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Mabinogion: An Analysis

BA Illustration

Word Count total - 6143

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons)
UWTSD, Swansea, December 11th, 2019

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Synopsis: This discourse will be analyzing, dissecting and deconstructing the Welsh Folktales of *The Mabinogion*. It will discuss a number of theories regarding the dissimulation of folk tales and apply them to the Mabinogi. It will analyze and scrutinize the women of the tales, how they compare to more well known female protagonists.

The Mabinogion: An Analysis

Introduction

Wales has a vast and rich culture. From the Knights of King Arthur and Merlin to more modern tales such as Merched Becca. None have quite the depth and character as *The Mabinogion*. Comprising of four main stories, or branches (cainc in welsh), *The Mabinogion* is the basis of Welsh folk tales and storytelling. Though it is still widely unknown by the rest of the world, *The Mabinogion* has influenced countless authors and creators, including J.R.R. Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *Lord of the Ring*. This analysis will be delving deep into the structure of *The Mabinogion*, its functions, lore, and characters as well as comparisons to popular fairytales.

Before being able to dissect *The Mabinogion*, it first needs context. Translated from middle welsh by Lady Charlotte Guest in the mid-1800s, *The Mabinogion* is a collection of four short stories, otherwise known as branches. Modern adaptations include a number of shorter stories that entwine with the four branches, taken from other illuminated texts. Originally, these stories would have been told orally throughout wales in Princely courts. An unknown author transcribed these interweaving stories into three major medieval illuminated texts.

The Red Book of Hergest, The White book of Rhydderch, and The Black Book of Caerfyrddin.

Unlike French and Germanic fairytales such as *Cinderella* and *The little mermaid*, *The Mabinogion* has not hit the world by storm and is largely unknown. Disney, in their attempts at something resembling Welsh myth, created the Black cauldron in 1981. It was influenced by the book *The Chronicles of Prydain* (Prydain meaning Britain in Welsh), a book that was adapted from and transformed the Mabinogi tales. With a budget of 44mil, the movie set out to rebrand Disney as a franchise that could create darker, grittier animations. Though, the general consensus was that it was too dark, with scenes of skeletal armies causing nightmares for children.

The movie made less than half it's original budget in the box office and almost destroyed Disney as a company. After the failed attempt of bringing wales to the big screen, Disney stuck to what it knew best, child-oriented fairy tales where the hero wins, the prince marries the girl, and they live happily ever after.

There have been few attempts since, of bringing *The Mabinogion* to the world's attention. S4C (Sianel Pedwar Cymru or channel four wales) brought out their own animated movie of the Mabinogi, simply titled *Y Mabinogi*. Though this was even less successful in bringing Welsh literature on the global map. It aired only on S4C, a channel exclusively in Wales and did not do so well with views. What is it about *The Mabinogion* that defies adaptation? Is *The Mabinogion* too dark to become popular? are the protagonists not relatable or unlikable?

Genre, Propp's Functions, and The Mabinogi

First, what is a folktale? Many people believe various things about folktales as a whole. Such as what they are, what defines them, their purpose, moral stance etcetera. Since folktales

have been written down, people have tried to analyse them in a methodical and conclusive ways with varying degrees of success. What if folktales could be definitively defined?

Jack Zipes is an author with many books regarding folktales under his belt. In total, there are three of his books referenced in this discourse alone. It could be said then, that he is a reliable authority on fairy and folk tales. In his book *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, Zipes likens Folktales to modern-day *memes*, devices that convey a message through many forms that can be dissected, reconstructed and reformed, though the core structure must remain intact. Zipes argues;

In Order for a meme to survive, it must exhibit three major characteristics: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. A meme must be capable of being copied in a faithful way; it must be shaped or formed in such a way that many copies will be disseminated.

(Zipes, 2010, Pg. 5)

Is that not like a folk tale? Little Red has had many many retellings, both modern and historic and yet, each one is recognizable enough that we associate them with the original tale.

Hoodwinked is a modern movie adaptation that plays on the idea of the true villain being a friend of Little Red's, whilst the wolf is an officer of the law who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Grandma is away because she is adventuring, and has not been eaten by the wolf. The woodcutter is a failed actor who happens to fall into the house with a prop axe. Regardless of these discrepancies, it is still clear to see that the original core of the story is recognizable and unchanged. That is to say, Red goes to her grandmother's, ignoring her mother's warnings to not talk to any strangers when she arrives, the wolf is undercover, the Huntsman comes in and a fight breaks out in which Granny emerges from the cupboard.

Despite this, for folktales in the traditional sense, Zipes references Bakhtin, Todorov, and Stock. Though this topic will be predominantly focusing on Bakhtin and Todorov.

