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The Four Branches

One of the problems of the modern, non-specialized reader in approaching medieval vernacular compositions is that their idiom and background are relatively foreign and inaccessible to him. As a result he is more than normally dependent on the guidance of the expert, in this case the philologist, in forming an opinion of their artistic significance, and there is a very real danger, especially since the philologists are not automatically endowed with literary sensibility, that he will accept as canonical the views and judgements of a handful of influential scholars which have become common coinage in academic and pedagogic commentaries. The result is that he — in common indeed with many academics — tends to adopt a received, conformist appraisal of these works which precludes the flexibility of subjective reaction. It is gratifying, therefore, to see that the virtual monopoly of the Four Branches by one or two authoritative scholars is gradually being replaced in recent years by a variety of individual studies marked by mature scholarship, lack of prejudice and a keen sense of enquiry which cannot but invest the whole subject with something of the instability and changing perspective which are essential to the living appreciation of any art.

Whatever one's particular approach to medieval vernacular texts, one will normally begin by asking when they were written; only rarely in the case of prose texts can one proceed to ask by whom they were

written, and it may be much more relevant to ask instead by what kind of person. In the case of the Four Branches the criteria for dating are wholly internal: the matter is drawn mainly from traditional sources, and the contemporary element betrays itself in the language and, rather less obviously, in veiled references to the contemporary situation. These constitute the evidence by which scholars have sought to assign a date to the quartet of tales.

A more or less complete text survives only in two manuscripts: the White Book of Rhydderch, dating from the last half of the fourteenth century, and the Red Book of Hergest, written sometime in the last quarter of the fourteenth century or the first quarter of the fifteenth (cf. n. 33 below), while two fragments of the second and third branches are found in Peniarth 6, a manuscript of the thirteenth century. That the composition is older than the earliest manuscript is generally agreed; by how much is still very much in question. Sir Ifor Williams adduced several linguistic features to show that the text was first written before 1100. These points are less than convincing, however, and carry less weight than his historical arguments. In the Four Branches, he maintains, stories from Gwynedd, Dyfed and Gwent have been combined in one narrative, and the most propitious time for such an undertaking during the eleventh century was between 1055 and 1062 when Gruffudd ap Llywelyn held the sovereignty of all Wales and when poets and storytellers would have been free to travel throughout the land learning the traditions and visiting the legendary sites of the other provinces. His conclusion was, therefore, that the Four Branches were probably written about 1060.

The argument is ingenious, but hardly compelling. Welsh poets and storytellers, like their Irish counterparts, were notoriously peripatetic and would have found little difficulty in receiving and transmitting literary traditions across political boundaries: one of the salient features of Celtic civilization is precisely its faculty for combining cultural unity with political disunity. But, because of the general plausibility of Sir Ifor's argument and perhaps still more because of his academic authority, there has until recently been a general consensus in favour of his suggested date. This has since been rather rudely disturbed by that brilliant author and academic nonconformist, Saunders Lewis. With characteristic panache and originality he dwells on the extent of Anglo-Norman feudal influence on the form and content of the Four Branches and relates certain incidents in the narrative to historical events of the late twelfth century.¹⁶ On the assumption that the four tales are by the same author he would therefore date them within the period 1170–90. But his arguments have in their turn come under the searching scrutiny of T. M. Charles-Edwards, whose verdict is that they are historically either incorrect or inconclusive. His own view is that the Four Branches were written sometime between about 1050 and about 1120,¹⁷ but he would be the first to admit that any date arrived at on the present state of the evidence can be no more than speculative, and undoubtedly Saunders Lewis's essays have done a useful service in reminding us that the date of the Four Branches is still very much an open question.

Each of the branches is rounded off by the colophon 'And thus ends this branch (*cainc*) of the Mabinogi', and it is from this that they have come to be known

collectively as the 'Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi*. Formerly it was generally accepted that the term *mabinogi* was based on the word *mab*, 'child, boy, son', and that it was used like the French *enfances* in the sense of a story about (a hero's) childhood, and the suggestion was that in this context it referred originally to the career of Pryderi son of Pwyll and Rhiannon.¹⁸ More recently, however, Eric P. Hamp has rejected this explanation, arguing instead that the term is a collective noun based on the stem **mapono-* and that it originally meant *material or doings pertaining to (the family of) the divine Maponos (W. Mabon)*.¹⁹ His argument is a cogent one and would seem to exclude, as he himself assumes that it does, the possibility that the cycle originally covered the career of Pryderi. On the other hand, even if the term *Mabinogi* referred initially to the traditions of the god Maponos/Mabon, by the eleventh or twelfth century it would undoubtedly have been understood as a derivative of *mab*, 'boy', and this more generalized meaning may be quite old. It is not wholly impossible, therefore, that both Eric Hamp and Ifor Williams are correct and that the title which originally denoted specifically the deeds of Maponos/Mabon came to be used subsequently in the wider sense of the deeds and career of a hero, whether Pryderi or another.²⁰

In the case of the Pryderi interpretation there is of course the additional difficulty that it does not appear on the surface of the narrative, but reveals itself only after some complicated — and some might say, selective — excavation. It may be useful therefore to give an outline of the narrative before attempting to show how, in the opinion of the experts, this primary pattern has been obscured and distorted.

In the first branch Pwyll, prince of Dyfed, from whom the story takes its name, agrees to aid Arawn, king of Annwn (the Otherworld), against his rival Hafgan. He assumes his form, goes to the Otherworld, and spends the year there ruling benignly and living chastely with Arawn's wife, who seemingly never doubts his identity, though a subsequent comment makes it clear that she finds his behaviour somewhat bizarre. At the end of a year and a day he defeats Hafgan in single combat and restores the united otherworld kingdom to Arawn. Thenceforth Pwyll is called 'Head of Annwn'.

One day while sitting on the gorsedd or mound near his court at Arberth in Dyfed, Pwyll sees a beautiful maiden pass by on horseback. After several vain attempts to overtake her he prevails on her to speak with him. He learns from her that she is Rhiannon daughter of Hefeydd the Old, that she is in love with him, but that she has been promised in marriage to Gwawl son of Clud. She proposes a ruse by which Gwawl is humiliated at the wedding feast and forced to abandon his claim. Rhiannon and Pwyll are married.

After a protracted delay which causes some unease among Pwyll's subjects Rhiannon gives birth to a son. However, the baby is stolen away on the night of his birth and, in a variant of a well-known international motif, Rhiannon is accused of having murdered her own child and is subjected to a harsh and demeaning penance.

Teyrnon, lord of Gwent Is-Coed, finds an infant boy in mysterious circumstances outside his dwelling. He and his wife keep the child and name him Gwri Wallt Euryn. Eventually, however, they hear of Rhiannon's misfortune and, realizing the boy's true identity, they restore him to his parents. He is given the new name Pryderi, grows to manhood, and, on Pwyll's death, succeeds to the lordship of the seven cantrefs of Dyfed.

