

Heroes and Villains
Moral Ambiguity and the Decline of the Heroic Age in
The Four Branches of the Mabinogion

Richard John Castle
27002385

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Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Chapter One	6
Chapter Two	24
Chapter Three	59
Conclusion	72
Bibliography	75

Abstract

The characters of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi are vivid and complex portrayals and are a departure from the more traditional depictions found in Medieval Welsh literature, particularly earlier Heroic poetry. The polarised concepts of ‘hero and villain’, ‘good and evil’ are challenged within the tales themselves – at times ‘heroes’ aren’t quite so heroic and the ‘villains’ act ‘heroically’, at least in a traditional literary sense.

We are presented with an almost ‘modern’ morality which is greatly at odds with the ‘Heroic’ tradition that is found in earlier Welsh poetry. Indeed, we can see a divergence from traditional heroic motifs in the prose tales of Medieval Wales. An analysis of selected episodes, examination of the motivations and actions of certain characters and comparing and contrasting them with the traditional (and often formulaic) motifs of the ‘hero’ and ‘heroism’ in the wider body of Medieval Welsh literature can show that the ‘author’ is consciously offering an audience a different viewpoint of the changing world around them.

During the Middle Ages, Wales was subject to pressure and change which affected the way the Welsh people thought about their society. The coming of the Normans, with the loss of land and sovereignty to the invaders in some parts of Wales, changed the Welsh socio-political landscape and left an indelible mark on culture and literature. It is against this backdrop that the ‘author’ wrote the Four Branches of the Mabinogi and it will be examined whether a conscious rejection of the ‘Heroic’ traditional literary motifs is evident in the Four Branches as a reflection of and reaction to these changes in the Welsh psyche. What implications this may have for the dating of the Four Branches will also be discussed, whether it confirms and supports an existing theory or suggest a new possible dating.

INTRODUCTION

The Mabinogion can justifiably take its place amongst the great literary works of medieval Europe, and in particular, the tales of the *Four Branches*. The authenticity and relatability of its characters connect with the imagination of its audience. Yet despite the magic and ‘otherworldly’ atmosphere, there is a humanity to the people who inhabit the tales; they are recognisable in spite of the distance in time and space to a modern reader.

The *Four Branches* and the other tales were preserved in two medieval manuscripts; the *White Book of Rhydderch*, dated c. 1350, and the *Red Book of Hergest*, dated between 1382 and c. 1410.¹ Of course, the tales themselves are, but how much older is still open for debate. It is likely that, before they were written down, they existed as oral tales, stories to be recited and enjoyed and presumably in the courts of the rulers and nobles. There, they may have jostled with the court patrons for attention, competing with the poetry of the bards, songs of battle and proud warriors. Heroic poetry for a heroic world.

The author of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, however, appears to renounce the heroic culture that is prevalent around him, offering his audience an alternative view of their world. He attempts to demonstrate, by inverting the heroic tropes favoured by the bards, that ultimately the heroic culture is fated to bring suffering and despair and he offers another way. The first chapter of this thesis entails a brief discussion of the ‘heroic age’ and how the author of the *Four Branches* utilises elements of heroic image

¹ S.Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. ix.

within his tales to paint a very different picture to present to his audience, than that of bardic poetry. This is followed by a theoretical examination of the author's relationship with the bards.

In the second chapter, selected episodes from each of the *Four Branches* are examined to further illustrate how the author presents the 'heroic-moral' and the potential pitfalls of making the wrong choices.

Chapter Three looks at the historical period during which the author may have composed the *Four Branches* and discusses the possibility of whether certain episodes or aspects of the tales relate to historical events and any implications that may have for dating. Throughout this work, the term author is used. Undoubtedly, he had a certain degree liberty in how he shaped the tales, but it does not imply that they were his original creations.

CHAPTER ONE

The Four Branches and the Heroic Age

The concept of a ‘British Heroic Age’ was first defined by the Chadwicks in *The Growth of Literature* and describes the struggles of the Britons against the Anglo-Saxon invaders.² Kenneth Jackson further defined the cultural environment of the heroic milieu:

‘It carries with it an implication of a social setting; a military aristocratic society, whether of a primitive or more highly developed kind, in which the real *raison d’être*, and the chief interest, of the nobility is warfare, and for which the accepted morality is courage and fierceness in war, generosity and liberality in peace, a longing for fame, a horror of disgrace, and a welcome for death in fight provided it leads to an immortal glory’.³

The term ‘heroic’ therefore refers a culture of traditional heroic values, such as courage in battle, skill at arms, loyalty and willingness to sacrifice one’s life for lord or land. Such qualities were upheld and promoted by the bards as the ideal for the warbands and warrior aristocracy they served. In peacetime these warrior bands were portrayed as passing the time in other heroic pursuits such as feasting and hunting.⁴ This image of the ‘heroic’ persisted in Wales. In the twelfth century Gerald of Wales said of the Welsh:

² H. Fulton, ‘Cultural Heroism in the Old North of Britain: The Evidence of Aneurin’s *Gododdin*’, in L. S. Davidson, S.N. Mukherjee, and Z. Zlater et al. (eds), *The Epic in History*, (Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies in Society & Culture, 2004), p. 18.

³ K.H Jackson, *The Gododdin* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1969), p. 38.

⁴ Eve E. Sweetser, ‘Figurative Harmony: Convergences and Tensions among Metaphors and Metonyms for the Heroic Society in Early Welsh Poetry’, *Heroic Poets and Poetic Heroes in Celtic tradition. A Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford*, CSANA Yearbook 3-4, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).

‘They esteem it a disgrace to die in bed, but an honour to be killed in battle.’⁵

Such a sentiment would not be out of place in the *englynion* of the *Cynfeirdd* and indeed this concept of heroic culture persisted beyond the loss of Welsh sovereignty in 1282. As such the poets of the princes often compared their patrons to the heroes portrayed in the older poetry of the *Cynfeirdd* and the milieu of the Heroic Age of Northern Britain. As Rachel Bromwich states:

‘An outstanding example of this attitude of mind is the manner in which Cynddelw implicitly conceived and recreates the figure of twelfth-century ruler Owain Gwynedd in the form of his sixth-century predecessor, the North-British hero Owain ab Urien.’⁶

The poets of the prince rarely saw the need to justify violence, and often gloried in the slaughter of enemies.⁷ Yet the author of the Four Branches appears to actively reject the heroic milieu of his contemporaries. He uses heroic tropes and imagery but under his skilful hand they transmute, becoming a negative mirror image of the original. For example, the depiction of warfare and martial imagery in the *Four Branches* is in stark contrast to the imagery found in the more ‘heroic’ representations of the *Cynfeirdd* and the *Gogynfeirdd*.

⁵ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales/The Description of Wales*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 233.

⁶ *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, edited and translated by Rachel Bromwich (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), p. lxiii.

⁷ H. Brodie, ‘Contrasting Cultures? Early thirteenth-century portrayals of and violence in ‘*L’Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal*’ and the Welsh court poetry in praise of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth’, *Studia Celtica*, LII: (2018), p. 100.

In the *First Branch*, Pwyll's only scene of combat consists of a single blow being struck. The warfare depicted within the *Second Branch* initially appears follow more heroic conventions but serves to demonstrate the futility of heroic violence. In the *Third Branch* the protagonist Manawydan shuns violence at every opportunity and is successful in restoring his land. Though battles do occur in the *Fourth Branch* the emphasis is on the suffering and waste of life rather than of glorious victories, and the violence within the tale goes hand in hand with deceit. It is thus far removed from the heroic action that a medieval warrior society would aspire to emulate.

The tales of the *Four Branches* would appear to have a greater affinity with the early Welsh saga poetry which offer their audience a sober corrective to contemporaneous heroic literature, dealing with themes such as loss and defeat - the realistic outcomes of adherence to a heroic code of conduct. Indeed, Jenny Rowland sees thematic parallels between Heledd in *Canu Heledd* and Branwen in the *Second Branch of the Mabinogi*.⁸ They are not necessarily homologous by any means, the sagas lacking elements of magic or mythology and take place within an historical setting, but the themes and general tone are analogous to certain episodes portrayed in the *Four Branches*.

Feasting played an important part of the heroic milieu, strengthening bonds between individuals to help form and maintain a cohesive social group. This ritual gathering was also held to celebrate the initiation of certain ventures and occasions, such as weddings and alliances, military

⁸ *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, edited by Jenny Rowland, (D. S. Brewer: Cambridge, 1990), p. 143.

campaigns, as well as commemorate events passed, such as a military victory and eulogise those who took part.⁹

Of course, the generosity and hospitality of a lord had to be repaid, it was a two-way contract of mutual obligation. *Y Gododdin* attests to the extremities of what could be expected in return and it was the heroic duty of the recipients to reciprocate and respond. We see similar tragedy within the *Second Branch* - of all those who feasted with Bendigeidfran only seven survive.

In the *First Branch*, Pwyll and his men are feasting in Arberth is told about *Gorsedd Arberth*, that any noble who sits upon it will either receive a wound or will see a marvel. Pwyll expresses that he is not afraid of being wounded amongst such a large retinue and thus decides to sit on the mound. Whilst Pwyll's words are typical of his impetuous nature, they also reveal something else. Pwyll has gathered around him and feasted a large company of men and that he is not afraid for himself whilst amongst such a company. The implication is that those who have feasted with him are expected to defend him, such as expressed in *Y Goddodin*:

'For their feast of mead, their lives were payment'.¹⁰

Feasts and gatherings play a central part within the narrative of the *Second Branch*, framing the pivotal episodes and foreshadowing events to come, the tension escalating with each sitting. The first feast to celebrate the marriage of Branwen and Matholwch supplies the catalyst to the violence perpetrated upon the king of Ireland's horses, thus repaying Efnysien's

⁹ J. Hunter, 'A Feast of Words: Conspicuous Consumption and Praise Poetry in Medieval Wales', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Vol. 14: (1994), pp. 39-48.

¹⁰ *Medieval Welsh Poetry*, translated by Joseph P. Clancy, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 53.

perceived dishonour of being omitted from the marriage negotiations and the ensuing celebrations with further dishonour, to himself, to Matholwch and ultimately bringing dishonour to Bendigeidfran.

Eve E. Sweetser, discussing the metaphors for heroic society in early Welsh poetry, proposes that the image of the hall is representative of the heroic leader and the host he shelters within it, a microcosm for the society that such poetry constitutes.¹¹ What then of Bendigeidfran, whose very size prevents him from owning and utilising such a construct? The author almost appears to be portraying Bendigeidfran as a model ruler; he is diplomatic, quick to make peace, is strong when he feels the necessity to be and willing to compromise. His inability to control his own kin is his weakness. So too is pride. Proinsias Mac Cana, in his study of the possible Irish influences on the Second Branch, views Bendigeidfran's great size to be incidental:

'Irish literature represented the great houses of tradition, and especially that at Tara, as being of huge extent, and there is a distinct possibility that Bendigeidfran was proportioned to fit the Irish hall, rather than the other way around.'¹²

It is possible that the author of the Four Branches, however, intended Bendigeidfran's stature to be figurative as well as literal. There may never have existed a house large enough to accommodate the king of the Island of the Mighty, but neither does he express any desire for one and as such is not confined by the heroic hero-hall analogy as posited by Sweetser. He is elevated above the archetypal hero-king of bardic praise. It is revealing

¹¹ Eve E. Sweetser, 'Figurative Harmony: Convergences and Tensions among Metaphors and Metonyms for the Heroic Society in Early Welsh Poetry', *Heroic Poets and Poetic Heroes in Celtic tradition. A Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford*, CSANA Yearbook 3-4, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).

¹² P. Mac Cana, *Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), p. 89.

that Efnysien is not present during the first feast, as if in some way Bendigeidfran, who cannot be contained within the heroic trope of having a hall, is able to exclude the negative elements of the heroic milieu from the feast. By accepting the house due the perceived honour that it bestows, Bendigeidfran allows himself to become diminished as he succumbs to the lure of heroic values. He becomes the ‘hero-hall’ of early Welsh poetry and thus is blind to, and powerless to prevent, the ensuing treachery that devastates his kin and kingdom.

Animal imagery is often used by the poets as allegorical representations of lords and heroes. As such, Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr saw fit to praise his patron, Madawg ap Maredudd:

‘Sleek, dappled, stag-bodied, well foddered
Silver hue of fish, young sea salmon.
Famed his bloodstained hand on bloodstained field,
Eagle of warriors since he was a warrior,
Spear-thrust of strife on white-breasted steeds,
Foremost pursuer, ferocious wolf.’¹³

In the *Mabinogion*, however, we find that the author has subverted the typical animal imagery so favoured by the bards. The depictions he presents to his audience are less than heroic.

In the *Third Branch* a gleaming white boar appears and Manawydan and Pryderi gives chase. The boar as hero is a common heroic motif in literature. As Sarah Sheehan explains:

¹³ Clancy, *Medieval Welsh Poems*, p. 140.

