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LBST 330

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Project Proposal

**Tutorial Advisor:**

LBST 390-09 with Cassidy Picken from the Humanities (English) Department

**Topic of Investigation**:

What connection does history have on pieces of Scottish folklore and how/if these pieces are culturally subjective?

* A look at specific pieces of Scottish mythologies
* Connections to a specific time in history
* Questions on whether history plays a role on the creation and adaption of mythology

**Proposed Learning Outcomes:**

Discover: What are the key elements in Scottish mythologies

Interpret: What are the meanings and what can I learn from them

Compare: Compare the mythologies with each other to discern any similarities and differences

Evaluate: Take a critical look at the data I’ve found and determine what is relevant or not

Hypothesize: Share my reasoning and conclusions based on the previous research

**Resources and Methodology:**

Literature review: I will be sifting through a lot of literature, both academic and original sources and so I will need to synthesize the works to discern what is relevant to my topic. I have many pieces of original work available for use, but I will also use electronic databases for academic journals; libraries for pieces of mythological literature and some archival work to look at diaries, letters and so on that may retain to mythology.

**Literature Review:**

Folklore and mythology is a topic that is not lacking in academic research; picked apart, examined, and taken in so many different directions that there is an oversaturation of related topics and articles to read. However, its narrows down quite a bit when looking at Scottish mythology and its connections to history and culture as there is decidedly a lack of academic research focusing on that topic. In my first tutorial I will be dealing directly with works and texts of Scottish mythology and I will want to find complimentary pieces of academic material that will aid me in analyzing each piece. My goal through this research is to break it down onto three categories: What is myth and how is it constructed; what are the key and recurring elements in Scottish mythology; and how myth is shaped by history and culture.

David Bidney’s essay “Myth, Symbolism and Truth” discusses various academic approaches to the general interpretation of myth and its contextual roots. He critiques different movements and theories that regard origin, language and views on the cosmology of myth. He compares Christian theology with its relationship to mythology, and the symbolism that is accepted or adapted by leaders in the Christian faith and which pieces of myth were viewed as being too pagan (4-5). Most of the essay is a critique of German philosopher Ernst Cassirer’s “neo-Kantian” essays, expanding on his breakdown of the structure and function of mythical works (8), and his view that they should be taken as a literal representation of theism rather than allegorical interpretation (9). Bidney compares other philosophers works with Cassirer’s with the largest contrast being those who see myth more as symbolism and rationalization of the reality around them. He also compares Cassirer’s work with essays by ethnologists who are more grounded in what he considers to be reasonable thought. Bidney’s conclusion is that study of myth should be done with a historical lens, “taken seriously” by taking in account the history and sense of reasoning during the period, but by approaching it pragmatically so that “we maintain a firm and uncompromising faith in the integrity of reason and in the transcultural validity of the scientific enterprise” (23). Bidney’s essay is a thorough exploration of mythical interpretation and theistic reasoning, however it was written in the 1950’s and shares similar problems with a lot of anthropological work at the time in the sense that he is ethnocentric in his views of other cultures, often relegating anything less than our Eurocentric reasoning as “primitive” or unscientific. Therefore, his work is valuable as displays different viewpoints of thought regarding mythology but should itself be looked at pragmatically so that we are not biased in a sense of western ethnocentrism.

It can be difficult to try and differentiate mythology and folklore as they have similar meanings and patterns in their sense of storytelling. Stith Thompson addresses this in their essay “Myth and Folktales” by explaining that while mythology can exist within its own category, folktales cannot exist without being a part of the former as folklore is a subset of mythology. Thompson stresses that a common mistake that folklorists and students of folklore often make is the “oversimplification” or overgeneralization of myth, and states that the “origins of myths and folktales over the world must be extremely diverse, so that it is not safe to [postulate] any single origin, even for those of a particular people.” However, despite this warning the reader is given several examples of mythologies and stories sorted thematically into categories. They state that anything that relates to a deity or “their actions, with creation, and with the general nature of the universe and if the earth” is a myth (173). You can see how broad the myth spectrum is and where the confusion of the definition of folklore falls. From Thompson’s point of reference, folktales seem to lie with more “primitive” cultures, passed down as tales or stories of heroes (174) but more emphasis is put on the difference between magical and non-magical tales. Thompson’s biggest takeaway from their writing is not to focused so hard on the origin of myth in a general sense but instead focus on “where does each individual myth come from” (175) as each story will have its own historical meaning. They suggest that folklorists have all formats of specific myth in front of them before they attempt to delve into meaning (176). Thompson’s essay has similar shortcoming as Bidney’s, with its use of language and Eurocentric biases that seek to relate non-western theism as primitive. However, the article redeems itself by being an invaluable cautionary tale on the generalization of folklore research.