Bakhtin's stance on folktales, paraphrased, is that Folktales are part of what he referred to as *Speech Genres*. The primary speech genre is the tales being retold orally, from generation to generation. It is his argument that Folktales take on the identity of the area they are spoken, taking on colloquialisms, idioms and general slang from the country of origin. So much so that it would be difficult for people who are not from the country of origin to understand these small intricacies of dialect. He also argues that literary folktales are considered a secondary speech genre, also as affected by idioms as its counterpart.

Zipes explains Todorov as, "Like Bakhtin, Todorov believes that a genre begins as a speech act and undergoes various transformations before becoming institutionalized." (Zipes, 2010, pg.19) Then, as Zipes asks in his book, how do transformations come about? Similarly to Bakhtin, Todorov believes that these transformations occur not all at once, but subtly across generations. Like a game of telephone, various details of the narrative as well as potential character names, get changed and distorted throughout time. Sheldon Cashdan in his book *The Witch Must Die*, discusses the origin of the sleeping beauty genre, and explains one of the earliest recorded. He goes on to say;

This story of an enchanted sleeping maiden, first recorded by the Neapolitan story teller Giambattista Basile in 1634, is one of the earliest written versions of the sleeping beauty saga. Titled *Talia, Sun, and Moon*, the story contains all the ingredients of tales that feature a sleeping maiden: an enchanted princess under a deathlike spell, a long internment in a castle tower, and deliverance by a handsome prince.

(Cashdan, 2014, pg.23)

It would be a safe assumption to say that many people have not heard of *Talia, Sun, and Moon*. Yet the overall plot is an age-old premise, one that has been watched by millions of Disney era children. This confirms both Bakhtin and Todorov's assumption that dependant on location and time, these tales are transformed to conform to the audience that is reading/viewing it. Disney has so wholly changed the narrative of *Sleeping Beauty* that the

original tale it was derived from, of the Brothers Grimm, has lost many of its more moralistic aspects. Zipes adds;

Todorov explains ... 'a society chooses and codifies the acts which correspond most closely to its ideology. This is why the existence of certain genres in a society, their absence in another, reveals a great deal about this ideology and permits us to establish it with more or less great certainty.'

(Zipes, 2010, pg. 20)

This further reinforces the idea that contemporary folktales have been warped and transformed by the audience viewing it, in this instance, namely children. How does this relate to *The Mabinogion*? What relevance does any of this have on these tales? During research for this topic, it was difficult to find any similarly framed folk tales such as *The Mabinogi*. Of course, it would be impossible to search every folktale in existence, especially with each variation of those tales. The comparisons made in this topic will primarily be with widely known tales, such as those from brother Grimm, Arthurian Legend and Disney's adaptations.

The Mabinogion is a culturally important piece of work. Welsh-speaking schools, such as the one I went to, teach and dissect its workings in class. We learn about the various characters, plots and their heroics, as well as the culture lost due to the tales being forgotten. So how does the Mabinogi compare to other folktales such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*?

Firstly, *The Mabinogi* is interconnected, originally orally shared, since it is believed, around the bronze age. They comprise of four main branches, the first being *Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed*, the second, *Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr*, the third, *Manawydan, son of Llŷr*, and the last being, *Math, son of Mathonwy*. These four branches are taken from two main medieval illuminated texts, *The Red Book of Hergest* and *The White book of Rhydderch*. These texts would likely have been a transcription of oral tales, written down for wealthy princes or lords. We will likely never know the original tales besides these illuminated texts, and so it is hard to say

whether the stories adapted and transformed with time until they were transcribed. It is likely that they did; names, places would change depending on who and where the story was being told.

It is clear to see that *The Mabinogion* falls into the genre of folktales, as Bakhtin and Todorov would argue. But then, are there subsections of folktales? *Cinderella* is arguably different from *The Little Mermaid*, as the little mermaid is from *Little Red*. So then how would these stories be categorized to show their differences?

Steven Swann Jones in his book, *The Fairy Tale The Magic Mirror of the Imagination* explains it as such;

Folk Narratives

1. Myths - etiological narratives employing immortal protagonists
2. Legends - quasi-historical narratives employing extraordinary protagonists
3. Folktales - quotidian narratives employing ordinary protagonists

A- Fables - Didactic or moralistic tales

B- Jokes - Humorous tales

C- Novellas - romantic tales

D- Fairy tales - magical tales.

(Jones, 2002, pg. 8)

Then what genre would *The Mabinogion* as a whole fall in to? The branches each have multiple characteristics of these subgenres. The first branch alone deals with morality, magic, and romance.

