

# Chaucer and Old Norse Mythology

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In a paper currently awaiting publication<sup>1</sup> I have argued that the story in *Skáldskaparmál* of Óðinn's theft of the poetic mead is an analogue to the story told in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, for three main reasons. First, both stories may be said to involve an eagle as a mediator between different kinds of poetry: in Snorri's account Óðinn in the form of an eagle expels, apparently from the front and back ends of its body, two portions of the mead, which represent poetry and poetastery respectively, while Chaucer's poem, which takes the form of an account by the narrator of a dream he has experienced, deals largely with two different places visited in the dream: the Temple of Venus in the first of the poem's three books, and the House of Fame in the third, at which literary and oral poetry, respectively, are given prominence; and it is an eagle, moreover, that conveys the narrator (himself a poet) from one place to the other. Secondly, Snorri's account hints at excretion in this context (Óðinn apparently excretes some of the mead: 'sendi aprt suman mjöðinn', I, p. 5, l. 4),<sup>2</sup> while Chaucer's

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<sup>1</sup> This paper, 'Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* and Chaucer's *House of Fame*' is at the time of writing still awaiting publication in the Proceedings of a conference entitled 'Ancient and modern: Old Norse myths and mythological poetry then and now', and held at Edinburgh University in September 1997.

<sup>2</sup> References to Snorri's account are to Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by A. Faulkes, 2 vols

hints at flatulence (the eagle speaks of ‘eyr ybroken’, l. 765, which may be an allusion to broken wind);<sup>3</sup> these two phenomena are not identical, of course, but are closely interrelated. Thirdly and finally, Snorri’s account presents Óðinn as collecting the mead from a mountain called Hnitbjörg, one meaning of which is apparently ‘clashing rocks’,<sup>4</sup> whereas in Book III of Chaucer’s poem the eagle and the narrator enter the House of Rumour by a window in a whirling wall; both types of entrance are typical of the other world as this has been presented in different mythological traditions.

In another paper, published in *Leeds studies in English* in 1998,<sup>5</sup> I have argued that the *Topographia Hibernie* (c.1188) of Giraldus Cambrensis was a source for Chaucer’s *House of Fame*. The main argument here involved the fact that, in his portrayal in the *Topographia* of eagles flying dangerously near the sun, Giraldus compares the eagle not just with contemplatives who can gaze without flinching at the nature of the divine majesty, but also with people who meddle in what they do not fully understand, and thus come to grief in a manner comparable to that in which the eagle’s wings are burnt by the sun’s rays. Giraldus, it seems to me, is here giving a rather less respectful picture of the eagle than emerges from the other writings which have been pointed out as possible sources for Chaucer’s presentation of this bird in *The House of Fame*: the Bible; certain works of classical literature; the works of Dante; and the bestiary tradition. In all of these, the eagle is an august and serious figure, clearly meant to be treated with respect, whereas the eagle in *The House of Fame* is predominantly a comic figure — not least in making the unwarranted boast of having flown close to the sun. This, as I have indicated above, was my main argument for suggesting that Chaucer, who is believed to have been acquainted with other works by Giraldus, might have been influenced by the *Topographia Hibernie* in his portrayal of the eagle in *The House of Fame*.

In the same paper of 1998 I also suggested, however, that additional evidence for the influence of the *Topographia* on *The House of Fame* could be found in certain further similarities between the two works, emerging when Chaucer’s account of the Houses of Fame and of Rumour is compared with the description in the *Topographia* of the fire of St Brigid in Kildare. This occurs considerably further on in the *Topographia* (in chs 67-72; 77) than the chapter (9) about eagles, but is linked to it by the fact that a falcon features in it (in ch. 70), and that Giraldus immediately precedes his chapter about eagles with one

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(London, 1998). At the conference referred to in note 1, above, Hermann Pálsson cast doubt on the ‘excretion’ interpretation of this passage. Vésteinn Ólason, however, at the same conference, defended it.

<sup>3</sup> See *Oxford guides to Chaucer: the shorter poems*, by A.J. Minnis *et al.* (Oxford, 1995), 223-27. References to *The House of Fame* are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., general editor L.D. Benson (Oxford, 1988), 347-73. The eagle is here explaining that sound, which is really broken air, travels by a natural process upwards from its place of occurrence to the House of Fame, which all sounds eventually reach.

