Perilous Shores: The Unfathomable Supernaturalism of Water in 19th-Century Scottish Folklore

Jason Marc Harris

Florida Institute of Technology

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation


Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol28/iss1/2
Abstract
Discusses the origin and significance of water superstitions and the varied array of water creatures in 19th-century Scottish folklore; compares these folkloric elements to similar stories from Norway to Benin to ancient Greece.

Additional Keywords
Scottish folklore; Superstitions; Water creatures in folklore; Water in folklore

This article is available in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol28/iss1/2
Perilous Shores: The Unfathomable Supernaturalism of Water in 19th-Century Scottish Folklore

Jason Marc Harris

From the seas troubled by dragons, to the lochs haunted by kelpies and water horses, to shores and banks watched by fairies and glaistigs, the islands, coasts, and Highlands of Scotland present borderlands where the role of the supernatural in folk tales and legends articulates a sense of the local identity, rugged beauty, and frightful peril of these dynamic waters.1 The power of water in Scottish folklore to present both a supernatural threat and defense exemplifies the riddle of deciphering the code of the many checks and balances of folk beliefs. Highland lore establishes the high water mark on a beach as protection against spectral assault, and generally spirits are reputed not to cross running water; however, in the countless variants of folk narrative there are tales that contradict these truisms of folk metaphysics.2 To interpret these permutations of meaning in the folk tradition of water one must turn to language itself as a fluid

1 The Scottish loch is particularly subject to monstrous predation and ominous visitations: “In addition to legends of the beithir-nin (venomous serpent) and uile-bheist (dragon; also a’ bheist) […] [t]here is hardly a district without some legend of a Linne na Baobh (Badbh): very often the water-horse is represented as a kind of creature covered all over with rags and ribbons, typifying the wind-tossed surface of the waves. His appearance is a portent of a drowning […]” (Henderson xxiv). Parsons suggests that the historical distribution of sea turtles and wayward patterns of manatees might account for some of the tales:

Detailed descriptions of animals with unique characteristics, such as narwhals and leather back turtles, indicate that the distribution of these animals has encompassed Scottish waters for decades, or even hundreds of years, before being recorded by modern scientists. […] The sightings of mermaids that bear an uncanny resemblance to manatees also suggest that vagrant individuals could have been sighted in Scottish waters, a theory which is rendered plausible by the recent report of a tropical dolphin species […] that normally has a distribution similar to that of manatees. (78-79)

2 Folk metaphysics refers to how the supernatural impacts the physical world: the countless implicit and explicit cause-and-effect relationships that are suggested by the magical principles extant in folklore.

Mythlore 28:1/2, Fall/Winter 2009 ca 5
borderland where the significance of any statement is contested by those who strive for the high ground in a battle of wits. Scottish wit-battles—especially between fairies and humans—demonstrate how a clash of perspectives rhetorically reshapes the contours of meaning, much as the shoreline is reformed by the breaking waves. Surveying the range of Scottish supernatural folklore gathered in the nineteenth century associated with watery frontiers reveals the fundamental struggle to define identity and power amid a chaotic world whose borders ebb and flow with countless perils.

One of the prevailing tendencies of folk legends is that the intrusion of the supernatural into the everyday world most often occurs along the borders between the wild and the civilized, whether it be on the edge of the woods, near the entrance to the underworld (a cave), or along the bank of a river or shore of a lake, sea, or ocean. Part of the reason for this dynamic of a metaphysical contact zone along a shore is that it is the realm where the known and unknown worlds collide—how to define the nature of existence (from God to ghosts and fairies) depends upon the cultural beliefs that compete along that border for interpretative dominance. The shore as a border for supernatural and cultural tensions is not unique to Scotland; its quality as a dangerous frontier is crystallized in the beliefs of the Saami (once called “Lapps,” they have reclaimed their ethnic identity by using their own native language for their name) dwelling in Northern Norway, as Robert Paine reports:

for the villagers, the Little People and the raw’ga [revenants from the sea]—located on the boundaries of tundra (with pastoral Saami) and sea (with Norwegians) – are lightning rods for the traumas and conflicts (with their brew of fear, stigma, ambiguity, and ambivalence) that villagers experience in their betwixt-and-between world. (360)

Globally, borders are historically fraught with anxiety: invaders must enter a land at its borders, and as the Celts discovered, the Norse arrived with their boats on their islands and coastlines. When Beowulf first arrives on the shores of Denmark from Sweden, he is looked at with suspicion as leading a vanguard of potential invaders or as “spies scouting out the land of the Danes” (Beowulf III.253). Likewise, pirates after plunder presented a predatory threat, and thus the shoreline also presents a threshold between lawful order and dangerous chaos.

---

3 The metaphysical contact zone refers to sites, whether spatial or temporal, where perspectives on the nature of reality conflict with other alternatives. The borders between countries are common metaphysical contact zones because belief systems come into direct conflict. See Harris 103, especially footnote 2.
In the folktales of Scotland, the shore as a place of peril and the identification of giants with pirates manifests itself in those narratives where kidnappings sometimes take place on the shore, and some giant or other assaulting force absconds over the water. For example, in “The Rider of Grianaig, and Iain the Soldier’s Son” three daughters of a knight are captured by a “beast” which delivers them to three giants who desire them for marriage: “There came a beast from the ocean and she took them with her, and there was no knowledge what way they had taken, nor where they might be sought” (John Francis [hereafter J.F.] Campbell, *Popular Tales* 3:1).

