

How was transformation utilized in the four branches of the Mabinogi, and for what reasons?

The Mabinogion was translated into English by Lady Charlotte Guest, and in 1838¹ the first volume was published. The Mabinogion consists of the main body, the first four branches, and other poetic tales such as the 'Arthur romance tales'. This research essay will be analyzing the main body of the *Cymreig*² texts, the four branches, and the question will be answered with a few examples of transformation within the four branches as there are many transformational occurrences throughout.

The first branch

At the beginning of the tale, *Pwyll* attempts to remedy an insult caused to *Arawn* of *Annwfn* and his hounds by transforming into *Arawn* and then living in *Annwfn* in the place of *Arawn* for a year, and vice versa. The mission was for *Pwyll* to defeat the nemesis of *Arawn*, *Hafgan*, after the year ended, and then the transformation will reverse. *Pwyll* does more than prove his friendship in that manner, he also displays loyalty and chivalry by not taking advantage of the queen of *Annwfn*, the unnamed wife of *Arawn*³. Catherine E Byfield refers to the transformation of both *Pwyll* and *Hafgan* in her chapter of the 'Bulleting Board of Celtic studies' "*Character and Conflict In The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi*":

*"Both men will adopt an additional role in the tale: Arawn, the otherworld King, will become a 'mortal' King for a year. Pwyll in fulfilling Arawn's demand for recompense, will assume Arawn's Kingship for that same year"*⁴.

This transformation is magical in origin though it also took both *Pwyll* and *Arawn* playing the parts well, *Pwyll* embodying an otherworldly King, and *Arawn* embodying a human King. These transformations are a guise to achieve redemption for *Pwyll*, truth, and respect. The transformation of *Pwyll* showcased his true heart and helped him grow into a finer person by utilizing glamour magic from *Arawn*. *Pwyll* succeeded in redeeming himself, he and *Arawn* forged an ever-lasting friendship, and he was elevated to *Pwyll Pen Annwfn*, *Pwyll* the head of *Annwfn*⁵. Byfield comments on the chivalry of *Pwyll*:

¹ "BBC - Wales History: Lady Charlotte Guest: Translator Of The Mabinogion Tales."

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/waleshistory/2012/05/lady_charlotte_guest_mabinogion_translator.html>, [accessed 28/12/2022].

² All words in Cymraeg will be written in italics to differentiate Cymraeg and English from each other.

³ Sioned Davies (tran.). 2007. *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press), P.3-8.

⁴ Catherine E Byfield, '*Character and Conflict In The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi*': - Academia.edu. (Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies 40 (1993): 51-72; revised) <https://www.academia.edu/5987435/Character_and_Conflict_in_the_Four_Branches_of_the_Mabinogi>, P.2. [Accessed 27/12/2022].

⁵ Davies, '*The Mabinogian*', P.8.

*“It seems likely, then, that the strength of the subsequent friendship between Arawn and Pwyll was due as much to Pwyll’s honourable conduct as it was to his successful fulfillment of Arawn’s task.”*⁶.

The key themes in this transformation would be forgiveness, chivalry, glamour magic, and friendship.

Next to analyze is the transformation of *Rhiannon* and *Pwyll*, they go through a change of personality and social standing. Once married, *Rhiannon* begins to always refer to *Pwyll* as Lord⁷, whereas before they were married, *Rhiannon* had only used this title three times to refer to *Pwyll*. *Rhiannon* was the more confident and intelligent, and transformed into the dutiful and traditional wife the audience would have related more with, whereas *Pwyll* becomes more assertive and confident, previously he had been more aloof and naïve, especially towards the intentions and trickery of the otherworld⁸. Byfield also gives her thoughts on *Pwyll* and his previous lack of good judgement: “only after Arawn reveals his task does Pwyll question the consequences of his promise”⁹. These transformations are of mundane origin, though it is wise to bear in mind that *Rhiannon* orchestrated the meeting with *Pwyll* to begin with. Considering that her intelligence was 'otherworldly' it would be understandable to assume that these role-reversal transformations were obvious to *Rhiannon* before meeting *Pwyll* that day in *Arberth*. “Clearly, *Rhiannon* has engineered her meeting with *Pwyll*, and the pattern of their relationship is fixed from the outset, as she entices *Pwyll* into pursuing her.”¹⁰. *Rhiannon* may have chosen to undertake these transformations, rather than marry *Gwawl*, she could have seen a potential within *Pwyll* to choose him over every other man in existence. These transformations are social constructs, as well as character developments made from choice, which showcases the desire, love, and social expectations that have fuelled the decision to create these changes between *Pwyll* and *Rhiannon*. The key themes in this transformation would be loyalty, choice, tradition, and partnership, and originating from the mundane, though with magical influences.

