

Women In Celtic Mythology

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Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of human life.
Joseph Campbell

Mythology is the record of the gods and goddesses of an ancient time and culture. The mythology of a culture delineates the religious beliefs and spiritual practices of its people. It can, therefore, be assumed that the stories were almost a catechism for the people who believed in them. The stories would explain, in deep and metaphorical ways, the most important questions of life. These questions might include: what are the gods like, how does the world work, what is the meaning of life and how are we to behave. These are the same questions contemporary women and men struggle with today. Apparently, though the names of the gods and the details of the spiritual practices are different, people have always endeavored to make sense of life, and they have turned to some sort of religion to help them do this. As an illumination of the profound meanings of life, and as a guide to our spiritual potential, the myths are no less valuable to us today than they were to prehistoric peoples.

Though the Celts were the dominant people throughout much of Europe and the British Isles for more than a thousand years, we make little use today of any clues they may have sent us through their mythology. While the gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman mythologies are relatively well-known, we have not heard of the Morrigan, powerful Irish war goddess or of the adventures of Medb, warrior queen of Connacht for example. Yet Celtic tales are as rich in complexity and in spiritual clues as any others. The largest most complete body of written Celtic mythology is found in Irish mythology, and these myths are the subject of this article.

Overview of the Myths

The venacular mythology of Ireland as it has come down to us today can be arranged into three cycles which are roughly chronological. The earliest writings are found in the Mythological Cycle which details how the gods came to Ireland. The gods are members of the Tuatha de Danaan, or the family of the goddess Danu. The second cycle in Irish mythology is the Ulster Cycle. The central tale of this cycle is the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* or the Cattle Raid of Cooley which follows the pattern of the classic mythic hero quest with the hero CuChulainn as the central figure. And the final cycle of Irish Celtic mythology is the Fenian Cycle which centers around another mythic hero, Fionn MacCumhaill. This cycle is later in chronology than the other two and while the gods and goddesses of the Tuatha

de Danaan still occasionally play important parts in the stories, their influence is progressively diminished (Squire, 1996).

Regardless of when the stories of any of the cycles originated, however, all were written down between the ninth and twelfth centuries by Catholic monks (Rolleston, 1994). The long delay before the myths were recorded, and the fact that they were recorded by people who no longer believed in the pagan Celtic religion, probably had an impact on exactly how the myths were recorded. The extent of this impact is something we can only speculate about.

As the quote from Campbell at the beginning of this article reminds us, one purpose of myth is to help us find our own spiritual potentials. Toward this goal, the strong, insightful, courageous women who people Celtic myths can serve as fine guides and mentors. They have a great deal to say about the emotional or spiritual growth of women. With that in mind, let us now look at two well-defined female characters in Irish Celtic myths. The first is the powerful Queen Medb who is a goddess with the ability to confer kingship on a human man. The second is Grainne, a human woman who often behaves in superhuman ways.

Queen Medb

In Irish mythology no female character is more well-known than Medb, great queen of Connacht. She is the instigator of the central tale of the Ulster Cycle, the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, in which the hero CuChulainn must single-handedly defend Ulster against the rest of Ireland. Ostensibly, this entire war is begun because of Medb's desire for a prize bull. No other female figure in Irish mythology is so familiar, or so controversial. Since a great deal is written about Medb she is an excellent character to use to explore female attributes and actions. She must be explored on two levels, however, the literal level of what is written about her and the metaphorical level of what she symbolizes.

On a literal level, Medb is an evil and misguided woman. She instigates a large and bloody war over a matter of pride. Medb does not have a match for a magnificent bull which Ailill, her husband, owns, and she marshals her vast forces in order to steal a similar bull from Ulster. During the epic which follows, Medb is variously portrayed as headstrong, illogical, unfeeling, promiscuous, and ultimately defeated. She is the repeated butt of chauvinistic jibes and warnings. However, the same traits which are portrayed as negative in a literal re-telling, could actually be positive traits if Medb is viewed metaphorically as a goddess. Medb as a goddess of sovereignty is allowed, even expected, to act in certain ways. Let us look from these two perspectives at several instances in Medb's behavior.

