

The structure of this book

These then are the four different views of the Mabinogi: as tribal history; as vestigial pagan mythology; in its ‘literary aspects’ as a magical narrative or fairy tale; and finally as typological dynastic propaganda. It is according to this four-fold perspective that we will be exploring each of the Branches in turn in Chapters 2-5 respectively. Each of the Branches draws on a slightly different set of source-traditions (both tribal-historic and mythological), and these will be discussed at the beginning of each these chapters. We will then present a text-translation of the Branch itself (accompanied by footnotes on linguistic or contextual points of detail). The chapters will be concluded by a two-fold synchronic analysis: firstly conducting a stage-by-stage analysis of its functionality as textual whole; then considering its socio-political resonance within the world of its twelfth-century audience (with reference to its dynastic implications).

In practice, of course, it will not always possible to separate these areas of discussion. We will need to make reference to the Branch’s various mythological sources during our discussion of its literary functionality, for example. Nor can we avoid referencing to medieval tribal-historical traditions while discussing the contemporary political and dynastic implications of each of the Mabinogi tales. But dividing the analysis of each Branch into this four-fold schema does help us adhere to a convenient diachronic vs. synchronic format which, as we have seen, is approximately how the various categories of data and scholarly analysis of this text tend naturally to break down.

As we have also seen, it was the diachronic problem of sources and origins that most absorbed the early Mabinogi scholars, whose interest in the text was primarily as a repository of the mythological traditions of the Celtic West. A good example of this approach is to be found the elaborate exercise of literary archaeology embarked upon by Professor W. J. Gruffydd in his study of the prehistory of the First and Third Branches,²⁴ which has been criticised (with some justification) for being both over-schematic and insufficiently empirical. But amidst much that remains both unproven and unprovable, Gruffydd did manage to uncover convincing traces of the mythology of the Gallo-Brittonic horse goddess *Epona* behind the medieval story of Rhiannon, for which further evidence has subsequently emerged (for more on this, see on pp. 191-194 below). It was also Gruffydd who first highlighted the significance of the cult of *Maponus* and *Matrona* in the context of the First and Third Branches: a hypothesis to which Professor Eric Hamp has added recent confirmation (as discussed on pp. 214-217 above).

Gruffydd’s analysis of the origins and development of the Fourth Branch has also provided some useful hypotheses, which we have discussed at the beginning of Chapter 5. In this case too, it is possible to find substantial corroborating evidence from other Indo-European traditions as far apart as Ireland, Scandinavia and India, which not only validates Gruffydd’s basic hypothesis but also suggests that some of these mythical roots may be very old indeed – deriving from the Late Bronze

24 Gruffydd, *W. J. Rhiannon: An Enquiry into the Origins of the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1953)

Age if not earlier still. Other evidence of material of pre-Christian origin in the Four Branches can be found in the archaeological record. For example, as we will see in Chapter 3 (pp. 324-321), there is ample evidence for a ‘Cult of the Living Head’ in pagan Celtic Britain and elsewhere throughout the Ancient Celtic world, and this can be related quite distinctly to the *Penn Urddaul* episodes at the end of the Second Branch.

Although it has been less well explored, the related question of tribal-historic origins constitutes an important part of the diachronic analysis of the source traditions of the Four Branches. Robert Graves, the poet and amateur student of the Medieval Welsh tradition, is one of the first to have linked the contents of the Book of the Taliesin and related medieval works (including the Four Branches) with putative events in prehistoric Britain.²⁵ Unfortunately, Graves’s work was marred by the fact that he was neither an archaeologist nor a Welsh-speaker, leading to an over-reliance on inaccurate and out-of-date material. Furthermore, his mystical pronouncements on the ‘Triple Goddess’ have done little to bolster his credibility amongst his more literal-minded critics in the field.

Nonetheless, it would seem that a number of his basic assumptions are worth investigating further. Beneath the undergrowth of wild speculation there can sometimes be found the solid ground of a workable hypothesis. The following passage is a good example:

If the story of *Câd Goddeu* concerns the capture of the national necropolis on Salisbury plain from its former holders, this is most likely to have happened during either the first or second Belgic invasion. Neither the coming of the round-barrow men, nor the Goidelic seizure of South-Eastern Britain, nor the Claudian conquest, which was the last before the coming of the Saxons, corresponds with the story. But according to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s medieval *History of the Britons*, two brothers named Belinus and Brennius fought for the mastery of Britain in the fourth century BC.; Brennius was beaten and forced north of the Humber. Brennius and Belinus are generally acknowledged to be the gods Brân and Beli ... Amaethon evidently entered the Battle of the Trees as champion of his father Beli, the Supreme God of Light.²⁶

