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Ancient Tradition or Authorial Invention? The 'Mythological' Names in the Four Branches¹

JESSICA HEMMING

Depending on how one divides up the name elements, and counting patronymics as separate, there are between sixty-five and sixty-nine personal names in the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*. Of these, only about a third have received significant scholarly attention and still fewer have been subjected to thorough analysis. This is surprising, given that the Four Branches are among the most important of medieval Welsh prose texts and have been examined from almost every conceivable angle. There have been studies of individual names, particularly those of the major characters, but many are now very dated. Furthermore, the majority have begun from the starting point of looking for evidence of the tales' antiquity and presumed mythological substrate. More recent studies have tended to take the form of brief notes on a specific name or two at a time. Yet despite the central importance of these tales, there has been no sustained investigation of naming patterns across the Four Branches as a whole.

As part of my PhD thesis some years ago, I examined the fourteen names in the First Branch (*Pwyll*) in detail, with some surprising results. Most notably, I found that with the possible exceptions of *Rhiannon* and *Teyrnnon*, none of the characters' names could be demonstrated reliably to derive from ancient Welsh mythology. Most appeared to come from common nouns, a few were historical, and some were quite possibly jokes devised by the author.²

I have since started to extend this study to cover the remaining three Branches. Not only are the lesser-known names interesting in their own right, but the overall patterns of naming may yield valuable insights into the level of conscious authorial input. The degree to which the Four Branches may be regarded as the more-or-less original compositions of an individual

¹ A rather different version of this paper was presented at the Twelfth International Congress of Celtic Studies in Aberystwyth, August 2003. ² Jessica Hooker, 'A Textual Commentary on the First Branch of the *Mabinogi*' (PhD, University of Cambridge, 1995).

author, versus the other possibility that they are the imperfectly-preserved remnants of an ancient oral tradition, remains quite contentious. A thorough study of *all* the personal names in the four tales could prove to be a useful addition to this ongoing debate.

For the purposes of the present miscellany, I will only be discussing those names which have been generally (or at least occasionally) thought to derive from mythological antecedents. This essay should therefore be regarded as a prolegomenon to a future – longer – study.

THE FIRST BRANCH

Pwyll Our protagonist's name means 'wisdom' or 'good sense', and is cognate with Irish *clall*, both words deriving (along with Breton *poell*) from Common Celtic **k^wēllā* from the root **k^weis-*, 'to consider'.³ Rachel Bromwich notes further that '[w]ith Pwyll "wisdom, reason, understanding" etc. (GPC 2948–9) as a personal name, Holder compares Gaulish *Pellus* (ACS, II, 963). Cf. Also the Br. Verb *poellat* "to consider". The name appears as *Poyll* in the fourteenth-century *Cart. de Quimper* (Chr. Br., p. 227).⁴

There have been a couple of valiant attempts to equate Pwyll with the Gaulish divinity *Sucellos*, on the grounds that both names may derive from the same root, but the identification is not convincing.⁵ *Sucellos* is attested only on the Continent and, as he is depicted as a hammer-bearer, his name is usually translated as 'The Good Striker'.⁶

Likewise, attempts to identify Pwyll with any historical personage have been generally unsuccessful,⁷ although John T. Koch has suggested the possibility that he might have been *Tasciovanos*, king of the *Catuvellauni*.⁸ *Tasciovanos* (< **tazgo-* + *-uanos*) appears to mean 'badger-slayer' and Koch cites numismatic evidence that he believes may indicate that this king was a

3 Joseph Vendryes et al. (eds), *Lexique Etymologique de l'irlandais ancien* (Dublin: DIAS; Paris: Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, 1959–). 4 Rachel Bromwich (ed. and trans.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydain*, 3rd ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), p. 487. Her references are to the *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: A Dictionary of the Welsh Language* (GPC), ed. Gareth Bevan et al. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1968–2002); Alfred Holder, *Alt-Celtischer Sprachschatz*, 3 vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1896–1907); and Joseph Loth, *Crestomathie Bretonne* (Paris: Bouillon, 1890). 5 See Willy Borgeaud, 'Homérique (κατ) εἶβω "verser (des larmes)", grec ὑπὸς "humide"; gaulois **Succellos* et gallois *Pwyll*; encore *tranquillus*', *Indogermanische Forschungen* 74 (1969), 139–46, and Christophe Vielle 'D'un mythe celtique à un roman hagiographique galate', *Ollodagos* 1 (1990), 75–109. 6 Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, trans. Myles Dillon (reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover, 2000) p. 19; Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Celtic Religion: An Overview', in *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones, 15 vols (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 3:1478–97 (1485). 7 For early examples see A.W. Wade-Evans, 'Notes on Names in the Mabinogi', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 89 (1934), 176–9. 8 John T. Koch, 'Gallo-Brittonic *Tasc(i)ouanos* "Badger-slayer" and the Reflex of Indo-European *g^wh*', *Journal of Celtic Linguistics* 1 (1992), 101–18.

devotee of a god called *Rigonos*. Given this coincidence, Koch proposes that he could easily be Pwyll, who played 'badger-in-the-bag' and was 'beloved of Riannon [*sic*] < **Rigantonā* and *Teirnon* < **Tegernonos* < *Rigonos*'. This is an intriguing theory and particularly interesting is Koch's point, made in an earlier article, that in spite of the well-known semantic pairing of **Rigantona* and **Tigernonos*, the proper linguistic counterpart of the presumed goddess should be *Rigonos*.⁹ However, the whole argument hinges on the interpretation of an inscription on a single coin struck during the reign of *Tasciovanos*: TASCIO RICONI. Koch interprets this as 'Tasciovanos *Rigoni*', or *Tasciovanos* of the Divine King, meaning perhaps, something like 'devotee of *Rigonos*'. He then suggests that if the king were associated with the god, he might also have been symbolically wed to **Rigantona*, as *Rhiannon* is wife to both the mortal Pwyll and the (possibly) divine *Teyrnnon*. Given the lack of evidence elsewhere, Koch proposes that *Rigonos* and **Rigantona* may have been tutelary deities of the *Catuvellauni* and exclusive to that tribe.

But there are problems with this. How can Pwyll, prince of Dyfed, be king of a tribe in south-east Britain? Similarly, if the divine couple were worshipped solely by the *Catuvellauni*, then what is the story of *Rhiannon* doing in medieval Wales? Does the writing on the coin really mean 'Tasciovanos of the Divine King', and if even if so, is *Rigonos* really a proper name? It may match **Rigantona* linguistically, but the Celtic divine couples were not necessarily matched pairs. *Sucellos* himself was consort to the goddess *Nantosuelta*.

Certainly in the text as it stands there is nothing to suggest that Pwyll represents any historical figure, let alone the king of a distant tribe. Nor does he display any godlike characteristics. It seems more likely that he is largely a creation of the author of the Four Branches whose name reflects his personal development within the narrative. To begin with his name seems ironic, for throughout much of the story 'good sense' is hardly the attribute most applicable to him. He is rash and discourteous at first meeting with both *Arawn* and *Rhiannon*, and foolish in his initial dealings with *Gwawl*. Indeed, *Rhiannon* chides him for losing her to *Gwawl* with the words, *Ny bu uuscrellach gwr ar y ssynwyr e hun nog ry uuost ti* ('There was never a man feebler in his own intelligence than you have been', ll. 324–5). Chastened by experience, Pwyll by the end of the tale comes to deserve his name. It is a common convention in folk narrative for a character to either grow into or out of his name, and a similar device seems to be operating here. The remaining question, however, is whether the name *Pwyll* gave rise to the

9 'A Welsh Window on the Iron Age: Manawydan, Mandubracios', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 14 (1987), 17–52 (45).

foolishness-to-wisdom narrative development, or vice versa. The occurrence of the name in the poem *Preiddeu Annwn*, which probably antedates the Four Branches, suggests the former.¹⁰ His association with the magical fort of Caer Siddi in the poem, plus his acquired title *Pen Annwn*, seems to indicate some degree of association with the Otherworld, but nothing in his character in either text is reminiscent of Sucellos or any other recognised Celtic deity.

