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Branwen: A Study of the Celtic Affinities

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THE critical analysis and understanding of such medieval narratives as the tale of 'Branwen', the second branch of the Mabinogi, is by no means at a very advanced state. In the present century, there were the pioneering interpretative efforts of W. J. Gruffydd on the Four Branches,¹ work that was carried forward and enhanced in certain respects by Proinsias Mac Cana in *Branwen: A Study of the Irish Affinities*.² The learned tradition of Branwen is discussed by Rachel Bromwich in *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*,³ along with some of the archaeological connections to her name. The social background of the tale has been admirably discussed recently by Morfydd Owen,⁴ and various other literary and linguistic matters relating to Branwen have seen print recently.⁵ Among the Four Branches, 'Branwen' has perhaps the most appeal for modern readers, dealing, as it does, with family relationships, domestic alienation, vengeance for the honour of one's family, heartbreak, and so on. Also, it is perhaps the simplest of the Four Branches with respect to its plot. But as the scholarly literature continually compels us to do, we must always remind ourselves that 'Branwen', like all of our literature, must be read at the several levels it occupies in our culture. As Morfydd Owen has shown, it has a precise synchronic social meaning, most profitably read against the background of the legal tradition of shame and reparation. In that respect, the traditional narrative *reflects* social values, mirrors contemporary concerns about 'woman's place in the kin'. But traditional narratives are encoded with more than just exemplary or non-exemplary social behaviour, they carry codes that relate to purely cultural (non-social) concerns and values. In other words, 'women in society' is a subject different from 'women in culture',⁶ which is why (at one level of the story) Branwen is such a different heroine than Rhiannon. Rhiannon reflects the idealized women of Celtic culture, the type of woman elevated and immortalized in the accounts of Dio Cassius,⁷ Posidonius,⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus,⁹ Tacitus,¹⁰ Pomponius Mela,¹¹ and who emerges from the traditional literature of Ireland in figures such as Medb, Macha, and her ilk.

And yet even the tale of one so profoundly embedded in Celtic cultural notions of women can be turned to social purposes, as Brinley Rees's recent important contribution shows.¹² Rees shows that Welsh analogues to the three kinds of kings depicted in the Irish *Audacht Morainn*: to wit, *fírflaith*, *tarbflaith*, and *ciallflaith* may be discovered in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi.¹³ He goes on to show that *Pwyll* (cognate of Ir. *ciall*) represents, as it were, a lordship characterized by the learning of restraint of various kinds (the limits to which one can justly exercise one's authority) and the wisdom of just counsel, and thereby the perfection of rule.¹⁴ This theme is emphasized in the name of his son and successor, *Pryderi* 'care, concern', and is manifested in another way in the restraint and patience demonstrated

by Manawydan, who takes Pwyll's place as spouse of Rhiannon and father of Pryderi. Rees adduces further evidence to show that *ciallfhlaith* (= W. *pwyllwledig*) is characterized by special attention to the cultivation of peace, counsel, well-being, prosperity, etc.¹⁵ A similar approach was taken by Roberta Valente of Cornell University, in an unpublished paper, 'Woman's Words: The Function of Rhiannon in the *Mabinogi*',¹⁶ except that Valente concentrated on Rhiannon as the giver of wisdom.

But the fact that a traditional narrative may demonstrably mean one thing does not mean that it cannot signify other cultural and social things as well. 'Pwyll' is surely a Welsh version of a *speculum principis*, as Rees suggests, and just as surely contains elements of an inherited myth about the Celtic horse goddess.¹⁷ And just as 'Branwen' is set firmly in medieval Welsh legal tradition, so is it firmly anchored in cultural values not concerned with social realities.¹⁸

My own approach to these tales is essentially cultural and the method is basically structural, though admittedly idiosyncratically so. I believe, however, that the traditional narrative yields a great deal when its sequentially presented events are perceived paradigmatically or 'vertically'. At least this method is preferable to the once fashionable reconstruction of the *ur*-tale, a reconstruction made possible by the Historic-Geographic method of folktale research. It is also preferable to the allied motif-oriented approach, wherein a traditional tale may be seen as little more than the sum total of its motifs, and whereby any tale may be compared with any other that possesses the same assortment of motifs. The latter approach allowed scholars to posit wholesale borrowings and make one culture heavily dependent on another (where these motifs were first—or more abundantly—discovered) for its body of traditional narrative.¹⁹

The basic premise of the discussion that follows here, then, is that the text makes sense as we have it; our problem with it is that we don't yet know *how* the text means. When we have explored that problem, we might eventually be in a position to discover *what* the text means. We are all familiar with the counsels of despair offered by earlier (and some modern) commentators on the *Mabinogi*, who declared that the tales represent a mythology in decline and that their original shapes are probably lost to us forever. W. J. Gruffydd in particular sought to discover what those original shapes had been, and in the process he attempted reconstructions that were feasible in their own right, but that had dubious value for our understanding of the texts as we find them. And, we might add, as medieval Welsh audiences found them. For example, Proinsias Mac Cana paraphrases W. J. Gruffydd thus: 'The outstanding characteristic of the existing Second Branch, i.e. *Branwen*, is the "excessively large number of 'loose ends' in the narrative and a vast amount of incoherence and confusion".'²⁰ Professor Mac Cana's approach was to dissect the narrative episode by episode, motif by motif, and identify the medieval Irish narratives from which those episodes and motifs were borrowed. In the process, he supports the notion that the tale has loose ends, is at times incoherent and confused (though he stresses the literary skill of the 'author' of the branch in deploying these Irish borrowings in his tale). Referring, for example, to the iron house episode in *Branwen*, Mac Cana notes that it 'has little more than a superficial connection with its context' (p. 10). He believes that this particular episode was borrowed by the redactor from *Mesca Ulad* and inserted into the text. Toward the end of his study,

he declares, 'the Second branch is largely a composite of diverse elements chosen arbitrarily from Welsh and Irish literature . . .' (p. 172). Though the Welsh author's favourite source seems to have been *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, he was also closely familiar with and borrowed extensively from *Fled Bricrenn*, *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, and numerous other ancient Irish tales.²¹

