



Understanding Celtic Myths

An in-depth exploration of the medieval Welsh classic

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi,

containing the most ancient myths of Britain.

Thank you for your interest in this course. All of the information you need about taking part is provided here, but should you have any further questions, please email Gwilym at welshmythology@gmail.com.

Myths are not only sacred tales about gods and human origins; in the past, they have also been thought of as stories with a deeper meaning. So said the 4th century Greek philosopher, Sallustius, “. . . to conceal the truth by myths prevents the contempt of the foolish, and compels the good to practice philosophy.”¹ For some classical writers at least, the hidden truths of myth were revealed through ‘philosophy’, or a way of uncovering the deeper patterns and meanings of a tale.

The idea of a tale containing a deeper meaning is an old one. Countless cultures across the world have used storytelling as a way of conveying cherished ideas, philosophies and beliefs. Allegories, or tales with hidden meanings, have also been popular for the last few thousand years, and were used in a similar way to illustrate moral or philosophical truths. The Four Branches of the Mabinogi is similar (but not identical) to a traditional allegory. In some medieval allegories there are characters such as Folly or Virtue, just as in The Four Branches we find the character Pwyll, who’s name is also the Welsh word for discernment, deliberation, wisdom, caution and care. A more modern translation may be ‘mindfulness’.

But perhaps just like Sallustius’ myths, The Four Branches also contain hidden meanings. For example, no explanations are given for many of the wondrous events in The Four Branches, suggesting they contain what Pwyll himself calls ystyr hud, or ‘magical explanation’: a deeper, hidden meaning that needs interpreting before it can be understood.

It is of course difficult, if not impossible, to know how Medieval Welsh audiences would have interpreted The Four Branches, what meanings they would have found hidden in the tales. It’s very likely that many of them would have made sense of the tales by comparing them to other narratives, other legends, histories, myths and lore preserved in their culture. But our modern culture is very different to that of our ancestors. All we have left of their older, spoken culture is preserved in medieval writing, and within those pages, that oral tradition will only ever sound as an echo.

Yet by comparing The Four Branches with those other few traditional tales that were written down, we can begin to tease out common motifs, themes and characters. Only by comparing The Four Branches with these other tales can we stay within the limits of what the Medieval Welsh audience may have understood by these traditional tales.

[This course presents] The Four Branches of the Mabinogi as symbolic, almost allegorical, teaching tales, and focus on those characters and events that offer easiest access to the depths contained within. My hope is that by elucidating the tradition in which these tales arose, we can reach a greater understanding of these profound stories, perhaps the only myths of ancient Britain to survive intact.

from *Understanding Welsh Myths*, p. 1, G. Morus-Baird

¹ Sallustius, *On the Gods and the World*, I.III translated in Gilbert Murray, *The Five Stages of Greek Religion* (1925).

The course is spread over two days and participants can choose to either attend the first day only (£50) or the whole two days (£100). Below is a loose timetable:

Day 1:

10am - Welcome and introductions. What are your expectations?

11am - What are myths and symbolic narratives?

12pm - What is Celtic mythology?

12:30pm - Storytelling: *Pwyll in Annwfn*, with storyteller Milly Jackdaw.

1pm - Lunch (bring your own) and general conversation.

2pm - Storytelling: Comparative Tales, with Milly Jackdaw.

2:30pm - Interpreting the text, part 1.

3:30pm - Break.

4pm - Interpreting the text, part 2.

5pm - Finish.

Day 2:

10am - Storytelling: a section of *The First Branch*, read from Sioned Davies' translation.

10:30am - Storytelling: Comparative Tales, read from original sources.

11am - Interpreting the text, part 3.

1pm - Lunch (bring your own) and general conversation.

2pm - Storytelling: a section of *The First Branch*, read from Sioned Davies' translation.

2:30pm - Storytelling: Comparative Tales, read from original sources.

3pm - Interpreting the text, part 4.

4:30pm - Conclusions.

5pm - Finish.

What to do next . . .

1. Get yourself a copy of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, preferably the translation by Sioned Davies in *The Mabinogion* (OUP 2007), then read it; or at least the first branch, *Pwyll*. There is a Kindle edition available. Don't use the Lady Charlotte Guest translation.
2. Pay the non-refundable deposit 2 weeks before the course begins: £25 if you're only coming for the first day or £50 if you're coming for both days. There are a limited number of places, so pay as early as you can to reserve your place. You can pay either by Paypal: pay gwilym_morus@hotmail.com, or by bank transfer: Gwilym Morus, Co-operative Bank, acc. no. 07256776, sort code 08-93-00.
3. Please email welshmythology@gmail.com to let me know you've paid a deposit.
4. Pay the remaining sum on the first day; no cheques please.

Any questions, please get in touch. More information, (including free book, audio courses etc) can be found at welshmythology.com

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