The second branch, Branwen Daughter of Llŷr, opens with the arrival of Matholwch, king of Ireland, at Harlech to seek Branwen daughter of Llŷr in marriage. He parleys with Bendigeidfran and Manawydan, her brothers, and the union is

arranged and duly consummated at Aberffraw in Anglesey. However, there is a fly in the ointment in the person of the irascible Efnisien, half-brother to the sons of Llŷr. He insults the Irish king by mutilating his horses and Matholwch is only prevented from departing immediately for Ireland by the promise of abundant reparation and the gift of a wondrous cauldron that had been brought from Ireland.

Matholwch brings Branwen to his home and eventually she gives birth to a son, who is called Gwern. Then in the following year there is a strangely delayed reaction to the insult offered to Matholwch, and Branwen is maltreated and humiliated. She sends a starling with a message to Bendigeidfran.

Bendigeidfran invades Ireland. When the Irish retreat across the Shannon, destroying the bridge after them, he lays himself down as a human bridge. The Irish are forced to come to terms. They plan a treacherous attack, which is thwarted by Efnisien, but battle is joined furiously when Efnisien the trouble-maker casts the child Gwern into the fire. The Irish have a cauldron of rebirth in which they revive their slain, but it is destroyed by Efnisien at the cost of his own life. The British are victorious, though only seven of them, including Manawydan son of Llŷr and Pryderi, survive the battle. Bendigeidfran, who has been wounded by a poisoned spear, asks that his head be struck off and brought to the White Mount in London.

When they come to Anglesey, Branwen dies of grief for the death and destruction of which she has been the unwitting cause. The seven survivors proceed on their way and, in fulfilment of Bendigeidfran's prophecy, they spend a period in Harlech and in Gwales enjoying the characteristic ease and pleasures of the Celtic Otherworld. But they violate a prohibition on opening a certain door and forthwith must abandon the paradise of Gwales and continue to London to bury the head.

In the third branch, Manawydan Son of Llŷr, Pryderi gives his mother Rhiannon in marriage to Manawydan. The whole of Dyfed becomes desolate and without habitation through a strange enchantment and Manawydan and Pryderi and their

wives must seek their living for a time in England, where Manawydan distinguishes himself in turn as saddler, shield-maker and shoemaker. They return to Dyfed and, in the aftermath of a hunt, Pryderi and Rhiannon find themselves imprisoned in a magic fort which promptly vanishes in a cloud of mist.

Manawydan captures one of a horde of mice which consume his wheat while still on the stalk. It turns out that she is the wife of Llwyd son of Cil Coed, a friend of Gwawl son of Clud, the suitor whom Rhiannon rejected for Pwyll. Llwyd it was who cast the enchantment on Dyfed. In return for the release of his wife Manawydan compels him to lift the enchantment and release Pryderi and Rhiannon.

The fourth branch, Math Son of Mathonwy, is named after the lord of Gwynedd, whose peculiarity it is that he must keep his feet in a maiden's lap except when engaged in war. Goewin is the name of his foot-holder, and his nephew Gilfaethwy falls in love with her. Gilfaethwy's brother Gwydion devises a plan to render the maiden accessible.

He persuades Pryderi to exchange his marvellous swine, which had come from Annwn, for stallions and hounds which he himself had conjured up by magic and which would last but a day. The brothers return to Math's court pursued by Pryderi and Gilfaethwy sleeps with Goewin against her will.

The forces of Pryderi and Math join battle and Pryderi falls in single combat against Gwydion. Math punishes Gilfaethwy and Gwydion by changing them into animal form for a time.

Math proposes to appoint his niece Aranrhod as his new foot-holder, but when she is required to step over a wand as a test of her maidenhood, she fails dismally. She drops a yellow-haired boy-child, who goes off into the sea forthwith and is later named Dylan Eil Ton 'Son of Wave', and something else which is not then named but which turns out to be a boy who is eventually called Lleu Llawgyffes.

Aranrhod swears that her son will never have a name, nor bear arms, nor have a wife of mortal race, and the tale tells

how Gwydion by his cunning and magic circumvents her interdiction, and in particular how he creates for Lleu a wife from the flowers of the field. But Blodeuwedd, as she is called, proves to be more beautiful than virtuous, and soon she has a lover in Gronw Pebyr and together they plot Lleu's death. Lleu is wounded but restored through Gwydion's care. Gronw is killed and Blodeuwedd turned into an owl, the enemy of all the other birds.

The two great authorities on the study of the Four Branches were Sir Ifor Williams and W. J. Gruffydd: on the one hand the exemplary philologist who never allowed his arguments and conclusions to stray far from textual analysis, on the other the speculative enquirer who seemed sometimes to place as much store by instinct as by evidence and whose reconstructions, even at their most air-borne, have a disarming semblance of plausibility. But, despite their obvious differences of approach, there were several basic points on which they were more or less agreed: Gruffydd, for example, came to accept Williams's dating of the text, while Williams agreed with Gruffydd that in their primary form the Four Branches comprised the life cycle of the hero Pryderi, lord of Dyfed, divided into four distinct tales or branches and that in their actual form they were the work of a single redactor or author. According to Williams this author, while accepting the serial narrative of Pryderi's youth as his framework, made certain additions which in turn suggested others, producing ultimately a large composite frame-tale encompassing diverse material from Dyfed, Gwynedd and Gwent. Here again there is a substantial measure of agreement between the two scholars, though Gruffydd ventured very much further than Williams would have thought prudent or possible in seeking to chart the prehistory of the text

and re-create its constituent traditions in their primitive, uncontaminated form.

Basing himself — persuasively if not always accurately — on the analogy of Irish heroic narrative, Gruffydd envisaged the primary cycle of Pryderi as comprising (i) the story of Pryderi's conception and birth, (ii) his youthful exploits, (iii) his rape or banishment, and finally (iv) his death. But the contents of these original Four Branches were progressively supplemented, and in very large measure displaced, by the intrusion of disparate themes and narrative complexes. First came the two major additions comprising the deeds of the Children of Llŷr and the Children of Dôn, both related to north Wales and mainly to Gwynedd. The Children of Llŷr, Brân (or Bendigeidfran) and Branwen, have a central role in the second branch, while the third member of the family, Manawydan, who is little more than a name in the second branch, becomes the dominant and controlling character of the third. The affairs of the family of Dôn — Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, Aranrhod and (very fleetingly) Gofannon — are confined to the fourth branch, a good part of which is also taken up with the story of the birth and career of Lleu Llawgyffes, Aranrhod's son. These more important additions were followed, evidently over a period of time, by a number of minor tales including the anecdotes of Irish origin in *Brantwen* and traditional or international themes such as that of the Unfaithful Wife in the history of Lleu and Blodeuwedd in the fourth branch.

