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Narrative Prosthesis and The Others: Celticity, Disability, and the Figure of the Fairy in Celtic Revivalist Literature

Katharine Morgan, 2106544

A thesis submitted to the University of Wales Trinity St. David in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA (Celtic Studies), 2025

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Abstract

Disability has long featured in Celtic fairy folklore and literature, be it in relation to the physical and mental effects of fairy encounters; descriptions of fairy bodies and behaviours; or through tropes which associate disability with visionary abilities, framing ‘disability as exceptionality’ (to use Michael Bérubé’s phrase), or ‘supercrippling’ (as Sami Schalk might say). Through identifying examples of literature from the Celtic Revivals pertaining to the fairies, and examining them via twentieth and twenty-first century disability theory, I hope to offer fresh insights into these narratives, and to establish their value as an area of disability studies enquiry, particularly in relation to Mitchell and Snyder’s conception of the ‘narrative prosthesis’. I also demonstrate how fairies, disability, and Celticity intersect in these texts in a way which illuminates the authors’ attitudes towards otherness, and exposes ableist tropes.

Introduction

David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's seminal work in Disability Studies, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000), opens by observing that it is disability's 'very unknowability that consolidates the need to tell a story about it.'¹ The fairy literature of the Celtic revivals is peppered with examples of such stories: perfectly healthy humans withered by fairy touch; abnormal, sickly children believed to be supernatural imposters; divergent fairy brides who try, (and fail), to understand strange, alien social norms; humans who lose decades by crossing momentarily into the otherworld; blind seers who can see deep into the fairy realm; and melancholy visionaries who can hear, and channel, fairy secrets. This work aims to explore, and unpack such stories, and to show how Celticity, disability and the figure of the fairy intersect across six literary works. Chapter One discusses Arthur Machen's 'The Novel of the Black Seal' (1895) and Sir Walter Scott's *Peperil of the Peak* (1823) in relation to fairy touch and changeling lore; Chapter Two focusses on John Pughe's translation of *The Physicians of Myddfai* (1861) and Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924), suggesting how fairy bride narratives can be read as analogous to the Neurodivergent experience of being (as Lennard Davis might say), a sub-nationality within a larger (Neurotypical) cultural structure; and Chapter Three examines two archetypes: the blind seer and the melancholy visionary, in W.B. Yeats' *The Celtic Twilight* (1895), with reference to disability represented as exceptionality, or 'supercripping'. My conclusion discusses Joanne Walton's *Among Others* (2011), a work which, I will argue, reflects many of the familiar tropes and metaphors seen throughout the other narratives, but which reframes them, exposing how the disabled fairy is used as narrative prosthesis, and suggesting a departure from this. As Alice Hall and others have highlighted, the disability activist slogan 'nothing about us without us' underlines the importance of including disabled peoples' voices when discussing areas relating to their disability.² I will therefore include comments in my analyses from disability theorists, activists and members of disabled communities (Celtic and

¹ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 6.

² Alice Hall, *Literature and Disability* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 133.

otherwise), to demonstrate the impact revivalist literature might have in representing these communities, and in exposing, and working to overturn, ableism.

Chapter One: ‘Touched’ or ‘Taken’: Transmutation, Devolution, and the threat of the Subhuman Foreigner

One of the most powerful ideas in disability theory is that we are all ‘temporarily able-bodied’ (TAB), or ‘not yet disabled’, and the realisation that, as Mitchell and Snyder observe, ‘what [makes] disability distinct [is] an unambiguous ability to impact every other identity category at any time.’³ Disability as an identity category is continually in flux, and Celtic revivalist literature concerning being ‘touched’ or ‘taken’ by fairies draws on this concept and its accompanying anxieties, with fairy encounters often acting as a catalyst for disability. Some accounts cite direct fairy touch as the moment of disability onset, referencing being ‘fairy stroke[d]’, fairy ‘touched’, or ‘elf-shot’.⁴ Others draw on the belief that fairies abduct humans in exchange for one of their own—a changeling—who closely resembles its human counterpart, but whose ‘sudden decline and loss of health’ renders them Other, or less than human.⁵ This chapter will focus on examples of fairy touch or abduction in Celtic Revivalist literature, and will discuss how such depictions intersect with the authors’ representations of disability and Celticity.⁶ First, I will examine Arthur Machen’s exploration of the menacing nature of a fairy touch in ‘The Novel of the Black Seal’, a portrayal which is closely tied to Victorian ideas concerning evolution, and which depicts the disability caused by the fairies as a devolved, inhuman state, which exemplifies the ‘medical model’ of disability; a model

³ Hall, *Literature and Disability* p. 6; Mitchell and Snyder, p. x. By identity category, Mitchell and Snyder refer to identities which ‘mark’ bodies as ‘Other’, including femininity under gender, ‘all categories outside of Whiteness’ under race, and all sexualities outside of heterosexuality. Mitchell and Snyder, p. ix.

⁴ W.B. Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2016), p.122; W.B. Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight* (UK: Andrews UK Ltd, 2020), p. 71. All future references to *The Celtic Twilight* will refer to this edition, unless otherwise stipulated; Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fawns and Fairies* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2008), p. 54.

⁵ The real-life murder of Bridget Cleary (a suspected changeling) in 1895 is testament to the fact that beliefs regarding changelings persisted in Ireland right up until the end of the nineteenth century, and the witness statements taken by W. Y. Evans Wentz as part of his 1911 study *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, show that these beliefs endured in Celtic countries until at least the first part of the twentieth century. See Bourke, Angela, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (New York: Random House 2010), and Evans Wentz, W.Y., ‘Section 1. The Living Fairy Faith’ in *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries: The Classic Study of Leprechauns, Pixies, and Other Fairy Spirits* (Oxford, 1911; repr. NuVision Publications, 2007), pp. 23-224.

⁶ The period of Celtic Revivals refers to the multiple revivals of aspects of Celtic culture and language which have been underway from approximately the eighteenth century to the present day. Those nations deemed ‘Celtic’ are defined as coming from one of six regions associated with a form of Celtic language (namely Brittany, Cornwall Ireland, the Isle of Man, Scotland, and Wales).

which, as Alice Hall explains, conceptualises disability as ‘a deficit residing in the individual’.⁷ I will then examine Sir Walter Scott’s treatment of suspected changeling, Fenella, in *Peperil of the Peak*, and will argue that whilst her impairments are seen in terms of deficit, it is the other characters’ behaviour towards her that truly disables her. This recognition will move my discussion away from the medical, and towards the social (or ‘social constructionist’) model of disability, which, as Hall explains, argues that disability ‘is created through a social process: through the relationship between an individual with an impairment and the society in which they live.’⁸ During my discussions, I will demonstrate how the authors use disability as a ‘narrative prosthesis’ (according to Mitchell and Snyder’s definition), which equates disability and foreignness, and frames them in opposition to both Celtic and English characters who, whilst demonstrably different to each other, are nevertheless aligned against the threat of the contaminating, foreign (particularly Eastern, colonised), Other. I will also argue that whilst, at face value, fairy contact presents a danger to the (British/English) concept of able-bodied normalcy, when read through the lenses of disability and postcolonial theory, the humans in these texts are just as terrifying in their attempts to colonise, control, and exploit those they deem Other.

‘Touched’

At the end of the nineteenth century, leading Irish literary revivalist, W.B. Yeats, recorded several fairy traditions which were present in rural Ireland, in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, and *The Celtic Twilight*. Yeats’ framing of ‘the gentry’ is generally romantic, depicting an ethereal race resembling humans who haunt the enchanted Irish landscape as they ride forth from the otherworld.⁹ But Yeats also told of a darker side, explaining ‘when the fairy strikes anyone a tumour rises, or they become paralysed [by the] “fairy blast” or a “fairy stroke”’, and warning that one who had received ‘the touch of the *Amadán-na-Breena* [fairy fool]’ would ‘never recover.’¹⁰ Such dark themes were further explored by Yeats’ Welsh contemporary, and later his

⁷ Hall, *Literature and Disability*, p. 21.

⁸ Hall, *Literature and Disability*, p. 21.

⁹ Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 46.

¹⁰ W.B. Yeats, *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), pp. 159-160.; Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 129.

colleague in the occult Order of the Golden Dawn, Arthur Machen. Widely accepted today as ‘a foundational figure’ of the horror genre for works such as *The Great God Pan* (1894), and *The Three Imposters* (1895), Machen was profoundly influenced by the Welsh landscapes of his childhood which included the Roman town of Caerleon and the Gwent village of Llanddewi Fach: a rural idyll backed by looming, shadowed hills.¹¹ Machen developed his literary career in London during the Decadent movement, and his resulting ‘weird’ fiction combined his fascination with mysticism and the occult, with the big city whose horrors he placed in juxtaposition to the luminous, but somewhat uncanny, rural Welsh landscape. Several of Machen's stories concern the fairies (known as the ‘Little People’ or the ‘*Tylwyth Teg*’), who are depicted as a savage, prehistoric race who live in the desolate and barren ‘Grey Hills’, a landscape whose bleakness, Felix Taylor suggests, was, for Machen, likely due to their degradation following the nineteenth century rise of industry in Wales.¹² In Machen’s 1895 works ‘The Novel of the Black Seal’, ‘The Shining Pyramid’ and ‘The Red Hand’, the ‘Little People’ prey on those who stumble through their territory, violently attacking and kidnapping them, and leaving behind only scattered remains, and their own primitive stone tools (*NBS* 137). This portrayal depicts the fairies as an ancient race who have fallen out of ‘the grand march of evolution’ and combines older folklore with the newer sciences of evolutionary theory, anthropology, ethnology, and archaeology (*NBS* 136).¹³ Machen’s exploration and subversion of these sciences, and his depictions of the Welsh landscape and its ancient inhabitants is, as Taylor argues, a complex literary exploration of his own

¹¹ Aaron Worth, ‘Introduction’, in *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories*, by Arthur Machen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.ix-xxx (p.x).

¹² Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 141. All further references to the short stories contained in this edition will be included in the main body of the text in parentheses at the end of the sentence to which they refer. ‘The Novel of the Black Seal’ will be abbreviated to *NBS*, ‘The Shining Pyramid’ to *SP*, and ‘The Red Hand’ to *RH*.; Felix Taylor, ‘Welsh Mythology & Folklore in the Novels of Arthur Machen, John Cowper Powys & Alan Garner’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2021), p. 11.

¹³ Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, the foundational work of evolutionary biology had been published approximately thirty-five years before Machen’s writing on the subject. The idea that the fairies were related to a neolithic pygmy race goes back further, as Andrew Lang describes in his introduction to Scottish folklorist Rev. Robert Kirk’s *The Secret Commonwealth*: ‘To shun the flitting, men visit church on the first Sunday of the quarter: then they will be hallowed against elf-shot [...] As is well known, superstition explained the Neolithic arrow-heads as Fairy weapons; it does not follow that a tradition of a Neolithic people suggested the belief in Fairies. But we cannot deny absolutely that some memory of an earlier race, a shy and fugitive people who used weapons of stone, may conceivably play its part in the Fairy legend.’ Lang, ‘Introduction’, in *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, by Robert Kirk (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2008), pp. 13-42 (p. 21).

identity as a Welsh exile, along with his exploration and critique of the constructed ideas of nationalism, Welshness, and Celticity that had been developing more widely since the eighteenth century. Although Machen has been observed to have been ‘not noticeably vocal about the political situation in Wales’, his work is, nevertheless, politically charged, and his portrayal of the fairies intersects with ideas concerning disability, foreignness, and pre-Celtic paganism, in a formulation which explores Machen’s own feelings and fear, of otherness.¹⁴

‘The Novel of the Black Seal’, an episode in Machen’s novella *The Three Imposters* (1895), narrates a series of encounters with the ‘Little People’ related by imposter Miss Lally to scientist Mr Phillipps (*NBS* 141). Lally’s story concerns the disappearance of Professor Gregg, known to Phillipps as ‘the authority on ethnology and kindred subjects’ (*NBS* 111). Lally relates Gregg’s attempts to link a series of disparate clues in his pursuit of a mysterious prehistoric race living in the Celtic hills, which culminates in his own transmutation and death at the fairies’ hands via a process referred to as ‘*Protoplasmic Reversion*’—an inversion of the evolutionary process (*NBS* 141). Lally’s story takes place in Caermaen, a small, ‘west of England’ hamlet, which is thought to be based on Machen’s South Wales birthplace, Caerleon (*NBS* 118). Whilst in Caermaen, Gregg employs Jervase Cradock, a local youth prone to seizures and episodes of talking in a ‘hissing sibilance’, whom he believes holds ‘the key of the awful transmutation of the hills’ (*NBS* 141). Local folklore implies Jervase’s mother was raped by fairies in an attack which renders her temporarily insane, and such stories fuel Gregg’s desire to observe Jervase, given the likelihood he contains ‘something of the blood of the “Little People”’ (*NBS* 141). The manner of Jervase’s speech, language, overall demeanour, and his grisly deterioration (from a disabled human, into a tentacled, reptilian creature which devolves into primordial ‘slime’), confirms Gregg’s suspicions. Gregg follows the trail onto the Grey Hills in search of the ‘Little People’ but disappears—his own abduction and murder strongly implied (*NBS* 141, 143, 144).

Before Lally meets Jervase, Gregg tells her that, like some of the other local ‘country lads’, he is ‘not over-bright’ in a way that is characteristic of those referred to as ‘idiotic’, or ‘naturals’—terms from the period which are known to have been used for

¹⁴ Taylor, p. 25.

those with cognitive disabilities (*NBS* 124).¹⁵ When Lally first meets Jervase he communicates in ‘awkward gestures’, with a ‘queer harsh voice’ leading her to conclude ‘that he [is] mentally weak’ (*NBS* 125).¹⁶ Jervase’s voice, an aspect of his character which is repeatedly described in terms of difference, erupts when he is in a state of seizure, in a harsh, bestial sibilance, like the ‘hissing of a phonograph’ or of a snake or reptile—a lower creature (*NBS* 125). This description is recognisable from earlier in the narrative as being like the foreign, primitive race described in relation to the Black Seal itself, who have ‘nothing [of the] costumes of humanity’ and who ‘hiss rather than speak’, with harsh, frightening voices (*NBS* 122). The ‘ghastly jargon’ Jervase spits forth whilst convulsing is later revealed to be the language of the ‘Little People’; his disabilities, voice, and language are all attributable to his being part fairy, and as such signify his less than human status (*NBS* 141).

