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## **Bibliographic Essay**

### **'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi'**

#### **A Medieval Celtic Text**

#### **English Language Scholarship 1795-1997**

**Will Parker**

### **Introduction**

Those investigating Celtic mythology, students of the Arthurian literature and historical analysts of the Western cultural tradition itself will all, at some stage in their research, find themselves referred to a quartet of medieval stories known as the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. Normally associated with a larger collection of Middle Welsh prose (the so-called *MabinOGion*), the Four Branches consist of a poignant recollection of the births, lives and deaths of a group of interrelated figures from the British Celtic mythological cycle, through which the author takes the opportunity to present a very personal vision of the historical, magical and psycho-social realities surrounding his community.

Since their initial translation into the English language, these stories have stimulated a significant body of scholarly debate. The aim of this study is to outline this literature: much of which informs wider studies relating to Celtic

mythology, the Arthurian tradition, and the cultural anthropology of the proto-feudal West. By understanding the origins and developments of Mabinogi scholarship, the reader might acquire the ability to differentiate fact from fiction in the relevant areas within these wider contexts. As well as providing a critical survey of the highlights of Mabinogi scholarship in the English language, this overview also aims to include references to ancillary works and reference tools which might prove useful for direct investigations into whatever linguistic, literary, cultural or historical leads interested readers may wish to pursue.

### **Translations of the Four Branches**

The earliest surviving recensions of the full text of the Four Branches are to be found in two closely related manuscripts, the White Book of Rhydderch (1300-1325) and the Red Book of Hergest (1375-1425)[\[1\]](#) The earliest complete English translation of the Mabinogi, along with other 'native' material in the ancient books of Hergest and Rhydderch, was attempted by Lady Charlotte Guest[\[2\]](#). But it was Dr. William Owen Pughe[\[3\]](#), who had opened up the field with his translation of the first section of the First Branch, in a Welsh antiquarians' magazine at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so he effectively brought the Mabinogi out of the obscurity into which it had fallen: both in Wales and beyond, since the decline of the native bardic schools over the preceding four hundred years.

These translations, and their introductory commentaries, were penned in the days when the foundations of Celtic scholarship were still in formation. While classics in their own right, they are unfortunately riddled with inaccuracies and misreadings arising from the vagaries of paleographic Welsh.

With the emergence of critical editions[\[4\]](#), authoritative grammars[\[5\]](#), dictionaries[\[6\]](#) and a proper understanding of the historical evolution of the Celtic languages the quality of English language translations of the Mabinogi has improved considerably. Of the two standard translations available today, each has something to recommend it. The Everyman version[\[7\]](#) is the more literal. This close adherence to the text does, however, come at the expense of

readability. The poor reception of the Mabinogi in the English-speaking world today probably lies at least in part with these translators' use of rather turgid, quasi-biblical English: which merely adds to the obscurity of an already difficult text. Jeffrey Gantz [\[8\]](#) provides an alternative to this in the form of the Penguin edition of the Mabinogion. His English is considerably easier to read. However, it is a freer translation and therefore (arguably) less accurate. His decision, for example, to render the name of the Irish king in the Second Branch as *Malloloch*, instead of the more usual *Matholwch*, is not widely supported.

### **Critical Approaches: The Old School (1878-1977)**

The academic study of the contents of the Mabinogi (that is, beyond the primary problem of its translation), can be said to have begun with Matthew Arnold [\[9\]](#), who summed up his impression in the following memorable and oft-quoted terms:

'The first thing that strikes one, in reading the Mabinogion, is how evidently the medieval story-teller 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.' [\[10\]](#)

This observation encapsulates what might be known for convenience as the 'Old School' of Mabinogi scholarship. It was followed (albeit unconsciously) by numerous subsequent scholars including W. J. Gruffydd [\[11\]](#), Proinsias Mac Cana [\[12\]](#) and Kenneth Jackson [\[13\]](#). While each of these interpreters developed differing, individual approaches to the material at hand, a number of important shared assumptions can also be identified in hindsight. Central among these was the assumption that the Mabinogi, in its extant form, was somehow a corruption or confusion of once more clearly understood, integral originals. They shared Matthew Arnold's feeling of disappointment with the text as it stood, and saw it as their duty to restore it to its original glory. With such assumptions in mind: each of these scholars set about reconstructing the 'original', and identifying its subsequent accretions and corruptions.

