



## Chapter 1

# The Four Branches of the Mabinogi

## *The Background*

### Introduction

#### **Wales and the Medieval Mind**

Power in the High Middle Ages might be described as a function of brute force allied with degrees of psychosocial coercion. The ability to raise and maintain private armies was the prerogative of the largely French-speaking feudal aristocracy; just as the inner life of medieval man – suspended as it was between Heaven and Hell – was the acknowledged jurisdiction of the Church of Rome. In any study of the Middle Ages this Franco-Roman axis inevitably looms large, due in no small part to the nature and provenance of the surviving source material. However, in order to complete our understanding of the period, we also need to consider the lesser-known periphery. On this geopolitical frontier, the conventional model of western Franco-Roman feudalism was at best a poorly defined presence; elsewhere it was in open conflict with rival cultural systems and religious ideologies. Such was the situation that prevailed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the native-controlled territories beyond the Anglo-Norman March, the northern and western areas of what we now call Wales. It is this mysterious but enduring Brythonic enclave that we will be seeking to explore and understand throughout the chapters to come.

We will be focussing in particular on a quartet of magical tales that emerged from this Celtic-speaking milieu, known to us today as *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. Originally composed in the late twelfth century,<sup>1</sup> the Four Branches represent a symbolic self-expression of a deeply traditional tribal society on the threshold of a radical internal transformation. For this and other key reasons, ‘the Four Branches’ or ‘the Mabinogi’ (the terms here will be used interchangeably) represents a useful vantage point for surveying the wider psychological terrain through which western humanity has passed on its roundabout journey from antiquity to modernity.

It has been over thirty years since John K. Bollard’s groundbreaking study *The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* was first presented to the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion in

---

<sup>1</sup> The dating of the Mabinogi is discussed in more detail on pp. 17 n.23 and 144-145 below.

1974. Since that time, the findings of Patrick Ford, Brynley Roberts, Fiona Winward and Andrew Welsh – to name but a few – have significantly advanced our understanding of the work in question. Previously thought of as a degenerate repository of half-forgotten fragments, the Mabinogi is now rightly regarded as a medieval *tour de force*, perhaps one of the finest examples of vernacular writing from the Central Middle Ages. Moreover, it was the product of a highly disciplined intellectual tradition, which, as will be demonstrated in the pages below, exhibits a greater continuity with its pre-Christian roots than was formerly supposed.

The book before you has been conceived in part as a tribute to this recent body of Mabinogi scholarship. Much has changed in our understanding of the Four Branches since the popular Everyman edition of the *Mabinogion* was first published in 1949 and the time is long overdue for this new knowledge to be brought before a wider reading public. We now understand the narrative method by which the medieval Welsh author composed his work, which in turn leads us directly to the question of how the Four Branches would have been read (i.e. received and assimilated) by its original audience-community. The ground-rules of the traditional medieval narrative are easy enough to comprehend in themselves and can be applied with little difficulty to the text of the Four Branches. But they do not constitute part of the modern reader's conscious apparatus in the first instance, and thus an explanation of their workings is generally required. The more or less total ignorance of medieval hermeneutics within our culture today – even among the educated reading public – accounts for the sense of disappointment that all too often follows the modern encounter with the Mabinogi in its existing popular translations. An attempt is made here to remedy this unfortunate situation, and avail the contemporary reader of the riches of the medieval literary experience.

As well as introducing the modern readership to medieval narrative poetics, this book also seeks to provide a detailed context for the Four Branches. The dynastic politics of medieval Wales, as modern scholarship has only just begun to reveal, constitute an essential part of the living background against which the Mabinogi was composed and enacted. The Four Branches might be seen, as much as anything else, as a *domestic mythology* of the Welsh ruling caste. This group – essentially the dynastic descendants of the warlord Rhodri Mawr (d. 877 AD) – find themselves obliquely reflected in the Mabinogi. This connection with the content of the Four Branches is the immediate reason that this native aristocracy is of interest to us here; but it is also the case that the activities and interactions of the medieval Welsh *membra regis*, recorded in detail from 1100 onwards, are not without a certain dramatic poignancy of their own. For both of these reasons we will be considering these dynastic-political developments in some detail in the chapters to come.