Machen’s portrayal of Jervase can be read as a wider commentary on Celticity, particularly in relation to Wales’ language, and country customs. In comparing Jervase to other local ‘naturals’ Machen implies that, in Gregg’s eyes, there is a wider element of the local peasantry whose speech and behaviours are similarly uncivilised (*NBS* 123). Machen also, however, distances the Welsh language from the ‘inarticulate noises’ of fairy speech (*NBS* 136). Machen describes Welsh as ‘quaint’, and as being as close to nature as the ‘gurgle of [its] native brooks’, giving it romantically primitive connotations, which are framed as being far gentler than the ‘brute’ fairies’ ‘jargon’ (*NBS* 128, 136). In addition, kindly, Welsh-speaking parson Mr Meyrick, points out that Welsh is ‘dying out’ and is not spoken by the locals, including the Cradocks (*NBS* 128). Meyrick is portrayed as ‘genial’, and well educated in subjects like ‘philology’ and ‘the old, fading customs and lore of the country’ (*NBS* 128). This portrayal is a far cry from the hissing language and violent, savage behaviour of the fairies, or that of the ‘harmless’ but ‘mentally weak’ Jervase (*NBS* 124, 125). Throughout the nineteenth century the Welsh language had faced attack from many English sources. In 1867

¹⁵ Essaka Joshua, ‘Appendix’, in *Physical Disability in British Romantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 195–198. The earliest known use of the terms ‘idiot’ and ‘natural’/‘unnatural’ date back to 1400 and 1425 respectively (at the time of Joshua’s publication in 2020).

¹⁶ Joshua, ‘Appendix’ in *Physical Disability*, p. 196. According to Joshua, the term ‘weak’ was used from 1425 onwards to indicate cognitive impairment, and a wanting of ‘moral strength.’

Matthew Arnold quoted *The Times*' view that 'The Welsh language is the curse of Wales. Its prevalence, and the ignorance of English, have excluded [...] the Welsh people from the civilisation of their English neighbours', a sentiment which Arnold criticised for its mean spiritedness, whilst nevertheless conceding 'the sooner the Welsh language disappears as an instrument of the practical, political, social life of Wales, the better.'¹⁷ In 1847 the Blue Books were published, English government reports written by monoglot English speaking officials who argued that education in Wales (particularly education delivered in Welsh) was deficient.¹⁸ Machen references the 'dull and sure and irreproachable' Blue Books, and whilst it is possible that this is a general reference to books of statistical information, it may be that Machen intends to evoke the 1847 Blue Books in his readers' minds. Either way, the cold, dry Blue Books, and the language and behaviour of the fairies both stand in contrast to Meyrick's gently spoken Welsh with its 'quaint lls'; suggesting that the Welsh people and their language—though embedded in their homeland and 'other' to the likes of Gregg and Lally—are not uncivilised, and that they instead represent a source of rich, important, cultural information, which was at risk of disappearing as a result of policy changes implemented following 1847's Blue Books (*NBS* 119). Machen, then, seems to be simultaneously highlighting overly negative English attitudes towards the Welsh language, whilst implying that the threat residing in Caermaen's Grey Hills comes from a pre-Celtic, pagan race from *outside* of Britain, which targets English and Welsh alike.

The Black Seal, revealed to be the fairies' sacred stone 'Ixaxar', was sent to Gregg from 'near the site of the ancient Babylon' by 'an agent in the East', suggesting that the 'Little People' come from outside of Britain (*NBS* 138). In 'Black Seal', and other works, Machen plays on the fascination of the period with the East, which, by the late nineteenth century, had been largely colonised, subjugated, and scrutinised by European Empires. The East is associated with occult practices in several of Machen's other works including 'The Shining Pyramid' (1895) and 'Hieroglyphics' (1902), both of which draw on imagery relating to eastern occult symbols, rituals, and items. 'The

¹⁷ Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature and on Translating Homer* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898), p. xiii; p. 10.

¹⁸ For further discussion regarding the publication of the Blue Books, their historical context and their aftermath in England and Wales, see Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: Wales and Colonial Prejudice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011).

Shining Pyramid' narrates how young woman Annie Trevor is attacked by 'things made in the form of men but stunted like children' who are 'hideously deformed' and whose 'almond eyes' burn 'with evil and unspeakable lusts' (*SP* 236). These beings can be linked to 'Black Seal's 'Little People' by their 'horrible' speech 'like the hissing of snakes' (*SP* 236). Annie is savagely attacked by these beings, before being burned alive in 'the Pyramid of fire' a recognisably Egyptian symbol (*SP* 237). Ronald Hutton has explained how, in nineteenth century Britain, there was an inclination towards viewing ancient pagan beliefs and practices as brutal. During this time, Hutton argues, the British Empire subdued 'large numbers of traditional peoples with indigenous religions [...] and ancient paganism was often equated with the traditional religions [...] which were being absorbed into European Imperial systems.'¹⁹ This imperialist drive, Hutton continues, was accompanied by the 'new idea of evolution', which suggested continual biological and intellectual improvement via natural selection, a combination of ideas which was 'harsh on British pre-history because it was so far back it had to be awful.'²⁰ Machen seems to have combined these ideas through his portrayal of the 'Little People' as an expression of a pre-Celtic race linked to Eastern occultism, whose touch is dangerously disabling to modern, British inhabitants. By framing the fairies and their victims thus, Machen suggests that they are devolved, and uses disability to indicate this, a framing which distances both Celticity and Britishness from the foreign 'Little People' and their victims, in a way which is both ableist and racist.

Machen also, however, critiques science and imperialism, which are woven together in his characterisation of the ambitious, English Gregg as a self-styled 'Columbus' (*NBS* 115). Gregg's drive to explore, study, and colonise the Eastern-coded fairies, and his pursuit of mythological worlds and objects such as 'Atlantis' and 'the philosopher's stone' are dismissed by his colleagues, who believe him to be 'suffering from overwork and brain exhaustion' (*NBS* 116, 120). Gregg's theories prove to be correct, but his self-serving cruelty and lack of empathy are revealed in the 'ghastly pleasure' he takes in Jervase's suffering, which Gregg has subconsciously justified as acceptable through his dehumanisation of Jervase as imperfect, or 'idiotic', a view

¹⁹ Ronald Hutton, *Gods of Prehistoric Britain* (YouTube: Gresham College, 27 Sept 2022), <<https://youtu.be/QjC0lGr4h04?si=rb0tTiT6vgQnRO1z>> [accessed: 31 Jul. 2024].

²⁰ Ibid.

whose flawed, violent, basis is revealed by Lally's observation that Jervase is 'an afflicted fellow-creature', who is just as human as Gregg (*NBS* 127). Gregg's pursuit of the 'Little People' ultimately backfires: the allure of the occult and the desire to possess its secrets corrupts and kills the imperialist man of science, whose drive to uncover all of creation's mysteries leads to irretrievable damage and evil—a commentary which runs throughout Machen's works, including 'The Great God Pan', 'The Inmost Light' and 'The Novel of the White Powder'.

In Machen's 1895 writings on the fairies, then, the malevolent fairies and their insidious presence in the Grey Hills act as a narrative prosthesis. The fairies—the *others*—embody the idea of a pre-Celtic, pagan influence in Wales, which is foreign, backwards, and threatening to Welsh and English alike. The fairies are characterised by Machen as savage—unevolved—and as able to disable—devolve—those whom they touch. Machen also critiques the scientific imperialist, whose colonising ambitions are portrayed as violent, distasteful, and self-destructive. The fairies' presence in the Grey Hills can be viewed as a veiled warning and message to would-be industrial colonisers of Machen's own enchanted lands not to dig too deep into the Welsh hills—they (the fairies) are here, and *they* pose immeasurable danger. Machen's gentlest satire is reserved for parson Meyrick (a figure who arguably represents his own anglophone, Christian, Welsh background), who is presented as genial, well-read, and refined in comparison to the destructive pagan, pre-Celtic, fairy savages. In framing things thus, Machen suggests that Welshness is civilised, educated, and harmless, allying himself with dominant, British, colonial powers, against the corrupting influence of pathologised outsiders. Disability is conflated with racial difference in Machen's narrative, and the disabling agents—the fairies—are abnormal, unnatural and contaminating. This kind of dangerous conflation gained momentum in the twentieth century, and formed the basis of the violent eugenicist rhetoric and policies which were later enacted with horrendous consequences.

'Taken'

In 1895, the year of 'The Novel of the Black Seal's' publication, Bridget Cleary, a twenty-six year old woman from County Tipperary, Ireland, was burned to death by her

husband Michael, in front of ‘a crowd of “neighbours” not one of whom interfered.’²¹ Bridget had become ill before her death, and court records detail how Michael had been convinced by an idea that was ubiquitous in the fairy lore of the time; that Bridget had been taken by the fairies and substituted for a fairy changeling.²² Bridget’s death occurred at the height of the Irish literary revival when political debates concerning Irish Home Rule were underway, and English newspapers such as *The Daily Express*, *The Times* and the *Independent* used the case to call into question whether a nation which held such superstitious beliefs was capable of self-government.²³

In 1988 Susan Schoon Eberly made a speculative but compelling argument that cases concerning changelings—particularly those involving babies and children—were likely to have been linked to congenital conditions including Down syndrome, chromosomal abnormalities, hydrocephalus, dwarfism and mucopolysaccharidosis syndromes such as Hunter’s and Hurler’s syndromes, arguing that the relationship between such disorders and the details contained in changeling tales ‘seems too strong to ignore.’²⁴ Essaka Joshua has since discussed how language concerning disability as we understand it in a modern sense only began to emerge in the nineteenth century, and has listed the term ‘changeling’ (which she traces back to 1584 in its earliest known written form) as a likely early descriptor for people who had physical and/or cognitive disabilities.²⁵ Christopher Gabbard has also discussed how the term ‘changeling’ was commonly used as a slur to denigrate a political opponent in the long eighteenth century, as it was known to denote a state of functional ‘idiocy’; a term rooted in the Middle

²¹ Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (New York: Random House 2010), p. 95.

²² Much of the folklore concerning changelings would have been transmitted orally, but many of the literary sources from the Celtic Revivals period concerning the fairies reference changelings, including Kirk’s *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fawns and Fairies* (1815); Thomas Keightley’s *The Fairy Mythology* (1828); Sir Walter Scott’s *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830); Wirt Sikes’ *British Goblins* (1881); and W.B. Yeats’ *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), and *The Celtic Twilight* (1893).

²³ Bourke, pp. 145-146.

²⁴ Susan Schoon Eberly, ‘Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids and the Solitary Fairy’, *Folklore*, 99 (1988), pp. 58-77 (p. 71). Schoon Eberly cites a number of tales including those concerning ‘the Brownie, the Gille Dubh, Meg Moulach, the Brown Man of the Muirs, the Urisk and the Gorgan and the Fenoderee.’

²⁵ Joshua, *Physical Disability*, p. 196.

Ages which was used for those believed to be ‘cognitively “other”’.²⁶ Gabbard comments on how those considered to be mentally deficient were demonised by the rising class of intelligentsia, who ‘needed an “other” against which to define itself.’²⁷ The use of supernatural terms such as ‘changeling’ played on older ideas concerning demonic possession, and relegated those with cognitive or mental disabilities to demonic, bestial figures—‘animals with human form’—a type of othering of cognitively disabled people which, he argues remains ‘true into the present day.’²⁸

Approximately seventy years before Cleary’s death, Scottish writer and folklorist Sir Walter Scott related the Celtic belief concerning the fairy tendency to ‘carry off Human Beings, both Infants and Adults.’²⁹ Scott describes how the fairies took humans in exchange for one of their own, who was ‘almost always’ distinguishable by being ‘imperfect in some one or other of the organs proper to humanity.’³⁰ As with Machen’s depiction of Jervase, Scott’s conception of the changeling is rooted in ideas which associate disability with a state of imperfection, or defect, which links with Barker and Stuart’s observation that disability has historically been framed in opposition to a concept of normalcy, which has resulted in the dehumanisation (or as Gabbard argues, the demonisation), of those who differ from such standards.³¹

Scott’s depiction of Fenella—a character believed by the Manx peasantry to be a changeling in his 1823 novel *Peveiril of the Peak*—incorporates the framing of disability as abnormality, and the categorisation of disabled people as subhuman. *Peveiril* moves between settings in England and the Isle of Man, and concerns political events that

²⁶ Christopher D. Gabbard, ‘From “Changelings” to “Libtards”’: intellectual disability in the eighteenth century and beyond’, in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. by Alice Hall (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 97-108 (p.97).

²⁷ Gabbard, ‘From “Changelings” to “Libtards”’, in *The Routledge Companion*, ed. by Hall, p.99.

²⁸ Gabbard, ‘From “Changelings” to “Libtards”’, in *The Routledge Companion*, ed. by Hall, p.100.

²⁹ Sir Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1884), p. 101. In ‘Letter IV’ Scott details how those ‘taken in the manner of’ may have been so for a number of reasons, including the fairies’ desire to breed with mortals ‘as beings of their race’, the mortal having committed an act of indiscretion towards the fairies, or the fairies needing to pay a tithe to hell, of the kind narrated in the legendary ballad of Tam Lin, and preferring to use human souls as payment instead of their own.

³⁰ Clare Barker and Murray Stuart, ‘Introduction: On Reading Disability in Literature’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. by Clare Barker and Stewart Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1-13 (p.3).

³¹ Sir Walter Scott, *Peveiril of the Peak*, with Introductory Essay and Notes by Andrew Lang (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910), p. 256. All further references to this text will appear in the main body of this paper in parentheses at the end of the sentence to which they refer. *Peveiril of the Peak* will be abbreviated to *PP*, and shortened in the main body to *Peveiril* from this point forwards.

follow the Manx Rebellion of 1651. William Christian, leader of the Manx militia, is defeated and executed by the Countess of Derby (Lord of Man), leaving his brother Edward (the novel's main antagonist), to avenge his death. The main narrative follows Julian Peveril's coming of age. An Englishman growing up on Man under the Countess' tutelage, Julian travels to the King of England's court to defend her reputation (and that of his father, a royalist cavalier descended from William the Conqueror), from rumours regarding her involvement in the treasonous 'Popish plot' (*PP* 246). During his journey Julian is accompanied by several characters, including Fenella, the Countess's hearing- and speech-impaired ward. Fenella's initial depiction as an impaired fairy marks her as the embodiment of otherness in the narrative, but the final revelation of her as a foreign trickster, whilst reinforcing her otherness, also reveals that her disability is rooted in her father's construction and ruthless exploitation of her identity, in a way which resonates with the social model of disability.

