

Introduction

The word *mabinogi* applies properly to only the first four tales collected and translated here.¹ They are otherwise known as the “four branches,” a designation whose precise meaning is as yet not clear. For that matter, neither is the term *mabinogi* understood clearly, although we shall try to shed some light on it. “Lludd and Lleuelys” and “Culhwch and Olwen” are purely native tales; the former reaches back into Celtic antiquity and has analogues in Irish mythological tradition, and the latter, despite its resemblance to international types of this tale and its well-known folktale motifs, is firmly rooted in native tradition. “The Tale of Gwion Bach” and its sequel “The Tale of Taliesin” come from late manuscripts, but together they are a mine of information about the archetypal poet of Welsh tradition. A fair amount of attention has been given to purely external aspects of some of these tales, that is, to problems of dating, social customs, language, and so on, but they have been slighted more than most works of medieval literature in the matter of criticism.² There are good reasons why they have been ignored, and it is one of the purposes of the present introduction to offer some critical perspectives on the tales as literature.

All of these tales with the exception of the Gwion Bach and Taliesin narratives occur in more or less complete versions in the White Book of Rhydderch (*Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch*, A.D. 1300–1325) and the Red Book of Hergest (*Llyfr*

1. The form *mabinogion* (ms *mabynnogyon*) occurs only at the end of “Pwyll” *Mabinogi* and its variant spellings occurs at the end of the other three branches, and it is clear that *mabinogion* is a scribal error. The suffix *-(i)on* is a very common plural ending in Welsh, and Lady Charlotte Guest assumed that *mabinogion* was the correct form and referred to all of the tales found in the White Book and Red Book. Because the tales became widely known under this designation, scholars have not seen fit to correct the error, and even the Joneses refer to “the eleven stories of the Mabinogion.”

2. Sir Edward Anwyl analyzed the structure and composition with characteristic insight and erudition in “The Four Branches of the Mabinogi” (see Select Bibliography). A brief biography and bibliography of the work of this important Welsh scholar by Dr. Brynley F. Roberts can be found in *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1968), pp. 211–264. More recently, P. L. Henry has made an important contribution with his structural analysis of “Culhwch and Olwen.”

Coch Hergest, 1375–1425). Fragments occur in manuscripts earlier by a hundred years or so, but they need not concern us here. It is clear that the tales are older than the manuscripts, but how much older we do not know. Sir Ifor Williams believed that the four branches belonged to about the middle of the eleventh century; “Culhwch and Olwen” may be a century earlier. The linguistic data that served to support those dates has been seriously challenged recently by Dr. T.M. Charles-Edwards and Professor Eric Hamp, and it appears that cultural criteria are a surer guide to the antiquity of the tales.³ The Taliesin material, though not extant in any manuscript prior to the sixteenth century, is set in the time of King Arthur and Maelgwn, a sixth-century king of Gwynedd.

These stories occupy the central position in medieval Welsh literature, and they have been the focus of numerous studies. W.J. Gruffydd was the first to study the mythological aspects systematically and in detail, and his work has been continued with particular success by Professor Proinsias MacCana. Mrs. Rachel Bromwich has shed much light on the composition of the tales in her *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* and in other studies, and Professor Kenneth Jackson has analyzed the tales with respect to international popular tradition. Yet in spite of the labors of these and other scholars over the years, there is much in the *mabinogi* and other medieval Welsh narratives that remains obscure.

As to the former, it has long been recognized that the word contains the regular Welsh word for ‘son, boy,’ *mab*. It was thought, therefore, that the tales had something to do with youth, either tales for boys, perhaps for their edification, or apprentice tales for those learning the story-telling art. Alternatively, it was noticed that *mabinogi* translates Latin *infantia* in a fourteenth-century apocryphal gospel of the boyhood of Jesus. On the basis of the French form of the word, *enfance*, it was thought that the tales were histories of the birth, boyhood deeds, later feats of arms, of certain heroes. The difficulty in all of these guesses is that they fit none of the four branches of the *mabinogi*, nor do they fit the four branches as a whole.

This is not the place to examine the theories expounded by W.J. Gruffydd on the *mabinogi*, but it is appropriate to acknowledge that he was essentially correct, though he went too far. He believed that the four branches originally told of the birth, youth, marriage, and death of a single hero, Pryderi, and that Pryderi was virtually identical with the British god Maponos. Professor Hamp has recently offered a brilliant explanation of the word *mabinogi*, in which he demonstrates (conclusively, in my view) that the word originally meant “the (collective) material pertaining to the god Maponos.”⁴ He rearranges the genealogical

3. For full references to the work of these and other scholars mentioned in this section, see the Select Bibliography.

4. “Mabinogi.”

chart produced by W.J. Gruffydd to suggest that part of what we have in the four branches concerns the father of Maponos, Gwri (= Pryderi).

It is important to emphasize that we are dealing with a collection of material, and that only part of it deals, or dealt originally, with Maponos. A glance at the end of “Branwen” shows us that smaller episodes were known independently, episodes such as “The Assembly of Bran,” “The Avenging of the Blow to Branwen,” “The Feasting in Harlech,” “The Singing of the Birds of Rhiannon,” and so on.⁵ These quasi-independent episodes or bits of lore were part of the storehouse of tradition on which story-tellers and poets alike could draw to inform their art. Sometimes the story-teller refers to lore outside the context of his narrative, lore that he knows but has chosen not to incorporate or elaborate; at the end of the fourth branch, for example, he says, “and according to the lore (i.e., inherited tradition) he was lord of Gwynedd after that.”