Another contextual factor that needs to be examined is the backdrop of pre-Roman Britain, in both its prehistoric actuality and its subsequent recollection in the mythical traditions of Medieval Wales. The source-material of the Four Branches itself ultimately derives from the collective memory of this ancient past: whether in the form of oral-historical traditions relating to the demographic events of the distant past on one hand; or magico-religious mysteries underpinning the ritual life of the pre-Christian era on the other. That there is a pagan-mythical substrate to the Mabinogi is not controversial: this is an aspect of the text that has been comprehensively explored since the earliest

days of Mabinogi scholarship, as we will be considering in due course. The tribal-historic element, however, is less widely recognised. Here we will be following the lead of John Koch of Harvard University, one of the few modern scholars to consider the Mabinogi in the light of definable (pre)historic events. This will involve forays into the fields of archaeology and historical linguistics, as well as ancient history. The speculative and provisional nature of these analyses should be acknowledged at the outset. However, it has proved to be impossible to evaluate the Mabinogi as a whole without investigating this tribal-historic core, or considering the relationship this material might have had to the actualities of the prehistoric past. Thus, events in Britain and elsewhere, back as far as the Early Neolithic (c. 4500 – 3800 BC) have been discussed here (so far as they can be reconstructed). Readers are invited to evaluate for themselves the strength of their connection with the content of the Four Branches. This discussion has been presented both in general terms (in the first Chapter) and in the context of the specific analyses of each of the Branches, in the introductory sections of Chapters 2-5 respectively.

In our analysis of the literary functionality of the Four Branches (in relation to these contextual factors) we will adopt the same concoction of formalist and structuralist criticism on one hand and the various strands of psychoanalytic theory on the other that has been successfully applied to the interpretation of other pre-modern narratives. Previous experts in the field of medieval romance in particular, have used phrases such as ‘the magical plot’ or ‘the magical narrative’ to describe the form of the traditional tale, and their findings in this area have some useful applications for the medieval Welsh literary tradition, as we will be considering below.

For these critics, the term ‘magic’ is used in a specialised psychological sense to denote fantasy material of a distinctively solipsistic nature. More controversial is the idea that such narratives (by virtue of their psycho-dynamic potency) had a residual ceremonial significance in pre-modern societies, and may have been associated with communal occasions of a ritual nature even into the Central Middle Ages. In the pages below, sometimes we will be using the term ‘magic’ in this more explicit sense, with reference to the oracular nature of bardic performance, the narrative culture in medieval Wales and the delirious ‘carnavalesque’ aspects of traditional vernacular narration. Following the interesting if controversial suggestions of the anthropologist Ernest De Martino, we will be considering these functional affiliations in the light of what we know about the role of the sacred imagination within traditional cultures, and the ontology of the magical world-view.

Magical belief is one of the most prevalent features of the pre-modern mind yet also one of the most poorly understood. In the present author’s view, we cannot afford to ignore magic as a cultural phenomenon in considering a traditional tale like the Mabinogi, but neither can we be too definite about the precise role it would have played in the conscious thought-world of medieval Wales. Our conclusions in this area (like those relating to the tribal-historic aspects of the Four Branches) have been left deliberately open-ended. We will confine ourselves chiefly to an analysis of the psychodramatic affect inherent in the narrative poetics of each of the Branches, and offer no more than few provisional words about how this may have cohered with certain acknowledged patterns of belief and cultural practice in the medieval Celtic world.

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi illustrates as well as any other source the peculiar genius of the Celtic Middle Ages. We have characterised the Mabinogi as an anachronous meeting point of the old and the new. The primitive psychological state, known to the anthropologist Lévi-Bruhl as ‘mystic participation’, is certainly evident in the magical substrate of this work. So too is the rigid (and characteristically medieval) adherence to received tradition. More surprising, perhaps, is the humanity and compassion of our anonymous author, which is all the more remarkable for its vocal presence in one of the most violent corners of the twelfth-century West. We find in the Four Branches character-types and social situations which would not be unfamiliar to the modern audience today. From the sociopathic Efnisien to the self-effacing Manawydan; from the victimized Branwen to the vengeful Aranrhod: we are introduced to a set of vivid, distinctive personalities whose internal dynamics and mutual interaction hold the keys to the unfolding of events on the social-dramatic and tribal-historic planes. While we shall devote time drawing the readers’ attention to the characteristically medieval Celtic interpretation of the events involved, it is also hoped that some effort is made to consider the timeless message communicated by our anonymous author. For while the chronological and geographic coordinates are specific to a medieval recollection of prehistoric Britain, human nature and its perennial dilemmas are universal phenomena on which the author has his own profound and challenging observations to share.