Fenella, the Countess of Derby's train bearer, is assumed to be one of the 'irritable, fickle, and dangerous race' of the fairies by Manx peasantry because of her 'miniature' physical stature, unusual appearance, hearing and speech impairments, and emotional, irascible demeanour (*PP* 257, 254). Referred to initially as a 'little creature', and mockingly called 'the Elfin Queen' by the Earl of Derby, the dehumanising way in which others view Fenella is immediately apparent, and throughout the novel she is referred to by a number of othering terms including 'ape', 'fairy', 'nymph', 'exotic monster', 'sylph', 'familiar', 'Numidian witch', and 'Moorish sorceress' (*PP* 257, 254, 289, 514, 515, 520, 768, 779, 780, 820). Fenella's otherness is connected to her race, with Scott referring to her 'foreign attributes', including her 'darker' skin, and profuse, long 'silken hair' (*PP* 254). Fenella's racial characteristics and disabilities lead other characters to treat her as primitive and childlike: a portrayal which foreshadows the views of figures such as Matthew Arnold, who later wrote of the Celt as 'an emotional race wanting [of] mature judgement' who lacked 'balance, measure and patience'.³² These traits are, however, contrasted by aspects of exceptionality shown by Fenella, such as her 'quickness', her dancing prowess, and her 'exquisite' proficiency with a needle or pencil; aspects which are seen as compensating for the 'imperfection of her

³² Murray G. H. Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), p. 65.

other organs', and which lead some characters to view her as a mesmerising enchantress (*PP* 254, 255). In this way, Fenella embodies the romantically picturesque, 'an aesthetic' which Essaka Joshua describes as having been 'introduced as an alternative to the sublime and the beautiful [which] describes real and represented objects whose appearance conforms to standard philosophical definitions of deformity, but without the negative evaluation'.³³ However, the 'linkage of exceptionality with disability' has been identified by Michael Bérubé as a common literary trope which offers a 'narrative redemption' of disability, ensuring 'disability itself effectively disappears', which, he argues, 'does violence to [its] materiality'.³⁴ Whether framed as a supernatural monster, or as romantically picturesque, Fenella's disabilities and racial differences are viewed via an othering and stigmatising gaze, which sets her firmly apart from the other characters.

The 'redemption' (as Bérubé might say), of Fenella's disabilities appears at first to lie in her great dexterity and effective non-verbal forms of communication, but it also rests in the revelation that her hearing and speech impairments are fake. This revelation effectively erases the legitimacy of her disability, despite her real, lived experience having been rooted in being made to act as if deaf and voiceless for the sake of her father's 'private applause', 'a trial' she argues 'few indeed could have sustained' (*PP* 784). Fenella's trickery plays on what Joshua refers to as 'a major anxiety' of the long eighteenth century, where the able-bodied 'were anxious about the counterfeiting of function impairment, especially in the case of begging and extortion'.³⁵ In Fenella's case, the faking of her hearing and speech impairments allows her to stay close to the Countess, who funds, educates, and provides for her; whilst utilising her disguise to deceive, and to spy. Such a portrayal had the potential to reinforce Romantic-era anxieties regarding the legitimacy of functional impairments, propping up this ableist trope. In the novel's twist however, Fenella is the one most deceived and betrayed, despite her 'acuteness of intellect' (*PP* 255). Fenella's father (Edward Christian) lies to

³³ Essaka Joshua, 'Disability and Deformity: Function Impairment and Aesthetics in the Long Eighteenth Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. by Clare Barker and Stewart Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 47-59 (p. 55).

³⁴ Michael Bérubé, 'Disability and Narrative', *PMLA*, 120 (2005), 568-576 (p. 569).

³⁵ Joshua, 'Disability and Deformity', in *The Cambridge Companion*, ed. by Barker and Stewart p. 52.

her about her true parentage, and in doing so weaponises her grief towards his own vengeful aims, constructing and shaping her in a way that serves him (*PP* 255). This erases both Fenella's sense of agency, and the idea she is disabled, which she arguably has been, particularly if her experience is examined through the lens of the social model of disability, which argues 'disability is not a feature of "dysfunctional" bodies and minds, but instead is created by the inaccessible architectural and social infrastructures that typify [...] living environments.'³⁶ Fenella's experience of disability is rooted in her interactions with her environment, and the way in which others see her, as opposed to an inherent biomedical or bodily impairment.

Fenella's constructed identity, and the eventual revelation of who she really is highlights the dangers of being too credulous, a running theme throughout Scott's narrative. Scott initially highlights the concept of credulity in reference to the Manx peasantry whose belief that Fenella is a fairy changeling suggests (at least to Julian) that they are all stuck in the old ways of 'Manx superstition' (*PP* 256). The Manx hold several superstitious beliefs about Fenella, including that she talks 'with the invisibles of her own [elvish] race'; has a '*Double*' (a doppelganger); and that she can be heard singing 'the song of the mermaids on the moonlight sands, or the dance of the fairies in the haunted valley of Glenmoy' (*PP* 257). Scott's portrayal of such beliefs paints a primitivistic view of Manx culture, romanticising it whilst highlighting how the peasants' views were wedded to old beliefs full of 'absurdities', which 'so frequently connect[ed] that which is unusual with what is supernatural' (*PP* 258). However, as with other Anglophone writers involved in the Celtic Revivals, there is ambiguity in Scott's writing, which suggests the Manx are no more or less credulous than the English. Julian is, at times, presented as both credulous and superstitious, considering whether Fenella's wailing makes her akin to 'A Banshee [...] foreboding evil times', and comparing the character Bridgenorth to a ghostly apparition (*PP* 308). King Charles also observes how easily convinced the English are by the allegations of the 'Popish Plot'; a plot which, whilst elusive in its finer details, nevertheless draws in 'the credulous people of England with the most undoubting belief' (*PP* 246, 297). Fenella (also known as Zarah) manages to deceive multiple people, from the Manx peasantry to

³⁶ Barker and Murray, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion*, ed. by Barker and Murray, p. 5.

the formidable Countess of Derby, and the King. The Manx's mislabelling of Fenella may be because she is essentially unknowable to them—as Mitchell and Snyder note 'it is the narrative of disability's very unknowability that consolidates the need to tell a story about it'.³⁷ For the Manx, this story is that Fenella's bodily and behavioural differences are because she is a fairy. The English on the other hand continually underestimate Fenella and disregard her despite her many accomplishments, as they do to other disabled characters such as Sir Geoffrey Hudson 'the dwarf', a brave, loyal fighter and 'sworn servant' of Queen Henrietta, who is viewed as a figure of amusement by the aristocracy, and who is subjected to humiliating practices such as being 'imprisoned in a huge platter' of pie, and a violincello case (*PP* 583, 763).

Finally the King, in his own act of trickery, forces Fenella's voice out in 'a loud scream of agony', which can itself be read as a further act of violation towards a character whose manner of expression has been moulded and controlled by those more powerful than she (*PP* 817). Fenella's mutism, though feigned, still renders her voiceless, and her mixed Manx-Mauritanian lineage (which the other characters mislabel, speculatively calling her 'foreigner', 'Oriental', and '*Étranger*' [stranger]), speaks to the overlapping experiences of disabled and colonised people (*PP* 515, 514, 517). Voicelessness or vocal difference is a common trope in literature relating to fairies from the period of Celtic revivals, as already seen in relation to Machen's Jervase.³⁸ Fenella is mute for much of *Peveril* and when her voice is heard it is described in terms of abnormality, either as bestial 'shrieks' and primitive 'grunts', or as 'silver toned', magical and otherworldly. In her article on 'Radiant Affliction', Clare Barker examines Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in relation to muteness as a recurrent trope in postcolonial literature. Barker provides examples of numerous texts in which '[c]haracters who are nonverbal or who have other forms of non-normative speech feature' and discusses how, on a metaphorical level, Spivak questions whether those considered to be 'subaltern' (of a lower status) ever

³⁷ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p.6.

³⁸ The subject of Orientalism—the Western fascination with and study of the languages, culture, and artefacts relating to Asia which began developing in the eighteenth century—in relation to the concepts of Celticism and Celticity, is a subject which is beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully explore. For further discussion on this topic see Edward Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), and Joep Leerssen's 'Celticism', in *Celticism* ed. by Terence Brown (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 1-20.

have ‘the means to represent themselves, whether their speech acts are recognised in dominant discourses, and if they are effectively “silenced” by inequalities, who is authorised to speak on their behalf and in what ways’?³⁹ In a similar vein, Bérubé comments on how

The dynamics of disability compel us to recognize that there will always be among us people who cannot represent themselves and must be represented. But the reason these dynamics should be of interest, with regard to aesthetic (rather than political) forms of representation, is that the relation of characters to their own narratives has been a concern for fiction from *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* to *The Counterfeiters* and [...] *Prisoners Dilemma*. Such fiction entails the possibility that literary characters may be aware that they are being narrated and could in theory take over some of the functions of the narrative.⁴⁰

Spivak concludes that ‘The subaltern cannot speak.’⁴¹ Barker and Bérubé though, suggest the trope of muteness can in fact be used in a text to ‘recover the silenced voices and suppressed stories of colonised others.’⁴² Crucially, even though she is denied her voice in a literal sense, Fenella communicates eloquently non-verbally, and when she is able to express herself authentically (as Zarah) towards the end of the novel, she resists, and actively tries to thwart her father’s plans against Julian, warning that he will ‘rue the hour most bitterly, in which you provoke me’ (*PP* 789). Despite this, she is condemned for her acts of trickery and exiled by the King as ‘a forlorn outcast, ridiculed and insulted by those on whose necks [she] might have trod’ (819). No adjustments are made to account for the abuses and betrayals she has endured, or to enable her to stay and live, free from her fathers’ influence.

³⁹ Clare Barker, ““Radiant Affliction”: Disability Narratives in Postcolonial Literature’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. by Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 104-120 (p. 107).

⁴⁰ Bérubé, p. 572.

⁴¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, ed., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press 1994), pp. 66-111 (p.104). Spivak reaches this conclusion after her examination of subaltern representation in the Hindu practice of *Sati* (widow sacrifice). Spivak concludes that ‘between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears [...] into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization’, noting that ‘repression functions well as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, affirmation of non-existence; and consequently states that of all this there is nothing to say, to see, to know.’ Spivak, ‘p. 102.

⁴² Barker, ““Radiant Affliction””, in *The Cambridge Companion*, ed. by Barker and Murray, p. 107.

Fenella, like Bridget Cleary, is not a fairy changeling; she is a mixed-race human woman, whose body and behaviour diverges from the dominant standards of normalcy in both Manx and English culture, and her casting as a foreign, fairy, trickster is the narrative prosthesis that expresses this. Fenella is forced into trickery; and the dehumanising gaze of others in the novel, and their poor understanding of difference, disables her at a social level. Fenella's race and disability are presented as traits to fear or mistrust, subdue, and ultimately eliminate, and the intersection of her disability, race and gender culminate in her disempowerment, as she is exposed, humiliated, and exiled by the King in an act not dissimilar to the 'warehousing' described by disability activists such as Eli Claire.⁴³ Meanwhile Julian—the love of her life for whom she risks everything—marries the more appropriately delicate English rose, Alice.

Through combining the concept of the fairies with disability both Machen and Scott create narrative prostheses which invoke the idea of disability in terms of defect or abnormality, a framing of disability that disability theorists refer to as 'the medical model'. Both authors use their narrative prostheses as opportunistic metaphors for otherness, and in doing so prop up the ableist, racist and colonialist tropes which run throughout their work. Both authors are from regions characterised as Celtic, and place their characters in Celtic contexts for parts of their narratives, but Celticity is presented ambiguously in both cases: on the one hand as romantically primitive and essentially non-threatening, on the other, as superstitious and credulous, a tension which likely reflects the authors' awareness of the attitudes held by their largely anglophone audiences. In both cases, real authorial criticism seems to be reserved for characters who are assumed to be from outside of the British Isles altogether, who are presented as savage, untrustworthy, disabled and disabling. The fairies (or the idea of the fairies in Scott's case), in these narratives are a force of unpredictable change, and their catalytic, transmuting touch moves humans into states of disability—poorly understood states which (as Bérubé might say), required a story, and which were ultimately characterised as unevolved, uncivilised, and inhuman. However, whilst Jervase is disabled because of

⁴³ 'Warehousing' is a term used in disability activism to describe the exclusion and confinement of disabled people in institutions which separate them from mainstream 'normal' society. Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 13. Kindle ebook.

his contaminated fairy blood, Fenella is disabled because she is forced to be so by other humans, and her divergence from the norm leads to her exclusion from society.

Chapter 2: ‘The mermaid who had forsaken the sea’: Nature, Neurodivergence, and Fairy Brides

Fenella, Jervase, and historical figures like Bridget Cleary were believed to be fairies because of their perceived divergence from what it means to be a ‘normal’ human. Jervase Cradock’s seizures and intellectual disability, and Fenella’s differences in communication and physicality are traits which highlight their otherness, and, if read through a framework which acknowledges neurological diversity (or neurodiversity), can be read as neurodivergent. In this chapter I will briefly explain the Neurodiversity framework—a framework which has evolved from, and which shares many of the tenets of the social model of disability—and will use this framework to read two Celtic narratives concerning fairy brides: the 1861 translation of the Welsh lake legend *The Physicians of Myddfai*; and Lord Dunsany’s *The King of Elfland’s Daughter*. In doing so, I will argue that the experiences of the characters in these narratives—the fairy bride who leaves the otherworld, or the human who crosses the border to fairyland—can be read as analogous to the experiences articulated by neurodivergent people living in a neurotypically structured environment. Such figures are required to live in a society which does not accommodate how they process, or interact with the world, which leads to their disability, abuse, marginalisation and exclusion. During my discussions I will include comments from neurodivergent people (Celtic-identifying and otherwise), in order to demonstrate how revivalist fairy bride narratives can be read allegorically, in a way which resonates with lived experiences, and will reflect on how Celticity and neurodivergence intersect, particularly in relation to landscape, nature, religion, and time.

The Neurodiversity Framework

‘Neurodiversity’, a term coined in 1998 by sociologist Judy Singer and promoted by journalist Harvey Blume, provides a framework (or ‘paradigm’, cf. Neurodivergent activist Sonny Jane Wise) for understanding neurological difference, which, Singer argues, extends the social model of disability’s theoretical framing into the field of neurology, representing ‘a new addition to the familiar political categories of

class/gender/race/[sex and sexuality which] augments the insights of the social model.’⁴⁴ Singer’s premise is that humans are naturally neurologically diverse, and so exist within a framework which encompasses both those who are considered to be neurologically normal (the ‘Neurotypical’), and those who diverge from these (socially constructed) standards of normalcy (the ‘Neurodivergent’).⁴⁵ As an umbrella term, ‘Neurodivergent’ encompasses a range of conditions, including (but not limited to), Autism (ASD/ASC), ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dysgraphia, Hyperlexia, Tourette's syndrome, Tic syndrome, Synaesthesia, Bipolar, Schizophrenia, Down’s syndrome, and Epilepsy.⁴⁶ Each of these conditions exists across a spectrum, has its own distinct traits, and can occur singly in people, but have a high level of comorbidity both with each other and with conditions such as hypermobility.⁴⁷ As such, Neurodivergence is fluid in its expression, and, as Hannah Tweed notes, it has no ‘definitive representation’: individual people have individual traits and experiences.⁴⁸ Singer and other Neurodiversity advocates (Price, Middleton, Wise), argue that as no one neurotype represents the ideal, the Neurodiversity framework should be used as a means of critiquing social norms and pushing for the social changes and adjustments needed to accommodate the full range of neurological diversity.⁴⁹

Singer has argued that the computer is ‘*the* essential prosthetic device’ for neurodivergent people, and the start of the twenty-first century has seen an awareness of what it means to be neurodivergent, and the existence of connected, neurodivergent

⁴⁴ Sonny Jane Wise, *We’re All Neurodiverse* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2024), p. 1; Judy Singer, *Neurodiversity: The Birth of an Idea* (Judy Singer, 2017), p. 9.