The Old School were tireless in their search for analogues or sources for the Mabinogi. While it is easy to criticize their some of their assumptions in

hindsight, their prolific research truly laid the foundations for subsequent generations of Mabinogi scholars. The encyclopedic knowledge possessed by W. G. Gruffydd, in particular, of the Celtic world: its philology, vernacular literature and folklore remain invaluable to this day. His monumental works *Rhiannon: An Enquiry into the Origins of the First and Third Branches* and *Math vab Mathonwy* are especially impressive. In *Rhiannon*, Gruffydd identifies a twelve-stage process by which the legend of the Iron Age Gallo-Brittonic horse-goddess *Epona*, known by her accolade \**Rigantona* 'The Great Queen', became conflated with the myth of *Matrona*, the Great Mother, and her son *Maponus*<sup>[14]</sup> and a number of pan-Celtic or popular narrative themes: with the end result being the medieval story of Rhiannon and Pryderi in the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi. *Math* contains a similarly rigorous process of reconstruction for the Fourth Branch, out of which a Celtic variant of the Perseus and Danae myth is identified: where a daughter (in this case Aranrhod) is prophesied to give birth to a son (Lleu), whose fate it will be to kill his mother's own father (Beli Mawr/Math). The son is born despite the maternal grandfather's best efforts to protect his daughter's chastity, and grows up to fulfill his fratricidal destiny. After generations of telling and re-telling, the significance of the original characters and their motives was gradually forgotten, and the myth became 'corrupted', the result being the 'confused' story as it survives in the extant plot-structure of the Fourth Branch.

Gruffydd is almost certainly correct in many of his basic assumptions. The Four Branches do seem to have drawn upon extremely deep-rooted Celtic mythological themes. Many of its protagonists would have originally been revered as deities. Forms of magical belief can be used to explain some of the peculiarities of narrative continuity and happenstance. And last but not least, there is much to be learnt from the comparison with Irish mythological material: which can shed light on both meanings and origins implicit in the Welsh text. But in his desire to rebuild these mythic prototypes, Gruffydd far outstretched the capabilities of his methodology. While supported by copious evidence, these reconstructions have to be recognised, regretfully, as pure speculation.

Having said this, the works of Gruffydd remain a valuable resource for the contemporary student, containing as they do a mine of ingenious analogues and syntheses, many of which are yet to be fully absorbed by the current generation

of scholars. But in handling his work, students and researchers would be wise to bear in mind the words of his pupil and protégé Proinsias Mac Cana:

"(Gruffydd was a) speculative enquirer who placed as much store by instinct as by evidence and whose reconstructions, even at their most airbourne, have a disarming semblance of plausability"[\[15\]](#)

The other pillar of the Old School, K. H. Jackson, differed from Gruffydd in giving greater emphasis to the *narrative-entertainment* (as opposed to the magico-historical *mythological*) function of the Four Branches in his analysis of the narrative constitution of the Mabinogi and its origins. Having been impressed by the memory and verbosity of oral story-tellers in the Scottish Islands, Jackson investigated more deeply the phenomena of the so-called traditional *popular tale*. This brought him into the realm of folklore studies: the schools of Aarne and Thompson[\[16\]](#), Wesselski and Krohn. It was perceived that, rather than belonging exclusively to the background of pagan Celtic mythology, the constituent elements of the Mabinogi could be seen as belonging to an *international* context, in which popular tales and motifs had been transmitted from ear to mouth across national boundaries, often over thousands of years. Thus, in *The International Popular Tale and the Early Welsh Tradition* Jackson identifies the ubiquitous 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[\[17\]](#). He also includes some useful discussion of popular elements within the other three branches. He identifies, for example, the perennial 'Unfaithful Wife' scenario, in conjunction with the 'Achillies Heel': which he perceives as underlying the circumstances surrounding the adultery of Blodeuedd and the epiphany of Lleu in the Fourth Branch.[\[18\]](#)

Jackson's analysis brought a refreshingly down-to-earth perspective to the hitherto somewhat rarefied tradition of Mabinogi scholarship. He rightly drew attention to analogues outside the Celtic world and, in doing so, questioned the assumption that the cultures of medieval Ireland and Wales were a closed system, impervious to international influence.

However, his reasoning was fundamentally flawed in several respects. He assumes, for example, that where an international analogue can be found, a

native mythological origin must necessarily be discounted. This line of argument misunderstands the deep-rooted and perennial nature of the phenomenology of the International Tale, elements of which were probably in circulation throughout the human world as early as the Mesolithic Age [19]. The Celtic tradition is more accurately seen as a *sub-set* of this International context, rather than its antithesis. This peculiarly Celtic variant of the basic international tradition, as found perennially throughout the oral and literary narrative cultures of Ireland and the Wales, forms the true context of the Mabinogi. As recognised by Gruffydd, some knowledge of this context is essential for the understanding of this otherwise rather opaque and laconic text.

