



# Arianrhod

Steve O'Brien

## I

**M**y name means silver wheel. My palace turns slowly in the great north sky. There was a time when my home was anchored to sharp rocks off the coast of Gwynedd. It was made all of wet slate and granite. Chains of white gulls circled my battlements. The salt rain was ever in my silver hair and my gown clung to me wetly, but I was happy there alone in the slick-flagged courtyard and on the spray-flecked ramparts. Now, when I recall the seal pups mewling on the reefs at low tide it brings me straightaway back to the son I lost to the waters and of another son who was set against me. The shame of their birth and the confusion of it now passes more quietly over my brow. I am beyond the years of men and my fury has cooled to become a pale ghost in the cloisters of my heart ...

My palace is wrought all of stars. I wander the silver chambers and frosted halls. I am quiet now and, if not happy, I am content. There are no raw mornings or calm sunsets here. Only the palest glow cast across walls of smooth crystal. The breeze from distant galaxies plays through my silver hair. I turn slowly and I am forever alone.

For all that has been said of my own wickedness, there was none so wronged as me. Goewin the lap-virgin was disordered by my brother and yet for some reason it was I who dropped two sons in front of Math and his whole troop of retainers! Surely there was some sorcerous contrivance which drew me in, perhaps merely to give some grotesque symmetry to the whole story. I often wonder if it was Math himself, my father's brother, who orchestrated everything all along. After all, he placed his broad hand on the tousled heads of many boys and gave them their names. Almost as if he was an old jealous bull, intent on claiming all the new season calves for his own.

No doubt you have heard that when I went to Math's keep I was made to leap across his wand. And of the fair-headed son who sprang from between my legs at the very moment of stepping over? When I looked back I saw that I had also let fall a ball of flesh.

Anyway, suddenly shamed and hollow, and astonished with emptiness, because I had never known a man or known myself to be full, I ran back towards my tower above the rocks. There I grieved for many days with a raw wind howling through my casement and the click-clawed crabs side-slanting across the floor. My tears were like silver minnows flashing amongst the flotsam of a spring night.

I was told one morning by a cockle woman that my firstborn had fled to the ocean as soon as he could walk. The name Math gave him was Dylan son of Ton, which holds

all the ebb and flow of salt water in it, for it means nothing more or less than 'sea wave'. The old woman told me that my son went to live on the crests of the swells and in the green depths. Unexpected, unwanted – and so much missed – my boy who was lost to me from the instant of his first cry.

Of the bundle I had slipped as I headed for the door, the cockle woman knew nothing. I went back and stared at the sea sucking and heaving at the feet of my tower until I grew giddy with its rise and fall. In the pause between each wave surge I found myself pondering on what I had been before Gwydion had summoned me to the fortress of Math son of Mathonwy.

I found that I had no memory of that life. As new as a glass of fresh milk I had set out for Math's place that morning. It was as if I had stepped into the world with nothing behind me, except a love of my own company and a delight in the halls of my own sea-cradled towers. I knew that Gwydion and Gilfaethwy were my brothers, in the way that I recognised a grey cloud or the shadow of a tree, but they had been hitherto untold in my mind. In the same way, I knew Math son of Mathonwy was my uncle and that my father was the mighty Don whom I had never seen. How long had my existence been, before my brother's command came to leave my rain-slaked walls? Days, years, centuries? I had no idea.

Now, mourning the void in my belly I sat rocking in time with the drag and rush of the silver-topped tides and I could have done so for the eternity left to me, until I forgot myself again. Until my palace was worn down by the water, and at last I could be engulfed.

It was the sharp mobbing gulls' cries that stopped all this. For I also began to realise that I appear to be always the silver needle sewn into the story of men. Yet I carry no silken thread at my tail and so I do not hold the stories together. I flitter in through their purposes with about as much importance as a gull slanting across the heads of a band of shore-seeking sailors.

I lay on the soaked stone, alone, wrapped in tresses of dulse and kelp for a full-moon cycle of waxing and waning. My anger grew for these men-creatures, these thieves and tricksters, these lusty namers and governors. Like mother of pearl, like ancient lunar ice, accruing layer upon layer, my pitiless anger honed to a blade.

## II

One blustery morning as I was eating laver and guillemot eggs I saw from my casement two figures walking the strand. One of them was Gwydion. I rose and left my grey halls and met them among the tussock grasses where salty sheep graze. With Gwydion was a tall youth with yellow hair.

'A year has passed since you came to Math's fortress,' said my brother.

'Has it?' was my reply. 'I know nothing of the time men keep.'

Gwydion shrugged. 'We have come to find you.'

'Who is this boy who follows in your steps?' I asked.

'This is your son whom I have raised for these past four seasons.'

'How can that be?' I asked. 'He is nearly a man.'

