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Did a Woman Write the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*?

The role of women in the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* has been considered on various occasions.¹ So, too, has the question of authorship.² Yet it seems never previously to have been noticed that the *Four Branches* show signs of having been written or composed by a woman. In what follows an attempt will be made, first, to prove that the *Four Branches* are the work of a woman, and, second, to show that she can be identified as Princess Gwenllïan (c.1097–1136) of Gwynedd. Gwenllïan was the daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan, king of Gwynedd; the wife of Gruffydd ap Rhys, prince of Deheubarth (South Wales); and the mother of the Lord Rhys (d. 1197), who dominated the politics of West Wales in the later twelfth century.

If this identification is correct, we can date the *Four Branches* to between about 1120, when Gwenllïan attained her majority, and 1136, when she was killed while leading an attack on the Norman garrison at Kidwelly, in South Wales. Other evidence suggests the *Four Branches* were actually composed in 1128 or slightly later. If Gwenllïan did write the *Four Branches*, she almost certainly did so while living in the commote of Caio, between Lampeter and Llandovery in south-west Wales.

I

As we read the *Four Branches*, we again and again find passages which would be unusual if the work of a man, but which read naturally as the work of a woman. In the first branch, Pwyll takes on the form of Arawn, other-world king of Annwn, and makes for his court. He arrives and is made welcome, sitting at table between Arawn's queen, 'the fairest woman any one had ever seen, dressed in a robe of shining gold brocaded silk', and the earl.³ We hear more of the queen, 'the most unaffected woman, and the most gracious of disposition and discourse', and nothing of the earl. The writer was clearly interested in the queen, but had no interest in the earl. When Pwyll sleeps with the queen, he turns his back and retains his chastity over the entire year. After slaying Hafgan, Arawn's other-world enemy, Pwyll meets Arawn, changes form and semblance with him, and returns home. Arawn comes back to his wife, goes to bed with her, and indulges in 'loving pleasure and affection'. She wonders at the apparent change in him. 'Alas, God,' said she, 'what different thought is there in him tonight from what has been since a year from tonight!' He is puzzled at her silence, and we hear their pillow talk. 'Shame on me', said she, 'if since a year from yesternight, from the time we were enfolded in the bedclothes, that there has been either delight or converse between us, or thou hast turned thy face towards me, let alone anything that would be more than that between us.' Arawn reflects on the steadfastness and unswerving fellowship of his comrade, and tells his wife all. 'By my confession to God,' said she, 'strong hold hadst thou on a comrade, for warding off fleshly temptation and for keeping faith with thee.' 'Lady,' said he, 'that was my thought too when I was silent with thee.' 'Nor was that strange', she replied.

The delicacy in thought and expression of this intimate passage has been noted. W. J. Gruffydd and others thought it showed the *Four Branches* were the work of a monk or other cleric.⁴ But it reads more convincingly as

the work of a woman. Arawn's wife gets the upper hand in the dialogue, where we have almost twice as many words from her as from him, and where she has the last word. We are also given an insight into her thoughts. This can be contrasted with the bedroom scenes in the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, by a male author, where everything is seen from the point of view of Gawain, lying in bed, and not at all from the point of view of the lady of the castle, who enters his room secretly three mornings in a row to try and seduce him. The role given to Arawn's wife, her thoughts and feelings, would be less surprising if the passage were written by a woman.

In the next part of the story, Pwyll attempts to converse with a mysterious lady on a white horse, with a garment of shining gold brocaded silk about her, who passes the *gorsedd* or great mound at Arberth. No rider can overtake her, even Pwyll himself, until he asks her to stay for the sake of the one she loves best. It is she who commands the situation. She also commands the dialogue that follows. 'Lady,' he asked, 'whence comest thou, and where art thou going?' 'I go my own errands,' said she, 'and glad I am to see thee.' Her reply is both courteous and uninformative. But eventually she reveals that she is Rhiannon, and that she has come to see Pwyll because she is being given to another husband against her will. 'But no husband have I wished for, and that out of love of thee, nor will I have him even now unless thou reject me.' Pwyll comes up with the desired answer: 'If I had choice of all the ladies and maidens in the world, 'tis thou I would choose.' She bids him make a tryst; he agrees, and asks her to make it where she will; she tells him to come a year from that night to a feast she will have prepared at the court of Hefeydd the Old; he promises to come; and it is she who has the last word. 'Lord,' said she, 'fare thee well, and remember that thou keep thy promise, and I will go my way.' From beginning to end, it is Rhiannon who is in command. If this passage were written by a woman of character and high social rank, it would appear exactly as it does. But if it were written by a man, it would be curious that Pwyll is

presented in it as so passive, even feeble. In this wooing, the shots are called by the woman, not the man.

The feast comes. Pwyll sits between Rhiannon and her father; a stranger enters, seeking a boon; and Pwyll promises him anything he wants, to Rhiannon's wiser comment, 'Alas, why does thou give such an answer?' The stranger is Rhiannon's unwanted suitor Gwawl, who asks for her. Dumbfounded, Pwyll knows not what to do. 'Be dumb as long as thou wilt', said Rhiannon. 'Never was there a man made feebler use of his wits than thou hast.' 'Lady,' said he, 'I knew not who he was.' Rhiannon bids Pwyll bestow her upon him, explaining, at his protests, that she will give him a small bag, and the feast to the warband and the retinues. She tells Pwyll to make a tryst a year from that night, as one of a hundred horsemen, and instructs him on all he must do to outwit Gwawl. When Gwawl demands an answer, it is Rhiannon who does the talking. Throughout this episode, it is Rhiannon who appears as a woman of authority and resource, used to making plans and ordering men about. Pwyll's authority and wits seem, in contrast, of a minor order. Rhiannon's 'Be dumb as long as thou wilt. Never was there a man made feebler use of his wits than thou hast' certainly shows scant respect for them. If this passage were written by a woman of high social rank, this would not be surprising; but if it were written by man, it would be difficult to explain why the supposed hero Pwyll is at a loss in a crisis, so oddly failing to live up to his own name (which means 'Sense').

This pattern continues when the feast comes a year later. It is Rhiannon who bids Gwawl tread down the bag of the disguised Pwyll, tells Pwyll the terms and sureties to demand after Gwawl is overcome, and the largesse to make minstrels and others on the following day. Rhiannon's own father, Hefeydd the Old, plays a minor role throughout (even, when he expects Pwyll to depart without his bride, a slightly ludicrous one, like a medieval Mr Woodhouse). On the arrival of Rhiannon and Pwyll at Arberth she again shows herself active, presenting each

man and woman of the court with 'a brooch or a ring or a precious stone'.

When a boy is born to Rhiannon, after a delay of over three years, we are given the famous episode in her bedroom, with her waiting women awaking at cockcrow to find the boy lost, becoming terrified of being burnt alive, and together devising the grotesque lie that she destroyed her own child. The author describes this incident in the women's quarters with a convincingness that might be thought remarkable for a male author. The pathos of the scene when Rhiannon, waking to find her child gone, pleads with the women to tell her the truth, likewise shows a power that would perhaps be surprising if a man had written it.

