

The Role of Women in the *Mabinogi* and the *Táin*

The *Mabinogi* and The *Táin Bo Cúailnge* are two of the earliest tales we have from the Celtic world. This essay will delve into the role women play, how they help further the plot, and exhibit the themes which form the backbone of these stories. We will first address the character of Rhiannon and the Calumniated Wife motif of the First Branch, then compare it with the tale of Branwen. Following that, we will examine the role Medb plays in *The Táin* as well as the interplay between gender and the heroic ideal. It is important to contemplate these characters within the context of their tales, so we do not, in effort to understand them as women isolated from narrative, revoke the purpose of their actions, and thus lose sight of their true meaning. This essay desires to approach these stories with this in mind.

Andrew Welsh proposes that Rhiannon plays both the role of the ‘Fairy Mistress’ and that of the ‘Culminate Wife’ in the *Mabinogi*.¹ Pwyll first encounters Rhiannon from upon a mound which is often associated with the Otherworld.² Combined with Rhiannon’s mystical steed and the inability of the men to catch up to her, Rhiannon’s enigmatic figure insinuates a spiritual unattainability or wisdom. As Pwyll notes, no physical speed matters and he sees ‘that it was useless to pursue her.’³ As the story progresses, the Calumniated Wife motif comes into play. There are many resemblances between the story of Rhiannon who is accused of destroying her own son, even though innocent, and this common medieval, romance motif.

In such stories, illusion is an attribute of society as a whole rather than of an individual. Such a society sets up a perverted order... the hero or heroine, who has the vision of liberation, and the society they are involved with that wants to remain in a blind and gigantic darkness.⁴

Through the false accusation, the tale reveals the blindness of society, and it is Rhiannon, alone, who can see the truth. She stands by her innocence, claiming that ‘God, who knows everything, knows that to be a lie.’⁵ Yet, her accusers reject truth to save their own skins, and such a deceitful allegation threatens to divide Pwyll and Rhiannon. As punishment, Rhiannon is forced to carry ‘guests and strangers on her back’⁶ like a horse. Many credit this scene to Rhiannon’s nature as the Celtic horse-goddess Epona.⁷ This reversion to an animalistic state also has its

¹ Andrew Welsh, ‘Doubling and Incest in the *Mabinogi*,’ *Speculum*, 65, 2 (1990), p. 355.

² Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘*Kaer Sidi* and Other Celtic Otherworld Term,’ *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 56.

³ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 10.

⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and England: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 139.

⁵ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 17.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 230.

connection to the unjust trial motif. Frye remarks how in descent narratives, there is often a transformation into an animal or a plant. It is only on the ascent, that the character can cast off the false identity and the 'animal disguise or something parallel is replaced by the original human form.'⁸ Rhiannon's journey as the falsely accused wife and her equine-esque reversion is central to the First Branch and is integral in showing the corrupted state of society. It is a representation of the conflict between justice vs. injustice and truth vs. blindness. Rhiannon's return to her original state is therefore a regaining of truth and a breaking of deception. This episode challenges Pwyll, who has struggled with wisdom and caution throughout the First Branch, from his reckless encounter with Arawn to his final recognition of Rhiannon's innocence.

Branwen's tale has often been compared to Rhiannon's because they are both innocent wives subjected to unjust punishments. However, there are a few notable differences. Whereas Rhiannon is thought to have committed the sin of destroying her own child, Branwen is not accused of a crime. In fact, those that are punishing her know she is not responsible for the contention between Ireland and Britian. In revenge for the insult Efnysien caused by mutilating Matholwch's horses, they exile Branwen from 'her husband's chamber,' force her 'to cook for the court,' and every day 'give her a box on the ear.'⁹ When her brother, King Brân, and his soldiers come to Ireland to rescue her, there is a moment where one believes peace is achievable between the two people. Yet all is thwarted. The Irish plan a betrayal and Efnysien kills many of their men. Branwen's child is tossed into the fire, and after her brother's death, Branwen dies of a broken heart. These all point to Branwen not being a Calumniated Wife but the main figure of a Peaceweaver Tale.

