

Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi and the Otherworld

The question of whether we approach the text of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* [The Four Branches of the Mabinogi] on its own terms or in an attempt to 'reconstruct[...] the ruined edifice of an underlying mythology' [McKenna, 105] is particularly pertinent when we come to consider its representations of 'an Otherworld' or 'the Otherworld'. Behind the Middle Welsh prose tales lies a range of characters and situations for which there are often analogues in Irish literature, Celtic iconography, or other Welsh texts. The latter include both poetry and mnemonic records preserved in triadic form and relating to the mythology and legends of insular Brythonic culture. Consideration of the 'Otherworld' perhaps instinctively draws us to explore the tales for what they can add to our understanding of early Welsh and Celtic culture; how they can 'flesh out' other suggestive references. Conversely, especially in view of what is now a general consensus in favour of sole authorship of the *Pedeir Keinc*, and changing practices in scholarship relating to them since the days of Edward Anwyl and W. J. Gruffydd, we may find ourselves drawn to consider how 'Otherworldly' episodes shed light on the intentions of their author as we interpret the texts themselves. Catherine McKenna writes perceptively of this dichotomy as it faces scholars:

... critical readings of the Mabinogi that insist upon engaging the extant text on its own terms must contend with the insistent presence of an irreducible body of traditional material, of *cyfarwyddyd*. This material ... makes it impossible to treat the Four Branches as if they were *not* mythological. Consequently, we struggle with the tension between the traditional, or mythological, and the literary, or fictional. ('The Colonization of Myth in *Branwen Ferch Llyr*', 106)

Even if we are able to focus on interpreting the mythical through the lens of an approach which prioritizes the textual, seeing the author as one 'deliberately infusing traditional story materials with his own purposes, values, and meanings', for instance (McKenna, 'Learning Lordship: The education of Manawydan', 103), the problem of interpretation is further compounded by the uncertainty which prevails regarding the date of the *Pedeir Keinc*'s composition. The tales survive in two (closely related) versions, that of Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch (the White Book of Rhydderch, NLW, Peniarth MSS 4 and 5), c.1350, and of Llyfr Coch Hergest (the Red Book of Hergest, MS Oxford, Jesus College 111), c.1400. Fragments of both the Second and Third Branches are found in NLW, Peniarth MS 6, dated c.1250–1300. T. Charles-Edwards's 1970 article with its critique of Saunders Lewis's attempts to locate the texts historically is an admonition against overconfidence in such undertakings. Still, a number of studies do venture to locate the *Pedeir Keinc*, even if only loosely so, within a period of Welsh subjugation to conquest by the Normans. Joseph Shack writes that, 'Regardless of the exact dates at which the *Mabinogi* was first composed, it is beyond contention that the tales were composed amidst the backdrop of Norman colonization and profound change in Welsh history' ('Otherworld and Norman "Other": Annwfn and its colonial implications in the First Branch of the Mabinogi', p. 173 n. 5). McKenna argues that it is possible (as Ifor Williams

suggested, mainly on linguistic grounds) that the tales were composed before the Norman conquest in 1066, their unsettled depictions of kingship and lordship linked to the threat posed to Wales by the Wessex dynasty throughout the earlier eleventh century. Nevertheless, she appears to conclude that 'the period in which they were composed [was] the period of Norman incursion and colonization in Wales' ('The Colonisation of Myth in *Branwen ferch Lŷr*', p. 111).

The more recent strand of scholarship reflected by the work of McKenna and others has close bearings on the theme of the 'Otherworld'. Helen Fulton's essay on 'Cultural Meanings in the Mabinogi' describes the Otherworld, Annwn, of the First Branch 'as a paradigm of the Norman settlements in Wales, in that it can be either friendly or hostile but in any case has an inevitable and unsurpassable power compared to the mortal world' (p. 447). For Joseph Shack, Pwyll's meeting with Arawn, king of Annwn, in the same Branch, is 'at an ambiguous, liminal location on a Welsh territorial border, suggesting the encroachment of the Otherworld into Dyfed and perhaps indicating anxieties regarding the fluidity of borders' (*op. cit.*, p. 175). Yet, in spite of these enlightening readings of the *Pedeir Keinc*, the mythological background retains its hold and its pertinence. Essays approaching the tales from iconographic perspectives, linking characters such as Rhiannon or Manawydan with Roman and Greek gods, or liminal character such as the Dylan Eil Ton of the Fourth Branch with traditional, folkloric tales about humans living a dual animal existence, offer fascinating insights to the world which they preserve. It is this 'tension', to echo McKenna, which makes them such gems of Middle Welsh literature and such a rich source for exploration and interpretation.

