was safely restored before morning. One evening when the smith was away, his wife loaned the cauldron to the fairies but never thought of saying the rhyme. As a result, the cauldron was not returned and the smith scolded his wife. She then went to the *brugh* (the fairy home), snatched up the cauldron and ran off with it. As she was leaving, she heard one of the fairies calling:

Thou dumb sharp one, thou dumb sharp,
That came from the land of the dead,
And drove the cauldron from the brugh –
Undo the Knot, and loose the Rough

She managed to get home before the fairy dog Rough overtook her, and the fairies never again came for loan of the cauldron. The cauldron was such an important item that fairies humbled themselves to borrow one from humans. The ancients

probably found great humor in this story as it was shared around the cauldron's fire.

In the Holy Grail, we find the fusion of the magic cauldron of Celtic paganism and the sacred chalice of Christianity (MacCullough 328). It is not surprising that many critics have seen links between the cauldron of Celtic tradition and the Arthurian Grail. A prized serving vessel became a prized chalice. Instead of holding an endless supply of food or a magic potion, legend purported it held wine served at the Last Supper and later collected the blood of Christ. The early Christians took the border crossing mythological powers of the cauldron and transferred them to a most sacred relic, endowing it with supernatural powers as well. Arthur Brown observes that Christmas was moved from April to December 25th to supplant the Winter Solstice Festival, and All Saints Day was moved from May 13th to November 1st to coincide with Samhain. Various saints' legends were spun out of stories about pagan gods. For example, St. Bridget legends were adopted from stories about the pagan Brigit, daughter of the Dagda. Brigit was the goddess of all things exalted, such as high hills and high flames, and lofty activities like poetry and healing. If we accept these alterations to pagan religion as an attempt to appease early Christians, then it is understandable that a plenty-giving cauldron had been Christianized into something that closely resembled the Holy Communion service (Brown 65-7). The Grail also incorporated the legend of the Cauldron of Restoration. As the Cauldron restored life to a corpse, it was an archetype for the Grail which also restored life, but an esoteric, spiritual life (Markale, *Epics* 23).

If the cauldrons themselves were not Otherworld magic, then the potions they brewed were. We turn to the meads and juices to examine the third life-related attribute of the cauldron: that of obtaining knowledge that was usually reserved for Otherworld beings with superior abilities. When a mortal gained this knowledge, he had assimilated powers from across the border. The enchantress Ceridwen created a magic brew which after a year's boiling, produced three drops; whoever swallowed the drops would know all the secrets of past, present, and future. Ceridwen intended it for her son Afagddu, who was ugly and whom she desired to compensate by making him wise. As Gwion Bach stirred the cauldron, the magic drops fell onto his finger which he put in his mouth, thereby gaining the wisdom. Realizing the danger from the enraged Ceridwen, he ran from her, but she set out in pursuit. During the chase, he transformed himself into a hare, a fish, a bird, and a grain of wheat, and Ceridwen chased him in the appropriate form of a greyhound, otter-bitch, hawk, and hen. As the hen, she swallowed the grain of wheat that was Gwion Bach, and he was later reborn from Ceridwen as the great bard Taliesin (Ellis 119).

This accidental ingesting of an inspiration brew is a motif captured in other stories, such as Finn and the Salmon of Knowledge, and Sigurd and the dragon Fafnir. These stories reflect how a border crossing event occurred when the supernatural, powerful potion was unwittingly imbibed. The famous poet Finnecc had been fishing on the Boyne River for seven years, trying to catch the Salmon of Knowledge. The young hero Finn mac Cumhaill traveled there to study poetry with Finnecc. The Boyne River is one of seven that flow from Connla's Well, also

known as the Well of Wisdom. This Salmon of Knowledge had eaten nine hazel nuts that fell into the Well of Wisdom from nine sacred hazel trees surrounding the well. In doing so, the salmon gained all the knowledge in the world. It was foretold that the first person to eat of its flesh would gain this knowledge. Finnece finally caught the salmon and ordered his apprentice, Finn, to prepare it for him. While Finn was cooking the fish over the fire, some of its juice dripped on his thumb, which he immediately put into his mouth to soothe. From that point on, Finn could easily access any knowledge he required by simply sucking on his thumb (“Boyhood Deeds”). This gaining of knowledge is a border crossing event in that inspiration is a special attribute reserved for superior humans, like Druids, who are Otherworldly beings.

In *The Prose Edda* (Snorri 97-8), Regin and Fafnir were brothers, sons to Hreidmar, a powerful dwarf. Hreidmar obtained the Rhinegold hoard from the gods as ransom after Loki was responsible for the death of his other son, Otter. Regin and Fafnir killed their father for the gold, but could not agree to divide it, and Fafnir ended up with the hoard. Regin adopted Sigurd as his foster son and manipulated him into slaying Fafnir, who had turned himself into a dragon to better guard the gold. Sigurd dug a pit in Fafnir’s path and lowered himself into it. As Fafnir crawled to his watering hole, he passed over the pit and Sigurd stabbed him with his sword Gram. He roasted Fafnir’s heart over a fire, and while testing to see if it was done, he burned his fingers on the juice. Sigurd instinctively put his fingers in his mouth to cool them and instantly understood the language of the birds. He heard nuthatches speaking, and one of them warned him that Regin was

planning to betray him and take the entire hoard. Sigurd struck off Regin's head with Gram. The knowledge Sigurd gained from his life-saving encounter is a border crossing event in that the supernatural aspect of Fafnir's blood came from a source beyond the human world. The three stories of accidental ingestion just discussed, Taliesin, Finn, and Sigurd, hint to us that the mysterious Otherworld possesses a sense of fair play in that the greedy, selfish "employers," after abusing their apprentices in their obsessive quest for special knowledge, find the unique gifts bestowed upon the deserving.

The Saga of the Volsungs contains many examples of magic potions. Brynhild gave Sigurd "the drink of love" (50). Gudrun's brothers, Gunnar and Hogni, gave Sigurd a magic drink to make him forget Brynhild and marry their sister (61). Her brothers gave Gudrun a drink of forgetfulness so she would agree to marry Atli (85). These magic potions were significant in their ability to manipulate Fate, drawing on forces from across the border to determine a chain of events.

Magic potions were also found in the Celtic literature, their supernatural influence gained by acquiring powers from the Otherworld. In "The Wasting Sickness of Cúchulainn," the Druids gave Cúchulainn a drink of forgetfulness, a draught of which was also given to his wife Emer so that she would forget her jealousy (Rees 307). In "The Courting of Emer," Cúchulainn was living with the banshee Scathach, learning his hero's feats, when a battle occurred between Scathach and her enemy Aoife, queen of the surrounding tribes. Cúchulainn wanted to join the fight, but Scathach gave him a sleeping potion to keep him safe

lest some harm come to him (Gregory, *Cúchulainn* 37). In the story of Diarmuid and Grainne, a predecessor to *Tristan and Iseult*, Grainne is the daughter of the High King of Ireland, Cormac mac Airt. A much older Finn asked for her hand in marriage and she refused. She served each of the Fianna a cup of drugged wine and while they were sleeping, she used her magic powers to seduce Diarmuid, one of Finn's warriors, into fleeing with her. Finn eventually caught up with them and in a most ignoble act, he allowed an injured Diarmuid to die of thirst (De Vries 88).

The Prose Edda (Snorri 84-6) contains the story of the wise Kvasir, created from the spittle of the Vanir and the Aesir, two races of Norse gods. Kvasir traveled the world teaching men knowledge until two dwarfs, Fialar and Galar, tired of his lectures and killed him. The dwarfs poured Kvasir's blood into a kettle called Odrerir and two cauldrons, Bodn and Son, mixed it with honey, and brewed a mead with special power. The mead was Kvasir transformed, allowing anyone who consumed it to acquire knowledge and magical skills in poetry. It was therefore called the "Mead of Poetic Inspiration." Odin learned of this unique drink that would imbue special knowledge and set out to obtain the mead. Traveling in disguise as Bolverk, Odin was hired by Baugi the giant to perform the work of nine men in exchange for one drink of the Mead. Bolverk performed the work but was refused the drink as compensation. Baugi's brother Suttung was the actual owner of the Mead and refused to part with a single drop. Bolverk and Baugi plotted to steal the Mead. Bolverk brought out the auger called Rati, and bore a hole through the mountain where Suttung was hiding the Mead. He transformed into a snake and crawled through the auger hole and came upon Suttung's daughter Gunnlod

guarding the Mead.² Bolverk slept with her for three nights and she allowed him three drinks of Mead. On the first drink, he consumed all the Mead in the kettle Odrerir. With the second, he drained the Mead in the cauldron Bodn. His third drink emptied Son and he now possessed all the Mead. Odin changed himself into an eagle and flew to the Aesir who had placed vats in the courtyard, and as Odin flew overhead, he spat the Mead into the waiting vessels. Odin also attempted to gain wisdom by trading his eye for a drink from the Well of Mimir, the well of inspiration and knowledge. Even though Odin is a god of what we consider the Otherworld, his attempts to gain access to the illusive treasure of wisdom also represent border crossings.

