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Where Were the Four Branches of the Mabinogi Written?¹

BRYNLEY F. ROBERTS

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi is, in not a few respects, a unique text in Middle Welsh literature. Granted that the title 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi' is a modern one, nevertheless the two complete extant medieval copies which we possess regard the four stories as forming a single entity called *mabinogi* of which they are branches, and there are no other examples in native Welsh literature of this concept of formally designated quasi-autonomous sections of a complete narrative. The use of the word *ceinc* 'branch' to denote a section of narrative is unique to this text. 'Branch' (*branche*) is used in Old French literature, from the mid-twelfth century onwards, to denote narratives within the same general context, either as separate texts in a manuscript or, as in the *Roman de Renart*, relating the exploits of characters within the same group and written by different authors, grafting their work onto the whole. In *Perlesvaus* (from the early thirteenth century), *branche* is used for a segment of text, but the fourteenth-century Welsh translation, *Ystoryaeu Seint Greal*, does not use *ceinc* for this. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan has examined these texts, comparing the French and Welsh usages of *ceinc* and *branche*. Her conclusion is that it is 'highly unlikely that there was any direct connection between the use of *ceinc* in Welsh and *branche* in French', and that *ceinc* in this sense in Welsh may pre-date the first attestation of *branche* in Old French narrative.² The semantics of 'branch' lends itself to this extended, metaphorical use in spheres other than literature, and that there should have been independent parallel developments in Welsh and in French is not inherently improbable. It is, however,

¹ This paper was given at the 1999 CSANA conference in New York. I apologize for the traces of the oral delivery which remain in this published version. ² Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'The Branching Tree of Medieval Narrative: Welsh *cainc* and French *branche*', in Jennifer Fellows, et al. (eds), *Romance Readings on the Book*, Cardiff, 1996, 36-50. Sioned Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Llandysul, 1993), 18, notes that *cainc* also means 'tune'.

striking that the use of *branche* in narrative developed shades of meaning, a fact suggesting a broad acceptance in a literary context of the metaphor in a variety of senses, but that narrative *ceinc* is restricted to a single text which has other equally singular characteristics. If the date of the composition of the Four Branches is ever convincingly revised and brought forward, the chronology of possible influences will become more firmly established. In the Four Branches we find, not narrative threads, 'segments of stories', so much, as virtually free-standing stories which implicitly, and as I believe we now see, structurally, contribute to the whole. Whether there are four only, or whether there may have been more (or fewer), is essentially a literary question.³ Scribes marked out four in the manuscripts, and we have four. The question is whether the four comprise a complete narrative. I believe that they do. We have a set of four stories following one another in a particular established order – the fourth depends to some extent on the first, and the second and third are specifically said to be sequential in time – and coming to a conclusion. A narrative conceived and designed on this scale, however well or badly executed it may be, is another unique feature of this text.

The Four Branches is one of the few, even rare, texts which encompass both north and south Wales. Leaving aside chronicles like *Brut y Tywysogion* where the historical context determines the locale of the action, Middle Welsh stories fall into two categories in their geographical orientation. Some have few or no real locations, and if a place-name occurs, it has no spatial resonance: examples are *Ystoria Peredur*, *Owein*, *Culhwch ac Olwen* (apart, of course, from the onomastic functions of the hunting of *Twrch Trwyth*). *Caerleon* and *Caerloyw* are literary or mythic in their significance. Other stories are more firmly grounded and the area where events occur, often in a fairly restricted area, is expected to be recognized by the audience: *Gereint's* journey to Cardiff, *Maxen's* coming to Caernarfon, both the circumstances of *Rhonabwy's* dream and the location of its action, are examples which come to mind. The Four Branches has significant locations in both Dyfed and in Gwynedd, while other place-names have different functions: the driving of the swine from Rhuddlan Teifi has clear onomastic features, and the references to Kent, London, Gwynfryn, Oxford are part of the wider scenario of *Ynys Prydein* (or *Ynys y Kedyrn* here) which interests the writer in the third branch. But overall here is a narrative which is firmly set in both Gwynedd and Dyfed.⁴ The confines of Dyfed are clearly set out in