Vladimir Propp, however, was also frustrated with how folktales had previously been categorized such as the ones in Jones' book. Propp is considered by some to be the founding father of folk tale studies. In his book *Morphology of the folktale*, Propp explains and dissects folktales by using a series of functions that the *dramatis personae* (the hero of the tale) must endure to classify as a folk tale. Propp states in his book "One must also keep in

mind that just as elements are assimilated within a tale, whole genres are also assimilated and intermingled.” (Propp, 1968, pg. 100) As it is, *The Mabinogion* would struggle to fit into any singular category. Even each branch viewed individually would be difficult to categorize. So then how does Propp dissect folktales to classify and separate them? It would be impossible in this analysis to discuss everything that Propp argues. His book *Morphology of the folktale* is a 134-page essay that goes into such depth that if I were to try and dissect *The Mabinogion* in as much detail, I would exceed the word limit tenfold. So, in short;

Propp created a number of spheres that included subsections that he dubbed as functions. The spheres typically go in chronological order and tend to follow a specific pattern separating the story into four parts. The spheres are large and difficult to put in quote form without paraphrasing (taken from my essay *Folklore, Narrative, Morality*, 2019)

Sphere one - Introduction: 1. Abstention, 2. Interdiction, 3. Violation of Interdiction, 4. Reconnaissance, 5. Delivery, 6. Trickery, 7. Complicity.

Sphere two - The body of the story: 8. Villainy and lack, 9. Mediation, 10. Counteraction, 11. Departure

Sphere three - The donor sequence: 12. Testing, 13. Reaction, 14. Acquisition, 15. Guidance, 16. Struggle, 17. Branding, 18. Victory, 19. Resolution

Sphere four - The heroes return: 20. Return, 21. Pursuit, 22. Rescue, 23. Arrival, 24. Calm, 25. Task, 26. Solution, 27. Recognition, 28. Exposure, 29. Transfiguration, 30. Punishment, 31. Wedding.

(Woodhouse, 2019, pg. 4)

Today we would view these spheres as *acts*, such as what Shakespeare would use in his plays. Propp attributed each function with a symbol.

Propp's functions are thus:

THE THIRTY-ONE FUNCTIONS

<i>α</i>	Initial situation	(0)
<i>β</i>	Absentation	One of the members of a family absents himself from home (1)
<i>γ</i>	Interdiction	An interdiction is addressed to the hero (2)
<i>δ</i>	Violation	The interdiction is violated (3)
<i>ε</i>	Reconnaissance	The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance (4)
<i>ζ</i>	Delivery	The villain receives information about his victim (5)
<i>η</i>	Trickery	The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of his belongings (6)
<i>θ</i>	Complicity	Victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy (7)
<i>λ</i>	Preliminary misfortune	Preliminary misfortune caused by a deceitful agreement (7a)
<i>A</i>	Villainy	The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family (8)
<i>a</i>	Lack	A member of a family lacks something or desires to have something (8a)
<i>B</i>	Mediation	Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched (9)
<i>C</i>	Beginning counteraction	The hero agrees to or decides upon counteraction (10)
<i>↑</i>	Departure	The hero leaves home (11)
<i>D</i>	First function of the Donor	The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or a helper (12)
<i>E</i>	The hero's reaction	The hero reacts to the actions of the future Donor (13)
<i>F</i>	Provision of a magical agent	The hero acquires the use of a magical agent (14)
<i>G</i>	Guidance	Hero is led to the whereabouts of an object of search (15)
<i>H</i>	Struggle	The hero and the villain join in direct combat (16)
<i>I</i>	Branding	The hero is branded (17)
<i>J</i>	Victory	The villain is defeated (18)
<i>K</i>	Liquidation of Lack	The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated (19)
<i>↓</i>	Return	The hero returns (20)
<i>Pr</i>	Pursuit	The hero is pursued (21)
<i>Rs</i>	Rescue	Rescue of the hero from pursuit (22)
<i>O</i>	Unrecognized arrival	Unrecognized, he arrives home or in another country (23)
<i>L</i>	Unfounded claims	A false hero presents unfounded claims (24)
<i>M</i>	Difficult task	A difficult task is proposed to the hero (25)
<i>N</i>	Solution	The task is resolved (26)
<i>Q</i>	Recognition	The hero is recognized (27)
<i>Ex</i>	Exposure	The false hero or villain is exposed (28)
<i>T</i>	Transfiguration	The hero is given a new appearance (29)
<i>U</i>	Punishment	The villain is punished (30)
<i>W</i>	Wedding	The hero is married and ascends the throne (31)

Figure 1 - Todorov's functions, The northern library project.

These functions are the basis for each folktale in existence. Throughout his book, Propp goes in to much further detail with each function. Giving each one several subfunctions that dismantle very specific coding. A, the code for villainy in a tale, has nineteen alternatives alone. For the sake of brevity, I will be predominantly focusing on the thirty-one functions only.

In the chapter *The Folktale as a Whole* Propp goes on to say;

Morphologically, a folktale may be termed any development out of villainy, or a lack, through intermediary functions to marriage, or to other functions used in the capacity of the dénouement.

