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The *Mabinogi* and the education of princes in medieval Wales

Helen Fulton

In the second branch of the *Mabinogi*, Bendigeidfran, the king of Britain, leads his men on an invasion of Ireland. When they arrive at a river which has no bridge, Bendigeidfran says to his men, '*A uo penn bit pont*', 'he who is the leader, let him be a bridge.'¹ Then the king, with his giant-like proportions, stretches himself across the river and the army walks over him to the other side.

This explicit reference to a king's obligations signals one of the major themes of the Four Branches, namely, the normative expectations of political leadership and how these may be exemplified for the reading or listening audience. Kings and princes are the major actors in all four of the tales, and their deeds illustrate and dramatize the leadership role and ways in which it might most effectively be realized. In their preoccupation with kingship and noble leadership the Four Branches perform, among other things, an educative function for the nobility of Wales, contributing a native version of the *speculum principum* ('mirror of princes') tradition which was widespread in both prescriptive and exemplary forms among medieval European cultures.

The standard model of Celtic kingship is generally taken to be that of sacral or 'thaumaturgic' kingship, exemplified among a number of early medieval societies, particularly the Carolingian rulers, and normalized in early Irish literature.² The figure of the king, as priest, is literally sacrosanct, hedged about with taboos, physically unblemished, elected by auguries and rituals of divination, and chosen by the sovereignty goddess as a guarantee of his legitimacy and of his responsibility for the fertility of his kingdom. Irish heroes such as Conchobar, the king of Ulster, Ailill, the king of Connacht, and Conaire Mór, the hero of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* ('The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'), are all examples of sacral kingship.³

It is customary to read the representations of kingship in the medieval Welsh prose tales in the same way, as examples, garbled over time, of sacral kingship.

1 Ifor Williams, *Pedeir keinc y Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1930), p. 40. 2 See Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges: étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale, particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (1924; repr. Paris, 1961); Henry A. Myers, *Medieval kingship* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 138–9. 3 On the concept of sacral kingship in early Irish society, see Ronald Hutton, *The pagan religions of the ancient British Isles* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 172–6; G.A. Wait, *Ritual and religion in Iron Age Britain*, British Archaeological Reports 149 (London, 1985).

Rhiannon is typically explained as a version of the sovereignty goddess who marries Pwyll and legitimizes his rule. Later she marries Manawydan, confirming him too as the legal ruler of Dyfed (despite his clearly demarcated role as Pryderi's regent). The assumption that Manawydan represents an ancient model of Celtic kingship has led some scholars to denounce him as a failure, 'the complete Un-King' as John Koch has called him.⁴ In presenting a more positive view of Manawydan's achievements, Catherine McKenna argues that the author of the Four Branches 'is unlikely to have accepted the ancient sovereignty myth as a sacred narrative in any literal sense. That would not necessarily have prevented him, however, from exploiting its inherent semiotic value.'⁵

Yet there is little evidence from the Welsh tales, or from historical documents, that any of the medieval Welsh rulers, even in Gwynedd, were regarded as sacral kings. 'The princes of Gwynedd', says David Stephenson, 'seem not to have laid great claims to supernatural or mystical sanctions for their rule.'⁶ More significantly, the Four Branches, as we have them, were written down during a period when Wales was politically included in the centralized English monarchy, with its very different practices of kingship. Given the difficulties in dating the 'original' composition of the Four Branches, the earliest manuscript records of the tales can be used as an indicator of a time period in which they were definitely circulated, and presumably salient, among Welsh courtly audiences. Fragments of *Branwen* and *Manawydan* in a mid-thirteenth-century manuscript, National Library of Wales MS Peniarth 6, represent the earliest written survivals, with complete texts of the Four Branches found in the two major fourteenth-century anthologies, *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* ('The White Book of Rhydderch') and *Llyfr Coch Hergest* ('The Red Book of Hergest').⁷

In view of their inclusion in these major anthologies, it seems likely that all the tales of the larger Mabinogion had a particular resonance for aristocratic Welsh audiences during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but whether they were written down and collected because of their significance or became significant as a result of being available in written anthologies is not easy to determine. Rachel Bromwich has pointed out that Welsh court poets of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries made very few references to characters from the

4 John T. Koch, 'A Welsh window on the Iron Age: Manawydan, Mandubracios', *CMCS* 14 (1987), 17–52 at 36. 5 Catherine McKenna, 'Learning lordship: the education of Manawydan', in John Carey et al. (eds), *Ildánach Ildírech: a festschrift for Proinsias MacCana* (Andover, 1999), pp. 101–20 at 105. 6 David Stephenson, *The governance of Gwynedd* (Cardiff, 1984), p. 3. 7 For a description of these manuscripts, see Daniel Huws, *Medieval Welsh manuscripts* (Cardiff, 2000), pp. 80–3 and 227–68. On the date of composition, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The date of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1970), 263–98; Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The submission of Irish kings in fact and fiction: Henry II, Bendigeidfran and the dating of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *CMCS* 22 (1991), 31–62.

Mabinogion, and were clearly far more reliant on the Triads and *Brut y Brenhinedd* for their knowledge of traditional legends.⁸

It is possible that few, if any, complete written versions of the Four Branches (as we know them) existed before the earliest survivals in the thirteenth century. The preservation in the Four Branches of the early linguistic forms, *stlys* and *stryw* (without the prosthetic *y*), seems to provide evidence of Old Welsh spellings, possibly indicating the existence of a pre-Norman manuscript version of the Four Branches, though as Thomas Charles-Edwards concludes, 'this is not enough by itself to prove that the Four Branches had been written down by 1100.'⁹ While the linguistic evidence for earlier written versions of the older tales, particularly *Culhwch ac Olwen*, is much stronger, we cannot assume that the Four Branches were written down, in anything like the form of the fourteenth-century versions, before the thirteenth century. Early references to Mabinogion characters in the *hengerdd* and the *gogynfeirdd* are just as likely to have come from the Triads, while archaic spellings may preserve oral forms or add the authority of age to a contemporary text. Whether as original texts, then, or as reworkings of traditional material, the Four Branches effectively belong to the time of their earliest manuscript appearances, that is, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