<sup>4</sup> See Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk orðsifjabók* (Reykjavík, 1989), 349.

<sup>5</sup> R. McTurk, ‘Chaucer and Giraldus Cambrensis’, *LeedsSE*, n.s. 29 (1998), 173-83.

about hawks, falcons and sparrowhawks (ch. 8).<sup>6</sup> These further similarities, some of which are more striking than others, are five in number. I give them here in the order in which they occur in the *Topographia*: first, the fact that in the *Topographia* (ch. 67) St Brigid's fire is described as reputedly (though not in fact) inextinguishable, and that in *The House of Fame* (ll. 2075-80) the power of rumour is compared in a simile to that of a fire beginning as a spark but increasing until it is large enough to burn a city; secondly, the fact that in the *Topographia* (ch. 69) St Brigid's fire is surrounded by a circular hedge of withies, and that in *The House of Fame* (ll. 1935-40; 1985) the House of Rumour, which is shaped like a cage, is made of twigs; thirdly, the fact that in the *Topographia* (ch. 70) a falcon perches frequently on the top of a church tower near St Brigid's fire (until it is eventually killed by a rustic with a staff), and that in *The House of Fame* the eagle perches 'faste by [...], hye upon a stoon' (ll. 1986-92), before lifting the narrator into the House of Rumour by a window (ll. 2027-30); fourthly, the fact that in the *Topographia* (ch. 71) there is said to be a miraculous book at Kildare containing illustrations of the four creatures representing the Evangelists, and depicting them in such a way as to make their wings appear to change in number, and that in *The House of Fame* (ll. 1368-92), when the goddess Fame is described as appearing to change in size, she is said to have as many eyes as there were feathers on the four beasts that honoured God's throne in the Book of Revelation; and fifthly and finally, the fact that in the *Topographia* (ch. 77) the archer who went mad as a result of blowing on St Brigid's fire is described as blowing upon every person he meets by way of demonstrating how he did so, and that in *The House of Fame* (ll. 1615-88) good and bad reputations are described as spreading as a result of the god Aeolus blowing one or the other of his trumpets.

None of these five similarities (with the possible exception of the second and fourth) is particularly striking on its own, but if they are viewed together, and in combination with the one involving the eagle, discussed above, they have a certain cumulative quality which suggests, to me at least, that Chaucer did indeed have the fire of St Brigid in Kildare in mind when he wrote *The House of Fame*. The similarities are perhaps not so great, however, as to suggest, as I did in 1998, that Giraldus's *Topographia Hibernie* was itself a source for Chaucer's poem. In the present paper I should like to modify that view, and to suggest instead that both Giraldus's account of St Brigid and Snorri's account of the theft of the poetic mead reflect a story that became known to Chaucer most probably in oral rather than written form, and influenced his composition of *The House of Fame*. It was probably in oral form also that this same story influenced both Snorri's and Giraldus's accounts, though it has clearly done so in different ways. Since its influence on Snorri's account and on Chaucer's

<sup>6</sup> References by chapter number to the *Topographia* are to Gerald of Wales, *The history and topography of Ireland*, trans. by J.J. O'Meara (Harmondsworth, 1982). References to the Latin text are to O'Meara's edition of the *Topographia* in *PRIA* 52C (1948-50), 113-78.

poem is in my view more readily apparent than its influence on Giraldus's account, I shall argue my case, for the sake of clarity, in three main stages, as follows: first, I shall identify and briefly describe the story as it is preserved in ancient Indian texts; secondly, I shall argue for its influence on Snorri's account of the theft of the poetic mead and on Chaucer's *House of Fame*; and thirdly, I shall argue for its influence on Giraldus's account of the fire of St Brigid in Kildare. Then, in a brief conclusion, I shall deal with the question of the form in which this story is most likely to have become known to Chaucer.