(Propp, 1968, pg. 92)

As defined by *literarydevices.net*, “Denouement is a literary device that can be defined as the resolution of the issue of a complicated plot in fiction.” (N/A, 2019, <https://literarydevices.net/denouement/>)

So in short, these functions are what causes the end of the complex plot of the fairy tale.

Though Propp does specify that folktales specifically are characterized by there being a lack at the beginning of the tale. A lack here is defined as something the *dramatis personae* is missing, such as wealth, popularity, a family member etcetera. This is the catalyst, or the motivation, for the hero to begin their adventure.

In the first branch of the Mabinogi, this is seen by Pwyll wanting to make amends to Annwn for slighting him. In the second, Branwen is married off to create peace between Wales and Ireland. In the third, Manawydan has just lost three of his siblings, has made a friend in Pryderi, and sets to regain his lost land. These are rather simple lacks that reflect on the environment in which they were set, that being Bronze Age Wales. The fourth is a little more complex though.

In the fourth branch, the initial lack is not by the hero but is nonetheless important in pushing the narrative forward. Math, who is our introductory character reveals that he must lay his feet in the lap of a virgin unless he is at war. His nephew Gilfaethwy had fallen in love with Math's virginal lap holder and with his brother, Gwydion's, help devised a plan to steal her away. Gilfaethwy's lack is his inability to be with Goewin (the foot holder) due to Math not being at war.

This then leads us into the *dramatis personae's* lack, of which there are three. Due to Gwydion's treachery, he is told to find another foot holder. He offers up his sister, who he assures is a virgin. When his sister, Arianrhod, is tested, two babes fall to the ground. One of them, Dylan ail don, flees to the sea and becomes one with the seafoam. The other, Gwydion steals away and raises him in secret. This boy is, in fact, the hero of the fourth branch.

When Gwydion takes the boy to Arianrhod after several years, she refuses to acknowledge him. In fact, she curses him to never have a name, to never bare arms and to never find love. Arianrhod is the creator of the boys, who eventually is named Lleu, lack because she curses him to never have a name, bear arms or have a wife. She is the villain in the tale because she is the one who inhibits Lleu's progression.

The end of a folktale, according to Propp is to end in a wedding. Though, in this definition, a wedding does not specifically mean marriage. It could be a large celebration, a coming together of the family, something that is an inherent celebration of the heroes heroism and that acts as their reward. In *The Mabinogion*, marriage plays an integral part in many of the tales, though they do not necessarily happen at the end of the story.

So how does *The Mabinogion* conform to Propps structure and Functions? Do the four branches conform to the rule of *lack leads to eventual marriage*?

Below is an example of *The Deathly Hallows' Functions* from the site *Wescscreenplay.com*;

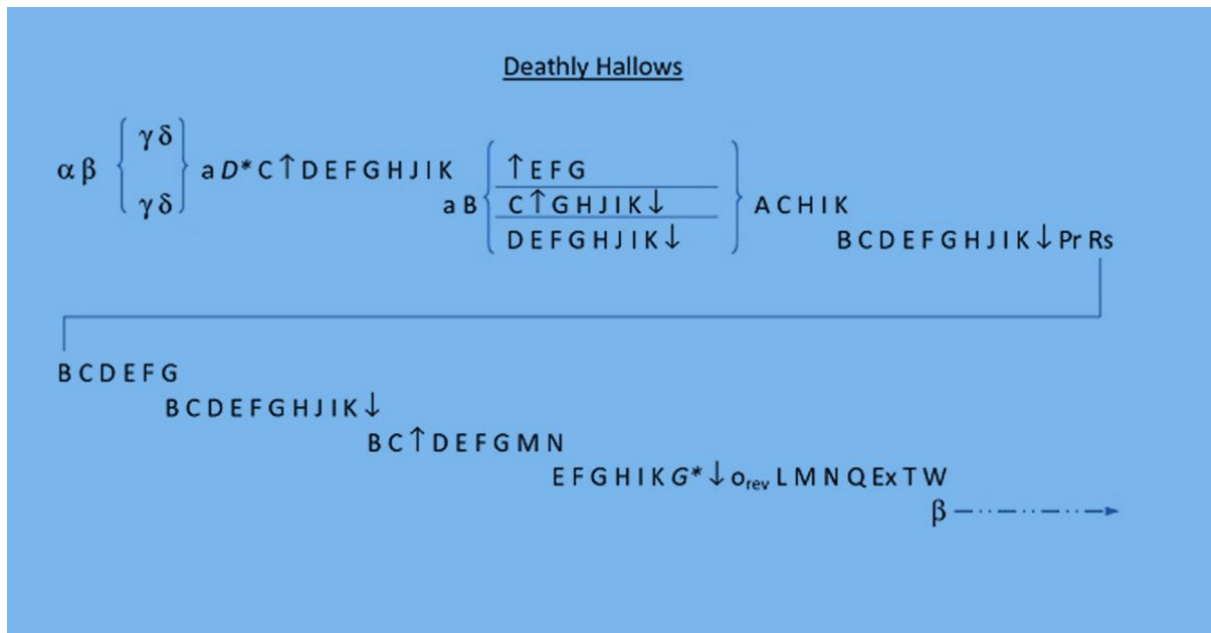


Figure 2. Functions of the deathly hallows

In this example, we see the struggle of the protagonist, his initial lack, his absentation, his departure, and the detailed steps of his villain.