We know that Wales was not isolated from European texts and ideas: the wealth of manuscript material in Latin and in Welsh translations from Latin and French confirms the internationalism of the medieval Welsh tradition of learning. It is fairly certain, then, that the educated Welsh were exposed to the mainstream tradition of medieval European political thought, including models of kingship, especially as these models were enacted for them both by the Anglo-Norman and English kings to whom they were subject, and by their own peers, the thirteenth-century princes of Gwynedd. Pwyll's relationship with his council, Bendigeidfran's conduct as a battle-leader, Manawydan's awareness of Caswallawn's status, and Pryderi's invasion of Gwynedd, to name a few examples, all suggest that the model of kingship predominating in England and elsewhere in Europe during the central Middle Ages was a significant influence on the normative practices of Welsh lordship. The political structure of England, with its centralized monarchy and tiers of feudal barons, was not only emulated among the marcher lordships but provided the model of rulership for the native princes of post-conquest Wales.

KINGSHIP IN THE FOUR BRANCHES

The emergence of feudal kingship as the dominant model in medieval Wales, as opposed to the older traditions of sacral kingship, followed a development

⁸ Rachel Bromwich, 'The Mabinogion and Lady Charlotte Guest', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1986), 127-41, at pp 127-8. ⁹ Charles-Edwards, 'The date of the Four Branches', 264.

already accomplished in the rest of Europe. There were two principal theories of kingship expounded by clerical and didactic texts in the middle ages, both of them related to the vexed issue of the relative status of church and crown. The theocratic model of kingship, first explored by St Augustine in his *City of God* in the early fifth century AD, and insisted upon by later Latin writers such as John of Salisbury in the twelfth century and Giles of Rome in the thirteenth century, assumed that kings derived their power from God, via the Pope. 'The will of the king,' said John of Salisbury, 'depends on the law of God.'¹⁰

But there was another model of kingship emerging in the twelfth century which in many ways offered a direct challenge to the theocratic version so earnestly promoted by the church. This was the feudal model, by which the king was the overlord of his people. The basis of this model was the economic relationship between ruler and subjects, a relationship which could only work with the explicit consent of the noblemen or barons who formed the class of vassals immediately below the king. To achieve and sustain this hegemonic consensus (in Antonio Gramsci's sense of the term), to maintain the feudal contract between lord and vassal, the king had to engage, as far as possible, in processes of consultation, negotiation and compromise.

What is particularly interesting in relation to the production and reception of the Four Branches is that the English kings, far more than their continental counterparts, had been forced by baronial pressure towards this consultative feudal model. Magna Carta of 1215 represented the explicit legalization of the feudal contract between the king and his barons. It recognized that the king was not simply an autonomous agent of God, answerable only upwards to the Pope, as in the theocratic model, but a ruler whose power and laws depended on the consent of his subjects and who was therefore answerable downwards to his barons and noblemen.

Medieval Welsh practices of kingship and lordship resemble those of the Anglo-Norman feudal model in their move towards a two-tier system of overking and barony, their emphasis on consultation, and their concern with succession. All these aspects are illustrated in the Four Branches as the concerns of a ruling sector informed by the economics of English feudalism. The two-tier system emerged in Wales in the thirteenth century, when the practice of autonomous and technically equal *brenhinoedd*, 'kings', ruling over dynastic landholdings and endowed with sacral properties, was challenged by the model of a single king supported by a dependent nobility. In the wake of the state-building ambitions of Gwynedd, its rulers effectively inserted themselves between the Welsh princes and the English crown, setting themselves up as feudal lords over the other native rulers.¹¹ As a consequence, the status of the Welsh princes

¹⁰ Cited by Walter Ullmann, *Medieval political thought* (London, 1975), p. 123. ¹¹ A similar tactic had been tried by Owain Gwynedd in relation to Henry II in the twelfth century,

effectively changed from *brenin*, 'king', to *arglwydd*, 'lord', that is, from autonomous territorial rulers to subjects of the princes of Gwynedd, and, ultimately, of the English crown.¹² Explicitly referred to by the English term 'barons',¹³ the Welsh *arglwyddi* were positioned not as autonomous 'kings' but as baronial subjects like the marcher lords.

This political transition is mapped in the Four Branches through the efforts of the noble protagonists to establish rightful lordship in relation to a larger political unit. The tales distinguish between *brenhinoedd*, Bendigeidfran and Caswallawn, who are kings of the whole of Britain, and *arglwyddi*, such as Pwyll or Math, subject to an implied and often absent overking.¹⁴ Manawydan's insistence, in the third branch, that Pryderi should pay homage to Caswallawn, the king of Britain, acknowledges the reality of a centralized monarchy in medieval Wales. The only other *brenhinoedd* are the two kings of Annwn, Arawn and Hafgan, whose titles suggest an older, more authentic, political structure of pre-conquest Wales, preserved only in the symbolic realm of Annwn.¹⁵ For thirteenth-century audiences of the Four Branches, the tales illustrate how the Welsh *arglwyddi* can best perform as barons under a central English monarchy.

