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BOOK REVIEWS

Patrick K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1977, Pp. xii, 205. Bibliography, Glossary, Index. Hardcover, \$10.00; paperback, \$2.45.

The *Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* constitutes the first new literal translation of the "Four Branches of the Mabinogi," "Culhwch and Olwen," and "Lludd and Llewelyn" in almost thirty years since Gwyn and Thomas Jones first published their translation, *The Mabinogion*, in 1948.¹ This is the first translation of "Gwion Bach" and "Taliesin," the remaining tales in this collection, to appear since Lady Charlotte Guest included them in her translation of *The Mabinogion* originally published between 1838 and 1849.

Although the Charlotte Guest and Jones and Jones translations of *The Mabinogion* were reprinted several times in the ensuing years, they have often been difficult to obtain. Both translations attempted to preserve the archaic quality of the original, for example, by using "thou" and "wilt" and awkward constructions taken directly from the Middle Welsh, which often obscured the meaning of difficult passages. Ford's translation, which uses the plural forms of the second person throughout, avoids much of the "quaintness" of the original translations and manages to deliver the tales in a fluid and readable manner.

Ford indicates his sensitive and intuitive reading of the original tales in both his translations and interpretations. In the introduction he indicates that one of his principal interests is in the psychological finesse with which the storyteller characterized the relationships between men and women in the tales. Quite frequently there is a humorous element in the dialogues, which Prof. Ford has not failed to suggest by the style of his translations. In the tale, "Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed," the hero, Pwyll, unsuccessfully pursues the supernatural horse-woman, Rhiannon,

whose horse maintains its distance ahead of Pwyll no matter how fast he rides his horse until he succeeds in persuading her to stop by saying: "Maiden, for the sake of the man you love most, wait for me!" To this she responds: "I will wait gladly, and it had been better for the horse if you had asked it long ago" (p. 44). Ford's skill as a translator becomes clear if one compares this with the more cumbersome style of Jones and Jones's translation of the same passage: "Maiden, for his sake whom thou lovest best, stay for me." To which Rhiannon responds: "I will gladly, and it had been better for the horse hadst thou asked this long since" (Everyman ed., p. 11). It is primarily because of the more colloquial tone of Ford's translation that the comic irony of Rhiannon's statement is allowed to come to the surface.

In the tale of "Culhwch and Olwen," one is confronted by the long and burdensome passage in which the hero, Culhwch, when requesting his uncle, Arthur, to find the giant's daughter, Olwen, for him, invokes the names of all of Arthur's warriors as warrantors. This passage extends over some six pages, and can be extremely tedious to read through. Ford manages to greatly alleviate the difficulty by providing translations of many of the warriors' epithets, e.g., "Esgeir Gulhwch Gonyon Cawn with the stinging stalks," "Gofwy son of Echel Morddwyd Twll of the pierced thigh," so that the reader has a sense both of the often rich alliteration of the original, as well as the literal meaning of the epithet. In the earlier translations of the tale, either the original epithet or its literal translation was usually sacrificed or placed in a footnote, which either created a discontinuity or else left the reader with an unsatisfied feeling.

Although the tales of "Gwion Bach" and "Taliesin" were treated as a single story by Lady Guest, Ford shows that the two sections contain very different material, and gives good reason for considering them as separate tales, although linked by the presence of the same central character. "The Tale of Taliesin" is perhaps the most difficult story in Welsh tradition to translate in a lucid and coherent manner, mainly because the prophetic poems (said to have been composed and recited by the legendary sixth-century poet, Taliesin), are found in the tale in a highly-fragmented state. As with the poem, "Cad Goddeu," translated in an appendix to the work, these poems have long remained obscure for Celtic scholars. In his translation of both the Taliesin poems and "Cad Goddeu," which describes a mythic battle (*cad*) fought by trees (*goddeu*) transformed into warriors, Ford has been able to bring some order to the chaos.

The general introduction and head-notes for each tale provide valuable discussions of the stories, both from a mythological and literary perspective. Ford provides interpretations of the tales which take into consideration comparative material not only from Irish, but from other Indo-European traditions as well (e.g., his discussion of "Lludd and Lleuelis.") On the basis of comparison with several Irish tales he shows that there probably existed at one time a common Celtic myth "wherein the sea-god" (represented by Manawydan in the *Mabinogi*) "mated with the horse-goddess" (Gaulish Epona; represented by Rhiannon in the *Mabinogi*), which survives in a fragmented form in the first and third branches.

The critical apparatus also includes a select bibliography of important works dealing with the tales and an index and glossary of the proper names occurring in the *Mabinogi*. Ford has performed the service of compiling an index which allows the reader to find a particular personage from among the myriad of names found in the tales, greatly facilitating the scholarly study of these tales.

This work will undoubtedly furnish an invaluable contribution to the field of medieval literature. The translations are of equal use to both the general reader and the more specialized student of Middle Welsh or of folklore and mythology. As Ford points out, this volume is not meant to replace Jones and Jones' *Mabinogion*, which contains translations of five tales not included in the present collection, but *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* will certainly provide a useful, and much-needed, adjunct to the earlier work.

1. The other recent translation, *The Mabinogion* (Penguin, 1976), by Jeffrey Gantz, is not intended as a literal rendition of the Welsh texts, and contains a liberality of spelling and diction which would render difficult its use by a serious student of the tales.

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Donald R. Howard. *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Univ. of California Press, 1976. Pp. 403. Illustrations. Hardcover, \$15.00.

Donald Howard's book, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, both intrigues and maddens. It intrigues because of the many fascinating subjects the author brings under discussion. It maddens for the same reason. Howard seems to have the same propensity for *curiositas*, or "wandering by the way," that afflicts the Canterbury pilgrims. We get courses in medieval theories of memory, in rose-window design, in real pilgrimages to Canterbury, in manuscript initials, in book-making, "and much, much more." No matter; it's all interesting, even if the question "How did we get *here*?" keeps nudging itself into one's consciousness as one reads.

With such *richesses* of subjects, I can only mention a few that seemed most promising to me. Howard contends that the poem is "unfinished but complete" (quoting Northrop Frye), that Chaucer never meant to write 120 tales and that he never envisioned a return trip after the poem had taken shape in his mind. The pilgrimage is a one-way journey, starting in the morning and drawing to a close as the sun goes down, thus suggesting a parallel with the human life-cycle. Chaucer wrote a beginning, an ending, and some middle fragments, which Howard groups into tales of civil, domestic, and private conduct. It follows from this theory