



‘QUEERING’ THE FOURTH BRANCH: AN APPROACH TO
ANALYSING THE FOURTH BRANCH OF THE MABINOGI USING
QUEER THEORY

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A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales Trinity St David in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA Celtic Studies, 2024



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Abstract

In her 2009 article on the *Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*, Sarah Sheehan comments on the 'pervasive ambiguity' of the *Fourth Branch* and notes the level of restraint taken in Celtic studies when incorporating new critical tools into literary analysis of medieval Welsh literature. She states that this is due to the 'normative nature' of critical approaches such as queer theory. However, in English and French medieval literary studies, queer theory has become a powerful tool of critique, with Bill Burgwinkle in 2006 going so far as to suggest that the Middle Ages a kind of 'queer utopia'. Burgwinkle, Dinshaw, and others have demonstrated that concepts such as 'gender', 'sexuality' and 'normativity' may be used in the analysis of medieval literature in ways that facilitates new insights and spotlights marginalised voices in traditionally interpreted material.

This dissertation is inspired by Burgwinkle and Dinshaw and demonstrates how a literary analysis of the *Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi* may be carried out by employing the use of theoretical tools of queer theory. A brief outline of queer theory and its relevant theoretical approaches is followed by an examination of the characters Aranrhod and Lleu employing queer theoretical tools. This critique incorporates the work of Foucault, Butler, Edelman, Halberstam, and Bersani, amongst others, using theories of gender/sex, queerness, heteronormativity, queer temporality, subjugation, and resistance. The lack of transgression found in seemingly queer elements of the tale, primarily the physically transformations, and sex/gender swapping punishment of Gwidion and Gilfaethwy, is also examined using the same critical tools. Next, the way in which the scholarship of the *Fourth Branch* has been conducted is also reviewed, highlighting how queer theory reveals invisible biases and prejudices that have driven certain lines of enquiry and preferred certain narratives over others. Finally, this dissertation comments briefly on the importance of queer theory in revealing the innate queerness of the *Fourth Branch* as an entity that exists beyond Celtic studies.

Introduction

The *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* are some of the most influential literary works to emerge from the Welsh medieval records. Few other texts from this period can claim to be as relevant to the modern sense of Welsh identity, nor to have remained as consistently popular, both within academia and in the public sphere. Since its translation into English and publication in the eighteenth century, mainstream media culture has taken elements of plot, characters, and motifs from the four tales, reworking them in books (for children and adults), plays, television and radio programs, and even videogames.¹ Amongst the four narratives, the *Fourth Branch – Math uab Mathonwy* has been described as the strangest of the *Four Branches*.² The narrative's protagonists are turned from human form to animals and back again; physical sex becomes a malleable trait which is changed against characters' wills; a woman spontaneously conceives and births a premature child in an instant; another is made from flowers to be the otherworldly bride for a character who is cursed to never mature to his full potential as a man and royal heir without magical aid. Indeed, magic and enchantment are front and centre in the narrative, entwined with the everyday ruling of the kingdom. As they unfold, the events and the characters' seemingly bizarre actions and murky motives create a sense of confusion and unfamiliarity for many modern readers. Illicit desire results in punishment, retribution, and redemption enacted upon those that transgress the *Fourth Branch's* implied social conventions, alluding to a top-down patriarchal system of medieval social hierarchies and control, in which gender and the social body play key roles. The integrity of the physical bodies of the characters is constantly invaded. Notably, despite this, themes of resistance and defiance

¹ Such as: Alan Garner, *The Owl Service* (Book 1967, TV Mini Series 1969–1970); Lloyd Alexander, *The Chronicles of Prydain*, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964); Evangeline Walton, *Island of the Mighty*, Reissue edition (Del Rey, 1979); Gwyneth Lewis, *The Meat Tree* (Seren, 2010); 'Curious Under the Stars', dir. by James Robinson (BBC Radio 4, 2015-present); 'Mabinogi' (Nexon Korea, 2004).

² Sarah Sheehan, 'Matrilineal Subjects: Ambiguity, Bodies, and Metamorphosis in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', *Signs*, 34.2 (2009), p.319.

feature just as prominently in the text, creating a dialogue between those that, through their actions, represent a conservative voice upholding the established hierarchies (those that demand conformity to socially created identities), and those that, actively or passively, resist or contravene subsummation into such structures. The identity, sex, gender, and species (human, animal, or vegetable) are all frontiers that the *Fourth Branch* troubles and subverts, where the normative and the defiant do battle, and where the boundaries between the natural and the un-natural are blurred.

Scholarship of the *Fourth Branch* has explored some of these themes, beginning with Roberta Valente's article in the late 1980s on gender entitled 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in Math', emerging from waves of feminist discourse encouraging a reappraisal of the approach to female characters found in earlier scholarship. This movement was interested in how gender informs both our reading of events and characters in the text, as well as the nature of questions that scholars posed in their analyses.³ However, beyond these, critical readings of the *Fourth Branch* that have incorporated theories of gender, sex, and sexuality, have been somewhat limited in numbers in Celtic studies.⁴ For English and French medieval literary studies, such theories have provided an attractive subject for literary analysis of texts.⁵ Why this has not been the case for

³ Roberta Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in Math', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 35 (1988), pp. 1–9.

⁴ That is not to say that it has been wholly lacking. Interest in gender transgression in the *Four Branches* has seen an increase in recent years. See: Cara Bartels-Bland, "'You Took My Spirit Captive among the Leaves': The Creation of Blodeuwedd in Re-Imaginations of the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', *Pomegranate*, 16.2 (2014), pp. 178–206; Luciana Cordo Russo, 'Sin, Punishment, and Magic: Changing Form in Medieval Welsh Literature', in *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*, ed. by Luciana Cordo Russo and Santiago Barreiro (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 155–84; Jessica George, 'Contesting Narrative Over the Body of Blodeuwedd: Gender, Nation, and Language in Adaptations of the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', in *Talking Bodies Vol. II: Bodily Languages, Selfhood and Transgression*, ed. by Bodie A. Ashton, Amy Bonsall, and Jonathan Hay (Springer International Publishing, 2020), pp. 17–40; Gabriela Pirotti Pereira, 'To Take On the Nature of Wild Animals: Elements of Biological Horror in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', *Revista Da Anpoll*, 51.3 (2020), pp. 74–83.

⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Duke University Press, 1999), R. Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the 14th Century*, 2003rd edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), Zrinka Stahuljak, 'Errancy, Insanity, Morality: Finding "La Droite Voie" in Chretien de Troyes', unpublished paper presented at 'The French Medieval Seminar' (Cambridge University, 2005).

Celtic studies has at least been partly addressed in the article 'Matrilineal Subjects: Ambiguity, Bodies and Metamorphosis in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi' by Sarah Sheehan in 2009. Here Sheehan argues that the tendency in the discipline to be relatively slow to incorporate new theoretical approaches into its analytical tool kit can be justified as a practical response to some of the limitations of critical analysis. She highlights how critical approaches such as psychoanalysis, post-colonial theory, and queer theory operate by establishing a 'societal normative foil' against which to project interpretation.⁶ Developing this point Sheehan remarks that the medieval Welsh occupied a distinct fringe population within the British Isles that were on the edge of intellectual and political innovation and power during the writing of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. She argues that this marginal position and colonial othering during the period by the dominant cultural forces across the Isles problematises an attempt to apply critical analysis to medieval Welsh texts. This is because, according to Sheehan, a central aim of critical theory is to comment on and critique wider society by revealing the social conventions that underpin it.⁷ Secondly, and further complicating matters, Sheehan proposes that the *Fourth Branch* itself has what she calls 'a pervasive ambiguity [that] complicates analysis of the Fourth Branch, and a productive reading must address that ambiguity'.⁸

I am in agreement with Sheehan's point that it is correct to be realistic about the limits of using critical theory in the literary analysis of historical documents. Prevailing academic protocol for medieval Celtic Studies in the mid-to-late twentieth-century remained cautious of using techniques of literary criticism found more commonly in English and French studies when commenting on medieval literature. This reluctance to expand such narrow-focus work to relate to a larger social-historical

⁶ Sarah Sheehan, 'Matrilineal Subjects', p.320.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.* Academics in other areas of Medieval studies are now beginning to employ the tools of queer theory to shed light on texts that have been described by scholars as complex and ambiguous, similar to how Sheehan describes the *Fourth Branch*. The benefit of this approach is that that queer theory can leave the text 'tangled' – this can be part of the way queerness can be seen in the text. Useful analysis using queer theory does not require it to be 'untangled'.

context, as Shenan says, can be partly attributed to limitations of the historical method itself.

Translating manuscripts in such a way as to preserve the authenticity of the message whilst also communicating historical socio-cultural messages to the modern reader is a difficult balancing act, and documents written in the Celtic languages pose unique challenges to interpretation, without the compounding effect of textual uncertainties or inconsistencies.⁹ Additionally, the understandable drive during the second half of the twentieth century in Celtic Studies to move out from under the shadow of the Celtic exoticisation of the Romantic period, and the ever popular 'pre-Christian pagan myth finders', led to a situation in Celtic studies where, as Mary-Ann Constantine notes, 'establishing critical texts has been the priority; literary criticism has not'.¹⁰

However, this may be coming to an end. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states that critical theory, as a social and philosophical movement, critiques subconscious and/or structural cultural norms and systems of power through which people are oppressed.¹¹ Literary analysis of historical texts draws on critical theory, applying the framework of critical movements to deepen understanding of texts, revealing how they are shaped by socially constructed norms of period *and* also by our own as readers. Regarding this point, Peter Barry states that, at the most basic level, theoretical approaches in literature are 'a reaction against something which went before'.¹² As feminist movements and activism inspired Welsh medieval literary scholarship in the 80s and 90s increased interest in the

⁹ Constantine writes in 2003 that there is a lack of annotated translations and 'up to date guides to the field' for medieval texts written in the Celtic languages, compounding the problem of multiple meanings that may be present in medieval literature. Mary-Ann Constantine, 'The Battle for the "Battle of the Trees"', in *Graves and the Goddess: Essays on Robert Graves's The White Goddess*, ed. by Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop (Susquehanna University Press, 2003), p. 47. The problem of lack of robust translations from medieval Celtic languages into modern English still exists today.

¹⁰ Mary-Ann Constantine, 'The Battle for the "Battle of the Trees"', p. 47.

¹¹ 'Critical Theory', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2024 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/critical-theory>> [accessed 1 June 2024]

¹² Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester University Press, 2002), p.2.

experiences of women in the *Four Branches*,¹³ the subsequent critique of the male-centred, reconstructive ‘original myth-finding’ approach that dominated before, exposed the contemporary social norms and expectations regarding gender that was embedded in older scholarship.

This dissertation demonstrates that the tools of literary criticism, specifically those of queer theory, can be used to provide new perspectives and insights into the events that transpire in the *Fourth Branch*, and shine a light onto the invisible basis of the scholarship itself. As a queer Welsh person, when I first began rereading English translations of the *Four Branches* as an adult, it seemed obvious to me that the text itself contained a multitude of parallels with contemporary queer experience. Family ostracization, disowning of children, moral policing of sexuality, disrupted coming of age markers, and the difficult relationship between identity and physical body are experiences that are part of past and, for many, present LGBT+ experiences within Wales. The theoretical tools of queer theory provide a new means of interacting with the narrative. Concepts built on Foucault’s notion of ‘episteme’ provide a means to approach and recognise queerness in historical works of literature.¹⁴ Judith Butler’s work highlighting the interdependency of sex and gender in the creation of the social body will be used when considering the implications of sex swapping, the body as a form of punishment and the implication of rejecting specific gender roles within the narrative. Lee Edelman’s and Jack Halberstam’s theories of queer temporality provide ways of approaching characters’ relationships with time, drawing analogies with queer experiences of growing up, unable to obtain expected markers of coming of age, and personhood.

¹³ Fiona Winward, ‘Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 34 (1997), pp. 77–106., Roberta Valente, ‘Merched Y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of the Four Branches’ (UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1988)., Kathy E Shimpock, The “Unlikely Female” Characters of the Mabinogi’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2017)., Catherine Byfield, ‘Character and Conflict in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 40 (1993), pp. 51–72.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Routledge, 2002).

LGBT+ activism and gay liberation movements from the 1970s to the 90s, formed in response to governmental and societal discrimination during the AIDS crisis, helped to raise queer theory's profile in academia. Themes of resistance and transgression in the face of systemic and societal oppression feature prominently in queer theory. Regarding this dissertation, the metaphor of the AIDS crisis is useful to separate the types of crises that arise in the *Fourth Branch*, allowing a distinction between what this dissertation will call 'societally tolerable' and 'societally intolerable' crises. 'Societally tolerable crises' are events where the world of the *Fourth Branch* is able to successfully process retribution, recompensation and reconciliation without lasting societal upheaval. 'Societally intolerable crises' are cases where the social fabric of the *Fourth Branch* itself seems threatened or damaged, despite the employment of usual social and political machinations to resolve conflict. On these occasions we see lasting instability and disruption due to the desire-driven actions of individuals that transgress the social boundaries of the patriarchal world of the *Fourth Branch*.