Before moving on to discuss the Revisionist (or Contemporary) school of Mabinogi scholarship, it is worth briefly considering the work of the above-mentioned Mac Cana, successor of the tradition of analysis envisioned by the father of the field, W. J. Gruffydd. Mac Cana fills the gap in Gruffydd's published work by submitting an analysis of the Second Branch, where the latter had covered the First, Third and Fourth. In his book *Branwen* [20], Mac Cana is a good deal more circumspect than his mentor in formulating all-encompassing hypotheses. He does, however, follow some of Gruffydd's basic assumptions. The first of these is that the Second Branch as it survives represents 'a garbled account of [the chieftain's] traditionally great feat...The Expedition to the Otherworld, and his snatching from Penn Annwvn, the Chief of the Otherworld, his Cauldron of Resurrection' [21]. Secondly, he argues that the Irish element within the Mabinogi should not be underestimated. Mac Cana identifies a number of convincing analogues within the body of surviving Irish literature, including parallels for the 'Iron House' episode and so-called 'The Watchman Device' [22]. Less convincing are his arguments for an Irish origin for the Cauldron of Rebirth, The Great House or the Men in the Bags episode: which can be shown to be common either within the Celtic tradition as a whole, or to the wider context of the International Popular Tale. Elsewhere in this study, Mac Cana also includes some useful discussion about the origins of Bendigeidfran and Manwyddan mab Llyr (whom he relates to the Irish figures of Bran Mac Febail and Manannan Mac Lir).

Mac Cana might be seen in some respects as the last representative of what has been described here as the Old School of Mabinogi scholarship, the terminus of

which has been dated with the publication of his study of the Mabinogi and its associated literature in 1977 [23]. As I hope to have made clear, this term is not intended pejoratively, and the usefulness of this vast body of research (accumulated over ninety years or more) remains undiminished. For synthetic, diachronic surveys the works of Gruffydd, Mac Cana, Loomis [24], and Newstead [25] provide useful introductions to questions both of the pagan, mythological origins of the Mabinogi; and its relationship to the later medieval Arthurian material. While it has been suggested that Jackson overcompensates in his rejection of the nativist paradigm: his work provides an important counter-balance to this rather romanticized, esoteric view of the Mabinogi. Much highly useful research into sources and analogues, dating and authorship, continues to be carried out in the diachronic/historical spirit of the Old School. For issues of dating and authorship, for instance, the work of Charles-Edwards [26] provides a comprehensive evaluation of the existing opinions and evidence relating to the literary provenance of the Four Branches. John Koch, also published over the last twenty years, has provided some fascinating suggestions as to a link between the narrative events within the Mabinogi and recorded historical events within the Gallo-Brittonic world during the Late Iron Age period [27].

### **Critical Approaches: The Revisionists (1975-)**

What unites the diverse strands of research which comprise the Old School, as suggested above, is the underlying attitude towards the extant text itself. The *synchronic*, organic import of the Mabinogi to its contemporary audience is ignored in favour the mythological, historical or narratological scenarios from which this 'final version' was descended. While some lip-service was paid to the author's 'conscious artistry', any analysis of such was avoided, on the grounds that it was the preserve of 'the literary critic'. That the exploration of Celtic texts necessitates a level of linguistic and/or historical expertise has tended to exclude the mainstream literary-critical reader, leaving this state of affairs still largely unresolved [28].

However, in 1975, the American scholar J. K. Bollard [29] published a paper, *The Structure of the Four Branches*, which opened up some interesting lines of enquiry into these more literary, synchronic aspects of the text. Bollard highlighted for the first time the highly structured nature of the extant work. He

identified the use of iterative formulae, which, he believed, might have been deliberately employed as architectural devices: punctuating and highlighting *themes* of concern to the author and his contemporary audience. His was, as he put it, 'a social reading' of the Four Branches. He identified within the text a perennial interest in the areas of *friendship, marriage* and *feuds*. Rather than regarding the text, as the Old School were prone to do, as an imperfect recollection of some distant tradition, Bollard saw the Mabinogi as very much a consciously-constructed product of the proto-feudal world of late pre-Norman Wales. Bollard acknowledged that traditional material is employed by the author, but this is done with the primary aim of expressing distinctively medieval concerns.

In the same essay, Bollard also introduced the concept of *interlacing* as an appropriate critical approach for a medieval work of art like the Mabinogi. In a subsequent essay, *The Role of Mythology in the Four Branches*[\[30\]](#) he expands this idea, which had been originally evolved as an effective perspective for the analysis of the Arthurian Vulgate cycle[\[31\]](#):

"an apt analogy for the structure which emerges is *interlaced artwork* in which threads of textile (or text) repeatedly come to the fore, and recede, eventually creating a design which can be perceived as a whole, and which often looks deceptively simple until it is scrutinized in detail."[\[32\]](#)

This approach was also endorsed by P. K. Ford. In his *Prolegomena to a Reading of the Mabinogi*[\[33\]](#) he draws in the thinking of that founding father of modern social anthropology, Lévi-Strauss[\[34\]](#), whose structuralist methodology for the interpretation of mythical narrative might be usefully employed in the elucidation of the Mabinogi[\[35\]](#). This intensely text-focused, componential approach has been followed by a whole new generation of scholars, referred to for convenience as the Revisionist or Contemporary school. By examining the Mabinogi in this way it has become clear that far from being clumsy recording of some bastardised oral tradition, it is indeed a highly sophisticated, involved work of art articulating a depth and complexity of meaning far beyond that which one might have previously expected of a medieval work.

