

# **The Mabinogion Study Guide**

## **The Mabinogion by Anonymity**

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# Overview

## Overview Summary

## Overview Analysis

The eleven tales known as The Mabinogion were preserved in two manuscripts known as The White Book of Rhydderch and the Red Book of Hergest. These manuscripts were penned during 1300 to 1425, the White Book being the earlier of the two. The stories in these manuscripts are much older, and many were originally oral tales. The Mabinogion is considered to be one of the most important collections of Celtic tales originating in Wales. The Three Romances are the most "modern" (later Medieval) tales in the collection and are Welsh versions of stories originally by the French troubador Chretien de Troyes. This is in contrast to "The Tale of Culhwch and Olwen", which is one of the oldest Arthurian stories.

The name Mabinogion is a late invention, coined by Lady Charlotte Guest. The name derives from the Welsh term mabinogi and is thought to mean "tales of a youth" or "tales of a hero." Technically, only the first four stories should really be called The Mabinogion but the title is applied to the whole collection.

One of the more distinctive features of The Mabinogion as a whole is the onomastic or "place naming" episodes. These onomastic tales are designed to explain an unusual place name. It is likely that these onomastic tales are later additions to the original stories, as they often have a far-fetched or "strained" quality about them.



# Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed

## Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed Summary

Pwyll offends Arawn king of Arawn by driving his hounds from their quarry. As recompense, Pwyll must take Arawn's place and form as king of Annwn for a year, and defeat Hagfan in single combat. Arawn returns to his kingdom and none notice the difference, except for Arawn's wife, who reveals that Pwyll did not make love to her. Arawn is astonished by Pwyll's honor and grants Pwyll the title "Head of Annwn."

Pwyll sits on a mound. Rhiannon rides past. He sends messengers who gallop in pursuit but cannot catch her. Pwyll calls her and she comes to him. Rhiannon is to be married against her will. Pwyll promises to claim her as his wife.

At the wedding feast, Gwawl asks Pwyll for a boon. Against Rhiannon's advice, Pwyll promises to give Gwawl whatever he asks. Gwawl claims Rhiannon and the feast. Rhiannon gives Pwyll a small bag with infinite capacity. Pwyll comes disguised to the wedding of Rhiannon and Gwawl and asks for a bag of food. Pwyll traps Gwawl inside the magic bag, and forces him to give Rhiannon back.

Rhiannon gives birth to a boy, but he vanishes. Rhiannon is accused of murdering him. She is sentenced to carry every visitor from the town gate to the court on her back.

Teyrnnon Twryf Liant has a mare, but her foals vanish every year, so he guards the foal overnight. A hand reaches through the wall, and Teyrnnon hacks it off. The arm vanishes, but leaves behind a baby. Teyrnnon and his wife raise Gwri as their own. They hear the tale of Rhiannon and realise that the child must be Pwyll's son. Teyrnnon takes Gwri to Pwyll's court. The boy is claimed as Pwyll's son and Rhiannon is vindicated. Gwri is renamed Pryderi, and he becomes the king of Dyfed.

## Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed Analysis

This story is the first of four tales associated with Pryderi; this tells the story of his parents and his childhood.

The opening, with Pwyll setting out hunting, begins in the everyday world. The appearance of the Otherworldly pack (these hounds are known as the Cwm Annwn) signals the transition from the ordinary world into the world of myth. White animals appearing during a hunt are a method of introducing a faerie element into a tale. Pwyll's stay in Annwn are his introduction to the otherworld, preparing him for his later experiences. His conduct in Annwn, notably his restraint regarding Arawn's wife, show that Pwyll is a man of honour, in spite of his behaviour during the hunt.

It is unclear why Arawn needs Pwyll to take his place and face Hagfan, or why Arawn is certain that Pwyll will defeat Hagfan. Possibly, it is because Pwyll is a mortal man and



Hagfan is a king of the Underworld. Some consider that the exchange of shapes and kingdoms was a motif used as a way for an Otherworldly king to sire a child on a mortal woman to produce a wonder-child or hero. This motif seems to be reversed in this tale, concentrating on Pwyll's celibacy, rather than the sexual activity of Arawn in the mortal world.

Rhiannon is based on some of the pre-Christian goddesses. Her name is apparently derived from Rigantona, meaning "great queen" and she seems to have a connection with the horse-goddess Epona. When she first appears, she is riding a horse that outpaces the fastest mortal horse even at a gentle walk. Her son is found in a stable, with a hint that the creature that steals Pryderi has also been stealing Terynon's foals. Even Rhiannon's punishment has an equine nature—she must carry travellers on her back.

Other tales in the Mabinogion mention the miraculous "birds of Rhiannon," but, surprisingly, they do not appear in this tale. Another link between this tale and "Culhwch and Olwen" is the motif of the Stolen Son—one of the tasks set to Culhwch is to recover "Mabon Son of Modron" (literally "The Son of the Mother") who was stolen at three days old like Pryderi.

Rhiannon is one of the more complex characters in this tale; Pwyll and the other major characters are more one-dimensional. Rhiannon is an intelligent woman—she comes up with the plan of thwarting Gwawl—with Otherworldly powers (her horse, the magical bag). She also has a measure of control over her own person—she cannot be caught by force or speed but must be entreated, and she takes the initiative to seek out Pwyll. However, she still is subjected to ill-treatment from three sources: her father, who wishes to marry her to Gwawl against her will; Pwyll's counsellors, who advise Pwyll to divorce her (twice); and her waiting women, who make her appear guilty of murder. She seems to accept her penance without complaining.

The magical bag is a reverse of the Cauldrons of Plenty often appearing in Celtic lore. Instead of producing an unlimited amount of food, it has an infinite capacity for food. Oddly, a Cauldron of Plenty appearing in another Welsh Arthurian poem (Preideu Annwfn) is called the "Head of Annwn's Cauldron", which seems to be linked to these tales of Pwyll, who has the title "Head of Annwn."

Rhiannon's penance is the first appearance of a common motif in The Mabinogion—and other European folk-tales—the motif of the Falsely Accused Wife. All these tales have the virtuous (and possibly magical) queen who is falsely accused of some crime. She is punished for these crimes but is ultimately vindicated. Rhiannon's story follows this pattern perfectly.

Pwyll is a weaker character, with a blend of honour, dogged loyalty and foolishness, but his love for Rhiannon is undoubted. He refuses to divorce or execute Rhiannon, and sentences her to do penance instead. Possibly, he is also afraid of her otherworldly powers.



Terynon is the third most important character in this legend. Like Rhiannon, he seems to be associated with horses. Some believe he is based on a Celtic god who was the consort of Rigantona or Epona, the god Tigernonos. His character is that of a man of practical commonsense and decency—in spite of having no children of his own, he insists on restoring Gwri/Pryderi to his birth parents and clearing Rhiannon's name. He also refuses to let Rhiannon carry him, knowing that she is innocent.

The only notable features of Pryderi, who is more important in the subsequent tales, are that he has an association with horses and that he grows supernaturally quickly, a feature common to many tales relating the infancy of a hero. It is interesting to note that the foal born on the night that Terynon finds Pryderi/Gwri also shows supernaturally rapid growth .

A theme of this tale that appears in many other Celtic tales is the concept of royal honour and reputation. This was considered to be the most important attribute of a king. This tale, like others in The Mabinogion portrays what an ideal ruler is like: generous, courageous, wise, loyal and a man of his word. The description of how Arawn king of Annwn ruled Pwyll's mortal kingdom is a classic description of the behaviour of an ideal ruler—a king demonstrated his wealth and power by showing how generous he could be. This concept also explains why Pwyll granted the stranger's request so readily at his betrothal feast, and why Gwawl also granted the disguised Pwyll's request—granting requests during festivals was typical behaviour for the kings of myth and legend (and possibly in reality).



# Branwen Daughter of Llyr

## Branwen Daughter of Llyr Summary

Matholwch, king of Ireland, wants to marry Branwen, Bendigeifran's sister, and make an alliance. When Efnisien learns of the marriage, he mutilates Matholwch's horses. As recompense, Bendigeifran gives Matholwch a cauldron that can give life back to a dead warrior.

In Ireland, Branwen gives birth to a son. Matholwch's nobles persuade him to banish Branwen. She is made a kitchen-wench. To prevent word reaching Bendigeifran, all ships from Britain are banned. Branwen tames a starling and it carries a letter to her brother.

Bendigeifran and his army cross the sea. He demands that Matholwch yield his throne to his son, and to recompense Branwen. Matholwch builds the giant Bendigeifran a house large enough to hold him but hides warriors in bags throughout the hall. Efnisien is told that the bags contain flour, but he kills the warriors when he feels inside.

Efnisien kills Gwern in a fit of jealousy. Battle breaks out and the Irish light the fire under the Cauldron of Rebirth. Efnisien disguises himself as a dead Irishman and is thrown alive into the Cauldron. He breaks it but the effort kills him. The British armies are victorious, although Bendigeifran receives a poisoned wound in his foot.

Bendigeifran instructs the survivors to cut off his head and take it to London. The survivors go to Gwales, where they find a hall with three doors, with the door facing Cornwall closed. They pass eighty years of bliss in the hall. One opens the third door, and memory floods back on them. They leave and bury Bendigeifran's uncorrupted head on the White Mount.

## Branwen Daughter of Llyr Analysis

This tale contains a blend of history and fantasy. It begins with an everyday situation: the forging of an alliance. Historical characters appear in passing, for example Caswallawn (Cassivellaunus), who leads an alliance in the defence of Britain against Caesar's invasion. However, the fantasy element is introduced by the gift of the Cauldron of Rebirth as recompense for an insult. This compares with the tale of Pwyll, where the fantasy element is also introduced when one key character offers recompense for an insult.

Another theme that this tale shares with the tale of Pwyll is the theme of the Falsely Accused Wife, with Branwen being ill-treated because of the misdeeds of her brother. Unlike Rhiannon, Branwen does not end happily: she loses both her son and her husband, and dies of grief instead of being vindicated. However, Branwen does not tamely accept her punishment, but takes the initiative to send a message to her brother,



calling for vengeance. Matholwch gives in easily to the demands of his counsellors, unlike Pwyll, who resisted demands to divorce Rhiannon.

This tale is only loosely linked with the four others considered to be the "Four Branches of the Mabinogion," although it provides some background, as it shows how Manawyddyn and Pryderi became friends. The tale can be told without reference to Pryderi, as the plot focuses on Bendigeifran, Branwen and Efnisien.

Many of the characters are flat and one-dimensional. Bendigeifran, Branwen and Efnisien are the exceptions.

Bendigeifran at first appears like a typical Celtic chieftan. However, when he marches to war, he begins to change to a more Otherworldly hero. His great size as he wades across the Irish Sea behind his war fleet may not be his permanent size—previously, he has commented on the vast proportions of Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid (the original owner of the Cauldron of Rebirth) and his wife. This great size is also referred to in the building of the house as a token of peace from Matholwch—no house has previously been able to contain him. Possibly, Bendigeifran is able to alter his size at will. Certainly, his head is easily carried by the seven survivors.

The episodes involving Bendigeifran's head hark back to early Celtic days, where the spirit or power of a hero was thought to reside in the head and remain there once the head was severed. The head of a leader had great spiritual power, and it was common practice for a raiding party to take the heads of highly respected enemies to obtain their power as well as as a trophy. Bluntly, the ancient Celts were head-hunters. The place where Bendigeifran's head is buried is significant and has links with a current superstition: Bendigeifran can be translated as "Blessed Raven" and the White Mount in London is the current site of the Tower of London; tradition has it that if the ravens remain in or around the Tower of London, all will be well in Britain.

The account of Bendigeifran is also linked with some of the Arthurian tales. According to one tale, Arthur dug up Bendigeifran's head, wishing to defend Britain by force of arms (or Christianity) rather than by (pagan) magic. The poisoned wound Bendigeifran receives in his foot also seems to echo the wound received by the Fisher King in the Grail cycle.

Both Bran and Branwen appear to be linked with birds. Bran is able to arrange for the birds of Rhiannon to entertain the seven survivors (which is odd, considering that Pryderi, one of the seven, is Rhiannon's son). Branwen (whose name means "White Raven") also has a mysterious power over birds, demonstrated by her ability to train the starling as her messenger. In this respect, she is more of a bird-charmer than Rhiannon, who never appears with "her" birds.

Efnisien is the most intriguing character in this legend, and possibly has an allegorical or symbolic role. On one hand, he appears to be wicked, demonstrated by his mutilation of the horses and his murder of Gwern. Jealousy seems to be his main motive for these actions. It is interesting, and possibly significant that both these atrocities are triggered





by events that can be seen as representing fertility or the life-force. By contrast, Efnisien has the intelligence to thwart Matholwch's stratagem of hiding armed warriors in flour bags, and it is he who turns the tide of battle by breaking the Cauldron of Rebirth and removing the advantage of the Irish.

Efnisien could possibly be seen as representing the forces of death, destruction and chaos. The narrator of the tale describes Efnisien as being able to "cause strife between the two brothers when they were most loving" in contrast to the peacemaker Nisien. Using the framework of folklorist Robert Graves, Efnisien plays the role of the Dark Twin personifying Winter, Death and the Waning Year in contrast to Nisien, the Light Twin personifying the Waxing Year, Summer and Fertility. Efnisien, in this role, is set in contrast to the gigantic woman Cymidei Cymeinfol, one of the original owners of the Cauldron of Rebirth. Cauldrons are symbols of the Earth Mother and of the cycle of life, and this seems to be borne out by the supernatural fecundity of Cymidei Cymeinfol. The Cauldron of Rebirth is another example of the classical Celtic cauldrons of myth, and (like the other wonder-Cauldrons) has an infinite capacity to produce life or abundance.

The episode where the survivors spend eighty years in the hall in peace seems jarring. However, this is usually interpreted as meaning that the seven survivors spend this in a place outside time. When the forbidden door is opened, the normal passage of time begins again.

This tale also contains the first example of an onomastic (place-naming) tale with the account of the mutilated horses and the recompense made for them being used to explain the place-name Talebolion. This translation of the place-name is widely held to be erroneous, with the interpretation "End of the Ridges" being more widely accepted. However, this is the least jarring and forced-sounding of the onomastic tales appearing in The Mabinogion.



# Manawydan son of Llyr

## Manawydan son of Llyr Summary

Manawydan, Rhiannon, Pryderi and Cigfa reign over Dyfed. All humans and domestic animals in their kingdom vanish. For a year, the four of them live off the land.

They travel to Hereford and become saddle-makers. The other saddlers become jealous and seek to kill the four. On hearing of the plot, Pryderi suggests that they fight back, but Manawydan counsels that they should leave quietly. They travel to another city, where they become shield-makers, but encounter the same problems. In a third city, they become shoemakers, but once again, they are chased out.

The four return to the wilderness. While hunting, Pryderi and Manawydan find a white boar that flees into a caer. Pryderi goes inside. He sees a golden bowl. He reaches out to touch the bowl and is trapped. Rhiannon enters and sees him. She goes to pull him away, but she is also trapped. The caer vanishes, taking them with it.

Cigfa and Manawydan return to Lloegres, and he takes up shoemaking. The other shoemakers become jealous and drive them from the town.

They return to Dyfed. Manawydan plants three crops of wheat, but both his first and second crops are stolen. He guards the third. Mice come to carry off the grain. Manawydan catches one mouse and decides to hang it.

Manawydan constructs a gallows. A clerk rides towards him and offers to buy the mouse. Manawydan declines. Next, a priest rides past and the same thing happens. Lastly, a bishop rides by and offers a princely sum for the mouse. Manawydan says he will only let the mouse go for the safe return of Pryderi and Rhiannon, and asks why the bishop sets such high value on it.

The bishop (Llwyd) reveals that the mouse is his wife in enchanted shape. Llwyd is the one who had cast the enchantment over the kingdom of Dyfed and had stolen the grain. Manawydan returns the mouse, and Llwyd returns Rhiannon, Pryderi and the other inhabitants of Dyfed.

## Manawydan son of Llyr Analysis

Like the previous three tales, this opens with a naturalistic tale of the politics of a tribal society. This natural tone continues well into the tale, despite the mysterious clap of thunder and the mist that makes the subjects and domesticated animals of Dyfed disappear. It is the appearance of the white boar and the disappearance of the hounds that signal the transition between everyday life and the world of magic—note the similarity between the appearance of the white boar in this tale and the appearance of the white hounds in "Pwyll Prince of Dyfed."



The fantasy elements of his plot can be seen as tying up some loose ends left by "Pwyll Prince of Dyfed," as the magical disappearance of Manawydan and Pryderi's subjects, the disappearance of Rhiannon and Pryderi, and the raid by the shapeshifting mice are all done to take vengeance for the insult to Gwawl, who was to have married Rhiannon. This could be seen as a third instance of an insult and the resulting compensation introducing the fantasy element.

This tale focuses on the friendship between Manawydan and the younger Pryderi. Manawydan's loyalty to Pryderi can be compared to Pwyll's loyalty to Arawn king of Annwn: Manawydan refuses to take advantage of Cigfa (which is why she is frightened after Pryderi's disappearance), and claims he would be loyal to Pryderi and not seduce his friend's wife even if he were a younger man.

Manawydan and Pryderi have markedly distinct characters. Pryderi appears as being impetuous and somewhat hot-headed, as demonstrated by his eagerness to fight the saddle-makers, the shield-makers and the shoemakers who plot to kill them. He also seems more conscious of his honour and his nobility—he considers it shameful to accept death or battle from the low-born craftsmen.

Manawydan is more level-headed and circumspect, and is a man of skill and practical wisdom, shown by his craftsmanship. He is less conscious of his honour and what is fitting for his rank. Not only does he insist on hanging the mouse—which hints at a trace of vindictiveness in his character—but he insists on becoming a shoemaker a second time, in spite of Cigfa's protests. It is implied that shoemaking was a dirty job; Cigfa describes shoemaking as "not to be commended for its cleanliness" and Pryderi describes shoemakers as having "no heart" or enough pride (or intelligence) to plot against them. It is also interesting that he learned the secret of colouring saddles and shields from the original owner (and possibly maker) of the Cauldron of Rebirth—this original owner was Irish and may contain a trace of the Irish craftsman god Lugh.

Feet and shoes may have had some symbolic significance to the original compilers of The Mabinogion and to other tellers of European folktales in general (for example, Cinderella, Puss in Boots, the Elves and the Shoemaker). Benegeifran's fatal wound is in the foot, and in "Math son of Mathonwy", the title character has to sleep with his feet in the lap of a virgin. Manawydan's choice in becoming a shoemaker may link him with this common fairytale motif.

Manawydan's attempt to hang the mouse seems out of place and vindictive. However, if Manawydan suspects Otherworldly involvement in the raid, these actions make sense. Either Manawydan may be punishing a mouse he knows full well to be no ordinary mouse and therefore deserving of punishment, or he is deliberately trying to force a meeting with the magician responsible for the enchantments. This interpretation is more in keeping with the characteristics that Manawydan shows elsewhere in the tale: wise, level-headed and circumspect.

