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The Role of Myth and Tradition in *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*

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ONE of the difficulties in discussing myth and tradition in *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* is that of determining what we mean by myth and tradition.¹ For this paper a rather simplified distinction between them should suffice, and we can begin by defining *myth* as a body of lore or narrative about gods and demigods and defining *tradition* as a body of lore or narrative about real or legendary figures who do not have the status of gods or other supernatural beings. In essence this is a distinction expressed more elegantly by W. J. Gruffydd in 1913: 'Mythology is the legend of the gods, and legend is the mythology of men'.²

The problems begin, of course, when we recognize that, especially after a new religious pantheon displaces the old, figures who were once gods lose some of their divine stature. And conversely, legendary and historical figures can acquire attributes and capabilities beyond those of the ordinary mortal. The interpretation of *The Mabinogi* is difficult partly because we are dealing with a number of these more or less intermediate figures.

However, there is a broader sense of *myth* which is relevant to our study of *The Mabinogi* and that is the view of myth as those tales and poems through which a society is able to examine the fundamental elements of its own structure. In the conclusion to an earlier article on the interlaced pattern of *The Mabinogi* I stated that

the author has created a world in which all actions are relevant to the structure of society within that world, and by implication, the ideals and the very straightforward code of conduct which underlie these actions become relevant in the somewhat less controllable world of the author and his audience.³

¹A version of this paper was read at a meeting of the Cylch Trafod Rhyddiaith at Jesus College, Oxford, in May 1981 and some additions to it are based on remarks read at the 1982 meeting of the Celtic Studies Association of North America. I would especially like to thank the Jingo Foundation for financial assistance which enabled me to attend these meetings. ²'The Mabinogion', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1912-13, p. 46. ³'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *ibid.*, 1974-75, p. 276.

The more I read and study *The Mabinogi* the more I am convinced not only that this is true but that it is the core which imbues the whole with meaning, especially for a medieval audience more familiar than we with both their own world and the literary conventions of their own time.

The Mabinogi is set in a non-Christian milieu and it is obvious from the text that the author or redactor was conscious of this fact. But neither author nor scribe feels obliged to include a disclaimer such as the Latin colophon to the Book of Leinster version of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*:

Sed ego qui scripsi hanc historiam aut uerius fabulam quibusdam fidem in hac historia aut fabula non accomodo. Quaedam enim ibi sunt praest(r)igia demonum, quaedam autem figmenta poetica, quaedam similia uero, quaedam non, quaedam ad delectationem stultorum.

I who have copied down this story, or more accurately fantasy, do not credit the details of the story, or fantasy. Some things in it are devilish lies, and some poetical figments; some seem possible and others not; some are for the enjoyment of idiots.⁴

On the contrary, the author of *The Mabinogi* has minimized the non-Christian elements of the tales and within his version of these obviously ancient stories he presents a Weltanschauung and an ethos which is of great import and relevance to his contemporary audience and which is not inconsistent with the Judaeo-Christian ethical system within which the audience lives. In the course of this paper I hope to illustrate some of the ways in which the author has fused the two types of myth defined above into a consistent and enduring work of art. Another of the things I want to examine is the apparent conflict in the different ways we have chosen or discovered of looking at and analyzing *The Four Branches*. In this context we would do well to keep in mind Oscar Wilde's dictum that 'Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital'.⁵

One of the great puzzles of *Mabinogi* criticism is that on the one hand there is almost unanimous agreement that someone at a late stage in the development of *The Mabinogi* was a master of Welsh prose to be reckoned among the best, while on the other hand many faults of construction or characterization are often remarked upon, although (and this is a crucial point) there is frequently disagreement among critics as to what is faulty. Some remarks by Professor J. R. R. Tolkien in reference to the author of *Beowulf* are applicable here:

⁴*Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, edited by Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin, 1970), p. 136; translation by Thomas Kinsella, *The Táin* (Oxford, 1970), p. 238. ⁵Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London, 1891).

It is, one would have said, improbable that such a man would write more than three thousand lines (wrought to a high finish) on matter that is really not worth serious attention. . . . Or that he should in the selection of his material, in the choice of what to put forward, what to keep subordinate 'upon the outer edges', have shown a puerile simplicity much below the level of the characters he himself draws. . . . Any theory that will at least allow us to believe that what he did was of design and that for that design there is a defence that may still have force, would seem more probable.⁶

In other words, if we agree that the author of *The Mabinogi* was highly skilled then we should also recognize the possibility, at least, that his work may have a coherent and subtle structure just as it has a coherent and subtle style.

This may be as good a place as any to touch briefly on what is meant here by the 'author' of *The Mabinogi*. I use the word *author*, for want of a better term, to mean the person or persons who put *The Mabinogi* into much the form in which it has come down to us. Thus, 'author' may be a blanket term for a series of storytellers, revisers, and scribes, but if so I am willing to go back in that series no further than the earliest point (now unknown to us) at which the basic four stories which we refer to as *Pwyll*, *Branwen*, *Manawydan*, and *Math* were brought together in essentially the form that we have them now. Beyond that we reach a level of conjecture at which the notion of author is meaningless. Merely for the sake of variation I also similarly use such terms as redactor and storyteller.