‘There is a tradition discernible in medieval Celtic literature of the boar as a warrior-ideal, as an animal to whose fierceness every hero should aspire. The metaphor or simile of the warrior as boar [twrch, baed coet] appears several times in the Gododdin, and the gwarchan of Cynfelyn, which is appended to the text of the Gododdin, likens a warrior to Twrch Trwyth himself.’¹⁴

The two men chase the boar, the symbol of the heroic warrior-ideal, to the fortress, yet only Pryderi is willing to go blindly in. Manawydan advises caution but his companion ventures in regardless. Pryderi’s heroic impulses lead to his imprisonment whilst Manawydan rejects the same path and escapes the same fate, eventually freeing Dyfed from the wasteland curse.

Considering the animal metaphors for heroic personages in Welsh literature, the method of punishment for the rape of Goewin takes on another element. Over the span of three years Gwydion and Gilfaethwy are transformed in stags, wild boars and wolves, alternating between male and female. This is however an inverted image of the heroic. These are animals to be hunted, as the barking of the dogs testify, rather than admired for their belligerent qualities.¹⁵

The eagle was a particular favourite animal for heroic allegory, particularly in praise poetry. As Catherine McKenna explains:

¹⁴ S. Sheehan, ‘Giants, Boar-hunts, and Barbering: Masculinity in “Culhwch ac Olwen”’, *Arthuriana*, Vol. 15, No. 3: (2005), pp. 11-13.

¹⁵ Rhiannon M. M. Davies, ‘*The Moral Structure of Peddeir Keink y Mabinogi*’, (PhD thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff, 1993), p. 236.

‘It occurs more than 100 times in the 12,600 lines of verse in *Cyfres Beirdd y Tywysogion*. It is such a common epithet for a patron that its editors routinely paraphrase *eryr* as *arglwydd* ‘lord’.’¹⁶

This usage was also common in earlier poetry. In *Canu Llywarch* the poet, speaking of the deceased hero Gwên, says:

‘Gwên, I knew your nature:
You were the rush of an eagle in the estuaries.’¹⁷

Likewise does the poet of *Y Gododdin* describe the warrior Eiddef as an ‘unconquerable eagle of wrathful men’.¹⁸

Yet in the *Fourth Branch* we find Lleu transformed as an eagle after being pierced by the spear of Gronw Pebr. The image is far from heroic. Lleu has been defeated and forced to flee, and when Gwydion finds him, he is hiding in an oak, rotting flesh and maggots falling from his body. The author presents us the image of archetypal heroism in decay.

Honour and shame were personal but could also be seen as transferable. This can be seen in *Canu Llywarch*, where Llywarch warns his son to maintain his honour in the coming battle, no matter how hard pressed he is:

‘If you escape, I will see you.
If you are killed, I will lament you.
Do not lose the honour of a warrior despite battle hardship.’¹⁹

¹⁶ C. McKenna, ‘Cyfarwydd as Poet in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi’, *North American Journal of Celtic Studies* 1, No. 2: (2017), p. 112.

¹⁷ *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, edited by Jenny Rowland, (D. S. Brewer: Cambridge, 1990), p. 469.

¹⁸ Clancy, *Medieval Welsh Poems*, p. 140.

¹⁹ Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, p. 468.

Gwen's reply is terse, and he reveals that he is fully aware of his father's true concern:

'I will not lose your honour, battle-ready man,
When warriors arm for the border.
I will suffer hardship before I yield ground.'²⁰

The honour of the father, unable to fight for himself, now lies entwined with the honour of the son.

This concept of transferable honour by familial association can be seen in the *Four Branches*, but here the author reverses it so that is dishonour and shame that become the primary concern. Throughout the *Four Branches* the legal framework of shame and compensation is a primary motivating factor and a catalyst for much of the conflict.²¹

The machinations of Llwyd ap Cilcoed are a direct result of the dishonour inflicted upon Gwawl son of Clud by Pwyll. We find a similar situation in the *Second Branch* where the mutilation of Matholwch's horses by Enfysien causes dishonour to be cast on his half-brother, Bendigeidfran. The context here is slightly different, in the sense that Matholwch and his entourage are enjoying the hospitality and protection of the king of the Island of the Mighty. Bendigeidfran however chooses to pay compensation for the dishonour, above and beyond that legally. The dishonour suffered by Matholwch, even though it is negated by full compensation, is

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 468

²¹ J. K. Bollard, 'Meul ar uy Maryf: Shame and Honour in *The Mabinogi*', *Studia Celtica*, XLVII: (2013), pp. 123-147.

transferred to his wife which erupts into conflict. The Irish attempt to make peace with Bendigeidfran, by honouring him by building the king a house

Josh Pittman, in a study of the Christian influences within the *Four Branches*, sees an unwillingness to forgive as continuing the cycle of dishonour and revenge.²² This may be an overly simplistic viewpoint when applied to medieval aspects of honour and revenge, but the sentiment still has value. Heroic adherence to codes of personal honour, legalistic or otherwise, lead to escalating levels of violence and unrest unless staunched by mitigating action. Thus, the cycle of dishonour depicted in the *Second Branch* leads eventually to the effective downfall of two kingdoms. Matters of revenge in the *Third Branch* threaten to bring about the destruction of Dyfed as a direct result of dishonour perpetrated in the *First Branch* and only resolved by patience and good judgement rather than the edge of a sword.

These concepts of honour and shame can also be found in *Y Gododdin*. As Helen Fulton explains:

‘For the British warband, honour accrues from fighting rashly and ferociously against the, enemy from loyalty to one’s lord and fellow soldiers, from generosity in gift-giving, all public acts of social honour. Failure to make these public observances results in shame, also publicly acknowledged, which is part of the shaming process. The poem makes it clear that the men of the Gododdin act only honourably, never shamefully.’²³

²² J. Pittman, ‘Christian Influences on the Mabinogi’, *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*, Vol. 14, Issue 1: (2012).

²³ H. Fulton, ‘Cultural Heroism in the Old North of Britain: The Evidence of Aneurin’s Gododdin’, in L. S. Davidson, S.N. Mukherjee, and Z. Zlater et al. (eds), *The Epic in History*, (Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies in Society & Culture, 2004), p. 28.

More than likely, the reality was far from the heroic ideals, as the author of the *Four Branches* appears to indicate. Not one of the warband of Gronw Pebr agrees to take his place and receive Lleu's judgment, thus earn the infamy of becoming 'one of the Three Disloyal Retinues.'²⁴ It is just as much of a reflection of the conduct of their lord, as it is their cowardice.

By inverting the typical heroic imagery and subverting the heroic tropes so favoured by the bards, the author of the *Four Branches* is deftly able to weave his tales and infuse them with a sense of morality.

The Bards

The poets were the great promulgators of the heroic culture within native Welsh society and held a privileged position in the courts of rulers and noblemen from the days of the *Cynfeirdd* through to the princes of the thirteenth century. They are a conspicuous voice throughout this period of Welsh literature. The bards often play a central role in their own works within the corpus of true heroic poetry; Aneurin identifies himself as the author of *Y Gododdin*, Taliesin is often a leading figure within his own works and much of the praise poetry of the *Gogynfeirdd* is framed around the relationship of patron and poet. Yet there is a paucity of references to the bards in the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* and even when there are appearances, they are represented in a negative light.

In the *First Branch* we have mention of singing, carousing and entertainment, and Pwyll calls for 'all the suppliants and musicians to present themselves, and telling them that each one be satisfied according to his wish and whim'.²⁵ The implication is that if the bards were present,

²⁴ *The Mabinogion*, translated by Sioned Davies, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 64.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 15.

their function was to provide music for entertainment. Mention of the bards directly is also scarce in the Second Branch, yet we are presented with a curious image as the army of the Island of the Mighty sets sail for Ireland:

‘But Bendigeidfran walked carrying all the stringed instruments on his own back and made for Ireland’s shore.’²⁶

No explanation is provided, perhaps such imagery connected the minds of a contemporary audience with hitherto lost tale or lore, but all a modern reader is left with is speculation. If we take the reference of ‘string instruments’ to be an allusion to the bards then we are left with a rather negative image, that of the poets literally clinging to the greatness of the king in some parasitic fashion. It could also imply that the expectations of the bards of a ruler at war could prove burdensome. Mac Cana argues that this episode has its origins in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, specifically the giant Mac Cécht who carries the son of Conaire, huge weapons and other enormous items under his arm and proceeds to travel Ireland under his enormous burden.²⁷ Regardless of whether this is the case, or not, the image of the string instruments would appear to be a deliberate choice, possibly for the reasons stated.

Towards the end of the tale we are presented with a single mention of the bardic paragon. The inclusion of Taliesin in the list of seven survivors of Bendigeidfran’s expedition to Ireland would certainly draw the attention of the audience to the affinities between the *Second Branch* and *Preiddeu Annwn*. It is doubtful however that such a cue was needed, the parallels between the tale of Branwen, *Preiddeu Annwn* and indeed *Culhwch and*

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁷ Mac Cana, *Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr*, p. 89.

Olwen would more than likely have been apparent to a contemporary audience. It is possible, considering the author's previous portrayal of the bardic class within the tale, that he is making a disparaging inference as to the survival rate of those who promote and celebrate the heroic lifestyle, and indeed, the violence that accompanies it. Indeed, Taliesin plays no part in *Culhwch and Olwen* but is mentioned as present at Arthur's court. He is mentioned in *The Dream of Rhonabwy* in the form of a patronymic only, his supposed son Addaon a member of Arthur's retinue.

On *The Dream of Rhonabwy*, Mac Cana says that 'it may be...that the author is simply parodying the tendency to elevate the heroes of old to giant stature'.²⁸ It is possibly true of the other cameo appearances of Taliesin. To the scribes who recorded the cultural output of medieval Welsh culture, the semi mythical archetypal bard may have become a rather worn out trope, and his inclusions something of an inside joke, as it were.

The *Third Branch* contains no reference to the bards whatsoever and so we come to the *Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*, the only tale that presents the bardic class to its audience, or rather men disguised as bards. Early in the tale, Gwydion and eleven companions gain access to the court of Pryderi to convince him to give them the pigs sent from Arawn, king of Annwfn.

Pryderi requests a tale from one of Gwydion's companions but Gwydion replies:

'Our custom, lord,' said Gwydion, 'is that on the first night we come to a great man, the chief poet performs. I would be happy to tell a story.'²⁹

²⁸ P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 85.

²⁹ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 48.

He skilfully utilises flattery, referring to Pryderi as a ‘great lord’ whilst avoiding an awkward situation. Possibly his companions lack of performance skills would reveal that they were not exactly who they were claiming to be. We are told, however, that ‘Gwydion was the best storyteller in the world’ and that he ‘entertained the court with amusing anecdotes and stories’. There is no mention of poetry or song but his skill at storytelling reinforces his adroitness in charm and deceit. When it is apparent that the most opportune moment has arrived to ask for the pigs Gwydion asks ‘can anyone deliver my request to you better than I myself?’ Pryderi acknowledges the rhetorical adeptness of his guest:

‘No indeed,’ said Pryderi. ‘Yours is a very good tongue.’³⁰

When Pryderi refuses, due to a covenant with his people, Gwydion is quick to act upon the apparent malleability of his host:

‘ ‘Lord,’ said Gwydion, ‘I can free you from those words. This is how: do not give me the pigs tonight, but do not refuse me either.’³¹

Gwydion then proceeds to utilise his magic in order to deceive Pryderi and start the conflict that is an integral component of his overall plan to aid his brother in satisfying his lust. This whole episode deftly presents us with Gwydion’s eloquence and oratory abilities in the guise of poet but, as the audience is aware, they are employed purely to deceive in order to promote war. As McKenna points out:

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 49.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 49.

‘since the objective is not the pigs, qua pigs, at all, but the warfare that stealing them will precipitate—Gwydion must be planning all along to conjure up those mushroom-based horses and hounds, tack and shields. But he presents himself as a poet, and to some extent behaves as one.’³²

It is significant that Gwydion dons the guise of bard a second time in order to deceive. He and Lleu go to Caer Aranhod disguised as young men, in order to break the destiny imposed by Aranhod on her son, that ‘he shall never get weapons until I arm him myself.’³³

At the fort Gwydion introduces Lleu and himself as poets from Morgannwg, a location of origin chosen presumably for its distance and possibly any local bards would have been well known and are enthusiastically received. Here we are told that the disguised Gwydion and Aranhod ‘talked of tales and storytelling’, though we are also informed that Gwydion was a ‘a good storyteller’.³⁴ This is somewhat of a demotion for a character previously described as ‘the best storyteller in the world’. It would appear that the author is inferring that the effectiveness of Gwydion’s talents are subjective to either the social perspective or the mental acuity of his audience. To the heroic and rash Pryderi and his court, Gwydion’s stories are the best in the world. To the more liminal Aranhod, existing as she does at the edge of (and independent of) heroic society, her brother’s tales are merely ‘good’. Gwydion once again however knows his victim’s weaknesses. He uses his magic to create the illusion of an attacking fleet, thus threatening the valued independence of Aranhod. She is tricked into arming Lleu and so the second destiny she had placed on her son is lifted.

³² C. McKenna, ‘Cyfarwydd as Poet in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi’, *North American Journal of Celtic Studies* 1, No. 2: (2017), p. 108.

