

Dr. Shân Morgain, 'The Mabinogi, Anglocentrism, colonialism & "Celtic Mythology"; offering a practical *Gwead Cymreig* if writing in another language.' (CAWCS, Sept 19 2025)

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Interlace

First I shall very briefly refresh our memories about the Mabinogi. Then I shall look at how this pioneering, Welsh work of genius has been coopted by English culture.

The Mabinogi is the leading originator, 1,000 years ago, of prose storytelling.

This was an astonishing revolution. All our prose novels, drama, gaming today, come from this mighty revolution 1,000 years ago.

But these Mabinogi tales are not merely a historic placeholder.



Branwen

They are fascinating to scholars and children alike, stories of love and war, loyalty and treachery, politics and enchantments.

They are intricate, sophisticated, with complex characters, powerful women and men, children and animals – yet the tales are easy to listen to or read.



Bard

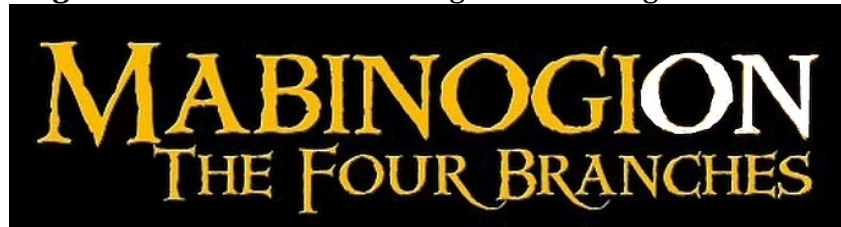
As Sioned Davies explains IndoEuropean tales were 'narrated in verse' to a listening audience. Poetic forms with their rhythm and rhyme aided the memory of performance artists, the *cyfarwyddiaith* storytellers.

From a rich ancestry of oral tradition, tales were gathered about three powerful ruling families. The work is composed in four 'Branches'.



One delightful aspect is the events are instantly recognisable today in their place-names: London, Oxford, Kent, Dyfed, the Preselis, Gwynedd, Ireland.

Before we continue to the central ideas of this talk, I must make sure we are clear about the **Mabinogion**. The two names Mabinogi and Mabinogion are SO similar.

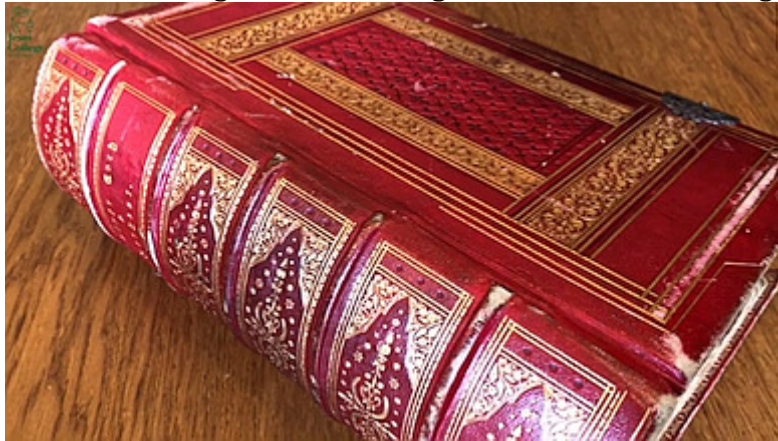


The Mabinogi, the subject of my talk, is also known as the Four Branches of the Mabinogi or Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi.

Then there is the title Mabinogion – a longer word. It names a collection of 11 tales INCLUDING the four Branches of the Mabinogi.

They are often confused. It's thought a scribe, tired and sleepy, made the error mabynnogyon in an early manuscript. The mistake has become an independent name ever since.

To keep them clear remember MABINOGI is a shorter word naming FOUR tales
The MABINOZION is a longer word naming ELEVEN tales including the Mabinogi.



Red Book MS

It was manuscripts becoming more available which relieved the strain on the memories of the bards. Prose, a more natural style of storytelling became possible.

The Mabinogi is not the only pioneer of prose. Another tale was composed around the same time. It's great fun but less sophisticated.



Bayeux tapestry

The Norman invasions of Britain stimulated a strong sense of native pride competing with the Norman bards.

These clever Norman PR agents nicked the tales of Arthur for example and twisted our native robber baron into a saintly king.