With Pwyll being the main focus of the below equation, Annwn's subplot (the catalyst of Pwyll's adventure) will be in brackets. The equation of the first branch would resemble something such as this;

$$a \beta D E M C T \{ A \beta T \uparrow \} \uparrow G \text{ — } H J N \downarrow \{ N K \downarrow \} I \text{ — } a \gamma a D E H M G - \uparrow B C \eta \theta$$

But what does this mean? what relevance do Propps functions serve on decoding and deconstructing folktales, let alone *The Mabinogion*? Propp's argument is, " If we are incapable of breaking the tale into its components, we will not be able to make a correct comparison." (Propp, 1968, pg. 15) Essentially, if we are able to break *The Mabinogion* down to its core components, we will be able to comparatively say that it is not of the same genre as say, *Sleeping Beauty*. That might be obvious when comparing to Disney's child-friendly version of the story, but the original *Sleeping Beauty* deals with sexual assault,

the internment of a princess, a vengeful evil wife, all of which play key roles in most of the branches of the Mabinogi.

From the functions of the first branch, what can we deduce about its genre? Propp does not believe genres are important in the grand scheme of folklore. His belief is that folktales are a genre in and of themselves and so dissecting them further derives no further enrichment into the complexity of folklore as a whole. Propp states in regards to dividing tales into genre's,

the classification discussed are concerned with the division of folktales into classes. beside the division into classes, there is a division according to plots.
... divisions of fairy tales according to plots is, in general, impossible. Folktales possess one special characteristic: components of one tale can, without any altercation whatsoever, be transferred to another... if we think about the law of transference, it is logically inevitable that the sole result will be confusion or, more accurately, a division marked with cross-references, a classification continually distorting the essence of the material under examination.

(Propp, 1968, pp. 6-7)

If one were to follow what Propp argues here, regardless of the characters and the setting, it's the plot remaining the same that defines the tale. As I referenced earlier, *Talia Sun and Moon* deals with generally the exact same plot as *Sleeping beauty*. Though the princes' names differ and *Talia Sun, and Moon* is set in Italy whereas *Sleeping Beauty* is in France, the basics of the plot remain unchanged. Yet we know that they are still different enough to be classed as two very different tales.

The Mabinogion then could be argued as being in the same vein as Slavic folk tales of the Baba Yaga. An extensive lore that branches across numerous tales and anecdotes, it does not *need* a genre to define it. Perhaps Disney could not adapt it simply because it is not as cut and dry, not as easily defined as their adaptations of fairy tales. It is darker, grittier and less veiled with metaphor than it's fairytale siblings, and perhaps that is okay.

The Women of *The Mabinogion*

Women in fairytales and folktales that we know today are not typically women that modernists aspire to. They are defined as feeble, damsels in distress, and rarely take control of any situation for themselves. As Christa Mastrangelo Joyce says in her essay *Contemporary Women Poets and the Fairy Tale*, “Male Authors of fairy tales created female characters who sleep through their lives.” (Joyce, 2009, pg.31) *Cinderella* in Disney's adaptation, for example, must wait on the magical aid of her fairy godmother to marry a prince to remove herself from poverty. In Brothers Grimm's *Red Riding Hood*, Little Red relies on the woodsman to save her and her grandmother.

Context in correlation to *The Mabinogion* is important. These are medieval texts, likely orally spread throughout the Bronze age. The women in these tales are likely to not meet the same independence as we would expect today. That being said, the female character of *The Mabinogion* are in fact, wildly different from their later written kin.

