

Prof Jane Cartwright

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi: Characterisation

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Branwen_drudwy.JPG

Branwen with her [starling](#) (*drudwy*) in the court of Matholwch in Ireland. A scene from the second of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi.



- What links the Four Branches? They may be read and enjoyed as independent tales, but if you were asked to analyse what links them, how would you respond? Common style? Themes? Characters?
- Pryderi is the only character mentioned in all four of the tales, but he is not necessarily one of the main characters in each of the branches.
- Rhiannon, his mother, appears in PKM1 and PKM3.
- W. J. Gruffydd (1881-1954), Professor of Celtic Cardiff University and poet, compared the tales to Irish literature and felt they originally had a clearer structure and stronger connection from the birth to the death of the hero Mabon/Pryderi. Effectively rewriting the Four Branches into one whole tale. Contentious, has been heavily criticised.
- Idea that the tales have been altered and distorted by generations of *cyfarwyddiaid* (storytellers).

Sioned Davies notes that the moral code of conduct is reflected in the characters of the Four Branches in their behaviour towards one another and in the choices they make. Oral tales tend to depict good or bad characters, i.e. extremes, but with the development of the written word, 'narrative comes to rely less on the heroic and marvellous until eventually it is able to move comfortably in the human lifeworld typical of the novel.' (quoted in Davies: 1993: 66). 'throughout *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, therefore, the author uses his characters to reinforce his ideas regarding proper social conduct. The virtues to be fostered are patience, modesty, wisdom, chastity, loyalty, - these are the virtues that will ultimately win the day.' (Davies: 1993: 80).

In R.L. Valente's opinion (1986:283) the most memorable characters in the *Mabinogi* are the female characters:

The women of the *Mabinogi* -- whose personalities range from the mysteriously elusive to the humorously practical -- are among the most vivid characters in the world of the Four Branches

Sioned Davies (1989:71) appears to agree with Valente:

However interesting the male characters in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* may be, it seems it is the women who are well-remembered.

Indeed modern Welsh media tends to focus on the plight of some of the female characters of the Four Branches and the experiences of Branwen, Rhiannon, Blodeuwedd and Aranrhod are reutilised in songs, plays, novels and films (e.g. by Geraint Jarman, Saunders Lewis, Gareth Miles, Ceri Sherlock and Menna Elfyn).

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Image: Blodeuwedd by Christopher Williams (1930) Bridgeman Art Gallery



- Valente argues that (1986:283) the actions and words of the female characters are extremely important to the structure of the tales. She states that the female characters frequently teach the male characters moral lessons relating to appropriate social conduct and, in particular, how to behave within the kin group. In her opinion, peace prevails while both sexes cooperate and respect each other, but when there is a lack of communication between the sexes there is strife and sadness.

On the didactic level, the Four Branches continually remind us that the actions of men and women are inextricably woven together. Where the women are faithful to their responsibilities and where the men respect their powers, the social group finds stability and just resolutions to unexpected difficulties or decisions. When either gender sets out to do anything without regard to the obligations owed to the other, the social group breaks apart and restitution is possible only if cooperative behaviour is implemented by the warring parties

In her article 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in *Math*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 35, Valente argues that Gwydion and Aranrhod are both guilty of transgressing traditional gender roles: Aranrhod acts almost like a male figure and Gwydion performs the traditionally female role of child-bearing and child-rearing. Aranrhod has her own fortress; takes her mother's name; refuses to marry; refuses to acknowledge her responsibilities as a mother and disowns Lleu. Although she is found to be a false virgin, she is not punished accordingly (*Cyfraith y Gwragedd* (the Welsh Law of Women) suggests that false virgins should be ritually humiliated – their nightgowns cut off above their genitalia in front of the wedding guests *neithiorwyr*).

On the virginity test, see Jane Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose' in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Anke Bernau et al. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 56-79

Valente (1986: 1-2) also makes the point that there has been a tendency to compare some of the female characters of the Four Branches with Celtic goddesses (e.g. Rhiannon has frequently been compared with Epona, the horse goddess):

The same (and, by now, old-fashioned) approach that led many scholars to find a solar-hero in every myth continues to be employed by certain modern scholars in their search to prove that every strongly characterized female figure in Welsh and Irish folk and legendary tales is a euphemized remnant of a shadowy Celtic goddess. Though no scholar today would look to solar mythology as the principal interpretive tool with which to analyse the movements and motivations of the male characters, the female characters are less fortunate in that many contemporary works of criticism deal with them through a method developed in the late 1920s.