It is notable that this “beast” has female gender, for in many Scottish tales the fierceness of the sea is characterized as a powerful and preternatural hag whose form and force appear to embody the aspects of a stormy sea, as John Gregorson [hereafter J.G.] Campbell describes in his analysis of an encounter between the warrior-band of the Fiona and a female being referred to as the “Muileartach,” which is also the name of the Eastern Sea: “She is ill-streaming (*mi-shruth*), abounding in seas (*muir-each*), bald-red (*maol-ruadh*), white-maned (*muing-fhionn*). She has long streaming hair, and is finally subdued by being let down into the ground to the waist” (J.G. Campbell, *The Fians* 133). How this being softly yet potently devastates Oscar, who is the strongest of the Fians, evokes the massive power that deceptively dwells beneath the rolling waves: “she laid her hand gently upon him; and he himself heard the noise of every bone breaking in his body” (138). A variant of the tale has diction similarly suggestive of the sea when describing the movements of this tremendous being: “There was seen coming over the waves / A hideous apparition—a heavily rocking object” (142). J.G. Campbell denies that there is any trace of historical truth in the battle, but another Campbell and respected Scottish folklore collector, J.F. Campbell, asserts that the Gaelic tale is actually a “remembrance of some real invasion of Ireland by the sea-rovers of Lochlann in which they got the worst of the fight, and that has been preserved traditionally in the Hebrides ever since” (qtd. in *The Fians* 132).

The behavior of this Scottish giant is also in keeping with the historical-linguistic derivation of the Scottish word for giant, as Donald Mackenzie explains:

The Scottish Gaelic term *famhair* (Irish *fomhor*, early Irish *fomór*) signifies not only “giant” but “pirate.” [...] Watson shows that the Fomorians were in old Irish accounts represented as pirates who ravaged the coasts of Ireland, laying the people under tribute. (Mackenzie 117)

The coastlines were and are a source of cultural transmission as well as a site of anxiety about invasion. Fishermen, traders, and travelers could cross the North
Channel of the Irish Sea and carry their own tales along with their wares and catch to Scotland. Mackenzie in fact claims that the Fionn tales were “imported from Ireland” and, transformed locally, the “Fians became Fomorians, or giants, and acquired the characteristics of these Fomorians” (112). Thus, out of the sea can come altogether new perspectives that reshape the cultural heritage of a land; just as the shapes of the Fians became more massive, so too the body of tales available to the Irish and the Scots grew from their intercourse during these coastal passages.

The supernatural threats that inhabit the waters of Scotland comprise a veritable bestiary: assorted fairies, glaistigs, dragons, water-bulls, water-horses, kelpies, selkies, blue men, and mermaids. It is generally known that the fairies have underwater kingdoms besides their underground mounds, and the sea as a dragon’s abode is also widely known to students of mythology and folklore. Multiple dragon-tales include a great wyrm that comes to the land out of the sea, such as the one from the Northern islands of Scotland claiming that the people are willing to sacrifice seven virgin maids to each week, according to the Orkney narrative of “Assipattle and the Muckle Mester Stoor Worm” (Marwick qtd. in Crossley-Holland 87; see also J.F. Campbell’s The Celtic Dragon Myth [Dragon]). It is also said that one of the great enemies of the Fionna, the immense sea-hag, Cailleach Bheur, can spawn dragons from her corpse by contact with the sea: “A worm creeping out from one of her bones will on reaching water become a fierce dragon” (Mackenzie viii). Supernatural tales of the sea in Scottish legends and hero tales repeatedly emphasize the ocean as a renewable resource of perils.

The most universal being that is found in folklore involving water in Scotland is the mermaid. Obviously, the mermaid is not unique to Scotland (indeed sightings recently have been claimed in Israel; see Waghorn), but the range of Scottish tales and beliefs about the mermaid exemplifies the dynamic of ambivalence that people have towards the powers of the water as well as the checks and balances of folk metaphysics. J.F. Campbell’s notes in The Celtic Dragon Myth suggest that when the mermaid asks the fisherman for his “first son” when the boy is three years old that this is a remnant of ritual human sacrifice to the ocean deities (34-35). The dynamic of sacrifice resonates in the interaction between this supernatural being (the mermaid) and the starving fisherman, who receives plenty of fish for his family in exchange for the eventual gifting of his son to this watery power. The ocean as a power that is fertile as

---

4 J.F. Campbell offers numerous mythological comparisons to this implicit sacrifice, including how “it is a custom in Dahomey [present-day Benin in West Africa] to sacrifice a man occasionally to Hu, the god of the sea” (Dragon 129n4).

5 However, the fisherman ultimately refuses to turn over his son, and after being granted numerous extensions by the mermaid, he sends the boy off into the world to escape the
mermaid's clutches. Eventually, she swallows him whole, but the young man's wife is able to trick the mermaid into disgorging him because of her cupidity for jewelry (78-80).

The supernatural powers of the mermaid to tell the future align her metaphysically if not generically with fairy spirits such as the banshee, who honors a household by wailing to prognosticate death, or the washer at the ford, who wrings the bloody shirts of the soon-to-be-deceased (see J.G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld* 22-23). In one tale, a mermaid is washing “more than thirty smocks and shirts, all horribly dabbled with blood,” and soon afterwards a church falls down, killing thirty-six people (Miller 301-303). It is unclear whether the mermaid's ritual washing has a causal role in the church collapse, or was simply an example of her performing her role as a being whose actions are harbingers of the inevitable. Regardless, the act of washing those bloody shirts was “with a malignant pleasure” (Miller 301), and her well-known murderous tendencies are reinforced in Highland tales of how to evade her pursuit of ships, as reported by J.G. Campbell: “Sailors throw barrels overboard, and while she spends her time examining these they make their escape” (*The Gaelic Otherworld* 108).

Despite their destructive natures, mermaids sometimes have mortal lovers. However, they are not amorous creatures that seek out romance, and it is generally only through precise measures that men gain their contractual allegiance. As it is for selkies (supernatural beings that appear as humans on the shore but as seals in the water), men who covet a mermaid as a domestic partner can only obtain this through stealing the scaly covering of the mermaid when she has removed it while temporarily on shore, or otherwise preventing her from entering the water. It is only at this border between land and sea that a mortal mermaid's clutches. Eventually, she swallows him whole, but the young man's wife is able to trick the mermaid into disgorging him because of her cupidity for jewelry (78-80).

