

Compare and contrast any TWO characters in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. In your answer, you should refer to some of the characterization techniques used by the author.

The following essay will compare the character of Bendigeidfran with that of Matholwch, both from the second branch of the Mabinogion. I have chosen to compare both characters from the same branch as I feel this would offer a more neutral baseline for comparison as both characters are defined within the same storyline and encapsulated within the same framework, by the same author. I intend to explore the authors characteristic techniques and exploit the use of the first-person narrative. I wish to draw particular attention to the first-person narrative between Bendigeidfran and Matholwch in the frame story of Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid,¹. As this passage empowers the reader to assign their character traits and perceived worthiness to each of the lead characters based on the same experience, in turn, limit the need for descriptive characterization by the author.

The analysis of two characters from the same branch of the Mabinogion will provide detailed in the insight of two characters psyches revealed to the reader under the same baseline conditions. This prompts each reader to assign their character traits based on personal perception and perceived moral value.

The second branch of the Mabinogion introduces the reader to Bran the blessed, who later becomes Bendigeidfran the King of Britain and Matholwch the King of Ireland, including their close kin and kinsmen. The author of the second branch immediately makes clear reference to the regal status of both characters within the first few paragraphs of its text and is keen to stress the genealogy of Bendigeidfran highlighting direct lineage links to his father Llyr and mother Penarddun the descendant of Mynogan.² That includes family members such as Pwyll and Rhiannon who's reputation and mythical prowess preceded Bran in the first branch of the Mabinogion.

The Welsh word 'Bran' can be translated to 'crow' or 'raven' offering the reader an eponymous adjective that congers up images of blackness above one's head, that

¹ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) pp 26-27.

² Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p 22.

prompt's the motion of looking upward. Possibly in anticipation. This would also reflect the physicality of Bendigeidfran who is clearly described as being of giant stature, capable of striding the Irish sea and so large that he is unable to fit inside a house. Bran's physicality draws close parallels with the giants depicted in Genesis chapter four and six of the old testaments. Collectively being described as 'men of old, men of renown'. Who are said to be the offspring of 'fallen angels' or 'Nephilim', who have taken wives with Homosapien sapiens women and bore unto them giants.³ Geoffrey of Monmouthshire also lends credence to the physicality of Bendigeidfran's character by suggesting that when Brutus descendant of Troy first arrived in Britain it was uninhabited except for a race of giants.⁴

The use of physically gigantic characters is numerous within much universal mythology'. They enable the author to 'up the ante' or 'raise the stakes' within the story, where their physical size often reflects the size of their achievements or misadventures.

The Author of the second branch of the Mabinogion does not assign the same descriptive backdrop or geology lineage to Matholwch as they do for Bendigeidfran. This is also true concerning academic sources or archaeological evidence. A small number of scholars have associated Matholwch with more credible historic figures, the likes of Ruaidri Ua Conchobair, the High King of Connaught⁵ or Diaramit King of Leinster. Whom offered his daughter to the Earl of Pembroke in a similar 'business deal'. However, it must be noted that this transaction involved Diaramit offering his sister's hand in marriage in exchange for strengthening his country as opposed to receiving a wife in a similar vein.⁶ For this reason, accurately identifying Matholwch character traits will be highly reliant upon text contained within the Mabinogion.

Therefore, within the texts of the Mabinogion Matholwch is initially presented to the reader as a symbol of peace, wishing to represent his people in search of an alliance between Ireland and mainland Britain. However, Matholwch identifies his interactions

³ Genesis; 6, 1-4.

⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Pp22-23.

⁵ Sean Duffy, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, in *Medieval Ireland: An Encyclopaedia*, pp. 466–471.

⁶ Otway-Ruthven, A J, *A History of Medieval Ireland*, 1968, p45.

with Bendigeidfran as a 'business deal'. Stating to Bran upon arrival that he will not enter the country unless it is under terms of business.⁷

Matholwch's intention is to unite both countries in a bid to make them stronger, and he intends to do this by taking Branwen, the sister of Bendigeidfran as his wife and intermarrying into the Mynogan lineage, therefore, ensuring his kin will become the first ruler of what will become Great Britain and sovereignty over both Ireland and mainland UK.* During this sequence of the text, the author makes good use of 'character action', that allows the reader makes several strong assumptions about Matholwch character. That of the 'peace seeker ' and that of the 'businessman'.

