



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

Culhwch and Olwen

Also called Kilhwch and Olwen

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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Contents

Chapter 1: The Name from the Swine

Chapter 2: The Stepmother's Destiny

Chapter 3: The Boon at Arthur's Court

Chapter 4: The Herdsman under the Fortress

Chapter 5: Olwen

Chapter 6: The Giant's Price

Chapter 7: The Oldest Creatures

Chapter 8: The Hunt of Twrch Trwyth

Chapter 9: The Black Sorceress

Chapter 10: The Shaving of Ysbaddaden

Chapter 11: The Wedding

Culhwch and Olwen is the oldest surviving Arthurian tale in Welsh. Culhwch is bound by a stepmother's curse to win Olwen, daughter of the giant Ysbaddaden, and Arthur's war-band must complete the impossible tasks. Written for readers aged 15 and up.

Chapter 1: The Name from the Swine

Kilydd the son of Prince Kelyddon married Goleuddydd, and while she carried his child a madness of wandering came upon her, and she fled the court. She was found among the swine, in their burrow in the mud, and there her son was born. From the pigs that sheltered him he took his name: Culhwch.

His mother did not live long after. Dying, she made Kilydd swear not to take another wife until a briar with two blossoms grew upon her grave, and for years the grave stayed bare.

Chapter 2: The Stepmother's Destiny

But the day came when Kilydd saw the briar, and he took a second wife. She offered Culhwch her own daughter, and when he refused, the stepmother's anger spoke with a power neither of them could undo.

"I will lay a destiny upon you," she said. "You shall have no wife but Olwen, the daughter of Ysbaddaden Pencawr."

Though Culhwch had never seen the girl, the name went into him like a spark into dry heath. From that hour he burned with love for her.

Chapter 3: The Boon at Arthur's Court

Ysbaddaden Pencawr was a giant, and every suitor who had come for Olwen had died by his hand, for it was prophesied that he would live only until his daughter wed.

Culhwch rode instead to the court of Arthur, his cousin, the war-leader of Britain. He talked his way past Glewlwyd the porter and came, booted and spurred, straight to where Arthur sat.

The youth asked a boon: that Arthur cut his hair in token of kinship, and that the warriors of the court be bound to help him win Olwen. He named them one after another, a great roll of heroes, and adjured them in Arthur's name not to fail him.

Chapter 4: The Herdsman under the Fortress

Arthur sent his messengers up and down the island to seek news of a maiden no one had seen, and when a year had passed and they came home with nothing, a company went out in person.

Among them were Cai, who could hold his breath nine days and nights under water, who could wake nine days and nights without sleep, and whose natural heat kept dry whatever he carried in his hand through the heaviest rain; Bedwyr, one-handed and the swiftest of them all; Gwrhŷr, who knew every tongue of bird and beast; Menw the enchanter, who could cast a charm over them so that no eye might see them when danger pressed; as well as Gwalchmai and Kynddelig the Guide.

It was they who came at last to a herdsman named Custennin, grazing his flocks beneath the giant's fortress. Custennin was the brother of Ysbaddaden, who had killed his sons and stolen his lands; only one child was left, Goreu, hidden where the giant could not find him.

Custennin's wife was Culhwch's own aunt, and when she heard his errand, she wept and brought him in.

Chapter 5: Olwen

Then Olwen came down to them, in a robe of flame-red silk, with a golden torque about her neck. Wherever her foot touched the ground, four white trefoils sprang up in her track.

Culhwch told her his love, and she answered plainly: if he would have her, he must ask her father and grant whatever he demanded, for the giant's life was bound to her wedding, and he would make the price impossible.

Chapter 6: The Giant's Price

On three days Culhwch and his companions went up to the fortress. Three times Ysbaddaden hurled a dart of poisoned iron at them, and three times it was caught and hurled back.

The first struck the giant's knee, the second his chest, the third his eye, so that the eyeball came out upon his cheek.