Perhaps the most noticeable of Medb's attributes is her blatant sexuality. She is known to have had at least nine lovers and indeed tells her husband, Ailill, that she, "never had one man without another waiting in his shadow" (Kinsella,

1969, p. 53). *The Tain* makes it clear that this sort of sexual activity is a bad thing which can lead only to destruction. Additionally, when faced with such a promiscuous woman men are well-advised to stay away but cannot be considered responsible for their actions. After Ailill catches Fergus sleeping with Medb, Ailill jokes and invites Fergus to a friendly boardgame saying, "I lay first fault straight at women's own sweet swellings and loving lust valorous Fergus" (Kinsella, 1969, p. 105).

However, this same promiscuity is perhaps the strongest evidence of Medb's goddess standing (Clark, 1991). The function of a sovereignty goddess was to confer kingship on a man who would be a righteous and noble king. Medb's job as sovereignty goddess was the protection of the people and land of Ireland. No king could rule unless he had been chosen by the goddess, and had slept with her. This showed in a metaphorical way that the land (the goddess) and the king had been mated. He would now bring about prosperity and fertility because he had been accepted by the land. Medb's ability to confer kingship on the men she slept with is a strong sign of her goddess standing. She slept with, and conferred kingship, upon Conchobar of Ulster, but later withdrew her favor because of his pride. Conchobar then raped her showing his wish to take the kingship by force. This incident is one of the causes of the war between Ulster and Connacht. Clearly, the goddess could not allow an unworthy man to take the kingship by force. Taken from this perspective we have a goddess protecting her people as opposed to a promiscuous and wanton woman.

Another attribute of Medb which can be viewed from two perspectives is her willingness and ability to bring about death and destruction. As a warrior woman, Medb brings about the death of many, many of her followers. Taken only in human terms her callousness and illogical thinking are sources of derision. For example, early in *The Tain*, Maeve notices that one troop in her army, the Galeoins, are far superior to any other troop. She wishes to be rid of them because they will take all the credit for any victories. Ailill proposes to send them away, but Medb also rejects this.

"Well, what are we going to do with them," Ailill said, "if they can neither stay nor come?" "Kill them," Medb said. "That is a woman's thinking and no mistake!" Ailill said. "A wicked thing to say." (Kinsella, 1969), p.. 66). From this exchange it is clear that a politically powerful human woman is dangerous and should not be followed.

However, Clark (1991), reminds us that the "arbitrary judgments of a goddess must seem unjust and illogical when they are given by a human being" (p. 133). The very fact that Medb can wield so much power over life and death is a sign that she is a goddess. Goddesses usually wreak destruction through fear and magic, but Medb, in her humanized form, uses her political influence, and actually mounts her chariot and goes into battle. She brings about the deaths of kings and heroes, and serves the goddess function of harbinger of death. Her decisions,

such as the wish to kill the Galeoins, would seem inexplicable in human behavior, yet the wisdom of the goddess is not to be questioned or mocked. In the sense that the Galeoins were placing themselves above the goddess, they were bringing about their own destruction.

Medb displays several other attributes of a goddess. According to Green (1993), she not only confers kingship and brings about destruction, but she also has superhuman speed, can communicate with animals and can change at will from hag to beautiful girl. These are all traits which demonstrate goddess standing, but as Medb is humanized these traits are no longer suitable for a mortal woman. Indeed, Clark (1991) notes that not only is Medb's status diminished as she is deprived of her goddess standing, but her characteristics are no longer suitable to the times, and so she is treated condescendingly. Mallory (1992) would agree. In fact, Mallory states that Medb's character is not only diminished in status, but is actually given a negative characterization as an anti-goddess and a failed sovereign.

