

According to John K. Bollard: 'One key to understanding the Mabinogi is to recognize that it probes issues of importance to all of us, most especially the matter of distinguishing between right and wrong and behaving accordingly.'
Discuss with reference to the Four Branches of the Mabinogi.

'The behaviour of the characters and the choices they make ... right and wrong may be matters of degree and are not always easily distinguishable'¹

How do we define right and wrong, especially in such an old text? In order to do this, we can consider those acts which appear to be morally right and wrong, although in this there is the risk of missing what a medieval audience would understand by viewing with modern eyes. We can also consider the legal rights and wrongs of certain situations, and the Welsh laws from the medieval period were written down and have been studied extensively by scholars so are available for this purpose.

The *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (PKM) are generally considered to be a linked group of stories, with references between the different branches to the other stories. Pryderi is the one character who features in all four branches, although he is not the main character. I have used Sioned Davies' 2007 translation of *The Mabinogion* throughout this work.

John Bollard has stated that the Mabinogi covers the issues of right and wrong. He has identified three main themes running loosely through the PKM; those of friendships, marriages and feuds. Each theme is presented over several episodes, and each time it appears it is presented slightly differently². I have adopted this structure for this essay in order to examine the issues of right and wrong and how they are presented. It is not possible to examine every single instance of right and wrong and the associated behaviour, so for the purposes of this essay I will consider the following items: friendship and how it may be won and lost through the behaviours of different parties; the right and wrong treatment of the wife with regards to marriage; and how a party involved in a feud may either defuse or escalate the situation with their actions. I will also consider specific instances which may not fit neatly into these categories.

Friendships

Pwyll's rashness in his first meeting with Arawn is very typical of his character, although he is an honourable man and goes to great pains to correct his mistakes. Pwyll finds a stag being hunted by other hounds. Pwyll drives the other dogs off the stag and feeds his dogs on it. He interacts with the owner of the dogs who refuses to greet him because he has committed a discourtesy. By unleashing his own dogs on the stag he was exercising his right as lord of the land, although to modern eyes it may seem that he was acting impetuously by driving off the other dogs. He

¹ J. Bollard 'The Role Of Myth And Tradition In The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, Vol 6 (Winter 1983), 67-86 (p.70).

² J. Bollard 'The Structure Of The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, (1974-75), 250-276 (p.253)

had not gone to the effort of hunting that stag himself, so it appears impetuous and unfair certainly to modern readers that he should do this. Legally speaking however Arawn's accusation of discourtesy is well made, and when Pwyll discovers Arawn is a King he admits he was wrong. According to the Welsh laws, Arawn hunting the stag in Pwyll's land was a breach of Pwyll's rights as lord, however Arawn as a King outranks Pwyll no matter where he is, and as such a discourtesy was done³.

Pwyll offers to make amends by any means necessary, without thinking too much about what this will entail. Pwyll and Arawn agree to change places for a year and a day, and Pwyll displays his fidelity to his friend by ruling his land well and not being physically intimate with the Queen of Annwfn. He also kills the man that Arawn wanted dead, which was part of their arrangement. This leads to a very strong friendship bond between the two men and the two kingdoms, as Arawn is impressed by Pwyll's fidelity. Although Pwyll had initially acted in accordance with what he thought was right, he sought to make amends once he realised he was in the wrong. This strong bond of friendship is formed by Pwyll behaving in such a way that allows him to make amends when he realises he has erred. This prevents any feud or need for vengeance from developing.

In the Third Branch Pryderi develops a strong friendship with Manawydan, who is calm and cool headed in comparison to the impetuous Pryderi, a trait inherited no doubt from his father Pwyll. Manawydan's tenacity and patience ensures there is no retaliation when the other craftsmen wish them ill and plot against them, and the enchantment is finally lifted from Dyfed thanks to Manawydan's efforts. Manawydan tries to warn Pryderi against various rash actions, with varying levels of success for example Pryderi's insistence on following his hounds into the magical *caer* shows he hasn't really thought through the potential consequences and is just reacting to the situation. Rhiannon castigates Manawydan for not following Pryderi, but when she goes after him the *caer* vanishes. If Manawydan had gone in then he too would have vanished, and Dyfed would have been without a protector. In this case it was certainly the right thing to do, even if it wasn't very heroic. After Pryderi and Rhiannon vanish in the magical *caer* Manawydan demonstrates his loyalty to Pryderi by reassuring Cigfa that he will be a true and faithful companion⁴, by not forcing himself upon her, by protecting her in the way her husband should have, and by working to lift the enchantment that has been placed on the land. He shows by his calm and measured actions how vengeance and feuding may be 'rejected and circumvented by the exercise of fortitude and prudence'⁵. This friendship can be compared to that of Pwyll and Arawn in the First Branch as a bond between two men of near equal social standing.

