The Feminist Druid: Making Way for New Stories/New Work
Dr. Michelle LaFrance, George Mason University

It is fitting that I offer this talk in the same year that Eimear Burke has been installed as the new Chosen Chief of the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids, the first woman to hold this position. Not inconsequentially, it is also the year that Dana O'Driscoll stepped into the role of Grand Arch Druid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America. Dana is the third woman to hold the position of Grand Archdruid in the AODA, following Dr. Juliet Ashley, in the 1960s, and Betty Reeves, in the 1980's (McCloud Reeves). It's just terrific that these two women have moved into global leadership positions for the largest world-wide Druid organization and the oldest US-based Druid organization.

They join many other women who have been shaping Druidry since the revivalist-era through their leadership, writing, artistic projects, activism, and community-building: Fearn Lickfield, Chief of the Green Mountain Druid Order, Jhenah Tellyndru, founder of the Sisterhood of Avalon, Ellen Evert Hopman, co-founder of the Order of Whiteoak, Emma Restall Orrr who founded the Druid Network, and authors Danu Forest, Joanna Van Der Hoeven, Nimue Brown, Sharon Paice McLeod, Cerri Lee, Mara Freeman, and Penny Billington—just a few that come immediately to mind and by no means an exhaustive list of the numerous authors, bloggers, and creative writers we might recognize. Today's global Druidry owes a significant debt to the women who have led, volunteered, staffed, organized, written, taught, posted, crafted, advocated, and offered their visions for this spiritual tradition.

This essay celebrates these Druid women, the role of women in Druid history, and the contributions of women to modern Druidry as a global spiritual, religious, and eco-conscious movement. It is also a feminist reflection on the present and future of modern Druidry. In Druidic fashion, I've adopted a triadic form for this work. I begin by recognizing the influence of the earliest feminists on the radical origins of Revivalist Druidry, as well as the contributions of women to Druidry's re-establishment and growth as a spiritual and religious practice in the 20th century. I then celebrate the contributions of feminists working in today's 21st century Druidry. Finally, I emphasize how the feminist sensibilities already encoded into today's Druidry might help us to imagine an even more overtly feminist future for Druidry and its diversifying communities. Each of these three sections begins with a retelling of a traditional folktale that offers a touchstone for consideration.

Feminism, the set of philosophies, theories, and practices driving this essay, proves difficult to define, because it has been a political and social movement for well over 300 years. What most people think of as "feminism" has become a quite malleable, big-tent term for a number of competing concerns, projects, and stances. Dictionary definitions often focus on the equality of "the sexes" and a commitment to women's rights, interests, and choices. "Intersectional feminists" take these beliefs a step further, seeing dimensions of individual and group identity (such as race, class, sexuality, ability, age, religion, and geography) as interwoven standpoints that cannot be teased out from one another. These feminists recognize that people often experience oppression quietly differently from one another because of the complexities of identity, embodiment, and social situation. Gender-oppression operates hand-in-hand with forms of subjugation that go by other names (D'Ignazio and Klein).

Other feminists have focused on the ways that universalized understandings of the human experience, such as those that organize medical, social, political, and educational research efforts, among others, in fact, center white, middle class, male experiences and bodies as the

"norm," thereby marginalizing others, including women, people of color, LGBTQ people, and the differently abled, in ways that are difficult to recognize. Some have named this structure the "patriarchy" and have sought to address the everyday invisibility and internalization of patriarchal power within our social groups and organizations. They would argue that these unrecognized "masculinist" structures cannot help but leech into our everyday contexts, like smaller, self-governed spiritual groups and the things we do within communities of practice. Even if we ourselves do not participate in overt sexism or engage in open discrimination, our ideas about how groups might be structured, what leadership and leadership-styles might look like, our patterns of communicative practice, and all sorts of other norms may be filtered through and inflected by patriarchal expectations.

Folklorists have argued that feminists first talked back to the power structures of their eras through folktales, especially those that were shared between women as they worked in spaces reserved for them, such as kitchens, hearths, and homesteads (Ashley). I call these folktales "kitchen-table myths" because of ways they commonly depict women who question social roles, norms, and status. All stories provide us tools by which we come to know and imagine ourselves and our relations to others. Stories in general emphasize our values, provide common emotional touch stones, and build a shared sense of purpose and possibility within and across communities. Bringing experiences, relations, and patterns to visibility via story has been an important social intervention for many individuals and groups throughout history, particularly those seeking to change the status quo. For many women, kitchen table myths offered opportunities to resist and critique the power structures that sought to define them and to offer alternative visions of their social roles, abilities, and relationships.

It will not be hard to see feminist motivations and sensibilities in the three stories I share here, which highlight the strength, courage, intelligence, autonomy, and problem-solving abilities of women. Moreover, as these stories highlight sensibilities that are already active within and further fostered by today's Druidry, they also offer a sense of what values Druids might continue to emphasize should we wish to work toward yet more equality and representation within our communities.

