

This week we're looking at prose for the first time. Dafydd has recorded a lecture on the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, so I don't want to repeat that too much. But I'd like to focus on some things to look out for in your reading. And especially with a view to comparing the Four Branches, which is perhaps the best-known piece of medieval Welsh literature, with *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or the Cattle Raid of Cooley, which has a similarly prominent status in medieval Irish literature. So we'll look at some similarities and differences, and some themes and things to look out for.

(SLIDE 2) First of all I'd better summarize a bit of the wider backgrounds to these stories.

To begin with *Táin Bó Cúailnge* [pronounced, roughly, TOYN VO COOLING-E], it's the longest and best known of the stories of the Ulster Cycle. And what we mean by 'cycle' is a collection of independent stories that are all set in the same time and place, in this case mainly around Ulster, in the first century AD¹; and that involve a recurring cast of characters. The focus shifts onto different characters in different stories, but the wider world where the action takes place is essentially the same. There are a lot of stories in the Ulster cycle – about eighty. And it's not the only cycle - there's also a Mythological Cycle, set in the earlier time of the Celtic gods and goddesses, the Fenian Cycle, set later, in the third century AD, and the cycles of the Kings, which contains a variety of stories about the prehistoric and historic kings of Ireland.

The eleven Welsh Mabinogion stories, taken as a group, are quite diverse. The title 'Mabinogion' was applied to them relatively recently and just used for convenience. The more significant term is *Mabinogi*, which refers only to the four stories called the four branches of the Mabinogi, all featuring the hero Pryderi. But oddly, Pryderi isn't the main character in any one of them – they're named instead after Pwyll, king of Dyfed, Branwen, the daughter of Llŷr, her brother Manawydan, and Math son of Mathonwy.

The other tales of the so-called Mabinogion involve different characters and settings. Most involve King Arthur. A subset of these Arthurian stories, sometimes called the three Romances, seem to belong to a similar kind of

¹ Conchobar, King of Ulster and foster-father of Cú Chulainn, dies at the same time as Christ. It was once thought that the 'events' of the Ulster Cycle did indeed take place around the time of Christ, but it is now accepted that such a chronology is an invention of the clerical redactors of the stories, and it is perhaps more useful to think of these narratives as existing in an imaginative realm rather than in any definite historical period (Carson, *The Táin*).

setting to one another, with influences from continental ideas of chivalry. ‘Culhwch ac Olwen’ is probably a bit older, and has a much more down-to-earth tone, sometimes brutal, but with a sense of humour as well. ‘Breuddwyd Rhonabwy’, the last Arthurian tale, is probably relatively late. And then we have ‘the Dream of Macsen Wledig’ and the tale of Lludd and Llefelys, two stories looking back at the legendary history of Wales in Roman times.

But that’s just some background, the only things we really need to consider for this module are *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and the Four Branches. But do read more if you have time - and if you haven’t already.

So, (SLIDE 3) why are we asking you compare *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and the Four Branches?

Firstly, as I said, they’re two very important and well-known texts. Both contain otherworld or supernatural elements, and are considered to retain traces of old Celtic religion, even though it was later, Christian writers who wrote them in their final form. They have some similarities in their narrative techniques and motifs, which I’ll say a bit more about later. And they have a strong sense of place, and include little asides, explaining names and place names.

But they also have differences. *Táin Bó Cúailnge* reads like a single ‘epic’ with an identifiable warrior-hero, Cú Chulainn. He’s been compared to Achilles, and the *Táin* has been compared to Homer’s *Iliad*.

The Four Branches have a looser structure; as I mentioned before, Pryderi is the only figure who appears in them all, but he is not the main character in any of them.

(SLIDE 4) So, to have a look in more detail. We have two versions or recensions of *Tain Bo Cualinge*. The first version derives from a bringing together of two incomplete sources. The oldest, called the Book of the Dun Cow, dates from around the year eleven hundred, but is thought to derive from ninth-century texts, which might themselves have derived from texts two or three centuries older. But the other source is relatively late, the fourteenth-century Book of Lecan.

The second recension, preserved in the twelfth century book of Leinster, seems to have been adapted in order to provide a more cohesive narrative. And that’s the one translated by Ciaran Carson in the book on the reading list.

