

The Red Devil and the Symbolic Meaning of the Colour ‘Red’ in Modern Breton

Anna R. Muradova

Like Welsh *rhudd* and Irish *rua(dh)* (Old Irish *ruad*), Modern Breton *ru(z)*, ‘red’ (Old Breton *rud*) comes from Indo-European **reudh-*, **roudh-* ‘red’, and is also attested in several other modern Indo-European languages: Sanskrit *rudhirá*, Greek εἰς ῥοῦθρος, Latin *ruber*, Slavonic рѣдръ, Modern Russian рудой (рудый). In the Celtic languages this word has an additional meaning: ‘strong’ or ‘aggressive’.

For Modern Breton, in his dictionary F. Favereau gives two meanings for *ruz*: ‘red’ and ‘cruel’ (‘déchaîné’: [GBV, 650]). Red is perceived by Breton speakers to be a ‘bad’ colour, like black. The examples of phraseology given by Favereau show that *ruz* marks a quality (often a negative one) or, following a substantive designating something hostile, can have the meaning ‘strong, big, cruel’.

Jules Gros notes that ‘Ruz marque le superlatif’ (‘Ruz marks the superlative’): *d’an daoulamm (pevarlamm) ruz* — ‘at a quick gallop’ (literally ‘at a red gallop’); *fachiri ruz* — ‘a violent quarrel (literally ‘a red quarrel’), to be compared with *bezañ fachet ruz gant unan bennak* ‘to be very angry with somebody’; *ar skorn ruz* ‘a bitter frost’ (literally ‘a red frost’)(Gros 1989, 451). As a synonymic construction for ‘red frost’, Favereau gives an idiomatic expression *ar rew du*, ‘black frost’ (GBV, 209); it is clear that in some idioms the colours ‘black’ and ‘red’ are interchangeable.

Not only cold, but heat too can be red: *tomm-ruz* literally means ‘hot-red’, idiomatically ‘red-hot (about a metal)’. What is of particular interest is the fact that in both cases (red frost and red heat) the qualified noun is regarded as being negative and the adjective ‘red’ only reinforces this negative character: if we need to translate it, it would correspond to ‘cruel, bitter’. The following examples are even more explicit: *naon ruz* ‘awful (literally ‘red’) starvation’ and a commonly used exclamation *mallozh ruz*, which can be translated as ‘red damnation’ or ‘red catastrophe’ (GBV, 650). Thus we can understand that Modern Breton *ruz* can refer not only to the colour ‘red’ but is also used to reinforce some qualities considered to be harmful for human beings.

In Breton folk tales, proverbs and ballads, the devil is associated with red. This is not unique to Breton, but nonetheless, it is interesting to consider the background of this traditional vision of the evil one in Brittany. In Breton folk poetry and tales the mention of colours is a rare thing. If there is a reference to the colour of clothes

or hair pertaining to one of the characters, there is in most of cases a symbolic meaning in the 'coloured' detail. Three colours appear most commonly: white, the symbol of joy and holiness, black the symbol of suffering and sin; and red as the third one. It is important to note that red is not the colour of evil and sin in the abstract but the colour of an evil male character in particular. The devil then appears as a handsome young man with red hair wearing red clothes. According Modern Breton proverbs red-haired men have a special power to seduce young girls: *an hini en deus blev ruz a dapo merc'hed diouzhtu* 'The man who has red hair will catch the girls at once' (Menard 1995, 427).

This is not only an obvious allusion to the Christian symbolism examples of which can be found in any Christian country. (One can think of Russian icons or paintings in Western Europe which show red devils in the flames.) The symbolic opposition between the three main colours white, black and red is also present in early medieval texts and folk tales based on pre-Christian traditions of Celtic and some other Indo-European peoples.

In early Irish texts as in modern Irish folklore, red hair is a feature that points to the otherworld origin of a character (both male and female) (Mikhailova 2000, 68–77). Contact with such characters can have both beneficial and maleficial effects for humans. The best known example is the three red men whose appearance prefigures the destruction of the hostel in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (Knott, ed. 1936, 9).

The two words used for the colour 'red' as applied to otherworld creatures in Irish are *rua(dh)* and *de(a)rg*. Old Irish *derg* has a specific meaning: 'the colour of blood', 'the red of hair', 'bright red'. Like the Modern Breton *ruz*, *de(a)rg* could be used to reinforce a negative quality, as a prefix, for example, *dergapad*, 'red warning', 'guilt incurred by entertaining a fugitive criminal'; *dergfine* 'family group that has been guilty of *fingal* or the first element of compound nouns: *dergdásachtach* 'raging mad', *dergmaith*, *dergnamae* 'bitter foe', *dergnaimdenas* 'fierce enmity' (DIL, s.v. *derg*).

On the other hand, Old Irish *ríad* 'reddish brown' had an additional meaning when used in poetic language: 'strong', 'mighty', 'formidable' (DIL, s.v. *ríad*); in poetic texts *ríad* could refer to a good quality of a king.