³ T. Ellis 'Legal References, Terms And Conceptions In The "Mabinogion"', *Y Cymmrodor*, Vol. 39 (1928) 86-148 (p.99).

⁴ C. Byfield 'Character And Conflict In The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, Cyf 40 (1993) 51-72 (p.633).

⁵ P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi* (University of Wales Press) p. 48.

The friendship between the kingdoms of Dyfed and Annwfn is a theme that continues into the fourth branch, and is inherited by Pwyll's son Pryderi⁶. I will consider this more fully when looking at feuds.

Marriages

Each of the stories of the PKM contain marriage as a component. According to Welsh law, a woman must be a freely consenting party to her marriage and could not be married off against her will.

When we first meet Rhiannon, she is to be given in marriage to a man she doesn't love and we can only assume that she has not consented to this marriage. She has sought out Pwyll in order to marry him instead, and as with many things concerning Rhiannon she is able to get her own way. As we know, it is not the smoothest path to wedded bliss, but the episode with Gwawl is resolved seemingly to satisfaction, although I will consider this in the feuds section later.

In the Third Branch, Pryderi gives Rhiannon, his mother, in marriage to Manawydan. She is a willing participant in this union, providing her consent. The Welsh law codes indicate that a woman should consent to marriage. In the first branch Rhiannon was trying to escape an unwanted marriage arrangement by marrying Pwyll instead, although through his rash words Pwyll inadvertently made things worse and brought about the eventual devastation of Dyfed in the Third Branch.

On the other hand, there are two unhappy marriages mentioned in the PKM. In Branwen there does not appear to be any evidence of Branwen providing consent to her marriage⁷. The arrangement is simply made by her brother and her husband to be, which in turn proves to be ruinous for both Ireland and Wales. The marriage of Blodeuwedd to Lleu is another unhappy event. Blodeuwedd is a fairy wife created by Gwydion specifically to marry Lleu. There is no consent sought, and no consideration for Blodeuwedd's free will, which she exercises as soon as she can by taking a lover and plotting with him to kill her husband and escape her marriage. As a created / fairy wife she is an outsider, and therefore it is possible that the audience of the PKM would not expect her to obey the laws or behave properly.

The laws imply that it is the right of the nearest male relative to give a woman in marriage after her consent has been obtained. Rhiannon is given by her father and later her son, Branwen by her brother, and Blodeuwedd by Gwydion her creator (and father of sorts). Efnysien feels that he should have been consulted on the engagement of Branwen to Matholwch and his reaction drives the story forward from this point as everything that happens is as a result of this. I will consider this reaction under feuds.

⁶ Bollard 'Structure', pp.253-254.

⁷ Ellis 'Legal References', p.125.

Both Rhiannon and Branwen act in accordance with their newly married status by giving gifts to the high status men and women of the realm^{8 9}. This is the correct thing to do in their situations and would have been expected by the audience at the time.

It is now timely to consider *sarhaed*. *Sarhaed* is the injury or insult that can be done by one person against another, and features heavily within the PKM. The word can also be used to indicate the price payable for the injury that has been committed. Insult can only be removed by reparation. The references to *sarhaed* as an insult to a person's honour which requires remedy is a constant within the PKM¹⁰.

I will look specifically at *sarhaed* now within the context of marriage, and I hope to show how the application of *sarhaed* can prevent or lead to feuding and vengeance. In the First Branch Gwawl promises not to seek vengeance following the game of Badger in the Bag, where he has been essentially cheated out of his wife and wedding night by his wife to be and her chosen husband. Whether Pwyll and Rhiannon were right or wrong to inflict this humiliation upon Gwawl it had the desired effect of driving him away. Although Gwawl does not seek it, a friend of his takes it upon himself to seek vengeance in the Third Branch.

