

The Mermaid and the Banshee in Gaelic folk tradition

Résumé. Cet article étudie et compare deux êtres surnaturels, la sirène et la banshee, dans les traditions orales gaéliques de l'Ecosse et de l'Irlande. Bien que ces deux figures surnaturelles soient clairement différentes, notamment en termes d'apparence et d'habitat, notre étude comparative révèle de nombreuses similitudes sous-jacentes, expliquant l'apparition de sirènes dans des légendes typiquement associées aux banshees et *vice versa*. Nous démontrerons que les croyances et récits attachés à ces deux êtres surnaturels reflètent des idées et des peurs qui sont en lien avec le statut des femmes dans les familles exogames et patrilocales. D'autres connections sont faites entre les récits oraux et les portraits de messagers de la mort et de figures de souveraineté féminins dans la littérature médiévale irlandaise ancienne.

Mots-clefs. Irlande, Ecosse, folklore, sirènes, banshee

Abstract. This discussion concerns the portrayal of two supernatural beings, the mermaid and the banshee, within Irish and Scottish Gaelic folk tradition. Despite some obvious differences, such as appearance and habitat, a comparison reveals many underlying similarities, allowing mermaids to appear in narratives typically associated with banshees and *vice versa*. It is argued that beliefs and narratives surrounding both beings reflect a common cluster of ideas and anxieties regarding the status of women within exogamous and patrilocal families. Further connections are drawn between folkloric accounts and portrayals of female death-messengers and sovereignty-figures in early Irish literature.

Keywords. Ireland, Scotland, Folklore, Mermaids, Banshee

Introduction

The present discussion is concerned with the portrayal and function of two different types of supernatural beings within the oral traditions of Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, traditions which are primarily preserved as transcriptions and recordings made during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first of these, the mermaid, has analogues in many other cultures across the world.¹ Like her international sisters, the mermaid of Gaelic tradition is a supernatural woman who dwells in or by the sea, sometimes described as part-human and part-marine animal, and is both an object of desire and a source of peril for sailors and fishermen.² The banshee (from Irish *bean sí* “woman of the fairy-mound” or “fairy woman”) is rather more peculiar to the Gaelic world: a predominantly terrestrial spirit who appears in the guise of a spectral woman, and whose mournful cries presage impending death, or who is seen washing the bloody clothes of someone whose death is impending.³

While these two types of beings may appear to be quite different at first glance, with distinct habits and habitats, a closer look at accounts and descriptions of such beings within folkloric sources reveals similarities in terms of appearance, custom, and their overall relationship with humanity. In this brief discussion, I will outline some of the major points of similarity, and present some preliminary observations regarding the significance of these similarities. Ultimately, I suggest that both of these figures are manifestations of a common cluster of ideas, symbols, assumptions, and anxieties regarding the status of women, prosperity, death, and the supernatural within rural Irish and Highland Scottish culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I also tentatively trace a line of development between the folklore material, and medieval Irish portrayals of feminine personifications of sovereignty and warfare.⁴

The present discussion draws upon my doctoral dissertation, completed in 2019. This was a study of the migratory legend designated as ML 4080 “The Seal Woman” or, in an Irish

1. See, for example, HAYWARD, Philip (ed.), *Scaled for Success: The Internationalisation of the Mermaid*, Barnet, U.K., John Libbey Publishing Ltd., 2018.

2. See MULLER, Sylvie, “Trésor d’Archives: La Sirène Irlandaise, une Femme entre Fleurs et Fruits”, in *Ethnologie française*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2011; DARWIN, Gregory, “On Mermaids, Meroveus, and Mélusine: Reading the Irish Seal Woman and Mélusine as Origin Legend”, in *Folklore*, Abingdon, U.K., Taylor and Francis Ltd., 2015; and DARWIN, Gregory, *Mar gur dream Sí iad atá ag mairiúint fén bhfarrage: ML 4080 The Seal Woman in its Irish and International Context*, Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Joseph F. Nagy, Stephen Mitchell, and Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, 2019.

3. The most comprehensive study of banshee belief in Ireland to date is LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee: The Irish Death-Messenger*, Dublin, O’Brien Press, 1986.

4. For a recent discussion of the image of the “Sovereignty Goddess” in early Irish literature, see TONER, Gregory, *Manifestations of Sovereignty in Medieval Ireland*, Cambridge, UK, Department of Anglo-Saxon Norse and Celtic, 2018.

context, “The Man Who Married the Mermaid”.⁵ This legend, known in the oral tradition of Ireland, Scotland, and the Nordic countries, recounts the capture of a supernatural woman from the sea (often described as a mermaid or selkie/seal-woman) by a human man, her period of captivity on land, and her eventual return to the sea.⁶ This research was indebted to and inspired by Patricia Lysaght’s classic 1986 study, *The Banshee: The Irish Death Messenger*, which in turn was based off her own doctoral dissertation.⁷ While both of these studies make use of published sources of an antiquarian nature, the primary sources consist of archival folklore materials, most of which were collected in Ireland and Scotland in the middle of the 20th century.⁸

The primary archive in Ireland is the National Folklore Collection, formerly known as the Irish Folklore Collection, housed in University College Dublin.⁹ The National Folklore Collection (hereafter NFC) includes two main collections. The first of these, the Main Collection, represents transcriptions of material recorded by full and part-time collectors between the years 1935 and 1971, as well as the field diaries of full-time collectors, mail-in questionnaires, and some manuscripts donated by private individuals. Of relevance to the current project are two questionnaires, one distributed in early 1939 on “families associated with animals (seals) and birds”, and another distributed in 1976 on the banshee.¹⁰ The second NFC collection, the Schools Collection, represents the results of a scheme conducted primarily between 1937 and 1938, where schoolchildren were encouraged to collect folklore from their neighbours and relatives, and to fill out copybooks and manuscripts which were then sent to the archive

5. DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, *op. cit.* For the taxonomy of the legend, see also CHRISTIANSEN, Reidar Thorolf, *The Migratory Legends*, Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1958: 75, and ALMQVIST, Bo, “Of Mermaids and Marriages: Seamus Heaney’s Maighdean Mara and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s An Mhaighdean Mhara in the Light of Irish Folk Tradition” in *Béaloides*, Dublin, Folklore of Ireland Society, 1990: 5 note 8.

