

### The Mabinogion and its reception in the modern age

The native tales of the White Book of Rhydderch, as we will see in further detail throughout this chapter, were products of the distinctive world of pre-conquest Wales, an archaic social order dominated by the warrior-prince on one hand and the tribal abbot and chief-bard on the other. When Rhydderch ab Ieuan came to assemble his collection c.1350, memories of this proto-feudal world would have still been alive and its characteristic forms of discourse still broadly understood. But without the social infrastructure that informed their original significance, the native texts in particular were perhaps always destined to lose their primary appeal. The Reformation may well have played a part in this wholesale abandonment of the old medieval traditions. No doubt the introduction of the printing press also played its part, as did the decline in the Welsh language following the Act of Union in 1532. There is evidence that there were antiquarians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (notably Elis Gruffydd, as we will see on p. 97 below) who were actively involved in the propagation and interpretation of this bardic narrative lore. But a growing number of Welshmen in the Early Modern Age the native tales seem to have been regarded with dismissive condescension. Such a mood is evident in a laconic marginal comment in the White Book of Rhydderch, thought to be the words of Dr. John Davies, found on folio 28 of Peniarth 4 at the end of the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi:

*Hic auctor certat fictis superare Chimaeram/Vel quicquid monstri Gaeci tota refert*<sup>9</sup>

This piece of late-Latin marginalia is open to a variety of interpretations, but the tone is unmistakable:

‘Here the author strives with falsehoods to surpass *‘the Chimaera’* – or whatever [other] monsters all of Greece brings forth’

These words were written in the mid-seventeenth century, at the dawn of what we have come to describe as the Age of Enlightenment. In his impatience with medieval ‘chimaera’, one might be tempted to say Dr. Davies was merely reflecting what was at the time a fashionable prejudice, a vocal aversion to the ‘superstitions’ of the benighted *medium aevum*. And yet three hundred and fifty years after its prefatory dismissal by Dr. Davies, the Four Branches now attracts more scholarly interest than any of the other texts from the White Book collection. There is something rather odd about this diametric reversal of critical tastes and we would be wise to step back briefly and attempt to take in the wider picture, to consider more general social changes that have occurred over the last few hundred years. An understanding of these changes is essential for an appreciation of the background of recent Mabinogi scholarship, revealing as it does certain habits of mind that continue to influence our thinking even today.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.260 n.82.

In short, what has taken place over the last three centuries is the Industrial Revolution, and its concomitant phenomenon: the Romantic anti-industrial reaction. The same period also witnessed a number of radical political developments including the emergence of a variety of nationalistic movements following the breakdown of the French, British and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Of particular interest here is the Irish independence movement, and its associated responses elsewhere in the so-called Celtic fringe. Without the potent combination of Celtic nationalism and arcadian nostalgia, it is unlikely there would have been much more interest in the Four Branches than there is now in some of the lesser-known texts from the White Book, such as *Gwyrthiau Mair* or the Welsh Song of Roland.

A common feature of the various nationalisms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the concept of the monolithic ‘nation’ (or ‘folk’ or ‘race’) itself. This fixed and unchanging demographic/political unit was held to be in possession of a unique and distinctive ‘national spirit’ expressed in its language, folklore, literature and verse.<sup>10</sup> *Myth*, above all, was considered to be the prime repository of this national spirit and in each case was considered to be something as old and definitive as the nation’s language. (The fact that the primary custodians of myth throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries were usually academic philologists tended to reinforce the idea of a connection between myth and the roots of language). Given its centrality to cultural and political thought in nineteenth-century Europe, myth was to become a highly desirable national commodity. Where anything resembling myth could be found or identified, considerable scholarly effort would be expended to see this unearthed and dusted off for public presentation.

