



The Classic Book I'd like to Rewrite and Why

Jonathan Edwards

I KNOW IT'S BEEN DONE and done, by Matthew Francis and Owen Sheers, Tishani Doshi and Meirion Jordan, Alan Garner and Lady Charlotte Guest, in poetry and prose, faithfully and fantastically. But the book I'd like to rewrite is *The Mabinogion*.

The thing is that the stories in these tales are wonderful products of the imagination, inventive and fantastical, resonant for human beings, whenever they are born. My *Mabinogion* might have only two stories, but each of them seems enough to sustain a novel.

My favourite story in *The Mabinogion* is that of Bendigeidfran's magic cauldron. After the King of Ireland, Matholwch, has his horses mutilated in a horrific attack, Bendigeidfran attempts to appease him by giving him a series of gifts. The most interesting of these is a magic cauldron: if the bones of someone are put into the pot, that person will be reincarnated, appear alive again in the world. But the kicker is, that they won't be able to speak.

In my version, I would want to tease out all the repercussions of this, because the nature of death and what it's like has bothered everyone, from religious leaders to Hamlet, caused Walt Disney – according to popular myth – to try cryogenics and caused writers to try to survive death by their work. Anyone who comes back from the dead is going to have a secret of great human importance and also, commercial value — imagine the bidding war and the intellectual property rights. I also thought it was



incredibly convenient in the original tale that the reincarnated person couldn't speak, but it needn't be a problem in the reinvented story. The first person I would get the characters to reincarnate of course, would be the village's greatest poet, and when he came back I would get them to give him a pen and paper, a luxurious pad to live in, the finest food and drink that money could buy. I'd get them to give him a month to write his poem, expressing the reality of the experience of death. What would his poem be like? Would he even write one, or would he slob about in a smoking jacket all day, sipping fine wines, until the month was up? What would the whole thing tell us about the nature of poets, never mind the nature of death? There's opportunity here for satire, suspense and allegory. There's also an opportunity to have a party in writing this story.

The second story I'd like to spend time with is that of Rhiannon. In the original, her newborn son is abducted in the night and, filled with anxiety, her servingwomen kill a puppy, place bones at the scene and smear blood on Rhiannon's face. When she wakes, they say she has killed her child and eaten it and, while this is daftly macabre, Rhiannon's experiences can be rendered emotively and realistically. Among things I find rich about this story is the nature of the punishment: Rhiannon has to wait every day at the entrance to the castle and tell any passing travellers her story, as well as offering to carry them on her back. I love this story for, among other reasons, the fact that it is about grieving and loss, and also about storytelling as a path to redemption. Rhiannon's suffering resonates for anyone going through grief: her punishment is an early sort of talking therapy, and her plight and response to it makes her a fascinating character.

The Mabinogion, then, has some fantastical and imaginative tales, and I'm especially drawn to the way it deals with loss and with grief, which I sometimes think that literature, in all its desire to preserve and record, is always really about. In *The Mabinogion*, the imagination and storytelling become ways of grappling with the reality of death, and I think the mix of the really quite unhinged imaginative world of these stories, with their pretty serious treatment of timeless themes, would be fantastic to spend



further time with. I'm just waiting now, for the call from the various publishers, the inevitable bidding war, or else just that magic cauldron, to show up at my door.