

Becoming a Goddess: Jane Drew and the Celtic Divine Feminine in Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* Series

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Those readers who are at all familiar with the Arthurian legends will very soon recognize that Susan Cooper's five-book fantasy series, *The Dark is Rising* (named after the second book) is a contemporary Merlin-Arthur tale. Indeed, some critics have argued that the use of the Arthurian legend as a basis for fantasy, with Will Stanton, Merriman Lyon, and, later, Bran Davies as the apparent focus, has caused the books to support a patriarchal worldview and to deprive the female characters of their power (Veeder 11). However, a close reading of the series reveals that much of Cooper's surface-level Arthurian fantasy is underpinned by Celtic mythology and, more specifically, the mythology of the aspects of the Celtic Goddess, or, Divine Feminine.

This mythology is embodied in one of the two central female figures of the series, the oldest Old One known as "the Lady,"; by the creature of the Wild Magic called "Greenwitch"; and the oldest power of all, Tethys, the goddess of the sea from which all life came (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 73). Not only are these female mythological figures described over and over again as being the oldest and strongest powers, they are also written as being essential to the success of the Arthur-Merlin quest. And because the quest is ultimately about Light defeating Dark (good defeating evil), this quest is never-ending, even after all the Old Ones but Will sail away to the West (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 264). As Merriman states of the Light and the Dark "...neither has ever triumphed altogether. Nor ever will...for there is something of each in every man" (Cooper, *Over Sea, Under Stone* 82). It is due to this fact that the character of Jane Drew, the only female human protagonist, has a much larger role than a surface reading of

the series would make it appear. Jane's relationships with Greenwich and the Lady allow her to become the human connection to both aspects of the Celtic Divine Feminine which has guided and enabled the larger quest of the Light, and, further, designates her as the female representative of the Light after the Lady leaves for the West.

When modern readers see the word "goddess," the first idea which comes to mind is that of a female deity – which, indeed, is one of its definitions ("Goddess"). However, the scope of that deity, her powers, the way she exists, varies from culture to culture. Additionally, the dictionary provides a second definition for the term "goddess": "A woman whose great charm or beauty arouses adoration ("Goddess"). By this definition, human women can be defined as goddesses if they are seen to possess certain traits and are treated a certain way.

Due to these subtleties of meaning, a more precise term to describe the essence of both the Celtic mythological figures and Cooper's characters is "divine feminine." As Fuhrman and Slater explain, the divine feminine is an archetype of feminine energy, one whose attributes include the cycle of birth, life, and death; wisdom; mystery; and almost always as humanity's connection to nature, if not nature herself (37-38). Often the divine feminine was seen as a creatress, in which she was synonymous with nature, was life-giving, and had the powers of regeneration (Fuhrman and Slater 38). As nature, the divine feminine was in all things and was a "sacred whole" with many facets, including those that might be considered destructive, such as power over death and the more violent forces of nature (Fuhrman and Slater 38-39). This definition is especially fitting for the oldest representation of the divine feminine in Celtic mythology, most commonly referred to as the "Mother Goddess."

In Celtic mythologies, specifically those of Ireland and Wales, the Mother Goddess was known as Don (Welsh) or Danu (Irish). In both mythologies' stories, the Mother Goddess does

not play an active role, but rather is known as the mother of all the other deities – Danu as the mother of the Tuatha de Danann (“Danu”), Don as the mother of the “Children of Don” (“Don”). More is written about Danu, though, because they are analogues, her attributes can also be applied to Don: “Sometimes called a ‘mother goddess,’ she was sometimes the ancestor of the human tribe, at other times of the gods themselves. Her name in myths is usually Danu or Anu or Don...” (Monaghan 292). From information about Danu, we learn that Her attributes included fertility, wisdom, wind, and strong ties to water and the earth (Wright), perfect corollaries to the attributes of the divine feminine. As the ultimate origin of the cosmos, Don/Danu is nature itself, and thus has a harsher, wilder side not associated with the “mother” figure so commonly associated with goddesses today (Dames). Cooper’s fantasy series incorporates both aspects of the Don/Danu – her motherly and her wild sides.