One is indeed struck even at a first reading by the range of heterogeneous materials that have gone to the making of the four tales, and it does not require a very discerning eye to see that their aggregation is

secondary and that it has probably come about in several different stages. Imperfect joints in the narrative, inconsistencies and non-sequiturs, all these are sufficiently numerous to indicate diverse origins and diverse editors. Moreover there are references in earlier poetry which presuppose independent and more extended versions of episodes in the extant text, as in the boast attributed to the poet Taliesin:

I sang before the sons of Llŷr in Ebyr Henfelen. . .
 [evidently a name for the Otherworld]
I was with Brân in Ireland,
I saw when Morddwyd Tyllon ['Pierced Thigh'] was slain

which clearly alludes to the happy Otherworld realm presided over by Brân and Manawydan and to the expedition to Ireland recounted in the second branch; or in the reflex of a variant account of the expedition, this time explicitly to the Otherworld, which is preserved in the poem *Preiddau Annwn*; or again in the reference in the same poem to the story of *Pŵyll and Pryderi* which, from the indications there given, differed from that in the first branch. Much later, in the poetry of the *cywydd* period, one finds allusions to versions which do not tally with those in the extant narrative, as when Lewis Môn speaks of Aranrhod, not Goewin, as the virgin companion without whom Math could not live.

Obviously, then, a vast area of oral tradition lies behind the actual narrative and is only very inadequately reflected in it; some of its main component traditions had already, as is the wont of oral literature, generated several divergent forms and some belonged to mythological or heroic contexts quite distinct from the original framework of the Four Branches. Given the subsequent interpolation of

miscellaneous matter from Irish and other sources, one can appreciate the extreme complexity of the final compilation. We shall see presently that the author of the extant text strove with very considerable skill to weld these assorted elements into a cohesive, consecutive narrative, and if he was not entirely successful this was probably due in the first place to the innate intractability of his materials and to the fact that he was attempting an ordered conflation of discrete elements such as was not — and for that matter may still not be — congenial to the Celtic artistic genius.

Matthew Arnold, whose instincts in Celtic literary matters were as sure as his knowledge of them was limited, was quick to note that the Celt lacked, or, as he put it, lacked the patience for, the sense of depth and structure, the *architectonicé*, which shapes the great works of literature, and certainly in the case of Irish literature, where the documentation is more plentiful, this is demonstrably true. The Irish had little stomach or talent for the composition *de longue haleine*: their best works are relatively short, and when they felt constrained for one reason or another to produce a composition of major dimensions, it never seems to have occurred to them that this called for new and appropriate structural modes. Instead, they tended to fill the extra space by simply multiplying the individual minor narratives and stringing them out within an essentially simple structure: in the massive Ossianic compilation of *Acallam na Senórach* 'The Converse of the Old Men' the form is that of the *Rahmenerzählung* or 'frame-story' and the linking device is topographical, the text following the peregrinations of St Patrick throughout a large part of Ireland while Oisín (or Caoilte) tells him the stories

associated with its hills and rivers and plains; and in the great epic of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* 'The Cattle-raid of Cuailnge' a great deal of the actual content is accounted for by thematic repetition, particularly in the extended series of single combats between Cú Chulainn and various warriors from the army of the Connachtmén. In neither case is there any attempt at latching the several episodes together by a pattern of cross-reference or thematic reprise; Irish narrative (and *a fortiori* pre-Norman Welsh narrative) was still too close to the oral tradition to have developed a technique that smacks of the more complex mechanics of written literature.

It is very likely, then, that our author had few, if any, precedents in Welsh for the way in which he sought to splice his diverse materials into a semblance of close-knit unity. How exactly he went about his task has been pointed up very effectively in a recent study by J. K. Bollard, in which he seeks to show that the Four Branches, despite a certain apparent looseness of structure, are in reality formed to an intricate pattern which can only be *the coherent and unified work of a single artist*.²¹ Bollard's argument is that the author exercised a discreet but firmly unifying control over his materials and that this is realized through a technique of interlacing such as is found in a number of other medieval compositions. What he means is best defined in his own words:

The fact that the Mabinogi is grouped into four 'branches' is significant in this context, for such a grouping takes the emphasis away from the tendency to regard the tales as a linear continuum. The four 'branches' have the effect of presenting the tales to us much in the same way that decorative interlace designs form knots which help to create form within the interlace. The four

tales are juxtaposed in order that the reader might compare the events of one with those of another, while each forms a complete tale in itself. The author expects his readers to keep in mind various themes, and when an episode arises, a slight reference to similar previous occurrences interlaces them together and we get a broader view of the entire pattern of the tales. There is no incident or detail which remains isolated or superfluous in the Four Branches.

The process operates in two ways, one structural, the other thematic. The structural binding is achieved by the use of meaningful repetition and narrative echoes or cross-references. Thus at the beginning of the third branch Caswallawn is referred to as Manawydan's first cousin, but not actually named; for this precise identification the reader must recall a passage in the latter part of the second branch. In the third branch again, when Manawydan and Pryderi and their wives settle in Dyfed, they hold a feast and then proceed to the mound of Arberth. Both the words and the action echo the episode in *Pwyll* which prefaces the appearance of the divine Rhiannon and here also they presage the invasion of the human environment by the supernatural. As for the thematic binding, Bollard identifies the three major themes developed in the four tales as Friendships, Marriages and Feuds, and he argues very persuasively that there is a continual interplay between the three which functions as a powerful and flexible unifying element in the text as well as providing an oblique comment on social relations and attitudes. Thus Pryderi's predicament and the devastation of Dyfed in the third branch are brought about by Llwyd in revenge for the treatment of his friend Gwawl in the first and the solution comes through the good offices of the prudent Manawydan acting out of friendship for his son-in-law Pryderi,

which friendship in its turn links the third branch to the second as well as to the first.

Bollard's essay is a conscious departure from the historical analysis and quest for origins which had dominated the work of Gruffydd and of most other students of the Four Branches. Where their approach is largely diachronic, his is strictly synchronic, accepting the text as it stands as a single unitary composition. Where their approach is analytic, stressing the segmental character of the text, his is synthetic, carefully assembling the elements that bespeak an overall unity. It is well justified in its results. Time and again Bollard succeeds in pointing up nuances and relations which might easily escape the casual reader or the student intent on historical analysis. For example, he reveals a subtlety in his treatment of the relationship of Pryderi and Manawydan which has not been evident in quite the same way to other observers, and we shall have reason to note further instances of his perceptiveness.