6. The word *selkie* or *silkie* is used in parts of Scotland to refer to a seal, or to a supernatural being who can assume the form of a seal; the second sense has been borrowed into global English, most likely due to the popularity of recordings of songs such as *The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry* and films such as *The Secret of Roan Inish*. The “seal-woman” is more typical of the legend as told the Nordic cultural sphere (Iceland, the Faroes, Shetland, Orkney, and Scandinavia), whereas the “mermaid” is more typical of the Gaelic world. Nonetheless, there is some degree of overlap between the two in Gaelic tradition. DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, *op. cit.*: 35-7.

7. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*

8. Due to travel restrictions during the global pandemic, I was unable to visit any of these archives in person after submitting the abstract for the conference presentation which became this chapter; I am therefore drawing upon my own notes and transcriptions from earlier visits as well as archival materials which are reproduced in other published sources or available online.

9. See BRIODY, Mícheál, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*, Helsinki, Finnish Literature Society, 2008.

10. Responses to the survey on families are archived as Dublin, National Folklore Collection (hereafter NFC) 1142: 16-21 and NFC 1306: 193-236. For responses to the banshee survey, see LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 321-63.

in Dublin. This scheme had the advantage of covering all twenty-six counties of Eire; although this method caused certain types of folklore to be underrepresented in the collection, such as longer wonder-tales, accounts of the mermaid and the banshee are plentiful. The sound archives of the Ulster Folk Museum, comprising audio and video recordings made throughout the 20th century, also contained a small number of relevant items.¹¹ In Scotland, the primary archival source is the School of Scottish Studies, housed at the University of Edinburgh. The School houses a sound archive containing recordings mostly made from the 1950s to the 1970s, as well as manuscript collections representing fieldwork by earlier collectors.

The Gaelic mermaid

English-language sources from throughout Ireland and Scotland typically use the term *mermaid* (from Middle English *mer* “sea” + *maid*), although the variant *merrymaid* occasionally appears in Ireland (showing the epenthetic vowel characteristic of Hiberno-English). In Irish-language sources the term *maighdean mhara* “sea maiden” is common throughout the northern half of the country, and *murúch* (anglicized as *merrow*, from Middle Irish *muir* “sea” + *dúchann* “chanting”) in the southern half.¹² In Scotland we find the Gaelic terms *maighdean mhara* and *maighdean chuain* “harbour maiden”, along with a handful of references to a hostile mermaid known as “the Vow” from northern Scotland.¹³

These accounts often describe the mermaid as a young and beautiful woman from the waist-up, and a fish from the waist down. The following description, from Ceathrú na gCloch, County Mayo, can be seen as typical:

Bean is ea an mhaighdean mhara. Ní thagann sí aníos go minic as an fharráige anseo. Uair ar bith a thagann sí aníos, suíonn sí ar charraig agus nuair a fheiceann sí duine ar bith gar di, léimeann sí isteach sa bhfarráige arís. Tá leath den mhaighdean mhara ina iasc agus an leath eile di ina dhuine agus mar gheall ar an leath di a bheith ina iasc, tig léi snámh agus léimeadh isteach sa bhfarráige uair ar bith is mian léi. Tá folt buí ar an mhaighdean mhara agus é ag dul síos leath a droma.

The mermaid is a woman. She doesn't come up out of the sea often now. Whenever she does come up, she sits on a rock and when she sees someone near her, she jumps into the sea again. Half of the mermaid is a fish and the other half is a human, and because of her fish half she can swim and dive into the sea whenever she pleases. The mermaid has blonde hair, going halfway down her back.¹⁴

11. Some relevant sources have been published in BALLARD, Linda-May, “Seal Stories and Belief on Rathlin Island”, in *Ulster Folk-Life*, Cultra, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, 1988: 33-42.

12. DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, op. cit.: 35-8; BOWEN, Charles, “Varia I: Notes on the Middle Irish Word for ‘Mermaid’”, in *Ériu*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 1978: 142-8.

13. School of Scottish Studies MacLagan MSS 6798, 8056-9; collected by Elizabeth Kerr (?), c. 1903.

14. Ó CATHÁIN, Séamas and UÍ SHEIGHIN, Caithlín (eds.), *A Mhuintir Dhú Chaocháin, Labhraí Feasta!* Inverin, Ireland, Cló Chonamara, 1987: 45-6. Translation by the author.

Other accounts omit any description of aquatic lower half, or present her as a shape-shifter, alternating between a human guise and that of a seal or another aquatic animal.¹⁵ Descriptions of the mermaid's hair are quite common: it is long and golden or red, and the mermaid is said to comb it when she appears on land.¹⁶

Unsurprisingly, the mermaid appears near the shore or other bodies of water, often sitting on rocks as in the previously quoted description. Certain rocks, bodies of water, or areas of the coast may be described as frequented by mermaids.¹⁷ Encounters with or sightings of the mermaid are often said to happen in the early morning, or at night, and sometimes at particularly significant times of year: *Bealtaine* (May 1) and less often *Sambain* (November 1).¹⁸ As we will see from some of the accounts presented in this section, the mermaid is a perilous being. She is an omen of bad luck, an impending storm, or even certain death; in some accounts, like the Siren of Greek myth, she lures men to their death or drowns them.