In his portrayal of the eagle in *The House of Fame* Chaucer differs from the four categories of writings most often adduced as sources for this aspect of the poem, and listed above, not only in presenting the eagle as a comic figure, as already indicated, but also in associating the eagle with poetry. As well as conveying the narrator of the poem, Geoffrey (whose name is of course the same as Chaucer's) from one poetic environment to another, as shown above, the eagle presents himself as something of an authority on poetry, accusing Geoffrey, for example, of composing poems on the subject of love while lacking in personal experience of it (see *The House of Fame*, ll. 614-28). The association of an eagle with poetry is in fact a very ancient one, even though it may be hard to find parallels for it in the works most often cited as likely sources for the eagle in *The House of Fame*. Writers on Snorri's story of the theft of the poetic mead have in fact shown more awareness of this association than have writers on Chaucer's poem. It has long been recognised, for example, that there is a relationship of some kind between this story of Snorri's and a story which may be pieced together from various ancient Indian texts — the dating of which is a complex and difficult business, but which clearly preserve traditions dating from well before the time of Christ<sup>7</sup> — about how a winged figure, identifiable as an eagle in some of the texts, brings from heaven to earth the drink known as Soma, believed to confer, among other things, the gift of poetry.<sup>8</sup> The Soma is well protected and hard to obtain, which means that, according to the *Mahabharata*, the winged messenger has to slip through a wheel of flame, as bright as the sun, in order to reach it;<sup>9</sup> in another version of the story, told in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, it has to fly between two gilded razor-sharp leaves, which may suddenly snap together.<sup>10</sup> In the *Rig Veda*, moreover (cf. also the *Satapatha Brahmana*), it is told that, as the eagle flew off with the Soma, an archer shot an arrow after it with the result that it lost one of

<sup>7</sup> See J. Puhvel, *Comparative mythology* (Baltimore, Md, 1989), 68-69.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, A.A. Macdonell, *Vedic mythology* (Strassburg, 1897), 104-15, esp. pp. 109, 111-12, and 114; A. Olrik, 'Skjaldemjoden', *Edda* 24 (1925), 236-41; E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and religion of the North* (London, 1964), 40-41; Svava Jakobsdóttir, 'Gunnlöð og hinn dýri mjöður', *Skírnir* 162 (1988), 215-45. Laurence K. Shook, writing on *The House of Fame* in *Companion to Chaucer studies*, ed. by Beryl Rowland, rev. ed. (New York, 1979), 414-27, p. 420, recognises the antiquity of the association of the eagle with poetry, but does not mention India in this context.

<sup>9</sup> See Svava Jakobsdóttir, 238-39 and cf. A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'Symplegades', in *Studies and essays[...] offered in homage to George Sarton[...]*, ed. by M.F. Ashley Montagu (New York, 1944), 463-88, p. 481.

<sup>10</sup> See Svava Jakobsdóttir, 239, and Coomaraswamy, 466-67.

its wing-feathers.<sup>11</sup>

As indicated above, I shall argue here that the story thus represented in Indian texts is reflected in different ways in Snorri's account of Óðinn's theft of the poetic mead, in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, and in Giraldus's account of the fire of St Brigid in Kildare. Before doing so, however, I should like to abstract from the various manifestations of the Indian story, very cursorily reviewed above, a sequence of four topics which may be used as headings under which to conduct the argument. These are: poetry; the bird as messenger; the perilous entrance; and the penalty of loss. To these four topics a sub-topic, the archer, may be added under the heading of the fourth, since in the Indian story, as we have seen, the penalty suffered by the eagle for taking the Soma is the loss of a feather, caused by an archer's arrow.

These four topics (though not the archer) are, I believe, all present in both Snorri's story of the theft of the poetic mead and the story told in Chaucer's *House of Fame*. Both stories are about poetry, as has already been shown; in both a bird (in fact an eagle) functions as a messenger, as has also been shown; and in both a perilous entrance is involved. In Snorri's account, as we have seen, the name of the mountain from which Óðinn collects the mead is very possibly to be interpreted as 'clashing rocks' (compare the snapping leaves of the Indian story); and entry into the mountain is in any case made difficult and dangerous for Óðinn by the giant Baugi, who, after finally, under pressure from Óðinn, boring a hole for him in the mountain, tries unsuccessfully, once Óðinn has entered the hole, to stab him with the auger he had used to bore it. It should be noted, incidentally, that Óðinn at this stage of the story is not yet in eagle form; before entering the hole he changes into serpent form, a point which serves to underline the narrowness of the hole and the difficulty of entry; it is not until the return journey that he adopts the form of an eagle.<sup>12</sup> In Book II of *The House of Fame* (ll. 904-59) the eagle in the course of carrying the narrator from the Temple of Venus to Fame's house boasts of having brought him on this journey closer than Icarus came to the sun on his ill-fated flight with wax wings; the eagle refers also the myth of Phaeton borrowing and failing to control the chariot of the sun god, his father. This may recall the wheel as bright as the sun through which the winged messenger has to pass in the Indian story summarised above. This wheel, according to Coomaraswamy, who refers to it as the Wheel of the Sun, symbolises the sun itself, thought of as a door in the sky through which it is possible to enter the other world, though entry is made difficult by the revolving of the wheel and the danger of being cut to pieces by its spokes, which represent the sun's burning rays. The sun thought of in this way is just one example of what Coomaraswamy calls the Active Door, by which entry to the other world is possible, but made difficult by the door's