Clearly, Medb is a much more complex character than the simply evil, misguided woman she is superficially portrayed as. To be understood her subtle fidelity to the duties of the goddess must also be explored. Taken at this level Medb displays a tenacious ability to protect her people. She performs her goddess duties despite the calumny of everyone around her, and despite almost constant derision. This steadfastness in the face of adversity could serve as a role model to many of us today. But must a female character be a goddess in order to teach us anything? Let us turn our attention now to Grainne, a human and very different woman from Medb.

Grainne

The story of Grainne and Diarmuid is part of the Fenian Cycle of Irish myths which is the most recent historically. It is an elopement tale in which Grainne is betrothed to a much older and very powerful man, Fionn MacCumhaill, but elopes with Diarmuid, her choice of husband. Fionn chases the pair in a jealous rage throughout Ireland, but they are able to elude him through their own cunning and the help of the love god, Aengus Og. Eventually an uneasy truce is called, and Diarmuid and Grainne are able to live peaceably for many years. Fionn's anger never really abates, though, and he contrives to kill Diarmuid in the end (Gregory, 1993).

In this tale, Grainne is a strong and challenging character who moves the action forward repeatedly by the force of her will. Throughout the story, we can also see Grainne as a girl growing into a woman. She ends at a very different place developmentally than she began.

Grainne is the daughter of the high king of Ireland, and is described as elegant, graceful and with the best shape and speech of any woman in the world.

Certainly, as the story opens Grainne is presented as the stereotypical pleasing woman. She is pampered, but a bit headstrong. Her father has ensconced her in a sunny house with many servants, but she will not consent to marry any of her various suitors. Then, as if on a whim, she consents to marry Fionn sight unseen. When Fionn arrives for the wedding feast, Grainne sees for the first time how old he is, and wishes to be saved. She first appeals to Fionn's son to take her away. When he refuses, Grainne goads Diarmuid into leaving with her.

Throughout the first part of the story we see Grainne acting in stereotypically girlish ways. She is flippant and coy. She often acts without thought or design. We see no real commitment to anyone besides self. She is not even truly committed to Diarmuid except as the tool she needs for her escape. These traits are very usual in a young person. Young adults are generally working out what they stand for, and can appear fickle as they move from one cause to another. They often are so concerned about self that they fail to consider the needs of others when they act. Grainne perfectly displays the selfishness and impetuosity of youth in the early part of the story.

As the tale progresses, Grainne slowly and haltingly approaches her adult self both physically and emotionally. There are several turning points for her along the way, and at each passage she emerges stronger and more self-directed. First, by making the choice to leave Fionn, she takes control of her destiny in her first intentional way. She not only decides she will not marry Fionn, but she uses every power available to her to accomplish this. She has some magical powers available and uses these to produce a sleeping potion which puts all but Diarmuid and his friends asleep. She also has the power of the *geis*. This is a taboo which can be placed on a warrior, and which he must obey under pain of death and dishonor. Grainne places a *geis* on Diarmuid which is powerful enough to compel him to take her to safety. At this point of the story, Grainne is the more adult and powerful of the two characters. Diarmuid so far is allowing himself to behave as a pawn.

As with most development, however, Grainne's push to adulthood slides backward a bit as life wears on. During the couple's early flight, Grainne is petulant, whining and demanding. She is tired; she wants a horse; she wants to be carried. For a time, Diarmuid tries to comply, but when Grainne wants Diarmuid to carry her, he finally balks at her demands. This is a second turning point for Grainne. Faced with the choice of going back to Fionn or going forward under her own power, she chooses to go forward and finds that she is much stronger than she expected. At this point she becomes much more of a true partner to Diarmuid as they help each other escape from Fionn. We see Grainne slowly beginning to think of others more, and act in a purposeful and powerful way.