The system of linking the king with his barons through a consultative council formalized the traditional relationship between a Welsh or Irish king and the learned men of his people. By the thirteenth century, the Welsh princes, as much as their English counterparts, were familiar with the concept of royal councils and were regularly summoned to such gatherings, either by the English king or, in the heyday of Gwynedd lordship, by the princes of Gwynedd.¹⁶ Consultation between the king and a group of respected advisers – 'barons' in England and *arglwyddi* in Wales – was the defining feature of medieval king-

when Owain adopted the title of 'princeps'. See Charles Insley, 'From rex Walliae to princeps Walliae: charters and state formation in thirteenth-century Wales', in J.R. Maddicott and D.M. Palliser (eds), *The medieval state: essays presented to James Campbell* (London, 2000), pp 179–96 at 193. On the government of Gwynedd as a state-building exercise, see Robin Frame, *The political development of the British Isles, 1100–1400* (Oxford, 1990), pp 118–23. I use the term 'feudalism' to refer to an economic system. See also S. Reynolds, *Fiefs and vassals: the medieval evidence reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994), pp 2–3. ¹² On the uses of the terms *brenin* and *arglwydd*, especially in legal texts, see Dafydd Jenkins, 'Kings, lords and princes: the nomenclature of authority in thirteenth-century Wales', *BBCS* 26 (1976), 451–62. ¹³ For example, when Dafydd ap Llywelyn went to do homage to Henry III at Gloucester in 1240, 'barwneit Kymry', 'the barons of Wales', went with him. See Thomas Jones, *Brut y Tywysogion* (Cardiff, 1955), p. 236. ¹⁴ Catherine McKenna draws attention to this distinction in her article, 'Revising Math: kingship in the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi*', *CMCS* 46 (2003), 95–117 at 116. ¹⁵ '*Brenhin coninauc wyf i*', 'a crowned king am I', says 'Arawn urenhin Annwryn' on first meeting Pwyll (Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 2), while his opponent is also called *Hafgan urenhin o Annwryn* (ibid., p. 3). ¹⁶ On the prince's council in Gwynedd, see R.R. Davies, *Conquest, co-existence and change: Wales, 1063–1415* (Oxford, 1987), p. 262; Stephenson, *Governance of Gwynedd*, pp 6–10. The debate about the nature of the council – chosen on the basis of birth or specialist skills – is discussed by Antony

ship, and the participation of Welsh lords in this role effectively defined their subordination to the English crown.

The importance of consultation between a ruler and his advisers is exemplified throughout the Four Branches, as it is in medieval English literature as well.¹⁷ Pwyll demonstrates his statesmanlike maturity in negotiating with his council at a formal meeting to discuss Rhiannon's failure to produce a child, and he defies them in refusing to cast Rhiannon off when her baby disappears – Rhiannon herself agrees to take penance. By contrast, Matholwch is goaded by his council into punishing Branwen for an insult which has already been settled by compensation, an act of weakness which leads to destruction. In the third branch, Manawydan demonstrates how the quality of leadership is tested in the absence of a council of advisers, and how a good ruler might still succeed in maintaining his realm. Math, on the other hand, has to deal with the problem of counsellors who betray him, namely his nephews Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, and their punishment reflects not merely their actual crime but their betrayal of the trust between lord and council. Once their punishment is over, Math restores them to their advisory role:

'A rodwch im kynghor pa uorwyn a geisswyf.' 'Arglwyd,' heb γ Guydyon uab Don, 'hawd γw dy gynghori.'¹⁸

'And give me advice as to which maiden I should take.' 'Lord,' said Gwydion son of Don, 'it is easy to advise you.'

Perhaps more significant than the relationship between the ruler and his men is the preoccupation demonstrated in all of the Four Branches with the issue of succession and the handing on of territorial power.¹⁹ If a monarchy is to remain single, centralized and specifically distinguished from its baronage, a regular pattern of uncontroversial succession is critical. By the same token, lordships held from the king, like those in Wales, also require, ideally, an unbroken succession to avoid the threat of annexation by royal or baronial rivals. While partible inheritance was the norm in Wales, and was specifically allowed to continue in the Edwardian settlement of 1284, none of the Four Branches describes such a pattern of succession. In each case – Pryderi, Gwern, Lleu – there is only one obvious heir to the kingship or lordship, and other possible heirs – such as Bendigeidfran's brother Manawydan, who is explicitly disinherited by Caswallawn's treachery, or Lleu's uncle Gwydion, whose crime implicitly renders him unsuitable – are excluded from consideration.

Black, *Political thought in Europe, 1250–1450* (Cambridge, 1992), pp 156–61. ¹⁷ See Geraldine Barnes, *Counsel and strategy in Middle English romance* (Cambridge, 1993). ¹⁸ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 77. ¹⁹ I have discussed this theme in more detail elsewhere: see Helen Fulton, 'Cultural meanings in the *Mabinogi*', in Geraint Evans et al. (eds), *Origins and revivals: proceedings of the first Australian conference of Celtic Studies* (Sydney, 2000), pp 443–56.

This seems to imply that at the upper level of the Welsh nobility, the English and French preference for primogeniture, or at least a unitary hereditary succession, was taking the place of the traditional custom of partibility, as had previously happened in France. The Capetian kings of France had taken a conscious decision to abandon the Carolingian practice of dividing the kingdom among male heirs, and to adopt a system of elective kingship which, in practice, normally resulted in the eldest son being appointed as the *rex designatus*. From 1223, with the succession of Louis VIII to the French throne without having previously been designated as the heir, primogeniture became the normal means of succession in France.²⁰ In England, however, although unitary succession was taken for granted, it was not always the eldest son who took the throne, but rather the one who was the most powerful and had the strongest baronial support (hence the accession of Henry I in 1100, rather than his older brother Robert). This seems to be the model accepted as normative in the Four Branches.

The urgency of producing and nominating a single heir seems quite palpable in all of the Four Branches. Rhiannon is to be put aside by Pwyll unless she produces a son, and is then blamed when the child disappears. Manawydan strives to restore fertility to the land of Dyfed to ensure that Pryderi is able to have a son. Gwydion devotes his life to positioning Lleu as Math's only heir. The story of Bendigeidfran illustrates the dangers of a kingdom without an heir: following the death of Gwern and of Bendigeidfran himself, the kingdom of Britain is conquered by another dynasty, and another unitary king, Caswallawn son of Beli. In reality, partition was a more likely outcome of a failed succession, but one which could be equally damaging. When Madog ap Maredudd, ruler of Powys, died in 1160 and his eldest son not long afterwards, Powys was divided among five other heirs, resulting in a long history of bloodshed and political decline. On the death of Ranulf, the childless earl of Chester, in 1232 his vast estates were divided among a number of nephews and brothers-in-law; when one of these nephews subsequently died his portion, the county of Chester, was annexed by Henry III, given to his son Edward, and became the base for Edward I's campaigns against Wales.