<sup>11</sup> See *The Rig Veda: an anthology*, [...] trans.[...] by W. D. O'Flaherty (London 1981), 128-31, and cf. Svava Jakobsdóttir, 239.

<sup>12</sup> See Snorri Sturluson, ed. Faulkes (as cited in note 2, above), I, pp. 4-5.

active quality; it may, for example, suddenly slam shut or move away, so that the moment of passing through it has to be carefully judged in advance. The Clashing Rocks, or Symplegades, of Greek mythology are another example.<sup>13</sup> It is in Book III of *The House of Fame*, however, that the idea of the perilous entrance in the form of an active door is approached most closely, at the point where the eagle, after perching nearby on a stone, carries the narrator by a window into the rapidly revolving, sixty-mile long, wickerwork House of Rumour, which, as soon as they have entered it, stops revolving. Coomaraswamy does not mention *The House of Fame*, but gives other examples of revolving barriers with doors or windows in them, in which, he claims, the barrier symbolises the sky, and the door or window symbolises the sun.<sup>14</sup>

As for the fourth topic, the penalty of loss, this is more clearly evident in Snorri's account than in Chaucer's poem. In Snorri's account, Óðinn loses a portion of the poetic mead by apparently excreting it in his nervousness at being closely pursued in his eagle form by the giant Suttungr, also in the form of an eagle. In *The House of Fame* the loss in question is the loss of intestinal wind, and this, it must be emphasised, is hinted at rather than explicitly mentioned; it should also be noted that whereas in Snorri's account and the Indian story the loss takes place after the messenger has passed both in and out through the perilous entrance, in Chaucer's poem the hints at flatulence occur before the eagle has entered the House of Rumour, and partly also before it has entered the House of Fame; there is in any case no account of a return journey in the poem, which may have been left unfinished.<sup>15</sup> A further point is that the idea of flatulence, if it can be accepted that it is indeed present in *The House of Fame*, is associated there not exclusively with the eagle, whose reference to broken air (at l. 765) occurs relatively early on in its conversation with the narrator (before its talk of flying close to the sun), but also — at least arguably — with the wind god Aeolus: A.J. Minnis has recently suggested that the description of the trumpet used by Aeolus to blow slander throughout the world from Fame's house (see ll. 1623-56) is strongly suggestive of the alimentary canal.<sup>16</sup> For these reasons, and also because the eagle in *The House of Fame* is not actually stated to have broken wind, the poem's hints at flatulence cannot be said to exemplify the penalty of loss in the same obvious way as the aquiline Óðinn's predicament seems to do in Snorri's account — unless it can be argued that the irony at the expense of Chaucer's eagle arising from its apparently unconscious hint at farting can be seen as a kind of penalty for its subsequent boast of having flown close to the sun. It is possible, indeed, that the loss of dignity to the eagle in the Indian story that is perhaps implied by its loss of a wing-feather

<sup>13</sup> See Coomaraswamy, *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> See Coomaraswamy, 479-80. Cf. note 27, below.

<sup>15</sup> See *The Riverside Chaucer* (1988), 990.

<sup>16</sup> See *Oxford guides to Chaucer: the shorter poems* (1995), 224.

represents an early stage in the development of the presentation of the eagle as a comic figure that distinguishes Chaucer's *House of Fame*, as already indicated, from the works most often adduced as sources for his portrayal of the eagle in that poem; Óðinn in his role as an eagle in Snorri's account is of course also something of a comic figure. It must be acknowledged that the loss of a wing-feather (or even a tail-feather) is not the same phenomenon as excretion; and that excretion and flatulence, albeit closely interrelated, are not identical phenomena either. Nevertheless there are, I suggest, sufficient similarities involving these phenomena between the Indian story on the one hand and Snorri's and Chaucer's accounts on the other to support the argument I am offering here under the heading of the penalty of loss; and even if this is not accepted, the argument is, as I believe I have shown, well enough supported under the headings of the first three topics in the sequence of four, given above, namely: poetry, the bird as messenger, and the perilous entrance.

