Using three basic texts (The Saga of the Volsungs, The Odyssey, and the Irish The Voyage of Mael Duin), but ranging over a variety of other examples, this article tries to define a symbol found in Celtic, Germanic and Classical literature, the symbol of the Drink-Bearer. It begins by considering the Cup presented by woman to the hero (1); it then studies some of the various symbolic contents of this cup and its functions, as well as its iconographic value in myth (2); thereafter it analyzes the vessel as a symbol of death and life (3); the enquiry then concentrates on the figure of the Drink-Bearer herself and on her role as dispenser of political power and status, and tries to reconcile the two basic notions she symbolizes: life and death on the one hand, territorial sovereignty on the other (4).

The purpose of this article is to outline a symbol that appears prominently in the three great sources of the European literary tradition: Classical, Celtic, Germanic; the symbol has been studied to some extent in Celtic (especially Irish) texts, and fragmentarily in other literatures, but as far as I know there is no systematic statement as

to its existence and significance in European literature. I have not explored the Biblical, Arabic and Slavic strains which have also contributed to the shaping of a literary tradition in Europe; but, while I have little doubt that the picture here sketched will require revision in the light of research in those other areas of myth, I do think it is accurate in its essentials and establishes the nature and characteristics of a literary symbol.

1. THE DRINKING-CUP

A woman shall be referred to by all female adornment, gold and jewels, ale or wine or other drink that she serves or drinks, also by ale-vessels and by all those things that it is proper for her to do or provide.

Thus wrote Snorri Sturluson\(^2\) in his observations on the language of poetry. The strength of the connection between woman and the drinking vessel is such that it has entered poetic convention, thence to be codified into a formal prescriptive statement by a 13th-century Scandinavian scholar. Such universal statements are usually reflected in mythic literature; for a straightforward example, the Anglo-Saxon Maxim “The dragon belongs in its barrow, canny and jealous of its jewels”\(^3\) is ‘dramatized’ in the various tales of the treasure-hoarding dragons faced by Sigurd, Sigfried or Beowulf. Maxim and tale do not only convey some essential quality of the dragon but also the symbolic part this quality plays in the cosmic scheme of things: the dragon is the representative of tellurian forces, keeper of its mother’s wealth and guardian of her mysteries; the struggle against it therefore symbolizes a struggle to wrest some boon away from the grasp of earth. To enquire whether Snorri’s maxim “A woman shall be referred to by ale-vessels” similarly embodies a symbolic quality of woman, and what role this quality

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