The mermaid is often stated to have a connection with a particular family or kin-group, and may even be identified as their ancestor.¹⁹ The consequences of this affiliation or descent vary. In County Kerry, people are reluctant to enter a boat with a member of the Ó Séaghdha family (in English, O'Shea or Shea), as the sea will try to claim them. On the other hand, families such as the Ó hAonghusa (Hennessy) or Ó Duibhlin (Dolan) have great prosperity at sea, and never drown within particular bodies of water. Other families, such as the Ó Conaola (Conneely) of County Galway, have a special affinity with seals, and may have a reluctance to kill the animal.²⁰ Webbed hands or feet (simple syndactyly) or scaly skin (*ichthyosis vulgaris*) may be explained as proof of such an ancestry. A mermaid may also announce or mourn the death of members of "her" family, a role which, as we will see, is more typically connected with the banshee.²¹

15. In Scottish sources such beings are referred to as *selkie* in English or Scots, and *bean ròin* "seal woman" in Gaelic. As noted above, there is considerable overlap between these two categories: a seal-woman may be called a "mermaid", and a "mermaid" may have some connections with seals. See also DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, *op. cit.*: 75-6.

16. As Sylvie Muller notes, the long hair and comb is typical of depictions of mermaids in medieval Europe. MULLER, Sylvie, "Trésor d'Archives", *op. cit.*: 230-1.

17. For example, "The Vow's Seat" near the river Carron in Scotland (School of Scottish Studies, MacLagan MSS 8057; Mrs Norman McANDREW, Ardgay, Rossshire; Collector: Elizabeth KERR (?), 1903 (?), and "Cloch na Brúch [*sic*]" ("The Mermaid Stone") in County Waterford, Ireland (NFC 317: 83-4; Tom TRESSEY (70), pensioner, The Cross, County Waterford; Collector: Nioclás BREATNACH, 15 February 1937).

18. DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, *op. cit.*: 45-6. For Muller, the association with *Bealtaine* is one aspect of the symbolic association between the mermaid, the cycles of the harvest, and female fertility. MULLER, Sylvie, "Trésor d'Archives", *op. cit.*: 231-2.

19. See DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, *op. cit.*: 352-69.

20. The nickname *cloiginn aníos* ("heads up"), referring to seals' heads breaching the surface of the water, is sometimes applied to members of this family in Irish. The author heard it used in conversation as recently as the spring of 2021.

21. E.g. School of Scottish Studies MacLagan MSS 5792a; collected by Elizabeth KERR (?), c. 1903; Dublin,

These traits are articulated in the form of simple statements of belief, as well as first-, second-, and third-hand accounts of encounters with a mermaid or mermaids. One common type of first-hand encounter involves a reported sighting of a mermaid. The experiencer attempts to get closer in order to get a better look, or to apprehend the creature, but as soon as she is out of his sight she vanishes. A fairly typical example is related by Séamus Bairéad of Inis Gé (Inishkea), County Mayo:

Bhí mé lá i n-Innis Géidhe. d'éirigh mé ar maidin agus chuaidh mé chun na cladaighe ag iarraidh leas. Bhí cailín ar an mbaile a raibh mé braith uirthi agus chonnaic mé an cailín mar shaoil mé gurb'é mo chailín féin a bhí ann ina suidhe ar an gcarraig cois na fairrge agus i a' cioradh a cinn agus ghá réidhteach. Theann mé léithi go mbaininn póg dí ar maidin acht cia bhfuighinn ann acht an mbaighdean mhara. Nuair a bhí mé i ngar dí chuaidh sí de léim ambáin amach ins an bhfairrge, agus ní fhaca mé níos mó í. One day, I was in Inishkea. I woke up that morning and I went to the shore to gather seaweed for fertilizer. There was a girl from town that I was hoping for, and I saw this girl who I thought was the girl I was expecting, sitting on a rock by the sea, combing and fixing her hair. I made towards her so that I might get a kiss from her that morning, but who should I find but the mermaid. When I was close to her, she leaped out into the sea, and I never saw her again.²²

Frequently, the sight of the mermaid has negative consequences for the experiencer. Mártan Ó Baoghail of Burrishoole, County Mayo tells us that:

Joe Sammon and John Joe Mac Donnell of Acres near Newport sailed one day as far west as Roc Island fishing for coalfish. Joe was in the stern steering and as he chanced to look behind him he saw a woman's head of hair appear above the water at the stern of the boat, and the woman's face looking up at him. He spoke to his mate: "it is time for us to be making for home at once." Before they had gone twenty yards a terrible storm arose and almost swamped the boat. They could not attempt the seven miles journey home, but with great difficulty they succeeded in reaching Roigh Pier.²³

Similarly, Duncan Duffe of Port Charlotte, Islay recalls that:

he knew a man who saw a mermaid on one occasion when he was out fishing. She came above the water until she could be seen down to the waist. It is said it is not lucky to see them, and not long after this man saw her he died.²⁴

In other accounts, the mermaid takes a more active role: rather than an omen of doom, she is a hostile supernatural assailant. Seán Bhait English of Baile an Sceilg, County Kerry, states:

National Folklore Schools Collection (hereafter NFCS) 1118:512; Pat McCOLGAN and John NORRIS, Ballymagaraghy, County Donegal; Collector Robert McELDOWNY, 1938.

22. NFC 1649: 10; Séamas BAIRÉAD, Inis Géidhe, County Mayo; Collector: Mícheál Ó TIOMÁNADHE, 1903. Translation by the author.

23. NFC 1206: 3; Mártain Ó BAOGHAILL (66), farmer, Maol Raithní, County Mayo; Collector: Pádraig Ó MOGHRÁIN, 3 December 1942.