In my earlier paper on the structure of *The Four Branches* it was suggested, taking the lead most notably from Professor Eugène Vinaver, that if we set aside our predilections for an Aristotelian structure of narrative as being composed with a beginning, a middle, and an end we may be able to perceive a different set of structural principles.⁷ An apt analogy for the structure which emerges is interlaced art work in which threads of textile (or text) repeatedly come to the fore and recede, eventually creating a design which can be perceived as a whole, and which often looks deceptively simple until it is scrutinized in detail. Now, there is no doubt that each of *The Four Branches* is constructed as a series of episodes arranged basically in chronological order and that there is a perceptible chronological order to *The Four Branches* taken as a unit. But the overriding principle through which the *meaning* of *The Mabinogi* is revealed is that of structural and especially thematic juxtaposition and interlace. The events of one episode are made clear by comparison with other

⁶'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, edited by Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, 1963), p. 61; originally published in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 13 (1936), 245-95. ⁷Bollard, 'Structure', pp. 250-53.

similar but different episodes. The cues to this comparison are often verbal similarities and repetitions, not to mention a few explicit textual cross-references. Viewing *The Mabinogi* from this perspective, I believe, allows us to perceive much of the narrative and artistic unity of the work.

As twentieth-century critics it would seem that we are duty bound to ask a number of questions of a work of art, such as 'How is it constructed?', 'What does it mean?' and 'Where does it come from?' If these three questions are asked it is my opinion that they should be asked only in that order, insofar as is possible. To begin, as many have done, with the question 'Where does it come from?' before determining the coherence of the work itself means that we run the risk of damaging its vital organs as we dissect it, with the result that when we put it back together again it is no longer a living work of art. The discovery of meaning is dependent to a large degree on an understanding of the structure of a work, although, to be sure, a knowledge of origins is often invaluable in elucidating details. In the case of *The Mabinogi* meaning lies in the behaviour of the characters and in the choices they make, though like all great artists the author of *The Mabinogi* was acutely aware that right and wrong may be matters of degree and are not always easily distinguishable. In a tale in which magic and fantasy are prominent, good and evil, right and wrong may be made to stand out in stark relief but the ultimate lessons to be learned are as applicable in the mundane world of the twelfth century (or even the twentieth) as they are in the timeless realms of story set on the boundaries of the Otherworld. Tolkien expresses this very clearly in *The Lord of the Rings*, a work in which he embedded much of his considered thinking and learning about the functions of narrative:

... said Eomer. 'It is hard to be sure of anything among so many marvels. The world is all grown strange. Elf and Dwarf in company walk in our daily fields; and folk speak with the Lady of the Wood and yet live. ... How shall a man judge what to do in such times?'

'As he ever has judged,' said Aragorn. 'Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men. It is man's part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house.'⁸

Issues of human choice occur repeatedly throughout *The Four Branches* as the predominant overriding theme. The themes of Friendship, Marriage, and Feud discussed in my earlier article are but the specific elements which make the tales relevant (and interesting) to eleventh- and twelfth-century audiences.

⁸J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (Boston, 1965), pp. 40-41.

If we accept that there is a structural and thematic coherence to *The Mabinogi*, either as I have outlined it or according to some other demonstrable and workable pattern, our task becomes easier, for we are thereby constrained within the boundaries of that basic construct. It is, perhaps, a worthwhile task to try to reconstruct some earlier version of the tale, but every step we take which goes beyond these boundaries or violates the structure of the tale leads us into conjecture and away from the practice of objective literary criticism designed to help us understand the work itself.

For some time now, especially under the influence of the theories of W. J. Gruffydd, we have concentrated our attention on the Scylla and Charybdis of sources and analogues, and, failing to perceive the narrative coherence of *The Mabinogi*, we have led ourselves into some unclear or perhaps even fallacious thinking. For example, let us take a brief look at the character of Pwyll and some analyses of it.

Many critics seem to have centered their search for the meaning of the first branch around the author's statement, 'y diffygywys y enw ef ar Pwyll, Pendeuic Dyuet, ac y gelwit Pwyll Penn Annwyn o hynny allan' (PKM 8; 'His name, Pwyll Prince of Dyfed, fell out of use, and he was called Pwyll Head of Annwn from that time forth').⁹ From this statement critics have concluded, contrary to the evidence of the text itself, that Pwyll was in origin an otherworld figure. Proinsias Mac Cana states in his book *Celtic Mythology*:

Since ... Annwn is a traditional name for the otherworld, it has been assumed that Pwyll was originally a deity. His name means literally 'wisdom', an apt title for the all-knowing god of the otherworld.¹⁰

The arguments which W. J. Gruffydd brings forth in *Rhiannon* to establish Pwyll's divinity or otherworldliness require several shifts of identity beyond the one made clear in the text and they also require a considerable reorganization of the story itself, leaving us with one of his elaborately structured but rather precarious theories bearing little resemblance to the text.¹¹

In 'Some Popular Motifs in Early Welsh Tradition' Kenneth Jackson betrays a degree of indecisiveness about Pwyll. First he states:

Now, it is generally believed, and probably rightly, that Pwyll himself represents a mythological being too, in fact another lord of the Otherworld, as his title 'Chief of the Otherworld' and other evidence shows.¹²

⁹Quotations from *The Mabinogi* are taken from *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, edited by Sir Ifor Williams (Cardiff, 1951), cited by page in the text as PKM. Many translations are available, in editions of the 'Mabinogion'. ¹⁰*Celtic Mythology* (London, 1970), p. 80. ¹¹W. J. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon* (Cardiff, 1953). ¹²*Études celtiques*, 11 (1964-67), 84.

Jackson goes on to observe that 'nevertheless the first Branch of the Mabinogi treats him as a purely human being when the story begins. . . .'¹³ But then he states, 'Of course, his character as an Other-world god would doubtless be primary, and very much older than this invention, but it is quite natural that a tale might grow up that he was originally a human being who later became a god'.¹⁴

The striking thing about Jackson's argument is that he then goes on to present quite convincing evidence that the first part of *Pwyll* is an example of the motif of an otherworld figure seeking, indeed requiring, the aid of a mortal in battle. This is completely consistent with the events recounted in *Pwyll* and it is difficult to see a need to postulate an otherworld origin for Pwyll himself. Since the tale states that Pwyll was Lord of Dyfed and since the parallels which Jackson gives us for a mortal aiding an otherworld king support the reading of the text, the application of Ockham's razor suggests strongly that we should accept Pwyll's mortality.