Arawn and Hafgan Remarkably little is known about the name *Arawn* or the character to whom it is attached. It is very unlikely to be derived from the biblical *Aaron* because this is normally rendered in Welsh as *Aron* with a short -o-.¹¹ The Welsh *Brut y Brenhinedd* uses *Arawn* for Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Anguselus*, king of Scotland, but this is probably simply a matter of the Welsh translator exchanging an unfamiliar name for a familiar one.¹²

Among the speculative etymologies for *Arawn* are Christophe Vielle's suggestion that it derives from **Ar-au-nos*, meaning "celui qui est très favorable", "qui preserve bien", on the grounds that the verbal root -au- signifies "respecter", "protéger", "preserver", "garantir". Subsequently, Patrizia de Bernardo Stempel proposed that the name has affinities with attested theonyms in -aun-/-oun-, and hazarded the meanings 'he who leads over' or 'he who apportions'.¹³ So far no etymological explanation has been widely accepted, nor does any seem to make obvious sense in the context of the existing narrative.

Hafgan is rather easier to translate. The first element of his name is evidently 'summer', while the second is probably 'bright, white, brilliant', but may alternatively be *cân* 'song'. Either way, he seems to be an explicitly summery figure. The *GPC* gives several citations from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries to a common noun *hafgan* meaning 'summer brightness' or 'summer-like radiance', and some to *hâfgân*, 'summer-song' or 'May-song'. While the seasonal/solar school of thought has mostly been discredited, in this case it may just be possible that there is a faint echo of a seasonal struggle between the lords of summer and winter.¹⁴ In the text there is no clear indication that *Arawn* has wintry connections (unless one

¹⁰ Marged Haycock, "Preiddeu Annwn" and the Figure of Taliesin', *Studia Celtica* 18–19 (1983–84), 52–78 (57). ¹¹ Bromwich, *Triodd*, p. 280. ¹² See *ibid.*, p. 280; Wade-Evans, 'Notes on Names', p. 177; Brynley Roberts, 'The Treatment of Personal Names in the Early Welsh Versions of *Historia Regum Britanniae*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 25 (1973), 274–89 (284). ¹³ Vielle, 'D'un mythe', pp. 98–9; de Bernardo Stempel, 'Das indogermanische *m(V)no*-Verbaladjektiv im Keltischen' in Roland Bielmeier and Reinhardt Stempel (eds), *Indogermanica et Caucasica: Festschrift für Karl Horst Schmidt zum 65. Geburtstag* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 281–305 (290–1). ¹⁴ This suggestion was first put forward by R.S. Loomis many years ago: 'More Celtic Elements in *Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 42 (1943), 149–84 (174–5).

counts his greyish garment), but in later folklore he seems to become a figure associated with cold weather and winter storms.¹⁵ His most compelling winter-like aspect is indeed the mere fact that he has an annual feud with another lord of Annwn whose name is clearly related to summer. But the story rather leaves this aspect hanging: if Pwyll, in Arawn's shape, defeats Hafgan, does that mean Dyfed is plunged into endless winter? If there was once a seasonal origin for the struggle between Arawn and Hafgan, it certainly seems to have become irrelevant by the time the present tale was composed.

Rhiannon Despite the fairly compelling etymology of her name (< **Rigantona*, 'Great/Divine Queen'), Rhiannon will be minimally treated here because I have examined her extensively elsewhere.¹⁶ If there is a good case for any character in the First Branch being derived from earlier mythology, it would have to be Rhiannon. Her name follows recognized rules for theonyms and echoes the names of goddesses like Matrona and Epona who are attested in the epigraphic record. However, a central stumbling block to being certain about Rhiannon's original divinity is her *absence* from such inscriptions, or indeed any other texts of any kind. It leaves open the possibility that her name (and perhaps Teyrnon's also) was actually made up by the author of the Four Branches, using the conventions of deity-naming, in order to further imbue the narrative with an atmosphere of ancient mystery.¹⁷

If **Rigantona* really was a genuine mythological figure at some point, she would seem to have had some relationship to the equine goddess Epona, who was evidently widely known well into the Roman period,¹⁸ as discussed in my articles already cited. She also may have been the local sovereignty goddess of Dyfed, although it should be observed that Pwyll is already prince of Dyfed before he marries her. His lordship is therefore not contingent upon her favor, although she certainly improves his leadership skills. Also, in the Third Branch, Pryderi bestows the possession of Dyfed upon Manawydan as a gift when he marries Rhiannon; the cantref's do not

¹⁵ See Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes* (New York: Columbia UP, 1949), pp. 131–2 for examples. See also one modern example in Jonathan Caredig Davies, *Folk-Lore of West and Mid-Wales* (Lampeter: Llanerch, 1992; orig. pub. 1911), pp. 160–1. ¹⁶ Hooker, 'Textual Commentary', pp. 27–54; Jessica Hemming, 'Sellam Gestare: Saddle-bearing Punishments and the Case of Rhiannon', *Viator* 28 (1997), 45–64; Jessica Hemming, 'Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in *Pwyll*', *Western Folklore* 57 (1998), 19–40. My PhD thesis also contains a more-or-less comprehensive survey of scholarly work on Rhiannon up to 1995. ¹⁷ Thanks are due to Dr Oliver Padel for this last suggestion (personal communication, 2002). ¹⁸ A list of all known inscriptions to Epona and pictorial representations of her (including doubtful ones) appears in Claude Sterckx, *Éléments de cosmogonie celtique* (Brussels: University of Brussels, 1986), pp. 11–38.

come automatically with the queen and indeed remain technically Pryderi's.¹⁹ This would seem to militate against a sovereignty-goddess identity. However, given the strong evidence, particularly in Ireland, that ancient Indo-European kingship often depended upon union with a territorial goddess,²⁰ it is still quite plausible that this was Rhiannon's original role. In addition, there is some further evidence linking sovereignty goddesses with horses in some cases, which would help to strengthen Rhiannon's claim to divinity.²¹

It just goes to show that even names with simple etymology are fraught with difficulties when one tries to prove ancient mythological roots.

Teyrnon Twryf Vliant There have been two long-running discussions of this character: one focusing on the meaning of his epithet *Twryf Vliant*, the other on his presumed mythological identity. Most scholars suggest that *vliant* is a corruption of *lliant*, 'waters, flood, sea', and that the name signifies something like 'noise of the waters'.²² However, Thomson is cautious in his edition of the text: 'His cognomen is obscure; *twryf uliant* here [l. 510], *toryf liant* in 637, *twr bliant* in WBM 464.14, all of which can stem from one early spelling. *Twryf* is "noise", *toryf* is "crowd" (Latin *turma*, *turba*), and *twr* is "heap" or "tower" (Latin *turris*); *bliant* is a material, sometimes translated "linen", *lliant* "waters, flood, sea".²³ Despite my suspicion that some of the names in the Four Branches are jokes devised by the author, I do not think 'Heap of Linen' is likely to be one of them. It is more plausible that the epithet may be a conventional formulaic tag such as often occurs in medieval narrative. 'King of the Roar of the Waters' has a similar ring to the 'Lady of the Fountain' in *Owein* or the 'Knight of the Cart' in Chrétien's *Lancelot*.