⁴⁵ See Lennard J Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 73-99 for Davis’ comprehensive discussion on this.

⁴⁶ Wise, p. 82. There is ongoing debate about which conditions fall under the Neurodivergent umbrella, with some contesting whether psychiatric conditions should be included. For the purposes of this dissertation, I define Neurodivergence as Wise and Singer both have: as anyone who does not fit the neurological norm.

⁴⁷ Neurodivergent conditions are more often represented as a number of commonly occurring traits which fall within a circular, rather than linear, spectrum. These circles are often shown as overlapping to demonstrate the comorbidity of neurodivergent conditions. See Appendix A for further illustration.

⁴⁸ Hannah Tweed, ‘Challenging the neurotypical: autism, contemporary literature, and digital textualities’ in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. by Alice Hall (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 366-377 (p. 367).

⁴⁹ As seen in the previous chapter, there is an important difference in emphasis between the medical and social models of disability in disability theory. For Singer the medical model ‘locates disability in impairments of individual bodies and seeks cures rather than social change’, whereas the social model of disability recasts disability ‘from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity,’ which, she argues, is of particular relevance to neurodivergent communities. Singer, p. 10, p. 36.

communities, developing alongside the growth of internet and social media usage.⁵⁰ Such communities have parallels with other disabled communities (notably the deaf community, as explored by Lennard J. Davis), in forming a ‘symbolic form of group identity’ whose ‘culture, language, and community constitute them as a totally adequate, self-enclosed and self-defining sub-nationality within the larger structure.’⁵¹ The deaf community exists within the larger structure of ‘the audist state’ and, in parallel, the Neurodivergent community arguably constitutes a sub-nationality within the larger, Neurotypical state.⁵² Celtic otherworlds and their inhabitants are typically represented as existing alongside the human world, but as being separated by an intangible, fluctuating boundary, which is referred to variously as a border, a boundary or a ‘veil’.⁵³ When fairies or humans cross this border, they too become members of a sub-nationality within a larger cultural structure, and the figure of the fairy bride in particular, acts as a narrative prosthesis for this concept.

The Physicians of Myddfai: Social and Communication differences, and relationship to landscape

Wales’ most famous expression of the fairy bride tradition, *The Physicians of Myddfai*, is believed to have first been recorded from oral sources by Mr Rees of Tonn.⁵⁴ Translated by John Pughe in 1841, this legend has been frequently retold and republished, and is one of Wales’ key folkloric legends, appearing in compilations of Welsh folklore, fairytales, and websites promoting Welsh tourism.⁵⁵ According to

⁵⁰ Singer, p. 65.

⁵¹ Singer, p. 37; Davis, p. xiv.

⁵² Singer, p. 37; Davis, p. xiv.

⁵³ Lord Dunsany, repeatedly refers to the ‘frontier’ or ‘boundary’ of faery being ‘made of twilight’ throughout his novel *The King of Elfland’s Daughter*, and W.B. Yeats talks of the otherworld lying beyond ‘the cobweb veil of the senses’. At certain times of the year, notably Beltane (May Day), and Samhain (Halloween), the veil is said to ‘thin’ and allow beings to cross between worlds. In some of the folklore this is when the wild hunt are said to ride out across the human landscapes. Lord Edward Dunsany, *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* (London: Gollancz, 2020), p. 7, p. 15; Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 49.

⁵⁴ John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore Welsh and Manx*, Vol. 1 (London: Wildwood House Limited, 1980), p.2.

⁵⁵ Juliette Wood describes how she found ‘eleven different published versions of the [Llyn Y Fan Fach] story’ in one Cardiff bookshop alone, and estimates that there are ‘about three dozen variants’ of the Welsh fairy bride tale more generally, ‘dating from the tenth to the twentieth century.’ Juliette Wood, ‘The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales’, *Folklore*, 103 (1992), 56-72, (p. 56); ‘Discover the myths and legends of Wales’, *Visit Wales* <<https://www.visitwales.com/info/history-heritage-and-traditions/welsh-myths->

Pughe's version, a young man stumbles across a beautiful fairy woman who appears from the waters of Llyn y Fan Fach, and persuades her to marry him by agreeing not to give her 'three causeless blows.'⁵⁶ The couple live contentedly together with livestock from the fairy's dowry and have three children, but when the young man inadvertently breaks the conditions of their marriage, the bride returns to the otherworld, revisiting only to impart her knowledge of herbal medicine to her sons, who become the titular physicians.

The problems between the young man and the fairy bride in *Myddfai* arise because of diverging ways in which they use and understand language and social codes, an experience which may resonate with neurodivergent people who have social and communication differences. The wife's literal use of language when she sets her marriage terms is a striking example of this. When the bride stipulates that the young man must not give her 'three causeless blows', her husband assumes he should not strike, beat, or physically abuse her.⁵⁷ When the 'blows' are given, they are described casually as if they are merely a touch from the husband who 'jocularly slapped' or 'touched' the wife's shoulder, or hushed her with a 'pat'—words which imply gentle, good humoured contact, not abuse (*PM* xxvi). It may be that the language used in Pughe's Victorian era translation of this legend is attempting to minimise, or soften, the young man's potentially abusive behaviour towards the wife to fit with Victorian sensibilities regarding the explicit portrayal of domestic violence within such stories. 'Domestic violence' as Jina Moon writes, 'was pervasive not only in Victorian culture, but also in Victorian literature.'⁵⁸ However, the Victorian regime 'for the first time in

[and-legends](https://www.landoflegends.wales/)> [accessed 17 November 2024]; *Land of*

Legends<<https://www.landoflegends.wales/>>[accessed 17 November 2024].

⁵⁶ Llyn Y Fan Fach is a ten hectare lake in Carmarthenshire, Black Mountains, Bannau Brycheiniog. Variants of the fairy bride legend are spread throughout Wales, and most commonly appear close to a *Llyn* [lake or pool]: see Appendix B for Juliette Wood's map of their distribution.

⁵⁷ Williams Ab Ithel, John, ed. *The Physicians of Myddfai; Meddygon Myddfai, or the medical practice of the celebrated Rhiwallon and his sons of Myddvai, in Carmarthenshire, Physicians to Rhys Gryg, Lord of Dynevor and Ystrad Towy, About the Middle of the Thirteenth Century. From Ancient Manuscripts in the libraries of Jesus College, Oxford, Llanover, and Jonn; with an English Translation: And the Legend of the Lady of Llyn Y Van*, trans. by John Pughe (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1993), p. xxvi. All references to this edition shall from now on, appear in the main body in parentheses at the end of the sentences to which they refer. The title *The Physicians of Myddfai* will be abbreviated to *PM* or *Myddfai* in the main body.

⁵⁸ Jina Moon, *Domestic Violence in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) (ebook) [Accessed 15th July 2024], pp. 1-2.

English [and Welsh] history clearly articulated specific standards proclaiming the intolerability of marital violence and created institutions to aid its victims,’ and such violence, whilst still normalised, was beginning to be viewed as distasteful.⁵⁹ The extent to which the husband verbally admonishes the wife varies across retellings of the legend, with nineteenth century American Celticist and antiquarian Wirt Sikes later recounting a version of the tale where the husband’s language is described in terms of ‘anger’, ‘wrath’, and denigration, as he tells the wife she has made ‘a fool of herself’, ‘push[ing]’ or ‘thrust[ing]’ her away.⁶⁰ This variation in tone brings into question whether oral versions of this tale were more explicitly violent than their potentially sanitised literary counterparts. This is speculative however, and if the language (particularly in Pughe’s translation) is taken at face value, it is surprising to both the young man within the story, and to the reader, that the young man’s touch breaks the wife’s marital conditions, because of the literal way in which the wife’s language is applied. Such literalism is comparable to the way in which some neurodivergent people use and understand language; as Vicente et al. discuss in their article ‘Literalism in Autistic People’, ‘Autistic individuals are commonly said—and also consider themselves—to be excessively literalist, in [their] interpretations of words and utterances.’⁶¹ Autistic ADHDer and activist Ellie Middleton clarifies that for her, such literalism means that she will often believe exactly what she is told, but will not make any implicit assumptions around this, which leads to frequent misunderstandings.⁶² In *Myddfai*, both parties suffer negative consequences following the husband’s misinterpretation of the wife’s words—the husband loses his wife and her fairy dowry, and the wife is forced to leave her family and return to the otherworld—a fate Pughe’s version emphasises she has ‘no control over’ (*PM* xxvi).

⁵⁹ Moon, pp. 1-2. Moon notes how ‘The Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (1884) and the Female Temporary Home (1852)’, were set up as ‘places victims could go to escape their brutal husbands’ as part of a move to help victims of domestic violence during the Victorian era, even though as she acknowledges ‘abominable abuses and cruelties occurred in many actual homes.’

⁶⁰ Wirt Sikes, *British Goblins: Welsh Folklore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions* (Nevada: Stargatebooks, 2017), p. 37.

⁶¹ Agustín Vicente, Christian Michel, Valentina Petrolini, ‘Literalism in Autistic People: a Predictive Processing Proposal’, *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, Advance online publication (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-023-00704-x>> [accessed 12 Aug 2024].

⁶² Ellie Middleton, *Unmasked: The Ultimate Guide to ADHD, Autism and Neurodivergence* (Ireland: Penguin Life, 2023), p. 60.

In addition to the fairy bride's literalism, and the different ways in which the two central characters use and understand spoken language, there are three examples in *Myddfai* which demonstrate a difference in the fairy bride's interpretation of human social situations which leads to her inadvertently falling foul of human social norms: she refuses to attend a christening, cries bitterly at a wedding, and laughs gleefully at a funeral. In each of these cases the wife expresses reasons for her behaviour which make sense to her: she believes 'the distance was too great for her to walk' to the christening; 'people [were] entering into trouble' at the wedding; and people 'go out of trouble' when they die, causing her to appear in 'the highest and gayest spirits' at the funeral (*PM* xxvi). The wife has clear reasons for her behaviour, but, as many neurodivergent people report, her social interactions do not translate or conform to social norms. Wood suggests 'Fairy beliefs [are] a mechanism for distancing oneself from the complexity of the social context and indeed commenting on it.'⁶³ In this case, the supernatural nature of the fairy allows the wife to convey a radically different perspective on human religious rituals, which can be read as a comment on the arbitrary and constructed nature of such rituals. The way in which the bride interprets the rituals, however, further emphasises her otherness—she has come from a world beneath the lake and on land is the proverbial fish out of water. British neurologist Oliver Sacks has written about his observations of Autistic academic and animal behaviourist Temple Grandin, commenting that in her autobiographical writing, 'we get a glimpse of her total bewilderment about other people's minds, her inability to decipher their expressions and intentions, [and] her determination to study them, study *us*, our alien behaviours, [...] as if (in her own words) she were "an anthropologist on Mars."'⁶⁴

Grandin's identification of herself as 'an anthropologist on Mars' is a phrase which resonates widely within the neurodivergent community, and Scottish Autistic comedian Fern Brady has discussed how neurotypical social cues and codes are simply a language many neurodivergent people do not speak; commenting that living in a neurotypical social context 'is like trying to speak a foreign language 24 hours a day.'⁶⁵

⁶³ Wood, p. 61.

⁶⁴ Oliver Sacks, 'Foreword' in *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from my Life with Autism*, by Temple Grandin (New York: Random House, 1996), pp. 11-16 (p. 13).

⁶⁵ Fern Brady, *Strong Female Character* (London: Brazen, 2023), p. 26.

Brady describes how feeling ‘like an alien in a meat suit’ has led her to try to mask her social differences, but acknowledges the painful feeling that: ‘irrespective of the effort I put in, I’ll never be fluent in the language of socialising.’⁶⁶ It is clear the Welsh fairy bride finds human behaviour equally as bewildering. Her use of language, and her reactions to religious rituals, are misinterpreted by those around her, leading to her admonishment, and exclusion from the human world. Like Brady, the fairy bride of Llyn y Fan Fach is unable to assimilate with the dominant, neurotypical-coded culture, and her marriage to her husband breaks down as a result.

How then, does the fairy bride’s relationship with her husband relate to Celticity? Wood has mapped the occurrences of Welsh fairy bride narratives and has shown how they are particularly linked to Wales’ ‘deep glacial lakes’, which she notes ‘are the focus for a number of supernatural beliefs’ (see Appendix B).⁶⁷ The beautiful, neurologically different, fairy bride who emerges from these shimmering, quintessentially Welsh lakes, can be read as their embodiment, and the complex relationship she has with the young man can be read as a metaphor for the relationship Celtic (in this case Welsh) people had with their landscapes. The young man inhabits the land, but the bride is *of* the lake itself, which would have represented an important, life-sustaining resource for the beings who lived within its environs. To obtain the wife’s resources, the young man must commit to her on her terms (which in *Myddfai* is symbolised by their conditional marriage), when he inadvertently damages her, he loses her and the resources she brings. Such a narrative potentially provides an important cautionary lesson to those who rely on their local landscape for food, water, and health. The suggestion that these legends and their characters reflect their local landscapes is strengthened by the fact that fairy brides take different forms in different places. For example, in coastal areas such as the west of Ireland, the Hebrides, and Orkney, there is a strong tradition concerning the selkies—seal people—who marry the mortal who holds their enchanted selkie skin, but who revert to seal form and return to the sea as soon as they gain it back, conveying the fickle nature of man’s relationship with the sea and his

⁶⁶ Brady, p. 26, p. 259.

⁶⁷ Wood, p. 61.

inability to indefinitely control it.⁶⁸ The idea of a mortal being wedded to the landscape can be traced back through Celtic literature to Blodeuedd, the maiden conjured ‘out of flowers’ by magicians Gwydion and Math in ‘The Fourth Branch’ of *The Mabinogi*.⁶⁹ As with the fairy bride, Blodeuedd’s perspective and experience of the world diverges from her husband’s, her neurotype is tied to her being of the landscape, and her difference in processing and relating to the world reflects this. Blodeuedd’s husband, Lleu Llaw Gyffes, fails to recognise this, and unwittingly neglects her to both of their detriment, foreshadowing later tales involving mortals marrying an aspect of the landscape, of which *Myddfai* is arguably one.

The central relationship between the husband and wife in *The Physicians of Myddfai*, and the experiences the wife has whilst living outside of the otherworld, reflect both the social and communication difficulties neurodivergent people face as a sub-nationality who exist within a larger, neurotypical state; and the longstanding relationship Celtic (Welsh) people have historically had with their landscapes, which contain many beautiful mysteries, but which they misunderstand and mistreat to their detriment. Poetically in *Myddfai* it is only those born of the land to whom the land gives its secrets—in this case the sons of the fairy bride who, being native to their environment perhaps possess something of its unique perspective. Here, fairy descendancy is accompanied by gifts which aid and advance humankind, as opposed to the degeneracy suggested by Arthur Machen.