The cauldron was a container to hold the most special items: food, wine, water, gold, and corpses. It was a conduit to the Otherworld when used by Druids to perform sacred rites. Since valuable items went into the cauldron, the cauldron itself acquired special powers. Cauldrons were expensive household items and not everyone could afford to own one, making the cauldron a unique, prized possession and status symbol, something the chiefs treasured as much as their weapons. It is interesting that the ancients placed so much importance on the kettle and cauldrons that they named them. These pots were so magical and powerful that they took on almost divine attributes. Once a cauldron was stolen from the gods, it had made the border crossing from the Otherworld into the human world, bringing with it the special quality and magic power of its own.

Chapter Six: Transformations: Talking Heads, Distorted Warriors, and Shapeshifters Across the Border

The literary examples discussed in this chapter depict the various transformations humans and other creatures undergo which precipitate approach to that liminal space where they reside at the threshold between worlds. These transformations may also be a full border crossing from one world into another. Transformations of humans into living decapitated heads and of warriors into deranged predators on the battlefield are examples of existing “in between” the real world and the Otherworld, where Otherworld powers are being drawn upon, but not fully actualized. Shapeshifting is an Otherworld ability and although the human or creature may still physically reside in the real world, he has become a creature of the Otherworld for the time that his shape is not that of his own. These stories cited show the ancients’ avid interest in transformation as a method for completing a border crossing, and establish the basis for future popular stories of headless beings and shapeshifting creatures.

To understand the talking head as a border crossing entity we must first comprehend the historical significance placed on the head by the ancient Celts. All ancient Celtic societies revered the body’s head. They believed the souls of mankind were located in the head, not in the heart (Ellis 122). This is reinforced by stories where the head refuses to die, straddling the border between life and death

as it continues to speak and offer counseling even after being separated from the torso. Talking heads were believed to literally sit in liminal space, located between life and death, in the process of crossing over. They may, or may not, ever reach death on the other side, unlike those Otherworld creatures who have permanently crossed the border to another realm.

Severed heads, especially heads that speak, are featured strongly in Celtic lore. Much claim has been made for “a cult of the head” among the Celts, but others (Matthews 120) almost certainly do *not* believe the Celts worshiped heads. These nonbelievers put forth a much more subtle argument relating to ancestors. To the Celts, the head was the seat of wisdom as well as the soul. To venerate the heads of one’s forebears was a form of ancestral respect. To take the heads of one’s enemies was to appropriate their cunning and wisdom for use in one’s own tribe. Denying the heads a place among their kindred was added insult.

This view is supported by Anne Ross (154-6) who identifies the severed head as an iconographic and verbal symbol, which she believes sums the whole of pagan Celtic religion. Severed heads served as trophies testifying to the military prowess of the victors; in addition, powers believed to be inherent in the human head would act protectively to keep evil from the fortress or home, while ensuring good fortune. The Celts believed the human head, as the seat of the soul and essence of being, was the possessor of every desirable quality: it could remain alive after the death of the body; it could avert evil and convey prophetic information; it could move, act, speak, and sing; and it could tell tales and entertain.

Simon James quotes Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian who chronicled world history in his *Bibliotheca historica* and illustrated the Celtic treatment of the head in battle: “When their enemies fall they cut off their heads and fasten them about the necks of their horses; and turning over to their attendants the arms of their opponents, all covered in blood, they carry them off as booty, singing a paean over them and striking up a song of victory, and these first-fruits of battle they fasten by nails upon their houses.” James also concurs with Ross that the taking of heads may have had a religious purpose: the Celts believed that the head was the dwelling place of the immortal soul, and by keeping control of the head of an enemy, they may have thought that the spirit was also controlled (James 82). The preponderance of historical evidence supports the significance of the numerous references to the head in ancient literature.

The story of Bran, King of Britain, is a famous epic adventure involving a border crossing event surrounding his talking head. Bran has two brothers, Nissyen and Evnissyen, who was always causing trouble. The King of Ireland, Matholwch, comes to England for a visit to ask for the hand of Branwen, the King Bran’s sister, in marriage. Out of jealousy that Branwen was given without his consent, Evnissyen maims Matholwch’s horses. To make up for the insult, Bran gives Matholwch the Cauldron of Regeneration as a gift. After some years have passed, Bran discovers that his sister is being mistreated by her husband and sets out on an expedition to Ireland to rescue her. Since the sea was not deep and the giant Bran could not fit into any ship, he waded across the sea. As the Irish saw the British approaching, they destroyed the bridge that would have allowed the enemy access.

Bran then proclaims, “Let him who is a chief be a bridge” and Bran lies down across the river so his host can cross. During the ensuing battle, Bran is injured with a poisoned spear and he orders his seven surviving warriors to cut off his head and carry it with them. For the next four-score years, they stayed in the Isle of Gwales (Otherworld) eating, drinking, and listening to the pleasant conversation of Bran’s head (*Mabinogion* 68-79).

In another Talking Head story, as the pangs of the Ulster were coming to an end, Cúchulainn’s human father, Sualdam, trips over his shield and decapitates himself (possibly as punishment for violating the *geis* (taboo) of speaking before the Druid). His head was brought back to Emain Macha on his shield and his head continued to issue warnings to the men of Ulster that they were about to be attacked by Ailill and Medb (*Táin* 219). In “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” Conare’s head is cut off but Macc Cecht kills those who were attempting to take it as a trophy, gives the head a drink of water, and Conare’s head begins to recite a poem of gratitude (*Early* 104). These two examples show how the heads have entered a supernatural plane where the body is unnecessary for the head to live on.

This next example shows how the head can not only talk after decapitation but can prophecy as well. In the story *Lomna’s Head*, Coirpre has an affair with Finn’s wife, and the fool Lomna witnesses it. Lomna writes an ogham to alert Finn, and Coirpre cuts Lomna’s head off and carries it away. Finn finds the headless body and performs divination rhymes to discover the identity of the corpse. He discovers that the body belongs to Lomna and that he was murdered. Finn turns his hounds loose and they find Coirpre cooking a fish on a spit with

Lomna's head on a spike beside him. When Coirpre fails to share his fish with the head, Lomna's head speaks, vowing that Coirpre will be chopped into many pieces by Finn, which is indeed how the story unfolds (Gregory, *Gods* 244).

With the story of *Bricriu*, we have the forerunner of the "beheading challenge" motif when Uath challenges Loegaire, Conall, and Cúchulainn to cut off his head; in return he would cut their heads off the following day. Only Cúchulainn accepts. Uath is an Otherworld being

who could perform druidry and discharge claims of mutual obligation ... and he was called a specter because of his ability to transform himself into any shape. Uath stretched his neck out on a stone and Cúchulainn took the axe and cut off his head. Uath rose, took his axe, put his head on his chest and returned to his lake. (*Early* 245-6)

A variant of this story is retold in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (lines 443-8) where the Green Knight's severed head reminds Gawain of his promise to meet for the beheading exchange the following New Year.

The tradition of the talking head continued beyond the ancient epics, as even in *Macbeth* we find a talking head. When Macbeth wants to hear his future, the three weird sisters concoct a brew which makes spirits appear and the first apparition to materialize is an armed head who warns Macbeth to beware Macduff (4.1.69-72). While laid out as a terrifying scene, both Macbeth and the audience somehow know to trust the words of the liminal head.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus pursues his beloved Eurydice into the Underworld. After losing her twice, he is seized by the *maenads*, the followers of

Bacchus, who, inspired by drink into ecstatic frenzy, tear his body apart. But his head still sings and his harp still plays:

His mangled limbs lay scatter'd all around,
His head, and harp a better fortune found;
In Hebrus' streams they gently roul'd along,
and sooth'd the waters with a mournful song.
Soft deadly notes the lifeless tongue inspire. (Ovid
11.74-8)

The significance of the head, even a silent one, is emphasized in *The Táin*. As King Conchobor's champion in Ulster, Cúchulainn is constantly pitted in battle against Medb and Ailill of Connaught. After Cúchulainn allows Medb's army to take Ulster by surprise because he was with a woman, he circles behind the forces and cuts off the heads of four warriors and tosses them onto four points of a tree fork (*Táin* 73). In an account of his boyhood deeds, Cúchulainn is awakened by the sounds of Ulster in battle. He encounters a half-headed man carrying half a corpse. After exchanging words with the half-headed man, "he knocked off the half-head with his hurling stick and drove it before him, playing ball across the plain of battle" (*Táin* 80), very similar to the way King Arthur's knights treat the Green Knight's head in *SGGK* (428). Upon returning to Emain Macha after his first battle, Cúchulainn cuts off the heads of the Ulster enemies Foill (Deceitfulness), Fannall (the Swallow), and Tuachell (the Cunning) and brings the three heads into the chariot saying, "I won't let go of these trophies until we reach Emain Macha" (*Táin* 87-90). It was in the House of the Red Branch in Emain Macha that the heads and weapons of beaten enemies were displayed (Gregory, *Cúchulainn* 43).