"God who knows all things knows that accusation of me is false. And if it be fear that is upon you, by my confession to God I will protect you." "Faith," said they, "we will not bring hurt on ourselves for any one in the world." "Poor creatures," said she, "you will come to no hurt for telling the truth." For all her words, whether fair or pitiful, she got but the one answer from the women.'

Rhiannon is in no way at a loss in a crisis. But we see too her mingled sorrow, tenderness, generosity, and nobility. These qualities appear in her acceptance of her fate. She summons teachers and wise men, and, 'as she preferred doing penance to wrangling with the women, she took on her her penance'. Rhiannon's moral integrity is evident here, but we may also note the reference to her summoning of teachers and wise men. It is likely that Gwenllïan as princess was accustomed to doing this. If the present hypothesis on authorship is correct, she may have done it in collecting material before dictating the *Four Branches*, which seem to have been written down at composition. As for Rhiannon's punishment, of sitting by a horseblock and carrying comers on her back, the author again shows delicacy in the comment, 'It was chance that anyone would permit himself to be carried.' In short, this part of the *Four Branches* shows Rhiannon as maintaining her dignity and moral authority, for all her grief, in prose that could

hardly be improved. The author must also have been familiar with the speech and behaviour of women of the highest social rank.

When the narrative moves to Gwent, Teyrnon's battle with a night-monster outside his house is dealt with in summary fashion. ('Teyrnon drew his sword and struck off the arm at the elbow, so that that much of the arm together with the colt was inside with him.') Clearly, the author had no interest in monsters, fighting, or swords (unlike the author of *Beowulf*, which provides an analogue of this episode). But the writer was much interested in the baby that Teyrnon discovers and in the reaction of Teyrnon's wife to the lad. She is the third of the wives figuring in this branch and we hear much of her. She has no child, as Rhiannon for three years had no child. She asks about the silk garments on the baby, declares he is the son of gentlefolk, that it would be pleasure and mirth to her to bring him up, that she will bring women into league with her to do this (her husband readily agrees); we hear of the boy Gwri's baptism, hair, nursing, walking, growth, interest in horses, and his foster-mother's arrangements for him to be provided with horses (again, Teyrnon's role is to accord in this). When the boy is to be restored to Rhiannon, Teyrnon's wife gives her husband good advice; when the boy is handed over, we are told no person in the world will feel more grief than her for the loss of him (a trauma in part healed when agreement is made for the boy's fostering).

Teyrnon's wife is crucial for the conclusion drawn by this chapter. Arguments for female authorship of the *Four Branches* stand or fall by her. If a woman wrote the *Four Branches*, the prominent role given to Teyrnon's wife and her interest in a child are natural. On the other hand, if the *Four Branches* were the work of a man, his interest in such matters as childlessness, the provision of a wet nurse, or a foster-mother's sorrow on losing her child to another woman, would be unusual, to say the least.

II

The second branch of the *Mabinogi* likewise deals with women and marriage, seen from a royal point of view. Matholwch, King of Ireland, comes with a fleet to ask for the hand of Branwen, sister of Bendigeidfran, King of Britain. When Branwen reaches Ireland, she bestows on nobles and ladies of the court 'a brooch or a ring or a treasured royal jewel, which it was a wondrous sight to see departing'. The last phrase, somewhat dry in tone, may suggest the author had personal experience of giving readily-accepted treasure to the Irish upper classes. After a year a son is born to Branwen, who is 'put out to foster in the very best place for men in Ireland'. But then follows the humiliation of Branwen in the king's kitchen, from which she escapes after three years by training a starling. Branwen instructed the starling, and brought it 'a letter of the woes and the dishonour that were upon her'. The bird flies with her message to Bendigeidfran at Caernarfon, where 'it alighted on his shoulder and ruffled its feathers so that the letter was seen and it was known that the bird had been reared among dwellings'. The casual reference to a letter, either written by Branwen herself, or written by another and appropriated by her as testimony of her plight, is remarkable evidence for women's consciousness of literacy at this date. Although the text does not say that Branwen wrote the letter, it shows the narrator's awareness of how a woman might use literacy to escape from bondage and male violence. That there is no actual mention of Branwen's writing the letter may suggest that the presumed woman author of the *Mabinogi* could not write. But it is a striking indication of the author's knowledge of written words, and of the power they could bring (in Branwen's case, a power that literally brings about her liberation).

This stratagem achieves redress for Branwen. Her brother at once prepares to invade Ireland to seek justice for her. When Branwen is addressed as 'Lady' to explain what is seen approaching across the Irish Sea, she begins

with a wry 'Though lady I am not': both the response of a woman ill-treated by men, and a lady of high rank who, like Rhiannon with the waiting women, has been insulted by her social inferiors. Some commentators have seen Branwen as a slighter character than Rhiannon. This is no doubt true. Yet peace terms between Irish and Welsh are made 'by counsel of Branwen, and lest the land be laid waste she did that'. As a princess of Gwynedd, she is as capable of playing a part in Welsh-Irish politics and diplomacy as she is of organizing her own liberation from slavery. The kingship of Ireland is to be conferred on Gwern, Branwen's son, with 'all who saw him loving him'; but when Efnisien, in an act of madness, thrusts Gwern into the fire, Branwen makes as if to leap in too; yet Bendigeidfran saves her, and protects her in the fight that follows. Again, we hear almost nothing of the fight itself. The writer was not interested in describing it. But we do hear of a magic 'cauldron of rebirth', which restores life to slain Irishmen cast into it. The writer cares nothing for swords or spears, but is interested in this round womb-like entity, which is crucial to the plot. We need not subscribe to the theories of Sigmund Freud to see such emphasis as perhaps characteristic of a woman writer. When Branwen escapes to Britain with seven others, the author describes the pathos of her death.

"Alas, Son of God!", said she. "Woe is me that ever I was born; two good islands have been laid waste because of me!" And she heaved a great sigh, and with that broke her heart. And a four-sided grave was made for her, and she was buried there on the bank of the Alaw.'

The tale ends with the curious anecdote of five pregnant women (the only people left alive in Ireland), and the description of the narrative as concerning the blow to Branwen, how it was avenged, the feasting at Harlech and Gwales, and the singing of the birds of Rhiannon.

III

Women play a less important role in the third branch than in the first, second, and fourth. Yet it begins with Pryderi's bestowal of his mother Rhiannon with the seven cantrefws of Dyfed on Bendigeidfran's brother, Manawydan. Pryderi tells Manawydan that, even after the eighty-seven years since the party left Ireland, he will not be ill-pleased with Rhiannon's looks. So it proves. On meeting her, Manawydan discovers he has never beheld a lady 'more graced with beauty and comeliness than she'. When Pryderi, his wife Cigfa, Manawydan, and Rhiannon are forced to live in exile in England, Manawydan seems to show wisdom in yielding to their foes, when Pryderi would reach for his sword. The four return to Dyfed. While hunting, Manawydan loses Pryderi inside a magic fortress. On his return, Rhiannon robustly tells him he is a bad comrade and has lost a good comrade, goes to find her son in the fortress, and is lost in a fall of mist. Cigfa, alone with Manawydan, fears for her virtue. He assures her of his honour. The tale ends with the ravaging by mice of Manawydan's lands. He captures one of them, pregnant, in his glove; she turns out to be the transformed wife of the magician Llwyd son of Cil Coed, who has been taking vengeance on Dyfed for the harm done to Gwawl in the first branch. By holding her hostage, Manawydan obtains the release of Pryderi and Rhiannon.