So far as I know, no one has yet pointed out in this context that Pwyll does, indeed, die. In the second part of the tale his men themselves express their apprehension that Pwyll will die without an heir: '“Nyt byth,” heb wynt, “y perhey di”' (PKM 19; '“Not forever”, said they, “will you last”'). Later, talking to Teyrnnon, Pwyll makes reference to his own mortality:

'Y rof i a Duw,' heb y Pwyll, 'tra parhawyf i, mi a'th kynhalyaf, a thi a'th kyuoeth, tra allwyf kynnhaf y meu uy hun.' (PKM 26)

'Between me and God', said Pwyll, 'while I last I shall maintain you, you and your possessions, so long as I am able to maintain my own.'

And finally, in the conclusion to the first branch we are told unequivocally: 'Uelly y treulyssant blwydyn a blwydyned, yny doeth teruyn ar hoedyl Pwyll Penn Annwn, ac y bu uarw' (PKM 27; 'Thus they spent years and years, until there came an end to the life of Pwyll Head of Annwn, and he died'). Thus, Pwyll's mortality is an important element not only in the first part of the tale, in which he is enlisted to help Arawn, but also in the second part, in which his inevitable death is a significant factor in the motivation of the final episodes.

The first part of *Pwyll*, therefore, is not *primarily* the story of how Pwyll came to be called Pen Annwn, though that is indeed one of the things which happens. Structurally speaking, it is the story of how there came to be a friendship between Dyfed and Annwn—a friendship which has considerable implications some years later in the events recounted in the fourth branch. In thematic terms, as I

¹³ibid. ¹⁴ibid.

have shown elsewhere, it is a careful examination of various aspects of the nature of friendship itself.¹⁵

As a means of getting into a specific discussion of other mythological and traditional elements in *The Mabinogi* I should like to respond to some objections which my reading of *The Mabinogi* has occasioned, for obviously our conception of the unity (or lack of unity) in *The Four Branches* will have considerable bearing on how we understand the work itself, on how we perceive the workings of traditional elements in the tale, and on the extent to which we allow ourselves to postulate earlier redactions.

It is rare that one's work is both commented on so favourably and criticized so graciously as was mine in Professor Mac Cana's short book *The Mabinogi*. In that book Mac Cana outlines the differences between the synchronic and diachronic approaches to the study of *The Mabinogi* and he sets out what he sees as their strengths and weaknesses. He remarks that 'a . . . snag in the synchronic approach adopted by Bollard is that it tends to understate the breaks and inconsistencies which are quite frequent in the text'.¹⁶ As a general reply to this statement I would simply say that the breaks and inconsistencies in *The Mabinogi* are neither as frequent nor as troublesome as some critics believe. The approach to *The Mabinogi* which I have taken is, I admit, one that pays considerable attention to the strengths of the work, but it is primarily through a recognition of the compositional method adopted by the author that we are able to perceive the meaning of the surviving text. Some critics have seen breaks in the tale at precisely those points at which the tale refuses to conform to one or another of the various theories of origin.

Let us take as an example the episode which Mac Cana adduces to illustrate the above remark—the story of the stealing of Rhianon's child. He summarizes Kenneth Jackson's analysis of this part of *Pwyll*, and I agree with this analysis insofar as I believe Jackson is right in seeing a conflation of three widely used motifs—the Calumniated Wife, the Monster Hand, and the Congenital Animal. Where I disagree with Jackson is in his conception of *The Mabinogi* as the result of contamination and disintegration. One of the most notable and exciting aspects of widely known international motifs is that in the hands of a skilled narrator they can be combined, rearranged, and adapted in any number of ways to suit the storyteller's purposes. The language which Jackson uses, however, betrays a different notion of development and composition. Postulating an original Monster Hand tale he remarks: 'This original tale was, I suggest, *badly broken up* and altered by the later introduction of the other two motifs'; first the Congenital Animal motif was interjected,

¹⁵Bollard, 'Structure', pp. 253–56. ¹⁶Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1977), p. 36.

and 'Then came the third stage in the *disintegration* of the tale', the interpolation of the Calumniated Wife theme, more specifically, the motif of the woman charged with eating her own child.¹⁷ He then goes on to conclude:

It was the *clumsy patching* at this stage of the tale, consequent on the *violent* introduction of the Calumniated Wife, which has left it *practically unintelligible* in its present form. Who stole the child? What was this mysterious claw? Why did it steal Teyrnon's foals? How did it come to drop the child in Teyrnon's stable and what was it doing there anyway? These are some of the questions which arise when we first read *Pwyll*, and the tale provides no answers—the answers are only to be found by the methods of comparative folktale study.¹⁸

Professor Mac Cana states, 'By contrast Mr Bollard brushes these difficulties aside as so many "details"'.¹⁹ The questions which Jackson asks of the tale at this point, however, seem to add to the sense of confusion and give more stress to these details than does the author himself. Some answers to these questions can indeed be found by the study of comparative folklore, but within the context of the tale the questions and even the answers found by folklorists are not entirely relevant. Nor are all of Jackson's questions entirely unanswerable in the context of the tale itself. For example, the author does not choose to tell who stole the child until it is implied by the appearance of the claw in a subsequent episode that the monster was somehow involved in the matter. It is part of the author's style that the audience sleeps through the stealing of the child, as it were, along with the women set to watch:

Gwylat a wnaethont wynteu dalym o'r nos, ac yn hynny eisswys, kyn hanner nos, kyscu a wnaeth pawb ohonunt, a thu a'r pylgeint deffroi. (PKM 20)

They watched for a portion of the night, but nevertheless, before midnight, every one of them fell asleep and awoke towards dawn.

