Modern Bards on the World Stage: Capturing the Mysticism of Ireland

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The first strains of sweet, light-classical instrumental music echo from the pit, tossed over the audience in an undulating wave of high and low pitches. Purple and blue light washes over the stage. A steady drumbeat starts up, the drummers on either side of the stage raising each arm high in between every beat, providing a steady undercurrent to the string instruments hidden from view. Four spotlights switch on over center stage, and from the wings step the women of the hour. In time with the drums they step, swinging their long, full gowns as they do so. The three vocalists let the first notes of their opening number slip past their painted lips. They all make a full turn towards the audience. Their voices blend seamlessly with the orchestra in a breathtaking harmony. The violinist places her bow upon the strings, waits a beat, then draws it dramatically downwards, her own notes adding to the growing pulse of the music. The music builds, taking off and carrying you with it. You feel yourself falling into every note, forgetting about everything except the mystical fantasy world that has been created onstage. This is Celtic Woman.

The Making of a Global Phenomenon

Celtic Woman is a popular group of light-classical Irish musicians, meaning the group is comprised of musicians who produce sentimental, positive, uplifting, and generally easy-to-listen-to Irish music. The origins of the group can be traced all the way back to a chance encounter in the lobby of a French hotel in 2004, where Sharon Browne, a founder of Celtic Collections records, had the opportunity to pitch her idea for Celtic Woman to then-vice president for PBS programming Gustavo Sagastume. At the time, Sagastume wasn't looking for a light-classical group, but when he saw Browne's set in-person approximately six months after their first encounter, he realized that Celtic Woman would be a perfect program for

PBS. At first, only one special was planned (Dederer 28). The group got together in Dublin for their first and supposedly last performance, only to be met with a full house. In fact, the performance was so well-received that it prompted an immediate concert tour in the United States. Now, after several international tours alongside the release of multiple albums and PBS specials, the group is highly regarded across the globe for their talent ("Celtic Woman Biography").

Unfortunately, even though Celtic Woman may seem harmless at first glance, I have to agree with some of the sentiments expressed by American novelist Claire Dederer in her early 2007 *New York Times* article about the group. One point in particular that I find myself agreeing with is Dederer's claim that it is actually quite "easy to make fun of Celtic Woman" (28). Indeed, when examined critically, the entire spectacle put on by the group is simply ridiculous; what self-respecting grown woman agrees to prance around a stage in an elaborate ball gown straight out of a Disney movie? This ridiculousness is actually, in part, the fault of the audience, as Celtic Woman has been purposefully produced to be "the very vision of what we want Ireland to be" (Dederer 28). The group gives the audience what it wants, using elements of fantasy in order to create a stereotypical construct of Ireland, which is inherently problematic because it has the ultimate effect of diminishing the status of Ireland on the world stage.

A Musical Foundation for Fantasy

Having established what Celtic Woman is, let's think back on the performance described in the introduction—and notice the word *performance* as opposed to *concert*. A concert, in the traditional sense of the word, is a musical showcase in which musicians stand up onstage and "wow" the audience with their talent. A performance, however, is something more. Performances consist of many elements which, taken together, enhance the audience's engagement with the world being built by the music—think about it like a Broadway musical. In every Celtic Woman performance, multiple elements of theater are utilized in order to fully flesh out the Irish fantasy being established through the group's songs. But before we delve into the theatrical elements that help build this fantasy, it is important to examine the role of the member's pretty voices in developing a strong foundation upon which the fantasy can be built.

For a moment, forget about the performance, and focus on the music. When we listen to a Celtic Woman soundtrack on its own, without watching the actual performance, it is clear that even without the extra theatrical elements, the music produced by the group is distinctly "Irish" in nature. But what makes it so "Irish?" Well, according to Helen O'Shea, an Irish music expert and author of the article "When Irish Eyes Are Tearful: Nation, Gender and Musical Stereotypes in Irish Music," Irish music tends to be either slow and melancholic or fast-paced and optimistic (1). Celtic Woman combines both of these categories; some of their numbers are comprised of swooping, haunting melodies associated with nature and sentiment, while other numbers are more fast-paced and joyous, associated with spiritual rejuvenation and Irish optimism. What this means is that Celtic Woman numbers draw heavily on historical and ideological constructs of Irish music in order to ground the audience in stereotypical fantasies of Ireland.

