

Compare and contrast the depiction of warfare and its consequences in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi and *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi and the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* represent some of the earliest prose stories in the Celtic-speaking world. Both deal with conflict and the supernatural, and they represent a view of the ancient past as seen from the perspective of medieval Wales and Ireland. The Four Branches survives in two manuscripts: the White Book of Rhydderch (c. 1350)¹ and the Red Book of Hergest (1382 – c. 1410).² Dafydd Johnston notes that 'the evenness of style and tone suggests that the four are the work of a single author, who may well have been a cleric, probably in the latter half of the eleventh century'.³ Mythological elements such as the giant Bendigeidfran and Lleu indicate that some of the material derives from a much older oral tradition.⁴ The *Táin* forms part of the Ulster cycle of early Irish literature and survives in fragments in the Book of Dun Cow (c. 1100 with later additions during the twelfth or thirteenth centuries)⁵ and the Yellow Book of Lecan (c. 1391 – c. 1401),⁶ as well as in a more complete version in the Book of Leinster (c. 1160).⁷ Much like the Four Branches, the *Táin* 'had a long oral existence before it received a literary shape'.⁸ The world described in the *Táin* is clearly pre-Christian, and its depiction of warfare in particular is similar to Classical descriptions of Iron Age British and Gaulish societies.⁹ While the *Táin* focuses on the courage, fate, and feats of individual warriors, the Four Branches is more concerned with the underlying causes of conflict and its personal and societal consequences.

¹ Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, *White Book of Rhydderch*, c. 1350, Peniarth MS 4.

² Oxford, Jesus College, *Red Book of Hergest*, 1382 – c. 1410, Jesus College MS. 111.

³ Dafydd Johnston, *The Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), p. 25.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, *Book of Dun Cow*, c. 1100, RIA MS 23 E 25.

⁶ Dublin, Trinity College, *Yellow Book of Lecan*, c. 1391 – c. 1401, MS 1318.

⁷ Dublin, Trinity College, *Book of Leinster*, c. 1160, TCD MS 1339.

⁸ Thomas Kinsella, *The Táin: From the Irish epic Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. ix.

⁹ Ibid.

Warfare in the Four Branches arises from personal grievances, plots, or political disputes. An example of this can be found in the First Branch: Arawn is an otherworldly being locked in a territorial dispute and 'forever fighting' with his neighbour, Hafgan.¹⁰ The war between Bendigeidfran and Matholwch in the Second Branch is first caused by Efnysien's offence at not being consulted over his sister's betrothal, and then again when he discovers the Irish treachery before Matholwch's meeting with Bendigeidfran.¹¹ The war between Pryderi and Math in the Fourth Branch is ultimately a result of Gwydion's scheming to separate Math from the virgin Goewin in order for his brother Gilfaethwy to rape her.¹² While war is often a means of exerting royal authority, the influence of the supernatural can also be found driving the conflict; Arawn's battle with Hafgan can only be won by Pwyll taking his place for an entire year and then slaying Hafgan without delivering a final blow. Math needs Gowein in the first place due to a 'special attribute' that requires him to rest his feet in the lap of a virgin except when he is making war.¹³ Gwydion uses magic to conjure twelve stallions with golden bridles and twelve hounds with golden collars and leashes to convince Pryderi to part with his herd of pigs so Gwydion can bring them to Math. The hounds and stallions vanish soon after and Pryderi mobilises the south of Wales to war with Gwynedd. The Four Branches depict warfare as an often devastating consequence of personal and political ambitions, with magic and trickery subverting the course of events.¹⁴

Warfare in the *Táin* is motivated by Queen Medb of Connacht's ambition to equal her husband Ailill in wealth and status; when comparing each of their possessions, they are almost fully 'matched and measured', however when comparing their herds of cattle, Medb discovers

¹⁰ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 24–32; Byfield, Catherine E., 'Character and Conflict in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 40 (1993), 51–72 [p. 9].

¹² Davies, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 47–48.

¹³ Ibid, p. 47.

¹⁴ Byfield, 'Character and Conflict', p. 15.

that Ailill possesses a great bull named Finnbennach, the White Horned, who was born to a cow in Medb's herd but refused 'to be led by a woman'.¹⁵ Medb learns of Donn Cuailnge, the Brown Bull of Cuailnge, and her determination to acquire Donn Cuailnge escalates into a full-scale war with Ulster that draws in warriors from all over Ireland. While the war is caused by Medb's pride, it is amplified and sustained by Ireland's warrior culture and its code of personal honour. Medb's motivations remain deeply personal throughout; as she notes to her charioteer at the beginning of the saga: 'Everyone leaving a lover or a friend today will curse me... This army is gathered for me'.¹⁶ However, the war becomes an expression of her personal sovereignty, and she entices warriors to do battle on her behalf with promises of wealth, fame, sex, and the hand of her daughter.¹⁷ Cúchulainn by contrast is forced into the role of Ulster's sole defender by the demands of duty and honour and a supernatural curse that causes all the men of Ulster to be stricken down with pain for a nine day period – an affliction from which Cúchulainn is immune as he is both a youth and the son of the god, Lugh.¹⁸ While magic and trickery are present within the story, they do not dictate the course of events the same way as in the Four Branches; instead, Medb's desire for supremacy is contrasted with Cúchulainn's commitment to duty in a society that prizes martial prowess and personal renown above all else.