When we do learn about the claw the author does not concern himself with identifying it; indeed, its owner never becomes more than a *twrwf mawr*, a 'great commotion' (PKM 22). It had come to steal Teyrnon's foal as, presumably, it had done each year in the past, and it dropped the child at the door either because of its wound or perhaps because it had intended to leave the child in any case. More than this the author does not tell us and we must give him the

¹⁷Kenneth Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961), p. 92. ¹⁸*ibid.*, p. 93; my emphasis throughout the above paragraph.

¹⁹*The Mabinogi*, p. 37.

benefit of the doubt at least in this instance, because the very fact that we never learn more about this strange occurrence heightens the power and wonder of the tale. Thus, while the author uses the tradition of the Monster Hand, it is not the monster with which he is ultimately concerned, but the relations between the characters of the tale, in this instance between Pwyll, Rhiannon, Teyrnon, and the men and women of the court.

Although a medieval audience had no Stith Thompson *Motif-Index*, we do have the evidence of the triads that some form of classification of tradition was engaged in and we also have the evidence of similar episodes and incidents in different tales that variation in motif and theme would be understood by the audience. Thus a contemporary audience may have needed no explanation of the origin of the mysterious claw, for other similar tales may have been known. Even if there were no other coexistent Monster Hand tales the surviving examples of strange incidents recurring on *nos galan Mai* (May Day eve), such as the scream heard annually in *Lludd a Llefelys* and the fight each year between Gwythyr ap Greidawl and Gwyn ap Nudd in *Culhwch ac Olwen* suggest that a medieval audience would understand the repeated stealing of Teyrnon's foals and the appearance of the claw as additional examples of those mysterious events which, in tales at least, have a tendency to happen at such times.

Thus it is possible to recognize the great skill with which the author has combined the themes of the Calumniated Wife, the Monster Hand, and the Congenital Animal. He has integrated them into a complex of incidents demonstrating some basic moral lessons about truth, faithfulness, and humility, especially in his portrayals of the characters of Rhiannon and Teyrnon. The use of familiar traditional elements makes it easier for the audience to apprehend the significance or meaning of the tale.

A further drawback which Mac Cana sees to my synchronic approach to *The Mabinogi* is 'the danger . . . that one is prone to find what one sets out to look for'.²⁰ For example, my article comments on the author's subtle portrayal of the relationship between Pwyll and Rhiannon and suggests that one of the elements of this characterization is the fact that Rhiannon has kept her position of honour in the court at Pwyll's side 'for at his arrival Teyrnon is given a place of honour between them'.²¹ Mac Cana objects to this on the grounds that 'some might see this as a pardonable inconsistency, explicable by the conventional manner in which court seating arrangements are described in these texts or simply by the fact that the Calumniated Wife theme has been interpolated into an earlier and more conventional setting'.²²

²⁰*ibid.* ²¹Bollard, 'Structure', p. 265. ²²*The Mabinogi*, p. 37.

Given the tightly knit structure of the first branch, however, it is unwise to postulate an error or slip resulting from the uneasy interpolation of this theme into some hypothetical earlier version. I would like to suggest that it is precisely because of the stylized nature of the statement 'Sef ual yd eistedyssont, Teirnon y rwg Pwyll a Riannon' (PKM 25; 'This is how they sat—Teyrnon between Pwyll and Rhiannon') that it has broader implications for our reading of the tale. First of all, to dispel any lingering doubts about the very real significance of the order of seating in medieval Wales and elsewhere, let us remind ourselves of a passage in the Red Book version of *Brut y Tywysogyon* reporting an event which took place during the very time the manuscript tradition of *The Mabinogi* was apparently getting under way. In the entry for the year 1176 we read:

In that year, in Lent, a council assembled in London to confirm the laws of the churches there before a cardinal from Rome, who had come thither for that purpose. And after trouble had been bred between the archbishop of Canterbury and the archbishop of York, the council was thrown into confusion. For on the first day of the council the archbishop of York had occupied the seat of the chair on the right-hand side of the cardinal, where the archbishop of Canterbury had a right and was wont to sit. And the following day, when they came before the cardinal, after disputing about their rights in the presence of the whole court, those behind the archbishop of York came and overturned his chair, so that the archbishop's back was on the floor and the chair on top of him and they upon him trampling him with their feet and striking him with their fists, so that it was with difficulty that the archbishop escaped thence alive.²³

To a chronicler who does not go out of his way to report events outside of Wales this was clearly an occasion of note.

The narrative statements of the order of seating found especially in the first two branches of *The Mabinogi* and in the three Welsh romances serve several functions. They are, of course, statements which evoke vivid visual images, thus enlivening the story. They also provide clues as to the status of the characters concerned, and the above anecdote from the chronicles indicates that such outward manifestations of status were important. In *The Mabinogi* in particular these statements also provide clues to the structure and development of the narrative. In the description of Pwyll's arrival in Annwn we read:

ac eisted a wnaethant ual hynn—y urenhines o'r neill parth idaw ef, a'r iarll, debygei ef, o'r parth arall. (PKM 4)

²³*Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicle of the Princes, Red Book of Hergest Version*, edited and translated by Thomas Jones (Cardiff, 1955), pp. 166–67.

and they sat like this—the queen on the one side of him, and the earl, he supposed, on the other side.