These references within the texts to adventures, tales, bits of lore, and the like, suggest to me that *mabinogi* was an extensive collection of more or less related adventures, related sufficiently for them to be metaphorically conceived as branches, rather than as independent tales and that each branch consisted of episodes of related lore (in Welsh, *cyfarwyddyd*) and adventures (*cyfrangau*). In Irish tradition, we find *dindshenchas* ‘lore of famous places,’ *cóir anmann* ‘fitness of names,’ and other homogeneous collections that served as the raw materials, as it were, for the tales, which were classified by the native storytellers according to types (e.g., adventures, wooings, elopements, raids).

If we accept this eclectic theory of the composition of the *mabinogi*, that is, that each branch represents a collection of more or less related lore, our understanding of the material and its treatment by the redactor is improved. It means that we can look at isolated episodes, examine their structures, compare them with related episodes elsewhere in Celtic and Indo-European, and thus grasp their meaning more fully. It offers an explanation of why the quality of the redactor’s work is so high within individual sections and episodes, and why continuity between these sections is often lacking or poor.

Let us test the method and examine one of the episodes in detail. In “Pwyll,” after Teyrnnon has returned the boy Gwri to the court of Pwyll

5. Cf. Loth’s remark, “on peut, à la vérité, distinguer dans le *Mabinogi* et ses *branches*, des cycles qui se sont mêlés et confondus” (*Les Mabinogion*, p. 43); similarly, Anwyl: “it is clear from the Four Branches themselves that they presuppose previous stories, not unprobably in a written form . . . the stories here enumerated [in “Branwen”] were probably originally distinct and condensed by the writer of Branwen and the earlier part of Manawyddan [sic] into one narrative” (*Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, II, 127).

and the meal has finished, Teyrnnon explains how he happened to find Gwri: ‘and he told them the entire adventure concerning the mare and the boy’ (*menegi y holl gyfranc am y gasec ac am y mab*). If we were to list the episodes that constitute this branch, in the way that the contents of the second branch are given at the end of “Branwen,” we would see clearly that one of them is *Cyfranc Caseg a’r Mab* ‘The Adventure of the Mare and the Boy.’ I would suggest that it had a separate existence and perhaps was known independently by that name. There was more to it than we find in the first branch, and some of it found its way into the third branch. External evidence shows that, from a mythological point of view, it must have been one of the most significant narratives in the tradition, reaching back to some event that was central enough to Celtic society to generate a variety of literary reflexes.

Cyfranc Caseg a’r Mab had its origins in a myth concerning a horse-goddess and fertility deity, attested among the continental Celts in the name of Epona.⁶ This divinity was widely known, and her worship is documented over a large area of the continent. There are remains of monuments and inscriptions to her in what is now Germany, France, Switzerland, and Austria, and she was worshipped in Rome itself. She was a favorite even with Roman cavalry units, and Apuleius says that one could see statues set up in her honor in stables. Juvenal and Minucius Felix extend her association to mules and asses. The connection with cavalry and beasts of burden is underscored by her very name, for the element *ep-*, cognate with Latin *equ-us* and Greek *hipp-os*, means ‘horse.’ She is sometimes depicted mounted on a horse, which always is at an amble, is sometimes accompanied by birds, and is sometimes holding a bag. Other monuments show her seated, surrounded by horses or foals. She has various nicknames, one of which is *regina* ‘queen.’ The Romans celebrated her feast on December 18, between the Consualia (December 15) and the Opalia (December 19), and we should remember that Consus himself was identified with Poseidon Hippios. The important point here is that Epona was associated in the calendar of feasts with the hippomorphic sea god and fertility deity.

The name of the heroine of the first branch, Rhiannon, comes from an earlier form **Rīgantonā* that means “great queen goddess,” and

6. See Jan de Vries, *Keltische Religion* (Stuttgart, 1961), esp. pp. 123–127 and references there.

brings to mind the Roman given epithet of Epona, *regina*. The narrative or *cyfranc* that concerns Rhiannon, *Cyfranc Caseg a'r Mab*, begins with a feast in Arberth at which great hosts are present. After the nobles have eaten, Pwyll, the chief, and his men depart for the mound of Arberth. As they are sitting upon the mound, they see a maiden mounted on a pale-white horse travelling along the road. Her horse moves at an easy amble, never increasing its pace, and yet no one of the assembled company is able to over-take her. Eventually, she stops and Pwyll succeeds in winning her hand in marriage. It is important to note in this section that there is a competitor for her favors and her hand, and that the successive marriage dates are one year apart, and therefore on the same day as that on which Pwyll had assembled his feast.

Eventually, a son is born to Rhiannon and Pwyll, but, under mysterious circumstances, he disappears. Rhiannon is accused of having destroyed her child, and as a punishment is required to sit by the horse block and carry visitors to the court on her back. The story switches at this point to introduce Teyrnon Twrf Liant, a neighboring lord. Teyrnon has a mare that foals every May eve, but the offspring disappear. This year he decides to be vigilant; he overcomes a monster that tries to steal the new-born colt, and when he returns to the mare he finds not only the rescued colt but a baby boy (Rhiannon's son) as well.

Teyrnon and his wife pretend they are the boy's parents and rear him. He enjoys a precocious development, like that of Lleu Llaw Gyffes in the fourth branch (and most heroes), but besides that we hear of his fondness of horses, and that he would ask the grooms to let him take them to water. Teyrnon's wife suggests that the colt be broken in and given to the boy, since "it was the night you found the boy that the colt which you rescued was born." Teyrnon replies that he will not oppose her suggestion, but that he will let her give the horse to the boy. From then on, she takes charge and gives the orders to the grooms. In the end, the boy and his colt are restored to Rhiannon and Pwyll.