Professor Mac Cana's insistence that 'Branwen' was the conscious literary creation of a 'scholar with the leisure and the inclination to divert his gifts of learning to the creation of such literature of entertainment' (p. 182), and that the tale is an 'almost entirely untraditional piece of work' (p. 189) scarcely seems defensible any longer. Literary relations between Ireland and Wales in the early period have been studied often, but I can think of no more reasoned conclusions than those offered by Patrick Sims-Williams in his 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Mediaeval Welsh Literature.'²² Sims-Williams quotes Mac Cana himself (in the latter's review of Jackson's *International Popular Tale*) as saying that 'one can scarcely doubt that most of the similarities between Welsh and Irish literary usage and content are to be ascribed to common origins' (pp. 236-7). It is true that there were channels and opportunities for Irish narrative material to pass over to Wales, and Mac Cana is but one of many scholars to propose that that is precisely what did happen. But as Sims-Williams says, 'In itself the thesis is plausible enough, but it is quite unproven and perhaps unprovable.' And later, 'Future literary historians not wishing to put too much faith in Slover's "countless opportunities" will do better to regard mediaeval Irish literature as a rich and indispensable quarry for analogues rather than for sources.'²³ Given the cumulative evidence of twentieth-century scholarship on the questions, I think that most would agree that it is entirely possible that Welsh poets and storytellers were acquainted with a considerable amount of Irish story and lore. The converse is equally true. The tendency to isolate individual episodes which can be found in both Welsh and Irish and then assume borrowing from Ireland to Wales perhaps stems from the undeniable fact that vastly more Irish material has survived. Mac Cana is aware of this fact and addresses it on the first page of his study. Given the parallel development of the two traditions, I don't see how we can argue against the notion that there was an extensive narrative corpus in Welsh that simply has not survived. And if it were proportionately smaller, that would still not allow us to decide on the basis of such negative evidence just which 'motifs' were borrowed. In the rare instance where borrowing could be absolutely proved, we should have to invoke the notion of 'community acceptance' (see footnote 33 below), and argue that the borrowing was possible only because there was a 'cultural fit'; in other words, the motif or theme was as much at home in the receiving culture as in the donor culture.

In my view, however, the approach represented by Mac Cana's study is misguided from the outset.²⁴ One does not have to look far from Wales (or even outside Wales) to find cauldrons, monstrous men and women, deaths of chieftains in burning houses (iron or otherwise), sinister trickster figures, or any of the other motifs, themes and incidents isolated by Mac Cana. The real question is, what do these incidents have to do with one another within the tale of 'Branwen'?²⁵ Let us try a different mode of analysis then, one which begins by assuming that 'Branwen', like the other branches of the *Mabinogi* is a traditional tale with (mostly) traditional characters. As a traditional tale, it is culturally anchored, and we shall find little in it that

does not belong to inherited Celtic tradition as preserved and maintained in early Wales. Conversely, the elements in it will cohere in a special way, no matter how difficult it may be for us to see or understand that coherence. The present exercise, then, stresses the integrity of the text as we have it.

The concept of 'narrative attention' is one that I think has been overlooked in our analyses of medieval Welsh texts. Narrative attention means simply observing those parts of the narrative that receive considerable attention from the author/redactor and those that receive little. It also means that apparently irrelevant matter introduced into the text, however brief, is probably there for a reason and deserves our attention. It remains to be seen what value such approaches may have, but the least we can do is to explore them, for as yet no single method or critical approach has revealed to us the complexity of meanings represented by medieval Irish and Welsh tales. I wonder, for example, how many have noticed how the individual branches of the Mabinogi begin.²⁶ Is it significant? If the narratives are traditional, we might well expect that they would begin in a traditional way, and that their beginnings would tell us something about the tale. Let us consider the beginnings of the four branches.

The First Branch, 'Pwyll', begins: 'Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, was lord over the seven cantrefs of Dyfed.'²⁷ The Fourth Branch, 'Math son of Mathonwy', begins: 'Math son of Mathonwy was lord of Gwynedd, and Pryderi son of Pwyll was lord over twenty-one cantrefs in the South. . . .' The Third Branch, which follows sequentially on the Second Branch, and which is titled 'Manawydan son of Llyr', begins: '(after the seven men we have spoken of above buried Bendigeidfran's head in Gwynfryn in London with his face toward France,) Manawydan looked at the town of London and at his companions. . . .' The Second Branch, 'Branwen daughter of Llyr', begins: 'Bendigeidfran son of Llyr was crowned king of this island, and was invested with the crown of London.' Branwen doesn't turn up until many lines later.