William of Normandy – Le Bâtard – made a great progress across South Wales in 1081 supposedly a pilgrimage.

We can imagine slow weeks of travel with the bards of each side competing with each other at the evening feasts. Firelight, boozing, stories.

This rivalry was the context of the Mabinogi tales being put together as a work of genius. It has always been a political work, defining the Cymru, native Brits as a sophisticated culture against English contempt.

The surviving manuscripts were scribed during the proud time of independent native Princes 13thC, and later the powerful Glyndŵr Rising.

After the Glyndŵr Rising ended, early 15thC, Wales was at last conquered.

We had no universities or national library. Education relied on Oxford, London or Paris.



William Owen Pughe

The first to successfully publish and translate most of the Mabinogi was William Owen Pughe (1795, 1799, 1818, 1821, 1828, 1829)

Pughe's many Mabinogi publications are not at all well known.

He and other 18thC Welsh Mabinogi scholars saw the Mabinogi as a historical source for native ancestral society, and the original Romance tradition of Europe. (Diana Luft)

William was sent to an English boarding school knowing no English. In his loneliness he began making a Welsh Dictionary (published 1803).

He came to London as a teenager and lived in poverty. The wealthy merchant Owain Myfyr took him up and he then became the leading Welsh scholar of the period.



Pughe, sketch

His virtually unknown Nine Sketches which illustrate the First Branch of the Mabinogi, are the earliest known illustrations. (1826, NLW)

Pughe has been accused of neglecting his work for a whole decade because he was swept up in the cult of the famous prophetess Joanna Southcott. (e.g. Arthur Johnston, 1957)

This ruthless critique overlooks two other factors. Pughe inherited an estate, which was wonderful in solving his poverty but terribly challenging to learn to manage.

As he emerged from that steep learning curve he was bereaved three times over in about a year. Joanna Southcott. His other mentor and dearest friend Owain Myfyr. His beloved wife. Pughe never really recovered in health. He did however complete a whole Mabinogion (the eleven tales).

Sadly he died with the manuscript all ready to print on his desk (June 1835). His son and heir had his own major publishing project and was wary of debt.



Charlotte Guest

Only four months later a new translator and publisher was in conference with the Welsh scholars Carnhuanawc and colleagues.

This was Lady Charlotte Guest, a young English bride just married in from London. She was already a skilled linguist and, crucially, very wealthy.

The speed of Guest's appearance suggests she was urgently and actively recruited. She immediately began learning Welsh



Carnhuanawc

Guest remarks admiringly on Carnuanawc's charisma and nationalist passion. The old lion clearly made a strong impression on her and mentored her affectionately for 13 years until he died.



Guest illustration

Scholarly, graceful in style, lavishly illustrated by Samuel Williams the foremost engaver of the day, Guest's books deserve enthusiastic praise.

Guest's translation is probably the most famous of all the Mabinogi/on translations. First published in 7 volumes 1835-45 it held primary place as the lead translation for a century. It was also the first Mabinogi/on text to go online (Gien, 1999).



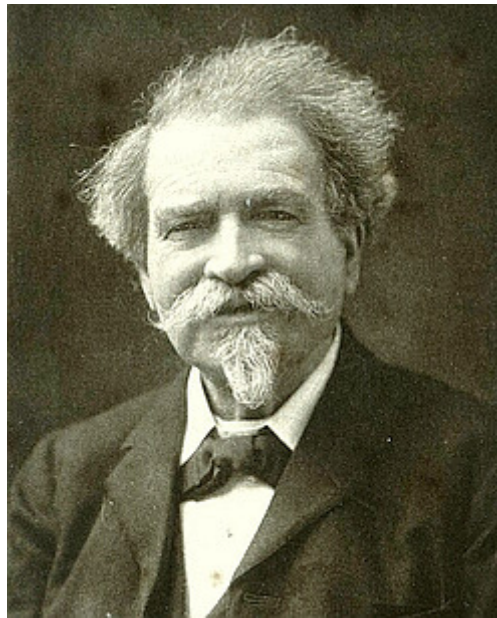
'Miss Gien' 1999

However, although English translation vastly enlarged the audience for the Mabinogi, it also began slanting it as 'English literature'. (*Monthly Review*, 1843)

Guest's first editions were bilingual Welsh-English, as were almost all Pughe's versions. Pughe operated both in London and in Wales.