This stereotypical Irish fantasy world created by the music alone is very familiar, especially to those of us who grew up in a Western culture. In many Western cultures, that sense of familiarity that we have when we listen to Irish music is consistently described as a sense of authenticity, and therefore Irish music is almost always viewed as a form of authentic, traditional folk music (O'Shea 2). Each of these concepts, that of "authenticity" and "tradition," are important in examining the appeal of Celtic Woman. "Authenticity," according to O'Shea, means placing more value in nature, one's spirit, and one's emotions instead of in material objects or success (2). To put it plainly, O'Shea is saying that something is authentic when it is emotional, since emotions are seen as pure, natural forms of expression. Since Irish music oftentimes has swooping, haunting melodies that are evocative of nature and spiritual rejuvenation, it is typically seen as "authentic." Furthermore, Irish music that is more fast-paced and optimistic seems more "down-to-earth," or "traditional," like most folk music. The traditional and authentic aspects of Irish music are evocative of better times rooted in a mystic, ancient Ireland, and Celtic Woman not only recognizes this, but also recognizes its audience's yearning for those mythical days. Through their use of elements such as traditional Irish instruments, video backdrops featuring iconic images of Irish cliffs, a spritely fiddler, melodramatic harmonies, and long, full gowns reminiscent of those worn by elite women during the Romantic Period,

alongside many other, smaller things, Celtic Woman exploits their audience's yearning by building the very world the audience wishes it could visit, attracting people of all backgrounds who wish they could return to simpler times.

All of the above theatrical elements combined make a Celtic Woman performance very similar to a Broadway show in the sense that there is a world being built onstage. In the case of Celtic Woman, this world is the mystical, ancient Ireland that has been circulating in our popular culture for quite some time now. In fact, this world has been in the making ever since the British colonized Ireland hundreds of years ago (O'Shea 3-4). In order to prevent an Irish uprising during the pre-modern era, the British worked to create a unifying "Irish identity" within the Irish upper-class through music. In doing so, they created a strong association between Irish music and certain instruments, such as the harp, the fiddle, uilleann pipes, and tin whistle (O'Shea 1). In other words, the colonizers encouraged the Irish to use these "traditional" Irish instruments in their music and discouraged the English from using the same instruments, thereby making those instruments symbols of Ireland separate from England. Furthermore, the music produced by these instruments, primarily the harp and uilleann pipes (Irish bagpipes with a softer sound than Scottish bagpipes), was the sort of sweet, slow, melancholic music associated with emotion and, therefore, femininity (O'Shea). This was no accident, as during this time period women were seen as weak and in need of protection; therefore, by associating Ireland with feminine weakness through "Irish" music that was distinctly feminine, England was able to justify their control over Ireland by claiming Ireland was too weak to protect itself. England literally created the image of what they wanted Ireland to be, spreading that image and perpetuating it through stereotypes (O'Shea). In other words, England used music to create the image of a weak, feminine Ireland in need of protection, and this is the Irish fantasy Celtic Woman upholds.

The Role of the Fiddling Fairy

After all of this effort to associate Irish music with certain instruments and a certain sound, a small group of "Irish" instruments has been established. Included in this group are both traditionally Irish and non-Irish instruments alike, with the non-Irish instruments being

associated with Irish music because the sounds they produce are very similar to those produced by the recognizably Irish instruments. Almost all of these "Irish" instruments, including the flute, bombard, and bagpipes, are represented in a typical Celtic Woman performance ("Celtic Woman Biography"). The most obvious representation is found in the violinist. When she takes the stage, she presents the audience with an image of the "Irish fiddler," spry and alluring as she leaps and spins across the stage. Notably, the pieces she plays are complex and typically take on a rapid tempo, and yet her bow seems to dance across the strings as effortlessly as she dances across the stage. This gives the impression that playing comes naturally to her, and since she is Irish, the audience generalizes this assumption to all Irish people, perpetuating the stereotype that the Irish are, as a whole and without exception, wild fiddlers. This is problematic because the fiddle is negatively associated with the lower-class and lower-class entertainment. It is viewed as "informal" and, as such, does not command the same respect that violin music does. It does not help that the fiddler does not wear shoes when she is onstage—this only enhances the "hill-billy" connotations associated with the fiddle. These negative connotations associated with fiddling and the fact that the Irish are directly associated with fiddling strengthens the image of a backwards Ireland incapable of governing itself in spite of the fact that British colonialism ended nearly a century ago.

In addition to all of this, the way Tara McNeill (and more obviously her predecessor, Máiréad Nesbitt) dances around the stage while playing her fiddle is reminiscent of a fairy musician, which plays into the myth and fantasy of Ireland. Everyone knows that in Irish fairytales and folklore the court of the Fairy Queen is always lively, filled with music and dancing. The fairies are light on their feet, highly skilled, and have an ethereal beauty to them. With her skill, fancy dress, flying hair, and clever lighting, the fiddler looks like something straight out of a fairytale, reinforcing the fantasy that is built onstage. In large part, the creation of this fantasy is only possible because the fiddle works to bring the rural Irish stereotype to the forefront of the audience's mind before an attempt to create the fantasy world is made. In other words, the fantasy world Celtic Woman is working to create more closely resembles the stereotype of a rural Ireland rather than the reality of modern Ireland. Therefore, the group works to bring forward this

stereotype in order to more easily project the desired fantasy world onto the stage and into the minds of the audience members.

