

**HORSES, SWINE AND MAGICAL BIRDS:  
THE ROLE OF ANIMALS IN THE *MABINOGION***

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# HORSES, SWINE AND MAGICAL BIRDS: THE ROLE OF ANIMALS IN THE *MABINOGION*

Susan F. Garlick

Master of Arts in Celtic Studies, University of Wales, Trinity St David, Lampeter, 2011

## ABSTRACT

Numerous animals, both real and enchanted, occur repeatedly throughout the *Mabinogion* collection of tales. This thesis explores the significance of these animals in some depth, considering why so many appear, what purposes they serve and how they affect both the characters and the overall narratives. On a general level animals act as catalysts - making the tales more dynamic and moving the plots and therefore also the characters forwards - by acting as messengers, modes of transport and combat, means of revenge, punishment and transformation and leaders into otherworldly adventure, particularly via the hunt. Some animals are more predominant than others and separate chapters on 'Horses', 'Swine' and 'Magical Birds and Other Enchanted Beasts' cover general depictions of these creatures across several of the tales, along with in-depth explorations of relevant episodes and discussions of the animals' particular functions within the narratives, as well as considering the roles of enchantment, shape-shifting and otherworldly activity as they relate to the animals in question. The fourth chapter, 'The Oldest Animals: Folk Tale Motifs' additionally considers the influence of international popular tale motifs in regard to the animals of the *Mabinogion*, focusing primarily on the tradition of the oldest animals found in *Culhwch ac Olwen*. The thesis then concludes with an overall appreciation of the significance of the animals and birds found within these tales and their important narrative function as catalysts.

(Word Count: 20,624 words including abstract)

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## INTRODUCTION: The *Mabinogion* and its Animals

The *Mabinogion*, as it is popularly known, is a collection of eleven medieval Welsh tales which form the nucleus of early Welsh prose. Fully preserved in *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (The Red Book of Hergest, Jesus College, Oxford - MS 111) c.1382–1410,<sup>1</sup> ten of the tales, some of which are incomplete, are also found in the slightly earlier *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* (The White Book of Rhydderch, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth - Peniarth MSS 4–5) c.1350.<sup>2</sup> Fragments can also be found in slightly earlier extant manuscripts of around a hundred years or so,<sup>3</sup> yet the stories themselves are based on much older oral material, incorporating aspects of Celtic myth, folklore, onomastic tales, international motifs and legendary history, although it must be remembered that they were composed in literary form for a medieval audience and therefore also additionally reflect aspects of medieval society. Indeed, these literary tales are generally set in the real world, socially and geographically reflecting that of medieval Wales, although they also shift repeatedly into the realm of magic, resonating with echoes of earlier Celtic myth and tradition yet clearly more than simple written versions of the oral narratives of the professional storyteller or *cyfarwydd*<sup>4</sup> ('learned one'<sup>5</sup>). Dates of original literary composition for each tale are uncertain and still being debated, although *Culhwch ac Olwen* c.1100<sup>6</sup> and *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, thought to

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<sup>1</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. ix; D. Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, p. 82; R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen. An Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale*, p. ix; J.K. Bollard, *Companion Tales to The Mabinogi. Legend and Landscape of Wales*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p.9; S. Davies, 'Horses in the Mabinogion', p. 122; S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. ix; S. Davies, 'Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales', p. 786; D. Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, p. 89; M. Green and R. Howell, *Celtic Wales*, p. 103; D. Johnston, *The Literature of Wales*, p. 17; J.K. Bollard, *Companion Tales to The Mabinogi. Legend and Landscape of Wales*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 9; S. Davies, 'Horses in the Mabinogion', p. 122; S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. xvii; P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 22; P.K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and other Medieval Welsh Tales*, p. 2; G. Jones and T. Jones, *The Mabinogion*, p. ix.

<sup>4</sup> M. Green and R. Howell, *Celtic Wales*, pp. 102–103; S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 10; S. Davies, 'Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales', pp. 785–786; D. Johnston, *The Literature of Wales*, p. 17; B.F. Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 41; G. Jones and T. Jones, *The Mabinogion*, p. xi; J.K. Bollard, *Companion Tales to The Mabinogi. Legend and Landscape of Wales*, p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> D. Johnston, *The Literature of Wales*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen. An Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale*, p. lxxxix; R. Bromwich, 'The Character of the Early Welsh Tradition', p. 106; S. Davies, 'Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales', p. 786; M. Green and R. Howell, *Celtic Wales*, p. 111; P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 60; B.F. Roberts, 'Culhwch Ac Olwen, The Triads, Saint's Lives', p. 73; B.F. Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 50; R.S. Loomis, 'The Tale of Culhwch and Olwen', p. 27. However, it should also be noted that Simon Rodway has more recently concluded that the earliest possible date that can be given for *Culhwch ac Olwen* is in fact the middle of the twelfth century – S. Rodway, 'The Date and Authorship of *Culhwch ac Olwen*: A Reassessment', p. 43.

date in their present form to the late eleventh or early twelfth century<sup>7</sup> although evidently based on earlier tradition,<sup>8</sup> are considered to be the earliest extant Welsh narrative prose tales; the remainder of the collection dates approximately to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>9</sup>

The tales were first translated into the English language and made widely available by Lady Charlotte Guest in the mid-nineteenth century under their present collective title the *Mabinogion*. This term, however, appearing only once in the surviving texts, is now thought to originate in a probable scribal error of ‘Mabinogi’<sup>10</sup> which properly refers to only four stories, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* or the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, arguably the finest tales in the collection, each of which end with a similar closing formula ‘and so ends this branch of the Mabinogi’.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless *Mabinogion* is a useful and convenient modern title which has remained in use since established and popularised by the work of Lady Guest, who regarded the term as the plural of Mabinogi. As ‘mab’ means ‘son’ or ‘boy’;<sup>12</sup> ‘mabinogi’ is generally understood to refer to the tales of a hero’s youthful exploits and some commentators such as Gruffydd have concluded that, because he is the only character to occur in all four branches, the hero in question is Pryderi.<sup>13</sup> Opinion on this, however, is divided and ultimately inconclusive, particularly as he is not a dominant character in the extant versions of these tales which are populated with a wealth of often vividly yet carefully portrayed individuals. While they can be perceived as independent narratives, as ‘branches’ the tales are linked together and can thus be seen to operate as a unified whole, underpinned by themes such

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<sup>7</sup> S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 9; S. Davies, ‘Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales’, p. 786; P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, pp. 22–23; G.E. Jones, ‘Early Prose: The Mabinogi’, p. 191; G. Jones and T. Jones, *The Mabinogion*, p. ix; M. Green and R. Howell, *Celtic Wales*, p.103; However, Charles-Edwards and Sims-Williams concede that no precise date can be given: T.M. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Date of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi’, p. 288; P. Sims-Williams, ‘The Submission of Irish Kings in Fact and Fiction: Henry II, Bendigeidfran and the Dating of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*’, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the author or redactor of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* indicates that the tales are derived from traditional story material at the close of branches two, three and four: S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 34, 46 and 64. See also, for example, P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 52; G.E. Jones, ‘Early Prose: The Mabinogi’, p. 201; C.A. McKenna, ‘The Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll*’, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> S. Davies, ‘Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales’, pp. 786–787.

<sup>10</sup> G.E. Jones, ‘Early Prose: The Mabinogi’, p. 190; S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. xii–ix; S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 9; S. Davies, ‘Horses in the Mabinogion’, pp. 121–122; S. Davies, ‘Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales’, p. 786; G. Jones and T. Jones, *The Mabinogion*, pp. ix–x; P.K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and other Medieval Welsh Tales*, p. 1; D. Johnston, *The Literature of Wales*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 46 and 64; see also pp. 21 and 34.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. ix; P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 24; G. Jones and T. Jones, *The Mabinogion*, p. xii; D. Johnston, *The Literature of Wales*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> W.J. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon. An inquiry into the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 8; P.K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and other Medieval Welsh Tales*, p. 3; P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, pp. 24–29.

as friendship, loyalty, marriage, dishonour, adversity and feud, leading many scholars to believe the four branches to be the work of a single author or redactor.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the remainder of the collection is compiled of separate, unrelated tales although again portraying a wealth of distinctive characters and derived from oral storytelling traditions.

In addition to *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, the full *Mabinogion* collection also includes the independent native Welsh tales of *Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig*, *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and *Culhwch ac Olwen*, the former of which are pseudo-historical in nature and the latter of which is of particular importance as the earliest extant tale of Arthur, preserving allusions to early Arthurian material now lost; and the later Welsh Arthurian romances of *Historia Peredur vab Efwrawg*, *Owain* or *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynnon* and *Chwedl Geraint ab Erbin*, which are also sources for the Arthurian legend in Wales and parallel the late twelfth century French verse romances of Chrétien de Troyes.<sup>15</sup> These diverse stories vary considerably in regard to content, style, potential origins, date and possible authorship<sup>16</sup> as well as characterisation, yet it is not simply human characters that appear in these complex tales for they all, to varying degrees, include specific animals as part of their narratives, with the exception perhaps of *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* where animals are only referred to in a more general sense. The rest of the *Mabinogion* tales incorporate varied horses, swine, dogs, deer, cows, enchanted mice and wolves, ants, bees, goats, sheep, salmon, snakes and even lions into their narratives, as well as various birds including a starling, wren and eagle as well as owls, ravens and hawks.

Indeed, throughout the narratives numerous animals, both real and enchanted, abound and this study aims to explore in some depth the significance of such animals and birds in the *Mabinogion* collection, attempting to discern why so many appear, what purposes they may serve and how they affect both the characters and the overall narratives. On a general level they appear to act as catalysts - making the tales more dynamic and moving the plots and therefore also the characters forwards - by acting as messengers, modes of transport, means of transformation and punishment and leaders into otherworldly adventure, particularly via the hunt. Some animals, however, are more

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, J.K. Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', p. 250; also P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, pp. 28 and 32; W.J. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon. An inquiry into the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. xi; D. Johnston, *The Literature of Wales*, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> S. Davies, 'Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales', p. 786.



predominant than others which will be reflected in the ensuing discussion, the most prevalent being undoubtedly horses, dogs and swine as well as birds in general. Dogs tend to appear primarily in the role of hunting animals and so it is primarily horses, swine and birds which will be considered in-depth as they appear across several of the tales, although other animals will of course be referred to where appropriate. While this thesis intends to explore the role of animals in the *Mabinogion* tales primarily from a literary viewpoint, considering their significance within the narratives themselves, it will also consider, to some extent, how this portrayal may reflect the importance and relevance of such animals to both the medieval and ancient Celts, although continuity between historical periods cannot of course be assumed nor assessed with any certainty.

However, animals were undoubtedly important within both medieval Welsh and ancient Celtic society. The religious ideas of the ancient Celts appear to have been animistic in nature with a deep respect for the natural world including animals, and as such a great deal of animal imagery and symbolism can be discerned in extant artwork, coinage and iconography found across the Celtic world,<sup>17</sup> including Romano-Celtic depictions of animals alongside various possible deity figures such as the boar goddess Arduinna<sup>18</sup> and the horse goddess Epona.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, archaeological evidence indicates that animals were involved in ceremonial activity in the form of ritual burials found at varied locations such as at Danebury in Hampshire.<sup>20</sup> On a more general level, however, it is understood that the ancient Celts ‘depended on domestic beasts for their livelihood, on wild creatures for hunting and on horses for warfare’,<sup>21</sup> hence their lives were inextricably connected to animals, a link which continued into medieval society. Wendy Davies has noted that pastoral farming in Wales in the early Middle Ages included ‘the rearing of sheep, cattle, pigs and occasionally goats... Oxen were kept for ploughing, and as beasts of burden, as were asses occasionally; while horses more usually appear to have been kept for the transport of persons rather than goods.’<sup>22</sup> Hunting was also a significant activity in medieval Wales although not necessarily primarily for food, as by the ‘eleventh century hunting... appears to have been an

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<sup>17</sup> M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, pp. 131–133; M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 167–168; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 168.

<sup>18</sup> M.J. Green, ‘The Gods and the Supernatural’, p. 479; M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 132.

<sup>19</sup> N. Chadwick, *The Celts*, p. 154; M. Green, *Celtic Art*, p. 148; M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, pp. 102–103; M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 168.

<sup>21</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> W. Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 39.

aristocratic pleasure'<sup>23</sup> and interestingly in the third branch 'hunting for pleasure is explicitly distinguished from hunting for necessity.'<sup>24</sup> Hunting wild animals in the *Mabinogion* is repeatedly connected with a magical or otherworldly encounter and it has been demonstrated that the hunt is often a means by which to facilitate such an adventure in medieval literature.<sup>25</sup> The medieval distinction between wild and domestic animals has been indicated by Joyce Salisbury, suggesting that the latter 'as property... afforded their owners labor, materials, and status', with animals utilised in hunting and warfare being the most valued.<sup>26</sup> This is also demonstrated in the *Mabinogion* in the predominance of both horses and hunting hounds throughout most of the tales, as is the notion that in 'both medieval law courts and some noble households, animals were treated as humans'<sup>27</sup> which can be discerned particularly in the third branch.

The importance of animals in both medieval Welsh society and earlier Celtic tradition is reflected in various ways in the *Mabinogion*, particularly in the dominant pursuit of hunting, the links between animals and the supernatural and perhaps also in the seemingly respectful approach given to the animal world by the authors or redactors of the tales. Indeed, Miranda Green suggests that the 'earliest vernacular writings from Ireland and Wales provide a wealth of mythology and tradition relating to animals, endorsing the [ancient] Celtic attitude to the animal world that is implied by other evidence',<sup>28</sup> furthermore stating that it 'is clear from the stories that animals played a large role in the Celtic consciousness, a role in which beasts were respected and not held in low esteem.'<sup>29</sup> Thus the *Mabinogion* can also be seen as an important source for Celtic animal lore and perceptions of animals.

While this thesis aims to cover the role of animals within the entire *Mabinogion* collection, particular emphasis will be placed upon the earliest tales in the corpus, being those of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* and *Culhwch ac Olwen*, although other tales will of course be referred to where relevant. The first three chapters, covering the principal animals of 'Horses', 'Swine' and 'Magical Birds and Other Enchanted Beasts', will include general depictions of these animals across several of the tales, along with an exploration of relevant episodes in detail and discussions of the animals' particular

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> D.H. Green, 'The Pathway to Adventure', pp. 185–186; See also M.J. Green, *Celtic Myths*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>26</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, pp. 7–27.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>28</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 162.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 164.

functions within the narratives, as well as considering the roles of enchantment, shape-shifting and otherworldly activity as they relate to the animals in question, particularly in chapter three. Joyce Salisbury has pointed to the general ‘late-medieval preoccupation with half-human monsters and shape-shifting between humans and animals’<sup>30</sup> and it is clear that such human to animal shape-shifting is a significant recurring theme in the *Mabinogion*, particularly in the earliest tales, hence it requires some consideration when assessing the role of animals in the tales as a whole. Such discussions furthermore will also, where appropriate, touch upon the archaeological evidence of these animals within earlier Celtic society as well as comparable occurrences elsewhere in Celtic literature, particularly from Irish but also other Welsh material, to both highlight and corroborate the importance and function of animals within the *Mabinogion* tales. Such supporting background information on specific *Mabinogion* animals will be a balance between that from medieval Wales, the contemporary context of the literary composition of the tales; other medieval Celtic literary sources; and the wider Celtic background, often considered to be ‘pagan’ in character, which is threaded through the tales and supports the underlying folklore, myth and legendary history upon which many aspects of these narratives were based, providing traces of earlier Celtic ideas and beliefs including those related to animals such as horses, swine and birds.

Other animals will be discussed in the fourth chapter, ‘The Oldest Animals: Folk Tale Motifs’, whilst exploring the influence of international popular tale motifs upon the *Mabinogion* in relation to its animals. It will focus primarily on the important and widespread tradition of the oldest animals which can be perceived in the tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, but will also discuss the occurrence of other animal motifs from Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, referring back to preceding chapters where appropriate. The significance and usage of such international motifs within medieval Welsh literature will also be considered along with their effects upon the narratives in question, specifically upon the roles and importance of the animals found within them. The study will then conclude with an appreciation of the overall significance of the varied animals and birds found within the *Mabinogion* collection, particularly horses, swine and birds, highlighting specifically their invaluable narrative functions as catalysts.

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<sup>30</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 8.

## CHAPTER ONE: Horses in the *Mabinogion*

Perhaps the most predominant animal within the entire *Mabinogion* collection is the horse, appearing in ten of the eleven tales.<sup>1</sup> Horses occur primarily as means of transportation and hunting although they also function as an important aspect of battle where fighting on horseback takes place. They play a particularly significant role in the narratives of Rhiannon and Branwen in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* as well as in *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Historia Peredur vab Efwarg*. Horses can also be seen as playing an important role in the narrative structure, particularly in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and at times are vividly described. Sioned Davies has suggested that these descriptions ‘are highly formulaic’ and that such formulae are an ‘integral part of oral prose narrative’, for whilst written, these tales were composed primarily for oral delivery.<sup>2</sup> She further suggests that the correspondences between the descriptions of horses ‘suggest that the authors were drawing on a well-established narrative technique which could be elaborated or modified to suit particular circumstances.’<sup>3</sup> Such descriptions may include the rider, the type of horse and varied adjectives detailing colour, size, gait and spirit such as the ‘shiny black, wide-nostrilled, swift-moving palfrey with a pace steady and stately, sure-footed and lively’<sup>4</sup> found in *Peredur*.