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi, by contrast, is no earlier than the thirteenth century in terms of the manuscripts where it's preserved. We find it in two of the most important Welsh manuscripts of the Middle Ages, the White Book of Rhydderch, written in the mid fourteenth century, and the Red Book of Hergest, written around the end of that century. And there are also a couple of fragments in an earlier, mid-thirteenth century manuscript called Peniarth 6.

We don't really know when the Four Branches were composed, but it's generally agreed that it's at least as old as the twelfth century.

The take-home message from all that is that the Four Branches and the second recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* may have been reaching their final form at roughly the same time, around the twelfth century.

But it's thought *Táin Bó Cúailnge* has a much longer history as a written text or texts. Whether it derived ultimately from much earlier oral material, or was essentially a literary composition, the work of Christian writers recreating or imagining Ireland's pre-Christian past, has been a matter of debate.

By contrast, in the case of the Four Branches it's generally agreed that it does originate from the oral tradition, that is, from a bringing together of a variety of orally transmitted tales.

We don't know for sure who the author was in either case - that is, the person or persons who shaped the stories in their final stages. There's a suggestion in the case of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and other stories of the Ulster cycle that they were written by clerics at Armagh, which was an important centre of learning and close to the ancient Navan Fort, which forms a centre of the action in the stories. In the case of the Four Branches, it might again have been a cleric, or it could have been a courtier. We just don't know. Though it does appear that these stories were written for an aristocratic audience.

So, to look more closely at the structure (SLIDE 5). In the case of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* the basic plot is quite linear and the setting consistent - there's a raid by the men of Connacht to steal a bull from Ulster, there's a lot of fighting involving the hero Cú Chulainn whilst the rest of the Ulstermen are laid low by a curse, there's a great battle between the two armies, and a final combat between the two bulls of Connacht and Ulster. And as I said, the *Táin* is only one of the stories that together make up the Ulster Cycle, so there is a very large and complex range of material involving its characters.

(SLIDE 6) The Four Branches of the Mabinogi, as the name suggests, are four stories, and the extent to which they make up a unified whole is a matter of debate. They are all fairly self-contained, though there are links between them, notably the presence of Pryderi, who is born in the first branch and killed in the last. As I've said, Pryderi is not the main character in any of the branches, but perhaps they derive ultimately from a story or saga in which Pryderi *was* the hero.

As they stand, though, each of the Four Branches has its own cast of characters, albeit overlapping to some extent. And the setting changes too. The first and third branches, that is, the stories of Pwyll and Manawydan, could be called southern – they are set mainly in Dyfed, in south Wales. But the second and fourth branches are from the viewpoint of Gwynedd in the north, though with an extended visit to Ireland in the second branch.

Another difference between the branches – and this is something you'll form a view on yourselves as you read them – is a difference in tone. In the southern branches, everyone seems to behave better. Pwyll's name means 'wisdom', and though he may not always show much wisdom, he does *learn* wisdom during the course of the first branch. In the third branch, Manawydan is always wise. And both branches have an emphasis on friendship, and self-restraint, including in sexual matters.

By contrast, the second and fourth branches, the stories of Branwen and Math, seem a lot darker and grimmer. There's more violence, including rape, and there's more vengeance and selfishness.

Even so, though they may have had disparate origins, there's a general view that the Four Branches were consciously brought together by a single author. John Bollard's article, in the reading list, discusses this, arguing that the author's main concern was on the kind of personal conduct that was needed for society to function and progress. And Bollard identifies three dominant, interlacing themes that bind the Four Branches together into a unified whole, namely friendships, marriages and feuds. That is, three things which either bind society together, or break it apart. And Sioned Davies, if you read the introduction to her edition, takes a similar view.

(SLIDE 7) As I said, it seems the Four Branches, and *perhaps* also *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, originated as a variety of oral stories. And these would have been part of a tradition that everyone knew, but quite fluid rather than being fixed. They

might change with each telling, either because the storyteller forgot things, or thought he could improve things, or because he was adapting for a particular audience. I like to think of it as being a bit like the modern Avengers or X-Men films - they're all set in the same 'universe' and different characters can appear either in a major role, or in a minor role in another character's story. And in fact, Cú Chulainn, the hero of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, does come across a lot like a superhero. And the same is true of some of the Mabinogion stories, especially in the story of 'Culhwch ac Olwen' which you'll also find in Sioned Davies's book.