At the same time, it must be kept in mind that the Four Branches is, in one fashion or another, the product of a lengthy evolution during which it has undergone substantial changes at the hands of at least several storytellers or redactors. It still bears all the marks of a highly composite text, and it might well be argued that Bollard's preoccupation with the unifying elements produces a picture which is as incomplete, and therefore misleading, as that of the purveyors of origins. To take a specific example, he lays considerable stress in the passage already quoted on the fact that the text comprises four conjoined tales, and seems to credit this to the deliberate and sensitive craftsmanship of the author. But what exactly is the

premise on which this judgement rests? Are we to take it, though he does not say so, that he rejects Gruffydd's view that the fourfold grouping reflects the four stages in Pryderi's life-cycle? Or, alternatively, that he is referring to the secondary complex of tales which now fill the original framework and that he is attributing this to the final author? If so, this is something which has not yet been demonstrated, and probably cannot be.

A further snag in the synthetic approach adopted by Bollard is that it tends to understate the breaks and inconsistencies which are quite frequent in the text. Let us take one or two examples. The story of the stealing of Rhiannon's child has been carefully analysed by Kenneth Jackson who finds that it has been constructed out of three well-known story motifs: the Calumniated Wife, the Monster Hand, and the Congenital Animals.²² In the primary stage it told how Rhiannon's children were mysteriously stolen by a monster which was pursued by the hero (Teyrnon in the extant text) and slain. It was then disrupted by the introduction of the Congenital Animals motif, which was not integrated very happily but which explains the stealing and rescue of Teyrnon's foal and the young Pryderi's subsequent attachment to it. The final stage in what Jackson calls 'the disintegration of the tale' came with the interpolation of the motif of the Calumniated Wife charged with eating her own child. By this time the narrative was in a state of some disorder, as Jackson observes:

It was the clumsy patching at this stage of the tale, consequent on the violent introduction of the Calumniated Wife, which has left it practically unintelligible in its present form. Who stole the child? What was this mysterious claw? Why did it steal

Teyrnon's foals? How did it come to drop the child in Teyrnon's stable and what was it doing there anyway? These are some of the questions which arise when we first read Pwyll, and the tale provides no answers — the answers are only to be found by the methods of comparative folktale study.

By contrast Bollard brushes these difficulties aside as so many 'details' and concentrates on uncovering the positive elements in the author's handling of his text, which are very real indeed.

The danger in this is that one is prone to find what one sets out to look for. For example, Bollard comments on the 'subtle portrayal' of the relationship between Pwyll and Rhiannon when she has been accused and subjected to a humiliating penance, and then he adds:

We learn later, when Teyrnon comes to Arberth, that not only has Pwyll chosen to keep Rhiannon with him, but that, except for the penance which she still undergoes, she has kept her position of honour in the court at Pwyll's side, for at his arrival Teyrnon is given a place of honour between them.

Some might regard this as a pardonable inconsistency, explicable by the formulaic manner in which court seating arrangements are described in these texts or simply by the fact that the Calumniated Wife theme has been interpolated into an earlier and more conventional setting. In any event, it is doubtful whether it can reasonably be taken as evidence of the author's subtle drawing of character.

Another instance is the violent reaction of Efnisien in the second branch when he hears of Branwen's marriage to the Irish king, Matholwch. He is enraged that she should have been bestowed without his

consent as kinsman and sets about mutilating Matholwch's horses. His reaction implies clearly that he knew nothing until then of Matholwch's mission, yet in the opening passage of *Branwen* he is in the company of Bendigeidfran and Manawydan when Matholwch approaches and announces his errand. The inconsistency is all the more noticeable in that the incident in question provides the *point de départ* for the whole action of the second branch.

The fact is that examples of crude joinery are numerous in the Four Branches, and if one adopts an exclusively synchronic view of style, sense and structure, then one must saddle the author with their shortcomings as well as commending him for their virtues. If, however, one takes account of the historical perspective, then most of these shortcomings — though not all — may easily be explained and perhaps excused as the product of the stage-by-stage evolution of the text. The moral is that, in dealing with a compilatory work like the Four Branches, ideally one should at one and the same time have regard to all the several different methods of assessment and interpretation. One is reminded of Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's comment that

in order to see the shape of a myth, one has to shine light on it from as many different sides as possible in order to illuminate its many various surfaces

and her conviction that this is best achieved by approaching myth armed with *the toolbox of pluralism*.²³ While her prescription has particular relevance for the polyvalent character of myth, it is also, one feels, peculiarly apt for texts such as the Four Branches which in their extant form have been shaped by

various discrete agents — the skills and preferences of the final author for example, the structure, style and content, and the lengthy evolution, of the traditional narrative constituents with which he worked, and, of course, the mythology which gave some of these constituents their primary meaning and motivation — so that the more comprehensive our range of perspectives on such texts, whether synchronic or diachronic, critical-aesthetic, thematic, stylistic, social-historical, oral-traditional, folkloristic or mythological, the richer and more authentic will be our reading and understanding of them. Such a holistic approach is perhaps a counsel of perfection, and it is inevitable that most commentators on the Four Branches will, for sound practical reasons, tend to adopt a single main perspective in their exploration of the text; all one can reasonably require is that each specialist recognize that his own particular approach to the text is not the only valid one, and that to proceed as if it were is to restrict needlessly our understanding of what is after all a notably heterogeneous composition.²⁴

Let us take for example the second branch, which, if we accept Gruffydd's notion of its original content, has been radically transformed in its subsequent development. The suggestion is that the tale originally told of an expedition by Pryderi to the Otherworld of Annw(f)n. This would be a variant of an expedition led by Arthur which was already by about AD 900 the subject of the poem *Preiddau Annwn* and of which there is another variant in the story of *Culhwch and Olwen*. As in *Branwen*, so in *Preiddau Annwn* only seven survivors return to the Island of Britain. In the poem, as in *Culhwch*, the purpose of the adventure was to capture a wondrous cauldron belonging to the ruler of the Otherworld, though in both *Culhwch* and *Branwen*,

by a conflation of supernatural and terrestrial locations which is well attested in Celtic tradition, the island of Annwfn has become the island of Ireland. In *Branwen* the expedition is led by Brân (under his emended title Bendigeidfran 'Blessed Brân'), but Pryderi is one of his companions and figures among the seven survivors. Brân's role justifies the introduction of the family of Llŷr and in particular the story of Branwen which becomes the centre-piece of the tale.

There is a suggestion of how this may have come about in an Irish analogue of the Otherworld raid. Here the heroes Cú Roí and Cú Chulainn set out to recover (or alternatively to abduct) the woman Bláithíne and to gain possession of a Cauldron of Plenty. The lady is the principal object of the quest, the cauldron a secondary but important attraction. In the original form of the Welsh tale the cauldron was the principal object, but, whether on the analogy of the Irish tale (which was almost certainly known in Wales) or of another analogue, it is possible that a redactor saw in the recovery of the lady a neat way of giving his tale variety and a more human motivation. And so Branwen displaced the cauldron — almost but not quite.