In turning now, with all four topics in mind, to Giraldus's account of the fire of St Brigid in Kildare, I must acknowledge at once that there is (as far as I can discover) no explicit reference to poetry anywhere in this account. It is likely, however, that the name of Brigid carried associations of poetry, if not for Giraldus himself, then for those who preserved the traditions he records. As will become increasingly clear below, traditions of St Brigid, about whom as a historical figure very little is known, tended to combine with and be influenced by traditions of her pagan namesake, the Celtic goddess Brigid, who was believed to be, among other things, a patroness of poetry. She is also the Irish counterpart of the Gaulish Minerva, who was regarded as a patroness of arts and crafts.<sup>17</sup> Brigid's association with poetry is strongly emphasised in Cormac's *Glossary* (c.900), where she is described as 'a poetess, daughter of the Dagda', and as 'the goddess whom poets adored' to the extent of calling her 'goddess of poets'; and where she is also said to have had two sisters and namesakes, associated with healing and the smith's craft respectively.<sup>18</sup> It is not without interest in the context of the goddess Brigid's association with the arts to note that Giraldus, in his account of St Brigid in the *Topographia Hibernie*, devotes two chapters (71 and 72) to the miraculous book at Kildare, paying particular attention to the artistry of its illustrations, and telling how the scribe responsible for these was assisted in his work by an angel who appeared to him in dreams on successive nights, producing drawings for him to copy, and in the first dream successfully exhorted him to obtain the help of St Brigid's prayers. This may recall the dream setting of *The House of Fame*, in which a heavenly messenger, the eagle, who claims to have been sent by Jupiter (ll. 605-13), advises the dreamer-narrator, as we have seen, on poetic composition. The Dagda, of whom Brigid is said to be the daughter in Cormac's *Glossary*, is known from other

<sup>17</sup> See P. Mac Cana, *Celtic mythology* (London, 1970), 34-35.

<sup>18</sup> See *Sanas Chormaic: Cormac's glossary*, trans. [...] by J. O' Donovan; ed. [...] by W. Stokes (Calcutta, 1868), 23.

sources as the father god of the Túatha Dé Danann, or ‘people of the goddess Danu’, a divine people who were believed to have lived in Ireland before the ancestors of the Irish, the Milesians or Sons of Míl, arrived there and drove them into the subterranean otherworld of the *síde*, or fairy mounds, from which, it was believed, they continued to exert their influence.<sup>19</sup> The very name of Kildare, *Cill Dara*, ‘the church of the oak’, specifies the kind of tree which, the Celts believed, provided access to the invisible world.<sup>20</sup> With these various considerations in mind, we may venture to suggest that, both before and after the time of Giraldus, St Brigid’s shrine at Kildare was associated with traditions of poetic knowledge gained as a result of entry to the other world.

With regard to our second topic, the bird as messenger, it has already been noted that Giraldus (in ch. 70) gives an account of how a falcon perched on the top of a church tower at Kildare. This falcon, known as ‘Brigid’s bird’, was used by people in the neighbourhood to hunt other birds, which it did expertly, just as if it had been tamed and trained for the purpose; it also showed a tyrannical superiority to lesser birds. During the mating season it chose to mate near Glendalough rather than in the precincts of the church at Kildare, thus showing respect for the local ecclesiastics. After a long life it was eventually killed by a rustic with a staff. Giraldus sees its death as a lesson in the dangers of over-confidence; his tone here is reminiscent of that in which he had earlier (in ch. 9) compared the scorching of the eagle’s wings when it flies close to the sun with the dangers of trying to acquire knowledge that is beyond one’s grasp. This falcon, as will be evident, suffers in death a worse fate than the eagles described by Giraldus or the ones that figure in the Indian story and in Snorri’s and Chaucer’s stories; nor is it sent on such a specific errand as the eagles in those three last-named stories seem to be. Nevertheless, what is said about it in Giraldus’s account is enough, I suggest, to support the idea of a relationship between that account and those same three stories, provided that other features of the account can be found to do so as well.