Finally, near the end of the tale, the couple faces a turning point from which both emerge changed and matured. Throughout the long days and years of flight Diarmuid and Grainne have traveled together and helped each other, but

have not become a couple sexually. Diarmuid refuses to take Grainne as his wife, because to do so would break the honor code he had toward Fionn. Grainne becomes increasingly impatient with Diarmuid's refusals, and when a stranger makes camp with them, Grainne flirts with the man and goads Diarmuid into a jealous rage. In the quarrel that follows Diarmuid kills the stranger and Grainne sinks a knife into Diarmuid's thigh. When Grainne is calmer and apologizes, she finds that Diarmuid has not removed the knife. She is forced to do this herself. According to Caldecott (1992), this represents the first time Grainne takes responsibility for her own actions. As a result, Grainne becomes a mature, responsible adult able to enter into a full union with Diarmuid. They become partners in the full sense of the word and serve as equal helpmates throughout the rest of the story.

In looking at the character of Grainne, it is clear that she changes in ways that represent increasing maturity and wisdom. Her character is much-improved by the incidents surrounding her journey. But, what of Diarmuid? Does his association with Grainne help him in any way? His character compared at the beginning of the story to the man he is at the end would suggest that Diarmuid's association with Grainne was indispensable to his own growth.

Diarmuid is also young at the beginning of the story, and he is severely rule-bound. He acts according to his honor code as a Red Branch Knight, and is used as a pawn because he is willing to follow the rules of a *geis*. Until the quarrel in which Grainne knifes him, Diarmuid is even unwilling to admit his sexual nature. At each step of the way, he needs Grainne to take the initiative and compel him to do the difficult tasks which will lead to his maturation. Her very presence sets him on his hero journey in which he comes through ever-more difficult tests and trials.

Besides the tests Diarmuid successfully undergoes during his flight with Grainne, she is specifically responsible for bringing him to physical and spiritual manhood. It is the incident with the knife that achieves this. With the knife still lodged in his thigh, Diarmuid retreats to the ocean to think things over. According to Caldecott (1991), this is the moment when Diarmuid finally begins to understand the complexity of life. He begins to question the rules he has followed so slavishly, and in so doing begins to take personal responsibility for his actions and his desires. It is after his ponderings by the ocean that he consummates his relationship with Grainne, and they go onward as a real couple. Grainne's value to Diarmuid is summed up by Markdale (1975) in the following words:

...after considerable effort from the woman (comparable to the labour of childbirth), man can reach the decisive stage that will make him a real man, but only on condition that he breaks all links with the past and transgresses the original prohibition. (p. 226).

Clearly, Grainne displays many traits which could act as clues to the spiritual potentialities of women today. Grainne is not perfect. She is immature when young, and impetuous even later in life. She accepts these limitations, but does not allow them to limit her. As she matures, and despite her imperfect nature, Grainne becomes a self-determined, responsible, risk-taker who eventually leads not only herself, but her husband and children to a mature and productive life.

Conclusion

In her work, *The Serpent and the Goddess* (1989), Mary Condren considers the place of myth in an age of objectivity. She says, "History is not the objective science it was once thought to be but a particular form of power and knowledge, involving the manipulation of academic and political resources and serving to ensure the dominance of certain groups" (p. xxiii).

Keeping this quote in mind it is important to remember that every Irish myth was written down by monks of early Irish Christianity. Every myth, then, has been recorded through a male lens, and superficially will hold many stereotypical views of women. If myths are viewed only literally, therefore, there will be little of positive value for women.

But myths are not meant to be viewed objectively or literally. They are rich in symbolism and subtle depth. They must be examined on a deeper, metaphorical level to be of worth to us. By looking at the more sublime level of meaning concerning Grainne or Medb or a host of other strong female characters in Irish mythology, we are able to access the "clues to the spiritual potentialities" which Joseph Campbell cites as a major value of myths. All of us can see these women as powerful and heroic role models as we undertake the hero journeys of our own lives.

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