historical terms – *seith cantref Dyfed* at the beginning of the first branch, then as a result of Pwyll's *cynnydd* (conquests) *Seisyllwg*, the three cantrefs of *Ystrad Tywi* and the four cantrefs of *Ceredigion*, is annexed; in the fourth branch the seven cantrefs of *Morgannwg* have been added to the domain of Pwyll's son, *Pryderi*. The author has a strong historical and temporal awareness, it appears, and he makes clear that his narrative took place at some period in the past not merely by means of a phrase such as *o'r bedyd a wneit yna*,⁵ but more significantly by his use of territorial nomenclature which was not contemporary, *Cantref Dinodig* ... *A hunnw a elwir yr awr hon Eiwynydd ac Ardudwy*: perhaps *Seisyllwg* is another example. It is dangerous to argue from text to specific historical events but nevertheless, it is difficult not to sense contemporary significance in references such as the development of Dyfed, the relationships of Dyfed and Gwynedd, of Gwynedd and Penllyn, of Dyfed and Gwent, or the gift of *Dinodig* to *Lleu Llaw Gyffes*. The careful delineation of this greater Dyfed (but not *Deheubarth*) over a period of time in the past and as the achievement of Pwyll and *Pryderi* presumably had significance for the audience and for the author's purpose, though it is not, perhaps, so clear for us. Just as Pwyll has courts at *Arberth* and *Rhuddlan Teifi*, so too do the lords of Gwynedd hold court in *Har(dd)lech*, *Caer Seint*, *Aberffraw* and *Caer Dathyl*. The geographical settings throughout the text are specific and real (though the location of *Caer Dathyl* is not known to modern readers, the description of the journey there is precise), because they are linked to groups of protagonists who are, it appears, regional heroes – Pwyll and *Pryderi* in Dyfed, the family of *Llŷr* and of *Dôn* in Gwynedd, or more clearly in Gwynedd *Is-Conwy*, in *Arfon* and *Eifionnydd*. The bringing together of regional heroes from north and south Wales, and therefore of their localities, in a single narrative is unusual.

This brings us to another special feature of the Four Branches: namely that this is the most clearly authored text of all the native Welsh stories. The consensus has moved some distance from previous views on the composition of the Four Branches, and indeed of the other tales. Whatever the origins of the material of the stories – myth, legend, folktale or other forms of oral narrative – no longer do we perceive the authors as Matthew Arnold's peasant rummaging for the stones of a ruined palace to put up his humble cottage, nor yet, as the variant version of this view has it, as an antiquarian putting together half-learned, dimly recalled fragments of a tradition not quite his own. Whatever the relationship of our native tales to oral narratives, the stories as we now have them in their written forms are not attempted

³ Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, pp. 17–18, questions the number of branches. ⁴ For the north-south interests of the text see Ifor Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1930), xxxix–xli, Andrew Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts

Press, 1997), p. 76, Catherine A. McKenna, 'The Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 29 (1980), 35–52 (p. 44). ⁵ Ifor Williams (ed.), *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 23.

verbatim rewriting or even worse, regurgitating, of traditional stories. They are the work of writers, of authors, and we shall never know how they used the material which they had at hand, what form that material took or what status it had. What adaptations they may have made, what combinations they may have devised, what functions they may have altered and created – all this is unrecoverable. In that sense all our *mabinogion* tales are authored but no author is as individual as that of the Four Branches in his characterization, in the scenes and cameos which he presents, in his literary skills of style, irony and narrative architecture.