The Quintessential Irish Woman

While she definitely plays an important role in creating the strange fantasy of Ireland during a Celtic Woman performance, the fiddler is by no means the only member of the group with a role to play. The very name of the group, "Celtic Woman," implicates them all while helping to establish the foundation upon which the fantasy is being built. When I first heard of Celtic Woman, I thought it was weird that they were called "Celtic *Woman*" as opposed to "Celtic *Women*." Apparently, I'm not the only one who has been confused by this, given that during an interview for Canadian-based *Music Express Magazine* in 2014, host John Jacobson asked the group that very question. Vocalist Lynn Hilary chose to respond, claiming that the name was chosen to represent the "quintessential Irish woman... the all-encompassing... woman who kind of does everything... she sings, she dances, she plays music, and she's lovely as well."

To put it bluntly, what Hilary means is that Celtic Woman is meant to represent all of the Irish women out there, but more specifically the perfect, idealized Irish women who can sing, dance, play instruments, and look beautiful while doing all of this. This is important because it means the group's identity is effectively generalized to an entire population of Irish women. In claiming to represent all Irish women, Celtic Woman limits the audience's thinking, strongly suggesting that they, the members of Celtic Woman, are the reality and not the fantasy. And since Celtic Woman represents *all* Irish women instead of a single static group of performers, the members of Celtic Woman are more or less interchangeable. As it stands, the stereotype is fixed; so long as the group continues to represent the "quintessential" Irish woman, they will be Celtic Woman.

This concept of interchangeability is actually quite common in theater. For example, when you go to see *Hamlet* at one theater, a different actor than the one you remember from the last time you saw *Hamlet* may hold the namesake role. This does not change the fact that the character you watch onstage is the character of Hamlet, delivering the familiar lines and interacting with the familiar characters. The image of Hamlet is produced through the audience's negation of reality (reality being the actor) in order to view the character—the character being the thing that is

removed from reality and a part of the world created onstage (Gilbert 200). Similarly, the members of Celtic Woman provide a foundation on which the audience can build the fantasy of the "quintessential" Irish woman and, in doing so, allow for the members to leave the group and be replaced periodically. The women themselves become "unreal," in a sense, woven into the fantasy of Ireland they have created onstage.

Given the fact that the members of Celtic Woman are so similar to actors, one would not expect them to address the audience during a performance. In fact, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher and playwright credited in part for developing modern semiotic theory (the theory concerning the role of signs in theater), during a performance an actor should *never* address the audience directly because this causes the imaginary character to vanish and the real actor to emerge (Gilbert 202). However, the members of Celtic Woman are not technically actors, so they do address the audience from time to time—usually to thank them for coming or explain how the next song is special to them as Irish women. Incidentally, these brief interjections are actually important to consider because they reinforce the audience's notion that these are small-town Irish women onstage, even if they are not *all* from small towns, especially when one of them says something like "I used to sing this song every night with my family after dinner" before singing an entire song in Irish-Gaelic. This has the effect of making the audience believe that the "real actors" are these idealized Irish women, creating the impression that the "real" Ireland is that stereotypical rural environment from the group's songs. Since audiences project the fantasy onto the foundation of this world (Gilbert 200), it then follows that the audience is more easily able to project the fantasy of Ireland onto the performance itself, as the fantasy is more closely related to the stereotypical Ireland than it is to the modern Ireland.

The Role of Modern Technology in the Creation of the Pre-Modern Fantasy

While the fiddler is a complex vehicle for transportation into the realm of Irish fantasy, subtle and difficult to pin down, and the name of the group is an even subtler cue for stereotyping, the video images projected behind the women are very obvious cues for the audience. As the vocalists raise their voices in dramatic harmonies, video images of Ireland's craggy shores appear behind them, the sweeping landscapes reinforcing the ones that have already appeared in the minds of every audience member. These

images are iconic; they have been ingrained into our schema of Ireland through movies, travel brochures, folktales, and other media. For example, movies such as *Leap Year*, a popular romantic comedy set in Ireland, incorporate lots of shots of the Irish countryside and cliffs. At the end of the movie, the main female character finds herself at the edge of one of these cliffs, staring out over the crashing waves of the ocean as she holds back tears (she has just been rejected by her love interest). The lonely, ruggedly beautiful landscape is given, through movies and other media such as this, a dually sentimental association and Irish association. After being saturated with images such as these their entire lives, it should be no wonder why audience members can tell the video clips are of places in Ireland, even though there are no captions or explicit cues that this is the case. The audience is transported away from the grimy urban cities they live in. Through all of this, the physical Irish world is established as a rugged, nature-centric place, lonely and sparsely inhabited, quite contrary to the modern Ireland reality.