'I took him when he was but a nub of flesh and saw to it that he was given the best in all nourishment,' replied Gwydion. 'He has grown quickly and is the marvel of Math's court. When he was only four months old it seemed as if four years had gone into him. At eight months he stood half my height and so on and so on, until I thought it best to bring him to you.'

I was dazzled by the sting of my own response. The blade of my tongue was unsheathed. 'What cruelty prompted you to show me this boy who is nothing more than a pang of my shame? Why do you delight in laying open the shell of my disgrace for the world to see?'

Gwydion placed his arm around the youth. 'There is no shame in loving this fine boy. I do, as if he were my own son. Arianrhod, you should love him too and wave your disgrace away on the wind.'

'What name do you call him?' My words glittered between us and I saw that Gwydion thought he had consoled me.

'As yet he has no name.' He replied.

'Well then,' I readied my tongue and pronounced a tynged over the boy's head. It was cold as moon silver, or a knife dropped into a bowl of ice water at midnight. A doom-spell. A tingling forged curse. 'He is a stain on me,' I cried. 'He is a thorn to my heart and he shall never have a name unless he obtains one from me.'

Gwydion drew back, as if I had struck him, saying 'These words are your real shame, sister. You have let your generosity wither because your virginity is lost. Yet, one way or another the boy will take a name from you. This I swear.'

I turned from them and made for the gates of my palace. My mouth was numb from the sting of my first tynged.

### III

In the chamber above the rocks I spent a month on the cold floor. The sea reached over the sill and threw dogfish purses, oarweed and barnacles across my silver dress. The gulls rode the grey sky and cried into the wind. I lay alone and grieved in the fathoms of night that washed up from the well where my two sons were hatched.

One morning I heard voices down below. I looked out and saw a small ship had sailed up to the strand from the direction of Caer Dathal. On the sand the old cockle

woman was talking to the crew. There were two men, both brown and burly. The ship had a red sail that flapped and cracked even though the morning was calm. I called to the cockle woman. She came to my gates. I stood there with my dress glistening in the sunlight. 'Who are they?' I asked.

'Shoemakers,' the old woman replied. 'On their way to Aber Menai. They have hides of leather from Spain. Red and tooled and painted with gold spirals – it is the finest I have ever seen.'

'I have gone barefoot for far too long. Measure my feet and tell them to make me some shoes and I will give them three pearls.' The cockle woman went to the cobblers. I could see that their hair was dark and curly. They wore the earrings and cloaks of Spain. They spoke the hoarse words of that country.

When the tide was sinking the cockle woman came to my gates with two new shoes in her basket. Straightaway I could see that they were too big. 'Take them back,' I said, looking out to where the shoemakers were standing on the deck. 'I will only pay them if they make them smaller.' The cockle woman walked away with the shoes.

When the tide was out and the ship was beached the cockle woman returned with two exquisite shoes so small they looked as though they had been made for a doll. 'What is this?' I asked. 'Why can't they make them the right size? I will not give pearls for this poor work.' The cockle woman went back with the shoes.

When the tide had risen and the ship was tugging against its anchor the cockle woman came to my gates. I stood in the archway with my silver hair fluttering out across my eyes. 'They wish you to go to them,' said the old woman. 'They say that they must see your white feet if they are to make you a pair of good shoes.'

I stepped across my threshold and went down to the ship. The two shoemakers were sitting cross-legged on the deck cutting patterns into the red leather hides. There was one older than the other. They smiled at me and hailed me in the hard accents of Spain. I spoke to them. 'I am surprised that two craftsmen such as you could not make a pair of fitting shoes for me.'

The older one stood and leaned against the mast. 'Ah, now I can see the length of your feet,' he replied in a voice like a rusty gate, 'I will be able to gauge the exact measurements.'

Just then a wren flew in to rest on the prow. Quick as the gleam of a fish knife the younger cobbler flung a stone and caught the wren between the bone and the sinew of its leg. 'I have never seen the like of this,' I said. 'Your companion strikes with a skilful hand.'

'He does. He does,' agreed the older shoemaker. 'And it will prove a curse to you.' With that he waved his arm. The ship shuddered and collapsed to become a pile of kelp. From it stepped Gwydion and my son, now shorn of their disguise.

I drew back as if salt had been cast into my eyes.

Gwydion laughed. 'You have given the boy a good name. He will be known as Lleu Skilful Hand from now on.'

I pointed at Gwydion with the stab of my finger. 'Causing me this agony will not do you any good.' I let out a scream and spoke a tynged over the head of the youth. A curling, bitter curse, all split like ice in a pail. A frost-lick doom. 'I swear that the boy will never have weapons until I choose to arm him. He will be as useless as those shoes you made.'

I turned from them and went through my gates where they could not follow. This second tynged was like a cough of silver pins in my throat.

