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An Exploration of Welsh Folklore and, Shadow Puppetry.

The aim of this essay is to document discuss and reflect on my own creative processes as I make a short piece in response to the call for works from the Copper Coast International Film Festival. The piece will be a video based around storytelling and Welsh mythology and will be a retelling of one of the Welsh stories I have come across performed as a shadow puppet show.

"Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here."- (Kidd, 2005). It is well known that stories are an essential part of being human and I want to explore the stories that make up my Welsh heritage. Aural story telling was a very big part of my childhood (be it sitting cross legged on the floor enthralled by a storyteller, one of the many storytellers I grew up with, or my father, reading out loud to me at night as I would follow along with the words on the page.) I have chosen to make this project in Welsh in order to challenge myself and utilise my Welsh but also to contribute to the few works in Welsh that are out in the world. Aural storytelling has such a rich presence within folklore including the Welsh tales. And even in the middle ages it seemed that storytelling was a necessary part of society. "It would seem that the original meaning of *cyfarwyddyd* was not "tale," but rather "traditional lore" or traditional learning that was necessary for society to function" (Davies, 1992). There is a need for stories, and I want to work with the ones I feel should be out there and rebuild a bridge for myself and other Welsh people that feel a disconnect from this part of our heritage. As well as making use of the Welsh tales I also want to incorporate shadow puppetry into the project, combining two forms of storytelling, aural and visual. Bring aural storytelling to an audience in the digital age. We are not in a time where we can sit cross legged on the floor and so the next best thing is to have it in video form.

My first call for research was into the stories themselves. It was my intention to either adapt or write my own story. I had plenty fanciful options to choose from. I was interested in the stories that referred to fairies. According to Wirt Sikes in 'British Goblins' (2010, pp. 12) there are the different types of fairies, "thus, we have 1. the *Ellyllon*, or elves; 2. the *Coblynau*, or mine fairies; 3. The *Bwbachod*, or household fairies; 4. the *Gwraegdd Annwn*, or fairies of the lakes and streams; 5. the *Gwyllion* or mountain fairies." It was the *Gwraegdd Annwn* that interested me the most as they connect the communications between this world and *Annwn* (The lower world overseen by the king of the fairies, *Gwyn ap Nudd*.) I came across T. Llew Jones's book '*Lleuad yn olau*' (1989, pp 59-66) that contained the story '*Morwyn Llyn y Fan*'. This story was remarkably similar to the three versions of the same story in 'British Goblins'. I decided to use a combination of all four versions as a basis for my own adaptation. In short, a young farmer is captivated by a dame by the lake (a *Gwraig Annwn*, wife of *annwn*) and instantly falls for her. Having lured her with bread and cheese, she agrees to marry him on one condition. If the farmer hits her three times without reason she will return to the lake, taking with her the magical livestock, she brought as her dowry.

Having decided on the story I then needed to start designing the puppets themselves. Lotte Reiniger was a very big influence when it came to designing the puppets and especially the set/background. Like Reiniger's puppets I wanted to have them be articulated "by means of wire hinges" (Staples, 2015) To animate them she would arrange the puppets below the camera on a glass table that was lit from below and expose one frame of film. She would then modify their positions ever so slightly and expose the next frame. (Staples, 2015). This way of stop motion

animation would be very time consuming despite the pleasing results, so I decided to go with a more traditional puppet method as used in Java puppetry from the Philippines where the puppets are manipulated in real time with “bamboo rods or concealed wires running up the centre of the figure and operated from below the screen” (Hartnoll and Found, 2003).

Following my initial research, the next step was to adapt the story. I wanted to bring the story to a modern audience but keep the charm of a traditional tale. To experiment with this, I decided to swap the male main character to a woman. In the original stories if the husband hit the Gwraig three times without cause she returns to the lake and he never sees her again. Except in the one version where they both seem to actually be in love with each other, the Gwraig and her mother create a floating island on the lake where the lovers can still meet. I wanted to continue with this more positive theme and so instead of being hit and then returning to the lake the father gives the two women a finite number (seven) of years together on the land, at the end of these seven years they cannot bear to part and so the father agrees that the woman can join the Gwraig on the condition that she enters the lake with a pure heart and a kind soul. In order to fit the story into a three-minute video I cut out the magical animals the Gwraig has as her dowry because, though interesting it was one element too many. Food, especially cheese and bread are key parts of the story. I included the cheese specifically, partly for the humour, but also as Wirt Sikes says it is a detail ‘so peculiarly welsh’ and appears not only in the original tale “Clad in his best array, and armed with seven white loaves and his biggest and handsomest cheese” (Sikes, 2010) but also in a surprising amount of the other tales.

I wanted the characters to have simple outlines but have a distinct element to distinguish them clearly as shadows. The main character is inspired by Shui Rhys from ‘British Goblins’ (Fig 1). Traditional welsh dress, especially the hat obvious nod to the welsh source. The Gwraegdd Annwn would have long flowing gowns with long hair as they are described by sikes. The father’s distinguishing feature would be a big beard as he is not described in the tales and a beard will stand out.

As a show the story will be performed against a screen, lit from behind. It is my aim to not be visible while manipulating the puppets. To aid this I will be manipulating the puppets with rods attached to the main moving parts of the puppet. Ideally, I would be able to record the show in one go however I am aware that I may come across some issues doing it this way and so am expecting to have to edit different takes/clips together.

While my aim was to not be visible, a wonderful example of being able to see the puppeteer is in *The Double life of Veronique* (*The Double Life of Veronique*, 1991). Though the puppeteer is visible, his face is obscured and the audience (on screen and in real life) are still enthralled and gripped by the performance. As such, if I come across an issue where it is not possible to be completely hidden from the camera, it will not take away from the performance.

Delving into the world of Welsh folktales has broadened my thinking as a creative person, and I have come across many elements that would be fantastic to inspire future projects. I have also learnt about myself and my own practice when it comes to writing, that fewer elements are better, at least to begin with. I also found that keeping the video capped to be relatively short, worked to my advantage as I had to narrow the story down instead of cramming too many elements in as I had tried to at the beginning. If I were to work on a similar project again, I would make sure to start with the bare bones of the story and add elements as needed. In a similar vein, one of the important considerations I had when starting this project was that, while I wanted to be ambitious with the designs, I also needed to avoid over complicating it so it would be achievable within the time constraints. I feel that I have done well in this regard, however, next time I will definitely be more disciplined with my time management.

Moving forward I am keen to continue my work with folklore, fairy tales and myths, especially through the medium of welsh. I would love to try this type of project again in my own time and experiment with different types of puppets and performance. Such techniques as using a clear acetate like the ancient Chinese puppets documented by Annie Rollins (2016). Using the clear plastic would allow for more features to be present on the puppet as it would not just be a silhouette. An interesting concept for further research and experimentation.



Fig.1 (Sikes, 2010, pp. 68)



Fig.2 (Rollins, 2016)

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