In 1877 Guest as a widow had returned to England. She published a cut-down, single volume book of her English translation only. This was pivotal.

It was merely Guest's intention to offer a low-budget book. But the solely English text fed the 'English literature' identity.



John Rhŷs

The same year as this English book appeared John Rhŷs was appointed the first Professor of Celtic at Oxford University. This was a tremendously prestige achievement – in England. Oxford University, in England, as noted above, was a major hub for Welsh scholars. The only available manuscript of the Mabinogi/on was held by the Bodleian, Oxford. Matthew Arnold, a famous English poet and Oxford scholar, was a strong influence on Rhŷs. Arnold insisted the tales were the broken remains of 'Celtic Mythology'. 'Mythology' was all the rage, fascinating European scholars who studied the inferior races of their Empires. The Welsh traditions were part of this condescending colonial approach. As Arnold's broken remains the myths would need salvaging. Rhŷs wanted to fit the tales into a fashionable theory of light/ dark deities (Muller). Rhŷs admitted the Welsh traditions did not fit at all well. He therefore simply changed characters and plots to make them fit the theory. The giant influence Mythological Reconstruction was born. Mythological Reconstruction roared through the 20thC driven by the ambitions of William John Gruffydd (WJG). His *Rhiannon* (1953) is one of the best known books on the Mabinogi. However his versions (more than one) often bear little resemblance to the original Mabinogi.



Edward Anwyl

A more cautious and accurate scholar, Edward Anwyl, was ruthlessly suppressed by WJG with considerable political skill. (WJG was for a time an MP.)



Evangeline Walton

Another cautious voice came from Evangeline Walton, author of fantasy novels retelling the Mabinogi. Although a novelist her research is large and scrupulously accurate for her period.

Walton vows 'never to alter' the Mabinogi source, only to add and expand.

But she was only a novelist, not a prestigious academic like WJG.

Increasingly, Guest the Englishwoman, has been framed as the first translator and publisher of the Mabinogi.

Rather than the culmination of Welsh scholars's work and their protégée, she becomes the start point of Mabinogi Studies.

Mythological Reconstruction fitted seamlessly with the 'eclectism' of the New Age of the later 20thC. Goddesses and Gods from different cultures are merged, losing their origins.

An interesting example comes from the Glastonbury Goddess Temple (Somerset, England).

Its leading priestess and teacher Kathy Jones back in the 1980s saw the Mabinogi as too masculine.

Women like her were largely shut out of the academy so Radical feminism called for cutting new, creative pathways based on intuition. (Mary Daly and Monique Wittig)



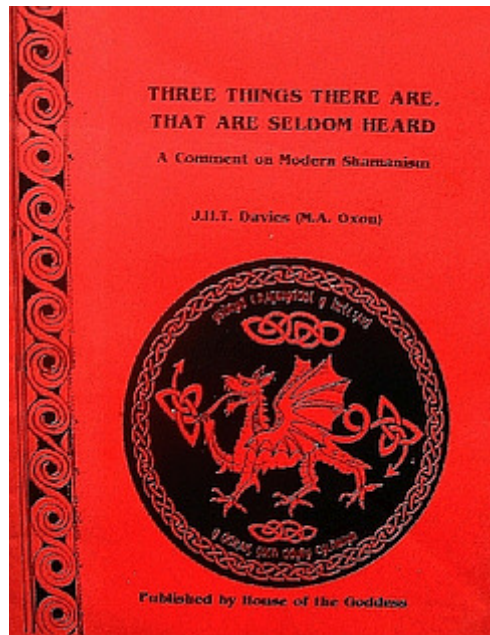
Rebecca Jane Stockburn 'Rhiannon' Jan. 2016.

Rhiannon in the Mabinogi of Wales, is Lady of the courts, a strategist, and married mother, robed in gold silks.



Goddess Temple Rhiannon shrine

In the English interpretation of the Goddess Temple, Rhiannon draws on a May Eve/Beltaine mention (about mothering) to become a wild, free inspiration of sexual desire, throbbing red. (I call this Avalonian Rhiannon, 2025)



Three Things ...

John Davies as a native son wrote an angry diatribe against such New Age bowdlerisation (1993).