Our current era gives urgency to efforts to tell the types of stories that simultaneously inspire us as individuals and call us to toward more effective forms of communal action and social understanding. As we face global climate catastrophe, as our global political and social systems are increasingly called out for their complicity in racial and socioeconomic disenfranchisement, and as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed that we really are all in this together, people in Western nations are often seeking new models of social organization and governance. As overtly feminist stories, the tales shared here offer exactly these models of resistance, vision, and social organization for the future, as they underline the values we are called to emphasize in our relationships and open a shared sense of purpose toward ecological, social, and socioeconomic justice.

"The Tale of the Seal Wife"

This first story was collected in the Orkney Islands by William Trail Dennison and originally published in *The Scottish Antiquary* in 1893. "Selkie" was the name for "seal people" (seals who could take human form) in the Scottish Highlands and there are many, many stories about human interactions with Selkies, collected across the Highlands and in Ireland. The Selkie were said to be exceedingly fair of face and body, as well as charismatic and joyful in their human forms.

This story begins with a handsome and popular goodman in Wastness, known for his skill with the ladies. But, it was also known that this goodman would not choose a wife. No matter how his family and friends chided him or how many young women complained that he had trifled with their hearts, he remained unentangled.

"I have trials enough without being tried by a wife," he was heard to say. "If Adam had not been a fool, he might have been a happy man in Eden to this day."

The old wives of the village would scold the goodman, "Take heed yourself or you may also be bewitched someday."

"Ay," the goodman said, "when I can walk to the mainland without getting my feet wet at all."

Well, it came to pass that the handsome goodman was walking the shore at low tide, when he saw several selkie folk, women and men, gathered on a flat rock. On the other side of the rock, lay wide open sea.

The goodman crept upon them until he got right to the edge of the rock where the Selkie played. He watched them with wonder for a long moment—they were the most beautiful people he had ever seen. They were all naked and their pale human skins were without blemish. Their seal skins lay crumpled in small heaps on the rock, as well.

The goodman seized the closest skin and clutched it to his breast. He had grown up hearing the stories around the fire, so he knew well what, or who, he had captured. He tucked the skin under his arm and made for home, hearing a doleful weeping and lamentation rise from the waves behind him.

The selkie woman he had captured was a wretched sight to behold, leaving the water and following him down the beach. She sobbed in bitter grief, holding out both hands in eager supplication, while tears rolled down her fair face. "If there's any mercy in your human breast, please give me back my skin."

But, the goodman's heart would not soften. He wooed her ferociously, as she begged for her skin, unrelenting until he wrung from her a reluctant submission to live with him as his wife. What could she do? Without the skin she could not live in the sea. Without clothes or means she could not live on land.

So, the selkie woman went with the goodman and became a thrifty, dutiful, and kindly goodwife. She bore him seven uncommonly beautiful children, four lads and three lasses. And she did her best to appear happy, even merry at times. Yet she spent many hours longingly looking out to sea. As the years passed, she taught her children strange songs, that no ears on earth had ever heard before. No one could mistake but that she was a creature of the sea, parted from the land and kin of her heart.

Over the years, the selkie wife had often looked for her skin, but not one of her determined searches had turned it up. She had searched up, and she had searched down; she had searched but, and she had searched ben; she had searched out, and she had searched in, but never could she find what she sought.

One day, her youngest daughter changed her mother's fate. "Did you know that Da hides a bonnie skin in the roof just there?" The youngest daughter pointed to the "aisins," the space between roof beam and thatch. The daughter had seen the father take the skin down while everyone else was asleep.

The selkie mother quickly climbed the rafters to reach into the secret space—and there was her long-lost skin! "Farewell, my little darling!" she said to the child and raced to the waves.

A wild cry of joy could be heard above the crash of the surf, as the selkie woman flung on her skin and plunged into the sea. A male of the selkie folk met her just beyond the shore and greeted her with equal joy—he had been waiting all this time for her return.

The goodman was rowing home and saw them both from his boat.

The selkie wife uncovered her face and cried out to him: "Goodman of Wastness, farewell tae you! My life of the sea is my truest love!"

And that was the last the goodman ever saw or heard of his bonnie wife.

As this tale clearly emphasizes the power dynamics between men and women, humankind and wild creatures, it not only foregrounds the mistaken belief that mankind has dominion over the natural world, it also echoes with the messages of today's consent culture and the feminist principle of reciprocity. The good man of Wastness holds the selkie woman against her will. He gains children and the work of her hands and emotions because of his theft of her skin. I need not belabor the message that this is not a right relationship with the natural world nor underline the lessons of feminism 101 conveyed—all people must have freedom to make choices, even bad or unpopular ones, and they must be offered equal respect. We cannot simply take from the natural world, we must see ourselves in respectful relation to it.

And clearly, the message this story sends about respect for the wild world and its many beings, natural and supernatural, resonates with the sensibilities that have shaped today's Druidry. In Druid work, we greet and honor those beings we seek to build relationship with - from the tree and plant teachers we meet along our journey, to the ancestor-allies we remember and cherish, to the figures and mentors we discover in our inner groves. The respect that is signaled in asking, listening, and recognizing that we do not own these figures - at best we collaborate with them *when they are willing*, we learn from them when *they choose to be our* teachers, and we recognize that they owe no obligation to us (even if they are a part of ourselves we have only just recognized) - is central to the ethos of today's Druidry.