This tale provides a little more evidence for female authorship. The curious point about Rhiannon's looks and remarriage may be worth noting, since ageing is a subject on which women tend to be more sensitive than men (hence the modern cosmetics industry). If the *Four Branches* were written by a woman, it may be no accident that fears for Rhiannon's beauty prove groundless, and she obtains a husband who is charmed by her. (Parallels here are the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, a middle-aged widow's story of a rejuvenated bride, and the novels of Jane Austen, described as the fantasies of an ageing spinster.) Cigfa's concern for her virtue is another subject more

likely to worry a woman than a man, particularly in a traditional society; while Manawydan's desire to avoid conflict indicates the same regard for peacekeeping as is shown by Branwen in the second branch. Yet he later proves a coward, being humiliated by Rhiannon's scorn as she takes resolute action to recover her son: an episode certainly consistent with female authorship. Finally, even a plague of mice reveals that interest in pregnancy which is such a persistent feature of the *Four Branches*; a subject to which a woman author might relate.

IV

With the fourth branch we again find abundant material on women and children. Math, lord of Gwynedd, can live only with his feet in the fold of the lap of a virgin. At the beginning of the tale she is Goewin, daughter of Pebin. By tricking Pryderi, the magician Gwydion enables Math's nephew Gilfaethwy, who is in love with Goewin, to rape her. This incident is described with restraint. Gilfaethwy and Goewin 'were put to sleep together in Math son of Mathonwy's bed; and the maidens were roughly forced out, and she was lain with against her will that night'. When Math returns, Goewin protests to him, defending her virtue with the point, 'Nor did I bear it in quiet; there was none in the court did not know of it.' In medieval literature, concern of this kind for a woman's feelings in such an outrage is rare. Vengeance follows. Gilfaethwy and Gwydion are turned into animals, in successive years bearing offspring, transformed into boys who are respectively named Hyddwn, Hychdwn, and Bleiddwn. (The author is careful to tell us that Hychdwn was 'a fine boy with rich auburn hair'.) When Aranhod is called to take over Goewin's office, and has to step over a magic wand to test her virginity, she drops 'a fine boy-child with rich yellow hair', who is named Dylan, and a 'small something', which Gwydion hides in a chest at the foot of his bed.

When Gwydion wakes one morning, he hears a muffled

cry in the chest. He opens it to discover 'an infant boy thrusting his arms from the fold of the sheet and opening it apart.' Gwydion finds a wet nurse (a 'woman with breasts'), and we hear in some detail how the boy grew rapidly and how he loved Gwydion 'better than any one'. When the boy is four (attention to children's ages is a feature of these tales), Aranhod discovers who he is and curses him. He shall get no name, unless from her; he shall bear no arms, unless she equip him; he shall have no wife of the race now on earth. The first of these curses is of interest. There is repeated emphasis in the *Four Branches* on children's baptism, described (somewhat artlessly) as the baptism 'which they used in those days'. Robert Thomson notes that for the author, as for many people today, the important thing about baptism was the name-giving (not the infusion of supernatural grace).⁵ A child's baptism, considered as name-giving, is perhaps a concern of mothers rather than fathers. To deny a child a name might thus seem especially unnatural to a female author. Aranhod here commits something close to child abuse and the author condemns her for it.

These curses Gwydion overcomes by magic. When the boy, named Lleu Llaw Gyffes, is 'a man in stature, and the handsomest youth that mortal ever saw', Gwydion circumvents the last curse by making him a bride from flowers, who is named Blodeuedd. But she is unfaithful to her husband, taking the initiative in the affair with her lover, Gronw. With her husband absent, it is she who invites the hunter Gronw into her court; she comes herself to meet him and welcome him; they change their clothes and sit down. Then,

Blodeuedd looked on him, and the moment she looked there was no part of her that was not filled with love for him. And he too gazed on her, and the same thought came to him as had come to her. He might not conceal that he loved her, and he told her so. She knew great joy at heart, and their talk that night was of the affection and love they had conceived one for the another. Nor did they delay longer than that night ere they embraced each other. And that night they slept together.

We are told how she loved him before we hear how he loved her; we hear of her feelings for him, rather than his for her; the attention is on her, not him. She continues to take the initiative throughout the affair. When Gronw tries to leave the next day, she holds him back, declaring, 'Faith, thou wilt not go from me tonight.' The day after she again prevents him from leaving, keeping him for a third night. She is the dominant partner of the two. Together, Blodeuedd and Gronw attempt to murder Lleu. The tale ends when, through Gwydion's efforts, Gronw is killed and Blodeuedd transformed into an owl. Lleu, restored to his normal form, rules as lord of Gwynedd.

The fourth branch provides varied evidence for female authorship. It is striking that, although rape and adultery are central parts of the plot, they are described with restraint. Babies likewise figure largely, above all the infant Lleu. The account of the baby crying in a chest, waving his hands in the air, and being found a 'woman with breasts' to nurse him, might have been written by a man (though it is not easy to think of a similar passage written by one), but reads more naturally as the work of a woman. So does the narrative of Blodeuedd's affair with Gronw. It is written from the woman's point of view; it is her seduction of him, rather than his of her. If a woman composed the *Four Branches*, she might naturally describe a love affair as seen and promoted by the woman. But, if a man wrote the account of the love of Gronw and Blodeuedd, Gronw's somewhat passive role in it is hard to explain. We can go further. Although Aranrhod and Blodeuedd are formidable women, they are overcome by a male character, Gwydion. Yet this need not indicate a male author, because Aranrhod is a bad mother, Blodeuedd a bad wife. That they fail in their wickedness shows the author condemning cruelty to children and adultery as the evils they are. This attitude may be more typical of a female writer than a male one. It would be especially so of a married female writer with children.

V

The evidence set out above for the *Four Branches* as the work of a woman writer is of a cumulative nature. There are male writers who have disliked describing fighting and weapons, and who have given an important place to women and children (to say nothing of fine clothes and jewels) in their work. An obvious example of this is Chaucer. Yet even he has been typified by Derek Pearsall as having a view of women that is far from escaping medieval male stereotypes. Pearsall has a pertinent comment here on Chaucer's representation of women's sexuality. Here Chaucer, 'like other medieval male writers, finds himself both repelled and fascinated. Women must be idealized or deliberately made disgusting'.⁶ Yet neither attitude occurs in the *Four Branches*. Sleeping together is seen as the normal end of courtship, as with Rhiannon and Branwen; with Arawn's wife, the act of love is seen as totally normal; Blodeuedd and Gronw's falling in love is also seen as a normal process, neither idealized nor (despite its evil consequences) made out as disgusting. So the author of the *Four Branches* has a viewpoint very different from the medieval male writers cited by Pearsall; especially clerical writers. This point must create difficulties for critics with much to say on the misogyny of medieval clerics, who would at the same time have us believe that the *Four Branches* are the work of a monk or priest.