A recently published collection[\[36\]](#), has assembled a collection of essays (including those of Bollard and Ford mentioned above) which ably represent

some of the most significant work undertaken by this Revisionist school. These essays, have been culled by the editor from articles published in the scholarly press over the last twenty years, and include a mixture of perspectives, both diachronic and synchronic: with attention paid to the contextual, as well as the textual, characteristics of the Mabinogi. But it is primarily from the second and third section of this collection, explorations of the synchronic/thematic content of the Mabinogi, that the selected essays reviewed below have been drawn.

The first of these I have chosen as an example of how, even with the 'narrative attention' which characterises these Revisionist analyses, strongly subjective and even misleading interpretations might still be derived. Elizabeth Hanson-Smith's interpretation of the First Branch[\[37\]](#), is in my opinion, just such a misreading. A 'medieval preoccupation with manners and morals' is correctly identified by Hanson-Smith. She also rightly diagnoses a mythical subtext which permeates the discourse: enriching this didactic 'Book of Governance' with an engaging, archetypal appeal. However, for no particular reason, Hanson-Smith chooses to define the esoteric backdrop of the First Branch in terms of the Wasteland Myth: the ritual story of the healing of the magically blighted land (and the associated sickness of its elderly king) by a young hero.[\[38\]](#)

Frustratingly, Hanson-Smith is not wide of the mark in diagnosing the presence of the Wasteland myth (or a variant thereof) at the heart of the Mabinogi and the British Mythological cycle in general, but it is surely in the *Third* Branch (as already suggested by Gruffydd[\[39\]](#)) rather than the First, that such a mythologem comes to the fore. A more accurate elucidation of the mythical subtext of the First Branch comes with Catherine McKenna's *The Theme of Sovereignty in Pwyll*[\[40\]](#).

The 'sovereignty' theme is something of a fetish within the field of Celtic studies, and claims of its presence should be treated with the utmost caution. However, McKenna is probably correct in identifying Rhiannon with the *tutelary goddess* often symbolised by a mare in the Celtic world, the sexual favours of whom are mystically identified with the exercise of successful kingship over the land. The sacred marriage between the king and this Sovereignty Goddess traditionally yields bounty to the countryside, and fertility amongst man and beast alike[\[41\]](#). McKenna identifies a series of signifiers within the First Branch

which would suggest that the marriage of Pwyll to Rhiannon represents a myth of this kind. Like Hanson-Smith, McKenna also argues persuasively that the First Branch (and the rest of the Mabinogi) should be regarded in its contemporary context as a didactic 'mirror of princes', in which certain models of Lordship are defined: in order both to glorify and edify the patron king of the bardic composer.

Elsewhere in this collection, Andrew Welsh[\[42\]](#) provides an ingenious suggestion as to the significance of Manawydan's pacifistic, non-retaliatory behaviour in the Third Branch, which seems to defy the essential creed of the 'heroic' warrior society from which the author and his early medieval audience would have been scarcely removed. Welsh draws on an earlier, diachronic analysis arrived at by John Koch[\[43\]](#), in which Manawydan is related to the Late Iron Age British Celtic figure of Mandubracios (whose name literally meant 'Dark Traitor'). According to Welsh, this mythological figure of archetypal bad kingship and misrule was subversively re-cast as a kind of anti-hero: celebrating the wisdom of restraint and humility, against the more traditional masculine virtues of bravery and impulsive, dominant behaviour.

The theme of temperance and restraint does indeed seem at odds with traditional Celtic values, and its significance in the Mabinogi has not been fully resolved. One finds, for example, an episode in the First Branch in which Pwyll refuses the favours of the wife of an Otherworldly king, in a situation where according to traditional Celtic mythological lore, the rejection of such a proposal would have not only been a shameful waste, but might even have been seen as magically dangerous.

Ford[\[44\]](#) would see the revelation of this aspect of Pwyll's behaviour as an implicit statement on the part of the author relating to the latter's virility, and consequently the true paternity of Pryderi. However, the observations of Gantz[\[45\]](#) and O' Coileen[\[46\]](#) in the same volume would suggest that perhaps this episode should be seen in terms of the structural context of the Four Branches as a whole. Gantz draws attention to the structural and thematic proximity of this episode with various other incidents in the Mabinogi, including the adulterous encounter between the wife of Lleu and the antagonist Gronw Pebyr. The *binary opposition* between their respective actions and their subsequent fortunes would suggest that the author is inviting a comparison

between the two: out of which Pwyll emerges as the wiser and more fortunate. Likewise, the comparison highlighted by O'Coileen between Pwyll's 'chastity' episode, and his succeeding union with the goddess-like figure of Rhiannon, carries a further suggestion that, in complete opposition to the traditional Celtic philosophy, the author of the Mabinogi was attempting to construct a mythological case for the virtues of patience, humility and sexual responsibility. Further evidence of these sentiments can be seen in the unusually gruesome and humiliating punishment meted out to the sons of Don following their rape of Goewin, at the beginning of the Fourth Branch or the Mabinogi of Math.

