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*The* *Mabinogion*

# Defining *the Mabinogion*

The work that is now commonly known as the *Mabinogion* has many facet and aspects. The stories within vary in date, authorship, sources, content, structure and style (Davies x). These stories give the modern reader a glimpse into the types of stories that were told in medieval Wales. According to translator Sioned Davies, “Not only do they reflect themes and characters from myth and legend, they also show how Wales responded to conquest and colonization, and in so doing made a unique contribution to European Literature (Davies xiii).”

## History of the Manuscript

### It is made up of eleven Welsh tales written down between the end of the 11c and the beginning of the 14thc.

### These tales are found in two manuscripts referred to as

#### The White Book of Rhydderch (c.1350) and

#### The Red Book of Hergest (1382-1410).

### The word Mabinogion translates loosely as “story of youth.”

### Lady Charlette Guest translated the tales into English (1838-1849) and changed the title of the tales from *Mabinogi* (singular) to *Mabinogion* (plural).

## The Eleven Tales

### Four of the elven tales form The Branches of the *Mabinogi.*

#### Each one ends with the same formula in both the White and Red books, “…so ends this branch of the Mabinogi.”

#### The name of this potential female author is Gwenllian, daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan, wife of Gruff ap Rhys. Some of the reasons she is the ideal candidate as author are as follows. (Breeze 77)

##### Her life spanned from about 1098-1137, the correct time period for the Mabinogi.

##### Being the daughter of a king, she would know much of courtly life.

##### Her high rank gave her the opportunity to not only write, but to have the tales told after her death.

##### The use of Irish sources given her family were political refugees from Ireland follows suit.

##### Her family was known for their literary activity and so this would not be out of character.

#### They are the only tales to refer to themselves as Mabinogion.

##### The term branch is used in medieval French to denote a textual division.

##### This indicates that they are made episodes that lead off from the main narrative which is referred to as a trunk.

#### The only hero that appears in all four is Pryderi.

##### He is born in the first branch.

##### He is killed in the fourth.

#### They feature an aspect of morality tales, but it would be wrong to assume that the tales are moral lessons. Those who behave poorly are often rewarded.

### There are three tales referred to as romances, though this is considered a misnomer.

#### The term romance was initially used hey have their focus in the court at Caerllion on Usk – home to Arthur and his queen, Gwenhwyfar[[1]](#footnote-1). They reflect Chrétien de Troyes’ tales as:

##### Peredur son of Efrog (mirrors Perceval).

##### Geraint son of Erbin (mirrors Erec et Enide).

##### The Lady of the Well (mirrors Yvain).

#### While acknowledging the French source, it is vital to recognize that each one of the tales is crafted in a uniquely Welsh way espousing Welsh values and beliefs (Davies xi).

##### The commonality of the appearance of French loan words in the three tales exceeds that of the other tales. (Breeze 92)

##### The tales feature tournaments, which resemble those France’s William Marshal. (Breeze 93)

### Two of the four remaining tales of the eleven are Arthurian, the other two are written about early British History.

# *The Mabinogion* As Fairytale

## In reading and thinking about the *Mabinogion*, it is helpful to think of it as folklore or fairytale. Certainly, it shares many tropes and motifs with other fairytales and can be categorized using either the Aarne-Thompson classification system or that of Vladímir Propp.

### The stories feature a heavy amount of repetition, often in threes as in:

#### The Three Fortunate Concealments,

#### The Three Unfortunate Disclosures, and

#### The Three Unfortunate Blows.

### There are animal-human-botanical transformations.

### Circumstances matter, meaning that goals can only be accomplished if a certain amount of seemingly convoluted or abstract means/methods can be met.

#### The method by which Lleu can be killed and

#### The requirements that Manawydan must fulfill to remove the enchantment of Dfyd.

### There is a lot of love at first sight.

### Supernatural animals appear such as:

#### Dogs with white faces but red ears and

#### Impressively sized swine.

# The Branches

This section will go through and in detail, discuss the first four branches of the eleven tales of the *Mabinogion* (and are considered the original *Mabinogi*). Listed will be character names and plot-points to assist new readers in tackling the beginning parts of *Mabinogion* for the first time.

## The First Branch

### This branch is perhaps the most famous as it features hero, Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed and his wife, Rhiannon. It also features Annwfn, king of the underworld.

### Pwyll’s son Pryderi’s origin story can be found in this branch. The decisions and desires of Pryderi play heavily into the Third and Fourth Branches.

## The Second Branch

### This Branch primarily concerns itself with Bendigeidfran, his sister Branwen and the King of Ireland, Matholwch. It is interesting to note that this story too, includes the wronging of a woman and the aftermath.

### It tells the story of Matholwich’s marriage to Branwen and the fallout that their union causes, along with the consequences for both lands.

## The Third Branch (The Mabinogi of the Collar and the Hammer)

### Manawydan, one Bendigeidfran’s landless chiefs, is pretty depressed after the war in Ireland and after burying the head of Bendigeidfran’s head. He goes on with Pryderi to encounter Rhiannon, Pryderi’s wife Cigfa, and a cursed Dyfed.

### Unbeknownst to the characters, their desire to continue their lives after the war between the two nations is held-up by consequences of actions taken in the first two branches.

## The Fourth Branch

### This Branch features Math the son of Mathonwy, who the lord over a land just south of Pryderi’s. Math’s particular condition combined with the greed and desires of those complicate the lives of everyone involved.

### The majority of this tale follows the actions of Gwydion and his brother Gilfaethwy. Their wants determine the fate of not one kingdom, but two and the use of magic to accomplish these ends is clever as well as dramatic.

# REsources

## Listed below are resources that aid in discovering more about the *Mabinogion*.

### NGfL Cymru has lessons available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/repository/resource/f1310767-d8bc-46bc-a92d-dbfe1a471468/en>

### A guide to Arthurian Romance including stories and elements found in the *Mabinogion*:

### <http://virgil.org/dswo/courses/arthurian-romance/syllabus.htm>

### This is the Mabigoni web-based RPG (Role-Playing Game):

### <http://mabinogi.nexon.net>

### A brief introduction to *The Morphology of Fairytale* by Vladímir Propp:

### <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/propp.pdf>

### This link is an introduction to the Aarne-Thompson cataloguing system for fairytales:

### <http://www.mftd.org/index.php?action=atu>

# CitationS

## Davies, Sioned. *The Mabinogion*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 2007

## Breeze, Andrew. *Medieval Welsh Literature*. Four Courts Press. Dublin. 1977

1. See what I did there? Okay, well the Welsh did it but they have -great- taste in names. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)