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AmeriCymru spoke to Shan Morgain about her passion for the Mabinogi and about her excellent website: Mabinogi Study. Shan has lived in Wales for 25 years, studying the Mabinogi and Middle Welsh. She is a storyteller and writer. She fell in love with Welsh myth, then a Welshman, then the Mabinogi. She is currently starting a PhD at Swansea and creating a collection of resources for fellow Mabinogi lovers (aka the Mabinogion). [www.mabinogistudy.co.uk](http://www.mabinogistudy.co.uk) has lots of helpful articles from history, literature, translation to storytelling and arts. Discussion forum. Massive bibliography. Weekly seminar chats.

AmeriCymru: Hi Shan and many thanks for agreeing to this interview. How would you describe the Mabinogi to someone approaching it for the first time?

Shan: This is a collection of stories, the oldest literature of Britain, including the earliest stories of King Arthur. They were originally in an older form of Welsh, but now widely known in translation.

Yet though so old, these stories are so well written they are read, told and performed across Wales, and wherever people connect to Wales and its traditions.

One of the things I love about the Mabinogi stories in Wales is you can go into any pub or supermarket and Welsh people know these stories just like the latest fashionable TV drama. If you know the stories a bit too you are welcomed with open arms.

I saw the Mabinogi performed as a stage play directed by Manon Eames for the Youth Theatre of Wales. If that had been Shakespeare performed in England the audience would have been stuffy intelligentsia, literary types only. But for the "Magnificent Mabinogi" it was all the local families – and their children.

AmeriCymru: How did you first become interested in the Mabinogi?

Shan: As a young farm girl who went up to London in her teens I was always mad for mythology. I remember Tolkien first coming out was a huge event. (There was not a lot of fantasy in those days.)

I read Greek, Egyptian, Sumerian, Viking, Japanese ... you name it I read its mythos. Voraciously. But it was the Celtic legends that most spoke to me, and of them all, the Welsh.

I wouldn't have known the name Mabinogi then. I just knew there was something different, something much more ... mature, intricate, sexy, philosophical and magical about these particular stories.

One part of me did a BA Philosophy at London University, which trained in strict line thinking, the codes of logic. Sadly it seemed my two passions for mythos and logic, could not meet as one. In yet another part of my life radical feminism burned my synapses, challenging the roots of my society. But back then, Celtic dreaming, logic, and being a woman, all had to stay in separate pots.

I was given a Welsh name which was wonderfully prophetic. Eventually at 40 I found my wild and tender sexy Welshman who climbed the magical Glastonbury Tor to find me sleeping in the sun.

Like Rhiannon I chose him later for my own, by pouncing on him; which he says he is always devoutly thankful I did, dear heart.

He showed me his wet green land, and I was doubly, deeply in love. Would I have loved him so very much if he'd come from Birmingham? To speak truth, I doubt it.

Pillow talk is, just as they say it is, the best teacher. By now in the 90s I had become quite a well known Craft priestess and my John helped me run a Celtic study circle. My first big discoveries about the Mabinogi came out of that circle. I also became a storyteller for both adults and children.

AmeriCymru: What is your current involvement with the Mabinogi?

Shan: Ah well, by now I have learned so much more. The Tales are inscribed on my cells I think. Being old is so delicious because of knowing more about how things fit together.

Philosophy has changed now too. Western thinking is no longer obsessed with straight line logic. Post-modernism, theoretical physics, and loads of other -isms have opened up thinking in interesting patterns – much more like the ancient Celts.

So now my Philosophy brain is no longer split in two. Annwfn, the deep world of Welsh spirituality, and this world, weave into one another. Logic is servant not master. Worlds are not separate; they are a web of threads going over and under each other. Holding them in the world is my woman life, and there too the Mabinogi speak to me in intricate ways.

Which all brings me to a PhD in the Mabinogi at Swansea university. In particular I am exploring my beloved Rhiannon. She's a lady, a horse, a politician, a goddess, and the pivot of a multivalent matrix.