Bendigeidfran agrees to discuss matters and both Matholwch and Bendigeidfran with their respected entourage took council the very next day to discuss matters. After the marriage is consummated both parties who congregate for the celebration. At this point in the text, the author confirms the positive social environment at the time of this event by use of descriptive narrative that physical places the characters next to one another within the same social construct, offering the reader a sense of empathy and mutual respect between Bendigeidfran , Matholwch and their kinsmen. This passage in the text enables the reader to identify shared characteristics of 'the peacekeeper' within the persona of both Bendigeidfran and Matholwch which is again confirmed by resolution of compensation paid to Matholwch for the mutilations to his houses by Efnysien, Bendigeidfran's half-brother.⁸

Tradition law compiled by Howel Dda offers another element to Bendigeidfran and Matholwch's character traits. According to medieval law, clear guidelines are given for arrangement of marriage and particularly who should have capacity over the matter. Therefore, the text makes it clear that Bendigeidfran had full capacity to offer Branwen to Matholwch especially as Efnysien was absent from marriage council therefore his value within the council is lessened because he is only a half-brother. Howel Dda law also bolsters Bendigeidfran 's character traits of 'peacekeeper' and now 'law abider', by acknowledging his motivation to overcompensate Matholwch for the malice deeds carried out by Efnysien, Bendigeidfran goes to great extent to maintain his friendship with Matholwch and honour amounts his people.⁹ The

⁷ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p 23.

⁸ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) pp 24-26.

⁹ *The Athenaeum*, Journal of English and foreign literature, science and the fine arts. No 898. 1845, P 480.

motivation for peace is clear character traits that both Bendigeidfran and Matholwch share. Matholwch's motivation to cross the Irish sea and seek unity by marriage via the blessing of an imposing giant of great renown is equal to the motivation and level of compensation to 'win back' Matholwch's friendship. However, although both characters share motivational character traits, there is a definitive contrast between the source of their motivation. This is confirmed when Bendigeidfran next takes council with Matholwch and immediately notices that the conversation was not as meaning full as it had previously and Bendigeidfran is greatly saddened by this, suggesting he is fearing a loss of friendship¹⁰. Bendigeidfran is keen to make mend and offers Matholwch more compensation in the way of his personal prized possession, the caldron of rebirth. The author is keen to highlight Matholwch's emotional pleasure upon receiving the caldron is far exceeds the pleasure of maintaining a solid relationship with Bendigeidfran and Branwen.

The exchange of the cauldron of rebirth plays a significant part in the story. It withholds the mystical key element of providing life after death for those who are placed within, which traditionally symbolises the female womb and the birth process and identified as one of the spoils of the underworld. Taliesin also lends weight to the mythical significance a magic cauldron in the Book of Taliesin¹¹ and descriptions of the Holy grail in 'The Quest del Saint Greal' offer similar connotations surrounding its use.¹² Often its use is accompanied by a forfeit or consequence that swiftly pursues the user, resulting in this case, by in the inability to speak. On the other hand, it can rejuvenate dead soldiers and enable them to fight again. A profound symbol of strength for the beholder or in Bendigeidfran's case, quite a powerful weapon to hand over to a past enemy. Suggesting Bendigeidfran views his friendship with Matholwch as stable and long-lasting and Bendigeidfran's action confirms his motivation for peace. Perhaps this exchange can be interpreted to mean that now Bendigeidfran feels he and Matholwch are allies, he has no need of such an unforgiving machine of war and does not foresee a use for such an item. By handed it to Matholwch the readers notice a strong symbolic gesture, sharing similarities to current military disarmament.

¹⁰ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p 25.

¹¹ J. Evans *Gwenogvryn*, poems from the book of Taliesin, *llanbedrog Tramvan*, 1915, pp 26-41.

¹² George H. Brierley, *Cymru fu: notes and queries relating to the past history of Wales and the border*, Vol 1, Part 4 Published by Daniel Owen and company. Pp16-18.

The origins of the cauldron of rebirth are as much a mystery to the reader as it is to Matholwch up until this point in the text. However, the author has purposely provided the reader with the inclusion of a clever frame story that appears almost halfway through the story. That offers an origin back-story for the cauldron of rebirth that lays the foundations for an integral piece of the first-person narrative that Pitt's both our characters against the same moral dilemma and experienced within the same structure environment of and framework of the text. This has allowed the reader to accurately assign character traits based on primary source accounts played out under equal conditions.

Within the descriptive first-person narration of the frame story, the reader can extract many moral and immoral psychological traits from both characters.