Rhiannon = Rigantona / Epona (Celtic horse goddess)



- Rhiannon first appears on a magical horse.
- The night Rhiannon's son disappears (May eve) a foal is usually stolen from Teyrnon's mare.
- Rhiannon is wrongly accused of killing her son and her punishment is to sit by the mounting block and carry people on her back to the court at Arberth (i.e. act like a horse)

Rhiannon = Rigantona / Epona (Celtic horse goddess)



- The only Celtic deity to be worshipped in Rome – patroness of the cavalry
- Protector of horses, ponies, donkeys and mules
- Epona (Great Mare, etymology from Proto-Celtic), inscriptions usually in Latin
- See Miranda Green, *Gods of the Celts* and Ronald Hutton who is sceptical of this association.

Fiona Winward (1997) analyses why the female characters are more memorable in her article 'Some Aspects of the Women in The Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34, pp.77-106.

In Andrew Breeze's opinion, the author of the Four Branches sympathises in particular with the female characters. He believes that the tales were written from the point of view of a woman, and therefore comes to the conclusion that the tales were written by a woman (Gwenllian daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan). What is your opinion?

Catherine E. Byfield (1993: 51) claims that 'it is from the delineation of characters, and in their interactions and motivations, that the Four Branches derive much of their value as literature'. She discusses the various techniques used by the 'author' for the purposes of characterisation and highlights the importance of:

- authorial presence or authorial voice
- the actions performed by the characters
- the interplay between characters
- dialogue

Authorial voice

- We rarely hear the opinion of the author of the Four Branches
- Generally the author invites members of the audience to make up their own minds about the characters.
- Second Branch (when Nysien and Efnysien are introduced):
- ‘His two brothers on his mother’s side were the sons of Euroswydd by his own mother Penarddun, daughter of Beli son of Mynogan. One of these was a good lad – he could make peace between two armies when they were most enraged; that was Nysien. The other would cause two of the most loving brothers to fight [i.e. Efnysien].’ (p. 22)

Actions performed by the characters

- Efysien maims Matholwch's horses:
 - 'Is that what they have done with such a fine maiden, and my sister at that, given her away without my permission? They could not have insulted me more,' he said.
 - Then he went for the horses, and cut their lips to the teeth, and their ears down to their heads, and their tails to their backs; and where he could get a grip on the eyelids, he cut them to the bone. And in that way he maimed the horses, so that they were no good for anything'
- p. 24

Interplay between characters

- Pwyll and Rhiannon

Then Pwyll said, 'Maiden,' he said, 'for the sake of the man you love most, wait for me.'

'I will gladly,' she said, 'and it would have been better for the horse if you had asked that a while ago!'

The maiden stopped and waited, and drew back the part of her headdress which should cover her face, and fixed her gaze on him, and began to talk to him. p. 10

Think also of Pwyll and Arawn; Bendigeidfran and Matholwch; Math, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy; Math and Goewin.

Dialogue

- When Rhiannon is falsely accused of killing her own child:

‘You poor creatures,’ said Rhiannon, ‘for the sake of the Lord God who knows everything, do not tell lies about me. God, who knows everything, knows that to be a lie. And if you are afraid, by my confession to God, I will protect you.’

‘God knows’, they said, ‘we will not let ourselves come to any harm for anyone in the world.’

‘You poor creatures,’ she replied, ‘you shall come to no harm if you tell the truth.’ Whatever she said, out of fairness or pity, she received only the same answer from the women. p. 17

See also the dialogue between Matholwch’s messengers and Branwen p. 29 (and the unusual description of Bendigeidfran using a series of metaphors).

Dialogue (or direct speech) forms a substantial part of all Four Branches. This has been calculated by Sioned Davies as follows:

- *Pwyll* 42% direct speech
- *Branwen* 39%
- *Manawydan* 43%
- *Math* 37%
- Overall 40% direct speech

What role does direct speech play in the portrayal of characters? What do we learn from the dialogue? How do characters interact verbally? Is silence/lack of communication important in the Four Branches?

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- Do you agree that the female characters in the Four Branches are more memorable, and perhaps more realistic than the male characters? Explain why.
- Compare and contrast any two characters from the Four Branches, e.g. Rhiannon and Pwyll, Bendigeidfran and Efnisien, Manawydan and Pryderi, Blodeuwedd and Goewin.
- To what extent is Rhiannon an 'otherworldly' figure? Compare and contrast the way in which she is portrayed in the first and third Branches of the *Mabinogi*. Are inconsistencies apparent?
- To what extent are the characters of the Four Branches fully developed? Are they described in detail or do the physical descriptions in the tales tend to be formulaic?

Bibliography

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