The Book of Fermoy contains the story of “Táin bo Fraech,” a short legend giving an account of how Caliber Crom, King of Hy Maine in Connaught is murdered and his head cut off. Afterwards, he is restored to life by the miracles of St Ciaran of Clonmacnoise, who replaces his head in such a manner that it remains forever somewhat crooked. Cairbre is called Crom, or “the Stooped” from that point on.

It is not only in the ancient texts but in the early Christian works as well where we find examples of talking heads among the martyred saints. These “cephalophores” (Greek for “head-carriers”) are depicted in art and literature as carrying their own heads after being beheaded, some of the heads continuing to speak. The best example is that of St Denis who was beheaded circa A.D. 250 by pagan priests at Montmartre. St Denis then picks up his head and miraculously preaches a sermon while holding his head as he journeys six miles to his burial place (*Golden Volume V*). At the moment of his execution by the Vandals, St Nicasius, the Archbishop of Rheims, is reading Psalm 119, and after his head falls to the ground, he continues to complete the Psalm (*Golden Volume II*).

The Golden Legend Volume IV describes the martyrdom of Paul of Tarsus: “he stretched forth his neck and was so beheaded. And as soon as the head was from the body, it said: Jesus Christus! which had been to Jesus or Christus, or both, fifty times.” The head is cast onto a pile located in a valley along with the heads of many others. When the head is recovered, to prove it is the head of Saint Paul, the Christians said “let us set this head at the feet of the body . . . and if it be his head that the body may turn and join it to the head” (*Golden*). They set the head at the

feet of Paul; the body turned and joined him to his head so that they knew with certainty this was the head of Saint Paul. Christians call this a miracle but the ancients might have looked upon this as an Otherworld intervention.

In a significant story from the *Mabinogion*, Peredur witnesses a very strange event at the house of his uncle (a king) who is lame. In the “procession of the bleeding lance,” two lads enter the hall carrying a large spear from which blood dripped off the end. He then witnesses two girls bringing in a severed head on a large platter filled with blood, a reminder of Salome’s request for John the Baptist’s head to be served in the same manner (Matthew 14.1-12). The people in his uncle’s court weep and lament. In this particular story the head does not speak, but Peredur later discovers that it is his first cousin’s head and if he had merely inquired about the identity of the head rather than remaining silent, the king’s health would have been restored (*Mabinogion* 226, 249). This version is in contrast to the quest cited in *Idylls of the King* where instead of a severed head, it is the Holy Grail that will heal the king and restore peace to the kingdom. Alternatively, the severed head reflects the state of the land at that time: the crops are dying and cannot be harvested and the earth is brown, just barely alive. Revealing the identity of the head would have restored both the land and the lame, impotent king.

The Norse have their well-known story of the talking head. Odin seeks giants who are known for their wisdom. One such giant is Mimir who lives at the root of the World Tree Yggdrasill and guards the Fountain of Wisdom. Mimir is wise because he often drinks from the Fountain. Mimir warns Odin that he must form an alliance with the other race of gods, the Vanir, since Odin will need all

possible allies when Ragnarök arrives. As punishment for a perceived betrayal, the Vanir cut Mimir's head off. Odin continues to receive counsel from Mimir's head even after the Vanir cut it off, relying on the head to warn him of dangers.

According to the *Ynglinga saga*, "Odin took the head, smeared it with herbs so that it should not rot, and sang incantations over it. Thereby he gave it the power that it spoke to him, and discovered to him many secrets."

Other characters do not literally lose their heads but rather figuratively lose their minds by going insane in battle. Odin's warriors are known as Berserkers and their battle tactics provide another example of a border crossing. Berserkers appear to belong to the world of men, but take on attributes of Otherworld creatures when they go into battle, crossing the border to become frenzied animals. According to Chapter 6 of Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, these battled-crazed men wear wolf pelts on their heads and "rushed forward without armor, were as mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, and were strong as bears or wild bulls, and killed people at a blow, but neither fire nor iron told upon themselves."

According to the *OED*, although the etymology of "Berserk" is disputed, many agree the original meaning was probably "bear-sark" or "bear-coat." A modern portrayal of Berserkers is evident in *Eaters of the Dead*, a version of the *Beowulf* story by Michael Crichton, where Hrothgar's people come under attack from the "wendols," a band of warriors covered in bear skins, who fight like bears, live like bears, and for all intent believe they are bears. In J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, the "skin-changer" or shape-shifter Beorn could assume the appearance of a great black bear (116). In naming his character, Tolkien used "beorn," the Old

Teutonic word for “bear” and Old English word for “warrior” (*OED*). The word came from the same origin as “Berserker.” The Skaldic poem *Haraldskvædi* assigns Berserkers to the forces of King Harald Fairhair at the battle of Hafrsfjörd (late ninth century) in stanza 8b: “The berserks howled, / battle was on their minds, / the wolf-skins growled / and shook their spears.” In stanza 20 the poet asks about berserkers “who drink blood,” and answers himself: “They are called wolf-skins / who in battle / carry bloody shields; / they redden spears / when they come to battle.” In *The Waking of Angantyr*, Hervor passes by ghosts and spirits until she comes to the mound of the Berserkers. The poem references Arngrim, Hervor’s grandfather, who was a Berserker along with his twelve sons, including Angantyr. The eeriness of this surreal imagery is enhanced by the knowledge that the spirits Hervor encounters are those of dead, blood-crazed warriors. Berserkers, formally human warriors, experience a border crossing when entering the violent battlefield, becoming Otherworld beings when their rage overtakes them.

At the point when Cúchulainn undergoes his *riastrad*, he is temporarily an Otherworld creature, having crossed the border to become a monster. The *Táin* makes numerous references to Cúchulainn’s “warp-spasm” where he loses his temper so completely that he actually becomes a Berserker. The best example of this is when Cúchulainn wants to join the boy-troop of “three time fifty” boys who always played in Emain. His mother does not want him to go alone and begs him to wait until some Ulster boys can go with him. But Cúchulainn refuses and immediately ran up to King Conchobor’s boys without following the rule of

declaring a pledge of safety first. The boys take exception to this and attack Cúchulainn.

[Then] the warp-spasm overtook him: it seemed each hair was hammered into his head, so sharply they shot upright. You would swear a fire-speck tipped each hair. He squeezed one eye narrower than the eye of a needle; he opened the other wider than the mouth of a goblet. He bared his jaws to the ear; he peeled back his lips to the eye-teeth till his gullet showed. The hero-halo rose up from the crown of his head. (*Táin* 77)

He then laid low fifty of the boys before the King interfered to set things in order.

In another example, after Cúchulainn completes all tasks set before him in order to win Emer as his wife, the trouble-maker Bricriu points out that it is King Conchobor's right to sleep with her first on the wedding night ("droit de seigneur"). "Cúchulainn grew wild at this and trembled so hard that the seat cushion burst under him and feathers flew around the house." The problem is finally solved by having not only the king sleep with Emer but having Fergus and Cathbad join them in the bed as well to ensure her virginity for Cúchulainn (*Táin* 38). Later when Ulster and Connaught are engaged in battle, Cúchulainn learns that the armies of Medb and Ailill have destroyed the boy troop of three times fifty from Emain Macha and the *riastrad* overtakes him again.

The first warp-spasm seized Cúchulainn, and made him into a monstrous thing, hideous and shapeless, unheard of. His shanks and his joints, every knuckle and angle and organ from head to foot shook like a tree in the flood or a reed in a stream. His body made a furious twist inside his skin, so that his feet and shins and knees switched to the rear and his heels and calve switched to the front. . . . His mouth was weirdly distorted: his cheek peeled back from his

jaws until the gullet appeared, his lungs and liver flapped in his mouth and throat, his lower jaw struck the upper a lion-killing blow, and fiery flakes large as a rams' fleece reached his mouth from his throat.
(*Táin* 150)

He then mounts his chariot and rides out to meet his enemies where he slaughters no less than five hundred. Cúchulainn's warp-spasm causes him to cross the border and assume a supernatural, grotesque persona.

In Norse mythology, the Valkyries are sent by Odin to every battle, where they choose which men are to die and which side will have victory (Snorri 45). Skuld, the youngest of the Norns (the three women who appear at the birth of a hero to prophesy his fate), is also a Valkyrie, choosing the moment of a hero's death. This makes Skuld a particularly interesting character, if we stop to realize that she is one who not only forecasts an individual's fate as a Norn, but then as a Valkyrie, determines when to end his life on the battlefield as well. This makes her entirely omniscient relative to the hero's life and an extremely powerful prophetess. The Valkyries select the battle-slain who will go to Valhalla and then provide hospitality to these dead warriors in the great hall, serving ale to the Einherjar (*Poetic Edda* 57). The Einherjar still retain most of their human attributes. Their only purpose now is to prepare to fight the enemy at Ragnarök. They prepare for the coming event by battling one another in the courtyard every day (Snorri 49-50). These beings are now both alive and dead simultaneously, crossing the border between one world and another on a daily basis.