We may assume that in Old Irish *derg* had taken over some of the semantic functions of *ríad*, and particularly the field of meaning related to aggressive forces and negative qualities. However, the poetic meaning of *ríad* 'strong', is very close to the notion of aggressive force (see further below). A similar process concerning the distinctions between two words meaning 'red colour' can be seen in Russian, where the adjective рудой (рудый) (etymologically related to Old Irish *ríad* and Modern Breton *ruz*) first meant 'red', and then became a rare word in the modern language meaning a reddish colour of wood and wool (Bakhilina 1975, 109–116).

Comparing Old Irish and Modern Breton texts, one can state that Old Irish *derg* and Modern Breton *ruz* have one similar connotation: ‘negative, aggressive’. On the one hand the association with the devil in Breton folklore might suggest that red is a ‘bad’ colour. But it is not possible to draw such a conclusion. A Modern Breton proverb from Favereau’s dictionary says: *Toud al livioù a zo mad med ruz eo an tad* ‘All colours are good but red is the father’ (GBV, 650).

At first sight this proverb contradicts the connotations of the colour ‘red’ already mentioned. But in fact there is no contradiction here. If we remember that the devil in folk tales, legends and ballads in most cases is a transformed character from pre-Christian mythology, the link between the proverb and the folklore texts seems more obvious. Both in Irish and Welsh medieval texts, white and red are sometimes connected: for example, the white and the red colours of the otherworld beasts in the Mabinogion (Thomson, ed., 1). Red and white in these cases were not ‘good’ or ‘bad’, they were just two sacred colours, and we see no opposition between them. But the symbolic meanings of these two colours were still different.

Gaulish theonyms supply some information for further reconstruction of the pre-Christian symbolic meanings of the colour ‘red’: *Rudianos* is one of the epithets of the Roman god Mars, and is usually translated as ‘strong, powerful, red’, coming from **Rudios* + the suffix *-ono-* (*-ano-*), from **rudhio-* < IE **reudh-* ‘red, or from **Rudiodivos* ‘strong god’. *Rudiobos*—also one of the Mars’ epithets with the same meaning ‘strong, powerful, red’—may be a result of a haplology < **Rudiodivos*. (Kalygin 2006, 92 -94).

In this case the epithet ‘red’ does not denote a colour; it is an indication of the power of a god. It is to be noted that in Gaulish we have not found such an epithet in connection with a woman’s name, which may suggest that in Gaulish as in Breton red is associated with a characteristic of a man’s force and the power of a warrior. In Breton folklore the devil when represented as a handsome man has red clothes and sometimes red hair.

In Old Irish the element ‘red’ *ród-* / *ruad-* was a part of some personal names. In Ogam inscriptions we can find names like *Rodagni* (Korolev 1984, 186). Very often this element is part of the compound names of Irish kings: *Ross Ruad*, *Roth-ruad*, *Ruadguss* (*Rudguss*), *Ruad* (*mac Deigg*), *Derg* (*mac Deirgthened*). According to Kalygine (2006, 93), red was the colour of royal power both in Ireland and also in India, where it was the colour of the power of *kshatrias*. The similarity of this symbolic meaning of the colour ‘red’ and of the presence of the element ‘red’ in royal names in both Ireland and India was first pointed out by Bolelli and Campanile, according to whom these striking parallels were inherited from Indo-European tradition (Bolelli and Campanile 1971, 123–140). It is not the only common element in Celtic and Indian royal names: Bolelli and Campanile also compared Gaulish *-rix* and Sanscrit *-ràja*. According to Kalygine, Old Irish

Ruadri 'Red-King' has both the elements mentioned: the colour 'red' and the royal power.

How, then, is this fact connected with the Breton proverb mentioned by Favereau? Red is called the father (*tad*) of the other colours. The father is a male character who can simultaneously protect and punish, build and destroy. In archaic societies the king was regarded as the father of the population. Red is the father of the colours, just like the 'red king' and the 'red god' was the father of a tribe. One of the qualities most appreciated in the king of an archaic society was his destructive power, his military and sexual activity: the 'father of the people' was supposed to procreate new life, and protect the population against its enemies by killing and destroying them. Thus the 'red' aggressive force was not a negative feature for those who were protected by the king or a male divinity.

Later, when Christianity introduced a new scale of values, the destructive and sexual male force became sinful. Thereafter it was regarded as a bad quality, and was attributed to the devil.

Thus we can see that 'red', having first been a symbolic colour referring to a king's power, in the Celtic languages as an adjective came to be a synonym of 'strong, powerful'. In Irish epic and folk literature red was the colour both of male and female otherworld characters, but in Gaul and later in Brittany it was probably mainly a 'male colour'. In oral literature the king's aggressive and destructive power was transformed into a devil's force, and red became an attribute of the devil.

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