The mythological argument stems from the name *Teyrnon* itself. Although it is a well-attested common noun meaning 'king, sovereign, prince',²⁴ it derives from the apparent theonym **Tigernonos*, 'Great/Divine Sovereign'. It has been repeatedly noted since the end of the nineteenth century that the names Teyrnon and Rhiannon form a suspiciously tidy pair. The 'Great King' and the 'Great Queen' so obviously belong together that a common speculation has been that it was originally Teyrnon, not Pwyll, who was Gwri/Pryderi's

19 A *chyn bo emwedigaeth y kyuoeth y mi, bit y mwynant y ti a Riannon, Manawydan uab Llyr*, ll. 23–4, in Ifor Williams (ed.), *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, 2nd ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1951).

20 See Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature (suite et fin)', *Études Celtiques* 8 (1958–59), 59–65, and Catherine McKenna, 'The Theme of Sovereignty in Pwyll', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 29 (1980–1), 35–52, for some discussions of this issue.

21 See, for instance, Patrick K. Ford (trans.), *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 4–12, and Ford, 'Prolegomena to a Reading of the Mabinogi: "Pwyll" and "Manawydan"', *Studia Celtica* 16/17 (1981–2), 110–25; Hooker, 'Textual Commentary', pp. 31–34. 22 Williams, *Pedeir Keinc*, pp. 146–7. 23 R.L. Thomson (ed.), *Pwyll Pendewic Dyuet*, Mediaeval and Modern Welsh Series 1 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1986), p. 39. 24 GPC, s.v. *teyrn* and *teyrnon*.

father.²⁵ All kinds of complicated reconstructions of hypothetical ur-texts have been proposed to make sense of this, but there remains the basic fact that this is not what we have in the extant tale. There is no reason to suppose, from the story as we have it, that Teyrnon had any divine attributes. While Rhiannon at least has clear otherworldly associations in the Mabinogi, any that Teyrnon might have are solely due to his relationship to her. This includes his name, which seems to be a semantic match for hers, and his mysterious acquisition and then adoption of her son. In other words, one has to work very hard indeed to create a godlike identity for him out of what we have in the First Branch.

Gwri Wallt Euryn and Pryderi These are, of course, one character with two names. Rhiannon's son has been at the centre of a great deal of mythological speculation and reconstruction since the early days of Mabinogi scholarship. John Rhys and R.S. Loomis both regarded 'Gwri Golden-Hair' as a solar hero and tried to equate him variously with Cú Chulainn, Gawain and Lleu.²⁶ Loomis and Gruffydd also attempted to draw parallels between Gwri and the character Gweir who appears in the poem *Preiddeu Annwn* as an immemorial prisoner.²⁷ *Culhwch ac Olwen* also contains an immemorial prisoner, Mabon son of Modron, whose name (presumably from **Maponos*, 'Divine Son', son of Matrona, 'Divine Mother') does suggest very strongly an ancient mythological origin, especially as Matrona is a well-attested goddess.²⁸ It is worth summarizing Gruffydd's argument because it seems to have been the inspiration for subsequent attempts to sort out Gwri's family relationships. Gruffydd's case is this: Mabon is the immemorial prisoner in *Culhwch*, and Gweir a similar figure in *Preiddeu Annwn*, therefore these two persons must be the same; Mabon is the son of Modron (= the mother-goddess Matrona); Matrona and **Rigantona* (Rhiannon) are interchangeable spouses of **Tigernonos* (Teyrnon); therefore, Mabon ap Modron equals Gwri son of Rhiannon. He sums up: 'There is little doubt in my mind that *Mabon*, *Gwri*, *Gweir* and *Mynweir* [the mysterious name at the end of *Manawydan*] all represent the same person – the original of the *Mabonagrain* of [Chrétien's

25 Edward Anwyl, 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi (I.II)', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 1 (1896–7), 277–93 (289); W.J. Gruffydd, 'Mabon ap Modron', *Revue Celtique* 33 (1912), 452–61 (455); Gruffydd, *Rhiannon: An Inquiry into the Origins of the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1953), pp. 98–100; Ford, 'Prolegomena', 118–25; Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 5.

26 Rhys, *The Hibbert Lectures, 1886: Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religions as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1888), p. 501; Loomis, 'Gawain, Gwri, and Cuchullinn', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 43 (1928), 384–96. This is effectively rebutted by Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Irish Geography of *Culhwch and Olwen*', in Donnchadh Ó Corráin et al. (eds.), *Sages, Saints, and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989), pp. 412–26 (419). 27 Loomis, 'Gawain', and, more particularly, Gruffydd, 'Mabon', p. 461.

28 Bromwich, *Trioeidd*, p. 449.

romance] *Érec*, and the famous prisoner of Welsh mythology'.²⁹ Claude Sterckx more or less reiterated this argument over seventy years later, claiming that Epona (= Matrona) and Rhiannon both have as a son a boy who is simultaneously a colt and that therefore Maponos/Mabon and Gwri are one and the same.³⁰

In Gruffydd's later, monumental *Rhiannon*, he tried heroically to prove that Gwri was also identical to the Irish character Mongán.³¹ Presumably Mongán is therefore also Maponos, along with Gwri, Gweir and Mabon. If we also accept the equation of Rhiannon with both Epona and Matrona/Modron, we are left with no more than a handful of characters in all of Insular Celtic mythology!

Eric P. Hamp offers an interesting variation on the argument concerning Maponos' relationship to Gwri. Rather than identifying the two with each other, he suggests that Gwri was the son of *Tigernonos and *Rigantona, husband to Matrona, and father to Maponos.³² Although he does not mention it, this also would have major implications for the identity of Rhiannon, for she obviously could not be Matrona if the latter goddess is married to her son.

This all requires doing considerable violence to the existing text. In the Four Branches Gwri is clearly the son of Pwyll and Rhiannon, his name changes to Pryderi in boyhood, he grows up to marry Cigfa, and he has no children. He is not imprisoned at all in the First Branch, and only temporarily in the Third. His name bears no resemblance to Mabon/Maponos, nor to Mongán, nor etymologically to Gweir ('grass, hay'). What it does look like is the common noun *gwr* 'man', plus the suffix *-i*, frequently found in personal and place-names. Eilert Ekwall states that this suffix generally occurs in 'abstract nouns and in collectives, as *caledi* "hardness", *llestri* "vessels"'.³³ One might also include *mabinogi* itself in this category, but that is another story. *Gwri* could, then, mean something like 'manliness', which fits well with various other names in the Four Branches, including Pryderi and Pwyll.

Which brings us neatly to *Pryderi*, 'anxiety, distress',³⁴ or perhaps 'care, worry'. Ifor Williams suggested that *pryder* might also have the sense of 'loss', cf. Breton *priti* used to gloss *iactura*, 'loss, sacrifice'.³⁵ Thomson, in his edition of *Pwyll*, approves of this alternative definition because it is appropriate for a child who 'has been lost to his mother since birth'.³⁶ However, Léon

Fleuriet's dictionary of Breton glosses gives no such sense to the word, stating rather that, '*Pritiri* signifie "reflexion, souci"', and the related *preteram*, *pridiry*, *prediry*, "'pensement, tourment, soin, meditation'".³⁷ I see no reason, under the circumstances, to dispute the explanation given in *Pwyll* itself for the boy's name: his loss caused his mother great *pryder* ('anxiety, concern, worry, distress').

Furthermore, both Ifor Williams and, much later, Marged Haycock, have suggested that *Pryderi fab Pwyll* ('Loss/Care son of Good Sense', according to Williams, but perhaps better, 'Worry son of Wisdom') is an example of parallel construction found both in names (such as *Nerth mab Kadarn*) and stock phrases (such as *tir a daear*) in Middle Welsh narrative.³⁸ This idea is well supported by the personal names in the Mabinogi and elsewhere. The general pattern probably has its origins in folk narrative, but it also leaves plenty of scope for an inventive medieval author to play with new examples. In this particular case, it fits the characters well, agrees with the author's own explanations, and requires no mythological reconstruction or other meddling with the text. That said, there is an allusion to Pryderi in *Preiddeu Annwn* seemingly indicating that the name antedates the composition of the Four Branches.³⁹ With the dating of neither text entirely secure, it is still difficult to determine which is the earlier. It could be that *Preiddeu Annwn* simply refers to the story in *Pwyll*.