This sentence demonstrates clearly that, as Arawn had promised, the disguise of Pwyll is absolute, for we see him sitting in the king's place observing and learning the usage of the court. We might also point out that Pwyll recognizes the *iarll* as such specifically because of the order of the seating.

The next two examples of the seating statement occur at the two wedding feasts held for Rhiannon. At the first feast we are told:

Sef ual yd eistedyssont, Heueyd Hen ar neill law Pwyll, a Riannon o'r parth arall idaw; y am hynny pawb ual y bei y enryded. (PKM 13)

This is how they sat, Hefeydd the Old on one side of Pwyll, and Rhiannon on the other side of him; after that, each according to his honour.

Here we see Pwyll sitting in the highest seat and the wedding feast proceeding according to plan. However, the wedding is interrupted and Gwawl is promised to Rhiannon in a year's time. At the second feast note that there is no seating statement made until after Gwawl is tricked out of marrying Rhiannon and he leaves for his own land. Straightaway everyone goes in to dinner and we read:

ac ual yd eistedyssant ulwydyn o'r nos honno, yd eistedwys paub y nos [honno]. (PKM 18)

and as they sat a year from that night, each one sat that night.

From this we can see that the events resume at the place they were interrupted a year earlier. In the second branch the account of Branwen's interrupted wedding feast is framed by a very similar pair of statements.²⁴

The structural and thematic significance of these examples suggests that the fourth instance in *Pwyll* may also function similarly. The audience is aware that Rhiannon is innocent of the charges for which she is being punished and the text makes it clear that the members of Pwyll's court also believe her to be innocent:

Sef a wnaeth Teirnon Twryf Uliant, o achaws y douot a gawsssei, ymwar-andaw am y chwedyl, ac amouyn yn lut ymdanaw yny gogleu gan lawer o

²⁴'Sef ual yd eistedyssant, brenhin Ynys y Kedeirn, a Manawydan uab Llŷr o'r neill parth idaw, a Matholwch o'r parth arall, a Branwen uerch Lyr gyt ac ynteu' (PKM 31; 'This is how they sat, the king of the Island of the Mighty, with Manawydan son of Llŷr on one side of him, and Matholwch on the other side, and Branwen daughter of Llŷr together with him'); 'Ac ual y dechreuysant eisted ar dechreu y wled, yd eistedyssant yna' (PKM 34; 'And as they began sitting at the beginning of the feast, they sat then').

luossogrwyd, o'r a delei y'r llys, mynychu cwynaw truanet damwein Riannon, a'y phoen. (PKM 24)

Teyrnnon Twryf Liant, because of the find he had made, listened to the news and asked about it continually until he heard from many of the multitude who came to the court repeated complaining of Rhiannon's sad fate and her punishment.

Earlier in the story Pwyll's counsellors tried to make Pwyll take another wife. After Rhiannon is accused, these noblemen again come to ask him to leave his wife, and among other things Pwyll replies: 'Nyt yscaraf a hi' (PKM 21; 'I will not separate from her'). The later statement of the seating order made upon Teyrnnon's arrival makes it clear that Pwyll has indeed kept Rhiannon with him and that she has kept her place of honour in the court as his wife, in contrast to the treatment of Branwen in the second branch. A structural indication that Rhiannon's inclusion in the seating formula is not inadvertent is provided by the fact that she takes part in the subsequent conversation. Thus, this reference to the seating contributes to the subtle balance which the author achieves in his handling of the accusation, punishment, and vindication of Rhiannon.

I have laboured this point because I believe that such close reading of the text reveals the narrative methods of the author and demonstrates how he manages to infuse his telling with significance without ever faltering in the grace and liveliness of his style. As I pointed out in my earlier article there are a number of similarities and contrasts between the weddings and unjustified punishments of Rhiannon and Branwen.²⁵ The skill with which the author presents these two tales in relation to each other raises another question about the extent to which he may have reshaped the materials which came to him in order to fit the pattern of *The Mabinogi* as he saw it. For instance, the variant tradition of Branwen's punishment recorded in the triad of the *Teir Gvith Baluawt Ynys Prydein* (Three Harmful Blows of the Island of Britain) has been noted by others:

Vn onadunt a drevis Matholwch Vydol ar Vranwen verch Lyr.²⁶

One of them Matholwch the Irishman struck upon Branwen daughter of Llŷr.

In *The Mabinogi*, of course, the punishment is inflicted on Branwen by the butcher rather than by Matholwch himself. This serves to increase the pathos of Branwen's situation but it also heightens the

²⁵'Structure', pp. 263–66. ²⁶*Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*, edited by Rachel Bromwich, second edition (Cardiff, 1978), triad 53, p. 144, with addendum on pp. 538–39.

contrast with the story of Rhiannon in the first branch. Whether this is a change introduced by the author of *The Mabinogi* is ultimately unknowable but the circumstances are suggestive.

In terms of its structure and continuity the story of *Branwen* has been more severely criticized than have the remaining three branches. For instance, W. J. Gruffydd said of the tale that 'the outstanding characteristic of *Branwen* is the excessively large number of "loose ends" in the narrative and a vast amount of incoherence and confusion'.²⁷ Professor Mac Cana, who has commented most extensively on the second branch states that 'the tale itself is a collage of disparate materials marked by discontinuity and lack of internal development'.²⁸ I should like, therefore, to point out some of the unifying elements of this tale and briefly discuss their significance.

Some time ago I was struck by the number of times that the word *cyngor* 'counsel, council' occurs in the tale. There are no less than twelve incidents in this relatively short story in which *cyngor* is used, sometimes three or four times, or in which the giving of advice is an important element. Looking at these instances a fairly simple pattern emerges: Bendigeidfran gets good advice from his counsellors and Matholwch, for the most part, gets bad advice from his. This is not simply a pro-Welsh bias betraying itself; it is of considerable relevance to our comprehension of the structure and meaning of the tale. A list of the councils in the tale is very nearly a summary of the whole story up to the return of the survivors to Wales.

