

11-15-1987

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Recommended Citation

Reedman, Janet P. (1987) "*Paying the Piper*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 1987 : Iss. 4 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol1987/iss4/14>

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien
Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



PAYING THE PIPER

by
Janet P. Reedman

A lady dwelt under a hollow hill, inside a stone womb raised by an ancient people who had intended it to represent the woman's ever-fruitful womb. Pale-faced and arrogant, her hair corn-gold and her eyes deep and devouring, she sat on a block of moon-quartz, admiring herself in a mirror of polished bronze. In this incarnation she called herself Modron, though the names she bore were many.

Suddenly Modron ceased her preening in the mirror and looked toward the low doorway that lead to her chamber in the heart of the hill. There, leaning against a massive stone upright, was a tall, pale man wearing garb of a woodland hue. Red hair crackled on his shoulders, and his lips bore a cruel haughty smile, as did Modron's. A shadow of antlers darkened the air above his flaming head.

"Mabonwy!" The lady rose in a rush of crimson robes and went to him, setting her long hands on his shoulders.

"Lady Mother of Earth." The man gazed down at the white-cheeked woman, his Mother and his Divine Consort, bound to him by a primeval law that heeded not the fears and taboos of mortals. "How goes it with you?"

"It goes ill!" She whirled away from him, casting her mirror against the wall. "Do you not see, Mabonwy? I grow old! Silver streaks my golden locks and my face is lined! Aye, and it is not even wintertime, when such a change would be proper and right."

Mabonwy clutched her wrists. "You look fair to me. Have no fear."

"You fool!" she snapped. "To you I look fair, aye, for your plight is the same as mine! You, too, fade, my son-lover! Where are the hunting temples raised to you of yore? They lie broken 'neath the peat: forgotten shrines to a nigh-forgotten god!"

"Well, what would you have me do?" Mabonwy released Modron's wrists and folded his arms across his chest. "In these evil years the people follow the Christos, God of the Fish, and heed not the old ways."

Modron sighed. "We need blood, you and I, as we had of old. It kept us young. When people ceased to fear, they ceased to sacrifice and then to believe. Mabonwy, you must find us a willing sacrifice!"

Mabonwy's brows lifted. "I told you, they worship the Christos..."

Modron looked at him darkly. "Not all do, you know that, else we would

have vanished from the earth! Some folk still half-believe, albeit they no longer offer, and some pay only lip service to the Christos. Surely you must know that even today barren wives touch my Sacred Stones hoping to become fertile."

Mabonwy nodded. "Say no more, Mother Goddess. You have convinced me. I shall fare into the mortal world and seek a sacrifice."

"You must not be obvious, though," said Modron. "You do not want the black crow-men of the Christos to toss poison-water at you. You may have to resort to trickery to get the sacrificial victim."

"I am no fool, Lady Mother," said Mabonwy, smiling unpleasantly. He lifted his pan-pipes from his belt. "Mortals are always desperate--weak, short-lived beings that they are--and there will always be one willing to make--a deal."

"Farewell, then," said Modron. Her face, though hot and eager, suddenly looked old, taut, haggard. "Do not return until you have wet the stones of one of my Sacred Sites with blood."

Mabonwy came to Clun village in the middle of a violent rainstorm.

Lightning tore the sky and the earth trembled, as he entered the ill-defended compound, his lean frame wrapped in an oily skin cloak, his crafty, arrogant face hidden by a fold of his hood.

He drew attention at once. A score of thin, ragged people tumbled from their ramshackle cots to gawk at the stranger.

They seemed hideous to Mabonwy, five thousand years old and clad in the guise of a youthful man. Old, wretched and broken, the folk were bent by lives of deficiency and hard toil as a tree limb is bent by continual blasts of wind. Even the women were grotesque, toothless and wan, worn out before thirty by constant childbearing.

"Who are you?" asked the headman, a wizened greybeard with phlegmy cough. "Why have you come? Are you from the King?" The men behind him muttered, and waved filthy pitchforks in a menacing fashion.

Mabonwy held out his hands. "No kingsman am I, good folk," he said. "My name is Mabon Piper, and I am a wandering minstrel."

"Wandering minstrel? Hah!" cried an uncharacteristically burly fellow.