Now evidence of this sort might well be supportive of Gruffydd's old contention that the Second Branch was originally about Bendigeidfran, and that Branwen was secondarily drawn into it. He argued chiefly from the fact that Branwen doesn't have a very great role in the tale, that it really is about Bendigeidfran. But as we have seen, it seems likely and plausible that these particular narratives we call the 'branches' of the Mabinogi utilized a common stylistic device of opening the tale with reference to the chief character in it, so that on that ground the second branch is certainly Bendigeidfran's branch. But if it is, why do we know it by the name of Branwen? The colophon of the tale says:

And that is how this branch of the Mabinogi ends: the incident of Branwen's Slap—which was one of the three unfortunate slaps in this island, the occasion of The Assembly of Bran—when the hosts of one hundred and fifty-four districts went to Ireland to revenge Branwen's slap, The Feasting in Harlech—which lasted seven years, The Singing of the Birds of Rhiannon, and The Assembly of the Head—which lasted eighty years.

It would have it, thus, that the tale recounts events particular to both Branwen and Bendigeidfran.

Now the curious thing about these names, as I have pointed out,²⁸ is that one is apparently old, the other post-Christian. The first is a compound of

bran, a feminine noun, with the adjective (fem.) *gwen*, 'white, holy'. The other, of course, is our noun compounded with *bendigeid* 'blessed, holy', from Latin *benedic-*. It might be argued, then, that *Branwen* and *Bendigeidfran* (*Bran fendigeid*) are one and the same name, the latter reflecting the later and borrowed word for 'holy', etc., the former representing a purely native development.²⁹ The fact that the order of the elements in the compound are inverted in the latter case need not disturb us, for **Bran Fendigeid* is possible if not attested;³⁰ cf., for example, *Cadwaladr Fendigaid*, *Gwrthefyr Fendigaid*.³¹ On the other hand, *gwen-* may occur as the first element in such compounds, just as does the calque *bendigeid-*; e.g. *Gwendor(y)f* 'blessed host'.³² One notes, too, that Branwen seems to be a female name because of the feminine form of the adjective, *gwen*. But of course the feminine form is required here, since the noun *bran* is feminine, although Bran is clearly conceived as a male deity in Welsh (cf. the Irish Bran). The point I wish to make here is simply that the opening formula of the tale may tell us something significant about its meaning.

The concept of 'narrative attention' compels us to pay special attention to the so-called interpolation toward the beginning of 'Branwen', an interpolation that in fact occupies roughly one-sixth of the narrative and takes up much more space than, say, the marriage of Branwen, Efnisien's mutilation of the horses, the death of Gwern, or the Otherworldly feasting. It is, in short, one of the most fully developed episodes in the tale.

Matholwch, offended by the action of Efnisien, departs from the court of Bendigeidfran, who in turn lures him back by promising him sound horses for those that had been maimed and gold and silver as prescribed by law. In addition, but only after Matholwch has returned to the court, Bendigeidfran promises him a magical cauldron, a cauldron that revivifies slain warriors, except that they return to life without the gift of speech. On the next day, horses are paid out to Matholwch as promised, and this event is used to explain the name *Talebolion*, said to be the name of the district in which the horses were paid out to Matholwch and explained in the usual onomastic fashion as a compound of *tâl* 'payment' and *ebol-ion* 'horse-s' (though *ebol* is more properly 'colt').

Following immediately upon this etymology, Matholwch asks how Bendigeidfran happened to come by the cauldron. The story that follows is a remarkable one, and Bendigeidfran is as amazed as we are that Matholwch does not seem to know anything about it, especially since the whole business started in Matholwch's kingdom. The ragged narrative seam³³ shows us that we can expect some sort of structural shift here, and I believe that to understand this episode we have to conceptualize it vertically, to use Levy-Strauss's orientation. To put it another way, viewed as part of the horizontal (linear) development of the narrative, the episode seems to be an interpolation or digression; in fact, it stands not in syntagmatic relation to the rest of the text but in paradigmatic relation.

Matholwch relates that he was one day hunting atop the mound³⁴ above the Lake of the Cauldron when he saw a great yellowish-red haired man coming from the lake with a cauldron on his back. He was of enormous stature, but if he was big, his wife was more than twice his size. (We will remember that this story is being told to Bendigeidfran, himself a giant of such stature that he has never enjoyed the comfort of a house and is able to cross the Irish Sea by wading.) The man's name is Llassar Llaes Gynfnewid

and his wife is Cymidei Cymeinfol. In response to Matholwch's query, the man says that 'at the end of a fortnight and a month this woman will conceive, and the boy born of that pregnancy at the end of a fortnight and a month will be a fully armed warrior'.

Matholwch took them in and within a short time she had borne more children, that is, fully armed warriors, and they were making themselves unwanted—insulting (that is, verbally annoying) people, and molesting noble men and women. The realm was not able to get rid of them on its own, and the warlike race did not choose to go willingly. So an iron house was constructed, and the man, his wife, and their children were induced to go into it. They were provided with food and drink, which they proceeded to consume, while outside a great fire had been built and men stationed at bellows all around the house to fan the flames. At the crucial moment, when the wall was white hot, Llassar, with his wife behind him, broke out through the wall and escaped the flames and the iron house. Only the man and his wife escaped from there; the children apparently perished. The warlike pair then went over to Britain.

'How did you receive them, Lord?' asks Matholwch.