To thirteenth- and fourteenth-century audiences, then, there would have been nothing surprising in the implicit warnings of the Four Branches against the dangers of weak or ambiguous succession arrangements, or in their promotion of a single unitary successor, preferably an eldest son. Partibility meant not only a division of land into smaller, and eventually uneconomic, parcels, but also a sharing of power among a number of rivals which led to that 'chronic political instability' which R.R. Davies attributes to 'the absence of a unitary rule of succession.'²¹ The rise of Gwynedd in the thirteenth century had much

²⁰ Henry Myers, *Medieval kingship* (Chicago, 1982), p. 211. ²¹ Davies, *Conquest, co-existence and change*, p. 267.

to do with its relatively stable line of single princes who claimed and sustained supremacy over their co-heirs. In their concerns with succession, the Four Branches seem to promote a unitary lordship, similar to that prevailing among the feudal nobilities of England and France, as the normative political structure for medieval Wales.

'MIRRORS OF PRINCES'

In their construction of social and political practices associated with feudal lordship in Wales, the Four Branches can be read as having an educational function, among other functions. The feudal model of kingship was normalized in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe through the genre of the *speculum principum*, the 'mirror of princes', found in Latin and vernacular versions throughout medieval Europe. Catherine McKenna has already suggested that the story of *Pwyll* functions as 'a mirror and exhortation for medieval Welsh princes',²² and the same might be said of all the Four Branches in their illustrations of the obligations and dilemmas of different kinds of rulers. The Four Branches are not only normalizing practices of feudal kingship and lordship, but are implicitly educating the Welsh nobility to be effective political leaders.

The emergence of a genre like the *speculum principum* expresses the medieval concern with the personal qualities of the king or ruler which should, ideally, match the demands of the public role to which he was born. Fears that the outward trappings of hereditary office did not automatically signify the nobility of the person within – a fear explicitly realized in the satire of Arthur in the Welsh tale *Breuddryd Rhonabwy* – help to account for the popularity of didactic texts addressed to the sons of the nobility. Definitions of the genre of *speculum principum* can be broad enough to include all texts which say something about the role and image of princes and kings, including medieval romance and exemplary tales such as the Four Branches, or sufficiently narrow to include only those texts, largely dating from the thirteenth century, which have an explicitly educational and prescriptive function for young princes. Arguing for the latter definition, Jean-Philippe Genet makes a distinction between the genuine *miroirs*, which were highly technical and 'required a learned intermediary', and the 'political literature of the court, specially designed to be more easily understood by the laity'.²³

Political commentaries on the appropriate behaviour of kings can be traced back to late antiquity, emerging as a significant genre within scholastic human-

²² Catherine McKenna, 'The theme of sovereignty in *Pwyll*', *BBCS* 29 (1980-2), 35-52 at 35. ²³ Jean-Philippe Genet (ed.), *Four English political tracts of the later Middle Ages*, Camden Fourth Series 18 (London, 1977), p. xvi. For a broader definition of the genre, see Nicholas Orme, *From childhood to chivalry: the education of the English kings and aristocracy, 1066-1530* (London and New York, 1984), pp 81-111.

ism.²⁴ John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, written in the middle of the twelfth century and dedicated to Thomas Becket, contains not only instructions on etiquette and knightly behaviour, but also a theocratic ideal of kingship in which the king is the head of the corporate state, and the people are its feet (V.2). As the upholder of the Augustinian ideal of justice tempered with mercy, the king represents an earthly image of God and is subject to both natural and divine laws.²⁵

Gerald of Wales' treatise, *De Principis Instructione*, written between 1191 and 1216, sets out in Book I the ideal qualities of a prince – 'moderation, generosity, magnificence, justice, boldness, religion and devotion'²⁶ – in order to illustrate the differences between a good ruler and a tyrant, a common *topos* in medieval didactic literature.²⁷ It is precisely because Manawydan, for example, exercised such virtues that he did not become a tyrant ruling over Pryderi's kingdom. More importantly, Gerald takes for granted a theocratic model of kingship, attributing the fall of Henry II to his crimes against God, such as his failure to defend the Holy Land and the murder of Thomas Becket.

During the thirteenth century the genre responded to political and intellectual developments, including the 'rediscovery' of Aristotle's works, particularly the *Politics*, and their circulation in Latin versions from the late twelfth century. Aristotle repeatedly stressed the importance of consultation between a ruler and his council of advisers, a theme which resonated with medieval kings and their baronial nobilities. Here was a model of kingship, based on consultative and contractual practices, which provided a welcome alternative to that of theocratic kingship, increasingly rejected by the militaristic rulers of twelfth-century Europe who relied on the personal loyalty of their barons. The theocratic model, so heavily promoted by twelfth-century clerics, was already suffering challenges from the actual practices of military and economic kingship realized in a feudal state. Most of the thirteenth-century *miroirs* and their later imitators contain numerous quotations and paraphrases from Aristotelian texts, signifying this shift of emphasis away from theocratic ideals of kingship towards the ethics – personal, Christian and political – of feudal kingship.

Such texts were appearing at a time when the concept of centralized kingship was dominant in England and was competing in Wales with native legal and practical understandings of the role and status of kings. Traditional concepts of Welsh rulership were under stress, with the ambitions of Gwynedd's princes compromising the customary autonomy of the Welsh lords. Most of the writers of the *miroirs* were mendicant friars, who saw their role as educating the laity.

