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Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Oldest British Prose Literature: The Compilation of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009). Pp. 592. £84.95. ISBN 0-7734-4710-5.

The Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* have been the object of scholarly interest since their translation into English by Lady Charlotte Guest in the nineteenth century. Critics have

described them in varying terms, ranging from 'venerable relics' and a 'peasant hut', to a 'magpie's hoard', a 'twisted braid' and a 'moral mirror'. More recently, the emphasis has been on the literary strengths of the tales together with their stylistic features, and in particular their contribution to the oral/literary debate. Permeating through these discussions are questions relating to date of composition, authorship and provenance, questions that hitherto remain unanswered.

With Nikolai Tolstoy's new publication, we see a return to the interests of the early scholars whose main concern was with the mythological elements in the story and the establishing of an *Ur-text*. His interpretation, as outlined by Nicolas Jacobs in the preface, is 'that the mythical narratives, which had come by the Middle Ages to be regarded as what we would call legendary history, provided a trans-historical paradigm into which recent or contemporary events could be fitted' (p. ii). This forms the basis, then, on which to establish precise dates and a chronology for the Four Branches, together with a provenance and author. The discussion itself is substantial – some 567 pages – divided into eight chapters which are further divided into sub-sections. The emphasis is on the Second and Third Branches, with three complete chapters devoted to *Branwen* and one to *Manawydan*. Even in the remaining chapters, there is relatively little detailed discussion of *Pwyll* and *Math*. (I fail to see why Chapter 7: 'History and Heroic Tale' merits its own chapter with the discussion spanning a mere six pages.)

Tolstoy's main hypothesis can be summed up briefly as follows (see pp. 539–40): the author of the Four Branches was the king of Dyfed's *pencerdd* who was based at the promontory fortress of Tenby, described in the poem *Etmic Dinbych*. Between 1000 and 1018, he wrote *ebostol Pwyll a Phryderi* (cited by the author of *Preiddeu Annwfn*; indeed, he may well have composed this poem), the story now known as the First Branch. Soon after 1018, the same *pencerdd* acquired material for the composition of *Branwen* from the *beirdd teulu* of Llywelyn ap Seisyll of Gwynedd who reigned over Deheubarth for five years – this accounts for the emphasis in the Second Branch on the monarchy of Gwynedd. During Llywelyn's reign, the *pencerdd* also wrote *Manawydan*, its account of the wedding of a king of Gwynedd (Manawydan) to a queen of Dyfed (Rhiannon) paralleling the marriage of Llywelyn ap Seisyll and Angharad daughter of Maredudd ab Owain. When Llywelyn's reign ended in 1023, the *pencerdd* composed the poem *Etmic Dinbych*, and subsequently *Math uab Mathonwy*. Tolstoy further suggests that the 'writing(s) of Britain' revered in *Etmic Dinbych* was in fact the *Mabinogi* manuscript, and that the 'cell' in which this was safeguarded may well have 'provided a study assigned to the *cyfarwydd* or bard, within which he compiled his *ysgrifau Brydein* undisturbed by the bustle of the court'; indeed, the author is 'pictured in the position of a reader in the rare books section of a modern library' (p. 532). The author's aim in all of this, so it is claimed, was not only to entertain and to instruct but also to retell the early history of Britain in dramatic form and offer an explanation of 'contemporary events as paradigmatic re-enactments or reflexions of events occurring in the remote past' (p. 543).

There is no doubt that Tolstoy throughout the discussion shows a breadth of knowledge, both of primary and secondary sources, and of Welsh and comparative literature, although I note that he has hardly any references to secondary sources written through the medium of Welsh. He attempts to guide the reader by producing tables where elements in the text are juxtaposed with corresponding historical elements, and now and then provides a synopsis of his arguments due to the fact that he has 'digressed', a fact which he readily admits. Even so, points are laboured which makes reading a

challenge at times, and the prose is often opaque. At the micro level, Tolstoy draws attention to several interesting elements within the tales that are worthy of re-visiting, for example the sub-titles at the end of *Branwen*, the aetiological interpretation of the Irish name for Dublin, the Battle at the Ford in *Pwyll*. At the macro level, however, the methodology is problematic. Let us examine his treatment of *Branwen*. The Second Branch, he claims, is a recasting of a Gwynedd tale in the context of the pseudo-historical Monarchy of Prydein, paralleling the situation after 1018 when the Dyfed annalists of *Brut y Tywysogion* extolled Llywelyn ap Seisyll as king both of Gwynedd and all Britain. The story contains 'implicit allusions' to Mael Sechnaill's bridge-building on the Shannon in 1001, his submission to Brían Bóromha the following year, the massacre of St Brice's Day in 1002, Brían's victory and death at Clontarf in 1014, Sveinn Forkbeard's conquest of England in the same year, and Knutr's great assembly at Oxford in 1018. But how would the author have known of these events? Tolstoy is unconvincing as he argues 'while *Annales Cambriae* does not include any reference to Mael Sechnaill's bridge-building in 1001, the omission is far from indicating that it was absent from the lost original' (p. 214); furthermore, 'it is likely enough that it (the bridge-building) aroused sufficient interest in Wales to be included in the annals compiled at St David's. There it could well have attracted the attention of the *cyfarwydd* searching for material suitable for inclusion in his retelling of the early history of Britain as it was understood in the Middle Ages' (p. 234). An 'omission' suddenly becomes the basis for an argument that is central to the thesis. Indeed, Tolstoy himself does not seem altogether convinced, as reflected in his choice of vocabulary: 'likely enough ... could well have'. Nevertheless, it is on fragile premises such as this that his hypothesis is based. Furthermore, to what extent can it be claimed that medieval authors did indeed look for parallels in historical situations? Was writing in the Middle Ages so contrived and so pre-conceived? The notion of a *pencerdd* in his study is surely anachronistic.

A further problem is the conviction with which Tolstoy views the author as euhemerizing supernatural tales. Bran becoming a bridge, for example, represents a detritus of older elements, before the Otherworld became Ireland and the aqueous barrier separating this world from the other became the Irish Sea. Indeed, the basic structure of *Branwen*, it is argued, reflects 'an archaic myth of Bran's guidance of the people ... of Britain (i.e. the Dead) across the River of Death to the Otherworld'. The author 'converts' this mythical expedition to the Otherworld into history, or at least into history as defined by Tolstoy. Moreover, following in W. J. Gruffydd's footsteps, the earlier versions of the *Branwen* story are re-created to include, for example, an episode whereby 'the figure identified in the tale as Matholwch arrived at the court of Bran, slapped the Queen, and bore her off by force to his otherworld stronghold' (p. 287). All in all, this is an extremely subjective reading, based on the flimsiest of assumptions.

There is no doubt that readers will be fascinated by several of the fresh insights presented in this volume; they will also be highly impressed by the range of sources upon which Tolstoy draws. However, I must agree with Stephen Knight who described Tolstoy's earlier work, *The Quest for Merlin* (1985), as a 'mix of real scholarship and pure speculation ... [he] generally proceeds via the chain of dubious argument and rapidly cumulating assumptions' (*Merlin: Knowledge and Power Through the Ages* (2009), pp. 219–20). Unfortunately, his latest work, too, reflects a similar methodology, highlighted in the way he is forced to propose a much later date than currently accepted for the poem *Etmic Dinbych*, so that the hypothesis stands. As much as I enjoyed reading this latest volume on

the Four Branches, the questions of date, provenance and authorship must remain, for me at least, an enigma.

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