Rhiannon's character has changed from the Otherworldly woman of "Pwyll Prince of Dyfed", and she appears as an ordinary older woman who scolds her husband and



goes in search for her son, becoming trapped by magic in the process. Any traces of a Celtic goddess about her have vanished.

Cigfa is a one-dimensional character, although she seems to share Pryderi's consciousness of honour and fitting behaviour, and she steps into his role of advising Manawydan to fight the envious shoemakers seeking to kill them.

Many of the incidents in this tale follow the classic three-fold pattern commonly seen in fairy tales and folklore. Pryderi and Manawydan follow three crafts, with the third being the most important. Manawydan plants three crofts of wheat and traps the magical mouse when the third croft is raided. Three men ride past attempting to redeem the mouse from Manawydan (possibly, all three are the same person), with the third being successful.



# Math Son of Mathonwy

## Math Son of Mathonwy Summary

Math, king of Gwynedd, must sleep with his feet in the lap of a virgin except during war. Math's brother Gilfaethwy lusts after Goewin, Math's foot holder. Gwydion promises to arrange a war so Gilfaethwy can have her.

Gwydion travels to Pryderi's court in disguise and asks for some of his magical pigs. Gwydion conjures up horses and hounds and offers these in exchange. Pryderi agrees but the horses and hounds vanish. War breaks out. While Math is absent, Gilfaethwy and Gwydion rape Goewin. Gwydion and Pryderi meet in single combat. Gwydion uses magic and kills Pryderi.

As punishment for the rape, Math turns Gilfaethwy into first deer, then pigs, then wolves, changing their genders and making them bear offspring to each other. He also makes Goewin his queen.

Gwydion suggests Aranrhod as Math's next footholder. As she steps over his wand in a virginity test, she gives birth, and drops something tiny, which Gwydion hides in a chest. Later, he hears a cry from the chest and finds a baby boy inside. Gwydion tells Aranrhod that the boy is her son. She grows angry and puts a destiny on him that he will have no name unless she gives him one.

Gwydion and the boy disguise themselves as shoemakers and travel to Caer Aranrhod. While Gwydion is measuring her foot for shoes, the boy aims a stone at a wren and hits it, causing Aranrhod to praise his skill. Gwydion reveals his identity, and says the boy has a name: Llew Llaw Gyffes. Aranrhod says Llew Llaw Gyffes will not bear arms unless she equips him.

Later, Gwydion disguises himself and Llew Llaw Gyffes, and they sail to Caer Aranrhod. Gwydion creates an illusion of an attack. Gwydion asks Aranrhod to help Llew put on the armour and sword so he can defend the caer. Gwydion dispels the illusion and reveals their identity. Aranrhod is angry and puts a third destiny on Llew: he will never have a human wife.

Gwydion and Math work magic to create a woman out of flowers as a wife for Llew named Blodeuedd. Math gives Llew a cantref to rule over. Blodeuedd meets Gronwr, and they commit adultery. Gronwr then suggests that Blodeuedd should find out Llew's weaknesses and how he can be killed.

Llew reveals that the only way he can be killed is if he has one foot on a goat and one on a bathtub that is in a hut with a roof but no walls, using a spear made when people are at church on Sundays. Blodeuedd tells Gronwr and he makes the spear.



Blodeuedd again asks Llew to show her how he can be killed. Llew builds the hut, fetches the bathtub and the goat. Gronwr hurls the spear at him and wounds him. Llew transforms into an eagle and flies away.

Math and Gwydion set out to find Llew. They follow a sow to a tree. An eagle is roosting in this tree. Gwydion deduces that this eagle is Llew, and lures it down. Gwydion returns him to human shape and they take Llew home to be healed.

Gwydion punishes Blodeuedd by transforming her into an owl. Llew insists on giving Gronwr a blow equal to the one Gronwr struck him. Gronwr pleads to set a stone between him and Llew, as he was duped by a woman's wiles. In spite of the stone, Llew kills Gronwr.

## Math Son of Mathonwy Analysis

Unlike the other tales connected with Pryderi, this tale is set in the world of fantasy and has very few realistic elements. Pryderi only makes the briefest appearance.

The tale seems to have the theme of conflict between men and women. Some commentators read this legend as portraying the conflict between a matriarchal system (represented by Aranrhod) and a patriarchal system (represented by Gwydion). This tale contains the interaction of Goewin, Gilfaethwy, Gwydion and Math; Gwydion, Aranrhod and Llew Llaw Gyffes; and Llew Llaw Gyffes, Blodeuedd and Gronwr.

Math and Goewin seem to represent a harmonious relationship between men and women, which seems to be highlighted by Math's need to sleep with his feet in the lap of a virgin when he is not at war. War can be seen as a force that disrupts the relationship between the sexes, as it takes Math away from Goewin and leaves her vulnerable. Math's punishment of the rapists seems appropriate: he makes both of them experience what it is like to be a female and to bear young, with Gilfaethwy (who was the more guilty of the two) having to be a female twice. Note also that Math recompenses Goewin by making her joint (or sole) ruler of his kingdom—another way of representing balance between men and women.

Math can be read as a man who lives successfully within a matriarchal system. Some analysts interpret Math's peculiarity to represent the need of the king to be tied to the land or the Earth Mother—he needs to be grounded in the earth. It also may have some link with the Celtic sheela-na-gig figures, which are female totems depicted displaying their genitals and considered to be a protective force.

The battle of wills between Gwydion and Aranrhod, who are brother and sister, is a more obvious conflict between a patriarchal and matriarchal system. This conflict begins with Gwydion's testing of Aranrhod. Some analysts see Aranrhod as being a maiden on matriarchal terms: she is a woman who belongs to no man. However, under patriarchal terms, she is not a virgin: she has sexual experience. The test itself seems sexually symbolic: Aranrhod has to step over Gwydion's wand—a phallic symbol. Gwydion's hiding of the "little bundle" in a chest until it becomes a child seems to be a



sort of "male pregnancy." Gwydion, representing a patriarchal system, has already begun taking control of Lleu and aspects of life that were previously under the control of women.

The main conflict between Gwydion and Aranrhod relates to Lleu's initiation into manhood. Clearly, to be considered an adult male capable of taking his place in society—which is the significance of his being given a territory to rule—Lleu Llaw Gyffes needs a name, weapons and a wife. Aranrhod claims the right to grant him these—the rights of the mother in a matriarchy—and then denies him these. One by one, Gwydion uses his magic and cunning to trick Aranrhod into giving him the first two of these.

Gwydion's stratagem for getting Lleu Llaw Gyffes his name seems to stress and highlight the symbolic significance of feet and shoes. Like Manawydan son of Llyr, Gwydion takes the role of a shoemaker. It is while Gwydion has hold of her feet to measure her that Aranrhod accidentally gives Lleu Llaw Gyffes his name, which is reminiscent of Goewin holding Math's feet. This incident also reminiscent of (but opposite to) the scene from the fairy-tale Cinderella where the Prince fits the shoe perfectly to the heroine's foot—but the later French tale involves power and status being granted to a woman; in this Celtic tale, power is being taken from the woman.

The process of Lleu Llaw Gyffes' initiation into manhood has the three-part structure common to fairy-tales. The third part, typical of this folk-lore structure, is very different from the first two. Here, Aranrhod totally repudiates Lleu Llaw Gyffes and the solution to the problem is entirely worked by (patriarchal) magic. However, this woman created artificially by the male magicians will betray her husband and cause chaos. This can be seen as representing the chaos that results when male and female relationships are out of balance and women are stripped of their power and role in fertility, raising children and initiation.

The story of Blodeuedd's betrayal can be seen as portraying an imbalance between men and women. Here, Blodeuedd is able to manipulate her lover Gronwr and her husband, which brings about the deaths of both men—note Gronwr's plea when he asks for the stone to be set between him and Lleu Llaw Gyffes. Blodeuedd's discovery and betrayal of her husband's secret weakness is reminiscent of the Biblical story of Samson and Delilah.

According to Robert Graves, the Blodeuedd episode also portrays a classic theme of myth: the betrayal of the hero by the woman to his rival, followed by his return and vengeance, which Graves interprets as the Waxing Year (represented by Lleu Llaw Gyffes) competing with the Waning Year (represented by Gronwr) for the Moon (represented by Blodeuedd—her transformation into an owl may give weight to this theory, as the owl is associated with night and the moon). In this light, the scene where the sow is seen devouring the rotting flesh of Lleu Llaw Gyffes in his eagle form can be seen as the earth goddess or the death goddess (represented as the sow—the Welsh legend of Taliesin shows the Earth Mother Ceridwyn as a sow as part of the cycle of death and rebirth) consuming the dead hero, but simultaneously regenerating him. It is probably significant that the tree that Lleu Llaw Gyffes perches on in eagle form is an





oak—the oak was important in the Celtic religion and throughout Europe, it was associated with divinity, thunder and royalty, with oak's parasite, mistletoe, being a symbol of lightning (heaven come down to earth), fertility and rebirth. This idea is supported by the name of Llew Llaw Gyffes, which is similar to the name of the Irish sun-god, who was known as Lugh of the Long Hand or Lugh of the Swift, Sure Hand—a direct translation of Llew Llaw Gyffes' name.

"Math son of Mathonwy" contains a number of onomastic tales. The most notable ones are those associated with the raid of Pryderi's pigs. The incident where Llew Llaw Gyffes hurls a spear through a stone at Gronwr, while it is not strictly onomastic, seems to provide an explanation for (or is associated with) one of several pierced stones that can be seen standing throughout Celtic countries. The incident where Blodeuedd's maidens flee and fall into the lake seems like an onomastic tale, but lacks the typical "and so this place was called" formula.

Many of the characters in this tale are one-dimensional. Goewin and Llew Llaw Gyffes are straight "good and innocent" characters, while Gilfaethwy and Gronwr are flat villains. Of the more interesting and complex characters, Math is the most unambiguous: he seems to be a primarily good character. This is demonstrated by his seeking justice and reparation for Goewin, and his punishment of the two rapists. He also demonstrates his good character by helping Gwydion to create Llew Llaw Gyffes' magical wife, and by searching for Llew and restoring him to wholeness. While he approves of Gwydion's idea of obtaining some of Pryderi's herd of pigs, he does not approve of the use of magic and trickery to obtain them and to kill Pryderi. This also is an example of a just and honourable ruler—honour and kingship being two of the key themes or motifs in *The Mabinogion*. Math also appears as a powerful magician, possibly more powerful than Gwydion, as Math is able to enchant Gwydion, and Gwydion needs his help in creating Blodeuedd.

Aranrhod is an ambiguous character. On the one hand, Gwydion's testing of her seems intrusive and she justifiably feels humiliated. She may also feel indignant that Gwydion has usurped her role in nurturing Llew Llaw Gyffes. On the other hand, her withholding of the symbols of manhood from her son seems spiteful and unnecessary. She is shown at her most human during Gwydion's disguised visits to her island fortress: she takes a feminine interest in fine footwear and insists on having perfectly fitting pair, and she also shows concern for any possible harm that could have come to her people as a result of Gwydion's illusory attack on the caer.

It is also interesting that Aranrhod is the ruler over a caer—rule and authority over territory are consistently associated with men throughout *The Mabinogion*. However, Math confers authority over his territory on Goewin when she becomes his wife and Pryderi gives the authority over his kingdom of Dyfed to Manawydan along with the hand of his mother Rhiannon, which may indicate a link between women or the feminine principle and the land; a king was held to be in a relationship with his kingdom in the same way that he was in a relationship with his queen. As explained in the landmark work *The Golden Bough*, the idea that the king confers fertility on the land and makes it produce in an analogy to a husband giving woman children is an ancient and universal





concept. Possibly Aranrhod's rule over her island fortress is meant to symbolise matriarchy, or else it could be interpreted as symbolising women's rule over the emotional world—notice that her fortress is an island, which is separate from the mainland and surrounded by the sea. Oceans and the sea, like the moon, have often been linked with femininity, as the moon, the sea and women all have a monthly cycle. It is also significant that Gwydion needs to create a magic boat to reach Caer Aranrhod rather than using an ordinary non-magical boat.

Gwydion is ambiguous, showing both good and evil characteristics, and using his magic for both good and evil. He starts a war between Math and Pryderi for the lowest of motives: he wants to give his brother a chance to rape Goewin. It is also implied that he rapes Goewin along with his brother. He also uses his magic to deceive Pryderi into exchanging his pigs for illusory horses and greyhounds. His use of magic to defeat Pryderi in single combat is also highly dishonourable. On the other hand, he uses his magic to help Lleu Llaw Gyffes win the symbols of manhood, and then uses his powers to restore Lleu Llaw Gyffes to full health. It is also Gwydion who captures and punishes Blodeuedd for her treachery. It may be significant that all Gwydion's good actions take place after his three years of punishment—he has "learned his lesson." Blodeuedd's transformation into an owl mirrors the punishment inflicted on Gwydion.

Anthropologists are likely to see Gwydion as being a classic example of a shaman figure, thanks to his shapeshifting (although, in this tale, Gwydion is not the cause of the changes of shape) and his creation of illusions and wonders from plant substances, most notably using a toadstool (the toadstool is notorious as being used as a hallucinogen in Northern European shamanic cultures). He is also the one who guides and helps Lleu Llaw Gyffes through the process of initiation into manhood. It is possibly significant in this context that Gwydion twice disguises himself as a bard—bards were considered to be "uncanny" people who were often outside the normal patterns and roles of society.

Blodeuedd, the woman created by magic, is shown as treacherous and lustful. This flaw in her character may be seen as being a result of her magical, unnatural origins. As Aranrhod says, Lleu Llaw Gyffes' wife is not of the human race: she lacks humanity. She was created by men's magic to be physically beautiful, but the "woman" who results is shallow and soulless. Like the horses, greyhounds, leather and ships that Gwydion creates from plants, Blodeuedd is not a real wife for Lleu Llaw Gyffes; she is a deceptive illusion.



# The Dream of Macsen Wledig

## The Dream of Macsen Wledig Summary

Macsen, emperor of Rome, dreams that he sails to a country, where he comes to a hall. Inside the hall, he sees two young men playing gwyddbwyll, while an old king sits near them carving. Beside the king sits a woman, who embraces Macsen.

Macsen wakes filled with longing for the dream-woman. He no longer takes any pleasure in eating or drinking. His subjects grow concerned, and he tells them his dream. They suggest that Macsen should send messengers to find her. Thirteen messengers set out. When Macsen recognises the start of his dream-journey, he sends the messengers on. They take ship and sail to Britain. They find the castle Macsen described. When they find the maiden, Elen, they hail her as Empress.

Elen says Macsen must come to claim her. Macsen conquers the island as he travels to meet her. Macsen takes Elen as his wife. As she is a virgin, she claims her maiden-fee: rule over all of Britain for her father and three strongholds for herself. She causes the Roman roads to be built throughout Britain.

Macsen stays with Elen seven years. The Romans appoint a new Emperor who sends a message to Macsen warning him not to return. Macsen returns to take his place as Emperor. Macsen is victorious with the help of Elen's brothers. He rewards them with land. The brothers conquer Brittany. The conquerors remove the tongues of the women so the children speak only Celtic.

## The Dream of Macsen Wledig Analysis

This tale is a romanticised account that attempts to explain a number of historical facts. Unlike other tales in The Mabinogion, this tale has few fantasy elements, apart from the dream itself.

Macsen Wledig is the Celtic name for Magnus Maximus, who lived in the later half of the 4th Century AD, and who was one of several commanders who contended for the position of Roman Emperor. Magnus Maximus was posted as an army commander in Britain, and, according to one historian, was responsible for withdrawing the Roman peacekeeping forces from Britain, leaving the island open to Saxon invasion. Elen, or Helen, is also considered to be a figure from history rather than myth, and is today remembered as Saint Helen of Caernarfon (Caer Arfon). This tale creates a romantic legend out of his coming to Britain and his attempt to be made emperor of Rome. In this tale, Macsen is portrayed as the true Emperor of Rome, and an example of a good ruler.

The tale also gives a romantic origin for the Roman roads in Britain, and also creates a legendary explanation for why a Celtic language is spoken in parts of France. The motif of the women's tongues being cut out is a fairly common one in tales seeking to explain



why the inhabitants of one area speak a completely different language to the areas around them, and the tale is also onomastic, with the original compiler of this tale mistakenly interpreting "Llydaw" to mean "half silent."

Elen comes across as a very strong character, unlike many of the other female characters in *The Mabinogion*. She shows her strength by insisting that Maccsen comes to claim her for himself in her own land, rather than leaving her country to marry a stranger, and she also shows the strength of character and will by negotiating that her father take command of Britain. She is also the one given the credit for the building of some of the key strategic sites in Wales, and with the building of the Roman roads (incidentally, the Roman roads are thought to predate the historical Helen). This strength of character is reflected in her full name: Elen of the Hosts. She also appears as a wise, practical character, shown by her shrewd negotiations, her foresight in creating the road network and in how she peaceably settles the potential for conflict between Maccsen and her brothers.

Elen can be seen as a classic Celtic representation of the land, and Maccsen cannot rule over the land until he has married her—another instance of the idea that a king is "married" to the land. This is similar to the marriage between Manawydan and Rhiannon, and between Math and Goewin. The king-land link is also highlighted by the incident where soil is brought from his home country for Maccsen, which is a way of reminding the reader that Maccsen is supposed to be the true emperor. The idea that some of the properties of one country can be preserved in a sample of soil from that country appears in many places, ranging from the Book of Kings in the Bible to *Dracula*.

Many commentators see Elen as having traces of a Celtic goddess figure about her. The goddess she most resembles is the Morrigan, who was a goddess of battle and war. Elen also seems to have echoes of historical Celtic warrior queens, such as Cartimandua and Boudicca, and character may have been based on folk memories of these leaders.

Stylistically, this tale owes a lot to the tales of courtly love. This is seen particularly in the rich descriptions of the hall and of Elen, and in the love-sickness of Maccsen, both of which are very typical of the Courtly style.



# Llud and Llefelys

## Llud and Llefelys Summary

Llud rules Britain while Llefelys becomes king of France by marrying the French princess.

Three plagues strike Britain. The first is the Coranieid, who hear all secrets spoken on the wind. The second is a scream every May Eve that strikes animals and plants barren. The third is the disappearance of all food in the king's courts.

Llud asks Llefelys for help. So the Coranieid cannot overhear them, Llefelys makes a horn of bronze for them to speak through. A demon inside the horn confuses their speech, but Llefelys washes it out. He tells Llud how to deal with the plagues.

Llud breeds the insects Llefelys gives him, crushes them to powder and mixes them with water. He throws this on the Coranieid, killing them.

The scream is caused by two dragons. Llud digs a pit in the centre of his kingdom, where he places a tub filled with mead and covered with silk. The dragons fight, but when they grow weary, they turn into pigs and fall into the tub. Llud traps them and buries them in Dinas Emreis.