The relatively few descriptive passages relating to human appearance make those of the horses particularly stand out, but what ‘particular circumstances’ inspired the authors/redactors of these medieval tales to convey such lively descriptions of their character’s mounts? In a more generalised context of animals in the Middle Ages, Joyce Salisbury suggests that horses were the ‘highest-status animals’ and that animals, as a form of property, were used to ‘enhance the status of their owners’, with colouring and general appearance reflecting either poorly or positively upon them.<sup>5</sup> Descriptions of horses in the *Mabinogion*, then, ranging from a ‘black-hoofed, high-headed’<sup>6</sup> or ‘fine black gascon horse... with a saddle of beechwood’<sup>7</sup> to a ‘lean, sweaty’<sup>8</sup> or even ‘scraggy horse’<sup>9</sup> are perhaps meant to convey to the reader or listener something about

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<sup>1</sup> Excepting only *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* where animals do not feature other than insects and a general reference to all animals.

<sup>2</sup> S. Davies, ‘Horses in the Mabinogion’, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, pp. 21–22.

<sup>6</sup> *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* - S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 224.

<sup>7</sup> *Owain or Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynnon* - *ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>8</sup> *Historia Peredur vab Efwarg* - *ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> *Historia Peredur vab Efwarg* - *ibid.*, p. 101.

the status of their owners or riders. The importance of rank and status in the *Mabinogion* can be clearly discerned in the initial exchange between Pwyll and Arawn in the first branch, the emphasis placed on which may be underscored by the difference in the quality of their horses – Pwyll’s is not even mentioned, merely assumed, while Arawn’s mount is described as a ‘large dapple-grey horse’<sup>10</sup> with emphasis, perhaps, on the ‘large’ to indicate his higher rank. The idea of horses denoting rank is made more explicit in *Peredur* in the marked difference between his ‘untidy’<sup>11</sup> horse and the steeds of Arthur’s knights. Indeed, it has been suggested that medieval literature depicts ‘the increased preoccupation with a horse’s appearance as a sign of status’, such as in *Beowulf* where their trappings become more significant than the horses themselves.<sup>12</sup> Within the *Mabinogion* the distinctive horse colourings and trappings in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and the later romances certainly distinguish their riders, suggestive of their status and perhaps also their possible aggressiveness such as the fearsome black knights of *Owain*, for a horse’s spirit is ‘often conveyed by the movement of the animal, which in turn reflects the hero’s own temperament’.<sup>13</sup> Such attributes as ‘high-spirited, impatient’<sup>14</sup> or ‘bold-paced’<sup>15</sup> may, then, say much about the personalities of their riders.

Colour, the ‘most striking and obvious characteristic’,<sup>16</sup> is perhaps the most significant aspect of the descriptions of the horses, for whenever ‘horses are described in the tales, then a colour term follows almost without fail’.<sup>17</sup> This is particularly noteworthy in *Chwedl Geraint ab Erbin* and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, the latter of which describes a variety of brightly coloured horses including red, black and white, yellow and green and dapple-grey, often with their legs from the ‘kneecaps downwards’<sup>18</sup> being a different colour to their bodies. Such fantastic colourings may perhaps be explained by the fact that they are seen in a dream, although it has been argued that the tale does present ‘an account of knights and horses with a firm basis in reality’.<sup>19</sup> It is clearly stated at the close of the tale that ‘no one knows the dream – neither poet nor storyteller – without a book, because of the number of colours on the horses, and the many unusual colours

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> S. Davies, ‘Horses in the Mabinogion’, p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> *Chwedl Geraint ab Erbin* - S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> *Chwedl Geraint ab Erbin* - *ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> S. Davies, ‘Horses in the Mabinogion’, p. 125.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>18</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 215; 216; 219.

<sup>19</sup> M. Giffin, ‘The Date of the “Dream of Rhonabwy”’, p. 34.

both on the armour and the trappings’,<sup>20</sup> indicating the importance of such colourful horses to the structure of the tale which perhaps signify the statuses of their often unnamed riders. The importance of horse colour is also highlighted in a Welsh treatise on horses dating to the sixteenth century which details how ‘to choose a horse by his colour’, listing horses by colours such as dapple-grey and white with their appropriate corresponding characteristics.<sup>21</sup> While horse colouring may imply ‘prestige and status’, particularly the rarer hues, in ‘some cases the colour may well have a symbolic significance, too’.<sup>22</sup> The horses of Arawn and Rhiannon in the first branch, for example, may denote the otherworldly origins of their owners. Dapple-grey, the colour of Arawn’s mount can be compared to the colour of horses often ridden by fairies in both Welsh legends and later ballads and folk tales from England,<sup>23</sup> while Rhiannon’s horse is white, a colour often used as a ‘marker’<sup>24</sup> to ‘indicate the shift between the real world and the otherworld.’<sup>25</sup>

Rhiannon’s initial, rather iconic appearance riding ‘a big, tall, pale-white horse’,<sup>26</sup> suggests her regal status and presents her as somewhat mysterious, elusive and otherworldly, particularly as she manifests in response to Pwyll seating himself upon Gorsedd Arberth where local superstition states that a nobleman will either be ‘wounded or injured, or else he will see something wonderful.’<sup>27</sup> Her large horse of otherworldly hue is central to this ‘wonderful’ appearance and her first meeting with Pwyll, magically transporting her into his realm while demonstrating her competent riding skills. Rhiannon and her horse present more than just a visual wonder, however, for Pwyll’s men, try as they may, cannot catch up with her despite the fact that anyone ‘who saw it would think that the horse had a slow, steady pace’.<sup>28</sup> Over the course of three evenings she appears and is pursued in some detail; firstly on foot and the court’s fastest steed, the swiftest known in the realm, then on the fastest horse of the field, yet no matter how each horse was spurred, ‘the further she drew away’<sup>29</sup> effortlessly, although her ‘pace was no faster than before’.<sup>30</sup> Pwyll thoughtfully discerns that ‘there

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<sup>20</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 226.

<sup>21</sup> C. O’Raphilly, ‘A Welsh Treatise on Horses’, pp. 145–149.

<sup>22</sup> S. Davies, ‘Horses in the Mabinogion’, p. 126.

<sup>23</sup> A. Welsh, ‘Traditional Tales and the Harmonizing of Story in *Pwyll Pendueic Dyuet*’, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> S. Davies, ‘Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales’, p. 789.

<sup>25</sup> J. Wood, ‘Colour Themes in Mabinogion Tales’, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 9 and 10.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

is some magical explanation here',<sup>31</sup> hinting at the supernatural aspect of Rhiannon's character as well as her horse's gait, which may be linked to the time distortion which often occurs in otherworldly journeys and adventures.<sup>32</sup> Finally Pwyll himself follows on his own 'spirited, prancing horse',<sup>33</sup> thinking 'at the second leap or the third he would catch up with her',<sup>34</sup> yet suffers the same defeat until he calls out for her to wait, upon which she assertively replies 'I will wait gladly... and it would have been better for the horse if you had asked me that a while ago!'<sup>35</sup> Horses, then, are an important catalyst in their relationship, enabling Rhiannon to engineer their meeting in such a way that Pwyll has to physically pursue her and even begin their first conversation which, conducted on horseback, sets the tone for their subsequent encounters. The horses involved in this meeting further signify the author/redactor's understanding of horsemanship<sup>36</sup> and significantly add to the lively pace of this memorable portion of the tale.

The equine symbolism which continues to pervade Rhiannon's story to an extent is also evident during her later punishment for supposed infanticide of being forced to act like a horse, sitting by the mounting block and offering to carry visitors to the court on her back, although 'rarely'<sup>37</sup> does anyone actually take up her offer. Such symbolism is further demonstrated in the circumstances surrounding the supernatural abduction and subsequent recovery of her new born son; he is discovered in the stable of Teyrnon whose mare, the most handsome horse in his kingdom, foals every May eve yet her offspring mysteriously vanish. Resolving to discover the fate of his foals, Teyrnon's ensuing vigil finds him battling a mysterious claw attempting to steal the new born foal. Slicing off part of the claw he discovers not only his foal but also a baby boy, whom he rears with his wife. The boy grows unusually rapidly and shows such interest in the horses that he is gifted with the one born on May eve. His true identity is then discovered and riding his own horse he is restored to Rhiannon, so ending her punishment. Horse symbolism can also be glimpsed in the nature of her later imprisonment in the third branch which links her tale together.

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> In the *Mabinogion* this can be compared, for example, with the journey to Ysbaddaden's castle in *Culhwch ac Olwen*.

<sup>33</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup> C.A. McKenna, 'The Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll*', p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 17.

The horse elements of Rhiannon's tale have led commentators such as Anwyl and Gruffydd<sup>38</sup> to see parallels between Rhiannon and the Celtic horse goddess Epona, attempting to explain some of the equine associations inherent in her tale. However, this remains a matter of interesting conjecture with little but speculation, however convincing, to prove such theories.<sup>39</sup> Rhiannon's horse symbolism does work on a narrative level nonetheless, with her magical white horse indicating not only her regal and otherworldly status but also acting as a catalyst enabling her meeting with Pwyll. In addition, the missing foals are a catalyst to the recovery of her son and the nature of horses also figure in her punishments. Rhiannon herself also acts as something of a catalyst to Pwyll, steering his impetuosity towards the good sense his name implies,<sup>40</sup> which all stems from their initial meeting on horseback. Thus it is clear that horses play a significant role in the first branch, acting as plot devices that enhance the narrative, adding tension, pace and at times a supernatural element.

Magical horses can also be seen elsewhere in the *Mabinogion* such as that belonging to Iddog son of Mynio in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, which has the curious ability to control distance with its breath: as 'the horse breathed out, the men moved further away from him; but as he breathed in, they came closer to him, right to the horse's chest'.<sup>41</sup> This ability ensures that Rhonabwy converses with Iddog and travels with him to meet Arthur and is again indicative of magical ability and the distortion of time and distance often associated with the Otherworld, comparable to Rhiannon's horse. Other potentially enchanted steeds include 'Gwyn Myngddwn', meaning 'White Dark Mane'<sup>42</sup> who is 'as swift as a wave'<sup>43</sup> and 'Du' meaning 'Black',<sup>44</sup> the acquisition of whom form part of the impossible seeming tasks required to win the giant's daughter in *Culhwch* and allow Ysbaddaden to be slain. The need for these miraculously swift horses also demonstrates the fast, ferocious nature of the boar they are required to help hunt and whilst Arthur gathers 'every choice steed'<sup>45</sup> to assist, it is Mabon riding Gwyn Myngddwn who manages to snatch the required razor from between the boar's ears;

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<sup>38</sup> W.J. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon. An inquiry into the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi*, pp. 67 and 103–109; W.J. Gruffydd, *Folklore and Myth in the Mabinogion*, p. 25; J. Hemming, 'Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in "Pwyll"', p. 20; J. Wood, 'The Horse in Welsh Folklore: A Boundary Image in Custom and Narrative', pp. 168–169.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, J. Wood, 'The Horse in Welsh Folklore: A Boundary Image in Custom and Narrative', pp. 168–173.

<sup>40</sup> S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 216.

<sup>42</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. 132; S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 270.

<sup>43</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 198.

<sup>44</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, pp. 135–136; S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 199.

<sup>45</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 209.



hence this swift horse also enables another task to be partially fulfilled, helping bring the tale to its conclusion. Arthur's own mount is named as Llamrei, meaning 'Grey or Swift Leaper', interestingly a mare rather than a warhorse<sup>46</sup> although she enables four of Arthur's injured men to be born away from the cave of the Very Black Witch during another task, indicating her reliable capability and suggesting her great size.

Though unnamed, horses form a central part of the narrative of the second branch where they form a significant pivot upon which the tale turns. Following the marriage of Matholwch and Branwen his horses are billeted in 'every region as far as the sea'.<sup>47</sup> Upon enquiring who these horses belong to, Efnysien learns of his sister's marriage and is insulted at not being consulted, although apparently present at Matholwch's arrival. He declares

'Is that what they have done with such a fine maiden, and my sister at that, given her away without my permission? They could not have insulted me more,' he said. Then he went for the horses, and cut their lips to the teeth, and their ears down to their heads, and their tails to their backs; and where he could get a grip on the eyelids, he cut them to the bone. And in that way he maimed the horses, so that they were no good for anything.<sup>48</sup>

This rather startling insult to the Irish king, particularly *after* his marriage to Branwen, creates a great deal of tension within the tale which is only temporarily diffused by Bendigeidfran distancing himself from Efnysien's actions and offering suitable compensation, primarily in the form of Matholwch's kingly honour-price and new horses, although additionally giving him a magical cauldron with regenerative powers. The horses 'were handed over to him, so long as there were tame horses to give',<sup>49</sup> after which foals are taken from another area 'called Talebolion from then on',<sup>50</sup> attempting an onomastic explanation<sup>51</sup> based on the horse theme. The mutilation of the horses is an international folk tale motif and its use here indicates the importance of both horses and honour, in addition to setting up the plot for the remainder of the tale, for during Branwen's second year of marriage 'there was a murmuring of dissatisfaction in Ireland because of the insult that Matholwch had received in Wales, and the disgrace he had suffered regarding his horses'.<sup>52</sup> This leads to Branwen being punished for the matter until she eventually sends word home and a devastating war ensues, after which only seven men return to Britain. As high status animals horses clearly play an integral role

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 274

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> P. Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr*, p. 157.

<sup>52</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 27.

in the ‘unforgivable insult... promoting the catastrophic hostility between Britain and Ireland’,<sup>53</sup> demonstrating their significance to the narrative structure.

During the third branch horses only explicitly appear at the close of the tale where a priest rides ‘a well-equipped horse’ and Llwyd attempts to exchange ‘seven horses’ for the thieving mouse Manawydan has caught,<sup>54</sup> so demonstrating their desirability and value. However, their presence is repeatedly implied in relation to saddle-making and the varied episodes of hunting. The oldest form of hunting was with hounds and mounted hunters<sup>55</sup> and certainly dogs are a recurring feature of hunting practices in the *Mabinogion*, even during the enchantment of the third branch when in theory only ‘wild animals’<sup>56</sup> remained. We can perhaps, then, also assume the presence of horses at many of the hunts, even when not clearly depicted. Indeed, in *Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig* horses are not described in the opening hunting episode which leads to Maxen’s dream, yet the emperor’s palfrey is mentioned on their journey home, confirming their presence. Furthermore, in the fourth branch we are told that Gronw’s hunting party consisted of hounds, huntsmen and ‘a band of men of foot’,<sup>57</sup> suggesting that the main huntsmen were indeed mounted riders. This particular hunt is also the catalyst for Gronw and Blodeuedd to meet and commit adultery and attempted murder.

In the same tale Gwydion ‘conjured up twelve stallions’<sup>58</sup> with saddles and bridles and accompanying hounds with leashes in order to convince Pryderi to exchange his pigs. The enchantment only lasts one night, however, resulting in a war killing many ‘men, and their horses’.<sup>59</sup> After raising Lleu so ‘he could ride every horse’, Gwydion also tricks Aranrhod into arming Lleu who was ‘pining for horses and weapons’,<sup>60</sup> so illustrating the significance of acquiring arms and a mount in the maturation of a hero which can also be discerned in *Peredur*. As an integral part of warfare, ‘no one dared mention horses’<sup>61</sup> to the young Peredur whose mother was anxious to shield him from the dangers of battles and tournaments. Perhaps inevitably he meets some of Arthur’s knights and aspires to become one himself, taking a pack horse and forming a makeshift

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<sup>53</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 187.

<sup>54</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 44–45.

<sup>55</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 35.

<sup>56</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 37.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65.

saddle and trappings in imitation of the knights, indicative of the noble status he wishes to acquire. The immature and somewhat ridiculous nature of his poorly-conceived new image is underlined, however, when he enters Arthur's hall 'on a bony, dapple-grey nag with its untidy, slovenly trappings',<sup>62</sup> appearing in stark contrast not only to the knights but also to other heroes in the *Mabinogion*, notably Culhwch, of whom this image may be a parody.<sup>63</sup> Peredur is told his 'horse and weapons are too untidy'<sup>64</sup> to be a knight, again suggesting the power of status implied by great horses, but his humble mount nonetheless marks the beginnings of his journey. Ultimately he receives a horse, weapons and instruction from one of the witches of Caerloyw whom he was fated to kill.

Contrasting with the image of Peredur is the elaborate description of Culhwch, centring on 'a steed with a gleaming grey head, four winters old, well-jointed stride, shell-like hoofs, and a tubular gold bridle-bit in its mouth, with a precious gold saddle'.<sup>65</sup> This image of 'the youthful hero *par excellence*... is conveyed by a telling sequence of association: horse, weapons, dogs, mantle, and foot-gear';<sup>66</sup> personal description is superfluous as the quality and youth of the horse imply much. Furthermore his 'steed's four hoofs would cut out four clods, like four swallows in the air above him, sometimes in front of him, sometimes behind him',<sup>67</sup> additionally enhancing his vivid description. Proceeding to make a 'brash and aggressive'<sup>68</sup> entrance at court, Culhwch rides straight into the hall rather than dismounting first, 'contrary to royal custom and all the canons of good behaviour',<sup>69</sup> yet making a bold statement of which his horse is an integral part.