Granted that other tales are written by individual authors and that they reveal personal touches, an authorial attitude does not pervade the whole composition and in the Four Branches, more than in any other narrative, we are conscious of an author using story to convey a view of society and of social values, in so doing revealing something of his own personality and convictions. His view of society is not, it appears, a traditional one, and it is not expressed in contemporary modes – chivalric, heroic, propagandist, folktale, and so on – but it is, rather, a personal one. Medieval authors commonly took existing material, which they were free to rearrange and organize, in order to create 'new' works. Creativity was not synonymous with inventiveness. The authors of 'native' Welsh tales design their stories upon essentially simple patterns which reflect structures already existing in oral narrative. *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* is an extended triad; *Culhwch ac Olwen*, though it shows the personal traits of its redactor, elaborates but at the same time follows closely an underlying folktale structure. *Breuddwyd Maxen Wledig*, as far as we can judge, is a combination and retelling of two stories told of Maxen in the legendry of medieval Wales, and its author is content to follow the existing narratives while using them for his own purposes. The author of the Four Branches found his material in its diverse forms and contexts at hand but it must be questioned whether these, or parts of them, were organized as four branches, or whether separate episodes were related to one another in the same way as they are in our text.⁶ His role was not merely to rearrange or to rewrite narrative for his own purposes but rather to create a new vehicle, more comprehensive than existing narrative patterns,⁷ and to compose a new story to convey his themes. In his aims and his methodology he is more like the authors of medieval romance than a traditional storyteller –

6 See Sioned Davies, *Crefft y Cyfarwydd: Astudiaeth o Dechnegau Naratif yn y 'Mabinogion'* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1995), pp. 52–61, on the nature of the material of the Four Branches.

7 I am referring here to the overarching structure of the Four Branches and the relationship of one branch to another. For the use of existing narrative patterns to create a new unified tale or branch see Andrew Welsh, 'Traditional Tales and the Harmonizing of Story in *Pwyll Pendewic Dyuet*', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 17 (1989), 15–42.

more akin, in Welsh literature, to the later author of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* as a writer of literary fiction.

This change of critical stance towards the Four Branches has, of course, changed the nature of scholarly discussion. Nevertheless, those unique or singular features to which I referred earlier – the ambitious structure in four parts of an entity, the dual geography, the hand and voice of a single author – lead us to ask the same fundamental question as former generations of scholars asked, that is, wherein lies the unity of the Four Branches? Approaching it from a different view of origins and with a different concept of authorial intentions and of personal creativity, we come, perhaps, to different conclusions.

The question of the unity of the text remains a perplexing one. Ever since the days of Edward Anwyl, a century ago, it has been commonly held that what holds the Four Branches together is the story of Pryderi. The story which seems to form the main trunk upon which the Four Branches hang, is the life of Pryderi, the hero of Dyfed – his birth and disappearance, his imprisonment and the spell on Dyfed, his death: this, it was said, is the 'nucleus of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi'.⁸ It was left to W.J. Gruffydd to formalize these episodes and to present them as the life-cycle of Pryderi.⁹ Ifor Williams, though he rejected Gruffydd's detailed reconstructions of the tales as *cors anobaith*, 'a slough of despond', nevertheless offered the same analysis of the basic structure as did Anwyl and Gruffydd (*Gan mai buchedd Pryderi sy'n dolennu'r Pedair Cainc ynghyd ...*), and he believed that disparate stories and traditions were bound together (*asiwyd neu iaswyd hwy ynghyd*) by the story, *hanes*, of Pryderi.¹⁰ All these critics, with the starting point of their analyses lying in the area of origins, regarded the text not so much as flawed as disjointed. Thus Anwyl spoke of fragments from various sagas more or less skilfully combined into a unity,¹¹ Nutt of a South Wales bard who conceived the idea of gathering together a number of traditional legends and of giving them a cyclic form for the convenience of his younger colleagues.¹² In our day, Ford sees 'an extensive collection of more or less related adventures, related sufficiently for them to be metaphorically conceived as branches'.¹³ The 'new criticism' of the Four Branches seeks a more integrated structure, both within and between the branches, in thematic interlace, parallels,

8 Edward Anwyl, 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 1 (1897), 277–93 (p. 280).

9 W.J. Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1928), *Rhiannon* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1953), *Llên Cymru*, 4 (1957), 129–34 (by A.O.H. Jarman).

10 *Pedair Keinc y Mabinogi*, xxxix.

11 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi', p. 280.

12 Alfred Nutt, notes to *The Mabinogion: Medieval Welsh Romances* translated by Lady Charlotte Guest (London: D. Nutt, 1910), pp. 335–6.