At some stage a sub-tale was introduced, almost certainly from Irish, which told of the monstrous pair Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid and his wife, whom the Irish tried to burn in an iron house but who escaped to Britain, bringing with them a cauldron of wondrous properties which they bestowed on Bendigeidfran who in turn gave it to Matholwch. This story has the kind of bizarre drama beloved of medieval audiences and readers, and it has the additional advantage of providing a neat explanation, half learned, half

popular, of how the Irish colonies of Wales came into being. Its inclusion meant, however, that the cauldron, which Bendigeidfran should have won by main force in Ireland, was his already long before the Irish incursion was conceived. Nevertheless, the redactor contrived that it should return to Ireland and stand at the centre of the mighty conflict, as it did in the prototype. His anxiety not wholly to jettison the old while accommodating the new is a trait he shares with many medieval redactors of traditional narrative, but in this particular instance the compromise is worked very neatly and in such a way as to provide a timely and glorious demise for the fractious Efnisien, who had by then outlived his usefulness.

The story of Branwen was transformed — not very skilfully it may be said — into a version of the Calumniated Wife theme and further padded out by material from various sources, including Irish. The aftermath of the fight in Ireland is made to encompass the double stay in the blissful Otherworld, here located in Harlech and Gwales, the two episodes probably being drawn from two different oral versions of the same Otherworld theme.²⁵ If one adds to all this a scatter of minor narrative elements of diverse origins, one will have a fair idea of the complexity of *Branwen* and one will appreciate Gruffydd's comment that

*the outstanding characteristic of Branwen is the excessively large number of 'loose ends' in the narrative and a vast amount of incoherence and confusion. In other words, the author or the cyfarwydd is dealing with material which has undergone little of the 'ironing-out' process, as compared with the equally complex material of Math, for instance.*²⁶

Clearly, Gruffydd does not lay the 'incoherence' of *Branwen* fairly and squarely at the door of its author, but regards it as the product of its peculiar textual history. One can sympathize with his viewpoint, but it does bring into question the whole notion of the final redactor of the Four Branches as an 'author', a notion which Gruffydd has done more than most to popularize. If we think of the author, as most moderns do, as a writer who has complete control over his material within the limits of his talent, then assuredly the final redactor of the Four Branches is not one. If, on the other hand, we envisage him in the more strictly etymological sense of the term as one who gives increase to his subject, whether in range, in meaning, or in style, then we can concede him the title with fair confidence. It is primarily in this latter sense that Saunders Lewis, J. K. Bollard and Gruffydd himself considered him as author rather than storyteller: he endowed the matter he inherited with a certain style and a certain philosophical cast which colour all four branches and mark them out in their present form as the product of a single artistic talent.

But the matter is perhaps not quite as simple as that. In almost everything that has been written about our author's achievement, whether from a historical and textual or a synchronic and literary point of view, there is the assumption that he had some role in the compilation of the constituent materials as well as in their writing. This obviously complicates one's assessment of his work, since the greater his part in compiling the text, the greater is his responsibility for its structure as well as for its style. And yet none of the commentators — and this applies particularly to the proponents of historical analysis — has been very explicit on this point.

Gruffydd exonerates the author from serious responsibility on the grounds that

most of the puzzling inconsequences of the Mabinogion . . . developed in the spoken cyfarwyddyd and had already entered into the totality before the author took the matter in hand. He had to make the best he could out of unpromising material which had already been distorted during the centuries when it had passed from cyfarwydd to cyfarwydd.²⁷

On the other hand he sometimes seems to credit him — if only by implication — with a more active part in assembling the various materials of his narrative:

He based his prose epic on a series of recited tales; he makes that plain by his references to his sources, herwydd y dyweid y cyfarwyddyd — 'as the cyfarwyddyd says', and by giving to different sections of Branwen their original designation.²⁸

In so far as *Branwen* is concerned, therefore, Gruffydd sees our author as being close to his sources and even in some instances as being responsible for bringing them together. In this he may well be correct for, despite the fact that many of its narrative elements are clearly traditional, one gets the impression that they have been conjoined at a much later stage than in the case of the other three branches. With the exception of *Branwen*, however, he appears in general to assume a long-drawn-out transformation of the original life-cycle of Pryderi, with the matter relating to the families of Llŷr and Dôn being introduced at a fairly early date.

By contrast, Sir Ifor Williams seems to attribute more or less the whole conflation to the final redactor,

whom he describes as *editor, composer, or compiler*. And, he argues, since this is the person who *joined together the stories of Gwynedd, Dyfed and Gwent in a single narrative*, and since the bond which joins them together is the life of Pryderi, one may safely conclude that he belonged to Pryderi's homeland of Dyfed.²⁹ The weak link in this argument, particularly in the light of Gruffydd's observations, is that, with the exception of his birth, the events of Pryderi's life have been smothered under the weight of materials of northern provenance, and if the argument from local loyalty or expertise has any force, then surely an inhabitant of Dyfed would be less likely than any other to obscure the deeds of Dyfed's hero. On the other hand, there are several linguistic features in the text which might suggest that the author was a southerner.

When Professor Jackson speaks of the architects of 'the final compilation' of the Four Branches, he does so in the plural. That he should assume the participation of several compilers is not surprising, considering that his specific concern is with the international tale motifs in the text and how precisely they have been incorporated — in other words, his approach is by definition analytic and in some degree historical — but on balance it surely seems more likely that the actual text is the work of a single hand. He believes, no doubt rightly, that a good many of the interpolated narrative elements have been added by the final compilers (for which I prefer to read 'compiler'), though his analysis of *Pwyll* shows that the text has experienced at least three stages of interpolation and change.³⁰ But, unlike most other commentators on the Four Branches, Jackson follows the logic of his own argument: one cannot associate the author with the compilation of the text — or even with the editing of it — while absolving

him from all responsibility for its shortcomings as narrative. It has become almost routine to praise him for his storytelling skill, which is rather like making virtues out of other people's vices, for, as Professor Jackson says in effect, no self-respecting oral storyteller of the present day would be content with the kind of gaps and inconsistencies which abound in the Four Branches. No, to compliment the author as storyteller is to divert attention from his real qualities as a man of literature.

He is a stylist rather than a storyteller,³¹ and his style has been consciously wrought from a judicious blend of colloquial and learned techniques. It has many of the characteristic features of oral narrative. Its sentences are generally short and direct, and, as in spoken narrative, they are frequently linked by the conjunction *a(c)* 'and' or introduced by temporal adverbs:

*And he set out that night from Arberth, and came as far as Pen Llwyn Diarwya, and there he was that night. And on the morrow in the young of the day he arose and came to Glyn Cuch to loose his dogs into the wood. And he sounded his horn . . .*³²

It makes abundant use of the affixed pronouns after verbs and prepositions, and in this it is much closer to modern spoken Welsh than is most modern Welsh prose (compare southern colloquial '*weles-i* beside learned/literary *gwelais*). It also approximates to oral storytelling in its liberal, and extremely effective, deployment of dialogue to vary and to personalize the course of the narrative. On the other hand, its normal sentence form is the rather paradoxically named 'abnormal sentence', in which the verb is regularly preceded by its subject or object and which, if my

assumptions are correct, is a mark of the literary register as opposed to the colloquial register of Middle Welsh.