The frame-story starts with Bendigeidfran, as he eases Matholwch's curiosity regarding the cauldron by explaining it had originated from his, Matholwch's homeland Ireland, and that it had been given to him as a gift for allowing sanctuary in his kingdom to Llaes Llaes Gyfnewid, who was a giant of a man the similar stature as Bendigeidfran and accompanied by his wife Cymidei Cymeinfoll of even larger proportion? Llaes Llaes Gyfnewid and his wife had informed Bendigeidfran how they were deceived while intoxicated and then placed into a house of iron which was swiftly set on fire; and how they had suffered great pain and loss.¹³

It is at this point in the text that the author assigns a 'compassionate element' to Bendigeidfran's personality yet contrasting elements of malevolence towards Matholwch. This passage encourages the reader to draw upon the similarities in the physical size of the Irish refugees and Bendigeidfran. However, while Bendigeidfran is renowned for his size and empowered by his people, Llaes Llaes Gyfnewid and his wife are excommunicated and made scapegoats. This suggests that Bendigeidfran was in a good position to self-identify with the giant refugees resulting in traits of compassion and equality.

Bendigeidfran is surprised that Matholwch had enquired about the family of giants, especially as it had no longer any concerned for him. It is at this point in the story

¹³ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p 26.

that the author reveals to the reader that the cauldron of rebirth had been 'under the nose' and within easy reach of Matholwch for a significant amount of time, before unknowingly ending up in Bendigeidfran's possession.

The frame-story continues in the first-person narrative with Matholwch telling Bendigeidfran all he knows on the matter. Matholwch describes in the first person, his experience with Llaser Llaes Gyfnewid and company. Matholwch describes how he observed a giant of a man with a cauldron on his back coming out of a lake in his homeland. Matholwch makes several direct physical descriptions of the man. Stating to Bendigeidfran that he was 'huge, monstrous man, too, with an evil, ugly look about him'¹⁴. Within this short passage, the reader can gain a small insight into the psyche of Matholwch's character by identifying the negative immoral and physical pre-judgement assigned to Llaser Llaes Gyfnewid's character before meeting him in person.

Matholwch proceeds to inform Bendigeidfran that a female giant, the wife of Llaser Llaes Gyfnewid followed behind, approached Matholwch and spoke with him. Explaining their dilemma, the giants stated that very shortly the female giant will be due to give birth to a boy who will quickly become a fully armed warrior. Matholwch responds to this dilemma initially with moral compassion equal to that of the wisest of kings and describes how he physically relocate them to a safe place.

Matholwch continues to describe that for a year no one objected to the family of giants but at some point, this all changes. Matholwch receives continual complaints made against the giants and he explained to Bendigeidfran that because of the giant's behaviour, his people rose against him and asked him to get rid of the giants. Leavening Matholwch with two opinions, his kingdom or the giants. Matholwch is left with a conundrum, the results of which will define the true character of Matholwch and proceeds his reputation throughout the rest of the Mabinogion and related literature.

Cecum to the pressure of his people and personal ego to maintain the throne, Matholwch empowers his council to facilitate the destruction of the giants. This transcends into a plan to deceive the giants into entering a house made of iron and when the giants fell asleep the house was set on fire in the hope of destroying the

¹⁴ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p 26.

giants within. The reader quickly identifies Matholwch decision to 'sell-out' on his moral code and compassionate nature due to the pressure of the people, and all too easily turn a blind eye to the deceitful plot to murder a family he once felt compelled to help. Suggesting that King Matholwch compassion manifests from the heart, but all too easy corrupted in exchange for power, stature and wealth of the people.

Luckily, Llaes Llaes Gyfnewid and his wife manages to escape the burning house and flee to mainland Britain where he encounters Bendigeidfran and gifts him with the cauldron of rebirth.

The first-person narration now changes to Bendigeidfran and the reader is aware of Bendigeidfran's new insight into Matholwch conduct. The author focuses on comparing both character traits of the Kings; and so, with a hint of shame, Matholwch asks Bendigeidfran 'what sort of welcome did you give them lord'?¹⁵ Offering the reader, a unique framework to measure the moral value of two equal status characters.

