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This proposal will explore the three keywords: feminism, mythology and storytelling, focusing on some of Celtic mythologies most iconic female characters and deities. I intend to examine the stories that centre around these important characters and investigate the reasons why there are so few illustrative or artistic representations of these historic women. This proposal also will aim to analyse the importance of having strong female characters be recognised and celebrated through art. Through researching these three keywords, I hope to compose a question which I will endeavour to answer within my independent project.

Feminism

The topic of feminism is one that is highly disputed, whether that be in the context of art, literature, film or society in general. However, it is important to understand why feminist thoughts, figures and perspectives are important to know and understand. McRobbie and McCabe (1981, p. 6) state that feminism is about “having choices...being who you want to be – and finding out who you are in the first place”, from which I can infer that therefore feminism is inclusive to all genders in society not just women, surely meaning that everyone should be benefitting from its influences.

Most common knowledge surrounding the subject of Celtic mythology will likely have something to do with the legend of Merlin and King Arthur, as most children in the UK are taught something about the tale during school. And their retelling of it would usually centre around daring medieval battles involving knights and dragons, however little is ever said to the female characters such as Guinevere who’s most notable contribution to the tale is her

involvement in an iconic love story and her betrayal of such. Even less is widely known about Welsh myth and the impactful role that women played in medieval Welsh society.

Medieval concepts of chivalry and courtly love, further perpetuated by the idea of a 'knight in shining armour' have been carried through to the way we tell stories in the modern day. With female characters being painted as the helpless victims leading boring lives until the handsome prince comes along to save them, marry them, and live happily ever after (Orenstein, Baker-Sperry and Kaufman, 2020). The roles in these stories trickle down into the ways in which people behave in society, and due to these stereotypes, women are left without strong self-sufficient role models to learn from, as well as those who get rescued by the handsome prince.

Similarly with Celtic mythology and medieval history, women and their impacts on society have been somewhat overlooked and at times unseen altogether. In previous years it was thought that women had no real poignant role on medieval intellectual and institutional culture. However, Kerby-Fulton *et al* (2020, p. 213) shows that a common mistake within medieval studies is an "absence of evidence was confused with evidence of absence" and that women in fact did leave a significant footprint in medieval society and its inner workings. However not all the blame can be placed on the downfalls of a patriarchal and, at many times a misogynistic, society. Women in medieval society were at an almost constant disadvantage when it came to building institutions that preserved records. As well as, in many medieval contexts, gender offering a far less applicable basis of categorisation; "Women escape notice for the reason that the records for the most part treat them, simply,

as people” (Kerby-Fulton *et al.* 2020, p. 213-214). The same can also be said for artistic interpretations of prominent Celtic women, for which I have found few of.

Some of the most notable depictions of iconic Celtic women I could find come from the Pre-Raphaelite period. These representations are well in tune with the Pre-Raphaelite style of illustrating women in a way that has become synonymous with a specific feminine appearance (Marsh, 1987). In the case of the notorious character of Morgan le Fay, featured prominently in Arthurian legend as an evil sorcerous, the Pre-Raphaelites do not shy away from heavily featuring the frenzied behaviour we associate with such a character.



Fig. 1, *Morgan-le-Fay*, Frederick Sandys, 1864

In Sandys' (1864) interpretation of the character "he created a crazed, determined women governed by jealousy" (Hawksley & Hacking, 2003). Therefore, by all accounts, diminishing her to a fairly stereotypical depiction as a mad woman who resides in the woods. Granted however it is a painting rather than a piece of writing on the character, I feel that she deserves more justice in her artistic rendition. A further example of this can be seen with the character Guenevere, also taken from Arthurian legend.



Fig. 2 *La Belle Iseult*, William Morris, 1858

In Fig. 2, Morris depicts the Arthurian Queen Guenevere with an expression of anguish on her face, suggesting the "infidelity to her husband, King Arthur" as well as her room in a chaotic state, "deliberately disordered to emphasise her disordered mind and also

suggestive of her sexual relationship with Lancelot” (Hawksley & Hacking, 2003), diluting her character to one that is only of any concern when associated with men.