Yet these are but the crude ingredients of his style. What gives it its special quality is the way in which they are combined in a controlled and flexible harmony that helps disguise the structural disunities of the narrative. If there are obscurities in the sequence of events, there are none in the rhythms of his prose. Clear and economical, smooth-flowing and sinuous, despite the various features which it shares with oral narration it strikes one as the product of a sophisticated talent, more at home with Latin manuscript texts than with the oral telling of myth and saga. Most orally conditioned literature gives itself free rein in the use of repetition, hyperbole, simile and a host of other characteristic stylistic devices, culminating at moments of emotional tension or dramatic action in streams of rhetorical language richly embellished with alliterating adjectives and designed for the ear rather than for the eye. There is some of this in *Culhwch ac Olwen* and in several of the other tales of *The Mabinogi*, but in the Four Branches there is virtually none. Adjectives are used sparingly, and almost always functionally. Figurative language has hardly any place here, and one suspects that our author would have felt it unbecoming, if not slightly indecent, to indulge himself in these overtly cosmetic aspects of his art.

There is an overriding restraint and discipline in his work, an element of puritanism one might say, and he evinces little sympathy with the barbarism and rodomontade that were so much a part of medieval courtly society. In *Branwen* he reports the cruel

mutilation of Matholwch's horses by Efnisien, reflecting a motif which is common to all horse-riding peoples and which is attested in the Welsh laws as well as in the Life of St Cadoc by Lifris of Llancarfan, but he does not dwell on it, using it briefly and objectively as an essential element in the motivation of his narrative. He bases part of his description of Bendigeidfran crossing to Ireland on a grotesquely extravagant passage in an Irish tale,³³ but the extravagance of his account and the very notion of Bendigeidfran as a mountainous giant are at variance with the whole tone of his narrative and become strangely muted by the sobriety of his style. In following the Calumniated Wife theme in *Pwyll* he has to subject Rhiannon to the extreme penance of sitting each day by the gate and offering to carry on her back from there to the court all those who approached. It is hardly the kind of story he would have invented himself, and he betrays his slight discomfort by applying a touch of anti-deodorant before and after: he opens the passage with the statement that Rhiannon *summoned to her teachers and wise men. And as she preferred doing penance to wrangling with the women she took on her penance*, the implication being that her penance was named by those whom she had summoned and that it was therefore in a sense self-imposed;³⁴ and he closes it by pointing out that, even though Rhiannon offered to carry visitors on her back, *it was chance (damwein) that any one would permit himself to be carried* — a nice ambiguous phrase that salves the conscience without ruining the point of the story.

He has wit and understanding but not a great deal of humour.³⁵ His prevailing trait is a kind of *gravitas* compounded of good sense, moderation, and a feeling

for the proprieties, whether of style or behaviour. It is one he shares with Manawydan, and as one reads the Four Branches 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. He is the pragmatist and the peace-maker. When Pryderi entered the magic court despite Manawydan's counsel and when Rhiannon taxed her husband with being disloyal to his friend because he did not hurry to his rescue, Manawydan made no protest, nor did he seek to prevent Rhiannon rushing impetuously to join Pryderi in his imprisonment. Nor did he show resentment when Cigfa, Pryderi's wife, waxed melodramatic about the danger to her virtue in being left alone with him, or when she tried, with a kind of prim suburban snobbery, to dissuade him from taking up the craft of shoemaking.

But his patience and tolerance were not born of weakness. Despite his quiet courtesy to Rhiannon and Cigfa he was not diverted from his planned course of action, and his tenacity appears at its most dogged and receives its complete vindication in the episode of the mice in the corn when he outstays and outsmarts the magic of Llwyd son of Cil Coed. Here again a familiar story motif is brought into play — the ascending series of boons of which all but the last are refused — but it is admirably adapted to the canny circumspection of Manawydan, who takes nothing for granted: not merely does he secure the release of Rhiannon and Pryderi and the raising of the enchantment from Dyfed, but he retains his bargaining counter until he extracts from Llwyd the final undertaking that there will be no revenge for this humiliation. Vengeance and feud were part of the pattern of medieval life, but Manawydan shows how they may be rejected and

circumvented by the exercise of fortitude and prudence.

As J. K. Bollard has remarked, Manawydan's overriding concern in the Four Branches is with the maintenance of law and order, even if this entails acting in ways contrary to the code of a medieval nobleman. Where Pryderi and Rhiannon react to their situation with 'heroic' or instinctive action which compounds rather than resolves their problems, Manawydan chooses the role of 'Cunctator', stolid and slow-moving to the imperceptive and the impetuous, but subtle and quick-witted to those observers, in other words the readers of the Four Branches, who follow the events to their final outcome. This is precisely what D. Myrddin Lloyd has in mind when he sees in Manawydan's conduct a thoroughgoing criticism of the heroic ideal. 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 the unheroic and somewhat prosaic virtues of prudence and tolerance. Though his origins are deep in Celtic mythology and though even in the Four Branches he retains his association with the Otherworld and gives evidence of a more than natural prescience, above all he is cast as the protagonist of reason and enlightenment in the fight against the crudities and excesses that were so much a part of the mythopoeic world of tradition.

For men of scholarship and sophistication in the eleventh or twelfth century — and especially for churchmen — this must often have been a very real and disturbing conflict. Some time in the first half of the twelfth century a new recension was made of the great Irish saga *Táin Bó Cuailnge* 'The Cattle-raid of

Cuailnge' and was written into the compendium manuscript known as the Book of Leinster. But the monastic scribe evidently had some scruples about the propriety of labouring thus to perpetuate traditions that were often barbaric and always unchristian, and he added this colophon (in Latin, significantly):

But I who have written this story, or rather this fable, give no credence to the various incidents related in it. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, others poetic figments; some are probable, others improbable; while still others are intended for the delectation of foolish men.

In his case, however, he was fortified by the example of numerous generations of clerics and monastics who recorded and redacted matter that was wholly at variance with Christian belief and practice, and so his misgivings, such as they were, were easily exorcized by a pious genuflection to orthodoxy — but not before his dubious task had been well and truly finished.