Bendigeidfran Provides Matholwch with a complete contrasting description of treatment shown towards the giants. Stating that 'I dispersed them throughout the land, and they are numerous and prosper everywhere'. Bendigeidfran further describes positive attributes associated with his actions, stating they (the giants) 'strengthen whatever place they happen to be in with the best men and weapons anyone has seen'.¹⁶

Bendigeidfran has benefited from his compassionate nature and moral judgment far more than Matholwch did and even though both kings offered the same amount of compassion to the giants, but Bendigeidfran prospers from the situation under the same conditions that Matholwch fails. Suggesting that Matholwch bends easily to the will of his people, while Bendigeidfran had the foresight to integrate the giants where their skills were best needed. Perhaps Bran was able to empathize with the giants and by drawing on personal experience, able to place them in certain sectors of the country, this meets the needs of the giants, while both Bendigeidfran and his country benefited from their inhabitancy.

¹⁵ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p 27.

¹⁶ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p 27.

The author again highlights Matholwch's unstable political position within his kingdom by illustrating the diverse treatment received by Branwen once in Ireland. All is well for Branwen until the second year with Matholwch, where once again Matholwch comes under political pressure from his closest kinsmen and intense social dissatisfaction. Matholwch is taunted openly by his closest friends, who questioned his leadership and honour by persuading Matholwch to take revenge on Bendigeidfran via the treatment of Branwen for the insult that he received when in Britain. Matholwch once again gives in to the pressure of his kinsmen and he forces Branwen into a life of imprisonment and daily punishments. The author adds a display of embarrassment and fear by the actions of Matholwch who refuses all visitors to Ireland nor lets excursions out.

The author draws a lot of attention to the weak leadership skills of Matholwch by repeatedly confirming his inability to lead from the heart and do what's morally just, in exchange for the popularity of the people. The next section of the story provides the reader with a stark contrast of leadership skill as Bendigeidfran's character traits are now put to the test.

Bendigeidfran receives word of Branwen's treatment by Matholwch and plans a rescue attempt by mustering an army and striding through the Irish sea. The size of Bendigeidfran's army is described by the author as a levy of one hundred and forty-four districts. suggesting universal grievance for Branwen's mistreatment while the offer of military support is a testament to his renown stature of Bendigeidfran's character; both physical and metaphorically, and later becoming firmly established as 'leader of men'.

The author lends weight to Bendigeidfran's physical description by describing how he strides across the Irish Sea carrying the stringed instruments. The Author continues to reiterate Bendigeidfran's physical size by the indirect use of Branwen's decipher of the swine heard story that confirms to the reader Bendigeidfran 's physical size. The author uses Branwen to make comparisons between bran's physical features and imposing natural geographical landmarks. Making a direct comparison to Bendigeidfran as a mountain, containing two ridges each with a lake representing his eye's that are fully focused on Ireland.¹⁷

¹⁷ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p 29.

Matholwch character traits start to become familiar to the reader as he again accepts advice from his king's men and retreats further into Ireland, putting the physical barrier of the Liffey river between his army and Bendigeidfran's. However, this sets the stage for Bendigeidfran to reveal his finest quality. One that immortalizes the character of Bendigeidfran forever, while making him the primary ideology of many noble genealogies spanning hundreds of years.¹⁸

Unable to cross the Liffey by boat, Bendigeidfran fully adopts the leader role, by laying down and using his gigantic statue to physical span the width of the river, acting as a physical bridge and allowing his army to cross over him to reach the other side. Whilst resighting the famous proverb 'he who is leader, let him be a bridge'. The author is keen to express Bendigeidfran's traits of leading by example, stepping up to the task and taking full responsibility, especially under pressured circumstances. Quite the contrast compared with Matholwch's lack of leadership skills.

Matholwch and his army who are now territorially backed into a corner and offer to concede the kingdom of Ireland to Branwen and Matholwch's son Gwern. However, Bendigeidfran is not convinced by Matholwch's level of compensation and so he is offered another. Matholwch offers to honour Bendigeidfran by building him a house big enough for both him and his kinsmen to occupy. Having not being able to fit inside a house before, Bendigeidfran accepted the offer, the house was built and the two kings, including their kinsmen, arrange to take council in the newly established house.

Again, the author sets up the narrative mechanisms of the story and the reader is all too aware of Matholwch's deceptive nature of offering shelter to his victims and lulling them into a false sense of safety before attempting to kill them. This time is no exception; Matholwch has planned to ambush Bendigeidfran. Only this time the now estranged half-brother Efnysien foils the ambush by uncovering the hidden soldiers and killing them. Efnysien retains his anger for the attempted ambush until both kings took council and once in possession of Gwern, he cast him into the fire. Ending the lineage that binds the two countries together and the destroys the only remaining symbol of peace and prosperity between the two nations.