²⁴ See Lester Kruger Born, 'The perfect prince: a study in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century ideals', *Speculum* 3 (1928), 470–504. ²⁵ Bernard Guenée, *States and rulers in later medieval Europe*, trans. Juliet Vale (Oxford, 1985), pp. 39, 43, 81. ²⁶ Orme, *From childhood to chivalry*, p. 89. ²⁷ Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales, 1146–1223* (Oxford, 1982), p. 71, says: 'Distinctions between *rex* and *tyrannus* and exhortation of the prince to be just, merciful, and prudent were commonplace.'

The friars had a high profile in both England and Wales, and the works of the friars clearly had an influence (not always positively regarded) on Welsh cultural production.²⁸ Furthermore, many of the more popular *miroirs* were translated into French and other vernaculars, including English, by the fourteenth century, and it is clear that the *miroirs* were intended for, and used by, the nobility as well as royalty itself. As Madeleine Pelner Cosman notes, 'A familiar phrase in [Giles of Rome's] *De Regimine* is that a particular quality ought to be possessed by "les gentiz homes" but "meësment les rois et les princes" ... What is merely desirable for the nobleman is obligatory for the prince.'²⁹

Evidence of Welsh interest in the genre of 'mirrors of princes' can be found in the Welsh versions of a twelfth-century Latin text known as the *Secretum Secretorum*. Allegedly a set of instructions issued by Aristotle to his pupil, the junior prince Alexander, the Latin text was apparently based on a tenth-century Arabic original. It was then translated into French by the end of the thirteenth century and into English during the fourteenth century, and the large number of vernacular manuscripts dating from the late middle ages indicates its popularity as an educational text.³⁰ The Welsh versions, usually referred to as *Cyfrinach y Cyfrinchoedd*, appear in a number of manuscripts, including the Red Book of Hergest, where it is added on to the end of the medical tract known as 'Meddygon Myddfai'.³¹ The medical sections of the *Secretum Secretorum*, in which Aristotle apparently advises Alexander on how to maintain physical health, were clearly the most popular for Welsh audiences, but the theme of the ideal king, which Elizabeth Meinir James relates to the longing for the *mab darogan*, the 'son of prophecy', was also a reason for translating the text.³²

The *Secretum Secretorum* contains lists of precepts which support the same ideals of kingship that we find reiterated in the Welsh prose tradition. A king should be chaste, for example, as Pwyll was when he changed places with Arawn. A king should earn the obedience of his subjects by virtuous living, courtesy and honour, as Gwydion so signally failed to do in the story of *Math*, thereby forfeiting his succession to Math's crown. Above all, a king should

²⁸ Of the mendicant orders in Wales, Glanmor Williams, *The Welsh church from conquest to Reformation* (2nd edn, Cardiff, 1976), p. 26, says: 'In their midst or closely associated with them were the foremost Welsh graduates and scholars of the thirteenth century.' ²⁹ Madeleine Pelner Cosman, *The education of the hero in Arthurian romance* (Chapel Hill, 1965), pp. 193–4. ³⁰ M. Dominica Legge, *Anglo-Norman literature and its background* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 214–16. For English versions of the text, see M.A. Manzalaoui (ed.), *Secretum Secretorum: nine English versions, vol. I: text* (Oxford, 1977). The vernacular transmissions have been traced by W.F. Ryan and Charles B. Schmitt (eds), *Pseudo-Aristotle, the 'Secret of Secrets': sources and influences* (London, 1982). ³¹ The Welsh versions have been studied by Elizabeth Meinir James, 'Secretum Secretorum: astudiaeth feirniadol o ddetholiadau Cymraeg a Lladin o'r llythyr ffug-Aristotelaidd at Alecsander Fawr' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1986). ³² James, 'Secretum Secretorum: astudiaeth feirniadol', p. 158.

choose advisers, and choose them carefully, so that he can trust their advice, as Bendigeidfran does in the second branch of the Mabinogi. It is the importance of the king's generosity which is emphasized in one of the Welsh versions of the text, in particular the appropriate manner of disbursing largesse without impoverishing the kingdom:

Y neb a rodo y eidaw mywn amser yr rei aghenus, y ryw vrenhin hwnnw yssyd hael wrthaw e hun ac wrth y werin, ae vrenhinyaeth a geiff tagneued, ae orchymynneu a gedwir. Y ryw vrenhin hwnnw a ganmolei filosofffwyr gynt. Brenhin a rodei da y deymas yr neb nys dirperei [y] amaw ac yr rei diaghen, hwnnw yssyd dinustrur ar y goludoed kyffredin a heuyt ar y deymas e hun, ac anteilwng yw y wledychu.³³

Anyone who gives his property promptly to those who are needy, that kind of king is generous to himself and to his people, and his kingship will have peace and his commands will be kept. Philosophers used to praise that kind of king. A king who would give the goods of his kingdom to anyone who does not deserve them or to those who are not in need, he is a destroyer of the common wealth and of his kingdom as well, and his reign is unworthy.

This very lesson is enacted in the first branch, when Pwyll thoughtlessly grants an open-ended favour to the treacherous Gwawl and almost loses Rhiannon as a result.

The didactic function of texts of Latin origin, and their salience for Welsh audiences, is supported by the circulation of popular narratives such as *Chwedlau Odo*, the tales of Odo of Cheriton, and *Chwedlau Saith Ddoethion Rhufain*, the Welsh version of the Latin tales of the Seven Sages of Rome. Both texts are found in Welsh manuscript collections of the fourteenth century, sometimes alongside the Four Branches. Consisting of moralizing *exempla* illustrating desirable forms of behaviour appropriate to good leaders and citizens, these collections of fables circulated in both oral and written forms. Poets of the *uchelwyr*, such as Dafydd ap Gwilym and Tudur Aled, referred to the tales as part of the known culture of their audiences. The romance genre, popularized by the tales of Tristan, Perceval and other Arthurian heroes, often included explicit references to the boyhood and early education of the hero, and clearly had an exemplary function, seen in both the Welsh and French version of Arthurian romances.