The Sullivan collection of essays contain numerous explorations of the issues of *gender* within the Mabinogi. Sullivan himself[\[47\]](#) explores the issue of lordship and inheritance in the Fourth Branch: which he reads as a struggle between the opposing principles of matrilineage and the agnatic descent through the male line. Elsewhere, Juliette Wood[\[48\]](#) discusses the Calumniated Wife theme in relation to Rhiannon and Branwen, with reference to the treatment of women and foreigners within Medieval Welsh society. Meanwhile, in her discussion of the lost tale of Dylan Eil Ton, Sarah Keefer[\[49\]](#) opens further discussion of the Otherworld Mistress motif, with some fascinating references to the totemistic seal mythology of the British Isles.

Other noteworthy studies relating to the Mabinogi have appeared in scholarly journals over the last twenty years. For example A.E. Lea[\[50\]](#) explores the relevant parallels between Lleu in the Fourth Branch and Myrddin/Suibne Geillt: the shamanistic bird-man of the Insular Celtic tradition. A fascinating suggestion, mooted by Andrew Breeze[\[51\]](#), argues the case for the *female* authorship of the Mabinogi. Attractive though his case may be, there simply isn't the evidence to support (or refute) this proposition either way. In fact there remains very little we can say about the authorship of the Four Branches beyond the fact it was almost certainly composed during the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century, probably by a bardic author, possibly at the court of the High King Gruffydd ap Cynan[\[52\]](#).

Following in the tradition of Bollard and Ford, Ito-Marino's study[\[53\]](#) provides an interesting analysis of the structural, ideological and thematic features of the Four Branches as a whole. The highly involved, organic nature of the Mabinogi renders particular value to readings of this kind: which seek to identify what

Ford[54] referred to as the 'single message stated over and over again' at the heart of the text. As the Contemporary School identified: the repetition, inversion and dovetailing of symbols is a fundamental aspect of the conscious artistry of the Mabinogi. To understand the nature of this semantic edifice, we must look beyond the linear progression of individual events and episodes within the Four Branches and seek to identify the *architecture of meaning* which emerges out of a non-sequential, symbolic perspective.

### **Some Background Reading**

Having surveyed the highlights of Mabinogi scholarship in the English language, the reader will now have some idea of the current consensus relating to the medieval work and the various interpretative modes which have been employed in its elucidation.

To assist any future researchers, this study will be concluded with a supplementary list of reference tools which should be on hand for any serious investigation of the Four Branches, within its literary, cultural and historical context. First and foremost within such a list, we would have to include Rachel Bromwich's excellent publication of Medieval Bardic lore known as *Troiedd Ynys Prydein* 'The Triads of the Island of Britain'[55]. The 'triads' consist of a series 96 three-line stanzas (appended by explanatory notes) compiled by the medieval Welsh bardic schools as a mnemonic device to assist with the learning of the numerous names and roles which formed the mythological tradition with which they were expected to be conversant. Typical triads included 'The Three Bull-Spectres', 'The Three Lover's Horses', 'The Three Unrestrained Ravishings of the Island of Britain' etc. The triads are important as they provide a manual or catalogue of the very same tradition from which the author of the Mabinogi himself extracted his traditional material. The Four Branches even contain direct references to the triadic tradition itself[56].

But Bromwich's edition of this material is doubly useful to scholars of the Medieval Welsh tradition. The volume is appended by an alphabetic listing of *every single personal name* mentioned in the triadic literature: including a description of the traditions of each, comprehensive inventories of their

appearances elsewhere in the medieval corpus, possible mythical origins etc. Definitive descriptions of this kind for almost every major character in the Mabinogi can be found in this section (including particularly useful entries for Bran/Bendigeidfran, Aranrhod, Lleu Llaw Gyfess and Beli Mawr): furnishing potential researchers with numerous spring-boards for further investigation.

We have mentioned that native British mythology and folklore forms the cultural context out of which the medieval literary work of the Mabinogi was synthesised. The author presupposes an intimate knowledge of this tradition, which, while acting as the foundation to much of what takes place in the Four Branches, is alluded to only in the most subtle and laconic of ways. Thus, a ready acquaintance with parallel traditions, from both the Gaelic culture of Ireland and elsewhere within the Brythonic world, is an important key to the understanding of the Mabinogi. For a convenient introduction to both the general themes and specific traditions of this mythological universe, *Celtic Heritage* by Rees and Ress[\[57\]](#) is ideal: providing as it does a comprehensive and well-indexed coverage of the relevant domain. Beyond this, J. G. Frazer's famous work *The Golden Bough*[\[58\]](#) remains the most comprehensive guide to the perennial manifestations of pagan belief throughout the world: which is well worth exploring for those wishing to further understand the magical and theological elements underlying the mythology involved. Complementary to this, Anne Ross's *Pagan Celtic Britain*[\[59\]](#) introduces the pre-Christian iconography of Celtic Britain: from the point of view of an archeologist familiar with the literary mythological traditions of medieval Ireland and Wales.