The author of the Four Branches had no comparable scribal tradition to influence him, and, in any case, one feels that he was more the detached observer and manipulator of vernacular tradition than were his monastic contemporaries in Ireland. He was probably a cleric — many things in the matter and style of his composition suggest as much — and there is nothing to indicate that he had a very profound or extensive expertise in native secular tradition. For example, when in *Branwen* fighting erupts at the instigation of Efnisien, the text has this rather cryptic sentence: *And it was then that Morddwyd Tyllion said: 'Dogs of Gwern, beware of Morddwyd Tyllion' (Guern gwngwuch uiwch Uordwyd Tyllion).* The words quoted probably come from an early poem dealing with Brân's expedition

similar to that cited above from the Book of Taliesin (p. 30). They yielded up their meaning to the formidable skills of Sir Ifor Williams, but in the text they are corrupt and clearly were not understood by the scribes of the White and Red Books. Whether the author of the Four Branches understood them we cannot now be sure, but evidently he had no idea who this Morddwyd Tyllion was, though we, with the benefit of hindsight and perhaps a few extra sources, can be reasonably certain that Morddwyd Tyllion was a sobriquet for Brân and that it refers to a wound in his thigh which is the antecedent of that fateful wound which incapacitated the Fisher King and several other derivatives of Brân in continental Arthurian romance.

Our author had a variety of sources at his command: apart from the traditional material on the families of Llŷr and Dôn which form the substance of his work, he draws on the legal, genealogical, triadic and proverbial tradition as well as on Irish and international story, though much of this was no doubt already embedded in the text which came to his hand; but he strikes one withal as the gifted and learned amateur, selecting and reconstructing and sewing together, yet not somehow as a participator in the integral tradition, whether because the tradition itself had become fragmented or because as a cleric and a Latin scholar (if one may presume as much) he stood outside it, however great his interest in it.

Many commentators have remarked on this residual, miscellaneous character of the Four Branches, but none in words quite so memorable as those of Matthew Arnold:

These [Pwyll, Arawn, Teyrnon and others] are no mediaeval

personages; they belong to an older, pagan, mythological world. The very first thing that strikes one, in reading the 'Mabinogion', is how evidently the mediaeval story-teller is pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret; he is like a peasant building his hut on the site of Halicarnassus or Ephesus; he builds, but what he builds is full of materials of which he knows not the history, or knows by a glimmering tradition merely — stones 'not of this building', but of an older architecture, greater, cunninger, more majestic.

It is true that most of the main incidents in the Four Branches belong to the mythological layer of British tradition. The family of Dôn evidently corresponds to the divine people of the Irish known as Tuatha Dé Danann, Manawydan is the British equivalent of the Irish god of the sea Manannán mac Lir, Rhiannon (from **Rīgantonā* 'Divine Queen') and Teyrnon (from **Tigernonos* 'Divine Lord') with their son Mabon (from **Maponos* 'Divine Son') are central to the whole concept of deity among the Celts, and so on. Similarly, most of the narrative revolves around familiar mythical themes of sovereignty, the Otherworld and the Birth of the Hero, and some less obvious elements may continue archaic and all but forgotten religious forms: for instance, Georges Dumézil has discussed the curious condition by which the magician-king Math is always obliged, except in time of war, to keep his feet in the lap of a virgin girl and has related it to an ancient Indo-European myth and ritual of kingship.³⁶ And finally, if Eric Hamp's explanation be correct, the very title *Mabinogi* derives from the mythic history of the god Mabon.

One can therefore readily understand why Brinley Rees, whose personal contribution to the study of Celtic mythology is so very considerable, should have

considered it necessary to redress the balance of critical commentary in favour of the mythological reading. In a recent essay, *Ceinciau'r Mabinogi*,³⁷ he has demonstrated that the mythological element pervades all of the four tales and that one cannot properly evaluate them without giving it its due weight; this is precisely where the student of literature goes badly astray who pretends to judge the Four Branches by purely literary and synchronic criteria. He shows, for example, that the representation of the family of Dôn as a congeries of magicians whose activities are dyed in illusion and trickery belongs to their mythic role and that this and many other features of the narrative spring from the creativity of myth and not from that of the author.

When he goes beyond this, however, appearing to argue that the mythology of the Four Branches constitutes an articulate and intelligible whole, and particularly when he sees in it the omnipresence of the trifunctional system which Dumézil has shown to underly much of the ideology of the Indo-European peoples, then, I feel, he presses too heavily on the evidence. Be that as it may, the important consideration for us modern readers of the Four Branches is not so much the antiquity which the author pillaged for the materials of his edifice as the mind and attitude which prompted him to use them as he did. However much mythology the Four Branches contains, it is not a mythological document in any primary sense: it is a literary construct which makes use of mythological, and other, materials. Its author is not a mythographer conscientiously recording the traditions of the gods for their own sake, but a gifted writer shaping the shattered remains of a mythology to his own literary ends. Far from giving it credence,

as many of his Irish contemporaries obviously do their traditions, he handles it more in the spirit of a modern dramatist selecting and adapting Greek myth as a medium already rich in associations and as a vehicle for his own comment on contemporary society.

The analogy with drama is apt in more ways than one. No one has read these tales but has been impressed by the subtle weave of dialogue that enriches the texture of the narrative and frequently blurs the distinction between the arts of the storyteller and the dramatist. It is not an invention of the author's — the more extensive Irish materials, as well as the other Middle Welsh tales, bring out clearly the Celtic storyteller's delight in the dramatic use of dialogue — but the qualities which distinguish his narrative prose — clarity, succinctness, style, and a certain intellectual subtlety — these are again present in his speech passages but enhanced by an acute sense of situation and character. There is in fact, perhaps not surprisingly, a visible correlation between the quality of his dialogue and the strength of his characterization. I have suggested elsewhere that the characters in *Branwen* lack depth and it seems to me that those who would argue otherwise have been led by the general merits of the composition to look for conscious nuances even where these do not exist; this is one of the prevailing hazards of pre-modern literary study, where reputation so often pre-empts criticism. *Branwen* herself seems to me a passive and colourless figure who has little of the spirit and complexity of the great heroines of Celtic literature. Efnisien dominates the tale by his actions, but even he remains a stock character with little semblance of a developed personality. When J. K. Bollard declares that he is *a complex, and in many ways, a very tragic figure* and that

*the author is very concerned with the character himself as well as with his key role in the action of the tale, this is, I fear, an instance of the modern commentator reading his own subtleties into the author's succinct and rather matter-of-fact narrative. Efnisien is indeed complex, but only in the sense that he acts with extreme inconsistency and wilfulness, in keeping with the traditional type to which he conforms. That he has the potential of tragedy is beyond question, that he achieves tragedy I find hard to accept. Even his act of final reparation, when he sacrifices himself in order to destroy the Irish Cauldron of Rebirth, is dealt with perfunctorily for what it is: a simple narrative convenience which has more to do with plot than with personality. If this is true, and if *Branwen* is indeed rather weak on character, the probable reason is that the tale itself is a collage of disparate materials marked by discontinuity and lack of internal development.*