The tale of a man securing a seal-woman (selkie) for his wife through stealing and hiding her sealskin is widespread: “ML [Migratory Legend] 4080 [...] there are hundreds recorded all along the Atlantic coasts from Ireland to Iceland.” There are also legends of people having families from these unions between man and seal-woman: “[I]n the story of the ‘Selkie Boy’ of Breckin in North Yell and another match which is held responsible for an actual hereditary disability in Orkney, involving a thickening and hardening of the skin on the palms of the hands until they are as clumsy as the reputed ancestor's flippers - these seem to be unique to the Northern Isles” (Bruford 122). For an analysis of the selky stories, including the theme of human and selky breeding, of the nineteenth-century writer Fiona
suitor can hope to overcome the primal power of the mermaid’s link to her element, and it is often only a temporary victory.

More ambiguous than the threat of sea-hags, mermaids, and dragons is the nature of glaistigs, water-bulls, water-horses, and kelpies. Folklorists from the nineteenth to the twentieth century have debated how to define the glaistig, which is thought to be either a fairy or a mortal given fairy powers. The glaistig’s identity is one of the murkiest of all supernatural beings, since tales range from it being a type of vampire to a helpful but sometimes mischievous spirit. Regardless, the glaistig is yet another supernatural being that haunts Scottish waters, although it was known to occasionally offer domestic aid: “[the] glaistig […] is associated mainly with domesticated animals and with the agricultural mode of life, and is attached to certain families, but has a sinister aspect as a river fury” (Mackenzie vii).

Unlike glaistigs, water-horses would not willingly perform service to a household; encounters with water-horses were always considered dangerous. Although familiarity with them has decreased in current Scottish folklore, water-horses were once considered almost ubiquitous in the Highlands, as J.G. Campbell asserts:

[I]n olden times almost every lonely freshwater lake was tenanted by one – sometimes by several – of these animals. […] It was said to make its approaches […] as a young man, a boy, a ring, and even a tuft of wool […] any woman upon whom it set its mark was certain at last to become its victim. (The Gaelic Otherworld 109)

Like the mermaid and selky, mortals can gain power over water-horses (usually this result is obtained by casting a special bridle over them to compel menial service—see for example “Water-horse of the Dark Lake” [MacDougall Folk and Hero Tales 195]), but they are not sought as mates, although water-horses in human guise often hunt women as victims.

There are some tales where it is the water-bull that comes to the rescue of maidens whose virtue and life were threatened by the lascivious water-horse (see J.F. Campbell Popular Tales 4:236). Traditionally water-bulls were not a

---

MacLeod (William Sharp) see Harris 180-189. Both mermaids and selkies will often long for the sea, and many tales recount how they eventually find their animal covering and return from whence they came.

7 See Mackenzie 240 for his critical challenge of J.G. Campbell’s claim that the glaistig (spelling varies) was once human and is not a malicious being. See MacDougall for examples of the glaistig as a helper, such as “The Glastig or Maid of Glen Duror”: “the night they left the pail full of milk for her, they would find everything right next day” (Folk Tales and Fairy Lore 269). Regarding the glaistig as a vampire, see “The Four Hunters and the Four Glastigs” (259-261).

10 @ Mythlore 107/108, Fall/Winter 2009
threat; J.G. Campbell declares that the water-bull “unlike the water-horse, was of harmless character” (115). Just as there can be offspring as the result of human and selky coupling, so too water-bulls can mate with domesticated cows: “Even to this day […] if a young heifer gives much trouble in the milking, and is recalcitrant and reluctant to have her head bound up in her stall, and her feet confined in the buarach or milking shackle, it may be gravely suspected that she has more or less of the old water-bull blood in her veins” (Stewart 41).

Unlike the mild water-bull, one of the most dangerous and ambiguous supernatural denizens of water that haunt both the rivers of the Highlands and the lakes and streams of the Lowlands of Scotland is the kelpy. It lures or coerces its prey into the merciless waters to be drowned and devoured, or can cause flooding spontaneously to capture a person attempting to ford a stream. There is some confusion over how to define the kelpy, and even debate about what shape it takes. Folklorist Katharine Briggs claims that it is the “best-known of the Scottish Water-Horses” and it can “assume human form” but that its “most usual shape was that of a young horse” (Briggs 246). However, Stewart and J.G. Campbell both insist that water-horses do not haunt rivers, only lakes, and in their estimation of Scottish lore, the two beings are distinct:

Some writers speak as if the water-horse were to be identified with it, but the two animals are distinctly separate. The water-horse haunts lochs, the kelpie streams and torrents. The former is never accused of swelling torrents any more than of causing any other natural phenomenon, nor of taking away children, unless perhaps when wanted to silence a refractory child. (J.G. Campbell, The Gaelic Otherworld 115)

Despite his attempt to make this clear distinction between water-horse and kelpy, J.G. Campbell’s allusion to how there may be some occasions where the water-horse is mentioned as an abductor of children nevertheless belies his efforts at clearly separating these two channels of tradition. Campbell’s point here that a storyteller may alter the general tendencies of tradition by concentrating on a particular purpose—disciplining a “refractory child”—also underscores how the meaning of a particular folk narrative or belief is malleable to the objectives of the informant who articulates that narrative. Moreover, one of Campbell’s informants asserts that he “cannot remember of ever hearing what shape they were of”—this very uncertainty of even clarifying the form of this aqueous predator highlights the amorphous fluidity of Scottish supernatural water lore (115).