The King of Elfland’s Daughter: The Feminine Celt, Nature, and Time

The fairy bride of *Myddfai*’s differences in processing human social and religious practices, and her close connection to nature, are all also demonstrated by fairy bride Lirazel, who, on leaving Elfland, is likened to ‘a mermaid who has forsaken the sea’ in Lord Dunsany’s early fantasy novel *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* (1924).⁷⁰ Lord

⁶⁸ See David Thompson, *The People of the Sea: A Journey in Search of the Seal Legend* (London: Paladin Granada Publishing, 1980), for further, in-depth discussion of the selkie legends.

⁶⁹ ‘The Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi’, in *The Mabinogion*, ed. by Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 47-64 (p. 58).

⁷⁰ Lord Dunsany, *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* (London: Gollancz, 2020), p. 28. All references to this edition will be in the main body of the text from this point forwards, and will appear in parentheses at the end of the sentences. The title *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* will be abbreviated to *KED*.

Dunsany (1897-1957), an Anglo-Irish writer and figure of the Irish literary revival, sets his story between the otherworld of Elfland and the human village of Erl. Erl's rulers wish to be governed 'by a magic lord' and send hero Alveric on a quest to 'wed the King of Elfland's daughter' (*KED* pp.1-2). Wielding a sword forged from thunderbolts, Alveric crosses Elfland's 'twilight borders', and returns with Lirazel. The couple marry and have a son, but as with *Myddfai's* fairy bride, Lirazel struggles to understand and conform to human social norms, particularly those concerning religion, and fails to thrive after unsuccessfully trying to mask her differences. Lirazel returns to Elfland, which ebbs back from the human world like the waters of a tide, leaving behind a barren, wintery landscape. Alveric, devastated by the loss of his wife, desperately tries to find Elfland, and recover her. When the King of Elfland realises how unhappy his daughter is without her mortal family, he expands Elfland's borders, and absorbs Erl into his kingdom, an adjustment which resonates in some ways with the principles of the social and neurodiverse models of disability, but which is ultimately bittersweet, as Erl is separated from the rest of earth, and lost.

Lirazel's differences to humans are immediately apparent upon her arrival in Erl. 'Delighted' by the Earthly fields, Lirazel's joy and 'laughter' at earthly phenomena suggest to Alveric 'a beauty that he had never dreamed of in buttercups, and a humour in carts that he never had thought of before [and e]ach moment she found with a cry of joyous discovery some treasure of Earth's that he had not known to be fair' (*KED* pp.26-27). Lirazel's humour, and the ways in which she processes and responds to her new surroundings, are surprising to Alveric, and her novel perspective and intense joy allow him to see his previously familiar surroundings in a new light. Autistic Irish naturalist Dara McAnulty describes how '*Autism makes [him] feel everything more intensely*' and comments that he does not have '*a joy filter*.'⁷¹ Differences in emotional regulation including intense joy, heightened anxiety, decision making paralysis, and states of meltdown or shutdown, are recognised as being common in neurodivergent conditions, and have been linked to several factors including differences in sensory processing.⁷² Differences in emotional response and regulation were also used in relation to the figure

⁷¹ Dara McAnulty, *Diary of a Young Naturalist* (Dorset: Little Toller Books, 2020), p. 64.

⁷² Devon Price, *Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing our Hidden Neurodiversity* (London: Octopus Publishing, 2022), p. 114.

of ‘the Celt’, by Matthew Arnold who, in trying to pinpoint the source of ‘Celtic genius’ in his *On The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), described how ‘[t]he Celt is often called sensual; but it is not so much the vulgar satisfactions of senses that attract him as emotion and excitement; he is truly [...] sentimental.’⁷³ For Arnold, the Celt expresses traits—sensory seeking behaviour and emotional dysregulation—that have traditionally been pathologised, and which are now commonly linked to neurodivergence. Arnold, and his predecessor Ernest Renan, further stigmatise these traits by ascribing to them an inherently feminine quality: there is ‘no doubt’, Arnold argues, that ‘the sensibility of the Celtic nature [and] its nervous exaltation, have something feminine in them, and the Celt is thus peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy; he has an affinity to it; he is not far from its secret.’⁷⁴ It is this essentially feminine aspect, Arnold argues, which gives the Celt ‘a peculiarly near and intimate feeling of nature [...] the secret of natural beauty and natural magic, and to be close to it, to half-divine it.’⁷⁵ Celtic genius then, for Renan and Arnold, is characterised by traits which may be understood as neurodivergent, which are inherently feminine, and which place the Celt closer to nature (i.e. lower) than other humans. This highly problematic framing equates those who are Celtic, neurodivergent, and feminine with the figure of the ‘noble savage’, a dehumanising set of stereotypes, which, as Murray Pittock argues, have at their heart ‘the outlook of a masculinized [English] empire.’⁷⁶ Such stereotypes were negatively utilised, particularly in nineteenth century Ireland, to justify arguments against Celtic home rule on the basis that those who possessed such traits had an ‘incapacity for self government’, an argument which is overtly racist, ableist, and misogynistic in its framing, and which appears to be rooted in English imperialism. Lirazel can be read as the embodiment of Arnold’s Celt: she is emotional, feminine, subordinate to masculine influences, and closely connected to nature, being often placed alongside natural phenomena such as when she blows away from Erl with ‘wind and leaves together’ (*KED* 62-63). That Lirazel is a supernatural entity serves only to further emphasise her otherness. However, as with the loss of the bride of Llyn y Fan Fach, the loss of this

⁷³ Arnold, p. 5; p. 77.

⁷⁴ Arnold, p. 82.

⁷⁵ Arnold, p. 82.

⁷⁶ Pittock, p.66.

Celtic, neurodivergent coded character leaves Alveric bereft, and plunges Erl into a barren, unnatural winter (*KED* 58, 63). Eli Clare uses monocultures as a metaphor to demonstrate the necessity of diversity to the ability of an area to thrive: ‘simply put’, he argues, ‘monocultures do an immense amount of damage. So much labor and violence goes into creating and maintaining them. Their existence requires hundreds of eradications and removals.’⁷⁷ Without Lirazel and Elfland, Erl becomes a monoculture.

Whilst a generic link to nature can be demeaning when applied to whole races, genders, or neurotypes, it is still possible to acknowledge that individuals can and do have legitimately powerful and positive connections with nature. McAnulty has described how, to him, nature is ‘*so bewitching, so fascinating*’, and key to the formation of a place’s ‘Folklore and stories, [which] are so often inspired by the strange and beautiful in the natural world.’⁷⁸ McAnulty’s fellow Irishman, W.B. Yeats, articulated a similar view: that the source of Celtic magic is ‘the ancient worship of nature and that troubled ecstasy before her, that certainty of all beautiful places being haunted’—nature is the inspirational font from which Celtic stories and spiritualities flow.⁷⁹ McAnulty’s interest in and self-professed affinity with nature is shared with some other prominent autistic people: Greta Thunberg and Chris Packham are both renowned advocates for ecological and climate causes; Temple Grandin attributes her success in designing agricultural animal handling equipment to having (in her words) ‘a cow’s eye view’—an ability to see things from a cow’s perspective; and Irish autistic teen Fiacre Ryan has written about the deeply regulating effect nature has on his senses, saying ‘I am at peace with nature. [...] Destined to never speak, I am calm when nature envelops me in her soothing world, and gives my senses peace.’⁸⁰ Clearly, some neurodivergent (and some Celtic) people feel an intimate connection with nature; feel compelled to protect it, and find spending time in it profoundly regulating. However, these observations all come from a place of self-identification, rather than from a

⁷⁷ Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, p. 133.

⁷⁸ McAnulty, p. 64, p. 41.

⁷⁹ W.B. Yeats, ‘The Celtic Element in Literature’ in *Ideas of Good and Evil* by W.B. Yeats (London: A.H. Bullen, 1898), pp. 162-177 (p. 166).

⁸⁰ National Autistic Society, <<https://www.autism.org.uk/>> [accessed 10 July 2024]; Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures* pp.142-157; Ryan, p. 46.

reductive, external gaze which would likely be stigmatising when applied indiscriminately.

Lirazel's own enthusiasm for nature serves to highlight her difference from the human (English) inhabitants of Erl. This is particularly apparent when she expresses a fascination with the stars, loving their 'gentle beauty', naming her son after the constellation Orion, and feeling sadness and confusion when instructed not to 'worship them', or pray to their 'images in the water' (*KED* 54, 56). Lirazel inadvertently offends when she uses 'four flat stones' in a sincere attempt to mimic the Freer's worship of 'Christom things' (his candle, bell, lectern, and symbolic bowl), an attempt which is misunderstood, and which leads to accusations of heresy, linking her relationship with the natural world to the idea of an early, pre-Christian form of Celtic paganism (*KED* 60). The eighteenth and nineteenth century had seen Welsh antiquarian and nationalist Iolo Morganwg play a central role in cementing the idea of the ancient Celtic Druids as 'major figures' in the 'national imagination', and later, Scottish comparative anthropologist James Frazer referred to the 'oak-worship of the Druids' in his own formulation of a pagan nature religion and mythology in his 1890 work *The Golden Bough*.⁸¹ The Classical sources for the Druids, including Strabo, Julius Caesar, Pomponius Mela and Pliny, do discuss the high esteem held by the Druids for the stars, earth, and trees.⁸² Later attempts to revive Druidism have drawn on such sources, but they are scarce, ambiguous, and problematic in that they only represent non-Druid perspectives. Morganwg—the father of the modern *Gorsedd* ceremony—has been discredited as a forger 'who built his own career on deceit' and Frazer's methodology, assumptions, and ideas concerning an ancient, magical mythology based on the 'worship of trees' where a 'priest' known as the 'King of the Wood' would pluck 'the Golden Bough from a tree in the sacred grove' have been widely criticised, and debunked.⁸³ Nevertheless, the connection between nature and an ancient form of Celtic spirituality

⁸¹ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 86.

⁸² Strabo, *Geography* (64/63 BC-21AD), 4.4.4.; Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* (c. 50 x 44 BC), 14.; Pomponius Mela, *De Situ Orbis* (c. AD 37-c. 50), 3.2.18.; Pliny, *Natural History* (AD 23/4-79), 16.24., in *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales*, ed. by John T. Koch and John Carey (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), pp. 18, 22, 31, 32.

⁸³ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 156; James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Heritage Illustrated Publishing, 2014), Location 48. Kindle ebook.

has endured, and is cited across modern neopagan religions, many of which see themselves as being rooted in ancient Celtic traditions which incorporate nature and seasonality in their rituals; for example, the neopagan Wheel of the Year, as popularised by figures such as English Wiccan Gerald Gardiner in the twentieth century, includes nature-based Celtic festivals such as Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh, and Samhain, alongside festivals of different origin such as the Early English ‘Eostre’ (Ostara), and the Norse winter festival, Yule.

Welsh PhD researcher Becky Ellis, a late-diagnosed autistic content creator and founder of @Neuro_Divers (a social media handle which Ellis uses to both ‘engage with and learn from the ND community’), recently initiated a conversation about ‘Autistic Witches’ via social media, asking for ‘contributions from autistic wiccans, pagans, and similar’ commenting on their engagement with alternative spiritualities, and how they felt they related to their autism, or neurodivergence.⁸⁴ Following this interaction, Ellis cited several reasons why she believes some neurodivergent people may be drawn towards such spiritualities, such as their ‘connection to nature’, anti-patriarchal, anti-monotheistic outlooks, the inclusion of environments which encourage sensory stimulation or hyperfocus, a lack of ‘rules and prohibition’, and a tendency to seek ‘outsider spaces’ which fall outside of societal norms.⁸⁵ The idea of a correlation between neurodivergent and Celtic neopagan communities, whilst coming from within the communities themselves, is currently highly speculative, and further study is needed to establish what correlations—if any—exist, before discussing the underlying reasons for these, whilst taking care to avoid sweeping generalisations and stereotypes.

Lirazel’s veneration of Erl’s stones and stars are viewed as heresy by Alveric and the Freer, who give her constant correction and negative feedback every time she expresses her joy in the natural world.⁸⁶ Lirazel tries hard to conform—to mask these aspects of herself—but she does not understand the reasons why these things are

⁸⁴ Becky Ellis, Neuro_divers <instagram https://www.instagram.com/neuro_divers/>[accessed 17 November 2024]

⁸⁵ Becky Ellis @Neuro_divers ‘Autistic Witches’ (Instagram, 8 June 2024) <https://www.instagram.com/p/C76HBE4syu/?hl=en&img_index=1>[accessed 17 November 2024]

⁸⁶ Middleton suggests that ‘for every fifteen negative comments that a child with ADHD receives, there is only one positive comment, and that, by age twelve, children with ADHD [receive] 20,000 more negative messages from parents, teachers, and other adults than their non-ADHD peers.’ Middleton, pp. 120, 281-282.

required of her on such a fundamental level, that she forgets them, and becomes increasingly anxious. Lirazel's anxiety is compounded by the passage of time on Earth, which has 'no value or meaning' to her, given Elfland's timeless, unchanging state (*KED* 30). When ageless Lirazel observes changes in a woman who 'looked less fair than she had looked a year ago' she fears 'that Time in the fields we know might have power to harm that beauty that the long long ages of Elfland had never dared to dim' (*KED* 37, 39). The passage of time highlights Lirazel's aversion to change, a trait which may resonate with some members of the neurodivergent community, given that an '[i]nsistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualised patterns of verbal or non-verbal behaviour' which can present as '[s]truggling with change more than [neurotypical] people do' is part of the diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum Condition.⁸⁷ Autistic comedian Hannah Gadsby refers to their brain as 'change-resistant', and comments that they find it 'incredibly difficult to cope with change.'⁸⁸ Similarly, Autistic ADHDer and neurodivergent activist Ellie Middleton describes how '[she] knew that [she] was different at the age of seventeen, when all [her] peers were accepting offers to go to university, but [she] was housebound, unable to speak, and debilitated by the impending change.'⁸⁹ Middleton reflects that the anxiety that often accompanies change, may be because 'living as an autistic person in a world built for Neurotypical people means that lots of things feel out of [her] control.'⁹⁰ For Lirazel, the passage of time and the changes it brings is something she has neither experience of, nor control over.

Alveric—who views the world through his own, mortal lens—is unable to empathise with Lirazel's distress, and tells her that 'Time must have his way' (*KED* 39). Alveric however, has his own divergent experiences of time following his visit to Elfland, observing that 'All was changed' in his world, and that 'ten years must have passed away during that one blue day he had spent in Elfland' (*KED* p. 27). Differences in the passage of time between the human world and the otherworld is a recurring motif in many folktales concerning human visits to fairyland, and include Irish warrior-poet

⁸⁷ Middleton, pp. 35-36.

⁸⁸ Hannah Gadsby, *Ten Steps to Nanette: A Memoir Situation* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2022), p. 98, p. 94, p. 126. Kindle ebook.

⁸⁹ Middleton, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Middleton, p. 75.