If critics insist on seeing the *Four Branches* as written by a man, certain features beside the above must seem unusual. The first is the repeated dominant role of women (who sometimes treat their males as inferiors), and the weakness or passivity of some male characters (variously seen in Pwyll, Teyrnnon, Matholwch, Manawydan, Gilfaethwy, Gronw, and Lleu). The women characters of women writers tend to be more convincing than their male characters, and the *Four Branches* seem to bear this out. In this context one may recall Dickens's conclusion, in one of his letters, that 'George Eliot' was surely a woman writer,

since in her first pseudonymous novel *Scenes from Clerical Life* the female characters are better drawn than the male ones; matters are repeatedly seen from a woman's point of view, as in the break-up of a love affair; and there is consistent interest in children, including a description of a woman mending children's clothes.⁷ (Compare, more pungently, another critic's remark that he could think of no male character in a novel by a woman who was not, in the end, a booby. There are boobyish aspects of many men in the *Four Branches*; though significantly not of Bendigeidfran, for reasons discussed below.)

Secondly, after the dominant role of women, one may note the delicacy (almost 'chastity') in narrating the relations of men and women, as seen in the first, third, and fourth branches. For some this has suggested a clerical author.⁸ But this opinion is difficult to reconcile with, for example, the intimate account of how Blodeuedd fell in love with Gronw. This does not read like the work of a cleric, but of a woman who knows what falling in love is like.

Third is the repeated interest in motherhood and babies (even extending to their appearance and need for milk). Childlessness, loss of a new-born baby, the grief of a foster-mother on losing her child to another woman: these are matters in the *Four Branches* rarely touched on by male writers, but of natural interest to a woman. Fourth is the author's lack of interest in bloodshed and warfare. This contrasts sharply with accounts of swords, spears, combat, and sudden death in literature from Homer onwards, and featuring in English writing from *Beowulf* to Malory. However, one may note that the author, though indifferent to combat and military hardware, was intimately concerned with the organizational and diplomatic aspects of war, as also its human tragedy. This is evident from the aftermath of Bendigeidfran's invasion of Ireland in the second branch, and the fate of Pryderi's attack on Gwynedd in the fourth. Here it forms an aspect of the author's understanding of government and politics, which has been given particular recognition in recent years by

Catherine McKenna and Brynley Roberts, amongst others.⁹

On the basis of all this, it seems reasonable to see the *Four Branches* as the work of a woman writer. There is nothing impossible in this. That women could write vernacular literature at this date is shown by Marie de France, a poetess (possibly of royal blood) of the later twelfth century, whose work includes love and babies amongst its subjects. There is an even more striking parallel to the *Four Branches* in medieval Japanese, in *The Tale of Genji* (a point made to the present writer by Professor Fergus Kelly of Dublin). This was composed by Murasaki Shikibu (c.980–c.1030), a married lady and mother in the service of the Empress Akiko. Although Genji's adventures are all amorous, the narrative is of great charm 'and not at all indecent'. Fighting has little place in it, but we hear much of babies and children. Because *The Tale of Genji* was certainly composed by a woman, it provides a valuable check for analysis of the *Four Branches*.

VI

If the *Four Branches* are actually the work of a woman writer, can we go farther and say who she was? It seems we can. There are strong grounds for taking the author as Gwenllïan, daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan. Her authorship would explain many features of the text.

Gwenllïan was the daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan (c.1055–1137), king of Gwynedd; her mother was Angharad, daughter of Owain ab Edwin (a descendant of Hywel Dda). Gruffudd, subject of a unique Middle Welsh biography, married his wife about 1095, after long exile in Ireland. Gwenllïan, who had three brothers, was the oldest of five sisters. Although we cannot know exactly what she looked like, by an extraordinary chance we do have a description of her mother, said to be 'of noble birth, well-grown, with fair hair, large-eyed, of fine shape, with queenly figure and strong limbs and well-made legs and

the best of feet, and long fingers and thin nails; kindly and eloquent, and good at food and drink; wise and prudent, a woman of good counsel, merciful towards her kingdom, charitable to the needy, and just in all things'.¹⁰ Even if we discount a conventional element, it is likely the daughter took after the mother in looks and physique. Perhaps the descriptions of the mother as 'eloquent', 'good at food and drink', 'of good counsel', 'merciful towards her kingdom', and 'just in all things' also deserve consideration here. All these qualities may be exemplified in the *Mabinogi*, particularly 'eloquence', though many recent scholars have noted as well a concern with wise and just government, one Canadian scholar even calling it a 'mirror for princes'.¹¹ ('Handbook for politicians' might equally well express its political realism on the practical settlement of disputes.)

There is in any case good reason to believe that Gwenllian possessed courage and resource, as well as beauty and good health. Shortly after 1116, when she was nineteen, Gwenllian married Gruffydd ap Rhys (c.1090–1137), prince of Deheubarth (South Wales), who had been an exile in Ireland from early childhood until his return to Dyfed in 1113. After many hazards, including full-scale rebellion against Henry I in 1116, Gruffydd lived quietly (except for a brief Irish exile in 1127) in the commote of Caio (between Lampeter and Llandovery, within the three cantrefs of Ystrad Tywi mentioned at the close of the first branch and beginning of the fourth). Gruffydd's sons by Gwenllian were Maredudd, Rhys (1132–97), Morgan, and Maelgwn. The second is famous as the 'Lord Rhys', founder of Talley Abbey, and effective founder of Strata Florida. Anarawd (murdered in 1143) and Cadell (who died at Strata Florida in 1175, after an eventful life) were Gruffydd's sons by an earlier union.

Gwenllian died very early in 1136, beheaded after Maurice of London routed an attack led by her with her sons Morgan (also killed) and Maelgwn (taken prisoner) against Kidwelly. Writing of the battle over fifty years later, Gerald of Wales described Gwenllian as riding forward 'at the head of an army, like some Penthesilea,

Queen of the Amazons'. The battlefield (now in state care) north of Kidwelly is still called *Maes Gwenllian* 'Gwenllian's Field'.¹² There is no doubt of the strong impression Gwenllian made in her time.

VII

Even if we accept that the *Four Branches* were written by a woman, what reason have we to believe she may have been Princess Gwenllian? The evidence is circumstantial, but nothing in it suggests she could not have been. It is worth emphasizing here, first, that if Gwenllian did not write the *Four Branches*, there should be clear evidence against her authorship (but there seems none); and, second, that the case for her authorship tallies with the information provided by the text even in small details. We can draw an analogy from a modern law court. Experienced lawyers there place high value on the details of evidence (the notes in a policeman's notebook, and so on) for corroboration. The importance of circumstantial evidence should also be noted. Almost all scientific evidence given in a courtroom, including that of ballistics experts, is circumstantial. One's fingerprints on a murder weapon, traces of one's DNA on clothing at a crime scene, are also circumstantial, but have hanged men nonetheless. So the circumstantial information provided by the *Four Branches* may suggest to thoughtful readers a verdict for Gwenllian's authorship. It may be set out as follows:

1. Once we admit an early medieval literary text to be the work of a woman, we limit the number of potential authors. Only a woman of high rank would be in a position to write such a text or have it copied; only if she were within an influential circle would copies of it continue to be made. As mother of the Lord Rhys, a protector of monasteries and patron of bards, Gwenllian would be well placed for her writings to survive after her time.