13 Patrick K. Ford, trans., *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 3.

thematic development and consistency of authorial attitude, all of which contribute to the meaning and significance of the text.¹⁴ Mac Cana more cautiously describes the author as one who 'strove with very considerable skill to weld these assorted elements into a cohesive and consecutive narrative' but he warns against too synthetic an approach, seeking to balance the holistic literary view with a consideration of the shape of motifs and of structural faults in the work.¹⁵ There are differences of opinion as to how unified the Four Branches is as a text, whether we are justified in reading it as a progressive narrative leading to a conclusion, or whether a structure of common characters, recurring themes and completed episodes is unity enough, given the nature of the material and the period of its composition. But a common thread in modern criticism is that there is here a conscious author (or authors) who is attempting to accomplish far more than to conserve or reorganize traditional tales. Andrew Welsh, commenting on the author's use of folktales to express his themes of the hero's development, observes, 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi are, as far as we know, the most significant prose fiction produced in medieval Britain before the romances of Malory four centuries later'.¹⁶

The relationship of the branches points, in my view, to this being a well conceived progression. Branch 1 is a prologue (or an overture) where what could, and can, be autonomous stories will later be used to motivate more crucial actions, for example, the enchantment of Dyfed, the death of Pryderi. Branches 2 and 3 are sequential: they relate the friendship of Manawydan son of Llŷr and Pryderi (and incidentally the 'historical' myth of the gaining of the crown of Britain by Caswallon, displacing the sovereignty of the family of Llŷr). In all this Pryderi plays a subservient role, his rashness and militant attitude a contrast to Manawydan's patience and sagacity. In Branch 4 Pryderi is brought into the orbit of Math and the family of Dôn. The conflict between Dyfed and Gwynedd is engineered by the theft of the swine given to Pryderi by Arawn, king of Annwn, the start of whose friendship with Pwyll is related in Branch 1, and it is this conflict which brings about the death of Pryderi, which is merely an episode in a larger narrative. The narrative does not end with his death for he is no more than the means for others to achieve their ambitions. The story of Lleu, Gwydion and Blodeuwedd is not an appendage to the death of Pryderi but the final stage in the development, not of the narrative as such, but rather of the themes

¹⁴ For example, J.K. Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, (1973-74), 250-76; Jeffrey Gantz, 'Thematic Structure in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Medium Aevum*, 47 (1979), 247-54. ¹⁵ Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), pp. 31-8, see p. 31. ¹⁶ Welsh, 'Traditional Tales', p. 21.

which the author has been exploring. The character of Gwydion and the punishment by Math of wrongdoing are part of the concern of the Four Branches which progresses through successive branches in its study of transgression, injury, restitution, punishment, and of shame and reconciliation. Math and Manawydan are necessary characters; Gwydion, Lleu and Blodeuwedd are the concluding part of the exposition of the need for personal and civic relationships, notwithstanding the insufficiencies of the law and the faults of human nature.¹⁷ Pryderi is not an expression of these themes, and nowhere in the Four Branches is he a dominant character, not even in the third branch, which is located in Dyfed, where Manawydan of Gwynedd is the exemplary persona.

The corollary of regarding Pryderi as the central character of the Four Branches has been to take the unified text as a Dyfed composition. Anwyl spoke of its 'Dimetian bias' and of the author as a South Wales writer who had picked up tales from Gwynedd on his travels.¹⁸ Ifor Williams developed this and claimed that the warmth of reference to Dyfed, *nyt oes seith cantref well noc wy*, and the 'obvious sympathy' (*cydymdeimlad amlwg*) shown with the men of the south on the death of their leader confirmed the Dyfed connections of the author.¹⁹ Neither reference is convincing. Pryderi's description of Dyfed (if it is more than a rhetorical commonplace) is an inducement to persuade Manawydan to marry Rhiannon (still attractive 'though past her prime') and is also preparation for the later contrast with the enchanted wasteland, while the reference to the grief of the men of the south can equally well be read as triumphalism on the part of the men of Gwynedd.²⁰ It is, in any event, a curious way to report the death of a Dyfed hero at mid-point in a Dyfed text. In terms both of the roles of the leading characters and of thematic analysis the Dyfed involvement is not as important as that of Gwynedd. The Four Branches cannot be construed as a history of the misfortunes of the life of Pryderi, as Anwyl held.²¹ The main protagonists are the Gwynedd families of Llŷr, kings of *ynys y Kedyrn*, and of Dôn: Manawydan son of Llŷr is the guide and mentor of Pryderi who is his foil, Gwydion and Math are responsible for his death. Even Pryderi's foster-father, Pendaran Dyfed, is brought into branch 2 as a subsidiary character, a *gwas ieuanc*, with the defenders of the island under the leadership of Bendigeidfran's son, Caradawg. Throughout the Four Branches the priority of Gwynedd is

