

Mabinogion: first branch

The word "Mabinogi" originally designated only these four tales, which are really parts or 'branches' of a single work, rather than the whole collection.

Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, is the hero of the first branch; his story is told in three distinct episodes.

In the opening part he changes places with Arawn, the king of Annwn, for one year. Annwn was the underworld, also identified as the island of Gwales or Grassholme on the Pembrokeshire coast.

Pwyll wins the title Head of Annwn, and Arawn's undying friendship, by uniting the two warring kingdoms of Annwn when he defeats Arawn's rival, King Hafgan in combat.

The second part of the tale concerns Pwyll's return from Annwn. After his men fail to catch the beautiful maiden Rhiannon on her ambling horse which magically can not be caught up with. However, Pwyll does so simply by asking her to stop.

Rhiannon, the first of several strong women in the Mabinogi, is betrothed to Gwawl. Nonetheless, she falls in love at first sight with Pwyll and proposes an elaborate plan to enable her to marry Pwyll rather than Gwawl.

Pwyll follows her plan - which relies on Rhiannon's knowledge of Gwawl's weaknesses, his pride and lust for her - and traps Gwawl in a sack that can never be fully filled. Pwyll's men beat Gwawl while he is in the bag, and Rhiannon is left free to marry Pwyll.

In the third part, Rhiannon bears Pwyll a son. The child disappears on the night after his birth, even though six women are appointed to keep watch on the new mother and her child.

The women plot to smear the blood of puppies onto Rhiannon's face and hands. Rhiannon is accused of killing the child, and is forced to sit outside the castle in Narberth, Pembrokeshire as punishment. She must tell her story to passers-by, and offer to carry visitors and pilgrims on her back into the court.

Meanwhile, Teyrnion Twryf Liant, lord of Gwent-Iscoed, finds the baby on his doorstep after chasing a monster away from his home. He raises the boy as his own and names him Gwri Golden-hair.

When the child's resemblance to Pwyll becomes apparent, he is returned to his parents. Rhiannon re-names him Pryderi (Worry) after all the anguish he's caused. Her punishment is ended.



Mabinogion: second branch

The second story centres on the triangle of Bendigeidfran (meaning Bran the Blessed), the giant king of Britain, his sister Branwen, and their evil half-brother Efnisien (sometimes spelt Efnissyen).

Branwen is given in marriage to Matholwch the king of Ireland. Efnisien, enraged at not having been consulted about the marriage, mutilates Matholwch's horses in a horrific act of revenge.

Bendigeidfran pacifies the insulted Matholwch with new horses and gifts, including a magical cauldron that brings the dead back to life. Matholwch returns to Ireland with Branwen by his side.

Branwen becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, Gwern. But the shadow of the mutilated horses hangs over her, and the people of Ireland demand that their king avenge the disgrace brought by Efnisien.

She is banished to the kitchen of Matholwch's castle, where she sleeps and works each day. Each day Branwen is beaten by the bloody hands of the butcher. She trains a starling to take a letter to Bendigeidfran at Caer Seint (Caernarfon) to let him know of her humiliation.

Bendigeidfran gathers his army to invade Ireland and rescue Branwen. His men cross the Irish Sea in ships, but Bendigeidfran is able to wade across, such is his height.

Matholwch tries to make peace, offering to give the kingship of Ireland over to Branwen's son Gwern, and to build him a new palace. At the coronation feast the Irish hang 100 deerskin bags in the new banqueting hall. The bags, supposedly containing flour, actually hold armed Irish lords.

Efnisien, still feeling insulted, foils the plot by crushing the men's skulls as they hid. He throws Gwern headlong into a fire, ruining the chances for peace.

Fighting breaks out. Seeing that the Irish use the magical cauldron to revive their dead, Efnisien hides beneath a pile of Irish bodies. He is thrown into the cauldron, and breaks it into pieces by pushing against the sides. The strain costs him his life.

With the Irish defeated, just seven Welsh soldiers survive the battle, including Bendigeidfran, his brother Manawydan, and Pryderi. Bendigeidfran, mortally wounded by a poisoned spear in his foot, orders the soldiers to cut off his head and take it to be buried in London facing towards France, ensuring that the country will never be invaded from the sea.