This reverence for the natural world began with the earliest Revivalist Druids, who rekindled Druidry in an era coincident with the rise of enlightenment, romantic poetic traditions, and political radicalism. Iola Morganwg, author (or conveyor) of the "Druid's Prayer" and self-styled "Bard of Liberty," was known as a poet and writer of spiritual tracts in his era, but was also a renowned seditionist, dissident, and abolitionist. Resonant with the story of the Selkie women's captivity, historians of Universal Unitarianism and Druidry have noted that Morganwg wrote many of his initial Druidic tracts while in debtors' prison in Cardiff (Klein). Morganwg's earliest Druidic works were inspired by his love of the Welsh countryside where he often walked and by news of the indigenous ways of the "American Indian." Famously, Morganwg refused to sell sugar from slave-plantations in his Cowbridge bookshop and, throughout his life, Morganwg condemned the slave trade and was an ardent reader of abolitionist literature (Jenkins). (When push came to shove, however, after years of refusing monies from his brothers' Jamaican plantations, Morganwg accepted the legacy so that he could establish his children in their own trades.)

Moreover, while Morganwg was not a supporter of the feminist cause - the politics of his age precluded women from "active citizen[ship]" (Jenkins 98) - his political and literary associations brought him into close contact with several figures of early feminism. While we cannot say these figures directly influenced Morganwg's Druidic tracts, they were visible and vocal feminists within Morganwg's era, so their indirect influence is altogether likely. During his

tenure in London, Morganwg attended social gatherings hosted by Elizabeth Stuart Bowdler, a writer, and her daughter, Henrietta Maria Bowdler, a literary editor. He visited the salons of Elizabeth Montagu, a British social reformer, patron of London artists, literary critic, and organizer of the Blue Stocking Society. (Montagu was known as the "queen of the Blue Stockings"; Jenkins; Dobbs). Morganwg likewise moved in literary circles with the Wollstonecrafts, including Mary Wollstonecraft, who published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. He also admired, and took some inspiration from, the writings of Ann Letitia Barbauld, whose poetry, essays, and social criticism aroused public consciousness against war and slavery.

It is altogether likely that feminist tracts passed through Morganwg's hands, as well; he was a bookseller and voracious reader of political writing. Morganwg was well-informed about the social experiments of the era (many of which highlighted equality between the sexes, if not free love, and a return to living close to the land), particularly the experiments of the Quakers in the British Isles and the US - where scholars root many early strains of the feminist movement (Abray). Our understandings of "radicalism" have expanded quite a bit since Morganwg's day. Many of today's Druids, animists, and eco-activists now hold that trees, rivers, and animals are *non-human persons*. Many of us would argue that nature itself has inalienable rights. So, it is not too far a stretch to imagine that Morganwg's thoughts on women may have advanced to reflect our era's ideals, as well.

The feminist influence upon Druidry comes into yet clearer focus when we recognize the more direct work of women Philip Carr-Gomm has named the "Founding Mothers" of Druidry (161). Among these foremothers, the two most recognized are Vera Chapman and Doreen Valiente. Knowles' online biography of Chapman, notes that she is "best known as the founder of the Tolkien Society of Great Britain" and "an accomplished author herself," having written the Arthurian trilogy, The Green Knight (1975), King Arthur's Daughter (1976) and The King's Damosels (1976). She met Ross Nichols through their mutual involvement in the Ancient Druid Order and served as the Pendragon of the Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids founded by Nichols in 1964. Like Morganwg, Chapman believed in social reform and economic justice, though she chose not to focus her energies on overt political action.

Valiente, held by many to be the "mother of modern paganism," is often recognized for her poetic and moving "Charge of the Goddess," a witches' liturgical text that popularized what is now a well-integrated eco-feminist ethos in pagan circles. Shortly after the 1952 repeal of the British Witchcraft Act, Valiente was introduced to Gerald Gardner, became the High Priestess of the New Forest Coven, and collaborated extensively with Gardener to update his "Book of Shadows." Ashley Mortimer, a trustee of the Doreen Valiente Foundation, argues that "the Gardnerian cult" as we know it today, would not have seen the popularity it has achieved without Valiente's organizational acumen or her "inspirational and poetic additions." We might say the same thing for Chapman, who was a friend and ally to Nichols and who maintained papers and memorabilia central to OBOD's continuation following Nichols' death in 1975. Both women were advocates for other women and for ecological awareness; Valiente was further known for her outspokenness on pro-choice, pro-birth control, anti-racist, and anti-homophobic issues.

Carr-Gomm emphasizes the influence of these two founding mothers on 20th century paganism, but particularly the influence of Vera Chapman upon the new Druidry. Chapman drew on noteworthy academic credentials "that rivaled" Nichols own, as well as a similarly deep affinity for history and poetry. She maintained her friendship with Nichols and held the position of Pendragon until 1991, 17 years after Nichols' death. It was Chapman who gave Carr-Gomm

the draft manuscript that became "The Book of Druidry" and other documents that yet inform OBOD's liturgies and philosophies today (Knowles).