That, briefly, is the substance of *Cyfranc Caseg a'r Mab* as we find it in the first branch of the *Mabinogi*. As Gruffydd saw, there is some reconstruction to be done here, and he supplied numerous hypothetical lost links in order to reconstruct the *mabinogi* as a whole and the first and third branches in particular. But Gruffydd was looking in vain when he sought in the *mabinogi* an original story that told of the birth, boyhood

deeds, wooing, marriage, and tragic death of Pryderi. Such a cycle may have existed, but the four branches are not its direct descendant.

The matter of Rhiannon's punishment is central to the underlying myth. Gruffydd suggested that in the original she had been accused of giving birth to a foal, and that is why she was given the punishment of acting like a horse. But in her hippomorphic aspect she would be expected to give birth to a foal (and that is exactly what happens in the complementary tale of Teyrnnon), and there could be no punishment for that, certainly. Analyzing the tale structurally, we might say that she has been deprived of her equine divinity, demoted to beast of burden for failing her function as progenitor. But on a purely literary level, I think that two things influenced Rhiannon's punishment: (1) it was a punishment well-known in the medieval period, as Dr. Brynley Roberts has pointed out,⁷ and (2) Rhiannon's hippomorphic character had not been forgotten; it had survived with sufficient force to influence this part of the tale.

Irish versions of "The Adventure of the Mare and the Boy" are found in two stories. One is *Noínden Ulad*, "The Debility of the Ulstermen,"⁸ and it may be summarized as follows: a woman appears one day to the widower Crunnchu and begins keeping house for him. She eventually discloses her identity, saying that she is Macha daughter of Sainreth mac Imbaith, or 'Nature of the Sea.' She insists that he must not mention her existence to anyone, and while she stays with him his prosperity increases. At the king's assembly, however, Crunnchu boasts that his wife can outrun the king's horses. He is compelled by the king to bring her to the assembly, where before everyone she is forced to race against the royal horses. Alas, she is pregnant. Still, she wins the race and as she crosses the finish line she gives birth to twins—a boy and a girl. Thereupon, she utters a curse, saying that in their time of greatest need, the Ulstermen will all be stricken with pangs of childbirth. There is no further mention of the twins, except that it is from them (*emain* 'twins') that the capitol of Ulster takes its name, Emain Macha. The pertinent facts are that, at a king's assembly, a woman races against his horses and, while thus behaving

7. "Penyd Rhiannon," *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, XXIII (1970), 325–327.

8. Trans. in *Ancient Irish Tales*, ed. by Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover with revised bibliography by Charles W. Dunn (New York, 1969), pp. 208–210.

like a horse, gives birth. The equine associations of Macha do not end there, and we turn now to *Compert Con Culainn* 'The Birth of CúChulainn.'⁹

There are two versions of this tale, and they differ rather significantly, but I shall take account of that in the summary that follows. King Conchobor and his men set out to hunt a flock of birds that have been ravaging Emain Macha. Night overtakes the party, and they find themselves guests of a man and his pregnant wife. In one of the versions, Conchobor insists that the woman sleep with him; it is his right to sleep with the wife of every man in his realm, and thus he is nominally the husband of every woman in his kingdom and potentially the father of every child. This is appropriate to the sovereign in his role of guarantor of fertility. In this instance, because the woman is pregnant, she is not forced to have intercourse with the king but lies next to him. In the morning, the boy who is later to be known as CúChulainn is found in the folds of Conchobor's cloak. In one of the versions, a mare standing outside the door gives birth to twin colts at the moment the woman delivers. In the morning, the house, man, wife, and birds have all disappeared; only the boy, the colts, and the king and his party remain. The boy is given to the king's sister to raise, and she declares that he will be treated exactly like her own son Conall Cernach, *conid cumma lem 7 bid e Conall Cernach* 'and he will be the same in my mind as though he were Conall Cernach.' The congenital horses turn out to be exceptional, but one is greater than the other, and is called Liath Macha, 'The Grey of Macha.' When CúChulainn is finally killed, the Grey of Macha returns to the water, whence, presumably, it came. There is an obvious twinning element here, for the text implies that Conall and CúChulainn are twins, although as we can see from other stories in the cycle, Conall is victorious only over mortal opponents, whereas CúChulainn establishes his superiority over the supernatural as well.¹⁰ Similarly, while the one horse exceeds ordinary horses in beauty, speed, and the like, the Grey of Macha is supernatural.

9. Trans. by Thomas Kinsella, *The Tain* (London, 1969), pp. 21–25; trans. from a different manuscript in *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp. 134–136. For the Irish text, see the edition by A. G. Van Hamel, *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories* (Dublin, 1933).

10. The supremacy of CúChulainn against supernatural opponents is the major theme of the tale "Bricriu's Feast," trans. in *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp. 254–280.

In these two Irish tales, we glimpse once again the remnants of a myth operating at both the hippomorphic and anthropomorphic levels. Macha, daughter of the Sea, appears as one who insures prosperity. Compelled to behave like a horse, she runs against the king's horses and delivers twins while in that equine role. Elsewhere, twin horses are born of Macha (the supernatural one is *liath* 'grey' like the *canwelw* 'pale-white, whitish' horse upon which Rhiannon rides) under circumstances that also yield the birth of the hero. At least one of these horses is of the sea, but both become associates of the hero.