The difficulty in defining the kelpy in comparison to related beings, such as the water-horse, is a similar challenge that faces those who would comprehend the nature of the blue men. According to J.G. Campbell, one of his informants in Skye connected the blue men to the Christian folkloric framework
of the fairies' derivation from the one-third of fallen angels who were banished to the earth since they chose to abstain from the war in heaven. Campbell's informant divided this group of fallen-to-earth angels: "The fallen angels were driven out of Paradise in three divisions. One became the Fairies on the land, one the blue men in the sea, and one the nimble men (fir chuis), i.e. the northern streamers [Northern lights?] or merry dancers in the sky" (107). This attempt to reconcile the blue men with a generalized etiology of fairy origins underscores the ultimately untenable and regional quality of such a venture towards rigid systematizing when it comes to supernatural lore: "In Argyllshire the blue men are unknown, and there is no mention of the merry dancers being congeners of the Fairies" (107).

Beyond pirates and denizens of the water, another physical feature that plagues both land and sea is volatile weather. Sailors warned Hugh Miller against whistling because of their correlative belief that it could raise a wind – "Whisht, whisht, boy, we have more than wind enough already" (59) – but it is the whirlwind in particular that has some notable attendant folk beliefs invoked to evade its danger. The whirlwind is a nexus between earth and sky and water and land, for it can cross the shoreline border in either direction in the form of a tornado or waterspout. Stewart talks about a "neighbour of ours, an old man, who has for many years been a dabbler in occult philosophy and thaumaturgy [who] will have you believe that at this season in each and every dust whirlwind on land and spindrift column at sea there is present an invisible spirit of evil […] let loose for seventeen days and nights together at the season of the vernal equinox […] Their busiest time is in Annuciation week" (212-13). Stewart offers an interesting mix of practical and supernatural advice: "Against the demon of the dust-cloud, as it swirls along the highway, a wise man will take this precaution: as it approaches, you are instantly to close your eyes and mouth as tightly as possible, at the same time turning your back upon it until it has swept by" (213) As if often the case, the sign of the supernatural is something physically impossible: one can detect the wind demons if you see the "form of a blue lambent flame, that, to prove its spiritual and unearthly character, is always inclined backwards—in a direction, that is, directly opposite to the wind, however fiercely it may blow at the moment" (214).

Water is the quintessential metaphysical contact zone along which and across which belief systems converge to mix or clash, such as during times of war where invaders pillage a coastline or during times of peace where fishermen, sailors, and traders exchange tales. The sea not only serves as a frontier between nations but also betwixt everyday reality and the otherworld. Visually, any water's surface reflects the nature of external reality, but ponds, lakes, rivers, and oceans also contain their secret depths.
Water is well known as a liminal element. It is the threshold between life and death and different sides of spiritual identity: an element in the baptism of Christians or serving as the border of the underworld for the Ancient Greeks, whose souls allegedly traversed the river Styx. Beowulf first establishes his heroic credentials in his swimming race against his companion Breca, winning the race and dispatching sea monsters along the way (Grendel’s mother was not the first watery beast he contended against). In Scottish folklore, water also serves as a heroic proving ground for the Gaelic hero Fionn, much as it does for Beowulf. Fionn acquires his strength through rigorous swimming through the waves, which he learns from his aunt (or nurse, depending on the tale variant), and earns his name for his first heroic deeds—or rather his first murders:

They came to a loch where a number of children were swimming. Fionn went out among them, and every one he caught he kept his head under water and drowned him. A woman who was looking out at a window said: 'Who is the Fair White one who is ever drowning the children'? [...]

Los Lurgann said: 'May you enjoy your name; you will be called Fionn always after this, and you were without a name till now.' (J.G. Campbell, *The Fians* 25)

Fionn’s behavior is probably startling to people who expect something closer to the golden rule when it comes to heroism, but the point here as regards the role of the water is how the loch serves as both a location where lives perish and new identities emerge.

Despite the many tales that involve the sea as a pathway for predation, the shoreline is also considered a place of sanctuary, as J.G Campbell summarizes:

The *dubh-chladach* ('black shore'), as it is called, i.e. the shore below the line or roll of seaweed thrown up by the tide (*vólag róid*), is according to Highland belief an asylum from all kinds of supernatural beings that haunt the night – Fairies, ghosts or evil spirits. [...] It is a saying, *Cha d’thig olc sam bith on fhairge.* “Evil comes not from the sea.” (*The Gaelic Otherworld* 272)

The phrase “Evil comes not from the sea” sounds like a hopeful proverb, one akin to euphemistically calling the fairies the “good people,” which is meant to avert possible disaster. But if to consider the sea as a safe border is taken as a watertight generalization, the leaks in that dam become readily visible.

In fact, any body of water carries essential risk, and it is no surprise that sailors and fishermen have more occupational superstitions than any other field.
The inherent uncertainty of the moods of the sea can offer a calm, glassy road to life-sustaining food or a hurricane or tsunami, producing fatal waves and a thousand other ways to die a watery death. In his enlightening criticism of superstitious thinking, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, Michael Shermer points to the research of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who “discovered that among the Trobiand Islanders (off the coast of New Guinea), the further out to sea they went to fish the more they developed superstitious rituals” (295).

Scottish folk beliefs among sailors articulate a deep-seated assumption about the role of the supernatural in the sinking of ships. Most disturbing is perhaps the attitude towards the survivor of a wreck, as Miller explains:

I have heard it affirmed too, that when the crew of some boat or vessel have perished, with the exception of one individual, the relatives of the deceased invariably regard that one with a deep, irrepressible hatred; and in both cases the feelings described are said to originate in some occult and supernatural cause. (62)

The superstitions of Scottish sailors include multiple other taboos; for example, Walter Gregor reporting on taboos among sailors observes that the word “hare” was not pronounced at sea” and the pig was even more taboo: “Among some of the fishing population it was accounted very unlucky for a marriage party to meet a pig. The men of several villages would not pronounce the word ‘swine’ when they were at sea. It was a word of ill-omen” (Gregor 129). Malinowski’s conclusion about the superstitious tendencies of sailors is paradigmatic: “we find magic where the element of danger is conspicuous” and certainly there is danger lurking in the swift current of a river or the murky depths of a Scottish loch (qtd. in Shermer 295).

