

Virgins, Mothers and Bastards

In the 14th century the Mabinogion went through a major key change and one which was to ensure its survival, it was written down on manuscripts, for the very first time. The first of these texts is the White Book of Rhydderch c1350 (held at Aberystwyth, NLW MSS Peniarth 4 and 5) and the second is the Red Book of Hergest c1400 (held at Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Jesus College 111). The Red book of Hergest is the biggest and most important book to survive from the Welsh medieval period and one of Britain's most prized ancient manuscripts. Within its pages are poetry, astrology, medical notes and also the four branches of the Mabinogion. The stories of the Mabinogion are set, in the much earlier Medieval courts of the gentile upper class societies, where the characters are people of note, living in a patriarchal society, as it was at the time. Previously the stories had been passed down orally, but now they were written down. We also need to remember that the stories of the Mabinogion spanned over a period of 1000 years, that is 1000 years of stories being passed and told orally, in which time, these stories will naturally have changed a little, as they were told, recounted, and remembered.

The tales in the Mabinogion consists of 11 tales and 4 branches, however in Lady Charlotte Guest translation (1838-45) she also included an extra 12th tale (Ystoria Taliesin), were written in Middle Welsh and at a time when Wales consisted of 4 separately ruled kingdoms, Dyfed situated in the Southwest, Morgannwg situated in the Southeast, Powys situated in the centre and Gwynedd situated in the North. These tales were devised to be performed aloud and the storyteller would use local landmarks like mountains, boulders, buildings, rivers, and the likes, to really bring the story alive for the audience, we also need to note that very few people were literate at that time. Of all the tales and branches, the Fourth Branch holds the strangest scenes, where magic and shapeshifting are never far away. Roberta .L.Valente "has seen the complex story of The Fourth branch a concern with established gender roles, individual violations of which deeply disturb the customs and coherence of social order." (Welsh, A. 1990. p.346). This of course all set in an era when women were regarded as "inferior and subordinate" (Ward, J. 2002. p.1) and where "the reproductive powers of a women are being withheld." (Larsen, C. 1993. p.36) Although rape was considered, "to be one of the nine forms of legal union." (Cartwright, J. 2003. P.59). However, "it was regarded as a punishable offence for which a number of fines were payable." (Cartwright,

J.2003. p.59). One form of fine was “amobor, which was payable to the virgins territorial Lord/King.” (Cartwright. 2003. P.59). Men still only sought and required a virgin for their wife. Cartwright noted that “Virginity and the power associated with virginity are the primary importance to the fourth branch of the Mabinogion.”(Cartwright, J. 2003. P.58) Mann notes “the polarised nature of medieval attitudes to women is notorious” (Mann, J.1991.) There is also a Middle Welsh proverb, to demonstrate the “need” to be a virgin, “E gont a del yw frovi hwyr e daw yw friodi (A tried and tested cunt marries late).” (Cartwright, J. 2003.p.56)

Math wanted a virgin wife, she was” expected to be a virgin – pure, inviolate and not yet pregnant.” (Cartwright, J. 2003. P.61). ‘Men,’ he said, ‘you have had peace and you shall have friendship. Now give me advice as to which virgin I should seek.” (Davies,S. 2007, p.54). Medieval bloodlines were particularly important, and a man would not want to risk marrying a woman who was carrying another man's child. The man would be seen as a fool if this were to occur, and his wealth and land could be passed down to the incorrect bloodline. Cartwright mentions that “according to the Welsh law of women, the girls close family, her cyfneseftiaid – that is her parents, brothers and sisters” (Cartwright, J. 2003.p.61), were able to vouch that the women in question, was indeed a virgin as required by the man. ‘Lord,’ said Gwydion son of Don, ‘it is easy to advise you – Aranrhod daughter of Don, your niece, your sister’s daughter.’ (Davies,S. 2007, p.54). It is interesting in the way Gwydion answered the question. Rather than emphasize his own relationship with her and the fact that she was his sister, he instead focuses on the fact that she is Maths niece. Was Gwydion trying to trick Math when he offers his sister to him? We do need to remember however though, that Gwydion had been away for 3 years (after Math had previously turned him and Gilfaethwy firstly into a stag, then a wild boar and lastly a wolf, as punishment for previously assaulting and raping Goewin), so perhaps Gwydion did really believe that Aranrhod was in fact still a virgin. Jane Cartwright notes that "he certainly seemed disappointed by her actions.” (Cartwright, J.2003. p.62).

