

Is it possible to determine who the ‘author’ of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* might have been? Evaluate the main theories that have been proposed in relation to this.

Bibliography (letters on the right are for noting references within the essay plan below)	Ref
Breeze, A. <i>Medieval Welsh Literature</i> . (Dublin: Four Courts, 1997).	A
Breeze, A. ‘The Date Of The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi’, <i>Studia Celtica Posnaniensia</i> , 3 (1) (2018), pp. 47-62. <DOI: 10.2478/sep-2018-0003>, [Accessed: 23 November 2019].	B
Breeze, A. <i>The Origins Of The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi</i> . (Leominster: Gracewing Publishing, 2009).	C
Charles-Edwards, T. ‘The Date Of The Four Branches’, <i>Transactions Of The Honourable Society Of The Cymmrodorian</i> , 1970 (Part 2) (1970), pp. 263-298. < http://hdl.handle.net/10107/1418639 >, [Accessed: 23 November 2019].	D
Davies, S. <i>The Mabinogion</i> . (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).	E
Koch, J. Review of ‘Culwch And Olwen: An Edition And Study Of The Oldest Arthurian Tale’ by Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, <i>Speculum</i> , 71 (1) (1996), pp. 132-133.	F
Lloyd-Morgan, C. ‘More Written About Than Writing? Welsh Women And The Written Word’, in Pryce, H (ed.) <i>Literacy In Medieval Celtic Studies</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).	G
Luft, D. <i>The Origin Of The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi</i> (Review of ‘The Origins Of The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi’ by Andrew Breeze), <i>Beltaine</i> , 27.2 (2010), pp. 9-12.	H
Mac Cana, P. <i>The Mabinogi</i> . (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992).	I
Rodway, S. ‘Culwch Ac Olwen’, in Lloyd-Morgan, C. and Poppe, E. (eds.) <i>Arthurian Literature In The Middle Ages</i> (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019).	J

Essay Plan

- Introduction
 - In *Arthurian Literature* Simon Rodway, looking at *Culwch*, describes frustrations of determining authorship, but states ‘it is quite appropriate to ask questions about the circumstance of composition: where? who? when? why?’ (J) We will take a similar tactic here, exploring various writer’s attempts to unravel the knotty problem of authorship with theories on the author’s position, the time of writing, the author’s familiarity with certain places, and the author’s motivation for writing.
- Who wrote the *Four Branches*?
 - What do we mean by authorship?
 - A single creator of an original work? A redactor (I)? Multiple authors?

- The case for a single author (Brynley Roberts, see C)
- Could the author be a professional storyteller, as suggested by Sioned Davies? (E)
 - Argued against by Kenneth Jackson (B, p. 50)
- Could the author be a cleric? A lawyer? A political figure?
- Can we determine the author's gender? Breeze vs. Lloyd-Morgan on women writers
- Specific figures proposed:
 - Gwenllïan (A and C)
 - Cneppyn Gwerthynion (B, 52)
 - Llewelyn Offeiriad (B, 54)
 - Rhygyfarch (B, 57)
- When were they written?
 - Dating of the manuscripts
 - The White Book of Rhydderch
 - Dated to the last half of the 14th century (I, 22)
 - MS Peniarth 6
 - Dated by paleographer Daniel Huws to the second half of the thirteenth century (B)
 - Relative dating of the stories (B)
 - Oldest: *Culwch*
 - Current theory Bromwich and Evans, about 1090
 - John Koch (F) states evidence is circumstantial and hence inconclusive
 - Next oldest: *The Four Branches*
 - Ifor Williams' argument: 1060-1120
 - 1066 significance
 - Lewis vs Charles-Edwards
 - With scholars generally in agreement on *Culwch* being oldest tale, we can tentatively place the *Four Branches* after 1090 (due to the circumstantial arguments dating *Culwch*, long-held adherence to 1060s as the earliest date cannot be discounted).
 - Nutt: no apparent influence from the extremely popular and influential *Historia Regum Britanniae* can be found in the *Four Branches*, meaning the HRB of the 1130s would have come after them
 - At the very latest, cannot be older than MS Peniarth 6 unless accepting multiple authorship
- Where were they written?
 - Topographical arguments in Breeze's *Origins*
 - Other scholars also focus on Gwynedd and Dyfed, though often with an either-or mindset
- Why were they written?
 - Entertainment? 'Handbook for Princes'? Commentary on the political state of Wales at the time?
- What can we determine about authorship from these arguments?
 - Who:

- Getting specific, to the point of a name, may be impossible without new evidence being uncovered. Scholars cannot even agree on the occupation of the author, even if there is largely consensus that there is a single author.
 - When:
 - Dating is almost as problematic as authorship. Anything from 1060-1300 seems plausible, and in spite of some progress in perhaps narrowing the window to around 1090-1130 (between *Cwllwch* and the HRB), there is much less certainty here.
 - Where:
 - There does seem to at least be consensus on an author local to Gwynedd who somehow also obtained specific knowledge of parts of Dyfed. Without more certainty around dating though, cannot narrow down to a specific author.
 - Why:
 - Why the *Four Branches* were written can only be speculative. However, it is a worthwhile area to explore as, in combination with more certain arguments about location and dating, it can bolster these arguments with circumstantial evidence. One must be careful to avoid fallacies of logic in using such arguments, as Diana Luft (H) points out about Breeze's *Origins*, or Charles-Edwards (D) about Lewis' arguments on dating.
- Conclusion
 - While a multitude of scholars have made promising contributions to theories regarding the authorship of the *Four Branches*, the topic remains problematic and open to debate. Dating remains an especial point of contention, and until dating can be conclusively determined it is unlikely that a specific author can be found. Even if, for instance, we were able to accept Breeze's controversial claim of Gwenllïan's authorship, we have no way of knowing if Gwenllïan would have written the work herself or if she acted as patron for another writer who composed the *Four Branches* for her. At best, without the discovery of new evidence, we can only speculate.

Sample paragraph:

In a recent essay¹, Andrew Breeze provides a useful summary and list of references to all the major arguments around dating of the *Four Branches* from Alfred Nutt in 1897 to Robin Chapman Stacey in 2018. While countless criticisms of Breeze's theory on the authorship of the *Four Branches* compel us to read with care, his logic here is sound. In addition to describing past and present scholarship, Breeze uses a relative dating approach, placing the writing of the *Four Branches* between the composition of *Culwch Ac Olwen* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. The argument runs that *Culwch Ac Olwen*, linguistically older than the *Four Branches*, must predate it.² Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, two of the most prominent authorities on *Culwch*, place the composition of the text at the end of the eleventh century. Thus, the *Four Branches* must postdate this.³ Alfred Nutt argued in 1897 that the *Four Branches* show no evidence of influence from Geoffrey of Monmouth, an argument which many scholars still adhere to. Considering Geoffrey's immediate popularity in the 1130s, it is likely the *Four Branches* were written earlier.⁴ This restricts the date of composition to about 1090-1130. Breeze makes further arguments to restrict the dating even more, but his remaining evidence and conclusions are less sound. Even this 1090-1130 window is plagued with problems. As pointed out by John Koch, Bromwich and Evans' dating of *Culwch* is 'circumstantial (and therefore hardly ironclad)'.⁵ If we cannot set a firm date on *Culwch*, we cannot use it to set a date on the *Four Branches* either. Without a date, determining an author is all but impossible.

¹ A. Breeze, 'The Dates Of The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi', *Studia Celtica Prosnaniensia*, 3 (1) (2018), pp. 47-61.

² Breeze, 'The Dates Of The Four Branches', p. 50.

³ Ibid, p. 53.

⁴ Ibid, p. 54.

⁵ J. Koch, Review of 'Culwch And Olwen: An Edition And Study Of The Oldest Arthurian Tale' by Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, *Speculum*, 71 (1) (1996), p 133.

Medievalists.net tries to be useful but gears itself towards a general audience. The website was founded by Sandra Alvarez and Peter Konieczny and is currently run by Konieczny and Danièle Cybulskie. Alvarez holds a BA in Medieval Studies and is editor of *The Medieval Magazine*, Konieczny is the editor of *Medieval Warfare Magazine*, while Cybulskie is an author with an MA in Medieval Literature. Their website includes articles, videos, a podcast, contemporary news, and recommendations for books and films. The site looks at the medieval period in general, but is easy to navigate and highly searchable, providing well over 300 articles when searching the word 'Celtic' alone. Such variety, including articles on specific topics such as Breton lays, Irish manuscripts, and storytelling in medieval Wales, at first seem promising for research. Looking closely however, articles exclusive to the website tend to be short (500-1500 words) with few references, and the most scholarly articles are linked from other publications such as academic journals. The authors of articles are generally not known scholars in the field of Celtic Studies, so their reliability should be scrutinized. There is more usefulness in the videos and podcast, as these often feature expert speakers. However, The 'News' section also has potential value as a place to keep track of current breakthroughs in medieval archaeology and study. Unfortunately, the lack of an obvious date for each article is a massive oversight that makes the section virtually unusable. Lastly, the website does not disguise the fact that it is looking to profit from its readership. Advertisements for Alvarez's and Konieczny's magazines and a link to Patreon are prominent throughout the site. There may be useful resources throughout Medievalists.net, but the site warrants caution and seems an inefficient option for finding credible research material.

