

A brief introduction into the supernaturalism of Rhiannon's presence in the first branch of the Mabinogi.

Rhiannon, A Celtic horse Goddess native to *Cymru*, is a main figure in the Mabinogion. Rhiannon appears in the first and third branches of the Mabinogi,¹ the branches are similar to chapters in a story. The Mabinogion is a collection of eleven Welsh prose tales which were derived from *Llyfr Goch*, The red book of Hergestor, written approximately between 1382-1410, and *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch*, the white book of *Rhydderch*, written circa 1350. In 1838 Lady Charlotte Guest published her first translation from Middle *Cymraeg* (Welsh) into English, though it would be appropriate to note that without two other contributors Lady Charlotte would not have been able to complete the work as she did. In 'Rhiannon, An Inquiry Into The Origins Of The First And Third Branch Of The Mabinogi' Written by W.J Gruffydd, Gruffydd states that the majority of the glory that Lady Charlotte received should have gone to two other people. 'It seems to me certain that the main credit for this work should go to the two scholars who "devilled" for her. The Rev. John Jones (Tegid) (1792-1852) and the Rev. Thomas Price (Carnhuanawc) (1787-1848)'.²

Cymru['kamri]

DEFINITION

The Welsh name for Wales.³

Rhiannon in the first branch.

We see Rhiannon for the first time in the first branch of Mabinogi, this is where she meets her future husband, Pwyll Pen Annwn,⁴ in Dyfed. Rhiannon is spotted on her Otherworldly horse which possesses supernatural abilities, In Sioned Davies's translation of the Mabinogion these abilities are denoted as:

Anyone who saw it would think that the horse had a slow, steady pace, and it was drawing level with the mound.

'Men,' said Pwyll, 'do any of you recognize the rider?'

'No, lord,' they said.

'Let someone go and meet her to find out who she is,' he said.

One of them got up, but when he came to the road to meet her, she had gone past. He followed her as fast as he could on foot. But the greater his speed, the further she drew away from him.⁵

Another notable supernatural attribute is Rhiannon's logic, all it took was for Pwyll to ask Rhiannon to stop and so she did, which is not what Pwyll first thought of,⁶ this denotes a difference in discerning skills between a regular human in Dyfed and a being from the Celtic otherworld.

It took two years from this meeting for Rhiannon to marry Pwyll. Firstly, Rhiannon sets a date for a year from her meeting with Pwyll, at the court of *Hyfaidd*, then her previously intended Gwawl, manages to trick Pwyll into letting him marry Rhiannon, Rhiannon set another date for a year from

¹ The word Mabinogi will refer to the first four branches of the Mabinogion, whereas the Mabinogion refers to the entire book.

² W.J Gruffydd, *Rhiannon – An Inquiry Into The Origins Of The First And Third Branches Of The Mabinogi*, Cardiff University Press 1953.

³ The online search for the translation of *Cymru* to English is defined via a plug-in rather than a website source, <<https://www.bing.com/search?q=meaning+of+cymru&FORM=QSRE3>> [accessed 22/11/2022].

⁴ *The Mabinogion*, Translated by Sioned Davies, Oxford University Press (New York, 2008), p.8.

⁵ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.8-9.

⁶ *ibid*, p.10.

then to marry Gwawl instead. After Pwyll and Rhiannon trick Gwawl at the wedding feast, they finally marry.

In Rhiannon and Pwyll's story, we see supernatural logic and tools, From how Gwawl managed to trick Pwyll to Rhiannon's quick thinking in giving Pwyll the bag to trick Gwawl. In the translation by Sioned, Davies Pwyll says to Gwawl: "I ask only to ward off hunger. This is my request, to fill this little bag that you see with food."⁷ The bag wouldn't fill, so Gwawl was told to stand inside the bag to supernaturally make it full, he was then trapped in the bag and attacked by Pwyll's men until he conceded his wedding to Rhiannon. We see a supernatural bag and supernatural logic winning the day, similar to the logic that got Rhiannon to stop her horse for Pwyll. This can help the reader to realize that sometimes we have to think in other ways to invoke change in sticky situations. Pwyll Pen Annwfn stands for 'Pwyll the head of Annwfn'. Earlier in the first branch, he is awarded this title for aiding Arawn of Annwfn. His logic, which eventually gets Rhiannon to stop her horse is similar to the logic of the Otherworld, which makes him a good human match for a supernatural Rhiannon.