The third plague is caused by a magician who casts an enchanted sleep. Llud stays awake on guard. A huge man comes and fills a bottomless hamper. Llud fights him and makes the man his vassal.

## Llud and Llefelys Analysis

This independent tale is much simpler than many others contained in The Mabinogion and preserves the style of an orally transmitted fireside tale that blends elements collected from other tales and blended into a whole. The fantasy elements are somewhat downplayed and not used to their full potential by the storyteller.

The opening of the tale has a few quasi-historical elements, although these do not tie in with the legendary history of Britain described in other tales within The Mabinogion. Llud and Llefelys are described as being the sons of Beli and the brother of Caswallawn. According to "Branwen Daughter of Llyr" and "Manawydan Son of Llyr", it is Caswallawn rather than Llud who rules over Britain. Possibly the two accounts could be reconciled if Caswallawn is seen as the High King, and Llud as king over a smaller realm.

The incident where Llefelys travels to France to marry the king's daughter and thus become the next king of France is another incident where a man becomes the ruler of a territory by marrying a woman of that land. Again, this seems to represent the idea that a king was married to the land, with his queen representing the land. This sort of



marriage, known as an exogamous marriage, where a prince becomes the ruler of a kingdom by marrying the princess, is very common in fairy tales and may contain vestigial traces of a matriarchal or a matrilinear system, where inheritance is based on the female line rather than the male line. However, marrying an inheriting princess could also be a "natural" way of obtaining a kingdom for a second son, and the marriage also seems to be a way of creating political alliance between the two kingdoms. It also serves as a way of making the two brothers equals.

The plague of the Coranieid is the one plague that is unique to this tale, with the other two being reminiscent of or borrowings from other folktales. However, it is not made clear exactly why the Coranieid are considered to be a plague, as they do not seem to create any problems other than they make it impossible to keep anything secret. While it is not implicitly stated in this tale, it could be that the Coranieid were causing friction and trouble by spreading the secrets they learned. The Coranieid certainly seem linked with disrupted communications, and while it is not stated that the demon inside the bronze horn used by Llud and Llefelys is a Coranieid, it is a reasonable enough assumption to guess that the demon is one, and the twisted communications between the two brothers is an example of what the Coranieid have been doing.

The plague of the scream caused by the sleeping dragons seems to borrow elements from the legends relating to the childhood of Merlin. Like Llud and Llefelys, Merlin removes a plague caused by battling dragons. However, the dragons in the tale of Merlin are imprisoned underground and are described in more detail: one is red (symbolising Wales and the original Celts of Britain) and the other is white (representing the Saxons). There may be a link between the two tales; in "Llud and Llefelys", the dragons are imprisoned in the ground near a castle named Dinas Emreis. In the tale of Merlin—who is also named Emrys—the dragons are already underground near a castle, causing it to collapse. It is reasonable to assume that they are the same dragons. Possibly, this tale is given to explain how the dragons in the Arthurian tale got there. Certainly, it is stated in "Llud and Llefelys" that as long as the dragons stay buried, no plague can harm Britain, while in the Arthurian tale, the dragons are released and the island becomes plagued by an invasion of the Saxons shortly afterwards.

Dinas Emreis is an actual site of a Celtic hill-fort, and visitors can see a hollow in the ruins where the dragons were supposedly confined. The site also has a range of other local legends attached to it, mostly associated with Merlin.

The date of the scream may also have some significance. May Eve was the night before the Celtic holiday of Beltane or May Day, which is still celebrated throughout Europe as the beginning of the agricultural year and the start of spring. This makes the blight caused by the scream more significant; Beltane was a celebration of the land's fertility and abundance, so striking the land with barrenness at this time of year was particularly devastating.

The mysterious vanishing of the food from the king's court brought about by a enchanter who plays music to cast the people in the court into a deep sleep is also borrowed from another tale (or has been borrowed from the same source). This incident is very similar



to one appearing in the Irish legends of Fionn mac Cumhaill, where the court is cast into magical slumber by music before the enchanter comes to the king's hall. However, in the Irish tale, the enchanter burns the hall down instead of stealing all the food. Like Llud, Fionn mac Cumhaill stays on guard, keeping himself from the enchanted sleep as he keeps watch. Llud's stratagem for staying awake is more naturalistic and was possibly actually used by guards keeping watch overnight; the strategy used by Fionn mac Cumhaill is more magical: he has to press the head of his (possibly magical) spear to his forehead. This incident also has echoes of the conflict between the Anglo-Saxon hero Beowulf and the monster Grendel. However, Llud's conflict with the unnamed enchanter ends more peaceably than the battles fought by the Irish and Saxon heroes: Llud spares his opponent and makes him swear fealty instead of killing him.

The hamper used by the unnamed enchanter to steal the food sounds very similar to the magic bag given to Pwyll by Rhiannon in "Pwyll Prince of Dyfed" in that it seems to have infinite capacity.

Both Llud and Llefelys are examples of ideal kings. Llefelys is shown as a good leader on account of his wisdom and his loyalty to his brother, but of the two brothers, Llud is the more complex. The narrator of the tale describes him as being "a good warrior, and generous and liberal," which is a summary of what the narrator's society considered to be some of the highest virtues in a ruler. Llud also demonstrates his nobility of character in how he helps Llefelys win the hand of the French princess, and in his concern for his kingdom. Llud can also be seen as a humble character—he is not too proud to ask for help and his actions in dismissing most of his fleet and meeting with his brother in a single ship mid-ocean are also indicative of his humble nature. The description of Llud as being a good warrior is demonstrated by his ability to keep himself awake while on guard and his fighting ability against the heavily armoured enchanter. His mercy in sparing his enemy is also an example of his nobility—mercy was considered a desirable virtue in kings.

"Llud and Llefelys" has two onomastic tales that seem more plausible than most of the other onomastic tales in *The Mabinogion*. The first gives the origin of London's name, deriving it from Llud. The second relates to Dinas Emreis (known today as Dinas Emrys), which means "fortress of Ambrosius." Ambrosius is another name for the legendary Merlin, again providing a clear link between this tale and the Arthurian cycle. The origin suggested for the name of London is also plausible; Ludgate in London is also considered to be named after this king. Other place names in Southern England are named after him.

Other tales are told about Llud, especially one where he loses a hand in battle and has the missing limb replaced by a silver hand. J.R.R. Tolkien wrote a monograph about the name of this folk hero (or a close variant of his name) after one of the sites associated with Llud was excavated by archaeologists.





# Culhwch and Olwen

## Culhwch and Olwen Summary

Goleuddydd is the sister of King Arthur. She dies but she makes her husband promise never to take another wife until a two-headed briar grows on her grave. After seven years, the king finds a double-headed briar, and makes war on a neighbouring king and takes his wife. However, he keeps his son Culhwch hidden. When she finds Culhwch, she puts a destiny on him that he shall have no other wife than Olwen, the daughter of Ysbaddaden Chief Giant.

Culhwch's father sends him to the court of Arthur for help. Culhwch reaches Arthur's court and demands entry. Glewlwyd the porter denies him entry. Culhwch insists on entering, saying that he will bring dishonour on the court. Arthur tells Glewlwyd to let Culhwch in.

Culhwch asks for his hair to be cut, and Arthur does. Arthur then recognises Culhwch and asks him to name what he truly wants. Culhwch asks help in winning Olwen in the name of each member of Arthur's court, invoking each one in detail.

Arthur has not heard of the maiden, but sends his men with Culhwch to find her. When they tell a shepherd why they have come, he is dismayed, because everybody who has come to ask for the hand of Olwen has been killed. The shepherd's wife promises to introduce Olwen to them on condition that they will not harm her. Olwen comes to the hut. Culhwch declares his love for her, but she tells him she cannot be taken by any man who does not ask her father's permission.

Culhwch and his party then travel to Ysbaddaden's fortress. On hearing that a man has come to ask for the hand of his daughter, Ysbaddaden asks his servants to raise up his eyelids so he can see his son-in-law. Ysbaddaden tells Culhwch to return the next day, but as the party departs, Ysbaddaden hurls a spear at Culhwch. Bedwyr catches the spear and hurls it back at the giant, wounding him in the knee. The party returns the next day and Ysbaddaden then tells them that he must consult with Olwen's great-grandparents. As Ysbaddaden hurls a second poisoned stone-spear at them. Menw catches it and hurls it back, wounding the giant in the stomach. When the party returns a third time, Ysbaddaden asks his servants to raise his eyelids. He throws his third spear at the party, and Culhwch catches it and hurls it back, wounding him in the eye.

Ysbaddaden sets Culhwch 39 difficult tasks, including finding the comb and scissors between the ears of the boar Twrch Trwyth, and finding Mabon son of Modron.

Cei and Bedwyr obtain the sword of Wrnach the Giant by posing as refurbishers of weapons; this gives them the opportunity to take the sword and slay the giant. Arthur delivers Mabon's kinsman Eidoel from prison, and then sets Cei, Bedwyr, Eidoel and Gwrhyr the Interpreter to find Mabon.



The four go first to the Ouzel (Blackbird) of Cilgwri and ask her if she has heard of Mabon. The Blackbird has heard nothing of Mabon. However, she tells them to ask the Stag of Rhedynfre. The Stag sends them to the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd, who in turn sends them to the Eagle of Gwernabwy, who sends them to the Salmon of Llyn Llwy. The Salmon says he has heard a prisoner lamenting in Caer Loyw. Cei and Gwrhyr ride on the Salmon's back to question the prisoner. The prisoner is Mabon, and he can only be freed by force. A warband rides out to free Mabon.

Next, Arthur arranges for the two boarhounds to be found. Arthur and his men surround their wolf-bitch mother and capture her two pups. As Arthur and his men return, one of them comes to an anthill on fire. The man extinguishes the fire and the ants repay the favour by bringing in the flax seeds Ysbaddaden demanded.

Cei and Bedwyr go to pluck the beard of Dillus the Bearded to make the leash for the boarhounds. As the hairs must be plucked from Dillus while he is alive, the warriors trap him. Cei plucks out his beard hairs and then kills Dillus. Arthur teases Cei about how the hairs were obtained, which makes Cei angry.

Arthur settles a debate between two lords over the maiden Creiddylad, which allows Arthur to obtain two more items needed for their quest.

Arthur leads the hunt for Ysgithyrwyn Chief Boar. Arthur's hound Cafall kills the boar.

Arthur arranges the hunt for Twrch Trwyth, after making certain that the comb and scissors are still between his ears. The boar has laid much of Ireland waste. Menw goes to search for the boar in the form of a bird but is wounded by one of the boar's poisoned bristles.

Arthur also sets out to recover the cauldron of Diwrnach the Irishman. He has to fight for it, and Llenlleawg the Irishman manages to defeat Diwrnach using Caledfwlch, Arthur's sword. They return with the cauldron.

Arthur summons a host to hunt Twrch Trwyth in Ireland. The warbands and their dogs fight against the boar, and Arthur kills all of Twrch Trwyth's piglets except one. Arthur then sends Gwrhyr in the form of a bird to negotiate with Twrch Trwyth, but Gwrhyr learns the only way to obtain the treasures is to kill Twrch Trwyth.

Twrch Trwyth crosses the sea to Wales. Arthur follows. The hunters pursue the boar, many losing their lives when the boar stands at bay. Arthur's hunting party kill all Twrch Trwyth's bodyguard of boars. Mabon snatches the scissors from between the boar's ears. Twrch Trwyth is driven into Cornwall, where the comb is snatched from the boar's head, although two of Arthur's men nearly drown. Twrch Trwyth is driven into the sea.

Arthur sets out to fill a tub with the blood of the Black Witch. Two of Arthur's men attempt to subdue the witch, but she overcomes them. Arthur's men warn him that it is not fitting for a king to scuffle with a witch, but Arthur fights the witch and hacks her in two.





Arthur, Culhwch and the rest of the court then go to Ysbaddaden Chief Giant. The giant is shaved and Ysbaddaden admits that he is defeated—Culhwch can marry Olwen, thanks to Arthur's help, and they can kill Ysbaddaden. This they do, setting the giant's head on a stake. Culhwch and Olwen are then married.

## Culhwch and Olwen Analysis

"Culhwch and Olwen" has a fair amount of literary significance, as this tale is the earliest known prose legend concerning King Arthur (two Welsh poems about King Arthur dated to around the same time as this tale are referenced in this one). This tale pre-dates the quasi-historical works by Gildas and Geoffrey of Monmouth that were used as source material by the troubador poets and, ultimately, Thomas Mallory in creating the legend of King Arthur as it is known today.

The tale opens like many classic fairy-tales: the birth of the protagonist, followed by the death of the mother and a curse placed by a vindictive stepmother. However, this tale gives a reason for the ill-will of the stepmother: her resentment is understandable, given that the protagonist's father took her by force.

The incident explaining Culhwch's name seems odd and out-of-place. Presumably, the narrator of the tale invented this in the belief that Culhwch's name is derived from "hwch", meaning "pig". This assumption is not completely out of place, given the dominant role that pigs and boars play in this adventure. Possibly, Culhwch's name may be a way of viewing him as being like a young boar who has to battle the old boar, represented by Ysbaddaden Chief Giant, for dominance.

Although it is easy to overlook at first reading, the encouragement given to Culhwch by his father echoes the almost ritual responses later given by Culhwch as Ysbaddaden names the tasks that he needs to fulfill in order to win the hand of Olwen. This seems to relate to the importance of kinship and family ties that seem to be stressed in this tale—Culhwch is aided at every turn by family members, and this word of encouragement seems to suggest that Culhwch's father also plays a role in helping him obtain his wife and becoming a man.

Culhwch's arrival at Arthur's court—which, interestingly, is not named—contains references to other tales. The most obvious to a reader of *The Mabinogion* is Culhwch's threat of a scream that will strike barrenness and be heard across the kingdom. This is very reminiscent of the second plague in "Llud and Llefelys." The second reference is not so obvious, and this is the exchange with the porter Glewlwyd Mighty-Grasp, followed by the recounting of the deeds of Arthur. This seems to link with the Welsh poem *Pa Gur*, another of the earliest appearances of Arthur in literature; in this poem, Glewlwyd seems to act as a porter into the Otherworld. In "Culhwch and Olwen", Glewlwyd certainly seems to be an exceptional character who has slight Otherworldly overtones—notice his extensive history and experience.



The initial exchanges between Culhwch, Glewlwyd, Arthur and Cei play on the theme of honour. Again, generosity is shown to be a desirable attribute in a king, and Cei even states that people coming to ask favours is a measure of the nobility and prestige of Arthur and his court. Another value of the society portrayed in this tale also stands out: craftsmen seem to be placed in a rank equal to princes and the nobility. This ties in well with the other tales in *The Mabinogion*, where rulers and magicians often work as craftsmen, and this is not seen as being shameful or a reduction in status (with the possible exception of the status of shoemakers, as explained in "Manawydan Son of Llyr"). In "Culhwch and Olwen", the nobles Cei and Bedwyr also obtain entrance to a stronghold by working as craftsmen. This important role of craftsmen and artisans in Celtic society is also highlighted by an Irish myth of the sun-god (and the patron of craftsmen) Lugh of the Long Hand: when this deity first presents himself to the divine Tuatha De Danaan, he presents himself as a master of all known crafts.

The incident where Arthur personally grooms Culhwch seems to indicate that Arthur accepts Culhwch as a kinsman. This is the first incident related to grooming in this tale, and grooming, hair-cutting and shaving seem to be of some importance and significance. Possibly, this is related to the ancient belief that a man's virility is related to his facial and head hair (as in the Biblical story of Samson, who loses his strength when his hair is cut, or the American Indian practice of taking scalps to prove victory over an enemy). This belief may also be related to the biological fact that human males produce facial hair as a sign of full maturity, so its link to manhood and virility is obvious.

The list of the members of Arthur's court seems to be a catalog of potential tales. It is possible that this list served as a memory-tool for storytellers. This list is so extensive that it suggests that "Culhwch and Olwen", as it appears in this collection, was a written story rather than a purely oral tale; no or very few oral storytellers would be able to remember this entire list. This idea is supported by the rich descriptions of Culhwch as he rides to Arthur's court, and the description of Olwen. These are more characteristic of a written tale than an oral tale—contrast the descriptions in this tale with the descriptions given in, say, "Math Son of Mathonwy" or "Branwen Daughter of Llyr." However, as people in a more oral society tended to have more highly trained memories than those with a written culture, it is possible that a teller of tales could remember the entire list, and the formulaic nature of some of the descriptions seems to support this alternative view.

Many of the characters listed as members of Arthur's court survive in later tales, although they are more familiar to most readers under slightly different names. Cei Wynn (Fair Cei) becomes Sir Kay, although the character who appears in "Culhwch and Olwen" is nothing like the surly buffoon of the later romances. Bedwyr becomes Sir Bedivere, Drwst Iron-Fist becomes Sir Tristan, Gwalchmei becomes Gawain, Gwalhafed becomes Galahad, Llenleawg is possibly Lancelot, and Gwenhwyfar is Guinevere. Another familiar "member" of Arthur's court also makes an appearance: Caledfwlch, Arthur's sword, which later is called Excalibur. This list also contains other characters who appear in *The Mabinogion*, such as Gereint son of Erbin, Osla Big-knife and Manawydan son of Llyr. One character seems conspicuous by his absence: Merlin Emrys (Ambrosius) does not appear anywhere, although Taliesin the Bard does, and



Menwr acts as the chief magician of Arthur's court, with Gwrhyr the Interpreter also demonstrating supernatural powers.

The next key incident is the encounter with Custennin the shepherd. Often, in Arthurian tales (for example, "The Lady of the Fountain"), meeting a strange herdsman indicates an encounter with adventure or the Otherworld, although here is the dog rather than the herdsman that has the forbidding appearance. This seems to be a more civilised version of the older motif used to indicate the threshold of adventure during a hunt: the appearance of a white animal, as seen in "Pwll Prince of Dyfed" and "Manawydan Son of Llyr." This incident is also used to create plot tension; we learn that others have attempted to win the hand of Olwen from the giant, but have died in the attempt. This tension is heightened by the episode concerning Custennin's son; even the children of Ysbaddaden's servants are not safe from the giant.

The encounter between Cei and Custennin's wife seems a little odd. It is unclear whether the woman is trying to strangle Cei deliberately (possibly in an attempt to keep her last surviving child safe and hidden), whether it is used to indicate that she has some of the strength of the giants and "doesn't know her own strength," or whether she is testing the strength and wariness of Culhwch and his companions. It is also possible that her actions are a result of her confused emotions, although it is explicitly stated that she is filled with joy to see them.

Olwen, when she appears, seems to share some of the characteristics of the other heroines of The Mabinogion. This is best illustrated by her insistence that Culhwch must go to ask her father for her hand in marriage rather than consenting to elope with him. In this, she seems to be testing Culhwch and making sure that she goes with him on her terms, similar to how Rhiannon cannot be overtaken by Pwyll's servants but needs to be asked by Pwyll himself, and similar to Elen's insistence that Maccsen Wledig come in person to marry her.