Understanding language, and the evolution of dialect is important when doing any sort of historical research. Much of the original texts I will be looking at will be written in Scots dialect or a bastardization of it. James Costa’s article “Language history as charter myth?
Scots and the (re)invention of Scotland” discusses the cultural importance of the Scots language and its historical relevance. The purpose of the Costa’s essay is to both provide evidence and critique the state revitalization of Scots. He states that Scots is often relegated to being called a dialect when it is in fact is its own language (4) and deserves the same amount of national attention to revival and funding that Gaelic has got in recent years and critiques other texts to makes his point. He states that the call for “revitalization” of the Scots language can be detected in seven key “moments”: origins, diversity in Scotland (8), the growth and spread of the language, nationalization of the language, the Reformation and the decline of Scots (10), revival (11), and Scots in the present day (12). Costa argues that Gaelic came over from Ireland around the tenth century and arrived at the same time as the Scots language which was brought by the Angles in the south and therefor impacted the use of language in Scotland just as deeply (8). The language spread nationally up until the Reformation and the printed bible along with the increasing presence of England in written works circulated in Scotland creating growing need for English to be the dominant language (10). However, later as Scottish romanticism grew, poets such as Robert Burns thrived is reviving the Scot’s language (11). The author concludes that Scotland is a diverse country linguistically, and more research needs to be done on the history of Scots so that its relevancy as a national language can be acknowledged.

Through this literature review it has become clear to me that what I thought was a tight topic was still far too broad. I came to this conclusion not only through reading the material but also by the lack of academic material that I was able to find on Scottish specific mythology. It was reading the article by Stith Thompson that why became clearer: I was stuck too much on the generalization of Scottish mythology as a whole that I failed to see variances and to take in account regional history. In fact, when looking for articles I found a few that were specific to certain areas of Scotland. James Costa’s article on the Scot’s language emphasized how a history can become romanticized or ignored depending on whose point of view and the goals of the person or organization telling the history. When researching historical connections, it will be important for me not to be swayed completely by one papers viewpoint as it may be intentionally trying to lead the reader to a point of view. Language and history are essential elements to culture and will be something I delve into deeper when looking at Scottish mythology.

**Looking Forward:**

**LBST 391:** For my next tutorial, I would like to take a more anthropological approach at mythology and do more ethnographic research on the prevalence of mythology in society. I would like to do this tutorial with Gillian Crowther and get her experience with ethnographic research and interviews as I would like to include them in this portion of my tutorials. Research methods I would like to use besides interviewing is participant observation and dealing with storytelling with a basis of myth in society. I would also like to include surveying so that I may get data for a larger group

**LBST 392:** I would like to look at myth through a geographical lens by looking at the origin of myth and how it ties in with people, land, and culture. Ideally, I would like to this project with Cheryl Shreader. Research methods would include literature review, and geographic surveying. Comparisons would be done of like myths to discern if there any differences, if any, due to physical geography (water, mountains, forests etc.) and human geography (placement of people to other groups of people, rural or urban settings etc.)

**LBST 490 or 495/6:** For my final project, I would like to write a series of short stories bringing classic Scottish myths to present day and writing them in situations that we are dealing with now such as climate change and the environment, race and gender, world politics and so on. My previous research projects will be pivotal is ensuring I keep the structural integrity of a myth while adapting it to modern day audiences. I would like to do this with an English or creative writing teacher.

Works Cited

Bidney, David. “Myth, Symbolism and Truth.” *Myth: A Symposium.* Indiana University Press, 1955, 3-23.

Costa, James. "Language History as Charter Myth? Scots and the (Re) invention of Scotland." *Scottish Language* 28, 2009. 1-25.

Thompson, Stith. “Myth and Folktales.” *Myth: A Symposium.* Indiana University Press, 1955, 169-180.