³³ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 57.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 57.

The appearances of Gwydion as poet in the *Fourth Branch* form the most comprehensive portraits of the bard that the author is willing to present to his audience and, as we have seen, they are discoloured by the almost Machiavellian machinations of this magician-poet.

Gwydion's identification as poet is further enhanced by the three *englynion* he performs to entice Lleu (in the form of an eagle) down from the oak tree. As McKenna explains, Gwydion's primary function elsewhere in traditional Welsh lore is that of magician, but also admits that:

‘As we know, however, authors who work with traditional narrative material select, highlight and refract that material to serve their own rhetorical purposes.’³⁵

With this in mind it would seem possible that the author is equating court poetry with deceit and flattery, at least to a certain degree.

That a magician should also be identified as bard is not unusual. In Welsh literature, poetry, prophecy, and performance of magic go hand in hand and are sometimes closely entwined and difficult to distinguish. As McKenna concludes:

‘in Math, the conflation of the magician and the poet reflects the habitus, so fundamental to the culture of medieval Wales, that identifies poetry simultaneously with the acquired craft of verse informed by traditional learning (*cyfarwyddyd*); with the magical power to transform, whether for good or for ill; and with divine creative power.’³⁶

³⁵ McKenna, ‘Cyfarwydd as Poet’, p. 115.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 119.

There is, however, another element that can be added to the equation of poetry, prophecy and magic, and that is madness. The stories of Suibne Geilt and Myrddin Wyllt show that in Celtic tradition there can be a fine line between muse and mania, and it is not insignificant that, apart from Math's inconsequential verse regarding the three sons of Gilfaethwy, the only other character to sing an englyn in the *Four Branches* is Efnysien.

On one hand, it could be considered unusual that the very group of people that appear to have acted as something of a cultural mouthpiece in medieval Wales should be so poorly represented in the pages of one of the greatest literary achievements of that very culture. However, if we accept the proposal that the author was indeed a cleric, a man more concerned with morality and a world-view so fundamentally opposed to the heroic culture that sustained the bardic class, then perhaps it is not so surprising. After all, the poets of the princes made very few references to the characters of the *Four Branches*.³⁷ Possibly they were not a cultural fit for their works.

Taliesin expressed a rather disdainful opinion of the clergy in *Preiddeu Annfwn*:

‘Monks cluster in a pack like wolves,
[shrinking] from encounter with the lords who shall find them out.’³⁸

This presented view of ‘anticlericalism’ is far from uncommon within the corpus of bardic poetry.³⁹ Regarding *Preiddeu Annfwn*, Sims-Williams explains:

³⁷ R. Bromwich, ‘*The Mabinogion* and Lady Charlotte Guest’, in C. W. Sullivan (ed.), *The Mabinogion: A Book of Essays*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 25.

³⁸ *The Celtic Heroic Age*, edited by John T. Koch (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publication, 2003), p. 311.

³⁹ M. Adderley, ‘Singing to the Silent Sentinel: ‘*Preiddeu Annwn*’ and the Oral Tradition’, *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 60, No. 244: (Apr., 2009), p. 186.

‘Through the persona of Taliesin, then, the poet strikes a playful blow for the secular poets or *cyfarwyddiad* against the vain pretensions of the Welsh clerical orders, with their noses in the scientific works of Macrobius, Isidore and Bede.’⁴⁰

We do not know whether this was the viewpoint of the bardic classes in general but, if so, it is entirely possible that contemporary *religieux* held the poets in a similarly low regard - if not of the institution itself, then at least the culture it represented. Some evidence for this can be found in the *Vitae*, the ‘Lives of the Saints’ composed during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, where a particular saint is assigned the role of ‘hero’, and the ‘villain’ of the tale usually a legendary secular lord or ruler. More often than not the antagonist is the Welsh hero par excellence, Arthur, whose portrayal is far from the dizzying heights of the conventional bardic praise, as Brynley Roberts points out:

‘For the most part he is a foil for the saint, an arrogant grasping tyrant who is humbled in ignominious defeat, not in any armed struggle but in his childish greed and even in his failure to fulfil his traditional role as giant or dragon-slayer’.⁴¹

Undoubtedly, it is probable that on a personal level individual bards and clerics enjoyed a perfectly amiable relationship but on a cultural and philosophical level the ideals and principles that they expounded were on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum.

⁴⁰ P. Sims-Williams, ‘The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems’, in R. Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman and B. Roberts, eds., *The Arthur Of the Welsh* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 54.

⁴¹ B. Roberts, ‘*Culhwch ac Olwen*, The Triads, Saints’ Lives’, in R. Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman and B. Roberts, eds., *The Arthur Of the Welsh* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 83.

CHAPTER TWO

The primary dynamic within the *Four Branches* is the question of how to act – heroically or morally. Within the tales, heroes are not always heroic, and villains are not always so two dimensional. The line between right and wrong is often blurred, sometimes to comic effect, sometimes tragic, but despite the magical setting we are always presented with rich, identifiable, and relatable characters. They are certainly more authentic than the conventional images of heroes and villains, and an audience can relate to them in a way that they may not with the heroes of the *englynion* or panegyric poetry.

The author displays a preference for legal redress over vengeance, thought over action, and patience is sometimes a ‘hero’s’ greatest virtue. The morality depicted obviously has its roots in medieval concerns, but, at times, it can appear very modern. The primary issue, however, that the author is trying to transmit to his audience is the inadequacy and instability of the heroic code as a contemporary cultural movement. Rather than voice his disapproval out loud, he uses heroic tropes to demonstrate the pitfalls of this worldview.

What follows is a study of selected episodes from each of the Four Branches. It is by no means comprehensive but they demonstrate how the author portrays the moral-heroic dichotomy.

The First Branch

As Proinsias Mac Cana observes, ‘Pryderi and Rhiannon react to their situation with ‘heroic’ or instinctive action which compounds rather than resolves their problems’⁴². Certainly, Pwyll displays an instinctive tendency toward heroic action and reaction which the author utilises to diminish the virtues of the ‘heroic’ whilst demonstrating the moral attributes, such as chastity and mercy can lead to personal development.

The story begins with a hunt, a typical motif in heroic literature and Pwyll is alone. He encounters a stag and a strange pack of hounds giving chase. Pwyll acknowledges the strangeness of the hounds, yet this isn’t enough to convince him to employ a more cautious approach. His first instinct is to drive them away and feed his own hounds on the stag. For Pwyll, the impulse to achieve the heroic, in this case the act of claiming the kill and displaying his hunting prowess, is far stronger than any sense of moral or social propriety.⁴³ To claim the stag may well be his legal right as lord of the land, but his own inability or desire to reign in his heroic urges mean he finds himself in a situation where his honour is compromised.⁴⁴

When Pwyll is then approached by Arawn, crowned king of Annwfn, he acknowledges his superior rank and is eager to redeem his honour.’ Arawn’s solution is for Pwyll to defeat Hafgan, a neighbouring king in Annwfn and Pwyll eagerly agrees, ‘I will do that gladly’.⁴⁵ before even enquiring as to how such a feat could be achieved. Arawn has offered Pwyll an heroic solution to his moral predicament, to redeem his honour,

⁴² P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 48.

⁴³ C. E. Byfield, ‘Character and Conflict in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, Cyf 40: (1993), p. 52.

⁴⁴ J. Fife, ‘Legal Aspects of the Hunting Scene in Pwyll’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, Cyf 39: (1992), pp. 71-79.

⁴⁵ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 4

and the young Prince of Dyfed agrees without considering the consequences. The opportunity to win ‘glory’ is too attractive to be questioned but of course, Arawn is manipulating the young hero.⁴⁶

He is also willing to abandon his people for a whole year and allow Arawn to rule his realm in his place with no knowledge of Arawn’s true character. The possibility that the king of Annwn could be weak or ineffectual, or worse, a tyrant does not even enter Pwyll’s consciousness. Redeeming his honour is all that truly matters.

Pwyll spends a year in Arawn’s guise, ‘hunting and singing and carousing’ with the war-band. Yet, at night, Pwyll shows great restraint and acts honourably. Despite Arawn’s wife being ‘the most beautiful woman that anyone had ever seen’, Pwyll makes no attempt to sleep with her even though Arawn has implied that he should. Instead, Pwyll turns away from her every night and does not say a word, let alone attempt anything more amorous. Again here, Arawn’s morality is called into question, but the author uses Pwyll’s reaction to emphasise that he is not of bad character and we begin to see the seeds of the man that he will become. His failings are due to his adherence to an ‘heroic’ code than of any lack of morality.

It must be noted, however, that Pwyll’s decision not to sleep with Arawn’s wife is not necessarily a choice made from any sense of morality. It was through the act of taking something that was not his, even if in the belief that he had a right, that resulted in his current situation. It may simply be that he is learning caution, and thereby beginning to earn his name.

⁴⁶ E. Morgan, ‘Revenge and Reconciliation: A Giradian Reading of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi’, *Studia Celtica*, XLVI: (2013), p. 153.

After a year feasting and hunting the appointed night arrives and Pwyll and the noblemen of Annwfn come to the ford where the combat is to take place. The author tells us that ‘the meeting was as well remembered by the inhabitant in the remotest part of the realm as it was by him, ensuring that any honour won by heroic action would be well observed and celebrated. Despite being accompanied by the ‘fairest and best-equipped men’ this is to be single combat. The battle to come, however, is not borne of the impetuous nature of Pwyll. There has been a whole year to plan and to gather intelligence. It is no less removed from the ‘heroic’ milieu of the court and cultural environment for that, but it is a more considered and deliberate heroic action. The combat itself is very brief affair, as if the author has no particular interest in the details of combat. The two kings meet in the middle of the ford where, at the first attack Pwyll is able to deliver a fatal blow to his adversary, splitting his shield and armour with a single strike. Hafgan’s response is curious:

“‘Lord,’ said Hafgan, ‘what right did you have to my death? I was claiming nothing from you. Nor do I know of any reason for you to kill me;’”⁴⁷

Hafgan may well be attempting to incite Pwyll to strike again in contravention of Arawn’s proscription, but to make such a claim, that he is innocent of wrongdoing, in front of witnesses is a claim that could easily be dismissed. It is possible that Hafgan, having suffered the blow from a mortal, can now see through the disguise and recognises that Pwyll is not his true enemy. Another possibility, however, is that Hafgan’s claim is just and that Arawn has been the chief antagonist. He may simply be the victim of an aggressive expansionist policy.

⁴⁷ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 6

Pwyll, who should be experiencing pride at his at victory in heroic single combat, honour redeemed, is apparently faced with the reality that heroic action can lead to suffering and expresses that he may indeed regret what he has done. He refuses to deliver another blow and thus ensures the death of Hafgan.

Pwyll then displays further his propensity for action and his desire to make a name for himself. He declares that whoever will not become vassals of Arawn will be forced to do so at sword point. This is a step further than what was required of him by Arawn, the defeat of Hafgan being the only stipulation for the redemption of his honour. It appears that Pwyll is keen to cement his 'heroic' status by completing the unification of the two realms.

In this first episode of the First Branch of the Mabinogi we begin to see the germination of the author's moral outlook and how that may potentially be expressed in the rest of the tale. He characterises Pwyll as a rash and impulsive young prince at odds with his name, meaning 'wisdom' or 'caution' (ref). The author also depicts Pwyll as a product of the 'heroic' environment and is in many ways the archetypal young hero eager for fame and glory. He is skilled in arms as he is able to defeat Hafgan with a single blow and he acts decisively to unite the two realms. Pwyll's courage and prowess earn him the name 'Pwyll Pen Annwfn', Pwyll, Head of Annwfn and thus he has achieved the measure of fame that he desires. Yet Pwyll is not of an amoral temperament as shown by his refusal to sleep with Arawn's wife and sympathy towards the defeated Hafgan, thus displaying the potential to become a 'hero' more apposite to the author's own moral outlook.

Though Arawn is not a ‘villain’ as such, his morality is certainly questionable. It appears that the author is drawing attention to the compliancy of those who follow a ‘heroic’ code over a more considered moral conscience. Arawn is certainly able to exploit Pwyll’s rashness to his full advantage. It may well be that upon meeting, the king of Annwfn is able to discern the impetuous nature of Pwyll’s character. The whole scene, however, may well have been preconceived and orchestrated by Arawn to resolve his own predicament. A young lord brought up in the heroic culture of a Medieval Welsh court and eager to win the praise of bards would be the most amenable solution. He is keen to manipulate the dishonour shown to him and both parties must have been aware of the possibility that Pwyll may not have survived his combat with Hafgan, although Pwyll would have considered the risk as secondary to the potential ‘heroic’ attainment and redemption of honour. Arawn, however, is willing to sacrifice the young prince to satisfy his own ambition.