Other battlefield warriors may not lose their heads, but they experience that liminal space by transforming into creatures across the border empowered to defeat

their enemies. These transformations are known as “shapeshifting.” In an example from the *Volsung Saga*, Sigmund is the son Volsung, great-grandson of Odin, and his son is Sinfjolti by his sister Signy. Sigmund and Sinfjolti come across a house in the wood where two very large men are sleeping.

Now these twain were spell-bound skin-hangers, and
wolf-skins were hanging up over them in the house;
and every tenth day might they come out of these
skins; and they were the kings' sons: so Sigmund
and Sinfjolti do the wolf skins on them, and then
might they nowise come out of them, though forsooth
the same nature went with them heretofore; they
howled as wolves howl but both knew the meaning of
the howling; then lay out in the wild-wood, and each
went his way. (19)

Sigmund and Sinfjolti live for some time in the woods as werewolves before avenging Sigmund's father's death. Even the Russian epic *The Song of Igor* includes a werewolf: a prince of the house of Polotsk, Vseslav rules towns by day “but at night he prowled / in the guise of a wolf” (Nabokov lines 660-2).

In a manuscript *De chophur in dá muccida* from the *Book of Leinster* preceding *The Táin*, the argument between Medb and Ailill over the bulls is described. There is bad blood between the king of the sídh in Munster, Bodb, and the king of the sídh in Connaught, Ochall. Each has a pig-keeper: Fruich is Bodb's pig-keeper and Rucht is Ochall's and the two are good friends. They are both practiced in the magical arts and can turn themselves into any shape. After refusing to betray one another, they are dismissed from their respective sídhe and spend two full years in the shape of birds of prey. They spend the next two years under water, and then they turn into two stags before becoming two warriors slashing at one

another. Then they became two phantoms, terrifying each other, then they are two dragons pouring snow on each other's land. Finally, they become two maggots. One is devoured by a cow belonging to Daire mac Fiachna and the other eaten by a cow belonging to Medb and Ailill. From them spring the two bulls, Finnbennach, the white-horned, and Donn Cuailnge, the brown. During a bedroom chat, Medb points out to Ailill that their wealth is perfectly matched, but when they actually take inventory to prove it, it turns out Ailill possesses one more item than Medb: the bull called Finnbennach. So Medb sends a messenger to Daire to see if she might "borrow" his bull Donn Cuailnge and after first agreeing, Daire changes his mind. This is the start of the famous war detailed in *The Táin* (46-55), a war started over a lover's quarrel concerning who holds more possessions, not unlike how many wars are started over which country holds or should hold more land.

In a Welsh story from the *Mabinogion*, the Druid king Math transforms his nephews, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, into animals for three years to teach them a lesson, after Gilfaethwy, urged on by Gwydion, rapes the maiden Goewin. Math causes the rapist to become a hind and Gwydion to become a stag in their first year; in the second year they switch genders and the rapist becomes a boar and Gwydion a sow; in their third year, Gilfaethwy becomes a she-wolf and his brother a male wolf. Humiliating though this may be, Math compounds the punishment. His nephews mate with one another, producing three litters from their unnatural union. Thus the rapist has to bear fawns and wolf cubs and learns for himself what it is to be female (*Mabinogion* 104-6).

The Goddess of War, Morrígan, desires Cúchulainn for her lover. His refusal earns him her lifelong hatred for she pursues him in numerous guises, baiting him until he is overcome. She appears as a black eel, a white heifer, and a gray wolf, and is wounded each time by him (*Táin* 133). She tricks him into healing her by appearing as a decrepit hag leading a milk-heavy cow. In return for three drinks of milk, Cúchulainn blesses the giver three times, his every word a healing to the Morrígan.

It is appropriate that the Morrígan should be regarded as the Celtic patroness of shapeshifting, since she has a long descent down to more modern times in the person of Morgan le Fay, herself a renowned shapeshifter in the Arthurian legends. As Geoffrey of Monmouth's Morgan, she is the Queen of Avalon, a healer and shapeshifter. In Malory, she retains her Morrígan-like characteristics in her jealous pursuit of Arthur's downfall. According to Matthews, in the whole of Celtic literature, there are no better stalkers than she, the mistress of life and death (152).

In a tale of the Fianna, Finn meets a woman, Sadbh, who is under the influence of the *fith-fath* charm, which renders the subject invisible by making him or her appear in a different guise (Matthews 152). For refusing the love of a dark Druid, she is changed into a wild deer. The spell can only be broken by coming under the protection of the Fianna. Finn falls in love with her and offers her his protection, but while he is away fighting, the dark Druid appears before Sadbh in the form of Finn, tricking her into leaving the Fianna sanctuary. She is immediately turned back into a deer. When Finn returns and discovers what has

happened, he spends the next seven years looking for his wife. One day, his hounds find a little boy who has been left alone when his mother was dragged away by an evil dark man. The boy is Finn's son and he names him Oisín, meaning "young deer." Oisín eventually becomes the greatest poet of the Fianna (Gregory, *Gods* 159-61).

In both the story of Etain and the Children of Lir, the characters are enchanted into other shapes through jealousy. Mider is married to Fuamnach and she is very jealous when he takes Etain as a second wife. Fuamnach contacts a Druid to help put a spell on Etain to drive her away. When Etain is driven out of Mider's home, she is taken in by the Dagda's son Angus Og, who treats her with respect and love. Fuamnach's jealousy continues to grow so that she plots to have Angus and Mider meet, leaving Etain alone where she uses a Druid rowan-tree wand to cast a spell turning Etain into a fly. When Angus discovers what Fuamnach has done, he strikes her head off. Meanwhile, Etain is blown around as a fly until she ends up in the wine glass of the wife of Etar, a warrior known as the King of the Riders of the Sídh. Nine months later, she is born as his daughter, Etain the second (Gregory, *Gods* 85-7).

When the god of the sea, Lir, loses his wife, Bodb Dearg offers one of his foster daughters in marriage and Lir chooses the eldest, Aebh. Together they have four wonderful children: a daughter, a son, and twin boys, but Aebh dies in childbirth. Next Lir chooses her sister Aeife. While the children grow up to be great favorites among the people, Aeife grows more and more jealous because she is unable to produce children of her own. She begins plotting and although she is

unable to arrange for the children's death, she sends them into Lake Darva to bathe and then uses a Druid wand to change them into swans. They still retain their human speech and thoughts. Aeife tells the children they will remain three hundred years on Lake Darva, three hundred years upon the Sea of Moyle (the North Channel), and three hundred years at the Isle of Glora in Enis. They will suffer no grief and will be able to sing the most beautiful songs. They are fated to remain as swans until a southern princess marries a northern prince.

When Aeife's treachery is discovered, Bodb Dearg orders her to tell him what shape she abhors above all others. Aeife responds that she most fears to become a demon of the air. So Bodb turns her into a shrieking demon. After nine hundred years, the children are turned back into their human form, but they are very old and do not live long after their transformation. At the time when they are transformed back into their human forms, the King of Connaught (in the north) is Lairgrn and his wife is Deoch, from the southern region of Ireland, satisfying the prophecy (Squire 142-6).

Sometimes a shapeshifting enchantment has the effect of rendering the subject a threshold guardian of the Otherworld. The Green Knight of *SGGK* is a latter-day example of this. He is transformed from a human into an Otherworldly shape by Morgan le Fay, appointed by her to keep the gates of Winter against all challenges (*SGGK* lines 2444-60). He guards this edge of the border between the Otherworld and the real world. Heimdall is a boundary figure, also known as a threshold guardian, from Norse mythology. He guards the threshold of the gods' site at the edge of their home Asgard, protecting the bridge from the mountain

giants. Heimdall's other main action involves a temporal boundary, namely his sounding of the Gjallarhorn to signal the changing of the world at the beginning of Ragnarök (Lindow 167-70). Heimdall is the perfect boundary guard to sound the horn, since he traded an ear with Mimir for a drink from the Well of Wisdom.

Such figures are so ancient that none remember if they ever had human ancestry (Matthews 155). In the *Mabinogion*, the human Pwyll changes shape with Arawn, the ruler of the Otherworld. Pwyll spends a year in the Otherworld, defeating the evil Hafgan on Arawn's behalf while Arawn governs Pwyll's home at Dyfed. No one guesses the substitution. At the end of the year, both men return to their respective domains. Much of Pwyll's subsequent story requires his attendance in Annwfn, and he marries Rhiannon, herself a woman of the Otherworld. He also acquires the pigs of Annwfn, a species hitherto unknown to earth (Matthews 155-156). Pwyll is also a threshold guardian, carefully protecting the delicate border between the Otherworld and the real world. Pwyll is another of the few humans who is granted safe passage to and from the Otherworld. He eventually succeeds Arawn as the permanent ruler of the Otherworld.