'I divided them throughout the land, and they are numerous and thriving everywhere, and strengthening the places in which they happen to be with the best men and arms anyone has ever seen.'³⁵

Following this account of the cauldron, Matholwch and Branwen return to Ireland, she has a child, Gwern, and he is placed in fosterage. Then, Matholwch's nobles remind him of the insult he had received over the horses, and in a belated retaliation, Branwen is humiliated, being forced to cook for the court, and submit to a blow by the butcher each day (presumably accounting thereby for the phrase *Palfawd Branwen*, the title embedded in the colophon to the tale, although we notice that what she indeed receives each day is not a *palfawd* but a *bonclust*). With the aid of a helper bird, Branwen informs her brother Bendigeidfran of her plight, and he assembles an invasion force and heads for Ireland.

After some negotiations, it turns out that the only way Bendigeidfran can be appeased and come to terms with Matholwch is for the latter and his men to construct a special house for him—the one thing he has never had. It is so done, but the Irish are deceitful and they 'fixed a peg on every side of each of the one hundred columns that were in the house, and hung a hide-bag on each peg, with an armed warrior inside each'. Efnisien comes into the house before the rest and succeeds in foiling the Irish plan.

Here again, narrative attention compels us to pause over the singular events that ensue. As I read the text, Efnisien is alone when he enters the house except for the hidden Irishmen. Admittedly, this is not the usual reading, for scholars (and my students) often assume it is some Irishman accompanying Efnisien who is doing the talking and who is addressed by the wily Welshman. But it seems to me that there are at least two things to support my view. The first is rational: if Efnisien were speaking in the presence of or directly to one of the Irish, why would such a person allow Efnisien to proceed from bag to bag dispatching the hapless warriors? Compare Mac Cana's comment: '... the Irishman who was by him either did not notice what was going on or else, for some strange unknown reason, held his peace.'³⁶ The second thing is the evidence of the text: after the event and after the *englyn* recited by

Efnisien, the text says, 'After that the hosts entered the house: the man of the Isle of Ireland on one side and the men of the Isle of the Mighty on the other.' Reading the text in the way I have suggested then, let us review what happens. Efnisien goes up to one of the bags:

'What's in this bag?' he asked one of the Irishmen.

'Flour, friend,' said he [from the bag].

What the other did then was to feel around him until he found his head, and squeezed his head until he could feel his fingers meet in the brain, through the bone. Then he left him and put his hand on another, saying, 'What do we have hear?'

That one suffers the same fate, and then the text says that Efnisien did that to each in turn until only one of the two hundred remained. He went up to that one and repeated his question, got the same answer, and killed him. Then he recited an *englyn* as follows:

There is in this bag a form of flour,
Champions, battlers, fighters in the fray,
From warriors, battle-ready.

The story resumes and the two hosts come into the specially constructed house, and in the course of events, Branwen's child is destroyed in the fire. A great battle arises between the two hosts then, and because they have the cauldron, the Irish enjoy the upper hand for a while. Finally, however, Efnisien regrets his actions, crawls in among the slain Irish, is put into the cauldron and, stretching himself, succeeds in shattering the cauldron. Only seven of the British escape, and when they return home, they find that their country has been conquered.

Let us briefly recapitulate the events in the preceding summary. It is not my intention here to reduce the narrative to serve the purposes of my argument, only to call attention in a different way to episodes already heavily marked in the text itself.

- a. The explanation of the name *Talebolion*.
- b. The prodigious woman who gives birth to fully armed warriors.
- c. The cauldron of rebirth.
- d. The iron house and the destruction of Cymidei's children.
- e. The special house constructed for Bran.
- f. The armed warriors lurking in bags.
- g. The destruction of Branwen's child.
- h. The destruction of the cauldron of rebirth.
- i. The fall of Britain.

Most of these points are concerned with the generation of warriors and with the containment of warriors in various ways.

First, let us look at the woman Cymidei Cymeinfol. Sir Ifor Williams (following Loth) noted, and I would agree, that her first name appears to be an extension of the ordinary noun *cymid* 'battle'.³⁷ Her second name is a compound of *cymaint* and *boll* and would therefore mean something like 'equally' or 'so much' 'distended'.³⁸ The phrase that constitutes her full name, then, suggest something like 'pregnant' or 'bloated' with 'war' or 'warriors'. In other words, her name is simply a description of her capacity and her function. She conceives and gives birth with alarming rapidity, and her offspring are fully armed (and I suppose we should assume fully grown, too) warriors—perhaps not so great a feat considering the fact that she is

enormous in stature. In respect of her unique abilities, she is virtually identical with the *peir dadeni* 'the cauldron of regeneration or rebirth', which revivifies fully armed warriors. We notice further that the *peir dadeni* requires a fire beneath it, and so it is fitting that the mate of Cymidei—the one who bears the cauldron upon his back—is appropriately named 'fire'.³⁹ Indeed, the very name *cymidei cymeinfol* would be a perfectly appropriate name for the cauldron itself: 'distended, bloated with warriors.'