And, of course, any historical treatment of the role of women and feminist ideals in today's Druidry is incomplete if we do not recognize the many women who have written about pagan traditions, magical working, and the centrality of reverence for the earth to pagan practice, from Margot Adler to Starhawk to ZZ Budapest, to Selena Fox and Oliva Robertson—all who, in some way, have directly and vocally advocated for the power of women, the power of earth-based practice, and the role of women in forming, leading, and sustaining our global networks of pagan community. The contributions of these feminist foremothers, those in the shadows of their male peers and those who stood out visibly and on their own terms, amplify the morals of the "Tale of the Seal Wife": respect for others and their choices, reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships with all living things, recognition of our place in the web-of-existence, *and consent*. Indeed, these women remind us that these sensibilities are crucial to effective relationships, meaningful spiritual practice, and sustainable communities.

"Kate Crackernuts"

This story was collected by folklorist Andrew Lang in the Orkney Islands and first published in *Longman's Magazine* in 1889. It was later edited and republished by Joseph Jacobs in his collection, *English Fairy Tales* (1890). It has inspired a series of children's books, a play, and a musical score for piano.

> *We begin with two stepsisters, both named Kate. Kate, who everyone admired as "beautiful" was the King's daughter and Kate, who was instead "sensible," was the daughter of the Queen.*
>
> *There were jealousies, who would be surprised? Everyone knows beauty and sense are often coveted. Particularly in a royal household. And sometimes, beauty is even perceived as a threat.*
>
> *And so, the Queen set out to diminish beautiful Kate. She brought in the Henwife, which is always a bad sign if you know these types of stories, and after three attempts, the Henwife put a spell upon beautiful Kate's head so that it took on the appearance of the head of a sheep.*
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> *Sensible Kate was said to love her half-sister. She could not tolerate this offense or let her sister come to further harm. She wrapped her sister's head in a silken cloth and took beautiful Kate away from their first home, seeking a new place where both sisters might live quietly and without harm.*
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> *After some travel, the sisters found a household where the king had two sons. One of the sons was quite sick, suffering what the people of his era called a "wasting disease" (which we now call by any number of difficulties of body, mind, or spirit). Mysteriously, whoever watched over this young man by night. . . vanished without a trace. The household's members saw immediately that Kate was "sensible" and gratefully offered her the post of nursemaid.*
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> *The first night of her new post, when all the household had just fallen into the depths of slumber, the sickly young man suddenly rose from his bed as if he were not troubled by sickness at all. Kate followed him as he - as if in a trance - made his way to the stables, saddled a horse, and climbed upon it. He did not even notice when she drew herself up behind him to share the ride. Where he would go, she would go.*

And ride they did - through the fields and over the hills and finally into the woods - where Kate filled her pockets with hazelnuts, ripe upon the branches, should she be hungry later. And, finally they came to a clearing in the woods and within that clearing rose a green, faery hill. The hill opened and Kate rode inside it with the young man.

There, she slipped deftly into the shadows and watched as the young man was greeted merrily by the good people within. She watched him join them in dancing until the first hint of dawn - until he was so tired and ragged of foot, he could barely stand. And, she stealthily rejoined him - when he climbed onto his horse and rode home.

It could only have been a dream, she thought, as the young man returned to his bed and lay in restless fatigue through the day.

But the second night, when all the household had fallen once more to slumber, the young man again rose - hale and healthy, though deeply entranced. And, Kate slipped onto the horse he saddled and rode with him again over the hills and through the wood into the faery mound. She collected hazelnuts from the forest trees as they passed, just as she had the night before, filling her pockets.

They entered the faery mound and again she watched him dance himself into distress. But this night, she ventured a little more beyond her stealthy shadows - and encountered a baby, who played with a faery wand. Kate overheard some other faeries saying that the wand would undo any enchantment - and she thought for certain that this might help her once beautiful sister return to her former self. And so, sensible Kate cracked open and rolled a hazel nut toward the baby's feet. . . the baby squealed and waved its fat arms. She rolled another hazel nut - and another, and another - until the delighted baby dropped the wand.

Kate snatched up the wand and hid it in her pocket as the baby ate the nuts. And she rode home that dawn, with the wand and the young man, who lumbered to his bed stricken with exhaustion. Kate touched the wand to her sister's sheep head and returned her to her beauty.

The third night, Kate once more rode with the young man and filled her pockets with hazel nuts as they passed through the wood, but this time she rode determined to free the young man from his enchantment as she had freed her sister. This time, as the young man danced, Kate again stole through the shadows to see what she could learn about the faery mound. She again found the baby. The baby now played with a bird and Kate overheard other faeries saying that three bites of the bird would break any faery spell. She thought perhaps that might help the young man who was dancing himself into exhaustion each night.

So, again, she distracted the baby, cracking open and rolling hazel nuts across the floor. . . until the baby dropped the bird and Kate was able to tuck the bird into her pocket. Kate returned home with the young man, who fell exhausted into his bed upon his arrival. Kate then cooked the bird, and woke the young man to spoon three bites into his mouth. The faery enchantment fell away from him and he was cured.

This story has a happy ending. Kate agrees to marry the young man, who is impressed by her - who wouldn't be? She is not just sensible, after all, but courageous and smart and someone who gets things done. And beautiful Kate, her stepsister, agrees to marry the other brother. And we all know that when two people marry in a story, they live happy ever after, so imagine the joy when the two couples are married.