We first sense Cooper’s use of this mythology by learning about the Old Ones, who are “‘as old as this land and even older than that’” as Merriman explains (Cooper, *The Dark Is Rising* 32) and that they were “from the beginning when magic was large in the world” (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 93). The Old Ones possess the magic of the Light and are constantly doing battle with the agents of the Dark (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 32, 36). Marking a strong connection between the Old Ones and the Don/Danu is that the Children of Don, like the Old Ones, were constantly fighting the Children of Llyr, who some scholars interpret as being the powers of darkness (“Don”). This is supported by Cooper herself, who has the Dark Rider, the most powerful agent of the Dark, use an “Old Spell of Lir” at one point to try to defeat will (*The Dark is Rising* 186). This, combined with the knowledge that Susan Cooper herself says she grew up knowing Celtic myth, specifically in Wales where her grandmother lived, and that she drew on these when she started to write (Cooper, “But Myth

Has No Prototype” 22), make a strong argument for the Goddess figures in her series – the Lady, Tethys, and Wild Magic’s representative, Greenwitch – to be the Goddess Don.

The Lady of the Light, or “the Lady,” as she is most often referred to, is first met in Cooper’s second book, *The Dark is Rising*. There, we learn that she has had “many, many names” (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 32), and that the Lady is beyond the power of the Dark (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 43). Even Merriman, Cooper’s Merlin figure, calls her “Madam” (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 42) and shows her respect and reverence. She is described as giving a sense of benison of being connected to music, of bringing joy, and of having healing magic (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 39, 42). Also often noted throughout the series are her “ageless eyes,” though her appearance is that of a very old woman (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 208). She alone can overcome the Dark at its full power (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 44) and Will describes her as, “ ‘...One of the great figures of the Light...She is the greatest of all, the one essential’ ” (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 67). This again points to her as the source of life, as a creatress and an origin.

Though the Lady is powerful, her age has made her weary, and for most of the series she is gone, having faded away after holding off the Dark during winter, their time of greatest power (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 43). She is reborn every St. Stephen’s day in the “Hunting of the Wren” ritual (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 137-138, 207) and also returns for the final battle when the mountains of Wales sing – a “ ‘helping magic ...from the sum of the centuries of this spell-ridden island,’ ” as Merriman puts it (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 42-43). The Lady is likened to a bird in other ways, as well: she is “fine-boned” her arm is compared to a bird’s wing, and when she enters the final battle against the Dark, her presence is heralded by a pair of swans (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 87,243, 244). Her connections to bird speak not only of

her connection to nature, but add an additional connection to Welsh mythology by giving her aspects of the goddess Rhiannon, who is associated with birds in the second branch of *The Mabinogion* (38).

Though there is this gentle, beautiful side to the Lady, she is also part of the High Magic, which is above both the Light and the Dark and does not have allegiances (Cooper, *The Grey King* 96-97). Thus, there are times when the Lady has to be impartial, even if it be to the detriment of the Light. This colder aspect of the Lady shows her immense power, beyond that of human ethics, for the High Magic exists throughout the universe, and thus is not bound by “‘humanity, mercy, and charity,’” as John Rowlands, a helper of the Light, says in describing the goodness of men (Cooper *Silver on the Tree* 246, 145). This aligns with the definition of the multiple facets of the divine feminine, and adds support for the other two Goddess figures in Cooper’s series – Greenwich and Tethys – as being other aspects of Don.

The middle book of the series, *Greenwitch*, takes place in Cornwall and is centered around the old tradition of creating the Greenwitch to sacrifice to the sea for good luck, good harvest, and plenty of fish (Cooper 22). The shortest book of the series, it is nevertheless integral, because without the Greenwitch, the cipher, a key to the Light’s successful use of the Grail, would have been lost forever. Thus, Cooper writes the role of the Wild Magic of the Greenwitch “a force neither of the Light nor the Dark nor of men” (*Greenwitch* 119) as essential to the fulfillment of the Light’s quest. The Greenwitch itself is not gendered, but remains “unclassifiable, like a rock or a tree” (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 33). This, however, does not separate it from the divine feminine for, as Fuhrer and Slater point out “The Great Goddess contained all things, for a long time, she paradoxically personified male as well as female attributes, embracing the whole...” (38). The Greenwitch, an active image and symbol of the

Wild Magic of nature “all the force of the earth and sea” (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 34) is thus a representative of the presence of the divine feminine as nature, uncontrollable, always present, and “beyond any line drawn between good and evil” (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 34). As noted above, Don/Danu was seen as an earth and water goddess, a source of all nature, paralleling the divine feminine power behind the Greenwitch.