Once Arawn returns to Annwfn, however, he truly learns what Pwyll has done, or rather, what he has not done. The silent shock of Arawn’s wife at her husband’s amorous advances reveals the truth of Pwyll’s character. Arawn is equally surprised by her revelation:

‘Shame on me,’ she said, ‘if there has been between us for the past year, from the time we were wrapped up in our bedclothes, either pleasure or conversation, or have you turned your face to me, let alone anything more than that!’⁴⁸

Arawn wonders at the ‘steadfast and secure’ loyalty of his newfound friend particularly as the impetuous Pwyll had been given dispensation to sleep

⁴⁸ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 7.

with his wife. Here the author begins to display his true path for the development of Pwyll and the polarising, but not necessarily incompatible forces at work within the psyche of his character. It is through 'heroic' impulsiveness that Pwyll finds himself in Arawn's debt and through considered 'heroic' action that he gains Arawn's respect. However, it is through moral conduct that the bonds of friendship are enforced and develop to a personal relationship beyond the legal formality.⁴⁹

Hafgan's appearance as 'villain' is brief and yet the author provides us with enough characterisation to question whether he is the villain at all. Both Arawn and Hafgan are making claims against each other regarding territorial rights which suggests equal culpability in relation to the conflict, particularly in Hafgan's dying statement that he was claiming nothing and knew not of any reason that Pwyll (as Arawn) would seek his death. Here, Hafgan is a villain purely as the hero's opponent and not through any obvious malice or explicit lack of morality and it is difficult for an audience to not feel some sympathy toward him.

Though in the second episode of the tale there is little opportunity for heroic action, it opens in familiar 'heroic' surroundings as Pwyll is feasting and carousing with his teulu at his court in Arberth. It is interesting that he is now surrounded by a 'large retinue', whereas he begins the tale hunting with 'companions'. This is reinforced when he and his retinue make for the top of the mound of Gorsedd Arberth after the feast. He is told that whatever nobleman sits upon the mound will receive a wound or injury, or else see a wonder. Pwyll's reply is typical of the 'heroic' prince: 'I am not afraid to be wounded or injured among such a large company as this. As for something wonderful, I would be glad to see that.'

⁴⁹ C. E. Byfield, 'Character and Conflict in the Four Branches', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, Cyf 40: (1993), p. 53.

The author is informing his audience of two things. By emphasizing the size of Pwyll's retinue, he is demonstrating that Pwyll's renown has increased, likely due to stories of his adventures in Annwfn. He is now the archetypal Medieval Welsh lord, as favoured by the bards, attracting to his person young men eager to share in his own personal glory. Secondly, we are seeing that Pwyll is still eager to seek a 'heroic' encounter. His first thought is that he is not afraid to receive a wound and heads to the mound without any deliberation. The possibility of seeing something wonderful is of secondary consideration.

The wonder is of course Rhiannon and Pwyll and the young hero finds himself in the unfamiliar world of romance. There is a feeling here that he is truly out of his depth, particularly with the shrewd and quick-witted Rhiannon. Rhiannon is to be married to a man not of her choosing and expresses that it is Pwyll whom she truly loves. She arranges a meeting and a feast at the court of her father Hyfaidd Hen, her father, a year from that night and Pwyll promises to be there. It now feels that Pwyll's bravado has abandoned him, his heroic background has evidently not prepared him in how to react in respect to matters of the heart. He also shows a considerable amount of discretion after his initial meeting with Rhiannon as the author tells us that he would turn to other matters whenever questioned about the lady.

Pwyll keeps his promise and meets with Rhiannon at the feast and they enjoy their time in eating and carousing. Here, however, he is keen to act as a heroic lord and eager to demonstrate his generosity. A 'tall, regal, auburn-haired lad' enters and announces himself as a suppliant. Pwyll promises him that, 'Whatever you ask of me, as long as I can get it, it shall be yours.'

The stranger is, of course, Gwawl, son of Clud, and the man to whom Rhiannon was promised. His request is, of course, Rhiannon herself. In his overconfidence in his own heroic status, Pwyll has inadvertently promised his betrothed to another man. Yet, it is here that we first begin to see Pwyll's adherence to the heroic code beginning to waver. Rhiannon tells him that he must give her to Gwawl or else bring disgrace and dishonour upon himself, but Pwyll replies that he could never bring himself to do that.

Rhiannon has a clever plan, however, and Pwyll promises her to Gwawl. They are to marry in a year from that night and a second feast will be prepared. Pwyll, as instructed by Rhiannon enters this feast disguised as a beggar and carrying a magic bag. He tricks Gwawl into getting into the bag and here we see a slip in his morality. He calls for his retainers who enter the hall, each one striking a blow upon the helpless Gwawl. Pwyll has the advantage and such violence is unnecessary but it is Rhiannon who has defeated Gwawl with her cunning.⁵⁰ Pwyll feels the need to resort to violence to lay claim to the victory but it is an immoral and unheroic act.

Once Pwyll and Rhiannon are married however, we begin to see a maturation of the youthful hero. He begins to display a balance and stability to his character and grows into a responsible ruler. In the third year of his marriage to Rhiannon, his noblemen and foster brothers approach him with their concerns over her childlessness. Yet, as Helen Fulton observes:

‘Pwyll demonstrates his statesmanlike maturity in negotiating with his council at a formal meeting to discuss Rhiannon’s failure to produce a

⁵⁰ C. E. Byfield, ‘Character and Conflict’, p. 53.

child, and he defies them in refusing to cast Rhiannon off when her baby disappears - Rhiannon herself agrees to take penance.'⁵¹

His challenge of his counsellors' judgement portrays him as a confident ruler with a good knowledge of legal basics:

'They have no reason to ask me to divorce my wife unless she has no children. I know that she has a child, and I will not divorce her. If she has done wrong, let her be punished for it.'⁵²

It is a revealing statement and also a tactful one; he uses present tense when speaking of the child as if he believes him to be alive and his words, *if* she has done wrong, demonstrates he has serious doubt that his wife is guilty. That he has decided to stand by his wife is further proved during the visit of Teyrnon and his wife, with the child 'Gwri'.

As Helen Fulton observes, 'By the end of the tale, Pwyll is effortlessly and independently in charge of his realm'.⁵³ Pwyll has matured from hot-headed young hero to a balanced mature ruler, but it is a journey he had to make. John K. Bollard regarded the tale as one of conflicting demands and roles.⁵⁴ Indeed, the author sees roles of 'hero' and 'effective ruler' as incompatible and appears to be exhorting his audience to follow a moral path to success. As Catherine McKenna explains:

'Unlike legendary heroes as they are presented in bardic verse, Pwyll is a fairly comic, and thus accessible, figure. In him a medieval Welsh prince

⁵¹ H. Fulton, 'The Mabinogion and the Education of Princes in Medieval Wales',

⁵² Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 17.

⁵³ H. Fulton, 'The Mabinogion and the Education of Princes', p. 242.

⁵⁴ J. K. Bollard, 'The Role of Myth and Tradition in The Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 6: (1983), p. 70.

could not only see an image of good lordship, but an image too of inept humanity, struggling successfully to achieve full sovereignty not so much through battlefield heroics and unlimited munificence as through the less spectacular but more practical virtues – humility, prudence, judicious wisdom and self-restraint.’⁵⁵

The Second Branch

The *Second Branch* of the Mabinogi share few of the moral subtleties found in Pwyll. The primary ‘villain’ of the tale is Efnysien, half-brother to Bendigeidfran and his sister, Branwen. Efnysien repays family loyalty with dishonour and ultimately murder in order to fuel his own insatiable appetite for war. In Efnysien, the author has created a truly ‘evil’ and immoral character, one who follows the heroic ideal with a fanaticism with no regard to the suffering it causes. Matholwch, the king of Ireland, is morally weak and easily manipulated by his noblemen to react to and propagate dishonour. Indeed, the element of honour, both as a legal concept and in a personal heroic sense, provides the catalyst for much of the conflict and tragedy in the *Second Branch*.

The tale begins at Harlech where Bendigeidfran, king of the Island of the Island of the Mighty is with his retinue. Ships approach from Ireland carrying Matholwch, king of Ireland, who has come to ask for the hand of Branwen, the sister of Bendigeidfran. After deliberating with his advisors Bendigeidfran agrees and they set out for Aberffraw on Anglesey for the marriage celebrations.

⁵⁵ Catherine McKenna, ‘The Theme of Sovereignty in Pwyll’, in C. W. Sullivan (ed.), *The Mabinogion: A Book of Essays*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 381.

The author informs us in the opening of the tale that Efnysien is with Bendigeidfran at Harlech yet does not appear to be aware of the proceedings. This has been seen by Proinsias Mac Cana an inconsistency by the author.⁵⁶ However, the author may be trying to tell us something more about Efnysien. He is present at Harlech but is not a part of the negotiations or privy to the decisions of Bendigeidfran's inner court. The author tells us that he would 'cause two of the most loving brothers to fight'. Certainly not the most desirable quality for a king's advisor, regardless of their familial ties. It may be that his immoral nature and penchant for violence has pushed him to the fringes of the royal court. He represents the darker side of heroic culture that Bendigeidfran, despite his stature fails to keep in check.

He comes across Matholwch's horses by chance and feels gravely dishonoured when informed that Branwen has been given to Matholwch without his counsel. He takes his brutal revenge, mutilating the horses of the Irish king. Although the horses are Matholwch's, the revenge is aimed at his own family and social peer group as his words betray:

'Is that what they have done with such a fine maiden, and my sister at that, given her away without my permission? They could not have insulted me more,' he said.⁵⁷

Efnysien feels dishonoured by his own kin but takes revenge on their royal guest, presumably to bring dishonour on Bendigeidfran himself and foment conflict. The failure of the king of the Island of the Mighty to curb the immoral and violent tendencies of his half-brother have devastating repercussions later in the tale.

⁵⁶ P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 35.

⁵⁷ S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 24.

Bendigeidfran is quick to offer legal recompense, proposing to replace each of the horses and paying a *sarhaed* - a rod of silver as tall as he and a gold plate as broad as his face. These Matholwch accept, though grudgingly, to avoid further dishonour as Bendigeidfran's offer fulfils the requirement of Medieval Welsh law.⁵⁸

Bendigeidfran, however then goes beyond legal requirement and offers further compensation of a cauldron, which can bring the dead back to life.⁵⁹ Here he is displaying a quality much favoured by heroic society – that of generosity. However, the author here is subtly but artfully playing with a heroic literary trope. Both in *Preiddeu Annwn* and *Culhwch and Olwen*, costly expeditions are undertaken to recover a cauldron, yet here it is in Bendigeidfran's possession and he is giving it away unnecessarily, thus displaying that, at this point, the British king is refusing to identify with heroic culture. He has also given away a military advantage.⁶⁰

Mathlowch returns to Ireland with Branwen where, as Mathlowch's queen, she gains renown and honour. She gives birth to a child, Gwern yet, after a year, the insult suffered by Mathlowch in Wales begins to fester amongst the noble until even the closest companions of the Irish king begin to insult him openly. As a result, Branwen is sent to work in the court kitchen where she is mistreated. Matholwch's moral weakness is further exposed by the author, as he has accepted the required legal compensation offered by Bendigeidfran therefore this dishonour from his peers is of a much more personal nature. The further disintegration of the Irish king's

⁵⁸ J. K. Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', in C. W. Sullivan (ed.), *The Mabinogion: A Book of Essays*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 235.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 215.

⁶⁰ J. Gantz, 'Thematic Structure in the Four Branches of The Mabinogi', in C. W. Sullivan (ed.), *The Mabinogion: A Book of Essays*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 326.

morality is evidenced by the fact that he allows his dishonour to be transferred to his innocent wife.⁶¹

Branwen manages to get word to her brother in Wales. She trains a starling and sends the creature with a note for Bendigeidfran, informing him of her dishonour. The king of the Island of the Mighty acts now in typical heroic fashion as he summons all his forces for an invasion of Ireland. Yet even this is tempered with patience as he takes counsel before any action is taken.

He leaves behind seven stewards to govern his realm in his absence and the army sets sail.

Due to his gigantic size, the author tells us that Bendigeidfran is able to wade across the sea ‘carrying all the stringed instruments on his own back’. The author offers no explanation for this curious statement and maybe none was necessary for his audience. It may be a reference to some legendary motif that has not survived. It is also possible, however, that the author is making a disparaging comment about the bards, the purveyors of traditional heroic literature. Bendigeidfran is going to war and the bards are ‘jumping on the bandwagon’ as it were.

In Ireland that the author truly begins to explore the darker sides of heroic culture and the suffering that fanatic adherence to such a culture can bring to affect. The author may be dealing with mythology and is presenting his audience with extremes, yet in Medieval Wales his warnings may have been all too valid.

⁶¹ C. E..Byfield, ‘Character and Conflict’, p. 57.

Messengers are sent to Bendigeidfran, addressing him on behalf of Matholwch ‘his kinsman’, appealing to his sense of family loyalty. They propose peace and will invest Gwern with the kingship of Ireland and Bendigeidfran can make provision for Mathlowch on his own terms. These two offers mirror the compensation and redress that the Bendigeidfran made to the king of Ireland and, as if to echo the gift of the cauldron, the Irish add to the proposal at Bendigeidfran’s request for a better response. The Irish will build him a house, large enough to accommodate gigantic frame and the two opposing hosts. Bendigeidfran accepts but it is at this point that his invulnerability begins to unravel. Matholwch’s men advise their king to build a house ‘in his honour’, and because of the ‘honour in building the house’ the British king will make peace. By accepting the house and the heroic honour shown to him, Bendigeidfran submits to the heroic code and the violence that accompanies it.