There are many reasons that I have always loved this story - from the ways it subverts the traditional evil stepmother trope, to the humorous image of a beautiful woman with the head of a sheep, to the ways that sensible Kate, as protagonist, is unthreatened by her sister's beauty, to the sisters' refusal to stay in her jealous mother's household and sensible Kate's determination to rescue them and the bewitched young man. Kate Crackernut's fearlessness and quick thinking throughout the story are remarkable. I particularly love that hazelnuts, the nut of ancient knowledge in the Gaelic imagination, figure so well in the problem-solving Kate undertakes. In my version, I took the liberty of adding more about Kate's pockets - the place she stashes the hazelnuts, the wand, and the bird - because I read somewhere once long ago that the first pockets for European women were secretly handsewn into petticoats, providing young women a place to hide novels. Few things say *resistance* and *smart women are cool* to me like a pocket.

And, sure, this fairytale, even in my telling, is not perfectly in sync with today's ideas of liberation for women. Like most fairy tales, the two sisters inevitably end up married - which is how the issues women faced were most often resolved in previous eras. Jacobs' 1890 version ended with a note about the weddings, "the sick brother [wed] to the well sister, and the well brother to the sick sister," which is the sort of irony-tinged denouement that appealed to the Victorian reader.

But this story does offer us an important model for thinking about the ways we see women working in Druidry today. For, at the center of today's Druidry lies a conundrum. To be part of any neo-pagan movement in the 21st century means to be familiar with eco-feminist principles, such as goddess worship, the global empowerment of women, the challenging of traditional religious structures that limit women's roles and experiences, and the equation of environmental and social activism with human/women's rights. And while we may celebrate the women I've discussed above and recognize their significant contributions to today's Druidry, the image of "the Druid" in popular understandings somehow yet resonates with white maleness, masculine power structures, and male dominated histories.

"If you were to ask someone to describe *an historical* Druid," the organizers of the *Women in Druidry* conference of summer 2020 explain, "most [people] would overwhelmingly paint a picture of a wise old man with a long grey beard and white flowing robes." The conference organizers note that the Druid's historical association with the "elite and learned social caste in ancient Celtic cultures," as well as the social power of their traditional roles as "priests and augurs, teachers and judges, transmitters of history, and holders of sacred memory," continues to align Druidic figures with masculine forms of prestige. Ellen Evert Hoffman additionally notes that "the Druid" a historical figure is quite often associated with Christian monks and the stories told by Roman authors, who focused their attentions on male leaders in Celtic and Germanic cultures as a matter of their own cultural and historical blinders. So clearly, one piece of the work of today's Druidry is to recover and circulate more about the historical contributions of Druid women in previous eras, putting some pressure on the masculinist centers that dominate popular consciousness.

Moreover, there may be people in this audience who are wondering whether we still need feminism, particularly within the Druid world. The presence and contributions of women in the Druid world seems pretty unassailable, after all. In the last five years alone, 31 of 54 (57%) total nonfiction publications about Druidry as a spiritual, religious, or magical practice were authored by women (Carr-Gomm, *Year End Review*)—so, why would we argue that feminism is an important force that needs to be recognized in Druidry today? Haven't we, in the developed

world, let alone in communities brought together by earth-based spirituality, achieved equality between the sexes? *Isn't the work of feminism realized?*

I'll acknowledge, too, in the wider world, particularly in the US, the term "feminist" remains a point of contest for many people. The work of "feminism" has lost a good deal of currency in the ongoing culture wars. In US-based popular media cycles, Twitter-verse take-downs, and political commentaries, "feminists" are often manhating, bothersome, uptight, killjoys. (They are also often fat, ugly, and unlovable in the popular imagination and popular media.) Negative stereotypes about women, and feminists, are not new, by any means. They are as old as stories. Wherever there are women standing up for their rights, or the rights of others, for our planet, or for children, there are likely to be stories that paint those women as betrayers of a natural order.

A component of our effort, then, requires us to think about how these inheritances and realities - our histories, our current cultural orders, our resulting habits of mind - may tacitly inform today's Druidry as philosophy and practice. *On that account, it seems, our work really is only just beginning.* We've done well in creating space for Druid women to write, think, and imagine today's Druidry, but *the presence of women* as Druid leaders and active community-members is just one step toward a more overtly feminist consciousness—*we must also carefully think through how unrecognized expectations and sensibilities may yet restrict our conceptions of Druid practice.*

The forthright and prolific Nimue Brown confronts one example of the type of habitual thinking we might disrupt. In a blog post, Brown argues that invocations of the Goddess are not necessarily a *defacto* means to empower women. Tropes such as the Maiden-Mother-Crone standard, often superimposed upon the characters of pagan ritual and the cycles that order the natural world, may instead diminish representations of women to their biological relationship with reproduction. Moreover, some Goddess-forms reiterate the passivity and male-centric views of women that feminists have often sought to trouble. Brown describes one example: "earth mother, endlessly fertile, her divine thighs always open to the God/Priest/King. . . focused on being penetrated by a male." When the Goddess is "beautiful, eternal, untouched by human degradation" and "surprisingly benevolent, given how the majority of us treat her," she is merely a male-focused ideal, Brown argues - a "pristine, untouched world that never existed." Brown suggests that these images drown out the abusive relationship humans have had with the earth, toxically supporting the "beneficent tolerance of abuse" as an ideal.