Nowadays, few archaeologists would speak so blithely about ‘the round-barrow men’; still less of the ‘Goidelic seizure of the South-Eastern Britain’ (an event that Graves would place at c.600 BC). But, despite this rather picturesque account of British prehistory, Graves seems to have intuitively made the significant connection between the Medieval Welsh ancestor-figure Beli Mawr, and the Late Iron Age population group known as the *Belgae*. John Koch, professor of Celtic philology at Harvard University, came (independently, it would seem) to much the same conclusion.²⁷ Koch, whose conclusions we can now support with further archaeological and philological evidence (which will be considered on pp. 272-282 above) also equated Beli Mawr with the *Belgae*: tracing both names back to the Ancient Gaulish warlord *Bolgios*. It was the Sack of Delphi, led by *Bolgios*’s contemporary

25 Robert Graves *The White Goddess – A historical grammar of poetic myth* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber; amended and enlarged edition 1961). For more on Graves see pp. 624-626

26 *ibid.* p. 56

Brennus (d. 279 BC), in which Koch sees the distant origin of the Medieval Welsh tradition of the *Yspadawt Urân* ‘The Assembly of Brân’ – the narrative core of the Second Branch. Thus, Koch suggests, we have what would appear to be evidence for a Gallo-Brittonic oral tradition spanning over thirteen hundred years.

Koch’s findings offer a strong case for a serious investigation of the possible tribal-historic origins of at least some of the source-material of the Four Branches.²⁷ In the opening sections of chapters 2-5, I have investigated this possibility in the case of each of the four Branches in turn. I have argued that the dynasties depicted in the Four Branches – the indigenous House of Pwyll, the maritime House of Llŷr, the matriarchal House of Dôn and the royal House of Beli Mawr – each represent certain demographic components recognised by the medieval Welsh as the historical constituents of their nation. Along with each of these tribal components comes a corresponding body of mythical and narrative lore.

In the case of the House of Beli Mawr, this narrative lore is represented by the hosting mythology of the Assembly of Brân, which, as we have seen may have been based on *actual events* in ancient history out of which the Belgic nation had emerged, i.e. the Sack of Delphi and ‘The Gold of Toulouse’ (the origin, I have suggested on pp. 285-289 of the ‘Rhinegold’ mythic complex). In the Third Branch, on the other hand, we find a quite different strand of Welsh tribal identity and consequently a rather different body of folk history and myth. Here we have the legacy of the Irish element in the Welsh population – the Third Branch itself being a variant of the exile myth of the *Déisi* people (see pp. 381-382 above), along with several other traditions subsequently accrued.

In the First and Fourth Branches, on the other hand, rather more generic groupings are involved. For the former, we have developed the overlapping categories of the ‘Indigenous Underworld’ and the ‘Ancient South’ to describe this notional demographic element (in reality a rather more mixed population, chiefly defined by their common subject-status, re: pp 154-164 below). It is with this group that the core tradition of the **Maponâkijî* (re: pp. 214 ff) seems to have become most closely associated, along with other archaic magico-religious structures such as the Horse Goddess cult alluded to above, and the primitive figures known throughout Europe simply as ‘The Lord’ and ‘The Lady’, whose roots may belong to the pre-Indo-European Neolithic substrate. In the Fourth Branch, ‘The House of Dôn’ represents a matrilineal group apparently cognate with the Irish *Tuatha Dé Danann* ‘Peoples of the Goddess Danu’. The mythology associated with this group appears to be that of the differentiated, anthropomorphic pagan tradition which was emerging in Europe during the first millennium BC. The basic tale-type identified by Gruffydd – ‘The King and his Prophesied Death’ – would seem to have its roots in rain-making/fertility rituals from the prehistoric world we know as ‘proto-Indo-European’. The close connections between the Welsh and Irish traditions, and that of Scandinavian Iceland, suggest that a northernwestern variant of this magico-religious

27 ‘Bran: Brennus: An instance of Early Gallo-Brittonic History and Mythology’ *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 20 (Winter 1990) pp. 1-20

28 ‘Koch made a further connection of this kind: between Manawydan (the hero of the Third Branch) and *Mandubracios* (a 1st-century British chieftain). His reasoning here is considerably less persuasive (re: p. 389, n. 680).

tradition might well have been involved. Accordingly, I have described the substructure of the Fourth Branch as the mythology of the ‘proto-Celtic’ peoples (pp. 452 ff.).