The fact that Ysbaddaden's eyelids need to be raised on forks is reminiscent of an Irish myth, where the evil Balor has a terrible eye that has to be raised by his servants, allowing him to burn all he looks on. As in the Irish myth, where the hero Lugh waits until Balor's eye is open before shooting at him, Culhwch is able to wound Ysbaddaden in the eye when the giant's eyelids are raised open.

The three encounters between Culhwch and the giant are another example of the three-part structure common to fairy tales. The three wounds incurred by Ysbaddaden from his own spears being flung back at him can be interpreted as symbolising old age overtaking the giant. By giving his daughter in marriage to an adult warrior, Ysbaddaden has to acknowledge that another generation has arisen and his generation is growing old and deteriorating. The symptoms experienced by Ysbaddaden suggest some of the infirmities of old age: painful joints, loss of appetite, chest pains and worsened eyesight.

The list of seemingly impossible tasks Ysbaddaden sets Culhwch also seems like a catalogue of potential tales that a storyteller could draw upon. Not all the tasks set by



Ysbaddaden are fulfilled in the account as written down. Possibly, older versions of the tales may have included accounts of how the tasks were accomplished.

The first set of tasks Ysbaddaden sets Culhwch are reminiscent of the tasks set by the speaker in the folk-song "Scarborough Fair" with their impossible agricultural demands. While we are not told how Culhwch accomplished these tasks—with the exception of the task of obtaining the nine hestors of flax seed—it is possible that setting these tasks is a remnant of actual practice. It is possible that a man seeking to marry a woman would have had to prove himself capable of supporting a family, and accomplishing agricultural tasks would have been one way of proving this. The other tasks could also be remnants of this type of practice, as they relate to Culhwch's hunting prowess, social and family connections, and his ability to provide for the wedding feast. As this is a fantasy story, the tasks set by Ysbaddaden must seem to be impossible as a way of driving the plot.

However, the incident where Arthur's boarhound kills Ysgithyrwyn Chief Boar may indicate that Ysbaddaden's demands may not be as impossible as they seem and some of them may be, as Culhwch repeats almost ritually, easy to get. Certainly, some of the names appearing in the list of tasks are names that have appeared in the list of Arthur's warriors.

Some of the tasks contain traces of the old pagan Celtic mythology, most notably the birds of Rhiannon and the finding of Mabon Son of Modron. Mabon is thought to be a deity of the Tammuz type who is held in prison in the Underworld for part of the year (usually the winter, as Tammuz represents fertility and growth, or else the sun) and who is rescued from this prison. The detail given about Mabon being snatched from his mother's side when he was in early infancy is reminiscent of how Pryderi was taken from Rhiannon. Several magical vessels of the Horn of Plenty type appear in this list. The most obvious one is the hamper of Gwyddneu Long-shank, which produces unlimited food. Other magical vessels are the cauldron of Diwrnach the Irishman, the bottles of Gwyddolwyn the dwarf and the bottles of Rhynton Stiff-beard.

The dominance of hunting and boars is quite striking, and the reader may be justified in seeing a link between Ysbaddaden Chief Giant and Ysgithyrwyn Chief Boar, especially as Culhwch's name also is derived from "hwch" or "pig." In this way, the death of Ysgithyrwyn at the hands of Arthur and his warband foreshadows the death of Ysbaddaden. The hunting of the boars can be seen as representing the "young boar" Culhwch becoming dominant over the "old boar" Ysbaddaden. This may also represent the younger generation taking over from an older generation, or the way a woman's father has to yield his place to her husband in her affections.

Another dominant motif is that of grooming and hair-cutting. Possibly, this also represents masculinity and a new generation taking its place. Tasks related to shaving or plucking out the beard seem to stand out. Possibly this is again symbolic of Ysbaddaden's loss of his position as the dominant male as Culhwch takes his place, either in society or in Olwen's life.



The final "task" set by Ysbaddaden provides a touch of light humor and relieves some of the tension—Culhwch may be able to achieve the other tasks set, but he will not be able to get a good night's sleep while the tasks are hanging over him. This is a point that many readers and listeners would have been able to sympathise it, and humanizes the characters.

The first task achieved is very reminiscent of the stratagems used by Gwydion. Like Gwydion posing as a shoemaker, Cei and Bedwyr pose as sword-sharpeners and obtain entrance to the fortress. They use their skill to win the giant's confidence and get into a position where they have power over him, similar to how Gwydion managed to draw Aranrhod down into a position where he could have power over her and where she could see Llew Llaw Gyffes. However, the stratagem used by Cei and Bedwyr does not have any symbolic significance to it, but simply demonstrates their cunning and skill.

The search for Mabon involves numerous encounters with the Oldest Animals. This episode, where the questers are sent from one helper to the next, and the helpers getting older and more powerful as the journey progresses, is reminiscent of other folk tales such as "The Black Bull of Norway" and "East of the Sun and West of the Moon." Regarding the animals themselves, it is significant that the oldest of all who is actually able to guide the questers to Mabon Son of Modron is the salmon; the salmon was considered to be the source of wisdom in Celtic mythology. The fact that Cei and Gwrhŷr actually ride the salmon to discover the lost Mabon could represent the two men embracing wisdom or following the path of wisdom closely.

The incident where Cei plucks out the beard of Dillus and then kills him foreshadows how Ysbaddaden will be shaved and then killed. The fact that Dillus is first seen shaving a boar is yet another example of foreshadowing, as well as highlighting the imagery of boars and of shaving. The poem Arthur recites to Cei does not seem in proportion to Cei's reaction and subsequent animosity towards Arthur. However, the poem can be seen as slighting Cei's honour, either because Arthur is chiding Cei for having killed Dillus unnecessarily or because Arthur implies that Cei is no match in strength for Dillus. As honour is vitally important to the characters in *The Mabinogion*, Cei's indignation is more understandable. This hostile reaction of Cei's may also form the basis for how the character of Cei is later presented; the Sir Kay that Cei Wyn later becomes is surly and ill-tempered (see "Peredur Son of Efrag" for an example of how Cei appears in most Arthurian stories).

The interlude about Creiddylad and her two rival suitors is interesting on three points. Firstly, it provides a link between this tale and "Llud and Llefelys", as the Llud Silver-hand who is the father of Creiddylad is often identified as being the Llud of the other tale. Secondly, this episode is designed to show Arthur as a just king and a good ruler. Thirdly, the battle between the two rivals every May-calends until Doomsday contains traces of the mythological battle between the Waxing Year and the Waning Year for the earth-goddess (or the moon-goddess, according to Robert Graves), which takes place every year; the calends of May fall near to the spring equinox in the Northern Hemisphere, which is one of the cross-over times of year when the Waxing Year "fights with" and overcomes the Waning Year.



The hunting of Ysgithyrwyn Chief Boar contains more foreshadowing. It is Cadw of Prydein/Pictland who brings the boar to bay and kills the boar, and it will be Cadw who shaves and kills Ysbaddaden.

The hunt for Twrch Trwyth seems more of an epic than the hunt for Ysgithyrwyn Chief Boar. Twrch Trwyth has more of the supernatural about him, with the treasures between his ears and his poisoned bristles. Twrch Trwyth is also able to wreak more destruction than a more natural boar like Ysgithyrwyn, and he also has a "bodyguard" or warband of lesser boars and young pigs. Possibly an earlier version of "Culhwch and Olwen" may have had only the one hunt and the one boar, but these have been separated into two hunts for this tale, possibly so Ysbaddaden can demand more tasks.

The incident where Arthur sails to Ireland to obtain the cauldron is based on one of the very early poems about Arthur known as The Spoils of Annwn. In this poem, Arthur sails to obtain a magical cauldron (the poem calls it "the Head of Annwn's Cauldron," which seems to be linked with "Pwll Prince of Dyfed") that is another magical food vessel. Most commentators see Arthur's quest for this cauldron as being the earliest examples of the Grail legend. In "Culhwch and Olwen," Arthur's quest for the cauldron has little of the Otherworld or any mystical overtones, unlike the earlier (and later) tales. The compiler of this tale may have blended an historical raid into Ireland made by the historical Arthur mentioned in some of the earliest histories of Britain (which were written down later than "Culhwch and Olwen") with the older tale about voyage into the Underworld for a magical cauldron.

The actual hunting of Twrch Trwyth is a straight action sequence that has a rather earthy atmosphere to it. While the extent of the damage caused by Twrch Trwyth are exaggerated to fit into a fantasy tale, the original audience (many of whom would have been familiar with the process of hunting wild boars) would have sympathised with the incidents, such as Osla Big-knife dropping his weapon into the river and nearly being swept away, driving the boar into a body of water to slow it down, and the risk of injury or death from being gored by the boar.

The hunt for Twrch Trwyth ends successfully, unlike other mythological boar hunts. Culhwch and Arthur manage to achieve their aim (more or less; they get the comb and scissors but do not kill the boar) and remain uninjured. By contrast, Tammuz, Adonis and Diarmid of the Golden Torc are fatally wounded by the boars they hunt. This is possibly because the three unsuccessful legendary heroes represent youth or the Waxing Year being overtaken by old age or the Waning Year, while Culhwch represents youth supplanting the older generation.

The successful hunt for Twrch Trwyth is, structurally, the climax of the tale. All the other incidents, including the actual shaving of Ysbaddaden and the wedding of the title characters, have more of the air of tying up the loose ends and bringing the story to a close.

The final quest is another action sequence, but it shows Arthur in action. Arthur has a well-defined character in "Culhwch and Olwen" that is very different to how he is





portrayed in other Arthurian tales, including those in *The Mabinogion*. In this tale, Arthur is a more down-to-earth leader who demonstrates all of the attributes of a good king. He is brave and a strong fighting man; he is able to single-handedly defeat the witch that has overcome four of his men, and he plays an active role in the two boar hunts. His justice is shown in his solution to the problem of Creiddylad's rival suitors, and nearly all the tale demonstrates his generosity towards the petitioner Culhwch. He also appears as a warm, approachable leader who is well loved by his warband.

Cei is one of the other more complex characters in "Culhwch and Olwen" and (as already mentioned) this character is very different to later portrayals of Cei/Kay. He seems to be one of Arthur's chief men and advisors who has supernatural powers, and it is he who is sent on the initial quests. Cei is shown to be cunning, which is demonstrated by how he avoids the over-enthusiastic embrace of Custennin's wife, and how he fulfils two of the seemingly impossible tasks (the sword of Wrnach and the beard of Dillus). This cleverness and cunning of Cei is possibly symbolised by the fact that he is the only one to ride on the shoulders of the Salmon (which represents wisdom) twice. The description in the catalog of Arthur's warriors of Cynyr Fair-beard gives more details about Cei and some of his more supernatural attributes.

Culhwch himself has a distinctive character. He appears as a confident young man—perhaps a little over-confident, as demonstrated by his demands to Glewlwyd the porter. He also wants to take Olwen with him without her father's leave. However, he is honourable enough and brave enough to face up to Ysbaddaden the giant and ask for her hand in marriage. The incidents with the stone spears are also an opportunity for the narrator to highlight Culhwch's physical prowess and strength.

Ysbaddaden is portrayed as a crusty, grumpy old man who is unnecessarily rude and harsh to his servants, and attacks Culhwch and his companions without provocation. However, he seems to have a softer side; he has close ties with the great-grandparents of Olwen, and he seems to be very fond of Olwen and reluctant to let her go. In many ways, the narrator has created him as the "worst possible father-in-law" for the sake of plot tension: a bad-tempered, powerful and dangerous man who is very protective of his daughter.

Most of the other characters are very one dimensional and require little analysis. However, it must be noted that Olwen seems to be a woman of normal human size. This is reminiscent of Bendigeifran and Branwen; he is portrayed as a giant some of the time, but his sister is a normal-sized woman. Certainly Cei is described as having the ability to change his size at will, so this may also be true of the other giants in these tales.



# The Dream of Rhonabwy

## The Dream of Rhonabwy Summary

Rhonabwy goes to sleep on an oxhide in a filthy hall. In a dream, he meets a young man who is so awe-inspiring that he and his companions flee. However, the young man catches up with them and speaks with Rhonabwy. The young man is Iddawg, who triggered the battle of Camlan deliberately.

Iddawg takes Rhonabwy and his companions to Arthur, who laments that weaklings now live in Britain. Arthur gives Rhonabwy a magic ring so he can remember his dream when he wakes.

Cei's army arrives to strengthen Arthur's troops ready for a battle at noon. One horseman accidentally splashes Arthur and is reprimanded.

Arthur invites Owein to play gwyddbwyll. A rider tells Owein that Arthur's men are teasing Owein's ravens. Owein asks Arthur to order his men to stop, but Arthur says to keep playing the game. A second rider says the men are wounding the ravens and Owein again asks for them to stop but Arthur keeps playing. A third rider says the men have killed the best ravens, and the same thing happens. Owein tells the squire to raise his standard where the fighting is most intense.

A fourth rider tells them that Owein's ravens are attacking Arthur's men. Arthur asks Owein to call off his ravens. Owein responds by telling Arthur to continue playing. Two more riders come, telling of the battle between the ravens and the men, but Owein keeps playing. Finally, the game ends and Arthur crushes the pieces to dust .

An envoy comes from Osla Big-knife asking for the battle to be postponed. Arthur shifts camp to Cornwall. Rhonabwy wakes to discover that he has been asleep three days and nights.

## The Dream of Rhonabwy Analysis

This tale is something of a "time travel" story that is designed to contrast the present (when Rhonabwy is living) and the idealised past. Sleeping on an oxhide was part of the divination process used by Irish druids, and this practice may have provided the inspiration behind the idea that Rhonabwy travels back in time in a dream when he sleeps on the oxhide. The honoured place that the yellow oxhide is spread out on supports this idea, as does the statement that Rhonabwy was asleep for an abnormally long time. This "extended sleep while travelling through time in a dream" idea is very common and is still used by science-fiction and paranormal writers today.

The strife between the brothers and the filthy condition of the hall at the start of the tale are deliberately intended to contrast with the richness of Arthur's court. This contrast





between the idealised Arthurian past and the grim reality of the present is emphasised by the statements by Arthur and the first rider to approach Iddawg and Rhonabwy: the men of today appear like tiny weaklings compared to the mighty heroes of the past. Arthur's lament about how puny the men of the present are can also be interpreted as a lament (possibly tongue-in-cheek) from the narrator: the anonymous narrator seems to be commenting that people in the narrator's/Rhonabwy's time do not live up to the glories and great deeds of the past. The appearance of the hall that Rhonabwy and his companions sleep in is also in complete contrast to the accommodation found by the protagonists in the other tales—the others always seem to go to sleep in rich halls or pavilions, or in the open air tended by their companions (this latter point contrasts with the weather in this tale).

This contrast may be intended to be a form of black humour. The descriptions of the squabble between a petty chieftan and an ambitious brother, and of the rough hall with bad food, foul weather and flea-ridden beds have a tone of realism to them. The descriptions of the underlings who ride to bring the messages to Arthur and Owein are almost exaggeratedly splendid and decorative. This may have the purpose of emphasising the unreality of the Arthurian past (this tale is the most recent of the Arthurian accounts in *The Mabinogion*). The outfits of the squires are so impossibly beautiful and ornate that an audience can enjoy them but, at the same time, realise that this is pure fantasy and is unrealistic. Nobody, for example, would really wear silk and gold-buckled shoes if a battle was about to take place.

The key incident in this tale seems to be the game between Owein and Arthur, and the parallel battle between the men and the ravens. The conflict between the men and the ravens appears odd and seems to overshadow the imminent battle between Arthur and Osla Big-knife. However, given the ceremony and the preparations made prior to the same of *gwyddbwyll* indicate that maybe the game may have some significance—possibly the movements of the pieces mirror the actions of the men and ravens—or vice versa. This battle—either the battle between the playing pieces or between the ravens and the men—may even be taking the place of the conflict between the armies of Arthur and Osla Big-knife. Possibly, Owein is one of Osla Big-knife's men and the game is a substitute the battle. However, the conflict between the men and the ravens ends with Owein's ravens being victorious, whereas in the conflict between Osla Big-knife and Arthur, it is Osla Big-knife who asks for the truce, indicting that he is in the weaker position.

Owein's standard seems to have some sort of magical power—it is after the standard is raised that Owein's ravens begin to dominate. This role of a standard or flag in boosting morale, with the idea that the standard represents a nation or a faction itself, is a concept that is held to this day (the fact that burning the Stars and Stripes is a crime in the USA is a classic modern-day example). The idea seems to be that if the standard or the flag is displayed proudly, the army or the nation it represents will also stand tall and proud, and will remain undefeated.

The character of Arthur that is portrayed in this tale is in complete contrast to that shown in the other Arthurian material in *The Mabinogion*. Arthur here is described as being an



emperor who receives tribute from far nations, in contrast to the more humble cheifan who appears in "Culhwch and Olwen." This Arthur appears very cold and remote—he will not speak directly to the rider who soaks him, and he is particularly callous towards Owein's request that the men should stop harrassing and wounding the ravens. Even if the battle between the men and the ravens takes the place of the battle between Osla Big-knife or mirrors the actions of the gwyddbwyll game, Arthur here displays none of the mercy and generosity that seems to be a prized attribute of the other rulers portrayed in *The Mabinogion*. He also seems to display a trace of bad temper, as shown by his crushing of the playing pieces after his men have been killed by the ravens. Possibly this is another form of wry commentary on the part of the narrator—possibly he or she is trying to add to the unreality of the past and making the reader question the idea that Arthur was an ideal king ruling over an ideal court in an ideal past.

However, this crushing of the playing pieces could also have a deeper significance and may not be indicative of a bad temper. Instead, it may be a way of breaking the seeming deadlock of the endless games that seem to keep the conflict between the men and the ravens going. It is only after the pieces are crushed to powder that Osla Big-knife asks for a truce.

Another indicator of the changed character of Arthur in this later Arthurian tale is that Arthur's two opponents—Owein and Osla Big-knife—are supporters of Arthur in the earlier tales. Osla Big-knife is one of those accompanying Arthur on the hunt for *Twrch Trwyth* in "Culhwch and Olwen" and Owein is the protagonist of "The Lady of the Fountain" who is on intimate terms with Arthur.

The character of Iddawg and his role in stirring up conflict is tantalisingly brief. His eagerness for strife seems to echo the character of Efnisien in "Branwen Daughter of Llyr" and his twisting of the communications is reminiscent of the demon in the bronze tube in "Llud and Llefelys." Possibly, these are hints that Rhonabwy (and the reader) should not take what he says too seriously, as he is untrustworthy. Certainly, he seems proud of his nickname in spite of having to do penance.

Cei, however, has much of the character of the Cei that appers in "Culhwch and Olwen" and none of the surlier characteristics shown in the three other Arthurian tales.

The tale as a whole is completely different in style to the others in *The Mabinogion* and this is explicitly referred to in the closing paragraph by the narrator. This tale has put a very heavy emphasis on description, and the narrator comments that this is why you will never hear a bard or storyteller recounting "The Dream of Rhonabwy" orally, as it would be impossible to learn all the description off by heart. This may also be ironic—it could also be true that no storytellers repeat the tale because it makes a mockery of the more popular Arthurian material.