The third topic, the perilous entrance, is well illustrated by St Brigid’s fire itself, which is described in three brief chapters (67-69) immediately preceding the relatively lengthy one about the falcon, and which also features again in ch. 77. In chs 67-69, Giraldus describes how in St Brigid’s time twenty nuns, of whom she herself was one, kept the fire perpetually burning, and how since her death only nineteen have done so. No male is allowed to cross the circular hedge of withies which surrounds the fire, though some have rashly tried to do so. Only women are allowed to blow the fire, and then not with their mouths, but only with bellows or fans. A curse of the saint means that goats never have young in the area; on the other hand, the grass in the nearby pastures is miraculously restored overnight after grazing animals have consumed it. In ch.

<sup>19</sup> See Puhvel, 176-78.

<sup>20</sup> See S. “Catháin, *The festival of Brígit: Celtic goddess and holy woman* (Dublin, 1995), 16, 26 (note 140).



77, Giraldus gives two examples of what has happened to males who have attempted to cross the hedge round the fire. One of these is the archer, mentioned above, who, after crossing the hedge, blew on the fire, and at once went mad, and then went around blowing on everyone he met, saying that this was how he had blown on Brigid's fire; he also blew on every fire that he encountered. In the end he drank so much water in his desperate need for it that he burst and died. Another person (*alius*; presumably also an archer), who was restrained by his companions before he had crossed the hedge completely, nevertheless lost the foot and shank that did cross it, and was lame ever afterwards.

St Brigid's fire, which, since the hedge around it is circular (*orbicularis*), is presumably itself circular in shape, is surely reminiscent of the Wheel of the Sun, discussed above. Celtic scholars seem reluctant to describe the pagan goddess Brigid as a sun-goddess, but they readily acknowledge her association with fire and also, though perhaps rather more cautiously, with fertility;<sup>21</sup> and Giraldus's account of her Christian namesake, just summarised, clearly links her with both. It was in the light of a consideration of this account, among others, that Mac Cana maintained that 'no clear distinction can be made between the goddess and the saint';<sup>22</sup> in other words, traditions of the saint have been so heavily influenced by traditions of the goddess that it is hard to disentangle one set of traditions from the other. St Brigid's feast-day, February 1, coincides with *Imbolc*, the pagan Celtic festival of spring, which celebrated the promise of the return of the sun's brightness after the darkness of winter, and Mac Cana and others have drawn attention to a number of sources which associate St Brigid with fire and brightness, not least the brightness of the sun.<sup>23</sup> One of these is the anonymous *Vita prima Sanctae Brigitae* (known as *Vita I*), dating most probably from the mid-eighth century at the earliest, according to which St Brigid, who it was foretold would shine in the world like the sun in the vault of heaven, was born just after sunrise neither within nor outside a house (a borderline location which perhaps parallels the temporal borderline between winter and spring that her feast-day represents). It also relates that, on different occasions when she was a child, a house in which she was sleeping appeared to be ablaze; a piece of cloth touching her head was seen to glow with a fiery flame; and a column of fire was seen rising from the house in which she slept.<sup>24</sup> Another source, Cogitosus's *Vita Brigitae* (known as *Vita II*), dating most probably from early in the second half of the seventh century, tells how she

<sup>21</sup> See "Catháin, 2; cf. also Mac Cana, 34-35, 94-95, and D. "h"gáin, *The hero in Irish folk history* (Dublin, 1985), 16-26.

<sup>22</sup> See Mac Cana, 35.

<sup>23</sup> See Mac Cana, 34-35; "h"gáin, 19-23; and the references given under 'fire' and 'sun' in the Index to "Catháin.

<sup>24</sup> See S. Connolly 'Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae: background and historical value', *JRSAL* 119 (1989), 5-49, pp. 6, 14-15.

hung her wet clothes on a sunbeam to dry.<sup>25</sup> Many more examples could be given, but I shall content myself here with quoting from a statement by another Celtic scholar, Miranda Jane Green, which is particularly useful for the purposes of this part of my argument: according to Green, the Celts acknowledged fire as ‘the terrestrial counterpart of the sun in the sky.’<sup>26</sup>