For the sake of completeness, one should note that John Koch has proposed that the apparent personal name *Pryderi* might be in fact the title '*PritēRi* with a suspension stroke for *n*, thus Mod. *Prydain Ri*, "King of Britain", corresponding exactly to the "Britannorum Rex" which Suetonius applied to Tasciovanos's son Cunobelinus'. This accords well with his theory that Pwyll is Tasciovanos and the whole account of Pwyll and Pryderi part of a 'saga glorifying the dynasts of the Catuvellauni'.⁴⁰ However, although, as Koch himself is at pains to point out,⁴¹ the title 'King of Britain' is used in the Mabinogi, neither Pwyll nor Pryderi is so designated in the very tales which are supposed to be glorifying them. Rather, it is quite clearly stated that they are lords of Dyfed (with Pryderi later adding some additional cantref). What happened? Did later redactors forget that Cunobelinus had been 'Britannorum Rex', despite remembering that his ancestor Cassivellaunos/Caswallawn had been? There is also the difficulty that the Mabinogi makes

29 Gruffydd, 'Mabon', p. 461. 30 *Cosmogonie*, p. 59. 31 Gruffydd, *Rhiannon*, pp 24–32. This is rebutted by Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Mongán Mac Fiachna and *Immram Brain*', *Ériu* 23 (1972), 102–42 (130). 32 'Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmudorion* (1974–5), 243–9 (248). 33 *English River-Names* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1928), p. lxxvii. Also cited in R. J. Thomas, *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1938), p. 127. See also Eric Hamp, 'Early Welsh Names, Suffixes and Phonology', *Onoma* 14 (1969), 7–13 (10–11). 34 GPC, s.v. 35 *Pedeir Keinc*, p. 157. 36 Thomson, *Pwyll*, p. 41.

37 *Dictionnaire des gloses en vieux Breton* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1964), p. 290. 38 Williams, *Pedeir Keinc*, p. 158; Haycock, 'Taliesin's "Lesser Song of the World" in Tegwyn Jones and E.B. Fryde (eds), *Ysgrifau a Cherddi Cyflwynedig i Daniel Huws: Essays and Poems Presented to Daniel Huws* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1994), pp 229–50 (246, 248). 39 Marged Haycock, 'Preiddeu Annwn and the Figure of Taliesin', *Studia Celtica* 18/19 (1983–4), 52–78 (60 and 62). 40 'Tasc(i)ouanos', p. 112. 41 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

Pryderi contemporary with Caswallawn (an historical king who died c.47 B.C.), which he can hardly have been if he was Cunobelinos (reigned c.A.D. 10 to A.D. 43).

THE SECOND BRANCH

This branch deals with the family of Llŷr, whose members seem to have – in varying degrees – some connection to a broader corpus of British mythological material. One might also consider the grotesque Irish giant-couple, Llasar Llaes Gyfnawid and Cymidei Cymeinfol, to be ultimately ‘mythological’ insofar as they apparently come from the Otherworld (specifically, out of a lake). However, there is no evidence to suggest that they were anything more than generic supernatural figures.

Bendigeidfran fab Llŷr. Despite the great quantity of scholarly discussion he has inspired, this character has remained essentially impenetrable. Proinsias Mac Cana devoted considerable space to the origins of his name and tradition in his book-length study of the Second Branch and essentially concluded that the evidence is inconclusive.⁴² His name, Brân, can be translated easily enough as ‘raven, crow, rook’ and his epithet means ‘blessed, holy’. The raven is a pervasive image in early Welsh, and other Celtic, literature, but animal names were common and do not suggest mythological origin in and of themselves. Nor does *bendigeid* offer much help, as it is not attested until the twelfth century by which time the Christian implications of ‘blessed’ would have been long-since entrenched. This is not to say that Brân was not originally a divinity, for in our text and elsewhere he has many features which suggest an euhemerized god, including his huge size and magical head.⁴³

Patrick Ford has argued that *Bendigeidfran* means ‘divine raven’ and that his name is a Christianized variant of the native *Branwen* (also, figuratively,

⁴² Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr: A Study of the Irish Affinities and of the Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), pp 129–39. Relevant to the whole of my present study is the following: ‘Obviously one of the difficulties which bedevil a discussion of this sort is how to distinguish between the source of a name and the source of traditions pertaining to it, for they are not necessarily the same’ (p. 139). ⁴³ See Bromwich, *Triodd*, pp 291–2, for references to Brân outside the Four Branches. She also presents her own and Ifor Williams’ suggestions for early meanings for *bendigeid* and *urddawl* (the epithet applied to his severed head), p. 291. Glenys Goetinck discusses the mythological significance of Brân’s size and, especially, his magic head in ‘The Blessed Heroes’, *Studia Celtica* 20/21 (1985/6), 87–109 (92–5). She further suggests that the ‘blessed’ epithet (which was also applied to the more or less historical figures of Gwerthefyr, Cadwallon, and Cadwaladr) was a ninth-century Welsh development reflecting the complex nationalistic feelings of the period. *Bendigeid* was thus applied to heroes who were fitting symbols of national pride, despite having ultimately suffered defeat at the hands of foreign enemies.

‘divine raven’), making the two characters originally a single (male) war-god.⁴⁴ Onomastically this is a compelling suggestion, but there is the paradox that, despite the inordinate amount of violence in the Second Branch, neither Brân nor Branwen is characterized in a manner reminiscent of what might be considered more obvious war-deities (such as the Morrigan) elsewhere in Celtic literature.

The problem is that there is no solid evidence earlier than the Mabinogi which allows Brân to be identified with a ‘real’ god. John Koch has suggested that he might be derived from the historical Continental Celtic leader Brennos (d. 78 B.C.) who, he argues, became a kind of legendary founding ancestor for various tribes.⁴⁵ While this is theoretically possible, it does require quite a stretch to make the connection. It is inherently very difficult to equate characters and events in medieval Welsh tales to Classical reports and the archaeological record. It is in fact the general *lack* of correspondence that leaves so much wide open to speculation, from the wholesale reconstructions of Gruffydd to more recent studies.

If Brân does derive from either Brennos or Brennius (or some combination of the two), then he becomes more legendary ancestor and less euhemerized god. In the Second Branch, however, it is notable that he dies without offspring, making him ancestral to nobody! Legendary and mythological ancestors are typically thought to have sired, in a literal sense, the ruling dynasties of their people, but Brân’s family line peters out completely with the death of his nephew Gwern.

Given this serious impediment to ancestorhood, it seems more likely that Brân’s supernormal attributes come from an original divine identity. The most compelling evidence, to my mind, is his patronymic *mab Llŷr*. If the Welsh Llŷr may be taken as the equivalent of the Irish Ler, then we might actually have something to work with. The Irish mythological record has survived in a much more intact state than the Welsh and on occasion provides fairly direct parallels. However, there is still the problem, spelled out thoroughly by Bromwich, that the attested Irish sea-god Mannanán mac Lír may be not ‘M. son of (the god) Ler’ at all, but simply ‘M. son of the sea’.⁴⁶ If this is the case, then Ler/Llŷr becomes a phantom character and the only

⁴⁴ ‘Branwen: A Study of the Celtic Affinities’, *Studia Celtica* 22/23 (1987/8), 29–42 (33 and 38–9).