When Efnysien mutilates the horses in the Second Branch Matholwch decides to leave Wales with his retinue. There are two insults at work here; the first being Efnysien's actions and the second being Matholwch's decision to leave 'without asking, without permission'¹¹. This insult is deemed to be worse for Bendigeidfran than Matholwch. Bendigeidfran is torn between his familial duty to his half brother, and the duty to address the insult given to his new brother in law¹². Bendigeidfran can only offer the *sarhaed* price to Matholwch in repayment for the horses, and he is unable to seek personal revenge on Efnysien because of their blood relationship¹³

This is now a good time to consider the motif of the calumniated wife. Both Branwen and Rhiannon are punished by their husbands for events that were not their fault¹⁴ and this has repercussions.

Rhiannon is accused by her ladies in waiting of killing her own child because they fell asleep whilst they were supposed to be keeping watch and feared her reaction. Branwen is punished for the horse mutilation undertaken by Efnysien, even though reparation has been received¹⁵. In Rhiannon's case she retains her status at court, and is able to maintain her social position^{16 17}.

⁸ Byfield 'Character And Conflict', p.54.

⁹ Ellis 'Legal References', p.132.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.115.

¹¹ S. Davies, *The Mabinogion A New Translation*, Oxford World's Classics, p.24.

¹² Byfield 'Character And Conflict', p.56.

¹³ Bollard 'Structure', p.256.

¹⁴ J. Wood 'The Calumniated Wife In Medieval Welsh Literature', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, Vol. 10 (1985) 25-38 (p.26).

¹⁵ Ellis 'Legal References', p.117.

¹⁶ Byfield 'Character And Conflict', p.55.

Pwyll is still treating her as his wife, even though she has to sit by the horse block and offer to carry guests to the court. Wood notes that it is Pryderi's refusal to allow her to carry him that frees her¹⁸, although I would suggest that it is Pryderi's presence and recognition at court that frees her.

In Branwen's case however Matholwch has neglected his responsibilities as her husband, and has allowed the cook to strike blows around her head. Matholwch has dismissed Branwen from his bed and court, deprived her of his protection and allowed the daily insult by the butcher. This is unbefitting a man of his stature to act in this way as the insult now by law constitutes an insult against himself as her legal protector^{19 20}. This has moved beyond *sarhaed* and into the realm of vengeance²¹. Ellis states that subjects have the right to withdraw their allegiance when the protection of their lord is withheld²². Branwen no longer considers herself to be his wife after this, and she demonstrates this with her response of 'Though I am no "lady"'²³. Matholwch also knows that the way he is treating her is wrong because he imposes the embargo on the island in order that her brother Bendigeidfran should not find out about what he has done.

Wood has argued that Branwen and Rhiannon both share the status of outsiders in their respective courts. Branwen is a Welsh woman who has married an Irish king, and Rhiannon is an Otherworldly woman (a fairy wife) who has married a mortal. Their foreignness has led to their persecution²⁴. Somewhat ironically, Branwen's marriage to Matholwch was proposed in order to 'unite ... two families ... to join together the Island of the Mighty and Ireland so that they might be stronger'²⁵. Wood notes that there Welsh and Irish laws dealing with foreigners and marriage. In Ireland the laws would only apply between the members of a *túath* (the tribal or geographical grouping of people), and problems could occur when marriage took place outside the *túath*. Branwen is not a member of Matholwch's *túath* despite her marriage, and she has been removed from her own kin who would protect her, becoming a 'resented foreign element among her husband's people'²⁶. Children born of these marriages were generally not considered full members of the social group as they had alien blood. In Wales there was no prohibition between a Welshman marrying a foreigner, and foreigners did have rights under the law. Rhiannon as an outsider requires a protector whilst she lives in Wales, and she finds this first in Pwyll (First Branch) and later in her son Pryderi and her second husband Manawydan (Third Branch).

¹⁷ Bollard 'Myth And Tradition', p.75 & p.78.

¹⁸ Wood 'Calumniated Wife', p.30.

¹⁹ Byfield 'Character And Conflict', p.57.

²⁰ Ellis 'Legal References', p.135.

²¹ Byfield 'Character And Conflict', p.58.

²² Ellis 'Legal References', p.92.

²³ Davies, Mabinogion, p.29

²⁴ Wood 'Calumniated Wife', p.26.

²⁵ Davies, Mabinogion, p.23.

²⁶ Wood 'Calumniated Wife', p.32.