We might well ask at this point what kings have to do with horses, and what mares have to do with kings. I do not think it is possible to supply an answer that goes beyond the reasonable assumption that horses were important to a society in which the warrior aristocracy figures so prominently. But, structurally, the myths that underly medieval Irish and Welsh tales reaffirm repeatedly the female and equine nature of sovereignty. When an Irish king espoused his kingdom, he became responsible for fertility in the land, among other things. One aspect of this responsibility was enacted ritually, and has been recorded for us by Giraldus Cambrensis. In Book III, Chapter 25 of *Topographia Hibernica*,¹¹ he recounts what he calls a "monstrous" ritual he heard reported in Tirconnell in the North of Ireland. When a king was to be inaugurated, says Giraldus, all of the people of that land were assembled in one place, and a white mare was led into their midst. He who was to be inaugurated king, in front of all assembled there, publicly comported himself like a horse and acknowledged himself to be one. The meaning of Giraldus' outraged Latin, is, as Julius Pokorny recognized, that the king had sexual intercourse with the mare.¹² Afterwards, according to Giraldus, the mare was cut up and cooked in a broth. The king sat in a bath prepared from this, and, without use of a cup or even his hands, drank of the broth about him, while he and all the people consumed the meat of the mare.

Schröder discussed this reference long ago, and compared it with a rite described in the Sanskrit *Aśvamedha*, where the roles are reversed—there, it is the queen and a stallion who symbolically mate.¹³ The purpose,

11. Trans. by John J. O'Meara (Dundalk, 1951), p. 93.

12. *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, XVI (1926), 123.

13. "Ein Altirischer Krönungsritus und das Indo-germanische Rossopfer," *Zeitschrift*, XVI (1926), 310–312.

said Schröder, was to make the generative power of the hippomorphic fertility god effective in the earth. The explanation offered by Schröder sheds some light, I believe, on the stories we have been considering. Sovereignty, female, was elusive. There was competition for the kingship, several suitors trying to espouse the kingdom, of which only one could be successful. To put it another way, there was one on whom the lady Sovereignty bestowed her favors or was forced to do so. The king mated with her, and the result was prosperity in the land. In myth, the mating has two reflexes, human and equine, depending on whether it functions on the anthropomorphic (king and queen) or zoomorphic (mare and stallion) level. When the two levels overlap in narratives, the boy and the horse become inseparably bound to each other's fate.

We can be quite sure that the king was cast in the role of stallion at the ritual recounted by Giraldus, for it is borne out by onomastic evidence.¹⁴ The people of Tirconnell were Uí Néill, descendants of Niall Noígiallach, whose father was Eochu Mugmedón.¹⁵ The root of the name Eochu, and Eochaid with which it is frequently confused, is *ech-* 'horse,' the Irish equivalent of *ep-* that we find in Gaulish Epona. Indeed, Irish tradition abounds with the name. The chief over the Túatha Dé Danann, the Dagda, was otherwise called Eochaid Ollathair 'Eochaid Great-father.' Bres, half Fomorian, half Túatha Dé Danann, who guarantees fertility in exchange for his freedom in "The Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh," is otherwise known as Eochaid Bres. Several of the husbands of Medb (English Maeve), the personification of sovereignty in the Ulster cycle of tales, are called Eochaid, and her father is yet another Eochaid.

We have one more thread to pick up in this fractious Celtic narrative of "The Adventure of the Mare and the Boy," and that is the connection with the sea. We have seen that the Grey of Macha appears to have come from the sea, and that Macha is once called daughter of the Nature of the Sea, and we may now explore further marine associations. In the fourth branch of the *mabinogi*, Math induces birth in

14. The evidence of proper names and their signification must be used cautiously, as D. Ellis Evans points out; see his "A Comparison of the Formation of Some Continental and Early Insular Celtic Personal Names," *Études Celtiques*, XIII (1972–1973), 171–193.

15. T.F. O'Rahilly showed that Irish tradition confused Niall's father with Eochu Domlén (? = Eochu mac Echach Domlén), but it was not the epithet that was significant in the name; see *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), pp. 221–222.

Aranrhod. She delivers twins, one of whom is christened Dylan; he immediately makes for the sea and assumes its nature. One is tempted to believe that whoever sired this child also came from the sea, although the principles of genetics do not always dictate the shape of mythic narrative. The other of this pair is Lleu Llaw Gyffes, whose name is cognate with that of the Irish Lugh, foster-son of Manannán mac Lir, the Irish sea god. (According to the story of his birth, CúChulainn was the reincarnation of Lugh.)

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of the horse-king and his marine affiliation is in the *Compert Brese* 'The Birth of (Eochaid) Bres,' interpolated into the "Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh."¹⁶ It tells how Eri daughter of Delbaeth was watching the sea one day when she saw a vessel of silver on an unusually becalmed surface. Its extent seemed great to her although she could not determine its shape. The tide brought it to land, and she saw that it held a man of very fair form, yellow-haired, dressed in gold cloth and ornaments, with two silver spears. The man addressed her as though his visit had been planned or fore-ordained. He lay with her, identified himself as Elotha son of Delbaeth, king of the Fomorians, and prophesied to her that she would bear a son of their union, and that he would be called Eochaid Bres. Following the prophecy, he went back as he had come. Eri's child enjoyed a prodigious development, growing at twice the rate of ordinary lads, so that he reached a growth of fourteen years at the end of his seventh. Later Eochaid Bres became king in place of the unfit Nuadha, and reigned until the Túatha Dé Danann expelled him. When he asked his mother for information concerning his own race, she took him to the hill whence she had seen the vessel of silver, then to the strand where she gave him the ring left by Elotha. Then they set out together for the land of the Fomorians.

