

Kirk Thomas

Prof. Owen Thomas

Study and Research Methodology

The Hierarchies of Reading – The Encyclopaedia in Research

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The encyclopaedia that I will be modeling this entry on is the *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* by James MacKillop, (Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 1998) as agreed with the lecturer for this course. The definitions for *Pwyll* come from *Y Geiriadur Mawr* (Llandysul, 2001).

**Pwyll.** [W, discretion, sense, wisdom, steadfastness]. Prince of Dyfed in south Wales and title character in the First Branch of the *Mabinogi*, while hunting encounters a pack of shining white hounds with red ears (usually a sign of otherworldliness in Celtic lore) which had cornered a stag. Recklessly, he chases them off and sends his own hounds after the stag. When a man dressed in grey appears on horseback, Pwyll learns that the owner of the otherworldly hounds is Arawn, King of Annwfn (W, Otherworld). Pwyll agrees to change places with the king and fight his enemy Hafgan (W, summer white) using only one blow to kill him. While there, Pwyll has the opportunity to sleep with Arawn's wife but chooses not to do so. At the end of the appointed year, after defeating Hafgan, Pwyll and Arawn change places once again, and Arawn gives the first swine in Wales to Pwyll in appreciation. Pwyll also wins the title *Pen Annwfn* (W, Head of Annwfn). Later, while sitting on the Gorsedd (W, mound) of Arberth, Pwyll sees a lady dressed in white, riding a white horse, and he becomes enamored of her. He sends his men riding after her to discover her name, but the lady appears to be magical, for no one can catch up with her. On the third attempt to meet her, Pwyll rides after her himself and when he also cannot reach her, calls out for her to stop, which she does immediately. She is Rhiannon, and she agrees to marry him, setting the date and organizing the wedding feast. At the feast, however, a generous Pwyll offers a boon to a stranger, Gwawl, who immediately claims Rhiannon for himself. Rhiannon sets the date for the following year, and privately advises Pwyll on how to defeat Gwawl. The next year at the feast, Pwyll tricks Gwawl into climbing into a bag, where he is beaten until he agrees to renounce his claim on Rhiannon. Pwyll then weds Rhiannon himself. After three years

of marriage but no heirs, the courtiers at Arberth advise Pwyll to set Rhiannon aside for another wife, but he refuses and asks for another year. Within that time Rhiannon gives birth to a boy on May eve. In the night, however, the baby disappears, and the serving women assigned to watch over mother and child kill a pup and smear the blood on Rhiannon's face, accusing her of having eaten her own child. Pwyll again refuses to put her aside, but she is punished by being forced to wait at a horse-block for seven years, asking visitors if she could carry them to the court on her back. The child is eventually returned and the punishment lifted.

While many modern commentators claim that Pwyll appears spineless or weak, Sioned Davies suggests that his character grows into the man his name implies (discretion, sense, wisdom, steadiness) over the course of the tale, starting out as hot-headed, as when he drives off Arawn's hounds and again when he rashly offers Gwawl anything in his power to give, but growing into wisdom and steadiness when he refuses twice to give up Rhiannon, even when she has been accused of a terrible crime. The meaning of Pwyll's name (sense) may also connect him with the Ir. *Conn*, whose name means 'sense, reason' and which is also one of the many names used by the Irish Celts for a god of the Otherworld. See Sioned Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Llandysul, 1993), 66-68; T.F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1999), 281; Rachel Bromwich, *Trioeidd Ynys Prydein* (Cardiff, 1978) triad 26w, 46-47.