Animal Symbolism in the Tales of the Mabinogion.

Introduction

In the Mabinogion, themes of wildness, wonder, and restitution are threaded through quests for adventure. Many beasts populate the pages, emphasizing these themes and furthering the plot. Within the framework of the Mabinogion, we will first examine their Otherworldly association, then the mythology of the 'hunt' and the triumph over death, and finally, the significance of humans shapeshifting into animals. It is impossible to examine all the different contexts in which animals appear in the Mabinogion, however a few examples will be given to explore the points mentioned above. While no essay could give a full perspective on this topic, delving into the symbolism of the fantastic animals gives us a greater appreciation of the meaning and enchantment of the Mabinogion.

Animal Associations with the Otherworld

To the Celts, animals held a special place as intermediaries between this realm and the supernatural realm. Birds because of their ability to fly and their connection with the sky were thought to be 'spirits or perhaps the souls of the dead.'[1] They were able to traverse the different realms as messengers as the starling does in the second branch of the Mabinogion, carrying Branwen's message from overseas to her giant brother Bendigeidfran. Another example of their mystical association is the birds of Rhiannon who 'wake the dead and lull the living to sleep.'[2] Not only is the duality of the underworld and the living world present, but the birds of Rhiannon are mentioned in 'How Culhwch Won Olwen' as an impossible task, insinuating a spiritual attainment of a kind that is out of reach to the everyday man. Similarly, Rhiannon herself is connected to the Otherworld for Pwyll spots her astride a 'big, tall, pale-white horse.'[3] White often conveys the intermingling of the Otherworld with this one.[4] No matter how fast Pwyll races on his horse, he cannot keep up with Rhiannon or her magical steed, further emphasizing the ephemeral unattainability of the Otherworld, an idea which is tied integrally to the description of animals.

The Mythology of the Hunt & the Power of Death

Another image which fills the pages of the Mabinogion is that of the 'hunt.' Usually 'a precursor to an encounter with the supernatural'[5] the hunt has historically been a source of ritual and

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[1] Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 125 <https://r4-vlebooks-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/Reader?ean=9780203023563> [accessed 26 November 2025].
[2] Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p 196.
[3] ibid., p. 8.
[4] Susan Garlick, 'Horses, Swine and Magical Birds: The Role of Animals in the *Mabinogion'* (unpublished dissertation, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2011), p. 15.
[5] Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 228.

religious beliefs.[6] To the Celts, beasts were considered 'sacred and numinous'[7] and oftentimes possessed a 'divine status.'[8] The hunting of an animal became an image of resurrection, due to its death helping the community survive.

> The idea seems to have been that a death released new life and force, the sacrifice establishing a channel of communication between this world and the realm of the supernatural.[9]

This is exhibited when Pwyll, during a hunt, encounters another pack of dogs belonging to Arawn, king of Annwfn which is a name for the Celtic Otherworld.[10] The dogs were 'a gleaming shining white and their ears were red.'[11] Not only have we touched on the significance of the color white, but red was the color of death in Ireland.[12] Following a common Welsh and Irish tradition, Arawn employs Pwyll to kill a rival king, Hafgan, insinuating that the task is impossible for Arawn to complete himself.

> The whole concept that living men were required by the gods seems to be based on the idea that in the shadowy lands of the dead, the strength of a living, full-blooded hero is needed to fulfil a particular purpose.[13]

In the hunt, the stag is used as an intermediary between the two worlds. The symbolism of a knight hunting for a numinous or divine creature (often personified as a white stag or boar) which leads him to a world of gods or the dead holds connotations of the journey of the soul towards transformation or knowledge, or even the triumph over death. Green points out, regarding an Insular legend of how the Salmon of Wisdom acquired his knowledge, that the 'implication must be that this wisdom comes from the chthonic, underworld regions.'[14] While not in reference to the Mabinogion, it is interesting to ponder the association of wisdom with that of the supernatural realms. The third branch of the Mabinogion exemplifies the triumph over death when Lleu, instead of physically dying after being struck by a spear, transforms into an eagle who whenever he shakes, 'the worms and the rotten flesh fall from him.'[15] All this points to a metaphorical death revealed through animal transformation followed by a resurrection as he is restored to his human form.

Shapeshifting & the Interrelation of Man and Beast

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[6] Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 4.
[7] ibid., p. 3.
[8] ibid., p. 3.
[9] ibid., p. 94.
[10] Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 228.
[11] ibid., p. 3.
[12] Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 190.
[13] ibid., p. 168.
[14] ibid., p. 191.
[15] Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 62.

