

The Source of Matthew Arnold's "Forsaken Merman"

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The extent of Carlyle's indebtedness to Mallet is less easy to determine. The fact that he refers to the theory of Torfæus that Odin came to the North in the year 70 B.C. appears to point to familiarity with Mallet, and this is perhaps confirmed by the account of Odin as the inventor of the runes. Such forms as Loke and Hela are identical with those found in Mallet, though it is hardly safe to press this argument too far. It also seems probable, though absolute proof is almost impossible, that Carlyle's accounts of Balder's death, of the creation of the world, of the cow Adumbla and the great ash Ygdrasil are based on the extracts from the Edda given in the second volume of Mallet.

One fact emerges clearly from a study of the sources of the lecture on *The Hero as Divinity*, namely, that Carlyle was no mere plagiarist, nor a mouthpiece for the views of others. As Professor J. G. Robertson has said: 'Carlyle is not to be regarded as a mere apostle or transmitter of German ideas and German ideals.' Nowhere is the constructive aspect of Carlyle's genius better revealed than in the first lecture of *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. What he owed to Grimm and also to the Swiss Mallet was chiefly facts. To Uhland and his naturalistic explanation of old Norse mythology, his debt was greater. But Carlyle's perception of 'the robust simplicity, the veracity, the directness of conception' of the old Norse spirit, and his interpretation of Norse mythology in this light—this is entirely his own. Carlyle was willing to learn from Grimm and Uhland, but he is no mere apprentice. At times he lays violent hands on their opinions and uses them for his own ends. Always he shows himself to be an original master-builder.

HERBERT WRIGHT.

BANGOR.

THE SOURCE OF MATTHEW ARNOLD'S 'FORSAKEN MERMAN.'

The story of the merman who marries a maiden and is afterwards abandoned by her is one that has enjoyed considerable popularity in several countries. In Denmark it appears, though not until a comparatively late date, in the ballad *Agnete og Havmanden* which was a source of inspiration to the Danish poets Oehlenschläger and Baggesen. In his edition of the Danish ballads, Svend Grundtvig traced numerous German and Slavonic versions, though he was unable to discover a Swedish or Norwegian form. He therefore concluded that the Danish ballad was an importation from the south¹.

¹ *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, II, 48-51.

The question arises as to the source which gave Matthew Arnold the story on which *The Forsaken Merman* is based. Bearing in mind Arnold's knowledge of German, we might be inclined to think that he was familiar with one or other of the German versions. In the latter, however, the name of the merman's bride appears as Hannele, Annerle, Agnese, Agnete or Angnina, none of which would seem to suggest Arnold's Margaret. For this and other reasons, which we shall shortly discuss, we must look to Denmark as the ultimate source of the legend which Arnold dealt with.

It is perhaps surprising that Matthew Arnold should have published his poem without giving any indication that it was not an entirely original work, and, as far as I am aware, none of his editors have rectified the omission. The late Mr Macaulay, for example, in his excellent selection of Arnold's poems has nothing to say on the matter.

Mr Clement Shorter takes us a step further in his biography of George Borrow, where he contrasts the poetical quality of *The Forsaken Merman* with that of a ballad by Borrow entitled *The Deceived Merman*¹. This poem, which appeared in *Romantic Ballads* (pp. 120-23) in 1826, is a translation of the Danish ballad of *Agnete og Havmanden*. It runs as follows:

Fair Agnes alone on the sea-shore stood,
Then rose a Merman from out the flood:
'Now, Agnes, hear what I say to thee,
Wilt thou my leman consent to be?'
'O, freely that will I become,
If thou but take me beneath the foam.'
He stopp'd her ears, and he stopp'd her eyes,
And into the ocean he took his prize.
The Merman's leman was Agnes there,—
She bore him sons and daughters fair:
One day by the cradle she sat and sang,
Then heard she above how the church bells rang:
She went to the Merman, and kiss'd his brow;
'Once more to church I would gladly go.'
'And thou to church once more shalt go,
But come to thy babes back here below.'
He flung his arm her body around,
And he lifted her up unto England's ground.
Fair Agnes in at the church door stepp'd,
Behind her mother, who sorely wept.
'O, Agnes, Agnes, daughter dear!
Where hast thou been this many a year?'

¹ *George Borrow and his Circle*, 1914, pp. 104-10.

'O, I have been deep, deep under the sea,
 And liv'd with the Merman in love and glee.'
 'And what for thy honour did he give thee,
 When he made thee his leman beneath the sea ?
 'He gave me silver, he gave me gold,
 And sprigs of coral my hair to hold.'
 The Merman up to the church door came ;
 His eyes they shone like a yellow flame ;
 His face was white and his beard was green—
 A fairer demon was never seen.
 'Now, Agnes, Agnes, list to me,
 Thy babes are longing so after thee.'
 'I cannot come yet, here must I stay
 Until the priest shall have said his say.'
 And when the priest had said his say,
 She thought with her mother at home she'd stay.
 'O Agnes, Agnes, list to me,
 Thy babes are sorrowing after thee.'
 'Let them sorrow and sorrow their fill,
 But back to them never return I will.'
 'Think on them, Agnes, think on them all ;
 Think on the great one, think on the small.'
 'Little, O little, care I for them all,
 Or for the great one, or for the small.'
 O, bitterly then did the Merman weep ;
 He hied him back to the foamy deep :
 But, often his shrieks and mournful cries,
 At midnight's hour, from thence arise.

The general similarity between this ballad and Matthew Arnold's poem will be readily perceived, and though Mr Shorter does not expressly mention it as containing the germ of *The Forsaken Merman*, the reader will undoubtedly be tempted to connect the two poems.