Now there is in all of this the operation of paronymy, wherein the name Fomorian suggested 'the people from the sea' (*fō* + *mor*). The etymology is generally considered spurious, though it is by no means inconceivable that Fomorian could be an alternative name for the Túatha Dé Danann. Anyone who has read around in that masterpiece of muddled medieval miscellany, the *Lebor Gabála*, knows that the genealogies of the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomorians overlap in many places and are

16. Ed. and trans. by Whitley Stokes, *Révue Celtique*, XII (1891), 52–130, 306–308; *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp. 28–48.

almost hopelessly confused. Both Elotha and Eri have the same patronym, and are perhaps brother and sister. It may be, of course, that the name Fomorian is simply the marine appellation of the descendants of Danu/Anu, the Túatha Dé Danann. But I leave that interesting and tantalizing question for the moment, and conclude simply that a king of the Túatha Dé Danann who bore the appropriate soubriquet (*Eoch* ‘horse’), was sired by a gold and silver youth who came in on the tide and departed the same way. These motifs seem to have an affinity for each other elsewhere in Celtic tradition; in “Culhwch and Olwen,” the shepherd Custennin falsely claims that Culhwch was found in the sea with a gold ring around his finger, and in the Irish “The Death of Connla,” CúChulainn’s only son comes in from the sea wearing his gold band of identification.

In his analysis of the *mabinogi*, W. J. Gruffydd showed that Manawdan son of Llŷr ‘son of the Sea’ must have been the father of Pryderi. His arguments were based in part on the Irish *Compert Mongán* ‘The Birth of Mongán,’ and he was no doubt correct in adducing that parallel. My own view is that the third branch preserves the detritus of a myth wherein the sea-god mated with the horse-goddess; this view is supported by evidence from the first branch and the parallels we have considered from elsewhere in both Irish and Welsh. In the first branch, Teyrnon is the ersatz father of Pryderi (he and his wife pretend that the foundling is their own son and, in fact, they raise him) and lord of the mare that foals on the night Pryderi is found. Teyrnon is called Twrf Liant, an epithet which very possibly means “tempestuous flood,” so that he may be Lord of the Raging Sea—a fitting title for the sea deity. In the third branch the relationship between the marine and equine divinities finds a variant expression: Manawydan son of the Sea becomes the father of Pryderi by marrying Rhiannon. The Romans understood this close association between the horse goddess and the hippomorphic sea god when they fitted Epona into their calendar.

I have devoted a good deal of space to “The Adventure of the Mare and the Boy” and its mythological ramifications, because I wanted to show that it is possible to isolate episodes in the four branches, and to suggest that they existed independently. I do not suggest that these narratives survived as myths in the strict sense of that word, but their mythic significance may well have been understood in a general way by an eleventh-century audience. In their introduction to *The Mabinogion*, Thomas

Jones and Gwyn Jones stated that the matter of the *mabinogi* is “mythology in decline.” That may be true, yet we must not assume that the meaning of the tales was lost to a contemporary audience. We are not yet sufficiently familiar with the structure of medieval prose—and certainly not medieval Welsh prose—to know how these tales were received by an audience in the eleventh, tenth, or earlier centuries. Structural analysis suggests that the myths reflected in these tales were very much alive and that the story-teller was very much aware of them. For example, the first branch appears to confront the problem of the failure of the horse-goddess to guarantee fertility and generate a hero (at the anthropomorphic level) and a foal (at the hippomorphic level). For that failure, she is punished by being deprived of her divinity and reduced to the function of beast of burden (to wit, Rhiannon carried men on her back). The story is successfully resolved, that is, it has a happy ending, in that the hero and foal are restored and so is Rhiannon to her proper role as consort of the king and guarantor of fertility. In the second branch, it is the destruction of horses that causes Branwen to be removed from her place as consort of the king of Ireland and to be reduced to performing menial tasks. But in this branch there is no restoration; Branwen dies and the two kingdoms are virtually destroyed. These sub-structures are veiled by a literary fabric woven in the interests of the tales’ audiences, but it is difficult to believe that the story-teller who put together the versions we have was not aware of the general drift of the myth, even though his primary concern was the telling of a good tale.

The same concern with regeneration is evident in the fourth branch. The punishment of Gilfaethwy and Gwydion, wherein their uncle turns them into pairs of animals and they beget off-spring on each other, enforces the notion that the punishment for unlawful intercourse (rape) is for the offenders to experience the pangs of childbirth. The episode is reminiscent of that in Irish tradition where Macha gets revenge upon the Ulstermen for tampering with her procreative powers by making them all experience the pangs of childbirth. The punishment of Math’s nephews, then, may be structurally significant, and but a repetition of the underlying theme of the whole tale. As Lévi-Strauss says, “repetition has as its function to make the structure of the myth apparent.”¹⁷

17. “The Structural Study of Myth,” in *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, 1958), p. 105.

The views advanced here are unquestionably speculative, and they are intended only to show that structural studies of the *mabinogi* might well reveal something of the compositional techniques of medieval Welsh literature.¹⁸ Within the various episodes there is a skillful use of language, of characterization, of dramatic irony, and other rhetorical and narrative devices that we associate with the literary art. But the episodes are never completely harmonized in a given tale, and there are inconsistencies. It is this episodic character and the inconsistencies that suggest to me, more than anything else, that the materials of the tales were of great antiquity; however much the redactor elaborated the super-structure, the sub-structure remained intact.