An understanding of the social-historical context involved will also be of interest to many researchers. The fourth chapter of John Davies's *A History of Wales*[\[60\]](#) provides an excellent overview of the relevant period involved (800-1200). Supplementary to this, readers might wish to explore some of the primary historical sources: most relevant of which might include Jenkins's annotated translation of the ancient law tracts of Wales[\[61\]](#) (outlining as they do some relevant social institutions) and Gerladus Cambrensis' eye witness accounts of twelfth century Wales[\[62\]](#). For the pre-medieval background, the works of Peter Berresford Ellis[\[63\]](#) on hand and Simon James and Valery Rigby[\[64\]](#) between them provide a judicious balance between the traditional historical perspectives and the revisionist, archeological views of Iron Age Britain and the Ancient Celtic

world.

When working directly with the text of the Mabinogi, there can be no substitute for taking the time to learn Medieval Welsh, and approaching the Four Branches in the original language. Numerous tools are on hand to assist the reader with such an endeavour,[\[65\]](#) and the rewards are well worth the efforts involved. Readers lacking the time or resources to do this would be well advised to work with more than one of the translations available (probably the Gwyn and the Gantz versions[\[66\]](#)) for a balanced linguistic interpretation.

Close adherence to the textual content, combined with a judicious understanding of the cultural context involved (the narrative traditions of the Medieval Celtic West) make for a satisfying reading of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. As recent scholarship is beginning to reveal, this Medieval Celtic novella can be seen as a rich and multifaceted work of art, a veritable panorama of the Native British mythological universe, containing within it the deeply personal vision of a man (or woman) wise beyond the cultural age of their time and place in history.

## NOTES

[1] **The White Book of Rhydderch** (Peniarth 4) is held at the National Library of Wales

**The Red Book of Hergest** (Jesus College cxi) is held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

[2] **Guest, Charlotte Elizabeth** *The Mabinogion: from the Llyfr Coch O Hergest* London: s.n., 1849

[3] **Pughe, William Owen** *The Mabinogion, or Juvenile Amusements, being Ancient Welsh Romances* Cambrian Register For the Year of 1795, pp. 177-187

----- *The Mabinogi: Or, the Romance of Math ab Mathonwy* The Cambrian Quarterly Magazine and Celtic Repository Volume 1 (1829) pp. 170-179

Pughe's *Cambrian Biography: Or, Historical Notices of Celebrated Men Among the Ancient Britons* includes entries for a number of characters from the Mabinogi: including Lleu, Bran, Aranrhod and Prydri. It contains some unusual material, not recorded elsewhere, which may reflect the remnants of a genuine bardic tradition known to the antiquarian author (e.g. the tradition of Lleu and Gwyddion's journey in a chariot of gold, the correspondence of certain characters in the Fourth Branch with astronomical constellations etc.).

[4] **Evans, J. Gwenogvryn and Rhys, John** *The text of the White Book of the Mabinogion and other tales from The Red Book of Hergest* Oxford: s.n., 1887

**Evans, J. Gwenogvryn** *The White Book of the Mabinogion: Welsh Tales and Romances reproduced from the Peniarth manuscripts* Pwllheli: s.n., 1907

**Thompson, R.L.** *Pwyll Penddeic Dyfed: The First of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi edited from the White Book of Rhydderch with variants from the Red Book of Hergest* Dublin: The Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1957

**Thomson, D.S.** *Branwen Uerch Lyr: The Second of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi edited from the White Book of Rhydderch with variants from the Red Book of Hergest and from Peniarth 6* Dublin: The Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1961

Both of the latter items are annotated and are appended with glossaries. They form an ideal starting point for the student with little or no familiarity with the Medieval Welsh language. Similar editions of the latter two Branches are said to be in preparation.

[5] e.g. **Evans, D. Simon** *A Grammar of Middle Welsh* Dublin: The Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1964

[6] **Evans, Harold Meurig** and **Thomas, William Owen** (eds.) *Y Geiriadur Mawr: the complete Welsh-English, English-Welsh dictionary* Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer; Llandybie: Christopher Davies, 1958

**Thomas, R.J.** and **Bevan, G.A.** (eds.) *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: A Dictionary of the Welsh Language* 2 vols Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1950

[7] **Jones, Gwyn** and **Jones, Thomas** (translators) *The Mabinogion* (revised edition) London and Melbourne: Dent (Everyman's Library Series), 1974

[8] **Gantz, Jeffrey** (translator) *The Mabinogion: translated with an introduction* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976

[9] **Arnold, Matthew** *On the study of Celtic literature and other Essays* London: J.M.Dent & Sons; New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1910

[10] *ibid.* p.54

[11] **Gruffydd, W.J.** *The Mabinogion* Transactions of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorian 1912-1913, pp. 14-80

----- *Math vab Mathonwy* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1923

----- *Rhiannon: An Inquiry into the Origins of the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1953

[12] **Mac Cana, P.** *Branwen Daughter of Llyr: A Study into the Irish Affinities and Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958

----- *The Mabinogi* (second edition) Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992

Includes a summary of the plot-structure Four Branches and a rounded

discussion of the various critical approaches employed in its interpretation. This small book is strongly recommended for the time-pressed reader.