Efnysien enters the newly constructed hall ahead of the army, casting ‘fierce, ruthless glances around the house’.⁶² Even now, at a time of peace and reconciliation, Efnysien is prepared to foment discord to achieve his extreme heroic ideals and satisfy his lust for battle. He discovers the Irish warriors hidden in the sacks and his first instinct is to kill, rather than raise the alarm. He desires war and plans to sabotage the peace process. In Efnysien the author has clearly defined his personal concept of evil – heroic ambition devoid of all morality.

That Efnysien is present with Bendigeidfran at all displays how far the British king has fallen and how little control he now has over his volatile half-brother. After peace is made, he encourages his young nephew to go

⁶² S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 31.

to Efnysien who expresses desire to make friends with the boy. However, he reveals his deceit and evil intentions:

‘I confess to God,’ said Efnysien to himself, ‘the outrage I shall now commit is one the household will never expect.’⁶³

Indeed, his next crime truly displays the depth of his depravity. He grabs the child and throws him into the fire, starting the violence he has so desperately craved, as fighting breaks out between the British and the Irish. As the death toll increases, the Irish begin to throw their dead into the cauldron of rebirth, thus replenishing their dwindling forces. Efnysien is dismayed by the large number of British dead:

‘Oh God,’ he said, ‘woe is me that I am the cause of this mountain of men of the Island of the Mighty; and shame on me,’ he said, ‘unless I try to save them from this.’⁶⁴

He creeps in amongst the bodies and is thrown into the cauldron, where he stretches out and breaks the vessel into four pieces, his own heart breaking within him.

Initially, it appears as if Efnysien has redeemed himself. Catherine Byfield notes:

‘His self-sacrifice in throwing himself into the cauldron of rebirth at once both gratifies and confuses the reader. His death in the cauldron gratifies by providing ‘a timely and glorious demise for the fractious Efnisien’; and

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 32.

the confusion stems from the inconsistency of this selflessness compared with his previous behaviour.’⁶⁵

But there is no real redemption for Enfysien. He is faced with dishonour and shame that it is he who has brought the men of Britain so close to annihilation, and not the glorious victory he so desired. His status as ‘hero’ is on the brink of collapse and so his remedy for the situation is to commit the most heroic act of all, that of self-sacrifice. It is a selfish action to save his honour and not a sudden change in moral outlook.

From this act, the British gain victory, but it is a pyrrhic victory and the loss of life is almost absolute. The author tells us that:

‘There was no real victory, except that seven men escaped’.⁶⁶

Bendigeidfran has been wounded in the foot by a poison spear and is dying, and the attempt to join the two islands together to make them stronger has resulted in near annihilation and the weakening of both realms. For Helen Fulton, the tale is ‘not about the failure of a centralized monarchy, in fact it affirms its continuity, but about the strength and virtues of Bendigeidfran as a king, the perils of dynastic succession, and the economic destructiveness of wars fought for personal power.’⁶⁷

When they arrive back in Wales, they discover that the kingdom has been usurped. Branwen is overcome with ‘woe’ and her heart breaks at her perceived guilt at causing the slaughter. She is buried in a four-sided grave, thus mirroring the death of Efnysien, the true cause of the suffering; he

⁶⁵ C. E. Byfield, ‘Character and Conflict’, p. 60.

⁶⁶ S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 32.

⁶⁷ H. Fulton, *The Mabinogion and the Education of Princes*, p. 244.

expresses ‘woe’ for the slaughter of the British, his heart breaks within him, and the cauldron is broken into four pieces. Thus, the author invites his audience to judge for themselves where guilt truly lies – with the moral peacemaker or the fanatical heroic adherent.

The Third Branch

The *Third Branch* is, in many ways, the least heroic of all the Four Branches and indeed, there is little opportunity for the characters to display heroic behaviour. The threat of violence is largely absent and contained to minor episodes where the potential belligerents are merely reported rather than seen and are occupied in rather unmartial professions. The main protagonist, Manawydan, displays his morality primarily by rejecting heroic action, as Mac Cana explains:

‘Where the archetypal hero opts for a short life and lasting glory, Manawydan’s priorities are peace and prosperity, which can only be purchased through the practice of unheroic and somewhat prosaic virtues of prudence and tolerance.’⁶⁸

Status is also an important issue within the tale and Manawydan is willing to reject the expectations of his rank and identify with those of a lower social standing. It is a complex study of morality and status but in the end, through a willingness to adhere to a moral code rather than a heroic one, Manawydan is able to reverse the fortunes of the realm. As Fulton observes, Manwydan ‘shows that politics, diplomacy and knowing one’s

⁶⁸ P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 48.

enemies are often more effective than the kind of heroic warfare – traditionally celebrated in Welsh court poetry – which the rash Pryderi wants to enact against the English and which proves so disastrous for him against Gwydion in the fourth branch.⁶⁹

The first indication we have of Manawydan's character is Pryderi's identification of his companion as one of the 'Three Undemanding Chieftains'. Manawydan has never claimed land or territory and it appears that he has little desire for power. He is wracked with sorrow and grief as he has lost his kin and home, but refuses to claim anything from Caswallon, the usurper and kinsman.⁷⁰ He is, then a man of principles and modesty.⁷¹ Pryderi offers him a solution to his predicament - he will give Manawydan both his mother and the seven cantrefs of Dyfed. It is a generous but rash proposition, but we learn throughout the tale that this is typical of Pryderi's nature and reminiscent of a youthful Pwyll.⁷² Generosity is one of the attributes so praised by the bards, a quality that every good lord should practise, but promises given to fulfil the requirements of heroic appearance can often lead to an unnecessary moral quandary.

Manawydan accepts Pryderi's offer of friendship and, it would seem, the authority and benefits of the seven cantrefs of Dyfed. As to Rhiannon, he agrees to meet with her but makes no firm commitments as to the proposed marriage. Already the author is demonstrating that Manawydan is no typical heroic lord and parallels with the First Branch are subtle but deftly drawn. If Pryderi resembles his father as a youth, then Manawydan is the

⁶⁹ H. Fulton, *The Mabinogion and the Education of Princes*, p. 245.

⁷⁰ C. E. Byfield, 'Character and Conflict in the Four Branches'. p60.

⁷¹ S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi. Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1993), p. 72.

⁷² C. E. Byfield, 'Character and Conflict', p. 62.

‘finished product’, the mature Pwyll. It is an apt contrast and much of the dynamic of the tale weaves around it.

They are welcomed back to Dyfed with the typical heroic trope of a feast, yet Manawydan’s reaction to Rhiannon is far from stereotypical as he converses with her:

‘and as a result of that conversation his head and heart grew tender towards her, and he was delighted that he had never seen a woman who was fairer or more beautiful than her.’⁷³

This is far removed from the archetypal response of a hero to his beloved. Manawydan’s affection grows organically through spending time with Rhiannon and he sleeps with her before the period of feasting ends and so they are married.

Much of this early account of the four companions - Manawydan and Rhiannon, Pryderi and his wife Cigfa - depicts a rather leisurely existence. The mood is carefree and the image that is suggested is of a noble court at peace. They continue to entertain themselves with heroic pursuits as the author informs us that they ‘hunted and enjoyed themselves’ and later, when Pryderi returns from paying homage to Caswallon in Oxford, that they ‘feasted and relaxed’. It is not to last, however. Once again, analogies to the First Branch are drawn. After a feast they decide to visit Gorsedd Arberth and, as the audience are forewarned from events in *Pwyll*, either a blow or a wonder will ensue.

⁷³ S. Davies, *The Mabinogi*, p. 36.

As expected, an otherworldly event occurs. An intense tumultuous noise is followed by a heavy mist and everywhere becomes bright. Once they have recovered, they are able to see that every sign of human civilisation, apart from their empty hall, has vanished - every man and woman, dwelling place and domestic livestock. Only the wild animals remain. Here the author presents us with a bizarre image. Instead of any urgency to discover the source of this calamity and a resolution to their predicament we are told that:

‘The four of them continued with the feast; and they hunted and enjoyed themselves.’⁷⁴

When the feast and their food supplies are finally exhausted, they hunt for meat and live off fish and wild honey and are happy for two years. The Third Branch is often proposed as an example of good kingship, yet at this point of the story the two lords, Pryderi and Manawydan, display a most ineffectual and indifferent rule. It is as if they have become so enmired in the insouciant lifestyle preceding the visit to Arberth that, even in a time of tragedy, they are unable to relinquish it. Here again we see the darker side of the heroic culture. Although not threatened with violence, the land is in distress, yet those responsible for the realm and its people are occupied in enjoying the fruits of their status. It is possible that this reflects the authors opinion of the attitudes of rulers and ‘heroes’ in times of peace - when there is war they will fight, and when there is peace they will feast and hunt, oblivious all the while to the needs of the people.

Eventually, after a search of the land and tiring of such an existence they decide to journey to England to make a living. First, they visit Hereford

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 37.

and begin making saddles and pommels but, the quality of their craftsmanship draws the ire of the other saddlers in the town as they see their profits shrink. Pryderi and Manawydan are warned that their lives are in danger. Pryderi's reaction is typical of a hot-headed young heroic prince and he advises that they stay and 'kill these churls'. This also betrays a rather low opinion of those who he considers of a lower status.

Manawydan, however, persuades him that they should leave, shunning violence and dishonour in favour of a rather less heroic but certainly more reasonable and considered course of action.

They move on to two other unnamed towns where they practise the crafts of shield making and the results are the same. They earn the acrimony of the local craftsmen; threats of violence are made but confrontation is avoided through Manawydan's diplomacy and avoidance of heroic reaction.

As Andrew Welsh points out:

'the real conflict in the English episodes is not between the Welsh aristocrats and the English craftsmen but between the Welsh themselves: between the aristocratic and heroic warrior code which they have all inherited and a different way of life which only Manawydan seems gradually to perceive and tentatively reach towards.'⁷⁵

The triple repetition of the events in England informs the audience that something is about to occur, and anticipation is intensified. After the four companions return to Dyfed, the mysterious agency behind the enchantment moves to act against them. Manawydan and Pryderi are out hunting when they give chase to a gleaming white boar. The colour alone

⁷⁵ A. Welsh, 'Manawydan fab Llŷr: Wales, England, and the "New Man"', in C. W. Sullivan (ed.), *The Mabinogion: A Book of Essays*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 175.

should give them pause as the audience is all too aware; Pwyll's encounter with Arawn was preceded by the appearance of shining white hounds with red ears. The two companions continue after the creature with their hounds and the audience is aware that they are being purposefully led into a precarious situation.

They come across a 'huge towering fort, newly built, in a place where they had never before seen either stone or building.' The dogs chase the boar into the fort but Manawydan and Pryderi resist the urge to follow and wait, recognising the potential danger in the situation.⁷⁶ Eventually, Pryderi's heroic nature gets the better of him and decides, against Manawydan's advice, to enter the fort. Manawydan's observation is shrewd and he understands that this is a trap, acknowledging that 'whoever has cast a spell on the land has caused the fort to appear.' Pryderi, however, in typical heroic fashion, refuses to abandon his dogs.

He enters the fort where he sees a marvel; a well with a golden bowl suspended by chains that reach up to the sky. Pryderi is enraptured by this treasure and attempts to seize it, the concern for his hounds having apparently evaporated by his sudden greed, but is stuck fast to the bowl and the ground he stands on, and loses the power of speech. He is rendered helpless then by his own covetous and heroic nature. His initial concern is for his hounds but such desire to recover them is lost when presented the opportunity for such riches. It may well have been a complaint of the author's contemporaries that their rulers were too preoccupied with wealth, and inattentive to the needs of their own people; rejecting their moral obligations to pursue heroic advancement.

⁷⁶ C. E. Byfield, 'Character and Conflict', p. 63.

Rhiannon is predictably upset with her husband, telling him that ‘you have been a poor companion, and you have lost a good friend.’ The implication is that Manawydan’s moral courage and loyalty is in question, although his wisdom in refusing to act is further highlighted as Rhiannon rushes to the aid of her son to become likewise entrapped. The fort disappears leaving Manawydan alone with Cigfa, wife of Pryderi. Manawydan further emphasises his strong sense of morality when he reassures Cigfa that she will have his friendship and he will not take advantage of the situation.

The two return to England where Manawydan chooses to become a shoemaker, but Cigfa does not approve of him taking up a trade that is unsuitable for his rank and status. Manawydan is determined however and the situation develops much as it did during their previous visits. Cigfa echoes her husband’s sentiments; the jealous locals are churls and thus their actions should not be tolerated by those of higher status. Manawydan once again chooses to avoid confrontation and they return to Dyfed, taking with them a load of wheat.