Sometimes shapeshifting border crossings occur *within* border crossings. We have already discussed how the Norse gods are often portrayed with human attributes but live "across the border" in Asgard. Not only do they experience a border crossing with their physical existence, but some of the gods cross another border in order to populate their world with monsters to fight at Ragnarök. Loki is the most notorious case. He fathers three monsters with the ogress Angrboda (Sorrow Bringer): Fenrir wolf; the Midgard serpent; and Hel (Snorri 39). When

the gods learn through prophecies of the evil these three are to bring, Odin has them brought before him. He throws Hel into Niflheim (equivalent of Hades) where she rules over nine worlds. Fenrir wolf is fettered, destined to remain bound until Ragnarök. The Midgard Serpent remains in the ocean entwined, so large that he can encircle Midgard (Earth) and grasp his own tail. Loki also “mothered” Sleipner, Odin’s eight-legged horse, after mating with the Giant-builder’s stallion Svadilfari while in the form of a mare (*Poetic Edda* n271). All these examples demonstrate how shapeshifting, crossing the border in a different form, is as varied as the imagination of the god, goddess, Druid, demon, or wizard who invokes the enchantment.

Interest in stories featuring the personalities of heads continues through the ages. In Canto 28 of *The Inferno*, Dante and Virgil come upon Bertrand de Born who “held [his] severed head by its own hair, / swinging it like a lantern in its hand; / and the head looked at us and wept in its despair” (lines 121-3). It is not a very far stretch to see how the severed head evolved into carved turnips and pumpkins. In the nineteenth century story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, it is the living headless body that is emphasized more than the head itself. The Hessian is called the “headless” horseman, his still-functioning body holding his head positioned on the pommel. The Hessian is unable to cross the bridge at the town entrance because as discussed earlier in this work, spirits cannot cross divisions of water. Or it could be that he might be recognized as one of their own if he were to come any closer to the town. The Hessian is depicted as throwing his head across the river to strike down Ichabod Crane. While Ichabod’s fate is left unexplained, it is possible

the Hessian was actually Brom Bones, Ichabod's rival for the hand in marriage of Katrina van Tassel, who merely created the guise of the Hessian to frighten Ichabod away. The fact that a shattered pumpkin was found beside Ichabod's abandoned hat supports this theory, implying that a pumpkin may easily have been used to simulate the horseman's severed head (Irving 366). The pumpkin has also been used in place of the head in later stories. Jack Pumpkinhead, a fictional character from the Oz series by Frank Baum has a Jack-o'-lantern for a head. In Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, the lead character is named Jack Skellington and also has a pumpkin for a head. He has the ability to take off his own head and throw it at adversaries when necessary.

The Jack-o'-lantern was named after the strange light that flickers over peat bogs, called *ignis fatuus*, (Latin for "fire" + "foolish") or "Will-o'-the-wisp," where a wisp is a bundle of sticks often used as a torch, and the name Will, who may have represented a night watchman or a blacksmith. With a Jack-o'-lantern, the top is cut off, similar to beheading a human, and the inside flesh is removed to allow for a light to be placed inside. Carving pumpkins is an American tradition while in the days of the ancient Celts they carved turnips. The more modern story of Jack of the Lanterns comes from "Stingy Jack" who was a lazy but shrewd drunk who was able to trap the devil up a tree. In return for releasing the devil, Jack asked that his soul never be taken by the devil into Hell and the devil agreed. When Jack died, he was refused entrance to Heaven. But neither could he enter Hell due to Satan's promise. Since he had no where to go and no way to see how to get there, the Devil mockingly tossed him an ember that would never burn out since it came from

the flames of Hell. Jack is a prime example of the old saying “Be careful what you wish for” as he carved out a turnip and put the ember inside it and began endlessly wandering the earth for a resting place (Morton 105-7). He became known as “Jack of the Lantern,” a liminal being stuck on the border between good and evil for eternity. Despite this colorful legend, the term Jack-o’-lantern originally meant simply a night watchman or a man with a lantern.

Whether discussing Jack of the Lantern, Cúchulainn’s riasrad, shapeshifting werewolves, or Bran’s talking head, we observe the various transformations humans and other creatures undergo which bring them to that critical threshold area between worlds. We also observe how the border crossing themes discussed in this chapter establish long traditions which are still apparent in Halloween celebrations and modern movies such as the shapeshifting werewolves and vampires in *Underworld* and the *Twilight* series.

Chapter Seven: From The Morrígan to Three Weird Sisters

Powers from the Otherworld may be pulled across the border into the real world and melded into a single being or shared among several. One often-encountered situation was where a border crossing occurred and three women shared mystical, prophetic abilities. Three was considered a magical, powerful number in most ancient cultures. For the pagans, their world was divided into earth, water, and heaven (or Otherworld). Three solved the discord created by a polarity of two, eliminating the possibility of a split decision between two women, ensuring a degree of fairness, according to Eliezer Posner in “What is the Mystical Significance of the Number Three?” Three represented birth, life, and death, as well as past, present, and future - areas where shaman women were devoted to making predictions, as stated in “Symbolism and Spiritual Significance of the Number Three.” Three also represented beginning, middle, and end, or the division of life’s woven tapestry into birth, adulthood, and death.

The ancient Celtic society honored the goddess, the symbol of motherhood, in her tri-form as evidenced in sculpture and bas-reliefs, also noted in “Symbolism.” Most ancient civilizations maintain somewhere in their history the idea of three women who have ability to prophesy Fate, sometimes even

manipulating it for their own purposes. The three women, witches, sisters, prophetesses, or hags who are entwined with Fate are excellent examples of beings who easily cross borders. They are able to move smoothly between the real world, the Otherworld, and a future world few can see. Their ability to control Fate means they can see the future, are instruments of prophecy, and they are never wrong. This very popular theme has been captured by various nations throughout the ages, remaining an active topic in works such as *Macbeth* and the more modern *Chronicles of Prydain* series by Lloyd Alexander.

The concept of three women possessing powers from across the border can be traced as far back as ancient Greece with the idea of the *Moirae*, the Fates. The *Moirae* were three goddesses who determined the course of human life. They were sometimes described as daughters of Night, indicating the darkness and obscurity of human destiny; other times, they may be the daughters of Zeus and Themis, whose name means Law, giving them the title “daughters of the just heavens.” Hesiod (*Theogony* 217) distinguished three *Moirae*: Clotho (spinner) who spun the thread of life from her distaff onto her spindle; Lachesis (drawer of lots) measured the thread of life allotted to each person with her measuring rod; and Atropos (inexorable or inevitable, literally “she who cannot be turned”) was the cutter of the thread of life. It was Atropos who chose the manner and timing of each person’s death (Bulfinch 904). The Greek word *moira* means a part or portion, and more literally, one’s portion of life. The *Moirae* appeared three nights after a child’s birth to prophecy his course and spin his thread of life. The *Moirae* directed this course according to the counsel of the gods. Unlike other prophetesses, theirs was

not an inflexible fate. Zeus had the power to save those whose fate had already placed them at death's door, as noted in the "Moira" article from *The Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*.

Homer usually referred to only one individual goddess. In Book 24 of *The Iliad*, after the death of Hector, his mother Hecuba stated, "So this is the doom that strong Fate spun out, our son's life linen drawn with his first breath" (248-9), referencing a singular goddess. But more often the three were described as cold, remorseless, and unfeeling and depicted as old crones or hags, sometimes even as lame, to indicate the slow march of Fate (Ovid 309). They had forbidding appearances (beards). They were often depicted weaving or spinning lives of heroes. As goddesses of Fate, they must necessarily know the future (Ovid 155). When they revealed this future to mortals or gods, they became prophetic divinities, bringing forth knowledge from across the border between an esoteric realm and the real world.

The Romans incorporated the three women of Fate into their religion when they conquered the Greeks. The *Parcae*, "sparing ones," were Nona, the goddess called upon in the ninth month of pregnancy, Decuma, the goddess called upon in the tenth month of pregnancy, and Morta, the goddess of the "still-birth" or death, according to the "Parcae" article from the "statemaster.encyclopedia" website. The role of the *Parcae* was the same as the *Moirae*, foretelling the path the infant would follow in life.³

By sharing a vision of the future with those affected, the mysterious three women of Destiny could influence decisions individuals made, possibly changing

the outcome of an event. But we do not observe heroes avoiding challenges because some dreadful fate had been predicted for them. This is most clearly observable in the Celtic stories of the great Irish epic hero Cúchulainn and the triple war-goddess Morrígan. The Morrígan repeatedly insinuated herself in the champion's battles, at times helping him and other times attempting to herald his downfall.