This, it is hoped, will give some indication of the kind of diachronic analyses we will be embarking upon in the opening sections of Chapters 2-5. Although caution is required in pursuing diachronic speculations of this kind, some consideration of putative origins is both necessary and appropriate. This is especially true given the conservative nature of the *cyfarwyddyd* tradition itself (see pp. 66-71 below). The Four Branches has been accurately described as ‘a collection of narrative fragments and traditions from many separate sources, skilfully woven into a living relationship’.²⁹ While the arrangement and presentation of this inherited material may have been shaped by a variety of contemporary literary and political considerations, the *hen chwedlau* or ‘old stories’ used by the author as his raw material left their own mark on the final content involved. The composition of the Mabinogi was the work of a craftsman as much as it was the work of a creative artist. In order to understand this author’s personal input, we must first understand the formative influence of the tradition within which he was writing.

Most of the Branches (with the exception of the Third) break down into readily-identifiable sub-sections, the boundaries of which are generally recognised by most in the field. The First Branch, for example, can be seen to consist of three semi-autonomous parts: ‘Pwyll I’ being the sojourn in Annwfn; ‘Pwyll II’ the courtship of Pwyll and Rhiannon; and ‘Pwyll III’ the birth and disappearance of Pryderi.³⁰ The Fourth Branch is characterised by a similar tripartite structure. The Second Branch divides more comfortably into two, ‘Branwen I’ and ‘Branwen II’ – the second and final part representing what some scholars have described as the ‘coda’ of the piece, i.e. the Otherworld sequences, which contrast markedly in atmosphere and content to the more straightforward Heroic Age scenario of ‘the Tragic Peacemaker’s Tale’ represented by Branwen I.

These sub-divisions have been reflected in our presentation of the each of the Branches in Chapters 2-5. Each sub-division will have its own introduction discussing the relevant source-traditions involved. For example, the Celtic myth of the Otherworld Island will be discussed as an introduction to Branwen II (pp. 310-331). Branwen I, on the other hand, will be prefaced by a review of what would appear to be the underlying source-tradition of that section: the so-called ‘Tragic Peacemaker’s Tale’ (of which the Germanic ‘Rhinegold’ complex is a well-known variant) (pp. 285-289). Each of these old stories may have had their own specific historic provenance, but each also had the propensity to detach itself into the ahistoric plane of mythical thought. Both of these aspects of the *cyfarwyddyd* tradition are discussed in these introductory sections.

29 Sarah Higley quoting Saunders Lewis in ‘Dirty Magic: Seir, Science and the Parturating Man in Medieval Norse and Welsh literature’ *Essays in Medieval Studies* 11 (1994), p.141

30 Another convention adhered to in this study is the naming of the Branches. The First Branch is usually known as ‘The Mabinogi of Pwyll’, the Second as ‘Branwen’, the Third as ‘Manawydan’, and ‘Math’ for the Fourth. It is not entirely clear from what source these naming conventions initially derive and it is fair to assume that they have no greater antiquity than Lady Guest’s translation of 1849. This usage has been adhered to by a number of critics and translators of the Mabinogi and as such offers a perfectly acceptable means of denoting the Branches.

At the end of each chapter, after the text of each Branch has been presented, we will consider the work from a *synchronic* perspective, i.e. the characteristics of its final, extant form. This will encompass a consideration of the *reception* of the Branch, and the presumed effect on the consciousness of its contemporary audience, following the two main synchronic perspectives we have hinted at above: i.e. the Mabinogi as Magical Narrative, and the Mabinogi as Dynastic Propaganda. Another way of describing these two aspects of its synchronic reception is to refer to the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ significance of the tale.

In terms of its internal structure, what we have referred to its ‘literary aspect’, a magical narrative like the Mabinogi can be conveniently broken down into a series of discreet steps or *moves* – each representing a staging-post in a mental ritual, the aim of which is the attainment of the desired psychic state (see pp. 82-83 below). We will be examining each of these moves in sequence, tracing the shifting power-relations between the protagonists involved. The significance of these moves is defined in two ways: by the symbolic content involved at each stage, and also by the *arrangement* of the events involved, i.e. the circumstantial relationship between them (what P. K. Ford has called ‘vertical correspondences’). Structurally, we will see that the Four Branches functions like a Cyclic Romance – with additional depth being evolved through a significant juxtaposition of disparate thematic strands (cf. p. 84 ff. below). As the Four Branches progresses, this interlace becomes progressively more complex and involved. Here we will attempt to unravel this process and carefully consider its incremental significance.