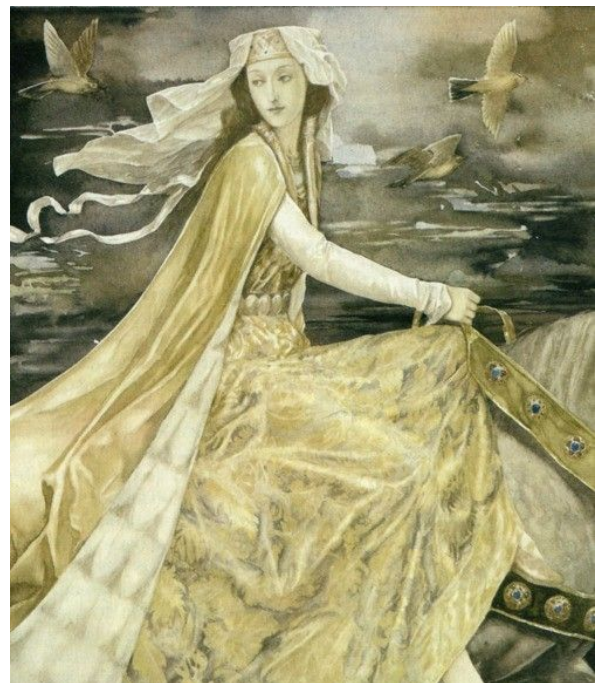


Figure 3. Rhiannon, Alun Lee

Rhiannon is the first woman we meet in *The Mabinogion*. In the first branch, Pwyll's soldiers tell him that a mound of earth near his castle would show a wondrous thing to whoever sits upon it. When Pwyll does so, a woman riding a brilliant white steed rides past him and he becomes immediately enamored with her. When any man goes to follow her, the horse only

gets further away as if by magic. Only when Pwyll asks her to slow down so that they may speak does she actually stop.

Rhiannon is atypical for women in folk tales for this very reason. As Joyce continues to say in her essay, "They are commonly flat, one-dimensional characters who come to life only through the actions of a male character." (Joyce, 2009, pg. 31) Rhiannon does not stop when men chase her. She defies them by continuing to ride until Pwyll politely asks her to stop. Typically, the male would need only run her down and she would profess her love for him as though she were a prize he had won. But Rhiannon is different.

Throughout the first branch, Rhiannon shows that she is not a woman to be owned by any man. Of course, She is married to Pwyll at the end of the tale, but as equals. Steven Swann Jones says in his book *The fairy tale: The magic mirror of imagination*, "The female protagonists are said to be relegated to passive roles, relying on others to provide guidance, motivation, and solutions to other problems." (Jones, 2002, pg. 65) This does not fit Rhiannon in any form. She is the one who devises a plan to break the contract between her and her betrothed. She is the one who guides Pwyll on what to say and do to win her hand in marriage. She is the one who is in control of her own destiny. Unlike so many other women in folk tales, Rhiannon is not passive in her own story.

Towards the end of the first branch, Rhiannon gives birth to a son. In the night, when six stewardesses' are supposed to be tending to the babe, they fall asleep. When they awake, the babe is gone and fearing their lives, they lie and say that Rhiannon murdered the child. Rhiannon taking counsel with her own advisors and people offers to sit at the front gate of the castle every day and tell the tale of her lost child. She is to carry people to the castle proper, like a beast of burden. Eventually, her son Pryderi is found again and she is cleared

of any wrongdoing. Pwyll is pressured by many of the other noblemen in Dyfed to execute her for her supposed crimes but he refuses.

Despite everything, Pwyll stands by Rhiannon's side and has her every night sit beside him still as the Queen of Dyfed. Jones states, "In many of the fairy tales they are discouraged from speaking their mind or acting on their own initiatives." (Jones, 2002, pg. 65) But again, Rhiannon is the one who suggests penance instead of death and her husband respects her opinion. He agrees with her, listens to her counsel above those in his court. That is a rare trait in many folk tales, especially for medieval prose.

The second branch is named for its heroine, Branwen. She is similar to Rhiannon in so much as she is not a woman to sit idly by and be guided by the men in her life. Though both Rhiannon and Branwen's stories involve marriage and the birth of their respective children, Branwen's tale is much darker.

Throughout the second branch, Branwen is used as a pawn. She is first married off to Matholwch, the king of Ireland, by two of her brothers, Manawydan and Bendigeidfran. When her third brother, Efnisien mutilates Matholwch's horses because he was not consulted about the marriage, Matholwch becomes enraged and threatens war. After Bendigeidfran gives Matholwch a number of magical items as compensation, Branwen leaves with Matholwch to live in Ireland.

The people of Ireland, however, were not so easily pacified. They implore Matholwch to punish Branwen further for the digressions of Efnisien and so Matholwch locks her away in the kitchens to work harder than any maid. Enduring torment and isolation, Branwen teaches a starling to send word to her brother Bendigeidfran, who marches across the sea with his army. In the ensuing chaos, a battle breaks out and from the fight only seven survivors return home, Branwen being one of them.

As Dr. Silima Nanda says in her essay *The Portrayal of Women in the Fairy Tales*;

Although many female characters in fairy tales are passive figures, such as Snow White, there are others who challenge the passivity by their transformative power of speech. In 'Rapunzel', 'The Robber Bridegroom' and 'Scheherazade', the female protagonists are not passive or silent. They are women who begin as objects of desire, but who strive to find their voice and through means of speech transform their social ambitions.