Lastly, queer theory also provides a useful means through which to critique the approaches and analysis of the *Fourth Branch*. Heteronormativity is a concept within queer theory that reveals and critiques the often unconscious biases towards heterosexuality, as the default or normal mode of being. Attached to this core notion are assumptions concerning gender as a binary, the existence of 'natural' behaviours or roles that each gender exhibits, and the understanding that certain life events should be desired and strived for (i.e. marriage, producing children). When heteronormativity is used to look not at the text itself, but at the scholarship both past and present of the *Fourth Branch*, the existence of commonly understood biases and prejudices are revealed like a thread running through the discourse.¹⁵ Here queer theory provides an approach to unconscious bias, by revealing its

¹⁵ The most obvious and controversial work that demonstrated itself to be built on gender prejudice in recent times is the work of Breeze and his analysis of themes covered within the *Four Branches* which he claimed 'proved' they were written by a woman. The innate sexism in his argument was called 'outdated' when he

existence and challenging its primacy. This disruption of perpetuated conventions within traditional scholarship of the *Fourth Branch* offers the potential to reinvigorate Celtic Studies' approach to the text, and to provide fresh and novel ways to analyse and experience the narrative.

presented it suggesting the existence of a time when such reasoning was 'in date'. – A. Breeze, *The Origins of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Gracewing, 2009), Jessica Hemming, 'Review of Breeze (1997)', *Early Medieval Europe*, 8 (1999), pp. 149–50.

What is 'Queer Theory'?

1. Definition and Background

Originally entering the English language in the sixteenth century, queer referred to that which was odd or abnormal.¹⁶ By the nineteenth century, however, it had come to be used to refer to sexual deviance, and by the twentieth century had become a pejorative term, being used to describe individuals who in the modern day we would consider to be part of the LGBT+ community.¹⁷ During the 1980s and 90s the HIV and AIDS pandemic required a new form of activism based on coalitions between the groups affected – gay men took centre stage in the media discourse, but also affected groups were lesbians, trans individuals, communities of colour, immigrants, and sex-workers. Faced with inaction from governments and the pharmaceutical industry that maintained that AIDS, (initially formally recognised by scientists as Gay-Related Immune Disorder 'GRID'; informally Wrath of God Syndrome 'WOGS'¹⁸) was a specifically gay disease, these communities joined forces, and reclaimed 'queer' as an umbrella term to describe the 'coalitional thinking and organising' that arose across affected groups, rather than referring to discrete identity.¹⁹ As McCann and Monaghan say 'as an umbrella term to designate resistant and non-normative sexuality... reclaiming queer was about being different, but unapologetically so'.²⁰

In academia, it was at a conference in 1990 that Teresa de Lauretis is considered to have officially coined the term 'queer theory'. In the article 'The Normalization of Queer Theory' early queer

¹⁶ 'Queer', Wikipedia, 2023 <<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Queer&oldid=1167989868>>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures*, 1st ed. (Red Globe Press, 2020), pp.92-93.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Activism beginning in this period took many forms (sit-ins, boycotts, marches, art installations, public sphere takeovers, riots, etc), however civil disobedience on small and large scale in the face of systemic silencing of queer communities, sought to draw attention to the fatal consequences of homophobic inaction in public discourse, and as a second aim, to affirm gay pride – that is to say, pride in lives and bodies that fall outside of the "respectable" notions of heteronormativity.

theorist David Halperin remarks on how de Lauretis's use of the term was controversial, for its combining of queer (which was still relatively early in its rehabilitation journey by gay communities, activists, and members of the art world, as a gay-affirming term) with the word 'theory', which implied the weight and legitimacy of academia behind it.²¹ As Halperin says, '...the conjunction was more than mischievous: it was deliberately disruptive'.²²

2. Gender, Normativity, and Heteronormativity

The genealogy of queer theory is rich with the work of theorist such as Foucault, Derrida and Simone de Beauvoir to name a few. In addition to these three giants, one of the most influential pieces of queer theory literature is Judith Butler's 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.²³ Here Butler builds on Foucault's ideas concerning sexuality (which will be discussed below) and applies them to gender, in part of the move within queer theory that uncouples queerness from sexuality. Butler challenges the way that gender is understood as a binary – either male or female. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler proposes a rethink regarding the relationship between sex (biology) and gender (cultural interpretations of biology). She describes a 'heterosexual matrix' visualised in a hierarchical pyramid shape – where male or female sex is the foundation, upon which male or female gender is established corresponding to sex, on top of which exclusive desire for the opposite sex is expected. Using this matrix, Butler argues that sex (which is seen as 'natural' and fixed) and gender inform sexual desire, presenting heterosexuality as the natural pinnacle or outcome.²⁴ Butler theorises that this matrix provides a false understanding, arguing that both sex and gender are socially and mutually dependent constructed categories. Butler proposes that gender informs what we think of as sex just as much as our understanding of sex shapes what we think we know about

²¹ David M. Halperin, 'The Normalization of Queer Theory', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45.2–4 (2003), p.339.

²² *Ibid.*, p.340.

²³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1999).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

gender. Furthermore, the social and cultural construction of these categories is by its nature flexible and continuous, meaning that it is always in a state of reinvention and reaffirmation. Butler argues that gender is *performative* not descriptive. Gender is produced via “the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence”.²⁵ That is to say it is not a fixed state of being but is in fact a series of socially understood acts that are repeated in order to create individual and social identity, in which gender plays an essential and irremovable part. It is in gender as a *performative* act that the identity of an individual is mediated and created. Thus, as Butler says, there is no innate identity that exists before gendered expression.²⁶ Lastly, Butler notes that as gendered categories or identities contain embodied power dynamics (i.e. ‘housewife’, ‘real man’) they can be rejected, refused or subverted.²⁷ Butler proposes that certain enactments of gender parody or subversion (i.e. drag performances) cross boundaries of “acceptable” gendered behaviour, significantly upsetting commonly held assumptions about sexed bodies.²⁸ In doing so, they reveal the constructed nature of what is deemed to be ‘innate’, ‘normal’ or ‘natural’. Butler argues that gender subversion reveals how systems of power used to subjugate and oppress populations (misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, etc.) rely on notions of ‘naturalness’ for their legitimacy. By using the ‘unnatural’ via gender subversion, what is ‘natural’ is also revealed to be a constructed entity, and the power that is used to subjugate minority groups is redeployed by the oppressed.²⁹

In *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1991) Michel Warner proposed a means to define queerness through *heteronormativity*.³⁰ Heteronormativity relates to the pervasive and largely invisible norms that underpin society, and suggests that cis-gender, heterosexuality is the default, normal, or preferred mode of being. Warner argued that while many independent thinkers had been attempting to

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1999), pp. 32-33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

²⁷ Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.129.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.158

³⁰ Michael Warner, ‘Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet’, *Social Text*, 29, 1991, p.3.

theorise about sexuality from a non-heterosexual perspective already, queer theory established this as a legitimate practice, recognizing the ability of the outsider perspective to reveal and challenge foundational assumptions and biases that construct society. Though queer theory began by questioning the foundations of sexual identity, the idea of queer theory as resistant to fixed categorisations has meant that its applicable beyond questions of sexuality.³¹ Terms such as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'homosexual' etc. signify identities that refer to cultural forms, historical periods, political agendas etc. that may be approached and analysed sociologically. However, the term 'queer' is defined as a collection of practices, behaviours, and states of being that share a contrast to categories which are alleged to be 'normal' or 'natural'. This ambiguous element of queer theory underlines its relationship with the concepts of *normativity and normalisation*. Foucault explored the normalisation of heterosexuality and how norms function as a form of social control in his 1978 work *The History of Sexuality*.³² Foucault argued that oppressive structures in society regulate discourse surrounding sex and sexuality within normative (i.e. heterosexual) parameters. Therefore, heterosexuality is normalised, whilst queerness (homosexuality in the words of Foucault) is stigmatized. Foucault's writings on sexuality have been influential in queer theory, particularly the way Foucault maintained that sexuality should be thought of as a historical construct, rather than a naturally occurring phenomenon which must be upheld.³³

3. Queer Temporality

During the late twentieth century queer theorists began to raise questions concerning queerness and time, specifically how we consider time to be well used and what counts as a successful life. This was known as 'the temporal turn' in queer theory.³⁴ In the words of McCann and Monaghan, in

³¹ Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.4.

³² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by Robert Hurley (Penguin, 1998).

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.213.

philosophy, temporality describes the experience of time, its perceived duration, and relations between past, present and future, whilst for the social sciences, it is also used to describe the social organisation of time through certain categories.³⁵ They continue that the 'temporal turn' in queer theory therefore signalled an increased interest in the discipline in the relationship between sex, gender, sexuality, power, history, and time.³⁶ Elizabeth Freeman suggested that queer theory and queer temporality could be used together as a critical framework to provide new insight into a range of individual life narratives including worktime vs leisure time, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and the life experiences of LGBT+ people compared with cisgender-heterosexuals.³⁷ Queer theory's temporal turn brought these ideas into relation with the discipline's classic areas of interest – gender, sex, sexuality and power relations.

Heteronormativity's relation to temporality affects what is considered to be a 'good', 'successful', 'happy' or even 'moral' life. The narrative of a heteronormative life according to queer theorists is marked by certain celebrated milestones, for example birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, marriage, reproduction, parenthood, anniversaries, retirement, and death. Halberstam in 2005 argued in *In Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* that these milestones are founded upon the primacy of 'institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction'.³⁸ Current Western understanding of what a 'successful life' looks like requires that an individual pass through each life phase at an appropriate speed, i.e. the rebellious teenager becomes a responsible adult and 'settles down' with an opposite-sex partner to procreate. An example of heteronormative temporality is 'reproductive temporality' which especially effects women, and is ruled by the notion of a biological clock.³⁹ Another example is normative heterosexual familial time, which revolves

³⁵ Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.214.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010).

³⁸ J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (NYU Press, 2005), p.1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.216.

around the implementation of schedules (early to bed, on time for school, etc.) surrounding 'correct' childrearing practices which are dictated by notions of middle class respectability.⁴⁰ Halberstam argues that scheduling and reproductive time have become cemented in Western understandings about how life *should* be lived.⁴¹ This understanding creates a rift between those who follow this heteronormative narrative, and those who can't or won't, as is often the case with queer individuals and communities. Monaghan states that 'Queer life narratives... do not fit with these dominant (heteronormative) temporal logics. Non-linear in their temporality, they do not follow the same milestones and are often not celebrated'.⁴² As a result of this lack of perceived 'normal progression', queer lives often struggle to be seen as successful, good, respectable, and moral.

When used as a verb, 'to queer' involves challenging and resisting expectations or norms. MacCann gives an example of how 'queering femininity' might mean thinking about how femininity may exist in other forms beyond oppressive gender ideals, and can be expressed in non-normative ways.⁴³ In 1999 Carolyn Dinshaw's book *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre and Postmodern* was influential in addressing another aspect of temporality by looking beyond the life narratives of individuals in the early modern period, and exploring how to queer understandings of sex and gender across historical periods. Dinshaw posed the question of how communities in the past and present are created by their relationship to sex.⁴⁴ Sex and the erotic are 'heterogeneous, multiple, and fundamentally indeterminate', meaning that they cannot be traced through a progressive linear line from the past to the present.⁴⁵ Dinshaw uses this assertion to argue for an approach to the study

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁴¹ J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p.5., Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.216.

⁴² Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.217.

⁴³ Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.217., Hannah McCann, *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism and the Politics of Presentation* (Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁴ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Duke University Press, 1999), p.1, Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.215.

⁴⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p.1, Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.215.

of history that follows ‘a queer historical impulse... making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now’.⁴⁶ By approaching queerness in this way, and describing them as affective relations across time, Dinshaw encourages an understanding of queer/nonnormative communities in non-linear forms. This method draws parallels between post-modern identities and experience with pre-modern peoples.⁴⁷ By troubling linear timelines, this queer critique of historicism allows for the relationship between present and past incarnations of queerness to be better appreciated.

4. The Anti-Social Thesis, No Future, and the Figure of ‘The Child’

A critique of queer theory that emerged as a response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s was written by literary theorist Leo Bersani who sought to advocate for the breaking of hierarchies by exploring the relationship between homosexuality and death during the crisis.⁴⁸ By tracking the homophobic response to AIDS, Bersani advocated for an embrace of ‘subordinate positions’ that were deemed too feminine, too transgressive, and too opposed to white American family lifestyles and values (in essence, too queer) to be considered acceptable and/or safe for society to allow to exist.⁴⁹ Bersani advocated for embracing the productive qualities of a queer nihilist position, rather than a positive or pride-centric one, and his work advocated for the inherent antisocial-ness of homosexuality, opposing the move in the liberation movement towards sanitisation and respectability (i.e. equal

⁴⁶ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p.1, Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.215.