The two battles mentioned—the battle of Badon and the battle of Camlan—are possibly historical battles fought by the actual Arthur. Badon was supposed to be a decisive encounter between Arthur and the Saxon invaders, where Arthur managed to turn the

invaders back, while Camlan appears in the Arthurian canon (notably Mallory's *Mort d'Artur*) as being Arthur's final battle, after which he is taken to Avalon to be healed.

The list of characters who go with Arthur to give him counsel is reminiscent of the list given in "Culhwch and Olwen" and the reader can find many characters in common to both lists. It is interesting that once again, the character of Merlin is missing, and the character that appears as Arthur's closest counsellor is Bedwin the Bishop.



# The Lady of the Fountain

## The Lady of the Fountain Summary

Cynon tells how he found castle where he was directed to a forest where he would find a giant with one eye who herded wild beasts. The giant directed Cynon to a fountain with a marble slab and a silver bowl. The giant told Cynon that if he took water from the fountain and poured it onto the slab, a storm would come, followed by a black knight who would fight with him. Cynon did, but the black knight defeated him.

Owein follows Cynon's directions but he deals the black knight a fatal wound. The knight flees into a city, Owein pursuing him. The portcullis closes, trapping Owein. Luned rescues Owein.

The black knight dies. Owein goes to the funeral and falls in love with the widow. Luned goes to the countess and tells her to find a new husband from Arthur's court to defend the fountain. Luned pretends to travel and "returns" with Owein. The countess marries Owein. Any time any man comes to the fountain and pours water on the slab to produce a storm, Owein has to fight with him. Once he has overcome the challenger, Owein can then hold him, his horse or his armour to ransom. For three years, Owein does this, distributing the ransom money to his knights.

Arthur and his men ride to the fountain. Cei pours water on the slab and produces the storm. Owein rides out to meet the challenge, but they do not recognise him. Cei and Owein joust, and Owein is victorious. Cei asks for a second chance. Owein wounds Cei badly and breaks his armour. Gwalchmei challenges Owein. The two joust for two days, neither recognising the other. On the third day, Owein knocks off Gwalchmei's helmet and recognises him. Gwalchmei yields to Owein and escorts him to Arthur.

Owein agrees to return for three months with Arthur to Caer Llion but stays three years. A maiden rides to Caer Llion and strips the ring from Owein's hand. Owein rides out to return to his wife, but he becomes lost.

He collapses in a park owned by a widowed countess. The countess sends a maiden to revive him. After three months, Owein is fully well. The neighbouring earl attacks the castle. Owein determines to defend the castle, and asks for a horse and armour. Owein fights with the earl and takes him prisoner, holding him to ransom for the return of the widow's lands and possessions.

Owein encounters a serpent battling with a white lion. Owein slays the serpent, and the lion follows him.

Owein learns that Luned is in prison because she spoke on his when two chamberlains called him a traitor. Luned is to be put to death unless he comes to fight on her behalf the day after tomorrow. Owein gives her food and asks where he can find lodging. Luned directs him to a nearby castle. The lord tells Owein that a man-eating giant from



the nearby mountains is going to devour his two sons unless the lord gives his daughter to the monster. Owein and the lion fight the giant, but the giant claims that Owein has an unfair advantage: the lion is helping him. Owein shuts the lion inside the castle and fights again. The lion escapes from the castle and disembowels the giant. The lord of the castle asks Owein to stay with him, but Owein has to deliver Luned.

Owein arrives in time to see two youths about to hurl Luned into the fire. He and the lion fight against the two youths. Owein travels on to find his wife and takes her to live at Arthur's court.

Owein continues at Arthur's court as captain of the warband, fighting enemies such as the Black Oppressor.

## The Lady of the Fountain Analysis

In the classic nature-myth focused on a solar hero (according to the theories of Robert Graves, also illustrated in the tale of Lleu Llaw Gyffes and Blodeuedd, and in the rival suitors for Creiddylad) the character who personifies the sun or the Waning Year has to slay the personification of the Waxing Year. In "The Lady of the Fountain," the battle between the Waning and Waxing Year seem to be represented by the lion and the serpent. Owein and the lion are very closely linked (in the older French version of this tale, Owein/Yvain was known as "The Knight of the Lion"), so Owein's killing of the serpent, which seems to mark his return to full strength and wholeness, can also be seen as representing the victory of the Waning Year over the Waxing Year.

Also according to Robert Graves' theories, the woman in the love-triangle between the Waxing and Waning Year represents not only the land but also the moon. This makes the name of the most dominant female character—Luned—more intriguing, as it seems to be derived from luna or "moon." Certainly, it is Luned who first welcomes Owein to the city and is instrumental in arranging the marriage between him and the Lady of the Fountain, it is Luned's ring that is stripped from Owein's hand to mark his fall from favour and his subsequent decline, and it is Luned that Owein rescues on his return to his city. It is plausible that originally, Luned and the Lady of the Fountain were one character, rather than two.

The tale of "The Lady of the Fountain" is also a good example of a Medieval romance. Many of the knights who play the leading roles in these romances have to reconcile the conflict between love and duty, with the service of one's leige-lord often competing for a knight's loyalty against the love of a woman. Owein is a good example of this conflict, and this tale, if it is not seen as a nature-myth, seems to focus on Owein's struggle to reconcile these two conflicting loyalties and to find a compromise. Like many of the heroes of Medieval romances, Owein portrays the knightly virtues of chivalry, making it a point of honour to defend "damsels in distress" and to show mercy to vanquished rivals. These knightly virtues are very similar to, if not identical to, the virtues shown to be desirable in a king in the older tales in The Mabinogion.



The conflict experienced by Owein does not seem to be the demands of his lady versus the duty to his lord. Instead, he has to find a balance between two conflicting duties: his duty as one of Arthur's knights and his duty as the new ruler and protector of the city and the fountain. In many ways, the conclusion of this tale, where Owein solves the problem by inviting his wife to live with him at Arthur's court, is rather unsatisfactory and begs the question why all the characters did not think of this solution earlier. However, the final few paragraphs seem to indicate that Owein needed to spend time at Arthur's court as leader of the war-band as a way of gaining experience in leadership. The name of one of Owein's warbands has an interesting link with "The Dream of Rhonabwy"—his warband is known as "The Flight of Ravens."

However, the tale of "The Lady of the Fountain" differs from the majority of the tales of courtly love in one key point. In this tale, Owein is able to marry his true love, who does not appear to be one of the remote, haughty beauties of typical courtly romance. This is unlike the classical courtly romances, where the hero would fall hopelessly in love with a woman (who was often the wife of another man) and would consequently suffer the agonies of unrequited love, while performing great deeds of chivalry at the request of the woman in the hopes that she would show him some token of favour. Even the tales of courtly love that did not involve an adulterous relationship would spend a lot of time describing the love-agonies felt by the hero and heroine, and would usually include a discussion of the nature of love. This description of love-agonies and the discussion of Love is notably missing from "The Lady of the Fountain." The brief unwillingness of the Lady of the Fountain to remarry seems like only token reluctance, with none of the melodramatic vows and declarations typical of the characters of a typical courtly love story; Luned, however, plays the almost stock role of the confidante and go-between perfectly.

Luned seems to be one of the more interesting and developed characters in the tale, showing herself to be kind, clever and loyal. In many ways it is she, not the Lady of the Fountain, who is the heroine of this tale, and it is fitting that Owein rescues her from burning and shame.

The character of Arthur in this tale seems to fall somewhere between the character portrayed in "The Dream of Rhonabwy" and in "Culhwch and Olwen." Here, Arthur is a warm, kindly character, even though he is called the "emperor" and it is implied that he is not just one petty king among many (albeit a powerful and renowned one) as he is in "Culhwch and Olwen." However, Arthur is not the vigorous, active hero of "Culhwch and Olwen"; although he rides out in search of Owein, he does not personally fight against the black knight (Owein) at the fountain. Arthur almost seems to have something of the buffoon about him—notice his request to Owein and Cynon that they should not make fun of him while he takes a nap.

In "The Lady of the Fountain," Cei has the surly, rude nature of the Sir Kay often seen in Arthurian literature. His claim that he was "unfairly" beaten by Owein is quite unjustified. However, his taunts seem to help stimulate Owein into taking on the adventure. Interestingly, in Chretien de Troyes' original version of this tale, Cynon is named Celogrenat, which some take to mean "Kay the Complaining." As Cei or Sir Kay in most



Arthurian literature ("Culhwch and Olwen" is one of the few exceptions) usually ends up battered and wounded after attempting an adventure that is later successfully achieved by another warrior, it could be conjectured that Cei and Cynon were originally one character rather than two.

The giant who directs Cynon and Owein to the fountain is reminiscent of Custennin the herdsman. Like Custennin (and the earlier, less civilised white Otherworldbeasts), this giant seems to be the guide that marks the entry of the main character in the world of adventure, magic and fantasy. Possibly, Owein's later encounter with the white lion marks his re-entry into the adventure-world.

The widowed countess who restores Owein to health is not the Lady of the Fountain, although her situation is rather similar. This may seem like an unnecessary addition to the plot, but it must be remembered that in the Medieval world where rulers were expected to be warriors (and possibly Crusaders) and life expectancy was shorter, widowed countesses who had their lands taken from them by an aggressive neighbour were part of the society that would have been the target audience of these romances. Her situation would be a typical way that a woman could find herself in difficulties and in need of the help of a (literal) "knight in shining armor." The next castle Owein encounters has a similar situation: a man's sons being held to ransom by an unpleasant neighbour in exchange for an unwilling daughter's hand in marriage—although the neighbour here is a man-eating giant, which is appropriate after Owein has encountered the white lion that indicates his return to the fantasy world.





# Peredur Son of Efracg

## Peredur Son of Efracg Summary

Peredur is raised in the wilderness. One day, he encounters three knights. His mother tells him they are angels. The three men ask Peredur if he has seen a knight go by. Peredur replies that he does not know what a knight is. The three inform him that they are knights. Horrified, his mother faints.

Peredur finds a piebald pony and attempts to saddle it like a warhorse. His mother gives Peredur some instructions: if he encounters a church, he is to enter and say his prayers; if he is hungry, he can help himself; if he sees a lady, he can pay court to her; if he sees a jewel and takes it to give to another, he will become famous; if he hears a cry for help; he is to answer it. Peredur sets out armed with a few javelins. He comes across a pavillion where a woman sits. Believing this pavilion to be a church, he goes in to pray. He follows his mother's instructions naively, helping himself to the food, taking the lady's ring and kissing her.

At Arthur's court, another knight arrives. This strange knight rides into the hall, takes Gwenhwyfar's goblet, empties the wine over the queen and boxes her ears. This knight rides out carrying the cup, challenging anyone who dares to avenge the queen to come to a meadow and fight him to reclaim the cup. None take the challenge.

When Peredur comes to Arthur's court and asks to be made a knight, Cei and the whole court jeer at him. However, a dwarf breaks his total silence to hail Peredur as the flower of knighthood. Cei knocks the dwarf unconscious. A female dwarf enters and she, too, breaks her silence to hail Peredur as the "flower of warriors and the candle of knights." Cei kicks her unconscious.

Peredur asks where Arthur is. Cei tells him to follow the rough knight to the meadow to retrieve the goblet, and to return with the horse and armour. Peredur hurls one of his javelins at the knight. The javelin pierces the knight's eye and kills him.

Owein finds Peredur dragging the dead knight. Owein offers to help Peredur take the armour off. Peredur is astonished, as he believed that the armour was part of the knight's body. Peredur bids Owein to take the cup back and to tell them that he will not return unless he can challenge "that tall man" (Cei) and avenge the insult to the dwarves.

Peredur fights a ruffian. Peredur sends him to Arthur's court to tell the court who defeated him and has to repeat the promise to avenge the insult to the dwarves. Peredur meets sixteen other knights who he treats the same way.

Peredur comes to a castle on the shores of a lake where he meets a lame old nobleman. The old man, who is Peredur's uncle, praises his potential as a swordsman,





and offers to teach him the skills of knighthood and courtesy, especially not to ask questions about strange things.

Peredur sets out and comes to another hall where a second old man directs him to chop an iron column in half with his sword. Peredur does, breaking sword and column. His mentor tells Peredur to rejoin both column and sword. Peredur repeats the process of breaking and repairing the sword and column but cannot repair them a third time.

Two youths bear a spear that drips blood through the hall, followed by two wailing maidens bearing a head on a charger. Peredur refrains from asking about them.

Arthur rebukes Cei for driving an excellent knight away. Owein comments that Peredur will never come to the court, as Cei will never leave it alone to face Peredur's challenge. Arthur resolves to ride out with his knights to find Peredur.

Peredur comes to a stronghold ruled by a countess dressed in rags. While Peredur sleeps, the countess wakes Peredur and says her neighbour wants to take her in marriage, but because she does not want him, the neighbour is attacking her. She offers herself to Peredur in exchange for help.

Peredur meets knight after knight in single combat. Peredur then meets the earl's champion and overcomes him. This champion is the leader of the earl's warband who has taken control of one-third of the countess's possessions. Peredur ransoms him in exchange for the return of the countess's land. The second day passes in a similar way. The knight Peredur jousts against the earl's court steward, who also has control over a third of the countess's former possessions. Peredur spares the steward on the same conditions as the leader of the war band. On the third day, the final opponent Peredur faces is the earl himself. The earl is spared at the price of not only the countess's possessions but also his own earldom, and the earl must also become the countess's prisoner. Peredur sets off again, after promising the countess that if she needs him, he will come to her aid.

Peredur encounters a woman who is the wife of the Proud One of the Clearing, and her husband is imposing penance on her. Peredur realises that she was the woman in the pavillion and her penance is his fault. Peredur fights with the Proud One and orders him to proclaim his wife's innocence.

Peredur comes to a court and asks for shelter. The countess says to go elsewhere, as the nine witches of Caer Loyw plague her court. In the middle of the night, he finds an armed witch. Peredur strikes her so her helmet is flattened. The witch calls on Peredur to spare her. The witch offers to teach Peredur horsemanship and use of weapons. Peredur goes to the Witches' Court for three weeks.

One snowy day, a hawk kills a duck but is frightened from her kill. A raven begins tearing at the carcass. The drops of blood on the snow remind Peredur of the cheeks of the woman he loves; the raven's feathers remind him of her hair; and the snow reminds him of her skin. Peredur stands still, thinking of the woman.



Arthur and his party see Peredur. A squire goes to ask who Peredur is, but Peredur takes no notice. The squire attacks Peredur, who responds by unhorsing the squire. Twenty-four more knights receive the same treatment. Then Cei comes, speaking harshly to Peredur. Peredur counterattacks, knocking Cei from his horse. Peredur's horse tramples Cei, and Cei is wounded badly.

Gwalchmei resolves to go and take his turn. Cei sneers, saying Gwalchmei will not need armor or weapons to overcome a man who is exhausted. Gwalchmei approaches Peredur courteously. On hearing that he has wounded Cei, Peredur is pleased that he has avenged the dwarves.

Peredur falls in love with a maiden named Angharad Golden-Hair. She spurns him and Peredur vows never to speak to a Christian soul until she declares that she loves him. Peredur travels to a valley of black houses in a forest. An old man's daughter says that the giants who live in the black houses will kill him. Peredur fights against the warband sent by the old man and defeats them. The old man asks for mercy, and Peredur spares him on condition that he goes to pay homage to Arthur and that the whole household become baptised into Christianity. The old man says that Peredur is the first Christian who has escaped alive from the valley. Peredur is pleased; he has kept his vow not to speak to a Christian soul.

Peredur keeps wandering through the wilderness, killing a serpent and taking the gold ring it was guarding. He returns to Arthur's court. Cei rides out to greet him. Bound by his vow, Peredur does not answer Cei, so Cei attacks and wounds him. Peredur retaliates and rides on. Another knight arrives and determines to challenge all comers in the meadow. Peredur fights this newcomer and earns the name "The Dumb Knight." Angharad declares that it is a pity this knight cannot speak, as she loves him. At this, Peredur breaks his silence and is welcomed back to the court.

Peredur comes across a castle in a forest. He asks the lord of the castle how he lost his eye. The lord lost it fighting the Black Worm of the Barrow at the Dolorous Mound. This serpent has a magical stone that will provide unlimited gold.

Peredur comes to the Court of the King of Suffering. He sees one of the king's sons returning dead from their daily battle with the addanc. The dead man is anointed and placed in a tub, whereupon he returns to life. Peredur determines to kill the addanc but will not let the men come with him. Peredur meets a maiden who gives him a stone that will make him invisible in return for his pledge of love.

Peredur rides past a flock of sheep that change colour and passes a tree half on fire and half covered with leaves. Beyond this, he comes across a squire beside three paths. The squire tells Peredur which path is the one that leads to the addanc; one of the other paths leads to the squire's castle where he can find food and lodging, while the other path leads to a town where he can buy food and drink. Peredur takes the path to the addanc, kills it and cuts off its head.



Peredur meets a red knight who offers to be his man-at-arms. Peredur comes to the court of the Lady of the Feasts. After Peredur has fought with her warband, the Lady reveals that she is pining for her true love, Edlym Red-sword. This is Peredur's new man-at-arms. The Lady and Edlym Red-sword are married.

Peredur comes to the Dolourous Mound, and he sends Edlym ahead with a demand that the men guarding the pavilions come to do him homage. The men determine to fight against Peredur, and Peredur is victorious. Peredur goes to fight the Black Worm. He gives the magical stone to Edlym Red-sword.

The Empress of Constantinople is organising a tournament. The winner will have her hand in marriage. On his way to the tournament, Peredur sees a woman in a pavilion. For two days, he gazes at her. On the third day, a miller strikes him and tells him to go to the tournament. Peredur is victorious. He learns that the empress is the woman who helped him overcome the addanc, and he rules with her for fourteen years.

Peredur returns to Arthur's court. A hideous woman and chides Peredur for not asking questions about the bleeding spear; because of his failure, the king has remained lame. Peredur sets out to solve the mystery. A priest directs him to a castle, where he is thrown in prison. Next day, he hears a commotion and asks the king's daughter what is going on. A neighboring earl is attacking. The princess fits Peredur out with arms and weapons so he can fight incognito; Peredur returns to the prison every night. After three days, the princess reveals his identity and the king releases Peredur and directs him to the Castle of Wonders.

At the castle, Peredur sees a gwyddbwyll set playing automatically. Peredur hurls the board into the lake and takes the pieces. The hideous woman reappears and chides him for losing the empress's board. Peredur must restore the board by defeating the lord of Ysbidinongyl Castle. Peredur does. The hideous woman tells Peredur that he will not see the empress until he has killed the one-horned stag that is destroying the area. Peredur takes the empress's lapdog and goes to hunt the stag. Peredur kills the stag, but once he has done so, a lady takes the lapdog, furious with Peredur for killing her stag.

