

Introduction to Celtic Literatures

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi

Editions

Ifor Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (1930)
R. L. Thomson, *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet* (1957)
Derick S. Thomson, *Branwen Uerch Lyr* (1976)
Ian Hughes, *Manawydan Uab Llyr* (2007)
Ian Hughes, *Math Uab Mathonwy* (2013)

Translations

Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, *The Mabinogion* (Everyman, 1948)
John K. Bollard, *The Mabinogi: legend and landscape of Wales* (2006)
Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford Classics, 2007)

Studies

Sioned Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (1993)
Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi* (1977, 1992)

Title

Mabinogi contains the element *mab* ‘boy, son’, and probably originally meant ‘tale of a hero’s boyhood’, then a hero’s life as a whole. The hero of the Four Branches may have been Pryderi, who is born in the first and killed in the fourth. The plural form *Mabinogion* is used to denote a wider group of eleven tales including Arthurian romances.

Date

The Four Branches are preserved in two 14th-c. manuscripts, The White Book of Rhydderch and the Red Book of Hergest, with fragments in a 13th-c. manuscript. The relative lack of Norman influence (in contrast to the romances) suggests a date of composition in the early 12th-c. But some of the story material may be much older, and would have been preserved by oral storytellers (*cyfarwyddiaid*).

Authorship

Like all medieval Welsh tales, the Four Branches are anonymous. However, consistency of style and themes suggest that all four tales are the work of a single author with a distinctive world view, most likely from a clerical background. The role of that author would have been to bring together disparate material to form a new literary composition.

Themes

Although there is no overt commentary on the action, recurrent themes can be identified, such as friendship, feuds, and the need for patience and reasonable behaviour. See further John K. Bollard, ‘The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi’ (1973-4):
<https://journals.library.wales/view/1386666/1419353/251#?xywh=-1151%2C-194%2C4581%2C3875>

Questions to consider

How far has the author of the Four Branches succeeded in creating a unified whole?
Do the tales present any moral lessons?
What do the tales have to say about the position of women in society?