⁴⁷ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p.1. – the influence of Foucault’s theory of episteme – unconscious, pervasive understandings of how the world works which are defined in history by big social-cultural breaks, – is evident here in Dinshaw’s rejection of historicism’s assertion of smooth continuous progression of thought throughout history towards greater knowledge.

⁴⁸ Leo Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’, *October*, 43 (1987), pp. 197–222.

⁴⁹ Leo Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’, p.203., Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.218. – note that this parallels Foucault’s assertion in a 1981 in *Friendship as a Way of Life* that ‘Homosexuality threatens people as a “way of life”, rather than as a way of having sex’. – cited in J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p.310.

marriage and adoption rights), and questioning whether a homosexual should be a good citizen at all,⁵⁰ ushering in a period of exploring 'queer unbelonging' amongst theorists.⁵¹

The anti-social thesis has been expanded on by several theorists, notably Lee Edelman and the figure of 'The Child'. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) Edelman criticises the framing of current political and cultural dialogue as being based on ideas of reproductive futurism.⁵²

Edelman's main argument is that contemporary social discourse is dominated by the symbolic figure of 'The Child', through which the burden of futurity rests on the notion of a future theoretical child's wellbeing, a wellbeing that is threatened by queerness's lack of biological reproduction.⁵³

Building on the symbol of 'The Child', Winnubst's notion of the 'future anterior' is an anticipation of a future state that establishes the present as a realm of utility, a time for grafting and sacrifice for a potential, imagined future. 'The Future Child' authorises a utilitarian relationship with the present, and requires protection from challenge at all costs, especially to those whose existence may be seen as a threat to the heteronormative reproductive future ideal it represents.⁵⁴ As a result, the unseen cultural acceptance of reproductive futurity can create a dystopic future where all relationships must be heterosexual, monogamous, with the express aim to breed and to pass goods, money, property, power etc, via generational descent. This model requires the sacrifice of the present in favour of a

⁵⁰ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Harvard University Press, 1996), p.113., Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.219.

⁵¹ Robert L Caserio and others, 'PMLA Conference Debate: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory', (2006), cxxi, p. 819., Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.219.

⁵² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Series Q (Duke University Press, 2004).

⁵³ Phrases such as 'think of the children' or 'doing this for the children' are abundant in these discourses and contemporary western family value politics and shapes the framing of political debate along the lines of reproductive futurism. The result is the establishment of an ideological limit on political discourse, one which perpetuates the continuing privilege of heteronormativity as the only legitimate and respectable way of being. 'The Child' is a promise of a better tomorrow whilst at the same time suppressing queerness and other forms of relationality, which represents a threat to the future by nature of its lack of biological reproductive potential.

⁵⁴ Shannon Winnubst, *Queering Freedom* (Indiana University Press, 2006). pp.185-194.

perpetually deferred idealised future, with the result that all sex must be heterosexual and strictly functional, stripped of all eroticism, and any sexualities, identities, or behaviours that do not fit this mould must be destroyed.⁵⁵

5. Critical Present-ness and Queer Childhoods

Similar to Edelman, Halberstam argues for viewing queerness through a politics of negativity via pathologized forms of queerness. Halberstam suggests that queer life narratives may develop in opposition to respectable, accepted normative reproductive temporality, developing 'according to other logics of location, movement, and identification'.⁵⁶ Halberstam says when we detach queerness from sexual identity it is possible to understand queerness 'as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices', one that directly challenges the heteronormative institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction.⁵⁷

The AIDS epidemic was influential on the emergence of queer temporality in the academic world, which saw members of the gay community in the West see their 'horizons of possibility severely diminished'.⁵⁸ During the crisis, the creation of community centred around disease, infection and death. This framing resulted in the focus of queer life to move away from longevity and stability and towards the needs and desires of immediate present. In relation to this, Halberstam argues that queer life is 'about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance and childrearing' (heteronormative reproductive temporality), proposing a 'rethinking of the adult/youth

⁵⁵ Shannon Winnubst, *Queering Freedom*, pp.185-191..

⁵⁶ J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p.1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

in relation to an “epistemology of youth” that disrupts conventional accounts of youth culture, adulthood and maturity’.⁵⁹

Finally, Kathryn Bond Stockton proposes the existence of ‘queer childhoods’, arguing that childhood is a key site where heteronormativity is enacted. In her book *The Queer Child; Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Bond Stockton highlights that in everything from legal texts, to media and popular culture, child development is considered to be a vertical action (growing up) ‘toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction and the loss of childishness’.⁶⁰ Childhood for queer individuals, Bond Stockton says, is an experience that is a ‘frightening, heightened sense of growing towards a question mark. Or growing up in a haze. Or in suspense – even wishing time would stop, ... so that one wouldn’t have to advance to new or further scenes of trouble’.⁶¹ As Bond Stockton continues, feelings associated with queer childhood provide insight into the limitations of the heteronormative vision of development. The notion of ‘growing up’ is revealed to be an extremely narrow and limited understanding of human development, as it suggests that there is a final destination where growth ceases to occur, when full stature or successful reproduction is achieved.⁶² However, rather than rejecting ‘The Child’ and the future it represents, Bond Stockton proposes sideways growth that ‘locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and emotion in ... back and forth connections ... that are not reductive’.⁶³ By this she suggests that forms of growth – personal, social, political, historical – may be revealed by shifting focus onto lateral connections between people and communities in new, novel, and queer ways, rather than in linear upward development.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p.2.

⁶⁰ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 2009), p.4.

⁶¹ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*, p.3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.227.

⁶³ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*, p.13.

⁶⁴ Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.227.

The Middle Ages as a 'Queer Utopia': How to read- Medieval texts Queerly – Two case studies.

In their 2006 essay entitled 'État Présent: Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', Burgwinkle makes the claim that the Middle ages could be considered an emerging 'queer utopia'; a time period where the common people of western Europe endured very little direct control from the state or the church over matters such as standardised forms of marriage (which varied wildly between communities), and where same-sex segregation was common especially in educated communities.⁶⁵ Burgwinkle references the work of Zeikowitz, proposing that queer theory offers 'unsettling heterosexual paradigms of scholarship by seeking unread or distorted texts, unloosening hetero-homo binaries in our reading of romance, looking for the homo in the hetero (and vice versa), and locating culturally specific codes of desire.'⁶⁶ Love stories between men in particular were covertly alluded to in manuscripts from the period,⁶⁷ though Burgwinkle follows Foucault in asserting that, as all sexual relations that were not conducted with the express aim of procreation were considered sodomitical during the period, a situation emerges whereby sources reveal 'a magic moment when the immovable modern status of hetero and homo as polar opposites simply dissolves'.⁶⁸ Burgwinkle promotes the Foucauldian notion of episteme, i.e., not historical periods that progress chronologically one after the other, but as groupings of years that are separated by distinct, era defining epistemological breaks 'affecting both the way we see things and the paradigms we use to interpret them'.⁶⁹ Burgwinkle argues that queer theory aids in the understanding of medieval social formations such as medieval marriage, and the gender and class power inequalities that exist

⁶⁵ Bill Burgwinkle, 'État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', *French Studies*, LX.1 (2006), p.79.

⁶⁶ R. Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the 14th Century*, 2003rd edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Cited in Bill Burgwinkle, 'État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', *French Studies*, LX.1 (2006), p.82.

⁶⁷ Bill Burgwinkle, 'État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', p.79.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.88.

therein, at a time where urban society was still developing, money economies are novel and same sex communities were common. In this context, queer becomes a useful term which incorporates queerness beyond sexuality, and offers the medieval scholar the chance to create new 'corrective' and ethical readings that incorporate past and present epistemology into new future insights.⁷⁰

Burgwinkle illustrates queer theory in action by citing Zrinka Stahuljak who in 2005 demonstrated ways in which distinctions made by queer theorists could offer insight even in a heteronormative medieval landscape, using the work of Chretien de Troyes.⁷¹ Stahuljak reframes the standard chivalric notions of adventure romance, arguing that in the case of the Arthurian knights, the pattern of one-upping of their predecessors/betters leads through a state of disorientation, indirection and madness. Here there lies a 'cognitive disjunction' between adventure as it is experienced in the present, and the adventure as something that the knight has already passed through (a state between needing to prove one's self as a knight, and having done so).⁷² Stahuljak proposes that this gap between occurrence and interpretation where the knight is held in status between a receding past and a promised, but yet unrealised future, results in a 'decidedly queer' loss of bearing and/or identity.⁷³

⁷⁰ Bill Burgwinkle, 'État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', p.88.

⁷¹ Zrinka Stahuljak, 'Errancy, Insanity, Morality: Finding "La Droite Voie" in Chretien de Troyes', unpublished paper presented at 'The French Medieval Seminar' (Cambridge University, 2005). Cited in Bill Burgwinkle, 'État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', p.87.

⁷² Zrinka Stahuljak, 'Errancy, Insanity, Morality'. Cited in Bill Burgwinkle, 'État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', p.87.

⁷³ Stahuljak develops this point by noting how this period of insanity is integral to the adventure and yet it is generally not acknowledged as a sign of a period of personal trauma, and an 'encoding of the social' (i.e. a dissolving of the knight's self, his thoughts, actions, and mystical experiences into the fabric of culture and ideology of knighthood), and is instead celebrated as heroism. To separate the self from the tightly interwoven social tapestry is transgressive, because the self is so enmeshed within the social that it can only respond to 'primordial drives' in a disguised form. Thus 'madness' or 'insanity' in these tales is an allegory for (queer) discomfort/reality, where the social self is stripped away leaving the knights lost and unsure of themselves and their place in the world. As Stahuljak says, Identity is only constructed in the perceivable gap where the self is revealed in opposition to the social body. - Zrinka Stahuljak, 'Errancy, Insanity, Morality'. Cited in Bill Burgwinkle, 'État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', p. 88.

A second example of the use of queer theory in medieval studies is Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval*, particularly her analysis of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which recounts the story of a famous British mystic who in the early fifteenth century was known for her claims that she is a bride of Christ, with whom she maintained she had an erotic relationship, wearing only white (the colour of virginity) despite being married and having fourteen children, and for her extravagant fits of crying/wailing.⁷⁴ Dinshaw uses the Kempe case to illustrate how her own approach of 'touch historicism' acts as a bridge to connect figures across time that are neither fully the same nor completely distinct from people today. Traditional historicism does not like to label figures as gay or lesbian, cautioning against anachronism and encouraging an understanding of the past contextually. However, this method often explains away potential historical queerness by focusing on the alterity of the past.⁷⁵ Stockton notes that contemporary queer readers often feel drawn to figures (such as Kempe) who did/could not identify as some form of queer at the time.⁷⁶ Indeed, much of the argument for Kempe as queer is located in her overly strict and novel adherence to religious orthodoxy, and in the disjunction between her social body as a married women (with many children), and her claims of virginity. Her white clothes and behaviour 'exacerbate the contradiction between marriage's orthodox construction as a church sacrament and marriage's distance from "the ultimately perfect perfection" of virginity'.⁷⁷ Queer as a descriptor therefore communicates the way in which Kempe 'enacts the dissonance between the virginal ideal and the fact of the fallen embodiment. It also highlights the perversity of marriage itself as a sacramental institution that strays from the ideal'.⁷⁸

Both case studies above explore ambiguous intersections and experiences that draw parallels to modern queer experiences and recalls Sheehan's quote regarding 'pervasive ambiguity' within the

⁷⁴ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, pp.148-149.

⁷⁵ And also citing lack of knowledge of context.

⁷⁶ Above all because such terms did not exist.

⁷⁷ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p.149.

⁷⁸ Will Stockton, *An Introduction to Queer Literary Studies: Reading Queerly* (Routledge, 2022), p.91.

Fourth Branch surrounding the complex intersections between, gender, sex, and identity. Stahuljak's knights' periods of insanity have similarities to Bond Stockton's description of growing up sideways – lack of place in the world, lack of future and unable to reconcile the self with the social body. This resembles the experience of Lleu in the text resulting from Aranrhod's curses, expressed through his stalled and abnormal maturation and gender expression. Similarly, Dinshaw's proposed queerness of Margery Kempe and her professed reclaimed virginity is reliant on the same disjunction between the individual and the social body, though in this case it is through proactive resistance and disavowal of 'straight reasoning', much in the same way that Aranrhod does negotiating her own 'non-virginity'. Butler's notion of gender is also felt in Dinshaw's assertion that Kempe enacts medieval womanhood to an extreme by performing extreme piety and claiming the feminine virginal perfection. Notably, both case studies employ a form of historicism that travels back and forth across temporal divides, recognising queerness not as identities relating specifically to sexuality, but as experiences that trouble the relationship between sense of self, embodied desire, and the social body in a structure of normativity.