In the beginning a marriage is proposed 'y ymrwymaw ynys y Kedeirn ac Iwerdon y gyt, ual y bydynt gadarnach' (PKM 30; 'in order to bind together the Island of the Mighty and Ireland, so they might be stronger'). From the moment that Efnisien takes umbrage and vents his rage on Matholwch's horses, however, the tale moves inexorably towards the final catastrophe which destroys the population of Ireland and which gives but a Pyrrhic victory to the few Welsh survivors. The movement towards the unavoidable battle is set out in increments by detailing the negotiations between the Welsh and the Irish, recounting the advice which the noblemen of each court give to their respective kings. We have already seen in the first branch how Pwyll responds to the advice of his counsellors with utmost care and how his deliberate judiciousness provides for a minimum of personal and social upset until finally the truth is revealed. In *Branwen* this theme is examined in much greater detail and is brought to a level of profound significance to the audience of *The Mabinogi*. Throughout the story there are repeated efforts by Bendigeidfran to establish or restore peace. Matholwch, too, seems interested in maintaining peace with the Island of the Mighty, yet he

²⁷Quoted in Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, p. 41. ²⁸*ibid.*, p. 56.

is prevailed upon by his fosterbrothers and counsellors to carry on a feud which had already been settled in specifically enumerated legal terms, with the not insignificant augmentation of a magic cauldron included to seal the alliance.

In my earlier article I discussed the feud theme in *The Mabinogi*; it is clear that the bloodfeud presented a serious problem in Wales as it did in other societies based on a heroic model. However, the series of events recounted in *Branwen* is significant in that it goes beyond the boundaries of the clan or *cenedd*. The negotiations are carried out at the medieval equivalent of the diplomatic level and indeed the final result is the almost total destruction of two countries, for not only is Ireland depopulated, but practically the entire Welsh army is destroyed and upon their return to Britain the survivors find that the throne has been usurped by Caswallawn. The constant alternation of peace and strife and of good counsel and bad in *Branwen* provides the narrative and thematic coherence for much of the tale. This use of alternation also contributes to an ever-increasing dynamic tension throughout the story which is not relieved until the fury of the final battle breaks loose.

At a pragmatic level the examples of good and bad counsel in the tale can be seen to provide models from which obvious lessons can be drawn; however, the significance of the tale goes beyond this mundane or moralistic aspect. The story becomes a study in the relationship between a king and his country. In this context it is significant to note that the noun *dygyuor* 'muster' and the corresponding verb *dygyuoryaw* occur fairly frequently in connection with instances of *cyngor*. Sometimes the people gather to make demands of their king and at other times the king summons his people. *Branwen* can be seen, then, as a tale which probes a very crucial aspect of the structure of the social machinery available in that culture to prevent war and as such it is a mythic paradigm of that all-important facet of society. The fact that the story ends in disaster heightens the mythic function of the tale, for it provides the audience with an archetypal example of a kind of cultural failure which must have seemed endemic.

While a brief respite from grief is shared by the audience during the account of the elysian sojourn in Harddlech and in Gwales, the end of the second branch is largely a tale of further woe and loss; the loss felt by those at the *Ysbydawl Urdawl Benn*, 'The Assembly of the Wondrous Head', when the charm is broken has often been remarked as one of the most touching and effective passages in *The Mabinogi*. A brief review of the various direct and implied references to the Triads in the tale will show how the author's world-view extends beyond the story itself. The triads cited in the second branch place some of the characters and events into the broader narrative

and historical tradition. In addition to this, however, there is a thematic relevance to these triads which helps us to understand the thematic concerns of the tale.

Although there is no direct reference to the triad of the *Tri Chynweissyat*, 'The Three Stewards', in the tale, the occurrence of the name of Caradawc mab Bran in the Peniarth 16 version of the triad is of some importance to the study of *Branwen*:

Tri Chynweissyat Enys Prydein:
Caradawc mab Bran,
a C(h)aurdaf mab Karadauc,
'Ac Ewein mab Maxen Wledic.

Rachel Bromwich has suggested that 'it may be significant that each of the three *cynweissieid* named in the triad could be described as the son of a father more famous in Welsh tradition than himself'.²⁹ We have no story about Caurdaf mab Karadawc but the various stories concerning the son of Maxen Wledic are suggestive. The Red Book version of triad 35, 'Three Levies that departed from this Island', includes 'And the second [army] went with Elen of the Hosts and Maxen Wledic to Llychlyn: and they never returned to this Island'.³⁰ In the Orosian account of Maximus we learn that the emperor left his son Victor as emperor over the Gauls. Victor was slain and a certain Eugenius, a name perhaps to be equated with *Owein*, was set up as emperor.³¹ A garbled memory of this may account for later traditions of *Owein uab Maxen Wledic* and these traditions seem consistent with the story of *Branwen* in which a Welsh host leaves the island and only seven return. I should like to suggest here the possibility that the triad refers to stories of three sons whose fathers led armies from Britain never to return.

Unfortunately, no early version of the triad of the 'Three people who broke their hearts from bewilderment' has survived, but at least two of the three members of this triad are referred to in early sources—Cradauc in *Branwen* and Ffaraon Dandde in the independent versions of *Lludd a Llefelys*. Dr Bromwich further suggests that Moses Williams was not far off the mark with his inclusion of *Branwen* in his version of this triad.³² We might point out also that there is in *Branwen* an implied contrast or comparison between the stories of *Branwen* and *Cradauc*, whose hearts broke from sorrow or bewilderment, and that of *Efnisien*, whose heart burst as he destroyed the magic cauldron in repentance for the destruction he had caused.