It was against this background that we should see the earliest translations of the Mabinogi into the English language, a project that was begun by William Owen Pughe in 1795, and continued by Lady Charlotte Guest throughout the first half of the nineteenth century (see also pp. 620ff. below). The prose tales found in the Red Book of Hergest (almost precisely the same selection as those that we find in Peniarth 4 – the ‘native’ fragment of the White Book of Rhydderch) suited, to some extent, the purposes of these early Welsh translators. The ensemble as a whole was labelled *The Mabinogion*, a term translated by Pughe and Guest as ‘The Tales of Youth’ or ‘Juvenile Entertainments’.<sup>11</sup> Each of these texts was described as a ‘Romance’, presumably as a nod to the Medieval French tradition, with which it was clear that a number of these tales were closely connected (c.f. pp. 79-88 below).

But what the educated nineteenth-century public wanted from the Mabinogion wasn’t Romances, let alone Juvenile Entertainments. They wanted myths: ideally something resembling the rich theogonies of the classical world. There was undoubtedly disappointment in some quarters with

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<sup>10</sup> One need hardly point out the extent to which these theories have fallen into disrepute in more recent times. The basic critique is perhaps best summarised by George Orwell’s definition of nationalism as ‘the habit of assuming that human beings can be classified like insects and whole blocks of millions if not tens of millions of people can be confidently labelled “good” or “bad”’ (‘Notes on Nationalism’ 1945, reprinted in *England Your England and other essays*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1953). It is also worth remembering that what we understand by ‘nationhood’ and ‘nationality’ are essentially post-medieval concepts, and anachronous when applied to antiquity.

the Mabinogion, which was clearly not the native Hesiod or Ovid that many had been expecting. The frustration of these Victorian English readers can be heard in the frequently-cited complaint of the poet Matthew Arnold:

The first thing that strikes one, in reading the Mabinogion, is how evidently the medieval storyteller is pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret; he is like a peasant building his hut on the site of Halicarnassus or Ephesus; he builds, but what he builds is full of materials of which he knows not the secret, or knows by a glimmering tradition merely...<sup>12</sup>

Following Arnold, a succession of Celtic-language experts took it upon themselves to restore this putative native mythology to its 'original' state. They began by dismantling the extant work in order to analyse its constituent elements. Using a range of comparative and reconstructive techniques, an attempt was then made to reassemble the original Common Celtic tradition. These efforts, it must be said, have not been without value. The comparative work of Professors John Rhys and W. J. Gruffydd, as we shall see, served to confirm some important connections between the Welsh and the Irish medieval traditions; and between this medieval evidence and the collections of oral lore independently recorded in more recent times in Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, Ireland and Scotland. It is evident from these findings that there was indeed a continuum of tradition that might legitimately be described as 'Celtic'; and that it was within this background that the Mabinogion tales should be situated in the first instance.

Although this approach has been subject to a number of important revisions (some of which we will be considering below), reference to this Celtic tradition – its prehistoric roots and medieval manifestations – remains central to our understanding of the Mabinogion tales and the Four Branches in particular. However, the nineteenth-century idea of a body of national myth – uniform throughout the Celtic-speaking world, unchanging throughout the ages, and impervious to any non-Celtic influences – has more recently been called into question. We should mention in particular the observations of Cambridge philologist K. H. Jackson, whose influential essay *The International Popular Tale and the Early Welsh Tradition* published in the immediate post-war period signalled a new approach to these medieval Welsh texts – what we might call the 'folkloristic perspective'.

While conducting linguistic fieldwork in the Western Isles, Jackson had been impressed by the memory and verbosity of the local story-tellers, and felt compelled to investigate more deeply the phenomenon of the so-called 'oral popular tale'. This brought him into the realm of folklore studies: the schools of Aarne and Thompson, Wesselski and Krohn<sup>13</sup>. From this perspective, Jackson pointed out that rather than belonging to the background of pagan Celtic mythology, the constituent elements of the Mabinogion tales could instead be seen as belonging to a more universal story-telling tradition, in which popular tales and narrative devices (or 'motifs') had been transmitted from ear to mouth

11 The word *mabinogion* is found at the end of both the White and Red Book versions of the First Branch. In all likelihood it is a corruption of *mabinogi*, rather than a plural form (see p. 229 n. 429)