Mythology

When broaching the subject of mythology, most people immediately think of Greek or Roman mythology as those are the most widely spoken about as well as having a lot of representation in visual media. However, Celtic mythology does not seem to garner the same adoration outside of the Celtic nations.

During the 19th century in Ireland and Britain, the Celtic Revival arose with various artists and writers looking back to the folklore and art of Medieval Britain (National Galleries Scotland). This resulted in a lot of artworks involving characters featured in Celtic mythology and folklore. Looking back to the ancient past, artists such as John Duncan and Phoebe Anna Traquair were able to find inspiration for contemporary pieces of art (National Galleries, 2020).



Fig. 3, *Merlin and the Fairy Queen*, John Duncan,
no date

John Duncan was not only a painter and illustrator, but also a mural artist, stained glass designer and teacher. He became involved in the Celtic Revival through its leader Patrick Geddes for whom he painted murals for (Buckman). His work entitled *Merlin and the Fairy Queen* (no date) is exactly what I would expect a visualisation of an ethereal being such as a fairy to look like. The glow and serenity he has given her in comparison with the blunt green and red worn by Merlin really sets her apart as something mystical. Another brilliant contrast is the softness of the Fairy Queen's pale skin and blonde hair against the harsh angles and tone of Merlin's hair and beard. The Fairy Queen is truly set apart from the forest setting of the painting whereas Merlin blends in, emphasising her other worldly nature and

impressing upon any viewer her importance and status. She truly is the main character of this painting.

However, most of the Celtic Revival was seen in correlation with Scotland and the tales and folklore specific to that Celtic nation. And it leads me to question why the same level of interest isn't seen when it comes to Wales and its Celtic heritage, and why there isn't the same desire to look at it from an artistic perspective. Most artwork or illustrative work surrounding the theme of Celtic mythology is centred around Arthurian legend, however Wales is steeped in pieces of that story, with many landmarks and folk stories having connections to the legendary King. Arthur and his followers are linked with many places up and down Wales, including Excalibur Lake in Eryri, Arthur's Stone in the hills of Gower, Dinas Emrys near Beddgelert and Bardsey Island on the Llyn Peninsula (Visit Wales).

When it comes to looking at the female characters within Celtic mythology, I am immediately drawn to those who "expand the boundaries of social norms" (Shimpock, 2017). These include Rhiannon, Branwen and Arianrhod, who all present with qualities such as being independent and forthright within a Medieval context. These three characters also feature heavily within the Mabinogion, which is a collection of some of the earliest Welsh prose. The Mabinogion is good at displaying characters with much more fully developed personalities, giving them clear aims and motives. A good example being Branwen "who is portrayed as a generous noblewoman, take independent action after being dishonoured and shamed" (Shimpock, 2017).

As we see in many societies, the status of a Medieval woman was dependent on the status of the men in their lives, father, husband, or brother. And it is within domestic life that female characters of the Mabinogion would display their independence (Shimpock, 2017). Another good example of an independent Celtic female character is Rhiannon, who as a maiden independently sought out a relationship with the character Pwyll when the norm was for the men to initiate relationships. She chose to “craft her own destiny” (Shimpock, 2017) during a time when most marriages of nobility were arranged.

Storytelling

One of the fundamental objectives of an illustrator is storytelling. As illustrators, we can fit whole written narratives into one picture, tell a whole story without words and use a multitude of forms to do so. And this is not only limited to picture books or graphic novels. This section of my proposal will focus on the ways that storytelling can be achieved through other mediums, specifically the art of stained glass windows and panels, as well as searching for a deeper recognition of the theories surrounding storytelling.

When looking at storytelling through stained glass, the first thought to reach many people’s minds is religious imagery in churches and cathedrals. As literacy was not as widespread during the medieval and Renaissance periods, stained glass and other artworks were used by the church to provide teachings of Christianity to the wider population. Gothic churches featured windows filled with extensive narrative scenes in stained glass “like huge and colourful picture storybooks” (V&A Museum). Now however, the art of stained glass making

is most definitely overlooked, perhaps because access to education for things like reading and writing is now a human right so its original purpose has become overshadowed. However, it cannot be denied the beauty of a piece of stained glass.