The third branch

In the third branch, Dyfed was transformed into a barren land with no inhabitants bar *Rhiannon*, her son *Pryderi*, her husband *Manawydan*, and her daughter-in-law *Cigfa*, though the transformation that will be analyzed appears a little after that in the story. *Rhiannon* and *Pryderi* have disappeared into an additional curse, leaving *Manawydan* and *Cigfa* to try to grow food while they deal with the situation, but then every night at harvest time a field of crops disappear. *Manawydan* then sets traps to catch the culprits on one of these nights and succeeds, *Manawydan* builds gallows for the culprit, a pregnant mouse, and three different passers-by walked up to *Manawydan*, they attempted to barter and then plead with him for the life of the caught culprit¹¹. Obsession is a massive part of why this curse was enacted, and these people passing were revealed to be the same person under the guise of glamour magic. A curse was put over *Dyfed* as an act of revenge on *Rhiannon* and *Pwyll* for defeating

⁶ Byfield, 'Character And Conflict In The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi', P.3.

⁷ Byfield, 'Character And Conflict In The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi', P.3-4.

⁸ Davies, 'The Mabinogian', P.3-16.

⁹ Byfield, 'Character And Conflict In The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi', P.2.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, P.3.

¹¹ Davies, 'The Mabinogian', P.35-46.

Gwawl, and then marrying each other. The crops were being taken by hundreds of people seeking retribution for *Gwawl*, they had been transformed into mice to do this task.



Figure 1The Mabinogion page 411.png translated by Lady Charlotte Guest (Wikimedia.com)

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Transformation had once again been utilized by using glamour magic for nefarious intentions, even though there are two sides to every story this was not justice, this was revenge. “However, Llywd’s predicament springs from his violation of the sureties *Gwawl* gave to *Pwyll* in the First Branch, that no vengeance would be taken for the insult *Gwawl* suffered.”¹³. The keywords in this transformation are revenge, magic, and obsession.

The fourth branch

The last transformation to be analyzed is the tale of *Gwydion* and *Gilfaethwy*. *Math*, the King of *Gwynedd*, used magic to transform his brothers into animals who would make offspring together. The reason for this is because *Gwydion* had used glamour magic, another transformation, to trick *Pryderi*, Lord of *Dyfed* into losing the pigs that were gifted from *Arawn* of *Annwfn* to his father, *Pwyll*. It was then revealed that the purpose of this was to start a war between the south and north so that *Gilfaethwy* could sleep with *Goewin* but he ended up raping her instead¹⁴.

Whilst *Math* is not exactly of better morals or actions, he did bestow justice for the maiden who had been turned into a woman, for himself, and for the south.

“*Math’s primary role is that of arglwyd*¹⁵. The author provides only brief glimpses of his motivations, chiefly in his rage at the rape of *Goewin*: he is above all the upholder of social order.¹⁶”.

The transformation was animal shapeshifting which was utilized as a punishment and a

¹² "File:'The Mabinogion' page 411.png translated by Lady Charlotte Guest - Wikimedia Commons." 22:29, 4 March 2021. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Mabinogion_page_411.png>, [Accessed 28/12/2022].

¹³ Byfield, 'Character And Conflict In the Four Branches Of the Mabinogi', P.14.

¹⁴ Davies, 'The Mabinogian', P.54.

¹⁵ Arglwyd (hwn) noun masculine (arglwyddi) – Lord, Peer “translate arglwyd in English | Gweidur.” <<https://www.gweidur.com/welsh-dictionary/arglwydd>>, [Accessed 29/12/2022].

¹⁶ Byfield, 'Character And Conflict In The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi', P.16.

lesson to *Gwydion* and *Gilfaethwy*. By invoking shame to occur in both men. The keywords in this transformation are magic, shapeshifting, justice, education, and retribution.

Conclusion

From these folktales it is rather apparent how and why transformation is utilized in the first four branches, though some transformations are not magical in nature, they are just as key to the goal of these stories as the audience are not magical in nature themselves, which is a probable influence to the folktales having relatability to this day.

In both magical and mundane transformations we see two distinct groups, and to keep it simple these two groups will be referred to as honorable deeds, and dishonorable deeds. In honorable deeds, there is Justice, forgiveness, love, friendship, family, protection, heroism, and righteousness. In the dishonorable deeds we see obsession, revenge, and cruelty. In some of the folktales mentioned but not analyzed, we also see sexual assault, which is an act of violent selfishness and entitlement. The characters are archetypes of humanity, and transformation plays an enormous part in human life, it is intricately woven into every person's experience throughout life. Folktales are known to reflect the people whom they are made for, what is astonishing is how relatable these transformations are still to this day, from the experiences of cis-gendered women within a misogynistic society to the trans community feeling that they can also relate to a magical and entertaining cultural piece that has kept so many enthralled for hundreds of years, which is a feeling of acceptance and visibility in a world full of anti-trans hate. Transformation seems to be the one thing all humans can relate to, and in the four branches of the Mabinogi, we can see that the relevance of transformation is what has kept it and the stories alive to this day.

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