This level of the text, it will become clear, spoke in *symbols and clusters of association*: i.e. in the language of the unconscious mind. It was on this level that the transformational ‘work’ of the Branch was most powerfully effected. Using the tools of literary criticism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and comparative mythology we will attempt to delineate and demystify this process.

The exoteric significance of each of the Branches refers to its engagement with the social world of its audience, rather than the more private dream-space accessed by the magical stratum of the tale. As we have indicated, the Four Branches can be seen as a domestic mythology for the Welsh royal caste. But clearly, while the ‘veiled reference to contemporary events’ would have been apparent enough to the court-community in twelfth-century Wales, these will need some explanation for the modern-day reader. Following on from our move-by-move analysis of the text itself, we will sketch out – more or less without comment – the nature and scope of these typological allusions.

Finally, concluding our view of the external/social significance of the Branch involved, a summary of its overall moral force will be considered. This is the level on which the Four Branches puts forward a number of straightforward observations on human behaviour and interaction which are simple and universal enough to speak directly to the reader of today. For all its sly political nuances or subliminal machinations, this ‘moral headline’ of the Mabinogi should not be forgotten. As has been suggested by Andrew Welsh, a leading authority on the Four Branches, the Four

Branches is on this level ‘if not primarily ... a tale of ethical enquiry and moral judgement’.

There is less we will need to say about this stratum, but this should not be taken as a measure of its importance. Rather, it is simply the case that it speaks for itself to a greater degree, and thus requires less elucidation. It is not hard to see, for example, how the Second Branch is largely ‘about’ the relentless destructiveness of the Heroic Age ethos, just as the Third Branch is primarily an advocacy of the values of peace and restraint as embodied by the figure of Manawydan (p. 444 ff.). An underlining of this moral headline of each Branch seems as good a way as any to round off each of the synchronic analyses involved. This will be followed by a general conclusion – summing up the overall impact and significance of the Branch (on all its levels), bringing each of these chapters to a close.

If Chapters 2-5 relate to each of the four Branches in turn, Chapter 6 might be considered a panoramic view of the Mabinogi as a whole. Here, we will attempt to conclude what this work of prose tells us about the cultural and intellectual life of native Medieval Wales c.1195. The Four Branches, as will be clear by this final chapter, can be understood as a cultural *reaction* to a variety of pressures experienced by the Native Welsh communities towards the end of the twelfth century. These pressures were both external (i.e. the hegemonistic Anglo-Norman assault on Welsh culture and political independence) and internal (endemic internecine conflict), and we will attempt to take an overview of the *solution* offered by this literary polemic: its dynastic-political affiliations, its implicit attitude towards Angevin power and its programme for the regeneration of Native Wales at the threshold of the thirteenth century. From this, we will take a forward-looking view – into what actually did occur (culturally and politically) in Wales following the composition of the Mabinogi and how this may or may not have accorded with the agenda of that work. Notably, this will involve a consideration of the Age of the Llywelyns (c.1200-1283) – when Wales briefly established itself as a unified High Medieval kingdom.

After this, we will briefly consider what the Four Branches tells us about the complex relationship between the Medieval Celtic tradition and the pan-European tradition of Arthurian Romance. Like the problem of pagan survivals alluded to above, this is an issue of rather more general interest, and one which may have led many readers to the Mabinogi in the first instance. Here, we can do more little than allude to the considerable body of literature that already exists outlining this possible Celtic element in the quintessentially medieval genre of Arthurian Romance. We will round off this consideration of the posthumous influence of the Welsh narrative culture to which the Mabinogi belonged with a summary of its evident legacy in and beyond Arthurian Romance, through which it seems to have nurtured a number of areas of European cultural life: from the carnivalesque fecundity of the Shakespearean comedy, to the nightmarish dislocation of the Gothic Horror, to the more recent cultural phenomena of fantasy literature and Celtic neopaganism. This most recent re-invention of the Celtic pagan tradition might be contrasted with what we can understand about the magical world view of the medieval author of the Mabinogi himself, presented in the Appendix on pp. 639 below. Though there were important differences between the belief-system of this medieval bardic author and that of the twentieth century neopagan ‘druid’, there are also a number of ironic similarities. The Four Branches might be seen as encapsulating a brave if ultimately unsuccessful

attempt to offer a radical alternative to the prevailing cultural and ontological norms of the day. In this respect, we will conclude, the Mabinogi represents an offshoot of the Western intellectual tradition that, while it ultimately was supplanted by the homogenising tendencies of Franco-Roman imperium, offers us a tantalising glimpse of what (under different historical circumstances) could have constituted the foundations of a completely different European identity.