Though the Greenwitch itself is not gendered, the traditions surrounding its making are. Only women are allowed to be present at the making, and they have a female leader at the ritual, echoing the rites of a witches’ coven (Cooper *Greenwitch* 23, 32-33). What connects this spirit of nature more thoroughly to the feminine principle is the fact that it is the child of what Cooper chooses to call Tethys, the “Lady of the Sea,” “Older than the land, older than the Old Ones, older than all men, she ruled her kingdom of waves as she had since the world began: alone, absolute” (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 79). When Merriman and Will go to speak to Tethys in the deeps, she is described as “...a presence merely, she was the sea itself...” (*Greenwitch* 80), once again connecting Tethys with the idea of the Mother Goddess as the source of all life. It is Tethys who gives Greenwitch life, and, indeed, the Greenwitch refers to her as “mother” (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 117, 102). Though Cooper has chosen to give this goddess the name of a Greek Titan (“Tethys”) she goes no farther with this analogy. Indeed, the fact that Tethys rules alone is also reminiscent of Don in particular, who did not have a consort god (Sullivan 2020).

Tethys and the Greenwitch both show the wild, untamed side of the divine feminine. They both express rage which affects the natural world (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 83, 102). Tethys’ power is ““without discipline or pattern,”” (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 106). This is a destructive power echoing the attributes of the divine feminine as being a source of death and mystery.

Tethys, unlike any other magical being, has the power to forbid the Old Ones entry into her realm (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 82), again putting the divine feminine beyond the earthly division of Light and Dark. She and her magic are “outside Time” and thus remain even when the other aspects of the divine feminine/Don leave the earthly plane (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 34).

It is into this world of female magic that Jane Drew is thrust, as one of the “three from the track” prophesied to help bring about the fall of the Dark (Cooper, *The Dark is Rising* 37). Tellingly, Jane appears at the beginning, middle, and end of the series, in the first, third, and fifth books. In all three books it is noticeable that Jane is not an “average” human: she is extremely intelligent and often figures out first what is going on or how to solve a puzzle; she has keen intuitions, sharp senses, and can feel magic even without knowing what it is: It is she who first understands that there is something different about Will, and that he reminds her of Merriman (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 39, 41, 106). Immediately upon being introduced to her, we see her connection to nature, as her very first line is “I can smell the sea!” (Cooper, *Over Sea, Under Stone*), even though she is still a few miles from the ocean. This hints at her direct connection to the nature side of the divine feminine principle.

Jane, though not Cornish, is invited to watch the making of the Greenwitch because she is the “only female close to the Perfessor...” (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 30). Not only does this give her status in Cornwall, but it hints at her role as the new Lady, much as Will is taking on the role of Merriman. Observing this tradition is a rite of passage for Jane: she is being initiated into the nature side of the divine feminine principle. As a sign that she is the right person for this role, when Jane sees the Greenwitch, she intuitively understands what no one else has noticed: that the Greenwitch is *lonely* (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 34). Jane continues to be concerned about the Greenwitch throughout the book, even when its power is causing destruction.

Jane's relationship with the Greenwitch goes beyond empathy, however. The Greenwitch visits her twice in her dreams. The first time, the Greenwitch tells Jane it has a "secret," which Jane can tell is a comfort to it (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 51). In the middle of the Wild Magic's haunting of Trewissick, the Greenwitch visits her again, after explaining to Merriman and Will that Jane had been the only one ever to care for her " '...she looked at me as if I were human...'" (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 118). When Jane explains that the "secret," which is the grail cipher, means something to *her*, the Greenwitch gives it to her in thanks (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 122-123). What Jane has done is no less than incredible: she has caused wild nature to love *her* and has formed an intimate relationship with it. This recalls the second definition of "goddess": Jane's charm, which lies in her love and kindness, has aroused and admiration/adoration from the Greenwitch. Jane's compassion continues even after she has obtained the cipher – she is sad that the Greenwitch once again has nothing of its own, and gives it a different gift – one that Will, somehow knowing it would be needed, had made (Cooper, *Greenwitch*, 144-145). This ensures the continuation of her bond with Greenwitch, and through Greenwitch, with Tethys, and once again evokes her role as the apprentice Lady figure, Will's partner in the work for the Light.