Fantasy as Escape

Incidentally, Sartre is not the only person who believes that the creation of fantasy is largely in the hands of the audience. Jack Zipes, in his paper entitled "Why Fantasy Matters Too Much," expresses his belief that we are constantly looking to "project our desires in the form of fantasies onto reality" (78) and that we have always tried to make sense of the world through fantasy, not reason, citing examples such as the Bible and fairy tales (78). Incidentally, as Dederer pointed out just a few years before Zipes made this observation, Celtic Woman is not a vision of the real Ireland, but rather the "very vision of what we want Ireland to be" (28). Celtic Woman *is* the fantasy that we have created in order to escape from the relatively bleak reality we live in.

In short, we use fantasy as a form of escape, projecting our desires onto reality so that we can realize our "most profound wishes and desires" (Zipes 78). Those who listen to and watch Celtic Woman performances have a desire to get lost in an "authentic" world that has not lost its integrity, as our world today is filled with uncertainty and conflict; it seems that the news is constantly informing us of another terrorist attack, school shooting, or natural disaster. This has resulted in a world where integrity is constantly called into question and little trust is put into anyone, including the ever-fickle Mother Nature. In order to cope with this

uncertain reality, people turn to fantasy in order to "enjoy a moment of calm estrangement or titillation" and "appreciate the extraordinary in the ordinary" (Zipes 79). In other words, we need fantasy not because life is boring, but because it allows us to "contemplate alternatives to our harsh realities" and engage in spiritual rejuvenation (Zipes 79). Through fantasy, we find a way to preserve our personal integrity (Zipes 78).

Incidentally, Natasha Casey also brings up this idea of preserving integrity in her own paper, "Riverdance: The Importance of Being Irish American," when she comments on the fact that those who write about Irish music and what it means to them have repeatedly stressed the fact that folk music works to preserve integrity, both in a cultural and personal sense (21). In other words, Casey has noted here that because traditional folk music is viewed as authentic, it acts as a sort of time capsule, or a vehicle for connecting those in the present to a simpler, less conflict-ridden past in which integrity was still abundant within society. As I have mentioned before, Celtic Woman recognizes its audience's desire to escape into a fantasy world full of the authenticity and integrity associated with the pre-modern era, and this is why the fantasy of Ireland as presented by Celtic Woman supports the stereotypes the Western world has assigned to the country.

Return to Reality

The final strains of melodramatic music soar over the audience as the members of Celtic Woman line up in a sweet embrace, their arms looping behind each other's backs and painted smiles turned on the audience: each of them the very image of the sweet, innocent Irish woman. You blink once, twice, pulling yourself out of the fantasy world you have been engrossed in for nearly two hours as the audience rises to its feet and ecstatic applause echoes throughout the packed theater. Without thinking you join in, pushing yourself up out of the cushy red chair and clapping your hands together in praise for the talent standing upon the stage. The members of the group curtsey. The lights come back on, flooding the theater with a harsh yellow glow that pulls you fully back to reality.

Or maybe it doesn't. It is very likely that you have never been to Ireland yourself, or even studied Irish culture and history in great detail. This means that your entire concept of Ireland is based upon the Irish stereotypes and half-truths that are perpetuated within Western culture by books, movies, and performance groups just like Celtic Woman. The link

between England and Ireland is still there, in the back of people's minds, because the fantasy of Ireland that England helped to create through music is still prevalent within today's society. Those who argue that Celtic Woman is harmless because they preserve Celtic traditions ignore the fact that the stereotypes tied into the traditions themselves are problematic. The fantasy created through this "preservation" enforces problematic Irish stereotypes that, in turn, perpetuate the pre-modern belief that Ireland is a weak, feminine, easy-to-make-fun-of country incapable of ruling itself, thus diminishing the status of Ireland on the world stage. The fantasy has, in effect, become the reality, without which Celtic Woman would never have become the global sensation that it is today. So, while it may not be in Ireland's best interests to keep the fantasy alive, it is in Celtic Woman's best interests; and as long as the audience remains ignorant, this will continue to be the case. One can only hope that, one day, the audience will fully return to the reality of the modern world.

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