If, as I suggest, St Brigid’s fire as described by Giraldus may be taken as an example of the Wheel of the Sun, this would help to explain *why* people were so rash as to attempt to enter it by crossing the hedge surrounding it. Giraldus himself gives no explanation for this. What he seems to be recording here, apparently without fully understanding it, is a tradition comparable to that preserved in the Indian story discussed above (and I believe also in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*), according to which the other world could be entered by way of the sun. In the Indian story, as we have seen, it is a bird who enters (cf. *The House of Fame*) and returns from the other world, though not without difficulty; and a recollection of the bird’s part in the story may lie behind Giraldus’s account of the falcon (perched on high at first and later falling to its death), reminiscent as this is of his previous account of eagles flying dangerously near the sun, and close as it also is to his account of St Brigid’s fire. The purpose of entering the other world in the tradition he preserves may well have been the acquiring of poetic knowledge, as the Indian and Chaucerian accounts, as well as Snorri’s, all suggest in different ways. Alternatively, or additionally, it may have been the reconciliation of opposites, which Coomaraswamy sees as the fundamental purpose of visits to the other world as these have been represented in different mythological traditions; the other world, according to him, is believed to lack the oppositions such as Fear and Hope, North and South, Night and Day, etc., which trouble us in this world, and the purpose of visiting the other world is to find a way of negating or neutralising these contrasts. Linked with this belief is the notion that the ideal time for entering the other world is at a temporal borderline, such as that between winter and spring, with which, as we have seen, St Brigid is associated. He refers to the account in the Old Irish saga *Fled Bricrend* (probably originally from the eighth century) of how the chieftain Cú Ruí possessed a stronghold over which he sang a spell each night, whereupon it started revolving as swiftly as a mill-wheel, so that its entrance could never be found after sunset. Behind this, according to Coomaraswamy, lies the idea of the sun as the Active Door.<sup>27</sup> It is surely not unreasonable to suppose, in any case, that a house which starts revolving at sunset would stop doing so at sunrise. Here it may be pointed out that the narrator of *The House of Fame* twice mentions (at ll. 63 and 111) that his dream befell him on December 10; and it may be recalled that when, in the course of his dream, the narrator

<sup>25</sup> See S. Connolly and J.-M. Picard, ‘Cogitosus’s *Life of St Brigit*: content and value’, *JRSAI* 117 (1987), 5-27, pp. 5, 15.

<sup>26</sup> See M. J. Green, *Celtic myths* (London, 1998), 46.

<sup>27</sup> See Coomaraswamy, 480. Cf. note 14, above.

enters the House of Rumour with the eagle's help, this house, which had been revolving, stops doing so. *The House of Fame* is thought to have been composed very soon after 1376, a year in which, according to the Julian Calendar, the winter solstice fell on December 11.<sup>28</sup> It may thus be suggested that the eagle and the narrator of *The House of Fame* enter the House of Rumour at sunrise on the morning of the winter solstice of 1376, December 11, that is, on the borderlines between night and day and between the shortening and lengthening of the days of the year, at the time when the first hint of spring comes in the middle of winter — a highly suitable time, as Coomaraswamy would surely accept, for visiting the other world.<sup>29</sup> However this may be, enough has been said here, I trust, to establish the presence in Giraldus's account of the topic of the perilous entrance.

Enough has probably also been said above to indicate how the fourth topic, the penalty of loss, manifests itself in Giraldus's account. The falcon suffers the penalty of loss of life — not, it is true, for attempting to enter St Brigid's fire, but rather, as Giraldus puts it, for 'having occupied itself without sufficient caution with the prey which it had caught, and having too little feared the approaches of men'<sup>30</sup> — in other words, for becoming over-confident; and the penalties suffered by the two men who attempt to cross the hedge surrounding the fire involve loss of wits and of a foot respectively. 'The archer' was mentioned above as a sub-topic under this heading, and it is of some interest to note that of these two men the first to be mentioned is certainly an archer (*sagittarius*), and the second (*alius*) very possibly is as well. It is true that the archer in the Indian story has the opposite function from that of the archer in Giraldus's account; in the former it is the archer who inflicts the penalty of loss, whereas in the latter it is the archer who suffers it. The loss of wits and/or of a foot in Giraldus's account corresponds to the bird's loss of a feather in the Indian story. It is nevertheless noteworthy that an archer is specified in both Giraldus's account and the Indian story; and if it can indeed be claimed that the second of the two human sufferers in Giraldus's account, the one who loses his foot, is, like the first, an archer, it is also of interest to note that Krsanu, as the archer in the Indian story is called in the *Rig Veda*, is apparently also known as 'the footless archer' in Indian sources.<sup>31</sup> The similarities and differences between Giraldus's account and the Indian story in this and other respects may be compared with those that have been pointed out between, on the one hand, Giraldus's account, also in the *Topographia Hibernie* (ch. 102), of a horse sacrifice, and, on the other, ancient Indian traditions of such a sacrifice. Ritual intercourse is involved in both cases, but in Giraldus the coition is between a

<sup>28</sup> See *The Riverside Chaucer* (1988), xxiv-xxv, and [Geoffrey] Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, ed. by N.R. Havely (Durham, 1994), 10, 137 (note to l. 63).

