

Bran (The Crow)

Wounded full sore is Bran the knight:
For he was at Kerloan fight;
At Kerloan fight, by wild seashore
Was Bran-Vor's grandson wounded sore.
And, though we gained the victory,
Was captive borne beyond the sea.
He when he came beyond the sea,
In the close keep wept bitterly.
"They leap at home with joyous cry
While, woe is me, in bed I lie.
Could I but find a messenger,
Who to my mother news would bear!"
They quickly found a messenger;
His hest thus gave the warrior:
"Heed you to dress in other guise,
My messenger, dress beggar-wise!
Take you my ring, my ring of gold,
That she your news as truth may hold!
Unto my country straightway go,
It to my lady mother show!
Should she come free her son from hold,
A flag of white do you unfold!
But if with you she come not back,
Unfurl, ah me, a pennon back!"

So, when to Leon-land he came,
At supper table sat the dame,
At table with her family,
The harpers playing as should be.
"Dame of the castle, hail! I bring
From Bran your son this golden ring,
His golden ring and letter too;
Read it, oh read it, straightway through!"
"You harpers, cease you, play no more,
For with great grief my heart is sore!
My son, (cease harpers, play no more!)
In prison, and I did not know!
Prepare to-night a ship for me!

To-morrow I go across the sea."

The morning of the next, next day
The Lord Bran questioned, as he did lay:
"Sentinel, sentinel, soothly say!
See you no vessel on its way?"
"My lord the knight, I nought espy
Except the great sea and the sky."
The Lord Bran asked him yet once more,
When as the day's course half was o'er;
"Sentinel, sentinel, soothly say!
See you no vessel on its way?"
"I can see nothing, my lord the knight,
Except the sea-birds in their flight."
The Lord Bran asked him yet again,
When as the day was on the wane;
"Sentinel, sentinel, soothly say!
See you no vessel on its way?"
Then that false sentinel, the while
Smiling a mischief-working smile;
"I see afar a misty form--
A ship sore beaten by the storm."
"The flag? Quick give the answer back!
The banner? Is it white or black?"
"Far as I see, 'tis black, Sir knight,
I swear it by the coal's red light."
When this the sorrowing knight had heard
Again he never spoke a word;
But turned aside his visage wan;
And then the fever fit began.

Now of the townsmen asked the dame,
When at last to the shore she came,
"What is the news here, townsmen, tell!
That thus I hear them toll the bell?"
An aged man the lady heard,
And thus he answered to her word:
"We in the prison held a knight;
And he hath died here in the night."
Scarcely to end his words were brought,
When the high tower that lady sought;
Shedding salt tears and running fast,

Her white hair scattered in the blast,
So that the townsmen wonderingly
Full sorely marveled her to see;
When as they saw a lady strange,
Through their streets so sadly range
Each one in thought did musing stand;
"Who is the lady, from what land?"
Soon as the donjon's foot she reached,
The porter that poor dame beseeched;
"Open, quickly open, the gate for me!
My son! My son! Him would I see!"
Slowly the great gate open drew;
Herself upon her son she threw,
Close in her arms his corpse to strain,
The lady never rose again.

There is a tree, that doth look o'er
From Kerloan's battle-field to the shore;
An oak. Before great Evan's face
The Saxons fled in that same place.
Upon that oak in clear moonlight,
Together come the birds at night;
Black birds and white, but sea birds all;
On each one's brow a blood-stain small,
With them a raven gray and old;
With her a crow comes young and bold.
Both with soiled wings, both wearied are;
They come beyond the seas from far:
And the birds sing so lovely
That silence comes on the great sea.
All sing in concert sweet and low
Except the raven and the crow.
Once was the crow heard murmuring:
"Sing, little birds, you well may sing!
Sing, for this is your country!
You died not far from Brittany!"^[1]

Old Breton poem from the Barzaz Breizh.

Bran was the name of a legendary king of Britain, is the original Fisher King of the Grail Legend, and appears in both Welsh and Irish literature, each time connected to Mannanan

MacLir/Manawyddan MabLlyr, and also here in Breton literature. This knight is named Bran, and is the grandson of a Bran-Vor, or Bran the Great, possibly identified with King Bran, known in Welsh as Bendigedfran ap Llyr, literally "Blessed Raven, son of the Sea." He is brother to Manannan/Manawyddan.

The death-scene of the poem is similar to that of Tristan and Iseult, where Tristan, wounded in a tower above the sea and unable to look out the window, is tricked into thinking his beloved will not come, and so dies of a broken heart. The color of the sails is also tied to the story of Theseos and his father Aegeos: if the sail of Theseos' ship is white, then he is alive; if black, then his men are bearing home the body of the prince. In that tale, Theseos, in a drunken stupor, forgets to change the sails from black to white. His father sees a black sail on the horizon, and so leaps to his death in the Aegean Sea (hence its name).

--Lyra Celtica. Ed. E. A. Sharp, J. Matthey. Edinburgh: John Grant. 1896, 1924.

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