Aranrhod was brought to Math, ‘Maiden,’ he said, ‘are you a virgin?’ (Davies,S. 2007, p.54). Aranrhod gave an ambiguous answer when she was asked if she was a virgin, she said “I know not but that I am” (Davies, S. 2007. p.54). With no pregnancy tests as such in Medieval times, other ways and methods were used, in the Mabinogion Math asks Aranrhod to step over his magic wand, ‘Step over this,’ he said. ‘and if you are a virgin I shall know.’ (Davies,S. 2007,

p.54). Jane Cartright recognised the obvious phallic symbol of the wand that Aranrhod was to step over. (Cartwright, J.2003.p.61). Mac Culloch noted "that the virginity test in the Mabinogi involves passing under a rod, the fact that Aranrhod steps over the wand, and, in the process, opens her legs as she straddles the phallic symbol, it is important to the sexual imagery of the text." (Mac Culloch, J, A. 1918. p.314). By demanding that a women should take a test, it shows that a women's word was also being doubted. Cartwright also notes that "ultimately, however, the message implicit in this branch of the Mabinogi is that virginity and fertility were not personal, private matters, for they were of extreme importance to the kin group as a whole." (Cartwright, J. 2003.p.63)

'Then she stepped over the magic wand, and as she stepped she dropped a large, sturdy, yellow haired boy.' (Davies,S. 2007, p.54). This baby (Dylan) we assume to be the result of a near full term or indeed full-term pregnancy.

'She made for the door, but as she went, she dropped a small something.' (Davies, 2007, p.54). "In Aranrhod, we have another case of withholding the reproductive powers of a women, but in this case, the withholding is also by the women, Aranrhod herself. The withholding of birth (signified by Aranrhod) is the opposite counterpart of the rape (signified by Goewin)." (Larsen, C. 1993. p.36). Cartwright suggests that Aranrhod was "perhaps expecting to be punished for being a twyllforwyn(false virgin)." (Cartwright, J. 2003. p.61)

The fact that Aranrhod "delivered" one baby and one foetus can only mean that conception occurred on two occasions and, if this was to be true, then there was an extremely high probability that it was also by two different fathers. To be born out of wedlock would present many challenges, who you were related to was incredibly important and gave power, money, and a social standing. You were nothing if you had no father's name. "Aranrhod, apparently unaware – or at least claiming – that she was not a virgin, is either unable or unwilling to admit the name of the child's father, and in denying the child a name denies him gender and kin also." (Winward, F. 1997. P.100)

"A woman who for good reasons would prefer to occupy the social identity of "maiden" is magically forced to deliver "twins "in public." (Welsh, A. 1990. P.361).

The small something, for which we take to be an embryo or foetus, we are told that before anyone else could get a second glimpse, "Gwydion took it and

wrapped a sheet of brocaded silk around it and hid it. He hid it in a small chest at the foot of his bed.” (Davies, S.2007, p.54). The small something (Lleu) then was said to remain in the chest, until one day when Gwydion heard crying. Upon opening the chest Gwydion saw a small boy waving his arms. Can we take from this that the writer is saying that a woman is not needed to grow a baby inside her, posing the question, are/were women really necessary? This exemplifies what we should and would expect from a patriarchal society.

‘He took the boy in his arms and carried him to town, where he knew of a woman who was nursing. He struck a bargain with the women to suckle the boy.’ (Davies, S. 2007, p.55). We see here the understanding of gender roles in the medieval period. Women were only seen as mothers; their duties were only really to nurture and care for the babies and the children.

“The theme of incest prevails.” (Zeiser, S.E, 2008. p.211). “Given that Aranrhods children are circumstantially the result of an incestuous union, either between uncle and niece or brother and sister.” (Zeiser, S.E.2008. p.211).

The fourth branch shows “incestuously doubled identities.” (Welsh, A. 1990. p.361). We also see that Aranrhod was replaced with Blodeuedd, but was Blodeuedd a woman, as she was made from flowers.

Before I end this essay. I would like to address just one more point. Some have asked “was the Mabinogion written by a woman”? There have been countless suggestions by no real proof. We see in Sioned Davies translation that there were many oral techniques used and there were displays of some strong female characters, but, the strongest argument, that the writer was female, comes from Dr Andrew Breeze. He suggests that the Mabinogion was written, or partly written by a Welsh princess, her name was Gwenllain and she was the daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan, who was the King of Gwynedd, situated in the North of Wales. Dr Breeze explained some of his reasons behind his theory, he said “What we can say about these stories is that they are very good at describing children, babies, breast feeding, motherhood, and even though warfare occurs the writer is not interested in swords and daggers and axes.” (Medieval News. 2009. P.1). I can see where Dr Andrew Breezes is looking to substantiate his theory, would men in the Medieval times be so aware of such female matters, I really do not believe that the men at the time would want to speak about or have any interest in such female matters. One only needs to go back less than 100 years from the present day, to find that even then, men

were not aware of such female issues. Even though some scholars have shown Breezes arguments to be unfounded, we will never really know for sure.

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