

Week 3

- The Four Branches of the Mabinogi and *Táin Bó Cúailnge*
 - overview
 - themes and motifs
 - things to look out for



Wider context

- the Ulster Cycle
 - about 80 stories with a large cast of characters (*Táin Bó Cúailnge* is the longest and regarded as the most important)
 - ‘set’ in the first century A.D., mainly around Ulster
- There are other ‘cycles’ with different settings – Mythological Cycle, Fenian Cycle, the Cycles of the Kings
- the ‘Mabinogion’ stories (diverse characters and settings)
 - the Four Branches of the Mabinogi
 - stories of Pwyll, Branwen, Manawydan and Math
 - Arthurian tales
 - ‘Three romances’ (Peredur, Owain, Geraint)
 - ‘Culhwch ac Olwen’
 - ‘Breuddwyd Rhonabwy’
 - Breuddwyd Macsen Wledeig
 - Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi and *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

- Amongst the most famous works of literature from medieval Wales and Ireland
- Both are considered to retain traces of old Celtic religion but were the work of later, Christian writers
- Some similarities in narrative techniques and motifs
- Both have a strong sense of place, with ‘onomastic’ elements
- Differences in ‘tone’ and structure
 - *Táin Bó Cúailnge* reads like a single ‘epic’ with an identifiable warrior-hero, Cú Chulainn
 - the Four Branches have a looser structure; Pryderi is the only figure who appears in them all but he is not the main character in any of them

Táin Bó Cúailnge

- Recension 1
 - Book of the Dun Cow, c.1100 (< 9c texts < 6/7c texts?)
 - Yellow Book of Lecan, 14c (both are incomplete)
- Recension 2
 - Book of Leinster, 12c
- Derived from much earlier oral material? Or a literary creation reimagining Ireland's past?
- Clerical authorship - Armagh?

Four Branches of the Mabinogi

- Preserved in
 - White Book of Rhydderch (mid-14c)
 - Red Book of Hergest (c.1400)
 - fragments of 2nd & 3rd branches in Peniarth 6 (canol 13c)
- Written in current form ?12c or a little earlier
- Derived from much earlier oral material
- Written by cleric – or courtier?

Structure

Táin Bó Cúailnge

- Basic plot quite straightforward, unity of ‘setting’ and characters
 - raid by men of Connacht to steal a bull from Ulster for their queen, Medb
 - Cú Chulainn is sole defender while the Ulstermen are afflicted by a curse
 - battle between the two armies
 - combat between the Ulster bull and Connacht’s own bull

Structure

Four branches

- Quite loosely linked – all feature Pryderi (was he originally the hero?)
- Differences in setting – first and third branches from viewpoint of Dyfed ('southern'), second and fourth from viewpoint of Gwynedd ('northern')
- Differences in tone – in the 'southern' branches the characters display (or learn) wisdom, and show friendship and chastity; in the 'northern' branches there's more violence, including rape, and there's more vengeance and selfishness
- Uniting themes, re. uniting/dividing society? Friendships, marriages, feuds (see J. R. Bollard article).

The oral tradition

- The Four Branches (and the *Táin*?) originated as a variety of oral stories
 - independent but part of a tradition that everyone knew
 - stories could change with each telling ('re-imaginings', all in the same 'universe'!)
- Became (more) fixed in prose
 - but prose transmission can be fluid too
 - different recensions of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*
 - additions to *Peredur* (one of the Arthurian Mabinogion stories)

‘Oral’ features

- Episodic structure within each branch – manageable size to read aloud
- Repetition of themes and episodes (often threefold) – builds tension, and easy to remember!
 - Pwyll and Rhiannon at Gorsedd Arberth
 - Gwydion charms Lleu from the tree ...

The Morrígan appeared to him in the shape of a one-eyed old hag, milking a cow with three teats. He was dying with thirst, and he asked her for a drink. She gave him milk from the first teat.

‘Good health to the giver,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘and the blessings of the gods of heaven and earth on you!’ With that, her ribs were healed.

She gave him milk from the second teat, and her eye was healed. She gave him milk from the third teat, and her leg was healed.

C. Carson, *The Táin* . Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.

‘Oral’ features

- Episodic structure within each branch – manageable size to read aloud
- Repetition of themes and episodes (often threefold) – builds tension, and easy to remember!
- Repeated, formulaic phrases
 - oaths
 - greetings and responses
 - physical appearance
 - fighting (‘Pwyll’ similar to ‘three Romances’)
 - passage of time
 - approaching a castle or fort
 - opening formula - name of lord, status, dominion, then ‘once upon a time’
 - comparison
 - taking counsel

‘Oral’ features

- Episodic structure within each branch – manageable size to read aloud
- Repetition of themes and episodes (often threefold) – builds tension, and easy to remember!
- Repeated, formulaic phrases
- Strong reliance on dialogue – would have been ‘acted out’ by the performer
- Also poetic elements (especially in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*), spoken by characters at ‘heightened points of the action’ (Carson, *The Táin*)
- Appealing to the audience’s wider knowledge and interests
 - Triads
 - stories ‘explaining’ personal names or place-names