12 Matthew Arnold *On the study of Celtic literature and other Essays* London: J. M. Dent & Sons; (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1910) p.54

backwards and forwards across national boundaries, apparently over several thousand years. Thus, Jackson identifies the international motifs of ‘The Congenital Animals’ and ‘The Chaste Brother/Chaste Friend’ and the scenarios of ‘The Calumniated Wife’ and ‘The Smith Outwits the Devil’ in the First Branch alone. He also includes some useful discussion of popular elements within the other three Branches of the Mabinogi. He identifies, for example, the perennial ‘Unfaithful Wife’ scenario, in conjunction with the ‘Achilles Heel’, which he perceives as underlying the circumstances surrounding the adultery of Blodeuedd and the epiphany of Lleu in the Fourth Branch. *Culhwch and Olwen*, another White Book text, is identified as a well-known international tale-type: the ‘Six Go through the World’ or ‘Giant’s Daughter’ scenario (about which more will be said on pp. 76 below). In pointing out these parallels, Jackson was implicitly challenging the earlier approach to Medieval Welsh literature by situating these tales in a context that was international and secular, rather than Celtic and magico-religious in its original provenance or function.

Jackson’s analysis brought a refreshingly down-to-earth perspective to the study of these medieval Celtic texts, which had hitherto been dominated by the rather rarefied mythographic approach previously described. But the folkloristic interpretation of Medieval Welsh narrative has proved to be not without limitations of its own. Today, we would describe it as a ‘modernist’ perspective: as liable as the mythographic view to impose dogmas of its own on the evidence involved. There is a tendency to treat ‘Tale Types’ and ‘Motifs’ as *sui generis* entities in their own right, wholly independent of any social context, and to regard the entire folk narrative system as absolute, unchanging and disconnected from all other areas of cultural life. Inevitably, as with the mythographic perspective, there is a tendency to downplay the significance of the individual work. Thus, where a medieval tale failed to fit neatly into a predefined category from the Motif Index, it is written off as ‘corrupt’, ‘botched’ or ‘imperfectly synthesised’. The question of what the text *in its extant form* might have meant to its medieval readership is largely ignored in favour of the question of its ‘original form’, and other aspects of its literary prehistory.

Both the folkloristic and the mythographic perspectives fall into what is known as the *diachronic* approach to cultural forms – focussing as they do on sources and origins, and the related question of the evolution or corruption of the tradition over time. The diachronic view of the Mabinogion tales, which would tend to see these tales primarily as a quarry for fossilised ‘pagan survivals’ or ‘international motifs’, continued to dominate the field until the mid-1970s, and some important investigations of this kind are still undertaken today. This approach is by no means without purpose or validity. There is, for example, considerable public curiosity about the pre-Christian thought-world of the Celtic British Isles. Here the native Welsh tradition does indeed offer some valuable evidence (we have offered a summary of this evidence in pp. 639-656 below). Likewise, the ubiquity of certain narrative structures throughout the human world is a question which continues to preoccupy folklorists, anthropologists and psychologists alike. In the Medieval Welsh tradition, we have an opportunity to examine some of these perennial structures *in situ* – giving us a

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13 For a bibliographic survey of folklore studies over the past two hundred years see Munro Edmunson *Lore – An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature* (New York, Chicago : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) pp. 31-50

suitable case-study for a contextualised scrutiny of wider-ranging narratological problems. Finally, the issue of the historical evolution (and corruption) of the traditions underlying these tales remains a relevant factor in their effective interpretation, making it impractical to dispense with the diachronic perspective in its entirety.

However, contemporary approaches to this body of medieval work have tended more recently to take a *synchronic* rather than a diachronic view. That is to say they have tended to put to one side the question of origins or constituent parts, and focus instead on the characteristics of the surviving text as a functioning whole. Thus, rather than merely a source of evidence on long-lost traditions, the Mabinogion tales have more recently been regarded as significant cultural products in their own right. Whereas previous generations had tended to regard these medieval documents as the records of careless, indifferent or censorious clerical redactors, the manuscript texts are now more widely regarded as the work of conscious literary authors, men who were selectively drawing on existing traditions but adapting these to suit a particular artistic agenda. It is the end-product of this process that is now the chief object of interest, rather than its source traditions or historical development.