²⁹Bromwich, *Triodd*, triad 13, pp. 23–24. ³⁰*ibid.*, p. 77. ³¹See *ibid.*, p. 478. ³²*ibid.*, triad 95, p. 226.

The reference to the burial and subsequent exhumation of Bendigeidfran's head as one of the *Tri Matgud* (Three Fortunate Concealments) and the *Tri Anfad Datgud* (Three Unfortunate Disclosures) provides a link with a famous and perhaps later tradition of disaster coming to the Island of Britain for, as the Red Book version of the triad states, 'And Arthur disclosed the head of Bendigeidfran from the White Hill since it did not seem right to him that this island be kept by the strength of anyone but his own'.³³ A further link to early historical tradition is provided by the account of Caswallawn's seizure of the crown of London. The version of Caswallawn's accession given in *Brut y Brenhinedd* contains a passage in Avarwy's letter to Caesar which expresses Avarwy's discontent in terms different from those given in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Referring to Caswallawn, Avarwy writes, 'Y mae ym digyuoeythi ynneu o'm kyuoeth weithion, a mynneu a dylwyn kystal ac ef o ynys Brydein' 'he is despoiling me of my possessions now, and I have as good a right as he to the island of Britain'.³⁴ There was a tradition, therefore, that Caswallawn usurped the throne from his nephew or nephews and it would appear that a version of this tradition is embedded in the second branch of *The Mabinogi*.

The final triadic reference in *Branwen* is also to a triad of catastrophe, the *Teir Gvith Balvawt Ynys Brydein*, 'Three Harmful Blows of the Island of Britain'.³⁵ Matholwch's punishment of Branwen occasioned the destruction of Ireland and much of the Island of the Mighty. Gwenhwyfach's blow struck upon Gwenhwyfar resulted, we are told, in Arthur's final battle at Camlan. And thirdly, Golydan Vard struck down Cadwaladr Vendigeit, the hope of Wales whose return is prophesied in *Armes Prydein*. Thus the second branch is a story which deals consistently with a vision of society which is doomed to a series of losses and catastrophes within both the accepted historical tradition of the time and the mythological tradition which provides the culture with a reflection of itself. The triads in *Branwen* help to highlight these thematic implications and for the modern reader they provide evidence external to the text itself that such themes were familiar to a medieval Welsh audience or at least to a storyteller with a working knowledge of *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*.

The narrative method of *The Mabinogi*, drawing heavily on thematic and structural interlace and on direct and implied cross-reference, allows (perhaps even requires) us to compare its parts with one another. In a given reading or recitation of the whole, however, this is not accomplished by the literal turning back of pages or the juxtaposing of widely separated passages for comparative

³³ibid., triad 37R, p. 89. ³⁴*Brut y Brenhinedd*, edited by J. J. Parry (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), p. 76; my translation. ³⁵Bromwich, *Trioedd*, triad 53, p. 144.

purposes. That is the *modus operandi* of the modern literary critic. The reader or listener experiences *The Mabinogi* as a linear continuum through time and the comparative aspects of the work make themselves felt as an increasingly complex body of information accrues and colours our understanding of events as we come to them and incorporate them into the whole. The above discussion of *cyngor* 'council, counsel' in *Branwen* is, therefore, incomplete without taking into account the workings of this minor theme in the other three branches. From one perspective we can see the use of *cyngor* throughout *The Mabinogi* simply as a reflection of reality, insofar as that is how decisions are often made in both life and literature. From a more literary perspective, however, we have been able to see that a closer look at this theme in *Branwen* reveals some of the underlying literary and cultural significance of the tale. This is compounded and enriched by extending our examination to the whole of *The Mabinogi*, although a brief return to this theme in the first part of *Math* will have to suffice here as a demonstration.

The first reference to *cyngor* in *Math* comes when Gwydion calls his eleven companions together after Pryderi's refusal to present them with the gift of swine. At this council Gwydion prepares the trickery that he has planned. Magic stallions and hounds are all very interesting and make for a visually colourful tale; however, this midnight council serves a more important purpose as a reminder that the real goal of Gwydion's quest is to start a war. Gwydion, at least, could have been neither surprised nor disappointed at Pryderi's initial refusal to give them the swine. The moral issues at stake in Gwydion's behaviour affect the entire country and the stage is finally set when Pryderi in turn takes counsel with his men and agrees to trade the swine for Gwydion's ephemeral horses, dogs, and paraphernalia.

When the chase is on and battle is imminent Math, too, takes counsel about where to engage Pryderi's army, and the geographic detail and planning of strategy must have struck a note of realism in an audience whose lives were filled with war and some of whom must have been familiar with the very places named. After returning home from this disastrous war and after dealing with the treachery of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, Math also takes counsel about selecting a new footholder. On a narrative level this prepares the way for the rest of the tale, leading to the birth of Lleu and the humiliation of Aranrhod. But there is a deeper significance to this reference to the selection of the virgin footholder necessary for Math's survival. As we noted in the discussion of *Branwen*, much of that story examines the relationship between a king and his country. The same is true in *Math*. Math's remarkable necessity for a virgin footholder is undoubtedly a reflection of his magical, mythological, and mysterious origins. In the context of *The Mabinogi*, however, it portrays quite

directly and starkly the fact that the welfare of the country is closely tied to the welfare of the king, not just in his judicial and military functions as ruler but in his very person. This becomes more clear when we note that Math's debility (if it is such) prevents him from personally going on a *cylch* or circuit of the land. This custom has a twofold function in that on the one hand it provides the king and his aristocracy with the tangible necessities for their survival and on the other hand it provides the people with firsthand evidence of the power and character of their king and of his abilities to rule, to judge, and to defend them from their enemies. In *The Mabinogi* Math's own forcefulness, wisdom, and good counsel enable him to prevent such total destruction or even disappearance of the country which we find in the second and third branches, though great loss is also suffered in the fourth branch.