"No one travels this land alone in these

times, stranger. I say you're a spy sent from the bloody king. And we don't like spies here--we lynch 'em!"

"Do you not believe I am a minstrel?" cried Mabonwy angrily. "I will play for you, then!" He reached beneath his cloak and drew out his pan-pipes. Raising them to his lips, he played a haunting melody that recalled the events of ancient times: Lithe dark people dancing in the firelight; farmers tilling the warm, rich soil; gold-decked chiefs passing under stone doorways that framed the rising sun; a cold moon floating over a stone standing near the cremation of a mother and child...

Mabonwy stopped playing. The villagers were huddled together, weeping, their pitchforks fallen from their hands.

"You are a sorcerer!" gasped the headman.

"No." Mabonwy veiled his dark eyes with his lashes. "I am not. I'm but a skillful piper come seeking shelter for a day or two."

"Why have you come to humble Clun? You are so talented you could play at the court of the king himself!"

"The king's court is not for me," lied Mabonwy. "I must wander this land playing for ordinary folk like yourselves. That is the penance set upon me by the Bishop of Canterbury, for a wicked sin I committed in my youth."

"The Bishop set you out wandering? You're a Christian, then, and not a sorcerer?" The headman eyed Mabonwy warily.

Mabonwy held up a medallion he wore: a lopsided cross fashioned from river reeds and bound with threads of Modron's hair. "Look--here is my Christos cross." He did not tell them the the cross was a sacred symbol long ere their Christ-man died on one.

The villagers looked relieved. The headman smiled brokenly. "Then you are welcome here, master. Come into my hut and play for us again!"

Inside the hut Mabonwy played. His melodies were sweet, by far the loveliest sounds the villagers had ever heard, and they wept in both joy and sorrow. Mabonwy watched them as he piped, scanning them with cold, glittering merciless eyes. There had to be one...

His gaze fell upon a young woman who sat rapt, her mouth gaping, her blue eyes dripping tears. She cradled a small child that looked ill unto death in her scrawny arms.

Setting his pipe aside, he spoke in a voice deceptively gentle. "My dear woman, what ails your child?"

The girl started. "You be speaking to me, sir?" she asked shyly, pushing back strands of greasy brown hair that flopped over her face.

"Yes, my dear. What is wrong with your babe?" He leaned over, touching the child's brow with long, slender fingers. The infant, a boy of about

two, moved sleepily and moaned. Its flesh burned beneath Mabonwy's touch.

"Don't know, sir," said the girl. "He's been sickly ever since birth. Has rickets, for one thing--but there's more besides. The leech think he's not long for this world..." She bowed her face into the child's sparse hair and sobbed harshly.

Mabonwy, his cruel gaze shaded by his long lashes, knelt beside her and clasped her hand. "Surely you do not grieve, my dear! Know you not that the soul of your child will fly at death to the very arms of the Christos?"

"So the priests say," replied the girl, "but alas! I'm a wicked sinner, and don't want my son to go to heaven where I can't see him no more. He's the only child I have, you see, Master Piper, for my poor man died of a rotted foot and I'll not wed another. God, I'd do anything to see my Kilian well!"

Mabonwy smiled, a smile that did not quite reach his unearthly eyes. "Lady, I know a little of healer-craft," he said, "and I believe your child can be treated. Unfortunately, no healing can take place here in Clun--the, ah, conditions are not right."

"You just held out hope to me, then snatched it back!" the girl pouted.

"Caristiona!" someone reprimanded her. "Don't be rude!"

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

"There's no need to apologize; I am not angry at you. There was a misunderstanding on your part. You thought that I snatched hope from you, when I was actually suggesting you accompany me to foreign parts to find healing for your child."

Caristiona's face brightened. "Do you mean it, sir?"

"Of course!" He stood up, hands outstretched. Healing your child would help me atone for the wrongs I committed in youth. And I would fain serve unto eternity the Lord of Lords and his Blessed Mother." He smirked at his own blend of lies and truth.

"So be it, then," said Caristiona. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow," said Mabonwy, thrusting his pipe into his belt. "At the first light of dawn."

The next day dawned cold and rainy. Mabonwy and Caristiona moved slowly through the damp grayness, mist swirling about them, muffling the sound of Caristiona's soft weeping as she left the only place she's ever known.