Animals are often used to 'elucidate aspects of characterisation,'[16] and to reveal internal struggles. This battle is between man and his own wild nature and is often shown through animal transformations, most notably as a form of punishment. Twrch Trwyth, the giant boar in 'How Culhwch Won Olwen' was a 'king and for his sins God changed him into a swine.'[17] Culhwch's name translates to 'pig/boar' and after his mother goes mad, he is born in a pig sty which illustrates his 'destiny as standing on the margins between the realm of the civilized world and that of the wild, unrestrained, unpredictable and non-domesticated nature.'[18] Gifaethwy and Gwydion, after raping Goewin 'take on the nature of the wild animals.'[19] Subsequently, Gwydion himself transforms Blodeuwedd into an owl for the 'shame'[20] she brought upon Lleu Llaw Gyffes. In each of these scenarios, the men and women have behaved in a way against reason and human nature. Led by their passions, they've had affairs, indulged disordered sexual desires, and disobeyed God. Changing into animals is less a change of nature and more a revelation of the nature they were already exhibiting. When Blodeuwedd and her maidens heard of the recompense that Lleu sought, they were 'so afraid that they could only travel with their faces looking backwards.'[21] It is therefore a fitting punishment for Blodeuwedd to be changed into an owl, a creature that can rotate its head 270 degrees and look straight backwards. It is also important to note that Lleu has the potential nature of a sun god, denoted by his name 'Bright One' and his association with the eagle.[22] In that case, the owl as a night creature would be a contrasting image to Lleu.

These bestial trappings uncover the symbolic struggle of the characters. The first interaction between Pwyll and Arawn, involving the killing and stealing of the stag from Arawn's pack to feed his own dogs, is a foreshadowing of the fleshly temptation that Pwyll (whose name means 'wisdom' or 'caution')[23] later must overcome regarding Arawn's wife. Because his dogs devoured what they should not have, Pwyll must learn to fight off his own 'temptations of the flesh'[24] and to exhibit *caution* instead. The hunt of the stag heralds this as it is 'an aggressive, masculine, conquering activity pitting man against the forces of wild nature.'[25] The tale of Owain also shows a positive triumph over the passions. As he wanders into the wilderness where he keeps 'company with the wild animals,'[26] his description is reminiscent of a beast himself: 'All

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[16] Garlick, 'Horses, Swine, and Magical Birds,' p. 63.
[17] Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 209.
[18] Lucie Vinšová and Václav Blažek, 'Study of the Zoonyms in the Mabinogion,' *Journal of Indo-European Studies,* 48, 1/2 (2020), p. 91, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2429822577/fulltextPDF/58F949401E5A462FPQ/1?accountid=130472&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals [accessed 26 November 2025].
[19] Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 52-53.
[20] ibid., p. 63.
[21] ibid., p. 63.
[22] Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 173.
[23] Davies, *The Mabinogion,* p. 228.
[24] ibid., p. 7.
[25] Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 60.
[26] Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 131.

his clothes disintegrated and his body all but gave out and long hair grew all over him.'[27] It is only when he clothes himself and with great difficulty mounts upon a horse, that his long hair drops from him in 'scaly tufts.'[28] A knight and his horse were so closely connected they were viewed as 'two inseparable and complimentary components.'[29] Metaphorically, the rider was often viewed as the soul/reason controlling the passions, i.e. the horse, keeping it away from sensual temptations.[30] Here, Owain is conquering his own passions and wildness. His success is exemplified by befriending the lion who follows him and plays around 'like a greyhound.'[31] Not only is Owain identified with the lion, but he also clothes himself in lion regalia: all in golden brocade and boots with 'an image of a golden lion fastening them.'[32] In surmounting his own wildness, Owain has transformed the king of the wild into a playful domesticated animal. The lion even helps defeat his enemies and then lays down in the horse's manager. This takes the symbolism one step further as 'no one from the castle dared go near the horse because of the lion'[33] revealing how, when passions are in proper accord with reason, they can protect and defeat the temptations that threaten the soul. In these varying contexts, animal imagery is used to reflect and represent human nature in a myriad of ways. It reveals both the good and the bad inclinations of hearts, highlighting the battles the characters fight not only with their enemies but also with themselves.

Conclusion

In Celtic life and religion, animals were heavily associated with the Otherworld. They were able to traverse the realms and bring messages from the gods. In the hunt, their sacrificial deaths opened portals through which renewing life forces could focus upon the earth. The Mabinogion overflows with these types of spiritual connections. Animals are also used as a mirror of the characters' hearts or actions, emphasizing their bestial nature or exhibiting the passions which they need to overcome. Once the importance of these beasts to the Celtic and the medieval mind is understood, the Mabinogion is filled with a mythical significance that is otherwise missed.

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[27] ibid., p. 131.
[28] ibid., p. 132.
[29] Burcin Erol, 'Galloping Through the Middle Ages: Horse in Medieval Life and Middle English Literature,' *Nalans,* 10, 19 (2022) p. 7, <https://doaj.org/article/f4e9abeb33a941c4a5deab4d40642750> [accessed 26 November 2025].

[30] ibid., p. 8.
[31] Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 134.
[32] ibid., p. 127.
[33] ibid., p. 135.

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