Another striking example of the survival of the kernel of myth occurs in the tale of "Culhwch and Olwen." At the level of folktale, it belongs to a widely known type, "the giant's daughter." A number of motifs known to students of the international folktale are clustered here: the jealous stepmother, love for an unknown and unseen maiden, the oldest animals, the helper animals, and the impossible tasks are perhaps the most obvious. But the combination of these motifs and the universality of the tale types are features of the super-structure of the tale, and they belong to the later development of an ancient myth, the key to which lies in the opening paragraph of the tale.

It is a commonplace concerning Celtic heroes (indeed, heroes in most cultures), that there is some confusion over parentage. This is usually because the hero has both divine and human parents. In the instance of CúChulainn there is multiple conception, accounting for the fact that he is both the son and reincarnation of Lugh and the son of Sualtam, a mortal. The opening of "Culhwch and Olwen" is not so explicit in the matter of conception, but I believe that it can be shown that the strange events recounted there preserve a very nearly obscured account of the origins of Culhwch. According to the tale, Cilydd's wife becomes pregnant, goes mad, and wanders in the wastes. She returns to her senses just as she is about to give birth, an event that takes place among swine and in the presence of a swineherd. It is the swineherd

18. Professor Daniel Melia has done an excellent study of the Irish *Táin Bó Cúalnge* 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley' in his 1972 Harvard University doctoral dissertation (unpublished), but the field is otherwise largely ignored. See also Melia's "Parallel Versions of 'The Boyhood Deeds of CúChulainn,'" *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, X (1974), 211-226.

who brings the boy to court, and the boy is named Culhwch ‘pig-run,’ because that is where he was found.

In order to get at the underlying significance of this bizarre account, let us reconsider the events of the birth of Pryderi in the first branch of the *mabinogi*. He was found with a mare and a colt, and eventually brought to court by Teyrnnon and restored to Pwyll and Rhiannon. I have tried to show that the narrative is merely taking account of different levels of the myth of the horse-goddess: at one of the levels her offspring was a hero, at another a foal. Her mate was the sea god, explained in the story as a neighboring lord, Teyrnnon, who merely found the boy and later brought him to court. I would like to suggest now that the first paragraph of “Culhwch and Olwen” reflects a tradition about the birth of another kind of hero, associated with the god known in Gaul as Moccus (Welsh *moch*, Irish *mucc* ‘pig’). In that tradition, the myth recounted the circumstances of the birth of a hero sired by the swine-god. All that remains in our tale is the location of the birth, a pig-run, and the role of the swine-herd in delivering the boy to the court. In the story of Pryderi, too, we are left with the location of the epiphany, the horse-stable, and the role of the mare’s lord in bringing the boy to court.

There is no denying that the swine was an important animal among the Celts, and the references to it are commonplace.¹⁹ In addition to its domestic and economic importance, it may well have been the animal held most sacred by the Celts. At the divine level, besides the Gaulish Moccus, the boar turns up as alter ego of Diarmuid in the Irish tale of Diarmuid and Grainne.²⁰ Diarmuid’s foster-brother is said to have been killed by Diarmuid’s father. He was changed into a boar, and it was decreed that he would have a life as long as Diarmuid’s; he became Diarmuid’s nemesis and the two die in combat with one another (another fairly clear instance of the myth operating simultaneously at both the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic levels). The major episode of “Culhwch and Olwen,” of course, is the boar hunt, where Arthur the hunter pursues Twrch Trwyth (and his double, Ysgithrwyn). The episode is strongly reminiscent of the boar fight in the Irish

19. See, e.g., Anne Ross, *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts* (London and New York, 1970), pp. 169–170.

20. Translated in *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp. 370–421.

tale known as “The Chase of Síd na mBan Finn,”²¹ where the object of the chase is also of supernatural if not divine proportions.

“Culhwch and Olwen” is much more episodic than any of the four branches, yet its unusual opening and its central episode assure us that it carries on traditions associated with a Celtic swine divinity. One of his manifestations was the ferocious though noble and rational opponent of such divine hunters as the Welsh Arthur and the Irish Finn; on the continent he was assimilated to the Roman god Mercury; his human form is to be associated with such characters as Culhwch and, perhaps, Hychdwn Hir, the “tall swine” turned champion, born to Gwydion and Gilfaethwy while they were in the shape of boar and sow in the tale of “Math.” As these traditions become obscured, only those elements that had dramatic or some other entertainment value survived with any vigor, although the mythological connections were not entirely lost. The result is a story about a boy whose paternity is confused by the presence of a swineherd, and whose name, bearing the word for a pig, is explained in typical onomastic fashion. Even though the basic type of the story is that of the lad performing various difficult tasks to win the giant’s daughter, the major episode is Arthur’s hunt of the great boar. No doubt the doublet episode of the hunt of Ysgithrwyn Pen Baidd developed out of one of Twrch’s epithets, *ysgithr wyn* ‘shining tusks.’ By the same token, a differentiation occurred so that the epithet *gwrych ereint* ‘silver bristles’ became yet another boar and a kind of lieutenant to Twrch Trwyth. It is interesting to note that the corresponding Irish words, *torc* and *triath*, mean both “boar” and “chieftain, hero,” suggesting that the tradition of the swine god as ferocious fighter survived in Ireland as well. In Cormac’s Glossary (early tenth century), we read *Orc* [a young pig] *trēith .i. ainm do mac righ: triath enim rex uocatur* ‘orc of a triath, that is, a name for the son of a king: for a king was called a triath’;²² it is tempting to think that herein lies a potential literary source for the remark, made by Arthur, that the boar “had been a king, but God changed him into a swine for his sins.”