⁴⁵ ‘Brân, Brennos: An Instance of Early Gallo-Brittonic History and Mythology’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 20 (1990), 1–20. The earlier argument of Arthurian scholars, that Brân derived from Geoffrey’s accounts of Brennius, sacker of Rome in 390 B.C., is set out in Helaine Newstead, *Bran the Blessed in Arthurian Romance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1939), pp 163–7. ⁴⁶ *Triodd*, p. 419; Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, rev. ed. (New York: Peter Bedrick, 1985), p. 66. See now Charles MacQuarrie, *The Biography of the Irish God of the Sea from The Voyage of Bran (700 A.D.) To Finnegans Wake (1939)* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen, 2004). Even if Llŷr/Ler is not a separate person per se, the mere fact of being ‘Son of the Sea’ suggests a supernatural identity of some kind.

solid evidence for the divinity of Brân evaporates, leaving one more vague possibility among many.⁴⁷

Finally, one of the most puzzling things about Brân is that he seems to spring up virtually *ex nihilo* (as do most of the characters in the Mabinogi), but then goes on to play a significant part in the Arthurian cycle in his revised role as the Fisher King.⁴⁸ Why is he the only major character in the Four Branches to make this transition (except, perhaps, for Branwen in a much smaller way as Isolt's maid in the Tristan stories)? Perhaps it is because there was once a much larger cycle of stories concerning him, but if so, they are now lost and we shall probably never be certain. It has been said of various characters in the Four Branches (Pwyll, Pryderi, Rhiannon, Manawydan, and so on) that they must once have featured in larger bodies of lore, but all these supposed tales have evidently disappeared and none of these figures occurs in any significant way elsewhere in medieval literature, except Brân. This is in marked contrast to *Culhwch ac Olwen* and the Welsh romances, which have obvious connections to the Arthurian cycle, and it is one of the great mysteries – and frustrations – of the Four Branches.

Manawydan fab Llŷr Brân's brother is the principal link between his family and the surviving Irish mythological literature, but the connection is not secure. While Manawydan may perhaps be equivalent to Mannánán, there are several problems with this identification. First, and most obviously, there is no indication whatsoever in the Four Branches that Manawydan had any special relationship to the sea, nor any divine attributes. On the contrary, he appears in the Second and Third Branches as a very human, gentle and modest man. His nature is in fact pointedly non-heroic, as the author of the text asserts repeatedly, calling him an 'Ungrasping Chieftain' and stressing that he had no desire for territory.⁴⁹ Whether we regard his personality traits as wimpiness or as post-heroic sensibility, they certainly do not seem to point to a divine origin.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ I do not agree at all with Koch's contention that *bran* in *Canu Aneirin* needs to mean 'the god Brân' rather than simply 'raven', understood as symbolic of death on the battlefield. Likewise, Branodunum in Norfolk can just as well be 'raven's fort' – see Koch, 'Some Suggestions and Etymologies Reflecting upon the Mythology of the Four Branches', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 9 (1989), 1–9 (8–9). ⁴⁸ See, for example, Newstead, *Bran*, *passim*, and the introduction to Derick Thomson's edition of the text, *Branwen uerch Lyr* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1986), p. xxxi. ⁴⁹ *Manawydan*, ll. 12, 25, in Williams, *Pedeir Keinc*. ⁵⁰ See Catherine McKenna, 'Learning Lordship: The Education of Manawydan' in John Carey et al. (eds), *Ildánach Ildrech: A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana* (Andover and Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 1999), pp 101–20. Along with her own argument that Manawydan is an ineffectual leader who gradually learns lordship skills, she includes references to a number of other studies arguing that he is a sympathetic character who perhaps represents the presumed clerical author's own views.

A second difficulty is that Manawydan and Mannánán do not easily relate directly to each other linguistically. There have been various attempts to prove literary borrowings in one direction or the other, but none is as convincing as the suggestion that the names are in fact independent developments from the Welsh and Irish names for the Isle of Man: *Manaw* and *Mana*, *Manu*, respectively.⁵¹ With this being the most likely linguistic explanation and with the Irish character being clearly mythological, it is possible that Manawydan was originally a sea-god associated with the Isle of Man. However, his name occurs in texts antedating the Mabinogi (most notably *Culhwch ac Olwen*, *Preiddeu Annwn*, and the poem *Pa gur?* from the Black Book of Carmarthen), indicating that he had a wider currency, and yet there too no marine association is mentioned.⁵² This may mean that his apparent relationship to Mannánán is spurious, or else that these quite brief references simply do not *happen* to refer to this aspect of his nature.

Another, quite different, explanation of the origin of Manawydan is that he derives from an historical British chieftain of Caesar's time.⁵³ Koch puts forward a complex and ingenious argument from closely-read Classical sources, but fundamentally it is supported by no more in the way of solid evidence (as opposed to tortuous etymological and historical speculation) than is the equation of Manawydan and Mannánán. While I remain unconvinced by his historical argument, Koch does provide a useful and thoroughly annotated discussion of the matter of Manawydan's sovereignty in the Third Branch.⁵⁴ This is an additional complicating factor in attempting to determine whether the character was originally considered a god or a mortal lord. There is good reason to suppose that sacral kingship and the concept of unrightful rule leading to a blighting of the land are significant themes in the Third Branch. If we accept that Rhiannon was in origin the sovereignty goddess of Dyfed, then surely her husbands (Pwyll and then Manawydan) should be mortal kings, not gods in their own right.

On balance, it really is impossible to say whether Manawydan was a mythological character in his earliest form. All we can say with certainty is that he was clearly not depicted as a god in any of the surviving medieval texts.

⁵¹ Bromwich, *Tríoedd*, p. 433; Proinsias Mac Cana discusses the various possibilities for the derivation of the Irish and Welsh names and their relationship to each other in considerable depth in his *Branwen*, pp 122–9. ⁵² Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems', in Rachel Bromwich et al. (eds), *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Early Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), pp 33–71 (40–1). For *Preiddeu Annwn*, see Haycock, 'Preiddeu Annwn', pp 52–78. ⁵³ John T. Koch, 'A Welsh Window on the Iron Age: Manawydan, Mandubracius', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 14 (1987), 17–52. ⁵⁴ 'Welsh Window', pp 31–40.

Beli. This name occurs in the Second Branch only as the patronym of Brân's mother Penarddun and then later as Caswallawn's patronym.⁵⁵ Beli Mawr was evidently regarded in Welsh tradition as a legendary ancestor of the ruling families – 'a king of the Britons in the golden age of their legendary history'⁵⁶ – but it is difficult to identify his ultimate origin. One popular explanation is that he derives from the attested Gaulish god *Belinus* or *Belenos* 'the bright one'.⁵⁷ Belenos was associated with Phoebus Apollo in inscriptions from the Roman period, thus indicating that he was a sun-god. There is nothing in the Welsh sources to suggest a solar identity for Beli, however.

Alternatively, his name may derive from Celtic **Belgios* or **Bolgios*,⁵⁸ which is tempting to consider because it might suggest that he was originally the eponymous ancestor (although not necessarily a god per se) of the Belgae.⁵⁹ This argument requires the assumption that the medieval Welsh were, or believed themselves to be, the descendants of the Iron Age Belgae of southern Britain – or at least the heirs of their oral tradition.

Finally, there is the intriguing occurrence of Beli's name in two apparent kennings for the sea, one in *Canu Aneirin* and another in the Book of Taliesin: *biw beli bloeddauwr* 'the noisy cattle of Beli', and *Gnavt rvyf yn heli beli wiravt*, 'Usual an oar in the brine of Beli's liquor'.⁶⁰ Is this an indication of a marine aspect to Beli's nature? The association does not seem to occur elsewhere, but it is nevertheless provocative.