The Morrígan possessed a particular aspect of the Celtic deities known as "triplism." It was an expression of the extreme potency of any one deity. It may be likened "to the power of three" as this number was sacred and auspicious (Powell 154-5). Irish war-goddesses were more prominent than male, and usually portrayed as a group of three. There were examples of both a single deity in three different forms, and of three different deities. It is sometimes difficult to ascertain within the literature which case the originator intended. One frequently mentioned group of three is Morrígan, Nemain, and Macha. A fourth, Badb, sometimes took the place of one of these, or is identical with Morrígan (MacCullouch 71). In a different version of the triple goddess, Anu (also called Danu), Badb, and Macha, were war-goddesses or battle-furies, all malignant beings who delighted in battle and slaughter (Joyce, Vol 1 266).

Since the first Irish texts were translated, there has been confusion regarding exactly which deity is the "mother of the Irish gods," making analysis of the triple mother-goddess a challenge. The figures of Anu and Danu were both labeled with this title. Anu was considered the mother of the land but in some references also the mother of gods and goddesses, according to the "Anu" article

contained in the Mary Jones website. This confusion continued throughout the *Book of Invasions* where some redactions claimed Morrígan as the mother of the gods and others listed Brigit. But then there were three Brigits: Brigit, daughter of the Dagda, was the goddess of poetry and wisdom. She had two sisters, also called Brigit: one was the goddess of medicine and the other was the goddess of smithwork. Therefore, she was often referred to as a triple goddess (Joyce, Vol 1 260).

In the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, more commonly known as the *Book of Invasions*), Anu was one of the trio of sisters which also included Badb and Macha. In one redaction, Macha is identified with the figure of Morrígan, while in another, Anu is identified as Morrígan. It is difficult to say which she may be as she is sometimes thought to refer to all three sisters, and perhaps like the triple goddess Brigit, these are all one and the same goddess, again as cited in the “Anu” article. At times, the names Badb and Morrígan are used to refer to the same deity; at other times, the names refer to two aspects of the triple war-goddess. The old accounts of them are somewhat confused: Morrígan means “great queen” or “phantom queen” (Joyce, Vol 1 266), but Badb is the name generally applied to a war-fury. According to Clark, in *Lebor Gabála*:

Badb and Macha, rich the store.
Morrígan who dispenses confusion,
Compassers of death by the sword,
Noble daughters of Ernmas.

The significant point to note is that ancient Celts had a belief in the triple goddess, regardless of how names were interchanged, and of her ability to affect the battlefield.

Morrígan was the most popular war-goddess in early Irish tradition, usually spoken of with the definite article, “the Morrígan.” She did not engage in combat herself but rather affected armies psychologically, especially by her frightful appearance. The Morrígan had the power of prophecy and divination and could cast spells. Much associated with the crow, the Morrígan was often described as living in the Cave of Cruachan, where many magical, border crossing events occurred (MacKillop, “Morrígan”).

Badb was a goddess of war and of fate, deciding who lived and who died on the battlefield. In the Irish tales of war and battle, the Badb was represented as foreshadowing, with her cries, the extent of the carnage about to take place (Hennessey 35). On the eve of the last battle between Conchobor and Ailill, Badb “cried out to the men of Ireland . . . and a hundred warriors died of fright” (*Táin* 238-9). Badb was represented by the bird known as the hoodie, scald-crow, or Royston-crow. The readers of the *Mabinogion* will call to mind the crows of Owein, a contemporary of Arthur, who always ensured victory with the aid of three hundred crows under his command (*Mabinogion* 184-8).

Macha was the archetypical Celtic horse goddess, similar to the Welsh Rhiannon, symbolizing sovereignty as well as a goddess of fertility. She was also a war-fury who reveled amidst the bodies of the slain. “Emain Macha,” the capital of ancient Ulster, now known as Navan, was named for her and translates “the brooch

of Macha” because she marked the boundary of the hill-fortress where they dwelled with her brooch (Rolleston 150-1). With these three deities, we see an example of how the Morrígan triad represented central aspects of Celtic life: battle, sovereignty, and land, as noted by Alan Elued in his article “The Bavarian Triple Goddess.” The supernatural powers possessed by the goddesses are targeted at these significant Celtic areas.

As previously stated, the war goddess appeared in triple form under many name-combinations. In an episode from *The Táin* when Cúchulainn rescued Conchobar from the field of battle, only Badb’s name was used. In this story, which took place on a dark battlefield covered with corpses, Badb taunted Cúchulainn: “Poor stuff to make a warrior is he who is overthrown by phantom” (*Táin* 80), inciting Cúchulainn to win his fight against a ghost. In “The First Battle of Maige Tuired”:

Then the Badb, and Macha, and Morrígan went to the hill of hostage-taking, the tulach (hill) which heavy hosts frequented, to Teamhair (Tara), and they shed druidically formed showers, and fog-sustaining shower-clouds, and poured down from the air, about the heads of the warriors, enormous masses of fire, and streams of red blood; and they did not permit the Fir-Bolgs to scatter or separate for the space of three days and three nights. (Hennessey 38)

In “The Second Battle of Maige Tuired” as told in *Ancient Irish Tales* (48), after the Fomorians were defeated and chased out of Ireland, the victory speech was delivered by “Badb (i.e., the Morrígan)” so in this instance, they were considered one and the same person, depicting again how sometimes the goddess is one deity with several names and at other times, three different deities.

The assistance given to Cúchulainn by Nemain was considerable, but intervention by the Morrígan on his behalf was more constant. Nemain would confound her victims with madness (her name means “panic”) while Morrígan incited the hero to deeds of valor, or planned strife and battle (Hennessey 42). The Morrígan appeared to have a “love/hate” relationship with the hero, Cúchulainn. He often seemed to be the object of her special devotion. In “The Cattle Raid of Regamna,” she told him “I am guarding thy deathbed and I shall be guarding it henceforth” (*Ancient Irish Tales* 213). She sometimes met him in the form of a woman, but also frequently in the shape of a crow. Apparently his tutelary goddess, the Morrígan seemed to have been the instrument, through the decree of a cruel fate, of his premature death (Hennessey 43). On one occasion, the Morrígan appeared before Cúchulainn as a beautiful young woman, claiming to be the daughter of King Buan (*Táin* 132), offering Cúchulainn her love, cattle, treasure, and aid in the war. But he rebuffs her, saying that he “does not have time for women's backsides.” When Cúchulainn refused her, she threatened him instead. She said she would attack him viciously in battle in the guise of a wolf, an eel, and a hornless, red heifer. Later, she fulfills her threat but Cúchulainn manages to shake her off and wound her three times. He breaks the ribs of the eel, puts out an eye of the wolf, and breaks the leg of the heifer. She appeared to him afterward in the shape of a “squint-eyed old woman” (*Táin* 136) with three wounds, offering him milk from her cow. With each drink she took from the cow, he healed her with his blessing, not knowing who she really was. In the “Cattle Raid of Regamna,” she prophesied Cúchulainn would die when the Brown Bull of Cooley and the cow

she brought out of Cruachan mate and their calf is one year old (*Ancient Irish Tales* 211–14).

We read in the “Tragedy of Cúchulainn” on the last morning of his existence when he approached his horse, the *Liath Macha* (the Grey of Macha), his faithful companion of his many victories “turned his left side three times to his master,” preventing him from mounting. In addition to this omen of doom, he found that “the Morrígan had unyoked and broken the chariot the night before” (Gregory, *Cúchulainn* 333). She did not want Cúchulainn going into battle as she knew he would perish. Then followed a scene between Cúchulainn and the Grey where his horse was so affected by the impending fate of his master, “that he let big round tears of blood fall on Cúchulainn’s feet” (Gregory, *Cúchulainn* 333). The grief of the *Liath Macha* and the arts of the Morrígan were of no avail: Cúchulainn would go to the field of battle, spurred on by the unseen power which ruled his destiny, an Otherworld manipulation he was powerless to resist.

But before he approached his foe on the battlefield, he met three hags, blind in the left eye, cooking a venomous hound on spits made of the charmed rowan tree. They were hateful creatures, full of wicked purpose (Gregory, *Cúchulainn* 336.) They invited him to join them and at first he declined. But then one hag derided him, saying that he would not eat with them because they only had dog-meat to feed him - if they had a grand cooking hearth with much to offer he would not pass them by. After this remark designed to insult his chivalrous nature, Cúchulainn took the food in his left hand and ate it, and then put it down on his left thigh. The hand and thigh that had touched the dog meat lost all their strength,

since he had violated his *geis* (taboo). Cúchulainn's strength must be annihilated before the battle, or the Fates would be in error, which is inconceivable.