Queering the Narrative

The exploration of the *Fourth Branch* via queer theory will be split into two sections focussing on two characters. Firstly, Aranrhod and the failed virginity test will be examined using queer theory's concepts of gender, temporality, and the antisocial thesis. This will shed light on the social and political power dynamics governing gender, sex, fertility, and desire in the *Fourth Branch*. Secondly, Lleu, and how queer temporality, critical presentness, and queer childhoods provides a lens through which the tension surrounding by his character can be understood as heteronormative anxiety over the queer body, and heterosexual fertility and succession.

These two characters have been chosen as their fates reveal how heteronormativity is constructed, policed and reinforced by those who represent the patriarchal order (Gwydion, Math, etc.) by enacting punishment, retribution, and reconciliation. Aranrhod and Lleu's narrative arcs demonstrate the literal threat that queerness (either as an act of resistance, or through mere existence) threatens Gwynedd's social-political stability.

Finally, a discussion employing the methodology of Zeikowitz of 'finding the homo in the hetero and vice versa' will examine the use of forced transformation of physical bodies as a tool of compulsory heteronormative conformity employed by the ruling regime in the *Fourth Branch*. This section underlines the power of queer theory to reveal false binaries in literary analysis between the queer and the non-queer, blurring the lines in the normative and the transgressive in the text.

A brief summary of the *Fourth Branch*: The narrative begins by introducing Math, the magical king of Gwynedd, and a particular condition that requires him to sit with his feet in the lap of a virgin when

not at war. The honoured position is held by Goewin, who is the unfortunate object of obsession by Gilfaethwy, Math's nephew. Gwydion, Gilfaethwy's brother, devises a plan to start war with Dyfed requiring Math to ride to battle and leave Goewin unattended, providing Gilfaethwy an opportunity to assault her. When Math returns from battle, Goewin publicly reveals what has happened.⁷⁹ Goewin describes how the assault was made against her and how she did not bare it quietly. She names the King's nephews as the perpetrators. As punishment the two are transformed into of a mated pair of animals (deer, boar, wolf – a male and female of each) and are to be banished to the wilds for three years, producing offspring each year. After which time, the punishment is deemed completed and Math offers them peace and friendship. Needing to find a new virgin footholder, Gwydion suggests his sister Aranrhod. When questioned regarding her sexual experience Aranrhod provides an ambiguous answer. When Math tests her virginity using magic and she spontaneously gives birth to a baby and an embryo.⁸⁰ Aranrhod flees, and Gwydion gestates the embryo in a magic chest. The embryo grows into a young fair-haired boy that matures at a rate of roughly twice the rate of a normal child. At the age of four the child returns to court and is fostered by Gwydion. However, the child who will become Lleu still does not have a name. In order to address this, Gwydion brings 'proto-Lleu' to Caer Aranrhod where Aranrhod resides to ask her to name the child, and by extension claim them. Angered at Gwydion for bringing a reminder of her humiliating experience at Math's court to her door, Aranrhod proceeds to place three destinies on the child. One, that they shall not have a name unless she names them. Second, that they shall not bear arms unless she herself arms them. Third, that they shall not have a human wife. The first two destinies Gwydion circumvents using trickery. The last however proves more complicated. Gwydion and Math use magic to create a woman out of flowers whom they name Blodeuedd to be Lleu's bride. However, Blodeuedd falls in love with a neighbouring Lord, Gronw Pebr, and together they co-conspire to assassinate Lleu.

⁷⁹ "Lord", said Goewin, "seek now a maiden to be under thy feet. I am a woman". Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: University Press, 2007), p.52.

⁸⁰ 'That is my belief'. Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.54. The implication of Aranrhod's response to Math's questioning is that she may be hiding the full truth.

Blodeuedd finds out the very particular way in which Lleu must be killed.⁸¹ However, the attempt is unsuccessful and Lleu escapes in the form of an eagle. Gwydion finds Lleu and returns him to human form. Gwydion punishes Blodeuedd by turning her into an owl, and Lleu kills Gronw. The narrative ends with Lleu ruling his lands alone and in time the kingdom of Gwynedd after Math's death.

1. Aranrhod; Gender, Sex, and Resistance

Michael Cichon begins his piece entitled 'Eros and Error: Gross Sexual Transgression in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi' by stating:

elements of the erotic appear in much medieval Welsh literature such as the romantic heroic exploits depicted in the three Welsh Arthurian Romances... the *Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi* is no exception to this penchant for the passionate, replete with its references to sexual encounters that both spark the erotic imagination and serve an instructive social purpose. Recounting erotic situations in and of themselves is not the redactor's primary objective: he uses the erotic potential of his tale to convey the message that misapplied passion and lust result in the breakdown of society.⁸²

Cichon's assertion, that the *Fourth Branch* is primarily a cautionary tale showing how society itself can be threatened if the obligations of individuals within social groups are transgressed, in this case by illicit sexual behaviour, is a succinct and accurate summary of the main underlying tension of the text. This agrees with the landmark piece written by Roberta Valente in 1988 in which she says that the *Four Branches* contain guidelines for moral conduct that require an individual's obedience to behavioural codes, and that individual's ability to use initiative in situations where moral principles

⁸¹ He must stand with one foot on the edge of a tub by a river with a thatched roof above, whilst the other foot is on the back of a billy goat, and with a strike from a spear that takes a year to make during the hours of Sunday mass. Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.60.

⁸² Michael Cichon, 'Eros and Error: Gross Sexual Transgression in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', in *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. by Amanda Hopkins and Cory James Rushton (Boydell & Brewer, 2007), p.105.

clash or are non-existent.⁸³ Though the narrative does contain references to social obligations and correct comportment necessary to maintain societal cohesion, Cichon's 'misapplied passion' is a weak description of socially threatening transgressive behaviour that instigates a 'societally intolerable crisis'. The acts in question commit great violence to the social tapestry of the *Fourth Branch*, pulling whole threads of individual self loose from the social whole, and casting some characters beyond heteronormative reconciliation.

In *The Women of the Four Branches* (1997), Winward establishes that Aranrhod has the claim to being the most independent woman in all *Four Branches* in terms of both behaviour and status. Her reasoning is that she is the only woman to live independent of male kin, and seems to be unanswerable to Math in the way members of his court and kin group normally are.⁸⁴ The assertion that she is the most 'independent woman' however requires some scrutiny. How independent were women of medieval Wales and what were the limits of their constraints and how did they operate? To shed light on these issues, what is known of the relationship between gender and power in the time of the *Mabinogi* must be established.

Beginning with establishing an appropriate means of framing medieval gender, Judith Butler in her 2004 book *Undoing Gender* notes that gender is not so much constructed, as it is inseparable from identity itself. Instead, it emerges, and is formed through subjugation.⁸⁵ Burgwinkle elaborates Butler's position, noting the role in which confrontation with the law is essential to the development of a gendered body.⁸⁶

⁸³ Roberta Valente, 'Merched Y Mabinogi', p.97. cited in Michael Cichon, 'Eros and Error', p.105.

⁸⁴ Fiona Winward, 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches.', p. 88., Roberta Valente, 'Merched Y Mabinogi', pp. 259-260.

⁸⁵ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2004), p.41.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Cited in Bill Burgwinkle, 'État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', p.83.

Gender becomes a “practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint”⁸⁷; It is performed through and for and interacting with an audience. Affect and desire are both staged and structured by norms until they feel like the innermost core of the self.⁸⁸

The assertion of a relationship between the law and the gendered body that Butler and Burgwinkle make is relevant considering how Celtic scholars inform their understanding of medieval gender norms in part through the existence of surviving legal records. Valente writes that men in the *Four Branches* are described by their titles indicating status in their lands.⁸⁹ This, she says, defines men’s role in medieval Wales as protectors, of their lands and of their closest female kin.⁹⁰ Women on the other hand are defined in status by their nearest male kin (brothers, fathers, husbands, etc.), and live under their protection.⁹¹ The question of what exactly is being protected becomes clearer when the role of ‘potential fertility’ is understood to be *the* defining factor between power and subjugation in relation to the performativity of medieval womanhood. Though women were technically seen under Welsh Law as a ‘non-person recognised by society only as an appendage to some male with whom she was connected’,⁹² a woman’s fertility *could* be a source of individual power for her, but, importantly, was also an essential determiner of status and honour for her nearest kin. If she remained chaste until marriage, and subsequently gave birth in due course, her husband’s family (her new kin) would benefit from the securing of their biological line and their honour and status upheld, and even increased. This would happen concurrently as a woman’s relatively high status as a virgin (*morwyn*) is lowered, becoming that of a woman/wife (*gwraig*).⁹³ This change from high to low status can be reflected in a financial way as Morfydd Owen highlights in the medieval Welsh Law of *sarhaed*

⁸⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p.1.

⁸⁸ Bill Burgwinkle, ‘État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages’, p.83.

⁸⁹ Roberta Valente, ‘Gwydion and Aranrhod’, p.2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Morfydd E. Owen, ‘Shame and Reparation: Women’s Place in the Kin’, in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (University of Wales Press, 1980), pp. 40–68.

⁹² Morfydd E. Owen, ‘Shame and Reparation’, p.40.

⁹³ Both *morwyn* and *gwraig* are legal terms – Morfydd E. Owen, ‘Shame and Reparation’, p.43.

(insult price),⁹⁴ where a woman's value was 'half that of her brother before her marriage when she is a *morwyn* and a third that of her husband when she is a *gwraig*'.⁹⁵ However, women who were not chaste until marriage *required* punishment under the law for their behaviour. Aranrhod's apparent sexual experience has potential ramifications for her kin group, beyond the danger it poses to Math.⁹⁶ Cartwright notes that the payment of *amobr* (a fine) to the ruler of a territory occurs when a woman commits a sexual act that is deemed inappropriate or is promiscuous. This payment would be demanded from the woman's family until she was declared a prostitute.⁹⁷ In these circumstances, the *cyfneseftaid* of the woman (her closest kin) could vouch for her virginity if challenged. However, if they were unable or unwilling to do this then the girl was ostracized by her kin and rejected by her partner. The accused woman would be punished by being given a year old steer if she could hold on to its tail which had been greased to deliberately make it slippery.⁹⁸ These punishments, if enacted as recorded, paint a picture of severe penalties for women who did not to remain chaste.⁹⁹ Aside from the financial loss, if a woman was found to be *twyllforwyn* (false-virgin)¹⁰⁰ then the status of her nearest kin was also negatively impacted.¹⁰¹ Medieval Welsh law therefore made a woman's exclusive fertility and sexual status public and the property of her entire kin group. If part of what it was to be a medieval man was linked to leadership and ownership expressed through titles, and as

⁹⁴ 'Insult price' paid as compensation to the victims whose honour has been damaged. – Morfydd E. Owen, 'Shame and Reparation', p.41.

⁹⁵ Morfydd E. Owen, 'Shame and Reparation', p.43.

⁹⁶ As it is specified that Math must have a virgin footholder when not at war, we can speculate that his life maybe in some way be threatened if he is without for too long. – Michael Cichon, 'Eros and Error', p.109.

⁹⁷ Similarly, if a woman was discovered to be, or suspected of being a false-virgin on her wedding night, that Welsh medieval laws recommended that she be subjected to a public shaming ritual whereby the wedding guests were called into the room and the girl's nightshirt would be severed to reveal her genitalia. – Jane Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Ruth Evans, Sarah Salih, and Anke Bernau (University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp.59, 63.

⁹⁸ The punishment hints at a kind of lewd symbolism that was meant to mock the woman in question Jane Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', p.64.

⁹⁹ It is possible to argue that Aranrhod is publicly shamed in a similar way for her sexual independence by having to endure the test of her virginity and the subsequent public labour and birth after. However, no fine is paid by her or her kin and most importantly, there is no loss of status or power for her. She retains her lands and her castle and remains lord over them. In this way Aranrhod could be described less of an Eve figure, and more of an inverse Mary – a miraculous birth followed by the rejection of motherhood.

¹⁰⁰ A legal term and criminal offence in medieval Wales - Morfydd E. Owen, 'Shame and Reparation', pp. 40-68.

¹⁰¹ Roberta Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod', p.3.

protective figure of their female kin, the role of women in a functioning society is to be the vessel through which heterosexual reproductive futurism and honour must be enacted. Beyond the law, medieval women in literature tended to follow the tradition of religious texts where they were divided between virgins (linked with Mary and upheld as symbols of virtue and purity, the perfect embodiment of womanhood),¹⁰² or they were unchaste (linked with Eve, associated with deception, unfaithfulness, shame and sin).¹⁰³ For the concept of medieval womanhood, Edelman's figure of 'The Child' looms large.¹⁰⁴

In light of the evidence, therefore, the fact that Aranrhod very publicly fails the test of her virginity but is *not* punished by Math in any way is striking. Perhaps, as Winward suggests, she is not fully answerable to Math. Despite her *caer* (fort/court) being just off the coast of Gwynedd, it is still within his domain, and so Math would still be owed a payment of *amobr* for her presumed sexual transgression, even when she rejects her maternal obligations to Dylan and Lleu.¹⁰⁵ Winward observes that within her fortress Aranrhod takes on the role of lord, welcoming visitors and in command of unseen retainers and serving people etc.¹⁰⁶ Valente highlights how, unusually, 'she is not named in relation to a man, who might be her protector, suggesting her independence from conventional rules of behaviour'.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of the reason why, the lack of punishment for Aranrhod leaves a queer moral gap in the narrative from which the characters in the tale are not quite able to move on. Considering the evidence in the legal record outlined above, and by comparing the punishments of Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, and Blodeuedd, it might have been expected that some kind of symbolic transformation of Aranrhod into an animal associated with sin and

¹⁰² Often virginity also inferred protective or healing powers.