A peaceweaver tale seems always to be a tragic tale, the story of a woman ambivalently situated between two peoples, belonging to both and yet completely to neither, and finally unable...to stop the fires of old feuds from flaring up again and consuming both.¹⁰

It is a common motif that the peaceweaver's child, the emblem of union between both groups, ends up dying in flames.¹¹ If Efnysien is the main agent of strife, Branwen is his opposite. She is the hopeful agent of peace between Ireland and Britain. Both die in strikingly similar ways. Efnysien 'stretches himself out in the cauldron so that the cauldron breaks into four pieces, and his own heart breaks too.'¹² In comparison, Branwen's life ends with this declaration:

⁸ Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, p. 140.

⁹ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁰ Andrew Welsh, 'Branwen, Beowulf, and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale,' *Viator*, 22, 1 (1991), p. 8.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹² Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 32.

‘Oh son of God,’ she said, ‘woe that I was ever born. Two good islands have been laid waste because of me!’ She gives a mighty sigh, and with that her heart breaks. And they make a four-sided grave for her...¹³

After she has died, the seven men with Brân’s head go to Harlech where they listen to the birds of Rhiannon. For eighty years, all memories of sorrow and suffering fell away. Yet, they open the door they were advised not to.

Every loss they had ever suffered, and every kinsman and companion they had lost, and every ill that had befallen them was as clear as if they had encountered it in that very place; and most of all concerning their lord. And from that moment they could not rest.¹⁴

They cannot remain in this land of peace where it is as if no sorrows exist. Instead, they must open the door and return to life. There is something inevitable in this return to suffering that is encapsulated in Branwen’s tale. As much as we strive for endless peace, strife will always slip in. Where the theme of Rhiannon’s story was blindness and truth, Branwen’s tragedy is the strife between people that ultimately plunges into destruction. If one views the story in comparison to the other women of the *Mabinogi* who are stronger like Rhiannon or more dynamic like Blodeuwedd, it is easy to write Branwen off as passive or dull. She dances around the background of the story—a woman traded from one island to another—and does very little in the fighting. Yet, this view not only stunts the story but Branwen as well. Her heroism is silent and softer than that of the heroic male or the outspoken female, but her place as the peaceweaver binds the tale together.¹⁵ It is her heroic ethos as a woman which bridges an impossible abyss and strains to keep two warring factions together. Tragically, the bindings snap and peace is lost along with the woman who tried to carry it.

Medb in *The Táin* is a very different character, and the role she plays is unique from any in the *Mabinogi*. There are similarities in the way Medb and Rhiannon have been perceived as goddesses and Mac Cana proposes that Medb was a personification of Ireland, ‘and to gain possession of Medb was to gain possession of the kingship.’¹⁶ Despite how the character of Medb evolved, from Celtic mythology or otherwise, it is important not to remove her from the *Táin* entirely because by ‘preventing Medb’s characteristics from being examined as a literary persona outside of the divine, one fails to fully comprehend her character and thus the text itself.’¹⁷ Following this line of thought, it is difficult to deal with Medb’s role without understanding the larger theme it is a part of, mainly the interplay of gender and the reversal of roles. Masculinity, femininity, and heroism are in tight tension from the first page. We start with

¹³ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 33.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁵ Welsh, ‘Branwen, Beowulf, and the Tragic Peaceweaver.’ p. 13.

¹⁶ Proinsias Mac Cana, ‘Aspect of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature,’ *Études Celtiques*, 7, 2, (1956), p. 78.

¹⁷ Erica J. Sessle, ‘Exploring the Limitations of the Sovereignty Goddess through the Role of Rhiannon,’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 14 (1994), p. 10