The tale now turns to its climax and revelation. Manawydan sows three fields of wheat but the first two are stripped bare before he can harvest the crop. On the third night he decides to stand guard over the field and watches as a huge host of mice arrives and proceeds to devastate his crop. He manages to catch one of the vermin, a rather fat and slow-moving mouse, and decides to hang it. Cigfa is typically unimpressed and stresses that such action is disgraceful for someone of his status and rank. Manawydan is determined to have justice however and sets out to Gorsedd Arberth to hang it. His choice of location for the execution is significant; Manawydan obviously suspects that the curse may only be ended at the place where it began.

The proceedings are interrupted three times, by a cleric, priest, and bishop, respectively. Each stress that such actions are below his rank and offers him money to release the mouse but Manawydan is resolute in his path of seeking legal redress for his losses. Eventually the last visitor, the bishop, asks him what he will accept to release the creature. Manawydan once again displays a judicious mind with his demands. He asks for the release of Rhiannon and Pryderi, the removal of the enchantment from Dyfed, the identity of the mouse, an oath that no other spell will ever be cast on Dyfed again and assurances that no other revenge will be taken. As such Manawydan has lifted the curse, but also avoided the cycle of revenge and reciprocated violence that began in Pwyll.⁷⁷ Manawydan displays no greed in his demands; he asks only for restoration and reassurance that the matter is indeed ended.

Andrew Welsh sees similarities between themes of the Second and Third Branches:

‘In different ways, the Second Branch and the Third both show the outcome of those relentless processes of honour and revenge which characterize the heroic code: apocalyptic destruction in the Second Branch, an empty land in the Third. Thus, it seems right that Manawydan is no warrior-hero but a man of crafts and a man of agriculture.’⁷⁸

Despite Manawydan’s morality and rejection of heroic conduct, the author shows that he still requires a certain degree of development before he can be presented as the model ruler. At the beginning of the tale we learn that, even though he has never sought power for himself, his credentials as a

⁷⁷ C. E. Byfield, ‘Character and Conflict’, p. 62.

⁷⁸ A. Welsh, ‘Manawydan fab Llŷr’, p. 178.

high-born lord are significant. He was brother to a king over the Island of the Mighty and is cousin to the usurper. Presumably then, his position within the royal kindred provides him with a strong claim to the throne.

Manawydan dispenses with status, however. After a long period of feasting and hunting something changes within him. He is willing to do physical work and takes up crafts which, echoing Cigfa's statement, are unsuitable for a man of his rank. This apparently forces Llwyd ap Cilcoed to act. After returning from his second sojourn in England he resorts to farming, an occupation reserved for those of the lowest status in his society. Once again Llwyd is forced to act against him, leading to the final confrontation whereby Manawydan is able to outwit his opponent and achieve the restoration of Dyfed.

Proinsias Mac Cana views the character of Manawydan as the author's own creation and as exemplifying his own principles.⁷⁹

The more he is willing to identify with the lower rungs of the social order, the closer he gets to resolution and the kingdom is restored to its former state of prosperity and stability. That is where his true morality lies

The Fourth Branch

Mac Cana's assessment of the *Fourth Branch* as 'the longest, the most complex, and the most dramatic' is an accurate summarization.⁸⁰ This is due to the complicated moral outlook of its characters. The primary villain, and hero, is Gwydion, whose chief redeeming quality is his loyalty. However, it is a narrow and aberrant form of allegiance that brings

⁷⁹ Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 58.

⁸⁰ Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 56.

suffering and death. To satisfy his brother's lust he is willing to 'arrange that Gwynedd and Powys and Deheubarth gather for war' and in doing so will cause the slaughter of many. Such loyalty does not extend to his uncle, the king, however - Math cannot live unless his feet are in the lap of a virgin, thus the rape of Goewin could prove potentially fatal to the ruler of Gwynedd.⁸¹ Neither does his loyalty extended to his sister, Aranrhod, as Gwydion later deceives his way to overcoming the destinies she places on her son.

Gwydion travels to Dyfed with his men, disguised as bards, to ask Pryderi for the pigs sent to him from Annwn. Pryderi cannot give Gwydion the swine as he has made a covenant with his people, that he will not part with until they have their numbers have multiplied, presumably to ensure a sustainable food source for his land. Gwydion however, much like Arawn in the First Branch, is able to manipulate the lord of Deheubarth and take advantage of his heroic nature. The magician offers an exchange - twelve horses and twelve hounds, all equipped with gold instead of iron, and twelve golden shields, but the illusion is of a temporary nature. Pryderi and his men decide to accept Gwydion's offer of exchange, thus breaking the agreement with his people. John Bollard saw this as 'the generosity and nature of Pryderi'.⁸² However, Pryderi has put his own interests above those of his land, his desire for these trappings of heroic culture stronger than any aspiration to be a good and responsible ruler. Allowing himself to be deceived, his stature as a ruler is diminished by this exchange, much like Brân's acceptance of the house built for him by the Irish. He summons his troops to go after Gwydion.

⁸¹ R. L. Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in *Math*', in C. W. Sullivan (ed.), *The Mabinogion: A Book of Essays*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 405.

⁸² J. K. Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches', p. 212.

Gwydion and his men arrive in Gwynedd after meandering across the land to find the kingdom mustering for war. Gwydion and Gilfaethwy use the confusion to slip away to Caer Dathyl. Godwin's maidens are violently forced out and she is raped in Math's own bed. The author voices no moral judgement directly on this act of violence and violation, but later Goewin's speech and the punishment of Math betrays his feelings. In portraying this scene of such moral degradation, the author forces his audience to be witnesses to the darkest side of the two 'heroes' and the heroic milieu in general. In war there are no true 'heroes' and it is the innocent that bear the greater portion of suffering. Also, he presents us with the consequences of unconditional loyalty to kin - Gwydion is willing to permit and commit acts of violence out of loyalty to his brother just as Bendigeidfran is unwilling to punish his own brother in the Second Branch which ultimately leads to slaughter.

Gwydion returns to the battle where there is a 'great massacre on either side' followed by 'immeasurable slaughter'.⁸³ The author is keen to ensure that his audience are aware of the devastation caused by Gwydion's deceit and immortality. Eventually Gwydion accepts Pryderi's offer of single combat and the two men fight. Gwydion is triumphant 'because of strength and valour', which are perfectly heroic attributes, but the author then dilutes this image by adding 'and magic and enchantment'. The implication seems to be that his martial abilities are not enough to defeat the lord of Deheubarth and so Gwydion is forced to resort to his usual trickery, employing his less than heroic powers to gain the victory.⁸⁴

After the war, Math returns to Caer Dathyl where he learns from his erstwhile footholder of the events that transpired whilst he was at war.

⁸³ S. Davies, *The Mabinogi*, p. 51.

⁸⁴ J. K. Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches', p. 233.

Goewin's dialogue is direct and dignified as she informs Math of her rape by his nephews. Indeed, she emphasises their kinship with the king - 'It was your nephews who came, lord, your sister's sons' - intensifying the betrayal and shame that they have brought upon him by informing him that she was 'taken in your chamber and in your very bed.' Goewin is not willing to act like a victim here but she does demand justice, in terms that imply that the greater shame will fall upon Math if he fails to act. She directs her complaints to Math's 'heroic' concerns of shame and dishonour and is wholly justified in her actions. Her astuteness and dignity after the violence enacted upon her makes her one of the strongest of the female characters of the Four Branches. It also serves to emphasise the depths of immorality that Gwydion can sink to. Math acknowledges the severity of the crime and the profundity of Goewin's suffering by stating that he will seek recompense for her first and himself second.

The two brothers eventually face Math's judgement, and the punishment is fitting for the violation they have committed - the two brothers are transformed into animals, alternating sexes and living each year as a stag and hind, wild boar and sow, then wolf and she wolf respectively. They are to take on the nature of the animals themselves and therefore this is more than just illusion and are forced by this animal nature to procreate. They are dehumanised, just as they treated Goewin as something less than human. They acted like animals and so are forced to become animals, forced by their bestial nature to copulate and thus the additional shame of incest further degrades their status.⁸⁵ They have literally become the animals so favoured by the bards as metaphorical praise for heroic culture.

⁸⁵ C. W. Sullivan III, 'Inheritance and Lordship in *Math*', in C. W. Sullivan (ed.), *The Mabinogion: A Book of Essays*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 427.

Once their punishment is complete, they return to Math and he grants them his 'friendship' and they are legally reconciled. Math requests Gwydion's advice as to which maiden he should seek to replace Goewin as footholder. Gwydion suggests Aranrhod, his sister and Math's niece. Aranrhod is rather vague about her virginity but after undergoing Math's test she is forced to flee when she gives birth, first to a boy and then a 'small something', which Gwydion takes and hides before anyone notices. Of course, this 'small something' grows, at an accelerated rate typical of mythological heroes such as Pryderi, to become the yet unnamed Lleu. Aranrhod has abandoned her child and refuses him a name, arms and a wife. Gwydion is forced to use magic once again to deceive his sister and overcome each *tynged* in turn.

Aranrhod may be a bad mother but she does not lack morality or compassion. When Gwydion and Lleu visit Aranrhod in the guise of shoemakers to lift the first *tynged*, (that the boy will not have a name unless received from her), she is willing to pay for the shoes that are too big. When she goes down to the two shoemakers in their boat she is obviously paying attention to the boy and in her compliment that 'it is with a skilful hand that the fair-haired one has hit it', Lleu is named. During the lifting of the second *tynged*, she chastises Gwydion for the summoning of a phantom army:

'Between me and God,' she said, 'you are an evil man. And many a young lad could have lost his life in the uprising you brought about in this cantref today.'⁸⁶

⁸⁶ S. Davies, *The Mabinogi*, p. 58.

This indicates that her foremost concern is for her people, her shame at being fooled again by the magician of secondary importance. One also cannot help wondering if her use of the words ‘young lad’ betrays a hint of concern for her son. Regardless, her disdain for the pursuit of heroic passions is obvious in her anxiety of the effects of war of those under her care. It shows a morality and responsibility that seems lacking in the majority of male characters of the Four Branches.

The three destinies that Aranrhod places on her son deny him the three elements necessary for him to become a man in the heroic culture. Without a name he has no identity amongst his peers, without arms he cannot fight in heroic battles and without a wife he shall bear no children to continue his line.⁸⁷ It may be her own shame that motivates her, or it may be something else. Aranrhod leads an apparently peaceful existence on the very edges of society, shunning the heroic culture and the suffering that accompanies blind adherence to it. She acknowledges that Lleu is her son, although expresses shame that it is so, but it is possible that she fears for Lleu’s future and acts to spare her son from the same fate of heroes such as Pryderi.

To overcome the third and final *tynged*, Math and Gwydion create a woman made from flowers and she is given to Lleu as his wife. He is also given land where he sets up a court, and as such his journey to noble hero is complete. Blodeuedd falls in love with a nobleman, Gronw Pebr, the lord of Penllyn. Together they plot Lleu’s death and Blodeuedd endeavours to find out how it can be accomplished. Lleu, like any respectable hero, can only be killed when highly unlikely conditions are met and Blodeuedd is able to convince him to reveal this to her, ‘because

⁸⁷ J. K. Bollard, ‘The Structure of the Four Branches’, p. 230.

my memory is better than yours when it comes to avoiding danger.’ Such a statement could easily be applied to other heroes such as the young Pwyll and Pryderi. Of course, once revealed, Blodeuedd is able to contrive a situation where Lleu is at his most vulnerable and he is struck by Gronw. He is severely wounded and flees in the form of an eagle leaving Gronw to take his lands and court.

It would appear then that the concerns of Aranrhod were not unfounded; she is proved right. No sooner than Gwydion has defeated her three destinies, they begin to unravel in reverse order. Lleu loses his wife and the chance of an heir. He loses his warrior status, as he is wounded and defeated without striking a blow. Finally, he is stripped of his identity, forced to flee in the form of an eagle, and not as a man. Having finally achieved status as a ‘hero’, he loses it again. Gwydion finds him, still in the guise of an eagle, in the top of an oak tree. Rotten flesh and maggots fall from his wasting form, and when Gwydion transforms him with his magic back to the shape of a man he is nothing but skin and bone.

It is difficult to know how a contemporary audience would have viewed the moral characteristics of Blodeuedd but for a modern reader the ethical implications of her conception are more apparent. She is a wife created, not a woman born. She has not experienced a journey through the stages of female development, such as that which Gwydion strived to ensure Lleu would have. She is a creature of emotion and instinct and has not had the opportunity to develop a moral intellect. Indeed, her two ‘fathers’ are hardly paragons of moral virtue themselves - Math was willing to sanction the deceit of Pryderi to obtain the swine from Annwfn whilst Gwydion, so proficient in deceit, started a war to enable his brother to satisfy his lust. As we have seen, Gwydion’s magic lies in deception and ephemeral

illusion and it is no wonder that Blodeuedd possesses the same qualities. It is difficult then to see Blodeuedd as a villain, having as she does the nature of her creator. She is more of a tragic character, simply reacting to the world in which she finds herself with the skills and abilities that have been woven into her psyche.

Lleu eventually recovers and seeks recompense. Blodeuedd attempts to flee but Gwydion catches up with her and transforms her into an owl, a fate he considers worse than death. He tells her:

‘because of the shame you have brought upon Lleu Llaw Gyffes, you will never dare show your face in daylight for fear of all the birds. And all the birds will be hostile towards you. And it shall be in their nature to strike you and molest you wherever they find you.’