24. School of Scottish Studies MacLagan MSS 633; Duncan DUFFE, Port Charlotte, Islay; Collector: Elizabeth KERR, 1894.

I mBólus a thuit sé amach. Bhí fear de Mhuintir Laoghaire a' máirseáil timpal na fáille lá, agus do thainig a' bhean air ó'n bhfaraige. Bhí sí ad iarraig é chur leis a' bhfaill, ach n'fhéad sí mar bhí sé ró-láidir di, ach ar a shon san do chaill sé a shláinte dá deasgaibh. Duairt an bhean nár chuaig aon fhear riamh di go dí é. This happened in Bólus. A man of the Laoghaire family was wandering about the cliff one day, and a woman from the sea came upon him. She was trying to throw him off the cliff, but she could not because he was too strong for her, but he lost his health as a result of her. The woman said that no man had matched her before him.²⁵

Accounts of “the Vow” from Scotland also portray her as a hostile supernatural assailant, dwelling in rivers rather than in the sea. Mrs Norman MacAndrew of Ardgay, Rossshire, tells us:

One time a man was bathing in the river [Carron], and she [the Vow] got a hold of him, and was dragging him down, but he cried “for goodness sake let me go” and she let him go. People said that was quite true, and I believe it, but we do not hear anything about her now, if she is still there.²⁶

In the man’s exclamation – “for goodness sake” – we see a minced oath, and a possible parallel with Swedish legends of the *bäckahäst* or *näck*, in which a would-be victim is often saved from drowning after calling upon God or the cross.²⁷

The last two accounts bring us into the realm of the *fabulate*, a more structured and stereotyped narrative of an encounter with the supernatural.²⁸ Many such fabulates involving the mermaid fall into the category of *interference legends*: stories in which a human interferes with a supernatural being in some way – often by injuring it or stealing its property – and as a result suffers bad luck or experiences a supernatural visitation.²⁹ Often, these legends involve the theft of a cloak or other garment from the mermaid, as in the following anonymous account from Lewis:

Many people in our place believed in the existence of mermaids and there was a story I often heard told of a man who one time found a *breacan* (highland plaid) of one of them on the shore. It seems it was very beautiful, and made in many colours. He brought it home with him, and kept it for a good while, but by and by one after another of his family became ill, and the man could not make out the cause of their illness, till he asked some body about it. This person told him the mermaid’s plaid being in his house was the cause, and advised him to put it away, for it was a very unlucky thing for one to have in his house. The man was lazy [reluctant] to part with it, but he went and left it back,

25. INGLIS, Seán Bhaít, “An Bhean Ó’n bhFarraige”, in *Béaloidéas*, Dublin, Folklore of Ireland Society, 1934: 291. Translation by the author.

26. School of Scottish Studies, MacLagan MSS 8057; Mrs Norman MCANDREW, Ardgay, Rossshire; Collector: Elizabeth KERR (?), 1903 (?).

27. See AF KLINTBERG, Bengt, *The Types of the Swedish Folk Legend*, Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2010: 122-3.

28. VON SYDOW, Carl Wilhelm, “Kategorien der Prosa-Volksdichtung” in *Selected Papers on Folklore*, Copenhagen, Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1948: 60-85.

29. To the best of my knowledge, the term “interference legend” was first used by Patricia Lysaght, in LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 154-90.

on the shore, where he had found it, and after that his children were well, and strong.³⁰

Legends concerning marriage, or at least sexual relations and cohabitations, between humans and mermaids are particularly common. The most widespread of these legends, the previously-mentioned “The Man Who Married the Mermaid”, can be regarded as an interference legend of sorts, as the man typically steals a cloak, garment, skin, or other object from the mermaid. A fairly typical example of the legend follows, as told by Mícheál Ó Mongáin of Tulachán Dubh, county Mayo:

Fear a bhí i n-a chóimhnuí i n-dit icint i n-aice le Baile Chaisil. Chonnaic sé an mbaighdean mhara lá ins a' gcladach. Bhí brat léithe ar charraic a bhí ann. Rug sé ar an mbrat 7 choinnigh sé uaithe é. Ní rabh aon dul aici ar imeacht gan an brat. Thug sé leis abhaile í 7 phósadar. Bhí beirt ná thriúr chlainne acu. Chonnaic an chlann é lá a' cur an bhrait i gcruach arúir. D'innis siad don mbáthair é. Thug sise léithe an brat nuair a fuair sí an deis air 7 bhain an fharaige amach duith héin ath-uair. Níor phill ariamb. Iasgaire a bhí ins a' bhfear. Thugadh sí neart éisg i n-a bhealach i n-a dhéidh sin.

A man lived somewhere near Baile Chaisil. He saw a mermaid one day at the shore. She had a cloak lying on a rock nearby. He grabbed the cloak and kept it from her. She could not leave without the cloak. He brought her home, and they married. They had two or three children. The children saw him one day hiding the cloak in a haystack. They told their mother this. She took the cloak back as soon as she had a chance, and made for the sea again. She never returned. The man was a fisherman. She would send many fish his way afterwards.³¹

While the man is anonymous in Ó Mongáin's account, other accounts identify the children with particular lineages, and the legend serves to explain why the mermaid takes a special interest in particular families. This supernatural “patronage” is, as we will see, a common feature in beliefs about the banshee in Ireland.

The Banshee

In English-language published and archival sources, this being is typically referred to as the *banshee*, derived from the Irish phrase *bean sí*, which is similarly ubiquitous in Irish-language sources.³² In the southeast of Ireland, she may also be referred to as a *bean chaointe* “keening/lamenting woman”, or *badhbh* (pronounced /bəib/ or /bau/). The latter term is a development of Old Irish *badb*, signifying both the hooded crow, *corvus cornix*, and a phantom who appears at or

30. School of Scottish Studies MacLagan MS 9169; Alex BEATON, Barvas, Lewis; Collector: Elizabeth KERR (?), 1903 (?). The use of “lazy” here might indicate that the informant's first language was Gaelic, as *leisg* can mean both “lazy” or “reluctant”.