¹⁰³ Jane Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', pp. 57-58, 60, 67.

¹⁰⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Series Q (Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁰⁵ Fiona Winward, 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches.', p.88.

¹⁰⁶ Fiona Winward, 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches.', p.88. Aranrhod also seems to be responsible for the people of the cantref, expressing anger at Gwydion's fake attack, and how 'many a lad might have lost his life in the muster brought about' - Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.58.

¹⁰⁷ Roberta Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod', p.5.

sensuality would have been a feature of this part of the tale.¹⁰⁸ Aranrhod, by retreating back to her *caer* troubles what we expect from a medieval text, not because it shows that a woman *can* have sex before marriage if she chooses, but because regardless of the outcome, she does *not* have to accept the loss of status and power as a loss of status and power as a 'non-virgin'.

Other women in the *Four Branches*, such as Rhiannon, Branwen, and Goewin, work within the patriarchal system to achieve their aims, invoking their roles as mothers and the need for protection by their male kin (and in the case of Rhiannon, accepting punishment for the crime of infanticide that she did not commit). However, Aranrhod rejects these options and creates another by flatly refusing to play by the rules at all. This point recalls Bersani's proposal that a queer citizen should not be a good citizen at all, suggesting that the queer social body is by nature destructive of the status quo, and cannot accept the subjugated role in which they find themselves. We may therefore find in Bersani's 'antisocial thesis' a narrative of 'queer unbelonging' that provides a framework for understanding Aranrhod's motives within the *Fourth Branch*, particularly her refusal to concede that she is a *twyllforwyn*, and to both claim Lleu and receive her legal punishment. If we entertain the idea that the compromised sexual status of Goewin, Aranrhod, and Blodeuedd exacerbates the crisis of the stability of Gwynedd in the same way that Bersani describes how the AIDS crisis disrupted white America's heteronormative ideals, then it is possible to read Aranrhod's actions as a move against respectability and responsibility for her actions in a world where she already represents a depowered demographic. If she is to be socially and politically shamed by society, then her refusal to participate in said society by denying all accusations, despite all evidence, and even physically removing herself from Math's court, reads as a rage against the system and a refusal to play by the rules in a way we would expect in Bersani's anti-social thesis.

¹⁰⁸ A snake would have been a natural choice and would be in keeping with religious motifs familiar to medieval audiences, drawing a clear line between Aranrhod's fall from purity with that of Eve's.

Furthermore, by rejecting motherhood, and cursing Lleu by denying him his social existence, Aranrhod shatters social expectations of normative gendered behaviour for women in the *Fourth Branch* in a way that both figuratively and literally threatens the line of succession. Aranrhod participates in a disruption of the usual process of events and by doing so negates enactment of the 'future anterior' in the text. By placing her own safety, status, and position of power before that of her child Lleu (the heir to the dynasty), and by refusing to be unrepentant for her presumed promiscuity, Aranrhod queerly centres her present wellbeing in the manner of the antisocial thesis. Furthermore, by not conceding to the pressure to sacrifice her position of power, she rejects her gendered societal role and social status, a social identity that is wholly constructed around the utility of her reproductive capacity to be enacted under conditions that produce socially legitimate children. Aranrhod refuses to be terrorised by Edelman's figure of 'The Child' and rejects the promises of 'reproductive futurism' and Winnubst's 'future anterior' that require the sacrifice of her autonomy, and safety in order to uphold heteronormative future ideal. Of course, since she has violated the heteronormative vision of womanhood through her sexual 'deviancy', she is no longer welcome to partake the 'benefits' of such a world anyway. Edelman's assertion that queer individuals *cannot* assimilate into a regime that holds heterosexual monogamous reproduction as the only valid life reflects Aranrhod's predicament, and adds weight to his call to reject this regime altogether. As Edelman says in *Death Drive*:

Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorised; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the net; fuck Laws both with capital Is and with small; fuck the whole network of symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future*, p.31.

It is arguable that this is exactly what Aranrhod does, and by doing so queers her gender, and thereby her social body, by negating the common misogynistic Mary/Eve dichotomy in medieval material, choosing present wellbeing, and not suffering penalty. According to Butler's notion of performative gender, by choosing self-government and independence whilst acknowledging sexual experience (and even perhaps sexual agency/autonomy) Aranrhod un-genders herself in a medieval context, selecting an option that is neither Mary, nor Eve, nor male, and places herself beyond normal heteronormative patriarchal system.

At various points, the *Fourth Branch* describes the mechanisms employed by the ruling regime to enact appropriative punishment countering 'societally tolerable crises' involving illicit sexual behaviour.¹¹⁰ However, this section demonstrates that whilst Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, Blodeuedd and Gronw receive personal punishment culminating in either reconciliation or retribution,¹¹¹ this is not the case for Aranrhod, neither on an individual level when she is discovered to be *twyllforwyn*, nor on a wider societal-political level. Furthermore, there is no closure regarding who the father of Dylan and Lleu might be, or the circumstances through which they were conceived. It is here in the murky gap between what is truth and conjecture that queer theory offers a way forward, holding the ambiguity of the 'crime' and its repercussions at the same time, allowing for unexpected narratives to fill the gap. Uncontrolled sexuality, in particular female uncontrolled sexuality, negates kin obligations and threatens heteronormative patriarchal society of the *Fourth Branch*. However, there is a proper societal process for dealing with this problem. In spite of this, Aranrhod successfully getting away unscathed from the public revelation that her sexual status is compromised is unexpected and introduces queer ambiguity into the narrative. Aranrhod's narrative arc is a

¹¹⁰ Roberta Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod', pp. 1–9; Fiona Winward, 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches', pp. 77–106; Catherine Byfield, 'Character and Conflict in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', pp. 51–72; Michael Cichon, 'Eros and Error', pp. 105–15; Jane Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', pp. 56–79; T. P. Ellis, 'Legal References, Terms and Conceptions in the Mabinogion', *Y Cymmrodor*, 39 (1928), pp. 86–148.

¹¹¹ One that can be inferred to have been considered proportional their crimes to a medieval audience.

disruption of expected medieval gender categories. Deviation from correct gendered behaviour without personal consequence creates queer instability, and leads to the destruction of heteronormative society, seen in the failure of the patriarchal line of descent through Lleu at the end of the tale. More than simple controllable 'misapplied passion', the existence of queerness as anti to the utilitarian, heteronormative mould of medieval woman is thus the true 'societally intolerable crisis' of the *Fourth Branch*, one where the official mechanisms of patriarchy fail to contain and destroy queer threat.

2. Lleu; Queer Childhoods and Growing Sideways

Beginning with abandonment at birth and ending with him as lone ruler, Lleu's life as it unfolds is the central tension in the second and third acts of the *Fourth Branch*. It is the principal cause of conflict between Gwydion and Aranrhod, and the lack of expected resolution at the end finishes this branch on an unsettling note. The unusual constraints which affect Lleu's life and his ability to proceed through the usual stages of development at the right pace are apparent in the narrative. Certain social and legal markers of personhood, gender, and kinship are delayed, deferred or denied to him, leaving him in a state of suspension that requires external intervention from Gwydion and others to overcome. Theories of queer temporalities provide a new means of interacting with his story. Bond Stockton's proposal that childhood is a key location where heteronormativity is enacted creates a framework to approach the relationship that Lleu's stalled maturity has with his social identity, part of which is being the heir of the ruling dynasty in Gwynedd. Similarly, Edelman's notion of reproductive futurism and Halberstam's reproductive temporality generate insight into the lived queer experiences of Lleu in a similar way to Aranrhod, and how the narrative suggests we may consider his life to be 'successful' and/or 'moral' in the world the *Fourth Branch* presents to us.

Beginning with his initial lack of name, Charles-Edwards explains what not having a name means in medieval Wales, and what exactly is at stake should they remain nameless.

The nine months as a foetus: the sex of the child is unknown and it remains the status of a foetus until baptized. Birth, then is not by itself a full transition, for it continues to have the statuses of a foetus until it can be named. Naming entails the public recognition of the sex of the child. Since the name will normally include at least a patronymic, if not the full bilateral descent, naming typically implies public recognition of the child's kinship.¹¹²

This lack of a name for 'proto-Lleu', therefore, provides a social and cultural barrier to actualising full personhood. A foetus cannot be an active member of the community, nor recognised by the laws and customs of the land. This status means 'proto-Lleu' is not yet a child and therefore socially and legally does not exist. The necessary identifying parameters of the social body, upon which societal forces of gender and kinship enacts identity, meaning, and constraint are missing.¹¹³ The term 'Proto-Lleu' is used here in reference to Bond Stockton and their drawing together of the works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Derrida, and Freud's 'deferred effect' creating the concept of the 'proto-gay' child.¹¹⁴ Bond Stockton argues that queer adults only have the complexity of their proto-gay childhoods perceived retroactively. The understanding is that, as heteronormativity requires all children to be straight by default, and because of heteronormative discomfort with placing queer identities in close proximity to notions of childhood, queer children may only attribute meaning to their past queerness retroactively once they have come out as adults.¹¹⁵ 'Proto-Lleu' only exists in retrospect because *they* (not he) then become Lleu. Once named Lleu Llaw Gyffes through Gwidion's trickery, Lleu is finally allowed access into society, and thus brought into being, by having his place

¹¹² T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.175-176.

¹¹³ The link with kinship here is particularly interesting as it effectively severs the connection between Lleu and Aranrhod. This is undoubtedly a means Aranrhod uses to distance herself from consequence for the failed virginity test.

¹¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War against Effeminate Boys* (1991). Cited in Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*, p.14.

¹¹⁵ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child*.

within its structures defined. The act of naming is performative in that it creates Lleu the social being, whilst also legitimising his past and present. Butler's theory of gender as a performative event is seen in action here.¹¹⁶ As the name is given, so too are the two most important factors that affect Lleu's place in society: his kinship bonds that dictate his standing in the social strata, and his sex/gender affecting his social role within that strata. As Lleu enters into society, so he begins to be embodied by his gender, and it is notable, therefore, that the following two destinies sworn upon him intend to impede that expression of gender. Charles-Edwards notes that the taking up of arms by young nobles was one of the ways in which both gender and maturation were signalled in the medieval Celtic world.¹¹⁷ Similarly, though not seen to carry as much societal weight for men as for women, taking a wife was regarded as a legitimate way to signal sexual experience for men, as it represented the 'natural' next step to confirm the movement from youth, into adult-manhood.¹¹⁸ Recalling Butler's argument that gender itself is constantly being enacted by laws and social and cultural norms,¹¹⁹ in the *Fourth Branch* we see that Lleu's gender is created, recreated, and affirmed by transitioning through several states of social being (from childhood, to youth with martial training, to mature adult ready to continue their legacy via the creation of offspring).

However, as Lleu is betrayed by Blodeuedd, the last of Aranrhod's destinies holds. Earlier in the *Fourth Branch* we see Gwydion harass his sister for failing Math's virginity test, coming into conflict with her over Lleu. Gwydion himself is an ambiguous character in the narrative, seeming to have little regard for his duties to his kin regarding Math and Aranrhod, and yet is willing to go to great lengths to satisfy his brother Gilfaethwy. It is somewhat surprising therefore that he should seem to take such an interest in Lleu's wellbeing. However, as guardian of Lleu and persecutor of Aranrhod, Gwydion takes on the role of newly reformed enforcer of the oppressive gender paradigms of

¹¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

¹¹⁷ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p.178.

¹¹⁸ Roberta Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod', p.9.