Triads

(characters and episodes arranged in groups of three
as a mnemonic device)

Johnston, *The Literature of Wales*

‘And that is how this branch of the Mabinogi
ends, concerning the Blow to Branwen which was one of
the Three Unfortunate Blows [*tryded anuat paluawt*] in
this Island...’ (Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 34)

‘ “... you have never claimed land or territory - you are one
of the Three Undemanding Chieftains [*trydyd lledyf
unben*]” ’ (ibid. 35)

Triads

‘Three Sinister (Ill-omened) Hard Slaps [*Teir Gwith Baluawt*] of the Island of Britain :

One of them Matholwch the Irishman struck upon Branwen daughter of Llŷr

The second Gwenhwyfach struck upon Gwenhwyfar: and because of that there took place afterwards the conflict of the Battle of Camlan
And the third Golydan the poet struck upon Cadwaladr the Blessed’

‘Three Prostrate (‘Humble’) Chieftains [*Tri Ledyf Unben*] of the Island of Britain:

Llywarch the Old son of Elidir Llydanwyn ,
and Manawydan son of Llŷr Half – Speech
and Gwgon Gwron son of Peredur son of Eliffer
of the Great Retinue’

Triads

- In prose tales, used to emphasize important points or sections of the story by linking them to the wider tradition
- Triad-collections contain many triads not referred to in surviving prose tales, and many allusions to 'lost' stories
- Triad collections regarded as a memory-aid for poets and storytellers (in both Welsh and Irish – Irish also has groups of two, four and seven)

‘Onomastic’ elements

- ‘Explanation’ of a place-name, e.g.

‘Lethan came to his ford on the river Níth in Conaille. Galled by Cú Chulainn’s deeds, he lay in wait for him. Cú Chulainn cut off his head and left it with the body. **Hence the name Áth Lethan, Lethan’s Ford.**’ (Carson, *The Táin*)

- retrospective, i.e. made up to ‘explain’ a pre-existing name (whose true origin was probably quite different: *Áth Lethan* could just mean ‘broad ford’!)
- or a pure literary device, to ‘explain’ a name that only ever existed in the story
- links the story to a place in the landscape
- personal names similarly explained
 - Pryderi, Cú Chulainn

Traces of Celtic gods and goddesses

- *Táin Bó Cúailnge*
 - references to plural gods
 - the Morrígan, goddess of war
 - Cú Chulainn is son of Lug (cf. Lugus, Gaulish god of light and the arts), who comes to heal him in the story, on the ‘mound of Lerga
 - Fergus and Medb could also be seen as deities; Medb a sovereignty goddess originally
- Four Branches
 - Lleu Llaw Gyffes (‘the fair-haired one with the skilful hand’), the equivalent of Lug / Lugus
 - Brân or Bendigedfran a giant, head lives on after death
 - Rhiannon < Rigantona (‘Great/Divine Queen’), links to horse-goddess Epona?

Otherworld encounters

- Particular points of contact with the Otherworld
 - Cú Chulainn is healed by Lug on a mound
 - Pwyll sees Rhiannon from a mound (Gorsedd Arberth)
 - Matholwch acquires his magic cauldron from a man who emerged from a lake ...
- Hunting as a precursor to otherworld encounters or adventure
 - Pwyll meets Arawn, king of Annwfn, during a hunt for a stag
 - Manawydan and Pryderi led during a boar-hunt to the fort where Pryderi is magically taken prisoner
 - more examples in Arthurian stories...

Fate and taboos

- Strong in the Ulster Cycle
 - prophecy that if Cú Chulainn fights on a particular day stories will be told about him forever
 - taboo (*geis*) against him eating the flesh of a dog, or against going past anyone cooking beside the roadside without taking some food
- Similar ideas in the ‘northern’ branches (Branwen and Math)
 - three ‘fates’ (*tynged*) pronounced by Arianrhod upon Lleu (he cannot get a name, weapons or a wife unless she gives them, and no wife from this earth)
 - complex conditions required to kill Lleu
 - does get Blodeuwedd, but by ‘cheating’ – leads to betrayal
 - was Bendigeidfran originally under a taboo rather than being a giant?

Combat and heroism

- Fighting at fords in the Tain; also Pwyll
- Cú Chulainn motivated by a desire for immortality through fame
 - prominence of the heroic ideal, with respect to the individual warrior ... but is war itself glorified?
- Is there any comparable figure in the Four Branches?
 - Pwyll's fight at the ford is presented as a success...
 - but his son Pryderi's desire to fight the tradesmen in the English towns is overcome by the more sensible Manawydan...

Aims

- entertainment?
- moral lessons?
- preserving important traditions?
- promoting a particular view of the past...?