Irritated by her tears and the piteous whining of the child strapped to her back, Mabonwy snapped, "Why are you sniveling, woman? You're on your way to save your son!"

"I'm glad of that," said Caristiona, "yet I'm afraid, master. What if I die on the journey and never see my mam again? But maybe if I pray hard...Mam gave me her cross which has been in the family since St. Augustine came to Britain." She reached around

her neck and drew from her baggy kirtle an ugly iron cross. "Mam said I could use this to pay you, sir, if and when Kilian's healed. It's the only valuable object the family owns."

Mabonwy, a true lord of Faery and a hater of iron, recoiled in horror from the cross. "Put it away!" he snarled.

Caristiona looked hurt. "but you--you're a Christian!"

"Put it away, I say!" Mabonwy's face twisted with revulsion--and pain, for the cold sheen of the iron hurt him. "'Tis no relic, you simple wench! St. Augustine, indeed! Some country smith banged it out for a couple of coppers, I'll wager! Hide it! I'd be ashamed to pray to my god on such a tawdry thing."

Head bowed, Caristiona thrust the cross into her pocket. Then she trudged slowly at Mabonwy's boot heels, her own bare feet slipping in the mud.

By the end of the day they reached a ruined hillfort. Where torches had once glowed and warriors feasted, there were only burnt timber and lumpy earthen mounds. Caristiona squatted amid the ruins and nursed her child, while Mabonwy stalked hither and thither, his eyes full of memories. "This place is haunts," whispered Caristiona as the sun set behind the green hills and a huge orange moon rose like an eye in the West. "Can't you feel it, lord?"

"Aye. A great slaughter took place here long ago. Beneath your very feet, woman, lie a hundred youths slain by the Romans. Some still have ballistae lodged in their bones." Gloomily he turned from the gawking girl. The Romans were first to bring trouble to his kind: killing the druids, burning the sacred oak groves, melding the old deities with effete southern gods.

"We should leave, Master."

Caristiona's voice interrupted his glum thoughts. "Wicked ghosts of unbaptised men might be abroad..."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mabonwy.

"Neither you nor the babe will survive if we proceed. Be quiet, and I'll play my pipes for you."

Caristiona hoisted Kilian onto her shoulder and leaned forward attentively as Mabonwy took out his pipes and played a haunting air, a dirge for the warriors of the fort who had once invoked the name of Mabonwy the Hunter.

Suddenly a figure appeared on the fort's ramparts, wreathed in golden light. A naked woman with flowing locks sat astride a snow-white mare. The woman's brow shown like a star in the gloom.

Caristiona leapt to her feet, crossing herself. "Blessed Mary!" she gasped.

"Epona!" breathed Mabonwy, dropping his pipe. "What brings you here?"

"The folk who once dwelt her were Iceni--horse people," replied the woman. "Thus this hill belongs to me. Your piping awoke me from long sleep, son of

Modron."

"Mary!" Caristiona sprinted toward Epona, the Horse Goddess. "You must be the Blessed Virgin, or--or an angel!"

"Virgin? Never that, stupid mortal!" Caristiona did not hear Epona's words as the goddess leaned down and smote her with a shining hand. Caristiona crumpled on the grass, her babe landing unharmed beside her.

Mabonwy sprang at Epona, clutching her wrist. "Why did you strike her?" he cried. "She is valuable to our kind, Horse Goddess! She or the child will spill blood to the Mother and restore the Old Race, temporarily, to power and youth!"

"I haven't harmed her." Epona glanced at the unconscious woman. "She will wake in a day or two, not knowing what struck her."

"Nonetheless, you have caused a delay I can ill afford!" Green sparks darted from Mabonwy's eyes. "I want atonement, Epona."

"Peace!" cried Epona, alarmed by the menace in the Hunter God's voice. "Although I could argue that the wench got no better than she should, with her babble of virgins and angels, I will give you atonement in the form of two of Epona's wind-swift mares. Riding them, you will re-gain the time lost here at Dun Ro-Ech."

She clapped her hands and two white horses cantered out of the shadows, streaming witchlight from their manes and tails. They approached Mabonwy and bowed their necks to him. "They are fully yours now," said Epona. "They bow their heads in submission to your will."