## IV

For a month I lay on the stone floor among the starfish and bladderwrack and green sea glass that the waves tossed in each night. Silver and cold were my half-dreams. In them I climbed inwards down the ladder of my own ribs and reached for the empty basin of my pelvis. Yet always I awoke with a start, as if I had been suddenly turned back at a walled frontier. As the dawn seeped in I webbed my hands around my waist questioning the secret trickery that had sown the two seeds of my sons deep inside me. Why was I forbidden the answer?

When the summer was done there came a morning when the air changed. Birds of all kinds were being called south across the sea. There were silver clouds on the horizon.

I heard clear voices at my gates. I looked out to see two handsome young men with the long hair and fringed cloaks of bards. They commenced a song, matching each other line for line. No doors are closed to the bards. They are always welcome. I stood at the top of my staircase listening. I went down and stood in the close and listened. At last I spread my hands on the wooden doors, listening to them singing outside. The song was all about the legions who tramped the lands long ago and the clearing of the trees ...

*Kindle lick the bark to flames*

*The oaks smoulder and blacken*

*Make a broad straight path*

*And pave it with white stones.*

I found myself beckoned in to the mesh of their glad voices. I reached for the bolts and drew them open. I called them in and led them to a hall that looked out over the bay.

I made a fire of driftwood in a hearth that had long been cold and empty. These handsome young men, both tall, but one more so, threw off their fringed cloaks and

sat before it. I gave them a dinner of mackerel and kale and little griddle cakes. All the while they were singing and telling stories, one against the other. They had honey-coloured eyes.

It was a long night of words. More than had ever been known in my fortress. Laughter and lament – bards are bold acrobats in this art. They can make language turn somersault. So it was with this long-haired pair. When they told the stories from Ireland it was as if I could taste the rain and wind of that country. They spoke of a mountain in the kingdom of Connacht and I saw it before me, grey and green – a wolf crag. They sang of a king slain in battle and I saw him bloody and pale, as if he lay right there between me and the bright hearth. I drank a flask of pale mead with my two visitors. They were the only guests ever to enter my fortress.

At last they grew weary and wrapped themselves in their cloaks. I left them to sleep in front of the embers. The night was calm. In my dreams I was a glassy elver drifting on the swell. My vexing had been hushed by the wash of the bards' singing and banter.



CLAMOUR! There had never been such an uproar in my halls. Voices bawling alarm out on the battlements. The sound of running feet on the stairs. The door of my chamber buckling under the hammer of fists. 'Lady, lady, Come to the walls!'

Panic was in the eyes of my guests. 'What calls you to shatter the dawn like this?' I asked. I pushed away my silver hair, for it still had dreams caught in it.

'Look to your casement,' one of them cried. I turned to see the bay choked with a thousand scarlet sails.

'A fleet has come in the darkness,' added his companion. 'They are on either side of the causeway and their scaling ladders are poised.'

I went to the battlements and saw that it was true. A storming siege of men was poised to assail my towers. They were shouting their war cries. The morning sun licked across their helmets and picked on the points of their spears. My hands went to my mouth. I felt slender in the wind, like a single blade of corn. The gulls above me wheeled away to the west with despair in their beaks. 'What are we to do?' I asked, picking at the sleeve of my gown. Fear like a draught of icy water panged me.

'Have you weapons, lady?' cried one of the young men as he leaned out over the walls.

'Yes,' cried the other. 'We need arms to defend this place. Or we will all be slaughtered.'

I took them to a room in the highest turret. I opened the chests and showed them steel swords and tight-sprung bows. I showed them coats of silver mail. Arrows too, with cold, dark points. The bards hefted the blades. 'Quick' I said. 'I will help you put on these trappings, for the baying of the army below is getting louder.'

'Him first,' said the tallest of the two. So I helped the other slide the mail over his head. Then I buckled his belt quickly and handed him a blue shield.

'Is it done?' asked the tallest, who had been looking out through a slit in wall.

'Yes,' I replied. 'And now you too must arm yourself.'

He turned to me. 'I have no need to put on these things now.'

'What?'

'Come, look here.' He drew me towards him. I saw that there were no soldiers at the ramparts and all the ships had gone.

'Where is the war band?' I asked, shocked and doubting what I had just seen. 'And what kind of host can depart so quickly?'

'This was a host to undo the last tynged you swore,' said the tallest bard. 'This boy has arms now from you. And no thanks to your wicked schemes.'

I reeled from his words. He passed his hand over his face and I saw instantly that he was Gwydion. I turned and saw my son also stood there in his new battle gear. 'This is harsh evil,' I hissed. 'The conjuring you have done against me will come to haunt you. It is against all custom that you have come into my halls disguised, where no man was ever before.' I put my arm up and summoned a tynged. A scratching curse it was, like the silver cry of a sea eagle. A chill, slicing oath. A fork of lightning saved in a buried crock.