2. The author of the *Four Branches* had an intimate knowledge of the courts of kings and princes, and a royal attitude to life. Women like Rhiannon organize their lives with confidence; even Branwen possesses political skills. In matters of social inferiors, such as Rhiannon's treatment by the waiting women or Branwen's by the butcher, we see things from the princess's point of view. If a princess wrote the *Four Branches*, this would not be surprising.
3. The author had a detailed knowledge of Gwynedd, a less detailed one of Dyfed, and a shadowy one of Gwent and the rest of Britain. The author even knows of Gronw's stone, just over five foot long, and still to be seen a mile from Ffestiniog.¹³ As regards Dyfed, the region really known well is the Teifi valley, which forms the northern border of Caio, where Gwenllïan lived. W. J. Gruffydd suggested the 'Arberth' of the first branch was in north Pembrokeshire, near Glyn Cuch and the Preseli Mountains, which are also mentioned.¹⁴ But Professor R. Geraint Gruffydd of Aberystwyth informs the present writer that Arberth is in Ceredigion, in the parish of Llangoedmor, about a mile east of Cardigan. In the same parish is the conspicuous hill of Crug Mawr, where, some months after Gwenllïan's death, her husband defeated the Normans (probably on 10 October 1136). Lloyd describes it as a knoll, now called 'Banc y Warren', two miles outside Cardigan on the road to Aberystwyth. As *Cruc maur* in *Cereticiaun* it is one of the *mirabilia* of *Historia Brittonum*. This suggests it was the magic *gorsedd* or mound from which Pwyll first saw Rhiannon.¹⁵ In any case, both Dyfed and Gwynedd are praised in the *Four Branches*. At the start of the third branch, Pryderi says there are no finer cantrefes than the seven cantrefes of Dyfed; in the fourth branch, Math describes the cantref of Dinoding (around the north-eastern corner of Cardigan Bay) as 'the very best cantref for a young man to have'.¹⁶ The defeat in the fourth branch of a Dyfed army by one of Gwynedd is also described with tact.

- Such knowledge and praise of Gwynedd and Dyfed would not be surprising if the *Four Branches* were written by Gwenllïan, a Gwynedd princess married to a Dyfed prince. The Dyfed dialect of the manuscripts (if Gwenllïan did not acquire it) would be due to her scribe or to later copyists.
4. The knowledge of Ireland shown in the *Four Branches* accords with the exile there of Gwenllïan's father and husband. Their circumstances of involuntary exile may account for the second branch's somewhat negative view of the Irish. Branwen's position in Ireland also parallels that of Gwenllïan in Dyfed. Through marriage, each was living away from her immediate kin. Both had powerful kinsmen who were rulers of Gwynedd. Derick Thomson has related the divided loyalties of Branwen to women of the age and circle of Gruffudd ap Cynan.¹⁷ If Gwenllïan wrote the *Four Branches*, his point is more apt than he thinks. Branwen's vindication with the arrival of her brother's fleet in Ireland would be a comforting passage for Gwenllïan to write. Like Bendigeidfran, Gruffudd organized an invasion by sea (in 1081, when he landed Welsh, Irish, and Viking troops near St Davids). In 1138 Gwenllïan's stepsons Anarawd and Cadell brought over fifteen Viking ships (probably from Dublin) to attack Cardigan castle.¹⁸ For the men of action who were Gwenllïan's kin, organizing naval assaults in the Irish Sea was no mere literary motif. As regards the dating of the *Four Branches*, it is worth noting that Gruffydd ap Rhys was briefly exiled to Ireland in 1127. Presumably he went to Dublin, presumably with his wife. If so, it is possible Gwenllïan composed the *Four Branches* on their return to Wales. The second branch tells how the Irish broke down a bridge over the 'Llinon' or Liffey.¹⁹ This must allude to the bridge built in Dublin about the year 1000 at the foot of the modern Bridge Street, on the site of the present Father Mathew Bridge.²⁰ The possibility that Gwenllïan wrote the *Four Branches* after exile in

Ireland in 1127 accords with the belief that so great a work of art is more likely to be by a woman of about thirty, with experience of life's vicissitudes, than by a young wife in her early twenties.

5. The *Four Branches* emphasize royal descent and status. The first branch begins with a statement of Pwyll's princely rank; the second, with one of Bendigeidfran's exaltation with the crown of London (an expression making sense only after 1066. The Confessor was crowned on Easter Day 1043 at Winchester. But Harold, the Conqueror, William Rufus, and Henry I were all crowned at Westminster). Such references would be natural for Gwenllian, daughter of a king, wife of a prince. We could even see the character of Bendigeidfran as reflecting Gwenllian's own memories of her father, in assembly at Caernarfon or on campaign. The knowledge of law in the *Four Branches*, especially on such matters as horses or honour-price, is also consistent with princely authorship. What we do not find is evidence for bookish Latin learning. There are no allusions to the Bible, or to Cicero or Vergil (in contrast to *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, certainly by a cleric).²¹ We hear much of royal courts: nothing suggests the cloister. With a total lack of allusion to such religious centres as St Davids or Llanbadarn, this must (*pace* the memory of Proinsias Mac Cana) count against his attempt to link the *Four Branches* with the circle of Bishop Sulien (d. 1081) and his son Rhygyfarch.²² Nor does anything suggest the influence of Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose *History of the Kings of Britain* was published after Gwenllian's death.
6. Jackson and others have noted the *Four Branches* are hardly the work of a professional storyteller, but of 'antiquarian literary men' whose writing is 'the product of the study rather than the mead-hall'.²³ This account (where Jackson apparently makes out the author of the *Four Branches* to be someone rather like himself) can be modified in the light of the evidence

- for Gwenllian's possible authorship of the tales. Although in no way a professional storyteller, she might yet be the kind of person capable of reworking half-forgotten tales into language 'masterly for its ease, refinement, and limpidity'. Jackson also notes the author's easy familiarity with the ceremonies and luxuries of court life. Again, the familiarity is more likely to be the attribute of a princess than of antiquarian scholars.
7. The royal houses of Gwynedd and Dyfed were known for literary interests. The Latin life of Gruffudd ap Cynan, written soon after his death (but known only from a later Welsh translation), is one aspect of this. Another is the poetry of Hywel (d. 1170), son of Gwenllian's brother Owain. Hywel's poems figure in *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*. If the *Four Branches* were by his aunt, it would accord with the family's talents. (We discuss below links between the language of the *Four Branches* and of Hywel's poems.) These literary interests were continued by Gwenllian's son, the Lord Rhys, who instigated the Cardigan eisteddfod of 1176.²⁴ Gwenllian's grandnephew also had literary interests. He was none other than Gerald of Wales, grandson of Princess Nest, sister of Gwenllian's husband Gruffydd. Although not closely related to Gwenllian by blood, he yet shows the unexpected links between writers and royalty in Wales at this date.
 8. Gwenllian was married to a Deheubarth prince somewhat down on his luck, living in reduced circumstances in the hills of Caio; and a strong note of Dyfed irredentism runs through the *Four Branches*. The first branch opens by describing Pwyll as Prince of Dyfed. *Math* opens by describing Pryderi son of Pwyll as lord over one-and-twenty cantrefes of the South: the seven cantrefes of Dyfed, the seven of Glamorgan, the four of Ceredigion, and the three of Ystrad Tywi. The *Four Branches* look back to the ancient glories of the realm of Deheubarth, an attempt to revive which led to

Gwenllian's execution at Kidwelly in 1136. Her commitment to the cause of a greater Dyfed tallies with the political implications of the *Four Branches*. In the light of this, it is difficult to accept Mac Cana's suggestion that the *Four Branches* were written by a Gwent man.²⁵ Had they been, their political geography would surely be different. Nor would they show such intimate knowledge of places in Dyfed and Gwynedd.