It may seem that *Greenwitch* was Jane's first and only quest, her largest moment. However, in the last book, *Silver on the Tree*, it is Jane who enables Will, Bran, and herself and her brothers to embark on the final quest to retrieve the crystal sword. And this is because of her meeting with the Lady.

Up until this point, Jane has not even heard of the Lady's existence. She asks Will who the Lady is, and it is then that he explains that she is " '...the greatest of all, the one essential'" (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 67). When Jane meets the Lady, she meets her alone. The Lady

tells her “ ‘It was intended, from the beginning, that you should carry the last message,’” and goes on to explain: “‘Some things there are that may be communicated only between like and like...For you and I are much the same, Jane, Jana, Juno, Jane, in clear ways that separate us from all others concerned in this quest’” (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 87, 88). By speaking privately with Jane, and calling her by the names of other goddesses, the Lady is initiating Jane into her position as Lady-in-waiting, as an entry-level goddess. When the Lady leaves her, she calls Jane, “‘...my daughter,’” cementing the bond between them (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 88). This was a female meeting, a passing on of knowledge of the divine feminine.

After meeting the Lady, Jane acts even more as if she has senses and gifts like the Old Ones. She is immediately attacked by a creature of the Dark, and instinctively tries to use a mental defense of happy images, much the way the Old Ones do (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 91). Though much of the rest of the quest is Will and Bran’s, Jane’s presence is helpful worlds away: when Bran cannot think clearly because of the *Mari Llywd*, the nightmare, thinking of Jane clears his mind, much as thinking of the Lady brings warmth to Jane (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree*, 95, 172). Jane’s “sixth sense” is also heightened: when Will and Bran return from the Lost Land, she can sense Bran’s new power, and the fact that Will feels drained; she can also sense that Blodwen is evil, whereas before, she couldn’t feel this (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 212, 229, 71). Jane’s gifts have been heightened by her association with the Lady.

In the end, in the final battle, Jane is part of the Circle during the last fight against the Dark, as Bran cuts the mistletoe from the midsummer tree (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 256-257), and thus she is there to see the Lady leave her world, leaving humans to protect the earth, “[n]ow especially since man has the strength to destroy this world...” as Merriman tells them. As Plante puts it, “It seems that the job of the Light was to deliver man from the evil

outside of him. The evil inside still exists...” (40) and must be fought with those good qualities John Rowlands mentioned before: humanity, mercy, and charity (Cooper, *The Grey King* 145). Jane, with her unbounded love and compassion, is the embodiment of this human Light power for, as is revealed when Bran chooses to stay in this world, ““...loving bonds ...are outside the control even of the High Magic, for they are the strongest thing on all this earth”” (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 249). It is the mother-love of Jane’s goddess principle which will now help protect the earth from the evil in human hearts.

Though Jane and her brothers are made to forget all their adventures, to remember them only in dreams (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 268), it must be remembered that Jane has already been designated as the female representative of the Light. The Lady has named her (Cooper, *Silver on the Tree* 88). Additionally, though concrete knowledge of the Old Ones and their history may have been taken from Jane, it does not necessarily follow that she has forgotten the ritual of the Greenwitch itself. That was a right-of-passage practiced by human women, and this initiation into the nature side of the divine feminine will stay with her, especially since the magic of nature, of Tethys, the oldest part of the divine feminine, always remains, for it is outside of Time (Cooper, *Greenwitch* 34). Jane does not have magic, but she has knowledge of one old tradition, a reminder of the Old Ones and their fight in the form of a stone from the Lost Land, and the bonds she forged with the facets of Don, all marking her as the next embodiment of the divine feminine principle, and thus Jane-as-goddess remains to connect the old world with the new, and guard the Light.

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