"So be it," said Mabonwy, stroking milk-pale flanks and neck. "Now go, Lady of Horses, ere you do any more damage in your haste and wrath!"

Epona whirled about, hair haloing her head. She glanced over her shoulder at Mabonwy, lips curved in a vicious smile. "I will go," she said, "but not because I obey your orders. I leave because I cannot abide a fool--and such a desperate, dangerous fool you are, Mabonwy! You play a deadly game."

Mabonwy released her wrist as if her flesh burnt him. "What do you mean, Epona?"

The goddess' mocking smile flashed again as she rode into the night. "A woman's mind is as quick as a tongue of flame," she said. "Remember that, Son of the Mother."

"You prattle foolishly," spat Mabonwy, but his eyes bored into her slim white back till it had vanished into the darkness.

A day later Caristiona awoke with a splitting headache. "Christ," she moaned, clutching her temples, and then, as she reached full wakefulness: "Where's Kilian?"

"I have him." On the ramparts Mabonwy sat with the child on his knee.

Wrapped in magics, fed on the milk of Epona's mares, the sickly infant lay quiet in the god's hold.

"Oh thank you; I must have dozed off." Struggling to her feet, Caristiona retrieved her son. "Foolish me for sleeping! How's me poor babe? Do you need a change of swaddling, love?"

"No time for that!" said Mabonwy. "Time passes all too swiftly. We must reach Kernewyk soon...the Equinox would be an auspicious time."

"Why, sir?" asked Caristiona, strapping Kilian to her back.

"Ask no questions; you would not understand the answers. Come--I have steeds for us."

Meekly Caristiona strode over to one of Epona's mares and straddled it. The beast moved uneasily, disturbed by her heavy mortal weight. Awkwardly, Caristiona clutched its mane. "Is this beast tame, Master?" she asked.

"Of course!" cried Mabonwy impatiently, flinging himself upon his own steed and slamming his heels into its flanks. "I'd not risk having you and the child killed in a fall. You are too important to me."

Together they rode over the desolate countryside. Mabonwy spoke seldom, but Caristiona uttered no complaint, her thoughts all of Kilian's well-being. At length they reached Kernewyk, where sea smote white sands and ghosts of drowned cities appeared in the morning sea mists. There, Mabonwy bore her to the ancient site known as the Men-An-Tol, where a round stone bored through the center by the pounding of an ancient hammer stood before an upright pillar. Dismounting, Mabonwy yanked the weary Caristiona from her steed. "We have reached the place of healing," he announced.

Caristiona rubbed her aching eyes and stared in shock at the Men-An-Tol. "This is an old pagan place!" she cried; "a haunt of dark powers!"

"Silence!" Looming before her, Mabonwy cast back his hood. Antlers were sprouting from his brow. "Know me now for who I am, girl: Mabonwy Ap Modron, lord of the Hunt."

Caristiona covered her mouth with her hands, as Mabonwy snatched Kilian from her back-sling and carried him to the Men-An-Tol, which had begun to vibrate and fill with eerie blue flame. Kneeling, the god passed the child through the centre of the stone as he chanted:

"Men-An-Tol, through which spirits fly,
Heal this child so he will not die,
Heal the sickness of the flesh,
Let his body come afresh;
Death-head lifted from his soul,
Through the womb of Men-An-Tol."

There was a burst of flame and light, and a shriek from Kilian. Then the boy lay shivering but unharmed on the far side of the holed stone.



Mabonwy grabbed him and held him aloft. The child's cheeks glowed with radiant health; his eyes were bright and alive. Strong limbs pummeled the smoky air. Caristiona gasped in awe and tears of joy and relief streaked her cheeks.

Mabonwy thrust Kilian toward her. "See! I have healed your son! You name me and my kind demons, but could your Christos have done this? Your holy book says he heals the sick--but did he heed your prayers and heal your babe?"

Caristiona was speechless, but she fingered the battered crucifix in her pocket. Mabonwy swept forward, enfolding her in his cloak. "Come," he said, "I shall show you that my world is fairer than the heaven of which your priests prattle."