¹⁷ I have tried to develop these ideas in 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi', chap. 5, *Studies on Middle Welsh literature* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1992). ¹⁸ Anwyl, 'Four Branches of the Mabinogi', pp. 282, 284. ¹⁹ *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, xxi. ²⁰ Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 76, refers to the 'tact' of the author. ²¹ Cf. Elizabeth Hanson-Smith, 'Pwyll Prince of Dyfed: the Narrative Structure', *Studia Celtica*, 16 (1981-82), 126-34. 'The idea that Pryderi is the link among [the branches] must be taken into question' (p. 134).

emphasized. More importantly, Manawydan and Math, both of Gwynedd, reflect the author's views of the characteristics of the good leader and ruler, and the examination of the virtues of forbearance, justice and compassion, and of the limits of the legal process is worked out through an account of the tribulations of the two Gwynedd families. It is they who face the moral questions: it is they who have to change both their circumstances and their attitudes. The author's ideas of social values are more clearly displayed in the Gwynedd branches than in the Dyfed ones and this, clearly, raises the question of whom the author saw as his audience.

The Gwynedd place-names in the text are more meaningful – these are the ones that have local legends attached to them – and they have a greater ring of confidence than the Dyfed locations. Arberth, Preseleu, Llwyn Diarwya, Glyn Cuch (perhaps a liminal area) give no real sense of geography, while the mythic associations of Gwales and Aberhenfelen are more significant than their geographical locations; they lack the sense of place which Aber Menei, Harddlech or Aberffraw have or which informs the journey from Creuwriion to Caer Dathyl. The author uses the geography of Arfon (*kedernid Gwyned*) with far greater assurance than he does that of Dyfed. If our author was a Dyfed writer, it is difficult to believe such a detailed topography, and one which lacked any significance for his audience, could have been transferred from a Gwynedd source. It could be argued, of course, that we have more than one author and that the Dyfed branches were composed separately from those from Gwynedd.²² One cannot, however, isolate the separate branches of the narrative in this way as the 'Gwynedd' branch 2 and the 'Dyfed' branch 3 are essentially a single 'episode'. We may note, too, that the honour price which Bendigeidfran offers Matholwch is that of the king of Aberffraw, but in silver not gold (as the laws specify). This is presumably the tradition familiar to the author: it is too subtle to argue that a Dyfed author deliberately selected the Gwynedd version of the honour price to suit the context. As I have argued above, I believe a single hand is responsible for the architecture of the Four Branches, whatever the ultimate cultural and local origins of the materials which he used.²³

²² Sioned Davies, 'Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi: a case for multiple authorship?', Cyril J. Byrne et al. (eds.), *Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples. Proceedings of the Second North American Congress of Celtic Studies* (Halifax, NS: D'Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies, Saint Mary's University, 1986), pp. 443–59.

²³ Cf. T.P. Ellis and John Lloyd, *The Mabinogion: a New Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), vol. I, pp. 2–3, regard 'the person of Pryderi ... as the connecting thread running through all the Four Branches' but nevertheless assert, 'There is, however, a probability that the original territorial locale of the Four Branches was in North Wales'. I wish to thank Professor Patrick Sims-Williams for reminding me of this reference. Andrew Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, pp. 75–8, 'Did a Woman Write "Four Branches of the Mabinogi"?', *Studi Medievali*, 37 (1997), 679–705, interprets the evidence differently. He postulates an author familiar with both kingdoms, and proposes Gwenllïan, daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan of Gwynedd, and wife of Gruffudd ap Rhys of Dyfed.