31. NFC 662:66; Mícheál Ó MONGÁIN (66), farmer, Tulachán Dubh, County Mayo; Collector: Liam MAC COISDEALBHA, 17 February 1939.

32. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 27-40.

after battles in early Irish literary texts, as well as the proper name of one such being – *the Badb*.³³ In Scotland, she is typically known as the *bean-nighe* “washer-woman”.

The banshee is presented in these sources as a solitary being.³⁴ She typically appears as a small old woman with long, unbound white hair, clad in white or black clothing. This description is consistent with accounts of the *bean chaointe* or “lamenting woman” in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland and Gaelic Scotland.³⁵ Less frequently, she may be said to be tall, young, and beautiful, with hair of various colours, and her clothing may be red, a colour associated with the supernatural in modern Irish folk tradition.³⁶

The aural manifestations of the banshee also connect her to the custom of ritual lament, as she produces her distinctive scream or wail in order to warn or inform humans of an impending death.³⁷ The vocabulary used to describe her scream is consistent with the vocabulary of ritual lament: *cry* and *lament* are the most common terms in English; *caoineadh* and *gol* in Irish. Other terms, such as *roar*, *scream*, *shriek* in English and *scréach*, *béic*, *liú* in Irish, signify a harsher and more frightening sound, also consistent with ethnographic accounts of the mourning ritual in Ireland.³⁸ It is worth noting that descriptions of the banshee’s cry are far more common than those of her appearance; while she may be heard and not seen she is never, to the best of my knowledge, seen but not heard.

As with the mermaid, we encounter straight-forward statements of belief about the banshee within the archive, as well as accounts of encounters with her. Because of the personal nature of this experience, most accounts are presented as first-hand. A fairly typical example, taken from County Antrim goes as follows:

33. See references in <<https://dil.ie/5114>>, accessed 15 October 2022. See also CAREY, John, “Notes on the Irish War Goddess”, in *Éigse*, Dublin, National University of Ireland, 1983: 263-75; GUYONVARCH, Christian-J. and LE ROUX, Françoise, *Mórrígan, Bodb, Macha: la souveraineté guerrière de l’Irlande*, Rennes, Ogam – Celticum, 1983; and HERBERT, Maire, “Transmutations of an Irish Goddess”, in BILLINGTON, Sandra and GREENE, Miranda (eds.), *The Concept of the Goddess*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996: 141-51.

34. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 87-111.

35. On ritual lament in Ireland, see Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN, Seán, *Irish Wake Amusements*, Cork, Mercier Press, 130-45; also BOURKE, Angela, “The Irish traditional lament and the grieving process”, in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1988: 287-91, and LYSAGHT, Patricia, “*Caoineadh os Cionn Coirp*: The Lament for the Dead in Ireland”, in *Folklore*, Abingdon, U.K., Taylor and Francis Ltd., 1997: 65-82. For similar customs in Gaelic Scotland, see STIÙBHART, Dòmhnall Uilliam, “Keening in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd”, in JUPP, Peter and GRAINGER, Hillary (eds.), *Death in Scotland*, Oxford, Peter Lang Press, 2019: 127-46.

36. Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN, Seán, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, Dublin, Folklore of Ireland Society, 1942: 426-7. There are parallels to this association in early Irish literature; perhaps the best-known example is that of the three red men who appear as an omen of doom in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* “The Destruction of Dá Derga’s Hostel”. KNOTT, Eleanor (ed.), *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*, Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1942.

37. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 64-86.

38. E.g. Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN, Seán, *Irish Wake Amusements*, *op. cit.*: 140.

I heard the banshee when my grandmother died. She was heard on Rathlin too by the people, but I never heard her there. We were saying the rosary when this cry started and when she stopped and ceased we could hear the long sigh. They said she was a wee woman all in white although I never seen her. We went up to my grandmother's and they were on their knees at the rosary waiting for her to die. That's quite true.³⁹

Within counties Cork and Kerry, the banshee's manifestation described as a purely sonic phenomenon. For example:

Do chuala-sa an bhean sí trí huair. Do bhíos ag teacht abhaile, oíche, ó thigh m'uncaillí agus do bhí deirfiúr dom in éineacht liom. Do chuala ag olagón í (an bhean sí) agus má sea, níor éirigh sé leis an deirfiúr. Do thug sí brain fever as agus do cailleadh í.

I heard the *bean sí* three times. I was coming home one night from my uncle's house and my sister was with me. I heard her lamenting (the *bean sí*), and faith, the sister did no good. She got brain fever from it and died.⁴⁰

The banshee typically manifests shortly before the death of someone who has been in poor health for some time and whose death is expected as is the case with the account from County Antrim; less often, she may be heard at the precise moment of death or shortly afterwards, and announce an accidental or unexpected death.⁴¹ The experiencer is generally someone close to the deceased – family or a neighbour – but in a handful of accounts the experiencer dies shortly after encountering the banshee:

Bhí fear thiar in Clais Mhór, Joe Condon a bhí air agus bhí m+e féin agus é féin ag baint prátaí i bhofchair a chéile agus an lá so nuair a tháinig sé go dtí mé bhí deallradh cráite air. D'fhiafraigh mé de cad a bhí ag déanamh caithimh dó agus dúirt sé liom gur dháirigh sé an bhadhb agus go raibh duine éigin a bhain leis chun bás d'fháil. 'Óise, nár liege Dia a leithéid', arsa mise. Ar maidin do bhíos ag obair agus dúirt muintir an tí liom nuair a tháinig mé isteach go raibh Joe tar éis bháis ó aréir.

