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Women Outlaws in Medieval Welsh Literature

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WOMEN OUTLAWS IN MEDIEVAL WELSH LITERATURE



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Rhiannon from *The First Branch Pwyll Pendueic Dyuet of The Four Branches of The Mabinogi*



Branwen from *The Second Branch Branwen uerch Lŷr of The Four Branches of The Mabinogi*

Results:

Calumniated Wife

The Calumniated Wife motif is used in literature to express different aspects of a woman, but in the case of *The Four Branches of The Mabinogi* the motif is made to represent the characters of Rhiannon and Branwen as foreigners that give birth to "supernatural" children and must be punished for that. Both women are accused and punished for their actions, making them to be some sort of "beasts" or monsters." Both women are associated with the Calumniated Wife motif is some way but are put in vastly different scenarios.

Each of these characters is put into a situation where they are unwelcome, and both endure extreme punishments. Rhiannon's child is stolen from her and she is framed for killing the child. Rhiannon has a strong connection with horses throughout the story, which draws a connection between her being some form of a beast and being punished in this way. Branwen is punished by being driven away from court. Rhiannon is much more assertive and receives a harsher punishment, while Branwen is much more passive and is reunited with her family as her child is born before she is punished and is reunited with her family, but however does end up murdering her son later in the story and dying herself.



Rhiannon from *The First Branch Pwyll Pendueic Dyuet of The Four Branches of The Mabinogi*



Branwen from *The Second Branch Branwen uerch Lŷr of The Four Branches of The Mabinogi*

Gender Roles in Other Literature

There are other instances in literature where women figures are treated in similar ways as Rhiannon and Branwen, specifically in the realm of domestic violence. For example, Rhiannon can be looked at alongside Mary Magdalen in that they are both ambiguous and divine figures that have maternal instincts. Both women are taken advantage of as well domestically.

Other scholarship also mentions examples of gender roles in this time period written in literature in stories such as...

- "In the Anglo-Saxon *Apollonius of Tyre*, for instance, a king's sexual violation and possession of his daughter precipitates another king's acquisition of wife, child, and geopolitical might.
- In the Old French *Vie de saint Gregoire*, the sociospiritual crisis of mother-son incest catalyzes the sequence of events that culminate in Gregory's election as pope.
- In *The Seven Sages of Rome*, a woman's desire for her step-son and her false accusations of rape against him justify the father's show of power over the son and finally inspire the father's affirmation of his son as heir to his kingdom.

Gender Roles in Welsh Society

Women had very specific expectations of how they were supposed to act all over the world over time, in this case in Welsh Law, women had certain expectations to uphold when it came to aspects of their lives such as marriage, children, and sex.

Results cont.

Gender Roles in Welsh Society cont.

Some of these laws and expectations included...

- Different kinds of marital unions such including gift by kin, rape, and elopement were recognized by Welsh Law where the most respectable marriages were those that a girl was given to a man by her kin and was expected to be a virgin (Cartwright 56).
- Legally, a union that did not have a woman's consent in a situation that involved issues like rape, abduction, or an unwelcome marriage carried much less weight compared to a marriage where a woman did consent (Nugent 184).
- There were other laws in Welsh society that outlined what should happen to women if they are unfaithful to their husbands, say something "shameful" to their husbands, or what can be shared with her husband (money, land, etc.) (*Hywel Dda* 93)

Conclusion: Both Rhiannon and Branwen are in a similar world and are treated in similar ways but have very different personalities and attitudes. Rhiannon is an Otherworldly figure who stands up for what she needs and does not let her punishment define her future. Branwen sticks to the standard expectations for a woman marrying a King, and yet is still punished, but is redeemed. Branwen ends up caving into the pressure and killing her own son, resulting in her own grief related death. Both women can step outside of the stereotypes for women in Welsh society in some way or another, and both fit into the Calumniated Wife motif but are still able to be their own characters and bring unique qualities to *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*.

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Introduction: This project seeks to analyze two women in a Welsh text, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, written in the late 11th to early 12th century, where in the first story, *Pwyll Pendueic Dyuet*, Rhiannon is from the Otherworld and is very assertive and strong, and stands up for herself by marrying a mortal. In the second story, *Branwen uerch Lŷr*, Blanche (also known as Branwen) is quite passive, sticking to the standard expectations and marrying an Irish King.

Topics of research for the project will include...

- the idea of the Calumniated Wife motif that suggests women as foreigners
- gender roles in other literature at this time and how women are seen and represented
- the ways that women were treated in the time period that *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* was written in the area it was written

The overall goal is to compare two characters within the same text to see how they fit within what the typical woman in literature should be and how they break the barriers or stereotypes using scholarship, Welsh laws, and ideas such as the Calumniated Wife to provide an overall insight of the text.

Methodology:

- **New Criticism**, also known as close reading both stories to analyze each character as well as various articles about the motif of Calumniated Wife, how gender was used in other literature, and Welsh Laws about gender roles and the expectations that women had at the time *The Four Branches of The Mabinogi* was written all in order to have a bigger picture of this text and what the women represent.
- **Historical Background** of the ways in which women were treated and expected to act in Wales in order to gain perspective of how the women in these stories acted in comparison to what they were expected to be like.
- **Compare and Contrast** of the characters of Rhiannon and Branwen (or Blanche) in relation to society's expectations for women in order to analyze each character deeper.