9. Gwenllian's life coincides with the period to which the *Four Branches* is normally dated (between 1050 and 1120). Yet Sims-Williams, demolishing attempts to give more precise dating to them, has with justice quoted Mac Cana's view that the dating is 'still very much an open question'.²⁶ If in attributing the *Four Branches* to Gwenllian we date them to 1128 or slightly later, this does not strain such other evidence for dating as the relative paucity of loanwords in the tales (*pali* 'brocaded silk', *cordwal* 'Cordovan leather', *swmer* 'sumpter', of which the first only must be directly from French).
10. Gwenllian was a contemporary of 'Bledhericus Latermeri' (*sic*), active in the Carmarthen region from 1089 until his death in about 1133. We hear much of him. The son of Cadifor of Dyfed (d. 1089), he defended in 1116 the castle of Robert Courtemain against Gruffydd ap Rhys. At a date between 1129 and 1133 he gave land to Carmarthen Priory. He may be Bledri 'the well-known storyteller, who lived a little before our time' mentioned by Gerald of Wales (1146–1223), and the Welshman called Bleheris who (according to the second continuator of the *Conte del Graal*) told the story of Perceval to William, count of Poitou from 1086 to 1127.

What matters for our purposes is that Thomas, Anglo-Norman author of *Tristan*, refers to a certain 'Breri' as his authority for the poem and names Iseult's female companion as 'Brangien'. This 'Brangien' probably derives from 'Branwen'. If Thomas's

source for the name was Bledhericus, who knew the tale of Branwen as told by his neighbour Gwenllian (Caio is some twenty miles from Carmarthen), this would explain how a name which is rare in any written source reached the French poet.²⁷ It would also give the *Four Branches* a *terminus ad quem* of about 1133, when Bledhericus died. Since it is unlikely he learned the tale of Branwen on his deathbed, this strengthens the case for dating the *Four Branches* to 1128 or slightly later.

11. The hypothesis of Gwenllian's authorship of the *Four Branches* is supported by the provenance of the MS Peniarth 6 fragments of the second and third branch, and of the later White Book of Rhydderch. In a letter of 18 January 1995, Dr Daniel Huws (formerly of the National Library of Wales) told the writer that the standard dating of the fragments to about 1225 was some fifty years too early, and that their script most closely resembled that of the Hendregadredd Manuscript, of about 1300. That manuscript was written at the Cistercian abbey of Strata Florida, effectively the creation of Gwenllian's son, the Lord Rhys. It was the burial ground of his descendants, including his grandson Maredudd ab Owain (d. 1265), whose children Efa and Gruffudd were literary patrons. The links between Gwenllian's descendants and the manuscripts can be expressed as follows. The Peniarth 6 fragments can be associated with the Hendregadredd Manuscript, begun probably at Strata Florida about 1300; Strata Florida was strongly associated with Gwenllian's descendants; the third part of the Hendregadredd Manuscript was written some ten miles from Strata Florida at the home of Ieuan Llwyd, a descendant of Gwenllian via Maredudd ab Owain, who was Ieuan's great-great-grandfather; and the White Book of Rhydderch, written in about 1330 for Ieuan's son Rhydderch, contains Welsh translations (commissioned by Maredudd's son Gruffudd) of *Transitus Mariae* and pseudo-Turpin's history of

Charlemagne, as also a translation (commissioned by Maredudd's daughter Efa) of the Athanasian Creed.²⁸ If the *Four Branches* were by Gwenllïan, their appearance in manuscripts associated with her descendants should cause no surprise.

12. A further test for Gwenllïan's authorship of the *Four Branches* comes from poems by her nephew, Hywel (d. 1170) ab Owain Gwynedd. If the *Four Branches* were the work of Hywel's aunt, they should parallel his poems in grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. This is certainly true as regards vocabulary. Here the *Four Branches* and Hywel's poems, written in lucid upper-class Middle Welsh, are effectively identical. Some of their characteristic formations are not uncommon, like *duïno* 'agree', and *gosteg* 'silence'. But they also share words or formations which may be found elsewhere in poetry or prose, but are rarely found in both. Examples are *hyweddu* 'to tame', *marannedd* 'treasure', *dihenydd* 'execution', *pall* 'tent', *brawdfaeth* 'foster-brother', *taeru* 'maintain', *gorawenus* 'joyous', *parabl* 'utterance', and *pali* 'brocaded silk'. Two instances deserve special mention. In a love poem, Hywel describes a girl as

Mabinaidd, luniaidd, lawn gweddeiddrwydd,
Mabddysg oedd iddi rhoddi yn rhwydd.
Mabwraig, mwy yd ffaig ffenedigrwydd ar wen
Na pharabl o'i phen anghymhenrwydd.
Peddestrig iolydd a'm bydd eilwydd,
Pa hyd y'th iolaf? Saf rhag dy swydd.

That is,

Child-like, well-formed, full of comeliness,
Young she was trained to be bountiful;
Young woman, more passion will come to the fair
Than unseemly speech from her lips.
Pacing, pleading, shall I have a tryst?
How long must I ask you? Come meet me!²⁹

There is a possible link between *mabinogi* and the unique verbal sequence *mabinaidd*, *mabddysg*, *mabwraig*. *Peddestrig* 'walking' is also rare. Hywel's use of it curiously resembles that in the first branch. Pwyll's servant followed Rhiannon 'as fast as he could on foot (*o pedestric*), but the greater was his speed, all the further was she from him.' He tries again on horseback, but 'his horse flagged, and when he knew of his horse that its speed (*y bedestric*) was failing, he returned to where Pwyll was'. In using *peddestrig*, Hywel seems to be comparing himself to Pwyll's servant, who can do nothing unless the lady change her mind. Hywel's unique reference to *tonn Dylan* is also closely paralleled in the name *Dylan Eil Ton* 'Dylan son of Wave' in the fourth branch.³⁰ The similarity of vocabulary between the *Four Branches* and Hywel's poems accords with the proposition that they are the work of aunt and nephew. They also resemble each other in the intimate love they show of the landscape of Gwynedd, and, perhaps, their frank recognition of the love of man and woman.

13. Irish literature may also help date the *Four Branches*. It has long been recognized that one source of *Branwen* is *Mesca Ulad* 'The Intoxication of the Ulstermen' as contained in the Book of Leinster. That text has been dated to within fairly close limits. Thurneysen argued on stylistic grounds that it had the same redactor as the Book of Leinster *Táin*, who was also the author of *Cath Ruis na Ríg* 'The Battle of Rosnaree'. Thurneysen dated the career of this man, his 'Bearbeiter C', to the first third, perhaps the first quarter, of the twelfth century.³¹

If the *Four Branches* show knowledge of the work of Bearbeiter C, they must postdate him. Given the lapse of time needed for a Welsh writer to come across an Irish text, this would suggest *Four Branches* hardly predate the second or third decade of the twelfth century. We may note that this evidence for dating the *Four Branches* is independent of arguments for

attributing them to Gwenllian; but it nevertheless tallies neatly with the date of soon after 1127 suggested above, when Gwenllian's husband is known to have been in Ireland. Perhaps Gwenllian came across *Mesca Ulad* while in Dublin. It is certainly a Leinster text. Derick Thomson's valuable discussion of the relation of *Mesca Ulad* to the second branch is unfortunately spoiled by his belief that *Mesca Ulad* is no older than the Book of Leinster itself, of about 1160. Knowing the *Four Branches* to be earlier than 1160, he is therefore forced to suggest the Iron House story of the second branch is an interpolation.³² But, once we recognized the Book of Leinster *Mesca Ulad* as of the earlier twelfth century, the need for this argument vanishes.