Branwen goes with them, but her heart breaks with sadness when they get back to Wales and she dies. The seven soldiers travel to Harlech with the still-living head, where they stay for seven years feasting and listening to the birds of Rhiannon to make them forget their pain and loss.

Then they travel to the island of Gwales, where they stay in a royal palace for another eight years. One day a soldier opens a door looking out on Cornwall, and they remember their pain and their lost friends. The men then set out for London to bury Bendigeidfran's head.

In Ireland, meanwhile, five pregnant women survive. Their children repopulate the nation.



Mabinogion: third branch

Manawydan is one of the seven survivors of the [second branch](#). At Pryderi's suggestion, he marries Rhiannon, widow of Pwyll and Pryderi's mother - mentioned in the [first branch](#).

Manawydan and Rhiannon become close friends with Pryderi and his wife Cigfa. One day they take a walk to the throne of Arberth (Gorsedd Narberth) to look over the land where a mist of enchantment falls on them.

When the mist lifts, the kingdom of Dyfed is deserted - everyone and everything has disappeared without trace. They search for two years throughout Dyfed but find no humans or animals.

Manawydan suggests they earn a living making saddles in England. The saddles are so beautiful and well made that, before long, the other saddlers of Hereford plot to kill Pryderi and Manawydan and Pryderi.

Although Pryderi wants to stay and fight, Manawydan suggests they move elsewhere. They make shields, shoes and saddles, and but again are driven away by tradesmen as they travel from town to town. At Manawydan's suggestion they move back to Arberth.

One morning while out hunting with their hounds they come upon a shining white boar. The animal leads them to a huge castle which appears from nowhere in the forest.

The hounds follow the boar into the fort and Pryderi, ignoring Manawydan's warning, follows them. The fort is deserted inside and Pryderi sees a golden cauldron hanging over a well and, reaching out to take hold of it, becomes stuck to it.

Meanwhile, Manawydan returns to the court at Arberth. Disgusted with his disregard for her son, Rhiannon rushes to help Pryderi. She finds him unable to speak, and she too becomes stuck to the cauldron. At nightfall the fort disappears with them inside.

Manawydan leaves for England with Cigfa to work as a shoemaker. Again, his shoes are much in demand, and the shoemakers of the town plot to kill him. Driven away, Manawydan and Cigfa return to Dyfed.

Manawydan becomes a farmer and sows three fields of wheat. At harvest time he goes to reap the first, but it is stripped bare during the night. The following day he goes to reap the second field, but it too is stripped bare.

He keeps watch on the third field the next night and, at midnight, sees a horde of mice attacking the crops. Manawydan manages to catch a fat, slow mouse which he decides to hang for eating his crops.

He goes to kill it on the throne of Arberth, where he meets a cleric and a priest who offer him money for the mouse's life. A bishop appears and pleads with Manawydan, but he won't free the mouse. When the bishop asks Manawydan to name his price, he asks for the spell on Dyfed to be lifted and for Rhiannon and Pryderi to be released.

The bishop is Llwyd, son of Cil Coed, a friend of Rhiannon's jilted lover Gwawl from the first branch of the Mabinogi. He put Dyfed under the spell to avenge the humiliation of Gwawl.

The mouse is revealed to be Llwyd's pregnant wife, and the rest of the mice are her ladies-in-waiting and his soldiers who were sent to destroy Manawydan's fields.

As a result of Manawydan's patience and resourcefulness, the spell is lifted and Dyfed is restored.



Mabinogion: fourth branch

The final and most complex branch of the four takes place in and around the Lleyn peninsula.

As Pryderi is governing Dyfed, Gwynedd is ruled by Math, son of Mathonwy.

Math's nephew Gilfaethwy has fallen in love with Math's beautiful foot-maiden Goewin. Gwydion, a magician, conspires to start a war so Gilfaethwy can be with her.

Gwydion steals some special pigs, a gift from the king of the Other World, from Pryderi to give them to Math. He then turns toadstools into 12 horses and 12 hounds, which he swaps for the pigs, though the following day they turn back into toadstools.