<sup>29</sup> See Coomaraswamy, 470 (note 13).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted from O'Meara's translation (1982) as cited in note 6, above, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> See R. Calasso, *Ka*, trans. by T. Parks (London, 1999), 14, 419. Svava Jakobsdóttir, 239, implies that the guardian of the Soma, who shoots an arrow after the eagle, is a snake. Cf. Calasso, 14-16.

man and a mare, whereas in the Indian traditions it is between a woman and a stallion.<sup>32</sup>

In concluding this paper I shall need to rearrange to some extent the order and emphases of the foregoing remarks. The accounts by Snorri and Giraldus preserve two somewhat different versions of a story in which a bird seeks to bring knowledge of poetry from the other world. I shall call these two versions the Norse and the Irish versions respectively. Since this story is also preserved in ancient Indian texts, it must be of great antiquity. Chaucer, I am arguing, made use in *The House of Fame* of a version of the story falling somewhere between the Norse and the Irish versions, the latter of which, as I hope I have produced sufficient evidence to show, had become combined with traditions relating to (St) Brigid well before the time of Giraldus (d.1223), who in turn was writing well before the time of Chaucer (d.1400). The Norse version of the story is relatively close to Chaucer's in having both an explicit concern with poetry and (apparently)<sup>33</sup> a scatological element; on the other hand, it differs from Chaucer's in reflecting the idea of the entrance to the other world as a narrow opening between rocks in a mountain. The Irish version is relatively close to Chaucer's in reflecting the idea of the sun as the entrance to the other world, and in linking this idea to the concept of an enclosure of withies or twigs; on the other hand, there is no mention of poetry in the Irish version of the story in its preserved form. The goddess Brigid's association with poetry nevertheless makes it likely that this, too, was an element in the Irish version. On balance, it seems to me that Chaucer's poem, with its references to the sun and to a house of twigs, reflects a version of the story marginally closer to the Irish than to the Norse version. There is moreover one particular similarity between Giraldus's account and *The House of Fame* that strongly suggests to me that Chaucer knew the story in question in a version that was linked to traditions of the shrine of St Brigid in Kildare. This is the reference to the mystical representations (as composite beings) of the four evangelists, which in Giraldus's account (ch. 71) occurs in connection with the miraculous book at Kildare, with its depiction of the beings in question as having wings that appear to change in number, and which in Chaucer's poem (ll. 1368-85) occurs in connection with the goddess Fame's apparent ability to change in size: just after saying that Fame at first looked no taller than a cubit's length but subsequently seemed to stretch from earth to heaven, the narrator says she had as many eyes as there were feathers on these same four beings, as described in the Book of Revelation.<sup>34</sup> The reference thus occurs in both accounts in a context of what the onlooker in each case — the peruser of the book in Giraldus, and the

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<sup>32</sup> See Puhvel, 273-76.

<sup>33</sup> I add 'apparently' mainly because of the difference of opinion recorded in note 2, above, but also because of the doubt as to whether there really is a scatological element in *The House of Fame*. See the reference given in note 16, above.

<sup>34</sup> See Revelation, 4: 6-11, and cf. Ezekiel, 1: 4-28.

narrator in Chaucer — perceives as miraculous physical change, and together with the motif of the enclosure of twigs is a relatively specific similarity between the two accounts, as indicated above. While I do not now believe, as also indicated above, that it is so specific as to justify my earlier expressed view that Chaucer was indebted to Giraldus's account itself in composing *The House of Fame*, it may, I suggest, be used as evidence, along with the other similarities and possible connections that have been pointed out here, that Chaucer in writing that poem was influenced by oral traditions relating to the shrine of St Brigid in Kildare.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Guðni Elísson for reading through this paper and suggesting a number of changes, most of which I have implemented. Needless to say, the paper as it now stands is entirely my responsibility.