"I particularly do not wish to see a horrible bastardised travesty of my heritage making money for a few English and American teachers. Stop it. Hands off. Enough is enough."

I champion personal interpretation of the Mabinogi or indeed of anything else.

I do call firmly for interpreters to acknowledge personal vision. Especially if they are teachers. (Morgain 2001)

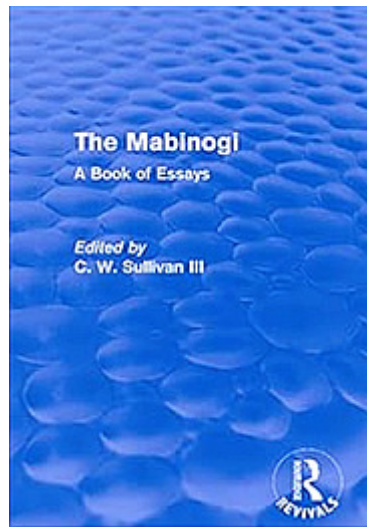
Like the American Evangeline Walton in the 20thC (above), William Sullivan III in the 21stC calls for 'conscientious use' (2004).

Simon Rodway has satirised the exploitation of Celtic mythology, speaking of the 'Hollywood Celt' (2017).



John Bollard

More American aid came from John Bollard and Patrick Ford (1970s). Ably chronicled by William Sullivan III (1996) a new paradigm, point of view, was born.



Sullivan's 'Essays' 1996

The Mabinogi, they said, is a complex work of unity, not broken fragments. It can be seen as myth but also as fine literature, a work of genius.

This perspective actually revived much from Edward Anwyl who had been so ruthlessly suppressed – but the new theorists did not know that.

I have written of this approach as 'Trusting the Text' (PhD 2025). I find this trust tends to find reasons for apparent problems, contradictions. Vice versa, assuming wrongness tends to get blocked by anything odd.

For example Pendaran Dyfed appears in the First Branch as a mature statesman. In the Second Branch he's a boy. [Thinks, trust?] This is a whole generation later so most likely a boy heir.



Women's Liberation

The new Mabinogi ideas arose as the Women's Liberation Movement roared across the world.

Ironically Kathy Jones of the Goddess Temple turned away from the masculinity of the Mabinogi just as the feminist scholars Andreas Pennar (1975) and Rob Valente (1986) began investigating Mabinogi women and their power.

We have seen how the Mabinogi began in a context of rivalry between Welsh and English bards. Centuries later, conquered Cymru had to use English resources like Oxford university.

English translations widened the audience considerably but built the Mabinogi as an 'English literature'. WJG and then the New Age built Celtic Mythology further, leaving Welsh origins behind.

In my own work I have necessarily written in English. However hard I studied the Cymraeg I could never achieve the same skill in Cymraeg wordcraft as I have in English.



Welsh Weave

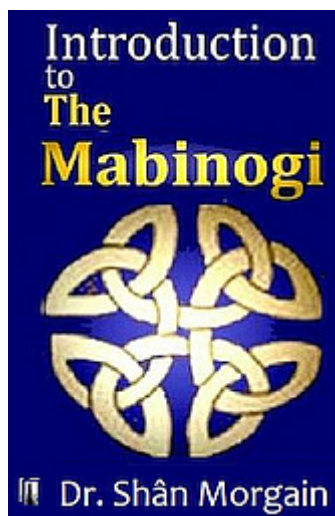
I have therefore worked *Gwead Cymreig*/ 'a Welsh weave' (Daniel Williams' 2024 name for my efforts). Here's how I do it.

My title and subtitles are bilingual, Cymraeg-English.

Quotes from the Mabinogi or other Cymraeg sources are given in the Cymraeg, with English translation either closely following or footnoted. So the Cymraeg comes first.

I scatter a moderate selection of key Cymraeg terms in my text, giving the English meaning the first three times next to the term.

It's a bit tough on the word count but it's worth it to honour the proper origins of the text. It ensures my reader stays aware of the Mabinogi, Wales, Cymru and the Cymraeg.



I hope you will forgive a shameless plug for my new book about the Mabinogi just out this month. ***Introduction to the Mabinogi*** [£8.25 on amazon](#)

Not a fully academic book, it's written to be friendly and accessible to the ordinary reader. But it does review the main theories – and gives an excellent retelling of the tales, very close to the original. Plus 50 illustrations.

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