Peredur offers to recompense her. She tells him to go and find a slab at the foot of a mountain. Peredur must ask a man there to joust three times. Peredur does so, and a man in rusty armor rises up from under the slab and fights with Peredur.

Peredur comes to a castle where he finds the Lame King. A young man greets him and says that he had disguised himself as the hideous maiden and had also been there while Peredur had recovered the board, killed the stag and jousted with the knight. The youth was the one who had carried the spear. The head Peredur had seen on the salver was his cousin's. The cousin had been killed and the Lame King wounded by the witches of Caer Loyw. Peredur defeats the witches.



## Peredur Son of Efracwng Analysis

"Peredur Son of Efracwng" is the Welsh version of the original "Conte du Graal" by Chretien de Troyes, although this tale contains a lot of extra material and incident that are left out from the original. This tale also alters the original by leaving out one of the central images in the romance by Chretien de Troyes: the mysterious Grail is missing. Peredur is more commonly known by his French name of Percival, with Gwalchmei being the more familiar name for Gawaine.

This tale exemplifies a picaresque narrative, where the protagonist goes on adventure after adventure, with the links between adventures being tenuous or non-existent. Reading this version gives one the sense that this tale was a source-book for oral storytellers; possibly, they could use the central tale about Peredur (the account of his leaving home and coming of age before his full acceptance into Arthur's court) with the additional tales, such as his vow of silence and the quest for the stone of the Black Worm, providing material that could be used for an encore.

However, some of the images and motifs in the episode of the Black Worm seem to be taken from alchemy. As alchemy was outlawed as a dangerous heresy, it is possible that the compiler of this tale was hiding an allegorical description of the alchemist's quest for the Philosopher's Stone inside this wonder-tale, surrounding it with other accounts of mysteries, adventures and marvels to disguise it. If this is the case, then it is possibly significant that the tale of Peredur was chosen to be retold but without the central image of the Grail. Some believe that the Grail itself in other later versions of the Grail legend (but not in the Chretien de Troyes original) is also a symbol for the Philosopher's Stone (certainly, in some versions of the Grail legend, the Grail is not a cup or a dish but a stone).

For much of the tale, Peredur does not seem to have a very well developed character and is pretty much the stock hero of Medieval courtly romances, apart from the way that he vows love to first one maiden and then another in a most uncourtly fashion (the "rules" of courtly love required a knight to be devoted to one woman only). For most of his adventures, nearly any name could be substituted in place of "Peredur" and the small incident where Gwalchmei becomes the main focus could easily have been done by Peredur. However, in the earliest parts of the tale, Peredur has a marked character of his own that sets him apart from many of the other heroes. Naiveté is his chief characteristic; Peredur here is the Perfect Fool who asks the questions that should not be asked. A trace of this early naiveté and curiosity reappears in the encounter with the one-eyed man, however. If the alchemical hypothesis about this incident is correct, the reappearance of the "Perfect Fool" asking the forbidden question is possibly deliberate. Peredur's naiveté is comic but it is this naiveté that allows him to overcome the knight who took Gwenhwyfar's goblet. In this respect, Peredur is similar to the Fortunate Fools who often appear in folk tales, where they are the despised younger sons who manage to succeed where their more favoured elder brothers fail (as is the Brothers Grimm's tale of the Golden Goose). The scene where Peredur arrives on his piebald pony



dressed in makeshift armour was later borrowed by Andersen for his tale of "Hans Clodhopper," another example of the Fortunate Fool.

The main story of Peredur tells of his coming of age and passage to knighthood. His tale could be read as an allegory of how a boy becomes a man. He begins in the world of his mother, knowing nothing of the world of adult men and knights. However, when he reaches the age of transition, his focus shifts away to the masculine side. His mother faints and later dies, which seems to represent the way the mother loses her importance in the world of a young man growing up. Peredur attempts to prove himself a man by trying to follow his mother's advice, but this advice merely makes him look foolish. His first attempt at becoming a knight is met by opposition—the only two who hail him as a knight receive abuse for doing so. However, Peredur goes to reclaim the queen's goblet and demonstrates that he has the qualities and the potential to become a knight. Peredur then finds two mentors: his uncles. These men teach him the basic of knighthood—the use of a sword. The second uncle's comment that Peredur has come into two-thirds of his strength also alert the reader to a third step of initiation that is yet to come.

It is during this process that Peredur makes his greatest mistake and does not ask the question that needs to be asked about the bleeding lance and the head on the platter (the head on the platter seems to be "filling in" for the missing Grail). This leads to the blighting of the kingdom, which is linked to the infirmity of the Lamé King, Peredur's uncle. This parallel between the infirmity of the king and the infirmity of the land again demonstrates the link between the king and the land; as the king is "married" to the land, if he fails in vigour and virility (represented by lameness), the land also languishes and is stricken with barrenness.

Peredur receives his final initiation not at the hands of a man but at the hands of women; it is the witches who teach him horsemanship. This may be a glancing reference to the Celtic horse-goddess Epona. However, the fact that he is given his final initiation by women after spending the night in a castle ruled over by a woman may indicate that Peredur has passed the final test into adult manhood; he is not only a warrior, but he is also a lover. It is after this final initiation that Peredur is able to avenge the insult to the dwarves and defeat Cei. He defeats Cei after demonstrating true knightly behavior: devotion to his true love and fighting prowess. It is after this that he is received as a full member of Arthur's court. It is also significant that before his full initiation, he has to repair the damage he caused by his naiveté in following his mother's advice blindly, and he also has to demonstrate the knightly virtues of chivalry and rescuing damsels in distress. His championing of the countess against the ravages of the neighbouring earl are very similar to some of the adventures of Owein.

In the incident where Peredur is reminded of his lady-love by the raven, the blood and the snow contains a motif that appears in other fairy-tales, the most familiar of which is found in "Snow White" before the birth of the heroine. Another example appears in the Irish tale of Deidre of the Sorrows, where the heroine longs for a man with white skin, black hair and red lips after seeing a raven feed on the blood of a calf in the snow. The three colours may or may not be symbolic of the three phases of womanhood, with



white representing the Maiden, red representing the Mother and black representing the Crone. The one glaring problem with this episode is that nowhere previous to this does the tale mention who Peredur's true love is; all the maidens he has encountered so far he has treated (and addressed) as his sister. In the original by Chretien de Troyes, Peredur's love is the Tattered Countess he delivers from the witches, but this is one point where this tale deviates greatly from the original.

The "proper" tale of Peredur (following the original by Chretien de Troyes) is then set aside until the appearance of the hideous woman in Arthur's court. Peredur then sets about solving the mystery of the spear and learns about the wrongs done to his family. The reappearance of the witches of Caer Loyw is somewhat jarring—they were Peredur's final initiators—but may be an attempt on the part of the compiler to tie up a loose plot end. In the final struggle against the witches, the reader sees a small trace of the witch-killing Arthur of "Culhwch and Olwen." Prior to this, Arthur is a rather weak character whose role seems only to be to seek out and welcome Peredur into the court.

Gwalchmei is an enigmatic figure who is portrayed as being wise and prudent, demonstrated by his tactful handling of Peredur when he reappears as a full knight. Gwalchmei's reappearance in the court of the Lame King, having arrived there before Peredur, may also be seen as representing his wisdom; he was able to solve the mystery of the spear first. However, this may also be a reference to other popular versions of the Grail legend, where Gwalchmei/Gawaine is able to heal the Lame King and restore the kingdom after Peredur's/Percival's failure to ask the key question.

Cei demonstrates his typical behaviour in the later Arthurian tradition: surly, rude, discourteous and rough. As he does when he encounters Owein in "The Lady of the Fountain", he ends up badly wounded. The only trace of the older Cei is seen in Peredur's reference to him as the "tall man."

The episode of Peredur's vow of silence is a classic example of a tale of courtly love, where a hero performs great deeds in order to win the favour and love of a reluctant, cold or haughty beauty. His encounter with the pagan giants and their master is a clever way, on the part of the compiler, of allowing Peredur to keep his vow but to still be able to undertake adventures. The scene found by Peredur as he comes to the castle is almost identical to the scene in "The Lady of the Fountain" that Owein finds before being directed to the Hideous Herdsman in the forest.

The episode of the Black Worm and the subsequent marriage to the Empress contains many alchemical symbols, as mentioned above. The fact that Peredur is embarking on a quest for hidden wisdom is first hinted at by his encounter with the one-eyed man. Here, Peredur asks the forbidden question, which may be a hint at the traditional Grail quest, or may indicate that that the tale will concern a quest for forbidden occult knowledge. The one-eyed man may contain traces of the one-eyed Norse god of wisdom, Odin or Woden, who underwent a terrifying ordeal to gain the secret of the runes. The description of the stone in the tail of the Black Worm with its ability to produce gold is as good a description of the Philosopher's Stone as any found in literature. The second stone, the one that confers invisibility and allows Peredur to win





the Empress, may also be a representation of the Philosopher's Stone. Many of the stages Peredur passes in his quest may be allegorical or encoded descriptions of the process of alchemy needed to obtain the Philosopher's Stone. The stage that is the most easily decoded is when Peredur arranges the marriage between the Lady and the Red Knight; one of the better understood symbols of the occult practice of alchemy related to the "sacred marriage" of the sun and the moon or the masculine and the feminine principle (or gold and silver), which was described as a marriage between the Red King or Knight and the White Queen or Lady. One easily understood aspect of the other stages in Peredur's quest seem to indicate the dedication and the asceticism needed by the devotee of alchemy. At every turn, Peredur must refuse the hand of a maiden in marriage, and must not take the path where he can find food and drink.

The Empress may also be another alchemical symbol, possibly representing Wisdom (often portrayed as a queen or a woman), which is the ultimate goal of the alchemist. The directions the empress first gives to Peredur and her position as Empress may give a faint clue: travelling eastwards (towards India) from Western Europe to the throne of the Holy Roman Emperor would bring one to Byzantium (Constantinople), where the most important church or basilica is one dedicated to the Hagia Sophia or Holy Wisdom.

Some of the other stages encrypted in this episode remain encrypted, but the reader feels their significance. These are the black and white sheep, and the tree that is half on fire. These wonders are not of the same type commonly seen in Medieval romances; the rich and mysterious castles and the one-horned stag with the golden collar (and the outraged owner) encountered by Peredur elsewhere are more typical.

The mention of Peredur's fourteen-year reign with the empress also hints at the "added in" nature of this episode. Later, when the "proper" tale of Peredur resumes, Peredur exclaims that it has been exactly a year since he set out from his home country, which is inconsistent—unless the alchemical allegory is left out. Peredur's adventures after Good Friday, where he spends three nights in the prison before his victorious release on Easter in time to find the Lame King at his court, contains traces of a Christian allegory (possibly to throw heretic-hunters off the scent), as this seems to parallel the gap between Christ's death on Good Friday, the Harrowing of Hell and the Resurrection at Easter.





# Gereint Son of Erbin

## Gereint Son of Erbin Summary

Arthur sets out to hunt a white stag. Gwenhwyfar oversleeps, as does Gereint, and they ride to join the hunt. A lady, a knight and a dwarf ride by. Gwenhwyfar sends a maiden to ask who the knight is, but the dwarf whips the maiden. Gereint rides to ask the same question and receives the same answer. Gereint decides to follow them and challenge them.

Gereint follows the trio to a town where he is welcomed by an impoverished old earl and his daughter, Enid. The earl tells him to go to a tournament the next day. The prize is a sparrowhawk, which the victor must award to his lady-love. Gereint says he will take Enid as his true love, and the old earl gives him armor.

Gereint defeats Edern and sends him to Arthur's court. Gereint awards the sparrowhawk to Enid. Gereint tells Enid to travel to Caer Llion, where he will marry her, in her chemise. Meanwhile, Arthur has successfully hunted the stag. The knights bicker about which lady should win the head, but Gwenhwyfar says to wait until Gereint returns. Gereint and Enid arrive. Gwenhwyfar dresses Enid with her own clothes. Gereint and Enid are married and Enid is awarded the head.

Gereint takes his father's place as king of Cornwall but spends all his time in bed with Enid. This causes discontent among his noblemen. Enid laments that it is her fault such a fine man has been weakened and dishonored. Gereint grows suspicious that she is unfaithful.

The couple depart, Enid wearing her worst dress. Gereint instructs Enid not to say anything to him unless he speaks first. Enid sees four knights coming to attack them. She hears their plans and warns Gereint. He chides her for not following his orders before defeating the knights. Gereint tells her to drive the horses in front of her. She overhears three more knights planning to ambush them. Again, she warns Gereint. Gereint scolds her, but overcomes the three knights. This happens a third time when five more knights attack them.

That night, Gereint asks Enid to keep watch over the horses. The next day, they meet the Dun Earl. The Dun Earl begins to talk with Enid and offers to be her lover. Enid replies that she will be true to Gereint. The earl says that he will kill Gereint. That night, Enid warns Gereint of the plot. He is annoyed with her for speaking, but does not scold her. They leave. The Dun Earl rides after them. Enid sees him and gives warning, with the usual reaction from Gereint.

They go to the kingdom of Gwiffred Petit. Gwiffred Petit challenges Gereint for trespassing. Gereint manages to overcome the dwarf king, who promises to help



Gereint. Gwiffred looks at Enid and feels sorry for her. The couple continue on, but Gereint is weakened by his wounds.

As Gereint is taking shelter from the heat under a tree, Cei rides up and fails to recognise him. Cei attacks him but Gereint wounds Cei. Gwalchmei approaches Gereint courteously and takes him to Arthur's pavilion. Arthur arranges for doctors to heal Gereint while Gwenhwyfar tends to Enid.

Gereint and Enid travel again. They hear a scream and find a lady and a knight who has been killed by three giants. Gereint slays the giants but is wounded again. When he reaches Enid, he swoons, causing her to scream. Her scream is heard by Earl Limwris. This earl carries Gereint to his castle. Enid refuses to eat until Gereint revives. The earl boxes her ears, and she cries out. Gereint hears her and revives to attack the earl. Gereint realises that she has been true to him. He sets her in front of him on his horse and they ride away together.

The Little King tends Gereint and sets him on his way, directing him to the enchanted games at the court of Ywein. Gereint enters the mist-filled hedge-maze and finds a horn hanging from a tree and a pavilion with an empty chair. Gereint sits in the chair, challenging a knight. They joust and Gereint is victorious. The knight tells Gereint to blow the horn to remove the mists and break the enchantment.

## Gereint Son of Erbin Analysis

This romance is based on an original by Chretien de Troyes, and follows the original very closely. The only main difference between this version and the French original is the name of the male protagonist, who was called Erec in the original; Gereint is the name for this character that has become more popular and was used by later Arthurian writers (for example, Mallory and Tennyson). Another point of difference between this version and the original is the lists of names—here, the Welsh members of Arthur's court are listed, somewhat reminiscent of the lists in "Culhwch and Olwen."

This romance is unusual as it focuses on the female protagonist as much as the male protagonist. The relationship between the hero and heroine is the primary focus of the tale. What is more, their relationship does not follow the typical model of courtly love; Gereint's behaviour towards his wife is far from chivalrous courtesy. Gereint suffers no love-agony and Enid is no haughty, demanding beauty.

The main characters within this romance are clear-cut and distinctive, unlike the protagonists in "Peredur Son of Efracw" and "The Lady of the Fountain." Enid shows herself throughout to be a woman of great loyalty and patience. Her tolerance of some of the more unreasonable demands of her husband, such as keeping watch over the horses overnight and dressing in shabby clothing, is given some credibility by her first appearance as the hard-working daughter of the impoverished earl who tends to Gereint's horse and runs errands for her father. Gereint is presented as a man who is silent almost to the point of sulkiness (note the comments by the knights who ambush



the couple), and it is not surprising, therefore, that his main cause for complaint in Enid is her inability to keep silent and hold her tongue. He also appears as a man of wisdom and tact who is a good ruler over his kingdom. It is possible that some of his demands that seem outrageous have a subtler reason behind them; he possibly requests Enid to appear for the first time at Arthur's court in her shift, knowing well that Gwenhwyfar will instantly take pity on her and array Enid in clothes that are much more splendid than anything she would have owned as the daughter of the impoverished earl. Also, his insistence that she come with him on his quest is his way of letting her see what his world is like and that he is not lacking in courage and honour. Another aspect of his character that is kept consistent is his tendency to sleep very deeply; when we first meet him, he has missed the start of the hunt through oversleeping, and Enid always seems to be awake before him.

Arthur and Gwenhwyfar are portrayed as the ideal king and queen, who display the desirable virtues of rulers such as justice, mercy and generosity. This tale does not give the slightest hint that Gwenhwyfar is an unfaithful wife—in fact, this tale has her acting as the voice of reason that was given to Gawaine/Gwalchmei in the Chretien de Troyes original—and they can be seen as the model that Gereint and Enid need to follow, both as rulers and as a married couple. As an example, Arthur demonstrates a lot of care and tenderness towards his wife, for example when he finds her sleeping before the hunt. It is probably significant that the encounter Gereint and Enid have with Arthur and Gwenhwyfar while on their quest together marks a turning point in their relationship, after which they begin growing closer together. Arthur, arranging for the healing of Gereint's wound, seems to parallel the healing in their relationship. Arthur in this tale is more reminiscent of the Arthur that appears in "Culhwch and Olwen", taking an active role in the hunt and accompanied by his dog Cafall, who brings down the white stag in much the same way as he brought down Ysgythwyn Chief Boar.

As in the other two romances in The Mabinogion that are based on French originals, Cei appears a rude, surly boor who ends up wounded for attacking the hero without recognizing him. As in "The Lady of the Fountain" and "Peredur Son of Efwarg", Gwalchmei succeeds in greeting the hero and leading him to Arthur.

The plot of this tale falls into two main parts. The first relates to the hunt of the white stag and the first meeting between Gereint and Enid. The second part concentrates on how their relationship falls into difficulties but is then restored. The section where Gereint is summoned to Cornwall is more of a transition that links the two sections and allows the setting to be shifted from Arthur's court at Caer Llion to Gereint's kingdom of Cornwall.

The action is introduced by the appearance of a white stag, which is a typical motif heralding the start of an adventure (see, for example, the white boar in "Manawydan Son of Llyr" and the white hounds in "Pwyll Prince of Dyfed"). However, the appearance of the stag does not introduce a fantasy element into the tale. In fact, "Gereint and Enid" contains very little fantasy, with the mist-filled maze being the only magical element, which is not, in itself, particularly marvellous and magical in contrast to the magical elements appearing in the other tales in The Mabinogion. This tale is by far the most



realistic of the collection, and the theme of a relationship in trouble that is later restored, combined with the struggle to balance the demands of love and duty, is one that audiences can identify with. This theme seems to be timeless and just as applicable today as it was in the Middle Ages.

Honour again is an important theme. Gereint initially sets out on the adventure that brings him to Enid in order to avenge the dishonour done to Gwenhwyfar's handmaidens. This need to avenge the maiden's dishonour is Gereint's main motive for entering the tournament for the sparrowhawk; it gives him a chance to meet Edern son of Nudd on an equal footing. Gereint's marriage to Enid begins as a marriage of convenience, as he needs a lady-love in order to enter the tournament.