Oisín's experience of returning from Tir na n-Og (an Irish otherworld) to find three hundred years has passed; and incidents involving fairy rings, which, once stepped into, warp the human experience of time, such as the story of 'Rhys at the Fairy Dance' recounted by Thomas Keightley, where a man from the Welsh Vale of Neath, stumbles into a fairy ring and is lost for days, despite his protestations that 'he had been only five minutes away.'⁹¹ Activist Sonny Jane Wise comments on their experiences with time as 'an Autistic ADHDer with bipolar', and notes how '[a]s someone with bipolar, my relationship with time and how I perceive time actually changes [...] While most individuals associate mania with a shift in our mood, it's actually also a shift in our perception of time', a phenomenon Martin Moskalewicz and Michael A. Schwartz discuss in their article 'Temporal experience in Mania'.⁹² Wise also comments on how 'ADHDers [...] have a faster inner clock' and cites several studies which demonstrate 'that individuals with schizophrenia have an internal clock that speeds up, slows down and doesn't necessarily run at a constant speed.'⁹³ In terms of Alveric's experience and the experience of other humans in wider Celtic fairy lore, the human who crosses between Earth and the otherworld experiences a similar speeding up and slowing down of time. Wise argues that time, its measurement, and its management is a socially constructed norm from which there will therefore naturally be divergences across cultures and neurotypes, and this concept appears to be reflected in stories regarding humans in the otherworld in a very literal way.⁹⁴

The elements within the story which disable its characters—time in Alveric's case, and the accusations of heresy over Lirazel's spiritual connection with nature—are socially constructed aspects of their environments, and as such (according to social constructionist theory), can be pressured, dismantled, and remade. At the novel's close, Elfland encompasses Erl. The King of Elfland, observing Lirazel's yearning for her family (and remembering his own relationship with Lirazel's mortal mother), modifies her environment: a solution which can be read as a precursor to both the social model of disability and the neurodiversity framework. Magic is applied to Erl, and its physical

⁹¹ Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology Illustrative of the Romance and Superstition of Various Countries* (London: William Clowes and Sons, Limited, 1892), p. 130. Kindle ebook.

⁹² Wise, p. 181.

⁹³ Wise, p. 182.

⁹⁴ Wise, pp. 181-183.

borders bend as a result. This can be read as a metaphor, that with the right kind of pressure it is possible to change and reshape societal structures and norms to reflect a wider diversity of needs. However, *KED*'s finale is bittersweet. Erl is essentially lost to the rest of Earth; a suggestion that such world-altering magic cannot be used without a heavy price. In restructuring the world for Lirazel, Erl and all of its inhabitants (bar the Freer and the witch) are lost, as they go 'into the twilight', a very recognisable motif in relation to the Celtic revivals, which evokes with it the wistful sense of melancholy at the loss of a magical, romanticised Celtic past (*KED* p. 438).

When read allegorically then, the experiences of the otherworldly beings in *The Physicians of Myddfai* and *The King of Elfland's Daughter* are analogous to those of neurodivergent communities: they represent a sub-nationality living in the context of a more powerful, (neurotypical) culture, which pathologises anything it views as diverging from neurological norms. As the quintessential fish out of water, or 'mermaid[s] who ha[ve] forsaken the sea', the fairy placed outside of fairyland can express a radically different perspective on normalised human social behaviours and practices and apply pressure to such. Both fairy bride texts examined use the connection to otherworlds, nature, landscape and time to highlight such divergences in perspective, and to demonstrate how difference can easily be misunderstood, or negatively received. However, the narratives also acknowledge the gifts that can accompany such difference: the wife of Llyn Y Fan Fach's fairy dowry and healing secrets, and Lirazel's joyous, summer magic. These narratives then, do suggest that the differences in perspective brought by 'the Others' can be beneficial—like Clare they recognise the limits of the 'monoculture'—but they also fall short of suggesting how societies can truly be adjusted to accommodate all neurotypes in the way the social model and neurodiversity framework advocate for.

Chapter Three: The Blind Seer and the Melancholic Visionary; Celtic Supercrips and Internalised Ableism

I have so far demonstrated how the fairies and disability were combined in the Celtic Revivals as narrative prostheses to signify difference, and have examined two manifestations of this: the dangerous, racial ‘other, and the fairy bride’s outsider perspective. The third manifestation I wish to examine conflates disability, Celticity, and the ability to access the fairy realm, and represents the disabled Celtic figure in terms of superpowers, or as what modern disability theory refers to as the ‘supercrip’. Sami Schalk defines the term ‘supercrip’ as ‘a stereotypical representation of disability’ which focuses on ‘concepts of overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary.’⁹⁵ Schalk cites disability theorist Rosemary Garland Thompson who links the concept to the freak show, arguing ‘supercrip narratives [...] rely upon “the oldest mode of representing disability”: the visual rhetoric of wonder.’⁹⁶ Such ‘supercripping’ is found across literature and popular culture, and includes figures such as blind Daredevil, paraplegic Professor X, and deaf Hawkeye: characters whose disabilities are accompanied (and compensated), by extraordinary, or uncanny abilities. Schalk acknowledges that supercrip narratives existed long before the term itself was established, and the mechanisms which underpin this type of disability representation appear in Celtic revivalist literature, notably in the form of the blind seer, or melancholic visionary: humans whose lack of sight, or cognitive difference, is compensated by an ability to cross the boundaries between worlds, and communicate with otherworldly beings. Such characters appear throughout *The Celtic Twilight*, W.B. Yeats’ 1893 literary collection of Irish folktales. Through a reading of this work, I will suggest Yeats’ conflation of disability with visionary insight and poetic prowess plays into his romantically primitivist framing of the Irish peasantry, and into his own self-presentation as a disabled mystic—a supercrip. Furthermore, I will argue that such portrayals are highly unlikely to reflect the lived experiences of disabled people, and that the sense of nationalistic pride Yeats appeals to through them is rooted in a sense of

⁹⁵ Sami Schalk, ‘Reevaluating the Supercrip’, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 10 (2016), pp. 1– 86, (pp. 71-72).

⁹⁶ Schalk, pp. 71-72.

deficit, which can be read as an expression of his own internalised ableism and sense of personal and cultural deficiency.

The Blind Seer

The blind seer, a literary archetype traceable back to antiquity, includes figures such as Greek mythology's Tiresias; biblical Ahijah the Shilonite; and the Norse god Odin, who forfeited an eye in the pursuit of knowledge. Running alongside this, is a tradition of famous blind or partially blind wordsmiths, including Homer, Milton, Macpherson's Ossian, and Yeats himself, who had astigmatism in his right eye and a condition known as keratoconus (conical cornea) in his left, which by 1894 had rendered that eye 'practically useless.'⁹⁷ *The Celtic Twilight* includes several figures whose visual impairments (Yeats suggests), enables them to access the otherworld and its faery inhabitants, from whom they obtain insight, inspiration and poetic gifts. Yeats refers, for example, to the blind bard Oisín, who sought 'for three hundred years to appease his insatiable heart with all the pleasures of faeryland'; to blind Carolan, who had the fairies to thank for making him 'the great musician he was' after he 'slept upon a faery rath [whereupon] their tunes ran in his head' ever after; and to Raftery, a blind poet whom Yeats describes (somewhat comically) as receiving 'knowledge of all the things of the world' from 'an enchanted voice' which spoke to him 'in Irish' from 'under a bush one time.'⁹⁸ For Yeats, these figures 'have a way of seeing things, and have the power to know more, and to feel more, and to do more, and to guess more than those that have their sight', because, he argues, 'Blind eyes can see more than other eyes'—impaired ocular sight opens up other ways of seeing, which stretch beyond the material world and access deeper, mystical levels (*TCT* 19,73). Yeats' use of blindness in relation to these characters resonates with Tobin Siebers' observation that disability is often used in narratives as 'the other other which makes otherness imaginable'.⁹⁹ By using blindness as both a marker of, and foundation for Celtic insight, Yeats gives the nature of that insight 'supplementary meaning, sharper focus and additional weight'—its gifts are

⁹⁷ Paul Cohen, 'Blindness in Yeats', *Yeats Eliot Review*, 6 (1979), 49-55 (p. 49).

⁹⁸ W.B. Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight* (UK: Andrews UK Ltd, 2020) p. 11; p. 68, p. 19. All references to this edition will appear in the text from this point forward in parentheses at the end of the sentence to which they refer. *The Celtic Twilight* will be abbreviated to *TCT*.

⁹⁹ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 48.

abnormal and are born from a different (impaired) view of the world.¹⁰⁰ Blind academic Georgina Kleega criticises the prevalence of ‘compensatory second sight’ or ‘the blind mystic’ in her memoir *Sight Unseen*, arguing that it is not recognisable as an aspect of blind experience, and that ‘like the freak show of the past, these works may only delineate the distance between the writer and the reader and emphasise the alien nature of blind experience.’¹⁰¹ Such representations present blindness as an exceptional gift—a gift which Yeats highlights as being particularly prevalent amongst Irish bards and storytellers. However, such representation is, once again, suggestive of a difference rooted in absence or lack, and is dehumanising for both blind and (in this context), Celtic people, whose gifts are so exceptional that they cannot possibly be of this world.

Yeats situates his references to blind Celtic poets within a wider Western classical tradition which goes back to Homer, the celebrated poet who acted as medium between the godly realm of Olympus and humanity. When referring to Michael Moran, Yeats recalls how, when arrested as ‘a vagabond’ by ‘an officious peeler’, he invoked the memory of Homer, ‘who was also [...] a poet, and a blind man, and a beggarman’ (*TCT* 32). Sinéad Garrigan-Mattar has observed that ‘Few aspects of Yeats’s thought can be dissociated from a romantic primitivist impulse’, and Yeats’ linking of Irish poet Moran, and Homer via their poetic ability, disability, and state of poverty (social class) plays on such an impulse.¹⁰² Yeats’ primitivism extends to the Irish peasant class more widely, a class who were poor, debilitated by colonialism, and whose identity was built on a rich base of orally transmitted folktales. Kathleen Raine notes how ‘Yeats found in the West of Ireland [in both landscape and people] a world like that of Homer.’¹⁰³ When narrating the peasants’ belief that Mary Hynes—the beautiful muse of blind, Irish Gaelic poet Raftery—was abducted by fairies, Yeats comments that ‘These poor [Irish] countrymen and countrywomen in their beliefs, and in their emotions, are many years nearer to that old Greek world, that set beauty beside the fountain of things, than are our men of learning’ (*TCT* 19). The Irish peasants, for all their poverty and disadvantages,

¹⁰⁰ Siebers, p. 48.

¹⁰¹ Georgina Kleega, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 3.

¹⁰² Sinéad Garrigan-Mattar, ‘Yeats, Celticism and Comparative Science’, in *Primitivism, Science and the Irish Revival*, by Sinéad Garrigan-Mattar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 41-82 (p.41).

¹⁰³ Raine, ‘Introduction’, in *The Celtic Twilight*, by W.B. Yeats (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Limited, 1981), pp. 7-29 (p.21).

are closer in their nature to accessing true beauty, which as Raine notes, was for Yeats ‘a quality of the imagination, not of fact’, and which—like the world of Classical antiquity—is rooted in ancient pagan beliefs that long predate those of modern, Christian Ireland (*TCT* 19).¹⁰⁴ Yeats’ linking of rural Ireland with the Homeric may also, as Fiona Stafford has argued, point to a desire to appeal to ‘a cultural mainstream’ in presenting Ireland and its traditions ‘in forms suited to the tastes of the supposedly “civilised” [anglicised] reading public.’¹⁰⁵ However, in doing so, Yeats inadvertently contributes to what Stafford regards as the ‘general marginalising tendencies of the metropolis.’¹⁰⁶ Yeats’ attempt to present Celtic insight as exceptionality associated with disability and poverty is unintentionally ableist, and runs the risk of leading to further marginalisation of both blind and Irish people.

‘Mysterious Melancholy’

Yeats first mentions Homer in relation to Paddy Flynn, the ‘little bight-eyed old man’ from whose oral testimonies much of *TCT*’s content is sourced (*TCT* 7). For Yeats, Flynn embodied the Homeric ‘simplicity and amplitude of the imagination’, which allowed him to ‘empty heaven, hell, [...] purgatory, faeryland and earth, to people his stories’ (*TCT* 7). As with Homer, Yeats links Flynn’s ‘ample [artistic] circumstance’ with a sense of poverty in other respects. Materially, Flynn is described as living ‘in a leaky and one-roomed cabin’ in rural Ballisodare, and Yeats emphasises Flynn’s cognitive differences, describing how ‘eccentricity’ and ‘melancholy’ undercut his otherwise ‘always cheerful’ demeanour (*TCT* 7). The term ‘melancholy’ had, at Yeats’ time of writing, been used to denote madness, or mental illness, for centuries: Robert Burton had written about it in disordered terms in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), and the gates of Bethlem hospital had been adorned with two life-sized stone statues known as ‘Melancholia’ and ‘Mania’ (‘Raving Madness’), between 1676 and 1815.¹⁰⁷ Yeats characterisation of Flynn’s melancholic disposition suggests it places him closer to animals (lower beings) than to humans: the melancholy ‘in [Flynn’s] eyes (swift as

¹⁰⁴ Raine, ‘Introduction’, in *The Celtic Twilight*, by Yeats, p.21.

¹⁰⁵ Fiona Stafford, ‘Primitivism and the “Primitive” Poet’, in *Celticism*, ed. by Terence Brown, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 79-96 (pp. 88-89).

¹⁰⁶ Stafford, ‘Primitivism and the “Primitive” Poet’, in *Celticism*, ed. by Brown, pp. 88-89.

¹⁰⁷ Roy Porter, *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 104.

the eyes of a rabbit when they peered out of their wrinkled holes) [was] the visionary melancholy of purely instinctive natures and of all animals' (*TCT* 7).¹⁰⁸ Here, Yeats once again uses eyes to emphasise difference. In characterising Flynn's eyes as rabbit-like, Yeats' suggests his melancholy gives him an animalistic lens. Rabbits are a prey species, and Yeats' comparison suggests a sense of vulnerability. Flynn's exceptionality—the source of his visionary and creative ability—is linked to a sense of suffering, vulnerability and lack, all of which is rooted in the idea that his melancholy disposition makes him less than human.