Horses are again indicative of status and character in *Geraint*, whose horse was 'a willow-grey colt, enormous in size... The horse was tall and stately, swift and lively, with a short steady step'.<sup>70</sup> Geraint meets with Gwenhwyfar and one of her maidens whose presence alone in the forest is explained by the lack of horses<sup>71</sup> left in the stable after they overslept on the morning of the stag hunt. They then encounter

A dwarf riding a big, sturdy horse, powerful, wide-nostrilled, ground-devouring, courageous, and in the dwarf's hand there was a whip. Near the dwarf they could

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>63</sup> P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 106; S. Davies, 'Horses in the Mabinogion', p. 130.

<sup>64</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 68.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>66</sup> G. Jones, *Kings Beasts and Heroes*, pp. 74–75.

<sup>67</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 181.

<sup>68</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. xxxi.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p. xxxi.

<sup>70</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 141.

<sup>71</sup> R. Middleton, 'Chwedl Geraint Ab Erbin', p. 151.

see a woman on a horse, pale-white and handsome with pace smooth and stately, and she was dressed in a garment of brocaded silk. And close to her a knight on a great, muddy charger, with heavy, shining armour on him and his horse. And they were sure that they had never seen a man and horse and armour whose size impressed them more<sup>72</sup>

This is surely among the most vivid descriptions of horses in the *Mabinogion*, clearly setting out the differences between the riders and indicating that the dwarf, controlling such a large horse, is not to be under-estimated. The differing status of all the characters becomes further apparent when the dwarf strikes both Gwenhwyfar's maiden and Geraint for attempting to speak with the knight as their 'status is not high enough'.<sup>73</sup> Once again, this meeting on horseback becomes the catalyst for further adventures, as do the horseback meetings of Pwyll with both Arawn and Rhiannon. There are several other detailed horse descriptions in *Geraint* including 'even-paced, high-spirited but manageable',<sup>74</sup> often demonstrating the 'attributes conforming to the virtues of a good horse.'<sup>75</sup>

The notion of good horses further arises in *Owain* where Cynon is given a 'dark-brown palfrey with a bright red mane on him, as red as lichen', so good he 'would not exchange it for the best palfrey in the Island of Britain'.<sup>76</sup> He receives this favoured horse after his own mount is taken by a black knight on a 'pure black horse',<sup>77</sup> the first of many such fights on horseback which are a recurring theme throughout this tale. When Owain becomes the new black knight he fights all Arthur's retinue in turn on horseback, culminating with Gwalchmai whom he battles for three days in fairly detailed description. Ultimately these fights restore Owain to Arthur's company but result in him leaving the Countess of the Fountain. He is later berated for this by a maiden 'on a bay horse with a curly mane that reached the ground',<sup>78</sup> triggering the next stage of Owain's adventures. Horses in this tale, then, can be viewed as catalysts for change based on their integral roles in the unfolding action, where they provide both a means of transportation and a method of fighting, comparable to the first branch where Pwyll both meets Rhiannon and fights Hafgan on horseback. *Owain* also gives us the rather graphic image of a horse being severed in two by a portcullis, leaving Owain

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<sup>72</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 142.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 120–121.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131.

trapped.<sup>79</sup> This strange aspect of the tale, however, significantly furthers the narrative by bringing about Owain's first meeting with Luned. She not only gives him a magic ring of invisibility enabling his escape but continues to aid him, particularly in his pursuit of the Lady of the fountain.

Horses clearly play an integral part in the *Mabinogion* tales, particularly in relation to hunting, fighting and travel, allowing both male and female characters to move about in furtherance of their own schemes, with female riders noted in several tales including all three romances. They also, however, feature in other ways such as when 'the stamping of the horses'<sup>80</sup> and other noises act as a catalyst waking the emperor Maxen from his dream of Elen. They also provide the important means of conveying messengers to the emperor once Elen is found in reality, the urgency of which is demonstrated by the fact that as 'their horses failed, they left them behind and bought new ones',<sup>81</sup> additionally signifying the wealth of the emperor. In *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, a tale which 'dramatically evokes the sense of horsemen rushing to and fro',<sup>82</sup> a mounted horse is 'struck on its nostrils' as a way of stopping the rider to both reprove him for splashing water over Arthur and to offer 'advice' on the matter.<sup>83</sup> Finally, in Geraint's tale he demonstrates his continued prowess by overcomes a series of mounted knights, whereupon he gives the increasing numbers of horses to Enid to drive in front of her as part of his efforts to test her love.

Elsewhere in medieval Welsh manuscripts horses also feature in poetry, notably in *Y Gododdin* where warriors fight on horseback, *Canu y Meirch* and works by the Poets of the Princes. Horses in the latter carry messages or even the poets themselves to their loves<sup>84</sup> and are a strong feature in poems praising their patrons where they are both 'prestigious objects'<sup>85</sup> indicative of munificence and wealth and eager warhorses symbolizing 'their owners' military might', the most esteemed qualities of which are 'swiftness and spiritedness'.<sup>86</sup> Horses are also referred to in detail in poems requesting them as gifts from patrons including Cistercian abbots, often specifying 'colour or

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<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>82</sup> J. Wood, 'Colour Themes in Mabinogion Tales', p. 19.

<sup>83</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 218.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>85</sup> N.A. Jones, 'Horses in Medieval Welsh Court Poetry', p. 83.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

temperament or pedigree'<sup>87</sup> and they also feature strongly in *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (The Triads of the Island of Britain). Dating in extant form from the thirteenth century onwards<sup>88</sup> yet clearly comprising fragments of earlier tradition, the triads contain a distinct group known as *Trioedd y Meirch* or the triads of the horses, listing 'the names of horses belonging to the traditional heroes', many of which have fabulous characteristics.<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, the 'horses' names are all of a descriptive nature'<sup>90</sup> and 'most frequently give their colours',<sup>91</sup> again indicating the importance of this characteristic as demonstrated in the *Mabinogion* where horse colours recur although horse names are rare, only featuring in *Culhwch* in the form of Llamrei, Gwyn Myngddwn and Du who also feature in *Trioedd y Meirch*.<sup>92</sup> The triad of the three bestowed horses also alludes to the pale yellow horse of Lleu, perhaps recording an additional or variant detail of his acquisition of arms to that seen in the fourth branch.<sup>93</sup> Throughout the triads horses are presented with a 'status equivalent to that of their masters',<sup>94</sup> emphasising the prestige of horses and suggesting 'the close bond between the warrior and his steed'.<sup>95</sup>

In Irish literature horses are frequently described as 'the companions of warriors' whose 'warlike attributes and physical prowess were often described in as much detail as their human counterparts'.<sup>96</sup> Such detailed descriptions can be seen in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, *Bricriu's Feast* and *The Wooing of Etain*<sup>97</sup> and are comparable with descriptions in the Welsh tales. Swift horses also feature<sup>98</sup> and 'Fantastically coloured horses are a regular feature of the happy Celtic Otherworld'.<sup>99</sup> Irish tradition furthermore records how Macha was forced to act like a horse (cf. Rhiannon) by racing those of the king, even though heavily pregnant,<sup>100</sup> while *The Grey of Macha* and *The Black of Saingliu*<sup>101</sup> are

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<sup>87</sup> Huws, B.O., 'Praise lasts longer than a horse': Poems of Request and Thanks for Horses', pp. 146–148.

<sup>88</sup> S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 25; J.B. Coe and S. Young, *The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend*, p. 74; R. Bromwich, 'The Welsh Triads', p. 46; R. Bromwich, 'The Triads of the Horses', p. 102; W. Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 212.

<sup>89</sup> R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Triads of the Island of Britain*, pp. lxxx–lxxxi.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. lxxxi.

<sup>91</sup> R. Bromwich, 'The Triads of the Horses', p. 107.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 107–115.

<sup>93</sup> R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Triads of the Island of Britain*, p. 103.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>95</sup> Rowland, J., 'Warfare and Horses in the *Gododdin* and the Problem of Catraeth', pp. 15–16.

<sup>96</sup> N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland's Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>99</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 411.

<sup>100</sup> N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland's Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, pp. 24–25; M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 138; M.J. Green, *Celtic Myths*, p.28; P.K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other*

born at the same time as Cú Chulainn and gifted to him while still a young boy, comparable to Pryderi and the foal. Hence the roles of horses are not dissimilar to those in Welsh tradition.

Horses were undoubtedly significant creatures at the time the Mabinogion tales were recorded in medieval Wales and indeed the triads indicate ‘the honourable and important role played by the horse in all aspects of medieval life’.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore the law texts, *Cyfraith Hywel*, feature references to horses ‘scattered throughout’ in varied contexts, including the tractate on the ‘Value of Wild and Tame’ which offers ‘direct information about different kinds of horse’.<sup>103</sup> Extant poetry also indicates that ‘the wealthiest members of Welsh society had been breeding horses for many centuries’<sup>104</sup> and selective horse breeding in the Middle Ages not only led to increasingly stronger and larger horses but also those with distinctive features and characteristics, including temperament, that would enhance the status of their owners.<sup>105</sup> Further in the Celtic past horses also ‘quite clearly, had a very special significance’,<sup>106</sup> with riding thought to have been ‘prestigious’ and horsemen ‘people of high status’.<sup>107</sup> Horses moreover played ‘a major role in Celtic culture and religion’<sup>108</sup> and Epona, always depicted with a horse, is thought to have been a widely revered horse goddess whose name is derived from the Celtic word for horse.<sup>109</sup> There is also ‘substantial evidence for ritual associated with horses’<sup>110</sup> such as horse burials<sup>111</sup> and horse symbolism in artwork and iconography, including stone reliefs and bronze statues found throughout the ancient Celtic world.<sup>112</sup> In all, the ‘evidence of literature and archaeology point to the high

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*Medieval Welsh Tales*, p. 7; E.J. Sessle, ‘Exploring the Limitations of the Sovereignty Goddess through the Role of Rhiannon’, p. 11.

<sup>101</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 410; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 190; P.V. O’Sullivan, *Irish Superstitions and Legends of Animals and Birds*, p. 12.

<sup>102</sup> R. Bromwich, ‘The Triads of the Horses’, p. 117.

<sup>103</sup> D. Jenkins, ‘The Horse in the Welsh Law Texts’, pp. 64–66; see also D. Jenkins, *The Law of Hywel Dda*, pp. 171–175.

<sup>104</sup> N.A. Jones, ‘Horses in Medieval Welsh Court Poetry’, p. 91.

<sup>105</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>106</sup> M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 173–4.

<sup>107</sup> M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 120.

<sup>108</sup> B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, p. 152.

<sup>109</sup> M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, pp. 90–92; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 204; A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 405–406; N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland’s Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, p. 26.

<sup>110</sup> M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 121.

<sup>111</sup> M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 147; M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 121; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, pp. 113–116; B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, p. 153.

<sup>112</sup> M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, pp. 146–149; M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, pp. 121–122.

status accorded to horses in Celtic society'<sup>113</sup> which is reflected to an extent in the *Mabinogion*.

Horses clearly play a dominant role in the *Mabinogion* tales. They provide a means of transportation for the characters and their messengers, play a significant role in hunting as well as combat and form part of crucial meetings. They can be perceived as an integral and dynamic aspect of narrative style and structure, helping to maintain the motion of the plot and often having pivotal roles such as in the mutilation of the horses, a situation which has many consequences and brings out the true natures of several characters including Bran and Matholwch. Horses are also seen as desirable possessions, particularly in the gift exchanges between Pwyll and Arawn in the first branch and furthermore their descriptions in the form of appearance (notably colour), spirit and trappings often convey something significant regarding their riders, particularly linked to status and temperament. Indeed, 'the horse reflects the dual qualities of the hero himself – both his prowess and his generosity', especially as horses are often exchanged as gifts.<sup>114</sup> Therefore the higher quality horses may indicate far more than just higher status. The role of horses is clearly important in these medieval tales which also hint at their deeper significance in both medieval Welsh and ancient Celtic society.

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<sup>113</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 72.

<sup>114</sup> S. Davies, 'Horses in the Mabinogion', p. 135.



## CHAPTER TWO: Swine in the *Mabinogion*

Swine are a significant feature of the *Mabinogion*, particularly in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* where they play an important role in the tales of both Pryderi and Gwydion, but they are most predominant perhaps in the oldest narrative of the corpus, *Culhwch ac Olwen*. The main protagonist of the tale, Culhwch,<sup>1</sup> is the most closely associated character with these animals due to the nature of his birth for his mother, Goleuddydd, lived wild during her pregnancy and gave birth in or near a pig sty:

from the hour she became pregnant she went mad, and did not go near any dwelling. When her time came, her senses returned to her. This happened in a place where a swineherd was tending a herd of pigs. And out of fear of the pigs the queen gave birth. And the swineherd took the boy until he came to court. And the boy was baptized, and was named Culhwch because he was found in a pig-run. But the boy was of noble descent<sup>2</sup>

Hence we learn that Goleuddydd's pregnancy with Culhwch caused her temporary loss of sanity, resulting in her leaving the safety of the court and living wild until the baby was born. Her fear of the swine appears to have acted as a catalyst or inducement to her actually giving birth on the spot, although why tending pigs should have caused her such fear is a matter of conjecture. We are also to assume from the explanation given regarding Culhwch's naming that his birth was actually amongst the pigs themselves in the sty.<sup>3</sup> Sioned Davies, however, has noted that while *hwch* means 'pig'; *cul* only meant 'sty' or 'run' from the fourteenth century, hence the more likely interpretation of his name at the time the tale was recorded was actually 'slender' or 'lean' pig rather than 'pig run',<sup>4</sup> suggesting he was actually named as one of the piglets. Nonetheless his naming, which is a crucial stage of a hero's development as demonstrated in the fourth branch, indicates his origins and possibly also underlines his inherent nature, as perhaps does the fact that he was initially reared by a swineherd. This idea has been taken a stage further by Eric Hamp, suggesting that in the original tale 'It is clear that Culhwch literally was a pig',<sup>5</sup> his apparent nobility indicating an important pig at that, while Patrick Ford has also considered Culhwch's possible association with Moccus, the Celtic swine god.<sup>6</sup> Such ideas, however, while interesting are inconclusive, yet it is clear from the outset that the figure of Culhwch is closely linked with swine.

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<sup>1</sup> Although arguably Arthur usurps the lead role and dominates much of the action in the second half of the tale.

<sup>2</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly unusual birthplaces which set characters apart can also be seen in many Saints' Lives.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>5</sup> E.P. Hamp, 'Culhwch, the Swine', p. 257.

<sup>6</sup> P.K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, pp. 15 and 119.

It is possible to discern a similarity in circumstances, to a point, between the finding and rearing of both Culhwch and Pryderi, for both are discovered with animals - Culhwch with swine and Pryderi horses - and are initially raised and then brought to court by the animals' owners. Indeed, it has been observed that the 'link between Culhwch's birth and pigs betrays supernatural influence similar to that of Pryderi and the foal'<sup>7</sup> and Culhwch, like many of the characters in his tale, appears to have his own unusual abilities which can be seen in his threat to make all the women in the land barren should he not be admitted to Arthur's court. From the beginning, though, 'Culhwch's destiny is inextricably linked with pigs'<sup>8</sup> and as well as being connected with his birth and naming, swine are also catalysts for the main action of the tale, moving the plot along and providing the many of the adventures involved in his quest for Olwen, the giant's daughter.<sup>9</sup> Ysbaddaden Bencawr sets Culhwch a series of impossible sounding tasks including hunting wild boar, intended to get Culhwch killed in the process and therefore prevent his union with Olwen and his own subsequent death. However, it is the completion of a number of these tasks with the aid of his cousin Arthur that allow the giant to be killed and Culhwch to marry his bride.

The tasks mainly revolve around preparations for the wedding and include several animals such as varied oxen, birds and bees as well as swine. Tasks central to the entire tale are two boar hunts, unsurprising perhaps for a hero so linked with pigs; indeed, his intended death was perhaps meant to be as connected to swine as his birth, and certainly swine are a central feature at both the commencement and climax of the tale. The first hunt is for 'Ysgithrwyn Pen Baedd',<sup>10</sup> meaning 'White Tusk Chief of Boars',<sup>11</sup> whose tusk is required to shave Ysbaddaden for the wedding and must be extracted whilst Ysgithrwyn is still alive. Nonetheless, an axe is used to 'split his head in two'<sup>12</sup> in order to acquire the tusk and furthermore it 'was not the dogs that Ysbaddaden had demanded of Culhwch that killed the boar but Cafall, Arthur's own dog',<sup>13</sup> indicating that the tasks are not always accomplished in the manner dictated; indeed, the tasks are not attempted in order and not all of them are achieved before Ysbaddaden is overcome. Neither is Culhwch directly involved although the quests are completed for his benefit,

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<sup>7</sup> M.J. Green, *Celtic Myths*, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> M. Green & R. Howell, *Celtic Wales*, p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> 'The giant's daughter' is a well known folktale motif – see, for example, B.F. Roberts, 'Tales and Romances', pp. 214–215.