By this stage, it had become clear that the tales found in Lady Charlotte Guest's original Red Book Mabinogion collection varied considerably in age, style and quality. Despite appearing side by side in their fourteenth-century manuscripts, these were clearly the works of completely separate authors, which seem to have constituted an approximate canon of native Welsh prose literature that was recognised as such during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (we will be considering the historical circumstances of this corpus in greater detail on pp. 75-88 below). Of all these tales, by far and away the most critical interest has been reserved for the text we now know as the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, found on pages 171-200 of the White Book of Rhydderch.

There are a number of reasons why the Four Branches should have attracted so much interest, both from a diachronic and synchronic point of view. It has long been clear that this quartet of magical tales – the core of which seems to derive from traditional mystery tales associated with the pagan god *Maponus* (re: pp. 214-217 below) – contains a particularly high concentration of 'native' material, in contrast to a number of the rather later Arthurian tales found alongside them in the Mabinogion collection, a number of which were closely associated with Old French originals (re: pp. 79 ff. below). Furthermore, because of its origins, the Mabinogi has a genuine claim to a mythological provenance, lending it a high degree of relevance to diachronic questions relating to native magico-religious traditions from the British-Celtic world. From the (synchronic) literary-critical perspective, the Four Branches is without doubt the most skilfully composed of the Mabinogion tales: with the author demonstrating a dramatist's skill in his use of dialogue; as well as the most highly developed (and early) example of the medieval narrative 'interlace' idiom, as we will be considering in more detail below. Running at more than seventy pages in translation, the Four Branches dwarfs even the later Romance works such as *Peredur* or *Owain*. Taken as a single text, the Mabinogi comes close to assuming the proportions of a modern drama or paper-back novella. Finally, from a practical point of view, Ifor Williams's magisterial edition of the White Book text (first published in 1929) has provided a useful platform for further research, which has only recently been

matched by Bromwich and Evans's diplomatic edition of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, first published in 1985.

It has now been established beyond doubt that there was a concerted literary intention behind the composition of the Four Branches, and the disclosure of this medieval artistic purpose has been the chief goal of Mabinogi scholars over the last thirty years. There is not the scope here to take anything more than a bird's-eye view of these recent findings (many of which we will return to in due course). But a quick review might be appropriate at this stage to illustrate the background to some of the themes explored in this present work.

J. K. Bollard, one of the earliest pioneers of the synchronic approach, identified the Four Branches as an extended medieval treatise on the interrelated themes of friendship, marriages and feuds. Bollard acknowledged that traditional (mythological) material had been deployed by the author, but proposed that this had been done with the primary aim of exploring contemporary social concerns.<sup>14</sup> A similar view has been advocated by medievalist Catherine McKenna, who has interpreted the First Branch, the Mabinogi of Pwyll, as a didactic 'Mirror of Princes': in other words, as a mythological *exemplum* in which certain models of lordship are defined in order to both edify and glorify the author's aristocratic patron.<sup>15</sup> Gantz and O'Coileáin, following the thematic-interlace paradigm first defined by Bollard,<sup>16</sup> have discerned a similarly moral/didactic interest implicit in authorship of the Mabinogi. Gantz drew attention to a series of binary oppositions within the text, juxtaposing the consequences of good and evil behaviour;<sup>17</sup> while O'Coileáin argued that the First Branch in particular puts the mythical case for the virtues of patience, humility and sexual restraint<sup>18</sup>.

With the synchronic perspective of the Four Branches now firmly established, recent critics have been rather more adventurous in their exploration of some of the text's more controversial nuances. P. K. Ford, for example, wondered if the chivalrous chastity of Pwyll should not be read as an implicit comment on the latter's sexuality, and consequently on the paternity of Pryderi.<sup>19</sup> Roberta Valente has explored the representation (and inversion) of gender roles in the Fourth Branch (the Mabinogi of Math), and their relationship to the underlying social order.<sup>20</sup> Andrew Welsh has suggested that the Second Branch represents an impassioned critique of the heroic-age warrior ethos; while the Third Branch goes as far as to subversively recast the figure of the traditionally vilified figure of the 'unking' as the hero of the piece. The same critic has opened up some fascinating lines of enquiry with his introduction of the psychoanalytic perspective into study of the Mabinogi, and the Fourth Branch in particular.<sup>21</sup>