In some ways, the punishment again fits the crime. It also matches Gwydion's crime for the rape of Goewin.⁸⁸ Blodeuedd is transformed into a bird much as Lleu was when struck by Gronw's spear. But here Gwydion's perverted loyalty drives him to deliver such extreme retribution. It must be remembered that the magician started a war, resulting in immeasurable slaughter and the death of Pryderi, in order to facilitate a rape, endangering the life of Math in the process. Yet the opportunity to regain friendship, as afforded to Gwydion by Math, is denied to Blodeuedd and his lack of empathy for his own creation is disturbing.

Lleu refuses to accept financial or territorial recompense from Gronw and instead demands that the punishment must match the crime. Gronw must stand where his victim stood and allow Lleu to throw a spear at him.

⁸⁸ S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 75.

Gronw is fully aware that he is unlikely to survive. Neither can he deny the request. He asks if any one of his retinue are willing to receive the blow in his stead. They refuse and thus earn themselves the ignominy of being remembered as one of the 'Three Disloyal Retinues'. It would appear that the author is reminding his audience of how far removed *Y Gododdin* real contemporary life is. It is ironic, however, that it is the very request itself that stains his honour and thus erodes his worthiness of loyalty. If his plea for a substitute has not diminished his heroic status enough, Gronw's honour is further reduce by his request to place a stone between him and the spear, 'since it was through the deceit of a woman that I did to you what I did'. Lleu accedes, though the audience, of course, is aware that there was no deceit and with Gronw's attempts to avoid and then dilute his punishment any sympathy felt for him is drained away. He is killed by Lleu, as the spear pierces through the stone and into his body, breaking his back.

It is the moral complexity of the tale that makes it so intriguing. The sympathies of a modern audience lie with Goewin, Aranrhod and Blodeuedd - the women of the tale. Neither Aranrhod nor Blodeuedd, though antagonists, effectively fulfil the role of 'villain'. We are provided with little reason to empathise with Lleu and several reasons to feel repelled by Gwydion's moral conduct. Indeed, as Catherin Byfield points out:

'He acts under the guise of devotion, directed first to Gilfaethwy and then transferred to Lleu; and the consequences are tragic in both cases. In the first, Math is endangered, Gowin raped and Pryderi slain in battle. In the second, Gwydion's anger at Aranrhod's rejection of Lleu goads him into

creating Blodeuwedd – an act which culminates in Blodeuwedd’s deception and betrayal of Lleu.’⁸⁹

Even though Lleu is restored to his lands, but it is a rather hollow victory and the end of *the Fourth Branch* has rather a pessimistic atmosphere. The young hero has conquered his enemy and has achieved his revenge, yet he is without a wife and no child is mentioned, no heirs to rule after him. We are simply informed that he ruled over his land prosperously, eventually becoming lord of Gwynedd. The outlook holds little promise, however. In a land where matters of succession were often answered with internal conflict, the question of the kingdom’s future is open, Gwydion’s hopes and aspirations for his ward lie in uncertainty. It is a fitting final image for the author’s view of the ‘heroic’ world.

⁸⁹ C. E. Byfield, ‘Character and Conflict’, p. 67.

CHAPTER THREE

Although the question of dating the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* is still ongoing, it is generally accepted that they were composed sometime from the middle of the eleventh century to sometime in the twelfth century. During the period before the arrival of the Normans in Britain, Wales consisted of four main independent kingdoms - Deheubarth, Gwynedd, Powys and Morgannwg. There was no process of consolidation of political authority until Gruffydd ap Llewelyn rose to power through conquest in 1057. Gruffydd ruled until 1063 and was killed by his own men in 1064; his rise to power had been bloody and he had made many enemies within Wales. Rivals to his position were violently removed which, according to twelfth century cleric Walter Map, Gruffydd defended as political expediency:

‘Talk not of killing. I only blunt the horns of the progeny of Wales lest they should wound their dam!’⁹⁰

Violence, however, had always played a role in the political life of Wales. As any member of the royal kindred could lay claim to the throne, dynastic struggles were often settled by conflict and warfare. Viking raids and confrontations with the English also played their part but internal hostilities prevented any possibility of long-term political cohesion. Indeed, the Welsh chronicles recorded the violent deaths of no fewer than 35 rulers in Wales during the period of 949 and the Norman Duke, William, and his conquest of England in 1066. By 1071, William had created three new Norman earldoms along the border of Wales, based around the border towns of

⁹⁰ J. Davies, *A History of Wales* (Penguin Books, 1994), p. 119.

Chester, Shrewsbury and Hereford, and it wasn't long before these new Marcher lordships began extended their interests westwards.⁹¹

In 1081, William marched his army into Wales as far as St. David's under pretence of visiting the saint's shrine. That same year, the allied forces of Rhys ap Tewdwr of Deheubarth and Gruffydd ap Cynan of Gwynedd had secured their territories in battle at Mynydd Carn with the aid of Hibernian-Norse mercenaries from Dublin, and such an alliance may have sounded alarm bells for William. Rhys paid homage to the king but Gruffydd, however, was imprisoned by the Normans on his return to Gwynedd and Robert of Rhuddlan, a kinsman of the earl of Chester, seized power in North Wales.⁹²

In 1087, William, king of England died and his successor, William II was forced to acknowledge the right of the Norman lords on the border to territorial expansion into Wales. Bernard de Neufmarché, a lord based in Hereford, began to move into Brycheiniog and Rhys ap Tewdwr, King of Deheubarth was compelled to act. He was killed in battle at Brecon in 1093 and Bernard took possession of Brycheiniog.

With the death of Rhys, the most powerful of the southern Welsh rulers, Deheubarth lay vulnerable to opportunistic Norman expansion, and they swept through Ceredigion and Glamorgan, taking most of southern Wales.

In the north Gruffydd ap Cynan had managed to escape from his imprisonment and kill Robert of Rhuddlan in 1093. He was forced to flee to Ireland, however, by the invasion of Gwynedd by Hugh, Earl of Chester but returned within a year. About this time, Powys was beginning to enjoy

⁹¹ A. D. Carr, *Medieval Wales* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995).

⁹² *ibid.*

something of an upturn in fortunes, but its stability was wracked by internal feuds and dynastic conflict. Cadwgan was unable to assert control over his restless kin, much like Bendigeidfran and Math, and in 1109 he was forced into exile; his son, Owain, had abducted Nest, wife of Gerald of Windsor, castellan of Pembroke Castle. Cadwgan was eventually able to regain his position in Powys but was killed by his nephew, who had previously slain Cadwgan's brother, in 1111. Owain now took power in Powys but was also slain by Flemings from Pembrokeshire while he was campaigning against Gruffydd ap Rhys.⁹³

The fortunes of the Welsh, however, began to change after the death of Henry I in December 1135. Civil war in England followed the ascension to the throne of Stephen of Blois and the Welsh rulers were quick to seize the opportunity. War broke in South Wales, leading to some territorial recovery and other leaders followed the example. In 1136, most of Deheubarth was won back by Owain and Cadwaladr, the sons of Gruffydd ap Cynan of Gwynedd, in alliance with Gruffydd ap Rhys of Deheubarth. Political control in Deheubarth, however, was retained by Gwynedd and the territory was annexed to the northern kingdom. This then is the historical environment of the author of the *Four Branches* - decades of invasion, native disunity, dynastic conflict, abductions and murder.⁹⁴

Several attempts have been made to place the *Four Branches* within this historical context and possible dates and locations for composition have been proposed. Sir Ifor Williams believed that the unification of Wales by Gruffydd ap Cynan in the middle of the eleventh century created an environment whereby poets and *cyfarwyddwr* would have unrestricted access to all corners of Wales and thus tales and *cyfarwydd* could be

⁹³ J. E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales* (London: Longmans, 1912).

⁹⁴ A. D. Carr, *Medieval Wales*.

gathered and disseminated much more fluidly. He proposed a date of 1060, basing his arguments on phonological and linguistic grounds, also citing the paucity of French loanwords within the text.⁹⁵

T. M. Charles-Edwards, however was able to show that archaic spellings were utilised in medieval Welsh literature until the thirteenth century and also that the movements of the Welsh bards do not seem to have been much restricted throughout the medieval period. He also convincingly challenged the theories of Saunders Lewis who had suggested the late twelfth century for composition of the Four Branches. Lewis based his argument on perceived uses of Anglo-Norman feudal terminology within the text and proposed that the reference to Caswallon being present in Kent and then Oxford in the Third Branch was a reflection of events during the reign of Henry II. Charles-Edwards argued that the sequence of events was a relatively common occurrence, citing examples from the reign of Henry I and Stephen. He also pointed out that in the *Third Branch*, Caswallon's council in Oxford appears to occur only a matter of months after he is in Kent, whilst in Lewis' theory the two events are three years apart.⁹⁶

Patrick Sims-Williams favoured Clynnog Fawr in Gwynedd as the location of composition, linking the Four Branches with *Englynion y Beddau* and *Buchedd Beuno*, in his topographical study of medieval Welsh literature.⁹⁷ In *Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr*, Proinsias Mac Cana was tempted to attribute composition to either Rhygyfarch or his father Sulien, thus associating the author of the Four Branches with Llanbadarn Fawr in Ceredigion. He admits, however, that the lack of information about the

⁹⁵ T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Date of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', in C. W. Sullivan (ed.), *The Mabinogion: A Book of Essays*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 43-90.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ P. Sims-Williams, 'Clas Beuno and the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', in Bernhard Maier, Stefan Zimmer & Christiane Batke (eds), *150 Jahre "Mabinogion" – Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen* (Tübingen, 2001), pp. 111-27.

period presents difficulties in making any definite conclusions.⁹⁸ More recently, Andrew Breeze has proposed Gwenllian, daughter of Gruffydd ap Cynan of Gwynedd, and wife of Gruffydd ap Rhys, prince of Deheubarth, as the author and has suggested a date of c. 1128.⁹⁹

If we agree with the opinion of Mac Cana that ‘one can hardly avoid the conclusion that the author has created in *Manawydan* a reflection of his own personality and a vehicle for his own philosophy of life’, it is perhaps to the *Third Branch* that we should turn in order to attempt to make any reasonable deductions as to a possible origin of the *Four Branches*, or rather the version that has survived.

As we have seen, at the beginning of the tale of *Manawydan, son of Llŷr*, we are told that Caswallon the king is at Kent and Pryderi is convinced to wait until he is at Oxford before travelling to pay homage to him. As discussed, Saunders Lewis proposed that this was a reference to events in Henry II’s, as the King was in Canterbury in 1174 and then held a great council in Oxford in 1177 but T. M. Charles-Edwards argued that the sequence of events alluded to were a relatively common occurrence. He also points out that, in the case of Henry II, three years separate his visit to Canterbury and then Oxford, whilst in the Second Branch the impression is that only a few months pass. However, in December 1135 King Henry I died, and Stephen of Blois took the English throne. Stephen arrived in Canterbury in December and was then in Oxford a few months later in 1136, where he issued a charter of liberties for the church, which was witnessed by Bernard, Bishop of St. David’s.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ P. Mac Cana, *Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr*, p. 187.

⁹⁹ A. Breeze. *The Origins of the Four Branches* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2009).

¹⁰⁰ T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Date of the Four Branches’, p. 55.

If this is the course of events alluded to in the *Third Branch*, are there any other possible indicators within the text that could possibly support this date? 1136 was a propitious year for the Welsh that saw much reversal of native fortunes, both politically, territorially, and ecclesiastically. It is possible to detect other suggestions within the text, particularly regarding the supporting *dramatis personae*.

To begin with, the character of Cigfa is absent from the contemporary corpus of extant Welsh literature. She is found neither in poetry or prose and it has been suggested that her inclusion in the tales may be a later addition. Indeed, throughout the *Third Branch*, Cigfa appears to be a somewhat liminal figure, present with her companions but devoid of any real purpose within the narrative. It is not until the disappearance of Pryderi and Rhiannon that she is given any real dialogue, and even then, her words betray a somewhat disdainful and superior attitude, in spite of her circumstances. She implores Manawydan to take up a ‘clean’ trade during their sojourn in England, then objects to his decision to practise shoemaking.