<sup>10</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 197.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 208.

for, unless we are to simply assume his presence even if he does not actively participate, he effectively drops out of the story until the final confrontation with the giant, leaving the tasks to be achieved by Arthur and his retinue. Such absence or inaction, however, naturally ensures that Culhwch is not slain whilst hunting boar.

The second boar hunt, for 'Twrch Trwyth, son of Taredd Wledig',<sup>14</sup> is given in much more detail, with many of the remaining tasks associated with acquiring particular hunters, horses, hounds and equipment in order to undertake this hunt successfully. An earlier form of the boar's name, *trwyd* rather than *trwyth*, is 'cognate with the Irish *triath* meaning 'king' or 'boar''<sup>15</sup> and indeed early Irish sources name 'Torc Triath, king of the boars of Ireland',<sup>16</sup> clearly a parallel figure. Furthermore, Twrch Trwyth has already 'destroyed one-third of Ireland'<sup>17</sup> before he is found and goes on to devastate a further fifth of the country during the hunt before moving on to Wales and finally Cornwall in a somewhat epic chase. The real significance of his name, however, is highlighted when we learn that he was no mere animal, but was in fact 'a king, and for his sins God changed him into a swine'.<sup>18</sup> This, then, is no ordinary wild boar but a human transformed into an animal as punishment, to be hunted as a beast, although what sins warranted such a penance are left untold. He 'plays a leading role'<sup>19</sup> in the tale where 'the author seems at times to feel some pity for him, as well as awe and respect'.<sup>20</sup> Despite this king's debasement into animal form and the havoc and desolation he subsequently wreaks, he still honourably defends his 'seven little pigs'.<sup>21</sup> Six of these are named including Grugyn Gwrych Erait (Grugyn Silver-bristle),<sup>22</sup> whose 'bristles were like wings of silver, and one could see the path he took through woods and over fields by the way his bristles glittered'.<sup>23</sup> Nowhere is Twrch Trwyth himself explicitly described, yet the pace of the ferocious hunt is suggestive of an extremely fast and aggressive animal and the repetition of 'little' in terms of his pigs implies that the boar himself was unusually large.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>16</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxxviii.

<sup>17</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 208.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>19</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 398.

<sup>20</sup> O.J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 209–211.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 209.

The fact that Arthur ‘gathered together every warrior... every choice hound and celebrated steed’<sup>24</sup> to assist in the arduous hunt further demonstrates the boar’s strength and ferocity. Indeed, ‘Arthur himself fought against him, for nine nights and nine days’,<sup>25</sup> only killing a single piglet. On two separate occasions characters transform themselves into the likeness of a bird in order to get close to Twrch Trwyth; Menw<sup>26</sup> to determine that the treasures between the boar’s ears are actually present before engaging him and Gwrhyr in order to parley with him. Miranda Green suggests that Gwrhyr shape-shifts to better communicate with the boar,<sup>27</sup> but this is clearly unnecessary as we have already been told he can speak with birds and beasts;<sup>28</sup> surely it is simply a way to get close enough to Twrch Trwyth without risking injury, underlining the dangerous nature of the boar whose bristles appear to be laced with poison. It is Grugyn who replies ‘God has done us enough harm by shaping us in this image, without you too coming to fight against us’,<sup>29</sup> indicating that the piglets too were transmogrified men and reinforcing the scope of their punishment.

The hunt ‘ends virtually in a draw between Arthur and the boar, although the carnage on both sides is great’<sup>30</sup> and many casualties are named including the piglets, with Twrch Trwyth ultimately and ambiguously ‘driven straight into the sea’,<sup>31</sup> never to return. However, ‘the purpose of hunting the boar was not, in any case, to kill him, but to obtain the valuable treasures from between his ears’<sup>32</sup> in the form of the comb, razor and shears which ‘appear to symbolize his regal status’<sup>33</sup> and are eventually laboriously snatched prior to his disappearance. These were to be procured to trim the giant’s hair in preparation for the wedding feast, similarly to the tusk of Ysgithrwyn for shaving. The role of both boars can thus be clearly seen as catalysts on a narrative level, the achievement of these tasks allowing Culhwch to win his destined bride and Ysbaddaden to be slain. The ‘well-developed’,<sup>34</sup> ‘buoyant, bouncing’,<sup>35</sup> ‘thrilling’<sup>36</sup> and fast-paced nature of the second boar hunt over a wide geographical area, ‘told with verve and

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>26</sup> Menw is named as one of the three enchanters of the Island of Britain in the triads: R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 193.

<sup>28</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 203.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>30</sup> P.K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, p. 119.

<sup>31</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 212.

<sup>32</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. liv.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. lxix.

<sup>34</sup> G. Jones, *Kings Beasts and Heroes*, p. 68.

<sup>35</sup> B.F. Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p.54 and B.F. Roberts, ‘Tales and Romances’, p. 214.

gusto',<sup>37</sup> also forms the climax of the tale, providing Arthur with the opportunity to vanquish a threatening, near-invincible animal as well as adding a moral element to the tale.

The hunting of Twrch Trwyth by Arthur and his dog Cafall is also referred to in the *Mirabilia* appended to the *Historia Brittonum*<sup>38</sup> c.829–30,<sup>39</sup> indicating that this aspect of the tale was clearly known prior to the recording of *Culhwch ac Olwen* and therefore existed independently, likely known to its author or redactor.<sup>40</sup> Additional allusions to Twrch Trwyth in Welsh poetry also strengthen the likelihood that the tradition was known and widely distributed in Wales from an early period.<sup>41</sup> Whether or not it was originally part of the tale of Culhwch and the giant's daughter or was a later accretion<sup>42</sup> is unclear, but the fact remains that the hunt for Twrch Trwyth adds much to the pace and climax of the narrative as it stands in addition to supplementing the boar symbolism already inherent in the tale. A further function of this boar hunt in *Culhwch* also appears to be the provision of certain onomastic details, accounting for place names such as Garth Grugyn where Grugyn was slain. It has also been suggested that the rivers Gwys and Twrch 'commemorate or gave rise to the tales of these mythic boars'.<sup>43</sup> Such topographical lore relating to swine can also be seen in the fourth branch when Gwydion steals the pigs of Pryderi, the journey of which results in the naming of several places such as Mochdref meaning 'swine-town'.<sup>44</sup>

While Pryderi's birth is more connected with horses than pigs, in comparison with Culhwch swine also underlie his tale, woven throughout the four branches, although in a somewhat different manner. The narratives of the four branches are linked in various ways, for example by recurring characters such as Pryderi and Rhiannon, but also by the actual pigs themselves which were a gift from the Otherworld stemming from Pwyll's relationship with Arawn, the King of Annwfn, in the first branch although interestingly we do not learn of this particular gift until the fourth branch:

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<sup>37</sup> B.F. Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 54; B.F. Roberts, 'Tales and Romances', p. 214.

<sup>38</sup> J. Morris, J. *Nennius: British History and The Welsh Annals*, p. 42.

<sup>39</sup> T. Charles-Edwards, 'The Arthur of History', p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxxvii.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. lxxv.

<sup>42</sup> R. Bromwich, 'The Character of the Early Welsh Tradition', pp. 106–107; B.F. Roberts, '*Culhwch Ac Olwen*, The Triads, Saint's Lives' pp. 78–79.

<sup>43</sup> J.K. Bollard, *Companion Tales to The Mabinogi. Legend and Landscape of Wales*, p. 62.

<sup>44</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 241. Several modern place-names still preserve such swine links - J.K. Bollard, *The Mabinogi. Legend and Landscape of Wales*, p. 12.

‘Lord,’ said Gwydion, ‘I hear that some kind of creatures that have never been in this island before have arrived in the South.’  
 ‘What are they called?’ said Math.  
 ‘*Hobeu*, Lord.’  
 ‘What sort of animals are they?’  
 ‘Small animals whose flesh is better than beef. They are small, and their name varies. They are called *moch* now.’  
 ‘Who owns them?’  
 ‘Pryderi son of Pwyll - they were sent to him from Annwfn by Arawn, king of Annwfn.’<sup>45</sup>

While this is somewhat ambiguous regarding whether it was actually Pwyll or Pryderi who received this otherworldly gift of swine, it is likely to have been given during the time frame of the first branch before Pwyll’s death and Pryderi’s succession, when Pwyll and Arawn exchanged ‘whatever treasure they thought would please the other’.<sup>46</sup> This clearly illustrates the interwoven nature of the narratives of the four branches, each tale adding to our understanding of the others.

During this fourth branch the swine become part of Gwydion’s elaborate schemes in which he convinces Math that they should procure these animals for themselves, although in reality it is merely in order to further his own personal ends. He resorts to trickery and deception upon learning of Pryderi’s agreement with his people that he ‘should not part with them until they had bred twice their number in the land’,<sup>47</sup> temporarily conjuring twelve stallions with saddles and bridles, twelve hounds with collars and leashes and twelve golden shields to convince them to accept an exchange for the pigs, so beginning the ensuing war between Dyfed and Gwynedd. This results not only in the rape of Goewin but also the death of Pryderi in honourable single combat with Gwydion who dishonourably uses enchantment to overcome his foe. The swine, then, act as a catalyst not only for war and Pryderi’s downfall but also for Gwydion’s scheming and subsequent punishment for Goewin’s rape, during which he and his brother Gilfaethwy are transformed by Math into three successive pairs of animals and forced to couple with each other, each time producing offspring. Interestingly, as well as deer and wolves, they are also appropriately turned into a wild boar<sup>48</sup> and sow, this being the only transformation in which Gwydion is forced to live as the female and give birth to a piglet who is described as being ‘big for its age’,<sup>49</sup> comparable perhaps to the growth of Lleu who is raised by Gwydion and also

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> cf. Twrch Trwyth, also transformed as a punishment.

<sup>49</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 53.

potentially his son,<sup>50</sup> subtly indicated perhaps by the comparable rapid nature of the growth of both his youngsters. The piglet is transformed by Math into human form and named ‘Hychddwn Hir’,<sup>51</sup> derived from ‘hwch’ meaning swine,<sup>52</sup> indicating his true nature, and ‘Hir’ meaning tall.<sup>53</sup>

The swine in Pryderi’s care can thus be seen as a factor not only significantly moving the narratives forwards but also illuminating the natures of the characters, particularly Gwydion, as well as being an integral part of the interweaving plots of the four branches. Furthermore, it is a magical ‘gleaming-white wild boar’<sup>54</sup> which lures Pryderi and as a result also his mother Rhiannon to their imprisonment in the third branch at the hand of Llwyd, acting as a pivot upon which the story turns. It is possible that the reason Pryderi follows the boar inside the mysterious newly built fort is not merely a rash decision not to abandon his hunting dogs as it appears upon first reading this tale, particularly when contrasted with the prudence of his companion Manawydan who interestingly also appears as part of the hunt for Twrch Trwyth in *Culhwch ac Olwen*,<sup>55</sup> but rather the desire to seize a potential opportunity to overcome the enchantment of Dyfed and restore his kingdom and people. Indeed, we are told at the close of the first branch that Pryderi ‘ruled the seven cantrefs of Dyfed successfully, beloved by his realm and all those around him’,<sup>56</sup> implying that his nature was in fact far from impetuous and it is unlikely that he was ignorant of the adventures of his father, titled ‘Pwyll Pen Annwfn’.<sup>57</sup> If this was the case then surely Pryderi would have recognised the supernatural nature of the boar, particularly from its otherworldly colouring but also by its actions, clearly attempting to lure them into a strange fort. This can, of course, be further understood upon learning in the fourth branch that pigs themselves apparently originated in the Otherworld, which again Pryderi must have been aware of as his own swine were a gift from Arawn. Thus the presence of the enchanted boar may serve to subtly elucidate the character of Pryderi as well as to highlight Manawydan’s careful wisdom and Cigfa’s ensuing prudence, in addition to providing a vehicle for Llwyd to extract revenge on behalf of Gwawl. If this is the case it surely underlines the significance of the boar and its narrative importance.

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<sup>50</sup> By his sister, Aranrhod, although this is open to conjecture.

<sup>51</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 54.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> Meaning ‘Head of Annwfn - *ibid.*, pp. 8 and 230.

Swine also occur in the second branch where Matholwch's swineherds are the first to observe the spectacle of Bran and his retinue, which includes Pryderi, crossing the Irish Sea.<sup>58</sup> As, according to the fourth branch, pigs were apparently a gift to man from the Otherworld, we can wonder retrospectively where Matholwch acquired *his* swine, particularly as Math is forced into war to acquire some. The second branch does, however, indicate that Matholwch had at least one encounter with the Otherworld himself when a hunt led him to a mound (cf. the mound of Arberth in the first and third Branches<sup>59</sup>) and an encounter with giants Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid, Cymidei Cymeinfoll and their magical cauldron;<sup>60</sup> therefore it is feasible that he also acquired his swine from the Otherworld. However, the weakness seemingly inherent in his character indicates that he is unlikely to have received such an otherworldly gift. Nonetheless, however Matholwch acquired his pigs, the swine themselves can be clearly seen to be a thread permeating the narratives of all four branches, particularly in the aspects of story relating to Pryderi where they clearly act as narrative catalysts, providing both Llwyd and Gwydion with their opportunities to plot and scheme and Manawydan and Cigfa to demonstrate their true natures, as well as eventually resulting in the downfall of Pryderi and being a catalyst of the appearance of Aranrhod following Goewin's rape and the subsequent birth of Llew.

Ultimately at the close of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* pigs also assist in Gwydion's recovery of Llew. While searching he meets with a swineherd whose sow repeatedly disappears: 'Every day when the pen is opened she goes out. No one can grab her, and no one knows where she goes, any more than if she sank into the earth.'<sup>61</sup> Gwydion, perhaps understanding the nature of the sow after spending a whole year in the form of one, decides to follow her 'brisk pace', eventually arriving at an oak tree under which she feeds on 'rotten flesh and maggots'<sup>62</sup> falling from an eagle at the top of the tree. The eagle turns out to be an emaciated, metamorphosed Llew who Gwydion restores and cares for but it is interesting that once again a pig features large in Gwydion's own story, again acting as a catalyst, this time to the recovery of Llew.

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 8–10, 36 and 43.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.



The only mention of pigs other *Mabinogion* tales is in *Historia Peredur vab Efwraig*, where they merely serve as a source of food in the form of ‘chops of the flesh of sucking-pigs’.<sup>63</sup> This aspect of the relationship between humans and pigs can also be discerned in *Culhwch* where ‘Dillus Farfog roasted a wild boar’.<sup>64</sup> Although swine are absent from the remaining tales, it is clear they play a dominant role in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* and *Culhwch ac Olwen*, the latter of which preserves an additional fragment of swine lore relating to ‘Ôl son of Olwydd – seven years before he was born his father’s pigs were stolen, and when he grew to be a man he traced the pigs and brought them home in seven herds’.<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere in Welsh literature *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* preserve more detail regarding Pryderi who appears as one of the three powerful swineherds. A later version of this triad informs us that Pryderi’s pigs

were the seven animals which Pwyll Lord of Annwfn brought, and gave them to Pendaran Dyfed his foster-father. And the place where he used to keep them was in Glyn Cuch in Emlyn. And this is why he was called a Powerful Swineherd: because no one was able either to deceive or force him<sup>66</sup>

confirming that it was indeed Pwyll who first brought the swine from Annwfn and also giving us their original number.<sup>67</sup> Pendaran Dyfed is Pryderi’s foster father in the first branch but his connection to the swine is unknown outside this triad. In the fourth branch Pryderi does of course fall prey to deception which also contradicts the version of the tale recorded here, but nonetheless its inclusion in the triads further reinforces the importance of the tale and the significance of the swine, as well as hinting at the power of the swineherd. Indeed, the tending of pigs by swineherds is a recurring theme, mirroring the fact that ‘pigs had their swine-herds’ in medieval Wales.<sup>68</sup>

The same triad further details the exploits of a pregnant sow whose name, Henwen, ‘Old White’,<sup>69</sup> is perhaps indicative of her magical nature. She leads her swineherd, Coll son of Collfrewy, from Cornwall to various places in Wales, interestingly ‘reversing the itinerary of the Twrch Trwyth’,<sup>70</sup> where she delivers a bee, grain of barley, wolf cub, young eagle, grains of wheat and a kitten who grows into the monstrous Palug’s cat. In the later version Arthur and his men attempt to destroy her due to a prophecy she would bring disruption to the island of Britain, again attesting the

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>66</sup> R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 52.

<sup>67</sup> cf. the significant number in the aforementioned story of Ôl.

<sup>68</sup> W. Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 39.

<sup>69</sup> R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, pp. 55 and 397.

<sup>70</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxvi.

importance of swine in Celtic tradition. Episodes involving following a pig also ‘recur frequently in Celtic Saints’ Lives in which the saint is directed to follow a (white) boar or sow who will lead him to a suitable building site for his church’,<sup>71</sup> further highlighting the supernatural aspects of pigs and their literary roles as catalysts. Other swine in Welsh literature include the companion of Myrddin during his wild sojourn in the forest as demonstrated in the poems *Hoinau* and *Yr Afallennau*<sup>72</sup> where the pig is directly addressed, seemingly indicating just how far he is removed from civilisation, although once a warrior and person of note. This is comparable, perhaps, with Culhwch’s mother, Goleuddydd, also living wild as a result of madness although from pregnancy rather than battle. Pigs, however, do not become her companions but rather her personified fears and the catalyst for her giving birth.