For much of human history and across cultures, many spiritual traditions have approached "masculinity" and "femininity" as binary oppositions - reinforcing particular characteristics or natural features as inherently masculine or inherently feminine and calcifying conceptual differences between what is male and what is female. Feminist thinkers have additionally urged us to decouple "biological sex" from "cultural expressions of gender," understanding gender and gender characteristics as fluid and performative aspects of personal identity. "No one is born one gender or the other," eponymous gender theorist Judith Butler has argued, rather "We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman."

Nicole Youngman, a sociologist and a Druid, underlines these distinctions in a blog post: "Sex has existed for billions of years, and has created the possibility for complex life forms to evolve; gender is a *human invention*, a set of ideas that is constantly changing." Youngman further notes that medieval magical systems often assigned gender to "things like stones, elements, planets, herbs, etc., that have no literal sex (much less gender)." For Youngman, this

equation of the natural world and related characteristics "risks making comparisons with how men and women are supposed to feel or behave. . . ie, mountains are somehow 'masculine' because they are towering, strong, and immovable, while bodies of water are somehow 'feminine' because they are passive, nurturing, and accepting." Aligning gender-characteristics with the natural order is problematic, according to Youngman, because "historically, those sorts of assertions have been used as a proxy for 'the way God wants it,' and have been made to justify some pretty heinous social structures, like slavery, the 'doctrine of discovery,' and keeping women barefoot and pregnant."

Such quite traditional sensibilities about men, women, and their societal roles, Brown and Youngman remind us, have long regimented storytelling traditions, particularly stories enshrined by national mythologies and patriarchal systems. We see these outdated gender-norms reflected in Arthurian tales, for instance, where men are almost exclusively knights and wizards, women are noble ladies, maids, crones, witches, or fallen, and the ideals of Christian purity often structure relationships, quests, and romantic ideals. We see them at work in many mythological systems that enshroud pantheons of Gods and Goddesses. We might still learn a good deal from these stories, allowing our future to be informed by the wisdom of the past; but we also have yet to build a commonly recognized set of alternatives to or ways of re-imagining these traditional stories, as well. There is absolutely nothing wrong with choosing to embrace the traditional gender roles offered in these histories for one's self; but we still have work to do to ensure that outdated ideals of gender do not sustain blind spots or forced expectations for others in our shared practices, rituals, and philosophies.

In my own efforts to rethink the role of gender in Druid practices and our communities, I personally owe a great debt to my LGBTQ friends, who have consistently demonstrated gender as a fluid and dynamic form of creative play. (Butler famously called this "gender trouble.") Bodies, sexual orientations, and identities rarely fit neatly into narrow or exclusive categories. My friends who are drag performers, for instance, have often superseded cultural expectations and defied perceptions in ways that make the performativity of gender-identity all the more visible. My trans friends have shown me that the surface characteristics of bodies and sexualities are less important than the openness of hearts, minds, and communication. Their lived activism insists that we see all forms of embodiment, emotional experience, and personal expression as sacred, lest we exclude and devalue those whose expressions of gender (or lived embodiment) such as race, ability, and other makers of personal identity) defy our categories.

Ideals of gender fluidity also resonate strongly with the traditions of Animism that I've encountered, which have pushed me to embrace "myriad multiplicity" in my conceptions of the natural world. Most recent animist principles, Graham Harvey notes, encourage a radical move away from modernist, binary, and oppositional ideals which have sought to categorize and systematize our understandings of the world around us. "Animists celebrate plurality, multiplicity, the many and their entwined passionate entanglements. . . all dualisms are, at best provisional and/or contingent" Harvey notes (xiv-xv). Many Animist cultures have foregrounded instead that all expressions of existence, in their infinite pluralities, are sacred and can be our teachers, should we open to their messages.

Finally, the story of Kate Crackernuts emphasizes "an ethos of care" (Kirsch and Royster; Gilligan) that resonates with Druidic principles of authenticity and respectful connection. Crucially, Kate's return to the household where she cures the bewitched young man and her beautiful sister reminds us that much of our most important work takes place in the real world in which we live, particularly within our everyday relationships. Druidry is not separate from the

real world, this story suggests, and we are wisest when we honor our inter-connections and move with compassion as we seek to solve problems and build community. Personal healing is often best complimented by interpersonal healing, this story suggests.

The pro-active model Kate presents, cracking open the wisdom we have gathered, models living with care. As this story, and others like it, root our attention in a mindful service to others, we might additionally affirm the shared feminist and Druidic values of pro-activity, problem-solving, inclusivity, empathy, and coalition-building.

"The King and the Foal"

I first heard this story told by Sharon Gunn at a Gaelic Society event (in Vancouver Canada) and later by Seumas Gagne at a *Slighe nan Gaidheal* event (in Seattle, WA). It can be found in *Tales until Dawn: The World of the Cape Breton Gaelic Story-Teller,* a collection of stories told by Joe Neil MacNeil of Cape Breton, Canada.