Violence in the Four Branches is usually alluded to or described only in broad terms. The most detailed description of combat is Pwyll's encounter with Hafgan:

With that the two kings approached each other towards the middle of the ford for the fight. At the first attack, the man who was in Arawn's place strikes Hafgan in the centre of the boss of his shield, so that it splits in half, and all his armour shatters,

¹⁵ Kinsella, *The Táin*, p. 55.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 60.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 169.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 8.

and Hafgan is thrown the length of his arm and spear-shaft over his horse's crupper to the ground, suffering a fatal blow.¹⁹

These lines stand in stark contrast to the long and often brutal descriptions of Cúchulainn's single combats. Notably, the battle is on horseback and resembles a high medieval joust, whereas the battles in the *Táin* take place either on foot or from chariot, emphasizing the different cultural contexts of each story. Even greater brevity is employed in the Second Branch during the battle between the Welsh and Irish, where no deeds of valour are referred to except for Efnysien's redemptive sacrifice in breaking the Cauldron of Rebirth. This allows the Welsh to win with just seven survivors, Pryderi among them, and all of the Irish men slain.²⁰ Pryderi ultimately perishes by the hand of Gwydion in the Fourth Branch, but his death is summarized in a single line: 'because of strength and valour, and magic and enchantment, Gwydion triumphed and Pryderi was killed'.²¹ There is less emphasis placed on leaders as warriors; instead kings are shown to favour prudence and peacemaking, as in the case of Bendigeidfran and Matholwch.²² Bendigeidfran utters the words, 'he who is a leader, let him be a bridge' before allowing his army to cross a river over his back.²³ After Pryderi's army suffers heavy losses in the battle against Math's forces, Pryderi sues for peace and offers to settle the issue in single-combat against Gwydion. Math replies, 'I will allow it gladly. I will not force any one to go and fight if we can prevent it'.²⁴ Rather than status and personal renown, the leaders of the Four Branches are motivated by

¹⁹ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 6.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 32.

²¹ Ibid, p. 51.

²² Byfield, 'Character and Conflict', p. 6.

²³ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 30.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 51.

responsibility for the wellbeing of their people as well as observing the rules of hospitality and good moral conduct.²⁵

The *Táin* contains vivid descriptions of combat, particularly in Cúchulainn's fights in the ford. The ford represents a ritualistic space for combat in Celtic literature,²⁶ and this can also be observed in the example of Pywll and Hafgan in the First Branch of the Mabinogi. However, where the First Branch offers a brief account of the battle the *Táin* seems to revel in detail. When Cúchulainn fights his foster-brother, Ferdia, the battle takes a gruelling three days, with the warriors taking it in turns to choose their weapons and ending each day at sunset by embracing and kissing each other on the cheeks.²⁷ On the final day, Cúchulainn suggests they try 'fighting in ford water', and Ferdia agrees although he knows that 'Cúchulainn destroyed every hero and high warrior that ever fought him in ford water.'²⁸ Much attention is given to the panoply of individual warriors, such as when Fergus visits Cúchulainn and Laeg, his charioteer, notes: 'He carries a curved shield with a scalloped edge of light gold and a stabbing-spear bound around from its neck to its foot. There is a sword as big as a boat's rudder at his thigh'.²⁹ A warrior is defined by their weapons, and they dictate how they are perceived by others. Cúchulainn debates whether he should go to a meeting with Medb unarmed, and Laeg cautions him: 'A warrior without his weapons is not under warriors' law; he is treated under the rule for cowards'.³⁰ This emphasis on single combat and martial display highlights the warrior ethos of the *Táin* and the role of violence in determining an individual's worth. Cúchulainn is unique among the warriors of Ireland, in that he possesses supernatural powers inherited from his

²⁵ Ibid, p. xxvi.

²⁶ Ciaran Carson, *The Táin : A New Translation of the Táin Bó Cúailnge* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 10.