I have the honour to be supervised by Christine James, the Archdruid of Wales. You'll have seen her on the news leading the national Gorsedd ceremony.

AmeriCymru: What is the history of the work? How did these tales come to be collected together?

Shan: The Tales were developed in oral tradition, that is, in storytelling by living voices. There were the great bards who made power poems in praise of kings and heroes, who were like the big bands of today with names up in lights. Then there were the cyfarwythdydd – terrible mouthful that! the storytellers. So there seems to have been a fairly clear split between the high world of the noble poets, and the people's world of storytellers, a mediaeval pop culture.

It is also a very distinctive thing that the British (now called the Welsh) told their first great stories in prose. Most of the other old European cultures told their sagas in poems.

The storytellers were an odd lot. They didn't leave their names attached to the stories but quietly passed the stories around to each other anonymously.

The original King Arthur is in there but he's very different to the Arthur of romance. The older Welsh Arthur is a rough edged warlord, who has to be dragged off by his mates from doing some pretty cruel things. Not a shining ideal!

The Mabinogi stories are about politics, especially dirty politics, and history. They tell of past events and the lessons we can learn from them. They are about love, sex, war, magic, children, questing, and heroes with swishing swords and huge horses. About people making the agonising choices of destiny. Oh and monsters, giants, magic cauldrons.

The big change came when those rough, tough Normans conquered Britain in 1066 which meant Wales too was invaded. The fighting, storytelling, princes of Wales gradually became Englishified. A few of them decided to preserve their old stories by having them written down, because everyone was dumping the bards and storytellers in favour of the fashionable new French troubadours.

This written record in mediaeval manuscripts was a jolly good thing because otherwise these oldest British stories would have been lost forever. You can still see the precious papers in Aberystwyth and Oxford, in museums.

But the stories then slept quietly in old Welsh books for centuries until an impossibly aristocratic Victorian English lady married a Welsh ironmaster. That was a major scandal, as he was far beneath her socially you see! She fell in love not only with him, but with his heritage. These Welshmen have a magical effect you know!

Anyway Charlotte Guest was a genius scholar who already knew seven languages including Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Persian. So Welsh, even mediaeval Welsh, which is a hell of a language to learn, was no problem for her! In between having ten babies and running the biggest iron foundry beside her husband, dear Charlotte translated the Mabinogi Tales into English and published them (in both Welsh and English) in a series of three books, 1838-1849.

Interest from the public exploded and edition after edition has been published right up to today.

AmeriCymru: Which of the various translations would you recommend?

Shan: Charlotte Guest is still very good and easily available online, but a bit Victorian for modern taste.

My all time personal favourite is John Bollard "Legend and Landscape of Wales: The Mabinogi." (2006) It's not only a lovely easy read, it's a beautiful book full of photos of the places around Wales where the stories happened.

<https://sites.google.com/site/themabinogi/home>

Bollard also gives a thoughtful introduction which reflects his position as the modern pioneer of new thought about the Mabinogi as living literature, not just leftover fragments of the past.

Sioned Davies recent "The Mabinogion" (2007) is also very popular, and she has skilfully explored the practical storytelling aspect of the tales, which is very important.

For anyone on a very tight budget you can read a major part of the Tales completely free on Will Parker's generous site here: <http://www.mabinogi.net/translations.htm> It gives you the Four Branches. This friendly and reputable translation is so useful online to quickly look up what was actually said in a story, and to copy/ paste a quick quote. Saves boring copy typing, so thanks Will -he's a darling too.

(Parker has also published a substantial book about the Mabinogi for serious interest later; "The Four Branches of the Mabinogion" 2005.)

Now some prefer to listen and watch than to read. After all this is what the Mabinogi were intended for, a living voice by a person, not print.

Cyb the chuckling monk offers you some free video tales:-

[www.valleystream.co.uk/products.htm](http://www.valleystream.co.uk/products.htm)

or you can buy them all. Note the complete set has not been recorded but most are there.)