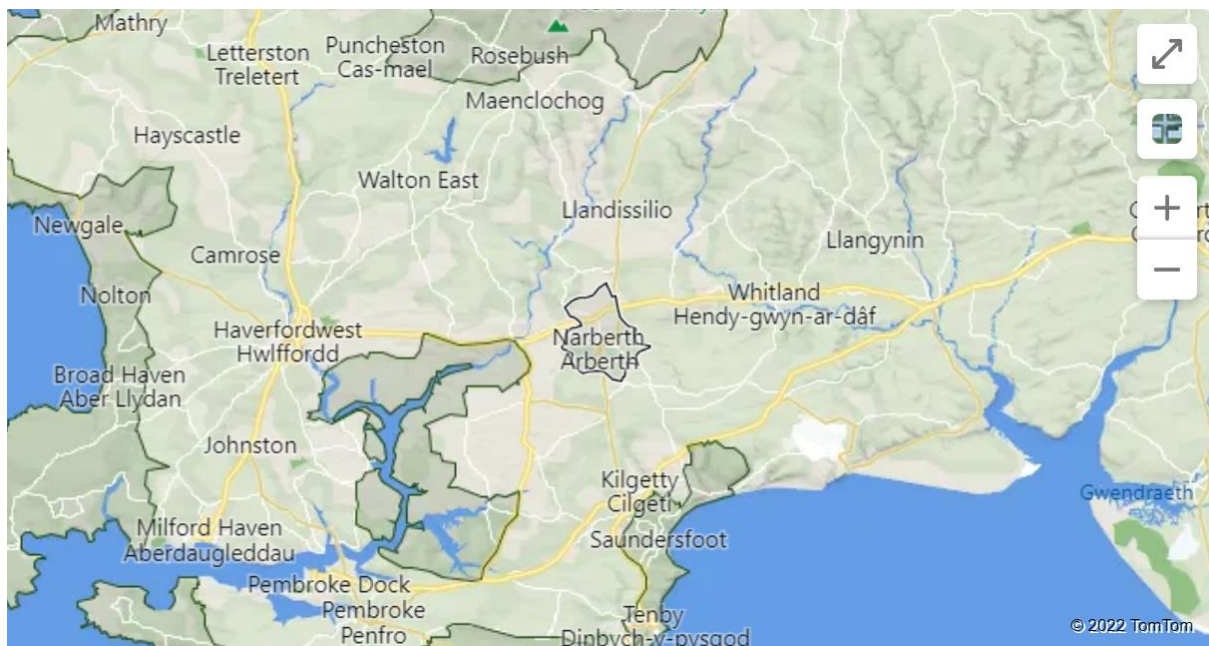


Figure 1 Map of Dyfed in 2022, bing maps.⁸

After a few years, Rhiannon conceived a little boy and gave birth to him in the following May. What happened next would be every parent's worst nightmare, the baby went missing. What was the most shocking part of the story is that Rhiannon's handmaids blamed her. They killed puppies to disguise as her son's blood, then her punishment was to act alike a 'broken-in' mare, which highlights her supernatural connection to horses. In the book 'Myth and Materiality', John Waddell mentions this:

'It is remarkable that horses play such a strange role in the medieval stories of both Macha and Rhiannon and it is even stranger that both women are forced to effectively become horse-like.'⁹

For many years Rhiannon was forced to offer visitors a back ride to the castle whilst telling them the

⁷ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.13.

⁸ Modern map of Dyfed, Bing maps. <<https://www.bing.com/maps?osid=2bfabd12-e043-489c-b28d-3cca78931a60&cp=51.804219~-4.776301&lvl=13&imgid=2738cdb2-755e-493f-91ae-955184e12fd1&v=2&sV=2&form=S00027>> [accessed 23/11/2022]

⁹ John Waddell, *Myth And Materiality – chapter 7, The Ancestors Of Epona*, Oxbow Books, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh1dtnp.12>> [accessed 18/11/2022]

tale of how she devoured her son. Whilst these events were unfolding, a local noble had a mare who gave birth every year, and her foals also went missing. The nobleman hatched a plan to find out what happened, he managed to save the foal and discovered a baby boy. He raised the baby with his wife, he made the connection years later. Both the nobleman and his wife returned the son to Rhiannon and Pwyll, who was then renamed Pryderi.

We see many examples of Rhiannon's supernatural infinity with horses throughout the tales of the first branch of the Mabinogi, the horse she rides, her son being born at the same time as another foal, as well as her son going missing and being the reason for her punishment of carrying others. The Goddess Rhiannon, supernaturality, and horses are intertwined in these tales, which can showcase how important these archetypes and symbols are to those within Cymru.

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