Whilst exalting melancholy on one hand then, for the visionary qualities it can bring, Yeats' also suggests the intense vulnerability which accompanies it, and highlights how the line between melancholy and visionary states is akin to a tightrope, which, if unbalanced, will ultimately (as Roy Porter notes on the relationship between madness and creativity in Romanticism), 'exact a terrible toll', leading to deeper mental illness, and further dehumanisation.¹⁰⁹ In 'A Visionary' Yeats describes how a friend (rumoured to be A.E. Waite), had 'latterly [...] neither written nor painted, for his whole heart was set upon making his character vigorous and calm, [as] the emotional life of the artist was bad for him' (*TCT* 10). Yeats describes how the same friend 'wander[ed] about upon the hills talking to half-mad and visionary peasants', a sentence which directly connects madness, visionary abilities, and the peasant class (*TCT* 10). One such peasant was said to be 'wandering in his mind with prolonged sorrow', reporting that "'The fret" (Irish for doom)' was over him, and crying about 'what happened under the thorn-tree forty years ago [as] the tears upon his face glistened in the moonlight'—a mournful image of a grieving man standing alone in rural Ireland (*TCT* 11). The thorn-tree was commonly associated with fairies, so this image may be invoking Ireland's lost, pagan past. However, the timing of this reference—forty years before *TCT*'s first

¹⁰⁸ I use the term 'cognitive difference' here as Alice Hall does in an imperfect attempt to 'capture the [...] breadth of this shifting category', which is in a constant state of flux, and which covers a range of what Margaret Price refers to as 'conditions of the mind' including 'mental illness (madness), cognitive disabilities (mental retardation, intellectual disabilities), autism spectrum disorder (neuroatypicality), and learning disabilities (learning difficulties).' Alice Hall, *Literature and Disability*, p.108; Margaret Price, 'Mental Disability and Other Terms of Art', *Profession* 11 (2010), 117–123 (p. 118). These 'conditions of the mind' would also be termed neurodivergent in accordance with Sonny Jane Wise's explanation of the Neurodivergence, as 'individuals whose mind or functioning falls outside dominant societal norms.' Wise, p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ Porter, p. 64.

publication in 1893—potentially links to another source of sorrow. The potato famine of 1845-1852 had devastated Ireland, and had had a lasting impact on Ireland's social, economic and demographic landscape. Margaret Kelleher writes how, in Sligo, a lone 'whitethorn or hawthorn tree' known as the '*sceach gheal*' was a place where 'many starving people lay down [...] to die or were buried', with the tree acting as 'a sacred marker or protector for the un-named dead.'¹¹⁰ It is possible then, that the melancholy from which Irish visionary qualities arise, is, for Yeats, not only linked to the loss of Ireland's native pagan past, but also to a state of national trauma and mourning caused by the famine. The link between melancholy, the ability to see fairies, and visionary creativity plays into (as Porter puts it), the 'Romantic doctrine which saw genius and madness as doubles, elevated art into ecstasy and the artist or writer into an aesthetic analogue of the prophet gifted with otherworldly powers.'¹¹¹ Yeats is often referred to as 'the last Romantic' and Roy Porter has commented on how, during the Romantic movement, 'melancholy once more became the midwife to art', with madness and artistic genius becoming 'indissolubl[y] link[ed]', the former becoming 'the anvil of noble art.'¹¹² In *TCT* figures like Flynn and the 'half-mad, visionary Irish peasants' associated with Yeats' visionary friend, can be read as supercrips—their cognitive differences serving as the symbolic anvils on which the art of Irish folklore was shaped.

At the close of *TCT*, Yeats reflects on the ephemeral nature of folk-tales and the belief held by some folklorists that they are easily lost 'like a mist on the coming of night that is scattered away by the light breath of wind', whilst simultaneously acknowledging that 'the faery and ghost kingdom is more stubborn than men dream of. It will perhaps be always going and never gone.'¹¹³ At the heart of these traditions' endurance are the Celtic visionaries: those who can capture, preserve, and promote their stories—figures such as Yeats himself. In a revised edition of *TCT* Yeats reminds us

¹¹⁰ In her chapter 'Commemorating the Great Irish Famine: 1840s-1990s', Kelleher references a memorial entitled '*Faoin Sceach* [Under the Bush]' by the sculptor Fred Conlon, which was commissioned in 1997 by the County Sligo Famine Commemoration Committee to commemorate 'the unnamed dead of [Sligo] who perished in the Great Famine of 1845-1847'. Margaret Kelleher, 'Commemorating the Great Irish Famine: 1840s-1990s' in *Memory Ireland: Volume 3: The Famine and the Troubles*, ed. by Oona Frawley (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), pp. 91-120 (pp. 102-103). Kindle ebook.

¹¹¹ Porter, p. 64.

¹¹² Porter, p. 63.

¹¹³ Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight* (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Limited, 1981), p. 158.

that he is the visionary central to this collection—it exists because he has ‘talked with many who believe they have seen it,’ and he has himself ‘had my own glimpse of unaccountable things.’¹¹⁴ In this sense Yeats sets himself up as the inheritor of the great bardic tradition, as Raine comments he was ‘a bard in the old sense, giving Ireland's story its place in the record of the imagination of the world.’¹¹⁵ It is perhaps no coincidence then, that the two aspects of the disabled Celtic bardic visionary that Yeats highlights in *TCT*—blindness, and cognitive difference—arguably converge in him. Most images of Yeats include his famous pair of spectacles, a part of his appearance that became so iconic that Arthur Machen’s character known only as ‘the young man in spectacles’ was rumoured to be based on him. His progressively impaired sight was likely, Paul Cohen has argued, to have been a significant factor in Yeats’s move away from a career as a painter in the mid-1880s, and towards ‘his development as a poet’.¹¹⁶ In addition, Yeats biographer R.F. Foster reports how there was ‘a strain of mental instability taking the form of manic depression’ in Yeats’ mother’s side of the family, whose ‘withdrawal into her own abstracted world toward the end of her life fitted into this pattern’, and Yeats’ work possesses a sense of melancholy which was undoubtedly heightened by his well-known, unrequited obsession with Irish nationalist Maud Gonne—an aspect of his life which both Yeats and Gonne acknowledged was a source both of torment and creative inspiration.¹¹⁷ Yeats, a master constructor of Irish folk tradition and mythology, was also deeply conscious of his own image as a poet: he was (as R.F. Foster notes) ‘prepared to live life as a pose’ and was fully engaged in ‘constructing a mythology for himself, his past and the circles with whom he intersected’—and part of that mythology involved framing himself as the visionary par excellence.¹¹⁸

It was no doubt Yeats’ goal to use the idea of the blind or melancholic Celtic visionary to (in Garrigan Mattar’s words) ‘serve silently the romantic and revolutionary purpose of bringing again the Golden Age’, to build an Irish literary culture with as

¹¹⁴ Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight* (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Limited, 1981), p. 158.

¹¹⁵ Raine, ‘Introduction’, in *The Celtic Twilight*, by Yeats p. 22.

¹¹⁶ Cohen, pp. 49-55 (p. 49).

¹¹⁷ Foster, *W. B. Yeats, A Life*, p. 5.

¹¹⁸ Foster, *W. B. Yeats, A Life*, p. 58.

revered a standing as the Ancient Greek culture he so often invokes through them.¹¹⁹ However the way in which Yeats uses these traits as ‘the other other[s] that help make otherness imaginable’ is an early example of supercripping. In equating poverty with disability (blindness and cognitive difference), and framing them in terms of visionary exceptionality, Yeats dehumanises, and potentially further marginalises both disabled people and the Irish peasantry, whose mystical, visionary tendencies separate them from the rest of humanity. This may have been the result of Yeats’ own internalised ableism both as a visually impaired, melancholic poet, and as an Irish exile living in London a generation after the national trauma caused by the famine, where the horrifyingly racist attitudes of certain social reformers and politicians that ‘the Irish population must either be improved a little, or else exterminated’ still shamefully endured.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Garrigan-Mattar, pp. 41-82 (p. 82).

¹²⁰ David Lloyd, ‘The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger’, in *Memory Ireland: Volume 3: The Famine and the Troubles (Irish Studies)* ed. by Oona Frawley, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), pp. 17-58 (p. 25). Kindle ebook. Lloyd takes this quote from Thomas Carlyle’s work ‘Chartism’, which was originally published prior to the famine in 1839, however it was reprinted in *English and Other Critical Essays*, which was published in 1915, and negative beliefs about the Irish on the basis of animalistic stereotypes, religion, and lack of ability to self-govern, continued throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.

Conclusion: *Among Others* and Letting Go of the Narrative Prosthesis

I conclude by examining Welsh-Canadian writer Joanne Walton's *Among Others* (2011). A more contemporary fairy narrative, *Among Others* synthesises many of the concepts previously discussed in relation to the framing of the fairies, disability, and Celticity in Celtic revivalism. However, this novel's subversive, genre-blending form offers a potential departure from the literary tropes already examined. Walton invites her reader to 'feel free' to view *Among Others* as a 'fairy story'; but her semi-autobiographical narrative incorporates elements from multiple genres including fantasy, folk literature, history, philosophy, and science fiction.¹²¹ *Among Others* follows a transformative year in the life of fifteen-year-old Morwenna (Mori), a young, Welsh woman with a fierce love for books, who can see fairies. Mori's childhood in the South Wales valleys is abruptly diverted by an event involving her mother and the fairies which leads to Mori's disability and her twin's death. In an attempt to escape her mother, Mori crosses the border into England where, as an outsider, she struggles with grief and feelings of alienation, before her passion for reading and storytelling helps her to let go of that which no longer serves her, and to make new, meaningful connections—as science fiction author Kurt Vonnegut (one of the many authors Mori references) would say, to find her 'karass'.¹²²

Mitchell and Snyder have observed that disability's 'very unknowability [...] consolidates the need to tell a story about it', and as discussed, the association of fairy touch with the sudden onset of disability was one such story people used to reconcile disability's unknowability throughout the Celtic Revivals.¹²³ Walton references this motif through Mori's first-person narrative, but its ambiguous framing prompts the reader to question what is really at play. The beginning of *Among Others* sees Mori run away from her abusive mother following a car accident which kills her twin sister, and leaves Mori 'a funny little spiky crippled teenager' with life changing injuries to her leg (AO 26, 22). Mori remembers how 'the fairies [...] told us what to do' in the moments

¹²¹ Jo Walton, *Among Us* (Corsair, 2012), p. 16. All references to this edition will appear in the text from this point forward, in parentheses at the end of the sentence to which they refer. The title *Among Others* will be abbreviated to *AO*.

¹²² Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 2024), p. 2.

¹²³ Mitchell and Snyder, p. 6.

preceding the accident, instructing the twins to ‘keep on’ through a series of illusory obstacles, with the final obstacle being a ‘real car’ (AO 256). Mori’s retelling of events may lead readers to assume the fairies had intentionally caused the girls’ accident, especially as she references the disabling nature of the fairy touch elsewhere, using, for example, the term ‘elfshot’ in relation to her grandfather’s stroke (AO 256).¹²⁴ The fragmented presentation of Mori’s story, however, paints a more ambiguous picture. Mori tells the reader that ‘[t]he fairies couldn’t make anything [...] real. They couldn’t do anything. That’s why they needed us’ (AO 32). The world of *Among Others* is created, and tangibly affected, by humans, not fairies. Mori is the one who runs towards the car, she, as the perceiver, is the one who fatefully blurs the lines between illusion and reality, and she is the storyteller whose perspective the reader receives. It is possible that the fairies are Mori’s way of rationalising the dramatic, life altering changes that, as Bérubé might say, ‘demanded a story’, just as perhaps people in the earlier part of the Celtic revival period sometimes used fairy touch to rationalise the abrupt onset of disability, or to explain behaviour which was believed to be (as Amanda Leduc puts it), ‘incomprehensible or strange.’¹²⁵ Walton leaves this ambiguous—the reader must decide for themselves.

Whether the fairies caused Mori’s accident or not, this catalytic event, in her eyes, renders her as ‘half of a broken pair’, and prompts her to leave her ‘real family’ (her mother), and Wales (her motherland) (AO 295, 21). Throughout the book Walton emphasises the profound effects environment can have on the formation of personhood. ‘If you put Ged [the protagonist of Le Guin’s high fantasy novel *Earthsea*] on Annarres or Shevek [the protagonist of her science fiction novel *The Dispossessed*] in *Earthsea* they wouldn’t be the same people’, Mori comments, ‘the background’ shapes the person (AO 136). This is reflected by the formative influence the South Wales Valleys had on Mori’s childhood self. Mori describes how

¹²⁴ Being shot by the fairies, or being ‘Elf-shot’ is a concept used widely throughout Celtic revivalist literature to denote the sudden, unexplained onset of death or disability to people or cattle, by authors and folklorists including Robert Kirk, Thomas Keightley, Sir Walter Scott, and Celticist John Rhys.

¹²⁵ Bérubé, p. 570; Amanda Leduc, *Disfigured: on fairy tales, disability and making space* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2020), p. 52.

it was the landscape that formed us [...] that made us who we were as we grew in it, that affected everything. We thought we were living in a fantasy landscape when actually we were living in a science fictional one [...] I named the dramroads after places in *The Lord of the Rings* when I should have recognised that they were from *The Chrysalids* (AO 34).

This passage conveys how the landscape and the children mutually affected each other: the children were shaped by their environment, but they *read* the landscape and in doing so, imbued it with a sense of fantasy, magic, and with the fairies—beings who are so close to the land they seem ‘more like plants than anything else’ (AO 38). The landscape of science-fiction novel *The Chrysalids* stands in stark contrast to the girls’ interpretation of their homeland, telling of a world scorched by a ‘tribulation’ (an event akin to a nuclear apocalypse), which changed the natural world and mutated its inhabitants beyond recognition.¹²⁶ It seems, then, that Mori and her sister romanticised Welsh landscapes—saw them through the rose-tinted glasses of childhood—and their reading and interpretation such landscapes added layers of meaning to them. As Yeats might have it, Mori and her sister brought the ‘old Irish and the old Welsh’ ability to dream ‘that fair women could be made out of flowers, or rise up out of meadow fountains and paved fountains’ to the world around them, they were the ones who imbued the landscape around them with a sense of Celtic poetry and spirituality.¹²⁷ This draws on Yeats’s idea (explored in chapter two), of Celtic natural magic being that ‘certainty of all beautiful places being haunted.’¹²⁸ There is something of a reciprocal relationship suggested here, then, between the environments, which shape their inhabitants, and those same inhabitants, who dream layers of meaning into their landscapes: a relationship which suggests the possibility that humans can collectively reshape their environments, as Mori and her sister did, an idea which resonates with the social model of disability.

When Mori leaves her homeland, she experiences a deep sense of displacement, and observes how her voice and accent act as outward signs of her outsider status, just as they did with Jervase Cradock’s ‘hissing sibilance’, Fenella’s unearthly grunts and shrieks, and the sound of Lirazel’s native elvish, which to human ears was ‘made of

¹²⁶ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids* (New Delhi: Adhyaya Books, 2021), p. 4.

¹²⁷ Yeats, ‘The Celtic Element’ in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 166, p. 167.