Branwen Although many aspects of the Second Branch have been subjected to scholarly examination, Branwen herself remains something of a mystery.⁶¹ She has no obvious mythological attributes except her familial relationship to certain other characters who most likely have divine origins. Her name is of limited help. *Branwen* means 'white raven' an inherently unlikely combination which has led various scholars to believe that it was originally the well-attested name *Bronwen*, 'white breast', with a vowel changed either through scribal error or association with her brother's name, Brân.⁶²

⁵⁵ Thomson, *Branwen*, ll. 8, 414. ⁵⁶ Peter C. Bartrum, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary: People in History and Legend up to about A.D. 1000* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1993), p. 38. He also includes references to a variety of other suggestions about Beli's origin. ⁵⁷ See Bromwich, *Trïoedd*, pp 288–9, for references to this long-standing view; also John Koch, 'Ilawr en asseð (CA 932) "The Laureate Hero in the War Chariot": Some Recollections of the Iron Age in the *Gododdin*', *Études Celtiques* 24 (1987), 253–78 (264–5). ⁵⁸ Thomson, *Branwen*, p. 20, note 8. ⁵⁹ Koch, 'Brân', pp 3–6. The name means 'man of the Belgae', which tells us little. For the possible original meaning 'he who swells up with heroic fury, the bulger', see John Carey, 'Fir Bolg: A Native Etymology Revisited', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 16 (1988), 77–83. ⁶⁰ See Bromwich, *Trïoedd*, p. 288, where she gives the full references but does not pursue the matter further. ⁶¹ There is a whole chapter in Mac Cana, *Branwen*, just on the character of Branwen (pp 151–73), beginning with the inauspicious remark: 'Apart from the tale to which she gave her name there are no traces in the early literature of traditions relating to her' (p. 151). ⁶² For example, Bromwich, *Trïoedd*, p. 293;

However, *gwen* has the extended meaning 'holy, divine', which led Patrick Ford to his equation of the character with Bendigeidfran, as mentioned above. He further supports this argument by noting that just as Irish war-goddesses are often tripled, Branwen is cryptically called one of the three principal *rieni* of Britain.⁶³ This term has often been translated 'ancestresses', which makes no sense in the context of the narrative, given that Branwen's only son dies in childhood. *Rieni*, however, can also mean 'descendants',⁶⁴ which might conceivably refer to Branwen's descent from an important figure (i.e. Llŷr), although the general meaning 'ladies, queens' seems more likely.⁶⁵

In the narrative the most puzzling aspect concerning Branwen is her mistreatment at the Irish court after her marriage to Matholwch. The reason given by the narrator – that the nobles persuaded the king to punish his wife as belated vengeance for Efnisien's mutilation of the Irish horses – seems unsatisfying. After all, Branwen has already proved herself a gracious queen and has borne an heir to Matholwch. It has been pretty well established that this episode in Branwen's story, like Rhiannon's, is connected to the international folktale known as 'The Calumniated Wife',⁶⁶ but Branwen is not accused of any personal wrongdoing; infanticide is the usual charge in the folktale and its literary reflexes. Gruffydd suggested that she is persecuted out of pure xenophobia because she is a stranger and therefore regarded as a fairy, but he arrived at this conclusion by an unacceptable wholesale reconstruction of the text.⁶⁷ It may be, as both Gruffydd and Mac Cana have suggested, that the Calumniated Wife motif was interpolated into the narrative at a relatively late stage.

Finally, while there is considerable evidence for Irish influence on several of the scenes in the Second Branch, there is no good parallel to the actual character of Branwen in the Irish analogues.

THE FOURTH BRANCH

With the exception of Llwyd fab Cil Coed,⁶⁸ who has not generally been regarded as mythological, there are no names in the Third Branch which have not already occurred in either the First or the Second. We move

Mac Cana, *Branwen*, p. 155. But see GPC, s.v. *brân*: '**b. wen**: (i) *white crow, rara avis, rarity*'. ⁶³ 'Branwen', p. 39. ⁶⁴ GPC, s.v. *rieni*. ⁶⁵ Gruffydd, 'Mabon', p. 455. ⁶⁶ Juliette Wood, 'The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 10 (1985), 25–38; Andrew Welsh, 'Traditional Tales and the Harmonizing of Story in *Pwyll Pendewic Dyuet*', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 17 (1989), 15–41 (35–9); Mac Cana, *Branwen*, pp 161–73. ⁶⁷ Gruffydd, *Rhiannon*, pp 58 ff. His reconstruction of Branwen's story is extensively rebutted by Mac Cana in *Branwen*, pp 162–73. ⁶⁸ Llwyd seems to have some kind of supernatural attributes to the extent that

therefore straight on to the Fourth Branch, where there are more plausibly mythological characters than in any other part of the Mabinogi.

Math fab Mathonwy Here we have two names, one of which is probably a doublet of the other, but which is the 'real' name and which the 'ghost'? Generally, *Mathonwy* has been considered the extra, but it is also possible that it is a metronym, in keeping with the metronymic scheme of the rest of his family.⁶⁹ Either way, we need to resolve Math and there are various possibilities.

There are Gaulish names in *Matu-*, *Mato-*, *Mati-*, some perhaps from Celtic **matu-* (> OIr. *math* 'bear'); others from Celtic **mati-* (> OIr. *maith*, *maid* 'good, excellent, profitable'; W. *mad* 'fortunate, auspicious, good'). D. Ellis Evans offers the following suggestions: 'It is possible that *matu-* in some examples, as well as *mato-* and *mati-*, should be treated as an adjective meaning "good, fortunate, propitious, favourable" or the like', and 'With names in *matt-*, showing hypocoristic doubling of *-t-*, compare the Welsh personal name *Math*'.⁷⁰ Given that there does not seem to be a Welsh word for 'bear' that is cognate, the meaning 'good' may be more likely. This then leads to the possibility that Math might once have been an all-purpose benevolent deity parallel to the Irish Dagda 'the Good God'.⁷¹ There is, however, no surviving lore nor any suggestion in the Mabinogi to indicate such an equation, except insofar as Math's sister Dôn might be interpreted as the Welsh version of the Irish mother-goddess Danu, for whom see below.

Alternatively, Math might be related to the Welsh word *mathu* 'to form, shape', although it is not attested until the sixteenth century.⁷² As Math in the Fourth Branch is a magician who shapes people – whether from raw material, such as flowers (Blodeuedd), or through transformation (Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, the three beast-boys) – a meaning related to 'forming' or 'shaping' would be quite evocative. The noun *math* 'sort, type, species, class, kind, variety' and the verb *mathu* both derive from *bath* 'likeness, similarity, resemblance, form, shape, pattern, fashion, stamp, kind, sort', which is attested from the thirteenth century,⁷³ making the possibility more plausible. Another possible derivation is from *Amaethon* 'Great/Divine Ploughman', a theonym attested from *Culhwch ac Olwen*. Koch sets out this argument in detail, suggesting that Math/Amaethon's original role was as the chief god of a prelapsarian mythic age who was forced to become a 'ploughman' through the treachery of his nephews.⁷⁴

he is a powerful magician. ⁶⁹ Bromwich, *Triodd*, pp 438–9. ⁷⁰ Gaulish Personal Names: A Study of Some Continental Celtic Formations (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pp 229–30. ⁷¹ Sterckx, *Cosmogonie*, p. 56 ⁷² GPC, s.v. ⁷³ Ibid. ⁷⁴ Koch, 'Some Suggestions', pp 2–4. The equation of Math with Amaethon is complicated by the fact that the latter is said to be son of Dôn and (at least sometimes) brother to Gwydion, which would make him Math's nephew (see Bromwich, *Triodd*, pp 393–4). A much fuller discussion of this cosmogonic interpretation of the Fourth Branch as a

While it is problematic to explain the Four Branches as predominantly mythological, *Math* arguably does lend itself to such an interpretation. Although the characters are not actually called gods – and Goewin, the raped foot-maiden, is too much of a cipher to represent an earth or sovereignty goddess, no matter how euhemerized – most of them do have overt magical attributes, which is not the case in the other three branches. It seems quite plausible – even likely – that Math, Dôn, Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, Aranrhod, Dylan, Lleu, Gofannon and perhaps Blodeuedd originated as mythological characters, and they all appear elsewhere in the Middle Welsh corpus, particularly in the esoteric poetry attributed to Taliesin.⁷⁵

Dôn While she does not appear as a character in her own right in the Fourth Branch, Dôn needs a mention as the sister of Math and mother of Gwydion, Gilfaethwy and Aranrhod. The usual argument has been that her name reflects a parallel with the Irish mother-goddess Danu or Anu and ultimately the Continental Celtic goddess after whom the Danube was named. Although this equation has been called into question on etymological grounds by Koch,⁷⁶ it is fairly widely accepted.⁷⁷ The uncertainty is likely to remain, as Dôn does not appear in person anywhere in the Middle Welsh literary corpus.

