



University of Victoria

Enchanted Avians: Cataloguing & Interpreting Birds’ Presences in Medieval Welsh Literature

AUTHOR & AFFILIATIONS

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“Let it not seem absurd to anyone to learn a lesson of virtue from birds.”
- Saint Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne (Crane 171)



Image from Medieval Bestiary in MS. Bodley 764, fol. 79v, Oxford Bodleian Library

Bird Cataloguing

- Branwen & Bendigeidfran: The Raven Siblings
 - Siblings' names translate from Welsh to raven or crow
- The Birds of Rhiannon
 - Funerary birds associated with Rhiannon, queen or goddess in Wales
- Lleu's Eagle Ascension
 - Transforms into an eagle after being deceived by his wife
- Blodeuwedd's Feathered Fate
 - Transformed into owl as punishment, and her name becomes the modern Welsh word for owl

...in tempalium successibus quasi pede pacifico blande ingreditur: miseris tandem animas tanquam pede rapaci predo cruenta rapit & dispergit.



Image from Medieval Bestiary in MS. Bodley 764, fol. 60r, Oxford Bodleian Library

A Note on *The Mabinogi*

The Mabinogi is a collation of 11 Medieval Welsh prose tales collated from The White Book of Rhydderch and The Red Book of Hergest. Lady Charlotte Guest completed the collation in 1845, bringing *The Mabinogi* to a wide English audience for the first time.

Methodology

From dragons to fairies, otherworldly and enchanting creatures fill Medieval Welsh literature. Among these fae-like creatures, there is one species all readers of the material are familiar with: birds. Looking specifically at *The Mabinogi*, this catalogue illustrates how Medieval Wales's nature and magic intersect in these enchanting avians who flit between forests and folklore.

The Wild & The Rewild

As Crane argues, “[birds assert their] ownership of [the] text and its entire context” (139) claiming a power over literature and authorship with their songs. *The Mabinogi's* interactions preserve a nature centric literature that empowers the birds as active subjects and authors. Rewilding's restorative process requires something to return to, and contemporaries can learn from these old ways of interacting with and respecting nature. Exceeding interpretation and objectification, Medieval Wales respects nature as equal in authorship to the human scribe fostering a unique literary relationship to nature. Unusual in this case, *The Mabinogi's* authors are unknown, but the birds' names are preserved. From its base epistemology in authorship, literature begins relearning a “conceptual restorationism that reorients the denaturalized reader [...] to an artifactual version of environment” (Abberly et al. 207). From this medieval bird field guide, contemporary nature writing learns how to rewild literature from *The Mabinogi's* wild. Whether that return goes back to *The Mabinogi's* woods in Dyfed or other less magical woods, *The Mabinogi's* birds continue teaching humans how to reconnect with nature and themselves.

“Nature, the real world existing beyond our description of it,
contains no such abstractions or ideas.”

-Tom Tyler, *Ciferae* 94

Consider the Birds: Or what do Medieval Welsh birds have to do with anything?

The seemingly distant text becomes hauntingly crucial to the relearning of nature's role in culture and literature. Somehow, these birds become informants that guide the “re-” part of rewilding. Contemporary readers and writers can learn from Brânwen, Bendigeidfran, Rhiannon, Lleu, and Blodeuwedd how a meaningful relationship to nature emerges. Medieval Wales has been said to embody the “broad ecological understanding of the interconnectedness of human and non-human life” (Abberly et al. 198) that contemporaries seek. From *The Mabinogi's* birds, the contemporary reader learns the old ways of interacting with nature which can transform the anthropocentric focus of the current world. These birds imbue life into the text and breathe their anima into Medieval Welsh and contemporary culture, fostering a literature deeply interwoven with nature and animals—a truly wild literature.

Bibliography
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Image from Medieval Bestiary in MS. Bodley 764, fol. 76r, Oxford Bodleian Library

Magical Naturalism in Medieval Wales

From eagles to starlings, *The Mabinogi's* birds blend the relationship between human and animal—particularly the avian—forming magical naturalism: a process that integrates magic and nature into literature. I use the term “Magical Naturalism” to describe culture and nature's deep and often mystified relationship in Medieval Wales. Exceeding the traditional fable which “presses its beasts into human shapes” (Crane 44), the birds of Medieval Wales meld with humans in physical forms overthrowing expected anthropocentric transformations as a type of animism. Throughout human history, philosophers theorized a binary between animals and humans to “define humanity's special difference and closeness to God” (Augustine qtd. in Crane 44) which Medieval Welsh literature resists. The text binds the animal and human together. The birds' autonomies illustrate cultural understandings that “[respect] the difference between human and animal” (Tyler 20) rather than confining animals to literary cages.