Similarly to medieval Welsh literature, ‘Irish tradition is rich in legends of magic destructive pigs and legendary boars’<sup>73</sup> including Torc Triath, the pigs of Cruachan and the six swine of Derbrenn who were also transformed men,<sup>74</sup> one of which is named Caelchéis, possibly cognate with Culhwch.<sup>75</sup> In particular ‘Pig-hunting appears in many early Irish tales, especially of the Fianna’,<sup>76</sup> such as the hunts for the boars of Formael and Ben Gulban, the latter famously leading to the death of Diarmaid.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, ‘Fenian warriors are constantly portrayed as hunting not only powerful boars, but tremendous, transformed otherworld animals, whose purpose seems to be to lead the heroes to some otherworld abode’,<sup>78</sup> a porcine role also glimpsed within the *Mabinogion*. Irish tradition moreover ‘attributes the introduction of pigs to Ireland to the gods, the Tuatha Dé Danann’,<sup>79</sup> comparable to their otherworldly origins in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, and pigs also occur in place names.<sup>80</sup> The power of the swineherd is also suggested<sup>81</sup> and indeed the two prized bulls fought over in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* began life as

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<sup>71</sup> R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 55; See also K. Jankulak, ‘Alba Longa in the Celtic Regions? Swine, Saints and Celtic Hagiography’, pp. 271–275, who argues that this is a Celtic phenomenon.

<sup>72</sup> See J.K. Bollard, ‘Myrddin in Early Welsh Tradition’, pp. 22–30.

<sup>73</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 399.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 399–401; J.A. MacCulloch, *Celtic Mythology*, pp. 125–127.

<sup>75</sup> P. Ní Chatháin, ‘Swineherds, Seers, and Druids’, p. 202; R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. 47.

<sup>76</sup> N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland’s Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, p. 85.

<sup>77</sup> A. Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 117.

<sup>78</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 401.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 398.

<sup>80</sup> N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland’s Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, pp. 15 and 87; R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, pp. lxxviii–lxxix.

<sup>81</sup> P. Ní Chatháin, ‘Swineherds, Seers, and Druids’, p. 203.

swineherds before undergoing several metamorphoses.<sup>82</sup> There is, then, an abundance of Irish lore surrounding swine, much of which is comparable to the role of pigs in Welsh tradition, including the fact that ‘Shape-shifting often involved pigs, and magico-divine pigs were involved in ritual hunts where the invincibility of the beast was stressed’.<sup>83</sup> Finally, pigs also appear in Irish literature as self-regenerating beasts providing endless food for the feast,<sup>84</sup> the champion’s portion of which was often fought over.<sup>85</sup>

Other examples of medieval literary swine include a vivid boar hunt in *Gawain and the Green Knight* and it has been noted that the ‘boar remained a powerful figure in medieval imagination, feared and respected. It represented power, invincibility, and fearlessness and appeared in literature marking these qualities’.<sup>86</sup> This can clearly be seen within the *Mabinogion*, particularly in *Culhwch* where the dangerous nature of the hunts are stressed. Pigs can also ‘be seen to represent an extraordinarily valuable asset for the Celts of Welsh literature’<sup>87</sup> with the tales demonstrating not only their importance in medieval Wales but also their deeper significance in the ancient Celtic past. Indeed, the ‘boar is, without doubt, the cult animal *par excellence* of the Celts’,<sup>88</sup> with evidence of possible boar deities such as Arduinna<sup>89</sup> and Moccus<sup>90</sup> and symbolic appearances on helmet crests, the Gundestrup cauldron, coins, carnyxes and other artwork and iconography including bronze statues.<sup>91</sup> Quite often boars were depicted with exaggerated bristles as a sign of fierceness and it appears they ‘possessed prominent and dual symbolism in the Celtic world. They were adopted as images of war, because of their ferocity and indomitability; and they were symbols of prosperity,

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<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203; B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, p. 91; N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland’s Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, p. 9; M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 170; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 18; P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 50; S. Heinz, *Celtic Symbols*, p. 263.

<sup>83</sup> M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 180.

<sup>84</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 401–402; M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 180; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, pp. 163 and 170; M.J. Green, *Celtic Myths*, p. 17; M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 45.

<sup>85</sup> Such as in the tale of *Mac Da Thó’s Pig* - N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland’s Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, p. 89; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 170.

<sup>86</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 40.

<sup>87</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 170.

<sup>88</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 390.

<sup>89</sup> A Gaulish boar goddess - M.J. Green, ‘The Gods and the Supernatural’, p. 479; M. Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 165; J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 23.

<sup>90</sup> A Gaulish boar god - J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 332; P.K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, p. 15.

<sup>91</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 390–394; M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, pp. 139–140; M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 44.

because pork was a favourite Celtic food and played an important part in feasting.’<sup>92</sup> Classical writers such as Strabo commented on the Celts’ love of pork<sup>93</sup> and pig bones occur as grave goods, associated perhaps with the Otherworldly feast.<sup>94</sup> Wild boar was hunted by the early Celts<sup>95</sup> yet was not ‘a major constituent part of the Celtic diet’,<sup>96</sup> suggesting it was more for sporting or ritual purposes, particularly as evidence ‘for domestic pigs is very abundant, but boar bones are rare.’<sup>97</sup> This archaeological evidence serves to demonstrate the significance of swine to the ancient Celts, clearly still seen in medieval Celtic literature where they often play a central role.

Real and enchanted swine, including metamorphosed humans, play significant roles in the *Mabinogion* where they can form a bridge between the real and the supernatural. They can be perceived as objects of the hunt; as leaders into adventure for good or ill; as opportunities for characters such as Gwydion and Ysbadden to forward their own schemes; and as catalysts for character growth and development, including their role in the punishments of Gwydion, Gilfaethwy and the son of Taredd Wledig where they also provide a moralistic element. They are furthermore an integral and dynamic aspect of narrative structure, acting as pivots and plot devices to keep the story engaging and forward-moving. In the case of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* they also help bind the tales together, adding to the overall understanding of the reader or listener. Such is the role of swine as they appear in these important medieval narratives, which additionally highlight the deeper significance of pigs, particularly the boar, not only for medieval Welsh society but also for its more ancient Celtic past.

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<sup>92</sup> M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, pp. 139–140.

<sup>93</sup> T. Koch and J. Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, p. 17.

<sup>94</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 391; M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 139.

<sup>95</sup> M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 139; B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, p. 224.

<sup>96</sup> B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, p. 224.

<sup>97</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 46.

### CHAPTER THREE: Magical Birds and Other Enchanted Beasts

Birds of varied types are a fairly common feature in the *Mabinogion* tales. They appear both in real form where they act as messengers and hunting aides as well as in their more predominant guise of magical creatures with varied supernatural abilities, whereby they play a variety of helpful roles. Human characters also appear in the form of birds, particularly in the fourth branch and *Culhwch ac Olwen*, their transformations at times voluntary, at others involuntary and for a number of different reasons. Indeed, such episodes of metamorphosis can be seen as a regular feature of the oldest tales in the collection, not just in bird but also in animal form, although often as a result of punishment for transgression rather than for shamanistic purposes. Such shape-shifted creatures at times play a central role such as in the boar hunts of *Culhwch ac Olwen* and other enchanted animals also occur, at times luring hunters into otherworldly adventure for good or ill and often unusually coloured and unnaturally swift.

The main occurrences of real birds can be found in the second and fourth branches. During Branwen's three-year punishment in the second branch she resourcefully trains a starling to assist in alerting her brother to her plight:

Branwen reared a starling at the end of her kneading-trough, and taught it to speak, and told the bird what kind of man her brother was. And she brought a letter telling of her punishment and dishonour. The letter was tied to the base of the bird's wings, and it was sent to Wales<sup>1</sup>

It proceeded to seek out Bendigeidfran where it 'alighted on his shoulder, and ruffled its feathers until the letter was discovered and they realized that the bird had been reared among people.'<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that the starling is taught to speak yet does not do so in the narrative but instead is given a letter to carry, presumably so Bendigeidfran would not doubt the authenticity of the information. Clearly the starling acts as a messenger and the communication it carries leads to a devastating war, hence the bird can be seen to play a pivotal role upon which the narrative turns. In the fourth branch a bird is instrumental in the naming of one of the central characters. Having refused to name or have contact with her illegitimate son, Aranrhod is tricked into doing so by a disguised Gwydion. In the process 'a wren lands on the deck of the ship. The boy aims at it and hits it in the leg, between the tendon and the bone',<sup>3</sup> whereupon the skilled nature of the shot is remarked upon by Aranrhod, 'it is with a skilful hand that the fair-haired one has

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<sup>1</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56.

hit it',<sup>4</sup> inadvertently naming her son Llew Llaw Gyffes, meaning 'the fair one with the skilful hand'.<sup>5</sup> Thus the wren acts as a catalyst to the naming of the hero whilst illustrating his skilled marksmanship, comparable with Medyr son of Medredydd in *Culhwch* who can shoot a wren through both legs from a great distance.<sup>6</sup>

Also found in this collection of tales are hunting hawks which feature in the first branch along with hounds and horses in the gift exchanges between Pwyll and Arawn. This is indicative of the desirability of such birds of prey which were 'very important in medieval Welsh society'<sup>7</sup> and moreover suggests their role in maintaining good relationships by the exchanging of often valuable gifts, possession of which in turn may signify the wealth, status and generosity of the characters. The desirability of such birds can also be glimpsed in *Geraint* where a sparrowhawk is the prize of a jousting tournament thereby also signifying prowess, although the hawk itself is forgotten once Geraint has triumphed.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless the winning of the sparrowhawk not only allows the completion Geraint's quest to avenge the insult to Gwenhwyfar, but also leads to his marriage to Enid; hence it clearly moves the story along. In *Peredur* a wild hawk kills a duck resulting in a black raven consuming its red blood in the white snow, the contrasting chthonic colours of which cause Peredur to remember the woman he loves best, comparable to the tale of Deirdre in Irish tradition.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere in the *Mabinogion* birds are used to enhance the descriptions of characters - Olwen is compared to hawks, falcons and swans, a squire in *Rhonabwy* is described as having 'hawk-like eyes'<sup>10</sup> and Gwalchmai's name can be interpreted as the 'hawk of May',<sup>11</sup> all in turn further underlining the esteemed qualities of such birds. Indeed, even the peacock-feathered arrows in *Owain* serve to enhance the image of wealth and status described in the tale.

More commonly found within the *Mabinogion*, however, are magical birds, perhaps the most memorable of which are the singing birds of Rhiannon. In the second branch they

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>6</sup> G. Jones and T. Jones, *The Mabinogion*, p. 106; J.K. Bollard, *Companion Tales to The Mabinogi. Legend and Landscape of Wales*, p. 32; T.P. Ellis and J. Lloyd, *The Mabinogion*, vol. 1, p. 188; J. Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, p. 147; P.K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and other Medieval Welsh Tales*, p. 131; Sioned Davies, however, gives a starling in her translation - S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> R. Middleton, 'Chwedl Geraint Ab Erbin', p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 247; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 221.

<sup>11</sup> J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 261.

sing to the survivors of the war in Ireland during their seven year feast at Harlech, where

As soon as they began to eat and drink, three birds came and began to sing them a song, and all the songs they had heard before were harsh compared to that one. They had to gaze far out over the sea to catch sight of the birds, yet their song was as clear as if the birds were there with them.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly possessing magical powers, these three birds most likely have their origin in the Otherworld, with which ‘Birdsong is often associated’.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, they further confirm the otherworldly status of Rhiannon to whom they are said to belong, help link the narratives of the first three branches and appear to be connected to the distortion of time and distance regularly associated with the Otherworld, also seen in the gait of Rhiannon’s horse. Their melodious song is also preternatural, not just because it can be clearly heard from so far away but also due to its gentle, soothing nature, further explained in *Culhwch ac Olwen* as having the power to ‘wake the dead and lull the living to sleep’.<sup>14</sup> It seems clear, then, that the main role of these birds is to soothe the survivors after all they have been through, particularly after the loss of both Bendigeidfran and Branwen, whereas in *Culhwch* they function as one of the difficult tasks which must be undertaken in order for the hero to win the hand of the giant’s daughter. Ysbaddaden requests the birds to entertain him on the wedding night where, should the tasks be completed, he will be slain, suggesting perhaps that the birds are required either to lull his enemies, soothe his passing or even revive him, according to the properties he states they possess. Interestingly, this task is not explicitly achieved in the tale which does nonetheless culminate in the death of the giant; possibly we must simply assume all the tasks are completed, or perhaps the birds are not acquired either due to the difficulty in locating them or because of their potential effect on Ysbaddaden.

Similar birds can also be found in *Owain*, again to whose song no other can be compared: ‘a flock of birds will alight on the tree, and you have never heard in your own country such singing as theirs’.<sup>15</sup> The difference in country perhaps denotes the Otherworld and indeed they appear as part of a supernatural adventure of which their song evidently signals the next challenge, for just when at its most enjoyable, a fearsome black knight appears and a difficult fight ensues. The description of the singing is repeated four times in the tale, stressing the significance of both the magical

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<sup>12</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 254; See also P. Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr*, p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 196.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 120.

flock and their song. Indeed, we additionally hear Cynon's opinion 'that never before nor since have I heard singing like that',<sup>16</sup> that their song was 'most pleasing',<sup>17</sup> to Owain and finally that Cai, Arthur and his retinue 'had never heard a song as delightful as the one the birds sang'.<sup>18</sup> While such birds are clearly akin to those of Rhiannon, the term 'flock', of course, suggests more than three birds. In Irish tradition parallel creatures appear as Clíodona's three colourful birds whose song also has the ability to heal and comfort.<sup>19</sup>

A further flock of birds can be discerned in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* in the form of Owain's ravens. During his game of *gwyddbwyll* with Arthur he refers to his warriors as his 'little ravens'<sup>20</sup> and each move made in the game appears to signal actual combat between their respective retinues, with Owain's ravens initially suffering badly at the hands of Arthur's men until given respite where

the ravens flew up into the sky angrily, passionately, and ecstatically, to let wind into their wings and to throw off their fatigue. When they regained their strength and power, with anger and joy they swooped down together on the men<sup>21</sup>

Arthur's troops then suffer in turn, leading to 'a great commotion in the sky with the fluttering of the jubilant ravens and their croaking'.<sup>22</sup> It is clear from these detailed descriptions that the warriors fighting on Owain's behalf are actual birds who, despite their initial oppression, turn out to be skilled fighters, achieving significant battle victory for Owain, despite the fact that it is apparently a game. At the end of the second game Owain finally calls off his ravens whereupon Arthur crushes the golden game pieces to dust, so signalling his dispirited defeat. While the triumphant warriors in the central portion of this tale are literally ravens, at the close of *Owain* his people are referred to as both the 'Three Hundred Swords' and 'the Flight of Ravens',<sup>23</sup> perhaps indicating that his ravens were usually perceived as men, although the first term could of course refer to his human troops while the latter may signify the actual ravens under his command. Interestingly the 'association of Owain with ravens seems... to have a long history in Welsh tradition'<sup>24</sup> and is 'frequently mentioned in Welsh poetry'<sup>25</sup> in

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> M. Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, pp. 52–53, 87 and 176; See also M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 181; M.J. Green, *Celtic Myths*, p. 59; A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 339–340; P. Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr*, pp. 105–106.

<sup>20</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 221.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> C. Lloyd-Morgan, 'Breuddwyd Rhonabwy and Later Arthurian Literature', p. 186.



which raven ‘is a common metaphor for warrior’;<sup>26</sup> while in Irish tradition ravens were often associated with war goddesses.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere in the *Mabinogion* it can be discerned that Bendigeidfran’s name means blessed crow or raven,<sup>28</sup> perhaps denoting his warrior status.

Other magical birds found in these tales include the ouzel/blackbird, owl and eagle who, along with the stag and salmon, appear as the oldest living animals in *Culhwch ac Olwen*, all leading unnaturally long lives and therefore possessing knowledge and memory unsurpassed. Each demonstrates its long lifespan and we learn that the eagle has ‘wandered most’<sup>29</sup> and as a result encountered the oldest creature, the salmon, to whom he leads Arthur’s men. Variant versions of this tale can be found within both Welsh and Irish tradition and the oldest animals is furthermore an international story motif which, as such, will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter. However, it can be clearly seen that all five animals, including the three birds, assist in the task of finding and freeing the lost prisoner, Mabon, so aiding not only Arthur’s men in their quest, but also Culhwch in the winning of Olwen.

Other birds appearing in the *Mabinogion* are actually metamorphosed humans. In *Culhwch Menw* and *Gwrhyr* voluntarily and by their own means shape-shift into unspecified birds in order to get closer to Twrch Trwyth, as discussed in the previous chapter. In the fourth branch an instinctual transformation occurs when Lleu, seriously wounded by a poisoned spear, shape-shifts into an eagle, enabling him to flee and save himself. Indeed, he ‘flew up in the form of an eagle and gave a horrible scream, and he was not seen again’<sup>30</sup> until a sow<sup>31</sup> leads Gwydion to his location, whereupon Lleu requires his magical assistance in order to transform back into human shape. Gwydion further transmogrifies the unfaithful Blodeuedd into an owl as a means of punishment,<sup>32</sup> declaring that

because of the shame you have brought upon Lleu Llaw Gyffes, you will never dare show your face in daylight for fear of all the birds. And all the birds will be

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<sup>25</sup> J.A. MacCulloch, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 190.