Gwenllian's proposed authorship of the *Four Branches* also has an implication for Bearbeiter C. If she postdates him, he must predate her. Dating the *Four Branches* to 1128 or slightly later would therefore vindicate Thurneysen's placing of Bearbeiter C in the first third, or even first quarter, of the twelfth century. It is true that Thurneysen's arguments here have been criticized, with some reason, by O'Rahilly and Mac Eoin.³³ Nevertheless, if Gwenllian wrote the *Four Branches* using the work of Bearbeiter C, Thurneysen's conclusions must be substantially correct. Her authorship must also be fatal to Ó Concheanainn's belief that Bearbeiter C was none other than Áed Mac Crimthainn, the scribe-compiler of the Book of Leinster in the later twelfth century.³⁴

14. The last main argument for Gwenllian's authorship of the *Four Branches* derives from their geographical orientation. Their view of Welsh geography accords well with what we should expect of a Gwynedd writer living in the commote of Caio at a time when south Dyfed was occupied by the Normans. The Teifi valley, which forms the northern border of the commote, is crucial here. In its lower basin are Arberth, the northern slopes of the Preseli Mountains, and Glyn Cuch,

which are discussed above. Upstream was Pryderi's court at Rhuddlan Teifi, near Llandysul in south Ceredigion. About 1165 Gwenllian's own son, the Lord Rhys, gave it and its 'rich meadows' to the monks of Whitland.³⁵ If Rhys's mother wrote the *Four Branches*, we could see the place as one with special significance for both of them. When Gwydion steals Pryderi's swine, he escapes via Mochdref 'in the uplands of Ceredigion' (that is, Nant-y-Moch, above the 1000-foot contour on the western slopes of Plynlimon), before moving eastwards into Powys.³⁶ The easiest route for him to take would be up the Teifi valley, moving swine in haste via Lampeter and then Devil's Bridge, which would take him immediately past Gwenllian's husband's domain of Caio. The reference to Hereford in the third branch also fits in with the hypothesis that the *Four Branches* were composed at Caio. Hereford is easily reached from Caio by the ancient road though Brecon and Hay-on-Wye. So it may be no coincidence that Manawydan and his companions are stated as carrying out their trade in Hereford (relatively accessible from Caio), rather than (say) Bristol, Shrewsbury, or Chester, which are farther away.

In addition to the above, there are five lesser arguments for Gwenllian's authorship of the *Four Branches*. Though not conclusive, they provide corroboration for the fourteen arguments above.

15. It seems another of Gwenllian's descendants, via Ednyfed Fychan of Gwynedd, was the poet Dafydd ap Gwilym.³⁷ Hence it may be that the greatest of Welsh poets descended from the greatest of Welsh prose writers. Dafydd's fondness for alluding to the *Four Branches*, rather than to other prose narratives accessible to him, has often been noted.³⁸ Perhaps he knew an ancestor of his was their author. Welsh royalists and others may also be cheered to learn that HRH the Prince of Wales is likewise a descendant of Gwenllian, through Ednyfed Fychan (d. 1246) and Henry VII.

16. The fourth branch closes with a puzzling allusion to the 'Three Disloyal Warbands'. A triad explains these as the warbands of Goronwy, of Gwrgi and Peredur, and of Alan Fyrgan. The last was a real person: Alan IV (d. 1119), Duke of Brittany, son-in-law of William the Conqueror, and ally of Henry I. Alan's son was Brian fitz Count (fl. 1119–42), lord of Abergavenny, who in Gwenllian's time was living less than forty miles from the border of Caio.³⁹ This circumstance may add to the case for dating the *Four Branches* after 1119, when a gibe against Alan, father of a local alien ruler, would have more bite. It also accords with the case for attributing the *Four Branches* to Brian's neighbour in South Wales, Gwenllian.
17. A fundamental aspect of the *Four Branches*, as of Welsh literature as a whole (even in the twenty-first century), is that of the unity of Britain, shattered when sovereignty was lost to a foreign invader.⁴⁰ Towards the end of the second branch, Manawydan learns that Caswallon son of Beli has conquered the Isle of the Mighty and is a crowned king in London. For what it is worth, the politics of this accords well with the later part of Henry I's reign, when the English crown had a tight grip on Wales, rather than with (for example) the reign of Stephen, a period of anarchy fully exploited by the Welsh. If Gwenllian wrote the *Four Branches*, it would not be too much to see the pessimism of this passage as reflecting a defeatist mentality amongst the Welsh in the period before Henry I's death in 1135.
18. In the third branch, Pryderi goes to Caswallawn in Oxford and tenders him homage. This reference to Oxford is surprising, since the town was under a cloud until well into the twelfth century. The first sign of its new importance came with the building of the King's House, on a site north-east of the modern Worcester College. A royal charter of 1133, 'when the king visited his new house, is the first evidence of a royal presence in the town for nearly seventy years'.⁴¹ If we take this at face value and assume Pryderi's act

- of allegiance reflects the events of 1133, this creates some difficulty for the dating proposed above of the *Four Branches* to 1128 or slightly later, and certainly before about 1133, when Bledhericus died. However, it is surely the case that Henry I was in Oxford for the purpose of government before 1133, and that evidence may be brought forward to prove this. Oxford was conveniently near his hunting-lodge at Woodstock (mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 1123, which tells how the Bishop of Lincoln collapsed and died there). The King's House would not have been built unless Henry had found growing business in Oxford made a base there necessary. If so, the *Four Branches* would reflect Henry I's visits to Oxford in the 1120s and early 1130s. It is not easy otherwise to see why Oxford, which plays no great part in medieval Welsh tradition, should figure in the *Four Branches*.⁴² Alternatively, 'Oxford' might be the author's shorthand for 'Woodstock'. The distinction between the two would mean little when seen from Wales. Henry I's interest in Oxford in no way damages the case for attributing the *Four Branches* to Gwenllian; who would have more than usual concern with Henry, since her sister-in-law Nest (who long outlived her) was one of his lovers.
19. Although the *Four Branches* deal mainly with Gwynedd and Dyfed, Glamorgan also has a place in their political geography. At the opening of the fourth branch the seven cantreys of Morgannwg are amongst Pryderi's domains, part of the historic realm of Deheubarth. It may be no coincidence that two of Gwenllian's stepdaughters were married to Glamorgan rulers. Gwladus was married to Caradog ab Iestyn (active in 1127), Nest to Ifor Bach of Senghenydd (who made a sensational raid on Cardiff Castle in 1158). Caradog ruled the whole of upland Glamorgan from Neath to Taff.⁴³ Whether the marriages had taken place before the *Four Branches* were written is perhaps not of crucial importance. It is

enough that the house of Deheubarth, like the author of the *Four Branches*, had a policy of extending the power of Dyfed (though not, of course, at the expense of Gwynedd). One way of explaining this is by attributing the *Four Branches* to a member of that house.