Story Archaeology is a podcast by Chris Thompson and Isolde Carmody, who also host a blog at storyarchaeology.com. The podcast and blog are dedicated to Irish mythology and literature. Thompson holds a degree in educational drama and is a professional storyteller. Carmody obtained her MA in Early Irish. While it is primarily Thompson who writes for the blog, Carmody's expertise in Old Irish has allowed the team to discuss never-before-translated poetry buried within Old Irish stories such as *Cath Maige Tuired*. Granting access to these poems for English-language readers may prove highly valuable to research in Irish literature. While there is little else recommending the blog, which is not very easy to navigate and boasts little else in terms of original material, one quality stands out. The speculations made by Thompson and Carmody around Irish mythology is rich with potential topics for further academic inquiry. For instance, they argue that Lugh and Balor of *Cath Maige Tuired* are not native to Ireland and explore what the story may have looked like without these characters. In another article (and podcast episode), they muse on parallels between the Irish Mongan and the British Arthur. Such insights warrant further analysis, and the podcast and blog are bursting with these ideas. It is also worth noting that the website becomes more valuable when used as a supplement to the podcast, rather than on its own.

The Celtic Literature Collective (CLC), maryjones.us/ctexts/, attempts to gather and provide a massive range of Celtic literature in translation. The site is somewhat successful in providing

access to these primary sources, and where it lacks links to texts it at least provides a thorough list of Celtic literature so that one can attempt to locate the source elsewhere. Categories of texts include a section for each of the Celtic nations, a section for Arthurian literature, and even one for ecclesiastical texts. Sadly, the CLC no longer appears to be regularly maintained. The 'News' section has not been updated since 2008. A significant number of hyperlinks no longer function, reducing the website's usefulness. As acknowledged on the CLC's homepage, all the provided texts and translations are out of copyright and are therefore unlikely to be the most recent and most accurate translations and transcriptions. On the positive side, a sprawling page of links gives a great deal of options for further exploration, from virtual libraries to digital manuscripts. The Encyclopedia section is quite useful for a quick reference to a wide variety of topics on all things Celtic. The site would be a consistently helpful tool for anyone studying Celtic literature if only the links were maintained and regularly added to. But it seems that the CLC is more likely to gather dust as its links cease to function and its other resources become more and more outdated.

The National Library of Wales website, at library.wales, boasts 300,000 title maps, fifteen million newspaper articles, 450 journals, a collection of medieval manuscripts, options to view the site in English or Welsh, and more. Not only is the quantity (and quality) of resources astounding, but the website is exceptionally user-friendly. A clean, easy-to-navigate layout, search tools geared towards each type of collection (searching maps looks different than searching journals, for instance), and easy access to materials makes the site an ideal resource. The manuscript collection may be one of the most valuable tools to anyone studying Celtic (and specifically Welsh) literature, law, or religion. Instead of relying on a transcription, one can view the source material personally through high-resolution images of both the manuscript cover and each individual page. It is possible to zoom in on particular areas of any given page. Even for those not able to read the manuscripts due to language barriers, there is a useful description of each manuscript and one can appreciate the antiquity of the material being studied. If you become a library member, you can view additional material, such as approximately 50,000 postgraduate theses and dissertations presented in Welsh institutions of higher education. Altogether, the National Library of Wales website is an excellent online resource for research in Celtic Studies. Other library websites should strive to meet its level of functionality and usefulness.

For anyone studying Welsh poetry, the Dafydd ap Gwilym site, dafyddapgwilym.net, published through Swansea University, should be one of the first resources looked to. To access all the site's materials one must view it in Welsh, but the majority of the site is also accessible in English. The website provides 171 poems attributed to Dafydd ap Gwilym, a fourteenth century poet, and for each individual poem one can view a transcription of the original text, see a modern Welsh paraphrase, access an English translation, listen to an audio transcription, find source manuscripts and see relationships between them, view some of the original manuscript pages, and access informative notes about the poem. Full information on the team behind the website is provided, so the reliability of its contents is in no doubt. In fact, the website would be an excellent model for other websites featuring similar content. Though the interface is already quite intuitive, there is a user guide available in case of any difficulty in navigation. Hopefully, the English version of the site will eventually be as thorough as the Welsh version, but otherwise dafyddapgwilym.net is difficult to fault.