<sup>26</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 255.

<sup>27</sup> M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 143.

<sup>28</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 232; S. Heinz, *Celtic Symbols*, p. 127; A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 367; J.K. Bollard, *The Mabinogi. Legend and Landscape of Wales*, p. 118.

<sup>29</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 204.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, in *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* the great sow Henwen is also linked to an eagle, as discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>32</sup> Also seen in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: S. Heinz, ‘The Owl – a Symbolic Figure from the Dawn of Celtic Culture to Modern Day Wales. Revisiting a Welsh Tradition and its Cultural Context’, pp. 93–95.

hostile towards you. And it shall be in their nature to strike you and molest you wherever they find you<sup>33</sup>

This is a fate worse, in Gwydion's opinion, than death and implies that owls are persecuted by other birds as a result of Blodeuedd's treachery. Such bird-forms, then, can be seen to enable reconnaissance, communication, preservation of life and punishment for adultery and conspiracy to murder.

Shape-shifting to bird and other animal forms is a significant and recurring feature of the earliest *Mabinogion* narratives, particularly in *Culhwch ac Olwen* where it is so pervasive it implies a probable 'ancient belief in animal transformations'.<sup>34</sup> This can also be glimpsed in extant Celtic images of human figures depicted with animal characteristics<sup>35</sup> such as the antlered figure on the Gundestrup cauldron, possibly a depiction of Cernunnos, the horned one,<sup>36</sup> although many such images are ambiguous. Joyce Salisbury suggests that medieval interest in such transformations is indicated by the 'growing popularity of metamorphosis literature'<sup>37</sup> from the twelfth century onwards, where human to animal transformations reveal the 'increasing blurring of lines between humans and animals'<sup>38</sup> and perhaps a belief that boundaries were more fluid.<sup>39</sup> Certainly boundaries between humans and animals are far from rigid in the *Mabinogion* where such transformations are at times voluntary, the required animal or bird form desired for specific reasons. Involuntary transformations, however, are more common, often occurring as a form of punishment where such transmogrification appears to be a degradation, perhaps 'making a visible transformation that expressed the state of the human's animal side'.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, as Miranda Green points out, usually 'only their physical form is altered; they retain the ability to think as humans'<sup>41</sup> although deprived of their human status.<sup>42</sup> There are few true shape-shifters in the *Mabinogion* who are able to transform at will, with many of the metamorphoses caused either by a magician

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<sup>33</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 63.

<sup>34</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. xxx.

<sup>35</sup> M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 170 and 198–199.

<sup>36</sup> A possible deity of whom many possible images survive without accompanying inscriptions to verify them: N. Chadwick, *The Celts*, p. 153; M.J. Green, 'The Gods and the Supernatural', p. 475.

<sup>37</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 142.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 150; J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 140.

<sup>40</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 143.

<sup>41</sup> M.J. Green, *Celtic Myths*, p. 63.

<sup>42</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 192.

or God, the latter ascription possibly occurring as a result of redaction by monastic scribes.<sup>43</sup>

Metamorphosed creatures other than birds in the *Mabinogion* include the ‘huge army of mice’<sup>44</sup> who appear in the third branch to devastate Manawydan’s crops, heralded by a loud noise signalling their enchanted nature. We subsequently learn this army is comprised of Llwyd’s retinue, who voluntarily requested transformation by their master to further his scheme of revenge, even joined ultimately by the women of the court and Llwyd’s pregnant wife who is caught by Manawydan. Treating the captured mouse as a human thief, Manawydan proceeds to put her on trial for her crimes which, while seeming bizarre to the modern reader, was in keeping with medieval society where animals were actually prosecuted for committing harm to humans and their property ‘with the same serious concern for legal points as trials of humans’.<sup>45</sup> In this case, however, the mice are transmogrified humans who clearly further the revenge theme and additionally bring the third branch to its conclusion, where the enchantment of Dyfed is lifted and Llwyd restores his wife to human form using his wand.

It is involuntary transformations, however, which form the majority of such metamorphoses within the *Mabinogion*. We have already seen in the preceding chapter how various characters in *Culhwch ac Olwen* are transformed into swine for their undisclosed sins, a theme paralleled in Irish tradition. The same narrative also features Nynniaw and Pebiaw who ‘God transformed into oxen for their sins’,<sup>46</sup> as well as the bitch Rhymhi who was in ‘the form of a she-wolf’,<sup>47</sup> although her original shape is unspecified. These creatures all feature as part of the task list Culhwch must complete in order to marry Olwen, thus playing their roles in bringing about the narrative conclusion. The transmogrifications resulting from transgressions within this tale are all caused by God who additionally changes Rhymhi and her two whelps<sup>48</sup> ‘back into their own shape for Arthur’.<sup>49</sup> In the fourth branch, however, similar transmogrifications are carried out by magicians. As punishment for inciting war in order to commit rape, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy are struck with Math’s magic wand and transformed into

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<sup>43</sup> Many early Welsh texts were likely compiled in written form within a monastic Christian context: M. Green and R. Howell, *Celtic Wales*, p. 102.

<sup>44</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, pp. 109–111.

<sup>46</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 195.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>48</sup> Who also feature in the court list earlier in the tale - *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 205.

successive pairs of animals – a hind and stag, a wild boar and sow and a male and female wolf. This demonstrates Math's magical ability which appears greater than Gwydion's and seems focussed on the power of his wand which is repeatedly stressed in the tale. The brothers are forced to live as each pair of animals for a year: 'Since you are in league with each other, I will make you live together and mate with each other, and take on the nature of the wild animals whose shape you are in; and when they have offspring, so shall you'.<sup>50</sup> Their subsequent offspring are transformed into human shape by Math, again using his wand, and baptised with names denoting their animal origins.<sup>51</sup>

Other scenes linking humans and animals include the badger in the bag episode in the first branch where Gwawl is literally treated as a badger when caught in Rhiannon's magic bag and beaten by Pwyll's men. Despite being referred to as a badger during the incident, however, it is nowhere stated that he was actually turned into one; nonetheless, it serves to punish Gwawl for duping Pwyll and allows Pwyll and Rhiannon to finally marry. A further interesting sequence involving animals occurs in *Owain* where the gigantic keeper of the forest has the power and authority to summon 'remarkable' wild animals 'as numerous as the stars in the sky', including 'serpents and lions and vipers'.<sup>52</sup> This otherworldly figure proceeds to point the respective heroes on their way as their adventures take them further from their familiar world. A disconsolate Owain later wanders in desolate regions 'until all his clothes disintegrated... and long hair grew all over him; and he would keep company with the wild animals',<sup>53</sup> comparable to Chrétien de Troyes' Yvain<sup>54</sup> and the Scottish Lailoken<sup>55</sup> as well as Myrddin and the Irish Suibhne.<sup>56</sup> Here we have examples of humans becoming animal-like through reactions to personal crises rather than magical transformations, as a form of self-punishment perhaps. Such wild men of the woods were popular figures in medieval art and romances, often serving as a 'foil for chivalrous, civilized knights'.<sup>57</sup>

Elsewhere in early Welsh literature the tale of Gwion Bach describes a full sequence of animal transformations - following his drink from Cerridwen's cauldron he instinctively

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

<sup>51</sup> It has further been suggested that the naming of Dylan may also refer to his true nature, as a fish or seal: S.L. Keefer, 'The Lost Tale of Dylan in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*', pp. 28–29.

<sup>52</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 119.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>54</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 132.

<sup>55</sup> A.O.H. Jarman, 'The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition of Prophecy', p. 122.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 126–130.

<sup>57</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, pp. 131–132.

shifts shape into varied animals and birds in order to flee. During their elaborate chase Cerridwen also shifts forms, including into a greyhound and hawk and the episode results in Gwion being reborn as Taliesin. Additionally Gerald of Wales also refers to people changing into animals such as pigs<sup>58</sup> and in *Ymddiddan Arthur a'r Eryr*,<sup>59</sup> Arthur's deceased nephew Eliwlad takes the form of an eagle in order to converse with him, although as Anne Ross notes, this appears to be a 'soul in bird form rather than a clear-cut metamorphosis'.<sup>60</sup> Irish tradition also shows 'frequent examples of shape shifting',<sup>61</sup> particularly into swan form, with figures such as the Morrigan,<sup>62</sup> Fintan mac Bóchra<sup>63</sup> and Tuan mac Cairill<sup>64</sup> metamorphosing into many different forms while the Children of Lir and Étain are transmogrified as a result of jealousy.<sup>65</sup>

Other enchanted animals in the *Mabinogion* include the knowledgeable stag and salmon appearing as part of the aforementioned oldest animals and the varied boars and stags hunted by the protagonists of the tales who are often separated from their companions and led into chthonic adventures as a result, a theme which also occurs in Irish literature, notably in the tales of Fionn.<sup>66</sup> In *Geraint* his adventures begin during the hunt for the white stag and in *Peredur* the hero's dogs kill a stag 'in a deserted place'<sup>67</sup> which leads the hero to a dwelling and the next stage of his adventures. Later in this tale a strange stag with supernatural abilities appears who is 'as swift as the swiftest bird, and there is one horn in his forehead, as long as a spear-shaft, and as sharp as the sharpest thing'.<sup>68</sup> Acting as an oppressor, this stag devastates the forest and its creatures and daily drinks the fishpond dry, resulting in no man entering the forest. Peredur, however, slays the stag who is then described as 'the most beautiful jewel in my land'<sup>69</sup> by a female rider who sends Peredur on a further quest. The appearance of stags in the *Mabinogion*, then, can be seen to herald new adventures and indeed it is a stag hunt

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 142–144.

<sup>59</sup> J.B. Coe & S. Young, *The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend* pp. 103–107.

<sup>60</sup> A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 350.

<sup>61</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 140.

<sup>62</sup> M.J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 150; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 195.

<sup>63</sup> N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland's Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, p. 7; J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 230; R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxiii.

<sup>64</sup> N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland's Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, p. 7; J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 414; R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxiii; R. Bromwich, *Triodd Ynys Prydein. The Triads of the Island of Britain*, p. 236.

<sup>65</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 193.

<sup>66</sup> B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, p. 153; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 164.

<sup>67</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 86.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

which results in Gronw's pivotal meeting in the fourth branch with Blodeuedd, an enchanted woman conjured from flowers.

Such stags are likely to be of otherworldly origin, indicated by their often white colour as well as the fact that they lead the heroes into new places and adventures. We have already seen how Rhiannon's white horse may represent the otherworldliness of both horse and rider, as well as the enchanted nature of the white boar which frightens Pryderi's dogs<sup>70</sup> and lures him to his imprisonment. In the first branch, however, while the hunt results in Pwyll separating from his men, allowing for his solo adventure, it is not the colour of the stag that is significant but rather the colour of the unknown hounds chasing it. Indeed, he simply 'looked at the colour of the pack, without bothering to look at the stag',<sup>71</sup> indicating the significance of the hounds who were 'a gleaming shining white, and their ears were red. And as the whiteness of the dogs shone so did the redness of their ears'.<sup>72</sup> As white animals with red ears are particularly and 'exclusively associated with the otherworld'<sup>73</sup> in both Welsh and Irish literature, these dogs are clearly otherworldly and indeed signal the arrival of Arawn, triggering Pwyll's ensuing adventure which has lasting consequences. Interestingly connections have been made between Arawn's hounds and those known in Welsh folklore as the Cŵn Annwfn, sometimes cited as being white with red ears.<sup>74</sup>

Other significant, potentially enchanted hounds can be found in *Culhwch* where Aned and Aethlem are 'as swift as a gust of wind'<sup>75</sup> and always triumphant when hunting. The unusually large size of Arthur's 'favourite'<sup>76</sup> hound Cafall is suggested by his name, derived from 'horse',<sup>77</sup> and is comparable perhaps to Custennin's 'shaggy mastiff... bigger than a nine-year-old stallion'.<sup>78</sup> Cafall, as noted in the preceding chapter, also features in the earlier *Historia Brittonum* and as well as figuring in the

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> J. Wood, 'Colour Themes in Mabinogion Tales', p. 18; See also R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 397; A. Welsh, 'Doubling and Incest in the Mabinogi', p. 351; A. Welsh, 'Traditional Tales and the Harmonizing of Story in *Pwyll Penddeic Dyuet*', p. 24; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, pp. 164 and 186; M. Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 52; M.J. Green, *Celtic Myths*, p.29; A. Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 101; S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 228; M. Green and R. Howell, *Celtic Wales*, p. 116.

<sup>74</sup> E. Owen, *Welsh Folk-Lore: A Collection of the Folk-Tales and Legends of North Wales*, pp. 125–128; M.J. Green, *Celtic Myths*, p.73; See also A. Welsh, 'Traditional Tales and the Harmonizing of Story in *Pwyll Penddeic Dyuet*', p. 25.

<sup>75</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 199.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 257; O.J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature*, pp. 8 and 103–104.

<sup>78</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 190.

hunt for Twrch Trwyth, he also plays a significant role in a stag hunt in *Geraint* where he is faster than the other hounds. In addition to dogs, the magical swiftness of several horses such as those ridden by Rhiannon, Iddog and Mabon have also been indicated in chapter one and further enchanted horses and greyhounds appear in the fourth branch where they are conjured by Gwydion in order to trick Pryderi into releasing his swine. Other strange chthonic creatures also figure in *Peredur* where he vanquishes a fearsome lake monster in addition to the ‘Black Serpent of the Cairn’<sup>79</sup> who guards a magical stone, both leading to further adventures. He furthermore observes two marvellous flocks of sheep separated by a river, one white and the other black, who change colour as they cross over, signalling an otherworldly environment.<sup>80</sup>

A final animal-related incident in the *Mabinogion* which merits attention is found in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* where a yellow ox-skin with magical properties acts as a catalyst for Rhonabwy’s dream, thus setting up the entire tale which recounts this vision in detail. Apparently ‘good luck would befall’<sup>81</sup> whoever lay on the skin and doing so endows Rhonabwy with his visionary dream, for ‘as soon as sleep entered his eyes he was granted a vision’.<sup>82</sup> At the close of the tale we learn he had ‘slept for three nights and three days’,<sup>83</sup> reinforcing the magical nature of the animal skin upon which he dreamt. Such a theme is also found in Irish tradition where poets/seers ‘were said to lie on the hides of bulls to acquire hidden knowledge’<sup>84</sup> often via a prophetic dream,<sup>85</sup> also seen in the ritual of tarbfeis, meaning ‘bull-sleep’, used to determine a king’s successor.<sup>86</sup> In *Rhonabwy*, however, the skin acts as a device enabling Rhonabwy to gain a vision of the past rather than of the future.<sup>87</sup>

It is clear that magical birds and other enchanted beasts who often ‘possess qualities beyond... natural limits’<sup>88</sup> are significant features of the *Mabinogion*, as are human to animal metamorphoses. Birds in particular can be seen as hunting companions,

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<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>80</sup> A comparable occurrence can be found in the Irish tale of the voyage of Máel Dúin - J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 271; W. Joyce, *Ancient Celtic Romances*, pp. 133–134.

<sup>81</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 215.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. xxi.

<sup>85</sup> C. Lloyd-Morgan, ‘*Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and Later Arthurian Literature’, p. 189; S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 276.

<sup>86</sup> B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, p. 261; T.F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, pp. 323–324.

<sup>87</sup> P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 90; S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. xxi.

<sup>88</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 190.

messengers, helpers and as aspects of naming, healing and punishment as well as gifts signifying status and promoting good relationships. Clearly important in ancient Celtic society where iconography and ‘coins frequently depict bird motifs’,<sup>89</sup> their power of flight may have contributed to their more symbolic significance.<sup>90</sup> Other enchanted and metamorphosed animals, most prevalent in the earliest tales in the collection, act as a means of swift transportation, as aspects of revenge and punishment and as leaders into otherworldly adventure via the hunt. It is difficult to imagine the tales without these magical creatures to enhance them.

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<sup>89</sup> M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, pp. 142–143; although birds appear as symbols in many early cultures and are not exclusive to the Celts.

<sup>90</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 172.



## CHAPTER FOUR: The Oldest Animals: Folk Tale Motifs

The oldest and wisest animals appearing in the *Mabinogion* collection are the blackbird, stag, owl, eagle and salmon in *Culhwch ac Olwen*, who together constitute the significant episode of the oldest animals which is an internationally occurring folk tale motif. Many such traditional motifs occur within these tales as noted by Kenneth Jackson,<sup>1</sup> underlining the fact that the narratives are based on older oral material although they currently exist in a literary form where characters are more defined and motifs have been expanded to fit a literary context. Whilst each recorded instance of a particular traditional narrative element may vary to some degree, the same 'narrative motifs are found scattered over the world',<sup>2</sup> no doubt having been transmitted cross-culturally in numerous ways over a long period of time.<sup>3</sup> Such international story elements have been usefully catalogued and classified as a 'foundation for comparative study'<sup>4</sup> of folk tales from around the world based on the identification of such motifs within them, each tale often being comprised of several separate motifs.<sup>5</sup> Stith Thompson has pointed out that 'Animals play a large role in all popular tales'<sup>6</sup> and indeed his monumental *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* has a whole section devoted to animal motifs,<sup>7</sup> several of which occur in the *Mabinogion* underlining the significance of the animals within the tales, particularly in *Culhwch* where episodes of grateful animals and magic bird-song occur in addition to the important oldest animals.