To comprehend the range and meaning of Scottish folk beliefs about water, whether a stream or loch, demands careful inquiry into the balance of forces that are invoked where the supernatural is associated with the water. What emerges from the competing currents that push towards alternate interpretations of water lore is a dynamic dialectic between life and death, wherein water itself figures as both womb and grave, border and passage: a liminal zone which defies any absolute categorization as to its physical or spiritual state. Culturally laden with both pagan and Christian mythological.

---

8 See also Chapter 26 “Boats and Fishing” 197-202. Gregor is identified as one of only two folklore collectors who gave special attention to sealore: “Rev. W. Gregor and his friend, Mr. J.E. Crombie of Aberdeen [...]” are “two Scottish collectors” who “observed and noted tabus and rites practised in the making of nets, fishing-lines, baits and boats, and these notes stand alone in studies of fisherman customs” (Banks 342).
properties, the manifold aspects of water in Scottish lore reveal primal fears and anxieties. This elixir of life and raging element engages the heart of supernatural truths, which tend in folklore to be methods for defining a context where the individual has a sense of stability and power in a world in flux.

J.G. Campbell claims that that there is a rational explanation for why spirits of the dead can’t cross running water; he claims that this is “a belief which had its origin before the days of bridges. The shock given to the nerves by the cold water, when it was of any depth, served to dispel the optical delusion caused by unfounded terror” (272). Campbell also asserts that “the tales of one district are never contradictory of those of another. They are rather to be taken as supplemental [...]” (1). However, this claim that the range of folk beliefs asserted in multiple tales constitutes a consistent system does not ultimately hold water, and the distinction between “supplemental” and “contradictory” does not dispel the additional sense of uncertainty that these ambiguous interpretations produce when it comes to spirits encountering water without a bridge.9

Deciphering the relationship between water and supernatural beings in Scottish lore shows the challenge at reconciling the opposing claims of folk metaphysics. Consider for example J.G. Campbell’s generalization drawn from his study of Scottish folklore that “A running stream could not be crossed by evil spirits, ghosts and apparitions but made no difference to the Fairies” (26).10 And

9 Interestingly, not only does the presence of a bridge apparently sometimes allow for ghosts to cross water in Scottish folklore, but the water below which corpses have been carried has reputed healing properties: “Informant spoke of a method of curing illness in horses by means of water taken ‘from under a bridge where the dead and the living cross.’ He either did not know or did not care to give the full particulars; a silver coin was put into the pail, and if this stuck to the bottom when the water was poured out, the horse’s illness was at once ascribed to witchcraft” (Craigie 378). Anne Ross describes a folk belief from an informant who outlines a series of steps that involve a similar dynamic for defending against the evil eye by recourse to this variety of passed-over water: “one must rise early in the morning and go to a boundary stream over which the living and the dead have passed – a very magical point” (Ross 86). Furthermore, Gregor describes another cure where one ventures “to a ford, where the dead and the living cross” and proceeds to gather the water, “pour it into a ‘cog’ with three ‘girds’ over a ‘crosst shilling,’ and then sprinkle the water over the victim of the ‘ill ee’ in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost” (42). This same idea of gathering water from the uncanny ford or bridge where the living and dead cross is fundamental for obtaining the cure of “sleepy fivvers”[sleeping fever]: “a woman, who was ‘to look for the fever,’ went to a ford or bridge, over which ‘the dead and the living’ cross, ‘atween the sin an the sky,’ commonly in the gloamin, and took up three stones. These stones were to represent the head, the heart, and the body, and were so named” (Gregor 44).

10 In J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Fellowship of the Ring, one of the difficulties (besides the combined power of the magic of Gandalf and the Elves) the Ringwraiths have with crossing the Ford of Bruinen into Rivendell appears to be within this tradition. As undead “wraiths,” these
Black Riders are approximately spirits of the dead, so running water presents a challenge to their power. However, since wraiths are traditionally also "spirits of the living" this running water is not an impenetrable barrier for them (The Lord of the Rings I:12.209).

Yet "Below high water mark no Fairy, ghost or demon can come" (29). One can distinguish perhaps between salt and fresh water as fairy impediments, as in the tale "Luran": the protagonist hears from a "friendly voice" "Luran, Luran Black, / Betake thee to the black stones of the shore" (29). However, it seems it is the high water mark that is the safe threshold there. As for fresh water, in an additional tale retold by J.G. Campbell a fairy woman seems unable to cross a creek: "She asked him [a herd-boy] to cross the stream, but he again refused" (56). The fairy woman's reluctance suggests the presence of an inhibiting boundary much like the threshold of a house that a vampire reputedly must be invited to pass over. Yet, generally the stream is not alleged to be such a boundary ("made no difference" to the fairies), so the context seems particular to this tale, perhaps signifying the fairy woman is tempting the herd-boy to a transgressive act, drawing him closer to her. Thus, in the matrix of fairylore, such exceptions challenge the extrapolation of a rigid metaphysical framework of cause and effect.

Fishermen had to be wary of fairy entrapment, just as herdsmen did, and living on the island of Iona, surrounded on all sides by the sea, apparently was not a reliable defense against fairy predation, as this tale of an "Iona Banshi" clarifies, and here is most of it:

A man in Iona, thinking daylight was come, rose and went to a rock to fish. After catching some fish he observed he had been misled by the clearness of the moonlight, and set off home.

On the way, as the night was so fine, he sat down to rest himself on a hillock. He fell asleep, and was awakened by the pulling of the fishing-rod which he had in his hand. He found the rod was being pulled in one direction and the fish in another. He secured both and was making off when he heard sounds behind him as of a woman weeping. On his turning round to her, she said, "Ask news, and you will get news."