In the episode in which the Irish have hidden two hundred warriors in bags along the pillars of the great house, the phrase for bag is *boly croen*. W. *bol*, *boly*, cognate with Ir. *bolg* means 'bag, pouch', but is also used commonly in the sense of 'belly, womb'. The fully armed warriors hiding out in the bags hanging on the pegs are, as it were, by metonymy, in wombs. After Efnisien has destroyed each of them, while still in their womb-like bags, he recites the *englyn* that begins *Yssit yn y boly hwn . . .*, referring to the warrior in the *boly*. It is a striking fact that this *englyn*, the only one in the Second Branch, could equally well have been recited by Llassar Llaes Gyfnawid, husband (consort) of Cymidei Cymeinfol, when Matholwch first encountered them. He asked after their business, and Llassar replied that the woman would conceive and would bring forth a fully armed warrior. He might well have said, *Yssit yn y boly hwnn . . .*, placing his hands on her belly, as Efnisien placed his on the bags containing the armed Irish.⁴⁰

We need not pause long over the cauldron of rebirth itself, for its role in the (re-)generation of warriors is clear; what is interesting is that the warriors so regenerated are without the faculty of speech. Cymidei and her brood made themselves unwelcome by overstepping their bounds in society. They became obnoxious and, among other things, they verbally abused people. It was this that cost them their lives and drove Cymidei and her mate from the land. In Efnisien's encounter with the warriors in the bags, it was their speech that betrayed them: they didn't know when to keep their mouths shut. The text is quite explicit about that, detailing the dialogue that passed between Efnisien and his adversaries: 'what's in here?' he would say. And when they would respond, he would reach out and snuff their lives.⁴¹ The cauldron of rebirth of warriors seems to do the job right from the beginning: it brings warriors back to life but without the gift of speech. We might be tempted to venture some modern parallels here and recall that outspoken members of the professional military class, that is, those who have verbally encroached on the civilian domain, have brought down the wrath of their civilian commanders-in-chief (e.g. Generals Patton, MacArthur in twentieth-century US military history).⁴² But there is plenty of evidence from within early Indo-European society itself to show that the warrior function is always perceived as a threat to the society it protects; as in the case of Cú Chulainn in the Irish heroic age, the rest of the society had to constantly be on guard against the potential of force being turned inward upon society itself.⁴³ Bendigeidfran seems to have avoided this potential difficulty with the warrior class by dividing it (i.e. Cymidei's brood) throughout the land (*eu rannu ym pob lle yn y kyuoeth*): 'and they are numerous and thriving everywhere and strengthening the places in which they happen to be with the best men and arms anyone has ever seen.' This, of course, is the same strategy adopted by Medb in the *Táin* with respect to the dreaded Gailioin.⁴⁴ But there may be other reasons why Bendigeidfran himself should have no trouble controlling warriors.

While *talebolion* 'payment of colts' may have a reasonable—if somewhat folksy—explanation in the text, one cannot help but perceive at least a pun on an alternative meaning: *tal y bolion* 'payment of the bags', i.e. bags in the senses in which it is used elsewhere in the text.⁴⁵ The morphology is common, echoing such commonplaces as *Talybont* 'edge, end, of the bridge', English *Bridgend*. Thus, although *-ebolion* is an acceptable explanation in terms of the episode in which the name is adduced, *-bolion* suits the 'bag, womb' theme of the tale and would be very much at home in the cluster of episodes we have been considering.

Taken individually and viewed only in terms of the linear development of the tale, these episodes might well seem at best to have a loose and arbitrary connection with one another. But when we look at the events in paradigmatic relation to one another they fit neatly. The prolific and prodigious woman who gives birth to fully armed warriors has, in this contrapuntal scheme, a corresponding element in the numerous bags that conceal fully armed warriors. Both are undone by speech. The cauldron of rebirth belongs to the same scheme, as perhaps does the collocation *tal-y-bolion*, and the whole makes some sort of statement about the role of military might in society.

The iron house seems to have something to do with the cauldron, since both are made of iron and both are shattered by the action of a man inside. But its closer affinities (or perhaps 'its other affinities') in the text seem rather to be with the house of Bran. Both are special constructions, made ostensibly to appease their occupants. In both, the offspring of the inhabitants are killed in flames; the inhabitants of both escape to Britain after an ensuing battle. The big difference between the two is that Cymidei and her mate escape with the cauldron, and as a result bring prosperity to Britain and fortify the land. In the case of Branwen and Bendigeidfran, the cauldron is shattered, Bendigeidfran is destroyed, Branwen dies, and Britain's defenses collapse and the land is conquered. Perhaps part of the message is that cauldrons and other gifts from the Otherworld must be maintained in safe keeping, and that he who gives them away dooms himself and his race—as does Pryderi in the Fourth Branch when he barter away the swine entrusted to him from Annwn.

In the article I have already referred to, Mr Brinley Rees has shown that the types of sovereign or lordship characterized in Irish as *fírfhlaith*, *tarbfhlaith*, and *ciállfhlaith* are to be found in the Four Branches. *Tarbfhlaith* is defined as follows: 'The bull ruler strikes [and] is struck, wards off [and] is warded off, roots out [and] is rooted out, attacks [and] is attacked, pursues [and] is pursued. Against him there is always bellowing with horns.'⁴⁶ Just as those three *flatha* form a triad, argues Rees, so do the three families whose story is told in the Mabinogi: the family of the magician-lord of Gwynedd, and their story revolving around knowing the truth, hiding it and revealing it, words that determine or delimit truth, and deceit; the family of the huge and awesome king of the Isle of the *Mighty*, with their attempt to secure stronger territories leading to anger, revenge, and horrible war; and the family of Pwyll. Thus, from an entirely separate analytical view, 'Branwen' may be seen as concerned with the warrior class and the fortunes of war and warriors.