Colin Jones has the First Branch as a recording with haunting music, on his site, free.

<http://themabinogion.com/album/mabinogion-the-four-branches>

Or buy all four Branches as a download.

For those who want to get more serious here's a mini guide.

1) Read the introduction sections to the above translations.

- 2) Get Patrick Ford "The Mabinogi and Other Welsh Tales" (1977) and read his intro.
- 3) Splash about on my website, contact me;
- 4) Order this book from the library: Charles Sullivan, The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays. (1997). Sadly otherwise unobtainable.
- 5) See my weekly online seminars, which are live chat based, and free.  
<http://mabinogistudy.com/>

AmeriCymru: How important is the Mabinogi in Welsh literature and history?

Shan: It's rather like the Welsh Shakespeare as people and situations from the stories appear all over the place. But it's not just literature, it's part of Welsh identity as an independent nation.

Wales has had to rebuild itself from a conquered people who were not even allowed to speak their native language. Children were bullied and shamed in school, if they forgot and used their native Welsh words. In my dear John's lifetime he was sent far from home as a child to be trained to speak with a perfect Oxford English accent. It was the only way he would get a good job.

The Welsh know all about racism; colonial domination was practiced early on in Wales and exported to Africa and India. Oh my dee-ah not a Welsh maid, they're so dirty they don't even know how to use a tap to wash. (No taps on mountain sheep farms you see.)

The Welsh diaspora is no new subject to ameriCymru folk of course but know with pride that the Welsh did it especially well. With stories, and poetry, music and beliefs in helping each other, Wales' children have quietly spread across the world. Pushed to survive, their myths and dreams have sustained them into successful lives.

Nowadays there is S4C, the BBC TV station in Welsh. But in 1980 it took a hunger strike threatened to last to death by Gwynfor Evans, a Welsh MP, to get it.

The Mabinogi has played its vital part in the building of the vigorous society of Wales today, and wider Wales. A people must have its myths, its own sacred stories of origins, in order to believe in itself, or there is no sense of being a people. Knowing we have the oldest British literature in our keeping is a backbone, a fiery pride. That it is a sophisticated literature, with powerful philosophy and human understanding – plus a lot of fun! adds to its proud gifts.

That is why the Mabinogi are told, sung, performed, everywhere the Welsh gather, across the world.

AmeriCymru: In your opinion which of the Mabinogi Tales is the most significant or important? Do you have a favourite?

Shan: I would be presumptuous to judge which Tale is the most significant. We are not a people who go for the One Truth. We can hold with contradictions before breakfast. We are

also politically aware and I am not going to open myself to furious condemnation from opposing camps!

I can however say that the Four Branches are the most popular which is a form of significance. These Four Branches are a quartet of stories in four chapters, which can also stand each by themselves. Or you can fit them together in puzzle patterns, an interlaced logic like the ancient Celtic knotwork. (See John Bollard's modern innovative theories.)

The Branches have strong women, interesting thoughtful men, extraordinary villains, and a tenderness for children. It is easy to relate to these people as women and men, even if they turn into animals in places, or cook up zombie soldiers. One minute they are like you and I, next moment they are not.

The other stories are either the older Culhwch, a rollicking adventure story with much more limited depth; or later romances and tales much more influenced by French troubadours. So I think the Branches do hold a special place.

My favourite? Ah that is Rhiannon, in the First Branch. Like her I came to Dyfed, West Wales, as a powerful stranger woman, and found my love there. Like her I have one precious son with him. Like her I am proud, strategic, realistic, sensual, clever and devoted.

Like her I am quick to rebuke and generous in giving. My own darling Pwyll, like the one in the old story, is not at all what he appears to be. Like many Welsh he will allow himself to be unnoticed, or underestimated, while deftly getting exactly what he wants. It's a conquered people's skill he says, and its skill amuses him.

I cannot share my lady's horse nature though – big teeth and hooves terrify me!