Regardless of her precise identity, many of her abundant children (there are several others in different texts) have clear otherworldly connections, which would seem to indicate a role as a mythical ancestor-figure at the very least.

Gwydion There seems to have been a substantial tradition surrounding Gwydion, of which we now have remnants not only in the Mabinogi, but also in the Taliesin material. The various allusions suggest that he was always regarded as a powerful magician, particularly in terms of his ability to create people and things.⁷⁸ Carey has suggested that he was a type of divine or semi-divine culture hero, along the lines of Prometheus,⁷⁹ and this seems a reasonable interpretation given the existence of a magical trickster-figure in many cultures. Bartrum observes that Gwydion persisted into modern North Welsh folklore as king of the fairies which, if accurate, would support an earlier divine identity.⁸⁰

whole appears in an article by John Carey, 'A British Myth of Origins?', *History of Religions* 31 (1991), 24–38. ⁷⁵ See Carey, 'A British Myth', p. 37 for references. ⁷⁶ Koch, 'Some Suggestions', pp 4–5. Personal names do not always follow regular phonological rules, as they are subject to many other influences, including folk etymology and spurious parallels with similar-sounding names. ⁷⁷ For example, Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 78; Bromwich, *Triodd*, p. 330. ⁷⁸ See Bromwich, *Triodd*, p. 393, for references. ⁷⁹ Carey, 'A British Myth', pp 29–30. ⁸⁰ Bartrum, *Classical Welsh Dictionary*, p. 350.

It has also been variously suggested that Gwydion was the father of Dylan and Lleu via an incestuous union with his sister Aranrhod,⁸¹ but the story is not clear on this point. Lleu is indeed called Gwydion's son on several occasions, but an adopted relationship may be intended. However, there is clearly some kind of additional connection between them, as Gwydion essentially 'gestates' the boy in the box at the foot of his bed.⁸² His name might be from *gŵyd* 'wickedness, harm, deceit', given that Gwydion is a master of deceit and causes a great deal of harm to Goewin, Aranrhod, Math, Pryderi and their respective armies directly, and indirectly to Gilfaethwy by bringing down Math's vengeance upon both of them.

Gilfaethwy With a spelling which alternates between Gilfaethwy and Gilfathwy, this name seems to mean 'servant of Maethwy/Mathwy',⁸³ but it is not clear who 'Maethwy/Mathwy' is supposed to be. The name is, of course, suggestively similar to Math, Mathonwy, and Amaethon. *Math* we have already discussed, *amaeth* means 'ploughman, husbandman', *maeth* is 'sustenance, nourishment' and by extension 'fosterage, rearing', and *-wy* is a common suffix in personal names. The usual interpretation is that Gilfaethwy means 'servant of Math', but it is actually Gwydion who cares for his brother solicitously, to the extent of arranging the rape of Goewin on his behalf. It may be, therefore, that Gilfaethwy is the 'servant' not of his uncle Math, but of his brother (and 'rearer'?) Gwydion, in which case *maeth* and not *math* would be the original element in the name.⁸⁴ It is not clear from the text and Gilfaethwy disappears from the story after his joint punishment with Gwydion is completed.

Koch also believes that *maeth* was the earlier form, on the grounds that the simplification of a diphthong is more likely phonologically than the opposite process by which *-a-* would become *-ae-*.⁸⁵ The *gil-* element seems reasonably straightforward, as names in *gilla* are amply attested in Ireland (and later Scotland) from the ninth century onward, typically in the formulation 'servant of such-and-such a saint'.⁸⁶

Aranrhod ferch Dôn Along with Rhiannon in the First Branch, Aranrhod is one of only two female characters in the Mabinogi with real backbone. Whether this stems from an original divine nature, or from the exigencies of the narrative is a matter for separate discussion.⁸⁷ Given that there seems to

81 For example, Rhys, *Hibbert Lectures*, pp 284, 308; Bartrum, *Classical Welsh Dictionary*, p. 350.

82 Roberta Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in *Math*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 35 (1988), 1–9 (7). 83 Williams, *Pedeir Keinc*, p. 252; Koch, 'Some Suggestions', pp 2–3. 84 Koch, in 'Some Suggestions', pp 2–3, favors *maeth* also, but he derives the name ultimately from *Amaethon* whom he equates with Math. 85 Ibid., p. 3. 86 Brian Ó Cuív, 'Aspects of Irish Personal Names', *Celtica* 18 (1986), 151–84 (167–8). 87 Roberta Valente has done

be good reason to suppose that the rest of her family had mythological antecedents, Aranrhod probably did too, but if she was a goddess once, it is not clear what kind. The well-known types in the Celtic pantheon include sovereignty/territorial goddesses (who might also be tutelary deities of specific tribes), maternal/earth/fertility goddesses, goddesses of natural features such as rivers, war-goddesses, and zoomorphic goddesses like Epona. No doubt there were other varieties, but Aranrhod's possible mythic function is no longer apparent by the time she appears in the Fourth Branch.

Her name is also somewhat obscure. The vacillation in the manuscripts between *Aranrhod* and *Aryanrhod* complicates matters, although the former occurs much more frequently (and is the only form to be found in the Mabinogi). The latter spelling means 'silver wheel', which has given rise to some fanciful speculation that she might represent a moon goddess, despite her total lack of lunar attributes.⁸⁸ And as *Aranrhod* seems more likely to be the correct form, the 'silver' element (*aryan*) cannot be used convincingly to explain her name. *Aran* is obscure, occurring primarily in the names of mountains. Bromwich hazards a possible meaning of 'huge, round, humped',⁸⁹ which makes perfect sense for mountains, but not much for a personal name.

Her fortress, *Caer Aranrhod*, is evidently either on an island or on the shore of the mainland – on a promontory perhaps, as the text says that Gwydion and Lleu sail a ship right up to the entrance gate. Is this some indication of a marine association? If so, it might help to make sense of the fact that her first child is the fully aquatic Dylan Eil Ton. It is also notable that she, a single woman, is apparently in sole control of a fortress which bears her name, while her brothers are dependants at the court of Math. Her independence and forceful character rather suggest an origin as a goddess, but it is impossible to be any more precise.