“The Tale of Gwion Bach” and “The Tale of Taliesin,” which together form a continuous saga about the birth and boyhood deeds of the

21. Ed. and trans. by Kuno Meyer in *Fianaigeacht* (Todd Lecture Series, XVI, Dublin, 1910), pp. 64ff.

22. *Sanas Cormaic* (Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts, iv, 1912), p. 86.1018.

poet/prophet Taliesin, are straightforward narratives with virtually no textual confusion or complexity. There are no awkward transitions here, no seams behind which we can glimpse a sub-structure that might give a clue to the underlying mythical significance of the material. And yet when we look outside the saga at the wider traditions about Taliesin, we see a good deal of confusion and complexity.

Taliesin is known from the earliest extant Welsh sources, and he is mentioned by Nennius in the *Historia Brittonum* as one of five poets distinguished for their poetry in the late sixth century, the others being Aneirin, Blwchbardd, Cian (called Gwenith Gwawd “Wheat of Song”), and Talhaearn Tad Awen. To Aneirin is ascribed the sixth-century Welsh poem *Y Gododdin*, which celebrates elegiacally the valor of a band of warriors who fought against the expanding Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. Nothing remains of the work of the other three. Of the work of Taliesin, a good deal remains, most of it preserved in a thirteenth-century manuscript called “The Book of Taliesin.” But there is an inconsistency in the types of poems attributed to this most famous of Welsh poets; there are panegyrics in praise of known historical figures, religious poems, and most peculiar of all, those litanies of metamorphoses sometimes called transformational poems.²³ The primary source of all this material is the thirteenth-century Book of Taliesin, but there are a number of other poems not found there that occur with great regularity in manuscripts from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In this latter category of manuscripts we usually find at least a fragment of the *Hanes* or “Tale” of Taliesin; rarely do we find in them any of the poems from the Book of Taliesin, and we are tempted to conclude that there were two independent traditions about Taliesin, one concerning a genuine poet, one a legendary shape-shifter. This was Sir Ifor Williams’ conviction and he maintained that the transformational poems in the Book of Taliesin were to be understood in terms of the “folk-tale” of Taliesin, that is, in terms of the shape-shifting that goes on in the first part, “The

23. The poems of the “historical” Taliesin have been edited by Sir Ifor Williams and discussed often. But aside from Sir Ifor’s discussion in *Chwedl Taliesin* (Cardiff, 1957), the tale has been neglected, owing largely to the unavailability of a satisfactory text. I have identified over two dozen manuscripts that contain at least part of the tale, and I hope to publish an edition soon.

Tale of Gwion Bach.”²⁴ The eulogies and elegies to such known historical persons as Urien and his son Owain, and those alone, he asserted, are the poems of Taliesin, “the bard who is mentioned in the *Historia Brittonum* . . . This Taliesin is a genuine historical figure—not a legendary character who combines the powers of a magician, a sorcerer, and a prophet.”

In order to understand the relationship between these two apparently distinct poets and the widely divergent contexts of the poems attributed to them, it is essential to turn back to an earlier Celtic society. The practice of poetry among the Celts had explicitly magical overtones, and the poet was understood to have supernatural and divinatory powers. This is most clearly manifested in the early Irish tales and other documents such as Cormac’s Glossary, where the ritual of divination known as *imbas forosna*, one of the three things that characterized poets and poetry, is described. These powers are alluded to by the ethnographers of classical antiquity in their commentaries on the Celts, and there is a celebrated reference to divinatory practices in Wales in the works of Giraldus Cambrensis, who lived in the twelfth century. Keating knew about similar practices in Scotland as late as the seventeenth century. Taken together, this evidence points to the belief that in Celtic tradition the poet had the power to loose his spirit to seek out knowledge, in whatever quarter that was to be had. I have discussed elsewhere the possible connections of this notion with shamanistic practices,²⁵ and it seems that these powers are related to the ability to shift shape and are connected as well with the idea of the transmigration of souls in which there is ample evidence to suggest the Celts believed.

Against this background was projected the image of the archetypal poet, seer, diviner, prophet. In Irish, one of his names is Amergin, who in the quasi-historical *Lebor Gabála* recites a poem as the Sons of Míl land in Ireland, in which he claims to be many things, including a wave, a salmon, a sword, a plant, and a spear. As O’Rahilly rightly saw, Amergin has been “borrowed from Irish mythology,” the seer of the pantheon,

24. See the Introduction in the English version of Sir Ifor Williams’ *Canu Taliesin: The Poems of Taliesin*, prepared by Professor J. E. Caerwyn Williams (Dublin, 1968), esp. pp. xv–xix.

25. See the discussion and references in Patrick K. Ford, *The Poetry of Llywarch Hen* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1974), pp. 58ff.

wisdom itself.²⁶ In Welsh, one of his names is Taliesin; he claims that he was not created from a mother and father but from the elements, and he has been in existence since the dawn of creation.²⁷ He has been all things, knows what is, what has been, what will be; he will endure till doomsday. He is, therefore, the repository of supernatural and otherworldly knowledge, the ultimate divine projection of the Celtic poet whose intensive wisdom (the literal meaning of *druï*, *derwydd* 'druid,' *imbis*, *cyfarwydd*, and other words associated with the scope of poetic activities among the Celts) was his hall-mark. The tale that Elis Gruffydd recorded for us in the sixteenth century was still sensitive to the tradition that Taliesin had existed among the Welsh for hundreds of years under different names, and the shapeshifting powers of Gwion Bach are but one manifestation of the polymorphic powers of the archetypal poet.²⁸