¹¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p.41.

patriarchal society.¹²⁰ He attempts to 'correct' by force a situation where a man who is heir to the kingdom of Gwynedd has his social identity, gender, and fertility limited by a woman who has seemingly liberated herself from these very constraints. The relationship therefore between Lleu and Aranrhod turns normal patriarchal society on its head. Edleman's figure of 'The Child', so prevalent in the Aranrhod's narrative, appears again here. For Aranrhod, her refusal to accept her punishment for not being chaste signals a move against Edleman's ideas of reproductive futurism where heteronormativity, and tightly controlled heterosexuality, is compulsory for all, especially for women. Aranrhod's sexual freedom and disavowal of consequence is an act of queer defiance in the face of subjugation, refusing to pay the price in the present for the imagined heterosexual future 'The Child' represents.¹²¹ Theoretically, Lleu is the embodiment of 'The Child', by his existence requiring that Aranrhod pay the price for her transgression, as he represents the potential descent of titles, land, goods etc. through his kinship bonds, securing the patriarchal succession of the ruling dynasty. It is likely, therefore, that as an agent of these patriarchal structures in the *Fourth Branch* that an additional motive for Gwydion is to ensure that Lleu can fulfil his role upholding the status quo by stepping fully into his social identity, securing the line of descent by producing a legitimate heir. Ironically, when Blodeuedd betrays Lleu, the fate Aranrhod casts over him holds, making his queerness sine birth permanent, and preventing him not only from being able to full integrate into society politically and socially in the *Fourth Branch*, but also in many ways foreshadowing its societal doom.¹²² Queerness, not merely illicit sex, reveals itself again as the 'societally intolerable crisis' that threatens the social order *Fourth Branch* and could explain the abrupt and strange ending of the *Fourth Branch*. Lleu as the last ruler of Gwynedd is unable to produce a legitimate heir, and so leaves

¹²⁰ Reformed through his punishment and reconciliation with Math.

¹²¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future*.

¹²² Though this is the 'final straw' regarding Lleu's chances of integrating into the hegemonic patriarchal society of the *Fourth Branch*, the compounding evidence of Lleu's innate 'otherness' can be found littered throughout the narrative. From the manner of his birth and the quick rate that he grew as a child, to the fates placed upon him as he matures, and the very strange and particular circumstances needed for him to be killed. The evidence suggests that Lleu never had a chance at actualising the normative life proscribed to him. Thus, we may describe him euphemistically as 'not being like other boys' since the moment of his birth.

a queer question mark over the future of the family dynasty, and, more importantly, of the heteronormative system that has existed up to this point.

By attempting to thwart his linear temporal progression, Aranrhod's destinies have the effect of restricting Lleu's ability to achieve the 'successful' life that is expected of him by placing barriers at important life transitions, slowing and even halting his progress, evoking Halberstam's assertion that heteronormativity requires that an individual passes through each life phase at an appropriate speed.¹²³ Furthermore, these barriers specifically impede Lleu's expression of gender and heterosexuality and his ability to produce legitimate offspring. By denying him this expression of social identity, the process being enacted as a punishment or curse operating over Lleu is designed to 'other' him, irrevocably queering his social body in the eyes of the society of the *Fourth Branch*.

Many of the characters' actions in the *Fourth Branch* cause 'societal tolerable crisis' by deviating from implied common codes regulating behaviour. However, only Lleu and Aranrhod's experiences of temporality impede the 'correct' functioning of the normative linear heteronormative temporality of the *Fourth Branch* in fundamental and lasting ways. Interestingly, a difference between these two characters is that Aranrhod *chooses* to be actively disruptive, whilst Lleu is passively disruptive with the text providing little in the way of his own thoughts on the matter. However, the result is a similar victimising of both characters by the hegemonic socio-political culture of the *Fourth Branch* and their suspension in a queer liminality (literal for Aranrhod, figurative for Lleu). Attempts are made by Gwydion predominately to reconcile Lleu with the 'straight' social political society in the *Fourth Branch*, but at the end of the *Branch* cannot conceal his innate queerness by giving him a wife and the chance of reproductive futurity.

¹²³ J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p.1.

3. Finding the Hetero in the Homo – An Insight into the Straightness of Metamorphosis in the *Fourth Branch*

The queerness expressed by Aranrhod and Lleu has been discussed above. However, questions may arise asking why these two figures were chosen over other queer seeming episodes involving physical transformation of bodies across human-animal and sex/gender boundaries that are experienced by Gwydion, Gilfaethwy and Blodeuedd. As Davies says speaking specifically about the transformation of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, the punishment ‘inflicts liminality’ upon the brothers: ‘they are thus not only humiliated (...) but are also marginalized as they live out this liminal existence as *men yet not men, animals yet not animals*’.¹²⁴ Similarly, Blodeuedd is punished with liminality through her transformation into an owl and ostracization from society. Destabilizing categories in this way does seem to be decidedly queer. Stahuljak’s assertion that the knights’ journey in chivalric romances contains a queer loss of bearings and identity can provide a comparison here. Similar to the knights’ experience, Gwydion, Gilfaethwy and Blodeuedd are subjected to a seeming loss of identity that precipitates a period of personal trauma and an encoding of the social by the nature of them being punished. If they behave like beasts, they will be turned into them. Furthermore, Math offering ‘friendship’ – legal reconciliation between two parties¹²⁵ – to Gwydion and Gilfaethwy creates a timeline from action, to a state of suspension, to reconciliation that also corresponds to Stahuljak’s argument. However, despite the similarities, there are also important differences that gesture towards the ‘hetero within the homo’.

Zeikowitz’s work regarding the ‘unsettling of heterosexual paradigms in scholarship’ by ‘loosening hetero-homo binaries’ and ‘looking for the homo in the hetero and vice versa’,¹²⁶ draws focus to

¹²⁴ Sioned Davies, “‘Venerable Relics’? Re-Visiting the Mabinogi”, ed. by Joseph Falaky Nagy (Brepols, 2013), p.173. cited in Luciana Cordo Russo, ‘Sin, Punishment, and Magic’, p.170.

¹²⁵ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p.242.

¹²⁶ R. Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry*, cited in Bill Burgwinkle, ‘État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages’, p.84.

medieval same-sex relations. Zeikowitz advocates for the greater significance of the political (and also social) contingent for understanding medieval texts, over universal and essentialising categories of men or women, homo or hetero.¹²⁷ As Burgwinkle summarises, just because same-sex relations between a king and a lover are condemned, does not mean that same-sex relationships between people in other classes would be.¹²⁸ As ever, context matters. The magical sex/gender swapping that occurs in the *Fourth Branch* may seem queer to modern audiences, but here is argued to operate within the normative medieval notions of gender, sex, and social control and oppression, when medieval notions of innate personhood is understood, and when transformations are used as punishment for transgressions against kin obligations.

Drawing attention to how liminality as punishment is enacted in the text, Caroline Walker Bynum writes that, in cases of metamorphosis, medieval authors maintain the importance of identities, and that even when destabilised, a certain degree of 'self' endures.¹²⁹ Luicana Cordo Rosso adds that several tales, when taken with hagiographic references to human-animal transformations, highlight the 'fluidity and instability of the boundaries between the human and animal worlds', suggesting that 'there was no rigid barrier in the Celtic mind between the human and the animal form'.¹³⁰

When responding to the trespassing or infringement of social obligations within the kin group in the world of the *Fourth Branch*, the narrative outlines the process of punishment, reparations and reconciliation via forced transformation of wrongdoers. Acting as official process, forced transformation allows for the injured parties to be compensated and to reduce the chances of future conflict, whilst punishing the wrongdoers and warning off potential future trespassers. Cichon says that 'the various transgressions are rooted in passion, and the strength of passion is directly

¹²⁷ R. Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry*, p.14.

¹²⁸ Bill Burgwinkle, 'État Présent; Queer Theory and the Middle Ages', p.84.

¹²⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity, Illustrated edition* (Zone Books – MIT, 2005), p.32.

¹³⁰ Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992)., Cited in Luciana Cordo Russo, 'Sin, Punishment, and Magic', p.170.

proportional to the transgression it sets up. With its inevitable punitive outcome, every transgressive sexual act initiates a social exchange that, as in the compensation for any insult, resolves the disruptive pairing'.¹³¹ This is seen in the design of the punishments themselves. The animal transformations that Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, and Blodeuwedd endure communicate the nature of their crimes to medieval audiences – the deer and the boar have medieval associations with cunning, and their horns/tusks are phallic, the wolf is a predator and associated with outcasts,¹³² the owl is scorned by other birds and is also an outcast.¹³³ Via the symbolism of the animal forms, the oppressive power structures of the *Fourth Branch* communicate what type of person and behaviour is unacceptable to society and must be destroyed.

Therefore, in the *Fourth Branch* the enactment of *punitive* metamorphoses by the hegemonic regime is a means of legitimate and normative social control and terror used to enforce its structures and conventions. It destabilises, but does not destroy, the individual identity, nor does it stop reintegration into the kin group and the network of dependency ties and familial responsibilities and obligations.¹³⁴ Thus, the punishments of Gwydion, Gilfaethwy and Blodeuedd become less socially threatening and more socially enforcing if we are to understand that the social body remains intact throughout the process. This is most clearly seen in the *Fourth Branch* when Blodeuedd is transformed into an owl and Gwydion 'fixes her name' in her new *rith* (shape) so that she retains an aspect of herself as part of her punishment, one that references her original vegetal state.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Michael Cichon, 'Eros and Error', p.115.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p.108.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp.114-115.

¹³⁴ Luciana Cordo Russo, 'Sin, Punishment, and Magic', p.170.

¹³⁵ Luciana Cordo Russo, 'Sin, Punishment, and Magic', pp.168-169.

Katherine Millersdaughter points out that Gwydion and Gilfaethwy's shapeshifting episode in the *Fourth Branch* functions as a trial for the punished subjects to re-enter the community as political subjects.¹³⁶ As she states in her article *Incest in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*:

Before punishment Gwydion was passively born into close kinship with Math, after punishment he has actively earned that relation: Math tells his nephews, 'You have received peace and will have kinship'.¹³⁷ Illicit desire, lawless discourse, sexual aggression and reprisal constitute stages in the consolidation, even consummation, of political relations between Math and his sister's sons'.¹³⁸

The experience thus brings the brothers into closer partnership with Math, the patriarch and ultimate arbiter of patriarchal law. Gwydion's punishment of Blodeuedd, also for a sex-based crime, can also therefore indicate that he has become fully integrated into the politically symbolic world of the *Fourth Branch* as a new enforcer of the normative laws governing behaviour.¹³⁹ Whereas he, as a man, has access to forgiveness for sexual misconduct, under this misogynistic regime Blodeuedd, as a woman, can never repent for the shame she has brought to the kin group, and so her transformation is permanent.¹⁴⁰ Those who transgress sexual taboos against kin and culture are punished with human and physical sex instability. After this period, those who are privileged by the society (men - Gwydion), become agents for the reinforcing of the patriarchal system of control, and those who bare the weight of shame for their kin group (women - Blodeuedd) are outcast.

¹³⁶ Katherine Millersdaughter, 'The Geopolitics of Incest: Sex, Gender and Violence in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', *Exemplaria*, 14.2 (2002), p.299.

¹³⁷ Jeffrey Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, (Penguin Classics, 1976), p.104. cited in Katherine Millersdaughter, 'The Geopolitics of Incest', p.299.

¹³⁸ Katherine Millersdaughter, 'The Geopolitics of Incest', p.299.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.311.

¹⁴⁰ Note that Blodeuedd, as a being created by Gwydion and Math through magic, has no kinship ties other than to the family she was created to marry into. Being married to Lleu she also lacks the individual autonomy that Aranrhod has. She has no lands or *caer* of her own. She therefore is in a significantly depowered position, even compared with other women *Mabinogi*, as there is no one to vouch for her honour as per the Welsh medieval law discussed above.

From our modern perspective the idea of body transformation and especially biological sex switching is highly queer. However, with the help of queer analysis of medieval case studies, the evidence points to a medieval context that did not find bodily instability and metamorphosis particularly disruptive or transgressive. Indeed, the acts of physical change themselves seem not only to be in line with the social, political and cultural structure in the *Fourth Branch*, but indeed reinforce its structures of power, subjugation and forced compliance. The illicit sex that occurs in these sections of the narrative creates a 'societally tolerable crisis'; situations where ruling regime is able to successfully contain and punish transgressions that threaten hegemonic social stability, legitimacy, and hierarchy. Queer theory here reveals the false understanding that queerness and non-queerness exist separately, confusing the assumed fixed binaries of gay and straight, integral and non-essential, victim and perpetrator.