Dylan Eil Ton Aranrhod's firstborn son is commonly supposed to be a sea-god on the basis of his name, 'Sea son of Wave'.⁹⁰ In this one case there actually is the overt statement in the text that he had a supernatural affinity for the sea. Sadly, this and the allusion to his tragic death at the hand of his uncle, Gofannon fab Dôn, are all that remain of his story. The additional references to Dylan in the Book of Taliesin merely reinforce his marine nature and suggest that the waves mourned his death.⁹¹ Sarah Larratt Keefer

some excellent work on Aranrhod's characterization, both in 'Gwydion and Aranrhod' and in her unpublished thesis, 'Merched Y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of the Four Branches' (PhD, Cornell University, 1986). 88 Koch, 'Some Suggestions', pp 5–6. Gruffydd's argument for 'silver rath', from *rât* 'rath, mound, circular stronghold' (*Math*, p. 189) is not generally accepted. 89 *Trioedd*, p. 284. 90 *Dylan* is a poetic term for 'sea', perhaps deriving from *dy* + *llanw*, hence 'frequent flood' or 'repeated tide', akin to English poetic 'briny deep' or 'foaming swell'. 91 Bartrum, *Classical Welsh Dictionary*, pp 318–19, lists these and other references.

has proposed that Dylan might have been a seal-child – the offspring of a mortal mother and a selchie father.⁹² Keefer's identification of Aranhod as an ordinary mortal is slightly problematic, and her closest parallel – the Child ballad (113) known as 'The Great Selchie of Sule Skerrie' – has the serious drawback of being attested no earlier than the nineteenth century. Yet there is (as Keefer points out) plenty of selchie-lore from Ireland and Scotland, and it is reasonable to suppose that it is of some antiquity. Equally reasonable is Keefer's inference that Gofannon might have unwittingly killed Dylan in his seal-form. Unfortunately, the full story is probably irretrievably lost.

Gofannon fab Dôn This character appears in the Mabinogi only in a passing reference to his woeful slaying of Dylan. However, we have evidence from *Culhwch ac Olwen* that he was probably a mythological figure parallel to the Irish smith-god Goibhniu.⁹³ His name means 'Great/Divine Smith', from *gofan* 'smith' plus the usual theonymic '-onos'. It is only a pity that the stories associated with his tradition have not survived.

Lleu Llaw Gyffes It is a commonplace of Celtic studies that Lleu 'Bright One' is the Welsh reflex of the Irish Lug and Gaulish Lugus. Furthermore, his epithet 'skilful hand', is frequently compared with Lugh's epithet *samildánach* 'skilled in many arts together'. As Lugus and Lugh are both clearly gods, Lleu is generally thought to be one also; specifically, a god of craftsmanship.⁹⁴ It is also generally thought that Lugus was one of the most important and widespread of the Celtic gods, on the basis of the wide distribution of placenames containing the element *Lugo-* or *Lugu-*, and given Caesar's account that the Gauls revered 'Mercury' in particular.⁹⁵

Berhard Maier has called into question both the identification of Lugus with Mercury and the relative importance of his cult, arguing that the toponymic and epigraphic evidence is inconclusive.⁹⁶ This does not by any means rule out an equation of the three gods, Lugus-Lug-Lleu, but it does raise the issue of why a deity thought to be so important among the Celts generally does not show up in the epigraphic record of the Insular Celts. While Lleu and Lugh were evidently important in their respective narrative traditions, it is frustrating that there are no inscriptions to Lugus in Britain which could confirm that his cult was actually practised among the ancient Britons.

⁹² 'The Lost Tale of Dylan in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*', *Studia Celtica* 24/25 (1989/90), 26–37. ⁹³ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, pp 34–5. ⁹⁴ Bromwich, *Trioedd*, pp 412–13; Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, pp 24–5. ⁹⁵ *De Bello Gallico*, 6.16.1. See also Mac Cana, 'Celtic Religion', p. 1483, and pp 1481–7, where he discusses the pitfalls involved in comparing Roman with Celtic deities in general. ⁹⁶ Maier, 'Is Lug to be Identified with Mercury?', *Ériu* 47 (1996), 127–35.

Blodeu(w)edd Lleu's flower-wife is not generally considered to be a mythological character, but I include her here because of an interesting possibility raised by Gwynfa Adam in a conference paper in 2003.⁹⁷ She suggested that the second element of Blodeu(w)edd's name is not *-wedd* 'face' or *-edd* (the plural ending for 'flowers'), but *medd* 'mead', and that the whole name implies an intoxicating drink brewed from blossoms. The text says that Math and Gwydion used oak flowers, broom, and meadowsweet to create Blodeuedd. Adam posits that by 'oak flowers', the author might have meant the parasitic mistletoe and goes on to explain that broom is both a narcotic (it is in fact quite poisonous) and a long-standing symbol of kingship (cf. 'Plantagenet' from *planta genesta*, 'broom'),⁹⁸ and finally, that meadowsweet has been used as a flavouring and an aphrodisiac since the Bronze Age. Her central contention is that Blodeuedd is in fact a sovereignty goddess whose name and some of whose function are cognate with those of the Irish figure *Medb* 'Intoxicating' or 'Intoxicated One'. In support she cites the apparent fact that for both Lleu and Gronw, possession of Ardu dwy follows directly after possession of Blodeuedd. Like *Medb*, she herself is the intoxicating drink by means of which the sovereignty figure bestows kingship upon a man.

It is a fascinating argument and quite persuasive in many respects. However, there are some unanswered questions. Why does Blodeuedd transfer sovereignty from Lleu to Gronw when the text tells us that Lleu was a good ruler? Adam raised this point but did not manage to resolve it. Furthermore, if Lleu is already a god (which he probably is), it would be anomalous for him to marry the territorial goddess and thereby take on the role normally reserved for a mortal king. And finally, how could Math and Gwydion conjure up a sovereignty goddess in the first place? Perhaps Blodeuedd is a *bogus* sovereignty goddess, because, like the rest of Gwydion's magical creations in the Fourth Branch, she is in fact ephemeral – like the horses and hounds which last for only a day. But this is only speculation. In fact, Blodeuedd is one of the least resolvable characters and seems to be a good candidate for straight authorial invention.

CONCLUSION

As the title of this article indicates, the purpose of my ongoing, larger study is to examine all of the names in the Four Branches as a group to try to

⁹⁷ Gwynfa Adam, 'Blodeuedd: ei henw a'i natur', a paper delivered at the Twelfth International Congress of Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth, 2003. ⁹⁸ Whether broom's association with kingship antedates the rise of the Plantagenets, I cannot confirm. It may be that they originally chose the plant as their crest for more mundane reasons.

reveal the overall patterns of naming used by the author. My principal intent is to try to determine the extent to which the author devised his own names versus using those already current in Welsh tradition. This partial study is therefore rather skewed and cannot be expected to reveal very much concerning the author's broader scheme. What it does indicate is that the majority of those names that have generally been considered 'mythological' probably did have associations in the wider tradition with beliefs about otherworlds and supernatural beings. This is not to say that they were all once gods as such. Some characters, such as Pwyll and Pryderi, seem more likely to have been thought of as mortals who had dealings with the otherworldly realm of Annwn. Some may have been invented by the author for his own narrative purposes, or indeed recycled from several characters, both specific and generic.

Notwithstanding the findings of this limited study, I do not think that the Four Branches are primarily representative of a 'mythology in decline'. Rather, a comparison with some texts from the Arthurian cycle is more appropriate. There are indeed characters and episodes which derive from pre-Christian beliefs – probably not directly from memories of the native religious tradition in its original form, but perhaps via early medieval fairy folklore and the more formalized stories of heroic deeds preserved by the professional poets. There are also numerous characters (by far the majority) that do not derive from any apparent mythological antecedents. Nor are the 'mythological' characters necessarily rehearsing their original roles when we meet them in the Four Branches. They may equally well be acting in accordance with the needs of the plot at hand, in which case the texts reveal very little about ancient British belief-systems. Once upon a time, as an undergraduate, I was told in an archaeology class that whenever archaeologists are unable to identify an artefact they call it a 'ritual object'. We should be careful not to do likewise with those elements of the Four Branches that defy easy explanation.