

The beast that changes shape

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE water-horse is a supernatural creature, an otherworld beast. Nothing is more suggestive of this than his ability to change shape. He can be horse, of course, but also handsome young man, young woman, ‘fair to see, but with hooved feet likely’, or even old woman, ‘craving protection and shelter’, as Alexander Macbain told the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1887. He can be ugly monster, or beautiful man, or horrible demon. He can be man or bird, indeed such a bird has been seen and is minutely described, according to John Francis Campbell in his ‘Popular Tales of the West Highlands’.

Of course the logic of this is that he can be anything. In certain stories where alleged water-horses are represented as women with hooves, they seem to have very few water-horse attributes. To qualify as a water-horse a creature must surely be aquatic as well as equine. In telling a version of the woman-with-hooves story, the writer of the ‘Golspie Book’, a manuscript on display in Dunrobin Castle Museum, has made a sound judgement in titling it simply ‘The Horse Fairy’.

It seems to me that, thanks to its metamorphic character, belief in the water-horse allowed society to rationalise certain moral dilemmas. Stories of this type operate on different levels. We read, for example: “A Water-horse was killed in Skye, where the stream from Eisgeadal falls into Loch Fada, at the foot of Storr, by sticking a knife into it. It had previously killed a man.” (That’s from John Gregorson Campbell’s ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands’ of 1900.) On the metaphysical level it’s proof of the existence of the water-horse; on the physical level it’s circumstantial evidence for murder. The crime is excused by the allegation that the victim, the alleged water-horse, was himself a murderer, and communal guilt at the summary nature of his execution is expressed in the form of a water-horse story. The water-horse is not metamorph but metaphor.

In the same way, a particularly violent tale from Tiree seems designed to rationalise a crime of passion. As told by John Gregorson Campbell, a young man who has been seeing a particular girl is really a water-horse. Her father and three brothers seize him and lay him on his back in the bed. He allegedly turns back into a horse, there is a ‘fearful struggle’, and ‘the conspirators cut the horse in pieces with their dirks, and put it out of the house dead’.

As if to distance the community from the idea that violent death can be an appropriate punishment for a sexual peccadillo, while at the same time maintaining a family’s perceived right to protect its womenfolk as it pleases, the father and brothers are described as having six fingers on each hand, the implication being that their appearance, and therefore their behaviour, is not to be perceived as normal. They are carefully named, and their farm, *Baile nan Cràganach*, ‘the Town of the Clumsy Ones’, is stated to be lost under blowing sand.

A variant of the story, told by Alexander Polson in ‘Our Highland Folklore Heritage’, has the murder taking place out in the dark: “He screamed all the while like a horse, and kicked so furiously that he broke one of his assailant’s legs, but when he was dead it was a horse and not a man that lay on the ground. They carried the wounded man home, but, when next morning they went with a cart to fetch the body of the water horse, only slime was to be seen.”

A very common tale justifies the maiming or demasculation by a woman of a persistent suitor on the grounds that he is a water-horse, thus prefiguring for us a traditional approach to the difficult area of sexual harassment and rape. Still more interesting is a story from the isle of Coll which (if my interpretation is correct) seeks to condone homosexual behaviour through the strategy of stating that the partner is a water-horse, and thus, by implication, not covered by scripture or subject to normal rules of behaviour. “At noontide,” says John Gregorson Campbell, “while the cattle were standing in the loch, the herdsman near Loch Annla was visited by a person in whose head he observed *rathum*, that is, water weeds. When going away the stranger jumped into the loch and disappeared without doing any harm. People used to hear strange noises about that loch, no doubt caused by the Water-horse, which was the herdsman’s visitor.”

My interpretation of that story is based on the fact that the finding of water-weeds in the hair is a consistent motif in the tale-type that we can call ‘Water-Horse and Woman’. The story doesn’t vary much. It goes like this: handsome young man appears, places his head in girl’s lap, and falls asleep. She finds shells or sand or water-plants in his hair. She cuts or removes her dress from under his head or gives him an alternative pillow in the form of a peat. She escapes, but he stalks and pursues her, and finally carries her off from the middle of a crowd — very often the congregation spilling out of church on Sunday. All that is ever seen of her again is her lungs, livers or entrails floating on the surface of a nearby loch.

Perhaps the earliest occurrence of this idea is in the Yellow Book of Lecan, which dates from about 1400. This great manuscript says that among the three wonders of Glenn Dallán (now Glencar, six miles north of Sligo) is *Míl Leittreach Dalláin*, ‘the Beast of Lettir Dallán’, which ‘has a human head and otherwise the shape of a smith’s bellows. The water-horse (*ech usci*) which lived in the lake by the side of the church went upon (*dochúaidh ar*) the daughter of the priest and begot the beast upon her.’