That such a work as the Four Branches of the Mabinogi (or whatever title we may choose to give it) should have been produced in Gwynedd should not surprise us. There was an old tradition of intellectual activity and of learning in Gwynedd in the early Middle Ages. This has been described by Nora Chadwick who believed that a 'school of antiquarian activity flourished in Gwynedd about the beginning of the ninth century, and was fostered throughout that century at the courts of Merfyn Frych and Rhodri Mawr'.²⁴ She held that the *Annales Cambriae* acquired their present form in Gwynedd about the time of bishop Elfoddw, the tutor of Nennius of the *Historia Brittonum*, and she placed the compilation found in BL Ms Harley 3859 in Gwynedd in the tenth century at the time of Rhodri Mawr as a political document created by the new dynasty.²⁵ The court was of a high intellectual level, in touch with Irish and western European schools, a place, too, where northern British traditions were fostered as propaganda. Though there was a hiatus in the succession of Gwynedd, the dynasty of Gruffudd ap Cynan (died 1137) regarded themselves as the descendants of Rhodri Mawr and inherited the ambition of a greater Gwynedd and of Welsh hegemony. There may well have continued not only a tradition of learning and of writing in ecclesiastical centres but of close links between court and *clas*, and later religious houses, that led to the production of works of political significance. What is striking about the Gwynedd texts, in both Welsh and Latin, that can be recognized as such in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is their variety, their quality and their intellectual, often quasi-political nature.

The major text to be produced is *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, the only secular biography from Wales and one which clearly reveals its inspiration in the Suetonian model. The author, no doubt, had more than one purpose in composing this 'life' but an important concern was to stress the legitimacy of Gruffudd's claim to the throne of Gwynedd.²⁶ The original Latin text was presumably written in Gwynedd sometime in the second half of the twelfth century or later, and it was then translated fairly quickly, as the Welsh text appears in NLW Peniarth Ms 17, dated to the second half of the thirteenth

²⁴ Nora K Chadwick, 'Intellectual Life in West Wales in the Last Days of the Celtic Church', in Nora K Chadwick et al. (eds.), *Studies in the early British church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), pp. 121–82 (pp. 118–20). ²⁵ 'Early Culture and Learning in North Wales', *ibid.*, pp. 29–120 (p. 56). ²⁶ D. Simon Evans (ed.), *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1977); Nerys Ann Jones, 'Historia Gruffud vab Kenan: The First Audience', in K.L. Maund (ed.), *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography* (Woodbridge, UK, and Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1996), pp. 149–56 (p. 151); J. Beverley Smith, *The Sense of History in Medieval Wales* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1991), pp. 6–7. He notes, 'In its Welsh garb the *History* certainly has an affinity with the prose tales, and at several points the text is strikingly reminiscent of the Four Branches'.

century. The scribe of Peniarth 17 was responsible for other important manuscripts including Peniarth 14, pt. i (i), containing translations of the Miracles of the Virgin, Miracles of St. Edmund of Kent and *Transitus Mariae*. The translation of the Miracles of St. Edmund was made soon after the appearance of the original which is dated c.1240–46. Ingo Mittendorf in the course of his extensive studies of these texts and manuscripts has shown that this scribe is the B hand of *Llyfr Aneirin*. The scribe who copied Peniarth 16,iii, which contains the earliest and original version of *Breuddwyd Maxen Wledig*, and a translation of a Latin commentary, post 1216, on Merlin's prophecy in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, also copied the second group of texts in Peniarth 14, pt. i (ii). Interestingly, Peniarth 21, a copy of *Brut y Brenhinedd*, a translation of Geoffrey's *Historia*, c.1300 × 25 either way, has the arms of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd and of the earl of Chester, and is in the same hand as Peniarth 7, *Historia Peredur*.²⁷ Peter Wyn Thomas has argued that both Peniarth 7 and Peniarth 14, pt. ii, i.e., the 'primitive' version of *Historia Peredur*, are north Wales texts.²⁸ If we put together the scribal activity, the translating and the composition of texts in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, we begin to get a picture of a prosperous and lively intellectual milieu open to extraneous cultural influences.