[13] **Jackson, Kenneth H.** *The International Popular Tale and the Early Welsh tradition* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961

[14] For more discussion of the relation between the British god Maponus (> Middle Welsh *Mabon*) and the etymology of the title of the Four Branches see **Hamp, Eric** '*Mabinogi*' Transactions of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorian 1974-1975, pp. 243-249

[15] Macana, 1992, *op. cit.*, p.28

[16] **Aarne, Antti** and **Thompson, Stith** *The Types of Folklore* Folklore Fellows Communications No.74, 1928

The works of Krohn and Wesselski are not available to my knowledge in the English language, and thus lie outside the scope of this study.

[17] Jackson, 1961, *op. cit.* pp. 81-95

[18] Jackson, 1961, *op. cit.* pp. 107-112

[19] **Edmundson, Munro S.** *An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature* New York, Chicago: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston pp.57-61

[20] Mac Cana, 1958 *op. cit.*

[21] *ibid*, p.4

[22] For an interesting counterpoint to Mac Cana's strongly Gaelic hypothesis see **Simms-Williams, Patrick** *The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Medieval Welsh Literature* In: Ireland and Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes ed. Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamund Mckitterick and David Dumville Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982 pp.235-257; and (by the same author) *Riddling Treatment of the 'Watchman Device' in 'Branwen' and 'Togail Bruidne Da Derga'* Studia Celtica 12/13 (1977-1978) pp. 78-111

[23] The first edition of Mac Cana, 1992 (see n.12.).

[24] **Loomis, Roger S.** *Wales and Arthurian Legend* Cardiff: University of Wales

Press, 1956

[25] **Newstead, Helaine** *Bran the Blessed in Arthurian Romance* New York: Columbia University Press, 1939

[26] **Charles-Edwards, T.M.** *The Date of the Four Branches* Transactions of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodian 1970 pp. 263-298

Also in Sullivan (1996), *infra*, pp. 19-58

Charles-Thomas suggests a provenance of 1000-1100 on linguistic and cultural-contextual grounds. This supports the c.1060 proposed by **Ifor Williams** (*Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1951) and supported by McKenna (*infra.* ). The 12<sup>th</sup> century dating suggested by **Saunders Lewis** (*Manawydan fab Llyr Y Traethodydd* 532 (1969) pp. 137-142) is convincingly criticised.

[27] **Koch, John T.** *Bran-Brennos: An Instance of Early Gallo-Brittonic History and Mythology* Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies 20 (Winter 1990) pp. 1-20

----- *A Welsh Window on the Iron Age* Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies 14 (Winter 1987) 17-52

[28] A notable exception to this trend can be found in the works of the poet and maverick Mabinogi scholar, **Robert Graves**, whose flamboyant essay *The White Goddess* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), contains (among other things) a synchronic reading of the Four Branches as a medieval work of literature. Graves' work has been shunned by the academic mainstream: containing as it does a highly subjective interweaving of Celtic, Greek and Hebraic mythology. This perspective, however, combined with Graves' intuitively bardic mindset, lend this interpretation more credibility than has been hitherto recognized. Graves' work is due for a reappraisal in the light of the Revisionist developments to Mabinogi scholarship.

[29] **Bollard, J.K.** *The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* Transactions of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorian 1974-1975, pp. 250-256

Also in: Sullivan, 1996 (*infra.*) pp. 165-196

[30]----- *The Role of Myth and Tradition in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies 6 (1983) pp. 67-86

Also in: Sullivan, 1996, (*infra.*) pp. 277-302

[31] see **Vinaver, Eugene** *The Rise of Romance* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971

[32] Bollard, 1975, *op. cit.* p. 280 (Sullivan edition)

[33] **Ford, Patrick K.** *Prolegomena to a Reading of the Mabinogi: 'Pwyll' and 'Manawydan'* Studia Celtica 16-17 (1981-1982): pp.110-125

Also in: Sullivan (1996), *infra*, pp. 197-216

[34] **Lévi-Strauss, Claude** *The Structural Study of Myth* In: Myth, A Symposium ed. Thomas Seboek Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press

[35] "these sequences [of narrative events] are organized, on planes of different levels (of abstraction), in accordance with schemata, which exist simultaneously, superimposed on one another: just as a melody composed for several voices is held within bounds by constraints within two dimensions, first by its on melodic line which is horizontal, and second by the contrapunctual schemata (settings) which are verticle." (**Lévi-Strauss, Claude** *The Myth of Asidwal* In: The Structural Study of Myth and Totemsism ed Edmund Leach, London: Tavistock Press, p.17)