There was a man beyond in Clashmore, Joe Condon was his name, and he and I were digging potatoes together. This day when he arrived he had a tormented appearance. I asked him what was troubling him and he told me that he heard the *badhb* and that someone belonging to him was going to die. 'Oh, may God forbid,' said I. In the morning I was working and the people of the house told me when I came in that Joe was dead since last night.⁴²

While, like death, the banshee may come at any time of year, she typically gives her message at midnight, or at the liminal periods of dusk or dawn.⁴³ The announcement of death may be delivered over a great distance – for example, several accounts relate how a banshee announced

39. NFC 1365: 218; Cary, Rathlin Island, county Antrim; Rathlin Island Ordnance Survey, 1954. Quoted in LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 67.

40. NFC 1312: 246-8; Iveragh, county Kerry; Kells Ordnance Survey. Quoted and translated in LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 65-6.

41. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 137-9.

42. NCF 259: 616; Decies within Drum, county Waterford; Glasmore Ordnance Survey, 1936. Quoted and translated in LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 116-8.

43. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 119-21.

the death of an emigrant to his family in Ireland – but typically she manifests nearby, in the vicinity of the soon-to-be deceased’s house, or at least in the home parish. When she manifests near a house, she invariably remains outside but often gravitates towards openings or entrances to the house: windows, doors, chimneys.

Outside of the domestic space, the banshee is often said to appear near rock formations, especially those which can be imagined as a sort of seat. Although she is never identified as a water-dweller, she is also said to dwell near bodies of water: lakes, rivers, wells, and so on. In County Galway and much of Scotland, the banshee or *bean-nighe* is often said to appear washing the clothes of the deceased in rivers and lakes.⁴⁴

The banshee is frequently said to have a connection to particular families, as in the following example from Clare:

Michael McMahon of Fountain, Ennis, heard great crying in the middle of the day. It went from the back of his house to where John Keane, a neighbour of his, lived. In half an hour’s time he heard that John Keane was dead. The banshee always followed the Keane family.⁴⁵

The verb *follow* is frequently used in English-language accounts to refer to the banshee’s relationship with a particular family, along with *cry for* (corresponding with *lean* and *caoin* respectively in Irish-language accounts).⁴⁶ A banshee is believed to “follow” a particular family, and to lament the deaths of certain members of the family, typically older men who might be thought of as “heads” of the family. Not every family was “followed” in this way, and several archival sources claim that the banshee only followed families with a “Mac” or “O” in their name.⁴⁷ While accounts of the banshee do provide examples of families whose names lack these elements – such as Keane in the example quoted above – these are invariably Anglicized forms of Irish names which did have these elements (e.g. Keane from Ó Catháin). Thus, such statements can be seen as a shorthand for the belief that the banshee only “follows” families of Gaelic origin, or families of Norse or Anglo-Norman origin who had adapted Gaelic culture by the later Middle Ages, rather than families of “New English” origin who arrived in the seventeenth century or later.

This belief is alluded to in an elegy by the seventeenth-century Irish poet Piaras Feiritéar, from Ballyferriter, County Kerry:

44. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 133.

45. NFC S608: 273; Kilmaley, county Clare; Kilmaley School Ordnance Survey. Quoted in LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 116.

46. The verb *lean* in Irish signifies both “to follow” and “to adhere, cling to” someone or something. This particular use of *follow* in English seems to be a calque off of the Irish expression, suggesting that this belief predated language shift from Irish to English in most (if not all) communities where it was recorded.

47. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 56-9.

*Ins an Daingean níor chaigil an ceol-ghol,
 Gur ghlac eagla ceannaidhthe an chnósta,
 Dá n-eagla féin níor bhaoghal dóibh sin,
 Ní chaoínid mná sidhe an sórt soin.
 In Dingle, she did not cease her musical lament
 And fear seized the stingy merchants,
 Despite their fear, they were in no peril,
 The banshee does not lament their sort.⁴⁸*

Like the mermaid, the banshee is the subject of various interference legends: a human, usually a man, accosts or steals from the banshee, and is later visited by the banshee or punished for his transgression. The most widespread of these legends, termed “The Comb Legend” by Lysaght, unsurprisingly involves the theft of a comb, as in the following example:

One night at about 12 o'clock as a man was crossing home from Ardfinnan he heard something moaning but he could not see anything. He walked on for some distance and then he was in another field when he saw something in the corner of the field wearing a long white dress. He walked towards it and it kept standing still. It was a woman combing her hair. He ran after her and she dropped the comb and he took it up. That night when he was in bed he heard knocks at the window and he also heard moaning. He slept for a while and then he awoke and he saw something at the window. He got up and he put the comb into a tongs and he gave it out the window to her and when she was taking it she took half of the tongs with her.⁴⁹

The object is typically returned through the window, a liminal site which links the house to the outside world, and one of the places where the banshee is frequently heard in her more conventional role as death-messenger.⁵⁰

Comparison

Having presented an overview of the ways in which these two beings are portrayed in Irish and Highland Scottish tradition, we can proceed to a comparison of the two. Firstly, there are some obvious differences: the mermaid is aquatic while the banshee is terrestrial (although sometimes said to dwell near bodies of water), the mermaid is young and beautiful while the

48. UA DUINÍN, Pádraig, *Dánta Phiaras Feiritéir*, Dublin, Oifig Díolta Foilseachán Rialtas, 1934: 2. Translated by author. Cf. LYSAGHT, Patricia, “Irish Banshee Traditions: A Preliminary Survey”, in *Béaloides*, Dublin, Folklore of Ireland Society, 1974: 111-2.