Given the role of Latin and vernacular texts in educating the feudal nobility, from the overtly didactic 'mirrors of princes' to the more palatable romances and *exempla*, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*, like other Welsh prose tales and romances, have at their heart an exemplary and didactic purpose. It is suggestive that all Four Branches work on the basis of a two-generation structure in which an older generation, of parent or mentor, instructs a younger generation, overtly or by example, in behaviour

³³ From MS Cardiff 3.242 (Havod 16), p. 49, as transcribed by James, 'Secretum Secretorum: astudiaeth feirmiadol', pp 340–1.

that is appropriate in terms of gender and status. In each branch, a *mab*, the male heir of the next generation, plays a significant role: Pryderi in the first and third branches, Gwern in the second branch, Lleu Llaw Gyffes in the fourth. Through his relationship to the *mab*, the older man confirms his role as protector of the territory and guarantor of its continuity.

The most overt lessons offered by the tales are related to practices of leadership, good governance, and the development of appropriate personal virtues, practices designed to encourage and maintain loyalty, and the political stability of units within a centralized state. Each of the Four Branches presents a different kind of prince – regional, national, regent, boy-prince – each of whom demonstrates a number of the leadership skills which are promoted in the educational and didactic literature of the Latin tradition. These include not merely military leadership, but a more specific set of personal values and qualities which distinguish the 'good king': wisdom, moderation, generosity, consultation, concern for the common good, knowledge of law and politics. One of the most pervasive themes of instructional literature is the need for young princes to listen to older and wiser counsellors. This Aristotelian theme is combined in the *Mabinogi* with concerns about succession and securing loyalty to the designated ruler or heir by means of consultation, negotiation and strength of character.

In the first Branch, Pwyll is a regional prince, corresponding to the rulers of Welsh territories in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Wales. From his succession as a young man, he comes to achieve wisdom and maturity, through the mentoring of an older male ally, Arawn, and through marriage and fatherhood, the typical rites of passage of the hereditary leader coming to manhood and the public assertion of his right to rule. The main objective of Pwyll's education is to teach him how to manage the baronial vassals under his lordship, the men with whom he must maintain a feudal contract which will allow him to govern effectively.

Arawn functions as a kind of tutor to the young Pwyll, setting him straight about matters of hunting etiquette and then assisting him through an important rite of passage, the single-handed defeat of a powerful enemy, Hafgan. The episode of the hunt affirms the class identity of Pwyll and Arawn, and their shared recognition of the symbolic, rather than practical, value of the hunt as aristocratic ritual. There is perhaps another clue here to the date of the story: already the hunt has become detached from its practical purpose of collecting food or culling wild beasts, and has evolved into a symbolic ritual of power in which 'the major skill changed from the actual handling of a weapon to the management of a pack of hounds.'³⁴

³⁴ Jorge Ardit, *A genealogy of manners: transformations of social relations in France and England from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century* (Chicago, 1998), p. 79. David Crouch comments on the practice of hunting by royalty and magnates in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See *The image of aristocracy in Britain, 1000–1300* (London, 1992), pp 305–10.

In killing Hafgan, Pwyll not only removes a 'bad king' and cements a powerful alliance with a neighbouring 'good king' but also averts a larger war, demonstrating the virtues of loyalty, courage and military skill in the process. The values of statesmanship – intelligence, negotiation, seeing the bigger picture – are exemplified by Arawn and shown to be more effective in practice than full-scale military aggression. At the same time, the two-tier political structure of king and baronage is reinforced by Pwyll's adventurous exchange with Arawn. In his discreet leadership of Arawn's court during his year's exchange, Pwyll embodies the subjectivity of a nobility not long removed from the status of kingship, exemplifying its ideology that a competent lord can be the equal of the ruler of a small kingdom. In a humorous bow to the special nature of kingship, however, the tale records that Arawn the king can still teach Pwyll the prince something about lordship:

Ynteu Pwyll, Pendueic Dyuet, a doeth y gyuoeth ac y wlat. A dechreu ymouyn a gwyrda y wlat, beth a uassei y arghwydiaeth ef amunt hwy y ulwydyn honno y wrth ryuassei kynn no hynny. 'Arglwyd,' heb wy, 'ny bu gystal dy wybot; ny buost gyn hygaret guas diheu; ny bu gyn hawsset gennyt titheu treulaw dy da; ny bu well dy dosparth eirot no'r ulwydyn honn.' (Williams, p. 8.)

Then Pwyll Pendueic Dyuet came to his realm and his country. And he began to ask the men of his land what his lordship over them had been during that year compared to what it had been before then. 'Lord,' they said, 'your understanding was never so good; you were never so kindly a man; you were never so free with dispensing your goods; your judgment was never better than during this year.'

By the end of the tale, Pwyll is effortlessly and independently in charge of his realm, demonstrating his command by going on a circuit, acknowledging the restored Pryderi as his son and heir, and making strategic alliances through the boy. The 'natural' congruence of nobility of birth and nobility of behaviour, already asserted through Arawn and through the episode of Rhiannon's punishment, is reassuringly confirmed in the characters of Pwyll and Pryderi. Pwyll's reward to Teyrn demonstrates his noble generosity to his men, while Pryderi's respect towards Rhiannon (when he refuses to let her carry him to the court) reveals his true nobility of birth. Though the tripartite plot structure is routinely attributed to the conglomeration of unrelated story motifs, the tale as a whole exemplifies the transition from *anbwyll*, 'unwise, unthinking', to *pwyll*, 'wise, discreet, thoughtful', as a journey that every 'good prince' must make, assisted by his teachers and mentors.