Later in the tale she displays further disapproval of Manawydan’s actions when he expresses his intentions to hang the mouse and tries to convince himself to release it, claiming concern once again that it reflects poorly upon him and cause dishonour, telling him that ‘it’s not proper for a man of your status and rank to hang that sort of creature, but let it go.’¹⁰¹ When Manawydan expresses nothing but determination to execute the creature for its crime, Cigfa relents in her objections, saying ‘there is no reason why I should help this creature, except to prevent you from being disgraced. So do as you will, lord.’¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 43

¹⁰² *ibid.*,

Curiously, these words are mirrored by Llwyd ap Cilcoed when he appears three times, in the guises of cleric, priest and bishop, respectively. Their three responses closely follow Cigfa's dialogue in word and sentiment. As priest, he tells Manawydan, 'It is not fitting for a man of your status to handle such a creature. Let it go!'¹⁰³ When Manawydan refuses the offer of payment to release the mouse expresses feigned disinterest: 'If it were not improper to see a man of your status touching such a creature, it would not worry me.'¹⁰⁴ The further visits of priest and bishop follow the same pattern, the price offered to release the mouse increasing, until Manawydan is able to secure the release of Pryderi and Rhiannon and Llwyd reveals his true identity. That Cigfa's dialogue and concerns so closely match those of Llwyd may simply be the author using repetition to build up the dramatic tension in the scene, with Manawydan's indignation and resolve increasing with each challenge. Repetition is used to great effect throughout the *Four Branches* as a whole - the three appearances of Rhiannon in the First Branch, Efnysien and the Irish warriors hidden in sacks in the tale of Branwen and Manawydan's fields in the Third Branch are only a few examples. It is possible, however, that it is the author's intention is to create a connection between Cigfa and Llwyd ap Cilcoed in the minds of his audience. That is not to say that the author is presenting Cigfa as a villain of the tale or that she is in some way conspiring with Llwyd, but that he wishes to draw an association between what the two characters represent.

In the First Branch Cigfa is identified as daughter of Gwyn Gohoyw, son of Gloyw Walltlydan, son of Casnar Wledig. In the Third Branch her patronymic changes slightly and her father is given as Gwyn Gloyw.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*,

Whilst Cigfa's pedigree is no doubt sufficiently prestigious for the wife of the prince of Dyfed it is of little consequence to the tale. What may be significant, however, is that the author draws the attention of his audience to Gloucester, or, in Welsh, '*Caerloyw*'. In 1116 the native 'clas' of Llanbadarn was dislodged and a monastic cell established for the monks of St. Peter's, Gloucester, by Gilbert fitz Richard. There they remained until driven out in the reconquest of Ceredigion in 1136 and presumably, a native Welsh institution re-established.

It is possible that Llwyd ap Cilcoed is also invested with some ecclesiastical significance, beyond that of his chosen disguises as cleric, priest and bishop. A 'Llwydeu son of Cilcoed' is named as one of Arthur's court in Culhwch and Olwen. We are told that his house was at Porth Cerddin in Dyfed and that 'Mesur y Pair'. The location of Porth Cerddin has not yet been satisfactorily identified but Porth Mawr at St. David's Head and Pwyll Crochan near Fishguard have been proposed as possible sites.¹⁰⁵ Porth Mawr in particular would draw associations with the centre of Norman ecclesiastical power in Dyfed. It is also tempting, though possibly pushing the boundaries of credibility, to associate Llwyd's 'huge, towering fort' with the cathedral built by Bishop Bernard, consecrated in 1131.

Cigfa's liminality is further emphasised at the conclusion of the tale. Manawydan demands that no vengeance will ever be taken on Pryderi, Rhiannon or himself, yet Cigfa's name is curiously left out; a dangerous omission for her considering the spell on Dyfed was a result of revenge sought for insult to Llwyd's friend, many years in the past. It is possible then that Cigfa is no longer considered a part of Pryderi's future. When

¹⁰⁵ S. Lloyd, *The Arthurian Place Names of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), p. 286.

Llwyd releases Pryderi and Rhiannon from their otherworldly imprisonment, Manawydan greets them and the three companions sit down together, reunited after their long separation. Cigfa is of course conspicuous by her absence. There is no apparent desire (or at least none that the author deems to portray) by Pryderi to be reunited with his wife after all this time. It appears that once she has fulfilled her role, her presence in the tale is no longer required. It may then be the role of Cigfa, in the Third Branch at least, is not so much as Pryderi's 'love-interest' but as something more symbolic that would resonate with a contemporary audience.

It is suggested then that the Four Branches could have been written at Llanbadarn Fawr, after it was re-established as a Welsh clas, the monks affiliated to St. Peter's, Gloucester having been driven out in 1136 after the Normans lost northern Ceredigion to the forces of Owain and Cadwaladr, the sons of Gruffydd, king of Gwynedd. J. E. Lloyd notes:

'How they dealt with Llanbadarn is not on record, but the sudden change at this point in the attitude of the Llanbadarn chronicler is full of significance; whereas under Henry I, he reserves his praises for the chieftains of Powys and towards the end of the reign grows perfunctory and lifeless in his notices, the entry of Owain and Cadwaladr is hailed by him with transports of delight and they are lauded to the skies as "two bold lions, virtuous, fearless and wise, who guard the churches and their indwellers, defend the poor and overcome their enemies, affording a safest retreat to all who seek their protection.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ J. E. Lloyd, *History of Wales*, p. 472.

Clearly then, Llanbadarn enjoyed something of a restoration to its position as a native Welsh institution. Possibly, the conditions thereafter were sufficiently stable and conducive for a minor renaissance in Welsh literature. It is not so difficult to imagine that a cleric, or someone so associated with Llanbadarn Fawr, undertaking such an endeavour. 1136 would have been a momentous year for Llanbadarn, liberated from the control of the Norman ecclesiastical institution of St. Peter's in Gloucester just as Dyfed was liberated from the 'wasteland' curse of Llwyd ap Cilcoed (representing Norman ecclesiastical power in Deheubarth), and this could be commemorated within the tale.

Such an author, of course, would have several influences at work upon him. He would have been a man of Deheubarth, but but living within the sphere of Gwynedd's political influence. As Cadwaladr now ruled northern Ceredigion from the castle at Aberystwyth, and presumably brought with him trusted men from Gwynedd, it would not have been surprising if such men brought with them their own bards and cyfarwyddwr. The preponderance of Gwynedd place names within the Four Branches has led some to view that the author was a native of that kingdom. It is not necessarily the case. An audience native to Deheubarth would presumably not need be told where Arberth or Glyn Cuch were situated, or of significant details of local topography. For an unfamiliar location however, greater detail and geographical narrative may be needed to paint a more vivid picture.

Admittedly the evidence is rather conjectural but if the tale of *Manawydan* does allude to the events of 1136 and a possible link between the Third Branch and Llanbadarn accepted, can a potential author be identified? In his study of *Branwen, Daughter of Llyr*, Proinsias Mac Cana suggested the

possibility of attributing the Four Branches of the Mabinogi to or either Rhygyfarch or Sulien, or indeed both, but admits that the paucity of knowledge of the period prevents drawing any definite conclusion.¹⁰⁷

There is another name that could be suggested, however. Rhygyfarch died in 1099 but he left a son, named after his grandfather Sulien, to be raised by the clergy of Llanbadarn. We are told that he was a learned man, much sought after as a peacemaker and a judge, who died in 1147, probably at Llanbadarn. What little we know of Sulien, son of Rhygyfarch, would certainly appear to make him a plausible candidate. The author of the Four Branches certainly valued negotiation and legal redress above more ‘heroic’ means to resolve disputes and there is a poem attributed to Rhygyfarch, father of Sulien concerning the devastation caused by mice:

‘Longa fluit pluuiis tempestas noxia nimbis, nam nequit in segites messo committere falces: quamuis ipse suis matures parcat aristis, turba tamen muris nescit iam parcere campis.’¹⁰⁸

The interminable rain, injurious (to the harvest) with its violent downfall pours down, for the reaper cannot commit his scythes to the crop. Although he himself spares his mature crop, none the less a host of mice refuse to spare the fields.’¹⁰⁹

There is a rare example in the *Fourth Branch* where we can hear the author’s voice for a brief moment. Gwydion has fomented war in order for his brother to assault Goewin. Gwydion then defeats Pryderi, Lord of Deheubarth, in battle. After the death of Pryderi, the author tells us:

¹⁰⁷ P. Mac Cana, Branwen, *Daughter of Llŷr*, p. 187.

¹⁰⁸ M. Lapidge, ‘The Welsh-Latin Poetry of Sulien’s Family’, *Studia Celtica*, 14: (1979), p. 92

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 93.

‘The men of the South set off for their land lamenting bitterly, *and no wonder*; they had lost their lord, and many of their best men, and their horses, and most of their weapons’ (*my italics*).¹¹⁰

It is possible that what we are hearing here is a sympathetic voice, an author with an affinity for the plight of Deheubarth. As Patrick K. Ford points out:

‘The initial episode, which tells of the love of Gilfaethwy for Goewin and the ruse by which he rapes her, bears no apparent relation to the rest of the story.’¹¹¹

It is conceivable then that, if Sulien ap Rhygyfarch was the author, this episode of the Fourth Branch was a later addition, an analogy to the murder of Anarawd ap Gruffydd of Deheubarth in 1143. Cadwaladr ap Gruffydd, brother of Owain Gwynedd was strongly suspected of being the instigator and was stripped of his lands and forced to flee to Ireland.

Of course, the theory here offered is based on evidence of rather circumstantial nature, the elements of which do not fit neatly together to provide a conclusive answer beyond any reasonable doubt. This is not wholly surprising considering the nature of the *Four Branches*, set as they are in a world of liminality, where the rules of time and space do not conform to expected conventions and where the presence of the ‘otherworld’ can be tangibly perceived throughout. It does not appear to be the author’s intention to imply any sort of chronology to the episodes

¹¹⁰ S. Davies, *The Mabinogi*, p. 51.

¹¹¹ P. K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 89.

within the *Four Branches* that potentially allude to external historical events. Indeed, he appears to be indicating as such in the text; Pendaran Dyfed, the foster-father of Pryderi is a grown man in the First Branch, yet it is curiously emphasised that he is a ‘young lad’ in the *Second Branch*, whilst the seven survivors feast for seven years in Harlech and then spend eighty years in Gwales yet when they return to the ‘real world’ there is no indication that any time has passed.

Of course, the author isn’t writing history, but maybe he is employing allusions and allegories to recall events in recent history in order to invoke a mood and invite his audience to connect with the narrative more intimately. Theories, however unlikely, must be disclosed, discussed, and discounted and as such can provide some stimulus for academic discourse. Nevertheless, we must ultimately agree with Mac Cana:

‘It is an attractive possibility but in view of the gaps in our knowledge of the general background of the period, it can scarcely ever become more.’¹¹²

¹¹² P. Mac Cana, *Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr*, p. 187.

CONCLUSION

The author of the *Four Branches* successfully, and effectively, inverts the heroic literary tropes of the bards to create a work that is both entertaining and moving. At times, a modern reader can be amused, bemused, and repelled by the tales but the examples that the author is presenting to his contemporaries is clear.

In the *First Branch* concerned with a young lord with heroic ambitions, easily manipulated until he casts aside such aspirations and gains wisdom in order to rule effectively. In the *Second Branch* we are presented with a strong and moral king who is wise and just but his kingdom falls as he allows himself to be tempted by honour and drawn into an internecine war as a result of his unwillingness to deal with the destructive heroic elements within his own kin group. In the *Third Branch* we are offered the image of a war weary lord who has rejected the heroic culture of his peers but is unable to restore the realm to its former state until he is able to identify with the lowest members of the social order. The *Fourth Branch* deals with aspects of morality, the destructive nature of the heroic culture and the suffering and instability that accompanies the perpetuation of the heroic milieu.

They are all valid concerns for an author living through such violent and turbulent times. Land hungry Norman lords and ambitious Welsh princes, both with their own heroic cultures, vie for territory and power. Even amongst the Welsh there is little appetite for true unity unless it comes through conquest. Whether he wrote in Llanbadarn or Clynnog Fawr, the fears for the future would have been the same.

It would appear then, that the author is consciously rejecting the heroic environment and encouraging his audience to do the same. As has been mentioned, the poets of the princes paid scant attention to the characters of

the Four Branches. It is possible that the values of the Four Branches did not align with their heroic culture and therefore they had little use for this corpus of work.

It is also possible that we are seeing a functionary evolution of the prose medium within these tales. The parodical characteristics of *Culhwch and Olwen* and the satirical nature of *The Dream of Rhonabwy* suggests a growing apathy, specifically towards the Arthurian genre but also the heroic milieu as a whole, even though both tales can assert the right to be included within the corpus of both. Such definition of classification eludes *The Dream of Macsen Wledig* and *Lludd and Llevelys* but they may well be experimentations, independent attempts at imitation of the style and nature of the *Four Branches*. These possible attempts at modernising would appear to culminate in the compounding of these styles - Arthurian heroism and conscious morality - into the subsequent Romances.

The success or failure of the tales lie within their ability to connect with, and be enjoyed by, an audience. The early twelfth century was a turbulent period in Welsh history, one which the author of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* were intended to entertain and enthrall has never been in doubt and the fact of their very survival is a testament to their qualities and most readers would agree with Sioned Davies, that ‘With stories such as these to draw upon, it is no wonder that Gwydion, in the *Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*, is described as ‘the best storyteller in the world’.¹¹³

¹¹³ S. Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 48.

In his conclusion of his study into the Irish affinities of the *Second Branch*, Proinsias Mac Cana suggests that ‘perhaps we should, after our attempts to dissect his text and trace its origins, sit back, relax and read him as he would wish to be read.’¹¹⁴ It is good advice.

¹¹⁴ P. Mac Cana, *Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr*, p. 190.

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