Cúchulainn's destiny must be answered through his partaking of the forbidden dish, which he resolved to do rather than tarnish his reputation by refusing the request of the witches.

Another account of three manipulative hags can be found in the Fenian tale "The Enchanted Cave of Keshcorran" which begins with Finn seated on his hunting-mound. The three misshapen daughters of the local chief of Tuatha de Dana were seeking vengeance against the Fianna for hunting on their grounds. They sat at the mouth of the cave beneath the hill and reeled off bewitched hasps of yarn left-hand-wise from three wry holly-sticks.

Their three coarse heads of hair all disheveled; their eyes rheumy and redly bleared; their mouths black and deformed, and in the gums of each evil woman of them a set of the sharpest venomous and curved fangs; their three bony-jointed necks maintaining their heads upon those formidable beldames; their six arms extraordinarily long, while the hideous and brutish nail that garnished every finger of them resembled the thick-butted sharp-tipped ox-horn; six bandy legs thickly covered with hair and fluff supported them, and in their hands they had three hard and pointed distaffs. ("Enchanted Cave")

On approaching them, Finn and Conan became entangled in the hasps and lost all their strength, whereon the hags bound them and carried them into the cave. The hags captured all of the Fianna in this manner, except Goll son of Morna, who appeared on the scene, slew the hags, released his fellows, and won Finn's daughter for his wife. As a border crossing event, we again find a cave as an entrance to the

Otherworld, used by the three hags to gain physical access between worlds (Rees 303). The dark, damp, eeriness and mystery of the cave likely made it a prime location for the veil between worlds to be breached easily.

In Norse mythology, the three *Norns* were prophetesses, regarded as dispensers of Fate. They were called Urth (knowledge of the past); Verthandi (knowledge of the present); and most importantly, Skuld (knowledge of the future). They dwelt at the foot of the mighty ash tree Yggdrasill, carefully tending the root extending into Asgard by drawing water from the Well of Urth (Well of Fate) and pouring it over Yggdrasill so that its branches would not rot (Snorri 27). Norns appeared at the birth of a hero to spin his web of fate (*Poetic Edda* 114-5). Sigurd asked the dragon Fafnir about the nature of Norns: “which are those Norns who go to those in need / and choose mothers over children in childbirth?” Fafnir replied, “From very different tribes I think the Norns come, / they are not of the same kin; / some are of the Aesir, some are of the elves, / some are daughters of Dvalin” (*Poetic Edda* 159). In the *Helgakvitha Hundingsbana I*, Helgi had just been born:

‘Twas night in the dwelling,
and Norns there came,
who shaped the life of the lofty one;
they bade him most famed
of fighters all
And best of princes ever to be.
Mightily wove they
the web of fate,
While Bralund’s towns
were trembling all;
And there the golden
threads they wove,
and in the moon’s hall
fast they made them.

There was no clear distinction between Norns, Valkyries, and Swan-maidens, or with the more general term *disir*. The three main Norns were giantesses. Odin confirmed what Fafnir stated, explaining that while there were three main Norns, there were also many others of various races (Snorri 26).

In later sagas, Norns appeared to have been synonymous with *Völvas*, (female shamans). The *Völva* were held in high esteem and were believed to possess such powers that even Odin consulted one (the Seeress Saga) to uncover what the future held for the gods. The *Völva* were not considered harmless. The goddess who was most skilled in magic was Freyja, and she was not only a goddess of love, but also a warlike divinity who caused screams of anguish, blood, and death. What Freyja performed in the gods' world of Asgard, the *Völvas* tried to perform in the mortal world of Midgard. The weapon of the *Völva* was not the spear or sword but rather the wand. A distaff possessed magical powers and in the world of the gods, the three Norns twined the threads of Fate. Many of the wands that have been excavated have a basket-like shape in the top, and they are very similar to distaffs used for spinning linen.

Poets, especially of *Eddic* verse, spoke repeatedly of the judgment or verdict of the Norns. “Norns are called those women who shape what must be,” and the noun related to the verb “shape” which has a similar meaning to “fate” is also used with the Norns. These maidens “shaped” the lives of people (Lindow 243). They also had prophetic abilities. The Norns informed Atli in a dream that his wife would kill him: “So recently the Norns have wakened me, / (he wanted me to interpret prophecies of trouble) / “I thought that you, Gudrun, daughter of Giuki,

“/ ran me through with a poisoned sword” (*Poetic Edda* 201). The Norns as a triad of women of Fate have been compared with the Moirae and the Parcae and indeed the distinct number of three could be influenced by classical ideas (Simek 237).

In a more modern portrayal of the three women of destiny, Shakespeare’s witches in *Macbeth* were prophetesses. They were called the three “Weird Sisters,” derived from the Old English “wyrð” or Fate. The witches’ lines in the first act: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air” set the tone for the entire play by establishing a sense of confusion and unseen evil hidden from view. Shakespeare’s characters were created from his vivid imagination: “each at once her choppy finger laying / upon her skinny lips. You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / that you are so” (1.3.44-6). The witches first appeared in 1.1 where they agree to meet later with Macbeth. In 1.3 they greeted Macbeth with a prophecy that he would be king. Their prophecies had a great impact on Macbeth, where this forecasting served as the possible motivation for all his subsequent actions, their manipulation all the more poignant in its subtlety. In 4.1, the Weird Sisters produced a series of ominous visions for Macbeth that aided in his downfall. Macbeth was very different from heroes like Cúchulainn, Achilles, and Sigurd who knew they were destined to die young as it had been foretold from birth by the three women of Fate. According to Frank Kermode’s review in the *Riverside Shakespeare*, (1309):

The role of the Weird Sisters is, then, to represent that equivocal evil in the nature of things which helps deceive the human will. But they are not mere allegories or the abstractions they might be in a modern play. Shakespeare meant the sisters to

occupy a true physical presence, visible to whom they wish, and endowed with the powers appropriate to demons. They are not mere witches, though they have some of the powers of witches, for, though produced by nature, they maintain a freedom from limitation of space and time, a power to perceive the causes of things, and to see some distance into the human mind. They assume bodies of air or mist (“the earth hath bubbles”).

Macbeth is tormented by the “solicitation” of the Weird Sisters, which, he says, “cannot be ill; cannot be good” (1.3.131) and is very confused as the sisters have just vanished in front of him, conflating the Otherworld and the real world.

The theme of three women of Fate who serve as representations of border crossing beings is still significant in modern literature. Lloyd Alexander wrote a five-book children’s series inspired by Welsh mythology called the *Chronicles of Prydain*. In the second book, *The Black Cauldron*, the reader is introduced to the three enchantresses, Orddu, Orwen, and Orgoch. They live in the Marshes of Morva, where “ropes of fog, twisting and creeping like white serpents, [rise] from the reeking ground” (115). The hero, Taran, encounters Orddu:

a short and plump little woman, with a round lumpy face and a pair of very sharp black eyes. Her hair hung like a clump of discolored marsh weeds, bound with vines and ornamented with bejeweled pins that seemed about to lose themselves in the hopeless tangle. She wore a dark shapeless, ungirt robe covered with patches and stains. Her feet were bare and exceptionally large. (120)

When the companions enter the enchantresses’ cottage, they see a wide loom in one corner with many threads straggling down. “The work on the frame was less than half-finished and so tangled and knotted he could imagine no one ever continuing

it” (118). Later in the evening, Taran observes the hags as three beautiful young women: “One of them was carding wool; one of them was spinning; and the third was weaving” (147). They claim to be neither good nor evil, but are simply interested in “things as they are” (153). Taran encounters the three enchantresses and their loom again in *Taran Wanderer*:

the work on the frame had gone forward somewhat, but it was far from done; knotted, twisted threads straggled in all directions, and what looked like some of Orgoch’s cockleburs were snagged in the warp and weft. Taran could make out nothing of the pattern, though it seemed to him, as if by some trick of his eyes, that vague shapes, human and animal, moved and shifted through the weaving. (21)

In the conclusion of the series, Taran is offered the opportunity to leave Prydain for the land of Summer Country, “a fair land . . . where all the heart’s desires are granted” (Alexander, *The High King* 280). The evening before the victorious companions are to leave for this Otherworld, a sleepless Taran again encounters the three enchantresses, who have come to bring him a brightly woven tapestry, the one Taran had seen previously on their loom. As Orddu explains, “It does come from our loom, if you insist on strictest detail, but it was really you who wove it” (286). Taran sees in the fabric the images of his own life. Orddu goes on to tell Taran “the pattern is of your choosing and always was” (287). While it is hinted throughout the stories that these three determine human fate, it is revealed at the end of the series that the hero had always determined his own fate throughout every step of his life and these three “weavers” had merely captured his story on their loom – not predetermined his story.

