

MYTH, MAGIC, FANTASY, AND FAERY :

The Origins of the Insular Imaginary

This course is an exploration of the mythic origins of British and Irish identity and literature, which explores the languages and mythologies of the various peoples of the British Isles, and the development of the fantastic, imaginary, magical, and weird in literature and popular narrative, through the Medieval Period, to the Romantic and Gothic revival of Medieval sensibilities, the birth of genre literatures of the Imagination in the Nineteenth Century, the use of Myth in Modernist literature, and Twentieth Century literature of the fantastic, the weird, the wonderful, and the horrific. The resurgence of Fantasy as a genre in the Twenty-First Century, and modern approaches to Myth will form the conclusion of the course.

In approaching Myth, we embark on a quest for the origins of the linguistic and cultural groups whose mixing and interweaving created the literature of the British Isles. These primarily Celtic and Germanic peoples brought with them, rather than a myth of creation, a myth of invasion and discovery of their Island Nations. Successive waves of invaders contributed to the mythological imagination of the Insular Mind, such as Viking and Norman, and traces of the previous inhabitants and their remnants provided a backdrop of ancient, hidden history for each successive incoming population. The Book of Insular History is a Book of Invasions. This historical palimpsest has created an Imaginary in which hidden worlds and lost paradises are paramount, as well as Isles of the Blessed across the Western Sea, the Celtic myth of Tír na nÓg, Hy Brasil, or the New World. Medieval Romance and the Folk Tale tradition created the fantastical imaginary, with its feudal knights and courts, mirrored in the Otherworld of Faery. These elements were rediscovered and revived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries with Romanticism, and its dark twin, the Gothic. In this fertile ground were sown the seeds of the modern genres of Fantasy and Horror, and British and Irish literatures abound with Imaginary Worlds, fantastical creatures, magic, myth, and the denizens of Faery. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Fantasy and Myth have come to forefront of popular culture in all media, and are now a mainstay of video games, graphic novels, films and TV series, and a booming literary genre for both young people and adults. This course will interrogate the construction of the Insular Fantastic Imaginary, and its place in British and Irish, and more broadly Anglophone, culture in today's world.