He answered, "I put God between us." When he said this, she caught him and thrashed him soundly.

Every night after, he was compelled to meet her, and on her repeating the same words and his giving the same answer, was similarly drubbed. (57)

We see here a few notable elements of Scottish fairylore. The Scottish fairies can be very aggressive, apparently covetous or protective of wildlife stocks whether
deer or fish, at times immune to Christian spirituality, and capable of exerting an inescapable compulsion upon mortals. This particular fairy woman seems to resemble the Celtic goddesses, the Morrigan or Babh, because she appears as a “raven” and a “crow.” When the protagonist decides to flee to America, after she followed him to the lowlands, she vows: “You are going away to escape from me. If you see a hooded crow when you land, I am that crow”(57).11

The focus of this tale is clearly not on water as a folk defense: the tale highlights the inexorable power of an assaulting fairy to inflict injury against a man who has raised her ire, and perhaps the single-minded vengeful attitude of this fairy woman suggests the behavior of a scorned lover. Even the ocean dividing Scotland from America is no barrier to this fairy that harasses and kills the man from Iona. So much for the high watermark.

A final observation on the contentiousness between this fairy woman and this man is that he refuses to engage in the rhetorical framework that she offers: “Ask news, and you will get news.” She might have chosen to prophesize some future to this man, but he warily dismissed this overture by the appeal to the Christian God, and the result is she switches from verbal gaming to physical violence. Defenses against fairy power often rely on the power of calculated rhetoric that can prove more reliable than mechanistic Christian prayers or topographical barriers like a stream or high watermark whose power is ultimately arbitrary and inconsistent.

One of the most intriguing—and in many ways perplexing—Scottish folk tales is the Gaelic narrative “Nighean Righ Fo Thinn: The Daughter of King Under-Waves” because of the ways the story presents the powers of volition and destiny while presenting multiple worlds separated by watery borders. The main narrative involves how Diarmaid, the legendary “lady’s man” of the Fianna, allows a “creature of uncouth appearance” (J.F. Campbell, *Popular Tales* 3:421) whom both Fionn and Oisean reject from their doorways, to enter his abode, warm herself by the fire, and even come into his bed, despite the fact that he calls her “a strange, hideous creature. Thy hair is down to thy heels” (3:422). This “hideous creature” explains that she has “spent seven years travelling over ocean and sea” without the warmth of the fire, and thus Diarmaid is positioned as a locus of dry land in contrast to her watery mode of migration (3:422). Not surprisingly by the expectations of the donor sequence of folk tales where the

11 Perhaps in the punitive undercurrent this is a cautionary tale for self-imposed emigrant exile where the practice of leaving the country insults the native powers. You betray your heritage at your own peril. “Babdh is a crow of battle and of death. Her appearance can prophecy that someone is about to die. In the *Tale of Da Derga’s Hostel*, she appears as an ugly, black, crow-like hag, harbinger of doom [...]. [She] appears also as a ‘washer at the ford’ washing the arms of warriors about to die in battle. [...] Both the Badbh and the Morrigan shape-change to ravens or crows in the field of battle” (Green 38, 154).
protagonist is rewarded for compassion, this woman turns out to be the most beautiful in the universe, and she magically gives Diarmaid a castle and her amorous companionship as long as he never says to her “thrice how thou didst find me” (3:424). Naturally Diarmaid breaks this taboo, although not without some provocation: his lover gives away the three puppies of his greyhound to the three Fenians who come asking for them while Diarmaid is absent from the castle on a visit to the others of the warrior band. And she does this despite Diarmaid expressing his concern for the greyhound’s pups before his departure. So it comes to pass that both Diarmaid and his lover break their pledges to each other, and we can see in the nature of their conflicting loyalties that it is partly their adherence to different sets of ethics acquired from their separate realms that have produced this unfortunate result.

Diarmaid’s lover, we learn, had passed seven years under spells and comes from the land beneath the sea, the “Realm Underwaves,” while Diarmaid is of the land and one of the warrior band: it is to his companions that he owes his loyalties, and dogs who are integral to hunting are dear to his heart. Consider also the importance of the dog Bran, who is of fairy derivation, and who becomes Fionn’s dear companion and reliable ally, for he defeats numerous adversaries. It is from this larger context of clan and canine loyalty that Diarmaid’s attachment to the greyhound emerges, as well as the possibility that those three pups psychologically signify the promise of progeny from this mysterious daughter of “Realm Underwaves.”

As for the daughter, she has lived under spells for seven years, her lineage is from under the ocean, and it was by Diarmaid’s observation of the laws of hospitality that she was rescued from her loathly form. Thus, she will not refuse the other Fianna who come as guests, whom she invites in, and then they ask for the pups as gifts. Her nature is closer to the rigid code of supernatural beings that populate folk legends, where the fairies bestow curse or blessing based on the adherence of mortals to traditional etiquette. And so Diarmaid

---

12 Holbek explains that the hero’s character is tested in the donor sequence: “the hero reacts to the test as a mature and responsible person and is rewarded accordingly” (414). To pass this test of integrity often depends on the outward display of compassion: “The hero is put to a test; he passes the test, showing generosity; he is rewarded” (334).

13 So often Fionn finds himself in extremity, and it is only through Bran’s aid that he triumphs: “Fin called to Brân, ‘Are you going to allow him to kill me?’” Brân had a venomous shoe; and he leaped and struck the Big Man on the breast bone, and “took the heart and lungs out of him.” Fin drew Mac-a-Luin (his sword), and cut off his head (J.G. Campbell, *The Fianna* 180-81). This same pattern happens with the father and wife of the giant. In terms of combat prowess, Bran is the true champion: “When she had nearly done for him Brân struck her with the venomous shoe, and killed her as he had done to the rest” (182).
rebukes her in his bitterness at the loss of the three pups, forgetting his promise to her, and so she retreats to her underwater realm.