'I swear from the deeps and dark of my heart that this boy will go unmarried, for he shall have no wife of the race of men.'

'You were always vengeful and bitter,' replied Gwydion. 'Yet I have undone all your schemes so far and Lleu here shall have a wife in spite of your spells.'

'Go,' I screamed at them. It was as if I was vomiting thorns at them and here in my own place they had no power to stay. It was good, at least, to see them quail. They took off and I made the gates to my fortress slam behind them.

The last of my tynghedau was bitter as buckthorn berries on my tongue.

I lay on the floor of my chamber through a month of gales. When the sea slapped at my walls red urchins and razor shells were scattered over me. Clams rattled like beads in my silver hair. The water pooled around me. I slept and mourned the shoaling space inside me. It was like a grotto under the waves that I could grope for, yet never quite enter, as the lack of air made me surface.

## V

I awoke one morning to find that the storms had passed and the air had been washed clean. I looked out of my casement and saw the white sand and clear water. I could see the fishes under the lip of the tide. My sight was silver in the dawn.



I went down to talk to the old cockle woman who was unstrapping a sieve and long rake from her back. 'A fine morning for your work,' I said as I drew near.

'That it is, my Lady,' she said, smiling, as she made her gear ready. 'Because of the storms I haven't been down to the shore of late. Many strong men have perished out there these last weeks.'

'That means nothing to me,' I replied.

She looked at me. Her eyes were blue and grey, like gull's feathers. 'No,' she said. 'I suppose not.' Her tone did not seem unkindly. 'I have heard of your three tynghedau and how the first and the second were undone.'

'What of the third?' I asked.

'I have news of that, my Lady.' She placed her tools down and took my hand. 'Come sit on this dune and I will tell you.' So the two of us went and sat and looked out to sea.

I had occasion to walk near to the fortress of Math son of Mathonwy. The rain had been passing over me all day and so I went under the leaves by the forest path. As evening drew on there came a gap in the weather and for the first time in ages the clouds parted. I was happy then for I could see my way through the trees. Now, I go quietly, so when I came upon two figures in a clearing I was able to step back into the darkness and watch what they were doing.

'One was Gwydion, your tall brother. The other was Math himself. He was stroking his great auburn beard. Together they were at some secret business. As the moon rose I saw them take flowers and lay them together: First they laid the green oak flowers. Then the yellow broom petals, and lastly the pure white meadowsweet. I kept this vigil while the moon rose. Math and Gwydion both muttered and sang quietly as they bent to their task.

'At about midnight the scent of the flowers grew and the two men stood back. On the ground between them was the semblance of a girl all woven from petals. Math looked down at this curious effigy. "Come forth now," he said. The wind and the moon were stilled for an instant. The trees all stopped swaying. And there, all kissed silver in the moonlight, instead of the blossom form lay a living girl, opening her eyes and stretching as if waking from a long sleep. She stood between them and she was the loveliest girl I have ever seen, for in her beauty was the essence of flowers.

'Math held out his hand. "Your name will be Blodeuedd and we will take you away from this glade," he said. "And you will be a wife to Llew Skilful Hand, the son of my nephew Gwydion."

'Then all three of them walked off towards Math's fortress with the girl going quietly in the middle and the scent of meadowsweet trailing after her.'

The old cockle woman smoothed her skirts. 'That is what I saw and heard, my lady.'

I laughed out loud. As far as I could recall it was the first laugh that ever broken from my lips. The cockle woman looked shocked. I clapped my hands together. 'They think

they have been wily in conjuring up a bride made of flowers. They think that they have skirted around the doom I lay on my son.' I brushed my wet gown down and stood up from the dune. 'This mischief will play bad. For all their man-magic this just shows that my third tynged still holds.' I laughed again and bade farewell to the cockle woman.

'What will you do now?' She asked as she leant on her rake.

'You will see,' I replied. I walked towards my towers out on the causeway. The clear water reflected me as a flicker of silver. I locked my gates behind me and vowed that I would never open them again.

## Lastly

Of the girl Blodeuedd I know nothing more. Nor did I ever discover why I suffered the bewilderment and disgrace of my pregnancy. Nor who plotted it. I admit to some pity for the girl made all of flowers – another woman called up from nowhere to suit the designs of men. Petals are of such flimsy substance. Perhaps she knew love and joy. However, I doubt it.

As for me, I unmoored my palace from the reef and the causeway, and let it drift away into the north sky, where it spins now slowly. I expect the old cockle woman spread the word of this retreat.

I am contented that the binding silver temper of my last tynged was too strong for my enemies.

My silver hair flutters with starry dreams. My towers and my cloisters are quiet and I am alone.

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**Steve O'Brien**