Queering the Scholarship of the *Fourth Branch*

The position of any scholar is never a truly unbiased one. The beginning of this dissertation made the argument that Celtic studies continues to be slow to acknowledge cultural biases and prejudices within the body of the scholarship of the *Four Branches*, that at times include elements of misogyny, homophobia, and exoticisation amongst others. These 'invisible arbiters' are evident when looking at areas of focus, and the conclusions that scholars have drawn concerning the history of the manuscript, and the nature of the narrative itself. This is problematic as it can obscure different narratives that the text is communicating, suppressing some of these whilst upholding others, creating an unjust and false hierarchy that dictates which stories, and whose voices are considered worthy of being listened to. This produces biased scholarship, and also locks the *Mabinogi* stories within a heteronormative, white, academic environment and suppressing queer, non-white and non-academic engagement with the texts and its scholarship. Further complicating the situation is the

impact of the translation of medieval texts. How translations change the pace, meaning and content of the *Mabinogi* corpus is similarly subject to evolving cultural biases and prejudices, and over the years has added layers of complexity to the study of the narrative's reception, history, and afterlife beyond the physical manuscript. Therefore, literary theory, and in particular queer theory through its usefulness as a tool for uncovering oppressive structures, provides a necessary means to reveal and interrogate these invisible forces and power dynamics that have affected, and continue to affect, the relationship between the text and modern audiences, both within academia and beyond.¹⁴¹

The questions posed of the *Mabinogi* beginning in the mid nineteenth century and ending in the 1970s centred around the notion that the tales were the corrupted remains of an original pre-Christian mythology.¹⁴² This approach characterises the scholarly preoccupation of the time of stripping back the more 'modern' (meaning 'Christian') elements which they hypothesised had retrospectively been overlayed by medieval scribes onto an older narrative of pagan gods.¹⁴³ These theoretical reworkings were proposed to have been carried out to bring the *Four Branches* in line with medieval Christian sensibilities.¹⁴⁴ I would argue that the desire by scholars and antiquarians at the time to find the 'original' or 'pure' *Mabinogi* reveals a dissatisfaction with and rejection of the

¹⁴¹ Note that this is an overview of the English language literature. A fully robust analysis would benefit from a combined overview including the Welsh language literature on the subject and a discussion on how the two linguistic fields may differ in their conception of the *Fourth Branch*. However, this is beyond the capacity of this dissertation. The discussion here hopes to be a beginning point for such future analysis.

¹⁴² The ending of this can be broadly equated with Proinsias Mac Cana's volume on the *Mabinogi* and its associated literature, the first edition of which was published in 1977.

¹⁴³ This attitude can be seen in many of the great Celtic scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries. Proinsias Mac Cana, Kenneth Jackson, W. J. Gruffydd etc. A quotation from Mathew Arnold's *On the study of Celtic literature and other Essays* originally published in 1867 can be seen at the beginning this movement, stating 'The first thing that strikes one, in reading the *Mabinogion*, is how evidently the medieval story-teller is pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret; he is like a peasant building his hut on the site of Halicarnassus or Ephesus; he builds, but what he builds is full of materials of which he knows not the secret, or knows by a glimmering tradition merely.' Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London, Smith, Elder and Co., 1867), p.54.

¹⁴⁴ This reworking was speculated by most academics to have been carried out by Medieval scribes. Due to access to literary education during the period, these were most likely to be men living as monks or priests in one of several monasteries in Wales at the time.

extant version. Its perceived hybridity between two distinct entities – a hypothesised ‘original’ single pagan work, and the ‘sanitised’ Christianised version – being considered a weakness of the prose.¹⁴⁵

For many modern literary theorists such dissatisfaction would not come as a surprise. Foucault, and later Butler, maintain that any engagement with historical texts that involves translation, interpretation, and reproduction for modern audiences is a political act.¹⁴⁶ The fact that in many of the first editions of the *Mabinogion*, the *Fourth Branch* was heavily edited to eliminate scenes deemed unsuitable for contemporary audiences, such as the perceived homosexual incest that occurs between Gwydion and Gilfaethwy. Less obvious but perhaps more insightful is the fact that Lady Charlotte Guest translated the *Mabinogion* at the height of one of the main Celtic revivals of the nineteenth century, a time when Wales was scrambling to find its answer to the popular (and forged) Ossianic texts of Scotland, in order to secure a similarly glorious and faded ‘golden age’.

According to Constantine, the legacy of this ‘Celticisation’ was seen in scholarship up to the modern period. She argues that a pattern regarding dissatisfaction and reconstruction of material is found in other medieval Welsh texts, including *Cad Goddau* where the possible mythological undertones were so over-developed there existed widespread, and false acceptance in academic circles outside of Celtic studies of the existence of ‘Celtic Tree Alphabets’ as popularised by Robert Graves. Her paper on the relationship between *Cad Goddau* and Graves’ *The White Goddess* makes an argument that is in line with Foucault and Butler, that unacknowledged biases and prejudices, (in this case compounded by the complexity of translation of medieval manuscripts) impose current societal understandings of importance, relevance and value through the past via textual ambiguities.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Apart from ‘Is the Rectum a Grave’ cited above, Leo Bersani has also written from a modernist perspective about scholars identifying a text as ‘sick’ and seeking to restore it in *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* in 1982, highlighting this trend in academia beyond Welsh medieval studies.

¹⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

¹⁴⁷ This reworking was speculated by most academics to have been carried out by Medieval scribes. Due to access to literary education during the period, these were most likely to be men living as monks or priests in one of several monasteries in Wales at the time.

¹⁴⁷ To quote Constantine ‘Every reading is thus a kind of reconstruction. It is not totally arbitrary of course: any single line might be debatable, but accumulated readings and translations do overlap enough to make up a poem. Yet it is a disconcerting business, like impressionist painting: the thing looks convincing enough from a distance, but at short range the shapes dissolve, break up. Close textual criticism is not easy under such

The notion of uncovering the 'original Celtic narrative' is less popular within the discipline in recent years, but nevertheless has had continued traction both within and beyond the scholarship.¹⁴⁸ What is to be made of such a sustained and extensive focus? At the heart there is a binary distinction between the pre-Christian and the Christian world as separate entities. The image of the 'pagan' Celt was a potent symbol during the Revivalist period of late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, inspiring many works of art, poetry, and literature throughout the Romantic movement. Wild and savage, the figure of the Celt was associated with nature, passivity, the emotional, and femininity. Christianity however was considered to be a marker of civilisation and the undeniable march of progress – rational, innovative, active, moral, and masculine. This artificial distinction was very much felt during this period when the Celtic fringes of the British Isles were seen as 'other' to the central Anglo culture,¹⁴⁹ being both beautiful and ancient with strong ties to the landscape, but also fatally doomed as a way of life, as the necessary modern civilising influence of Anglo-British rationality, nationalism and identity could not be denied.¹⁵⁰

The construction of a gendered binary distinction between increasing Anglo-Norman influence across the British Isles during the medieval period, and a preceding primitive yet ultimately doomed Celtic-pagan golden age was an imagining of medieval Wales through the understanding of nineteenth-century colonial attitudes, where Morgan notes, revivalist historians would have seen the colonising

circumstances; some texts seem to hold together by an act of collective will'. Mary-Ann Constantine, 'The Battle for the "Battle of the Trees"', p.41.

¹⁴⁸ Such arguments can be found in Carey, John. 1991. "A British Myth of Origins?" *History of Religions* 31(1):24–38., and of course in the continued popularity of *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves.

¹⁴⁹ Arguably this is still the case today.

¹⁵⁰ An example of these sentiments in action is the popularity of the national tale that sprung up during the period, a classic example being Sydney Owenson's *the Wild Irish Girl* published in 1806. The format of these novels reliably followed a sceptical English (male) protagonist's travels in an exoticized 'Celtic' country where over time he comes to respect the beauty of the rural and uncultured local inhabitants traditional yet *dying* way of life. Often a courtship or marriage occurs between the protagonist and a formally 'wild', now 'tamed' local woman serving as a metaphor for English goodwill, but necessary domination over their Celtic neighbours, and by doing so, releasing them from their own progress-inhibiting, and 'primitive' local culture.

Anglo-Norman influence as an earlier phase of a continuous linear process that they could witness taking place in their own time.¹⁵¹

With this in mind, analysis by revivalist scholars and antiquarians shows evidence of a gendering of components of the tale, employing a method of binary classification to deem what in the text is 'pure' and what is 'corrupted'. When viewed as a single entity, the fourteenth century versions of the *Mabinogi* found in the Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch and the Llyfr Coch Hergest represented a subversive un-pure mixing of binary opposites for many revivalist men of letters.¹⁵² The 'corrupted' extant version brings together the pagan, and Christian together in a transgressive tangle that queers notions of the separateness of these two categories, and challenges its veracity. As sex, gender, physical, and social bodies are considered mutable in the narrative, I would argue that the blending of perceived older 'pagan' and newer Christian elements in the tale (in terms of form, structure, theme, etc.) troubled the conventional understanding of cultural purity and uniqueness for these early scholars. Thus, from this perspective the 'pure' vs 'corrupted' distinction of this period can be seen as an ineffectual attempt to address the 'pervasive ambiguity' that Sheehan describes in *Matrilineal Subjects*, one where the gender, cultural, and religious ambiguity is seen as a defect in need of correction, rather than as a strength of the narrative.

The notion of digging for the 'original narrative' found reinvention in the scholarship of the twentieth century with the quest for the 'author' of the versions of the *Four Branches* that survive in the Llyfrau Gwyn and Coch, with some scholars going as far as to name potential candidates.¹⁵³ However

¹⁵¹ Prys Morgan, 'From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 53, 56.

¹⁵² 'Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch', 1325, Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru – The National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 4. <<http://hdl.handle.net/10107/4396205>>, 'Llyfr Coch Hergest', 1382, Jesus College, University of Oxford, MS 111, <<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/9bf187bf-f862-4453-bc4f-851f6d3948af/>>.

¹⁵³ Andrew Breeze's hypothesis that the author could have been Gwenllïan ferch Gruffudd ap Cynan wrote is based on very dated ideas on what themes interest women. However, Iestyn Daniel in 1997 suggested that the

the work of Sioned Davies has highlighted the oral heritage of the tales, proposing that the *Four Branches* were most likely a collection of narratives that formed part of the repertoire of the *cyfarwyddiad*,¹⁵⁴ and therefore would have been continuously adapted by various individuals over many years before being written down.¹⁵⁵ In this case we see how the nature of the tales transgresses post-Renaissance literary conventions, problematising the nature of literature as distinct work stemming from the creative process of one individual. If we are to consider all *Four Branches* as a collective creative process involving many individuals spanning both geographical space and time, then an understanding of the nature of the tales themselves as an indistinct, polymorphous, queer entity is revealed. The versions in the *Llyfrau Gwyn and Coch* are but a snapshot of the tales in their life as dynamic and constantly evolving entities. The notion of these stories existing in multiple forms and being in a continuous process of becoming – responding, informing and being informed by social and cultural forces – parallels Judith Butler’s assertion concerning the creation of the gendered and the social body as performative. Furthermore, the plurality of many generations of creators, without fixed source, and the fact that there may have been many versions of the *Four Branches* in existence at any one time, again troubles both the search for the original pagan narrative and a single author. Sioned Davies raises further complications by reiterating that the oral versions of these tales would have been performed in a public venue, very likely with high levels of audience participation and interaction. Even written versions of the text were most likely intended to be read aloud to an audience. This is clearly not how modern academics interact with the text in the present day, and so recognition of the non-literary life of the *Four Branches* should not be neglected.¹⁵⁶ The tales

author could have been the monk Cnep Gwerthrynion, based on the detailed knowledge of the geography of North Wales found in the *Mabinogi*, and earlier in 1988 Sioned Davies also proposed a case for a collaborative authorship involving several individuals, before later changing her position on the matter. A. Breeze, *The Origins of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Gracewing, 2009), Iestyn Daniel, ‘The Date, Origin and Authorship of “The Mabinogion” in the Light of Ymborth Yr Enaid’, *Journal of Celtic Studies*, 4 (2004), pp. 117–52., Sioned Davies, ‘Pedair Keink y Mabinogi: A Case for Multiple Authorship’, in *Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples: Proceedings of the First North American Congress of Celtic Studies*, ed. by MacLennan (Chair of Celtic Studies, University of Ottawa, 1988), pp. 443–59.

¹⁵⁴ Professional storyteller in medieval Wales.

¹⁵⁵ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. xiii.

¹⁵⁶ Sioned Davies, ‘Written Text as Performance: The Implications for Middle Welsh Prose Narratives’, in *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. by Huw Pryce (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 133–48, pp. 135–136.

challenge the notion of what storytelling was in medieval Wales, and show how it is different to today's notions of art and literature.

This mode of critique of the scholarship highlights the queerness of medieval Welsh literature and what makes it a distinct entity, ultimately revealing how texts such as the *Fourth Branch* transgress contemporary hegemonic literary conventions. Multiple storytellers, in a constant process of revision point to a messy process whereby the nature of the tales is in constant dialogue with the audience. Thinking beyond questions of a single original narrative as the work of one creative mind, the notion that the tales are on a journey without destination,¹⁵⁷ destabilises the supposed static nature of the tales. As mentioned, modern Welsh culture has taken the stories and reevaluated them, building on the elements of the story and discounting others. Scholars such as Dimitra Fimi have done valuable work in exploring the role of the *Mabinogion* in shaping the modern fantasy genre.¹⁵⁸ However much of this modern analysis still frames these modern works as 'inspired by' the *Mabinogion* rather than considering it a continuation of the tales themselves. Queer theory in this context therefore provides an opportunity to approach modern interactions with the *Four Branches* beyond academia. In this new Foucauldian epoch, modern creatives that employ the tales in their art, are in connection with medieval *cyfarwyddiad*, through a process that arguably more closely reflects the relationship with the tales that the *cyfarwyddiad* would have had themselves.