When Diarmaid resolves to pursue “the daughter of King Underwaves” his journey takes him over both rivers and seas, upon a ship and a boat. The strangest means of conveyance across the watery borders that divide him from his goals of first reuniting with then healing his lover is the red-haired little man who presents himself as both a guide and an arbiter of Diarmaid’s future. Campbell compares this odd character to Charon, the ferryman over the river Styx in Greek mythology, but also notes that the “little red-haired man rising in the middle of a river that was a year’s sail wide, and taking a great hero over on the palm of his hand, is not to be reasonably accounted for, and he should be some marine divinity” (J.F. Campbell, Popular Tales 3:343fn). A river that takes a year to cross has never been heard of, and as such an impossibility it serves well as a supernatural border to divide the realm of Underwaves with that of the Plain of Wonder, where Diarmaid must fetch water from “the cup of Righ Magh an Ioghnaidh, the King of Plain of Wonder” from which Diarmaid’s lady must drink along with the three gulps of blood she lost from her heart as she pined in her flight earlier from Diarmaid (3:343).

Watery topography partly charts the course of reversals that Diarmaid experiences: the mixture of blood and water that he returns to his lover in the mystical cup may cure her, but it also cures him of his romantic feelings. Whatever debt he had owed her by betraying his oath not to remind her thrice of her loathly prior form has clearly been expiated by saving her life. But he remains a man of another world—the surface dry land—and this daughter of the realm Underwaves must remain a world apart.

The red-haired river god who ferries Diarmaid to that even further world of the Wondrous Plain presents himself as a “messenger of the other world”—a being whose transcendent nature supersedes the authority of the Fianna or the magical realm of those who dwell under the waves. The elevated supernatural status of the red being is highlighted by the paradox of how, despite its small stature, it can carry a large man in its palm. The paradox of the being’s size-to-strength ratio is evoked and amplified by the size differential of the river itself that seems wider than any sea. Diarmaid’s inability to cross this river by his own power underscores the limits of heroism, and the red-haired being’s impossible manipulation of space, weight, and size through magical strength, along with its authoritative and prophetic rhetoric, establishes itself as a power greater than any other in the narrative.

Water is an elemental power in this folktale, both as the nexus that connects all regions of habitation in the narrative, but also as the fundamental life principle. Water is as necessary for life as blood, which seems to be the essential meaning of the cure that the Daughter of the King of Underwaves requires. But it
is also examining the role of estrangement through ethical transgressions and cultural alienation that helps to resolve the puzzling ending of this narrative.

The clearest way to navigate through the seemingly unresolved conflicts of belief systems—such as Diarmaid’s vow breaking with his lover after she also fails to keep her promise to protect the dog’s pups—is to inspect the dynamics of the rhetoric they employ to make their vows and to exert influence over each other. It is here also where the idea of “language games” and wit-battles must be more closely explored, because Scottish wit-battles, where the last speaker to make an utterance has the chance to re-center or reframe the contextual borders of power, is also a model to explain how the last storyteller to present a folk belief assumes the position of primary expositor of folk metaphysics.

Jean Francois Lyotard’s analysis of the philosopher Wittgenstein’s term “language games” provides a foundation for understanding wit-battles: “What he means by this term is that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put” (10). Lyotard asserts that “every utterance should be thought of as a ‘move’ in a game” and that ultimately “to speak is to fight” (10). Most relevant to wit-battles and the authoritative speech of the red-haired man who prescribes Diarmaid’s fate is the notion of “performative” utterances, which Lyotard affirms are “not subject to discussion or verification on the part of the addressee, who is immediately placed within the new context created by the utterance. As for the sender, he must be invested with the authority to make such a statement” (9). The red-haired being’s tone certainly allows for no “discussion.” Similarly, Diarmaid gives in to his lover’s framing of his protest and begs forgiveness each time, accepting her judgment as the one with more validity. He briefly protests against the river deity’s forecast of future evaporation of amorous feelings, but his manner is largely conciliatory as he plays through the script that the divinity gives him including acting as a chorus to its declarations, the straight man to its catechisms, and a general yes-man to its guidance.

Diarmaid’s lack of rhetorical confrontation—despite his willingness to dispatch 4400 opponents—is directly in opposition to how many wit-battles progress. Contained within the utterance of the last participant in a debate is the living present of perception and judgment where context is most directly tied to performance; the present moment stands on the precipice before the breaking waves of the future and the undertow of the past. It is significant that the most controlled speaker of dialogue in this narrative is the red-haired man who has the power of foresight, inner perspicuity of the psychological and performative present, and a full scope of the historical impact of the living moment.

It is in this contest for rhetorical power that the tradition of Scottish wit-battles becomes relevant to understanding the authoritative position of entities such as the red-haired man and other supernatural beings who patrol liminal
shores, as well as exemplifying how an individual storyteller frames the current tale as the prime space above all other precedents. Stewart’s translation from his Gaelic-speaking informant Bailie John Cameron of Fort-William details how the sea stands as both a geographic and cultural division between even country men as these two bards rail against the respective charms of the women and landscape of their home regions in Scotland: the western islands of Uist vs. the highlands of Lochaber (233):

The Lochaber bard *log*.: —

“Though I were old and grey as is the lichened rock,
With many years my face all furrow’d o’er,
An Uist maid for wife I’d shun and mock—
I *could* not love a maid from that dull shore.”