John comments: Shapeshifting is why Welsh identity is very hard to define satisfactorily. It is elusive. That is not an accident. In Wales we have learned that if we define ourselves openly and explicitly, what we define as Welshness is in danger of being devalued or even officially abolished. So we are deliberately vague in key places, leaving our enemies in England fighting the fog. There is often lots of fog in Wales! We are very comfortable with it.

AmeriCymru: You run an excellent website called "Mabinogi Study". Care to introduce it for our readers?

Shan: Thank you kindly sir. I started Mabinogi Study because I detest how students have to constantly reinvent the wheel. You have to find out what to read, and then get hold of it, both very difficult to do once you go beyond the first step or two. You copy type and make notes endlessly, which duplicates what a thousand others have done.

So all my notes and lists are going online. Who has translated the Mabinogi and which one is a good starter? What is Middle Welsh like? What's this interlacing malarkey? Is Rhiannon really a goddess and if so what does that mean? What are her politics? What about

shapeshifting? Why did Arianrhod get found out? Where did things happen? What do the names mean?

Plus a comprehensive bibliography of 1,000 listings, searchable. Biographies. A baby course on Middle Welsh, or a for those who just want to dip, a one page dictionary of the essential words. A weekly live seminar online.

Here's some useful links to get started:

First Steps with Mabinogi: recommended starter reading, video, recordings.

<http://www.mabinogistudy.com/xz-articles/first-steps-with-y-mabinogi.1/>

Four Branches, brief summary: Overview of these well loved stories.

[www.mabinogistudy.com/xz-articles/the-four-branches-a-brief-summary.171/](http://www.mabinogistudy.com/xz-articles/the-four-branches-a-brief-summary.171/)

The Mabinogi Bibliography: This is on a separate site where I have collected about 1,000 books, articles, recordings etc. Not much fiction, interpretations, that will come later. Here you can search on a type or topic, even make your own booklist from mine.

[www.zotero.org/groups/mabinogistudy/items/](http://www.zotero.org/groups/mabinogistudy/items/)

Index of All Articles: [www.mabinogistudy.com/xz-articles/articles-index.24/](http://www.mabinogistudy.com/xz-articles/articles-index.24/)

The Mabinogi Meetings: [www.mabinogistudy.com/xz-articles/mabinogi-meetings-weekly-welsh-myth.110/](http://www.mabinogistudy.com/xz-articles/mabinogi-meetings-weekly-welsh-myth.110/)

AmeriCymru: That's a lot! Anything else planned?

Shan: I'm waiting for a software script to be ready so I can post up a small encyclopaedia, a Mabinogi A-Z.

AmeriCymru: Any final message for the members and readers of Americymru?

Shan: Yes please. I'd like to say how very touched and pleased I was at how Ceri welcomed me on americymru. He didn't just say the standard Croeso.

When I wrote and criticised his little 2010 Mabinogi quiz as inaccurate in a few places, even though I did it with courtly gentleness, I expected the usual dickwaving defensiveness. I knew I risked a faceful of rudeness. Not a bit of it. Ceri actually welcomed the chance to consult me, and immediately proceeded to put me to work.

This is very rare. Most people don't handle expert elders at all well. They are far too touchy and insecure, and as a result don't learn, and don't become expert in their turn. Nor do they get gifts of help on the way, and struggle more than is needed.

I'm well aware that in fostering and exploiting my talents Ceri is gaining much for americymru while helping me too. It works both ways. But again so few people know this skill of mutual support and flourishing called collaboration.

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I'm still exploring americymru full of admiration for what this skilled couple have built. I've already met some fascinating people here, and that is treasure to me.

To end I will just say that a warm welcome awaits you here in the homeland. Let me know you're coming, then the cawl pot will simmer and the kettle boil as John collects you from the station, or as you park your car outside our rambling Welsh manor. We'll gladly help you visit the beautiful places here. Just bow down to the mighty Cat clan and you are our honoured guests, my gentle readers.

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