As I have argued here, too, 'Branwen' is about war. It is first of all the story of Bran, the divinity whose zoomorphic (ornithomorphic) manifestation is the raven or carrion crow. The divinity's epithet, whether native (*gwen*) or Christianized (*benedigeid*) clarifies its divine nature. In Irish tradition—in this instance representing the Celtic state of affairs—the divinity in charge

of war, warriors, and the battlefield is consistently female. She goes by a variety of names, but is either represented as single or triple. Thus, she is the Mórrígan or the three Mórrígan, or the Mórrígan and her three sisters Badb, Nemain, and Macha, or the three sisters themselves. The Second Branch has altered the sex of the war divinity, but has not fully divested itself of the female Bran figure. In Celtic terms and minus the Christian epithet, the war goddess Branwen would have been one of the triple 'great queens' (in Irish, *mór-rígan*).⁴⁷ In fact, the Welsh text does call her *trydedd prif rieni yn yr ynys hon*.⁴⁸ This triad has caused all sorts of problems and discussion. Sir Ifor, following Morris-Jones (WG), understood it to mean 'parent(s)', that is, a word susceptible of either singular or collective meaning—like *etifedd* 'heir, heirs'.⁴⁹ In so doing, he opposed both Loth ('maidens') and Gruffydd, who with his usually sharp perception (if sometimes flawed by his method), sought to link it to a word cognate with Ir. *rigain* 'queen', hence, he said, 'rhieni, pl. of *rigan*—means in Welsh both *parents* and *ladies*; trydydd prif rieni "one of the three greatest 'ladies' or 'queens'"'.⁵⁰ Sir Ifor settled on the meaning of 'ancestress', and suggested that the triad referred to Rhiannon as mother of Pryderi, Branwen as mother of Gwern, and Aranrhod as mother of Lleu Llaw Gyffes. He was aware of the fact that at the time the triad is mentioned in the text she was not yet a mother (nor was she married!). He does not mention the further difficulty that since her son Gwern died young and Branwen herself shortly thereafter, she is no ancestress at all. The present argument virtually compels us to accept Gruffydd's analysis, for the cultural context of the tale places Branwen alongside the Mórrígan and the other Celtic manifestations of the goddess of war.

And so, seen as a traditional tale with traditional (for the most part) characters, 'Branwen' fits very comfortably indeed in Celtic cultural notions about war and warriors. The Celtic war divinity has become male, though her former sex is upheld in the character of Branwen. The names of two characters fundamental to the opposition inherent in the theme of this tale have been reduced to labels: Mr Peace (Nisien) and Mr Un-Peace (Efnisien). And, naturally, Branwen's land is known by the military designation 'Isle of the Mighty'. It has not been my purpose to rationalize or explain every single detail in this intricate narrative. But I hope that enough has been said to show that 'Branwen' is essentially traditional and that its principal episodes form a coherent nucleus of inherited cultural notions, notions for which one may find analogues elsewhere in the Celtic realms.

This brief exercise is designed primarily to show that the texts we have inherited from the Middle Welsh period are susceptible of serious scrutiny of more than one kind. The method may have its weaknesses and its application may not be uniformly appropriate, but it is motivated by the conviction that, until we can prove otherwise, the text is still the authority and that our excursions into its deeper meanings must come to grips with that authority.

1. *Math vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff, 1928), *Rhiannon* (Cardiff, 1953), and a host of articles.
2. Cardiff, 1958.
3. 2nd edn., Cardiff, 1978.
4. 'Shame and Reparation: Woman's Place in the Kin', in *The Welsh Law of Women* (Cardiff, 1980), pp. 40-68.