There exists, however, another version of this Danish tradition, which is even more closely connected with *The Forsaken Merman*. It occurs in an article by Borrow in the January number of *The Universal Review* for 1825¹. He is reviewing Just Mathias Thiele's *Danske Folkesagn* (*Danish Popular Legends*) and quotes the following tale :

There lived once two poor people near Friesenborg, in the district of Aarhus in Jutland, who had one only child, a daughter, called Grethe. One day that they sent her down to the sea-shore to fetch some sand, as she was washing her apron, a merman arose out of the water. His beard was greener than the salt sea ; his shape was pleasing, and he spoke to the girl in a kind and friendly tone, and said, 'Come with me, Grethe, and I will give you as much gold and silver as your heart can wish.' 'That were not badly done,' replied she, 'for we have very little of it at home.' She let herself be prevailed on, and he took her by the hand, and brought

¹ Vol. II, pp. 563-64.

her down to the bottom of the sea, and she in the course of time became the mother of five children. When a long time had passed over, and she had nearly forgotten all she knew of religion, one festival morning as she was sitting with her youngest child in her lap, she heard the church bells ringing above, and there came over her mind great uneasiness, and an anxious longing to go to church. And as she sat there with her children, and sighed heavily, the merman observed her affliction, and enquired what made her so melancholy. She then coaxed him, and earnestly entreated him to let her go once more to church. The merman could not withstand her tears and solicitations, so he set her on the land, and charged her strictly to make haste back to the children. In the middle of the sermon, the merman came to the outside of the church, and cried, 'Grethe! Grethe!' She heard him plainly, but she thought she might as well stay till the service was over. When the sermon was concluded, the merman came again to the church, and cried, 'Grethe! Grethe! will you come quick?' but still she did not stir. He came once more, the third time, and cried, 'Grethe! Grethe! will you come quick? your children are crying for you.' But when she did not come, he began to weep bitterly, and went back to the bottom of the sea. But Grethe ever after stayed with her parents, and let the merman himself take care of his ugly little children, and his weeping and lamentation have been often heard from the bottom of the deep.

There is a tone of malicious satisfaction in these concluding lines which does not agree with Arnold's sympathetic description of the sorrowing merman. For this reason we might be at first inclined to think that Arnold was also familiar with Borrow's ballad, where the conclusion is less out of keeping with that of *The Forsaken Merman*. But there is, of course, always the possibility that Arnold may have arrived at this ending independently, and on the whole this seems the more likely. The similarity between the titles *The Deceived Merman* and *The Forsaken Merman* may also be a mere accident. In every other respect it seems to be the prose legend and not the ballad with which Arnold was acquainted. Notice especially

1. 'Twill be Easter-time in the world' [Arnold],
'One festival morning as she was sitting' [prose version].
[Nothing corresponding in the ballad.]
2. 'She sate.....
And the youngest sate on her knee' [Arnold].
'As she was sitting with her youngest child in her lap' [prose version]. This is much nearer than
'One day by the cradle she sat and sang' [the ballad].
3. 'I lose my poor soul' [Arnold]. A hint of this is given in the prose version—'She had nearly forgotten all she knew of religion...she heard the church bells ringing above, and there came over her mind great uneasiness.' The ballad merely states that she wished to go to church again.
4. In the ballad, the maiden meets her mother, whilst in Arnold and the prose version this motive does not occur.

5. The merman's bride is called Margaret in Arnold, the equivalent of Grethe in the prose version, whereas she is Agnes in the ballad.

6. 'But ah, she gave me never a look' [Arnold]. In the ballad Agnes shouts disagreeable and cold-hearted replies to the merman. In the prose version as in Arnold, the maiden merely ignores his entreaties.

To sum up then, there seems every reason to believe that it is Borrow's article in *The Universal Review* and not his poem *The Deceived Merman* in *Romantic Ballads*, which contains the germ of *The Forsaken Merman*. There is just the bare possibility that Arnold was familiar with the ballad as well, but in view of the lack of any positive evidence in its favour, there scarcely seems any necessity to make this assumption.

HERBERT WRIGHT.

BANGOR.

'MEALY-MOUTHED.'

In the *Modern Language Review* for July, 1917 (p. 357), Mr Ernest Weekley asserts that the first element in *meal-mouth* (and the later *meal-mouthed*, *mealy-mouthed*) is not *meal*, farina, but represents the Primitive Germanic **melip*, honey. He also says that, whereas in the *Oxford English Dictionary* the earliest quotation for *meal-mouth* is dated 1546, its history really extends nearly three centuries further back, the word being recorded in A.D. 1279 as the surname of a certain Henry Millemuth.

Mr Weekley's novel etymological hypothesis involves some important and startling consequences. If *meal* in *meal-mouth* is the Germanic **melip*, it necessarily follows either that the simple word existed orally in Old English, although it has not been found in the extant remains of that language, or of any Germanic tongue except Gothic; or, what would be more extraordinary still, that while Old English had not retained the simple word, it had inherited the compound from pre-English times. On the latter supposition, the case would be parallel to that of *mildew*, with the important exception that, while the one word appears both in Old English and in continental writings, the other word has admittedly not been found recorded anywhere before A.D. 1279. Mr Weekley seems to have been so enthusiastically convinced—on grounds of intrinsic plausibility—of the truth of his novel hypothesis that he either did not shrink from its surprising implications, or forgot to enquire whether it had any implications at all.

Mr Weekley's view of the derivation of *meal-mouth* will gain no assent from etymologists who require to have evidence for their beliefs.