The waters of this native tradition have been muddied somewhat by the influx of classical and Judeo-Christian traditions. Here, as elsewhere in Irish and Welsh, the confluence of these traditions produced some interesting results. Materials from the non-native cultures were often joined clumsily onto the other, so that instead of assimilation we have agglutination; in the place of "Christian coloring" of native sagas or the like, we find references to New Testament events inserted into the tales. For example, in the Irish Ulster Cycle, King Conchobor dies a victim of his own rage upon hearing the news of Christ's crucifixion, although the events that lead to Conchobor's death have nothing whatsoever to do with the events of the Passion. This technique of grafting from one tradition onto another is not very satisfying artistically, but it does ease the task of distinguishing the native from the non-native. In the poem that Taliesin recites in response to the queries of Maelgwn Gwynedd (below, p. 172), Old Testament, Classical, and Welsh traditions come together with a resounding thud: we meet Absalon and Alexander, Lucifer and Gwydion. There is Noah's ark, Nimrod's tower, Aranhod's prison, and the survivors of Troy. Though the speaker of these lines dwelt in the land of the Trinity, he issued forth from the

26. *Early Irish History and Mythology*, p. 199.

27. See Appendix: *Cad Goddeu*, esp. ll. 74ff.

28. Merlin was believed to have been identical with Taliesin, but existing in another time and place. See Patrick K. Ford, "The Death of Merlin in the Chronicle of Elis Gruffydd," *Viator*, VII (1975), pp. 379-390.

womb of the witch Ceridwen. There is not better evidence that the Taliesin material passed through many hands, each embellishing its shape with learning from classical and Biblical sources.²⁹

Emerging from these poems, then, and the transformational poems in the Book of Taliesin is the figure of the eternal, divine poet and prophet, essentially amorphous yet paradoxically having many shapes. The prose tale itself tells how this archetypal poet first acquired wisdom, and is analogous to tales in Irish that explain how Finn acquired wisdom, and to those in Scandinavian that tell how Odin gained poetry and wisdom. In all three traditions there is a cauldron of poetry or inspired wisdom, and there is a contest over the custody of it.

One of the Irish versions tells how Finn, who was still called Demne at this time, goes to his namesake Finn Éces to learn poetry.³⁰ Finn Éces had been waiting on the banks of the Boyne for seven years to catch the salmon of Wisdom, and when the fish is finally caught, young Demne is given the task of cooking it in a cauldron of water. As he is doing so, some of the steam escapes and burns his thumb. When he puts the thumb into his mouth to ease the pain, he immediately knows all things, and is renamed Finn by his tutor. There is no overt hostility here, but the wisdom that resided in the salmon was intended for Finn Éces, and instead was acquired by the boy.

In the Old Norse *Skáldskaparmál*, Odin drinks up all the mead of poetry from the kettle and two crocks that are in the possession of the

29. There is a superficial resemblance between this poem and portions of the apocryphal "Wisdom of Sirach," where personified Wisdom claims to have existed from all time:

I issued from the mouth of the Most High,
And covered the earth like a mist.
I lived on the heights,
And my throne was on the pillar of cloud.
I alone compassed the circuit of heaven,
And I walked in the depth of the abyss.
I owned the waves of the sea and the whole earth
And every people and nation.

The Apocrypha, trans. by Edgar J. Goodspeed (Chicago, 1938; rptd. New York, 1959), p. 268. Cf. Proverbs 8:22–31 and the notes to those verses in R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (The Anchor Bible: Garden City, New York, 1965).

30. "The Boyhood Deeds of Finn," *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp. 360–369.

giant Suttung.³¹ Suttung pursues Odin, both of them assuming the shape of an eagle. Odin returns safely to the Aesir and gives the mead to “those men who can compose poetry.”

In our story, the cauldron of inspiration is being brewed for Afagddu, the hideous son of the witch Ceridwen. The lad Gwion Bach positions himself so that the magical drops that spring from the cauldron alight on himself instead of upon Afagddu, and Gwion acquires the wisdom. Thereupon he is pursued by Ceridwen, both changing their shapes several times in the course of the chase. In the end, Gwion is swallowed up by Ceridwen; nine months later, he is reborn as Taliesin, the gifted poet and prophet. Like Finn, his name is changed after he has acquired wisdom.

Clearly, the tales of Gwion Bach and Taliesin cannot be lightly dismissed as “folktale” or late developments. Perceptible in them and in their attendant poems, despite the layering of successive generations and external influences, lies the myth of the primeval poet, in whom resided all wisdom.

The structures of the tales discussed here reveal their mythological orientation, and the tales survived because the myths they reflected, however much in decline, were still an important part of the traditions of medieval Wales. But it is evident that the primary interest in the tales on the part of the redactor and his audience was in their entertainment value. The storyteller’s art is everywhere in evidence, and though he could not alter his inherited materials at will, for that would have done violence to the myth, he could and did suit them to his own purposes and to the tastes of his audience. The divine characters who play out these events are not always “invested with a physical and moral grandeur” as the translators of *The Mabinogion* asserted. These characters, like those in medieval Irish sagas, received no consistent treatment from the redactor of their tales, and if there is mythology in decline here, it is mainly a decline in reverence. Math has great dignity, it is true. But think of Manawydan building his tiny gallows to hang a pregnant mouse; think of Pwyll bungling his way toward

31. Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. by Jean I. Young (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964), pp. 102–103. Older versions of the myth are found in the *Hávamál*, and are discussed by Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (New York, 1964), pp. 36–37.