> *This story begins with a widower who lived with his only daughter. The daughter was extremely smart, she was kind, and she was good in every other respect. But the angry king sent for the widower, they had had some falling out, and the king said to the widower that he had one day to answer a question: What was the most plentiful thing in all the world? If the widower could not give an answer to the king, the widower would be put to death.*
>
> *The daughter noticed that her father looked extremely sorrowful that day. She asked him what his trouble was and the widower told her how things stood.*
>
> *"And why did you not tell him the answer when you were there?" the daughter asked. "Couldn't you tell him that there is nothing in the world as plentiful as sides? It does not matter at all how plentiful anything is in the world; there are at least two sides to it and there are many things which have more than two sides. There might be, for example, an inside and an outside and a top side and a bottom side and one some things a far side and a near side. You can name sides as being more plentiful than anything else."*
>
> *The following day the widower went before the king and gave him that answer: "There is nothing in the world more plentiful than sides."*
>
> *The king was taken aback and frowned, unsatisfied.*
>
> *"My proof is this," replied the widower quickly. "There are at least two sides to everything and however plentiful anything is it must have at least two sides. And there are some things which have three sides and others have four sides."*
>
> *"I am satisfied," said the king, raising his hand. But the king demanded that the widower answer yet another question lest he lose his head: "What is the wealthiest thing in the world?"*
>
> *The widower went home and his daughter saw right away that he was sorrowful. And so, the widower told her the king's question and that he would be put to death if he did not have a satisfying answer on the morrow.*
>
> *"And why did you not tell him the answer?" the daughter asked. "Could you not tell him there is nothing as wealthy as the sea? Name anything on earth and the sea is much larger than that and it contains more of everything."*
>
> *"By virtue of that, the sea is the wealthiest thing in the world," the widower agreed. He returned to stand before the king: "Nothing on earth is wealthier than the sea."*

The king bristled. "Am I myself not wealthier than the sea?"

"Oh, no indeed, by your leave," the widower continued. "The sea is larger than the rest of the world; it is larger than the land and it contains more of everything. For those reasons alone, it is the wealthiest thing there is."

"I must confess that I am satisfied with that," said the king.

But the king bade the widower to return the next day to answer the question: What is the swiftest thing in the world?

And he told the man that he should lose his head if he could not answer.

The widower appeared very down-hearted at home that evening.

The daughter asked him what his trouble was and the widower told.

"And why did you not tell him the answer?" the daughter asked. "Could you not have told him that there is nothing in the world so swift as thought? You simply think of being in any part of the world at all—far away on the other side of the world—and there you are in your thoughts. There is not a bird or a horse or any other creature who could go over to the other side of the world as swiftly as your thoughts would travel."

"By virtue of that, thought is indeed the swiftest thing in the world," the widower agreed. The next day he stood before the king: "Thought is the swiftest thing in all the world."

"Oh, no indeed," the king disagreed. "I have a horse as swift as that."

"Indeed, no," said the old widower. "Your thought can be on the other side of the kingdom or the other side of the world so swiftly that there is not a horse or a bird nor any other beast who could take you there in the same time."

"I am satisfied with that answer," said the king, as he looked the widower up and down shrewdly. "But tell me. Did you come to these answers on your own or did you find an aide somewhere?"

"My daughter is always of great service to me," replied the widower, "It was she who offered these answers."

So, the king arranged to meet the daughter. And after a short time, the king saw her intelligence and character and asked for her hand in marriage and she agreed. But, the king gave her this condition, "If anything were ever to come between us, you must depart and leave the castle immediately."

The daughter agreed to his condition. "I must impose my own condition, too," she said, "or I will not be in the least willing to agree to any conditions whatsoever. If anything were to come between us and I must leave the castle, you must permit me to take three loads out of the castle as I am leaving."

The king agreed. The conditions were made binding and things were going ahead happily enough after the marriage. Their first born was a bonny boy. He was put in a cradle and the daughter would rock him back and forth as she spun, or knitted, or sang. And they were very happy.

But it so happened that a foal that did not belong to the king got lost on the mountain side and was mixed in with the king's geldings. And the foal followed the geldings into the king's stable. When the farmer came to claim the foal, the king claimed that he had the right of ownership over the foal since it was in the king's stable, and the man could not get his foal back no matter how he tried.

Word of the daughter's intelligence and goodness was well known, so the farmer paid a visit to her while she rocked her son in his cradle and the king was away.

"Here is what you should do," the daughter said after hearing his tale, "Bring along a bucket of salt and begin sowing it in the field when you know the king is near. The king will come to see what you are doing—say to him then that you are sowing the field with salt. Be sure to talk as if this is the most usual thing in the world. And when he asks you whether you believe the salt you are sprinkling on the field will grow, say to him that it is just as likely that salt would grow as it is for a gelding to have a foal."

So, the farmer came over early in the morning and he was sprinkling salt onto the damp earth.

The king went over to him. "Do you really think that the salt will grow from the ground?"

"It is just as likely for salt to grow as it is for a gelding to have a foal," the farmer said.

And the king was not happy, because he had been shamed and had then to part with the foal. "This is your doing," said the king to his wife, "giving advice to the farmer."