It will be noted that much of the remainder of the present chapter has been printed in a smaller font. These sections are intended to provide a context for subsequent discussions in the chapters to come, and may be skipped by those already familiar with Medieval Wales (the time-pressed reader may wish to cut straight to the summary on pp. 140-145). This contextual background will commence with a general historical survey: from its earliest background in British prehistory; through to its tentative emergence as a network of Brythonic kingdoms in the ‘Dark Age’ of the post-Roman centuries; into the formative period of the Early Middle Ages, and finally reaching the events of 1066 and the advent of the Norman period. After this we will consider our medieval Welsh context from a ‘synchronic’ point of view: starting off with a general analysis of the Native Welsh society in the late-twelfth century. Following this, we will focus on the clerico-bardic establishment, and the School of Taliesin in particular, where we can situate the specific cultural origins of the Mabinogi. This will lead us on to a brief survey native vernacular prose from Medieval Wales, and the place of the Four Branches within this composite tradition. After this, we will need to consider the phenomenology of *magical belief* within Medieval Wales, drawing heavily on the manifestations of folk superstition, as recorded by contemporary observers such as the Cambro-Norman Gerald of Wales.

We will conclude Chapter 1 with a close-up view of the key political and cultural events of late-twelfth century Wales, i.e. within the lifetime of the author and his primary audience. Here we find there was a successful fight-back against the Anglo-Norman hegemony led jointly by Owain Gwynedd from the North with ‘Lord’ Rhys ap Gruffydd representing the South. The success of this coalition led to a revival of national feeling in Wales, a mood we might associate with the self-confident display of the bardic arts at the first Eisteddfod of 1176 (re: pp. 130 below). However, the death of Owain Gwynedd in 1170 had ushered in a period of chaos and civil war in the lordships of the North, which lasted the best part of twenty years before being finally resolved by the young warlord Llywelyn ap Iorwerth in the mid 1190s. It was against the background of these particular events – which we will expand upon throughout this study – that we might situate the composition of the Mabinogi.

At the end of the book we have included a separate discussion of what is undoubtedly an area of interest to many students of the Mabinogi. In the Appendix on pp. 639-656 we will be offering an overview – so far as we are able to reconstruct it – of the magico-religious system of pre-Christian Celtic Britain: the ultimate source of a number of the mythical elements in Mabinogi. We will conclude that the Late Iron Age Celtic paganism was in fact a patchwork of local practices and cult-forms which – like the source materials of the Branches themselves – were of varying age and origin. After this, we will present a glossary of the terminology (Welsh and otherwise) used throughout this study. This will be followed by a comprehensive index.

Throughout this book, I have adopted a strategy of frequently cross-referencing the topics and discussions involved. In a study of this kind, the diversity as well as the complexity of the subject matter at hand might seem at times rather overwhelming. These page references are intended to help the reader by pointing back wherever possible to earlier relevant discussions of the topic in hand, or forward to later junctures where these topics are expounded in more detail. Along with the aforementioned glossary, and a healthy input of footnotes and citations, it is hoped the reader will sufficiently equipped to venture through the alternating, interdisciplinary discussions we will need to pursue in order to penetrate this complex but fascinating literary expression.

The Four Branches is not a work that can be apprehended at a single glance, nor can it be reduced to a single definition. In writing this book, I have not sought to present reductive answers, nor to assert a single view of the Mabinogi, whether as magical narrative; tribal history; pagan mystery-tradition or satirical dynastic-propaganda. The best we can do is to consider each of these various facets in turn and allow readers to form their own understanding of the mysterious interplay between them. The world and imagination of the medieval mind is still ‘a strange landscape’ to the modern eye. In this book we seek to expose the gap that undoubtedly did exist between our own view of the world and that of the medieval audience involved. In considering this question, it seems to me we have as much to learn about *ourselves* as we do about the inhabitants of the pre-modern past.

31 Sea levels are thought to have been lower during the early Mesolithic. The landmass of Britain only became fully separated from the continent c.5000 BC.