Reading:

The earlier approaches represented by Anwyl and Gruffydd are found in

- Anwyl, Edward, 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, I (1896–97), 277–93; 2 (1898–99), 124–33; 3 (1900–1901), 123–34
- Gruffydd, W. J., *Math vab Mathonwy: An Inquiry into the Origins and Development of the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi with the text and a translation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press Board, 1928)
- *idem*, *Rhiannon: An Inquiry into the Origins of the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1953).

A (Welsh-language) summary of Gruffydd's interpretation of the Second Branch (which he did not manage to publish) was made by his pupil, A. O. H. Jarman:

- Jarman, A. O. H., 'Mabinogi Branwen: Crynodeb o Ddadansoddiad W. J. Gruffydd', *Llên Cymru*, IV, no. 3 (1957), 129–34.

These can be approached, if preferred, through summaries provided by later scholars, whose standpoint was radically altered by the belief that the *Pedeir Keinc* were created by a conscious author, 'in control of his craft'. See, for example,

- Welsh, Andrew, 'Doubling and Incest in the *Mabinogi*', *Speculum*, 65, n. 2 (1990), 344–62, esp. 344–7 [available on JSTOR].

For Welsh texts which can be usefully read alongside the *Pedeir Keinc* for their depiction of the Otherworld, see

- Bartrum, P. C., 'Tri Thlws ar Ddeg Ynys Brydain', *Études Celtiques*, 10 (1963), 434–77, available for download at https://www.persee.fr/doc/ecelt_0373-1928_1963_num_10_2_1372
- Bromwich, Rachel (ed.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain*, 4th edn. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014)
- Haycock, Marged, *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin* (Aberystwyth: CMCS Publications, 2007), esp. nos. 5, 'Kat Godeu', 8, 'Golychaf-i Gulwyd', and 18, 'Preideu Annwfn'
- eadem, ' "Preiddeu Annwn" and the Figure of Taliesin', *Studia Celtica*, XVIII/XIX (1983/4), 52–78. Link to content: <https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=f601fd57-0a32-ea11-80cd-005056af4099>
- Roberts, Brynley F., 'Culhwch ac Olwen, The Triads, Saints' Lives', in Rachel Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman and Brinley F. Roberts (eds.), *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), pp. 73–95
- Sims-Williams, Patrick, 'The early Welsh Arthurian poems', in Rachel Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman and Brinley F. Roberts (eds.), *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), pp. 33–71 [available as a PDF under Additional Resources for this Unit].

For texts and translations of the *Pedeir Keinc*, refer to Unit 3. For issues relating to dating and authorship, see

- [Charles-Edwards, T. M., 'The Date of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* \(1971\), 263–98](#)
- Roberts, Brynley F., 'Where were the four branches of the Mabinogi written?', in Joseph Falaky Nagy (ed.), *The Individual in Celtic Literatures*, CSANA Yearbook 1 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 61–73. Link to content: <https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=46130f66-7230-ea11-80cd-005056af4099>

Other approaches mentioned in, or informing, this introduction are:

- Coe, Paula Powers, 'Manawydan's set and other iconic riffs', in Joseph Falaky Nagy and Leslie Ellen Jones (eds.), *Heroic poets and poetic heroes in Celtic tradition. A Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford*, CSANA Yearbook 3, 4 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 42–54. Link to content: <https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=a9f61834-0932-ea11-80cd-005056af4099>

- Fulton, Helen, 'Cultural meanings in the *Mabinogi*', in Geraint Evans, Bernard Martin and Jonathan M. Wooding (eds.), *Origin and revivals: Proceedings of the First Australian Conference of Celtic Studies*, Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 3 (Sydney: Centre for Celtic Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), 443–5.
- Keefer, S. L., 'The Lost Tale of Dylan in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', *Studia Celtica*, 24/5 (1989/90), 26–37. Link to content: <https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=802ef1c8-0932-ea11-80cd-005056af4099>
- McKenna, Catherine, 'Learning Lordship: The education of Manawydan', in *Ildánach Ildírech: A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana*, ed. John Carey *et al* (Aberystwyth; Celtic Studies Publications, 1999), 101–20 Link to content: <https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=0b322f57-7830-ea11-80cd-005056af4099>
- eadem, 'The Colonisation of Myth in *Branwen ferch Lŷr*', in Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Myth in Celtic literatures*, CSANA Yearbook 6 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 105–19. Link to content: <https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=5957f77f-7330-ea11-80cd-005056af4099>
- Shack, Joseph, 'Otherworld and Norman "Other": Annwfn and its colonial implications in the First Branch of the Mabinogi', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 35 (2015), 172–86 [available on JSTOR]

See also the MA theses by Gwynedd Rhian Rees and Elaine Eichner under the Additional Resources for Unit 6.