(Nanda, 2014, pg. 247)

Branwen in the Second branch begins as a peace offering and ends as the lone female survivor of a war caused by her brother. She is first silenced by her husband, isolated and forced to live in seclusion and to work as a maid for his Caer. She defies this isolation and censorship, and paves the way for her own rescuing. In Halo Quin's *Gods and Goddesses of Wales*, they say "Branwen's starling carries her words across the water and land to gain help. Her voice is silenced and yet she finds a way to speak." Branwen defies the stereotypical 'damsel in distress' trope, by fighting her own corner. She is the one who reaches out for help and is the one who creates the reason for her rescue. Women in folk tales are often incarcerated for one reason or another, but almost always rely on men in their lives. It's true that Branwen does go to her brother for help, inadvertently conforming to the trope of the damsel in distress. But she does so only because of the bond between Branwen and Bendigeidfran is so strong.



Figure 4. The Cauldron of Rebirth, Alan Lee

Having survived all of the torment, pain, and humiliation that two men in her life force her to endure, a war that erupts because of her brother, she dies of a broken heart on the return home. Branwen's heart is compassionate, and though this does somewhat play into the

stereotype that all women are inherently good, it is also a reminder for girls that just because you have endured hell, does not mean you should lose your compassion.

In the fourth and final branch, females and womanhood is a strong theme, that replays throughout the tale. The story focuses on the actions of two women, in particular, that of Arianrhod and Blodeuwedd. Both women encompass traits that are uncommon with women in folktales. Both are depicted as being villainous (Arianrhod cursing her own child three times and Blodeuwedd cheating on her husband and plotting to kill him).

Arianrhod in this tale is the catalyst for the trials to come. When Gwydion helps his brother Gylfaethwy steal away a young woman who is the foot holder of his uncle, his uncle demands a replacement. Once she steps across the magical wand of Math, Arianrhod is shamed for her being unchaste. As Jones says, when discussing female sexuality in *The Speaking Horsehead*, “Most young girls in western culture are taught, that sex is dirty and immoral...” (Jones, 2013, pg. 70). Arianrhod is unmarried, though she owns her own castle. She is shamed and belittled for her sexual activities and is humiliated with physical evidence of her proclivities.

Arianrhod flees the castle to return to her own, and Gwydion steals away Lleu. Years later, once Lleu has grown up, Gwydion returns to Arianrhod’s castle. Women in fairy tales do not typically own castles, not even when they are princesses'. *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, any property they call their own is in fact owned by the men in their life. Either by their father or by their husbands. Or, if they do own their own property they are the villains of the tale, such as the evil stepmother in *Snow White* or Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*. Dr. Nanda says in her essay argues, “Ambitious women in the fairy tales are always portrayed as evil from within, ugly and scheming, wielding over other women and men.” Arianrhod is not depicted

as being ugly, though she is portrayed as scheming and villainous. She is the source of Lleu's 'lack' (as Propp suggests in his book *Morphology of the Folktale*).

Arianrhod does not exhibit the same physical characteristics as her strong female counterparts. She is classed as beautiful and is powerful enough to curse her son and to cause her brother Gwydion (who is deemed the most intelligent wizard in Wales) to struggle to trick her into breaking the curses. Alice Keikrik stated in her essay "*...Happily Ever After*" (*Or what fairy tales teach girls about being women*).;

If the heroine is beautiful and good, then the evil character must exhibit the opposite physical attributes and this largely holds true... Lazy girls and older women are generally ugly, evil, and determined to take advantage of the heroine. They also exhibit traits that directly threaten the feminine ideal; they are strong, determined, and perhaps even greedy (Lieberman, 1972). Rather than accepting their situation, they make plans to change it, occasionally without even the presence of a man.

(Keikrik, 2009, pg. 39)

Arianrhod is depicted as all of these things and more. Though she is never shown to be ugly, physically, she is shown to take advantage of the heroine. Arianrhod, in fact, curses her son, Lleu to never truly be a man. He would never have a name, never bear arms, never marry. In medieval times (and earlier) these three things were incredibly important in defining masculinity. What is in a name? Status? Power? By Arianrhod removing his ability to be named, she also removes any ability for Lleu to own land, to work. To bear arms is to protect oneself. In the bronze age, men would be the ones to go to war, men would be the protectors of the home, the land. To marry was to continue your lineage, to secure your family line. Arianrhod threatens the feminine ideal by removing any masculine traits her son could identify with. In medieval times, the feminine ideal was to support and nurture the men in your life, to have their children and care for hearth and home. Arianrhod shunning her children and being shown to never have married is a direct threat to that ideal.

Blodeuwedd is the secondary antagonist in this tale. She is created by Gwydion and his uncle Math. She is formed from nature itself and her sole purpose is to oppose Arianrhod's last curse on Lleu, which is to never marry. Blodeuwedd's existence is to serve as a wife to a man she has never met, regardless of her own wishes. When Lleu is away on business, Blodeuwedd has an affair with a neighboring lord, Gronw Pebr. Blodeuwedd learns that Lleu can not be killed except for a very specific way, which is by a spear that has been forged for a year, whilst one foot is in a bath and the other is on a goat at dusk. She asks Lleu to show her this pose and Gronw, taking a spear he'd forged for a year, throws it at Lleu. Instead of killing him, Lleu transforms into an eagle and flies away to not be seen again.