As stated by Veenstra-Ashmore (2021) the greatest purpose of stained glass is its “ability to encompass and portray stories with singular images”. There is also much to be said about the special relationship between colour and light when discussing the importance and unique nature of stained glass as an artform. As light evolves throughout the day it can “bring attention to certain features and change the saturation of the colours” (Veenstra-Ashmore, 2021). In fact, the changing colours within a piece of stain glass are themselves a changing story while also often carrying “connotations that cannot be explained away with words” (Veenstra-Ashmore, 2021). Therefore, the importance of such an artform cannot be understated, while it is not only beautiful but also an intriguing and enlightening form of storytelling and reaching a perspective that cannot be achieved only with words.

Storytelling itself is a form of art, providing life with meaning, teaching the young and conveying culture. They can also connect different elements withing oneself and experiences, connecting to other cultures and providing a sense of wholeness “that the pieces of one’s life fit together and add up to something” (Miller, 2011, p. 2). Miller (2011) also argues that the most important processes when it comes to people and stories are “Projection, Identification, Empathy, Intimidation and Imagination” with listeners and/or viewers essentially putting themselves fully into the shoes of the story’s main characters. Projecting themselves on to the characters, identifying with them, feeling empathy for them,

all of which occurs through the listener's or viewer's imagination. They then may go on to imitate that character in certain ways. However, when it comes to storytelling exclusively through visual media, especially illustration, it is empathy, identification and imagination that they must cater to the most. Creating grand depictions of a character's emotional state is a fine line to walk as one mustn't step into being too on the nose. Allowing a viewer to interpret a character's emotional state without prior context could mean that it will reach a wider circle of individuals. They would be able to place their own life experiences on to it, with each experience varying vastly from each other. It is through this imagination would become involved, picturing the character in question undergoing your same experience. Perhaps this could be the new form of communication stained glass is perfect for, introducing a modern audience to ancient stories while still providing them with characters they can relate to and be inspired by.

The research I have conducted into these three keywords has led me to envision the direction of my writing for next year's independent project. Looking into feminism, mythology and storytelling and the correlation between the three subjects has opened many different potential avenues to explore further. Through the previous research, I have found that conversations and pieces of artwork surrounding female characters from Celtic mythology is sorely lacking, with a lot of focus being placed on Arthurian legend only. And with many artistic renditions of these characters painting them in a crazed and jilted light, especially when looking at pieces from the Pre-Raphaelite period. I have also discovered the lack of awareness or common knowledge surrounding Celtic mythology, especially when looking at it from a Welsh perspective. Celtic mythology specific to Wales is rich in diverse

and strong female characters, which is a hugely sought after commodity in visual media today. The Mabinogion is full of female characters who defy the social norms of medieval Wales and take up agency and independence when it comes to making important decisions around their future. My research has also shown me the true depths that stained glass art can reach. Not only is it a truly beautiful thing to look at, stained glass windows and panels are also a severely effective tool when it comes to storytelling and conveying narratives to a wider population. With each person having their own slightly different interpretation of the piece and its true inner meanings and the context behind it. I want my practice-based project to display these female characters in an iconic way that really impresses upon any viewer how important they were to Celtic mythology. My hope is that my work will develop people's interest in the history of the characters themselves, as I believe these characters should be celebrated more than they currently are.

This leads me to propose the following question to answer in my independent project: What is the importance of female characters within Celtic mythology? I will further my research with sub-questions such as why is Welsh Celtic mythology not widely discussed? What is the impact of stained glass narratives on cultures and religions? How may these have an effect on a modern audience?

My proposed practice for this project would be to illustrate five different panels of stained glass depicting select female characters from Celtic mythology that I believe deserve to be displayed in an iconographic light. I really want to impress the importance of these characters through my illustrations and will aim to display them in the way classic religious

stained glass presents religious figures in churches and cathedrals. If I then have the means and the resources to do so, I will create a finished stained-glass panel of my favourite design.

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Figure List:

Fig. 1, Sandys, F. (1864) *Morgan-le-Fay*, *Art UK*. Available at:

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Fig. 2, Morris, W. (1858) *La Belle Iseult*, *Tate*. Available at:

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