VIII

This concludes the arguments for Gwenllïan's authorship of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. It is possible, though it seems unlikely, that they can all be discounted, and *Four Branches* studies can return to the status quo taught in departments of Celtic throughout the world, in which the work is attributed to one or more unknown males, perhaps clerics or court officials, writing at some time in the eleventh or twelfth centuries. On the other hand, it is possible that Celticists as a whole will in time accept the above case for Gwenllïan's authorship as proved, or at least as very probable. If so, what implications has this for future academic work?

There seem three answers here. First, the *Four Branches* will probably gain more attention, especially in North America, from students of women's writing. Princess Gwenllïan may join Marie de France, St Hildegard of Bingen, Margery Kempe, and Dame Julian of Norwich in the small, privileged class of medieval women writers. If this means Celtic Studies are taken more seriously than they are at present, this must be all to the good. In the light of new evidence for authorship, students may particularly wish to examine the conclusion of Roberta Valente in her 1986 Cornell University thesis, that the *Four Branches* end in 'the total disintegration of trust between the genders'. Those accepting this view may feel that female authorship of these tales would explain such disenchantment. They may also wish to consider why the universal belief of scholars over the last century and a half has been that the *Four Branches* were written by a man.

Second, the *Four Branches* should receive increased attention from historians, not least in providing unique insights into the mentality of the Welsh ruling classes in the early twelfth century. Even so great a scholar as Sir John Lloyd failed to grasp this point, when he typified the *Mabinogion* merely as embodying 'the luxuriant and free-flowering springtime of the Welsh genius, when fancy and patriotic fervour and wistful love of the past took a hundred different shapes', etc.⁴⁴ The *Four Branches* do this, of course, but possess other elements too. Parts of them are close to being a handbook for politicians. They show native Welsh government in action: a king taking counsel, conducting diplomatic negotiations, mustering troops, invading a foreign country, and so on. Of special interest is their view of Ireland. Gruffudd ap Cynan (and thus Gwenllïan) claimed descent from Brian Boru, the royal house of Leinster, and the Viking kings of Dublin. It would be gratifying to attribute aspects of the *Four Branches* to Gwenllïan's Irish-Scandinavian blood. Unfortunately, the claim that Gruffudd's mother was Rhanillt, granddaughter of Sihtric Silkbeard, figures only in Gruffudd's biography, and we cannot be sure it is true.⁴⁵ No Irish source mentions it, and the *Four Branches* themselves shed no light on this point. In spite of this, the tales provide testimony of incalculable value for Welsh civilization about 1130. If their date, provenance, and authorship can be regarded as settled, they can be used by historians with more confidence than has previously been possible.⁴⁶ They should also advance the work of linguists and literary historians, especially those working on Welsh narrative prose.

Finally, the present chapter, if correct in its conclusions, should allow certain ideas about the *Four Branches* to be dropped. Some of these have been with us a long time, others are more recent. A study of early Welsh narrative, published in 1992 by Brynley Roberts, gives a good survey of them.⁴⁷ It still cites, for example, the received dating of the *Four Branches* to between 1050 and 1120. But it seems this orthodoxy, now held rigorously by nobody, may be

laid to rest. All the evidence points to a date for these tales of after 1120, not before. Nor does analysis of them provide any basis for the hypotheses of their being the work of a royal clerk, or of multiple authorship.

If the *Four Branches* can be accepted with confidence as the work of Princess Gwenllïan, we may close by asking what they and other sources reveal of her character. If her portrait of Rhiannon is anything to go by, she must have been a remarkable woman: resourceful, charming, generous, courageous, and noble. *Le style c'est la femme même*. Only the account by Gerald of Wales of her fatal attack on Kidwelly suggests any criticism, of a dangerous overconfidence that went with heroism. Yet, taken all in all, the image of Gwenllïan from what we can guess from her life and presumed writings is an attractive one: a wife, a mother, a patriot, and surely one of the most gifted woman writers of the entire Middle Ages.

Notes

1. Owen, 40–60; Wood, 25–38; Valente, 331–45; Winward, 77–106.
2. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon*, 78–9; Mac Cana, *Branwen*, 182–90; Jackson, *International Popular Tale*, 124–30; *Branwen*, xi n. 2, xxxi n. 1.
3. Jones and Jones, 5. All references are to this translation.
4. Jarman, 131.
5. *Pwyll*, 40.
6. Pearsall, 140.
7. I owe this point to Professor John Carey of Oxford.
8. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon*, 78–9; Mac Cana, *Branwen*, 182–3; Jarman, 131.
9. Koch, 'Welsh Window', 17–52; McKenna, 'Education', 101–30; Roberts, 'Where Were the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* Written?', 61–75.
10. Jackson, *Celtic Miscellany*, 183.
11. Echard, 196–7, 200–1.
12. Lloyd, *History*, 435, 470; *Dictionary*, 310–11; *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts*, 47, 98, 104; *Historia*, 88; Gerald of Wales, 136–7.
13. G. V. Jones, 131–2.
14. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon*, 18.
15. Lloyd, *History*, 473; Griffiths, 100, 121; T. Llew Jones, 6–7.

16. Lloyd, *History*, 238.
17. *Branwen*, xlv.
18. *Dictionary*, 8, 61; Griffiths, 101.
19. Sims-Williams, 'Submission', 38.
20. Clarke (with an Irish Ordnance Survey map), 8.
21. *Historia*, 88.
22. Mac Cana, *Branwen*, 183–7.
23. Jackson, *International Popular Tale*, 125–8, 129–30.
24. Lloyd, *History*, 548–9; Griffiths, 106.
25. Mac Cana, *Mabinogi*, 43–4.
26. Sims-Williams, 'Submission', 61.
27. Bullock-Davies, 10–12; *Trioedd*, cxv, 287, 528.
28. Huws, 'Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch', 19–20, 22, and his *Llyfrau Cymraeg*, 15, 19.
29. *Oxford Book*, 28; Clancy, 130.
30. Haycock, 'Dylan Ail Ton', 26–38.
31. *Mesca Ullad*, xix–xx; *Táin*, liv.
32. *Branwen*, xxxvii–xl.
33. O'Rahilly, 68–72; Mac Eoin, 117.
34. Ó Concheanainn, 19, 30.
35. Lloyd, *History*, 260, 596–7.
36. *Pedeir Keinc*, 258–9.
37. *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*, xxxii; *Dictionary*, 839.
38. Bromwich, *Aspects*, 132–3.
39. *Culhwch*, 79–80.
40. Cf. Roberts, *Studies*, 25–40.
41. Southern, 5.
42. *Cyfranc*, xxxviii–xxxix.
43. Smith, 25–7.
44. Lloyd, 692.
45. *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts*, 136; Flanagan, 85–6.
46. Wendy Davies, 211–12; R. R. Davies, 17–18, 69–70, 116–17.
47. Roberts, *Studies*, 96.