Blodeuwedd here takes the initiative to end the relationship that she wanted no part in. She chooses for herself the man that she loves, and though her method of ending it is unorthodox, divorce is not something she was capable of choosing. She is literally created for Lleu in every sense, and her defiance is framed as an act of villainy. As Quin says, "Just as Arianrhod did not choose to give birth, Blodeuwedd did not choose to be married. In both instances, they take matters into their own hands and do their best to change things."

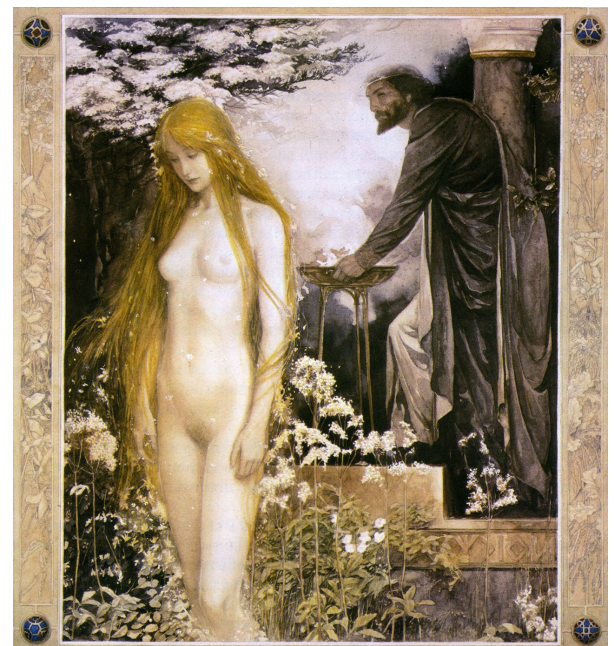


Figure 5. Blodeuwedd's creation,
Alan Lee

Blodeuwedd's rebellion is framed as a villainous act. Even today we can see the villainy behind her actions, cheating and then attempting to murder her husband. But, is she truly villainous? Her entire existence is created to serve her husband, is to be subservient to him.

In many artist renditions of the tale, Blodeuwedd is framed as being nude, formed of flowers and innocently sexual. Meaning that her sexual attractiveness comes from her inexperience with any man besides that of her forced husband. Keikrik states in her essay "The good female is generally submissively accepting of her lot in life while waiting for the prince to appear and take control of her destiny." And is that not the embodiment of Blodeuwedd? She is expected to answer to every whim of Lleu, and though we see no evidence of him being an awful husband to her, it is easy to understand exactly why she goes against him.

Sheldon Cashdan in his book *The Witch Must Die* states, "And in the manner of classic fairy tales, the story ends with the death of the witch, in this case, the evil wife." Though, Blodeuwedd does not necessarily die, so much as to be transformed. Blodeuwedd is punished by Gwydion when he finds out about her actions. He transforms her into an owl so that all birds will attack her if she shows her face in the day. She is returned to nature she was created from, not necessarily killed.

Conclusion

In Conclusion, *The Mabinogion* is a complex and reflective piece of literary genius. It conforms and also rebels against the confines of the folktale genre. *The Mabinogion* is as culturally important to the Welsh as the Baba Yaga to Slavic countries. Its characters are important moral reflections, and their struggles are still relevant today, discussing themes such as love, lust, betrayal, and death. Welsh learning pupils are still taught the tales in Welsh classes, the events in the tales told as warnings and cautionary tales.

The women of *The Mabinogion* are strong, independent and atypical of women in folktales. Rhiannon and Branwen are strong-willed women, who define their own path and destiny. They counter-argue, correct, guide the men in their lives without persecution. They are respected by their peers, valued. Arianrhod and Blodeuwedd are vilified for being

emasculating the men in their tales. Both women go against Lleu, Arianrhod cursing him and Blodeuwedds affair and eventual murder attempt. From a modern perspective, these women are justified in their anger against the men in their lives, but we still sympathize with the male hero. The men can be brutish and caring, or tender and loving. Pwyll and Bendigeidfran and loving, gentle husband and brother. Matholwch is viewed as weak, giving in to any demands made by his country. Gwydion is seen as cunning and ambitious, using his sister as a means to an end, whereas Lleu is impressionable, and does not make a single decision for himself. Regardless of gender, the characters rich and diverse in personality. The stories are dark and rooted in reality, with hints of magic that all folktales possess. It is no wonder then that Disney's brief attempt at welsh representation did not go so well when the tales discuss such dark themes. But maybe now is the time for them to try again, with their new wave of darker, female empowered films, *The Mabinogion* would fit in perfectly.

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