At some point, someone decided to write these stories down.

Writing a text down fixes it in a sense of course, but every time it is copied there is a potential for change – either copying errors or deliberate adaptations. We have different recensions of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, as I mentioned, with the second recension having been adapted to make the story more cohesive. For the Four Branches things are more straightforward, I'm glad to say, as the surviving manuscript copies are quite similar to one another.

But we do have an example of a more fluid text in the wider context of the Mabinogion stories. And that's the Arthurian tale of Peredur, which exists in a short and a long version, the longer one having had some episodes added on at the end. You can read about that in Sioned Davies's book.

(SLIDE 8) Even once they'd been written down, these texts still weren't the kind of prose we're familiar with today, that we read for ourselves as individuals – it's thought they'd usually have been read aloud to an audience. So the action tends to get broken down into relatively short episodes. And there are other features in the text which are regarded as being particularly suited to oral delivery, or as being remnants of oral transmission.

Firstly, there's a lot of repetition of themes and episodes. Often it's three-fold repetition, building to a climax the final time. For example, in the first of the four branches Pwyll goes three times to the mound called Gorsedd Arberth and sees Rhiannon riding, and the third time she speaks with him. And in the fourth branch Gwydion sings three *englynion*, three short poems, to Lleu, who's been transformed into an eagle, to bring him down from a tree, and with the third Lleu drops on to Gwydion's knee so he can be returned to human form.

And it's similar in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. (SLIDE 9) In one episode Cú Chulainn is tricked by the Morrígan [pronounced Mo-REE-gan], the goddess of war, into healing the wounds he'd earlier given her. When he's exhausted from fighting she comes and offers him milk to drink, and he blesses her for it – and note by the way that these are the blessings of plural gods, of heaven and earth. And with the first drink her first wound is healed, and with the second, her second wound, and with the third and final drink her last wound is healed.

Repetition like this is a common storytelling device, it helps build an expectation on the part of the audience, creating tension. And in an oral story, repetition is a convenient way of making a story longer without its details being too hard to remember.

(SLIDE 10) So going back to the oral features, in the case of the Four Branches and other Mabinogion stories Sioned Davies has drawn attention to a variety of formulaic phrases which crop up in the same or slightly different forms at various points in the story. I won't say too much about these as you'll be able to spot them for yourselves, but they include oaths, like 'God knows' or 'between me and God', various greetings and responses, the physical appearance of characters, and fighting, as in the case of Pwyll attacking Hafgan, breaking his shield and armour, and throwing him over his horse's rear end to the ground, which was a fatal blow. And there are similar accounts in the Three Romances, especially the story of Geraint, as Sioned Davies notes.

And then there's also formulae for the passage of time, and approaching a castle or fort. There's opening formulae – the name of lord, his status and dominion, then 'once upon a time'. For example, 'Pwyll, prince of Dyfed, was lord over the seven cantrefs of Dyfed. Once upon a time he was at Arberth, one of his chief courts...'. And so on.

Going back to my list of oral features (SLIDE 11), another one is a strong reliance on dialogue. So you can imagine the different parts being acted out by the storyteller or the person reading the text aloud.

And there's poetic elements, spoken by the characters 'at heightened points of the action', as Ciaran Carson puts it. They're especially common in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, but there are also a few in the Four Branches, as I mentioned. And as well as adding more drama to the story these would have been easier to remember than prose, because of rhyme and alliteration.

There's also various kind of 'asides' which seem designed to appeal to the audience's wider knowledge and interests, and locate the story within a wider tradition, or within the landscape of Ireland or Wales.