49. NFCS 571: 85; Derrygrath, county Tipperary; Grange Ordnance Survey. Quoted in LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 154. The destruction of the tongs presents another parallel with Scandinavian traditions: in the migratory legend ML 5010 “The Visit to the Old Troll. The Handshake”, a man uses a metal implement instead of his own hand in order to give a handshake, or offer an object, to a troll. The troll easily deforms or destroys the implement, showing that the man narrowly avoided serious injury or death. CHRISTIANSEN, Reidar Thorolf, *The Migratory Legends*, *op. cit.*: 86-8.

50. Cf. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 135-7.

banshee is old (although sometimes described as youthful), and the mermaid is often (but not always) a hybrid of human and fish while the banshee appears human.

Despite these differences, there are several similarities in terms of their appearance, habits, and overall relationship with humanity. Both take the form of women – or mostly women, or women most of the time – and have long and unbound hair. Both tend toward extremes of age and attractiveness: youthful and beautiful maidens, or withered crones, with little in-between. Both have an affinity for liminal times and spaces: coasts and riverbanks, doors and windows, dusk and dawn, and the festivals of *Bealtaine* and *Samhain* which mark the halfway-points of the year.⁵¹ Both presage death, although the mermaid is typically a visual warning and the banshee an aural one. Both have connections with particular families: the banshee is said to “follow” her family while the mermaid is often explicitly identified as an ancestor to that family. As noted above, the mermaid may also appear to lament the death of members of “her” family.

Both beings are the subject of interference legends: their feminine appearance attracts unwanted attention from men who are often punished for their transgression. Folkloric accounts pay great attention to the hair of both – conspicuously unbound in a social context where most women wore head coverings – as well as the comb which they use. The interference legend of the banshee’s comb was discussed earlier, and in multiple versions of “The Man Who Married the Mermaid” the stolen object is identified as the mermaid’s comb.⁵² As Lysaght observed, “The Comb Legend” generally not known in areas where “The Man who Married the Mermaid” is widespread; the stories are apparently too similar to coexist.⁵³ There is at least one account that I am aware of, where “The Comb Legend” is told about a mermaid rather than a banshee. Patrick Neylon of Cahercalla, county Clare relates that:

Mick Reynolds, Corbally, Quin, Co. Clare, used to go every night to the well in Mick Labor’s field, Corbally for a bucket of water. He used to see a mermaid walking around the field near the well. She had a rack [comb] which she used to comb her hair stuck in the poll. He took the rack from her, and she followed him for it. He brought it down home and left it on the mantelpiece in the kitchen. She came to the window for three nights, crying for her rack and the people around advised him to give it back to her and he gave it back to her and he never saw her afterwards.⁵⁴

Despite the fact that the banshee and the mermaid are typically regarded as different classes of being, with distinct habits and habitats, the foregoing shows that the line between the two is not always a firm one, and that either may fulfill the same role in narratives or belief statements as the other. The defining difference appears to be location: the mermaid dwells in or near the sea, the banshee on land.

51. Ó DUILEARGA, Séamus (ed.), *Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonail*, Dublin, Folklore of Ireland Society, 1977: 353.

52. DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, *op. cit.*: 41.

53. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 159-63.

54. NFCS 596:44; Patrick NEYLON, Cahercalla, County Clare; Collector unknown, 26 May 1938.

Crucial to understanding these two beings, I suggest, is the fact that both are portrayed as women, and are almost always described as solitary beings which marry into, or otherwise interact with, an existing human kin-group.⁵⁵ As Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball famously discussed, marriage in rural Ireland in the twentieth century was exogamous and patrilocal: women “married in” to their husband’s family, and entered a complex and fraught social role: on the one hand, they were outsiders, on the other hand, they played a crucial role in the maintenance of the family.⁵⁶ As Bettina Kimpton notes:

The contradictory status of the woman in the rural Irish community... made her an obvious focal point for anxieties about disorder and the supernatural. As the woman normally married into the husband’s home, she was considered an outsider, and for this reason constituted a threat. However, she played vital roles in the sustenance and continuity of the family; she had, for example, to bear and raise children, cook, clean, milk the cows, and churn... this combination of indispensability and untrustworthiness was a great source of tension.⁵⁷

In addition to this paradoxical role described by Kimpton, women presided over the crucial *rites de passage* of birth and death – as noted above, *keening* or ritual lament for the dead was woman’s work in medieval and modern Ireland and Gaelic Scotland.

Like the real-world women of the communities in which these folklore accounts were recorded, the mermaid and banshee are thought of as at once attractive and perilous, foreign and familiar, connected with the mysteries of life and death, and implicated in the fortune and fate of the patriarchal and patrilocal family. At the level of narrative and belief, therefore they reflect ideas and anxieties concerning the status of women in these same communities.

In her discussion of literary antecedents to contemporary banshee-belief, Lysaght distinguishes two strands of medieval Irish literary traditions, which she terms *ben síde*-texts and *badb*-texts.⁵⁸ In the former strand, a beautiful woman (or women) from the *síd* (“fairy mound”) laments a dead hero, or a hero who is soon to die. In the latter, the supernatural death-messenger takes on a more sinister aspect: she appears as a hag rather than a beautiful woman, washing the bloody clothes of the condemned man at the ford. She is also described as a *badb* in some of these texts, a word which signifies both the hooded crow, and a type of

55. It should be noted that in some versions of “The Man who Married the Mermaid”, the mermaid or seal-woman does appear alongside a group of her sisters or companions. This motif is most common in Iceland, the Faroes, Shetland and Orkney, and Scandinavia, but relatively rare in the Gaelic-speaking world, although not unattested. DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, *op. cit.*: 46-7, 316.

56. ARENSBERG, Conrad M., and KIMBALL, Solon T., *Family and Community in Ireland*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1940, 123-44.