The traditional narrative element of the oldest animals forms part of the quest for Olwen, the giant's daughter. One of the many tasks Culhwch must achieve before he can wed Olwen is to find 'Mabon, son of Modron, who was taken when three nights old from his mother. No one knows where he is, nor what state he's in, whether dead or alive'.<sup>8</sup> The narrative importance of this particular task becomes clear when we learn that Mabon is required not only to track a particular dog required for the hunting of Twrch Trwyth, but also, with a particularly fast steed, to assist in the great boar hunt

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<sup>1</sup> See K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* and K. Jackson, 'Some Popular Motifs in Early Welsh Tradition'.

<sup>2</sup> S. Thompson, *The Folktale*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, pp. 37–47.

<sup>4</sup> A. Welsh, 'The Traditional Narrative Motifs of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*', p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> S. Thompson, *The Folktale*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* [online – <http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/thompson/index.htm>] <accessed 12/01/11 - page numbers unavailable online>. NB: I have opted not to capitalise motif titles to minimise disruption to the flow of this discussion.

<sup>8</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 198.

himself, where he ultimately plays a pivotal role in snatching the razor from between the boar's ears. This boar hunt is crucial to the successful conclusion of both the quest for Olwen and the tale itself; hence the finding of Mabon is particularly significant. The unknown nature of his whereabouts is reinforced further by Ysbaddaden, additionally stating that 'Mabon will never be found – no one knows where he is',<sup>9</sup> stressing the difficulty of the task. However, the key to this search appears that while no man may know his location, another, older creature might. As such, four men including Gwrhyr who knows 'all languages'<sup>10</sup> including that of some birds and beasts, are sent to locate Mabon, travelling until they encounter the Blackbird of Cilgwri.

When Gwrhyr asks the blackbird if she knows anything of Mabon, she clearly demonstrates her great age in her reply:

'When I first came here, there was a smith's anvil here, and I was a young bird. No work has been done on it except by my beak every evening. Today there's not so much of it as a nut that is not worn away. God's vengeance on me if I have heard anything about the man you are asking after. However, what is right and proper for me to do for Arthur's messengers, I will do. There is a species of animal that God shaped before me. I will go there as your guide.'<sup>11</sup>

So begins the cycle of oldest animals, each in turn demonstrating its great age before admitting it knows nothing of Mabon and guiding the travellers to an even older creature who may have more information. The blackbird thus leads Arthur's men to the Stag of Rhedynfre who explains his life has been longer than that of an oak tree before taking them to see the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd. The owl in turn demonstrates its long lifespan by recounting the growth and subsequent destruction of two forests, adding that the third wood has now grown and the 'roots of my wings are mere stumps',<sup>12</sup> before leading the heroes to the Eagle of Gwernabwy. The eagle describes the erosion of a great rock during his lifetime to illustrate his extreme age, yet still he knows nothing of Mabon. He does, however, recount his attempt to catch a great salmon who almost caused his death in the process; the two eventually becoming allies whereupon the eagle pulled 'fifty tridents'<sup>13</sup> from the salmon's back, indicating its great size and ability. Finally, then, the searchers are led to the Salmon of Llyn Lliw, who has no need to verify the length of his life as he knows where Mabon may be. Thus he travels up river with Cai and Gwrhyr on his shoulders to Mabon's prison and Arthur's warriors besiege the fort until Mabon is released.

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 204.

The sequence of these animal guides demonstrates that each is not only older than living men but also more aged than the previous animal, until the salmon is reached. With such extended age comes great memory and more opportunity to acquire knowledge, yet none knows anything about the prisoner Mabon until the final, wisest animal is reached. It is clear that each of these animals plays an important role in the tale, assisting in the crucial task of finding and freeing the lost prisoner which in turn enables the razor of Twrch Trwyth to be got, the giant to be subsequently slain and Culhwch and Olwen to be wed. This oldest animals episode is comprised of several international motifs found within Stith Thompson's index, including the salmon as the oldest and wisest of animals,<sup>14</sup> magic salmon carrying heroes over water,<sup>15</sup> helpful animals<sup>16</sup> and the rescue of a lost person,<sup>17</sup> the latter of which, as Kenneth Jackson notes, only occurs in this particular version.<sup>18</sup> It has been demonstrated that tales of 'the oldest animals are common throughout the literature of the world, ancient and modern. Such legends are to be found in Jewish, Persian, Chinese and Hindu literature ; possibly in many others',<sup>19</sup> indicating the widespread nature of this motif. Furthermore, the 'legend itself, like so many other popular stories, came to Europe originally from India',<sup>20</sup> where it is found in 'fourth-century Indian Jatakas and in other Buddhist works and other early Eastern texts, where a dispute between the animals about their age is involved'.<sup>21</sup> This theme, then, of a group of extremely aged animals, 'is ultimately an oriental one',<sup>22</sup> although in 'the Asiatic versions, as was to be expected, the animals are different, and as a rule they number only three'.<sup>23</sup> It seems clear, then, that whilst occurring worldwide, this traditional tale varies with the telling, perhaps given different relevance for each particular culture which has embraced it yet still 'used to express unimaginably long periods of time'.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst such traditional narrative patterns may have originated outside Wales, then, they have clearly been well harnessed within early Welsh tradition, particularly in *Culhwch*

<sup>14</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Motif B124.1 [online].

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B175.1 [online].

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B300; see also B455.3 helpful eagle, B461.2 helpful owl and B474 helpful salmon [online].

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, Motif R130 [online].

<sup>18</sup> K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> E. Hull, 'The Hawk of Achill or the Legend of the Oldest Animals', p. 383.

<sup>20</sup> E.B. Cowell, 'The Legend of the Oldest Animals', p. 170.

<sup>21</sup> K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, pp. 76–77.

<sup>22</sup> A. Breeze, 'Siôn Cent, the Oldest Animals, and the Day of Man's Life', p. 70; A. Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 82.

<sup>23</sup> E. Hull, 'The Hawk of Achill or the Legend of the Oldest Animals', p. 383.

<sup>24</sup> J.K. Bollard, *Companion Tales to The Mabinogi. Legend and Landscape of Wales*, p. 118.

where the ‘poetic beauty of the episode of the oldest animals’<sup>25</sup> has been noted. Indeed, Rachel Bromwich comments that ‘the story-teller has with considerable artistry adapted the concept of creatures who are preternaturally long-lived in such a way as to illustrate and emphasize his rendering of the myth of *Mabon fab Modron*’<sup>26</sup> which, as indicated, is a critical aspect of the plot. Brynley Roberts has furthermore observed that ‘the delightful, leisurely, Oldest Animals episode is immediately followed by a swiftly moving account of Mabon’s release’, demonstrating the contrasting styles of the narrative and its dynamic changes in pace,<sup>27</sup> thus also indicating the importance of such motifs to narrative style and structure. Although this version of the oldest animals is the ‘earliest to be recorded in Wales’,<sup>28</sup> variants can be found elsewhere in early Welsh tradition occurring ‘independently of the search for Mabon’,<sup>29</sup> including a seventeenth-century manuscript which differs further in that the owl is given as the eldest creature.<sup>30</sup> Other popular versions focus on the marriage of the owl with one of the other birds<sup>31</sup> and some additionally incorporate the Toad of Cors Fochno as one of the animals.<sup>32</sup> *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* moreover records that the ‘Three Elders of the World’ are the ‘Owl of Cwm Cowlwyd, the Eagle of Gwernabwy, and the Blackbird of Celli Gadarn’,<sup>33</sup> highlighting the particular importance of these birds. The longevity of the oldest animals is also referred to in *cywyddau*<sup>34</sup> and comparable lists of ancient animals can also be found in Irish poetry<sup>35</sup> as well as the *Book of Lismore* where the stag, ouzel/blackbird, eagle and salmon are additionally listed together,<sup>36</sup> demonstrating the similarity between Welsh and Irish use of the tradition of the oldest animals in the context of longevity.

Other comparable Irish traditions feature the salmon of knowledge<sup>37</sup> where its wisdom, apparently gleaned by eating hazel nuts,<sup>38</sup> is acquired by Fionn mac Cumhaill when he

<sup>25</sup> G. Jones and T. Jones, *The Mabinogion*, p. xxi.

<sup>26</sup> R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Triads of the Island of Britain*, p. 235.

<sup>27</sup> B.F. Roberts, ‘*Culhwch Ac Olwen*, The Triads, Saint’s Lives’ p. 77.

<sup>28</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxii.

<sup>29</sup> K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, p. 77.

<sup>30</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxii.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. lxii; W.J. Thomas, *The Welsh Fairy Book*, pp. 163–164.

<sup>32</sup> R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxii; R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Triads of the Island of Britain*, p. 235; E.B. Cowell, ‘The Legend of the Oldest Animals’, p. 169; E. Hull, ‘The Hawk of Achill or the Legend of the Oldest Animals’, p. 379; W.J. Thomas, *The Welsh Fairy Book*, p. 164.

<sup>33</sup> R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Triads of the Island of Britain*, p. 235.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 235; R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxiii.

<sup>35</sup> E. Hull, ‘The Hawk of Achill or the Legend of the Oldest Animals’, p. 382.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 380; R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Triads of the Island of Britain*, pp. 236–237; A. Breeze, ‘Siôn Cent, the Oldest Animals, and the Day of Man’s Life’, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Motif B124.1.1 [online].

eats the salmon. Other tales include protagonists who pass through several successive animal transformations in order to prolong their lives and transmit the traditions and history of Ireland, such as Tuan mac Cairill who becomes a stag, boar, hawk/eagle and salmon<sup>39</sup> and Fintan mac Bóchra who similarly becomes a salmon, eagle and hawk/falcon.<sup>40</sup> In the tale of the Old Crow of Achill who is apparently hundreds of years old,<sup>41</sup> he kills an eagle chick in order to shelter in its place on an extremely cold night, after which he tricks the eagle into visiting a sequence of oldest animals to discover whether there has ever been a colder night, thus enabling him to safely escape from the nest. The eagle visits a blackbird and a bull, each of which demonstrates their great age, followed by the Blind Salmon of Assaroe who does remember a colder night, during which he became frozen in the ice and the Crow of Achill pecked out his eye. Too late, he informs the eagle that the crow must be masquerading as his chick.<sup>42</sup> In the poem *The Hawk of Achill* the bird in question is given as a hawk rather than a crow although we learn from his colloquy with Fintan that the salmon he encountered on the coldest night was in fact Fintan in salmon form,<sup>43</sup> who believed him to be a crow. Interestingly, it transpires that both Fintan and the hawk are equally old.<sup>44</sup> Similarities to the oldest animals episode in the *Mabinogion* are apparent, particularly in the relationship between the crow/eagle and the salmon, both being the oldest creatures. In *Culhwch* the eagle is furthermore said to be ‘the oldest animal in the world’<sup>45</sup> despite the fact that he leads the heroes to the salmon who is more knowledgeable. Other Irish variations on the tale include the story of the eagle of Léithín which also incorporates the coldest night theme through a series of ever-older creatures including a stag, blackbird and eagle, again culminating in the Salmon of Assaroe losing an eye, this time to the eagle. Kenneth Jackson notes that a similar tale is also known in Scotland and furthermore it ‘is obvious that the Eastern motif of the Oldest Animals was modified in

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<sup>38</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 191; A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 437; T. F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, p. 323; J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 376; N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland’s Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, p. 209.

<sup>39</sup> A. Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 82; A. Breeze, ‘Siôn Cent, the Oldest Animals, and the Day of Man’s Life’, p. 70; N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland’s Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, pp. 7 and 209; J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 414; R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxiii; R. Bromwich, *Triodd Ynys Prydein. The Triads of the Island of Britain*, p. 236.

<sup>40</sup> N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland’s Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, pp. 7 and 209; J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 230; R. Bromwich and D.S. Evans, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, p. lxiii; T.F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, p. 319.

<sup>41</sup> S. O’Sullivan, *Folktales of Ireland*, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 15–18; See also D. Hyde, *Legends of Saints and Sinners*, pp. 43–55 and pp. 57–62 where a variant version is also given.

<sup>43</sup> D. Hyde, *Legends of Saints and Sinners*, pp. 40–41; E. Hull, ‘The Hawk of Achill or the Legend of the Oldest Animals’, pp. 389–390.

<sup>44</sup> E. Hull, ‘The Hawk of Achill or the Legend of the Oldest Animals’, p. 389.

<sup>45</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 204.

the British Isles into a new form which appears in strikingly similar guise in Wales, Ireland, and Scotland',<sup>46</sup> although in the *Mabinogion* it has additionally become inextricably linked to the quest for the lost prisoner and the subduing of the giant.

In addition to the oldest animals, other helpful creatures linked to international motifs can also be found in *Culhwch*, where grateful animals<sup>47</sup> in the form of ants<sup>48</sup> come to Gwythyr's aid after he rescues them from the peril of death.<sup>49</sup> Cutting off their anthill at ground level he saves them from a fire,<sup>50</sup> resulting in their grateful offer that 'that which no man can recover, we will come and recover it for you'.<sup>51</sup> They thus fulfil the task of recovering the 'nine hestors of flax seed'<sup>52</sup> demanded by Ysbaddaden, recovered 'in full measure, with none missing except for a single flax seed, but the lame ant brought that before nightfall',<sup>53</sup> the latter of which Kenneth Jackson suggests is a 'charming additional touch' peculiar to Wales.<sup>54</sup> Proinsias Mac Cana additionally purports that such use of this motif, found elsewhere in Europe as well as Asia, illustrates the 'storyteller's flair'.<sup>55</sup> Clearly the grateful ants play their role in completing the giant's tasks and the episode is reminiscent of the enchanted mice in the corn in the third branch, where one mouse lags behind the others.

A further instance of the grateful animal motif can be found in *Owain* where the hero rescues a lion trapped by a snake.<sup>56</sup> Owain slays the serpent and is subsequently followed by the thankful lion, interestingly described as being 'pure white',<sup>57</sup> who proceeds to supply him with firewood and food, protecting both him and his horse so that 'no watchman ever guarded his lord as well as the lion guarded Owain'.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, even when twice left behind the lion finds a way to assist<sup>59</sup> Owain, so grateful is he, hence its behaviour has been compared to that of a loyal dog.<sup>60</sup> The rescue of the lion

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<sup>46</sup> K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, pp. 77–78.

<sup>47</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Motif B350 [online].

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B481.1 [online].

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B360 [online].

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B364.2 [online].

<sup>51</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 206.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 196 and 206.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>54</sup> K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, p. 79; See also O.J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 65.

<sup>56</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Motif B374.1 [online].

<sup>57</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 133.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>59</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Motif B431.2 helpful lion [online].

<sup>60</sup> S. Heinz, *Celtic Symbols*, p. 75.

and ‘its consequent attachment to him... including supplying him with food, [is] a story going back to classical times’,<sup>61</sup> harnessed in Owain to positive narrative effect where ‘the lion is used as a connecting link to bind together adventures’,<sup>62</sup> despite that fact there were no lions in medieval Wales. In contrast, the chained lion appearing in *Peredur* is simply slain by the hero.

Aspects of other traditional animal motifs within the *Mabinogion* have already been referred to in previous chapters, including birds acting as messengers<sup>63</sup> as seen in Branwen’s starling; congenital helpful animals born at same time as their master<sup>64</sup> as most likely discerned in the instance of Lleu and the foal; magic bird song bringing ‘joy and oblivion for many years’ with the power to wake the dead<sup>65</sup> as well as bring sleep<sup>66</sup> and dispel grief,<sup>67</sup> as seen in the singing birds of Rhiannon; devastating wild animals<sup>68</sup> such as the stag in *Geraint*; and pigs with venomous bristles<sup>69</sup> as found in *Culhwch*. Additionally horses with magic speed<sup>70</sup> such as those discussed in chapter one can be discerned along with the curious ability of Iddog’s horse.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, however, Jessica Hemming has highlighted the fact that Rhiannon’s horse is in fact a variation on the usual magically swift horse motif, being a horse with deceptive speed rather than being miraculously fast.<sup>72</sup> Each of these animal motifs have, however, been woven into the *Mabinogion* narratives in such a way as to enhance them, the animals in question all helping to forward the plots of the tales.

Other types of international motifs linked to animals found in the *Mabinogion* occur in other sections of the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* such as magic, deceptions, chance and fate, marvels and unnatural cruelty, all of which have numerous analogues elsewhere. Magic motifs include the transformation of man to wild beast<sup>73</sup> or bird,<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> R.L. Thomson, ‘Owain: Chwedl Iarllles Y Ffynnon’, p. 165.

<sup>62</sup> B.F. Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 125.

<sup>63</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Motif B291.1; see also B291.1.0.1 bird as letter carrier [online].

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B311 [online].

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B172.2 [online].

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B172.2.1 [online].

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B172.2 [online].

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B16.2 [online].

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B776.4.1 [online].

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B84.1.1; see also F989.17 marvellously swift horses [online].