Queering the scholarship of the *Four Branches* therefore offers scholars a means of seeing the tales as a whole creative process that is ongoing, revealing and providing means of undoing structural boundaries that twentieth century notions concerning the nature of authorship and literature may

¹⁵⁷ One which continues only as long as there is a willingness to find meaning and recognition in them.

¹⁵⁸ Dimitra Fimi, *Celtic Myth in Contemporary Children's Fantasy: Idealization, Identity, Ideology* (Springer, 2017).

place on them.¹⁵⁹ However, it is also worth noting how queer theories can also highlight the move within the scholarship to consider the content of the tales. A trend towards seeing the *Mabinogi* as they are – that is to say, an artistic work that drew on cultural narratives and spoke to audience preoccupations enough to be considered worthy of preserving – has increased with more scholarly energy directed to the content of the extant text. The assertion by Mary-Ann Constantine cited at the beginning of this dissertation, that the critique of the *Mabinogi* as a work of literature in and of itself is a valid way to gain deeper understanding of the text, is again pertinent.¹⁶⁰

The study of gender in Medieval Welsh sources has been until relatively recently the study of medieval women. Arguably this was the result of medieval women being a neglected category in terms of academic focus until the twentieth century. The first half of the century was content to continue the framing of Welsh women in the *Four Branches* as ancient goddesses owing to the romantic sensibilities of the time. Not until Valente's essay on the role of gender in the *Fourth Branch* did the women of the *Mabinogi* begin to be looked at as individuals, with motives and desires, rather than mythic archetypes.¹⁶¹ Happening after the 'second wave feminist' movement of the 1960s-80s, the subsequent works of Fiona Winward, Marged Haycock, and Helen Fulton among others brought the personhoods of the women of the *Mabinogion* to the fore for the first time in the history of the scholarship.¹⁶² Work at this time continues to be illuminating in terms of bringing the social position and power of medieval Welsh women in to the discourse. Notions of femininity/womanhood, female desire, sexuality, etc. in the *Four Branches* are important areas of study. However, a limitation with

¹⁵⁹ Notably, 20th century ideas of authorship have a long history in Western thought beginning in the Renaissance period, and then becoming foundational during the Romantic era. However, importantly this long history is not as old as the *Four Branches* themselves.

¹⁶⁰ Mary-Ann Constantine, 'The Battle for the "Battle of the Trees"', p. 47.

¹⁶¹ Roberta Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod', pp. 1–9.

¹⁶² See Fiona Winward, 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches', pp. 77–106; Marged Haycock, '"Defnydd hyd Ddydd Brawd": rhai agweddau ar y ferch ym marddoniaeth yr oesoedd canol', *Cymru a'r Cymry 2000: Trafodion Cynhadledd Milflwyddiant Canolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymreig a Cheltaidd Prifysgol Cymru*, Geraint Jenkins, ed. (Aberystwyth 2001) pp. 41-70; Helen Fulton, 'A Woman's place: Guinevere in the Welsh and French romances,' *Quondam et Futurus* 3:2 (1993), pp. 1-25.

the feminist dialogue from this period is that the study of gender is exclusively the study of women.

On this point Kapphahn writes

‘If feminist scholarship is a recent field, the study of masculinity is younger still. This is not to say that men have been at all excluded from studies of literature and history, but that maleness is assumed in the bulk of it – maleness, in conjunction with the dominant social, ethnic and economic majority, has provided the baseline for the study of most of human history’.¹⁶³

Kapphahn correctly observes that history is the study of men, not so as to provide insight into this group, but as the dominant segment of society. Medieval studies, by acknowledging the focus on the histories of men, results in woman being an afterthought- a sub form of medieval person who is different to the default (male) being. Feminist scholars respond to this by spotlighting women, as can be seen in the case of the scholarship of the *Four Branches*.¹⁶⁴ Kapphahn advocates for a more holistic approach to the study of gender in the Welsh medieval texts by arguing that in order to understand medieval femininity, medieval masculinity must also be studied. Specifically, the fact that the male body *is* a historical and literary standard of measurement.¹⁶⁵ Kapphahn’s analysis does not address the *Fourth Branch* specifically. I would argue that the innate mutability of the physical bodies in the *Fourth Branch* should provide a problem for her approach. The content of the *Fourth Branch* lends itself to an anachronistic ‘gender fluid’ reading, whereby the characters are not tethered to both their ‘fixed’ gender and sex identities, either through physical transformation – Gwydion, Gilfaethwy – or societal – Aranrhod, Lleu.

¹⁶³ Krista R. L Kapphahn, ‘Gender and Genre in Welsh Arthurian Literature’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Aberystwyth, 2015), pp.2-3.

¹⁶⁴ For further examples see Fiona Winward, ‘Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches’, pp. 77–106; Kathy E Shimpock, ‘The “Unlikely Female” Characters of the Mabinogi’; Jane Cartwright, ‘Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose’, pp. 56–79.

¹⁶⁵ Krista R. L Kapphahn, ‘Gender and Genre in Welsh Arthurian Literature’, pp.2-3.

This dissertation argues that the suggestion that the study of medieval gender should be conceptualised as the study of men *and women* betrays the cisgender heteronormativity which the scholarship may fall into, should contemporary notions of the immutability of sex and gender be unconsciously applied. As neither gender, nor sex is fixed in the *Fourth Branch*, coupled with far less knowledge of the biological mechanisms of sex during the medieval period, then to uncritically overlay these categories on ambiguous medieval narratives is *unconsciously* anachronistic, something which generally the historical method seeks to avoid. As has been explored in this work, a method similar to that of Dinshaw's 'touch historicism' that employs elements of an anachronistic approach can be a valid and useful means of engaging with the *Fourth Branch*. Discourse in LGBT+ communities and activists, as well as queer theory thinkers, provide new ways to approach gender by providing a rainbow of alternative genders, sexualities and identities, beyond the male – female binary where limited understanding of biology informs and equates to the social body. The work of Foucault and Dinshaw encourage a 'heterogenous, multiple and fundamentally indeterminate'¹⁶⁶ approach to the study of sex and gender, in ways that speak to the 'pervasive ambiguity' of medieval monastic and spiritual texts,¹⁶⁷ and of course to the *Fourth Branch*. However, this anachronistic approach must be consciously carried out. My fear is that by approaching gender, power, identity and sex in the *Fourth Branch* using a 'men *and women*' approach is a move in the right direction but does not go far enough towards relinquishing implicit biases in the scholarship, and instead brings, unconsciously, much of the baggage of postmodern gender ideology. The use of queer theory in this dissertation therefore demonstrates both the benefits elements of an anachronistic approach when used consciously, and the potential for undermining research and scholarship when it does not.

¹⁶⁶ Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p.215.

¹⁶⁷ Sarah Sheehan, 'Matrilineal Subjects', p.319.

Conclusion

The use of queer theory in this dissertation has demonstrated how literary theory may be boldly applied to some of medieval Welsh studies' most thoroughly examined texts. Specifically, it has been an experiment with the aim of offering to Celtic studies one of many readings of the *Fourth Branch* that may be generated from the point of view of sexual and gender minorities. On the act of reading queerly, Ramzi Fawaz and Shanté Paradigm Smalls write:

One of (queer theory's) most ambitious projects has been to reveal the distinct perspective of LGBTQ subjectivity as potentially relevant for making sense of forms of cultural production, even those texts, objects, and performances that do not appear to have any immediate relation to non-normative sexuality or desire.¹⁶⁸

The framing of the narrative through a queer theory lens does indeed provide a new perspective on the events and characters in the *Fourth Branch*. The social politics of gender still play a pivotal role, as Valente asserted in 1988,¹⁶⁹ particularly concerning the function of fertility and who wields it. The central conflict between Aranrhod and Gwydion which drives the action in the second and third acts, however, is seen in a new light. Through Butler's notion of gender as a social construct we see Aranrhod's successful rebellion against the labels *twyllforwyn* and mother to Lleu, and the social consequences that come with both as the driver of the unresolved 'heteronormative tragedy' of the *Fourth Branch*. By queering the narrative through this lens, the full disruptive scope embodied by Aranrhod is revealed. She is the 'unwoman' who refuses to renounce her claims of body autonomy and independent agency by maintaining she is not a false-virgin. She retains the political and economic powers and independence of the virgin, as *arglwydes* (Lady) of her *caer*, (and the lands surrounding it), despite birthing two children. Even if we are to believe that she is unaware of her

¹⁶⁸ Ramzi Fawaz and Shanté Paradigm Smalls, 'Queers Read This!: LGBTQ Literature Now', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, p. 171.

¹⁶⁹ Roberta Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod', pp. 1–9.

sexual status, the Mary-Eve dichotomy of medieval womanhood is queered by the simultaneous evidence of Aranrhod's fertility, and her maintenance of social status and lack of legal consequence for her actions. Queer theory also offers a means to better understand Aranrhod's motives through Bersani's *Anti-Social Thesis* and Edelman's figure of *the Child*. By reframing her rejection to comply to the expectations of normative gendered behaviour her queer, non-normative, non-virgin/non-non-virgin body is centred, the focus trained on her present context and wellbeing, in contrast to the perpetual deferring of present wellbeing that is required in Winnubst's *future anterior*.

By using queer theory to highlight the crisis surrounding access to sex that is engendered by the queerness of Aranrhod's status as a mother who also maintains the social and political power of a virgin, new light is shed on Lleu's narrative as the product of derailed reproductive futurism. Through Halberstam's notion of queer childhoods his plight suddenly comes to the fore. In the patriarchal world of the *Fourth Branch* Lleu does not 'grow up', but does, as Bond Stockton says, 'grow sideways', thwarted as he is in the breaking of Aranrhod's last destiny upon him. Lleu is denied access to the heteronormative life expected of him. Though it is unclear whether motivated by Lleu's supposed wellbeing, or by his own sense of malicious competition with his sister, by employing help to try (and notably failing) to make Lleu 'straight', Gwydion reveals the impulse to legitimise the social body of Lleu through valorised indicators of personhood and maturity. In this light, Lleu's status as 'proto-queer' ('proto-gay' in the original words of Sedgwick) is revealed in hindsight, and calls into question the way that the finale of the *Fourth Branch* is interpreted. Queer theory invites readings of the text that turn the 'heteronormative tragedy' of the ending of the *Fourth Branch* on its head. The fall of the ruling regime making way for the potential of new queer social and societal configurations to be generated and the centring of new voices and narratives that have previously been maligned. In this light, Aranrhod certainly seems to be triumphant, both in terms of status and power, and by having the last laugh over Gwydion who symbolises the old regime. It also asks us to consider the ambiguity

of Lleu's position and how scholars have interpreted it. An anachronistic queer reading of Lleu as an A-sexual being for example could be possible as he seems to be at best ambivalent to his magical wife (described as the most beautiful woman in the world),¹⁷⁰ and notably only seeks personal revenge on Gronw Pebr for his attempted assignation.¹⁷¹

Beyond a reading of the text itself, the benefit of queer theory is that its powers of analysis may also be turned to the scholarship. As successful as queer theory is at bringing to light systems of power and oppression within the narrative of the *Fourth Branch*, so too does it reveal such patterns in the academic literature. Though an in-depth investigation was beyond the scope of this dissertation, my hope is that Celticists moving forward will be as increasingly interested in the manner in which the *Fourth Branch*, the *Mabinogion*, and Welsh medieval literature in general has been studied, as they are in texts themselves. This self-reflection is complex and not commonly carried out in Celtic studies, however I am optimistic that by discussing here notions such as heteronormativity in the scholarship of the *Fourth Branch*, that bias and prejudice in the literature can begin to be recognised and addressed, allowing the identification of areas of study that have hitherto been neglected or suppressed, and may now be recognised and perused.

Touched on in this dissertation is that the *Mabinogi* and the *Fourth Branch* in particular is extremely well known and well-loved beyond academia. Interpretations and reinterpretations of the story and

¹⁷⁰ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.58.

¹⁷¹ Blodeuedd herself could not be covered in this dissertation but also provides an attractive subject for examination via a queer lens. This 'trans-floral-human-avian being' has already begun to provoke questions regarding the nature of purpose, creation, artificiality, and personhood by the troubling of the human/non-human boundary in the *Fourth Branch*, (in a different way to Gwidion and Gilfaethwy who start as humans and then return to human form, Blodeuedd is originally non-human and seems to be considered a different species from humans even when she is transformed) prompting discussions that make comparisons with AI and relations with other 'alien' beings in the modern day. See Cara Bartels-Bland, "'You Took My Spirit Captive among the Leaves': The Creation of Blodeuwedd in Re-Imaginations of the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi", *Pomegranate*, 16.2 (2014), pp. 178–206.

characters generated by artists, authors, musicians in the public sphere reflect the charisma of these tales both within Wales and abroad. The value of this process happening beyond academic institutions should not be underestimated. Queering the *Fourth Branch* invites us to remember that the surviving text is not a single fixed narrative that exists in static form, but the product of many interweaving *narratives* that were, and continue to be, part of a dynamic tradition of change, adaption and fluidity, as pervasively ambiguous as the characters themselves.

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