[36] **Sullivan, C.W. III** (ed.) *The Mabinogi - A book of essays* New York: Garland Press, 1996

[37] **Hanson-Smith, Elizabeth** *'Pwyll Prince of Dyfed': the narrative structure* Studia Celtica (1981-1982) pp. 126-134

Also in : Sullivan (1996), *op. cit.* pp. 153-162

[38] **Weston, Jesse** *From Ritual to Romance* Cambridge: University Press, 1920

Weston provides a comprehensive discussion of the Wasteland myth and its appearance throughout the ancient, classical, medieval and folk traditions of Europe. A classic example of the Wasteland myth would be the Grail Quest of Arthurian legend.

[39] Gruffydd, 1953 *op. cit.*

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

Also in: Sullivan, *op. cit.*, pp. 303-330

[41] see **Mac Cana, Proinsias** *Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature* Études Celtique 7 (1955-1956) pp.76-114. As McKenna (1980, *op. cit.*) points out, there is very little direct evidence for the Sovereignty Goddess in the British tradition.

[42] **Welsh, Andrew** *Manawydan fab Llyr: Wales, England and the 'New Man'* Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples ed. Cyril J.Byrne et al, s.l.: St. Mary's University, 1989

Also in: Sullivan, *op. cit.* pp.

[43] Koch, 1987, *op. cit.*

[44] Ford, 1981, *op. cit.*, p. 210

[45] **Gantz, Jeffrey** *Thematic Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* Medium Aevum 47 (1978) pp.247-254

Also in Sullivan (1996), *op. cit.* pp. 265-274

[46] **O'Coileen, Sean** *A Thematic Study of the Tale of 'Pwyll Pendevic Dyfed'* Studia Celtica 12-13 (1977-1978) pp. 78-82

[47] **Sullivan, C.W. III** *Inheritance and Lordship in the Math* In: Sullivan (1996) *op. cit.*, pp. 347-366

[48] **Wood, Juliette** *The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh literature* Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies 10 (1985) pp.25-38

Also in Sullivan (1996) *op. cit.* pp. 61-78

[49] **Keefer, Sarah Larratt** *The Lost Tale of Dylan in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi* Studia Celtica 24-25 (1989-1990) pp. 26-37

Also in Sullivan (1996) *op. cit.* pp.79-98

[50] **Lea, A.E.** *Lleu Wyllt (The Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi and Welsh stories of Myrddin Wlyt: an Early British prototype of the legend of the wild man?)* Journal of Indo-European Studies 25 (1997) pp. 35-47

[51] **Breeze, Andrew** *Did a woman write the Four Branches of the*

*Mabinogi?* Studi Medievali 38 (1997) No. 2 (Dec.) pp. 679-705

[52] See Williams (1951, *op. cit.*), McKenna (1980 *op. cit.*) and Charles-Edwards (1970 *op. cit.*). Mac Cana proposed a clerical authorship, and even suggested the prominent eleventh century British scholar Sulien ap Rhygvarch as the possible individual. For more on the historical background of the period under question see Davies (1993), *supra*, pp. 97-100

[53] **Ito Morino, S.** *The Sense of Ending in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* Zeitschrift fur Celtische Philologie 49 (1997) pp.341-348

[54] see Ford, 1981, *op. cit.* p. 209

[55] **Bromwich, Rachel** *Trioedd Ynys Prydein - The Welsh Triads. Edited with introduction, translation and commentary* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978

[56] e.g. Manawydan is referred to as 'one of the Three Ungrasping Chieftains' (Gwynn and Gwynn, 1974, p.41). In the Second Branch, Branwen is referred to as one of the 'Three Matriarchs of the Island of Britain' (*ibid*, p.26). There is no triad which corresponds to this one in the extant manuscript corpus, but it clearly belongs to the same tradition.

[57] **Rees, Alwyn and Rees, Brindley** *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* London: Thames and Hudson, 1961

[58] **Frazer, Sir James George** *The Golden Bough - A Study in Magic and Religion* (abridged edition) London: Macmillan and Co., 1925

[59] **Ross, Anne** *Pagan Celtic Britain - Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (revised edition) London: Constable, 1992

[60] **Davies, John** *A History of Wales* London, New York: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1993

[61] **Jenkins, Dafydd** *The Law Texts of Hywel Dda: Law Texts from Medieval Wales* Llandysul, 1986

[62] **Gerald of Wales** *The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales. Translated with an introduction by Lewis Thorpe.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978

[63] **Ellis, Peter Beresford** *The Celtic Empire* London: Constable, 1990

[64] **James, Simon and Rigby, Valery** *Britain and the Celtic Iron Age* London: British Museum Press, 1997

[65] see notes 4-6 above

[66] see notes 7 & 8