The second Branch, *Branwen uerch Lyr*, focuses on a very different kind of ruler. No mere regional prince, Bendigeidfran is the king of all Britain, representing a myth of pre-Saxon domination.³⁵ The power of this myth suggests

³⁵ Patricia Ingham, 'Marking time: *Branwen*, daughter of *Llyr* and the colonial refrain' in Jeffrey J. Cohen (ed.), *The postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York, 2000), pp 173–91, reads the tale as a lament of the colonized Welsh in the face of English erosion of their culture.

that the tale took shape well after the Norman conquest: the remembered Britain is not the collection of separate territories and competing interests that typified the pre-Norman political landscape, but is conceptualized as a unified state under a single king, much more like the Anglo-Norman kingdom which had already engulfed large areas of Wales by the early twelfth century. In order to have the title *brenin*, Bendigeidfran has to be positioned, not as a territorial lord, but as the king of the whole country. He is offered to the audience as Wales' answer to the English monarchy, a true statesman and fearless battle leader whose attempts to secure the British state for his successors fail only because of dynastic rivalries and Irish treachery.

In this vision of a British, or Welsh, state with a centralized monarchy, Bendigeidfran's practice of kingship is contrasted with that of another national ruler, Matholwch, the Irish king. As heads of state, Bendigeidfran and Matholwch are equally mindful of the importance of territory, centralized power, and succession. But the strategies by which they attempt to control these elements are quite different. The British king is the 'good king' who rules by consultation and inclusiveness, who prefers assimilation and co-operation to hostility and competition. The Irish king relies on a strategy of 'divide and rule', of treachery rather than negotiation. Their different styles are exemplified in the issue of Matholwch's compensation, and in their responses to the family of the cauldron. In offering compensation to Matholwch, Bendigeidfran pledges more than the compensation payable to a Welsh king. His aim is to avoid hostility, at whatever cost, conforming to the didactic tradition which urged that war must be a last resort.³⁶ Matholwch, however, both accepts the compensation and continues to allow Irish resentment to fester into war. As head of state, he is ruled by his people and cannot keep the peace in his own country.

In his dealings with the family of the cauldron, Matholwch shows a similar lack of judgment. Meeting violence with violence, he allows the situation to escalate into brutality. When the family arrives in Britain, however, Bendigeidfran shows wisdom and nobility in assimilating them. Recognizing their skills and the contribution they can make, and distributing them strategically around the country, he turns their peculiarities into virtues, thereby disarming a potentially destabilizing force. Handling 'foreigners' and migrants, symbolized by the family of the cauldron, was a particular test of leadership in the medieval state, where groups of Flemish, English, Jews and others were often planted, or moved themselves, to form economically motivated settlements. While the Irish king shows himself to be parochial and outside the economic mainstream, the British king demonstrates the flexibility and strategy of the true statesman whose priority is to the 'common wealth.'

³⁶ For e.g. see Manzalaoui, *Secretum Secretorum: nine English versions*, p. 85: 'Looke pu haunt not bataill[es] neper expone pi soule and pe in them, but vse the counseile[s] of the worthiest of thy court, and occupie the not in goyng to them as scomfited and shamles men vsed forto do.'

Bendigeidfran's death does not mean the end of the kingdom of Britain: a new king, from another dynasty, takes over. 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. In that sense, it is as much about contemporary English politics in the thirteenth century as about Wales and its past, showing the consequences of a political landscape in which hegemony can only be sustained by force of arms. Bendigeidfran, literally a giant among men, is in many ways a role model for the Gwynedd dynasty, symbolizing its nationalistic ambitions by appealing to a remote and apparently authentic Welsh past, while also enacting the kinds of threats which challenged the stability of contemporary political units under English rule.

In the third branch, Manawydan represents yet another kind of leader, the trusted regent who rules in the absence of the rightful prince. In his responses to the depopulation of Dyfed, Manawydan exemplifies a range of personal virtues translated into leadership skills: strategic decision-making, negotiation skills, the ability to avoid violent resolutions, and above all, a sound grasp of the economics of regional prosperity. Andrew Welsh has commented on the significance of Manawydan bringing wheat seeds from England to Dyfed, symbolizing the introduction of agriculture to Wales: he is a 'culture hero' who brings a new impetus to Welsh cultural practices.³⁷ This is the only one of the Four Branches in which a son, a *mab*, is not born, but it is Pryderi who is the *mab*, the young prince who has not yet produced an heir. The disappearance of the entire population of Dyfed into a mysterious mist is not only a comment on Pryderi's failure to generate a son, but also an economic disaster which Manawydan deals with by trading in England and bringing back English goods. This is a clear example of the way in which disempowered Welsh princes might make economic use of their proximity to England, while at the same time demonstrating their moral superiority to their neighbours.

The story of Manawydan continues the theme of Wales as part of a centralized state under the rule of a single king. In his role as regent and as tutor to Pryderi, Manawydan shows him that he must acknowledge the superior rights of the feudal sovereign. In England, Pryderi pays homage to Caswallawn, who has succeeded Bendigeidfran as king of Britain, and Manawydan discourages Pryderi from fighting with his English rivals in order to safeguard his allegiance to Caswallawn. In other words, the young prince is being taught the political realities of living under a centralized monarchy, in which the Welsh leaders are *arglwyddi* rather than *brenhinoedd*. Resistance merely escalates violence and precipitates economic ruin. Compliance at least preserves regional power and regional stability.

³⁷ Andrew Welsh, 'Manawydan fab Llyr: Wales, England and the "New Man"', in Cyril J. Byrne et al. (eds), *Celtic languages and Celtic peoples* (St Mary's University, Halifax, 1989), pp 349–62.

Manawydan is more than a 'culture hero'. He is, like Arawn, the essence of the 'good king', whose wisdom and judgment, exemplified most dramatically in the episode of the mouse and the gallows, provide important lessons for young princes. He shows that politics, diplomacy and knowing one's 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. Manawydan also demonstrates that, although Welsh craftsmen may be superior, they can still learn from the English and foster an economy based on trade and farming rather than on hostile plunder raiding. Above all, he restores fertility to a depopulated land, a metaphor for the issue of hereditary succession which provides the central core of each branch.