In *Manawydan* the situation is very different. Here we have a relatively simple and progressive story with few if any pointless diversions and, still more important, the author is dealing with the character whom, if I am not mistaken, he has chosen to mediate his own attitudes and philosophy of life. There is moreover a sustained and stimulating tension throughout, first in the ethical gap which sets Manawydan in firm though benign opposition to Pryderi and Rhiannon, and secondly in the more concentrated and wholly antagonistic opposition of Manawydan and Llwyd which resolves the primary opposition while vindicating Manawydan's caution. This is reflected in the dialogue, which has a purposiveness that is lacking in *Branwen*. After a brief *renvoi* to the events of the second branch the story opens with a dialogue between Pryderi and

Manawydan in which Manawydan laments his situation, bereft of his brother Bendigeidfran and subject to the will of his cousin Caswallawn, while Pryderi, assuming for the moment the author's favoured role of counsellor and reconciler, persuades him to accept the kingdom of Dyfed for his use and pleasure and to take Rhiannon in marriage. When they come from London to Dyfed there is a brief exchange in which Manawydan and Rhiannon declare their mutual affection, and finally Pryderi announces his intention of going to England to give homage to Caswallawn, an act of political accommodation which would have done justice to Manawydan himself. The whole passage has a remarkable courtliness and the three characters address one another with a restraint and mutual respect which is a far cry from the usage of traditional oral narrative. One can see why Saunders Lewis should think this the most masterly piece of creative writing in the tale and why he attributes it to the humanistic environment of the second half of the twelfth century.³⁸

Apart from Manawydan, and Gwydion to some extent, the female characters are the most strongly delineated. Branwen, it is true, presents a rather negative image and Cigfa strikes one as a slight though effective vignette of a contemporary bourgeois snob, but Rhiannon, Aranrhod and Blodeuwedd are all in their different ways strong and assertive characters that lend themselves to dramatic treatment. In some ways they recall the noble women whom the poets of *amour courtois* purported to serve as their slaves or vassals, but it is more simple to take them for what they are: literary reflexes of the Celtic goddess in some of her many aspects. When Rhiannon comes from the Otherworld and chooses Pwyll for her

husband, she reincarnates the goddess of sovereignty who, in taking to her a spouse, thereby ordained him legitimate king of the territory which she personified. Not only does she take the initiative in forming a marriage alliance, but she overpowers her lord and her suitor and imprints her conscious dominance on all her converse with them (except for the Calumniated Wife episode, which is in any case a secondary theme). When Pwyll in his innocence allows himself to be tricked by Gwawl son of Clud into yielding her to him, she does not conceal her impatience: *'Be dull as long as you will. Never was there a man made feebler use of his wits than you have'*, and in the aftermath it is she who dictates the stratagem by which Gwawl is finally foiled. Her masterful behaviour carries over into her dealings with Manawydan in the third branch, though here the shrewd old pragmatist is more her match than the conventional heroic prince.

The fourth branch, which is the longest, the most complex, and the most dramatic, is dominated by Aranrhod and Blodeuwedd together with Gwydion. Aranrhod embodies the implacable aspects of the goddess, ruthless in the face of rebuke or rebuff, like, for example, the Irish war-god Morrígan when rejected by Cú Chulainn. One of the crucial conflicts in the tale is that between herself and Gwydion when she seeks to smother her shame by preventing her son Lleu having a name, or arms, or a wife, which would be in effect to deny him social existence. In the event, her intransigence is thwarted by the greater magic of Gwydion, who tricks her into giving Lleu a name and arms, and finally himself conjures up for him a wife from the flowers of the oak, the broom and the meadowsweet. Blodeuwedd is the Celtic goddess in her role of *femme fatale*, and more specifically as the

beautiful and faithless wife who betrays her husband for a lover. Like the Irish Bláthnaid 'Little Flower' whom she resembles in name and deed she is a creature of guile and passion, but also of tragedy, for hardly has she achieved her erotic fulfilment when she is destroyed by an inexorable vengeance. It is she more than any other character who imparts to the fourth branch the dramatic colour and force which raises it above the more balanced and more unified narrative of *Manawydan*.

This formidable trio of women owes its dramatic impact more to the resonance of tradition than to the pen of the author. If Branwen is by comparison a flaccid, colourless creation, this is probably because she plays none of the independent roles that formed the traditional repertoire of the Celtic goddess; her only part was the almost wholly passive one of the Calumniated Wife, and this she performs as if she were made for misery, more in the spirit of a Cinderella than of a Deirdre or Gráinne, or indeed of a Rhiannon or Blodeuwedd.

The case of Manawydan is different; for here surely is the author's own creation — and his greatest achievement. It is hard to know how much the characterization of Manawydan leans on traditional sources, but its whole nuance seems more redolent of the eleventh or twelfth century than of mythic prehistory. Certainly it has little enough in common with the image of Manawydan's Irish counterpart, Manannán, and the evidence for the earlier conception of him in Welsh is lamentably sparse. In a poem in the Black Book of Carmarthen he is credited with being 'profound of counsel' (*oet dui y cusil*), but to ascribe great wisdom and knowledge to Celtic as to other

deities is commonplace and one should not attach too much special significance to this particular instance. It is not, however, inconceivable that the author's development of Manawydan's character, and indeed his choice of Manawydan as the exponent of his own philosophy, was inspired in the first place by this reference in a poem with which he was undoubtedly acquainted. However that may be, the Manawydan of the third branch seems to me to exemplify all the author's principal virtues, and also perhaps his limitations. One pictures the author as a cleric, learned in Latin and reasonably well informed, if not professionally expert in vernacular literature, an apostle (if that is not too dramatic a word) of tolerance and moderation for whom morality and good sense were close neighbours, sagacious and quick-witted and endowed above all with a superb sense of style. In his narrative and use of character, particularly in the case of Manawydan, he subtly conveys a scale of values which, by implication, he commends to the practice of contemporary society. For the exaggerated and impulsive ideals of heroic tradition — and, one suspects, of much of contemporary life — he projects the more Christian and more practical virtues of patience and compromise. These values are mirrored in the clear, restrained perfection of his prose.

In the final issue, literary assessments must be subjective, and for me the great accomplishment of the author of the Four Branches lies, not in his ability to structure a convincing narrative from diverse materials, for in this he is far from faultless, but in his complete and easy control of the quieter rhythms of Welsh prose and in his capacity to communicate through traditional materials not primarily of his own making a personal view of life that had relevance to

the social and political situation of his time. For some readers, however, his very consistency constitutes the measure and the limit of his achievement. They miss the waywardness, the spates of hyperbole, the spontaneous flashes of lyricism, that are so much a part of the integral Celtic tradition. Had our author written all the tales of *The Mabinogi*, we would, I fear, find his very virtues becoming a little leaden through excessive familiarity. Fortunately there were other and diverse talents at work creating the varied prose literature that provides a setting for his *chef-d'oeuvre*.