¹²⁸ Yeats, ‘The Celtic Element’ in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 166.

syllables like bird's cries at night.'¹²⁹ 'My voice', Mori narrates, 'was posh for the Valleys and immediately marked my class origins to everyone there, [but] here [at school] brands me as an outlander barbarian' (*AO* 34-35). Mori uses 'the clue of voice' to 'identify the other barbarians' around her and seeks to befriend them in a hostile climate where her peers call her names like 'Taffy', 'Thief', 'Commie', 'Crip', and 'Suck-up', degrading her and making her feel inferior and 'other' (*AO* 35). Mori uses Welsh to communicate with the fairies, who have further differences in their speech and language in that '[t]hey're not big on nouns at all', and they speak in a fragmented and stilted way, making statements such as 'Go! Danger! Find!' to which Mori (and the reader) must apply meaning and interpretation (*AO* 39). This need for interpretation feeds into the sense of ambiguity regarding the fairies' intent, although it is unclear whether the resulting confusion comes directly from the fairies' language and behaviour, or indirectly through Mori's interpretation, the reader's interpretation, or some combination of these factors. Mori muses on the question of whether 'language really shape[s] the way people think' following her reading of Delaney's *Babel-17*, a book which stresses the importance of language in understanding others: 'when you learn another tongue', *Babel-17* character Rydra Wong states, 'you learn the way another people see the world', a concept which Mori constantly tries to grapple with as she struggles to understand those around her (*AO* 91, 89).¹³⁰

The alienation Mori feels, and the difficulty she experiences in understanding language, communication, and social cues—from both the fairies and the people around her— lends itself, as with the fairy bride texts, to reading her character as Neurodivergent (*AO* 13). Mori has several traits which could be read as Neurodivergent, including hyperlexia (she reads prolifically and references many of the books throughout the novel); synaesthesia ('it's funny how the sounds of words have colours'); intense special interests ('[m]y reading has been solace and addiction'); ritualistic behaviours ('I have my wooden key ring dangling from the zip of my cardigan [...] I touched it, to touch wood, and I saw them looking'); masking ('I played Nice Niece as well as I could'); meltdowns ('I don't want to cause a scene in the street or in

¹²⁹ Dunsany, p. 53.

¹³⁰ Samuel R. Delaney, *Babel-17* (London: The Orion Publishing Group Ltd, 2010), p. 20.

the shop, but I will if I have to’); sensory issues (‘The scones were as dry as the Kalahari’ and ‘I’d [...] have liked to feel his pullover to see if it was as soft as it looked’); and dyscalculia (‘Maths class may as well be taught in Chinese. It makes no sense to me [...] and if I ask her to explain again, it doesn’t make any more sense’) (*AO* 188, 24, 22, 181, 184, 96, 247, 232). These traits, combined with her physical disability, her Welshness, her displacement, and her differences in language, accent and communication, all contribute to the profound feelings of alienation that Mori feels around her English peers; ‘I will never understand this place’, she exclaims about her English school, ‘Sometimes, I’m not sure whether I’m entirely human [...] I don’t feel as if I’m part of their species’ (*AO* 62, 118, 119). Mori’s feelings of difference, or divergence, resonate with those of Lirazel in *The King of Elfland’s Daughter*, and the fairy wife of Llyn y Fan Fach, and echo the feelings expressed by neurodivergent writers such as Brady, Gadsby, Grandin, McAnulty, and Ryan, who have described how their divergence from a neurotypical norm makes them feel as if they are an alien on a different planet: ‘an anthropologist on Mars.’¹³¹

Morwenna’s sense of alienation and otherness leads to her yearning for ‘a karass’, a concept taken from Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*, which describes a group of people who are meaningfully linked at a cosmic level (*AO* 66). Mori uses magic to manifest such a group, and when it appears in the form of an ‘evening SF book club’ she is overcome that the magic has worked (*AO* 128). Reading plays a central part in Walton’s narrative, and Mori uses literature to both escape from, and make sense of the world. The combined power of words, imagination, and stories is in evidence throughout: the story itself is Morwenna’s creation; all perspectives are seen through her eyes, and, as already demonstrated, she and her sister had the power to transform their scarred, industrial home into the high fantasy landscape of *The Lord of the Rings*. ‘Poet in Greek means maker or builder’ Rydra Wong states in *Babel-17*, the written word brings ideas into creation—a sentiment which chimes with Yeats’ ideas regarding poetic visionaries.¹³² But whilst Mori is a creative writer, she is also —perhaps more importantly—a reader of both books and the world around her, and her interpretations

¹³¹ Sacks, ‘Foreword’, in *Thinking in Pictures*, by Grandin p. 13.

¹³² Delaney, p. 157.

are ultimately what endows these with meaning. Mori interprets many things through a magical lens when they could be pure coincidence, and the book is deliberately ambiguous on many points (including the exact events surrounding her sister's death, the nature of her mother's abuse, whether magic causes things, her father's drunken attempts to kiss her, and whether her mother and aunts are witches), but magic is real to Mori because she knows it to be so. Here, Walton allows the reader to imagine the details of these aspects of the story, acknowledging that whilst the writer weaves the initial magic, the reader is active in receiving the story. As *Babel-17's* Rydra Wong puts it, the reader is 'active even watching', adding their own unique layer of meaning to the object or text they behold; 'what you perceive you change.'¹³³ Feminist writer Angela Carter puts it another way, commenting that 'reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.'¹³⁴ The reader is the visionary within Walton's tale, Mori—the 'crippled', Welsh 'barbarian' who sees and speaks to fairies—is the one that perceives, interprets, and ultimately changes the world she reads.

As Mori's narrative unfolds it becomes clear that she is one 'other' surrounded by many, and her journey emphasises the importance of finding community and on fostering connection, whether you are a disabled, displaced teenage girl, a fairy, an elderly Jewish man, or a teenage boy mired in local scandal. As Walton herself says on the response to *Among Others*:

One does not expect to discover in one's forties that one is less odd than one had always supposed oneself — but it seems that I'd written about a quite common fannish coming-of-age experience of having books instead of people for friends and solace. Well, there we are then. Lots of us, apparently.¹³⁵

Through writing this book, it seems, Walton discovered her own karass. Community is important. The sense of alienation and otherness that the intersection of Mori's

¹³³ Delaney, p. 158.

¹³⁴ Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in *Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings Angela Carter*, ed. by Jenny Uglow (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 36-42 (p. 37).

¹³⁵ Joanne Walton, 'Among Others', *Jo Walton Science Fiction and Fantasy Writer* <<http://www.jowaltonbooks.com/books/among-others/>> [accessed 17 November 2024].

disability, Celticity, and her relationship with the fairies act as a narrative prosthesis to highlight, are very real, and they find a unique combination in her. However Walton's 'new wine' is the realisation that we are all 'Among Others'—people with complex intersecting aspects of identity—and that instead of viewing difference as brokenness, we should instead focus on the social change and justice needed to recognise, accept, and support diversity. As disability theorist Amanda Leduc writes:

Give me stories where disability is synonymous with a different way of seeing the world and a recognition that the world can itself grow as a result of this viewpoint [...] where disabled characters not only triumph but also change the world. Because disabled people have already done that countless times over, and in a world that continually tells them another story: one where they have no place at all. What might we accomplish, instead, in a space where the disabled body is front and centre in our stories.¹³⁶

Over the past three chapters I have noted where Celticity, disability, the fairies have been used in conjunction with each other in ways which resonate with Mitchell and Snyder's conception of the narrative prosthesis. *Among Others* can be read as a comment on the idea of prosthesis (the notion of an artificial device which enables a sense of functionality), and on how the effectiveness of such devices is dependent on how they are used, why, and on what kind of functionality we are aspiring to. In the novel's final confrontation, Mori pushes the cane the fairies give her away, after it transforms into a dagger which the fairies suggest she uses to kill herself. Mori's dependence on this stick can be read symbolically, as her dependence on the idea of the fairies—an illusion which, when leant on, is not assisting but hurting her. Instead of this prosthesis helping her, she must let go of it to truly begin to heal. I do not wish to suggest that Walton is arguing for disabled people to discard their prosthetics (Mori mentions she has multiple canes which are unconnected to the fairies), such an argument would be deeply problematic and ableist. Rather I read this as Walton's suggestion that, as readers, we can put aside the symbols of otherness that have historically served to marginalise, and frame people as less than human: demonising the Other makes no sense when you realise we are *all* Other. Turning Mori's fairy cane—her prosthetic—into a

¹³⁶ Leduc, p.234.

device which she must either let go of or die by, reveals the false dependence the reader has on narrative prostheses which conflate Celticity, disability, and the figure of the fairy, and *Among Others* urges us to recognise such opportunistic metaphors for what they are, and to let them go. Our stories are part of our social landscapes, and they can be powerful in shaping us individually and culturally, but our readings of them can be equally as transformative, allowing us to push back against the tropes which do not serve us, and to change our social landscapes in the process.

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Appendix A

The following infographic from the University of Birmingham illustrates the estimated co-occurrence of two or more Neurodivergent conditions. The University have compared the following nine Neurodivergent conditions: Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), Dyscalculia, Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), Speech Disorder, Tic disorders, Auditory Processing Disorder (APD). As the website states ‘the blue section of each pie graph represents the likelihood of that condition being present with the primary diagnosis (listed down the left side). Gaps represent a lack of statistical understanding in these areas.’ As demonstrated, the comorbidity of these conditions is high:

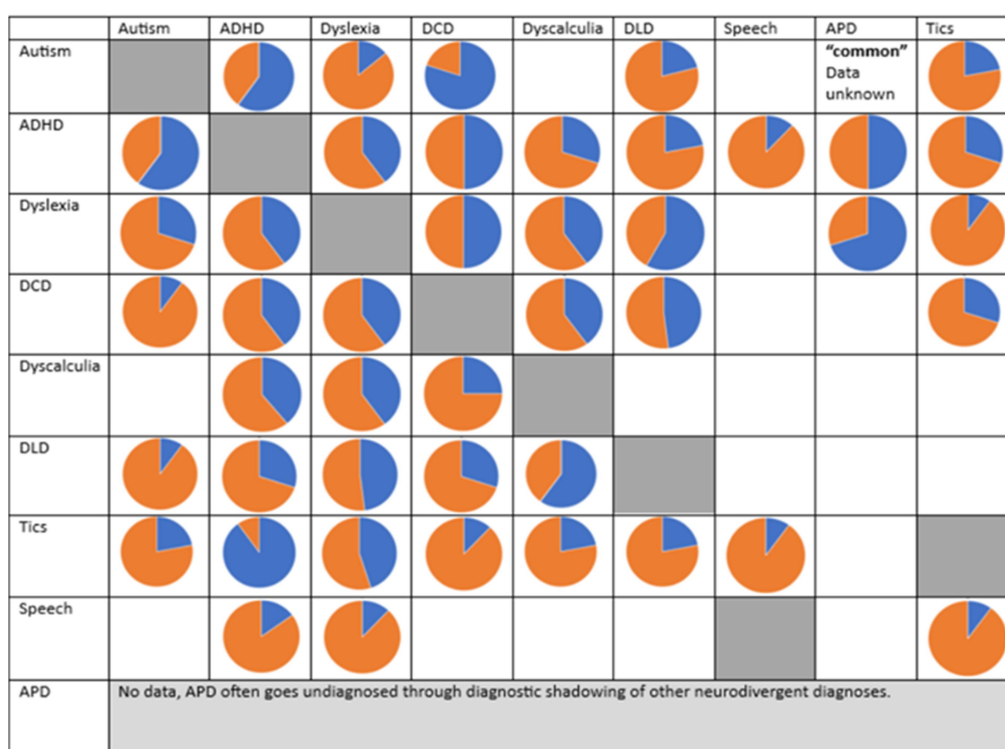


Figure 1. Table of co-occurring Neurodivergent conditions. University of Birmingham, School of Education, Department of Disability Inclusion and Special Needs
<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/departments/disability-inclusion-special-needs/resources/understanding-neurodivergence/co-occurrence> [accessed 17 November 2024]

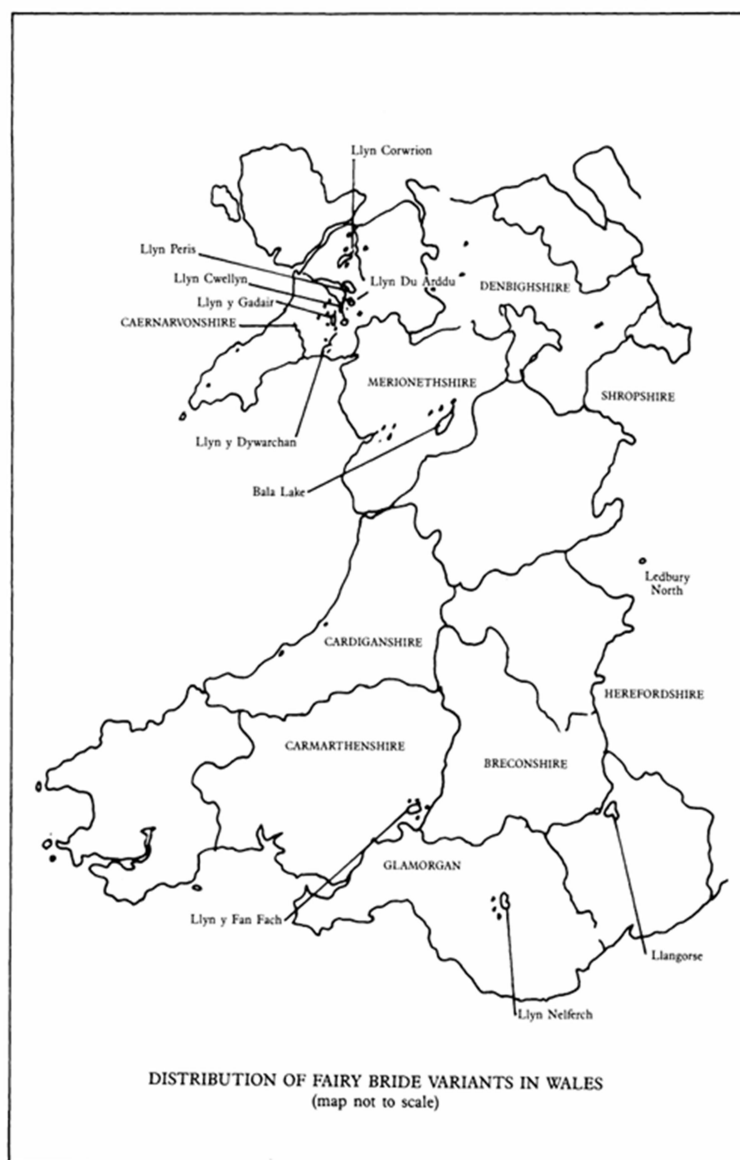
In addition to a high comorbidity with each other, Neurodivergent conditions are also known to have a high co-occurrence with other conditions, including sensory processing, mental health, bowel and bladder, neurological, hormonal, and muscle and joint conditions. A full discussion of the co-occurrence of Neurodivergent conditions with other conditions falls outside of the scope of this paper, but an overview can be found at University of Birmingham, School of Education, Department of Disability Inclusion and Special Needs
<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/departments/disability-inclusion->

[special-needs/resources/understanding-neurodivergence/co-occurrence>](#) [accessed 17 November 2024]

Appendix B

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JULIETTE WOOD



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Figure 2. Map demonstrating the distribution of fairy bride variants in Wales, taken from Juliette Wood, 'The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales', *Folklore*, 103 (1992), 56-72 (p. 64). The map illustrates how many of the fairy bride variants in Wales are clustered around *Llynoedd* [lakes or pools].