



The Morrigan: The Nightmare Queen

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The Morrigan is the best known of all the goddess figures in medieval Irish literature next to Bridget. Indeed, she often functions as a dark alter-ego to Bridget, standing for all the things that the latter does not. Violence, sex, shape-shifting and sorcery are at the top of the list. She represents the scary side of feminine power. This talk is designed both to go back to her Irish roots in quest of her original identity and to explain her modern prominence.

First, what does her name mean? Experts disagree over this because the medieval Irish spelled it in two different ways. As *Mórrigan*, it means 'the great queen', but in most manuscripts, including the earlier, it lacks the accent. This means she is still a queen, but the first half of her name becomes cognate with the Old High German *mara* and Anglo-Saxon *maere*, meaning a frightening superhuman female. It gives us the word 'nightmare'. As she is not the great queen of Irish deities, and she is definitely superhuman and frightening, this is the more likely origin, and she becomes 'the nightmare queen'.

The confusion over her name is matched by a lack of consensus among experts concerning her identity. Since 1990 she has been variously described as just one aspect of a single Irish war goddess with many names; as a representative of war, fertility and sovereignty, as an embodiment of soil and irrigation and as summing up armed conflict in all its guises. Such discord results from medieval sources which represent attempts by Christian authors to use ancient traditions which had never developed a coherent mythology and divine pantheon. What they had instead was a confused medley of characters and stories on which they drew in different ways for different purposes.

It can be said that the Morrigan featured in these texts within an inner and outer penumbra of associations with other beings. The outer one consisted of generalised spirits of battle and the inner one of named goddesses associated with war. The battle spirits were generic, not individual, and were expected to swarm around major clashes of armies, anticipating, encouraging and then enjoying the slaughter. No other ancient or medieval European culture had beings of this kind. They neither carried off the souls of the dead, like Norse Valkyries, nor went on individual missions, like Roman Furies, nor actually ate the dead like animals. To them battle was a spectator sport, without team loyalties.

In many respects Irish war goddesses were the generic Irish war spirits writ large. Five of them feature as personalities. The medieval authors believed that they formed some kind of group, but had no common idea of what kind of group that was. They accordingly shuffled them like cards in a deck or rearranged them like twists of a kaleidoscope. They were formed into pairs or trios, and given siblings, parents and husbands, but the nature of these relationships could vary even within the same version of the same text. Nevertheless, the associations attached to these five goddesses were very strong and largely uniform. They were personally terrifying and connected to war, which they encouraged and enjoyed exactly as the collective groups of battlefield spirits did.

Of the five, Bé Néit is well cited in the extant texts but barely a personality, and more of an add-on, the wife of the war god Néit. The second, the Nemain, does not appear at battles, but terrifies an army destined to be the losers with her screams on nights before a battle. The third, Macha, has a name born by a confusing number of characters: a shadowy war goddess, a divine woman who marries an Ulsterman and

bears him twins, a warrior queen of Ulster, and a gentle queen of an early race of beings. How they relate to each other is anybody's guess. The fourth is the Badb, who often appears in the form of a crow, but also as either a crone or a beautiful woman. She prophesies slaughters, incites them and enjoys them.

So we come at last to the star of the show, the Morrigan, and our mission now is to determine what made her stand out in this literature, and explains her modern fame while the other goddesses remain known only to specialists. For a lot of the time she behaves in the stories like all the others, predicting or inciting military mayhem and then enjoying it. However, she differs from them in three ways. First, she does not just prophesy battles but many other and greater things as well. Second, she has a distinctly amorous aspect to her, seducing or attempting to seduce gods and heroes. Third, she is the only war goddess to act also as a benevolent protectress, giving success in both love and war to favoured people. No more than the others has she got any coherent mythology and relationships: instead individual storytellers or local traditions of them varied her appearance, nature and deeds according to their own wishes.

It is time now to ask if all these representations of her add up to a consistent portrait of a goddess, and if so of which kind. She is not a convincing fertility deity, as she does not give lands or people fecundity and abundance. Nor is she a tutelary goddess, not being associated with the protection and wellbeing of particular provinces, kingdoms or peoples. Nor is she a sovereignty goddess, for she does not bestow kingship and rulership on anybody. She is definitely a war goddess, but one also with strongly sexual and amorous characteristics. In this she resembles not other Irish goddesses but some from other pantheons, such as the Mesopotamian Ishtar, the Roman Venus and the Norse Freyja.

The modern Morrigan is usually portrayed as a black-haired Gothic woman wearing black and associated with crows and ravens. These trappings were not part of her medieval persona, and some are borrowed from other figures such as the Badb. Nevertheless, the medieval authors were themselves inconsistent in their representations, within a broad set of characteristics for her, and served their own tastes and those of their audiences. We should feel free to do the same.

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References and Further Reading

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