²⁷ Kinsella, *The Táin*, pp. 187–200.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 194.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 118.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 138.

otherworldly father, Lug mac Ethnenn.³¹ This allows him to undergo a 'warp-spasm' when enraged, turning him into: 'a monstrous thing, hideous, shapeless, unheard of';³² when transformed, Cúchulainn is capable of cutting down hundreds of foes single-handedly. This contrasts with the depictions of magic in the Four Branches, where the supernatural is more often a subtle force shaping events rather than a means of violence.

The consequences of warfare in the Four Branches are generally tragic. The decimation of Ireland and Wales in the Second Branch leads to the death of Branwen from a broken heart, as she blames herself for the conflict.³³ When the survivors return to Britain, they learn that Bendigeidfran's son, Caradog, has been usurped in their absence by Caswallon with the aid of a magic cloak. In the Fourth Branch, Pryderi's war against Math is ultimately futile, costing many lives including his own. In both cases, the conflict was instigated by family members pursuing their own agenda against their king's will. The Four Branches consistently emphasize the futility of war and the moral lessons to be learned from its consequences. However, single combat between leaders to decide the outcome of political disputes can lead to positive outcomes. The battle between Pywll and Hafgan, which Pywll agrees to in the first place to avoid causing offence to Arwan over a hunting mishap, results in a prosperous friendship and Pywll meeting Rhiannon.³⁴ While Pryderi is slain by Gwydion, his sacrifice saves the lives of his soldiers and leads to peace between Gwynedd and the South. Rather than fighting purely for personal glory or to satisfy a warrior ethos, the heroes of the Four Branches are motivated by loyalty and duty to their kin.

³¹ Ibid, p. 142.

³² Ibid, p. 150.

³³ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.33.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

The war between Connacht and Ulster in the *Táin* results in a pyrrhic victory for both sides; Cúchulainn, along with the recovered men of Ulster, defeats Medb's army, but he allows her escape with Donn Cuailnge. Upon returning to Connacht, Donn Cuailnge slays Finnbennach only to continue roaming Ireland until he also falls dead. The war has no lasting political consequences for Ailill and Medb other than a truce with Ulster that lasts seven years.³⁵ The cycle of warfare and raiding appears to be endemic to early Irish culture, providing an arena for heroes to find fame and fortune. Despite being victorious Cúchulainn pays a heavy price for the *Táin*, as he is forced to kill his childhood friend and endure immense physical and mental suffering. The deaths of both bulls seems to mirror the futility of the conflict itself, yet the narrative nonetheless revels in the spectacle of battle.

Both the Four Branches and the *Táin* deal with warfare and its consequences, but they do so from distinct cultural perspectives. Conflict in the Four Branches is the result of political intrigue and the intrusion of the supernatural on mortal affairs, and the cost of war is emphasized more than glory or heroism. Wise leaders seek peace wherever possible, and they act with the good of their people in mind. By contrast, the world of the *Táin* is one in which war is both inevitable and celebrated. Leaders engage in war to increase their status, while warriors participate to win wealth and fame. The role of the warrior is highly codified, and a willingness to commit violence is an expression of one's strength of character. Magic and the otherworld are always present, but it is the heroism of mortals which drives events. War and conflict are ingrained in both stories, but the different ways in which they are depicted reveal contrasting visions of the role of warfare in early Celtic society.

³⁵ Kinsella, *The Táin*, pp. 252–253.

Bibliography

- Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, *White Book of Rhydderch*, c. 1350, Peniarth MS 4.
- Byfield, Catherine E., 'Character and Conflict in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 40 (1993), 51–72
- Carson, Ciaran, *The Táin : A New Translation of the Táin Bó Cúailnge* (London: Penguin, 2008)
- Davies, Sioned, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, *Book of Dun Cow*, c. 1100, RIA MS 23 E 25
- Dublin, Trinity College, *Book of Leinster*, c. 1160, TCD MS 1339
- Dublin, Trinity College, *Yellow Book of Lecan*, c. 1391 – c. 1401, MS 1318
- Ford, Patrick K., *The Mabinogi, and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (California: University of California Press, 2019)
- Gantz, Jeffrey, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981)
- Hanson-Smith, Elizabeth, 'Pwyll Prince of Dyfed: the narrative structure', in *The Mabinogi: a book of essays*, ed. by C. W. Sullivan III (London: Routledge Revivals, 2015)
- Johnston, Dafydd, *The Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017)
- Kinsella, Thomas, *The Táin: From the Irish epic Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970)
- Mallory, J. P., *Aspects of the Táin* (Belfast: December Publications, 1992)
- Mckenna, Catherine A., 'The Theme of Sovereignty in Pwyll', in *The Mabinogi: a book of essays*, ed. by C. W. Sullivan III (London: Routledge Revivals, 2015)
- Ní Bhrolcháin, Muireann, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009)
- Oxford, Jesus College, *Red Book of Hergest*, 1382 – c. 1410, Jesus College MS. 111