Feuds

In the PKM feuds and vengeance are the result of insult or *sarhaed* occurring. It is as a result of Gwawl's humiliation during the badger in the bag episode in the first branch that the land is laid to waste during the third branch by Llwyd and his devices, even though Gwawl promises that no vengeance will be sought. It is wrong of Llwyd to break Gwawl's promises to Pwyll, and it is dishonourable of him to act in this way by re-igniting the feud. He casts a devastating enchantment on the land, removing all the people, and finally by allowing the women of his court to raid Manawydan's fields in the guise of mice.

There is an amusing conclusion to this where Manawydan seizes a thief, a fat mouse who he has captured during a raid on his wheat fields. He has correctly identified one of the thieves, and is legally correct in deciding to hang the thief as punishment. The reader can only assume that Manawydan, who has repeatedly proved to be level headed and sensible, has not taken leave of his sanity and knows what he is doing, and that by trying to hang the mouse he will force the real villain of the piece to reveal himself. Numerous religious figures appear and offer a price in exchange for the mouse's life, which is consistent with the law of theft absent rather than theft present²⁷. These religious figures are all Llwyd in disguise, and the fat mouse captured by Manawaydan is Llwyd's pregnant wife.

Manawydan is careful to ensure that strictly worded provisions are put in place to avoid further vengeance from Llwyd, showing wisdom and caution by blocking all avenues of possible retribution for example 'Remove the magic and enchantment from the seven cantrefs of Dyfed,'²⁸ 'there will never be any spell on the seven cantrefs of Dyfed, and none will ever be cast'²⁹, 'no vengeance will ever be taken on Pryderi and Rhiannon, nor on me'³⁰. In this, Manawydan is behaving properly as befits a lord of the land, and Llwyd's conduct is sharply highlighted as improper by dishonouring Gwawl's vow to seek no vengeance, failing in his attempt to seek full vengeance and being outwitted by Manawydan.

In the story of Branwen, Efnysien has taken insult over not being consulted with regards to Branwen's marriage to Matholwch, and rightly or wrongly he takes vengeance as a formal reply to his perceived insult. He re-opens the feud by killing Branwen's son, and Bollard feels that Efnysien is reacting to being ignored³¹ first by Bendigeidfran and then by Gwern, his nephew and new King of Ireland.

Matholwch, despite his initial intention to unite Wales and Ireland, repeatedly allows himself to be persuaded by his advisors into taking offence. Bollard points out that his advisors encourage him to carry on a feud that had actually been settled in 'specifically enumerated legal terms'³²,

²⁷ Ellis 'Legal References', p.112.

²⁸ Davies, Mabinogion, p.45.

²⁹ Ibid. p.46

³⁰ Ibid. p.46

³¹ Bollard 'Structure', p.272.

³² Bollard 'Myth And Tradition', p.80.

and Wood notes that his advisors remind him repeatedly of the insult that has been committed³³. This is despite the fact that reparations were agreed, and Bendigeidfran pays that which is due to a king³⁴ including adding the cauldron of regeneration as an additional extra. Ellis states that counsel should always be taken by the King in matters of difficulty³⁵, so in listening to the advice of his men Matholwch is doing the correct thing, but in acting upon it he is acting improperly.

The fourth branch of the PKM is a story of vengeance and broken friendships, a genuine tragedy brought about by one man's obsessive inability to act other than in his own self interest. Gwydion is prepared to set the kingdoms of Gwynedd and the South at war to ensure that his brother Gilfaethwy is able to sleep with the woman he desires. He has chosen his loyalty to his brother over that of his lord Math, and he sets out to deceive both his lord and Pryderi Lord of Dyfed, manipulating both men with relative ease. When Goewin tells Math that she has been raped and can no longer fulfil her role as his footholder, Math punishes the brothers for the dishonour they have done to both Goewin and himself³⁶. Math was legally obliged to support Gwydion his nephew over Pryderi his friend³⁷, an instance of where doing the right thing legally was probably morally the wrong thing. The punishment of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy is unusual in its nature, reflecting the crime, but it does not deter Gwydion from continuing to act in his own self-interest whilst acting as though it is for the benefit of another.