In Latin: the lost originals of *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan* and of the *vita* of St Beuno

Translations: *Historia Gruffudd vab Kenan*
Brut y Brenhinedd, Peniarth 21
 Commentary on Merlin's prophecy
Delw y Byd (Imago Mundi), Peniarth 17

Religious works

Legal texts, many of which show innovations, e.g., in court law,
galanas, sarhad, Llyfr Iorwerth (BL Cotton Titus Dii), *Llyfr Du'r Weun* (Peniarth 29), *Llyfr Colan* (Peniarth 30)

Hengerdd, *Llyfr Aneirin*, Hand B

Breuddwyd Maxen Wledig, more a propagandist than an antiquarian text
 from the court of Gwynedd

Historia Peredur, which betrays French influence

²⁷ For the dates of manuscripts see Daniel Huws, *Llyfrau Cymraeg, 1250–1400* (Aberystwyth: Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, 1993), pp. 19–21. Mr Huws kindly gave me the information regarding the arms in Peniarth 21. For the information on the texts in Peniarth 14 and the identity of the B hand of *Llyfr Aneirin* I thank Dr Ingo Mittendorf. ²⁸ In a seminar on *Historia Peredur* held at Cardiff University in 1996.

With these prose texts must be placed the corpus of court poetry from Gwynedd which (we are increasingly coming to appreciate) often has a particular contemporary relevance. Families like that of Iorwerth ap Madog or of Meilyr, Gwalchmai and his sons are testimony to the way in which religion, law, poetry and politics intermingled in the courts and *clasau* of Gwynedd, and how scribal activity and antiquarianism could cross boundaries, so that *Llyfr Du'r Weun*, circa 1250, could contain Dafydd Benfras's elegy to Llywelyn ab Iorwerth who died 1240, as well as the laws, and reveal how lawyers could use legendary dynastic traditions in a contemporary political context.²⁹

Here in Gwynedd was a courtly audience able to listen in a sophisticated way to literature that was not what it seemed to be on the surface, and able to get behind the stylistics of court poetry to pick up contemporary promptings; able, too, to enjoy the new-style love poetry of Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd (d. 1170). Here, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were authors writing in contemporary fashion, both Latin biography and French-style chivalric romance, busy scribes and translators producing Welsh versions of newly acquired Latin religious and historical works. The Four Branches, an ambitiously constructed text with its own significance, the work of an author ready to adapt and to develop his tradition for his own literary ends and concerned with questions of wise governorship,³⁰ sits easily within this milieu, which is a continuation of the intellectual ambience of court and church in an earlier period. There is, admittedly, a hiatus in the extant manuscript evidence but it is unlikely that literary work of this quality could have appeared in the thirteenth century had there not been a firm foundation in an earlier and continuing tradition, such as we know existed before the flowering of court poetry in the early twelfth century.

Where in Gwynedd the Four Branches of the Mabinogi may have been written I do not know, though Clynnog is a strong candidate on both cultural and geographical grounds.³¹ The date remains 'an open question'.³² Progress is being made towards establishing criteria for absolute dating of

²⁹ For *Breiniu Gwyr Arfon* see Aneurin Owen, *Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales* (London: G.E. Eyre and A. Spottiswoode, 1841), vol. I, p. 104. ³⁰ See McKenna, 'Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll*', p. 40 for a description of the audience; also Hanson-Smith, '*Pwyll prince of Dyfed*: The Narrative Structure', *passim*; C.W. Sullivan, 'Inheritance and Lordship in Math', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1990), 45–63; and Ian Hughes, 'Math fab Mathonwy a Gwydion fab Don', *Duned*, 5 (1999), 9–22. ³¹ Clynnog and Bangor, which had close relationships with each other and the courts of Gwynedd, were the two most important churches in Gwynedd. See W.P. Griffith, ed., '*Ysbryd Dealltwnus ac Enaid Anfarwol*': *Ysgrifau ar Hanes Crefydd yng Ngwynedd* (Bangor: Canolfan Uwch-efrydiau Crefydd yng Nghymru, Prifysgol Cymru, 1999), pp. 41, 51. ³² See Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Submission of Irish Kings in Fact and Fiction', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 22 (1991), 31–61, who also reviews earlier discussions.