5. Bedwyr Lewis Jones, *Transactions of the Anglesey Archaeological Society* (1966), 32-7; P. K. Ford, 'On the significance of Some Arthurian Names in Early Welsh', *BBCS* 30 (1983), 268-73.
6. See, for example, D. B. Walters, 'The European Context of the Welsh Law of Matrimonial Property', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, p. 115.
7. *Roman History*, 77.16.5.
8. See Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *PRIA* 60 (1960), 252.
9. Quoted in Anne Ross, *Everyday Life Among the Pagan Celts*, p. 44.
10. As quoted in Dillon and Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms*, p. 26.
11. *De Chorographia*, III. 6.48.
12. 'Apair fris, ni fil inge cethri fathemna and . . .', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 29 (1982), 686-9.
13. There are actually four kinds of kings, three of which have the same formation (those cited here); the fourth is *fhlaith congáile co slógaib díanechtair*. *Audacht Morainn*, ed. and transl. Fergus Kelly (Dublin, 1976), p. 19.
14. *ciallfhlaith* is defined as follows: '§60 The wily ruler defends borders and tribes, they yield their valuables and dues to him'; Kelly, loc. cit.
15. This, of course, represents a sovereignty that fits the third-function slot of Dumézil's tripartite structure of Indo-European society; *firfhlaith* is first function, *tarbhfhaith* second function. Rees objects to Kelly's rendering of 'Wily ruler', and though he does not advert to Dumézil, he does rearrange the list of sovereigns as it is given in the *Audacht* to conform to the canonical first, second, and third functions.
16. 8th Annual University of California Celtic Studies Conference, 2-4 May, 1986, Los Angeles.
17. As I attempted to show in 'Prolegomena to a Reading of the *Mabinoi*: "Pwyll" and "Manawydan"', *Studia Celtica*, xvi/xvii (1981-2), 110-25.
18. Still, there are limits to our searches for meaning. As Eric Hamp observed from the floor at the UC Celtic conference already referred to, (my paraphrase) 'Our task is not only to discover all the meanings in our texts, but also to discover and to define what our texts do *not* mean.' In other words, meaning must be circumscribed by social and cultural parameters, and whenever we argue a particular meaning, it must be carefully justified within the social and cultural context.
19. This approach characterizes the work of Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen: A Study of the Irish Affinities* (Cardiff, 1958), and Kenneth Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961). Whereas Mac Cana was concerned primarily with identifying the Irish analogues (which he takes for the most part to be sources) to the motifs and themes of Branwen, Jackson casts his net much wider, as the title of his work indicates.
20. *Branwen*, p. 4.
21. Scholars continue to be fascinated with the idea of 'borrowing'—even when the matter under consideration is demonstrably traditional. John Morris-Jones reacted strongly against the notion seventy years ago, when commenting on Alfred Nutt's theories about the origins of the Mabinogi: 'But why all this assumption of borrowing? It rests on the perfectly gratuitous supposition that the British had no traditional lore of their own' (*Taliesin*, = *Y Cymmrodor*, 28 (1918), p. 239, and see Mac Cana's comments on this, op. cit., p. 2). And further on, '... it is sufficient to insist on the obvious truth that the two races *inherited* the fundamental conceptions of their respective mythologies from their common ancestor' (p. 240). He later diluted somewhat this sound pronouncement by conceding that 'It is also true, no doubt, that they contain elements which have been borrowed from Irish and other sources' (p. 240). Among other things, he had in mind the suffix that turned *Manawydd* into *Manawydd-an*. And he may have had in mind the Irish personal names in *KO*: see now Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Significance of the Irish Personal Names in *Culhwch ac Olwen*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 29 (1982), 600-20. But Morris-Jones' final words on the subject would seem to be these: 'it is inconceivable that British names of British gods could have survived except in traditions concerning them' (p. 240). Therefore, where we have British names, let us look to British traditions, which we may assume to be *cognate* with extant comparable Goidelic traditions, not *borrowed* from them.
22. In *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, eds. Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick, David Dumville (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 235-57; see also Sims-Williams, 'The Significance of the Irish Personal Names in *Culhwch ac Olwen*' and 'The Riddling Treatment of the "Watchman Device" in *Branwen* and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*', *Studia Celtica*, 12/13 (1977/8), 83-117.
23. P. 257; the reference is to Clark Slover, 'Early Literary Channels between Britain and Ireland', *Studies in English*, 6 (1926), 5-52, esp. p. 42.

24. Even Jackson, who also pays almost exclusive attention to motifs and tale types in his study, rejects the notion of borrowing from Irish into Welsh. His purpose, however, is to show that the motifs of early Welsh literature (and early Irish literature, for that matter) are often to be traced to extra-Celtic sources and are usually international. When they are found exclusively in Celtic sources, however, he insists that if borrowing were involved, it could have gone either way. (*The International Popular Tale*, pp. 122 f.)

25. Neither Mac Cana nor Jackson seem terribly interested in the question of meaning, apart from the question of *how* the tales came to have their present (corrupt) shapes. For Jackson, the word 'meaning' would seem to be anathema. He uses it in quotation marks when referring to the 'corrupted myth' theory of folktales (p. 39). Myth appears to be inextricably entwined with 'solar' and with other outdated theories in Jackson's view. 'By and large, however,' he says, 'I think it is wise to regard mythological explanations of even the non-international episodes in the Mabinogion with cautious scepticism. Such interpretations can be tailored to fit anything, and hence they are a favourite device in the hands of the unscholarly. This is not to say that they cannot be handled in a scholarly manner, but as a common rule when a mythological explanation is fore-shadowed one suspects that a speculation is likely to be on its way, and probably a series of others erected on the basis of that one. In any case, no theory involving the supposition of a myth should even be advanced until one has made sure that the motif one is studying is not an international one' (p. 129). The message is clear: myths may have meaning, but it is dangerous to look for it; folklore and folktales are the aggregate of motifs and tale-types, and these have no meaning outside their relationship to other tales with the same motifs or outside their participation in the international community of motifs. Therefore, meaning is out of the question, and since that is true, motifs—international or otherwise—cannot function 'locally' in tales as signifiers; they are only there to be identified and numbered. As to theories to explain the existence of such narratives, 'whether by supposing it to represent the detritus of old myths, or the expression of rituals, or the dreams of hashish-eaters and others (as has been suggested). Such hypotheses are dangerous attempts to be too clever—dangerous because they invariably lead to their author's attempting to force the facts to fit the theory. No explanation is needed, it seems to me, other than the fact that man has always loved stories and story-telling for their own sake as entertainment and always will love them for that reason. This is a universal human activity, and does not require to be accounted for' (p. 43).

26. I know that Brynley Roberts has: 'Stories normally open with a phrase naming the hero and giving his status, kingdom, etc.' And '... the formulaic tale opening had as its primary purpose the presenting of the hero's name and status'; 'From Traditional Tale to Literary Story: Middle Welsh Prose Narratives', in Leigh Arrathoon, ed., *The Craft of Fiction: Essay in Medieval Poetics* (Rochester, Mich.: Solaris Press, 1984), pp. 216, 222.