Finally, the strange tale of Math and his nephews offers a new variation on the theme of lordship. Though Math is the lord of Gwynedd, it is Gwydion, his nephew and vassal, who drives the action of the story, whose main plot concerns the legitimizing of the boy-prince, Lleu Llaw Gyffes, as Math's heir and his final succession to the lordship of Gwynedd. Like Manawydan, Gwydion is resourceful and strategic, but he is also ruthless in pursuit of his aim to support his nephew, Lleu, positioned as an hereditary and unitary ruler (whose twin brother conveniently disappears and then perishes). Gwydion is the powerful baron who takes action to protect and promote a very young heir in the context of a weak or absent ruler.

The relationship between Math and Gwydion is similar to that which operates between Arthur and his men in the three Welsh 'romances' or in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. Arthur and Math are powerful and possess special skills, but it is their men, such as Owain and Gwydion, who make things happen while the overlords play the role popularized in French romance, that of *roi fait-néant*, the king who does nothing, or very little. In his determined efforts to help Lleu assume his rightful role as *mab*, the heir to Math, Gwydion acts as his tutor, advisor and mentor, steering a difficult path through complex family relationships to ensure the best possible outcome for the realm. It is Math, not Manawydan, who might be judged as the failed king by the standards of the dominant ideology of the baronial class. Uninterested in providing an heir, largely house-bound, invested with a magic which symbolizes the absolute power of the feudal king, Math rules by aura rather than action.

The story of Math in fact exemplifies the inadequacy of the 'Sovereignty' model of sacral kingship typical of an earlier Celtic literary tradition, compared to the 'modern' feudal paradigm. Math is a parody of the ancient myth of Celtic kingship, surrounded by magic and taboos, rousing himself to lead an army but ultimately ineffectual and barren. It is Gwydion who provides counsel and tutoring to his nephew, Lleu, and who resolves the fertility crisis in the kingdom which Math, the *roi fait-néant*, seems not to have noticed. The failure of a dynasty was a particularly acute problem in regional Wales, where lands without male

heirs, or inherited by minors, were likely to be appropriated by marcher lords or by the king himself, affecting the balance of power in Wales.³⁸ There are lessons here, then, about the duty of a lord to take care of the succession, and the means by which a marginal candidate such as the illegitimate Lleu can be made into the acknowledged heir.

Most of all it is a story about family politics and sexual politics and how these impact on the politics of a Welsh kingdom which, like all the Welsh kingdoms, suffered from dynastic rivalries and instability. Catherine McKenna reads the fourth branch as the story of a covert rebellion by Math's nephews, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, whose 'autonomy fosters the growth of envy.'³⁹ Such stories were equally relevant to the English monarchy and the marcher lords, who grappled with similar problems of succession, boy-princes, and the ease with which powerful barons could occupy the vacuum created by a weak king or feudal lord. In the relationship between Gwydion, political fixer and mentor, and Math, the overlord whose vast power achieves very little, the tale offers a paradigm of the relationship between baronial politicians and the king, told from the point of view of Welsh and marcher lords ambitious to bypass the control of the monarchy. Just as the *roi fait-néant* of French romance assured the magnates of their political autonomy, the Welsh version of this role, as exemplified by Math, interrogates older models of Welsh kingship and supports the independence of the Welsh princes from royal control.

The four types of lordship illustrated by the Four Branches – regional prince, national king, regent on behalf of an inexperienced prince, and boy-prince in waiting – display a range of lordship roles available to Welsh princes of the thirteenth century, all of them positioned within a normative feudal framework. More importantly, the tales exemplify to *uchelwyr* audiences the qualities of leadership and statesmanship which offer the best advantages to those on the receiving end of them. The most significant tasks of the lord, whether local or national, are to secure an appropriate succession, to maintain continuity of power, and to preserve peace and the economic survival of the realm. The story of Pwyll and Pryderi shows how these aims can be achieved despite setbacks and rival ambitions. Bendigeidfran's attempts to secure succession through Branwen's marriage are doomed by Irish failure to play by the same rules, but the rules themselves are not in question. The tales are dynamic examples of good leadership in action, working at symbolic and allegorical levels like manuscript illuminations.

In their central concerns of good kingship and dynastic succession, the Four Branches are based not on the myth of 'Sovereignty', whose limits are illustrated in the figure of Math, but on a model of kingship drawn from the contemporary context of England and France. The Welsh princes, like the marcher lords, are

in service to the English king, and the relationship between regional baronial power and the centralized monarchy of England is one of the main themes of the tales. In addition, the keen attention paid in all four branches to the need for a *mab*, the appropriate heir to take power into the next generation, and the noticeable absence of additional co-heirs, suggest an endorsement of the hereditary succession of a unitary ruler, an issue which equally occupied the kings and magnates of England and France from the late twelfth century.

The leadership skills displayed by the Welsh lords and princes of the Four Branches – the rules of good statesmanship – correspond to those emphasized in European didactic literature and mirrors of princes, addressed to the feudal nobility. The tales suggest that medieval Welsh princes based their practices of rulership not so much on ancient concepts of 'Sovereignty', but on the same theories of kingship that were circulated by commentators such as John of Salisbury, and practised by the English monarchy and the marcher lords of Wales. To a large extent, the Welsh princes were not permanently hostile to English rule at large, even post-1282, but shared similar aristocratic values of strong leadership, wise judgment, the importance of good counsel, and a consultative relationship between an overlord and his vassals, between a regional prince and his men. These were the values which were being handed on to successive generations of the Welsh nobility in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries through the socializing agency of popular tales such as the Four Branches.

³⁸ Davies, *Conquest, co-existence and change*, pp 93–7. ³⁹ McKenna, 'Revising Math', 111.