She did not deny it.

"You have allowed this to come between us. I am sure that you remember the conditions," the king said.

"Oh yes," said she, "I remember them very well. All of them.*"*

"Then, you may go in whatever direction you please, but you must go out of the castle immediately," the king said.

"I will go," said she. "But I will also have three loads to take out of the castle, because if I hold to your condition, you must hold to mine."

So, the daughter filled a chest of gold and silver and jewels and all sorts of valuables and carried that out of the household and put it outside on the road. She then returned and lifted up the cradle with her bonny boy inside it and that was the second load that she was allowed to take to the road outside. And I am sure the king was looking at the chest of gold outside and looking at the baby boy in his cradle and holding his temples because he had agreed to those conditions.

But the daughter came next to the king's side and hoisted him *over her shoulder. She carried him out as well and set him beside the chest and the cradle on the road.*

And that is the story of the king and the foal.

This kitchen table myth strikes me as a deeply resistive tale that fosters respect for women's intellect, a recognition of the gifts and properties of others, and a call for leadership that is grounded in humility, accountability, and sincere connection. Like our previous two stories, this story demonstrates the importance of holding dear our closest relations, and the deep and healing work we do when we honor others and are accountable to them. This particular story also highlights the importance of courage, close and respectful listening, and the need for creative, even quirky, solutions to common issues.

And, like many feminist stories, this story is also specifically focused on the workings of power within and around our public roles. For Druids, stories like "The King and the Foal" suggest a mindful approach to political dynamics and leadership. Western cultures are steeped in hierarchies - political, workplace, academic, and community. But we can see where these models have led us - ecological devastation, inequity, and social divisions. New models of leadership and group dynamics are vital to an era when so much of what we truly value as spiritual people- the ecosystems that we revere, the political systems that we have relied upon, the economic-

systems that have sustained some of us - are splintering and collapsing. Stories like these teach us to be clear about the expectations, habits, and values we carry into the spaces where we work as individuals and within groups, providing examples of connection and transformation. They teach us to courageously challenge powerful institutions, to walk in humility, and to hold to our own guiding ethics.

These types of stories suggest that we might more mindfully choose what we will carry along our paths, creating shared Druidic spaces where all members have equal opportunity and responsibility to speak, to think, and to engage. This story also suggests that we navigate disagreement as an *expected, positive, and healthy process, and* build resilient and authentic connections through respectful and active listening. Especially for those who view themselves as leaders or agents of change in the 21st century, these skills are not just about building Druid communities - they are quintessential to fostering genuinely open, cooperative, and just ways of being in the world. And, they are the types of relations and leadership skills Druids are primed to model for others, in a world hungry for authentic connection, deeper wisdom, and belonging.

Druids have much to learn from and offer to the coalitional movements raising nationally and globally in these last few years. Black Lives Matter and global protests against police brutality have made us aware of the everyday racial oppressions that undeniably order our world. #MeToo, #TimesUp, and the prosecution of high-profile abusers have made visible the scale of sexual harassment people undeniably encounter in the everyday. A new movement to bring awareness to the importance of consent has structured conversations in schools and public groups, including pagan circles, highlighting the ways gender norms snare us all and require a responsible accountability to others. Permaculture and ecological groups have worked toward greener city, suburban, and rural living. We note that these groups and their stories teach Druids not only that our spiritual lives are inseparable from the world around us, but that - as humans, more generally - we must more mindfully honor others, seek true equality, and reflect on our roles within these global structures of power and domination if we are to authentically live in alignment with Druidic ideals. This is personal work, this is political work, and it is work we do in relation with others in the everyday.

A Pause, Not a Conclusion: New Stories, New Work

I will conclude by recognizing that these are just three of the overtly feminist stories we might find if we search archives and storytelling traditions; there are likely hundreds more, from many different cultures, time periods, and perspectives, yet to be shared within Druid community, offering the same sorts of reflective and intriguing models for expansive, progressive, and experiential understanding. The question I would bring today is whether we can find or compose yet more imaginative stories, stories that draw from the past but take us in even newer directions, stories that celebrate and reconfigure gender, stories that help us to confront and manage the many challenges we face in today's communities and ecosystems. What other sensibilities might we also emphasize and what more might these stories teach us about 21st century Druid practice and community?

As we face unprecedented global, national, and local challenges, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves take on a significant weightiness. Beneath all the layers of gender, race, sexuality, class, nationality, and history- those social forces that are always unforgivingly structuring our experiences and movements in difference - our stories will continue to root us in time, space, *and shared purpose*. They will continue to shape our work and our realties, fueling our imaginations and our relationships.

If stories hold many powers, one of the greatest is the power to change minds, to lift hearts, and to bring us together in and across our differences. So, I end here today, not with a conclusion, but a pause *and an invitation.* I invite you, in coming months, to share the stories you have most cherished and learned from with me and to reflect with me upon what your favorite stories teach us and how they enable us to share in common purpose. I invite you, in coming months, to share the stories you've written, dreamed, and lived with me and others, inviting us to learn and walk with you into our shared future. I look forward to hearing the new stories we will bring to our work as Druids, to the unfolding of our co-creative efforts to reimagine the world, and the transformations these stories enact.

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