He raises his sister Aranrhod's disowned son and tricks her into giving him a name (Lleu) and arms after she refuses to do those things. Byfield suggests that Lleu is Gwydion and Aranrhod's child through incest and this is why Aranrhod disowns the child and Gwydion takes on this role³⁸. Numerous other scholars do not share this view, and I think it an interesting position which could explain Gwydion's actions to a degree. I think it more likely that Gwydion is Lleu's uncle, and Bollard has stated that the bond between uncle and nephew is one of the closest ties between male relations in medieval literature³⁹. Gwydion uses his magic to create a wife, Blodeuwedd, for Lleu. This is an unnatural act and does not go well for Lleu as mentioned above. Ultimately Gwydion punishes Blodeuwedd by turning her into an owl, and Lleu takes vengeance on his wife's lover Gronw.

In this story Ellis notes that there is very close adherence to the Welsh laws, including the fundamental rule that all wrongs must be remedied. Lleu tells Math that he requires recompense from the man who has caused him distress, which Math agrees with. By seeking Math's approval Lleu keeps the feud between the two men involved. Gronw offers Lleu land or money for the insult, but Lleu refuses, demanding instead to throw a javelin at him in exactly the same way that Gronw did to him⁴⁰. It seems fitting that Gronw should meet his death in this way.

³³ Wood 'Calumniated Wife', p.36.

³⁴ Ellis 'Legal References', p.113.

³⁵ Ibid. p.97.

³⁶ Byfield 'Character And Conflict', p.67.

³⁷ Bollard 'Structure', p.256.

³⁸ Byfield 'Character And Conflict', pp.68-69.

³⁹ Bollard 'Structure', p.256.

⁴⁰ Ellis 'Legal References', p.114.

It is worth noting explicitly at this point that in every Branch of the PKM the Lord of the land suffers an insult in some way and not only is this an insult against his person but also against his status and indeed the land itself. Every wrong done to the ruler is a blow against the country, and the ruler's reaction is key to how the country fares. Pwyll and Manawydan take measured responses to the troubles they face, and their country fares well, or is saved from devastation. Bendigeidfran and Math are unable to save their countries from devastation as a result of the trouble that is made for them.

In conclusion, I must return to the quote I began this essay with. Matters of right and wrong are always subject to interpretation. Friendship, marriage and feuding are age old issues which remain as relevant in today's society as they would have been in twelfth century Wales, and as such it is not too difficult for a modern reader to appreciate the various motivations and reasons for the characters in the PKM acting in the way that they do. Society has always been interested in the way people behave in social settings, as the way a person behaves and other people react to them is what makes the behaviour right or wrong. Using this as a loose structure for the essay has given me the opportunity to provide a number of examples of morally and legally right and wrong behaviour, and hopefully I have highlighted how they are not always the same thing.

A number of writers have commented that the author of the PKM clearly had a variety of sources available to him, including legal works. If we make the assumption for the time being that the PKM had the same author, then we can see the consistency of topics flowing through the stories to a greater or lesser degree, and it would make sense to assume that this author was familiar with the laws of the land and how they would be applied to various situations. It is also likely that this author had access to other literary sources, and may be referencing them in ways which a medieval audience would have understood but may be lost on a modern audience.

The PKM are character-driven stories, and without these colourful characters and their behaviour there would be no story. Gwydion and Efnysien are chaotic characters whose actions trigger conflict, and whose obsessions with their own situations cause trouble for others. It is hardly surprising that the stories they feature in do not end happily, specifically for the female characters. Matholwch is a passive character, acting only when forced to do so by his men. It is not an exaggeration to say that nothing he does goes well for him, and the Branch ends with the devastation of both Ireland and Wales. Manawydan is concerned with the maintenance of law and order. He acts carefully rather than rashly like Rhiannon and Pryderi, and he prioritises peace rather than glory. The story that he features in has a happy ending for the majority of the characters, and a non-violent ending for the main antagonist. Rhiannon and Pwyll are well matched, with Pwyll's rashness and haste tempered by Rhiannon's influence and advice. It is her advice that sees them successfully married despite Pwyll's behaviour. Finally, I am sure I am not the only one who feels sorry for Branwen and Blodeuwedd, two women forced into marriages that they had not sought; two very different circumstances that both ended tragically.

Therefore, it is safe to say that I agree with Bollard's statement that one key to understanding the Mabinogi is a matter of distinguishing right from wrong, and behaving accordingly. Good personal conduct and the impact it has is necessary for society to survive and thrive.

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