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, Motif B184.1.5 [online].

<sup>72</sup> J. Hemming, ‘Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in “Pwyll”’, pp. 30–33.

<sup>73</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Motif D110; see also D113.1 man transformed to wolf, D114.1 man transformed to deer, D114.3 man transformed to wild swine, D114.3.2 man transformed to boar, D117.1 transformation of man to mouse and additionally Q584.2 transformation of a man to animal as fitting punishment [online].

many examples of which have been discussed in chapter three along with the instances of crops being stolen by magic means<sup>75</sup> and magic objects inducing dreams,<sup>76</sup> as seen perhaps in the ox skin in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. Deception motifs include animals made by magic being exchanged for real ones which subsequently disappear,<sup>77</sup> discerned in the intricate schemes of Gwydion in the fourth branch; while the most relevant motif of chance and fate is that of adventures resulting from pursuing animals<sup>78</sup> which can be perceived in several of the tales and is linked to the marvel of the Otherworld being reached by hunting an animal.<sup>79</sup> Further marvel motifs include black sheep turning white<sup>80</sup> as seen in *Peredur* and otherworldly beings riding either dapple-grey<sup>81</sup> or white horses.<sup>82</sup> The animals occurring in the *Mabinogion* as part of these motifs all clearly play their own particular roles in the relevant narratives, assisting the forward motion of each plot and at times impacting on specific characters, as has been discussed in the previous chapters.

The unnatural cruelty section of the index includes a particularly pivotal international motif relating to animals occurring as a central theme in the second branch; that of the mutilation of the horses.<sup>83</sup> Traditionally the horses' tails and manes are torn off with the skin 'in order to humiliate their owner',<sup>84</sup> although in the *Mabinogion* it is the horses' lips, ears and eyelids which are horrifically damaged in gruesome detail by an angry Efnysien until 'they were no good for anything',<sup>85</sup> in revenge for not being consulted in the matter of his sister's marriage. In this manner he significantly insults her new husband, Matholwch, with serious prolonged consequences. This traditional motif occurs in a similar fashion in the Norse *Hrólf's Saga* and can additionally be discerned in the Life of St Cadog where the saint 'maims the horses of a band of robbers'.<sup>86</sup> As has been discussed in chapter one, the sequence in the *Mabinogion* indicates the importance of both horses and honour and moreover is used as a device to set up the remainder of

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, Motif D170; see also D152.2 transformation of man to eagle and Q551.3.2.2 woman transformed into a bird as punishment [online].

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, Motif D2087.1 [online].

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, Motif D1584 [online].

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, Motif K139.1 [online].

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, Motif N7774 / N774.3 [online].

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, Motif F159.1 [online].

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, Motif F985.1 [online].

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, Motif F241.1.1.2 [online].

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, Motif F241.1.1.1 [online].

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, Motif S175 [online].

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, Motif S175 [online].

<sup>85</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 24.

<sup>86</sup> B. Miles, 'Branwen: A Reconsideration of the German and Norse Analogues', p. 19; see also S. Davies, 'Horses in the Mabinogion', p. 136.



the tale where Branwen is punished for her half-brother's misdeeds and a devastating war ensues.

Numerous other instances of narrative patterns from international traditional tales are also evident in the *Mabinogion*, such as the unique invulnerability<sup>87</sup> of Lleu in the fourth branch and the paradoxical tasks<sup>88</sup> associated with his downfall, including his being neither 'on horseback, nor on foot'<sup>89</sup> which is partially overcome using a goat. While it is clear that several of the motifs utilised in these tales involve animals in some way, many others are also harnessed such as the chaste friend<sup>90</sup> in the first branch, the magic mist<sup>91</sup> in *Geraint*, the forbidden door<sup>92</sup> in the third branch and the calumniated wife<sup>93</sup> in the tales of both Rhiannon and Branwen, although Rhiannon's calumination is also linked to the punishment of being ridden as a horse.<sup>94</sup> Although these folktale motifs mostly originated outside Wales, they have been effectively incorporated into Welsh literature, revealing 'something about the nature of the connection between these medieval Welsh stories and their cultural context'<sup>95</sup> and enhancing the dramatic themes of the Celtic material.

From the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* alone, it is clear that animals play important roles in many traditional tales around the world, wherever particular motifs may have originated. This is reflected in the *Mabinogion* where animals also have significant roles to play and indeed the use of such motifs in these tales serves to accentuate the narrative importance of these animals. Whilst the incorporation of international tale motifs in medieval Welsh literature reinforces the fact that such narratives have their origins in oral storytelling, influenced by story elements from outside Wales resulting from the 'migrating story-elements of traditional storytelling',<sup>96</sup> in the *Mabinogion* collection as it stands they are also utilised alongside wholly Celtic motifs stemming from both Wales and Ireland<sup>97</sup> and are skilfully used in a literary context where they enhance the tales and their underlying structure. Indeed, Juliette Wood has argued that

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<sup>87</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Motif Z310 [online].

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, Motif H1050 [online].

<sup>89</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 60.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, Motif T350 [online].

<sup>91</sup> S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Motif D902.1 [online].

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, Motif C611.1 [online].

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, Motif K2110.1 [online].

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, Motif Q493; see also Q482.4 [online].

<sup>95</sup> J. Wood, 'The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature', p. 38.

<sup>96</sup> A. Welsh, 'The Traditional Narrative Motifs of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*', p. 51.

<sup>97</sup> K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, pp. 127–128.

the authors of these tales made ‘a creative and very controlled’ use of such folklore sources, reworking them by ‘developing the dramatic possibilities and adding characterisation’.<sup>98</sup> A variety of international motifs can thus be discerned in the *Mabinogion*, many of which are connected with animals and all of which affect the narratives in which they appear. The varied animals linked to such motifs clearly play specific roles in the narratives, many acting as catalysts as has been discussed throughout this study. Perhaps, then, a general motif of ‘animal as catalyst’ can also be discerned within these tales.

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<sup>98</sup> J. Wood, ‘The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature’, p. 38.

## CONCLUSION: The Role of Animals in the *Mabinogion*

Numerous animals, whether real, enchanted or shape-shifted, can be found throughout the *Mabinogion*, forming a significant aspect of the collection as a whole in which they play a variety of roles which can all, in some way, be perceived as creating change. The animals in these tales can thus be understood to be catalysts, not only to the action and pace of the drama, but also to character growth and development. Animals enhance characterisation through their interactions with human protagonists, at times indicating their origins or social standing as well as particular attributes which are reflected in the ways the characters both use and respond to animals. The variable roles of animals as helpers, methods of transportation, battle, hunting and communication, and as key aspects of schemes of revenge, punishment and even naming, all point to the notion of animals as catalysts, precipitating change both for the characters associated with them and for the tales as a whole, assisting in the development of the plots and the momentum of the narratives.

One of the most basic functions of animals within the *Mabinogion*, involving the most prevalent creatures, is to act as a method of transportation. Horses thus provide a means of travel allowing protagonists in several tales to move from place to place as the drama of the narratives unfold, in addition to swiftly conveying messengers in *Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig*. Such a mode of travel also both allows and indeed regularly leads to pivotal meetings on horseback such as those seen in the first branch, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and *Chwedl Geraint ab Erbin*, often changing the life of the hero and leading to further adventures, therefore driving the tales forward. In such meetings the mounts of the characters are often described, denoting the otherworldliness or rank and status of their riders and even suggesting personality traits such as ‘high-spirited’ or ‘impatient’.<sup>1</sup> Prowess is further illustrated by fighting on horseback, notably in *Owain* or *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynnon* where horses can be seen to provide a significant means of combat. The importance and high status of horses further leads to the ability to insult a king in the second branch, where the cruel mutilation of his horses eventually fuels a devastating war.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 177.

Many animals in the *Mabinogion* occur and play roles in the recurrent activity of hunting which additionally pervades much medieval vernacular literature<sup>2</sup> and hunting animals, in the form of horses and hounds, are the most predominant creatures in the tales, reflecting their importance in medieval Wales. Such animals, as well as hunting hawks, are also given as gifts to promote good relationships as seen in the first branch, emphasising the desirability and significance of such animals. The importance of the hunt is repeatedly demonstrated in the collection, often for pleasure or as a way of life for the court leaders and their retinues, where prowess may be displayed in dangerous combat with ferocious wild creatures. The most common quarry in these tales are stags and wild boars, mirroring those creatures most hunted in the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> Often of a large size and an enchanted nature, such animals in the *Mabinogion* regularly lead hunters into unusual circumstances as seen in both the first branch and *Historia Peredur vab Efrwag*. Lead characters often become separated from their retinue in pursuit of such quarry, leading to adventures, frequently of a supernatural or otherworldly nature, where the hero is tested; indeed, the hunt is at times used as a method of facilitating adventures in the Otherworld, a common theme in medieval literature.<sup>4</sup> Marvellously swift horses and hounds are also periodically utilised, particularly in the hunts forming the central portion of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, where they enable the successful outcome of the quest for the treasures held between the ears of the metamorphosed Twrch Trwyth. As catalysts for adventure, the animals involved in these hunts are also catalysts for change, advancing both plots and character maturation.

Animals are also linked to the birth, naming and death of heroes in the *Mabinogion* where it can clearly be seen that a wren acts as a catalyst to the naming of Lleu and pigs lead to the downfall of Pryderi. Furthermore swine play a central role in the birthing, naming and marrying of Culhwch, whose tale begins in a pig sty and culminates in a dangerous and ferocious boar hunt designed to cause his death. The hunt, however, is successful; the giant behind it is dispatched and Culhwch is married rather than killed. The comparison of Culhwch's bride, Olwen, to birds<sup>5</sup> enhances her narrative description and the meaning of names such as Gwalchmai<sup>6</sup> and even Arthur<sup>7</sup> moreover demonstrate

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<sup>2</sup> A. Smets and B. van den Abeele, 'Medieval Hunting', p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, pp. 38–40.

<sup>4</sup> D.H. Green, 'The Pathway to Adventure', pp. 185–186; See also M.J. Green, *Celtic Myths*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>5</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> The 'hawk of May' - J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 261.

<sup>7</sup> Possibly derived from bear - J. Mackillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 26; R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman and B.F. Roberts, *The Arthur of the Welsh. Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature*, pp. 5–6.

the often close links between the protagonists and animals, suggestive perhaps of their personalities or origins as demonstrated in the case of Culhwch.

Animals can furthermore be seen to play significant roles in the themes of revenge and punishment found in the *Mabinogion*. The magician Llwyd arranges for an enchanted white boar to lure Pryderi to his imprisonment in the third branch and temporarily transmogrifies his own retinue into mice in order to destroy Manawydan's crops.<sup>8</sup> These acts are carried out as a means of extracting revenge on Rhiannon and her kin for the duping and ill-treatment of Gwawl, beaten like a badger in the first branch. Furthermore Gwydion permanently transforms Blodeuedd into an owl in retribution for conspiring against her husband Lleu in the fourth branch, after earlier undergoing a similar but temporary punishment himself where, with Gilfaethwy, he was transmogrified into three successive pairs of animals for using Pryderi's swine as a means of inciting war so as to remove Math from court and rape Goewin in the ensuing chaos. They are moreover forced by Math to produce offspring together whilst in animal form,<sup>9</sup> an unusual yet perhaps fitting punishment for their behaviour. Clearly these themes revolve around the difficult relationships between men and women, with the incorporation of animal forms perhaps signifying the basic animal natures of some of the characters.<sup>10</sup> Such punishments, adding a moralistic aspect to the tales, are also discerned in *Culhwch* where several of the animals featuring in the giant's list of tasks turn out to be men transformed as penance for undisclosed sins. Interestingly, it is wild animals that are predominantly selected for such transmogrification - there are no instances of metamorphosis into dogs or horses and furthermore 'ordinary animals cannot turn into people'.<sup>11</sup> People do, however, voluntarily turn into animals for reasons such as communication and reconnaissance and such shape-shifting clearly illustrates 'the close linkage between people and beasts'<sup>12</sup> within the *Mabinogion*, additionally bridging the real and supernatural realms. Animals acting as a connection between worlds is further demonstrated in the otherworldly gift of the swine and indeed Rachel Bromwich suggests that in early Celtic sources 'domestic animals were generally thought of as having their origin in the Otherworld'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 39–46.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 52–54.

<sup>10</sup> J.E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, p. 143.

<sup>11</sup> N. Mac Coitir, *Ireland's Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> M. Green and R. Howell, *Celtic Wales*, p. 116.

<sup>13</sup> R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 397.

A further role fulfilled by several animals is that of directly assisting various characters. Such intentionally helpful animals include the grateful, protective lion in *Owain*, the ants and oldest animals that help fulfil tasks in *Culhwch* and the starling in the second branch who acts as Branwen's messenger, so aiding her rescue. Animals also assist in other ways in the *Mabinogion* where Rhiannon's birds soothe the survivors of war, Owain's ravens bravely fight in his battles and a dead ox facilitates Rhonabwy's dream. Additionally animals are described carrying goods such as the 'seven horses'<sup>14</sup> bearing loads in the third branch and the 'twenty-four mules'<sup>15</sup> carrying gold and silver in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. Many of the animals assisting the protagonists of these tales appear in tandem with international tale motifs which have been subsumed into the narratives, notably in the case of the oldest animals who demonstrate wisdom and longevity while significantly furthering the quest for Olwen. Such traditional and widespread motifs, many of which include animals, appear to have been incorporated and adapted to enhance the tales and underline the importance of the animals within the collection.

On a more general level, part of the role of animals within the *Mabinogion* is to enhance narrative style and structure. On a plot level they help to keep the tempo of the narratives moving by assisting in the forward motion of the tales, at times driving the stories onwards as in the 'breathless gallop... in parts of the Twrch Trwyth chase'.<sup>16</sup> The authors or redactors of these tales therefore perhaps harnessed animals at times as a way of changing the pace of the narrative as well as to better engage the reader or listener as the tales advance towards their conclusions. Indeed, Gwyn Jones has noted that 'the pages that tell of Mabon and the Oldest Animals, and of the hunting of the boar Twrch Trwyth, are among the most compelling in the *Mabinogion*',<sup>17</sup> whilst instances of shape-shifting are also particularly memorable. The range of animals, both wild and domestic, incorporated into these tales significantly adds to the appeal of the collection, from the swift horses and magical birds to the 'gigantic boars and tiny ants'.<sup>18</sup> Animals also serve to elucidate aspects of characterisation, particularly in the interactions of protagonists such as Gwydion, Pryderi, Manawydan, Efnysien and Matholwch with the animal world. An important aspect of the animals themselves is often their specific colouring, which not only underpins the structure of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* but also, in

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<sup>14</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>16</sup> P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> G. Jones, *Kings Beasts and Heroes*, p. 82.

<sup>18</sup> B.F. Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 51.

several of the tales, denotes the otherworldliness of the animal. Animals also occur in the narratives as part of onomastic explanations for place names and occasionally as a form of symbolism, as seen in the carved ‘red gold’ eagles<sup>19</sup> in *Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig*, the ‘image of a golden lion’ fastening Owain’s boots<sup>20</sup> and the serpent, lions, eagle, griffin and leopard decorating the pavilions and helmet crests described in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*,<sup>21</sup> which Mary Giffin suggests may be an aspect of heraldry.<sup>22</sup>

The importance of animals within the *Mabinogion* collection is further illuminated by their comparable occurrences elsewhere in Welsh literature as well as in Irish tradition where dangerous hunts, enchanted creatures and adventures involving animals also abound. The regular appearances of animals within such Celtic literature additionally underlines their significance not only for the medieval culture in which the tales were recorded, but also perhaps for the ancient Celts whose deep respect for these animals can be discerned from extant artwork, coinage and iconography.<sup>23</sup> Such creatures were conceivably ‘revered and admired for their particular qualities – whether it was ferocity, speed, sexual vigour and fertility, or simply their beauty and usefulness to humankind’,<sup>24</sup> perhaps also discernable in the Middle Ages. This respect for the animal world can moreover be perceived in the *Mabinogion*, where shape-shifting between human and animal forms suggests ‘there was no rigid barrier in the Celtic mind between the human and animal form’, implying that ‘animals were not considered to be significantly lower in status than humankind’.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst animals are particularly dominant in the earliest tales of the collection, they feature in various guises throughout, particularly in the form of horses, swine and varied birds, often appearing in the context of a hunt or quest. Indeed, animals are clearly of crucial significance in the *Mabinogion* where, in addition to generally enhancing the plots, pace and characterisation of the tales, making them more dynamic and accessible to the reader or listener, they also play an invaluable role as catalysts. Whether enabling meetings, combats or adventures, whether used for transportation, war, messages, gifts or hunting, or whether occurring as aspects of naming, revenge, punishment and

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<sup>19</sup> S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 104.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 220–224.

<sup>22</sup> Giffin, M., ‘The Date of the “Dream of Rhonabwy”’, p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, pp. 131–133; M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 167–168; M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 168.

<sup>24</sup> M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 132.

<sup>25</sup> M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 195.

metamorphosis, animals can be seen primarily as aspects of change and transformation within these narratives, each separate role leading back to their predominant and overriding narrative function as catalysts. As such their importance in the tales is immeasurable and the narratives would undoubtedly be considerably different and far less engaging without the animals to enhance them.



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