[the] Uist bard *responds*: —

“Of worthless, toothless father, worthless son!
Spawn of Lochaber’s dismal woods and meres.
Silence! or, as to lewd, cream-stealing cats is done,
Close by the roots I’ll crop off thy long ears!”(Stewart 239)

The Uist bard’s response is full of invective and even the threatened act of violence of ear-cropping, but most importantly his retort alters the context of the previous bard’s diatribe, reframing the former poet as an unworthy miscreant whose lineage and location discredit him as a viable critic—whom this backwoods Lochaber bard could or could not love becomes irrevelanl. Stewart explains that the winners of wit-battles achieved posthumous fame, becoming locally legendary figures in their own right, and he presents a legendary example:

One day there was a meeting of some sort at High Bridge, where all the Brae-Loch-aber people were assembled. In the course of the day the good man of Killiechonate (Fear Chillechonaite) came up to Donald Bane of bohuntin (Domhnull Ban Bhohuntuin) and launched this wit-word shaft: “A Domhnull Bhain Bhohuntuin tha buille agam ort” (“Donald Bane of Bohuntin, I have to launch a wit-word shaft at thee!”). (216)

And so they duel. Donald Bane wins the exchange: “Everything that is on the world is mine,” says his opponent, and Donald retorts with “Mine is the world itself. Take up therefore, your property, and be off with you, bag and baggage!” (216). Once again we have here the linguistic phenomenon of whoever has the last word being in the position to reframe the previous context and potentially top the last claim to rhetorical control.
The primacy of wit-battles in tales of encounters with the fairies demonstrates how the metaphysical borderland of life and death hovered perilously close to acts of speech, where imprecations and invocations could be implicit in subtle circumlocutions, and just as potent as more outright invective. It is also true, as Angela Bourke concluded in her analysis of folk-belief driven murder in The Burning of Bridget Cleary, that “Fairy legends claimed no monopoly on morality, but instead represented moral decisions as negotiations between rival claims” (qtd. in Black xxxvii). This contest between “rival claims” is the answer to resolving competing interpretations of folk beliefs and is the principle to deciphering the dynamics of wit-battles as well.

In multiple tales of a fairy woman seeking to abduct a human mother’s child, the fairy woman, or banshee, attributes characteristics to the child that mark it as weak while the human mother reinterprets these words in a more positive context. J.G. Campbell, in a section entitled “Ready Wit Repulses the Fairy,” gives a clear example of this contest:

"Grey is your child."
"Grey is the grass, and it grows," was the ready answer.
"Heavy is your child," said the banshi.
"Heavy is each fruitful thing," the mother replied.
"Light is your child," said the banshi.
"Light is each happy worldly one," said the mother. (45)

When the banshi calls the child grey, it is clear that sickness is implied, but the mother defends this epithet deftly by appealing to the grass as a correlative that proves healthy despite the named color. Subtler is the banshi’s attempt to trap the mother in a paradox, for how can the mother acknowledge that her child is both heavy and light? She succeeds, however, in shifting the context of “light” from another unhealthy euphemism, suggesting that the child is malnourished, to an emotional or spiritual diagnosis of joy. Thus, in this wit-battle between mother and fairy, the mother’s responses exemplify how, without outright contradiction, one can shift the frame in which a particular word and its attendant burdensome meaning from a negative to a positive connotation.14

And at the same time, the mother maintains a respectful decorum towards the banshi, who is not to be trifled with outside of this dire but dignified debate. It would do no good to directly try to dispel the fairy by epithet or by recourse to Christianity. The role of euphemism is well-known in the names

---

14 To avoid the evil eye a mother not only had to worry about direct curses but compliments, so she had to be ready to deflect or defuse praise through divine appeal as Anne Grant explains: “An infant, in short, was not to be praised at all, without a previous invocation of the Deity” (Grant 168).
bestowed upon the fairies themselves – honest folk, good folk, good neighbors, those who know, people of peace.\textsuperscript{15} The Scots have a number of denominations to substitute for the perils of direct address to these often unpredictable supernatural neighbors, as J.G. Campbell observes:

\textit{Daoine còire}, “honest folk,” had its origin in a desire to give no unnecessary offence. The “folk” might be listening, and were pleased when people spoke well of them, and angry when spoken of slightly. [...] The same feeling made the Irish Celt call them \textit{daoine matha} “good people,” and the Lowland Scot “gude neighbours.” (5)\textsuperscript{16}

And we must remember that the fairies also lived under the water; whether dwellers beneath the waves or the still surface of a pond, these good neighbors offer a continuing model for reflection into human culture.

It is especially in the interactions between humans and magical beings like the fairies where they appear at the water’s edge that we witness the immediacy of the struggle to define the borders of the threatening forces of the outside and the ambiguous identities of human nature and culture as they exist in our internal psyches. The various manifestations of anxieties and uncertainties in nineteenth-century Scottish water lore express a regional and historical representation of storytelling. This lore exemplifies the difficulty of containing the conflicting supernaturalism of a folkloric tradition that encodes a collective growing consciousness of the beautiful dangers of water as a life-giving and death-dealing element, like the mermaid who is capable of both mesmerizing beauty and murderous malice. However, these very specific tales and beliefs from one narrow corner of the world also articulate a more universal psychological paradigm. The uncharted depths of water have long been considered a metaphor for the subconscious, and there is no denying that within whatever ship you sail, and whatever weather you encounter, that with each step into the recesses of the mind, you too are a hero or heroine approaching an unknown, sometimes perilous, shore.

\textsuperscript{15} “The fairies are known in the Highlands as ‘Daoine-sith,’ literally hill-folk. They are generally known as ‘Fiosaichin’ or ‘those that know’” (MacRae 2).

\textsuperscript{16} J.G. Campbell reports that his informants clarified that the same euphemisms for the fairies carry a negative connotation if directed towards people: “every one of the names, when applied to mortals, is contemptuous and disparaging” (4). This suggests the suppressed anger and fear that people had towards the fairies and the resentment of having to use euphemisms.
Works Cited


Grant, Anne MacVicar. Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland: to which are Added, Translation from the Gaelic; and Letters connected With Those formerly Published in Two Volumes Vol. 1 [1811] London: Norwood, 1975.