Middle Welsh, but even in relative terms the date of the Four Branches is problematic. If *Culhwch ac Olwen* as we have it is c.1100,³³ is not the Four Branches later? It is earlier than *Breuddwyd Maxen Wledig*, which does not have old perfect forms like *dothoedd*, *athoedd*, 3 pl. prepositions like *gantu* or *yng* 'wele', and which I believe can be dated to the first half of the thirteenth century. The question arises whether we are being led to consider, once again, a twelfth-century date, together with its implications for issues like the odd coincidence of the semantics of *ceinc* and *branche*, or the question of the first appearance of 'fiction' in western literature.³⁴

I leave this speculative essay with one other difficulty. The earliest manuscript of part of the Four Branches is Peniarth 6, nearer 1300 than the old date of c.1225.³⁵ This follows different orthographic conventions from Peniarth Mss 14, 16, 17 and does not appear to be a Gwynedd manuscript. There is little textual variation between these earlier fragments and the complete texts in the White and Red books, suggesting that this is a fixed and established text such as might be expected in the transmission of a new and composed literary narrative. It is ironic, however, that this classic from

33 Rachel Bromwich and D Simon Evans (eds.), *Culhwch and Olwen* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), lxxxi. 34 See *supra* and the discussion by Per Nykrog, 'The Rise of Literary Fiction', in Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable (eds.), *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford: Harvard University Press and Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 591-612.

35 See Huws, *Llyfrau Cymraeg*, p. 19.

Gwynedd which stresses the subsidiary role of Dyfed has been preserved for us in southern manuscripts.³⁶

36 Rachel Bromwich has convincingly shown that there is a close connection between the Triads of the Island of Britain – the Early Version and in a number of cases the extended version in the White Book of Rhydderch – and our text of the Four Branches. Not only is there a coincidence of content but she has argued that the triads are an integral part of the text as it now stands: in some instances the triad has determined the shape of the narrative. See *Triodd Ynys Prydein*, 2nd ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978), lxxxvi-xc. Dr Bromwich also argues for the south Wales origin of the early compilation of triads, noting, for example, the St Davids' interest revealed in triad 1, the favourable attitude to south Wales in triad 26 contrasted with the jaundiced view of the north, and the omission of the north Wales hero Hiriell from the text (*ibid.*, cxx-xxi). The Early Version is found in Peniarth 16, iv, which is a detached fragment of NLW 5266B, *Brut Dingestow*. The texts in NLW 5266B and in Peniarth 16, iv are in the same hand and apparently derive from the same exemplar. The NLW 5266B-Peniarth 16, iv manuscript is a Gwynedd manuscript (Paul Russell, 'What Did Medieval Welsh Scribes Do?: The Scribe of the Dingestow Court Manuscript', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 37 [1999], 79-96 [p. 85]) and is further testimony to scribal and antiquarian activity in late twelfth and early thirteenth-century Gwynedd. The main (though of course, not the only) interests of the compiler of the Early Version (triads 2-46), if we accept Dr Bromwich's view of triad 1 as an addition to the text, seem to lie in heroes of the Old North – figures of both cultural and dynastic significance in Gwynedd, for example, the place given to Rhun ap Iarlle Gwynedd and the defeat of his rival Elidir Mwynfawr; the early kings of Gwynedd, like Cadwallon and Cadfan, and the wars with Edwin; and the mythic family of Dôn. Most of the figures who can be identified in the Early Version of the triads are of either the Old or Welsh North. The court poets of Gwynedd were well informed as to the contents of the compilation at an early date. The use of *mab aillt* (triad 68 – see the full discussion in Bromwich, *Triodd Ynys Prydein*, pp. 179-81) suggests a north Wales context, and it is worth noting that the triads in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi appear for the most part in the two branches most closely associated with Gwynedd. It may be appropriate to reconsider the provenance of the Early Version of the triads as a compilation which has much in common with the Four Branches, and for which the earliest manuscript evidence comes from Gwynedd.