His mantle swirled over her head, then fell away revealing a different landscape filled with awesome and beautiful towers and castles. The Men-An-Tol still stood nearby, but it was surrounded by a glowing, green-clad host. They laughed and sang and called to Caristiona in sweet voices.

Drunkenly the girl staggered toward them, drawn by their eerie singing. They caught her hands and began dancing around the holed stone, their movements

growing frenzied as the stone shivered in its bed. Their pale hands caressed over the dazed Caristiona, giving the undernourished woman the form of a lovely immortal. Warm auburn hair flowed in place of knotted brown locks; slender white limbs replaced thin stalks of arms and legs.

Caristiona gasped in awe, while her dancing comrades tittered.

Mabonwy, watching with a vicious smile, set the girl's child aside and went forth to Caristiona. He caught her in his arms, raised her up, and kissed her fiercely. She leaned creamily against him, hands threaded through his hair. "O let this night last forever!" she whispered ecstatically. "I have grown fair and whole, and you--you are with me, my lord. I want you--now and forever."

"Maybe that is possible." His hands stroked her neck. "But to be my lover, you must give more than your body. Beneath faerie glamour you are still mortal--but I can take the humanity away from you."

"How so?" She leaned against the Men-An-Tol, unclasping her dress and letting it fall.

"You are not a goddess and never will be, but faery women are meet brides for Mabonwy, and the people of Faerie are the ancient dead."

"I must die for you?"

"Yes. First renounce your fish-god, then render up your life."

Caristiona shuddered. "I don't want to die...even though you claim I'll be with you for eternity."

Angrily he clutched her arms. He had not expected any resistance. He had thought her new beauty, and the godlike sensuality he radiated would have pushed her beyond normal reason. "You are an ungrateful wench," he snarled. "I've cured your brat and offered you great gifts--yet you refuse me. I am hurt, and wrathful; I may harm that child..."

"No!" she caught his wrist as he faced Kilian. "Forgive me. I am foolish and selfish...Still weakly human--for now...Here, leave Kilian and come to me. I'll give you what you want, as payment for your noble deeds."

She drew him down in the heap of her clothing. He caressed her and she responded ardently. Glowing opalescent, the faerie host swarmed round, murmuring words Caristiona seemed not to hear:

"Fool, fool! She'll never be one of us.

Never...ever..."

Mabonwy's hands smoothed over Caristiona's throat. So easy to snap such frail bones...He grinned viciously. Soon he and the Mother would have a new lease on life. "Do you renounce your fish-god, Caristiona?" he muttered in her ear. "Will you pay Mabon Piper for curing your son?"

The girl shifted uncomfortably, burrowing down into her ragged garb as if trying, for a second, to cling to the shreds of her old life. Then her arms encircled Mabonwy, holding him tightly against her. "Mabonwy Ap Modron," she whispered, "I will pay you indeed."

Smirking, he reached for her throat--but then he screamed in agony and tore himself away. Caristiona shrank back, shivering, as the illusion faded from her body, revealing her natural, wasted form.

Mabonwy screamed again, and far away, under a hill, the Mother who was also a bride wailed hideously, her voice rising in a terrible crescendo of grief. The Hunter god clawed at his back, where the cross-piece of Caristiona's iron crucifix jutted from his flesh. Steaming blood pattered on the ground. "Iron!" he shrieked. "I am undone. O Mother, I am lost!"

Caristiona grabbed Kilian as Mabonwy writhed in death-agonies. Before her very eyes, the god's body shriveled and decayed, becoming a twisted skeleton impaled by an iron cross. The watching faerie emitted a horrid screech, then they and their sorcerous realm vanished, blown out like corpse-candles on the wind. Suddenly it was day on a lonely moor, and Caristiona stood alone, blinking in wan sunlight.

Drawing on her fallen garments, she gingerly plucked her cross from Mabonwy's skeleton. Her eyes were tired, a little sad, and surprisingly wise.

"I suspected it from the first, Mabonwy," she murmured. "I knew you had abnormal powers. But I risked going with you--for Kilian's sake. Mam said I'd have to pay the piper, though--and I have, oh indeed I have. I paid you exactly as you deserved, demon."

Giving the healthy Kilian a hearty squeeze, she looped her trusty iron cross about her neck and began the long journey home.

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