



Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (ASNC)

Question

How does early medieval literature mediate between the Christian present and the pre-Christian past? Answer with reference to **two** of the following areas: Medieval Irish, Medieval Welsh, or Old English literature (suggestions for primary texts and secondary scholarship are given below). Essays should be no longer than 1200 words.

When thinking about this question, it is worth keeping in mind that all medieval vernacular texts surviving from Ireland and Britain were written by Christian authors and the majority of the manuscripts in which they survive were produced in monasteries. Some possible further questions to ask yourself when developing your answer to the question above include: What interest might Christian writers have had in (re)telling stories about the pagan past? Are these texts likely to be exclusively Christian or pagan in their outlook? Who was their intended audience? To what degree might texts represent an accurate memory of pre-Christian belief as opposed to a fanciful recreation of it?

Vernacular literature in the early medieval insular world was not produced in a vacuum: monastic authors also read and composed texts in Latin, and early medieval insular vernaculars including Medieval Irish, Old English, Medieval Welsh, and Old Norse were in contact with one another. You might thus consider the similarities and differences between treatments of the pre-Christian past in texts written in different medieval languages.

For copyright reasons, to access some of the texts listed below you will need to [sign up](#) so that we can email them to you. Please note that signing up in this way is not a commitment to submitting an essay!

Medieval Irish

Primary Texts:

- *Cath Maige Tuired* (The Second Battle of Moytura): (online translation: <https://celt.ucc.ie//published/T300010/index.html>).
- *Tochmarc Étaíne* (The Wooing of Étaíne): (online translation: <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T300012/>)

Secondary Scholarship

- 'Myth and Mythography in *Cath Maige Tuired*' by John Carey (about *Cath Maige Tuired*)
- 'Baptism of the Gods' by John Carey (about *Tochmarc Étaíne* and other texts)

Both *Cath Maige Tuired* and *Tochmarc Étaíne* date to roughly the 9th century (although some elements of *Cath Maige Tuired* are the product of 12th-century editors). *Cath Maige Tuired* tells the story of a conflict between the Túatha De Danann (a group of immortal, supernatural beings often interpreted as the pre-Christian gods of Ireland), and their monstrous relatives the Fomorians. Some scholars have seen this conflict as a reflex of the Indo-European *theomachy* ("battle of the gods") myth and

compare it with the struggle between the Titans and Olympians in Greek mythology. Others see it as a reflection of more contemporary concerns such as the Viking raids. Do you think either or both explanation(s) explains the text fully? Do the Túatha De Danann remind you of a divine pantheon in the same way as the Olympian gods might in Greek or Roman mythology?

In *Tochmarc Étaíne*, the titular heroine Étaín marries Midir, one of the Túatha De Danann. She is later reincarnated as a human woman who marries an Irish king, but things are complicated when her first husband Midir comes looking for her. . . . You may wish to consider the social concerns on display in this text as well as the relationship(s) between Otherworldly characters and mortals. Both Irish texts have virtually no direct mention of Christianity—to what degree might Christian ideas or perspectives be present in the stories regardless? How do the texts present a (fictional) history of Ireland, and why might this have been important to Christian authors?

**NB: Both Irish texts are fairly long and complicated, so you may wish to focus on one of the two and its corresponding secondary scholarship.

Medieval Welsh

Primary Text

- *Pwyll Prince of Dyfed (The First Branch of the Mabinogi)*

Secondary Scholarship

- *Introduction* to Sioned Davies's translation of *The Mabinogion*
- 'Kaer Sidi and Other Celtic Otherworld Terms' by Patrick Sims-Williams

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi are a series of four loosely-connected Medieval Welsh tales, probably dating to the 12th century (although oblique references to some of the characters and events from the *Four Branches* in earlier literature suggests that at least some of the material is likely based on older traditions). You are welcome to read all four branches if you would like (see <http://mabinogi.net> for somewhat dated translations of all four tales), but focus on the *First Branch: Pwyll Prince of Dyfed* (translation by Sioned Davies provided). *Pwyll Prince of Dyfed* tells the story of Pwyll, who swaps kingdoms for a year with Arawn the lord of the Otherworld, marries Rhiannon, and rediscovers his son Pryderi after Rhiannon has been falsely framed for the child's murder. Debate has raged as to whether the *Four Branches* represent pre-Christian Welsh or more general Celtic mythology or are literary products of medieval learned elites. Some early scholars have seen Rhiannon as a horse goddess and Arawn as the pre-Christian god of the underworld, while more recent approaches to the *Four Branches* set them within a medieval literary context and interpret them as social commentary, parody, folktales, or even children's stories.

Start with the Introduction to Davies's translation (provided). You may wish to consider the text's audience and how human and supernatural characters interact within the narrative. If you are also looking at the Medieval Irish texts given above, how does the Otherworld of Annwfn compare or differ from the Otherworld inhabited by the Túatha De Danann in Irish literature? Keep in mind that Irish and Welsh are both relatively closely related Celtic languages that share some common elements of vocabulary and grammar as well as (potentially) inherited narratives (although medieval Irish- and Welsh-speakers did not recognize the close relationship of their languages and conceptualized themselves as separate cultures).

Old English

Primary Text

- *Beowulf* (you may read any translation; there is a convenient online edition and translation at: <https://heorot.dk/beowulf-rede-text.html>).

Secondary Scholarship

- ‘*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics’ by J.R.R. Tolkien

Beowulf is the longest surviving poem in Old English, the distant ancestor of Modern English. The date of the poem’s composition is disputed but it may have been written sometime between the 8th and 11th centuries. It is also disputed whether the poem reflects older oral tradition(s) or was an original, relatively late composition. *Beowulf* tells the story of the Scandinavian hero Beowulf, who as a young man defeats the monster Grendel and Grendel’s mother and, at the end of his life, fights a dragon. When approaching *Beowulf*, think about how religion is presented in the poem—the narrative voice may refer to Christianity, but the action of the poem is set in pre-Christian Scandinavia and its characters are all pagans. How are references to Biblical history (such as Cain and the sword hilt depicting the Flood that Beowulf finds in Grendel’s cave) integrated into the narrative? Similarly, does it matter that *Beowulf* is not set in Anglo-Saxon England itself? (For reference, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes migrated to the British Isles from the continent in the 5th century). If you compare *Beowulf* to the Medieval Irish or Welsh sources given above, consider how the supernatural characters in *Beowulf* may differ from Otherworldly characters like the Túatha De Danann, the Fomorians, and Arawn.

Before J.R.R. Tolkien (the same Tolkien who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*) wrote his 1936 article ‘The Monsters and the Critics’ (provided), scholars had largely ignored the supernatural elements of *Beowulf*, preferring to mine the poem for historical details about Scandinavian kings; Tolkien turned the critical conversation towards the work’s literary merits as a standalone text. Scholarship on the poem has moved on since Tolkien, but his article remains seminal to the field of *Beowulf* studies.

**NB: You are welcome to read the entire poem, but since it is significantly longer than the other primary texts suggested, you may wish to focus on lines 1–990, 1251–1650, 2207–2820, and 3058–3182.