Wounded and raging, he named his terms. He spoke of a hill that must be rooted up and ploughed and sown and ripened in a single day, honey nine times sweeter than the first swarm of the year, the cauldron of Diwrnach the Irishman, and nine bushels of flax seed for Olwen's wimple.

He wanted the warm blood of the jet-black sorceress, and the comb and scissors that lay between the ears of Twrch Trwyth, the terrible enchanted boar, for his beard must be dressed before he died.

To hunt the boar he required the whelp Drudwyn with its leash and collar and chain, and Mabon son of Modron as huntsman, a youth stolen from his mother when he was three nights old and not seen since.

Nearly forty tasks he named, and to each one Culhwch gave the same answer:

"It will be easy for me to compass this, although thou mayest think that it will not be easy."

And the giant answered in his turn:

"Though thou get this, there is yet that which thou wilt not get."

Both of them knew whose life hung on the bargain.

Chapter 7: The Oldest Creatures

Culhwch did not do these things himself. It was Arthur and his companions who went out and did them.

Cai tricked his way into the hall of Gwrnach the Giant, won the great sword that hung there, and slew the owner with it.

To find Mabon, lost since the world was younger, Arthur's men questioned creatures whose memories reached further and further into the past. They went first to the Ousel of Cilgwri, who had worn an anvil to the size of a nut with her pecking. The Ousel sent them to the Stag of Rhedynfre, and the Stag to the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd, who had seen forests rise and fall.

The Owl directed them to the Eagle of Gwernabwy, described in the tale as the oldest animal in the world. Even the Eagle did not know where Mabon was imprisoned, but he remembered fighting a great salmon and led the searchers to the Salmon of Llyn Llyw.

The Salmon knew the place.

He carried Cai and Gwrhyr upon his shoulders up the river to the walls of Caer Loyw, where Mabon lay imprisoned in stone. Arthur's men attacked the stronghold and brought him out.

From Ireland they took the cauldron of Diwrnach, and Gwythyr's ants gathered the nine bushels of flax, grain by grain, from the burned ground.

Chapter 8: The Hunt of Twrch Trwyth

Last and hardest came the hunt of Twrch Trwyth, who had once been a king and was changed into a boar for his sins.

The hunters drove him out of Ireland and across Wales; his young pigs were slain one by one, and many good men died beneath his tusks.

At the river Severn the boar turned, and Mabon tore the razor from between his ears, and Kyledyr Wyllt seized the scissors. But before the comb could be taken, the boar regained the

ground with his feet, and neither dog nor man nor horse could overtake him until he came to Cornwall.

There, after worse trouble than all that had gone before, the comb was won at last. Then Twrch Trwyth was driven from Cornwall straight forward into the deep sea, and from that day it was never known whither he went, and Aned and Aethlem went with him.

Chapter 9: The Black Sorceress

One thing remained.

At Pen Nant Govid the black sorceress made her lair in a cave. Man after man went in against her and came out flung and broken, until Arthur himself entered, drew his little knife Carnwennan, and clove her in two.

Kaw of North Britain took her blood and kept it for the shaving.

Chapter 10: The Shaving of Ysbaddaden

So the tasks stood done, and the company went up for the last time to the fortress of Ysbaddaden Pencawr.

Kaw shaved the giant's beard close to the bone, flesh and all, and asked him if he was shaved.

"I am shaved," said the giant.

"And is thy daughter mine now?" asked Culhwch.

"She is thine," said Ysbaddaden, "but thou needst not thank me for it. It is Arthur that has given her to thee. Had it been for me, thou shouldst never have had her, for now my life is done."

Then Goreu, the hidden son of Custennin, dragged him away and struck off his head, and set it on a stake upon the wall.

Chapter 11: The Wedding

That night Culhwch wedded Olwen, as the stepmother's destiny had said he must.

Arthur's hosts went every man to his own country.

Thus did Culhwch win Olwen, the daughter of Ysbaddaden Pencawr.

Source note

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