The cheated Pryderi assembles his army to get his pigs back from Gwydion. Math sets out to meet Pryderi's attack, yet while he's away from his court, Gilfaethwy rapes Goewin in Math's bed.

A truce is called after the battle. Pryderi, realising that Gwydion is his real enemy, fights him hand-to-hand at Tremadog Bay. Pryderi is killed when Gwydion uses magic against him. Math returns to his court, and Gwydion and Gilfaethwy slip away.

Math promises to marry Goewin after she reveals that Gilfaethwy has raped her. He turns Gilfaethwy into a hind and Gwydion into a stag, and bans them food and drink within his kingdom.

Each year for the next three years, Math turns them into different animals and they're forced to give their young to Math. He turns their offspring into boys: Bleiddwn, Hyddwn and Hychdwn the Tall.

After three years, Math turns his nephews back to human form. He asks them to recommend another maiden to rest his feet on, and Gwydion suggests his sister Arianrhod.

When Math uses magic to test Arianrhod's virginity she reveals a golden-haired child, Dylan, who flees to the sea. Arianrhod runs away in disgrace but drops something small, which Gwydion hides in a chest at the foot of his bed.

One morning he wakes to hear a child crying. Inside the box he finds a baby boy, who is looked after by a woman in the town. By the time the child is four, he's bigger than one twice his age.

One day Math follows Gwydion to Arianrhod's castle where he tells her that the boy is her son. She refuses to acknowledge or name the boy. The following day Gwydion conjures a ship out of seaweed and leather and he and the boy sail to Caer Arianrhod near Dinas Dinlle.

Math changes their appearance to prevent Arianrhod from recognising them. Once in view of the fort they begin making beautiful shoes on the deck of the ship. Arianrhod sees the shoes and orders them to make a pair for her.

As Gwydion measures her feet, a wren lands on the ship's deck. The boy aims a needle at the bird's leg and breaks it. Arianrhod comments that 'the fair boy has a deft hand', which provides his name: Llew Llaw Gyffes (fair skillful hand). Angry at being tricked into naming the boy, Arianrhod swears that he'll never carry weapons unless she gives them to him.

When Llew grows up Gwydion disguises them as storytellers and they trick Arianrhod into believing the country is at war. In panic, she gives the boy armour and weapons. When she realises who they are she swears that Llew will never have a human wife.

Gwydion and Llew go to Math and tell him about Arianrhod's curse. They create a wife for Llew out of the flowers of the oak, the meadowsweet and the broom from the forest, naming her Blodeuwedd. Llew and Blodeuwedd marry and Math gives them the lands of Eifionidd and Arduwy to rule.

They move their court to Mur Castell, overlooking Trawsfynydd. Soon afterwards Blodeuwedd falls in love with a neighbouring lord, Goronwy Pefr of Penllyn, and they plot to kill Llew.

Llew is no ordinary mortal. He cannot be killed inside a house, nor outside one, on horseback, or on foot. Blodeuwedd tricks him into revealing that can be killed only by a spear which must be a year in the making, but he must be standing with one foot on a trough built on the side of a river with a roof over it, with the other foot on the back of a billy goat.

Blodeuwedd tells Goronwy, who begins work on the spear. A year later she asks Llew to show her how he should stand in order to be killed. As he does, Goronwy throws the spear at him, but Llew turns into an eagle and flies away.

Goronwy goes to live with Blodeuwedd and takes control of Llew's land. Gwydion is heartbroken, and searches all over Wales until he finds Llew perched in an oak tree in the Nantlle valley below Snowdon.

Gwydion changes Lleu back to human form but he's weak through illness, and Gwydion carries him back to Math's court.

When fully recovered, Lleu plans revenge on Blodeuwedd and Goronwy Pefr. Blodeuwedd tries to run away but Gwydion catches her at Llyn Morwinion. He turns her into an owl, ensuring that other birds will attack her if she shows her face in daylight again.

Gwydion and Lleu overcome Goronwy, making him stand in the same position as Lleu did when the spear was thrown. Lleu does, however, allow Goronwy to use a stone as a shield. Lleu throws the spear so that it pierces the stone and kills Goronwy.

The stone is said to still exist, at Llech Ronw in the Cynfal Valley.