Similarly, the three Weird Sisters threw out a suggestion for Macbeth that was too irresistible for him to refuse so that he ends up performing exactly as they had foreseen, but the choice was of his own making. His free will was tested and temptation for power overcame his reason. In the case of Cúchulainn, he was too much of a hero to abandon his duty, even though he had received a forecast of certain death. Since the three women of Fate can look into the world of the future and know how events will unfold, they are either weaving Fate ahead of events, actually dictating what will occur, or they are capturing events immediately as they occur, building an historical record.

The three women of Destiny are endowed with special powers from the Otherworld. They are mystical, supernatural creatures who can see the future. As some of the examples illustrate, they can seemingly manipulate events. Their uncanny knowledge of future occurrences, as well as seeing the unfolding of the Fate of a hero, must be transferred across the border into the real world. None of the stories suggests that the women are dictating events themselves, such as a king would do, but rather that they are channeling some mystical force that only they can see. As border crossing entities, the three women of Fate have been with us since ancient times. They remain active in literature and in pop culture, as the movie "Hocus Pocus" brings the three Sanderson sisters back to life three hundred years after they were hanged as witches in Salem.

Conclusion

Modern society still enjoys Otherworld adventures because the unknown is exciting, removing us from the mundane predictability and domestic dullness of our daily lives, if only for a short time. We like to wonder if this Otherworld border crossing is really possible. In the *Twilight* trilogy, we are presented with the good, moral, and handsome vampire, Edward. Even though we know vampires do not exist, a little part of us likes to fantasize what it would be like to have such a hero in our lives. It brings us out of our everyday doldrums, adding a little spice. Our fantasizing allows us to approach border crossings without the fear the ancients had. We can play the “what if” game endlessly, heightening our own excitement, adding to the wonder of it all.

The ancients held a literal belief in the supernatural. They lived in a society in which there were many basic causes to be frightened. Superstition and ignorance were rampant. The average person was at the mercy of the natural elements, the ruling class, the religious orders, and invading Vikings. For the most part, we live in an enlightened time and fortunate place. In our culture, children enjoy Halloween for the sheer pleasure of being scared while living in their safe

little worlds. Adults can enjoy a heart-pounding suspenseful story or movie for the same reason.

To conclude that border crossings in ancient Celtic and Norse epics were the ancients' explanation of the unknown and inexplicable occurrences in their lives is really too simplistic. The more we learn about our world and universe, the more we realize how much we do not know. The storytellers among us continue to dream and fantasize about the unknowns, and we readers look forward to words that describe worlds we did not know existed and could not have imagined. There will surely be border crossings in their stories.

Scholars should look for opportunities to identify new genres of border crossings, such as those liminal areas that exist in space, with black holes and worm holes. There are still border crossings to be uncovered across the universe and in the sea. Scholars need to be vigilant in identifying newly-defined Otherworlds in these areas. They should continue to seek border crossings within our world, looking at opportunities where the mind can take an everyday walk in the park and transform the event into an Otherworld encounter complete with gilded castles, fairies dressed in green mantles, warriors out for heads in battle, and cauldrons bubbling with unknown magical brews. We must never lose the power of imagination, and scholars should help facilitate the vast world of possibilities by continuing to discover and address border crossings.

Modern research should search out and investigate border crossings as they continue to appear in literature. Using border crossings as a methodology can transform critics' perception of modern literature by offering a new way to engage

literary works. Studying all facets of supernatural crossing opportunities allows us to thoroughly examine the binaries that mask underlying themes, such as the example of Thomas Lovell Beddoes's "Phantom Wooer" ghost who appears more alive than dead, and sees a warm and inviting home instead of a cold, barren grave. A knowledge of border crossing themes allows us to see the mist that surrounds Arthur in his final battle with Modred, not as a sudden environmental occurrence, but rather as something brought on by the Druids and magicians to add an ominous and supernatural element to the battle. If we have knowledge of the three women who control fate, then we know that the three women who arrive on the barge to carry Arthur's body away are more than just three queens: they are prophetesses who are present to aid Arthur in his border crossing to the world of Avalon, the Otherworld.

Border crossings take us into liminal space, that thin threshold betwixt and between the binaries that existed within the seasonal, temporal, physical, and mystical boundaries: as summer turned into winter on Samhain-Eve, the veil separating two worlds was diminished; midnight, twilight, and midday elicited spirit activity; stepping stones were used to cross streams so that spirits could not follow; and the fairy mounds hidden in the mist kept the ancient people house-bound. We should be aware of border crossing themes in all literature because it allows us to engage with literature using a new process for examining binaries that might be masking important themes that would enhance the work for us. Border crossings also direct our attention to differences in mood and tone established by each side of the threshold. Recognizing border crossings enhances themes which

have been with us for hundreds of years and will remain active in literary works yet to be written. Understanding the original intent and meaning of border crossings in ancient pagan works illuminates those themes in modern works. Border crossings are still prolific and relevant in modern works, and I recommend a border crossing methodology when reading to better engage with and understand underlying themes in literary works.

Notes

1. *The Lay of the Cid* is closely related in theme and structure to *The Song of Roland*. Both works are based on historical events: *The Lay of the Cid* describes the battles fought by Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (1043-99) during the Reconquista, the reconquest of Spain from the Moors. *The Song of Roland* is about Charlemagne's battle at Roncevaux pass (778), which was a battle fought against the Basques. When *Roland* was composed, this fact was altered to make it a battle against the Saracens in an attempt to rally the French against a common enemy during the Crusades. The *Cid* was written in 1142 and *Roland* was written c. 1098, but both are based on oral tradition, songs to be performed by jongleurs. Swords and horses are valuable symbols in both poems. El Cid's swords, Colada and Tizón, and his horse Babieca are special because they are won in battle from worthy foes. This relationship with sword and horse is even stronger in *Roland*. Roland's horse Veillantif is depicted as a close friend, as is his sword Durendal, to which he talks and which takes on an almost magical quality. Both are devout Christian poems, containing prayers and visions. The angel Gabriel appears to El Cid in a dream (Cantar 1.19) and to Charlemagne in a dream (Laisse 185.2526). The religious leaders are also exemplary warriors: Archbishop Turpin is given the honor of being second only to Roland as the last of the Twelve Peers alive to do battle at Roncevaux (Laisse 167.2250-2255). In *Cid*, the Bishop Jerónimo is granted the honor of striking the first blows against the Moors (Cantar 2.94). I found the poetry of *Roland* more beautifully vivid and descriptive, as the following comparison shows:

The Lay of the Cid, Cantar 1.46

As mio Cid of Bivar left Alcocer,
the Moors and their women commenced to wail.
He raised his banner and left, passed
down the Jalón, spurred onward; as
they left the course of the river, he saw
many birds of good omen.
Those of Terrer were pleased at the Cid's going,
even more the people of Calatayud, but
the Moors of Alcocer lamented, for he
had treated them honorably.
Mio Cid set spurs to horse,
passed onward still,
until he reached a rise above Monreal.
Lofty and large that hill,
no one need fear attack from any side, and you
know it.

The Song of Roland, Laisse 176.2375-2396

Count Roland rests beneath a pine,
his faced turned toward Spain.
He begins to remember many things:
the land he conquered as a knight of sweet France,
the men from whom he descends,
of Charlemagne, his sovereign, who raised him.
He cannot stop weeping and sighing.
Remembering his sins,
he beats his breast and asks God for mercy:
"True Father, who never lied,
who raised Lazarus from the dead
and defended Daniel against the lions,
save my soul from all perils
for the sins I have committed in my life."
He offers his right gauntlet to God.
Saint Gabriel takes it from his hand.
He lays his head on his arm,
and with his hands joined, breathes no more.
God sends His angels Cherubin
and Saint Michael of Peril.
Saint Gabriel also accompanies them,
as they bear the Count's soul to Paradise.

2. In *The Kalevala*, old *Väinämöinen* is trapped in the Underworld of Tuonela and also escapes by changing himself into an iron worm, a viperish snake 16:373-4.
3. The Latvians and Lithuanians also had their version of the three women who control Fate. *Laima* (“luck, fate”) goddess of Fate who, with her two sisters, *Karta mate* (“mother of cards”) and *Dekla* (from *det* “to make,” a deity of fortune and destiny) formed a trinity of deities, another part of the conception of Destiny in the hands of three ageless ancient women. They were sometimes referred to as the three *Laimas*, indicating that they were the same deity in three different aspects. Though *Laima* made the final decision, all three made *joint* resolutions regarding the fate of particular individuals. *Laima* was not only the goddess of Fate and marriage, but also of darkness and light and determined the relationship between events and the passing of time (“*Laima*”). “*Laima* looked down upon men from a hilltop, from where she distributed both rewards and punishments to men” (Winterbourne 56). Stories abound in which three *Laimas* wandered the countryside and were present at the birth of a child. While in some sources they were called “Goddesses of Birth,” they participated in birth only by pronouncing their words of destiny. The *Laimas*’ mission on earth was temporary, because their permanent dwelling as Otherworld beings was “in the sky” (Jackson 346).

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