the pillow talk scene, where Ailill and Medb, husband and wife, are already pitted in competition against one another. Our first hint at the reversal of gender roles is when Medb claims that Ailill is 'a man dependent on a woman's wealth.'¹⁸ Yet, in everything Medb and Ailill are matched and equal except for Finnbennach, the bull. Medb sets the plot in motion in her desire to steal the Donn Cúailnge, and the emphasis lies on a 'woman's pride provoking rivalry.'¹⁹ However, as much as they are matched, Ailill takes a backseat to most of the action of the tale. He is more passive to the 'raving carnality' of his wife, who offers to sleep with multiple men to achieve her military endeavors.²⁰ The men seem to be stripped of their masculinity. The Ulster men, for example, are laid low by a curse which causes them to suffer birthing pains every time they need to defend themselves. Fergus, a symbol of fertility and sexuality, is robbed of his sword because of his affair with Medb and it causes 'him to be rendered impotent and divested of his manhood.'²¹ The key to understanding this set up in the *Táin* can be found in another Ulster tale: *Fled Bricrenn*. While the *Táin* is not a farce and carries a more militaristic, somber tone throughout, in both we see 'female characters acting in situations designed to parallel those of their male counterparts, often with the men concurrently occupying more passive roles.'²² The women, in their more aggressive states, continuously disarm the men from Fergus whose 'weapon lost in the deep ford of a royal belly'²³ to a young Cú Chulainn who is brought to heel by naked women when no man could quell his fury. Images of division abound; bodies cut in two,²⁴ trees sundered in half; the splitting of holly branches, as well as army companies.²⁵ When division occurs between people--man and woman--so too does strife. At its center is the heroic ideal, often undermined and twisted by the role of gender. Just as the women are the victors over Fergus and Cú Chulainn, Cú Chulainn as a 'beardless youngster' and a 'young buck'²⁶ continuously destroys the virile, older men sent to fight him. By donning a fake beard, 'this proof of manhood, Cú Chulainn robs it of its significance and undermines the masculinity that it represents.'²⁷ Even further, Medb exploits the men's masculine weaknesses through her daughter, Finnabair. One after the next, the men succumb. Only Fer Diad resists the snare of Finnabair, but soon falls onto the sword of his own heroic pride when Medb deceives him about Cú Chulainn, claiming he boasted of Fer Diad's easy defeat.²⁸ And so, like trees and

¹⁸ Ciaran Carson (trans.), *The Táin*, (New York: Penguins Classics, 2009), p. 4.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 77

²⁰ Edyta Lehmann, "'And Thus I Will It": Queen Medb and the Will to Power,' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 28 (2008), p. 149.

²¹ Jennifer Dukes-Knight, 'The Wooden Sword: Age and Masculinity in the "Táin Bó Cúailnge,"' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 33 (2013), p. 112.

²² Jennifer Dukes-Knight, 'Gender and Comedy in the Early Irish Tale *Fled Bricrenn*,' *South Atlantic Review*, 81, 2 (2016), p. 15.

²³ Carson, *The Táin*, p. 62.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁷ Dukes-Knight, 'The Wooden Sword,' p. 119.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 124.

men and holly branches, Fer Diad and his foster brother are also divided in this bloody endeavor to prove Medb's excellency over her husband. Whereas in *Fled Bricrenn*, the feminine is used to 'disrupt, undermine, and mock the masculine heroic ideal,' in the *Táin*, it is used to reveal the bloody consequences of strife and the flaws of the heroic ideal when fame and pride are pushed to their extremes and reach even the pillows of a marriage. On one side we have Conchobar, the impotent King, who cannot defend his people and on the other, Medb--aggressive, prideful, and headstrong--marching her army towards destruction.

bewildering times

disorderd armies kings cast down....

three armies wiped out.²⁹

Yet in all this division, when the Ulster men finally arrange to defeat the Connacht armies, it is Fergus who speaks straight to the heart of the story: 'what you saw was a people coming together.'³⁰ It is unification in response to the division depicted in the marriage of Medb and Ailill. Further, when Medb gets her period during battle, Cú Chulainn who has now stepped into manhood, finds her and spares her 'because usually he did not kill women.'³¹ While this could be read as a humiliating scene, it is in fact reordering and reunifying the genders which have battled to bloody consequences through the *Táin*. Cú Chulainn and Medb, enemies, meet on the battlefield and show mercy.

Rhiannon, Branwen, and Medb each play a unique role. These characters, rather than shrunk by their status as women within a greater plot, are enlarged by the themes which they exhibit. Rhiannon becomes not just the Calumniated Wife but a symbol of justice, truth, and wisdom. Branwen's tragedy is not only that of a grieved wife and mother, but the burning hope for peace in a future day when strife ceases. Medb, rather than being reduced to a rageful, adulterous woman becomes a warning against vicious pride and division. Through her femininity, she turns the masculine heroic ideal on its head to reveal the somber and foolish consequences of fame and pride no matter the cost. These characters matter the most when examined within the context of their tales and through their roles, one can better understand the transcendent layers of the *Mabinogi* and the *Táin*.

²⁹ Carson, *The Táin*, p. 180.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 193.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 206.

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