The adventures in the second part of the tale have something in common with the adventures in the second part of "The Lady of the Fountain." Like Owein, Gereint needs to learn how to balance the demands of duty and honour against the demands of love. However, Gereint goes in the opposite direction to Owein and errs by being too uxorious and ignoring the demands of honor. It is interesting to note that Enid does not blame her husband for his loss of honor: she blames herself after the matter has been brought to her attention by her father-in-law.

Gereint refers to the journey they set out on as a "quest," which implies that his journeys are not random wanderings but have a goal. This goal could be the restoration of their relationship (note that Gereint suspects that Enid is unfaithful to him and wishes him dead), the restoration of his honour as a knight, or finding a balance between the demands of love and duty. During this quest, both the hero and the heroine have to change. Gereint, as previously mentioned, has to learn to balance the conflicting demands, while Enid has to learn discretion. Their quest also acts as a way for the two to learn to trust each other more via a series of tests. Enid has to learn to trust her husband's ability and fighting prowess, while Gereint has to trust Enid to be faithful to him in spite of all temptations.

His demand that Enid wear her worst clothing could be for three reasons. Firstly, as he explicitly states, it means that she will not be in any condition to flirt with any potential paramour. Secondly, he knows that they will be sleeping and living in the wilderness, so finery would be out of place—another demonstration of Gereint's common sense. Thirdly, it may be reminiscent of their first journey together when she first came to Arthur's court.

The reader can see the changes in Gereint's attitude to Enid throughout their journey in how he responds to her reactions to his attackers. At first, his response is to accuse her of hypocrisy and wishing him dead. By the time they pass the night in the Dun Earl's castle, his reaction has changed merely to a wish that she would learn to hold her tongue, as he is capable of handling attacks. This is unsurprising, as her warning is conclusive proof that she is genuinely concerned for his safety. The turning point seems to be their meeting with Arthur and Gwenhwyfar, as mentioned earlier. After this point, Enid gives up warning her husband of approaching attacks—she has learned that he is more than capable of dealing with any attack—and Gereint is able to respond to her



genuine call for help when Earl Limwris strikes her by rousing from his wounded stupor and fighting for her honour. This incident seems to mark the restoration of their relationship, and it is significant that the couple leave the castle together on the one horse rather than riding separately.

The mist-filled maze and the enchanted games is understood by some scholars as being a symbol of the unrealistic demands of courtly love. By breaking the enchantment, Gereint symbolically shows that he has learned how to balance the two halves of his life.



# Characters

## Arthur

King Arthur is mostly portrayed in all the tales as an ideal ruler who presides over a perfect kingdom, surrounded by the best warriors. He is a ruler and a warrior of great renown who, on the whole, demonstrates all of the virtues that are desirable in a king.

It is unclear exactly how old Arthur is, but his behaviour and wisdom seem to indicate an older man. His wife is Gwenhwyfar, and they have an ideal marriage (these tales contain no trace of the idea that Gwenhwyfar is an adulteress and Arthur is a cuckold). He seems to have an extensive family, and many of the warriors of his court. He owns a hunting dog named Cafall who is capable of bringing down both boars and stags.

The earliest portrayal of Arthur in "Culhwch and Olwen" is that of a vigorous warrior who is one petty king among many, albeit one of high renown. In this early tale Arthur takes an active part in all the adventures, and is shown to be wise and generous. He is a brave ruler and fighter, rushing in to defend his men against the Black Witch in spite of the discouragement of his men. This way of portraying Arthur is continued, more or less, in "Gereint Son of Erbin", where Arthur plays the leading role in the hunt of the white stag, and demonstrates the kingly virtues of justice and mercy, as well as generosity.

In "Peredur Son of Efwarg" and "The Lady of the Fountain", Arthur is a weaker, more passive character who takes no active role in the adventures and his only action seems to be that of welcoming warriors into his court. He remains a warm, kindly and generous king who shows great concern for his men. However, in "The Lady of the Fountain", he has a touch of the comic about him, slightly worried that his queen and his men will laugh at him when he takes a nap. By this stage, Arthur is no longer a petty king, but is more of a High King.

In the later "Dream of Rhonabwy", the character of Arthur has changed completely. Here, he appears as a remote and cold ruler who is described as an emperor who receives tribute from lands as far away as Greece. This version of Arthur is quite unsympathetic, demonstrating a complete lack of concern and more than a trace of bad temper.

## Cei

Cei is one of the most significant members of Arthur's court and frequently acts as Arthur's right-hand man who is the first to interact with newcomers to the court.

Cei is consistently described as being a tall man, and in the earliest tale, he is described as being able to alter his height supernaturally at will. He is also a handsome character who is sometime called "Fair Cei."



When he first appears, Cei is a warrior whose prowess is second to none, except maybe Arthur. This early version of Cei also demonstrates great wisdom and cunning, and acts with great courtesy. Cei also has a number of supernatural powers alongside the ability to change his height, such as being able to stay dry in the rain, stay underwater for nine days and to give off heat. A wound from Cei's sword was incurable. Cei also has some skill as a craftsman, particularly as a furbisher of swords.

The later presentations of Cei are totally different. Cei consistently appears in the later romances as a surly and rude boor who sneers at and mocks newcomers to Arthur's court. He does not appear to be much of a fighter in spite of his hot temper, and a stock situation seems to involve Cei failing to recognise the hero of a tale, attacking him rudely and ending up seriously wounded as a result of the hero's counter-attack (this is always followed by Gwalchmei going and speaking courteously to the hero and presenting him to Arthur). This presentation of Cei borders on the comic.

Cei appears at his worst in "Peredur Son of Efracw", where his discourtesy to Peredur is extreme, as is his abuse of the two court dwarfs; it is this rudeness that creates some of the plot tension and a motive for Peredur's wandering elsewhere to find training and a mentor.

## Owein

Owein is another of Arthur's chief warriors and is also known as "The Knight of the Lion" after he wins the companionship and protection of a white lion.

Owein is the son of Urien. He becomes ruler over a territory by marrying the Lady of the Fountain, which gives him the responsibility of guarding the magical rain-making fountain in the woods nearby. After winning his position, he habitually wears black armour and rides a black horse, which seems to be the livery of the Fountain's guardian.

Owein is shown to be chivalrous and courteous. He never fails to act in the defence of the weak and oppressed he encounters, and it is he who is the first member of Arthur's court to go to greet Peredur.

Owein has a warband known as the Flight of Ravens. These Ravens appear as actual birds in "The Dream of Rhonabwy", and Owein treats them with great consideration and shows a lot of concern for them.

Owein is possibly a personification of the Sun or the Waning Year, with his adventures symbolising the cycle of the seasons.

## Peredur appears in Peredur Son of Efracw

Peredur begins life as a naive, sheltered boy who has the ambition to become a knight. His naiveté and enthusiasm both help and hinder him. In many ways, he is the Perfect Fool. As he matures, he loses some of his innate curiosity and naiveté, and fits into the





standard mold (or cliché) of a gallant knight of courtly romance who is brave, courteous, daring, chivalrous and devoted to the service of his true love. However, he seems more promiscuous than other knights and has several lady-loves throughout his adventures.

## **Pryderi**

Pryderi is the son of Pwyll and Rhiannon, and his early life was notable in that he was stolen from his mother in infancy and raised in ignorance of his true heritage. He is later restored to his position and becomes the ruler of Dyfed. After the death of his father, he arranges for his friend and mentor to become his stepfather, and is mentored by this older man. In spite of his father's experiences with the Otherworld, Pryderi is occasionally caught unawares by magical traps and can be duped by illusions. He is given the gift of a herd of pigs by Arawn, king of Annwn, his father's Otherworldly ally. These pigs bring about his death, as they are taken by Gwydion, who later defeats Pryderi in single combat by using magic.

Pryderi is described as having golden hair, and he was first called Gwri Golden-hair.

## **Gwydion appears in Math Son of Mathonwy**

Gwydion is a magician of considerable powers and great cunning. He is responsible for arranging for his king's handmaiden Goewin to be raped, and also uses illusion to steal Pryderi's pigs, and is punished for his crimes by being transformed into various animal shapes.

After this, Gwydion seems to reform and becomes the mentor for Llew Llaw Gyffes, helping the young man win the tokens of manhood from Aranrhod by using his cunning and his magic powers.

## **Gereint appears in Gereint son of Erbin**

Gereint is a knight who becomes the ruler of Cornwall and who has to learn to balance the demands of love and duty. He is a member of Arthur's court.

His father's name is Erbin, who surrenders the kingdom to a younger man, and Gereint is married to Enid. Gereint is described as having red hair and being well-dressed. He is also a heavy sleeper.

Gereint is a silent man who is irritated both by his wife's inability to hold her tongue and by his suspicions of her infidelity. His marriage to Enid begins as a marriage of convenience enabling him to fight for the honour of one of Gwenwhyfar's handmaidens, but this relationship changes and matures into a balanced and loving marriage, albeit one that faces difficulties.



Gereint is no courtly lover, and his treatment of his wife seems less than chivalrous. However, he is very fond of Enid to the point of losing his honor by preferring to make love to her instead of performing in tournaments and other knightly pursuits.

Gereint proves to be a wise and fair ruler over Cornwall, and his prudence is commented on and commended by Gwenhwyfar.

## **Enid appears in Gereint Son of Erbin**

Enid is the beautiful and long-suffering wife of Gereint. When she first meets her husband, she is the hard-working daughter of an impoverished earl, a background that provides her with the resilience to cope with her later adventures with her husband.

Enid is completely loyal to her husband and is faithful to him in spite of being tempted to betray him by two earls. However, she doubts her husband's prowess, and acts impulsively in a superfluous concern for him. She has to learn to trust him fully.

## **Culhwch appears in Culhwch and Olwen**

Culhwch is Arthur's cousin and the son of a king. His stepmother puts him under a geas to take no wife except Olwen, the daughter of Ysbaddaden Chief Giant.

Culhwch is a confident young man who demonstrates courage and skill in his confrontations with the giant, and he benefits from a strong kinsman and his many family ties.

## **Ysbaddaden Chief Giant appears in Culhwch and Olwen**

Ysbaddaden is the bad-tempered and powerful ruler of the giants who puts all young men who come to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage to severe tests.

Ysbaddaden is evil-tempered and slaughters even the children of some of his own followers, and he treacherously attacks Culhwch and his party when they first arrive. He then has the ill grace to curse the warriors for wounding him with the poisoned spears he first threw at them.

However, Ysbaddaden tamely allows himself to be killed once the quest is achieved, and he is obviously highly protective of his daughter, who does not appear to be as harshly treated as his retainers. He also demonstrates a few gleams of humour.



## **Efnisien appears in Branwen Daughter of Llyr**

Efnisien loves battle and strife, and his mutilation of the the Irish horses causes the war between Bran and Mathowlch. He is an enigmatic character, sometimes acting helpfully and sometimes causing needless, random harm and violence. He seems to personify the forces of death and chaos, and it is appropriate that he is the one who shatters the Cauldron of Rebirth.

## **Elen of the Hosts appears in The Dream of Macsen Wledig**

Elen becomes the wife of Macsen, emperor of Rome. She is a woman of great power and common sense, who negotiates a wide territory for her father in exchange for her hand in marriage, and who establishes the road network in Britain for easy movement of troops.

## **Rhiannon**

Rhiannon is the mother of Prydreri. At first, she is the wife of Pwyll, but is later married to Manawydan.

Rhiannon seems to come from the Otherworld and is associated with horses. She also owns a flock of magical birds, but is never seen with them.

She is an attentive mother to Pryderi even after he is a grown man, possibly because of the way that she was falsely accused after his mysterious disappearance. She accepts her penance patiently.



## Objects/Places

### **The Cauldron of Rebirth appears in Branwen Daughter of Llyr**

The cauldron given by Bran to Matholch of Ireland as a wedding gift. It has the power of restoring dead warriors to life, although the regenerated warriors lose the power of speech. It is shattered self-sacrificially by Efnisien, turning the battle in favour of the Welsh.

### **Twrch Trwyth appears in Culhwch and Olwen**

A great magical boar who carries the scissors and comb needed by Ysbaddaden Chief Giant to groom himself for the wedding. He has poisoned bristles and lays realms waste. Obtaining his treasures is one of the tasks Culhwch and his helpers must perform to win the hand of Olwen.

### **Caer Llion appears in Gereint Son of Erbin, Peredur Son of Efrog, The Lady of the**

The site of Arthur's court.

### **Annwn appears in Pwyll Prince of Dyfed, Manawydan Son of Llyr, Math Son of Ma**

The Celtic Otherworld. Mortals can enter the Otherworld. The appearance of Otherworldly characters and events is often heralded by strange white animals. Pigs are said to originate from here.

### **Cornwall appears in Culhwch and Olwen, Gereint Son of Erbin**

One of the small kingdoms of Britain, ruled over by Erbin and then Gereint. Twrch Trwyth is finally driven into the sea off the coast of Cornwall.



## **Ireland appears in Branwen Daughter of Llyr, Culhwch and Olwen**

Source of the Cauldron of Rebirth and the country where Twrch Trwyth first appears. It seems to almost double for the Otherworld at times.

## **Dyfed appears in Pwyll Prince of Dyfed, Manwydan Son of Llyr, Math son of Mat**

The kingdom ruled first by Pwyll, then jointly by Manawydan and Pryderi, and finally by Pryderi alone. Located in western Wales.

## **The Fountain appears in The Lady of the Fountain**

Has the power to generate a storm when water from this is poured onto a marble slab. The husband of the countess of the city associated with this fountain has the responsibility to guard the fountain and defend it and its powers against all challengers. Directions to the fountain are given by the Hideous Herdsman.

## **Caer Aranrhod appears in Math Son of Mathonwy**

The island fortress surrounded by sea that is unusual in that it is ruled over by a woman.

## **Horse appears in Pwyll Prince of Dyfed**

Closely linked with Rhiannon and with Pryderi. Rhiannon is first seen mounted and she later has to play the role of a horse. Pryderi's disappearance and finding is linked with the appearance and disappearance of a foal.

## **Salmon appears in Culhwch and Olwen**

A symbol of wisdom and the oldest creature alive who guides the questers to the prison of Mabon Son of Modron.

## **Lloegyr**

Modern-day Great Britain. Notable kingdoms within Lloegyr include Cornwall, the Summer Country, Dyfed and Gwynedd. Also known as the Island of the Mighty.



## **Lion appears in The Lady of the Fountain**

The faithful companion of Owein who hunts for him and helps him in battles.

## **Shoemakers appears in Manawydan Son of Llyr, Math Son of Mathonwy**

Heroes often pose as shoemakers as a way of making a living or to gain entrance to a fortress. However, shoemakers are considered to be lower in status than other craftsmen and to have no fighting spirit.

## **Giants appears in Branwen Daughter of Llyr, Culhwch and Olwen, Peredur Son of**

Giants are usually malignant and fearsome opponents, with the exception of Bendigeifran. Giants seem to be able to shift their size, and their relatives are often normal humans.

## **Llydaw appears in The Dream of Macsen Wledig**

Modern-day Brittany, originally settled by the two brothers of Elen of the Hosts.

## **Pigs appears in Math Son of Mathonwy, Manawydan Son of Llyr, Culhwch and Olw**

Pigs were first introduced into Lloegyr by Pwyll, who received them as a gift from Arawn King of Annwn, but were coveted and stolen by the magician Gwydion for Math Son of Mathonwy.

Two of the tasks set by Ysbaddaden involve hunting boars, and obtaining the equipment needed to do this. Twrch Trwyth is the more ferocious of the two boars, and he has a retinue of other pigs who act as his war band.

## **Sparrowhawk appears in Gereint Son of Erbin**

Awarded as the prize of a tournament to the lady-love of the champion; won by Gereint and awarded to Enid.



## **Coraneidappears in Llud and Llefelys**

Supernatural beings that plague the kingdom of Llud and cause strife by making it impossible to keep secrets, which also makes it impossible to plan to destroy them. Llefelys reveals the secret for destroying them to Llud by speaking through a brass tube. They can be destroyed by mixing the crushed bodies of a certain type of insect and sprinkling this over them.

## **Gwyddbwyll**

A game like chess that is very popular with the nobility in the society portrayed in The Mabinogion.





# Themes

## Honor

Maintaining and preserving one's honour is very important to all the characters throughout The Mabinogion and many adventures are initiated by a character seeking make amends for slighting another's honour (for example, Pwyll's sojourn in Annwn to make reparation for his insult to Arawn King of Annwn) or to avenge an insult to the honour of another who cannot defend him/herself (as when Peredur vows to meet Cei in battle for the insult to the dwarf and the she-dwarf, or Gereint's pursuit of Edern son of Nudd because of the insult to Gwenhwyfar's handmaiden). A character can also undertake adventures in order to increase their honor (Peredur) or to restore lost honor (Gereint and Owein).

Honor has to be lived up to, and the actions of all the main characters are often dictated by what is honorable. For example, Arthur and Cei agree that leaving a nobleman such as Culhwch waiting in the gatehouse would be a slight to their honor. Sometimes, maintaining one's honor can lead to conflicting demands, such as when Pwyll wishes to be seen as a generous lord by granting the request of a stranger at his wedding, which leaves him with the obligation to yield his new wife and his feast to Gwawl.

A petitioner to a king or a noble was often aware of the need to maintain or preserve one's honor, and would often request that a boon be granted for the sake of honor. This could be for a noble end, as in the example of Culhwch, who asks his boon in the name of the honor of each warrior and lady in Arthur's court. However, it could also be used for ignoble ends, as in the case of Gwawl.

In spite of the demands of honor, heroes do not always behave honorably. Although his men advise him not to personally fight against the Black Witch, Arthur does so out of concern for his men. Similarly, in spite of Cigfa's urging, Manawydan becomes a shoemaker to make a living. These lapses in honor, whether deliberate (for example, Pwyll driving another man's hounds off a kill) or accidental (Peredur's slaying of the one-horned stag, thus insulting the owner) often initiate adventures.

For men, honor seems to be related to fighting prowess, while in kings, honor is also linked to virtues such as generosity, mercy and wisdom. For women, honor is linked to chastity—Aranrhod reacts fiercely when her lack of chastity is exposed, which leads to her placing three "destinies" on her son. By contrast, Enid maintains her honor and is unashamed; she is a faithful wife. Women, most notably Branwen, Rhiannon and Enid, are sometimes made to suffer penance because they are falsely accused of shameful deeds, but all three bear their hardships nobly and patiently, and are ultimately vindicated (or rescued, in the case of Branwen).



On the whole, honor is a highly valued attribute in the society portrayed in The Mabinogion and was a way of ensuring, at least partially, that rulers remained just and fair rather than tyrants, and prevented the strong from taking advantage of the weak.

## The Kingly Virtues

Several kings appear in the pages of The Mabinogion, and many of them portray what makes an ideal ruler. In brief, these virtues seem to be generosity, courage, wisdom, justice and mercy.