57. KIMPTON, Bettina, “Blow the House Down: Coding, the Banshee, and Woman’s Place”, in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, 1993: 39.

58. LYSAGHT, Patricia, *The Banshee*, *op. cit.*: 191-218. *Ben síde* “woman of the *síd*/fairy-mound” develops into Modern Irish *bean sí* and English *banshee*. The earliest texts which Lysaght discusses may date as early as the eighth century, although the beliefs reflected in them could no doubt be much older.

phantom or spirit associated with death and the battlefield, as noted above. Lysaght connects these accounts to the broader context of early Irish literature, in which there are numerous other examples of supernatural (or at least exceptional) female characters who appear bestow legitimacy to rule upon kings, and cause the downfall of kings when they revoke their favour. Both of these strands of tradition, the *ben side* and *badb* texts, become entangled over time resulting in the modern cluster of traditions concerning the banshee, with the washing-woman motif particularly prominent in Scotland.

Many of the elements which I have described as common to accounts and descriptions of the mermaid and banshee are also to be found in the texts discussed by Lysaght: the mermaid's beauty, her long hair, her appearance as an omen of death, her tendency to appear in liminal times and places (especially near bodies of water), her association with particular families (especially those who have aristocratic pedigrees), and her ability to grant prosperity or bring ruin. It seems very likely then that traditions about the mermaid preserved in the folkloric material also derive from the early medieval Irish (if not pan-Gaelic) complex of ideas regarding sovereignty, legitimacy, prosperity, and women discussed by Lysaght. There is further evidence for such a continuity in the fact that some Scottish mermaids are identified as "the Vow". Old Irish *badb* becomes *badhbh* "old hag, she-spirit, witch" in Scottish Gaelic, pronounced /br:v/. The digraph "ow" is a reasonable approximation of this vocalism in English orthography, while the change from initial /b/ to /v/ is a regular feature of Gaelic languages, especially when feminine nouns (such as *badhbh*) follow the definite article; here we may note that term found in English is invariably "the Vow".

There are, still, some salient differences between the portrayal of the mermaid and the banshee in contemporary Irish and Scottish folklore, and any theory which posits a common origin for both must account for these differences. The most obvious of these differences is the fact that the banshee is almost always portrayed as human, whereas the mermaid is frequently portrayed as half-fish. While the *Badb*, or *badbs*, sometimes appear as their namesake, the hooded crow, in medieval Irish literary sources, none of the earlier sources discussed by Lysaght present beings who are part-fish, and indeed, such figures are quite rare in early Irish literature.⁵⁹ On the one hand, it seems plausible that supernatural women believed to dwell by or in the sea might be imagined as having the characteristics of other aquatic animals: her upper half remains human because it is important that men perceive her to be beautiful. On the other hand, this image may have been borrowed, via the Norman presence in Ireland, from the late medieval Anglo-French concept of the mermaid, which eventually became well-established in many other European traditions.⁶⁰ Other differences in the prevailing portrayal of

59. For an overview of "mermaids" in medieval Irish literature, see DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, *op. cit.*: 147-70.

60. Cf. DARWIN, Gregory, *ML 4080 The Seal Woman*, *op. cit.*: 171-3. For a discussion of visual depictions of the mermaid in medieval Irish churches, see also HIGGINS, J. G., *Irish Mermaids: Sirens, Temptresses and their*

these two beings seem to reflect a change of emphasis on elements which are to be found in the older tradition. In the case of the banshee, the function of lament and warning has been emphasized at the expense of other aspects of her character. With the mermaid, we see something of the ambivalent character of these supernatural patrons: bringing prosperity or ruin with equal likelihood.

Conclusion

This preliminary and, necessarily, brief discussion is inspired by a question which came up over the course of my doctoral research: why do mermaids sometimes appear where one would expect to find a banshee, and *vice versa*? While I have focused on beliefs and symbols from the Gaelic-speaking world, primarily recorded in folkloric accounts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I do not mean to suggest that there are not analogues to these traditions elsewhere.⁶¹ Further comparative work has the potential to yield insight into what, if anything, is particularly “Gaelic” about the Gaelic mermaid and banshee, and whether these peculiar qualities are inherited from an earlier Celtic tradition, or the result of a more recent historical development (as I gestured towards in the discussion of the banshee and family names). Further comparative work also has the potential to say more about the question of historical development, dissemination, and the origin of these traditions. Nonetheless, despite the fairly preliminary nature of this discussion, I hope to have demonstrated the similarity and partial interchangeability of two seemingly disparate beings in Gaelic folk tradition, and that these similarities show that both beings reflect a common set of cultural assumptions regarding prosperity, death, and the power of women.

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Symbolism in Art, Architecture and Folklore, Galway, Crow’s Rock Press, 1996. A similar historical development can be seen in England, where the “archetypal modern mermaid” has supplanted earlier images of aquatic humans and human-like beings. YOUNG, Simon, “Mermaids, Mere-Maids, and No-Maids”, in *Shima*, Sydney, Shima Publishing, 2021, 176-200.

61. As noted earlier, mermaids and similar beings appear in several cultures. Welsh folk tradition has examples of supernatural brides who, although not described as mermaids or half-fish, are associated with bodies of water and stand in similar relationship to particular families. These are discussed by WOOD, Juliette, “The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales”, in *Folklore*, Abingdon, U.K., Taylor and Francis Ltd., 1992, 56-72. Parallels between these Welsh accounts, Irish tradition, and medieval Latin and French literature are discussed by DARWIN, Gregory, “The Mélusine Legend Type and the Landscape in Insular and Continental Tradition”, in EGELER, Mathias (ed.), *Landscape and Myth in Northwestern Europe*, Turnhout, Belgium, Brepols, 2019, 163-79.