(SLIDE 12) So quite often in the Four Branches we get references to what are called Triads, that is, as Dafydd puts it 'characters and episodes arranged in groups of three as a mnemonic device'. For example, at the end of the second branch, the story of Branwen, there is a reference to a blow striking the heroine that was one of the 'Three Unfortunate Blows' of the Island of Britain. And at the start of the third branch, her brother Manawydan is told by Pryderi that he is known as 'One of the Three Undemanding Chieftains'. Who the other two may have been isn't mentioned. But these groups of three things, or people, are also found outside the context of the prose tales, grouped together in large collections. And in fact there are two important collections in the Red Book of Hergest and the White Book of Rhydderch – the same two manuscripts where we find the Four Branches and the other Mabinogion stories.²

(SLIDE 13) In the triad-collections we find the full list of the three sinister or ill-omened blows or slaps – the word, *palfod*, is the same as in the Four Branches. And here again we find the blow to Branwen, along with a slap to Gwenhwyar or Guinevere by her sister Gwenhwyfach, and a slap by a poet named Golydan upon Cadwaladr, a king of Gwynedd. Interestingly, the Triad says that it was Branwen's husband Matholwch who struck her, not his butcher as in the text of the second branch. Perhaps Matholwch is regarded as being indirectly responsible, or perhaps the Triad reflects a slightly different version of the story.

The second Triad I mentioned, in the story of Manawydan, is also present in the Triad collections. And here Manawydan is found along with Llywarch Hen, who we've already met in the context of the saga poetry, and Gwgon Gwron son of Peredur, a hero of the Old North. The translations differ, but the Welsh phrase is the same, again: *lleddf unben*, in each instance.

(SLIDE 14) So to summarize - in the prose tales, Triads are used to emphasize important points or sections of the story by linking them to the wider tradition. There are many Triads not referred to in the surviving prose tales, and many allusions to 'lost' stories. It does seem there were many more stories in

² There's also a smaller collection, dating from the late thirteenth century, in a manuscript called Peniarth 16. And in origin, the triad collections probably go back considerably further than this, either in written or oral form. Edition & translation by Rachel Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (4th edition).

circulation in medieval Wales than we know about today. But the Triad collections also had an importance of their own. It's thought they were regarded as a memory aid for poets and storytellers, to help them remember the names and attributes of traditional and historical figures. And the poets used this knowledge a lot - for example, by comparing a patron to someone famed for courage, or wisdom, or some other attribute.

And you do get Triad collections in Welsh and Irish. In fact, Irish also has groups of two, four and seven.

(SLIDE 15) Another kind of aside, linking the story into wider traditions or the wider world, is when the storyteller offers an explanation of how a person or place got its name. You might find the word 'onomastic' used in your reading, which just means that an explanation or story is concerned with the origin of a name.

For example, in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* we have an account of how a warrior called Lethan lay in wait for Cú Chulainn at a ford, and was killed. And as a result, the place was called Áth Lethan, or Lethan's Ford.

These 'explanations', in inverted commas, shouldn't be taken too literally though. It's thought they were generally made up to 'explain', in inverted commas, a pre-existing name, whose real origin was probably quite different and not so dramatic. In this case, as Ciaran Carson points out, *Áth Lethan* could just mean 'broad ford'.

It's hard to say how many of the place-names referred to in the stories are real. There could have been many names known to the audience in the Middle Ages, that have since been lost. It's possible that some of the explanations in these stories relate to names that only ever existed in the story. But on the other hand, it's thought storytellers would try to link the events of their stories, whenever they could, to real places known to their audience.

Explanations of the origin of personal names were also popular - in the Four Branches, for example, Pryderi gets his name when his mother Rhiannon is delivered from her anxiety, or *pryder*, on his account. And Cú Chulainn gets his name - which means 'the hound of Culann' - when the guard-dog belonging to Culann attacks him and he kills the dog. And he offers to find a pup of the same breed, and in the meantime to take up the dog's guard duties himself.

(SLIDE 16) So that's a few things to look out for. Another important feature of these stories is the traces they contain of earlier Celtic religion. As I mentioned, in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* we sometimes find references to plural gods. Though this doesn't necessarily mean that the storyteller believed in plural gods himself – he may just be imagining what it was like in the pre-Christian past.

Then again, we do have various godlike figures. The shapeshifting Morrígan, I mentioned earlier. And Cú Chulainn himself has superhuman abilities as a warrior, and is the son of an otherworld figure, Lug, who is regarded as a Celtic god of light and the arts, identified with the Gaulish Lugus. Lug comes to heal him in the story, and significantly this takes place on a mound.

Again, Fergus and Medb [pronounced MAYV] could be seen as a god and goddess, in the latter case a sovereignty goddess, specifically.