The bond between a king and his people, or between the king and his land, was a close one, bordering on intimacy, and was based on mutual love and respect. Often, the bond between a king and the kingdom is symbolized by the marriage between a king and his queen. Often, a king obtains his position by marriage to the queen rather than inheriting in his own right (for examples, Manawydan and Rhiannon, Owein and the Lady of the Fountain). This close bond has a touch of sympathetic magic about it, and the fertility and vigor of the king is reflected in the health and well-being of the land itself (the classic example here is the Lame King in "Peredur Son of Efwarg", whose kingdom falls into decline and ruin because the king is not healed from his wound. Arthur, in all tales except "The Dream of Rhonabwy" demonstrates this closeness and love for his followers perfectly and consistently.

Generosity is one of the key kingly attributes, and according to Cei in "Culhwch and Olwen", the fact that petitioners come to court to make requests is a mark of honor and prestige. It almost seems as if kings in this society demonstrate their wealth not by accumulating wealth but by distributing it. Similarly, Owein and Gereint prove that they are worthy rulers over their respective territories by their generous gifts to their subjects.

Wisdom is also the mark of a good king, and kings who demonstrate this attribute include not only Arthur but also Llefelys, Gereint and Manawydan, the latter of whom is able to deliver his family and his subjects from magical bondage. Math Son of Mathonwy is another example of a wise king, although his wisdom is aided by magical powers.

Math is also the best example of a king who enforces justice, with his highly appropriate punishment for the men who rape his handmaiden Goewin. Arthur tends to temper justice with mercy, as shown by his treatment of Edern Son of Nudd after Gereint sends him to Caer Llion, penitent and badly wounded.

The prime example of kingly courage is seen in Owein, whose role as the ruler over his city also includes being the defender of the magial fountain. This is appropriate, as Owein won his kingdom by fighting prowess and defeating the former guardian, and must maintain his role by force. Arthur, in all tales except "Culhwch and Olwen" and "Gereint Son of Erbin" demonstrates less of this fighting prowess; the implication seems to be that he is now an older man who has proven himself in battle, but is now a lord of wisdom rather than battle.



Many of these idealized kingly attributes are acknowledged, in a rather snide fashion, by the less-than-ideal king in "The Dream of Rhonabwy", who is colder and more petty. However, a positive description of an ideal king appears in the opening of "Llud and Llefelys."

## Male/Female Relationships

Like many tales, those in The Mabinogion have the relationships between men and women as an important theme. A range of relationships are portrayed, some positive and some negative.

The heroines of the earlier Celtic tales such as Elen of the Hosts, Rhiannon and Olwen appear very strong and self-possessed, and this inner strength affects the relationships they have with their men. They are not examples of meek, subservient females who bow to the wishes of the men in their lives, but they retain a measure of their power. The best example of a woman who keeps her power within marriage is Elen of the Hosts, who insists that she will not marry Macsen Wledig, the all-powerful Emperor of Rome unless he comes personally to ask her; she does not leave her home with mere ambassadors. When Macsen does come, she claims her right as a newly married woman (it is implied that a woman who was a virgin when she married could claim a "maiden fee" from her husband) to negotiate for more power for her family and for herself. Similarly, Rhiannon does not respond to the forceful pursuits of Pwyll's messengers, but only responds when Pwyll comes to ask her politely, even though she has been deliberately seeking Pwyll out. Olwen, although she appears to be subservient to her giant father, refuses to elope with Culhwch even though she is able to do so, but insists that he prove his courage and his worth by approaching her father and winning her fairly.

In the later romances, women appear less powerful than the men they interact with, and the stereotypical "damsels in distress" in need of a gallant knight to defend them from oppressive neighbors frequently cross the paths of the heroes as they wander around the countryside. However, these heroines still retain a measure of power, and they are frequently found presiding over castles and strongholds of their own, which was a rare situation in the older society portrayed in the purely Celtic tales. Gwenhwyfar, while she is not a ruling queen, seems to hold considerable power and prestige in her husband's court (which contrasts with the conduct of Rhiannon), and she takes an active role in the hunt of the white stag and appears to act as one of the chief sources of wisdom in Arthur's court.

Many of the tales seem to contain traces of an old marriage custom, namely exogamy. In an exogamous society, it was the custom for a princess or a queen to take a husband from "outside" and her husband would remain in her kingdom and would often become the ruler of that kingdom. In many ways, the kingdom and the queen were closely associated, and by marrying the queen, a man would symbolically marry the land as well. This may contain vestigial traces of belief in an earth-goddess and a sacred marriage, where the queen would symbolise the land while the king would symbolise



the sun. "The Lady of the Fountain" is a prime example of an exogamous marriage (note that the countess's advisors urge her to take a new husband from outside her realm), and many of Owein's adventures seem to symbolise the cycle of the seasons, with Owein representing the sun or the Waxing Year; Owein is also responsible for guarding (and presumably controlling) the rain-making fountain.

However, not all the male/female relationships portrayed in The Mabinogion are harmonious and perfect. More than a hint of injustice towards women is found. For example, the counsellors in "Pwyll Prince of Dyfed" seem to take it for granted that a queen could be divorced for barrenness. Cigfa's terror and grief when her husband mysteriously vanishes, leaving her vulnerable to rape, also suggests that it was not uncommon for men to take advantage of women; in fact, Manawydan's honourable treatment of her is proof of his good character and loyalty to Pryderi, his friend (and stepson) and her husband. Goewin, too, is ravished by the king's nephews, although this act is acknowledged as an outrage and a great dishonor, and Math not only makes her his queen and joint ruler with him by way of redress for the wrong she has suffered, but also punishes the rapists by transforming them into animals, with both of them taking turns at being female animals and experiencing what it is like to be female.

Two tales, "Math Son of Mathonwy" and "Gereint Son of Erbin" seem to focus on male/female relationships that are out of kilter. In "Math Son of Mathonwy," much of the plot tension is created by the struggle between Aranrhod and Gwydion for the right to raise and initiate the young Llew Llaw Gyffes. This struggle can also be read as a symbolic struggle between a matriarchal system (represented by Aranrhod, Llew Llaw Gyffes) and a patriarchal system (represented by Gwydion). In this case, it is interesting to consider what is implied by the treacherous wife Blodeuedd who Gwydion creates. Is her betrayal of Llew Llaw Gyffes an example of "female treachery" or is it because she is not a real flesh-and-blood woman but something created by the patriarchal magicians that is pleasing to the eye and the body but has no soul or morals?

"Gereint Son of Erbin" is a timeless tale of a relationship that begins well, falls into problems and is then restored. Their relationship begins as a marriage of convenience, although it is probably significant that Gereint's motive for entering the tournament for which he needs Enid is to avenge an insult to a woman. Like Owein, Gereint needs to balance the demands of duty with the demands of love, and he errs by becoming too uxorious, and it is something of a paradox that his and Enid's relationship falls into difficulties because he was too focused on his wife. They then undertake a quest together, where Enid has to learn to trust her husband as well as facing various tests of her faithfulness to Gereint, while he has to learn to trust her while undergoing various tests of his valor. The turning point in their relationship comes after Gereint's wounds are healed by Arthur; the example of Arthur and Gwenhwyfar seems to heal their struggling marriage, in a parallel to Arthur's healing of Gereint's wounds. After this turning point, we see Enid convinced that nobody would dare to mistreat her if Gereint was in full health—clearly, she has learned to trust him and knows that his honour and reputation are intact—while he is able to respond by fighting fiercely for her honour in spite of his wounds and in response to her cry for help (not, as previously, a shout of warning out of over-fussy concern for him motivated by doubt in his prowess).



# Style

## Point of View

All tales in The Mabinogion are narrated from a third-person omniscient viewpoint, also known as the "Eye of God" perspective. Occasionally, the narrator addresses the reader directly with a comment on the tale, with the most obvious example being the closing paragraph of "The Dream of Rhonabwy", where the narrator comments on his style and how this tale cannot be told without the written text.

## Setting

All the tales are set in the Great Britain of myth and legend, with many places corresponding to real places that can be found today. Onomastic tales (incidents appearing to explain the origin of a place name) are frequently found throughout the narratives. The Britian (Lloegyr or the Island of the Mighty) appearing in these tales is one that is divided into many smaller kingdoms ruled over by petty kings. In the later romances, while Arthur appears to be a High King with overall rule over Lloegyr, the smaller earldoms and kingdoms (for example, the city ruled over by Owein; or the realm of Cornwall ruled first by Erbin and then by Gereint) are still present.

The setting in time is nominally the Dark Ages, or the period towards the end of the Roman Occupation of Britain. Many scholars consider Arthur to be an historical figure who led Britain against the Saxon invaders, and "The Dream of Rhonabwy" seems to refer to some battles (Badon and Camlann) that are possibly historical. However, the three romances have more of a late Medieval flavour about them, with knights, castles, counts and chivalry replacing caers ruled by petty kings who are supported by a band of warriors who seem to be on an intimate footing with their lord. Exact dates can be deduced by the appearance of several other historical figures, notably Macsen Wledig and Caswallawn.

The seats of government are referred to as "caer" or "castles" and these are islands of civilization in the midst of wilderness. These caers tend to be surrounded by farmland, with roads running between the strongholds passing through thick forests and deserted countryside—some of these roads were commissioned by Elen of the Hosts for easy movement of troops between fortresses. These forests were filled with game, notably stags, and poorly kept roads were also common sites for ambushes by ruffians, who frequently cross the paths of travelling knights in Arthur's court. It seems to be taken for granted that a wanderer could expect hospitality and lodging at any of these courts, even if he (or, more rarely, she) had to lodge in the gatehouse unless he was a prince or a craftsman.

However, this realm also contains many wonders, such as magical fountains and talking animals. Passage to and from Annwn, the Otherworld, seems common, with the



appearance of either a white animal or a Hideous Herdsman heralding the transition from the everyday world to the realm of fantasy. Pigs, in particular, seem to have close links with the Otherworld, and in "Math Son of Mathonwy" it is explicitly stated that they were given to Pryderi or Pwyll by Arawn King of Annwn.

Other realms beyond Britain are mentioned within the text, notably Llydaw, Rome and Ireland.

The exact setting of "Peredur Son of Efracg" is also unclear. While he is never described as crossing the ocean, he certainly travels eastwards when he goes in quest of the Black Worm of the Dolourous Mound and eventually meets and marries an empress. Possibly, this entire journey takes place in the Otherworld.

## Language and Meaning

The Mabinogion was originally written in Welsh and has been translated into English. However, even though the translation was made in the early 20th Century, the translators have deliberately used an archaic version of English, which suits the setting of the tales.

The earlier tales have a narrative style that is suited to oral storytelling, with description sparse and formulaic language common, with the best example of formulaic language appearing in "Culhwch and Olwen" in the exchange between Ysbaddaden and Culhwch. On the whole, characters are rather one-dimensional and are not well rounded.

The later tales are more likely to have been written rather than oral, as they contain much more detailed descriptions of the characters, which would have been harder for an oral storyteller to recount. This factor is deliberately exaggerated in "The Dream of Rhonabwy", which specifically states that the details are proof that "no one, neither bard nor story-teller, knows the Dream without a book."

Many Welsh words and Welsh spellings are preserved in these tales. One trivial example is how the characters tend to play gwybbwyll as a pastime rather than chess, as they do in the Norman-French romances. Also, the Welsh versions of the standard Arthurian characters are used and preserved by the translators, with Cei being used in place of Kai or Kay, Gwalchamei being preferred to Gawaine and Gwenhwyfar used instead of Guinevere.

## Structure

Each of the eleven tales in The Mabinogion can stand alone as an independent tale. Not all of the tales have the same manuscript source; they certainly do not have the same authors. However, the tales are usually grouped into three parts for convenience:





1. The Four Branches of the Mabinogion ("Pwyll Prince of Dyfed", "Branwen Daughter of Llyr", "Manawydan Son of Llyr" and "Math Son of Mathonwy");
2. The Independent Native Tales ("Culhwch and Olwen", "The Dream of Macsen Wledig", "Llud and Llefelys" and "The Dream of Rhonabwy"); and
3. The Three Romances ("The Lady of the Fountain", "Peredur Son of Efwarg" and "Gereint Son of Erbin").

The Four Branches, while each can stand alone, are held together by the character Pryderi, with the first tale telling of his parents and his birth, and the last telling of his death. However, Pryderi never seems to be the main character in any of the tales and seems to play the role of linking the tales into one, in much the same way as Arthur links the tales in the Arthurian cycle (appearing as a character but not playing the lead role). These tales have an oral narrative style and contain many onomastic elements within them.

The Independent Native Tales contain both the earliest and the most recent Welsh tales of Arthur, "Culhwch and Olwen" and "The Dream of Rhonabwy", respectively. They are a very "mixed bag," with styles ranging from the oral fairy-tale style of "Llud and Llefelys" to the exaggerated descriptions of "The Dream of Rhonabwy." The other two tales lie somewhere in between stylistically, with "The Dream of Macsen Wledig" containing some features and descriptions that seem typical of the courtly romance style, with the style of "Culhwch and Olwen" being more reminiscent of an oral narrative, albeit one containing extensive lists that would have been difficult (but not impossible) for a bard or story-teller to retain. However, extensive lists of characters are not unknown to oral narratives (examples include the list of ships in Homer's Iliad, the ability of many oral cultures to recite their genealogy) and those in a primarily oral rather than written culture tend to have better memories.

The Three Romances are all Welsh versions of Norman-French originals originally written by Chretien de Troyes. These were probably written stories rather than orally told tales, and contain many of the conventions and descriptive style of courtly medieval romances. These tales are all part of the Arthurian cycle and contain most of the standard characters who are consistent from from tale to tale, for example, Cei.

All of the tales seem to contain examples of three-part incidents; the three destinies sworn on Llew Llaw Gyffes by Aranrhod, the three trades plied by Manawydan and Pryderi, and the three spears thrown by Ysbaddaden at Culhwch and his companions are all examples of this. This is a very common stylistic feature in fairy tales and follows the typical pattern of the first two of the three being solved or approached in a similar fashion and the third deviating from the pattern or being the climax. Thus, it is on the third battle that Peredur encounters and overcomes the oppressive earl and on the third time that Terynon's mare gives birth that he recovers the foal and also discovers the infant Pryderi.





## Quotes

"... it came into her mind that were Gereint alie she would not be boxed on the ear so. With that Gereint came to himself at the echoing of her shriek...he knew then she was in the right."

(Gereint Son of Erbin, p. 269)

"Because thou hast spoken the word thou hast, bestow me upon him lest dishonour come upon thee."

(Pwyll Prince of Dyfed, p. 13)

"And for that reason, the name Talebolion was henceforth given to that commot"

(Branwen Daughter of Llyr, p. 29)

"[Efnisien] would cause strife between the two brothers when they were most loving."

(Branwen Daughter of Llyr, p. 25)

"I will bestow her upon thee, and authority over the seven cantrefs with her"

(Manawydan Son of Llyr, p. 41)

"I see a creature in thy hand like a mouse, and it ill becomes a man of such rank as thou to touch such a creature as that."

(Manawydan Son of Llyr, p. 51)

"My dishonour you cannot make good to me, let alone the death of Pryderi. But since you are come unto my will, I will begin punishment upon you."

(Math Son of Mathonwy, p. 61)

"I swear on him a destiny, that he shall not get a name till he get it from me."

"By my confession to God," said he, "thou art a wicked woman, but the boy shall have a name, even though it be vexatious to thee."

(Math Son of Mathonwy, p. 64)

"... he asked her to name her maiden-fee. And she named for her father the Island of Britain... to be held under the Empress of Rome, and that three chief strongholds be made for her in the three places she might choose."

(The Dream of Macsen Wledig, p. 85)

"Moreover, he was a good warrior and generous and liberal in giving meat and drink to all who sought them."

(Llud and Llefelys, p. 88)

"... the maiden was given to Llefelys, and the crown of the kingdom along with her; and thereafter he ruled the land prudently and wisely and happily, so long as his life lasted."

(Llud and Llefelys, p. 90)



"We are noble men as long as we are resorted to. The greater bounty we show, the greater will be our nobility and our fame and our glory."  
(Culhwch and Olwen, p. 99)

"Lord," said Owein, "call off thy men, if it please thee."  
"Play the game," said the emperor.  
(The Dream of Rhonabwy, p. 146)

"And here is the reason why no one, neither bard nor story-teller knows the Dream without a book—by reason of the number of the colours that were on the horses, and all that variety of rare colours both on the arms and their trappings, and on the precious mantles, and the magic stones."  
(The Dream of Rhonabwy, p. 152)

"They determined by their counsel to let her take a husband from elsewhere"  
(The Lady of the Fountain, p. 169)

"Faith," said Owein, "that was a good knight and I should marvel had he not come to defend her, had he known how it was with the maiden."  
(The Lady of the Fountain p. 180)

"Go thy way," said she, "to Arthur's court, where are the best of men and the most generous and the bravest."  
(Peredur Son of Efracg, pp. 184-185)

The knight asked for quarter. "Quarter shalt thou have, said Peredur, "on thou swearing to go to Arthur's court and tell Arthur that it was I who overthrew thee, in service and honour to him. And tell him that never will I set foot in his court till I encounter the tall man who is there, to avenge the injury to the dwarf and the she-dwarf."  
(Peredur Son of Efracg, p. 189)

"Then Cei came to him and spoke to Peredur rudely and harshly. And Peredur took him with a spear under his jaws and threw him a great fall away from him."  
(Peredur Son of Efracg, p. 200)

"Woe is me," said she, "if it is through me that these arms and this breast are losing fame and prowess as great as was theirs."  
(Gereint Son of Erbin, p. 251)

"yonder solitary, moping, lumpish, dejected knight"  
(Gereint Son of Erbin, p. 255 and elsewhere)

"However much thou art bidden to hold thy tongue, hold thy tongue thou never wilt. Thy warning is naught to me. And hold thy tongue!"  
(Gereint Son of Erbin, p. 260)



## Topics for Discussion

How does the way Arthur is portrayed change over time? For this question, bear in mind that "Culhwch and Olwen" is the earliest Arthurian tale and "The Dream of Rhonabwy" is the most recent, with the Three Romances coming in between.

Some commentators maintain that Celtic society was less patriarchal and women were held to be equal with men or even to be more powerful. Using the tales in The Mabinogion as evidence, is this view justified?

Stories and legends often reveal what is valued and important in a society or culture. What can be gleaned about Celtic culture from the tales in The Mabinogion?

Describe in detail what the people in the world of The Mabinogion would consider an ideal king.

Honour is an important theme in The Mabinogion. Discuss the nature of honor using the following three questions:

What are some of the things that are considered honorable behaviour?

What is not honorable behaviour?

How can honor be restored once has been lost?

Some of the tales in The Mabinogion were originally orally recounted, while others were written. What stylistic differences can be noticed between the two types?

In "Math Son of Mathonwy," is Gwydion primarily a good character or an evil character?