The ‘water-horse and woman’ story used to be told with great consistency throughout Gaelic Scotland. John Gregorson Campbell reviewed it succinctly, like this: “A young woman herding cattle drove her charge to a sequestered part of the hill, and while there a young man came her way, and reclining his head on her lap fell asleep. On his stretching himself she observed that he had horse-hoofs, and lulling him gently managed to get his head rested on the ground. She then cut out with her scissors the part of her clothes below his head and make her escape. When the Water-horse awoke and missed her it made a dreadful outcry.”

He goes on: “This tale, with unimportant variations, is known over the whole Highlands. Sometimes the young woman is sitting on the turf wall (*tota*) forming the end of the house when the Water-horse, in the shape of a handsome young man, comes her way; sometimes she is one of a band of women, assembled at the summer shieling — the rest are killed and she makes her escape. She detects the character of the youth by the water weeds

or the sand in his hair. Many of the stories add that the young man (or Water-horse) came for her on a subsequent Sunday after dinner, or to church, to which . . . she went for security rather than keep an appointment previously made with him, and took her to the loch.”

He concludes: “In Sutherlandshire the scene of the incident is laid at *Loch Meudaigh* in Durness, and the descendants of the woman to whom it occurred are still pointed out. She detected the young man by the sand in his hair, and on looking back, after she had got to some distance, she saw him tearing up the earth in his fury. Such was the terror inspired a few years ago by a report that the Water-horse of Loch Meudaigh had made its re-appearance that the natives would not take home peats that they had cut at the end of the loch by boat (the only way open to them), and the fuel was allowed to go to waste.”

A final point, omitted by Campbell (he was, after all, a minister, and had been in trouble as it was for taking an interest in such things), is the underwater frenzy which frequently results from the arrival of the woman in the loch. A typical tradition-bearer’s reaction comes from Jura, as told in a little book of BBC talks from 1938, ‘Am Measg nam Bodach’ (I translate): “When this uncanny creature returned to the loch from which it had come, and the other monsters realised that he had been in the company of a person of this world, they wrestled so hard that the water became red with their blood.”

It seems to me that the water-horses’ frenzy is sexual, as they fight for possession of the virgin to take her to their otherworld. In Freudian terms this is code for difficult things like sexual harassment and rape. The profoundly ambiguous and symbolic nature of the water-horse in this tale-type is demonstrated by the existence of a traditional song which takes the form of a dialogue between the creature and its victim. First noted by Dr George Henderson under the title ‘Còmhradh eadar Nighean Òg agus Each-Uisge’ (‘Conversation between a Young Girl and a Water-Horse’), it’s said to depict a girl sent to bring home the cattle for milking who, expecting to meet her own lover, encounters instead ‘a water-horse in human form’. Many readers will know it. The chorus goes:

*Ho ró, lig dhachaigh gu m’ mhàthair mi,
Ho ró, lig dhachaigh gu m’ mhàthair mi,
Ho ró, lig dhachaigh gu m’ mhàthair mi,
Sann a dh’iarraidh chrodh-laoigh a thàinig mi.*

(“Ho ró, let me home to my mother, / Ho ró, let me home to my mother, / Ho ró, let me home to my mother, / It’s to look for milk cattle that I came.”) She says:

*Gur h-ann a-raoir a chuala mi
Mo ghaol a bhith ri buachailleachd,
'S ged fhuair thu 'n iomall na buaile mi,
A ghaoil, lig dhachaigh mar fhuair thu mi!*

(“It was last night I heard / That my love was a-herding, / And though you’ve found me by the cattfold, / My love, let me home as you found me!”) He replies:

*Ged sann a-raoir a chuala tu
Do ghaol a bhith ri buachailleachd,
'S ged fhuair mi 'n iomall na buaile thu,
Cha lig mi dhachaigh mar fhuair mi thu.*

(“Though it was last night that you heard / That your love was a-herding, / And though I found you by the cattfold, / I will not let you home as I found you.”) And so on. It’s by no means the only ‘water-horse and woman’ song (I won’t say ‘water-horse meets girl’, because I believe the motif is genuinely sinister). Here’s one more example, got by Frances Tolmie from Mary Ross, Kilmoluag, Skye, in 1897 or thereabouts. Called ‘Caoidh an Eich-Uisge’ (‘The Lament of the Water-Horse’), it’s placed in the mouth of the creature itself as it searches the hills for its human lover, Mór.

*A Mhór, thoir a’ bhruthach ort,
A Mhór, thoir an gleann ort,
A Mhór, nach freagair thu 'n fhead,
A Mhórag bheag nan gamhna?*

(“Mór, go up the hillside, / Mór, go down the glen, / Won’t you answer the whistle, Mór, / My little Mór of the stirks?”) The idea, clearly, is that the voice of the water-horse is heard on the wind.

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