27. Quotations are from Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Los Angeles, Berkeley, London, 1977).

28. 'On the Significance of Some Arthurian Names in Welsh', *BBCS* 30 (1983), 268-73.

29. This is apparently what W. J. Gruffydd argued, according to A. O. H. Jarman in *Llên Cymru*, 4, 133. Bromwich could not accept this; *TYP*, 2nd edn., p. 287n. For other conjectures on Bran's epithet, see *TYP*, 2nd edn., pp. 285, 545.

30. Bromwich has *Bran fendigeid* in *TYP*², p. 284, though she cites no source for this form.

31. *TYP*², p. 386 and note to Triad 37.

32. *Geirfa*, s.v., *gwen*. Also, compare index of epithets, s.v. *gwyn* in Bartrum, EWGT.

33. The 'fabric of fiction' metaphor employed here suggests that the cauldron digression is a kind of patch clumsily applied to the story; as Mac Cana puts it, 'The Iron House episode has little more than a superficial connection with its context' (op. cit., p. 10). And here is Jackson on *Pwyll*: 'It was the clumsy patching at this stage of the tale, consequent on the violent introduction of the Calumniated Wife, which has left it practically unintelligible in its present form' (*International Popular Tale*, p. 93). But until we can prove otherwise, we must begin our criticism with the principle of the integrity of the text; the text as preserved is the text we critique, and before we reject any part of it as invalid (borrowed, misunderstood, miscopied, concocted), we must satisfy ourselves that we have exhausted the resources of the culture that produced it. It has been argued that cultures do not retain what is no longer useful or relevant: 'Community acceptance ... is the major factor in deciding whether a piece of oral folk literature or popular literature will survive to the point where it may be recorded and brought into the realm of written literature' (Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin and London, 1978), p. 181, referring to the work of Roman Jakobsen and P. Bogatyrev). Therefore, even borrowings will not take hold if there isn't a cultural fit readily available (see further footnote 21). Thus, the patchwork appearance of the text doesn't necessarily mean something borrowed has been struck on; more likely it signifies a structural shift—an

episode is being introduced that does not fit neatly into the linear or syntagmatic development of the narrative and so it must be perceived in its paradigmatic relationship to the narrative. To use Wittig's words, surface textual transformations of one sort and another (e.g. 'flashbacks' and other 'out of order' or 'extraneous' episodes) serve as vehicles for important cultural information vital to the narrative process; they may present 'information (which may be obscured, especially for observers from another culture, by the complexities of the narrative process) [which] is encoded within the deeper structure of the stories and is exemplified in the repetition of certain narrative components; it quite clearly has to do with the reinforcement and perpetuation of certain social and political beliefs held by the community' (op. cit., pp. 180-1).

34. It should be noted that the mound and the hunt place the episode squarely in the environment of the Otherworldly encounter.

35. Again, 'the best anyone has ever seen' no doubt points to the Otherworldly origin of the arms. Cf. *Pwyll*'s visit to Annwn: 'the most splendid and best equipped troop that anyone had ever seen ... the fairest woman anyone had ever seen ... the noblest and gentlest in her nature and her discourse of any he had ever seen ... Of all the courts he had seen on earth, this was the court best supplied with food and drink, gold vessels, and royal treasures'; *The Mabinogi*, p. 39.

36. Op. cit., p. 69.

37. *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 180.

38. Sir Ifor: "'cestog'" — *PKM*, p. 180.

39. See Sir Ifor's discussion of the name, *PKM*, pp. 179-80.

40. Had that been the case, then the problem of singular *boly* with plural nouns in the second line would cease to exist; v. Mac Cana, op. cit., p. 70: 'As it stands it refers to only one bag, and we know from the preceding passage that there is only one warrior in each; yet the three nouns in the second line are in the plural. If the *boly* of the englyn referred to the wonderfully productive womb of Cymidei, then the reference to plural warriors would be quite appropriate.'

41. On the function of redundancy in narrative, see Wittig, op. cit., p. 181; for redundancy in myth in particular, pp. 125-6 (quoting Edmund Leach).

42. The 'otherness' of the military is noticed even at the popular level in contemporary Western society: 'A soldier ain't suppose to talk, just fight!', spoken by a minor character in the 1935 American movie 'Red Salute', starring Robert Young and Barbara Stanwyck.

43. See, for example, *LL Tain*, ll. 1177-85.

44. O'Rahilly, ll. 345-50.

45. W. J. Gruffydd saw *tal y bolion* as the original form; *Math vab Mathonwy*, p. 305.

46. *Audacht Morainn*, p. 19.

47. According to Fergus Kelly, the first element in the Irish name is probably **mor-* 'specter, phantom, mare' (cognate with OE *Mære* 'female spirit or monster'; *Audacht Morainn* (DIAS, 1976), p. 22.

48. *PKM*, p. 31.1.

49. Thomas Jones took this argument a step further, showing that in the sixteenth-century Mostyn MS 158 (Elis Gruffydd) at least, *rhieni* could mean all that Latin *progenies* meant: 'ancestry', 'race' or 'family', and 'descendants'. See his 'Rhieni', *BBCS* 9 (1938), 131-3.

50. *PKM*, p. 166. Gruffydd's discussion is in *Revue Celtique*, 33, p. 455.