And in the Four Branches we have Lleu Llaw Gyffes, whose name means 'the fair-haired one with the skilful hand'. Or the word *lleu* more literally means 'light' or 'brightness'. And he's been equated, again, with the Gaulish Lugus or Irish Lug.

Bran or Bendigeidfran, too, has some superhuman attributes. He appears to be a giant – he can't be contained in a house, he resembles a mountain as he wades the Irish sea, and at one point he lies down to form a bridge over a river. And in addition to all that his head carries on living after it's been cut off.

And then Rhiannon has the power, on horseback, to evade Pwyll's men, and to evade Pwyll himself until he calls on her. It's thought her name derives from that of the Celtic goddess Rigantona ('the great, or divine queen'). And she's also been compared to the horse-goddess Epona.

(SLIDE 17) Another supernatural aspect is the otherworld encounter. Places such as mounds or lakes were seen as points of contact with the Otherworld. So, as I mentioned, Cú Chulainn is healed by his father Lug on a mound, and Pwyll sees Rhiannon from a mound (Gorsedd Arberth). And indeed, Pwyll went there in the first place because he was told he'd see a wonder, or else be wounded. Again, Matholwch acquires his magic cauldron from a man who came out of a lake.

Another theme in the Four Branches and the *Mabíngion* more widely is that the heroes have otherworld encounters when they leave the safety of the court and go out into woodland or some other wild setting. Often it's when they're out

hunting. For example, Pwyll meets Arawn, king of Annwfn, during a hunt for a stag; and Manawydan and Pryderi are led during a boar-hunt to the fort where Pryderi is magically taken prisoner. And there are more examples in the Arthurian tales.

(SLIDE 18) Another interesting supernatural aspect involves ideas of fate and taboos. Ian Hughes has written about this, though only in Welsh I think.³ Anyway I mentioned last week the prophecy involving Cú Chulainn, that if he fought on a particular day, stories about him would be told forever.

Another of the Ulster Cycle stories gives the account of how he eventually died, and this involves two taboos – namely, things which he had to avoid doing, and which if he did do them would hasten the day of his death.

One was that he could not eat the flesh of a dog – and his naming involved a hound, of course. And the other was that he must not pass a place where someone was cooking, without taking some of the food. And of course, in the story, these two things come together. He meets three witches cooking a meal of hound meat, and is wounded when he has to take some.

In the Mabinogion there's similar ideas in the two 'northern' branches, especially the fourth branch. So here we have Arianrhod pronouncing three fates or destinies on her son Lleu – the word used is *tynged* – so that he cannot get a name, weapons or a wife unless she provides them. Gwydion overcomes all three by trickery, but Ian Hughes suggests that he doesn't really succeed, and that there is an eventual reckoning when Blodeuwedd, the woman Gwydion and Math conjured from flowers, betrays Lleu.

And again, Lleu is someone who like Cú Chulainn is almost invulnerable, with various complex conditions being needed to kill him.

Ian Hughes also suggested that Bendigeidfran might not have been an actual giant in the earliest version of the story, but that the idea that he could not be contained in a house was originally a taboo or *geis*. And Ian noted that it's when that taboo is broken, and the Irish king Matholwch builds a house to offer hospitality to Bendigeidfran, that his head is struck off.

(SLIDE 19) One more thing to consider is the heroic ideal that we looked at last week.

³ Discussed (in Welsh) in Ian Hughes, 'Geis, tynghet a kynnedyf', *Dwned*, 19 (2013), 11–37.

Cú Chulainn is the archetypal fearless hero fighting for fame. Although, on the other hand, is war itself glorified? Is it portrayed as a good thing for society as a whole? You can draw your own conclusions on that score.

In the Four Branches there's much less trace of the heroic ideal, and fighting certainly isn't portrayed as always being the best answer to a problem. Pwyll's fight at the ford may be presented as a success. But in the third branch, when Pryderi – possibly the original hero of these stories – wants to fight the English tradesmen, Manawydan keeps dissuading him. And it's Manawydan's wisdom and prudence that win the day at the end of this branch.

(SLIDE 20)

You can decide for yourselves what the main themes of these stories are. And likewise, what the aim of the author, or the final author, may have been. Was it pure entertainment, or was there an intention to convey moral lessons, or preserve important traditions, or promote a particular view of the past? Or perhaps some combination of all of these!