One brief anecdote will perhaps illustrate that such thematic pressures do indeed make themselves felt to the audience of *The Mabinogi*. In the spring of 1982 I inflicted upon the members of my car-sharing pool a reading of *The Four Branches* (in English) on our way to and from work, partly to while away the time with 'pleasant tales and storytelling' and partly to see what response it would receive. Upon finishing the fourth branch, one of the listeners directed a comment towards the moment at which Gronw Bebyr asks:

'Wy gwyrd a kywir, a'm teulu, a'm brodyr maeth, a oes ohonawch chwi, a gymero yr ergyt drossof?' 'Nac oes, dioer,' heb wynt. (PKM 92)

'My trusty noblemen and my warband and my fosterbrothers, is there one of you who will take the blow for me?' 'God knows, there is not', said they.

The response to this was to the effect that 'I like the way the author didn't say, "And so they took counsel and this is what they decided. . . ." They just said "Oh, no! Not us!"' This demonstrates fairly clearly that the narrative method of repetition and interlaced cross-reference does indeed work, even for an audience hearing the tale for the first time.

One critical method which has been used in the study of the origins and development of *The Mabinogi* and which I should like to touch upon before ending is the isolation of various events or episodes which seem to have an independent structure. It has been said about a number of incidents in *The Four Branches* that they each form an independent story which is not closely connected to the tale around it. For instance, Professors Gruffydd and Jarman have commented that the Mice in the Corn episode and the first part of *Pwyll*, respectively, have little connection with the rest of *The Mabinogi*.³⁶ It

³⁶Gruffydd, *Rhiannon*, p. 71; A. O. H. Jarman, 'Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi', in *Y Traddodiad Rhyddiaith yn yr Oesau Canol*, edited by Geraint Bowen (Llandysul, 1974), p. 89.

is occasionally remarked that each such episode could be extracted and related independently as a coherent short tale. There are two basic problems with this assumption, however. On the one hand, if an episode is taken out of its context it may at first glance seem to form a complete coherent tale, but closer analysis often reveals that some key motivation has been lost and more questions would need to be asked than before we isolated it. This is the case with the Mice in the Corn episode. First of all, some character relationships would have to be changed, otherwise we would have to account for Manawydan living with someone else's wife. This is no great problem; perhaps we could just change the names. But we would also have to explain how a nobleman of the stature necessary to account for Cigfa's repeated rebukes comes to be doing his own farming without any help. Thus we already require the sort of explanation that is given earlier in the third branch—the enchantment of Dyfed. Assuming that we overcome these problems we must still find an explanation for things at the end. Why should all these enchanted mice be raiding someone's cornfield? The explanation of Llwyd uab Cil Coed, of course, provides not only the motivation for this episode but the resolution to earlier episodes in *The Mabinogi* as well. Thus, to tell the story of the Mice in the Corn independently requires considerable change in the episode itself, especially in the crucial matter of motivation. In essence, it becomes a different story, for in a narrative style which is so blatantly episodic, as is much medieval narrative (and certainly *The Mabinogi*), this question of motivation is of utmost importance.

We might also look at this question of independent episodes from the opposite perspective. If we extract an episode from *The Mabinogi* what are we left with? Without the Mice in the Corn in the third branch we would be left without any resolution to the tale and we would never learn what happened to Pryderi and Rhiannon. A slightly trickier case is presented by the account of Pwyll's year in Annwn. This section of the first branch can indeed be presented as a separate narrative leaving no loose ends. But then, what is *The Mabinogi* without it? At the purely structural level, in the fourth branch Gwydion would have to find some other excuse for sending Math off to war. Thus there is a strong motivational link between the first and the fourth branches and the further thematic comparison of events in these two branches is also considerably revealing in our attempts to understand *The Mabinogi* as a whole.³⁷ In the second branch the Iron House episode, which is manifestly a story within a story, could indeed be extracted and told on its own, though we might be left wondering where Llassar and his wife escaped to and what was the significance of the cauldron he carried with him. At

³⁷See Bollard, 'Structure', pp. 269–70.

the same time not much would seem to be missing in terms of narrative structure if the second branch does not contain this account. However, it is again in terms of its thematic implications that this story has significance to the tale around it, for the ruse of the Iron House devised by the Irish parallels the ruse designed to trap Bendigeidfran inside a building.

A basic compositional method drawn heavily upon by the author of *The Mabinogi* is the weaving together of such seemingly independent episodes, stories, and traditions. In this paper I have tried to show that some of the thematic threads which run throughout the resulting tightly-knit structure are concerns of great social significance to the audience. It is primarily this consistent thematic undercurrent which unifies *The Four Branches* and which lifts the whole into the realm of cultural myth. It is not surprising that the author draws on traditional stories ultimately derived from earlier primary Celtic mythology, for these are his cultural 'deposits' about which David Jones wrote: 'You use the things that are yours to use because they happen to be lying about the place or site or lying within the orbit of your "tradition"'.³⁸ What is striking in *The Mabinogi* is the consummate skill with which the author adapts these materials, creating a revitalized myth infused with a vision and a moral code to meet the contemporary needs of his audience, a myth in terms of which it could examine and evaluate its own society. This is, of course, one of the recognized roles of mythology. It is also an important function of a work of literature, and *The Mabinogi* is both myth and literature.

³⁸*The Anathemata* (London, 1953), p. 34.