It has become clear, then, that the Four Branches is a complex work – not least in terms of its

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14 J. K. Bollard 'The Role of Myth and Tradition in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 6 (1983) pp.67-86

15 Catherine A. McKenna 'The Theme of Sovereignty in Pwyll' *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 29 (1980) pp.35-52

16 J. K. Bollard 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' *Transactions of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorian* 1974-1975, pp.250-276

17 Jeffrey Gantz 'A Thematic Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' *Medium Aevum* 47 (1978) pp. 247-254

18 Sean O'Coileáin 'A Thematic Structure of "Pwyll Pendevic Dyfed"' *Studia Celtica* 12-13 (1977-1978) pp.78-82

19 P. K. Ford 'Prolegomena to a Reading of the Mabinogi' *Studia Celtica* 16-17 (1981-1982) pp. 110-125

ideological content. In the light of these more recent approaches, there would appear to be a strong case for regarding the authorial voice as *polemic* rather than didactic, suggesting a cultural world in which controversy and division played as much of a part as monolithic consensus. The precise nature of this wider political context will perhaps never be entirely clear, but even a brief acquaintance with the historical record of Wales in the Central Middle Ages is enough to show that conflict – often of a shockingly violent nature – was never far beneath the surface of this particular milieu. Notional binaries such as ‘patriarchy versus matriarchy’, or the ‘non-combatant majority versus the warrior elite’ (two of the oppositions implicitly invoked within the Four Branches<sup>22</sup>) may well in themselves have only reflected the respectable face of a more complex set of agendas and interests involved.

For the purposes of clarifying this murky socio-political context, we will explore the hypothesis that Mabinogi was initially composed and performed (i.e. read aloud) in a court-community in North West Gwynedd, at sometime during the mid-1190s. While it should be acknowledged that there has been and still is extensive debate on the question of the provenance and dating of the Four Branches,<sup>23</sup> there are a number of reasons for favouring this particular location, many of which will become apparent in the course of this study. We will find, for example, a number of rather extraordinary correlations between key individuals that were active in Welsh dynastic politics during the late-twelfth century and the leading figures of the Mabinogi. An exploration of these typological allusions will constitute an important strand of our investigations in the chapters below.

There are many ways of defining the Mabinogi, and regarding it as a dynastic-political tract is but one of the many faces of this complex narrative work. On a formal level it is simply a ‘magical narrative’, following a template that is to some extent universal, displaying (in the European context) connections with both the fairy-tale *märchen* on one hand, and the medieval romance genre on the other. In terms of the source traditions of the Mabinogi, it is clear that there are both pagan-mythological and tribal-historic elements present within this medieval tale and these too will be considered at the relevant junctures. But there was also this allusive reference to contemporary personalities and events: what will be referred to as the ‘typological’ aspect of the work. Taking in this multiplicity of perspectives is essential for the qualified understanding of the Mabinogi as a cultural phenomenon.

20 Roberta L. Valente ‘Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in Math’ *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 35 (1988), pp. 1-9

21 Andrew Welsh ‘Doubling and Incest in the Mabinogi’ *Speculum* 65 (1990) pp. 344-362

22 e.g. Sullivan (1996) *op. cit.* pp.347-366

23 The first to venture an opinion on this matter was Sir Ifor Williams (1954), who suggested a late-eleventh century/Demetian provenance. This view was convincingly challenged Thomas Charles-Edwards (‘The Date of the Four Branches’ *Transactions of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion* (1970), pp 263-298), who provisionally revised the dating forward by a few decades, but criticised the theories of Saunders Lewis, who saw in the internal evidence the imprint of later twelfth-century events and concerns (re: p. 306 n. 552 below). A paper endorsing this later dating has recently been published by the present author (‘Gwynedd, Ceredigion and the Political Geography of the Mabinogi’ *The National Library of Wales Journal* Volume XXXII Number 4, 2002), in which these earlier theories are also outlined in more detail.