

This passage is situated within the tale of *Branwen ferch Llŷr*, second branch of the Mabinogi, after the men of Wales led by Bendigeidfran have crossed the Irish Sea to avenge the insult done to Branwen by her husband Matholwch. The passage describes Matholwch's attempts at peacemaking, the advice he is given by his men, and the subsequent failed ambush by his men on the Welsh.

This passage shows the Welsh and Irish agreeing to make peace by way of a public gift giving exercise, a recognised technique, as counselled by Matholwch's advisors and Bendigeidfran's sister Branwen. The building of the house to contain the giant Bendigeidfran is a noted improvement over previous offers, paralleling the gifting of the cauldron of regeneration given earlier in the story by Bendigeidfran to Matholwch. Sims Williams¹ proposes that the building of the house may have been inspired by the building of a palace for Henry II in Dublin in 1171/2. After the peace is agreed but before the men from both sides enter the newly built house, Efnisien enters the hall and through his violent actions prevents an ambush attack. This action goes some way to offsetting the damage he caused when he mutilated Matholwch's horses. His actions in killing the ambushers allow the Irish and the Welsh to sit together and make a short lived peace, which is again broken, and atoned for, by Efnisien later in the story.

We learn a lot about the main characters in this section by way of direct dialogue. Matholwch's men, speaking as one, advise him how to make reparation for the insult paid to Branwen. These are the same men who advised him earlier in the tale to treat her badly in retaliation for the insult given by Efnisien, which was repaid in full at the time. Matholwch is portrayed as a man who does not wish to make hasty decisions. To a modern reader this may seem like the act of a weak leader, and it is important to bear in mind that the text we read today lacks the nuances of oral transmission that the original audience would have heard.

Bendigeidfran takes advice from Branwen with regards to accepting the gift. We learn that Bendigeidfran has never had a house built that can accommodate him because of his gigantic size, although we know from earlier in the story that he has fitted into more temporary accommodation such as tents. Both Matholwch and Bendigeidfran rely on others to advise them, which is probably quite fitting for kings who are on the verge of all out war (again).

Efnisien however is not bound by any convention. Introduced initially as a troublemaker, he has already set himself outside of normal societal conventions. Mac Cana² feels this is in keeping with the type of troublemaking character he is. He is described as casting fierce glances around the room, indicating he is already suspicious and liable to act without warning. He does not take any advice before he acts, in fact he enters the hall before the rest of the Welsh host, and does not appear to have any thought for the trouble he causes. Three times Efnisien asks what is in the bag, three times he is told it is flour, and three times he is described as crushing someone's head, although it is made clear that he has crushed the head of every concealed Irishman. Gray

¹ P Sims Williams, 'The Submission Of The Irish Kings', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 22 (1991), 31-61 (p. 37).

² P Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, 2nd Edition, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992, 21-59

³ believes this repetition clearly once served a purpose, and points to the oral roots of the *Mabinogi* stories. Interestingly, in Davies' translation Efnisien is talking to an Irishman as he goes around killing the ambushers, however Ford⁴ believes an alternate reading of the section indicates that the Irishmen in the bags are speaking to Efnisien. This demonstrates that they do not know when to be quiet, and later on when they are reincarnated in the cauldron they lack the ability to speak as a result.

The first motif in this section is that of the character prone to causing trouble, a widespread literary motif. Similarities can be seen between Efnisien and Bricriu Nemtheanga (Bitter Tongue) from the Ulster Cycle, both men known for causing trouble seemingly for the sake of it. Bollard⁵ mentions Unferð from Beowulf who told the tale of Beowulf's ill-advised swimming contest in order to make trouble for him. Hall⁶ is reminded of characters from *Hrólfs saga krakr*, namely Egill Skalla-Grimsson, warrior and poet, and Starkaðr Storviksson. Finally, Miles⁷ argues for the calculated imitation on the part of the Welsh author of Norse and German historical narratives, namely the Volsungs and the Nibelungs and their associated troublemaking characters, although Mac Cana rejects this.

A linked theme is that of treacherous house building. Bollard⁸ draws parallels with the Irish story *Bricriu's Feast*. Bricriu, poet and known troublemaker (like Efnisien), invites three heroes to a feast in his hall and then through various taunts he sets them against each other, sitting back to watch. Sims Williams also mentions the Destruction of Dinn Ríg (Book of Leinster), in which Labraid invites Cobthach into a house under the guise of receiving his submission, but has made the house of iron in order to roast Cobthach alive in return for the years of torment and insult he experienced. A callback to this is the house built for Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid mentioned earlier in *Branwen*, which was made of iron in order to roast the inhabitants alive.

Then there is the theme of the concealed warrior. Hall⁹ again notes parallels between the tale of Branwen and *Hrólfs saga*, in particular the scene where Svipdagr, one of Hrólf's champions enters a hall and finds many decorative hangings on the walls which actually contain armed men waiting in ambush. Svipdagr and the Icelandic men end up fighting the concealed men rather than killing them in advance. There are earlier parallels drawn by Hall between the two stories, with both stories containing similar scenes of horse mutilation. Hall remarks on the superhuman grip displayed by Efnisien when crushing the heads of the Irishmen, which again reminds him of Egill and Starkaðr.

³ B Gray, 'Repetition In Oral Literature', *The Journal Of American Folklore*, 84 (333), 289-303

⁴ P K Ford, 'Branwen: A Study Of Celtic Affinities', *Studia Celtica*, XXII/XXIII (1987/88), 29-41 (p. 36)

⁵ J K Bollard, 'The Structure Of The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi', *Transactions Of The Honourable Society Of Cymmrodorion*, 1974/5, (p.273)

⁶ A Hall, 'Gwyr y Gogledd? Some Icelandic Analogues To Branwen Ferch Lyr', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 42 (2001), 27-50

⁷ B Miles, 'Branwen: A Reconsideration Of The German And Norse Analogues', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 52 (2006), 13-48

⁸ Bollard, 'Structure Of The Four Branches Of The Mabinogi' (p.273)

⁹ Hall, 'Gwyr y Gogledd?', (p. 33)

These themes seem to appear readily in European literature of this period, indicating a potentially shared source of storytelling. The stories that today make up the Mabinogi will not be the same as the stories that were initially told about Branwen and Bendigeidfran, and it is only to be expected that orally transmitted tales will change over time with retelling. It is highly possible that the author of the Mabinogi was aware of some of the other stories mentioned and had incorporated elements in order to produce the final stories we have now.