¹⁸ Hanes Iestyn ab Gwrgant, Traethawd buddugol yn Eisteddfod Aberafon, Seren Gomer. 1849 P 333.

A monumental war swiftly followed between the men of Britain and the men of Ireland resulting in a victory for Bendigeidfran and his British men, but this victory comes at great cost, leaving only a small number of people inhabiting both countries.

This is the last the reader hears about Matholwch and must accept that he was destroyed along with the rest of Ireland. Bendigeidfran, however, despite receiving a fatal blow by a poisoned spear to the foot, that echo similarity's with Achilles downfall in the Trojan war storeys*, order his men to cut off his head and transported to London to act as a defence mechanism against invaders. But before this can happen, Bendigeidfran ensures his men many years of good company, stating 'you will find the head to be as good company as it ever was when it was on me'. This last statement made by bran draws out the very essence of his moral worth. suggesting that it is Bendigeidfran's moral code of conduct, equality and compassion and overall mental strength, that are far more beneficial to them than his physical strength and stature. The author confirms this in a later passage by directly informing the reader that 'Having the head there was no more unpleasant than when Bendigeidfran had been alive with them'.* As a result of experience with Bendigeidfran's head by his close kin within the confines of Gwales, where the author establishes the label of 'the Assembly of the Noble Head' that assigns the 'noble' characteristics of wise kings and suggests the assembly may represent a school of thought located in Gwales. A fine time to gain valuable knowledge in the wake of such a disaster if the country has any chance of being restored to its current state.

Bendigeidfran's head eventually arrives in London as instructed and is buried on Gwynfryn. Traditional believed to be the mound which the Tower of London sits upon which is a testament to Bendigeidfran's legacy. Bendigeidfran's reputation can also be found in the Arthurian literature, that suggests King Arthur's motive to remove Bendigeidfran's head from the mound as King Arthur felt that only he should have the privilege of defending the country. Suggesting Bendigeidfran's reputation was inspiring character definitions hundreds of years later.

The second branch of the Mabinogion provides the reader with a structured story line, in to which Matholwch and Bendigeidfran, both leaders of their country, must face equally challenging dilemmas. This enables the reader to draw's out a wide

range of diversity of character traits that distinguish both kings' moral judgement and leadership skills; and

although the outcome of the story within the second branch ends in such a loss, it must be noted that both Matholwch's and Bendigeidfran's sole intention was peace between the two nations. However, this was never to last. The reader is encouraged to identify the contrasting character traits of both kings within the story frame of Llaser Llaes Gwyn as the author Pitts one kings attributes against the other within the same textual dilemma. Matholwch's character displayed traits of weak leadership that failed to ensure peace and lead to both countries becoming inhabited.

Bendigeidfran's Character provides different traits to those associated with Matholwch as the author promotes Bendigeidfran moral judgment and decision making in the same textual environment where Matholwch continually failed. The companionship of both kings must be highlighted for their importance within this text. The reader is consistently reminded of the pressure put on Matholwch by his kinsmen and all too easy bending the will of Matholwch resulting in actions of deceitful means. Yet the relationship between Bendigeidfran and his country men are built upon respect. Several times throughout the story the author reminds the reader of Bendigeidfran attributions that are now immortalized throughout medieval literature and still celebrated today. Bendigeidfran has, therefore, become a symbolic representation of his moral actions and character traits that establish him as the true king of Britain.

Bibliography:

Brierley, George H. Cymru fu: notes and queries relating to the past history of Wales and the border, Vol 1, Part 4 Published by Daniel Owen and company. Pp16-18.

Davies Sioned, The Mabinogion (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Dean Pitman 29001195.

Duffy Sean, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, in *Medieval Ireland: An Encyclopaedia*, Pp. 46.

Evans J. Gwenogvryn (ed.), *The Book of Taliesin* (Llanbedrog, 1910), 33.10; 27.13–14; 6–471.

Genesis; 6, 1-4.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Pp22-23.

Iestyn Hanes ab Gwrgant, *Traethawd buddugol yn Eisteddfod Aberafon*, Seren Gomer. 1849 P 333.

Jones David, *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, (Part2), Issued by The Society, new Stone Buildings, Chancery Lane, London. 1970 P 236.

Otway-Ruthven, A J, *A History of Medieval Ireland*, 1968, P 45.

The Athenaeum, Journal of English and foreign literature, science and the fine arts. No 898. 1845, P 480.